

# Coercion and the Mass/Count Distinction

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**Abstract:** It is usual to distinguish common nouns into mass and count nouns. The usual account of the distinction has serious difficulties in dealing with the mass/count flexibility: many common nouns have both mass and count noun uses. So it is commonly argued that the mass/count distinction cannot be drawn at all for nouns *per se* because all common nouns can be coerced to be used as both mass and count nouns. This paper argues against this common objection, and presents a refinement of the usual account that can explain the flexibility and coercibility.

**Key Words:** mass/count distinction, syntactic criteria, universal grinder, coercion, type shifting

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It is usual to distinguish common nouns of English and other similar languages into mass and count nouns. For example, ‘cow’ and ‘book’ are count nouns while ‘milk’ and ‘water’ are mass nouns. But many people argue that one cannot draw such a distinction because all common nouns have *mass/count flexibility*: they can be used as both mass and count nouns. Gleason, for example, holds that “the count-mass distinction is not one that divides the nouns of English into two separate subclasses” because “every noun, given the right context, can occur in either type of usage, count or mass” (1965, 137). Similarly, Parsons holds, “Strictly speaking, it is occurrences of words, or something of the sort, which counts as mass nouns, for the same *word* can occur both as a mass noun and a count noun” (1970, 137; original italics).<sup>1</sup> It is certainly an interesting phenomenon in human language that many common nouns have both mass and count noun uses. But it is wrong to take this to mean that the mass/count distinction cannot be drawn for words (or lexemes) *per se*. Not all common nouns can be used as both mass and count nouns; and among those with both uses, some are used primarily as count nouns and some primarily as mass nouns. This, I argue, provides a sufficient basis for distinguishing nouns themselves into mass and count.

## **1. Coercion and its limits**

The mass/count distinction stems from Jespersen’s work on English and related European languages. He (1924, 198-201 & 240) distinguishes count nouns from mass nouns, and suggests some syntactic criteria for mass and count nouns:

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<sup>1</sup>See also Pelletier (1975, 5ff), Bunt (1985, 9-15), Pelletier & Schubert (2003), and Borer (2005, Ch. 4).

- (a) Count nouns (unlike mass nouns) take singular and plural forms.
- (b) Count nouns (unlike mass nouns) can combine directly with numerals.
- (c) Count nouns can combine directly with ‘many’ and ‘few’, mass nouns with ‘much’, ‘little’, ‘less’.

These criteria form the basis for the standard account of the mass/count distinction. Jespersen observes that the account faces “some difficult problems, because many words have several senses” (*ibid.*, 199). Gleason, Parsons, and many others hold that the problems are insuperable. They argue for the *mass/count flexibility thesis*:

- (I) Any common noun has both mass and count noun uses (or senses).

And they conclude:

- (II) One cannot draw a mass/count distinction for words (or lexemes) *per se*.

To defend the flexibility thesis, Parsons gives ‘chicken’ as an example. The noun, he says, “is [used as] a mass noun in ‘I had some chicken for dinner’ . . . [as] a count noun in ‘Some chickens got into the garden’. . . and is ambiguous between its count noun sense . . . and its mass noun sense” in ‘I looked, but I saw no chicken’ (*ibid.*, 137). Similarly, ‘apple’ can be used as count, as mass, or equivocally:

- (1) a. Jane has a lot of apples. (count)

- b. This salad has a lot of apple. (mass)
- c. Jane got no apple. (equivocal)

But not all common nouns are as flexible. While ‘chicken’ is used for the meat of the hen as well as for hens,<sup>2</sup> ‘hen’ is not used for the meat. Similarly, one cannot use ‘cow’ or ‘pig’ for the meat of the cow or the pig. One must instead use ‘beef’ or ‘pork’.

