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Amy S. Orf

Northern Michigan University, aorf@nmu.edu

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# It Just Doesn't Add Up: Grammatical Number in Spanish and English

Amy Orf

[aorf@nmu.edu](mailto:aorf@nmu.edu)

Northern Michigan University

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# Abstract

- ▶ This presentation examines the differences in grammatical number between Spanish and English, with respect to both the lexicon and agreement. These differences result in common errors by English-speaking students, such as *yo pedí el camarón* (“I ordered the shrimp”), *tengo muchas ropas* (“I have a lot of clothes”), *mi postre favorito es las galletas* (“my favorite dessert is cookies”), and *me gustan cantar y bailar* (“singing and dancing please me”). By highlighting the differences between Spanish and English, instructors can help their students avoid these pitfalls.



Lexicon



# Count nouns that are invariable for number in English

- ▶ deer = el ciervo / los ciervos
- ▶ fish = el pez / los peces
- ▶ moose = el alce / los alces
- ▶ sheep = la oveja / las ovejas
- ▶ shrimp = el camarón / los camarones (la gamba / las gambas)
- ▶ squash = la calabaza / las calabazas
- ▶ squid = el calamar / los calamares
- ▶ means = el medio / los medios
- ▶ series = la serie / las series
- ▶ species = la especie / las especies

# Count nouns that are invariable for number in English (cont.)

- ▶ I have one fish. = Tengo un pez.
- ▶ I have three fish. ≠ \*Tengo tres pez. (→ Tengo tres peces.)
- ▶ I saw the deer. = Vi el ciervo. / Vi los ciervos.
- ▶ I heard the sheep. = Oí la oveja. / Oí las ovejas.
- ▶ I ordered the shrimp. ≠ \*Yo pedí el camarón. (→ Yo pedí los camarones.)
- ▶ the World Series = la Serie Mundial / las Series Mundiales



# Count nouns that are invariable for number in Spanish

- ▶ Nouns ending in an unstressed vowel + -s (Whitley 146)
  - ▶ el/los lunes, el/los martes, el/los miércoles, el/los jueves, el/los viernes **vs.** el sábado / los sábados, el domingo / los domingos
  - ▶ el/los atlas, la/las caries, la/las crisis, la/las diagnosis, la/las diéresis, la/las diócesis, la/las dosis, el/los énfasis, la/las génesis, la/las glotis, la/las hipótesis, el/los oasis, el/los paréntesis, la/las pelvis, la/las perífrasis, la/las psicosis, la/las sinopsis, la/las síntesis, la/las tesis, el/los virus
  - ▶ el/los cortaúñas, el/los cuentagotas, el/los cumpleaños, el/los lanzacohetes, el/los lavaplatos, el/los limpiaparabrisas, el/los paraguas, el/los sacacorchos, el/los sacapuntas, el/los salvavidas, el/los sujetapapeles, el/los tocadiscos



# Count nouns that are invariable for number in Spanish (cont.)

- ▶ Nouns ending in an unstressed vowel + *-t* (Whitley 146)
  - ▶ el/los *afidávit* (Wikcionario: *afidávits*)
  - ▶ el/los *cénit*
  - ▶ el/los *clóset* (Wikcionario: *closets*)
  - ▶ el/los *déficit* (Whitley) (Larousse: *déficits*; Moliner: invariable or *déficits*)
  - ▶ el/los *dónut* (Moliner: *dónuts*)
  - ▶ el/los *hábitat* (Moliner, Wikcionario: *hábitats*)
  - ▶ el/los *pívot* (Moliner: *pívots*)
  - ▶ el/los *sóviet* (Moliner: *sóviets*)
  - ▶ el/los *superávit* (Larousse: invariable or *superávits*)
  - ▶ el/los *tíquet*





# Count nouns that are invariable for number in Spanish (cont.)

- ▶ Nouns ending in an unstressed vowel + -x (Woodward Spanish)
  - ▶ el/los clímax
  - ▶ el/los clínex
  - ▶ el/los cóccix
  - ▶ el/los córtex
  - ▶ el/los dúplex
  - ▶ el/los télex
  - ▶ el/los tórax

# Count nouns in English that are plural nouns in Spanish

- ▶ vacation / vacations = las vacaciones
- ▶ fee / fees = los honorarios
- ▶ funeral / funerals = los funerales (Whitley) (Larousse, Moliner: sg. or pl.)
  
