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## Introduction

In traditional school grammars, one often encounters the definition of nouns that they are all and only those expressions that refer to a person, place, thing, event, substance, quality, or idea, etc. This is a semantic definition. It has been criticized by contemporary linguists as being quite uninformative. Part of the problem is that the definition makes use of relatively general nouns ("thing," "phenomenon," "event") to define what nouns are. The existence of such general nouns shows us that nouns are organized in taxonomic hierarchies. But other kinds of expressions are also organized in hierarchies. For example all of the verbs "stroll," "saunter," "stride," and "tread" are more specific words than the more general "walk." The latter is more specific than the verb "move." But it is unlikely that such hierarchies can be used to define nouns and verbs. Furthermore, an influential theory has it that verbs like "kill" or "die" refer to events, and so they fall under the definition. Similarly, adjectives like "yellow" or "difficult" might be thought to refer to qualities, and adverbs like "outside" or "upstairs" seem to refer to places. Worse still, a trip into the woods can be referred to by the verbs "stroll" or "walk." But verbs, adjectives and adverbs are not nouns, and nouns aren't verbs. So the definition is not particularly helpful in distinguishing nouns from other parts of speech.

The common semantic definition of nouns in the US is: a noun refers to a person, place, or thing. Unfortunately, this definition doesn't work: running is a noun and it refers to an activity; goodness is a noun and it refers to a quality. Semantic definitions of nouns are all problematic but a reasonable rule of thumb is a noun treats things in the real world as (concrete or abstract) objects or substances.

## Definition

A **noun** is the name of a person, place, thing, or idea. Whatever exists, we assume, can be named, and that name is a noun. A **proper noun**, which names a specific person, place, or thing (Carlos, Queen Marguerite, Middle East, Jerusalem, Malaysia, Presbyterianism, God, Spanish, Buddhism, the Republican Party), is almost always capitalized. A proper noun used as an addressed person's name is called a **noun of address**. **Common nouns** name everything else, things that usually are not capitalized.

A group of related words can act as a single noun-like entity within a sentence. A **Noun Clause** contains a subject and verb and can do anything that a noun can do:

What he does for this town is a blessing.

A **Noun Phrase**, frequently a noun accompanied by modifiers, is a group of related words acting as a noun: the oil depletion allowance; the abnormal, hideously enlarged nose.

There is a separate section on word combinations that become **Compound Nouns** — such as daughter-in-law, half-moon, and stick-in-the-mud.

Another semantic definition of nouns is that they are prototypically referential. That definition is also not very helpful in distinguishing actual nouns from verbs. But it may still correctly identify a core property of nounhood. For example, we will tend to use nouns like "fool" and "car" when we wish to refer to fools and cars, respectively. The notion that this is prototypocal reflects the fact that such nouns can be used, even though nothing with the corresponding property is referred to:

John is no fool.

If I had a car, I'd go to Marakech.

The first sentence above doesn't refer to any fools, nor does the second one refer to any particular car.

The British logician Peter Thomas Geach proposed a very subtle semantic definition of nouns. He noticed that adjectives like "same" can modify nouns, but no other kinds of parts of speech, like verbs or adjectives. Not only that, but there also doesn't seem to exist any *other* expressions with similar meaning that can modify verbs and adjectives. Consider the following examples.

Good: John and Bill participated in the **same** fight.

Bad: \*John and Bill **samely** fought.

There is no English adverb "samely." In some other languages, like Czech, however there are adverbs corresponding to "samely." Hence, in Czech, the translation of the last sentence would be fine; however, it would mean that John and Bill fought *in the same way*: not that they participated in the *same fight*. Geach proposed that we could explain this, if nouns denote logical predicate with **identity criteria**. An identity criterion would allow us to conclude, for example, that "person x at time 1 is *the same person* as person y at time 2." Different nouns can have different identity criteria. A well known example of this is due to Gupta:

National Airlines transported 2 million **passengers** in 1979.

National Airlines transported (at least) 2 million **persons** in 1979.

