

8.6.1 Concord with plurals not ending in -s

Zero plurals, like *sheep*, do not change between singular and plural (see 4.8.4). These forms appear to break the concord rule, but in fact do not. (The subject noun phrase is marked by [] in examples.)

1a [*The sheep*] **is** infected by ingesting the mollusc. (ACAD†)

1b In its grassy centre [*the dark-wooled sheep*] **were** grazing. (FICT†)

The different forms of *be* used in **1a** and **1b** obey the concord rule: *sheep* in **1a** is singular, and in **1b** it is plural.

There are also some pronouns and semi-determiners which do not change between singular and plural, e.g. *which*, *who*, *the former*, *the latter*:

2a He is beside **a rock face** [*which*] **is** like the loose side of a gigantic mule. (FICT†)

2b These are **the moments** [*which*] **are** calculable, and cannot be assessed in words. (FICT†)

In these cases, the concord is shown by the antecedent nouns of the pro-form: e.g. singular *a rock face* in **2a** v. plural *the moments* in **2b**.

8.6.2 Concord with singular forms ending in -s

Some nouns ending in -s are singular (e.g. *billiards*, *checkers*, *measles*, etc.; see 4.8.5), and therefore take a singular verb. Nouns denoting fields of study (e.g. *mathematics*, *economics*, *politics*) are also singular, but they allow some variation between singular concord (in 1) and plural concord (in 2):

1 [*Politics*] **wishes** to change reality, it **requires** power, and thus it **is** primarily in the service of power. (NEWS)

2 [*The oppositionist politics*] of the 1970s and early 1980s **are** over. (NEWS)

In these cases the singular tends to be used where the meaning is 'field of study', and the plural where reference is to 'mode(s) of behavior'.

8.6.3 Concord with coordinated subjects

A Coordination by *and*

Subjects consisting of noun phrases coordinated by *and* take plural concord, since *and* gives these subjects plural reference:

1 [*The trees and the church*] **are** reflected in the water. (ACAD)

However, there are occasional exceptions to this rule. Where we find singular concord, the subject refers to something that can be viewed as a single entity:

2 [*The anxiety and anger*] **is** then taken away and suddenly **erupts** in the family environment, placing stress on other members of the household. (NEWS)

For example, in **2** *anxiety and anger* are merged into a single emotional state.

B Coordination by *or*

Subjects consisting of noun phrases coordinated by *or* generally take singular concord if both noun phrases are singular:

Check that [no food or drink] **has** been consumed. (ACAD)

However, examples with plural concord also occur occasionally:

I'll wait until [my sister or mother] **come** down, and I'll eat with them.
(FICT)

Where one of the noun phrases linked by *or* is plural, plural concord is the rule:

Whether [interest rates or intervention] **were** the chosen instrument, and in what combination, was probably a secondary question. (NEWS)

C Coordination by *neither ... nor*

Subjects consisting of phrases coordinated by *neither ... nor* have singular concord where both noun phrases are singular, and plural concord where both are plural:

[Neither geologic evidence nor physical theory] **supports** this conclusion.
(ACAD)

But [neither the pilots nor the machinists] **appear** interested. (NEWS)

D Agreement of person

Coordination of different grammatical persons causes no problem with *and*, since a plural verb is used (in accordance with the general rule). Where *or* or *neither ... nor* link different grammatical persons, the verb tends to agree with the closest noun phrase:

Not one leaf is to go out of the garden until [either I or **my chief taster**] **gives** the order. (FICT)

In many years of service [neither Phillips nor **I**] **have** seen anything like it.
(FICT)

This pattern follows the **principle of proximity** (see 8.6.7 below).

8.6.4 Concord with quantifying expressions

The indefinite pronouns *anybody/anyone*, *everybody/everyone*, *nobody/no one*, and *somebody/someone* agree with singular verb forms:

1 [Everybody]'s doing what they think they're supposed to do. (FICT)

2 [Nobody] **has** their fridges repaired any more, they can't afford it. (FICT)

Here subject–verb concord is singular, even though co-referent pronouns and determiners may be plural, as we notice from the forms *they* and *their* in 1 and 2 above.

Quantifying pronouns such as *all*, *some*, *any*, *none*, *a lot*, *most* can take either singular or plural concord, according to whether they have singular or plural reference. If an *of*-phrase follows, the noun phrase after *of* indicates whether singular or plural is required:

3 [Some of it] **is** genuine, some of it all a smoke-screen. (NEWS)

4 [Most of the copies] **are** seized in raids. (NEWS)

5 Yeah all people are equal yet [some] **are** more equal than others. (CONV)

In 3, the concord is singular, as signalled by the singular pronoun *it* in the subject phrase. In 4, the concord is plural, signalled by *copies*. Example 5 illustrates the

case where there is no *of*-phrase, but the context signals a plural meaning (*some* = *some people*).

