



SOME PROBLEMS OF GRAMMATICAL AGREEMENT IN WRITTEN PRODUCTIONS OF SCIENCE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

Adaje, A. Ochigbo¹,

Alagbe, A. Adewole²

¹Department of Educational Foundations and
General Studies, University of Agriculture,
Makurdi, Nigeria

²Department of English,
Nassarawa State University,
Keffi, Nigeria

Abstract:

Concord, also termed *Agreement* in English grammar, is an indispensable sentential element in daily language use. So its knowledge is instrumental to meaningful learned communication. A major type is subject-verb concord which has attracted detailed description in grammar and adequate focus in empirical studies on the usage problems of learners of English as a second language particularly at the tertiary school level in Nigeria. But other concord types have not had sufficient focus in such research works. The purpose of the study is to describe the other concord types using structural grammar approach and investigate the difficulties with their usage in the written productions of some science undergraduate students. The study subjects are two hundred and eighty-six students randomly drawn from among first-year students of an academic session in University of Agriculture, Makurdi. A research instrument, which has both essay- writing task and objective test, was administered to the students at the close of the session when they had had a use of English course, called *Communication in English*. Frequency and percentage statistical tools, in addition to extracts from the students' works, are used to analyze the data. The findings show that the students construct sentences devoid of the following concord relationships: subject-complement, object-complement, distributive-number, pronoun-antecedent and concord of person. The identified linguistic incompetence adversely affects their communication in English. It is therefore recommended that the concord types studied here should be adequately taught and accompanied with sufficient practice exercises at the level of the English course for first-year university students so that they can gain mastery in the use of the items in communication.

Keywords: grammatical agreement, usage problems, second language learners

1. Introduction

The linguistic category of concord, like tense, is a feature of every utterance or sentence in daily language use. Concord, which is also called *agreement* in English grammar, is the relationship between two grammatical elements such that if one contains a particular linguistic feature then the other must manifest a corresponding similar feature, also. (Quick et al., 2007). To guarantee effective communication, knowledge of concord is imperative. A concord error arises where no grammatical bond exists between two linguistic forms which should otherwise exhibit structural bond; for example, a singular noun should be preceded by a singular determiner or take a singular verb in the predicate section of the sentential structure. There are various types of concord. A structural grammar description of concord recognizes subject-verb, pronoun-antecedent, subject-complement, object-complement, distributive-number and concord of person. (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1976; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 2007). Subject-verb concord has attracted elaborate attention in many empirical studies on Nigerian learners' usage problems (Oludare, 2016; Agbo, Kadiri and Ijem, 2018). The other concord types lack adequate focus in such studies. This study particularly describes the other concord types and investigates the difficulties associated with their usage in the written English productions of some science undergraduate students.

2. Aspects of Grammatical Agreement in Modern English Communication

In the section that follows, a description of the uses of the other types of concord in modern English communication are provided. They are the concord of person, subject-complement, object-complement, distributive-number and pronoun-antecedent concord (Azar, 1999, 2003; Quirk and Greenbaum, 1976; Leech and Svartvik, 2002; Close, 1981)

A. Concord of Person

Rule 1: The verb in the present tense has person concord with the 1st and 3rd person subject; concord with BE and only 3rd person concord with other verbs (Quirk, et al, 2007, Ansell, 2000):

- (1) *I am* your colleague. (1st person singular concord).
- (2) *He is* your colleague.
- (3) *She knows* you.

While (1) demonstrates 1st person singular concord, sentences 2 and 3 illustrate 3rd person singular concord. The past of BE manifests concord distinctions, also:

- (4) *I am* your colleague.
(5) *He was* your colleague. } 1st and 3rd person singular concord

'Were', a past form of BE, is used with 2nd person plural and all the plural persons.

Rule 2: In a coordinate subject that has *or, either or, neither nor*, as coordinators, the last noun plural determines the person of the verb (Quirk, et al, 2007; Azar, 2003):

- (6) Neither you, nor *anyone* else *knows* the route.
(7) Either my wife or I *am* going.

Rule 3: In a relative clause and cleft sentences, a relative pronoun subject is mostly followed by a verb in agreement with its antecedent (Quirk, et al, 2007; Thomson and Martinet, 1986).

- (1) It is I who *am* to blame.
(9) It is she who *is* in command.
(10) It is they who *are* opposing the ban

B. Subject-complement and Object-complement Concord

Rule 4: There is number concord between subject and subject complement (Quirk, et al, 2007; Nelson, 2002):

- (11) *My son is* a saint.
(12) *My sons are* saints.

