

Consistent anomalies in the grammatical number of nouns: an overview

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Outline

- Grammatical number and its complexities
- Lexical plurals: synchronic and diachronic approaches
- Pluralia and singularia tantum: synchronic and diachronic approaches
- Plural dominant nouns and the frequency to polysemy continuum
- Conclusions

Quantity and Number

«Grammatical number is one of the manifestations of the more general linguistic category of quantity (see Linguistic Category), along with its lexical manifestation ("lexical number"), such as numerals or as quantitative expressions in other parts of speech (cf. "hundred", "single", "many", "full", etc.).» (Vinogradov, 1990: 583, own translation)

Grammatical number

The simplest system is based on an opposition contrasting a **singular** and a **plural** value:

singular	plural
cat	cats

Cross-linguistically more complex systems involving more values can be found (dual; trial; paucal, see Corbett, 2000)

Grammatical number

singular	
word form	relative frequency (NKRJ)
<i>стол</i> “table”	<u>363.57</u> (ipm)
<i>сестра-а</i> “sister”	<u>130.7</u> (ipm)
<i>лиц-о</i> “face”	<u>680.1</u> (ipm)

plural	
word form	relative frequency (NKRJ)
<i>стол-ы</i>	<u>27.62</u> (ipm)
<i>сестр-ы</i>	<u>39.41</u> (ipm)
<i>лиц-а</i>	<u>229.59</u> (ipm)

singular	
word form	relative frequency (CORIS)
<i>tavolo-o</i> “table”	<u>80.4</u> (ipm)
<i>pizz-a</i>	<u>7.44</u> (ipm)

plural	
word form	relative frequency (CORIS)
<i>tavol-i</i>	<u>12.41</u> (ipm)
<i>pizz-e</i>	<u>1.69</u> (ipm)

■ markedness (frequency, see Greenberg, 2005; Haspelmath, 2006)

Grammatical number

«NUMBER (gram.). A class of morphological inflectional categories, determining the functioning of nouns, pronouns, adjectives and verbs. The central category is the one concerning nouns.» (Žerebilo, 2010: 456, own translation)

красивое *лицо*

красивые *лица*

la pizza è buona

le pizze sono buone

■ Inherent inflection

■ Contextual inflection

(Booij, 2012)

Grammatical number: complexities

«The category of number in nouns represents a complex conceptual-semantic node in which different grammatical and lexical-semantic peculiarities of nouns are intertwined» (Vinogradov, 1986: 128, own translation)

1. Grammatical semantics (meaning of the grammatical values):

- singular: one / plural: many
- singular: uniqueness; universality; collectivity / plural: discrete plurality; collective plurality; distributive plurality (Vinogradov, 1990)
- Plural (semantically unmarked, see Bale et. al., 2011; Sauerland et. al., 2005):
 - generic; sortal; emphatic; associative (pronouns); indefinite (Plungjan, 2011)
 - hyperbolic, plural of complex objects; plural of divisible substance; plural of places; plural of time; plural of state; inherent state. (Potebnja, 1888)

Grammatical number: complexities

2. Lexical semantics and grammatical values:

1. Lexical plurals:

cat - cats



wine - wines



(Corbett 2000: 82)

Grammatical number: complexities

2. Singularia and Pluralia tantum nouns:

- Singularia tantum:

furniture - Ø

sadness - Ø

butter - Ø

aggregates;
abstract homogeneous substances;
concrete homogeneous substances.

(Acquaviva et. al. 2023)

- Pluralia tantum:

Ø - *trousers*

Ø - *measles*

Ø - *woods*

Ø - *clothes*

bipartites/internally complex objects;
places;
diseases;
aggregates of heterogeneous entities.

