Number agreement with collective nouns as subjects

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Number agreement with collective nouns as subjects

Završni rad

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1. Introduction

Aim of the paper

Problems with collective nouns as subjects occur both with foreign learners and native speakers of English, since there is a choice between singular and plural verb agreement. As it is pointed out by Quirk et al (1985:316), singular forms are used when a collective noun is thought of as a unit and plural forms when the speaker thinks about individual members of the collective. However, this does not apply to every noun and there appear to be some preferences depending on which national variety of English is concerned (Levin 2001:9). Moreover, the choice of number agreement may also depend on the semantics of the verb phrase, on the collective noun itself (e.g. *couple* or *committee*) and on whether the utterance is written or spoken.

Given space limitations, we cannot take all these factors into account. In this paper we will first describe patterns of agreement with collective nouns as subjects in general, regardless of national variety. Then, we will compare the patterns observed in two national varieties of English, viz. American English and British English. We will also discuss the patterns which occur within spoken American English.

The structure of the paper is as follows. After the introduction (Section 1), Section 2 introduces the theoretical background of the paper and defines the terms that are used in the paper. Section 3 discusses the material and the methods used. Section 4 examines variation in the distribution of the singular and plural form of the verb 'to be' with collective noun subjects in general. Next, we discuss the variation that occurs between AmE and BrE, and then, we focus on effects of the medium, viz. written or spoken, on agreement with collective nouns, however, only within American English. The paper ends with the conclusions, which are presented in Section 5.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

In this section we will define the terms 'collective noun' and 'agreement' (Section 2.1.1). We focus specifically on the term *agreement* in Section 2.1.2 and then move on to briefly discuss discuss the term *mixed agreement* in Section 2.1.3. In Section 2.1.4 we will talk about the

semantic factors which should be considered when we talk about agreement and in Section 2.1.5 we focus on regional variation with collective nouns. After that, we briefly present a subclassification of collective nouns in Section 2.2.

2.1.1 Definitions of 'agreement' and 'collective noun'

The word 'agreement' (or concord) can be defined as "a formal relationship between elements, whereby a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another" (Crystal 1997: 14), or, according to Quirk et al (1985: 755) concord can be defined as the relationship between two grammatical units such that one of them displays a feature (e.g. plurality) that accords with a displayed (or semantically implicit) feature in the other. Quirk et al's definition makes one important thing explicit, namely, that a form can sometimes agree with a feature of another that is only implicitly present, but is not visible in the latter's form. In our case, this feature is the formally unexpressed idea of plurality, which underlies collective noun subjects.

Most linguists say that when it comes to collective nouns, singular agreement is used when the referent of the noun is thought of as a unit and plural agreement when the referent of the noun is thought of as a number of individuals (Levin 2001:11). Jespersen (1909–1949 II: 93) adds to this general statement that the issue of animacy should also be considered when one discusses collective nouns. Jespersen accepts the definition of a collective as "a substantive which denotes a collection or number of individuals", but, he says that plural agreement is only used when the noun denotes living beings.

Although this goes a long way toward explaining patterns of agreement with collective nouns, more factors need to be taken into account before any conclusions can be drawn about singular/plural agreement with collective nouns. In this study we will address some of these additional factors (see Sections 4 and 5).

2.1.2 Agreement with collective nouns

As already mentioned in the sections above, collective nouns can take a singular or plural verb. Usually, when we want the collective noun to mean a single group, we use a singular verb. For example:

(2.1) Battered, hunkered down, but Iraq's army is undefeated.
(The Economist. London: The Economist Newspaper Ltd, 1991)

(2.2) Yes, the Kardashian clan is going head-to-head in an all-new interview with talk queen, Oprah Winfrey. (CNN Showbiz, 2012)

When we want the collective noun to refer to a number of individuals, we use a plural verb. This can be best illustrated with the following examples:

(2.3) The crowd are climbing on each other's shoulders to get close to them and the hippy chicks are dancing acid-trip hand jives in pairs.

(New Musical Express. London: Holborn Publishing Group, 1992)

(2.4) The committee are absolutely appalled,' he said, 'particularly in view of a directive sent to clubs in regard to foul play. (London: Newspaper Publishing plc, 1989)

According to Marckwardt (1958:77), AmE is more conservative in its use of concord patterns than BrE. As Rohdenburg and Schlüter (2009:28) report, studies such as Levin's study from 2001, have shown that AmE is actually leading world English in using more singular concord with collective nouns in the twentieth century. The results from our analysis actually agree with this claim (see Section 4).

