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**EXPLICATION OF THE VARIANCE OF SYNTACTIC  
STRUCTURES EITHER... OR, NEITHER... NOR**

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**Abstract**

The article is devoted to the study of the variance of syntactic structures with either... or / neither... nor, which manifests itself in the existence of alternative ways to agree the predicate with homogeneous subjects joined by conjunctions either... or / neither... nor. The relevance of this study is due to the presence of significant discrepancies between the rules described in the normative grammars and the persistent irregularity of the usus. The aim of the study is to identify the amplitude of variation and the nature of the influence of extralinguistic factors. One of the most important results of the research is the identification of the latest trends and preferences in the use of syntactic constructions with either... or / neither... nor in modern English. Due to the limitations of the study, the authors were unable to establish clear boundaries for the variation of the phenomenon under consideration, which opens up prospects for further research.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite the problem of linguistic variation being one of the most studied in modern linguistics, the features of the functioning of some syntactic variants—taking into account the usus of the modern language – are out of the researchers' scope. However, such information is necessary to establish a system of syntactic variants of a specific language, determine the patterns of their functioning, formulate norms, scrutinize applied issues. Such the results are also beneficial for practical teaching of the English language. All this determines the relevance of our study the main goal of which is to identify the nature of the influence of extralinguistic factors on the specifics of the usus of syntactic variants when the predicate is agreed with homogeneous subjects in structures with *either ... or / neither ... nor* and to determine the main trends in their development in English (British and American) linguistic culture.

## 2. Problem Statement

To achieve the above goal, the following tasks were addressed:

- to study the mechanism of agreement of the predicate with homogeneous subjects in structures with *either... or / neither... nor*;
- to determine the factors of the modification of the predicate;
- to establish the grammatical and stylistic components of the action of the modification factors;
- to search for system properties that determine the choice of the predicate form;
- to study the mechanism of interrelation of grammatical and semantic characteristics of the members of the predicative group and the integrative process of this correlation, which irradiates into the systemic organization of the English language;
- to determine the intensity of the influence of extralinguistic factors, taking into account the psychophysiological and social status of the respondents;
- to analyze the preferences in the choice of the predicate form by the respondents who are the native speakers of British and American English;
- to consider the specifics of the functioning of syntactic options for agreement of the predicate with the subjects in structures with *either... or / neither... nor*, taking into account the gender factor.

## 3. Research Questions

The study used a complex and systematic methodology that combines methods of qualitative analysis based on observation, description, classification and generalization of the identified features of the phenomenon under study, semantic, quantitative, lexical-semantic and structural analyzes using methods of component analysis, distributive and functional analyzes, as well as methods of field observation and experimentation (interviewing informants, questionnaires) with subsequent linguistic interpretation of the data obtained during the study. In modern English grammar, there is a rule: a verb which is a predicate in a structure with *either... or / neither... nor* agrees in person and number with the

nearest subject: *Neither my father nor my friends are ready. Neither my friends nor my father is ready* (Weichman, 2002).

However, as our research has shown, its implementation in speech encounters a constant irregularity of the usus, which causes many difficulties for both learners of English as a foreign language and for naive native speakers.

The situation is aggravated by the fact that in a number of well-known dictionaries, examples of the use of paired conjunctions *either... or / neither... nor* are given without comment: *Neither Sue nor Colin were clever. Neither his son nor his daughter were at the funeral* (Straus, 2006), *Neither my father nor I were by nature inclined to faith in the unintelligible* (Dubovsky, 2011).

Difficulties also arise when the predicate is agreed with a group of subjects expressed by more than two nouns (or pronouns): *Neither John, nor Lisa, nor Mary is / are coming with us*. In some grammar books and dictionaries, the very possibility of building such a construction is rejected, since the original meaning of the conjunction *neither... nor* (neither (of the two)) is similar to *either ... or* (1. any (of two), one (of two); one or the other) (Longman, 2006).

Some dictionaries and grammar books recommend avoiding constructing structures with *either... or / neither... nor* as the subject, so as not to create friction between communicants (Hewings, 2003).

#### Variation amplitude

The agreement of the predicate with the subject in English is characterized by certain restrictions due to the vagueness in the expression of the person or number of the predicate. Variation, suggesting the presence of formal modifications within the framework of the considered models, is possible only in those cases where there is a material expression of the meanings of the person and the number of the predicate verb (Wilson, 1993).

