

The Puzzle of (Un)Countability in English

A Study in Cognitive Grammar

Prace Naukowe



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**The Puzzle
of (Un)Countability in English**
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Preface

All projects begin with a flash of inspiration. Mine came quite unexpectedly, while reading a passage where Ron Langacker was scrutinising count and mass properties of nouns. After a detailed analysis of these properties, Ron came to a conclusion that was perfectly natural within the discussed framework – that probably all English nouns can be used in a count and mass manner. This claim shattered not only the peace of my mind but also the received knowledge that I had scrupulously gathered over the previous decades. As a consequence, a determination and drive appeared to put the shattered pieces together and to see the picture of the English language that emerges once the puzzle is done. The present book is a result of the work that followed.

At the outset, writing this book seemed just a trip. However, the further I went with the writing, the more I recognised that this trip metaphor should in fact be reformulated as a journey into an unfamiliar territory of metaphor. What is more, I realised the accuracy of several, more specific metaphors instantiating it: Cognitive Grammar was a compass in the jungle of theories and the great people I had the privilege to discuss my ideas with were signposts that indicated where I could go on and whether the route I had taken made sense.

At this juncture, I wish to express my warm thanks and deep appreciation to Dirk Geeraerts, Professor Elżbieta Tabakowska, and Ron Langacker for their insightful and friendly discussions, encouragement, and comments on different aspects of the research. My special thanks go to Adam Głaz for his thoughtful review that ultimately led to the present form of the text and the ideas included in it. Naturally, all the flaws that are still there remain my own responsibility.

Taking a broader perspective, I want to express my gratitude to the people who supported me on my journey. Klaus Uwe-Panther and Linda Thornburg motivated me not to give up while crossing troubled waters. Rafał Molenciki, a supervisor, colleague, and friend, was always there when I needed him. I also highly value all the comments and the positive feedback from my colleagues from the Institute of English (University of Silesia in Katowice). Last

but not least, I wish to thank sincerely my two wonderful companions: my wife, who not only inspired me in the work but also spent immeasurable time with me discussing various details of linguistics, and my son, who encouraged me to proceed against all odds. Without all this, the book would not have been possible.



Introduction

When confronted with the title *The Puzzle of (Un)Countability in English*, someone's first reaction might be: Why write another book on a topic that is so well-described? The answer to such a question is not simple, for it is undoubtedly true that much has been written about this issue. At the same time, perhaps, a more important question is whether the explanations that have been provided are exhaustive or satisfactory. And this is where a more complex facet of the problem of countability appears.

Actually, this problem resembles a situation that can be observed in a seemingly much easier and much better described grammatical problem – the number in English. However, under scrutiny the intuitive simplicity of this problem quickly disappears:

[T]here are nouns that normally do not have an s-plural (*tea, cotton*) unless different types or quantities are referred to, many have a zero plural only, unless different species are intended (*trout, salmon*), others are always plural, but with the zero ending (*cattle, vermin*), while still others have two plurals, one in zero and one in -s, e.g., *bear(s), million(s)* and *staff(s)*. Also, many substantives occur only with the s-ending. According to Quirk et al., some are singular (*measles, phonetics*), whereas others are plural (*scissors, outskirts*). A number of these s-nouns can take the indefinite article (*a scissors, a shambles*), and in a few cases, there is an opposition, for example, *a wood* versus *a woods*. Finally, certain nouns are sometimes countables (*a cake/two cakes*), sometimes uncountables (*eat cake*). (WICKENS, 1992: 4)

And what do linguists say about countability and uncountability? A cursory look at grammar books reveals that the dominant view of the issue can be summarised as follows: “apart from a tendency for concrete nouns to be count and for abstract nouns to be noncount, there is no necessary connection between the classes of nouns and the entities to which they refer” (QUIRK et al., 1985: 251; cf. also, e.g., GLEASON, 1955; PALMER, 1983). When this is complemented by comments similar to WARE's ([1975] 1979: 15), that “the distinction between

count nouns and mass nouns is notoriously difficult to make,” one is almost forced to conclude that countability and uncountability are irregular and unpredictable.

