Linguistic Environment as a Determinant of English Countability

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Abstract

Chinese and English belong to different language families (Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European) and have structural differences. Furthermore, typical explanations for countability either in grammar books or from language teachers cannot reflect the deviations students confront outside the classroom. Chinese students sometimes find the English concept of countability hard to grasp. This paper investigated viewpoints on English countability by reviewing antecedent studies. Certain issues were highlighted for a thorough examination on the determinant factors in English plurality. What was surveyed was the treatment of English countability and plurality in some widely-used grammar books on the market. Finally, pedagogical implications were drawn. This study is expected to shed light on the TESOL field where there is a scant number of effective instructional strategies in this area.

Introduction

Chinese and English belong to two different language families (Sino-Tibetan and

Indo-European), and have many structural differences. Chinese students sometimes have difficulty

understanding the English concept of countability. Culture-dependent intuition to a logically

consistent criterion of classification is unreliable. For example, *furniture*, *equipment*, *luggage*, *news*,

etc. can all be counted in the Chinese mind (Swan & Smith, 2002). Hence there will be such errors

as: *Let me tell you an interesting news.

*She's brought many luggages with her.

Furthermore, typical explanations for countability either in grammar books or from language

teachers cannot reflect the deviations students confront outside the classroom. The count/noncount

distinction in grammar books is often based on lists of words which are used with *much* and *many*,

and omits valuable information which could leave students with an oversimplified notion of

countability. Brigman (1984) has described a case in an ESL class in New York City, where teachers

gave an ambiguous rule, "Your breads, wines, and cheeses are always noncount!" (1984).

The countability and plurality of nouns refer to different linguistic aspects, so

the two terms are not used interchangeably in this paper. Countability concerns whether a noun has a

possible referent thought of as a separate entity; however, plurality touches upon if a noun has the

ability to take a plural form, e.g., –s or –es. Therefore, countability, determined by the linguistic

environment, accounts for a larger scope than plurality, realizing the form of a noun in the word

boundary when it has been endowed with the countable feature.

This paper will investigate viewpoints on English countability by reviewing antecedent studies,

ranging from journal articles to one chapter selected from a book discussing the relationship between

a grammatical and a semantic description of language. Certain issues will be highlighted for a

thorough examination on the determinant factors in English plurality. In addition, what will be

surveyed is the treatment of English countability and plurality in some widely-used grammar books

in Taiwan. Finally, pedagogical implications will be drawn and are expected to shed light on the

TESOL field where there is a scant number of effective instructional strategies in this area.

Literature Review

Brigman (1984), Conrad and Schousboe (1989), Mizuno (1993), Rastall (1993), Yoon (1993),

Budge (1989) hold the same view that count/noncount distinction in English is not a straightforward system, and the plurality of a noun relies on the linguistic environment it is in at a particular time.

The view of the determinant role linguistic environment plays is shared by Budge but from a different perspective—decoding language learners' output. In her empirical study conducted in 1989, the results suggest that the Hong Kong English speakers tend to mark plural where there is some semantic reminder that the noun is to be so marked, especially where the reminder is strong or unambiguous. The pronominal elements include (a) those that are neutral with respect to plurality (e.g., "other, certain"); (b) modifiers indicating the noun should be marked for plural (e.g., "one of the, all, fewer"); (c) the modifiers "some, any" (p. 39).

Instead of regarding the nouns as either countable or uncountable, according to Conrad and Schousboe, they can be considered as neutral with respect to countability.   But when the noun is used in connection with a pre-modifier in an utterance, the joint expression will thereby receive an element of countability or uncountability (pp. 23-24).

The legitimacy of pluralizing a proper noun has been justified by Mizuno (1993). He has laid down conditions where proper nouns are free to be pluralized: (a) individuals which have more or less arbitrarily been designated by the same name, e.g., in the party there were three *Johns* and four *Marys*; (b) members of the same family, e.g., all the *Tymperleys* have long noses; (c) people or things like the individual denoted by the name, e.g., *King Henrys*, *Queen Elizabeths* go their way; (d) by

metonymy, a proper name may stand for a work of the individual denoted by the name, e.g., there

are two *Rembrandts* in this gallery (pp. 142-143).

