

Problems in Subject-Verb Agreement

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Problems in subject-verb agreement

Since subject-verb agreement is a problem for learners at all levels and even puzzles native speakers at times, many reference grammars or style handbooks include a discussion of this topic. One of the most comprehensive treatments is in Crews (1980). He provides the reader with the preferred form as well as acceptable alternatives and covers more rules than most other sources. However, Crews tends to be more *prescriptive* than *descriptive* in his account; i.e., he tells the reader what to do rather than telling the reader what educated native speakers do. We try to be as descriptive as possible in our review of the rules of subject-verb agreement because we feel the ESL/EFL teacher must be aware of current usage as well as the traditional rules.

When we discuss the usage preferences of native speakers with respect to subject-verb agreement, we draw heavily on studies done by Van Shaik (1976) and Farhady (1977). They both surveyed the performance and preferences of large numbers of native speakers and pointed out a number of discrepancies between traditional rules and the elicited performance of native speakers.

Whereas some cases of subject-verb agreement are puzzling mainly to nonnative speakers, several cases cause difficulty for native and nonnative speakers alike. We will now review many of the problematic areas in subject-verb agreement along with the more predictable and obvious rules.

The general rule

In the most straightforward cases the subject-verb agreement rule tells us to use the third person singular inflection if the subject is a singular proper name, a singular common noun, a mass noun, or a third person singular pronoun. Elsewhere, i.e., for proper or common plural nouns, for first or second person singular pronouns, or for plural pronouns, no inflection is used in the present tense:

1. What is meant by the perceptual saliency of a form is whether or not it is easy for learners to hear. Because final consonants and consonant clusters tend to be more weakly articulated in English than initial consonants or clusters, this morpheme is in fact somewhat difficult to hear.

Third person singular inflection

John walk s to school.
 The bus stop s here.
 This water taste s funny.
 She want s an apple.

No inflection

The Smiths walk to church.
 These books contain good information.
 { I
 You } want an apple.
 { We
 You } want an apple.
 They

These examples of the general rule are easy and cause little or no difficulty—at least not at the conceptual level. However, there are so many special or difficult cases concerning this rule that we will fill several pages with subrules and examples as we try to give you a complete picture of the problem.

Collective nouns (see Chapter 15) may take either a singular or plural inflection depending on the meaning.²

The Gang of Four has been discredited. (= the gang as a whole)

The Gang of Four have been discredited. (= the individual gang members)

Rules for persistently troublesome cases

1 Some common and proper nouns ending in -s—including -ics nouns—are singular and take a singular inflection.

No news is good news.

This series is very interesting.

Physics is a difficult subject.

Wales is a lovely area to visit.

2 Plural titles of books, plays, operas, films, etc., take the singular.

Great Expectations was written by
 Dickens.

The Pirates of Penzance is a lovely
 operetta.

3 Nouns occurring in sets of two take the singular when the noun pair is present, but the plural when pair is absent—regardless of whether one pair or more is being referred to.

A pair of trousers is on the sofa.

Todd's trousers are on the sofa.

This pair of shoes needs new heels.

These shoes need new heels.

4 A number of takes the plural, but the number of takes the singular.

A number of students have dropped that course.

The number of students in this school is 2,000.

5 Fractions and percentages take the singular when they modify a mass noun and the plural when they modify a plural noun; either the singular or the plural may be used when they modify a collective noun.

MASS: One-half of the toxic waste has escaped.

Fifty percent of the toxic waste has escaped.

PLURAL: Two-thirds of the students are satisfied with the class.

Sixty-six percent of the students are satisfied with the class.

2. In American English there still is a strong tendency to use the singular inflection with a collective noun subject. In British English plural inflections are more freely used:

(Am. E.) My family is on vacation.

(Br. E.) My family are on holiday.

COLLECTIVE: One tenth of the population of Egypt $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is Christian} \\ \text{are Christians} \end{array} \right\}$.

Ten percent of the population of Egypt $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is Christian} \\ \text{are Christians} \end{array} \right\}$.

6 *Conflicting rules for none and problems with all, each, and every.*

Many traditional grammars state that when used as a subject, *none* is always singular regardless of what follows in a prepositional phrase. The argument for this rule is that *none* means *not one*. However, usage surveys give us a different picture. When *none* refers to a mass noun, the inflection is uncontroversially singular, but when it refers to a plural noun—human or nonhuman—usage seems to be more or less equally divided between the singular and plural inflection.

