

Review of Fernández-Pena, Yolanda. 2020. *Reconciling Synchrony, Diachrony and Usage in Verb Number Agreement with Complex Collective Subjects*. New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-367-41715-4 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367815899>

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In her 2020 monograph, Yolanda Fernández-Pena analyzes subject-verb agreement patterns of English noun phrases (NPs) with collective nouns which also include an *of*-prepositional phrase (*of*-PP), as in *a group of students*, *a bunch of flowers*, *a couple of phone calls*, etc.

All together 23 singular collective nouns are investigated qualitatively and quantitatively: *band*, *batch*, *bunch*, *class*, *clump*, *couple*, *crowd*, *flock*, *gang*, *group*, *herd*, *host*, *majority*, *minority*, *number*, *pack*, *party*, *rash*, *series*, *set*, *shoal*, *swarm*, *troup*. These nouns are selected due to their relational nature. The (explicit or implicit) presence of the PP dependent specifying the members of the collective is obligatory, in contrast to more prototypical collective nouns, such as *committee* or *family*. In other words, it is much more likely that these words are followed by an *of*-complementation pattern.

It must be mentioned straight away that the presented analysis is limited in the sense that it investigates these collective nouns and their preferred subject-verb agreement exclusively in so-called ‘complex collective subjects’ (i.e., cases where an *of*-PP complement is present) but when doing so, also more complex examples than those listed above are analyzed, as in (1)–(3).

- (1) [A number of eminent scientists] are active in promoting closer ties[sic] between scholarship and religion (COHA: 1985 MAG SatEvePost)



- (2) [*The third set of case studies we discuss here*] was carried out by Barry Wilkinson (BNC:1985-1993, CAN 1101)

- (3) [*A gang of bank robbers, masquerading as an unlikely string quartet*], engages in a battle of wills (BNC: 1985: 1933 HTT 46)

In these examples, the determiner is sometimes definite or one finds additional modification in the pre- or posthead. In other words, what is being investigated is the binominal structure of complex collective subjects following the constructional template [Det<sub>1</sub> (Mod) N<sub>coll</sub> of (Det<sub>2</sub>) (Mod) N<sub>pl</sub> (Mod/Comp)].

In the literature, collective nouns have been researched extensively (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 757–759; Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 501–504; Corbett 2004; Keizer 2007). It is textbook knowledge that in English speakers have the option to either choose a verb that is singular or plural to follow these collective nouns, as in (4a) vs. (4b)

- (4) a. [*The group*] has paid the entrance fee in advance.

- b. [*The group*] have paid the entrance fee in advance.

The main explanation for the speaker's chosen verb agreement pattern, being either singular or plural, has long been the possibility of dual conceptualization of the collective noun. The variation is possible as the verb is either applicable to the collective as a whole or to the individuals that compose it (Biber *et al.* 1999: 188–189). If the collective noun *group* is interpreted as a conceptual unit, singular agreement is chosen; if it is seen as a homogeneous set of several visitors, where each member of the set has paid the entrance fee, then the plural verb form is preferred. Additionally, it has been suggested that the observable variation depends on register and region, with formal registers and American English showing a preference for singular agreement (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 19; Levin 2001: 60–70; Algeo 2006: 279–285; Hundt 2006, 2009). Diachronically, there also seems to be a growing overall preference for singular noun agreement. However, many examples do not reflect the postulated preferences and the observable variation is much more complex.

This is why, in recent years, several studies have been published which investigate additional factors that may be responsible for the chosen subject-verb agreement going beyond regional influence and dual conceptualization. For example, 'language-internal factors' like morpho-syntactic factors (e.g., type of determiner, distance between collective noun and verb), or semantic factors (e.g., animacy and type of the collective noun) have been shown to play a role (Dekeyser 1975; Levin 1999, 2001; Depraetre 2003; Algeo 2006). Another crucial factor which might affect agreement, but which has

often been neglected in the literature so far, is whether the collective head noun takes an *of*-PP complement, as in (5).

(5) [*The group of visitors*] has/have paid the entrance fee in advance.

