

BARE SINGULAR MASS NOUNS CAN BE INTERPRETED AS COUNT NOUNS

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The basic denotation of bare singulars (BS) in Brazilian Portuguese (BP) as in ‘Eu comprei livro’ (I bought book) has been the topic of much debate in formal semantics. Some authors (cf. Munn & Schmitt 2005, Schmitt & Munn 1999, Müller 2002 and Paraguassu-Martins & Müller 2007, Dobrovie-Sorin & Pires de Oliveira 2008) argue that BSs in BP are number neutral count nouns and cannot be analyzed as mass nouns. Others (Pires de Oliveira & Rothstein 2011) argue that BSs in BP have mass denotations. We explore experimentally two possible predictions of Pires de Oliveira & Rothstein’s (2011) proposal. First, that BS count nouns can be interpreted as referring to Volume (mass interpretation) and Number (count interpretation). Second, that BS mass nouns could be interpreted as referring to Number (just like BS count nouns). Two offline tasks were used in order to test those predictions: a truth value judgment task and a quantity judgment task. **Truth value judgment task** (Crain & Thornton 1998) this task was used to evaluate: 1) whether utterances that included BS mass nouns (*água* ‘water’) can be felicitously interpreted as count nouns (Number (1b), not Volume (1a)); whether utterances that include BS count nouns (*bola* ‘ball’) and aggregates (*família* ‘family’) can be felicitously interpreted as mass nouns (Volume, not Number). 22 adults were exposed to 8 items (2 BS count nouns, 2 BS mass nouns, 2 BS aggregate nouns) randomized in two different lists:

(1a)



(1b)



‘Tem muita água no chão’

(There is *muita** water on the floor)

**muita* = ambiguous quantifier (a lot/many)

Results in the ‘Volume scenario’ (2a), participants accepted the description with a BS mass nouns in all trials (100%). For count and aggregate nouns, 73% of the answers indicated that count nouns can be interpreted as referring to Volume and only 9% of the answers suggested the same pattern for aggregates. In the ‘Number scenario’, participants accepted the description with a BS count noun (95%) and BS aggregate noun (90%). For BS mass nouns, we observed 73% of acceptance, which indicates that mass nouns can be interpreted as referring to the number of individuals (count). This suggests that BS mass nouns and BS count nouns can both be interpreted as Number and Volume. **Quantity judgment studies** (Barner and Snedeker (2005) and Bale and Barner (2009)) while presenting two different photos, one with two big portions of *x* (Volume) and another with six different portions of *x* (Number), we asked whether a person had more *x* than another. Subjects answered 3 questions with a BS mass noun, 3 questions with a BS count noun, and 3 questions with a BS aggregate noun. **Results** participants consistently chose the ‘Number’ photo for BS count (99%) and BS aggregate (97%) nouns; BS mass nouns are rarely associated with the ‘Number’ answer (21%). Thus, the default interpretation for BS mass nouns in neutral contexts is a ‘Volume’ interpretation and a ‘Number’ interpretation is the default interpretation for BS count and BS aggregate nouns. **Discussion:** supporting Pires de Oliveira & Rothstein (2011) BS nouns - count or mass - in BP can be interpreted as both Number and Volume as long as the context supports these interpretations. In neutral contexts, a count interpretation prevails for BS count and BS aggregate nouns and a mass interpretation prevails for BS mass nouns as also showed by Bevilacqua (2014) and Lima (2014, in press).

Keywords: experimental semantics; count/mass distinction; bare singulars; Brazilian Portuguese.

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