

# Indefinite Article with Plural Nouns and Uncountable Nouns

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**Kwon, Yonghyun. 2012. Indefinite Article with Plural Nouns and Uncountable Nouns.** *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*. 20(1). 133-151. Normally, the indefinite article combines with singular countable nouns. However, we often find linguistic expressions in which an indefinite article combines with plural countable nouns, as in *a good many books*, and with uncountable nouns, as in *a good knowledge of Greek*. In the former case, the combination of *a* and the plural noun *books* looks unnatural at first glance. In the latter case of *a good knowledge* as well, the noun has been traditionally treated as partly countable or as an exception in that *knowledge* accepts the indefinite article while it is not allowed to become a plural. This research discusses the way such unique combinations have been made possible.

**Key Words:** indefinite article, countable, uncountable, form, minimal representation

## 1. Introduction

The indefinite article combines with singular countable nouns, but normally it is not allowed to join with plural countable nouns. (1) demonstrates the general rule:

- (1) a. This is *a crime*.  
b. \*This is *a crimes*.

(1a) is grammatical while (1b) is not. The incorrectness of the latter is explained by the rule that the indefinite article (*a/an*) cannot be used together with plural

nouns (*crimes* in this case).

However, there are some cases in English where an indefinite article is accepted to plural nouns. This looks like an exception. Let us have a look at the sentence below:

(2) *A great many crimes* go unreported. (Eastwood, 1994: 220)

(2) is grammatically correct. Our concern in this research is the type of *a great many crimes*. The head noun is *crimes*, which is preceded by *a*, *great*, and *many*. What draws our attention is that *a* is accepted to the plural noun *crimes*.

This type of expression is frequently found. Here is another similar example:

(3) The distinction has some connexion with the natural distinction between male, female, and sexless, but in *a great many cases* it seems to be purely arbitrary without any reference to natural conditions. (Jespersen, 1933: 188)

*A great many cases* has exactly the same structure as *a great many crimes* in (2) in that *a* is followed by the plural noun *cases*. This pattern is very unique because it apparently violates the general rule that *a* cannot join with plural nouns.

In respect to the peculiar structure, Swan (1995: 534) says, "Plural expressions of quantity can be used with *another* and with *a/an+adjective*." The related examples are here in (4):

- (4) a. He's been waiting for *a good twenty-five minutes*.  
 b. She spent *a happy ten minutes* looking through the photos.  
 c. I've had *a very busy three days*.  
 d. I've lain awake *a good many nights* worrying about you.

The four sentences each have the same syntactic pattern: *a* is followed by plural nouns. *A good* is followed by *twenty-five minutes* in (4a), *a happy* by *ten minutes* in (4b), *a very busy* by *three days* in (4c), and *a good* by *many nights* in (4d).<sup>1)</sup>

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1) The way of breaking *a happy ten minutes* down into *a happy* and *ten minutes* instead of *a* and *happy ten minutes* will be discussed later on.

However, there has been no attempt to provide a reason for the way such combinations of the indefinite article with plural nouns have been made possible. This will be one of our issues in this research.

Another peculiar combination is that of the indefinite article with uncountable nouns. Normally, *a/an* is acceptable to singular countable nouns only. Uncountable nouns do not accept an indefinite article. However, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 339) says, "Under restricted conditions, however, *a* can combine with a non-count singular." Let us have a look at (5):

- (5) a. I have *a high regard* for them.  
 b. Jill has *a good knowledge* of Greek. (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 339)

*Regard* in (5a) is an uncountable noun in this use.<sup>2)</sup> The question is how *a* has been accepted to the uncountable noun *regard*. "Under restricted conditions" highlights that the type of combination is being treated as nothing more than an exception.

Quirk et al. (1985: 287) also raises the same question, saying, "The indefinite article is used exceptionally here with nouns which are normally noncount. The conditions under which *a/an* occurs in such cases are unclear." Here are the relevant examples in (6):

- (6) a. Mavis had *a good education*.  
 b. My son suffers *a strange dislike* of mathematics.

*Education* and *dislike* in (6a, b) are both uncountable nouns. However, *a* is present with each of them. It is admitted in Quirk et al. (1985) that it is not clear how such combinations have been accepted.

