Uncountable uses of countable nouns: a study of creative reclassifications

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Contents

Abstract

The subject of this paper was reclassification of countable nouns into uncountable. For the theoretical overview of this phenomenon, a number of chosen grammar books was consulted (see references) and the point of view of cognitive linguistics was chosen as main point of view on the subject. Namely, we explained the phenomenon in the terms of conceptual metonymy. After careful examination of examples found in already mentioned grammar books, a small study was conducted to see whether there are examples of reclassification of countable nouns to the category of uncountable in authentic use. The main source for our data was the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). After the examples of reclassification of countable nouns to uncountable were found, our next step was the analysis of the found examples in the terms of cognitive linguistics. The results of the study confirmed our initial hypothesis: that this kind of creative reclassification does happen in the English language and that it typically affects certain semantic domains such as food, nature, etc.

Key words: countable nouns, uncountable nouns, reclassification, conceptual metonymy

Sažetak

Tema ovog završnog rada je bila reklasifikacija brojivih imenica u nebrojive. Izabrane su određene gramatike (vidi Popis literature) koje su poslužile kao teorijska podloga ovoj temi. Za glavni teorijski okvir odabrana je kognitivna lingvistika. Reklasifikacija brojivih imenica u nebrojive objašnjena je u okvirima konceptualne metonimije. Nakon što su obrađeni primjeri reklasifikacije u već spomenutim gramatikama, napravljeno je kraće istraživanje reklasifikacije brojivih imenica u nebrojive služeći se korpusom suvremenog američkog engleskog „Corpus of Contemporary American English“ (COCA). Glavni razlog za ovo je bila potreba da se provjeri koristi li se ova vrsta reklasifikacije u govornom i pisanom jeziku. Nakon što smo pronašli takve primjere, analizirali smo ih u okvirima kognitivne lingvistike.

Rezultati ovog istraživanja potvrdili su našu prvotnu hipotezu: da se u engleskom jeziku doista događa reklasifikacija brojivih imenica u nebrojive i da se takve imenice najčešće pojavljuju u određenim semantičkim domenama, kao što su hrana, priroda, itd.

Ključne riječi: brojive imenice, nebrojive imenice, reklasifikacija, konceptualna metonimija

1. Introduction

Nouns are commonly divided into countable and uncountable and most grammarians agree which nouns are to be considered countable and which ones uncountable. Countable nouns are entities which can be counted, have singular and plural forms and have a clear distinction between definite and indefinite forms. Uncountable nouns refer to entities which cannot be counted and usually do not vary for number. They usually do not take the indefinite article but allow a contrast between an indefinite and a definite form, for example *milk* vs. *the milk*. (Biber et al, 1999: 241).

However, every grammar book which was consulted for this paper also emphasizes that some uncountable nouns can be used as countable and that language also allows some countable nouns to be used as uncountable (Biber et al, 1999; Buljan & Gradečak-Erdeljić, 2013; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Quirk et al, 1986; Radden & Dirven, 2007 and Taylor, 2003). Even though countable nouns outnumber the uncountable (Biber et al, 1999: 242), this paper will study creative reclassifications of countable nouns to the category of uncountables. It will focus on the uncountable uses of countable nouns in authentic corpus examples collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).

We have chosen to use cognitive grammar as the theoretical basis of our study as we find it the most appropriate and intuitive. The paper will start with a theoretical overview of the phenomenon under study, which will include some illustrative examples found in grammars. After the theoretical part, the paper continues with the analysis of examples taken from COCA.

2. Theoretical overview

2.1. Cognitive distinction between countable and uncountable nouns

Whether nouns are countable or uncountable is not simply a reflection of reality, i.e. of the individuated/non-individuated status of their referents in the real world. Rather, it is a reflection of how we choose to conceptualize the entities which we want to talk about (Taylor, 2003: 376). In everyday life we perceive things[i] either as objects or substances. This is reflected in the linguistic distinction between count nouns and mass nouns or, as we are going to refer to it in this paper, the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns (Radden and Dirven 2007: 63). However, due to the prototype structure of all conceptual and linguistic categories, the distinction between objects and substances is not always straightforward and tends to be blurred. That means that objects may shade into substances and vice versa (Radden and Dirven 2007: 63).

