



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Traballo fin de grao  
Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

# **A comparison between British English and American English, with special emphasis on collective nouns**

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**Título: A COMPARISON BETWEEN BRITISH ENGLISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON COLLECTIVE NOUNS**

SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

**Resumo** [na lingua en que se vai redactar o TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:




As students of English, we are very familiar with the major distinctions between British English and American English. We know that they have different words for the same concept (BE rubber vs AE eraser), they have differences in phonetics (AE is a rhotic accent while BE is not) and they also have differences in grammar. This last discipline is the one concerning my work.

The purpose of this work is to analyze and to explain why British English uses the plural form of the verb with collective nouns, while American English uses the singular form of the verb in many of the same situations. Why does one use the singular while the other one uses the plural? I will analyze what linguists have ascertained about the topic, trying to sum up the main explanations from the grammatical point of view. As Quirk et al. (1985: 758PAGE) mention, the choice between singular or plural verbs depends in British on whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body, or as a collection of individuals, which seems logical but, does it mean that where one sees a forest, the other one sees trees? Are differences of a conceptual nature, in the Whorfian sense?

As a final practical part, I will try and ask some British and American participants to complete some sequences with collective nouns where the singular or the plural form of the verb has to be used, and see if the theoretical explanations are followed by these speakers or not.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). A comprehensive grammar of the English language. London. Longman.

Santiago de Compostela, 6 de novembro de 2018

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SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

## **Abstract:**

This dissertation, entitled "A comparison between British English and American English, with special emphasis on collective nouns" deals, as the title describes, with a comparison between British English and American English, the two most influential varieties of the English language, in the domain of grammar. To be more accurate, I will deal with the treatment of collective nouns in both varieties.

This dissertation will be organized in four different parts, being each one divided as well in smaller section. In the first part, I will make an introduction to the topics of this paper. I will start, in the first section, establishing a brief presentation of both varieties and a characterization of them by making a small comparison between them. The second section will be focused on our domain of analysis, the grammar of English. I will pay attention to important terms that will help us later in this paper to understand the aim of our study, the grammar of collective nouns.

In the second part, I will focus on our domain of study by defining and explaining the noun phrase (NP), revising the structure and the most important terms and points. After this, in the second section of this second part, I am going to deal with the agreement between the NP and the VP in the English grammar, what linguists say about the concordance between the subject and the verb form that must be used.

In the third part of this dissertation, the object of study is going to be a more specific concept in our domain of study: the noun. As an introduction to this point, I will revise the countability of nouns, the different types of nouns that we can find in the English grammar in terms of number. Then, I will focus my attention on collective nouns and on the different views that we can find in some of the main English grammars, trying to explain why British English prefers the use of a plural verb while American English uses the singular in the same situation. Does it mean that British people see trees while Americans see a forest? Is it an issue of perception/conception of reality? In my attempt to explain this, I will need to revise as well what the Whorfian perspective says about the connection between language and conceptualization/ thought/ perception.

In the fourth part of this essay, I will run some interviews with native speakers of British

English and American English where I will ask them to complete a questionnaire containing some of the most problematic sentences with collective nouns, to see if the theoretical level aligns with the practical level.

I will finish this dissertation by establishing the most important conclusions I take from the whole paper and I will revise and propose, if needed, any further topic for investigation.

# 1. Introduction

From our first steps into the English language as primary or high school students, or later in our classes at the university, one is naturally drawn to a comparison between British English and American English. Both RP (British English) and GA (American English) are considered the main standard varieties of the English language and therefore, the two most compared varieties in terms of phonetics, syntax and grammar. In this section, I will take a brief look at the English language and focus on the two most important varieties before mentioned.

## 1.1 British English and American English

If we take a look at the current situation of English, it is probably the most widely used language in the world (Huddleston & Pullum 2005: 1), however, it is not “the most widely used native language in the world” (Baugh & Cable 2002: 4), a position occupied by Chinese (just in China we find 1.3 billion speakers). One of the most common representations of the speakers of English is Kachru’s ‘Three Circles’ of English (1985) where he established the following classification: in The Inner Circles, he represents those countries where English is the Native Language (ENL: UK, USA, Australia, Canada...); in The Outer Circle, he represents those countries where English is a Second Language (ESL: India, Philippines, Gibraltar, Liberia ...); and in The Expanding Circle, Kachru represents the countries where English is a Foreign Language (EFL), used in education, business or the media (China, Brazil, Japan, Germany, Italy...).

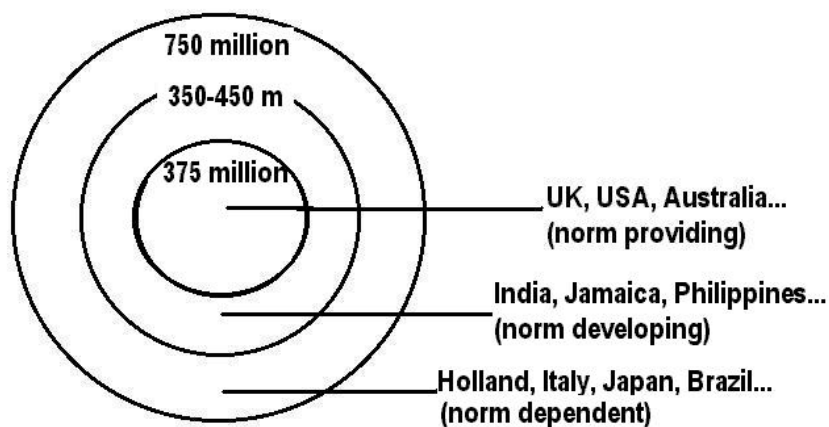


Figure 1. Kachru’s ‘Three Circles’ of English (1985) from David Crystal’s *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the*

A more updated version of the number of speakers in each circle, *A Student's Introduction to English Grammar* by Huddleston & Pullum (2005:1) says that the number of speakers of ENL is around 400 millions, a similar number of speakers of ESL and hundreds of millions of speakers of EFL around the world.

In such a worldwide spread language as English, we expect to find different varieties or dialects, as well as many different accents. If we take a look at Kachru's model (1985), the varieties in The Inner Circle are the result of the expansion of the British Empire but with time, they developed different national and regional varieties. They provide the norms followed by speakers of English in other countries and here emerges the first classification of dialects as more British or more American, depending on the norms they follow. This explains why Canadian is more related to American English while Australian English is very close to British English. The same happens in The Outer Circle with those varieties of English developed through colonization. Most of the varieties found in this Circle are 'norm-developing' into British English, such as Indian English or Gibraltar English, but we found the case of Philippine English, which has followed the American English norm. In the Expanding Circle, countries are norm-dependent and they follow the "grammar" of either British English or American English.

With all these different dialects of English spread across the globe, a standard variety is needed, especially when speaking about the written version. As Huddleston & Pullum (2005: 2) remarked, the written form of Standard English "is regarded worldwide as an uncontroversial choice for something like an editorial or a serious subject in any English-language newspaper, whether in Britain, the USA, Australia, Africa or India". But they also pointed out that there are "few minor points of difference [...] between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) [but] using Standard English doesn't even identify which side of the Atlantic the user comes from" (2005: 2).

According to Brinton and Arnovick (2006: 392), British English and American English are national varieties and therefore "a kind of large-scale regional dialect (a form of a language spoken in a particular geographical location which is mutually intelligible with other forms of the language)". They add that "national varieties of English differ primarily in their phonology and

lexicon” (2006: 392) but “grammatical differences among the national dialects are rather limited” (2006: 395). This means that although British English and American English are considered two varieties of English, they only differ from each other in terms of accent and some anecdotal aspects of the lexicon. Taking the most remote origin of the language, the differentiation between British English and American English as two different languages should be impossible because we could say that American English was born from British English when it was taken to the United States by the British and it developed mixing that initial British English with native words and grammar features of the languages spoken in the territory.

In May 1963, Professor Albert H. Marckwardt from Princeton University and Professor Randolph Quirk from University College London participated in a broadcasting radio program where both varieties were compared at all levels (morphology, phonetics, and grammar). To speakers of English, “the notion of a widening gulf between the two varieties of the language has become generally accepted” (Marckwardt & Quirk 1965: 5). They treated British English and American English as ‘varietie[s] rather than dialect[s] [...] because, after all, there are dialects in both of our countries’ (Marckwardt & Quirk 1965: 10). They discussed that there are differences in pronunciation but when it comes to grammar, differences are not that prominent and “it’s usually quite impossible to look at a piece [...] and be able to say whether it originated in America or Britain” (Marckwardt & Quirk 1965: 20). This reflects the idea of that Standard English that we mentioned before, meaning that differences in the domain of grammar are not representative in the distinction of varieties; unlike vocabulary, that changes from one variety to another, or in an extreme case, pronunciation, which varies from speaker to speaker.

In chapter 5 “The Common Starting Point”, they say that “it is to the English of this Shakespeare’s England that we have to look, then, for the basic common ground that we have in British and American English today” (Marckwardt & Quirk 1965: 32). For them, it was in the 18th century, with the Industrial Revolution, when a separation and re-identification at each side of the Atlantic was made through the language when the American or the British sense of identity applied. Towards the end of the radio program, Marckwardt (1965) makes a great comment into the field of education “when foreign teachers are worried about which English they should teach - British or American” and he says “without hesitation: teach the form that you know and that you have the resources to teach” because, as Quirk (1965) himself answers, “they won’t make much difference to ready understanding or ready acceptability” (Marckwardt & Quirk 1965: 69).

The conclusion we take from Marckwardt and Quirk’s broadcasting (1965) is that for them, British and American are considered the same language because although they have some differences, these are mainly in the field of phonetics. They share, in a way, the same origin and the main difference between British English and American English have to deal with self-identity on both sides of the Atlantic.

