

# Semelfactives in English and in Hungarian: a countability-based analysis

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While the parallel that is most commonly drawn between the nominal and verbal domains is one between the count/mass distinction and the telic/atelic distinction (cf. Taylor, 1977, Mourelatos, 1978, Bach, 1986, a.o.), I will argue that the distinction between semelfactives and activities can also be seen in analogy to a countability-related distinction. I will also argue that a cross-linguistic difference between English and Hungarian with respect to countability is also at least partially reflected in a difference with respect to semelfactives. In Hungarian, but not English, *neatness* (or natural atomicity) appears to be a sufficient feature for countness in the nominal domain; and correspondingly, semelfactives, which are also characterised by neatness, are—like telic predicates—also “count” in Hungarian, but not English, in that they can only refer to singular events.

**Semelfactives vs. activities** My starting point is the analysis of Rothstein (2004, 2008), who exploited the notion of an atom or minimal part to differentiate between semelfactives and activities. According to Rothstein (2004, p. 186), “[a]n activity predicate  $P$  will denote a set of events  $P$ , and will contain a subset  $P_{\min}$ , which is the set of minimal events in its denotation. If a predicate has a semelfactive use, then there will be a *natural atomic function* which picks out the set  $P_{\min}$ , and  $P_{\min}$  will be an atomic set.” This, she says, captures the intuitive idea that while the minimal elements of an activity like walking may overlap, this does not hold for minimal elements of, e.g., a jumping event. It is well known that English has mass nouns which intuitively come with natural units, like *furniture*. These are succinctly called *neat mass* nouns by Landman (2011), and if we accept Rothstein’s (2004, 2008) analysis of semelfactives, semelfactives are the counterparts of neat mass nouns in the verbal domain.

**English vs. Hungarian count nouns** While neatness is “neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for count noun predicates” (Rothstein, 2010, p. 356) in English, I claim it is a *sufficient* criterion for countability<sup>1</sup> in Hungarian. This is because there appear to be no neat mass nouns in Hungarian (naturally atomic mass nouns *without* count uses). Nouns whose atoms are non-overlapping appear in Hungarian to be count nouns, which is shown by the fact that they can be preceded by numerals and can be pluralized, e.g., *evőeszköz(ök)* ‘cutlery(PL)’, *bútor(ok)* ‘furniture(PL)’, *ékszer(ek)* ‘jewellery(PL)’, etc. We can therefore adopt the following principle in Hungarian.

**Principle 1 (Neatness entails countability in Hungarian)** *In Hungarian, neat entails count, and so there are no neat mass nouns.*

So, in sum, disregarding here non-neat (non-quantized) count nouns like *line*, *fence*, English has the following kinds of nouns: *i*) neat count nouns like *dog*, *chair*, *ii*) neat mass nouns like *furniture*, *cutlery*, *iii*) non-neat (i.e., mess) mass nouns like *wine*, *mud*. In contrast, Hungarian has the following kinds of nouns, again disregarding here non-neat (non-quantized) count nouns like *line*, *fence*: *i*) neat count nouns like *kutya* ‘dog’, *szék* ‘chair’, *bútor* ‘furniture’, *ii*) non-neat (i.e., mess) mass nouns like *bor* ‘wine’, *sár* ‘mud’. In the case of count nouns in both languages, a singular predicate like *dog* only has atomic reference, while in order to refer to sums, a plural marking needs to be used.

**English vs. Hungarian semelfactives** In English, “all semelfactives are homonymous with activity predicates” (Rothstein, 2008, p. 182), and so, e.g., *jump* can be used to refer to an iterated process involving several jumps when combined with a durative adverbial or the progressive as in *Jump for 3 minutes and then take a rest*. But in Hungarian, this is not the case. In fact, quite the opposite holds: no semelfactive can be used to describe a durative process, i.e., Hungarian semelfactives cannot receive an iterated interpretation:

- (1) \*Ugorj                      3 percig,                      aztán pihenj                      egyet!  
jump.2SG.IMPER 3 minutes.until then rest.2SG.IMPER one.ACC  
Intended: ‘Jump for 3 minutes and then take a rest.’

