**LITUANUS**
LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 38, No.2 - Summer 1992
Editor of this issue: Antanas Klimas, University of Rochester
ISSN 0024-5089
Copyright © 1992 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.

# A FEW REMARKS ON THE NUMBER CATEGORY OF THE LITHUANIAN NOUNS

ANTANAS KLIMAS
University of Rochester

## A. Introductory remarks

As in most modem Indo-European languages, in Lithuanian also we find a group of nouns which are used only in the singular. In other words, they have no plural number category and are called in Latin, *singularia tantum.* In most cases, these nouns express a product or material that simply cannot be counted, e.g., *milk, sugar, flour, yeast,* etc., or they are abstract nouns such as *fear, envy, guilt, etc.*

On the other hand in every modern Indo-European language there are nouns that occur only in the plural and are called *pluralia tantum.* Usually, they mean something that consists of two or more parts, such as *trousers, scissors.*

What is interesting is the fact that even related languages such as English and Lithuanian do not agree, as it were, on their "view of the real world," i.e., for example, in English the word *gate* is singular and plural, of course: *gates,* but in Lithuanian, this word is used in plural only: *vartai* 'gate/ gates'. The Lithuanian word was derived from the old Proto-Indo-European root **wert-/*wort-/*w(i)rt-* which had meant "to turn, to turn over, to move/turn to one side." Apparently, the Lithuanian *vartai* 'gate' might have originally consisted of at least two movable parts, although we are not absolutely sure about this.

## B. Singularia tantum: nouns used in singular only

According to the Lithuanian Academic Grammar[1] Lithuanian nouns which are used in the singular only do not signify just ONE item, unit, thing of the whole semantic group, but the entire "species." This way, the singular-only nouns differ from the regular singular/plural nouns. If we say *langas* 'window,' we really mean ONE window, and *langai* 'windows' simply means that we have more than one window in mind. But if we take such singular-only nouns as *grietinė* 'cream,' *visata* 'universe,' *senimas* 'old folks,' they mean, as it were, both the entire thing and any part of it, depending on the given situation. E.g., *Mūsų senimas pasiliko namie* 'Our old folks remained at home': this will mean older family members, like grandparents or older parents and other older close family members. On the other hand, if we say *Senimas nesupranta jaunimo,* then the meaning is: The old do not understand the young.' ("The young" in the sense of the soap opera 'The Young and the Restless.")

There are various descriptions of the several hundred of these Lithuanian nouns used in the singular only.

The Academic Grammar, the greatest description of the grammar of Lithuanian to date, lists five groups of such nouns.

1. Nouns denoting certain matter, or material, or element. E.g., *arbata* 'tea,' *auksas* 'gold,' *betonas* 'cement,' *cementas* 'concrete,' *cukrus* 'sugar,' *degtinė* 'whiskey,' *druska* 'salt,' *gintaras* 'amber,' *grietinė* 'cream,' *molis* 'clay,' *medus* 'honey,' *pienas* 'milk,' *plienas* 'steel,' *sviestas* 'butter,' *vanduo* 'water,' *varškė* 'cottage cheese,' etc.

**Remarks** Both in Standard Literary Lithuanian as well as in various Lithuanian dialects, there are examples, or rather, deviations here and there. We shall mention, here, only the more frequent ones.

a. Although *medus* 'honey' is normally used in the singular only, there is also an ancient proverb where the plural *medus* 'honeys' is used to emphasize the statement. Namely, *Gardus kaip devyni medūs* 'As tasty as nine honeys,' in other words, nine times tastier/yummier than just (one) honey!

b. *Vanduo* 'water' is also normally used in the singular only. But both poetically and descriptively, the plural *vandenys* 'waters' is used to indicate masses of water. E.g., *Nemuno vanduo tuomet dar buvo gana švarus* 'The water of the Nemunas (river) was, at that time, still rather clean.' Cf. that to the following, *Nemuno vandenys užtvindė visas mūsų pievas* The waters of Nemunas inundated all of our meadows.'

c. *Gintaras* 'amber' is also used in the plural, *gintarai,* but then it receives a different meaning: in the plural, *gintarai* means 'amber beads, amber necklaces, amber ornaments.'

d. There are a few nouns in this group of *singularia tantum* which are sometimes used in the plural, with no apparent change of meaning. E.g., one can say, *Mes jau nupjovėme šieną* 'We have already cut the hay,' or, using the plural *šienai* 'hays': *Mes jau nupjovėme šienus,* with the same meaning: 'We've already cut the hay.'

2. Nouns denoting abstract ideas or subjects which cannot be counted in the plural. E.g., *baimė* 'fear,' *blogis* 'evil,' *dora* 'morality,' *drąsa* 'courage,' *drausmė* 'discipline,' *elgesys* 'behavior,' *esmė* 'essence,' *garbė* 'honor,' *grožis* 'beauty,' *ilgesys* 'longing, nostalgia,' *ištikimybė* 'faithfulness,' *kantrybė* 'patience,' *kūryba* 'creativity,' *lygybė* 'equality,' *meilė* 'love,' *narsa* 'bravery,' *nuojauta* 'premonition,' *pavydas* 'envy, jealousy,' *sąžinė* 'conscience,' *ramybė* 'peace, peacefulness, serenity,' *vartosena* 'usage,' *vienybė* 'unity,' etc.