(Acquaviva et al. 2023;
Koptjevskaja-Tamm et al. 2001)

Lexical plurals

- mass - count distinction (“stuff” and “things”, see Kiss et. al., 2021: 1)

«[...] for nouns which are otherwise outside the number opposition, the forms that would be expected by the normal processes. English *wines* ‘sorts of wine’ is the plural one would expect.» (Corbett, 2000: 85)

две мысли пронизали мозг поэта
"two thoughts ran through the poet's mind"

Count reading

*это жители разных планет, разных
мышлений*
“they're from different planets, different
mindsets”

Sortal reading

Inflection or derivation

Inflection

- Obligatory
- Word forms are created

use - uses

сестра - сестры “*sister-sisters*”

~~*вино - вина*~~ “~~*wine-wines*~~”

(Reformatskij, 2018)

Derivation

- Non-obligatory
- Words are created

useless

сестра; сестры

вино; вина

(Fortunatov, 1956)

Other synchronic perspectives

mixed category

- Inflectional with derivational instances (Plungjan, 2011)
- Singular and plural are **lexical-semantic variants** of a same noun. (Soboleva, 1979)
- Lexical plurals; **compositional** - **non compositional/idiosyncratic** plural

«if the meaning of a plural noun cannot be completely inferred from the meaning of the base and the plural morpheme, the plurality of that noun is lexical in a semantic sense» (Acquaviva, 2008: 33)

chairs - *goods* (Alexiadou, 2021)

Lexicalization: synchrony

«The term LEXICALIZATION has been used for two very different phenomena. Synchronically it has been used for coding of conceptual categories. Diachronically it has been used variously for “adoption into the lexicon” or “falling outside the productive rules of grammar.”» (Brinton; Traugott, 2005: 18)

- A byproduct of lexicalization (the meaning of the constituents get lost, Booij, 2012)
- Lexicalization of plurals: substance and abstract nouns (Pivovarova, 2009; Škuropackaja, 2011)

1. *радость ≠ радости*

2. *беда - беды*

3. *отдых - *отдыхи:*

Хватит с меня этих отдыхов!

“I’ve had enough of these holidays!”
(Škuropackaja, 2011: 317)

Lexicalization: synchrony

- Lexicalization of Russian plural forms as a byproduct of conceptual derivation (Šemaeva, 2013)

- Italian double plurals as lexical plurals (Acquaviva, 2008)

Metonymic relations (Šemaeva, 2009):

- part - whole: *карта* - *карты*;

- material - product of that material:
мех (a) - *меха* (b);

- modality - event: *без* (a) - *бега* (b)

- multiplex - mass transformation;
(Velasco et al., 2005: 89):

(a) La mia mamma ha un dolore alle
ossa The.F.sg my.1POSS.F.sg mother.F.sg
have.3sg.PRES a.M.sg ache.M.sg in-the.F.pl bone.F.pl

(b) Ho dato gli **ossi** al cane
Have.1sg.PRES give.PP.M the.M.pl bone.M.pl to-
the.M.sg dog.M.sg

Lexicalization: diachrony

- Degrammaticalization of number leads to an active process of lexicalization: new or collective meaning (*капли 'жидкое лекарство'*, see Plungjan, 2011: 155)
- «Lexicalization of grammatical forms is a historical process, and its formulas should objectively reflect history, not the contemporary perception of semantic transformations.» (Degtjarev, 2014: 214, own translation)

A. Substance concepts:

B. Abstract concepts:

the plural does not share the same generic substance meaning, in isolation it develops new meanings.

the coexistence of the two senses in the singular is the result of a diachronic process of lexicalization (specifically by metonymy; see Apresjan 1974)

Lexicalization: diachrony

SINGULAR

1) il mio **amore** per gli altri è vero ‘my love for others is sincere’ - FEELING

2) il mio **amore** mi ha mollato per una donna ‘my love left me for a woman’ - LOVED PERSON

1) Моя **любовь** к этому фильму переросла в некую зависимость - ‘my love for this film has grown into a kind of addiction.’ FEELING

2) Понимаете? Моя **любовь** пенсионерка. Это смешно? - ‘you see? My love is a retired woman. That's funny?’ LOVED PERSON

PLURAL

1) Ø - FEELING

il mio nome ? Viene da due miei **amori**, Tracy e la birra (‘my name? It comes from my loves, Tracy and beer’) - LOVED PERSON

1) Ø - FEELING

2) Я рассказал, как потерял две **мои любви** и как сейчас пытаюсь спасти третью (‘I was telling how I lost my **two loves**, and now I am trying to save the third one’) - LOVED PERSON

