

SUBJECT-VERB CONCORD WITH COLLECTIVE NOUNS
OR THE COUNT-MASS DISTINCTION:
WHICH IS MORE DIFFICULT
FOR POLISH LEARNERS OF ENGLISH?

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ABSTRACT

Two aspects of English syntax were chosen for closer analysis in the present paper, i.e., subject-verb concord involving collective nouns in the singular and the syntactic marking of noun reclassification from the category of uncountable nouns to that of countable ones with the help of the indefinite article. The study aims to find out which of them is more difficult for Polish learners of English and whether the degree of difficulty depends on the learners' proficiency in the foreign language. The discussion is based on the results yielded by an empirical study in which intermediate and advanced Polish students of English took part. The subjects had to complete partial English translations of Polish sentences with specific low-frequency English nouns which substituted true English equivalents of the Polish nouns shown in the sentences. The study reveals that marking subject-verb concord in the case of collective subject nouns was as difficult for the subjects as signaling the count-mass distinction by means of the indefinite article and the zero article, respectively.

KEYWORDS: collective nouns, subject-verb concord, noun reclassification, articles

1. Introduction

1.1. Collective nouns

Collective nouns, or nouns of multitude (Michael 1970: 302), are usually defined syntactically. The nouns have both singular and plural qualities; they can have singular or plural pronoun concord and impose variable subject-verb concord. As Quirk et al. (1972: 190) explain, English collective nouns can be replaced by either the singular pronoun *it* or the plural pronoun *they*, even though the number in the noun itself does

not change (e.g., *the army: it/they*). The substitution choices depend on the interpretation of the referent; the singular pronoun mirrors the non-personal collectivity of the group, that is the group itself, while the plural one conveys information on the personal individuality within the group, that is on the members of the group (Svensson 1998: 126). Besides, a collective subject noun in the singular can be accompanied by either singular or plural verb. In this way, notionally plural but grammatically singular collective nouns obey the principles of notional concord whereby a verb agrees with its subject “according to the *idea* of number rather than the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that idea” (Quirk et al. 1972: 360), e.g.:

- (1) The audience were enjoying every minute of it.
- (2) The audience was enormous.

In (1), the verb in the plural is more appropriate, since the sentence concerns individual reactions of members of the audience. By contrast, the sentence:

- (3) The audience were enormous.

would describe an audience of enormous people (Quirk et al. 1972: 360–361). It should also be noted that when a collective noun designates a group of people and has plural pronoun and/or verb concord, it antecedes *who/whom* rather than *which* (Quirk et al. 1972: 361).¹ The following examples, cited after Quirk et al. (1972: 371), clearly illustrate the forgoing principles of concord in the case of collective nouns:

- (4) The government, who are cutting their losses...
- (5) The government, which is cutting its losses...

Thus, personal and relative pronouns may be seen as syntactic manifestations of notional subject-verb concord involving collective nouns.²

¹ Even though the category of number does not apply to relative pronouns, Levin (2001: 159) notes that the usage of personal and non-personal relative pronouns coincides with their “plural” and “singular” usage with collectives. Thus, he suggests treating *who* as “a plural relative” and *which* as “a singular relative” with collective nouns.

² Even though plural verb and pronoun concord in the case of singular collective nouns is traditionally said to be a feature of British and Australian English, Svensson (1998: 141) challenges this view in the light of more recent corpus research. The study conducted by Levin (2001: 159), in turn, “confirmed that AmE in general has the lowest proportion of plural verb agreement, BrE the highest and AusE held an intermediate position”. Nonetheless, the author also found that some collective nouns, e.g., *couple* and *staff*, which usually take plural verbs in British English, are often accompanied by plural verbs in the other varieties as well (Levin 2001: 160).

The principles of notional concord, crucial in the case of English collective nouns, do not apply to Polish, where the grammatical properties of the nominal subject decide the number of the verb predicate in a sentence. The principles of formal concord require the verb to be in the same number as the subject (Jadacka 1995: 478). Thus, to be followed by a plural verb, the subject must be marked for plurality.³ In Polish, explicit conjunction and, with the exception of *pluralia tantum*, the morphological form of the plural number are markers of noun plurality (Topolińska 1984: 317). A noun in the singular, in turn, even one which designates a collection of people or things, needs to be followed by a singular verb. Therefore, subject-verb concord in the case of singular collective nouns can be different in Polish and in English, as pointed out by Duczmal (1975: 166):

- (6) The government have just decided to solve the problem (noun singular – verb plural).
- (7) Rząd właśnie postanowił rozwiązać problem (noun singular – verb singular).
- (8) *Rząd właśnie postanowili rozwiązać problem (noun singular – verb plural).

This implies that what may be particularly difficult for Polish learners of English is the use of plural verbs after English collective nouns which are not definitely marked for plurality, a construction impossible in Polish. The following sentences, cited after Duczmal (1975: 166) further illustrate the point:

- (9) Our Planning Committee have considered your request (noun singular – verb plural).
- (10) Nasz Komitet Planowania rozpatrzył pańską prośbę (noun singular – verb singular).
- (11) *Nasz Komitet Planowania rozpatrzyli pańską prośbę (noun singular – verb plural).

