



## Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Learners in Translating English Collective Nouns

Ibtihal M. Al Tameemi\*

Mahmood A. Farhan\*\*

\* Department of English /College of Languages/University of Baghdad

\*\* Department of English/College of Education for Human Sciences Ibn Rushd

### Abstract

The current study is concerned with investigating the difficulties that Iraqi EFL learners of English may face when translating English collective nouns. Such collective nouns as *committee, government, , jury , Parliament* , etc. are considered singular when the concept of the unity as a group is emphasized , but when the concept of the individuals or numbers is emphasized they are treated as plural. A sample of twenty undergraduate students have been selected randomly to translate certain English collective nouns in some selected political texts in order to find out the difficulties they might face in rendering them into Arabic. It is hypothesized that most of the testees have used the singular form rather than the plural ignoring the notion of meaning of these nouns. Theoretically speaking, the most important conclusions that the present paper has come up with are: Firstly, English collective nouns may co-occur in the singular with either a singular or a plural form of the verb; secondly, in terms of form, three types of collective nouns can be recognized : (a) invariable singular collectives, (b) invariable plural collectives, (c) variable ( singular and plural); thirdly, in terms of meaning there are two types of collective nouns , i.e. human and non- human collectives. Empirically speaking, the paper shows the following conclusions: English collective nouns are problematic and difficult to translate due to the disparity between form and meaning of both languages , the inadequate knowledge of the function of some structural clues in determining the emphasized idea (i.e., singular or plural), and formal equivalence and literal translation are used by most testees.

**Keywords:** collective nouns , formal equivalence , meaning , political texts, translation

### 1.English Collective Nouns

This section intends to show some definitions of collective nouns.They 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 (Michael 1970: 302)

Quirk and Greenbaum state that collective nouns, notionally plural but grammatically singular, obey notional concord. (1973: 177). Semantically , collective nouns may be defined as “ lexemes which denote collections or groups of persons and objects” (Lyons,1987:315)

According to Crystal (1997:69) a collective noun is a term which refers to "a noun [denoting] a group of entities, and which is *formally* differentiated from other nouns by a distinct pattern of *number* contrast (and in some languages, morphologically).”

### 3.Classification of English Collective Nouns

In terms of form, two classes of English collective nouns are recognized : first, those that are pluralized with (-s) such as *committee , government, jury , team ,* etc. and termed variable plurals. Biber and Leech call this type ( of-collectives) because they are followed by an of + plural noun that the plural indicates the individuals , for example *group* has a general meaning while an utterance like a group of girls , buildings , adults has a more specific application. The second class of collective nouns includes those collective nouns that cannot be pluralized with (-s) or have zero plural such as *people , police , audience,* etc. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 83) call these nouns invariable unmarked plurals.

On the other hand ,Quirk et al (1975: 190) distinguish three classes of collective nouns : (a) specific , (b) generic and (c) unique. Table (1) below displays examples of collective nouns classified into the three classes:

(a) Specific	(b) Generic	(c) Unique
Army	The aristocracy	The Arab League
Clan	The bourgeoisie	(the) Congress
Class	The clergy	The Kremlin
Club	The elite	The Papacy Parliament
Committee	The gentry	The UN
Crew	The intelligentsia	The Vatican
Crowd	The laity	
Family	The proletariat	
Flock	The public	
Gang		
Government		
Group		
Herd		
Jury		
Majority		
Minority		

Table (1) Quirk et al Classification of Collective Nouns

However, two classes are identified in terms of meaning. First, special group names used with both animate (living) and inanimate (non-living) things; second, some collective nouns refer to a group of people which are related or linked in some way to each other, e.g. *team, committee, audience, class,...*etc. (Hooper,1980:11). Dušková et al. (2004: 44) determines two groups of collective nouns according to their semantic reference: firstly, group collective nouns like *family, committee, company* that refer to a group of individuals; secondly, generic collective nouns like *bourgeoisie, clergy, the public* refer to a whole class.

The current research is concerned mainly with a specific number of collective nouns, namely, “audience, committee, government, jury, majority, the public, Parliament, staff, team and the United Nations.” that are invariable unmarked plurals.

#### **4. Concord with English Collective nouns**

The concept of concord is common but rather scant in English in the sense that it is limited to the third singular present and verb “to be” in the present and past. Number concord is considered the most important type of concord particularly that between the subject and the verb. It also occurs between a noun and a pronoun or pronouns referring to it. The general rule is that a verb must agree with its subject in number, i.e. a singular subject requires a singular verb and a plural subject requires a plural verb. Quirk et al (1972: 359) distinguish between grammatical and notional concord where in the former the verb agrees with its subject in number and in the latter the verb and subject should agree according to the idea of number rather than the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that idea.

