

I'm sorry readers but I am right about the word 'none'

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Some discontent has surfaced in the EDP about my statement that the word none can be plural. I wrote that it's perfectly grammatical and totally correct to say "None of them are very interesting". Some readers responded that they thought this was wrong.

I don't doubt they believe this, but I'm a 100pc sure that they use none as a plural themselves sometimes – and probably more often than not. It's entirely natural for all mother-tongue English speakers to respond to a question like "Are some of them coming?" by saying "No, none of them are".

You can say "none of them is" if you want to: I didn't write that none HAS to be plural. Sometimes it actually has to be singular, as in "none of this cheese is any good", and "none of that bread was very fresh". The people who like to prescribe how we "ought to" speak don't go around telling us to use is and was in those sentences, because all of us always do. That's a natural rule of English grammar which all of us use automatically. Cheese and bread in these sentences are singular, and so none is singular too.

What the prescriptivists criticise as "wrong" is the treatment of none as a



■ Our columnist refers to cheese in his explanation of whether the word 'none' is singular or plural.

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plural in sentences like "none of these cheeses are any good". Some argue that "none is short for not one" (it isn't). Others use a kind of arithmetical reasoning which goes: zero is less than one; none refers to zero; so it can't possibly refer to more than one; so it can't possibly be plural.

The fact is that, in "none of the cheeses are", none is negating a plural noun and so is plural grammatically even if not mathematically. The Oxford English Dictionary understands this. It says that "it is sometimes held that none can only

take a singular verb, never a plural verb: none of them is coming tonight rather than none of them are coming tonight. There is little justification, historical or grammatical, for this view. None has been used for around a thousand years with both a singular and a plural verb."

So English speakers can continue to do what comes naturally to those of us who learned the true grammatical rules of our language as infants, and who instinctively treat none as a plural when it is.

None of the prescriptivists are right about plural none being "wrong".