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BSc Degree

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English - II (Advanced English)
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Agreement in English Sentences (Subject and Verb in Sentences)

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Agreement in English Sentences
(Subject and Verb in Sentences)

Rajesh Kumar



Welcome to the class. We are going to look at agreement in English sentences today. As we know, in order to be able to communicate with people and to bring in sharpness, that is, bring in confidence, and in particular to bring in communicative confidence, we need to be accurate. Remember, there are two parts of learning of language; one is accuracy, the other is appropriateness, and together they bring confidence in speaking. They make our writing impressive and they have a lot of impact on our learning. They have a lot of impact on production part, that is, performance part. So, the phenomena of agreement in sentences in particular is directly connected with accuracy. Agreement basically is the key to grammaticality, which is what we know as accuracy.

And as I tell you to look at agreement as cognitive process as one of the components of computation of elements in human mind in the process of learning is very simple, that is, agreement happens to be very simple part. In the sense that, the two parts of the sentence that is subject and the verb within the whole predicate, so basically verb, they need to match their match features.

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Sentence and Complex Sentence

- Sentence = [Subject + Predicate]
- Predicate = [Verb + Object(s) [adjuncts/adverbs]]
- Complex Sentence:
- Subject + Predicate [embedded sentence as an object]



So, let us look at it systematically and then we talk more about it. So, as we know there are two parts of a sentence, that is, one is the subject, the other is the verb within the predicate.

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Agreement

- Handwritten notes: P I / III, [Raju and I] like pizza.*
- Raju likes pizza. —
 - I go to the office on time.
 - You go to the market every week.
 - She leaves her office late in the evening.
 - We are happy.
 - The school is closed.
 - Am is a special case tense marker.
- Handwritten notes: P I / II, P I / III, SUP, S/P, P I / III*



What we do in an agreement is the subject which a lot of times a nominal element in a sentence has to, we say the verb has to agree, the subject has to agree with the verb. True, that is how it appears, but if we take a step back and look at it, then we see that features of that nominal

element in the subject also appearing on the, those features also appear on the verb and then they match.

So, basically verbs host the features of nouns and I will explain that to you. So look at this. So, the first sentence: 'Raju likes pizza', and so in this one, 'Raju' is a nominal element and 'likes' is the verb. So, what I am trying to say is the certain features of this element they are, we call them number, person and gender. In English, gender does not become, does not become so apparent or gender basically we can say it does not take part in agreement.

So, the whole thing is between person and number. So, 'Raju' is third person and singular in number. So, these two features and of course, it is masculine, but this is what I was saying is not so prevalent, not so obvious. So these features of this element also show up in one form or the other or at least we conceptually visualize that these features also appear on the verb, whether they really manifest morphologically or not, meaning whether they really show up on the verb or not is it a matter of what becomes obvious. So look at it. So, in this case we have, we see this small part on the verb which basically match with these features and this is what is called agreement in English sentence. It is true for all languages but since we are talking about English this is true for English sentences. This is what we call subject and verb, agreement between subject and verb.

So, look at it, the noun 'Raju', even outside the sentence has the same feature, it is a third person noun, proper name, and it is singular. So, these two features it retains even outside the sentence. So, by the virtue of becoming the subject of the sentence, these two features have to percolate on the verbs too. So, it is not that verbs also have these features and then we just match the two.

What we are, what we need to understand is when we say subject-verb agreement, it feels like there are two elements subject and verb and they have to do some negotiation, some agreement. There has to be agreement in terms of negotiations. Actually that is not true conceptually and cognitively speaking.

What happens is the sub, the certain features of nouns in the subject position or whatever appears in the subject position, have to show up on the verb as well and thus, we, if they match then the sentence is grammatical, if they do not then the sentence is ungrammatical. So, for example, we

cannot say 'Raju like pizza', because the absence of these features on the verb will result in ungrammaticality of the sentence.

So, let us take another sentence just to: 'Raju and Ramu like pizza'. Here, these two elements are making it plural and this is still third person. So these two features have to come here and then so this is no morphological marker, no suffix, no element on the verb we call it zero. Nothing appears on the verb at least in the present tense, in the examples that we are taking, that indicates agreement between this plural subject and this verb.

