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English Grammar: Language as Human Behavior

Anita K. Barry

Third Edition

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One situation in which the number of the subject might be difficult to determine is where the subject contains more than one noun phrase. If it is a compound noun phrase with *and,* we treat the subject as plural: *The man and the woman are working.* But the agreement requirement is different if there are two noun phrases joined by *(either) or,* or *(neither) nor,* as in (42), often called a **disjunction.**

(42) Either my sister or my brother is picking me up.
Neither the man nor the woman works here.
You or your friends are expected to show up.

Here we might be inclined to think of these subject noun phrases as plural also, but standard English requires us to view them separately and imposes the following rule: *the noun phrase closest to the verb determines the agreement.* If you look again at the sentences in (42), you will see how that works. Sometimes following this rule gives rise to sentences that are awkward to the ear, like *Either he or I am to blame,* and we might avoid the problem by rephrasing the sentence: *Either he is to blame or I am,* for example.

The next set of sentences illustrates another situation in which it may not be clear to us what the number of the subject is.

(43) One of the professors requires a term paper.
Each of the children receives a gift at Christmas.

Although the subjects are *one of the professors* and *each of the children,* it is only the head of the noun phrase that determines the agreement. That means the verb must agree with *one* and *each,* both of which are singular. This is an especially difficult rule to follow for two reasons. First, the meaning of the subject may be plural, as in *each of the children;* second, we are used to thinking of the noun phrase right before the verb as the subject. This rule of agreement goes counter to our intuitions about how English works and so it is often violated, especially in speaking. The same problem arises if the head of the noun phrase is a singular noun, as in (44), and nonstandard sentences like the following are commonplace.

(44) The range of answers were interesting.
The intelligence of the children amaze me.
The use of cameras are prohibited.

A third situation that goes counter to our intuitions about subject-verb agreement occurs in sentences that begin with *there.* Consider the pairs of sentences in (45).

(45) A book is on the table. Three books are on the table.
There is a book on the table. There are three books on the table.

The meaning of each pair is the same; the only difference is that in the second sentence of each pair, the subject has been moved behind the verb and *there*

has been put in its place. No matter whether it has been moved or not, the subject noun phrase determines the person and number of the verb. But, given its location in the sentence, there is a strong temptation to treat *there* as if it were the subject. The result is nonstandard but very common sentences like *There's three books on the table,* where *there's* is a contraction of *there is.*

Subject-verb agreement is not a difficult rule to follow as long as it doesn't collide with other things we know and expect about English: we expect the subject to appear before the verb; we expect the grammatical number and the meaning number to be the same; we expect that if there is more than one noun phrase in the subject it will be plural. These are all reasonable expectations, and they work most of the time for English. But there are instances in which the standard rule of subject-verb agreement requires that we set aside those expectations and figure it out instead. We are more successful at this in writing, since we have time to reflect, and less successful in speaking, where we speak and formulate our thoughts simultaneously.

DISCUSSION EXERCISES 19

1. Each of these sentences violate the standard English rule of subject-verb agreement. Tell what the violation is and what leads people to make the error. What is the standard version of each sentence?

   Neither my mother nor my father are going.
   Either Sue or I are supposed to respond.
   There's too many people in this room.
   Each of you have to take the exam.
   One of the dogs keep barking all night.
   Everyone in my family attend the reunions.
   There's three reasons for rejecting this offer.
   Neither you nor I are to blame.

2. The above instructions are written in nonstandard English. Did you notice? Let's hope so.
3. Similar to sentences like *Each of the children receives a gift* are sentences like

   All of the children receive gifts.
   Both of the children receive gifts.
   Why don't these sentences cause subject-verb agreement problems for us?

4. There are many nouns, called *collective nouns,* that are grammatically singular but have plural meaning, like *group, committee,* and *team.* In

(*continued*)

American English, they usually require a singular verb: *the group is meeting, the team is playing.* In British English they may have plural verb agreement: *the team are playing.* Even in American English there are some collective nouns that can be thought of as singular or plural, such as *faculty: the faculty is responsible, the faculty are responsible.* Can you think of others that allow this fluctuation in number?

5. This headline appeared in a local newspaper:

   The enlightening power of the arts are overblown.

   What rule of grammar does it violate?

6. A prominent writer was quoted as saying, "out comes the prepared formulae." How does this exhibit a problem speakers of English may face in applying the rule of subject-verb agreement?

You have now crossed an important threshold in the study of English grammar. Noun phrases and verb phrases are the basic building blocks of sentences. Once you understand what they are made of and how they behave, you have a grounding in how the language works generally.

REFLECTIONS

1. It may seem strange to you that only third-person-singular subjects require a suffix on the verb. In fact, there was a time when all forms of the verb required suffixes, but most of them were lost over time. You can still see remnants of these earlier suffixes in most versions of the Bible and in earlier literary writing: *thou hast* (you have), for example. You will also notice that the -(*e*)*s* suffix used to compete with -(*e*)*th* as the third-person-singular verb ending. Look up Portia's famous speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* that begins "The quality of mercy is not strained. . . ." How does this speech illustrate that these two suffixes competed during Shakespeare's time?

2. In her column titled "Word Court" in the *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1996), Barbara Wallraff tells us about the rule of *will* vs *shall:* "The traditional distinction made in England is that in the first person *will* has to do with willpower—that is, it denotes intentionality—and *shall* with simple futurity, whereas the second and third persons reverse the pattern." She goes on to explain the difference in meaning between *I shall drown; no one will save me,* and *I will drown; no one shall save me.* Can you figure it out?