Originally, when it comes to collective nouns, the singular verb was used, but as early as 1000, plural verbs began to appear with collective nouns. The use of singular verbs is the way they are still used in the United States today (Rohdenburg et al 2009:27).

According to Rohdenburg et al (2009: 28), the use of plural verbs with collective nouns developed in England in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet other studies of BrE have shown that plural verb agreement was at its highest even earlier, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but decreased again in the nineteenth century (Levin 2001:36).

2.1.3 Mixed Agreement

Another phenomenon that needs t be mentioned (although it was not specifically addressed in our analysis) is that of mixed agreement. Mixed agreement or "shifts" as Levin (2001:110) called it, is a construction where a shift between singular and plural agreement occurs within a

single or an adjacent sentence. In Levin (2001:114), the most frequent shift was a collective noun that occurs with a singular verb and a plural pronoun. For example: "The women's team received their medals."

In Levin's study these shifts occurred more often in written AmE than BrE and spoken American English also contained higher rates of shifts (2001:120).

2.1.4 Semantic factors

This section deals with the semantic influence of the verb and the interaction between the collective noun and the verb. There are a few verbs which seem to require plural agreement with collective nouns. In this kind of situation the speaker should decide if the focus of the collective noun is on the collective or on the members.

According to Levin (2001:131), decision-making bodies, such as *association, commission, committee, company, council, department, government* and *party*, almost exclusively take singular agreement in AmE, while the same nouns can occasionally take plural agreement in BrE. The nouns *army, audience, band, club, crowd, group* and *population* in general also preferred the singular in the corpora, but with some degree of variation in BrE.

There are also specific verbs, such as *contain, compromise, include or made up of* that, if included in a sentence, make the focus of the collective as a whole, and not on the members. As seen in the following example, singular concord is in this case used:

(2.5) The competition sub-committee is made up of very poor people. (Levin 2001:149)

2.1.5 Regional variation with collective nouns and effects of the medium

Regional variation with collective nouns has been discussed in reference grammars (e.g. Quirk et al (1985) and in individual studies, such as Levin (2001).

The difference between AmE and BrE has been frequently studied. What most linguists agree upon is that singular verbs are used more often in AmE than BrE (Quirk et al 1985:758). According to Johansson (1979:205), in BrE singular verb agreement is slightly more common than plural verb agreement.

Generally speaking, plural agreement occurs more often in speech in both AmE and BrE, where singular agreement occurs more often in writing. Quirk et al (1985:758) said: "on the whole, the plural is more popular in speech, whereas in the more inhibited medium of writing the singular is probably preferred."

Levin (2001:76) has a very similar theory as well: "Spontaneously produced AmE speech appears to contain high proportions of plural agreement with relative and personal pronouns, whereas more formal AmE preserves low proportions of plural agreement…Verbs, on the other hand, very rarely take plural agreement in AmE".

2.2 Subclasses of collective nouns

According to Quirk et al (1985:755), there are three subclasses of collective nouns, and those are: a) specific collective nouns, which include nouns like: army, clan, class, club, committee, crew, crowd, family, flock, gang, government, group, herd, jury, majority and minority; b) generic collective nouns (aristocracy, bourgeoisie, clergy, elite, gentry, intelligentsia, laity, proletariat, public) and c) unique collective nouns (the Arab League, the Congress, the Kremlin, the Papacy, Parliament, the United States, the United Nations, the Vatican). Although this seems like a reasonable subclassification meaning-wise, we do not think that it can significantly affect agreement patterns. Instead, to save space we shall base our analysis on specific collective nouns because they are likely to be among the more useful and frequently used collective nouns in a neutral context (see Section 3.1.2).

3. Methodology

The present section presents the material and the methods used in this study. Section 3.1.1 describes the corpora used for this corpus analysis and Section 3.1.2 describes the nouns used in the analysis.

3.1 Material

3.1.1 Description of the corpora

As mentioned in the introductory section, the present analysis includes material from two corpora, the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) is the largest freely-available corpus of English, and the only large and balanced corpus of American English. The corpus was created by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University and contains more than 450 million words of text. It has a collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources. The Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) is composed of 1.9 billion words from 1.8 million web pages in 20 different English-speaking countries. This corpus was also created by Mark Davies of Brigham Young University, and it was released in 2013. We used the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) for the comparison between AmE and BrE, since it gives us the possibility to search words from various regional and national sources like newspapers and books.

