Countability in the history of English: Evidence from grammars and dictionaries

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ABSTRACT

Since at least the mid twentieth century, countability has been a lively topic in many fields of linguistics as well as an important subject in the field of teaching English as a second/foreign language. Yet the development of this category in the history of English has been little researched and never comprehensively described. This paper looks at the current state of the descriptions of the emergence of this category in the history of English. It notes a possible connection between its prominent status in the descriptions of Present-Day English and of English as a global language (studied by many non-native learners as well as linguists). It maps the history of the description of the category in grammars and dictionaries from the fourteenth until the early twentieth century, and prepares the ground for a follow-up corpus-based research of the development of countability in English.

1 INTRODUCTION

Quirk et al. note that "[t]he division of nouns according to countability into count nouns and noncount nouns is basic in English" (1985: 247). Unsurprisingly, contemporary grammars (both comprehensive and undergraduate-level) as well as learner's dictionaries of Present-Day English (PDE) feature this division very prominently. I put stress here on Present-Day, since the category of countability is conspicuously missing in both grammars and dictionaries of Old as well as Middle English (OE, ME). It seems quite surprising, then, that a category that is so prominently present in the description of contemporary English but almost completely missing in the representations of its earlier periods has so far received almost no attention from a diachronic perspective and that little attempt to explain its origins has been made so far.

The present study[1] aims to at least start to amend this glaring deficit by identifying points of interest such as periods of change, grammatical constructions or lexical items, and more specific questions that will inform the methodology of the following corpus-based probes. It will start in the first part by reviewing the current literature on the development of the category of countability in English. The second part of the

paper will then focus on historical descriptions of the category in grammars, glossaries and dictionaries, since these may reflect both the changes in the grammatical system itself as well as its understanding and conceptualization by the contemporary grammarians, teachers and lexicographers. Such an overview may be important because it seems that the present prominence of the category in the descriptions of English and teaching materials may be to some degree meta-linguistic in nature — due in part not only to the specific formal realization of countability in PDE but also due to how and why it has been described.

2 COUNTABILITY IN PRESENT-DAY ENGLISH

This paper has no ambition to discuss our current understanding of countability. The literature on the topic is extensive, particularly from recent years — in fact six items from a very selective list from the past decade (Antes 2019; Chierchia 2015; Doetjes 2012; Filip 2021; Grimm and Wahlang 2021; Kharlamenko 2020; Kiss et al. 2021, 2016; Kulkarni et al. 2013; Lievers et al. 2021; Moltmann 2020) come from the last two years. The breadth of the discussion is also wide, as the problem has been approached from a number of angles. Due to its connection to the conceptualization of the denotation, it has been examined especially extensively in the fields of philosophy of language, logic, mereology, cognitive linguistics or semantics (among others). A highly informative selection of literature has been provided by Srinivasan and Barner (2020) amongst others.

In comparison to the functional aspects examined in those fields, formal grammatical aspects of countability in PDE appear relatively simple, although hardly straightforward in their precise description. Contemporary grammatical descriptions mostly note the differences in the formation of plural and in determination between the two classes of nouns: count(ables) and non/un-count(ables),[2] but without fail also point out the semantic or denotational basis for this difference. According to Biber:

> "Countable nouns refer to entities which can be counted; they have both singular and plural forms (*a cow, two cows*, etc.). Both in the singular and the plural there is a contrast between **definite** and **indefinite** forms (*a cow* v. *the cow, cows* v. *the cows*). Uncountable nouns refer to entities which cannot be counted and do not vary for number. Though they do not combine with the indefinite article, they allow a contrast between an indefinite and a definite form (e.g. *milk* v. *the milk*). The

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2   Uncountables are also called *mass* nouns. I prefer to use *uncountable* nouns, because the term is less connected with the semantics underlying the class. In my opinion, the term *mass* describes this semantics rather imprecisely — the majority of uncountables seem to be abstract nouns that do not semantically express mass (see section 5 below for other terms that have been used for un/countables). Note that this paper does not take any specific stance on the competing interpretations of the link between the grammatical/formal category of countability and the semantics of the lexis involved.

most typical uncountable nouns are singular, but we also find plural nouns which do not vary for number and do not combine with numerals." (2000: 241)

Most grammars also note that this distinction is hardly clear-cut and that some (or even the majority of) lexical items a) can switch their class membership based on context, b) exhibit dual-class membership, c) feature individual senses belonging to different classes, or d) cannot be categorized by a binary classification. The number of suggested classes, in fact, shows a steady increase over time. Early descriptions like Matzner's (1874) or Jespersen's (1924, 1942), Bloomfield's (1933) or later Quine's (1960) introduce the two basic classes, but Quirk et al. (1985) or Barner and Snedeker (2005) increase the number to three, Allan (1980) to eight, Wierzbicka (1988) to fourteen and recently Grimm and Wahlang (2021) to fifteen. Classifications with a higher number of classes often understandably form a cline, while Allan (1980), e.g., speaks of countability preferences and levels of countability, rather than of well-defined classes. The classifications, naturally, depend on the detail, the criteria and especially their aims but it is clear even from such a short list that the problem is not trivial.