The same issue is discussed in Swan (1995: 57):

Many other normally uncountable can have 'partly countable' uses: they do not have plurals, but can be used with *a/an*. This can happen when

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2) *Regard* in *a high regard* is uncountable in that *regard* here does not have any sense of individuation, which is required for all countable nouns. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 339) points out that "*We both have high regards for them* is not allowed.

the meaning is particular rather than general.

The examples are in (7):

- (7) a. You've been *a great help*.  
 b. I need *a good sleep*.

What is termed "partly countable" in Swan (1995) suggests that he is trapped between countable and uncountable. According to his view *help* in (7a) is like a countable noun in that it accepts *a*, but at the same time it is like an uncountable noun in that *help* cannot become *helps*. Similarly, *sleep* in (7b) is faced with the same dilemma, because *sleep* which accepts *a* cannot become *sleeps*.

What is more, his "particular rather than general" in terms of meaning is not clear enough. Let us consider (8):

- (8) a. You've been a lot of *help*.  
 b. I need a lot of *sleep*.

The sentences in (7, 8) have more or less the same meaning. It is hard to appreciate or feel that *help* and *sleep* in (7a, b) are "particular" while they are "general" in (8a, b).<sup>3)</sup> His "*particular rather than general*" does not seem very convincing.

The issues which will be dealt with in this research are: (i) how the indefinite article is allowed to combine with plural countable nouns, and (ii) how the indefinite article can be accepted to uncountable nouns. The two issues might not look connected to each other. In fact, it will be suggested here that the two issues have much to do with the role of the indefinite article.

We need to investigate the role of the indefinite article particularly in reference to the seemingly unnatural combinations before we discuss the main issues.

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3) The significant difference between (7) and (8) is that *help* and *sleep* in (7) has the indefinite article while they do not in (8).

## 2. Role of Indefinite Article

### 2.1 Form and Indefinite Article

The key concept of the indefinite article is well pointed out in Yule (1998):

Underlying concepts like countable or non-countable and singular or plural is the more general notion of whether an entity is being treated as a single unit or not. The process of classifying as a single unit, or individuation, is the key to the use of the indefinite article in English. (Yule, 1998: 30)

The statement above clearly explains that nouns are not inherently predetermined in terms of countability. Whether nouns are countable or uncountable depends on how speakers/writers treat the entities.<sup>4)</sup> Nouns appear to switch back and forth between countable and uncountable. However, nouns referring to entities do not change in meaning. The proper meaning of nouns stays the same. The sense of individuation is created or removed with the addition or deletion of the indefinite article to or from the nouns.

When speakers see entities as individual units, they add the indefinite article to the nouns, so that at last they come to be established as an individual unit. If speakers do perceive entities as nothing more than a material or immaterial substance without the sense of a form, they do not add an indefinite article to the nouns. In this case, the form or shape of the entities does not exist or is not regarded as significant by the speakers. Let us appreciate how the sense of form is created and removed in the case of *potato*:

There was *a potato* lying on the floor. A little child spotted it. He approached it and took it in his hand. He began to play with it. Unfortunately, it fell on to the floor and he stepped on it by mistake. The potato had crushed into several pieces. Now the potato may be just *potato*, no longer *a potato*. (Kwon, 2005: 26)

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4) Jacobs (1995: 107) also says, "In fact, though, nouns in English are not inherently count or noncount, but rather are used countably or uncountably."

The first *potato* in the first line above is *a potato*, which denotes that the potato has a form with the help of the indefinite article. However, the potato with a form changes to *potato* without a form, which is the *potato* in the last line. *Potato* and *a potato* are not the same in the sense that the former points to only the substance itself without its form, while the latter indicates not only the substance but also the form at the same time.

*A* is just a one-letter word so that the gravity of *a* tends to be a little hard to appreciate. When we consider that *a* is a minimal marker of a form, we can see much more clearly that *a potato* refers to *a piece of potato*.<sup>5)</sup> When we compare *a potato* and *a piece of potato* side by side, *a* represents *a piece*. Whether it is a broken piece or a whole piece, the sense of having a form or an individual unit is clearly felt in the expression *a piece of potato*. *A piece of* expresses its form while *potato* indicates a substance. The full expression *a piece of potato* more clearly shows the form and the substance separately. In this case, the form is indicated by *a piece*.

