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### Numberless count nouns in Danish: Rejecting a non-contrastive zero suffix

In modern Danish, a substantial group of nouns that denote countable concepts exhibit no formal distinction between singular (SG) and plural (PL) in the indefinite form, e.g. *mus* ‘mouse’, in contrast to the majority of count nouns where SG is formally unmarked, i.e. expressed by a zero sign, and PL is expressed by an overt suffix (e.g. *bil-er* ‘cars’) or by stem change (e.g. *mænd* ‘men’), cf. Table 1.

	Noun gloss	Indefinite	Definite
Singular	‘mouse’	<i>mus</i>	<i>mus-en</i>
	‘car’	<i>bil</i>	<i>bil-en</i>
	‘man’	<i>mand</i>	<i>mand-en</i>
Plural	‘mouse’	<i>mus</i>	<i>mus-ene</i>
	‘car’	<i>bil-er</i>	<i>bil-er-ne</i>
	‘man’	<i>mænd</i>	<i>mænd-ene</i>

The established interpretation of the morphology of the *mus* type is that it has a zero PL ending, which entails that *mus* exhibits a structural contrast between SG zero suffix and PL zero suffix (Hansen & Heltoft 2011: 488, cf. Basbøll 2005: 369 who rejects zero as a PL expression element but assumes a semantic SG/PL distinction). In contrast, this paper argues that *mus* and similar nouns constitute a class of numberless count nouns that are essentially indeclinable (cf. Russian indeclinable nouns, Timberlake 2006: 148-150). The analysis is based on Mel’čuk’s (2006: 470-471) criteria for positing zero signs, first of all the contrastiveness criterion, and the theoretical framework is structurally informed sign-based functionalism (Engberg-Pedersen et al. 1996, 2005; Harder 1996). The empirical data of the study are obtained from the OLAM-database of Danish word structure (Madsen et al. 2002).

The SG/PL contrast of the definite forms *musen-musene* (cf. Table 1) may appear to save number inflection of the *mus* class, but the definite ending should be disregarded in the analysis. Definiteness is a mandatory category of the NP (Hansen & Heltoft 2011: 464) but not mandatorily marked morphologically on the noun; it may be expressed syntactically by a determiner (1).

- (1) *den lille mus*  
ART small mouse  
‘the small mouse’

Number is the core inflection bound to nouns (Hansen & Heltoft 2011: 486), while the definiteness category is peripheral, which is reflected in the fact that only number (PL) can have a lexically specified unproductive ending, while definiteness is always expressed by the fully productive non-integrated ending (*-en/-et/-ene*) (Basbøll 2005: 358, 368).

The morphological definite marker is a morpheme bundle that combines marking of definite form, gender and number (Heltoft 2001, Hansen & Heltoft 2011: 466). The contrast SG -Ø vs. PL -e in the morphologically definite noun forms is the definite ending's "own number inflection" which agrees with the true number inflection of the noun (if any), cf. agreement with the SG/PL stem alternation in *mand-en* vs. *mænd-ene* in Table 1. Thus, the marking of plural in the definite plural *musene* 'the mice' is not a number inflection of the noun stem.

The paper discusses further morphological and syntactic as well as semantic aspects of the numberlessness of the indeclinable nouns, including communicative ambiguity.

## References

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