Collective nouns

Introduction: our aim and scope

We chose to write about collective nouns, which are nouns that denote a group of objects, because we wanted to know more about how they are used, in particular if they take singular or plural concord. Concord, or agreement, is a term used to denote the grammatical relationship regarding number, gender, case, person etc.

We also wanted to investigate which forms are more common in American or British English and if there has been a change in usage over time. This is interesting to us because in Sweden we do not conjugate verbs according to number and as future teachers we want to make sure we are able to explain this in a good way to our pupils.

In brief, our research questions during the process of writing this essay were:

• How are collective nouns treated in American and British English?
• Has there been a difference in usage over time?

Previous research

Chalker and Weiner (1994:69) says that ‘the choice of a singular or plural verb – and corresponding pronouns and determiners – depends on whether the group is considered as a single unit or as a collection of individuals’, and this is the explanation we found in most grammars. However, this explanation does not seem to be crystal clear, as we have found different theories on how singular and plural concord is used.

Levin (2001) mentions Jespersen who discusses a theory about animacy when it comes to collective nouns. According to Jespersen’s theory, plural agreement is only used with collective nouns when the noun denotes animate beings. So this means that even though a collective noun is grammatically singular, it is used with plural agreement when the semantic meaning is that of a group of living beings.
Persson (1989) discusses that some collective nouns that denote collections of animate beings can have variable concord and others cannot have variable concord. Therefore he argues that the question of animacy is not a sufficient explanation and says that volition (if the subject has the intention to do something) and mobility (when the subject has the ability to move) are features that could be taken into consideration when defining collective nouns. By this he means that members of a club join it of their own free will and are also able to leave it, and therefore club can be called a collective noun. And contrasted with this we have wood, which is not animate and cannot be considered a collective noun according to Persson’s theory since the trees do not join the woods of their own free will and are not able to leave it.

Bauer (1994) investigated collective nouns used in editorials in The Times during the twentieth century and found that there was an increasing tendency to use singular agreement with collective nouns. In her research she found words that were used with plural concord in the beginning of the century, but later in the century the same word is used with singular concord. For example, army was last used with plural agreement in 1900. Of course, the language used in the editorials in The Times is very formal English, so the results Bauer found does not account for less formal styles of English.

**Material and method**

We decided to use corpus searches to answer our questions about collective nouns. For this purpose we chose 22 collective nouns:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{committee} & \text{staff} \\
\text{audience} & \text{council} \\
\text{couple} & \text{government} \\
\text{family} & \text{crowd} \\
\text{nation} & \text{public} \\
\text{minority} & \text{majority} \\
\text{team} & \text{population} \\
\text{group} & \text{department} \\
\text{party} & \text{crew} \\
\text{gang} & \text{jury} \\
\text{club} & \text{army}
\end{array}
\]
In our tables of results, we removed a few words, which did not give us any results. They are: 
*minority, crew, gang and jury.*

Initially we chose to do our searches in LOB (British English, 1961), FLOB (British English, 1991), BROWN (American English, 1961), FROWN (American English, 1991), COCA (American English, 1990-2011) and BNC (British English, 1980s-1993). After having done the searches, we decided to disregard the results from COCA and BNC because we felt the amount of information to go through was too much for the time limit we had for this essay.

We searched for words using Wordsmith tools and we looked at the collocate words and found that the two most frequent verbs were *be* and *have* so we decided to focus our searches on them. We chose to limit our searches to the present tense since *have* in the past tense does not make a distinction between singular and plural and our aim was to find out whether there is a distinction made between singular and plural. Since English is an SVO language, which means that the subject precede the verb, our searches looked like this:

\[
\text{Collective noun} + \text{is/are/has/have}
\]

**Presentation and discussion of results**

Levin (1998) mentions in his article that some nouns are more likely to take plural concord, whilst others are more likely to take singular concord. Collective nouns such as *team* and *family* are more likely to take plural concord since they are seen as a group consisting of individuals. Nouns such as *committee* and *government* are more likely to take grammatical concord and singular since they are looked upon as a single unit. We found similar results in our corpus searches. *Family* and *team* in British English (see figure 1 and 3) and *crowd* in American English (figure 2) take plural concord, which confirms the theory of individuals. *Committee* only took singular concord (figures 1 and 2), which also matches the idea of a committee seen as a unit.

Svartvik and Sager (1996:150) state that collective nouns normally take plural agreement in British English, whereas singular is used in American English. Our results differed a bit from this description; while we did find that plural concord is hardly used in American English, the use of plural concord in British English is not that common.
In our searches we found that there has been a difference over time when it comes to plural agreement in British English. As mentioned above, Bauer (1994) found that the plural usage with collective nouns has declined in British English and we found this change as well when we compared the searches we did in LOB and FLOB. Bauer noted that words that had plural concord in the beginning of the century now have singular concord and this on-going change can be illustrated in figure 3 showing results from 1961 (LOB) and 1991 (FLOB).
Figure 3. Results from LOB and FLOB, singular concord with collective nouns (%).

Perhaps the increasing use of singular in British English has been influenced by the usage in American English. Since American English has more speakers and it is the version of the language that the world is the most exposed to, e.g. through TV series, films and songs, it would not seem strange if British English has been influenced by it. However, Bauer (1994) mentions that this change towards singular concord in British English is not American influence because it appears in the 1930’s, which is a long time before American English started to influence British English. But Levin (2001) discusses the possibility that American English has helped reinforce the use of singular concord in the later part of the century. On the other hand, he mentions that plural concord is still very popular in speech in British English but we have not been able to confirm this, since we used a corpora of written language.

Conclusion

Our aim with this paper was to acquire more knowledge collective nouns, in particular if there is a difference between American and British English and whether there has been a change over time. We found that singular concord is used more often in American English than in British but that singular concord is increasing in British English. We could not find a change over time in American English, but we noted a difference in British English, where we found a development towards using more singular concord.

We believe our research is somewhat inconclusive because the corpora we used did not have enough words for our area of research, whereas we found larger corpora such as BNC and COCA to
be too large. This was our first time doing a corpus study and therefore there is a possibility that the method we used was insufficient. However, most of our results matched previous studies in the area, so we feel content with our research.

We believe that this is a dynamic field in linguistics and it would be interesting to see the contemporary usage and especially to see how collective nouns are used in social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. This is particularly interesting to us as future teachers since our pupils probably will be very adept at using social media.

References