However, the choice of the right number between a subject and its verb is confused when the subject is a collective noun which has a singular form and a plural meaning.

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).The example below illustrates this principle:

The *government*, who are cutting their losses...

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 (Ibid,371)

#### **5. Translating English Collective Nouns**

According to Hatim and Mason (1990, 2), “translation is a useful test case for examining the whole issue of the role of language in social life. In creating a new act of communication out of a previously existing one, translators are inevitably acting under the pressure of their own social conditioning while at the same time trying to assist in the negotiation of meaning between the producer of the source-language text (ST) and the

reader of the target-language text (TT), both of whom exist within their own, different social frameworks.” (Ibid , 1)

Nord (1997, 32) defines translation as the production of a functional target text maintaining a relationship with a given source text that is specified according to the intended or demanded function of the target text (translation skopos).

Translating is decoding a written piece of discourse from the source language according to our private language but considering the private language of the original writer and the original context as much as possible, and then coding that piece again according to our corrected-to-an extreme vision of the target language and context. (Pinheiro, 2014)

Translating English collective nouns could be problematic for Iraqi EFL learners in the sense of whether they are treated as singular when the concept of the unity as a group is emphasized or treated as plural when the concept of the individuals or members is emphasized .In other words, two interrelated difficulties on the part of Iraqi EFL learners are found ; namely , their ability to recognize and interpret correctly the English collective nouns and how they translate them into Arabic accurately and appropriately.

## **6.Research Methodology**

The methodology used in the current study includes the participants , the tools used , data collection and the way in which data analysis is done .

### **6.1. Participants**

The research includes (20) Iraqi undergraduate students of the department of English/ college of Languages /University of Baghdad .They are selected from morning studies of the academic year (2017-2018)

### **6. 2. Tools**

The materials and tools used in the current study are as in below:

- (a) In order to assess the students’ receptive knowledge of using English collective nouns and recognize their meanings , a recognition test is used. It consists of ten items of multiple choice type. The participants are asked to choose the most appropriate form of the verb that agrees with the collective noun and the substitute pronoun. Then they are given twenty minutes to respond to this test.(See appendix I)
- (b) For measuring the students’ ability in translating English collective nouns appropriately, a production test is used .It consists of ten items where the participants should translate the English collective nouns into Arabic. The time allocated for this test is twenty minutes. (See appendix II)

### **6.3. Data Analysis and Discussion**

The data will be analyzed focusing on the responses received for each test asked to the participants .

Regarding the participants , they are chosen randomly from the department of English /college of Languages /University of Baghdad and

they have been studying Translation for three years .They are twenty undergraduate students /fourth year during the academic year (2017-2018). The comprehension test is composed of ten items which is designed to measure the student's performance at the recognition level in which they are given sentences with two options and they have to underline the correct verb form (singular or plural) that agrees with the subject (collective noun) then translate the whole sentences into Arabic.

The production test is designed to measure the student's performance at the recognition level. The students are provided with ten sentences and asked to fill in the blanks with the appropriate pronoun (personal , possessive, reflexive ) and relative pronoun (who ,which) and then to translate the whole sentences into Arabic.

In comparing the subjects' responses in both tests , it is found that the number of incorrect responses at the recognition test (124 – 24.8%) is greater than that in the production test (105 – 21% ) whereas the number of correct responses at the recognition test is (72 – 14.4% ) which is lesser than that of correct responses at the production test (96 – 19.2 % ).

According to the findings of the tests, the total number of students' correct responses at both the recognition and production tests (168 ) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses ( 229 ) as shown in the following tables :

Item No.	Correct Responses No.	Incorrect Responses No.		
		Singular Pattern	Plural Pattern	Both Patterns
1.government	6	9	5	–
2.committee	14	4	–	2
3.audience	5	3	12	–
4.jury	-	9	11	
5.Parliament	6	–	10	4
6.puplic	4	3	13	–
7.The United Nations	9	–	11	–
8.majority	17	2	–	1
9.staff	6	–	12	2
10.team	9	–	8	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>124</b>		

Table (1) The subjects' Responses in the Recognition Test

Item No.	Correct Responses No.	Incorrect Responses No.		
		Singular Pattern	Plural Pattern	Both Patterns
1.government	17	_	3	_
2.committee	6	14	_	_
3.audience	18	2	_	_
4.jury	2	5	13	_
5. Parliament	10	_	10	_
6. public	2	2	16	
7.The United Nations	_	3	17	_
8.Majority	15	5	_	_
9.staff	9	11	_	_
10.team	16	4	_	_
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>105</b>		

Table (2) The subjects' Responses in the Production Test

In considering the above mentioned collective nouns , it is found that when both patterns (singular and plural ) are required most collectives are misused and then mistranslated. This indicates that the subjects do not understand or recognize the use of collective nouns.(See items 1,3, and 4 in the recognition test and items 4 and 7 in the production test ).For example, The *government* has/ have decided to introduce fresh legislation.