3 DIACHRONIC DESCRIPTIONS

What has been published on the development of countability in English has so far been rather fragmentary in its coverage. While Fischer (1992) notes the absence of the indefinite article in the case of abstract nouns and uncountables in ME,[3] and several descriptions of Early-Modern English (EModE) mention the category, it is only in passing. EModE descriptions note the word-formation processes with respect to countability (Lass 1992), the changeable nature of lexical class membership as compared to PDE (Görlach 1991: 80 and 143) or the change in countability preference of a single classifier (Strang 1970: 139). Denison has commented both on the situation in Late-Modern English (LModE) as well as on the state of current research stating that "[i]t seems very likely that there is a systematic process of change from noncount to count for some nouns, but full evidence is not yet available" (1998: 96). Both Rozumko (2002) and Sinkko-Latvala (2009) explore these changes in LModE, but only on a few selected nouns. None of the contributions above have, however, attempted to shed light on the origin of the category in English or describe its overall development. An exception is a study by Toyota claiming that:

"Earlier English surprisingly has a reasonably poor counting system and can be considered a classifier language. PDE, on the other hand, is a non-classifier language and this change seems to have happened around the lME/eModE periods. The earlier lack of a clear distinction between the count and mass nouns was in part due to the paucity of earlier mass nouns and classifiers, and this seems to have been resolved by language contact with French and Latin. However, it is ar-

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3   She also quotes Rissanen's 1967 study pointing to Early ME as a still largely formative period for the use of indefinite articles (Fischer, 1992: 221).

gued here that this was also due to the change in speakers' world-view, i.e., the way speakers of earlier English treated certain objects differently from that of PDE speakers." (2009: 128)

This distinction of non/classifier languages is based on Lyons (1977: 227), where classifier languages are characterized as requiring classifiers such as '*a pound of* butter' (used in English for quantification of uncountables) for any nominal quantification or individuation, making no difference between un/countables. It is, however, surprising that Toyota would, on the one hand, note that OE uses almost no true classifiers (he mentions one, *sester*, in his overview) and, on the other, characterize it as a classifier language. Apart from that, his claims that OE does not distinguish un/countables are difficult to accept without more detailed examination. Toyota seems to have dismissed some formal distinctions such as the partitive genitive because they do not correspond to the distinctions in PDE. He also dismisses numerals, noting that "[t]hroughout the history of English, the numerals are only used with count nouns, but earlier instances of mass noun did not have any classifiers [...], which makes these instances look superficially quite similar to those of count nouns" (Toyota 2009: 120), but then only gives examples of quantified uncountables *with* his only classifier.[4]

Moreover, there are studies such as Marckwardt's (1970) on the history of the quantifiers *much* and *many* showing clear distributional preferences in OE, Kharlamenko's (2020) exploring specific neuter plural markers signaling (non-)individuation, or Kemenade and Vincent's (1997: 81–82) identifying Proto-Germanic genitive objects with uncountables. While none of them deal directly with countability and in that sense their evidence is fragmentary, they still seem to suggest that, contra Toyota's claims, countability was actually expressed formally in OE, though by different means than in PDE. Consequently, in order to uncover the roots of the PDE system, a comprehensive analysis of countability in OE will be necessary as part of future research on the development of countability in English.

4 TYPOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Whatever was the exact status of countability in OE, it is clear that its formal expression has changed considerably as compared to PDE. The most glaring difference lies perhaps in the use of articles — these have been shown by Grimm and Wahlang (2021: 19) to be the strongest indicators of countability in PDE, yet the article system had not

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4   In fact, such quantifications are not rare, e.g. *fiftig punda goldes* 'fifty pounds of gold'. Toyota (2009: 120) also dismisses a number of OE words as not true classifiers, but as "countable nouns referring to small parts". One of those is *dæl* 'deal, part, portion', but what are examples such as the following one if not classifiers used in the quantification of uncountables: *Nim ecedes anne dæl, huniges twegen dælas wel geclæsnodes, wæteres feorðan seoð þonne oð þæt þriddan dæl þære wætan.* 'Take one portion of vinegar, two portions of honey well cleansed, fourth part of water, then boil down to the third part of the fluid'? All the OE examples come from *The Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (2009).

yet developed by the OE period. If at the same time it can be shown that case marking was an important formal signal of countability in OE, the difference between the two periods can be at least partly ascribed to the overall typological change: from a relatively synthetic OE to the largely analytical PDE. The grammaticalization of the numeral *ān* 'one' would have thus given rise not only to the article participating in the emerging category of definiteness, but also to one of the most important formal signals of the category of countability in PDE. By its early numeral status and thus association with countable concepts, it has become established specifically as a marker of countability in singular nouns — or the other way around, its absence has become interpreted as a signal of the uncountable class of nouns. This must have already happened by the ME period, since, as we will see below, the distinction was already present in early glossaries and dictionaries at the end of the period.

