

PSEUDO-PLURALS VS. QUASI-PSEUDO-PLURALS

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Imagine a pair of singular nouns A and B in which B but not A contains a letter at its right edge corresponding to the letter used to express plurality. If A and B are otherwise orthographically identical, I refer to the latter as the pseudo-plural of the former. Pseudo-plurals are very different from pseudo-comparatives, e.g. BE ~ BEER ~ BEEST, P ~ PER ~ PEST (see David Morice, *The Dictionary of Wordplay*). The reason is that triplets like these do not consistently belong to the same word class, e.g. BE is a verb, while BEER is a noun. By contrast, the words A and B described above must both be (singular) nouns. For reasons that will be clear below, I consider first the nature of pseudo-plurals in German and then I discuss their status in English.

German is a language in which pseudo-plurals can be found with many common nouns. One of the reasons this is possible is that German is a language with several different suffixes which indicate plurality. For example, we find –S in words like PARK ~ PARKS and DECK ~ DECKS, –E in HUND ‘dog’ ~ HUNDE ‘dogs’ and TISCH ‘table’ ~ TISCHE ‘tables’, and –ER in EI ‘egg’ ~ EIER ‘eggs’ and BILD ‘picture’ ~ BILDER ‘pictures’. A prime example of a pseudo-plural involves the singular noun EI ‘egg’ and the singular noun EIS ‘ice cream’. The latter word is a pseudo-plural of the former because it ends in –S, which we know on the basis of the examples listed above is a suffix expressing plurality. A list of German pseudo-plurals is presented in Figure 1 with the three endings –S, –E, and –ER. In this list, the singular noun in the Noun B column is the pseudo-plural of the corresponding singular noun in the Noun A column. I make no claims that the list in Figure 1 is complete; in fact, given a good reverse dictionary a diligent logologist might not find it difficult to uncover additional examples.

Figure 1: German pseudo-plurals:

<u>Noun A</u>		<u>Noun B</u>	
EI	‘egg’	EIS	‘ice cream’
BUCH	‘book’	BUCHS	‘box’
MAI	‘May’	MAIS	‘corn’
RAP	‘rap’	RAPS	‘rapeseed’
KUR	‘spa’	KURS	‘course’
DACH	‘roof’	DACHS	‘badger’
SCHRANK	‘cupboard’	SCHRANKE	‘barrier’
ZINN	‘tin’	ZINNE	‘pinnacle’
TYP	‘guy’	TYPE	‘model’
AKT	‘act’	AKTE	‘file’
FISCH	‘fish’	FISCHER	‘fisherman’
BAD	‘bath’	BADER	‘barber-surgeon’
DAMPF	‘steam’	DAMPFER	‘steam boat’
TREFF	‘rendezvous’	TREFFER	‘hit’
SIEG	‘victory’	SIEGER	‘victor’

HANG	'slope'	HANGER	'hanger'
KOCH	'cook'	KOCHER	'cooker'
FLUCH	'curse'	FLUCHER	'curser'
MAL	'time'	MALER	'painter'
DRUCK	'pressure'	DRUCKER	'printer'
SPIEL	'game'	SPIELER	'player'
ZAHL	'number'	ZAHLER	'payer'

The three endings in the pseudo-plurals listed above (i.e. –S, –E, and –ER) not only look like true plural suffixes from the point of view of orthography; they also sound like true plural suffixes. Put differently, the –S in the singular noun EIS, the –E in the singular noun SCHRANKE and the –ER in the singular noun FISCHER are all pronounced just as their corresponding suffixes in the plurals DECKS, HUNDE 'dogs' and BILDER 'pictures'.

And how does English fare? In that language there is a single regular plural suffix –S with a variant –ES. Imagine word pairs consisting of two singular nouns A and B, in which B differs from A by the presence of a final –S (or –ES). In the type of example just described, B looks like it is the plural of A because it ends in –S, but since both nouns are in the singular B is the pseudo-plural of A. English pseudo-plurals are not easy to find; see Figure 2 for four candidates; all eight words can be found in Merriam-Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 11th edition.

Figure 2: English quasi-pseudo-plurals:

<u>Noun A</u>		<u>Noun B</u>	
BAA	'bleat of sheep'	BAAS	'boss'
O	'letter o'	OS	'bone'
PA	'father'	PAS	'dance step'
RA	'Egyptian sun god'	RAS	'family of genes'

I refer to the items in the Noun B column above as 'quasi-pseudo-plurals' because they differ from the German pseudo-plurals in Figure 1 in an important respect: Examples like OS in Figure 2 are not pronounced as genuine plurals. In English, the plural suffix –S is consistently pronounced as [z] and not as [s] after a vowel sound, e.g. LLAMA ~ LLAMAS, BEE ~ BEES, YOYO ~ YOYOS, TAXI ~ TAXIS. By contrast, the –S in BAAS, OS, and RAS is pronounced [s] and in PAS it is not pronounced at all. Words like OS are therefore only pseudo-plurals with respect to the orthography, but not with respect to the pronunciation. Since they only fulfill one condition on pseudo-plurality, they are quasi-pseudo-plurals.