NB. In popular speech, however, *meilė* 'love' is also used in plural as *meilės* 'love affairs, lovers.'

3. The so-called group *pluralia tantum* nouns. E.g., *aristokratija* 'aristocracy,' *augalija* 'flora,' *brolija* 'brotherhood,' *diduomenė* 'nobility,' *gyvulija* 'fauna,' *jaunimas* 'youth; younger people,' *kunigija* 'clergy,' *liaudis* 'people, folk,' *profesūra* '(university) faculty,' *velniava* 'disorder,' *vasarojus* 'summer grain,' etc.

4. The names of a few illnesses. E.g., *džiova* 'tuberculosis,' *gripas* 'flu,' *maras* 'plague,' *mažakraujystė* 'anemia,' *vėžys* 'cancer,' etc.

5. Many popular names. E.g., *Lietuva* 'Lithuania,' *Amerika* 'America,' *Vilnius* 'Vilnius,' *Vašingtonas* 'Washington, D.C.,' etc.

NB. Some grammarians do not include proper names under the *singularia tantum.* They argue that in each case the plural form of every proper name may be used., E.g., *Aš kelias Onutes pažįstu "I* know several Annes.'

## C. Pluralia tantum — nouns used in plural only

The Academic Grammar[2] divides these nouns into NINE semantic groups.

1. Nouns denoting feasts, fiestas, religious holy days, and similar celebrations. E.g., *Kalėdos* 'Christmas,' *Velykos* 'Easter,' *Sekminės* 'Pentecost,' *pabaigtuvės* 'end of the work celebration,' *laidotuvės* 'funeral,' *vestuvės* 'wedding,' *Joninės* 'St. John's day (June 24th),' etc.

2. Nouns denoting some action which must be carried out by several people simultaneously. E.g., *kautynės* 'battle,' *pjautynės* 'massacre,' *riaušės* 'riot,' *rinkimai* 'election,' *skyrybos* 'divorce,' etc.

3. Nouns denoting certain types of material. E.g., *dažai* 'paint,' *dujos* 'gas,' *klijai* 'glue,' *lašiniai* '(slab) bacon,' *mielės* 'yeast,' *pelenai* 'ash,' *taukai* 'lard,' etc.

4. (By far the largest group). Nouns denoting implements, tools, instruments, clothes made of several parts. E.g., *akiniai* 'glasses, spectacles,' *kopėčios* 'ladder,' *ratai* 'wagon cart,' *svarstyklės* 'scale,' *žirklės* 'scissors,' *marškiniai* 'shirt,' *kailiniai* 'fur coat, fur jacket,' *kelnės* 'trousers, pants,' *vartai* 'gate,' *durys* 'door,' etc.

5. Nouns denoting a certain duration of time. E.g., *atostogos* 'vacation,' *priešpiečiai* 'lunch (time),' *pavakariai* ','late,' afternoon time meal,' etc.

6. A few names of certain illnesses. E.g., *raupai* 'pox,' *niežai* 'itching disease,' etc.

7. Nouns denoting certain parts of the human and/or animal body. E.g., *kepenys* 'liver,' *plaučiai* 'lung,' *smegenys* 'brain,' *viduriai* 'intestines, guts,' etc.

8. All four main compass directions as well as their derivatives: *pietūs* 'south,' *rytai* 'east,' *vakarai* 'west,' *žiemiai* 'north,' *pietryčiai* 'southeast,' etc.

NB. *rytai* 'east' is really derived from *rytas* 'morning,' and *vakarai* 'west' is derived from *vakaras* 'evening,' In addition to *žiemiai* 'north,' there is also the singular only *šiaurė* 'north.'

9. Again, some linguists and/or grammarians, consider many proper names, mostly names of human habitation, such as hamlets, villages, towns, cities, localities as part of this group of nouns. And about 50 percent of the Lithuanian place names are used only in the plural. eg., *Raseiniai* 'city name,' *Pelekonys* 'village name,' etc.

As we have seen, Lithuanian seems to have preserved more nouns of both kinds than some other related (Indo-European) languages such as English or German. This can be simply due to the fact that Lithuanian is so much more archaic or conservative than German and/or English. In other words, in English we have now only remnants of such nouns, both the *singularia* as well as *pluralia tantum.*

In Lithuanian, as we have seen, there are still many nouns of both kinds.

1 *Lietuvių kalbos gramatika.* Volume I, Vilnius, 1965, pp. 175 ff.
2 *Lietuvių kalbos gramatika,* op. cit, pp. 176 ff.