# The Semantic Features of Collective Nouns in English

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## ABSTRACT

| **Keywords**: vocabulary, English, collective nouns, semantic features | The vocabulary, particularly nouns, is considerably more important in communication. Collective nouns are kinds of nouns depending on their meaning. They are distinct terms used to describe a particular collection of things and play a significant role in English. However, it is very difficult for non-native speakers to recall all of the specific nouns used to characterize each category of things. For instance, a "bunch of lions" could be taken advantage of instead of "a pride of lions"; however, it would detract from the language's beauty. Thus, in order to understand and utilize collective nouns accurately, learners must be familiar with their semantic characteristics. The research is related to the semantic characteristics of collective nouns that are utilized to teach vocabulary to non-English major students at the University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang. The researchers used descriptive and analytic techniques to comprehensively describe the semantic characteristics of 100 English collective nouns chosen at random from renowned short tales. In terms of semantic characteristics, collective nouns in English from gathered data are utilized to represent humans, animals, and objects semantically. Additionally, this research sought to hypothesize certain metrics for more efficient teaching and acquiring English vocabulary. In conclusion, the results of this research have many significant implications for future English practice and therefore clearly contribute to the development of English vocabulary acquisition and teaching. |

## Introduction

Among apparent difficulties in mastering English vocabulary, the comprehension and use of collective nouns appear to be a demanding task for learners of English. The term "collective noun" refers to a collection of things, people, animals, or ideas that form a single notion or entity. While a collective noun does not refer to a single individual or object inside a group, it

is treated as a single concept, entity, or thing. It is also regarded as a "group noun." Remembering this kind of noun is really challenging for non-English major students. Then, students try to memorize them in various ways, such as doing follow-up exercises and rote learning, or even some students avoid using them. Actually, the multiple meanings of English collective nouns in different contexts may cause problems for learners. Therefore, an alternative approach to teaching and learning English collective nouns are needed for Vietnamese teachers and learners of English. According to Bui (2021), Chau (2021), and Tran (2021), students often have problems when they use nouns or collocations in their speech or writing. They have spent years learning English, but they still face difficulties in both writing and speaking (Candilas, 2021). The students' anxiety might be one of the problems that lead them to this issue (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021, Chau, 2021). Hoang (2021) states that different students might have different styles of learning a second language, and each student has different learning strategies. As can be evidently seen from the observation, the researchers recognized that a typical strategy for teaching and collective learning nouns is that the teachers provide learners with the semantic features of collective nouns in English.

Apart from the aforementioned, many research studies on collective nouns have been conducted; nevertheless, very few in-depth studies focusing only on the grammatical features of collective nouns have been conducted. The semantic description of collective nouns seems to be overlooked and has not been paid attention to as expected.

The researchers decided to conduct a study entitled "**The Semantic Features of Collective Nouns in English**" for all of these reasons. This study aims to determine the semantic properties of collective nouns and their consequences for teaching and learning English vocabulary. Furthermore, it is anticipated that this research would assist English learners in developing a better understanding of how to utilize collective nouns to convey their thoughts effectively and adequately.

## Literature review

After examining the relevant literature, the researchers found that many writers, including Rodney and Pullum, Downing, have addressed collective nouns. Rodney and Pullum (2005) noted that a collective noun could not be used in isolation in English, both in terms of syntactic characteristics and semantics. It is preceded by the indefinite article a/an and followed by a prepositional phrase that contains the preposition "of" and a noun or a noun phrase in plural forms. Collective nouns serve as head nouns in this arrangement. A collective noun may be pre-modified with adjectives as a noun; for example, "a chaotic throng of people." In particular, unlike other common countable nouns, collective nouns cannot be employed in plural forms in the same way as other common nouns, despite indicating plurality semantically—conjugate collective nouns with either a single or plural verb. Additionally, the collective noun may be employed independently when it serves as an anaphoric reference to the antecedent to which it refers.