The conceptual substrate on which we base our distinction between countable nouns and uncountable nouns is closely linked to the distinction between individuated objects and unindividuated substances (Taylor 2003: 367). The reasoning for this is simple: an object has its internal structure, if we split it up, it loses its identity. For example, if we dismantle a *car*, we no longer have a *car*, but *car parts*. On the other hand, if you divide a quantity of *meat*, you still have *meat*. If we put one *car* next to another, we do not have *car* but two *cars*, while if we put two quantities of *meat* next to each other, we still have *meat* (Taylor 2003: 367).

According to Radden and Dirven (2007), we can distinguish between objects and substances based on three criteria: boundedness, internal composition and countability. If we apply these three criteria to a noun, we can decide whether it is countable or uncountable. However, as we mentioned before, the distinction between objects and substances or

countable and uncountable nouns is sometimes more complex being that many nouns can easily shift between the two categories.

The first criterion is boundedness. This is an essential characteristic of objects and their interpretation as countable nouns, like *car*. *Car*, as an example of an object, has clear visual contours. Therefore, it appears to us as an individuated object. In order to perceive a *car* as an object, we have to see it as a whole, and we achieve that if we adopt a maximal viewing frame (term adopted from Radden, Dirven, 2007: 22), which allows us to detect the object's boundaries. On the other hand, *water* appears to us as unbounded, shapeless liquid. Therefore, *water* is a typical representative of substances. *Water* is considered uncountable because when we look at it from a limited point of view, we cannot perceive its boundaries. However, if we discern the boundaries of the water on the floor, we usually refer to it as *a puddle of water*, using a partitive expression and proving once more that water is in fact a substance (Radden and Dirven 2007: 64).

Internal composition is the second criterion. It distinguishes nouns based on the assumption that things whose internal compositions are seen as heterogeneous are seen as objects. We call such nouns countable nouns. If we use the *car* from the previous section as an example, we can see that a *car* is composed of many different parts that have been put together in order to function as a unit. Even though a *car* is composed of many parts, when we look at it, we perceive it as a whole because it works in an integrated way. If the structure of the *car* is destroyed, we no longer perceive a *car* as a whole, but rather as a wreck. In these terms, even a *car* can be perceived as a substance and considered a mass noun. Things that have homogenous internal composition are seen as a substance and are therefore coded as uncountable nouns. A typical example of a substance is *water*, already mentioned before. From a scientific point of view, *water* consists of particles and because of that we can say that its internal composition is heterogeneous rather than homogenous. However, in our everyday

life, we perceive *water* as homogenous because we cannot see those particles with the naked eye and if we do, they are irrelevant to us. They are irrelevant to us because any portion of *wate*r is the same as any other portion. If we divide, expand and contract *water*, its properties will remain the same, in other words, we will not destroy its identity. Furthermore, we can divide substances in portions, something we cannot do with objects, and for that we use partitive expressions, for example: *a drop of water, a puddle of water*, etc. (Radden and Dirven 2007: 65).

The last criterion is countability. According to the criterion of countablity, entities that have similar characteristics can be subsumed under the same category and counted. If we take a *Bible*, *the Oxford English Dictionary* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as an example, we notice that they all have the same function; they are meant to be read and can be subsumed under the category of *book*. When we count them, we have *three books*. However, we would not try to count entities that are not similar, for example, a *car*, a *mouse* and a *cloud*. Countability is therefore a reflex of our ability to recognise entities that are members of the same superordinate category. If we recognise them as members of the same category, we can count them and replicate them. Furthermore, using countability as a criterion, Radden and Dirven refer to any conceptualisations of single entities, e.g.*a tree*, as uniplex entities. Entities coded by e.g. *three trees* or *a forest* they call multiplex (Radden and Dirven 2007: 65).

