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Towards a typology of singulatives: Definition and overview of markers

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Abstract: The singulative is a category that has never been mapped out crosslinguistically. This article begins to do that, starting with a definition and a disambiguation of terminology related to grammatical methods of individuation and unitization. The singulative is argued to be one strategy to denote individuals and units, and it occurs as part of many different number systems. I present a typological overview of markers, both those which are straightforward to analyse as singulatives and more ambiguous examples. This allows us to test and define the boundaries of this category and its overlap with others (e.g. the diminutive). I also suggest some diachronic developments which further illustrate the relationship between singulatives and other categories.

Keywords: singulative, grammatical number, morphology, linguistic typology, typology of number, diminutive

1. Introduction

This paper¹ has two aims: to define what singulatives are and are not, and to give a typological overview of singulative markers. The focus on markers allows us to apply the definition to examples and to define the boundaries of this category, i.e. what does and does not count as singulative. It brings to light possible diachronic patterns in the development of singulatives and the marking of number and individuation more generally. It also demonstrates how this category can overlap with the diminutive and the implications that this has for the definition and typological search for singulatives.

The paper begins with examples and a definition in 1.1. Section 2 compares the singulative to other categories used for individuation, unitization and packaging and argues for their disambiguation. Section 3 focuses on defining and finding singulatives: I examine the treatment of singulatives in previous literature, introduce the new database, and present the terminology used in the paper. Section 4 examines different ways of marking the singulative cross-linguistically. Section 5 concludes the paper.

1.1 Definition and terminology

(1) presents three nouns from Welsh (Indo-European). (1a) shows the pattern taken by the majority of Welsh nouns, with an unmarked singular and a marked plural (plurative [PLT] in my terminology, see below); this is the same pattern we find with most English nouns, e.g. *cat~cats*. A relatively small group of nouns, illustrated by (1b), have the opposite pattern, with an unmarked plural and a marked singulative (abbreviated SGT). (1c) is an example of a mass noun, some of which can also have a singulative denoting a unit out of the mass.

(1) a. *cath* 'cat', PLT *cath-od* 'cats'

¹ I would like to thank Rahel T. Dires, Matilda Carbo, Don Killian, Thomas Stolz and Iwan Wyn Rees for providing feedback to various parts of this article. All remaining errors are mine alone.

b. *moch* ‘pigs’, SGT *moch-yn* ‘a pig’

c. *gwellt* ‘grass, straw’, SGT *gwellt-yn* ‘a blade of grass, a (single) straw’

More examples of singulatives are given in (2) and (3) from a typological range, based on the Singulative database (Nurmio, Dires & Carbo forth.). The base forms of singulatives (such as *dimín* in (2a)) are not glossed for their grammatical number status here for simplicity; this varies, as does terminology, and the exact status is often difficult to determine from grammars (discussed further below). The examples show nouns with singulatives, but note that not all nouns in these languages mark number in this way:

(2) a. *dimín*, SGT *dímina* ‘cloud’ (Khamtanga, Afro-Asiatic, Appleyard 1987: 254)

b. *ūl*, SGT *úldis* ‘drop of water’ (Ket, Yenisean, Vajda 2022: 329)

c. *kuk*, SGT *kukte* ‘piece of charcoal’ (Bari, Nilotic, Spagnolo 1933: 45)

d. *neĝo*, SGT *neĝero* ‘snowflake’ (Esperanto, Artificial language, Kellerman 2005: 134, 431)

Here are a few example sentences with singulatives. (3a-b) illustrate units of aggregate substances (pluralized in (3b)) while the singulative (3c) denotes an individual, similar to (1b) above. (3c) also shows possible agreement effects of singulatives: in Arabic, singulative nouns are feminine and trigger feminine singular agreement on the verb. This is not generalisable to all languages with singulatives; I will not go further into agreement in this paper. Likewise, there is much to be said about the semantic basis of singulative marking, but that is another topic for another paper.

(3) a. *Jisa* *ajweba-mū* *kwla*
pick.up rice-SGT all
‘Pick up all the rice kernels.’ (Baule, Atlantic-Congo, adapted from Timyan 1976: 163)

b. *Last-h* *jīh* *lopme-tjelmie-h* *hispieh*
leaf-PLT and snow-SGT-PLT whirl.3PL.PRES
‘Leaves and snowflakes are flying around.’ (South Saami, Uralic, adapted from Ylikoski 2022)

c. *Nemel-a* *kaħl-a* *daxl-et* *l-el* *kujina*
ant-F.SGT black-F.SG entered.3-F.SG to-the kitchen
‘A black ant entered the kitchen.’ (Arabic, Afro-Asiatic, Dali & Mathieu 2021: 278)

I define the singulative as follows:

(4) A singulative is a derived noun form which is formed by adding a marker to a non-unit-denoting base and which denotes ‘a/one X’ or ‘a/one unit of X’

Many singulative markers have other meanings in addition to individuation (‘a/one X’) and unitization (‘a/one unit of X’), such as having a diminutive function with some bases, as discussed below. Consider (4) in the light of the Welsh example in (1). In (1b), the base is a morphologically unmarked plural form: its syntactic behaviour matches that of marked plurals such as *cath-od* ‘cats’ (Nurmio 2019: 59; Plein 2018: 287–310) but, unlike *cath-od*, *moch* bears no plural marker. In (1c) the base is a mass noun, i.e., it cannot be directly modified by numerals in its basic form (Nurmio

2019: 145).² The singulative is formed by adding a suffix which has two forms in Welsh: *-en* (feminine) and *-yn* (masculine). A suffix is the most common singulative marker (see section 4) but the definition includes any kind of morphological marking. The term “singulative” seems to go back to Zeuss’ *Grammatica Celtica* (1853: 299–301). In this passage we also find the term “collectives” (*formae collectivae*) applied to bases like *moch* ‘pigs’ which continues to cause terminological confusion in Brittonic linguistics and beyond (see Nurmio 2017: 63–65 for a discussion).³ The function of singulatives ranges from singular number (‘a pig’ as opposed to ‘pigs’) to unitization (‘a blade of grass’); singulatives may take part in inflectional number distinctions or they can be a derivational strategy.⁴ Unitization can be further divided into natural minimal units (‘grain of sand’—I will use this example from now on since *grain* is a more prototypical minimal unit noun than e.g. *blade* in English) and packaged units (‘chocolate *bar*’), as discussed below.

