

COMPTE RENDU

Lori MORRIS
professeure d'anglais
UQAC

Mark Wickens, **Grammatical Number in English Nouns**, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992, 321p.

For a scholarly work devoted to the subject of number in English, this monograph is decidedly singular; not of course in the sense that the plural has been overlooked, but rather in that it possesses a delightful uniqueness which sets it apart from other works on the subject. While most grammarians have pointed out that a number of English nouns can bear an inflexional *-s* while still being followed by a singular noun, none has explored the problem raised by such cases to the same extent and with the same degree of zeal as the author of **Grammatical Number in English Nouns**. Wickens takes his reader on a lexical romp through a collection of enough names of ailments, liquids and tools to leave hypochondriacs quaking in fear, bootleggers ready to toast the work, and craftsmen tipping their caps out of respect. In short, for the lover of obscure words, this book is essential reading.

Wickens's work, however, is far more than a simple lexicon. A theoretical undercurrent serves to bind together what might initially appear to be unrelated examples and lead the reader through a coherent discussion intended, as the author declares in his opening paragraphs, to test the psychomechanical theory of the system of number initially proposed by Hirtle in his 1982 work, **Number and Inner Space: A Study of Grammatical Number in English**. Wickens's goal is to measure the extent to which Hirtle's theory is capable of handling a different, much broader sampling of attested examples of hard-to-deal-with cases of *-s* singulars and \emptyset plurals.

Given the theoretical dependency of Wickens's book on Hirtle's earlier work on number, a brief summary of the latter proves to be useful. Hirtle proposes that the \emptyset and *-s* endings form a binary system in which continue space (\emptyset) is opposed to discontinue space (*-s*). This approach represents a significant break with the long-standing practice of describing English number in terms of singularity and plurality in two major respects. Firstly, it offers grammarians a means of coming to terms with both those nouns which can take an inflexional *-s* while still being

used with a singular verb or modifier (e.g. *Results is what I want*) and those nouns which can be used with a plural verb or modifiers while showing no inflexional ending (e.g. *Elk have a strong characteristic smell*). More importantly, this approach provides a potential solution to the nagging problem of polysemy which underlies each of the two endings. While many grammarians have pointed out that the $-\emptyset$ and $-s$ endings can evoke various values ranging from a generic sense (*Butter is nourishing, Horses are quadrupeds*) to clear numeric singularity (*He only put one sugar in his coffee, The party reached a picnic grounds*), few have been able to suggest why this is so and fewer still have been able to formulate a theory of the system of number in English capable of accounting for all of the data. In suggesting that the potential meaning of either morpheme is best represented as a movement from the generic to the singular or from the singular to the generic, a movement which takes us through continue space ($-\emptyset$) and/or discontinue space ($-s$), Hirtle reaches well beyond most existing visions of the system number in English and ultimately provides a theory which quite satisfactorily accounts for a very substantial sampling of data.

It is at this point Wickens steps in, putting Hirtle's theory to the test by subjecting it to previously unconsidered or little-considered data drawn from six main areas: ailment names, liquid names, nouns in *-ings*, names of binary objects, the abstract *-s*, and external singulars. The diversity of these fields of investigation is at once tantalizingly and puzzling. The reader, while intrigued by the range of categories covered, might well wonder on what basis Wickens decided to include them while excluding others; fields such as plant names, spatial expanses and games, all of which are mentioned in the chapter devoted to problems and prospects, would appear to be as "developable" as those topics retained for exploration. Naturally, the author had to restrict his research to a limited number of fields to pare the undertaking down to manageable proportions, but how this narrowing process was carried out is never clearly revealed. Was availability of data a factor? Were there theoretical considerations? Was this done out of personal interest? One might also wonder why some of the excluded categories and examples were not developed more fully and integrated into the main body of the work. The discussion of Epsom salts, for example, might have been mentioned in a note when products of distillation processes were discussed and §6.1 might have been expanded to include the collection of nouns in *-ics* relegated to the problems and prospects section.

