

NUMBER

PLIN0020 ADVANCED  
SEMANTIC THEORY

## MARKED VS. UNMARKED

English nouns generally have two forms: unmarked/bare ('singular') and marked ('plural')

*room*

*rooms*

---

*woman*

*women*

*phenomenon*

*phenomena*

*it*

*them*

Some nouns only have one form.

- ▶ Unmarked-only: *fish, sheep, aircraft, Pokémon*. But:  
(1) *The fish is/are in the fish tank.*
- ▶ Marked-only ('pluralia tantum'): *trousers, dregs*

But the majority have two forms, unmarked and marked.

# TERMINOLOGY IS MISLEADING

Terminology like 'singular', 'plural' is misleading.

E.g. in many cases the unmarked form can be used as a mass noun.

- (2) a. *There is rope in the garage.*  
b. *There is a rope in the garage.*  
c. *There are ropes in the garage.*

Some nouns are always mass: *evidence, furniture, blood*

We'll also see later that 'plural' might not be quite right.

# COMMON MORPHOLOGY

- ▶ Suffixation, e.g. English *-s*, Turkish *-lar/ler*
- ▶ Apophony (word-internal sound change), e.g. *man-men*, *goose-geese*
- ▶ Suppletion, e.g. *čelovek-ljudi* in Russian
- ▶ Inflection, e.g. 'table' in Russian:

|       | Sg.           | Pl.           |
|-------|---------------|---------------|
| Nom   | <i>stol</i>   | <i>stoly</i>  |
| Acc   | <i>stol</i>   | <i>stoly</i>  |
| Gen   | <i>stola</i>  | <i>stolov</i> |
| Dat   | <i>stolu</i>  | <i>stolam</i> |
| Instr | <i>stolom</i> | <i>stolam</i> |
| Loc   | <i>stole</i>  | <i>stolax</i> |

- ▶ Reduplication, partial-reduplication
- ▶ Zero derivation

(see Corbett 2000:§5.3)

## DUAL, ETC.

Some languages have a three-way number distinction.

E.g. Upper Sorbian (Corbett 2000:20)

|                  | Sg.         | DI.           | Pl.          |
|------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1st              | <i>ja</i>   | <i>mój</i>    | <i>my</i>    |
| 2nd              | <i>ty</i>   | <i>wój</i>    | <i>vy</i>    |
| 'palace, castle' | <i>hród</i> | <i>hrodaj</i> | <i>hrody</i> |

See Corbett (2000:Ch.2) for trial and paucal, and the controversy about quadral.

*Greenberg (1963)'s Universal 34*: No language has a trial number unless it has a dual. No language has a dual unless it has a plural.

# GREATER PLURAL

Niger-Kordofanian (Corbett 2000: 31)

| Sg.          | Pl.         | Greater Pl.    | Translation |
|--------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| <i>ngesa</i> | <i>gese</i> | <i>geseeli</i> | 'field'     |
| <i>wuro</i>  | <i>gure</i> | <i>gureeli</i> | 'herd'      |

Is this really a number category on a par with singular and plural??

## GENERAL NUMBER

General number should be distinguished from singular.

General number nouns are compatible with plural reference, unlike singular nouns.

E.g. *hana* 'flower' in Japanese (cf. the plural form *hana-bana*).

Baiso has both singular and general number (Corbet 2000:11).

| Sg.              | Pauc.           | Pl.              | GenNum       | Translation |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------|-------------|
| <i>lubántiti</i> | <i>lubanjaa</i> | <i>lubanjool</i> | <i>lúban</i> | 'lion'      |

Same Q as above: Can these number categories be treated on a par morphosyntactically?

## SINGULATIVE

Corbett (2000:17) remarks that no language has just singular and general number.

But you can find this pattern for a subset of nouns in some languages, e.g. Arbore (Corbett 2000:17).

| Singulative     | GenNum       | Translation |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| <i>tiis-in</i>  | <i>tíise</i> | 'maize cob' |
| <i>lassa-n</i>  | <i>lásse</i> | 'bread'     |
| <i>nebel-in</i> | <i>nebel</i> | 'ostrich'   |

Note that the singular is marked ('singulative').



## COLLECTIVE

Welsh has a similar pattern except that the unmarked form is plural, or mass-y, in meaning ('collective'), rather than general number.

| Singulative      | Collective    | Translation |
|------------------|---------------|-------------|
| <i>cacyn-en</i>  | <i>cacwn</i>  | 'hornet'    |
| <i>picwn-en</i>  | <i>picwn</i>  | 'bee'       |
| <i>chwann-en</i> | <i>chwain</i> | 'flea'      |
| <i>dincod-yn</i> | <i>dincod</i> | 'seed'      |
| <i>cneu-en</i>   | <i>cnau</i>   | 'nut'       |

(Grimm 2020, 586)

