

MAGNUS LEVIN

Manchester United are my team: On concord with collective nouns

Ett för många förbryllande inslag i den engelska grammatiken är de avsteg från de formella kongruensreglerna som ibland görs i samband med s.k. kollektiver, dvs. substantiv vars betydelse representerar en grupp. Plural-kongruens vid kollektiver brukar betraktas som ett normalt drag i brittisk engelska, medan amerikaner inte sällan påstår att det är "fel". Förf., som är verksam vid Högsolan i Växjö och Lunds universitet, kan på grundval av ett korpusmaterial visa att saken är mera komplicerad än så.

Concord, or agreement, with collective nouns like *family*, *group* and *team* sometimes causes trouble both for native speakers and foreign learners of English. The difficulty lies in the fact that these nouns denote a number of individuals although they are formally singular. It is this conflict between form and meaning which causes variation in the grammatical number of the concord-marks. The concord-marks which exhibit a number distinction in English are verbs and pronouns. It is often stated that singular, or so-called grammatical concord, is used when the unity of a group is stressed and that plural, or notional concord, is used when the focus is on the individuals within the group (Quirk et al. 1985:758). However, it is not always easy to determine why the singular is chosen in one case and not in another. Example (1) contains both plural and singular concord:

(1) Her *family are* quite well off whereas Celie's *family is* poor. (BrE, fiction)

The aim of this article is to discuss some of the factors influencing concord with collective nouns. Unless otherwise stated, all the examples are authentic and taken from the corpora listed at the end of the article.

That semantic factors have a strong influence on the choice between singular and plural forms is shown by the fact that singular verb forms are more likely with verbs like *consist of*, *contain* and *include* (Levin forthcoming a, b). Therefore it can be claimed that at least in cases like (2) the collectives are seen as units. (3), taken from Quirk et al. (1985:758), illustrates another semantic aspect. In this case the singular would refer to an enormous number of people and the plural to an audience consisting of enormous people.

(2) *Group 6 also includes* the Czech Republic (...). (AmE, press)

(3) The *audience was/were* enormous.

An important point usually brought up in the context of concord variation with collective nouns is regional differences. American English (AmE) is said to use notional concord "far less commonly" than British English (BrE) (Quirk et al. 1985:316). This is confirmed in my research. Plural verb forms are indeed used in AmE, although rarely. On the other hand, the frequency of plural forms in BrE should not be overstated. Singular verb forms are actually more common than plural forms in most contexts even in BrE. Furthermore, some recent studies (e.g. Bauer 1994) point towards a decreasing proportion of plural forms in BrE during this century. (4) can be said to be typical of both AmE and BrE (disregarding the interesting paradox in the meaning of the sentence), whereas (5) is typical only of BrE.

(4) My *family has* been sterile for generations. (BrE, fiction)

(5) The Moroccan *army were* alerted by rally organisers and scrambled a rescue party late on Saturday night. (BrE, press)

It is often stated that there is variation in this area between written and spoken language in BrE. Quirk et al. (1985:758) write that "the plural is more popular in speech, whereas in the more inhibited medium of writing the singular is *probably* preferred" (italics added). However, my research indicates that different written genres can contain either higher or considerably lower percentages of plural forms than spoken language. Barring the AmE texts, which contained few plural forms, the largest proportion of plural verb forms in these two investigations was found in the sports pages and the lowest in the news pages of *The Independent*. Fictional texts, scientific texts and spoken language contained about equal percentages of plural forms.

There is not only concord variation with verbs, but also with personal pronouns and relative pronouns. Either singular (*it/its*) or plural forms (*they/them/their*) of personal pronouns can be used and with the relative pronouns, there is the choice between *that*, *which* or *who*. *That* is used with either singular or plural verbs, *which* is normally used with singular verbs and *who* with plural verbs (Juul 1975:96f; Thagg Fisher 1985:142f). In Levin (forthcoming b) there were 100 instances of a collective + *which* or *who* + verb found in *The Independent*. *Which* + singular verb was used 49 times and *which* + plural verb was only used twice. *Who* was used with plural verbs 49 times. In *The New York Times*, *which* was consistently used with singular verbs and *who* with plural verbs. Below are four examples of pronominal concord. Notice the verb forms in (8) and (9).

(6) Yesterday the Labour co-ordinating *committee met* for *its* annual get together (...). (BrE, spoken)

(7) I can't see the education *committee with their* lack of money paying for transport for children from here (...). (BrE, spoken)

- (8) But is it not the *government which is* responsible? (BrE, science)
 (9) Valiant attempts were made to develop a humane and worthwhile schooling for the *majority who were* not selected into grammar schools (...) (BrE, science)

The proportion of plural pronouns is generally higher than that of plural verbs. Plural personal pronouns are frequent even in AmE. One important reason for the higher proportion of plural pronouns is that these often occur far away from their antecedents, frequently in a following sentence. Verbs, on the other hand, necessarily occur in the same sentence as their subjects, whereas relative pronouns can be placed in a following clause. Nixon (1972) shows that long distances between antecedents and their pronouns cause an increase in notional concord. This principle has been proven to affect both verbs and pronouns (Levin forthcoming a, b).

Mixed constructions in which there is a shift between singular and plural concord marks can be found both in BrE and AmE. By far the most frequent type involves a singular verb followed by a plural pronoun. (10) and (11) are therefore typical of both BrE and AmE, whereas *which* + plural verb in (12) is a more uncommon construction. The fact that plural forms tend to be more frequent the longer we move away from subject or antecedent makes shifts from singular to plural forms more likely, whereas shifts from plural to singular concord are virtually non-existent in English (Thagg Fisher 1985:142f).

