further remarks on the mass/count distinction in Japanese:

postscript to "Needing the Other"[1]

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In "Needing the Other" (2014a), I argued that the Mass Noun Thesis is an example of "sophisticated othering" (see also my 2014b). Part of that argument is based on an analysis of the grammar of numeral classifiers in Japanese. There is, however, an alternative analysis thereof – as mentioned in footnote 8 on page 114 – leading to the same conclusions about the Mass Noun Thesis, but differing in other respects. Because of limitations of space, this alternative analysis was ignored in the published paper. This "postscript" is intended to remedy that omission.

It should be noted that the differences between the two analyses is terminological more than substantial, and depends primarily on different definitions of, and boundaries between mass nouns and count nouns, and classifiers and unitizers/individuators. Furthermore, in the context of the argument in "Needing the Other" the two analyses are more or less equivalent; that is, they lead to the same conclusions with regards to the Mass Noun Thesis as an example of othering. Hence, the omission is not a defect of the original paper (or not a serious defect at least). Nevertheless, one may wonder which analysis is to be preferred as an analysis of the mass/count distinction and numeral classifiers in Japanese. About this, my opinion slightly changed. Until fairly recently I preferred the original analysis, but now I tend towards that presented in this "postscript".

The analysis in section 5 of "Needing the Other" takes the standard definitions of mass and count nouns as uncountable respectively countable for granted and concludes that this distinction doesn't apply to Japanese (and other numeral classifier languages), which does (and do) not lack the ontological distinction between stuffs and objects. The order of analysis is from grammar to ontology, or actually: from a Western (Indo-European) perspective on grammar to folk-ontology. The alternative analysis explored here reverses this order. It takes the ontological distinction for granted – and given that there is plenty of empirical evidence that this is universal,[2] there are good reasons to do so – and proceeds from there towards grammar. In doing so, this alternative analysis also puts the standard definition of mass and count nouns into question.

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1 Version of 12/10/14.

2 See section 4 of Brons 2014a for references.

Liquids are stuffs, not objects, but units of liquid are objects (at least in some sense of "object"). This is true as much for a speaker of Japanese as it is for a speaker of English. And in either language, the choice of units is more or less free: one can count buckets, glasses, drops, bottles, and so forth, of some liquid. These names of units are *unitizers* or individuators (I used the latter term before, but changed my preference to "unitizer" since). For example, '3 bottles of water' in Japanese is *misu san-bon* 水三本 or *san-bon-no mizu* 三本の水 in which *mizu* 水 is water, *san* 三 is the number 3, *hon*[3] 本 as a unitizer means bottle, and *no* の is a suffix that changes a clause into some kind of modifier similar to a genitive.

Chairs, cows, cars, letters, trees, books, and so forth, are objects, not stuffs. This too, is true as much for a speaker of Japanese as it is for a speaker of English. Nevertheless, in Japanese (and other numeral classifier languages) when these are counted, a classifier affix is added to the numeral, and these classifiers appear to be very similar (if not identical) to unitizers. For example, '3 books' is *hon san-satsu* 本三冊 or *san-satsu-no hon* 三冊の本 in which *hon* 本 is book, and *satsu* 冊 is the *numeral classifier* for books.

Unitizers and numeral classifiers are syntactically identical. In *mizu san-bon* 水三本 and *hon san-satsu* 本三冊, the unitizer *hon* 本 and the numeral classifier *satsu* 冊 have the exact same syntactical roles and characteristics. Moreover, many morphemes used as unitizers such as 本 ('bottle' as such, 'book' as a noun) and *mai* 枚 ('sheets' of something) are *also* used as numeral classifiers: 本 is the classifier of long things; 枚 that of flat things. Arguably, 本 and 枚 derive their use as unitizer from their use as numeral classifier. This isn't the case for all unitizers, however – *baketsu* バケツ ('bucket'), *rittoru* リットル ('liter'), and *teki* 滴 ('drop') are not numeral classifiers. Based on syntactic identity of unitizers and numeral classifiers and on the fact that some morphemes can function as both, it is commonly assumed that in numeral classifier languages such as Japanese, unitizers just *are* numeral classifiers.