*A potato* as an equivalent of *a piece of potato* tells us of two facts: (i) *a* indicates a minimal formal representation of *a piece*, and (ii) when we assume that *a piece of potato* is a derivational foundation for *a potato*, we do not need to argue over whether or not *potato* is converted to a countable noun, because *potato* in *a piece of potato* stays unchanged and still refers to the substance. This new perspective leads us to the issue of polysemy in the following section.

## 2.2 Issue of Polysemy

Traditionally, nouns have been considered to switch back and forth between countable and uncountable use. According to the traditional perspective, when uncountable nouns convert to countable and vice versa, they go through a semantic shift. So it brings about the issue of polysemy. Let us consider (9):

- (9) a. Would you like another *chocolate*?  
 b. Would you like some more *chocolate*? (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 334).

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5) Strictly speaking, *a piece of potato* is ambiguous. It can mean a whole piece of potato or a small piece out of many broken pieces of a potato. Whatever it is, *a piece* indicates that it refers to an individual form.

*Chocolate* in (9a) denotes an individual unit of chocolate whereas *chocolate* in (9b) refers to a food substance. As to the difference, Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 334) says:

But in the case of (9)<sup>6</sup> there is a clear relation between the two meanings, and we therefore take them to be senses of a single lexical item. Chocolate accordingly exhibits polysemy: it has more than one meaning.

According to them, *chocolate* is treated as having more than one sense. If it is true, we have to regard almost all nouns as having more than one sense. However, the sense of an individual unit in *chocolate* in (9a) is not an inherent trait of *chocolate*. That unitary sense is not supposed to come from within chocolate. Instead, it is attributed to the presence of *another* in *another chocolate*. Without *another* in its place, there would be no sense of individuation in *chocolate*. So it is not sensible to take the sense of individuation to be part of chocolate.

*Another chocolate* is similar to *a chocolate* in that each of them has a form. *A chocolate* represents *a bar of chocolate* or *a stick of chocolate*, and thus *another chocolate* means *another bar of chocolate* or *another stick of chocolate*, etc. Then we can see that *a chocolate* has come from *a bar of chocolate* or *a stick of chocolate*. *A bar of chocolate* is a full formal expression, in which the form and the substance are both identified, while *a chocolate* is a minimal representation, in which only the substance is identified, but although the form is referred to, it is not identified. The full formal expression *a bar of chocolate* fully says that *a bar* is the form and *chocolate* is the substance.

If we regard the indefinite article as the minimal representation of full formal expressions, then we can get ourselves out of the trap of polysemy. If it is accepted that *a chocolate* is a reduction of *a bar of chocolate*, chocolate is chocolate whether it is a chocolate or a bar of chocolate. Then it would be meaningless to argue over whether there is a meaning shift.

The so-called semantic shift is also mentioned in Quirk et al. (1985: 248):

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6) The number (9) is adjusted here for consistency in this article. It is [4] in the original.

Nouns may also be shifted from one class to another by means of conversion. Thus a noncount noun like *cheese* can be 'reclassified' as a count noun involving a semantic shift so as to denote quality partition 'kind/type/form.'<sup>7)</sup>

Here are the examples:

- (10) a. What *cheeses* have you got today?  
 b. They enjoy *cheese* everyday.

According to the reclassification, the sense of *cheese* has gone through a semantic shift in (10a). The semantic shift should distinguish between *cheese* in (10a) and *cheese* in (10b). However, the sense of 'kind/type/form' cannot be attributable to *cheese* itself. The unitary sense is created with the help of the addition of the indefinite article. *Cheeses* in (10a), which is the plural counterpart of the singular, *a cheese*, mean *brands of cheese* or *kinds of cheese*. Accordingly, *a cheese* represents a brand of cheese or a kind of cheese. The brand or kind is not an essential property of *cheese*. They come from *a*, not from within *cheese* itself.

### 2.3 Form and Context

We have seen that the indefinite article is chosen and added to nouns when speakers see entities as having a form.<sup>8)</sup> However, a variety of forms are hard to identify when only *a* stays on while the rest is left out. Naturally, the context or situation plays a key role in identifying the form. *A* is a minimal representation in that it merely indicates that entities have a form but that it is still not clear what form the indefinite article refers to without any help from the context.