Given that, in general, all passengers are persons, the last sentence above ought to follow logically from the first one. But it doesn't. It is easy to imagine, for example, that on average, every person who travelled with National Airlines in 1979, travelled with them twice. In that case, one would say that the airline transported 2 million *passengers* but only 1 million *persons*. Thus, the way that we count *passengers* isn't necessarily the same as the way that we count *persons*. Put somewhat differently: At two different times, you may correspond to two distinct *passengers*, even though you are one and the same person. For a precise definition of *identity criteria*, see Gupta.

Recently, the linguist Mark Baker has proposed that Geach's definition of nouns in terms of identity criteria allows us to *explain* the characteristic properties of nouns. He argues that nouns can co-occur with (in-)definite articles and numerals, and are "prototypically referential" *because* they are all and only those parts of speech that provide identity criteria. Baker's proposals are quite new, and linguists are still evaluating them.

## Categories of Nouns

Nouns can be classified further as **count nouns**, which name anything that can be counted (four books, two continents, a few dishes, a dozen buildings); **mass nouns** (or non-count nouns), which name something that can't be counted (water, air, energy, blood); and **collective nouns**, which can take a singular form but are composed of more than one individual person or items (jury, team, class, committee, herd). We should note that some words can be either a count noun or a non-count noun depending on how they're being used in a sentence:

1. He got into trouble. (non-count)
2. He had many troubles. (countable)
3. Experience (non-count) is the best teacher.
4. We had many exciting experiences (countable) in college.

Whether these words are count or non-count will determine whether they can be used with **articles and determiners** or not. (We would not write "He got into ~~the~~ troubles," but we could write about "The troubles of Ireland."

Some texts will include the category of **abstract nouns**, by which we mean the kind of word that is not tangible, such as *warmth, justice, grief,* and *peace*. Abstract nouns are sometimes troublesome for non-native writers because they can appear with determiners or without: "Peace settled over the countryside." "The skirmish disrupted the peace that had settled over the countryside." See the section on **Plurals** for additional help with **collective nouns**, words that can be singular or plural, depending on context.

## Forms of Nouns

Nouns can be in the subjective, possessive, and objective case. The word *case* defines the role of the noun in the sentence. Is it a subject, an object, or does it show possession?

* The English professor [subject] is tall.
* He chose the English professor [object].
* The English professor's [possessive] car is green.

Nouns in the subject and object role are identical in form; nouns that show the possessive, however, take a different form. Usually an apostrophe is added followed by the letter *s* (except for plurals, which take the plural "-s" ending first, and then add the apostrophe). See the section on **Possessives** for help with possessive forms. There is also a **table outlining the cases of nouns and pronouns**.

Almost all nouns change form when they become **plural**, usually with the simple addition of an *-s* or *-es*. Unfortunately, it's not always that easy, and a separate section on **Plurals** offers advice on the formation of plural noun forms.

## Assaying for Nouns

Back in the gold rush days, every little town in the American Old West had an assayer's office, a place where wild-eyed prospectors could take their bags of ore for official testing, to make sure the shiny stuff they'd found was the real thing, not "fool's gold." We offer here some assay tests for nouns. There are two kinds of tests: formal and functional — what a word looks like (the endings it takes) and how a word behaves in a sentence.

* **Formal Tests**
	1. Does the word contain a noun-making morpheme? organization, misconception, weirdness, statehood, government, democracy, philistinism, realtor, tenacity, violinist
	2. Can the word take a plural-making morpheme? pencils, boxes
	3. Can the word take a possessive-making morpheme? today's, boys'
* **Function Tests**
	1. Without modifiers, can the word directly follow an article and create a grammatical unit (subject, object, etc.)? the state, an apple, a crate
	2. Can it fill the slot in the following sentence: "(The) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ seem(s) all right." (or substitute other predicates such as unacceptable, short, dark, depending on the word's meaning)?

