

36. The Associative Plural

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1. Introduction

Associative plural constructions consist of a noun X (typically of human reference, usually a person's name or a kin term) and some other material, most often an affix, a clitic, or a word. The meaning of the construction is 'X and other people associated with X'. An example is Japanese *Tanaka-tachi* 'Tanaka and his associates'.

The reader may have come across various other terms in the literature for the associative plural and related constructions, such as Delbrück's *elliptical dual* (Delbrück 1893: 137), Jespersen's *approximative plural* (Jespersen 1965: 192), the term *plural a potiori* used in Indo-European and Semitic studies, and the label *reprezentativnaja množestvennost'* (representative plural) employed by Russian Orientalists. For extensive discussions of the associative plural construction, see Corbett (2000: 101–111), Daniel (2000), and Moravcsik (2003).

2. Identifying the associative plural

We identify associative plural constructions by two semantic properties: referential heterogeneity and reference to groups. The first property, **referential heterogeneity**, distinguishes associative plurals from additive plurals. **Additive plurals** (cf. Barulin 1980) are the most common type in most languages. An example of the additive plural is English *boys*. It is additive in the sense that it refers to a set where every member is a boy and thus the set is referentially homogeneous: every referent of the plural form is also a referent of the stem. In contrast, the **associative plural** designates a heterogeneous set. For example, Japanese *Tanaka-tachi* does not refer to more than one person

named Tanaka: it refers to a group of people only one of whom bears this name. We will call the named member of the group the **focal referent**; the other referents are the **associates**. By virtue of its referential heterogeneity, the associative plural construction is related to other non-homogeneous plurals, such as what might be called the **similative plural** (e.g. Telugu (Dravidian; India) *puligili* ‘tigers and such’ (Colin Masica, p.c.)), which differs from the associative plural in that it denotes a class of objects sharing similar features rather than a group of closely related associates. A near-universal instance of heterogeneous plurals is plural personal pronouns, e.g. *we* meaning ‘speaker and some other people’ (see chapter 39). The focal referent of associative plurals is often interpreted as pragmatically dominant; thus, in many languages associative plurals meant to designate a family are formed on the husband's (rather than the wife's) name.

The second semantic feature of the associative plural is reference to groups: it refers to a **close-knit group of individuals** rather than to sets without any internal cohesion. This characteristic ties associative plurals to **collective plurals** such as Russian *listva* ‘a mass of leaves’; the difference is that collective plurals are referentially homogeneous. The group's numerical size may be two or more. Note that, unless otherwise indicated, we use the term *plural* in a broad sense covering not only plurals but also duals and potentially also trials, paucals etc., although for associatives we only have examples of plurals and duals.

3. Semantic types of associative plurals

We will consider two aspects of the meaning of associative plurals: the lexical classes that can form associative plurals and the nature of the relationship within the associated group.

3.1. Lexical constraints on associative plurals. What kinds of nouns can form associative plural constructions? In almost all cases, the focal referent and the associated referents belong to the same cognitive category, which is mostly the class of humans or, much more rarely, non-human animates (e.g. Tatar (Turkic; Russia) *jeldezler* 'Star (a cow's name) and (my) other cow' (Michael Daniel, field data)). There is only sporadic evidence for inanimate heterogeneous plurals designating sets of objects closely related to each other, and this pattern is never productive. Our examples come from Sanskrit, where the dual form of the word for 'mortar' refers to 'mortar and pestle' (Delbrück 1893: 137), and from Nganasan (Uralic; Russia), where the plural form of the word for 'bow' refers to 'bow and arrows' (Valentin Goussev, p.c.). Among human nouns, associative plurals are much more typical of proper names than of common nouns; and among human common nouns, of kin terms (especially of terms for 'father' and 'mother') more than of other human common nouns.

In some languages, the associative plural construction is not productive: only a closed set of nouns form them. This is the case in Spanish: the few examples include *mis padres*, literally "my fathers" but meaning 'my father and mother', *los reyes*, literally "the kings" but meaning 'the king and the queen'.

All in all, there is a clear preference for associative plurals formed from proper names over kin terms over non-kin human common nouns over non-human nouns. Although most of our examples are from the top of this scale, all our evidence is consistent with the generalization that if a language forms associative plurals from any lower type of the four categories mentioned, it also forms associative plurals on any of the higher types (see also chapter 34).

3.2. Semantic constraints on the associated group. Let us now turn to the second semantic issue: what is the nature of the relation among members of the group that associative plurals

refer to? Given X as the focal referent, the group may be: (i) X's family (ii) X's friends, or familiar associates, or (iii) an occasional group that X is a member of. The kin reading seems to be the core meaning of associative plurals: although there are many languages which allow all three interpretation (e.g. Tatar), there are also languages where neither (ii) nor (iii) is available (e.g. Bagvalal (Daghestanian; eastern Caucasus)).

In sum: There are crosslinguistic preferences regarding the semantic types of associative plurals in both respects, with human proper nouns being the most common stem, and kin forming the most commonly understood associates.

4. Formal types of associative plurals

Table 1 lists the various formal types of associative plurals. The first column identifies the type of marking, the second column expands on the nature of the marking and characterizes the structure of the whole expression, and the third column names an example language. The plus sign indicates cooccurrence without regard to linear order.

