



# Countability of Collective Nouns in Child Mandarin

Linguistics Seminars

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## Abstract

The count-mass issue for the semantics of nouns involves an interplay between ontology, cognition and language. While there is a general tendency to conceptualize and encode countable objects (e.g., apples) via count nouns (e.g., *apples*), and uncountable fluids or substances (e.g., water) via mass nouns (e.g., *water*), the same entity could be classified as either count or mass in a language (e.g., *shoes* vs. *footwear*). Collective nouns, a subtype of nouns, are classified as either count or mass (e.g., *furniture* vs. *tools*), and they are divisively interpreted as denoting individuals, or as non-individuals. Thus, the study of collective nouns constitutes an excellent research topic that allows us to examine various interacting syntactic and semantic factors in the characterization of countability. Moreover, in Mandarin Chinese, nouns are not systematically marked with the grammatical count-mass distinction like some Indo-European languages such as English do. Instead, the expression of countability is closely related to the Chinese classifier system.

Considering the complexity of countability in collective nouns and the typological features of Mandarin, the present study attempts to investigate the interpretation and acquisition of collective nouns in Mandarin, in order to adjudicate the ongoing syntactic versus semantic disputes. While the semantic account contends that nouns in Chinese are divided into count nouns and mass nouns based on their ontological properties, the syntactic account holds that bare nouns (nouns without an accompanying classifier) are underspecified in countability, and classifiers determine and specify countability of a noun.

Using the Truth Value Judgement Task, we conducted two experiments to test 4-to-5-year-old Mandarin-speaking children and adults in their interpretation of Chinese collective nouns, such as *jiaju* 'furniture' and *gongju* 'tools'. The experimental design considered two factors that affect the interpretation of collective nouns: their morpho-syntax (the presence/absence of the individual classifier *ge*), and contextual information (the amount-oriented context vs. the individual-oriented context). The data indicate that, children, like adults, assigned individual-denoting readings and substance-denoting readings in appropriate contexts to bare collective nouns. Thus, in the child grammar (and in the adult grammar), bare collective nouns are underspecified in countability (Experiment 1). On the other hand, both children and adults were well aware that, collective nouns in the presence of the individual classifier *ge* receive only the individual-denoting reading in distinct contexts (Experiment 2). Taken together, the two set of data give support to the syntactic account and militate against the semantic account: nouns on their own are underspecified in countability, and it is classifiers that encode the countability in Mandarin. Overall, the present study contributes new data to and sheds new lights on our understanding of countability in Mandarin and the count-mass issue in general.

ALL ARE WELCOME

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