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Grammar vs. Lexicographic Practice – a Few Remarks on What English Dictionaries Do Not Say About Countable and Uncountable Nouns (Though They Should)

ABSTRACT

The issue of countability and uncountability of English nouns may seem simple – nouns are count when their designations can be counted, and mass when they cannot (e.g., Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 334). Consequently, we might expect that lexicographic characteristics of nouns will be generally unequivocal: count or mass. However, a closer analysis of this issue reveals several fundamental problems of a grammatical and lexicographic nature. The article analyses how grammatical problems with such classifications translate into lexicographic practice. The analysis focuses on five reputable dictionaries of English and their approaches to the issue of countability and uncountability of selected nouns.

Keywords: count and mass nouns, English dictionaries, grammatical information

1. Introduction

It is customary to adopt a clear-cut approach to the category of count and mass nouns in English: when nouns refer to things that can be counted, they are countable (Sinclair, 1990, p. 26). When, however, they refer to “qualities, substances, processes, and topics rather than to individual items or events” (p. 28), they are uncountable (cf. e.g., Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, p. 241; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 334). And even if, as Biber et al. (1999, p. 242) note, “countability is not a simple reflection of things observed in the external world”, and Huddleston and Pullum (2002, p. 335) discuss “count and non-count conceptualisations” (cf. Langacker, 1987, p. 97), the classification remains straightforward and leaves no doubt about both the criteria of classification and the resultant division of nouns.

The goal of the present article is to demonstrate how these assumptions translate into lexicographic practice. More specifically, it aims to check whether dictionary entries convey such information and, if not, how they actually approach the count-mass contrast and deal with many of its problems.

The article begins with a presentation of one of the problems of the count/mass classification – the categorisation of nouns. This serves as the basis for an analysis

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of five reputable dictionaries of English and indicating three problematic areas in the accounts that they provide.

2. Count and mass nouns – properties and controversies

Both count and mass nouns possess certain morphological and syntactic characteristics due to which speakers are able to distinguish the two types of nouns. There is a set of such characteristics, e.g., only count nouns have singular and plural forms, e.g., *a table – tables*; only count nouns combine with the indefinite article and cardinal numerals, e.g., *a plate, one plate, two plates*, etc.; there are quantifiers typical for count and mass nouns, e.g., respectively, *many* and *much*; mass nouns select specific forms of verbs, e.g., *crockery is*, while count nouns agree with a wider range of them, e.g., *The dog likes her* and *The dogs like her*, etc. (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 241–243; cf. Drożdż, 2017, pp. 85–86; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 334 etc.). At the same time, since “most nouns have both singular and plural forms” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 340), they are treated as variations of count nouns.

While the majority of grammar books follow these guidelines and assume a general division of nouns into proper, count, and mass (e.g., Biber et al., 1999, p. 241; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 334; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 245), all the major dictionaries of English have adopted a much more problematic classification – based on Sinclair (1990, pp. 26–34). Its main principle is that instead of three major types of nouns there are six: proper, count, mass, singular, plural, and collective nouns. In other words, Sinclair postulates three additional categories of nouns: singular, plural, and collective. Before discussing how this classification can be received by dictionary readers (cf. section 3.1.), let us analyse its grammatical consequences.

Although adding three categories of nouns might seem profitable or, at least, innocuous, in fact it introduces a lot of confusion in the count-mass distinction. The major reason of this confusion is that the purpose of a new category is primarily to delineate a group of nouns that possess different properties than the others. What is more, the members of such a category should be clearly distinguishable from the other nouns.

Unfortunately, Sinclair’s classification does not follow these rules. The first of his categories, count nouns, is so general that it encompasses more specific categories of singular and plural nouns: “many nouns have two forms, the singular form, which is used to refer to one person or thing, and the plural form, which is used to refer to more than one person or thing” (Sinclair, 1990, p. 26). Actually, his characterisation of count nouns is limited to several general properties, e.g., the fact that the use of the singular form of the noun as the subject of the verb requires a singular verb, and the use of a plural form – a plural verb, or the fact that when nouns are used in the singular form they require a determiner (p. 26).