This type of conclusion might have been acceptable had it not been for dissenting voices that have been insisting for the past five decades that the situation in English is in fact radically different. Such scholars as GLEASON (1965), PELLETIER (1975), BAUER (1983), WICKENS (1992) and, more recently, LANGACKER (2008) keep showing a contrary vision of English – one in which “a noun may have a count sense in one case and a mass sense in another, depending on how the speaker conceptualizes the notion” (WICKENS, 1992: 22).

What is more, there is a growing body of evidence that nouns do have senses that exceed standard expectations and accounts, and that such senses are far more frequent than many scholars would like to believe. Actually, more recent grammar books, for example, HUDDLESTON and PULLUM (2002), take a considerable step towards this alternative picture of countability and uncountability. Still, their view is quite distant from Wickens’s stance. At this juncture, the considerable amount of research and observations made by Polish scholars into this body of evidence needs to be noted, such as TWARDZISZ (1998), BEREZOWSKI (1999, 2009), WILLIM (2006), GŁAZ (2012), WOŹNY (2012), BLOCH-TROJNAR (2012), BIERWIACZONEK (2013, 2016), and DROŹDŹ (2014a, 2014b, 2016). And although the data gathered so far are still inconclusive, the vision of grammar presented, among others, by QUIRK et al. (1985) or PALMER (1983) is seriously undermined.

The question that remains to be settled, then, is which of these two extreme views is more accurate for English. The aspect of countability and uncountability that we are concerned with is the already mentioned claim about the possibility of using every noun in English in count and mass senses. We want to check whether this claim is valid and, while investigating this issue, we aim to determine the semantic regularities that accompany such grammatical changes. The theory that we want to apply for this purpose is Ronald LANGACKER’s Cognitive Grammar (1987a, 1990, 1991, 2000a, 2000b, 2007, 2008, etc.), one of the prominent theories of grammar within the cognitive linguistics enterprise.

The book is divided into two main parts: theoretical and analytical. In the theoretical part, there are three main chapters. In the first one, we make an overview of the major views on countability and uncountability, indicate their major characteristics, point to the insights that each of them has made, and collect the regularities of count-to-mass and mass-to-count shifts that have been observed within them. The second chapter introduces Cognitive Grammar (CG) and its terminological apparatus. It discusses the major assumptions of CG: its approach to meaning, to the noun, and to countability and uncountability. The first part concludes with a chapter that compares the claims found in other branches of linguistics and those made within CG.

The analytical part is divided into four chapters. In the first one, we present the methodology of the analysis. In the second chapter, we present the schemas and patterns of semantic extension that we determined after an analysis of mass extensions of 30 count nouns. In the third chapter, we present the results of an analysis of count extensions of 30 mass nouns. The final chapter sums up the analysis and provides a discussion of the results.

Grzegorz Drożdż

Zagadka (nie)policzalności w języku angielskim Studium z perspektywy Gramatyki Kognitywnej

Streszczenie

Monografia poświęcona jest zagadnieniu policzalności i niepoliczalności rzeczownika w języku angielskim. Przyjmując punkt widzenia jednej z teorii językoznawstwa kognitywnego – Gramatyki Kognitywnej Ronald Langackera – praca stawia sobie dwa cele. Po pierwsze, weryfikuje jedno z twierdzeń tej teorii, iż prawdopodobnie każdy rzeczownik może wystąpić zarówno w formie policzalnej, jak i niepoliczalnej. Po drugie, wskazuje regularności zmian tych własności gramatycznych rzeczownika.

Książka składa się z dwóch rozdziałów. W pierwszym z nich autor dokonuje przeglądu literatury poświęconej zagadnieniu policzalności i niepoliczalności i przedstawia najważniejsze osiągnięcia wypracowane w ramach różnych podejść: logicznego, morfologicznego, syntaktycznego, semantycznego oraz pragmatycznego. Zarysowano tu również główne założenia oraz aparat terminologiczny Gramatyki Kognitywnej, która stanowi bazę teoretyczną dla przeprowadzonej w drugiej części monografii analizy. Rozdział kończy zestawienie wybranych założeń Gramatyki Kognitywnej z postulatami poszczególnych podejść.