In sum, the three criteria presented in this section are the conceptual substrate that helps us to distinguish objects from substances and will be used, together with some informal frequency data, in the classification of examples in the analytical section of this paper.

2.2. Grammatical behaviour of countable and uncountable nouns

Apart from their conceptual basis, countable nouns and uncountable nouns also differ according to a number of grammatical phenomena, which will be explained in more detail in the following sections.

The first phenomenon that helps us distinguish countable nouns from uncountable nouns is the possibility of taking numerals and being marked as either singular or plural. Countable nouns can be combined with numerals (e.g. *one car*), while uncountable cannot. We cannot say *one traffic* because *traffic* is considered to be an uncountable noun and does not combine with numerals. Moreover, countable nouns also allow the distinction between singular and plural, so they change morphologically as their number increases, e.g. notice the plural marker in *three cars*. On the other hand, uncountable nouns do not take the –s marker, or any other plural marker - we cannot say *three traffics*. Uncountable nouns are often described as singularia tantum because they are always singular (Radden and Dirven 2007: 66).

The use of quantifiers is also one of the means of distinguishing between countable and uncountable nouns. Two types of quantification can be used: number quantification and amount quantification. The former is used for objects and it is specified by the usage of *many* and *(a) few*. The latter is characteristically used for uncountable nouns and it includes *much*, *not much* and *(a) little*. *Many cars* and *(a) few cars* can be used to describe an unspecified number of cars, while *not much traffic* and *(a) little traffic* are used for an unspecified amount of traffic (Radden and Dirven 2007: 67).

Another grammatical phenomenon relevant for the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns is the use or absence of articles. When we want to refer to a single object, we use articles, e.g. *a car* or *the car*. The indefinite article requires the noun that follows to be

countable or at least construable as countable. Since substances cannot be counted, they are not paired with the indefinite article. However, both countable and uncountable nouns have in common that they take the definite article *the*. With countable nouns, like *the car*, *the* is used for emphasising one definite single object. Uncountable nouns take the definite article because in this case the definite article singles out a definite amount of a substance. For example, in the sentence: *Can you pass the salt?* the definite article clearly refers to a definite *portion of salt* which is probably close to the person that was asked the question. The definite article is used here to refer to a certain *salt* (container), not just any random *salt*, but the one that is close to the person that was asked to pass it (Radden and Dirven 2007: 68).

The grammatical behaviour of singular count nouns and plural count and mass nouns is motivated in other, perhaps less obvious ways too. For example, the quantifier *whole* (as in *the whole car*), the particles *in* and *out* (*day in, day out*) and the verb *take* (*take a bus*) relate to bounded entities, and are thus compatible with countable nouns. The quantifier *full*, in turn, (*full of cars*), the noun *shortage* (*shortage of labour*) and noun *collect* (*collect money*) relate to unbounded entities, hence, uncountable nouns.

Further, there seems to be a conceptual affinity and grammatical similarity between plural count nouns and uncountable nouns, which is why Radden and Dirven claim that : "The common behaviour of plural count nouns and (singular) mass nouns is also not haphazard but motivated" (2007: 65). It is motivated mostly by our perception. When we see a lot of cars on the motorway we no longer percieve them as *cars*, individual objects, but rather as *traffic*. Because of the high speed of the cars we cannot see the outlines of every single car. We perceive them as an unbounded, homogenous mass. This also happens when we look at a group of people from a distance. (Radden and Dirven, 2007: 65).

2.3. Objects vs. substances

Not everybody is familiar with the objective properties of objects and substances. Therefore, people in everyday life mostly rely on their perception and the relevance of an object or a substance to decide whether it is countable or uncountable.

