



PAIRS

DESCRIBING

SINGULAR AND PLURAL NOUNS

描述单数和复数的成对名词

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PAIRS: DESCRIBING SINGULAR AND PLURAL NOUNS

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One of the most common Chinglish mistakes that Chinese speakers and writers of English make involves the use of singular and plural nouns, especially as it relates to pairs or groups of things. Chinglish has a lot of singular-plural noun problems, mainly because there are no plural nouns in Chinese. In this article, we will focus mainly on correcting group and pair problems. First, we will deal with some basic group and pair errors, and then we will move into a more serious Chinglish situation related to single-unit pairs.



A frequent error in describing groups occurs when Chinese students talk about their families. This kind of mistake is seen when a student writes, "I visited my families during Spring Festival." When I hear this, I ask my students, "How many families do you have?" They usually get it after just a few seconds of pondering my question. Most people have just one family, even though the family has multiple members. Therefore, the correct sentence is, "I visited my family during Spring Festival."

There are exceptions, especially when we are referring to more than one family. For example, a married couple visits the parents of both the wife and the husband during the holiday. After the holiday, one, or both, of them can say, "We visited our families."



"That couple are buying a house," is another example of incorrectly representing a singular noun as a plural noun. "Are" is used after plural nouns, e.g. "The trees *are* green," "Those girls *are* sisters," "We are English students." "Couple," on the other hand, is not a plural noun. If there are two couples (4 people), "couples" with the "s" is plural, but when there is only one couple (2 people) the noun is treated as singular. The correct sentence is, "That couple *is* buying a house." Similarly, "pair" (2 things) is a singular noun, but "Two pairs" (4 things) is plural. One pair, one couple, and one group, are all singular nouns.

中式英语最常见的一个错误是误用单数和复数名词，特别是涉及到一类或一群物品的时候。这是由于中文没有复数名词。比如，有的学生写“春节期间我拜访了我的家人”时会用“families”表示“家人”。实际上 family 是集体名词。虽然家里有不同的家庭成员，但大多数人只有一个家，所以此处应该用“family”代指“家人”。但当我们指的是多个家庭时，比如，已婚的夫妻在节日拜访双方的家人，可以用“families”表示不同家庭中的“家人”。

Single-unit Pairs

Using the correct noun form for single-unit pairs is even more problematic. Some common examples include pants and glasses. Pairs that are physically two separate items are usually a little easier, for example, gloves, shoes, and socks. While we would use the singular “a pair of gloves,” we would also say, “two gloves.” Notice that in the first example, “pair” is singular, but the word “gloves” is still plural. Likewise, some groups of items are described as sets, which according to McCarthy (2012), are “only used for things which need more than one individual part to form a proper set e.g. ‘a set of rules’” (para. 2). For most Chinese students of English, two separate items are not hard to describe, but single-unit pairs are more challenging.



The word “pants” (also *jeans, trousers, shorts, etc.*) is never used as a singular noun. We cannot say, “That is a jean,” or “that is jeans.” We can only say, “Those are jeans.” The singular “that” is only used with the word, “pair,” e.g. “a pair of pants.” “Some plural count nouns without a singular form are viewed strictly as pairs” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Mreeman, 1999, p. 327). Words like trousers, pants, etc, are always plural.



INCORRECT SENTENCES

This is pants.
This is pant.
That is my pants.
That is my pant.
This is pair of pant.
This is a pair of pant.
I like this pants

CORRECT SENTENCES

These are pants.
Those are my pants.
This is a pair of pants
I like these pants
Note: The words “pants” and “trousers” have the same meaning.

INCORRECT SENTENCES

This is jeans
This is a jean.
That is my jeans.
That is my jean.
This is pair of jean.
This is a pair of jean.
This jeans is blue.
I want that.

CORRECT SENTENCES

These are jeans.
Those are my jeans.
This is a pair of jeans.
I want those.
Those are my jeans.
These jeans are blue.
Note: “Jeans” are a kind of “pants.”

