

Counting pieces of stuff in Tzeltal Maya

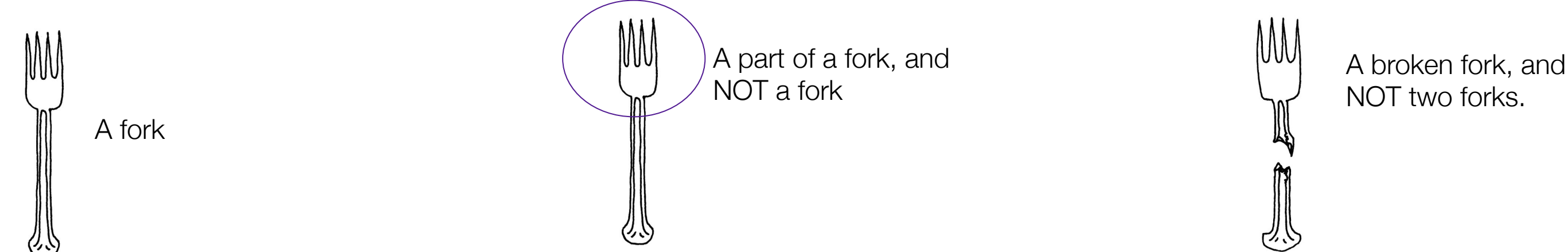
Ruthe Foushee¹ & Peggy Li²

¹University of California, Berkeley, ²Harvard University

What do nouns refer to in Tzeltal?

Background

"Sortal concepts enable us to enumerate and to track identity over time, and they are lexicalized as count nouns in languages that make the count-mass distinction." (Xu, 1996).



Not all languages have count vs. mass nouns. Universally, nouns name kinds. Some name sortals (e.g., objects), and others non-sortals (e.g., substances).

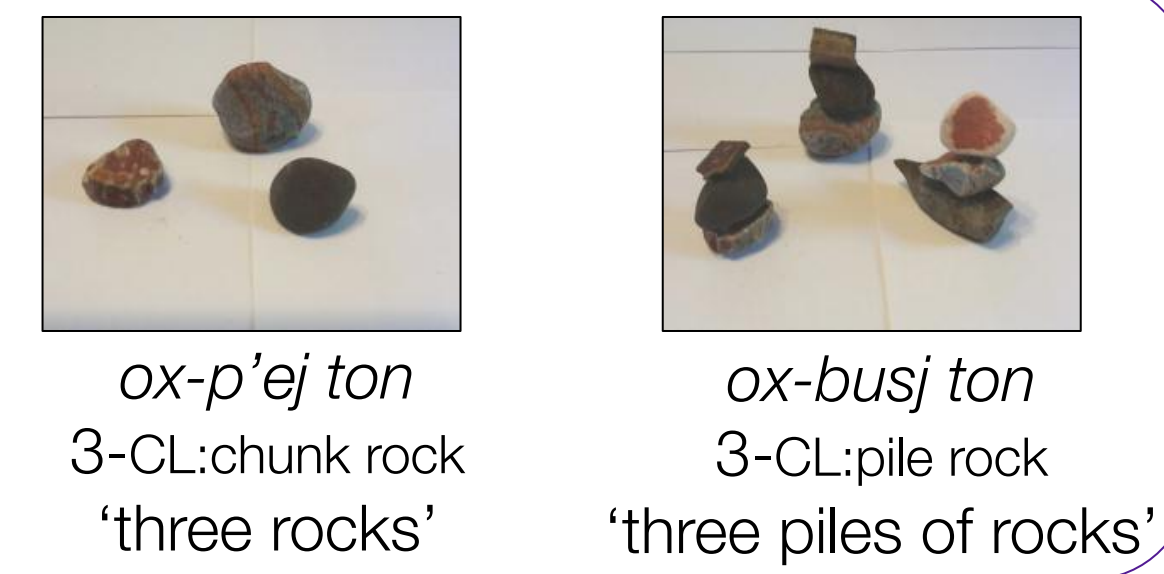
Do object-denoting nouns provide criteria of individuation? Given cross-linguistic variations, is the answer to this question different crosslinguistically?

Hypotheses

- Object-denoting nouns provide criteria of individuation by virtue that sortal concepts provide criteria of individuation (Xu, 1996).
- In languages without count vs. mass nouns, object-denoting and substance-denoting nouns all refer to unindividuated essences: "Yucatec nouns, lacking such a specification of unit, simply refer to the substance or material composition of an object" (Lucy, 1992; p. 89).
- Although we may know what constitute an individual of that kind that is named by the noun, the noun itself does not provide criteria of individuation (Srinivasan et al. 2003).