- ▶ I went on vacation last month. ≠ \*Fui de vacación el mes pasado. (→ Fui de vacaciones el mes pasado.)
- ▶ The speaker's fee is reasonable. ≠ \*El honorario del conferenciante es razonable. (→ Los honorarios del conferenciante son razonables.)



# Plural nouns in English that are count nouns in Spanish

- ▶ alms = la limosna / las limosnas
- ▶ hair clippers = la maquinilla / las maquinillas para cortar el pelo
- ▶ pants = el pantalón / los pantalones (Whitley: “for some speakers”)
- ▶ pliers = el alicate / los alicates (Whitley) (Moliner: sg. or more frequently pl.; Larousse: *alicates*)
  
- ▶ **vs.**
- ▶ glasses = los anteojos / las gafas / los lentes
- ▶ scissors = las tijeras (Whitley) (Larousse, Moliner: sg. or pl.)
- ▶ tongs = las tenazas (Whitley) (Larousse, Moliner: sg. or pl.)
- ▶ tweezers = las pinzas


# Plural nouns that look singular in English

- ▶ the rich ≠ \*el rico (→ los ricos)
  - ▶ the poor ≠ \*el pobre (→ los pobres)
  - ▶ the living ≠ \*el vivo (→ los vivos)
  - ▶ the dead ≠ \*el muerto (→ los muertos)
  - ▶ the injured ≠ \*el herido (→ los heridos)
  - ▶ the hungry ≠ \*el hambriento (→ los hambrientos)
- 
- ▶ The **rich** have many advantages. ≠ \***El rico** tiene muchas ventajas. (→ **Los ricos** tienen muchas ventajas.)
  - ▶ She feeds the **hungry**. ≠ \*Le da de comer a **el hambriento**. (→ Les da de comer a **los hambrientos**.)



# Plural nouns that look singular in Spanish

- ▶ Family names, with the exception of royalty (Whitley 146)
  - ▶ the Montanos ≠ \*los Montanos (→ los Montano)
  - ▶ the Simpsons ≠ \*los Simpsons (→ los Simpson)
  - ▶ the Smiths ≠ \*los Smiths (→ los Smith)
  - ▶ the Joneses ≠ \*los Joneses (→ los Jones)
  - ▶ the Hapsburgs = los Habsburgos
  - ▶ the Bourbons = los Borbones
- ▶ Decades
  - ▶ the twenties ≠ \*los veintes (→ los (años) veinte)
  - ▶ the fifties ≠ \*los cincuentas (→ los (años) cincuenta)
  - ▶ the eighties ≠ \*los ochentas (→ los (años) ochenta)



# Plural nouns in English that are noncount/mass nouns in Spanish

- ▶ clothes ≠ \*las ropas (→ la ropa)
  - ▶ lyrics ≠ \*las letras (→ la letra)
  - ▶ morals ≠ \*las morales (→ la moral)
  - ▶ people ≠ \*las gentes (→ la gente)
- 
- ▶ I have a lot of **clothes**. ≠ \*Tengo **muchas ropas**. (→ Tengo **mucha ropa**.)
  - ▶ I don't understand the **lyrics**. ≠ \*No entiendo **las letras**. (→ No entiendo **la letra**.)
  - ▶ We watched the **people**. ≠ \*Miramos a **las gentes**. (→ Miramos a **la gente**.)




# Noncount/mass nouns in English that are count nouns in Spanish

- ▶ asparagus = el espárrago / los espárragos
- ▶ candy = el dulce / los dulces
- ▶ cereal = el cereal / los cereales (dialectal)
- ▶ seafood = el marisco / los mariscos
- ▶ spaghetti = el espagueti / los espaguetis
- ▶ spinach = la espinaca / las espinacas
- ▶ toast = el tostado / los tostados
- ▶ advice = el consejo / los consejos
- ▶ furniture = el mueble / los muebles
- ▶ lightning = el rayo / los rayos (el relámpago / los relámpagos)
- ▶ news = la noticia / las noticias
- ▶ nonsense = el disparate / los disparates (la tontería / las tonterías)

# Noncount/mass nouns in English that are count nouns in Spanish (cont.)


- ▶ I love spaghetti. ≠ Me encanta el espagueti. (→ Me encantan los espaguetis.)
- ▶ I cooked the spinach. ≠ Cociné la espinaca. (→ Cociné las espinacas.)
- ▶ I bought new furniture. ≠ \*Compré mueble nuevo. (→ Compré muebles nuevos.)
  