There are, however, two fundamental differences between unitizers and numeral classifiers. Firstly, the choice of unitizers is free (at least grammatically), while the choice of numeral classifiers is determined by the class the noun belongs to. To count books with another classifier than *satsu* 冊, cows with another classifier than *tou* 頭, or cars with another classifier than *dai* 台 is grammatically wrong, but there is nothing (grammatically!) wrong with counting glasses of water rather than buckets of water.[4]

Secondly, and much more importantly, unitizers do not classify. Noun classes separate nouns into semantically distinct categories, and classifiers specify in which noun class a noun belongs (*e.g.* Aikhenvald 2000). Unitizers, however, do not specify noun class. For example, 'a bucket of water' and a 'bucket of apples' do not classify water and apples – there is no noun class of 'things that come in a bucket' (or something similar). The unitizer/classifier distinction can be thought of in terms of quantity and quality. Numeral classifiers are merely about the quality (or kind) of the good counted, not about the quantity (the numeral is about

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3   *Hon* becomes *bon* after *san.*

4   There are circumstances in which it is not grammatically wrong to use another numeral classifier than the standard one. In such (rare) cases, the non-standard classifier is used to stress a particular aspect of some object other than its noun class membership. Sometimes this is done for humorous effect as in *kodomo ni-hiki* 子二匹 meaning 'two children' but counted with the classifier for small animals.

the quantity). For unitizers it is the other way around: unitizers are merely about the quantity of the good counted (or measured, as the unit functions as measure), not about the quality (or kind).

An apparent counterargument to the latter point is that *teki* 滴 ('drop') can only be used to count units of liquid, and thus *classifies* the good counted as a liquid.[5] Moreover, like numeral classifiers and unlike unitizers, 滴 is a bound morpheme rather than a noun.[6] The first aspect of this counterargument is based on a too liberal understanding of noun classes, however. The bare fact that certain unitizers can only be used for goods that satisfy certain requirements does not imply that they classify those goods. 'Grams' can only be used for goods that have mass; 'square centimeters' for goods that have surface; 'cube centimeters' only for goods that have volume, and so forth. This doesn't mean that there are noun classes 'goods that have mass', 'goods that have surface', and so forth. Neither does the fact that only goods that are liquid can be counted in drops mean that 滴 ('drop') classifies those goods as belonging to the *noun class* liquid.

The second aspect of this counterargument is more difficult to assess. The character 滴 does occur as a noun (*i.e.* free morpheme), but is pronounced *shizuku* then, rather than *teki* (which is its pronunciation as unitizer). In Japanese, most characters have multiple pronunciation variants and typically, when they occur as bound morphemes or in a compound (of a certain kind) they have a different pronunciation than when they occur as free morphemes. Numeral classifiers are attached to numerals, and consequently, the classifier has the bound-morpheme pronunciation. For example, as a free morpheme 頭 is pronounced *atama* and means head, as a bound morpheme it is pronounced *tou*, and as a numeral classifier (with the latter pronunciation) it is used to count large mammals.

Unlike numeral classifiers, unitizers never seem to change their pronunciation from free-morpheme to bound-morpheme variant however. Many of them – such as *rittoru* リットル ('liter') and other recent imports – are not written in characters but in phonetic script and, therefore, do not have different pronunciations, and of those that are written in characters and that do have different pronunciations, that difference usually also marks a difference in meaning. The latter is the case for many of the traditional measures such as *koku* 石 (180.4 liter; pronounced *ishi* as a free morpheme and meaning 'stone') that aren't used much anymore (if at all).

Superficially, *teki/shizuku* 滴 behaves similar to *koku/ishi* 石, but there is a significant difference. *Koku* 石 and *ishi* 石 are homographs – two different words written the same way – and the same is the case for many numeral classifiers, but this is not the case for *teki* 滴 and *shizuku* 滴: they both mean 'drop'. That is somewhat atypical for numeral classifiers in Japanese: there often is no obvious relation between the meaning of a character and the noun class it represents as a numeral classifier, and even if they are semantically related, this rarely

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5 A Google search (on October 31st, 2014) suggests that 滴 is used in Chinese – but not in Japanese – to count drops of sand (as in a sandtimer) as well.

6 I owe this counterargument (but not its rejection) to Makoto Kanazawa who mentioned it in a discussion at a workshop at Nihon University in July 2014. My response to the first aspect of the counterargument (*i.e.* the classificatory nature of *teki* 滴) is partly based on a remark made by Eric McCready in that same discussion.

is a relation of (semantic) identity.[7] Consequently, *teki* 滴 may be atypical for a unitizer, but it is (or would be) atypical for a numeral classifier as well. Furthermore, *teki* 滴 is not the only unitizer that show this pattern – *hai/sakzuki* 杯 ('cup') is another example. As a unitizer it is pronounced *hai*; as a free morpheme it is (almost always) pronounced *sakazuki*.[8] For example, *wain ni-hai* ワイン二杯 ('two cups of wine') and *sakazuki-de wain-o nonda* 杯でワインを飲んだ ('(he) drank wine from/with a cup').