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7) Han (1996) and Gang (2001) also deal with conversion or reclassification of nouns in terms of countability.

8) There are still some nouns which refuse to change from uncountable to countable. Among them are *information*, *furniture*, *advice* etc. When they have a sense of individuation, the expressions are *a piece of information*, *a piece of furniture*, *a piece of advice*. The reduced expressions such as *\*an information*, *\*a furniture*, *\*an advice* are not in popular use yet. However, it does not mean that they are logically ruled out. They seem to be just an accidental gap.



However, the form is easily identifiable once the context is given. Let consider (11):

- (11) a. Soon he came to a small town and decided to have *lunch* in the pub there. (Grahame, 2008: 41)  
 b. She had packed *a lunch* for each of them. (Sheldon, 1987: 40)

*Lunch* in (11a) has no indefinite article, so it signifies that it denotes the substance only. However, *a lunch* in (11b) has an indefinite article so that it denotes the form and substance both. We can guess without difficulty that the form would be a bag or any kind of container from the word *packed*. *A lunch* is a reduction of *a bag of lunch*. The full formal expression is *a bag of lunch* while *a lunch* is a minimal representation. The sense of unit derives from *a bag*, not from within *lunch* itself.

Similarly, *a potato* does not necessarily mean *a piece of potato*. Let us suppose that a waiter says to his coworker, "Here comes a potato." *A potato* in this particular situation indicates *a man of potato*. The form here is an individual man. *A man of potato* might refer to a man who always orders potato in the restaurant, considering the fact that the waiter was speaking to his coworker.

In reference to (10), *a cheese* is not always *a brand of cheese* or *a kind of cheese*. It also varies according to the context. Let us suppose that Ms Kim is *a cheese*. In this case, it might mean that Ms Kim is *a woman of cheese*. It is metaphorical. It may mean that the woman eats cheese very much or that she runs a cheese factory. The intended meaning will be determined in the context or situation in which *cheese* is used.<sup>9)</sup> Whatever it is, *a* in *a cheese* represents a form: a type, a brand, a woman. The sense of individuation comes from *a*, not from within *cheese*. *A cheese* is a minimal representation of the full formal expressions such as *a kind of cheese*, *a type of cheese*, *a woman of cheese*, etc.

The context has a clue to what the form is. That is why the full formal representation can be easily replaced by a minimal representation. The benefit is that a minimal representation is shorter, more economical and more efficient,

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9) Suppose that a customer is coming into a restaurant. He is a regular here. A waiter working for the restaurant recognizes him and says to his colleague, "Here is *a chicken* coming in." *A chicken* here indicates a customer who always orders chicken.

compared to its heavy full formal expression.

### 3. *A Great Many Crimes*

Now we go back to our main issues. What the examples in (2, 3, 4) have in common is that the indefinite article combines with plural nouns. This appears to violate the rule that the indefinite article is not accepted to plural nouns.

The concept of minimal representation applies to our approach to this issue. (2) is repeated here for convenience:

(2) *A great many crimes go unreported.*

Here let us examine the relations between the elements in *a great many crimes*.

#### 3.1 *A and Crimes*

*A* cannot directly combine with *crimes* simply because *a* is not accepted to plural nouns. Considering the simple fact, we can guess that there must be another noun to which *a* has to be anchored instead of *crimes*. In other words, *a* cannot be directly related to *crimes*. Otherwise we cannot explain the impossible combination of *a* and *crimes*. In fact, the impossibility is an excellent indicator that a noun associated with *a* is missing in the expression *a great many crimes*.

#### 3.2 *Great and Many*

The relative sequence of determiners and adjectives occurring prior to head nouns is more or less fixed. According to Ek and Robat (1984: 115), *many* comes before *great*.<sup>10</sup> For example, *I have many great books* is correct whereas *\*I have great many books* is not.

