Subject–verb concord

General rule

10.34 CONCORD (also termed ‘agreement’) can be defined as the relationship between two grammatical units such that one of them displays a particular feature (eg plurality) that accords with a displayed (or semantically implicit) feature in the other. The most important type of concord in English is concord of 3rd person number between subject and verb. The normally observed rule is very simple:

A singular subject requires a singular verb:

My daughter watches television after supper. [singular subject + singular verb]

A plural subject requires a plural verb:

My daughters watch television after supper. [plural subject + plural verb]

When the subject is realized by a noun phrase, the phrase counts as singular if its head is singular:

The CHANGE in male attitudes is most obvious in industry.
The CHANGES in male attitude are most obvious in industry.

Finite and nonfinite clauses generally count as singular:

How you got there doesn’t concern me.
To treat them as hostages is criminal.
Smoking cigarettes is dangerous to your health.

Prepositional phrases and adverbs functioning as subject (cf 10.15) also count as singular:

In the evenings is best for me. Slowly does it!

An apparent exception for clauses is the nominal relative clause. Nominal relative clauses are on the continuum from clause to noun phrase (cf 15.8f). For the purpose of concord, their number depends on the interpretation of the number of the wh-element. With the determiners what and whatever, the concord depends on the number of the determined noun. Contrast [3] and [4] below:

What were supposed to be new proposals were in fact modifications of earlier ones. [1]
What was once a palace is now a pile of rubble. [2]
Whatever book a Times reviewer praises sells well. [3]
What ideas he has are his wife’s. [4]

A verb counts as singular if the first verb in a finite verb phrase has a singular form:

My son has no intention of spending a vacation with me.
My sons have.

A letter has been sent to every applicant.
Two letters have.
The application of the general rule is restricted in several general respects:

(1) Except for the verb be, the verb shows a distinction of number only in the 3rd person present. Hence, the verb generally does not show concord in the past:

My daughter
My daughters\( \) watched television after supper.

The verb be displays concord also in the 3rd person past:

My daughter was watching television in my bedroom.
My daughters were watching television in my bedroom.

(2) Number concord is displayed only in the indicative. Nonfinite verbs, imperatives, and subjunctives make no number distinctions.

(3) Modal auxiliaries (cf 3.39ff) make no number distinctions:

My daughter
My daughters\( \) may watch television after supper.

Note
[a] It is possible to generalize the rule of concord to 'A subject which is not clearly semantically plural requires a singular verb'; that is, to treat singular as the unmarked form, to be used in neutral circumstances, where no positive indication of plurality is present. This would explain, in addition to clausal subjects, the tendency in informal speech for is/was to follow the pseudosubject there in existential sentences such as There's hundreds of people on the waiting list (cf 18.44ff). Similarly, interrogative who and what as subjects normally take a singular verb even when the speaker has reason to believe that more than one person or entity is involved: Who is making all that noise? However, a plural verb may be used if other words in the sentence indicate that a plural subject is expected in the answer (Who have not received their passes?).

On the other hand, the principle of proximity (cf 10.35) effects a change from singular to plural more often than the reverse, perhaps because the plural is the form that is morphologically unmarked.

[b] Apparent exceptions to the concord rule arise with singular nouns ending with the -s of the plural inflection (measles, billiards, mathematics, etc, cf 5.75), or conversely plural nouns lacking the inflection (cattle, people, clergy, etc, cf 5.78):

Measles is sometimes serious. Our people are complaining.

[c] Plural phrases (including coordinate phrases) count as singular if they are used as names, titles, quotations, etc (cf further 17.90):

Crime and Punishment is perhaps the best constructed of Dostoyevsky's novels, but The Brothers Karamazov is undoubtedly his masterpiece.

The Cedars has a huge garden.

'Senior citizens' means, in common parlance, people over sixty. Such noun phrases can be regarded as appositive structures with an implied singular head: the book 'Crime and Punishment', the expression 'senior citizens'. The titles of some works that are collections of stories, etc, may be counted as either singular or plural:

The Canterbury Tales\( \{ \text{exists} \} \) in many manuscripts.

[d] On the treatment of data, media, criteria, and phenomena as singular nouns, cf 5.91, 5.98 Note.

[e] Zero plural nouns (cf 5.86) do not display number. Hence, when they are subject and the verb is a modal or simple past, number differences manifest themselves only covertly through pronoun reference (cf covert gender, 5.104):

The sheep jumped over the fence, didn't it?
they?

[f] It is a peculiarity of English that -s is the regular inflection for singular in the verb but for plural in the noun.
Principles of grammatical concord, notional concord, and proximity

10.35 The rule that the verb matches its subject in number may be called the principle of GRAMMATICAL CONCORD. Difficulties over concord arise through occasional conflict between this and two other principles: the principle of NOTIONAL CONCORD and the principle of PROXIMITY.