TSELTAL MAYA

- Classifier language
- Numeral object classifiers apply to nouns on the basis of shape, material, animacy, & configuration



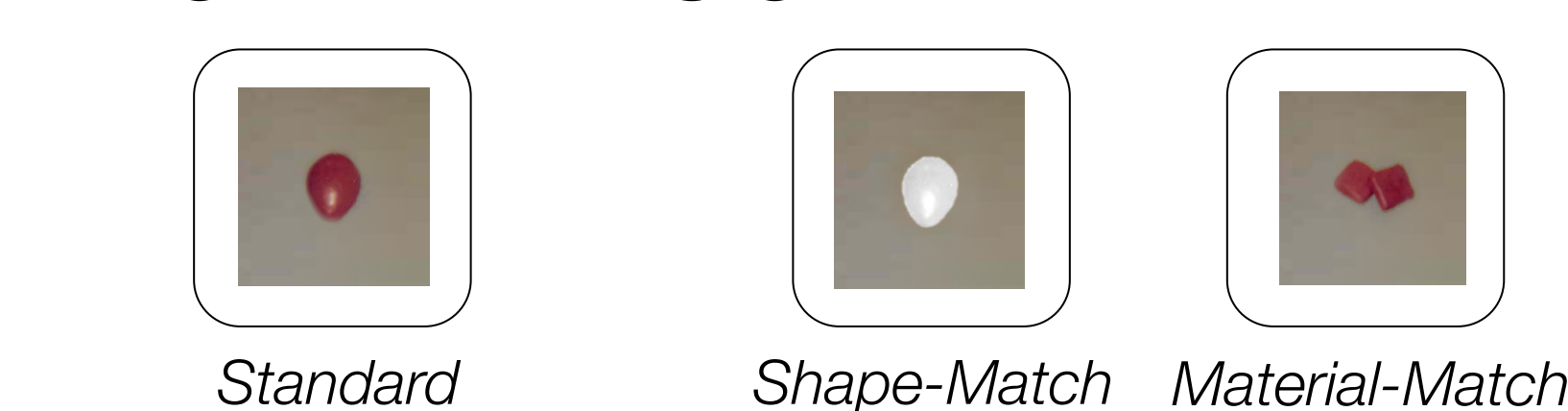
Experiment 1: Novel Entity Construal

How do Tzeltal speakers extend novel nouns? All by substance (H2), or by object for canonical objects and substance for canonical substances (H1 & H3)?

PARTICIPANTS 33 native Tzeltal-speakers (28 women, ages 18 – 59)

STIMULI Twelve novel entities, four from each of three categories: Complex, Simple, Non-Solid Substances

WORD EXTENSION



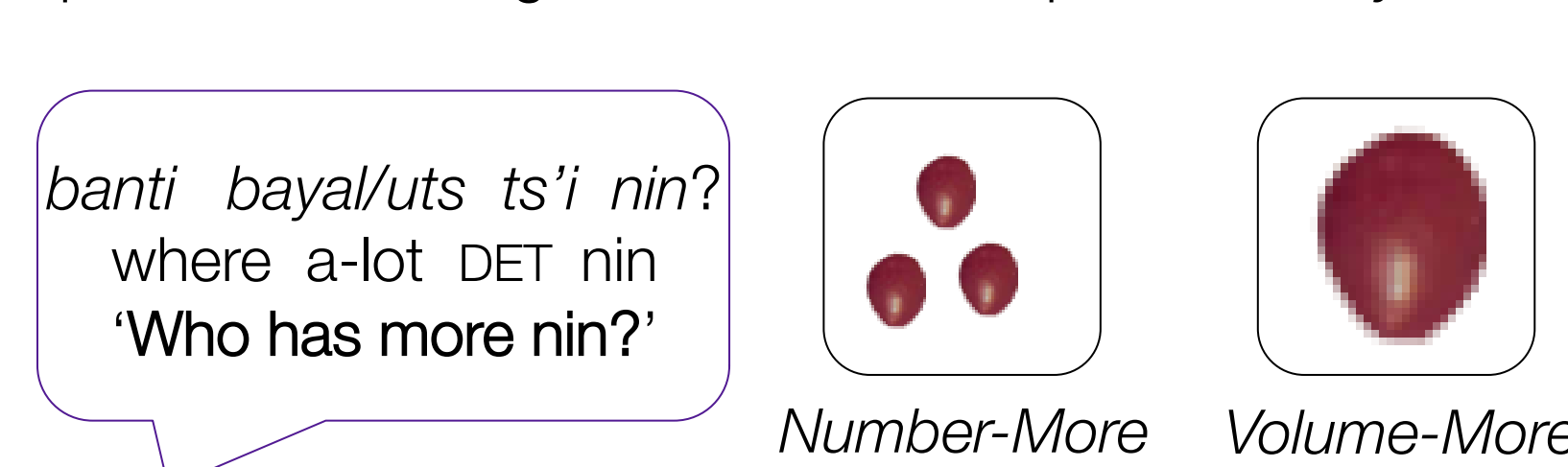
k'abu bel ts'i nin
look-IMP DIR DET nin
'Look at the nin.'

