

# Contemporary Grammar of English

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### Asst. Prof. Mahdi Alasadi

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Lecture 25:

- Number





# Number Classes



The English number system constitutes a two-term contrast: SINGULAR, which denotes 'one', and PLURAL, which denotes 'more than one'. Each noun phrase is either singular or plural, and its number is determined in general by its head, which is typically a noun. In the following slides we will concentrate on number as a property of nouns, and as a basis for their classification.

In addition to singular and plural number, we may distinguish dual number in the case of **both**, **either**, and **neither**. since they can only be used with reference to two. **Both** has plural concord; **either** and **neither** have singular concord:

- Either the Mayor or his deputy is bound to come.
- Neither he nor his wife has/have arrived. [In speech it is more natural with “have”]

Proximity principle is to be used when the coordinated noun phrases have different numbers. The general rule, here, is that the number of the verb is determined by the number of the last or closest noun phrase.

- Either the workers or the foreman is to blame for the disruption.
- Either the foreman or the workers are to blame for the disruption.



# Number Classes



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

- 1. SINGULAR INVARIABLE NOUNS** including noncount nouns (concrete and abstract) like (music, gold), most proper nouns (Thomas, the Thames). We may also consider here abstract adjective heads, (the true, the beautiful).
- 2. PLURAL INVARIABLE NOUNS**, i.e. nouns occurring only in the plural, for example people, scissors. We may also consider here personal adjective heads, (the rich)
- 3. VARIABLE NOUNS**, i.e. nouns occurring with either singular or plural number. Here, we distinguish two subclasses: (Regular, with plurals predictable from the singular (like dog), (Irregular, where the plural is not predictable (foot -feet, child-children). In this latter group we find a large number of nouns with foreign plurals, (criterion - criteria, analysis - analyses.)



# Singular Invariable Nouns



Noncount nouns are singular and invariable, i.e. they have no plural. Some concrete noncount nouns can be reclassified as count nouns with specific meanings, for example **butters** ['kind(s) of butter'] and **a beer** ['a glass of beer'].

Abstract noncount nouns normally have no plural: **music**, **dirt**, **homework**, etc. But some can be reclassified as count nouns where they refer to an instance of a given abstract phenomenon: **injustices**, **regrets**, **kindnesses**, **pleasures**, etc. Many abstract nouns are equally at home in the count and noncount categories.

Proper nouns are typically singular and invariable: **Henry**, **the Thames**, etc.

Some noncount nouns, particularly those denoting natural phenomena, may be pluralized, for example:

walking through the woods

I have serious doubts/grave fears.

raise someone's hopes

Let's play on the sands.

Some plurals express intensity, great quantity or extent, and have a literary flavor, for example:

- the snows of Kilimanjaro
- the sands of the desert
- sailing on the great waters



# Singular Invariable Nouns



Note the following classes of invariable nouns ending in -S which take a singular verb, except where otherwise mentioned:

- News is always singular:
  - The news is bad today.
  - Here is the news from the BBC.
- Subject names ending in -ics: linguistics, mathematics, phonetics, statistics.
  - Mathematics is the science of quantities.

Some, however, can be singular or plural, in particular when such words can denote both one's knowledge of the subject and the practical application of results :

- His politics are rather conservative. [political views]
- These statistics show that exports are still low.
- Some diseases: measles, German measles, mumps, rickets, shingles.
  - Mumps is a viral disease.
  - Rickets is a condition that affects bone development in children.
- Some games: billiards, bowls, darts, dominoes, draughts, checkers, fives, ninepins
- Some proper nouns: Algiers, Athens, Marseilles, Naples, Brussels, Flanders ....



# Plural Invariable Nouns/ Summation plurals



Summation plurals denote tools, instruments, and articles of dress consisting of two equal parts which are joined together:

The most common summation plurals are the following:

- (i) Tools and instruments: bellows; glasses, spectacles, binoculars; scales ['a balance']; clippers, forceps, pincers, scissors, shears, tongs, tweezers.
- (ii) Articles of dress: braces (BrE) breeches, britches (AmE), briefs, pannels, jeans, knickers, pants, pajamas (AmE), pyjamas (BrE), shorts, slacks, suspenders, tights, trousers, trunks.

Number contrast can be achieved by means of **a pair of**. Thus **a pair of trousers** refers to one item, but **two pairs of trousers** refers to two.

*That's a nice pair of slacks.*

*As I'm shortsighted I always carry two pairs of glasses.*



# Plural Invariable Nouns/ Pluralia Tantum



Some 'pluralia tantum' (i.e. nouns that, in a given sense, occur only in the plural) end in -S, whereas others have no plural marking, like : **people**. They have plural concord, for example:

- These damages have not yet been paid, have they? [damages = 'compensation in money imposed by law for causing loss or injury']

In many cases, pluralia tantum ending in -S also have singular forms, which however can be dissociated in meaning from the plural, for example:

- That damage was repaired long ago. [damage = 'loss, harm']

Other examples of pluralia tantum:

**accommodations** (AmE) : living accommodations

**amends**: make every/all possible amends for something

**annals** ['a historical record of events']: in the annals of history

**archives**: The documents should be kept in the archives. (BUT: archive administration)

**arms** ['weapons']: arms aid; arms control; the arms race; take up arms;

For other examples check your book pages 82-83.



# Plural Invariable Nouns/ Unmarked plural nouns



The following nouns have no plural marking but are used as plurals (also collective nouns like **clergy**, **staff**.... etc.)

(i) **people**: How many people are there in the world today?

People functions as the normal plural of person :

*There was only one person* } *in the room.*  
*There were many people* }

**Persons** is often used instead of **people**, especially in official style: '**a person or persons unknown**'. When **people** means 'nation', it is a regular count noun:

- *the English-speaking peoples*

In this sense, however, the singular form **people** is normally constructed with plural concord:

- *The Portuguese people have chosen a new President.*

(ii) **Folk** is more restricted in use than **people**: country folk, fisher folk, island folk, folk art, folk music. **Folks** is used in casual style (That's all folks) and often with a possessive determiner in the sense of 'family' (my folks).



# Plural Invariable Nouns/ Unmarked plural nouns



(iii) **police:** *'The police have caught the burglar.'*

To denote individual police officers we normally use **a police officer**, or **a policeman/policewoman** with the plurals **police officers**, **policemen**, **policewomen**:

- *Why don't you ask a policeman?*

**In a collective sense 'the police force', only police can be used:**

- *He wants to join the police. [NOT in this sense, the policemen]*

(iv) **cattle:** *'All his cattle were grazing in the field.'*

(v) **poultry ['farmyard birds']:** *'Where are your poultry?'*

**But it is treated as singular in the sense of 'meat':** *'Poultry is harder to come by nowadays than beef.'*

(vi) **livestock ['animals kept on a farm']:** *'Our livestock are not as numerous as they used to be.'*

(vii) **vermin:** *'These vermin cause disease.'*