

## English Corner 10: singular and plural verbs

Most nouns are either **singular** or **plural** and used with **singular** or **plural** verbs, respectively. Care should be taken that the number of the subject agrees with that of the verb. In [Between- and within-subject variability **was** also evaluated], although the word closest to the verb (**variability**) is **singular**, the **subject** of the sentence (**two variabilities** joined by **and**) is **plural**. It should be [Between- and within-subject variability **were** also evaluated]. Words themselves or words and phrases referring to **several items** can be followed either by **singular** or **plural** verbs, depending on their role in the sentence; *i.e.* whether the subject of the sentence is the **word** or **phrase itself** or what the **word** or **phrase refers to** or **consists of** (**plural** groups), and whether plural items are considered **collectively** as a (**singular**) group or **individually**.

### Confusing cases

- **Headquarters** is considered both **singular and plural** [The **headquarters** of the company **is** in London. The **headquarters** of the company **are** in London].
- **Species** can be **singular or plural**, depending on the meaning [This **species is** found in the Amazon. These **species are** endangered].
- The **singular** is used with some **plural nouns** [Medical **ethics is** involved in this case], **plural partitive expressions** [The **dynamics of** germ cell division **is** poorly understood. The **ethics of** the proposal **needs** careful deliberation. The xeno-transplanted sterile males are fertile but the **genetics of** their offspring **is** that of the donor. The **kinematics of** spermatozoa **was** recorded by CASA. The **optics of** the new microscopic system **is** quite complicated].
- Statistics is a **singular** noun treated as a **plural** [The **statistics were** checked by my Professor]. (As the final **s** does not indicate a plural, it cannot be removed to make a singular noun [**statistic**].)
- **Offspring** is a **plural** noun with **no singular**; it requires a partitive construction for use in the **singular** [One **of the** offspring died a few months after birth].
- Some **singular nouns** have **no plural** and need a **partitive construction** for use as a **plural** [Several **types of** behaviour **were** displayed. Several **areas of** co-operation **were** discussed. Many **regions of** contamination **were** found. **Signs of** damage **were** evident. Several **lines of** evidence **support** his theory. Your **sources of** information **need** to be indicated. Many **examples of** nuisance **were** listed at the meeting. Three **samples of** semen **were** evaluated per man. Two **examples of** software **are** listed. **Bags of** refuse **are** autoclaved daily. New **fields of** research **are** required]. Use of the incorrect plural form of such words is likely to bring confusion with the third person singular of the related verbs (**to damage, to refuse**) or other meanings of nouns (**damages** means financial compensation).

### Written and spoken forms of nouns used as adjectives

- The **singular** is used when a noun is used as an **adjective** [A new protocol for **stem cell** reprogramming. **Leydig cell** hyperplasia was observed. **Spermatid** retention was obvious in the treated males. Thermally damaged **mouse** skin was analysed. The **AKP protein** family was examined] but **plural** when it is used as a **noun** [A new protocol for reprogramming **stem cells**. The hyperplasia of **Leydig cells** was observed.

Retention of *spermatids* was obvious in the treated male. We analysed thermally damaged skin of *mice*. We examined the family of *AKP proteins*].

- Although the written form of **abbreviations** of nouns used as **units** displays no plural (e.g. ml **not** mls, mm **not** mms) when spoken, the **singular** is used when the noun is used as an **adjective** [We have a **\$30,000 (dollar)** CASA machine. We used a **500 ml (millilitre)** beaker. He is a **1.7 m (metre)** student] but the **plural** when the **noun** is used as such [The CASA machine cost **\$30,000 (dollars)**. The beaker holds **500 ml (millilitres)**. The student is **1.7 m (metres)** tall].

### **Non-intuitive use of number**

- In some cases the presence of **plural nouns** distracts from the correct use of the **singular** [It is difficult to say which of the **manuscripts** **is** the better. Only one in four **students** **gets** the spelling of epididymides correct]. In each sentence a **singular** pronoun (**which**) or noun (**one**) is the subject of the verb, as can be seen from their alternative texts [Of the manuscripts, it is difficult to say which **one** **is** the better. Of every four students, only **one** **gets** the spelling of epididymides correct].
- In the following cases of **singular** verbs, confusion arises from the use of words usually associated with **plural objects** [**Many a** scientist **has** tried to publish in Nature. **More than one** scientist **has** been accused of fraud]. In these cases, the confusing elements are adjectives of the **singular** noun (**scientist**) that is the subject of the **singular** verb.
- Use of the **plural** is not obvious when the singular **one** appears in the sentence [**One** drop or two of NaOH **are** required to raise the pH to the required value. It must be **one** of the more important documents that **have** ever been published. She was **one** of those scientists who **are** never satisfied with their Impact Factor. Inside each subdirectory **are one** or more methods for preparing media]. In each of these cases a **plural noun** is the subject of the verb; this becomes clear from the unabridged forms of these sentences [One drop of NaOH is or **two** drops **are** required to raise the pH to the required value. Of the **documents** that **have** ever been published, it must be one of the more important. Of those **scientists** who **are** never satisfied with their Impact Factor, she was one. One or more **methods** for preparing media **are** in the subdirectory].