Still, he considers two further categories, singular and plural nouns, to be equally general and *different* from the category of count nouns (Sinclair, 1990, p. 30). However, instead of detailing their unique semantic or any other characteristics, he simply specifies several grammatical cases when count nouns appear in the singular form, e.g.:

- “when you use a singular noun as the subject of a verb”, e.g., *The sun was shining* (which was also presented as a characteristic of count nouns);
- “some singular nouns refer to one specific thing [...]. Some of these nouns, in fact, refer to something of which there is only one in the world”, e.g., *The moon had not yet reached my window*; or
- “there are some activities which you do not usually do more than once at a time. The nouns that refer to them are usually the object of a verb, and are used with the determiner ‘a’”, e.g., *Bruno gave it a try* (p. 30).

Although Sinclair (1990) claims that singular nouns have “no plural” (p. 26), suggesting a plural form for the nouns mentioned in the examples is not really problematic. If we remember that the noun *sun* may refer to “any star in the universe that is similar to the sun, with or without planets” (Lexico), it is clear that both the singular and plural form of the noun may constitute the subject of the sentence. Similarly, the moon is the only one in the world as long as we mean the earth’s satellite. If we think about the moon as “a natural satellite of any planet” (Lexico), of which we can also easily talk from the perspective of the Earth, the plural form may become the standard, as in the case of Jupiter and its 79 moons. In other words, the limitation that “there is only one in the world” (Sinclair, 1990, p. 30) is not well founded, for it is largely subjective and depends on the perspective adopted by the speaker.

In a similar vein, we might assume that because most people know London as the capital city of the UK, they think it is the only one in the world. The point is that in fact there are 28 such towns and places all over the world – over a dozen of towns in the USA are called London (e.g., in Ohio, Arkansas, and Kentucky), there is one in Canada (in Ontario, also set upon the River Thames), etc. (see <https://www.wanderlust.co.uk/content/londons-around-the-world/>).

If we add to it the fact that instead of *a try*, exemplifying the third of the discussed uses of singular nouns, Bruno may have given it *a series of tries*, the classification becomes even more dubious. Most importantly, however, none of the provided examples shows the necessity of introducing a separate category of singular nouns. Rather, the discussed examples should be interpreted either as cases what the speaker chooses to refer to, or as a purposeful choice of specific designations, which happen to be singular in some cases and plural in others.

Similar problems can be noted in the discussion of plural nouns, where Sinclair (1990) mixes the semantic criteria with grammatical ones, that is, together with plurale tantum nouns he enumerates such criteria as:

- “when you use a plural noun as the subject form of the verb, you use a plural form of the verb”, e.g., *The foundations were shaking*;
- “some plural nouns are most commonly used with a possessive determiner such as ‘my’ or ‘his’”, e.g., *It offended her feelings* (pp. 31–33).

Again, despite the claim that plural nouns have “no singular” (Sinclair, 1990, p. 26), it is also relatively unproblematic to indicate contrary evidence, e.g., “build the arch resting on top of this solid foundation” (Lexico). It is also an issue of debate to what extent “an emotion that you feel, such as anger, sadness, or happiness”, characterised as [countable] by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online* (LG), is different from “someone’s feelings are their thoughts, emotions, and attitudes” [plural] (LG). In other words, what should be the matter of verifiable criteria turns into an arbitrary whim of a grammarian.

To make things worse, this classification does not solve any grammatical problems. Quite conversely, it multiplies them, because the labels *singular* or *plural*, unfortunately, do not determine unequivocally whether the noun is countable or mass. Naturally, it is count nouns that are typically associated with singularity or plurality. However, the matter is more complex. If we think about the number of the mass noun, we need to conclude that it is *singular*. Actually, as Biber et al. (1999, p. 241) note, “the most typical uncountable nouns are singular” (cf. Quirk et al., 1985, p. 298). What is more, they are even classified as “singulabilia tantum” (Wierzbicka, 1988, p. 520).