In strict sense, attributive nouns functioning as a modifier—usually as an adjective—are not

allowed to have plural forms like proper nouns. But modern English admits both singular and plural

attributive count nouns (Rastall, 1993, p. 309). Whether to pluralize the attributive noun depends

upon the sense to be conveyed, e.g., *a contracts officer* (one dealing with contracts) as opposed to *a*

contract officer (one serving on contract). Other cases where there is a functional distinction

between singular and plural include: *a medal winner* vs. *a medals winner* (i.e. a winner of more than

one medal), *a World Cup Final match* (to decide the winners of the competition) vs. *a World Cup*

Finals match (any match played during the World Cup Finals competition).

Even if we know that it is the context which determines whether the noun is used as count or

noncount, different perceptions of noun countability may cause difficulties in the correct

categorization of nouns. Yoon (1993) has commented that since there is no necessary relationship

between the classes of nouns and the entities to which they refer, the way of perceiving nouns with

respect to countability may not be the same among speakers of the same language or among all

speakers of different languages. This intuitive judgment of noun countability would even affect the

use of the *indefinite vs. zero* article in particular contexts (p. 269).

Lock (1996) has put forward the same point that although the distinction between mass and

count nouns in English is not an arbitrary one, it is often hard for a learner of English to see why

certain nouns should be mass rather than count. The following nouns are often used as count nouns

by learners, e.g., *furnitures*, *traffics*, *informations*, *luggages*, *equipments*, *homeworks*, *advices*, and

punctuations; it is interesting to consider why these nouns should be mass rather than count (or

indeed whether there are any contexts in which it might be acceptable to use them as count nouns) (p.

23).

Individuation, as depicted by Givon (1993, p.56), can function as a solution to this plight of

determining the countability of a noun. Nouns, both concrete and abstract, may be count

nouns—ones that code individuated entities, or mass nouns—ones that code either groups or

unindividuated entities.

More recently, researchers have proposed a conceptual basis for the count-mass distinction

that is broader in scope than previous vies. According to the cognitive individuation hypothesis,

whether a person uses a count noun or a mass noun to refer to some aspect of reality depends on

whether they interpret the referent as an individual or as a non-individuated entity (Bloom 1996;

Wisniewski, Lamb, & Middleton, 2003). Speakers are not passive observers of perceptual

characteristics that dictate whether an entity either named by a count noun or mass noun. Rather, a

cognitive agent takes an active role in conceptualizing an entity either as asn individual or a

non-individuated entity.

Discussion

The implications elicited from Budge's study on spoken HKE (1989) may not be convincing

and appealing enough in that two additional factors appear to play a part in plural marking. One is

separation of the noun from the plural-indicating marker, e.g., many old-style *building*, old fashion

building. The limits of short-term memory play a part in weakening the semantic link between the

modifier and the noun. The other is a specific phonological environment, the ending of the stem

form in the voiceless alveolar fricative [s], e.g., many *waitress* and *waiters*. Cantonese has no final [s]

or final clusters but only final nasals and a final voiceless stop series. It is therefore not surprising to

find the reduction of clusters in HKE.

Because people do use nouns in ways which defy the count/noncount distinction, it is

suggested to refer to the system purported by Brigman (1984).

There is a hair in my soup.	(*the 1st trough*)
There are two hairs in my soup.	(*the 2nd trough*)
She washes her hair every day.	(*the 3rd trough*)
The wigs were made of *a hair* well suited for color treatment.	(*the 4th trough*)
The hairs were separated into piles of length and color.	(*the 5th trough*)

In the 1st trough, a noun is a single item which will be counted.

In the 2nd trough, a noun represents more than one discrete item which will be counted. In the

3rd trough, a noun represents an undifferentiated mass with no discrete items, and will not be counted.

In the 4th trough, a noun represents a kind, or type of single item in a categorical or proverbial sense.

In the 5th trough, a noun represents some kinds, or types of items which form a category or several

categories. If a noun falls into the first trough, it can readily fall into the second trough. Although a certain noun may fall into any trough, when it shifts into a different trough, it experiences either a subtle or explicit change in meaning.

With this device, students can examine sentences which they have encountered in real communication in order to see the similarities and differences between nouns in context. Students will see that the word "breads" is not inherently wrong, but may only be appropriate in certain environment.