In terms of findings, Wickens's work generally confirms Hirtle's theory. It is convincingly demonstrated that the inflexional *-s* is used for names of ailments which involve repetitive manifestations (ex. *rickets, measles*), names of liquids which have a discontinuous flow (ex. *drippings, drops*), nouns in *-ings* which represent products of repeated activities (ex. *doings, shavings*), names of binary objects whose functioning depends on the opposition of two component parts or elements

(ex. *pliers, tongs*), abstract nouns which are situated ordinally or with respect to an alternative version (ex. *for starters, let's be friends*), and external singulars which convey the idea of many parts or units making up one (ex. *a fireworks, a crossroads*). In short, Wickens finds that the *-s* ending is a consistent marker of an underlying impression of plurality or multiplicity, while the *-ø* ending conveys a notion of singularity, be it numeric singularity or a feeling of singularity resulting from a reference to an entire species or to a mass substance.

The only point over which Wickens differs with Hirtle turns out to be a fairly minor one: the interpretation, or more exactly the appellation, to be given to external singulars. While Hirtle proposes that the *-s* ending represents the 'extendability' of the mental construct evoked (i.e. *a stairs* suggests a number of individual elements—steps—in a series, *a holidays* a stretch of days of rest, *an innings* series of turns at bat, *a headquarters* an expanse of meeting space), Wickens concludes that this solution is less than satisfactory for some external singulars which would appear to take the *-s* ending more because of their duality than their extendability. He, in turn, suggests that the use of *-s* in these cases might be better explained in terms of 'extensionality' rather than extendability, the former term being applied because it better reflects all of the various properties of the *s*-singular, particularly the impression that the individual components perceived by the speaker are bound together in some sort of relationship or pattern of organization. For instance, the *-s* of *a stairs* suggests a number of steps organized into a stairway and the *-s* of *a headquarters* gives the impression of an agglomeration of rooms or even functions bound together into a coherent whole by virtue of being interrelated.

Insofar as the author's stated goal is to "validate Hirtle's theory, or rather parts of it, to verify some of his analyses and to investigate several problems, some of which are mentioned in his work as subject for further research" (p. 1), the result is a highly acceptable achievement. As has already been mentioned, Wickens's collection of data in the fields he has selected is exhaustive and his analyses are painstaking. The reader is entertained by the variety of examples considered and impressed by the patience and ingenuity of the author in seeking out rare uses of certain nouns with or without an inflexional *-s* before concluding that new evidence can in fact be accounted for by Hirtle's proposals. Given this thoroughness, one is certainly left with the impression that Wickens has kept his promise to put Hirtle's theory to the test by submitting it to trial by evidence, the crucial, all too often forgotten test of validity.

This said, however, it might initially strike the reader that there is something slightly amiss, a certain "cart-before-the-horseness" in the manner in which this research project was conceived and conducted. Still on the first page of the work, Wickens writes: "The following study is principally an examination of data, especially in the form of examples in some of the chapters, so no effort is made to develop the theory any

further, although one slight modification is made thereto." Coming as it does on the opening page of the book, this statement might discourage the reader with a theoretical bent from pushing on. This would be particularly unfortunate given the tremendous potential for theoretical expansion that Wickens's meticulous research offers. Furthermore, this declaration, particularly when coupled with the citation from the preceding paragraph, might suggest to some that Wickens's purpose in studying new data was to confirm rather than truly test or expand upon an existing theory.

In this regard, Wickens might have been better to put more emphasis on the originality and potential of his work. Detailed studies of massive data bases with a view to testing a proposed theory are lamentably few and far between in the linguistic world. All too often, linguistic investigations result in theoretically "top-heavy" hypotheses founded on a good deal of speculation but very little examination of attested examples. Wickens, however, far from indulging in theoretical excess, tends to sin in the direction of theoretical parcimony. Although his research would seem to open a number of new avenues of study—notably the problem of number in the case of binarity and duality—, none of them are pursued to any length within the body of the work. This is particularly unfortunate given the splendid foundation Wickens's research could provide for a more substantial theoretical construction. Other grammarians and theories would certainly have had more to fear if Wickens had taken a little more time to point out how his findings shake the very foundations of previous singular-plural approaches to number, and Hirtle's proposals might have gained a great deal from the refinements that more theoretical reflexion from an outside source could have brought.

However, rather than call attention to what this book does not do, it would be considerably more profitable to all interested in the question of number in English to point out instead what it does do. **Grammatical Number in English Nouns** provides a firm stepping stone to further linguistic work by giving future researchers a tested theory of substantival number to work with and a wealth of new, highly entertaining examples to take into consideration when the challenge of exploring the problem of number is taken up the next time.