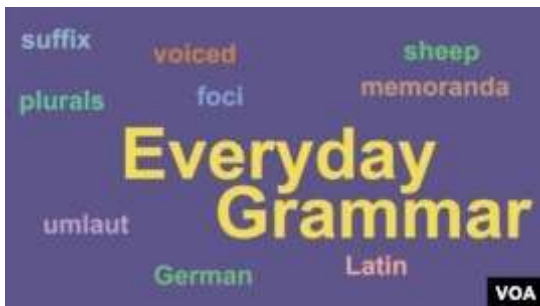# VOA Special English

*One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish,* goes the Dr. Seuss children's story. Why isn't it two fishes? You may think, "Ok, it's hard to count fish so we group them all together. No problem."

**Life on the farm**

It's easy to understand that farmers would not worry about making plurals when they talk about *sheep.* After all, they are almost always in a group. When you have one sheep, you can also call it a **ram** or a **ewe**, and make those nouns plural by adding an -s: *rams* and *ewes*.

Let's look at some other things we can make plural. You've got a left *foot* and a right foot. Put them together and what have you got? Two *feet*. That doesn't follow the "add an -s" rule.



Everyday Grammar: Unusual Plurals

Same with *mouse* and its plural, *mice.* What happened to our neat rule for making words plural?

**The German influence**

The answer is in our history. English came from German roots. German grammar changes the vowel sound in the middle of the word to show it is plural. The plural form of the German word for goose, *Gans* is *Gänse*. The vowel with two dots over it is called an **umlaut**. So *goose* becomes *geese* in English.

There are other plurals where the vowel changes like in the German pattern. Man - *men* and woman - *women* are examples of different vowel sounds in plural words. Sometimes a consonant changes, as with words that end in an *f* sound, such as *leaf*. The **voiceless** sound *f* takes on a **voiced** quality, or *v*, and an *s* sound is added to the word. We have autumn *leaves* and sharp *knives*.

Another way to make plurals in English is to add the **suffix** *-en*. We see this in the words *brother - brethren; child - children* and ox *-oxen*. These are words that come from Old English.

**Words of foreign origin**

With words that come from foreign languages, there are some patterns that may help you remember the plural. Many technical words in English came from Latin. Let's look at the plural of some words from Latin. Words that end in *-us* drop that ending and add *-i* to become plural, as in fungus - *fungi* and cactus - *cacti*.

*What is that orange thing on the tree?*

*It's a fungus. There are a lot of different fungi in this forest.*

For words that end in *-um,* the ending changes to *-a,* as in the words datum - *data* and medium - *media*. These two words are more common in their plural forms than the singular forms in our digital life. Listen to how the words *medium* and *media* appear in this conversation.

*I heard you got a job at the New York Times.*

*Yeah, I'm glad to be working in mass media.*

*But newspapers are a dying medium, aren't they?*

*Hey, I hope not. I'm writing a blog for them.*

When a word from Latin ends in *--ex* or *-ix,* the plural ending is *-ices*. This results in index - *indices* and matrix - *matrices*. Here is another conversation

*The financial news is bad. The Dow Jones index is down.*

*Don't worry, there are other indices, like employment, going up.*

**Try it yourself**

Are you ready to try making plurals with some English words?

Use the Germanic pattern for these words:

tooth (plural: *teeth*)

wolf (plural: *wolves)*

Use the Latin pattern for these words:

mémorandum (plural: *memoranda*)

focus (plural: *foci)*

There are many more irregular plural forms in English. We'll look at those in another episode of Everyday Grammar. For now, we leave you with Frank Sinatra, singing *Autumn Leaves,*

*But I miss you most of all my darling*

*When autumn leaves start to fall*

*Famous children's authors reading the classic children's story, "One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish."*

I'm Jill Robbins.

*Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this story for Learning English. Kathleeen Struck was the editor.*

# Words in This Story

**ram** - *n.* an adult male sheep

**ewe** - *n.* a female sheep

**umlaut** - *n.* a mark ¨ placed over a vowel (such as a u in German) to indicate a specific pronunciation

**voiceless** - *adj.* technical, of a sound made without moving your vocal cords

**voiced** - *adj.* technical, of a sound made by moving your vocal cords

**suffix** - *n.* a letter or a group of letters that is added to the end of a word to change its meaning or to form a different word

*Now it's your turn. Write a sentence with an unusual plural and we'll give you feedback in the comments section.*

**Reference**

*American linguist John McWhorter produced video on the history of English plurals on TED for Education.*