The definition in (4) states that singulatives exist in opposition to non-unit-denoting bases. In our database (Nurmio, Dires & Carbo, forth.), these include e.g. unmarked plurals and mass nouns as seen in (1). Another common type is “general number”, defined by Corbett (2000: 10) as forms whereby “the meaning of the noun can be expressed without reference to number”. This is illustrated here again from the Ethiopian language Sidaama (Afro-Asiatic) (Kawachi 2007: 345):

(5)	BASE	SGT	PLT
	<i>sina</i> ‘branch(es)’	<i>sin-čo</i> ‘a branch’	<i>sin-na</i> ‘branches’

Such forms may be number-neutral, as the glossing above suggests, but not always: Mous (2021: 523–524) observes that some are, in fact, associated (more) with a plural or a singular meaning. I strongly agree with Mous on the need to study the pragmatics of these forms further: it is rare to find examples of e.g. their agreement behaviour in grammars, not to mention variation in usage. Since it is not clear to what extent these forms have truly general meaning, I follow Mous (2021) and Dires (forth.) in calling them “base (forms)”. Terminology abounds for these: terms gathered from the literature on Cushitic languages alone include the following (see Dires, forth.): base (form), basic, collective, general, generic, mass, singular, transnumeral, unit, unmarked. This shows the need to clearly distinguish morphology from semantics. Such forms may indeed refer to collections or mass substances, but I use “base” specifically to refer to the form (unmarked, in opposition to at least a singulative or plurative form).⁵ The term “collective” occurs particularly often in relation to singulatives across languages, and it remains a topic for further research whether

² A note about frequency is needed here. Singulatives formed from mass nouns such as (1c) are rare in Present-day Welsh. For many mass nouns, e.g. *tywod* ‘sand’, the singulative appears to not be used, and the more common way of denoting units is with the measure phrase *gronyn o X* ‘a grain of X’, e.g. *gronyn o dywod* ‘a grain of sand’ (with a regular mutation on the noun). The main dictionary for Welsh, *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* [GPC] (ed. Thomas et al.), continues to list singulatives for such nouns (e.g. *tywodyn* for ‘a grain of sand’) but this may not reflect present-day usage.

³ In Nurmio (2017, 2019) I use the term “morphological collective” which is arguably a useful descriptive term for Welsh since these nouns are not simply a plural allomorph but have characteristics that warrant classifying them as a separate category. However, I use “unmarked plural” as a comparative concept in this paper to facilitate cross-linguistic comparison.

⁴ In translations of singulatives into English, I propose using the article (‘a pig’) to distinguish singulatives clearly from “generic” nouns (‘pig’ referring to a type of animal, with no reference to number).

⁵ In more detailed treatments of Cushitic-style systems, it may be wise to disambiguate base (= general term in morphology) and base (= a member of noun paradigms such as that in (5)) by e.g. capitalising the latter.

it emerges as a *morphological* category in some languages or whether it is best reserved as a semantic term only.

The bases described so far are all forms that are words on their own, such as *sina* ‘branch(es)’ in (5). There is another type of paradigm, the so-called replative or replacement pattern. The term was coined by Dimmendaal (2000a, 2021) for “Nilo-Saharan” languages.⁶ (6a) shows an example from Mursi (Surmic) (Worku 2020: 256). A similar pattern also occurs in Brittonic; (6b) is from Welsh (Nurmio 2019: 134). Mursi also has the patterns unmarked singular/marked plurative and unmarked plural/marked singulative; in this, it also parallels Welsh.

(6)	a.	SGT(?)	PLT	b.	SGT(?)	PLT
		<i>nàb-ì</i> ‘ear’	<i>nàw-à</i> ‘ears’		<i>blod-yn</i> ‘flower’	<i>blod-au</i> ‘flowers’

So, crucially, the replacement pattern typically seems to exist alongside the plural/singulative pattern, and I am not aware of a language with only the replacement pattern. Dimmendaal (2000a: 216) calls this type of number marking the “tripartite pattern” since there are three kinds of marking: singulative, plurative (Dimmendaal uses “plural”) and replative/replacement. The question is, do we still define the pair with singular meaning as singulative in (6) (hence the question marks)? Here, the base is not a noun that occurs on its own synchronically, but rather a stem (*nàb-* and *blod-*). I suggest treating these as singulatives, albeit less prototypical singulatives than those covered so far, for the main reason that the same markers are used in both the unmarked plural/singulative pattern and the replative pattern in these languages. Secondly, it may be that for some nouns this pattern derives diachronically from the unmarked plural/singulative pattern. There are likely to be several reasons why nouns end up in the replacement pattern (see Nurmio 2019: 134–136 for a discussion of Welsh) and this is another topic requiring more research.

2. Singulative vs. other strategies for individuation, unitization and packaging

There are other morphological unitization devices which are not singulatives in my definition but are sometimes collated with them. In my definition (see (4) above), *marker* refers to bound markers and not lexemes. This excludes words such as *grain* in *grain of sand*, or *jyvä* ‘grain’ in Finnish (Uralic) *hiekanjyvä* [sand.GEN grain] ‘a grain of sand’ since these are not bound markers, but lexemes attested on their own. However, it is possible for such lexemes to grammaticalize into singulative markers (see 4.1 below). The terminology for the *grain*-type words varies, e.g. “unit counter” (Greenberg 1972: 12; Allan 1977: 293), “minimal unit word/noun” (Goddard 2010: 146) and “individuating or partitive (sense)” (Jurafsky 1996: 555). I follow Goddard in calling them minimal unit nouns, since these nouns refer to the perceivable minimal units of aggregates.⁷ Jackendoff (1991, see also Corbett 2000: 79–80) proposes a classification of different types of nouns based on two semantic variables: boundedness and internal structure. All mass nouns are

⁶ There is disagreement whether several language families with shared features, including Surmic, belong to a larger macrofamily called Nilo-Saharan, see Güldemann (2018: 235–309) and Dimmendaal (2000a: 216–217). Glottolog (Hammarström & Forkel 2021) does not use Nilo-Saharan in its classification scheme. In this paper, the classifications in brackets follow Glottolog, with the understanding that some classifications are not fixed. In fact, the status of tripartite number as an areal vs. genealogical feature is an important part of the debate (Güldemann 2018: 255–256).

⁷ Perceivable in the sense of human conceptualisation (cf. Corbett 2000: 79); we are not concerned with minimal units in the sense that physicists would be.

characterized by lacking the feature +bounded (since one can add or remove sand and still have *sand*), but they can be divided into two further groups as regards +/-internal structure: aggregates (e.g. *sand*) have it, substances (e.g. *water*) do not. In terms of semantics, then, minimal unit nouns are formed from mass nouns with the feature +internal structure. A related type of marking is seen in *a head of cattle* or Breton (Indo-European) *penn-moc 'h* [head-pigs] ‘a pig’ with *penn* ‘head’ (see 4.2 below). This usage of ‘head’ is similar to that of minimal unit nouns, with the distinction that the referent is animate. Since one head of cattle is the smallest natural unit that makes up cattle, I propose calling *head* a minimal unit noun in the *head of cattle* construction (a subtype for animate nouns, to be more specific).

