Mass-to-count coercion in ‘granular’ nouns

Peter Sutton  
Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf  
peter.sutton@hhu.de

Hana Filip  
Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf  
filip@hhu.de

Background: Nouns which denote entities that come in grains, granules, flakes, display cross- and intralinguistic variation in mass/count lexicalisation patterns (count oats, lentil-s vs. mass oatmeal, čočka (‘lentil’, Czech)). ‘Granular’ Ns exhibit puzzling restrictions regarding mass-to-count coercion. E.g., rice can be coerced into a portion (e.g. bowls) count reading: Even with two rices between four of us, it didn’t all get eaten..., but strongly resists coercion into an individual unit reading: ??Three rice(s) fell of my fork. (Int: GRAIN(s) OF rice). In this paper, we will provide a formal model of such puzzling restrictions on coercion.

Proposal: The account is based on but adapts Sutton & Filip (2016a,b) and is partly inspired by Chierchia (2010). All predicates are interpreted at precisification contexts πi ∈ Π which model extension changes in predicates across contexts of use. For example, single grains of rice count as rice in some contexts (e.g. food allergy), but are too little in quantity to count as rice in others (e.g. making dinner). All mass nouns are saturated with the null precisification context in the lexicon, π0; Pπ0 = ∩ Pπi∈Π (at which only Ps that are Ps at all contexts are in P at π0). Single grains can be denoted using explicit unit extracting classifiers (e.g. grain of). This requires shifting the precisification context to one at which single grains are accessible. Portions can be denoted using explicit container classifier expressions (e.g. bowl of). These classifiers do not require a context shift. Classifiers triggered by numericals modifying mass Ns cannot induce the operation of re-writing the precisification context in the lexicon, hence single grains are inaccessible via mass-to-count coercion while whole portions are not.

References:  