In fact, such a development would have very close parallels elsewhere. Stark (2005: 458–459) describes the development of countability in Italian (and other Romance languages) from Latin. Referring to Gil (1987), she distinguishes three types of languages: I. languages like Japanese that need classifiers to quantify any type of noun (referred to above by Toyota 2009, after Lyons 1977, as classifier languages) and that have no obligatory explicit marking of countability; II. languages like Latin, Czech and perhaps OE that also have no obligatory marking of countability but allow classification by countability through a complex inflectional system; and III. languages like modern Romance languages, German[5] or PDE that have (a degree of) obligatory countability marking. She then shows a clear path of development from Latin (type II) to Italian (type III) via the grammaticalization of Latin *unus*. Not only is this an analogous path of development, but some degree of influence from this evolution in Romance languages on English (as already noted in Toyota above), based on the language contact situation in ME, cannot be dismissed at this point.

The extension of originally two types of languages (with and without classifiers) to three types suggests that, contrastively, the distinction is far from clear-cut. Bale and Gillon (2020: 33), in fact, conclude their comparison of number systems, classifiers and countability in languages like Western Armenian, Ch'ol and Mi'gmaq by noting that with respect to classifiers and countability, "languages do not cleanly divide", but rather that "there is a continuum". And perhaps even more importantly here, they also conclude that contrary to the general belief going back at least to Lyons, countability is, "in principle, not connected to classifier systems" (Bale and Gillon 2020: 31). This does not mean that languages without obligatory classification are not more likely to feature stronger formal marking of countability,[6] but that there are

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5   But note that while both PDE and German are similar in their use of indefinite articles to mark countability, German retains an inflectional system similar to OE. A comparison between the functions of the OE synthetic typological structure in marking countability and the German system may, therefore, also shed more light on the development of the category in English.

6   To study the prevalence in combinations of the two features and to find further examples, it is possible to combine features 38A and 55A using *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online* (Dryer, 2013; Gil, 2013).

notable exceptions to this 'rule'. Similarly, it seems it is impossible to simply class languages without the grammaticalized indefinite articles as those not expressing countability — in addition to the type II languages mentioned above like Czech, we may note that in Finnish, the distinction between un/countables (or non/divisibles) appears to be a key aspect in nominal morphology (Karlsson 2018), yet none of those languages feature an indefinite article.

Yet, if indefinite articles are obligatorily expressed under certain relatively frequent grammatical conditions in PDE, it transpires that their absence — signaling uncountability — will also be frequent and uncountables will, therefore, be relatively conspicuous in PDE. This is in marked contrast to OE, Latin and some other modern languages which, like Czech, express countability in much rarer circumstances and environments. What it means from a practical point of view is that, unlike in those languages, in PDE countability is a key category in language production (speaking or writing).

In the end, the status of countability (and maybe other categories like gender, animacy etc.) as a grammatical category in a given language should not be seen as necessarily binary, but rather again as a continuum. The factors for recognizing a feature as a category may stem from the structural considerations raised above, the frequency of its formal expression, but also from the detail and nature of the meta-linguistic description. While countability is not a problematic issue for native speakers of English,[7] it certainly is one for learners of English as a foreign/second language[8] and this makes it naturally more conspicuous to non-native speakers of English. Consequently, the status of PDE as a global language only highlights the importance of the category, and it is perhaps also why it was the non-native grammarians in the 19th and 20th centuries who were first to describe the category in any detail.

5 DEVELOPMENT OF THE CATEGORY OF COUNTABILITY IN LANGUAGE DESCRIPTION

5.1 METHODOLOGY

In general, there are two basic kinds of linguistic description that explicitly or implicitly make note of countability: grammatical treatises and dictionaries. My methodology for the following historical survey was to select and analyze 50 dictionaries and grammars spanning seven centuries — from the fourteenth to the twentieth.[9]

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7   Gordon (1985) has shown e.g. that young children do not tend to misclassify even semantically atomic words like *furniture* as countable. Native speakers of PDE therefore do not require formal training in distinguishing countability apart from using forms like *less* that are currently in variation and flux as countability markers (see Section 6 below).

8   E.g. Antes (2019: 1) notes that both research and pedagogical materials "frequently highlight countability as a locus of difficulty for English language learners, particularly learners whose languages do not overtly mark a count-mass distinction".

9   Note that both grammars and dictionaries have undergone major developments since the ME period and have existed in various forms, at times coexisting in a single text — gram-

The selection was partly based on chronological representativeness so that most periods are relatively evenly covered and a sense of progression and development of topic can be gained, even though an exhaustive survey is not possible. The selection was also partly based on representative coverage of the types and backgrounds of both the works and their authors, so that there are works authored by and aimed at native as well as non-native speakers, and works both more applied and more theoretical. Finally, I took into account the impact the selected works probably had — including the more famous and ignoring the peripheral ones unless mentioned in the secondary literature as somehow notable for the development of their fields. Among the most helpful comprehensive lists, descriptions and modern editions of historical dictionaries from which I have drawn were the following: Cowie 2009, 2011; Hüllen 2006; Starnes and Noyes 1991; Stein 1989, 2014; Wright 1857; Wright and Wülcker 1884, and for grammars: Alston 1965; Görlach and Michael 1998; Gwosdek 1993; Howatt 1984; Linn 2020; Michael 1987 2010; Thomson 2019.

