4. Major subclasses of nouns and verbs

Grammatical classifications are not limited to proposing broad categories of the noun, the verb, the adjective, etc. It is often useful and informative to propose more specific subcategories within these broad classes. In this chapter we will focus on two major subclasses of nouns and verbs. Even though the two types of words seem to be very different in nature, the basic cognitive mechanisms governing their respective subtypes are surprisingly similar.

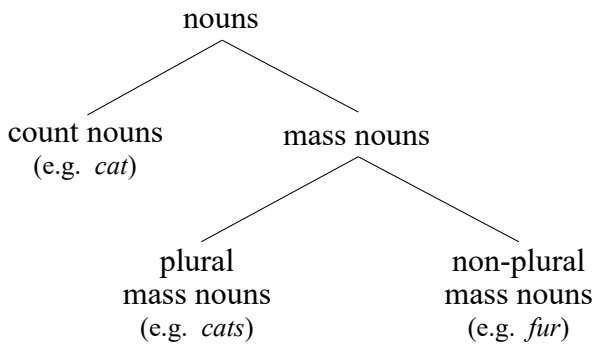
4.1. Mass and count nouns

Cognitive Grammar offers its own interpretation of the traditional distinction between countable and uncountable nouns, although uncountable nouns are renamed into *mass nouns* to better reflect the way we think about them. Thus, when we think about things, we usually think about objects with clearly delineated boundaries, like cars, houses, and rocks, or amorphous masses with vague or elusive boundaries like water, sand, or air. These are the two basic **conceptual archetypes**. A conceptual archetype can be thought of as a mental "template" for thinking about of things. By CG's lights, the traditional countable/uncountable distinction is not a distinction between two rigid categories of nouns, but two different ways of thinking about things. Therefore, a **count noun** is not so much a cut-and-dry type of noun, but a noun whose meaning is construed in accordance with the count object archetype. A **mass noun**, in turn, is a noun whose meaning is construed in accordance with the mass archetype. Table 2 summarizes the key features of count object and mass archetypes according to Langacker (cf. Langacker 2008, sec. 5.1):

Count objects are…	**Masses are…**
• *bounded* – The boundaries of the thing are inside the immediate scope of conception.	• *unbounded* – The boundaries of the thing are outside the immediate scope of conception.
• *heterogeneous* – Objects are not the same throughout.	• *homogeneous* – Masses are the same throughout.
• *non-contractible* – Portions of count objects are not the same as the objects.	• *contractible* – Every portion of a mass is a valid instances of the mass.
• *replicable* – Count objects can be replicated; after adding another results in a plural amount of objects.	• *expansible* – Adding portion of mass results in the same mass.

Table 2: Masses vs. count objects

Grammatical evidence suggests, however, that the picture may be more complicated than that. There are good reasons to propose that we may also need to distinguish **plural masses**. Masses of this sort are simply masses composed of multiple instances of count objects and are expressed by plural forms of countable nouns, e.g. *cats*.



As the name suggests, plural masses are a type of masses, as the behave grammatically unlike count nouns (cf. Langacker 2008, sec. 5.1.1):

- Only count nouns (but not mass nouns) can be used with the indefinite article.
  - *They have {*cat / fur / cats}.*
  - *They have a {cat / *fur / *cats}.*
- Mass nouns (but not count nouns) can be used with quantifiers like *most* and *all*.
  - *most {*cat / fur / cats}*
  - *all {*cat / fur / cats}*

