

ON THE ATTRIBUTIVE NOUN IN ENGLISH

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The standardly expressed rule of English that an attributive noun is singular, unless no singular noun exists, is now false. Modern English admits both singular and plural attributive count nouns. The selection of the number of the attributive noun depends on the sense to be conveyed. This is a proof, among others, that constructions of the ([attributive noun] + noun) type are syntactic rather than morphological.

The well-known standard treatments of the attributive noun in English are becoming out of date because of changes in the language. Thomson and Martinet tell us in their *Practical English Grammar* (p. 13), for example, that in the case of expressions such as *the walls of the town*, *the roof of the church*, *the keys of the car*, etc. "it is often possible to replace noun 1 + OF + noun 2 by noun 2 + noun 1 in that order" and thus we get, *the town walls*, *the church roof*, *the car keys*, etc.. They comment, "the first noun becomes a sort of adjective and is not made plural: *the roofs of the churches* = *the church roofs*". The rule that the attributive noun in English is "singular" is historically correct, although it might be better to say that it was neither singular nor plural (see Bradley, *The Making of English*, p. 112). Quirk *et al.* in their *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* say that the attributive noun is "normally number neutral. ... nouns which are plural in post-modification are singular (number-neutral) in pre-modification" and they give examples such as *a chair with arms* (*an armchair*), *decay of teeth* (*tooth decay*), *a pause lasting three seconds* (*a three second pause*), etc. (p. 1333). Jespersen gave the same rule as Thomson and Martinet in his *Essentials of English Grammar* (p. 215) – "In the first part of compounds the general rule is to use the singular form, even if the conception is naturally plural ... Thus we have ... *a five pound note*, *a seventy mile drive* ..." etc.. Jespersen pointed out, however, that there are exceptions "chiefly in modern compounds, and especially if there is no singular in use or if the plural form is scarcely felt as such". He gave the examples of *clothes brush*, *customs officer*, *a two-thirds majority*, *a savings bank*, etc.. Later, Zandvoort (*A Handbook of English Grammar*,