The Corpus of American English (COCA), which we used for the comparison between written and spoken American English, allowed us to limit our searches by frequency and to compare the frequency of words between spoken and written AmE. The written part of the corpus consists of texts from regional newspapers, academic books and popular fiction and the spoken part consists of transcriptions of unscripted informal conversations and spoken language collected in different contexts, such as radio or television shows.

3.1.2 The nouns studied

Given the classifications of collective nouns presented in Section 2.2 above, for purposes of the analytical part of this study we have opted for the list of specific collective nouns given in Quirk et al's (1985:755) classification. We have excluded the generic collective nouns and the unique collective nouns, since they were not attested, or in some cases, were attested only a few times in the corpora studied. Our choice was also influenced by pragmatic concerns. Namely, we hold that learners of English as a foreign language are more likely to hear and use specific collectives, which belong more or less to neutral, everyday contexts. Compare, for instance *crowd, family, flock* (all specific collectives) to the more register-specific generic collectives *clergy, aristocracy, intelligentsia* and unique collectives *The Vatican, the Arab League*, etc. Although this 'register-based' difference is not absolute, we hold that the latter two are more natural in the more specialized contexts of governance, politics, economics, etc.

Notice that our database also includes nouns denoting some relatively small groups of people who have some function in common (e.g. *crew*) and nouns that generally denote very large groups of individuals (e.g. *army*).

4. Analysis

In this section we present the results of our corpus analysis. We begin Section 4.1. with patterns of agreement with the verb 'to be' in the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE), ignoring te differences between the national varieties. In Section 4.1. we shall give a general description of patterns of agreement with the selected collective nouns, so as to get a rough idea about general tendencies regardless of which national variety of English is involved. That is the reason why we shall be using the Corpus of Global Web-Based English, ignoring at this point the variation between the different national varieties. Although this decision has its weaknesses, i.e. there is no way to control the relative proportions of patterns in the different national varieties, this is intended to give a preliminary general idea about the patterns that could be found in each of the national varities to be studied in more detail below (Section 4.2) In Section 4.2. our focus will be on the variation between AmE and BrE. For this analysis we shall again use the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE). We shall compare the use of singular and plural verbs with the collective nouns and see if any differences occur between these two national varietes. In Section 4.3 we will examine the results from the spoken media from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and find out if the patterns which occur in Section 4.2 match the results from the spoken media at least for AmE.

4.1 Collective nouns and the verb 'to be'

In this section, as already mentioned in the section above, we will use the verb 'to be' , since it is the most common verb used in the English language. More specifically, we shall search the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) for all collective noun subjects followed by different forms of the verb *to be* in the Simple Present Tense, to see how frequently the collective nouns are used with specific verb forms. We shall see, according to these results, if the collective nouns occur more frequently with the singular or plural verb form.

When we started our analysis, we searched the corpus, for example, for the collective noun *army* followed by the verb form *is*. By doing that we got a total of 3,879 results. But then we encountered some problems. For instance, we were looking for sentences which have the collective noun *army* as head noun (e.g. The army is spending about $75 million on building additional barracks.) and not sentences like the following examples:

(4.1) The active duty force of the British Army is more than 212,000 strong, making it the second largest army in the European Union behind France.

(http://israelpalestine-speedy.blogspot.com/)

(4.2) The idea of a professional army is increasingly popular in Spain, too.

(The Economist. London: The Economist Newspaper Ltd, 1991)

Because in Example 4.1 the head noun of the phrase is the noun *duty* and in Example 4.2 the head noun is the noun *idea*, we cannot use these, or similar sentences in our analysis. Therefore, we excluded all sentences where the noun *army* was not head noun, and after doing that we got a total of 3,266 results for *army is*. We did the same thing for *army are*. First, when we typed *army are* into the search box we got 518 results, but after excluding all sentences where the noun *army* was not head noun we had 476 results left. We repeated this action for every collective noun from our list. Although we did our best to select only the sentences which have the collective nouns as head nouns, we are still aware of the fact that some results may not be entirely correct. Since the selection was done only by one person, some sentences may have been overlooked and left in our analysis.

According to Bauer (1994:63) 'there appears to be a general trend for singular concord', so, too see if this also goes for the collective nouns that we are studying, we will look at our data, summarized below in Table 4.1 and Graph 4.1.

