Chapter 4

The Copula and Subject-Verb Agreement

Introduction

Grammatical Description

ESL/EFL learners are exposed to the forms of the copula *be* and the third person singular inflection almost immediately in their earliest English classes or in any English-speaking environment they might be experiencing. The forms are superficially simple to describe and understand, yet they pose problems for learners at all levels. The copula *be* poses the greatest problems at the initial stage. However, research on L2 morpheme acquisition has shown that the third person singular present tense *-s* inflection causes persistent problems for learners even at more advanced stages of proficiency.

In this chapter we will take a close look at these problem areas. They will reemerge regularly in the following chapters; however, we felt that a detailed treatment at this stage would be wise, given the pervasiveness of the learning challenges that these forms entail.

Form: The Structural Roles of *Be*

Be functions as an auxiliary verb as well as a copula, so we should first take stock of these two distinct functions:

Copula: John *is* { a teacher / tall / in Boston }.

Auxiliary: John *is* talking to Susan (progressive aspect)

The copula links nonverbal predicates (i.e., nouns, adjectives, and certain adverbials[1]) with their subjects and serves as a carrier for tense and subject-verb agreement; that is, in the present tense the form of the verb *be* reflects the person and number of the subject noun as well as signaling present tense: *I am, he is, you are,* and so on.

This structural function of *be* as a copula is distinct from the use of *be* in the progressive aspect, where *be* combines with *-ing* to make the action denoted by the main verb more limited (see Chapter 7). Auxiliary *be* always occurs in conjunction with another verb, and it is thus referred to as an auxiliary verb. The progressive aspect is only one of several

auxiliary verb functions that *be* has. It is also an auxiliary element in the passive voice (see Chapter 18) and in a number of phrasal modals (see Chapter 8).

WHY THE COPULA *BE* IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER VERBS

The rule for expanding the verb phrase makes a clear distinction between copular verbs like *be* and all other verbs in English. There are at least four very good reasons for making such a distinction. First of all, *be*, which is the most frequent verb in English, has more distinct forms with respect to person, number, and tense than any other verb in English. The traditional paradigm for *be* compared with that for a lexical verb such as *walk* makes this clear:

COPULA *BE*

	Present tense		Past tense	
Person	*Singular*	*Plural*	*Singular*	*Plural*
1st	I am	we are	I was	we were
2nd	you are	you are	you were	you were
3rd	he/she/it is	they are	he/she/it was	they were

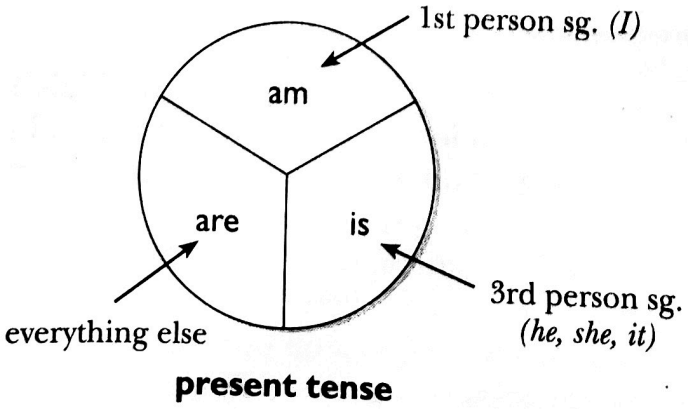
VERB *WALK*

	Present tense		Past tense	
Person	*Singular*	*Plural*	*Singular*	*Plural*
1st	I walk	we walk	I walked	we walked
2nd	you walk	you walk	you walked	you walked
3rd	he/she/it walks	they walk	he/she/it walked	they walked

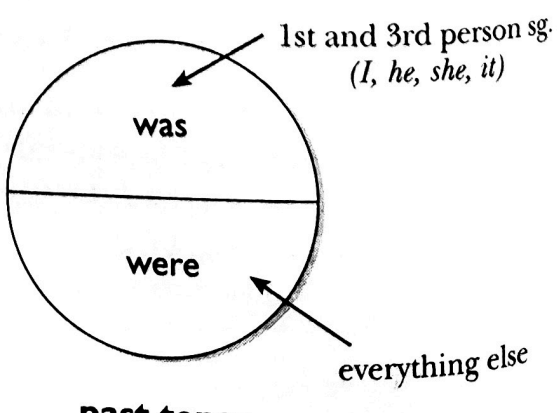
a verb like *walk* has two present-tense forms and one past-tense form:

Present: walks—third person singular
walk—all other persons and numbers
Past: walked—all persons and numbers

The verb *be*, on the other hand, has three distinct present-tense and two past-tense forms. Some of the forms are more restricted in their range than others, and this is represented in the following diagrams:



present tense



past tense

The multiplicity of forms explains why learners sometimes use the wrong form of the verb *be* in their speech or writing:

*You is late. *We was on time.

Second, the copula *be* may be followed by adjective phrases, a defining characteristic that it shares with many other copular verbs (also called "linking verbs").[2] Although *be* is the most frequent and the semantically most neutral copula, there are three other types of copulas:

1. *perception copulas* (mental or sensory). The perceiver is sometimes expressed.

They { appear / seem / feel / look / smell / sound / taste } funny (to me).

2. *state copulas* (tend to take participial adjectives):[3]

They { lie / remain / rest / stand } protected.

3. *change-of-state copulas* (often only one or two adjectives go with a given copula):[4]

They { become / come / fall / get / go / grow / run / turn } { tall. / true. / ill. / wild. }

The copula *be* can be followed not only by adjective phrases but also by noun phrases and adverbial prepositional phrases (i.e., it is the grammatically most flexible copular verb):

Naomi is { attractive. / an actress. / in New York. } prepositional

Most of the other copular verbs can be followed only by adjective phrases except for the change-of-state copulas *become*[5] and *turn*,[6] which can be followed by noun phrases as well as adjective phrases:

Naomi became { attractive. / an actress. }

She turned { wild. / traitor. }

Third, the syntactic behavior of the copula *be*, which behaves like an auxiliary verb and has operator function with regard to question formation (see Chapter 11), negation (see

Chapter 10), and other constructions, is very different from that of other verbs like *walk*, which require the addition of a *do* auxiliary as the operator if no other auxiliary verb is present.

