Mass-count shifts and the mass-count distinction

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Sentences such as (1) in English have been analysed in the literature as cases of coercion of a count N (apple) into a mass one, cf. the well-known Universal Grinder Hypothesis (Pelletier 1979).

(1) There is apple in the salad.

A different analysis is offered by Bale & Barner (2009), which relies on their generalizations stated in (2)-(3):

(2) No term that can be used in count syntax can also be used in a mass syntax to denote individuals.

(3) Some mass nouns (in the context of use) have individuals in their denotation and others do not.

B&B’s explanation of (2)-(3) relies on three assumptions: (i) nouns of the furniture-type are derived from roots that denote individuated join semi-lattices, i.e., join semi-lattices that have individuals at their bottom, whereas all other nouns are derived from roots that denote non-individuated ones; (ii) count interpretations are obtained via a count functional head that turns a non-individuated join semi-lattice into an individuated one; (iii) the mass functional head denotes the identity function. As a consequence, according to B&B (2009), the sentence in (1) would not be obtained by coercing the count N into mass, but it would rather display the baseline use of the NP apple in English, i.e. its use when no functional structure is added on top of it. In this talk, we argue that Gen(2) faces cross-linguistic challenges, in particular with respect to languages that exhibit General Number (Corbett 2000), and we propose an analysis of the cross-linguistic variation in the coercion effects triggered by mass-count use of NPs. Our proposal relies on different algebraic structures for the domains of mass and count, and on a cross-linguistic parametric difference at the interface with morphosyntax, specifically in the requirement of morphosyntactic marking of Number.