However, in *a great many crimes*, *many* is preceded by *great*. Despite the peculiar sequence, *a great many crimes* is correct. Then the peculiar sequence

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10) The relative sequence of premodifiers is discussed in Swan (1995: 8) and Quirk et al. (1985: 1337-49).

suggests that the adjective *great* does not modify *crimes*. If *great* had to modify the following *crimes*, the syntactic arrangement should be *many great crimes*.<sup>11)</sup> The fact that *great* is positioned before *many* in *a great many crimes* clearly demonstrates that *great* is not in the position to modify *crimes*. The relative location of *great* and *many* also suggests that there must be another noun to be modified by *a* and *great*.

### 3.3 Constituency

It has now become clearer that *a great* has no direct relation to *many crimes*: (i) *a* cannot be accepted to the plural noun *crimes*, and (ii) the relative position of *great* and *many* prevents *great* from modifying the following noun *crimes*. It implies that *a great* constitutes one group while *many crimes* belongs to another group.

If *a great* is an independent string, then there should be a noun for *a great* because *a* requires a noun. One possible noun will be *number*, and then *a great* represents *a great number*.<sup>12)</sup> Then the full formal expression will be *a great number of many crimes*.

Given *a great number of many crimes*, *great* modifies *number* while *many* modifies *crimes*. Each of the two adjectives has its own noun. The identity of *a* is also made clear. It is anchored to *number*, not *crimes*. Considering *a great number of many crimes*, there is no reason to relate *a* to *crimes*. The general rule is not violated any longer.

### 3.4 Minimal Representation

The full formal expression would be *a great number of many crimes*. However, the full expression is awkward because *a great number of* alone means *many* and

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11) The expression *many great crimes* may be correct in terms of the adjective sequence. However, the intended meaning by *a great many crimes* is not the same as *many great crimes*. In the latter case, *great* modifies *crimes*, which would make no sense.

12) *Number* here represents a quantity which is countable, as opposed to *amount*. *A great number* means a large number as opposed to *a small number*. There are many candidates for a large number. For example, it could be 9, 10, 100, or the like. A great number is only one of the many possibilities in this case. That is why the expression requires *a*.

we have another *many* in *many crimes*. Because of the overlap, we have all the more reason to reduce *a great number of*. Only *a great* stays on as a minimal representation for *a great number of*. Just as *a whole piece of potato* can be reduced to *a whole potato/a potato*, *a great number of many crimes* is reduced to *a great many crimes*.

We can apply the same approach to the examples in (4). They are repeated here for convenience:

- (4) a. He's been waiting for *a good twenty-five minutes*.  
 b. She spent *a happy ten minutes* looking through the photos.  
 c. I've had *a very busy three days*.  
 d. I've lain awake *a good many nights* worrying about you.

In (4a), the presence of *a* in *a good twenty-five minutes* indicates a form. *A good* is the minimal representation of *a good period of twenty-five minutes*, which is the full formal expression. *Good* here is not about good or bad, but it means a large amount. The possible full formal expressions would be *a good period of twenty-five minutes* or *a good number of twenty-five minutes*. *A good* represents *a good period* or *a good number*.

This approach demonstrates that the indefinite article does not join directly with *twenty-five minutes*. Instead, the indefinite article is tied to the formal representations such as *period* and *number*.

In addition, the new analysis clearly shows that the adjective *good* does not modify the following *twenty-five minutes*. *Good* is not about *twenty-five minutes*. If it were meant that way, the expression would be *twenty-five good minutes*. Then it would create a different sense. In fact, the intended meaning is a matter of a long period or a short period.

In (4b) *a happy ten minutes* represents *a happy period of ten minutes*. The former is an minimal representation while the latter is its full formal expression. Given the full formal expression, we can easily identify that the indefinite article has a connection with *period*, not with *minutes*.

In (4c), *a very busy three days* follows the same pattern. *Very busy* does not modify *three days*. *Very busy* is disconnected from *three days*. If it were meant to modify *three days*, it should be *three very busy days*. This implies that *a very busy*

*three days* has been reduced from *a very busy period of three days*. *A* is the minimal representation of a *period*. *Very busy* modifies *period*, not *three days*.

In (4d), *a good many nights* is also a short version of *a good number of many nights*. What is modified by *good* is not *nights* but *number*. *Good* here means *large*. It is not about a quality. *A good number of* means *a large number of*, which means *many*. We have another *many* in *many nights*. When *a good number of many nights* changes to *a good many nights*, the reduced expression enhances efficiency by removing redundancy.