Notional concord is agreement of verb with subject according to the notion of number rather than with the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that notion. In British English, for example, collective nouns such as government are often treated as notionally plural:

The government have broken all their promises. (BrE)

In this example, the plural notion is signalled not only by the plural verb have, but also by the pronoun their.

The principle of proximity, also termed ‘attraction’, denotes agreement of the verb with a closely preceding noun phrase in preference to agreement with the head of the noun phrase that functions as subject:

?No one except his own supporters agree with him.

The preceding plural noun supporters has influenced the choice of the plural verb agree, although the subject No one except his own supporters is grammatically singular, since the head no one is singular. On the other hand, the proximity principle is here reinforced by notional concord (‘Only his own supporters agree with him’), making the sentence somewhat more acceptable than if the proximity principle alone applied. The choice of the verb may also be influenced by preceding coordinated noun phrases, even if they are singular:

?*A good knowledge of English, Russian, and French are required for this position.

Conflict between grammatical concord and attraction through proximity tends to increase with the distance between the noun phrase head of the subject and the verb, for example when the postmodifier is lengthy or when an adverbal or a parenthesis intervenes between the subject and the verb. Proximity concord occurs mainly in unplanned discourse. In writing it will be corrected to grammatical concord if it is noticed.

The three principles and their interaction will be illustrated below in three areas where concord causes some problems: where the subject contains (a) a collective noun head; (b) coordination; and (c) an indefinite expression.

English speakers are often uncertain about the rules of concord. Prescriptive teaching has insisted rather rigidly on grammatical concord, with the result that people often experience a conflict between this rule and the rule of notional concord, which tends to prevail over it. When the proximity principle is followed in defiance of the other principles, the result is likely to be condemned as an error.

Note [a] The principle of notional concord accounts for the common use of a singular with subjects that are plural noun phrases of quantity or measure. The entity expressed by the noun phrase is viewed as a single unit:
The simple sentence

Ten dollars is all I have left. ['That amount is . . .']
Fifteen years represents a long period of his life. ['That period is . . .']
Two miles is as far as they can walk. ['That distance is . . .']
Two thirds of the area is under water. ['That area is . . .']

Cf. Sixty people means a huge party. ['That number of people means . . .']

[b] We also find a type of number concord at the phrase level in that certain determiners agree in number with their noun heads that idea, those ideas. There are apparent exceptions with measure noun phrases:

that five dollars (also: those five dollars) every few miles
this last two weeks (also: these last two weeks) each ten ounces
another two days another five per cent

A few and a good many function as units:

a good many friends a few days

e] Grammatical concord is usually obeyed for more than and many a, though it may conflict with notional concord:

More than a thousand inhabitants have signed the petition.
More than one member has protested against the proposal.
Many a member has protested against the proposal.

Although the subject is notationally plural in [2] and [3], the singular is preferred because member is analysed as head of the noun phrase. Contrast:

More members than one have protested against the proposal.
Many members

Collective nouns and notional concord

Singular collective nouns may be notationally plural. In BrE the verb may be either singular or plural:

The audience were enjoying every minute of it.
The public are tired of demonstrations.
England have won the cup.
Our Planning Committee have considered your request.

The choice between singular or plural verbs depends in BrE on whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body, or as a collection of individuals. Thus, in BrE plural is more likely in [1] than singular, because attention is directed at the individual reactions of members of the audience. On the other hand, the singular is more likely in these sentences:

The audience was enormous.
The public consists of you and me.
The crowd has been dispersed.

In contrast to [1a], The audience were enormous might be interpreted to refer to an audience of enormous people. On the whole, the plural is more popular in speech, whereas in the more inhibited medium of writing the singular is probably preferred. It is generally safer in BrE to use the singular verb where there is doubt, in obedience to grammatical concord.

AmE generally treats singular collective nouns as singular. Terms for the government and for sports teams are nearly always treated as singular in AmE, but other terms may (less commonly than in BrE) take plural verbs:

The administration has announced its plans for stimulating the economy.
America has won the cup.
The public has a right to know. [also in AmE: The public have a right to know.]
But, as in BrE, plural pronouns are often used in AmE to refer to singular collective nouns:

The committee has not yet decided how they should react to the Governor's letter.

Note

[a] If the collective noun subject occurs in the plural, the verb is of course plural in both BrE and AmE: The various committees are now meeting to discuss your proposal.

[b] When a noun referring to a collection of people has plural concord, the pronouns for which it is antecedent tend to be who/whom/they/them rather than which/it. Compare:

a family who quarrel amongst themselves

a family which dates back to the Norman Conquest

couple in the sense of two persons normally has a plural verb even in AmE: The couple are happily married. When it denotes a unit, the singular verb is used: Each couple was asked to complete a form.

