

# IRREGULAR PLURALISATION VIS-À-VIS PRONUNCIATION IN ENGLISH

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## ABSTRACT

Pluralisation is attributing plurality to a noun or similar word. It is mostly done by inflection, that is by generally by adding a suffix either an -s or an -es to the root word to assign a grammatical function. It may demonstrate some change with regard to pronunciation. In most cases, though the pronunciation is not remarkable. In this paper, we identify how and to what extent the irregular pluralisation affects pronunciation. We also suggest some measures to fix this problem.

**KEY WORDS:** Pluralisation, Pronunciation, Sounds, English, Irregular

## INTRODUCTION

Pluralisation refers to the act of pluralising nouns. Pluralisation can happen through inflection- a change in the form of a word (generally by adding a suffix) to indicate a change in its grammatical function. The correct spelling of plurals usually depends on the letter the singular noun ends with. We need to add an -s to the words, e.g. *cap-caps, robe-robos, cat-cats, need-needs, pack-packs, dog-dogs, puff-puffs, save-saves, earth-earths, breathe-breathes, pool-pools* etc. On the other hand, we add an -es if the singular noun ends with -s, -ss, -sh, -ch, -x, or -z as in *bus-buses, mass-masses, bush-bushes, church-churches, box-boxes, topaz-topazes* respectively. But two things are clear: some plurals in English are irregular; and pluralisation affects the pronunciation to a considerable extent.

## PLURALISATION

But not all nouns have regular plural forms like the -s or -es; there are many nouns which do not take -s or -es even when pluralised. They instead change the spellings or even retain the same spellings to become plurals as in the words *man-men, mouse-mice, child-children, foot-feet, person-people, alumnus-alumni, analysis-analyses, codex-codices, bacillus-bacilli, beau-beaux, corpus-corpora, criterion-criteria,*

*datum-data, formula-formulae, graffito-graffiti, calf-calves, ox-oxen, deer-deer* etc. However, the regular -s or -es endings, in addition to making the nouns plural, also result in distinct pronunciations as would be evident from the examples cited below:

## RULES GOVERNING PLURALISATION

The -s plural ending is pronounced /z/ after some of the voiced sounds, e.g. /b/, /d/, /g/, /v/, /ð/, /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, and /l/ as in the words *cab-cabs, road-roads, dog-dogs, dove-doves, breathe-breathes, sum-sums, can-cans, king-kings, and roll-rolls* respectively. However, the -s plural ending is pronounced /ɪz/ after some other voiced sounds, e.g. /dʒ/, /z/, /ʒ/ as in *bridge-bridges, quiz-quizzes, and sabotage-sabotages* (used very rarely, though) respectively. A voiced sound is one during the production of which there is vibration in the vocal folds.

The -s plural ending is pronounced /s/ after some voiceless sounds, e.g. /p/, /t/, /k/, /f/, and /θ/ as in *top-tops, state-states, pick-picks, cuff-cuffs, and moth-moths* respectively. But the -s plural ending is pronounced /ɪz/ after some other voiceless sounds, e.g. /tʃ/, /s/, and /ʃ/ as in *match-matches, boss-bosses, and push-pushes* respectively. A voiceless sound is one during the production of which there is no vibration.

## PLURALISATION PRONUNCIATION

There also exist some words in English which pose serious threats even to the more proficient users of the language. Such words are pronounced differently as in the case of *arses* which is the plural form of both *arse* /ɑːsɪz/ (meaning vulgar) and *arsis* /ɑːsiːz/ (meaning the upward stroke in conducting music). In the first case, the second vowel sound is pronounced /ɪ/ as in *bin*, *fill* or *slip*; and in the second case, the second vowel sound is pronounced /iː/ as in *bean*, *feel* or *sleep*. Another plural form spelled as *axes* (of both *axe* and *axis*), for example, is pronounced in two different ways: it is /æksɪz/ (the plural of *axes*) as in *cases*, *faces*, and *maces*, and /æksiːz/ (the plural of *axis*) as in *please*, *ease*, and *lease*, the difference being in the second vowel sound. When referred to as weapons, it has a short vowel /ɪ/ as in *if*, *bitter* and *coffee*; but as the plural of *axis* (a line around which a rotating body turns), it is pronounced as a long vowel /iː/ as in *eve*, *Negro* and *Turkey*.