Gleason gives a speaking termite story to argue that even nouns that are not usually used as mass nouns might be so used in special situations:

With the present vogue of speaking-animal stories, we can imagine one featuring a mother termite concerned over her child: *Johnny is very choosy about his food. He will eat book, but he won't touch shelf.* (1965, 136; my underline)

The imagined situation, where ‘book’ and ‘shelf’ are used as mass, is admittedly “farfetched” and “sufficiently unusual” (*ibid.*, 136f). But some might hold that one cannot even imagine such a situation unless the nouns already (if latently) have mass senses, senses that support mass noun uses.

Pelletier does so to argue that “every noun must have (perhaps hidden) both a count and a mass sense” (1975, 6). He says, “a mass or count sense of a word *exists* if one can describe a circumstance or set of circumstances in which that word with the requisite sense can (or would) be

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<sup>2</sup>In this respect, ‘chicken’ is an exception in English. In its entry on ‘meat’, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* says, “There is often a special word for the flesh of a creature considered as food, which is different from the name of that creature when it is alive. **Chicken** is the only one of these words that is also used of the creature when it is alive . . . [except for] **Lamb** [which ] is the word both for a young sheep and for its meat” (Procter et al. 1978, 674).

normally employed” (*ibid.*, 5; my italics). And he extends Gleason’s strategy to argue that “all words that one is tempted to call count nouns” have a mass sense (*ibid.*, 5).

To do so, he presents a “thought experiment” that envisages “the ‘universal’ grinder”,<sup>3</sup> a machine that can chop and grind up anything whatsoever, large or small, soft or hard, into “a homogeneous mass” and “spew it on the floor” (*ibid.*, 5f). He invites the reader to feed “an object corresponding to any (apparent) count noun he wishes”, wait for the grinder to run through, and then answer the question ‘What is on the floor?’ In the case of ‘man’, for example, he holds that a normal answer is

(2) There is man all over the floor

where ‘man’ is used as mass (*ibid.*, 6). In general, he holds that at least “*one* of the possible normal answers to the question” is the one that invokes “the mass sense of our ‘normal’ count noun” (*ibid.*, 6; original italics). And he concludes that “this test can be employed at will, always giving us a mass sense of count nouns having physical objects as their extension” (*ibid.*, 6).

The Gleason-Pelletier argument, I think, has serious problems. First, it is one thing to say that a noun might be used with a mass sense in special situations, quite another to say that the noun itself is already equipped with the mass sense. Second, some count nouns (e.g., ‘oil drop’) cannot be used at all for the mass that the “universal grinder” makes out of the things they denote.

To see the first point, it is useful to compare the mass/count distinction with the noun/verb

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<sup>3</sup>Pelletier says that this term was suggested for his idea by David Lewis (*ibid.*, p. 13, no. 7). While Pelletier uses the term for a *physical machine* that turns denotations of a count noun into a mass, others often use it for a *semantic mechanism* that turns count senses to mass senses.

distinction. A butcher's might use 'meat' as a verb to mean *to provide meat for*, as in "Always pleased to *meat* you, and our *meat* will always please you!";<sup>4</sup> and one can imagine a gruesome situation where the word is used as a verb to mean *to make meat out of*. But this does not mean that the word has had these senses all along (albeit as ones deeply hidden). Similarly, a count noun (e.g., 'book' or 'man') need not be equipped with a mass sense for one to use it as a mass noun in special situations. Language allows one to extend the usage of some expressions to use them in *deviant* senses to cope with special situations. And such deviant uses do not usually change the semantic or syntactic characters of the expressions. The noun 'meat' does not cease to be a noun to become a noun/verb polysemous word, one like 'love', just because a butcher's sometimes uses it as a verb. Nor does Gleason's termite story add a mass sense to 'book' to make it akin to 'chicken' or 'apple'.

