Mass Nouns as Kind Referring  
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1 The Quinean Intuition
Mass nouns relate to the world differently than count nouns. Mass nouns “divide their reference” while count nouns fail to.¹

2 What are mass nouns?
- Pluralization: mass nouns don’t take the plural morpheme and they fail to exhibit the singular/plural contrast.
  1 There is gold in that mine.
  2 #There are golds in that mine.
- Determiner distribution: determiners such as “much” and “little” only combine with mass nouns while determiners such as “many” and “few” only combine with count nouns.
  3 Much gold is contaminated.
  4 #Many water is contaminated
- Obligatoriness of measure or classifier phrases to combine with numerals.
  5 #Three gold are beautiful.
  6 Three ingots of gold are beautiful.

3 The Traditional Semantic Positions
- The name view²
  This view is motivated by the fact that mass nouns often have the same distribution as proper names.
  7 Dave is in front of the room.
  8 Water is in the glass.

  9 Dave studies philosophy.
  10 Water quenches thirst.

¹Quine (1960)  
²Parsons (1979)
• **The predicate view**³
  This view is motivated by the fact that mass nouns often have the same
distribution as predicative count nouns and adjectives.

  11 That liquid is water.
  12 That liquid is rancid.
  13 That liquid is a drink.

• **The Mixed View**⁴
  This view is motivated by both of the above.

4 My Plan

I claim that mass nouns are kind referring. In other words, all occurrences of
mass nouns are singular terms that refer to kinds. While my view is closest to
the name view, there are important differences.

My Plan:

1. Show that bare occurrences of mass nouns aren’t predicates.
2. Show that non-bare occurrences of mass nouns aren’t predicates.
3. Explicate the kind-referring view and explain why it is superior to all three
   traditional views.

5 Bare Mass Nouns Aren’t Predicates

Often, as in ”Lake Erie consists of water”, mass nouns occur in what appears
to the the second argument places of a term that denotes a two place relation.
If mass nouns are predicates, they cannot fill this argument place. Thus, the
predicate theorist is forced to claim that there is a unpronounced determiner
that combines with the mass nouns and allows them to fill this place.⁵ This
claim, however, leads to trouble.⁶

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³Burge (1972), Koslicki (1999)
⁵There are other options for the predicate theorist, but I think they are doomed. First, the predicate theorist could claim that there is a type shifting operation that shifts the mass
nouns to the proper type. In addition to appearing ad hoc, such a move seems to give up on the spirit of the predicate view. Second, the predicate theorist could claim that all terms
such as “is constituted of” are ambiguous. The problem with this move is that it commits
one both to massive ambiguity and to unexplained connections between the distinct meanings
that all such terms are ambiguous between.

⁶The data and reasoning in this section follows Carlson (1980). Carlson’s main goal in his
(1980) and his only goal in his (1977) is to argue that bare plurals function as names of kinds.
Though I will remain largely silent on plurals, my view on mass nouns will be significantly
stronger than Carlson’s. I will argue that all mass nouns refer to kinds, not simply those that
occur without determiners.
• False scope predictions
  “Everyone craved water” has only one reading while the sentence “Every-
one craved some water” has two.

• Missing particular readings
  “Sam craved some water” has a particular reading on which there is some
  specific water that Sam craves. “Sam craved water” doesn’t have this
  reading.

• Unexpected Anaphora
  “Dave saw some water and Karen saw it too” is true just in case Karen
  and Dave saw the same water. “Dave saw water and Karen saw it too” is
  true just in case we each saw water.

6 Non-Bare Mass Nouns Aren’t Predicates

It is always possible to enumerate the extension of a predicate. Here’s how. This recipe is far from practical, but it does show that enumeration is possible.

Step 1: enumerate the number of actual and possible terms such that substi-
tuting those terms into \( \langle x \text{ is MT} \rangle \) yields a true sentence.

Step 2: Eliminate all but one from each list of co-referring terms.

Step 3: Count the terms.

Once we realize that it is always possible to enumerate the extension of a predicate, determiner distribution on the predicate view becomes mysterious. As we will see, a non-predicate view gives a far better explanation of determiner distribution.

7 Mass Nouns as Kind Referring

My hypothesis: mass nouns are kind-referring singular terms. Kinds will be taken to have the following four properties, which I will not defend but which accord with our pre-theoretical intuitions.

Ductility: unlike sets, kinds need not have their members essentially or eter-
nally. In other possible worlds and at other times there are different people
and, as such, different instances of mankind.

Vulgarity: unlike properties, kinds have many features generally ascribed to
ordinary spatiotemporal objects and groups. Mankind pervades the planet
and is depraved, the property of being a man is neither.

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7 Obviously, some predicates have uncountable extensions. If I was being more careful I’d write that it is always possible to assess the cardinality of a predicate’s extension.

8 Moltmann(2004) gives reasons to think that bare mass nouns are kind referring and has a similar view of the nature of kinds to mine.
Structure: unlike fusions, the parts of members of a kind need not themselves be members of that kind. My hand is a part of me and I am a member of mankind. However, my hand is not a member of mankind. Contrastively, my hand is part of me and I am a part of the fusion of all humans, as is my hand.

Generality: Generality: unlike ordinary individuals, kinds have instances. I am an instance of mankind, as are the freshmen in philosophy 101 at Cornell. However, it does not make sense to ask for instances of ordinary individuals such as me or my frying pan. People and frying pans do not have instances.

Kinds often inherit properties from their instances. In this way they are analogous to ordinary objects which inherit properties from their parts. This fact about kinds explains the truth of sentences as diverse as “Water is wet”, “Water is in the tub”, and “Lake Erie consists of water”.

Some advantages of the Kind-Referring View:

Determiner Distribution: count determiners can’t combine with mass nouns because mass nouns do not have enumerable extensions; there is nothing for the determiners to count.

Anaphora: the referents of mass nouns are available as the referents of anaphoric pronouns.

Missing Particular Readings: A craving for a kind is general—see Generality—thus only the general reading is available.

False Scope Predictions since mass nouns are singular terms, they are scopally inert.

8 Mass Quantification

The kind referring view commits us to a non standard view of the semantics of mass determiners. (Those that can combine with mass nouns.) I take it to be a virtue of the view that we give a distinct account of the semantics of mass determiners. This is because, intuitively, count determiners allow us to enumerate while mass determiners allow us to measure. The type of view I favor is one on which mass determiners express relations between kinds and properties.9

9Higginbotham (1994) has developed an extremely similar view. Matthewson (1999) and (2001) has given independent reasons for favoring such a view of the semantics of determiners.
9 Mass Nouns Aren’t Names

The kind referring view is close to the name view, but I think it is a mistake to call it such. Proper names, as a category, are semantically unconstrained; they can refer to anything. Mass nouns, on the other hand, are constrained to refer to kinds. Since kinds are general, mass nouns allow us to speak generally without denoting any particular objects. In Quinean terms, they don’t divide their reference.

References


