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Collective nouns and language change

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This study concerns the changing and variable agreement patterns with twenty-one low-frequency collective nouns (e.g. *trio*) in British English. The data come from the 1990 and 2000 CD-ROM editions of *The Independent*. The token frequencies of nouns do not appear to affect the preference for singular verb agreement. There are, however, clear differences between noun types, as is typical for lexical diffusion. Most nouns have developed a strong preference for singular verb agreement, some remain variable, and some prefer the plural. Many of the agreement patterns for individual nouns can be motivated with reference to the characteristics of the nouns rather than to the semantics of the verbs. This investigation found no evidence that singular verb agreement, which is argued in this study to be the unmarked alternative, is generally on the increase. Rather it seems that nouns which prefer plural verbs continue to move towards plural agreement.

1 Introduction

It is often claimed that singular verb agreement[1] is used with collective nouns[2] in British English (BrE) when the referent is thought of as a unit and plural agreement[3] when the referent is thought of as a group of individuals[4] (see e.g. Langacker, 1988: 37; Quirk et al., 1985: 758). If we are to judge from this, then the writer in (1) highlights the unit, and the writer in (2) highlights the individuals.

(1) The *orchestra plays* Berg's score . . . (*The Independent* 1990)
(2) The dynamic piano *duo play* Ravel's Ma mère l'Oye . . . (*The Independent* 1990)

[1] 'Agreement', in English grammar often termed 'concord', is a phenomenon which has received a great deal of attention in recent years. It can be defined loosely as 'a formal relationship between elements, whereby a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another' (Crystal, 1997). For an overview of agreement in general and more specifically in English, see Morgan (1972); Juul (1975); Moravcsik (1978); Corbett (1979, 1983); Lehmann (1982); Barlow (1988 [1992]); Barlow & Ferguson (eds.) (1988); Pollard & Sag (1988); Reid (1991); Svensson (1998); Hudson (1999).

[2] A 'collective noun' will be defined in this article as 'a noun that refers to two or more entities, and which in the singular can be used with singular and plural verbs and pronouns' (cf. Levin, 2001: 18). Various definitions of the term are discussed in Langacker (1987: 196f), Talmy (1988: 180), Persson (1989), Levin (2001: 10f), and Depraetere (2003: 86ff).

[3] In this article the terms 'singular' and 'plural' agreement will be used for what has often been called 'formal' or 'grammatical' agreement on the one hand and 'semantic' or 'notional' agreement on the other. As will become evident, 'singular' and 'plural' are suitable because they are neutral as to the causes of the choice by not explicitly indicating whether, for instance, semantic factors are involved.

[4] Plural verb agreement with singular collective nouns occurs in several varieties of English, but BrE seems to be the variety with the highest proportion of plural verbs. Regional variation between British, American, Australian, and New Zealand English is discussed in Johansson (1979), Hundt (1998), and Levin (2001).

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This claim is often repeated in pedagogical grammars. However, the view has been challenged. Fries (1981: 23) argues that the distribution between singular and plural forms would be much more even if this were the case. For instance, this article will demonstrate that the distributions between singular and plural agreement with *orchestra* and *duo* are very different. Scepticism as regards the simple choice between the singular with a holistic construal and the plural with a construal of a collective as a group of individuals is also expressed by, among others, Nixon (1972), Levin (2001), and Depraetere (2003).

Variation between singular and plural agreement also occurs with personal pronouns, where the singular in (3) is thought by some to focus on the whole group while the plural in (4) focuses on the individuals.

(3) This declaration has, it seems, brought the *military* to *its* senses. (*The Independent* 2000)
(4) But some ask how the *military* can guarantee (as is *their* duty) respect for the election when the opposition is branded 'counter-revolutionary'. (*The Independent* 2000)

Wales (1996: 161f), although sceptical about the choice between singular and plural pronouns, with collective nouns being determined by a difference in 'point of view', nevertheless argues that the use of *they* instead of *it* may be influenced by the impersonal and inanimate connotations of the singular forms. Moreover, she finds that singular pronouns may be 'unobtrusive and even appropriate' in news reporting.

Certain semantic categories of verbs are believed to favour singular agreement while others are often believed to favour plural agreement (cf., e.g., Juul, 1975: 105f; Quirk et al., 1985: 758). Recent research (e.g. Depraetere, 2003; Levin, 2001: 129ff) nevertheless indicates that it is the noun itself that has a crucial influence on the choice between singular and plural agreement, and that the context is very rarely a determining factor. For example, many nouns, such as *government*, prefer singular verbs, while others like *family* are more variable, and a few prefer plural verbs (e.g. *staff*) irrespective of the semantics of the verbs.[5] Depraetere (2003: 124) concludes that it is 'misleading to say that the verb form is semantically or pragmatically motivated, i.e. that there is always a contextual element that induces the use of either a singular or a plural verb'. Similarly, Levin (2001) found evidence that only a limited number of semantic categories, which are rare in actual usage, are influential as regards agreement. Examples from Levin and Depraetere of verbs which require singular agreement with singular collectives include *be big/small*, *be established/formed/founded*, *double*, *grow*, and *consist of*.[6]

[5] It should be noted that the patterns of some nouns are mentioned also in pedagogical grammars. Some collectives (chiefly *people*, *police*, and *cattle*) are often referred to as being used 'always' with plural verbs. (For corpus results on these nouns, see Siemund, 1995; Hundt, 1998; Depraetere, 2003.)

[6] Nevertheless, both Levin (2001: 151) and Depraetere (2003: 120) demonstrate that this not an absolute requirement since counterexamples exist where plural verbs are used in similar cases. This further weakens the case that the meaning of the verb is a crucial factor in determining agreement.

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(5) to (7) below show typical examples of predicates with a very strong preference for the singular. In all three cases it can be argued that the predicate concerns the collective as a whole and not the individual members.

(5) His problem is that the low-church *congregation is* growing, while the number of prominent devotees of high-church Blairism are dwindling. (*The Independent* 2000)
(6) The *jury consists* of a Japanese, a Korean, a Frenchman and myself. (*The Independent* 2000)
(7) From the line-up of youthful players at St John's, Smith Square, on Friday evening, it would be impossible to guess that the Netherlands Wind *Ensemble was* founded in 1959. (*The Independent* 1990)

It might nevertheless be assumed that there are differences in the likelihood of plural agreement between other groups of verbs, like 'mental' verbs (e.g. *want* and *believe*), which have been thought to favour plural agreement (Quirk et al., 1985: 758), verbs of speaking (e.g. *say* and *claim*), which may focus on the unanimous action of the members in a group, and verbs of concrete 'action' (e.g. *work* and *play*), which may focus on the actions of the individuals, and therefore show a preference for the plural. However, Levin (2001: 152f) found no noteworthy differences in the likelihood of plural agreement between these groups of verbs. Instead most verbs are like the ones in (8) and (9) in that they allow either singular or plural agreement. Depraetere (2003: 118) therefore seems to be right when she claims that 'reference to activities performed by individuals does not require a plural verb to be used'.

