

Agreement with Collective Nouns in New Zealand English

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1 Abstract

This paper's aim is to study the concord with collective nouns, in particular team names and the noun *team*, across different classes of New Zealand society. The results show that plural concord is always used with plural team names, while singular concord, with singular team names, is used slightly more often in lower classes than in higher classes of the society. There seems to be an on-going shift towards singular concord, which would explain what is happening in British English (BrE).

2 Introduction

According to Asher (1994: 5103), a collective noun can be defined as '[a] noun denoting some entity made up of a collection of parts seen at any particular time as individual parts acting separately or as a combination acting as one, and taking, respectively, a plural or singular verb' (e.g. *government, family, club, army, team, public*).

The aim of this paper is to study the concord between verb and collective nouns and personal pronouns and collective nouns in New Zealand English (NZE).

In particular, this paper will focus on the differences in the use of the noun *team* and the names of sports teams across different social classes of New Zealand society.

3 Background

Both foreign learners and native speakers of English are often faced with the problem of how to treat collective nouns, since there is a choice between singular and plural concord marking. It is often argued that singular forms are used when the collective noun is thought of as a unit and plural forms when the speaker or writer has the individual members in mind (as pointed out by Quirk et al. 1985: 316). In this tradition there is a distinction made between singular, or grammatical, concord on the one hand and plural, or notional, concord on the other. The former involves agreement with the syntactic form of the subject and the latter with its meaning. In the following examples the first writer is thinking of the family as a unit, while the second writer is thinking of the family as a number of separate individuals:

- (1) John's family is religious.
- (2) A third person, Michael, whose family own a company, joined the party.

The singular/plural distinction can also be seen with a personal pronoun referring to a collective noun. Pronominal agreement differs from verbal agreement because the connection with its antecedent is weaker than between

subject and verb. This means that pronouns are more easily influenced by the semantic context.

The use of plural or singular concord is different in American English (AmE) and British English. Quirk et al. (1985: 316) claim that plural concord is used 'far less commonly in AmE than in BrE'. This could either mean that AmE speakers view collective nouns as single units while BrE speakers are more variable in the perception of collective nouns, or this means that the choice is grammatically determined (Bauer 1994: 61).

Bauer, in his study conducted on the noun *government* in editorials of *The Times* throughout the century, points out that 'although it is not possible to predict with any accuracy whether singular or plural concord will be used on any given occasion, or even how much singular concord will be used in any given text, there appears to be a general trend for singular concord to increase over time' (1994: 63).

Another interesting point has to be made. Nixon believes that the 'possibility of plural verbal concord exists only with those words denoting a collection of living individuals' (1972: 120). This is illustrated by the following two sentences:

(3) The *fleet is* in the harbour (i.e. a number of ships).

(4) The *fleet are* in town (i.e. a number of sailors).

New Zealand seems to present a different case.

4 Method

The aim of this paper is to study concord with team names and the noun *team* in New Zealand English (NZE), and, in particular, to see if there is any evidence of change across different social classes. The tokens were found in the sports section of two New Zealand newspapers, which are considered to be read by the two extremes of the country's society. The first is the major daily newspaper, *The New Zealand Herald*, and the second is a weekly newspaper, *New Zealand Truth*. *The New Zealand Herald* is New Zealand's largest daily publication, while *New Zealand Truth* is a weekly tabloid which mainly features gossip and sensational news.

Only current issues of the two newspapers were taken into account, so that it was possible to control for variation in the use of language across different periods of time. 152 collectives were found in the issues of the newspapers that were read. Concord for each token was counted more than once in instances where, in the same sentence, a verb and a pronoun were found that had agreement with the collective. In the corpora there were no cases in which both singular and plural concord marking occurred. It is interesting to note that there might be some differences between written genres and also between different sections of newspapers. Editorials normally employ a more formal English than other sections of a newspaper and the sports section, especially, is characterised by a relaxed and colloquial style. Thus, it is possible to say that even a middle-class newspaper, like *The New Zealand Herald*, probably uses a more informal style in the sports pages than in the editorial pages. This might make the major differences between the two newspapers disappear.

Verbs and pronouns, both personal and possessive pronouns, were considered separately to see if the concord with collective nouns was different. The noun *team* and singular team names (*New Zealand*, *Dunedin*, *Prada*) were studied together, while plural team names (*The All Blacks*, *The Warriors*, *The All Whites*) were studied as belonging to a different category. It is likely that plural team names have a different behaviour from singular team names and the noun *team*.

5 Results

	<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>		<i>New Zealand Truth</i>	
	Verb	Pronoun	Verb	Pronoun
Singular	0%	0%	0%	0%
	0/14	0/2	0/39	0/3
Plural	100%	100%	100%	100%
	14/14	2/2	39/39	3/3

Table 5.1: Concord with plural team names.