Coordinated subject

Coordination with and

10.37 When a subject consists of two or more noun phrases (or clauses) coordinated by and, a distinction has to be made between coordination and coordinative apposition (cf 10.39).

Coordination comprises cases that correspond to fuller coordinate forms. A plural verb is used even if each conjoin is singular:

Tom and Alice are now ready. ['Tom is now ready and Alice is now ready.]

What I say and what I think are my own affair. ['What I say is my own affair and what I think is my own affair'; but cf: What I say and do is my own affair, 10.38]

A plural verb is similarly required in asyndetic coordination (without a coordinator):

His camera, his radio, his money were confiscated by the customs officials.

Conjoins expressing a mutual relationship (cf 13.60), even though they can only indirectly be treated as reductions of clauses in this way, also take a plural verb:

Your problem and mine are similar. ['Your problem is similar to mine and mine is similar to yours.]

What I say and do are two different things. ['What I say is one thing and what I do is another thing.]

Note

[a] If a singular noun phrase is followed by etc and similar abbreviatory expressions (and so on, and so forth), a plural verb is normal:

The size etc are less important for our purposes.

[b] Preposed each or every has a distributive effect and requires a singular verb:

Every adult and every child was holding a flag.

Each senator and congressman was allocated two seats.

Contrast:

Each of them has signed the petition. They have each signed the petition.
[c] The coordination markers *respectively* and *respectively* (cf 13.62f) occur in coordination, but not in coordinative apposition.

[d] The principle of notional concord explains:

- The hammer and sickle was flying from the flagpole.
- Danish bacon and eggs makes a good solid English breakfast.
- The Bat and Ball sells good beer.

Despite the coordination, the subject names a single flag, a single meal, and a single pub respectively. Contrast:

- Danish bacon and eggs sell very well in London.

[e] Arithmetical sums may be used with a singular or plural verb:

Two and two \(\begin{array}{c}
\text{is} \\
\text{are}
\end{array}\) four.

So also *Ten times five is (or are) fifty; Two fives make (or makes) ten. But Two fives are ten; Ten minus two is eight; Ten into fifty is five.*

### Coordination within a singular subject

10.38 A singular noncount noun head may be premodified by phrases coordinated by *and*. As subject, the resulting noun phrase may imply two (or more) separate sentences, and may then be legitimately followed by a plural verb:

- American and Dutch beer are (both) much lighter than British beer.
- ['American beer is ... and Dutch beer is ...']

- White and brown sugar are (equally) acceptable for this recipe.

But a singular verb is often used in this context, and is required when the phrases are postmodifying:

- Beer from America and Holland is much lighter than British beer.

When the subject is a nominal relative clause, coordination reduction allows some variation in number interpretation:

- What I say and do are my own affair. ['What I say is . . . and what I do . . .'; cf 10.37]
- What I say and do is my own affair. ['That which I say and do . . .']

A generic noun phrase with a singular count head requires a plural verb when the head is premodified and the premodification contains coordination by *and*:

- The short-term and (the) long-term loan are handled very differently by the bank.
- A first-language and (a) second-language learner share some strategies in their acquisition of the language.

These noun phrases are notionally plural ('short-term and long-term loans'; 'first-language and second-language learners').

### Coordinative apposition

10.39 With the less common \textit{COORDINATIVE APPOSITION}, no reduction is implied, since each of the coordinated units has the same reference. Hence, a singular verb is required if each noun phrase is singular:

- This temple of ugliness and memorial to Victorian bad taste was erected in the main street of the city.
The two opening noun phrases here both refer to one entity (a statue). The following example, however, could have either a singular or plural verb, depending on the meaning:

His aged servant and the subsequent editor of his collected papers

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{was} \\
\text{were}
\end{align*}
\]

with him at his deathbed.

Singular \textit{was} is used if the servant and the editor are the same person, and plural \textit{were} if they are two different people.

Some latitude is allowed in the interpretation of abstract nouns:

Your fairness and impartiality \[
\begin{align*}
\text{has} \\
\text{have}
\end{align*}
\]
been much appreciated.

Her calmness and confidence \[
\begin{align*}
\text{is} \\
\text{are}
\end{align*}
\]
astonishing.

Law and order \[
\begin{align*}
\text{has} \\
\text{have}
\end{align*}
\]
been established.

Invoking the principle of notional concord, we may use either singular or plural, depending on whether qualities are seen as separate or as a complex unity.

