Number puzzles

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Some issues in the grammar of one and more than one

Number in English is a puzzling phenomenon – not least for foreign learners, and often also for those who have to teach them. Avowedly 'Standard' forms of English are in something of an in-between stage. The so-called 'singular/plural' distinction is only partly a question of distinguishing *one* as opposed to *more than one*, while number agreement in the verb is inconsistent and not always predictable from the apparent number of the subject – as in *The team was*[?]*/were*[?] *unhappy about losing the game*. While some Germanic languages, and some varieies of English, have altogether discarded verbal agreement in number, standard varieties of English redundantly retain traces of it: *He was, and they were, happy to hear the news*. As Jespersen has put it (1979:216), 'No distinction is made in verbs between the two numbers except in the present tense and there it is found in the third person only…. [I]n the preterit we have the solitary example *was*, plural *were*… .'

Introduction

All standard grammars and works of reference (such as Jespersen, 1979:198; Strang. 1969:50; Huddleston, 1988:87; Börjars and Burridge 2001:50; Quirk *et al*. 1985:297ff; McArthur, 1992:715) tell us there is a distinction between singular and plural in the English noun, except – confusingly – when there isn't such a distinction: that is, the plural of *bird* is *birds* but *deer* stays the same whether there is one or there are twenty-one. Something similar happens in the many words which, we are often told, 'have no plural', such as *knowledge* and *commerce,* and apparently also *industry* and *salt* (at least when used 'uncountably' and we aren't thinking about several industries and various salts). More recently of course we have also had *Englishes*, meaning in effect 'kinds' or 'varieties' of the language.

Then there are nouns like *trousers* and *scissors*, which 'have no singular': that is, the singular/plural distinction does not exist, because they are 'only' plural, as in *a pair of scissors*, and one doesn't ask for a 'scissor'. In addition, adjectives, when they are used as nouns, are plural without any plural marker, as in *The old are vulnerable in winter, The poor are always with us,* and *The good die young*[1].

There are also nouns like *politics* which appear to be plural but are treated as either singular or plural (according to perception, taste and context) and nouns like *cattle* and *people*, which have no plural marker and no singular form, but which contain plurality[2].

Considerations like these clearly undermine claims that 'English nouns express number obligatorily in their morphology' (Börjars & Burridge, 2000:50). We can all agree that *plural* 'denotes more than one' (Quirk *et al.*, 1985:297) or 'refers to more than one as well as two or more' (McArthur, 1992:788), but clearly *singular* is more than that which 'denotes one' (Quirk *et al.*, also p.297). As McArthur points out (1992:939), 'in English

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the term [singular] is often used to include uncountable noun usages like *love* and *wine* even though, in other ways, such nouns are different from singular countable nouns like *horse* and *stone*.'

The discussion in Quirk *et al.* (1985:757) of 'notional concord' (in words like *government*) and 'proximity concord' (see below) are, in fact, contradictions of the fundamental claims made, respectively, about number and agreement with the subject. Quirk *et al.* are right, however, to point out that the 'conflict of grammatical concord and attraction through proximity tends to increase with the distance between the noun phrase head of the subject and the verb' (1985:757). What we can say is that English nouns may combine with the *plural* marker to form a complex meaning (that is, more than one individual referent of the sort named by the noun[3]) and that the absence of the *plural* marker is capable of a range of interpretations consistent with non-plurality: see below.

English has lost most of the redundant agreements of other words in number. Thus, *the* and *a*(*n*) (but not *this/these*, *that/those*[4]), adjectives, relative pronouns, participles and most verbs do not agree in number[5]. Of course, where there is agreement in number, there is no simple correlation of verb forms with singular and plural number. The lexical surveys by Pam Peters in *ET* (especially in 1999) admirably show the diversity of usage along several dimensions. (It is important to note also the coherence [or 'distributive agreement', according to Quirk *et al.*, 1985:765] between the subject of a verb and a nominal complement or object, as in *Those women are teachers* and *The students raised their hands* – where 'more than one' is implicit in both positions.)

With reference to verbal agreement, on the one hand, speakers show considerable diversity in whether or not they maintain noun-verb agreements. Thus, we often hear such forms as *There is plans…/there is proposals… There was cries of joy when the miners were found alive* (BBC report) and inadquate ellipses as in *A man was killed and two others hurt* (for *were hurt* where number agreement has been ignored). There is also 'natural hesitation', as Jespersen (1979:218) has called it, when speakers have to link a subject and complement of different numbers by *is* or *are*, as in *Manners is/Manners are a good thing* and *Skills is/Skills are the focus of our programme*.