And the "grinder treatment" (*ibid.*, 6), which forces or, as they say, "coerces" count nouns to take a mass sense, has serious limitations. To see this, consider, e.g., the following:

- (a) 'hole', 'valley', 'river', 'mountain'<sup>5</sup>
- (b) 'pole', 'dome'
- (c) 'boulder', 'pebble'
- (d) 'water drop', 'raindrop', 'oil drop', 'ice cube', 'bronze statue'

Can one feed holes or valleys into the "universal grinder"? If so, what would be the "homogeneous

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<sup>4</sup>The sentence was on a board in the butcher's of a Whole Foods store on Aug. 26, 2010 and a while thereafter (original emphasis in red color).

<sup>5</sup>Consider also (i) 'region', 'area', 'shape', etc. and (ii) 'parent', 'offspring', 'cousin', 'friend', 'student', 'president', etc.

mass” it turns them to? Some might reply that it is the mass resulting from the air or the like that occupies holes or valleys. Surely, however, ‘hole’ or ‘valley’ does not have even a latent deviant sense that relates to such a mass. Similarly, the grinder might, so to speak, grind rivers to spew a lot of water (pure or impure) on the floor, but ‘There is *river* all over the floor’ would not be even “*one* of the possible normal” things to say about it. Nor can one use ‘mountain’ for the result of grinding mountains: earth, sands, etc.

Defenders of Pelletier might respond that the problems in these cases arise because holes, valleys, etc. are not “physical objects” in the relevant sense because they relate primarily to certain spatial areas, rather than the material objects occupying the areas.<sup>6</sup> Although this might seem somewhat plausible for ‘hole’, it is not so with ‘river’ or ‘mountain’. One might move a river or mountain without moving the area it occupies. Neither can one make the same response with regard to the nouns listed in (b)–(d).

Consider, for example, ‘pole’. This certainly denotes material objects, and the grinder would grind them. But it would yield different kinds of mass depending on what the poles are made of: wood, stone, steel, etc. One cannot use ‘pole’, even deviantly, to relate to any of those masses. The grinder treatment does not project a mass noun sense from the count noun sense of ‘pole’ because it does not indicate any specific material but only a certain shape. Now, ‘boulder’ and ‘pebble’, unlike ‘pole’, indicate a certain type of material. But they still cannot be used for the mass resulting from grinding boulders or pebbles. Grinding boulders would yield the same result as grinding lots of pebbles: earth, sands, etc. Neither ‘boulder’ nor ‘pebble’ is suitable for such a mass because both indicate certain sizes and shapes. Boulders differ from pebbles not in the constituting material, but

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<sup>6</sup>Some might do so because Pelletier initially restricts the grinder treatment to “count nouns having physical objects as their extension” (*ibid.*, 6).

in size. Moreover, there are nouns reserved for the mass that the grinder would turn them to: ‘earth’, ‘sands’, etc.

To talk about the result of grinding cows, for example, for which there is no specific common noun, one might *improvise* to use ‘cow’ as a mass noun. English, it seems, allows such an extension of the usage of ‘cow’ for the unusual situation. But this does not mean that one can use *any* putative count noun for material objects for the mass resulting from grinding them. There is no need to improvise for the results of grinding mountains, boulders, pebbles, etc. because English has other nouns that give “normal” descriptions of the results.

Similarly, one cannot use ‘water drop’ or ‘raindrop’, for example, even deviantly for the mass constituting water drops or raindrops. The grinder would (often idly) grind water drops, for example, to spew a homogeneous mass on the floor. Whether the mass is divided into parts with the shape of drops or not, one cannot say ‘\*There is water drop all over the floor’ to remark on the mass. The normal thing to say for this purpose is ‘There is water all over the floor.’ It is the same with, e.g., ‘ice cube’. The mass constituting the objects it denotes is ice, and one cannot use ‘\*There is ice cube all over the floor’ to say that the mass is all over the floor.

The grinder treatment, we have seen, can project mass senses only for a limited range of count nouns. We can see some of the constraints on doing so by considering ‘water drop’ and ‘ice cube’. The mass noun uses of these are preempted by other nouns, ‘water’ and ‘ice’, which are their first components. Moreover, they have extra components, ‘drop’ and ‘cube’, that indicate the shape or arrangement to be imposed on the material. These components, which cannot be ignored even in deviant uses, exercise strong resistance to attempts to coerce the nouns to take a mass sense.



