

On verbal concord with collective nouns in British English

Ilse Depraetere

► **To cite this version:**

Ilse Depraetere. On verbal concord with collective nouns in British English. English Language and Linguistics, Cambridge University Press (CUP), 2003, 7 (1), pp.85 - 127. 10.1017/S1360674303211047. halshs-00625750

HAL Id: halshs-00625750

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00625750>

Submitted on 22 Sep 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

English Language and Linguistics

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ELL>

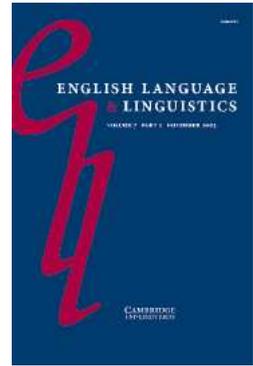
Additional services for *English Language and Linguistics*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



On verbal concord with collective nouns in British English

ILSE DEPRAETERE

English Language and Linguistics / Volume 7 / Issue 01 / May 2003, pp 85 - 127
DOI: 10.1017/S1360674303211047, Published online: 09 May 2003

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1360674303211047

How to cite this article:

ILSE DEPRAETERE (2003). On verbal concord with collective nouns in British English. English Language and Linguistics, 7, pp 85-127 doi:10.1017/S1360674303211047

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

On verbal concord with collective nouns in British English¹

ILSE DEPRAETERE

University of Lille III

(Received 4 July 2002; revised 10 November 2002)

The United States *is*, not *are*. The Civil War was fought over a verb. (Carl Sandburg cited in Walker-Read, 1974: 12)

The article aims to find out whether verbal concord with collective nouns (e.g. *committee*) in British English is indeed governed by the commonly accepted principle that a focus on the individuals that belong to the group results in the use of a plural verb, whereas a focus on the group as a unit leads to the use of a singular verb. This is a quantitative study: data extracted from the British English sections of the Collins Cobuild corpus have been subjected to statistical tests. The investigation reveals that, with a few exceptions, the preference for a singular verb of the so-called ‘verb-number-variable’ collectives (i.e. collective nouns that occur with both singular and plural verbs) is significant, which suggests that semantic and pragmatic factors do not play the crucial role they are commonly thought to play in the verb number assignment process. The article also includes taxonomic observations: in the first part, in which collectives are defined, a survey is given of their semantic and morphosyntactic characteristics.

1 Introduction

Certain nouns with multiple reference are singular in form but all the same can combine with a plural verb:

- (1) The *cast* give a special glow to an unusual and attractive film. (times/10)²
- (2) The *government* say there must be a high degree of relevance in the degree subject. (ICE-GB:S)³

¹ I am very grateful to Susan Reed for generously discussing the collectives issue and commenting on the text. I owe deepest thanks to Tine de Cat, for helping me with the statistical interpretation of the data. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees, for their critical observations and suggestions for improvement. One of the referees guided me to Levin’s doctoral dissertation (2001), *Agreement with collective nouns in English*, of whose existence I was unaware while writing my article. Ample references have been included to this impressive study in the revised version of the text. I am grateful to Chad Langford and Frank Joosten for casting a critical eye on the revised version of the article.

² As will be pointed out below, I first explored the 1,000,000-word British English component of the International Corpus of English. Although I got access to an interesting set of examples in that way, the corpus compiled turned out to be too small to be subjected to statistical tests. Some of the examples from this corpus have been retained though, to illustrate particular points: they are followed by *ICE-GB* (Spoken and *Written*). The quantitative analysis is based on data extracted from the British English sections of the Cobuild Bank of English, each of which consists of roughly 5 million words. The following are the abbreviations of the text categories that the Cobuild corpus examples were extracted from: ukephem (UK ephemera), ukmags (UK magazines), ukspok (UK spoken), BBC (BBC World Service), ukbooks (UK books), times (Times newspaper), today (UK Today Newspaper), sunnow (UK Sun Newspaper).

³ Note that the disfluencies and anacolutha in the corpus examples have been removed to facilitate reading.

This category of nouns, commonly referred to as *collective nouns*, involves a challenge for learners of English: first of all, the English collectives do not necessarily have the same status in the native language of the learner. Secondly, the system of concord is variable: whereas certain collectives only combine with a plural verb (e.g. *police*), others are also compatible with a singular verb (e.g. *government*, *crowd*), but apparently only under certain conditions:

- (3)(a) ... and the *crowd* are on their feet, roaring and waving their arms. (ukmags/03)
 (b) The *crowd* here is really thick despite the weather. (ICE-GB:S)

I will start with some observations on the typology of collective nouns (i.e. their semantic and morphosyntactic characteristics). I will then examine the verbal concord behaviour of some collective nouns, making use of data extracted from the ICE corpus and from the Collins Cobuild corpus.⁴ This article is inspired by pedagogical needs: I hope it will complement the as yet incomplete, and at times inadequate, account of collective nouns in pedagogical and – to a certain extent – reference grammars.

2 Definition – taxonomy of collectives

Let us use the following temporary working definition as a starting point: a collective noun is a morphologically singular noun with multiple reference that is compatible with a plural verb. This definition involves a semantic as well as a formal component.

In some contexts, the term *collective* is associated with group terms such as *flock*.⁵ The latter answer the semantic criterion of the definition just given but they are also different in the sense that (a) these nouns are almost uniquely used in combination with an *of*-PP, and (b) the potentially variable concord system is exclusively based on the principle of attraction or proximity. Although this class of nouns constitutes an interesting field of study, it will not be taken into account here, in order to limit the already considerable topic of investigation that collectives in the more restricted sense constitute.

2.1 Semantic characteristics

If the concord requirement of the definition is left out, *train* (a unity of wagons), *forest* (a set of trees), and *luggage* (a collection of suitcases) are to be classified as collective nouns as well. Some linguists have indeed drawn this conclusion: Jespersen (1961, II (1): 93), for instance, argues that these nouns are also collectives because

⁴ I am grateful to Bert Cappelle, who extracted the Cobuild data, and to Eva Dirckx, who helped me to process them.

⁵ In Sparkes's *Dictionary of collective nouns and group terms* (1975), for instance, *collective* is used in the meaning of 'collocational group term': the first part lists all the nouns that designate a group of entities and that can combine with an *of*-PP; the second part is a 'dictionary of subjects': it tells you what group term to use in combination with particular nouns. In the context of language acquisition, *collective* tends to be used as a synonym of *collection term* (e.g. *army*, *family*, *pile*) as opposed to *class term* (e.g. *soldiers*, *pigs*, *blocks*).

they are singular in form and denote a collection or number of individuals. In the same way, Krusinga (1932, II (2): 23) considers *forest*, *furniture*, and *fruit* as collective nouns.⁶ The latter observations show that if the animacy parameter is not taken into consideration, the class of nouns covered by *collectives* becomes considerably larger.

The necessary *semantic* requirement of a *collective* as it will be used in this article is that it should have multiple animate (inclusive or generic) reference. Cruse (1986: 176) also touches upon the requirement of animacy: he distinguishes groups (*tribe*, *jury*, *team*, *family*), classes (*proletariat*, *clergy*, *aristocracy*), and collections (*forest*, *library*, *heap*). *Groups* refer to associations of human beings 'who have a purpose or a function'; the formal characteristics are as follows: (a) when used in the singular, they can combine with a plural verb, and (b) they are compatible with the plural marker *-s*. A *class* 'is an assemblage of humans justified more by the possession of common attributes'. Classes are 'generally uncomfortable with the plural inflection' and prefer plural concord. *Collections* are 'typically inanimate', they occur 'readily in the plural, but when singular cannot contract plural concord with the verb'. Persson's (1989) account is no doubt the most fine-grained. He points out that [+mobility] is the principal characteristic of a collective, [+volition] being a typical but not necessary criterion: a *club* consists of members that have the freedom to leave the club if they want to ([+volition, +mobility]); soldiers (*army*) can move, but their freedom to move about is limited ([±volition, +mobility]); kittens (*litter*) 'have no choice but to be born as members of a litter, but as they are mobile entities they may stray away' ([-volition, +mobility]) (1989: 182). The features of mobility and volition cannot be attributed to *race*, as one cannot choose to belong to a particular race or decide to change one's race. Persson concludes that this may be 'a reasonable semantic explanation of why some collective nouns do not admit of variable concord, even though they denote a collection of human beings'.⁷

⁶ Joyon (1985: 214) also adds *furniture*, *news*, *advice*, and *information* to the list of collectives. Note that Berland-Delépine (1989: 302) uses the term 'nom à sens collectif' to refer to items such as *luggage*, *furniture*, and *rubbish*. Arigne (1998: 59) reserves the term *collectif* for a subclass of what she calls *groupes d'animés*; a collective being a noun that can be followed by a plural as well as a singular verb.

⁷ One referee points out that *race* may be followed by a plural verb, witness two examples from the British National Corpus (BNC) (cf. also Levin, 2001: 13, who mentions one counterexample (i.e. +plural verb) for *race* and *nation*).

(i) He explained that they embalm their bodies and he showed me their facilities which were surprisingly well organized, surprisingly because the Caribbean race are traditionally very laid back, everything is: 'No problem.' (BNC, HU1 920)

(ii) Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. (BNC, AR3 463)

It is not easy to assess the impact of these examples in the sense that, for instance, in my corpus, there are no examples of *race* followed by a plural verb and *nation* is followed by a plural verb in 2 out of 110 examples. A very general question raised by these 'counterexamples' is whether a small number of examples justify the rejection of a conclusion that is supported by a disproportionate number of data. Moreover, the examples in (i) and (ii) may be special in that they are preceded by an adjective of nationality and therefore only indirectly indicate physical characteristics inherent in the definition of *race*. Persson's analysis definitely has its merits, if only because it raises the question whether verbal concord behaviour (i.e. requirement of compatibility with a plural verb) is to be considered as a necessary characteristic of a collective.

Joosten (2001) sheds light on another interesting semantic characteristic of collectives. In a short discussion of Dutch collectives, he points out that they differ in terms of their *boorbaarheid*, literally *drillability*, or *penetrability/permeability*. His discussion is basically focused on the interpretation of adjectives followed by a collective in Dutch:⁸ whereas *een jong gezin* (*a young family*) means that the members of the family are young, *een jonge commissie* (*a young committee*) may be composed of very old members. In other words, the qualifying adjective applies to the items of which the collective is composed in the former case (high degree of *boorbaarheid*); it describes the ‘shell’⁹ in the latter case (low degree of *boorbaarheid*) (cf. Flaux, 1999: 474). *Permeability* refers to the relative ease with which a qualifying adjective characterizes the individuals of which the unit is composed. A collective is highly permeable if an adjective modifying the noun can only refer to a characteristic of the individual members of the group; it is not permeable if the adjective can only indicate a quality of the group. Whether or not the adjective characterizes the shell also depends on the ‘strength of the drill’, as Joosten puts it. *A big family*, for instance, means that it consists of many members: *big* is less effective a drill than *young*. Anticipating the discussion that follows, we might expect that highly permeable collectives are likely to be more often combined with plural verbs, provided, of course, the focus on the individuals is always reflected in the use of a plural verb. Another possible hypothesis is that the use of a singular verb with a ‘+ permeable’ collective is less likely to imply that the proposition applies to the unit rather than to the items of which it is composed (cf. (4)) or vice versa (i.e. it is less likely that the use of a plural verb with a ‘–permeable’ collective implies that the proposition should be ascribed to the individuals of which the referent consists) (cf. (5)):

(4) United’s team was by far *the youngest*, at an average of under 24. (times/10)

(5) So while the Indian government spend millions on atom bombs in what looks like an attempt to start World War Three, . . . (sunnov/17)

There is another related, but not completely similar, semantic characteristic which allows a classification of collectives. Although textbooks commonly assume that a collective may be looked at in two ways (either from the level of the unit or from the level of the individuals), not all collectives allow such a dual conceptualization as easily. Certain collectives indeed have a clearly ‘dual’ nature: we can think of the referent in terms of a shell or in terms of individuals (e.g. *army*, *audience*). In other cases, however, the focus appears to be almost automatically on the shell only, the individuals hardly entering into the picture (e.g. *government*), while, in still others, a clearly discernible shell appears to be lacking or almost invisible (e.g. *people*). Within the first category (+ [shell vs. individuals]), a further subdistinction can be made. With *army* and *church*, for instance, the meaning of the shell appears to differ from that of

⁸ In Dutch, all collectives combine with a singular verb.

⁹ Joosten (2001) uses the metaphor of a wall to refer to the unit that comprises the individuals. I prefer that of the *shell*, as it captures the organic character of the cocoon into which the individuals unite better.

Table 1. *Categorization of collectives in terms of visibility of shell and/or individuals and hypothesized impact on verbal concord*

+[shell vs. individuals]	+semantic difference	(1) <i>church, army</i>	singular or plural verb
	–semantic difference	(2) <i>audience, crew</i>	singular or plural verb
–[shell vs. individuals]	shell in focus	(3) <i>government, bureaucracy</i>	singular verb
	individuals in focus	(4) <i>cattle, people</i>	plural verb

the individuals: in my examples, the shell very often refers to the leaders of the army or the church whereas focus on the individuals means focus on the soldiers and believers respectively (class (1)). The other group of collectives that belong in the ‘+[shell vs. individuals]’ category can also be clearly conceived of in terms of either the shell or the individuals, but without there being a semantic difference between them (e.g. *audience*) (class (2)). The distinctions just described may impact on verbal concord (cf. column 4 in table 1), as it may be hypothesized that an exclusive or strong focus on either the shell (examples in (3)) or the individuals (examples in (4)) will result in the exclusive (or preferable) use of a singular verb/plural verb respectively (under the proviso that such a focus is reflected in the verb form used). There is no similar pattern predictable for the nouns belonging to class (1) or class (2), except that the choice of a singular verb rather than a plural verb (or vice versa) is more likely to be semantically motivated by the semantics of the collective itself in the case of nouns belonging to class (1). Table 1 summarizes these potentially useful distinctions.

2.2 *Morphosyntactic characteristics*

Within the class of collective nouns, several subcategories may be set up on the basis of *morphological* and *syntactic* characteristics. The survey in table 2 serves as a starting point for the discussion.

A first subdivision can be made depending on whether or not the nouns admit the use of the plural marker *-s*. If they do, the collectives are *individual collective nouns* (Kruisinga, 1932, II (2): 24) or *collective count nouns* (*Collins Cobuild grammar patterns 2*, 1998: 21), as they have been variously labelled. I will use the feature [\pm count (collective) noun] to refer to that characteristic. Note that there are two differences between the members from class II on the one hand and classes I and III on the other hand: (a) plural *-s* refers to a ‘set of sets’ (classes I and III) rather than a set (class II);¹⁰ (b) there is a semantic restriction on the addition of plural marker *-s* to the names of certain animals (class II). In the context of hunting, an unmarked plural tends to be used; in a more general context, plural *-s* can be added (cf. e.g. Declerck, 1991: 242; Zandvoort, 1964: 124–5).¹¹ There is no restriction on the addition of *-s* to nouns from

¹⁰ This difference is the reason why *collective* is in brackets in the label [\pm count (collective) noun].