Table 1. Formal types of associative plurals

| Marking | Construction | Example |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------|
| dedicated affix | noun + dedicated affix | Brahui |
| dedicated article | noun + element which occupies article position and has no other functions | Tagalog |
| dedicated clitic | noun + clitic with no other functions | Adyghe |
| basic plural marker | noun + affix, clitic or a free word, which also serves as additive plural marker on most nouns | Turkish |
| secondary plural marker | noun + affix, clitic or a free word, which also serves as additive plural marker on a few nouns | Evenki |
| possessive affix + plural affix | headless plural possessive | Bulgarian |
| plural pronoun | noun + plural personal pronoun | Mandarin |
| conjunction | noun + conjunction without the second | Basque |

| | | |
|------------------|--|-------------|
| | coordinand | |
| plural verb form | singular NP (verbal agreement controller) + plural target verb form | Plains Cree |

The map does not show each of these types separately. We have subsumed them under three more general classes; these will be explained in more detail in the next section.

5. Defining the values

The map shows four feature values. The basic division that we made among languages that do have associative plurals is between those where the marker of the construction also expresses additive plurals and those where it does not. Languages of the former type show up in blue regardless of whether the bifunctional marker is an affix, a clitic, or a free word. Languages with a special associative plural marker are red or orange: red for languages whose marker is an affix and orange for languages where the marking is by means of a free or bound word. Languages with no associative plurals or only non-productive (Spanish) or idiolectal (Russian, English) examples of associative plurals are shown in white.

| | | |
|---|---|-----|
| @ | 1. Associative plural marker also used for additive plurals | 104 |
| @ | 2. Special bound associative plural marker | 48 |
| @ | 3. Special non-bound associative plural marker | 48 |
| @ | 4. Associative plural absent | 37 |
| | total | 237 |

Here are some examples of the four types.

Type 1: the marker is **also used to express additive plurals** on at least some nouns. This type includes the fourth and fifth subtype in Table 1.

(1) Zulu (Bantu; South Africa; Lewis 1893: 52–53)

affix:

| | | |
|---------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| associative plural: | <i>o-faku</i> | ‘Faku and his company’ |
| | <i>(au-faku)</i> | ‘Faku’ |
| additive plural: | <i>o-kova</i> | ‘bananas’ |
| | <i>(u-kova)</i> | ‘banana’ |

(2) Hixkaryana (Carib; Brazil; Derbyshire 1985: 132–133, p.c.)

clitic:

| | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|--|
| associative plural: | <i>Waraka komo</i> | ‘Waraka and those accompanying him’ |
| additive plural: | <i>hawana komo</i> | ‘visitors’ |

Type 2: the marker is **an affix which is not used for marking additive plurals** on nouns. This type includes dedicated affixes, headless possessives, and conjunctions of the affixal kind in the chart above.

(3) Hungarian (Edith Moravcsik)

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| associative plural: | <i>Pál-ék</i> | ‘Paul and company’ |
| additive plural: | <i>toll-ak</i> | ‘pens’ |
| | <i>*toll-ék</i> | ‘pens’ |

Type 3: the marker is **not an affix and may not express additive plurals**. This includes dedicated articles, dedicated clitics, plural pronouns, non-affixal conjunctions, and agreement constructions in Table 1.

(4) Old Icelandic (Paul Hopper, p.c.; Heusler 1964: 124–125)

| | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| associative plural: | <i>þeir Gizorr</i> | ‘Gizorr and his associates’ |
| additive plural: | <i>*þeir gripingr</i> | ‘bulls’ |

Type 4: productive **associative plurals do not exist** in the language, e.g. Russian.

We have chosen the two parameters — morphological vs. non-morphological marking and whether the marker also marks additive plurals — for their inherent interest. First, regarding the latter issue: as the numbers given above show, nearly half of our languages belong to the type where the associative plural marker is also a marker of additive plurals. We wanted to highlight this type because the frequent convergence of two distinct plural meanings on a single form is intriguing. There are two possible ways of interpreting this fact. First, it may be an instance of homonymy — an accidental convergence. Alternatively, it may be an instance of polysemy due to the relatedness of the additive and the associative meanings. We believe the second analysis is the correct one; the argument is as follows. The division between those nouns which, when combined with this marker, are interpreted additively, and those nouns which, when combined with the same marker, are interpreted associatively, is roughly the same in different languages: as noted above, it is primarily human proper names and kin terms whose basic plural forms are interpreted associatively. As was suggested in Daniel (2000), this is so because proper names are linked to a strong pragmatic presumption of their referent's uniqueness, at least within a given speech act. The basic, additive plural interpretation is therefore problematic for such nouns. The meaning of the marker is then adjusted to the semantics of the stem, changing the homogeneous plural reference to the heterogeneous one and yielding associative plural meaning. The same argument is applicable to at least some kin terms.

The other parameter – affixal versus free-form marking – seems to have interesting implications: we assume that the affixes in a given language are historically older than its free

forms and thus this difference sheds light on the age of the construction.

6. Geographical distribution

One of the most salient features of the map is the near-absence of associative plurals in western Europe. The only other area having a considerable number of languages without associative plurals is the Americas.

Australia, Asia and Africa are extremely rich in associative plurals. However, the complete absence of white dots on these continents may be due to the fact that for an under-described language where speakers are also not readily available for direct elicitation, it is much harder to confirm the absence of the associative plural than to confirm its existence.

Considering the areal patterning of the formal types of associative plurals, one notices right away that Asia is the area where associative plurals are generally marked by the same means as associative plurals (blue), except for mainland Southeast Asia. This type also dominates in Africa and seems somewhat more frequent in the Americas, while it is nearly absent from Australia and the Pacific.

As for associative plurals which are distinct from additive plurals: their bound subtype (dedicated suffix, red) clusters in northern Australia, while the dedicated periphrastic construction (orange dots) is very frequent in the Pacific, which is most likely due to the general scarcity of nominal morphology characteristic of this area.