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The grammar of water

1. Introduction

Chemically, water is a simple substance whose elementary structure is captured in the well known formula H_2O . The grammatical behavior of the noun *water* is, however, far more complex as shown in the four British National Corpus (BNC) examples below:

- (1) Water is everywhere: canals, streams, small busy rivers with charming names like the Boutonne, the Mignon and the Belle, and big lazy rivers like the Sevre Niortaise and the Charente.
- (2) Of course the fashionable mineral waters – Perrier, Evian, Vichy, Malvern, and so on – are calorie-free, and are becoming increasingly popular in smart restaurants. So you can be chic as you get slim!
- (3) It is only the second time this century that a school of sperm whales has been seen in the waters around Orkney.
- (4) That is, you can have a shoal of bream of one size at or near the bottom of a water, and a shoal of bigger or smaller bream above them.

Besides the classic singular uncountable usage illustrated in (1) there are also less typical cases where the noun is morphologically plural and / or countable. In (2) it clearly instantiates distinct brands of mineral water marketed to sophisticated customers, in (3) it designates an extensive area covered by water, and in (4) a sports fishing location.

The usage illustrated in (1) is frequently held up as the paradigm example of nominal uncountability in English and is relatively well studied from a variety of angles, e.g. Jespersen (1949), Cartwright (1965), Langacker (1987), Wierzbicka (1988) or Higginbotham (1994). The other ones are, however, usually brushed aside as exceptions to be listed in dictionary entries and are rarely inquired into. They are not discussed at any length even in Wickens (1992), a book specifically dedicated to investigating atypical English plurals and their countable offshoots, despite the fact that they are not infrequent. In the BNC there are 2526 instances of *waters* and several cases of *a water*, altogether making up 6.8% of all the occurrences of the lemma *water* in the corpus.

This short paper will then survey the usage of the plural and / or countable forms and explore their meanings by drawing on data retrieved from the British National Corpus and relying on concepts developed in cognitive linguistics as summarized in Evans and Green (2006).

2. The expert vs. the layman

It is a trivial fact of life that water can be easily poured into containers of any shape and size, which makes it an excellent example of a homogenous substance that can be divided at will without affecting its fundamental properties. The uncountable construal illustrated in (1) above is then fully motivated by the rudimentary experience of an average person.

For an expert, though, it is equally obvious that water can display quite different sets of measurable properties and, consequently, be classified into a number of distinct varieties. For example, depending on its gas and mineral content, water may be still or fizzy, hard or soft, harmful or medicinal, fresh or saline, etc. with the number of subdivisions limited only by the accuracy of the measurement gear and the relevance of detail in a given field of study. Consequently, if an expert wishes to refer to a number of such varieties at once, it is only natural for him or her to use the plural:

- (5) Carbon dioxide is found free in some natural waters and is formed in hard waters by acidification.
- (6) It has been pointed out by various 'consumer experts' and journalists, who feel they have stumbled on a minor scandal that deserves an ex-

posé, that many mineral waters contain significant amounts of metals and salts.

Most of the properties defining any such varieties can be easily perceived by both the layman and the expert alike, but only for the latter are they salient enough to provide the basis for conceptualizing distinct water varieties. In layman's terms water is a single substance with different flavors, colors and odors, while for the expert it is a cover term for a number of varieties differentiated by giving cognitive prominence to otherwise negligible characteristics.

In other words, the plural construals exemplified in (2), (5) and (6) serve to express a view of the world based on scholarly expertise, while the singular construal in (1) encodes an unsophisticated view of the world typical of the layman. The reliance on the contrast between plural and uncountable conceptualizations of the same substance to represent this cognitive difference is, however, quite frequent in English and the usages reported on above are not in any way unusual in that respect, e.g. a connoisseur's construal of distinct vintages:

- (7) The meal was delicious: beef and venison pastries and different wines, blood-red claret as well as light, sweet Rhenish.