In these complemented NPs, the second so-called oblique noun (*visitors*) with its plural marking might affect subject-verb agreement choice as well, in the sense that in such cases it is more likely that speakers opt for plural agreement. This leads to the underlying main hypothesis of the monograph, namely that “the *of*-PPs and their constituent elements play a decisive factor in determining the pattern and present-day usage of the collective nouns that they accompany” (Fernández-Pena 2020: 4).

As a consequence, the monograph primarily investigates formal and lexico-semantic aspects of these prepositional constituents analyzing the potential interference and repercussions on the agreement relation. However, Fernández-Pena also looks at the nature of the chosen collective nouns, especially their quantifying potential, another aspect which has remained more or less unexplored so far. At the same time, the semantics of the verb is also investigated. Moreover, the existing research is also expanded by investigating the phenomenon diachronically.

In general, the following research questions are asked (RQs adapted from Fernández-Pena 2020: 4–5):

1. What determines verb number choice in the case of complex collective subjects: the collective noun, the PP or the structure as a whole?
2. To what extent (if at all) do the form and/or the semantics of the *of*-PP and/or the other elements in the subject affect the use of singular or plural verb number?
3. Are there any lexical biases? Is verb number agreement affected by the type of verb, type of collective noun or type of oblique noun?
4. Is there evidence of a diachronic evolution of those complex collective subjects, and in what way does it influence their current verbal agreement patterning and meaning?
5. What is the quantifying potential (if any) of complex collective subjects? To what extent does the interaction between the *of*-PP and verb agreement contribute to this use?

With regard to theoretical modeling, Fernández-Pena stresses that she uses a purely descriptive usage-based approach. Several theoretical frameworks are mentioned and

acknowledged, but the author does not openly subscribe to any particular theory. That being said, the monograph comes across as a functional-cognitive endeavor strongly inspired by the functionalist work of Keizer (2007) and Brems (2011), as well as by Langacker's (2008) *Cognitive Grammar* and by (Diachronic) *Construction Grammar* (e.g., Goldberg 2006; Traugott and Trousdale 2013).

The presented empirical studies are quantitative and corpus-based, using data that is extracted from three of the largest balanced corpora of English, namely the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA 1990–2012; Davies 2008–), the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA 1810–2009; Davis 2010–) and the *British National Corpus* (BNC 1960–1993; BNC Consortium).<sup>1</sup> Using these corpora, the author does not look at fine-grained dialectal or social variation, but what we get instead is an in depth, state-of-the-art multi-variate regression analysis with statistical testing of an extensive list of language-internal variables (for details see below).<sup>2</sup> Note, however, that at the end of the book, Fernández-Pena does investigate regional variation in more detail by incorporating data from the *Corpus of Global Web-Based English* (GloWbE; Davies 2013) analyzing some differences in six inner-circle varieties (American, Australian, British, Canadian, Irish, and New Zealand English).

With regard to length and chapter structure, the monograph is published in Routledge's *Studies in Linguistics* (volume 29) and is relatively concise (209 pages including references and indices) with only five main chapters including the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 2 summarizes the existing literature; the remaining two chapters are empirical and present first a diachronic corpus study (Chapter 3) and then a synchronic corpus study (Chapter 4). In the rest of this review, I will work through the individual chapters.

Chapter 2, "Complex collective subjects and verb number agreement in English: State of the art" (44 pages), is the main theoretical background chapter, which summarizes the current literature on the topic. It starts with a discussion of the internal differences of complex collective subjects (Section 2.1) showing that some of these binominal phrases have a partitive reading whereas others are pseudo-partitives. The collective noun can be

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<sup>1</sup> Fernández-Pena uses the COCA and COHA versions provided by the online interface <http://www.English-corpora.org>, as well as the Lancaster Interface for the BNC at <http://bncweb.lancs.ac.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> The author also uses 'random forests' (Tagliamonte and Baayen 2012; Levshina 2015) and conducts some collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003). For the statistical analysis, the software *R* is used (R Core Team 2020).