The percentages that we supply under the example sentences indicate the proportion of native speakers that favored each form in the survey cited.

MASS: None of the toxic waste has escaped.

PLURAL (Human): None of those firemen _____ hearing the alarm
enjoy—47%; enjoys—53%
 go off. (Van Shaik, 1976)

PLURAL (Nonhuman): None of the costumes he has tried _____ him.
fit—50%; fits—50%
 (Farhady, 1977)

Clearly, the traditional rule is inadequate. Additional research based on analysis of spoken and written English should be carried out to see if a more adequate rule of usage exists. In the meantime, ESL/EFL teachers must be aware of the fact that when *none* refers to a plural noun, either the singular or the plural inflection may be used, if current usage is any indication.

Although *none* is the most problematic quantifier with respect to subject-verb agreement, ESL/EFL learners also experience problems with the quantifiers *all*, *each*, and *every(one)*.

The rules for subject-verb agreement with *all* are as follows: If the noun that *all* modifies is a mass noun subject, then subject-verb agreement is singular:

All (of) (the) water is polluted.

If *all* modifies a countable plural subject noun, subject-verb agreement is plural:

All (of) (the) students have arrived.

A problem arises, however, when *all* is used to quantify a collective noun subject (see Chapter 15). Theoretically, one should be able to use either singular or plural subject-verb agreement in such cases. We tested such an item with 40 native speakers of English, and the results seem to support this theoretical duality:

All of my family _____ present.
is—55%; are—43%; no response—2%

Many style books, however, admonish us not to use the preposition *of* after the quantifier *all* in our writing. We thus administered a similar item, minus the *of*, to the same group of people a week later. The results were as follows:

All my family _____ present.
is—68%; are—26%; used both—6%

Thus the presence or absence of the preposition *of* definitely seems to have an effect on subject-verb agreement, since in the item without *of* our consultants favored singular agreement to a noticeably greater degree.

When the subject quantifier is *each* or *every(one)*, the rules are more straightforward. When the quantified subject noun is singular, there is no problem: the subject-verb agreement is always singular, e.g.:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Each} \\ \text{Every} \\ \text{Each and every} \end{array} \right\} \text{ student has a textbook.}$$

However, when the quantified noun refers to a definite plural set, there can be problems for ESL students since the quantifiers are grammatically singular yet the set they are modifying is notionally plural, e.g.:

Each of his examples $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{was} \\ \text{were} \end{array} \right\}$ out of context.

Every one of these athletes $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{runs} \\ \text{run} \end{array} \right\}$ the mile in four minutes.

The traditional prescriptive rule maintains that singular subject-verb agreement applies in such cases because *each* and *every(one)* are functioning as grammatically singular subjects. In these cases native speaker preference closely mirrors the prescriptive rule, since the same 40 subjects that reported divided usage for *all* were in agreement (93% or greater) that the verbs in the above two sentences should be *was* and *runs*. Thus the prescriptive rule and current usage both support singular subject-verb agreement for subjects with *each* and *every(one)*. ESL/EFL students should thus be made aware of this rule and encouraged to follow it, especially in their writing.

7 *Confusion with majority and minority.*

Depending on which reference grammar one consults, the nouns *majority* and *minority* are variously described as singular, plural, or collective. Sometimes conflicting statements occur within one and the same grammar.³

The only truly satisfying description of these words that we found was in Fowler (1965: pp. 349–350, 366). Fowler maintains that *majority* and *minority* have three related but slightly different meanings:

1. An abstract or generic meaning that refers to superiority of numbers; the reference can be human or nonhuman, but the number is always singular, e.g.:

The great majority is helpless.

2. A specific meaning where one of two or more sets has a numerical plurality (*majority*) or numerical inferiority (*minority*); the examples make reference to political parties, and grammatically these cases are like collectives and can be either singular or plural, e.g.:

The majority was/were determined to press its/their victory.

3. Quirk et al. (1972), for example, put *majority* and *minority* under collectives on p. 190 and then on p. 366 cite the following as an example of a grammatically singular subject being perceived as notionally plural, i.e. being attracted to the plural: The majority of them are Moslems.

3. A specific meaning where most (*majority*) or less than half (*minority*) of an explicit set of persons is being referred to. Here the number should always be plural, e.g.:

A majority of my friends advise it.