- ▶ He ate the asparagus. = Él comió el espárrago / los espárragos.
- ▶ I heard the news. = Oí la noticia / las noticias.
- ▶ I hope my advice helps you! = ¡Ojalá que mi consejo te ayude! / ¡Ojalá que mis consejos te ayuden!





# Noncount/mass nouns that look plural in English (but take singular verb)

- ▶ measles = el sarampión
- ▶ acoustics = la acústica
- ▶ ballistics = la balística
- ▶ ethics = la ética
- ▶ genetics = la genética
- ▶ linguistics = la lingüística
- ▶ logistics = la logística
- ▶ mathematics = la matemática / las matemáticas (Larousse, Moliner)
- ▶ optics = la óptica
- ▶ phonetics = la fonética
- ▶ physics = la física
- ▶ politics = la política
- ▶ robotics = la robótica
- ▶ semantics = la semántica



# Noncount/mass nouns that look plural in English (cont.)

- ▶ statistic / statistics = la estadística / las estadísticas

*statistics*: “the science of assembling, classifying, tabulating, and analyzing... facts or data” (Webster)

*statistic*: “a statistical item or element” (Webster)

- ▶ tactic / tactics = la táctica / las tácticas

*tactics*: “the science of arranging and maneuvering military and naval forces in action or before the enemy...” (Webster)

*tactic*: “a detail or branch of tactics” (Webster)

# Confusion about the number of some English nouns

- ▶ beer = la cerveza

I like to drink **beer** at parties = Me gusta beber **cerveza** en las fiestas.

\*I like to drink **beers** at parties. = \*Me gusta beber **cervezas** en las fiestas.

- ▶ medium / media = el medio / los medios

*medium*: "...a means of communication that reaches the general public and carries advertising: in this sense, a singular form **media** (pl. **medias**) is now sometimes heard" (Webster)

The **media is** saying that.... = **Los medios están** diciendo que....

?The **media are** staying that....

- ▶ datum / data = el dato / los datos

*data*: plural noun often with singular verb (Webster)

The **data show / shows** that.... = **Los datos muestran** que....



# Agreement

Number beyond the word level



# Large numbers

- ▶ one hundred = cien / ciento
  - ▶ two hundred ≠ \*dosciento (→ doscientos/as)
  - ▶ three hundred ≠ \*tresciento (→ trescientos/as)
  - ▶ hundreds of... = cientos de... / centenas de... / centenares de...
- 
- ▶ one thousand = mil
  - ▶ two thousand = dos mil
  - ▶ three thousand = tres mil
  - ▶ thousands of... = miles de... / millares de...
- 
- ▶ one million = un millón
  - ▶ two million ≠ \*dos millón (→ dos millones)
  - ▶ three million ≠ \*tres millón (→ tres millones)
  - ▶ millions of... = millones de...

# Noun phrases that are always singular in Spanish

- ▶ *Ninguno/ningún/ninguna* (**vs.** *alguno/algún/alguna/algunos/algunas*)
  - ▶ I have **some black skirts**. = Tengo **algunas faldas negras**.
  - ▶ I have **some**. = Tengo **algunas**.
  - ▶ I don't have **any blue skirts**. ≠ \*No tengo **ningunas faldas azules**. (→ No tengo **ninguna falda azul**.)
  - ▶ I don't have **any**. ≠ \*No tengo **ningunas**. (→ No tengo **ninguna**.)
- ▶ *ninguno*: "...se emplea siempre en singular, salvo que se use en respuesta a una expresión en plural, caso en el cual, por lo menos en lenguaje hablado, se emplea a veces el plural: 'Dame esas monedas que tienes en la mano. – No tengo en la mano ningunas monedas'.'" (Moliner)

# Third-person possessive adjectives

- ▶ In English, the choice of *his/her* vs. *their* depends on the number of the **possessor**. In Spanish, there is a single word *su*, and its form depends on the number of the **thing possessed**.
- ▶ **His friend** is nice. = **Su amigo** es simpático.
- ▶ **His friends** are nice. ≠ \***Su amigos** son simpáticos. (→ **Sus amigos** son simpáticos.)
- ▶ **Their son** is young. ≠ \***Sus hijo** es joven. (→ **Su hijo** es joven.)
- ▶ **Their sons** are young. = **Sus hijos** son jóvenes.