The analysis consisted of identifying and reading those passages of the selected texts that might have something to do with the description of countability. These were especially passages dealing with article usage (and in the case of dictionaries with headword labeling), the formation of plurals, the use of pronouns/determiners such as *much*, *many* or *each*, and generally sections covering nominal classifications. I have also searched the works for keywords historically connected with the topic and for words that have been commonly used in its exemplification. Thanks to the recent digitization efforts by projects like the *Early English Books Online*, *Google Books* or the *Internet Archive*, it was possible to examine all the texts selected — something Görlach and Michael (1998) noted as a major obstacle in the 1990s. But due to technical reasons, not all of the texts are (reliably) searchable and since especially the early works are somewhat unsystematic and inconsistent in their structure, it is quite possible that not all relevant comments are covered here.

5.2 DICTIONARIES BEFORE 1700

Considering what has been said above about the status of the category in OE, and given that the meta-linguistic description stems mostly from contrastive descriptions of Latin, it is not surprising that we have to wait until ME for any inkling of countability in language description — primary OE sources are thus not considered here.

Medieval English dictionaries, if we use this as a general term, usually took the form of glosses and glossaries, vocabularies (organized by topic) or simple word/phrase lists and were always bi- or multi-lingual. In the OE period, the other language in the pair was Latin, since that was the language of instruction, and teaching Latin or translating from Latin was the purpose of such texts. As Thomson points out:

> "After the Norman Conquest, English fell out of use as the language of elementary instruction in Latin grammar, and no grammatical texts in Middle English

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mars often accompanied by wordlists and phrasebooks, dictionaries sometimes prefaced by short grammatical introductions.

survive from before the closing years of the fourteenth century." (2019, Chapter Introduction)

Unlike grammars, a number of lexicographic texts appeared before the end of the fourteenth century. For our purposes, the earliest text worth noting is the thirteenth century Anglo-Norman[10] *The Treatise of Walter de Biblesworth*[11] (Wright 1857: 142–174), because its ME glosses[12] often feature articles in front of nouns, e.g. *une ventrere* is glossed as *a midewif*. This had not been the practice before and it begs the question as to whether the presence of Old French articles may have prompted their inclusion in the English gloss as well, especially since they were not present even in some later glosses of Latin texts. It is also worth noting that the *Treatise* is a didactic text. Although its purpose is to teach French rather than English, Romance languages, as noted above, have developed a similar system of marking countability with determiners.

The parallelism of the articles is even more conspicuous in the first French-English word-list *Nominale Sive Verbale* (Skeat 1906), probably from the early fourteenth century, which mirrors complete noun phrases such as *Vn herde de cerfs* by *A herde of hertes* 'a herd of harts'. The earliest vocabularies translating Latin that did include articles (thus not mirroring articles of source language, though in some later dictionaries, Latin headwords were introduced with *hic*) come from the fourteenth century — such as the *Metrical Vocabulary* and *Names of the Parts of the Human Body*, glossing e.g. *Anus* as *a narce* (Wright 1857: 174–205). The use of articles is, however, extremely inconsistent, and there seems to be no system by which the ME nouns receive definite, indefinite or zero articles.

Perhaps the first systematic, even if largely incidental treatment of countability in linguistic texts comes with an innovation that Stein notes in the fifteenth century dictionaries:

> "English nouns are given with the indefinite article, but we also encounter instances with the definite article or no determiner at all. The difference seems to be related to the distinction between countable nouns, uncountable nouns, and nouns of unique reference." (2014: 54)

An example of a clear-cut un/countable distinction may come from the fifteenth century's *A Latin and English Vocabulary*: "*Baco, ance* bacon. *Bacallarius, ance* a bachyler. *Baffa, ance* a flycche of bacon." (Wright and Wülcker 1884: 567), but there is still plenty of irregularity in the choice of articles, such as "*Cranium, ance* the braynpanne" where it is unclear why *braynpanne* should have unique reference.

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10 A dialect of Old French influenced by ME and spoken by the Norman conquerors of England, their descendants and followers for a couple of centuries after the Norman Conquest.

11 More commonly today spelled as *Bibbesworth*.

12 It is, however, not quite clear from Wright's comments whether these glosses are as old as the *Treatise* itself, since they come from a different manuscript.

In Latin–English dictionaries, the article (as well as another innovation, the in-finitival *to*) may have also been prompted by typographical needs — to clearly de-lineate the two parts of an entry,[13] but with the first English–Latin dictionaries, the only plausible function remains in distinguishing the word-class and classifying the nouns. With the first such dictionary, the *Catholicon Anglicum* (Herrtage 1475/1881), Stein notes a similar system mentioned above and adds: "There are of course incon-sistencies, but the lexicographical principle as such cannot be overlooked." (2014: 112) Clear intention can be seen e.g. in two homonymous forms, with the first count-able and the second uncountable, following each other: *a weddyr* 'a castrated ram' and *weddyr* 'weather, air', but some entries are difficult to explain, e.g. *a water*, and it is possible that, if carefully studied and collated, such inconsistencies common in the fifteenth century dictionaries could shed more light on the class membership of some Late ME un/countables. But it seems equally probable that these might be just typographical errors.

