

Tanulmány

Amira Dhifallah

Collective Nouns and Agreement Preferences in Tunisian Arabic

Abstract

This paper addresses the ability of collective nouns to license plural subject-verb agreement in Tunisian Arabic. One of the defining characteristics of collective nouns is that even when they are morphologically singular, they can trigger both singular and plural agreement with the verb in some languages, including English, as well as varieties of languages, such as Tunisian Arabic. This paper is based on a preliminary corpus study in which I concluded that collective nouns in Tunisian Arabic can be categorized into two main groups: nouns that only trigger singular agreement and nouns that allow both singular and plural agreement. I applied these results to design a language questionnaire for Tunisian Arabic native speakers to investigate their acceptability of the use of plural agreement with Tunisian Arabic collective nouns. The results of the study show that participants accepted the use of plural concord with all of the nouns belonging to the two groups. I conclude that the nouns used in this questionnaire can trigger plural concord regardless of the initial categorization that I established.

Keywords: collective nouns, subject-verb agreement, Tunisian Arabic.

1 Introduction

In most languages, like English, singular collective nouns are known for their peculiar properties, namely their ability to trigger either singular or plural subject-verb agreement. These properties are also present in languages belonging to different language families, such as Arabic. This variation in agreement patterns is linked to one of the semantic properties of these nouns: they can refer either to a collective entity or to the individuals that make up the collective whole. Singular collective nouns represent a case of semantic plurality (reference to more than one), which means that nouns such as *committee* and *bunch* can convey a plural meaning even when they are singular thanks to their ‘internal plurality’ (Gardelle 2019: 7). Previous studies on English collective nouns have established that the variation in agreement patterns is possible within the different varieties of English, and that singular collectives can indeed occur in plural contexts (Biber et al. 1999; Depraetere 2003; Levin 2001; Quirk et al. 1985). The aim of the present study is to examine the plurality feature of collective nouns in an under-researched variety of Arabic, Tunisian Arabic (TA). To my knowledge, there has not been any specific study on collective nouns in TA. Thus, my goal is to provide an addition to the literature on the morphosyntax of TA and to determine whether collective nouns in this variety can trigger plural agreement. The first section of this paper represents an overview of the relevant notions and

grammatical phenomena that are related to collective nouns in the English and Arabic literature. In the second section, I present the study that I designed to answer my research questions. Based on my corpus search, I argue that collectives in TA can be divided into two groups: nouns that only allow singular agreement and nouns that allow both singular and plural agreement. I hypothesize that plural agreement is more acceptable with nouns belonging to the second group, and I prove this claim through the results of my language questionnaire.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 *Collective nouns and subject-verb agreement in English*

Collective nouns represent a category that has long been problematic due to the lack of consensus around its properties in the literature. One of the defining properties of singular collective nouns is that they can license either singular or plural agreement:

- (1) a. The group *is* in the room.
 b. The group *are* ready to leave.

The use of both singular and plural verbs in sentences (1a) and (1b) with the same singular collective noun is perfectly grammatical. This variation in agreement patterns with collective nouns is present within the varieties of English, and a number of studies investigate how collective nouns can be categorized based on their agreement preferences: Biber et al. (1999: 188) argue that collective nouns in British English can be divided into three groups: nouns that prefer singular concord, nouns that prefer plural concord and nouns that occur with both singular and plural agreement. Examples of nouns belonging to these three groups (respectively) can be illustrated as follows:

- (2) The committee *has* made a decision.
 (3) The staff *have* worked all weekend.
 (4) My family *have/has* organized this party.

Based on another corpus study, Wong (2009) argues that collective nouns in Hong Kong English can also be divided into three groups based on whether they allow singular concord, plural concord or both.¹ In a more generalized study, Levin (2001) proposes a categorization of collective nouns based on the results of different corpora including sources from British English, American English and Australian English. He claims that, generally (in most of the corpora), collective nouns can also be categorized into three groups in the same manner, based on their agreement preferences. I summarize the classification of collective nouns in these different studies in the following table:

¹ Wong also briefly tests the use of collective nouns with what is called *mixed agreement*, which is the combination of a singular verb followed by a plural pronoun.

