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45. The countable *singulare tantum*

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Now that Britain has voted to leave the European Union, it is time to consider the curious expression ‘ten thousand euro’, with *euro* in the singular, which the BBC seemed to adopt about ten years ago. The question is: how could a countable noun come to be singular? The *singulare tantum* is, according to the grammar books, reserved for mass nouns or collective nouns. One idea was that euros had become likened to the butter mountains, and other inexcusable masses, that seem characteristic of the EU hoarding instinct. The singular form therefore suggested a mass noun, a vast inland reservoir coupled with a sea of extravagant spending. Still why no dissonance between a cardinal number and the mass noun?

Another idea was that the British might have an odd kind of inverted affection for the European currency, just like the slang term *quid* (as in ‘You don’t expect me to pay 5,000 quid for that old banger, do you?’) seems to convey both a familiarity and a belittling of the medium. In East End London, ‘five pound’ is also an unremarkable expression, made popular through the proverbial Cockney baddie in movies. The singular somehow suggests an attitude of easy come, easy go. But not all slang terms for currency are singular: compare ‘5,000 bucks’. The Americans, it seems, will not fall for this particular irregularity.

A quick look at Google N-gram viewer shows that ‘1000 quid’ had a peak popularity in the 1930s, a period of high inflation, when wads of paper money were rather more useful than coins. The Euro, due to its relatively recent invention, is harder to research, but it seems that ‘a thousand euros’ is a bit older than ‘a thousand euro’ and twice as popular, due to the overseas English press. That suggests another source: perhaps

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‘a thousand euro’ gained currency in Brussels because of a Francophone parallel to *bureaux* or other silent plurals. But a post based on Wikipedia suggests that in fact in EU legislation the singular form became regular usage but only in English.¹ Yet another case of the EU meddling in English affairs.

English makes prodigal use of the inverse construction, the pluralia tantum, as in *spectacles, trousers, pants, and scissors*, where the referent is singular and the form plural. Even the Americans (but not the Dutch for the most part) fall for this. Whatever the source of ‘a thousand euro’, the currency of the expression together with the general rarity of the construction remains rather puzzling. But the general question is: Why the hell do we English mess with such a nice clear semantic distinction? Do we have to muck up everything?

A word of advice. Whatever you do don’t follow the British: we’ll be staying in our fortress with our confusions, our trousers, our eye glasses and our rapidly devaluing quid. Now that Arie is free of his shackles, perhaps he can come and sort us out, starting with our grammar.

Best wishes, Arie.

Notes

1. <http://english.stackexchange.com/questions/13551/E2%82%AC10-ten-euro-or-ten-euros>