Singularia and pluralia tantum

«Balenae, non balnea, contra quod privati dicano unum balneum, quod plura balnea non dicant» (Duso, 2017: 203)

«Pluralia tantum is interesting, first of all, from a comparative point of view, because if a language has an obligatory category of number, it does not necessarily have a group of pluralia tantum.» (Akaj, 2019: 266, own translation)

Pluralia tantum

Table 1. Frequency count of pluralia tantum in 41 languages of Europe

Meaning	Number of languages with pluralia tantum
'glasses'	24
'trousers'	22.5
'tongs'	20
'scissors'	19.5
'firewood'	14.5
'measles', 'Christmas'	14
'horse-race'	13.5
'money', 'slops'	13
'chicken-pox'	11.5
'gate', (major) place names	11
'christening'	10.5
'wedding', 'hide-and-peek'	10
'bran', 'sleigh', 'brain', 'door'	9.5
'organ'	9
'yeast', 'troubles'	8.5
'car(t)', 'sorcery'	8
'balance/scales', 'funeral', 'rake', 'childbirth'	7.5
'debate', 'jungle'	6.5
'mane', 'thickets'	6
'ashes', 'straw'	5.5
'flour', 'oat(s)'	5
'twilight', 'clock /watch'	4.5
'salad', 'twenty-four hours', 'ceiling'	4
'lunch'	3.5
'smoke', 'foam', 'wheat', 'ink'	3
'rye', 'saliva', 'cream'	2.5
'dung / manure', 'fat', 'shirt', 'south', 'laughter'	2
'anger, wrath'	1.5
'year'	1

(Koptevaskaja-Tamm; Wälchli, 2001: 631)

Singularia and pluralia tantum: approaches

- «The singularia and pluralia tantum have the peculiarity that they stand outside the grammatical category of number» (Reformatskij, 2018: 73, own translation)
- Defective nouns are semantically motivated and are disposed in a gradient (Wierzbicka, 1988)
- «The grammatical category of number and the group of pluralia tantum help to get a known idea of the ways of worldview and history.» (Akaj, 2019: 268, own translation)
- Objects of the same size are denoted by regular nouns; close languages do not share the same repertoire of defective nouns. (Koptevskaja-Tamm, 2004; Ljaševskaja, 2004)

Singularia and pluralia tantum: potentiality

- Singularia tantum have a potentially complete paradigm; pluralia tantum have a homonymous number value (*лай - лай*; **ножница - ножницы*, Zaliznjak, 2002: 58)
- Potentially full paradigm of Russian singularia tantum (from specialised contexts: *риск* “risk”; *продажа* “sale”, Gorbov, 2014)
- Modern pluralia tantum had a singular form: *вила – вилы, грабля – грабли, ножница – ножницы, переговор – переговоры; сан* (Akaj, 2019; Zakharova, 2009)
 - From narrow contexts new items are created (jargon, specialised contexts, see Šaljan', 2015)

Singularia and pluralia tantum: potentiality

- Potentially full paradigm of Italian pluralia tantum (possibly from specialised contexts: *forbici* - *forbice* “*scissors* - *scissor*”, Serianni, 2006)
 - Fashion blogs (metonymically motivated “part-whole”; Miłkowska-Samul, 2016: 116):

(..) sotto il **pantalone** largo sta meglio una scarpa chiusa, o spuntata, e un tacco non troppo sottile.

Singularia and pluralia tantum: diachrony

- Pluralia tantum are extremely lexicalized plurals whose singular was lost (Acquaviva, 2008)

- Both singularia and pluralia tantum are a byproduct of lexicalization (Degtjarev, 2014):