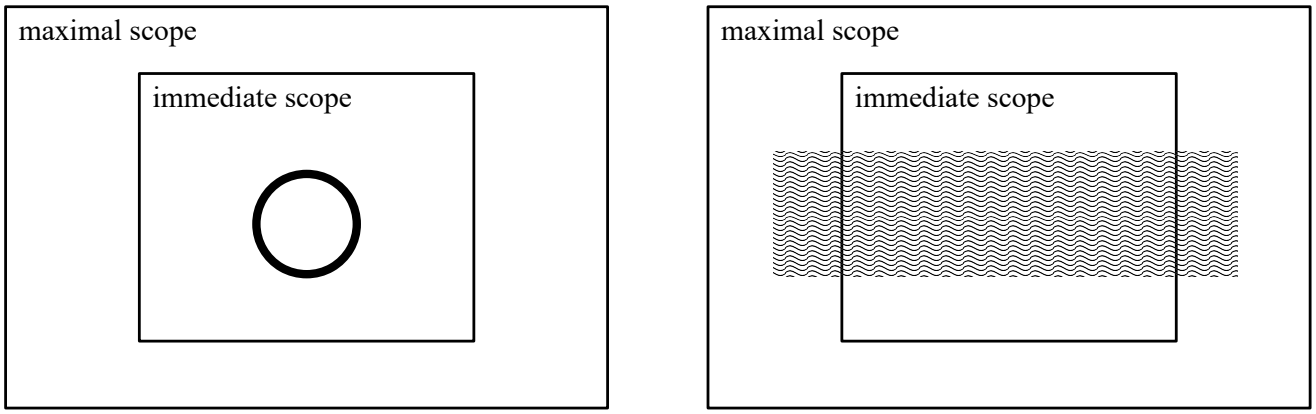
Yet grammatical behavior also provides reasons for drawing a distinction between plural and non-plural masses:

- Non-plural masses can be used with the demonstratives *this* and *that*; plural masses can be used with *these* and *those*.
  - *these cats* vs. *this fur*
  - *those cats* vs. *that fur*
- Non-plural masses can be used with the quantifiers *much* and *little*; plural masses can be used with *many* and *few*.
  - *many cats* vs. *much fur*
  - *few cats* vs. *little fur*
- The adjectives *several* and *numerous* can be used only with plural masses.
  - *several cats* vs. **several fur*
  - *numerous cats* vs. **numerous fur*

It should be remembered that construal is dynamic and flexible, so that we are usually able to think about things and events in new, non-standard ways. For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that what we typically think of as a mass referent can be re-conceptualized into a count referent. While in the example above *fur* is offered as an example of a mass noun, there is also a count variant of the word referring to an item of clothing, like in *Anne has two **furs** in her closet*. The flexibility of construal is reflected in alternate senses of various count and mass nouns.

(1)(a) ***Water** is composed of hydrogen and oxygen.* (mass noun)
(b) *I bought two **waters**.* (count noun)
(2)(a) *I don't like **meat**.* (mass noun)
(b) *We offer a wide selection of **meats**.* (count noun)
(3)(a) *The plane crashed, because it ran out of **runway**.* (mass noun)
(b) *The airport has only two **runways**.* (count noun)

To capture the key conceptual difference between mass and count nouns, we need to return to the notion of immediate scope of construal discussed in Section 2.2. We know that count nouns express the construal of a bounded object. More technically, in the case of a bounded object, the boundaries of the thing are within the immediate scope of construal. Less technically, when we think about bounded object, we easily imagine the boundaries separating it from its surroundings. This is quite typical of objects whose boundaries are well delineated and easy to perceive, like rocks, chair, and cats. Mass nouns, in turn, denote unbounded masses, i.e. things whose boundaries are beyond the immediate scope of construal. This, of course, does not mean that masses have no boundaries or that we are entirely unaware of them. Rather, it means that we do not readily think about them, because they are vague, hard to observe, or irrelevant for some reason. When I say *I don't like meat* as in (2a), where the concept MEAT is construed as an unbounded mass, I am not saying that meat is somehow boundless in the real world – after all, not everything is meat, so meat must end somewhere. Instead, I am saying that I do not like eating a particular type of food in general. Since I do not eat meat – any meat whatsoever – in this particular context there is no need to emphasize the "boundedness" of a singular piece of meat. In other words, I am referring to a particular kind of substance, rather than any specific portion of the substance with definite shape and size, so the unbounded construal that ignores the boundaries of the thing is a natural choice in this context. The difference between bounded and unbounded construal with respect to the immediate scope of conception is sketched in Figure 4.1.



bounded object (e.g. *cat*) unbounded mass (e.g. *fur*)

Figure 4.1: Bounded vs. unbounded construal in nouns

4.2. Perfective vs. imperfective verbs

There are many ways of subdividing verbs depending on the theoretical criteria we choose to take into consideration. In this section, we will have a closer look at the distinction between **perfective** and **imperfective** verbs. Even though it may not be apparent at first blush, the conceptual mechanisms underlying this distinction are in fact very similar to the ones behind the count/mass noun distinction.