Another type of construction found with mass nouns and comparable to the singulative (see e.g. Haspelmath & Moravcsik 2019) is “measure words/nouns”. Such nouns are used with numerals and other quantifiers to measure out the referent, e.g. *one/a cup of coffee*, *three kilos of sand*, *one/a piece of cake*. Such nouns can be used to measure out both countable objects (*three kilos of books*) and mass substances. This is not the case with minimal unit nouns which only apply to mass nouns with internal structure (**grain of books* is not possible). Greenberg (1972: 13) also observes that the *grain*-type unit nouns are almost completely restricted to a usage with ‘a/one’ and not higher numerals, while measure nouns do not have this restriction. Like minimal unit nouns, measure nouns are lexemes attested on their own, and are therefore to be kept apart from singulatives, despite some overlap in function. It should also be noted that, like classifiers (see below), unit nouns and measure nouns have *meaning* beyond just ‘a unit of X’ and ‘a measure of X’, since they are lexical nouns. Even *grain*, the meaning of which is somewhat bleached in *grain of sand* since this does not denote the grain of a plant, still carries meaning beyond unitization, i.e. it is “something very small” and “something hard” (Goddard 2010: 146–147).

The term “(numeral) classifier” is also sometimes found applied to nouns that I just defined as measure nouns (e.g. Lehrer 1986; Nurmio 2019: 137 uses the tentative term “classifier-like construction”). In this paper, I follow Allan (1977) in restricting the term “classifier” to classifier languages, such as Thai (Thai-Kadai) or Mandarin Chinese (Sino-Tibetan). In such languages, the majority of nouns require an additional element—a classifier—to precede them before they can be modified by e.g. numerals. Such languages have two types of constructions, one of which is often called “mensural classifier”, shown in (7b) (Aikhenvald 2000: 114–115). These add a unit of counting/measuring to the noun modified (e.g. ‘pile of X’) and are the type that overlaps most with measure nouns, since they apply to both semantically count and mass nouns. Note that some authors, e.g. Crisma et al. (2011: 285) who have a typological/comparative approach, call mensural classifiers “measure expressions”, avoiding the term classifier (as reflected in the glossing of (6b) below).

“Sortal classifiers” are usually treated as classifiers proper: they modify nouns that are semantically count (+bounded) and denote “one” or, more accurately, “times one” (Greenberg 1972: 10). In this, they resemble singulatives. However, in addition to unitizing, classifiers “have meaning” (Allan 1977: 285), most common meanings having to do with animacy and shape (Crisma et al. 2011; Aikhenvald 2000; Croft 1994). (7a) shows the Mandarin noun *shū* ‘book’ with its sortal classifier which has a shape reference (Crisma et al. 2011: 285).

(7)	a.	<i>yī</i>	<i>běn</i>	<i>shū</i>	b.	<i>yī</i>	<i>duī</i>	<i>shū</i>
		one	CL ^{VOLUME}	book		one	pile	book
		‘one/a book’				‘one/a pile of books’		

Since the classifier is required for the noun to be modified by numerals, it is a unitizing device. Classifiers are an interesting parallel to singulatives since they share the characteristic of denoting individuals or units. The difference is the fact that classifiers add meaning beyond just individuation/unitization. There are also examples such as Yucatec Maya (Mayan) *há'as* ‘banana’ which takes on a different meaning with a different classifier (‘banana *fruit*’ vs. ‘banana *tree*’ vs. ‘banana *leaf*’ etc.) (Lucy 1992: 74; see Seifart forth. for a similar example with noun class markers in Miraña (Boran)). Such examples can indeed involve unitization (‘banana’ (non-number specified) > ‘a banana’ (single fruit)) but there is also an added meaning (a fruit as opposed to e.g. tree). Also, as noted by Greenberg (1972: 7), classifiers are often nouns themselves, not bound markers, which is another reason not to equate them with singulatives.

There is yet another type of unitization process, seen in the English examples *beer* (mass) vs. *a beer*, *two beers* (count). This operation is called recategorization by Corbett (2000: 81); other terms include coercion (from mass to count) (e.g. Dali & Mathieu 2021: 276). In such examples, something that is more commonly treated as mass is treated as count and this is shown in the noun phrase syntax. This operation is also called the Universal Packager (Pelletier 1975; Jackendoff 1991). Recategorization shares some features with singulatives formed from mass bases, but it is not a singulative formation, since the recategorization from mass to count is not brought about by any marker. Rather, one can assume a recategorized count noun *beer* (= a conventional unit of beer), which can then be used with numerals, etc. Also, as noted by Dali & Mathieu (2021: 276), nouns resulting from recategorization can often refer to both kinds (‘one type of beer’) and units (‘one bottle/pint of beer’), while singulatives appear to have only the latter function.

I have defined the singulative as a form that is morphologically derived from its base. As also noted by Acquaviva (2016: 1172), this leaves out pairs such as *cow~cattle* and *person~people* from this definition, although, again, they are interesting in the wider typology of how groups and individuals thereof are denoted.

In addition to denoting units from substances with natural minimal parts (such as grains of sand or blades of grass), singulatives have a related function, namely creating packaged meanings from substances without natural minimal parts. Consider:

- (8) a. *caws* ‘cheese’, SGT *cos-yn* ‘a cheese’ (with a regular vowel change) (Welsh, Indo-European, Nurmio 2019: 72)⁸
- b. *šokolad* ‘chocolate’, SGT *šokolad-k-a* ‘a chocolate bar’ (Russian, Indo-European, Kagan & Nurmio forth.)
- c. *bier* ‘beer’, SGT *bier-tje* ‘a beer’ (Dutch, Indo-European, Acquaviva 2016: 1172)

Acquaviva (2016: 1172) discusses this function of the singulative separately, but this distinction is not made in all discussions and often examples of the two are listed together. Greenberg (1972: 12–13) does note this difference, namely ‘piece of meat’-type (which he calls “unit counters”) and ‘grain of sand’-type (“particulates” in his terminology). Many instances involve markers with overlapping diminutive and singulative functions. The singulative is here similar in function to the Universal Packager mentioned above (Pelletier 1975; Jackendoff 1991), which packages the

⁸ Note that *cosyn* is not normally used for ‘a piece of cheese’ (contra Cuzzolin 1998: 129; Acquaviva 2016: 1180) but only for a complete packaged cheese (such as one might buy in a supermarket). For the former, *darn o gaws* [piece of cheese] ‘a piece of cheese’ is more likely. However, these impressions need to be tested with more speakers, since it is possible that there is, in fact, more variation.

referent into a conventionalised form, such as a (packaged block of) cheese or a chocolate bar. Such examples of singulatives appear to be rarer than those denoting natural minimal units (as seen in 1c): for instance, Nurmio (2019: 77–84) lists 66 singulative forms in Welsh, with *caws~cosyn* as the only example of the packaging type. Examples such as those in (8) are also more lexicalised than singulatives which denote natural minimal units; for example, *šokoladka* is a chocolate bar, not e.g. a chocolate praline (another conventional packaged form of chocolate). In Kagan & Nurmio (forth.) we discuss more Russian examples (see also Acquaviva 2016: 1178), noting that there may be more nuances to this function. Some packaged meanings are closer to natural units since they are perceived as the smallest possible unit of which the derivative is true: for example, Russian *marmeladka* ‘fruit jelly candy’ (from *marmelad* ‘marmalade’) is one piece of fruit candy, and it cannot be divided further and still be called *marmeladka*. This is a topic that requires more research.

