

[Refereed Article]

# Modification and Acceptability of *a/an* with Abstract Nouns Referring to an Attribute of a Person

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## Abstract

Grammars argue that many abstract noncount nouns can be used with the indefinite article (*a/an*) when they are modified by an adjective. The influence of modification on the acceptability of *a/an* with abstract nouns that refer to an attribute of a person (*education, knowledge, understanding, etc.*) is examined with the data collected from two large corpora, the British National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English. Nouns modified by qualitative adjectives show a higher acceptability of *a/an* than those modified by classifying adjectives. Nevertheless, neither the type nor the amount of modification determines the use of *a/an*. An abstract noun accepts *a/an* when it refers to a particular instance, which is bounded in physical, temporal or type space. It is the speaker's intention to emphasize the particular and individual nature of the referent that determines the use of *a/an*. Modification does not force the use of *a/an*. It is the other way around: *a/an* forces the use of modification.

## Key Words

Abstract Nouns, Count, Noncount, Countable, Uncountable, Acceptability, Indefinite Article, Zero Article, Modification, Adjectives.

## 1. Abstract noncount nouns and *a/an*

Grammars agree that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* under certain conditions. Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, and Jan Svartvik (1985) argue that noncount nouns that refer to a quality or other abstraction of a person (e.g. *education, dislike, sensitivity*) can be used with *a/an* when they are modified and that the greater the amount of modification, the greater the acceptability of *a/an*. Quirk et al. (1985: 287) say as follows:

- (1) Mavis had *a good education*. [1]
- (2) My son suffers from *a strange dislike of mathematics*. <ironic > [2]
- (3) She played the oboe with (*a*) *remarkable sensitivity*. [3]

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, but appear to include the following:

- (i) the noun refers to a quality or other abstraction which is attributed to a person;
- (ii) the noun is premodified and/or postmodified; and, generally speaking, the greater the amount of modification, the greater the acceptability of *a/an*.

In confirmation of (ii), notice that *a* would have to be omitted from [3] if the adjective were omitted:

She played the oboe with  $\begin{cases} *a \text{ sensitivity.} & [3a] \\ \text{sensitivity.} & [3b] \end{cases}$

However, *a* would become more acceptable than zero if the noun were modified:

She played the oboe with  $\begin{cases} (a) \text{ charming sensitivity.} \\ a \text{ sensitivity that delighted the critics.} \end{cases}$

Swan (2005) argues that noncount nouns that refer to human emotions and mental activities (e.g. *knowledge, distrust, understanding, education*) are often used with *a/an* when their meaning is limited. Swan (2005: 132) says as follows:

With certain uncountable nouns — especially nouns referring to human emotions and mental activity — we often use *a/an* when we are limiting their meaning in some way.

*We need a secretary with a first-class knowledge of German.* (NOT . . . *with first-class knowledge of German.*)

*She has always had a deep distrust of strangers.*

*That child shows a surprising understanding of adult behaviour.*

*My parents wanted me to have a good education.* (NOT . . . *to have good education.*)

*You've been a great help.*

*I need a good sleep.*

Note that these nouns cannot normally be used in the plural, and that most uncountable nouns cannot be used with *a/an* at all, even when they have an adjective.

*My father enjoys very good health.* (NOT . . . *a very good health.*)

*We're having terrible weather.* (NOT . . . *a terrible weather.*)

*He speaks excellent English.* (NOT . . . *an excellent English.*)

*It's interesting work.* (NOT . . . *an interesting work.*)

Berry (1993) argues that abstract noncount nouns can be used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective or postmodified by some form of modification (e.g. adjective clause) or when their individual and particular nature is emphasized. Berry (1993: 20-21) says as follows:

Many abstract nouns, that is, nouns referring to things which cannot be seen, touched or measured, can be used with the indefinite article when an adjective is used with them. For

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example, if you talk about ‘a sudden violent hatred’, you mean a particular kind of hatred which is sudden and violent.

...*a passionate hatred of feminists.*

...*working up a passing anger.*

...*a certain quaint charm.*

Compare this with their use as uncount nouns when there are no adjectives.

*How long can hatred last?*

...*in a voice choked with anger.*

*He had neither charm nor humour.*

You don’t have to use the indefinite article with such nouns just because of the adjectives; you can still use them without an article if you don’t want to emphasize their individual, particular nature.

...*a man of immense personal charm.*

Instead of adjectives before the noun, you can have some form of qualification after it, for example a clause beginning with ‘that’.

...*a charm that contains heavy doses of boyishness.*

Biber, Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad, and Edward Finegan (1999) argue that abstract noncount nouns have both count and noncount uses and that the count use refers to individual instances or types. Biber et al. (1999: 244) say as follows:

Abstract nouns, which tend to be basically uncountable, also have countable uses:

It pulls together a series of wide-ranging recommendations for business, transport, and **education**. <U>

Although she was a girl she wanted an **education**. <C>

I don’t think her parents gave her much — very much **freedom**. <U>

These are tiny **freedoms**, and if a woman enjoys being part of a couple, they should count for nothing. <C>

They had received **kindness**, thoughts and good wishes from total strangers. <U>

It would be a “cruel **kindness**” to uphold the county court order. <C>

In these examples, the uncountable use refers to the general phenomenon, while the countable use refers to individual instances or types.

Both Quirk et al. and Swan mention two conditions under which noncount nouns can be used with *a/an*: 1) the noun refers to a person’s attribute, which can be assumed to include human emotions and mental activity; 2) the noun is premodified and/or postmodified. Swan does not mention modification as a condition, but he apparently has premodification in mind when he says “when we are limiting their meaning in some way” since all the nouns in his examples are modified by an adjective or an attributive noun (e.g. *a deep distrust, a first-class knowledge*). Berry adds a third condition: emphasis on the individual and particular nature of the referent. Berry does not mention the types of nouns that can be used with *a/an*, but all the nouns in his examples (*hatred, anger,*

*charm*) are attributes of a person, from which it can be assumed that he has in mind the same type of nouns that Quirk et al. and Swan have. To sum up, abstract noncount nouns can be used with *a/an* under the following three conditions:

- 1) The noun refers to an attribute of a person.
- 2) The noun is premodified and/or postmodified.
- 3) The individual and particular nature of the referent is emphasized.

In the following sections, two large corpora, the British National Corpus (BNC) with 100 million words and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) with 520 million words are used to explore the relationship between modification and the acceptability of *a/an* with abstract noncount nouns that refer to an attribute of a person. The validity of the first condition will not be examined since it is difficult to determine exactly what Quirk et al., Swan and Berry have in mind about the type of abstract nouns that can be used with *a/an*. Instead, the nouns they give in their example sentences (*education, dislike, sensitivity, knowledge, distrust, understanding, help, hatred, anger, charm*) are used to examine the second and the third condition. Two nouns (*help, sleep*) that Swan gives in his examples will not be examined since they do not refer to 'human emotions and mental activity.'