A similar problem occurs with the term *plural*. In grammar, since McCawley’s (1975) paper, it has become customary to talk also about “plural mass nouns” – nouns that are morphologically plural, but “do not vary for number and do not combine with numerals” (Biber et al., 1999, p. 244). Actually, Biber et al. (1999) admit that “it may seem to be a contradiction” to use the term “plural uncountables” (p. 244). Still, they provide such a category. Also Huddleston and Pullum (2002) introduce the category “plurals denoting aggregates of entities”, where they admit that “the aggregate nature of the denotation is comparable to that of the non-count singulars” (p. 343). What this means is that from the grammatical perspective the labels *singular* or *plural* suggested by Sinclair (1990) do not determine the information that readers expect from the dictionary – whether the noun is count or mass. What is more, the assumption behind this kind of description is that the reader should only possess the basic knowledge concerning count and mass nouns. If their knowledge exceeds the basics, the labels become confusing.

3. The dictionary approach to countability and uncountability

Although seemingly simple, the manner in which the issue of count and mass nouns is presented in grammar handbooks is far from unequivocal. Unfortunately, the account found in dictionaries makes it even more blurred. In the present paper,

one aspect of this imprecision is considered: grammatical. Three of its areas are indicated: the categories that dictionaries introduce except for count and mass nouns, the contradictory information that they provide, and the type of mistakes they make in their classifications.

3.1. Beyond countability and uncountability

One of the problems found in characterisations of head nouns and senses is not entirely grammatical in nature. Rather, it is more accurate to say that it is a combination of the decision concerning the strategy of providing grammatical information in dictionaries and of a specific grammatical classification. Let us discuss these issues in turn.

My analysis shows that there are three general strategies of presenting grammatical information. The first one can be found in two of the analysed dictionaries, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online* (LG) and *Macmillan Dictionary Online* (MCM), which provide grammatical information at the beginning of the entry if it is valid for all the senses of the noun or, if the senses have different properties, each sense is labelled separately, e.g., LG classifies three senses of *stage* as [countable] and one as [singular]. This, however, is just a general tendency, because there are also nouns like, e.g., *book* – all its senses have the same property, still each of them is classified separately as [countable].

The second strategy is adopted by two further dictionaries, *Collins Online English Dictionary* (CC) and *Cambridge Dictionary Online* (CMB). Their idea is quite straightforward – to provide grammatical information for every single sense of the noun, even if this is the same property.

A still different strategy is employed by *Oxford Dictionaries* which, after a fusion with Dictionary.com, began the project called *Lexico* (LEX). Three elements of their strategy are worth indicating. First, at the level of the head word it only provides explicit grammatical information about mass nouns. Count nouns, by default, have none. The second important characteristic is that it provides information that is aimed at the noun as a whole rather than at every single sense of it. There are two consequences of this: in some cases LEX enumerates senses with fewer properties than the other dictionaries and leaves some subsenses with no definition – only an illustration is provided (cf. section 3.2). At the same time, when important senses of a noun have different properties than the head noun, they are described as such, e.g., *blood* is labelled [mass], and three of its main senses are classified as [count]. Finally, LEX only classifies senses in a binary manner, that is, both a head noun and a sense can only be either [count] or [mass]. A similar approach, though much less strictly observed, can only be found in one more dictionary – CMB. The other three dictionaries quite readily classify senses as [countable, uncountable] or [variable].

After discussing the strategies, we can show the lexicographic consequences of implementing Sinclair's (1990) proposal. It is most visible in the case of CMB and

CC, which classify each sense individually. There, the new grammatical categories are immediately seen, e.g., CC classifies two senses of *stage* as [countable noun], and two further as [singular noun]: “You can refer to acting and the production of plays in a theatre as *the stage*” and “You can refer to a particular area of activity as a particular *stage*, especially when you are talking about politics”. In a similar vein, CMB classifies *water* as [U], and two of its senses as [plural]: “the area of sea near to and belonging to a particular country” and *the waters* as “water from a spring, especially when used in the past for drinking or swimming in, in order to improve the health”.