## 2. The mass/count distinction for English nouns

It is usual to deny lexicality of the mass/count distinction by arguing that any common noun has both mass and count uses (or senses). As we have seen, however, this is not correct. A wide range of count nouns ('hole', 'pole', 'water drop', etc.) do not have mass senses that allow one to use them as mass nouns. Moreover, it is one thing to say that a noun has both mass and count uses (or senses), quite another to say that it is neither a mass nor a count noun. For the mass and count uses (or senses) of a noun might not have the same status in its syntax or semantics.

One can use 'meat' as a verb to mean *to provide meat for* in special situations, but this is a deviant use that does not call for classifying 'meat' as a noun/verb polysemous word comparable to 'love'. Similarly, the deviant use of 'cow' as a mass noun that means the material that can constitute cows does not make the noun comparable to (*mass/count*) *dual nouns*, nouns that can be *equally* used as mass and count: 'chicken', 'salmon', 'cake', 'glass', 'hair', etc. And even among non-deviant or *customary* uses, some might not be on a par with *primary* uses. For example, one can use 'wine' as a count noun to denote different kinds of wine, and 'water' to denote glasses of water in Starbucks, as in

(3) Three waters, please!

But these are *subsidiary* uses of the nouns, which are primarily used as mass nouns for wine or water.

Invoking the different kinds of uses or senses, we can distinguish three kinds of common nouns:

- (i) count nouns: ‘cow’, ‘book’, etc.
- (ii) mass nouns: ‘water’, ‘beef’, etc.
- (iii) dual nouns: ‘chicken’, ‘cake’, ‘hair’, etc.

Count (or mass) nouns are common nouns whose primary uses are count (or mass), and dual nouns those with mass and count uses as equally primary. On this account, count nouns might have mass noun uses but only by shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses, and likewise with mass nouns. Dual nouns, by contrast, can be used as both mass and count without shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses. For example, ‘chicken’ is a dual noun insofar as its uses in (1a) and (1b) are equally primary. By contrast, ‘water’, which can be used as count, is a mass noun because its count noun uses are subsidiary or deviant. Similarly, ‘cow’ and ‘book’ are count nouns. Although Gleason and Pelletier argue that they might be used with “hidden” count senses in “farfetched” and “sufficiently unusual” situations, this does not mean that they are dual nouns because such uses are not their primary uses.

Those who hold Thesis (II), which denies lexicality of the mass/count distinction, take all common nouns to be dual nouns. To defend this view, it is necessary to hold that mass noun uses of putative count nouns are on a par with their primary uses. But Gleason and Pelletier, for example, do not hold this although they argue that all common nouns have both mass and count uses.

Most of those who hold this to defend (II) would still acknowledge disparity among possible uses of, e.g., ‘cow’ and ‘milk’. Bunt does so:

. . . one is inclined to say intuitively speaking nouns like ‘book’ and ‘car’ are ‘primarily’ count nouns, nouns like ‘water’, ‘furniture’ and ‘wine’ are ‘primarily’ mass nouns, and nouns like ‘cake’, ‘glass’, and ‘stone’ are ‘equally much’ count noun and mass noun. (1985,

12).

Clearly, this intuitive picture leads to the account given above. So Bunt ends up distinguishing mass and count nouns from dual nouns (which he calls “ground nouns”) because their primary uses are mass and count uses, respectively:

. . . virtually every concrete count noun has a potential mass noun use of which the meaning can be derived from the count noun meaning; it would be uneconomical to include both the mass use and the count use in the lexicon. It would surely be preferable to include as *lexical mass nouns* only those which are not ground nouns, such as ‘water’, ‘furniture’, ‘sand’, etc. (*Ibid.*, 211; original italics).