The Brittonic languages have a small group of derivatives formed with the same marker as the singulative, and with an idiosyncratic function. For example:

- (9) a. *gwiniz* ‘wheat’ — *gwiniz-enn* ‘a wheat field’ (Breton; Acquaviva 2008: 245; Trépos 1980: 67)
 b. *tywod* ‘sand’ — *tywod-en* ‘sandbank, sand-dune’ (Welsh; GPC: s.v. *tywoden1*)

These derivatives denote not minimal units of the referent, as expected, but features of landscape related to the referent. Welsh *tywoden* has only two attestations in GPC, both from the eighteenth century and both from dictionaries. Google search yields no results and native speakers consulted were not familiar with this form.⁹ It is not a productive formation. The examples in Trépos (1980: 67; 1982: 269) are more interesting, since his work is informed by contemporary usage, including dialect variation. Strikingly, he reports that forms like *gwiniz-enn* have both the unit meaning ‘stalk of wheat’ and the “extent of” (*étendue de*) meaning ‘wheat field’ (Trépos 1980: 67) shown in (9a). I have not come across such a function of singulative markers in other languages and it is not productive in Welsh either (and probably also not in Breton). I therefore refrain from suggesting that this is another function of the singulative cross-linguistically but wish to draw attention to these examples should similar ones be found in other languages.

This brief overview is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, I have included this discussion to show the kind of morphological and semantic strategies which are similar to the singulative and sometimes confused with it, and to argue for a terminology that keeps different formations apart. This is particularly important since the singulative is a construction that is lacking in English, and it may be this very fact that has led to terminological confusion, as we might try to describe this phenomenon using existing terms such as “measure word”. Table 1 summarises this discussion, setting the singulative apart from these other types of unitizing constructions.

Table 1: Summary of the categories for individuation, unitization and packaging discussed in this section, markers in bold

Term	Denotes	Example
singulative	an individual a minimal unit a packaged unit	Welsh <i>moch-yn</i> ‘a pig’ Welsh <i>gwellt-yn</i> ‘a blade of grass, a (single) straw’ Welsh <i>cos-yn</i> ‘a cheese’
unit noun	a minimal unit	English <i>a grain of sand, a head of cattle</i>

⁹ There is, however, a dialect form *dwnan* ‘sand dune’, with the dialect variant *-an* of the singulative/diminutive ending *-en* (Nurmio 2019: 119), which likewise refers to an extent of a particular landscape type (GPC: s.v. *twyn*; Iwan Wyn Rees pc.). This is based on a count noun *twyn* ‘hill; dune’, rather than a mass noun, but should nevertheless be considered in further studies of this phenomenon.

measure noun	a measured/packaged unit	English <i>a cup of coffee</i>
mensural classifier	a packaged unit	Mandarin Chinese <i>yī duī shū</i> ‘one/a pile of books’
sortal classifier	individual	Mandarin Chinese <i>yī běn shū</i> ‘one/a book’
recategorization	a packaged unit	English <i>a beer</i>

The table brings into focus the similarity of singulatives with unit nouns, and, to a lesser extent, measure nouns as well as classifiers (both mensural and sortal). The difference is that singulatives are formed with bound markers and do not have meaning beyond unitization, i.e. they do not denote characteristics such as the shape of the referent, as classifiers do. In addition to overlap in function, there is a possible diachronic continuum between different unitization devices; I demonstrate in section 4 below that it is possible for singulative markers to develop from unit nouns through grammaticalization. In theory, measure nouns and classifiers could also be possible sources. Crisma et al. (2011: 286) and Yue (2016: 115) discuss the Mandarin Chinese classifier *ge* which shows signs of becoming a default classifier in several dialects for nouns previously (and prescriptively) associated with other classifiers. Yue (2016: 115) notes that this shift has, in fact, happened in a dialect of Northern Chinese and shows signs of being completed in another, related one. In her grammar of Wutun, defined by Sandman (2016: 2) as a Northwest Mandarin variety with strong contact influence especially from Tibetan (it has also been previously described as a “mixed language”), *ge* has also become a default marker used with all nouns (Sandman 2016: 63–68 and pc.). As such, it may in fact qualify as a singulative: it is added to non-unit denoting bases to denote an individual and, being a default marker, no longer has further meaning such as shape or size of the referent. This, too, remains a topic for further research.

3. Finding singulatives

3.1 Singulative in previous literature

My definition in (4) largely aligns with Acquaviva (2016: 1171–1172) who states that “if a unit-denoting noun is morphologically derived from a more basic non-unit-denoting noun, the derived noun, its grammatical category, the individualizing marker, or the individualizing derivation, are often called *singulative*” (his italics). In my definition, there is more emphasis on derivation by a *marker* (to the exclusion of *grain of sand*-type derivatives). Secondly, my definition aims to reflect the two kinds of meanings seen in (1b–c): (1c) is indeed unit-denoting, but with count nouns like (1b), a single pig is perhaps better described as an individual than a unit.