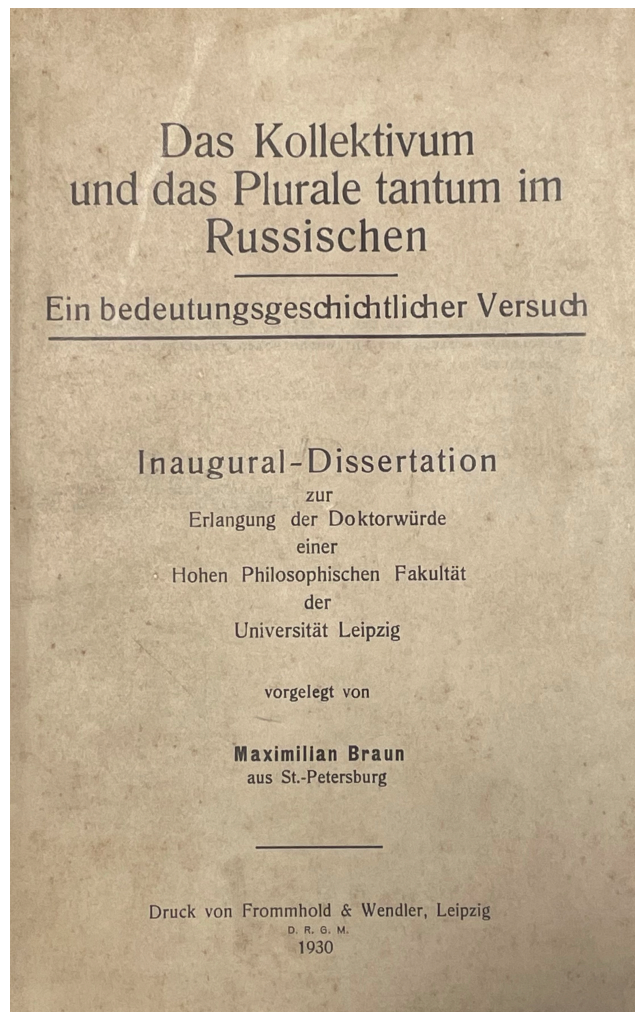
singularia tantum became the primary denominations of mass and abstract concepts

«pluralia tantum nouns were formed in the Proto-Slavic language as a result of lexicalisation of plural forms on the semantic basis of collectivity» (Degtjarev, 2014: 278):

-*ā (collective derivational suffix)

Proto-slavic: sg. *ножница > pl.
*ножницѣ

Pluralia tantum: diachrony



(Braun, 1930)

Pluralia tantum: diachrony

- Three moments: preservation; reduction and loss of individual forms; and expansion into new forms (Braun, 1930):
 - Expansion via analogical extension or organic formation:
 - Organic formation through three stages:
 1. “Logical” plural form
лица “faces”
 2. “Habitual” plural form
легкие “lungs” (plural dominant)
 3. “Transitional” plural form
записки “memoirs” (polysemous plural)
ножницы “scissors”
 4. Plurale tantum