Hal [is] an engineer.	Hall walk[s] to work.
[Is] Hal an engineer?	[Does] Hal walk to work?
Hal [is]n't a teacher.	Hal [does]n't walk home.

Like the main verb *walk*, copular verbs other than *be* take a *do* auxiliary in questions and negatives:

Did he get taller?
I don't feel well.

Finally, the copula *be* does not occur in all languages, but all languages have verbs. Especially in the present tense, many languages have nothing equivalent to the copula *be*; speakers of such languages simply express the literal equivalent of sentences like the three below, and this pattern readily transfers to English during their initial learning stage:

*Hal engineer. *Hal in next room.
*Hal tall.

In sum, a verb is copular if it is followed by a noun phrase, an adjective phrase, or an adverbial that specifically predicates something about the subject of the verb.

MEANING

The lack of universality of the copula *be* is understandable if we consider that semantically it is not a necessary form; it is a linking element that carries tense—which can be marked only on verbs—and subject-verb agreement. In fact, children learning English as their mother tongue often omit the *be* copula in their early speech as do many second language learners of all ages when they are first learning English. Second language learners have been observed to omit the copula regardless of whether or not their native language has an equivalent form. All these phenomena are related to the fact that the copula *be* is a marked form.

However, we agree with Langacker (1991:65) that *be* is not merely a semantically empty grammatical operator, as some linguists have suggested. Langacker proposes that the meaning of *be* is primarily temporal and aspectual. It signals that an imperfective state is continuing through time as a stable situation. For Langacker, *be* is a true verb marking a stative relation. It is not semantically specific in any way regarding the relation between the subject noun phrase and the element following *be*, which may be adjectival, nominal, or adverbial (in the latter case, usually a prepositional phrase).

USE

Besides learning that sentences like the ones above with Hal require the *be* copula, the other use problem for ESL/EFL students is to realize that copula *be* does indeed function as an operator—it does not require the *do* auxiliary. Failure to recognize the special status of the *be* copula in the formation of questions and negative sentences sometimes results in errors such as the following:

*Do they be happy? (for "Are they happy?")
*We don't be teachers. (for "We aren't teachers.")

THE COPULA *BE* AS A LEARNING PROBLEM

For all the above reasons the ESL/EFL teacher must be sensitive to the problems that his or her learners will have with the copula *be*—especially if the learners are at the beginning

level, since they may have a tendency to omit it. (For those students whose native language has no copula, this initial tendency will be even more pronounced.) The other problem, of course, involves use of the wrong form of *be*. Sufficient opportunity for meaningful practice can overcome both of these problems.

SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

FORM

Third Person Singular Present

Standard grammatical treatments state that for verbs other than *be*, number agreement between the subject and verb (sometimes referred to as subject-verb concord) poses a problem only in the present tense, where third person singular forms are explicitly inflected while other forms are not.

	NUMBER	
Person	*Singular*	*Plural*
1st	I speak French.	We speak French.
2nd	You speak French.	You speak French.
3rd	He/she/it (the parrot) speak-s French.	They speak French.

Some Typical Errors

Given the complexity of the choice, the beginning ESL/EFL learner tends to simplify and leave off altogether the third person singular inflection:

*Sharon live in Seattle. *Harry say he will come.

Occasionally, however, some learners will overgeneralize the inflection and apply it to uninflected forms, such as modal auxiliaries, or to verbs following modals (see Chapter 8):

*Jack can's dance disco.
or
*Jack can dances disco.

They also may overuse it as an agreement marker with subjects of inappropriate person and/or number:

*I
*They } goes to Stanford.
*You

Yet another reason why some learners overuse this form is that they interpret the *-s* ending as a plural marker on the verb to be used in agreement with plural subjects:

*They
*The boys } goes to the movies often.

Finally, it has also been observed that some Spanish speakers tend to initially overuse the verb + *-s* inflection with the second person singular pronoun because a similar form is used in their language when the subject noun reflects this person:

Spanish: Tu habla s inglés. *English:* *You speak s English.

By far the most common error in subject-verb agreement is the first one we mentioned, that of the learner simply omitting the inflection for third person singular. Research in both language typology and second language acquisition can help us understand why this is so.

The languages of the world can be roughly divided into topic-prominent languages with pragmatic word order (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean) and subject-prominent languages with grammatical word order (e.g., English, Spanish, Arabic); the former never mark subject-verb agreement, whereas the latter typically do. Thus it seems plausible that learners of English with a topic-prominent first language would find it more difficult to master subject-verb agreement than learners whose native language is subject-prominent like English. However, research in second language acquisition by Fuller & Gundel (1987) suggests that most learners pass through an early topic-prominent stage regardless of their first language. In analyzing the elicited oral narratives produced by low-intermediate learners of English, these researchers found no significant differences between native speakers of topic-prominent languages and those of subject-prominent languages in their use of subject-verb agreement in English. Most of their nonnative speakers made more than 10 errors demonstrating lack of agreement. Yet since speakers of topic-prominent languages are not prepared by their first language to expect the relationship between subject and verb to be marked in any way, it is likely to take them longer to master subject-verb agreement in English than speakers of subject-prominent languages. Further research is needed to see if this hypothesis is correct.

Agreement errors may be due to phonological or perceptual factors rather than syntactic or morphological differences. ESL/EFL teachers should be aware of the fact that some learners of English fully understand the third person singular present ending and can even produce it systematically when they write in English; however, they omit it frequently when they are speaking. One reason for this is because the sound system of their native language tends not to permit final /s/ sounds in particular or final consonants in general. Speakers of French and a variety of other languages have been observed to do this when speaking English.

