The syntax of (nominal) denotation: how inert are lexical roots?

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This talk will bear on the sources of the interpretive distinction commonly known as 'Mass/Count' (in noun phrases). This issue has triggered an important body of research since Jespersen (1909) introduced the Mass/Count distinction in the linguistic terminology to account for the syntax of English nominals. The two most radical available theories are Chierchia's (1998a,b) all-lexical/semantic approach, which places the entire burden of the Mass/Count distinction on the semantic properties of lexical nouns, and Borer's (2005) all-syntactic approach, which derives all Mass/Count effects from syntactic structure. Other approaches stand in-between these two opposite views (e.g. Doetjes 1997, Fassi Fehri & Vinet *passim*), analysing denotational contrasts as a combined effect of syntactic and lexical features. I will argue here in favour of the 'radical-syntax' approach, which involves the total inertness of lexical roots with respect to denotation (thus, both *child* and *water* are completely unspecified in the lexicon as to Count/Mass denotational effects), an assumption consistent with the Minimalist view of the syntax/lexicon interface developed for instance by Kayne (2008). One issue which any theory of denotation should address, and which I must also broach within the proposed syntactic framework, is that of linguistic variation — why and in what respects can and do languages vary as regards denotational properties?

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