Hungarian verbs in general have different lexical entries for the single-event, semelfactive reading and the iterative, process-type interpretation—more precisely, different suffixes are attached to the same bound morpheme to indicate semelfactivity or iterativity. For instance, *villan* ‘flash once’ contrasts with *villog* ‘flash (iterative)’, *(meg)csillan* ‘sparkle once’ contrasts with *csillog* ‘sparkle continuously’. This seems to indicate that Hungarian has the following constraint:

<sup>1</sup>Importantly, “count” is used to describe lexemes rather than uses, and “count noun”, when applied to Hungarian nouns, should be read as equivalent to “noun that has count usage”.

**Principle 2 (Principle of Iterative Marking (PIM))** *Iteration must be overtly marked by iteration markers.*

We can then assume that iterative verb stems denote a set closed under join that is generated from a set of atomic events denoted by the corresponding semelfactive verb. E.g., the semelfactive *vil-lan* ‘flash.once’ denotes  $V$ , while the iterative *villog* ‘flash.ITER’ denotes  $V^*$ . Then (notwithstanding some small differences between the verbal and nominal domains relating to plurals<sup>2</sup>) we see a close parallel between the nominal and the verbal categories with respect to neatness and countability. We see the following correspondences between verbs and nouns in English,<sup>3</sup> where  $P$  is a set of atomic eventualities, and  $P^*$  is a set of eventualities generated from  $P$  through join:

- **count** nouns (like *chair*) and **telic** predicates (like *arrive*) are neat and denote some  $P$ ;
- **mess mass** nouns (like *mud*) and **activities** (like *run*) are non-neat and denote some  $P^*$  with overlapping atoms
- **neat mass** nouns (like *furniture*) and **semelfactives** (like *jump*) are neat and denote some  $P^*$  with non-overlapping atoms

In Hungarian, we see the following correspondences:

- **neat** nouns (like *bútor* ‘furniture’, *szék* ‘chair’) and **neat** predicates (like *megérkezik* ‘arrive’, *felvil-lan* ‘flash.once’) are neat and denote some  $P$ ;
- **mass** nouns (like *sár* ‘mud’) and **activities** (like *fut* ‘run’) are non-neat and denote some  $P^*$  with overlapping atoms;
- **plural** nouns (like *bútor-ok* ‘furniture-PL’, *szék-ek* ‘chair-PL’) and **iteratives** (like *villog* ‘flash.ITER’) are neat and denote some  $P^*$  with non-overlapping atoms.

We see that the same kind of constraints are operative in the nominal and the verbal domains: The correspondent of Principle 1 in the verbal domain ensures that semelfactives are “count”, rather than “mass” verbs, and therefore denote some set of atoms  $P$  instead of some set  $P^*$  generated from atoms. The correspondent of Principle 2 in the nominal domain is that count nouns in Hungarian (as in English) denote sets of atoms, and pluralization has to be marked overtly. E.g., *szék* ‘chair’ only denotes atomic chairs, while plural marking (*szék-ek* ‘chair-PL’) is needed for sums of chairs to be included in the denotation of the predicate. In contrast to Hungarian, English does allow neat mass nouns, i.e., predicates (like *furniture*) which have non-overlapping atoms, but which still have a denotation closed under join, and the same holds in the verbal domain: English allows for verbal predicates (namely, semelfactives) with non-overlapping atoms to have a denotation closed under join. While I do not mean to imply that the same countability-related constraints are operative in all languages in the nominal and verbal domains, the example of English and Hungarian shows that over and above the well-known count/mass–telic/atelic analogy, more minute countability-related parallels can be drawn.

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<sup>2</sup>The most important difference between the verbal and nominal domain in Hungarian is that while all count (neat) nouns have plural counterparts, not all neat verbs have counterparts—with a few exceptions, only semelfactives do, otherwise, plurality needs to be expressed at the phrase level (e.g., with the help of numerals).

<sup>3</sup>I here disregard states, which are often assumed to have referents of a different type as dynamic predicates (for a discussion, see, e.g., Maienborn 2005). Among verbs (rather than at the verb phrase level) in English (and in Hungarian), I know of no non-quantized telic predicates like *eat at least three sandwiches* (cf. Filip 2000 for the problem of non-quantized predicates in the verbal domain). But monomorphemic durative telic predicates are not numerous, to begin with, *recover* being one rare example.