\textbf{Note} \[a\] The correlatives \textit{both . . . and . . .} (cf 13.35) mark coordination in subject noun phrases: \textit{Both her calmness and her confidence are astonishing}. With subject complements they mark coordinative apposition: \textit{She is both secretary and treasurer}. Contrast:

Both my wife and my secretary \textit{were} there. \[\text{[two persons]}\]
She \textit{was} both my wife and my secretary. \[\text{[one person]}\]

[b] Noun phrases are usually apposed without a coordinator. If they are subject, a singular verb is of course required if the noun phrases themselves are singular:

This temple of ugliness, a memorial to Victorian bad taste, \textit{was} erected in the main street of the city.

[c] A repeated determiner biases the choice to plural:

Your fairness and your impartiality \textit{have} been much appreciated.

\textbf{Quasi-coordination}

\textbf{10.40} Subject noun phrases may be linked by quasi-coordinators (cf 13.103), \textit{i.e.} prepositions (such as \textit{along with}, \textit{rather than}, and \textit{as well as}) that are semantically similar to coordinators. Grammatical concord requires a singular verb if the first noun phrase is singular:

The captain, as well as the other players, \textit{was} tired.

One speaker after another \textit{was} complaining about the lack of adequate sanitation.

Occasionally the principle of notional concord (sometimes combined with the proximity principle) prompts the plural, especially in loosely expressed speech:

?One man with his wife, both looking very anxious, \textit{were} pleading with a guard to let them through.

?The President, together with his advisors, \textit{are} preparing a statement on the crisis.
If an adverbial is attached to a second noun phrase linked to the first noun phrase by and, the construction is considered parenthetic, and grammatical concord similarly requires the verb to agree in number with the first noun phrase:

A writer, and sometimes an artist, is invited to address the society.
The ambassador – and perhaps his wife too – is likely to be present.

The same grammatical rule applies when the second phrase is negative, whether or not linked by and, though here the principle of notional concord reinforces the use of the singular:

The Prime Minister, (and) not the monarch, decides government policy.

**Coordination with or and nor**

**10.41** The rules are different for subject phrases or clauses which are coordinated with (either . . .) or:

Either the Mayor or her deputy is bound to come. [1]

What I say or what I think is no business of yours. [2]

Either the strikers or the bosses has misunderstood the claim. [3]

Either your brakes or your eyesight is at fault. [4]

Either your eyesight or your brakes are at fault. [5]

All these involve nonappositional coordination. Grammatical concord is clear when each member of the coordination has the same number: when they are both singular (as in [1] and [2]), the verb is singular; when they are both plural (as in [3]), the verb is plural. A dilemma arises when one member is singular and the other plural (as in [4] and [5]). Notionally, or is disjunctive, so that each member is separately related to the verb rather than the two members being considered one unit, as when the coordinator is additive and. Since the dilemma is not clearly resolvable by the principles of grammatical concord or notional concord, recourse is generally had to the principle of proximity: whichever phrase comes last determines the number of the verb, as in [4] and [5].

Where the disjunctive force is weak and or approaches the meaning of and, the plural verb is sometimes found with singular subject phrases, especially in informal usage:

Jogging or swimming is supposed to be good for the heart.

When or is used for coordinative apposition (cf. 10.39), grammatical concord requires the number of the verb to agree with the first appositive if the two appositives differ in number:
The hero, or main protagonist, is Major Coleman.
The hawks, or bellicose officials, are in the ascendency.
Gobbledygook, or the circumlocutions of bureaucratic language, is intentionally difficult to understand.
The circumlocutions of bureaucratic language, or gobbledygook, are intentionally difficult to understand.

The rules for the negative correlatives neither . . . nor are the same as for either . . . or in formal usage. In less formal usage, they are treated more like and for concord. Thus, [6] is more natural in speech than [7]:

Neither he nor his wife have arrived. [6]
Neither he nor his wife has arrived. [7]

This preference is probably connected with the use of the plural verb with neither as a determiner or pronoun (cf 10.42), but it may also reflect notional concord in that logically ‘neither X nor Y’ can be interpreted as a union of negatives: ‘both (not-X) and (not-Y)’.

If the number alternatives for the verb are both felt to be awkward, speakers may avoid making a choice by postponing the second noun phrase or sometimes by substituting a modal auxiliary (cf 10.44):

Either your brakes are at fault or your eyesight is.
He hasn’t arrived, nor has his wife.
Either your brakes or your eyesight may be at fault.

Note
[a] The coordinating correlatives not . . . but and not only/just/merely . . . but (also/even) behave like or with respect to number concord:

Not only he but his wife has arrived.
Not (only) one but all of us were invited.
Not just the students but even their teacher is enjoying the film.

Where the noun phrases differ in number, the principle of proximity determines the concord.

[b] The mixed expressions one or two and between one and two follow the principle of proximity in having plural concord:

One or two reasons were suggested.

