



On the Indefinite Article's Compatibility with Plural Nouns in English*

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to demonstrate that the indefinite article in English can pair with both singular and plural nouns. It is often claimed that the indefinite article in English necessarily matches only singular nouns within noun phrases. However, it is explained in syntactic and semantic terms that the indefinite article in English can combine with plural nouns as well as singular nouns. In syntactic terms, the noun phrase with two agreement elements follows the proximity condition in its agreement. If there is no explicit agreement element between the indefinite article and the head noun, it should only match the singular noun, as seen in “a dolphin” vs. “*a dolphins”. However, if there is another agreement element – a demonstrative, a quantifier or a number – between them, the head noun does not conflict but can combine with the indefinite article because the noun agrees in number with the other element, which immediately precedes it, as seen in “an amazing 200 students” vs. “*an amazing 200 student”. In semantic terms, the indefinite article can pair with plural nouns in a noun phrase, when indicating that the number or quantity of the head noun is approximate, as seen in “an estimated 500,000 migrants”, while it should combine with singular nouns in the other meanings.

KEYWORDS

indefinite article, plural, singular, noun, approximation, estimation, agreement

1. Introduction

How many words are there in English? Although there is no exact count of the number of words in English, many experts estimate that the English language comprises more than a million words. In reality, the Oxford English Dictionary (2007) includes about 500,000 words that are defined in the English language.¹ Although not all of these words are included in corpora, Leech et al. (2001) analyze the frequency of use of the vocabulary words included in the British National Corpus. Among these words, the definite article “the” is by far the highest – nearly 6.2% – followed by “of” (2.9%), “and” (2.7%), “a/an” (2.1%), etc. The indefinite article ranks as the fourth most frequently used word.²

Despite its frequent use, the correct use of the article is one of the most challenging aspects for non-native speakers of English. In English, the indefinite article is used in various meanings in combination with singular nouns within noun phrases, as illustrated below:

- (1) **A dolphin** is a highly intelligent marine mammal.³
- (2) **A bird** in the hand is worth two in the bush.
- (3) I bought **a Ford** last month.
- (4) The chef cooked eight hours **a day**.

The indefinite article is used to indicate that the noun it modifies is indefinite or unspecified. It is also employed to introduce a new or unknown item, person, or concept to the conversation or context. In sentence (1), the indefinite article introduces the concept of a dolphin, referring to any dolphin rather than a specific one. In sentence (2), the indefinite article represents a quantity of “one” bird, instead of the number “one”. In the noun phrase “a Ford” in sentence (3), the article precedes the proper name “Ford” to denote a car manufactured by the Ford company. In the noun phrase “a day” in sentence (4), the indefinite article used before the noun “day” implies “each” or “per”.

Typically, the indefinite article pairs with singular nouns to form a noun phrase. However, there are instances where the article is combined with plural nouns to create a noun phrase, as demonstrated below:

- (5) a. I have **a few friends**.
b. *I have **a few friend**.⁴
- (6) a. I want to live for **a hundred years**.
b. *I want to live for **a hundred year**.

¹ Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (1993) includes a similar number. English Wiktionary reports that it contains more than 580,000 entries. While many of them are not in daily use any longer, new words enter the language and continue to increase.

² Word Frequency List may vary depending on corpus type and version.

³ In the paper the noun phrases in question are in bold.

⁴ The asterisk * in the paper indicates that the sentence is not grammatical.

The combinations of an indefinite article with plural nouns — such as “*a few friends*” in (5a) and “*a hundred years*” in (6a) — are often viewed as idiomatic or exceptional in traditional grammar. Besides, there are other instances that have received little or no attention in grammar studies, as follows:

- (7) Earlier this year, Medicare approved the device as medically beneficial for **an estimated 500,000 patients**. (USA Today. Oct. 24, 2005)
- (8) In the 1980s alone, **a stunning 8.7 million people** poured into the U.S., matching the great immigration decade of 1900 – 10. (Business Week. Jul. 13, 1992)

As shown in (5) – (8) above, the indefinite article can co-occur with plural nouns within a noun phrase. In this study, we aim to demonstrate that the combination of an indefinite article and plural nouns is not a rare occurrence but is regular in both syntactic and semantic contexts. To elucidate this phenomenon, we will examine:

- (i) the agreement in number between an indefinite article and plural nouns within a noun phrase,
- (ii) the meanings of an indefinite article when paired with plural nouns within a noun phrase,
- (iii) the semantic type of adjectives positioned between an indefinite article and a numeral when the indefinite article is paired with plural nouns within a noun phrase.

This study adopts a data-oriented, descriptive approach, examining the subject from the lens of traditional grammar rather than through a specific theory. Data were collected primarily from newspapers, magazines, and novels, including sources such as “USA Today”, “Newsweek”, “Business Week”, “The New York Times”, “The Guardian”, “The Wall Street Journal”, “Surviving in Silence”, and more.

This research is expected to assist learners or teachers of English as a foreign language in using an indefinite article correctly and confidently by providing them with insightful answers both in syntactic and semantic terms.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 delves into previous studies on the compatibility of an indefinite article with a plural noun within a noun phrase. Section 3 discusses the agreement in number between an indefinite article and its head noun. Section 4 explores the meanings of an indefinite article when paired with singular or plural nouns within a noun phrase and investigates the semantic types of adjectives that appear between an indefinite article and a plural noun when combined within a noun phrase. Section 5 concludes the paper with a succinct summary.