interpreted referentially (*a bunch of flowers*, *a bunch of keys*), it can be given a partitive interpretation (*a bunch of the other guys*), or it can have a quantifier reading (*a bunch of guys*, in the sense of ‘many guys’). Here *bunch* would be semantically bleached and refers to an indeterminate quantity. Fernández-Pena makes clear that, diachronically, the quantifying meaning can only develop from the constructional template [*a/an* N<sub>coll</sub> *of* N<sub>pl</sub>], with the indefinite article and a bare plural noun, as in *a number of guys* or *a group of people*. The chapter sheds light on the lexical-semantic differences of the various types (Section 2.1.1), but also discusses how these partitives and pseudo-partitives differ with regard to headedness, complexity, and compositionality (Section 2.1.2). This paves the way for the second part of the theoretical introduction, which is about verb-number agreement with subjects. Section 2.2 summarizes what the comprehensive grammars and syntactically oriented approaches have to say out about canonical and non-canonical agreement and its motivations: Corbett’s canonical model (2004) and his ‘agreement hierarchy’ (Corbett 2006) are presented in Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2. Afterwards, Fernández-Pena continues to discuss alternative proposals, such as Langacker’s (2008) Cognitive Grammar (Section 2.2.3). The last subsection (2.2.4) provides a discussion of the empirical studies which have been conducted so far. It also includes a short overview of the intra- and extralinguistic variables that have been identified in the existing literature which may affect the speakers’ choice of agreement patterns. Fernández-Pena returns to these variables with a more detailed discussion in her empirical Chapter 4 (see below).

The theoretical background chapter is very well written and an easy read despite the complexity of the subject. It excels at summing up the current literature while pointing to many terminological inconsistencies in the current research. Especially useful for newcomers to the field is the introduction to measuring structural and syntactic complexity (the author’s methodology is based on Rohdenburg 1996; Szmrecsányi 2004; Berlage 2014). Obviously, the chapter also prepares the ground for the two empirical chapters that follow.

Chapter 3, “Insights from diachrony: Reconciling form and meaning” (48 pages), is a diachronic investigation of only seven of the 23 collective nouns: *bunch*, *couple*,

*group, host, majority, minority, and number*. For the analysis, the author uses data from the COHA exclusively.<sup>3</sup> The following queries are run:

1. '(a/ the) (bunch/ couple/ group/ host/ majority/ minority/ number) of (\*)(\*.[NN2]/ people) \*.[(VBZ/ VBDZ/ VDZ/ VHZ/ VVZ)]' for singular verbs;
2. '(a/ the) (bunch/ couple/ group/ host/ majority/ minority/ number) of (\*)(\*.[NN2]/ people) \*.[(VBR/ VBDR/ VD0/ VH0/ VV0)]' for plural verbs.

After pruning the results, 4,776 examples are analyzed. Every collective noun is first discussed in a separate subsection which is then followed by a general discussion chapter. The main focus is on indefinite NPs with the indefinite article (e.g., *a group of people*), as this constructional template is the most frequent one and the only one susceptible to grammaticalization (i.e., development of a quantifier reading). However, the queries that are used also enable an investigation of examples with the definite article and/or modification (e.g., *the group of people I saw, the number of the people*). For all the collective NPs a potential increase or decrease in modification patterns is investigated as well as their (changing) verb agreement preferences over the years. When investigating verb agreement, the data set is reduced to those NP cases which are used in subject position and where the verb overtly marks singular/plural contrast. For the rest of the investigation (e.g., overall frequency increase), other argument positions are taken into consideration as well.

The main aim in Chapter 3 is to investigate the level of grammaticalization and the level of idiomaticity of the seven constructions. Signs of syntactic fixation and semantic opacity are explored. The question is to which extent the seven complex collective NPs have developed particular collocational and colligational preferences which indirectly could explain their verb agreement patterns in present-day English. Above all other things, Fernández-Pena investigates how often the collective noun combination, as in *a bunch of, a host of, or a number of*, has developed a quantifier function similar to *a lot of*, and if plural agreement increases for each type in time. The analysis reveals that the constructions do not form a homogeneous set and that the type of collective noun strongly conditions the binomial's structure and preferences (e.g., decrease in premodification). Although all seven types increase their syntactic fixation, show an increasing preference

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<sup>3</sup> Although other diachronic historical corpora have been investigated as well, to a certain extent, pilot queries reveal that the COHA is the only diachronic corpus to provide enough data points for statistical investigation.

for the indefinite article, and an overall increase of plural agreement, one finds interesting individual differences.