Study	Variety of English	Classification
Biber et al. (1999)	British English	Three groups: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collective nouns that occur 80% of the time with singular concord: <i>audience, board, committee, government, jury</i> and <i>public</i>. 2. Collective nouns that occur 80% of the time with plural concord: <i>staff</i>. 3. Collective nouns that occur equally with both singular and plural concord: <i>family</i> and <i>crew</i>.
Levin (2001)	British English, American English and Australian English	Three groups: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collective nouns that prefer singular concord: <i>commission, company</i> and <i>government</i>. 2. Collective nouns that take plural concord only: <i>couple</i> and <i>staff</i>. 3. Collective nouns that occur with both singular and plural concord: <i>audience, crowd, family</i> and <i>team</i>.
Wong (2009)	Hong Kong English	Three groups: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collective nouns that occur mainly with singular concord: <i>community, department, university, government, council, committee, association, party, class, company, family</i> and <i>college</i>. 2. Collective nouns that occur mainly with plural concord: <i>staff, generation, couple, audience, majority</i> and <i>minority</i>. 3. Collective nouns that take both singular and plural concord: <i>team, population</i> and <i>group</i>.

Table 1. Classification of collective nouns

The data used in all of the above studies were taken from various English corpora and the results show that collective nouns in these different English varieties can be divided into three groups based on their concord preferences. Some of the nouns are classified in the same category (such as *committee* and *government*, which prefer singular concord, and *staff* and *couple* which prefer plural concord). In some other cases, there does not seem to be an agreement on whether the nouns belong to the singular and plural category or the singular only/ plural only categories (this is the case of *family*). The collective noun *audience* seems to be problematic: Biber et al. (1999) classify it as singular only, Wong (2009) classifies it as plural only, and Levin (2001) argues that it occurs equally with both singular and plural concord.

2.2 The factors that influence subject verb-agreement with collective nouns

Collective nouns are subject to two possible conceptualizations: when they are considered as a collective whole, singular concord is preferred; when the separate individuals that form the collective entity are highlighted, plural concord is used (Biber et al. 1999; Gardelle 2019; Quirk et al. 1985). Depraetere (2003: 101) argues that this semantic criterion that she calls “unity vs. individuality” may have an influence on the choice of agreement patterns with collective nouns, but it might be the case that these nouns themselves can have individual preferences for either singular or plural concord. In addition to how collective nouns are conceptualized, the use of certain predicates plays a crucial role in setting agreement preferences. There is a number of predicates that tend to be used in the singular form with collective nouns; Levin (2001) divides these singular preferring predicates into three groups.² He argues that the first group focuses on how the collective whole is composed and not necessarily on the members belonging to it (*contain*, *comprise*, *include* and *be made up of*). The second group focuses on how the collective entity is formed (*be formed*, *be founded*, *be started*, *be set up* and *be established*). Finally, the third group focuses on the size of the collective whole (*be big/small*, *decrease*, *double* and *grow*).³ Depraetere (2003: 102) adds the following predicates to the singular preferring groups: *consist of*, *be disbanded*, *be assembled*, *be gathered*, *be dispersed*, *erupt* and *scatter*. The difference in the use of either the singular or the plural form of one of the predicates mentioned above with a collective noun is illustrated in the following example:

- (5) a. The committee *is* big.
 b. #The committee *are* big.

In example (5a), the collective noun is regarded as one entity and not as individual members: the committee as an institution is big in size. On the other hand, the use of the plural predicate in example (5b) may indicate that we are referring to the members of the committee as being big, which is odd.

Depraetere (2003) argues that there are predicates that prefer plural agreement because they indicate that the action is done by individuals and that they impose some sort of differentiation: *disagree*, *hold different opinions*, *make up one’s mind*, *leave*, *be of a certain age* and *quarrel*. However, Levin (2001: 151) believes that although some verbs tend to prefer singular agreement, examples in which plural agreement is necessary are rare because “the singular is possible in almost all cases of plural verb agreement”.⁴ He gives the following sentences as examples of the rare cases in which plural concord might be necessary:

² Depraetere (2003: 102) claims that these predicates “imply the decomposition or categorization of a unity”.