A different distribution of the English language was made by Strevens in 1980 when he “separated all English varieties into having either British or American standards as their root, with American English accounting for Canada, the US, Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and British English accounting for the rest of the world” (Haswell: 2013). Haswell (2013: 124) remarks that a model like this “is unable to take into account the English varieties that developed through contact with local vernaculars without direct relation to either British or American Standard English”.

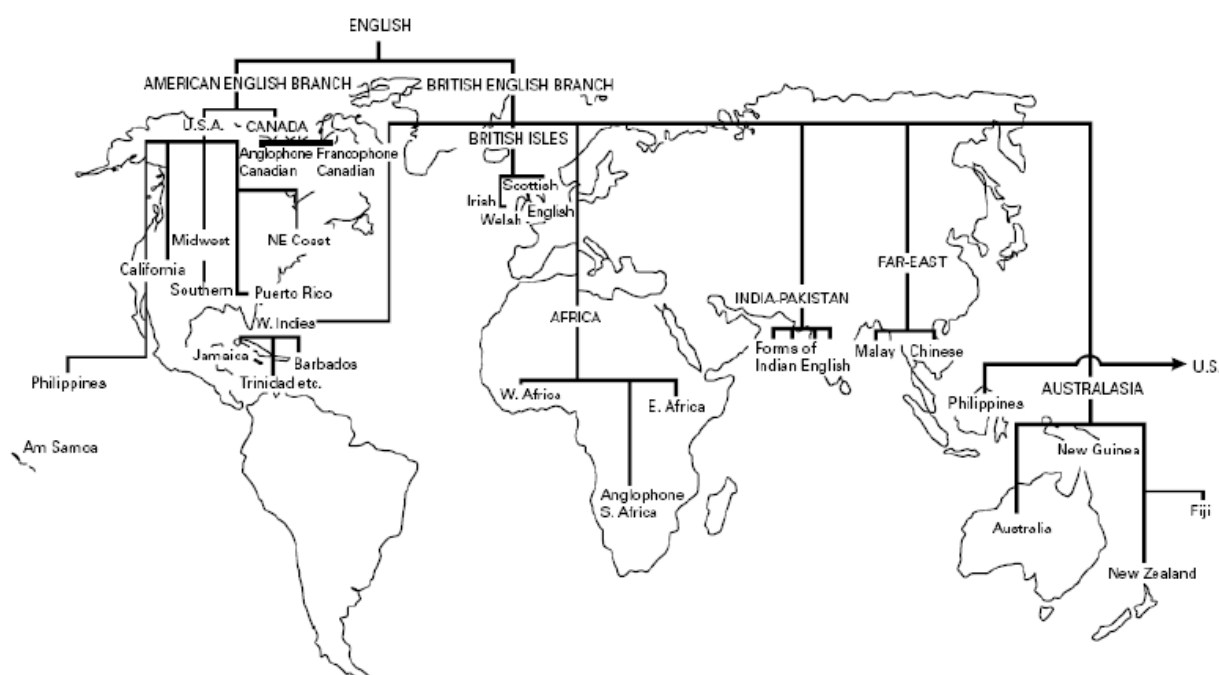


Figure 2. Distribution of the English language according to Peter Strevens (1980) found in David Crystal’s *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (1995: 107)

If we take all of this into account, are we then talking about a “real” difference between British English and American English? From the point of view of grammar, we can say that differences are not that significant, because the grammar tends to be a fixed domain and Standard English was developed to avoid any kind of problems when it comes to writing it but, as I remarked through this

section, the main differences between both varieties are believed to be found in pronunciation (also called accent) and in vocabulary only.

## **1.2 Approaches to grammar**

When it comes to talking about grammar, we can establish two different approaches based on the point of view they take when talking about it. As Huddleston and Pullum (2005: 4) point out, we can make “an important distinction [...] between two kinds of books of English grammar: [...] descriptive or prescriptive”. As they explain, and as its term says, a descriptive approach tries to describe how the grammar system works and tries to reflect the way it is used by the speakers of the language while a prescriptive approach wants to establish the rules we have to follow when it comes to using the language, it tells people how to speak and write (2005: 4). In this second group is where we can find dictionaries and manuals about the usage of the language. It is true that, as users of a language, we need to learn the group of rules that help us to speak properly but as Huddleston and Pullum (2005:4) note:

[Prescriptive manuals] do not make the distinction we just made between STANDARD VS NON-STANDARD DIALECTS on the one hand and FORMAL VS INFORMAL STYLE on the other. They apply the term ‘incorrect’ [...] But it isn’t sensible to call a construction grammatically incorrect when people whose status as fully competent speakers if the standard language is unassailable use it nearly all the time

As the quotation illustrates, when something does not follow the Standard, prescriptive grammar says that it is incorrect but as I mentioned before, the Standard variety is the "uncontroversial choice for something like an editorial or a serious subject" (Huddleston & Pullum 2005: 2). Users of the language are not always using the Standard, in fact, this variety is usually restricted to formal contexts, and not to the every-day usage of the language. Furthermore, when we talk about formal and informal style, we stay in the domain of the Standard variety but it refers to the way we express things depending on the context where we use the language. A person does not speak in the same way when giving a lecture in a class as when talking to colleagues in a bar. In the same way that the context changes, language changes to adopt the right style to each situation and “every speaker of a language with style levels knows how to use their native language more formally (and maybe sound more pompous) or talk informally (and sound more friendly and casual)” (Huddleston & Pullum 2005: 3).

Following Biber et al.'s words (1999: 94), language is not considered a block, something indivisible. In fact, language "[does] not just consist of sequences of words put together like beads on a string. They can be broken down into units which can again be analyzed hierarchically into successively smaller units" (1999: 94).

## 2. The Noun Phrase (NP)

### 2.1 Introduction

To start with our domain of study and following Biber et al (1999: 50), grammatical units "are meaningful and combine with each other in systematic ways" like a pyramid, from the morpheme, the smallest unit of the language with grammatical meaning to the complex structure of the sentence.

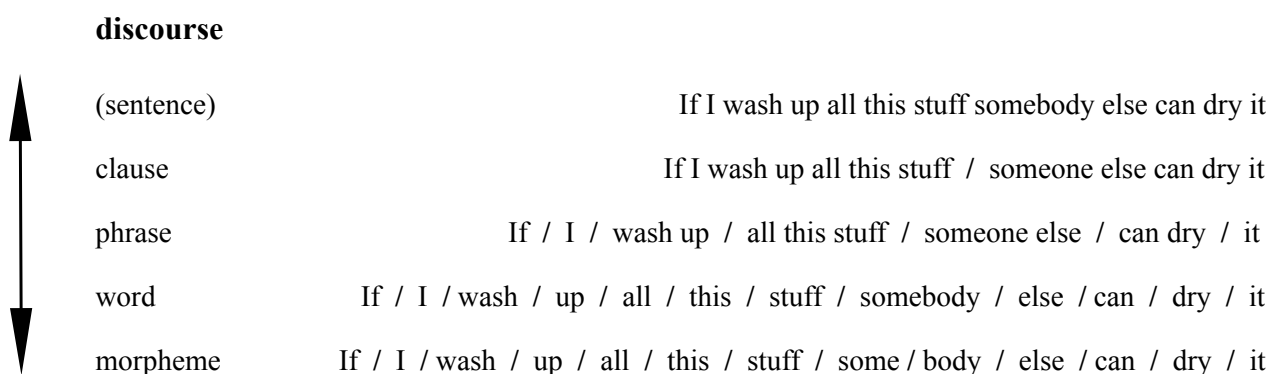


Figure 3. Hierarchy of units from Douglas Biber [et al]'s *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (1999: 50)

For this part of the dissertation, we will be focused on the categories of *phrase* and *clause*. The field of the *phrase* is going to be explored in this first and second part of the section, when dealing with the structure of the noun phrase and the verb phrase but in the third part of the section, the term *clause* is going to be used because we are going to focus on the agreement between the two phrases, how the noun phrase agrees, or should agree, with the verb phrase.

## 2.2 The structure of the Noun Phrase

Taking a look at definitions, the term *phrase* is defined by the *OED* (Vol. VII, 1933: 798) as follows:

A small group or collocation of words expressing a single notion, or entering with some degree of unity into the structure of a sentence; an expression; esp. one in some way peculiar to or characteristic of a language, dialect, author, book, etc.; an idiomatic expression

To be more accurate in our task in this dissertation, I took a look at how scholars have defined the term 'noun phrase' and at Biber et al. (1999: 97), and for a start, the following definition seems appropriate:

A noun phrase in the strict sense consists of a noun (2.3.1) as head, either alone or accompanied by determiners (which specify the reference of the noun; 2.4.1) and modifiers (which describe or classify the entity denoted by the head noun)

As they also pointed out, "the term 'noun phrase' or 'NP' is frequently used more widely for any unit which appears in the positions characteristics of noun-headed structures (including clauses)." (Biber et al. 1999: 97). When we talk about 'head', we refer to "what constituted the most important part of a phrase (its central element or nucleus)" (Keizer 2007: 9). Although in some cases, the differentiation of what acts as 'head' may be tricky, as for example when dealing with special formations of DET + Noun (see below). As Keizer (2007: 10) suggests, one of the tests that we may perform when we have to determine headedness is obligatoriness, where the 'head' element can never be removed. The problem with this view is that in "noun phrases with singular, countable heads the determiner cannot be left out either" (Keizer 2007: 10). Noun phrases with two nominal elements like *the lady president* or *the poet Burns*, as well as constructions connected by *of* as a functional element like *this kind of theory* or *a group of people* are problematic when it comes to identifying the head element of the phrase. If we take the test of obligatoriness, here we have two elements that could occupy the position of head in the noun phrase (Keizer 2007: 11). Scholars do not find a common answer and we can go "from those which regard either one of the two elements as the head to those which take both or neither of the elements to be the head" (Keizer 2007: 11).