The chapter represents an important contribution to the diachronic research on the topic, which so far has been rather scarce (Dekeyser 1975; Smitterberg 2006; Brems 2011; Shao *et al.* 2019). Especially, the presented classification schemes in Tables 3.4 and 3.5 (pp. 87–88) are an excellent attempt to determine the degree of grammaticalization and idiomatization. The constructions are positioned on a cline ranging from [*a number of* N<sub>pl</sub>] as the most grammaticalized construction to [*a majority of* N<sub>pl</sub>] as the least grammaticalized one. Additionally, the author includes a useful discussion of relative quantification as opposed to absolute quantification: out of the seven constructions, two of them show relative quantification (*minority* and *majority*) and five show absolute quantification (*bunch*, *couple*, *group*, *host*, and *number*). In general, it is shown that *minority of* and *majority of* behave slightly differently from the other collective nouns.

Chapter 4, “Modelling variation in verb number agreement with complex collective subjects in present-day English” (79 pages), is the main and longest chapter in the book. It reports the results of the synchronic corpus study. The corpora used are the BNC and the COCA in order to compare British with American English. Only five genres are investigated in the so-called ‘original’ version of the COCA (roughly 500 million words, before 2012 when the corpus was extended). Only the available written genres are used as a source because the spoken components of the BNC and COCA are not directly comparable. Regarding data retrieval, complex collective NPs in subject position are extracted. Again, various constructional templates are searched for. In contrast to the diachronic investigation, now the analysis is extended to the 23 collective nouns mentioned at the beginning. The data is again cleaned; for instance, examples with augmented subjects or with noun coordination are excluded.

After manual pruning of the data, the total number of valid instances is 5,406 tokens. The examples with the collective nouns *clump* and *couple* get excluded early on, as they do not show any variation in subject-verb agreement. In the end, 5,204 instances are analyzed. Those are coded for 25 variables, among them the dependent variable ‘subject-verb agreement’. The other core variables are ‘lexical type of collective noun’ and ‘lexical type of oblique noun’. Some of the coded morpho-syntactic variables are: ‘type of Det<sub>1</sub>’ and ‘type of Det<sub>2</sub>’, ‘type of pre- and post-modification’, and also

‘morphological number of the oblique’. Here I would like to draw the attention to the author’s classification scheme of morphological plural marking. POS (CLAWS7) tagged corpora<sup>4</sup> often show a lot of inconsistencies and errors when it comes to number distinction in noun tagging. In the chosen corpora, the used corpus tags NN0 (neutral for number), NN1 (singular) and NN2 (plural) are highly problematic for a number of reasons. On the one hand, NN0 is an extremely mixed bag and the NN1 tag subsumes singular and mass nouns. This grouping is seriously flawed as mass nouns are non-count nouns. In contrast to many researchers who simply ignore these issues, I applaud the author for her willingness to code the oblique nouns again using her own classification which is a useful scheme for future work in the field. Ultimately, the following bins are distinguished: 1) NN1 = singular nouns (*person, sample*); 2) NN2.s = plural marking by – s, (e.g., *bees, girls, computers*); 3) NN2.irregular = irregular plural marking by ablaut and other non-s strategies (e.g., *women, teeth, children, phenomena*); 4) NN0 = words which lack singular-plural contrast like mass nouns and others (e.g., *tuna, series, research, statistics, clothes*). The noun *people* constitutes its own category, due to its high frequency.

Fernández-Pena also investigates many variables related to structural complexity such as ‘number of words preceding N<sub>2</sub>’, ‘number of pre- and postmodifiers’, ‘syntactic configuration of the *of*-N<sub>2</sub> sequence’, and also the ‘distance between N<sub>2</sub> and the verb’ counted by the number of intervening words. Additional lexico-semantic variables are ‘lexical verb type’, ‘animacy of N<sub>2</sub>’, ‘semantic number of N<sub>2</sub>’, and ‘function of the NP/partition’, deciding whether the binominal NP takes a partitive, a pseudo-partitive, or a referential reading. The extralinguistic variables are ‘text’ and ‘variety’.