To use Dirven and Radden's example, *sunflower seeds* are considered countable even though they are often too many to count. Still, we consider them countable because they have a hard surface and soft interior, which is an expression of its heterogeneity. On the other hand, *grass seed* is considered uncountable, even though it similarly consists of particles. However, these particles are too small to count. Also, *sunflower seeds* seem to be of greater importance to us: we eat them and plant them individually, usually several seeds per each hole. On the other hand, we do not 'interact' with individual *grass seeds*, we only sow it in large amounts (Radden and Dirven 2007: 69).

Beyond these prototypical classifications of things as countable or uncountable, there is always a potential for more or less creative uses of nouns in nonprototypical ways. If we disregard the use of partitive expressions, which are pretty much a standard way of inducing countable readings in uncountable nouns, e.g. *beer* → *a pint of beer, a glass of beer* etc. (Biber et al 1999, Quirk et al 1986, Radden and Dirven 2007), the same effect can be achieved by using alternative lexical items, where available (*pig – pork*), but also by simply using a prototypically uncountable noun as countable, as in section 2.3.1. We refer to the latter mechanism as reclassification. Alternatively, count nouns such as *a car* can be used as an uncountable noun, which is less common but used nonetheless. It is precisely this type of creative reclassification that we addressed in this study. It will become evident from the following discussion that all reclassifications (in either direction) are based on conceptual metonymies, which allow us to conceptualise, in our case, objects as substances. Metonymy,

in general, helps us to trace mentally a path from one conceptual entity (the more easily accessible metonymic source or vehicle) to another conceptual entity (metonymic target, which is typically less directly accessible or important). Metonymy operates within a single cconceptual domain, so that the metonymic source and target are typically in a part-for-whole (*fifty **sail** for fifty **ships***), whole-for-part (*fill up the **car** (for **car tank**))* or part-for-part relationship. To give just one instance of the latter, consider the phrase, *table 4*, used by waiters in a restaurant domain. Reference to a table number (familiar, accessible) allows the service personnel easy access to the actual intended metonymic target - the customer, whose name and identity are unfamiliar. But conceptual metonymy is also used in grammar, in our case, to help us conceptualise an object (metonymic source) as a substance (metonymic target) of which the object is constituted in one way or another (Radden and Dirven 2007: 14).

2.3.1. Uncountable uses of countable nouns: some illustrative examples

This section will present a series of examples that were found in the following reference grammars: *Cambridge Grammar of English*, *Cognitive English Grammar*, *Cognitive Grammar* and *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. These examples were later taken as a starting point for our own independent search for some new, fresh examples in the COCA.

Let us look more closely at example (1) from Radden and Dirven's *Cognitive English Grammar* (p.73):

(1) We had octopus for lunch.

When we use an otherwise countable noun denoting an animal as an uncountable noun, we transform conceptually its referent, i.e. the animal to the domain of food (OBJECT FOR SUBSTANCE metonymy). In (1) we reduced an *octopus* to the domain of food; as food, chopped up for consumption, it no longer has its internal composition and boundaries. This change did not only happen in our conceptual system, but in reality too. Therefore, it seems reasonable that *octopus* in the sense of food is uncountable. There are more examples of this type (i.e. form the food domain), which largely cover all those instances where English does not already have a special lexical item for the meat of the animal (see examples (6) to (10) in section 4.1.1.). This reduction of the animal to the domain of food is also called grinding (in this case, animal grinding). In a study conducted by Alex Djalali, David Clausen, Scott Grimm and Beth Levin of Stanford University, it was concluded that higher acceptability of grinding sentences with foodstuff and animals is probably due to their conventional associations, in this case, animals are perceived as natural entities or as flesh (Djalali et al. 2011: 41).

Example sentence (2) shows another type of OBJECT FOR SUBSTANCE metonymy, i.e. a case of restricting real objects to something abstract metonymically associated with the object:

(2) You will get a lot of car for your money.

In this case, car, a real object, is a whole (metonymic source) that provides mental access to a part of the domain, namely, the comfort provided by the car, its performance or size.

In Taylor's *Cognitive Grammar* (2003: 379) it is claimed that almost every noun can be used as either countable or uncountable if it has an appropriate context, even though it may seem unusual. Examples include the already mentioned uncontable use of *car* in an advertising slogan:

(3) More car for your dollar,.

