PLURAL FORMATION IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN: A COMPARATIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract: In every natural language, plural formation is one of the most important morphological processes, and it often reveals structural and historical characteristics of language. This research aims to investigate a comparative linguistic analysis of plural formation in English and German and to identify the central differences and similarities between the two languages. The analysis also focuses on regular and irregular nouns, vowel change, zero plurals, affixation forms, and loanword adaptation. It is considered that both languages are belong to the same language family, while there are numerous differences between two languages. German exhibits a wider range of plural markers and more frequent stem modifications. In contrast, English relies mainly on the -s/-es suffix. At the same time, both languages involve historically irregular forms of nouns. The results of this study are instrumental in a better understanding of the plural morphology of two languages and useful for language teaching and learning contexts.

Key words: Plural nouns; irregular plurals; English pluralization; German pluralization; umlaut; -s/-es endings; noun inflection; morphology; language comparison.

Introduction: The formation of plural nouns is a fundamental aspect of morphology, helping linguists understand both the structure and historical development of languages (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). English and German, as members of the West Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family, share some common roots but have developed different systems for marking plurals (Franz, 2020). Studying these systems provides insights into linguistic patterns and the evolution of related languages.

In English, plural nouns are generally formed by adding the suffix -s or -es, as seen in book → booksand box → boxes. A few nounsfollow irregular patterns, such as man → men and child → children, reflecting historical sound changesand vowel modifications (Spencer, 1991; Franz, 2020). German, in contrast, employs a wider variety of strategies. Plurals are often formed with suffixes like -e, -er, and -(e)n, sometimes accompanied by vowel changes known as umlaut, as in der Mann → die Männer and das Kind → die Kinder (Wiese, 1996; ScienceDirect, 2005).

Exploring plural formation is significant not only for understanding the structural characteristics of each language but also for practical applications, including language teaching and learning. It also illuminates historical processes, such as umlaut and the adaptation of loanwords, which have shaped modern English and German morphology (European Proceedings, 2019). This study aims to provide a comparative analysis of plural formation in English and German, focusing on both

regular and irregular forms and highlighting the similarities and differences in their morphological systems.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are main morphological patterns of plural formation in English and German?
2. What similarities exist between the pluralization systems of English and German?
3. In what ways do the plural formation rules in English differ from those in German?
4. How do irregular plural nouns function in both languages, and to what extent are they comparable?

1.   Main morphological patterns of plural formation in English and German?

English plural formation is relatively simple and primarily relies on the addition of the suffixes -s or -es. To form the pluralization, most of the nouns follow this standard pattern. In irregular patterns, some nouns exhibit internal vowel changes such as *tooth-teeth,* a small number of word form of plurals by adding the archaic ending –(e)n, for example *ox-oxen.* Additionally, certain nouns especially animal names and loanwords, exhibit zero   inflection, such as *sheep-sheep.* (Booij, 2007; Spencer, 1991). Some words borrowed from Latin and Greek retain their original foreign plurals, e.g., criterion → criteria, stimulus→ stimuli, and analysis→ analyses.

Maja Latawiec (2025) indicates that In German, plural nouns are often created by small alterations to the singular noun, which may include adding or modifying the suffix, applying an umlaut to the stem vowel and changing the definite article, a distinctive feature of the language.

In German nouns can take a variety of endings to form plurals, making it important to learn the plural form along with each new word. Dictionaries typically indicate the plural ending alongside the noun, which should be applied to form the correct plural. For most masculine and neuter nouns (approximately 75-90%), the plural is formed by adding -e. Examples include:

- Der Tisch, -e → dieTische (table → tables)

- Das Papier, -e → die Papiere(paper → papers)

- Das Heft, -e → die Hefte (notebook → notebooks)

- Der Filzstift, -e → die Filzstifte (marker → markers)

2.   Similarities between the pluralization systems of English and German.

That pattern demonstrates that learning German plural requires attention to noun endings, gender and corresponding changes in the plural form. (Durrell, 2011).

Despite the differences in complexity, English and German share several notable similarities in their pluralization systems. Both languages exhibit irregular plural forms that do not follow the standard suffix patterns. In English, examples include man → men, tooth → teeth, and mouse

→ mice, which involve historical vowel changes known as mutation (Spencer, 1991). Similarly, German preserves irregular plurals with umlaut or other modifications, such as Mann → Männer and Buch → Bücher (Wiese, 1996). These historical irregularities reflect the common Germanic origins of both languages.

Another similarity is the presence of zero plurals, where the singular and plural forms remain identical. In English, this occurs with nouns like sheep → sheepand fish → fish, while in German, examplesinclude dasMädchen → die Mädchen (Clahsen & Rothweiler, 1993). Such cases require learners to memorize the form, as they do not conform to standard pluralization rules.

Additionally, both languages include loanwords or borrowed words that retain their original foreign plural forms. In English, Latin or Greek nouns like criterion → criteria or analysis → analysesmaintain the original endings, thoughAnglicized forms with -s are often accepted. German similarly adapts foreign words by adding -s, as seen in das Auto → dieAutosand dasHandy → die Handys(Durrell, 2011).
This indicates a shared strategy in handling foreign nouns in pluralization.

3. Differences between the Plural Formation Rules in English and German.

The plural formation rules in English and German exhibit significant differences in terms of complexity, morphological strategies, and grammatical considerations. In English, plural nouns are formed primarily by adding the suffixes -s or -es, making the system largely predictable and straightforward (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In contrast, German employs a variety of pluralization strategies, including -e, -er, -€n, and -s, often accompanied by vowel changes (umlaut), which increases the morphological complexity of the language (Durrell, 2011).

