

Plural semantics and reduplication in Indonesian

Mary Dalrymple

Classifiers provide a means to individuate relevant parts of the denotation of mass nouns in order to allow the parts to be counted. Mass nouns with a numeral modifier require the presence of a classifier word, while count nouns do not; additionally, count nouns but not mass nouns must be plural if they refer to more than one entity. These intuitions underpin the theory of the semantics of bare nominals proposed by Chierchia (1996,1998). In languages like Chinese and Japanese, on Chierchia's view, all nouns are mass nouns, there is no plural morphology, and classifiers are required with numerals. In languages like English, in contrast, nouns are either mass or count, count nouns are marked as either singular or plural, and bare mass nouns, bare plural count nouns, but not bare singular count nouns can appear as arguments to predicates. Chierchia's theory makes interesting predictions about correlations between morphology and syntax, and these accord well with our pretheoretic intuitions about differences between languages like English and languages like Chinese.

In a dissenting article, Chung (2000) proposes Indonesian as a counterexample to Chierchia's typology. In particular, she disputes the necessary link in Chierchia's theory between the requirement for classifiers in Type 1 languages and the absence of plural morphology, claiming that Indonesian has classifiers but also expresses plurality as reduplication. If the connection between the presence of classifiers and the absence of plural morphology does not hold up, Chierchia's transparent connection between morphological expression and semantic interpretation cannot be maintained in a simple manner.

However, Chung's argument goes through only under the assumption that Indonesian reduplication has exactly the same semantics as plural formation in a language like English. We argue that this is not the case, and propose an alternative semantics for Indonesian reduplication that is compatible with Chierchia's theory: reduplication serves to individuate relevant parts of mass nouns in a similar way to classifiers, and also requires a contextually specified, relatively large number of the parts to be involved in the predication. Our theory explains why reduplication is not obligatory for the expression of plurality, and why it is difficult (but not impossible) for reduplicated nouns to be modified with numerals and classifiers; it also makes the right predictions for the semantics of reduplicated nouns like "oil", which can mean "amounts of oil" as well as "types of oil".