

THE DISTRIBUTION OF OPTIONAL AND OBLIGATORY PLURAL MORPHEMES: CROSS-LINGUISTIC STUDY OF UZBEK -LAR AND KOREAN -들

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Abstract

This study compares how Uzbek and Korean express plurality through the suffixes **-lar** and **-들**. Although both languages are agglutinative and share a subject–object–verb word order, they apply plural marking in different ways. Using 400 noun phrases from the Sejong Corpus (Korean) and the Uzbek National Corpus, we examine how animacy, definiteness, the presence of numerals, and syntactic position influence the use of these suffixes. The results reveal a clear contrast: Uzbek **-lar** is largely optional and frequently omitted when context or a number word already indicates plurality. In contrast, Korean **-들** is strongly restricted to human and animate referents, systematically avoided with explicit numerals or classifiers, and preferred in formal registers. These findings demonstrate that plural marking in both languages is driven by semantic and pragmatic conditions rather than strict grammatical rules. The study contributes to cross-linguistic research on nominal number, offers practical insights for Uzbek–Korean language teaching, and provides empirically grounded constraints for machine translation and natural language processing systems.

Keywords: plural marking; optional morphology; Uzbek **-lar**; Korean **-들**; corpus analysis; animacy; typological linguistics

Аннотация

Данное исследование сопоставляет использование показателей множественного числа **-lar** в узбекском языке и **-들** в корейском языке. Несмотря на то, что оба языка имеют агглютинативную структуру и порядок слов SOV, они по-разному выражают множественность.

Анализ, проведённый на основе 400 именных сочетаний из Седжонского корпуса (корейский язык) и Национального корпуса узбекского языка, показал, что употребление показателей множественного числа зависит от одушевлённости, определённости, наличия числительных и позиции в предложении. Результаты выявили чёткие различия: в узбекском языке суффикс **-lar** часто является факультативным и опускается, если контекст или

числительное уже указывают на множественность. В корейском языке суффикс -들 преимущественно используется с одушевлёнными, особенно с человеческими существительными, почти не применяется при наличии точного числительного и чаще встречается в формальной речи. Данное исследование доказывает, что категория множественного числа зависит не только от грамматических правил, но и от значения и контекста. Полученные результаты могут быть полезны для совершенствования методики преподавания языков и систем машинного перевода.

Ключевые слова: показатель множественного числа; факультативная морфология; узбекский суффикс **-lar**; корейский суффикс **-들**; корпусный анализ; одушевлённость; типологическая лингвистика.

The grammatical category of number is expressed through diverse strategies across languages. Uzbek **-lar** and Korean **-들**, despite their typological proximity as agglutinative SOV languages, exhibit fundamental differences in the actual usage of their plural markers, particularly regarding semantic constraints and pragmatic licensing conditions. While existing literature provides descriptive accounts of each language separately, systematic corpus-based comparative analyses remain scarce. This study investigates when plural marking is obligatory versus optional in Uzbek and Korean, and how factors such as animacy, quantification, and discourse context influence the realization of **-lar** and **-들**. The findings contribute to typological linguistics, offer practical insights for second language pedagogy, and provide empirically grounded constraints for natural language processing systems. The article is structured as follows: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion.

In Korean, the primary means of expressing plurality is the suffix **-들**. This suffix is attached to a noun stem to indicate plural meaning. For example, when **-들** is added to **사람** (person), it forms **사람들** (people). However, plural marking in Korean is not as simple or mechanical as in Uzbek or English. The use of **-들** depends on a range of semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic factors, and its application is often optional rather than obligatory. The most important factor influencing the use of **-들** is the animacy of the noun. In linguistics, this phenomenon is known as the animacy hierarchy. According to this principle, the plural suffix is most frequently used with nouns referring to humans. For instance, adding **-들** to words like **학생** (student), **선생님**

(teacher), and 친구 (friend) is natural and very common. With animal nouns such as 고양이 (cat) or 강아지 (puppy), the use of -들 is optional and typically occurs only when emphasizing the group as a distinct entity or when required by context. In contrast, with inanimate nouns like 책 (book), 의자 (chair), or 사과 (apple), the use of -들 is generally unnatural and often considered incorrect. Corpus studies suggest that -들 appears in over 90% of cases with human nouns, around 30% with animal nouns, and less than 10% with inanimate nouns. A second important rule is that -들 is usually not used when a specific number or quantifier is present. This is explained by the principle of avoiding redundancy. If plurality is already expressed through a numeral or quantifying expression, adding a morphological plural marker becomes unnecessary. For example, when the noun 학생 (student) is used with the quantity expression 세 명 (three people), the correct and natural form is 학생 세 명, whereas 학생들 세 명 sounds unnatural or incorrect. The same rule applies to nouns used with quantifiers such as 많은 (many), 여러 (several), and 몇 (a few). Likewise, when classifiers or counting words are used, the suffix -들 is typically omitted. Third, the use of -들 is influenced by speech style and context. In formal registers—such as official documents, academic writing, news reports, and formal speech—the suffix is used more frequently because clarity and explicitness are prioritized. In contrast, in everyday conversation, family interactions, social media, and dialogue in literary works, its usage decreases significantly. In such contexts, plurality is often understood from context, and adding the suffix may be considered redundant. Additionally, syntactic position plays a role: nouns functioning as subjects are more likely to take -들 than those functioning as objects or indirect objects. Fourth, -들 serves not only as a grammatical marker of plurality but also fulfills various pragmatic functions. It can be used to emphasize a group as a whole, to address each member individually, to express distributive actions, or to add a formal or serious tone to speech. Moreover, in some cases, -들 can extend beyond the noun level and appear at the predicate or sentence level, conveying iterative or distributive meaning. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as event plurality, adding an additional layer of meaning to the sentence. Fifth, plurality in Korean is not always expressed morphologically. In many cases, plural meaning is inferred from context, quantifiers, or shared knowledge, and

