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 [Anyone *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].