The factor of relevance of the material expression of the number and the person of the predicate allows reducing the number of "marked" groups of subjects to three cases, namely, when the final component of the group is expressed by a noun (pronoun) singular: a) 1st and 2nd component are singular subjects ( $S_{\text{sing}}S_{\text{sing}}$ ); b) 1st component is a plural subject, 2st component is a singular subject ( $S_{\text{plu}}S_{\text{sing}}$ ); c) 1st, 2nd (and other) components are singular or plural subjects, the final component is a plural subject  $nS_{\text{plu}}(S_{\text{sing}})S_{\text{sing}}$  (where n is the number of components).

Following the intrasystemic premises, within the scope of the studied speech material, we found that the use of person and number forms vary in the framework of the studied model:

1) a simple predicate expressed by a verb in a personal form in *Present Indefinite, Present Continuous, Past Continuous, Present Perfect, Present Perfect Continuous* active voice;

2) a simple predicate expressed by a verb in *Present Indefinite, Present Continuous, Present Perfect, Past Indefinite, Past Continuous* passive voice;

3) a compound nominal predicate expressed by the verb *to be* in *Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite* or any other verb capable of acting as a link (for example, *to appear, to keep, to look, to become, to grow, to get, to turn, to remain*) in *Present Indefinite* in combination with the nominal part;

4) various types of compound verbal predicate, for example, a compound verbal predicate expressed by a combination of the verb *to be* in *Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite* or the verb *to have* in *Present Indefinite* with an infinitive; a compound verbal predicate, expressed by a combination of the

verb *to be* in *Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite* with an adjective (adverb) and an infinitive; a compound verbal predicate, expressed by a combination of verbs such as *to be able, to be unable, to be allowed, to be willing, to be going, to be capable* in *Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite* with an infinitive (or gerund); a compound verbal predicate, expressed by a combination of verbs such as *to say, to think, to state, to report, to announce, to believe, to expect, to know, to consider* in *Present Indefinite, Past Indefinite* passive with infinitive; compound verb predicate, expressed by a combination of verbs such as *to seem, to want, to wish, to desire, to like, to hate, to plan, to begin, to start, to continue, to fall* in *Present Indefinite* with an infinitive or gerund.

As the factors modifying the choice of the person and number form of the predicate verb, an inventory of characteristic parameters was established, reflecting such characteristics of nouns as: meaning, collectiveness, singularity – plurality, animate – inanimate, countability – uncountability, abstractness – concreteness, commonality – possession (6).

#### **Semantic and grammatical features of agreement**

The plural form of the predicate can be due to the nature of the relationship in a homogeneous construction with violation of the existing norm when the predicate is agreed with homogeneous subjects that include a collective noun. If a group of homogeneous subjects includes a noun with the meaning of "collectiveness", then, regardless of its position in relation to the predicate, there is a high probability of using the plural form of the latter. If a group of the subject is represented by a combination of a plural noun (pronoun) and a collective noun, the predicate is used in the plural. The form of the predicate plurality when agreement is guided by the semantics of the subjects. The semantic meaning of collectiveness bears the possibility of agreement in meaning. Since a collective noun in the singular form is capable of expressing a plurality, the predicate in the plural form is able to actualize the quantitative side of the predicative feature characteristic of each element that makes up the aggregate, which is designated by the collective noun, and for the second equal component of the compositional structure with conjunctions *either ... or / neither... nor*. This phenomenon only applies to nouns denoting animated subjects: *Shuttle commander Mark Polansky said neither he nor his crew were letting their guard down, despite the simple tasks ....* The number of subjects denoted by nouns in a group of homogeneous subjects increases if it includes a plural noun and a collective noun. In this case, the semantic and logical aspects dictate the plural form of the predicate: *I'm rather disappointed that erm neither the Conservatives nor the Labor Party are prepared to support a reasonable erm er reasonable plan ....*

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The results of the study allow us to draw a number of conclusions that are essential for identifying the main trends in the modern usus of the syntactic options under consideration and possible directions for the development of the English language in the field of reconciling the predicate with homogeneous subjects.

