

# Pluralia tantum and other wonders of the number system: a canonical analysis

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Pluralia tantum is a label for nouns which lack a singular when, in some sense, they should not. The fact that English *binoculars* has no singular is worth noting (that is, it is not predictable). True, there are other nouns denoting items consisting of two significant parts which behave similarly (*spectacles, trousers, ...*); indeed they are subject to 'middle-size generalizations', (Koenig 1999). But there are two reasons to take note of *binoculars* and similar nouns. First, there are many English nouns equally denoting items consisting of two significant parts which are unremarkable in this respect: *bicycle, bigraph, Bactrian camel, couple, duo, ...* And second, there are languages with number systems roughly comparable to that of English in which the equivalent of *binoculars* is a normal count noun: Russian *binokl'*. Conversely, Russian *sani* 'sleigh' is a pluralia tantum noun. How then do we talk of 'one sleigh' in Russian? These items are the entry point to a collection of items, some with much stranger behaviour, lurking between the unexpectedly defective and the semi-predictable. Moreover, while pluralia tantum nouns are of continued interest in the general linguistic literature (see, for instance, Wisniewski 1999), it is typically only the English type which is considered. The aim, therefore, is to set out a fuller typology of these fascinating nouns, so that their significance can be more fully appreciated and analyses can be based on a better data set. I start from the notion of canonical noun, and demonstrate the different non-canonical properties according to a set of orthogonal criteria.