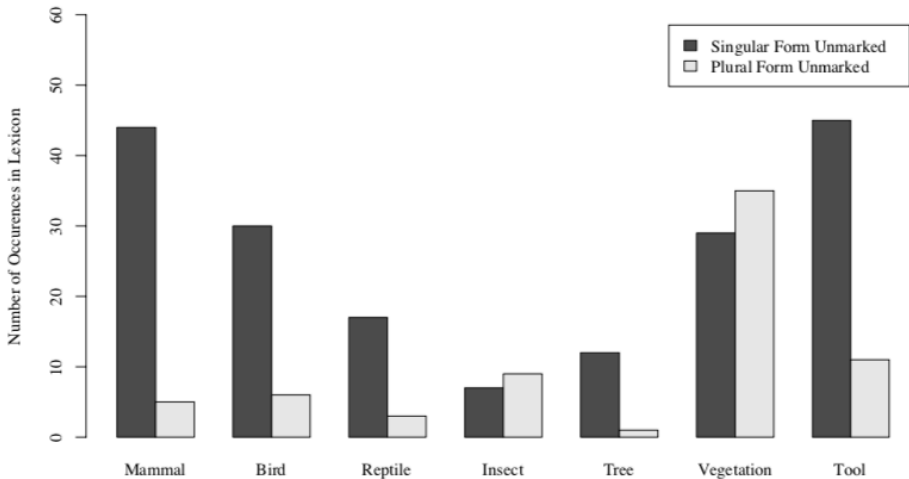
These nouns tend to describe concepts that are usually instantiated by groups.

# INVERSE NUMBER

Dagaar has an inverse number system where the same morpheme is used as a singulative or plural marker depending on the noun.

| Sg.           | Pl.           | Translation |
|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| <i>bíé</i>    | <i>bíí-rí</i> | 'child'     |
| <i>nàṅá</i>   | <i>nàn-ní</i> | 'scorpion'  |
| <i>bí-rì</i>  | <i>bíè</i>    | 'seed'      |
| <i>lúg-rì</i> | <i>lúgó</i>   | 'pillar'    |

(Grimm, ms.)



(Grimm, ms.)

## PAIR NOUNS

Slovenian distinguishes three number categories: singular, dual, plural

But for things that naturally occur in pairs, plural is often used to describe two instances that form a pair.

- (3) *Noge me bolijo.*  
feet.PL me hurts  
'My feet hurt.'

(Derganc 2003:172)

Dual seems to generate an extra inference (needs to be investigated).

Exception: when *two* or *both* is present.

Hungarian uses singular for similar cases.

## MORPH. VS. SEM. MARKEDNESS

In the above examples, the pattern seems to be: the unmarked form is used to describe more canonical cases, and the marked form is used to describe more surprising cases.

We can see this as an alignment between 'morphological markedness' and 'semantic markedness'.

This makes sense from the perspective of Game Theory.

UNMARKED PLURAL

## UNMARKED PLURAL

Morphologically plural nouns are not always semantically plural.

- (4) *This coat has pockets.*
- (5) a. *This coat does not have pockets.*  
b. *If you have coins in your pocket, put them on the tray.*  
c. *We should clean up the mess, before customers arrive.*

'Plural nouns' in some languages are really plural and don't behave like this, e.g. Western Armenian (Bale & Khanjian 2014).

## PARTIAL PLURALITY

Sometimes you see a bit of plurality, but not full-blown plurality.

(6) *Every passenger checked in their suitcases.*

# if every passenger has exactly one suitcase, but fine if at least one passenger has more than one.

Similarly:

- (7) a. *This email is sent to every professor who's supervising PhD students.*  
b. *Exactly one of my PhD students has published journal papers.*



# THEORIES OF UNMARKED PLURALS

Some have proposed an ambiguity view (Farkas & De Swart 2010, Grimm 2013): a 'plural noun' in English is ambiguous between general number and plural.

But this can't account for the partial plurality data from the previous slide.

Many pursue a competition-based analysis:

- ▶ Singular means singular.
- ▶ Plural is general number.
- ▶ You have to use Sg. whenever you can mean what you mean with it.

There are many variants of this idea (Mayr 2015, Sauerland 2003, 2008, Spector 2007).

## DUAL

How do other number categories work in relevant grammatical contexts?

Marušič, Žaucer, Nevins & Sudo (2020) ran some acceptability judgment experiments.

- (8) *Vsak moški je opral svoj-a avtomobil-a*  
every man AUX washed self's-DL car-DL  
'Every man washed his cars.DL'

Results:

- ▶ Unacceptable if some men have only one car.
- ▶ Perfect if every man has two cars.
- ▶ Intermediate if some men have two cars, other have three
- ▶ Intermediate if every man has three cars

## POSSIBLE ESSAY TOPICS

- ▶ The semantics of different number categories, and competition effects.
- ▶ Morphological markedness vs. semantic markedness
- ▶ Mass/count
- ▶ Classifiers (nominal, verbal)
- ▶ Number in the verbal domain