Furthermore, the argument from the atypicality of *teki* 滴 depends on the assumption that unitizers must always be free morphemes (nouns, particularly), but it is not at all obvious that this assumption is warranted. Indeed, in English unitizers always are free morphemes, but that doesn't mean that the same *must* be true in all other languages. Arguably, the opposite is true in Japanese: unitizers – like the numeral classifiers they are *syntactically* indistinguishable from – are always bound morphemes: they are – more or less – affixes to numerals, which is illustrated by the fact that they – unlike in English – never become the head noun in a noun phrase. In the English noun phrase 'two cups of wine', 'cup' is the head noun, but in its Japanese equivalent *wain* ワイン ('wain') remains the head noun and takes the appropriate case suffix.

Unitizers unitize; classifiers classify. This, of course, is painfully obvious, but these are their *essential* characteristics. By *necessity* a unitizer unitizes (otherwise it isn't a unitizer), and by *necessity* a classifier classifies (otherwise it isn't a classifier), but of course, necessity does not imply sufficiency. Unitizing may not be sufficient to determine that a morpheme is a unitizer, and the same for classifying and classifiers. Perhaps that is the case indeed, but the assumption that the possibly accidental features of unitizers and classifiers in English (and/or related languages) are the sufficient criteria for those kinds of morphemes in all languages is (born from) an indefensible bias. That is exactly the invalid (and usually unconscious) inference with which *sophisticated othering* starts (see Brons 2014b).

If unitizers and classifiers are mutually exclusive, then perhaps all that needs to be added to the aforementioned necessary characteristics is some clauses marking this mutual exclusivity:

def. 1   *Unitizers* unitize and do not classify (except in a very liberal sense of classification that has nothing to do with noun categorization as it occurs in natural languages).

def. 2   *Classifiers* classify and do not unitize.

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[7]   For example, 台 means 'platform' and is used to count machines such as cars; 枚 means 'stalk' or 'trunk' (of a tree) and is used to count flat things; 座 means 'seat' and is used to count mountains. There are many exceptions, however, such as 人 meaning 'human' and used to count humans, but in almost all of these cases, the noun class designated is very small and specific, and the character refers to members of that exact same class in other uses (*i.e.* when not used as a classifier). 人 is an example, others are 艦 for warships, 校 for schools, 曲 for pieces of music, and so forth.

[8]   It can be argued, however, that as a noun, *sakazuki* 杯 refers to a more specific and smaller type of cup than as a unitizer *hai* 杯, which can also be used to count bowls of something.

And similarly, "mass noun" can be defined without appealing to their accidental features in English as:

def. 3   *Mass nouns* can only be counted by means of unitizers.

Defined as such, Japanese distinguishes unitizers from classifiers and mass nouns from count nouns (which are defined as not needing unitizers in counting).

I think that definition 3 is debatable, however. It may work for English and Japanese and very many other languages, but not for some Nilo-Saharan languages in which oil, sand, and water are countable *without* the help (or intervention) of unitizers (Dimmendaal 2000). Apparently, some languages have their unitizers built-in for some mass terms.

Given the universality of the ontological distinction between masses/stuffs and discrete objects, this can lead to only two conclusions. Either the mass/count distinction is an ontological distinction and has nothing to do with grammar, or it is a grammatical distinction (then definable by def. 3) and has nothing to do with ontology. In either case, the argument for the Mass Noun Thesis fails.[9]

references

Aikhenvald, A. (2000), *Classifiers: a typology of noun categorization devices,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brons, L.L. (2014a), "Needing the other: the anatomy of the Mass Noun Thesis", *Argument* 4.1, 103-122.

Brons, L.L. (2014b – forthcoming), "Othering, an analysis", *Transcience* 5.2.

Dimmendaal, G. J. (2000), "Number marking and noun categorization in Nilo-Saharan languages", *Anthropological Linguistics*, 42.2, 214–261.

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9 Specifically, observation (7) in the 10-step argument (see pp. 106 and 110 of Brons 2014a) is rejected, and consequently, (8), (9), and the othering-constituting conclusion (10) no longer follow.