Instances of noun phrases modified by determiners other than *a/an* are not considered in this research since determiners often make it difficult to determine if the noun is used as a count or a noncount noun (e.g. *the education, any education, his education*). Determiners include the definite article, demonstratives (e.g. *this, that*), quantifiers (e.g. *some, any, much, more, less, each, enough, both, either, a lot, a few, a bit of*), possessives (e.g. *his, her, their, whose*), and others (e.g. *no, such, either, what, whatever*). When *much, more, less*, etc. are used as an adverb to modify an adjective (e.g. *he's getting a much better education*), their instances are counted. Instances of more than one noun joined by the conjunction *and* are not counted (e.g. *a middle-class upbringing and education*) since it is difficult to determine if *a/an* modifies the target noun (e.g. *education*). Other instances that are not counted are the cases of the target noun used as part of a proper name (e.g. book titles, names of organizations, etc.) and as an attributive noun to modify another noun (e.g. *education department*).

## 2. Modification and *a/an*

### 2.1. *Education* and modification

Table 1 lists a total of 25 noun phrases with *education* immediately premodified by an adjective or an attributive noun. Each noun phrase has 30 or more instances found in either BNC or COCA, and they are arranged from the top to the bottom according to the acceptability of the indefinite article (*a/an*) in COCA. In the table, '*a/an*' indicates the number of instances of a noun phrase used with the indefinite article (*a/an*); '*Ø*' indicates the number of instances with the zero article (*Ø*), and '% *a/an*' shows the percentage of the instances of a noun phrase with *a/an*. 'N/A' means 'not applicable.' For example, BNC finds 3 instances of *great education* used with *a/an* and 0 instances with *Ø*, and the acceptability of *a/an* is 100.0%. COCA finds *great education* takes *a/an* in 90.6% of instances (58 instances taking *a/an* and 6 taking *Ø*). All the tables in this section are arranged in the same way, unless otherwise mentioned.

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BNC finds 14 noun phrases with 30 or more instances, among which one phrase (*good education*) takes *a/an* in more than 50% of instances (excluding *great education*, *decent education* and *excellent education* with less than 30 instances) while 13 phrases accept  $\emptyset$  in more than 50% of instances. COCA finds 22 noun phrases with 30 or more instances (excluding *management education*, *media education* and *primary education* with less than 30 instances), among which seven noun phrases take *a/an* in more than 50% of instances (*great education*, *decent education*, *excellent education*, *good education*, *high school education*, *college education*, *adequate education*) while 15 phrases accept  $\emptyset$  in more than 50% of instances. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective.

Table 1. *Education* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>great education</i>	100.0%	3	0	3	90.6%	58	6	64
<i>decent education</i>	85.7%	6	1	7	85.7%	42	7	49
<i>excellent education</i>	66.7%	6	3	9	84.4%	27	5	32
<i>good education</i>	55.2%	37	30	67	82.1%	404	88	492
<i>high school education</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	78.9%	235	63	298
<i>college education</i>	35.3%	6	11	17	68.7%	453	206	659
<i>adequate education</i>	N/A	0	0	0	60.0%	24	16	40
<i>better education</i>	16.7%	6	30	36	43.1%	129	170	299
<i>quality education</i>	4.8%	1	20	21	42.3%	169	231	400
<i>university education</i>	39.4%	28	43	71	41.6%	77	108	185
<i>high (-) quality education</i>	4.3%	1	22	23	35.7%	25	45	70
<i>effective education</i>	12.5%	1	7	8	23.7%	9	29	38
<i>inadequate education</i>	0.0%	0	1	1	12.5%	4	28	32
<i>religious education</i>	2.0%	3	147	150	5.7%	19	313	332
<i>elementary school education</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	5.5%	13	224	237
<i>management education</i>	0.0%	0	34	34	4.0%	1	24	25
<i>secondary education</i>	1.0%	2	199	201	3.5%	16	435	451
<i>science education</i>	3.2%	1	30	31	0.9%	6	661	667
<i>higher education</i>	0.8%	15	1832	1847	0.8%	63	7364	7427
<i>further education</i>	0.0%	0	471	471	0.8%	1	132	133
<i>sex education</i>	0.6%	1	167	168	0.6%	4	649	653
<i>health education</i>	0.0%	0	153	153	0.2%	1	416	417
<i>teacher education</i>	0.0%	0	172	172	0.0%	0	1090	1090
<i>media education</i>	12.9%	9	61	70	0.0%	0	19	19
<i>nursery education</i>	2.4%	2	81	83	N/A	0	0	0

Table 2 shows the number of instances of *education* postmodified by an adjective clause with a relative pronoun *that* and *which* and by an adjective phrase that begins with the present participle (V-ing) and the past participle (V-en) of a verb. The acceptability of *a/an* varies from 18.2% (V-en in BNC) to 68.6% (*which* in BNC). The sentences (1–4) below Table 2 are taken from BNC, which show that the amount of modification does not influence the acceptability of *a/an*. There is not much difference in the amount of modification between (1) and (2) and between (3) and (4), but (1) and (3) accept *a/an* while (2) and (4) accept  $\emptyset$ . *Education* in (5), taken from Google Books, is modified by a very long adjective clause, but it accepts  $\emptyset$ . These data do not support the argument that the greater the amount of modification, the greater the acceptability of *a/an*. (The underlines and boldfaces are added by Kodera.)

Table 2. *Education* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL
<i>education that</i>	55.6%	5	4	9	58.5%	182	129	311
<i>education which</i>	68.6%	24	11	35	28.0%	7	18	25
<i>education</i> + V-ing	25.0%	2	6	8	40.0%	6	9	15
<i>education</i> + V-en	18.2%	2	9	11	31.8%	50	107	157
TOTAL	51.9%	28	26	54	32.0%	63	134	197

- 1) We need to offer an education that enables them to play a positive role in society by giving them the opportunity to use their talents. (BNC)
- 2) Many fewer people leave school at 16 than did when the examinations were introduced; and more every year are being encouraged to stay at school or to leave only to go to sixth-form college, college of further education, or wherever else they may receive education that will lead to a higher accreditation. (BNC)
- 3) All are entitled to attend the local school, to receive an education which responds to their needs and allows them equality of opportunity. (BNC)
- 4) People have the right to receive media education which will enable them to become critical viewers of the medium. (BNC)
- 5) It [money] motivates people to go into business for themselves, or to seek advancement in their jobs, or to procure education that will enable them to obtain the kind of work that will permit them both to maintain themselves and their dependents comfortably and, at the same time, to engage in work that has satisfaction for its own sake. (Frances Lomas Feldman and Frances H. Scherz. *Family Social Welfare: Helping Troubled Families*)

## 2.2. Knowledge and modification

Table 3 lists a total of 55 noun phrases with *knowledge* immediately premodified by an adjective or an attributive noun. BNC finds 20 noun phrases with 30 or more instances, among which five phrases (*working knowledge*, *thorough knowledge*, *good knowledge*, *intimate knowledge*, *basic knowledge*) take *a/an* in more than 50% of instances while 15 phrases accept Ø in more than 50% of instances. COCA finds 54 noun phrases with 30 or more instances, among which two phrases (*working knowledge*, *thorough knowledge*) take *a/an* in more than 50% of instances while 52 phrases accept Ø in more than 50% of instances. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective.