2. Previous Studies

Using an indefinite article with singular nouns to form a noun phrase is a standard rule in English grammar. However, when it is paired with plural nouns in specific contexts, it might seem contradictory to the general rule that an indefinite article should only be used with singular nouns. Nevertheless, it often appears with plural nouns, as illustrated below:

- (9) a. I want to stay for **another three weeks**. (Swan 1985, p. 526)
- b. We’ll need **an extra ten pounds**.
- c. He’s been waiting for **a good two hours**.

d. I've lain awake **a good many nights** worrying about you.

Swan (1985, p. 526) states that plural expressions of quantity can coexist with “another” and with “a/an + adjective”, as in (9a, b, c) and also notes the expression “a good many/few + plural (informal)” as in (9d). Swan treats the pairing of an indefinite article with plural nouns as a special pattern, which we will explore in more detail in section 3.2. Similarly, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 758) point out that there are occasions when an indefinite article can accompany plural nouns in measure phrases. This is especially evident when using adjectives with these phrases. For instance, in the noun phrase “an extra ten pounds” in (9b), the indefinite article refers not to the plurality of the pounds but to the singular concept of the amount or sum. Such patterns particularly arise when an adjective modifies a plural measure. In essence, the measure noun phrase becomes a singular entity in itself that describes a particular amount or chunk of time, money, distance, etc. Moreover, much of the literature regards the combination of an indefinite article with plural nouns in a noun phrase as an exception to the general rule.

In line with the general rule, however, Kwon (2012) contends through sentence (10a) that the bold-faced noun phrase is not a union of the indefinite article with the plural noun. Instead, it is a combination of the indefinite article with another singular noun. Let us consider (10):

- (10) a. **A great many crimes** go unreported.
 b. **A great number of many crimes** go unreported.

Kwon (2012, pp. 142-144) highlights two points regarding the noun phrase in (10a). First, in accordance with the general rule, the indefinite article in the noun phrase does not directly pair with “crimes”, which is a plural noun, solely based on its incompatibility with plural nouns. The fact that the indefinite article “a” is used in the phrase suggests that it must be linked to another noun within the phrase, not directly to “crimes”. Second, regarding the typical order of a determiner and an adjective, the sequence in (10a) is not regular. As per Ek and Robot (1984, p. 115), the determiner “many” should be placed before the adjective “great”. For instance, “I have many great books” is grammatically correct, while **“I have great many books”* is not. However, in the phrase “a great many crimes” in (10a), “many” comes after “great”, making the phrase grammatically sound. This indicates that the adjective “great” modifies not “crimes” but another noun.

Based on these two observations, Kwon posits that in the noun phrase in (10a), “a great” forms one group, while “many crimes” constitutes another. Viewing “a great” as an independent unit requires it to be paired with a noun since the indefinite article needs a noun to follow. The specific noun can be inferred based on the context. In the context of (10a), a suitable noun would be “number”, resulting in the phrase “a great number”. Therefore, the full formal expression of the noun phrase in (10), termed as a minimal representation, would extend to “a great number of many crimes”, as indicated in (10b). In this full formal representation, “great” modifies “number”, and “many” modifies “crimes”. Furthermore, the indefinite article associates with “number” rather than “crimes”. Kwon suggests that the minimal representation in (10a) serves as an elliptical version of the full formal representation in (10b). When considering the relationship between the full formal and the minimal representations, it becomes clear that there is no necessity to link the indefinite article with plural nouns. Thus, the general rule remains unbreached.

He employs the same approach to the following examples:

- (11) a. He's been waiting for **a good twenty-five minutes**.
 b. He's been waiting for **a good period of twenty-five minutes**.

- (12) a. The book was remarkably popular in its day, selling **an estimated 1 million copies**
 b. The book was remarkably popular in its day, selling **an estimated number of 1 million copies**.

The phrase “a good twenty-five minutes” in (11a) is the minimal representation of “a good period of twenty-five minutes” in (11b), which is its full formal expression. Inversely, “a good period of twenty-five minutes” in (11b) is the full formal representation of “a good twenty-five minutes” in (11a). The noun “period” is inferred from the context. Similarly, the relationship between the noun phrase in (12a) and that in (12b) can be comprehended in the same manner. The indefinite article in structures such as those in (12a) represents a minimal form derived from its corresponding full formal expression in (12b).

By proposing that a minimal representation is an elliptical variant of full formal representations, Kwon (2012) rationalizes the seemingly incorrect pairing of an indefinite article with plural nouns. However, his argument has at least two flaws.

The first concerns the function or order of adjectives preceding quantifiers within noun phrases that comprise a combination of an indefinite article and a plural noun. As pointed out in (10) above, referencing Ek and Robot (1984), the adjective “great” cannot be positioned before a quantifier like “many” nor can it modify the plural noun “crimes” that follows. This arrangement suggests the need to introduce another noun like “number”, depending on the context of the sentence. In this case, though, “great” does not serve as a qualifying adjective that describes the characteristics of the noun “crimes”. Instead, it serves as an intensifying adjective, thereby amplifying the meaning of the following quantifier “many”. Therefore, in this structure, “great” is positioned before the quantifier, not to describe the noun directly but to strengthen the meaning of “many”.

