
THE SINGULAR PLURALITY OF VERB DISCORD IN
ENGLISH*

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Number discord between subject and verb raises a theoretical problem for which linguists have, as yet, provided no satisfactory answer. Since facts of both morphology and syntax are involved, it is a problem which brings into focus the relation between what Guillaumians call *tongue* and *discourse*.¹ First I shall outline the problem by giving a number of examples, and then try to suggest one avenue which might be explored in the hopes of finding a solution.

The problem of discord is clearly and succinctly posed by the title of a book:

(1) *How a People Die*.

On the one hand, the substantive *people*, having no *-s* inflection and taking the indefinite article *a*, is clearly singular. On the other hand, the verb *die*, having no *-s* inflection, agrees with a subject that is plural. It would seem, then, that *people* is both singular and plural in the same sentence. In other words, there appears to be a flagrant contradiction in number on the level of discourse. A first reaction to this example is, of course, to say it is so infrequent that it really does not concern the mainstream of usage. However, this way of treating, or rather of dismissing the problem must be abandoned when confronted with Arne Juul's *On Concord of Number in Modern English* (1975) with its wealth of data drawn from the best sources of current written English. Here we find other examples of discord with *people* as in:

(2) We, therefore, decided from the day we took office, that the strength of the nation must come first, that when its strength was assured then, and only then, could we let up, and that *this people are* mature enough, when the final choice has to be made, to recognize this (36).

Here, *this* indicates a singular, *are* a plural.²

This type of discord is by no means restricted to the substantive *people*; it seems to be possible, in fact, with all so-called 'collectives.' For example, although the substantive *company* is usually found with a verb indicating a singular, in:

- (3) *This company are* superbly managed and their products will continue to be in great demand (85)

there is discord between the number of agreement evoked by the verb and the number of the substantive and its demonstrative.

So far we have given examples in which the number of the substantive is clearly expressed by the article or demonstrative. In most cases, however, only the grammatical morphology of the substantive (zero ending) provides a mark of the singular. The following examples are typical:

- (4) The group *say* their religious philosophy cannot accept that . . . (90).
(5) "Indeed," the unit *say*, "there is a strong interdisciplinary emphasis, reflected in work across subject-barriers and discussion of education issues in mixed study groups" (90-91).

The next case is less frequent:

- (6) Our client, an expanding and go-ahead Company, *are* looking for an equally go-ahead man to be responsible to the Chief Executive (95).
(7) Our client *are* amongst the largest retail groups in South Africa. Their chain of 300 superior shops sells dresses . . . (95).

These last two examples may be rather surprising at first, but they indicate that some speakers have a new way of thinking the notion of *client*.

It sometimes arises that two verbs, one indicating a singular, the other a plural, take the same substantive as subject:

- (8) The committee *says* that the proposals for the first cycle depend on the acceptance of the diploma as a valuable qualification, and *say* "no award can acquire high prestige overnight" (99).
(9) The company *market* Vogue and Butterick paper patterns and, in addition, through a subsidiary *markets* sports wear (102).

Such examples are revealing because they suggest that a substantive can be evoked as subject in two different ways, without any change in its grammatical form.

In the verb's agreement with a collective, however, there is not always free choice. For example, Juul maintains that the verb must agree with a notion seen as singular in:

- (10) The committee at present *consists* of 10 educationists closely involved in different aspects of modern teaching methods (105).

In other words, *consist* would not be possible here. On the other hand, agreement must be made in the plural in the following:

- (11) Another group, mostly extroverts, *brush* their teeth in the hope they will be bright and shiny (105).

Here *brushes* (and *its*) are excluded as possibilities. These examples show that in certain contexts only one way of evoking the notion of the subject is permissible.

So far we have given examples of discord wherein a verb indicates plural agreement with a substantive in the singular. The opposite case is also found, as, for example, in sentences of the type:

- (12) Results *is* what I want!

This type often occurs when the plural substantive is accompanied by an expression of quantity, as in:

- (13) The last few years *has* seen the advent of enclosed antique supermarkets (145).

