

Non-verbal number agreement. Between the distributive plural and singular: exceptions or free variation?

Karolina Rudnicka, University of Gdańsk;

Aleš Klégr, Charles University in Prague

Paper presented at the 50th Poznań Linguistic Meeting

Keywords: non-verbal number agreement; distributive plural; distributive singular; free variation; corpus linguistics

We investigate the topic of non-verbal number agreement, i.e. the agreement in number between the (formally or notionally) plural subject of a clause and a nominal clause element in the predicate part of this clause where the agreement may be viewed as an additional signal (and reinforcement) of the connection between them; compare sentences (1) and (2).

(1) 113 of the soldiers lost their lives, more than 100 were injured. (BNC, 1985-1994)

(2) Look at all of the new people that lost their job and (...) (COCA: 2012)

The paper focuses on contemporary English which seems to overwhelmingly prefer the so-called distributive plural occurring in a situation where “a set of entities [is] matched individually with individual entities in another set” (Quirk et al. 1985: 768). Sentence (1) is an example in which there is a direct correspondence between the number of the subjects and objects. This general tendency is, however, not without exceptions (cf. Sørensen 1985, Dušková et al. 2006), as example (2) shows.

The first aim of the paper is to provide a detailed account of literature-reported scenarios in which the general preference for the distributive plural is overruled (cf. Sørensen 1985 and Rappaport 2017), for example in the case of i) invariable idioms; ii) the indication of joint possession; iii) the intention to convey ideas of universal, abstract or figurative kind. The second aim is to offer fresh insights based on a corpus study (both quantitative and qualitative) of two structurally similar constructions, namely *lose one's life* and *lose one's job*, and the statistical data it provides on the distribution of the distributive plural and the distributive singular in these constructions. The third goal is to discuss the possible presence of free variation in some of the distributive singular and distributive plural uses, such as exemplified in (3) and (4):

(3) Those two men lost their lives and according to the Iraqi government so did two others from the Muslim family living nearby. (COCA: 2009)

(4) More than 65 people lost their life after a cruise ship sunk outside of the islands of Paros. (COCA: 2000)

On that account, the study suggests and discusses conditions for a case to be seen as an instantiation of free variation as understood by Capelle (2009). Methodologically, the study draws upon corpus linguistics, computational linguistics and usage-based approaches. The data analysed in the study is extracted from the BNC and COCA.

References

- Capelle, Bert. 2009. Can we factor out free choice? In Dufter et al., eds. *Describing and Modeling Variation in Grammar*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter: 183-201.
- Dušková, Libuše, et al. 2006 (3rd ed.). *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* [A Grammar of Contemporary English against the Background of Czech]. Praha: Academia.
- Quirk, Randolph, Greenbaum, Sidney, Leech, Geoffrey and Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Edinburgh: Longman.
- Rappaport, Jennifer. 2017. “Singular or Plural? Sometimes, It Depends”. *The MLA Style Center: Writing Resources from the Modern Language Association*, 31 May 2017, <https://style.mla.org/singular-or-plural/>, accessed on 28 October 2020.
- Sørensen, Knud. 1985. The distributive plural and its limits. *English Studies* 66(4): 338-350.