(8) . . . the *cast wears* early nineteenth-century costumes. (*The Independent* 1990)
(9) The *cast wear* ordinary, modernish clothes; . . . (*The Independent* 1990)

The working hypothesis in this article will thus be that in examples such as (1) and (2), agreement is to a large extent determined by the noun, whereas in (8) and (9) with identical nouns and predicates we may propose that this is an instance of (close to) free variation. The influence of the meaning of the predicate will not be discussed to any great extent in this article.

The aim of this article is to investigate agreement patterns with some rare collective nouns in written BrE. Since previous studies have almost exclusively focused on high-frequency nouns, this study will be the first to shed light on those low-frequency items that are, as is often argued, the first to be affected by analogical change. This study should therefore be seen as a complement to previous studies of high-frequency noun types. Needless to say, this study cannot produce statistically significant results on the level of all individual noun types, because of its focus on low-frequency items. Yet, as will be demonstrated below, the results are highly suggestive of the on-going changes in written BrE.

It can be hypothesized that changing patterns of usage are reflected in the variable frequencies of singular and plural verbs with individual nouns. It has often been suggested that items need to be frequent in order to resist analogical levelling (Hooper, 1976; Hopper & Traugott, 2003: 128; Krug, 2003; Ogura, 1993). The large amounts of data provided by newspaper corpora enable us to gain crucial insights into the

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agreement patterns of low-frequency nouns. Since the nouns studied are infrequent, it can be hypothesized that they are good indicators of where the agreement with collective nouns is moving.[7] Previously a number of studies have looked at possible changes in BrE with more frequent nouns. These studies indicate that the frequency of plural verb agreement is decreasing in BrE. Liedtke (1910: 180f) investigated usage in the period from Old English to Early Modern English and found a peak in plural verb agreement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dekeyser's (1975: 46f) material indicated a decrease in plural usage in nineteenth-century BrE for both verbs and personal pronouns. These findings show that a drift towards singular agreement started before American English, where singular verb agreement is clearly predominant, could have had any influence. Bauer (1994: 61f) found a decrease in plural verb agreement in the editorials of *The Times* during the twentieth century, while Siemund (1995) found indications that the number of nouns used with both singular and plural verb agreement had decreased between 1961 and 1991. Instead an increasing number of collectives were used exclusively with either singular agreement (which was the most frequent) or plural agreement. Finally, Levin (2001) found clear differences in usage between various frequent nouns in BrE from the 1990s. Most nouns in that study preferred singular verbs, a few remained variable, and a few preferred the plural, a finding that is supported by Biber et al. (1999: 188f), among others. It therefore seems that most nouns in BrE have drifted towards singular verb agreement and that there are some which are resisting this trend.[8] In the following we will see to what extent this is reflected with the selected low-frequency nouns.

Section 2 discusses the material used in the study, section 3 gives an overview of the background of the main theoretical concepts, markedness, lexical diffusion and frequency, and section 4 presents the main findings of the study.

2 Material

The material for this study comes from the British newspaper *The Independent* on CD-ROM from the years 1990 and 2000 (henceforth *Ind* 1990 and *Ind* 2000). Very large corpora are needed to elicit the patterns of the rarer nouns, and newspaper CD-ROMs are good for this purpose (see Minugh, 1997, for a discussion of newspaper corpora). They contain wide varieties of styles and writers and therefore cover a broad spectrum of any given language variety.

The present study is focused on twenty-one fairly infrequent nouns (*aristocracy, bourgeoisie, cast, clan, cohort, congregation, duo, ensemble, faculty, flock, gang, herd,*

[7] However, as will be discussed below, evidence from Ogura & Wang (1996) suggests that sometimes high-frequency items are the first to be affected by analogical change.

[8] It is worth noting that some languages related to English have a greater preference for the use of singular verb agreement. For instance, Findreng (1976) found a very strong preference for singular verb agreement with collectives in German, with the plural being used only with a limited number of collectives denoting indeterminate number. For Russian, Mullen (1967) observed that in general only singular agreement is used unless the noun has a quantitative meaning or is followed by a plural noun in the genitive.

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jury, legion, military, minority, orchestra, quartet, quintet, tribe, trio).[9] The study comprises nouns that refer to large numbers of people (*military, tribe*), nouns that refer to small numbers (*duo, jury*), nouns which usually refer to animals (*flock, herd*), and nouns that suggest number (*trio, minority*). What these nouns have in common is that they are (relatively or very) infrequent, and that they are therefore likely to be leading the way in any potential on-going changes. As argued above, it cannot be expected in a study of low-frequency items that all individual items yield statistically significant results, but the results for the individual nouns may be indicative of on-going developments.

3 Theoretical background

The results in this study will be considered from two main perspectives: *markedness* (a term from Prague school phonology connected with Jakobson and Trubetzkoy; more modern treatments include Greenberg, 1966; Zwicky, 1978; Lakoff, 1987; Moravcsik, 1988; Mišeska Tomic, 1989; Battistella, 1990, 1996; Comrie, 1996) and *lexical diffusion*, which means that some members of a set are affected before others (Bauer, 1994: 97; Curzan, 2003: 114f; Ogura, 1993; Ogura & Wang, 1996; Tottie, 1991). Frequency is an important factor for both perspectives, since it has often been argued that frequency of occurrence affects linguistic structure and change (Bybee, 2003; Bybee & Hopper, 2001; Hoffmann, 2004; Hooper, 1976). Most typically it has been argued that low-frequency items are the first to be affected by analogical change (Hooper, 1976).

Markedness (and the Agreement Hierarchy) will be discussed in section 3.1, and lexical diffusion and frequency in section 3.2.

3.1 Markedness

Markedness is defined as 'the relationship between the two poles of an opposition; the terms *marked* and *unmarked* refer to the evaluation of the poles; the simpler more general pole is the unmarked term of the opposition while the more complex and focused pole is the marked term' (Battistella, 1990: 1). Lakoff (1987: 60f) describes markedness as a prototype effect. There is an asymmetry in a category, and one of the members is seen to be more basic than the other. Typical examples in the literature

[9] The frequencies of some of these nouns are generally much lower than those considered in previous studies. For instance, the nouns considered in the present study occurred in between around fifty articles (*cohort* and *bourgeoisie*) and slightly fewer than 3,000 (*military* and *cast*) in *Ind* 2000. The most frequent collectives in English are much more frequent, e.g. there were more than 14,000 articles with *government*, 13,000 with *group*, 12,000 with *team*, and 9,000 with *family* in *Ind* 2000. These relative distributions were fairly closely mirrored in the British National Corpus (*cohort* 300, *bourgeoisie* 500, *military* 11,000, *cast* 4,000, *government* 61,000, *group* 41,000, *team* 18,000, *family* 34,000).

One factor which complicates the search for nouns in a particular frequency band is that the number of tokens in a superficial frequency search says little about the number of relevant tokens. Agreement marking is rare with most nouns, and most tokens therefore have to be discarded. For instance, 2,600 articles containing *military* in *Ind* 2000 only yielded 105 inflected verbs, while 800 articles for *trio* provided 127 tokens.