When dealing with the noun phrase, we have to pay attention to its structure. As the definition establishes, traditional views at least maintain that the obligatory object is a noun acting as the head of the phrase. The head can carry pre-modifiers, where we expect to find adjectives or adjective phrases, although we can also find another noun (*kitchen table*). It can carry also post-modifiers, where we can find prepositional phrases or relative clauses (*a table of wood, a table that fits here*). If the NP carries a determiner, this should occupy the very first position. This function is reserved for articles, demonstratives, possessives or quantifiers (*the/these/three/my cars*). Representing this in a clearer way, the structure of the NP is as follows:

**(determiner) + (pre-modifiers +) HEAD (+ post-modifiers)**

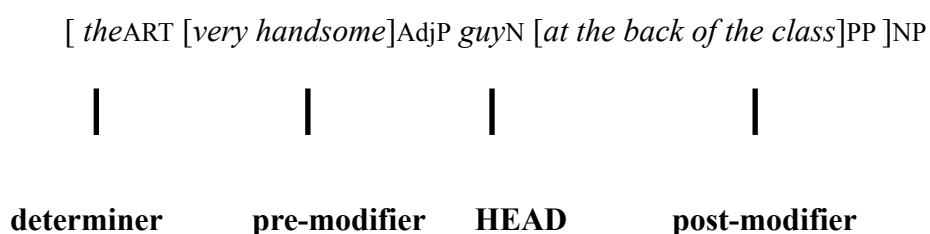


Figure 4. Structure of the noun phrase

As for the syntactic roles of the noun phrase, there is a wide range. The most common role is of subject of a clause, direct object or indirect object (performed usually by a pronoun).

**Louisiana officials** argue that the **U.S. Supreme Court decision last spring, upholding Missouri's abortion restrictions**, gave {the states} [enough flexibility] to make [abortion] illegal, except when necessary to save [the mother's life]

In this quotation from Biber et al. (1999: 98), subjects are marked in **bold**, [ ] is used for the direct objects and indirect objects are marked by { }. But these are not the only syntactic roles of the noun phrase. It can act also as a complement of preposition (e.g. *He worked in **a shop**[CONV]*), as pre-modifier in adjective or adverb phrase (e.g. *Among trees **two hundred and fifty feet tall and twenty-two centuries old**[FICT]*), or as apposition (e.g. *He and the club's solicitor and director, **Maurice Watkins**, sat either side of Edwards[NEWS]*). (Biber et al. 1999: 98-99)

### 2.3 Agreement with the verb phrase

As noted, for this part of the section the term *clause* is going to be used because the aim of this point is to see how agreement between the noun phrase and the verb phrase works and such agreement actually creates clauses. The *OED* (Vol. II, 1933: 470) defines the term *clause* as “a short sentence; a single passage or member of a discourse or writing; a distinct part or member of a sentence, esp. in *Gramm. Analysis*, one containing a subject and predicate”

As previously mentioned, the function of subject is usually performed by the NP so the function of predicate belongs to the VP, defined as "a lexical verb or primary verb as head or **main verb**, either alone or accompanied by one or more auxiliaries" (Biber et al 1999: 99). In some grammars, the verb phrase refers to "the main verb plus accompanying elements, including objects and predicatives" (Biber et al. 1999: 99). This last description is used by Biber et al. when referring to the predicate. The structure of the verb phrase is as follows:

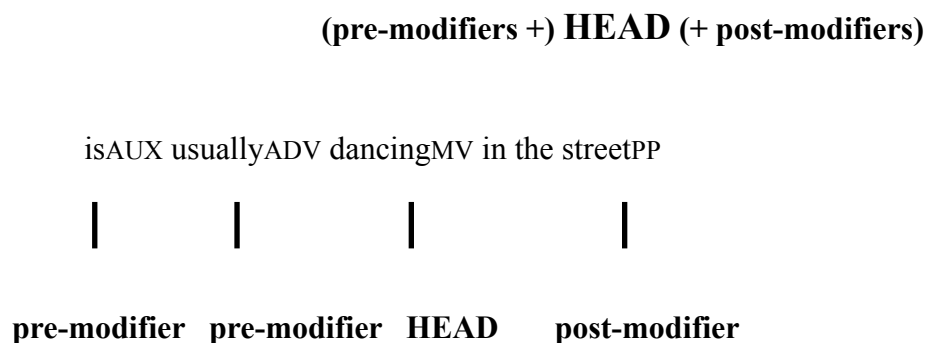
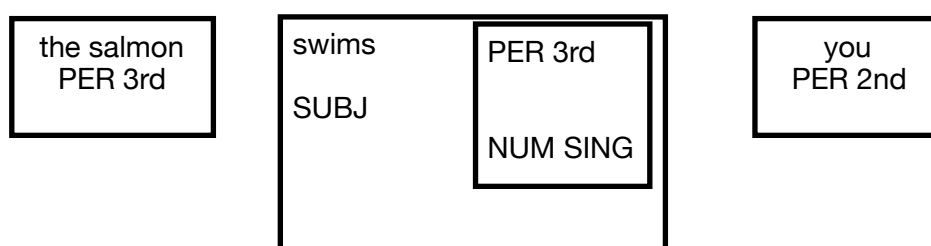


Figure 5. Structure of the verb phrase

Following Quirk et al. (1972: 755), *agreement* is " the relationship between two grammatical units such that one of them displays a particular feature (e.g. plurality) that accords with a displayed feature on the other". For them, as for many other scholars, there is a rule called *grammatical concord* which establishes that a singular subject triggers a singular verb and a plural subject triggers a plural verb (1972: 756). Although *the grammatical concord* is not the only principle followed to make the agreement between the NP and the VP, and we can find as well *the notional concord* and *the concord on the principle of proximity* (Quirk et al. 1972: 756). But I am going to deal with this in the point 2.3.1.

As Carl Pollard and Ivan A. Sag (1988: 2) suggested in *An Information-Based Theory of Agreement*, "agreement systems present an interesting focus of comparison between derivation-based and information based". As they define it, in the derivation-based approach there is "a nominal, called the agreement controller, into something that agrees with it, called the agreement target. On this view, the agreement features of the agreement controller are somehow inherent and logically prior to those of the target; the usual locution is that the verb agrees with the subject" (Pollard & Sag 1988: 2). This is what we mean when we make the concordance between a subject with a verb. First, we establish the subject and then we make the verb concord with it. This point of view is the one we can find in Keizer (2007: 12), for example, and in her work, she says that "it is generally acknowledged that syntactic verb agreement is typically determined by the head of the subject NP (e.g. *three reviews of the book were/\*was received*)". But this theory can be tricky sometimes as for example when we have a noun phrase with more than one noun that could be the head of the NP. Later in her work, Keizer (2007: 120) mentions sentences like *The herd of large African elephants was larger than I thought* and *The herd of large African elephants were stampeding toward us*, where the selection of the verbal form is restricted to "our judgement [...] to what must be the head" but this could be also restricted to the meaning of the sentence as a whole. In the first case, *herd* acts as the head because it is the whole that is 'larger than I thought' while in the second case, both singular and plural could fit depending on the meaning that we want to give to the sentence, taking *herd* as a single unit or as a group of *large African* elephants (Keizer 2007: 12). As she clarifies, "the test is only applicable to constructions in which N1 and N2 differ in number combining either a singular N1 and a plural N2 [...] or plural N1 and a singular N2" (Keizer 2007: 120).

The other point of view on agreement is the information-based approach that "assumes that two elements which participate in an agreement relation specify partial information about a single linguistic object" (Pollard & Sag 1988: 2). This is, both subject and verb provide a piece of information about the linguistic object, but "information coming from two sources about a single object must be compatible" (Pollard & Sag 1988: 3).



the salmon swims [SUB is resolved to 3rd person singular]

\*you swims [information about SUBJ is inconsistent]

Figure 6. Subject-verb agreement from Carl Pollard and Ivan A. Sag's *An Information-Based Theory of Agreement* (1988), pp. 3.

Following Biber et al.'s words (1999: 180):

The subject and the verb phrase agree in number in person [... and] the basic grammatical rule is that the s-form of lexical verbs and the primary auxiliaries is used with a third person singular subject in the present tense indicative.

This is represented in a very clear way in the table that follows:

Present tense		Past tense		
Lexical verb	DO	HAVE	BE	BE
I walk	do	have	am	was
You walk	do	have	are	were
He/She/It walks	does	has	is	was
We/You/They walk	do	have	are	were

Figure 7. Subject-verb concord from Douglas Biber [et al.]'s *Longman grammar of spoken and written English* (1999), pp.180

We know since at least Pooley (1943: 3) that "a verb must agree in number with its subject [and] the student is forced to conclude that every verb in English must agree with the form of the subject in number, regardless of the meaning or intention". This is, a singular subject triggers a singular verb and a plural subject triggers a plural verb but he also says that speakers of the English language "have made their verbs agree with the feeling or intention of the subject no matter what the form" and here we are not only speaking about people in general, but also about great authors such as Chaucer, Milton, Defoe or Shakespeare (Pooley 1943: 31).

In his article, Pooley (1943: 33) uses a sentence published by the Burlington Railroad in an advertisement where apparently the verb is used in its wrong way for some people, while others

claimed that the verb was in its correct form. The sentence was:

- (1) For within this tremendous area IS produced: two-thirds the oats, more than half the corn, more than half the barley, half the wheat, half the hogs, nearly half the cattle, nearly half the gold, wool, and cotton

This sentence created great controversy because "the question of whether IS or ARE was correct in this sentence arouse national interest [...] The question was of course not settled and never will be until rule and custom decide on one form." (Pooley 1943: 33). This can lead us to introduce the topic of our dissertation, the collective nouns. As Pooley (1943: 34) tested, the rule that we find in textbooks about collective nouns says that "*a collective noun takes a singular or a plural verb, according as the collection is thought of as a whole or as a composed of individuals*". This rule represents exactly the rule that we are familiar with but in this case, the simple change of election of a singular or plural verb changes the perception we have of the subject, either as a whole or a group of individuals and this is exactly what is represented in the following lines of a newspaper article:

- (2) Most of the throng **WHICH** will attend, if the two student bodies are excepted, **CARE** little who wins, and **IS ATTENDING** for the spectacle **IT HOPES** to see

As Pooley (1943: 34-35) comments, the noun *throng* "is first considered as a group and is modified by WHICH; it is next considered as a collection of individuals who *care little who wins*; then it becomes again a group in the singular with singular verb and a pronoun in agreement".

