Noun-defining categories as parameters for linguistic ontology

Paolo Acquaviva, University College Dublin

When making hypotheses about the grammar of nominal classification, it is important to be clear about what exactly gets classified, and how — that is, what exactly constitutes a noun and how its properties are represented formally. This paper outlines a view of the nominal ‘spine’ (a noun’s extended projection) based on a constructionist approach that distributes along the nominal projection line information about entity type, part structure, atomicity, and numerosity. It shares with work in the ‘exoskeletal’ approach the view that what defines a noun is a grammatical construction, but it proposes a finer-grained articulation of the inner field, with a level that turns a root into an entity-denoting expression, one that derives an underspecified property, and one that (if present) expresses a partition of this property.

Two consequences arise from this interpretation of ‘division of reference’. One is that the entity-denoting characterization links up directly with the rich body of work on number and kind- and object-level reference. In particular, empirical reasons are presented for thinking that nouns do not ‘start off’ as denoting kinds or objects, but simply entities; the kind- or object-level interpretation is one of the effects of syntactic structure-building. Number, it will be argued, is not by itself an instantiation operator, but leads to an object-level reading when the partition is based on spatiotemporally situated units.

The other consequence is that ‘division’ is differentiated, with distinct loci, into a denotation modelled as a sum of sums (substance mass), as set of units, and as a set of stable-sized, countable units, going from the least to the most informative. This articulated structure allows for an analysis of countability and number which accounts for the special properties of furniture-type mass nouns and savings-like mass plurals. In addition, it helps make sense of a puzzling phenomenon in Italian, where a feminized formally masculine noun cannot be pluralized at all. What is added in this case, I suggest, is a female-denoting abstract morpheme (not just feminine gender) which modifies the restriction imposed by number and is only compatible with the singular. This suggests that gender, too, is best seen as a property of a grammatical construction, even though it is clearly visible only in cases of ‘high gender’.

There are empirical reasons, then, for claiming that the whole nominal spine is involved in object- or kind-level reference, in the interplay between countability and number, and occasionally even in such a seemingly ‘lexical’ property as gender. This is compatible with the idea that DP layers have distinct functions, and that their meaning is computed compositionally: what is crucial is that the inner specifications restrict possible denotations (fixing logical type and part structure) but do not determine what a noun is true of, which is computed only at D-level. What counts as an entity for linguistic purposes (‘linguistic ontology’) is only fully determined when all categories inside DP, or at least below the D and Quantity level (‘noun-defining categories’) are computed.