

# Is the singular-plural number distinction clear-cut in Papuan Malay?

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## **Abstract**

For many linguists, number might be the simplest natural categories in linguistics. It would be as simple as singular vs. plural in grammar of a language. However, it presents more complex linguistic phenomenon when we go beyond structural level into semantic-pragmatic contexts. This paper describes the semantic-pragmatic of marking number in Papuan Malay. In the structural level, it is clear that Papuan Malay has singular-plural distinction. However, different semantic-pragmatic contexts may affect the use and the function of singular vs. plural.

Nouns/pronouns, which are significance of number identification, may produce different interpretation of number depending on the structural, semantic and pragmatic contexts.

Structurally, there is a clear-cut distinction in personal pronouns in regards to singular vs. plural. On nouns, the singular vs. plural is identified by reduplication process. The basic form of noun may be interpreted as the singular number; whereas, the reduplicated form, by default, is interpreted as plural. However, the default forms of singular on nouns/pronouns, in many contexts, can be interpreted as either singular for plural or plural for singular. Semantically, inclusory pronouns can also trigger the number distinction. The noun can be defined as plural as reflected on the modified inclusory pronoun. Pragmatically, plural pronouns can be used to represent singularity when the context shows (an) unidentified individual(s). This shows that singular vs. plural in PM is not a one-to-one distinction.

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