

# Counting the uncountable

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Language students often complain about the complexity and number of classifiers used for counting things in Japanese. For instance, *mai* is used for counting flat objects such as paper, glass and coins; *hon* is for long objects like pens, strings and movies (which used to be long rolls of film); *satsu* for bound items, typically including books and magazines; *hiki* for small animals such as cats and small dogs; *to* for bigger animals; and many more.

This appears complicated and cumbersome compared with English, in which things are counted simply by putting the number before the thing, as in: one pen, three books, and so on. Simple, you say, but is it really?

Actually it's not simple at all, because we've ignored some significant complexities in the English approach to counting. One of the most difficult aspects of English for foreigners is the handling of nouns. Perhaps you think I'm talking about how English employs counters sometimes, such as: one *piece* of information, two *sheets* of paper or three *head* of cattle. These are really only problems of memorization, however. What I'm referring to is that English distinguishes, in principle, between two types of nouns, countable and uncountable. Unless you are a trained English teacher, you may not be aware of this fact.

For instance, you can say, "I've got an apple," but not, "I've got a bread." This is because "apple" is conceptualized as countable but "bread" is not. For Japanese, it is easy to agree that "apple" is countable, but not so for "bread," which is always seen as countable in Japan. Presumably we need to have in mind the time when bread was first made and served to get a better idea of how people then conceptualized it. The Japanese did not go through this process of development; when bread was introduced it was always in a countable shape.

What about "chicken" as another example? "When I was a child, my grandfather kept many chickens." So far, this English is grammatically correct because "chicken" is countable. But I feel confident in saying you would not naturally say, "I ate chickens" nor "I ate a chicken." You would probably laugh if you heard me say this. This is because the word "chicken" has two different connotations, depending on whether you are referring to the bird or its meat. In other words, "chicken" is both countable and uncountable, depending on context.

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The word "glass" is similar: When referring to a drinking glass, "glass" is countable (one glass, two glasses), but when referring to the material "glass," it is uncountable. Recall that we say "two panes of glass" not "two window glasses."

"Aluminum is a relatively new metal" represents a countable usage while "This pen is made of metal" uses "metal" in its uncountable form. There are a great many other nouns of this type, such as stone, rock, wood and paper.

We reach the conclusion that one cannot categorically say that a certain noun is countable or uncountable; many can be both. This is because words represent images, and if that "image" shifts (i.e., a different meaning is intended), then the word (noun) is treated differently.

Some nouns seem to slowly change status with time. When I learned English, "coffee" and "tea" were definitely introduced as uncountable, and we were taught to say "two cups of coffee" or "three cups of tea." But in real life I have seen people say "two coffees" and "three teas." This is because the image of these words has shifted so that it includes the way these substances are being served or consumed.

Difficult as these nouns can be, they still refer to tangible things, and with some practice tangible nouns are not too hard to distinguish, even for a foreigner like me. Real difficulty arises when handling nouns for intangible and abstract notions such as information, production, news, increase, addition, art, beauty, hardship, pain or fever.

You never say "an information" or "many informations" but you can say "an addition" or "additions" or "an increase" or "increases." While I could have a severe pain or a high fever, I could not have a hardship. Or could I?

Treating these types of nouns as countable or uncountable is in many cases a never-ending riddle for foreign learners of English. Because English, for some unknown reason, distinguishes singular and plural, it is often difficult deciding whether to use the article "a" or not, or whether to make the noun plural. Even now, I seriously wonder if it is possible to say "I like apple" when I refer to its texture and taste, just as I can correctly say "I like chicken." Would you accept this usage?

Now back to the original issue of the complexity of Japanese classifiers. The existence of classifiers tells us that Japanese treats all nouns the same way. They are all abstract nouns in their basic conception that can only be quantified if given some kind of unit marker. This is the same thing as giving liquids, temperature and electricity units like "gallons," "degrees" and "watts." Both the English and Japanese languages agree that without these "units" these things could not be counted. Wouldn't you agree that the rule is simpler in Japanese?