### 2.3.1 Types of concordance

As mentioned in the previous part, to make the agreement between the NP and the VP, we can find three possible principles: the grammatical concord, the notional concord and by proximity.

*Grammatical concord* is the one where the head of the NP and the verb agree according to the grammatical sense, this is, a singular noun agrees with a singular verb and a plural noun agrees with a plural verb:

- (3) The book is on the shelf

- (4) The books are on the shelf

The principle of *notional concord* is defined as the one where "the choice of verb form may be determined by the meaning rather than the form of the subject" (Biber et al. 1999: 187):

- (5) King prawns cooked in chili salt and pepper was very much better, a simple dish succulently executed

In this sentence, the "singular verb form is chosen to agree with the dish being referred to, rather than the individual prawns specified in the subject noun phrase" (Biber et al. 1999: 187)

The principle of *notional concord* "refers to agreement of a verb with the subject according to the notion of number rather than with the actual grammatical marker on the subject" (Vigliocco et al. 1996: 262) and this principle is the one that we can find with the use of collective nouns. As Biber et al. (1999: 188) have pointed out, "singular collective nouns allow either singular or plural concord (at least in BrE) depending upon whether the focus is on the group as a whole or on the individuals making up the group". There is, although, a general rule that says that in most cases, collective nouns such as *audience*, *committee* or *government* take a singular form in the 80% of cases, while nouns such as *staff* takes a plural form in the same percentage of cases. *Crew* or *family* can occur with both singular or plural (Biber et al. 1999: 188)

Lastly, the agreement *by the principle of proximity*, also referred as "attraction", is defined as the one where "the verb [denotes agreement] with a noun which is closer to the verb (typically in a postmodifier) but which is not the head of the subject noun phrase" (Biber et al. 1999: 189; Vigliocco et al. 1996: 262):

- (6) [One] of the [**girls**] **have** got bronchitis  
(7) \***[One]** of the [girls] **has** got bronchitis (emphasis added)

### 3. Nouns

#### 3.1 Countability

An inherent property of nouns and noun phrases is countability and if we talk about it, it is compulsory, and obvious, that we are talking about number, “the system contrasting **singular** and **plural**” in most Indo-European languages (Huddleston & Pullum 2005: 85). When dealing with the term, Biber et al. (2002: 57) have pointed out that it can refer to “how we view the world, rather than how the world really is”. In fact, when we take for example the noun *furniture*, it is true that we cannot count it like \*one furniture / \*two furniture because it is an uncountable noun but it refers to a set of different elements (e.g. chairs, tables, etc) (Biber et al. 2002: 57). The English language makes a distinction between proper nouns and common nouns. Quirk et al. (1985: 246) performed a test with the following nouns: *Sid*, *book*, *furniture*, and *brick*. The aim of this test was to check if the nouns can act “as head of the noun phrase functioning as object in the sentence *I saw...*: without any determiner (a); with the [...] determiners *the* (b), *a* (c), *some* (d); and in the plural (e)” (Quirk et al. 1985: 245). The results of the test are represented in the following table:

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(2 + 3)
(a)	Sid	*book	furniture	brick
(b)	*the Sid	the book	the furniture	the brick
(c)	*a Sid	a book	*a furniture	a brick
(d)	*some Sid	*some book	some furniture	some brick
(e)	*Sids	books	*furnitures	bricks

Figure 8. Test table for noun classes from Randolph Quirk [et al.]’s *A comprehensive grammar of the English language* (1985), pp. 246

The result of this test shows the degree of variation from (1) with only one possibility to (2+3) with all possibilities. As mentioned before, the English language makes a first distinction between proper nouns (1) and common nouns (2, 3, 2+3). Nouns such as *book* (2), *bottle* or *chair* are defined as count nouns. In column (3) we expect to find words such as *furniture*, *bread* or *music* and these are considered noncount (mass) nouns. The case of (2+3) represents a class of nouns that depending on

the context can be considered count nouns or mass nouns (*brick, cake, coffee*). (Quirk et al. 1985: 246).

For this dissertation, the group of proper nouns is not pertinent but the group of common nouns and its types gains relevance for the paper. Revising how scholars have defined these terms (Biber et al. 2002: 56; Downing 2015: 365), if we talk about a countable (count) noun, the entity can be counted and it has number contrast while with an uncountable (mass) noun, the entity cannot be counted so there is no number contrast.

Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 335) had proposed a conceptualization of count and non-count nouns as atomic or not. As they mention, count nouns are atomic because “they cannot be divided into smaller parts of the same kind as a whole”. Taking *boy* as example of count nouns, the referential unit “consists of parts — head, arms, legs, etc. —but these parts are not themselves boys” whereas non-count nouns are not atomic because “particular amounts can be separated out and put in individual containers”. Taking *water* as example of non-count nouns, “an amount of water can be divided arbitrarily into parts which are themselves (amounts of) water” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 335-336). But not all mass nouns behave the same because if we take *crockery* as example, the subdivision can be made in terms of *crockery to food* and *crockery to drink* but it cannot be made arbitrarily because a handle of a cup or the cup as a whole, it is not considered *crockery*. The difference between *water* and *crockery* is that the first one is homogeneous while the second is heterogeneous, it is an aggregation of entities of different kinds and this is what makes it uncountable, because we can count the individual entities (plates, cups, saucers, etc) but we cannot count the whole concept itself (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 336). In other words, if we break a car in pieces it is no longer a car, but if we break sugar in pieces it continues to be sugar.

### 3.1.1 Countable nouns

In the case of countable nouns, there is a classification into regular or irregular depending on how the plural form is made (Downing 2015: 364-365). In the case of regular nouns, the plural is made by the addition of a suffix that changes depending on the ending of the word. After a sibilant we add /iz/ (*kiss - kisses; church - churches*), spelled -es; After a voiceless consonant we add /s/ or /z/ if the consonant is voiced or after vowel (*book - books; pole - poles; eye - eyes*); and in cases such as

*phenomenon - phenomena*, the original plural is retained. In the case of irregular nouns, the most common technique is by changing the vowel (*woman - women; tooth - teeth*); or by changing the consonant (*half - halves; loaf - loaves*). Furthermore, there is a third group that uses the same form for both the singular and the plural form, the well-known as ‘zero plurals’ (*salmon, sheep* or *series*).

Although I have mentioned that countability is a matter of perspective, which can be more related to semantics rather than to grammar, there are grammatical features that mark the use of count and mass nouns (Downing 2015: 365-366). The first grammatical rule is that count nouns accept cardinal numerals (e.g: one, two, three) while mass nouns do not. For example, we can have *one table / two chairs* but not *\*one furniture / \*two luggage*. If we want to make it “countable”, we can use for example a partitive expression like ‘a piece of’ or a quantifiers like ‘much’ or ‘little’. Countable nouns and uncountable nouns both make a distinction between definite and indefinite, but there is a difference. While count nouns make the distinction by using the indefinite and the definite article (*a cow / the cow*), mass nouns cannot occur with the indefinite article but they do use the definite article (*milk / the milk*). (Biber et al. 2002: 56).

When it comes to establishing agreement with the VP, count nouns take singular or plural depending on if the noun is in its singular or plural form but with mass nouns, the theory gets trickier. As I am going to revise in the next point, in the category of mass nouns we can make smaller groups depending on the characteristics of nouns.

### **3.1.2 Uncountable (mass) nouns**

As mentioned before, the category of mass nouns gets trickier if we take a closer look inside it. In fact we can find two different types of mass nouns: singular only or plural only.

In this category of non-count singular nouns, we can find nouns that refer to (a) food, substances, natural phenomena, abstractions, (b) nouns ending in *-ics*, (c) nouns which refer to a number of items or (d) activities (Downing 2015: 366-367). As examples of (a), we find words widely used such as *butter, coffee, rice, rain, snow, water, anger, love* or *childhood*; in (b) we find *aerobics, athletics, linguistics* or *phonetics*, which although they look plural, they are treated as singular; *luggage, jewellery* or *furniture* are examples of (c); and in (d) we could mention *research*

or *travel* among others. In all cases, we cannot use these words with cardinal numerals or the indefinite article (excluding the case of *coffee*, which I will mention later because this is one of the examples of nouns with count and non-count use).

On the other hand, in the category of non-count plural nouns, we can find nouns that refer to (a) clothes and artefacts, (b) miscellaneous or, the well-known and object of our dissertation in the next section, (c) the collective nouns (Downing 2015: 367-368). Words such as *pants / trousers*, *shorts*, *pajamas / pyjamas*, *glasses* or *scissors* are examples of (a). All these widely known words “consisting of two equals parts are individuated by ‘a pair of’ ” (Downing 2015: 367). In the case of (b) we may find words such as *belongings*, *riches* or *savings*.

As pointed out with the example of *coffee*, there is a small number of mass nouns that can be used “as count when they refer to conventional instances or quantities of the mass referent” (Downing 2015: 368). If we think of *coffee* as the beverage made by the mixture of coffee powder with hot water, it is a mass noun because we cannot measure it with cardinal numeral, so we need a ‘counter’ particle to measure it (*a sip of coffee*, *some coffee*); but if we think of *coffee* as ‘a cup of coffee’, then it is countable because we can say *one coffee / two coffees*. However, this is not the only case. We can do the same with words such as *cheese*, *cake* or *ham*, because if we imagine the entity “as having a definite shape” then we consider it as countable (*a cheese*, *a cake* or *a ham*); but if we think of “the substance or flesh” then it “is conceptualized as mass” (*some cheese*, *a piece of cake* or *some ham*) (Downing 2015: 368). This is discussed also by Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 334) using as example the word *chocolate*:

- |     |  |             |
|-----|--|-------------|
| (8) | Would you like [another <u>chocolate</u> ]?  | [count]     |
| (9) | Would you like [some more <u>chocolate</u> ] | [non-count] |

As in the case of *coffee*, this example also represents that the same word can be taken as countable or uncountable depending on the context. In (9) it “denotes a food substance, whereas in (8) it denotes an individual unit consisting of that substance” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 334). As they mention, this is “regard as a case of **polysemy**” because *chocolate* “exhibits [...] more than one sense” (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 334).

As we can see, mass nouns have a special way of becoming “countable” and this is possible

by adding a ‘counter’ particle. The most widely used particles are *a piece of* and *a bit of*, but there are more. If we want to be much more accurate, we could use for example *a drop of* (*milk, water, coffee*), *a pinch of* (*salt*) or *a slice of* (*cheese, ham*). Another way of “counting” mass nouns is by using types of containers where the substance can be retained such as *a bottle of* (*wine, water*), *a pack of* (*yoghurts, cards*) or *a tin of* (*tomatoes, soup*). In this case, this way of measuring can apply both to count and mass nouns (Downing 2015: 368).

Determiners can also function with a countable or a mass noun. In the case of *the, this my* or *no*, all of them can occur with both count and mass nouns (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 338):

- |      |           |               |               |             |            |
|------|-----------|---------------|---------------|-------------|------------|
| (10) | COUNT     | the house     | this piece    | my father   | no pianist |
| (11) | NON-COUNT | the equipment | this crockery | my clothing | no milk    |

But there are some others determiners that are restricted to only one class of nouns and if the function with countable nouns, they do not work with mass nouns and vice versa. In the case of *a little, enough, little, much* or *sufficient*, they are restricted to uncountable (mass) nouns, being incompatible with count singular nouns (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 339):

- |      |  |  |
|------|--|--|
| (12) | She drank <u>a little</u> water              | *He damage <u>a little</u> knee          |
| (13) | He has got <u>enough/sufficient</u> strength | *He has got <u>enough/sufficient</u> son |

On the other hand, determiners such as *another, each, either, every, neither* or *one*, they are restricted to countable nouns, being incompatible with non-count singular nouns (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 339):

- |      |                                   |                                       |
|------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (14) | <u>Each/Every</u> boy won a prize | * He broke <u>each/every</u> crockery |
| (15) | Choose <u>one/another</u> leader  | * Choose <u>one/another</u> clothing  |

Lastly, we could add a third category to the classification of nouns: the collective nouns; but this type of nouns is going to be treated in more detail in the next point of this paper because they show some peculiarities.

### 3.2 Collective nouns

As I mentioned at the end of the section before, collective nouns can be considered the third type of nouns that we can find in the English language. As will be seen, this category shows some peculiarities, in contrast to count and mass nouns. Starting with the definition of a collective noun, they "refer to groups of people, animals, or things: *army, audience, committee, family, staff, team, flock, bunch*" (Biber et al. 2002: 61). All these nouns show the peculiarity that they refer to groups of countable entities but they are considered a single unit.

Payne (2011: 120) makes a distinction between collective nouns and collective plurals. As he mentions, collective nouns are the examples mentioned above and collective plurals "are 'special' plural forms of nouns that exist alongside regular plurals [and it] consist[s] of only six members, *people, cattle, swine, fowl, vermin, and kine*". In these cases, "collective plurals are consistently plural [...] they always trigger plural verb agreement when functioning as the subject of a clause [and] collective plurals exist alongside regular plurals such as *persons, cows, and pigs*" (Payne 2011: 120-121):

- (16) The people are/\*is over-employed
- (17) Cattle have/\*has very sensitive muzzles

As Santana Lario suggested (2015: 126), collective nouns have two possible interpretations. On one hand, "they may be interpreted as referring to the collective they denote (and therefore take singular number), and on another hand, they may refer "to the individuals that form the collective (and therefore take plural number" and the example he proposes is using the word *team*:

- (18) The team is under considerable pressure to win
- (19) The team are growing fast this season

This idea was supported also by Quirk et al. (1985: 10.36) because the election of the verb form depends on "whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body, or as a collection of individuals".

The peculiarity treated in this dissertation deals with the agreement between the collective

noun used in the NP and the verb that must be taken both in British English and in American English. Revising Brinton and Arnovick (2006: 399), they point out the following:

With collective nouns (nouns naming a group consisting of individuals), such as team, herd, flock, family, committee, and government, BE tends to use a plural verb, while NAE uses a singular verb. Even in NAE, however, usage varies: if the collective is seen as a unit or as an abstraction, the singular is used (e.g. the committee agrees, the family is a dying institution), whereas if the collective is viewed in terms of its individuals members, the plural is used (e.g. the committee are all assembled, the family are all at home)

This idea was supported by many other scholars such as Quirk et al. (1985) who said that with collective nouns, American usage favours the singular after collective nouns, whereas in British English speakers use wither the singular or the plural. Roger Berry (2012: 9) or Huddleston & Pullum (2005: 89-90) have also mentioned that in cases such as *team* or *jury*, American English "normally take[s] a singular verb" while in British English, these nouns "can have a singular or plural verb":

(20) Am.E: The team is playing well

(21) Br.E: The team is/are playing well (Berry 2012: 9)

(22) Am.E: The jury is still delivering      \*The jury are still delivering (Huddleston & Pullum 2005: 90)

For the following part of the section, I will review what scholars have said about the topic of why British English uses, mainly, the plural form with a collective noun while American English uses the singular. Does it mean that where ones see a forest, the others see trees? Is this a "problem" of conceptualization/perception? The main sources for this section are going to be Biber et al. (1999), Quirk et al. (1985), Bock et al (2004, 2006) and Earl Hunt & Franca Agnoli (1991) showing the Whorfian perspective.

### **3.2.1 Theoretical background**

Regarding agreement, Bock et al. (2004, 2006) have written an article where they have formulated

three alternative hypotheses from the linguistic and psycholinguistic points of view. As they mentioned (2006: 66), to produce messages we need to make a real-time process where we need to retrieve the abstract representations of words and morphemes, assemble the syntactic structure of the sentence and integrate words and structures to create an utterance that can be encoded phonologically.

They have started their paper by defining this difference between British English and American English as “familiar but still striking” (2006: 64). As they suggested, the election of plural in British English and of singular of American English is based on the policy of large communities of the country, it is the prescriptive rule. As they advised, in British English for example, this community is well illustrated by the BBC Radio News (Bock et al. 2006: 64). The list of examples that we can find in Bock et al. (2004: 76) is going to be used in the practical analysis to see if there is any reaction or comment when we ask different native speakers from both accents to choose the option that fits the sentence in question because as Bock et al. (2006: 65) said, “many of the British examples strike American speakers as completely unacceptable, even ‘awful’, to quote one young informant”. Something similar happened in another study with American and British students, where “samples of British-style collective agreement were corrected by Americans 95% of the time, compared to 29% by British students (Johansson, 1979)” (Bock et al. 2006: 65). These quotations suggest that British speakers are more flexible when it comes to choosing the singular or the plural form of the verb, while Americans are more fixed, more determined to take one or another.

As they have established, agreement “can be broadly divided into constraint-based approaches [...] and derivational approaches” (Bock et al. 2006: 66). To explain each point of view, the need to take a look to the answer to two different question: the first one deals with “the nature of agreement features” and the other deals with “how agreement features are used by the grammar” (Bock et al. 2006: 66). In short, we could say that constraint-based accounts are based on the nature of the referent and depending on it, the phrase is considered singular or plural, while derivational approaches are represented by syntax and phonology and it is the structure of the clause the one that triggers the election of singular or plural number of the elements (Bock et al. 2006: 66).

To implement agreement, Bock et al. (2006: 67) mention two mechanisms which work together to make it possible: marking and morphing. The first mechanism, marking, has its base in the notion of Maximal Input but in a more restricted way, “the notional referents of arguments

determine the feature values of noun phrases in the syntax, and not feature values associated with verb phrase” (Bock et al. 2006: 67). It links “linguistically relevant features of nonlinguistic representations to the corresponding linguistic elements” and it occurs, for example, in native North American languages (Bock et al. 2006: 67). The second mechanism, morphing, binds targets “to the linguistic representations of their controllers in the course of grammatical encoding”, forgetting “the linguistic-structural link between agreement controllers and agreement targets in a derivation-like progress” and it occurs, for example, in subject-verb agreement in English (Bock et al. 2006: 67).

The article mentions, as examples of the mechanisms described above, the case of pronoun and verb number agreement in English. In the case of pronouns, “personal pronouns carry a number with them from the lexicon and their phrases may be marked in the syntax”, what “constitutes agreement concord”, an example of marking (Bock et al. 2006: 67-68). By contrast, in the case of verbs, they “inherit the number of the subject noun phrase during grammar encoding”, what “constitutes control of verb number by the subject number”, an example of morphing (Bock et al. 2006: 68).

Bock et al. (2006: 68) introduced “the phenomenon of ATTRACTION (Jespersen 1924) [as a] variability into the realization of agreement”. As they have mentioned (Bock et al. 2006: 68) “agreement features from a noun phrase that is not the canonical controller of agreement, [an attractor], appear on an agreement target”. For the practical part, I will use sentences with both a singular and a plural attractor, combined with a collective noun and the non-collective plural noun (See Appendix 1), to analyze if participants are affected by the phenomenon of attraction when it comes to making the subject-verb agreement. Following what the article mentions, “the plural features of attractors [...] are normally transmitted to the agreement target, rather than being directly linked to the target” as they are “grammatically [...] much more potent than singulars” (Bock et al. 2006: 68).