Similarly one and plus a fraction or percentage has plural concord, since the notion of plural applies not to at least two but to more than one:

One and a half years have passed since we last met.
The selection of the plural is reinforced also by the principle of proximity. But note:

A year and a half has passed.
The conjoint phrase is treated like ‘a period of a year and a half’, though the singular verb may be reinforced by the immediately preceding a half.

Indefinite expressions as subject

10.42 Another area of ambivalence for subject–verb number concord is that of indefinite expressions of amount or quantity, especially with the determiners and with the pronouns no, none, all, some, any, and fractions such as half. They have both count and noncount uses.

With noncount nouns (present or implied), the verb is of course singular:

So far no money has been spent on repairs.
None (of the money) has been spent on repairs.
Some cement has arrived.
Some (of the cement) has arrived.
With plural count nouns (present or implied) the verb is plural:

No people of that name \textit{live} here.
Some books \textit{have} been placed on the shelves.

\begin{itemize}
  \item Some
  \item Hardly any
  \item All
  \item Half
\end{itemize}

\textit{None} with plural count nouns is in divided usage:

None (of the books) \begin{itemize}
  \item has
  \item have
\end{itemize} been placed on the shelves.

Prescriptive grammars have tended to insist on the singular verb, but notional concord invites a plural verb, which tends to be more frequently used and is generally accepted even in formal usage. With \textit{either} and \textit{neither} the singular is generally used:

The two guests have arrived, \begin{itemize}
  \item and either
  \item but neither
\end{itemize} is welcome.

But a plural verb sometimes occurs in informal usage when \textit{either} or (particularly) \textit{neither} is followed by a prepositional phrase with a plural complement, both because of notional concord and because of the proximity rule:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Either
  \item Neither
\end{itemize} of them \textit{are} welcome. ["Both are (not) welcome."] <informal>

The plural is even more favoured in such constructions with \textit{none}:

None of them \textit{have} been placed on the shelves.

10.43 The proximity principle may lead to plural concord even with indefinites such as \textit{each}, \textit{every}, \textit{everybody}, \textit{anybody}, and \textit{nobody} (or indefinite phrases such as \textit{every one}, \textit{any one}), which are otherwise unambivalently singular:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Nobody, not even the teachers, \begin{itemize}
        \item was
        \item were
      \end{itemize} listening.
  \item Every member of the vast crowd of 50 000 people \begin{itemize}
        \item was
        \item were
      \end{itemize} pleased to see him.
\end{itemize}

Although these sentences might well be uttered in casual speech, or inadvertently written down, most people would probably regard them as ungrammatical, because they flatly contradict grammatical concord.

Other, more acceptable, instances arise with expressions involving kind and number. The number choice in the verb is usually influenced by notional concord:

\begin{itemize}
  \item These \begin{itemize}
        \item sort
        \item kind
        \item type
      \end{itemize} of parties \textit{are} dangerous. <informal>
\end{itemize}
A (large) number of people have applied for the job. [2]
The majority are Moslems. [3]
Lots of the stuff is going to waste. ⟨informal⟩ [4]

[1] illustrates an idiomatic anomaly: there is a discrepancy in number between the noun and the determiner those, as well as with the verb. Rephrasing can avoid the anomaly:

Those kinds of parties are dangerous.
That kind of party is dangerous.
Parties of that kind are dangerous.

[2] and [3] show seemingly singular phrases being treated as plural; notionally they are equivalent to many and most. Use of the singular in these sentences would be considered pedantic in [2], and unacceptable in [3] because of the plural complement (of the pedantic but acceptable The majority agrees with me). The opposite phenomenon, attraction to the singular, is observed in [4] where lots of is treated as if equivalent to singular plenty of and much of; but the singular is also influenced by the proximity of singular stuff. Contrast:

Lots of people are coming to our party.

Notional concord (‘many people’) is reinforced by the proximity of plural people.

Note  [a] For the analysis of quantifiers like a number of, cf 5.25.
[b] Determiners other than those or these are found in plural concord with the nouns in [1], eg: some, any. Like a (large) number of in [2] are locutions such as a lot of, a (whole) set of, a spate of, plenty of; analogous to the (or a) majority in [3] is the (or a) minority, and to lots in [4] are many other informal quantifiers, such as loads of, heaps of.
[e] The proximity principle may be extended to mean that concord is determined by whatever immediately precedes the verb, the position of the subject (which normally determines concord). The principle can then explain a singular verb in cases of inversion or of an adverbial quasi-subject: ?Where's the scissors?; ?Here's John and Mary; ?There's several bags missing. As what precedes the subject here is not marked for plural (cf 10.34 Note [a]), the singular verb follows by attraction. The occasional use of the singular verb in instances such as ?*Is the scissors on the table? and ?*Has my glasses ['spectacles'] been found? may be explained by a combination of two factors: these summation plurals (cf 5.76) are notionally singular, though morphologically and syntactically plural; since the verb precedes the subject, the influence of the subject on number is somewhat reduced. Compare the greater unacceptability of *My glasses has been found. All these are colloquial examples; in formal English plural forms of the verb would be substituted.
[d] If a relative clause follows a noun phrase containing one of plus a plural noun phrase, there is often a choice as to whether the verb in the relative clause should agree in number with one or with the plural noun phrase:

He's one of those students who never get(s) a piece of work done on time.
The choice of singular or plural can depend on whether attention is directed to the generality or to the uniqueness. Compare:

Charlatantry is one of the many words in English that are of French origin.
[=Of the many words in English that are of French origin, charlatantry is one.]
Charlatantry is one of the common vices that is particularly contemptible.
[=Of the common vices, charlatantry is one that is particularly contemptible.]

Concord of person

10.44 In addition to 3rd person number concord with the subject, the verb in the present tense may have person concord (cf 3.2, 3.52) with the subject—1st
and 3rd person concord with *be* and only 3rd person concord with other verbs:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I am your friend.} & \quad [1\text{st PERSON SINGULAR CONCORD}] \\
\text{He is your friend.} & \quad [3\text{rd PERSON SINGULAR CONCORD}] \\
\text{He knows you.} & \quad [3\text{rd PERSON SINGULAR CONCORD}]
\end{align*}
\]

*Are* is the unmarked form for the present of *be* with persons other than 1st and 3rd singular; in all other verbs the base form is used in the present for persons other than the 3rd singular. Only the past of *be* has further distinctions:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I was your friend.} & \quad [1\text{st and 3rd PERSON SINGULAR CONCORD}] \\
\text{He was your friend.} & \quad [1\text{st and 3rd PERSON SINGULAR CONCORD}]
\end{align*}
\]

The unmarked past form of *be* — *were* — is used with the 2nd person singular and all the plural persons. Like number concord, person concord applies only to the indicative; the subjunctive has one form for all persons.

A coordinate subject with *and* as coordinator requires a plural verb. Person concord does not apply, since there are no person distinctions in the plural (*You and I know the answer; She and I are in charge*). If the coordinator is *or*, *either . . . or*, or *nor*, in accordance with the principle of proximity the last noun phrase determines the person of the verb:

Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else *knows* the answer.

Either my wife or *I am* going.

Because of the awkwardness of this choice, a speaker may avoid it by using a modal auxiliary which is invariably for person (*eg: Either my wife or I will be going*) or by postponing the last noun phrase (*eg: Either my wife is going or I am*) (cf 10.41).

**Note**

[a] In archaic English, there is also concord of 2nd person singular pronouns and verbs in the present and past (cf 6.14 Note [c]) *Thou, Lord, hast redeemed us; Thou didst hear my prayer.* (Cf 3.4 Note [b] for archaic 2nd and 3rd person forms of verbs.)

[b] In relative clauses and cleft sentences, a relative pronoun subject is usually followed by a verb in agreement with its antecedent: *It is I who am to blame, It is Kay who is in command, It is they who are complaining.* But 3rd person concord prevails in informal English where the objective case pronoun *me* is used: *It's me who's to blame.* Similarly, 3rd person singular may be used in informal English in these constructions when the pronoun *you* has singular reference: *It's you who's to blame.*

In the archaic *Our Father, which art in Heaven*, agreement is with the 2nd person status of the vocative *Our Father, is: Our Father, thou which art in heaven.* Contrast a modern version *Our Father, who is in Heaven* [*he who is in Heaven*].

**Summary**

10.45 We suggest that the following generalizations apply to the system of subject–verb concord in English.

(a) The principle of *GRAMMATICAL CONCORD* tends to be followed in formal usage and has the sanction of teaching and editorial tradition.

(b) The principle of *NOTIONAL CONCORD* is most natural to colloquial English.

(c) The principle of *PROXIMITY*, despite its minor decisive role in cases where the other two provide no guidance, is generally felt to lack validity on its
own, and has more of an auxiliary role in supporting notional concord in colloquial speech.

Grammatical and notional concord generally work in harmony together. It is only occasionally that these principles are in conflict.

Other types of concord

Subject–complement and object–complement concord

10.46 Between subject and subject complement and between direct object and object complement, there is usually concord of number (but not of person):

My child is an angel. I consider my child an angel.
My children are angels. I consider my children angels.