ba jun-uk ts'i nin?
which one-IRR DET nin
'Which one is the nin?'

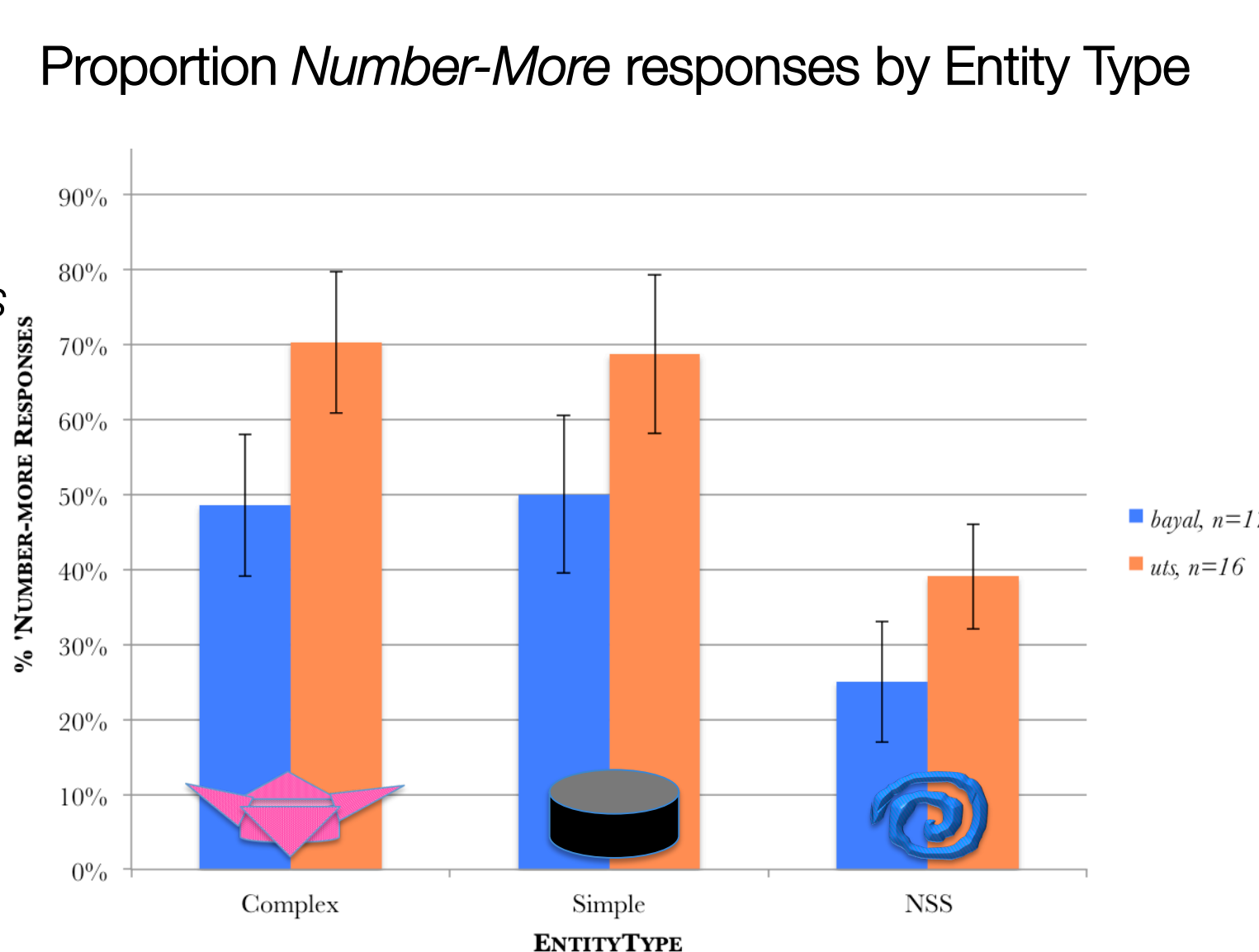
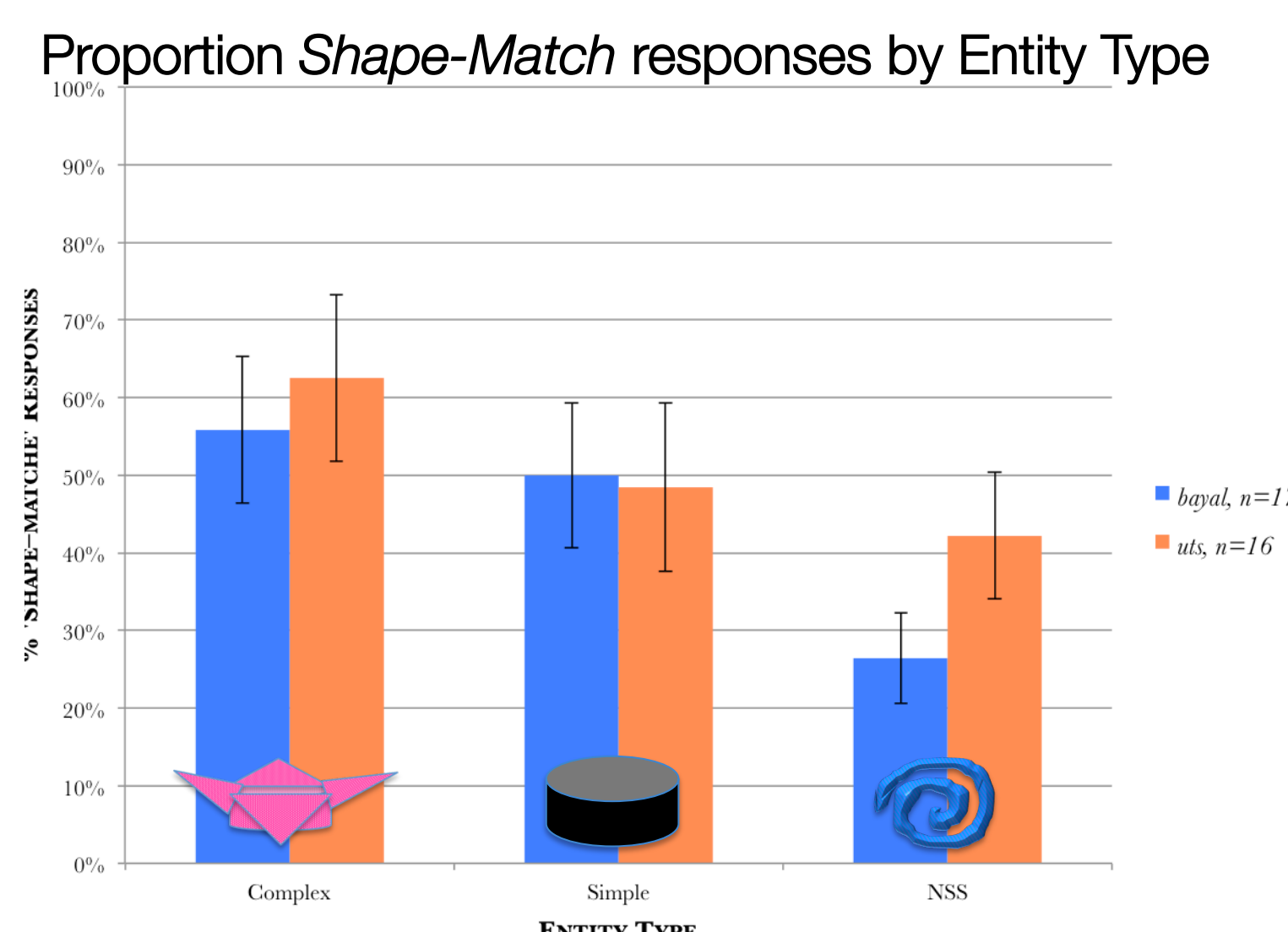
- Subjects extended nouns referring to Complex entities on the basis of shape, and Non-Solid-Substances on the basis of material ($p < 0.001$).

