

SEMINAR 5B – NOUNS - NUMBER

- **Three main number classes of nouns: singular invariable, plural invariable, variable nouns; irregular plurals; foreign plurals; Compounds; Collective nouns**

The grammatical category of number (operating for example through subject-verb concord) requires that every noun form be understood grammatically as either **singular** (=denotes ‘one’) or **plural** (denotes ‘more than one’).

- **singular** = ‘one’ for C nouns; most proper nouns and undifferentiated mass for U nouns

e.g. This suit fits me and I’ll buy it.

- **plural** = ‘two or more’ for C nouns; some proper nouns (*the Alps*), and individual units that are seen as reflecting plural composition (*binoculars, goods*)

e.g. Three students are hoping you will see them.

We distinguish **three main number classes of nouns**:

- I. **Singular invariable nouns** = they have **only singular** form, i.e. U nouns (*gold, music*) and most proper nouns (*Thomas, Henry*)
- II. **Plural invariable nouns** = they occur **only in the plural**, i.e. *people, scissors*; also some proper nouns (*the Alps*); adjective heads – *the rich*
- III. **Variable nouns** = occur with either **singular or plural** number; they form the plural either regularly (-s) or are irregular (*foot – feet; child – children*), esp. nouns with foreign plurals

↓

I. SINGULAR INVARIABLE NOUNS

- abstract nouns normally have no plural – *dirt, homework, music* (but there are exceptions: *regrets, pleasures, etc.*)
- some can be reclassified as C nouns with specific meanings, e.g. beer – a beer (=a glass)
- some plurals express intensity, great quantity, e.g. the *snows* of Kilimanjaro

- proper nouns – *the Thames, Jane*

- these nouns **take a singular verb**

i) **news** – always *sg*

e.g. What's the news today? / Here *is* the news from the BBC.

ii) nouns ending in **–ics** denoting subjects, sciences

e.g. <i>mathematics</i>	<i>ethics</i>	<i>phonetics</i>
<i>athletics</i>	<i>gymnastics</i>	<i>linguistics</i>
<i>classics</i>	<i>physics</i>	

But! some can be ***sg*** or ***pl*** – they can denote both one's knowledge of the subject and the practical application of results, as in:

e.g. *Politics is* said to be the art of the impossible.
His *politics are* rather conservative. (= his political views)
Acoustics is a branch of physics.
The *acoustics in* the Festival Hall *are* very good.
Statistics is useful in language testing.
The unemployment *statistics are* disturbing.

iii) names of certain **diseases ending in –s** are usually treated as *sg*
e.g. *measles, mumps, shingles*

iv) names of **games ending in –s** + a *sg* verb

e.g. *billiards, darts, draughts*
Darts is becoming very popular.

v) names of **cities** – Athens / Brussels/ Naples *has* grown rapidly.

II. PLURAL INVARIABLE NOUNS

A) the so-called '**summation plurals**' – denote tools, instruments, some clothing consisting of two equal parts

i) **tools and instruments** – e.g. *glasses, spectacles, binoculars, scissors, tweezers, pincers, shears, compasses,*

ii) **articles of dress** – e.g. *braces, briefs, jeans, knickers, pants, pyjamas, shorts, tights, trousers, trunks*

We can count them using e.g. *a pair of... .., two pairs of...*

e.g. I like these trousers. They are just my size.

I have a new pair of jeans. – How much was it? / were they?

B) the so-called ‘**pluralia tantum**’ – nouns that, in a given sense, occur only in the plural and end in –s; they have plural concord!

e.g. <i>archives</i>	<i>funds</i>	<i>minutes (=the m. of a meeting)</i>
<i>arms (=weapons)</i>	<i>goods</i>	<i>savings</i>
<i>belongings</i>	<i>looks</i>	<i>spirits (=be in good spirits)</i>
<i>clothes</i>	<i>manners</i>	<i>surroundings</i>
<i>congratulations</i>	<i>odds</i>	<i>thanks</i>
<i>ashes</i>	<i>outskirts</i>	<i>valuables</i>
<i>contents</i>	<i>premises</i>	
<i>customs</i>	<i>remains</i>	
<i>earnings</i>		

C) Unmarked plural nouns: people, police, etc.

i) **people**

e.g. How many people are there in the world today?

There was only one person in the room.

There were many people in the room.

!! When ‘people’ means ‘nation’ it is a regular C noun:

e.g. The Japanese are *an* industrious *people*.