Syntactic variance in the structures under consideration is possible and allowed only under strictly defined conditions, the amplitude of variation is set depending on the restrictions imposed by the language system itself. The studied syntactic variants make up a variant pair in relation to a certain type and temporal form of the predicate verb and a number of variant pairs for the whole grammatical category

of the predicate verb. This series of variant pairs is intra-paradigmatic, however, in the grammatical category of the predicate verb, it is presented fragmentarily and asymmetrically due to the specificity of the means that create the considered syntactic variance, namely, residual, defective forms of the person and number that do not represent the system.

Despite the existence in the English language of the rule of reconciliation of the predicate with homogeneous subjects, reflecting the opinion of the majority of English linguists that structures with *either ... or / neither ... nor* require agreement on the nearest component, in practice there is a discrepancy with the socially real linguistic reality. The degree of recurrence of the matching options is so great that we can talk about their entry into the modern usus.

## 5. Research Methods

Taking into account the fact that the agreement of the predicate with the subject can be stylistically determined, we examined the variability of syntactic structures with *either ... or / neither ... nor* in texts of different nature and analyzed the narrative sentences belonging to the scientific, artistic, journalistic and colloquial styles (4).

The mechanism of agreement of a predicate with a group of homogeneous subjects in structures with *either... or / neither... nor* is described in this article in the following models:  $CSP_{sing}$ ,  $CSP_{plu}$ , where CS is a group of homogeneous subjects consisting of  $S_{sing}S_{sing}$ ;  $S_{plu}S_{sing}$ ;  $nS_{sing}(S_{plu})S_{sing}$ . It is assumed that the choice of the form of the predicate  $P_{sing}$  and  $P_{plu}$  depends on the agreement method:  $P_{sing} \leftarrow$  when agreed with the final component of the CS group,  $P_{plu} \leftarrow$  when agreed with all components of the group.

In order to determine the degree of relevance of the stylistic factor when choosing the form of the predicate number in the structures under consideration in modern English, we studied the frequency of agreement models  $CSP_{sing}$ ,  $CSP_{plu}$ , in scientific, artistic, journalistic and colloquial styles. The modern spoken language was of the greatest interest to us. In the study of variable methods of agreement, we tried to take into account the factor of the form of speech flow (Ivanova et al., 1981).

## 6. Findings

Structural and semantic features of speech at the syntactic level are one of the areas in which various extralinguistic determinants are reflected. In order to find out how the options for agreeing the predicate with homogeneous subjects in structures with *either ... or / neither ... nor* conjunctions are distributed among the speakers of modern English, we carried out a special study, the main tool of which was a complex experimental technique that made it possible to reveal the dependence of the functioning of syntactic options from the national-territorial, age, professional and gender characteristics of speakers. The respondents were 94 native British and American English speakers: 44 British English speakers (24 men and 20 women) and 50 American English speakers (24 men and 26 women). The experiment was carried out in different age groups: youth (20–35 years old), middle-aged (35–50 years old), old (more than 50). Taking into account the socio-professional status, the subjects were divided into three groups: 1) people with or receiving humanitarian education; 2) people with or receiving technical

education; 3) people with secondary education or no education. The experimental technique included two stages, combining elements of written and oral questioning.

## 7. Conclusion

The preconditions for the emergence and existence of the variance of the agreement are laid in the very system of the English language. When agreeing predicative members in structures with conjunctions *either... or / neither... nor* variance is due to the possibility of different understanding of the relationship between them, when these conjunctions act as semantic actualizers of the members of the constructive structure. Evaluating the linguistic significance, that is, the number of relevant social features and the degree of their impact, it should be stated that the syntactic options for agreeing the predicate with homogeneous subjects in structures with *either... or / neither... nor* do not belong to the number of automated speech skills. The existing syntactic variance is a consequence of the contradictions between the real expression of thought and the influence of grammatical habits. This syntactic phenomenon is not geographically localized, the boundaries of its distribution are blurred and indistinct. The system of syntactic options for agreeing the predicate with homogeneous subjects in structures with *either... or / neither... nor* in modern English reveals only minor locally and nationally determined fluctuations. In general, we have recorded a prevailing trend towards agreement in the plural in American English.

However, due to the limitations of the study, the authors were unable to establish clear boundaries for the variation of the phenomenon under consideration, which opens up prospects for further research. Also, the issue of the regulatory status of the options under consideration has not been resolved, which is especially relevant for those who study and teach English as a foreign language.

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