Of course, other reasons for the slow and late acquisition of the third person singular present inflection on the verb—even when there is no phonological interference from the learner's native language—might be its lack of perceptual saliency[7] and its low frequency of occurrence in native speaker speech (Larsen-Freeman, 1976). The third person singular present tense inflection tends to be omitted for these reasons as well. Also, it is the only inflection in the present tense and has little communicative utility since the person/number is almost always clear from the subject noun phrase, just as it is with the other persons and numbers that do not take any inflection.

MEANING

Problems in Subject and Verb Number Choice

Whereas some cases of subject and verb number choice are puzzling mainly to nonnative speakers, several cases cause difficulty for native and nonnative speakers alike. We will now review many of the problematic areas in subject and verb number choice along with the more predictable and obvious rules.

The General Rule

In the most straightforward cases, the subject and verb number choice will agree: In the present tense we use the third person singular inflection (*-s* or the *be* form *is*) if the subject refers to one entity, whether it is a singular proper name, a singular common noun, a non-count noun, or a third person singular pronoun. Elsewhere—for nouns or pronouns referring to more than one entity[8] or for first or second person pronouns referring to one entity—no inflection is used in the present tense:

Third person singular inflection on verb	*No inflection on verb*
John walk[s] to school.	The Smiths walk to church.
The bus stop[s] here.	These books contain good information.
This water taste[s] funny.	I / You } want an apple.
She want[s] an apple.	We / You / They } want an apple.

To this formulation we should add that if the predicate of the sentence begins with an inflectable, tense-bearing auxiliary verb such as *be* or *have*, it is the auxiliary verb that indicates the third person singular inflection (not the main verb):

John [is] walking to school.

This water [has] boiled for 10 minutes.

Reid (1991) offers an excellent reanalysis of this problematic "rule." His arguments are based on meaning rather than form, and he emphasizes the fact that form follows from meaning; he believes that the subject-verb agreement "rule" is not grounded in syntactic automaticity but that its use reflects a series of semantic choices and decisions made by the speaker-writer. Reid proposes that all English nouns (in this case nouns that happen to function as subjects) have a number, which is either ONE or MORE THAN ONE. The number MORE THAN ONE can be encoded either lexically (e.g., *people, they*) or, more typically, morphologically with the inflection *-s*[9] (e.g., *several boys*). In some cases, lexical and morphological number can even co-occur and give new meaning to words (e.g., *peoples*).

Similarly, all English verbs have a number. Except for the verb *be*, which encodes number lexically even in the past tense, other English verbs encode number only in the present tense:

Present tense verb ending	Meaning	Example
–s	(ONE)	The boy runs.
–ø	(MORE THAN ONE)	The boys run.

Reid further proposes that the choice of number is made separately for both the subject noun and the verb (*be* or present tense lexical verbs) and that both choices contribute independently to the speaker's message. This perspective allows Reid to explain why the number of the subject noun and the verb, while most often the same, do not always agree since all combinations are possible though not equally frequent. The most frequent choices, i.e., the agreements, are the examples in the shaded boxes numbered 1 and 4:

		NOUN SUBJECT	
		One	More Than One
VERB	One	The boy likes candy. 1	Ten dollars is not a lot of money. 2
	More Than One	The family are all here 3	The boys like candy. 4

The examples in boxes 2 and 3 are unusual in that an overtly plural subject in 2 is reinterpreted as a singular lump sum, and an overtly singular subject in 3 is reinterpreted as a plural entity. We know this has been done by the speaker/writer because of the verb forms chosen: singular *is* in 2 and plural *are* in 3. The choice is complex, and for Reid it is based on the speaker's message and communicative intent in each case.[10]

We refer to Reid's system when we discuss several of the following problematic cases of subject noun and main verb number agreement/disagreement later in this chapter. We find his system appealing because it helps explain why the "rule" is so difficult for L2 learners to master and why even educated native speakers of English must constantly monitor their production in this area.

Examples of the general agreement rule are easy to understand and cause little or no difficulty—at least not at the conceptual level. However, there are so many special or difficult cases concerning subject and verb number that we must fill several pages with subrules and examples as we try to give you a complete picture of the problem.

Rules for Persistently Troublesome Cases

1. Collective nouns (see Chapter 17) like the one in box 3 of the preceding matrix may take either a singular or plural verb inflection depending on the meaning.[11] If the subject noun is conceived of as one entity, the verb carries the *-s* inflection; if the subject is felt to be more than one entity, the verb takes no inflection. (Note that other forms showing number agreement (e.g. determiners) may also change to reflect the number selected.)

Our school team has won all its games. (= the team as a whole)
Our school team have won all their games. (= individual team members)

2. Some common and proper nouns ending in *-s*, including *-ics* nouns and certain diseases, are always conceived of as a single entity and take a singular verb inflection.

No news is good news.
This series is very interesting.
Measles is a contagious disease.
Physics is a difficult subject.
Wales is lovely to visit.

3. Titles of books, plays, operas, films, and such works—even when plural in form—take the singular verb inflection because they are perceived as a single entity.

Great Expectations was written by Dickens.
The Pirates of Penzance is my favorite operetta.

4. Nouns occurring in sets of two take the singular when the noun *pair* is present but take the plural when *pair* is absent—regardless of whether one pair or more is being referred to.

A pair of trousers is on the sofa. This pair of shoes needs new heels.
Todd's trousers are on the sofa. These shoes need new heels.

5. *A number of* normally takes the plural, while *the number of* normally takes the singular.

A number of students have dropped that course.
The number of students in this school is 2,000.