1.2. Reclassifiable nouns

Another area of difficulty for Polish learners of English is related to nouns which lend themselves to reclassification. As the name itself suggests, the process consists in shifting nouns from one class to another. In particular, an uncountable noun can be reclassi-

³ This rule does not apply to *pluralia tantum*. To illustrate, *wujostwo* (*aunt and uncle*), which, morphologically, looks like a singular noun, is a masculine personal *plurale tantum*, and in the nominative requires a verb in the plural, e.g.: *Wujostwo czytali książkę* (noun plural – verb plural), versus the ungrammatical **Wujostwo czytało książkę* (noun plural – verb singular) (Saloni and Świdziński 1998: 177, 181). *Pluralia tantum* are not taken into consideration in the present discussion.

fied as a countable noun with a semantic shift so as to denote quality partition, that is a kind, type, brand, form, an appropriate unit or instance of something more general, e.g.:

- (12) A: Do you want tea or coffee?
B: A coffee, please. [i.e., ‘a cup of coffee’] ... This is a nice coffee. ... I like Brazilian coffees best.
- (13) A: Would you like a cake?
B: No, I don’t like cake. (Quirk et al. 1985: 247–248, 298–299).

The shift between the two noun categories is an extremely productive process. Allan (1980: 547, 565) claims that reclassification is very common indeed, since most nouns, with the exception of pluralia tantum and proper names, can be used either countably or uncountably. Yet, it should also be remembered that most nouns have countability preferences; some tend to be more often located in (un)countable noun phrases than others.

While uncountability is unmarked in English, marking countability of indefinite noun phrases in the singular is syntagmatic – a denominator is needed.⁴ Apart from the sentences above, the following one, adduced by Allan (1980: 546) illustrates the shift:

- (14) Small farmers in Kenya grow corn rather than wheat. *Triticum aestivum ssp. vulgare* is a wheat suitable for high altitudes.

The use and the omission of the indefinite article may be seen as a clear syntactic manifestation of different perception of noun referent in a given context, and, consequently, of noun assignment to the countable category and the uncountable one, respectively. As Hewson (1972: 90, 124) observes, when a common noun is to represent a formless continue entity, it does not require an article; when restrictions or limitations come into play, the indefinite article is needed. Thus, *a car* is a unit item, whereas *car* is a means of transport, a continue (Hewson 1972: 127).⁵

⁴ Marking countability of definite noun phrases in the singular does not really take place; they are used when their reference is known, and knowing the reference of a noun phrase means knowing its countability (Allan 1980: 565).

⁵ Master (1997: 216) pays attention to the fact that it is impossible to tell the difference between the non-use or omission of an article and the use of the zero article. The prevalent practice of treating the zero article as a full-fledged article will be followed below. Interestingly, Chesterman (1991) draws a distinction between the zero article and the null article. He observed that nouns which are not preceded by any article fall into two categories, i.e., indefinite mass and plural nouns on the one hand, and certain singular countable nouns and singular proper nouns – on the other (Chesterman 1991: 63). The former are preceded by the zero article, and the latter – by the null article. The zero article, pertinent to the present discussion, is the most indefinite of all articles, as it removes the boundaries which make a noun discrete. It occurs with singular countable nouns in alternation with the indefinite article and renders them uncountable. The indefinite article, in turn,

The distinction between countable and uncountable interpretations of noun reference is relevant to both English and Polish. In Critz's (1981: 207) words, "[a]ny noun in English or Polish is theoretically capable of both quantitative and non-quantitative reference". Yet in Polish, unlike in English, countable nouns in the singular are not preceded by the indefinite article, since Polish "has no equivalent overt marker for the semantic interpretations English associates with the presence or absence of this article" (Critz 1981: 199). Thus, the following Polish sentences, without any articles, would correspond to that in (12–14):

- (15) A: Chcesz herbatę czy kawę?
B: Poproszę kawę. ... To jest dobra kawa. ... Najbardziej lubię brazylijskie kawy.
- (16) A: Chciałbyś ciasto?
B: Nie, nie lubię ciasta.
- (17) Drobnicy rolnicy w Kenii uprawiają kukurydzę zamiast pszenicy. *Triticum aestivum ssp. vulgare* jest pszenicą odpowiednią do uprawy na dużych wysokościach.

Yet, even in the article-less Polish (Fisiak et al. 1978: 70; Kryk 1987: 45; Miodunka 1974: 65; Szwedek 1973c: 204) reclassification can have some syntactic manifestation as well. Apart from conventional units of measurement, there are less conventional methods of indicating the shift, e.g., the pronoun *ten* and the genetivus partitivus (Topolińska 1984: 314–317), e.g.:

- (18) To mleko (tzn. mleko w tym garnku) jest przypalone.
'This milk (i.e., the milk in this pot) is burnt.'
- (19) Daj mi mleko (ACC) vs. Daj mi mleka (GEN),
'Give me the milk' vs. 'Give me some milk',

where the accusative case denotes a whole, and the genitive case – a part of the whole. On top of that, the pronoun *jakiś* may designate a kind or a type of a substance e.g.:

is the opposite of the zero article inasmuch as it signifies, or even creates boundaries, thereby making a formless entity discrete, and thus countable. The indefinite article occurs with mass nouns also in specialist contexts, where the boundary it creates should be interpreted as *a kind* or *type of* (Master 1997: 222, 225). The null article, by contrast, is the most definite of all articles as it names one-member sets or precedes certain singular countable nouns in alternation with the definite article *the* (Master 1997: 223). In particular, singular countable common nouns follow the null article in the vocative, e.g., *Come along, boy!* Besides, it occurs in a set of fixed phrases, such as *go by train/be at (in) church* or *breakfast is ready/go to bed*. In such cases, the hearer is assumed to be familiar with the most common modes of transport or institutions, or noun referents are instantly recognizable in the immediate situation (Chesterman 1991: 65–66). Clearly, then, the null article falls beyond the scope of the present discussion.

