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English Grammar through Dutch Eyes

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www.coutinho.nl/egde

The code in this book gives you access to the companion website. The online material consists of exercises, fact sheets, and web clips.

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Preface

This doesn't promise to be the most thrilling reading experience that you'll ever have. It's not even the most interesting book on language and linguistics (for the authors' favourites, check out "Five fun reads on grammar in action", one of our web clips on the site accompanying this book). This is a grammar book, a rule book for language. Few people consider rules interesting or fun. Breaking the rules, rebelling against them, expressing yourself freely – that's fun! We agree. Take a look at the following poem by the American poet e e cummings (the way he spelt his name, without capital initials, already shows that he was a rebel; a lot of poets are) about a mouse:

Me up at does

out of the floor
quietly Stare

a poisoned mouse

still who alive

is asking What
have i done that

You wouldn't have.

Let's look at this poem from the grammar teacher's point of view. In English, sentences generally start with a grammatical subject (*onderwerp*), followed by a finite verb (*persoonsvorm*) and the rest of the sentence, for instance a direct object (*lijdend voorwerp*) or a prepositional phrase (*voorzetselgroep*). In this poem, the subject *a poisoned mouse* doesn't appear until the fourth line. The two parts of the finite verb group *does Stare* are separated from each other as well as from the human object of the mouse's stare. *Me*, the first word of the poem, is in the wrong place in a prepositional group complementing the verb *stare*: in correct grammar the mouse *stares up at Me*, not *Me up at*. We won't even mention the irregular use of capital letters and the fact that language that belongs together is separated by extra spacing. This is bad grammar! Or is it?

Now let's look at this poem from the dying mouse's point of view. You're only a small creature – so small that you refer to yourself with lowercase *i* – up against a giant human *Me*. Having just been poisoned, your little body is convulsing. Your movements are fidgety small movements, best described in fidgety small monosyllabic words. Your mind is obviously in a state of confusion, and so is your language: you can't think a straight thought or squeak a straight sentence. Then, you share with your human killer what may well be the last thought you'll ever think. Gone are the confused thoughts, worded in grammatically confused language. You have one last perfectly reasonable thought (what have I done to deserve this?), which you manage to phrase in perfectly reasonable language, into a grammatically reasonable question.

It's highly unlikely that the poet communicated this way with the people around him. They wouldn't have understood him and he'd have become a social outcast. As a native speaker of English, Cummings was a competent language user, capable of forming grammatically correct sentences. The confused syntax in the first five and a half lines of "Me up at does" must have been intentional, as was the switch to correct grammar in the last two and a half lines. The point we're trying to make with this example is that if it's actually your intention to break the rules of grammar for a particular communicative purpose – for instance, to describe the confused thoughts and language of a poisoned mouse – you need a very good knowledge of these rules. It's this knowledge that we're trying to spread with this book.

We'd like to stress that we've written a book about English, not Dutch, grammar. However, it is an English grammar "through Dutch eyes". Our discussion is contrastive, which means that we discuss Dutch rules if we think they will help you understand their English grammatical counterparts. In our Second Language Acquisition classes, we've learnt that when we speak a second or foreign language, our first language is always there in the background. Some linguists and language teachers use their understanding of both language systems to predict the errors that foreign learners will make. Others adhere to the contrastive analysis hypothesis, focusing less on errors and more on predicting which language patterns in the second or foreign language will be easier or more difficult to learn, depending on how much they differ from learners' first language. We sympathize more with the contrastive analysis teachers than with the error analysis ones, but if you want to use our book to analyse other people's errors, be our guest.

A number of people have helped us write this book. We're grateful to Manon Foster-van der Loo for her drawings of cats and cowboys. Hanneke Waszink (student at Stedelijk Gymnasium Leiden) gave us useful reader-response feedback. Martina Noteboom (Leiden University) and Dick Broeren (Tilburg University) gave us some good linguistic advice that we did or didn't take – at

our own risk! The comments by the reviewers of the first sample chapters of this book were much appreciated. Most of all, we'd like to thank Nynke Coutinho and her colleagues for their good-humoured and almost endless patience.

