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SOME REMARKS ON THE METALINGUISTIC  
USAGE OF THE TERM ‘COLLECTIVE’

1. THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM ‘COLLECTIVE’

The term ‘collective (noun)’ is very well established in the western tradition of linguistic studies. It stems from Latin (*nomen*) *collectivum*, whose first usage as a metalinguistic term is made by Priscian, who states that “*collectivum est, quod singulari numero multitudinem significat, ut ‘populus’, ‘plebs’*” (Prisc. 2.61.21). This definition itself matches almost exactly the one given by Dionysius Thrax of Gr. “περιληπτικόν (ὄνομα): περιληπτικὸν δέ ἐστι τὸ τῷ ἐνικῷ ἀριθμῷ πλῆθος σημαῖνον, οἷον δῆμος, χορός, ὄχλος” (D.T. 40.4); the only difference here is the presence of the word χορός “chorus”, which is not translated by Priscian. This definition of the term ‘collective’, which would eventually establish itself as the standard one in language description, relies both on morphological and semantic features: the collective is actually a noun, which is marked as singular (morphological feature), but whose meaning entails a plurality of objects (semantic feature).

2. VARIOUS MEANINGS OF THE TERM ‘COLLECTIVE’

It has been pointed out, however, that in modern linguistics the use of the metalinguistic term ‘collective’ has not always been consistent. According to David Gil (1996: 54), “in general linguistic parlance, the term ‘collective’ has been used in diverse context and with apparently different meanings”. This state of affairs is due on the one hand to the very general idea conveyed by the etymological meaning of *collective* (< Lat. *cum legere*, “gather together, collect”)<sup>1</sup>; on the other hand the definition of

<sup>1</sup> Significantly enough, in Priscian the term *collectivus* is also used referring to conjunctions such as *ergo, igitur, itaque*; this usage is explained by the grammarian as follows: “*hae* (i.e. these conjunctions) *enim per illationem colligunt supra dictum*”. However, it is also to be pointed out that this usage of *collectivus* is less frequent in Priscian, because the common terms to express the idea of ‘summing up the meaning of the preceding sentence’ are *rationalis* and *ratiocinativus* (see Schad 2007: 66), which in this meaning serve as translations of Greek συλλογιστικός (*ibid.*). In using the term *collectivus* with this meaning, then, Priscian is influenced by the clear etymological relationship between Latin *collectivus* (*cum + lego*) and Greek συλλογιστικός (σύν + λέγω).

‘collective’ mentioned above is itself multi-faceted, because it implies reference to (at least) two different distinctive features, which cross each other and thus confuse the picture of the situation.

In this paper I would like to sketch out some aspects of the problem based on the definitions of the term ‘collective’ commonly found in the field of linguistics<sup>2</sup>. For the sake of clarity, I premise that I will make use of the English word *collective* both as the English metalinguistic term and as a general label for the various terms proper to other metalinguistic traditions. When specific reference needs to be made to a non-English metalinguistic tradition, the proper term will be used.

### 3. RELEVANT FEATURES IN THE DEFINITION OF ‘COLLECTIVE (NOUN)’

Looking cursorily at the entry ‘collective’ in the main dictionaries of linguistics, it can be seen that there are some key-features that are almost always taken into account for the definition of ‘collective’ as a metalinguistic term, while other features very seldom are. It is thus worth it look at the aspects considered relevant to the definition of ‘collective’ as a metalinguistic term, in order to point out similarities and differences.

As already stated above, the core element in the definition of ‘collective noun’ is the property of a noun to refer to a plurality of entities as a single object. This can be observed for instance in the dictionary of linguistics edited by Dubois *et alii*, where the entry *nom collectif* is defined as “un nom désignant une réunion d’entités, par ailleurs isolables, conçue comme une entité spécifique” (Dubois 1994, s.v. *collectif*), and in Matthews’ *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*, where we read that collectives are nouns “used to refer to individuals as a group” (Matthews 1997, s.v. *collective noun*); already in the *Lexique de la terminologie linguistique* by Marouzeau we find a similar picture: here the term *collectif* is defined as a “formation propre à dénommer une somme ou un assemblage de plusieurs objets, abstraction faite des unités composantes” (Marouzeau 1951, s.v. *collectif*).

