

FEATURES

A singular treatment for sports team names

LAST year we commented on a difference in how sports teams are referred to in Britain and New Zealand: "England are playing well", but "New Zealand is playing well".

We wondered whether the difference related to a perception that the team is a bunch of individuals (are) or a coherent single entity (is).

Kate Blackhurst e-mailed at the time to observe that "the reason New Zealand insists on referring to sporting teams in the singular is not because they regard them as 'playing together as a team', but rather because they are promoted as a singular brand."

There may be something in that — but it is interesting to note that the branding of the national teams tends to be with a plural noun phrase, almost always with a

(Vantellini, 2003) surveyed the use in two newspapers of singular and plural verbs with singular sports team names. She found a higher proportion of singular verbs ("New Zealand is leading the series") in *New Zealand Truth* than in *The New Zealand Herald*. She linked this to a less conservative style in the tabloid *Truth* than in the broadsheet *Herald*.

This might suggest a change in progress in verb use with these singular team names, reflecting similar changes in other English-speaking countries, such as an increase in Britain for "the government is" rather than "the government are".

On this issue of singular and plural, Zheng Yuan from Wellington e-mailed complaining of journalists (and others) using plural verb forms with collective

nouns, as in "couple are", "family are", and "staff have", or with phrases like "one in four are".

Without further context, it is unclear whether the complaint is valid. Indeed, many grammar books acknowledge that both are acceptable, depending on the interpretation of the collective noun. The general practice is that if such nouns refer to a group of individuals, then a plural verb is appropriate. The plural pronoun "they" can also be used to refer to this group.

ON THE other hand, if the reference is to a single unit, then a singular form of the verb is expected, and a singular pronoun.

Take the case of "one in four", if this expresses a proportion of a much larger

overall count, so that the "one" is representative of a plural, then the plural verb is acceptable, as in "one in four of the students in this class have submitted late assignments", which clearly assumes a class size of more than just four students.

If the "one" is really a single individual out of a group of four, then a singular is called for: "one in four of the contributors to this column is a psycholinguist".

But usage is not consistent, as shown by the singular in this headline from a recent *Daily Telegraph* in Britain: "One in four chickens struggles to walk". The article is not discussing a small group of four chicks, but the collective population of battery-valued hens. Perhaps this is also an example of the increasing use of singular verb forms with collectives.

The pattern is the same with the other collective nouns Zheng Yuan refers to. So for instance, "his whole family is coming for Christmas, but to his great relief they are staying in nearby hotels". Or "the choir is singing beautifully" but "the choir are wearing red robes".

So perhaps in the examples Zheng Yuan complains about the couple are pulling in different directions, the family are staying in separate rooms, the staff have not been able to agree on a solution.

■ **Paul Warren** is at the school of linguistics and applied language studies at Victoria University. His research interests are the production and comprehension of spoken language.

■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz



Paul Warren

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

colour, such as All Blacks and Silver Ferns, and other names largely formed with reference to these, such as Tall Blacks, Black Ferns, Black Caps, Black Sticks, etc. These plural forms will almost invariably appear with a plural verb.

In a study published in the *New Zealand English Journal*, one of our students