### **Indefinite pronouns**

- These noun substitutes take the **singular** as they either refer to **one** person or thing [**Anybody** **is** welcome to join. **Anyone** **is** eligible. **Anything** **is** better than nothing. **Nobody** **is** permitted to smoke in the laboratory. **No one** **is** permitted to enter the sterile area. **Nothing** **is** known about the mechanism. **Somebody** from our laboratory **is** going to get the prize. After the lecture **someone** from our institute always **asks** a question. **Something** **happens** every time he attends] or refer to **all** members a plural group considered **collectively** as a **single group** [**Everybody** **is** taking the exams. **Everything** **is** now in place. **Everyone** **is** pleased with the result].
- The pronoun **what** may take the either **singular** or **plural** depending on what it is substituting [**What** (meaning **that which**) we need **is** more grant money. **What** (meaning **the thing that**) surprises me **is** the

cost of transport] but [The manuscript omitted **what** (meaning **those which**) *seem* to be two of the more important results].

#### Words describing *two countable items, and their partitive phrases*

- **Either** and **neither** take the *singular* when used alone [**Either is** feasible. **Neither is** feasible], when used with a *singular* noun [**Either** hypothesis *is* feasible. **Neither** hypothesis *is* feasible. The theory may not be true, but **neither is** any] and when they link a choice of *singular* items [**Either** the professor **or** the student *was* to blame. **Neither** the student **nor** the professor *was* to blame]. The partitive forms referring to *plural* nouns also take the *singular* [**Either of** the hypotheses *is* feasible. **Neither of** the hypotheses *is* feasible].
- The same conjunctions take the *plural* when they are used with a *plural* noun [The theories may not be true, but **neither are** any others], when they link a singular and a plural item [**Either** the professor **or** the students *were* to blame. **Neither** the student **nor** the professors *were* to blame] and when they link two plural items [**Either** the professors **or** the students *were* to blame. **Neither** the students **nor** the professors *were* to blame].
- **Both** and its partitive form always take the *plural* [**Both** hypotheses *are* valid. **Both of** the hypotheses *are* valid. Of the hypotheses **both are** valid].

#### Words describing *two or more countable or uncountable items, and their partitive phrases*

- Those that take the *singular* refer to members of a *plural group* considered *individually* [**Each one of** the students *is* studying hard. **Each of** the students *is* studying hard. **Each one is** studying hard. **Each is** studying hard. **None** (meaning **not one**) **of** the scientists *has* entered the building. **None** (meaning **not one**) *has* entered the building] or refer to *all* members of a plural group considered *collectively* as a *group* [**Every one of** the veterinary schools *is* alert to the outbreak. **Every one is** alert to the outbreak].
- Those referring to members of a *plural group* take the *plural* [**Few of** the students *are* good enough to speak at the meeting. **Few** students *are* good enough to speak at the meeting. **Many of** the media *were* unable to support the cells in culture. **Many** media *were* unable to support the cells in culture].
- Others can take the *singular* or the *plural*. The *singular* is used when the noun described is *countable* and *singular* [**All** (meaning **everything**) *is* lost. **All of** the syllabus *is* taught in the first year. **All** the syllabus *is* taught in the first year], *uncountable* [**All of** the semen *was* collected in the laboratory. **All** the semen *was* collected in the laboratory] or members of a *plural group* considered *individually* [**Any one of** a number of causes *is* possible. **Any one is** possible. **Any of** the valid methods *is* acceptable. **Any is** possible]. The *plural* is used when the noun is *countable* and *plural* [**All of** the spermatozoa *were* acrosome-reacted. **All** the spermatozoa *were* acrosome-reacted. **All of** the semen samples *were* collected in the laboratory. **All** the semen samples *were* collected in the laboratory].

#### Words describing *parts of a whole item or groups of items, and their partitive phrases*

- Some only take the *singular* because they refer to *one number* [The **range of** values *is* large. The **range is** large] or to *uncountable* nouns for *mass* or *volume* [The **bulk of** the work *is* over. The **bulk is** over. The **bulk of** the fluid *is* frozen. The **bulk is** frozen].