This book is the joint effort of members of the English Language teaching staff at Leiden University's English Department and Leiden's Academic Language Centre. Each of us has our own way of explaining grammar and our own writing style. What unites us is our enthusiasm for how language works or doesn't work, and why. With this book and the materials on the accompanying website, we are trying to share this enthusiasm with you.

Leiden, April 2018

Website

This book has a companion website, which you can access at www.coutinho.nl/egde. The online material consists of

- exercises;
- fact sheets;
- web clips.

The screenshot shows a web browser interface. On the left is a sidebar menu for 'English Grammar through Dutch Eyes' with links to 'Study material', 'Exercises', 'Fact sheets', 'Web clips', and 'Teachers'. The main content area is titled 'Web clips' and features a grid of topic buttons. The 'Comma splice' button is highlighted. Below this grid, the 'Comma splice' section is displayed, containing two bullet points: 'What?' with a sub-point 'The linking of two main clauses with commas.', and 'Why is it a problem?'. A video player shows a man speaking. At the bottom, there is a footer with the publisher 'uitgeverij coutinho', a logo, and the text 'English Grammar through Dutch Eyes'.

English Grammar through Dutch Eyes

< Vorige

Web clips

Allow us to introduce ourselves Five fun reads on grammar in action

Reducing relative clauses **Comma splice** Adding emphasis Referring to unknown people

Using a dictionary Corpora Metaphor The many meanings of modals

Doing linguistic fieldwork Foreign plurals in English

Comma splice

- What?
 - The linking of two main clauses with commas.
- Why is it a problem?

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Upon request, teacher instructions, PowerPoint presentations, and exam questions are available for teachers.

Our book contains many examples.

***Examples preceded by an asterisk are ungrammatical.**

?Examples preceded by a question mark may not be considered fully acceptable.

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Thingamajigs and what's-its-names: nouns and noun phrases

Towards the end of a baby's first year, after months of seemingly meaningless cooing and babbling, something magical happens: it starts to talk! Chances are that its first words are words like *mama* and *dada*, quickly followed by words such as *dolly*, *doggy*, or *cookie*. Helpless little creature that it is, it will first learn to address its parents in order to get their attention when it needs something. Similarly, adults who are learning a new language will first learn the names of the things they most desire (*bus stop*, *bank*, and, of course, *beer*). What babies in the early stages of their linguistic development and adults learning a new language have in common is that they begin by learning nouns. In this chapter, we will see how Dutch and English classify nouns and how different types of nouns behave grammatically.

1.1 What are nouns?

Nouns are often defined as words that point to the *things* around us: people, animals, and objects. You may have your doubts about this definition, and you're absolutely right. After all, what does *love* point to? Or *socialism*? Our definition needs some fine-tuning.

There are two main categories of nouns in Dutch and English. The first, **proper nouns**, refers to names of persons or places, like *Jill* or *Reykjavik*. The second, **common nouns**, refers to all nouns that aren't names, like *table* or *happiness*.

The main difference between proper nouns and common nouns is their spelling: proper nouns are written with a capital initial letter. This difference is visible in sentence (1):

(1) **Leiden University is the oldest university in the Netherlands.**

In this sentence, *Leiden* and *Netherlands* are capitalized because they refer to a specific city and a specific country. The word *university* refers to the entire class of Dutch universities and therefore isn't written with a capital. In

contrast, *Leiden University* is a name, and *University* as a part of that name is therefore capitalized.

We can further subdivide common nouns into two categories. **Concrete nouns** refer to physical objects (*pencil, house*), persons (*man, greengrocer*) and animals (*aardvark, hippopotamus*). But not all *things* are tangible or concrete; there are also abstract things such as *love, hatred*, and *happiness*. Unsurprisingly, such *abstract* things are called **abstract nouns**.