Table 3. *Knowledge* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL
<i>working knowledge</i>	100.0%	42	0	42	90.2%	138	15	153
<i>thorough knowledge</i>	97.0%	32	1	33	75.4%	46	15	61
<i>good knowledge</i>	85.7%	36	6	42	48.9%	23	24	47
<i>deep knowledge</i>	84.6%	11	2	13	46.5%	47	54	101
<i>intimate knowledge</i>	61.4%	27	17	44	42.0%	66	91	157
<i>basic knowledge</i>	71.9%	23	9	32	28.6%	48	120	168
<i>detailed knowledge</i>	47.8%	33	36	69	27.9%	29	75	104
<i>greater knowledge</i>	39.3%	11	17	28	18.5%	20	88	108

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<i>extensive knowledge</i>	63.6%	7	4	11	18.4%	14	62	76
<i>limited knowledge</i>	23.8%	5	16	21	15.6%	23	124	147
<i>shared knowledge</i>	4.3%	1	22	23	12.5%	4	28	32
<i>certain knowledge</i>	33.3%	5	10	15	12.0%	6	44	50
<i>theoretical knowledge</i>	16.7%	3	15	18	8.9%	5	51	56
<i>general knowledge</i>	11.1%	6	48	54	8.5%	15	162	177
<i>special knowledge</i>	13.8%	4	25	29	8.3%	4	44	48
<i>inside knowledge</i>	18.2%	2	9	11	8.1%	3	34	37
<i>personal knowledge</i>	2.5%	3	118	121	6.8%	9	123	132
<i>practical knowledge</i>	8.0%	2	23	25	6.5%	6	87	93
<i>increased knowledge</i>	25.0%	2	6	8	6.3%	5	74	79
<i>first (-) hand knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	20	20	4.8%	10	198	208
<i>full knowledge</i>	22.5%	9	31	40	4.8%	4	80	84
<i>useful knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	18	18	4.5%	3	64	67
<i>specialis (z) ed knowledge</i>	9.1%	1	10	11	3.3%	4	119	123
<i>technical knowledge</i>	6.9%	4	54	58	3.2%	4	122	126
<i>sufficient knowledge</i>	3.8%	1	25	26	2.7%	2	71	73
<i>superior knowledge</i>	9.1%	1	10	11	2.6%	1	37	38
<i>musical knowledge</i>	14.3%	1	6	7	1.7%	1	59	60
<i>cultural knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	1.7%	2	119	121
<i>pedagogical knowledge</i>	N/A	0	0	0	1.4%	1	73	74
<i>historical knowledge</i>	5.0%	1	19	20	1.1%	1	86	87
<i>specific knowledge</i>	11.1%	1	8	9	1.1%	1	86	87
<i>financial knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	1.1%	1	88	89
<i>common knowledge</i>	1.0%	1	95	96	1.1%	5	462	467
<i>scientific knowledge</i>	0.7%	1	151	152	1.1%	6	563	569
<i>current knowledge</i>	6.7%	1	14	15	1.0%	1	97	98
<i>local knowledge</i>	2.2%	2	90	92	0.9%	2	218	220
<i>medical knowledge</i>	2.6%	1	38	39	0.7%	1	137	138
<i>new knowledge</i>	2.2%	1	44	45	0.7%	4	581	585
<i>prior knowledge</i>	2.6%	1	37	38	0.6%	3	504	507
<i>content knowledge</i>	N/A	0	0	0	0.0%	0	521	521
<i>human knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	69	69	0.0%	0	213	213
<i>public knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	58	58	0.0%	0	212	212
<i>indigenous knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	0.0%	0	210	210
<i>environmental knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	0.0%	0	195	195
<i>ecological knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	0.0%	0	108	108
<i>procedural knowledge</i>	N/A	0	0	0	0.0%	0	101	101
<i>existing knowledge</i>	6.9%	2	27	29	0.0%	0	100	100
<i>direct knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	5	5	0.0%	0	95	95
<i>traditional knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	0.0%	0	93	93
<i>social knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	14	14	0.0%	0	85	85
<i>professional knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	16	16	0.0%	0	64	64
<i>previous knowledge</i>	2.6%	1	38	39	0.0%	0	56	56
<i>relevant knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	15	15	0.0%	0	36	36
<i>actual knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	18	18	0.0%	0	34	34
<i>linguistic knowledge</i>	0.0%	0	32	32	0.0%	0	13	13

Table 4 shows the number of instances of *knowledge* postmodified by an adjective clause beginning with *which* and an adjective phrase beginning with V-en. The acceptance of *a/an* is less than 25% with both types of postmodification in both corpora. *Knowledge* in (6) below, for example, is both pre- and post-modified, but it accepts Ø. The data in Table 4 do not support the argument that the greater the amount of modification, the greater the acceptability of *a/an*.

Table 4. *Knowledge* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL
<i>knowledge which</i>	13.0%	7	47	54	23.5%	8	26	34
<i>knowledge</i> + V-en	3.1%	1	31	32	5.1%	17	314	331

- 6) The increasing complexity of trade and commerce demands financial and legal experts such as accountants and lawyers. The growth of industry requires **more specialized scientific and technical knowledge** which results in the development of professions such as science and engineering. (BNC)

### 2.3. *Understanding* and modification

Table 5 lists a total of 30 noun phrases with *understanding* immediately premodified by an adjective or an attributive noun. BNC finds 11 noun phrases with 30 or more instances, among which eight phrases take *a/an* in more than 50% of instances (*clearer understanding*, *good understanding*, *thorough understanding*, *clear understanding*, *better understanding*, *deeper understanding*, *proper understanding*, *full understanding*), while three phrases (*greater understanding*, *sufficient understanding*, *mutual understanding*) accept Ø in more than 50% of instances. COCA finds 29 noun phrases with 30 or more instances, among which 20 phrases take *a/an* in more than 50% of instances while nine phrases accept Ø in more than 50% of instances. The acceptability of *a/an* varies from 95.0% (*thorough understanding*) to 13.0% (*sufficient understanding*) in BNC and from 96.3% (*clearer understanding*) to 0.9% (*human understanding*) in COCA. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective.

