

Safety in numbers?

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ET recently received a letter from Erwin Kreutzweiser of Toronto, citing the tendency for people to 'misuse the singular number'. He has been collecting instances of *there's* followed by a plural noun phrase, and has found, in newspapers and radio discussions, cases like this:

There's two issues . . . (*reply by a politician on the radio*)

There's Palestinian Arabs and then there's Arabs. (*direct speech quoted in the Globe and Mail*)

There's two other good movies on television tonight. (*entertainments editorial, Toronto Star*)

He writes: 'Surely the schools are teaching that a verb must agree with its subject. One would not deliberately say, *There is two issues*, but *there's* slips out easily nowadays. Why? Will this usage become universal some day?'

Actually, it already is – in informal speech. There's nothing surprising about the first of the above examples, which can be heard in almost any discussion or conversation, dozens of times a day, whether on the radio or not. It is so normal, in fact, that it is unlikely to be noticed even by those who are always on the alert for usage errors.

Nor is the second example very surprising, therefore, for this is a report of what someone actually said; but it is more noticeable, because the speech has been written down. Perhaps the only unexpected thing about it is the accuracy of the journalist's ear! The example does illustrate one point, though – the kind of stylistic effect which this construction can convey. The impact of the rhythmical contrast is lost if the 'correct' grammar is used: *There are Palestinian Arabs and then there are Arabs*.

The third example is different: this is part of an editorial commentary on television programmes, where the writer is evidently adopting an informal style – though it is not clear whether this was conscious or unconscious. But any written language inevitably involves a level of planning and organisation which is absent from spontaneous speech, and is bound to convey some hint of formality. The

use of a highly distinctive feature of informal speech therefore stands out, and is likely to attract comment. (Even literary attempts to represent conversation are a long way from reality. Dramatists, for example, have to be credited with rather more than 'a tape-recorder as an ear' – a comment once made by a reviewer of a play by Harold Pinter, and intended as a compliment).

This use of *there's* is one of the clearest examples of the way informal and formal English use different grammatical rules. In formal speech and writing, there is no choice: we must say *there are*, or risk criticism. In informal speech, most people opt for *there's*. But, as Mr Kreutzweiser says: Why?

The first thing to note is that *there's* is not alone. Compare:

Here's the answers to the quiz.

Where's the books I lent you?

Putting the words *there*, *here*, and *where* together indicates a probable reason for the development of the 's usage: it is much more awkward to pronounce *there are* or *there're*, especially when a vowel follows, and the final *r* sound (normally silent in Received Pronunciation) is pronounced (as in *There are apples in the cupboard*). In accents where *r* is routinely sounded after all vowels (as in much of US English), the problem is of course far greater.

So what is the grammatical rule involved in the informal cases? Basically, the verb is agreeing with the *meaning* of the following noun phrase, and not with its *form*. The distinction is summarised by calling the former principle *notional concord* and the latter principle *grammatical concord*. Traditional grammars always insist on people following grammatical concord, but spontaneous speech contains many examples of notional concord taking precedence.

Notional concord operates quite normally in standard British English in the case of collective nouns. (American English usually treats collective nouns as singular.) Thus we may say or write either *The committee is agreed* or *The committee are agreed*, depending on whether we

are thinking of the committee as a single, monolithic entity, or as an aggregate of individuals. Like *committee* are *army*, *government*, *jury*, *staff*, *majority*, *the United Nations*, and many more, including the names of commercial firms:

Xerox has increased its sales.

Xerox have increased their sales.

Other examples of notional concord can be found in cases where the subject expresses a single quantity or measure. This time the apparently plural subject is given a singular verb:

Five pounds is all I can give you.

Ten years is a long time.

Three quarters of the countryside is under water.

Also, coordinated nouns can be thought of as a notional unit or as a combination. Compare:

Bacon and eggs is a nice meal.

Bacon and eggs are both expensive.

Note that the use of *there's* is not equivalent to *there is*. Even in informal standard English, it is not acceptable to say **There is three problems* (though this usage can be heard in some dialects). Nor is it usual to use it in a question, **Is there three problems?* It has to be seen as a kind of idiom, like *il y a* in French, which can be followed by either singular or plural. A similar point emerges with the past tense, where a similar lack of agreement is sometimes heard with *was*. The usage occurs when *was* is unstressed, pronounced [wəz] (*there w'z two good films on TV last night*); it is uncommon with stressed *was* (**there WAS two good films on TV last night*).

There's, then, is not alone in being influenced by notional concord. Nor is the verb *to be* the only one affected in this way. There are such uses as the following:

There happens/happen to be three issues of importance.

There appears/appear to be two problems.

Evidently, the problem raised by *there's* is not unique in modern English. As some dialects would say, neatly avoiding the issue, there be principles at stake.