成对的物品有的是由彼此独立的两部分构成，比如“一双袜子”由“两只袜子”构成。但有些成对的物品是由不可分割的两部分构成，比如“裤子”（pants）。“裤子”虽然是复数形式，却是单数名词。我们只能说“那些是裤子，”（Those are pants）不能说“那个是牛仔裤。”（That is a pant or that is pants）

Now it's your chance to practice. Based on the pattern above, write correct words in the box on the right.



INCORRECT SENTENCES	CORRECT SENTENCES
This is short.	_____
This is shorts.	_____
That is my shorts.	_____
That is pair of shorts.	_____
This is not my shorts.	_____

The word "glasses" is used exactly the same way as "pants." We do not say, "a glasses" or "a glass." We do say, "She's wearing glasses," but we do not say, "She is wearing a glass." We can use the singular, "a pair of glasses," as in the sentence, "She's wearing a pair of



glasses." Here are some examples of correct sentences: "I need to buy some glasses," "I am not wearing glasses," "I am not wearing my glasses," "Those are glasses," "That is a pair of glasses."

Another error some Chinese students of English of English make is the distinction between, *glass*, *glasses*, and *a glass*. If you are looking at your computer screen, you are looking at glass. If you are thirsty, you will drink a glass of water. And, if you have difficulty seeing something, you should wear glasses. The incorrect use of these words is confusing to the hearer.

It's your turn again. Write correct sentences in the green box for the picture below. Remember to use "this" or "that" for singular nouns and "these" or "those" for plural nouns.

In the green box, write correct sentences to describe sunglasses.



INCORRECT SENTENCES	CORRECT SENTENCES
This is sunglass.	_____
This is sunglasses.	_____
That is my sunglasses.	_____
That is pair of sunglasses.	_____
This is not my sunglass.	_____
This is not my sunglasses.	_____

Can you see the English problem in the picture on the right? Look carefully at it. What should the correct English be? You can find the answer is at the bottom of this page, but before you look at the answer, try to figure out the English problem yourself. If you can figure out the problem, congratulations, your English is better than that of most Chinese students!



Photo by Michael Knapp www.nochinglish.org
What's wrong with this English?

我们需要区分下玻璃，眼镜和一杯 XX。如果你正在看电脑屏幕，你看的是玻璃（glass）。如果你渴了，你想喝一杯水（a glass of water）。如果你看不清东西，你需要戴眼镜（glasses）。

What's confusing, even for native English speakers, is that we can use the same words to describe one pair of glasses (or sunglasses) as we use to describe more than one pair.

These are sunglasses.



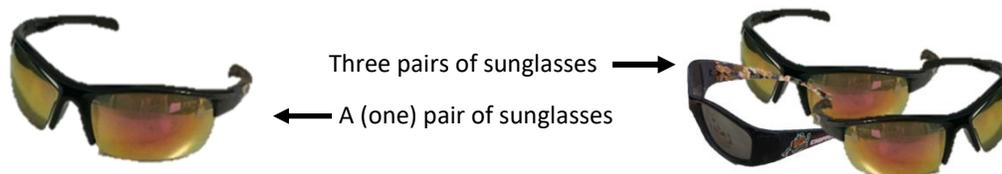
These are sunglasses.



Normally, we understand the meaning from the context, but if it does get confusing, we can say, "a pair of sunglasses" for the picture on the left, and "three pairs of sunglasses" for the picture on the right.

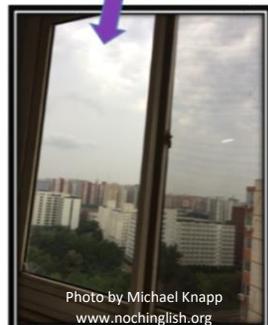
There are two ways to make the meaning of "sunglasses," above, clear. In most cases, we understand simply by context. If you are pointing at one pair of sunglasses, the person listening to you knows your meaning is the same as that of the picture on the left. If you are pointing at a several pairs of sunglasses, the other person knows your meaning is that of the picture on the right.

