

Snyder and Shapiro's Critique of Pseudo-Singularity

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Abstract: Call a term 'pseudo-singular' if it is syntactically singular but semantically plural. 'The pair who wrote *Principia*' is a good example, standing as it does for the two individuals, Whitehead and Russell. In this journal (2021), Eric Snyder and Stewart Shapiro launched an attack on the idea, calling it 'linguistically and logically untenable.' In this reply we rebut every one of their criticisms.

Key words: group nouns, plural logic, plural terms, pseudo-singular terms, singular terms

We call a term *pseudo-singular* if it is syntactically singular but semantically plural, capable of denoting many things, not just one. 'The pair who wrote *Principia*' is a good example, standing as it does for the two men, Whitehead and Russell. We introduced the idea in our *Plural Logic* (2016, §15.1). It has recently been criticised by Eric Snyder and Stewart Shapiro in their 'Group nouns and pseudo-singularity' (2021), who say that the case for it is 'problematic' and 'weak' and the idea itself 'linguistically and logically untenable.' They preface their detailed criticisms by an introductory section in which they contrast the semantic singularism they espouse with the semantic pluralism they attribute to us. They make it plain that in their view 'respecting surface linguistic appearances' (p. 68) is a virtue second only to consistency, whence their opposition to pseudo-singularity, which proposes a mismatch between the syntax and semantics of group terms. The importance they attach to the matter is re-affirmed in the final paragraph of their paper, where they look forward to providing a singularist 'semantics for plurals which is not only consistent, but which also preserves linguistic appearances' (p. 76).¹

Group terms, however, are not the only, or even the prime subjects of a semantics for plurals. Snyder and Shapiro themselves give pride of place to plural descriptions like 'the students,' followed by lists like 'Snyder and Shapiro.' Singularists, they say, view them as denoting 'a single collective entity' (p. 67). According to them (to it?), all these terms are syntactically plural but semantically singular, i.e., they are pseudo-plural. But Snyder and Shapiro make no mention here of mismatch or failure to respect linguistic appearances. Apparently, though pseudo-singularity is untenable, pseudo-plurality rules!

Snyder and Shapiro go on to present four objections, two under the heading 'linguistic problems' and two headed 'logical problems,' and we take them in turn. We use this opportunity to reinstate our notation for plural variables, which Snyder and Shapiro have suppressed in favour of the one devised by John Burgess and Gideon Rosen (1997).

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1. PLURAL OVERRIDE

When introducing the idea of pseudo-singularity, we observed that in British English, terms like ‘the pair’ have a hybrid status, respecting some but not all of the grammatical rules of agreement based on number. Grammarians have labelled this phenomenon ‘plural override,’ and we said that it ‘strongly suggests the presence of pseudo-singularity’ (2016: 306). Snyder and Shapiro ignore our actual words, misattributing to us the claim that since the relevant terms ‘are acceptable with [*some but not all*] plural morphology, they, like definite plurals, *must be* genuine plural terms’ (p. 72; our reminder and our italics), and misattributing to us the presumption which is needed to underwrite the entailment. In the event we decided not to rely on plural override, but Snyder and Shapiro do not mention this.

2. THE ‘OR’ TEST FOR PSEUDO-SINGULARITY

Having decided that the phenomenon of plural override was insufficiently widespread to use as evidence, we turned to the argument scheme

a is *F* or *G*, therefore *a* is *F* or *a* is *G*

to supply a test. We did not give it a name at the time, but we shall talk here of the ‘or’ rule. In Snyder and Shapiro’s piece the ‘or’ rule features as formula (14). The corresponding ‘or’ test claims that a term *a* is semantically singular iff the ‘or’ rule is valid for *a*.