The English speaking *peoples* share a common language.

ii) **folk** – used in certain phrases (e.g. *country folk, island folk*) and in casual style (That’s all, *folks*.)

iii) **police + pl**

e.g. *The police have* caught the burglar.

He wants to join *the police*.

But! individual police officers: *a police officer*

a policeman / policemen

a policewoman / policewomen

iv) **cattle** – e.g. All his *cattle are* grazing in the field.

v) **livestock** (=animals kept on a farm) - e.g. Our livestock *are not* as numerous as they used to be.

vi) **vermin** – e.g. *These vermin cause* disease.

III. VARIABLE NOUNS

A) REGULAR PLURAL

- regular –s – three pronunciations (z, s, iz)
- spelling -es – e.g. *boxes, churches*
- nouns in –y with a preceding consonant – e.g. *sky – skies* but *day – days* (exception – the two *Germanys* – proper nouns have *pl – ys*)
- the apostrophe + -s is used in some nouns of unusual form or numerals:
e.g. in *the 1980 's, some PhD 's*

- nouns in –o have plurals:
 - a) –os – e.g. *bamboos, embryos, kangaroos, radios, studios, zoos, pianos, dynamos, kilos, solos, sopranos, photos*

 - b) –oes – e.g. *dominoes, echoes, heroes, potatoes, tomatoes, torpedoes, vetoes, embargoes, negroes*

 - c) –os or –oes – both plurals – *banjo, cargo, motto, volcano, tornado, buffalo*

B) IRREGULAR PLURALS

1) Voicing and –s plural

- /θ/ → /ðz/
e.g. *path /θ/ - paths /ðz/*
mouth /θ/ - mouths /ðz/

! but with a consonant before –th the pronunciation is regular /θs/ -
births, berths, lengths

- nouns in –f or –fe → /vz/

e.g. <i>calf – calves</i>	<i>life – lives</i>	<i>thief - thieves</i>
<i>half – halves</i>	<i>loaf – loaves</i>	<i>wife - wives</i>
<i>knife – knives</i>	<i>self – selves</i>	<i>wolf - wolves</i>
<i>leaf – leaves</i>	<i>shelf - shelves</i>	

! both regular and irregular pl. are possible with:

<i>dwarf</i>	<i>wharf</i>	<i>scarf</i>
<i>hoof</i>	<i>handkerchief</i>	

! other nouns ending in -f (fe) have regular pl.: *belief, chief, proof, safe, roof, cliff*

2) Mutation (=change of vowel)

e.g. <i>man – men</i>	<i>woman - women</i>
<i>foot – feet</i>	<i>tooth - teeth</i>
<i>goose – geese</i>	<i>louse - lice</i>
<i>mouse - mice</i>	

!! Compounds *Englishman / Englishmen* – have no difference in pronunciation = / ə /

!! *German* is not a compound – pl *Germans*

3) The –en plural

e.g. *child – children*
ox – oxen
brother – brethren – only in a religious context = a fellow member of a religious society

4) Zero plural

- these nouns have **the same spoken and written form in both sg and pl** – the **verb is singular or plural**

e.g. *This sheep is* ours.
These sheep are ours.

i) animal names

- regular plural – bird, hen, monkey
- usually reg. plural – crab, duck
- both reg. and zero pl. – fish, herring, reindeer
- usually zero – bison, salmon
- always zero – sheep, deer, cod

ii) **nationality nouns in -ese**

e.g. one Chinese – five Chinese
or Japanese, Vietnamese

iii) **quantitative nouns** (e.g. dozen, hundred, thousand, million)

e.g. *three dozen glasses, two hundred people*
!! but *dozens of glasses, hundreds of people, millions of inhabitants*

iv) **nouns which plural same as singular** – some words ending in –s do not change in the plural

e.g. barracks - *This barracks is new.*
These barracks are new.

crossroads – *This is a busy crossroads.*
There are several crossroads here.

series – *This new series is good.*
These new series are good.

species – *This species is now extinct.*
These species are now extinct.

works = factory (e.g. steelworks)

means = The quickest *means* of travel *is* by plane.
There are several means of transport on the island.

