Attributive Quantity Words as Nonrestrictive Modifiers

The Issue: The occurrence of cardinal numbers and vague quantifiers (henceforth ‘quantity words’) in post-determiner or attributive position (1) has been taken as evidence that these items have the semantics of predicates rather than quantifiers (Hoeksema 1983; Landman 2004). On this view, the three dogs receives the analysis in (2), where three first combines intersectively with dogs, and the (interpreted as a supremum operator) takes the resulting set expression as an argument.

What has not been recognized is that (2) treats the quantity word as a restrictive modifier. In fact, the underlined words in (1) have nonrestrictive interpretations. Thus (1a) does not assert that the set of dogs with three members (as opposed to some other set of dogs) growled menacingly, but rather that the totality of contextually relevant dogs, whose number was three, did so. Furthermore, attributive quantity words exhibit clear parallels to prenominal adjectives on their nonrestrictive readings (e.g. the industrious Greeks, where industrious characterizes Greeks as a whole). Both can be taken to introduce secondary, backgrounded assertions, as in the paraphrases in (3). Determiners that allow nonrestrictive readings for a subsequent adjective (e.g. the, possessive pronouns) can also generally be followed by a quantity word, while those that disallow a nonrestrictive reading for the adjective (e.g. most) cannot be followed by quantity words (4,5). Finally, attributive quantity words also pattern with the nonrestrictive readings of pronominal adjectives in allowing relativization only with a wh-word, and not with that (6,7).

Analysis: I adopt the multi-dimensional framework of Potts (2003) and its extension by Morzycki (2008), in which the content of nonrestrictive modifiers is computed on a separate dimension of interpretation from the primary asserted content. I take the quantity words in (1) to be Quantity Phrases (QPs) situated in the specifier position of a functional head Meas. Semantically, I analyze numerals as denoting degrees (type d) and the vague quantifiers many/few as denoting quantifiers over degrees ((\(d,t\)), with Meas introducing a measure function that links the degree argument to the individual argument (8). The crucial compositional rule is given in (9): the QP composes with the remainder of the DP in the ‘conventional implicature’ (CI) dimension (below the •) to produce a fully saturated proposition (type t); at the same time, a referential expression (type e) remains available for further composition in the ‘at issue’ dimension (above the •). As an example, in (10), few is predicated in the CI dimension of the (singleton) set whose element is the number of trees, specifying that this number is less than some standard; the referential expression the trees remains available to compose with a sentential predicate. (11), featuring a cardinal number, is analyzed similarly with the exception that the function/argument structure in the CI dimension is reversed: three saturates the degree argument of the measure function.

Consequences: This analysis not only aligns the treatment of attributive quantity words to that of nonrestrictive modifiers more generally, but is also superior to the intersective analysis in (2) in accounting for the relevant data. First, the otherwise puzzling determiner restrictions are captured: the determiners that can be followed by a quantity word (e.g. the) are those that yield a referential (type e) interpretation for Det+NP, which is required to provide an argument of the correct type for the measure function \(\mu_e\). Second, the present account, like the intersective analysis, accommodates the predicative uses of many/few (12a). I take the subject to have a null MeasP layer (12b), yielding a denotation of type \((d,t)\) to serve as the argument of few (12c). (Evidence for this is provided by the determiner restrictions in (13): since \(\mu_e\) needs an argument of type e, only determiners that yield a referential interpretation for the DP are allowed here, just as in the attributive case.) But my account also explains the contrast between (12) and (14): while many/few denote predicates (of sets of degrees), numerals do not. Finally, attributive few allows a negative polarity item in the subsequent NP (15). This is unexpected on the analysis in (2), where the NPI would not be in the semantic scope of an appropriate licensor; but it is accounted for by the present approach, where the NP as a whole, including the NPI, is within the scope of few on the CI level.