At the same time, we should note a gradation in the approach to the new grammatical properties. While in CC all senses are classified as [countable], [uncountable], [variable], [singular], or [plural], CMB introduces two more possibilities – two subtypes of count nouns: [C usually singular] and [C usually plural], e.g., one of the senses of *belt* is classified as [C usually singular]: “an area, usually just outside a city, where a particular group of people live, such as the commuter belt and the stockbroker belt”.

The new properties make a different impression when they are accommodated within the strategy adopted by LG and MCM, as they allow two possibilities. The first solution resembles the classification found in CC and CMB: there are senses whose property [singular] or [plural] is so well entrenched that they are classified in this way, e.g., MCM enumerates three [countable] senses of *book*, and one [plural], as in the expression *do the books*. However, such senses are not too frequent.

What the two dictionaries do more often is introduce the categories [usually singular] and [usually plural], which they treat as subcategories of count nouns, e.g., LG describes the head noun *tie* as [countable], and one of its senses, “a strong relationship between people, groups, or countries”, as [usually plural]. It is also worth mentioning that although both LG and MCM use the same strategy, LG makes use of the properties [usually singular] and [usually plural] much more often than MCM.

As for LEX, it organises the grammatical information in a still different manner. First of all, out of the two new properties it only marks explicitly one of them, [in singular], as in one of the senses of *rain* – “A large or overwhelming quantity of things that fall or descend”, e.g., *He fell under the rain of blows*. The [plural] category is treated differently. It is also marked, but not explicitly as a grammatical category – it is provided as the plural form of the noun before definitions of particular senses, e.g., one of the senses of *rain*, “falls of rain”, is preceded by the plural form (*rains*). As a result, the interpretation of the grammatical property of such a noun seems to be left to the reader.

Another specific feature of LEX is that it introduces four further grammatical properties of both count and mass nouns: [as modifier], [usually as modifier], [with

modifier], and [often with modifier], which are respectively illustrated: *jacket – he put his hand in his jacket pocket*, *star – a star layout*, *book – an accounts book*, and *shower – she loved going to baby showers*. LEX is the only dictionary introducing this kind of information, and it is a matter of debate whether it is really needed. First, understanding it requires specialist knowledge – not everyone knows what modifiers are. Second, these labels may be confusing for non-specialists, who might wonder about the relationship between count and mass properties typically marked in dictionaries and these grammatical categories. Finally, I do not think that in a language like English, which quite freely forms compound nouns (e.g., Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 537), it is crucial for a dictionary to enumerate cases when nouns can modify other nouns or can be modified themselves. Especially that, as e.g., Huddleston and Pullum (p. 451; cf. Biber et al., 1999, p. 590; Quirk et al., 1985, p. 1332) indicate, this is a gradable and changeable property.

3.2. Contradictory grammatical classifications

A still different issue is the contradictory classifications provided by the dictionaries. Again, there are several dimensions of these divergences.

One of them stems from the fact that, as has already been mentioned, only LEX classifies nouns and senses in a binary manner. As a result, the nouns that are labelled as [countable, uncountable] or [variable] in other dictionaries, are either [count] or [mass] in LEX. This can be observed in the case of e.g., *food* in the sense “what people and animals eat” (CC). LG, CC, and CMB classify it as both countable and uncountable, while LEX marks it as [mass], with an additional, indeterminate sense illustrated by *baby foods*. A kind of compromise between these two extremes, which is also closest to the actual property of the noun, is proposed by MCM. It postulates one major uncountable sense, with two clearly defined subsenses: “a particular type of food” and “the things that plants need in order to grow”. And while the former is both countable and uncountable, the latter is only uncountable.

These considerations bring us closer to one of the major problems of lexicographic accounts – divergent grammatical classifications of the same sense. Unfortunately, the grammatical accounts provided by dictionaries vary to a significant degree. A good illustration of the point is the noun *juice*. One of its senses, “the liquid that comes from fruit and vegetables, or a drink that is made from this” (LG), is classified by LG, CC, and MCM as [countable, uncountable], while LEX and CMB claim it is [uncountable].