Snyder and Shapiro begin by criticising our illustrative applications of the test. They object to our taking *a* to be ‘the majority,’ on the grounds that ‘majority’ is not a group noun (p. 72). But this is not relevant to our work, since we were not interested in groups or group nouns and our test does not mention them. Snyder and Shapiro are in any case wrong about ‘majority.’ Although they appeal more than once to Chris Barker’s ‘Group terms in English’ (1992), they overlook his opening definition: ‘A count noun will be a group noun just in case it can take an *of* phrase containing a plural complement, but not a singular complement’ (p. 69). Contrasting, say, ‘majority of voters’ with the unacceptable ‘majority of voter,’ shows that ‘majority’ fits Barker’s definition. See too Quirk et al (1985, §5.108) on ‘collective nouns,’ where ‘majority’ is included along with all the usual suspects. Instead, Snyder and Shapiro bring in another authority, Susan Rothstein, saying that if ‘majority’ were a group noun it would be a ‘counting classifier’ in the sense of her book (2017). There she contrasts the behaviour of classifiers in different languages, arguing that ‘English classifiers are nouns’ by citing some of the wide range of properties of nouns that they possess—obligatory agreement with numerals, free modification by adjectives, etc (pp. 202–203). Snyder and Shapiro claim that ‘majority’ has ‘almost none’ of them (p. 72), and conclude that it is ‘not plausibly a group noun.’ But they should conclude that it is not even a *noun*—an unhappy outcome, since they immediately go on to describe it as a noun (specifically ‘a nominalization of “most,” typically restricted to people,’ p. 73). In fact, their claim that ‘majority’ has almost none of the properties on Rothstein’s list is false, since it clearly has all seven of them. So they change tack and continue ‘as shown by (18),’ namely

- 18 a. That’s an unshuffled new {deck/??majority} of cards.
- b. The people came in {droves/??majorities} and assembled on the steps.
- c. These {groups/??majorities} are highly skilled.

But now consider these, call them (18*)

- 18* a. That’s an unshuffled new {deck/??committee} of cards.
- b. The people came in {droves/??decks} and assembled on the steps.
- c. These {groups/??decks} are highly skilled.

If Snyder and Shapiro's (18) shows that 'majority' is not a group noun, then our (18*) shows that 'committee' and 'deck'—their paradigms—are not group nouns either. Something is badly wrong. What has happened is that Rothstein accompanied her list by illustrative examples, and Snyder and Shapiro have treated these as if they were standalone tests involving substitution in arbitrarily selected sentence frames; thus (18c) is their version of her (20b) 'These groups are highly skilled.' But such tests were no part of Rothstein's argument: they are entirely Snyder and Shapiro's idea.

Snyder and Shapiro are not finished with 'the majority,' however, objecting on the score of its indefiniteness that it is no better than the notorious 'the average person.' That would be a howler indeed, which explains why we took the precaution of introducing the example with 'suppose for the sake of definiteness that a majority of voters are in favour of some proposal, and with reference to them' (2016: 306). Snyder and Shapiro ignore this crucial caveat.

For our other example we chose 'the pair died during the twentieth century,' assuming it to be equivalent to 'the pair died during the first or second half of the century.' Snyder and Shapiro object that by adopting 'similar assumptions' (p. 73) it is easy to make even genuine singular terms fail the test, e.g., by assuming that 'Joe sang sonatas for an hour' is equivalent to 'Joe sang sonatas for the first half of an hour or Joe sang sonatas for the second half of an hour.' But who would assume anything so plainly false? Surely, to count as 'similar' the assumption must at least be true.

Snyder and Shapiro's final criticism is that the 'or' test is independently dubious as a test for singular term-hood since it admits clear counterexamples, citing the fact that 'some policeman' passes it.

Clearly, 'some policeman' is not a genuine singular term. Consequently, (14) fails to characterize all and only singular terms. But then even if DGNs [definite group nouns] like 'the pair' failed to license (14), that would not suffice to warrant the conclusion that they are *pseudo-singular* terms. (p. 73)

To deal with this argument, we need to highlight three points that its authors have overlooked. Every test has (i) a *scope*, the range of cases to which it is applicable, as well as (ii) a *purpose*, for while some are intended to make an exhaustive distinction between *Fs* and non-*Fs*, others are purely negative, designed only to rule out some of the most significant non-*Fs*. By way of illustration, although our 'or' rule is much the same as Dummett's (1973: 60), the corresponding tests are very different (*pace* Snyder and Shapiro: 73), both in scope and purpose. His tests apply to all noun phrases, definite and indefinite alike, and are negative, designed to rule out some of the latter from being singular terms (in this case, the word 'everything'). By contrast, our test applies only to definite noun phrases, aka terms, and its purpose is to make an exhaustive distinction between semantically singular and semantically plural terms: see our 2016: 306. Lastly, (iii), there is the familiar distinction between the two kinds of counterexample, false positives (non-*Fs* that pass the test) and false negatives (*Fs* that fail it).