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include plural nouns, which tend to be marked in that an overt mark is added to them (Lakoff, 1987: 60). Thus *linguist* (sing.) is taken to be unmarked whereas *linguists* (plur.) is marked. In semantics *tall* is unmarked in the contrast *tall–short*, since only *tall* can be used in neutral contexts as in *How tall is she?*, while *How short is she?* indicates that the speaker is expecting the person to be short.

Markedness deals almost exclusively with 'tendencies rather than strict regularities', as Zwicky (1978: 130) notes. Moreover, Battistella (1990: 24) emphasizes that what is marked in one language or dialect may be unmarked in another. He gives the example that in some languages objective pronouns are marked while they seem to be unmarked in English.[10] Zwicky (1978: 142) also remarks that 'marked forms tend to be acquired by children later than the corresponding unmarked term'.

It is often suggested, e.g. by Zwicky (1978: 142) and Stein (1989: 67), that language changes tend to go towards the unmarked alternative. Battistella (1990: 65f) lists five criteria that can be used to determine whether the singular or the plural is the marked alternative in English:[11]

- Firstly, the unmarked term is semantically indeterminate, which means that its meaning is broader and includes that of the marked term.
- Secondly, the unmarked category often serves as the prototype in an opposition.
- Thirdly, the unmarked category often displays a greater freedom of distribution or use. This can be interpreted in three different ways: (1) as occurring in a greater number of contexts, or (2) as there being certain contexts in which the contrast between the marked and the unmarked term is neutralized in favour of the unmarked one, or (3) as corpus frequency, which is brought about by factors (1) and (2).
- Fourthly, the unmarked member tends to exhibit a larger number of subcategorial distinctions. For instance, the number of case distinctions in a language is usually greater in the (unmarked) singular than in the (marked) plural.
- And fifthly, the unmarked term is usually signalled by formal simplicity.

These criteria are related to each other. For example, Greenberg (1966: 65ff) suggests that corpus frequency usually correlates with the other criteria and that it might be feasible to use this criterion alone to establish markedness values. (However, see Pinker & Prince (1994: 346) and Comrie (1996: 6f) for a discussion of cases where frequency does not correlate with markedness.)

The present study adheres to Battistella's (1990: 4f, 34f, 84f) markedness values in English: the singular is unmarked for nouns and verbs, and the plural is unmarked for pronouns. Although the focus of the present study is on the markedness values of verbs and pronouns, it is relevant to consider the markedness values for nouns as well. A number of criteria support the classification of the singular as being unmarked for nouns. Apart from the fact that the plural is semantically more complex than the singular (Moravcsik, 1988: 92) and the fact that singular nouns are usually more frequent than

[10] The nominative is specified for subjecthood, the objective is unspecified – it can function as the object of a verb or preposition or the subject of an infinitive or as a predicate nominal (*it's me*).

[11] Other formulations of the criteria, such as Greenberg (1966) and Moravcsik (1988: 90f), are basically compatible with Battistella's.

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plurals (as exemplified by Greenberg, 1966: 32), singular nouns are unmarked in that they do not have an overt mark (*-s*), and they are unspecified as regards number, since singular nouns may pick out either singular or plural referents. Examples of singular NPs with plural referents include collective nouns (10a), generic singulars (10b), and indefinite pronouns (10c). The examples below are from Battistella (1990: 4). (Note that (a) and (c) contain plural pronouns.)

(10) (a) The *team* is putting on their uniforms.
(b) The *beaver* builds dams.
(c) When I came to *everyone* was staring at me and I smiled up at them.

We will now consider markedness values of categories of verbs. Of the five criteria above, the fourth criterion is not applicable for verbs, and the fifth criterion regarding formal marking goes against what is expected; however, there is no obligatory correspondence between semantic markedness and formal markedness (Battistella, 1990: 36).

The other three criteria are satisfied for verbs. The distributional criterion is fulfilled since singular verbs occur in a wider range of contexts than plurals. Singular verbs are semantically appropriate in almost all contexts, while plural verbs are not. For instance, Levin (2001: 148ff) found only very few examples where a singular verb would have been inappropriate (or at least highly unlikely) (e.g. *A divorced* couple need *a house each, a refrigerator each, their own carpets, curtains, CDs*), while those contexts discussed in connection with (5) to (7) were more frequent. The unmarked member carries less information and therefore the unmarked may function as a ground against which the more specified marked plural functions as a figure (Battistella, 1990: 4; see also Lakoff, 1987: 58f). Furthermore, it has been proposed that singular verbs function as a default value in English (see e.g. Zwicky, 1978: 140; Bock & Eberhard, 1993: 59), and are selected unless the marked alternative is specifically chosen. For verbs, it is therefore a reasonable conclusion that the singular is the unmarked alternative with collective nouns.

We now turn our attention to the question of the unmarkedness of plural pronouns. To begin with, plural pronouns are sometimes used to refer to singular antecedents, as in 'the editorial *we*, the hospital *we*, and the monarch's *we*' and with indefinite pronouns such as *Everyone should find their seat* (Battistella, 1990: 85). Plural pronouns thus sometimes subsume the meaning of singulars and therefore Battistella argues that plural pronouns can be thought of as 'unspecified for singularity' as opposed to singular pronouns, which are so specified. *They* used with indefinite pronouns (*anyone*), conjoined NPs (*Hal or Mary*) or collective nouns can be argued to be neutral as regards number, while singular *it* with collectives implies 'massed monolithic behavior' (Whitley, 1978: 31). The traditional description of the situation in (3) and (4) that the plural indicates a focus on the individuals and the singular on the unit could be rephrased in the following way: singular pronouns are used with singular collective nouns if the referent is viewed as a unit – otherwise the 'neutral' plural is used. Since plural pronouns are semantically appropriate in most contexts (Levin, 2001), the plural can be seen as a

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ground against which the singular pronoun may be highlighted. Consequently there are a number of factors suggesting that plural pronouns are unmarked with collective nouns.

The fact that verbs and pronouns can be interpreted as having opposite markedness values requires some explanation. To begin with we should point out that these markedness values are in line with what we find with collective nouns in most English corpora: mostly singular verbs and – more frequently – plural pronouns. This is also what could be expected from Corbett's (1979, 1983) Agreement Hierarchy. This hierarchy predicts that nonformal agreement – in the present case the plural – is more frequent the further away we move syntactically. This is summarized in the Agreement Hierarchy below.

The Agreement Hierarchy
attributive – predicate – relative pronoun – personal pronoun

The idea behind this hierarchy is that the probability of formal agreement (in the case of singular collective nouns: singular agreement) decreases as we move to the right in the continuum. Thus, agreement within the NP is most likely to follow the formal characteristics of the noun, while it is least likely with personal pronouns. In the attributive position a singular collective only takes singular determiners (*this family* not **these family*), while either singular or plural verbs may be used. For relative pronouns, there is the choice between *who* and *which*. These relatives are not in themselves singular and plural, but both Corbett (1979) and Levin (2001) argue that *who* can be counted as a 'plural relative' and *which* as a 'singular relative' because *who* to a very great extent co-occurs with plural verbs and *which* with singular verbs with (singular) collectives. 'Plural *who*' is more frequent than plural verbs, and plural personal pronouns are the most common of all. Thus singular collectives demonstrate a greater likelihood of taking singular agreement close to the noun than far away from it. The hierarchy is therefore in line with the frequency criterion, since the hierarchy predicts more (unmarked) singular agreement with verbs than with pronouns, for which the plural is unmarked.

As regards change, Corbett (1979: 218) predicts that if there is a change in an agreement system, (in this case) plural agreement would spread from personal pronouns via relative pronouns to verbs. Levin (2001: 90) argues that, if there indeed is an increase in singular agreement in BrE, this would affect verbs first, and personal pronouns last (if ever). However, judging from AmE speech, where Levin (2001: 110ff) found a very clear preference for singular verbs and plural pronouns, the pull towards unmarkedness would seem to be a stronger force than Corbett's proposed drift towards 'consistency' in agreement.

Concerning change, variation and markedness, Battistella notes that marked alternatives are often more frequent in formal registers (e.g. the use of subject pronouns instead of object pronouns, as in *It's I/me*, and singular *he* with indefinite pronouns, as in *somebody . . . he*). The conservative influence of some genres may therefore affect the 'natural' development towards singular verbs and plural pronouns. For example, some written genres, such as news reporting, contain far more singular pronouns with

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collective nouns than speech does (as shown by Levin, 2001: 77). Unmarked singular verbs are usually more frequent in writing (e.g. *Ind*) than in speech, however. This is an exception to the tendency of marked forms being more frequent in formal registers. Note however that marked plural verbs are the rule in the 'officialese' of some British documents (Hundt, 1998: 88f), as in (11) below from Levin (2001: 38), where – exceptionally – the singular determiner *this* is also used:

(11) This *Government are* dedicated to a sustainable, economic recovery based on stable, low inflation. (FLOB)

In general, however, formal written genres would seem to favour 'consistency' in agreement in using either only singular or only plural verbs and pronouns.

Summing up the discussion of markedness in connection with agreement with collective nouns, we may classify singular verbs and plural pronouns as the unmarked alternatives. If there is a change in progress, we would therefore expect singular verbs and plural pronouns to be on the increase. As we have seen, however, the studies cited in the introduction rather indicate that while singular verb agreement is indeed increasing with many nouns, there are some nouns that seem to be moving in the other direction, and some which seem to remain variable. In the results section we will see to what extent the chosen nouns follow these seemingly conflicting predictions.

3.2 Lexical diffusion and frequency

In cases of lexical diffusion, individual items produce individual usage patterns as language change affects one item after the other. The concept of lexical diffusion has been applied more in studies of phonology than in syntax and morphology, according to Tottie (1991: 439), but seems applicable to many instances of morphological change as well. Lexical diffusion produces the typical S-curve in change (cf. Ogura & Wang, 1996: 119); innovations begin slowly, affecting few items. As more items are affected the change increases its speed, and the steep part of the curve is created. Finally, the change trails off at the end, leaving some words unaffected. It should be pointed out, however, that the rapid phase of a change does not necessarily mean that it is of short duration. The steep section in an S-curve has been found to cover several centuries in some cases (Fasold, 2003: 243).

In cases of lexical diffusion, frequency is often adduced as a crucial factor since frequent structures become more entrenched than infrequent ones (Bybee & Hopper, 2001: 8; Langacker, 1987: 59). Hooper (1976) made the interesting suggestion that sound change first influences high-frequency items, while analogical change, as in the present study, tends to affect low-frequency items first. We would therefore expect low-frequency nouns to be good indicators of where agreement with collective nouns is moving, since they are less likely to have firmly entrenched agreement patterns. An important factor in change such as this, according to Hopper & Traugott (2003: 155), is that 'sheer textual frequency' helps the spread of one successful variant at the expense of others. That is, since singular verb agreement has become the predominant

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choice overall in BrE (as confirmed by numerous recent studies), we can expect that the singular will continue to increase. If we could detect different usage patterns for individual nouns and different rates of change we would have a typical instance of lexical diffusion.

There is no simple correlation between token frequency and usage patterns, however. For instance, Ogura & Wang (1996) found that the high-frequency verbs *have*, *do*, and *say* first started to change towards taking third-person *-s* in writing in Early Modern English. Only later were low-frequency verbs affected by this shift, but when these had started to change, they moved even faster than the three most frequent verbs. Furthermore, Curzan (2003: 114f) found that the drift from grammatical gender towards natural gender in English was resisted much longer by some nouns than by others. This group of nouns, comprising items such as *sun*, *moon*, *wind*, *city*, and *soul*, is difficult to define and the motivations behind their resilience are rather elusive, Curzan contends, but the existence of such a list nevertheless highlights the importance of taking lexical diffusion into account. Finally, Levin (forthcoming) demonstrates that the (ir-)regularization of variable verbs such as *burned*/*burnt* and *leaped*/*leapt* in BrE and AmE produces very different patterns for different verbs and is highly independent of token frequency. The present study also indicates that linguistic rules apply to various degrees with various items. As will be seen below, for instance, *duo* as a rule takes plural verb agreement, while *orchestra* mostly takes the singular.

Both markedness and lexical diffusion highlight the importance of frequency to language structure. As seen above, high frequency is associated with unmarked forms (the frequency to a large extent being caused by the unmarked feature being used in a wider range of contexts), and analogical change in lexical diffusion is often argued to affect low-frequency items first. In the following section we will investigate (1) if there is any connection between token frequency and the use of singular verb agreement; (2) if there are any indications of change in the material, and to what extent lexical diffusion is reflected in the usage patterns of individual nouns; (3) the interplay between verb agreement and pronominal agreement.

4 Results

4.1 Token frequency and the use of verb agreement

Figure 1 presents the correlation between token frequency and the use of singular verb agreement (the numbers can be seen in table 1). Figure 1 shows that the frequency of the individual nouns does not affect the likelihood of the nouns taking either singular or plural verbs. For instance, two of the most frequent nouns, *jury* and *orchestra*, show very decided preferences for singular agreement, as do *ensemble*, *tribe*, and *herd*, which are of intermediate frequency (among these low-frequency nouns), while some of the relatively more frequent nouns (*cast*, *duo*, *trio*, and *minority*) often take plural verbs (discussed more thoroughly in section 4.2). There is thus no indication of any systematic correlation between token frequency and verb agreement in the present material. This