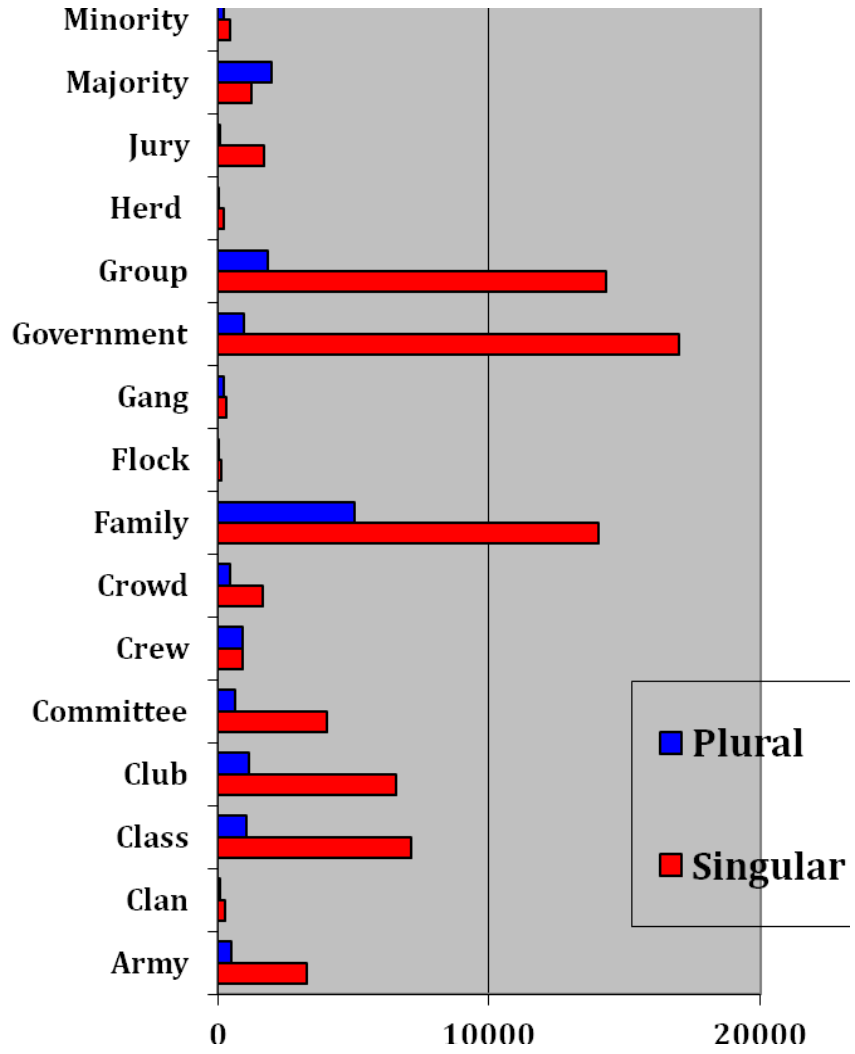
Table 4.1 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns

Collective noun	Singular (is)	Plural (are)
Army	3,266	476
Clan	279	98
Class	7,134	1,042
Club	6,593	1,159
Committee	4,012	655
Crew	902	891
Crowd	1,657	438

Family	14,021	5,035
Flock	138	19
Gang	304	201
Government	16,998	972
Group	14,338	1,860

Herd	211	26
Jury	1,689	67
Majority	1,240	1,982
Minority	435	199

Graph 4.1 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns



As we can see, the results in Table 4.1 and Graph 4.1 suggest that there is a preference for singular agreement. Especially, if we compare the nouns *family*, *group* and *government*. Comparing these three collective nouns, it is definitely obvious that there is a strong

preference for singular concord. In the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) we had remarkable 14,338 hits for the noun *group* with singular concord, and only 1860 hits with plural concord. The noun *family* had 14,021 hits for singular concord and 5,035 for plural concord and the noun *government* had 16,998 hits for singular and only 972 for plural concord.

According to Rohdenburg et al (2009:29) nouns that prefer singular concord over plural even in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English are for example *army* and *committee*.

Our results also agree with this statement since the noun *army* had 3,266 hits for singular concord and 476 for plural concord. The noun *committee* had 4,012 hits for singular concord and only 655 hits for plural concord.