The definition in (4) proposes the term singulative as a comparative concept (Haspelmath 2010), i.e. a term that should be applicable to any form that fulfils these criteria, despite language-specific descriptions often using different terms. It is common to find singulatives described as “singular” and in instances where the singulative overlaps with diminutive, different authors can call the same form diminutive or singulative (see Kagan & Nurmio, forth., for a discussion on Russian). Terminology matters, for several reasons. First, in order to study a phenomenon cross-linguistically, we must be able to compare like with like. Secondly, terminology matters to how we understand grammatical phenomena in individual languages. In Nurmio (2017, 2019) I review how Welsh singulatives are described in the literature, noting that calling them singular has led many scholars to try and lump these forms together with morphologically unmarked singulars, obscuring the fact that the number system of Welsh in fact has the interesting splits shown above in (1). Finally, as a

result of the first two issues, our overall understanding of grammatical number remains incomplete as regards this phenomenon. Typological discussions tend to note that overtly marking the singular number value is rarer than overtly marking the plural, i.e. that singulatives are a relatively rare phenomenon (Greenberg 1966; Haspelmath & Karjus 2017: 1214–1215, 1217). They are clearly rarer than morphologically marked plurals (pluratives in my terminology), but they may not be as rare as has been thought, given that there has never been a comprehensive data collection. In fact, singulatives are part of the number systems of one of the biggest language families in the world (by language count and by speaker numbers, see Ethnologue), namely Afro-Asiatic. An appreciation of these issues will add to our understanding of the diversity and complexity of grammatical number by shifting our view away from a rather Indo-European and Eurocentric view that takes a singular-plurative (*cat–cats*) paradigm as the norm (cf. Storch & Dimmendaal 2014: 1–2). This is seen, for example, in grammatical descriptions that state that a plural is formed by deleting a marker from the singular, i.e. making the singular the starting point of the paradigm even though it is the morphologically marked form (see e.g. Appleyard’s (1987: 254) description of the Khamtanga example in (2a), Williams (1980: 9, 13) for Welsh, and Arensen (1982: 40) for Murle (Surmic)).

As already noted, the singulative is an understudied category. While it is an established term for talking about especially the Brittonic branch of Celtic and about Afro-Asiatic languages, there is relatively little cross-linguistic work on it. Some existing discussions are Dali & Mathieu (2021), Grimm (2018), and Acquaviva (2016). In all of these, the typological sample is small; Dali & Mathieu (2021) look at Semitic, Celtic and Nilotic. Haspelmath & Karjus (2017: 1220) mention six languages with singulatives, and the generalisation that they are found “in substantial numbers” only in certain families—Celtic (Indo-European); varieties of Arabic, and Cushitic (Afro-Asiatic); and some other languages of north-eastern Africa. Grimm (2018) looks at four languages. Acquaviva (2016) is the most comprehensive treatment with 19 individual languages mentioned, as well as three families (Nilo-Saharan [see fn. 6], Cushitic and Chadic) mentioned as having singulatives. A full typological picture is lacking. This gap means that all hypotheses about the origin of singulative marking are awaiting to be tested. On a more practical level, it also means that singulatives go unrecorded and under-described in grammatical descriptions since grammar writers may not recognise them or look for them by e.g. checking whether a diminutive marker can be added to a mass noun to form a singulative.

3.2 Data collection and terminology

The data in section 4 below comes from the Singulative database (Nurmio, Dires & Carbo, forth.). It is the first dataset focused on this category, recording data on morphology and semantics. In this paper, I focus solely on markers. The scope is not limited to languages where the singulative is part of the inflectional number system, but I also discuss derivational types (such as those in (8)), especially singulatives formed from mass nouns.

Since the singulative is an understudied topic, it is perhaps for this reason that the term itself has not been firmly established. Formations that are singulatives in my definition go by various names in the literature¹⁰, making typological data collection more challenging; this is especially true of non-productive and derivational singulative formations such as those formed from mass nouns with markers that more commonly mark the diminutive. My terminology for number marking here

¹⁰ These include singulative, unit noun, nomen unitatis, singular, among others.

largely follows Haspelmath & Karjus (2017), Treis (2014) and Junglas & Güldemann (forth.) in separating morphological form from meaning and using “plurative” and “singulative” to denote morphologically marked forms, as opposed to unmarked singular and plural.¹¹

Table 2 summarises my terminology, focusing on morphology rather than meaning. Since singular and plural (ditto dual, paucal etc.) are also semantic terms, the qualifier “unmarked” can be added to specify that the reference is to the *form* of the noun:

Table 2: Terminology used in this article

Morphological forms (marking)	Example
(unmarked) singular	English <i>pig</i>
(unmarked) plural	Welsh <i>moch</i> ‘pigs’
plurative	Sidaama <i>sin-na</i> ‘branches’
singulative	Sidaama <i>sin-čo</i> ‘a branch’
base (form)	Sidaama <i>sina</i> ‘branch(es)’

Note that the terms “marked” and “unmarked” refer here to the synchronic state: a synchronically unmarked form is one which has no markers that can be deleted. Diachronically speaking, however, a form may bear a marker/markers. This is the case with the Welsh unmarked plural *llygod* ‘mice’ which historically has a plural suffix *-od*, but the old singular *llyg* has been overtaken by the singulative *llygod-en* in the basic meaning ‘mouse’ (Nurmio 2017: 64); the same goes for Breton *logod* ‘mice’ (Trépos 1980: 71). *Llyg* survives in the meaning ‘shrew’, including compounds such as *llyg y dŵr* ‘water shrew’ (see termau.org). Breton examples also include *stered* ‘stars’ (unmarked plural), old plurative of now-lost Middle Breton *ster* (Jouitteau & Rezac 2016). Cushitic languages also have examples of base forms which are old singulatives, e.g. Alaaba-K’abeena *’arriččut(a)* ‘sun’ (Crass 2005: 64; Dires, forth.) can be analysed as historically containing the singulative suffix *-iččut(a)*. Separation of form and meaning has already been pointed out as crucial when studying singulatives, and to that I would add a call to keep synchrony and diachrony separate as well.

The Singulative database (Nurmio, Dires & Carbo, forth.) is currently at 258 different singulative markers (see Table 3) in 120 different languages and some collection work is still ongoing. The database also currently covers languages which, we hypothesize, may have singulatives, but this is yet to be confirmed due to information on number/unitization being incomplete or lacking altogether.¹² As these numbers show, one language can have more than one singulative marker; an example of a language with a large number of markers is Iraqw (Afro-Asiatic) at 21 singulative suffixes (Dires forth.). Since singulatives are not equally represented across language families, this is not a database built by sampling. Instead, we aim to include all attested examples of singulatives

¹¹ As already noted in Corbett (2000: 17), if used logically and consistently, “plurative” should be used to refer to any plural form in opposition to a more basic singular, and as such this would include e.g. the English s-plural. This is unlikely to catch on given the established use of the term “plural”, but it is a useful and necessary term when discussing systems which show variation in whether the singular or plural number value is morphologically marked. In English-type systems where unmarked singular/marked plural is the overwhelming majority pattern, it may be less necessary to make such a distinction.

¹² The numbers here should also not be taken as absolute for two further reasons: first, the line between what constitutes dialects of one language and separate languages is fluid in many instances. Secondly, it is not always easy to tell whether something is an allomorph of another marker or a separate marker, especially when working with short and/or old grammar sketches.

both in living languages and also those spoken in the past (including extinct languages and earlier language stages, e.g. Old Irish (Indo-European)). Data is collected from existing literature and often by checking sister languages of those that are recorded to have singulatives. Some data is also collected directly from language experts. As already noted, singulatives built from mass nouns can sometimes be found by looking at descriptions of diminutives.