What we need is a definitive usage study that will confirm or modify Fowler's classification as appropriate.

The limited data we have from Van Shaik and Farhady support Fowler's first and third categories, respectively:

A majority of votes _____ needed to win. (Van Shaik, 1976)

is—81%; *are*—19%

The majority of Democrats _____ opposed to local blackouts of the Game of the Week. (Farhady, 1977)

are—80%; *is*—20%

We need more complete, more definitive data before we can make a final statement; however, until then, Fowler's analysis seems the best one available.

8 *Plural unit words of distance, money, time, etc., take the singular.*

distance: 1,000 miles is a long distance.

money: 2 million dollars is a lot of money.

time: 5 years is a long time to spend on an M.A. thesis.

9 *Arithmetical operations take the singular.*

addition: One plus one { *is* / equals } two.

subtraction: Four minus two { *is* / equals } two.

multiplication: Two times two { *is* / equals } four.

division: Ten divided by two { *is* / equals } five.

The proximity principle

For the correlatives *either . . . or* and *neither . . . nor* traditional grammarians argue for the proximity rule; i.e., subject-verb agreement should occur with the noun nearest to the verb:

Either my sister or *my brothers* are going to do it.

Neither the books nor *the movie* was helpful.

Either my brothers or *my sister* is going to do it.

Neither the movie nor *the books* were helpful.

Do native speakers consistently follow the proximity principle? Not really, but they support it more strongly for *either . . . or* than they do for *neither . . . nor*.

Either your eyesight or your brakes _____ at fault. (Van Shaik, 1976)

was—31%; *were*—69%

Either the professor or her assistants _____ explain every lesson.

has to—33%; *have to*—67%

(Farhady, 1977)

Neither the students nor the teacher _____ that textbook. (Van Shaik, 1976)
likes—49% like—51%

Apparently, *neither . . . nor* can easily be perceived as a negative conjunction, which would explain the slight preference for the plural form that Van Shaik's questionnaire elicited.

Personal pronouns pose special problems when used with the correlatives, where the rule of proximity would have us produce *either you or I am, neither you nor he is*, etc. In such cases, Farhady and Van Shaik found even less agreement with the proximity principle than they did when correlatives involved regular nouns:

Neither you nor he _____ able to answer the question. (Farhady, 1977)
was—40%: were—60%

Neither you nor I _____ trained for that job. (Van Shaik, 1976).
am—12%: is—15%: are—73%

The immediately preceding example is especially interesting because *are* is a gap-filling substitute for *am* in some other constructions (*I'm going, too, aren't I? Aren't I lucky?*). *Am* is apparently too limited a form for use in those correlatives where *I* is the second noun phrase constituent.

One other case where the proximity principle does in fact apply and where traditional grammar would not prescribe its use is in sentences beginning with *there* followed by conjoined noun phrases.⁴

Traditional rule: There are { a girl and two boys }
two boys and a girl } in the room.

Proximity rule: There { is a girl and two boys }
are two boys and a girl } in the room.

We have informally surveyed many native speakers, and a majority apply the proximity rule in such cases. So again we seem to have a situation where the actual usage preference of native speakers differs from the traditional prescription.

The principle of nonintervention

Many reference grammars make a point of emphasizing that a singular subject noun or pronoun should take a singular verb inflection; the speaker or writer should ignore all plural forms in intervening prepositional phrases and other expressions such as *together with, along with, as well as*, and *not others*.

When common or proper nouns are subjects, the nonintervention principle seems to be well supported:

The major cause of highway accidents in 1976 _____ drunk drivers.
was—93%: were—7%
(Farhady, 1977)

Peter, along with his 3 brothers, _____ to open a store. (Van Shaik, 1976)
plans—84%: plan—16%

The boy, not his parents, _____ being punished. (Van Shaik, 1976)
is—88%: are—12%

However, when the subject followed by the prepositional phrase is *either* or *neither*, the

4. For a discussion of subject-verb agreement in *there* sentences with nonconjoined subjects, see Chapter 21.

nonintervention principle weakens and perhaps comes into direct conflict with the proximity principle.⁵

Neither of them _____ ready for marriage. (Van Shaik, 1976)
is—66%; are—34%

Neither of them _____ enough money to afford a car. (Farhady, 1977)
has—50%; have—50%

