

Syntactic Boundaries and Pronominal Agreement with British Collective Nouns

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Abstract

While numerous collective nouns have attracted attention for their pronominal number agreement, this synchronic study investigates two nouns — *government* and *family*. Each noun is treated as a case study with its own agreement profile. Using a dataset from the British National Corpus (BNC), the study provides a comprehensive account of these nouns and explores how the structural distance between a collective noun and its anaphoric pronoun affects number agreement patterns in British English. This study offers a quantitative analysis that explicitly measures boundary position, incorporating syntactic boundaries (same clause; different clause in the same sentence; following sentence). It provides new empirical evidence for a frequently asserted but rarely quantified claim. The data were extracted from the BNC by identifying tokens where a collective noun was followed, within ten words, by an anaphoric pronoun. After manual filtering, in which ambiguous and non-anaphoric cases were excluded, each remaining instance was coded by boundary position to model pronominal agreement. The findings reveal that plural pronominal agreement becomes more likely as syntactic separation increases, and syntactic boundaries do not affect all nouns equally: agreement patterns depend on the specific noun, not merely on its status as a collective noun. In short, distance effects are robust but noun-specific. The study, therefore, offers a practical framework for extending boundary-sensitive analyses to other collective nouns and linguistic registers.

Keywords: agreement; British National Corpus (BNC); British English; collective nouns; syntactic boundaries