<sup>2</sup> On this topic see also Gil’s account (very useful, although almost exclusively based on English-written literature) of the various usages of the term ‘collective’ in the works of several linguists (Gil 1996: 66-70). However, note that on p. 67 Gil lists the previously seen use of ‘collective’ among those he defines “more idiosyncratic”; in doing so, he clearly does not recognize this meaning of ‘collective’ to be the most ancient and - so to say - the original one, and puts it on the same level as other usages, which in turn are really idiosyncratic and typical of few linguists.

Another point, which is frequently stressed in the definition of the term 'collective', is that collective nouns are often built by the means of dedicated morphological processes of composition and/or derivation. This is the case, for example, of the German prefix *Ge-* (e.g. *Gestühl* "group of chairs") or the Italian suffixes *-ame/-ume* (e.g. *bestiame* "cattle"). However, the characteristic of having specific morphological marks is not peculiar to all collective nouns, as it is clearly attested by the crosslinguistically widespread presence of simple collective nouns (such as En. *cattle*, It. *folla* "crowd"). This morphological trait must therefore be taken into consideration when giving a definition of 'collective' as a metalinguistic term, but, since it does not apply to all possible collective formations, it cannot be put on the same level as the previously considered semantic feature, which in turn is typical of all collective nouns.

On the syntactic level, a certain relevance is often given to the collective nouns' characteristic of heading singular noun phrases, which can trigger either singular or plural agreement with the predicate. This is shown for instance by sentence pairs such as *the committee is wrong* vs. *the committee are wrong*: while the former sentence states that the committee as a whole is wrong, thus considering the committee from the perspective of its cohesion as a single unit, the latter puts a special emphasis on the role played by every single member of the committee and implies a distributive reading of the meaning of the word 'committee'. This syntactic property is obviously made possible by the particular semantic characterization of collectives that we have already pointed out, since a noun phrase headed by a singular non-collective noun wouldn't allow plural agreement with the predicate (a sentence like *\*the boy are wrong* would be no doubt ungrammatical). Moreover, the ability to trigger either singular or plural agreement with the predicate while heading a singular noun phrase does not characterize collective nouns in every language. Indeed, if we look at the dictionaries of linguistics, we notice that this ability is mentioned chiefly in those which have English as their main reference language (see e.g. Crystal 1985, s.v. *collective*, Brown 2006, s.v. *Noun Phrases*), while dictionaries stemming from other linguistic traditions more often omit these feature in their definition of 'collective (noun)'. This state of affairs is of course not due to chance, since in the other major European languages collective nouns cannot trigger plural agreement with the predicate if they head singular noun phrases.

The facts discussed above lead to this temporary conclusion: the morphological and syntactic features associated with collective nouns are extremely relevant in the languages where they occur, and as such they ought to be mentioned in a definition of 'collective' as a metalinguistic

term; nevertheless, since they don't occur in every language, they cannot be given the same status as the property of referring to a plurality of entities as a single object. Therefore, this semantic property turns out to be the core-feature in the definition of the metalinguistic term 'collective' from a crosslinguistic perspective.

#### 4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CONCEPTS OF 'COLLECTIVE' AND 'MASS-NOUN'

The term 'collective' is often associated with another metalinguistic term, namely the term 'mass-noun'. This association is in my opinion one of the most relevant questions in the definition of 'collective' as a metalinguistic term. A general relationship between these two concepts is often remarked, though its details are seldom expressly pointed out; in this regard the main difference between collectives and mass-nouns, as is generally observed, is that collectives often have a plural form, while mass-nouns usually lack it. Sometimes collectives are actually identified with mass-nouns, as we can see in the definition of 'collective' given by Giorgio R. Cardona, who states that "un nome collettivo non ammette in genere di essere fatto plurale" (Cardona 1988, s.v. *collettivo*) and quotes as examples of collective nouns It. *olio, sabbia, acqua*, (respectively "oil", "sand", "water") which are typical mass-nouns.