The other way to make the meaning clear is to use the singular word, "pair" or the plural word, "pairs." We can describe the picture on the left as, "a pair of sunglasses," and the picture on the right as "three (or *several*) pairs of sunglasses.



Answer to the English problem in the picture at the top of this page: The English should be **READING GLASSES**. "Glass," with no article (the, a), means 玻璃.

“Glass” is a confusing word because it has multiple meanings, and each meaning is spelled and spoken differently. The picture below illustrates how to use this word with three meanings.

<p>a glass</p>  <p><small>Photo by Michael Knapp www.nochinglish.org</small></p>	<p>glasses</p>  <p><small>Photo by Michael Knapp www.nochinglish.org</small></p>	<p>glass</p>  <p><small>Photo by Michael Knapp www.nochinglish.org</small></p>
<p>Sentence Samples</p>		
<p>I drink water from a glass. This is a glass.</p>	<p>These are my glasses. She wears glasses.</p>	<p>The window is made of glass. Glass is very fragile.</p>



PRACTICE

Write three correct sentences about the picture on the left.

Your next step is to practice. Wherever, you go, look at people and describe what you see. Here are some examples you may want to use: *He is wearing glasses. She is not wearing glasses. She wears glasses. They are wearing glasses. She is wearing blue glasses. He is wearing glasses and drinking cola from a glass. The man beside the glass door is wearing glasses. She is carrying a pair of glasses.* The best way to practice is to find a partner and practice together, but if you cannot find a partner, you can practice alone.

Headphones and Earphones

Before we discuss the singular – plural problem, we need to clarify a vocabulary difference. The Chinese word 耳机 is less specific than the English translation. There are two basic types, with two distinct English words, as illustrated below.

Earphones



Headphones



Incorrect Sentences	Correct Sentences	Incorrect Sentences	Correct Sentences
This is my earphone	These are my earphones,	I like this headphone.	I like these headphones.
What is this?	What are these?	Whose headphone is this?	Whose headphones are these?
I'll buy an earphone.	I'll buy earphones.	This is headphones.	This is a pair of headphones.

Describing pairs of earphones and headphones uses the same patterns we use for pants and glasses. We do not say, “a headphone,” but we do say, “headphones.” We can also refer to them as “pairs of.” If you look carefully at the table above, you may notice an intentional error. In the first “Incorrect Sentences” column under earphones, the second sentence is actually correct in some situation. Normally we would ask, “What are these.” However, we could also ask, “What is this?” when referring to a pair. The correct answer, in this case, is, “This is a pair of earphones.” However, just as it is with glasses, “earphones” and “headphone” are plural.

Try this exercise: Draw a line through the sentences that are correct and circle the correct sentences.

Sample: ~~The headphone is black.~~ The Headphones are black. (Answers are on the next page)

1. I use earphones when I listen to music on my phone.
2. My sister bought me pair of headphone.
3. Are these red ones your headphones?
4. What color is the headphone you bought yesterday?
5. May I please borrow your earphone?
6. Your music is disturbing me. Please use your headphones.

Answers to the exercise on the previous page: 1. correct, 2. incorrect, 3. correct, incorrect, 4. incorrect, 5. correct.

Another Single-Unit Pair

What do you see in the yellow-framed picture on the right? You know the English word for 剪刀 is *scissors*. Is this English noun singular or plural? If it is singular, we would say, "This is a scissor (or a scissors)." If the noun is supposed to be plural, we would have to say, "These are scissors." Which sentence to you think is correct?



Before I tell you the correct answer, I want you to try making a correct English sentence about what you see in this picture. You can begin your sentence with, "I see..."OK, try it. What do you see in this picture?

How did you finish your sentence? Did you say, "I see a scissor," "I see a scissors," or, "I see scissors?" If you said, "I see scissors" you are correct. This noun is always plural.