This type of concord arises naturally from the semantic role of the two complements (cf 10.20). There are, however, exceptions:

My only hope for the future is my children. [also are] [1]
More nurses is the next item on the agenda. [also are] [2]
Their principal crop is potatoes. [3]
That man is nuts. [slang] 'insane' [4]
Good manners are a rarity these days. [also is] [5]
The younger children are a problem. [6]
The next few bars are pure Tchaikovsky. [also is] [7]
Dogs are good company. [8]

The complement in [1] seems condensed, with perhaps an implied preposition: My only hope for the future is in my children. The subject of [2] may similarly be analysed as condensed (something like 'the question of more nurses') or may perhaps be treated as a title (cf 10.34 Note [c]). In [3] the subject complement is a generic noun phrase, which might equally be singular: Their principal crop is the potato. Sentences [4–8] contain a subject complement which, although nominal in form, has a characterizing function closer to that of an adjective. There is often no singular/plural contrast; for example, we do not have *The houses are bricks, only The houses are brick.

Note

[a] The complements in [1], [2], and [3] are identifying (cf 10.20), as is shown by the potentiality for subject–complement reversal: My children are my only hope for the future; The next item on the agenda is more nurses; Potatoes are their principal crop.
[b] Pseudo-cleft constructions with a fronted object what may have a plural subject complement (cf 10.34):

What we need most is books.
But what is ambivalent in number, often interpreted as equivalent to either 'the thing that' or 'the things that', so that we also find a plural verb in concord with the subject what-clause:

What we need most are books.

Some prescriptive teaching requires the singular both for the verb within the what clause and for the verb that is in concord with the clause:

What is needed most is books.
We also find a singular verb when the what-clause is subject complement, but there are objections to this infringement of the concord rule:

*Books is what we need most.
what is needed most.

[c] If the subject is singular there is no subject–complement concord with the idioms be all ears, be all elbows, be all fingers and thumbs. For example: I'm all ears ['I'm listening with all my attention.'].

**Distributive number**

10.47 The distributive plural is used in a plural noun phrase to refer to a set of entities matched individually with individual entities in another set:

Have you all brought your cameras? ['Each has a camera.]
Hand in your papers next Monday. ['Each has to hand in one paper.]

While the distributive plural is the norm, the distributive singular may also be used to focus on individual instances. We therefore often have a number choice:

The students raised their hand(s).
Some children have a/an understanding father.
We all have good appetites.
They vented their spleen on him.
They can’t put their finger on what’s wrong.

Pronouns agree with their antecedent(s).
Their noses need / noses need to be wiped.
The exercise was not good for their back(s).

The singular is sometimes obligatory or preferable with idioms and metaphors:

We are keeping an open mind. ['open minds]
They vented their spleen on him. [*their spleens]
They can’t put their finger on what’s wrong. [*their fingers]

The distributive singular is sometimes used to avoid ambiguity:

Students were asked to name their favourite sport.

The singular makes it clear that only one sport was to be named. Similarly:

Children must be accompanied by a parent.

**Pronoun reference**

10.48 Agreement between a pronoun and its antecedent (cf 12.8ff) should probably be considered coreference rather than grammatical concord, but it is appropriate to treat the phenomenon here.

Concord of number, person, and gender is necessary between subject on the one hand, and object or complement on the other hand, if the second element is a reflexive pronoun (cf 6.23ff):

He injured himself in both legs.
She bought herself a raincoat.
I haven’t been myself for weeks. ['I haven’t felt well.']
The same concord relation holds when the reflexive pronoun occurs in other functions (e.g., as prepositional complement), or when the emphatic genitive his own, etc., is used:

She's making a sweater for herself.
I wrote to them about myself.
They're ruining their own chances.

For coreference relations of the type exemplified by Everybody . . . their, cf. 10.50.

Note  [a] In BrE, collective noun subjects permit, as one might expect, plural concord: The navy congratulated themselves on, if not a victory, at least an avoidance of defeat. In both BrE and AmE, plural reflexives often follow the indefinite pronouns (cf. 10.50): Everybody behaved themselves; some, however, avoid the construction.
[b] The concord relation may be with an element other than the subject, notably an object:
I wrote to my brother about himself, I drove them in their own car.

10.49 This type of concord may extend beyond clause boundaries. Thus the relative pronouns who, whom, and which agree with their antecedent in the superordinate clause in gender, the first two being personal, and the last nonpersonal:

Here's the hammer which I borrowed yesterday.
That's the man who(m) I saw talking to your parents.

Whose is used with either personal or nonpersonal antecedents:

The man whose wallet he stole. The house whose rafters were burned.

There is a feeling, however, that whose is more appropriate to personal antecedents, presumably because of its morphological relationship to who and whom, and some speakers feel uneasy about its use with nonpersonal antecedents.

