

Countable versus Uncountable nouns

“Okay, before we start class, would you like a cup of tea or coffee?”

“I smell a rat. You’re not normally this generous.”

“Don’t be so critical. Tea or coffee?”

“Tea please.”

“Would you like some milk?”

“Just a drop.”

“Sugar?”

“Three please.”

“There you go.”

“Thanks, I can still smell that rat though.”

“Okay, I admit, there was a little rat.”

“Go on.”

“How many cups of tea have you had this week?”

“Present perfect!”

“Well done. If you could just answer the question...”

“I drink a lot of tea, me. Five cups a day, so that means, I have drunk fifteen cups of tea this week. What about you? How much have you drunk?”

“I don’t drink that much tea. I find the caffeine affects my blood pressure adversely.”

“Er, excuse me, oh great master, I thought we’re here to push back the frontiers of English Language Teaching, not discuss the adverse effect of caffeine on your blood pressure.”

“There is method in my madness, oh simple one.”

“Okay, I prostrate myself in awe of your superior knowledge.”

“So back to your tea drinking habits. How many cups of tea do you drink every day?”

“Trick question!!!”

“Well spotted. So what is the correct form?”

'How many cups of tea do you drink every day.'

'Good, and why?'

'I don't know. It just sounds better.'

'I'm afraid 'just sounding better' is not a satisfactory explanation for our foreign friends.'

'Okay, so what's the rule?'

'I thought you enjoyed the deductive method.'

'I do! I do! Okay, give me some more examples.'

'How many milks did you have in your tea.'

'How many milks? What kind of... ha! Another trick question!'

'Right again, oh simple one. Why can't I say 'How many milks?''

'Because you can't use numbers with milk. Milk is... milk.'

'Very profound. Milk is milk, I must remember that one. So what you're saying is, I can't count milk: one milk, two milks, three milks etc.'

'In my humble opinion. Perhaps it is used in American English or in Australia, or Ireland or South Africa, but I, in my terribly limited exposure to the English language, have not come across anyone counting milks...'

'Nor have I. So we agree that we cannot count milk.'

'We do.'

'Can you think of anything else that we can't count?'

'So milk isn't the only case?'

'No, there are hundreds?'

'How many exactly?'

'I don't know. I've never counted. I have a life.'

'That's not what I've heard. Sorry! I shouldn't say nasty things about you. I'd like to borrow some money from you. I lost my bus fare.'

'Say that again!'

'I'm sorry! Oh great superior being. I am truly...'

'Not that bit. What would you like to borrow?'

'Some money, just 80p until...'

‘Excellent.’

‘Well, I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic.’

‘**Some** money.’

‘Yes, *some* money.’

‘Not two moneys, or five moneys.’

‘No, just 80p. Wait a minute, I get you. I can’t count money!’

‘Exactly!’

‘But hold on, hold on, my sister’s an accountant. She spends all day counting money. You’re wrong!’

‘Ouch, that hurt.’

‘I didn’t touch you. Oh, I get you, you meant metaphysically. Of course, you’re never wrong.’

‘I am occasionally wrong and am ready to admit it. But back to the lesson, you thought that money is countable.’

‘But it... explain this delicate problem to me, oh great one.’

‘Let’s do a mini role play.’

‘Great, I love role plays, me. Who am I?’

‘Your sister.’

‘And?’

‘I’d like you to count money.’

‘Er, that’s it?’

‘Yes, that’s it. This is not Broadway.’

‘Okay. Here I am, sitting at my desk, there’s a big pile of money in front of me!’

‘Only one pile?’

‘No, no, there are three piles.’

‘Good, good, so start counting.’

‘Ten pounds, twenty pounds, thirty pounds...’

‘Um, excuse me, what are you counting?’

‘This, I mean, **these** piles of beautiful money in front of me. You told me to count it all!’

‘But you said, ‘Ten pounds, twenty pounds, thirty pounds... ’.’”

‘Right. Like you told me.’”