³ Levin (2001: 154) mentions a small group of verbs that can only occur with mass, plural count or collective nouns, and that allow both singular and plural agreement. These verbs are the following: *disperse*, *scatter*, *assemble*, *flock*, *gather*, *meet* and *come/get together*. De Vries (2021) calls some of these verbs (*meet*, *gather* and *disperse*) collective predicates that can only be used with plural NPs (and, exceptionally, collective nouns); according to Champollion (2020), these predicates are applied to “a plural entity as a whole” and not to individual members.

⁴ Levin (2006: 323) also gives examples of verbs that allow either singular or plural agreement: he mentions “mental verbs” such as *want* and *believe* (which tend to prefer plural agreement), “verbs of speaking” such as *say* and *claim*, and “verbs of concrete action” such as *work* and *play* (which may prefer plural agreement due to the focus on the individuals’ separate actions).

- (6) a. It's almost as if it's a completely different *team*, *that don't* even talk to one another.
 b. Edward Fitzgerald, QC, and Andrew McCooey went to Georgia and soon found that the McKnight family *were* at each other's throats.
- (7) a. A divorced *couple need* a house each, a refrigerator each, *their* own carpets, curtains, CDs.
 b. The *couple were* both shoved and jostled as around one hundred demonstrators greeted them with jeers and shouts in Bolton, Lancashire.
- (8) The *crew are* mostly tall, bearded and from eight nations, with only one woman among *them*.

Levin (2001: 152)

All of the examples above contain some factors that promote plural concord: in sentences (6a) and (6b), the use of reciprocals indicates that the actions are necessarily performed by more than two individuals, hence the use of plural concord. In (7a) and (7b), the quantifiers *each* and *both* promote the use of the plural since they cannot be applied to singular entities. Finally, example (8) contains contextual elements that highlight the individuality of the members of the crew (*from eight nations* and *among them*), as well as the adjective *tall*, which is applied to the separate individuals.

2.3 *Collective nouns and their agreement patterns in Arabic*

Word order plays an important role in influencing concord choices in sentences in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in general as well as with collective nouns: subject-verb agreement is influenced by the position that the subject takes within the sentence, thus, affecting the choice of the verb form. On the one hand, full agreement (in person, number and case) occurs with preverbal subjects, as demonstrated in example (9). On the other hand, partial agreement (in person and gender) occurs with postverbal subjects, as in example (10) below.⁵

- (9) alalwlādu ṣaffaqū
 ART.boy.PL applauded.PL.M
 'The boys applauded.'

- (10) ṣaffaqa alalwlādu
 applauded.SG.M ART.boy.PL
 'The boys applauded.'

However, in the case of Tunisian Arabic (TA), the most natural word order that is commonly used by native speakers is the Subject-Verb (SV) order (Dali 2020). Therefore, almost all sentences in TA demonstrate full agreement, and all the TA examples in this article will be in SV order. The same SV form in TA would represent examples (9) and (10) as in (11):

⁵ See Mohammad (1990) for an exhaustive analysis of subject-verb agreement in MSA.

- | | |
|--|-------------------------|
| (11) ilwlad
ART.boy.PL
'The boys applauded.' | safqū
applauded.PL.M |
|--|-------------------------|

To my knowledge, there has not been any comprehensive study on collective nouns in TA. There is, however, a brief mention of collectives in a study of one of the only two available TA corpora, TuniCo (Möerth et al. 2014). Procházka & Gabsi (2017) report the results of the use of only three collective nouns (due to the limited number of examples). According to their corpus study, *ḡmē'ā* 'group' and *ahl* 'people, inhabitants' have a tendency towards plural agreement, whereas *'āyla* 'family' prefers singular concord. On the other hand, there are a few works in the literature on collective nouns and their agreement preferences in MSA. Dror (2016) argues that the most prominent agreement pattern with collective nouns in journalistic Arabic is the singular. Based on her study, she divides these nouns into three groups: nouns that prefer singular agreement such as *ḥukūma* 'government' and *ša'b* 'people', nouns that allow both singular and plural agreement such as *farīq* 'team' and, finally, nouns that prefer plural agreement such as *qawm* 'folk' and *ma'šar* 'company'.