One more time: it is not that verb is also plural or singular. Verbs are not plurals or singulars. Verbs take those features of plurality depending upon the feature of the subject and that is how agreement works in English. Now, at this point I also want to underline certain, something which is related to learning in our subconscious and how subconscious works with computation of these elements in human mind. So here is what we need to remember.

The subject, we need to decide what the subject is in the sentence and this sometimes is obvious and sometimes is not so obvious. When it is not so obvious, it becomes a sort of a cognitively complex exercise for human mind and once the human mind figures out that the features of the subject, whether it is singular or plural or third person or first person or second person, it selects markers accordingly. That is all is the computation for the purpose of accuracy in our process of learning.

So, one more time: I am trying to help you make certain underlying patterns, certain underlying rules, the way they work, that is, the way they operate in hidden computation of human mind, we are trying to make them obvious. And if you take a note of those rules, if you look at those rules, if you follow those patterns, then the output is totally clear and you do not need to look at every example one after the other.

Hence, it has implications for the entire process of learning. So, for, in that line of discussion, I will discuss this with you that the actual thing is, in this entire process of understanding agreement, the actual thing is that we need to determine the features of the subject. So, how do we determine the features of the subject?

First we need to determine what the subject is and then the features become apparent and then the computation part is simple. So that that is the process. So, let us look at some of these operations in actual sentences of English and see how they work and that is very interesting. It reveals certain, on surface it looks like we have a lot of rules but when you look at those rules, when you look at the patterns carefully, you realize that these, all of these things are physical manifestations and what is crucially significant is figuring out what is the subject, subject is in a sentence and that is all is the crux of the whole exercise. So here we go.

So, in this sentence the next one: 'I go to the office on time'. What is the subject of the sentence? If, 'I' is the subject of the sentence, look at this. We see, and I am purposely keeping all the sentences in the present tense for the time being so that we can see some patterns, look at this. We see zero marking on the verb, so it seems like we are following plurality as agreement but 'I' as a first person pronoun has a special status in the language and therefore it follows the same pattern as the plural nouns or plural subjects will follow. Hence, 'I go to the office on time', and we do not say 'I goes to the office on time' like 'Ramu likes' or 'Ramu goes'. So, 'Ramu' is also singular, 'I' is saying, if 'I' refers to the singular entity, then why should the agreement not follow the same way? The reason is, first person retains certain special characteristics across languages and this is where paying attention to our own languages, the way we speak, the way we have learned, also helps us in learning agreement process.

So, if you check the language that you speak you will realize that the first person works very differently or at least the same way in your language too. So, I remind you one more thing, so one is this first person and its agreement. The other was dropping of the subject in imperative sentences like 'sit down'. So we know that the subject is 'you' and therefore we can drop the subject.

So, universally all across languages, we drop the subject. That is a universal pattern and if you have checked your own language, you will realize that it works in your language as well. Same way, first person pronoun 'I' or whatever is the equivalent form in your language, has special status and it shows up differently and English works exactly that way.

So, if, when we look at these similarities and differences, our understanding of English agreement becomes slightly better, slightly grounded. Now, same thing works with second

person pronoun, 'you go to the market every week'. I want to retain your attention here, look at this, this is second person so this was first person, this was, this is second person.

Second person has a special case in English: it is always taken as plural even if it indicates one person, if it refers to one person, structurally it is always plural. Then we go to, 'she leaves her office late in the evening'. Here you see second person, third person singular and you see that here too, third person singularity on the verb. Now, you see this is a feminine gender but we do not see any indication of feminine, marking for feminine on the verb. Therefore, we say gender in the agreement in English does not participate so much. So, three, out of the three components of agreement, only number and person are critical. So, these 4 sentences show us quite a bit about agreement in English sentences. Look at this, 'we are happy', 'we' as the plural first person plural, so we are taking a plural marker. 'The school is closed', school singular hence the singular marking. Like I said, 'am' is a special case, a tense marker because it comes only for first person.

So it is good to refresh this and this much of refreshing, this much of understanding about agreement, can solve most of the patterns that we know. So now, let us look at some of the things which can be seen as exception but I invite you, not to look at these things as exceptions, rather you need to see how the subject works.