- (20) To była jakaś nadzwyczajna woda (Topolińska 1984: 316).
 ‘It was some extraordinary water’

Even though some parallels may be drawn between the role performed in Polish by the aforementioned *genetivus partitivus* and pronouns on the one hand, and English articles on the other, it should be remembered that pronoun distribution in Polish is markedly different from that of articles in English. Most importantly, the latter, in contrast to the former, are obligatory in specific contexts (Fisiak et al. 1978: 70). Thus, while both languages have tools for marking the count-mass distinction, the means are quite different.⁶ The category of articles as such is nonexistent in Polish; the count-mass distinction is not manifested here by means of any specific syntactic markers of countability as systematically as in English, but can be determined by broad linguistic and extra-linguistic contexts (Critz 1981: 204). Thus, the other area of difficulty for Polish learners of English with which the present study is concerned is the obligatory presence of the indefinite article in the case of English countable nouns in the singular, which, when uncountable, can occur without any article at all.

1.3. The aim of the study

The present study attempts to find out whether subject-verb concord involving singular collective nouns, and thus largely determined by notional concord, is more difficult for intermediate and advanced Polish learners of English than marking the count-mass distinction by means of the indefinite article and the zero article in the language they learn. Arguably, native speakers of Polish, an article-less language, in which subject-verb concord is grammatical, rather than notional, can serve as a source of relevant information. The level of learners’ proficiency in English is taken into account as it might be a factor affecting conclusions.

The article system in English, which, among other things, is used to mark the count-mass distinction, is said to be notoriously difficult for foreign learners (Ekiert 2007: 7). In fact, it is believed to be such a complex aspect of English grammar that it often remains troublesome even to the most advanced non-native speakers of English, who are still likely to make errors in the use of articles, their good knowledge of English grammar notwithstanding (Master 1997: 220; Master 2002: 331). No wonder, then, that learning and teaching English articles may seem to be a truly “daunting proposition” (Master 2002: 334). They are even claimed to be “not learnable in any conscious way and ... therefore not teachable” (Dulay et al. 1982, as quoted in Master 2002: 334). English articles, which constitute “a remarkably complex system to acquire” (Young 1996: 36), pose even more problems for the foreign learners in whose mother tongue

⁶ The issue resurfaces in Section 1.3.

there are no articles, or even article-like morphemes. There is convincing evidence that the lack of articles in languages such as Czech, Finnish, Japanese or Polish exacerbates the problems in question (Ekiert 2007: 1, 30; Young 1996: 138–142).⁷ There are even claims in the literature on the subject that learners of English whose mother tongue does not feature articles are one level behind those in whose native language there are articles. As the former need to create the category of articles in the first place, they need more time than the latter to acquire the system (Master 1997: 228).

Considering subject-verb concord with collective nouns, in turn, it should also be stressed that, as explained above, in Polish, in contrast to English, a plural verb cannot follow a collective noun in the singular. In fact, subject-verb agreement as such is one of the last elements of verb-related morphology that are mastered by learners of English. The scale of difficulty associated with acquiring verb-related morphemes and the functions which they perform may be presented in the following way (adapted from Hawkins 2001: 35, 48):

- (21) bare verb phrases → copula → aspect (+/- progressive) →
tense (+/- past) → subject-verb agreement (+/- 3rd person singular)

A possible descriptive generalization about the development of noun-related morphology and its functions in English as a foreign language, in turn, could take the following form (adapted from Hawkins 2001: 239):

- (22) bare NP → specificity in the NP (marked by *the*) →
hearer knowledge in the NP (marked by *a/zero*) → possessive 's

Obviously, mastering subject-verb agreement and manifesting it with the help of the third person singular suffix *-s* on the one hand, and using the indefinite article and the zero article to mark the count-mass distinction in English, on the other, appear to rank at the bottom of the hierarchies illustrating the acquisition of verb-related and noun-related morphemes, respectively. Admittedly, using copulas and auxiliary verbs, on which subject-verb concord can also be marked, seems to be somewhat easier than deal-

⁷ It should be stressed that the lack of articles in a language does not imply that its speakers do not mark definiteness and indefiniteness. The latter constitute a universal property of human languages which makes speakers distinguish between specific and nonspecific reference on the one hand, and referents which are known and unknown to the hearer, on the other (Ekiert 2007: 11). Bickerton (1981, quoted in Young 1996: 138) calls the specific-nonspecific distinction a semantic universal of noun phrase reference, and the known-unknown distinction – a discourse universal. The universals imply that each language has tools for achieving the communicative goals in question, but the means may be different from the system of articles in English, which itself reflects the universal system of semantic and discourse marking (Young 1996: 142). As for Polish, Szwedek (1973a, 1973b, 1973c, 1973d, 1974, 1976a, 1976b, 1981) argues that there are at least three ways of showing the definite/indefinite distinction, i.e., pronouns, stress and intonation, word order. See also the discussion in Section 1.2, where pronouns and the genitivus partitivus were mentioned as methods of indicating specificity in Polish.

