We database managers are known to be fastidious, we block data violations both obvious and insidious. So there’s nothing that makes us feel more slandered than questioning our search for data standards.

We believe in data standards with all our heart. Without them, our databases would fall apart. In writing copious documentation we do not slumber but we can’t agree on data’s pronunciation or number.

Many of us say ta
Pronounce the word as DAY-tuh.
Others think it ought ta
Be pronounced as DAH-tuh.
To others, that don’t matta,
They pronounce it as DAT-uh.

Habits are hard to erase, but standards will never pass
If some of us load a database while others load a dattabass.

What’s more, data, the plural of datum,
takes a plural verb
(other forms, we hate ‘em).
Good grammar we do not mar when we say the data are.
But we flunk our grammar quiz when we say the data is.

And, in the past tense, we can always infer
That the data were.
It would make our ears buzz to hear that the data was.

It gives some of us a righteous frown to hear data used as a collective noun.
In this new singular situation data is akin to information.
But if data has taken on a singular form then, for the plural, will datas become the norm?

If we don’t follow Latin rules verbatim at least, here is an ultimatum:

Please do not use are with datum!
No doubt it would be foolish to go so far to wonder whether metadata is or are.
And, what is worse (this will really grate ‘em), is there such a thing as a metadatum?

It’s quite simple, you see. Subject and verb in number must agree.
Else, we sound like grammatical rubes: “Standards is going down the tubes.”

In scientific circles, if we slip and say the data is, our status and tenure we will be trimmin’.
Just like using a title other than Ms at a meeting of the National Organization for Women.

For language and data we do need standards. (We can’t have Frenchmen speaking Chinese to Spaniards.)
And we couldn’t enjoy a game of Scrabble if we were a talking Tower of Babel.

But very strict grammar would be a bummer. We like to say “Let’s database those numbers.” By this usage we are not perturbed.
We believe any noun can be verbed.

But I’m beginning to fear, although we can design complex databases with numerous parameters, it’s becoming painfully clear that we can’t write consistent poetic quatrains in iambic pentameters.

English standards ease people communication and data standards ease database integration.
But let’s not pretend we can reach data nirvana when we use whatever English grammar we wanna.

Our search for data standards is hopeless, you see, until on the word data itself we can agree.
We will never have data standards harmony and bliss while some say DAY-tuh are and others say DAT-uh is.

STEPHEN S HALE is an ecologist with the Atlantic Ecology Division, US Environmental Protection Agency, in Narragansett, RI.