The second flaw pertains to the interchangeability between a minimal representation and its full formal counterpart. While a minimal representation can be expanded into a full formal representation, the reverse is not consistently true: a full formal representation cannot always be reduced to a minimal form. Although the representations in examples (10) through (12) are consistently interchangeable, those in (13) through (17) indicate that such interchangeability is not always feasible:

- (13) a. **A number of protesters** in the capital were severely injured.
 b. ***A protesters** in the capital were severely injured.
- (14) a. He is planning to open **a number of new stores** all over the country.
 b. *He is planning to open **a new stores** all over the country.
- (15) a. It attracts **a great number of tourists** every year.
 b. *It attracts **a great tourists** every year.
- (16) a. They dismissed **a number of the complaints**.
 b. *They dismissed **a the complaints**.
- (17) a. **A number of us** are planning on going to the event tonight.
 b. ***A us** are planning on going to the event tonight.

In sentences (10) through (12), the bold-faced noun phrases in the (b) versions could be formed by adding the noun “number” or “period” to the corresponding noun phrases in the (a) versions. Conversely, the noun phrases in

the (a) versions could be the result of removing “number” or “period” from their counterparts in the (b) versions. The noun phrases in a full formal representation of sentences (10) through (12) both have a number or a quantifier before their head nouns and an adjective after their indefinite articles. In these cases, such alterations do not affect the grammatical correctness of the sentences, and their meanings remain essentially the same. However, this pattern does not apply to sentences (13) through (17). In these examples, the noun phrases in the (b) versions cannot be derived simply by removing “number” from their (a) counterparts. Unlike those in sentences (10) through (12), these phrases do not have a number or a quantifier before their head nouns, nor do they have an adjective following their indefinite articles. Attempts to do so result in ungrammatical constructions, as indicated by the asterisks preceding each (b) sentence. This inconsistency in pattern between the two sets of examples (10-12 and 13-17) undermines the argument that in phrases like “a great many crimes”, the indefinite article “a” is modifying not the plural noun “crimes” but rather another singular noun inferred from the context, such as “number”, “period”, “sum”, etc.

3. Number Agreement within Noun Phrases

In English there is agreement in number within noun phrases, which means that determiners and modifiers should agree in number with the head noun.⁵ If the head noun is singular, then the determiners and modifiers should also be singular. If the head noun is plural, then the determiners and modifiers should also be plural. In particular, it is claimed that the indefinite article necessarily matches only singular nouns within its noun phrase. However, it is sometimes combined with plural nouns, which is considered an exceptional phenomenon in English grammar. This apparent contradiction in agreement can be explained by examining the elements explicitly involved in agreement with head nouns within noun phrases.

Within these phrases, the elements that explicitly agree with the head noun include indefinite articles, demonstratives, quantifiers, and numbers.⁶ There are cases where only one of these elements is combined with the head noun, and there are cases where two elements are combined. This method of binary combination helps

⁵ In English there are three types of number agreement – within noun phrases, between antecedents and pronouns, and between subjects and verbs – as illustrated respectively below:

- (i) a. **A big dog** is running in the park.
b. **These big dogs** are running in the park.
- (ii) a. **Mary** went to the store. **She** bought some bread.
b. **John and Jane** went to the store. **They** bought some bread.
- (iii) a. **The dog barks** at the mailman every day.
b. **The dogs bark** at the mailman every day.

In (ii), the pronouns must agree in number with the antecedent they replace. In (iia), the pronoun “she” is singular, and its antecedent “Mary” is also singular. In (iib), the pronoun “they” is plural, and its antecedent “Mary and Jane” is also plural. And in (iii), the verb must agree in number with the subject. In (iiia), the subject “the dog” is singular, and its verb “barks” is singular. In (iiib), the subject “the dogs” is plural and its verb “bark” is plural.

⁶ Demonstratives, known as demonstrative adjectives in a traditional grammar, are determiners that refer to where their noun or pronoun is in relation to the speaker. They are “this”, “that”, “these”, and “those”. Quantifiers, called indefinite adjectives in a traditional grammar, are determiners that are used to indicate an amount or a quantity of nouns without being precise. Among them are “all”, “some”, “few”, “many”, etc.

provide a consistent and convincing explanation for the pairing of an indefinite article with singular and plural nouns.

3.1 Single Agreement Element

In English, noun phrases often consist of one of the explicit agreement elements and its head noun. In other words, they can be structured as “indefinite article + head noun”, “demonstrative + head noun”, or “number + head noun”, as illustrated respectively below:

- (18) a. I lived in **a cottage**.
b. *I lived in **a cottages**.
- (19) a. **This book** is mine.
b. **These books** are mine.
c. ***This books** are mine.
d. ***These book** is mine.
- (20) a. He had **twenty books** in the bag.
b. *He had **twenty book** in the bag.

Sentences (18b), (19c), (19d) and (20b) are not grammatical due to violations of agreement in number within the noun phrases, which consist of the indefinite article and the noun in (18b), the demonstrative and the noun in (19c) and (19d), and the number and the noun in (20b). Sentence (18b) is not grammatical because the indefinite article is paired with the plural noun “cottages”, not the singular noun “cottage”.⁷ Sentence (19c) is not grammatical because “books” is plural, while “this” is singular. The demonstrative “this” indicates singularity, so it should be followed by a singular noun. Likewise, sentence (19d) is not grammatically accepted because “book” is singular, while “these” is plural. The demonstrative “these” indicates plurality, so it should be followed by a plural noun. Finally, sentence (20b) is not grammatical because “book” is singular, while “twenty” is plural. The number “twenty” is plural, so it should be followed by the plural noun “books”.

