ON THE COUNT/MASS DISTINCTION: ASPECTS OF THE QUANTIFIER SYSTEM IN WAPISHANA

This work aims at discussing the distinction between count and mass nouns by focusing on the description of the quantifier system of Wapishana, a language of the Arawak Family, spoken by the Wapishana people, who inhabit part of the territory of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana and the region of Serra da Lua, which comprehends the counties of Cantá and Bonfim, in Roraima State, Brazil. Our claim is that Wapishana seems to challenge any simplistic attempt to fit languages into one of the patterns traditionally provided in the literature on this semantic contrast, as it displays the count/mass distinction as well as it makes use of quantity classifiers; furthermore, it linguistically distinguishes between liquid and non-liquid mass. According to Rothstein (to appear), two sets of languages have usually been contrasted: (i) those in which the count/mass distinction is linguistically expressed, such as English, and (ii) those in which no noun can be directly modified by numbers and, therefore, require the presence of classifiers (c.f. Deny 1976; Grinevald & Seifart, 2004), such as Chinese (example in Rothstein, to appear, p. 13):

(1) sān *(ge) pingguō
   three Cl apple
   'three apples'

Wapishana displays the count/mass distinction, which is morphologically expressed in the language (see examples (2)-(3), with the presence of number inflection and the possibility of counting), but, on the other hand, it also makes use of classifiers, as can be seen in the examples in (4):

(2) a. João turi nii chururuØ
    João buy-3p-sg np Trouser-sg.
    ‘João bought one pair of trousers.’
  b. João turi nii idikinhayda’y churura-nau
    João buy-3p-sg np three Trouser-pl.
    ‘João bought three trousers.’

(3) a. Pedro su’utan kanyz tumkiz u’i
    Pedro harvested cassava make flour
    ‘Pedro harvested cassava in order to make flour.’
  b. * Pedro su’utan kanyz tumkiz u’i-nhau
    Pedro harvested cassava make flour-pl.
    ‘Pedro harvested cassava in order to make flour.’

(4) a. Zyn turi nii diatan dynyi kinha
    girl buy np two milk carton
    ‘The girl bought two cartons of milk.’
  b. * Zyn turi nii diatan dynyi
    girl buy np two milk
    ‘The girl bought two milks.’

We will assume a relativized view of classifiers in order to cover cases in which those do not occur as morphemes or particles, but as lexical items, as seems to be the case of *kinha (‘carton’) and many others. Their omission yields ungrammatical constructions in Wapishana, whereas constructions such as ‘one water’, ‘three coffees’ and even ‘two shits’ (‘I don’t give two shits about you’) have been attested in English, a language that traditionally displays the count/mass distinction and in principle would ban such constructions. To support the position that languages do not easily divide into the above mentioned traditional patterns, Rothstein (to appear) presents evidence from Hungarian and Western Armenian, languages which display the

1 np stands for ‘non-present’, indicating ‘past’ in the examples in question.
count/mass distinction, but which also make use of classifiers. Wapishana might be categorized together with these languages if it were not for two other properties, listed as follows: (i) it allows bare singular noun constructions (a property that is widely observed in Brazilian Portuguese; c.f. Müller & Oliveira, 2004; Müller & Doron, 2012; Pires de Oliveira, 2014), as illustrated in (5) and, most interestingly, (ii) it linguistically distinguishes between liquid and non-liquid mass through the use of the quantifiers tybary and diri’i (both meaning ‘a lot of’; the former being used to quantify over liquids; the latter used to quantify over non-liquid mass), respectively illustrated in (6) and (7):

(5) Kainha’au kurii ipei kabayn dia’a
    exist-past mouse all house in
    (lit. ‘There was mouse all over the house.’)
    ‘There were mice all over the house.’

    Woman-pl. bring much-liq. water
    ‘The women brought a lot of water.’

b. * Zyn-nau na’akan diri’i wyn.
    Woman-pl. bring much-non-liq. water
    ‘The women brought a lot of water.’

(7) a. Ana warakan diri’i awati’i niken nii sakichap kamuu.
    Ana cook-3p-sg. much-non-liq. rice eat np noon
    ‘Ana cooked a lot of rice for lunch.’

b. * Ana warakan tybary awati’i niken nii sakichap kamuu.
    Ana cook-3p-sg. much-liq. rice eat np noon
    ‘Ana cooked a lot of rice for lunch.’

These facts lead us to conclude that with respect to the discussion on the count/mass distinction, Wapishana furnishes further evidence against the traditional thought that “there is little crosslinguistic variation in the general grammatical architecture with respect to how the semantic contrast is expressed” (Rothsteins’ criticism; cf. Rothstein, to appear, p. 13). Furthermore, with this study we intend to contribute with the discussion on what the count/mass distinction really is, taking into account the observation, by a number of authors (cf. Chierchia, 2010; Kulkarni, Rothstein & Treves, 2013) that the distinction between count and mass nouns is far from being clear and predictable across languages.

References:
PIRES DE OLIVEIRA, R. (2014) Dobras e redobras do singular nu no português brasileiro: costurando a semântica entre as línguas. EDIPUCRS.