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A University Grammar of English

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Concord

7.18

Subject-verb concord

The most important type of concord in English is concord of number between subject and verb. Thus (3) and (4) are ungrammatical:

(1) The window is open
(sing + sing)

(2) The windows are open
(plur + plur)

(3) *The window are open
(sing + plur)

(4) *The windows is open
(plur + sing)

A clause in the position of subject counts as singular for purposes of concord: *How they got there doesn't concern me; To treat them as hostages is criminal.* The same is true of prepositional phrases, etc, acting as subject: *After the exams is the time to relax,* etc. Nominal relative clauses on the other hand, since they are equivalent to noun phrases (11.13), may have plural as well as singular concord: *What were once human dwellings are now nothing but piles of rubble.*

Note

[a] In fact, it is possible to generalize the rule as 'A subject which is not definitely marked for plural requires a singular verb'. This would explain, in addition to clausal and adverbial subjects, the tendency in informal speech for *is/was* to follow the pseudo-subject *there* in existential sentences such as *There's hundreds of people on the waiting list* (14.19 ff).

[b] Apparent exceptions to the concord rule arise with singular nouns ending with the *-s* of the plural inflection (*measles, billiards, mathematics, etc.*, 4.32), or conversely plural nouns lacking the inflection (*cattle, people, clergy, etc.*, 4.35):

Measles *is* sometimes serious Our people *are* complaining

[c] Plural words and phrases (including coordinate phrases, see 7.21) count as singular if they are used as names, titles, quotations, etc (see further 9.57):

Crime and Punishment is perhaps the best-constructed of Dostoyevsky's novels; but *The Brothers Karamazov* is undoubtedly his masterpiece.

'The Cedars' has a huge garden

'Senior Citizens' means, in common parlance, people over sixty

The titles of some works which are collections of stories, etc, however, can be singular or plural: *The Canterbury Tales exist/exists in many manuscripts.*

7.19

Notional concord, and proximity

Two factors interfere with concord as presented in 7.18. ‘Notional concord’ is agreement of verb with subject according to the *idea* of number rather than the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that idea. Thus *the government* is treated as plural in *The government have broken all their promises* (BrE), as is shown not only by the plural verb *have*, but also by the pronoun *their*.

The principle of ‘proximity’ denotes agreement of the verb with whatever noun or pronoun closely precedes it, sometimes in preference to agreement with the headword of the subject:

No one except his own supporters *agree* with him

One in ten *take* drugs

7.20


Collective nouns

In BrE, collective nouns, notionally plural but grammatically singular, obey notional concord in examples such as the following where AmE usually has the singular:

The public are tired of demonstrations [1]

The audience were enjoying every minute of it [2]

Although singular and plural verbs are more or less interchangeable in these contexts, the choice is based, if on anything, on whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body, or as a collection of individuals (*cf* 4.62). Thus plural is more likely than singular in [2], because consideration is being given to the individual reactions of members of the audience. Contrastingly, singular has to be used in sentences like *The audience was enormous*.

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- Q1/ The following sentences are ungrammatical, discuss mentioning the reason:
 - The window are open
 - The windows is open