Table 5. *Understanding* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	Ø	TOTAL
<i>clearer understanding</i>	94.1%	32	2	34	96.3%	131	5	136
<i>comprehensive understanding</i>	100.0%	6	0	6	95.7%	112	5	117
<i>good understanding</i>	92.7%	38	3	41	94.3%	183	11	194
<i>fuller understanding</i>	92.9%	26	2	28	94.3%	82	5	87
<i>thorough understanding</i>	95.0%	38	2	40	93.8%	165	11	176
<i>clear understanding</i>	89.7%	87	10	97	93.5%	332	23	355
<i>better understanding</i>	91.2%	186	18	204	89.8%	1529	173	1702
<i>basic understanding</i>	75.9%	22	7	29	89.0%	146	18	164
<i>deeper understanding</i>	87.8%	36	5	41	85.2%	473	82	555
<i>adequate understanding</i>	90.5%	19	2	21	85.1%	57	10	67
<i>complete understanding</i>	84.0%	21	4	25	83.2%	139	28	167
<i>proper understanding</i>	87.8%	36	5	41	82.5%	47	10	57
<i>detailed understanding</i>	77.8%	14	4	18	81.8%	36	8	44
<i>full understanding</i>	77.5%	31	9	40	79.7%	126	32	158
<i>new understanding</i>	60.7%	17	11	28	76.6%	216	66	282
<i>general understanding</i>	75.0%	12	4	16	75.6%	59	19	78
<i>common understanding</i>	80.0%	16	4	20	75.0%	96	32	128
<i>deep understanding</i>	88.2%	15	2	17	69.9%	151	65	216
<i>real understanding</i>	58.6%	17	12	29	64.4%	38	21	59
<i>greater understanding</i>	46.9%	38	43	81	61.5%	279	175	454
<i>sufficient understanding</i>	13.0%	6	40	46	36.8%	7	12	19
<i>increased understanding</i>	38.5%	5	8	13	31.0%	31	69	100
<i>scientific understanding</i>	43.8%	7	9	16	17.7%	26	121	147
<i>historical understanding</i>	16.7%	3	15	18	15.9%	11	58	69

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<i>mutual understanding</i>	17.3%	9	43	52	14.3%	38	228	266
<i>conceptual understanding</i>	18.2%	2	9	11	13.8%	24	150	174
<i>cultural understanding</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	10.3%	10	87	97
<i>public understanding</i>	0.0%	0	19	19	6.4%	10	146	156
<i>musical understanding</i>	0.0%	0	4	4	4.1%	3	70	73
<i>human understanding</i>	0.0%	0	17	17	0.9%	1	114	115

Table 6 shows the number of instances of *understanding* postmodified by an adjective clause beginning with *which* and an adjective phrase beginning with V-en and V-ing. The data are very limited and it is difficult to judge the influence of postmodification on the acceptability of *a/an*. It could be argued that the acceptance of *a/an* is higher when *understanding* is postmodified. It is still necessary to explain why *understanding* with postmodification sometimes accepts  $\emptyset$  as in (7).

Table 6. *Understanding* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>understanding which</i>	77.8%	7	2	9	83.3%	5	1	6
<i>understanding</i> + V-en	75.0%	3	1	4	64.7%	22	12	34
<i>understanding</i> + V-ing	0.0%	0	1	1	85.7%	6	1	7

- 7) Meditation is that process of mental digestion that gives rise to **understanding** which integrates the energies of mind and will in a desire for God which is prayer. (BNC)

#### 2.4. Sensitivity and modification

Table 7 lists a total of 11 noun phrases with *sensitivity* immediately premodified by an adjective or an attributive noun. Each noun phrase has 20 or more instances found in either BNC or COCA. BNC finds two noun phrases with 20 or more instances (*high sensitivity*, *chemical sensitivity*), and they take *a/an* in 19.0% and 0.0% of instances respectively. COCA finds 11 noun phrases with 20 or more instances, none of which exceeds 50% in their *a/an* acceptance. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective.

Table 7. *Sensitivity* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>heightened sensitivity</i>	0.0%	0	4	4	46.9%	30	34	64
<i>greater sensitivity</i>	21.1%	4	15	19	31.7%	32	69	101
<i>extreme sensitivity</i>	66.7%	2	1	3	16.7%	4	20	24
<i>increased sensitivity</i>	28.6%	2	5	7	16.3%	7	36	43
<i>high sensitivity</i>	19.0%	4	17	21	16.1%	9	47	56
<i>great sensitivity</i>	10.5%	2	17	19	10.5%	4	34	38
<i>chemical sensitivity</i>	0.0%	0	31	31	3.7%	1	26	27
<i>environmental sensitivity</i>	0.0%	0	7	7	1.9%	1	53	54
<i>cultural sensitivity</i>	N/A	0	0	0	1.8%	2	112	114
<i>interpersonal sensitivity</i>	N/A	0	0	0	0.0%	0	48	48
<i>light sensitivity</i>	0.0%	0	1	1	0.0%	0	27	27

Table 8 shows the number of instances of *sensitivity* postmodified by an adjective clause beginning with *which* and *that* and an adjective phrase beginning with V-ing and V-en. The data are very limited and it is difficult to judge the influence of postmodification on the acceptability of *a/an*. However, the sentences (8) and (9) below do not support the argument that the greater the amount of modification, the greater the acceptability of *a/an*. *Sensitivity* in (8) is both pre- and post-modified, but it accepts  $\emptyset$ . *Sensitivity* in (9), on the other hand, accepts *a/an* without modification.

Table 8. *Sensitivity* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>sensitivity that</i>	66.7%	2	1	3	57.1%	4	3	7
<i>sensitivity which</i>	66.7%	2	1	3	74.1%	20	7	27
<i>sensitivity</i> + V-ing	100.0%	1	0	1	33.3%	1	2	3
<i>sensitivity</i> + V-en	N/A	0	0	0	60.0%	3	2	5

- 8) How is spirituality, as we have examined it here, related to religion? In some contexts, this is an important question to address because there is **heightened sensitivity** set against promoting religion in a publicly supported school system or favoring one kind of religion over another in a multicultural, multifaith classroom. (COCA)
- 9) The department studies the Church's history with the aid of other relevant disciplines, for example, social, political and economic history and social anthropology, as well as with **a sensitivity** to theological perspectives. (BNC)

## 2.5. *Dislike* and modification

Table 9 lists three noun phrases with *dislike* immediately premodified by an adjective. Each noun phrase has 10 or more instances found in either BNC or COCA. BNC finds one noun phrase with 10 or more instances (*instant dislike*), and it takes *a/an* in 92.3% of instances. COCA finds three noun phrases with 10 or more instances (*instant dislike*, *strong dislike*, *personal dislike*) and they take *a/an* in 100.0%, 100.0% and 58.3% of instances respectively. Table 10 shows the number of instances of *dislike* postmodified by an adjective clause and phrase. The data are very limited and it is difficult to judge the influence of modification on the acceptability of *a/an*. It is still necessary to explain why *dislike* with postmodification sometimes accepts  $\emptyset$  as in (10).