¹¹ Cf. Reid (1991: 117–68) for a detailed questionnaire-based analysis of animal nouns compatible with zero and *-s*. Cf. also Hirtle (1984: 11, 20–3, 51–8).

Table 2. *Subcategories of collective nouns*

Collective noun that:	can be used as a count noun, i.e. base compatible with plural marker -s	can be used as an unmarked count noun with a cardinal number	can be used as an unmarked count noun with a plural demonstrative determiner	can be used as an unmarked count noun with quantifier <i>some</i>
I <i>government, family, cast, crowd, jury</i>	+	—	— ¹²	— ¹²
II <i>buffalo</i>	+	+	+	+
III <i>crew, people</i> ¹³	+	+ ¹⁴	+	+
IV <i>deer, cattle</i>	—	+	+ ¹⁵	+
<i>clergy</i>	—	+	+	+
<i>staff</i>	—	+	+	+
<i>police</i>	—	+	+ ¹⁵	+
V <i>folk, youth</i>	+ ¹⁶	—	+	+

Class I: (a) the governments (b) *four government (c) *these government (d) *some /səm/ government

Class II: (a) the buffaloes (b) four buffalo (c) these buffalo (d) some buffalo

Class III: (a) the crews (b) four crew (c) these crew (d) some crew

Class IV: (a)*the staffs (b) four staff (c) these staff (d) some staff

Class V: (a) my folks (b)*four folk (c) these folk (d) some folk

class I and class III. Note that in class V as well, the addition of plural -s changes the meaning of the base, which is no longer understood as a group of entities (*the youth of today*) but as an individual (*five youths*) (cf. also footnote 17).¹²¹³¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶

In table 2, three further formal characteristics are taken into account: (1) base compatible with a cardinal number, (2) base compatible with a plural demonstrative determiner, and (3) base compatible with the quantifier *some*.¹⁷

¹² One of my informants points out that in the context of a wedding party, when showing people to their places, guests may be asked 'Are you friends or family?'. In that same context, a sentence like 'Some/these family sit over here, other/those family over there' might just about be possible.

¹³ *Peoples* is a possible form but has a different (collective) meaning when used in the plural.

¹⁴ Note that Sweet (1900: 46) believes that *twenty people* is ungrammatical.

¹⁵ According to one of my informants, it is only possible to use *these police* and *these deer* when the NP has anaphoric, not deictic reference. *These staff* can be used deictically.

¹⁶ Note that *my folks* is an expression used (especially in American English) to refer to *my parents*. The plural *folks* only occurs in a limited number of contexts. *Youths* refers to a number of young people and not to several sets of a group of young people. In other words, the base is no longer a collective noun when the plural marker is added.

¹⁷ Larreya & Rivière (1999: 145) distinguish between *obligatory* collectives (e.g. *cattle*) and *optional* collectives (e.g. *army*). The former differ from the latter in that (a) they can be preceded by quantifiers typical of plural count nouns, (b) they can only be followed by a plural verb, and (c) they are incompatible with the plural morpheme -s to refer to sets of a set. Kruisinga (1932, II (2): 23) also believes that these are the necessary characteristics of a collective noun. In other words, these authors have in mind a subset of collectives to which I will assign the features [-count (collective) noun] and [+unmarked count noun]. Hirtle (1984) uses the

Table 2 reflects the acceptability judgements of five native speakers I consulted, complemented by a corpus investigation. As the informants agreed that the acceptability judgements for *crew*, *staff*, *police*, and *clergy* are particularly delicate, I checked whether their judgements are corroborated by (attested) examples from reference grammars and corpora. Those that are have been printed in bold type (+).¹⁸ The following survey sums up the findings:

- (6)(a) *two crew* (Larreira & Rivière, 1999: 144), *a/10/several crew* (Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen, 1997: 394–5), *900/five crew* (Juil, 1975: 33)¹⁹
Corpus findings: *more than 500 RAF air crew*, *some crew*, *two crew* (Cobuild corpus)
- (b) *10/several staff* (Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen, 1997: 394–5), *two staff* (Larreira & Rivière, 1999: 144), *300/2 staff* (Juil, 1975: 38)
Corpus findings: *sixty extra staff*, *some (junior) staff* (Cobuild corpus)
- (c) *10 police* (Malavieille & Rotgè, 1997: 140), *100 extra police*, but *six policemen* (Zandvoort, 1964: 312), *12 police* (Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen, 1997: 394–5), *many of these police* (Poutsma, 1914, II (1a): 297), *many/several police* (Downing & Locke, 1992: 423), *those police*, *thirty police* (Juil, 1975: 31)
Corpus findings: *fifteen hundred police* (Cobuild corpus), *some police* (ICE-GB), *extra police* (ICE-GB)
- (d) *1,725 Anglican clergy* but *five clergymen* (Zandvoort, 1964: 312), *3 clergy* (Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen, 1997: 394–5), *several thousand Anglican clergy* (Larreira & Rivière, 1999: 144), *these clergy* (Schibsbye, 1970: 106), *1,400 clergy*, *one or two clergy*, *these upstart clergy*, *many clergy* (Juil, 1975: 30). Examples with cardinal numbers are also mentioned in (Jespersen, 1961, II (1): 100; Sweet, 1900: 46;²⁰ Poutsma, 1914, II (1a): 281) although it remains an open question whether these examples reflect current usage.
Corpus findings: *some clergy* (Cobuild corpus)

Table 3 summarizes the formal characteristics of collectives, more specifically the compatibility of their base with plural *-s* (first column) and their compatibility with

term *internal plurals* to refer to the nouns (*police*, *people*, *cattle*) that are compatible with plural determiners and numerals; they have plural reference in spite of the fact that this is not marked by means of *-s*. Unlike *internal plurals*, ‘genuine’ collectives cannot be preceded by the plural determiners *these*, *those*, and numerals. As Hirtle sees it, *people* can function either as an internal plural or as a collective. The internal plural *people* is compatible with *these* and *some*. The collective noun *people* is grammatically singular but lexically involves plurality. The former characteristic explains why *people* is compatible with quantifiers *every* and *each*; the latter characteristic explains its compatibility with a plural (cf. (ii)) or a singular verb (cf. (i)):

- (i) Each people builds a culture adapted to its peculiar needs.
(ii) Every people worthy of being called a nation possess in their own language ample resources for expressing the highest ideas.

As I see it, *people* is (exceptionally) used as an ‘ordinary’ count noun in these examples; the so-called ‘internal plural’ *people* belonging to a subtype of collectives that can function as unmarked plural count nouns.

¹⁸ In the case of *clergy*, my informants believed the form was not compatible (or only ‘faintly possible’ in the case of ‘four clergy’) with a cardinal number and *some*. As there are examples of this kind in the corpus as well as in the reference grammars, the judgement of the native speakers has not been retained.

¹⁹ Note that Juil’s (1975) examples are taken from different types of sources that were written in the sixties.

²⁰ Sweet points out that *clergy* is preferred to *clergymen* in *Twenty clergy walking in procession* ‘because it implies that it was not a fortuitous assemblage of clergymen, but that they walked in procession through being members of one organization’ (1990: 46).

Table 3. *Examples of [+count (collective) noun] and [-count (collective) noun]*

+plural-s	+numeral	+demonstrative determiner <i>these</i>	+quantifier <i>some</i>	Examples
+(= [+count (collective) noun])	–	–	–	<i>government, family, cast, crowd, jury</i>
	+	+	+	<i>buffalo, crew, people</i>
	–	+	+	<i>folk, youth</i>
–(= [-count (collective) noun])	+	+	+	<i>deer, staff, police, clergy</i>

prenominals (columns 2, 3, and 4). Note that in this survey, the category of noun exemplified by *buffalo* has been merged with that exemplified by *crew* and *youth*, the compatibility or incompatibility of the base with *-s* being the criterion for assigning a noun to the [+count (collective) noun] class.

The taxonomic observations on collectives made so far enable us to distinguish a class of

- I. [+count (collective) nouns] (e.g. *government, buffalo, youth*)
- II. [-count (collective) nouns] (e.g. *staff, bureaucracy, police*)

Crosscutting that distinction is the classification of collectives that behave like

1. [+unmarked count nouns]^{21,22} (e.g. *buffalo, staff, police*) (with two subcategories: (a) +numeral, +*these*, +*some*, (b) –numeral, +*these*, +*some*)
2. [-unmarked count nouns] (e.g. *bureaucracy, government, audience*)

A third formal criterion that results in a three-fold classification of the collectives is that of the number of the verb with which the collectives are compatible:

- a. [+singular verb only] (e.g. *society*)
- b. [+plural verb only] (e.g. *police, buffalo*)
- c. [+singular verb or plural verb] (e.g. *government, staff*)

Most grammars, in fact, set up a two-class taxonomy of collective nouns on the basis of verbal concord, and distinguish between collectives that are compatible with a plural verb only and collectives that combine both with a plural and a singular

²¹ Incidentally (or not), quite a few of the collectives that can function as unmarked count nouns show a significant preference for a plural verb (e.g. *people, police, staff*) (cf. table 5).

²² The at first sight awkward terminology [+unmarked count noun] (rather than the expected [-marked count noun]) and [-unmarked count noun] (rather than the expected [+marked count noun]) is meant to make clear the distinction between collectives that can be used as unmarked count nouns ([+unmarked count noun]) and collectives that cannot be used as unmarked count nouns ([-unmarked count noun]). In other words, they do not signify the meaning usually associated with [-marked] or [+marked], i.e. it is not the case that the collective is 'marked' or 'unmarked'.

verb (although the choice is not random). In a number of reference grammars and articles (e.g. Declerck, 1991; Persson, 1989; Putseys, 1996; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985) it is pointed out that there is a third class, namely a set of collective nouns that is only used with a singular verb. If such a subclass of collective nouns exists, this requires us to relax our working definition (cf. p. 86 above) and throw overboard the formal requirement of compatibility of the base with a plural verb. Finding the answer to that question will be one of the aims of the quantitative analysis of the concord data. The following survey indicates how collectives have been classified in existing research in terms of their verbal concord behaviour.^{23,24}

- (7) Plural only: *cattle* (A, DD, J, LR, Z),²⁵ *cavalry* (DD), *clergy* (A, DD, LR, Z),²⁶ *folk* (D, DD, Z), *foot* (Z), *gentry* (DD, LR), *horse* (Z), *infantry* (DD), *laity* (DD), *livestock* (DD), *management* (MR), *military* (A, DD), *nobility* (DD), *people* (A, D, DD, LR, MR, Z), *peasantry* (DD), *police* (A, D, DD, LR, MR, Z), *poultry* (Z), *royalty* (DD), *staff* (Bi), *swine* (A), *vermin* (A, J, LR, MR, Z), *youth* (DD)
- (8) Singular or plural: *admiralty*, *aristocracy* (D), *army*, *association*, *audience*, *board*, *cabinet*, *cast*, *choir*, *class*, *club*, *college*, *commission*, *committee*, *community*, *company*, *Congress*, *council*, *corporation*, *couple*, *crew*, *crowd*, *department*, *enemy*, *episcopacy*, *family*, *federation*, *firm*, *flock*, *gang*, *generation*, *gentry*, *government*, *group*, *herd*, *hospital*, *institute*, *jury*, *left*, *management*, *majority*, *ministry*, *minority*, *nobility*, *opposition*, *orchestra*, *pair*, *party*, *peasantry*, *population*, *press*, *proletariat*, *public*, *regiment*, *royalty*, *school*, *staff*, *team*, *university*, *youth*
- (9) Singular only:²⁷ *army* (Ba), *the aristocracy* (P, Q), *the bourgeoisie* (P, Q), *bureaucracy* (D), *the cabinet* (Ba), *the church* (D, P, Q), *the clergy* (P), *the electorate* (D), *the elite* (P, Q), *enemy* (Ba), *the gentry* (P, Q), *House (of Commons, of Lords)* (Ba), *the Commons* (Q), *the intelligentsia* (P, Q),²⁸ *the laity* (P, Q), *nation* (D), *opposition* (D), *organization* (D), *the press* (P, Q), *the public* (Q), *the rank and file* (P, Q), *society* (D), *union* (Ba), *the youth of today* (P, Q)

²³ Fries is right when he points out that the class of collectives is almost endless: 'What we tend to forget is the enormous number of collective nouns that may occur, and which cannot possibly be listed in any grammar. Names of companies, e.g., will hardly ever appear in a grammar' (1988: 101–2). I will restrict myself to listing the collectives that are most commonly mentioned in reference books.

²⁴ Biber et al. (1999) are quite accurate in their claims about concord patterns. They point out that in more than 80 per cent of the cases, *audience*, *board*, *committee*, *government*, *jury*, and *public* combine with a singular verb. *Staff* is followed by a plural verb in more than 80 per cent of the cases, and *crew* and *family* are both commonly found with a plural as well as a singular verb.

²⁵ The references in brackets are to the grammars that list the item in question in this category: (A) Alexander (1988), (Ba) Bauer (1994), (Bi) Biber et al. (1999), (D) Declerck (1991), (DD) Dekeyser et al. (1999), (LR) Larreya & Rivière (1999), (MR) Malavielle & Rotgé, (Q) Quirk et al. (1985), (Z) Zandvoort (1964) (who adds that the lexical items in question 'nearly always take a plural verb' (308)).

²⁶ Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 503) list *clergy* with the collectives that can be followed by a singular or a plural verb.

²⁷ Putseys writes: 'The following collective nouns usually occur in the singular only with the definite article' (1996: 137). Quirk et al. also link up the 'obligatory' use of a singular with the presence of a definite article: 'the following [collectives] usually occur in the singular only with the definite article' (1985: 316). It seems to me to be a bit confusing to suggest that the 'singular only' character is dependent on the presence of the definite article. In most examples, irrespective of whether the collective is followed by a plural verb or a singular verb, the reference is inclusive and definite; accordingly, the definite article is very often used. Cf. also p. 103 below.

²⁸ Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 503) list *intelligentsia*, *public*, and *union* with the collectives that can be followed by a singular or a plural verb.

As has just been pointed out, the items listed in (9) are not collectives according to the working definition of the previous section (cf. p. 86 above), in which it is stipulated that collectives can combine with a plural verb. Anticipating what is to come (section 5), we can say that actual concord behaviour will be revealed to be such that the requirement of compatibility with a plural verb cannot be considered as a necessary characteristic of a collective noun. Accordingly, compatibility with a plural verb will no longer be considered to be a necessary characteristic of a collective noun.

