

Part-Whole Relations in the Semantics of Nouns

The key idea is that a simple noun is not merely a one-place predicate. Rather, a noun denotes an ‘algebra’ consisting of a universe (= its traditional extensions) along with a part-whole relation. I will argue that the part-whole relation is the locus of the count/mass distinction. Standard semantic accounts try to differentiate count and mass nouns in terms of their extension and run into problems with pairs like *traffic/cars*, *furniture/chairs* or *luggage/suitcases* which appear to be co-extensional in some contexts.

This more elaborate view of noun meanings will play a role in the explanation of a pattern of interpretation of prenominal adjectives. The account will make use of a particular constraint on possible part-whole relations in noun meanings. It will also appeal to and thereby lend support to the idea that prenominal adjective modification is a matter of X° -syntax.

The best evidence that a noun-interpretation includes a part-whole relation comes from the way measure phrases combine with nouns in partitives (*two ounces of soap*) and in non-partitives (*two-ounce stone*). I first discussed this data in *The Grammar of Measurement* (available at semanticarchives.net). Although I will not presuppose familiarity with that paper, it may serve as background. The account I will offer in this talk appeals to a crude version of the idea that where alternatives are possible less syntax is better (AvoidSyntax).