Furniture on Its Really Peculiar Behaviour: A Functional Account

Kensei Sugayama
Ryukoku University Kyoto/JSPS

Grammatically non-countable nouns include well-behaved mass nouns (e.g. *water*, *butter*, *sand*, *sugar*) and some misfits (e.g. *furniture*, *mail*, *luggage*, *change*, *jewellery*, *ammunition*). These so called "*furniture*-nouns" are attracting attention due to a surprising combination of properties, which straddles mass and count (Wierzbicka 1985, Wisniewski & Murphy 1989, Chierchia 1998, Barner & Snedeker 2006, Mihatsch 2007, Rothstein 2010). Like core mass nouns, liquids and substances (e.g. *water*, *butter*, *sand*, *sugar*), they are non-countable. In contrast to core mass nouns, denotations of these furniture-nouns appear to include individual entities, which have their own names. The individual constituent entities are of different types, e.g. tables, chairs, desks, sofas, etc. for *furniture*. This heterogeneity is at odds with the standard observation that entities named by mass nouns are homogeneous. There is yet no quantitative study of how these peculiar properties are morphologically or syntactically realised in the English language. Previous studies have emphasized either the "unindividuated" (Wisniewski, E.J., *et al.* 1996) or "individuated" nature (Barner & Snedeker 2006). My analysis of *furniture*-nouns recognises both facets, which are in fact structurally reflected in English.

This paper, using the data from contemporary English, addresses the following key question: what is in the denotation of *furniture*-nouns that allows them to have this puzzling conjunction of properties (i.e. non-countable syntax, individuals in denotation, heterogeneity)?

Let me first consider the key to the analysis: *furniture*-nouns denote artefacts. Artefacts encode a relation between entities and a predicate designating the associated event. *Furniture*-nouns are a specific type of artefact noun. They are special in that the associated event permits, and typically implies, a set of elements in the relevant relation. Artefacts have a function and thus participate in some way in the associated event. The canonical associated event for *furniture*-nouns is 'furnishing a space (or furnishing)'. The special properties of *furniture*-nouns follow from the type of function, or associated event, at issue; the associated event canonically involves the participation of multiple, and often diverse, entities, which leads to heterogeneity in the denotation of its participants. Thus, *furniture*-nouns should be considered "functional aggregates" (cf. granular aggregates such as sand, gravel, sugar, etc.), the name of which is motivated by the recognition that the constituent objects of the aggregate have some function in common despite their visible diversity.

Non-countability properties of artefact nouns follow from the nature of the associated event. Artefact nouns with associated events which canonically involve (a set of) multiple entities will not lexicalize as countable nouns, because it is usually the case that using more than one piece of furniture at a time to furnish a room, whereas it is only a chair at a time that one needs to sit on. Functional aggregate nouns behave analogously to granular aggregates, therefore show non-countable syntax, but with reference to the associated event; countable artefact nouns (e.g. *chair*) have associated events which canonically involve *single entities*. Functional aggregates, in contrast, have associated events which canonically involve *sets of entities* (cf. Schwartzschild 2011), connected through the associated event.

There are indeed two important components of *furniture-noun* meanings: the existence of an associated event which canonically involves multiple participants and the presence of these constituent objects in the denotation, hence a collection of objects substituted with and listed by single-entity-involved nouns. It is noteworthy that *furniture*-nouns and their purported constituents show different grammatical behaviours, which arise from the distinct functions *furniture*-nouns and their constituents may have.

This study shows that *furniture*-nouns designate more than a collection of individuals. They are better characterised as functional aggregates. This characterisation accounts for observed properties, i.e. non-countable syntax, collection of individuals, heterogeneity, and reference to function.

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