ing with the present simple tense in the third person singular. However, it is still difficult to determine whether showing proper subject-verb concord or using articles is in general more demanding for foreign learners of English. Apparently, as already mentioned, the answer depends on the category of verbs. Yet, it must also be influenced by subject nouns. After all, as observed above, in the case of collective nouns, the verb agrees not with the grammatical form of the noun, but with the notion that the latter represents. In such cases, the third person singular *-s* might be superfluous, which could pose a serious problem for those who have already managed to acquire the morpheme. This, in turn, makes it even harder to make any confident predictions as to the degree of difficulty that verb concord with collective subject nouns in English might create to foreign learners of the language, let alone try to judge whether the concord in question is more or less taxing than the use of the English articles to mark the count-mass distinction.

In view of the lack of any piece of empirical research which would explicitly demonstrate whether marking the count-mass distinction with the help of the indefinite/zero articles or ensuring proper subject-verb concord involving collective nouns is more difficult to Polish learners of English, a null hypothesis of no significant difference in the level of difficulty between the two aspects of grammar will be proposed. It seems reasonable to expect, however, that the more advanced learners of English are, the fewer mistakes in the foreign language they will make. Thus, the level of difficulty that the syntax of collective and reclassifiable nouns poses for Polish learners of English will probably decrease with proficiency development. Finally, it seems that when the syntax of Polish and English converge, the mother tongue can be helpful in solving the syntactic problems under discussion. By contrast, Polish learners will probably make more mistakes in the foreign language when the rules of Polish and English grammar diverge. In short then, the following hypotheses will be verified:

Hypothesis 1. Subject-verb concord with singular collective nouns is as difficult for Polish learners of English as the use of the indefinite article and the zero article to signal the count-mass distinction.

Hypothesis 2. A higher level of proficiency in English reduces the level of difficulty posed for learners by subject-verb concord when the subject is a collective noun as well as by the syntax of reclassifiable nouns.

Hypothesis 3. Similarities (differences) in grammar between Polish and English reduce (increase) the difficulty which the syntax of collective and reclassifiable nouns presents for Polish learners.

The next sections describe the research which yielded data that make it possible to achieve the aim of the paper and test the foregoing hypotheses.

2. Methods

2.1. Data

The study exploits the data obtained in an experiment conducted in March and April 2006 with a view to analyzing the way in which Polish learners of English consult dictionaries (Dziemiątko, in preparation). Even though the data were collected to serve a different purpose, their appropriate rostering and additional statistical analyses permit fulfilling the aim of the present paper.

2.2. Subjects

The data discussed below were collected from 252 advanced students of English (henceforth AS), who at the time of the experiment studied English at Poznań University, and 196 intermediate students (hereafter IS), who attended high schools and junior high schools across Poland. In the experiment, the subjects dealt with noun tests, and account for around half of the whole sample.⁸ The research was conducted in regular class time (45 minutes).

2.3. Materials

The noun tests consisted of twelve sentences in Polish, each of which was accompanied by its partial English translation and separated from it by a relevant dictionary entry. Since the entries supplied in the test are not seen below as a source of variables which could have affected the subjects' performance, they are not given any attention in what follows. It should only be noted that all the partial English translations had to be completed with the nouns which were headwords in the entries, and they had to be used in proper syntactic structures. The headwords, in turn, were presented to the subjects as English equivalents of the nouns which were underlined in the Polish sentences offered for translation. In fact, however, the headwords were low-frequency English nouns taken from the *Dictionary of difficult words*, and they were not semantically related to the true English equivalents of the underlined Polish nouns, which they substituted. The replacement was to prevent the subjects' from falling back on their lexical and syntactic knowledge of English nouns.

Table 1 presents the lexical items which were employed in the study. In each row, the English nouns which were replaced in the test are given first, while those which replaced them, which were also the headwords of dictionary entries to be used to com-

⁸ The other participants of the study were involved in verb tests, which are not discussed below.

plete the partial translations, come last. The Polish equivalents underlined in the sentences offered for translation are shown in brackets in between.⁹

Table 1. Nouns used in the test (English noun / (Polish equivalent) / English substitute).

Nouns	PL+	PL-
collective (concord)	nobility / (możnowładztwo) / hachure	cast / (obsada) / brogan
	team (animals) / (zaprzęg) / postil	crew / (zgraja) / chevet
	team (people) / (ekipa) / nauch	management / (szefostwo) / fanion
reclassifiable (article)	injustice / (niesprawiedliwość) / darnel	resin / (żywica) / jactancy
	mould / (pleśń) / gyle	veneer / (okleina) / turpeth
	sediment / (osad) / mackle	hardship / (ciężar) / chinch

As can be seen from the table, half of the English items were collective nouns, and the other half – reclassifiable nouns. Three of the collective nouns required singular concord, like their Polish counterparts, and that is why they are presented as PL+ collective nouns. The other three collective nouns had to be used with a verb in the plural. Needless to say, plural concord would be grammatically incorrect in Polish. Consequently, the three English collective nouns are labeled as PL- collective nouns. Similar distinctions can be made among the English reclassifiable nouns. Three such nouns were expected to be used uncountably, and thus did not require any article, which resembles the syntactic properties of their Polish equivalents. That is why they are described as PL+ reclassifiable nouns. The other three reclassifiable nouns were to be used as countable ones, and, therefore, had to be preceded by the indefinite article. As Polish nouns are not preceded by any article in the corresponding structures, the English nouns are referred to as PL- reclassifiable ones. Clearly, then, the syntactic behavior of the English collective and reclassifiable nouns either converged with or diverged from that of their Polish equivalents. The syntactic properties of the English nouns were explained in relevant dictionary entries.