In short:

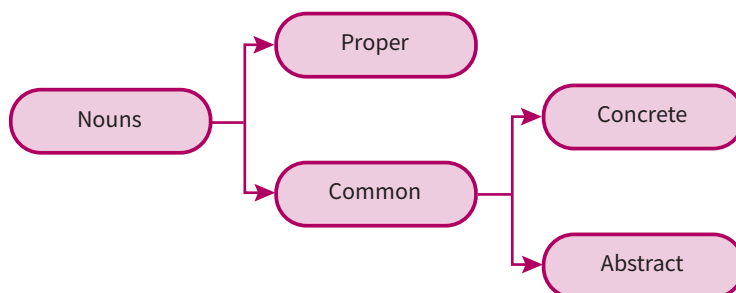


Figure 1.1 Types of nouns

1.2 One thing, two things, too many things

1.2.1 Countable and uncountable nouns

Compare this Dutch sentence with its ungrammatical English translation:

- (2a) Haar adviezen waren goedbedoeld, maar sloegen nergens op.
- (2b) *Her advices were well-meant but did not make any sense.

Why is (2a) correct but (2b) incorrect? After all, if we look up *advies* in the dictionary, we find that the English equivalent is *advice*. The answer to our question must be hidden in the grammatical properties of the Dutch and English nouns. Dictionaries often give very useful information about the grammar of words. If we look up the noun *advice* in *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, what we find is this:

ADVICE noun (uncountable)

an opinion you give someone about what they should do

The interesting piece of information here is **uncountable** (*niet-telbaar*), which means that this word does not have a plural (*meervoud*). This immediately explains why our sentence (2b) is incorrect: the noun *advice* cannot be turned into the plural *advices*.

Now let's look up the Dutch noun *advies* in our electronic *Van Dale*:

ADVIES (het; o; meervoud: adviezen)

raadgeving; op advies van aanraden; schooladvies, studieadvies

We immediately see that Van Dale provides us with the plural *adviezen*; we can therefore deduce that the Dutch noun *advies* is **countable**. Now we can explain why (2b) is an ungrammatical translation of (2a) and why we should look for another one. For instance:

(2c) Her advice was well-meant but did not make any sense.

Or this more natural-sounding translation:

(3) Her suggestions were well-meant but did not make any sense.

The distinction between countable and uncountable nouns isn't important only because it helps us understand that the literal English translation of a Dutch plural noun may be singular, or vice versa. It's also important because only singular countable nouns can be preceded by the indefinite article *a/an*. This is why the following sentence is impossible in English:

(4) *She gave me a good advice.

The noun *advice* can only be turned into something we can count with the help of a quantifying phrase like *a piece of*:

(5) She gave me a piece of good advice.

Figure 1.2 summarizes this distinction:

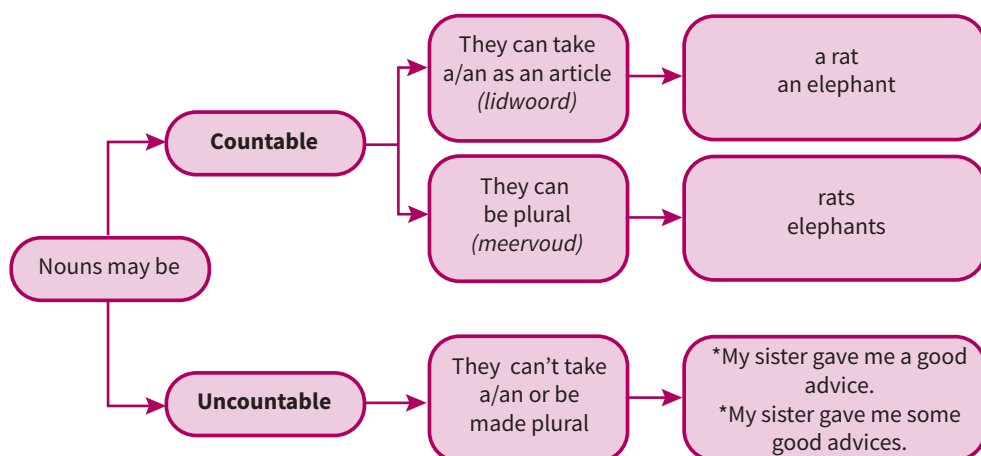


Figure 1.2 Countable versus uncountable nouns

1.2.2 How to make nouns plural

In high school, you will have learnt that in English most nouns are made plural by pasting <s> or <es> behind the noun:

