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The Duality of Collective Nouns

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# TECHNICAL MEMORANDUM

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The Duality of Collective Nouns

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Abstract

Instead of dismissing the existence of collective nouns in English on syntactic grounds, this article proposes that collective nouns comprise a contextual or discourse category of nouns exhibiting duality of number.

This duality stems from a choice, open to the writer or speaker, of using a collective noun as either a singular or plural noun--except for a few restrictions. The process of selecting one grammatical number rather than the other is more or less a semantic problem; however, since this choice manifests itself formally either within or across the boundaries of a main clause or sentence, it has syntactic or contextual (anaphoric) consequences and is therefore describable in grammatical terms.

The three main types of collective nouns we have observed (i.e., particularizing, unique, and generic) are discussed individually.

The Duality of Collective Nouns \*

The so-called "collective nouns" of English have never been satisfactorily described. There has been no consensus of opinion on them, among either linguists or traditional grammarians. It comes as no surprise, then, that textbook writers and teachers of English have presented inconsistent and often puzzling descriptions and definitions of collective nouns.

Is collectivity a numerical category akin to singularity or plurality? Is it merely a notional category which may prove useful to the teacher at times, but which has no explicit grammatical basis? In the course of this paper we shall see that the answer to both questions is "no." Rather, it will be seen that collectivity is both a notional and a grammatic category which operates on a more abstract level than do singularity and plurality.

Linguists whose primary interest is the structure of the English sentence tell us that collective nouns do not form a syntactic category distinct from singular nouns or plural nouns. As evidence they point to the fact that, if one considers any given sentence containing a collective noun, the noun can be described as being either singular or plural in number. For example:

The committee was discussing a proposal. (singular)

I saw the mob; they were on the verge of rioting. (plural)

And the conclusion of most linguistically-oriented grammarians has been that "collective nouns" are nothing more than a superfluous numerical category--a vestige of traditional grammar.

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The interesting thing about the above examples--something the linguists have ignored or missed entirely--is that one can easily change the grammatical number of the collective nouns used in both of these cases:

The committee were discussing a proposal.\* (plural)

I saw the mob; it was on the verge of rioting. (singular)

Furthermore, a thorough inspection of those nouns that have traditionally been regarded as collective reveals that the great majority of them share this characteristic of numerical duality--a notional characteristic which also manifests itself grammatically, but not necessarily at the sentence level.

In fact, if one limits discussion of number to the sentence level, those sentences containing simple past verb forms or modal auxiliaries will turn out to have no overt number indication (in the verb phrase) for collective subject nouns--or for any kind of subject noun for that matter, as shown by the verbs in the following:

The class didn't quiet down.

The government should rectify that mistake.

In such cases, then, one must go beyond the sentence in question to see if there are any clues to number, such as following anaphoric expressions (i.e., expressions which usually refer back to a previously mentioned item: the antecedent). The following extensions of the above examples show us that personal pronouns often perform this anaphoric function, and also give us a

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\*This example is typical of British English, where both the singular and plural choices manifest themselves within a sentence or main clause. American English on the other hand favors singular number within the sentence or main clause but freely uses both the singular and plural choices across sentence or clause boundaries. Where other such examples are given, it should be understood that British rather than American usage is being presented, e.g., the preceding pair of examples.

clue as to the number that the speaker or writer intended the collective noun to have:

The class didn't quiet down; they were in a boisterous mood.

The government should rectify that mistake if it can.

By looking beyond the sentence or main clause in question, we find the clue to the plurality of "class" in the fact that the pronoun "they" is used to refer to it; "government," however, is the antecedent of the pronoun "it" and must therefore be singular. One should remember that "it" could also be used to refer to "class" and "they" to refer to "government."

The choice of singular or plural number seems to depend on the speaker's, or writer's, point of view; it is not a completely random choice. If he conceives of "the class" as a whole group or unit, the choice of number will probably be singular. If he thinks more in terms of the individuals that make up the group, the choice will very likely be plural. \* The fact that one has this choice signals the presence of a collective noun. Therefore, we can define a collective noun as a noun that may operate as either a singular or plural noun--the number of the noun being determined by the verb of the sentence or main clause in which it occurs or by anaphoric reference. \*\*

Having established a procedure for identifying collective nouns in English, we shall now discuss the three main types of collective nouns--

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\* It has come to my attention that Talmy Givón made the suggestion that collectivity might imply two senses, one a singular sense, the other a collective sense.

\*\* It is, of course, possible to have the verb signal singular number and the anaphoric expression plural number but not vice versa: The class was boisterous. They wouldn't quiet down. (But not: The class were boisterous. It wouldn't quiet down.) Such examples reinforce the concept of duality presented here, but they also suggest that one must move from singular (group) to plural (members) but not vice versa in any given discourse.

which are but a reflection of the three main types of nominal expressions in English viewed from a contextual perspective. Consider the following groups of collective nouns:

<u>I</u>	<u>II</u>	<u>III</u>
(a/the) class	the U.S.	the clergy
(a/the) team	the Kremlin	the bourgeoisie
(a/the) crew	(the) Congress	the intelligentsia
(a/the) government	(the) Parliament	the mass(es)
etc.	etc.	etc.