Here he classifies nouns themselves as mass or count, as the term “lexical mass noun” suggests. One cannot do so while holding, as he does, that “The qualifications ‘count’ and ‘mass’ can only be applied to a noun as it occurs in the context of certain determiners” (1985, 12).

One cannot deny lexicality of the mass/count distinction while accepting the intuition that Bunt states. The primary senses of nouns used primarily as mass must be mass senses, and likewise with nouns used primarily as count. So ‘milk’ and ‘cow’, for example, which are used primarily as mass and count, respectively, must differ in lexical status. And neither can have the same lexical status as dual nouns (e.g., ‘chicken’), which have both mass and count uses as primary uses.

### 3. Refined syntactic criteria for mass and count nouns

Many, if not all, common nouns have both mass and count uses, as observed by Jespersen (1924, 199f). This does not mean, we have seen, that one cannot distinguish between mass and count nouns. But it calls for modification of the usual criteria for mass and count nouns (e.g., (a)–(c)). Although ‘water’ is a mass noun, it can take the plural form and combine directly with numerals.

To cope with this problem, we can refine the usual criteria (a)–(c) as follows:<sup>7</sup>

- (A) Count nouns (unlike mass nouns) take singular and plural forms *without shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses*.
- (B) Count nouns (unlike mass nouns) can combine directly with numerals *without shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses*.
- (C) Count nouns can combine directly with ‘many’ and ‘few’, but not with ‘much’, ‘little’, ‘less’, *without shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses*.<sup>8</sup>

Although ‘water’ can take the plural form and combine directly with numerals, as in (3), it can do so only by shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses. So it does not satisfy (A) or (B). Although dual nouns satisfy the two conditions, they do not satisfy (C); ‘chicken’, for example, can combine with ‘much’ as well as ‘many’ without shifting to a subsidiary or deviant use. By contrast, ‘cow’ and ‘mountain’ satisfy all the three criteria for count nouns. Although ‘cow’, for example, might

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<sup>7</sup>(A)–(C) are formulated as criteria for count nouns.

<sup>8</sup>Similarly, mass nouns can combine directly with ‘much’, ‘little’, ‘less’, but not with ‘many’ and ‘few’, *without shifting to subsidiary or deviant uses*.

combine with ‘much’, ‘little’, or ‘less’, it must shift to a subsidiary or deviant use to do so.

Now, some might object that (A)–(C) are not *purely syntactic* criteria. This, if correct, does not yield the conclusion that nouns *per se* cannot be considered mass or count, but the conclusion that the mass/count distinction is not purely syntactic. More importantly, the objection rests on an inadequate conception of syntax.

To see this, it is useful to consider ‘meat’ once more. It can be used both as a noun and as a verb:

- (4) a. Our meat will always please you. (noun)
- b. We are always pleased to meat you. (verb)

This, to be sure, does not mean that the word is neither a noun nor a verb. Nor does it mean that one cannot formulate a criterion for distinguishing verbs from nouns by invoking the infinitive marker ‘to’. What it means is that the criterion must invoke the difference between primary and other uses:

- (D) Verbs (unlike nouns) can take the infinitive marker ‘to’ *without shifting to a subsidiary or deviant use*.

So ‘meat’ fails to be a verb not because it cannot take the marker ‘to’ at all, but because it must shift to a subsidiary or deviant use to do so.

Does this mean that the noun/verb distinction is not a purely syntactic one because (D), for example, is not a purely syntactic criterion? I think not. It is wrong to take (D) to fail to be purely syntactic because of the italicized phrase. (4b), for example, does not have the same syntactic status

as (4a). Adding the phrase in (D) merely helps the criterion to reflect the syntactic difference, which competent speakers of English can recognize.

I think (4b), like (4a), is well-formed or *syntactically acceptable*. Both differ in syntactic status from, e.g., the following:

(4) c. \*Meat our will always please you.