This generalization holds true most of the time because the noun *number* in the phrase *the number of* generally modifies or implies a single entity such as a sum or a totality, whereas the noun *number* in the phrase *a number of* normally modifies or implies more than one entity, much as the quantifiers *some, a few,* or *several* do. However, as Reid (1991) points out, authentic counterexamples do exist for this heuristic—especially if adjectivals that semantically support the opposite number interpretation are modifying the noun *number* so as to make "*(the) number (of)*" reflect more than one entity or make "*(a) number (of)*" reflect a single entity:

". . . the increased number of cancers were occurring at radiation exposure levels well below the official limit. . . . " Reid (1991:219)

"A smaller number of steps suggests a growing ability to organize." Reid (1991:282)

6. Fractions and percentages take a singular verb inflection when modifying a noncount noun and the plural verb inflection when they modify a plural noun; either the singular or the plural verb inflection may be used when they modify a collective noun, depending on the speaker's meaning.

noncount: One half of the toxic waste has escaped.
Fifty percent of the toxic waste has escaped.

plural: Two thirds of the students are satisfied with the class.
Sixty-six percent of the students are satisfied with the class.

collective: One tenth of the population of Egypt { is Christian. / are Christians. }

Ten percent of the population of Egypt { is Christian. / are Christians. }

7. The nouns *majority* and *minority* are variously described as singular, plural, or collective, depending on which reference grammar one consults. The only satisfying description of these words that we found was in Fowler (1965: 349–350, 366). Fowler maintains that *majority* and *minority* have three related but slightly different meanings:

a. An abstract or generic meaning that refers to superiority of numbers; the reference can be human or nonhuman, but the number is always singular. For example:

The great majority is helpless.

b. A specific meaning where one of two or more sets has a numerical plurality (*majority*) or numerical inferiority (*minority*); the examples make reference to political parties, and grammatically these cases are like collectives and can be either singular or plural. For example:

The majority was/were determined to press its/their victory.

c. A specific meaning where most (*majority*) or less than half (*minority*) of an explicit set of persons is being referred to. Here, Fowler claims the number agreement should be plural. For example:

A majority of my friends advise it.

What we need is a usage study that will confirm or modify Fowler's classification. The limited data we have from studies of native speaker preference by van Shaik (1976) and Farhady (1977) support Fowler's (a) and (c) categories, respectively:

A majority of votes _____ needed to win. (van Shaik, 1976)
is—81%; *are*—19%

The majority of Democrats _____ opposed to local blackouts of the Game of the Week. (Farhady, 1977)
are—80%; *is*—20%

Until we have more complete and definitive evidence, Fowler's analysis seems the best one available.

8. Plural unit words of distance, money, and time (like the example in box 2 of the matrix on page 60) take the singular verb inflection when one entity is implied but a plural verb inflection when more than one entity is encoded in the subject:

one entity	*distance:*	1,000 miles is a long distance
	money:	2 million dollars is a lot of money
	time:	5 years is a long time to spend on an M.A. thesis
more than one entity	*distance:*	10 miles are to be added to this freeway next year
	money:	2 dollars are on the table in the kitchen
	time:	3 years (i.e., 1602, 1649, and 1687) are missing from this set of calendars for the 17th century

9. Arithmetical operations (add, subtract, multiply, and divide) take the singular because they are perceived as reflecting a single numerical entity on both sides of the equation or equal sign. For example:

addition: One plus one { is / equals } two.

subtraction: Four minus two { is / equals } two.

multiplication: Two times two { is / equals } four.

division: Ten divided by two { is / equals } five.

10. The quantifiers *all* (*of*), *a lot of, lots of,* and *plenty of* take singular verb agreement if the subject head noun is noncount but plural verb agreement if the subject head noun is plural:

A lot of nonsense was published about that incident.
A lot of people were present when it happened.

Usage Issues in Subject-Verb Agreement

Since the choice of subject and verb number is a problem for learners at all levels and even puzzles native speakers at times, many reference grammars or style handbooks include a discussion of this topic. One of the most comprehensive treatments is in Crews (1980). He provides the reader with the preferred form as well as acceptable alternatives and covers more cases than most other sources. However, Crews tends to be more *prescriptive* than *descriptive* in his account; that is, he tells the reader what to do rather than documenting what native speakers do. Crews's prescriptions are sometimes useful teaching aids, since when one is presenting the rules for subject-verb agreement to a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) preparation class, only the formal prescriptive rule corresponds to the correct answer. In our treatment, on the other hand, we try to be as descriptive as possible in our review of the rules of subject and verb number choice because we feel the ESL/EFL teacher must be aware of current usage as well as the traditional rules.

In discussing the usage preferences of native speakers with respect to subject and verb number, we have drawn heavily on studies done by van Shaik (1976), Farhady (1977), and Peterson (1990). They all surveyed the performance and preferences of a number of native speakers and pointed out discrepancies between traditional rules and the elicited performance of native speakers.

Obviously, not all cases of subject-verb agreement can be described as exclusively form-based or meaning-based. Some seem to be more a matter of usage and convention. The discussions below on quantifiers (*none, all, each, every*), relative-clause antecedents, clausal subjects, and heuristic principles are cases in point.

11. Rules conflict for *none,* and sometimes for *all, each,* and *every.* Many traditional grammars state that when used as a subject, *none* is always singular regardless of what follows in a prepositional phrase. The argument for this rule has been that *none* means *not one.* However, usage surveys give us a different picture of what native speakers are doing and thinking when they use *none.* When *none* refers to a noncount noun, the inflection is uncontroversially singular:

> *noncount:* None of the toxic waste has escaped.

But when *none* refers to a plural noun—human or nonhuman—usage seems to be more or less equally divided between the singular and plural inflection. The percentages that we supply under the example sentences indicate the proportion of native speakers that favored each form in the survey cited.