Table 2 provides examples of Polish sentences used in the test along with their partial English translations to be completed by the subjects. The examples illustrate each experimental condition discussed so far.

Clearly, the context of the sentences with reclassifiable nouns made it abundantly clear whether a noun should be used uncountably or not, that is whether it denoted an abstract phenomenon or a substance as such, e.g., *pleśń* (*gyle*), or a specific instance, type or kind thereof, e.g., *nieprzemakalna żywica taka jak Epo-tek* (*a water-proof resin such as Epo-tek*).

⁹ The symbols PL+ and PL-, which refer to the English nouns only, are explained below. The following discussion concerns the syntactic properties of the English nouns which were eventually substituted in the study with the low-frequency nouns. However, it should be pointed out that the subjects considered them to be syntactic features of the low-frequency nouns used as headwords.

Table 2. Sentences used in the test (selected examples).

Nouns	PL+	PL-
	Muszą pracować jak <u>ekipa</u> , która jest tak mocna jak jej najsłabszy członek.	Udaje mu się jednoczyć złodziejską <u>zgraję</u> , która często się kłóci.
collective (concord)	nautch /nɔ:tʃ nɔ:tʃ/ noun ... They must work as which as its weakest member.	chevet /tʃevˈt/ noun... He manages to unite the thievish who amongst themselves.
reclassifiable (article)	gyle /dʒarˈl/ noun ... Nie zamierzamy przejmować się szczurami czy <u>pleśnią</u> , czy czymkolwiek w tym rodzaju.	jactancy /dʒæktˈnˌsi/ noun... Jeśli fragmenty zostały preimpregnowane nieprzemakalną <u>żywicą</u> taką jak Epo-tek, to powinny być spojone tym samym materiałem.
	We're not going to worry or anything like that.	If sections have been pre-impregnated with Epo-tek, then they should be bonded with the same material.

In the case of collective nouns, it also had to be clear whether a collective subject noun needed a singular verb or a plural one. The partial English translations offered the hints, as they contained either personal or non-personal relative pronouns, i.e., *who* (*zgraja/chevet*) vs. *which* (*ekipa/nautch*), as well as either plural or singular third person pronouns or possessive adjectives, i.e., *themselves* (*zgraja/chevet*) vs. *its* (*ekipa/nautch*), which were co-referential with the nouns to be used to complete the sentences. Thus, the pronouns or possessive adjectives in any partial English translation indicated what number the verb should be in (e.g., *who* and *themselves* – a plural verb; *which* and *its* – a singular verb).¹⁰

The contextual or syntactic hints in the Polish sentences or their partial English translations notwithstanding, it seems reasonable to expect that the subjects could find it more difficult to use the English structures which are nonexistent in Polish. In the case

¹⁰ Even though such a solution was considered far from perfect, it was found to be the best under the circumstances. Relying solely on the idea of notional concord seemed to be a risky venture, especially in the case of intermediate learners of English, and, apart from the clues mentioned above, no other syntactic tools were in fact available to disambiguate the context of the sentences so as to make it crystal clear that either singular or plural subject-verb concord was in order. While such a design of the task might seem to suggest proper answers far too clearly, this was not the case in reality. See the Results section below.

of reclassifiable nouns, they might fail to use the indefinite article with countable nouns, since they do not use articles, or any other parallel syntactic forms, with countable nouns in Polish. Likewise, it stands to reason that Polish students of English would tend to use a verb in the singular with an English collective noun, since plural concord does not really occur in such contexts in Polish.

For the purpose of the study, relevant English sentences with reclassifiable and collective nouns were extracted from corpora of English and translated into Polish by the author herself. In the test, the Polish sentences thus created were offered for translation. The Polish equivalents of the English reclassifiable and collective nouns, as already mentioned, underlined in the Polish sentences in the test, were taken from *The New Kościuszko Foundation Dictionary*. The relevant chunks with the English key nouns were removed from the original English sentences, which then served as the partial English translations of the Polish sentences to be completed by the subjects. In the test, the arrangement of the tasks with reclassifiable and collective nouns was randomized.

2.4. Design summary

The above discussion of the materials and the sampling method suggests that the design of the study represents a 2x2x2 analysis of variance (ANOVA), i.e., there are three two-level factors. The three factors are:

- (1) proficiency level (*level*);
- (2) the investigated aspects of grammar (*grammar*);
- (3) the degree of syntactic similarity between Polish and English in the selected points of grammar (*PL factor*).