Although this article does not aim to present an overall taxonomy of nouns, it may be useful to try and determine where collective nouns belong within the more general framework of count vs. mass nouns.²⁹ Let us assess their nature in terms of the following basic characteristics commonly associated with count and mass nouns (cf. e.g. Declerck, 1991: 38–9; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 334–9):

- (a) Count nouns are heterogeneous; mass nouns are homogeneous.
- (b) Quantification is different in the sense that it implies reference to a quantity in the case of mass nouns and to a number of units (of the same kind as that referred to by the singular count noun) in the case of count nouns. Accordingly, only count nouns can occur in the singular and in the plural. Another consequence is that mass nouns and count nouns combine with different types of quantifiers (e.g. *much* vs. *many*, *less* vs. *fewer*).

Are collective nouns homogeneous? I believe this question cannot be answered with a straightforward *yes* or *no*. On the one hand, a subpart of what is referred to by the whole cannot always be qualified in the same terms as the whole. For instance, it may become impossible to refer to a subpart of a committee as a committee. On the other hand, a (sufficiently large) subpart of, say, an audience, remains an audience. In other words, while certain collectives appear to be homogeneous, others are heterogeneous. In their discussion of the count–mass distinction, Huddleston & Pullum (2002) point out that nouns such as *crockery* are not as homogeneous as, say, *water*; *crockery* denotes a ‘heterogeneous aggregate of parts’ (2002: 306). In spite of this, it is a mass noun because it is ‘not inherently bounded, so that we can add or subtract pieces, and still be left with *crockery*’ (2002: 336). This semantic characterization (cf. also Jackendoff, 1991) provides additional evidence for considering collectives like *people* and *audience* as mass nouns, but it does not result in a unified classification of collectives. Depending on the context, the ‘subtraction’ of parts from a unit may dismantle the unit (e.g. *committee*, *management*), which is why not all collectives can be considered as being inherently unbounded and therefore as mass nouns.

As far as quantification is concerned, it again appears that collectives do not automatically fit into either the class of count nouns or that of mass nouns. A considerable subgroup (e.g. *government*) does: these nouns can be used as ordinary count nouns and admit the addition of a plural marker to refer to sets of a set. However, collectives such as *aristocracy* and *police* cannot be put in the plural to refer to sets of

²⁹ Cf. Arigne (1998: 38–57) for very interesting observations on the difficulties encountered when assigning the [+mass] or [–mass] feature to pluralia tantum, collective nouns, and nouns such as *scissors*.

a set. And although *police* admits the addition of typical count noun quantifiers (*five, a few*), I hesitate to classify the collective *police* as a count noun, because the collective noun in *the police* does not have the same referent as *police* in *five police*. In a similar way, the addition of *-s* to, for instance, *youth*, changes the nature of the referent of the base.

It will be clear that semantic and formal considerations yield different results. Although it would be premature to formulate a conclusion on the basis of these few remarks, it is clear that collectives do not readily fit into a mass noun or a count noun mould; they seem to force us to consider the count–mass dichotomy as a gradient, different types of collectives finding their place at different loci on the count–mass continuum. More detailed considerations, however, would remove us too far from the present aim, that of checking verbal concord with collective nouns. The formal and semantic characteristics listed so far suffice to define the category of collectives, although admittedly an overall picture of noun types is lacking.

2.3 *Prototype collective*

A question that has not been addressed so far is what constitutes the most prototypical member of the category of collectives. And what are its necessary and/or sufficient characteristics? The requirements of (a) a morphologically singular noun with (b) multiple [+animate] (inclusive or generic) reference appear to be necessary and sufficient.³⁰ Bearing in mind the fact that the feature [+morphologically singular], [+animate] is shared by all collectives, it may be hypothesized that the prototypical collectives from a formal point of view will be those groups of individuals that share as few characteristics as possible with any other type of noncollective noun. In other words, the most prototypical collectives will be those that have the features [–count (collective) noun], [–[unmarked count noun]],³¹ and [+plural verb only]. As it happens, not a single collective combines those three features. Table 4 is an attempt to set up a gradient of decreasing prototypicality.³²

It is in any case clear from the discussion that a wide range of formal and semantic characteristics need to be taken into account to arrive at a fine-grained

³⁰ Juul (1975: 90) observes that semantic considerations are irrelevant for the definition of collectives; what matters is the formal characteristic that a formally singular noun is compatible with a singular as well as a plural verb. In his approach, the nouns listed in (7) and (9) would not be considered as collectives.

³¹ The reason why I believe the most prototypical collective will not have this feature is that it is one that is not typical of collectives only, but shared by a large number of other nouns that have an unmarked plural (e.g. *craft, cannon, microfiche, the Swiss*).

³² Determining the relative weight of the different features is a delicate matter. A different assessment of the relative importance of the characteristics will inevitably result in a different gradient. For instance, the quantitative analysis that follows will reveal that collectives are very often followed by a singular verb. From that point of view, a prototypical collective is one that has singular concord. However, in their treatment of collectives, grammars most often mention compatibility with a plural verb as a characterizing feature of collectives. From that point of view, a prototypical collective has plural concord. It will be clear that my gradient should be considered as a first attempt to distinguish more prototypical from less prototypical members in the class of collectives; it is not the definitive answer to that question.

Table 4. *Gradient of decreasingly less prototypical collectives*

+plural verb only	–[unmarked count noun]	–[count (collective) noun]	(a) /
+plural verb only	+ [unmarked count noun]	–[count (collective) noun]	(b) <i>cattle</i>
+plural verb only	–[unmarked count noun]	+ [count (collective) noun]	(c) /
+plural verb only	+ [unmarked count noun]	+ [count (collective) noun]	(d) <i>people</i> ³³
plural or singular verb	–[unmarked count noun]	–[count (collective) noun]	(e) <i>public</i>
plural or singular verb	+ [unmarked count noun]	–[count (collective) noun]	(f) <i>staff</i>
plural or singular verb	–[unmarked count noun]	+ [count (collective) noun]	(g) <i>government</i>
plural or singular verb	+ [unmarked count noun]	+ [count (collective) noun]	(h) <i>crew</i>
+singular verb only	–[unmarked count noun]	–[count (collective) noun]	(i) <i>press</i>
+singular verb only	+ [unmarked count noun]	–[count (collective) noun]	(j) /
+singular verb only	–[unmarked count noun]	+ [count (collective) noun]	(k) <i>society</i>
+singular verb only	+ [unmarked count noun]	+ [count (collective) noun]	(l) /

taxonomy of collectives. I will not pursue this issue any further here, as more detailed typological considerations would not constitute a substantial contribution to this basically pedagogically inspired investigation into verbal concord.

3 Methodology: selection of corpus examples

The discussion in section 2 of the criteria that may be used to classify collectives proves useful for the quantitative analysis, and, in particular, for the selection of the data. Not any occurrence of a particular collective can be taken into account. For instance, particular determiners can only be followed by plural count nouns. This implies that any noun that follows such a determiner will be interpreted as such, and this in turn affects the concord system. For instance, *these* can only be followed by a plural count noun. Accordingly, any collective noun that occurs in the slot [*these N*] will be understood as a plural count noun rather than as a collective noun. Examples of this kind have been excluded from the quantitative analysis. In this section, I give a survey of the way in which formal factors like these have shaped the corpus.

In what follows, [+count (collective) nouns] as well as [–count (collective) nouns] will be taken into account. It will be clear, though, that instances in which collectives are pluralized (e.g. (10)) will be disregarded. So will examples in which the collective noun is used as an unmarked count noun preceded by a numeral (e.g. (11)), a singular demonstrative determiner (e.g. (12)), a plural demonstrative determiner (e.g. (13)) or the indefinite article (e.g. (14)).³⁴

³³ As pointed out in footnote 13, the base in *peoples* does not have the same collective meaning as *people* in *the people*.

³⁴ Declerck (1991: 246), Larreya & Rivière (1999: 144), and Swan (1995: 526) have pointed out that a collective preceded by the singular indefinite article is not compatible with a plural verb. Out of 542 examples with *a, this, and that*, 38 combine with a plural verb. The examples are listed in appendix 1. These examples are striking because they challenge what is no doubt one of the most unshakeable rules of English grammar (indefinite

- (10) Three families died as well. (ICE-GB)
 (11) Its four crew are presumed dead. (ICE-GB:S)
 (12)(a) That large Iraqi army *is* still sitting there and it will have to be rooted out.
 (ICE-GB:W)
 (b) This government *believes* in the pound sterling. (ICE-GB:S)
 (13) Because these old folk *have* taught me that it was great. (ukspok/04)
 (14) In 1945 a committee *was set up* to review how the service should restart.
 (ICE-GB:W)

Examples with the quantifiers *another* (e.g. (17)), *each* (e.g. (18)), *every* (e.g. (19)), *many* (e.g. (20)), *one* (e.g. (21)), *no(t) one* (e.g. (22)), and *other* (e.g. (23)) have not been taken into consideration in the quantitative analysis either, as these items, too, all impose formal restrictions on the type of noun by which they can be followed:

- (15) +singular count noun: *another, each, every, one, no(t) one*
 (16) +(unmarked) plural count noun: *many,³⁵ several, other*

Given these restrictions, it will be clear that the head of the NP that contains one of these quantifiers is interpreted as either singular or plural and is hence only compatible with either a singular or plural verb. Although it might be argued that the effect of (pre)determiners could be taken as one of the principles that determine the number of the verb form (and that from that point of view, examples with any kind of (pre)determiner should be included in the quantitative analysis), it has been our conscious choice to exclude this parameter. I am interested, rather, in finding out to what extent the semantics (and pragmatics) of the sentence determine the choice of a singular rather than a plural verb form and whether what I will call ‘verb-number-variable’ collectives (i.e. collectives that can be followed by a singular verb or a plural verb) indeed behave as such in actual usage. The exclusion of the effect of (pre)determiners is therefore necessary to attain our goal.

article/singular demonstrative determiner + singular noun + singular verb). I believe that their exclusion from my database is justified given the disproportionate number of examples in which the rule applies. A wider corpus investigation (including noncollectives) would be needed to determine whether there are indeed more exceptions to the rule than was hitherto thought to be the case or whether it is only collectives that show this ‘aberrant’ behaviour. Cf. also Arigne (1998: 58). Cf. Levin (1999: 23–4) for observations on the influence of determiners on concord. Juul (1975: 104–5) points out that, occasionally, singular determiners may combine with plural verbs for the sake of pragmatic acceptability:

- (i) Another group, mostly extroverts, *brush* their teeth in the hope they will be bright and shiny. (Juul, 1975: 105)

³⁵ There is one example in the corpus with *less*. This quantifier is normally only compatible with a mass noun, but it is sometimes used with plural count NPs, especially in informal English. The following example apparently illustrates the latter use:

- (i) Anybody who thinks that less folk are travelling on fewer bus routes and in worse vehicles now than 10 years ago has obviously been living on a different planet. (times/10)

- (17) Another capacity crowd *is* expected due to Gill's reputation for guaranteeing excitement and an action packed fight. (ukmags/03)³⁶
- (18) Each family group *tells* tales of their travels, their ancestors, their hopes and fears. (ICE-GB:S)
- (19) But as every fair trade organization *finds*, commodity trade is so firmly in the control of governments and multinationals that it is often difficult to reach the producers directly. (ukephem/02)³⁷
- (20) Many non-diplomatic support staff *are* also being expelled. (bbc/06)
- (21) This is because nowadays what one government *decides* to do deeply affects others. (bbc/06)
- (22)(a) Not one voluntary organization *has* yet received a penny of Lottery revenue. (today/11)
- (b) No one organization *owns* the Internet, nor is there any governing body as such. (times/10)
- (23) But they insist other staff *get* the bonus to keep them at the bank. (today/11)

NPs with *more* (e.g. (24)), *most* (e.g. (25)), and *some* (e.g. (26)) have not been included in the survey, which may be surprising at first sight, as NPs with these quantifiers are compatible with a singular as well as a plural verb: (a) [[quantifier + plural count noun] + plural verb] or (b) [[quantifier + a mass noun] + singular verb].^{38,39} The reason for exclusion is that (in case (a)) the nouns in question do not retain their status of collective when they are used as unmarked count nouns. Moreover, there is also insufficient evidence justifying a mass noun interpretation (case (b)) (cf. pp. 94–5):

- (24) We are now regularly told that more and more bank staff *are* becoming redundant; the human being versus the machine. (times/10)
- (25) Most new school staff *are* not confident they can teach children how to read, a report revealed yesterday. (today/11)
- (26) Some folk *call* it a micro-climate, which seems reasonable. (ukmags/03)

³⁶ Note that the Cobuild corpus contains one example (out of 10 examples with *another*) in which the Subject NP combines with a plural verb:

(i) But at the same time another American Research team have announced that they are developing an experimental drug to try to treat Alzheimers Syndrome. (bbc/06)

³⁷ One out of 33 examples with *every* contains a plural verb:

(i) He only came to Oxford the same time as I had and he'd worked in er modern universities and continental, colonial universities where every library staff were all the same. (ukspok/04)

Susan Reed points out that this sentence should probably read 'every library's staff . . .', and that this explains the use of the plural verb.

³⁸ Note that *some* can also be followed by a count singular noun, but in that case, it does not have its quantifying meaning *an indefinite number of*, it signals: 'an unknown or unstated X' /sam/ or, as one referee points out, it has emotional meaning ('Some friend you are!' /sAm/).

³⁹ Note that sentences with *any* meaning *no matter which* have not been disregarded, as in this meaning *any* may be followed by a singular or a plural count NP. As it happens, the corpus contains no examples of *any* meaning *no*. In one out of the 17 Cobuild examples with '*any* (*no matter which*) + collective noun' a plural verb is used:

(i) Not even the harshest critic has said any Irish team have done less. (times/10)

This line of reasoning also explains why NPs with predeterminer *all* have not been included.⁴⁰

- (27)(a) I think he's totally wrong in assuming that all the working class *are* as he said in his articles. (ukspok/04)
 (b) All the class *have* unusual pets to bring into school to show off to Teacher. (ukmags/03)

Examples with *neither* have not been disregarded: although *neither* can only be followed by a singular count noun, its concord system is variable; 'neither X' being compatible with a plural as well as a singular verb:

- (28)(a) Neither team *was* at full strength. (times/10)
 (b) Neither team *have* failed to notice the sharp contrast in the footballing environments they found themselves in. (ukmags/03)

Examples with *no* have also been included, as this quantifier may be followed by a singular or a plural verb. In other words, *no* does not trigger a particular interpretation of the collective that follows:

- (29)(a) No Spanish Government *has* had the courage to accept that the Gibraltarians are a people in their own right. (times/10)
 (b) (At the time of writing no equivalent data *exist* for UK polytechnic or college graduates). (ukephem/02)⁴¹

Complex NPs with *or, neither . . . nor . . . or either . . . or . . .* have been included if a collective noun occurs in second position, as it is the principle of proximal concord that determines the number of the verb, i.e. the structure of the Subject NP does not impose the use of either a singular or a plural verb.⁴²

- (30)(a) If you were absent only because you or your family *were* temporarily abroad, you will be treated as if your ordinary residence in the British islands had not been interrupted. (ICE-GB:W)
 (b) There is little sign that either government or opposition *understands* this. (times/10)
- (31)(a) Neither his own advisors nor the Irish government *seem* to have prepared him for questions about the IRA and the resulting incident has distracted, albeit briefly,

⁴⁰ Note that in the occasional example, (pre)determiner *all* combines with a singular verb:

- (i) When all the family wants sports, exercise, fun and relaxation, the Riverside Racquet Centre is the obvious choice. (ukspok/04)
 (ii) All the cattle was Shorthorn cattle. (ukspok/04)

Levin (2001: 213–14) also points out that plural verb agreement is predominant in examples with *all*.