The concord in these sentences (11) and (12) is conditioned by the semantic role of the two complements. But there are exceptions:

- (13) My only hope at retirement *is* my business investments. (also, *are*)
(14) More teachers *is* the next item on the agenda (also, *are*)
(15) Our principal crop *is* yams.

The complement in (13) appears condensed with possibly an implied preposition: *My only hope at retirement is in my business investments*. The subject of sentence (14) can be said to have also been condensed from something like: *the question of more teachers* or may be considered as a title. In (15) the subject complement is a generic noun phrase which could equally be singular: Their principal crop is *the yam*. The complements in (13-15) have the potentiality of subject-complement reversal: *My business investments* are my only hope at retirement. *The next item on the agenda* is more teachers. *Yams* are their principal crop.

It must be noted that pseudo-cleft constructions with a fronted object *what* may have a plural subject-complement:

(16) What the school needs most *is* books.

But since *what* is ambivalent in number, it is often interpreted as equivalent to either '*the thing that*' or '*the things that*'; there can be a plural verb in agreement with the subject *What*-clause:

(16) What the schools need most *are* books.

It must be stressed too that there is no subject-complement with the idioms *be all ears*, *be all elbows*, and *be all fingers and thumbs*:

(18) a. We *are all ears* (we are listening with all our attention).

(18) b. I *am all ears* (I am listening with all my attention).

C. Distributive-Concord

Rule 5: The distributive plural is used in a plural noun phrase to refer to a set of entities that are matched individually with individual entities in another set (Quirk, et al, 2007; Lester, 2008):

(19) Have you all brought your *examination cards*? ('each has an examination card').

(20) Submit your *essays* next Wednesday (each has to submit one essay).

Though the distributive plural is the norm, the distributive singular may also be used to focus on individual cases:

(21) Some men have an understanding *wife*/understanding *wives*.

(22) The pupils raised their *hands*/*hand*.

The singular is compulsory or preferable with idioms and metaphors:

(23) They *are keeping an open mind*.

(24) They *vented their spleen on him*.

(25) We can't *put our figure on evil*.

Not:

(23) *They *are keeping open minds*.

(24) *They *vented their spleens on him*.

(25) *We can't *put our fingers on evil*.

D. Pronoun-antecedent Concord

Rule 6: Pronouns agree with their antecedents in number, person and gender; between subject and object or complement if the second element is a reflexive pronoun (Quirk, et al, 2007; Swan and Walter, 2000):

- (26) *They* helped *themselves*.
- (27) *She* allowed *herself* a rest.
- (28) *He* is not *himself* today.
- (29) *We* couldn't come *ourselves*.
- (30) *The Café* pays *itself*.
- (31) *I* wrote to the governor *myself*.

The concord relation may be with an element other than the subject, for example, an object:

- (32) He drove *them* in *their* own jeep car.
- (33) I wrote to *my* sister about *herself*.

The collective noun subjects allow plural concord:

- (34) *The army* congratulated *themselves*, if not victory, at least on avoidance of defeat.

Rule 7: The pronouns *who*, *whom* and *which* agree with their antecedents in gender (Quirk, et al, 2007; Berry, 2012)

- (35) *Joseph* is a guardsman *who* should know.
- (36) This is *the Librarian* *whom* you spoke to.
- (37) *The car* *which* you ordered last month has arrived.

Who and *whom* are used for personal references while *which* is used for non-personal reference. But *whose*, unlike *who* and *whom*, has personal and non- personal references:

- (38) The woman *whose* daughter you met is Mrs. James.
- (39) The House *whose* roof was damaged by the rainstorm has now been fixed.

There is however, a reluctance to use *whose* for non-personal antecedents probably because of its morphological link with *who* and *whom*. However its use in relative clause as in example (39) is not outrageous (Quirk, et al.). Speakers or writers who wish to avoid the use of *whose* for non-personal reference resort to the use of *which*, thought with some awkwardness:

- (40) The house *which* roof was damaged by the rainstorm has now been fixed.

Or:

(41) The house the roof of *which* was damaged by the rainstorms has now been fixed.

Rule 8: Personal and possessive pronouns in the 1st and 3rd persons agree with their antecedents in number. Also, the 3rd person pronouns (*he, she, it*) agree with their antecedents in gender (Quirk, et al, 2007; Greenbaum and Nelson, 1996):

(42) Martinet and I have finished *our* work. Can *we* start lunch now?

(43) a. This is *my* book and that is *his* book.

(43) b. This is *mine* and that is *his*.

(44) Mark hurt *his* right toe.

(45) Juliet knows *she* is weak in sums.

