Good Writing Practice

Grammatical misagreement in number

Part II - Subject to non-verb constituents

Introduction
In addition to subject-verb misagreement in grammatical number, a misagreement in number is common between a subject and other sentence constituents, which appears in the experimental and contextual sections of a journal article.

Experimental sections

Part 1 – Materials and Methods section: Method
Example: Singular subject antecedent – plural referent
Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move their centre of gravity.

Revision 1
Before data acquisition, all individuals were instructed about how to move their centre of gravity.

Revision 2
Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move his or her centre of gravity.

Notes
Can the possessive plural pronoun their be used as a singular? The use of the plural their is a hypercorrection to avoid the sexism of his and the awkwardness of repeated his or her. In the example, the singular pronoun each as a subject determiner intensifies the misagreement with the plural referent (their) and sounds awkward.

Transformation of the subject into the plural (all individuals) avoids the two distractions (hypercorrection and awkwardness). Although the revision is focused on individuals and not on each individual, the meaning is essentially the same. However, all individuals would not apply to just two or three individuals. Instead, the three individuals would suffice.

In Revision 2, minimal repetition of his and her with the focus on the singular is recommended, because the singular is usually more readily comprehended than the plural.

Part 2 – Materials and Methods section: Method
Example: Coordinated modifiers – singular subject
Transporter clones 2 and 3 expression was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

Revision
Transporter clone 2 and 3 expression each was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

Notes
In the example clones not only primarily convey that there are two clone types, but also secondarily that there may be more than one clone of clone 2 and clone 3. Although context, convention, or science familiarity may eliminate such a distraction, in the Revision no such distraction is incurred by use of each.

Part 3 – Results section: Result statement/observation
Example: Coordinated modifiers – singular subject
In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic treatments of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

Revision 1
In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic combined treatment of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

Revision 2
In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic sequential treatment of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

Notes
In this example, it is uncertain whether the symptomatic and prophylactic are combined or in sequence. In the revisions, the combined (Revision 1) and sequential (Revision 2) relation is explicit.

Part 4 – Results section: Result statement/observation
Example: Plural subject – singular direct object
All patients had an enlarged heart.

Revision 1
Every patient had an enlarged heart.

Revision 2
Each patient had an enlarged heart.

Notes
In the example, the image of many patients sharing one heart is distracting. Just as implausible is all the patients had enlarged hearts (more than one per patient).

Revision 1 is a compromise: the grammatical singularity of every (but the connotation of more than one patient) and the singular heart is less distracting.

In Revision 2, each is the most un-nuanced revision, supporting a principle that misagreement in number can often be achieved by focusing on the singular.

Contextual sections

Part 1 – Introduction section: Research problem pertinent background
Example: Singular subject – plural subject complement
The second indication of apoptosis is changes in morphologic features.

Revision
The second indication of apoptosis is a change in morphologic features.

Notes
The difference in grammatical number between
the subject indication and the subject complement changes creates a dissonant distraction? The inverse of the example is also a distraction: Changes in morphologic features is the second indication of apoptosis. The subject is connected to its complement by a linking verb, whereas to a direct object, by a transitive verb.

Part 2 – Introduction section:
Objective

Example: Plural modifier – singular subject

The root mice development model at the bell stage was used to identify normal DLx3 gene expression and protein localization.

Revision

The root mouse development model at the bell stage was used to identify normal DLx3 gene expression and protein localization.

Notes

Why doesn't mice development sound right? Maybe because mice convey the nuance of a specific group of mice rather than the generic singular (mouse development). Some other examples are tooth (not teeth) development; transition (not transitions) frequencies.

Part 3 – Introduction section:
Research problem pertinent background

Example: Plural subject – singular modifier

Different types of fibre are components of connective tissue.

Revision 1

Different types of fibres are components of connective tissue.

Revision 2

Different fibre types are components of connective tissue.

Notes

In Revision 1, the plural modifier of fibres matches the plural modifee types as would these fibres rather than this fibres. Probably, the adjective different necessitates a plural: either types of fibres or type of fibres.

In Revision 2, when the modifier fibre appears before the modifee types, the singular seems to be the only choice (not fibres types).

Summary

Modifier-caused misagreement in number is more common (n=4) than either complement (n=2) or referent-caused (n=1) misagreement. Most of the misagreements result in a dissonance, but the misagreement in number resulting from the coordination of subjects or modifiers is more severe resulting in impeded immediate comprehension.

Options for revision involve changing the number of the subject or the constituent, usually to the singular – maybe for its simplicity.

Michael Lewis Schneir, PhD
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Schematised misagreement in number distractions and preferred revisions

Between modifier and subject

Transporter clones 2 and 3 expression was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

→ Transporter clone 2 and 3 expression each was correlated to the uptake of free neutral amino acids.

In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic treatment of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

→ In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic combined treatment of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

→ In patients with MHC class II deficiency, symptomatic and prophylactic sequential treatment of infection prevented continued organ dysfunction.

Between subject and subject complement

The second indication of apoptosis is changes in morphologic features.

→ The second indication of apoptosis is a change in morphologic features.

Between subject and modifier

Different types of fibre are components of connective tissue.

→ Different fibre types are components of connective tissue.

Between subject and direct object

All patients had an enlarged heart.

→ Each patient had an enlarged heart.

Between subject and referent

Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move their centre of gravity.

→ Before data acquisition, each individual was instructed about how to move his or her centre of gravity.