> *plural (human):* None of those firemen $\underset{\textit{enjoy}\text{—}47\%;\ \textit{enjoys}\text{—}53\%}{\underline{\qquad\qquad}}$ hearing the alarm go off. (van Shaik, 1976)

> *plural (nonhuman):* None of the costumes he has tried $\underset{\textit{fit}\text{—}50\%;\ \textit{fits}\text{—}50\%}{\underline{\qquad\qquad}}$ him. (Farhady, 1977)

In a more recent survey, Peterson (1990:46) asked three groups with different socioeducational backgrounds (i.e., office workers, masters degree students, and Pepsi-Cola truck drivers) to respond to questionnaire items with *none* using a "Which do you prefer?" item-response format. Here are his results (the numbers for all of Peterson's sentences are ours, not his):

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. None of the negotiations is likely to succeed.	44%	19%	24%
b. None of the negotiations are likely to succeed.	56%	78%	76%
		3%—either	
2. a. None even knows how to tie shoes.	44%	28%	61%
b. None even know how to tie shoes.	56%	69%	39%
		3%—either	

For both questionnaire items, *none* is notionally plural; in the second item, *none* is plural by elliptical reference since it points back (presumably) to some plural noun such as *children*. Except for the response of the Pepsi-Cola truck drivers to item 2, all respondents indicated their preference for plural verb agreement with *none* where *none* modifies or refers to a plural countable noun. Clearly, the traditional prescription that *none* is always singular is inadequate. Additional research based on analysis of tokens from current spoken and written English should be carried out to see if a more descriptively adequate rule of usage exists. In the meantime, ESL/EFL teachers must be aware of the fact that when the subject *none* refers to a plural countable noun, the plural verb inflection may well be used if current usage is any indication.

Although *none* is the most problematic quantifier with respect to subject-verb agreement, ESL/EFL learners also experience problems with the quantifiers *all, each,* and *every* (*one*).

The rules for subject-verb agreement with *all* are as follows: If the noun that *all* modifies is a noncount subject, then subject-verb agreement is singular:

All (of) (the) water is polluted.

If *all* modifies a countable plural subject noun, subject-verb agreement is plural:

All (of) (the) students have arrived.

A problem arises, however, when *all* is used to qualify a collective noun subject (see Chapter 17). Theoretically, one should be able to use either singular or plural subject-verb agreement in such cases. We tested such an item with 40 native speakers of English (graduate students and professors), and the results seem to support this theoretical duality:

All of my family _____ present.
is—55%; *are*—43%; no response—2%

Many style books, however, admonish us not to use the preposition *of* after the quantifier *all* in our writing. We thus administered a similar item, minus the *of* to the same group of people a week later. The results were as follows:

All my family _____ present.
is—68%; *are*—26%; used both—6%

Thus the presence or absence of the preposition *of* seems to have an effect on subject-verb agreement, since in the item without *of* our consultants favored singular agreement to a noticeably greater degree.

Peterson (1990:58) followed up on this observation and presented the following questionnaire items to his three groups of consultants:

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. All of the class is restless today.	63%	89%	70%
b. All of the class are restless today.	37%	11%	30%
2. a. All of the team was caught drinking margaritas.	44%	66%	33%
b. All of the team were caught drinking margaritas.	56%	31%	67%
		3%—either	
3. a. All my family lives in Minnesota.	41%	66%	61%
b. All my family live in Minnesota.	59%	28%	39%
		6%—either	

Peterson did not test the same collective noun for items with and without *of;* however, his results suggest that factors other than the presence or absence of *of* are influencing or coloring these results. Analysis of spontaneous oral and written data showing different tokens of the same collective noun modified by *all* (*of*) with different types of subject-verb agreement would be useful in determining more precisely what the basis of this variation might be.

When the subject quantifier is *each* or *every* (*one*), the rules are more straightforward. When the quantified subject noun is singular, there is no problem: the subject-verb agreement is always singular:

$$\left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{Each}\\ \text{Every}\\ \text{Each and every}\end{array}\right\} \text{ student has a textbook.}$$

However, when the quantified noun refers to a definite plural set, there can be problems since the quantifiers are grammatically singular yet the set they are modifying is notionally plural:

$$\text{Each of his examples } \left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{was}\\ \text{were}\end{array}\right\} \text{ out of context.}$$

$$\text{Every one of these athletes } \left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{runs}\\ \text{run}\end{array}\right\} \text{ the mile in four minutes.}$$

The traditional prescriptive rule maintains that singular subject-verb agreement applies in such cases because *each* and *every* (*one*) are functioning as grammatically singular subjects. In these cases native speaker preference appears to closely mirror the prescriptive rule, since the same 40 consultants that reported divided usage for *all* were in agreement (93% or greater) that the verbs in the above two sentences should be *was* and *runs*. In contrast to our results, however, it is interesting to see what Peterson (1990:57) found when he surveyed his three groups:

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. Each of them sees many advantages in that plan.	50%	83%	39%
b. Each of them see many advantages in that plan.	50%	11%	61%
		6%—either	

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
2. a. Each of the children is happy today.	47%	58%	9%
b. Each of the children are happy today.	53%	39%	91%
		3%—either	
3. a. Every one of these four-door cars is ugly.	56%	64%	21%
b. Every one of these four-door cars are ugly.	44%	31%	76%
		5%—either	

Here we see the M.A. students showing a preference for singular agreement on the verb with *each* and *every* as subjects, while the Pepsi-Cola truck drivers strongly prefer plural agreement on the verb. The office workers are fairly evenly split between choosing singular and plural verb agreement. Peterson's results indicate that some consultants are indeed viewing *each* and *every* (*one*) as grammatically singular but that more are viewing these as notionally plural when a plural noun or pronoun intervenes between the quantifier and the verb. We will discuss reasons for this under our discussion of principles that influence subject-verb agreement.

