Modelling variation in verb number agreement with complex collective subjects: The interplay between morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic factors

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Verb agreement with complex collective subjects which often take plural verbs, such as *a bunch of things* or *a number of people*, has been explained in the literature in terms of a distributive or a quantificational reading of the collective noun (Huddleston & Pullum et al. 2002: 503; Smith 2009; Klockmann 2017) or in terms of the attraction exerted by the plural *of*-dependent (Levin 2001; Depraetere 2003). The research carried out thus far has bypassed the role that the *of*-dependent, in particular its morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic characteristics, plays in the resolution of verb number agreement.

This paper bridges that gap in the literature by reporting the results of a multifaceted corpus-based study with data from *The British National Corpus* (BNC) and *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). In particular, this research analyses the verb number agreement variation of 23 complex collective subjects (e.g. *the majority of*, *a group of*, *a host of*) through a binary logistic regression analysis of the morpho-syntactic and lexico-semantic factors pertaining to the *of*-dependent.

The results confirm that verb agreement with complex collective subjects is determined by both formal and lexico-semantic aspects. As concerns the former, the data show that the formal markedness (i.e. explicit plurality, *a bunch of <u>thing-s</u>*) of the noun within the *of*-dependent correlates with a high incidence of plural verbal patterns (62.48%), a trend which is significantly stronger with irregular plural nouns as a by-product of their contrastiveness (e.g. *a group of <u>children</u>*; 76.92% vs. *a group of <u>kids</u>*; 61.60%). Conversely, semantic markedness (i.e. conceptual plurality) is only determinant in the case of the highly frequent and formally-unmarked plural noun *people* (e.g. *the majority of the <u>people</u>*), particularly in simple syntactic domains (90.50%). With the increasing complexity of the subject (i.e. number of words and modifiers, clausal modification or embeddedness), only the *of*-dependents with formally-marked plural nouns, which provide an explicit cue of the conceptual plurality of the NP, still exert a significant impact on verb number (over 60%), while *people*, lacking explicit plural morphology, shows a progressively stronger preference for the default verb number (i.e. singular) (52%). Apart from the correlation between formal markedness and complexity, verb number agreement proves to also be constrained by the animacy of the referent and the quantifying interpretation of the collective noun in pseudopartitive configurations (i.e. *a N of N*), as both strongly favour plural verbal patterns (over 65%).

References

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