Of course, in this case *car* does not refer to the actual car but rather the domain of comfort or any other thing that is important and relevant to the customer. Another of Taylor's examples was the usage of cat as uncountable (p. 378):

(4a) After the accident, there was cat all over the road.

(4b) There is a smell of cat in this room.

It is clearly visible that once again, the noun *cat*, typically denoting the animal itself, is reclassified into uncountable *cat*, this time denoting in (4a) the roadkill and in (4b) the cat's smell.

Cambridge Grammar of English claims that the reclassification of countable nouns into uncountable often happens with food items. *Egg* is commonly known as an example of a countable noun, but when we break an egg shell, the noun *egg* becomes uncountable:

(8) Do you use egg when you make pasta?

Egg can also be used in its uncountable form as an idiomatic expression, but an example of that will be provided in the sections that follow.

In the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, we find another set of examples. *Rocks* and *stones* are perceived as countable things because we can clearly depict their boundaries and they are usually big enough to be counted. However, even these nouns can be used as uncountable:

(9) In this flat landscape of scrub and stone there was nowhere we could hide;

(10) Rock is defined as the inorganic mineral covering the Earth's surface.

The most interesting example of the creative nature of English is the usage of proper names as uncountable:

(12) We did Shakespeare today (from Dirven and Radden 2007: 73).

(13) The problem is not too much America in the NATO but too little Europe (Buljan & Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013: 48).

As with common nouns, these are also fostered by conceptual metonymy. In example (12), *Shakespeare* stands for Shakespeare's literary work, and his name stands for his whole literary corpus. In the example sentence (13), *America* stands for the American influence in the NATO, while *Europe* stands for the lack of Europe's influence in the NATO. In this case of metonymy, the names of a state[ii] (America) and a continent (Europe) are metonymically used for an aspect of their politics, in this case their political influence.

As far as the goal of this paper goes, these cases are special since we do not start from a prototypically countable noun to explore its uncountable uses. Proper nouns normally have unique reference and hence, the question of their countable vs. uncountable status (morphological variability for number) does not even arise. However, examples like (12) and (13) are worth mentioning at this point, since, despite their grammatical status, Shakespeare, Europe, NATO do seem to involve bounded conceptual entities. Their 'mass' interpretations, therefore, strike us as atypical.

3. Methodology

The main source for our study was the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The study was based, among others, on the nouns found in the selected grammar books, which were then checked for authentic uses in COCA. But we also included some other examples found in the COCA. We specifically focused on those nouns whose status as countable is hardly an issue, given that they denote concrete individuated entities. We did not include abstract nouns such as *experience*, since their 'basic' status as countable would need to be verified using a different, quantitative, methodology. However, this would take us far beyond the scope of this paper.

Our search of COCA involved a) searching for the concordances of preselected nouns, mainly those identified in the reference grammars consulted and b) an automatic search for other nouns that fit the description using the search strings likely to return uncountable uses of countable nouns such as "was little [n*]", "was [n*]","much [n*]". In the a) type of search, we manually analysed all the concordances and the contexts in which the nouns appeared so as to identify uncountable uses of the target nouns. If there were no examples of the uncountable usage of a noun, we moved to another noun. Sometimes we also extracted some countable uses of the target nouns if this was necessary for illustrative/comparative purposes.

After identifying authentic examples of uncountable uses of the target nouns or fresh examples of nouns atypically used as uncountable, the next step was to choose examples which best illustrate the points made. Usually there were a few concordances, so we only selected two example sentences. However, sometimes only one example sufficed.

4. Results: reclassification of countable nouns into uncountable

The following sections will provide authentic empirical confirmation for the claims made in the theoretical part of this paper. Many examples that follow were inspired by some example sentences found in the various grammar books referred to in the previous sections.