However, Brigman's sluice system can only serve as a possible means that help lead students observe how countability is realized in various contexts, failing to be categorized into rules of determining countable/uncountable uses. The ultimate consideration should resort to language users' intention of representing something as occurring in the form of discrete entities which can be counted or something as an undifferentiated whole which cannot be counted. That is, the motive of individuation is able to sustain their stance on noun pluralization. In the series of grammar books—*Grammar Dimensions*: *Form, Meaning, and Use* (2000), Larsen Freeman defines count nouns as things we can count and noncount nouns as things we "don't" count (p. 48). What deserves our attention is that in fact, noncount nouns be counted, but we, language manipulators, have no such an intention to do so. As a consequence, we use noncount nouns like *money* when we see a thing as whole; we use count nouns like *coins* when we refer to things we can count.

Nonetheless, the speaker is not free to make a semantic choice on the basis of his or her

language-independent knowledge of the surrounding world.   For instance, English does not allow

the speaker to refer to the contents of a toolbox as an unspecified mass or quantum. What happens is

that we select an utterance which linguistically possible and know what it implies to utter it.

Sometimes it is difficult to think of contexts in which a noun like *cat*, which is normally count,

could be used as a mass noun, but as along as the language user has a good reason to justify such

choice, there will be more room for manipulation of pluralizing a noun or not. Sentences existing in

often somewhat unusual contexts seem no longer weird, unacceptable for participants in the

discourse.

On the other hand, as the various examples show, there is now an opposition between plural

and singular in constructions with count attributive nouns. But we would not expect the choice of

singular or plural to apply to attributive non-count nouns, which are genuinely "number neutral"

(e.g., in *fun fair* or *air pump*, etc.). Yet in the future, perhaps to pluralize a noncount noun in its

attributive use may be innovated as an acceptable form and become a common practice.

New English Grammar by Ke, Chi-Hua (1996) offers an example sentence "*A Mr. White* came

to see you" (p. 14), echoing the view held by Rastall (1993) that the difference between proper

nouns and common nouns is the side on which we grasp objects. Common nouns are those that

identify a certain substance on the common side with the same kind of reference; proper nouns, on

the other hand, are those that show a certain substance on the peculiar side. *Longman Essential*

Activator (1997) demonstrates the same idea by offering similar instances (p.928):

E.g., On *Tuesdays*, I go swimming.

E.g., Are the *Robinson's* coming to the party?

E.g., We stayed with Mary three *Christmasses* ago.

Some grammar books nowadays have begun to treat English countability and plurality not in

too rigid a way. *Longman Grammar Series: Focus on Grammar* (1995) indicates that some

non-count nouns can be used in a countable sense. When they are, they can be preceded by a/an and

can occur in the plural. Contrastive examples are given in a table, with intended meanings in the

parenthesis (p. 53).

Non-Count Nouns in "Mass Use"	Non-Count Nouns in "Count Use"
I ate **meat** for dinner.	There are several **meats** available at most supermarkets. (*different types of meat*)
Too much **salt** in the diet can be unhealthful.	The mixture contains **a** dissolved **salt**. (*a type of chemical compound*)
Many events seem governed by **chance**.	I had **a chance** to talk with Sarah. (*an opportunity*)
I have no **money**.	The state will use tax **monies** (**moneys**) to fund the project. (*amounts of money from different tax source*)

Tunghua Contemporary English Grammar (1990) allows abstract nouns and material nouns to

be pluralized. The plural form of the former represents the referents inherited with the quality of the

noun; thus, *kindnesses* in "She did me many *kindnesses*" refer to many kind behaviors. The plurality

of the latter is explained by the example: "She was wearing very expensive *furs,*" where *furs* pertain

to the products made by the material noun *fur* (pp. 204-205).

Guillemin-Flescher (1999) also discusses the pluralization of abstract units (p. 160) from the

viewpoint that a notion can be fragmented into a class of units or occurrences qualitatively or

quantitatively. As in *chocolates should not be consumed in large quantities*, *chocolates* are here

abstract units derived from the fragmentation of the notion *chocolate*. The units expressed by the

plural are viewed with respect to the properties common to a class of elements rather than with

respect to individual entities (i.e. they are viewed as a kind or type; in other words qualitatively

rather than quantitatively). In the following example, however: *The chocolates I gave you have*

different fillings, *chocolates* are viewed as a set of entities and no longer as a kind or type

(quantification).

Pedagogical Implications

With the corroboration of the prominent role that linguistic environment places in English

countability, several pedagogical implications are evolved and serve to ground a reflective basis for

current and future language learning and teaching. First, the system proposed by Brigman (1984)

does contribute to students' understanding of noun shifting in versatile linguistic environment,

whereas teachers should not try to exhaust the usage of every vocabulary item. Otherwise, students

will be bored before they can appreciate the usefulness of the device.