Another example of interaction between the terms 'collective' and 'mass-noun' is found in the *Lexikon der Sprachwissenschaft* edited by Hadumod Bußmann. Under the entry *Kollektivum* an absolutely canonical definition is given, according to which collective nouns are nouns fit for representing multiple objects as a single entity ("Ausdrücke zur Bezeichnung einer Vielzahl als Einheit", see Bußmann 2002, s.v. *Kollektivum*). If we then look at the entry *Massen-Nomen*, we find the following statement: "Bei Massen-Nomina kann man im Einzelnen «Stoffnomina» wie *Wasser* und «Kollektivnomina» wie *Vieh* unterscheiden" (Bußmann 2002, s.v. *Massen-Nomen*). Looking at this state of affairs, one is immediately struck by the fact that the same metalinguistic term 'collective' is used in reference both to an individual category of nouns and to a subcategory of mass-nouns; in this regard, among the other examples found within the definition, the German word *Vieh* "cattle" is significantly cited as an example of both collective and mass-noun. This might look like a sort of 'metalinguistic short circuit', but is rather a consequence of the fact that on the one side German *Vieh* shares with collective nouns the semantic feature of referring to a plurality of objects, on the other side

it shows morphological and syntactic traits, which are typical of mass-nouns, such as the lack of a plural form (except for recategorized uses<sup>3</sup>), the inability to co-occur with numerals, etc.<sup>4</sup>.

The situation is indeed more complex than it appears at first glance. If we look at the word pair *cattle* ~ *herd*, we can easily observe that between these two words there are in fact some important differences: on the morphosyntactic level, *herd* is a count noun and, as such, it has a regular plural form *herds*, while *cattle* is a non-count noun and usually lacks a plural form. On the semantic level, *herd* refers to a group (or collection) of entities, whose constituent members are still perceptible - to a certain extent - as single units. If I am talking about a *herd* of cows, I am basically conveying this sort of information: 1) the cows in play are two or more 2) these cows act together as a single unit 3) the cows I am talking about constitute a very specific and limited portion of all the cows on earth. On the contrary, when I refer to cows using the word *cattle*, I may actually be talking about a limited extension of cows (for example if I speak about cattle breeding in a given country or even in a single farm), but the focus of my speaking is elsewhere: the main point here is that I am talking about bovine animals, and not, for instance, ovines or swines, that is to say, I am putting emphasis on the type of animals involved rather than on their number or on the individual nature of each member of the group. Moreover, even if I use the word *cattle* to refer to a limited number of animals (as in the above cited example), by no means I am giving information about the effective number of these animals, nor I am stating that they constitute a single, well-defined unit. In semantic terms, the fundamental difference between *herd* and *cattle* is that the former refers to a bounded, the latter to an unbounded entity<sup>5</sup>, and this difference is reflected on the morphosyntactic level by the fact that *herd* is a count noun, while *cattle* is in all respects a mass-noun.

It may be objected that it is always possible for a speaker to sense that the referent of the word *cattle* is ultimately made up of single units; this is of course true and is due to the fact that a bovine is an object big enough

<sup>3</sup> On recategorization of non-count nouns see Corbett 2000: 84-87.

<sup>4</sup> Notice that the same overlapping of metalinguistic terms is found also both in the English and in the Italian translations of Bußmann's dictionary (see the entries 'collective nouns', 'mass-nouns' in the English translation and 'collettivo', 'nome di massa' in the Italian translation). As we have already stated, and as we will see more clearly in the conclusions of the present paper, avoiding such overlap is ultimately impossible, unless we choose to give up the use of the term 'collective' altogether.

<sup>5</sup> Here and in the rest of the paper the terms 'bounded' and 'unbounded' are used according to Jackendoff's terminology (see Jackendoff 1991).

to be perceived as a single entity in common human experience. In this respect, mass-nouns like *cattle* differ from substance mass-nouns such as *water*, whose referents in a state of nature are perceived as unbounded masses<sup>6</sup>. Such an objection, however, is of little moment if we consider that the specific character of a word like *cattle*, compared to a word like *herd*, lies exactly in the power to push in the background the individual nature of the members of a group by treating them as a homogeneous mass; it can also be stated that word pairs such as *cattle* ~ *herd* do exist in many languages and that their existence most likely reflects a specific need of language to refer to masses of objects regardless of the individuality of their members as well as to specific, well-individuated portions of them<sup>7</sup>.

