

You may be singularly confused by this explanation...

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The idea behind the grammatical distinction between singular and plural seems straightforward enough: singular refers to one entity, and plural to more than one

With English nouns, we generally indicate this through the absence versus the presence of the plural suffix -s: one book, 10 books. And with pronouns we have singular forms like me versus plural forms like us.

Things are a bit more complicated than that, though. Think about the word 'both'. This does refer to 'more than one' – but it isn't just any old more than one: it refers specifically to two, and only two. You can't say "How are you both?" if you're inquiring about a family of five people. And you can't ask a couple "How are you all?"

At this point in English grammar, there's a three-way distinction: one-both-all. 'All' is plural, of course, but in this case plural doesn't mean more than one: it means more than two.

The word both is an example of the grammatical category which linguistic scientists refer to as dual. English has several other words which express dual rather than plural number. Just as dual both corresponds to plural all, so either is



■ Beautiful Slovenia where there are words for singular, two and three or more when the speaker wants to refer to 'you'.

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the dual equivalent of plural any, and neither is the dual form corresponding to plural none. If you were asked which one of two books you wanted, you couldn't reply "I don't want any of them"; you would have to say "I don't want either of them". And you couldn't answer "none of them"; you would need to say "neither of them". (Note that in spite of what pedants want us to believe, the word none really can be plural: it's perfectly grammatical to say "None of them are very interesting".)

Many other languages in the world have a much more fully developed dual number

system than we have. It's true that Old English used to have special dual pronouns – wit meant 'we two' while we meant 'we three or more' – but we have lost that in the modern language. But in Slovenian, si means 'you (singular) are', ste is 'you (two) are' and 'sta' means 'you (plural, ie three or more) are'. Some languages even have a category of trial number, which relates specifically to three items. In Fijian, taru means 'we two' and tou means 'we three', so the plural pronoun 'eta' can only mean 'we four (or more)'. Amazing things, languages.