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No change in forms of nouns in both singular and plural

• Sheep Deer

- The sheep is harmless creature.
- The sheep are expensive for some farmers.
- Deer is not available everywhere.
- Deer are free on IIT Madras campus.




So, some elements, some nouns like sheep or deer, these nouns do not change their forms in singular or plural. So just by the form we do not know whether we are talking about singular or plural rather one or many. So, we can say, and we know about this only when we use them in a sentence we can say ‘the sheep is harmless creature’.

So, in this case we know we are talking about one sheep. ‘The sheep are expensive for some farmers’: so when we use plural marking then we know that we are talking about sheep as plural, many sheep. So, these nouns do not change form. So again what is going on here? This is not an exception in our cognitive process, in subconscious, we need to be clear that this time I am talking about one, and in the plural context I am talking about many, hence we select the agreement marking accordingly.


Same thing for deer: ‘deer is not available everywhere’, ‘deer is not seen everywhere’, true. So, in this case we are talking about one. ‘Deer are free on IIT Madras campus’: here we are talking about when we say ‘are’, we are referring to a bunch of them in plurality. So, there is no exception involved here, there is. It is okay and normal for nouns not to have their plural counterpart because we need to understand plurality through their use.

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No plural forms

- Mathematics is tough to follow.
- Mathematics gives nightmare to some people.
- Politics is easy for everyone to understand.
- Politics requires careful speech.



In some cases, people argue that these nouns do not have plural forms at all. So we cannot make plural of this at all. We need to look at it conceptually and conceptual clarity is important here.

So, what are those nouns? They are like mathematics, politics, and there are a lot of them, the names of some diseases like measles, and all of them.

But just because, think about it, just because some noun sounds as plural that there is some plural sounding marker at the end of that noun, does not have to, that does not have to make a noun plural. This may not be a, this may not have any plural form at all. So, we always say ‘mathematics is tough to follow’, ‘mathematics gives nightmare to some people’.

We do not need to take them literally but the point is it is just this is, this shows singularity in agreement and therefore it is taken as singular and we cannot argue as if these nouns do not have plural forms. Rather there is this ‘s’ marking here, ‘s’ on mathematics may not be a marker, marking of plurality at all. Same thing in politics is, ‘politics is easy for everyone to understand’ and ‘politics requires careful speech’. So, here for our purpose we are only looking at it ‘politics’ as singular and singular marking on the agreement.

So, from, let us recap whatever we have seen so far. The process of agreement is very simple, whatever is the feature of nominals in the subject position, those features must also be there on the verb. Period.

How do we decide the feature? We need to look at it and we need to develop some conceptual clarity about that nominal whether it can have a plural counterpart, it can have a singular counterpart, whether as a total it is a plural or singular, once we have figured it out then the process is pretty simple.

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No singular forms ...

- Glasses, Jeans, Police
- My glasses are blue.
- Their jeans leave colour.
- Police are vigilant during festival.



Some nouns do not have singular forms like 'glasses', 'jeans', 'police' and many of them. I am just giving you a couple of examples. 'My glasses are blue', we will never say 'my glass', 'my glass is blue', because this noun can only be used as plural. My, 'their jeans leave colour', so 'leave' is has plural marking on it. 'Police are vigilant during festival', 'are' making police plural.

So, when we have these nominals they always take plural. So the point is not singular-looking noun take, singular-looking nouns take plural forms or plural agreement. The point is, these nominals always have plural features on them, and therefore they will need plural features on the verb as well and thus we do not see them as acceptance.

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Indefinites as singular

- Everyone/Everybody, Someone/somebody, No one/Nobody,
- Everything, Something, Nothing

- Everyone comes to the football match.
- Someone is speaking.
- Nobody comes after 5 pm.

- Everything is apparent.
- Something is missing.
- Nothing gets attention.



Just to bring your attention to this specific part, that indefinite, so nominals or nouns or pronouns which indicate, which do not refer to anything definite, they are called indefinite nominals and they are always taken as singular. They always select for singular agreement because they are singular in nature. So, what are they?