By investigating the relationship between the concepts of ‘collective’ and ‘mass-noun’, we have seen that the metalinguistic term ‘collective’ could be potentially applied to at least three types of nouns: nouns like *herd*, which seem to be the genuine collectives according to Priscian’s definition; nouns like *water*, which are instead prototypically mass-nouns, and nouns like *cattle*, which represent the most complex case. The point here is that these types of nouns are not isolated within the lexicon; quite on the contrary, they are placed alongside in a *continuum*, each sharing some features with one or another (in our example, *water* shares with *cattle* the feature of being non-count, and *cattle* in turn shares with *herd* the semantic property of referring to a plurality of objects, while *water* and *herd* share no relevant features). In such a context, the use of a broad-meaning metalinguistic label such as ‘collective’ can lead to the consequence that nouns with only a few common characteristics (e.g. *herd* and *water*) are actually included in the same category. This would entail a loss of clarity and precision, both of which are typical requirements of a scientific metalanguage. So, the question remains open if we have to apply the label ‘collective’ to all of these types of noun or just to some of them (or to none).

<sup>6</sup> See also § 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. word pairs such as It. *bestiame* ~ *mandria*, Germ. *Vieh* ~ *Herde* (both roughly equivalent to “cattle” and “herd”). However, it must be stressed that the boundaries which separate these two way of referring to pluralities of objects are vague and faint, and that a certain overlapping between them is observed in common linguistic usage (see e.g. the entry ‘cattle’ in *OED*).

## 5. THE QUESTION OF THE INDO-EUROPEAN COLLECTIVE NOUNS

Another research field in which the term ‘collective’ is highly widespread and in some respect problematic is that of Indo-European linguistics. Here, however, this term is not consistently used in various contexts and with diverse meanings: it is chiefly applied with reference to PIE formations which would have originally referred to groups of objects conceived as a single unit: such formations would have been mostly nouns formed by the means of the ancient PIE suffix  $^{*}(e)h_2-$ . This perspective has been establishing itself in recent scholarship: examples of this usage of the term ‘collective’ can be found for instance in contributions by Tichy (1993), Matasović (2006, though here the author is very cautious about the definition of ‘collective’) and Luraghi (2009). As Tichy (1993: 2) points out, this new trend towards the problem of Indo-European collectives has been clearly set up starting from Hardarson’s groundbreaking paper (Hardarson 1987): there the author resumes and critically discusses the preceding views on the topic and states that the purpose of PIE collective formations was to represent the referent of a noun as an “*einheitliche Zusammenfassung einer Mehrzahl von Einzelercheinungen*” (Hardarson 1987: 88)<sup>8</sup>.

This employment of ‘collective’ corresponds to the canonical one; however, in the history of Indo-European studies, this term has been employed in a more problematic way. The starting point of the problem seems to be Johannes Schmidt’s famous study *Die pluralbildungen der indogermanischen neutra* (Schmidt 1889), which eventually became a milestone in Proto-Indo-European morphology. In this work, the term ‘collective’ is used to refer to PIE  $^{*}\bar{o}r-$  neuter nouns<sup>9</sup>. In discussing the nouns belonging to this class, Schmidt states, without further explanation, that they were originally “*singularisch verwendete collectiva*” (Schmidt 1889: 195) and brings as an example Greek nouns such as τέκμων “goal, end”, ὕδωρ “water”, σκῶρ “dung”, πέλωρ “portent, monster”, ἐέλδωρ “wish, desire”, ἔλωρ “spoil, prey”, νύκτωρ “(by) night”; in particular,

<sup>8</sup> Due to space limitations, in the present paper I will not raise the question about the inflectional or derivational origin of PIE category of collective; to the present, anyway, the hypothesis of PIE collective as an inflectional category (first proposed by Eichner 1985) is less and less supported, and a general agreement has been spreading towards considering PIE collective a derivational category.

<sup>9</sup> Note that recent scholarship on this subject tends to consider PIE ending  $^{*}\bar{o}r$  as the outcome of a more ancient  $^{*}\bar{o}rb_2$  (through an intermediate phase  $^{*}\bar{o}rr$ ). Anyway, due to the scope and limits of the present paper, we may leave this question unconsidered.