Singular concord is normal with *each* and *one*. Both singular and plural forms are found with *either* and *neither*, although the singular is often considered more ‘correct’:

[*Neither of these words*] **is** much help. (FICT)

[*Neither of us*] **believe** in useless symbols. (FICT)

Concord patterns also vary with *any* and *none*. With these pronouns, the singular was traditionally considered ‘correct’, but there is little sign of such a deliberate preference these days:

[*None of us*] **has** been aboard except Vinck. (FICT)

[*None of us*] really **believe** it’s ever going to happen. (FICT†)

8.6.5 Concord with collective nouns

Singular collective nouns like *team*, *government*, *committee* allow either singular or plural concord in British English, but in American English the singular is the normal choice. Compare these examples from British English:

[*The flock*] **is** infected with *Salmonella Typhimurium*. (BrE NEWS†)

[*The Catholic flock – who constitute one third of Malawi’s population*] – **are** tired of dividing their loyalties. (BrE NEWS)

Plural concord, where it occurs, puts the focus on the individuals making up the group, rather than the group as a whole. A few collective nouns, like *family* and *crew*, regularly take both singular and plural concord in British English:

[*Her own family*] **has** suffered the anguish of repossession. (BrE NEWS)

[*The family*] **are** absolutely devastated. (BrE NEWS)

In fact, nearly all human collective nouns occasionally occur with plural concord in British English. For example:

[*The Government*] **have** decreed that we will have to rebid for our betting licence. (BrE NEWS†)

In contrast, singular concord is the norm with collective nouns in American English:

3 [*His committee*] **approves** covert operations only when there’s a consensus. (AmE NEWS†)

4 [*The Government*] **has** indicated it will make provision in the Bill for such an amendment. (AmE NEWS)

8.6.6 Notional concord

Competing with the rule of grammatical concord, there is a tendency to follow **notional concord**, that is, to let the *notion* of singular/plural in the subject determine the form of the verb, rather than the grammatical *form* of the subject. Notional concord helps explain many of the special cases we have considered in 8.6.3–5. Notional concord is also behind the following cases.

A Concord with names, titles, etc.

Plural names, titles, and quotations take singular concord if the reference is to a single thing (a country, a newspaper, a dish, etc.):

*The country can ill afford an operation that would permit others to argue that [the United States] **does** not respect international law.* (NEWS)

*[The New York Times] **was**, as usual, dryly factual.* (FICT†)

B Concord with measure expressions

Plural measure expressions take singular verb forms if the reference is to a single measure (amount, weight, length, time, etc.):

*[Two pounds] **is** actually quite a lot.* (CONV†)

*[Eighteen years] **is** a long time in the life of a motor car.* (NEWS)

8.6.7 Concord and proximity

In addition to grammatical concord and notional concord, the **principle of proximity** sometimes plays a part in subject–verb agreement. This principle is the tendency, especially in speech, for the verb to agree with the closest (pro)noun, even when that (pro)noun is not the head of the subject noun phrase. For example:

*Do you think [any of them] **are** bad Claire?* (CONV)

*[Not one of the people who'd auditioned] **were** up to par.* (FICT†)

8.6.8 Concord where the subject is a clause

Singular concord is the rule when the subject is a finite or non-finite clause:

*[Carrying cases, boxes, parcels, or packages] **was** a task only for servants.* (FICT)

But **nominal relative clauses** can have plural as well as singular concord:

*[What we do know] **is** this.* (NEWS†)

*[What is needed] **are** effective regulators.* (NEWS)

8.6.9 Concord with subject–verb inversion

There are some clause patterns where the subject follows, rather than precedes, the verb phrase. This pattern, known as **subject–verb inversion**, can give rise to opposing tendencies in the choice of subject–verb agreement.

A Existential there

With existential *there is/are*, the noun phrase which follows the main verb *be* is termed the **notional subject**. In written registers, the notional subject generally determines concord with the verb:

*There **was** [candlelight], and there **were** [bunks with quilts heaped on top].* (FICT)

However, in conversation a contrary trend is observed: the verb is likely to be singular even when the following notional subject is plural:

There's [so many police forces that don't even have computers yet]. (CONV†)

Gary, there's [apples] if you want one. (CONV)

(See 12.5–10 for a full discussion of existential *there*.)

B Other instances of subject–verb inversion

Other patterns similar to *there is/are* occur in conversation, where there is a tendency to attach the singular verb contraction 's to the preceding adverb:

Here's your shoes. (CONV)

Where's your tapes? (CONV)

How's mum and dad? (CONV†)

Here again, concord in conversation is singular even where the following 'notional subject' is plural.

8.6.10 Vernacular concord in conversation

In some non-standard speech, verbs like *say*, *do*, and *be* are not inflected for number, as in:

She don't like Amanda though. (CONV) <= *She doesn't...*>

Times is hard. (CONV) <= *Times are...*>

8.6.11 Concord and pronoun reference

There is normally agreement between subject–verb concord and any following personal pronouns that refer back to the subject:

In two short years [the government] has seemed to lose its grip. (NEWS)

However, there are exceptions to this where the plural pronoun *they* is used as a singular reference unspecified for sex (as discussed in 4.10.3):

Everybody's doing what they think they're supposed to do. (FICT)

It is common in speech to use *they* for a person whose sex is unspecified or unknown, and this use is increasingly found in written as well as spoken registers.

Review

Major points of **GRAMMAR BITE B: Subject–verb concord**

- ▶ In finite clauses, the subject and verb need to match in terms of concord (i.e. number and person).
- ▶ There are a few special cases for concord, such as collective nouns, quantifiers, and coordinated noun phrases as subject.
- ▶ Notional concord and proximity are two factors which influence grammatical concord.
- ▶ There is sometimes a mismatch between subject–verb concord and pronoun reference.