Table 9. *Dislike* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>instant dislike</i>	92.3%	12	1	13	100.0%	22	0	22
<i>strong dislike</i>	83.3%	5	1	6	100.0%	18	0	18
<i>personal dislike</i>	50.0%	3	3	6	58.3%	7	5	12

Table 10. *Dislike* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>dislike that</i>	100.0%	1	0	1	50.0%	1	1	2
<i>dislike which</i>	100.0%	2	0	2	N/A	0	0	0
<i>dislike</i> + V-ing	100.0%	1	0	1	N/A	0	0	0
<i>dislike</i> + V-en	N/A	0	0	0	100.0%	1	0	1

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- 10) He wasn't angry. Anger, which I knew to be transient and generally at least part theater, I was used to and could easily bear. What I saw was **dislike**, which can't be shrugged off, which abides. (COCA)

## 2.6. *Distrust* and modification

Table 11 lists four noun phrases with *distrust* immediately premodified by an adjective. BNC does not find any noun phrase with 20 or more instances. COCA finds four noun phrases with 20 or more instances (*general distrust*, *deep distrust*, *mutual distrust*, *public distrust*) and their acceptability of *a/an* varies from 66.7% to 3.3%. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns is often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective.

Table 12 shows the number of instances of *distrust* postmodified by an adjective clause and phrase. The data are very limited and it is difficult to judge the influence of postmodification on the acceptability of *a/an*. It is still necessary to explain why *distrust* with postmodification sometimes accepts  $\emptyset$  as in (11) and (12).

Table 11. *Distrust* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>general distrust</i>	100.0%	1	0	1	66.7%	14	7	21
<i>deep distrust</i>	80.0%	4	1	5	47.1%	24	27	51
<i>mutual distrust</i>	16.7%	1	5	6	10.8%	4	33	37
<i>public distrust</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	3.3%	1	29	30

Table 12. *Distrust* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>distrust that</i>	N/A	0	0	0	77.8%	7	2	9
<i>distrust which</i>	N/A	0	0	0	N/A	0	0	0
<i>distrust</i> + V-ing	0.0%	0	1	1	N/A	0	0	0
<i>distrust</i> + V-en	N/A	0	0	0	0.0%	0	1	1

- 11) Yamashita viewed the wormholer with **deep distrust** that verged on loathing. (COCA)  
 12) The “spontaneous” strivings of the working class were treated with **distrust** bordering on disdain. (BNC)

## 2.7. *Hatred* and modification

Table 13 lists 10 noun phrases with *hatred* immediately premodified by an adjective. Each noun phrase has 20 or more instances found in either BNC or COCA. BNC finds one noun phrase with 20 or more instances (*racial hatred*), and it has no instance that takes *a/an*. COCA finds five noun phrases with 20 or more instances, among which *deep hatred* takes *a/an* in 85.0% of instances while the other four phrases have no instance that takes *a/an*. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified. Table 14 shows the number of instances of *hatred* postmodified by an adjective clause and phrase. The data are very limited and it is difficult to judge the influence of postmodification on the acceptability of *a/an*. It is

still necessary to explain why *hatred* with postmodification sometimes accepts  $\emptyset$  as in (13).

Table 13. *Hatred* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>racial hatred</i>	0.0%	0	86	86	0.0%	0	130	130
<i>ethnic hatred</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	0.0%	0	51	51
<i>religious hatred</i>	0.0%	0	4	4	0.0%	0	37	37
<i>pure hatred</i>	0.0%	0	8	8	0.0%	0	27	27
<i>deep hatred</i>	50.0%	1	1	2	85.0%	17	3	20

Table 14. *Hatred* and postmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>hatred that</i>	100.0%	2	0	2	75.0%	15	5	20
<i>hatred which</i>	N/A	0	0	0	66.7%	2	1	3
<i>hatred</i> + V-ing	0.0%	0	1	1	22.2%	2	7	9
<i>hatred</i> + V-en	50.0%	1	1	2	35.7%	5	9	14

- 13) I sank back into my chair as soon as they were out of the room. Not just dislike, but **pure, unleavened, visceral hatred** growing more and more powerful was pumping adrenaline through me like a tidal wave. (COCA)

## 2.8. Anger and modification

Table 15 lists nine noun phrases with *anger* immediately premodified by an adjective. BNC finds no phrase with 20 or more instances. COCA finds nine phrases with 20 or more instances, and their *a/an* acceptability varies from 18.8% to 0.0%. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified. Table 16 shows the number of instances of *anger* postmodified by an adjective clause and phrase. COCA finds the *a/an* acceptability varies from 67.1% to 3.2%. The corpora find many instances of *anger* used with  $\emptyset$  when it is postmodified as in (14) below. The data do not support the argument that the greater the amount of modification, the greater the acceptability of *a/an*.

Table 15. *Anger* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL	% a/an	a/an	$\emptyset$	TOTAL
<i>real anger</i>	0.0%	0	6	6	18.8%	9	39	48
<i>intense anger</i>	50.0%	1	1	2	18.2%	4	18	22
<i>deep anger</i>	0.0%	0	2	2	16.0%	4	21	25
<i>growing anger</i>	25.0%	2	6	8	15.2%	5	28	33
<i>sudden anger</i>	33.3%	4	8	12	14.8%	4	23	27
<i>righteous anger</i>	0.0%	0	9	9	10.5%	6	51	57
<i>great anger</i>	11.1%	1	8	9	8.7%	2	21	23
<i>public anger</i>	0.0%	0	10	10	0.0%	0	117	117
<i>popular anger</i>	0.0%	0	6	6	0.0%	0	39	39

Mar. 2017 Modification and Acceptability of *a/an* with Abstract Nouns Referring to an Attribute of a PersonTable 16. *Anger* and pstmodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	Ø	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	Ø	TOTAL
<i>anger that</i>	30.0%	3	7	10	67.1%	49	24	73
<i>anger which</i>	40.0%	2	3	5	33.3%	1	2	3
<i>anger + V-ing</i>	80.0%	4	1	5	11.1%	8	64	72
<i>anger + V-en</i>	50.0%	1	1	2	3.2%	1	30	31

14) To take one example, **anger** directed against the wealthy Chinese minorities in much of Southeast Asia is growing. Already, more than 1,000 ethnic Chinese were killed last May during riots in Indonesia. (COCA)

## 2.9. Charm and modification

Table 17 lists 14 noun phrases with *charm* immediately premodified by an adjective or attributive noun. Each noun phrase has 20 or more instances in either BNC or COCA. *Good luck charm* (or *good-luck charm*), *lucky charm* and *magic charm* are not considered here, since *charm* in these phrases is a count noun that refers to a physical object. BNC finds one phrase (*great charm*) with 20 or more instances, which has no instance that takes *a/an*. COCA finds five noun phrases with 20 or more instances, and their acceptability of *a/an* varies from 100.0% to 9.5%. These data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective. Postmodification is not considered here since the data are very limited and it is sometimes difficult to judge whether the noun *charm* refers to an attribute of a person or a physical object.