Schmidt comments on Gr. ὕδωρ, which, according to his hypothesis, would originally have not meant “water”, but instead “water mass”, exactly as German *Gewässer* compared to *Wasser*. The problem here is represented by the fact that the term ‘collective’ is applied in reference to nouns whose semantic features match only partially those of typical collective nouns. We could certainly think a “spoil” to be the whole of the pieces of armour and weaponry taken away from a dead enemy, but what about nouns like “desire” or “night”? At first glance, it is quite clear that only a few of the nouns cited by Schmidt may be thought of as ‘collectives’ according to the canonical definition; the rest of them are labelled as collective formations more on a morphological rather than a semantic basis, because they are formed by the means of the same suffix *\*-ōr-*, which sometimes characterises (possibly) collective nouns.

In Schmidt’s argumentation, particular attention is drawn to the case of ὕδωρ in its alleged meaning of “water mass”; this Greek form would continue a PIE collective noun (today mostly reconstructed as *\*wédōr*), opposed to a non-collective form *\*wódr̥* (continued e.g. by Hitt. *uātar*)<sup>10</sup>. However, the word for “water” being typically a mass-noun in every language, it is not at all clear what kind of relationship should there be between the collective form and the non-collective (i.e. mass) one<sup>11</sup>. It is also clear that, in labelling PIE *\*-ōr-* formations as ‘collective’, Schmidt was influenced by German, where a morphological process for deriving collective formations from non-collective nouns was well active at those times. Therefore, it may be useful to look more deeply at the German data, in order to clarify Schmidt’s usage of the term ‘collective’.

Let us then take as an example the German word pair *Gestühl* “group of chairs” (derived from *Stuhl* “chair”) and *Gewässer* “water-mass” (from *Wasser* “water”), both belonging to the category of German collective formations. Although these words are formed by the means of the same morphological process (implying prefix *Ge-* and *Umlaut* affecting the root vowel<sup>12</sup>), *Gestühl* actually refers to a single entity, which is immediately conceived as a group of similar objects (a *Gestühl* being nothing else than a group of *Stühle*), while the relationship between the ‘collective’ formation *Gewässer* and the primitive noun *Wasser* is of quite a

<sup>10</sup> See *NIL*: 706, *EIEC*: 636.

<sup>11</sup> See Melchert’s sharp statement that “collectives to mass-nouns make no sense” (*Melchert* 2011: 396).

<sup>12</sup> The *Umlaut* on the root vowel is itself a consequence of the original suffix *-e* (< OHG. *-i*), still visible in some collective formations such as *Gebirge* “group of mountains” (from *Berg* “mountain”), see *Fleischer* 1982: 185-187.

different kind, the latter being a mass-noun, which serves as a general term to refer to water in its fundamental nature of substance; *Gewässer* instead has a more restricted domain of use, because it usually refers to a natural and individual mass of water, such as a river or a lake. In this case, the core semantics of the morphological process which derives 'collective' formations from primitive nouns has more to do with considering a single, definite instance of a typically fluid and unbounded substance, rather than with grouping together similar entities, as in the case of *Gestühl* from *Stuhl*.

From the comparison between the German forms *Gestühl* and *Gewässer* we can notice that under the same label 'collective' various formations are encompassed, which semantically speaking show slightly different characteristics. From the standpoint of terminological accuracy, then, the use of the term 'collective' to refer to nouns like *Gewässer* is not identical with the above mentioned 'canonical' usage, and the main reason of this discrepancy lies in the physical characteristics of the typical referents of mass-nouns: if we consider a typical mass-noun such as *water*, we can easily notice that in common human experience its referent is perceived as a homogeneous mass, not as a sum of minor subunits (atoms and molecules being obviously imperceptible to man's five senses). Therefore, if the core of the canonical definition of 'collective' is the semantic characteristic of grouping multiple elements into a single unit, such a definition cannot be logically applied to nouns whose referents are not conceivable as made up of discrete units (at least in common experience)<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, we cannot easily overlook the fact that in German formations like *Gestühl* and *Gewässer*, which are semantically different, are formed by the means of the same morphological process: since this circumstance can hardly be due to chance, one may wonder if there is some connection between the two types of formations on the semantic level, too. Actually, the operation of bringing together several objects in a group has something in common with that of considering a specific and individual instance of a homogeneous mass: in both cases, the starting point is an entity, which from the semantic point of view is unbounded, on the one hand because several objects (in our example chairs) are considered with-

