

Understanding linguistic patterns: Plural –s absence on nouns

In English, we form a regular plural by adding an -s sound to nouns, so that we say *one dog* but *two dogs* or *a cat* but *two cats*. In Outer Banks English, there is a set of words that do not require an –s sound to make them plural. You can uncover the pattern that determines when a word needs an –s to make it plural and when it does not. List A gives sentences that have nouns that require the addition of the –s to nouns to be plural. List B contains nouns that do not need the plural -s.

LIST A: Nouns that require -s to be plural

1. We caught two hundred **cats**.
2. How many **dogs** does he have?
3. There are two **bucks** sitting in the backyard.
4. They have lots of **ponies** down below.
5. They have three **sisters**.
6. It's about six **teachers**.

LIST B: Nouns that do not require -s to be plural

1. We caught two hundred **pound**_ of flounder
2. How many **bushel**_ does he have?
3. There are two **pint**_ sitting in the backyard.
4. There are lots of **gallon**_ of water.
5. They have three **acre**_ for building.
6. It's about six **mile**_ up the road.

Rule 1:

Examine the lists to determine what properties the nouns in list B share. How are the nouns in list A different?

Write a rule that explains the first part of this dialect pattern:

List C has the same nouns that were in list B, but they are given in sentences that require the plural –s. Compare these sentences to those in list B.

LIST C: Sentences with nouns that require -s to be plural

1. We had **pounds** of flounder that spoiled.
2. Sometimes people use **bushels** instead of **pounds**.
3. The **pints** of ice cream are in the freezer.
4. We had **gallons** of water in the skiff.
5. The best **acres** are owned by the government.
6. The beautiful beach goes for **miles**.

Rule 2:

What is different about the use of the weight/measure nouns in list B versus list C?

What would these sentences be like without the plural –s? Would they be confusing? Are the sentences in list B confusing?

Write a rule that explains this part of the dialect pattern.

Use your two rules to predict which of the nouns in list D may or may not have the –s. If you have stated the rule for plural -s correctly, you should be able to do this without guessing. Write Y for Yes if the –s can be dropped or N for No if it cannot be dropped.

LIST D: Predicting plural –s absence

1. ___ She had three pound___ of fish left.
2. ___ She had pound___ of fish left.
3. ___ It's forty inch___ to the top.
4. ___ It's inch___ to the top.
5. ___ There are rat___ in the yard.
6. ___ There are six rat___ in the yard.

Answer Key

Rule 1:

All the nouns in list A are common nouns whereas the nouns in list B are all weight or measure nouns.

A noun must be a measure noun for it not to require –s.

Rule 2:

In list C, all the measure nouns have a quantifier (e.g., two, many, etc.)

The weight and measure nouns must be accompanied by a quantifying word (a word that indicates specific or general quantity) that indicates the plurality.

Both these criteria – that the word must be a weight/measure noun AND it must be preceded by a quantifier – must be met in order for the –s to be left off.

LIST D: Predicting plural –s absence

1. _Y_ She had three pound__ of fish left.
2. _N_ She had pound__ of fish left. **(No quantifier)**
3. _Y_ It's forty inch__ to the top.
4. _N_ It's inch__ to the top. **(No quantifier)**
5. _N_ There are rat__ in the yard. **(No quantifier and not a measure noun)**
6. _N_ There are six rat__ in the yard. **(Not a measure noun.)**