An even greater divergence can be observed in another sense of *juice*: “the liquid that comes out of meat when it is cooked” (LG). For LG it is [countable, usually plural], for CC it is [plural], for MCM it is both [countable/ uncountable], CMB does not classify it, and in LEX, because the head noun is [mass], this sense by default should be interpreted as mass. However, in LEX this definition

begins with the plural form (*juices*), which leaves the reader with a puzzle about its grammatical property.

Unfortunately, such examples can be multiplied. And they concern both classifications of head nouns and particular senses.

3.3. Other grammatical problems

The last type of problems that we need to indicate is, at the same time, the most serious one in lexicographic practice. Actually, looking at the divergent classifications discussed in the previous section this problem has probably become apparent by now – that a number of grammatical classifications provided in dictionaries are inaccurate and, in many a case, even mistaken.

Let us begin with the inaccuracies. The most common one seems to stem from the confusion between grammatical categories and functions, that is, the grammatical (and semantic) properties of nouns are deduced on the basis of their syntactic functions. The problem is that nouns can function as attributive modifiers of other nouns and, in that position, they can have several different meaning relations, e.g., composition, content, partitive, time, location, etc. (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 590–591). But, since “just about any noun can appear in this function” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 537), it is inadequate to determine, on this basis, the meaning or the grammatical property of the noun.

Unfortunately, this is how such functions are treated, e.g., MCM proposes a sense of *fruit* that is characterised as follows: “ONLY BEFORE NOUN made from fruit, or relating to fruit”. Probably because of this, the pre-modifying position is often used as an illustration of the mass sense, e.g., LEX illustrates the mass sense of *belly* with 12 (out of 20) examples where *belly* is used in this way, e.g., *The meat was apparently very tasty, but very fatty, which one would expect belly pork to be*. Similarly, LG illustrates the [countable, uncountable] sense of *apple* only with such examples, e.g., *apple pie*, etc. While by itself this is a conceivable method of determining grammatical properties, one remark is due: with such illustrations all count nouns should be classified as mass, not just some of them.

An even higher level of inadequacy can be seen in LEX, which classifies *juice* as [mass], but the first context that it provides is grammatically indeterminate: *add the juice of a lemon*. Since both count and mass nouns can appear with the definite article, the example is vague.

Before dictionary mistakes are discussed, one more type of problem needs to be indicated: neglecting the fact that subsenses may have a different property than the head noun. More specifically, the grammatical properties of certain senses are not recognised or named, though we might expect them to be, e.g., LEX classifies *blood* as mass, and this is the default property of one of its subsenses: “blood samples or tests”. However, the examples illustrating it indicate something different: *his bloods were normal* and *a nurse was out on the corridor taking bloods from the*

patients. If we add to it the context found in Drożdż (2017, p. 144), *Respondent unable to give a blood for reason other than refusal*, we should classify this sense as [countable, usually plural] rather than [mass].

Unfortunately, dictionaries are also not free from blatant mistakes, e.g., CMB classifies one of the senses of *fruit* as solely count, though four out of five examples illustrating it are clearly mass, e.g., *The pear tree they planted has never borne fruit*. Another example of this type also concerns *fruit*, which is classified by LEX as count, though all the other dictionaries classify it as both [count, mass]. At the same time, none of the dictionaries proposes what seems to be closest to the actual senses of the noun and their grammatical properties: the head noun classified as mass, and one of its subsenses, “a kind of fruit”, as count.

Conclusions

As has been shown, the grammatical information related to count and mass nouns that is found in reputable dictionaries of English is far from satisfactory – it is not uniform across different dictionaries, it is partly irrelevant and, what is most problematic, sometimes also utterly incorrect. This leads to the conclusion that grammatical accounts of dictionary entries should not be exclusively the matter of lexicographers. Rather, producing accurate grammatical descriptions requires, first, a sound grammatical debate and, second, more attention to the recipients of the lexicographic information: their needs and knowledge.

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