As an exploratory technique to determine the importance of the variables, a conditional random forest is run. After the random forest, a generalized linear mixed effects model with interactions is fitted. The random effects are variety, verb form, type of collective noun and type of oblique noun. Interactions are also fitted, namely between number of postmodifier of N<sub>2</sub> AND type of N<sub>2</sub> and between the number of intervening words between N<sub>2</sub> and verb AND type of N<sub>2</sub>.

The results demonstrate that the patterns of agreement are mainly conditioned by the type of determiner, countability, animacy, semantic plurality, and morphological

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<sup>4</sup> <https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/claws7tags.html>

number of the oblique, as well as by the syntactic complexity of the *of*-PP. For instance, non-human referents, which are less readily conceived of as aggregates of individuals, are significantly less likely to opt for plural verbal forms in comparison with human referents. At the same time, semantically singular and uncountable oblique nouns prefer singular agreement, while semantically plural and countable N<sub>2</sub>s allow for greater variation. Regarding the morphological marking of the oblique noun, one can observe the so-called ‘markedness effect’, that is, singular oblique nouns are shown to be significantly less likely to occur with plural verbal forms in comparison with regular plural nouns in syntactically simple contexts. Importantly, the finding that irregular plural nouns favor more plural agreement than regular obliques contradicts previous studies. Morphologically unmarked nouns (NN0), including the semantically plural noun *people*, show a significant decrease in the likelihood of plural agreement with the increasing syntactic complexity of the noun phrase.

Syntactic complexity in terms of the number of postmodifiers is the only complexity measure to have a higher impact on agreement variation. In contrast, structural complexity counted in number of words is not a useful proxy of NP complexity. Most of the predictors that measure NP complexity in the study (number and length of the premodifiers, clause depth of the NP, and number of morphologically (un)marked nouns in the postmodifier) are discarded from the model for not improving its goodness-of-fit. The author also highlights strong lexical biases. Most of the variance in the data is accounted for by the collective noun, followed by the oblique noun and the verb.

A series of collocation analyses were used to examine these lexical factors more closely, producing further evidence of the collocational and colligational restrictions highlighted in Chapter 3. The most important findings concerned the interaction between the animacy of the referent and plural verb number, and the strong association of *bunch*, *couple*, *host*, *majority* and *minority* with the plural, as further evidence of their quantifying potential. (Fernández-Pena 2020: 177)

In general, it is shown that an intricate interplay of language internal (lexical, semantic, and formal) factors trumps extralinguistic factors like regional variety. Variety (British vs. American English) is still a significant predictor, but in NPs with *of*-PPs it plays less of a role.

To conclude this review, let us return to a more general evaluation of the monograph. As a reader I would have preferred to get the synchronic analysis first, with

the diachronic aspects being discussed only later. The interim presentation of the diachronic results in Chapter 3 somehow interrupts the theoretical discussion of the variables in Chapter 2 and their follow-up, hands-on coding and analysis in the regression model in Chapter 4. Moreover, it is a pity that no spoken data is investigated, a shortcoming that the author admits herself in the conclusion. Additionally, if one was desperately looking for criticism, what could be mentioned is that the book is a bit weak on the theoretical side, in the sense that it would have been nice to see a more elaborate discussion of some of the meta-theoretical concepts and what the empirical results ‘mean’ for usage-based, functional-cognitive or constructional models of language (change). In my opinion, the current length would have allowed for such an extension.

That being said, I would like to end with a clear recommendation: this book is an essential read for anyone interested in English binominals and agreement patterns. More generally, it will be of interest to students and researchers working in the field of language variation and change, corpus linguistics, and usage-based approaches to the study of language. The combined synchronic-diachronic analysis offers a much-needed, multi-faceted perspective and the large-scale quantitative analysis provides robust results. Moreover, from a didactic point of view, the book is truly a best practice example of how to explain and combine state-of-the-art quantitative methodology with meticulous qualitative analysis and substantial philological knowledge of the English NP. Especially the intelligent and motivated classification and categorization of the data as well as the thorough pruning of noise is something that no statistical (regression) model should do without. All this makes Fernández-Pena’s monograph a highly valuable contribution to the field.

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