QUANTITY JUDGMENT

potential encoding of count/mass in quantifiers *baya/* and *uts*



- Subjects systematically quantified Complex entities by number, and Non-Solid-Substances by volume ($p = 0.001$).



Exp. 2: Familiar Noun Quantity Judgment

Do Tzeltal speakers quantify by number for known object-denoting nouns and by substance for known substance-denoting nouns (H1 & H3) or do they not distinguish object- and substance-denoting nouns (H2)?

PARTICIPANTS 23 native Tzeltal-speakers (17 women, ages 17 – 51)

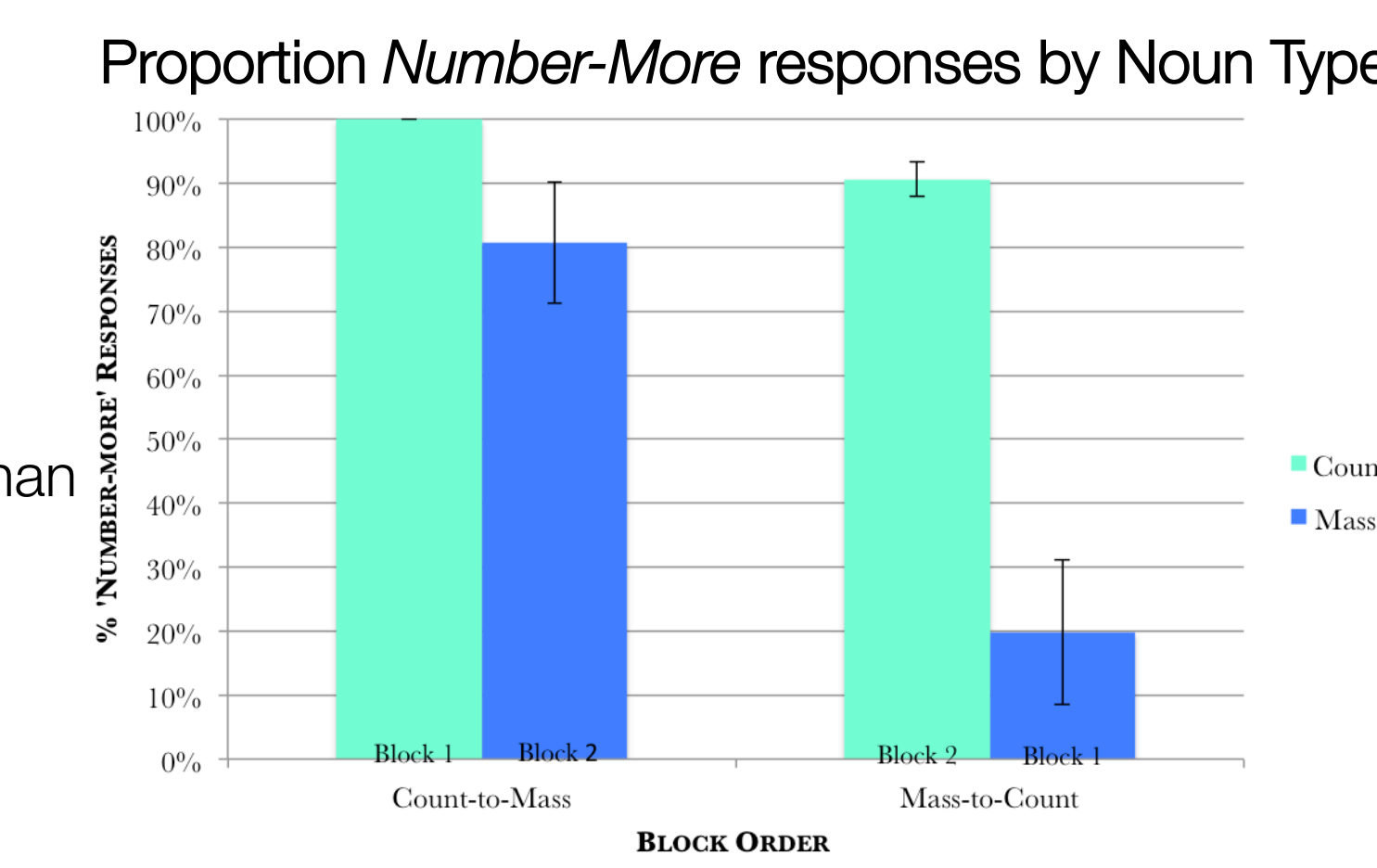
STIMULI 16 entities typed as 'count-like' or 'mass-like,' presented in blocks, with order counterbalanced across participants



- Participants judged quantity by number more for Count-like nouns than for Mass-like nouns (90% vs. 55%, $p < 0.001$).