## Collective Nouns, Company Names, Family Names, Sports Teams

There are, further, so called **collective nouns**, which are singular when we think of them as groups and plural when we think of the individuals acting within the whole (which happens sometimes, but not often).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| audiencebandclasscommitteecrowddozen | familyflockgroupheapherdjury | kindlot[the] numberpublicstaffteam |

Thus, if we're talking about eggs, we could say "A dozen is probably not enough." But if we're talking partying with our friends, we could say, "A dozen are coming over this afternoon." The jury delivers its verdict. [But] The jury came in and took their seats. We could say the Tokyo String Quartet is one of the best string ensembles in the world, but we could say the Beatles were some of the most famous singers in history. Generally, band names and musical groups take singular or plural verbs depending on the form of their names: "The Mamas and the Papas were one of the best groups of the 70s" and "Metallica is my favorite band."

Note that "the number" is a singular collective noun. "The number of applicants *is* steadily increasing." "A number," on the other hand, is a plural form: "There are several students in the lobby. A number *are* here to see the president."

Collective nouns are **count nouns** which means they, themselves, can be pluralized: a university has several athletic teams and classes. And the immigrant families kept watch over their herds and flocks.

The word following the phrase *one of the* (as an object of the preposition *of*) will always be plural.

* One of the reasons we do this is that it rains a lot in spring.
* One of the students in this room is responsible.

Notice, though, that the verb ("is") agrees with *one,* which is singular, and not with the object of the preposition, which is always plural.

When a **family name** (a proper noun) is pluralized, we almost always simply add an "s." So we go to visit the Smiths, the Kennedys, the Grays, etc.When a family name ends in *s, x, ch, sh,* or *z,* however, we form the plural by added *-es,* as in the Marches, the Joneses, the Maddoxes, the Bushes, the Rodriguezes. Do *not* form a family name plural by using an apostrophe; that device is reserved for creating possessive forms.

When a proper noun ends in an "s" with a hard "z" sound, we don't add any ending to form the plural: "The Chambers are coming to dinner" (not the Chamberses); "The Hodges used to live here" (not the Hodgeses). There are exceptions even to this: we say "The Joneses are coming over," and we'd probably write "The Stevenses are coming, too." A modest proposal: women whose last names end in "s" (pronounced "z") should marry and take the names of men whose last names do not end with that sound, and eventually this problem will disappear.

The **names of companies and other organizations** are usually regarded as singular, regardless of their ending: "General Motors has announced its fall lineup of new vehicles." Try to avoid the inconsistency that is almost inevitable when you think of corporate entities as a group of individuals: "General Motors has announced their fall lineup of new vehicles." But note that some inconsistency is acceptable in all but the most formal writing: "Ford has announced its breakup with Firestone Tires. Their cars will no longer use tires built by Firestone." Some writers will use a plural verb when a plural construction such as "Associates" is part of the company's title or when the title consists of a series of names: "Upton, Vernon, and Gridley are moving to new law offices next week" or "Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego & Associates have won all their cases this year." Singular verbs and pronouns would be correct in those sentences, also.

The **names of sports teams**, on the other hand, are treated as plurals, regardless of the form of that name. We would write that "The Yankees have signed a new third baseman" and "The Yankees are a great organization" (even if we're Red Sox fans) and that "For two years in a row, the Utah Jazz have attempted to draft a big man." When we refer to a team by the city in which it resides, however, we use the singular, as in "Dallas has attempted to secure the services of two assistant coaches that Green Bay hopes to keep." (This is decidedly not a British practice. In the UK, the city or country names by which British newspapers refer to soccer teams, for example, are used as plurals — a practice that seems odd and inconsistent to American ears: "A minute's silence will precede the game at Le Stadium today, when Toulouse play Munster, and tomorrow at Lansdowne Road, when Leinster attempt to reach their first European final by beating Perpignan" [report in the online *London Times*].)

# Plural Noun Forms

The plural form of most nouns is created simply by adding the letter *s.*

* more than one snake = snakes
* more than one ski = skis
* more than one Barrymore = Barrymores

Words that end in *-ch,* *x,* *s* or *s-like* sounds, however, will require an *-es* for the plural:

* more than one witch = witches
* more than one box = boxes
* more than one gas = gases
* more than one bus = buses
* more than one kiss = kisses
* more than one Jones = Joneses

Note that some dictionaries list "busses" as an acceptable plural for "bus." Presumably, this is because the plural "buses" looks like it ought to rhyme with the plural of "fuse," which is "fuses." "Buses" is still listed as the preferable plural form. "Busses" is the plural, of course, for "buss," a seldom used word for "kiss."