‘But I asked you to count **money**.’”

*‘But pounds **are** money. They’re the same thing, you.. why are you looking at me like that?’*”

‘There is a fundamental difference between the word ‘pounds’ and the word ‘money’. We can say one pound, two pounds, three pounds, but we can’t say, one money, two moneys, three moneys.’”

‘Well that’s obvious. I didn’t think I had to explain that.’”

‘What may be obvious to you, may not be obvious to learners of English.’”

‘I get you.’”

‘What about advice?’”

‘What about it?’”

‘Is it countable or uncountable?’”

‘Er, countable!’”

‘Sure?’”

‘Sure, I’m sure. One piece of advice, two pieces of advice.’”

‘But you’re counting **pieces** of advice, not advices.’”

‘I know that, but surely foreign learners wouldn’t...’”

‘Oh yes they would. You commonly hear, ‘please teacher, can you give me an advice?’.”

‘Some advice!’”

‘Exactly, but can you explain why?’”

*‘Because I can’t count ‘advice, only **pieces** of advice!’*”

‘I think we’re finally getting somewhere. Furniture?’”

‘Er, uncountable! Some furniture, a piece of furniture!’”

‘Information?’”

‘Uncountable! Some information, a piece of information!’”

‘Cake?’”

‘Countable! One cake, two cakes, three cakes!’”

‘Sure?’

‘Positive! This countable/uncountable is a piece of... wait a minute.’

‘Yes?’

‘I can count cakes, can’t I?’

‘You certainly can.’

‘But I can also say, ‘some cake’ or ‘a piece of cake.’

‘Correct.’

‘So?’

‘So what?’

‘Which is it? Countable or uncountable?’

‘Both!’

‘Both? How can it be both?’

‘It depends on how you consider the cake?’

‘Well, my mum’s cakes are the best in the world!’

‘In that example, you are thinking of the many different cakes that your mother bakes.’

‘I certainly was. Her fruit cake is the best.’

‘Okay. Now which is sweeter, cake or bread?’

‘Cake!’

‘Sure?’

‘Positive!’

‘Can you give me a full sentence?’

‘Cake is sweeter than bread. Bread is not as sweet as cake.’

‘Very good. When you were considering this, were you thinking of your mum’s cakes?’

‘No, just cake in general, just cake cake.’

‘Cake cake. I must remember that one. A bit like milk is milk.’

‘You know what I mean!’

‘I’m pretty sure I do. You were thinking of uncountable cake!’

‘I was?’

‘Cake in general, cake cake.’

‘Right. I said that, didn’t I?’

‘You certainly did. You also said ‘cake is sweeter than bread.’’

‘That’s right, isn’t it?’

‘Yes. But it’s interesting that you said ‘cake’, rather than, ‘a cake.’’

‘Excuse me, oh great one, but I don’t find that particularly interesting.’

‘It is a fundamental difference between countable and uncountable nouns. An amazingly common error for foreign learners. Almost all countable nouns take the indefinite article ‘a’ or ‘an’ when referred to in the singular.’

‘And the uncountable ones don’t! We don’t say ‘an advice’ or ‘a furniture’ do we?’

‘Indeed we don’t. Can you see the kinds of problems that our foreign friends have with English?’

‘I can indeed. Can I produce a quick table so that I don’t forget countable and uncountable nouns?’

‘Be my guest.’

	COUNTABLE NOUNS	UNCOUNTABLE NOUNS
Can you count them?	Yes: e.g. twenty nine books, seven balls, two wheels...	No. furniture, advice, gold, information
How can you tell them apart?	you can put ‘a’ or ‘an’ in front of the noun.	you can’t put ‘a’ or ‘an’ in front of the noun.
Question forms?	How many cigarettes have you smoked?	How much time have you got for me?
Articles?	Yes: A dog, an ironing board, a cabbage	No: some rain, some love
Plural form?	YES (usually)	NO
Common errors?	Forgetting articles! My sister is doctor. At home I have dog.	Using incorrect plural forms. Let me give you some advices. Adding articles. She gave me an

‘Like it?’

