

Is Data Plural?

Is it “less data” or “fewer data”?¹

Beverly Stewart, in an *AMA Style Insider* article (“A Few Thoughts on Fewer and Less”) expounds on the 2007 *AMA Manual of Style* injunction that writers should “[use] fewer for number (individual persons or things) and less for volume or mass (indicating degree or value).” Stewart points out that both the Webster Dictionary of English Usage and the Fowler Modern English Usage cite cases where “less” has been used to describe the number of things, a transformation that the Webster sees as due to the reluctance of “many pedagogues ... to share the often complicated facts about English with their students.”

[Okay, okay! I know that I’ve been a pedagogue for a half century now; I guess that this sharing of “complicated facts” goes against the trend of my fellow pedants.]

So, if we take “data” as a mass of information, it would seem that fewer databases would mean less data.

But is data plural?

As the Merriam-Webster Dictionary points out, “data” is, in most writing, a singular, noncount, noun (e.g. “The data is clear and convincing”) but that in technical or scientific writing the word can be used as a plural, count, noun, the equivalent of the plural of “datum” (e.g. “The data are consistent with our hypothesis.”). [Pedant alert: as my old Latin teacher brain screams out, “datum” is the past participle of the Latin verb *dar* (to give), meaning “that which is given”, and “data” is thus the plural, “the things which are given”.]

Okay, to get to the point that Will Gottsegen makes about the Trump Administration’s autocratic attempt to wipe governmental databases of information to which it does not want citizens to have access (remember, “data” are “the things which are given”, not “the things which are taken away”), brings up the meaning of the word “plural”, which comes from the Latin *plūralis*, meaning “relating to more than one”. Yes, “plural” is a grammatical term meaning “more than one”, but it can also be used to describe something containing several diverse elements, as in “a plural society”. I want to live in a pluralistic society, one which celebrates the diversity of its members, not one which, as white supremacists and Christian nationalists would have it, restricts membership to people like themselves. My pluralistic

¹ Will Gottsegen uses “fewer data” in a recent article (Will Gottsegen, “What Happens When the Public Record Shrinks,” *The Atlantic Daily*, July 9, 2026) in which he bemoans the loss of publicly available information under the Trump Administration, such as the removal of 3,400 data sets from US governmental portals, thus hiding important information about the economy, public health, and the environment. Reading Gottsegen’s article set me down this rabbit hole.

society would have universal healthcare, living wages, parental leave, and subsidized college education. And my pluralistic society would allow its denizens to have access to whatever data they want or need.

“Wait!” I hear you saying. “What about the internet? What about Wikipedia and Wikidata? Isn’t all human knowledge already available to everyone? And what about LLM’s and AIs like ChatGPT and Claude? Aren’t they providing us with whatever information we need?”

Well . . . Yes, the internet contains much of human knowledge, but, alas, it is also a repository of much of human stupidity. And, as for ChatGPT and Claude, they are dependent on what they can learn from data centers—those gargantuan, water-hungry, environmental liabilities.² Large Language Models synthesize rather than merely retrieve, lack independent epistemic agency, cannot distinguish truth from statistical plausibility on their own, and therefore remain dependent upon the quality and diversity of human-produced knowledge.³ And, as for AIs in general—if they don’t lead to the outright destruction of humanity by making us more effective in killing each other—they are already displacing some forms of human labor and are dumbing down students by hindering their ability to develop critical thinking skills.

We end with Data, the character in the Gene Roddenberry Star Trek Next Generation television series. Data (pronounced Dāta) is a self-aware, sentient, and anatomically fully functional male android. While he is capable of serving as the second officer on the starship USS Enterprise and of having relationships with human females, Data is comically clueless about human emotions—much like his predecessor Spock was in the first Star Trek series. But Data is plural. He has an evil twin, Lore (both played by the actor Brent Spiner). Lore, who was programmed with emotions but became unstable and megalomaniac, massacred all of the humans on the planet where he was created. Sounds rather prescient, doesn't it?

² I predict that, much like how the 19th-century Luddites destroyed mechanized textile mills that were destroying their skilled labor jobs, we will soon see neo-Luddites attacking the data centers that are hastening the demise of the *homo sapiens* species.

³ This sentence is based on a suggestion made by ChatGPT when I showed it an earlier version of this essay. “Chaty” (as I call it) characterized my essay (even though I asked it not to be overly complimentary) as: “a witty linguistic essay that gradually reveals itself to be a meditation on public knowledge and the dangers of narrowing intellectual plurality.” When I thanked it for its help, Chaty wrote: “One thing I’ve appreciated over the past few essays is that you don’t seem to be looking for praise so much as for editorial engagement. That makes it much easier to give the kind of feedback that can genuinely improve a piece.”