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consider the rules behind countability.

The tricky 's': how to teach food and foods?

Introduction

Nouns are one of the most prominent parts of speech and they occur in much of the written and spoken English we come across or produce. To fully comprehend and express each noun, one has to observe rules, directly and/or indirectly, associated with countability and plural marking, two core features associated with English nouns (Tsang, 2017).

Countability refers to whether a noun is countable/uncountable (C/U). Countable (or count) nouns denote 'individual countable entities' such as a *chair* and a *banana* while uncountable (or noncount/mass) nouns refer to 'undifferentiated mass or continuum' like *water* and *rubbish* (Quirk *et al.*, 1985: 246). Countable nouns can be preceded by numbers (e.g. *five* bananas), certain determiners (e.g. *every* banana, *a few* bananas) and suffixed with plural marker 's' (bananas), while uncountable ones cannot be preceded by numbers or the same determiners, and they cannot take the plural marker (Rothstein, 2010).

The C/U dichotomy described above seems rather straightforward and is often explained in textbooks and lessons but in reality, the distinction is much more complex, resulting in a lot of confusion for English learners. To illustrate this, Tsang (2017) discusses the C/U classification system from the perspectives of arbitrariness, reclassification, and conceptualization. The C/U system is inherently arbitrary in that nouns having largely similar meanings can be C/U as in 'pebbles vs. gravel, leaves vs. foliage, garments vs. clothing, and advice vs. suggestions' (Wisniewski, 2010: 167). Also, many nouns in English can be both C/U, depending on the contexts. For instance, a countable noun *cake* as in 'I'll go buy a cake' can be reclassified into uncountable in 'I want cake for dessert' (Wisniewski, Lamb, & Middleton, 2003: 584). Even more challengingly, the conceptualization of C/U is somewhat language-specific rather than universal. For instance, *information* is commonly uncountable in English but usually plural in French as in *renseignements* (Mufwene,

1981). The plural marker 's' is also far from straightforward as it does not always indicate plurality (e.g. *waters*, *fogs*, *sands* do not necessarily indicate the *more-than-one* concept). This leads to questions such as '[h]ow is one to tell if sorrows is the compositional plural of sorrow? Can one count one's insecurities or fears? ... Does hurting someone's feelings amount to hurting a collection of abstract things, each of which is a feeling?' (Acquaviva, 2008: 18).

We are aware that the countability of many nouns is easily discernible (see Figure 1, group 1) while others have no immediately apparent reasons why they are C/U (group 3). However, the unfortunate fact is that there is also a large group of nouns whose countability and plural marking are wishy-washy (group 2). We constructed a figure to illustrate a continuum from a noun's countability being easily understandable to inexplicable. Group 1 is called 'I can tell' because its countability is easy to determine. Group 3 is called 'just the way

it is' because there does not seem to be any logical or easily discernible reasons why these nouns are C/U. Groups 1 and 3 should not pose much difficulty for EFL learners and indeed most relevant textbooks, dictionaries, references, and teachers only focus on these two groups (see Figure 1).

Lying between the two is group 2 whose countability can be ambiguous depending on the contexts (e.g. *fruit*; *kindness*; *tea*). Even beginners in English would encounter (in reading and listening) and produce (in writing and speaking) plenty of them. We therefore set out to investigate a very common yet highly confusing concrete noun, *food*, in group 2, hoping to raise teachers' awareness of the 'it depends?' nouns and to shed some light on ideas how to guide learners (and indeed teachers themselves) to comprehend these confusing nouns. We invited 10 native English speakers through our own networks to help us.

The native English-speaking participants

The backgrounds of these participants are shown in Table 1. We deliberately invited people from different backgrounds to obtain greater insights and achieve higher generalisability.

All participants completed a brief questionnaire but only seven of them (#1-#7) agreed to attend an individual interview to elaborate on their responses in the questionnaire. The questionnaire required the participants to draw a picture of *food* and another one for *foods*, and then describe them. Follow-up interviews were then conducted.

Food or foods: where the confusion lies

For EFL speakers, it is extremely difficult to see when *foods* should be used when *food* alone can already mean *more than one* and *different kinds*, as shown in the drawings by some native speakers in Table 2.

Dictionaries often only show us C/U for each entry and give various examples but it is very hard, if not impossible, to spot any logical patterns (worse still, one sometimes gets even more confused