4. Singulative markers

In this section, I list all types of singulative markers found in the database. The prevalence of each marking type is discussed and some preliminary discussion about the diachrony of markers is included when it has a bearing on the synchronic analysis. Table 3 shows different markers in the database and the number of languages that have it. The list is not exhaustive (see above) but is meant to indicate trends as observed in the data collection so far.

Table 3: Types of singulative markers per number of languages in Nurmio, Dires & Carbo (forth.); numbers as of 23 February 2023

Marker	Nr of languages
suffix	109
prefix	7
circumfix	1
stem alternation	3

4.1 Suffixation

For nominal plural, suffixation is the most common marking strategy cross-linguistically (Dryer 2013). The same applies to singulative markers: 91% of the languages in the current database mark the singulative this way. For examples, see (1), (2) and (3) above.

Suffixation can take different forms. In the majority of instances, including examples (1)–(3) above, we can speak of “singulative suffixes” (sometimes with other overlapping functions such as the diminutive). However, there are also examples of inverse markers: they change the number value of the basic, unmarked form (Corbett 2000: 159; the term “inverse” goes back to Wonderly, Gibson & Kirk 1954). That is, the same marker can be used for different number values. This is illustrated in (10) with Dagaare (Gur) (Grimm 2021: 448, see also Grimm 2012, 2018), with the inverse marker *-rí*:

(10)	a.	<i>tìé</i>	<i>tìi-rí</i>	b.	<i>nyágá</i>	<i>nyág-rí</i>
		tree.BASIC	tree.INVERSE		root.BASIC	root.INVERSE
		‘a tree’	‘trees’		‘roots’	‘a root’

In (10a), the unmarked form of the noun is singular in meaning and *-rí* changes it to plural meaning. (10b) is the opposite pattern: the basic, unmarked form has a plural meaning and the form with *-rí* a singular one. *Nyág-rí* ‘a root’ conforms to my definition of singulative although *-rí* is not a singulative marker. Inverse number is also found in Nilotic, Austronesian and Kiowa-Tanoan languages (Corbett 2000: 156–165; see also Sutton 2010 for Kiowa-Tanoan); and in Atlantic-Congo (in Bidyogo, see Di Garbo & Agbetsoamedo 2018: 191). This kind of marking is, therefore, attested in a typologically diverse range of languages.

Singulative suffixes may have grammaticalized from minimal-unit nouns (*‘grain of sand’* type) (cf. below for prefixes with a similar history). One such transparent example is the noun *‘eye’* being used to denote a unit of a mass substance in a group of Uralic languages and also the Yeniseian language Ket which has been in contact with the Uralic language Selkup (Ylikoski 2021). In some languages the marker is clearly analysable as the lexeme *‘eye’* (e.g. Khanty and Selkup, see Däbritz 2021: 96, 103), in which case it would not qualify as a singulative marker but rather a minimal unit noun. This seems also the best analysis for Hungarian *-szem* from *szem* *‘eye’* (as noted by Haspelmath & Moravcsik 2019). In others, this lexeme has reduced phonologically, suggesting grammaticalization towards a singulative marker proper. This is visible in Ket: in (11a) the suffix still appears analysable as *dēs* *‘eye’*, while in (11b), it has developed to *-dis* (cf. also (2b) above). *-s* in (11c) is suggested by Helimski (2016) to derive from *dēs*, and if this analysis is correct, this would make it a grammaticalized singulative marker.

- (11) a. *e:l* *‘berries’* — *e:l-des* *‘a (single) berry’* (Helimski 2016: 158)
 b. *hānaŋ* *‘sand’* — *hānaŋ-dis* *‘a grain of sand’* (Däbritz 2021: 113)
 c. *a²q* *‘wood, trees, forest’*¹³ — *ōk-s* *‘a tree’* (Helimski 2016: 159)

Ket and Selkup both have another singulative marker, Ket *-lamt* and Selkup *-laka*, *-laga*, going back to a noun *‘piece’* (Däbritz 2021: 103, 113), suggesting a measure noun function in origin. While the diachronic developments suggested here require more research, I highlight this example in order to draw out possible diachronic links between singulative markers and minimal unit nouns as well as measure nouns.

4.2 Prefixation

Singulative marking by prefixation is less common. As noted above, nominal plurality is most commonly expressed by suffixation, too, so this picture is not surprising. Prefixation as a pluralisation strategy is most common in Africa, specifically within Niger-Congo and especially Bantu languages (Dryer 2013). This generalisation also extends to singulatives, if we choose to include noun class markers which mark individuals and units under the definition of singulatives. Consider the following example from the Bantu language Nata (Atlantic-Congo) (Laine 2023: 62):

(12)	a.	<i>oβu-rēesa</i>	b.	<i>oru-rēesa</i>
		CL14-beard		CL11-beard
		<i>‘beard’</i>		<i>‘a (single) beard hair’</i>

In Bantu languages, noun class and number information are jointly conveyed by a noun class prefix (Contini-Morava 1999: 4). Singular and plural meaning pairs are, therefore, both morphologically marked. Some constitute regular singular-plural meaning pairs. Some, however, have more of a “lexical-derivational” type relationship in Crisma et al.’s (2011: 260–261) terms: this is found with class 11 which may be used to derive units from mass nouns, as seen in (12). To decide whether certain noun-class markers have a singulative function, one would need to be able to demonstrate that (12b) is derived from (12a). While (12a) is not morphologically unmarked (it bears a class 14

¹³ Helimski (2016: 160) notes that perhaps the substance meaning *‘wood’* should be the main translation.

prefix), Bantu experts seem to suggest that this form is a more basic member of the paradigm. Gunnink (2018: 124), writing about Fwe, notes that a shift to class 11 expresses “a singular entity of something that usually does not occur by itself”, implying that this form is semantically marked (and presumably less frequent in usage than its base). For Swahili, Acquaviva (2016: 1173, referring to Contini-Morava 1999) argues that noun class reassignment can have a singulative function. I leave open the question whether forms like (12b) are best described as singulatives or not; to do so may require amending the definition of singulative to include not just morphological but also semantic markedness.

We also find a singulative prefix, or one developing into such, in Breton. In addition to the singulative suffix *-enn*, cognate with Welsh *-en*, Breton has another way of denoting individuals from groups and aggregate substances, namely prefixing with the following nouns: *penn* ‘head’, *loen* ‘animal’ and *pezh* ‘piece, bit’ (Jouitteau 2009–2022: *les singulatifs, ar pezh*; Trépos 1982: 236; Nurmio 2019: 137; Acquaviva 2008: 244, 258).