This example is to be compared with the following, where agreement is in the plural, as the grammatical morphology of the substantive might lead one to expect:

- (14) The last few years *have* seen the creation of an ever increasing army of enthusiasts (145).

However, agreement in the singular with a plural substantive does not necessarily require an expression of quantity, as the following examples show:

- (15) Raising the school leaving age *is* the first priority, absorbing nearly half the extra money in the first two years. Extra teachers *is* the next major item (159).
(16) The crippling costs of keeping these establishments going *means* that the society has no financial resources to meet new demands (162).

Such examples indicate that there is a way of thinking the subject that permits agreement in the singular, even if the substantive is grammatically plural.

Finally, the case of a subject composed of two or more substantives might be mentioned:

- (17) Bread and butter *is* nourishing.
(18) Bread and butter *are* nourishing.

Juul (184) gives the following striking example from a periodical:

- (19) The Games Parks, the palm-fringed beaches and the immense business potential of East Africa *is* now less than half-a-day from London.

He remarks that when the same advertisement appears in a later number of the periodical, there is a slight but significant change: *is* has been replaced by *are*. In examples like these, we are

manifestly confronted with two ways of grouping the notions evoked by the substantives, two ways of thinking of the subject of the verb.

These sentences and the hundreds of others cited by Juul (see especially 243ff.) constitute an impressive body of data involving, in each case, contradictory indications concerning number. Juul does not go on to deal with the problem thus posed. Any science of observation, however, necessarily assumes that there is a certain order in its object, and so as linguists we must postulate that language, the object of linguistics, is not incoherent and random but rationally organized in some way. We are then confronted with the problem of deciphering these apparently contradictory facts to see how they can lead us to a view of the underlying order.

To explore a means of reconciling the data, we must examine the tongue/discourse binarity more closely. Tongue includes not a set of ready-made items, but rather the formative elements and the constructional program, the mental itinerary, required to form any given type of word, say, a substantive. To bring to mind this constructional operativity presupposed by every word we use, Guillaume liked to characterize a word's final form as its *morphogeny* (rather than its morphology) so that he might contrast it with the word's *morphogenesis*, the operation of forming the word at the moment of speaking (Guillaume 1973a). Part of this program for constructing any substantive is the system of number, which is not quite so simple and straightforward as one might think at first glance. Suffice it to say here that morphogenesis endows each substantive with a grammatical number, singular or plural, usually marked by ϕ and *-s* respectively.

Discourse, on the other hand, being a result of the act of language, presupposes that the words thus produced have been grouped into phrases and that these phrases have been integrated to form a sentence. It is at this moment in the act of language—a moment which necessarily arises later than that of the morphogenesis of the words involved—that the relation between a verb and its subject is actually established. That is to say, the substantive has already been formed with its morphogeny, involving grammatical number, before it becomes part of a noun phrase which is then made subject. As a consequence, we are led to propose that the verb agrees, not with the substantive as such, but with the noun phrase, its subject.

The point of all this is to distinguish clearly between the number of the substantive, which results from morphogenesis,

and the number of the noun phrase, which provides a basis for the agreement of the verb. We have just seen that the substantive and the noun phrase are necessarily formed at different moments in the extremely brief act of language (Valin 1971) required to produce a finished bit of English discourse. Because the number of the substantive and that of the noun phrase arise at different moments, the possibility of each having a different number is introduced and, by the same token, a ground for resolving the apparent contradiction in usage is provided. The fact of distinguishing between the number of the substantive and that of the noun phrase in no way limits the possibility of concord, where both are singular or both plural, as in the vast majority of cases. However it does provide for the possibility of situations arising where there is a discrepancy between the two, and this would give rise to the cases of discord cited above.