(46) The chairs were too heavy so I left *them*.

Rule 9: The pronoun *they* is gender neutral so it is commonly used as a 3rd person singular pronoun. Thus to avoid gender partiality, *they* is used in preference to the indefinite pronouns *everyone, everybody, someone, anyone, no one, nobody* (Quirk, et al, 2007; Huddleston and Pullum, 2005):

(47) *Everyone* thinks *they* have the answer.

(48) Has *anybody* bought *their* lunch?

(49) *No one* could have blamed *themselves* for that mistake.

A similar use of the plural occurs with coordinate subjects referring to both sexes as in (50) and with a singular noun phrase that has a personal noun of indeterminate gender as head as in (51).

(50) Either *he* or *she* is going to have to change *their* practice.

(51) *Every student* had to submit *their* assignment paper this afternoon.

In formal usage, '*he*' is used as the unmarked form for indeterminate gender:

(52) Everyone thinks *he* has the answer.

But the tendency is increasingly being ignored now (Quirk, et al.). A more laborious alternative is the use of both masculine and feminine pronouns:

(53) *Every student* has to submit *his* or *her* assignment paper this afternoon.

In fact, this usage becomes clumsy if the pronouns have to be repeated for any reason:

(54) If a student fails to submit *his* or *her* assignment this afternoon, *he* or *she* will lose the allotted score.

To avoid the clumsiness, the subject can be made plural:

(55) All students have to submit their assignment paper.

A similar method can be used for the indefinite pronouns as well:

(56) All of them think they have the answer.

Rule 10: The indefinite pronoun *one* is followed by the same pronoun for subsequent references (Quirk, et al, 2007):

(57) *One* should choose *one's* spouse thoughtfully.

Rule 11: The rule that singular collective nouns take plural verbs where the individual members of the group are referred to holds for pronoun concord (Quirk, et al, 2007: Eastwood, 2002)

(58) The committee *are* reducing the number of *their* meetings.

(59) The committee *is* reducing the number or *its* meetings.

The use of personal pronoun *who* to refer to the group as a set of individuals as opposed to the use of noun-personal *which* for the group as a unit can reflect number even though there is no number contrast in relative pronouns:

(60) The committee, *who* are reducing *their* meetings, reconvene next month.

(61) The committee *which* is reducing *its* meetings reconvened next month.

3. Methodology

The research designed is a descriptive survey as the study aims at finding out if students' uses of some selected concord types are congruent with standard contemporary English (Quirk, et al, 2007). A sample size of two hundred and eighty-six students was randomly drawn from among first-year students of the University of Agriculture, Makurdi, Benue State, central Nigeria, during an academic session. The research instrument, which was made up of both essay-writing task and multiple-choice tests, was administered to the study subjects at the close of the second semester. Frequency and percentage statistical tools were used to analyze the data; in addition, extracts from the students' written productions were employed to depict their weakness in the use of the selected concord types. In the objective test in particular, all items in

which the subjects had average score of less than 50% were discriminated as problems that demand remedial teaching and drill.

4. Results

	X	%	Remarks
A. Concord of Person			
1. I do lots of advertisement but you never see me as I really <i>is/am</i> .	181	63	Less problematic
2. Neither you, nor he, nor anyone else <i>knows/know</i> the route.	153	53	Less problematic
3. It is I who <i>is/am</i> to blame.	64	22	Problematic
B. Subject-complement and object-complement Concord			
4. Our principal crop <i>is/are</i> yams.	134	46	Problematic
C. Distributive-number Concord			
5(a) They vented their <i>spleens/spleen</i> on him.	113	39	Problematic
5(b) We can't put our <i>fingers/finger</i> on evil.	69	24	Problematic
D. Pronoun-antecedent Concord			
6. They helped <i>themselves/themselves</i> .	197	68	Less problematic
7. The car <i>whom/which</i> you ordered last week has arrived.	174	60	Less problematic
8. This is <i>my/mine</i> and that is <i>he's/his</i> .	146	51	Less problematic
9(a) Everyone thinks he <i>has/they</i> have the answer.	54	18	Problematic
9(b) Either he or she is going to have to change <i>her/their</i> practice.	165	57	Less problematic
10. One should choose <i>one's/his</i> spouse thoughtfully.	160	57	Less problematic
11. The committee is reducing the number of <i>its/their</i> meeting.	168	58	Less problematic

5. Discussion

The students' performance in each concord type is discussed below:

A. Concord of person

Of the three items on concord of person in the multiple-choice test, the students failed one; representing 67% pass or 33% failure. Yet something does have to be said about the students' difficulty with the failed item which is (3): **It is I who is to blame*. There is no concord between the first person singular *I* with its verb. In a relative clause and cleft sentences, a relative pronoun subject is followed by a verb in agreement with its antecedent. So the correct sentence is this: *It is I who am to blame*. There are instances of error of concord of person in the students' essay as shown in the sentences below:

*1. Corruption is the act of embezzling what does not belong to *you*

*2. Anybody that *commit* crime and *he/she* is brought to the police station, *he* will issue money as bribe and the policemen will set free the person.