Perfective and imperfective verbs reflects two different ways of construing the processes denoted by the verbs. Just like nouns, the two construals reflect two conceptual archetypes for a process. Roughly speaking, "perfective" processes have clearly delineated beginning and end, and the are composed of several distinct stages. Oftentimes the participants involved in the process undergo some kind of change. Good illustrations of this archetype are denoted by the verbs *to cook*, *to eat*, *to watch*, and *to walk*. "Imperfective" processes have vague, unspecified, or irrelevant beginning and end, and less differentiated stages. Oftentimes, there is no clear or obvious change happening to the participants. Examples of this construal are denoted by the verbs *to know*, *to see*, *to prefer*, and *to be*.

Grammatical evidence for the distinction is that in English perfective verbs sound more natural in the continuous aspect and imperfective verbs in the simple aspect. Consider, for example, the sentences in (4).

(4)(a) *I'm **eating** an apple.*
(b) **I **eat** an apple.*
(c) *I **like** apples.*
(d) **I'm **liking** apples.*

Why is it so? Eating is a deliberate and controlled action with clearly delineated beginning and end. Liking is the opposite: it would be hard to argue that the speaker likes apples "deliberately" or that they have full conscious control over their preferences. Moreover, the beginning and the end of the process are somewhat vague and unspecified. In principle, there must have been a time when the speaker had

never eaten an apple and therefore had not liked them. Since the speaker likes them presently, there must have been a time when they developed the liking for the fruit. Yet it could be hard for the speaker to pinpoint this exact moment. Similarly, it is far from clear whether the speaker will ever change their mind about apples, so the process does not necessarily have a distinct endpoint. Furthermore, eating is more "structured": it consists of several different stages. Liking, on the other hand, does not consist of stages: it is simply a fairly stable and unchanging preference for something. In sum, the perfective construal takes place when the process is thought of as structured and delimited in time, like eating in (4a), and the imprefective construal takes place when the process is thought of an "unstructured" and not delimited in time, like liking in (4c). Just like in the case of nouns, construals behind verbs are flexible and dynamic, so it is usually possible to come up with contexts in which, for example, a perfective noun sounds natural in the simple aspect (e.g. *I eat one apple every day*), but without any additional provisos (4b) and (4d) sound rather weird.

In more technical terms, the distinction between the perfective and imperfective aspects is essentially not unlike the one between count and mass nouns discussed in Section 4.1. The claim that the beginning and the end of a perfective process is clearly delineated can be cashed out in more abstract and technical terms by saying that the beginning and the end of the process in within the immediate scope of construal. In this sense, perfective verbs are similar (in a rather abstract sense) to count noun construal, where the boundaries of the thing are within the immediate scope as well. The beginning and the end of a process denoted by an imperfective are less specified; hence, they fall outside the immediate scope of construal. This makes them similar to masses, whose boundaries are outside the immediate scope, too. Just like in the case of mass nouns, the fact that the boundaries of the process are outside the immediate scope does not mean that the process will never end. After all, the preferences of the speaker of (4c) may evolve over time, so that they may not like apples anymore in the future. It only means that the start and the end of the process is less clearly defined in the construal. To put this point impressionistically, imperfective processes are "diffuse" in time just masses are "diffuse" is space and the endpoints of the process are "fuzzy" in time like the boundaries of masses are "fuzzy" in space. The distinction is sketched in Figure 4.2 (pay attention to overall structural similarities between Figures 4.1 and 4.2).

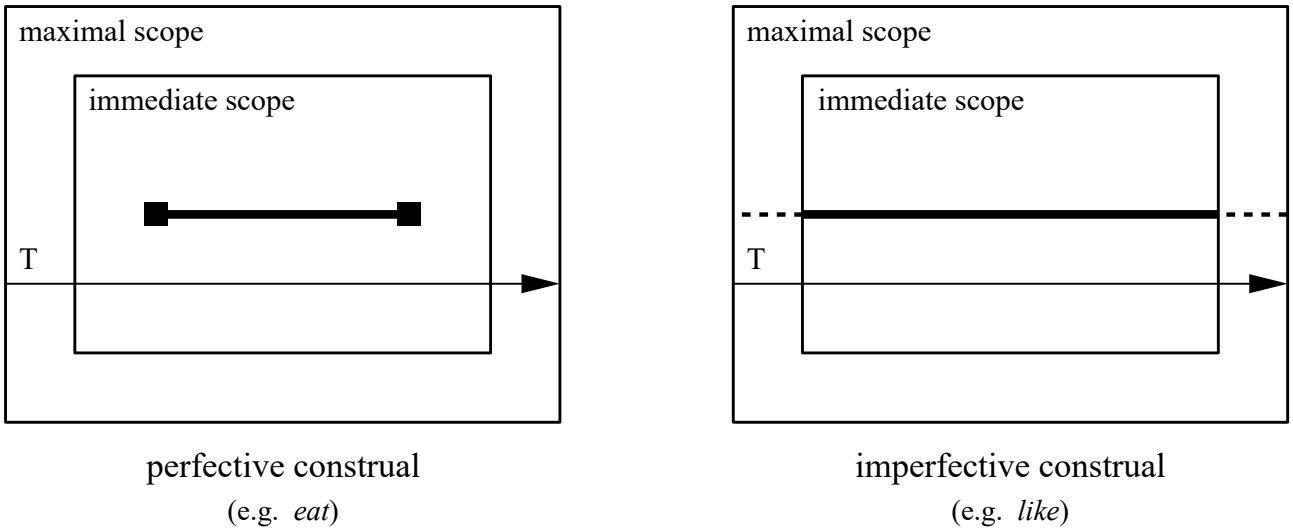


Figure 4.2: Perfective vs. imperfective construal in verbs

Some further examples may help to clarify the difference between perfective and imperfective verbs (adapted from Langacker 2008, 148–49). The pairs of sentences in (5) also illustrate the flexibility of construal: it is often possible to think about processes in alternate ways depending on the situation. Moreover, alternate construals have consequences for the grammatical shape of sentences: the perfective construal is expressed by the continuous aspect, while the imperfective with the simple aspect.

(5)(a) *She **is covering** the hole with a picture*. (perfective verb)
(b) *A picture **covers** the hole.* (imperfective verb)
(c) *We **are connecting** the wires.* (perfective verb)
(d) *A tunnel **connects** the two buildings.* (imperfective verb)
(e) *She **is swimming** right now.* (perfective verb)
(f) *She **swims** well.* (imperfective verb)

In (5a) the process of covering has clearly defined endpoints: it will last as long as the hole is successfully concealed by the picture. This is a perfective construal, which goes well with the continuous aspect. In (5b) the process is depicted as lasting indefinitely in time, so we do not know when it started and when it ends. Hence, the construal is imperfective and the simple aspects is more natural in this case. (5c) and (5d) are very similar to the previous pair, but they illustrate the construal with a different process. In (5e) the action of swimming has well defined endpoints: is started when the woman got into the water and will end when she gets out. The sentence in (5f), depicts the process as more "diffuse" over time and the endpoints are irrelevant (if they can be specified at all); what is important is the fact that the woman has a certain skill rather than the fact that the skill was mastered at some definite time in the past.

The distinctions between count and mass nouns, as well as perfective and imperfective verbs can be characterized in a different fashion (although a reader hoping for a less abstract account than the one offered in this chapter should not rejoice prematurely). The crucial element of the alternative formulation is the cognitive ability known as scanning, which is the main topic of the next chapter.

Study questions

1. What are other examples of nouns (apart from the ones mentioned in this chapter) that can have both "count" and "mass" construals? Provide examples in full sentences.
2. What are other examples of verbs (apart from the ones mentioned in this chapter) that can have both perfective and imperfective construals? Provide examples in full sentences.
3. Can you think of a context in which 4(d), **I'm **liking** *apples*, is grammatically correct? How does the context differ from a typical situation in which the verb *to like* is used?

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  - Section 5
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