

Speaker: **Gennaro Chierchia**  
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Title: **Countability, Individuation and Semantic Variation**

Date: Monday, November 13, 2006

Time: 4:00pm

Place: Rosenfeld Hall (corner Temple and Grove)

Abstract:

The way in which we count and express quantities in the languages of the world has been used in recent debates to probe the extent of semantic variation and to explore the relation between semantic categories and other (extralinguistic) conceptual systems (such as the system of objects vs. substances investigated by developmental psychologists like S. Carey and L. Spelke or primatologists like M. Hauser). In this talk, I intend to pursue such line of research further, starting from the following two puzzles.

First, in number marking languages like Romance or Germanic, the phenomenon of fake mass nouns is widely attested. These are nouns like *furniture* that are grammatically mass (e.g. do not combine with numerals \**three furnitures*) but cognitively count (for experimental evidence that furniture patterns with count nouns when it comes to counting / individuating tasks see, e.g., Barner and Snedeker's 2005 Cognition paper).

So the first question is: why do fake mass nouns come about?

Second, as is well known, in classifier languages like Chinese, the macrosyntax of every noun closely resembles that of mass nouns in English; so much so that it has been claimed that in classifier languages every noun is mass. In contrast with this, recent research (e.g. Cheng and Sybesma 99) has shown that classifier languages do have a grammatically encoded distinction between mass and count. I.e. mass nouns appear to have a syntax different from count ones also in classifier languages. However, fake mass nouns do not seem to exist in such languages: nouns that are cognitively count pattern systematically with count nouns with respect to the relevant syntactic tests. So the following question arises: why do fake mass nouns come about only in number marking languages (like English) and not also in classifier languages (like Mandarin)?

And does this tell us anything on the relationship between extralinguistic categorizations and linguistic ones?

I will try to make a case that addressing the puzzle of fake mass nouns involves modifying current models of the mass/count contrast and of how number marking works, in a way that requires developing a (formally precise) model of semantic vagueness. I will furthermore argue that the notion of individual encoded in grammar (i.e. what we count and quantify over) is not based on notions like individuation or atomicity, as is currently widely believed, but on something like homogeneity (in a sense to be made precise).