But this does not mean that there is no syntactic difference between (4a) and (4b). (4a) has no syntactic anomaly, involving no conflict among its elements. By contrast, (4b) strikes one as odd. It involves a conflict between the infinitive marker ‘to’ and ‘meat’, which cannot normally take the marker. Although the sentence, unlike (4c), is syntactically acceptable because one can reconcile the conflict, one can do so only by taking ‘meat’ to shift to an irregular use as a verb.

Given this difference between (4a) and (4b), the use of ‘meat’ as a verb in (4b) does not have as much significance for its syntactic status as its use as a noun in (4a). So it is necessary to add the italicized phrase in (D) to classify it as a noun by utilizing the syntactic disparity between sentences with *no syntactic anomaly* and those with *reconcilable syntactic conflicts*. It is the same with adding the phrase to refine the usual criteria (a)–(c). (2) and (3), for example, where ‘man’ and ‘water’ are used as mass and count, respectively, do not have the same syntactic status as (4a). They, though well-formed, involve conflicts among their elements. The italicized phrase in (A)–(C) makes the criteria sensitive to this disparity. And the refined criteria remain syntactic criteria because the disparity in question is a syntactic one.

The criteria invoke the distinction between primary and other uses of common nouns to focus on the core group of well-formed sentences, namely, those with no syntactic anomaly. We can now

reformulate the criteria by focusing directly on such sentences:

- (A\*) Count nouns take singular and plural forms *in sentences without syntactic anomaly*.
- (B\*) Count nouns can combine directly with numerals *in sentences without syntactic anomaly*.
- (C\*) Count nouns can combine directly with ‘many’ and ‘few’, but not with ‘much’, ‘little’, ‘less’, *in sentences without syntactic anomaly*.

#### 4. Resistance and Flexibility

Some might object to drawing a further distinction among well-formed sentences. They might argue that (3), “Three waters, please!”, for example, must be taken to have the same syntactic status as (4a). But even those who hold the flexibility thesis, Thesis (I), usually distinguish between them. They would say that (3), unlike (4a), involves “coercion” or “type shifting” of a noun (viz., ‘water’). So Borer (2005, 91 & 101), who accepts these descriptions, prefixes a special marker, ‘#’, to discuss such sentences, as in the following:

- (2) #There is man all over the floor.
- (3) #Three waters, please!

By adding the marker, she distinguishes these sentences from both of the following:

- (2\*) \*There is a men all over the floor.

(3\*) Three glasses of water, please!

(2\*) is marked by ‘\*’ because it is plainly ill-formed; (3\*) is not marked at all because it has no anomaly. By contrast, (3), for example, is marked by ‘#’ because it is, she says, “interpretable but ‘odd’” (*ibid.*, 101); the noun ‘water’ must take “an odd, coercive reading” (*ibid.*, 91) in the sentence.

Does this mean that (2) and (3), for example, have *syntactic* oddity? I think the answer is yes. Their oddity differs from the semantic (or pragmatic) oddity found in, e.g., the following:

(5) My dad is not my dad.<sup>9</sup>

Neither the oddity of this sentence nor its resolution pertains to its syntactic status. We could give the sentence a reading, albeit an eccentric one on which the sentence is plainly false, without resolving the oddity by attributing ambiguity to ‘dad’. The oddity of (3), by contrast, does not arise from the eccentricity of the request that would be made by those who issue the sentence while making a regular use of ‘water’. It arises from the syntactic anomaly that would result if (3) were to involve the regular use of the noun. That is, the sentence is “odd” because the noun’s syntactic character conflicts with the plural form. Accordingly, resolving the oddity involves reconciling the conflict by imposing to the noun an “odd” interpretation, which is “coercive” because it requires the noun to compromise its regular or primary syntactic character.