- The type of noun they judged first influenced how they judged the second type (interaction between Noun Type & Order, $p < 0.001$).

| Presentation Method | Count | Mass |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Physical | boch bowl | juchbil ich chile powder |
| | xampixol hat | ch'ab' honey |
| | jach'ubil comb | ach'al dirt |
| | tepil shoe | ch'ich blood |
| Photo | balti bucket | xepu fat |
| | akuxa needle | atsam salt |
| | ts'uj guord | tan ash |
| | echa axe | yalel broth |

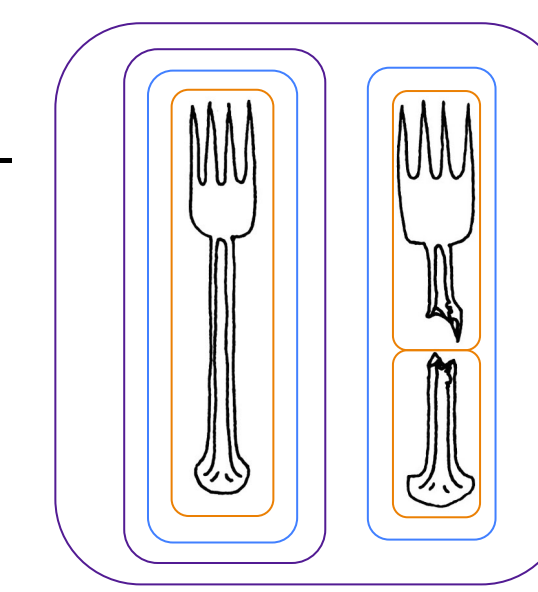


Experiment 3: Broken Objects

How do Tzeltal speakers count broken objects? Do they count pieces as individuals (H3) or do they only count whole objects as individuals (H1)? Do classifiers serve to explicitly provide criteria of individuation?

COUNTING BROKEN OBJECTS

PARTICIPANTS 34 native Tzeltal-speakers (20 women ages 19 – 60)



Jay-eb me tuts-e?
INT-CL:GEN DET fork-DET
'How many forks?'

Jay-k'ajs tuts-e?
INT-CL:BRO fork-DET
'How many broken forks?'

| Classifier in prompt | Proportion giving count in response to prompt | | |
|----------------------|---|----------|----------|
| | 1 (jun) | 2 (cheb) | 3 (oxeb) |
| Generic | 7% | 69% | 24%* |
| Broken | 0% | 100% | 0% |

* 0% of English-speaking adults count such an array "three"