All sixteenth century dictionaries surveyed here continued the tradition of using articles described for the fifteenth century above, even though they are quite differ-ent in form, coverage and target audience. *Septem linguarum* (van Middelborch 1535) is a multilingual dictionary and, interestingly, although six of its seven languages have grammatical articles, the dictionary provides them systematically only for Eng-lish and very selectively for Italian. Of the two dictionaries aimed at young audiences, *The Dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot knyght* (Elyot 1538) and *A short dictionarie for yonge beginners* (Withals 1553), the latter is more noteworthy in covering also a large number of multi-word headwords that are interesting from our point of view, such as *Water* or *Rayne water* vs. *A drop of water*, clearly marking the individuated uncountable *wa-ter*. Finally, the *Aluearie or triple dictionarie, in Englishe, Latin, and French* (Baret 1574) extends the information preceding the headword even more by adding paragraph marks and numbering for the headwords, and asterisks for parts of entries. Parts of speech are more thoroughly distinguished by also introducing elements like inter-jections for exhortation (e.g. *oh Deintie gentilman* 'oh dainty gentleman!') besides the articles and particles marking nouns and verbs.

The seventeenth century sees the advent of English monolingual dictionaries and with them the structure of the headwords changes. All the surveyed dictionaries, *A table Alphabeticall* (Cawdrey 1604), *An English expositor* (John Bullokar 1616), *Glos-sographia* (Blount 1656), and *The new world of English words* (Phillips 1658) have no in-dication of countability; in fact, apart from Phillips' inclusion of the verbal particle *to*, they contain no indication of the word-class either. This can be explained in Caw-drey's dictionary as perhaps economizing, since his is essentially just a short wordlist compared to the bilingual dictionaries mentioned above, but the other three diction-aries are progressively ambitious, and the omission of articles may therefore be bet-ter understood as resulting from his choice of aims and target audience. These early monolingual dictionaries are very much targeted at native speakers to help them in their native language, with e.g. the so-called 'hard words' or spelling, but certainly

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13   Though this has been largely achieved by yet another innovation noted by Stein, the ab-breviation *ance* for *Anglice*.

not countability. However, as we will see below, the difference in the treatment of the headwords can be also partly attributed to the two lexicographic traditions (bilingual and multilingual), especially since it was common at the time to largely recycle the preceding works both in content and in form.

5.3 GRAMMARS BEFORE 1700

I have noted above that no grammatical texts survived from the ME period before the close of the fourteenth century, but the fifteenth century brought a number of texts on grammar. Gwosdek notes that:

> "The replacement of French by English as the medium of instruction in Latin, which started about the middle of the fourteenth century, was of great importance in elementary teaching. [...] But it is only from the beginning of the fifteenth century that grammatical manuscripts in English survive." (1993: 133)

These early texts, spurred perhaps by the expansion of the teaching of Latin, all largely follow a similar structure and their content is also quite analogous — Thomson (2019) provides an excellent overview and edition of these texts. In a fragment ascribed to Thomas Wriothesley (from the turn of the sixteenth century, but with an exemplar dated to the mid-fifteenth century) we find what might be the first grammatical text in English to mention articles. When explaining how to identify Latin nouns, the author says: "Howe knowe ye a nowne substantyue? [...] In Englych [...] comynly one of thes tokens go before hym as 'a man/chyld/boke, an halle/halter/hors, the sone/mone/see'".[14] While there is no explicit mention of countability, the inclusion of 'sea' in the series with a definite and not indefinite article may be significant.

However, it is not until well into the sixteenth century that English grammars start addressing countability or rather its effects explicitly. I will first discuss the grammars aimed at native speakers. With the exception of the grammars targeted at the non-native émigrés, the grammars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries follow closely the structure of their Latin exemplars, and are, apart from William Bullokar, written mostly in Latin.

It is quite natural, then, that the first note on countability marking appears in the section on nominal declension and plural forms. When discussing the plural in nouns, William Bullokar[15] notes in his *Pamphlet for grammar* that "some-few have one voice and figure in both numbers, e.g. *a sheep*, and *two sheep* [...] are used in both numbers and most collectives and massatives"[16] (1586: 11). Although he does not further explain the term, he seems to have coined the term mass(atives) for uncountable nouns. And while his grammar is intended for native speakers, he closes the

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14 'How do you recognize a substantive? [...] In English [] one of these tokens commonly precedes it as in "a man/child/book, an hall, halter, horse, the son/moon/sea".'

15 William Bullokar, the famous spelling reformer, should not be confused with the John Bullokar of *An English expositor* mentioned above.

16 I have regularized here Bullokar's idiosyncratic reformed spelling and abbreviations.

paragraph on countability by mentioning strangers and presciently recognizing this issue as a useful shibboleth:

> "The doubtful stranger may follow general rule, whose meaning we understand, as well as we know him a stranger thereby, in changed declinatives." (1586: 11)

Or in other words, non-native speakers do not observe these exceptions in forming the plural and while we can still understand them, we will also easily recognize them in this manner.