Then some would have such a question in mind, "Should language teachers instruct the count/noncount distinction in class?" The better the students learn the "rules," the higher the risk of countability fixidity. Conrad and Schousboe have claimed that native speakers have quite a high tolerance for the noun shifting into different categories of countability. Moreover, the shifting is not merely tolerated, but regarded as information crucial to meaning (p. 42). We ought to let our students know that the form of language is one part of linguistic knowledge. It is the meaning intended to be conveyed in a context that develops versatile surface structures. Also, most nouns are clearly either count or mass in the contexts in which they are most frequently used; from the learners' point of view, it is worth first learning the countalibity status of a noun in the meaning and context most likely to be encountered. Later, learners may learn to manipulate countability for particular effects. For this, learners need to have access to a good dictionary in which the different uses of nouns associated with any differences in their countability status are clearly marked.

When it comes to the content of textbooks, should the countability markers [C] and [U] exist or not? Explicit illustration of prototypical experiences for beginning learners is not evil at all; it is teachers' improper extension of specifying strict rules that causes harm. Therefore, teachers are suggested to explicate the countability of a new word from the example sentences given. What follows is that the countability of a word should not be tested without a context. Many teachers still stick to this practice in a dictation test, asking students to write down a word accompanied by its

countability feature [C] or [U].

It is worthwhile to inquire whether or not the perceptual system of noun countability used by English native speakers is describable, explainable or acquirable by second language learners. Before such a valuable research outcome about cognitive process is available, students are advised to be conscious of the different perceptions with regard to noun countability cross-culturally. This way, they won't feel too frustrated when looking into the seemingly illogical system of categorization.

Students should acquire the habit of extensive reading to accustom themselves to the actual use of a word in a variety of text types. Newspapers, advertisements, brochures, pamphlets, menus, recipes, etc. are good resources for teaching English plurality (Kossack and Sullivan, 1989).

Finally, teachers ought to convey students definitions in English-English dictionaries when teaching new vocabulary items, especially those that are often countable in ESL/EFL learners' mother tongue (Lock, 1996; Swan & Smith, 2002). Take the words "furniture" and "luggage" for example. Their meanings illustrated in Collins Cobuild English dictionary (1995) respectively are "furniture consists of large movable objects such as tables, chairs, or beds that are used in a room for sitting on or for putting things on or in" and "luggage is the suitcases and bags that you take with you when travel." If learners know that the individuated entities are not coded here, only the mass sense inherited, they will not be hindered by their prior knowledge—the countable property of the two nouns in the source language.

Further research

Inspired by Yoon's study (1993), we should attempt to figure out the perceptual system of noun countability used by native speakers of English with a view to bridging the gap that ESL/EFL students cannot be expected to share the same frame of reference or network. Also, these investigations may direct us to identify types of linguistic environments (i.e. noun phrase patterns) and tasks in which the perception of noun countability in the first language would most likely transfer to that in the second language.

To elucidate the influence of the background language, we can further investigate under the same setting manipulated in Budge's study (1989) whether the tendency to mark plural more when there is some sort of semantic indicator preceding the noun is a strategy used by the majority of Chinese learners of English other than Hong Kong people.

Conclusion

On the basis of previous discussion, we should not classify nouns into count and mass. Instead, we should classify the *uses* of nouns into count or mass. The importance of individuation distinguishing count nouns from mass nouns is widely recognized (e.g., McCawley, 1979; Mufwene, 1984; Gordon, 1985; Macnamara, 1986; Gordon, 1988) (cited in McPherson, 1991, p. 316). A change in category from mass to count or vice versa signals a change in meaning that results from introducing or removing an element of individuation. Given the principle in mind, to count or not to

count will concern not whether it is correspondent with grammatical rules, but mainly whether it is

appropriate regarding the linguistic environment. Then English teachers and learners will not be

bombarded with any attempts to generate rules in approaching the concept of noun countability.

As the interesting slogan coined by Brigman goes, "Count/noncount: Don't count on it,"

having savvied the essence of English countability and plurality, students may come to ask

themselves more intelligent questions. Instead of asking, "Is this word count or noncount?" they may

ask, "Does the countability distinction which I have chosen for this noun correspond to the meaning

I want to express?" Then we might say the instruction of English countability has produced a

satisfactory outcome.

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