

Verb agreement with collective nouns in British and American English

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I. Introduction

What is a collective noun?

A 'collective noun' is a noun which has a singular form, but plural reference.

Such nouns include:

- a. General 'collection nouns': *collection, set, group, multitude*
- b. Nouns denoting multitudes of humans or animals: *crowd, herd, swarm*
- c. Nouns denoting particular spatial configurations of multiple objects: *stack, pile, heap, bunch*
- d. Nouns denoting institutions or groups of humans formed for some official purpose: *committee, council, team, army*

Complex collective subjects (a lot/heap/bunch/couple/group/host/number of)

(Hanna de Vries, 2018)

II. Previous literature

1. Most of the research into speakers' agreement choice, and the factors that influence it, has involved (British) English. (Jespersen, 1927; Bennett, 1974)
 - a) My family is old and distinguished.
 - b) My family are early risers.

2. Barker [1992] notes that VP number may disambiguate between member-level and collection-level interpretations:
 - a) The committee is old.
 - b) The committee are old.

3. Pearson distinguishes two classes of collective nouns: 'collection nouns' such as stack, heap, bunch, bouquet, and collection, and 'committee nouns' such as committee, family, and team. (Pearson, 2011)

(Hanna de Vries, 2018)

III. Semantic characteristics

1. Verb agreement with such nouns as: train (a unity of wagons), forest (a set of trees), and luggage (a collection of suitcases) – Jespersen (1961, II (1): 93) and Kruisinga (1932, II (2): 23) claims.
2. The animacy requirement according to Cruse (1986: 176)
3. All collectives in Dutch combine with a singular verb: een jong gezin (a young family); een jonge commissie (a young committee).
4. Most of the case, collectives in Russian combine with a singular verb but still there are a number of factors that contribute to the use of the singular or plural form.

IV. Corpus-based comparative study

Collective noun *family* with plural verb agreement

	Frequency	Spoken language	Written language	Academic language
British English	253	12	75	20
American English	1838	295	224	134

Collective noun *committee* with plural verb agreement

	Frequency	Spoken language	Written language	Academic language
British English	78	15	7	9
American English	253	66	19	26

*BNC** - British National Corpus
*COCA** - Corpus of Contemporary American English

V. Verb agreement with collective nouns in BE

1.

- a) The *family are* now celebrating at a secret location.
- b) And, quite honestly I'd (*pause*) my *family are* quite happy where they are.

(Spoken language)

2.

- a) The *family are* setting up a charity trust to help other people facing similar difficulties
- b) Anna's *family are* appalled.

(Newspaper)

V. Verb agreement with collective nouns in BE

3.

- a) So that the *committee are* aware of the the movement of cash from one period to the next.
- b) The European *committee are* trying to tighten them up.

(Spoken language)

4.

- a) The village hall committee are still looking for a secretary.
- b) The International Olympic Committee are today holding an emergency meeting with the committee organizing the Barcelona Games

(Newspaper)

*BNC

VI. Verb agreement with collective nouns in AmE

5)

- a) My family are mostly on my side. However, my father disagrees with this hobby.
- b) Your family are very bad people.

(Spoken language)

6)

- a) My whole family are Jet fans.
- b) I hope the Popovich family are also able to find strength in all of the loves this community has.

(Newspaper)

*COCA

VI. Verb agreement with collective nouns in AmE

7)

- a) The United States Olympic Committee are talking the right steps.
- b) I think the members of the Judiciary Committee are going to have hearings next week on perjury.

(Spoken Language)

8)

- a) The party rules say that the decisions of the Central Committee are obligatory for the communists in the Supreme Soviet.
- b) Members of the committee are helping decide how to market the schools, engage families and hire teachers.

(Newspaper)

*COCA

VII. Conclusion

- 1) Collective nouns combine properties associated with singularity and properties associated with plurality, on all levels of grammar (lexical-conceptual, morphosyntactic and semantic).
- 2) British English can easily accept the plural concord, while American English cannot.
- 3) The verb form is not only semantically or pragmatically motivated. There is always a contextual element that induces the use of either a singular or a plural verb.

VIII. References

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Thank you for your attention!