There are several nouns that have irregular plural forms. Plurals formed in this way are sometimes called **mutated (or mutating) plurals**.

* more than one child = children
* more than one woman = women
* more than one man = men
* more than one person = people
* more than one goose = geese
* more than one mouse = mice
* more than one barracks = barracks
* more than one deer = deer

And, finally, there are nouns that maintain their Latin or Greek form in the plural. (See media and data and alumni, below.)

* more than one nucleus = nuclei
* more than one syllabus = syllabi
* more than one focus = foci
* more than one fungus = fungi
* more than one cactus = cacti (*cactuses* is acceptable)
* more than one thesis = theses
* more than one crisis = crises\*
* more than one phenomenon = phenomena
* more than one index = indices (*indexes* is acceptable)
* more than one appendix = appendices (*appendixes* is acceptable)
* more than one criterion = criteria

A handful of nouns appear to be plural in form but take a singular verb:

* The news is bad.
* Gymnastics is fun to watch.
* Economics/mathematics/statistics is said to be difficult. ("Economics" can sometimes be a plural concept, as in "The economics of the situation demand that . . . .")

Numerical expressions are usually singular, but can be plural if the individuals within a numerical group are acting individually:

* Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money.
* One-half of the faculty is retiring this summer.
* One-half of the faculty have doctorates.
* Fifty percent of the students have voted already.

And another handful of nouns might seem to be singular in nature but take a plural form and always use a plural verb:

* My pants are torn. (Nowadays you will sometimes see this word as a singular "pant" [meaning one pair of *pants]* especially in clothing ads, but most writers would regard that as an affectation.)
* Her scissors were stolen.
* The glasses have slipped down his nose again.

When a noun names the title of something or is a word being used as a word, it is singular whether the word takes a singular form or not.

* *Faces* is the name of the new restaurant downtown.
* *Okies,* which most people regard as a disparaging word, was first used to describe the residents of Oklahoma during the 1930s.
* Chelmsley Brothers is the best moving company in town.
* *Postcards* is my favorite novel.
* The term *Okies* was used to describe the residents of Oklahoma during the 1930s. (In this sentence, the word *Okies* is actually an appositive for the singular subject, "term.")

## Plural Compound Nouns

Compound words create special problems when we need to pluralize them. As a general rule, the element within the compound that word that is pluralized will receive the plural -s, but it's not always that simple. *Daughters-in-law* follows the general rule, but *cupfuls* does not. See the special section on **Compound Nouns and Modifiers** or, better yet, a good dictionary, for additional help.

## Special Cases

With words that end in a consonant and a *y,* you'll need to change the *y* to an *i* and add *es.*

* more than one baby = babies
* more than one gallery = galleries
(Notice the difference between this and *galleys,* where the final y is not preceded by a consonant.)
* more than one reality = realities
This rule does not apply to proper nouns:
* more than one Kennedy = Kennedys

Words that end in *o* create special problems.

* more than one potato = potatoes
* more than one hero = heroes
. . . *however* . . .
* more than one memo = memos
* more than one cello = cellos
. . . *and for words where another vowel comes before the o . . .*
* more than one stereo = stereos

Plurals of words that end in *-f* or *-fe* usually change the *f* sound to a *v* sound and add *s* or *-es.*

* more than one knife = knives
* more than one leaf = leaves
* more than one hoof = hooves
* more than one life = lives
* more than one self = selves
* more than one elf = elves

There are, however, exceptions:

* more than one dwarf = dwarfs
* more than one roof = roofs

When in doubt, as always, consult a dictionary. Some dictionaries, for instance, will list both *wharfs* and *wharves* as acceptable plural forms of *wharf.* It makes for good arguments when you're playing Scrabble. The online version of **Merriam-Webster's WWWebster Dictionary** should help.