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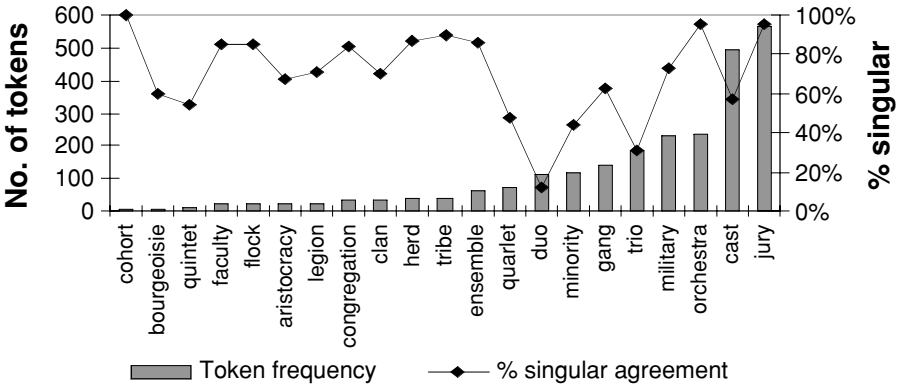


Figure 1. The correlation between token frequency and the use of singular verb agreement in *The Independent* 1990 and 2000

finding is given further support in a comparison with high-frequency nouns from Levin (2001). The high-frequency nouns[12] considered in that study do not behave systematically differently from the low-frequency nouns in this study. For instance, some of the most frequent nouns in Levin (2001) produced among the greatest proportions of singular agreement (*company* (98% singular; 13,000 articles in *Ind* 2000); *party* (98% singular; 8,000 articles), and *government* (95% singular; 14,000 articles)), while other high-frequency nouns (*team* (63% singular; 12,000 articles) and *family* (63% singular; 9,000 articles)) were highly variable. The only exclusively singular noun in that study, *department* (100% singular; 4,000 articles), was fairly infrequent.

Hence the data in table 1, in conjunction with the results from Levin (2001), demonstrate that the noun itself has a considerable influence on verb agreement, since some nouns are much more likely than others to take plural verbs, but that frequency of occurrence in itself is not an important factor in this instance of lexical diffusion. As will be seen in section 4.2, a number of lexical factors can instead motivate the different usage patterns of the nouns.

4.2 Change and lexical diffusion

Table 1 presents the results for verb agreement in the material. The second column indicates if singular agreement has increased (+), decreased (–), or remained stable (0) between 1990 and 2000. It should be noted that the differences between the years are often small, and in some cases there are only few tokens to go by, which makes some of the results rather uncertain. This lack of statistical reliability for most of the items is unavoidable in studies of lexical diffusion with low-frequency items. Still the large number of nouns in the study allow us to draw some well-founded conclusions,

[12] The token frequencies of these were discussed earlier in note 9.

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Table 1. *Verb agreement with collective nouns in* The Independent *1990 and 2000*

	Change in sing. agreement	1990				2000				Total			
		Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
cohort	0	1	**100**	0	**0**	4	**100**	0	**0**	5	**100**	0	**0**
jury	–	240	**95**	12	**5**	295	**94**	19	**6**	535	**95**	31	**5**
orchestra	0	145	**95**	7	**5**	78	**95**	4	**5**	223	**95**	11	**5**
tribe	–	19	**95**	1	**5**	19	**86**	3	**14**	38	**90**	4	**10**
herd	+	6	**86**	1	**14**	27	**87**	4	**13**	33	**87**	5	**13**
ensemble	–	27	**90**	3	**10**	24	**83**	5	**17**	51	**86**	8	**14**
faculty	+	2	**67**	1	**33**	15	**88**	2	**12**	17	**85**	3	**15**
flock	–	7	**88**	1	**12**	10	**83**	2	**17**	17	**85**	3	**15**
congregation	–	13	**87**	2	**13**	14	**82**	3	**18**	27	**84**	5	**16**
military	+	87	**71**	36	**29**	79	**75**	26	**25**	166	**73**	62	**27**
legion	–	8	**80**	2	**20**	9	**64**	5	**36**	17	**71**	7	**29**
clan	+	9	**64**	5	**36**	14	**74**	5	**26**	23	**70**	10	**30**
aristocracy	+	9	**60**	6	**40**	5	**83**	1	**17**	14	**67**	7	**33**
gang	–	34	**69**	15	**31**	53	**60**	36	**40**	87	**63**	51	**37**
bourgeoisie	–	2	**67**	1	**33**	1	**50**	1	**50**	3	**60**	2	**40**
cast	–	108	**61**	69	**39**	174	**55**	145	**45**	282	**57**	214	**43**
quintet	–	4	**80**	1	**20**	3	**38**	5	**62**	7	**54**	6	**46**
quartet	+	17	**44**	22	**56**	18	**53**	16	**47**	35	**48**	38	**52**
minority	–	33	**52**	30	**48**	18	**34**	35	**66**	51	**44**	65	**56**
trio	–	28	**47**	32	**53**	30	**24**	96	**76**	58	**31**	128	**69**
duo	–	4	**15**	22	**85**	9	**11**	75	**89**	13	**12**	97	**88**

while others will require further empirical study. As could be expected, singular verb agreement predominates with most nouns. In all, nine out of twenty-one nouns take plural verbs in fewer than 20 per cent of the cases, another eight have under 50 per cent plural verbs, and only four have over 50 per cent plural verbs. The propensity for singular verb agreement suggested by Liedtke (1910), Dekeyser (1975), Bauer (1994), and Siemund (1995) is therefore reflected among most of the rare nouns, even though, as seen above, there is by no means any direct correlation between low token frequency and a preference for unmarked singular verbs.

Table 1 demonstrates that the unmarked alternative predominates for verbs but that it does not appear to increase in the short term. Of the twenty-one collectives, six took more singular agreement in 2000 than in 1990, two remained unchanged, and thirteen decreased in their proportion of singular verb agreement. The only significant ($p \leq 0.05$) results on type level were obtained for *minority* and *trio*, which both have in fact decreased their preferences for singular verbs between 1990 and 2000. This would seem to go against the hypothesis that most collectives are drifting towards singular agreement. It must be borne in mind, however, that the time span in this study is short

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and that some of the results must be interpreted with caution, but it is still interesting to note that there is no indication of a general increase in singulars. If we look more closely at the results, however, there are some patterns that provide valuable insights into language change in progress. The increases in plural agreement are mainly seen at the ends of the scale in table 1, and the decreases in the middle. Thus it can be argued that those nouns which have very clear preferences for the singular have reached the end stage of their drift with some scope still remaining for variation with plural verbs, while the 'mostly plural' nouns are possibly continuing their drift towards plural agreement. The ones in the middle seem to be the ones where a decrease in the plural may be observed in the short term. The conclusion regarding language change is therefore that most, but not all, nouns in BrE have come to be used mainly with singular verbs. As predicted by markedness theory, most of the nouns have thus adopted the unmarked alternative as regards verb agreement. The marked alternative, the plural, does not appear to be disappearing, however. The drift towards the singular mainly seems to be continued by those nouns in table 1 that are 'in the middle'. Some nouns that often take plural verbs seem to be resisting the drift, while some nouns with a very strong preference for the singular may have reached the end point of the drift. The motivations for some of the patterns of individual nouns will be discussed in the following.