It is interesting, as suggested by Strang (1969:107), that another significant factor can influence concord. Collective nouns preceded by determiners or numerals associated with singular forms (e.g. a, one, every, each, this and that) are frequently used with singular verbs. As seen in the example below:

(4.3) Not that every married couple is happy (…)

This is also an important factor when it comes to concord, but it was not the focus of our analysis.

The data shown in the present section clearly indicates that in written English there is a clear preference for singular concord. In the next section we shall find out if this also goes for the national varieties of English and if any differences between these varieties occur.

4.2 Variation between American English and British English

Interestingly, the distributions of singular verb agreement from Section 4.1 are similar to those in Tables and Graphs 4.2 and 4.3 below.

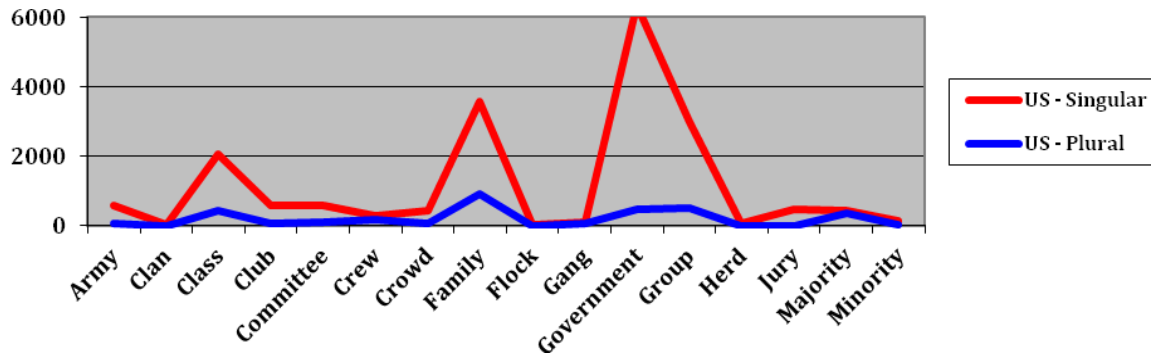
But before we start discussing the data, summarized in Graph 4.2, we should mention that in this part of the analysis and in those which follow in Sections 4.3 and 4.4, we also looked for collective nouns followed by different forms of the verb *to be* in the Simple Present Tense, but this time, we did not exclude sentences where the collective nouns were not head nouns. This being said, we have to be aware of the fact that our results are not entirely correct, since

the Tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 give us the initial results from the search box. In Tables 4.2 and 4.3 we see the results from the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE).

Table 4.2 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns in AmE

Collective noun	Singular (is)	Plural (are)
Army	575	74
Clan	42	15
Class	2,061	441
Club	595	62
Committee	599	96
Crew	285	186
Crowd	449	89
Family	3,580	932
Flock	48	12
Gang	96	56
Government	6,376	481
Group	2,985	515
Herd	59	8
Jury	474	11
Majority	433	359
Minority	131	46

Graph 4.2 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns in AmE



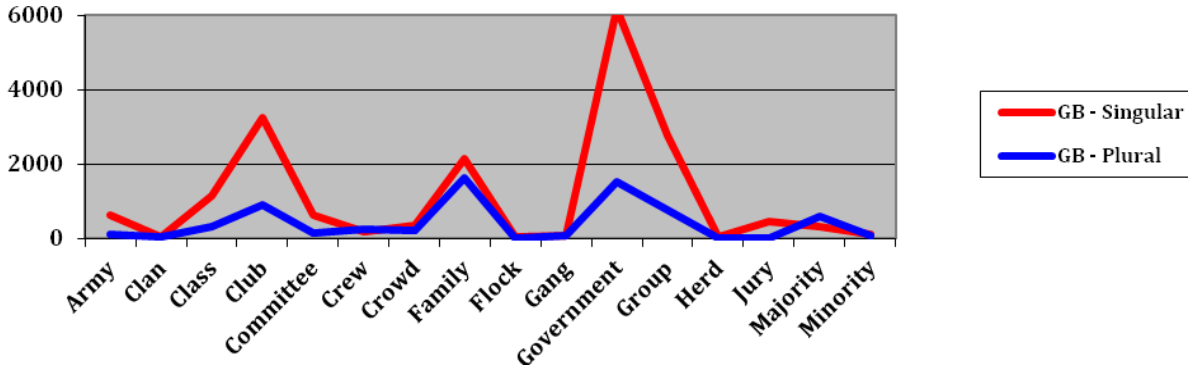
As we can see above, all of the collective nouns we studied occurred preferably with a singular verb form. Again, the nouns *family, government and group* are standing out. The noun *family* had 3,580 hits for singular concord and 932 hits for plural concord. The noun *government* had 6,376 hits for singular concord and 481 hits for plural concord and the noun *group* had 2,985 hits for singular concord and only 515 hits for plural concord.