A problem with relative-clause antecedents

Subject-verb agreement is particularly problematic in certain types of relative clauses. In an example such as the following:

Marsha is one of those rare individuals who _____ finished the M.A. early.
have/has

traditional grammars maintain that the antecedent of *who* is *individuals* and thus *have* is the correct verb form. This antecedent rule conflicts with the nonintervention principle; also, it does not agree at all with the preferences of the native speakers that Van Shaik and Farhady surveyed:

Jack is one of those rare individuals who _____ decided on a definite career.
have—16%; has—84%
 (Farhady, 1977)

He is one of the best students that _____ ever come to this school.
have—14%; has—86%
 (Van Shaik, 1976)

In fact, of the five survey items Van Shaik and Farhady used, only one was a bit weaker than the two above with respect to contradicting the rule for this type of relative clause:

I am one of those who _____ equal rights. (Van Shaik, 1976)
favor—35%; favors—65%

However, even in this example, where the presence of the *I* subject and pronominal use of *those* appear to be mitigating factors, the rule is still contradicted by an almost 2:1 margin. Clearly, most native speakers are using *one* as the antecedent of *who* or *that*, and the rule should be rewritten to reflect actual usage more accurately.

The clausal subject rule

Traditional grammar tells us that when a clause functions as a subject, the subject-verb agreement is singular—regardless of any plural noun phrases that occur as part of the subject clause or the verb phrase, e.g.:

That the children want friends doesn't surprise me.
 What they want is revolutions everywhere.

5. Van Shaik (1976) and Farhady (1977) only surveyed responses for *neither*. We suspected that similar problems might also arise with the usage of *either*, so we surveyed 43 consultants concerning the usage of *either* in a similar construction:

Either of the stories _____ going to be acceptable.
is—74%; are—24%; accepted both—2%

While there is also some weakening of the nonintervention principle in this item, it appears that *either* is perceived a bit more strongly as being singular than is *neither*. (See the description of correlative conjunctions in Chapter 23 for further discussion of this issue.)

We do not have survey information on this type of agreement; however, we suspect that the second type of subject clause cited above causes some difficulty—even among native speakers. This seems especially true when the verb is followed by a plural noun phrase.

Conclusion

In most English sentences subject-verb agreement is straightforward and noncontroversial. However, it is quite clear that there are a number of unresolved questions, too. In fact there may well be other problems that we have inadvertently omitted from this discussion. We do not claim to have exhausted the topic.

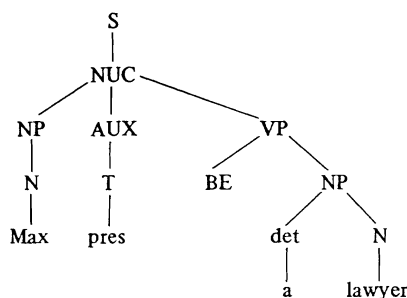
One of the reasons for the problems is that subject-verb agreement has both syntactic and semantic aspects. When a form is syntactically singular but semantically plural (or vice versa), there is a potential conflict. Another reason may be the existence of several different principles dealing with potentially conflicting aspects of subject-verb agreement. We have seen sentences where the proximity principle conflicts with the nonintervention principle and other sentences where the nonintervention principle conflicts with the antecedent principle. Where such conflicts occur, subject-verb agreement becomes problematic.

Our advice to ESL/EFL teachers is that they be aware of the major traditional rules and also of those instances where current usage seems to clearly deviate from the traditional prescription. Also, informal contexts will permit a greater range of acceptable forms than will formal contexts; thus teachers must be flexible about their correction standards.

In this grammar course our sentence derivations will indicate that subject-verb agreement has taken place only in those sentences where it explicitly applies to produce a special verb form. However, we want to emphasize that a subject-verb agreement check is needed only for sentences that have a tensed auxiliary. In actual fact, though, all verbs other than BE never require subject-verb agreement if past tense appears in the AUX or if the subject is plural.

Consider the following tree diagram and derivation for a sentence which requires subject-verb agreement.

Max is a lawyer.



Output of base: Max pres BE a lawyer

Affix attachment: Max BE + pres a lawyer

Subject-verb agreement and morphological rules: Max is a lawyer.

In this example, even if you change the tense to past or if you change the subject (number, person), subject-verb agreement will still be required.

Now consider this second example: