

The Category of Number

The category of number of English nouns is the system of opposemes (such a *girl – girls*, *foot – feet*, etc.) showing whether the noun stands for one object or more than one, in other words, whether its grammatical meaning is 'oneness' or 'more-than-oneness' of objects.

The connection of the category with the world of material reality, though indirect, is quite transparent. Its meanings reflect the existence of individual objects and groups of objects in the material world.

All number opposemes are identical in content: they contain two particular meanings of 'singular' and 'plural' united by the general meaning of the category, that of 'number'. But there is a considerable variety of form in number opposemes...

An English noun lexeme can contain two number opposemes at most (*boy – boys*, *boy's – boys'*). Many lexemes have but one opposeme (*table – tables*) and many others have no opposemes at all (*ink*, *news*)...

As already mentioned, with regard to the category of number English nouns fall into two subclasses: countables and uncountables. The former have number opposites, the latter have not. 'Uncountable nouns are again subdivided into those having no plural opposites and those having no singular opposites. Nouns like *milk*, *geometry*, *self-possession* having no plural opposites are usually called by a Latin name – *singularia tantum*. Nouns like *outskirts*, *clothes*, *goods* having no singular opposites are known as *pluralia tantum*.

As a matter of fact, those nouns which have no number opposites are outside the grammatical category of number. But on the analogy of the bulk of English nouns they acquire oblique (or lexico-grammatical) meanings of number. Therefore *singularia tantum* are often treated as singulars and *pluralia tantum* as plurals. This is justified both by their forms and by their combinability. Cf. *This (table, book, milk, love) is ... These (tables, books, clothes, goods) are ...* When combinability and form contradict each other, combinability is decisive, which accounts for the fact that *police* or *cattle* are regarded as plurals, and *measles*, *mathematics* as singulars.