

Concord Usage in English Grammar: An Overview

HARUNA SHUAIBU
IBRAHIM GHALI

Department of English
Aminu Saleh College of Education, Azare
Bauchi State, Nigeria

AHMED BABA MUSTAPHA

Department of General Studies Education
Federal College of Education (Tech) Gombe
Gombe State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

There are various kinds of concord in the English language because the principle of agreement between forms is very central to syntax as the whole point about syntax is the interrelationships among linguistic structures and their functions. On this note, this paper reviews some works on the concord, with the aim of bringing out areas whose agreements determine correctness of our sentences or otherwise. The agreements include but not limited to: modifiers and their heads, time adverbials and the verbs used, group or pair nouns and the verbs used; and pronouns and their antecedents. For simplicity sake, certain points about concord discussed by Eastwood (1994) and Murthy (1998) were respectively reviewed. The review reveals that concord is much more than agreement or relationship just between subject and verb but rather the relationship between elements that are used for sentence formation. The paper also offers some recommendations for the improvement of teaching, learning and use of concord in particular and the English language in general.

KEY WORDS: Syntax, Concord, Subject, Verb

Date of Submission: 08-09-2021

Date of Acceptance: 23-09-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

Concord is central to English grammar and to our understanding of how English sentences can be effectively used to convey our thoughts, ideas, feelings and so on. Grammatical elements that are used in forming sentences should always be well-connected and agreed with one another in order to produce a comprehensive linguistic construction. The elements combine to form phrases, clauses and sentences have to be systematically arranged and syntagmatically related, after being carefully selected to avoid any element of vagueness or ambiguity. This is to say that, sentence formation in English language involves selecting appropriate words and placing them in their respective suitable positions to provide constructions that can be easily comprehended as that is essential in both speech and writing. The paper therefore attempts to reveal some other areas apart from subject and verb that are worthy of noting as far as grammatical agreement is concerned. For effective communication to be achieved, sentences must be well-formed without disunity between the elements used.

THE CONCEPT OF CONCORD

This is a concept that is used in grammatical theory and description to refer to formal relationships that exist between elements of grammar. Concord is the general grammatical term of a language which in a basic sense, refers to the relationship between two grammatical units. One unit which triggers the agreement relation is known as “controller” and the other unit which is determined by the controller known as “target”. These two units are determined by syntactic and semantic characteristics which are called “agreement features”. This means that if the subject is the controller and the verb is the target, the agreement features are represented by the use of number and person (Corbett, 2006, pp. 4-5). In simple terms concord simply means that a form of one word requires a corresponding form of another.

In traditional grammar concord is seen as an agreement between a subject and a verb in a sentence, which is however much more than that. The subject and the verb are just two elements out of many elements

that possibly make up sentences. In this regard, Eastwood (1998: 191) explains that “concord can be seen as an internal agreement among the grammatical elements within a sentence, occupying their right and respective positions, showing their relationship in number, person and time as well as functioning to collectively generate an idea of the sentence in which they appear”. Yule (1996: 83), when discussing ‘agreement’, asserts the following:

In addition to the terms used for the parts of speech, traditional grammatical analysis has also given us a number of other categories, including “number,” “person,” “tense,” “voice” and “gender.” These categories can be discussed in isolation, but their role in describing language structure becomes clearer when we consider them in terms of agreement.

The quotation above shows that concord is a broad concept under which a number of grammatical issues such as the relationship between the speaker, listener, and the person/thing being discussed, singular and plural usages, time of speaking or writing and the agreement between pronouns and their antecedents are dealt with.

Looking at the brief arguments raised in the definitions and discussions above, concord has been seen as a concept that integrates all grammatical elements used in sentences rather than just limiting it to a relationship between ‘subject’ and ‘verb’. On this note, attempts have been made in paper to highlight some areas where agreement counts, as one word has to agree with another for having a grammatical construction either group or clause. To justify this claim, some wrong usages caused by lack of agreement are thus illustrated below:

Modifiers

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| ✓ These books | * This books |
| ✓ Handsome boy | * Beautiful boy |
| ✓ People’s party | * Peoples’ party |

Past tense

- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| ✓ I was... yesterday. | * I am... yesterday. |
| ✓ I had... last years. | * I have... last year. |
| ✓ We were... last month. | * We are... last month. |

Participle forms

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ✓ She has come. | * She has came. |
| ✓ They were taken. | * They were take/took. |
| ✓ The students have been asked.... | * The students have been ask.... |

Collation

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| ✓ Proud of | * Proud for |
| ✓ Congratulations on | * Congratulations for |
| ✓ Confidence in | * Confidence on |

The above examples provide clear pictures of some areas where agreement plays a vital role. Firstly modifiers are provided with their appropriate heads in one side, and paired with the ones used with wrong heads in the other side marked with asterisk *. Same pattern is done to the time adverbials and the verbs used; participle forms and collation. The wrong usages are culled from Shuaibu (2019) being categorized under errors of agreement.