⁴¹ *Data* is inanimate and has therefore not been taken into account in our survey. I have included this example because it is the only ICE-GB/Cobuild corpus example in which a plural verb is used in combination with a collective preceded by *no*.

⁴² Cf. Levin (2002: 65–7) for detailed remarks on concord with NPs co-ordinated by *neither . . . nor*. His conclusion is that concord is not clearly fixed.

from the vital issues which he must address when he meets Mrs Thatcher on Wednesday. (bbc/06)

- (b) Neither the Bar Council nor the Law Society *provides* counselling facilities. (times/10)

Examples with a zero determiner may give rise to different interpretations of the collective. Whereas occurrences of *management*, for instance, are automatically interpreted as *the management* (inclusive reference), *staff* does not always equal *the staff*, but rather *some staff* or *members of staff*. Examples in which the zero determiner gives rise to a partitive reading, as in (32), have been excluded from the corpus:

- (32)(a) This pattern has created a college where staff *are* aware of the opportunities and pitfalls associated with student exchange, and are committed to its integration within their courses. (ukephem/02)
- (b) At our main office in Reading, staff *have* been moved by the outpouring of compassion as grandparents, mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, and other caring individuals have seized the chance to make contact with an individual family in Bosnia. (ukephem/02)

4 Factors that influence verbal concord: a survey of existing research

In this section, the focus is on collectives that are compatible with a plural as well as a singular verb; I will use the label *verb-number-variable collective* (*VNV collective*) to reflect this characteristic. The following factors have been said to play a decisive role when it comes to selecting a particular verb form:

(a) *General principle: unity vs. individuals*

The principle spelt out in most grammars (cf. e.g. Bache & Davidsen-Nielsen, 1997: 395; Biber et al., 1999: 188; Bissonnette, 1994: 26; *Collins Cobuild English grammar*, 1990: 16; Dekeyser et al., 1999: 125; Greenbaum, 1996: 104; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 502; Kruisinga, 1932, II (3): 303; Larreya & Rivière, 1999: 122; Leech & Svartvik, 1994: 261; Malavieille & Rotgé, 1997: 140; Van Brederode & Koopman, 1990: 86; Zandvoort, 1964: 307) is that the singular form tends to be used when the speaker considers the set of referents as a single whole; the plural form indicates that the focus is on the individuals/items that make up the group.⁴³ As a result, ‘the singular

⁴³ Greenbaum (1996: 104), for instance, gives the following example to illustrate the different conceptualizations of *class*:

I was brought up in New Zealand and I’ve never forgotten how odd it seemed to me when I arrived in this country to find a society which is dominated by a ruling class *a class which is* cohesive and self-defining *a class which is* made up of people who look different often because they’re actually taller or bigger and sound different because they speak in a different tone or a different accent, who enjoy better health and longer life expectancy who live in different sorts of houses who send their children to different sorts of schools, who are educated in different sorts of universities *a class who dominate* all the best jobs *who own* most of the land *control* most of

stresses the nonpersonal collectivity of the group, and the plural stresses the personal individuality within the group' (Quirk et al., 1985: 316).

Poutsma (1914, II (1a): 283) adds quite an interesting point. He argues that if the noun denotes a very large number of individuals (e.g. *army, force, community, nation*), it is harder to conceive of it in terms of the constituents of which it is made up and a singular verb is 'the ordinary construction'. If there is reference to a collection of things or animals (e.g. *fleet, wood, shoal, swarm*, etc) 'to which no personal qualities are ascribed', the singular is also regular.⁴⁴ It is difficult though, to approach sections of society 'with distinct reference to some quality' (e.g. *aristocracy, gentry, nobility, peasantry*) as a collection of individuals, and accordingly the plural will be used.⁴⁵ In the case of 'a small body of persons' (e.g. *board, family, government, council*) as well, the plural will be used, 'even when joint rather than separate action is in question' (Poutsma, 1914, II (1a): 284). Jespersen (1961, II (1): 97) points out that the plural 'is also very frequent with words which do not in themselves denote plurality of beings, but acquire that signification by metonymy' (e.g. *the parish, the Quarterly* (= the writers in the *Quarterly Review*)). It will be interesting to check whether these hypotheses are borne out by the facts.

The above observations definitely reveal that the semantic criterion of unity vs. individuality is thought to play a role both on the level of the collective *sui generis* and on the level of the context: the referent(s) of the collective may be such that the collective inherently admits a characterization in terms of a unity or not (and this may in turn motivate the [singular verb only] or [plural verb only] characteristic). However, if the collective on its own does not allow a particular conceptualization, the context may force a particular reading. One can indeed easily find a context in which a change in verb number would result in a completely different reading:

- (33)(a) The audience *was enormous*. (Quirk et al., 1985: 758) (cp. *were enormous*)
- (b) The crowd *is bigger*. (ukspok/04) (cp. *are bigger*)
- (c) So that the club *does not die out* when this group finally leaves school, we would like to extend the club this year to the current Year 4. (ukephem/02) (cp. *don't die out*)
- (d) How the Club *works*. (ukephem/02) (cp. *work*)

No matter how unanimous a view grammarians appear to share when explaining verbal concord with collective nouns, a small number of sobering notes dampen (quite rightly, as I see it) this enthusiasm: Fries, for instance, writes that '*[D]ie Standarderklärung, dass der Sprecher entweder die Gruppe als ganzes betrachtet oder aber sich auf die einzelnen Glieder der Gruppe bezieht, kann dabei nicht die*

the wealth exercise most of the power and whose dominant position is underpinned by a dense and complex class structure which effectively insulates *them* against challenge.

⁴⁴ Note that I have excluded NPs with inanimate referents from the category of collectives.

⁴⁵ Poutsma's hypothesis actually contradicts Cruse's. The latter claims that the collectives belonging to the *class* category are 'generally uncomfortable' (1986: 176) with the plural (cf. p. 86).

ganze Erklärung sein; die Verteilung der beiden Formen wäre viel gleichmässiger zu erwarten, wenn nicht noch andere Faktoren mitspielten' (1981: 23) ([I]t seems hard to believe that the standard explanation, i.e. the speaker either considers the group as a unity or focuses on the individuals, is the whole story. If that were the case, we would expect there to be a more even distribution of the singular and the plural, if there were no other factors in play.)⁴⁶ In following Fries, we might posit the hypothesis that convention plays a far more important role in the context of verbal concord of collective nouns: it may well be a fact that particular collectives have a preference for either a singular or a plural verb without obvious semantic and/or pragmatic motivation.

(b) Semantics of the verb

A further specification of the general principle mentioned in (a) relates to the semantics of the verb: verbs that imply the decomposition or categorization of a unity (*consist of, be disbanded, be assembled, be gathered, be dispersed, erupt, scatter*) tend to be used in the singular:

- (34)(a) The crowd *was* rapidly dispersed when the police started using tear-gas. (Declerck, 1991: 246)
 (b) The committee comprises/consists of/has eight members. (Biber et al., 1999: 189)

Other verbs lexically presuppose differentiation and are therefore likely to promote the use of a plural verb (*disagree, hold different opinions, make up one's mind, leave, be of a certain age, quarrel*) (cf. Arigne, 1998: 62; Attal, 1987; Biber et al., 1999: 189; Crystal, 1984; Dekeyser et al., 1999: 257; Huddleston, 1984: 242; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 502; Juul, 1975: 105; Levin, 1998: 14, 2001: 149; Quirk et al., 1985: 758, 771–2). This is related to Swan's view that 'personal things like deciding, hoping or wanting' (1995: 526) tend to be exerted by individuals and therefore invite the use of the plural.

- (35)(a) The Yorkshire committee were divided about Tendulkar's replacement. (ukmags/03)
 (b) Our class get on all right. (ukspok/04)
 (c) A few more seconds, then lights! The Jackson Five! – It is incredible. The entire audience leap to their feet, half of them climb on to their seats, the front rows try to get on the stage. (Juul, 1975: 105)

Apart from the lexical semantics of the verb (phrase), there may also be constituents in the predicate that tip the scales in favour of an 'individualizing' interpretation. Poutsma (1914, II (1a): 283), for instance, points out that if the collective is preceded

⁴⁶ Zandvoort (1964: 308) also puts the 'general rule' in perspective when pointing out that a plural may be used even though the members of the group are not clearly individualized, in which case a singular can also be used.

by *all the* or *the whole*, and in this way is tantamount to *everybody*, the singular is likely to be used.⁴⁷

(c) Influence of determiners

As the discussion in section 3 has already shown, the presence of particular determiners may determine concord. With the notable exception of Levin (2001: 121–6), observations on this issue are restricted in existing research. Declerck (1991: 246), Larreya & Rivière (1999: 144) and Swan (1995: 526) point out that a collective preceded by the indefinite article cannot be followed by a plural verb. An indirect comment on the effect of determiners is that ‘singular-only’ collectives need to be preceded by the definite article in order for a singular verb to be used (cf. Putseys, 1996: 137; Quirk et al., 1985: 316) (cf. footnote 27).

(d) British vs. American English

VNV collective nouns are said ‘usually’ (Declerck, 1991: 246) to trigger formal concord (i.e. a singular verb) in American English (cf. Biber et al., 1999: 188; Dekeyser et al., 1999: 125; Greenbaum, 1996: 240; Huddleston, 1984: 242; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 502; Hundt, 1998: 80–9;⁴⁸ Larreya & Rivière, 1999: 122; Lamprecht, 1985 in Fries, 1988: 100; Leech & Svartvik, 1994: 261). On the whole, linguists tend to be rather cautious when it comes to comparing the two varieties of English, as the following quotes show: ‘AmE generally treats singular collective nouns as singular. Terms for the government and for sports teams are *nearly always* treated as singular in AmE, but other terms may (less commonly than in BrE) take plural verbs . . . But, as in BrE, plural pronouns are often used in AmE to refer to singular collective nouns’ (Quirk et al., 1985: 758–9); ‘In formal American English, particularly written English, the use of plural pronouns and plural finites with such nouns is *generally* avoided’ (Lock, 1996: 25) (*italics mine*).

Quantitative data providing evidence of different usage between the varieties are mentioned in Bauer (1988), Hundt (1998: 80–9), Levin (1998: 15), (1999), (2001: 60–70), and Peters (1999): Bauer (1988) compares the results of his elicitation test (New Zealand informants) with those of a comparable test carried out by Johansson (1979) (for American English) and his conclusion is that native speakers of American English indeed show a significant preference for the use of a singular verb form with collective nouns. Peters (1999) provides the following data about concord differences:⁴⁹

- (36) In some quarters the clergy is/are undecided about the ordination of women.
UK: singular: 32% – plural: 68%; US: singular: 45% – plural: 55%
- (37) I wonder if the orchestra has/have tuned their instruments yet.
UK: singular: 43% – plural: 57%; US: singular: 74% – plural: 26%

⁴⁷ Cf. also Arigne (1998: 61). As pointed out on p. 99 above (examples in (27)), I have not taken into account examples with predeterminer *all* in our quantitative analysis.

⁴⁸ Hundt deals with verbal concord in New Zealand English as well.

⁴⁹ There were 63 informants for BE and 194 for AE.

Note that the only gap that needed to be filled in (37) was the auxiliary slot. It remains all the more striking that, especially in AE, the plural pronoun did not trigger a plural verb.⁵⁰

Another piece of evidence is provided by Fries (1981: 26), who points out that in the American edition of a book by Anthony Sampson about ITT, all the plural forms after *ITT* of the British edition were replaced by singular verb forms. As I will concentrate on British English in the quantitative analysis, a comparison between the two varieties is beyond the scope of this investigation.

(e) Spoken vs. written English

Quirk et al. (1985: 758) point out that ‘on the whole, the plural is more popular in speech, whereas in the more inhibited medium of writing the singular is probably preferred’. Levin’s investigation (1998: 15) into the effect of register reveals the opposite (cf. also Levin, 2001: 80–6), at least when comparing spoken English with formal writing, i.e. the plural is more often used in formal written texts than in speech. In other words, Levin’s findings show that concord is not only determined by the difference between spoken and written English, but also by textual genre (cf. also Levin, 2001: 70–86). All in all, few linguists have laid much emphasis on the effect this parameter might have on the concord system (Lamprecht, 1986 in Fries, 1988: 100).⁵¹

(f) Complex NPs

In complex NPs in which the collective noun is part of a PP postmodifier of the type *the rest of society*, *the whole of Parliament* etc., the plural system tends to be used (cf. e.g. Declerck, 1991: 247; Dekeyser et al., 1999: 257; Leech & Svartvik, 1994: 262; Quirk et al., 1985: 757). As the issue of complex NPs constitutes an area of research on its own, it will not be possible to pursue this course in this article.

(g) Age

Bailey (1987) is the only study that takes age to be a determining factor. According to the author, young people find plurals after words such as *BBC* and *family*, ‘increasingly stilted’ (1987: 3).⁵²

In the quantitative analysis that follows, I will first be interested to see whether there is an even distribution of singular and plural verbs, and if this is not the case, whether there is a semantic and/or pragmatic motivation for the preference for a particular

⁵⁰ This confirms Johansson’s (1979) findings. His British English informants, far more than his American English informants, corrected the ‘disagreement’ in the sentence *The young generation hopes that their demonstration will lead somewhere* and opted more often for ‘consistent agreement’ than the American informants.

⁵¹ Strang (1966), who examines concord in general in examination papers, even points out that the paper of one student who (because of a medical condition) had dictated his text, contained a ‘lower rate of “licences” than the average and than the same candidate produces when actually writing’ (Strang, 1966: 75). We need to bear in mind, though, that Strang’s investigation was not limited to concord with collective nouns but was directed towards verbal concord in general.

⁵² Fries (1988) fiercely criticizes Bailey (1987) for making claims that are not based on a solid analysis of an extensive data base.

form. In other words, the hypotheses in (a) and (b) will be put to the test using actual corpora.

5 Analysis of the Collins Cobuild corpus

5.1 Preliminary remarks

5.1.1. A pilot project that investigated concord with collective nouns in the ICE-GB corpus revealed that this corpus is too small to draw solid (statistically based) conclusions. Therefore, I turned to the British English component of the Collins Cobuild corpus for the quantitative analysis of verbal concord, although I occasionally made use of ICE-GB corpus examples to illustrate a more general point.

