

When Mass Nouns Go Plural: The Case of Greek.

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One well known property distinguishing mass from count nouns is that the former do not, whereas the latter do, admit plural morphology. Exceptions to this generalisation can be found when the interpretation of mass nouns is coerced to that of (1):

- (1) a. Standard servings, or typical units of measurement.
- b. Type.
- c. Idiomatic expressions.

The different subcases of (1) are exemplified in (2) - (4) respectively:

- (2) We ordered three waters an hour ago (i.e. glasses, bottles etc. . .)
- (3) Our restaurant serves only three waters (tap water, still mineral water, and sparkling mineral water)
- (4) Matilda's waters broke.

There are also cases that don't fall squarely within any of the above categories, as in (5) but which can be made to look like cases of (1-a) under a suitable generalisation of the latter.

- (5) The Greek territorial waters

In Greek, however, a typical mass noun like *water* can be pluralised in its typical mass uses. Sentence (6) (thankfully) does not mean that bottles or glasses of water are falling from the ceiling, nor does it mean that tap water, still mineral water, and sparkling mineral water are dripping down:

- (6) Trexoun nera apo to tavani
drip-3rd-pl waters-pl-neut-nom from the ceiling-neut-sg
Water is dripping from the ceiling.

Further examples like (6) are easy to construct:¹

- (7) To patoma itan gemato nera
The floor was full water-pl
The floor was full of water
- (8) (Ta) Nera ke (ta) ladia sto dromo na fovase
(the) waters and (the) oils on-the road SM be-afraid
Be afraid of water and oil on the road
- (9) Me tosa nera ke xomata pos na mi gemisi to spiti laspes
with so-many-pl water-pl and earth-pl how SM not fill-3rd the house mud-pl
With so much water and earth how do you expect not to fill the house with mud.
- (10) Irthe katefthian apo tin amoudia mesa ke mas gemise amous
came-he straight from the beach inside and us-cl filled sand-s

¹In the glosses, SM stands for *Subjunctive Marker*.

He came from the beach straight iside and he filled the place with sand.

Clearly in the examples (7) - (10) there is no reference to standard units or types of water, oil, mud, earth (dirt), and sand, and they are not idiomatic expressions either. The meaning of *water*, *mud*, *sand*, *oil*, *earth* is that of the mass noun. The process of pluralisation of mass nouns is not, however, completely general. Thus, it is only in a list/enumeration that the plural of water or electricity is grammatical (12), not when it appears on its own (11):

(11) Kopike to/*ta nero/*nera
was-cut-off the water
The water was cut off

(12) Ase, ti na sou pw, kopikan nera, revmata, tilefona ... tipota
leave-it, what SM you-cl say-1st, were-cut-off waters electricities, telephones ... nothing
den ixame
neg had-1st-pl
It was terrible, what can I say, water, electricity, telephone were cut off ... we had nothing

Furthermore, we can note that in cases of massification of a count noun, again the plural is possible:

(13) Den mou aresi i salata me (to/ta) milo/mila
Neg me-cl like the salad with (the-sg/pl) apple/apples
I don't like salad with apple

Although the empirical picture needs to be sharpened there is one emerging question here, namely, what does the plural marking in mass nouns signal? if all mass nouns *can* be pluralised in Greek could that mean that Greek is the language that Chierchia (2003) claims does not exist? A language, that is, whose nouns are all count.² Or, alternatively, it tells us something about the nature of number marking in Greek. Could Greek mass nouns not be inherently (i.e.. lexically) plural as Chierchia (1998) claims? Moreover, this type of data raises questions concerning the status of the Nominal Mapping Parameter and Semantic Parameterisation more generally. These are the questions that I will be addressing in this talk on the basis of the data shown here.

References

- Chierchia, G. (1998). Plurality of mass nouns and the notion of semantic parameter. In S. Rothstein, editor, *Events and Grammar*. Kluwer, Dordrecht.
- Chierchia, G. (2003). Language, thought and reality after Chomsky. Manuscript, University of Milan.

²Chierchia claims this is a corollary of the universal mass status of nouns referring to liquids.