TYPES OF CONCORD

Being a broad concept in which a number of grammatical issues are treated, concord is generally discussed under three (3) different types namely: grammatical concord, notional concord and concord of proximity.

1. Grammatical Concord

This refers to the agreement of subject and verb, pronoun and its antecedent, subject and complement etc. It is the most fundamental type of concord in which the verb matches the subject in number. A singular subject agrees with a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. There are two types of grammatical concord which are concord of number and person. Concord of number deals with singularity and plurality, but concord of person deals with 1st person, 2nd person and 3rd person (Leech & Svartivk, 2002, p. 273).

2. Notional Concord

This is the second principle of concord. It is semantically based. It refers to the agreement according to the idea of plurality in a group noun rather than a singular form of the noun. Different words or a group of nouns take either singular or plural concord like the word “family”:

2. a- A new family have moved in across the street.
2. b- A new family has moved in across the street.

In (2) (a) above, the word “family” notionally takes the plural verb (have), but in (b) it grammatically takes the singular verb (has). The singular is used when the group is considered as a single undivided body.

3. Concord of Proximity

This is the agreement of the verb with the closely preceding subject. It is positionally based in which the verb agrees with the nearest subject. The verb takes its number from whatever pronoun or noun phrase precedes it and functions as a subject. This is evidently illustrated in the examples below:

3. a- No one except his own supporters agree with him.

In the sentence above, the verb “agree” agrees with the number of “supporters”. Although the head noun “No one” is singular, the verb agrees with the nearest noun. It is very important to note that proximity concord is reinforced by notional concord.

4. b- Either the teacher or the students are to blame for the bad results.

In the sentence above, the verb “are” agrees with the number of “students”. Although the first head noun “the teacher” is singular, the verb agrees with the nearest noun.

SOME POINTS TO NOTE ON CONCORD

To cut the argument short, certain points discussed by experts in relation to concord are hereby reviewed. Eastwood (1994) discusses some points to note on concord, and they are as follow:

1. There are singular nouns that look like plural ones. In effect, some learners get confused when using such words in sentences. These words include physics, linguistics, stylistics, news, gymnastics, economics etc. Below are some examples in usage:

✓ The news **is** not very good.

✓ Gymnastics **seems** difficult.

✓ Stylistics **does** not interest me.

2. Group nouns (sometimes called collective nouns) take either singular or plural verb. The choice depends on whether we see the group noun as a unit or as individual members, for example:

✓ The crowd **was/were** in a cheerful mood.

✓ The team **has/have** won the competition.

✓ The class **is/are** actively participating in the lesson.

• Note: using collective nouns with relative pronouns is different as in:

The crowd **which has** (Singular) / The crowd **who have**.... (Plural)

3. Pair nouns (nouns made up of two identical parts) are plural in form and they therefore take plural verbs when used as in:

✓ These trousers **need** to be ironed.

✓ Your new glasses **are** very beautiful.

✓ I want to buy **some** glasses.

• Note that pair/pairs are used with group nouns to refer to either one or both more as in:

The pair of trousers **needs** to be washed.

How **have** three pairs of scissors managed to disappear?

4. After *none of*, *neither of*, *either of*, *any of* + plural noun phrase, we can use either a singular or plural verb. But, the plural verb is more informal.

✓ None (of the pupils) **has/have** failed the test.

✓ I do not know if either (of these batteries) **is/are** good.

✓ Neither (of them) **has/have** a car.

5. We use a singular verb after a subject with ‘every’ and ‘each’ as in:

✓ Every student **has** to take a test.

✓ Each day was **the** same as the one before.

• Note that when ‘each’ follows a plural subject, the verb is plural as in:

The pupils each **have** to take a test.

6. Two or more phrases linked by ‘and’ take a plural verb as in:

✓ Both the kitchen and the dining room **are** closed.

✓ Unemployment and economic crisis **have** contributed....

• Note that a phrase with ‘and’ in the bracket does not make the subject plural as in:

The kitchen (and of course the dining room) **faces** due west.

7. A phrase with ‘as well as’ and ‘with’ does not make the subject plural, so it takes singular verb as in:

✓ George, together with some of his friends, **is** buying a book.

