

PLURAL-S

ONE is one and all alone and ever more shall be so'. So went the line in the number song *Green Grow the Rushes O* that I learned at primary school. Indeed, in English the singular is clearly marked off from the plural. There is one, and then there are many.

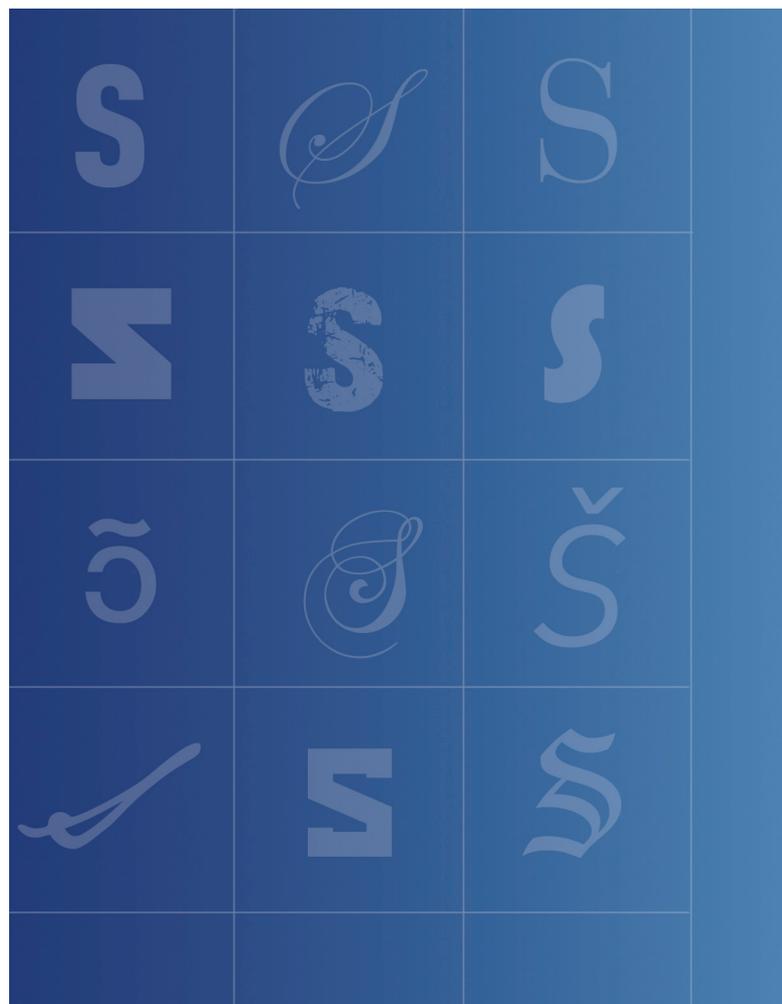
We clearly mark the singular-plural distinction in English by adding 's' to make nouns plural; one thing, two things. Except when we do not, of course; one ox, two oxen; one child, two children; one sheep, two sheep; one goose, two geese. These 'non-s' plurals in English are traces of the history of the language, and its varieties of dialects in the past.

The point is, that in English marking the difference between one and more than one is obligatory. It is not only nouns, but also the verbs and pronouns that must follow suit. We just cannot avoid leaving that solitary 'one' all alone.

In Indonesian, marking the plural is optional. Unmarked nouns are neither singular nor plural. The context usually makes the distinction evident, but one way that nouns can be made specifically plural is by doubling them. This has sometimes led to a perception that the use of plurals in Indonesian is like some kind of pidgin or 'baby talk'. A noted academic (who shall remain nameless) used to refer derisively to Indonesian-Malay as 'the buku-buku language' (*buku* is book—or books). Even an astute writer like Elisabeth Pisani in her wonderful book *Indonesia Etc* writes: "It is a funny one, Indonesian. Like many languages that evolved principally to ease negotiation in polyglot marketplaces, trading Malay/Indonesian is grammatically very simple. Instead of fussing with plurals, Indonesian just doubles up the noun. *Anak*; child; *anak-anak* (often written anak2); children."

But Indonesian-Malay is not alone in having optional plural. In Chinese and Japanese too (so I am told) marking number is optional. So Indonesian-Malay's 'not fussing with plurals' does not have anything to do with its use as a *lingua franca*, with trade, or 'simplicity'. Different languages have different sensitivities to 'plural', and different ways of conceptualizing 'more than one'. Sanskrit, for instance, like Greek marks a difference between singular (one), dual (two) and more than one (plural). Some languages use plural only for certain categories—like things close to you, or living things.

Over the 1950s, there was a push to 'modernize' the Indonesian language. One of the champions of this was the renowned linguist Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana. His modernizing mission was to make the Indonesian function more like a European language, particularly Dutch. He wanted all plural nouns to be marked as doubled words, and he promoted the use of the superscript 2 (the little 2 we use to mark square measurement,



m²) to note plurals. His own writing marks every plural noun as though he were writing English or Dutch—and the text is riddled with superscript '2's. For instance:

"...*buat peladjaran kedokteran dan ilmu téknik di Indonésia sekalipun bahasa Belanda amat pentingnja, oleh karena tentang vak² inipun amat banjak karangan² dalam bahasa Belanda...*" [1951]

(...the Dutch language is extremely important for the teaching of medicine and engineering, because there are so many *works* in Dutch for these *disciplines*...)



