

Towards a semantics for group nouns

There is a longstanding debate in the semantics literature concerning whether group nouns (GNs) such as *committee*, *team*, *group*, *bunch (of flowers)*, *deck (of cards)* etc. denote atoms or pluralities (Link (1983), Landman (1989), Barker (1992), Schwarzschild (1996)). On the one hand, these items combine with apparently singular predicates (1); on the other, they can to a limited degree combine with plural (distributive, collective, reciprocal) predicates (2). Plural-like behavior by these items is further manifested in their ability to license plural agreement in British and Canadian English (3).

The point of departure for our analysis is the observation that items such as *committee* and *collection* which have typically been classed together in the literature, in fact display a host of differences. We therefore divide group nouns into two classes - committee-type nouns such as *team*, *class*, *army*, *group (of people)* etc, and collection-type nouns such as *bunch (of flowers)*, *deck (of cards)*, *pile (of dishes)*, *group (of statues)* etc. Committee-type nouns (i) involve a notion of *membership*¹; (ii) require no *of*-complement; (iii) can combine with plural predicates even in the singular; (iv) license plural agreement in British and Canadian English. Collection type-nouns, on the other hand, (i) involve no notion of membership; their constituent parts (determined by the *of*-complement) are not members of the group referred to by the noun; (ii) require an overt *of*-complement or a context that is sufficiently rich to identify their parts (4); (iii) cannot in the singular combine with plural predicates (5); (iv) do not license plural agreement in British and Canadian English (6).

There is a fifth difference between the two classes which merits considering in some detail: we propose that committee-nouns, uniquely among singular items, have atomic proper parts that are defined or ‘stable’². Collections, on the other hand, are like items like *book* or *cake* in lacking stable atomic proper parts. This difference reveals itself in partitive constructions of the form ‘Det of the GN’. We shall refer to the class of determiners that typically can participate in the partitive construction only when the nominal complement of *of* is plural as ‘count determiners’ (7). Such determiners can combine with committee-nouns³, but not with collections (8). Furthermore, given a determiner that may participate in the partitive with either a committee- or a collection-noun, plural agreement is licensed in the former but not the latter case (9). We posit that the atomic proper parts of a committee-noun are the committee’s members; hence while there are various scenarios that could verify (10a), (10b) is true only if half of the members of the committee are submerged underwater.

We explore the possibility of using this discovery about the differences in the part-whole structures of committees and collections, along with an approach to plural predication that invokes the notion of cover (eg Schwarzschild 1996), to explain the differences between the two classes of group noun in terms of the predicates that they can combine with, and the agreement facts. Additionally, we argue that the *of*-complement plays a

¹ We have in mind here the ordinary English sense of ‘membership’, rather than the set-theoretic notion.

² On the notion of *stable atom*, see Chierchia (in progress), and recent handouts (Ling 207r, The Syntax-Semantics Interface, Spring 2009, Harvard).

³ Though with varying degrees of acceptability for different speakers.

different role for the two classes; the obligatory nature of an overt (or contextually understood) *of*-complement for collections but not committees argues for their being treated as relational items on a par with measure nouns like *kilo* and words like *quantity* and *amount*. We explore the consequences of extending to the domain of collection type nouns Chierchia's treatment of these latter two classes as denoting variables over partitions. If there is time, we will consider potential analogues between the developing picture and theories of kind-reference and the mass/count distinction.

- 1a. The committee was founded in 1911.
- 1b. The deck of cards is missing a Jack.
- 1c. The basketball team consists of very tall players.

2. The family was intelligent/assembled in the dining room/had different interests.

3. The committee were intelligent/always meet in the boardroom/dislike each other.

4. John bought several bunches for Mary.
(Strange out of the blue; acceptable as a continuation of, 'The florist has sold a lot of roses lately'...)

- 5a. *The bunch of flowers looks nice together.
(Compare: The flowers look nice together.)
- 5b. ?The pile of dishes is chipped.
(Compare: The dishes are chipped).
- 5c. The deck of cards is a similar size.
(No reciprocal reading; compare: The cards are similar sizes.)

- 6a. *The bunch of flowers are made up of roses and violets.
- 6b. *The deck of cards resemble each other.

- 7a. 3/Many/Few of the boys/cakes had been at the party.
- 7b. *3/Many/Few of the boy/cake had been at the party.

- 8a. 3/Many/Few of the family had been at the party.
- 8b. *3/Many/Few of the pile of dishes had been washed.

- 9a. Half of the family were at the party.
- 9b. *Half of the pile of dishes were dirty.

- 10a. Half of the bunch of flowers was submerged underwater.
- 10b. Half of the committee was submerged underwater.