

The communicative function of English verb number

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Abstract This paper offers an account of English verb number solely in terms of communicative function. In this account, verb number is a full-fledged expressive device comparable to the number system for English nouns; all instances of verb number are accounted for in terms of meaning, with the caveat that meaning pertains to conceptualization, not reference. Two points emerge from this line of analysis. First, verb number is not controlled by subject number; each is a separate communicative choice governed by discourse-based principles of semantic coherence. Second, even though the subject usually precedes the verb, speakers can nevertheless think ahead and choose subject number so as to accommodate an anticipated choice of verb number just as well as the reverse, and appear to do both on different occasions. Thus, both choices are best understood in terms of symmetrical relations of *textual cohesion*, usually with each other but sometimes with other features of the context.

Keywords Agreement · Subject-verb agreement · Number agreement · Verb agreement in English · Notional agreement · Grammatical number · Verb number · Noun number · Functional explanation · Columbia School

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