Although the class of collective nouns is the subject of various studies in the English literature, there does not seem to be many works dealing with collectives in Arabic.⁶ As discussed above, there are a few attempts to categorize collective nouns in MSA, but the characteristics of these nouns in Arabic varieties, namely TA, are still considered to be under-researched. The aim of the present study is to contribute to the growing interest in Arabic varieties through establishing a classification of collectives in TA based on their ability to license plural agreement.

3 The current study

3.1 A corpus study of collective nouns in Tunisian Arabic

In order to collect and set up an initial categorization of collective nouns in TA, I have done a preliminary corpus study based on the Tunisian Arabic Corpus (McNeil & Miled 2010-). I have gathered collective nouns depending on their agreement preferences with verbs when in subject position. I have concluded that there are two groups of collectives in TA: the first group contains nouns that only occurred with singular verbs when in subject position, and the second group contains nouns that occurred with both singular and plural verbs when in subject position. The nouns that were used in this corpus study were selected based on the agreement preferences of their English counterparts as observed in the English literature. Not all of the nouns that were tested in previous studies (namely the nouns that I mention in Table 1) could be used in the present study because they were either unavailable in the corpus or they did not satisfy the condition of selection (to be in subject position, followed by a verb). The following table summarizes the corpus findings using the Tunisian Arabic Corpus (TAC):

⁶ In this study, I only consider collective nouns that have the following features: [+human], [+animate] and [+countable]. This type of countable human collectives is under-researched in the Arabic literature. In fact, the focus of the Arabic literature is oriented towards a more inclusive type of collective nouns that Schulz (2004:80) calls "generic collective nouns": these nouns are studied in relation to a unit noun called *the singulative* (which is derived from the collective through suffixation), and they can be applied to almost all inanimate nouns in Arabic (Dali & Mathieu 2021; Fassi Fehri 2012).

Collective Noun	Frequency	Singular agreement	Plural agreement
ilša‘b ‘the public’	403	28	0
ilġumhūr ‘the audience’	96	28	0
ilḥukūmā ‘the government’	230	13	0
ilġmē‘ā ‘the group’	211	11	75
il‘āyla ‘the family’	60	9	3
ilkūpel ‘the couple’	4	1	1

Table 2. The frequency of the occurrence of singular and plural agreement with collective nouns in TAC

Based on these results, I establish the following categorization of these nouns: nouns belonging to group 1 (*ilša‘b* ‘the public’, *ilġumhūr*, ‘the audience’, and *ilḥukūmā* ‘the government’) prefer singular subject-verb agreement and nouns belonging to group 2 (*ilġmē‘ā* ‘the group’, *il‘āyla* ‘the family’ and *ilkūpel* ‘the couple’) allow both singular and plural agreement. This categorization is merely a preliminary overview of how we can classify collectives in TA: the frequency of the use of singular/plural verbal concord is low due to the limited number of examples in the corpus. Nevertheless, the available numbers play a significant role in this study, as they are indicative of the preferred agreement patterns with collectives in TA. The studies that I discuss in the previous section indicate that collective nouns in English and MSA can be divided into three groups. However, in this corpus study, there were no clear distinctions between ‘singular only’, ‘plural only’ and ‘both singular and plural’ preferences due to the limited number of examples. Therefore, the present study uses the preliminary corpus results to investigate the occurrence of plural concord with collectives in TA in light of the two-group categorization.

3.2 The experiment

Although my corpus study proved to be effective in establishing a primary classification of collective nouns in TA, it is still limited and it does not provide a deeper understanding of the agreement patterns of collective nouns. The categorization shows that in one group singular concord is the only possible pattern and in the other group both singular concord and plural concord are possible. However, I am not able to draw any conclusions regarding the ability of group 1 nouns to trigger plural concord solely based on the corpus study. Thus, the present questionnaire represents a tool to investigate these agreement patterns based on the limited corpus results. The following subsections present the materials used in this questionnaire, the results and the analysis of the participants’ demographic data.

