Plurals in Malayalam: the nonhuman pluralities without plural suffix

Many linguists (Krifka 1989; Schwarzchild 1996; Sauerland et al. 2005) have argued against the traditional understanding of plural as meaning 'more than one', pointing out that the plural does not necessarily imply cardinality greater than one in all cases. This argument, developed into the Weak Theory of the plurals (Sauerland et al. 2005) says that the inherent semantic content or the presupposition of the plural is weaker than that of the singular. It proposes that the plural is semantically unmarked and is blocked only when the presuppositions of the singular has to be satisfied. However, Ouwayda & Menon (2012) has argued that the Malayalam plural marker 'kaL' cannot take atoms (of cardinality equal to one) in its denotation, proposing that it requires an alternative analysis in line with the Strong Theory of plurals (Chierchia 1998).

Firstly, I'll show that the argument in Ouwayda and Menon (2012), henceforth O&M, that the semantics of 'kaL' is significantly different from that of English's' and that 'kaL' cannot have atoms of cardinality equal to one in its domain is problematic. The argument in O&M is that the pluralities with 'kaL' can only give collective readings. However, they can appear with inherently distributive predicates, as in (1). Besides, pluralities without the overt plural suffix can give collective readings, again contrary to the assumption in Ouwayda and Menon (2012) that these constructions are compatible only with distributive predicates. This is shown by the appearance of such a nominal construction with an inherently collective predicate in (2). Hence, we have to abandon their analysis wherein plurality without 'kaL' gives only atomic reading and plurality with 'kaL' gives only sum reading.

These facts mean that the Malayalam plurals also have a denotation inclusive of atoms, as proposed in the Weak Theory of the plurals. However, it is interesting to note that Malayalam nonhuman nouns, when appearing with numerals or quantifiers, can appear without any plural markers and denote a plurality or sum. This would pose a problem for the Weak theory of plurals, since morphologically singular nouns are employed in constructions with sum reading.

Farkas& de Swart (2010) have noted that the nouns in Hungarian appear in the singular form, when used with a numeral or a quantifier. In order to account for this, they propose a weak singular/strong plural theory, analysing singular as the default and the plural as denoting sums (inclusive of atoms or exclusive). They employ 'the Strongest Meaning Hypothesis' (SMH) to account for the preference for an inclusive sum reading when a plural noun appears in a downward entailing context. In order to account for the use of plural suffixes with English nouns in a nominal sequence containing numerals or quantifiers, they posit a constraint that requires sum-denoting nouns to be marked plural, which is high-ranked in English, as opposed to Hungarian.

Although the fundamental idea, that singular is both morphologically and semantically unmarked, is favourable, a constraint that would have to be high-ranked for human nouns and low-ranked for nonhuman nouns in Malayalam is not an optimal solution. It is possible to argue that the plural suffix in a sequence containing numerals or quantifiers, obligatory for English nouns and Malayalam human nouns, is semantically vacuous or different from the 'sum (inclusive or exclusive) meaning' of the plural which is realized on the Φ head above DP, just as the plural morphology in *pluralia tantum*, Mass Nouns in Greek (Alexiadou 2010) and some Mass Nouns in Telugu (Smith 2016). In that case, the syntactic reason for the use of plural morphology in such sequences has to be further explored, especially since the argument that plural morphology is a marker of countness (Doetjes 1998) is suspicious in this scenario because of the split between human and nonhuman count nouns.

My hypothesis is that this is a lexical phenomenon, in which Malayalam is deploying the lexeme for singular nonhuman noun as the plural form as well. The historical expansion of the domain of 'kaL' suffix, which was earlier used only with nonhuman nouns (as evidenced by Old Tamil), has resulted in the partial loss of human-nonhuman distinction in Malayalam plural forms. In the absence of verbal agreement, the language, in order to retain the human-nonhuman distinction, is gradually pushing 'kaL' into the domain of human nouns, resulting in the use of nonhuman singular nouns as plural forms as well. Although this is largely a phenomenon in sequences with numerals and quantifiers, a few instances of bare singular nonhuman nouns as plurals (inclusive sums) in episodic sentences, as in (3), are pointing towards the plausibility of our lexical explanation.

1) naalə paTTi-kaL or-o   ellə wiitham kazhiccu.
   four   dog-Pl   one-one bone part   ate.
   'four dogs ate a bone each'

2) muunnaalə paTTi ente kaaRine vaLanju.
   three-four   dog   my car-Acc surrounded
   'Three or four dogs surrounded my car'

3) ente viiTTil   paTTi   uNT
   my   house-LOC   dog/dogs   EX
   'There are dogs/ is a dog in my house'

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