The differences between the nouns provide strong support for the idea that the choice between a singular and a plural verb form is to a large extent independent of the type of verb used (Depraetere, 2003; Levin, 2001: 129ff), and that therefore the most important factor determining agreement with collective nouns in BrE in a given text type appears not to be the semantic and pragmatic context, but the individual (frequency-independent) preferences of the nouns. For example, the preference for singular verb agreement with *ensemble*, *military*, and *gang* often overrides contextual factors favouring the plural. This is seen in (12) to (14). In (12) the premodifier *five-strong* would seem to highlight the plurality of the referent. In (13) there is the 'mental' verb *want*, which would seem to highlight the opinions of individuals, and in (14) the floating quantifier *all* is used. In spite of these factors, the general preference for the singular prevails in all three examples.

(12) The anti-drug plot is reduced to sloganising, while a shoddily choreographed five-strong *ensemble leaps* on to sing 'Anger/The streets are full of anger/Anger and frustration' as if a boyband's backing dancers had been told to look really mean. (*Ind* 2000)
(13) The *military wants* the influential council of Fijian chiefs to select the country's leader. (*Ind* 2000)
(14) The *gang's* all here; it's time to find the leader. (*Ind* 1990)

Just as there are different usage patterns with different nouns, there are some indications that the nouns are changing at different rates, which is the typical pattern in lexical diffusion. However, there does not appear to be a universal trend towards singular verb agreement with collective nouns; it rather appears that there is on-going regularization (cf. Siemund, 1995). Most collectives in this study are chiefly used with singular verbs, although in fact the majority do *not* appear to be moving towards more singular

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agreement. There is a small group of nouns that strongly suggest number (*duo*, *trio*, *quartet*, *minority*) which are used with plural verbs in more than half the number of instances, and the present study shows that *trio* and *minority* have even increased their preferences for the plural between 1990 and 2000. It is thus misleading to describe the class of collective nouns as a monolithic whole.

An important point is that although the agreement patterns of the individual nouns are not *predictable* from their meaning, they are not entirely *unmotivated*. There are features that are shared by the nouns that are treated in similar ways, as illustrated by *duo*, *trio*, *quartet*, and *minority*, which suggest number and are likely to take plural verb agreement.[13] Moreover, it generally seems to be the case that nouns referring to large numbers of individuals are more likely to take singular agreement, possibly because it is more difficult to conceptualize the individuals in a large group. This was originally proposed by Poutsma (1914: 283), and, in Levin (2001), for example, it was found that *population* usually takes singular verbs while *couple*, referring to only two people, prefers the plural. In the present material *military*, which refers to many individuals, shows a 73 per cent preference for the singular. However, Depraetere (2003: 114) points out that Poutsma's claim needs to be weakened. The reasons for this are that most collectives, irrespective of the number of individuals that they refer to, prefer singular verb agreement, and also that those nouns which are almost exclusively used with either singular or plural verbs (such as *people*) include collectives consisting of both large and small groups of entities. Depraetere even thinks that this refutes Poutsma's hypothesis, but, as in most such cases in language, we are dealing with tendencies rather than strict rules. In the present material, we find that in the series *duo*, *trio*, *quartet*, and *quintet* the singular becomes increasingly frequent the more members of the group there are. A Chi-squared test indicates that the differences between *duo* and the three other nouns, and between *trio* and *quartet*, are significant ($p \leq 0.05$). This shows that the number of individuals referred to sometimes does indeed affect the likelihood of singular agreement.

Plural verb agreement with these four nouns is exemplified in (15) to (18). In (15) *duo* takes a plural verb in spite of the fact that the noun is preceded by the singular determiner *this*. The presence of singular determiners increases the probability of a singular verb being used (Juul, 1975; Levin, 2001: 121ff), but as demonstrated here the plural also occurs.[14] (16) and (17) contain the verb *play* as in (1) and (2) above and as with *duo* in (2), a plural verb is used. Finally, as regards (18) it could be argued that the context would favour a singular verb – it was the quintet as a whole which produced

[13] This should be compared with the results from Levin (2001), which primarily indicated high proportions of plural verbs with nouns such as *couple* and *majority*, and with Findreng's (1976) findings for German and Mullen's (1967) for Russian indicating that plural verbs are possible only with nouns with quantitative meaning in those languages.

[14] Depraetere (2003: 97) somewhat oddly excludes all instances of singular determiner + collective + plural verb because of 'the disproportionate number of examples' where NPs with singular determiners take singular verbs. Such instances have been included in this study, however, since the use or nonuse of determiners is just one out of many factors that potentially influence agreement.

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the albums – but because of the highly variable agreement patterns with *quintet*, the plural nonetheless occurs.

(15) This production *duo fashion* beautifully mellow sonic journeys with enchanting string arrangements. (*Ind* 2000)
(16) Mixing soul, gospel, blues and more, the New York *trio play* a free gig on the outdoor music stage at Canary Wharf's Cabot Square this Wednesday. (*Ind* 2000)
(17) The Britten *Quartet play* three of Haydn's quartets Op 76, tonight . . . (*Ind* 1990)
(18) As Oasis, the *quintet have* had three No 1 albums. (*Ind* 2000)

These findings may also be compared with those for two similar nouns – *orchestra* and *ensemble* – which usually refer to even more individuals. As could be expected, plural agreement was far less frequent with these nouns (cf. also Depraetere, 2003: 110). This indicates that there indeed is a tendency to use singular verb agreement when there are a large number of people in the referent. Other nouns in this study referring to large numbers of people such as *tribe* and *congregation* strongly prefer singular verbs, while *cast*, which usually refers to a rather small number, remains more variable. (*Cast* had a slightly stronger preference for the singular in Depraetere's (2003: 110) material.)

Some illustrative examples of these nouns are presented in (19) to (23):

(19) The *cast is* a delight. (*Ind* 1990)
(20) The *cast are* a mixed blessing. (*Ind* 1990)
(21) The Kisii *tribe recognises* marriage between women where a widow is too old to reproduce and has never had a son. (*Ind* 2000)
(22) Surviving on hunting, fishing, and gathering, the *tribe lead* a way of life which has remained largely unchanged since the Stone Age. (*Ind* 2000)
(23) At Wingfield your lycra-clad reporter made an awkward appearance after matins, when the feeble *congregation was* having coffee with the vicar. (*Ind* 2000)

As in (19), it is usually the case that a collective followed by a singular subject complement takes a singular verb. However, there is some variation even in this syntactic context, as is shown by (20) (see further Depraetere, 2003: 108f; Juul, 1975: 107; Levin, 2001: 155). It could be argued, however, that the probability of a plural verb in (20) is greater than that in (19) because the cast is viewed as individuals, some of whom performed well and some of whom did not. Nevertheless, a prerequisite for such variation in the first place is that the noun frequently takes plural verbs, as is the case with *cast*. The instances of *tribe* in (21) and (22) would both seem to refer to the tribe as a whole, and not to the actions of the individuals, but still the singular is used in only one of the examples. The plural in (22) even occurs when the noun refers to several generations, and this has been suggested as a factor that favours the use of a singular verb (Levin, 2001: 139; Svensson, 1998: 141). In (23) it might be argued that it was the individual members who were having coffee, but because the singular is generally used with *congregation*, the singular prevails also in this case.