4.1. Nouns denoting humans and human artefacts/institutions

This section will start with a typical example of a countable noun: a *car*. A *car* fits all the conceptual criteria for countable nouns. Therefore, most people think of cars as exclusively countable objects. However, the English language allows even *car* to become uncountable, which we can see in the following examples:

(1) The competition helps consumers by giving them more choices and more car for their money.

(2) Not because it's a fuel-economy champ; it's just OK. But because it's a lot of car for a modest price.

(3) Buying more car than your family needs only means you end up spending more- not just upfront, but everytime you refuel.

Here we see that even a car can be reduced from the category of an object to the category of an uncountable abstract noun which, in this case, refers to the domain of comfort, performance or size.

(4) We have a national problem of too much TV, too many videos, a decreased amount of time spent reading.

TV is a countable noun which stands for the machine that makes it possible to watch various programmes, shows, news channels etc. However, in this case, *TV* has a metonymical meaning and stands for the activity of watching television.

In the example sentence (5) government stands for the government regulations which navigate our everyday lives.

(5) In case you're one of those who think we're getting too much government, just imagine what it would be like if we were ever to get as much as we're paying for.

While *house* is typically a countable noun, when used as an uncountable noun, *house* is a conceptual metonymy which stands for the size of a house or for the luxury of the house that one owns (examples (6) and (7)):

(6) Well, one of the things that gets people into trouble is not just buying too much house, but not even considering how much it's going to cost you to live in that house once you have it.

(7) I've never heard of a person going into bankruptcy because they had too much house.

There are many different emotions, such as joy, sadness, fear, etc. That is why *emotion* is used as a countable noun. However, when used as an uncountable noun, it stands for presence or absence of any unspecified emotion:

(8) And she smiled inside, careful not to show too much emotion for fear of scaring him off.

(9) There is not too much emotion in the African-American church, but there is too much emotionalism.

(10) These give righthanded shooters trouble because as they swing to the right, they use too much arm and pull the gun off their cheeks (swinging left, right-handers push the gun into their faces).

(11) People would be critiquing my form - " too much arm, not enough body " - before I was even under arrest.

In the example sentences (10) and (11) *arm* is a metonymy which stands for the strength and the ability of the arms.

Woman is clearly a countable noun, but it is used as uncountable as well. When used as uncountable, it has a metonymic meaning:

(12) We met over this exact table and I seen right away she was too much woman for a needle-dick like old man Rapp.

(13) Red lips. Red nails. Black dress that shimmers silver. Way too much woman for him.

In examples (12) and (13), *woman* stands for the femininity and gentleness which is classically connected with a woman.

4.2. Nouns connected to food

An *egg* is most frequently used as a countable noun. However, when we break its shell, *egg* no longer appears to us as a bounded object because its internal composition was destroyed and it is not countable anymore. Cf. example (14):

(14) I still have egg on my hands.

Furthermore, *egg* is sometimes used as an uncountable noun in an idiomatic expression *egg on one's face* which usually means some kind of embarrasment or humiliation:

(15) There was egg on the faces of everyone at campaign headquarters.

(16) Those unnamed scouts from other organizations who have been saying we have nothing in the system now have egg on their faces.

It is clear why *egg* was used as an uncountable noun in these examples; *egg* was here conceptualised as some kind of humiliation or embarrassment. *Egg* was moved from the category of real countable objects to the category of abstract nouns. The noun *egg* is used in connection with humiliation or embarrasment because, according to old stories, an audience in a theatre watching a play threw eggs at actors who did not act very well.

From the domain of food, it is worthy to mention the noun *cake* as yet another example. *Cake* is probably the most obvious example of creative reclassification of countable nouns to uncountable, and people sometimes even use both forms in the same sentence, without even realising that they have reclassified a noun:

(17) "You already have a cake picked out," he said to her. "So?" "What if I wanted a different one?" "Do you?" He shrugged. "I don't even like cake."