# Nouns that are used to modify other nouns


- ▶ In English: “When a noun is used as a modifier, it is in its singular form.” (Azar 203)
  - ▶ country house = la casa de campo
  - ▶ credit card = la tarjeta de crédito
  - ▶ gold watch = el reloj de oro
  - ▶ science fiction movie = la película de ciencia ficción
  - ▶ silk blouse = la blusa de seda
  - ▶ Spanish book = el libro de español
  - ▶ wineglass = la copa para vino
  - ▶ wool sweater = el suéter de lana
  - ▶ one-hour exam = el examen de una hora





# Nouns that are used to modify other nouns (cont.)

- ▶ English uses singular nouns even when plurality is implied.
  - ▶ bookcase = el estante para libros
  - ▶ crop rotation = la rotación de cultivos
  - ▶ fairy tale = el cuento de hadas
  - ▶ flowerpot = el tiesto para flores
  - ▶ road map = el mapa de carreteras
  - ▶ tile roof = el techo de tejas
  - ▶ toolbox = la caja de herramientas
  - ▶ wheelchair = la silla de ruedas
  - ▶ two-week trip = el viaje de dos semanas
  - ▶ four-door car = el coche de cuatro puertas
  - ▶ ten-year drought = la sequía de diez años



# Nouns that are used to modify other nouns (cont.)

- ▶ carrot soup = la sopa de zanahoria
- ▶ chicken soup = la sopa de pollo
- ▶ fish soup = la sopa de pescado
- ▶ tomato soup = la sopa de tomate
  
- ▶ bean soup = la sopa de frijol/frijoles
- ▶ noodle soup = la sopa de fideo/fideos
- ▶ potato soup = la sopa de papa/papas (patata/patatas)
- ▶ seafood soup = la sopa de marisco/mariscos
  
- ▶ lentil soup = la sopa de lentejas
- ▶ mushroom soup = la sopa de champiñones
- ▶ pea soup = la sopa de guisantes
- ▶ vegetable soup = la sopa de verduras

# Plural nouns in English that are noncount/mass nouns in Spanish

- ▶ people = la gente
- ▶ police = la policía
- ▶ faculty = el profesorado
  
- ▶ Many people **read** the book. ≠ \*Mucha gente **leyeron** el libro. (→ Mucha gente **leyó** el libro. / Muchas personas **leyeron** el libro.)
- ▶ The police **arrived** quickly. ≠ \*La policía **llegaron** rápidamente. (→ La policía **llegó** rápidamente. / Los policías **llegaron** rápidamente.)
- ▶ The faculty **are** dedicated. ≠ \*El profesorado **son** dedicados. (→ El profesorado **es** dedicado. / Los profesores **son** dedicados.)



# Confusion about nouns that are the same in Spanish and English

- ▶ family = la familia
- ▶ My family lives in Iowa. = Mi familia vive en Iowa.
- ▶ \*My family live in Iowa. = \*Mi familia viven en Iowa.
- ▶ They live in Iowa. = Ellos viven en Iowa.
  
- ▶ My family is blond. = Mi familia es rubia.
- ▶ \*My family are blond. = \*Mi familia son rubios.
- ▶ They are blond. = Ellos son rubios.

# Copula verbs

- ▶ Copula verbs are plural in Spanish if either the subject or the complement is plural, whereas it depends on the word order in English.
  - ▶ Cookies **are** my favorite dessert. = Las galletas **son** mi postre favorito.
  - ▶ My favorite dessert **is** cookies. ≠ \*Mi postre favorito **es** las galletas. (→ Mi postre favorito **son** las galletas.)
- ▶ Hamburgers **are** the most delicious food of all. = Las hamburguesas **son** la comida más deliciosa de todas.
- ▶ The most delicious food of all **is** hamburgers. ≠ \*La comida más deliciosa de todas **es** las hamburguesas. (→ La comida más deliciosa de todas **son** las hamburguesas.)
- ▶ It **is** one o'clock. = **Es** la una.
- ▶ It **is** two o'clock. ≠ \***Es** las dos. (→ **Son** las dos.)