12. Relative-clause antecedents: Subject-verb agreement is particularly problematic in certain types of relative clauses. In an example such as the following,

Marsha is one of those rare individuals who _____ finished the M.A. early.
have/has

traditional grammars maintain that the antecedent of *who* is *individuals* and thus *have* is the correct verb form. This antecedent rule conflicts with the nonintervention principle (see below); also it does not agree at all with the preferences of the native speakers that van Shaik and Farhady surveyed; most want the relative pronoun to agree with the predicate noun *one,* which they view as the antecedent of *who:*

Jack is one of those rare individuals who _____ decided on a definite career. (Farhady, 1977)
have—16%; *has*—84%

He is one of the best students that _____ ever come to this school. (van Shaik, 1976)
have—14%; *has*—86%

In fact, of the five survey items Van Shaik and Farhady used, only one was a bit weaker than the two above with respect to contradicting the traditional rule for this type of relative clause:

I am one of those who _____ equal rights. (van Shaik, 1976)
favor—35%; *favors*—65%

However, even in this example, where the presence of the *I* subject and pronominal use of *those* appear to be mitigating factors, the rule is still contradicted by an almost 2:1 margin. Clearly, most native speakers are using *one* as the antecedent of *who* or *that,* and the prescriptive rule should probably be revised to reflect actual usage more accurately.

13. Clausal and phrasal subjects: Traditional grammars tell us that when a clause functions as a subject, the subject-verb agreement is singular—regardless of any plural noun phrases that occur as part of the subject clause or the verb phrase. For example:

That the children want friends doesn't surprise me.
What they want is revolutions everywhere.

We do not have survey information on this type of agreement; however, we suspect that the second type of subject clause cited above causes some difficulty—even among native speakers. This seems especially true when the verb is followed by a plural noun phrase.

This rule also extends to phrasal subjects that are gerunds or infinitives because they also take singular verb agreement; however, they seem to cause fewer learning problems than clausal subjects.

Reading books is my hobby.
To err is human.

Two Heuristic Principles that Influence Subject-Verb Number Agreement

1. The proximity principle: For the correlatives *either . . . or* and *neither . . . nor,* traditional grammarians argue for a proximity rule; that is, subject-verb agreement should occur with the subject noun nearest to the verb:

Either my sister or *my brothers are* going to do it.	Neither the books nor *the movie was* helpful.
Either my brothers or *my sister is* going do it.	Neither the movie nor *the books were* helpful.

Do native speakers consistently follow the proximity principle? Not really, but they support it more strongly for *either . . . or* than they do for *neither . . . nor.*

Either your eyesight or your brakes _____ at fault (van Shaik, 1976)
was—31%; *were*—69%

Either the professor or her assistants _____ explain every lesson.
has to—33%; *have to*—67%
(Farhady, 1977)

Neither the students nor the teacher _____ that textbook.
likes—49%; *like*—51%
(van Shaik, 1976)

Apparently, *neither* can easily be perceived as a negative correlative referring to more than one entity, which would explain the slight preference for the plural form that van Shaik's questionnaire elicited.

Personal pronouns pose special problems when used with full correlatives, where the rule of proximity would have us produce *either you or I am, neither you nor he is,* and so on. In such cases, Farhady and van Shaik found even less agreement with the proximity principle than they did when correlatives involved lexical nouns:

Neither you nor he _____ able to answer the question. (Farhady, 1977)
was—40%; *were*—60%

Neither you nor I _____ trained for that job. (van Shaik, 1976)
am—12%; *is*—15%; *are*—73%

The immediately preceding example is especially interesting because *are* is a colloquial gap-filling substitute for *am* in some other constructions (*I'm going, too, aren't I? Aren't I*

lucky?). *Am* is apparently perceived by native speakers as too limited a form for use in those correlatives where *I* is the second noun phrase constituent.

One other case where the proximity principle does in fact apply and where traditional grammar would not prescribe its use is in sentences beginning with *there* followed by conjoined noun phrases.[12]

Traditional rule: There are { a girl and two boys / two boys and a girl } in the room.

Proximity principle: There { is a girl and two boys / are two boys and a girl } in the room.

We have informally surveyed many native speakers, and a majority apply the proximity rule in such cases. So, again, we seem to have a situation in which the actual usage preference of native speakers differs from the traditional prescription.

2. The principle of nonintervention: Many reference grammars make a point of emphasizing that a singular subject noun or pronoun should take a singular verb inflection regardless of what else occurs between the subject and the verb; that is, the speaker or writer should ignore all plural forms in intervening prepositional phrases and expressions such as *together with, along with, as well as,* and *not others.*

When common or proper nouns are subjects, the nonintervention principle seems to be well supported:

The major cause of highway accidents in 1976 _____ drunk drivers.
was—93%; were—7%

(Farhady, 1977)

Peter, along with his brothers, _____ to open a store. (van Shaik, 1976)
plans—84%; plan—16%

The boy, not his parents, _____ being punished. (van Shaik, 1976)
is—88%; are—12%

However, when the subject followed by the prepositional phrase is *either* or *neither*, the nonintervention principle weakens because these forms can be perceived as signaling more than one entity—*neither* apparently more strongly so than *either.*

Neither of them _____ ready for marriage. (van Shaik, 1976)
is—66%; are—34%

Neither of them _____ enough money to afford a car. (Farhady, 1977)
has—50%; have—50%

However, van Shaik (1976) and Farhady (1977) surveyed only responses for *neither.* We suspected that similar problems might also arise with the usage of *either*, so we surveyed 43 consultants concerning the usage of *either* in a similar construction:

Either of the stories _____ going to be acceptable.
is—72%; are—24%; accepted both—2%

While there is also some weakening of the nonintervention principle in this item, it appears that *either* is perceived a bit more strongly as being singular than is *neither.* Peterson (1990) again found somewhat different results in his survey:

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. Either of the dictionaries is good enough for this.	50%	61%	33%
b. Either of the dictionaries are good enough for this.	50%	33%	67%
		6%—either	
2. a. Either of mine is OK for your system.	63%	66%	36%
b. Either of mine are OK for your system.	37%	25%	64%
3. a. Neither of the salebooks was a good buy.	53%	66%	27%
b. Neither of the salebooks were a good buy.	47%	31%	73%
		5%—either	
4. a. Neither of hers is the same as mine.	53%	58%	42%
b. Neither of hers are the same as mine.	47%	31%	58%

While there are noticeable differences across the three groups, within each group consultants treated *either* and *neither* very similarly except for the office workers' response to item 2, where there was a clear preference for a singular interpretation of *either* that did not occur with the other three items.

