ENGLISH FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS UNIT

KIBBITZER 6 A
***Data*: singular or plural? More evidence from academic writing and speaking**

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

One of Tim Johns' most valuable "talking points" is his discussion of whether the word *data*, and subsequently the word *criteria* are singular or plural. Here below are some updates on **Kibbitzer 6**, drawing upon two small corpora. One is Ken Hyland's corpus of 80 recent research articles, ten each drawn from eight fields ranging from engineering to philosophy; the other is the Research Sub-corpus of the **Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English**. This latter consists of 36 speech-events, covering such genres as colloquia, research groups meetings, advanced graduate classes, and dissertation defenses, drawn from all of the university's four main divisions.

Consider the case of *criterion/criteria* first. In Hyland, there were 18 instances of *criterion*, and 37 instances of *criteria* (almost exactly double). Of these 37, 25 were plural, 7 were indeterminate as to number, but five were singular. In **Kibbitzer 6**, Johns noted the occurrence of this singular usage in quality newspapers; it now seems that it has begun to spread to research writing. Here are four examples:

> 1. Surveys of clothes buying behaviour show that quality **is the most important criteria** followed by fashion and price.
> 2. It has been argued that the convenience orientation represents **a segmentation criteria** which transcends national and cultural boundaries.
> 3. …the global firm may be able to exploit **an evaluative criteria** important to individual consumers…
> 4. …mutualistic functioning of these associations should be **a defining criteria** of the term mycorrhiza.

In the MICASE data, *criterion* does not occur as a head noun but only in compounds such as "criterion-related validity". And rather surprisingly, only one of the 17 instances of *criteria* can be identified as singular:

> 5. i would have to have **a very stringent criteria** for for a moment in this study

The MICASE research sub-corpus findings for *data* show a slight preference for the singular over the plural (23 instances over 18, with around 150 hard or impossible to categorize). Here are some examples (with minor editing), the plural ones first:

> 6. **the sequence data are** available here
> 7. the first step would be to plot **these data**
> 8. this might help give you confidence if **all the data seem** to fit the curve.
> 9. **do your data** really, allow you to say that?
>
> 10. huh may need to back up **this data**
> 11. i'll show you **that data** in a minute
> 12. you need less, **less data**. uh, you can use averages
> 13. there **is very little data** collected for these databases
> 14. and we have **data that shows** that those very shaded plantations

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Finally, there are two very interesting cases where we get in effect a mixed message as to whether *data* is singular or plural. Consider:

> 15. there's **very few data** that's collected so, the first question is
> 16. because **this was** identifying **data**, at least **mine were**

In the first (15), the verbs are singular but the choice of *very few* suggests that the speaker believes that *data* is in fact plural. The second case (16) is even more interesting in that the speaker implies that the general data is singular/uncountable, but his or her own data are plural, perhaps somehow suggesting that the latter is more interesting or more relevant!

The findings from the Hyland corpus for *data* tend to confirm Johns' findings from *Nature*. Of those that could be identified as to number, 62 (80%) were plural and 15 (20%) were singular, many of the singular ones occurring - as Johns found - in contexts involving computer science. There remains a single occurrence of that "etymological relic", *datum*:

> 17. …a datum *vis-à-vis* a principle applied to it from without,

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