Clearly, each of the factors was measured at two levels: proficiency level was either advanced or intermediate (*AS* vs. *IS*), the grammar factor was represented by subject-verb concord involving collective nouns and the count-mass distinction manifested by the presence of the indefinite/zero article (*concord* vs. *article*), and finally – the PL factor meant that Polish and English either coincide or diverge in the selected points of grammar (*PL+* or *PL-* structures). It has to be noted that any test included both the items which were to show plural (*PL-*) and singular (*PL+*) concord with the verb on the one hand, and those which had to be used countably, i.e., with the indefinite article (*PL-*), and uncountably, i.e., with the zero article (*PL+*), on the other hand. *Grammar (GR)* and the *PL factor* are thus within-subject, or repeated measures factors, since they represent repeated measurements on the same subjects. *Proficiency level*, by contrast, is a between-groups factor because subjects were either advanced or intermediate students of English, and a subject dealt with only one test in the experiment. Table 3 presents the design architecture in a symbolic way.

Table 3. Design architecture (symbolic representation)

Level	GR	PL
AS	Conc.	PL+
		PL-
	Art.	PL+
		PL-
IS	Conc.	PL+
		PL-
	Art.	PL+
		PL-

The role of the dependent variable in the study was performed by the correctness of translation, judged by the presence of the expected syntactic structures, i.e., singular/plural concord and the indefinite/zero article. The design represents a between-within design, as two of the three factors, or independent variables, are repeated measures factors. This implies that not only the relationships between the dependent variable and all the factors had to be investigated, but also the relationships among the independent variables. To achieve the aim of the study and make the most of the design, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted.

3. Results

3.1. An overview

The mean proportions of correct answers supplied by the subjects in the experiment are presented graphically in Figure 1, which shows dependent variable scores on all the three two-level factors discussed above.

Three preliminary conclusions follow from an overview of the data. First, it appears that almost in each of the experimental conditions, the AS performed better than the IS. The intermediate students appear to have been a little more successful than the advanced subjects only in supplying the zero article with uncountable nouns (Art_PL+). Second, it seems that in each group of subjects and for each level of the grammar factor (Conc. and Art.), the nouns labeled PL+ proved to be easier to deal with than the corresponding ones marked as PL- ones, although the difference was the smallest for the count-mass distinction in the advanced group (AS: Art_PL+ and Art_PL-). Third, for each level of the PL factor (PL+ and PL-), there seems to be hardly any difference in the rate of success in supplying the relevant concord or using the articles at either proficiency level, and it is only in the advanced group that the use of the verbs in the singular after a collective noun (Conc_PL+) proved a little easier than using the zero article with uncountable nouns (Art_PL+).

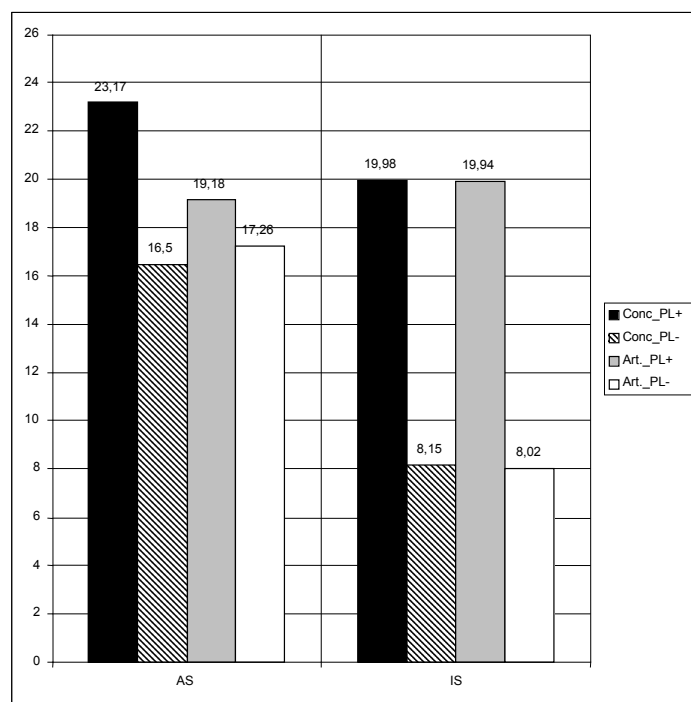


Figure 1. Correct answers given in noun tests by proficiency level, grammar and PL factor.

3.2. ANOVA

As these preliminary observations follow only from the inspection of the data presented in the figure, it is impossible to verify the hypotheses on their basis. Summary results obtained from the repeated measures ANOVA, shown in Table 4, supply the necessary information. Results statistically significant at the accepted level of significance ($p < 0,05$) are marked with the asterisk (*).

Table 4. Repeated measures ANOVA: An overview.