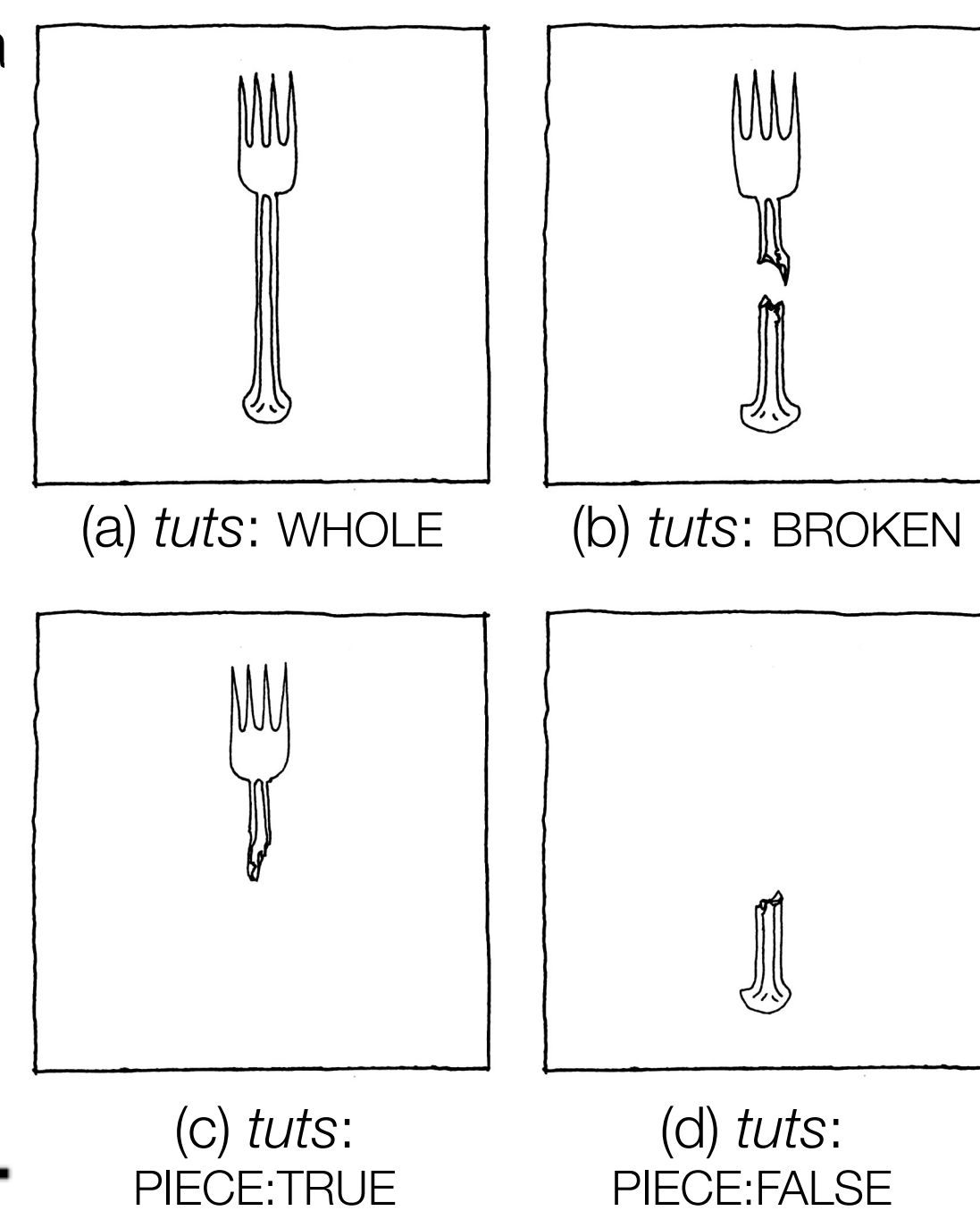
CRITERIAL CLASSIFIERS

PARTICIPANTS 5 native Tzeltal-speakers (4 women, ages 18 – 52)

STIMULI Eight cards with quadrants depicting the same item in four states of brokenness: whole (a), halved (b), and one piece that met the criteria imposed by a temporary classifier ((c) e.g., the pronged half of a fork) and another that did not (d).

METHOD

Participants answered yes/no to the question, "Is this one-CL NOUN?" for each quadrant on each card for each classifier category, resulting in four blocks of 32 trials each. Block order was counterbalanced across participants.