Table 17. *Charm* and premodification

	BNC				COCA			
	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	Ø	TOTAL	% <i>a/an</i>	<i>a/an</i>	Ø	TOTAL
<i>certain charm</i>	100.0%	6	0	6	100.0%	30	0	30
<i>old (-) world charm</i>	0.0%	0	7	7	15.6%	5	27	32
<i>Southern charm</i>	N/A	0	0	0	12.5%	5	35	40
<i>great charm</i>	0.0%	0	30	30	12.5%	3	21	24
<i>small (-) town charm</i>	N/A	0	0	0	9.5%	2	19	21

## 2.10. Types of modification and the acceptability of *a/an*

The corpus data do not support the argument that abstract noncount nouns are often used with *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective. There is no evidence that confirms the influence of premodification on the acceptability of *a/an*. The *a/an* acceptability varies greatly from 0.0% to 100.0% depending on adjectives (or attributive nouns). In this section, the relationship between the types of adjectives and the acceptability of *a/an* will be explored. Adjectives can be divided into two types: qualitative adjectives, which describe a particular quality of someone or something (e.g. *happy*, *wise*, *pretty*), and classifying adjectives, which indicate that something is of a particular type (e.g. *financial* in *financial help*) (Sinclair 1992: 11).

Table 18 lists noun phrases with *education*, *knowledge* and *understanding* immediately premodified

by adjectives (or attributive nouns) with 30 or more instances in either BNC or COCA. They are arranged according to the acceptability of *a/an*: the highest acceptability of *a/an* at the top and the lowest at the bottom. Qualitative adjectives are shaded. The data are from COCA except for those noun phrases that BNC finds more instances: *media education*, *nursery education*, *management education*, *linguistic knowledge*, *human understanding*.

Table 18 shows that the higher the *a/an* acceptability, the more chances to find qualitative adjectives. In the range of more than 70% acceptability of *a/an*, *education* has five noun phrases, out of which four are modified by qualitative adjectives (*great*, *decent*, *excellent*, *good*). *Knowledge* has two phrases in the range (*working knowledge*, *thorough knowledge*), both of which are modified by qualitative adjectives, and *understanding* has 17, out of which 15 are modified by qualitative adjectives.

In the range of less than 30% acceptability of *a/an*, *education* has 14 phrases, out of which 12 are modified by classifying adjectives (or attributive nouns), referring to levels of education (*elementary*, *secondary*, *higher*, *further*) and subjects of education (*media*, *religious*, *nursery*, *science*, *sex*, *health*, *teacher*, *management*). *Knowledge* has 50 phrases, out of which 36 are modified by classifying adjectives (*shared*, *theoretical*, *general*, etc.), and *understanding* has nine, out of which eight are modified by classifying adjectives (*general*, *common*, *real*, etc.). The data in Table 18 suggest that types of adjectives, i.e. whether qualitative or classifying, have a strong influence on the acceptability of *a/an*.

Table 18. Types of adjectives and the acceptability of *a/an*

EDUCATION	% <i>a/an</i>	KNOWLEDGE	% <i>a/an</i>	UNDERSTANDING	% <i>a/an</i>
<i>great education</i>	90.6%	<i>working knowledge</i>	90.2%	<i>clearer understanding</i>	96.3%
<i>decent education</i>	85.7%	<i>thorough knowledge</i>	75.4%	<i>comprehensive understanding</i>	95.7%
<i>excellent education</i>	84.4%	<i>good knowledge</i>	48.9%	<i>good understanding</i>	94.3%
<i>good education</i>	82.1%	<i>deep knowledge</i>	46.5%	<i>fuller understanding</i>	94.3%
<i>high school education</i>	78.9%	<i>intimate knowledge</i>	42.0%	<i>thorough understanding</i>	93.8%
<i>college education</i>	68.7%	<i>basic knowledge</i>	28.6%	<i>clear understanding</i>	93.5%
<i>adequate education</i>	60.0%	<i>detailed knowledge</i>	27.9%	<i>better understanding</i>	89.8%
<i>better education</i>	43.1%	<i>greater knowledge</i>	18.5%	<i>basic understanding</i>	89.0%
<i>quality education</i>	42.3%	<i>extensive knowledge</i>	18.4%	<i>deeper understanding</i>	85.2%
<i>university education</i>	41.6%	<i>limited knowledge</i>	15.6%	<i>adequate understanding</i>	85.1%
<i>high (-) quality education</i>	35.7%	<i>shared knowledge</i>	12.5%	<i>complete understanding</i>	83.2%
<i>effective education</i>	23.7%	<i>certain knowledge</i>	12.0%	<i>proper understanding</i>	82.5%
<i>media education</i>	12.9%	<i>theoretical knowledge</i>	8.9%	<i>detailed understanding</i>	81.8%
<i>inadequate education</i>	12.5%	<i>general knowledge</i>	8.5%	<i>full understanding</i>	79.7%
<i>religious education</i>	5.7%	<i>special knowledge</i>	8.3%	<i>new understanding</i>	76.6%
<i>elementary school education</i>	5.5%	<i>inside knowledge</i>	8.1%	<i>general understanding</i>	75.6%
<i>secondary education</i>	3.5%	<i>personal knowledge</i>	6.8%	<i>common understanding</i>	75.0%
<i>nursery education</i>	2.4%	<i>practical knowledge</i>	6.5%	<i>deep understanding</i>	69.9%
<i>science education</i>	0.9%	<i>increased knowledge</i>	6.3%	<i>real understanding</i>	64.4%
<i>higher education</i>	0.8%	<i>first (-) hand knowledge</i>	4.8%	<i>greater understanding</i>	61.5%
<i>further education</i>	0.8%	<i>full knowledge</i>	4.8%	<i>increased understanding</i>	31.0%
<i>sex education</i>	0.6%	<i>useful knowledge</i>	4.5%	<i>scientific understanding</i>	17.7%
<i>health education</i>	0.2%	<i>specialis (z) ed knowledge</i>	3.3%	<i>historical understanding</i>	15.9%
<i>teacher education</i>	0.0%	<i>technical knowledge</i>	3.2%	<i>mutual understanding</i>	14.3%
<i>management education</i>	0.0%	<i>sufficient knowledge</i>	2.7%	<i>conceptual understanding</i>	13.8%
		<i>superior knowledge</i>	2.6%	<i>sufficient understanding</i>	13.0%
		<i>musical knowledge</i>	1.7%	<i>cultural understanding</i>	10.3%
		<i>cultural knowledge</i>	1.7%	<i>public understanding</i>	6.4%
		<i>pedagogical knowledge</i>	1.4%	<i>musical understanding</i>	4.1%

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<i>historical knowledge</i>	1.1%	<i>human understanding</i>	0.9%
<i>specific knowledge</i>	1.1%		
<i>financial knowledge</i>	1.1%		
<i>common knowledge</i>	1.1%		
<i>scientific knowledge</i>	1.1%		
<i>current knowledge</i>	1.0%		
<i>local knowledge</i>	0.9%		
<i>medical knowledge</i>	0.7%		
<i>new knowledge</i>	0.7%		
<i>prior knowledge</i>	0.6%		
<i>content knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>human knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>public knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>indigenous knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>environmental knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>ecological knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>procedural knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>existing knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>direct knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>traditional knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>social knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>professional knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>previous knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>relevant knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>actual knowledge</i>	0.0%		
<i>linguistic knowledge</i>	0.0%		