Table 5.1 shows the results for plural team names in both newspapers. 42 plural team names were found in *New Zealand Truth* and 16 plural team names were found in *The New Zealand Herald*. All the verbs and the pronouns, both personal and possessive, had plural concord with the collective nouns they referred to. No cases, in either *The New Zealand Herald* or *New Zealand Truth*, were found where the singular concord was used. Plural team names seem all to require plural concord.

	<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>		<i>New Zealand Truth</i>	
	Verb	Pronoun	Verb	Pronoun
Singular	15%	9%	27%	50%
	6/40	1/11	10/37	1/2
Plural	85%	91%	73%	50%
	34/40	10/11	27/37	1/2

Table 5.2: Concord with the noun *team* and singular team names.

In the case of singular team names and the noun *team* the situation changes. Table 5.2 shows the percentage of singular and plural concord with verb and pronouns in *The New Zealand Herald* and *New Zealand Truth*. Here the percentage of plural concord is much higher than the percentage of singular concord, and this is true for verbs and pronouns. There seems to be a difference between the two newspapers, as is shown by Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2. Singular concord with singular team names and the noun *team* appears to be more frequently used in *New Zealand Truth* than in *The New Zealand Herald*. Unfortunately, only two pronouns were found in the corpora for *New Zealand Truth* and thus it is impossible to make assumptions in that case.

Figure 5.1: Concord with singular team names and noun team in *The New Zealand Herald*.

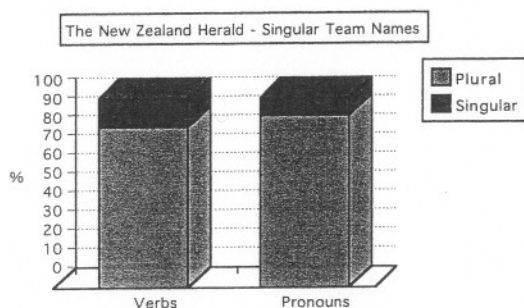
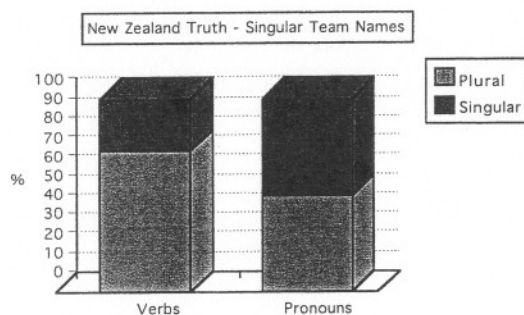


Figure 5.2: Concord with singular team names and noun team in *New Zealand Truth*.



6 Analysis

According to Bauer (1994: 63) 'there appears to be a general trend for singular concord to increase over time.' Also in the conservative editorial pages of a newspaper like *The Times* 'in the course of the twentieth century [...] there appears to be an increasing tendency towards singular concord with collective nouns.' Formal varieties of a language are usually the most conservative. This means that, if there is a change in formal English, there typically is a greater degree of change in less formal English. New features in a language normally first appear in low varieties of the language before spreading to more formal varieties.

The data collected from the two New Zealand newspapers in part support this thesis. It is, in fact, possible to notice that the use of singular concord with singular team names and the noun *team* is slightly higher in *New Zealand*

Truth than in *The New Zealand Herald*. This is true, though, only to some extent because, as Bauer points out, 'there is a certain amount of evidence that in New Zealand newspaper reports, the editorial pages and the sports pages are different with respect to this variable' (1994: 62). If this is true, it is possible to say that probably we would find more plural concord in editorials from *The New Zealand Herald*. The sports pages tend to use a much more informal and less conservative style than other pages of the same newspaper.

Not enough pronominal concord was found in the corpora to allow for conclusions, but it seems that pronouns tend to have a higher degree of plural concord than verbs. In *New Zealand Truth*, one sentence was found that had singular concord for the verb and plural concord for the personal pronoun:

- I believe this *team* is fantastic and why *they* won...

This seems to suggest that verbs can have either grammatical concord or notional concord with collective nouns, but pronouns seem to prefer notional concord. Teams are thus seen as a collection of individuals more than a unit, when they have to be referred to by a personal pronoun.

Plural team names like *The Warriors*, *The All Blacks*, *The Kingz* do not constitute a problem. The data suggest that they always require plural concord. This is due to the fact that, being plural names, they are seen as a collection of living individuals. In both newspapers all the tokens showed plural concord. Therefore, in the case of plural team names there is no difference between social classes.

7 Conclusion

Singular concord in NZE seems to have become more common following the pattern of BrE and probably under the influence of AmE.

Plural team names always require plural concord. In most cases, personal pronouns seem to prefer notional concord to grammatical concord.

References

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