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Less and less people see the need to say fewer



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

SOME things in the world seem to be easily counted: birds, chairs and people. Other things cannot be counted because they occur in masses: water, honey and knowledge. That just seems to be the way the world is.

But languages have to deal with this situation. In English we can ask "how many" with the countable nouns (how many birds, how many chairs, how many people) but we have to ask "how much" with the uncountables or mass nouns (how much water, how much honey, how much knowledge). So the use of "how many" or "how much" is one way in which we use language to distinguish between the two types of noun.

But while it may seem that we are simply using language to reflect the reality of the world, there are places where it becomes clear that our language is defining our world for us. In Maori and in dialectal Danish, rice is countable; in French, information is countable; in German, research is countable; in Italian, spaghetti is countable. The other way round, clothes are uncountable in Danish (so it's like "clothing" in English), and in English that most countable of all objects, money, is treated as uncountable: we have to say "How much money do you have?" not

"How many moneys do you have?"

Now, if you already have some birds, you could say "I'd like some more birds" and, if you already have some honey, you could say "I'd like some more honey". So you can use "more" with both countables and uncountables. This might lead us to suspect that, if we want to go in the opposite direction, we will be able to use the same word, too. But while "I wanted less honey" is uncontroversial, "I wanted less birds" is an innovation: the older system demands "I wanted fewer birds", because birds are countable. This is parallel to the expression "there were few birds in the sky"; we cannot say "there was few honey in the hive".

Most speakers seem unaware of this distinction these days. Several years ago, one of the local radio stations ran an advertising campaign, with posters saying words to the effect of "more music, less ads". Some wit defaced one such poster with the words "fewer grammar". Ads are countable, so in the old-fashioned system it had to be "fewer ads"; "less ads" was as silly as "fewer grammar".

These days, things have gone even further. Whereas we used to say "I saw a large number of birds" and "I saw a large amount of honey" ("number" for countable nouns, "amount" for uncountable

ones), now it is more and more common to hear people saying (and see them writing) "a large amount of people". For some of us, this implies that the people are stacked up in a huge amorphous and undifferentiated mass. Not so for the innovative speakers, for whom this is the normal way of expressing the notion.

Countability is more complicated than I have admitted. Sometimes we have different words for countable and uncountable versions of the same thing: "loaf" is countable, but "bread" is uncountable. At other times the same noun serves both functions: we can have too many cakes or too much cake.

Most uncountable nouns can occur in the plural, but then they mean "types of". So we have Reizenstein's breads (meaning types of bread). But the word "knowledge" doesn't work easily in the plural, even though we might talk of the several types of knowledge needed to put a lander on Mars.

No wonder foreign learners of English have so much trouble with our language when even such a small corner is filled with so many pitfalls.

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