### 3. Particular, individual nature and the acceptability of *a/an*

Qualitative adjectives describe a particular quality of someone or something. Typically, a speaker has a particular referent in mind, and s/he wants to describe its particular nature, which motivates the use of *a/an*. When we hear someone say ‘great education,’ ‘working knowledge’ and ‘clearer understanding,’ we assume that the speaker has a particular instance in mind, for example, a learning experience that someone enjoyed at a particular institution for a particular period of time, a certain level of knowledge required for a particular job, and a certain level of understanding of a particular subject. On the other hand, *teacher education*, *linguistic knowledge* and *human understanding*, being modified by a classifying adjective (or noun), refer to the type of education, knowledge and understanding in general. An individual instance of human understanding sounds strange as in ‘He has a human understanding of Japanese history’ because *human understanding* refers to the whole of human knowledge as in ‘The existence of God is beyond human understanding.’ In the same way, *teacher education* is not expected to be individuated, and an individual instance is referred to as a *teacher education program* (or *course*).

The corpus data show that qualitative adjectives allow abstract noncount nouns to accept *a/an* more than classifying adjectives. Types of adjectives influence the acceptability of *a/an*, but nevertheless they do not determine the use of *a/an* or Ø. *Great education*, *working knowledge* and *clearer understanding* show a very high acceptability of *a/an* (90.6%, 90.2%, 96.3% respectively), but this does not mean that they accept *a/an* because they are modified by a particular adjective (*great*, *working*, *clearer*). They can be used with Ø as well. The use of *a/an* is determined by two conditions: 1) whether the noun refers to a particular entity; 2) whether the speaker wants to emphasize its particular nature.

What makes a referent particular is determined by boundedness in physical, temporal or type (quality) space. Abstract nouns that refer to a person's attribute are generally conceptualized in physical and/or temporal space when they gain a count use. They accept *a/an* when they allow an episodic interpretation, i.e. being construed as an event that takes place at a particular time and place, or occupying a particular location in physical and temporal spaces.

Abstract nouns can be divided into four types: a state of affairs (*pregnancy, silence*), activity (*abortion, increase*), mental activity (*love, education, knowledge, understanding*), and quality (*beauty, intelligence*). The state type and the activity type generally allow an episodic interpretation. They gain a count sense when they are construed as a temporally bounded event with an initial and a final state (15–18). The mental activity type can also gain a count sense when they allow an episodic interpretation. *Love* and *education* can be used as a count noun when it refers to a loving relation and a learning experience of someone respectively (19–22). The quality type does not generally allow an episodic interpretation. They gain a count sense in three ways: referring to (i) an anthropomorphic transformation (23, 24), (ii) a quality that is attributed to an individual entity (25, 26), (iii) an individual experience (27).

- 15) After **a short silence** in which they both stood there awkwardly, he said, impatient again, “Faye must be ready by now! Let’s go back.” (BNC)
- 16) There was another of **those silences**. (BNC)
- 17) By 1983 the National Health Service was employing more than 800,000 staff, **an increase** of a quarter over the total in the early 1970s. (BNC)
- 18) Doubt has also been cast on the scale of **supposed increases** in crime in early nineteenth-century England, since **these increases** coincided with the rapid expansion of the police and changing attitudes towards lawbreaking. (BNC)
- 19) Their friendship blossomed when they met again at the funeral and developed into **a love** that was to stretch across forty years of marriage. (BNC)
- 20) La Fille Mal Gardée of 1789 was the first ballet to display the lives and **loves** of peasants and farmers. (BNC)
- 21) Over 80% of managers have had **a college education**, half of them studying liberal arts subjects. (BNC)
- 22) Wealthy benefactors from Manhattan’s Perfumed Stockade to the Hollywood Hills have embraced whole classrooms of inner-city kids, guaranteeing them **college educations** if only they’ll finish high school. (COCA)
- 23) She was **a beauty** and he’d often wanted to steal a kiss, but had had enough sense not to try. (BNC)
- 24) “I turned up for the interview, amid **all these Bond beauties**, in my tight black jersey dress on a really hot day, with false nails and false eyelashes sliding down my face,” Julie recalls with a smile. (BNC)
- 25) Even though her hitherto slim figure was heavy with child, there was **a beauty** about her, a certain dignity, that made him proud. (BNC)
- 26) I love Moscow, and I think **its beauties** are many. (BNC)
- 27) The decisive goal in the dying seconds of the first half was **a beauty**. (BNC)

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*Great education* in (28) refers to an interesting experience, which is spatio-temporally bounded, and accepts *a/an*. *Great education* in (29) refers to the education Bobby Farnham received at Brown University, which is spatio-temporally bounded. *Great education* in (30) does not refer to someone's experience, but to the type of education provided by a particular college. The emphasis is on the quality of the education that is attributed to a particular college. *College education* in (30) accepts *a/an* because its particular quality (or nature) is emphasized, being compared to other educational programs provided by other colleges. *Great education* in (31) refers to no particular instance, but to various types and levels of education many young men have had, which makes  $\emptyset$  acceptable. It is not the adjective *great*, but the particular, individual nature of the referent, that motivates the use of *a/an*.

- 28) Working with those people was **a great education**. (BNC)
- 29) So why does Bobby Farnham do this? He's from a wealthy family, has **a great education**. Why does he subject himself to the pain, to the dank hotel rooms and long bus rides and constant up-and-down life of a player on the fringe of the NHL? (COCA)
- 30) The most important payoff that a college is supposed to deliver is **a great education**. But as yet there aren't any reliable measures of what students learn. So to judge the quality of a school's education, MONEY relied on indicators that higher-ed experts say are the most reliable and highly correlated with later life success. (COCA)
- 31) A room full of young men, not necessarily with **great education** but with tremendous involvement. (COCA)

*Working knowledge* refers to a certain level of knowledge that is satisfactory for a particular purpose as in (32). The particular nature of the purpose and the particular level of knowledge motivate the use of *a/an*. In the context where the purpose or the level does not have a particular nature, *knowledge* accepts  $\emptyset$  as in (33). In the same way, *working knowledge* in (34) and (35) does not have a particular nature, referring to different levels of knowledge in (34) and a type of knowledge in general that is useful in elementary, middle and high schools in (35). The corpus data show that *working knowledge* is highly likely to be used with *a/an*, but it is not the adjective *working*, but the particular nature of the knowledge that makes *a/an* acceptable.