Things like these like ‘everyone’, ‘everybody’, they have the same, or ‘someone’. So we have these counterparts like ‘everyone’ or ‘everybody’, ‘someone’ or ‘somebody’, ‘no one’ or ‘nobody’, they mean the same thing. So, one pair works this way and then the other pair is between animate and inanimate, like ‘someone’ can be used for people and ‘something’ for inanimate stuff.

So, if you look at their pattern also they are basically distinction lies between animacy, the distinction is between animate and inanimate and we see ‘someone’ or ‘something’, ‘everyone’ or ‘everything’, ‘no one’ or ‘nothing’. So, they are basically the same thing and they are all as together as a bunch called indefinites, and when you use them in sentences, you see. ‘Everyone comes to the football match’: singular marking, ‘everyone is speaking’, ‘someone is speaking’, ‘no one comes after 5 pm’, so everywhere you will see singularity on the verb as well.

‘Everything is apparent’, ‘something is missing’, ‘nothing gets attention’. So we cannot use them with plural, we cannot say ‘everything are apparent’, knowing this has implications for accuracy as you can see. So, one more time: we need to clarify this conceptually for us, that ‘everything’ is not a nominal that is referent to anything particular, hence we can take it as singular.

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Quantity

- Time (4 hours, 5 minutes, 5 years)
- Five years is not long time in history.
- Sometimes 5 minutes appears too long.
- Four hours is fine.



The quantity at times is taken as singular, particularly quantity of time like 4 hours, 5 minutes, 5 years or these are just random numbers. You can select any. So we can say ‘5 years is not long time in history’. So here, we do say 5 years but as a whole this is considered singular, hence the singular agreement. ‘Sometimes 5 minutes appears too long’: so here again you see 5 minutes but singular marking.

‘4 hours is fine’. These are sentences out of the context but when you read things, when you speak, when you hear others speak, watch these things carefully and you will see these examples. Read one piece, one page from any book and you will definitely find one or two examples from these things, and to get that part of clarity, we need to understand these things or we need to look at those things through these lenses so that we clarify the agreement.

So, there is no exception to agreement feature, agreement pattern. It is just that we need to think about the subject carefully.

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Agreement with plural complements

- What distracts me are the children in the park.
- Most annoying thing last week were buses on the road.
- The most beautiful thing that I saw last week was the painting in the museum.
- There are several monkeys on the tree.



Here is something which requires a special attention. So, sometimes we have, we, agreement works with plural complements and this is an important part that how does agreement work with complement? This is tricky but we just need to understand at this point that sometimes agreement marking is done through complements as well.

So look at this: ‘there are several monkeys on the tree’. So, the reason why we have, ‘are’ here: we know that this is a sentence and ‘there’ is an expletive subject, it is, it appears just to fill the subject position, but we know that the agreement works between the subject and the verb. This is a strange kind of sentence where ‘are’ comes in the sentence as an agreement marker based on ‘several monkeys’ which is in the complement position.

So, we, this is how it shows on the surface but without going too far into the details of this, I want to, I still want to underline the fact that it at some level of in processing in human subconscious or cognition, it is monkeys which are taken as subject of this sentence at some level, and therefore the agreement works with this. But on surface ‘there’, since there was no subject in the sentence, ‘there’ appears as the subject and true that on surface it does not show the agreement between that subject and the verb does not show up.

So, in some other cases when we say ‘what distracts me are the children in the park’. The agreement ‘are’ comes from children. ‘Most annoying thing last week were buses on the road’, so again this agreement of ‘were’ plurality comes from the buses. ‘The most beautiful thing that I saw last week was the painting in the museum’. Here ‘the painting’ singularity comes from,

takes this agreement singular. So, for these kinds of sentences we need to pay little special attention.

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Closest noun



- Either ... or...
- Neither ... nor ...
- Either my father or my siblings are with me at home.
- Either my siblings or my father is with me at home.
- Neither my father nor my siblings are with me at home.
- Neither my siblings nor my father is with me at home.
- English tends to put plurals at the last.



