1. **Defining agreement**

Agreement describes the systematic correspondence between two or more elements in a sentence. It is often expressed in terms of the following schema:

(1) X agrees with Y in Z.

English nominal elements participate in three different kinds of agreement.

- **Subject verb agreement**

(2) English verbs agree with their subject in person and number.

But English has a highly impoverished system of verbal morphology:

(3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>I speak</td>
<td>we speak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>you speak</td>
<td>you speak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>he speaks</td>
<td>they speak</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So agreement is limited to the present tense of non-modal verbs and the past tense of *be*.

(4) a. She hates him ~ they hate him.
b. She might hate him ~ they might hate him.
c. I am leaving ~ she is leaving ~ they are leaving.
d. She saw him ~ they saw him.
e. She was here ~ they were here.

- **Determiner-noun agreement**

Determiners specified for number agree with the head noun of a phrase:

(5) a. This man/that man/*these man/*those man.
b. *This men/*that men/these men/those men.

(6) a. The book/the books.

- **Pronoun-antecedent agreement**

Pronouns agree with their antecedent in person, number and gender:
(7) a. If John wants to leave, he should go now.

2. **Subject verb agreement in detail**

2.1 **Clausal and other non-nominal subjects**

Clausal subjects are treated as singular:

(8) a. [That John is leaving] surprises no-one.
    b. [For John to leave] is unthinkable.

Other non-nominal subjects, such as prepositional phrases, are treated as singular too:

(9) [In the restaurant] is where I left my umbrella.

2.2 **Expletive subjects**

Expletive *it* always has third person singular agreement:

(10) a. It’s raining again.
    b. It seems that John is an idiot.

Expletive *there* constructions involve anomalous rightward agreement: although *there* is the subject of the sentence, the verb agrees with the ‘associate’ noun phrase to its right:

(11) a. There is a book on the table.
    b. There are two books on the table.

Many speakers, however, allow a singular verb with a plural associate (Rupp 2005):

(12) a. There’s so many useless degrees you can do now.
    b. There was pits everywhere.

2.3 **Singular agreement**

(13) a. Everyone is/*are* tired of hearing about it.
    b. Everybody was/*were* surprised to hear of his death.
    c. Anyone who has/*have* studied English grammar knows how dull it can be.

(14) a. The United States shares a border with Canada and Mexico.
    b. The United Nations is sending a peacekeeping force.

2.4 **Plural agreement**

(15) a. These scissors are/*is* blunt.
    b. These trousers are?/*is* torn.
2.5 Agreement and coordination

2.5.1 Coordination with and

If the conjuncts have different referents, plural agreement will be used; when they have the same (singular) referent, singular agreement is obligatory:

(16) a. Our friend and colleague are (both) leaving.
    b. Our friend and colleague is leaving.

2.5.2 Coordination with or

If two singular conjuncts are to be coordinated, singular agreement will occur; if two plural conjuncts are being coordinated, plural agreement will be used. But if the conjuncts are not of the same number, agreement fails to resolve:

(17) a. Either John or Mary is/*are leaving tomorrow.
    b. The men or the women are/*is leading the race.
    c. Either John or his sisters ?have/*has decided to leave.

2.6 Collective nouns

Nouns such as army, committee, crew, family, government, and team, allow ‘plural override’, in that they are treated as plural even though they appear to be singular. This is more common in British English than in American English (see Peters 1999)

(18) a. The committee were unanimous.
    b. The committee was unanimous.

2.6.1 Animacy

Plural override can only apply if the noun is animate:

(19) a. The crockery was lying on the table.
    b. *The crockery were lying on the table.

2.6.2 Interaction with pronoun-antecedent agreement

This has implications beyond subject-verb agreement. In particular, collective nouns can serve as antecedents for both singular and plural pronouns:

(20) a. The band is so popular that tickets for its new tour have already sold out.
    b. The band is so popular that tickets for their new tour have already sold out.

Various combinations are possible:

(21) a. The committee hasn’t yet made up their mind. [sg. verb + pl. pronoun]
    b. The committee haven’t yet made up their mind. [pl. verb + pl. pronoun]
    c. The committee hasn’t yet made up its mind. [sg. verb + sg pronoun]
    d. *The committee haven’t yet made up its mind. [*pl. verb + sg pronoun]
2.6.3 Collectivity vs. individuality

The singular-plural distinction is often said to reflect a difference in meaning, with singular used when the collective is understood as a single unit and plural when its components are being referred to individually:

(22)  a. The committee was surprisingly large.
    b. The committee were surprisingly large.

Adjectives may modify whole collective or members of it:

(23)  a. A young committee (= a newly formed committee)
    b. A young family (= a family whose members are young)

2.6.4 Floating quantifiers and demonstratives

Floating quantifiers force plural agreement; demonstratives force singular agreement:

(24)  a. The team have /*has all played badly.
    b. This committee/*those committee has now resigned.

2.6.5 Further syntactic influences

When modified by quantifiers that select for a singular count noun, quantifiers such as each and every, collectives tend to favour singular agreement:

(25) Every family has / *have secrets to tell.

But when they're modified by a numeral, they tend to require or favour the plural:

(26) Three crew have / *has been sent to tackle the blaze.

And when they're modified by quantifiers that select for a plural count noun, the plural is favoured:

(27)  a. Many crew have / *has attended the fire;
    b. All the team have / *has done their best.

But these are tendencies, not rules

(28) This England team is / are the worst we've ever seen.

2.6.6 Semantics of the predicate

Predicates that imply the decomposition of the unit (e.g. consist of, be composed of) will favour the singular:

(29) The committee consists/ ??consist of eight members.

But this is only a tendency, and there are exceptions:

(30) The committee were/was unanimous in their decision.
And the reverse is also true: if the predicate applies individuals or presuppose some differentiation (e.g. disagree, quarrel), then the plural will be favoured:

(31) The crew get /?gets on well.

2.7 Measure nouns

Are treated as a single unit:

(32) a. Five hundred pounds is a lot of money.
    b. Two weeks isn't long enough for a round the world cruise.

They may have internal singular syntax:

(33) That six months he spent in jail was the worst time of his life.

2.8 Quantificational nouns

In these cases, there is a conflict between syntax and semantics: syntactically, quantificational nouns are singular; semantically they are plural:

(34) a. A number of people have/*has made the same observation.
    b. A large proportion of students get/*gets the answer wrong.
    c. Half the students have/*has got the question wrong.

English resolves this conflict in favour of semantics; some other languages, such as German, do so in favour of the syntax (see Berg 1998).

2.9 Who/what

Default singular agreement with who and what can be overridden if there is a presupposition on the part of the questioner that the answer will be plural:

(35) Who were behind the conspiracy to have John kidnapped?

3. References and further reading


Synchronic aspects


**Diachronic aspects**


**Comparative aspects**


**Dialect variation**