3.2.1 *Materials and methods*

I designed a questionnaire using the results of my preliminary corpus study and taking into consideration how collectives should be categorized (the test sentences in TA are included in Appendix A and their translation in English is available in Appendix B). 50 Tunisian Arabic native speakers initially participated in the questionnaire. However, 13 participants were eliminated based on their judgments of the control sentences, so the results are based on the analysis of the remaining 37 answers.⁷ The questionnaire consisted of 12 test sentences, 12 filler sentences and 6 control sentences. The test sentences contained nouns belonging to group 1 and 2 in subject position followed by a plural verb. The variables consisted of the noun type (belonging to group 1 or 2) and the predicate type (collective predicates: *gather*, *meet* and *assemble*; distributive predicates: *sing*, *laugh* and *smile*⁸). I chose these predicates based on the discussion of the collective-distributive distinction on predicate types in the literature (Champollion 2020; Depraetere 2003; De Vries 2021; Levin 2001). The first three predicates are used in the singular, which facilitates the conceptualization of the collective noun as one single entity. The other three predicates are used in the plural, which helps the reader conceptualize the collective noun as a collection of individuals. The questionnaire consisted of an online survey available on Google Forms. The participants were asked to evaluate the sentences based on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally unacceptable) to 6 (totally acceptable). In the first section of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide their age, gender and the city they grew up in. In the rest of the sections, the participants were provided with a description of the task accompanied by the sentences they had to judge in a random order. Based on the preliminary corpus findings, I hypothesize that plural agreement is more acceptable with nouns belonging to group 2 than with nouns belonging to group 1.

3.2.2 *Results*

I calculated the mean for each group to see which group had the highest value, which is indicative of the number of positive answers and, thus, the rate of acceptability: the higher the mean, the more positive the judgments of the participants for the use of plural concord in the given group. The analysis of the results of the questionnaire show that the mean of participants' answers for group 2 nouns is higher than the mean of their answers for group 1 nouns.⁹ This difference in the means indicates that, according to participants' judgment, the use of plural verbs with collective nouns belonging to group 2 was more acceptable than its use with collectives belonging to group 1. Collective nouns in TA can indeed license plural agreement, and all of the nouns tested in this study (even the nouns belonging to the group that only triggered singular agreement in the corpus study) allow plural subject-verb agreement.

⁷ The 6 control sentences that I used in this questionnaire have a similar structure to the test sentences. They include collective and distributive predicates (used with non-collective nouns) and consist of 3 minimal pairs: each pair contains a grammatical and an ungrammatical sentence. The 13 eliminated participants judged the grammatical control sentences as ungrammatical or vice versa.

⁸ The collective predicates in TA consist of: *tlam* (*gather*), *tlēqā* (*meet*) and *tğama* (*assemble*). The distributive predicates consist of: *ğanā* (*sing*), *ḏhak* (*laugh*) and *tbasem* (*smile*).

