

Compare:

Aren't those *pheasants* beautiful?

NOTE Some of the nouns considered in 5.42/ as resistant to number contrast could also be regarded as having zero plural.

Nouns of quantity

5.40 There is a strong tendency for units of number, of length, of value, and of weight to have zero plural when premodified by another quantitative word. For example:

- (a) How many people live there? About three *dozen*/Several *hundred*!
More than five *thousand*/Almost four *million*.
(b) My son is nearly six *foot* tall.
The tickets cost four *pound* fifty each.
Three *pound/stone* of potatoes, please.

But in set (b), zero is much less common than the use of inflected plurals and in some cases zero is largely dialectal ('She lives five *mile* from me'). Moreover, items in set (a) have normal plural forms when not preceded by numerals:

Dozens (and *dozens*) (of people) crowded into the room.

I have no precise idea how many people live there: *thousands* certainly, perhaps *millions*.

Foreign plurals

5.41 Numerous nouns adopted from foreign languages, especially Latin and Greek, retain the foreign inflection for plural. In some cases there are two plurals, an English regular form (5.36) being used in non-technical discourse.

- (a) Nouns in *-us* /əs/ with plural *-i* /ai/:
stimulus focus alumnus bacillus
corpus ~ corpora genus ~ genera
(b) Nouns in *-us* /əs/ with plural *-a* /ə/ (only in technical use):
antenna formula nebula
(c) Nouns in *-a* /ə/ with plural *-ae* /i:/ or /ai/:
antenna formula nebula

The plural ending in *vertebrae* is also pronounced /ei/.

- (d) Nouns in *-um* /əm/ with plural *-a* /ə/:
addendum curriculum erratum
ovum stratum
(e) Nouns in *-ex*, *-ix* with plural *-ices* /isiz/:
appendix index matrix

- (f) Nouns in *-is* /ɪs/ with plural *-es* /ɪz/:

analysis basis crisis
hypothesis synopsis thesis

- (g) Nouns in *-on* /ən/ with plural *-a* /ə/:

automaton criterion phenomenon

- (h) Nouns in *-o* /əʊ/ with plural *-i* /i/: a few words in the field of music retain their Italian plural, especially in specialized discourse:

libretto tempo virtuoso

- (i) Nouns from French sometimes retain a French plural in writing, with the French (*ie* zero) ending in speech or – more usually – a regular English one:

bureau ~ bureaux *or* bureaux /-əʊ/ or /-əʊz/

So also *plateau*, *tableau*. Some other nouns with no change of spelling in the plural, have regular English plurals in speech: for example, *chassis* /ʃasi/, pl /ʃasɪz/

NOTE

[a] The plural *-im* is sometimes found in the English use of Hebrew words, as in *kibbutzim*.

[b] Most originally foreign nouns take only regular plural endings (*museum* ~ *museums*, etc), and in several cases the historically plural ending is reinterpreted as a singular (*agenda*, *insignia*, etc):

This *agenda* is rather lengthy as I'm afraid most Senate *agendas* tend to be.

Nouns resistant to number contrast

5.42 Whether or not with inflectional regularity, number essentially involves the distinction between one and more than one:

This school is ... These schools are ...
This woman is ... Those women are ...
This sheep is ... These sheep are ...

But as we noted in 5.35, there are singular nouns that cannot ordinarily be plural (*eg: meat*) and plural nouns that cannot ordinarily be singular (*eg: binoculars*). We shall look at such nouns under these two broad heads.

Ordinarily singular

5.43

- (a) Proper nouns such as *London* or *Navratilova* are plural only in such circumstances as are described in 5.26f.
(b) Noncount nouns such as *cheese* or *solidarity* can be plural when used to indicate partition by quantity or quality (5.2). Abstract nouns in the plural indicate instances of the phenomenon concerned (as in 'many *injustices*') or intensification of the phenomenon (as in 'I must