Personal and possessive pronouns in the 1st and 3rd persons agree with their antecedents in number. Those in the 3rd person singular (he, she, it) also agree with their antecedents in gender:

Tom hurt his foot. [1]
Beatrice knows that she is late. [2]
The books were too heavy, so I left them. [3]

The violation of concord in the case of nonreflexive pronouns does not lead (as it does in the case of reflexive pronouns) to an unacceptable sentence, but to a different interpretation. One may compare [1] with [4]:

Tom hurt her foot. [4]

In [4] the pronoun must refer to someone else, someone mentioned or known from the situational context. Of course, in both [1] and [2] the pronoun may also refer to somebody other than the subject.

Note In phrases denoting body parts and close personal belongings (cf. 5.35), possessive pronouns refer back to the subject where some languages prefer the definite article:

John shook his head. She dirtied her shoes.
So also in [1], if the reference is to the subject.
The pronoun *they* is commonly used as a 3rd person singular pronoun that is neutral between masculine and feminine. It is a convenient means of avoiding the dilemma of whether to use the *he* or *she* form. At one time restricted to informal usage, it is now increasingly accepted even in formal usage, especially in AmE. (On sexual bias in pronoun usage, cf 6.10.)

Rather than use *he* in the unmarked sense or the clumsy *he or she*, many prefer to seek gender impartiality by using a plural form where possible in reference to the indefinite pronouns *everyone, everybody, someone, somebody, anyone, anybody, no one, nobody*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Everyone} & \text{ thinks } \text{they} \text{ have the answer.} \\
\text{Has any} \text{body brought their camera?} & \\
\text{No one could have blamed themselves for that.}
\end{align*}
\]

A similar use of the plural occurs with coordinate subjects referring to both sexes, as in [4], and with a singular noun phrase subject having a personal noun of indeterminate gender as head, as in [5]:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Either he or she is going to have to change their attitude.} \\
\text{Every student has to hand in their paper today.}
\end{align*}
\]

In formal English, the tendency has been to use *he* as the unmarked form when the gender is not determined. The formal equivalent of [1], though increasingly ignored now, is therefore:

\[
\text{Everyone thinks he has the answer.}
\]

A more cumbersome alternative is the conjoining of both masculine and feminine pronouns:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Every student has to hand in his or her paper today.}
\end{align*}
\]

This device is particularly clumsy if the pronouns have to be repeated:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{If a student does not hand in his or her paper today, he or she will not be allowed to continue the course.}
\end{align*}
\]

One way of avoiding the dilemma is to make the subject plural:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All students have to hand in their paper today.}
\end{align*}
\]

Similar methods can usually be employed for the indefinite pronouns too:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{All of them think they have the answer.} \\
\text{Have any of you brought your camera?}
\end{align*}
\]

For [4] the only alternative in formal English is to rephrase the sentence:

\[
\text{Either he is going to have to change his attitude or she hers.}
\]

The indefinite pronoun *one* is followed in formal usage by the same pronoun for subsequent references:

\[
\text{One should choose one's friends carefully.}
\]

But AmE may also use the masculine pronoun:

\[
\text{One should choose his friends carefully.}
\]
In accordance with the tendency to avoid the use of the masculine pronoun to subsume both male and female references we may expect that AmE will increasingly replace indefinite one with indefinite we, you, or they, as appropriate:

We should choose our friends carefully. [6b]

We have noted (cf. 10.36) that, especially in BrE, singular collective nouns have plural subject–verb concord in cases where the speaker thinks of the group as made up of separate individuals. The same principle extends to pronoun concord:

The government are cutting their losses. <BrE> [7]
The government is cutting its losses. [8]

Although there is no number contrast in relative pronouns, the number distinction can be reflected in the choice of personal who (ie the group thought of as a set of individuals) as opposed to nonpersonal which (ie the group as an indivisible abstraction). Thus corresponding to [7] and [8], we may have:

the government, who are cutting their losses <BrE> [7a]
the government, which is cutting its losses [8a]

Hybrid forms are rare, and seem odd:

?the government, who is cutting its/their losses
?the government, which are cutting its/their losses

Note: Informally, with indefinite pronoun subjects, they is commonly used in subsequent tag questions: Everybody is leaving, aren't they?, Nobody is leaving, are they?
[b] For introductory it, that, and this, cf 6.17. Examples:
  Somebody opened the door. It was David.
  Hello! This is Susan. Is that Geoffrey? <on phone>

Semantic restrictions

10.51 Apart from concord, there are other ways in which the choice of one clause element may affect the choice of another:

The men scattered.
  not *The man scattered.
The police contingent dispersed the rioters.
  not *The police contingent dispersed the rioter.
John and Mary collided.
  not {John
  *The car
  } collided.
  but John collided with Mary.
The workers assembled.
  not *The worker assembled.