Greaves, in contrast, is one of the grammarians fond of establishing seemingly as many classes of nouns as possible. In his *Grammatica Anglicana* (1594: 7–9), he notes that no plural is taken by no less than thirteen different classes of nouns established specifically for this purpose. Interestingly, he starts with nouns formed by the suffixes *-nesse* as in *godlinesse*, *-litie*[17] as in *agilitie* and *-dise*[18] as in *cowardise*, which cover many abstract terms, and continues with semantic classes of names for arts, liquids, minerals, herbs etc. In addition to these classes, he lists additional nine paragraphs of other irregular nouns. The *Logonomia Anglica* (Gill 1619: 37 and 72) also deals with uncountable nouns by listing their semantic classes as *anomalia numeri*, but surprisingly returns to the problem in the syntactic passages, noticing irregular placement of articles. Specifically, Gill says that some nouns "neglect" (*negligunt*) the indefinite article, e.g. *virtue alone makes men*, and some words do not "accept the article" (*non accipiunt*), e.g. metals and herbs, but he adds that in *a bread that nutrisheth wel* the word *bread* is used for a type of bread (*genus panis*). He recognizes here that a) uncountable nouns with generic reference take no article and b) uncountable nouns in specific senses become, or behave as, countable.

Grammatica linguæ Anglicanæ devotes a whole chapter to the use of articles and, like Gill, Wallis notices that while *earth* is normally without any article, it has a definite article *the earth* (1653: 95) when used in the sense of 'a planet'. Finally, thirty two years later, in a grammar of the same name, Cooper both formulates the semantic characteristics of the uncountables, calling them "homogeneous things, which cannot be divided into distinct and different parts" (*res homogeneas, quae dividi non possunt in distinctas partes et differentes*), as well as describing the reason for their sometimes countable behavior — "to indicate individuation" (*individuationem indicabit*), giving the example of *water* vs. *a great water overflowed Rotterdam* (1685: 117–118).

Cooper's *Grammatica* can thus be seen as a culmination of the seventeenth century descriptions of countability. As Howatt points out, Cooper is one of the grammarians who "had a professional interest in teaching English to foreigners" (1984: 30) and notes that such authors as well as foreign ones were more perceptive than the native grammarians to certain grammatical features like the progressive. Given the role of translation dictionaries described above, it may therefore be worthwhile to consider now the grammars of English by non-native authors writing for non-native audiences.

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17   *–ity*.

18   *–ice*.

The earliest of such grammars are products of the two waves of the Huguenot immigration, and are therefore written for French speakers newly exiled in England. There is no hint of countability in the grammars of the first wave like Bellot's *Schoolmaster* (1580), and it is understandable that these grammars are mostly phrase-books largely to be used at school. In one of the grammars of the second wave which already profits from contemporary monolingual grammars of English, Miége notes that similar to French, some types of nouns do not take the plural in English (1685: 78) and in the part on nominal constructions he lists a number of examples that do take the definite article in French, but not in English (1685: 86). Mauger and Festeau not only make a very similar observation about types of nouns (1693: 26), but also, when discussing the use of articles, observe that "[n]evertheless, if we specifie some certain thing, in things that can be divided without destroying the other part, then we use the Article Definite as for Example, Give me a little of that wine." (1693: 120) In practice, they suggest that their readers use demonstratives in English for French partitives, but also implicitly exemplify a countable use of an uncountable noun.

Six years before Mauger and Festeau, the first English-German grammar was published by Offelen, but the German angle did not bring much new apart from some semantic types of uncountables undetected in the previous grammars, such as words for age (e.g. *infancy* or *childhood*, [1687: 95]). Although nominally belonging to the following century, Sewel's Dutch *Compendious Guide to the English Language* (1705) belongs very much to the same tradition.

Surprisingly then, it seems that before the eighteenth century, foreign grammarians contributed little that would not have been noticed by native authors.

5.4 EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

During the following two centuries, dictionaries standardized their treatment of countability. Kersey's *New English Dictionary* (1702) is the only monolingual dictionary to use articles in its headwords and also the last one to do so. This might have been due to his strong inspiration in previous bilingual dictionaries, as shown by Cowie (2009: 149). A little over thirty years later, *A New General English Dictionary* (Dyche and Pardon 1735) is the first dictionary to introduce abbreviations after the headword to mark its word-class, and it also introduces a short grammatical treatise into its front-matter that provides a short list of uncountables. Johnson's otherwise revolutionary *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) also mentions words that do not take an indefinite article in the singular in his grammatical introduction, but apart from mentioning (proper and) abstract names, he only adds (to me) a rather cryptic category of "[w]ords in which nothing but the mere being of any thing is implied: 'This is not *beer*, but *water*;' 'This is not *brass*, but *steel*'." *The Royal English Dictionary* (Fenning 1761) and *The New Royal English Dictionary* (Marriott 1780) follow this tradition and only slightly expand their passage on uncountables, following the progress in the grammars of the time. In fact, this tradition had continued throughout the nineteenth century. In his *An American Dictionary of the English Language,* Webster expands the grammatical description both of nouns without the indefinite article and especially of nouns admitting no plural. In a typical fashion, he conflates and digests much of the contemporary grammatical theory (often his own earlier grammatical

treatises) but not necessarily in a helpful way, e.g. when he treats uncountables like *wheat* together with zero plural words like *sheep.* Again, in a manner characteristic of his time, he explains the plural usage of some uncountables by the progress of his century:

> "Thus in early ages our ancestors took no notice of different varieties of wheat, and the term had no plural. But modern improvements in agriculture have recognized varieties of this grain, which have given the name a plural form. The same remark is applicable to fern, clay, marl, sugar, cotton, andc. which have plurals, formerly unknown. Other words may hereafter undergo a similar change." (1828, sec. Grammar)

With the exception of learner's dictionaries, even most modern dictionaries deal with countability only in their front matter. Therefore, since the turn of the eighteenth century (and before the introduction of learner's dictionaries in the twentieth century, see below), it has actually become more difficult to identify countability status in dictionaries.