Moreover, the presence of other modifiers situated between these explicit agreement elements and the head nouns does not affect the agreement within a noun phrase. This is evident in examples (21) through (23):

- (21) a. I bumped into **an old friend** on the street.
b. *I bumped into **an old friends** on the street.
- (22) a. I asked **this bright student** how he learned his lessons.
b. *I asked **this bright students** how he/they learned his lessons.

⁷ The indefinite article historically comes from a weakened form of the number “one”. Its incompatibility with plural nouns is due to its origin. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, p. 371, and Jespersen 1933, p. 132)

- (23) a. We should follow **three basic rules**.
b. *We should follow **three basic rule**.

In (21a), the indefinite article “an” agrees with the singular head noun “friend”, making the sentence grammatical. In contrast, (21b) is ungrammatical because the indefinite article “an”, which indicates a singular noun, does not agree in number with the plural head noun “friends”. In (22a), the demonstrative “this” agrees with the singular head noun “student”, resulting in a grammatical sentence. However, in (22b), there is a mismatch between the demonstrative “this”, which indicates a singular noun, and the plural head noun “students”, making the sentence ungrammatical. In (23a), the number “three” agrees with the plural head noun “rules”, making the sentence grammatical. In (23b), there is a disagreement between the number “three”, which implies a plural noun, and the singular head noun “rule”, resulting in an ungrammatical sentence. In all three cases, the presence of modifiers (e.g., “old” in (21), “bright” in (22), and “basic” in (23)) between the explicit agreement elements and the head nouns does not interfere with the agreement. The agreement between the explicit agreement elements and head nouns remains essential for the grammaticality of the noun phrases.

In (21) – (23), the noun phrases in question contain only one adjective, but agreement must be obeyed within a noun phrase, regardless of the number of modifiers, including coordinating conjunctions. The relevant examples are given in the following:

- (24) a. I bought **a beautiful large old round red Chinese silk decorative vase**⁸ at the department store yesterday.
b. *I bought **a beautiful large old round red Chinese silk decorative vases** at the department store yesterday.
- (25) a. This is **a social and political problem**. (Swan 1985, p. 12)
b. *This is **a social and political problems**.
- (26) a. He’s got **two very similar-looking daughters**. (Swan 1985, p. 30)
b. *He’s got **two very similar-looking daughter**.

In (24a), the indefinite article “a” agrees with the singular head noun “vase”, making the sentence grammatical. The presence of the multiple adjectives does not affect the agreement. In (24b), there is a mismatch between the indefinite article “a”, which indicates a singular noun, and the plural head noun “vases”, resulting in an ungrammatical sentence. In (25a), the indefinite article agrees with the singular head noun “problem”, making the sentence grammatical. The presence of the coordinating conjunction “and”, which connects the two adjectives “social” and “political”, does not affect the agreement. In (25b), there is a disagreement between the indefinite article “a”, which is singular, and the plural head noun “problems, making the sentence ungrammatical. In (26a), the number “two” agrees with the plural head noun “daughters”, resulting in a grammatical sentence. The presence of the adverb “very” and the adjective “similar-looking” does not interfere with the agreement. In (26b), there is a disagreement between the number “two” and the singular head noun “daughter”, resulting in an ungrammatical sentence.

⁸ The order of adjectives placed before nouns is not completely fixed, because they can be reordered for emphasis, to suit stylistic preferences or depending on the intended meaning. However, when multiple adjectives are used to describe a noun, they usually come in the order of size, age, shape, color, origin, material, purpose, etc. For more details about the order, see Bache (1978), Carter and McCarthy (2006), DeClerck (1991), Quirk et al. (1985), and Swan (2005).

As mentioned above, when noun phrases consist of one explicit agreement element and its head nouns, the agreement between them is crucial to the grammaticality of the noun phrases, regardless of the number of modifiers placed between them. In particular, the indefinite article is typically used with singular countable nouns to indicate one instance of the noun. This rule applies regardless of how many modifiers are placed between the article and the head noun, as long as the head noun is singular and countable.

3.2 Double Agreement Element

Now, let us turn to the cases where noun phrases often consist of two explicit agreement elements and their head nouns. In other words, there are two explicit elements within a noun phrase, which are realized as in the structures “indefinite article + quantifier + head noun”; “quantifier + indefinite article + head noun”; “demonstrative + number + head noun”; and “indefinite article + adjective + number + head noun”. Looking at these structures one by one, we will explore how number agreement occurs between explicit agreement elements and head nouns.

3.2.1 Indefinite Article + Quantifier + Head Noun

As one of the explicit agreement elements, the quantifier within the noun phrase must agree in number with the noun, as shown in (27):

- (27) a. **Few members** would agree to the proposal.
b. ***Few member** would agree to the proposal.

Sentence (27a) is grammatically correct because the noun “members” is plural and the quantifier “few” is also plural. However, in (27b), where “members” is changed to the singular form “member”, the sentence becomes grammatically incorrect. This is because “few” is a plural quantifier and does not agree in number with the singular noun “member”. For grammaticality, the quantifier within a noun phrase must agree in number with the noun it modifies.