⁹ Group 2 mean = 4.95 while group 1 mean = 4.08

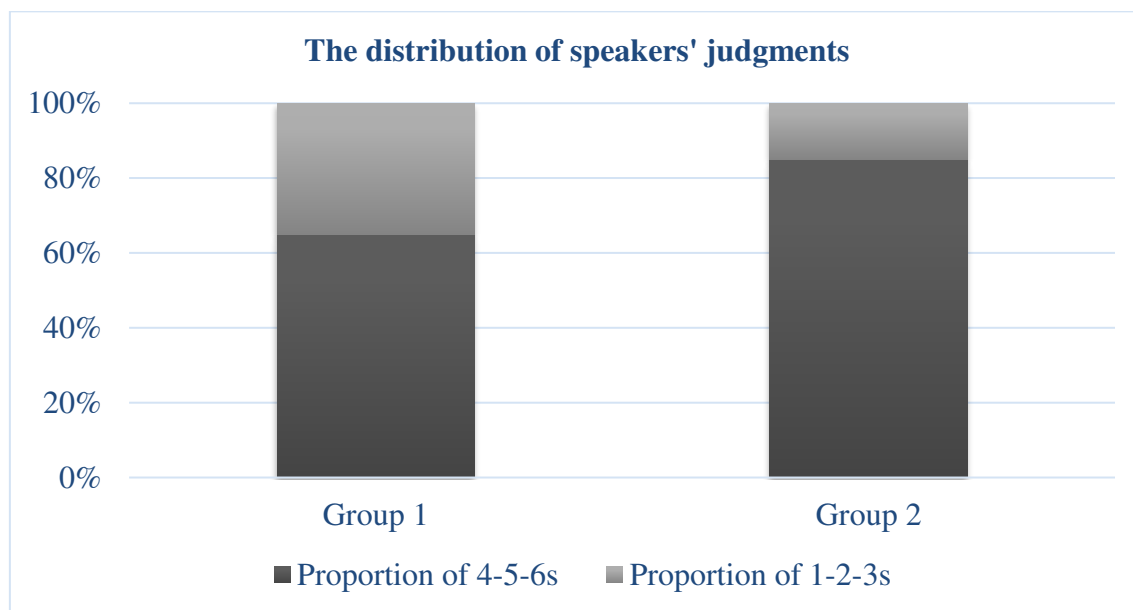


Figure 1. The distribution of participants' judgments

To further analyze participants' judgments, I present the distribution of the data in the form of percentages of the acceptability rates as illustrated in figure 1. The scale that I use in this questionnaire is a 6-point Likert scale that does not have a middle value, so the participants are obliged to choose either a negative value (between 1 and 3) or a positive one (between 4 and 6). The judgments that are included in the proportion with the negative values indicate that plural concord with the given nouns is deemed rather unacceptable by the participants, while the judgments that are included in the proportion with the positive values indicate that plural concord is acceptable. In the case of nouns belonging to group 2, the percentage of positive answers is relatively high (85%), which indicates that the majority of the participants find the use of plural concord with these nouns acceptable. On the other hand, the percentage of positive answers with nouns belonging to group 1 is lower (65%), indicating that even though participants accept the use of plural concord with these nouns, these acceptability rates are still lower than the rates observed with group 2 nouns. I predicted that speakers would accept the use of plural concord with nouns belonging to group 2 more than with nouns belonging to group 1. This prediction is confirmed through the results that are presented in Figure 1. I also predicted that the predicate type would have an effect on the acceptability of plural concord. However, there was no notable difference between the use of collective and distributive predicates.¹⁰

In light of these results, I consider the distribution of the data based on the two conditions in question: the use of either a collective or a distributive predicate with the nouns belonging to each of the two groups:

¹⁰ Collective mean = 4.62 – distributive mean = 4.41

		Mean	Median	Mode
Group 1	Collective	4.16	4	5
	Distributive	4	4	6
Group 2	Collective	5.07	5	6
	Distributive	4.83	5	6

Table 3. The results of each group based on the collective/distributive conditions

The mode in each of the four conditions is either 5 or 6, which further confirms that the majority of the participants find the use of plural concord with the given collective nouns acceptable regardless of the noun type and the predicate type. The mode gives us an idea on the central tendency, which is also a positive value in each of the conditions (4 for group 1 and 5 for group 2). The different means indicate that the average of the judgments for group 1 is lower than that for group 2. There is no notable difference between the collective and distributive conditions for each of the groups. However, there is a slight, but noteworthy, difference between the two groups.

3.2.3 Demographic data

I analyze participants' judgments of the use of plural concord with the nouns belonging to the two groups in light of one demographic factor (regional differences) to understand the differences in their answers. I categorize the participants into three regions based on the cities they grew up in: the north, the east and the southeast¹¹. These regions are illustrated in figure 2 below:

¹¹ The northern region consists of the following cities: Tunis, Mannouba, Bardo, Makthar, Bizerte and Kram. A total of 8 participants belong to this region. The eastern region consists of: Mahdia, Sousse, Nabeul, Monastir, Rejiche, Sidi Alouane, Kalaa Kebira and Msaken. 21 participants belong to this region. Finally, the south-eastern region consists of the city of Sfax and 8 participants belong to this region (this region consists of only one city because it is one of the biggest cities in Tunisia in terms of land and population; geographically speaking, it is the heart of the southeast and is considered to be the capital of the south).