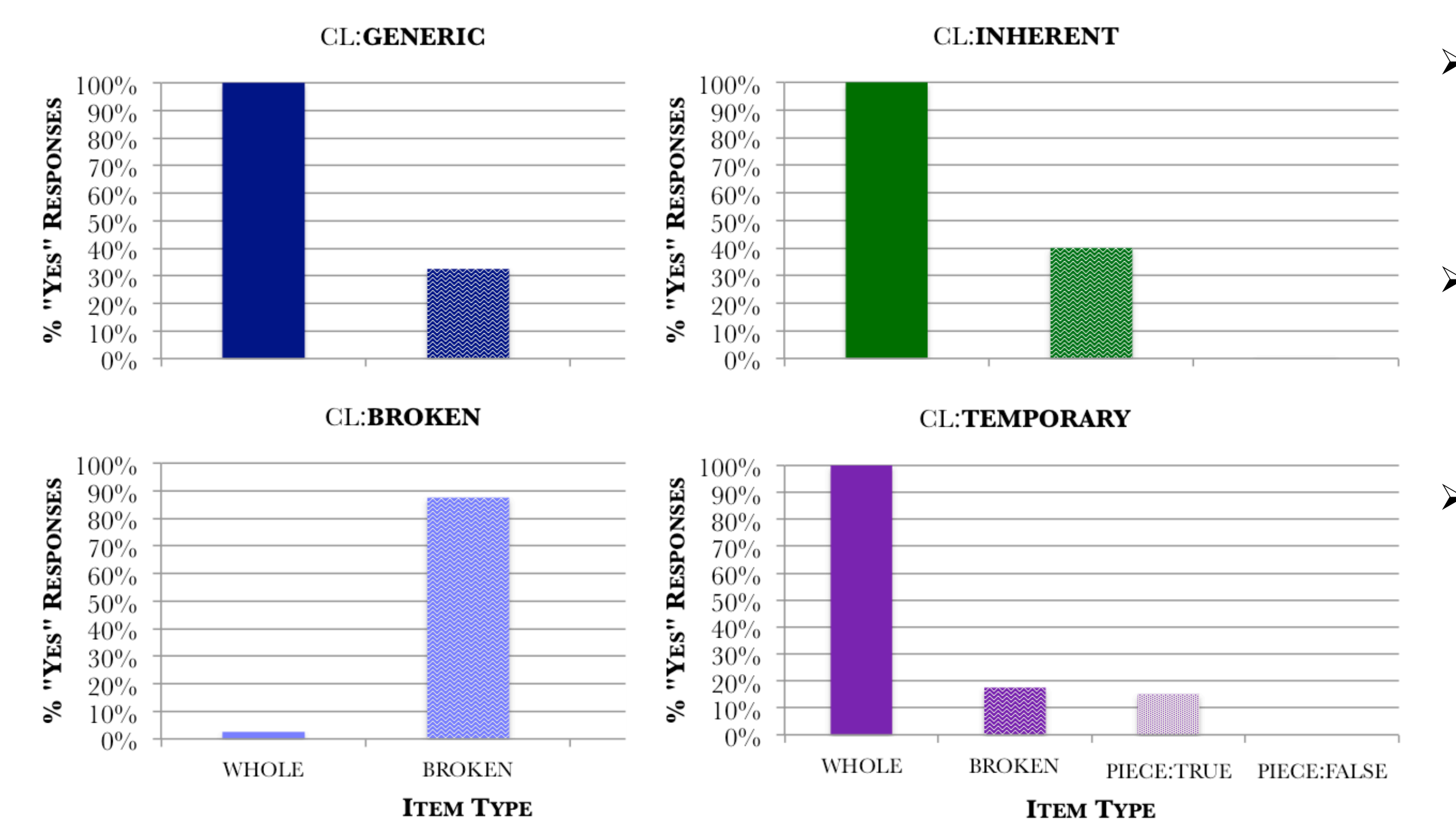


Nouns and Classifiers Used in Critical Question

| Object | Noun | Classifiers | | | Meaning (CL:TEMP) |
|----------|---------------|-------------|--------|-------|--------------------|
| | | INHERENT | BROKEN | TEMP. | |
| fork | tuts | ch'ijx | kajs | xal | single pronged |
| jar | p'in | chojt | xojt | pajch | full of food |
| rope | laso | lijj | xojt | pojch | knotted |
| bag | chojak | lijj | xojt | jiyp | hanging |
| shirt | k'ui'il | lijj | xojt | lim | laying flat |
| tortilla | waj | p'ejch | xejt' | sej | circular, flexible |
| wire | chajan tak'in | ch'ijx | k'ajs | pujch | bent upward |
| rock | ton | p'ej | jej | wol | spherical |

Jun/ch'ijx/xal/k'ajs wa'an me tuts-e?
1-CL DET fork-DET
'How many broken forks?'

Proportion "Yes" Responses to Critical Question by Classifier and Referent



- Speakers restricted application of noun to whole units of the referent
- No difference in reference of noun with generic and inherent classifiers
- Specific classifiers (BROKEN & TEMPORARY) contributed some criteria for reference

Conclusions

EXPERIMENT 1

- Speakers typed and quantified entities based on universally accessible visual features, in the absence of syntax.
- Lexical quantifiers, while anecdotally used with different distributions (e.g., *uts* more when describing great numbers of individuals), did not significantly impact the strategies speakers used to judge quantities (i.e., by number or by volume)

EXPERIMENT 2

- Speakers quantify familiar object-denoting and substance-denoting nouns systematically differently, even in the absence of syntactic cues

EXPERIMENT 3

- Only specific classifiers, not generic or inherent ones, seem to provide criteria for individuation. If English-speakers get the whole-object reference of unmarked nouns through pragmatic inference based on the contrast with alternative units like "a piece of—" (Srinivasan et al, 2013), Tzeltal-speakers' greater acceptance of individual pieces of objects as referents for unmarked nouns may come from the fact that all nouns are enumerated using the same syntax, decreasing the contrast of alternative units.
- When alternative units for a noun's referent are made more accessible, either visually or linguistically, speakers restrict their application of a noun to whole objects.

References

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