# Haber

- ▶ *Haber* is always singular in its existential use, even if the NP is plural, whereas in English the verb *be* agrees with the NP.
- ▶ Present
  - ▶ There **is** a cake. = **Hay** un pastel.
  - ▶ There **are** two cakes. = **Hay** dos pasteles.
- ▶ Imperfect
  - ▶ There **was** a cake. = **Había** un pastel.
  - ▶ There **were** two cakes. ≠ \***Habían** dos pasteles. (→ **Había** dos pasteles.)
- ▶ Future
  - ▶ There **will be** a cake. = **Habrá** un pastel.
  - ▶ There **will be** two cakes. ≠ \***Habrán** dos pasteles. (→ **Habrá** dos pasteles.)



# Gustar

- ▶ *Gustar* is always singular with multiple infinitives, as opposed to multiple NPs. In English, the verb is plural in both contexts.
- ▶ NPs
  - ▶ Coffee **is** pleasing to me. = Me **gusta** el café.
  - ▶ Coffee and tea **are** pleasing to me. = Me **gustan** el café y el té.
- ▶ Infinitives
  - ▶ Singing **is** pleasing to me. = Me **gusta** cantar.
  - ▶ Singing and dancing **are** pleasing to me. ≠ \*Me **gustan** cantar y bailar. (→ Me **gusta** cantar y bailar.)



# Singular vs. plural objects used with plural subjects

- ▶ Spanish uses a singular direct object when the subjects have one item each, and a plural direct object when the subjects have multiple items each. In English, the direct object is plural in both contexts.
  - ▶ The children take off their **hats**. = Los niños se quitan **el sombrero**. (*Puntos 149*)
  - ▶ The children put on their **coats**. = Los niños se ponen **el abrigo**. (*Puntos 149*)
  - ▶ We wash our **faces**. = Nos lavamos **la cara**. (*Practice Makes Perfect 85*)
  - ▶ They shake **hands**. = Ellos se dan **la mano**. (*¡Recuerdos! 111*)
  
  - ▶ They put on their **shoes**. = Se ponen **los zapatos**. (*Puntos 149*)
  - ▶ They put on their **gloves**. = Se ponen **los guantes**. (*Puntos 149*)
  - ▶ They brush their **teeth**. = Se cepillan **los dientes**. (*Practice Makes Perfect 85*)



# Singular vs. plural objects used with plural subjects (cont.)

- ▶ English uses a singular direct object only when the plural subjects have the same item.
  - ▶ We put on **the hat**. (= the same hat)
  - ▶ = Nos pusimos **el sombrero**.
- ▶ We put on **our hats**. (= one hat each)
- ▶ ≠ \*Nos pusimos **los sombreros**. (→ Nos pusimos **el sombrero**.)
- ▶ We (each) put on **the hats**. (= multiple hats each)
- ▶ = Nos pusimos **los sombreros**.

# Singular vs. plural objects used with plural subjects (cont.)

- ▶ \*Es mejor que ustedes se cuiden **sus cuerpos** con comida saludable...
- ▶ \*Por supuesto es necesario que Uds. encuentren **trabajos**...
- ▶ \*Les aconsejo que no consigan **trabajos** inmediatamente...
- ▶ \*También es bueno que ustedes no olviden **sus familias**.
- ▶ \*Sugiero que ustedes mantengan la salud para que puedan vivir **vidas largas**...
- ▶ \*Es mejor que vivan para ustedes, y no para **sus padres** ni **madres** ni nadie más.
- ▶ \*Ustedes deben decir gracias a sus amigos y **familias**...
- ▶ \*Es necesario que ustedes pasen tiempo con **sus familias** y sus amigos.
- ▶ \*Si ustedes pueden descansar, van a estar más contentos con **sus vidas**.
- ▶ \*...mis abuelos... me dijeron cuentos de **sus vidas**.



# Conclusions



- ▶ English-speaking students sometimes don't know whether to use the singular or plural form of a noun in Spanish due to lexical differences between the two languages. We have seen nouns that are invariable for number in one language but not the other, nouns that are plural in one language but not the other, plural nouns that look singular, singular nouns that look plural, and count nouns in one language that are noncount/mass nouns in the other.
- ▶ Students also make mistakes in number/agreement due to grammatical differences between Spanish and English. A singular form may be required in one language, while a plural form is required in the other. This occurs with large numbers, *ninguno*, possessive adjectives, nouns used to modify other nouns, agreement with some noncount/mass nouns, copula verbs, *haber*, *gustar*, and singular vs. plural objects used with plural subjects.
- ▶ By highlighting these lexical and grammatical differences, instructors can help their students avoid many common mistakes in number/agreement.

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