C) FOREIGN PLURALS

- from Latin, French, Greek, Italian,....

i) **nouns in –us /əs/ → plural –i /ai/**

e.g. *stimulus, alumnus, bacillus, locus, focus, fungus, syllabus, nucleus, cactus*

some can both plurals: *focus, fungus, cactus*

ii) **nouns in –a /ə/ → plural –ae /i:/ or /ai/**

e.g. *alumna, formula, antenna, vertebra, alga*

iii) **nouns in –um /əʊm/ → plural –a /ə/**

e.g. *curriculum, bacterium, erratum, stratum,*

some can have both plurals: *maximum, medium, memorandum,
symposium, millennium*

iv) **nouns in –ex, -ix → plural –ices /isi:z/**

e.g. appendix, index, matrix

!! appendix – appendixes	or	appendices
index – indexes	or	indices

v) **nouns in –is → plural –es /i:z/**

e.g. *analysis, basis, crisis, hypothesis, thesis, axis, diagnosis, synopsis*

vi) **nouns in –on /ən/ → plural –a /ə/**

e.g. *criterion, phenomenon, automaton*

vii) **French nouns**

either retain their French plural or have regular English plurals:

e.g. *bureau – bureaux /əu/ or bureaus /əuz/*

viii) **Italian nouns in –o → plural –i /i/**

e.g. *tempo, virtuoso, libretto*

ix) **Hebrew nouns**

e.g. *kibbutz – kibbutzim or kibbutzes
cherub – cherubim or cherubs
seraph – seraphim or seraphs*

COMPOUNDS

- consist of more than one base – these nouns form the plural in different ways

a) plural in the last element

e.g. <i>babysitters</i>	<i>take-offs</i>
<i>breakdowns</i>	<i>forget-me-nots</i>
<i>close-ups</i>	<i>spoonfuls</i>
<i>grown-ups</i>	<i>merry-go-rounds</i>
<i>sit-ins</i>	<i>lay-bys</i>

b) plural in the first element

e.g. <i>commanders-in-chief</i>	<i>mothers-in-law</i>
<i>men-of-war</i>	<i>coats-of-arm</i>
<i>coats-of-mail</i>	<i>lookers-on</i>
<i>passers-by</i>	
<i>runners-up</i>	

c) appositional compounds

either both elements are plural if the second is man, woman

e.g. *a woman doctor* – *women doctors*
a manservant - *menservants*

or just the last element is plural

e.g. *a lady singer* – *lady singers*
a boy friend - *boy friends*

COLLECTIVE NOUNS

Singular words such *family, team, government* (refer to groups of people) can be use with singular or plural verbs.

e.g. This *team is / are* going to lose.

Plural forms – when the group is considered as a collection of people doing certain personal things (deciding, hoping, wanting)

Singular forms – when the group is seen as an impersonal unit

e.g. The *government, who are* hoping to ease export restrictions,

The *government, which is* elected

My *family* have decided to move to
The average British *family* has 3 – 6 members.

Other collective nouns: *choir, class, club, committee, firm, jury, orchestra, public, staff, union*

Football teams: Arsenal *is / are* playing on Saturday.

Some nouns have in the plural another meaning!

e.g. colour – *colours* (barvy v. prapor)
custom – *customs* (zvyky v. clo)
iron – *irons* (žehličky v. pouta)
pain – *pains* (úsilí)
minute – *minutes* (minuty v. zápis ze schůze)
manner – *manners* (způsoby v. společenské chování)
picture – *pictures* (obrázky v. kino)
spirit – *spirits* (nálada)

Further notes:

Numbers

- singular forms (hundred, thousand, million etc.) have plural meanings – they have no final *-s* and *of* is not used:

e.g. five *hundred* pounds (but *hundreds of* pounds)
a few *million* years (but *millions of* years)
three *thousand* people (but *thousands of* people)

Also: a five-*pound* note (not pounds)
six two-*hour* lessons

Also: *dozen* – three *dozen* cookies
half a *dozen* eggs (but dozens of times)

Quantifying expressions

- many can be used with plural nouns, pronouns; plural verbs are normally used:

e.g. *A number of people* have tried to find the treasure, but they have failed.
A group of us are going to travel about Europe.
The majority of criminals are non-violent.
Half of his students don't understand a word he says.

Careful about the influence of Czech!

e.g. There *were* a hundred people. (not ~~was~~)

Amounts and quantities

- we usually use sg determiners, verbs, pronouns

e.g. Where is that five pounds I lent you?

Twenty miles is a long way to walk.

Two hundred pounds is a lot to spend on a dress.

Countries

- The United States is anxious to improve its image in Latin America.