Figure 2. The Tunisian regions represented in this study¹²

As shown in figure 3 below, while all of the participants from the three regions accept the use of plural concord with nouns belonging to group 2, there is a slight difference in the acceptability rates for the use of plural concord with nouns belonging to group 1. The participants who grew up in the eastern region have the highest acceptability rate for plural concord with group 1 noun, followed by the participants who grew up in the north, and finally, those who grew up in the southeast have the lowest acceptability rate.

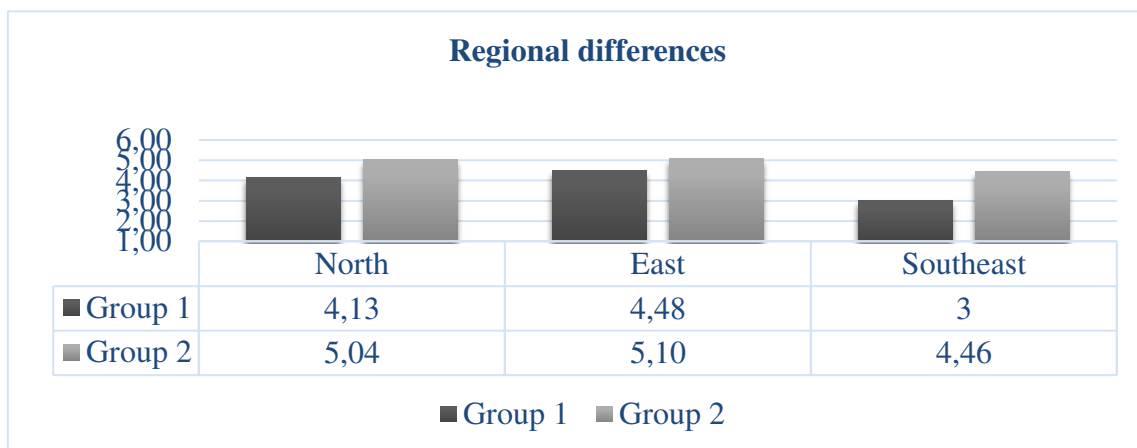


Figure 3. Regional differences

¹² Source: adapted from Wikipedia.

3.3 Analysis and discussion

(12) The committee *have* decided.

(13) [_{DP1} pro_[+PLUR] [_{DP2} the committee_[-PLUR]]] (Den Dikken 2001: 29)

(14) a. illağna qarrū (Tunisian Arabic)
ART.committee decide.PST.PL
'The committee have decided.'

The *pro*-drop phenomenon is one of the defining characteristics of Arabic: MSA and its varieties allow the omission of subject pronouns that are not obligatory in syntactic structures because they do not provide any additions to what is already expressed through verbal agreement features (Mohammad 1990). The following example demonstrates a case of *pro*-drop in TA in which the subject pronoun is not necessary, since the verb already conveys the needed grammatical inflections (mainly number and gender):

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| (15) ktib
write.PST.3SG.M
‘He wrote a book.’ | ktēb (Tunisian Arabic)
book |
|--|--------------------------------|

This fact confirms that *pro*-drop is a natural phenomenon in Arabic and it can occur in constructions such as (14b) above. To further confirm that collectives in TA represent a pronominally headed structures, I illustrate the analysis that Den Dikken (2001) suggests in relation to the use of demonstratives within the DP:

- | | | | |
|---------|----------------------------------|--------|---------------|
| (16) a. | illaġna | hēḍī | qarret |
| | ART.committee | this | decide.PST.SG |
| | ‘This committee has decided.’ | | |
| b. | illaġna | hēḍī | qarrū |
| | ART.committee | this | decide.PST.PL |
| | ‘This committee have decided.’ | | |
| c. | *illaġna | hēḍūmā | qarrū |
| | ART.committee | these | decide.PST.PL |
| | ‘*These committee have decided.’ | | |

Normally, singular demonstratives are only followed by singular verbs. Nevertheless, (16b) is grammatical, and it can be considered as a case of mismatch between the two targets of agreement: the demonstrative and the predicate (Smith 2017:825-826). The existence of a silent pronoun in (16c) is further confirmed through the ungrammaticality of this sentence: the pronoun *they* cannot be used with the plural demonstrative *these* (**these they*), and the plural demonstrative cannot be used with the morphologically singular collective noun that can still have plural reference. Thus, the structure in (14b) can be applied to singular collective nouns to account for their hidden plurality feature that is conveyed through the silent pronoun available in the DP.