5.1.2. Particular collective nouns are polysemous, the different meanings retaining the collective nature of the noun (e.g. *society*: (a) organization to which people may belong, (b) all the people in a country or several countries).⁵³ This information will also be included in the survey, as usage (i.e. verbal concord) may differ depending on the meaning of the noun. It is obvious that homonyms that are not compatible with a collective reading, as in the following example, will be discarded in the discussion:

- (38) If the plaster cast does get wet it may start to crumble and become smelly.
(ukmags/03)

5.1.3. Some of the examples in which the collective noun functions as Subject have not been retained as the verb is not morphologically marked for singular or plural:

- (39) The national Church *had enjoyed* the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of people, who thought it to be the best in the world. (ICE-GB:W)
(40) Speaking at a broadcasting conference in London this morning he also said that even if the new company *were to* transmit only from a European satellite it would always have to work within a regulatory framework. (ICE-GB:S)

5.1.4. As I am interested in *verbal* concord, examples in which number is only signalled by a pronoun or pronominal determiner have not been taken into account in the quantitative analysis:

- (41) Instead, the club rested on *its* laurels. (today/11)

5.1.5. (a) In the quantitative analysis of the Cobuild data, I was interested in finding out whether a random selection of collectives exhibit a significant preference for a singular or a plural verb. Our hypothesis was that a singular verb is more often used irrespective of the nature of the collective itself (many members or few) or the nature of the context. In other words, I assumed that 'convention' plays a far more important role than is

⁵³ *Class* may have the following meanings: (a) one of the groups in a society that people can be divided into according to their jobs, income, etc., (b) the system in which people are divided into such groups, (c) group of students, (d) lessons, a set of classes you attend in order to study a particular subject. Only meanings (a) and (c) were taken into account in this survey.

usually assumed. In order to test the hypothesis, it was necessary to exclude the cases where there is an element in the context that would engender a change in meaning if the verb were changed from singular to plural. The number of examples in which this is the case are listed in columns 4 and 6 in table 5, under the headings *SemDet plural* and *SemDet singular*, referring to *SEMantically* (and pragmatically) *DETermined* verb forms; a few examples are given in (42):⁵⁴

- (42)(a) The ‘contras’ say that they cannot disarm while the army *is* still in the hands of the Sandinistas. (bbc/06)
 (b) The crowd *was* definitely thinning now. (ukbooks/08)

In (42a), for instance, there is reference to the ‘army as an organization’, to ‘military power’, rather than to the capture of the individuals that constitute the army. In (42b), it is clear that a plural verb would imply that the members of the crowd are losing weight.

The reason I have not distilled a *SemDet* category from the ‘singular only’ or ‘plural only’ collectives (cf. table 5) is that I have found it impossible to interpret or judge the examples objectively. What has to be assessed in the case of ‘singular only’ items is whether there is an element in the context that would result in incompatibility with a plural verb. For the ‘plural only’ collectives, I would have to determine whether there are contextual features that are incompatible with a singular verb, i.e. whether the plural is semantically motivated. This appears an impossible task: native speakers appear to be too biased to formulate reliable acceptability judgements because, for instance, the use of a singular form after *police* is so unnatural that they conclude there must be something in the context that prevents the use of a singular form.

(b) It remains for us to comment on a number of the criteria used to assign sentences with pronouns to the class of examples with (what I call) a *SEMantically* (and pragmatically) *DETermined* verb form.

At first sight, it may seem that the presence of a plural or singular pronoun in the sentence should be automatically considered as a *SemDet* factor: a plural (singular) pronoun triggers a plural (singular) verb. However, in many cases, it is rather the other way round: the number of the pronoun is the reflection of a choice made earlier on, i.e. if a singular verb is selected, speakers tend to go on using singular pronouns and vice versa.⁵⁵

Examples with pronouns have sometimes been assigned to the *SemDet* class: there are indeed cases in which it is impossible to change the number of the pronoun, but this is in most cases not a mere technical or formal adaptation process in which the number

⁵⁴ I recognize that the assignment of examples to the *SemDet* category is a delicate matter, and open to a certain amount of argument. However, I hope that the thought that has been devoted to this task has resulted in a triage with which most people would agree for the majority of cases, and that therefore any effect on my findings that debatable assignments might have is negligible.

⁵⁵ Corbett (1979) posits an ‘Agreement Hierarchy’ ‘attributive – predicative – relative pronoun – personal’, and explains that ‘the possibility of syntactic agreement decreases monotonically from left to right’ (1979: 204). Corbett’s principle predicts that agreement between a Subject NP and a pronoun is less likely than agreement between a Subject NP and a verb. Levin (2001: 105–10) puts this hypothesis to the test by applying it to data extracted from British English and American English.

of the verb and the number of the pronoun are matched. The change from singular to plural (or vice versa) may bring about a difference in meaning: the singular pronoun implies that the proposition is characteristic of the ‘shell’ (i.e. the unity), the plural pronoun means that it applies to every individual belonging to the ‘shell’ (cf. pp. 100–1 above):

- (43)(a) The committee *has* six months to make up its mind. (today/11)
 (b) I would say we’ve got a lull at the moment, as the army *is* basically licking its own wounds, and looking at the political situation. (bbc/06)
 (c) The absence of a summer tour is no bad thing and will allow leading players a decent rest while the team management *makes* up its collective mind. (times/10)
 (44) The current team *were* chosen mostly for their athleticism as well as looks and personalities. (today/11)

In the examples in (43), the result of the activity referred to will be different depending on whether a singular rather than a plural verb is used. In (44), the situation referred to requires the use of a plural verb.

A change from a plural to a singular pronoun is usually more problematic than a change from singular to plural, probably because *it*, unlike *they*, inevitably implies that the referent is conceived of as [-animate]. In the examples in (45), the context requires reference to a human referent rather than to an impersonal one:

- (45)(a) The retired staff *keep in touch* and get together for social events which they organise themselves. (today/11)
 (b) We had been playing all of 14 minutes and the travelling Arsenal army *were* several choruses into their ironic rendering of ‘Boring, boring Arsenal’. (sunnov/17)
 (c) Earlier this year the EastEnders cast *were told* by new BBC head of drama Mal Young that they had nothing to worry about. (sunnov/17)

However, occasionally, a neuter *it* is used with multiple animate referents:

- (46)(a) The public *has* not yet made up its mind. (times/10)
 (b) Wait till we know the army’s on its way, and then send out the messengers? (ukbooks/08)
 (c) The cast *is* so clearly enjoying itself that all but the very young will be swept up by the spirit of the thing. (times/10)
 (d) But Pattison’s committee *fears* if it delays banning sheep offal until the results are available it might be open to recriminations if lamb is ever shown to have caused human CJD. (times/10)

The preceding examples show that a singular pronoun is almost exclusively used after a singular verb; I have come across only one example in which a plural verb is followed by a singular pronoun.

- (47) Now I think the council *have* shot itself in the foot because if people ain’t knocking at the door to get the rent people won’t pay it. (ukspok/04)

Justification for the fact that the number of the verb and pronoun are not inextricably bound up with each other can be found in the (many) examples in which a singular

verb is followed by a plural pronoun. It is not only the number of the pronoun that determines that of the verb, or vice versa, but rather animacy and the context in general that determine the choice of number:

- (48)(a) Our team *looks* as though they're in for a real beating until the girl supporters hatch a cunning plan to inspire the lads with a trusty pint of milk. (ukmags/03)
 (b) The team *has* been terrific – I don't think they have ever worked harder. (ukmags/03)
 (c) . . . in a sense the left *has kept* quiet because well they may not have liked some of the policies that Kinnock was bringing in but they thought . . . (ukspok/04)
 (d) The upper class *sends* their daughters and sons to schools abroad. (ukmags/03)
 (e) The audience *appears* to have lost their teeth with the absence of the Sandman (Tony Gulley) who played such a crucial role in the previous series. (ukmags/03)

It is only cases such as those in (49), in which the semantic factor that results in the unacceptability of a singular (or plural) verb is also reflected in the pronoun used, that have been included in the SemDet category.

- (49)(a) Barclays staff *have* paid with their jobs. (today/11) (every individual has a job)
 (b) Gay Palace Staff *are* being banned from bringing their boyfriends to the Queen's Christmas ball this year to spare royal blushes. (today/11) (every member of staff has a boyfriend)
 (c) Well we have dog stop alarms which are these high shrill alarms which the staff *wear* round their neck. (ukspok/04) (every member of staff wears an alarm)
 (d) The European Community *has* said discussions should begin between itself and South American countries on an action programme to protect the Amazon rainforest. (bbc/06)

The choice of plural/singular pronoun is determined by the fact that the properties referred to belong to individuals (or the unit in the example in (49d)) rather than only by a formal pronominal bounding system of some kind.

(c) A few comments on the effect of the Subject Complement (SC) on the choice of verb number also appear justified. A SC usually has the same number as the Subject (cf. Levin, 2001: 155), as the following examples illustrate (plural verb – plural NP (or a collective noun) in (50); singular verb – singular NP in (51)):

- (50)(a) The word for that, assuming that Hammam's coaching staff *are* credible judges, is management. (times/10)
 (b) The Cahu family *are* warm and welcoming hosts. (ukephem/02)
 (c) The Club *are* fully bonded members of ABTA and IATA, and are ATOL licence holders for your protection. (ukmags/03)
 (d) Jagger's crew *were* already darlings of Chelsea's bohemian aristo-set, whose King's Road, Regency dandy style would become the capital's post-mod rock style. (ukmags/03)
 (51) (a) My audience *is* the city of Birmingham and the region the people of the region – it's nothing to do with conferences. (ukspok/04)
 (b) In other words, the army *does* not want to appear to be an entirely disruptive force. (bbc/06)

- (c) I wouldn't have got all the information that indicated that the working class *was* not a homogeneous group but a vastly heterogeneous group with multitudes of strata within it and I think the same could be said about the lower-middle class. (ukspok/04)
- (d) If the company *is* a Photocode member, you can ask their trade organisation to try and help settle the dispute. (ukephem/02)

However, this is not a strict requirement given that a plural verb may also be followed by a singular SC (cf. (52))⁵⁶ and a singular verb by a plural SC (cf. (53)):

- (52)(a) Staff *are* the Society's core asset. (ukephem/02)
- (b) The company staff *form* a work force of five or six people and come up with ideas. (bbc/06)
- (c) She either does not hear, or chooses to ignore, my suggestion that her family *are* like a literary version of the Ewings of Dallas. (ukmags/03)
- (d) The audience *are* a great cast of extras for Corduroy's mythical film. (ukpron/03)
- (e) Olwyn confesses that the old Buttown community *were* a pretty mixed bunch. (ukmags/03)
- (f) The working class *were* once the backbone of this great nation. (ukspok/04)
- (53)(a) His team *has got* what it takes to become kings of Europe – just as Sir Matt Busby's Red Devils did during the club's previous glory days some three decades ago. (ukmags/03)
- (b) No, her audience *is* now her readers, and they will not be deprived. (times/10)
- (c) The target audience *is* obviously American kids. (times/10)
- (d) We're not just community we're residents because local community *isn't* necessarily residents. (ukspok/04)
- (e) The 'community' *becomes* a few stray elderly survivors surrounded by the holiday industry. (ukephem/02)

It will be clear that it is again impossible to assign all examples with a SC automatically to the SemDet category, as it is not always the case that it is the number of the SC that determines the number of the verb form. The question that has been asked in this case is whether the change from a singular to a plural verb (or vice versa) brings about a change in the number of the SC, and if so, if the meaning remains the same. If it does not, the example is labelled as a SemDet example. In other words, although the presence of a SC may play a role in the selection of the verb form, it need not be the sole or crucial factor determining the number of the verb.

5.2 *The Cobuild data*

Table 5 summarizes the quantitative findings.

I have used statistical tests to interpret the data and I was particularly interested in finding an answer to the following questions:

1. Does the set of what are traditionally classified as 'singular-only collectives' (S collectives) as a whole have a preference for a singular verb? An S collective is

⁵⁶ In all the examples in (52) except the final one, the SC is a (near-)collective and has plural reference, so it might be said that there is referential concord in most of the examples.

Table 5. *Verbal concord with collective nouns in the British English sections of the Cobuild corpus*

	Classification	Frequency plural forms	SemDet pl	Frequency sg forms	SemDet sg
Admiralty	VNV	0		1	
Aristocracy	VNV	2		5	
Army	VNV	45	3	380	68
Audience	VNV	46	2	135	25
Bureaucracy	S	6		16	
Cast	VNV	19	5	40	18
Cattle	P	25		2	
Church	S	6		290	
Class (all meanings)	VNV	12	3	41	14
School		7	2	16	5
Social		5	1	25	9
Club (all meanings)	VNV	99	2	331	116
Manag. of team		61	1	93	14
Sports club		31	1	97	41
Other club		4	0	104	38
Night club		3	0	30	17
Gentlemen's club			0	6	5
Book club			0	1	1
Committee	VNV	22	3	208	48
Community	VNV	21	1	267	57
Company (all meanings)	VNV	43	1	1 077	176
Performing arts		7	0	43	1
Publishing company		2	0	3	1
TV company		3	0	4	9
Record company		8	1	10	0
Army		4	0	4	0
Group of friends		0	0	2	0
Other meanings		19	0	1 011	165
Congress	VNV	2	0	111	8
Council	VNV	128	6	511	40
Crew	VNV	37	12	26	1
Crowd	VNV	55	10	52	8
Electorate	S	9		14	
Family	VNV	248	89	439	72
Folk	P	67		0	
Government ⁵⁷	VNV	128	2	2 940	212
Jury	VNV	10	2	77	1
Left	VNV	2	0	14	1
Management	VNV	29	0	77	4
Nation	S	2		110	
Nobility	S or VNV	0	0	0	0
Opposition	VNV	24		104	
Orchestra	VNV	3	0	48	12
Organisation	S	8		242	
Parliament		3		263	

Table 5. *Continued*

	Classification	Frequency plural forms	SemDet pl	Frequency sg forms	SemDet sg
Peasantry	S	0		7	
People	P	251		18	
Police ⁵⁸	P	1 767		33	
Population	VNV	7	0	49	8
Poultry	P	0		2	
Public	VNV	80	2	139	1
Royalty	VNV	0	0	9	2
Society (all meanings)	S	25		486	
Organisation		20		287	
All the people who live in a country		5		199	
Staff	VNV	214	10	27	5
Swine	P	0		0	
Team	VNV	198	15	391	52
Vermin	P	1		0	
Youth	P	7		11	

defined as a collective that combines with a singular verb in 80 per cent (or more) of the cases.⁵⁹ (normal test for one proportion with a level of significance of 5 per cent)

⁵⁷ Fries (1988) points out that the choice of a singular or a plural with *government* may be an idiosyncrasy of a particular speaker. The data at his disposal show that Sir Geoffrey Howe combines *government* with a plural verb in his address to Parliament and in the government White Book. The *Guardian* journalist who reports these events uses singular verbs. Fries concludes that maybe a distinction should be made in terms of text type, i.e. 'officialese' vs. 'journalese'. The composition of our corpus does not allow us to check this hypothesis. As the Cobuild data will also reveal, the preference for a singular verb (after *government*) is statistically relevant, which confirms the findings of Bauer (1994): the conclusion of Bauer's investigation into grammatical concord of *government* in a corpus consisting of *Times* editorials is that 'there is a clear development of a state of confusion at the beginning of the century, through a stage where the variation [singular verb/plural verb] is interpreted as being meaning-bearing, and finally to a stage where the variation is decreasing in favour of grammatical (as opposed to semantic or notional) concord' (1994: 65).