<sup>13</sup> However, it must be stressed that cases like that of *Gewässer* are statistically exceptions, not the rule: the majority of nouns derived from other nouns by the means of the prefix *Ge-* and root vowel umlaut are actually 'collectives' in the canonical sense. On this topic see Hermann Paul's still valuable account of the history of German collective formations (Paul 1920: 55 ff.).

out any limitation of number, on the other hand because we have to do with masses (e.g. water), which are by nature unbounded. On the contrary, as a result of the derivational process we find nouns, whose referents do have boundaries: as for *Gewässer*, it is clear that any river or lake is a limited extension of water (as big as it may be); as for *Gestühl*, we know that the chairs we are considering - no matter how many - are part of a limited set, to whom we refer as a single group<sup>14</sup>.

These observations show us that the semantic link between the different formations we have taken into consideration could lie in the idea of setting boundaries to originally unbounded entities. Better stated, the common feature between typical collectives and collective formations derived from mass-nouns seems to be the higher grade of individuation associated with their referents compared to that of count plurals and singular mass-nouns.

This statement of course leaves open the problem of whether we should make use of the metalinguistic term 'collective' to refer to nouns like German *Gewässer*. As we have already pointed out in discussing the overlap between the concepts of 'collective noun' and 'mass-noun', the problem relating to the use of the metalinguistic term 'collective' is twofold, as it is due partly to the definition of 'collective (noun)' we choose to give and partly to the vagueness of the boundaries between the various types of nouns that we could refer to with this term. However, since this vagueness is deeply rooted in the structure of a human language, it seems that our only chance is to intervene on the definition's side, but that obviously calls for further considerations about the definition of 'collective (noun)' itself.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

At the end of this brief survey, let us sum up the relevant questions and problems about the metalinguistic usage of the term 'collective', in order to try to clarify its position within the metalanguage of linguistics.

<sup>14</sup> It must be observed that in case of pairs such as Germ. *Wasser* ~ *Gewässer*, the idea, which originally led to the derivation of the collective noun, could actually have been that of considering the whole of the waters of a lake (or river, or sea); nonetheless, it seems to me that such a semantic process is not wholly comparable with that of gathering several homogeneous entities in a single group, due to the peculiar characters of mass-nouns' referents (see below in the text).

As we have seen, the major problems associated with this term come from the fact that it has been used to refer to various types of formations, which are only partially similar from a semantic perspective. Therefore, we must in the first place make a choice, which kind of definition we should give of the metalinguistic term 'collective (noun)', and then, according to this definition, we have to decide which types of nouns the term 'collective' can be used to refer to.

As for the kind of definition, since the term 'collective' has a long history, which starts in classical antiquity, the best thing to do is - in my opinion - to stay as close as possible to the traditional definition, which focuses primarily on the semantic level and states that a collective noun is a noun which refers to multiple similar objects treating them as a single unit. This course of action is also supported by the fact that - as we have already seen - the Latin term (*nomen*) *collectivum* itself was crafted in order to fit this particular linguistic feature, since a collective noun actually *collects* several objects. On this basis, in accordance with the etymology and the history of the term, it is reasonable to assume this feature as the core element for a definition of 'collective (noun)'.

