The Number of Nouns

Lecture 3
The category of **number** is based on the functional opposition of two forms of the noun: *singular ↔ plural*.

- **The singular form** is used to refer to a **single referent**: *I have a brother*.

- **The plural form** is used to refer to a **group referent** of two or more members: *She has three sisters*.

- The semantic opposition of **one ↔ more than one** is characteristic of **countable** nouns only.
Grammatical Markers of Plurality

- **Countable nouns** form their plural by means of **grammatical endings** or **change of the root vowel**.

- **a.** The regular **–s** ending can be attached to most English nouns:

  girl – girls; toy – toys; family – families; idea – ideas; lion – lions
In forming the plural we follow certain spelling rules:

- **Final -y after a consonant** changes into -i before the grammatical ending:
  - party – parties

- **Final -y** does not change in family names:
  - the Kennedys

- Abbreviated nouns in -o attach the grammatical ending -s:
  - photos, kilos

- Abbreviations attach -s:
  - Several VIPs are arriving for the ceremony.
b. The grammatical ending –es is attached to nouns ending in [s], [z], [dz], [t], [ʃ]:

kisses, vases, bridges, watches, dishes

It is also attached to nouns ending in –o:

potatoes, heroes

c. Some nouns, ending in –th, -f, or –s undergo voicing of the final consonant in the plural.

With –th and –s voicing affects pronunciation.

The voicing of [f] affects not only pronunciation, but spelling as well:

‘The Merry Wives of Windsor’
d. The grammatical ending –en is attached to several nouns:

   ox – oxen; child – children

e. **Change of the root vowel** takes place in several nouns:

   man – men; foot – feet; mouse – mice
f. The plural form of some nouns coincides with the singular form (zero plurals): series – series; aircraft – aircraft

salmon, sheep, grouse
Many borrowed words retain their **foreign plural endings**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>phenomenon – phenomena</th>
<th>hypothesis – hypotheses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>antenna – antennae</td>
<td>genius – genii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poncho – ponchos</td>
<td>tempo – tempi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, many nouns of **foreign origin** may attach −*s* ending as well:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alumnus</td>
<td>alumni</td>
<td>curriculum</td>
<td>curricula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>analysis</td>
<td>analyses</td>
<td>datum</td>
<td>data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bacterium</td>
<td>bacteria</td>
<td>genius</td>
<td>geniuses/genii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beau</td>
<td>beaux</td>
<td>hypothesis</td>
<td>hypotheses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oasis</td>
<td>oases</td>
<td>parenthesis</td>
<td>parentheses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crisis</td>
<td>crises</td>
<td>phenomenon</td>
<td>phenomena</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**antenna − antennas** (TV or radio aerial) ↔
**antenna − antennae** (long thin parts on the insect’s head)
Invariable Nouns

- **Uncountable** and **proper nouns** are **invariable** (they have only one form).

- Each lexeme belonging to these subclasses is either singular or plural.

- According to their semantics invariable nouns fall into two groups: **singular invariables** and **plural invariables**.
Singular invariable nouns take singular verbs. To this group belong the following semantic varieties:

- **concrete uncountable nouns** – milk, copper;
- **abstract uncountable nouns** – anger, safety;
- **proper nouns** – Mount Everest, Shakespeare;
- **some nouns derived** by means of the suffix –s – news, linguistics, Wales;
- **substantivised words referring to abstract notions** – the picturesque, the good, the evil;
Plural invariable nouns take plural verbs. This group is comprised of the following varieties:

- objects made of two similar parts:
- proper collective nouns – people, police, cattle;

- some nouns derived by means of the suffix –s – goods, thanks, looks;

- proper nouns in –s – Niagara Falls;

- substantivised words referring to people – the blind, the disabled;
Nouns of Differentiated Plural

- The plural form of some countable nouns has developed additional meanings altogether different from the meanings of the singular form:

  - arm = an upper limb of the human body
  - arms = weapon, heraldic bearings
-s can mark the plural and at the same time acquire a word formative function.

customs            colours
Some uncountable nouns have developed meanings different from the basic ones.

☐ Such meanings are marked by the plural form:

- moral = the principle contained in a fable
- morals = rules of conduct
- regard = careful thought or attention
- regards = greetings that show respect
Some nouns have different forms of plural which bear different meanings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>brothers (by birth), brethren (of a society)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die</td>
<td>dies (for coining or stamping), dice (for play)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fish</td>
<td>fishes (separate fish), fish (collective)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>index</td>
<td>indexes (in books), indices (in algebra)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>penny</td>
<td>pennies (separate coins), pence (sum of money)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>staff</td>
<td>staves (poles), staffs (bodies of assistants)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Three types of concord of number between subject and verb can be distinguished:

a. grammatical concord

Singular nouns functioning as subject take singular verbs:

The book is on the shelf.

Plural nouns take plural verbs:

The books are on the shelf.
b. notional concord

the verb agrees with its subject according to **the semantics of the noun** rather than its form:

The committee are discussing a tight budget.
c. concord on the principle of proximity

- the verb agrees in number with the noun, that is immediately before or after the verb:

Neither the teacher nor the students have answered his question yet.
Neither the students not the teacher has answered his question yet.

There is a piano and two chairs in the room.
There are two chairs and a piano in the room.