The Noun

Introduction
The noun is a class of words denoting entity (a separate unit that is complete and has its own characteristics).

- The noun is the central nominative word class.
- A typical noun has sense → the inherent meaning of the noun.
- Ex. the sense of girl → 'young female human being'
Nouns are commonly thought of as "naming" words, and specifically as the names of "people, places, or things".

- Nouns such as John, London, and computer certainly fit this description, but the class of nouns is much broader than this.

- Nouns also denote abstract and intangible concepts such as birth, happiness, evolution, technology, management, imagination, revenge, politics, hope, cookery, sport, literacy....
# Characteristics of Nouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantic characteristics of a noun</th>
<th>Syntactic characteristics of a noun</th>
<th>Morphological characteristics of a noun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denotes concrete entity (e.g. <em>dog</em>) or abstract notion (e.g. <em>idea</em>)</td>
<td>Functions as head of NP (e.g. <em>the girl</em>); can in some cases function as a premodifier in a NP (e.g. <em>an oak table</em>)</td>
<td>Inflected for number (plural) and case (genitive)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The noun class can be subdivided into the following semantic subclasses:

- **Noun**
  - **Proper**
    - *proper* (Tom)
  - **Common**
    - **Uncountable**
    - **Countable**
      - **Abstract**
        - *abstract* (hate)
      - **Concrete**
        - **Collective**
          - *collective proper* (milk)
        - **Mass**
          - *mass* (thought)
  - **Animate**
    - *animate* (vermin)
  - **Inanimate**
    - *inanimate* (furniture)
Common and Proper Nouns

- The basic division of the noun class is into common nouns and PROPER NOUNS.

- Nouns which name specific people or places are known as proper nouns.

- They are used to denote individuals, places, oceans, institutions, etc.

- For example, John, Mary, London, France.
Since proper nouns usually refer to something or someone unique, they do not normally take plurals.

However, they may do so, especially when number is being specifically referred to:

- There are three Davids in my class.
- We met two Christmases ago.
For the same reason, names of people and places are **not normally preceded by** determiners **the** or **a/an**

though they can be in certain circumstances:

- It's nothing like the America.
- Remember my brother is an Einstein at maths.
Changes in the meaning of the noun along the scale proper → common

- + proper
- +/- animate
- +/- human
- +/- female
- +/- countable
- + concrete

- + common
- - sex (neuter)
- + countable
- + concrete
Common Nouns

- **Common nouns** denote classes of **similar referents** or **specific representatives** of certain classes:

  - The computer is widely used nowadays.
  - The computer is on the desk.
common nouns

countable nouns & uncountable nouns

- Some can be either count or non-count, depending on the kind of reference they have.

- Ex. I made a cake. (cake is a count noun, singular)

- However, in I like cake, the reference is less specific. It refers to "cake in general", and so cake is non-count in this sentence.
Common nouns are either count or non-count.

- **count nouns** can be "counted": one pen, two pens, three pens, four pens...

- **non-count nouns**: one software, *two softwares, *three softwares, *four softwares...
non-count nouns do not take a/an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Non-count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a pen</td>
<td>*a software</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Countable nouns** have two categorical forms of number – **singular** and **plural**.
- **Uncountable nouns** have only one form – **either singular or plural**.
Both countable and uncountable nouns fall into two semantic varieties — concrete and abstract.

- **Concrete** nouns denote material referents. Abstract - immaterial referents.

- **Countable concrete nouns**
  - Individual nouns
  - Collective nouns
  - Improper
Collective nouns improper are treated grammatically as countable nouns.

The class is in the room.
The classes are in the room.

Plurality can also be marked by a plural pronoun:
The senior class, who had a meeting, decided they would have a party.
Mass nouns denote substances.

Example: Honey is good for you.
Animate collective nouns proper + plural word forms:
Vermin were crawling all over the place.

Inanimate collective nouns proper are treated as singular: Fruit is good for you.

Uncountable abstract nouns are in the singular: Hate is a negative feeling.
the semantic and formal feature undergoing change → types of shift:

- Proper noun → Common noun
- Common noun → Proper noun
- Countable noun → Uncountable noun
- Uncountable noun → Countable noun
- Abstract noun → Concrete noun
- Concrete noun → Abstract noun
Countable noun → Uncountable noun

- a shift from individual to generalized or from concrete to abstract (no article):

  - Her husband has been sent to prison for three years. (the institution in general)

  - We went by plane. (a form of transport)

  - The kids are still at school. (the period of one’s life)
Uncountable noun → Countable noun

- **Uncountable nouns do not form a plural.**
- They do **not** take the indefinite article.

However,

- **Cheese** is a solid food made from milk.
  (generalized)
- This shop sells a range of French **cheeses**.
  (individualized)
- He was lying full length on **the grass**.
  (a common plant)
- I could see various tall flowering **grasses**.
  (particular types)
A mass noun → a countable noun (a portion - individualized quantity):

- **Ice cream** is frozen sweet food.
- Would you like **an ice cream**?
  (one portion)
A mass word can be used by metonymy to refer to an object made from the substance:

- **Nickel** is a hard silver metal.
- **A nickel** is a coin worth five cents.
- She likes **cake**. (a sweet food)
- She was making **a cake** for his birthday. (a particular product)
Uncountable abstract nouns → countable concrete nouns:

- **Beauty** is the quality of being very good to look at.  
  (the quality)

- She is a **beauty**.  (a beautiful woman)

- I like cars and this one is a **beauty**.  
  (an object characterized by the quality)

- The **beauty** of working at home is that you don’t have to travel.  (advantage)
Not all uncountable nouns can undergo such semantic shifts.

- There are other means of **individualization** and **concretization of meaning**.
- One of them is the **partitive phrase**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concrete nouns:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a blade of grass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a bottle of rum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a glass of milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a mug of coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract nouns:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a piece of music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a word of praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a stroke of good luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an article of news</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sometimes individualization is achieved through **pairs of nouns**

- **the uncountable noun** in the pair denotes **the substance**

- **the countable noun** denotes **the article made from that substance**:

  wood → tree; bread → loaf