⁵⁸ The instances with a singular verb all have *Metropolitan Police* as Subject and occur in spoken English. Note, however, that the corpus also contains examples in which *Metropolitan Police* combines with a plural verb. One referee points out that in examples from the British National Corpus in which *police* forms part of a proper noun (*the Thames Valley Police, Strathclyde Police*) a singular verb is used as well.

⁵⁹ One referee points out that the borderline of 80 per cent for the 'singular-only' ('plural-only') class seems to be low. It is indeed not easy to define the class of S-only and P-only collectives, i.e. to determine what proportion of plural or singular verbs has to be reached in order for a collective to be assigned to the respective classes. However, if we raise the 'singular-only' and 'plural-only' borderlines to, for instance 90 per cent it seems we are merely shifting the problem: raising the borderline for this class implies that the VNV category has to be redefined as a category in which verbal concord lies between 10 and 90 per cent Sg or 10 and 90 per cent Pl, which no doubt is at least equally counterintuitive (i.e. if in 89 per cent of the cases a plural verb is used, we call the collective VNV) as a borderline of 80 per cent for the 'singular-only' and 'plural-only' category. Moreover, we are not dealing with a low number of tokens. While it may seem improper to call a noun a 'singular-only' noun when it triggers a plural verb in 'nearly 1 case out of 5', it seems a lot less so when we have to do with 20

2. Does the set of what are traditionally classified as ‘plural-only collectives’ (P collectives) as a whole have a preference for a plural verb? A P collective is defined as a collective that combines with a plural verb in 80 per cent (or more) of the cases. (normal test for one proportion with a level of significance of 5 per cent)
3. Does the set of VNV collectives as a whole have a preference for a singular verb? A VNV collective is defined as a collective that combines with a singular verb in between 20 and 80 per cent of the cases. The individual VNV collectives have also been submitted to this test. (normal test for one proportion with a level of significance of 5 per cent)
4. In case the VNV collectives as a set have a preference for a singular verb, does that preference equal the preference of ‘singular-only’ collectives for a singular verb (normal test for the difference between two proportions, level of significance 5 per cent)

The results of the test are as follows:

1. The preference of so-called S collectives for a singular verb is significant.
2. The preference of so-called P collectives for a plural verb is significant.
3. So-called VNV collectives (with the exception of *cast*, *crew*, *crowd*, *staff*) have a significant preference for a singular verb. Of the four collectives that do not have a preference for the singular, it is only *staff* that has a significant preference for the plural.⁶⁰
4. The set of S collectives have a stronger preference for a singular verb than the set of VNV collectives.

5.3 General conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. This quantitative analysis provides evidence for the fact that so-called VNV collectives are preferably used with a singular verb, the only exceptions being *staff*, *crew*, *crowd*, and *cast*. Given the fact that this is the general trend, and given that I have – as far as possible – excluded cases where any contextual factor(s) could be affecting the choice of number, it seems likely that ‘convention’ (or maybe the principle of the least effort) plays a far more important role than is usually thought to be the case. Semantic and pragmatic considerations no doubt enter the picture, but their contribution is less considerable than textbooks tend to believe (cf. section 5.5). It is actually not easy to pin down accurately the factor that could explain the preference for a singular form. From a linguistic point of view, the use of the singular is in any case motivated, as it is based on the principle of formal agreement. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the preference for the singular may reflect the pecking order among the different varieties of English: American English, in which the plural is allegedly less often used after collectives

out of 100 tokens. Incidentally (or quite revealingly) Biber et al. (1999: 188) also use 80 per cent as a dividing line when characterizing verbal concord with particular collectives.

⁶⁰ Our data corroborate Biber et al.’s (1999: 188) findings to a great extent. They point out that in more than 80 per cent of the cases, *audience*, *board*, *committee*, *government*, *jury*, and *public* combine with a singular verb. *Staff* is followed by a plural verb in more than 80 per cent of the cases. However, in their examples, *crew* and *family* ‘commonly occur with a plural as well as a singular verb’.

(cf. (c) in section 4), is beginning to set the norm for British English.⁶¹ From a cognitive point of view, a system in which the singular is always used is no doubt less demanding on the speaker's mind than one in which the context has to be processed first to make a choice. On the other hand, from the addressee's point of view, verb number can be a helpful tool to process the sentence and may result in less processing effort. I am afraid these observations have to remain inconclusive. In what follows, I will use the term *convention* as a cover term for all the factors that possibly lie at the origin of the preference for a singular verb. In any case, the data appear to corroborate Biber et al.'s claim that 'in actual use . . . the singular is preferred . . . Most common collective nouns prefer singular concord, although a few collective nouns commonly take plural concord' (1999: 188).⁶² The data show that Hirtle is no doubt on the wrong track when he writes that '*l'accord verbal, loin d'être une règle qui s'applique automatiquement, est, dans tous les cas, signifiant, motivé par le sens à exprimer, par la visée de discours*' (although verbal concord is not a rule that automatically applies, the fact remains that it is semantically motivated in every case by the meaning to be expressed and the sense of the discourse) (1984: 100). As he sees it, the choice of verb form can always be explained in terms of the following principle: '*C'est au moment même de la construction du syntagme verbal en vue de son incidence au support que le sujet parlant doit peser les deux impressions [unicité ou multiplicité] pour établir l'accord, soit au singulier, soit au pluriel, en fonction de l'impression qu'il juge dominante*' (The speaker has to pass a judgement when determining verbal concord and decide which of the two possibilities [unity or multiplicity] is the more explicitly present) (1984: 106–7). Our findings point in a different direction; they show that Poutsma is right when claiming that '[I]t is but natural that writers and speakers do not always pause to think whether the communication given applies to the individuals of which a collection is composed jointly or separately, nor is this always clear from the circumstances of the situation described, so that there is a good deal of vacillation and, apparently, even incongruity in the choice of number' (1914, II (1a): 283). Nixon (1972) also argues that some scepticism is warranted concerning 'the many formulations of binary choice rules dependent upon the degree to which the notion of plurality (or singularity) is dominant in a speaker's or writer's mind on a given occasion' (1972: 121).

2. The concord behaviour of the S collectives distinguished by Bauer (1994), Declerck (1991), and Putseys (1996) is in fact not different from that of the VNV collectives, in the sense that their preference for a singular verb is significant. It needs to be added, though, that the preference for the singular of (the complete set of) VNV collectives is less strong than that of the (complete set of) S collectives.

3. Of the P collectives traditionally listed in grammars, only *cattle*, *people*, and *police* are commonly used. There is a discrepancy between the prominence given by grammarians to the (plural only) lexical items *vermin*, *swine*, *poultry* and their rate of occurrence in actual speech.

⁶¹ This hypothesis is rejected by Levin (2001: 87).

⁶² Cf. Bauer (1994: 63) for the same observation.

4. Poutsma's hypothesis (cf. p. 101 above) that collectives referring to a large number of entities are preferably followed by a singular verb needs to be weakened: although large number entities such as VNV *army* and VNV *audience*, for instance, are indeed preferably used with a singular, VNV *crowd* has a variable system although its referent does not necessarily differ from *army* and *audience* in terms of number of individuals referred to. The fact that most VNV collectives, irrespective of the number of individuals they are composed of, have a significant preference for a singular verb, leads us to refute Poutsma's claim that collectives consisting of a small number of entities combine with a plural verb. In fact, Poutsma's hypotheses are already falsified by the S collectives and the P collectives, since they show clearly that there is no necessary link between the number of the verb and the size of the unit referred to. P collective *people*, for instance, no doubt refers to a higher number of individuals than S collective *organization*. Yet the former always combines with a plural and the latter is a 'singular only' collective.

5. Sometimes, it seems possible to explain concord behaviour in terms of permeability. *Government*, for instance, is rather on the '-permeable' end of the scale, and can accordingly combine with a plural verb to refer to the shell (cf. (55a)). Similarly, the use of a plural with *team*, to refer to the shell, might be explained in terms of its lack of permeability (cf. (55b)). But this is not the whole story: [-permeable] *government* can also be used with a singular verb to refer to the individuals (cf. (54c)), which shows that permeability as such does not necessarily exclude particular interpretations or forms. In other words, semantic characteristics of the collective notwithstanding, it remains a fact that the use of a plural verb does not automatically imply that the focus is on the individuals or that the use of a singular verb means that the focus is on the unit. In many examples, it seems perfectly possible to replace the singular verb by a plural verb (or vice versa) without dramatic changes in meaning:

- (54)(a) The Committee *works* in secret and is not required to explain its decisions. (bbc/06)
- (b) The black community's inferior in the sense of having been kept inferior having been precluded from things. (ukspok/04)
- (c) The Peking Government *is* officially atheist. (times/10)⁶³
- (55)(a) I know that the government *earn* lots of money from it [fines resulting from drinking and driving]. (ukspok/04)
- (b) The team *were* fined £50 when only one player turned up for a game earlier this season. (today/11)

6. The findings lead to the hypothesis that usage differences between American English (with an allegedly stronger preference for the singular verb form) and British English are likely to be less noticeable than is traditionally assumed.

⁶³ Ruth Huart points out (personal communication) that in this example it may be the presence of '*officially*' that triggers the use of the singular verb, because it may be indicative of the difference between what is said to be the case and what is the case (not all members are atheist in real fact).

5.4 *Further emerging patterns*

1. Examples with passive constructions as a rule give rise to singular concord (cf. (56a–c)). This is the case in all ICE-GB examples, but the Cobuild corpus contains examples in which a plural verb is used in a passive sentence:

- (56)(a) The jury *was told* the event went off well and there was no trouble until it was winding up shortly before 3 am. (ICE-GB:W)
 (b) As a result the Marconi company, which had a wealth of experience in transmitter design, *was invited* to join the venture. (ICE-GB:W)
 (c) Under the so-called Javitz Rules Congress *is* initially *told* in confidence about any big arms transfer the government has in mind. (ICE-GB:S)
 (57)(a) There was real excitement last season when the England v Wales match at Sale made a profit from gate receipts; even more recently when the team *were told* that their travel expenses would be met for the forthcoming international in France. (times/10)
 (b) The club *were replaced* in the old Fourth Division by Wigan back in 1978, but promotion to the GM Vauxhall Conference has put Southport on the verge of re-joining Merseyside neighbours Liverpool, Everton and Tranmere in the Football League. (ukmags/03)

2. Two concord systems may be used in one and the same utterance:⁶⁴

- (58) *Singular verb, plural pronoun in same clause (same sentence)*
 There the team *has made their* distiller mobile so that they can take it around the country and extract the oils from fresh material. (bbc/06)
 (59) *Singular verb, plural pronoun in next clause (same sentence)* (cf. (48))
 (a) Even the royal family *is* more interesting, especially now *they* are splitting up so that one of them can pursue a solo career. (times/10)
 (b) But you see the Council *is* so much guilty because *they* tell you to do so many rules and then *they* let everything at the back go. (ukspok/04)
 (c) I think it's what the public *expects* nowadays and *they* won't accept anything less. (ukspok/04)
 (d) Our team *looks* as though *they're* in for a real beating. (ukmags/03)
 (e) The left *has* kept quiet because well *they* may not have liked some of the policies Kinnock was bringing in but they thought . . . (ukspok/04)
 (f) In the kitchen the class *was* being taught jam-making and you felt *they* were indulging their young tutor most contentedly. (ukmags/03)
 (g) The committee *has* the power to confiscate assets which *they* judge were acquired illegally. (bbc/06)
 (h) But the insurance company *is* doing the best that *they* can. (ukmags/03)
 (i) . . . unless management *is* given a good deal of autonomy to make *their* own decisions. (ukspok/04)

⁶⁴ Cf. e.g. Arigne (1998: 63); Biber et al. (1999: 189); Declerck (1991: 246); Greenbaum (1996: 104); Hundt (1998: 84–9); Jespersen (1961, II (1): 99); Johansson (1979); Juul (1975: 94, 99); Larreya & Rivière (1999: 122); Levin (1998: 16, 1999); Poutsma (1914, II (1A): 297); Taylor (1993: 11); Watson (1979, quoted in Bauer, 1988) for comments on the frequency of various combinations (i.e. plural verb + singular pronoun, singular verb + plural pronoun, plural verb + singular verb, etc.). Cf. Levin (2001: 99–102, 110–21) for a detailed discussion of the effect of pronouns on verb number and shifts in agreement.

- (60) *Singular verb, plural pronoun in next clause (next sentence)*
Although the show was stylish and slick, the audience was largely impassive throughout. *They* clapped in all the right places but did little else. (ukmags/03)⁶⁵
- (61) *Singular verb, plural verb in next clause (same sentence)*
I mean and MX's family *has* got Asians my family *have* got West Indians. (ukspok/04)
- (62) *Singular verb, plural verb in next clause (next sentence)*
... on the left Warhol has used brightly luminescent colours, maybe to display Marilyn's public side of her nature, i.e., what the public *sees*. And on the right Marilyn is printed in black and white and the images gradually fade, maybe showing the hidden darker side of Marilyn, i.e. what the public *do not see*. (ICE-GB:S)
- (63) *Plural verb, singular pronoun in same clause*
Now I think the council *have* shot *itself* in the foot because if people ain't knocking at the door to get the rent people won't pay it. (ukspok/04)
- (64) *Plural verb, singular pronoun in next clause (same sentence)*
(a) South Cambridgeshire District Council *tell* us that *its* Planning Committee has written to Malcolm Rifkind... (ukephem/02)
(b) ... but the remaining staff *were* given X pound bonuses when *it* won last October. (today/11)
- (65) *Plural verb, singular verb in next clause*
(a) The left *don't* know what the right's doing. (ukspok/04)
(b) The army *say* that during the night an Israeli patrol laid an ambush on a known infiltration route. They caught four heavily-armed men. In the resulting clash, two were killed but so were five Israelis. The army *has* not yet explained why so many of its soldiers died when they outnumbered the enemy. (bbc/06)
- (66) *Plural pronoun, singular verb in next clause (same sentence)*
With its building [English National Opera], the imposing Coliseum, now firmly in *their* own hands, the company *is* secure and plans are afoot to refurbish the front of house and stage. (ukmags/03)

5.5 Semantic/pragmatic motivation of the verb choice

A detailed study of the contexts in which singular verbs and plural verbs are used with so-called VNV collectives reveals that only in very few cases is the number of the verb determined by the context (cf. table 5).⁶⁶

5.5.1. When there is reference to especially physical characteristics or states that may be ascribed to individual human beings as well as to groups of people, there is likely to be a difference in effect between a singular and a plural verb: *be small, be huge, be big*, etc. In this case the number of the verb form used indicates whether the proposition applies to the 'shell' rather than to the items of which it is composed:

- (67)(a) The shield committee *was* necessarily small, secrecy being a paramount consideration. (ukbooks/08)
(b) The staff *was* much bigger than that. (ukspok/04)
(c) The so-called new Left *was* in ferment. (ukbooks/08)

⁶⁵ Note that in this case, the shift to a plural pronoun is semantically motivated, as it is individuals that clap their hands.

