

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 5 May 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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Does Number Affect English Pronunciation?

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Complexity of Number Inflection in English

Number in English presents several difficulties to the second and foreign language learners of English.

For one thing, while most plural nouns are formed by adding –s to the singular noun, there are also other plural nouns formed by adding –es for nouns ending in Nouns ending in s, z, x, sh, and ch. Then there also nouns ending in -y preceded by a consonant is formed into a plural by changing -y to -ies. Yet another rule relates to nouns ending in y preceded by a vowel form their plurals by adding - s. Example: boy, boys; day, days. Most nouns ending in o preceded by a consonant is formed into a plural by adding -es. Example: hero; heroes; grotto, grottoes. Some words ending in –o add only –s. For example: piano/pianos, albino/albinos, memento/mementos. Yet another rule adds –ves. For example: nouns ending in -f or -fe are made plural by changing f or fe to - ves. For example, knife/knives, wife/wives. Then we also have irregular plurals: such as scissors (no scissor, please), oats (no, oat please). We also notice that some of the nouns are always used in singular. For example, sugar/sugar, gold/gold, wheat/wheat, etc. Note that when kinds of sugar are discussed, we are allowed to use “sugars.” This rule applies to other always-singular words when they mean varieties or kinds.

A List of Rules of Usage

Let us present these in some order:

1. Most plural nouns are formed by adding –s to the singular noun. Elephant/elephants.
2. There are plural nouns formed by adding –es for nouns ending in s, z, x, sh, and ch. Glass/glasses, box/boxes, match/matches, wish/wishes, buzz/buzzes.
3. Nouns ending in -y preceded by a consonant is formed into a plural by changing -y to -ies. Baby/babies, city/cities, story/stories.
4. Nouns ending in y preceded by a vowel form their plurals by adding -s. Example: boy/boys; day/days.
5. Most nouns ending in -o preceded by a consonant is formed into a plural by adding -es. Example: hero/heroes; mango/mangoes.
6. Some words ending in –o add only –s. For example: piano/pianos, albino/albinos.
7. Nouns ending in -f or -fe are made plural by changing -f or -fe to -ves. For example, knife/knives, wife/wives.
8. Irregular plurals: such as scissors (no *scissor*), oats (no *oat*).
9. Some of the nouns are always used in singular. For example, sugar/sugar, gold/gold, wheat/wheat, etc.

Thus, the students learning English as a second or foreign language need to master a variety of plural formation rules. Added to this variety is yet another rule that changes the pronunciation of words. Number affects pronunciation in a major way.

Does Number Inflection Affect Pronunciation?

1. The same word is pronounced in two different ways when used in the singular and in the plural.
2. It is significant to state here that the spelling of the word remains unchanged.

Of course, the English lexicon does not have many such words but the rule is certainly peculiar. We give below a set of words with their pronunciation to illustrate our point.

The word *corps* (a military unit trained to perform a particular duty), for example, is spelled the same in both singular and plural forms. It is only the pronunciation that distinguishes the singular from the plural. Similar is the case with words like *chassis* (a framework that supports a man-made object, for example, vehicle, etc.), *bourgeois* (a person or people belonging to the middle class or having the attitude of the middle class), *faux pas* (a violation of accepted social norms, for example, standard customs or etiquette rules etc.), *pince-nez* (a style of spectacles supported without earpieces, by pinching the bridge of the nose), *précis* (a concise summary or gist) and *rendezvous* (an agreement between two or more persons to meet at a certain time and place).

A List of Words that Bear Similar Pronunciation Both as Singular and Plural

We present a list of all these words in the table below for substantiating our view point. In all these cases, as would be evident the pronunciations appear to be similar. However, in case of those used as plurals, the plural marker ‘z’ sound at the end is clearly noticeable. And words being used singularly don’t have any plural markers. As is natural, pluralisation does not affect word-stress. In other words, the place of accent in both singular and plural remains the same.

Words	Singular	Plural
' <i>Bourgeois</i>	/ bɔ:ʒwɑ: /	/ bɔ:ʒwɑ:z /
' <i>Chassis</i>	/ ʃæsi /	/ ʃæsi:z /
<i>Corps</i>	/ kɔ: /	/ kɔ: z /
<i>Faux pas</i>	/ fəʊpɑ: /	/ fəʊpɑ:z /
' <i>Pince-nez</i>	/ pænsnei /	/ pænsneiz /
' <i>Précis</i>	/ preisi: /	/ preisi:z /
' <i>Rendez-vous</i>	/ rɒndivʊ: /	/ rɒndivʊ:z /

To wind up the discussion, pluralization plays havoc with non-native speakers’ process of learning spoken English.

Not many are aware of the strange rules governing English pronunciation which is why they tend to falter when it comes to pronouncing words in such cases. These spell similar but are pronounced differently. The only factor affecting the change is the number. Words in singular are pronounced in one way whereas their plural counterparts are pronounced in a different way, but the spelling remaining the same.

How to Master This Complex Variety?

Reading aloud the written text with these plural formation rules and reading the words that follow special rules for plural formation would help improve our pronunciation of these words as well as their recognition in speech. It is also important to spell the plural correctly in writing. For this, copy and dictation exercises may be offered in addition to other types of practice such as students quizzing one another in the class, etc.

What is most important to recognize is that these rules are followed in English and that we as second and foreign language users of English do not have any authority to change the rules! Errors are common in the initial stages but such errors should be corrected and the conventional spelling mastered well.

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