As I have mentioned before, Bock et al. (2006: 70) have formulated three different hypotheses in terms of making-and-morphing mechanisms “in which British and American English could come to display different patterns of collective agreement”:

The first two are psycholinguistically specific versions of the hypothesis that British speakers use the meaning of collective in a way that differs from Americans speakers; the third hypothesis is that it is not the meaning but

the number specifications of collectives that differ in the two dialects

In short, the three hypotheses formulated by Bock et al. (2006: 70) are: (1) different resolutions of notional ambiguity, (2) different sources of number constraints and (3) different lexical specifications.

The first hypothesis agrees with the maximalist input in the idea that number semantics permeates agreement (Bock et al. 2006: 70). In short, this first hypothesis deals and takes as starting point the consideration of a collection as “singleton sets or as aggregations of individuals” (Bock et al. 2006: 70). When this happens, “British speakers are more inclined to resolve such ambiguities in favor of an aggregate or distributive sense and American speakers are more inclined to resolve them in favor of the set sense” (Bock et al. 2006: 70-71). In this sense, “American speakers see a forest where British speakers see trees” (Bock et al. 2006: 71). When we find an ambiguous situation with a collective referent, “British speakers would be more likely than Americans to mark as plural those subjects noun phrases or pronouns phrases” (Bock et al. 2006: 71). As mentioned before, Bock et al. (2006: 71) declared that this variation affects also pronouns, so in British English, due to that consideration of the subject as a plural, pronouns “also tend to be plural” because “pronouns are more sensitive than verbs to variations in the notional number of their antecedents”.

The second hypothesis, different sources of number constraints, takes as a starting point the constraint-based views of agreement. This hypothesis suggests that British speakers “should rely on the message features or notional valuations of the number context [while American speakers] rely instead on distributional features of the linguistic context” (Bock et al. 2006: 71). In short and in the case of British speakers, this hypothesis defends that during the implementation of agreement, they give greater weight to notional number, instead of to lexical number (Bock et al. 2006: 71). As the article claims (Bock et al. 2006: 72), British are more likely than Americans to use plural agreement when “the notional aggregation behind a collective subject is enhanced by the nonlinguistic context”. As Bock et al. suggested (2006: 72), “British agreement is driven by deep, logical, meaning-based evaluations of numerosity in the cognitive context whereas American agreement is driven by superficial grammatical number properties”

Lastly, the third hypothesis, different lexical specifications, it “returns to the possibility that British and American agreement work in the same ways but call on different values of an agreement

feature” and in this case, agreement “reflects not notional number, but lexically specified number” (Bock et al. 2006: 72). This third hypothesis is based on the idea that British speakers and American speakers apply different grammatical number to collective nouns. For example, “some speakers of British English treat nouns such as *team* and *government* as plural, in the same way that some speakers of American English treat the noun *faculty* as plural” (Bock et al. 2004: 19). Most of these considerations are taken by default by speakers and this “variability is not notionally controlled, but lexically controlled” (Bock et al. 2006: 72).

After the theoretical point of view, Bock et al. (2004, 2006), “using a combination of corpus analysis, normative assessment, and experimental testing”, they tried to verify if the hypothesis that they have formulated can apply to reality. They performed several tests both in written and spoken versions, with sentences where collective nouns were used to make agreement with the right verbal form. They have performed three different tests trying to explain each of the hypothesis that they have formulated. In general, results did not show clear evidence of different treatment of collective nouns in both accents. In a similar way, I am going to perform as well a small test with native speakers of both accents.

Once again, scholars such as Quirk et al. (1985: 758) have said that “the choice between singular or plural verbs depends in British English on whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body, or as a collection of individuals” but in the case of American English, “speakers are less likely to bring such consideration to bear” (Bock et al. 2004: 7).

In a last attempt to understand why British speakers and American speakers differ in the use of collective nouns, I took a look to the Whorfian perspective, a psycholinguistic study developed by Benjamin L. Whorf and Edward Sapir in which they defended the view that language influences thoughts and the way we conceptualize the world.

### **3.2.2 Whorfian perspective**

The Whorfian perspective is a linguistic relativity hypothesis developed by the businessman and amateur linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf and the anthropologist Edward Sapir during the 1920s and 1930s where they tried to analyze and explain if “the language we use exerts any control over

thoughts” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 377). This view was known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (or Whorfian) (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 377) but this hypothesis was rejected by important scholars of psychology such as Clark and Clark, Foss and Hakes or Chomsky years. Bilingual speakers, on the other hand, had claimed that “they do think differently in different languages” and “[their] attitudes and interpersonal behavior were affected by the language [they were] using” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 377).

The Whorfian perspective has shown two possible versions: the strongest and the weaker version. The first version says that “a thought expressible in one language may not be expressible in another” but this contradicts the idea of translatability, which defends that a statement in one language can be translated in another language. The strongest version defends that language has a huge impact on thoughts. The weaker form deals with the degree of naturalness, if a thought “comes easily to the language user” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 378). Following this idea, the weaker version “states that language differentially favors some thought processes over others [...] a thought that is easily expressed in one language might virtually never be developed by speakers of another language” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 378). In this case, the weaker version defends that language may have a slight impact on thoughts.

In our study of why do British and American speakers treat collective nouns in a different way, we can pay attention to the view of cognition. It was developed by Pylyshyn in 1984 and as he had pointed out (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 379), cognition can be studied in three different levels: the representational level, the symbol manipulation level and the physiological level. The physiological level is considered the highest level and it treats the cultural universals not concerning us. The representational level is the lowest level in the study of cognition and it represents what aspects of the world are coded in the mind, it treats the content of thought. In between, we have the symbol manipulation level, the “mechanics” of how a representation is formed without regard to the content of the representation (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 379).

When we receive stimuli from the world, the visual or auditory code has to be converted into an abstract lexical code which connects “a physical symbol to the lexical entries it might represent” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 379). This is also related to the lexical influences, the lexicon of a person and the choosing of one word or another to structure an experience. According to the article, there are two classes of lexical effects: the direct effects and the indirect effects (Hunt & Agnoli

1991: 379). The direct effects “depend on discriminations that a person must take in choosing or comprehending a word”; and the indirect effects “depend on the semantic relations between the word chosen and others words in the speaker’s lexicon” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 379). In order to describe the world, “a word is chosen [focusing] attention on a particular aspect of experience that makes the word appropriate (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 379).

One of the studies performed to explain if it is true that perception affects language was by studying color although Hunt and Agnoli (1991: 380) said that they disagree due to “recent findings by anthropologists” and because testing with colors is not a relevant test to prove the Whorfian hypothesis. The article makes a comparison between English and other languages. For example, in English, we have the terms *green* and *yellow* but Ancient Hebrew had only one term for both colors; but in contrast with Italian terms *blu*, *celeste*, *azzurro*, and *turchino*, English uses only the term *blue*. Does it mean that “Italians see finer distinctions between shades of blue than do English speakers?” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 380). According to the article, the answer to this question is not as clear as it looks like because as Berlin and Kay (1969) proposed, “there are at most 11 basic color terms and they are assigned in an orderly hierarchy (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 380). The first colors are black and white; red comes next; and third colors are yellow, blue, and green (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 380).

Testing with colors was used by Lucy and Shweder (1979) as well in two different experiments of discrimination and description with chips. In the first one, participants had three chips, “two of the same color and one that differed very slightly” and they had to “select the two same-colored chips” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 380). In the second experiment, “one person had to describe a chip to a second person who would then identify the chip being described (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 381). They find out that “Mayan and Spanish speakers differed in their memory capacities [and] the difference was related to color codability in the speaker’s language” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 381).

Hunt and Agnoli (1991: 382) defended the idea that “different languages force us to describe events in different ways, in the sense that they focus attention on different aspects of the linguistic situation”. Imagine that you have the following sentence: “I was scared because I saw a bear with her cubs. I ran before she saw me”. In English, “the sex of the bear has been stated three separate times, twice through the use of the pronoun and once by context” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 382). If we

want to say the same in Italian, we will not use feminine pronouns but neutral, and in this case “the sex of the bear is inferable only from context” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 382). The repetition of the sex throughout pronouns could help memory in order to establish the animal’s biology.

The article also focussed its attention on syntactical-semantic effects based on an utterance analysis. As Hunt and Agnoli (1991: 383) have said, the ability to construct utterances (“a set of lexical items that conform certain rules for well-formed structure”) is one of the bases of human language. As it is known, “in English word order is the major cue to syntactical structure” but this is not as important, or fixed at least, in languages such as Spanish, Italian or French and, in fact, “there are fewer permissible word-order variations in English than in Italian” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 383). It is also mentioned in the article that “differential strength of cues in different languages can be found in studies of bilinguals” because it was shown that “learners transfer their first-language sentence-processing strategies to sentence-processing in the second language” and this “can be detected in weakened form even in fluent bilinguals who have spoken the second language for many years” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 383). As Hunt and Agnoli (1991: 384) have recognized, they paid attention to the distinction “between the structure of a set of words and the structure of a string of words” due to the fact that this distinctions have “implications for cognition”, because “to use language a person has to be able to figure out what an utterance means” and “if languages differ in ambiguity they force different styles of reasoning on their speakers”. The cause of such ambiguity is mostly polysemy. As a matter of fact, “if two languages are relatively high in polysemy, the more words that are used in a sentence the more chance there is for ambiguity [and] longer sentences should be more prone to ambiguity in a word-order language than in an inflected language” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 384). This was tested in a small experiment with two Italian speakers and two English speakers where they had to indicate which sentences were “potentially ambiguous”. The result of the test showed that English speakers pointed out that “18 of 33 sentences were potentially ambiguous” while Italian speakers pointed out that “3 of 64 were ambiguous” (Hunt & Agnoli 1991: 384). As Hunt and Agnoli have claimed (1991: 384) they “believe that this striking difference is due to the contrast between English (word order and relatively high polysemy) and Italian (inflected and relatively low polysemy).