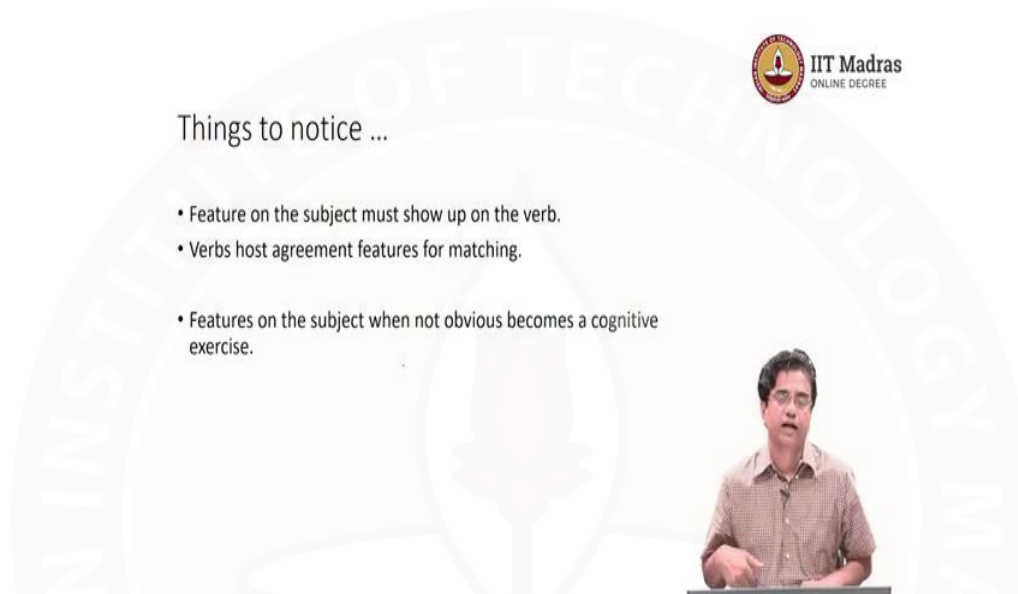
We say, we talk as a rule that in ‘either or’ ‘neither nor’ type of sentences, we take the second noun, that is, after the nominal element after or, participates in agreement. One more time: whether it is about these sentences of some noun from the complement position taking charge of agreement or ‘either or’ type of sentences, all we need to look at carefully and conceptually we need to clarify, is the fact that what is the noun that will participate in the agreement. Once this part is clear, the agreement does not have any exception.

So, look at these few sentences. So again ‘either or’, or ‘neither nor’: they are not two different things, one is affirmative, the other is negative. So, ‘either my father or my siblings are with me at home’. So, the element after ‘or’ that is ‘my siblings’ because it is plural, so we take plural agreement. So this sentence takes plural agreement.

‘My siblings or my father is with me at home’: so here after ‘father’, when we reverse the situation, ‘my father’ is a singular entity hence the singular element. But I want to draw your attention to one specific thing. To show this example, so, to show the point, to make the point I am giving you this example, but the crucial thing about ‘either or’ or ‘neither nor’ or any type of, any of these types of sentence that we need to know is, English tends to put plurals at the last.


So, if there are two nominals coming together in one subject, what happens is English opts for plural nouns at the end. So, it is grammatical, but ideally speaking, in English we will always say ‘either my father or my siblings are at, are with me at home’, ‘neither my sibling, neither my father nor my siblings are with me at home’. So, the plural ones, plural that is ‘my siblings’, comes last. This is a usual pattern in English and that is the part that we need to know.


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Things to notice ...

- Feature on the subject must show up on the verb.
- Verbs host agreement features for matching.
- Features on the subject when not obvious becomes a cognitive exercise.





So, to summarize this whole thing, the all I have talked to you about agreement today is, agreement is an important part, important element for attaining accuracy in our speech and like I usually tell, a careful attention to these things can help us attain this accuracy, attain this element, this part for better performance in speaking.

And once we understand these things, it becomes easier for us to look at everything that comes to us, and it also becomes easy for us to apply them. Keep reading. Please continue with listening and watch the applications of these subconscious processes, subconscious computation that operates in human mind and see the impact of that in your output. We are looking forward to an interaction with you about these things. Until next time, take care, bye.