Now, let's look at the correct form of our first sentence above, the *this/that is...* sentence. Remember, scissors is a plural noun. Therefore, we must say, "These are scissors," or "Those are scissors." We cannot use *this* or *that* with a plural noun. But, what if the other person's question *makes* us use a singular noun? For example, if you are using scissors and your friend asks you, "What's that?" how would you answer? We use the same pattern we used with pants and glasses by adding the singular noun, *pair*. The correct reply to the question is, "This is a pair of scissors."

It's your turn again. Use the right column to correctly re-write the erroneous sentences for the picture on the right. Remember to use "this" or "that" for singular nouns and "these" or "those" for plural nouns.



Incorrect Sentences	Correct Sentences
It is scissor.	
We need to buy two scissors.	
This is my scissor.	
That is pair of scissor.	
The scissor belongs to my sister.	
My scissor is black and yours is blue.	
Cut the paper using scissor.	
My teacher told me to buy a scissor.	

In summary, single-unit pairs, such as pants, glasses, and scissors, are always treated as countable plural nouns, unless the noun is preceded by “pair.” It’s the same grammar structure we use for other plural nouns. For example, we can describe the candles pictured on the right as, “These are candles,” or, “This is a row of candles.” *These* and *those* are used with plural nouns while *this* and *that* are used with singular nouns. Single unit pairs are described the same way as normal countable plural nouns.



Photo by Michael Knapp www.nochinglish.org

总之，由不可分的两部分组成的对数名词，比如裤子，眼镜，耳机（earphones 和 headphones）和剪刀，通常被视为复数可数名词，遵循相应的复数名词的语法结构，比如“这些是剪刀。”（These are scissors）如果这些名词前面有“一对”（pair）时，被视为单数名词词组，遵循单数名词的语法结构，比如“这是一幅眼镜。”（This is a pair of glasses）

Examples of single-unit pairs used with the singular noun, *pair*:

I want a bag of potato chips.	I want a pair of sunglasses.
Julie teaches a group of students.	Julie wears a pair of glasses.
He has a lot of books.	He has a pair of jeans.
She bought a box of strawberries.	She bought a pair of scissors.
Sam has several blue shirts.	Sam is wearing a pair of blue trousers.
I will buy three knives.	I will use scissors to cut it.

Examples of single-unit pairs used as plural nouns:

Incorrect single-unit pair use	Correct single-unit pair use	More plural noun sentences
<i>That is trousers.</i>	<i>Those are trousers.</i>	<i>Those are strawberries.</i>
<i>This is sunglasses.</i>	<i>These are sunglasses.</i>	<i>These are cups.</i>
<i>Is that scissors?</i>	<i>Are those scissors?</i>	<i>Are those apples?</i>
<i>Is this your shorts?</i>	<i>Are these your shorts?</i>	<i>Are these your pencils?</i>
<i>Do you want to buy a jean?</i>	<i>Do you want to buy jeans?</i>	<i>Do you want to buy books?</i>

Describing Separate-item Pairs

Separate-item pairs consist of pairs that are made up of two separate items, although they make up pair. Pants are not separate-item pairs because they are one piece of clothing. They have two legs, so we can refer to one side as, “a pant leg,” but never as simply, “a pant.” On the other hand, we can say, “chopsticks” (or, “a pair of chopsticks”) but because they are two separate items, we can also say, “a chopstick” when referring to only one. For example, if we are sitting at the table and our glasses (眼镜) and one of our chopsticks falls to the floor, we could say, “I dropped my glasses and my chopstick.” The singular vs. plural noun use is different for separate-item pairs (e.g. chopsticks) and single-item pairs (e.g. jeans).

Socks are a good example of separate-item pairs. One is simply, “a sock,” but most people wear two, so we normally say, “socks.” We can also use the singular, “a pair of socks.” Notice that “socks” is still plural, but “pair” is singular.



