Pluralization of Mass Nouns- Can they go together in Modern Hebrew?

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This talk examines plurality of mass nouns in Hebrew. It is known and accepted that mass nouns do not normally pluralize and that the issue of pluralization serves as a crucial difference between mass and count nouns. Some cases of pluralization of mass nouns are described in the literature, and can convey a kind meaning (as in three wines-three kinds of wine) or a standard serving meaning (as in three beers-three cups of beer). These are the canonical mass nouns. These canonical meanings can also come with a number and thus, behave almost count like.

However, other plural mass nouns are found in Hebrew, as well as other languages. These plural mass nouns are 'non-canonical' and can be divided into two groups. One group is of non-canonical mass nouns that keep the mass meaning of the noun. These non-canonical mass nouns can be the abundance plural that can be seen in Doron and Müller (2013) and the definite plural in Persian in Ghaniabadi (2012), as well as plural mass noun in Greek, as described by Tsoulas (2006).

Some natural examples show how the known explanations in the literature are not sufficient in explaining these plural nouns. In (1) I show that some plural mass noun may have a meaning of a little N or no N, thus, contradicting the idea of abundance plural which talks about a lot of N such that the plural form necessarily relates to big quantity of the noun.

(1) lema'ase, be-rov yemi ha-xoref lo yordim gesam-im be-israel
    actually, in-most days the-winter not raining rains-pl in-Israel
    "Actually, on most winter days, it does not rain in Israel"1

The data I present is different than the nouns discussed by Tsoulas (2006) and Ghaniabadi (2012) since the plural marker or morpheme indicates that some actual process of pluralization has happened. This led to the interest in the second group of non-canonical mass nouns, that are in fact quasi-mass nouns. These nouns do not keep their mass meaning, while still not allowing a complete shift to a count meaning, since they cannot be combined with numerals. It is clear that some individuated units must be accessible in order to allow pluralization and in fact, these quasi-mass nouns in Hebrew bear some meaning of individuation. I will present a meaning of events of N (2) and a meaning of location of N (3).

(2) az axaryi ha-gešam-im ha-rabim hetxila pluma šel yarok
    so after the-rain,pl the-many started down of green
    "After the rains, a down of green started growing"2

(3) yeladyinu sfunim be-šaot elu be-bateihem, ba-xadarim ha-memuganim,
    our-kids confined in-hours these in-their-houses, in-rooms the-shielded,
    bimkom lehitrozez ba-dšayim ve-levalot be-brexot ha-sxiya
    instead to-run in-grasses and-to-have fun in-pools the-swimming
    ba-xofoš ha-gadol
    in-vacation the-big

1 http://www.water.gov.il/Hebrew/Water-Environment/Pages/Rainfall-in-Israel.aspx
2 https://www.facebook.com/orlyya/posts/519043148146021
"Our kids are sitting at their homes and safe rooms instead of running around in the grasses and have fun in the swimming pools in the summer vacation"³

The talk will present the three groups of quasi-mass nouns I was able to find. The first two groups consist of different nouns that have a plural meaning accessible. They are grouped according to the meaning they present. The nouns presented in both of these groups cannot be combined with numerals, thus making them quasi mass nouns, and not count nouns.

Following these two groups, the third group of nouns consists of nouns that are also plural mass nouns in Hebrew, but they are not grouped according to their semantic meanings. They are presented as a third group since they all show how flexible the Hebrew language is in creating new plural nouns. Unlike the nouns in the previous two groups, these newly created nouns are more likely to be mass nouns that are slowly becoming count nouns in the spoken language. These nouns are also considered to be part of a lower, maybe younger, register. It is crucial to point out here that the nouns with the event meaning and the ones with the location reading are not going through the same process, but are true mass nouns that are acceptable to all native speakers of all ages and registers.

References


³ http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4556749,00.html