⁶⁶ Cf. Levin (2001: 148–58) for a discussion of the effect of the semantics of the verb phrase on concord.

- (d) Now that my family *is* no longer intact, I feel burned. (today/11)
- (68)(a) When the film was released in America, the audience *were* over 35 years old and we used that criteria as a yardstick for ploughing advertising money into the film over here. (ukmags/03)
- (b) Burke's family are related by crime rather than by biology. (ukmags/03)

However, as soon as we move somewhat away from strictly physical characteristics attributed to individuals to more general qualifying information, the relatively strict correspondence 'singular verb – shell', 'plural verb – individuals' is often challenged, witness the examples in (69), in which a singular verb is used in a clause that predicates something of the members of which the unit is composed:

- (69)(a) Those who run Choice FM surely know that their audience *is* mainly descended from people who volunteered to serve, and served, in all services during the second world war. (times/10)
- (b) Since the film's main audience *was* scarcely born when the Panthers raged, something obviously needed to be done to fit the story to America's current mood, made more belligerent since the O. J. Simpson trial. (times/10)

5.5.2. In the same way, if there is reference to a(n involuntary physical) process to which the shell is subjected (e.g. *thin*, *shrink*, etc), the use of the plural verb may bring about a difference in meaning (cf. Levin, 2001: 150):

- (70)(a) And given the shapeless characters, narrative turmoil and non-user friendly lingo, the target audience shrinks (*shrink) yet further. (ukmags/03)
- (b) The British army *is* being cut back by some twenty percent. (bbc/06)
- (c) The crowd *was* definitely thinning now. (ukbooks/08)
- (d) And the family's still growing! (ukmags/03)
- (e) Do you think you moved do you think because the family *was* getting bigger? (ukspok/04)
- (f) The world population *has* been growing very rapidly for the past 40 or 50 years, with advances in medical science and so on, and it is scheduled to go on growing quite rapidly, despite all we can do, to double the present size. (bbc/06)

It should again be pointed out that this is not a strict rule, given the following examples (cf. also Levin, 2001: 151):

- (71)(a) The left *have* so-called been getting buried for years. (bbc/06)
- (b) The truth is that the team *are* limping, almost regardless of who plays, and almost regardless of what tactics they adopt, because what is truly breaking down is their underlying ideology. (times/10)

5.5.3. If the utterance contains expressions referring to parts of the body, it seems logical that a plural verb will be used as these physical characteristics are commonly associated with human beings rather than with institutions:

- (72)(a) The crowd *were* on their feet again as substitute Murray Fraser picked up a quick throw-in and dived over after an 80-metre-run. (today/11)
- (b) Although the boat crew *were* all dressed more or less alike, in rough brown trousers and floppy brown shirts that gave their arms plenty of room to move, the helmsman sported a silver brooch pinned to one shoulder . . . (ukbooks/08)

- (c) The medical staff *have* their nose to the grindstone seeing and treating patients. (ukspok/04)
- (d) Well we have dog stop alarms which are these high shrill alarms which the staff *wear* round their neck. (ukspok/04)

However, plural ‘bodily NPs’ do not automatically result in the use of a plural verb (cf. Levin, 2001: 157):

- (73)(a) But his audience *was* all eyes and ears as he rattled off the wisecracks. (today/11)
- (b) The audience *appears* to have lost their teeth with the absence of the Sandman (Tony Gulley) who played such a crucial role in the previous series. (ukmags/03)
- (c) The class *seems* to be voting with its feet. (ICE-GB:S)

As it happens, in the previous examples, the parts of the body are used in metaphors, which could mean that metaphorical uses of terms for parts of the body do not affect choice of the number on the verb.⁶⁷ Moreover, by metonymy, a part of the body may be attributed to a shell as well:

- (74)(a) The Tartan Army *has put* on a brave face in the wake of so many past disappointments. (sunnov/17)
- (b) Now I think the council *have* shot *itself* in the foot because if people ain’t knocking at the door to get the rent people won’t pay it. (ukspok/04)
- (c) The English National Ballet management is so convinced it *has* a hit on its hands that Cinderella has been scheduled for two London seasons. (times/10)
- (d) The Unstoppable Sex Machine are the most unlikely stars the Top Of The Pops audience *has* taken to its bosom so far this decade. (ukmags/03)

5.5.4. If the quality in question can be assigned to both composite units and shell without there being any difference in meaning, it is not possible to predict whether a singular rather than a plural verb is likely to be used: *be fantastic*, *be noisy*, etc:

- (75) The staff was always great except for the only Italian with no charm I have ever met. (times/10)
- (76) The crowd were also wonderful. (sunnov/17)

5.5.5. In the same way, reference to activities performed by individuals does not require a plural verb to be used (*bursts into applause*, *starts clapping* vs. *were applauding*, *the audience was/were laughing*, *the committee meet(s)*, *the crowd roars*, *goes berserk*, *gasps*, *goes wild*, *stands up*, etc.). Although the plurality implicit in the activity is often reflected in a plural verb (cf. (77)), this need not be the case (cf. (78)) (cf. Levin, 2001: 152):

- (77)(a) The crowd *were* already calling for them to run the ball as Dods opted to kick (and miss) his fifth. (times/10)
- (b) Their club committee meet this week to consider the matter further. (ukmags/03)
- (c) Rehearsals of any show are always that much better and more useful once the cast *have* learned their lines. (ukephem/02)

⁶⁷ I am grateful to Susan Reed for this suggestion.

- (78)(a) The family sings all the time. (ukmags/03)
 (b) Well my family gets along with everybody. (ukspok/04)
 (c) The crowd screams. (ukmags/03)
 (d) The town's 60,000 population elects 18 councillors of whom only two are Tory. (times/10)

In the example in (79), a plural verb is used to refer to a collective statement by the staff, which proves that an activity that is to be attributed to the shell need not be referred to by means of a singular verb:

- (79) Staff *have* produced their own reply which among other things, suggests overheads could also be held down by urging members of the public to buy The Sunday Times and The Herald. (times/10)

5.5.6. Unlike what is commonly 'prescribed', reference to feelings does not automatically result in the use of a plural verb; reactions of audiences and crowds are expressed by means of singular as well as plural verbs (*be incensed, satisfied, etc.*):

- (80)(a) His son John said the family *was* 'shocked and distressed' at the sentence. (today/11)
 (b) The committee *was* particularly incensed by the unofficial tour of South Africa undertaken by a group of English cricketers. (bbc/06)
 (81)(a) His family *are* extremely shocked and distressed. (today/11)
 (b) This sort of art attack seemed in the spirit of the CCA's aims but, strangely, the audience *were* more hostile. (times/10)

5.5.7. In the same way, a context referring to a mental activity may include a singular as well as a plural verb (cf. Levin, 2001: 152):

- (82)(a) The park committee hopes to capture on screen the rugged beauty of Malham Cove and the limestone pavements above it . . . (times/10)
 (b) The crowd knows better, knows the final result. (ukmags/03)
 (c) Observers believe the government *is* again hoping to relieve pressure on this strategic provincial capital which lies close to the Pakistan border and the guerrillas' main supply lines. (bbc/06)
 (d) According to opinion polls released on Thursday, the public *has* not yet made up its mind. (times/10)
 (83)(a) You know, thinking what the general public think, (ukspok/04)
 (b) They must finish a job the public *don't* understand. (times/10)

5.5.8. It seems reasonable to assume that verbs that presuppose a unity (*divide, be composed of, etc.*) will combine with a singular verb (cf. p. 102).

- (84)(a) Desertions, sir. The whole army *is* falling to pieces. (ukbooks/08)
 (b) But our audience tonight consists of cadets recruits and serving officers in the Met who are here on training courses. (ICE-GB:S)
 (c) The orchestra *is* made up of a great many disparate personalities, as you can appreciate, and his is among the mildest – perhaps 'meekest' is a better word – of them all. (ukbooks/08)
 (d) It was quickly banned and the drama company *was* broken up. (ukmags/03)

- (e) Part of the problem, it appears, is that the film's large cast *has* broken down into cliques. (today/11)
- (f) No See in some subjects like science and Spanish the class *is* split into which can work the fastest. (ukspok/04)
- (g) ... it appears that the Council *is* split over how to proceed. (bbc/06)
- (h) Their family *was* split up. (ukspok/04)
- (i) On the London level the Boroughs' Grants committee *seems* to be breaking down. (ICE-GB:S)
- (j) The family *is* splintering into its separate units and detaching from Home Place in Sussex, where the wives and children took refuge from the bombs. (times/10)
- (k) Bulgaria will need a new prime minister because the existing government *is* due to be dissolved by the new parliament. (bbc/06)

But here again, counterexamples exist:

- (85)(a) The Centre's staff include Guyanese born Dr David Dabydeen, recent winner of Guyana's literary prize for his semi-autobiographical novel *The Intended*. (ukmags/03)
- (b) And the jury *are* made up of eight coloureds. (ukspok/04)

5.5.9. Verbs that presuppose diversity are commonly said to combine with a plural verb:

- (86)(a) John Smith's grieving family *were* finally reunited yesterday as eldest daughter Sarah arrived back from America. (today/11)
- (b) Think that's something that the community *have* come together on then. (ukspok/04)
- (c) Our class get on all right. (ukspok/04)
- (d) Staff *have* different timetables. (ukspok/04)
- (e) Permanent staff *are* unlikely to lose their jobs. (today/11)

Again, this is not a strict pattern, as the numerous counterexamples show:

- (87)(a) The whole family gathers to drive the flock to pastures new. (ukmags/03)
- (b) Fifty yards up the road, outside Haigy's Bar, the crowd *is* gathering. (today/11)
- (c) It was a great solace to the Kuwaiti people that the international community *was* united against Iraq. (bbc/06)
- (d) Do you think that the Government *is* united enough on this question? (ICE-GB:S)
- (e) A BBC correspondent in Kabul says Congress *has* not been convened before now because of bitter rivalries among the party's leaders. (bbc/06)
- (f) ... to show the Royal Family *was* united again after the Morton furore. (today/11)
- (g) As part of that process, the working class *has* to unite around, and help build its vanguard party of Marxism-Leninism. (ukmags/03)
- (h) Whatever is behind the extraordinary radio broadcast, it is clear that the government *has* not been united in its struggle against the Khmer Rouge, as a government official claimed earlier this week, and the Khmer Rouge, which has been making some gains on the battlefield, could benefit considerably from the apparent dissension and ... (bbc/06)
- (i) ... in theory, the whole community *was* joined together. (ukbooks/08) (p. 16)
- (j) The Government *has* come to a compromise stance on monetary union because of deep splits within the Conservative Party between pro-Europeans such as

Kenneth Clarke, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and a large group of Euro-sceptics on the right. (times/10)

As far as I can see, the underlined verbs in the examples in (87) presuppose diversity and should therefore be followed by a plural verb. However, determining the nature of the verb implied is not as trivial a matter as it is thought to be. Given the frequency with which they mention the generalizations described in 5.5.8 and 5.5.9 (cf. pp. 119–20 above), pedagogical grammars appear to take it for granted that learners of English will intuitively establish whether a verb presupposes a unity or diversity (and hence triggers a singular verb or a plural verb). Taking such a decision is sometimes harder than it may seem at first sight. For instance, phrases like *be in chaos* at first sight seem to presuppose reference to individuals, but the corpus examples appear to suggest that the speaker focuses on the unity being destroyed, hence the use of a singular verb:

- (88)(a) Its management *has been in turmoil* since the sacking in November of Lord Young of Graffham and James Ross. (times/10)
 (b) The Soviet Army *is in disarray* because its soldiers do not know who is leading them. (today 11)
 (c) When I joined it, the orchestra *was in chaos*. (times/10)
 (d) ... and the whole family *was in a turmoil*. (ukspok/04)

The verb *head* suggests the leadership of a number of individuals, but the hypothesis that this verb presupposes diversity is not matched by the following corpus example, where the focus is no doubt on the fact that the unit is headed by the Countess:

- (89) The hard-working committee *was headed* by the Countess of Limerick, Chairman of the Council of the Red Cross, the Lady Chalker of Wallasey. (ukmags/03)

In the same way, *reassemble* presupposes reference to parts, but the following example shows that the focus is apparently again on the unit:

- (90) This production was seen at the Traverse during last year's Edinburgh Festival and the company *has been reassembled* for a short term, though it stays at the Donmar only until April 6. (times/10)

A plural verb may suggest that the actors are being reassembled, a reading which is unacceptable for pragmatic reasons, but this example definitely shows that even though (out of context) the meaning of the verb may tip the scales in favour of either a singular or a plural verb, it is not always the decisive factor determining verbal concord.

Moreover, although we may be able to establish the nature of the verb, it is not automatically reflected in the verb number. For instance, in Collins Cobuild dictionary, we find the following entries for the verb *divide* and the adjective *divided*:

- (91)(a) When something divides or is divided, it becomes separated into two or more distinct or smaller parts.
 (b) If people divide over something or if something divides people, it causes strong disagreement between them.

- (c) If something is divided, it contains or involves two or more opposing ideas, opinions, etc.