According to this kind of definition, we can altogether give up the use of the term 'collective' in reference to substance mass-nouns of the type *water*, since the physical characters of their referents are incompatible with the basic idea of grouping together single, clearly distinguishable objects. The label 'collective' should obviously be maintained to refer to [+ bounded, + internal structure] count nouns like *herd* or *committee*, since they suit perfectly the traditional definition; moreover, they are in some respects to be considered the prototypical collective nouns, because they do refer to a plurality of entities as a single unit, which is also well defined, but their referents' sub-units maintain a high degree of individuation and perceptibility. On the contrary, nouns like En. *cattle*, Germ. *Vieh*, It. *bestiame* have a more general meaning (usually referring to types of objects rather than to specific objects) and are [- bounded] and non-count; nonetheless, they still suit the traditional definition of 'collective noun', because they are morphologically singular<sup>15</sup> and refer to a plurality of entities. Since the traditional definition of 'collective noun' is quite broad, it seems to me that we should retain the usage of the label 'collective' also in reference to nouns of the type *cattle*, possibly specifying (if the

<sup>15</sup> Since they are non-count, we should more precisely say that nouns of the type *cattle* are indifferent to the singular/plural distinction; however, in languages which mark morphologically the category of 'number', they are usually marked as singular.

need arises) that they are non-count nouns (we could make use of the label ‘collective mass-nouns’ or the like). As for cases like German *Gewässer*, the label ‘collective’, though less adequate from a semantic standpoint, can still be used to stress the fact that such nouns are formed by the same morphological process, which usually derives proper collective nouns.

As a conclusive remark, we may ask ourselves, of what usefulness such a definition of ‘collective (noun)’ could be to the metalanguage of linguistics, and if we should continue to make use of the term ‘collective’ or rather consign it “to the waste-paper basket” (Gil 1996: 77). It is true that a broad-meaning definition lacks in precision and is potentially ambiguous, but it is also true that some categories of nouns are more closely related than others, and that a wide-ranged definition can more effectively account for such relationships. Maybe in the metalanguage of linguistics, alongside with univocal definitions, there is also room for more general - one might say more ‘collective’ - metalinguistic terms.

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## ABSTRACT

*Un'etichetta linguistica problematica: il termine "collettivo"*

Il termine tecnico "collettivo" (sia come aggettivo, sia nel senso di "nome collettivo"), consacrato da una lunga tradizione di studi grammaticali, fa parte *pleno iure* del metalinguaggio della linguistica, in particolare della linguistica storica. Tuttavia, è stato recentemente osservato che tale termine non ha un significato univoco, ma viene utilizzato di volta in volta per riferirsi a entità e fatti linguistici in parte differenti.

Scorrendo le pagine dei principali dizionari di linguistica, infatti, si nota che le definizioni del termine "collettivo" (assieme ai suoi sinonimi presenti nelle principali lingue europee, ad es. fr. *collectif*, ingl. *collective noun*, ted. *Kollektiv*, *Sammelname*, ecc.) da un lato hanno in comune come nucleo semantico di base il riferimento a un gruppo di entità che vengono concepite come un'unità (cfr. it. *gregge*, ingl. *army*, fr. *forêt*, ecc.), dall'altro rinviano a proprietà che non sono unanimemente condivise da parte di tutti i nomi che vengono etichettati come "collettivi" nelle varie lingue prese in esame. Queste proprietà sono di ordine morfologico, sintattico e semantico e il fatto che non siano tutte compresenti nei nomi che in lingue diverse vengono definiti collettivi può di certo essere messo in relazione con le caratteristiche tipologiche di ogni singola lingua.

Nel quadro degli usi del termine tecnico "collettivo" merita poi una particolare considerazione la sua applicazione in riferimento ai nomi-massa; tali nomi presentano caratteristiche diverse rispetto a quelle dei nomi che comunemente vengono definiti collettivi, eppure una certa sovrapposizione tra le due categorie è ravvisabile nell'ambito degli studi di linguistica. L'utilizzo dell'etichetta "collettivo" per indicare nomi-massa è particolarmente presente nella tradizione di studi di indoeuropeistica, dove è stato consacrato - in momenti diversi - dall'opera di due linguisti come Johannes Schmidt e Jochem Schindler.

L'analisi degli usi del termine "collettivo" mostra dunque che si tratta di un'etichetta sotto certi aspetti problematica, il cui contenuto semantico principale è chiaramente individuabile nel riferimento a gruppi di enti percepiti come una singola unità, ma che allo stesso tempo, a causa dell'intreccio di fattori morfologici, semantici e sintattici a essa sottesi, può essere applicata anche a nomi che condividono solo parzialmente le caratteristiche dei nomi collettivi prototipici.

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