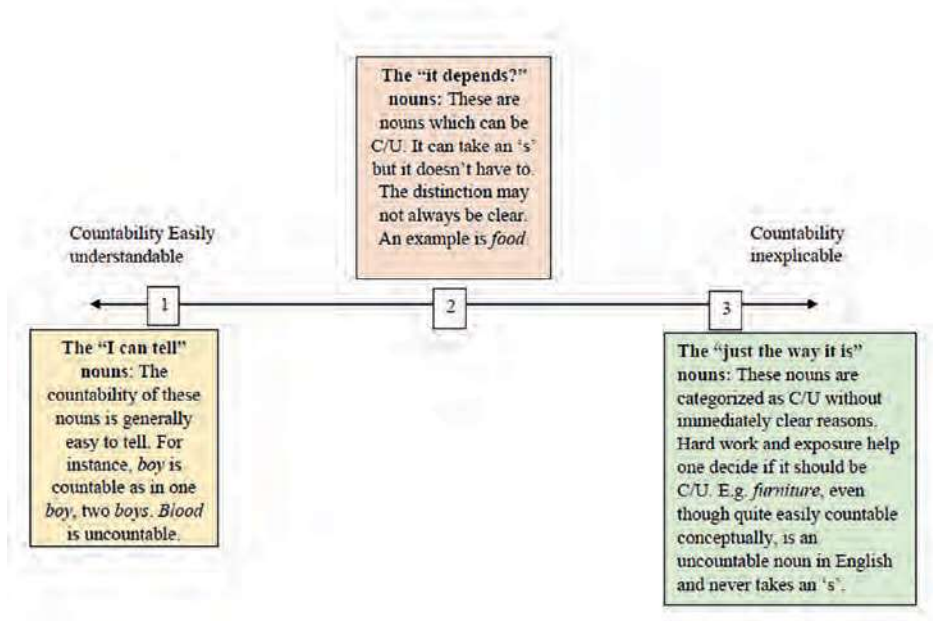


Figure 1 The three groups of U/C nouns

| Code | Types of English spoken | Place of origin | Age |
|-------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------|
| #1 | American | Hong Kong | 20 |
| #2 | American | Hong Kong | 25 |
| #3 | British | The Netherlands | 20-40* |
| #4 | British | UK | 28 |
| #5 | British | UK | 20 |
| #6 | Canadian | Canada | 21 |
| #7 | Canadian | Canada | 41 |
| #8 ^ | American | USA | 29 |
| #9 ^ | Canadian | Canada | 21 |
| #10 ^ | Canadian | Canada | 20 |

^These participants did not participate in the interviews; *The participant provided a range rather than their exact age.

Table 1 The participants

| Picture 1 | Picture 2 |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Food by #9 (showing more than one) | Food by #4 (showing different kinds) |
| | |
| Description by #9: This is picnic food. | Description by #4: Apples, oranges and bananas are food. |

Table 2 Drawings by native speakers of different kinds of food

having checked various dictionaries, e.g. *frozen foods* in Cambridge Dictionary and *frozen food* in Longman Dictionary). EFL learners are mostly only familiar with 's' for plural marking, indicating plurality (i.e. greater than one). If *food* can indicate more than one item already, why do we need *foods*? What is the difference between *food* and *foods*? Are they interchangeable? Is *food/foods* only correct in some situations? Even if both *frozen food* and *frozen foods* are correct, what are the nuances in meaning? Do native speakers perceive and use them differently? Which do they prefer and why? These are some example questions English learners often have but the answers are largely elusive.

Food or foods: the general difference

From the survey and the interviews, we can summarise that:

- *Food* refers to a single type; *foods* refer to more than one kind. However, the concept of singularity can be subjective. For example, a single type can actually be 'fruits' (#1) or 'breakfast food' (#2).
- *Food* refers to the general idea and *foods* denotes specificity ('sub-genre of food') such as 'fatty foods' (#5). This is rather counter-intuitive for learners as they would normally expect, for instance, *fatty food*, *healthy food*, and *processed food* (three specific types) are considered foods! But the opposite is true. In other words, from a certain perspective, native speakers view *food* as 'a bigger unit' and higher in classification than *foods*, the idea of which is hard to grasp for learners. From the pictures, we also found that when a specific group is mentioned and the noun *food* is pluralised (i.e. *foods*), there is more than one item as shown in Pictures 3 and 4 (Table 3).
- #3 stated that it used to be only common to use *food*, but recently, *foods* is heard and seen on (television) programmes and in magazines, so *foods* has gained currency. Still, *food* is used more often and preferred by the native speakers here. They do not think *foods* is grammatically incorrect, but it is either unnatural or used

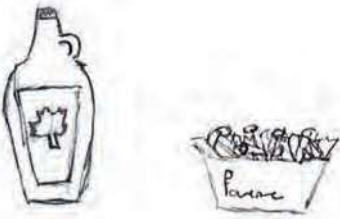

| Picture 3 Canadian Foods by #9 | Picture 4 Healthy Foods by #7 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |
| Description by #9: These are Canadian foods. | Description by #7: You should eat a lot of healthy foods. |

Table 3 Drawings by native speakers of different kind of foods

under specific circumstances only (as shown in Table 3).

Importantly, the following would be potential misconceptions for learners:

- There are more items in *foods* than *food*. There is no indication of number in *food/foods* as shown in Pictures 1 and 2 (both are food with multiple food items).
- There are different types in *foods* but there is only one type in *food*. This depends on how one defines type. There are indeed different food items in Pictures 1 and 2, but all the different items in the basket in Picture 1 and all three types of fruit in Picture 2 are considered as only one type of food (picnic food and fruit).

Modifiers + food/foods: which would native speakers choose?

