



CATEGORY OF GRAMMATICAL NUMBER IN ENGLISH

Submission Date: December 02, 2023, **Accepted Date:** December 06, 2023,

Published Date: December 11, 2023

Crossref doi: <https://doi.org/10.37547/philological-crjps-04-12-06>

Journal Website:
<https://masterjournals.com/index.php/crjps>

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ABSTRACT

In linguistics, grammatical number is a morphological category characterized by the expression of quantity through inflection or agreement. Modern English like most other languages distinguishes two numbers: singular and plural. The meaning of singular and plural seems to be self-explanatory, that is the opposition: one and more than one. With all this, expression of number in different classes of English nouns presents certain difficulties for a foreigner to master.

KEYWORDS

Category of grammatical number, singular and plural nouns, grammatical and stylistic features of plural nouns.

INTRODUCTION

Countable nouns (or count nouns) are common nouns that can take a plural, can combine with numerals or quantifiers (e.g. "one", "two", "several", "every", "most"), and can take an indefinite article ("a" or "an"). Examples of countable nouns are "chair", "nose", and "occasion". Uncountable nouns (or mass nouns)

differ from countable nouns in precisely that respect: they can't take plural or combine with number words or quantifiers. Examples from English include "laughter", "cutlery", "helium", and "furniture". For example, it is not possible to refer to "a furniture" or "three furnitures". This is true, even though the furniture referred to could,



in principle, be counted. Thus the distinction between mass and count nouns shouldn't be made in terms of what sorts of things the nouns refer to, but rather in terms of how the nouns present these entities. The separate page for mass noun contains further explanation of this point. Some words function in the singular as a count noun and, without a change in the spelling, as a mass noun in the plural: she caught a fish, we caught fish; he shot a deer, they shot some deer; the craft was dilapidated, the pier was chockablock with craft.

In linguistics, grammatical number is a morphological category characterized by the expression of quantity through inflection or agreement. As an example, consider sentences below:

That apple on the table is fresh.

Those two apples on the table are fresh.

The number of apples is marked on the noun "apple", singular number (one item) vs. "apples", plural number (more than one item), on the demonstrative, "that/those", and on the verb, "is/are". Note that, especially in the second sentence, this information can be considered redundant, since quantity is already indicated by the numeral "two".

A language has grammatical number when its nouns are subdivided into morphological classes according to the quantity they express, such that:

Every noun belongs to a single number class. (Number partitions nouns into disjoint classes.)

Noun modifiers (such as adjectives) and verbs have different forms for each number class, and must be inflected to match the number of the nouns they refer to. (Number is an agreement category.)

This is the case in English: every noun is either singular or plural (a few, such as "fish", can be either, according to context), and at least some modifiers of nouns namely the demonstratives, the personal pronouns, the articles, and verbs are inflected to agree with the number of the nouns they refer to: "this car" and "these cars" are correct, while "this cars" or "these car" are ungrammatical.

Not all languages have number as a grammatical category. In those that do not, quantity must be expressed directly, with numerals, or indirectly, through optional quantifiers. However, many of these languages compensate for the lack of grammatical number with an extensive system of measure words.

Modern English like most other languages distinguishes two numbers: singular and plural. The meaning of singular and plural seems to be self-explanatory, that is the opposition: one and more than one. With all this, expression of number in different classes of English nouns presents certain difficulties for a foreigner to master.

As already mentioned, plural and singular nouns stand in contrast as diametrically opposite. Instances are not few, however, when their opposition comes to be neutralised. And this is to



say that there are cases when the numeric differentiation appears to be of no importance at all. Here belong many collective abstract and material nouns. If, for instance, we look at the meaning of collective nouns, we cannot fail to see that they denote at the same time a plurality and a unit. They may be said to be doubly countable and thus from a logical point of view form the exact contrast to mass nouns: they are, in fact, at the same time singular and plural, while mass words are logically neither. The double-sidedness of collective nouns weakens the opposition and leads to the development of either *Pluralia tantum*, as in: weeds (in a garden), ashes, members, etc., or *Singularia tantum*, as in: wildfowl, clergy, foliage, etc.

In some cases usage fluctuates, and the two forms are interchangeable, e. g. brain or brains: he has no brains or little brains; victuals are more common than victual; oats than oat; similarly: His wages were high. How much wages does he get? That is a fair wage. They could not take too much pain.

The dual nature of collective nouns is shown linguistically in various ways: by the number of the verb or by the pronoun referring to it, as for instance, my family are early risers, they are already here. My family is not large.

It is important to observe that the choice between singular and plural depends on the meaning attached to the noun. Compare also: We have much fruit this year and the rich fruits of the

heroic labour of Soviet people are visible from all the corners of the earth.

Some nouns are always singular. These are nouns that designate substances (oxygen, copper), products (cheese, fish), a block of objects (furniture), some actions (hunting, clearing up), feelings (love, health), some vegetables and berries (potato, carrots).

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