The first group consists of nongeneric common nouns; such collective nouns might be referred to as "particularizing" because they mention some particular collection (people or animals) that belongs to a larger set composed of similarly identical collections. The majority of collective nouns in English belong to this group and the difference in meaning or intention (signaled by the singular/plural choice) is as follows:

The team have been waiting to play since noon.  
(particularizing plural collective: emphasis on individual members of the collection)

The team has been waiting to play since noon.  
(particularizing singular collective: emphasis on the collection as a whole)

Other particularizing collective nouns include: herd, flock, family, clan, club, group, army, etc.

The second list consists of "unique" or proper collective nouns--each of which could be described as the only member of the set to which it belongs. Strangely enough, such nouns have seldom been thought of as collective. But

by applying the test of duality one can establish that they are indeed a special type of collective noun:

The U.S. is having a presidential election in 1968.  
(unique singular collective: nation or institution as a whole; an inanimate concept)

What about the U.S.? They haven't enjoyed de Gaulle's remarks either.

(unique plural collective: the individual people belonging to a nation or institution--or more specifically, the present leaders or head of the nation or institution; an animate concept)

The difference of meaning signaled by the singular/plural choice becomes more pronounced in the case of unique collective nouns than in the case of particularizing collective nouns. It is therefore more difficult to think of constructions (using the unique collectives) in which either the singular or plural choice would be appropriate. The following, however, illustrates that such an example is possible, at least across main clause or sentence boundaries--though probably not within a main clause or sentence in either British or American English:

What is Congress doing? Is it considering such a reform?

What is Congress doing? Are they considering such a reform?

But not: Congress are considering such a reform.

Comments similar to those made previously, with reference to "the U.S." as a unique/plural collective, could also be made with regard to the use of "Congress" in the above examples.

Other unique collective nouns include: the U.N., the Papacy, the United Kingdom, the Arab League, the Vatican, etc.

The third and final group of collective nouns consists of the generic collectives (e.g., the clergy, the bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, etc.). These nouns are generic because they refer to all members of a class in either concrete or abstract terms depending upon the intended numerical reference. The generic collectives must be preceded by the.<sup>\*</sup> Like all other collective nouns, they are potentially either singular or plural and not overtly marked as to number.<sup>\*\*</sup> Consider the following examples:

The intelligentsia was indifferent to social ills.

(generic singular collective: abstract, inanimate reference to a whole group of people)

The intelligentsia were indifferent to social ills.

(generic plural collective: concrete, animate reference to the individual belonging to a group)

Other generic collectives include: the aristocracy, the elite, the gentry, the laity, the proletariat, the public, etc.

In addition to these, there are also a number of adjectivally-derived nouns in English that may be considered as generic collectives. Nouns like "the meek," "the dead," "the wicked," etc., when they have human reference, resemble generic collective nouns in a number of ways: They are not overtly singular or plural, they are always preceded by "the," and they may refer to a whole group in general terms rather than to a particular or unique group.

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\* Particularizing uses of these generic collectives may also occur. In such cases, the occurs only anaphorically. [E.g., "The Bolshevik Revolution overthrew an aristocracy. At the head of (the/this) aristocracy was the Romanov i'amily."] And, interestingly enough, some particularizing collectives may also be used in a generic sense. [E.g., "We studied the structure of the family in sociology."]

\*\* The only generic collective that sometimes gives us a clue to this singular/plural distinction in its own form is "mass(es)"; otherwise, there is only one form that may function as either a singular or plural collective noun.

Prior to the present study, the one problem with such a classification had been the fact that these adjectivally-derived nouns always seemed to be plural in number, syntactically and anaphorically, and thus (being deprived of the necessary duality) could not properly be considered collective. For example:

The rich always get richer, don't they?

The wicked are incorrigible.

This seemingly inherent plurality\* was, to me, a disturbing factor in the classification until I noticed the following example containing an adjectivally-derived generic collective noun which is anaphorically singular in number but also human in reference: "Let the wicked forsake his way" (Isaiah, 55:7, Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version). This example, admittedly a rare and perhaps slightly archaic case, provided the proof needed for classifying adjectivally-derived generic nouns with human reference as a subclass of generic collective nouns.

To summarize briefly, collectivity is a numerical category in English, but rather than a syntactic numerical category like singularity or plurality, it is a numerical category operating at the contextual or discourse level of English grammar. As such, it implies both a notional and a grammatical

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\*This might be explained as a development in English which grew out of the need to avoid ambiguity between such generic collective nouns and adjectivally-derived generic nouns that refer to inanimate objects or concepts that always are singular in number and not collective (e.g., "the true," "the false," "the beautiful," etc.)...an additional problem being that a few generic nouns which are adjectivally-derived may function both collectively and noncollectively:

The beautiful is a joy to behold. (noncollective--inanimate)

The beautiful are distributing flowers in the park. (collective--animate)

1 March 1968

-9-  
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TM-3861

duality in those nouns that may be either singular or plural in number depending upon the particular sense of the noun that the speaker or writer wishes to convey. There are three distinct types of collective nouns in English: particularizing, unique, and generic, the last of which includes two subtypes--ordinary generic collective nouns and also certain adjectivally-derived collective nouns with human reference expressed in a generic sense.

Such a "philosophy" of collective nouns in English can very likely be taught to both native and non-native speakers of English much more easily and effectively than other descriptions or definitions of collective nouns available to date.

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