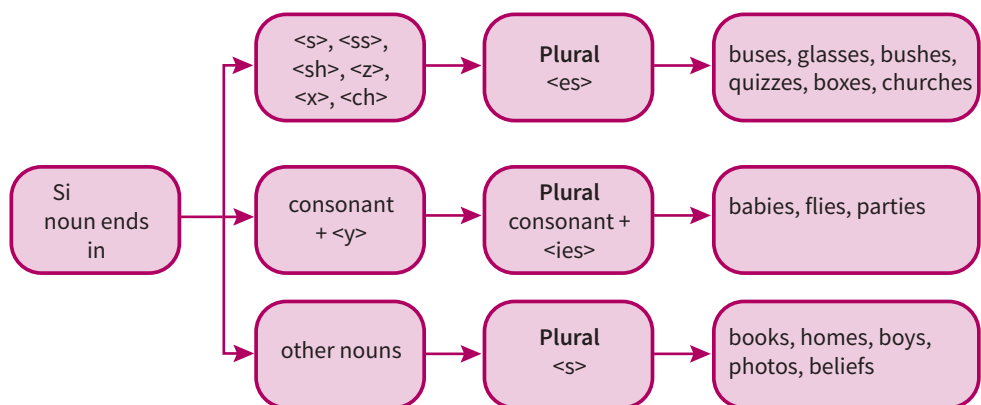


Figure 1.3 Regular plurals in English

Unfortunately, English also has very many irregular plurals:

Table 1.1 Irregular plurals in English

The following words ending in <o>		cargo → cargoes domino → dominoes echo → echoes hero → heroes potato → potatoes tomato → tomatoes
Other irregular English plurals		<div> child → children deer → deer fish → fish foot → feet goose → geese louse → lice man → men mouse → mice </div> <div> penny → pence (currency) penny → pennies (coins) series → series sheep → sheep species → species tooth → teeth woman → women </div>
The following words that come from Latin or Greek	<is>	analysis → analyses basis → bases crisis → crises diagnosis → diagnoses
	<ix>	appendix → appendices (added text) appendix → appendixes (organ)
	<on>	criterion → criteria phenomenon → phenomena
	<um>	bacterium → bacteria curriculum → curricula
	<us>	cactus → cacti fungus → fungi stimulus → stimuli

1.2.3 Plural-only nouns

Some English nouns are always plural. Compare (6a) with (6b) and (7a) with (7b):

- (6a) Eén spijkerbroek is nooit genoeg.
(6b) *One jeans is never enough.
(7a) Ik heb een nieuwe bril gekocht.
(7b) *I have bought a new glasses.

What these examples have in common is that they involve articles of clothing, appliances, and tools consisting of two main parts. Other examples are *pants*, *shorts*, *leggings*, *sunglasses*, *binoculars*, *scissors*, *pincers*, *tweezers*. These nouns cannot combine with the singular (indefinite) article. And they are followed by a plural verb. This means that if you want to translate sentences such as (6a) and (7a) into English, you need a quantifying phrase such as *pair(s) of*, as in (6c) and (7c).

(6c) **One pair of jeans is never enough.**

(7c) **I have bought a new pair of glasses.**

By the way, native speakers of English quite often just use the plural:

(8) **My neighbour's leggings are torn.**

(9) **My binoculars come in handy when I want to spy on my neighbours.**

Other much-used plural-only nouns are *data* (there's some discussion in English whether *data* can also be used in the singular) and *visa*.