## Plurals and Apostrophes

We use **an apostrophe to create plural forms** in two limited situations: for pluralized letters of the alphabet and when we are trying to create the plural form of a word that refers to the word itself. Here we also should italicize this "word as word," but not the 's ending that belongs to it. Do *not* use the apostrophe+s to create the plural of acronyms (pronounceable abbreviations such as laser and IRA and URL\*) and other abbreviations. (A possible exception to this last rule is an acronym that ends in "S": "We filed four NOS's in that folder.")

* Jeffrey got four A's on his last report card.
* Towanda learned very quickly to mind her *p*'s and *q*'s.
* You have fifteen *and*'s in that last paragraph.

Notice that we do not use an apostrophe *-s* to create the plural of a word-in-itself. For instance, we would refer to the "ins and outs" of a mystery, the "yeses and nos" of a vote (NYPL *Writer's Guide to Style and Usage*), and we assume that Theodore Bernstein knew what he was talking about in his book *Dos, Don'ts & Maybes of English Usage*. We would also write "The shortstop made two spectacular outs in that inning." But when we refer to a word-as-a-word, we first italicize it — I pointed out the use of the word *out* in that sentence. — and if necessary, we pluralize it by adding the unitalicized apostrophe -s — "In his essay on prepositions, Jose used an astonishing three dozen *out*'s." This practice is not universally followed, and in newspapers, you would find our example sentence written without italics or apostrophe: "You have fifteen ands in that last paragraph."

Some abbreviations have embedded plural forms, and there are often inconsistencies in creating the plurals of these words. The speed of an internal combustion engine is measured in "revolutions per minute" or **rpm** (lower case) and the efficiency of an automobile is reported in "miles per gallon" or **mpg** (no "-s" endings). On the other hand, baseball players love to accumulate "runs batted in," a statistic that is usually reported as **RBIs** (although it would not be terribly unusual to hear that someone got 100 **RBI** last year — and some baseball commentators will talk about "ribbies," too). Also, the U.S. military provides "meals ready to eat" and those rations are usually described as **MREs** (not MRE). When an abbreviation can be used to refer to a singular thing — a run batted in, a meal ready-to-eat, a prisoner of war — it's surely a good idea to form the plural by adding "s" to the abbreviation: RBIs, MREs, POWs. (Notice that no apostrophe is involved in the formation of these plurals. Whether abbreviations like these are formed with upper- or lower-case letters is a matter of great mystery; only your dictionary editor knows for sure.)

Notice, furthermore, that we do *not* use an apostrophe to create plurals in the following:

* The **1890s** in Europe are widely regarded as years of social decadence.
* I have prepared **1099s** for the entire staff.
* Rosa and her brother have identical **IQs**, and they both have **PhDs** from Harvard.
* She has over 400 **URLs**\* in her bookmark file.

## Singular Subjects, Plural Predicates, etc.

We frequently run into a situation in which a singular subject is linked to a plural predicate:

* My favorite breakfast is cereal with fruit, milk, orange juice, and toast.

Sometimes, too, a plural subject can be linked to singular predicate:

* Mistakes in parallelism are the only problem here.

In such situations, remember that the number (singular or plural) of the subject, not the predicate, determines the number of the verb. See the section on **Subject-Verb Agreement** for further help.

A special situation exists when a subject seems not to agree with its predicate. For instance, when we want each student to see his or her counselor (and each student is assigned to only one counselor), but we want to avoid that "his or her" construction by pluralizing, do we say "Students must see their counselors" or "Students must see their counselor"? The singular *counselor* is necessary to avoid the implication that students have more than one counselor apiece. Do we say "Many sons dislike their *father* or *fathers*"? We don't mean to suggest that the sons have more than one father, so we use the singular *father.* Theodore Bernstein, in *Dos, Don'ts and Maybes of English Usage*, says that "Idiomatically the noun applying to more than one person remains in the singular when (a) it represents a quality or thing possessed in common ("The audience's curiosity was aroused"); or (b) it is an abstraction ("The judges applied their reason to the problem"), or (c) it is a figurative word ("All ten children had a sweet tooth") (203). Sometimes good sense will have to guide you. We might want to say "Puzzled, the children scratched their head" to avoid the image of multi-headed children, but "The audience rose to their foot" is plainly ridiculous and about to tip over.