3. You will remember from the discussion in the chapter that there is fluctuation in *hypothetical if-then* statements between the standard *if I were you*

and the nonstandard *if I was you.* The explanation behind this unexpected form of *be* is that it is in a verb form called the *subjunctive,* a term you might be familiar with if you have studied Spanish or French. English doesn't use the subjunctive very much anymore, but it still appears in the *if* part of *hypothetical if-then* statements. You'll notice that the stigma of *was* diminishes greatly if the *if* statement is something other than *if I were you.* Consider, for example, *If the weather was better, we could have a picnic.* Does this sound nonstandard to you?

4. The distinction in meaning between the present perfect tense and the simple past tense can be very subtle, and in some cases they are used interchangeably. There is probably no difference at all between *I ate the pie* and *I have eaten the pie.* But notice that if you want to pinpoint the action at a specific time in the past, a difference emerges. Suppose you wanted to add *yesterday.* Could you add it to both? Which sounds odd? Why do you think the two tenses are not equally compatible with expressions like *yesterday, last week,* etc.?

5. The three main subcategories of verbs are transitive (requires a direct object), intransitive (can stand alone), and linking (requires a subject complement). But there are some verbs that don't fit neatly into any of these categories. For example, what requirement is there for the use of *be* with the meaning "be located," as in *He is in his seat?* What about the verb *put,* or the verb *lie* meaning "stretch out one's body"?

6. The verb *to act* can be either intransitive or linking. Consider the sentences

He acts odd.

He acts oddly.

Describe some behavior of his that would fit each of these descriptions.

7. It is possible for nonfinite verb phrases to have their own subjects. These constructions are known as *absolutes* and occur only in very formal English. Which are the absolutes in the following?

The king having abdicated his throne, the peasants rejoiced.

The students having passed their exams, the partying began.

You will notice that in these there is no requirement that the nonfinite verb phrase be linked to the subject of the finite verb phrase.

8. Dangling participles are actually part of a larger category of **dangling modifiers.** Modifiers at the beginning of a sentence are supposed to connect to the following subject; if they can't, they "dangle." What makes each of these a dangling modifier?

Unhappy with the election results, another vote was taken.

Located a block from home, it was easy for me to get to work.

There was a time when a sentence like the following was considered to have a dangling modifier:

Due to the storm, the school was closed.

In what sense can this modifier be consider dangling? What is your own judgment about this sentence? Listen for this construction in everyday usage. Do you know anyone who considers it to be nonstandard?

9. There is always more to say about dangling modifiers. When they are at the beginning of the sentence, modifiers must "borrow" the subject. But when they are at the end, they may borrow the subject *or* the noun phrase closest to them. So, some sentences may have two meanings:

I saw the boy looking through my window.

Who was looking through the window? There is nothing grammatically wrong with this sentence, but you need to be aware in your own usage that it can have two different interpretations.

10. You will find people struggling with agreement problems in sentences like the following:

The number of students is growing.

A number of students are coming.

Although they look very much alike, they have different structures. In the first, *number* is the head noun and is singular, so the verb is singular. In the second, *a number of* acts like a determiner, comparable to *several,* and the head of the noun phrase is *students*. Since *students* is plural, the verb is plural. Try to explain this to someone without using grammatical jargon.

11. Some nouns are singular in meaning but plural in form and require the verb to be plural. Some examples are *scissors, pants, trousers*. Why do you think these nouns have plural form?

12. The following is from a modern novel: "He shone his own flashlight upward then, so that two beams shone against the mast now." (David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars,* Vintage Books: New York, 1995, p. 452)

This is from another modern novel: "It lasted fine. It throve . . ." (Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety,* Penguin Books: New York, 1987, p. 103)

Does the past tense usage in these passages match your own?

13. A character in still another modern novel asks the following:

> "Is that because you understand I have to ask if you or your sister know where Hawkins is?" (Alice Hoffman, *Practical Magic,* Berkley Books: New York, 1995, p. 275)

What grammar rule does this question violate?

14. The following were collected from newspapers, textbooks, Websites, a published short story, and university student writing. What do they all have in common? Why is this particular usage in English so common?

> "Recent analysis of the structure of discourse in western courts have stressed the careful sequencing of speech turns."
>
> "The rule of r-lessness states that the 'R' in words are pronounced only if they come before a vowel."
>
> "One of the morphemes are the result of the natural change in language and the other is borrowed from another language."
>
> "The choice between the pronouns 'who' and 'whom' often present a problem for the English speaker."
>
> "I think teaching them these things are an important part in promoting skills they will need for the 21st century."
>
> "... the report concludes that a range of effective treatments exist for nearly all mental disorders."
>
> "I thought that the comparison of the words *pail* and *bucket* were quite interesting."
>
> "... as a stream of cars pass them on the way to work."
>
> "... the dialects that are spoken in various parts of the United States is heavily influenced by the geographic location of people more than commonly thought."
>
> "The distinction between particles and prepositions are that particles can be moved to the end of the sentence...."
>
> "The meaning of the words are changed."
>
> "Each of the words above explain how this German word is formed in the mouth."
>
> "In order to be sure that in the future the meaning of documents are clear...."
>
> "Investors are already beginning to see signs that the impact of pre-announcements are diminishing."

15. As we saw in Discussion Exercise 3, question 5, it is very common for nouns to be made into verbs, although they are often frowned on when they are first introduced. For example, in the recent past, grammatical purists have objected to sentences like the following:

> Contact his relatives.
>
> How will this impact your business?
>
> Loan me ten dollars.

In each case, what do you think is the basis for the objection?