1.2.4 It looks like a plural, but is it?

There are words in English that are disguised plurals but are in fact singular. These include some subjects taught in school (*mathematics*, *linguistics*) and areas of activity (*politics*, *economics*), as well as various games (*darts*, *billiards*), and diseases (*measles*, *mumps*). When these nouns are the subject (*onderwerp*) of the sentence, they need a singular finite verb (*persoonsvorm*) since they are singular nouns, as in examples (10) and (11):

(10) **Linguistics is her best subject at school.**

(11) **Measles is a very dangerous disease.**

The rule that the number of the subject – singular or plural – dictates the number of the corresponding finite verb is called *concord* or *subject-verb agreement*.

1.3 The I in team: *Is* or *are* we winning?

There's something funny about nouns that refer to a group of people or things, such as *police*, *government*, and *team*. Native speakers of English can't agree on whether they're singular or plural. Their form is certainly singular

(no plural *-s*). But because they refer to a plural entity, we tend to analyse their meaning as plural. Consider sentences (12)-(13) below. Which would you believe to be grammatical?

- (12) The police are looking for the suspect.
 (13) The police is looking for the suspect.

The answer is that both sentences are correct. It all depends on your point of view. Some speakers of English say that there's grammatical concord, which means that the verb form follows the grammar of the subject noun, so a singular-looking noun such as *police* also has a singular verb. Others say that there's semantic concord, which means that the verb form follows the semantics – the meaning – of the subject noun. Since we can argue that a police force usually consists of several police officers, the plural verb form is also grammatical. Speakers of British English generally prefer using a plural verb form in cases of collective nouns where Americans prefer a singular verb.

1.4 In the company of nouns: from nouns to noun phrases

We usually start with simple concrete nouns when we learn a new language. But as soon as we become more advanced learners, we try to say more complex things about the world around us, and this means that we move from simple nouns to more complex noun phrases. This is illustrated in the sentences below.

- (14) Lettie likes coffee.
 (15) She likes hot coffee.
 (16) She likes hot coffee with milk and sugar.
 (17) The 46-year-old teacher from Amsterdam likes hot coffee with a little bit of milk and sugar.
 (18) Lettie, who lives in Amsterdam but teaches in Leiden, likes hot coffee with milk and sugar.
 (19) Lettie, a 46-year-old teacher from Amsterdam, likes hot coffee with milk and sugar.

Sentence (14) is very simple in its structure: the subject (*onderwerp*) is realized by a proper noun, the direct object (*lijdend voorwerp*) by a common noun. It's grammatically fine for subjects and objects in a sentence to be "bare" noun phrases, so to only consist of a proper noun, common noun, or pronoun. Yet, in authentic discourse, noun phrases typically combine with a determiner (*a, this*), adjective (*hot*), prepositional phrase (*with milk and sug-*

ar), or even an entire clause (*who lives in Amsterdam*). It can be quite tricky to pinpoint the noun phrase, but you can apply the substitute test to find out which words belong to a noun phrase. In sentence (17), for example, *the 46-year-old teacher from Amsterdam* can be substituted by *she*, which means that this phrase is indeed an entire noun phrase. Note that only substituting *teacher* with *she* results in an ungrammatical sentence.

Although noun phrases are generally not a problem for Dutch learners of English, there is one structure that *is* particularly problematic. In Dutch, noun phrases may be structured [article] + [preposition] + [proper noun] + [past participle used as an attributive adjective] + [common noun]. This looks very complicated, but the following examples show how common this construction is:

(20a) een door Van Gogh geschilderd portret

(21a) de door Ronaldo gemaakte overtreding

Unfortunately, word-for-word translation of this structure is ungrammatical:

(20b) *a by Van Gogh painted portrait

(21b) *the by Ronaldo made foul

Instead, we need a full relative clause (20c) or a reduced relative clause (more about these in a web clip on our website), as in (21c):

(20c) a portrait that was painted by Van Gogh

(21c) the foul made by Ronaldo

1.5 Neither a borrower nor a lender be

Noun phrases can be linked with so-called **correlatives** or **paired conjunctions** such as Dutch *of...of; noch...noch; zowel...als; niet alleen...maar ook* and their English translations *either...or, neither...nor, both...and, and not only...but also*. One of the pressing questions these correlatives raise is whether the finite verb following them should be singular or plural. After all, correlatives seem to link two nouns together and thus create a plurality.