- (13) a. *moc’h* ‘pigs’ – *penn-moch*, *pe-moch* ‘a pig’
 b. *kezeg* ‘horses’ – *loen-kezeg* ‘a horse’
 c. *dilhad* ‘clothes, clothing’ – *pezh dilhad* ‘a piece of clothing’

Loen and *pezh* are best analysed similarly to English *head (of cattle)* and *piece (of clothing)*; i.e. they are not singulatives according to definition (4) but rather unit nouns, since they are lexemes rather than bound markers. Welsh has a similar construction with *llwn* (also spelled *llwdn*) ‘young of an animal; animal’ (GPC: s.v. *llwn*). GPC gives examples such as *llwn ceffyl* ‘young horse’ where the reference is to young animals, but compare e.g. *llwn dafad* ‘sheep; wether’ where there is no reference to age.¹⁴ This is confirmed by a Google search, although the examples come from older sources and it is unclear how common this usage still is; this warrants further research.

Breton *penn* seen (13a) is, however, of more interest regarding singulatives. The form with *moc’h* ‘pigs’ varies between dialects from *penn-moc’h* to reduced *pe-moc’h* (also *pi-moc’h*). In this latter form, *penn* could be said to have reduced and grammaticalized to a singulative prefix *pe-*. This only applies to some Breton dialects and, to the best of my knowledge, only happens with *moc’h* ‘pigs’ (confirmed by Mélanie Jouitteau, pc.). The dialect atlas by Le Roux (1924–1953, s.v. *porc*, *porcs*) shows the reduced form to be more widespread than its non-reduced counterpart. *Penn-* is also used to derive one member of paired body parts denoted by Breton duals (called “minor duals” in Nurmio 2019): e.g. *daoulin* ‘knees (of one person)’ – *penn-daoulin* ‘a knee’. I am not aware of examples where *penn-* phonologically reduces in such constructions.

In the Goidelic branch of Celtic, there is a somewhat similar usage with a prefix. These are formations with the noun *leath* ‘half; side’, used with natural pairs to emphasise that reference is to one member of the pair, e.g. Irish *leath-chluas* [half-ear] ‘one ear’. There are typological parallels from various families (see Nurmio 2019: 38–39). In the Irish example, *leath* ‘half; side’ functions more like a prefix than a lexical noun, since its meaning has been bleached to ‘one’; *leath-chluas* does not mean ‘half an ear’ or ‘side of an ear’. This would qualify *leath-* as a singulative marker. However, synchronically the base is a singular noun *cluas* ‘ear’ and not a non-unit-denoting noun which would be required for it to be classified as a singulative under definition (4). Irish nouns for body parts are complex also in the non-singular meaning: the pair meaning is often expressed not by

¹⁴ *Llwn* on its own has been restricted to the sense ‘wether’ in northern Welsh (Fynes-Clinton 1913: 353). I am grateful to Iwan Wyn Rees for drawing my attention to the *llwn*-construction.

the plural but a minor dual construction ‘two’ + noun (in a form reflecting the otherwise lost dual), e.g. *dhá chluais* [two ear.DUAL] ‘(one person’s) ears’ (Nurmio 2019: 35–38). Therefore, while there is a regular number paradigm *cluas* ‘ear’, PLT *cluasa*, there is a parallel pattern, specifically with reference to the pair and one member of the pair: *dhá chluais* ‘(one person’s) ears’/ *leath-chluas* ‘one ear (of the pair)’. The latter are semantically in a paradigm-like relationship of “pair/one member of the pair”. However, we lack usage data, and it is not clear whether speakers who use one of these also use the other, making it difficult to assess to what extent these are truly a paradigm. I leave the Irish ‘half’-forms tentatively out of the definition for singulatives, but they are clearly a related and interesting category.

4.3 Circumfixation

Circumfixation refers to marking by both a prefix and a suffix. Only one example occurs in my sample, in the Berber branch of Afro-Asiatic. This branch is variably presented as one language (“Berber”) or a number of dialects/languages (see Kossmann 2020 for details); I use the term dialect here for convenience. Example (14) comes from Nafusi (also ‘Nefusi’) (Beguinet 1942: 32).

(14) *azemmûr* ‘olive(s)’, SGT *t-azemmûr-t* ‘an olive’

As is common in Afro-Asiatic, the marker used in the singulative function in (14) is also the marker for feminine gender. Some exceptions are listed in Kossmann (2013b: 218). Feminine/singulative suffixes with *-t* are common to the Afro-Asiatic branch, while the circumfix marking with a prefixed *ta-* appears to be unique to Berber to the best of my knowledge.¹⁵ As for other Berber dialects, Kossmann (2013a: 20, 44; 2013b: 216) notes that the system seen in (14) is found in some, but not all of them (see also Di Garbo & Agbetsoamedo 2018: 203). Most Berber nouns have a singular/plurative opposition and only a subset (centred around terms for vegetables and fruits) have the system seen in (14), referred to in the literature as the collective/unity system (Kossmann 2013: 217). It has been suggested that this is an innovation in Berber which arose under influence from Arabic (while realizing the singulative form with Berber morphology) (Kossmann 2013b: 283).

4.4 Stem alternations

There are many instances of the addition of a singulative affix triggering regular stem alternations, e.g. Welsh *adar* ‘birds’, *ader-yn* ‘a bird’ with raising of the root vowel. However, since this alternation is triggered by the singulative suffix *-yn*, I only count the suffix as the singulative marker proper.

There are also instances where the singular value is distinguished from the plural value by stem alternation only, i.e. there is no affix. Such examples are seen in the Nilotic languages Dinka (Andersen 1990, 2014) and Nuer (Baerman & Monich 2021). In (15) I use the glosses “nominative singular/plural” used in the source literature since it is not currently clear to me whether these forms could be interpreted as singulative or plurative.

(15) a. Dinka	NOM PL	NOM SG	b. Nuer	NOM PL	NOM SG
	<i>bël</i>	<i>bêl</i>		<i>běel</i>	<i>béēel</i>

¹⁵ I’m grateful to Stanly Oomen for advice on Berber.

	‘sorghum (plural), canes’	‘sorghum (singular), cane’		‘dura (type of sorghum)’	‘dura (type of sorghum)’ ¹⁶
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Singular and plural are distinguished by changes to one or more features of the stem. In Dinka, these are vowel quality, vowel length, voice quality of the vowel (breathy vs. creaky), tone and the final consonant (Andersen 2014: 223). No particular combination signals singular or plural number: although there are some recurring singular-plural patterns, this does not amount to a predictable system. The number of a noun can be reliably detected only by looking at agreement (Andersen 2014: 224, 230). So even though the paradigms in (15) might lead one to interpret the lengthening of the vowel and change to breathy voice as a singulative marker, this is not the case since neither change denotes singularity.