- (10) Nelson Bryant discusses how savoring what his *family has* grown or gathered on *their* own is one of his happiest Christmas time rituals. (AmE, press)
 (11) A *group* of 132 former Desert Rats *was* heading for the city of Tobruk to visit battlefields and graves of fallen comrades. When *they* went to pick up *their* visas at Gatwick airport, *they* were told (...) (BrE, press)
 (12) (...) the fact that the *team which* improbably scraped through the play-offs in May *were* ultimately neither pleasing to the eye nor particularly effective. (BrE, press)

Attraction, or agreement with an item other than the head of the subject which closely precedes the verb-form, occasionally influences the choice between singular and plural forms (Quirk et al. 1985:757). For example, in (13) the presence of the postmodifying *of soldiers* increases the likelihood of a plural verb form (but compare (11)).

- (13) A *group* of soldiers *have* gone across to East Berlin for an evening's entertainment. (BrE, science)

Plural forms are not unusual even in AmE with subjects constructed like the one in (13) above.

A fact that is often forgotten is that there are differences between the

concord patterns of individual nouns. For instance, plural forms are more likely with nouns like *family* and *team* than with nouns like *committee* and *government* (Levin forthcoming a, b). The reason is probably that speakers and writers more often think of families and teams as being made up of different individuals, while committees and governments more often are seen as units.

There are some special cases which require some elucidation in connection with concord: the names of companies, the names of sports clubs and geographical names. In BrE, singular forms seem to be the preferred alternative with the names of companies or institutions (for a plural example see 14), while the names of sports clubs and names of countries involved in sports are almost always treated as plurals (15 and 16) (Juil 1975:112f; Fries 1981:25f). AmE generally uses singular verb forms in all these cases. Juil (1975:113f) states that the presence of a plural marker in sentences like (16) is enough evidence that the subject does not refer to the country but to a sports team. Notice that the verb in (16) is plural although the verbal complement is (formally) singular.

- (14) Many sound cards are available (even *Microsoft are* making them!) and you can expect to pay upwards of £100 for a good one. (BrE, press)
 (15) *West Ham show* value of loyalty bonus. (BrE, press)
 (16) The trouble is that *England are* my team. (BrE, press)

The names of countries in political and geographical contexts are treated as singulars in both BrE and AmE (Quirk et al. 1985:318).

The question arises how learners of English should treat collective nouns. Svartvik & Sager (1996:353) suggest that foreigners should be consistent in their usage and either use *that/which* + singular verb + singular pronouns or *that/who* + plural verb + plural pronouns. This recommendation can be qualified in the following way: Foreign learners should be consistent with the relative pronouns and their verbs and use *which* + singular verb or *who* + plural verbs, whereas since plural personal pronouns often follow singular verbs in both BrE and AmE, learners should be allowed to use that type of construction – at least when the pronoun is placed far away from its antecedent. Learners should however not use plural forms indiscriminately.

Corpora used

British National Corpus (BNC).
The Independent 1995 on CD-ROM.
The New York Times 1995 on CD-ROM.

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M GramTime News

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Hans Lindquist

NILS WRANDER

Some English Onomatopoetic Words

Nils Wrander har, vid sidan av en lång lärargärning, ägnat sig åt historisk språkvetenskap och disputerade 1983 på avhandlingen *English Place-Names in the Dative Plural*. Han har även behandlat svenska ortnamn av denna typ. I den här artikeln går han igenom ett antal engelska ljudhärmande ord med besläktade eller motsvarande ord i andra språk.

Onomatopoetic or sound-imitating words are common in English. In some cases they are new words, but often they have a long history. Several of these English words can be traced back to Old English or Middle English, but, as a rule, their forms have changed in the course of time. Rynell (1974:57) gives examples of onomatopoetic words occurring very early. In accordance with their nature they are more or less alike in other Germanic languages, above all in Dutch and Low German. But there are also such English words of Latin origin, which are sometimes less self-explanatory, and not seldom do we find that the same sound has been represented differently from language to language. Thus E *cough* is cognate with Ger *keuchen*, which primarily meant 'to pant'. E *growl* and Sw *groll*, *gräla* do not mean the same thing even if the words have much in common. In the same way, Sw *slöra*, *segla för slör* has got a sense different from E *slur*.

Not all words categorized as onomatopoetic show a direct acoustic resemblance to the sounds they purport to represent. In some cases, the relationship between the word and its referent is best described in terms of the wider concept of sound-symbolism, where certain sounds, or combinations of sounds, have come to represent certain areas of meaning. In many languages, for instance, the vowel /i/ is associated with smallness, and in English, the initial cluster *sl-* occurs in many words with pejorative meaning (*slip*, *slide*, *slime*, *slur*, etc.). It is hard to draw a rigid dividing-line between genuinely onomatopoetic words and sound-symbolic words with a vaguer relationship between sound and meaning. The following list includes some 75 English words which are normally referred to as onomatopoetic, together with cognates and other corresponding expressions in a number of languages.

- babble Noun and verb. *Babble* is interpreted as a child's *ba+ba+le* to form a word. ME *bablen*. Cf. Lat *balbus* 'stammerer', (O) Fr *babiller*, Du, LGer *babbelen*, Ger *babbeln*, *pappeln* and Sw *babbla*.
- bang Noun and verb. ON *bang*, *banga*. Cf. Du, LGer *bangen*, Ger *bengel* 'cudgel' and Sw *bängel* 'great lout'. In Sw also *bång* (*in*), *buller och bång*, *bångstyrig*. *Bang* 'fringe across the forehead' was first used in Am.