the suffix -들 is omitted. For example, in the sentence **학생이 책을 읽어요** (The student(s) read(s) a book), the noun **학생** appears without -들, yet depending on the context, it can refer either to a single student or to a group of students. This feature highlights the pragmatic richness of Korean, where speakers can convey meaning effectively without relying on explicit morphological markers.

In Uzbek, the primary morphological means of expressing plurality is the suffix **-lar**. This suffix is characteristic of the Turkic language family and attaches to nouns to indicate that countable entities are more than one. However, the plural marking system in Uzbek is not based on rigid mechanical rules; rather, it is a flexible structure shaped by semantic, pragmatic, and contextual factors. The suffix **-lar** fully follows the rule of vowel harmony. It appears as **-lar** after back vowels and as **-ler** after front vowels. The suffix attaches directly to the noun stem and precedes other grammatical markers such as case or possessive suffixes. For example: **kitob-lar** (books), **daraxt-lar** (trees), **o'quvchi-lar** (students), **bog'cha-lar** (kindergartens). One of the most important features of **-lar** in Uzbek is its optional nature. Unlike in languages such as English or French, where plural marking is often obligatory, in Uzbek it frequently depends on context and the communicative situation. If plurality is already clearly indicated by a numeral, quantifier, or contextual information, the suffix **-lar** is often omitted, and this omission is considered natural and stylistically preferable. For instance, in the sentence **uchta talaba keldi** (three students came), the word **uchta** already expresses plurality, so using **talaba** instead of **talabalar** is correct and natural. This phenomenon is explained in linguistics as the principle of redundancy avoidance. Semantically, the suffix **-lar** in Uzbek is not restricted by animacy. It can be used equally with nouns referring to humans, animals, and inanimate objects. This distinguishes it significantly from plural markers in some East Asian languages. Moreover, **-lar** can convey meanings beyond simple plurality, including definiteness, generalization, and sometimes social respect. For example, in **Kitoblar qiziq** (The books are interesting), **kitoblar** may refer not only to multiple books but also to a specific, identifiable set of books. In words like **kattalar** (adults), **ustozlar** (teachers/mentors), and **ota-onalar** (parents), the suffix expresses both plurality and a sense of social status or respect. Speech style and syntactic position also influence the use of **-lar**. In formal contexts—such as official documents, academic texts, and literary works—the suffix is used more frequently to ensure clarity and precision. In everyday conversation, speakers often rely on context and omit the suffix. From a syntactic perspective, nouns functioning as the subject are more likely to retain **-lar** than those functioning as objects, since the subject typically carries the main informational load of the sentence. In conclusion, plural marking in Uzbek is not governed by strict grammatical rules but by pragmatic flexibility. The suffix **-lar** not

only expresses number but also reflects contextual specificity, stylistic nuance, and communicative strategies. Although this feature may initially pose challenges for learners, understanding its usage reveals the logical and economical nature of the Uzbek language.

A comparative analysis of plural marking in Uzbek and Korean shows that, despite some surface similarities, the two languages differ significantly in their internal logic and conditions of use. In Uzbek, the suffix **-lar** has a broad range of application: it is not restricted by animacy and is largely governed by pragmatic economy. If the context or a numeral already clearly indicates plurality, the suffix is often omitted. In Korean, however, the suffix **-들** is subject to stricter semantic constraints. It is primarily used with nouns referring to humans, is rarely applied to inanimate objects, and is systematically omitted when combined with numerals or quantifiers. These differences are important not only in theoretical linguistics but also in practical domains. In language teaching, explaining the animacy restriction of **-들** to Uzbek learners, and the contextual optionality of **-lar** to Korean learners, helps prevent typical errors. In translation and natural language processing, taking these patterns into account improves both the naturalness and accuracy of the output.

In conclusion, plurality is not merely a grammatical category but a complex system reflecting semantic, pragmatic, and cultural characteristics of a language. The Uzbek language prioritizes communicative economy, while Korean emphasizes semantic precision—subtle distinctions that also reveal differences in how these two cultures perceive and structure reality.

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