	SS	Degr. of	MS	F	p
Level	16.7056	1	16.7056	10.8193	0.030236*
GR	0.4871	1	0.4871	0.2597	0.637139
GR*Level	0.3867	1	0.3867	0.2062	0.673329
PL	43.5725	1	43.5725	20.8748	0.010269*
PL*Level	9.5805	1	9.5805	4.5899	0.098821
GR*PL	0.9107	1	0.9107	1.1797	0.338495
GR*PL*Level	0.9796	1	0.9796	1.2690	0.322960

As can be seen from the table, two main effects were statistically significant. They were produced by the level of proficiency on the one hand, and the PL factor on the other. To visualize the effects, Figure 2 shows the mean percentages of correct translations when only one level of each factor is taken into account at a time.¹¹

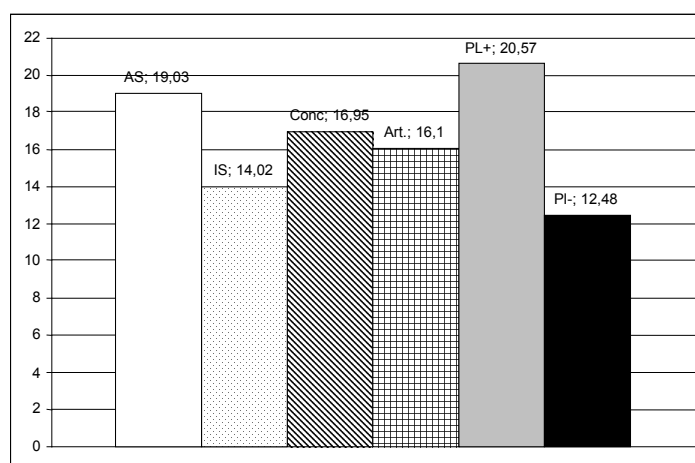


Figure 2. Mean percentages for the levels of all factors.

Clearly, the more advanced the subjects were, the more correct answers they supplied. Also, similarity in syntax between Polish and English encouraged more correct responses in the test than the situation where the syntax of the two languages was different. In other words, singular subject-verb concord and the zero article were the aspects of English grammar which were much easier for the Polish subjects to deal with than plural subject-verb concord and the indefinite article. The values of the levels of significance in Table 4 indicate that the effect exerted by the PL factor was stronger than that produced by the level of proficiency. The difference is clearly shown in Figure 2 as well. The graphic representation of the mean proportions also explains why the main effect produced by the grammar factor was insignificant. When the level of proficiency and the degree of similarity in syntax between Polish and English are neglected, it turns out that subject-verb concord and the count-mass distinction were comparably difficult for the subjects, who provided approximately as many correct translations with collective nouns as with reclassifiable ones.

¹¹ While only the main effects produced by two factors were significant in the ANOVA, mean percentages for the levels of the third factor, *grammar*, are also shown in the graph. It is believed that such an illustration may help account for the lack of a significant main effect in the case of *grammar*.

Even though the results yielded by the repeated measures ANOVA suggest a straightforward set of relationships, the overview of the data in the preceding section might imply that the broad picture which emerges on the basis of the analysis of the main effects does not have to hold true when the levels of the other factors are taken into consideration. Besides, it is not impossible that even the grammar factor significantly affected the subjects' performance, but the influence was comparable at both levels of proficiency or/and at both levels of the PL factor, in which case the main effect could prove insignificant in the ANOVA. To judge the degree of generalization inherent in the ANOVA summary results, the univariate test of significance for planned comparison was performed on the data which represent the highest level of detail, i.e., the mean percentages computed when the levels of all the three factors included in the research are taken into account. The results of the test are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Univariate test of significance for planned comparison.

AS/IS compared				Concord/Article compared				PL+/PL- compared			
Conc.	PL+	AS > IS	0.0019*	PL+	AS	Conc.=	0.3270	Conc.	AS	PL+ > PL-	0.0086*
						Art.					
Conc.	PL-	AS > IS	0.0095*	PL+	IS	Conc.=	0.9896	Conc.	IS	PL+ > PL-	0.0010*
						Art.					
Art.	PL+	AS = IS	0.8843	PL-	AS	Conc.=	0.6842	Art.	AS	PL+ = PL-	0.6498
						Art.					
Art.	PL-	AS > IS	0.0451*	PL-	IS	Conc.=	0.9414	Art.	IS	PL+ > PL-	0.0379*
						Art.					

The data reveal that the subjects at both levels of proficiency in English were comparably successful in providing translations involving subject-verb concord and in using the articles with reclassifiable nouns, both when the Polish language offered help in this respect and when the syntax of Polish equivalents could not be useful (*PL+/-*, *AS/IS*, *Conc.=Art.*).

For the less advanced in English, ensuring plural subject-verb concord in the case of collective nouns as well as placing the indefinite article before countable nouns posed significantly more problems than singular subject-verb concord and the zero article going with uncountable nouns, respectively (*Conc.*, *Art.*, *IS*, *PL+ > PL-*). In other words, at this proficiency level, differences in syntax between Polish and English entailed a significantly lower rate of success in the test for both aspects of grammar subjected to analysis. Also, it should be pointed out that the influence was stronger for subject-verb concord. For the advanced students, by contrast, the PL factor was neither helpful nor distracting in the case of the count-mass distinction (*Art.*, *AS*, *PL+ = PL-*). This means that the subjects used the indefinite article with countable nouns as often as they provided the zero article with uncountable nouns. Plural verb concord with collective nouns, in turn, was much less often present in their responses than singular concord

(*Conc.*, *AS*, *PL+* > *PL-*). For concord, then, the differences between Polish and English proved to be a factor which significantly lowered the advanced students' success rate in the test. However, its negative influence was not as strong in this group as in the less proficient one.