A logical consequence of such expert conceptualizations is that a distinct variety can then occasionally be given a singular countable construal:

- (8) Do you plump for a bottle with an attractive label or simply stick to a wine that is familiar?

And water is not any different:

- (9) Choose a mineral water that is available in glass bottles, but do not consume too much Perrier, as it seems to cause problems for some people.

3. Metonymy in action

As has been noted in the introductory section above, the plural *waters* is also used to express a spatial meaning in which the name of the liquid that covers an area designates the area itself. For example, in (10) below the water that covers the seabed around the British Isles and laps their shores is made to stand for the seas and ocean that surround them:

- (10) The submarines' main areas of activity were in the waters around the British Isles and in much of the Mediterranean.

The conceptualization underlying this usage of *waters* is then a standard example of metonymy in that the designation of a component is relied on to profile the whole entity. The only atypical feature of this metonymic construal is the fact that it is obligatorily expressed by a nominal in the plural, which might seem somewhat counterintuitive. However, on closer inspection it turns out to be well rooted in human cognition.

The ultimate motivation behind this puzzling point of English grammar is the fact that the curvature of the earth limits the range of what an unaided observer can see to the area circumscribed by the line of the horizon, where water seems to meet the sky. If a body of water is sufficiently large, at least a part of its surface is then bound to remain below the horizon and be invisible to the naked eye, which focuses human perception on more local features of the entity in question like waves, ripples, eddies, breakers, etc. The entity profiled by *waters* is then conceptualized as a collection of water surface disturbances and, consequently, obligatorily instantiated by a plural nominal.

Consequently, the same construal is applied not only to open seas and oceans but also to lakes and rivers:

- (11) It was an often spectacular bus ride on which the waters of Lake Titicaca were rarely out of sight.
 (12) At Cliften Hampden, fields were swamped by the rising waters of the Thames, though the flooding is now thought to have peaked.

However, water is not the only substance covering geographical areas that can give rise to such metonymic conceptualizations, e.g.:

- (13) It is a long way from the dark pine forests and the frozen rivers of northern Europe to the sun-baked sands of Arabia.

The surface features that are focused on in this case are obviously rows of dunes but that is the only difference between the construal in (13) and the previous ones. Further examples of fundamentally the same conceptualizations draw on surface formations made of snow and different types of rocks, e.g. granite, sandstone, etc.

A surprising but fully motivated side effect of this construal is the use of the singular countable form of the noun *water* to profile individual sports fishing grounds:

- (14) You can use your favourite bait, if you have one, when you fish a water which is little fished by anyone else.

Since anglers are obviously anxious to see if a fish has baited and carefully watch their floats, it is only natural to expect that the entire area they presume to be their fishing grounds on a given occasion remains within the range of their eyesight. The cognitive motivation for the use of the plural in metonymic construals argued for above is then missing and, consequently, any such fishing locations can be profiled by a nominal in the singular. Given the well known fact that anglers typically have a number of such favorite spots to choose from, it is also not surprising that the nominal is countable and can be pluralized if needed:

- (15) If it is still more important to you to enjoy your fishing, using methods and approaches more akin to your liking, than it is to catch big fish at the cost of a great deal of enjoyment, then there are still a few waters where you can use 'classic' tactics.

This fine countable usage comes close to the final and simplest metonymic usage of water found in the corpus:

- (16) Toby appeared at my elbow in very quick time – nobody was more expert than him at getting served quickly in a crowded bar – with an extra-large glass of Scotch and a mineral water for me, my habitual drink when I was working.

It is a staple example of a metonymy whereby the nominal designating a liquid poured into a container is made to profile the drink drunk from that vessel.

4. Conclusions

The usages discussed above are then not unrelated exceptions defying the standard claim that water is profiled by a singular uncountable noun, but a network of meanings related by well known cognitive processes attested in many other areas of language and motivated by common experience shared by millions of speakers.

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