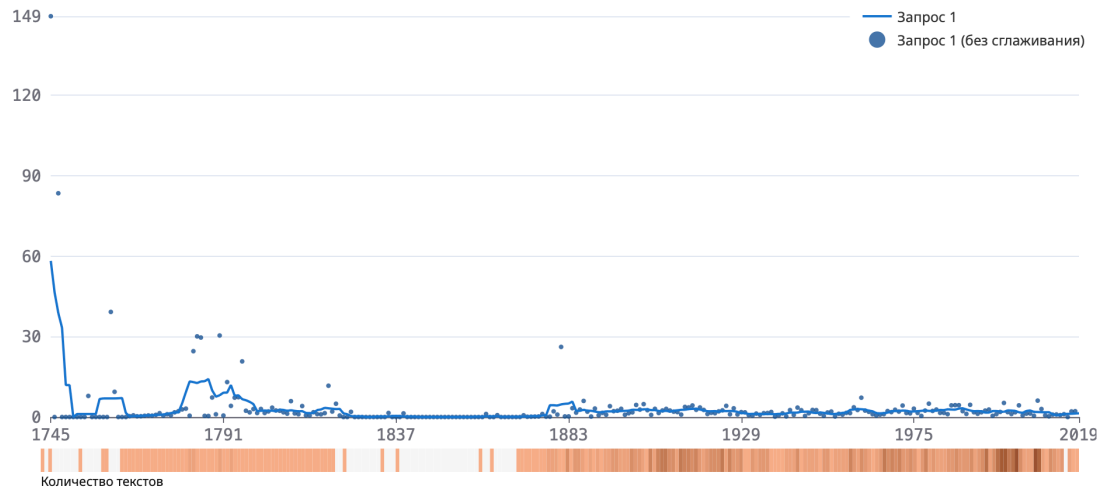
Plural dominant nouns

- Local markedness: «When the referent of a noun naturally occurs in **pair groups**, and/or when it is generally referred to collectively, such a is **locally unmarked in the plural**.» (Tiersma 1982: 835);
 - Plural dominant nouns are retrieved and produced faster than their singular counterpart (Baayen, 1997); different concept activation pattern (Nickels et al. 2015)

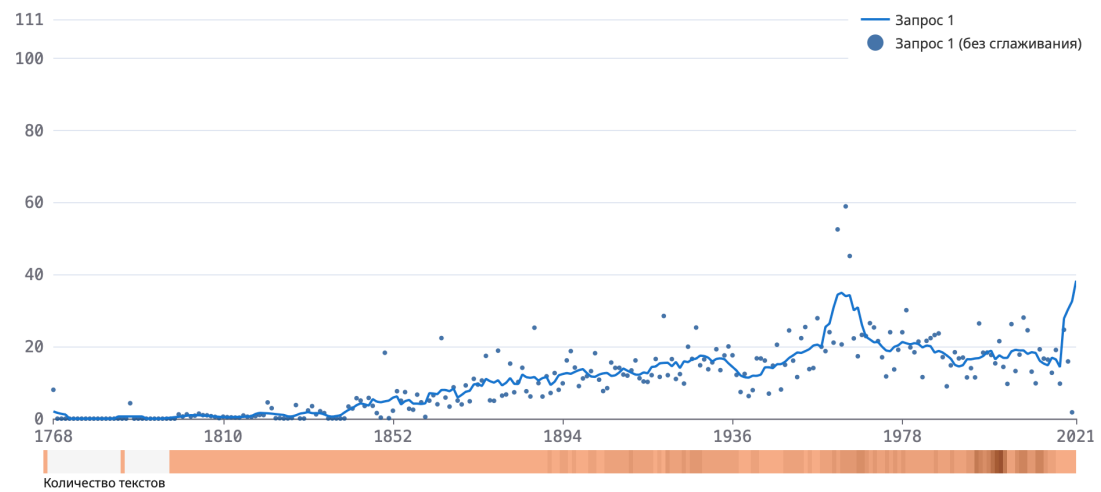
singular	
word form	relative frequency (NKRJ)
<i>легкое “lung”</i>	2,02 (ipm)

plural	
word form	relative frequency (NKRJ)
<i>легкие “lungs”</i>	<u>15,01</u> (ipm)

Plural dominant nouns



NKRJ - легкое (sg.)



NKRJ - легкие (pl.)

Plural dominant nouns - frequency to polysemy

plural		singular	
word form	relative frequency (NKRJ)	word form	relative frequency (NKRJ)
<i>alimenti</i> “foods”	<u>18,29</u> (ipm)	<i>alimento</i> “food”	<u>4,99</u> (ipm)

CORIS1980_2000 Si possono offrire in piccole quantità **alimenti** freschi (insalata , spinaci)
“Fresh food (salad, spinach) can be offered in small quantities”

CORIS1980_2000: Quando o più persone hanno diritto agli **alimenti** nei confronti di un medesimo obbligato
“When one or more persons are entitled to maintenance from the same obligor”

- Bleaching (weakening of meaning) due to frequency may lead to polysemy (Fenk-Oczlon, 2010; Aitchison, 2000)

Conclusions

- Pluralia and singularia tantum nouns are neither anomalies or isolated forms, rather two extremes of a continuum involving plural dominant nouns and lexical plurals
- Frequency and lexicalization (denomination for a specific concept in a given form by metonymy) are hypothesised to be the underlying processes of their formation; new meanings arise in narrow contexts
- The goal of the research is to build a larger dataset and verify this dynamics, drawing systemic conclusions for the two languages

Thank you for your attention!

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