‘It’s great.’

‘Thank you, oh great teacher. I am very impressed with the clarity with which you explained the differences...’

‘I can feel a ‘but’ coming.’

‘My discourse marker! BUT, like some people I could mention, a big butt, ha ha, I have a question.’

‘I shall try my very best to ignore your smut and answer your question. If I can’t, I’ll write your question down and do everything in my power to find out the answer before we meet again.’

“Gosh, that’s dedication.”

“A dedication which I hope I can instil in you.”

‘Back to my question.’

‘I’m ready.’

‘Can you remember the beginning of the lesson?’

‘I can. I offered you a cup of tea.’

‘Cups are countable, tea is uncountable!’

‘Correct.’

‘You then offered me some milk.’

‘I did. I said, ‘Would you like some milk?’.’

‘And I replied, ‘Just a drop’. Milk is uncountable, drops are countable!’

‘Right again.’

‘But then you offered me some sugar.’

‘I just said, ‘Sugar?’.’

‘Do you remember my reply?’

‘You said, ‘Three please.’.’

‘Well?’

‘Well what?’

'I got it wrong! Sugar is uncountable!'

'Don't forget to have more faith in your own language. What do you mean, 'wrong'?"

*'I should have said, 'three **spoonfuls** of sugar, please.' Shouldn't I?'*

'Not at all. That was an example of ellipsis.'

'Is that when the moon goes behind the sun?'

'Er, no, the sun is 93 million miles away, I don't think the moon goes behind the sun very often. What you are thinking about is an **eclipse**.'

'Total eclipse of the heart.'

'Er, well, can we get back on with the lesson?'

'Sorry, I love Bonnie Tyler, me.'

'Anyway, ellipsis is a linguistic term when a speaker or less commonly a writer, drops words which they believe will be known to the listener or reader.'

'Sorry, I'm a bit slow. Could you...?'

'Sure. You said, three sugars please. It was clear to me that you were referring to **spoonfuls** of sugar, not bucketfuls.'

'I get you. But this 'ellipsis' is not very common, is it?'

'Not common? We use it all the time! Fancy a pint after class?'

'Yeah!'

'Did you notice my ellipsis?'

*'Er, yes! You should have said, ' **Do you** fancy a pint after class?.'*

I don't think I **should** have said 'Do you...' You clearly understood what I wanted to say. Seen any good films recently?'

*'You mean, **Have you** seen any good films recently.'*

'You knew exactly what I meant. Ellipsis is incredibly common. Listen out for it!'

'Okay. Back to countable and uncountable. I have a final question.'

'I'm waiting.'

'What's that on top of your head?'

'Er, dandruff?'

'No, those long bits of stuff growing out of your head.'

“Mmm, I think you should practise your simple explanations. Can I presume you were referring to my hair?”

*‘You can. Now, how **many** hairs have got on your head?’*

‘I’ve never counted but I believe around one hundred thousand.’

*‘One hundred thousand **countable** hairs?’*

“Yes.”

‘So when I asked you initially, why did you use the form ‘hair’ in the singular form?’

‘Good question. Sometimes students say , ‘you have beautiful hairs’ and you should correct them. The reason we use the singular form is simply because we are referring to a head of hair, hair being considered, like cake, as an uncountable noun.’

‘Thought so.’

‘So why are you smiling?’

‘Well, at the moment you have hair...’

‘What **are** you implying? I have a fine head of hair.’

‘Well you are going a little thin on top. A head of fine hair but quite a few less than last week I think.’

‘That is outrageous!’

‘My question is, how many hairs do you have to lose before we should stop saying ‘I like your hair,’ and start saying ‘I like your hairs.’?’

‘I AM NOT GOING THIN ON TOP I HAVE A FINE HEAD OF HAIR AND DON’T YOU FORGET THAT!’

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