In the last part, *cake* is used as a general term for someone's fondness for cakes and, consenquently, the noun *cake* lost its features of a countable noun. When used as '*a cake*' it refers to one cake which was specifically chosen for a certain occasion and it is different from other cakes in its ingriedients and the way it is decorated. This makes *a cake* countable.

The following section will provide some examples with animals that do not have any counter expression for their meat, and as a result, they are used morphologically unaltered as uncountable. This is done to emphasise that we are talking about its meat, not the animal itself. When we use animal meat for a meal, the animal is no longer whole, and the shift here is not only in our conceptual system, but in reality, too. We reduce an animal to the domain of meat by literally chopping it into pieces.

(18) He pulled a piece from the end of the sharpened stick and it was rabbit spiced with something resembling chili and honey.

(19) It's a very neutral ingredient and most people eat chicken two to three times a week.

(20) That's baccala -- salt cod. On Easter, we eat lamb.

(21) Hae mul jun gol($ 34.99 for two) brings huge part of cod, shrimp, mussels and octopus to cook at the table with greens, onions and burbling orange broth.

(22) "If we're going to eat turkey tomorrow, we have to start it thawing," she said.

4.3. Nouns connected to nature and animals

Trees are another typical example of the creative nature of the English language and its tendency to reclassify nouns. While *tree* is obviously a countable noun because of its boundedness, internal composition and countability, when we talk about various types of wood (material) that is used for fuel or for the making of furniture, barrels, etc. we reclassify it into uncountable:

(23) I had some ash, but thought it would cut to waste, and hesitated to use oak because buck-saws sometimes get left out in the rain and oak will soak water like lobster trap.

(24) Pinots merely hint at their aromatic potential - his 2007 Hirsch is just starting to show its coniferous aromas - and young Chardonnays often seem tensely wound and inflected with oak.

In the example sentence (24), the uncountable form of the oak tree is reduced to the domain of aroma.

Stones and *rocks* are also a clear example of countable nouns, but as examples (25) and (26) show, even they can be used as uncountable:

(25) Gehry, whose works include the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, said his design does celebrate Eisenhower's accomplishments with heroic images and with his words carved in stone.

(26) Once rock is weathered, erosion moves the pieces away.

In the example sentence (25), *stone* is used as a building material and it had lost all the features of a countable noun; *stone* is no longer important as an object because it serves to create another object which is made of stone and has its own name. However, in the example sentence (26) rock is also no longer viewed as an individuated object with its own boundaries and ability to be counted, but rather as a general term in geology. *Clouds* are also subject to creative reclassification:

(27) Green and brown mountain peaks sat like islands in the dense white sea of cloud that covered the valley.

(28) Birnbaum could see a long carpet of cloud in the moonlight and, on the horizon, strobing lights like conflagrations in distant cities.

Clouds are perceived as separate entities and while we do not usually count them, we perceive them as something that can be counted because each cloud appears unique to us. Scientists have even placed clouds into certain categories according to their shape and creation. However, when we cannot see clouds as separate entities, we tend to conceive of them as endless, unbounded masses. Bounding for quantificational purposes is then achieved with the help of partitive expressions (see examples (27) and (28)).

Even an animal, such as a *cat* can be used as uncountable if we reduce it to a certain domain:

(29) A light breeze rustled the branches, bringing the unmistakable smell of cat.

The noun *cat* loses its original form and meaning: it is reduced from the domain of an animal to the domain of smell, it cannot be perceived as a countable noun anymore.

4.4. Proper nouns used as uncountable entities

This part of the paper will be concluded with probably the most interesting examples of uncountable usage of nouns. These will show the true nature of the creativity of the English language. This topic was opened with some examples found in grammar books with uncountable usage of proper nouns, i.e. personal names. While it is a common fact that proper nouns do not vary for number, English allows even this to happen under special circumstances. What is strange is perhaps not the fact that proper names can exceptionally vary for number, but their usage as uncountable. If we could imagine a situation where proper nouns varied for number, we would always assume that they are countable because we are aware of the possibility that there are more people in this world with the same name, and even places with the same names. However, there are some examples when proper names are used as uncountable:

(30) Since he had done much Shakespeare[iii] during his career, and I knew him better at playing Shakespearean characters than I did at being a father, I decided to shape a show around classical scenes.