Similar patterns where an indefinite article combines with plural nouns are found without difficulty. The examples in (12) all have minimal representations.

- (12) a. The book was remarkably popular in its day, selling *an estimated 1 million copies*.  
 b. He and his crowd pilfered about \$200 million while building veterans hospitals. He spent *a whopping two years* in jail.  
 c. He was endorsed by the American Federation of Labor and by the Socialists and would receive *a sizable 5 million votes*.

### 3.5 Summation Plurals

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 82) mentions about summation plurals<sup>13</sup>: "Many of the 'summation plurals' can take the indefinite article, especially with premodification: *a garden shears*, *a curling-tongs*, etc."

When we consider the surface level only, it is not natural that an indefinite article joins with plural nouns such as *shears* and *tongs*. However, when it is taken into account that the indefinite article here is a minimal representation reduced from its corresponding full formal expression, the seemingly unnatural combination of *a* and summation plurals is not unnatural any longer. The full formal expressions would be like *a pair of garden shears* and *a pair of curling-tongs*. Then we can easily recognize that the indefinite article is anchored to *pair*, not

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13) What they mean by summation plurals is tools and articles of dress consisting of two equal parts which are joined. ex) tongs, pants, binoculars, tweezers, spectacles, trousers, knickers, scissors, glasses, tights. A variety of plural-only nouns are introduced in Biber et al. (1999: 289-90).

to *shears* and *tongs*. The indefinite article used together with summation plurals is also an instance of minimal representations.

## 4. *A Good Knowledge*

### 4.1 Countable or Uncountable

Before we begin to discuss our main issues here, we need to identify the status of the nouns in (5, 6, 7). Let us employ some basic tests (*many/much* test, *another* test, plural test) to see if the nouns themselves can accept their own indefinite article.

Let us examine them one by one.

- (5) a. I have *a high regard* for them.  
 b. Jill has *a good knowledge* of Greek.

(5a) means *I have much regard for them*. However, *\*I have many regards for them* is incorrect. This shows that *regard* in (5a) cannot be an individual and does not have a form here. (5b) also means *Jill has much knowledge for Greek*. However, *\*Jill has another knowledge of Greek* is not correct. *Knowledge* cannot be an individual.<sup>14)</sup>

- (6) a. Mavis had *a good education*.  
 b. My son suffers *a strange dislike* of mathematics.

In (6a), *a good education* means much education, not *\*many educations*. In (6b), *a strange dislike* cannot be replaced by *\*two strange dislikes*. They demonstrate that *education* and *dislike* are not individuals.

- (7) a. You've been *a great help*.  
 b. I need *a good sleep*.

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14) The noncountability of *regard* and *knowledge* is fully discussed in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 339).

In (7a), *a great help* means much help. \**You've been many/two helps* would be wrong. In (7b), *a good sleep* refers to much sleep. It is not about whether the sleep is good or bad. The tests prove that *help* and *sleep* are not individuals.

The nouns in (5, 6, 7) are all uncountable even if they have an indefinite article before each of them. That is to say, the nouns cannot be treated as countable nouns which have been reclassified or converted from uncountable nouns. Now we need to discuss how the seemingly unnatural combinations are allowed.

## 4.2 Minimal Representation

Let us briefly summarize regarding the way the nouns are treated in Huddleston and Pullum (2002), Quirk et al. (1985), and Swan (1995). (i) Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 339) says, "Under restricted condition, however, *a* can combine with a non-count singular." (ii) Quirk et al. (1985: 287) admits, "The indefinite article is used exceptionally here with nouns which are normally noncount. The conditions under which *a/an* occurs in such cases are unclear." (iii) Swan (1995: 57) is not clear enough: "Many other normally uncountable can have 'partly countable' uses: they do not have plurals, but can be used with *a/an*." Each of them is treating the combination of *a* with the uncountable nouns as an exception.

Their exceptional treatment is attributable to their persistence in connecting the indefinite article directly to the following nouns. However, when we recognize that the indefinite article is a minimal representation of the full formal expressions *an amount of* or *a great amount of*, such an effort turns out to be a futile attempt.