Take a look at (22a)-(22b) and (23a)-(23b). Which of the finite verbs would you choose in each sentence?

(22a) Zowel Tony als Dick denkt (?)/denken (?) dat Lettie het antwoord heeft.

(22b) Both Tony and Dick thinks (?)/think (?) that Lettie has the answer.

(23a) Of Tony of Dick weet (?)/weten (?) wat te doen.

(23b) Either Tony or Dick knows (?)/know (?) what to do.

To make an informed choice, you need to know that there are two kinds of correlatives, those that add one noun to another, and those that present two nouns as each other's alternatives. In (22a)-(22b), the correlative conjunctions *zowel...als* and *both...and* signal that Tony *and* Dick are thinking. The finite verb is always plural in English, and singular or plural in Dutch. In (23a)-(23b), Dick *or* Tony (but not both) has knowledge. The rule for these alternative (disjunctive) correlatives requires slightly more analysis. What you need to do is establish whether the noun following the second conjunction is singular or plural. If it's singular, then the finite verb is also singular; if it's plural, then the finite verb is also plural. Let's now turn to (23a)-(23b). The word behind the second conjunction (*of/or*) is the singular proper noun *Dick*; the finite verb should therefore also be singular (*weet/knows*). Suppose that the noun was plural, so *studenten/students* instead of *Dick*. The result would be (24a)-(24b):

(24a) Of Tony of de studenten weten wat te doen.

(24b) Either Tony or the students know what to do.

In short:

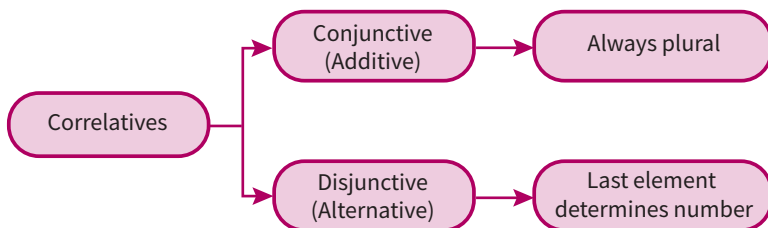


Figure 1.4 Rules for correlatives

1.6 Nouns that look like verbs: gerunds

Compare sentences (25)-(27):

- (25) I like a walk on the beach.
- (26) I like to walk on the beach.
- (27) I like walking on the beach.

Are these sentences interchangeable, or would you use each of them in a different context? In (25), a noun is used; in (26) an infinitive verb (*hele werkwoord*). Nouns refer to objects and phenomena, verbs to actions: this is probably what you learnt in high school, and we think that this rule of thumb also explains the difference between (25) and (26). It's almost as if we are robbing the action expressed in the verb *walk* of its activeness. We have a painting of an activity frozen in time. By contrast, the infinitive in (26) denotes the activeness, the doing: when you say (26), you almost feel the movement. So where does that leave (27)?

The *-ing* form in (27) is called a gerund: a verb turned into a noun. As we'll see in Chapter 10, the *-ing* form is used in all kinds of verb constructions to express some kind of action in progress. This is also what the gerund in (27) does: it turns an action into a general, frequently repeated phenomenon. Unlike *a walk* in (25), *walking* in (27) hasn't completely lost its sense of activeness. However, it is less active than *to walk* in (26).

Don't forget: a gerund is a noun. This means that it can be preceded by *the* or *a(n)*, an adjective, or even by a possessive like *my*:

- (28a) We heard a loud banging on the door.
- (29a) I don't approve of his lying.

The Dutch version of these gerunds is either a noun or an infinitive:

- (28b) We hoorden een luid gebons/bonzen op de deur.
- (29b) Ik vind zijn gelieg/zijn liegen maar niks.

English sometimes forces you to use the gerund rather than another form – even though the rules we've just described don't necessarily apply.