Rozdział drugi to część badawcza, której trzon stanowi analiza 30 rzeczowników klasyfikowanych w słownikach języka angielskiego jako policzalne oraz 30 rzeczowników typowo niepoliczalnych. Badanie dotyczy użycia tych rzeczowników w kontekstach, w których przejawiają one odwrotną własność gramatyczną. Analizę przeprowadzono na podstawie autentycznego materiału językowego obejmującego ponad 1700 wypowiedzi rodzimych użytkowników języka angielskiego. W ramach analizy opisano szereg ekstensji semantycznych, głównie metonimicznych, towarzyszących omawianym tu zmianom gramatycznym. Na wyższym poziomie abstrakcji ekstensje te ujęte zostały w formie schematów rozszerzenia semantycznego.

W podsumowaniu autor ocenia wiarygodność twierdzenia dotyczącego możliwości użycia każdego rzeczownika zarówno w formie policzalnej, jak i niepoliczalnej oraz przedstawia zestaw regularności dotyczących zmian tych własności gramatycznych rzeczownika. Poza odniesieniem się do dwóch głównych celów monografii, autor wskazuje również inne zjawiska językowe związane z omawianą zmianą własności gramatycznych rzeczownika, takie jak elipsa czy łańcuchy punktów odniesienia.

Grzegorz Drożdż

Puzzle de la (non) comptabilité en anglais Étude dans la perspective de la grammaire cognitive

Résumé

La monographie est consacrée au problème de la comptabilité et de la massivité des noms en anglais. En adoptant le point de vue d'une des théories de la linguistique cognitive, notamment de la grammaire cognitive de Ronald Langacker, l'auteur se pose deux buts. Premièrement, il se propose de vérifier une des hypothèses avancées dans le cadre de la dernière théorie: l'hypothèse selon laquelle probablement chaque nom peut être utilisé à la fois de façon comptable et de façon massive. Deuxièmement, il se donne pour objectif de mettre en évidence certaines régularités concernant le passage du massif au comptable et, inversement, du comptable au massif.

Le livre se compose de deux chapitres. Le premier chapitre donne un aperçu de la littérature sur la comptabilité et la massivité des noms et il esquisse les acquis les plus importants de différentes approches de ce problème: logique, morphologique, syntaxique, sémantique et pragmatique. Puis, il traite des principes fondamentaux et de l'appareil terminologique de la grammaire cognitive qui constitue la base théorique de l'analyse présentée dans le chapitre suivant. Le chapitre s'achève par une comparaison de certains postulats de la grammaire cognitive avec ceux des approches analysées plus tôt.

Dans le deuxième chapitre, qui constitue la partie analytique du présent travail, l'auteur étudie 30 noms décrits dans des dictionnaires de la langue anglaise comme comptables ainsi que 30 noms qui sont fondamentalement massifs. Il analyse les emplois de ces noms dans les contextes dans lesquels ils représentent une propriété grammaticale inverse. L'analyse est fondée sur un matériel linguistique authentique qui englobe plus de 1700 énoncés de locuteurs natifs de la langue anglaise. Elle permet à l'auteur de saisir un certain nombre d'extensions sémantiques, principalement métonymiques, qui accompagnent les changements grammaticaux en question. À un niveau d'abstraction plus élevé, ces extensions sont représentées comme des schémas d'extension sémantique.

En conclusion, l'auteur discute l'hypothèse concernant la possibilité d'employer chaque nom à la fois de façon comptable et de façon massive et il présente un ensemble de régularités du passage du massif au comptable et vice versa. Outre les deux principaux objectifs de la monographie, l'auteur décrit d'autres phénomènes linguistiques liés aux changements des propriétés grammaticales discutés : ellipse et chaîne de points de référence.

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