One problem with all of the preceding data is that they represent elicited judgments and do not necessarily reflect actual use in situations where people are not made conscious of their production. Therefore, there is a clear need for further studies that examine spontaneous use of subject-verb agreement by native speakers for the problematic cases we have noted.

Conclusion

In many English sentences subject-verb number agreement is straightforward and noncontroversial. However, it is quite clear that a number of unresolved questions remain. In fact, we may well have inadvertently omitted other problems from this discussion. We do not claim to have exhausted the topic.

One of the reasons we have discussed the problems of subject-verb number agreement is that form, meaning, and use are associated with it. When a form is syntactically singular but notionally plural (or vice versa), there is a potential conflict. Agreement based on form is straightforward, but when agreement is driven by meaning or use, this gives rise to the possibility of variation among users. Here Reid's (1991) formulation, which holds that all co-occurrences of subject noun number and of verb number are possible, though not equally frequent, helps to explain many so-called problematic cases in that meaning-driven choices help lead the listener or reader to the intended interpretation.

Our advice to ESL/EFL teachers is that they be aware of the major traditional rules (see teaching suggestion (6) in the following list) and also aware of those instances where current usage seems to clearly deviate from the traditional prescription. Also, teachers should keep in mind that informal contexts permit a greater range of acceptable forms than formal contexts; therefore, they must be flexible about their correction standards, which should be different for formal writing than for informal writing or colloquial speech.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Form. The copula *be* causes ESL/EFL students trouble because it is the most irregular verb in the English language. A lot of practice will have to be given to all its various forms:

present		*past*	
I *am*	we *are*	I *was*	we *were*
you *are*	you *are*	you *were*	you *were*
he, she, it *is*	they *are*	he, she, it *was*	they *were*

a. One technique for practicing *am, are,* and *is* in context is to conduct a chain drill with your students' names:

Student 1: I am Fatimah. Who are YOU?
Student 2: I am José. You are Fatimah. Who are YOU?
Student 3: I am Juan. You are José. She is Fatimah. Who are YOU?

Get the learners to contract "I am" to "I'm" as soon as possible.

b. Sometimes the plural forms can be practiced using nationalities when two or more students in an ESL/EFL class are from the same country.

Student 1 to 2: We are from Mexico. Are they from Mexico?
Student 2: No, they aren't.
(to 3 and 4): Where are you from?
Students 3 and 4: We are from Iran.

Get the learners to contract "we are" to "we're" as soon as possible.

c. The present tense forms of *be* should also be practiced with other adjectives and with prepositional phrases.

Teacher: I am (I'm) tired today. Are you tired?
Student 1: Yes, I am.
Teacher: Is he tired?
Class: Yes, he is.

Student 1: I am in class. Are you in class?
Student 2: Yes, I am. Is Ali in class?
Student 1: Yes, he is. Is Miriam in class?
Student 2: Yes, she is.

d. To practice the past-tense forms of *be,* past-time contexts must be created. The teacher can set the pattern and then have students practice with each other, reminding them *be* does not contract in final position.

Teacher: I was in class yesterday. Were you?
Student 1: Yes, I was.
Teacher: Were we in class yesterday?
Student 1: Yes, we were.
(Student 1 takes over the role of teacher.)

Teacher: Was Carlos late today?
Class: Yes, he was.
Teacher: Was Kin Lee late?
Class: No, she wasn't.
Teacher: Were they late?
Class: Yes, they were.
(A student then takes over the role of teacher.)

2. Form. Badalamenti and Stanchina (1997:10) suggest using the names of famous people from all over the world to practice the copula *be* with country of origin and nationality. For example, the teacher can give one model and then provide only a name.

Sophia Loren is from Italy. She's Italian.
Arnold Schwarzenegger is from Austria. He's Austrian.
Madonna is from the United States. She's American.
Nelson Mandela is from South Africa. He's South African.

3. Form. The problematic area with regular present-tense verbs other than *be* involves the third person singular form of the verb. Since the third person singular form of the verb is the only one inflected for person and number agreement, ESL/EFL students frequently and persistently omit the necessary *-s* marker by simplifying or by overgeneralizing the basic pattern to third person singular. Practice with the present tense should thus put a great deal of focus on the third person singular inflection and on the contrast with all other persons. The teacher can introduce a fictional character *Jack* and talk about what he *does* every day.

He gets up at 7 A.M.	He runs in the park at 5:00 P.M.
He eats breakfast at 7:30.	He comes home at 6:00.
He goes to work at 8:00.	etc.

Jack's schedule can be practiced by the class with the teacher using pictures and/or a clock with movable hands as prompts. Then, the practice can extend to classroom interactions, prompted by the teacher as needed.

Teacher: What does Jack do at 7 A.M.?
Student: He gets up.
Teacher: When do you get up?
Student: I get up at 8.
Teacher: Ask Maria when she gets up and then tell us what you found out.
Student: When do you get up, Maria?
Maria: I get up at 6:30.
Student: She gets up at 6:30.

Finally, pairs of students could interview each other about their daily schedules and report findings to the class.

4. Form. Riggenbach and Samuda (1997:9–11) suggest that job descriptions and names of occupations be first matched and then generated to practice the third person singular present tense.

a. He wears a uniform and usually travels many miles a day. He serves food and drinks, but he hardly ever prepares them for himself. He's _____.

b. She wears a uniform and drives many miles a day. She never serves food or drinks. She's _____.

a flight attendant	a nurse
a teacher	a bus driver
a librarian	a student

Now students write similar descriptions for the job names that are still left.