Let's analyse a few more words to understand the nuances of (irregular) pluralisation vis-à-vis pronunciation: *base-bases/basis-bases*, *ellipse-ellipses/ ellipsis-ellipses*, as illustrations. *Bases* when referred to as the plural of *base* (meaning the bottom layer) is pronounced /beɪsɪz/ (note the second vowel is short) as in *it*, *business*, and *Murry*. The same word, on the contrary, when referred to as the plural of *basis* (meaning the principal constituent) is pronounced /beɪsiːz/ with the second vowel being /iː/, as in words like *aesthetic*, *people*, and *taxi*. Or take another word *ellipses*, for example, which when used as the plural of *ellipse* (meaning a plane curve) is pronounced /ɪlɪpsɪs/ as in *it*, *fill*, and *skip* and is pronounced /ɪlɪpsiːs/ when used as the plural of *ellipsis* as in *feel*, *speak*, and *mean* (meaning omission of one or more words from a sentence). The difference lies in the third vowel, the /ɪ/ as in *igloo*, *women* and *city* as contrasted with its longer counterpart /iː/ as in *meal*, *sneak*, and *peel*.

Here is one more set of words to show the relationship between irregular plurals vis-à-vis their pronunciation: the plural of the word *ply* (meaning to use), for example, becomes *plies* which is pronounced /plaɪz/ as in *prize*, *pride*, *price* etc. but that of the word *pli* (meaning ballet) though spelled as *plies* is pronounced /pliːeɪz/ as in *create*. Similarly, the word *sole*,

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which means 'the only one', takes an -s in plural to become *soles* and is pronounced /səʊlɪz/ as in *moles*, *holes*, *doles* etc. The plural of *sol* (meaning the Peruvian coin), on the other hand, is spelled the same but is pronounced differently /sɔːlɪz/ as in *caught*, *brawl*, *dawn* etc. Another instance of the similar issue can be the word *taxes*, the plural of both *tax*, which means the money demanded by govt. and *taxi*, which refers to a mode of transport. In the first instance, i.e. the plural of *taxes* is pronounced /tæksɪz/ as in the words *shanties*, *panties*, *fancies* etc. In the latter case, on the contrary, the same word is pronounced /tæksiːz/ as in *lease*, *mean*, and *beep*.

## PLURALISATION PRONUNCIATION

## VIS-À-VIS

We add some more words to the list of words already discussed in the preceding paragraphs that will help us understand the pluralisation vis-à-vis pronunciation in English better. These words, of course, retain the same spellings in both singular and plural forms but the pronunciation changes. The word *chassis* (which means the frame, wheels, and machinery of a motor vehicle, on which the body is supported), for example, when used as a singular noun is pronounced /ʃæs.i/ as in *classy*, *grassy*, *splashy* etc. but is pronounced /ʃæs.iːz/ as in *classes*, *masses*, and *faces* when used as a plural noun (to refer to a number of chassis). *Bourgeois* (which refers to a member of the middle class) is another word that is pronounced /bɔːʒ.wɑː/ as in *car*, *star*, *war* etc. when it refers to a singular noun; the plural counterpart of the same word is pronounced /bɔːʒ.wɑːz/ as in *wars*, *crowbars*, *mars* etc.