Finally, when the role of the level of proficiency is considered, it transpires that the AS coped much better than the IS with both plural concord and the indefinite article (*Conc.*, *Art.*, *PL-*, *AS* > *IS*). Thus, proficiency development largely reduced the negative effect of the differences in syntax between Polish and English on translation correctness. It should be noted that the positive impact of proficiency development was stronger for concord. However, proficiency level proved unimportant in dealing with uncountable nouns (*Art.*, *PL+*, *AS* = *IS*); the advanced and the intermediate students comparably often supplied the zero article in their translations. The same does not hold true for singular subject-verb concord (*Conc.*, *PL+*, *AS* > *IS*). In fact, the higher level of proficiency of the advanced subjects led them to make fewer mistakes in marking singular subject-verb concord than was the case in the less advanced group.

4. Conclusions

When the most general findings from the investigation are considered, it transpires that all the hypotheses formulated in Section 1.3 have been confirmed. Nonetheless, a more thorough analysis makes it possible to qualify some of the conclusions. First, it turns out that as predicted in Hypothesis 1, subject-verb concord and the count-mass distinction are indeed comparably difficult for intermediate and advanced students of English. Second, Hypothesis 2, which assumes a beneficial influence of proficiency development on the number of correct responses, proved to be true in three experimental conditions: when the indefinite article was in order as well as when singular and plural concord was required by collective subject nouns. In fact, the advanced subjects' better command of English did not help them only when the zero article was to be used with uncountable nouns. Then, the intermediate and advanced subjects supplied comparably many correct translations. Finally, the role of the PL factor was found significant in certain experimental conditions as well, where, in line with Hypothesis 3, similarity in syntax between Polish and English resulted in a larger number of correct translations. More specifically, at both levels of proficiency, the subjects found it easier to use singular rather than plural verbs with singular collective subject nouns. The intermediate students were also more often successful in using the zero article with uncountable nouns than the indefinite article with countable ones. Yet, as regards the count-mass distinction, the zero article proved as difficult for the advanced subjects as the indefinite one.

The conclusion that subject-verb concord and the use of articles with reclassifiable nouns are comparably difficult for Polish learners of English appears to be largely independent of similarities or differences between Polish and English in the considered as-

pects of grammar as well as of the level of proficiency the subjects represented. Nonetheless, careful consideration of the results yielded by the ANOVA and post-hoc comparisons reveals how the two factors affected the subjects' performance on the tasks involving the syntactic structures considered in the paper. For one thing, at the intermediate level, the influence of the mother tongue was much more significant than in the case of the advanced subjects. Polish intermediate learners of English much more often supplied correct translations when a verb after a collective noun had to be in the singular, as is the case in Polish, than when a plural verb was needed. Also, they felt much more confident when the zero article was necessary before a noun, which resembles the situation in the article-less Polish language, than when an English countable noun required the indefinite article, which they quite often failed to supply. The role of the mother tongue apparently loses much of its importance with proficiency development. The more advanced the subjects were, the more often they used the indefinite article with countable nouns. In fact, it was present in their translations as often as the zero article with uncountable nouns. However, the better command of English did not prevent mistakes in subject verb-concord; using plural verbs with collective nouns in the singular remained much more difficult even for the advanced subjects than using singular verbs in such contexts. Yet, the role of the mother tongue, significant in the case of subject-verb concord with collective nouns in the more proficient group as it was, proved to be no longer as important as in the case of intermediate learners dealing with the same aspect of grammar.

One obvious conclusion which follows from the discussion is that in the process of teaching English as a foreign language more attention should be paid to differences in syntax between Polish and English so as to prevent learners from falling back on their mother tongue. While it is generally agreed that the article system in English is notoriously difficult for learners of the language whose mother tongue does not have such a system,¹² the overall findings from the study imply that plural verbs following singular collective nouns in English are equally difficult indeed. Such a conclusion is all the more justified in view of the fact that plural personal pronouns, given in the partial translations in the test, explicitly suggested the need for verbs in the plural. Obviously, such broad hints could be of help provided that the idea of plural subject-verb concord when the subject noun is not explicitly marked for plurality does not seem totally implausible.

The research is no doubt limited inasmuch as many other factors, not considered above, may have affected the results. No attention was paid, for example, to intralinguistic transfer (Dušková 1969: 21, 23, 25), or problems which non-native speakers of English might have with determining countability of the basis of contextual information, as discussed by Yoon (1993: 283).¹³ Yet, such limitations appear to be inextricably

¹² See Section 1.3.

¹³ Mis-specification of noun countability or number by foreign learners of a language can be best explained in Yoon's (1993: 283) own words: "[i]f one argues that it is the context that determines the countability of [...] nouns [...] how do we make [non-native learners of English] use the context in the same way as native

linked with controlled experimentation, where too many variables taken into account might render the obtained data unmanageable.

Finally, the study raises the question of how context-dependent the findings are. For one thing, it is not known whether they hold only for native speakers of Polish or not. It might be interesting to see whether similar conclusions could be drawn from studies in which native speakers of other languages could participate, as long as the languages do not have articles and subject-verb concord is determined only on the basis of the grammatical form of the subject. For another, even though the selection of nouns for the research was made without any bias whatsoever, it would be useful to check whether another set of nouns and sentences would yield comparable results in a similar study.

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