由两个独立物品组成的对数名词有不同的单复数形式。比如袜子，单数形式是“一只袜子” (a sock)，复数形式是“袜子”或者“一双袜子。” (a pair of socks) 但裤子不属于这类对数名词。裤子由同一块布做成。我们可以说“一条裤腿，” (a pant leg) 但不能说“一个裤。” (a pant)



This is a shoe.	These are shoes. This is a pair of shoes.
The shoe is black.	The shoes are black.
This is my shoe.	These are my shoes.
Is that your shoe?	Are those your shoes?
Where is my other shoe?	I want to buy those black shoes.

Another example of separate-item pairs is a pair of speakers. We usually use two speakers, so the plural form is used more than the singular. We may say, "I need to buy some speakers for my computer." We can also say, "I need to buy a pair of speakers."

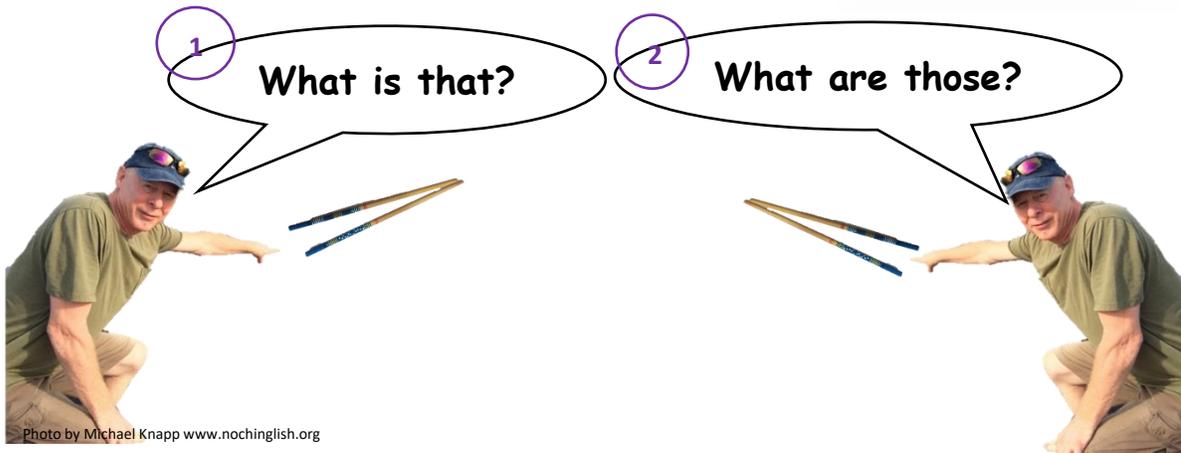
What's that?
This is a speaker.
It's a red speaker.
There is a red speaker on my computer.



What's that?
This is a pair of speaker.
What are those?
These are speakers.
They are red speakers.
There are red speakers on my computer.



Now, it's your turn. Answer the following two questions.



Your answer to question 1

Your answer to question 2

Correct answers:

1. It is a pair of chopsticks.
2. Those (or they) are chopsticks.

Some interesting facts about pairs of pants

We have learned that “pants” cannot be a singular noun, but why not? This is the big question. If we can say, “a shirt,” or “a dress,” why can’t we say, “a pant?” Why do pants have to be plural? The answer to this question lies in the original use of the English word, “pants.” “Our word pants is itself a shortening of the word pantaloons” (Maddox, 2017, para. 3). So, what are pantaloons?

Pantaloons were something from the past. They were “tight-like leg coverings worn by pirates and Shakespearean characters. And in those eras of 300 or 400 years ago, before pants were a single entity, pants were actually two separate garments. A person would put on each leg piece separately and then wrapped or tied together at the waist” (John, 2017, para. 3).

More single-unit pairs



Nail Clippers

These are nail clippers.
This is a pair of nail clippers.

~~This is a nail clippers.~~



Pliers

These are pliers.
This is a pair of pliers.

~~This is a pliers.~~



Tweezers

These are tweezers.
This is a pair of tweezers.

~~This is a tweezers.~~

Practice exercises

Use the space on the right side of this page, or a separate piece of paper, to practice writing sentences about the following pictures.



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