As a conclusion, although the Whorfian is not clearly supported by many scholars, those who believe in it defended that in a way, the language we speak has an influence in our thoughts and in the way we defined the world. As Hunt and Agnoli (1991: 387) have argued, they do think

“that every utterance in language A has a translation in language B” and although this statement “does not make the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis untrue”, it triggers several questions about the naturalness that I have mentioned at the beginning of this part.

In order to finish what I consider the theoretical part of the dissertation and as a curiosity, recently I have seen the movie *Arrival* (2006) in which we can see, in a way, a manifest of the Whorfian perspective. In the movie, the learning of a new language makes the protagonist to lose the sense of time as we know it. After the arrival of space-crafts to several points on the Earth, Louise Banks, a linguistic specialized in translation, is called in order to communicate with the "heptapods", two seven-limbed aliens. She and the physicist Ian Donnelly make contact with the aliens and they find out that their language is peculiar, non-linear and based on draws. It is a kind of language where circular symbols are used to represent words and sentences. After studying it, she learns their language and that not only allows her to communicate with the aliens, it makes her adapt the non-linear conceptualization of time as well, showing constantly flash-backs and flash-forwards creating a mess to the spectator, who for a moment loses the timeline of the movie.

In this movie, the Whorfian perspective is represented because of the learning of the aliens' language affects the way the protagonist organizes her thoughts and memories. It represents the strongest version of the hypothesis.

#### **4. Practical analysis**

After dealing with the theoretical point of view proposed by scholars (Bock et al. 2004, 2006; Quirk et al. 1985; and Hunt & Agnoli, 1991), I wanted to check, in a practical way, if the theory can be applied to reality and if it is true that there is a real difference between British and American speakers when using collective nouns.

##### **Participants:**

As the final point of this dissertation, I have spoken with 40 native speakers of the English language, being 20 native speakers of British English and 20 native speakers of American English. I

have used social media, such as Facebook or Instagram, to make contact with possible participants, as well as asking friends and friends of friends, spreading the word about this survey. Participants were all in their twenties or early thirties.

### **Method and material:**

Following Bock et al. (2004, 2006), I took a look to several examples of collective nouns and its correspondence with a non-collective plural noun (71-74, 78-80). Taking 8 different examples, I have used 36 sentences: 2 sentences with the collective noun, being one sentence modified by a singular post-modifier and another one by a plural post-modifier; and 2 sentences with the non-collective plural, being one sentence modified by a singular post-modifier and another one by a plural post-modifier (See Appendix 1). I have chosen this type of matching because as it was analyzed in several studies, “agreement errors were most common when the subject noun [...] and the local noun [...] were mismatched in number” (Vigliocco et al. 1996: 263) because this can be an effect of the proximity concord. In order to be able to contrast the results and to take the final conclusions, I have elaborated 4 different lists crossing the 36 sentences that I have made earlier, in a result of 4 lists of 15 sentences each one. In between of the sentences, I have included 7 fillers, which are the same in all of the lists, in order to “distract” the participants’ attention. The questionnaires were made using *GoogleForms* and I spread the links by social media and e-mail.

Imagine that you are a volunteer for the test and that I have sent you questionnaire A. I will ask you to read the whole questionnaire first and then complete each sentence with the predicate (verb + complement). In the document, you would find the following sentences:

- (23) The academy for the training program ...
- (24) The band with the powerful amplifiers ...
- (25) The actors in the soap opera ...
- (26) The teachers with the research awards ...
- (27) The government from the foreign country ...
- (28) The jury for the trials ...
- (29) The priests from the rural church ...
- (30) The representatives from the unions ...

To this ones, we must add the ‘fillers’. As mentioned before, questionnaires were made by crossing

the sentences that we can find in Appendix 1.

For the realization of the test, I have elaborated 4 groups of participants, mixing both British and American speakers and I have created four different documents. Following this, people in group 1 have received list A; group 2 have received list B and so on; and I asked them to read all sentences carefully and complete them with a predicate. I asked them to choose the “correct” verb form in the present tense, trying not to think about it too much and answer with the first thing that came to their minds.

After several months searching for participants, I reached my purpose and I got the answers from the 40 volunteers. Although from a first view I thought that the result was not as revealing as I thought they would be, there was in fact a difference between British speakers and American speakers.

### Results:

The final goal of this practical part was to analyze the 160 answers I got from the questionnaires, taking all the sentences where a collective noun was used, being 80 sentences with a collective noun + singular attractor and 80 sentences with a collective noun + plural attractor (in each questionnaire, I asked each participant to answer 4 sentences with a collective noun). The general view of answers, taking into account all of them as a whole and not if they were British answers or American answers, it is represented in the following chart:

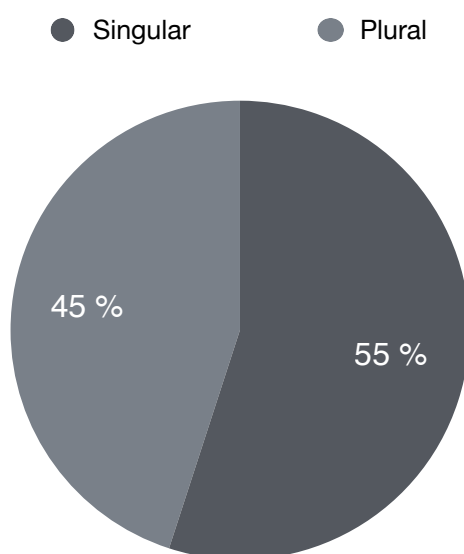


Figure 9. Total amount of answers (BE + AM = 160)

As we can see, 55% of answers were using a collective noun + a singular verb while 45% corresponds to a collective noun + a plural verb. But this chart does not say much about the results I got from the questionnaires so now I will analyze the answers in more detail. First, I want to take a look at the answers by nationality, comparing all the British answers with all the American answers; and then I will analyze the results paying attention to the classification of 'collective noun + singular/plural attractor', separating again the answers by nationality to see if there is any pattern I can identify as a justification for the results.

Figure 8(a) and 8(b) show the answers by nationality and the graphics help us to compare the answers of all British speakers and of all American speakers:

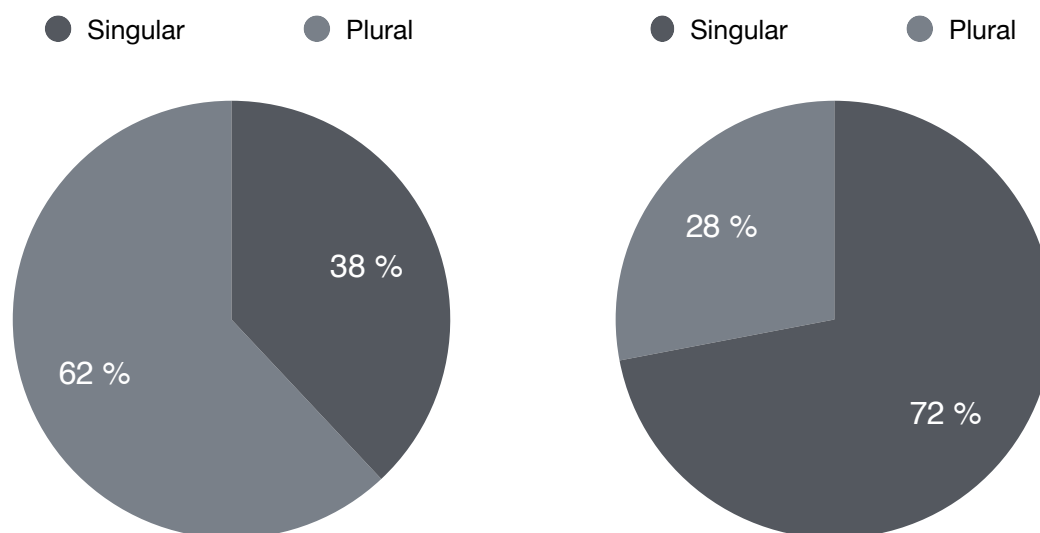


Figure 10. Total amount of results by nationality (80 BE vs 80 AE)

(a) British speakers

(b) American speakers

Taking a simple look at the charts, we can affirm that the theoretical background we saw in the previous point can apply to the practical approach in this case. Taking the British participants' answers, we can see that 62% of answers represent the agreement with the plural form of the verb while 38% uses the singular form of the verb. In the case of Americans, it is clear that majority of participants preferred the use of the singular form of the verb with a collective noun (getting 72% of answers) while only 28% of answers were using the plural form of the verb with a collective noun.

Taking some examples from the questionnaires, with collective nouns such as *academy*, *cast*, *jury*, *clergy* or *committee*, the majority of British participants have chosen a plural option while

American speakers clearly favored the singular choice:

- (31) **Br.** The academy for the training program are quite expensive vs **Am.** The academy for the training program provides classes
- (32) **Br.** The cast in the soap opera are singing beautifully vs **Am.** The cast in the soap opera is way too young for its content
- (33) **Br.** The jury for the trials appear nervous vs **Am.** The jury for the trials argues loudly
- (34) **Br.** The committee from the unions are giving incorrect information vs **Am.** The committee from the unions has decided to reject the deal

In the particular case of *clergy*, Americans showed a preference for the plural, instead of the singular, and it was clear in both accents that the collective noun *college* makes the agreement with the singular for 90% of speakers interviewed:

- (35) **Br.** The clergy are praying to God vs **Am.** The clergy have too much power
- (36) **Br.** The college with the research awards is winning constantly vs **Am.** The college with the research awards does well

The third classification of the results was made taking into account if the collective noun was followed by a singular attractor or a plural attractor (*The academy for the training program* vs *The academy for the training programs*) First, I analyzed the results in terms of ‘collective noun + singular attractor’:

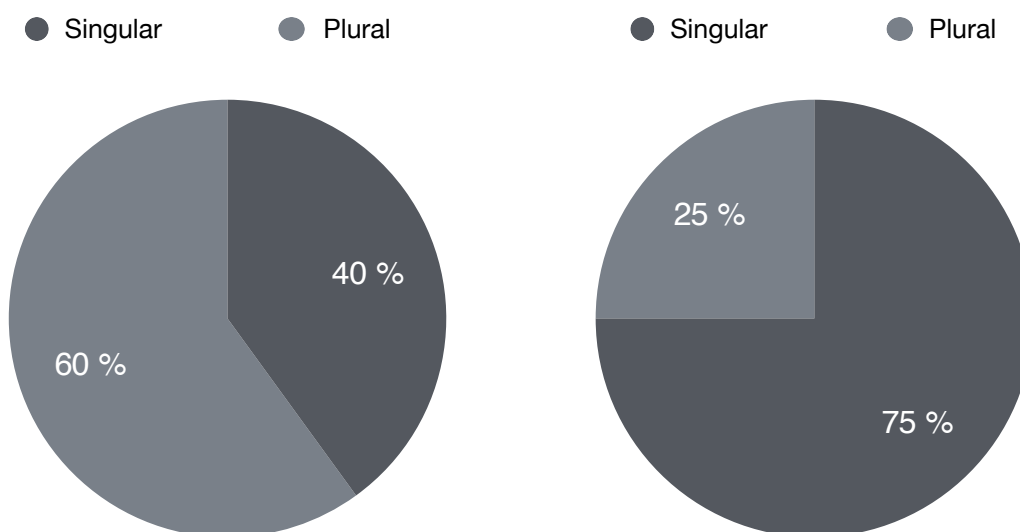


Figure 11. Results collective noun + singular attractor (40 BE vs 40 AE)

(a) British speakers

(b) American speakers

As we can see, the case of American English shows that speakers prefer the use of singular in a 75% against a 25% of use of the plural form while in the case of British speakers, the proportion is a 60-40. In the case of nouns such as *band* or *government*, participants from both nationalities tended to use the singular form of the verb while in the case of *clergy*, and as mentioned before, participants chose the plural form of the verb in both accents:

(37) Br. The band with the powerful amplifier is a very good band Am. The band with the powerful amplifier is loud

(38) Br. The government from the foreign country is interfering with our government vs Am. The government from the foreign country has malice in its heart

The last classification I have made for a better understanding of the results was analyzing the results that volunteers have elaborated in those sentences where a collective nouns was followed by a plural attractor and the results are shown in the following charts:

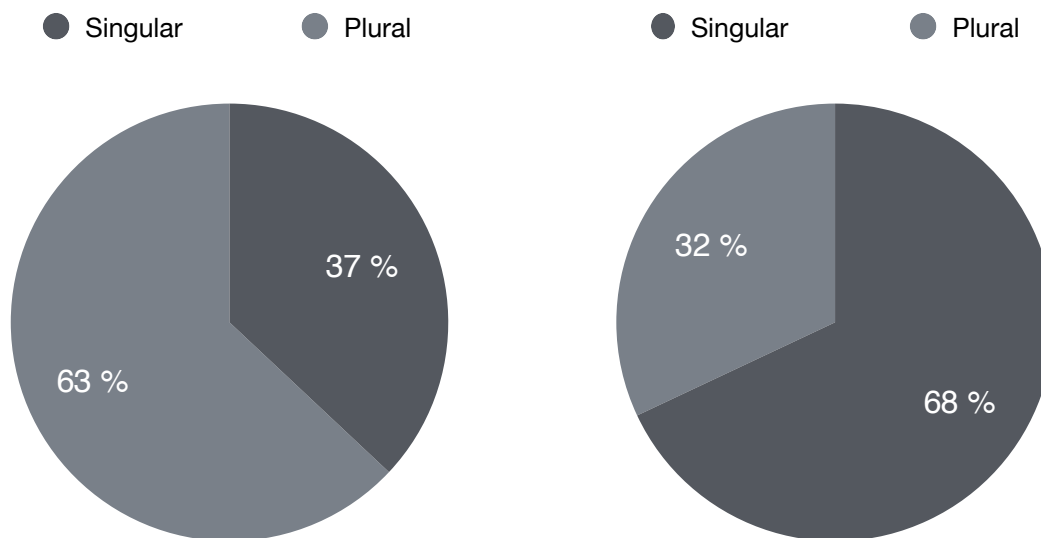


Figure 12. Results collective noun + plural attractor (40 BE vs 40 AE)

(a) British speakers

(b) American speakers

As we can see, among the 40 sentences I got in British English, 63% were using the plural verb

while 37% were using the singular form of the verb. In the case of American English, 68% of the results were using the singular verb while 32% were using the plural.

Consider the sentence *The band with the powerful amplifiers*, as example. British speakers seemed to be influenced by the plural attractor because in this case, 80% of participants chose the plural form contrasting with the results I got when *band* was followed by a singular attractor, where participants favored the singular form of the verb; while Americans kept the singular form as preferred. And the same happened with *The government from the foreign countries*, where British people have shown the same pattern. If we take the collective noun *cast*, for American speakers it triggers the singular verb when followed by a singular attractor, but when we have a plural attractor, it triggers the plural verb (e.g. *The cast in the soap opera carries the show through poor plot points* vs *The cast in the soap operas are dramatic*).

In order to conclude this dissertation, I want to comment that this questionnaire helped me to realize that that in a way, my mother-tongue can influence my use of English and there is one case in particular that shocked me. Although I introduced it as a distractor, the sentence with the word *couple* ended up surprising me. If I want to use the word *couple*, I would make the agreement with the singular verb (*the couple is*) but for 100% of participants, both British and Americans, this word triggers a plural verb (*the couple are*). I think this is caused because in the case of Spanish, this word is lexicalized as singular so when I use the English language, I keep that meaning of *couple* as one entity, not as 2 people.

## **5. Conclusion**

If we think about the English language, I am sure that for the majority of us, the first thing that comes to our minds is American English vs British English. Both accents are considered the most spread around English-speaking countries and when we study, grammars use to follow the rules from one or another. As a starting point of this dissertation, I wanted to pay attention to the geographical situation of both accents from two different points of view.

On one hand, I used Kachru's model (1985), which classifies English-speaking countries in a system of circles (Inner, Outer, Expanding) According to this classification, all varieties of English developed thanks to the British Empire. When British arrived at new territories, their language mixed with the local language spoken by the natives, which ended up developing what we know now as regional dialects. On the other hand, Peter Strevens' model (1980) does not allow the conception of regional dialects due to the contact between British English and the local languages of the colonized people, because he had divided all varieties into having American or British roots.

The second point of this dissertation wanted to define the general structure of the noun phrase and the basic rules for the agreement with the verb phrase. Here, I defined the three types of concordance involved in agreement (grammatical concord, notional concord and concord by proximity).

The third point narrows down to nouns, paying attention to the different types that we can find if we analyze countability. The two major classes are countable nouns and uncountable (mass) nouns, defined by a number of very specific characteristics that help us to classify each noun in one group or another. In between, we can find another "special" class of nouns: collective nouns. In this case, nouns do not follow the rules. In fact, the treatment of collective nouns is one of the differences that we can find between American English and British English. In general, the theoretical background establishes that with collective nouns, British English chooses a plural verb while American English prefers the use of a singular verb. For this, I revised what scholars have said about the topic. Following Quirk et al. (1985), Bock et al. (2004, 2006) and Hunt & Agnoli (1991), I took a look at the theoretical background of the topic. In the case of Bock et al. (2004, 2006), choosing a singular or a plural verb with collective nouns is defined by the lexical classification of them while the Whorfian perspective, which links language and thoughts, defines that the election is made depending on the semantic classification, as a result of a different conception of world which leads to a different codification of language.

Lastly, I wanted to check if the theory can apply to the real use of language. For that, I asked 40 native speakers of English, half British speakers and half American speakers, to complete a brief questionnaire with sentences containing several collective nouns. As I could realize after analyzing the results from the practical part, while revising the theoretical background I was convinced that there were no such differences nowadays when dealing with collective nouns but results were

revealing. Once all participants answered the questionnaires, I analyzed the results and I have elaborated the charts for a better illustration. It is clear that it is true that British speakers prefer the use of a plural form of the verb with collective nouns while American speakers prefer the use of the singular. It means that, while British speakers consider it a group of individuals, Americans consider it a single unity, which confirms that British people see trees while Americans see a forest. I could verify, as well, that the concordance by proximity can affect the election of one form or another because if the attractor is plural, participants chose the plural form of the verb in both accents. I could find as well some cases in which the singular attractor leads to choose the singular form of the verb, but it was not as relevant as in the case of the plural.

As mentioned in the very last paragraph of this dissertation and taking my case as an example, I think it would be interesting to repeat the survey I did with native speakers of English, but in this case I would include Spanish speakers as well to verify if it is true that, as it happened to me, there is a pattern which would probably help us to realize if our "codification" into the Spanish language conditions in a way the use of the English language, as a result of what the Whorfian perspective mentions about the influence that our first language has into a second language or a language that we learn later in our lives.

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**Appendix 1** : *Examples used in the practical analysis*

**Head noun phrase:** + **Prepositional postmodifying:**

Collective / Plural

Singular attractor / Plural attractor

(1) The academy for the training program / The academy for the training programs

The scholars for the training program / The scholars for the training programs

(2) The band with the powerful amplifier / The band with the powerful amplifiers

The drummers with the powerful amplifier / The drummers with the powerful amplifiers

(3) The cast in the soap opera / The cast in the soap operas

The actors in the soap opera / The actors in the soap operas

(4) The college with the research award / The college with the research awards

The teachers with the research award / The teachers with the research awards

(5) The government from the foreign country / The government from the foreign countries

The governors from the foreign country / The governors from the foreign countries

(6) The jury for the trial / The jury for the trials

The judges for the trial / The judges for the trials

(7) The clergy from the rural church / The clergy from the rural churches

The priests from the rural church / The priests from the rural churches

(8) The committee from the union / The committee from the unions

The representatives from the union / The representatives from the unions