Now let us look at the cases where a noun phrase contains two explicit agreement elements – an indefinite article and a quantifier. In fact, it is uncommon to find compatibility between indefinite articles and quantifiers. Sentences (28a) and (28b) below show whether the head noun must match the indefinite article or the quantifier in agreement, when both are present in the noun phrase:

- (28) a. **A few candidates** think that smoking is healthy.
b. ***A few candidate** think(s) that smoking is healthy.

Several studies, including those by Quirk et al. (1985), Huddleston and Pullum (2002), Biber et al. (1999), Aarts (2011), and Carter and McCarthy (2006), view the combination of “a few” (comprising an indefinite article and a quantifier) as a determiner. However, we treat the indefinite article and the quantifier as separate units, in that each of them can occur independently, as in “a candidate” and “few candidates”. Sentence (28a) shows that the plural head noun “candidates” should agree in number with the plural quantifier “few”, not with the indefinite article, farther away from its head noun. That is why the sentence is grammatical. However, the reason why sentence (28b) is ungrammatical is that the head noun agrees with the more distant indefinite article, not the quantifier closer to

it. This states that when there are two explicit agreement elements in a noun phrase, the head noun should agree with the agreement element right in front of it.

3.2.2 Quantifier + Indefinite Article + Head Noun

Contrary to the subject noun phrase of sentence (28) in the order of the indefinite article and the quantifier, the bold-faced noun phrase of sentence (29) is in the order of the quantifier and the indefinite article.⁹

- (29) a. **Many a girl** was surprised at the news.
b. ***Many a girls** were surprised at the news.

In the noun phrase of sentence (29a), the singular head noun “girl” agrees not with the more distant plural quantifier “many” but with the closer indefinite article, making the sentence grammatical. However, sentence (29b) is not grammatically correct although the plural head noun “girls” agrees in number with the more distant plural quantifier “many”. The noun should agree with the closer indefinite article in the singular form “girl”, as in (29a). This, as in (28), also means that when there are two explicit agreement elements in a noun phrase, the head noun has to match the element closer to it.

3.2.3 Demonstrative + Number + Head Noun

Now, let us examine the structure “demonstrative + number + head noun”, as shown in (30):

- (30) a. **This twenty dollars** isn't going to get us very far.¹⁰ (Huddleston 2002, p. 354)

⁹ While “many a + singular noun” and “many + plural noun” can be used interchangeably depending on the context, they are not always the same. The former is interpreted distributively, focusing on and emphasizing each individual entity. In contrast, the latter is a plural expression representing the entire group collectively. Though “many + plural noun” is primarily interpreted collectively, it can also be read distributively. “Many a + singular noun” is more suitable for archaic or literary contexts, whereas “many + plural noun” feels more natural in everyday and modern contexts (Carter and McCarthy 2006, DeClerck 1991, Huddleston and Pullum 2002, Quirk et al. 1985). Unlike “many a + singular noun”, “a many + singular noun” or “a many + plural noun” is not allowed, as in *“a many girl” or *“a many girls”. But “a great many + plural noun” and “a good many + plural noun” are used as more emphatic forms of “many”, as illustrated:

- (i) She has written **a good many poems**.
(ii) **A great many students** will agree with me on the issue.

¹⁰ Huddleston (2002, p. 354) notes that although “twenty dollars” in the subject noun phrase of example (30a) appears in a plural form, it is conceptualized as denoting a single entity and is treated as singular. Such conceptualization of plural noun phrases as singular is confined to measure phrases where the head noun refers to distance, price, weight, speed, volume, or temperature (For more details, see Flickinger and Bond 2003, and Quirk et al. 1985). This pattern of agreement is similar to that observed in structures like “an indefinite article + number + plural noun”. However, the sentence “These twenty dollars aren't going to get us very far” is also grammatically correct. In this instance, the head noun “dollars” in the subject phrase is plural and aligns in number with the two preceding explicit agreement elements: the plural number “twenty” and the plural demonstrative “these”. Thus, the demonstrative “these” and the number “twenty” both agree in number with their head noun “dollars”.

b. ***This twenty dollar** isn't going to get us very far.

The bold-faced noun phrases in (30) are composed of a demonstrative, a number, and a noun. In (30a), the plural head noun “dollars” agrees with the plural number “twenty”, which immediately precedes it, but disagrees in number with the demonstrative “this”. The phrase is grammatically correct. However, in (30b), the singular head noun “dollar” does not match the plural number “twenty”, which immediately precedes and modifies it, but agrees with the demonstrative “this”, which is more distant from it. This agreement makes the phrase ungrammatical. This structure, as in (28) – (29), also indicates that when two explicit agreement elements are present in a noun phrase, the head noun should agree with the agreement element that immediately precedes it.

3.2.4 Indefinite Article + Adjective + Number + Head Noun

Now, let us turn to the structure “indefinite article + adjective + number + head noun”, as exemplified in (31):

- (31) a. **A stunning 32 million Americans** filed for unemployment benefits in the past six weeks. (The Washington Post. Apr. 16, 2020)
 b. ***A stunning 32 million American** filed for unemployment benefits in the past six weeks.