Now to Snyder and Shapiro's argument, beginning with its premise. Because it is not a term, 'some policeman' is outside the scope of our test. Its behaviour is therefore irrelevant and the objection does not even get off the ground. Granted, it is within the wider scope of Dummett's test, but that does not help matters. For although it now counts as a counterexample, it is a false positive, and as such is irrelevant to a negative test like Dummett's. Snyder and Shapiro claim that their point about 'some policeman' was made by Dummett himself² and later Bob Hale (1994). But this is not correct. Nobody offered counterexamples of the 'some policeman' sort to Dummett's 'or' test, and there is a simple explanation for this: it was the third in a series of negative tests, and 'some policeman' had already been ruled out by the preceding 'and' test (see Dummett 1973: 61).

Not only is their premise irrelevant, the inference at the heart of their argument, beginning 'But then . . .', is fallacious. Once one distinguishes the two kinds of counterexample (false positives and false negatives), it amounts to this: 'If a test admits false positives, it may admit false negatives

too.' It is this non sequitur that allows Snyder and Shapiro to avoid engaging with the fact that 'the pair' comes out as semantically plural on our 'or' test.

3. PSEUDO-SINGULARITY MEANS VALIDATING NUMEROUS INVALID INFERENCES

To illustrate their logical problems for pseudo-singularity, Snyder and Shapiro offer a 'collector's deck of 500 miniature baseball cards, each packaged in plastic' (p. 74), and list four inferences, (23a–d), related to this scenario. They claim that all four are invalid but that our approach makes them provably valid within our own system of plural logic. Snyder and Shapiro see this as their most substantial criticism (p. 73).

Before tackling the inferences, we need to address the assumption on which they all rely, namely, that 'the deck' is a pseudo-singular term denoting just the relevant cards. To explain why Snyder and Shapiro attribute this analysis to us, we must spell out their conception of our project. We did not claim that *all* group terms simply refer to their members, since we were not interested in the general run of groups. Our aim in the relevant chapter was a proper understanding of set theory, and it is to Snyder and Shapiro's credit that they draw attention to this much narrower remit (p. 69). (But their accompanying gloss that in our view 'only those DGNs [group terms] whose identity is "determined by their membership alone" should be analyzed as pseudo-singular' is not supported by anything in our text.) Accordingly, they announce a policy of using only examples cited by us, or minimal variations of them. This is where their collector's deck comes in, for they call it a minimal variation on our example of a suit of playing cards. But this is not correct. We took our cards to be abstract objects, types not tokens, so there was nothing more to a suit than its thirteen cards. The opposite holds for Snyder and Shapiro's all-too-concrete deck. For instance, if the condition of the plastic film deteriorates the value of the deck will plummet, though the cards are unchanged. Decks and cards have been a prominent feature of the literature ever since Godehard Link's warning against taking terms for them to be co-referential, on the grounds that the use of a collective term like 'the deck of cards' is 'indicative of connotations being added enough for it to refer to a different individual' (1983: 304), but Snyder and Shapiro ignore his warning.

Since Snyder and Shapiro's chosen example violates their own policy, one could stop there, but it is worth carrying on, to see how things stand with their inferences (23a–d). It turns out that in every case it is Snyder and Shapiro's argumentation which is faulty, as we now show.