قررت الحكومة تقديم تشريع جديد

It is significant to note that (6) subjects prefer the singular form of the verb with such collectives as *Parliament* ,*staff* when the concept is plural (See items 5 and 9 in the recognition test). For instance:

*Parliament* is /are once again asking for more time in order to study the question carefully.

1. يطلب البرلمان مزيدا من الوقت لدراسة المسألة بدقة .

2. البرلمانين يطلبون مرة اخرى وقتا اضافيا لدراسة المسألة بعناية .

Regarding the collective noun *The United Nations* , three subjects decide to use the singular form of the verb whereas seventeen subjects decide to use the plural form of the verb .But no subjects decide both patterns which are correct. This is due to the argument of the effect of plural concept. Furthermore, this noun lack the plural morpheme which implies that the concern is only with form. Accordingly , it is not interpreted properly and thus mistranslated .Consider the example below:

The United Nations has/have promised to assist the poor people all over the

world.

1. لقد وعدت هيئة (منظمة) الامم المتحدة بمساعدة الفقراء في جميع انحاء العالم .
2. لقد تعهدت اعضاء هيئة (منظمة) الامم المتحدة بتقديم يد العون للفقراء في جميع انحاء العالم.

In such a case , what must be taken into account is the conceptual meaning instead of the lexical one .

Number concord can be determined obligatorily when some structural signs or clues are used .For example ,when the indefinite article “a” that reflects the singular idea is used then a singular concord should be realized. This can be seen with the collective noun “team “ where (8) subjects have chosen the plural form and three subjects have chosen both forms.(See item 10 in the recognition test). Another example where the structural sign is obvious can be seen with the collective noun “committee “ where only the plural form should be realized .(See item 2 in the recognition test). In terms of translation seven subjects have been successful in translating “committee “ as a group or members , thus plural concord is realized whereas (13) have rendered it into singular taking into consideration the concept of unit . Compare the examples below:

A team of experts has / have been called in to investigate.

1. تم استدعاء فريق من الخبراء للتحقيق معهم
2. أستدعي فريق من الخبراء للتحقيق

The committee is /are quarrelling among themselves and has /have not yet taken a decision.

1. يتشاجروا اعضاء اللجنة فيما بينهم ولم يتخذوا أي قرار بعد
2. يتشاجر اعضاء اللجنة فيما بينهم ولم تتخذ اللجنة أي قرار لحد الان .

### Conclusion

Generally speaking, the results indicate that Iraqi EFL university students face difficulty in using subject-verb concord concerning English collective nouns and therefore unable to translate them appropriately and accurately. This difficulty is due to the disparity between form and meaning ,i.e. , when the collective nouns refer to the group as one complete unit or as individuals acting separately.

Regarding the English collective nouns , it is found that they may co-occur in the singular with either a singular or a plural form of the verb.

In terms of form, three types of collective nouns can be recognized : (a) invariable singular collectives, (b) invariable plural collectives, (c) variable ( singular and plural)

In terms of meaning there are two types of collective nouns , i.e. human and non- human collectives.

The subjects' poor performance in both the recognition and production tests can be attributed to the following reasons:

The unfamiliarity with some collective noun, .ignorance or the inadequate knowledge of the function of some structural clues that are good markers in determining the emphasized idea (singular or plural) , carelessness and/ or indifference, uncertainty as to whether to consider form or meaning , when the form is emphasized singular concord is chosen but when the concern is with meaning , plural concord is used, the concept that certain collective nouns could be used both as singular and as plural is very rarely accepted.

As to the strategies used in translating English collective nouns, the subjects have shown that they adopted either literal translation and focused on form rather than meaning and have chosen the singular form, but in some cases they depended on meaning and have used the plural form like *audience* , *majority* and *staff* .Furthermore , they prefer formal equivalence in translating some collective nouns like *jury* , *public* where the plural concept is emphasized..