Borer disagrees. While agreeing that (2) and (3), for example, involve conflicts among their

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<sup>9</sup>Compare this sentence with “For nine years, I thought my dad was my dad”, which figures in Ruth Padawer, “Who knew I was not the father”, *New York Times*, November 22, 2009 (URL = <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/22/magazine/22Paternity-t.html?th=&emc=th&pagewanted=print>).



elements, she denies that the conflicts impinge on the domain of syntax:

. . . by assuming that the mass–count distinction as associated with listemes is conceptual, rather than grammatical in nature . . . . We opt to leave within the linguistic computational system precisely *those features which the grammar cannot override or ignore*, relegating those which the grammar does regularly override to a different cognitive component, the *conceptual* one. If this is indeed the division of labor, the *coercibility* of the (ontological) mass-count distinction with respect to N-stems emerges quite simply from the fact that the grammar performs computations based on those *formal* features which it recognizes, and the fact that N-stems, as such, have none. . . . *Coercion*, then, is but the *conflict* that emerges when the grammar returns a computation which is *not fully compatible* with the conceptual properties of listemes embedded within these structures. (*Ibid.*, 106; my italics)

Here she proposes to divide between “formal” (or syntactic) and “conceptual” features of nouns (and other words) by including among syntactic features only “those features which the grammar cannot override or ignore”, and explains the conflicts in (2) and (3) as resulting purely from mismatch between “conceptual” features of nouns and syntactic structures they figure in.

Both the proposal and explanation have serious problems. The proposal, as she holds, leads to the conclusion that the lexical mass/count distinction, which pertains to nouns *per se*, is not syntactic at all but purely “conceptual”, because the mass character of ‘water’, for example, can be overridden by grammar, as in (3). Similarly, the proposal leads to the conclusion that the (lexical) noun/verb distinction is not a syntactic distinction, either, because the noun character of ‘meat’, for

example, can also be overridden, as in (4b). But this conclusion is clearly wrong.<sup>10</sup>

And those who accept the proposal cannot explain why (3), unlike (3\*), is odd at all. Suppose, as Borer proposes, that the noun ‘water’ *per se* has no syntactic character whatsoever (except for being a common noun). If so, it should be indifferent to structures demanding uses of the noun as mass or count. It cannot have *more* conflict with the demand for the count noun use in (3) than the demand for the mass noun use in (3\*). So it would not be necessary to “coerce” it to get it to serve in (3) any more than it is necessary to do so to get it to serve in (3\*). To mitigate this problem, Borer suggests that the noun *per se* has the “conceptual” mass character. One cannot use this to explain the oddity of (3) without assuming that nouns with the “conceptual” mass character, unlike those with the “conceptual” count character, are “not fully compatible” with structures demanding count noun uses. But to assume this is to reject her proposal by acknowledging syntactic, as well as “conceptual”, significance of those characters.

To say that a noun can be coerced to figure as a count (or mass) noun is to say that it is *not* a count (or mass) noun. For it is not necessary to resort to coercion unless one meets resistance. Even “fully coercible” (*ibid.*, 106) features are not features with *no resistance*, but features with *flexible resistance*. In the combination of *flexibility* with *resistance*, then, we can see the grounds for well-formed sentences with reconcilable syntactic conflicts. (3), for example, is syntactically anomalous because ‘water’ resists coercion into count contexts, but still well-formed because the resistance is a flexible one that can be reconciled. The noun gives resistance, albeit a flexible one, to count

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<sup>10</sup>Defenders of Borer might reply that the mass/count features differ from the verb/noun features in being “fully coercible” (*ibid.*, 106). But it is wrong to assume this. The mass/count coercion has serious limitations, as we have seen (§1).

contexts, because it is a mass noun, albeit one with subsidiary or deviant count noun uses. Such nouns raise substantial difficulty with the standard account of the mass/count distinction, for the account fails to attend to disparity among various uses of nouns (and other words) to distinguish different groups of well-formed sentences. We can resolve the difficulty, as we have seen, by refining the account by distinguishing primary uses of nouns from other uses to focus on the core group of well-formed sentences. The resulting account explains both resistance and flexibility.

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