In the subject noun phrase of sentence (31a), there are two explicit agreement elements – the indefinite article “an” and the number “32 million”, and the head noun “Americans” agrees with the plural number, which immediately precedes it. Therefore, sentence (31a) is grammatical. On the other hand, sentence (31b) is ungrammatical. The reason is that the head noun “American” matches the more distal indefinite article, not the number closer to it, although it creates an agreement in number between the indefinite article and the head noun “American”, which are both singular in form. This agreement pattern makes ungrammatical the combination of an indefinite article with a plural noun in a noun phrase, unlike that of the subject noun phrase of sentence (31a). This, as in (28) – (30), also shows that there should be number agreement of the head noun with the agreement element that precedes it more closely in preference to agreement with the indefinite article of the noun phrase, in the structure “indefinite article + adjective + number + head noun”.

As we have seen above, there should be a strict number agreement between explicit agreement elements and head nouns within a noun phrase, regardless of the presence of other modifiers between them. To put it in more detail, when a noun phrase contains a single explicit agreement element, the head noun must align in number with this element. However, in cases where two agreement elements are present, the head noun should match in number with the agreement element nearer to it – this is referred to as local agreement. The other explicit agreement elements farther away are not involved in number agreement. Consequently, the indefinite article can co-occur with a plural noun when (i) there is another agreement element between them and (ii) the plural head noun agrees in number with the agreement.

4. Meanings of an Indefinite Article and Its Combination with Plural Nouns

4.1 Meanings of an Indefinite Article in a Singular NP

An indefinite article has a variety of meanings, but here we will look only at main meanings to examine the number of nouns it combines with.¹¹ First, an indefinite article is used before a singular noun to indicate that the noun is generic, not specific. It refers to a class as a whole. Let us look at (32):

- (32) a. **A bicycle** has two wheels.
b. ***A bicycles** has/have two wheels.

In sentence (32a), the noun “bicycle” refers to any bicycle, not a specific bicycle. In this case, the indefinite article can be replaced with “any” or “every”.¹² When we use “any” or “every” in place of “a/an”, it emphasizes that we are talking about the general concept or idea of the noun, rather than a specific instance of it, or, that all bicycles have two wheels, regardless of their individual characteristics or qualities. As seen in sentence (32b), an indefinite article with this meaning is not used with plural nouns.

The indefinite article is used to share a common trait or characteristic. Let us consider the following:

- (33) a. Birds of **a feather** flock together.
b. Birds of **the same feather** flock together.
c. *Birds of **a feathers** flock together.

In sentence (33a), the use of the indefinite article before the noun “feather” indicates that these birds share a common trait or characteristic. In this case, the article may be rephrased as “the same”. Sentence (33b) is a variation of the sentence in (33a) that adds the word “same” to emphasize that the birds share the exact same trait or characteristic. In this case, the use of the word “same” makes the sentence slightly more specific than sentence (33a). Overall, the two sentences are similar in meaning, but the second sentence places slightly more emphasis on the specific trait or characteristic that the birds share. As seen in sentence (33c), an indefinite article of this meaning is not used with plural nouns.

The indefinite article is used to mean “one”, as illustrated below:

- (34) a. Rome was not built in **a day**.
b. Rome was not built in **one day**.
c. *Rome was not built in **a days**.

- (35) a. I want to live for **a hundred years**.

¹¹ The main meanings of the indefinite article in this paper come from Biber et al. (2002), Carter and McCarthy (2006), Frank (1972), Hands (2011), Jespersen (1933), Quirk et al. (1985), Simon (2009), and Swan (1980).

¹² For generic reference, the distinction between singular and plural is neutralized, and so is the distinction between the definite and indefinite articles. In their generic use, all of the following are roughly similar in meaning: (Greenbaum 2009, p. 62)

- (i) **A bicycle** has two wheels.
(ii) **Bicycles** have two wheels.
(iii) **The bicycle** has two wheels.
(iv) **The bicycles** have two wheels.

b. I want to live for **one hundred years**.

In sentences (34a) and (35a), the indefinite article is used in place of “one”, especially in certain expressions such as “a hundred”, “a thousand”, “a million”, and so on.¹³ Using “one” in place of the indefinite article conveys a similar meaning, but there are nuances in their implications. For instance, in sentences (34a) and (34b), “Rome was not built in a day” emphasizes that building Rome was a long and complex process, while “Rome was not built in one day” underscores the specific amount of time it took to build Rome. Similarly, in sentences (35a) and (35b), “I want to live for a hundred years” conveys a wish for a long life, whereas “I want to live for one hundred years” seems to denote an aspiration to live for that exact duration. Generally, the use of “a/an” provides a broader, more general sense of quantity, while the use of “one” delivers a more precise notion of quantity. As demonstrated in sentence (34c), an indefinite article with this meaning should not be used with plural nouns.

The indefinite article “a” can be used to indicate the rate or amount of something per unit of measurement. This is commonly seen in front of nouns representing time, distance, price, weight, and so forth. Let us consider the following examples:

- (36) a. These bananas cost two dollars **a pound**.
 b. These bananas cost two dollars **each pound**.
 c. These bananas cost two dollars **per pound**.
 d. *These bananas cost two dollars **a pounds**.

In sentence (36a), “a pound” specifies the unit of measurement for the price of bananas. The indefinite article “a” means “each” or “per”, indicating the rate or amount of something per unit of measurement. In sentences (36b) and (36c), “each pound” and “per pound” are used to convey the same meaning as “a pound”, indicating that the price of bananas is two dollars for each unit of one pound. Although these sentences differ in their wording, they share the same meaning. However, as shown in sentence (36d), when indicating this type of measurement, an indefinite article should not be paired with plural nouns.