Vowel changes in English are relatively rare and limited to a small set of irregular nouns, such as man → men and tooth → teeth (Spencer, 1991). German, however, frequently modifies the stem vowel to form plurals, as seen in examples like Mann → Männer and Buch → Bücher (Wiese, 1996). Another significant differenceisthe influence of grammatical gender: English plurals are independent of gender, while in German, the choice of plural ending often depends on whether a noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter, making it essential to learn plural forms alongside the singular nouns (Durrell, 2011).

Zero plurals, where singular and plural forms are identical, occur in both languages, but they are more common in English (sheep → sheep, fish → fish) than in German, where they are largely limited to neuter nouns such as das Mädchen → die Mädchen (Clahsen & Rothweiler, 1993; Booij, 2007). Furthermore, both languages deal with loanwords differently. English often preserves original Latin or Greek plurals, e.g., criterion → criteriaor analysis→ analyses, although Anglicized -s forms are also acceptable (Booij, 2007). German generally adapts foreign nouns by adding the suffix -s, as seen in das Auto → dieAutosand das Handy → die Handys(Durrell, 2011).

Finally, the treatment of definite articles distinguishes the two languages. In English, plural articles do not change (the book → the books), whereasin German, the definite article for all plural nouns is always die, regardless of the noun's gender in the singular (der Tisch → dieTische) (Durrell, 2011). Overall, these differences show that while English plural formation

is largely regular and predictable, German pluralization is more complex, influenced by gender, vowel alternations, and multiple suffix patterns, which together make learning German plurals a more challenging task for language learner.

https://germanwithlaura.com/plurals/
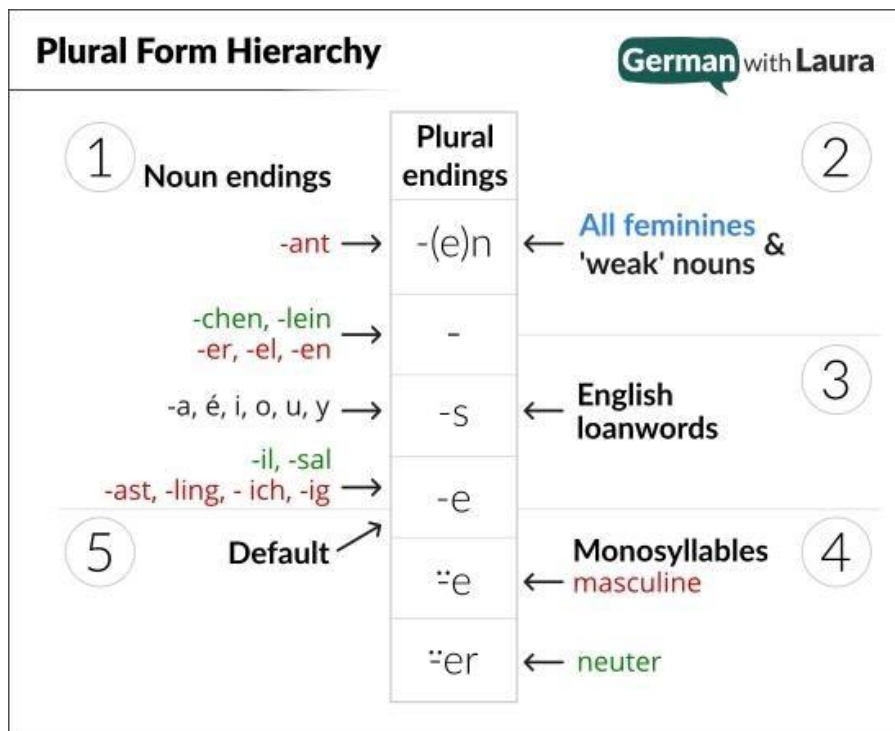
4. Irregular plural nouns function in both languages.

Irregular plural nouns are those that do not follow the regular English pattern of adding -s or -es to form the plural. Many of these forms are already familiar to English learners. For instance, the plural of man is men, not mans, and the plural of woman is women, not womans. There are hundreds of such irregular nouns, and mastering them generally requires practice through reading and speaking. Nonetheless, certain recurring patterns can assist learners in recognizing and memorizing these forms (Grammarly).

In German, irregular plurals are more complex and frequently involve umlaut, a vowel change in the stem to indicate the plural form. Many nouns add both an umlaut and a suffix, while some do not change at all. For example:

German	English
Das Buch → dieBücher	Book → books
Das Haus → dieHäuser	House → houses
Das Wort → dieWörter	Word → words

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https://www.taalhammer.com/how-to-form-plural-nouns-in-german/

Other nouns, especially loanwords, form plurals by adding -s, e.g., das Auto → die Autos and das Handy → dieHandys(Taalhammer, 2025). Umlaut isadistinctive feature of German plurals and is essential for correct pronunciation and plural formation.

Comparatively, both languages require learners to memorize irregular forms. However, German irregular plurals are more frequent and morphologically diverse due to umlaut, gender, and suffix variation, while English irregulars are fewer and structurally simpler. Despite these differences, irregular plurals in both languages serve a similar function, preserving historical forms and enriching the noun system.

In conclusion, both English and German have irregular plural nouns that do not follow standard plural rules. Although some patterns exist, many irregular plurals must simply be memorized. Understanding these forms helps learners use the languages more accurately and recognize historical and phonetic influences on word formation.

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