✓ The bag as well as the book **is** on the table.

✓ The teacher with her student **has** opened the classroom.

8. When two phrases are linked by ‘or’ the verb usually agrees with the nearest. Below are some examples:

✓ Either the girls or the boy **is** in the room.

- ✓ Either his sister or the neighbors **are** looking after the dog.
- 9. If a phrase comes after a subject, the verb agrees with the first subject as in:
 - ✓ The house between the two shops **is** empty.
 - ✓ The lady walking with two girls **has** written a novel.
 - ✓ The books in the teacher's hand **are** beautiful.
- 10. When a phrase or clause is used as a subject, it takes singular verb as in:
 - ✓ Through the trees **is** the quickest way.
 - ✓ Opening my eyes **was** exciting.
 - ✓ Having good ideas **helps** a lot.
- 11. A phrase of measurement usually takes a singular because it is seen as a unit. Below are some examples:
 - ✓ Ten miles **is** too far to walk.
 - ✓ Thirty pounds **seems** a reasonable price.

In the above examples, a distance is seen as a whole not the individual miles in the first sentence and in the second sentence, a sum of thirty pounds is seen not the individual pounds.

- 12. Titles and names also take a singular verb when they refer to one thing as in:
 - ✓ Star Wars **was** a very successful film.
 - ✓ Tom and Jerry **makes** children happy.
 - ✓ The Lions **wins** the national award.

Moreover, there are other areas worth considering as far as concord is concerned. Murthy (1998), in addition to the points discussed above, stresses on other important points such as the use of modifier-articles, possessive pronouns etc. especially when using two different nouns referring to two different persons, the use of 'either-or' and 'neither-nor' and related aspects. Some of the areas discussed by Murthy (1998) are reviewed below:

- 13. If two nouns used as subject and they refer to two different persons, the modifiers should be used before each noun to avoid ambiguity and the verb must be plural as in:
 - ✓ **My** aunt and **the** guardian **want** me to apply for a job.
 - ✓ **The** author and **our** teacher **have** invited me to a dinner.
 - ✓ **Their** teachers and **the** principal **were** in the hall.
- 14. When two singular subjects are connected by 'either/or' or 'neither/nor', they must be used with a singular verb. But, when one of the subjects is plural, the plural subject should be placed last and it should be followed by a plural verb. For example:
 - ✓ **Neither** Ahmad **nor** Grace **has** agreed to collect the topic.
 - ✓ **Either** the Guard **or** the student **is** not saying the truth.
 - ✓ **Either** Ali **or** his sisters **are** kind and considerate to me.
 - ✓ **Neither** the Minister **nor** his cronies **have** understood the problem.

II. CONCLUSION

The paper discussed 'concord' beyond the traditional point of view in which is limited to 'subject-verb' agreement. As such, the paper stressed the importance of incorporating the correct use of other elements that are frequently used in phrase, clause or sentence formation. It was shown how modifiers and their heads agree with each other, how verbs agree with time adverbials that they are used together, how group or pair nouns and the verbs used agree with each other and how pronouns and their antecedents also agree with each other. Consequently, the discussions showed that concord concerns with the general syntagmatic relations of the grammatical elements used in sentences not only 'subject' and 'verb'. To reveal more areas that are worthy of noting, the paper also reviewed some of the experts' works; particularly the work of Eastwood (1994) and Murthy (1998) on certain areas as far as concord is concerned.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Taken into consideration the points discussed in this paper, the following recommendations are hereby offered to help in drawing the attention of both the teachers and learners of English as a second language in respect to concord:

1. Teachers should endeavour to make their lessons students-centred so that there should be adequate participation in the lesson by the students in order to encourage discussion of the various agreements considered when forming English sentences.
2. Teachers should formulate various class exercises with different kinds of concord in sampling paragraphs and passages for easy identification by the students.
3. Elements of sentence structure such as subject, predicate, object, complement and adjunct should be thoroughly taught to students to aid understanding and usage of the concord.

4. Constituents of group structure such as nominal group, verbal group, adjectival group, adverbial group and prepositional group should also be intensively taught to provide the students with basic knowledge of composing good English sentences.
5. Students should be encouraged to practise both oral and written communications with the different kinds of concord so as to support linguistic and communicative competence in the use of English language.
6. Contrastive analysis on concord and other difficult language aspects between the native and target language (mother tongue and English) should be conducted so as to be in a good position to tackle errors from the negative transfers.

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HARUNA SHUAIBU, et. al. "Concord Usage in English Grammar: An Overview." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(09), 2021, pp. 01-05.