Singular verb agreement is not only the most frequent alternative in AmE writing, but also in AmE speech, but we shall concentrate on that more in Section 4.3. Now we will focus on the use of singular and plural verbs with the same collective nouns in BrE in the Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns in BrE

Collective noun	Singular (is)	Plural (are)
Army	613	124
Clan	42	24
Class	1,135	319
Club	3,236	911
Committee	610	152
Crew	182	258
Crowd	343	215
Family	2,157	1616
Flock	34	5
Gang	63	72
Government	6,179	1,528
Group	2,778	752
Herd	47	9
Jury	465	20
Majority	302	605
Minority	92	85

Graph 4.3 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns in BrE



To begin with, the Graph 4.3 shows that, on the whole, i.e. for most nouns, singular verb agreement is used more often than plural verb agreement in written BrE.

Our results also indicate a difference between the two dialects in rates of singular agreement. As we can see in the graphs above, although both, AmE and BrE prefer singular agreement,

the number of singular agreement results is smaller in BrE than in AmE, since in AmE, we have 100% of the collective nouns preferring singular verb agreement. In BrE, we have the nouns *crew*, *majority* and *gang* preferring the plural verb forms. The noun *majority* had 302 hits for singular concord and 605 hits for plural concord. The noun *crew* had 182 hits for singular concord and 258 hits for plural concord.

These comparisons between AmE and BrE lead to the conclusion that collective nouns are treated in similar ways in the US and in Great Britain. Yes, the number agreement with collective nouns varies a bit between AmE and BrE, since we can see from our own results that AmE prefers singular agreement and the collective nouns in BrE can sometimes occur even with plural agreement, but generally speaking, we can conclude that both varieties prefer singular concord.

4.3 Use of collective nouns in spoken corpora

In this section we shall focus on the differences that occur in spoken English, and see if the results that we get are any different from the results we got in Section 4.2.

We will use the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) to compare the number of results according to frequency in spoken English, to see how often each agreement pattern (Sg or Pl) occurs in the spoken language. Obviously, since we are using the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), our focus in this part of the analysis will only be on AmE.

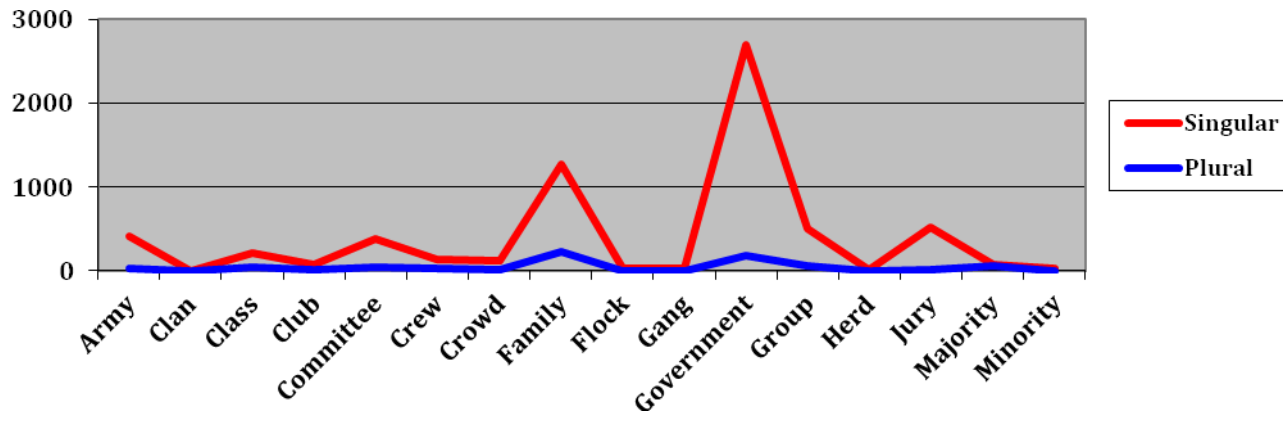
Biber (1988:47) says that writing is claimed to be “more structurally complex and elaborate”, and “more deliberately organized and planned than speech”. Therefore, we expect that people would use in writing singular agreement more often than in speech, since singular agreement seems to be the "right" choice. Speech is usually produced spontaneously, so grammatical correctness can often be ignored. That is the reason why some studies of collective nouns, such as Levin (2001), had more results for plural concord in spoken English than in written English.