Similarly, *corps* (meaning a military organization consisting of officers and enlisted personnel) is spelled the same way when used to refer to both singular and plural numbers. However, it is pronounced /kɔː/ as in *core*, *score*, *more* etc. when used to refer to singular and /kɔːz/ as in *boars*, *oars*, *stores* etc, when used to refer to plural. And the word *faux pas* again is an example of this type which is pronounced /fəʊ pɑ/ as *spa*, *star*, *scar* etc. when it refers to singular but /fəʊ paz/ as in *cars*, *stars*, *mars* etc. when used to mean plural although the spelling remains the same irrespective of whether it is used as singular or plural.

Here is one more: *pince nez* (meaning a pair of glasses held on the face by a spring that grips the nose) when used a singular noun is pronounced /pæns neɪ/ as in *clay*, *spray* and *stray*; and /pæns neɪz/ as in *plays*, *days* and *stays* when used to refer to a plural noun. This word is also spelled similar in both singular and plural forms. And *précis* which means a concise summary is spelled similar in both singular and plural forms. However, when it comes to pronunciation, it varies: singular *précis* is pronounced /preɪsi:/ as in the words *baby*, *daily* and *lazy*; and plural, /preɪsi:z/ as in *daisies*, *babies* and *scabies*. *Rendezvous* is another interesting word having this phenomenon wherein it is pronounced /rɒndɪvu:/ as in *view*, *dew* and *knew* when used as a singular entity but /rɒndɪvu:z/ as in *views*, *news* and *fuse* when used as a plural one though the spelling does not change.

## REMEDIAL MEASURES

Now that we have identified the problem, it is necessary to suggest some remedial measures too. How do we approach the issue then? First, an exhaustive list of words showing the relationship between irregular plurals vis-à-vis their pronunciation is provided for the speakers of English to understand the difference and get used to it so that they can use them in context. Here is the list of such words with ample examples:

*Arses* when used as a plural of *arse* is pronounced /ɑ:sɪz/ as in *masses*, *classes*, *passes*, *glasses*, *grasses*; and when used as a plural of *arsis* is pronounced /ɑ:sis/ as in *chances*, *Francis*, *advances*, *sentences*, *circumstances* etc. the difference, of course, lying in the last consonant sound. It is /z/ in the first case and /s/ in the second case. Similarly, *axes* which as the plural of *axe* is pronounced /æksɪz/ as in *taxes*, *waxes*, *ashes*, *gases*, *boxes* etc. but the same word when used as the plural of *axis* is pronounced /æksi:z/ as in *please*, *means*, and *lease*. In this case, the difference lies in the second vowel sound: in case of the former it is /ɪ/ (as in *pill*, *bin*, *sick* etc.) as contrasted with the latter where it is /i:/ (as in *peel*, *bean*, *seek* etc.).

One more word *bases* when used to refer to the plural of *base* is pronounced as /beɪsɪz/ as in *cases*, *maces*, and *masses*. However, the plural of the word *basis* is also spelled *bases* but the pronunciation is different: in one case it is short

/ɪ/ and in the other, it is long /i:/ as in *seen*, *keen*, *meal* vis-à-vis *sin*, *kin*, *mill* respectively. It is pronounced /beɪsi:z/ as in *please*, *lease*, and *meal*. Or take *ellipses*, for example, which is the plural of both *ellipses* and *ellipsis*. But the pronunciation makes all the difference: /ɪˈlɪpsɪs/ as in *mill*, *sin*, and *pill* and /ɪˈlɪpsi:s/ as in *meal*, *scene*, and *peel*.

We can take a couple of more words to account for the mismatch in terms of the pronunciation with respect to pluralisation. *Plies*, the plural of *ply* (something like plywood) is pronounced as /plaɪz/ as in *spies*, *cries*, *flies* etc. But the plural form *plies* (*pli*) is pronounced /pli:ɪz/ as in *haze*, *maze*, and *late* which is bound to confuse the users. Another word *soles* is spelled the same as plurals of both the words *sole* and *sol* but varies in pronunciation when used to refer to the undersurface of a person's foot /səʊl/ as in *holes*, *roles*, *doles* etc. and a former French copper or silver coin /sɔ:lz/ as in *calls*, *saws*, and *maws* respectively. Similarly, the word *taxes* (the plural of *tax*) is pronounced /tæksɪz/ as in *axis*, *laxes*, *faxes* etc. as opposed to the plural of *taxis* which is pronounced as /tæksi:z/ as in *please*, *mean*, and *lease*.