In (5a), *a high regard* represents *an amount of high regard*. *A* is the minimal representation of *an amount*. *A* is related to *amount*, not *regard*. The link of *a* to *amount* makes it unnecessary to attempt to associate *a* with *regard*, which is still uncountable in the full formal representation. Then we can avoid conditions such as 'under restricted condition', 'exceptionally', and 'partly countable'.

In (5b) also, *a good knowledge of Greek* is not about good knowledge or bad knowledge. It refers to *a good deal of knowledge* or *a good amount of knowledge*, as opposed to a low amount of knowledge. The full formal expression enables us

to identify what element *good* modifies. It is *amount* or *deal*. What is more, it also shows that the indefinite article is not directly tied to *knowledge*, whose full formal expression confirms that *knowledge* is still uncountable.

Then the similar nouns in (6a, b) need not to be exceptionally treated.

- (6) a. Mavis had a *good education*.  
 b. My son suffers a *strange dislike* of mathematics.

The adjective *good* in (6a) does not modify *education*, in that (6a) means that Mavis has much education. It is not about his good quality of education. Instead, (6a) says that Mavis had a good deal of education. So a *good* is tied to *deal*, not *education*. In (6b), a *strange dislike* is a short version of a *strange kind of dislike*. Then we can clearly see that the indefinite article is associated with *kind*, not with *dislike*.

## 5. Conclusion

The issue in this research regarding the indefinite article is that it sometimes joins with plural nouns and uncountable nouns. The apparent unnaturalness has put grammarians into a trap. However, the alternative approach suggested here provides a solution when we recognize that the indefinite article is a minimal representation of various full formal expressions.

The approach here brings us the following benefits: Firstly, in the expression *a good many crimes*, a *good* represents a *good number*.<sup>15)</sup> This full formal expression clearly explains that the indefinite article has a link with *number*, not with *crimes*. The unnatural combination of the indefinite article with the plural noun *crimes* is a good sign that there is another noun missing which the indefinite article should be anchored to. In this example, the missing part is *(a good) number of*. A *good number of* means *many*. So a *good number of* and the following *many* in *many crimes* overlap. The duplication enhances the

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15) *Number* is not always the only answer, of course. It is just one of possible candidates in this case. In fact, the formal noun is dependent on the context. For example, in *He spent a whopping two years in jail* in (12b), a *whopping* can represent a *whopping period*.



omission of *number of* with *a good* staying on.

Secondly, what looks unnatural in the combination of the indefinite article with uncountable nouns such as *a good knowledge* is explained away when we accept that *a good knowledge* has derived from *a good amount of knowledge*. In this example also, the indefinite article is not tied to *knowledge*. Rather, it is tied to *amount*. *Amount* here has a form, so it naturally takes an indefinite article. This analysis does not force us to treat the 'unnatural' combination as an exception, because the full formal expression clearly shows that *knowledge* is still uncountable.

Thirdly, when we view *a good many crimes* as *a good number of many crimes*, we can understand what makes the adjective *good* stand prior to the adjective *many*. If *good* were meant to modify *crimes*, the right syntactic sequence would be *many good crimes*, not *good many crimes*. However, this special sequence indicates that *good* and *crimes* cannot be grouped together. And it is also a good evidence to imply that there must be a noun to which *a good* must be tied. The noun is *number*. *Good* modifies *number*.

Fourthly, the issue of polysemy can be cleared away. When we accept *another chocolate* as *another bar of chocolate*, we can easily acknowledge that the unitary sense comes from *bar*, not from within *chocolate*. The sense of individuation is not the innate or inherent sense of chocolate. So it follows that we do not have to rack our brains over whether or not *chocolate* in *another chocolate* is reclassified as a countable noun. As a result, the traditional issue concerning meaning shift would be meaningless.

Lastly, the issue of the combination of the indefinite article with summation plurals leaves no suspicion any longer. When we regard *a good pants* as *a good pair of pants*, *a* is tied to *pair*, not *pants*. And *a* is simply a minimal representation of *a pair*. The indefinite article cannot be directly associated with summation plurals. *A good pants* is a good indicator that there must exist an invisible noun which the indefinite article should be attached to.

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