We begin our analysis of the use of collective nouns in spoken corpora by looking at the results from Table 4.4 and Graph 4.4. Here we can see the distribution of singular and plural agreement in spoken AmE.

Table 4.4 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns in spoken AmE

Collective noun	Singular (is)	Plural (are)
Army	408	35
Clan	6	3
Class	217	37
Club	80	7
Committee	378	42
Crew	132	29
Crowd	116	9
Family	1,274	229
Flock	24	1
Gang	34	6
Government	2,701	189
Group	503	65
Herd	7	0
Jury	524	7
Majority	82	62
Minority	29	4

Graph 4.4 Use of singular and plural verbs with collective nouns in spoken AmE



An observation that can be made from a comparison of Graph 4.4 and Graph 4.3 is that, there does not seem to be any difference between spoken and written AmE.

The distribution of singular and plural agreement between spoken and written AmE indicates that singular agreement is generally more frequent, both in speech and writing. Again, we have the nouns *government* and *family*, where the preference for singular concord is more than obvious. With 2,701 hits for singular concord and only 189 hits for plural concord the situation with the noun *government* is definitely clear.

Although at the beginning of this section we expected that we would have more results for plural concord in spoken American English, we can see from Graph 4.4 that there is an obvious preference for singular concord, even in the spoken register. We can only assume that the reason for this is the fact that what we analyzed was, in most cases, not spontaneous speech. The spoken part of the corpus consists of transcriptions from many television and radio shows. The people from the interviews and monologues are probably professionals who were trained for public speaking and this might be the reason why their speech was also organized and planned like written English. We cannot know if this is true, but it does seem like a possible theory considering that most of our sentences were actually taken out of transcriptions from different American channels, such as PBS, FOX etc., as seen in the following example:

(4.4) The Syrian army is pummeling Zabadani, punishing a town just 30 miles from Damascus that dared to revolt.

(PBS NewsHour for February 14, 2012)

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to test some predictions and retest some earlier findings about number agreement patterns with collective noun subjects in English. The initial idea was that collective nouns in general prefer singular concord, even if plural concord is also available based on semantic grounds. Our analysis in Section 4.1 agrees with this theory since all of the collective nouns studied, except one, preferred singular over plural concord. We also tried to establish whether it is indeed the case that BrE is more open to plural agreement than AmE. The conclusions which can be drawn from Sections 4.2 and 4.3 are also similar to the theories presented in Section 2.1.5. Namely, although plural agreement is found more frequently relative to singular agreement in BrE than in AmE, for most nouns it is still only the second option. In other words, the collective nouns both in British English and in American English prefer, according to our results, singular concord. In American English 100 percent of the nouns studied preferred singular agreement and in British English all nouns, with the exception of *crew*, *majority* and *gang* preferred singular agreement. Similar results were presented in Section 4.4 where we analyzed spoken American English.

6. Summary and key-words

This paper has presented the results of our analysis of number agreement with collective noun subjects. Most of the differences in concord with collective nouns analyzed were very small, but some conclusions can be drawn. Generally speaking, there seems to be an obvious preference for singular verbal concord in the English language. It is also indicated that singular verbal concord is more popular in AmE than in BrE. Plural verb forms with collective nouns are more common in BrE. But the difference between the varieties is not that big. We can also see in this paper that there are no differences between spoken AmE and written AmE. Although we can draw some conclusions about number agreement with the collective nouns from this analysis, we do have to consider the fact that the corpora used here are still too limited to determine with a 100 percent certainty that our conclusions are right. Thankfully, our analysis does seem to agree with the studies cited and drawn on in the paper, so we can say that we are on the right track, but we obviously need more evidence, especially from larger and stylistically stratified corpora, as well as statistical verification of our results for a larger set of collective nouns to arrive at more robust conclusions.

Key-words: collective nouns, number agreement, concord, singular, plural, BrE, AmE

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