The indefinite article is used before proper names in order to indicate that the noun phrase refers to a work or product associated with that name, as exemplified below:

- (37) a. I bought **a Hyundai** in Korea last month.
 b. *I bought **a Hyundais** in Korea last month.

- (38) a. This is **a genuine Rodin**.
 b. *This is **a genuine Rodins**.

In (37a), “a Hyundai” refers to a single car made by the Hyundai company, and in (38a), “a genuine Rodin”

¹³ “A” can only be used at the beginning of a number. (Swan 2005, p. 389)

- (i) one hundred
 (ii) a hundred
 (iii) three thousand one hundred
 (iv) *three thousand a hundred

refers to a single work of art created by the artist “Rodin”. However, this usage is not always appropriate for all proper names, as it depends on the context and the specific meaning intended. As indicated in (37b) and (38b), this kind of usage does not work when paired with the plural form of the noun.

As discussed above, when an indefinite article has any of the meanings mentioned above, it should be used with its singular head noun, not with its plural head noun.¹⁴

4.2 Meanings of an Indefinite Article in a Plural NP

As far as we know, the meaning of an indefinite article has been paid little attention to when the article is combined with plural nouns. Let us consider (39):

- (39) a. I've got **a few questions** to ask you.
b. *I've got **a few question** to ask you.

Let us examine the grammaticality of sentences (39a) and (39b) without delving into the meaning of the indefinite article. As discussed in section 3.2, when two explicit agreement elements – an indefinite article and a quantifier – are present in a noun phrase, the head noun should agree in number with the quantifier immediately preceding it, rather than with the more distant indefinite article.¹⁵ In (39a), the noun “questions” agrees with the plural quantifier “few”, not the indefinite article “a”, making the phrase grammatical. However, in (39b), the noun “question” agrees with the indefinite article, leading to an ungrammatical phrase. In the structure “indefinite article + quantifier + plural nouns”, the indefinite article is not involved in agreement.¹⁶

Turning our attention back to the meaning of an indefinite article, we discussed its various meanings in section 4.1. However, they do not correspond to that of the indefinite article in (39). As for the meaning of an indefinite article in this context, the Oxford English Dictionary states that the indefinite article suggests that the number or quantity is not exact, but rather an approximation or estimation. An indefinite article in this sense is frequently used, as illustrated below:

- (40) **An amazing 500 million bees** have died in Brazil in three months. (CNN. Jun. 20, 2019)

In the noun phrase “an amazing 500 million bees”, the indefinite article is used to indicate that the phrase

¹⁴ For more details on the other meanings, we refer you to Biber et al. (2002), Carter and McCarthy (2006), Frank (1972), Hands (2011), Jespersen (1933), Quirk et al. (1985), Simon (2009), and Swan (1980).

¹⁵ When it comes to the grammaticality of the bold-faced noun phrases in (39), it is often argued that “a few” should be followed as a determiner by plural nouns, with the meaning of the indefinite article unexplained. So (39a) is grammatical and (39b) is non-grammatical.

¹⁶ As illustrated below, an indefinite article can be followed by “quantifier + singular noun”.

- There is **a little milk** left in the fridge.

Also in this case, an indefinite article indicates approximation or estimation of a quantity.

“amazing 500 million bees” refers to an approximate number of bees, which may not be exact or certain. It signals that this number is not definite, specific or known, but rather an estimation or approximation.¹⁷ When an indefinite article is used in this usage, it is usually followed by “adjective + number + plural noun” to form a noun phrase. Let us look at a few more examples below:

- (41) a. Like **an estimated 500,000 migrants each year**, Castro came without a visa. (USA Today. Nov. 04, 2006)
 b. **A whopping 2 million people** applied for unemployment last week. (The New York Times. Mar. 26, 2020).
 c. In the 1980s alone, **an unprecedented 1.5 million college-educated immigrants** joined the U.S. work force. (Business Week. Jul. 13, 1992)

As shown in (40) and (41), this usage of an indefinite article with plural nouns is often found in journalistic or statistical contexts, where an approximation or estimate is being made.

The presence or the absence of an indefinite article in noun phrases of this structure does not affect grammaticality, as shown in (42):

- (42) a. **A surprising fifty volunteers** helped clean up the beach after the oil spill. (USA Today. Oct. 08, 2021)
 b. **Surprising fifty volunteers** helped clean up the beach after the oil spill.

The difference between (42a) and (42b) is that (42a) includes the indefinite article “a” before “surprising fifty volunteers”, while (42b) does not. The inclusion of the indefinite article “a” in (42a) emphasizes that the number of volunteers who helped clean up the beach after the oil spill is not exact. In contrast, (42b) without the indefinite article implies that the speaker or writer may know the exact number of volunteers, and that the number itself was surprising. Both (42a) and (42b) are grammatically correct. Using the indefinite article suggests that the number or quantity is approximate, while omitting it suggests that it is more precise.

As seen above, when an indefinite article can be combined with a plural noun in a noun phrase, its meaning represents an approximation in relation to the number and quantity of the noun.

4.3 Adjectives between an Indefinite Article and a Number

When an indefinite article indicates that the number or quantity of its head noun is approximate or is not exact, it is often immediately followed by adjectives or participles in the form of “adjective/participle + number/quantifier

¹⁷ In these cases, the indefinite article “a” can be replaced with “some” or “about” to convey a similar meaning of approximation or estimation, as in the following:

- (i) The manufacturer recalled **a whopping 1 million vehicles** due to a software glitch. (The Washington Post. Oct. 6, 2023)
 (ii) The manufacturer recalled **some whopping 1 million vehicles** due to a software glitch.
 (iii) The manufacturer recalled **about whopping 1 million vehicles** due to a software glitch.