In contrast to dictionaries, eighteenth and nineteenth century grammars saw great expansion in the description of countability. Brightland's *A Grammar of the English Tongue* (1711) expanded the description by clearly noting not only the generic meanings leading to uncountable use of otherwise countable nouns, but also the individuation achieved by the indefinite article in otherwise uncountable nouns. Brightland (1711: 79) also added a philosophical and contrastive reflection by saying that the impossibility to form the plural may be by custom, but more probably due to the physical properties of e.g. metals, and that this seems more probable because all languages work like this (giving examples from French and Latin).

The Royal English-Danish Grammar (Bertram 1753) and the Russian *Angliska Grammatika* (Zhdanov 1772) are the only two foreign grammars I include in this section. Although Bertram did not expand the theoretical framework of countability, he included a rather exhaustive list of types and examples of uncountables, at least symbolically paving the way for Jespersen in the twentieth century. Zhdanov, the only grammarian in this historical survey who might have been especially perceptive of countability due to his background in Russian (a Type II language, see above), surprisingly did not tackle the problem of countability at all.

Similarly, the two most famous English grammars of the period, Priestley's (1761) and Lowth's (1762), do not add anything beyond Brightland either. Priestley does not even mention the problem; and, probably due to the popularity of his grammar rather than originality, Lowth's rephrasing of the generic and individuated use of un/countables has come to be used by many other grammarians and lexicographers after him. A small but notable addition to the discussion of countability is then made in Fell's *An Essay Towards an English Grammar*, in which he notes that "plurality belongs to individuals, and not to the kind: thus, many *guineas*, but not many *golds*" (1784: 3) perhaps for the first time noticing that *many* does not combine with uncountables.

Grammars of roughly the first half of the nineteenth century (Brown 1825; Mason 1858; Murray 1795; Sutcliffe 1815) seem to have established a common treatment of the

topic: first quoting more or less verbatim Lowth's assertion on article usage (above) and then listing types and examples of nouns that do not form the plural. Two terms start to appear in this treatment: material nouns and abstract nouns, as the two major semantic classes of uncountables, replacing the wide variety of classes applied by the previous grammarians.

The next innovation in the description comes with Bain's *An English Grammar* (1863). Bain started his preface by saying that "[the] present work has been composed with more particular reference to the class of English Composition (attached to the Chair of Logic) in the University of Aberdeen" (1863: v), which may be the reason why he paid more attention than his predecessors to a topic spanning grammar, semantic classification and precision in language production, but also how he approached it. He started by re-introducing the usual classes of material and abstract words, but he analyzed what makes them semantically special, noted in which aspects they were similar, and also described explicitly that different senses of words, especially abstract vs. concrete, behaved differently in terms of pluralization (1863: 13–14). He treats this topic again under the adjectives of quantity and notices that words such as *much* or *little* refer to the quantity of mass, which "is also called continuous quantity, and is opposed to broken, numbered, or discrete quantity" (1863: 30). Mätzner, whose *An English Grammar: Methodical, Analytical, and Historical* (1874) was translated from German, continued in Bain's tradition, but through a meticulous analysis added a large number of examples from literary works. Beyond that, he also noticed an important general principle:

> "In connection with the plurals above discussed stands the apparent transmutation of the meaning of the substantive in the plural. But a difference arises through a notion's being taken either in a metaphorical, restricted or amplified meaning in the plural, or because subjects express in the plural a single compound thing." (1874: 235)

And then he proceeded with an exhaustive analysis of regular changes in meaning between the singular and the plural that play an important role in the discussion of countability.

Two final grammars of the nineteenth century did not add much to the theory but helped organize the matter for the grammars that were to appear in the following one. Reed and Kellogg's *Higher Lessons in English* (1878) is a very pragmatic affair and future student grammars were to benefit from their systematization and streamlining of the exposition. Sweet's *A New English Grammar, Logical and Historical* (1892) besides noticing the distribution of pronouns such as *each* and *all* (1892: 86) introduced a hierarchical diagram of noun classification (1892: 54) that would be modified by Jespersen, and then used in many current comprehensive English grammars.

5.5 TWENTIETH CENTURY

It is only in the twentieth century that the category of countability was labeled and defined as we understand it today. It is primarily thanks to Jespersen's work both in his *The philosophy of grammar* (1924) and especially in the two volumes of his monumental seven volume *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (Jespersen

1914/1948; Jespersen and Haislund 1949) followed by an integrated structuralist account by Bloomfield (1933). It is beyond the scope of this paper to summarize Jespersen's and Bloomfield's contribution in the manner carried out for the earlier works above — the focus here is on the descriptions predating the modern definition (as outlined in Section 2). However, it should be noted that it is Jespersen's work on the subject that inspired the seminal lexicographical authors — Harold Palmer and, perhaps even more importantly, his student A. S. Hornby.

