

Language as Science

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Plurality: How do languages indicate that there's more than one of something?

In this section we'll explore how a variety of languages convey that there is more than one of something. "Things" are nouns, and all languages have things and all languages have nouns. (Nouns aren't just "things", however. For more on exploring nouns, see [Part 1 Nouns here](#).) All languages have the notion of counting and marking plurality in some way. You'll get to discover here some of the varied ways that languages do this.

Overview and Instructor Notes

Examples of the ways that languages mark more than one of something:

Given here are short descriptions and examples of the basic processes. We'll explore all of these in more depth in the exercises that follow.

- 1) Suffix: Languages indicate plural by a suffix on the noun, like in the Nagatman language (a language of Papua New Guinea), shown below, as well as in most dialects of English (cat-cats).

a `ma-re (Campbell and Campbell 1987: 2)
dog-PL
'dogs'

- 2) No marking: Some languages, such as **Chinese** and **Pirahã** (Brazil), among many others, including some dialects of English, use the same noun form for singular and plural; the plurality is usually made quite clear from the context or from other markers (for example, *one dog*, *two dog*), but there is no morphological marker.

- 3) Prefix: Some languages indicate plural by a prefix, like **Anindilyakwa**, a language of Australia.

wirr-iyikwayiwa (Leeding 1989: 294)
PL-child
'children'

- 4) Plural word: Some languages indicate plurality somewhere in the noun phrase - not attached to the noun itself - with a separate word, like **Hawaiian** and **Chalcatongo Mixtec**. Read about how these examples are translated, using a system called interlinear glossing, in the [Representing Language Examples section](#).

a'u i'a
my fish
'my fish'

'elua a'u mau i'a
two my pl fish
'my two fish'

- 5) Plural tone: Some languages indicate plurality by changing the [tone](#), like Ngiti, a language of Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The different tones are represented by the accent marks (or diacritics). (Data from Kutsch Lojenga 1994: 135; cited in WALS)

kamà 'chief'	kámá 'chiefs'
màlàyikà 'angel'	màlàyíká 'angels'
màlimò 'teacher'	màlímó 'teachers'
adòdu 'my brother'	adódu 'my brothers'

- 6) Vowel changes: Some languages use variations within the noun itself to express plurality. This often involves changing vowels found in the noun stem, the same way that English does with 'goose' and 'geese'. An example of a language that marks plurality in such a way is Maricopa, a language of Arizona.

humar 'child'	humaar 'children' (Gordon 1986: 29)
nchen 'older sibling'	nchiin 'older siblings'
hat 'dog'	haat 'dogs'
mhay 'boy'	mhaa 'boys'

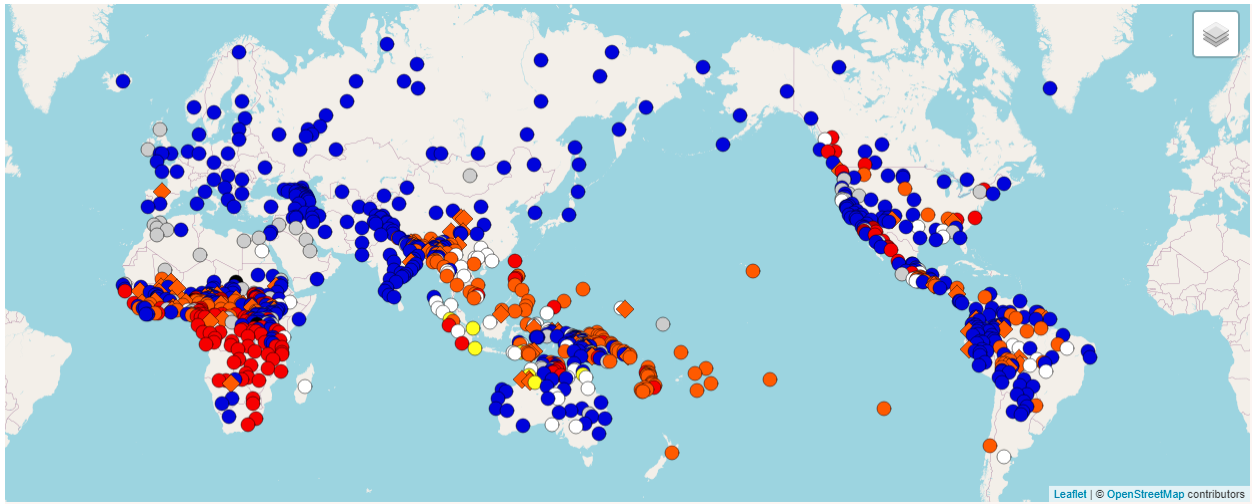
- 7) Plural via doubling: Plurality can also be indicated through complete doubling of a noun (called reduplication), as in the following example from Indonesian.

rumah	'house'	(Sneddon 1996: 16-17)
rumah-rumah	'houses'	

Dual: And in addition to singular and plural, some languages mark dual number - when there's two of something - with distinct forms for singular, dual, and plural. The Slavic language Slovene marks dual number, as shown in these forms for the noun 'wolf':

volk 'wolf'
volkova 'wolves - two'
volkovi 'wolves'

This [World Atlas of Language Structures map](#) shows the distribution of languages' noun plural marking strategies.



The problem sets that follow offer language data from Nicaragua English Creole, Spanish, English, Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Armenian. You don't need to know anything about those languages in order to engage in the problem-solving. You will use the tools of scientific investigation to discover how pluralization works in these languages.