



The Dominion Post
24-Feb-2010
Page: 5
Opinion
Region: Wellington
Circulation: 91500
Type: Metro
Size: 273.92 sq.cms
MTWTF--

Eating spaghetti easier than grasping use of Italian plurals in English



LIKE many other languages, English is not averse to taking words from somewhere else. With a handful of the languages from which we borrow words, we also borrow the plural forms of nouns. This is particularly noticeable with words borrowed from Greek and Latin. We have one crisis but several crises (Greek), one alumnus but several alumni (Latin). Just how firmly these are part of English is open to discussion; it is unlikely that anyone would talk about several alumnuses, but you would almost certainly talk about a university having several campuses. Furthermore, there are definite ideas of right and wrong when these appear in formal written English. A good example is provided by criterion/criteria. You can hear people saying (on some occasions find them writing) criterions, criterias, one criteria, but the standard form of written English allows (still) only one criterion, several criteria. That may soon change, of course.

There are several such cases, where it is not entirely clear what "the right answer" should be. For example, what is the plural of index? If you are a mathematician, you will say indices; if you are a publisher you will probably say indexes.

The plural of appendix is less clear. Tradition says that publishers, but not surgeons, tend to talk of appendices. Rather clearer is the plural of medium. Several media refers to things like TV and the

press, while several mediums refers to people through whom spirits communicate. But even here, if oils are your medium, what would the plural be?

The set of Italian plurals in English is interesting. We can see several types. Firstly there are the musical words. Several Italian words with a singular in -o have a corresponding plural in -i. Words like castrato, concerto, soprano and tempo are in this group.

BUT MANY readers will think that the plural of tempo is tempos (and similarly for the other forms), and they will be perfectly right. It is only people involved in music who use these -i plurals – and even then, not all the time. Indeed, it would be unusual to hear even a musician referring to celli (as the plural of cello), but it might appear in a musical score.

The second set is the food words – fusilli, macaroni (variously spelt), spaghetti, vermicelli and the like. Here we borrow the Italian plural form, and never use the Italian singular. But we treat these words in the same way we treat the word rice: as something that does not distinguish between singular and plural forms.

We say: "How much spaghetti would you like?" (just as we say: "How much rice would you like?") and not: "How many spaghetti would you like?" So though these are, grammatically speaking, Italian plural forms, they do not act as plurals in English at all. Regarding

spaghetti, we say "eat it", while Italians say "eat them".

When we look at what is left, it seems that English speakers do not really know how to deal with the Italian plurals. Consider confetti and graffiti. Most of us treat these the way we treat the word spaghetti. We say, "How much graffiti is there?" and not: "How many graffiti are there?" Yet graffito (the Italian singular of graffiti) is a technical term in art history or archaeology.

ANOTHER art word is putti. This can be the plural of putto, but we seem to prefer to say "one of the putti" than "a putto". The same is true of paparazzi. But here, some people also use paparazzi as a singular. Perhaps the oddest is the word panini. This is an Italian plural, with a singular panino meaning a bread roll. But in English panini is used as the singular (and doesn't just mean the bread).

All in all, it seems that we have a very hazy grasp of Italian plurals when we use Italian words in English. Accordingly, it might be better not to call these forms plurals at all. Let's just say that we borrow some Italian words, and not worry about singular or plural.

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