(23a) *There is exactly one deck* \vDash *The deck is a card.*

Their proof makes use of a singularity predicate which we defined in our book (p. 111) thus: $Sa =_{df} \forall \mathbf{x} (\mathbf{x} \leq a \rightarrow \mathbf{x} = a)$. In English, Sa means that any thing(s) among a is/are identical to a , in which case Sa is true iff a either denotes a single individual or is empty. The key step in the proof is their inference from 'there is exactly one deck' to S (the deck). The conclusion is indeed false, since they are supposing that 'the deck' denotes 500 individuals. But Snyder and Shapiro's inference is fallacious. The sense in which it is true that there is exactly one deck can be spelled out as we did in our book (p. 247), defining a plural version $\exists_1 \mathbf{x}$ of the quantifier $\exists_1 x$ by substituting plural for singular variables in the standard definition. Snyder and Shapiro are aware of this, since they explain this definition earlier in their piece (p. 70). So it is somewhat puzzling that they infer S (the deck) from 'there is exactly one deck.' Our conjecture is that they have confused 'there is exactly one deck' with 'there is exactly one lot of things in the deck,' i.e., confused $\exists_1 \mathbf{x}$ deck(\mathbf{x}) with $\exists_1 \mathbf{x} (\mathbf{x} \leq 1y \text{deck}(y))$. The latter, unlike the former, does entail S (the deck), but since it is false in their scenario, the entailment is harmless.

(23b) *The cards are packaged in plastic* \vDash *The deck is packaged in plastic.*

There is nothing wrong with their formal work here. The error lies in a fallacy of equivocation before the inference is translated into the language of the system. The predicate 'packaged in plastic' is open to many readings, and among others there is a vast difference between being shrink-wrapped in plastic film for permanent preservation and being temporarily packaged in bubble wrap for delivery. Snyder and Shapiro's presentation invites the former reading for the premise and the latter for the conclusion. Once the inference is properly disambiguated in the same way for both, for example as *The cards are packaged in plastic, each card separately* \vDash *The deck is packaged in plastic, each card separately*, it is seen to be sound.

(23c) *The deck is huge* \vDash *Each card is huge.*

(23d) *Every one of the cards is tiny* \vDash *The deck is tiny.*

By common consent, (23c) and (23d) raise the same issues, so it is enough to tackle the former. Its assessment turns on Snyder and Shapiro's claim that 'huge' is distributive. Though this is false (cf. 'the enemy's losses were huge'), an endnote reference reveals that they are relying on the authority of Roger Schwarzschild (2011) that there is a lexical category of 'stubbornly distributive' predicates like 'large' such that 'the boxes are large' does not even admit a collective reading; and their 'huge' is meant to be similar. Looking at other linguists, however, we find the ultra-empirical investigations of Gregory Scontras and Noah Goodman (2017), who conclude 'At the very least, the results of our experiments demonstrate that stubborn distributivity should not (indeed, cannot) manifest in terms of an all-out prohibition against collective interpretations.' (p. 307) Accepting Scontras and Goodman's results, we reject Snyder and Shapiro's proof.

4. SUPERPLURAL REFERENCE

Snyder and Shapiro conclude by attributing to us these jointly inconsistent claims (p. 76)

(T1) Singular DGNs [definite group nouns] are pseudo-singular terms.

(T2) Plural DGNs realize superplural reference.

(T3) Superplural reference is not realized by the plural morpheme.

It is puzzling that they should attribute (T3) to us, since a few pages earlier they cited our example of 'the authors of multivolume classics on logic,' with its plural 'authors,' and reported us as claiming that such plurally exhaustive descriptions achieve 'what is commonly known as SUPERPLURAL REFERENCE' (p. 70; their capitals).

Their justification for attributing (T3) is a quote from our book, that English 'is not adequate to the apparatus of superplural quantification, since it has no superplural forms of pronouns or common nouns, no "theys" and "thems" to follow "they" and "them," and no "thingss" or "mens" to follow "things" and "men" ' (p. 138). In fact, what this supports is not (T3) but 'Superplural reference is not realized by *iterating* the plural morpheme,' which is both true and harmless.

NOTES

1. Snyder and Shapiro cite their anticipated paper as forthcoming in *Erkenntnis*, but it actually appeared in another journal.
2. Snyder and Shapiro refer here to chap. 4 of 'Dummett, M. (1974). *The justification of deduction*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press,' but there is no such book. They mean his *Frege: Philosophy of Language*.

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