## الملخص

الصعوبات التي يواجهها متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية  
في ترجمة الأسماء الجماعية الإنجليزية  
ابتihal محمد التميمي  
محمود فرحان

تهتم الدراسة الحالية بالتحقيق في الصعوبات التي قد يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في اللغة الإنجليزية عند ترجمة الأسماء الجماعية الإنجليزية. تعتبر الأسماء الجماعية مثل اللجنة أو الحكومة أو هيئة المحلفين أو البرلمان ، وما إلى ذلك مفردة عندما يتم التأكيد على مفهوم الوحدة كمجموعة ، ولكن عندما يتم التأكيد على مفهوم الأفراد أو الأرقام ، يتم التعامل معهم على أنها تعددية. تم اختيار عينة من 20 طالبًا جامعيًا بشكل عشوائي لترجمة بعض الأسماء الإنجليزية الجماعية في بعض النصوص السياسية المختارة من أجل اكتشاف الصعوبات التي قد يواجهونها في تحويلهم إلى اللغة العربية. من المفترض أن معظم الخريجين قد استخدموا صيغة المفرد بدلاً من صيغة الجمع متجاهلين فكرة معنى هذه الأسماء. من الناحية النظرية ، فإن أهم الاستنتاجات التي توصلت إليها هذه الورقة هي: أولاً، قد تحدث الأسماء الجماعية الإنجليزية في صيغة المفرد مع صيغة المفرد أو صيغة الجمع؛ وثانياً، من حيث الشكل، يمكن التعرف على ثلاثة أنواع من الأسماء الجماعية: (أ) المجموعات الفردية الوحيدة، (ب) المجموعات الجماعية الثابتة، (ج) المتغير (المفرد والجمع)؛ ثالثاً، من حيث المعنى، هناك نوعان من الأسماء الجماعية، أي المجموعات البشرية وغير البشرية. من الناحية العملية، تُظهر الورقة الاستنتاجات التالية: الأسماء الجماعية باللغة الإنجليزية هي مشكلة ويصعب ترجمتها بسبب التباين بين شكل ومعنى كلتا اللغتين، والمعرفة غير الكافية لوظيفة بعض القرائن الهيكلية في تحديد الفكرة المؤكدة (أي المفرد) أو الجمع، والمعادلة الرسمية والترجمة الحرفية يتم استخدامها من قبل معظم الخريجين.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأسماء الجماعية، التكافؤ الرسمي، المعنى، النصوص السياسية، الترجمة

## References

- Crystal, D. (1997) *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. USA: Blackwell Publishers
- Dušková, L. (2004) *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny*. Praha: Academia.
- Hooper, J. (1980) *A Quick English Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lyons, J. (1968). *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1987). *Semantics* University Press.
- Michael, I. (1970). *English grammatical categories and the tradition to 1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nord, C.(1997). *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Pinheiro, M. R. (2013). *Ethical Codes for Translators and Interpreters*. Retrieved November, 8 2017 from <https://www.udemy.com/ethical-codes-for-translatorsandinterpreters/?dtcode=JWHCK1y1sMfq>
- Quirk, R; Greenbaum, S; Leech G; and Svartvik, J. (1972). *A Grammar of Contemporary*

English. London: Longman.

Quirk, R and Greenbaum, S. (1973). A University Grammar of English. London: Longman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **Appendix (I)** **(Comprehension Test )**

**Underline the choice that best fits the following sentences. In some sentences , more than one choice is possible .If two choices are appropriate, underline both of them. Then translate the whole sentences into Arabic.**

1. The *government* (has / have) decided to introduce fresh legislation.
2. The *committee* (is / are) quarrelling among themselves and (has / have) not yet taken a decision .
3. The *audience* (was /were ) so captivated and persuaded by president Obama's political speech during his presidential election campaign .
4. The *jury* (is / are ) unable to reach a verdict.
5. *Parliament* (is /are) once again asking for more time in order to study the question carefully.
6. The *public* ( has / have ) the right to know the truth.
7. The *United Nations* (has / have) promised to assist the poor people all over the world.
8. The *majority* of Americans (is/are) able to own or hire the modern houses with all its improvements.
9. The Close Up *staff* never ( takes / take) positions on the issues.
10. A *team* of experts ( has / have) been called in to investigate.

### **Appendix (II)** **( Production Test )**

**Fill in the blanks with the appropriate personal , possessive or reflexive or relative (who ,which) pronouns .If two pronouns are possible , give them both. Then translate the whole sentence into Arabic.**

1. The *government* is expected to announce ----- tax proposal today.
2. The *committee* , ----- are very sympathetic , are giving the matter careful consideration.
3. The *audience* clap ----- hands after a stirring performance of Michael's new play.
4. The *jury* announced that ----- could not reach a verdict.
5. The Parliament has declared ----- plans for stimulating the economy.
6. The *public* ----- demonstrates near the embassy demands its right.
7. The *United Nations* called for ----- members to an emergency meeting.
8. The *majority* of workers want to make ----- voices heard.
9. The *staff* ----- become dissatisfied with -----roles are going to make a strike .
10. The *team* were all enjoying ----- after the match .