During the interviews, we challenged the interviewees by presenting some pairs for them to choose and comment on. These pairs were: Baby food/foods, frozen food/foods, Italian food/foods, and 'I'm allergic to certain food/foods'.

Baby is a noun modifying *food/foods*, another noun. Most think that both are possible. *Baby food* refers to 'a whole collection of food that babies eat'. *Baby foods* is possible if emphasising the different kinds of such food (e.g. milk and processed soft food, #6).

Frozen and *Italian* are both adjectives modifying *food/foods*. Interestingly, the interviewees' views were less unanimous. For some, as with *baby food/foods*, *frozen food* is regarded as a 'collective umbrella encompassing' term (#1) while *frozen foods* 'bring[s] your mind to think about different kinds of frozen foods' (#1) such as 'ice-lolly or chicken' (#5). However, #3 and #6 thought that both refer to the exact same concept with no difference. The interviewees generally regarded both as correct although #3 commented that *frozen food* is 'more correct' although *frozen foods* is becoming more acceptable. They also have different opinions about the preferred version in shops or supermarkets. For instance, #2 opted for *frozen food* as 'you're talking about one specific type of food – frozen food. It doesn't matter if it is frozen breakfast, or frozen seafood, or frozen fruit... Within the frozen food category, there're different sub-categories, like breakfast, icecream, seafood, but these are already included, so you don't need "s"'. However, #4 stated having come across *frozen foods* more often. In shops, this helps convey the message that the variety of things that are frozen is here; however, for frozen food, 'the stress is frozen, that is, the food that is frozen', hence a less preferred choice.

As regards *Italian food/foods*, the interviewees thought that both are acceptable. They are all unanimous in saying that *food* is more common and the preferred choice. The interviewees commented that *Italian foods* 'feels more detailed', focusing on multiple

kinds of foods or cuisines (#1). When encountering *Italian foods*, #3 thought of a situation where one could say 'I would like a linguine, a pizza...' whereas *Italian food* does not specify any dishes. #6 also suggested that the 's' seems to imply the speaker/writer are 'giving an example of something... they're referring to certain types of food which they may present later on'. Likewise, for #7, *Italian food* refers generally to the cuisine but *Italian foods* means 'there are different subsets of Italian food, like pasta or certain types of vegetables...'.

Finally, we deliberately chose a more vague adjective *certain* to investigate interviewees' perceptions, as in *I'm allergic to certain food/foods*. Discrepancies were found. Most preferred *foods to food* as they deemed the adjective *certain* implies more than one types of food. #2 gave an example of 10 different food items and one is allergic to three of the ten, hence the 's' to refer to the specific three. #5 added that the focus here is on how one is allergic to more than one type of food and gave another example of *specific foods*. However, #3 and #7 thought that 's' is redundant and they would opt for *certain food*.

Messages for English educators

Based on the rather complicated patterns presented above, we arrive at a number of important remarks which are especially important for ESL/EFL educators.

Determining the countability and plural marking of these 'it depends?' nouns is highly challenging. In the case of *food/foods*, the 's' does not signify *more than one* as the common practice (e.g. two boys, two boats); therefore, as some participants pointed out, *a lot of foods* sound strange and even wrong. The 's' used as a suffix for *food* underlines the existence of variety. However, this is still baffling, as an apple, a banana and a kiwifruit together can be described as *food* (a general term referring to edible things) or *foods*, as in *healthy foods* (these are the various kinds and specific examples). We cannot judge if we need the 's' based merely on the number of food items or the kinds of these items. Similarly, *foods* does not necessarily imply a greater amount or variety than

food; rather, as shown above, *foods* is perhaps used only as a sub-category of *food*!

It is worthwhile highlighting that while native speakers' views do not always converge, they tend to be largely unanimous (as shown in Tsang, 2017 and the present study) despite their different backgrounds. They seem to be well aware of the common form(s) of a noun (e.g. the default for 'food' is the singular noncount form). There is an additional sense and emphasis when the special, rarer form, *foods*, is used. For learners, therefore, it is essential to receive a large amount of authentic input and develop greater sensitivity towards this topic. Due to extensive exposure, native speakers are quite capable of commenting on how likely a form occurs, what is appropriate, and why certain forms exist. For instance, based on his/her experience, #3 mentioned that *drink* is 'about... all kinds of beverage' while *drinks* is 'usually referring to something alcoholic, or something fancy'.

Although as the interviewees pointed out, *food/foods* is not a serious issue in terms of language accuracy, a greater understanding of the use of 's' stands learners in good stead when it comes to reading and listening (interpreting nuances) and writing and speaking (expressing nuances). Many high-frequency words have such C/U property and their various forms may carry different meanings (e.g. *food/foods* versus *kindness/kindnesses*). Although we have only discussed an extremely common noun, *food*, there are many other nouns (e.g. *fruit*, *vegetable*, and even abstract nouns such as *proficiency* and *attitude*) whose countability and plural marking need much more explanation. The article, hopefully, has served as a point of departures for teachers and students to explore the intriguing power C/U and 's' have to offer to the English language.

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