There are some exceptions to the tendency for nouns referring to small groups of people to take plural verbs. *Jury* refers to fairly few people, but plural verbs are very rare

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with it both in the present material and Depraetere's (2003: 110) study. It is probably important that a very large number of the verb phrases with this particular noun were passives (*was told*, *was asked*, *was sent home*). This would seem to facilitate singular verb agreement (cf. Depraetere, 2003: 115; Levin, 2001: 108), as in (24) where not even the intervening plural postmodifier *of eight men and four women* is enough to produce a plural verb.

(24) The *jury* of eight men and four women *was* told to assess the reliability of alleged victims before convicting Mr Jones. (*Ind* 2000)

Another noun requiring comment is *minority*, which can be compared with *majority*. (25) and (26) exemplify singular and plural verb agreement with *minority*. Both examples include the singular determiner *a* and refer to the feelings or thoughts of the individuals, but different choices are made all the same as regards verb morphology.

(25) No matter that a moral *minority* in America *is* up in arms over Harry; his creator has promised four further books. (*Ind* 2000)
(26) A small *minority believe* mothers should not be encouraged to go out to work. (*Ind* 2000)

In the present study 56 per cent of the verbs were plural with *minority*, while in Levin (2001) *majority* took plural verb agreement in 77 per cent (10 singulars, 34 plurals) of the cases (with material from *Ind* 1995). This greater preference for the plural with *majority* than with *minority* constitutes an exception to the tendency that a lower number of referents usually causes more plural agreement, but the significant ($p \leq 0.05$) difference between these two nouns can be motivated since it is possibly caused by *majority* ('more than half') highlighting number and plurality to an even greater extent than *minority* ('fewer than half') does.

Flock and *herd*, which usually refer to groups of animals, show a clear preference for the singular. This is what could be expected from the discussion of the influence of animacy on agreement by Jespersen (1909–49 II: 93) and Persson (1989). Both writers agree that only singular verb agreement is used with inanimate referents.

The following conclusions can be drawn about verb agreement: lexical diffusion makes it necessary to consider each collective noun on its own; the nouns range from almost exclusively singular to almost exclusively plural. Most low-frequency nouns in this study have a clear preference for singular agreement, as could be expected if there is a drift towards the unmarked alternative. Nevertheless, as is usually the case in lexical diffusion, the individual nouns produced very different agreement patterns, with some nouns preferring the plural. Furthermore, the patterns of the individual nouns do not indicate a general decrease in the plural, but rather that some nouns seem to have reached an end point where these nouns occasionally still take the plural. There are also indications that those nouns which prefer the plural increase their preferences for the plural, with significant changes recorded for *trio* and *minority*. Furthermore, it has been shown that many of the individual patterns of these nouns can be motivated.

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Table 2. *Pronominal agreement with collective nouns in* The Independent *1990 and 2000*

	1990				2000			
	Singular		Plural		Singular		Plural	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
pronouns	102	**58**	74	**42**	61	**39**	97	**61**

4.3 Pronominal agreement

The use of personal pronouns also sheds valuable light on language variation and change.[15] The distribution of personal pronouns with the same nouns as above is seen in table 2. Since pronominal agreement is less frequent than verb agreement, only the overall statistics are provided. Two main findings are presented in table 2: firstly, plural pronouns are frequent with collectives in written BrE, and secondly plural pronouns seem to be on the increase ($p \leq 0.05$). As could be expected from the positing of plural pronouns as being unmarked in English and from Corbett's Agreement Hierarchy, plural pronouns are more common than plural verbs with singular collective nouns. Thus markedness and the rather loose connection between a pronoun and its antecedent combine to produce a large number of plural pronouns. It should be noted that Gernsbacher (1991) and Oakhill, Garnham, Gernsbacher & Cain (1992) found that plural personal pronouns are comprehended faster and considered to be more natural than singular pronouns with collective nouns both by AmE and BrE informants, and hence there is reason to believe that plural pronouns will remain a favoured alternative.

As regards change, there was a clear overall increase in the proportion of plurals among the pronouns. This increase in the plural was also reflected in most of the more frequent nouns in the investigation. As noted above, an increased preference for the unmarked alternative is the expected scenario in language change. However, prescriptivism may upset the 'natural' development of pronouns, since marked forms tend to be more frequent in formal genres. Nevertheless, shifts like the one in (27) will possibly become more frequent in BrE if singular verb agreement and plural pronominal agreement increase.

(27) Elsewhere, the Jacques Loussier *Trio brings their* jazz interpretations of the music of Bach to the Middle Temple Hall (27 Jun). (*Ind* 2000)

[15] Since *they* is used as an unmarked alternative the term 'singular *they*' has been introduced (Whitley, 1978). It could be argued that *they* is the default choice in many genres and that *it* is chosen only if the unity of the referent is specifically highlighted. In this article we will nevertheless adhere to the traditional labels 'singular' for *it*-forms and 'plural' for *they*-forms to facilitate comparison between singular verbs and pronouns on the one hand and plural verbs and pronouns on the other.

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Such shifts in agreement have been studied extensively by for example Juul (1975: 98), Johansson (1979), Hundt (1998: 85), and Levin (2001: 110ff). All these studies suggest that shifts in agreement generally involve singular verbs followed by plural personal pronouns. This tendency is reflected to various degrees in different text types. For instance, Levin (2001: 110ff) found that written AmE from *The New York Times* preferred singular verbs followed by singular pronouns, while in AmE speech singular verbs and plural pronouns is the most frequent alternative. The fact that the two unmarked alternatives are chosen in spontaneous AmE speech indicates that markedness plays a part in the variation, and it is possible that informal BrE will be moving in the same direction.

There are also indications of differences in the present material between the individual nouns as regards pronominal usage. Some nouns that primarily take singular verbs often take singular pronouns while others fairly often take singular verbs and plural pronouns. For instance, some collectives, such as *jury* and *orchestra*, take almost only singular verbs, but whereas *orchestra* only rarely takes plural pronouns (16 per cent), *jury* does so much more frequently (44 per cent). *Cast* is variable as regards verb agreement but almost only takes plural pronouns (89 per cent). This is further evidence that different lexical items produce different patterns.

To conclude this section on pronoun agreement and verb agreement some examples are given in (28) to (32) below. (28) is a typical example of *jury* where the noun takes a singular verb, and (29) exemplifies the use of a plural pronoun. (30) shows the use of both a singular verb and singular pronoun with *orchestra*. (31) and (32) are perhaps most interesting since they are almost identical. (31) appeared in the late edition of the day before the one in (32). Apparently someone proof-read the first version in (31) containing the two marked alternatives plural verb + a singular pronoun[16] and changed them into the two unmarked choices – a singular verb + a plural pronoun. Presumably, this latter choice was considered better, although it should be noted that the choice in (32) involves the two unmarked alternatives but that it is not 'consistent'.