4 Summary and conclusions

The aim of this paper is to explore the use of collective nouns in TA and to test whether they can trigger plural agreement. The results of the questionnaire presented in this study indicate that it is possible: similarly to what is observed in English and other languages and varieties of languages, singular collective nouns in TA can occur in plural contexts despite their morphologically singular form. Semantic and syntactic analyses provide us with a better understanding of collectives and their agreement patterns: the notion of collectivity is intertwined with “semantic plurality” or the reference to more than one unit in the collective whole. This plurality feature and the *pro*-drop phenomenon that is available in Arabic grammar can account for the ability of singular collective nouns to trigger plural agreement. The present study also sheds light on the possible categorization of collective nouns based on native speakers’ acceptability rates of the use of plural concord with singular collectives in TA. I also examine the results in light of demographic data, namely regional differences, and conclude that geographical origin may have an effect on agreement preferences. This paper represents a preliminary overview of the possible variation in subject-verb agreement patterns with English

and TA collective nouns. A more specific categorization of collective nouns in TA based on both singular and plural agreement preferences can be the subject of further research.

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Amira Dhifallah
 University of Debrecen
 Doctoral School of Linguistics
 H-4002 Debrecen
 Pf. 400
 amira.dhifallah@arts.unideb.hu

Appendix A: The test sentences used in the questionnaire

- (1) الشعب تجمّعو في السّاحة
 ilša‘b tğam‘ū fī ilsēḥa
 ART.public assembled.PL PREP ART.square
 ‘The public assembled in the square.’
- (2) الجمهور تلمّو في السّتاد
 ilğumhūr tlamū fī ilstād
 ART.audience gathered.PL PREP ART.stadium
 ‘The audience gathered in the stadium.’
- (3) الحكومة تلاقوا في مجلس الشعب
 ilḥukūmā tlēqāw fī mağles-ilša‘b
 ART.government met.PL PREP parliament
 ‘The government met in the parliament.’
- (4) الجماعة ضحكوا
 ilğmē‘ā ḍaḥkū
 ART.group laughed.PL
 ‘The group laughed.’
- (5) العائلة تلمّو
 il‘āylā tlamū
 ART.family gathered.PL
 ‘The family gathered.’
- (6) الكوبل تقابلوا في القهوة
 ilkūpel tqāblū fī ilqahwa
 ART.couple met.PL PREP ART.coffee.shop
 ‘The couple met at the coffee shop.’
- (7) الشعب غنّوا النشيد الوطني
 ilša‘b ġanēw ilnašīd ilwatanī
 ART.public sang.PL ART.anthem ART.national
 ‘The public sang the national anthem.’
- (8) الكوبل تبسّموا
 ilkūpel tbaṣmū
 ART.couple smiled.PL
 ‘The couple smiled.’

(9) الحكومة أداو اليمين

ilhukūmā adēw ilyamīn
 ART.government performed.PL ART.oath
 ‘The government took an oath.’

(10) العايلة غناو عيد ميلاد سعيد

il‘āylā ḡanēw ‘īd-mīlēd-sē‘īd
 ART.family sang.PL happy-birthday
 ‘The family sang happy birthday.’

(11) الجماعة تلاقاو في الشارع

ilḡmē‘ā tlēqāw fī ilšēra‘
 ART.group met.PL PREP ART.street
 ‘The group met in the street.’

(12) الجمهور غناو غناية الجمعية

ilḡumhūr ḡanēw gnēyit ilḡam‘iyā
 ART.audience sang.PL song ART.team
 ‘The audience sang the team’s song.’