The Singulative: Comparative Syntax and Crosslinguistic Semantics

Summary: Singulative structures present a puzzling situation for current analyses of the morphosemantic contrasts between singular/plural and mass/count. Singulatives are morphologically similar to plurals as they are (typically) suffixes, but semantically similar to classifiers. This study compares novel Welsh data with Arabic and Mandarin Chinese (among others) to reveal their differences, and their effects elsewhere in the syntax/semantics interface.

Background: Recent work, (Sauerland et al., 2005, a.o) has suggested that the plural is the semantically unmarked choice and, correspondingly, it will be the morphological realisation of number when the denotation of the noun is not directly atomic. Therefore, in all cases that do not represent a singular individual, we should expect to find plural marking, (e.g. *Three pigs* and *0.5 apples*). This approach however cannot account for singulative inflection whereby a singular individual is derived from the plural. For example, while Welsh has pluralising morphology (*afal / apple → afalau / apples*) it has singularising morphology (*gellyg / pears → gellygyn / (a) pear*).

The -yn suffix is not an allomorph of the -au plural suffix, but acts upon the denotation of a class of nouns that are inherently plural, collective, or mass to derive singular reference, showing singulatives serve the same function as classifiers in “mass languages” such as Mandarin Chinese. Considering this, we must ask: How similar are singulative structures to classifiers?, How can a language be both pluralising and classifying?, and Does this effect other areas of the DP?.

Data: Welsh singulative-accepting nouns are found to be canonically collective. As such, they behave like nouns in Mandarin Chinese in that they: (1) Are indefinite in number, (2) Exhibit non-grammaticality if the singulative/classifier is absent when counting, (3) Are resistant to ‘universal grinder’ effects. Though with singulative morphology, collectives behave as count nouns, and may be subject to such ‘grinder’ effects. (4) never require determiners to be grammatical.

However, the Welsh singulative is variable. Collectives may optionally use the singulative suffix (*dau bysgodyn / two fish*) or a partitive structure. (*dau o bysgod*). The singulative never appears on liquids: they may only use measure phrases (*dau potel o ddwr / two bottles of water*).

Arabic singulatives on the other hand, while adhering to the counting regulation, differ in that liquid phrases may accept the singulative (*xamer/wine → xamr-ah/ a portion of wine*). Furthermore, Arabic collective nouns always require a definite determiner to be grammatical in generic contexts.

Analysis: Data from Welsh, Arabic, Mandarin (among others) are analysed to reveal that classifiers and singulative morphemes are derived under the same syntactic function which alters the semantics of mass/collective nouns. As such, singulative languages show that the mass/count distinction is not binary, and there is variation between which types of nouns can or cannot be mass/collective in a given language. The semantics of singulative languages are considered through a mereological framework, and the variation of classifier/singulative use is shown to be syntactically conditioned. Further to this, the ‘universal grinder’ is re-considered, showing that the non-binary nature of the mass/count distinction accounts for variable ‘grinder’ effects in Welsh.