In "The boys moved their car/cars," the plural would indicate that each boy owned a car, the singular that the boys (together) owned one car (which is quite possible). It is also possible that each boy owned more than one car. Be prepared for such situations, and consider carefully the implications of using either the singular or the plural. You might have to avoid the problem by going the opposite direction of pluralizing: moving things to the singular and talking about what each boy did.

**Conclusion**

Our course work was investigated from different kind of sources. We chose exactly nouns as a subject of investigation because we think that it is not completely investigated. Whether or not a noun is uncountable is determined by its meaning: an uncountable noun represents something which tends to be viewed as a whole or as a single entity, rather than as one of a number of items which can be counted as individual units. Singular verb forms are used with uncountable nouns. The indefinite articles a, an and numbers are not normally used with uncountable nouns , e.g. My grammar checker gave me a useful feed back. Please give me an information about how to access the library on the web. (The plural form some could, however, be used here –I need some information about…..)There are several ways to express quantity for uncountable nouns, e.g. I read an interesting news this morning. An interesting item of news Could I borrow a paper to make notes? A sheet/a piece of paper Teachers should be able to give students useful advices about oral presentations. some useful advice.

**Appendix**

**Nouns that can be Countable and Uncountable**

Sometimes, the same noun can be countable and uncountable, often with a change of meaning.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Countable |   | Uncountable |
| There are two hairs in my coffee! | hair | I don't have much hair. |
| There are two lights in our bedroom. | light | Close the curtain. There's too much light! |
| Shhhhh! I thought I heard a noise. | noise | It's difficult to work when there is too much noise. |
| Have you got a paper to read? (= newspaper) | paper | I want to draw a picture. Have you got some paper? |
| Our house has seven rooms. | room | Is there room for me to sit here? |
| We had a great time at the party. | time | Have you got time for a coffee? |
| Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's greatest works. | work | I have no money. I need work! |

# Uncountable Nouns

Uncountable nouns are substances, concepts etc that we cannot divide into separate elements. We cannot "count" them. For example, we cannot count "milk". We can count "bottles of milk" or "litres of milk", but we cannot count "milk" itself. Here are some more uncountable nouns:

* music, art, love, happiness
* advice, information, news
* furniture, luggage
* rice, sugar, butter, water
* electricity, gas, power
* money, currency

We usually treat uncountable nouns as singular. We use a singular verb. For example:

* **This** news **is** very important.
* Your luggage **looks** heavy.

We do not usually use the indefinite article **a/an** with uncountable nouns. We cannot say "an information" or "a music". But we can say **a something of**:

* **a piece of** news
* **a bottle of** water
* **a grain of** rice

We can use **some** and **any** with uncountable nouns:

* I've got **some** money.
* Have you got **any** rice?

We can use **a little** and **much** with uncountable nouns:

* I've got **a little** money.
* I haven't got **much** rice.

# Countable Nouns

Countable nouns are easy to recognize. They are things that we can count. For example: "pen". We can count pens. We can have one, two, three or more pens. Here are some more countable nouns:

dog, cat, animal, man, person

bottle, box, litre

coin, note, dollar

cup, plate, fork

table, chair, suitcase, bag

Countable nouns can be singular or plural:

My dog is playing.

My dogs are hungry.

We can use the indefinite article a/an with countable nouns:

A dog is an animal.

When a countable noun is singular, we must use a word like a/the/my/this with it:

I want an orange. (not I want orange.)

Where is my bottle? (not Where is bottle?)

When a countable noun is plural, we can use it alone:

I like oranges.

Bottles can break.

We can use some and any with countable nouns:

I've got some dollars.

Have you got any pens?

We can use a few and many with countable nouns:

I've got a few dollars.

I haven't got many pens.

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