- 32) When doing research on euthanasia, for example, you had to have **a working knowledge** of the German legal system; you can't grasp court papers unless you know how the system functions. (COCA)
- 33) Dave had **working knowledge** of everyone present and a rapport with most. (COCA)
- 34) It may also be the case that the measure we employed to assess **general working knowledge** of HIV transmission was inadequate, and that in fact, these participants did not have sufficient levels of general knowledge to reinforce healthy choices. (COCA)
- 35) Bain (1990) and Lawson (1985a) have noted that practitioners employed in the elementary, middle and high schools prefer **working knowledge** that blends the scientific, empirically derived with the practical and experientially gained. (COCA)

*Clearer understanding* in (36) refers to a particular level of understanding, with which their propositions are seen from a new perspective. On the other hand, that in (37) refers to various levels of understanding that each one of many people expect to attain. It is not the adjective *clearer* but the particular nature of the understanding that makes *a/an* acceptable.

- 36) Sociologists and social anthropologists now have **a clearer understanding** of the nature of their propositions, seeing them as attempts to provide interpretative accounts of one social group's ways of living to another group, which has a different set of values and assumptions. (BNC)
- 37) The number of different translations available today is a great advantage for reaching different ages. Many in my church prefer the Message translation for **clearer understanding** of scripture, including my 51-year-old pastor. My 13-year-old granddaughter prefers the NIV Student Bible because, as she says, "it just makes more sense to me." (COCA)

The corpus data indicate that abstract noncount nouns are more likely to accept  $\emptyset$  than *a/an* when modified by classifying adjectives (or attributive nouns). For example, *sex education*, *medical knowledge* and *human understanding* show a very low acceptability of *a/an* (0.6%, 0.7%, 0.9% respectively) as in (38–40). Nevertheless, classifying adjectives allow the use of *a/an* when the noun refers to a particular instance as in (41–43). *Sex education* in (41) refers to a particular program or course that is distinguished from other programs such as comprehensive sex education. In the same way, *certain medical knowledge* in (42) refers to a particular level of knowledge, and *human understanding* in (43) refers to a particular type (or level) of understanding.

- 38) Most of the Pakistani mothers I asked were against **sex education** in school. (BNC)
- 39) Advances **in medical knowledge** might lead to the conclusion that some are simply too dangerous: there has long been a debate about the status of boxing, with increasing knowledge of the risks of brain damage to boxers. (BNC)
- 40) In fact, the Word of God is by definition beyond **human understanding**. (COCA)
- 41) Parents are between a rock and a hard place. Both parents are working today, and many parents did not have — were not given the skills on how to communicate to their children, and so I think it's important that — that we have **a sex education**, certainly not like what — I certainly would never support what SIECUS talks about when they say **comprehensive sex education**. (COCA)
- 42) A kidney transplant isn't a small thing, that's for sure. You need a surgery room, complex medical equipment, dialysis machinery, **a certain medical knowledge**. (COCA)
- 43) Jesus God chose to take the form of a man in order that we might have **a human understanding** of some aspects of the nature of God. (*A Quest for Truth and Wisdom* by Robert Wilson)

*Education* can be used as a full count noun when conceptualized as spatio-temporally bounded, referring to an individual instance as in (44) and (45). *High school educations* in (44) refers to learning experiences of more than one person, and *college educations* in (45), being modified by a numeral *three*, referring to three different learning experiences that three children are expected to have at college. *Knowledge* can be used as a full count noun as well when conceptualized in type

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space, referring to different types of knowledge as in (46) and (47) or bodies of knowledge on different subjects as in (48) and (49). Unlike *education*, the plural form of *knowledge* does not refer to individual instances in physical space (i.e. an attribute of a particular individual). You do not say: *\*Jill has an excellent knowledge of Greek and Liz has another, \*They both have excellent knowledges of Greek* (Huddleston et al. 2002: 339).

- 44) "One of the challenges of working in these environments," explains Stoltzfus, "was that there were not many university-trained psychologists to employ. We needed to devise ways to measure child development that could be implemented by people with **high-school educations** and no formal knowledge of psychology. It took considerable training." (COCA)
- 45) Back then, Akiko never questioned her decision to quit teaching, confident that they could send three children to private schools on her husband's salary. [...] While far from impoverished, the Morimotos are miles from where they imagined they would be. Their home has fallen dramatically in value. They keep their savings in low-interest accounts rather than risk another disastrous go at the stock market. They take camping trips instead of vacations abroad. And they wonder how they'll ever fund **three college educations** and their own retirement. (COCA)
- 46) By this assertion it is assumed that our knowledge is a construction of many facets (Bettencourt, 1993). When we can begin to separate the components, we have a basis for teaching knowledge more reliably. Therefore, **three distinct knowledges** were differentiated for this study: declarative, procedural, and schematic. Metacognitive knowledge is an additional component but was not examined as part of this research. (COCA)
- 47) That **certain types of knowledge** can be applied effectively in so many different contexts and can endure is a challenge for the sociology of knowledge. Even where knowledge appears the same though, there is often a difference in the way it is applied and understood. The contradiction between **knowledges** emerges in everyday life which is also a context characterized by the repair of such contradictions. (BNC)
- 48) Following Althusser's suggestion that a historical problematic might be altogether invisible even to experiencing subjects, in *The Order of Things* Foucault analyses what he provocatively calls 'the historical a priori' according to which **the knowledges** of grammar, natural history and wealth, and their epistemic replacements, philology, biology, and political economy, were structured. (BNC)
- 49) However, in the researchers' view, there was a variability among these teachers in (a) the extent to which they were able to use the skills and knowledge that were part of the university program, and (b) their effectiveness in helping students attain quality movement responses. Based on whether they were able to use the skills and **knowledges** fostered at the university, the teachers clearly fell into two clusters. Five of the teachers exemplified partial incorporation of skills and **knowledges** fostered by the university, and one teacher, Everett, showed a more comprehensive incorporation of the skills and **knowledges** fostered at the university. (COCA)

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Grammars claim that abstract noncount nouns often accept *a/an* when they are premodified by an adjective and/or postmodified by an adjective clause or phrase, but modification alone (i.e. whether a noun is modified or not) does not influence the acceptability of *a/an*. The corpus data indicate that the acceptability of *a/an* with abstract noncount nouns that refer to an attribute of a person cannot be explained syntactically. An abstract noun accepts *a/an* when the particular, individual nature of the referent is emphasized. It depends on a speaker's intention whether to use *a/an* or  $\emptyset$ . When they have a particular referent in mind and if they want to emphasize its particular nature, they choose *a/an* rather than  $\emptyset$ . *A/an* is used not because a noun is modified. It is the other way around: The speaker uses *a/an* because they have a particular referent in mind, and they modify the noun because they feel it necessary to describe its particular nature. Hewson (1972: 106) says:

The grammarians have observed that a modifying adjective or adjective phrase juxtaposed to the noun may call into play the use of the article, and one might presume from this that an adjective *forces* the use of the article. This is not the case; again it is necessary to repeat that it is the representation sought by the speaker that causes the use of the article and rules cannot be deduced from the presence or absence of modifiers in the sentence.

Modification does not give a particular nature to the noun. It is *a/an* that gives an individual, particular nature. Modification does not force the use of *a/an*. It is the other way around: *a/an* forces the use of modification.

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