Conversely, it is very easy to find English words which qualify as pseudo-plurals by virtue of the pronunciation only. Examples like these are clearly quasi-pseudo-plurals because they do not resemble the plurals of the corresponding singular nouns from the point of view of orthography. Some examples are presented in Figure 3:

Figure 3: English quasi-pseudoplurals:

<u>Noun A</u>	<u>Noun B</u>	<u>Noun A</u>	<u>Noun B</u>
AD	ADZE	COP	COPSE
BOO	BOOZE	LAP	LAPSE
CLAW	CLAUSE	FLACK	FLAX
PAW	PAUSE	FLOCK	PHLOX
PRO	PROSE	LACK	LAX
RAY	RAISE	LINK	LYNX
ROW	ROSE	LOCK	LOX
RYE	RISE	STICK	STYX
TEA	TEASE	TACK	TAX

In these examples, the word in the Noun B column is pronounced just as the corresponding word in the Noun A column with the addition of either [z] (in the first group) or [s] (in the second group). Note that the pronunciation as [z] or [s] is determined by the same rules that tell us how the true plural suffix is pronounced, i.e. as [z] after vowels and as [s] after voiceless consonants like [p t k].

It might be fair to say that the English examples presented up to this point either satisfy the eye and not the ear (e.g. O ~ OS) or the ear and not the eye (e.g. PAW ~ PAUSE). Quasi-pseudoplurals therefore obey only one of the two conditions, but true pseudo-plurals must necessarily satisfy both. In this regard, it is interesting to consider English singular noun pairs like PAS ~ PASS and PUS ~ PUSS. The second example in these pairs does not resemble a plural orthographically, nor does it sound like a plural. Since they satisfy neither the eye nor the ear, they are neither pseudo-plurals, nor are they quasi-pseudo-plurals.

A natural question to ask is whether or not English has pseudo-plurals at all. The examples I have found so far have been listed below. Dictionaries often confusingly refer to the words in the Noun B column as ‘plurals’; I consider them to be singular nouns because this is how they are actually used, e.g. CRAPS IS A GAME, MEASLES IS A CHILDHOOD DISEASE.

Figure 4: English pseudo-plurals:

<u>Noun A</u>		<u>Noun B</u>	
BEND	‘curve’	BENDS	‘decompression sickness’
BLUE	‘color’	BLUES	‘type of music’
CHECKER	‘store employee’	CHECKERS	‘board game’
CRAP	‘feces’	CRAPS	‘dice game’
HIVE	‘nest of bees’	HIVES	‘allergic disorder’
MEASLE	‘tapeworm larva’	MEASLES	‘disease’
MECHANIC	‘repairer of machines’	MECHANICS	‘branch of physical science’
PHYSIC	‘act of healing’	PHYSICS	‘science dealing with matter’

Since BENDS, BLUES, CHECKERS, CRAPS, HIVES, MEASLES, MECHANICS and PHYSICS all satisfy the eye and the ear, they are true pseudo-plurals and not quasi-pseudo-plurals.

Many English words ending in –s appear to be akin to the words in Figure 4, but a closer inspection reveals that they are not. For instance, some singular nouns ending in –s do not have a

corresponding singular noun without the –s, e.g. PHONETICS, LINGUISTICS, HERPES. Other examples occur in pairs, but the noun with –s is used in the plural and not in the singular, e.g. BANG ~ BANGS, PANT ~ PANTS, GLASS ~ GLASSES. Yet another set of –s words fails to qualify for pseudo-plurality (and quasi-pseudo-plurality) not only because the word with –s is used in the plural, but also because it lacks a corresponding noun without –s, e.g. SCISSORS.

One realm in which a great many English pseudo-plurals can be found is proper nouns:

Figure 5: English pseudo-plurals involving proper nouns:

<u>Proper Noun A</u>	<u>Proper Noun B</u>	<u>Proper Noun A</u>	<u>Proper Noun B</u>
ADAM	(JOHN) ADAMS	REEVE	(KEANU) REEVES
ANDREW	(JULIE) ANDREWS	ROGER	ROGERS (HORNSBY)
DEB	(EUGENE V.) DEBS	STEPHEN	(ALEXANDER) STEPHENS
FIELD	(W.C.) FIELDS	WILLIAM	(TED) WILLIAMS
HAYE	(RUTHERFORD B.) HAYES		

The examples in the Proper Noun B columns are pseudo-plurals because they resemble plurals from the point of view of spelling and because they are pronounced as the true plurals.

It needs to be stressed that quasi-pseudo-plurals can also be found in the domain of proper nouns. Some examples have been presented in Figure 6:

Figure 6: English quasi-pseudo-plurals involving proper nouns:

<u>Proper Noun A</u>	<u>Proper Noun B</u>
AMO	AMOS
ANDREA	ANDREAS
JUDA	JUDAS
LAO	LAOS
MARCO	MARCOS
TAO	TAOS

While it might be true that the examples in the Proper Noun B column are spelled like plurals, they fail the pronunciation test because their –s is pronounced (in English) as [s] and not as [z].

So why does German allow for so many pseudo-plurals within the realm of common nouns while English apparently only has a handful? One reason was noted above: German has a number of different suffixes that are used to form plurals. Another reason is specific to English orthography: Spelling rules conspire against pseudo-plurals. For example, if an English word ends in the two sounds [k] and [s], then those sounds will be spelled with x if the [s] is not a plural suffix (cf. LOX, REX, TAX), otherwise as CKS, e.g. LOCKS, WRECKS, TACKS. By contrast, German orthography does not have as strong a bias against pseudo-plurals.

Here are three questions for readers of this journal to ponder: (a) How many examples of English pseudo-plurals are there, in addition to BENDS, BLUES, CHECKERS, CRAPS, HIVES, MEASLES, MECHANICS and PHYSICS? (b) How many examples of English quasi-pseudo-plurals are there, in addition to BAAS, OS, PAS and RAS? (c) Can pseudo-plurals or quasi-pseudo-plurals be found in languages other than German and English?