Furthermore, speakers have a tendency to 'proximity agreement' (concord), 'the agreement of the verb with a closely preceding noun instead of the noun head that actually functions as the subject of the sentence' (Chalker & Weiner, 2000:18–19), as in *A parcel of books have arrived for you* and *A discussion of the problems are taking place*. A combination of two focuses may account for *One of the important things are inclusivity issues* (BBC interview). A similar phenomenon is the tendency to make *those* and *these* agree with the 'psychologically' most prominent noun, as in *those sort of things*, *these kind of discussions*. Here the agreement is not with the apparent grammatical head[6], but with a complement of it. Similarly, agreement of the verb with a subject relative clause 'depends on the number of the determined noun' (Quirk *et al.* 1985:755) in *What ideas he has are his wife's*, *What was once a palace is now a pile of rubble*. Again, it is the psychologically prominent noun which determines the number in the agreement.

Such complications arise in part from the fact that number agreement is largely redundant (but not entirely so: see below). On the other hand, confusions arise because the so-called 'singular' is frequently not really a matter of number. It would be better to call it a 'non-plural' (cf. Mulder 1989 and Rastall 1993 & 1995b). In the first place, the singular is the unmarked form. It cannot be a sign because it has no signifier, whereas the plural is marked by the addition of the (*e*)*s* form or through a vowel change or changes (*woman/women*) or occasionally by a zero allomorph[7] (*deer/deer*) or an amalgam. In the second place, the *non-plural* may be used where there is:

1 countability and only one individual referent is named, i.e. the true singular
2 countability and there is no referent (*no man is an island, no delegate was present*) – This is not singularity but total absence of a referent of the noun
3 absence of countability, *knowledge*, *water*, *bread*, *independence*, *English*) – These are Jespersen's 'mass nouns' (1979:206). This can, of course, be overcome by referring to particular examples seen as separately identifiable referents (*various mineral waters*, *six pitta breads* (example seen in an Asda superstore), *world Englishes*, etc.).

The sense of wholeness or unity that may be found in collectives such as *the family/*

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team/parliament is…(as opposed to seeing the referent as composed of separate individuals – *the family/team/parliament are*…). This sense of wholeness is found also in numbers and measures: *One million pounds is a large sum, Three foot (of wood) is enough*, *Five hours is a long time to wait, Two thirds of the cake has already been eaten*. As Jespersen notes (1979:212): '[A] whole group of words containing a numeral may be treated as a singular meaning a unity of a higher order.' This sense of a unity can also come 'when two [or more] words form one conception' (Jespersen, 1979:217):

4 Two and three is five.
5 Fish and chips is expensive nowadays.
6 Bed and Breakfast is available.
7 The prime minister and government is determined to bring in the legislation.
8 Accuracy and precision is needed.
9 Higher tax and more regulation is making the UK uncompetitive[8].

As Peters (1999:6ff) shows, speakers vary in their use of verbal number agreement with grammatically complex subjects such as:

10 Neither Smith nor Jones is/are here.
11 Smith as well as Jones has/have come.

The sense of two or more individuals acting as one may override a formally marked plurality, or the sense of a plurality of individuals may override a grammatically 'singular' subject. The same is true of the use of tags in Peters' example:

12 The panel must identify a single winner, mustn't it/they?

The issue is one of how the speaker perceives the referent, and that may vary according to context. It is interesting to note that the coherence of number with numeral determiners is normally preserved (*one cat, two cats, much time, many times*, etc.) except – partly non-standardly – in names of measures (*three ton of soil; it weighed four pound; it measured five foot*, etc.).

We may note also the particularisation of something that is named by a plural but seen as a single unit, as in *a barracks*, *a golf links*, and *a chemical works* (Jespersen, 1979:205). Comparably, reference is often made by means of plural proper names to something perceived as a single entity, as in:

13 Southwest Trains has increased fares recently.
14 Great Universal Stores is making larger profits.
15 The United States is in negotiations with Mexico.

Representation of an entire class, especially of living creatures, can however be made through the singular rather than the plural, as in:

16 The horse is a useful animal (that is, any horse).
17 They are shooting duck (that is, all ducks or any duck)[9].

Conclusion

The upshot of these remarks is that *plural* is positively marked and implies reference to more than one (as in *one and a half miles*) or two or more individual referents of a given sort. The referents have to be (perceived as) capable of particularisation and being counted. In the case of *non-plural* there may be singularity where the referent is a single individual, there may be no individual referred to, or the referent is perceived as a whole, acting as a single referent, or as something for which counting is impossible or irrelevant.