There is also another set of words which is spelled same whether used as singular or plural. However, the pronunciation changes depending on the number of these words. Thus, for example, *bourgeois* is pronounced /buəʒwɑ:/ as in *war*, *far* and *star* when used to refer to singular number and /buəʒwɑ:z/ as in *wars* in India, *stars* in the sky, and *cars* on the road in its plural form. Some more words which fall under this category are: *chassis*, *corps*, *faux pas*, *pince-nez*, *précis*, and *rendezvous*. These are pronounced thus: /ʃæsi/ and /ʃæsi:z/, /kɔ:/ and /kɔ:z/, /fəʊ pɑ/ and /fəʊ paz/, /pæns neɪ/ and /pæns neɪz/, /preɪsi:/ and /preɪsi:z/, and /rɒndɪvu:/ and /rɒndɪvu:z/ respectively.

## WORDS FOR PRACTICE

Now that we are aware of how pluralisation affects pronunciation, the easiest way to understand it is through lots of examples. It is true that we don't have a considerable number of such words in English. So we give below the words wherein such discrepancies occur so that we get familiarized and use them judiciously so as to make our English less intimidating. Here is the list:

Words formed by pluralisation of two or more words wherein the spelling remains the same (whether used as singular or plural) but pronunciation changes depending on whether it is singular or plural:

ARSES /ɑ:sɪz/ plural of *arse*  
/ɑ:si:z/ plural of *arsis*

AXES /æksɪz/ plural of *ax* or *axe*  
/æksi:z/ plural of *axis*

BASES /beɪsɪz/ plural of *base*  
/beɪsi:z/ plural of *basis*

ELLIPSES /ɪˈlɪpsɪs/ plural of *ellipse*  
/ɪˈlɪpsi:s/ plural of *ellipsis*

PLIES /plaɪz/ plural of *ply*  
/pli:ɪz/ plural of *pli*

SOLES /səʊlz/ plural of *sole*  
/sɔ:lz/ plural of *sol*

TAXES /ˈtæksɪz/ plural of *tax*  
/ˈtæksi:z/ plural of *taxis*

Words formed by pluralisation of the same words wherein the spelling remains the same (whether used as singular or plural) but pronunciation changes depending on whether it is singular or plural:

BOURGEOIS /buɜʒwɑ:/ (singular)  
/buɜʒwɑ:z/ (plural)

CHASSIS /ʃæsi/ (singular)  
/ʃæsi:z/ (plural)

CORPS /kɔ:/ (singular)  
/kɔ:z/ (plural)

FAUX PAS /fəʊ pɑ/ (singular)  
/fəʊ pɑz/ (plural)

PINCE-NEZ /pæns nei/ (singular)  
/pæns neɪz/ (plural)

PRECIS /preɪsi:/ (singular)  
/preɪsi:z/ (plural)

RENDEZVOUS /rɒndrɪvu:/ (singular)  
/rɒndrɪvu:z/ (plural)

## CONCLUSION

Pluralisation sometimes changes the spelling and pronunciation too. The correct spelling generally depends on the letter the singular noun ends with because in some cases it takes an -s and in some other, an -es. But there are some words which are really difficult even for those who are proficient users. The word, *arses*, for example, is pronounced as /ɑ:sɪz/ (when used to refer to the plural of *arse*) and /ɑ:si:z/ (when used to refer to the plural of *arsis*). There is also one more type of irregular plurals wherein the spelling of the word remains the same irrespective of whether it is singular or plural though there is some change in pronunciation. It then establishes that the irregular pluralisation impacts the pronunciation of nouns to a considerable extent.

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