

Pluralia tantum:

Their morpho-semantics and what they tell us about plurality

Pluralia tantum are nouns with no distinct singular form. Unlike “normal” plurals, they have an obligatorily inclusive semantics, even outside of downward monotone contexts (1), and they are often deviant with numerals (2). Therefore, they seem to display a morphology-semantics mismatch, insofar as they do not behave like “real plurals”, despite having plural inflectional morphology.

- (1) a. I bought some **trousers/scissors** today. (= one or more)
- b. I bought some tomatoes. (\neq one or more, = two or more)
- (2) a. ??I bought three **trousers/scissors** today.
- b. I bought three tomatoes today.

This talk discusses this apparent mismatch from a cross-linguistic perspective. Ultimately, we propose that pluralia tantum are not linguistic peculiarities, but behave exactly as it says on the tin: they *are* normal plurals, which simply happen to lack a singular form (cf. Acquaviva 2008, Borer 2013). In turn, the peculiar lack of a singular form may be reducible to a morphophonological “accident”: pluralia tantum are bound nouns, and must therefore occur either with the plural suffix (-s in English, e.g. *trouser-s*), or within a compound (e.g. *trouser leg(s)*).

We survey plurale tantum nouns across fifteen genetically diverse languages (Jordanian and Saudi Arabic, Bulgarian, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish, Tsez) to ascertain how they behave with respect to their morphology, syntax, and semantics. By far the most common result is that pluralia tantum have plural morphology, show plural syntactic agreement, and have an inclusive plural semantics. Some examples:

- (3) **Püksi-d** sa-i-d musta-ks.
trouser-NOM.PL get-PST-3PL black-TRANS
‘The trousers got dirty.’ (= one or more) *Estonian*

Before delving into the apparent morphology-semantics mismatch mentioned at the beginning, we briefly consider some apparent cases of syntax-morphology mismatches. Corbett (2019) proposes the existence of two further types of pluralia tantum, beyond the type in (3):

- (i) nouns that are morphologically plural but may trigger singular agreement (e.g. Tsez *xexbi* ‘child(-ren)’);
- (ii) nouns that display neither singular nor plural inflection, but trigger plural agreement (e.g. Russian *galife* ‘riding breeches’).

We show that both of these cases are only apparent. Cases of (i) are analysable as containing a null singular noun à la Kayne (2005), as exemplified in (4) with English.

- (4) a. %The Seychelles is particularly warm this time of year.
 =The Seychelles COUNTRY is particularly warm this time of year.
- b. The Seychelles are particularly warm this time of year.

We will provide cross-linguistic support for the analysis just sketched, looking in particular at similar phenomena in Italian, where the presence of a null noun, which also creates apparent gender mismatches, is easily diagnosed. Cases of (ii), on the other hand, are extremely rare and are simply analysable as morphological accidents. Our interim conclusion is that there is no evidence for suggesting that some pluralia tantum display a syntax-morphology mismatch.

Moving onto the apparent morphology-semantics mismatch, we propose that plurals are always inclusive, and the exclusive reading arises due to a Gricean implicature (cf. Borer 2005, Sauerland 2003, Sudo 2018, Zweig 2009). Ordinarily, singular forms pragmatically “compete” with plural forms in terms of informativeness (see Sauerland et al. 2005, Spector 2007, Farkas and de Swart 2010 for other competition-based accounts of plurality). As such, the use of the plural usually carries the implicature that singularities are excluded, giving rise to an exclusive plural reading. With pluralia tantum, a singular form does not exist. As a consequence, pluralia tantum are always understood as denoting both singularities and pluralities, as there is no possibility of any pragmatic “competition”. This allows us to explain the lack of an exclusive plural reading with pluralia tantum. In (1-b), an exclusive reading arises because it is the most informative reading of the plural noun. Since pluralia tantum lack such a competition between singular and plural, an exclusive reading never arises in (1-a).

A second semantic issue that we explore concerns the countability of pluralia tantum: while some languages, such as Finnish (5), allow pluralia tantum to co-occur with numerals, others, like English, do not (6).

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| (5) | kolme-t hää-t.
three-PL.NOM wedding-PL.NOM
'three weddings' | (6) | a. ??I bought three trousers/scissors.
b. I bought three pairs of
trousers/scissors. |
|-----|--|-----|--|

As it turns out, the (im)possibility of counting pluralia tantum correlates with another phenomenon: whether it is possible or not to single out a unit for counting by combining a plurale tantum noun with the numeral *one* (and its equivalents). Finnish allows this (7)¹, English does not (8).

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|-----|--|-----|--|
| (7) | yhde-t hää-t.
one-PL.NOM wedding-PL.NOM
'one wedding' | (8) | a. *I bought one trouser(-s).
b. *I need one scissor(-s). |
|-----|--|-----|--|

We show that we can give a pragmatico-semantic account of this data under our assumption that pluralia tantum are ordinary inclusive plurals. We suggest that DivP (i.e. a countable noun phrase, cf. Borer 2005) denotes a lattice (see eg. Harbour 2014, Bylinina and Nouwen 2018, Martí to appear for similar treatments of number), out of which a numeral *n* picks out those elements that are made up of *n* atoms. We then suggest, in turn, that the notion of “atomicity” for each noun *N* is not semantically fixed, but is rather defined pragmatically based on the set of elements denoted by the expression *one N*. In English, *one N* is not grammatical if *N* is a plurale tantum. Consequently, atomicity relative to *N* is not defined, and *N* cannot be counted². In Finnish, on the other hand, the equivalent of *one N* is grammatical even if *N* is a plurale tantum, so *N* is able to co-occur with numerals.

Our conclusion is twofold. Firstly, we pave the way for the elimination of pluralia tantum as a truly “special” linguistic phenomenon: plurale tantum nouns are ordinary plural nouns, despite appearances (cf. Acquaviva 2008, Borer 2013). Their only peculiarity lies in the morphophonological requirement that they should be bound (with a plural affix, or in compounds), which is in line with the idea that PF should be the domain of interlinguistic idiosyncrasies (cf. Borer 2013, also Richards 2016). Secondly, our analysis offers strong support for the idea that plurals are always truly inclusive (Borer 2005, Sauerland 2003, Sauerland et al. 2005, *pace* Harbour 2014, Martí to appear).

¹But note that the noun is still plural-marked, as any plurale tantum should be.

²At least not in a pragmatically felicitous way, hence the judgement ??, rather than *, in (6).