It may be worthwhile to quote from Palmer's introduction to his *A Grammar of English Words* on this subject:

> "In addition to the grammar- and word-categories that are usually provided in books of reference and language textbooks, a few novel and much-needed categories have been marked in the present volume. Among these are: 1. 'Countables' and 'Uncountables'. One of the greatest difficulties encountered by foreign students of English is to know when a noun refers to a thing that can be counted (e.g. *a book, a house, a moment, an advantage*, etc.), or to something that cannot be counted (e.g. *water, snow, weather, bread, wisdom, dryness*, etc.). For it is not enough (nor is it true) to say that the names of material things are used without *a* or *an*, and that they are not used in the plural. There are many cases in which the noun stands for things countable or uncountable often according to the sense in which it is used, but often quite arbitrarily. Thus, for instance, the word *wood* refers to something uncountable in *made of wood*, but something countable in *a hard (sort of) wood*, and in the *fields and woods*. The problem may be stated in a long series of rules and exceptions, but in this book cases are marked specifically Countable or Uncountable, often with explanations, and generally with examples." (1938: vi–vii)

Though it has been successfully argued before and after Palmer that the changes in the sense based on countability are mostly not arbitrary (as it is not the case in his own example), he is quite right in presuming that exhaustive treatises like Jespersen's, or long lists of words by semantic classes like those by the eighteenth and nineteenth century grammarians, are of little use to usual non-native learners of English. He, in a sense, returns to the practice of the pre-eighteenth century bilingual lexicographers and makes it a lexicographic rather than a theoretical issue for the users — with a major update. His labeling is consistent, reliable, and it is connected not to headwords or lexical units, but to individual senses or groups of senses. It only remains to be noted in this summary that his approach has been adopted and fully developed by his former pupil A. S. Hornby for his *Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* (Hornby et al. 1948), which later became the de facto standard for learner's dictionaries, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (2020).

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The main purpose of this paper was to explore the grounds for follow-up corpus-based research into the origins and development of the category of countability in

English. I tried to identify the problems and periods of special interest on which such research should focus (see below). Finally, the aim was to trace in time the relationship between the meta-linguistic description of the category and its rise to its prominent status in current linguistic literature.

It has been already successfully shown that the prominence of the category in linguistic texts depends heavily on the purpose and audience of the descriptive material. Specifically in the case of English, the category emerges quite early as a result of bilingual wordlists and glossaries arising partly, perhaps, from the demands of the contemporary audiences, as well as from the contrast between languages with more and less overt signaling of countability, such as English, French or Latin. The later theoretical expansion of the description was often spurred again by the specific needs of the target audience of the linguistic material, such as during the expansion of the English elementary education (esp. in the grammars of the 18th and 19th centuries), with the expansion of written composition at English universities (cf. the discussion of Bain 1863 above) and primarily from the time of the expansion of English as a global language in the twentieth century (already in the works of late 19th and early 20th century non-native grammarians like Mätzner 1874 and Jespersen 1924, 1914/1948, 1949, but especially in the modern dictionaries like the *OALD*, cf. Hornby et al. 2020).

It is clear both from the introductory sections and from the historical summary that further research will be necessary to trace the emergence of the category in any meaningful way. Particularly, it will be essential to:

a) establish the status of countability in OE. This will entail the analysis of the OE number and classifier system and the analysis of structures with the potential for formal expressions of countability like the genitive of quantity, number and partition. The contrastive approach using the structures known to express countability in type II languages (above) may also yield interesting insights.

b) review the formation of the system of definiteness and the formation of the article system in Early and Late ME. A corpus study focusing on the use of subsequent prototypical un/countables and the distribution of articles and quantifiers such as *much* and *many* may determine a timeline for establishing the basis of the present-day system.

c) compare the data from the grammars and dictionaries with the corpus data for ME and EModE to discover trends in the membership of the un/countables, as well as any systemic changes to the category.

d) conduct a corpus survey of current English focusing on its varieties in view of the recent variation of words like *fewer* and *less*.[19]

The precise methodology will need to be determined in each of these follow-up studies based on the initial probes, but since a lot of the early material does not yield

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19 Note the conspicuous usage note in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD)*: "People often use **less** with countable nouns *There were less cars on the road then*. This is not considered correct in standard English, and **fewer** should be used instead." (Hornby et al., 2020, sec. less).

easily to quantitative research due to the overwhelming variation, especially in ME spelling and the non-lemmatized corpora of OE, ME and largely EModE, fully corpus-driven methodologies such as in Grimm and Wahlang (2021) may not be available for pre-LModE periods. The analysis of the earlier periods will thus have to be selective and to a larger degree qualitative.

This paper has provided the necessary starting point in delineating the main paths of development and in amassing a wealth of material (such as the essential markers of variation noticed by linguists over the centuries or variation in the category at different times) that will hopefully prove valuable for future corpus-based research into this topic.

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