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Semantic and cognitive aspects of singulatives

Abstract:

This paper reports on a project on the typology of singulatives. A so-far understudied category, the singulative is defined as a category that denotes a (single) unit and is formed by adding a morphological marker to a non-unit-denoting base, e.g. a plural, mass noun or a form not marked for number at all (general number). In some languages, singulative formation is closer to inflection, e.g. Welsh moch ‘pigs’ (plural), moch-yn ‘a pig’ (singulative); these two forms are in a singular/plural opposition, with the singular overtly marked. But in many instances the formation of singulatives is closer to derivation, e.g. Russian gorox ‘pea(s)’ (mass noun), goroš-ina ‘a pea’ (singulative). Furthermore, Jurafsky’s (1996) finding that the same markers are often used for the diminutive and the singulative suggests that there is a link between evaluative and unitizing semantics and morphology.

There has so far been no comprehensive typological study of the singulative. It is therefore relatively absent from theoretical discourse despite—as noted by Acquaviva (2016)—the relevance of a typology of unitizing for understanding how languages express the division of reference. The singulative is one of the categories that allow languages to code how objects are perceived by the speaker, that is, distinctions such as one vs. many, uncountable mass vs. countable objects, and homogeneous groups vs. distinct individuals. A central question regarding the singulative category cross-linguistically is whether it arises primarily due to the semantic and perceptual qualities of the noun referents. Grimm (2018), drawing from typology as well as cognitive work like Middleton et al. (2004), argues for a hierarchy (‘scale of individuation’) going from things that are perceived as free-standing individuals in the world to aggregate substances and liquids. He suggests that morphological marking may be sensitive to this hierarchy. An alternative view proposed by Haspelmath & Karjus (2017) is that frequency alone is the driving force.

My project involves creating an as-comprehensive-as-possible database of languages with singulatives and the properties of the singulative in each language. For instance, in what types of number systems do we find singulatives? Are there clear areal distributions? Are singulatives more common as derived forms or as inflectional number markers? How commonly are diminutive markers used to form singulatives? Do we find consistent patterns in semantic categories? I present a report on these findings with a focus on the semantic and cognitive aspects of the phenomenon.
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the chaff from the oats: Evidence for a conceptual distinction between count noun and mass