- Another group takes the **singular** or **plural**: the **singular** when the collective nouns **themselves** are the subject with the **definite** article [**The number of** experiments to do **is** growing. **The number is** growing. **The percentage of** motile spermatozoa **was** reduced by the treatment. **The percentage was** reduced by the treatment. **The variety of** sperm function tests **is** increasing monthly. **The variety is** increasing monthly] but the **plural** with when **what they refer to** is subject with the **indefinite** article [**A variety of** sperm function tests **are** available. **A number of** spermatozoa **are** acrosome reacted. **A large percentage of** basal cells **were** positive for p53].
- Others also take the **singular** or **plural**, but the **singular** when members of plural groups are considered **collectively** as a **group (en masse)** [A small **fraction of** these magnetic stirrers **is** enough for the practical class. Of the magnetic stirrers, a small **fraction is** enough for the practical class. **One third of** these paper clips **is** enough for the examination. Of the paper clips, **one third is** enough for the examination] and the **plural** when plural groups are considered **individually** [A **fraction of** the spermatozoa **were** motile. Of the spermatozoa, a **fraction were** motile. **One third of** the spermatozoa **were** motile. Of the spermatozoa, **one third were** motile].
- Yet others take the **singular** or **plural** with the **singular** if the subject they refer to is **singular** and **countable** [**Most of** the campus **is** empty. **No** (meaning **not one**) patient **has** cryptorchidism. **None** (meaning **not any**) of the syllabus **is** taught in the first year. The first **part of** the document **was** photocopied. A **part was** photocopied. **35% of** a scientist's time **is** taken up writing grants. **10% of** the male population **is** infertile. A **portion of** the cake **has been** eaten. A **portion has been** eaten. A **proportion of** the culture medium **has been** used. A **proportion has been** used. The **remainder of** the solution **was** frozen. The **remainder was** frozen. The **rest of** the solution **was** frozen. The **rest was** frozen. **Some of** the syllabus **is** taught in the first term. **Some is** taught in the first term] or **uncountable** [**No** semen **was** delivered. **Some of** the semen **was** lost during collection. **Some** semen **was** lost during collection. **Some was** lost during collection]. The **plural** is used with **plural countable** nouns [**Most of** the laboratories **are** empty. **No** (meaning **not any**) patients **are** infertile. **None** (meaning **not any**) of the spermatozoa **were** acrosome-reacted. A **part of** the shipments **were** damaged. **50% of** spermatozoa **are** acrosome-reacted. A large **portion of** the samples **have been** removed. A small **proportion of** the spermatozoa **were** acrosome-reacted. Of the spermatozoa, small a **proportion were** acrosome-reacted. The **remainder of** the cells **were** digested in trypsin. Of the cells, the **remainder were** digested in trypsin. The **remaining** cells **were** digested in trypsin. The **rest of** the cells **were** digested in trypsin. Of the cells, the **rest were** digested in trypsin. **Some of** the spermatozoa **were** hyperactivated. Of the spermatozoa, **some were** hyperactivated. **Some** tubes **were** broken in the centrifuge. Of the tubes, **some were** broken in the centrifuge].

### Collective nouns

- When these nouns **themselves** are the subject, the **singular** is used [The **committee has** come to a decision. The **couple is** known to work in the same laboratory. A **maximum of** 200 people **is** permitted in the lecture hall. The **maximum** allowed **is** 200 people. A **minimum of** 50 references **is** required in the proposal. The **minimum** required **is** 50 references. A **plethora of** non-standard forms of English **is** presented to reviewers. The new **pair of** microscopes **is** on the bench in the culture room. The scientific

**staff is** underpaid compared with other groups. The hospital surgical **team is** the best in this region. The **total** amount requested for consumables **was** added to that for animals. The **total was** added to that for animals. A **total of** 400 protein spots **was** identified].

- When what the **collective noun consists of** (a **plural** group) is the subject, the **plural** may be used [A **couple of** posters **were** presented at the meeting. The **committee are** making **their** decision. The **staff are** discussing **their** salary. The **team are** operating now]. This usage is equivalent to replacing the collective noun with a partitive expression, since the members of the group individually are the subject [The **[members of the] committee are** making **their** decision. The **[members of] staff are** taking **their** seats. The **[members of the] team are** operating now].

**Exceptions: where the number of the partitive form differs from that of the noun alone**

- When some partitive forms themselves are subject, they take the **plural**, since the emphasis is on what the plural group comprises **individually** [The **majority of** spermatozoa **were** acrosome-reacted. A **minority of** spermatozoa **were** motile] but without the preposition **of**, the collective nouns take the **singular** when the subject is the **word itself** [The **majority** for the motion **is** smaller than that last year. The **minority** against the motion **is** smaller than that last year].