Dinka does not have suffixes but marks inflectional distinctions by changes to the stem only (Ladd et al. 2009: 660). Nuer, on the other hand, has case/number suffixes in addition to stem alternation patterns. Nuer has three cases (nominative, genitive, locative) and two numbers (singular, plural) (Baerman & Monich 2021). There are two suffixes, one singular and one plural, which are used to mark some case and number forms, while the other forms remain unsuffixed. The NOM.SG. form is always unsuffixed. In addition, nouns have different stem alternations according to case and number which are similar to those found in Dinka (vowel quality and length, and tone). Baerman & Monich (2021: 266–268) note that, similarly to Dinka, the inflectional system of Nuer reflects an earlier system with what they call basic singulars (where the plural [= plurative in my terminology] is formed from the singular) and basic plurals (where the singular [= singulative] is formed from the plural). This distinction is reflected in the fact that old basic plural forms never have a NOM.PL. suffix in Nuer. Crucially, they note that the basic singular/basic plural contrast does not appear to be productive in the language.

A comparison with sister languages suggests that diachronically Dinka and Nuer had the tripartite system typical for “Nilo-Saharan” languages (see above) where some nouns overtly mark the plural value, others the singular value, and some mark both with suffixation (see Dimmendaal 2000a and discussion above). Dinka has lost the number-marking suffixes altogether, while in Nuer suffixes only mark some case/number distinctions while stem alternations do the rest. Another Western Nilotic language Pāri is included in (16) to show the cognate noun which has an unmarked plural and a marked singulative.

(16)	Pāri (Andersen 1990: 18)	
	PL	SGT
	<i>béel</i>	<i>bèel-ó</i>
	‘sorghum (plural), canes’	‘sorghum (singular), cane’

Diachronically speaking, then, Dinka *béel* and Nuer *béēel* are ex-singulatives, and for this reason some authors analyse Dinka as having an underlying tripartite system. However, Andersen (2014: 244–252) argues that in the synchronic stage the singular may be becoming the default basic member of the number paradigm. This is evidenced in particular by borrowed and derived nouns, e.g. SG *àṇàṇàṇaṭ*, PLT *àṇàṇàṇaṭ* ‘pineapple’ (< Arabic *ananaas*), where the plurative is formed from the singular by lengthening the vowel of the last syllable (Andersen 2014: 245; see also Ladd

¹⁶ I follow the authors’ glosses here, which differ slightly between the two languages.

et al. 2009: 666–668). Baerman & Monich (2021: 265) similarly observe that recent borrowings to Nuer inflect through suffixation alone, with the NOM.SG. as the unmarked form.

Synchronically, the pattern in (15) could be interpreted as a type of inverse number marking: singular and plural meaning are distinguished from one another by changes in the root while none of these changes is exclusively associated with either number value. This system differs from the Dagaare-type inverse system discussed above in that there is a range of possible inverse markers rather than just one. For Dinka, Andersen (2014: 226) argues that this means that the singular cannot be predicted from the plural, or vice versa. This is supported by Ladd et al. (2009: 666, 668) who observe some patterns of “subregularities” but conclude that they do not amount to the choice of number-marking being predictable. For Nuer, Baerman & Monich (2021: 264) demonstrate some predictability. Another analysis might be to regard Dinka and Nuer as having a replacement system where both singular and plural values are morphologically marked. This is what Andersen (2014: 244) suggests tentatively for Dinka. I leave open the exact analysis of these systems; psycholinguistic work might shed more light on the question of predictability of one form from another and the question whether the form with singular meaning is becoming the base for the plural one. In any case, I conclude that synchronically (15) cannot be interpreted as a tripartite systems with singulatives, although they are relevant to understanding the history of such marking.

The Nilotic examples show that singulative markers may be deleted by sound changes. Another instructive example of this is Baale-Olam (Surmic) with the singulative marker *-c* which is not realized unless it appears before another suffix, i.e. it is not present in all environments (Dimmendaal 2000b: 194–195). Compare *sō* (SG)/*sǒ* (PL) ‘foot, leg’ with no suffix following, but *só-j-a-naandí* ‘my leg’ (cf. *sǒ-a-ǵaandí* ‘my legs’) with a pronominal linker *-a-* and with the singulative realized here as *-j-*.

5. Conclusion

This paper proposed a definition of singulatives, followed by a discussion of other common grammatical strategies for individuation and unitization that share some features with singulatives but which I argued should be kept apart from them. I have presented an overview of different types of singulative markers based on a typological data collection. These are mostly suffixes, but we also find examples (some of them tentative) of prefixes, stem alternation patterns, and one circumfix. Some singulatives occur as part of the grammatical number system of a language, but singulatives can also be derivational; most commonly they derive units of mass nouns. The Welsh examples in (1b) and (1c) illustrate these functions in a language where both patterns are present. Especially in the latter function, examples may not be labelled as singulative in the literature, and descriptive terminology for singulatives varies greatly in general.

This overview of patterns is meant as neither exhaustive nor the final word on what kind of patterns fall under the term “singulative”. Instead, it is an exploration of what kinds of patterns fall under my definition and what are left outside of it. Some patterns are more straightforward to analyse than others. I have argued that some individuating/unitizing patterns belong under other labels while others were shown to count as singulatives diachronically but not synchronically. I have left open the question of how some formations should be classified for now; much work remains to be done on individual languages and typologically.

While the diachronic development of singulative marking deserves its own paper, I have demonstrated some possible pathways in this overview. One is the grammaticalization of unit nouns (***grain** (of sand)* type) into singulative markers. I also tentatively suggest that it may be possible for a classifier system to reduce to just one classifier whose function is simply unitization, which may warrant its classification as a singulative. This, too, requires further research.

Arriving at a crosslinguistic definition and a preliminary picture of how widespread singulatives are has implications for future research. Firstly, it can aid with the identification of singulatives, which can otherwise get placed under labels such as “singular” or “diminutive” in language descriptions. Secondly, the overlap between the singulative and other categories is very common in my data, raising questions about the connection between these categories. Here I have only discussed the overlap with the diminutive; other features or categories include gender and definiteness. The data collection also indicates that markers that form singulatives also have a variety of derivational functions, and it remains to be studied to what extent we can find crosslinguistic patterns in this. Finally, singulatives are a promising case study for the diachrony of number marking and unitization.

6. Abbreviations

CL = classifier; noun class (for Bantu)

F = feminine

GPC = Thomas et al. (eds), *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*.

NOM = nominative

PL = plural

PLT = plurative

SG = singular

SGT = singulative

7. References

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