For the speaker, a series of decisions is needed. In using a word such as *oak*, *success*, or *bread*, the speaker has to decide whether the oak, success, or bread referred to is seen as an a-numerical whole (*Bread is a good food*, *Oak is a hard wood*, *Success in life is what most people strive for*); as a particular or countable example or instantiation (*The oak I saw in the forest/the oak used for making the table, Her work on the contract was a success, Granary loaves are a good bread*); or as more than one referent (*The oaks in the forest, Oaks of different sorts were used in making the furniture, Successes in business are hard to achieve; This packet contains six pitta breads*).

The same set of decisions is involved in verbal agreement of number and coherence of the complement or object. Inconsistencies arise not only because of conflicting categories or perceptions, as we have seen, but also because of confusing contexts and a tendency to reduce effort by removing redundancy.

While verbal agreement is generally redundant in English, it *can* be useful in helping the hearer to determine which of the interpretations is correct in cases where plural is not

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marked in the subject nucleus, e.g. where an adjective is used as a noun: *The old are vulnerable in winter* (more than one particularised referent) as opposed to (*Where houses are concerned, the old is attractive to many buyers* (i.e. whatever is seen uncountably as old). It is noteworthy that, while number is positively marked in the noun, it is the non-plural form which is marked in verbal agreement (third person *s*, except *are* in the verb *to be*). This is also a useful piece of redundancy showing non-plurality, which may partially explain its survival.

It seems that *plural* has to be positively selected in English. The possibility of a distinction between more than one referent and a single referent conflicts with the usual grammatical form of the attributive noun as an apparent 'singular' (actually an a-numerical determiner of classification) even when there is a plural implication (*a shipyard, a car manufacturer*). It is not surprising, that there should be a tendency to exploit the *plural/non-plural* distinction in the attributive (pre-nominal) position in recent English: *a medal winner/a medals winner*, *a World Cup final match/a World Cup finals match* (in the final stages but not necessarily the final itself), and to extend the use of plural to plural references even where it was previously not used: *an antiques dealer*, *a roads inspector*, *a rates demand*, etc. (cf. Rastall 1993): that is, a sense that real plurality should be signalled.

A great deal of confusion for learners and apparently confusing usage among native speakers is explicable and indeed 'treatable' if we restrict the idea of *singular* to genuine cases and think more about any underlying non-plurality (wholeness, non-existence, genuine singularity, or non-numerality of the referent) in others. The *singular/plural* distinction is largely a hangover from the traditional modelling of English grammar on classical lines. It doesn't do justice to the reality of English today. ■

Notes

1 In Early Modern English, a singular conception and agreement was possible with an adjective as subject, as Partridge (1973:128) points out in his discussion of the linguistic features of the King James Bible (KJB), giving the example *The wicked is snared in the work of his own hands* (*Psalm IX*, 16).

2 *People* can also be a collective *a warlike people*, *The people speaks with one voice* (*COD*, 1974:901) and, in Early Modern English, *The people is grass* (AV, Isaiah 40, 7). Partridge (1973:134) notes the collective (singular agreements with) *people* and *cattle* in the KJB.

3 Words like *cattle* can be regarded as 'amalgams' – cf. Martinet, 1989:112.

4 These words are mutually exclusive with *the*, *a*, and other signs and thus stand in the same relative position as articles; see Rastall *ET* 1995/2.

5 The first and third person pronouns can be said to have a number distinction, but no longer, of course, the second.

6 As Jespersen notes (1979:202) 'there is a tendency to treat *kind of* and *sort of* [also *type of (PR)*] as inseparable units'. In such cases as the above, the conflict between the apparently less important noun *sort/kind* or *type* in the head or nuclear position and the more important noun as complement of a preposition has led to a change in grammatical structure. *Sort of/ kind of/type of* should be seen as 'pre-nominals' determining the nuclear noun. In that way the agreement of the article with the main noun becomes quite regular (see Rastall *ET* 1995a for a discussion of the noun phrase). Thus, *([these] → ([sort of] → things))* – square brackets for omissible units.

7 Not the same as the absence of any signifier.

8 Again, there is nothing new in this. Note *I Corinthians 13* in *KJV – And now abideth faith, hope and charitie, these three.* Partridge (1973:136) gives further examples in *KJV* and Jespersen in Shakespeare (1979:217).

9 There is a useful list also in McArthur, 1992:715–6.

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