Thanks to the distinction between tongue, discourse and the intervening act of language, we have been led to distinguish between morphology and syntax from the point of view of time, that is, between the moment of forming the substantive and the moment—later in the act of language—of forming the noun phrase (see Guillaume (1973b: 17–25) for more detail). Thus through the principle of operativity, we have been able to provide a theoretical framework, a hypothesis, for approaching the problem of discord between substantive and verb: the discord arises, not between verb and subject noun phrase, but between the noun phrase and its substantive. In itself, this hypothesis does not appear to be implausible, but before being seriously entertained as a basis for an explanation it must be examined to see if it is sufficiently general to account for all the data. In other words, is this hypothesis broad enough to be able to include the various contexts where discord is actually observed? A sampling of the data tends to confirm the viability of the hypothesis, as we shall now see.

In our example:

(17) Bread and butter *is* nourishing.

the distinction between the two substantives and the single noun phrase is quite clear, as is the fact that the verb agrees with the notion of the noun phrase. With *are*:

(18) Bread and butter *are* nourishing.

although there would be no change in the morphogeny of the substantives, the noun phrase would no longer evoke an image

of a piece of bread and butter, but rather the two food-stuffs. In the first case the verb agrees with an impression of oneness arising from the notion of the noun phrase, in the second case with an impression of more than one. Similarly in:

(13) The last few years *has* seen the advent of . . .

the verb agrees with an impression of oneness suggested by the noun phrase, which evokes a single period of time. On the other hand, in:

(14) The last few years *have* seen the creation of . . .

the noun phrase emphasizes the impression of several years, thereby suggesting that the creation came about gradually during the period. In the example:

(15) Extra teachers *is* the next major item.

the noun phrase clearly gives rise to some such notion as 'the question of,' and the verb agrees with the impression of singleness involved. If the writer had used *are*, it would have suggested that he was thinking more of the individuals concerned.

The expressive effects of the verb can sometimes be quite subtle. Thus in a case like:

(2) . . . *this* people *are* mature enough . . . to recognize this.

people represents a single group, but it seems to be viewed as a number of individuals, perhaps with the suggestion that the recognizing is a matter for individuals. This appears to be the nuance of the book title:

(1) How a People Die.

One gets the impression of a group expiring one by one.

An impression of more-than-oneness comes out quite clearly in an example like the following, where agreement in the singular would not be acceptable:

(11) Another group, mostly extroverts, *brush* their teeth . . .

Here one is obliged to think of the individuals who make up the group, since teeth belong only to individuals. One can hardly have group ownership of any set of teeth.

This rapid survey suggests that to take the notion expressed by the noun phrase as the basis for verb agreement—*constructio ad sensum* as tradition put it—we have a hypothesis which is sufficiently general to be viable. Furthermore, it seems that this hypothesis provides a useful basis for accounting for observable

shifts of meaning, which are as much a part of the data as changes in verb form. However, since each sentence evokes its own meaning, it is clear that a painstaking examination of usage must be undertaken to distinguish in each case just what gives rise to the impression of singularity or plurality associated with the noun phrase. For example, in:

- (9) The company *market* Vogue and Butterick paper patterns and, in addition, through a subsidiary *markets* sports wear.

is it an impression of diverse outlets for paper patterns that calls for agreement in the plural (*market*), as opposed to a single channel for sports wear (the subsidiary) which gives rise to a singular sense reflected in *markets*? The hypothesis can be considered confirmed only after working through all available data to see if the impressive nuances found agree with the explanation proposed.

In conclusion, when regarded only from the point of view discourse, the phenomenon of verb discord appears to involve a contradiction. If regarded in the light of the prior act of language, however, the phenomenon can be explained by assuming that different operations give rise to the number of the substantive and that of the noun phrase. Although this hypothesis has yet to undergo detailed confrontation with the data, its initial plausibility is enhanced by the fact that it concords with the already established body of Guillaumean theory.

NOTES

- * Another version of this article was presented as a working paper within the framework of the *Séminaire de syntaxe* at the Fonds Gustave Guillaume, where it benefited from the comments of a number of colleagues.
- 1 For an accessible discussion of the Guillaumian terms 'tongue' and 'discourse,' see Hewson (1981:163-64).
 - 2 It might be noted in passing that *people* poses another problem: how to explain the fact that a substantive without *-s* takes a plural determiner (cf. *these people, these peoples*). An attempt to solve this problem may be found in Hirtle (1982).

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