In other words, all these meanings seem to presuppose a unity (being destroyed), which is not entirely corroborated by the number of the verb in the corpus examples:

- (92)(a) The European Community *is* equally divided as the US. (bbc/06)
 (b) Diplomatic sources say the Council *is* divided about whether there should be a full review of the UN-imposed sanctions. (bbc/06)
 (c) The Spanish public *is* divided over who should inherit Julio's crown. (times/10)
 (d) The public *are* evenly divided between those that think . . . (times/10)
 (e) Permanent staff *are* divided into four categories. (ukephem/02)
 (f) The Yorkshire committee *were* divided about Tendulkar's replacement. (ukmags/03)

5.5.10. The presence of lexical items such as numbers, which one might expect to stress the individuality of the referents, does not necessarily result in the use of a plural verb:

- (93)(a) The 4,000-strong population *live* in subterranean dug-outs, no better than caves, which protect them from the harshness of their environment. (times/10)
 (b) The seven-man crew *were* unharmed, but the tether and satellite, last seen receding from Columbia at 100 mph, have been given up for lost. (times/10)
 (c) The 11-white-strong 12 person jury *were* asked to consider whether they believe the crime was deliberate. (ukmags/03)
 (d) The 350-strong team *were* told to expect 'hellish' heat humidity in America's Deep South next July. (today/11)
- (94)(a) The town's 60,000 population *elects* 18 councillors of whom only two are Tory. (times/10)
 (b) By 1.30, the 110-strong audience *has* settled down and is listening to gags from Scouse warm-up man Ted Robbin. (today/11)
 (c) The 100,000-strong army *is* recruiting 10,000 more to defend the city and pursue the Tigers in their new hideouts. (times/10)
 (d) Illingworth's five-man committee *sits* down to dinner at a secret location in the East Midlands tonight to pick the 13-man squad for next week's two Texaco Trophy matches against the Kiwis. (today/11)
 (e) The 6,300 crowd *was* set for a boring night as Atherton and Graham Gooch, opening after Stewart complained of back spasms while keeping wicket, put on 49. (today/11)
 (f) Yesterday, the close-knit 8,000-strong community *was* in shock. (today/11)
 (g) The trawler's four-man crew *is* missing, presumed dead, in the latest in a series of similar incidents in an area used by British and other NATO submarines. (bbc/06)
 (h) The eight member team *leaves* The Copthorne Aberdeen on March, 18, and at the end of the six stage run will have cycled more than 670 miles. (ukephem/02)

5.5.11. On pp. 102–3 above, it was pointed out that Poutsma (1914, II (1a): 243) believes that lexical items such as *all the* and *entire* stress the unity and are therefore followed by a singular verb. As far as *all the* is concerned, it was explained that in its function as predeterminer it is only compatible with a plural count NP (and a mass NP, a characterization that I believe does not apply to collectives, cf. pp. 94–5 above) and that for that reason, examples with predeterminer *all* were not taken into account. When

all is used independently, it seems to trigger the use of a plural verb (cf. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002: 502):

- (95)(a) Shortly, the yacht's crew were all safely tucked up in bed in the hospital. (ukmags/03)
- (b) The crew are all hand-picked. (ukbooks/08)
- (c) ... and immediate family are all around us (ukspok/04)

The semantics of the postdeterminers *entire* and *whole* appear to emphasize the unity of an entity and likewise we expect a singular verb to be used: in 14 out of the 17 examples I collected with *entire* this is indeed the case (cf. Levin, 2001: 124).

- (96)(a) The entire family *was* staring at him, waiting for him to speak. I can't. I don't know why. I can't say it. (ukbooks/08)
- (b) It may sound like the entire cast *is* imprisoned in a Christmas cracker factory. (today/11)

The following examples show that the context may trigger a plural verb irrespective of the fact that *entire* is used:

- (97)(a) A few more seconds, then lights! The Jackson Five!! – It is incredible. The entire audience *leap* to their feet, half of them climb on to their seats, the front rows try to get on the stage. (Juul, 1975: 105)
- (b) When I arrived at the Welsh Office in Whitehall the entire staff *were* assembled in the hall and greeted me with loud hand-clapping. A man would be a stone not to be moved by such a welcome home. (ukbooks/08)

The definition of *whole* is *all of something, entire (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English), complete or not divided (Cambridge International Dictionary of English)*. The description seems to imply a focus on the unity, which is confirmed by the fact that in only 8 out of 63 cases is a plural verb used.

- (98)(a) Why *don't* the whole company believe in my book? (ukspok/04)
- (b) When this first broke out our whole ministry team *were* just like you know sharks in a feeding frenzy man we were just going everywhere. (ukspok/04)
- (c) If you want some help my whole family *have* come for this ... (ICE-GB:S)
- (d) The whole crowd *are* twirling to their neighbours and promising not to be so Chicago-like. (ukmags/03)
- (e) The full committee *are* facing a recommendation to sign players born outside the county boundaries. (bbc/06)

Concluding remarks

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study was to explore the issue of verbal concord with collective nouns on the basis of attested corpus data. It has become evident that the ICE-GB corpus is not very well suited to that purpose for reasons of size. The Collins Cobuild corpus, which provides us with much larger numbers of examples, is a far more useful tool. This exploratory study has revealed some general patterns, the most important of which is that, with a few exceptions, collectives (morphologically singular NPs with multiple [+animate] (inclusive or generic) reference) are preferably

used with a singular verb. It is therefore misleading to say that the verb form is semantically or pragmatically motivated, i.e. that there is always a contextual element that induces the use of either a singular or a plural verb. It may be safe to advise students to use the singular as the default form, unless there are very clear semantic and/or pragmatic indications that impose the use of a plural verb. The final curtain on collectives has not been drawn. For one thing, our taxonomic considerations have shown that the nature of collectives is not easy to pin down. Hopefully, this investigation has cleared the way for a more in-depth examination of usage and a classification of collectives.

Author's address:

Tennisstraat 14

9050 Gentbrugge

Belgium

Ilse.depraetere@pandora.be

Appendix 1

- (1) If you're in England's barmy army, a even barmier army are watching you. (sunnov/17)
- (2) This invariably occurs when a studio audience have laughed at an amusing line or a funny piece of business during a film sequence and, in so doing, have drowned out the dialogue immediately following that point. (ukephem/02)
- (3) A club want their peg money returned after a disastrous day on the River Nene when all 30 anglers on a coach trip blanked. (ukmags/03)
- (4) Against the Road Crew: during the protest, a mischievous road crew sneak off with Tom and Brad's clothes and drive off back to the hotel in the tour van. (ukmags/03)
- (5) A British crew expect to eat what they know on location. (ukbooks/08)
- (6) Long after a tank's crew were dead, the thick, black oily smoke would rise, slowly, into the sky, finally to be joined by the acrid smell of burning rubber and the stench of roasted flesh. (ukbooks/08)
- (7) Though it was no classic, for once a fight crowd weren't left chanting 'rubbish' and demanding their money back. (ukmags/11)
- (8) A team from the London Business School and the London School of Economics have looked at the likely effects of the tunnel. (bbc/06)
- (9) And if this job that I've got now, which is only temporary pending orders that a company have put out... (ukspok/04)
- (10) Obree is also being followed by a television crew who are making a documentary for Channel Four, and, on Friday, a Paris-based company were talking of making a bid for his life story to make a fictional film about him. (ukmags/03)
- (11) However much it seems a certain London record company appear to be dithering. (ukmags/03)
- (12) ... you will know quite what's happening in a rough quite unstructured way – a theatre company are going to be dispersed around the library. (ukspok/04)
- (13) A young Danish family have settled in Hackney. (ukmags/03)
- (14) A fairly Famous Family present their vibrant and exciting show – Musical Manipulation guarantees a hilarious extravaganza of comedy stunts, salamandery and skill, admission free. (ukmags/03)

- (15) There's also an article in it that says that a problem family move into TV street and it was saying that Stan Ogden and Hilda Ogden are moving into Coronation Street. (ukspok04)
- (16) This method eventually got me to a grassy plateau where an Irish family were having a picnic. (times/10)
- (17) A missing teenager's family were last night waiting to hear if she was the victim of a horrific murder. (today/11)
- (18) A recession-hit family have turned their backs on Britain and moved to a grass hut in an African village. (today/11)
- (19) Yet just yards away, a family prepare to risk their lives leaving. (today/11)
- (20) A Liverpool Victoria friendly society have a free guide. (sunnov/17)
- (21) A numerous and active staff have research interests covering a wide range of topics throughout chemistry and applied chemistry. (ukephem/02)
- (22) It does seem to us now that unless your name's Patel Singh – something like that – Gupta, this Council do not want to know. (ukspok/04)
- (23) This crew were lost in space from the very start. (ukmags/03)
- (24) With that battery of binoculars and cameras, this crowd are clearly on to something big. Well, not that big. (today/11)
- (25) This amazingly talented team remain the benchmark against which other outfits still need to measure their effectiveness. (ukephem/02)
- (26) But I fear it could be the last time that this money-spinning team enjoy each other's company. (today/11)
- (27) But this team are likely to play worse before they play better, and the ferocious glare of the English tabloids is no place for the Irish to face humiliation. (times/10)
- (28) I want our TV news to cover the world from Glasgow, like we do on radio, and I know this team are up to it. (times/10)
- (29) This previously unknown-to-me boatbuilding company have produced a boat in the same vein as most of the US sportsboats that come into the country. (ukmags/03)
- (30) And er we're just believing and agreeing that we will see many many many many more come in to the Kingdom of God as this family have done to make the Lord Jesus Christ the Lord of their family and their life. (ukspok/04)
- (31) This family are a dirty lot and the house generally dirty. In terms such as these the 'neglect' was vividly portrayed. (ukbooks/08)
- (32) For this management have to create conditions where the motivation needs can be met for the workforce. (ukbooks/08)

References

- Alexander, L. G. (1988). *Longman English grammar*. London: Longman.
- Arigne, V. (1998). Le nom: problèmes de nombre et catégorisation nominale en anglais. In Paulin, C. (ed.), *Hommage à Jean Tournier, Recherches en linguistique étrangère XIX*. Besançon: Annales littéraires de l'Université de Franche-Comté. 32–67.
- Attal, J. P. (1987). *Grammaire et usage de l'anglais*. Gembloux: Duculot.
- Bache, C. & N. Davidsen-Nielsen (1997). *Mastering English*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bailey, C.-J. N. (1987). 'Marginalia' on singulars and plurals in English. *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 12: 3–11.
- Bauer, L. (1988). Number agreement with collective nouns in New Zealand English. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 8: 47–259.
- Bauer, L. (1994). *Watching English change*. London: Longman.

- Berland-Delépine, S. (1989). *La grammaire anglaise de l'étudiant*. Gap: Ophrys.
- Biber, D., S. Johansson, G. Leech, S. Conrad & E. Finegan (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. London: Longman.
- Bissonnette, N. (1994). L'accord du verbe au sujet en anglais: une simple question de 'bon' sens. *Actes des Journées de Linguistique* 8: 25–9.
- Cambridge international dictionary of English* (1995). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Collins Cobuild English grammar* (1990). London: HarperCollins.
- Collins Cobuild English language dictionary* (1987). London and Glasgow: Collins.
- Collins Cobuild grammar patterns 2. The noun* (1998). London: HarperCollins.
- Corbett, G. G. (1979). The agreement hierarchy. *Journal of Linguistics* 15: 203–24.
- Cruse, D. A. (1986). *Lexical semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (1984). *Who cares about English usage?* London: Pelican Books Ltd.
- Declerck, R. (1991). *A comprehensive descriptive grammar of English*. Tokyo: Kaitakusho.
- Dekeyser, X., B. Devriendt, G. A. J. Tops & S. Geukens (1999). *Foundations of English grammar*. 5th edition. Leuven & Amersfoort: Acco.
- Downing, A. & P. Locke (1992). *A university course in English grammar*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Flaux, N. (1999). A propos de noms collectifs. *Revue de Linguistique Romane* 251–2: 471–502.
- Fries, U. (1981). Zur Kongruenz bei Kollektiven. In Pöckl, W. (ed.), *Europäische Mehrsprachigkeit. Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Mario Wandruszka*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer. 19–27.
- Fries, U. (1988). The crew have abandoned the ship – concord with collective nouns revisited. *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 13: 99–104.
- Greenbaum, S. (1996). *Oxford English grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hirtle, W. (1984). L'accord en anglais et l'incidence du verbe au sujet. *Modèles Linguistiques* 6: 99–108.
- Hirtle, W. H. (1982). *Number and inner space: a study of grammatical number in English*. Québec: Presses de l'université de Laval.
- Huddleston, R. (1988). *English grammar: an outline*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huddleston, R. & G. K. Pullum (2002). *Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hundt, M. (1998). *New Zealand English grammar – fact or fiction?* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jackendoff, R. (1991). Parts and boundaries. *Cognition* 41: 9–45.
- Jespersen, O. 1961 (1914). *A modern English grammar on historical principles II. Syntax*, vol. 1. London: Allen and Unwin; Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard.
- Johansson, S. (1979). American and British English grammar: an elicitation experiment. *English Studies* 60: 195–215.
- Joosten, F. (2001). De 'boorbaarheid' van Nederlandse collectiva. *Over Taal* 40: 77–9.
- Joyon, J. (1985). *Grammaire anglaise*. Joyon édition.
- Juul, A. (1975). *On concord of number in modern English*. Copenhagen: Nova Copenhagen.
- Kruisinga, E. (1932 [1911]). *A handbook of present-day English. Part II. English accidence and syntax*, vols. 2 and 3. Groningen: Noordhoff.
- Larreya, P. & C. Rivière (1999). *Grammaire explicative de l'anglais*. 2nd edition. Harlow: Longman.
- Leech, G. & J. Svartvik (1994). *A communicative grammar of English*. 2nd edition. London and New York: Longman.
- Levin, M. (1998). Manchester United are my team. On concord with collective nouns. *Moderna Sprak* 92: 14–18.

- Levin, M. (1999). Concord with collective nouns revisited. *ICAME Journal* 23: 21–33.
- Levin, M. (2001). *Agreement with collective nouns in English*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Levin, M. (2002). Mid-Atlantic agreement. In Modiano, M. (ed.), *Studies in Mid-Atlantic English*. Gävle: HS-institutionens skriftserie No 7. 59–73.
- Lock, G. (1996). *Functional English grammar*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Longman dictionary of contemporary English* (1995). Harlow: Longman.
- Mackenzie, J. L. (1997). *Principles and pitfalls*. Bussum: Coutinho.
- Malavieille, M. & W. Rotgé (1997). *La grammaire anglaise. Collection Bescherelle*. Paris: Hatier.
- Nixon, G. (1972). Corporate-concord phenomena in English. *Studia Neophilologica* 44: 120–6.
- Persson, G. (1989). On the semantics of collective nouns in English. In Odenstedt, B., G. Persson & R. Matts (eds.), *Instead of flowers*. Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell. 79–88.
- Peters, P. (1999). Differing on agreement: a report on LANGSCAPE 3. *English Today* 15: 6–9.
- Poutsma, H. (1914). *A grammar of late modern English. Part II. The parts of speech. IA*. Groningen: P. Noordhoff.
- Putseys, Y. (1996). *A modular approach to the grammar of English*. Herent: Devano.
- Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech & J. Svartvik (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London & New York: Longman.
- Reid, W. (1991). *Verb and noun number in English*. London & New York: Longman.
- Schibsbye, K. (1970). *A modern English grammar*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sparkes, I. G. (1975). *Dictionary of collective nouns and group terms: being a compendium of more than 1800 nouns, group terms*. 2nd edition. Detroit: Gale Research Co.
- Strang, B. (1966). Some features of S-V concord in present-day English. *English Studies Today* 4 (ed. Ilva Cellini): 73–87.
- Swan, M. (1995). *Practical English usage*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sweet, H. (1900). *A new English grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Taylor, D. S. (1993). A question of concord. *English Today* 9: 10–17.
- Van Brederode, T. & W. Koopman (1990). *A key to better English*. Muiderberg: Coutinho.
- Walker-Read, A. (1974). Is the name United States singular or plural? *Names: Journal of the American Name Society* 22: 129–36.
- Zandvoort, R. W. (1964 [1945]). *A handbook of English grammar*. Groningen: J. B. Wolters.