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changes in written Indonesian since the 1950s has been the acceptance that plurals are understood through context. Contemporary Indonesian uses the written out doubled word form, but only when it is absolutely necessary to specify plural—which, most of the time, it is not. We usually understand the plural. In my translation work from Indonesian into English I rarely have to check with the Indonesian writer whether he or she meant singular or plural (whereas I am always having to check gender).

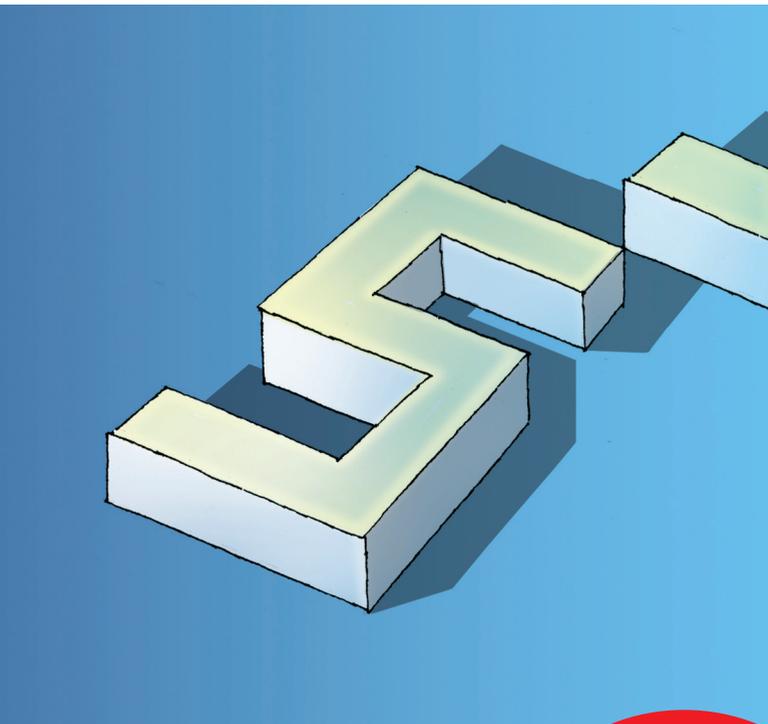
Anyway, apart from doubling the noun, there are many other ways to specify plural in Indonesian if you really have to. First, you can use words like ‘many’, ‘both’ or ‘all’; or numbers, ‘the three of them’, ‘the six of them’ and so on; or other number groups like ‘a dozen’ and so forth. Indonesian-Malay also has many collective nouns for groups of things—for piles, chunks, lumps, scraps, heaps, bunches and all kinds of groups, which is a subject that deserves a column in itself.

In spoken Indonesian, there is even less use of doubling than in writing to express plural. Doubling the word occurs only when one has to avoid ambiguity, which is actually not all that often. Except for formal speeches, that is, when wordiness is part of sounding official and flowery. The opening for formal speeches (‘Ladies and Gentlemen’) is usually ‘*Bapak-Bapak dan Ibu-Ibu sekalian*’, which is about as wordy as you can get (with ‘*sekalian*’ meaning all of you). There is another way of saying it, a shortcut—using the word ‘*para*’ which Indonesian has adopted from Javanese, and marks a plural. Addressing a crowd, one can say the more elegant ‘*para hadirin*’, which means ‘distinguished guests’ (and is a direct translation of the Javanese ‘*para rawuh*’). This is usually the preferred form at academic seminars—but has yet to catch on at weddings, where being flowery is *de rigeur*. The word ‘*para*’ is increasingly used as an alternative plural marker for nouns, often in journalism. Stevens, in his Indonesian-English dictionary says that ‘*para*’ is used as a collective plural only for human beings, but I have seen it used for inanimate things too.

Anyway, all this makes you think, what is the big deal, really, in ‘more than one’? Why ‘one’ and then ‘all the rest’? How do different languages and cultures conceptualize number, and what are the significant groups? And when, in a language, is specificity needed?

As with so much to do with the Indonesian language, learning how to express plural (and when and if it is necessary) is learnt through nuance. This is what makes learning Indonesian difficult. It is not a matter of ‘rules’, of treating words as just a matter of grammar as Alisjahbana would have liked, but of learning through context. And believe me, there is no end to that!

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Today, this sentence would be written in Indonesian without explicitly expressing the plural for the words ‘works’ and ‘disciplines’, for indeed in this sentence the plural of these words is clear, and the doubling is redundant. When Alisjahbana (and his contemporaries) treated Indonesian nouns in the Dutch (or English) way, treating the unmarked noun as ‘singular’ and the doubled as ‘plural’ they were more concerned with imposing ‘grammar’ than with contextual understanding.

Luckily, the ‘2’ trend did not stick. One of the many stylistic