There are clear wrong uses of person as italicized. The first extract, sentence (1), reads better when the objective case *you* is replaced with the impersonal indefinite pronoun *one*. There is inconsistency of person in (2), resulting in the elimination of gender neutrality initiated by the indefinite pronoun *anybody* and the introduction of gender bias with the second use of *he*. The sentence is better off without the third person singular *he* and *she*. The correct sentences are provided below:

1. Corruption is the act of embezzling what does not belong to *one*.
2. *Anybody* that *commits* crime and is brought to the police station, *he/she* gives bribe and the police set the person free.

B. Subject-complement and Objet-complement Concord

The students failed the lone item that examined them on this concord feature which is the fourth item in the multiple-choice test. The students' response, *Our principal crop are yams*, is ungrammatical because it is an exceptional case in which subject and its complement have different numbers and so the subject-complement does not determine the concord. The subject-complement here is a generic noun phrase which could be singular: *Their principal crop is yam*. The complement also has the potentiality of subject-complement reversal: *Yams are their principal crop*. There were also numerous concord errors of this sort in the students' essays as shown by these extracts:

- *1. *These are some of the question* I do ask myself, if it will start from the top which *is* our leaders who can make them change?
- *2. *Corruption in Nigeria* is the *abnormalities* that characterize the attitudes, thoughts and actions of Nigerians.

The sentences 1 and 2 display apparent instances of incongruent subject-complement concord. The corrections are given below:

1. *This* is the *question* that I do ask myself: if it starts with our leaders who can make them change?
2. *Corruption in Nigeria* is the *abnormality* that characterizes the attitudes, thoughts and actions of Nigerians.

C. Distributive-number Concord

Only two items examined this concord-type and the students failed them as reproduced below:

- *1. *They* vented *their spleens* on him.
- *2. *We* can't put our *fingers* on evil.

The plural subjects, *they and we*, induced the wrong usage but in modern English, the singular is mandatory or suitable with idiomatic and metaphoric expressions. The correct versions, therefore, are these:

1. They vented their *spleen* on him.
2. We can't put our *finger* on evil.

A similar concord problem exists in the students' composition as displayed by this excerpt:

*Not all that glitters *are* gold.
Correction: Not all that glitters *is* gold.

D. Pronoun-antecedent Concord

Items 6-11 in the objective test examined the students on pronoun-antecedent concord but the students failed item (9a) as shown below:

*Everyone thinks *he* has the answer.
The correct version is: Everyone thinks *they have* the answer.

To avoid gender partiality in (9a), *they*, being gender neutral, is used in reference to the indefinite pronouns *everybody, someone, anyone, no one, and nobody*. Though the students failed only one item here, errors of pronoun-antecedent concord ranked first in the students' essays. Instances of such error are:

- *1. On this fateful day they attacked *a women* and *his husband*, collected some of their things.
- *2. I asked myself "what if *you* were the one?"

Arbitrary pronoun-antecedent concord manifests in the sentences: the subjects are not in agreement with their antecedents, as italicized. The correct sentences are given below:

1. On this fateful day they attacked *a women* and *her* husband, collected some of their things.
- *2. I asked myself "what if *I* was the one?"

Finally, it is evident from the discussion of the results that the students have problems with all the five types concord studied. In the others, the students' problems were quantitatively high. The difficulty with concord of person is that relative pronoun subjects are not followed by verbs in agreement with their antecedents. Also, there are cases of unacceptable concord relations between subject and complement as well as

between object and its complement. Instances of wrong distributive-number concord also exist in their essays.

6. Conclusion, Implication and Recommendation

The main aim of the study is to investigate some undergraduates' difficulties with selected concord types which are given inadequate focus in usage research. The concord types are subject-complement, subject-object, distributive-number, pronoun-antecedent, and concord of person. The study has shown that the students have problems using them correctly in communication. The ultimate implication of these findings is that the students write sentences which are devoid of correct concord relations and the deficiency adversely affects effective self-expression. It is therefore recommended that the adequate focus should be given to teaching and practice exercise on basic structural items during the use of English course in our universities so as to groom the students in their uses in communication.

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