Regarding the above three sentences, they are all grammatically correct and convey a similar meaning. However, the use of “about whopping” in sentence (iii) sounds somewhat awkward and less common than “some whopping” or simply “whopping”.

+ (adjective) + plural noun”, as illustrated in the subject of each of the following sentences:

- (43) a. **A great many citizens** are concerned about the government's handling of the pandemic.
(The New York Times. Nov. 13, 2023)
- b. **An estimated 500,000 people** are living in poverty in the city.
(The Guardian. Oct. 4, 2022)
- c. **An unprecedented 2 million books** have been sold in two days in North America.
(USA TODAY. Aug. 2, 2016)
- d. Russia won **a meager three gold medals** in Vancouver, coming in sixth in the overall medal count.
(The New York Times. Mar. 13, 2010)

In (43a), the adjective “great”, which serves as an intensifier, modifies and emphasizes the quantifier that follows it. “Great many citizens” emphasizes an especially large number of citizens, implying an even more significant count than just “many citizens”. In (43b), the participle “estimated” implies that the following number “500,000” is not exact and is based on guess. It suggests that there is some level of uncertainty about the number being referred to. In (43c), the adjective “unprecedented” suggests that the number that immediately follows it is exceptional and has never been seen or heard before. That is, it implies that its modified number is unusually high. Furthermore, in (43d), the adjective “meager” suggests that the number of gold medals is considered small or insufficient in some way. It implies that the number being referred to is considered disappointing or unsatisfactory. All of these adjectives modify and emphasize the idea of the quantity or extent which immediately follows them. Moreover, they are preceded by an indefinite article, according to Klockmann (2020), when they modify article-free quantifiers that do not usually include an article – such as “one”, “seven”, “ten”, “fifteen”, etc., or “many”, “several”, etc.

In the structure “indefinite article + adjective/participle + number/quantifier + (adjective) + plural noun”, however, the appearance of the adjectives/participles between the indefinite article and the number/quantifier is limited, as shown in the following:

- (44) ***A fierce ten lions** were sent to Blijdorp, and **a meek ten lions to** Artis.¹⁸ (Rothstein 2016, p. 17)
- (45) ***A successful ten students** got full marks on the exam. (Rothstein 2016, p. 17)

Unlike the adjectives/participles between the indefinite article and the number/quantifier in (40) - (43), such qualifying adjectives as “fierce”, “meek” and “successful” in (44) and (45) are not allowed in the structure, because they should be positioned after a quantifier or a number in the order of adjectives placed before nouns. Besides, Rothstein (2016) claims that the adjective which can occur in this structure must be an evaluative one and must express the speaker’s value-judgement about the quantity denoted by the “number/quantifier + (adjective) + plural noun” in the relevant structure. Thus, the adjectives allowed in this structure indicate that the number that

¹⁸ To make the first conjunct clause grammatically correct, we can rephrase it in a few different ways depending on the intended meaning, as illustrated below:

- (i) **Five fierce tigers** were found from two areas.
- (ii) **A group of five fierce tigers** was found from two areas.
- (iii) There were **five fierce tigers** found from two areas.

immediately follows them is approximate or is emphatically large or small. Among them are “approximate”, “estimated”, “rough”, etc.; “amazing”, “exciting”, “good, great”, “surprising”, “whopping”, etc.; “meager”, “paltry”, “mere”, etc.

5. Summary and Conclusions

So far, we have examined the linguistic fact that in English usage an indefinite article can be used with plural nouns as well as singular nouns in syntactic and semantic terms.

First, in syntactic terms, it is important whether or not there is another agreement element – quantifier or number – between an indefinite article and its head noun, when the article combines with singular or plural nouns within noun phrases. In other words, when there is no other agreement element between an indefinite article and its head noun in noun phrases, they should agree in number. However, when there is another agreement element between an indefinite article and its head noun, there should be agreement in number between the element and the head noun. In this case, the indefinite article is not involved in agreement, making possible the combination of an indefinite article and a plural noun in a noun phrase.

Next, in semantic terms, we have examined that when an indefinite article represents “one”, “the same”, “any”, etc., it always matches the singular noun, but when it is used with plural nouns, it indicates an approximation or estimation. In particular, when an indefinite article is used with a plural noun within a noun phrase, it should be followed by a quantifier or a number, and there should be an adjective between an indefinite article and a number, as seen in “An unprecedented 2 million books have been sold in two days in North America”. These adjectives, among which are “approximate”, “estimated”, “rough”, “amazing”, “surprising”, “whopping”, “meager”, “mere”, etc., convey a sense of scale or emphasis to the number that follows them, and suggest that it is either an approximation or an unusually large or small quantity.

To sum up, when an indefinite article is used with a plural noun in a noun phrase, it is accompanied by another agreement element – a quantifier or a number – between itself and the plural noun, and has a meaning of approximation.

In pursuit of deeper understanding, further research could explore cross-linguistic comparisons to assess whether the compatibility of indefinite articles with plural nouns observed in English is mirrored in other languages, particularly those with distinct article systems. Such studies could clarify universal versus language-specific aspects of article usage.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: English