An Apparent Exception: Examples such as some ten people died in the accident might seem to represent exceptions to the patterns described here (e.g. some people is not interpreted referentially). I show that these cases require a different analysis, with some as an approximative modifier of the numeral.

Conclusion: The analysis of attributive quantity words as nonrestrictive modifiers provides a more complete account of the facts than existing analyses, while at the same time extending the empirical coverage of Potts’ multi-dimensional framework.
(1) a. The three dogs growled menacingly  b. I bought those four books in Paris
c. The few trees were stunted  d. His many friends supported him through his illness

(2) \[ \{ \text{three} \} = \{ \text{dogs} \} \cap \{ \text{three} \} = \lambda x. \ast \text{dog}(x) \& |x| = 3 \]
\[ \{ \text{the three dogs} \} = \sup(\lambda x. \ast \text{dog}(x) \& |x| = 3) \text{ if defined; undefined otherwise} \]
where \( \sup(P) = \lambda x[P(x) \& \forall y[P(y) \rightarrow y \subseteq x]] \]

(3) a. The industrious Greeks built an empire.
    ‘The Greeks, built an empire. Theyi were industrious’
    b. The few trees were stunted.
    ‘The trees, were stunted. Theyi were few’

(4) a. The industrious Greeks built beautiful monuments
    ✓ Restrictive ✓ Nonrestrictive
b. Her valuable books were destroyed in the fire
    ✓ Restrictive ✓ Nonrestrictive
c. Most industrious Greeks were sailors
    ✓ Restrictive × Nonrestrictive
d. Some valuable books were destroyed in the fire
    ✓ Restrictive × Nonrestrictive

(5) a. The three/many/few trees were stunted
b. His three/many/few close friends supported him
   c. *Most three/many/few books were destroyed in the fire
   d. *Some many/few books were destroyed in the fire

(6) a. The Greeks, who were industrious… Nonrestrictive reading available (with comma intonation)
   b. The Greeks that were industrious Restrictive reading only

(7) a. The trees, which were few, were stunted burner. The trees, which were few, were stunted
   b. *The trees that were few were stunted

(8) a. \[ \{ \text{three} \} = \{ \text{many} \} = \lambda P. \ast \text{dog}(P) > d_{\text{Std}} \]
   b. \[ \{ \text{few} \} = \lambda P. \ast \text{dog}(P) < d_{\text{Std}} \]
   where \( \mu_* \) is a counting measure function

(9) A structure of the form in (a) has the semantic translation in (b):
    a. \[ \text{[DP} \alpha [\text{MeasP} [\text{QP} \beta] \text{Meas} [\text{NP} \gamma]]] \]
    b. \( \alpha(\gamma): e^\alpha \cdot \text{FA}(\beta, \text{Meas}(\alpha(\gamma))): t^\epsilon \)
where FA=function application \( \text{FA}(\sigma, \tau) = \sigma(\tau) \text{ or } \tau(\sigma) \]

(10) \[ \text{[DP} \text{the} [\text{MeasP} [\text{QP} \text{few}] \text{Meas} [\text{NP} \text{trees}]]) \]
     the trees: \( e^\alpha \)
     few(\( \lambda d_\alpha \mu_\alpha \)(the trees) = d): \( t^\epsilon \)

(11) \[ \text{[DP} \text{the} [\text{MeasP} [\text{QP} \text{three}] \text{Meas} [\text{NP} \text{dogs}]]) \]
     the dogs: \( e^\alpha \)
     \( \mu_\alpha \)(the dogs) = 3: \( t^\epsilon \)

(12) a. The visitors were few
b. \[ [\text{[MeasP} \text{Meas} [\text{DP} \text{the visitors}]] \]
     were few
     c. few(\( \lambda d_\alpha \mu_\alpha \)(the visitors) = d)

(13) The/our/*/some/*/most/*/twenty visitors were few

(14) ??The visitors were twenty

(15) The few students who had ever read Plato understood the argument