5. Meaning. To practice with intermediate learners the notion that it is sometimes possible to use a plural or singular verb with a particular noun depending on how the noun is construed, give the students sentences and ask them to respond with "one" when the subject is singular and "more than one" when the subject is plural. They should also specify the entity or unit being referred to.

a. *Teacher:* The class is going to celebrate at the end of this term.
Students: one (class)

b. *Teacher:* The 20 minutes are going to pass quickly.
Students: more than one (minute)

c. *Teacher:* Twenty minutes is not a long time!
Students: one (time unit)

d. *Teacher:* My old school gang are meeting after work today.
Students: more than one (gang member)
etc.

6. Use. The following is a summary of traditional subject-verb agreement rules based on Frodesen & Eyring (1997:34–51) as well as in material in this chapter. The summary serves as a checklist of rules that ESL/EFL students need to learn or review for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) preparation or for a formal academic writing course.

a. Noncount noun subjects take a singular verb:

(The food/John's advice) is good.

b. In most cases collective noun subjects take singular verbs, but if the group is viewed as individual members, use a plural verb:

The class is going on a field trip.
The class have been arguing about where to go.

c. Subject nouns that are derived from adjectives and describe people take plural verbs:

The rich are in favor of a tax cut.

d. Some proper noun subjects that end in *-s* such as names of courses, diseases, places, as well as book and film titles and the word *news*, take singular verbs:

Wales is a beautiful region.
Mathematics is a difficult subject.
Measles often has side effects.
The news was very good.

e. Plural subject nouns of distance, time, and money that signal one unit take a singular verb:

Six hundred miles is too far to drive in one day.

f. Basic arithmetical operations (add, subtract, multiply, divide) take singular verbs:

Four times five equals twenty.

g. For items that have two parts, when you use the word *pair*, the verb is singular, but without *pair*, the verb is plural:

My pair of scissors is lost.
My scissors are lost.

h. Clausal subject are singular even if the nouns referred to are plural:

What we need is more reference books.

i. Gerund (verb + *ing*) and infinitive (*to* + verb) subjects take a singular verb:

Reading books is my hobby. To err is human.

j. With fractions, percentages, and the quantifiers *all (of), a lot of, lots of,* verb agreement depends on the noun coming after these phrases:

1) A singular noun, noun clause, or noncount noun takes a singular verb:

A lot of the (book/information) is about urban poverty.

2) A plural noun takes a plural verb:

A lot of computers need to be repaired.

3) A collective noun can take either a singular or plural verb depending on the meaning:

All my family (lives/live) in Ohio.

k. With *each, every,* and *every one* as subjects, use a singular verb:

Every student has a lunch box.

l. With *a number of* as subject, use a plural verb:

A number of students are taking the exam.

m. With *the number of* as subject, use a singular verb:

The number of students taking the exam is 75.

n. With *none* as subject, use a singular verb:

None of the magazines is here.

o. With *either* or *neither* as subject, use a singular verb:

(Either/neither) was acceptable to me.

p. With correlative subjects *either . . . or* or *neither . . . nor,* the verb agrees with the closest subject:

Either Bob or my cousins are going to do it.

Neither my cousins or Bob is going to do it.

q. With *there* subjects, the verb is singular or plural depending on whether the noun phrase following the verb is singular or plural:

There is one book on the table.
There are { three books / a book and a pen } on the table.

Remember that many of these formal prescriptive rules have informal variants that are different and often more frequently used in informal speech and writing. The context in which language is being used and the discourse community of the participants will determine what is acceptable usage.

7. Use. Frodesen and Eyring (1997:49) suggest that teachers give students many statements and have them decide which items have verb forms that are appropriate for formal written contexts (i.e., the traditional prescriptive rule) and which would be acceptable for informal written or spoken contexts:

a. Neither of those political surveys are valid because the sample was not random.
b. In conclusion, either of the textbooks reviewed above is an excellent choice for an introductory chemistry course.
c. There's a number of errors in this report.
d. As far as we know, none of the experiment's results has been duplicated to date.

EXERCISES

Test your knowledge of what has been presented.

1. Provide an original example sentence illustrating each of the following concepts. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your example.

a. the copular function of *be*
b. a copular verb other than *be*
c. an auxiliary function of *be*
d. collective noun subject
e. noncount noun subject
f. third person singular present inflection
g. the proximity principle
h. the nonintervention principle
i. subject-verb agreement with a clausal subject

2. What are two structural reasons for distinguishing the copula *be* from other verbs in English?

3. When does subject-verb agreement apply overtly? In other words, in what instances should your ESL/EFL students be aware that verbs must agree with subjects in person and number? Also, in what instances does subject-verb agreement not apply?

4. Name and illustrate two cases where a traditional subject-verb agreement rule is not supported by current usage.

Test your ability to apply what you know.

5. The following sentences contain errors that are commonly made by ESL/EFL learners. What is the precise nature of the error? How would you make the learners aware of these problems? What exercises would you use to practice the correct pattern and prevent such errors from recurring?

a. *Is you from Mexico?
b. *Felix go to school every day.
c. *I tired.
d. *Nora wills read the book.
e. *They sings in a choir.
f. *I don't be angry anymore.

6. What will you say to a high intermediate ESL/EFL student who complains to you that you correct mistakes in his compositions when he writes sentences like this one but that he hears native speakers say things like this all the time?

Either my roommates or my friend Bill are going to buy the refreshments.

7. How would you present the rules for fractions and percentages (see rule 10 on p. 62) to an intermediate-level high school ESL/EFL class? What contexts would you provide to help them have meaningful practice?

8. Some noun plurals are irregular (*men, mice*), and some have a change from *-f* (sg.) to *-ves* (pl.), such as *wife/wives*. How would you review irregular noun plurals with a low-intermediate ESL/EFL class?

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Suggestions for Further Reading

Other reference grammars or handbooks on style or usage with useful descriptions of subject-verb agreement are:

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