

# **Nouns that can be either count or noncount**

## **1. Introduction**

In spite of the basic division into two categories, count (frequently also called countable) and noncount (frequently also called mass and uncountable), some common nouns exhibit the properties of both categories. Very often the difference in meaning is considerable when these nouns are used in the two categories. Another interesting feature is their ability to take any kind of determiner, depending of course on whether we want them to be count or noncount.

## **2. Literature overview**

In preparation for writing this paper, I have mostly consulted two books: 'A Student's Grammar of the English Language' by Greenbaum and Quirk, and John Eastwood's 'Oxford Guide to English Grammar'. I have found the latter to be more helpful with the well organized overview of the six situations in which nouns can be either count or noncount, while Greenbaum and Quirk were perhaps a better choice for understanding the problematic of the English nouns as a whole. The two books do not agree in the terminology, with Eastwood using the terms countable and uncountable nouns, while Greenbaum and Quirk prefer count and noncount. In this paper I have chosen to adopt the latter approach.

## **3. Situations in which common nouns can be either count or uncount**

In order to comprehend the problem more easily, before moving on to the explanations of the different situations in which it occurs, we shall look at the schematic division of common nouns as presented by Greenbaum and Quirk (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990, 70):

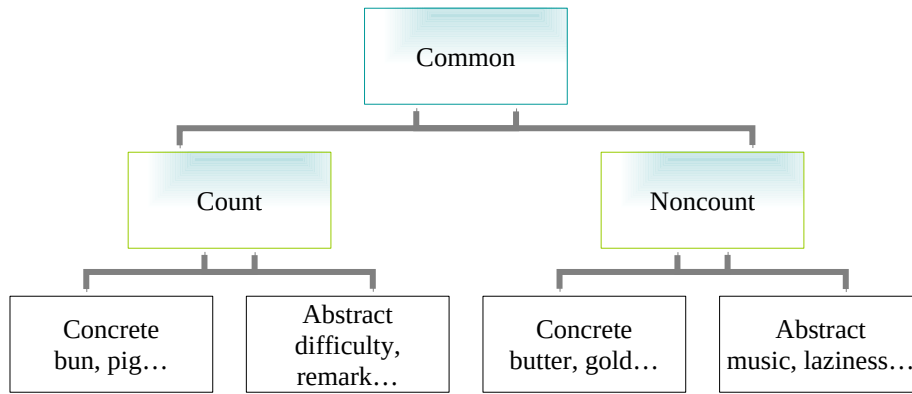


Fig 1

According to John Eastwood (Eastwood 1994, 182) there are six different situations in which common nouns can display dual membership. We shall examine each through examples, with the representative ones of each group looked at in more detail.

- a. Some concrete nouns are count when they refer to something separate and individual, but uncount when they refer to a type of material or substance.

(1) *Jaime picked up a stone that Robb left on the floor.*

(2) *The keep was made of stone.*

In examples (1) and (2), the noun of interest is *stone*. In example (1), it refers to separate, individual piece of stone left on the floor, it is used with the article *a*; all of this rendering it countable. However, in example (2) it marks the material of which the keep is constructed, and is not countable. Here are some similar examples:

(3) *Bright lights of the city made me feel dizzy.*

(4) *Light travels faster than sound.*

- b. Animals, vegetables and fruit are uncountable when we cut or divide them.

(5) *John peeled twelve oranges today.*

(6) *He then baked a cake with orange.*

*Oranges* are countable in example (5), they are specific and individual. In example (6) the orange on the cake is divided, and becomes uncountable. Other similar examples are:

(7) *I saw a strange fish while snorkeling.*

(8) *We had a fish lunch.*

- c. Some nouns can be count or uncount with different meanings.

(9) *some glasses of water*

(10) *my glasses*

(11) *a glass prison*

Example (9) and (10) show the use of *glass* as a count noun. In (9) its meaning is of a drinking cup, and in (10) of spectacles. In example (11) it refers to the material of which the prison is made of and is uncount. This situation most clearly shows the differences in meaning when a noun is used in the two categories. There are many nouns that can fit into this group, and examples (12) to (14) deal with the noun *paper*:

(12) *a daily paper* (newspaper, count)

(13) *my papers* (documents, count)

(14) *some writing paper* (regular writing paper, uncount)

- d. The count noun often refers to a specific example, and the uncount noun often refers to an action or idea in general.

(15) *a painting*

(16) *good at painting*

In (15), the *painting* is referred to as a specific thing, therefore it is countable, while in (16) *painting* is an action performed by somebody rendering it uncountable. A similar principle works for examples (17) and (18).

(17) *the wars won by Napoleon*

(18) *the gears of war*

- e. Nouns which describe feelings are usually uncount, but some can be count, especially for feelings about something specific.

(19) *a fear of the dark*

(20) *doubts of success*

(21) *a hate of rich men*

- f. Although nouns for food and drink are most commonly noncount (example (22)), when ordering food or drink or talking about portions, we can use count nouns.

(22) *They brew beer in that building*

(23) *Give me a beer.*

(24) *Three coffees, please.*

Example (23) means that we are asking for a glass of *beer*, and in (24) it is three cups of *coffee*. Therefore, in both examples the nouns are count. Some nouns are count with the meaning 'kind(s) of...', such examples are presented in examples (25) and (26):

(25) *These beers are all the same.*

(26) *There are lots of different grasses.*