(31) I am grateful that I can hear Shakespeare[iv] in his native tongue.

(32) You've been watching too much James Bond.[v]

(33) This is what happens when you watch too much James Bond[vi], Mission Impossible, and The Twilight Zone as a kid.

(34) I didn't watch too much David Brent[vii] because I didn't want to be inclined to do an impersonation of Ricky Gervais.

(35) " Too much David Robinson[viii], " said Warriors coach Don Nelson, whose team is 2 games behind eighth-place Houston and two behind Seattle in the race for the final Western

Conference playoff berth. „We just don't have an answer for him. He's just awesome against us.“

(36) So maybe the Cubs just needed to add a little Hollywood[ix] to be able to take their show on the road.

(37) Well, because he -- he told me that, you know, you could do Hamlet[x] standing on your head eating a carrot, as long as people could see your eyes every once in a while, and know that you're telling the truth.

It is important to note that all of these shifts from countable to uncountable are metonymic, whereby sometimes parts stand for wholes (the way David Robinson plays for David Robinson as a person) or wholes for parts (e.g. Hollywood stands for the glamour connected to the films made in Hollywood; Shakespeare stands for Shakespeare's literary work).

5. Conclusion

After careful reading of various grammar books and the small-scale study we performed, we came to the conclusion that the creative nature of the English language allows us to relatively easily reclassify countable nouns as uncountable, with a little help from conceptual metonymy. Most generally, entities normally perceived as objects and coded as countable nouns can easily be reconceptualised as substances, i.e. material from which the object is made (e.g. TREE FOR WOOD), substance associated with the functioning of the organism (CAT FOR CAT SMELL), abstract features connected with the denoted object (CAR FOR PERFORMANCE, SIZE AND/OR COMFORT), meat connected to the animal (CHICKEN FOR THE MEAT OF A CHICKEN) and are grammatically coded as uncountables. While there are some standard examples of this phenomenon in grammar books, our main reason for this conclusion are the results of the study of authentic corpus examples we collected from COCA.

It is important to note that when a countable noun is shifted to an uncountable noun, metonymy operates within a certain conceptual domain to allow the mentioned parts to provide mental access to wholes, wholes to provide access to parts and parts to provide access to other parts of the same domain. We have illustrated these metonymic mechanisms in the analytical part of the paper.

This study once again confirmed that the creative nature of the English language allows seemingly incomprehensible changes to happen, at least from the grammatical point of view. It would be interesting and beneficial to conduct a similar study in other languages to see whether other languages allow thess kind of changes to happen, and if they do, how it happens and why it happens. However, this kind of research goes far beyond the scope of this paper and will be left for some future, more ambitious projects.

6. References

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Corpora used:

Corpus of Contemporary American English accessible at http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/

[i] In this study, the term *thing* will be used to refer to everything we can see and perceive, regardless of its number. The term *object* will be used for referents of nouns which are countable, no matter whether they are animate or inanimate and the term *substance* will be used for referents of uncountable nouns, both abstract and concrete.

[ii] In this case, America is also a metonymy which stands for the United States of America, and here we see that metonymy can operate within another metonymy.

[iii] In this example, the noun *Shakespeare* is used as a metonymy and it refers to Shakespeare's literary work.

[iv] *Shakespeare* here stands for Shakespeare's way of writing and expressing a thought.

[v] *James Bond* is a metonymy for films in which the main character is called James Bond.

[vi] See 5.

[vii] *David Brent* stands for BBC mockumentary *The Office* in which David Brent is a recurring character.

[viii] *David Robinson* is used here as a metonymy for the way David Robinson plays, which is only understandable if we look at the next two sentences.

[ix] *Hollywood* is used here as a metonymy for the famous Hollywood glamour.

[x] *Hamlet* stands for a character from the Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet' of the same name.