(28) But the would-be murderer would not know that the *jury was* likely to acquit. (*Ind* 1990)

(29) The *jury* for the Translation Prize felt *their* original task to be, in the words of *their* chair Michael O'Loughlin, 'as impossible and absurd as a Europe united economically and politically but still speaking a dozen languages – and as necessary'. (*Ind* 1990)

(30) The London Philharmonic *Orchestra has* appointed Franz Welser-Most, a 30-year-old Austrian, as *its* musical director, . . . (*Ind* 1990)

(31) For the most part, dare-devil technical excellence gives way to pure high spirits but as the *cast set* fire to the stage in the act of pure, wide-eyed pyromania that passes for the finale, you realise that you have gone along with the conceit for an interval-free

[16] A plural verb followed by a singular pronoun is highly unusual (cf. Depraetere, 2003: 115f; Juul, 1975: 98; Levin, 2001: 107ff). Note that examples such as this one go against the predictions of Corbett's Agreement Hierarchy, which suggests that plural pronouns would be more common than plural verbs with collectives. However, the hierarchy was found to apply 'primarily at corpus level' and not at sentence level (Corbett, 1983: 67).

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hour and a half and are quite willing to be entertained by *its* refusal to grow up. (*Ind* 2000)

(32) For the most part, daredevil technical excellence gives way to pure high spirits, but as the *cast sets* fire to the stage in an act of pure, wide-eyed pyromania that passes for the finale, you realise that you have gone along with the conceit for an interval-free hour and a half and that you are quite willing to be entertained by *their* refusal to grow up. (*Ind* 2000)

The results for pronominal agreement suggest, as could be expected from the discussion of markedness and the Agreement Hierarchy, that plural pronouns are more common than plural verbs with singular collective nouns. Furthermore, the material indicates that plural pronominal agreement is on the increase in contemporary written BrE. The different patterns with some of the nouns indicate that lexical diffusion is also reflected in pronominal agreement.

5 Concluding discussion

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the interplay between language variation and change as discussed in this study. To begin with, token frequency, which has often been adduced as an important feature affecting structure and change in language (Bybee, 2003; Bybee & Hopper, 2001; Hoffmann, 2004; Hooper, 1976), does not have any immediate influence on the agreement patterns in lexical diffusion. Thus, individual nouns may behave very differently even with roughly equally frequent items (also in comparison with high-frequency nouns from previous studies).

This study demonstrates that there are notable differences between nouns, and that verb number is to a great extent determined by the noun. Even though token frequency is of little importance, the usage patterns of individual nouns can often be motivated. Those nouns which imply number (e.g. *minority*, *duo*) are more likely to take plural verbs, and we have also seen that nouns with referents consisting of many members are often more likely to take singular agreement than those with referents consisting of small numbers of members. Individual nouns behave in individual ways, and this fact emphasizes the importance of taking lexical diffusion into account in the study of language change.

Many low-frequency collectives prefer singular verb agreement in BrE, while plural pronominal agreement is often used with these nouns. The results do not indicate a general increase in (unmarked) singular verb agreement, but rather that some low-frequency nouns with intermediate preferences for the singular are changing towards the singular. Some nouns seem to have reached the end point of the shift towards the singular with some scope remaining for variation, while those nouns, such as *trio* and *minority*, that prefer plural verbs are moving further towards the plural. It therefore seems that there is an on-going regularization of the agreement patterns, rather than a drift towards unmarked singular verbs, but that some scope for variation will remain, so that the unmarked singular still may function as a ground against which the plural may function as a figure.

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The present study has touched upon factors which possibly influence the preference for, and in many cases drift towards, singular verb agreement with many collectives, as discussed by, among others, Liedtke (1910), Dekeyser (1975), Bauer (1994), Siemund (1995), Hundt (1998), Levin (2001), and Depraetere (2003). One potential factor that should be mentioned is the influence from other varieties. As is evidenced by the drop in plural verb agreement in Early Modern English (cf. Dekeyser, 1975; Liedtke, 1910), the change in BrE started long before AmE could possibly have influenced it. However, once the drift was under way in BrE, an influence from AmE may have strengthened this development. As seen in the present material, however, there is no unequivocal drift towards singular verb agreement in present-day BrE. Instead, number agreement with verbs appears to be becoming regularized or grammaticalized. Some nouns come to be used with the plural, some may remain variable, and some seem to change towards the singular (cf. Siemund, 1995). This change, which appears to be largely frequency-independent but to some extent motivated by the semantic features of the individual nouns, displays two typical features of a grammaticalization process. If a noun comes to be used obligatorily with singular verbs, both a loss of choice in a grammatical construction, i.e. a loss of intraparadigmatic variability (Lehmann, 1995 [1982]: 138), and a loss of meaning distinctions between the singular and the plural, i.e. desemanticization (Lehmann, 1995 [1982]: 127), have occurred.

Distance, or rather the lack of it, may be a contributing factor to this grammaticalization process. Nixon (1972) and Levin (2001) demonstrate that the longer the distance in words between a collective noun and its verbs and pronouns, the greater the likelihood of plural agreement. Thus, for example, the plural is statistically more likely in sentences like *The* club*, blinded by the gargantuan deeds and magnanimity of a player easily worth three times his Essex salary*, were *deaf to the needs of others* . . . than in *Our* club is *better than Baywatch* . . . where the verb follows immediately after the subject. Curzan (2003: 119) proposes that in the beginning of the change towards natural gender in Old English, distance in words seemed to be 'a critical factor'. She suggests that a long distance between a pronoun and its antecedent generally lowers the likelihood of nonformal agreement, a fact which affected the initial phase of the change. However, Curzan suggests that '[a]s the shift progresses, however, the influence of distance seems to wane, as other factors (semantic, lexical and discursive) become more prominent'. It is possible that the fact that a large majority of all verbs follow directly after their subjects (cf. Levin, 2001: 95f) facilitates a potential change towards singular agreement, because the clash between a singular subject and a plural verb is most conspicuous when they are close to each other. If most verbs directly following their subjects agree with the form of the subject, there may be pressure in the language for more distant verbs to follow suit. Nevertheless, lexical factors (such as the reference to number with *duo*, *trio*, *quartet* and *minority*) seem to be able to resist this drift.

Finally, this study has shown that markedness theory and lexical diffusion provide valuable insights into the changing agreement patterns in BrE. Although frequency was not found to be influential, as is often argued in cases of lexical diffusion, the unmarked alternative, singular verbs and plural pronouns, is the preferred one. The

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different agreement patterns with the individual nouns could be accounted for by making reference to various lexical factors, rather than to token frequency. This is in line with other studies of lexical diffusion (e.g. Curzan, 2003; Levin, forthcoming) where the rate of change does not correlate with frequency, and instead various lexical factors have to be adduced. The expected drift towards the unmarked alternatives (singular verbs and plural pronouns) was reflected in large parts of the data, although some lexical factors seem to be resisting this trend.

Further studies of other corpora with other time depths and other nouns are needed to chart this particular area of language variation and change. This study has shown that markedness and lexical diffusion, but not token frequency, are powerful tools for future research. And the well-known dictum 'each word has its own history' will have to be a guiding principle in this endeavour.

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