In the meanwhile, Downing (2015) expresses a fresh perspective on collective nouns. According to him, the indefinite article "a" precedes, and the preposition follows a collective noun grammatically. Angela substituted the term "counter" for "collective noun." There have

been a lot of studies conducted on collective nouns. Magnus (2001) also agrees in American English, British English, and Australian English with collective nouns. He demonstrated that many variables, including geographical and stylistic characteristics and syntactic, semantic, and lexical constraints, interact to determine the single and plural targets of collective nouns in English. He drew the conclusion that semantic influence on verb agreement with collective nouns appears to be decreasing in British English. A few verbs demand singular agreement, but for the most part, the choice is mostly affected by the noun's propensity for singular or plural agreement.

Besides, De Vires (2018) explained why a single or plural verb should be used with collective nouns in "*Collective Nouns*." He claimed that collective nouns combine properties associated with singularity or 'one-ness' and properties associated with plurality on all levels of grammar (lexical-conceptual, morph syntactic, and semantic). Because of this, they provide a window into the various factors that influence the expression and interpretation of numbers. Meanwhile, Petra (2014) examined how Swedes were writing in English to construct numbers concord with collective nouns. He concluded that singular concord seems to be more frequent with collective nouns in Sweden.

However, each of the preceding research focused on a single feature of collective nouns: concord or agreement. As a result, more research into the semantic properties of collective nouns in English and their application to the teaching of English vocabulary is worthwhile.

### Research Questions

To accomplish the research aims, the survey sought to answer the following research questions.
1. "What are semantic features of collective nouns in English?"
2. "What are measures for teaching and learning English vocabulary?"

## Methods

### Pedagogical Setting

To simplify the study of English collective noun semantic features, the researchers focused on collective nouns in the form of a collocation of "a/an collective noun + of - phrase" in short stories. Additionally, this research sought to hypothesize certain metrics for teaching and acquiring English vocabulary more effectively.

### Design of the Study

To accomplish the investigation's objectives, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to address the study issues. The qualitative method is used to describe and analyze data in order to ascertain the semantic properties of collective nouns. Their occurrence was calculated using a quantitative method.

Initially, the descriptive approach was utilized to explain the semantic properties of English collective nouns comprehensively. Second, the analytic approach was utilized to explain and defend a certain trait or aspect of English collective nouns. Finally, several strategies for vocabulary teaching and learning were discussed.

In summary, the techniques listed above serve as recommendations for performing the study.

However, depending on the study's objectives, descriptive and analytic techniques were often employed.

*Data Collection and Analysis*

In this research, 100 English short tales are randomly selected. The data for collective nouns are analyzed and categorized using the samples obtained. They are then characterized and evaluated using semantic characteristics found in English short tales. The researchers then synthesis the data and compared the number of semantic characteristics associated with collective nouns used in English short tales. Additionally, a more thorough investigation is conducted to ascertain the semantic characteristics of English group nouns. Tables are used to simplify the presenting and comparing process. Finally, a conclusion is made based on the data analysis results.

## Results/Findings and Discussion

Collective nouns indicating individuals fall into two broad categories: groups of people who collaborate with one another and groups of people in general. Following the selection of 100 samples, the following table illustrates the findings:

Table 1. A summary of English Collective Nouns used for People (Grammar-monster, 2018)

|  | Collective nouns | Head nouns | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Collective nouns denoting a group of people working together** | A choir | ladies | 3 | 8.3% |
|  |  | singers |  |  |
|  | A company | soldiers | 2 | 5.6% |
|  |  | actors |  |  |
|  | A group | strident queens | 4 | 11.1% |
|  |  | doctors |  |  |
|  | A crew | sailors | 1 | 2.8% |
|  | A cast | actors | 2 | 5.6% |
|  | A troupe | performers | 1 | 2.8% |
|  | A team | players | 4 | 11.1% |
|  | A class | students | 2 | 5.6% |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| **Collective nouns denoting a group of people in general** | A group | little fellows | 4 | 11.1% |
|  |  | old men |  |  |
|  | A crowd | villagers | 2 | 5.6% |
|  | A bunch | people |  | 5.6% |
|  |  | kids | 2 |  |
|  | A tribe | people | 2 | 5.6% |
|  |  | angry natives |  |  |
|  | A mob | thieves, robbers, whores | 3 | 8.3% |
|  | A circle | friends | 1 | 2.8% |
|  | A party | friends | 1 | 2.8% |
|  | A bevy | girls | 1 | 2.8% |
|  |  | beauties | 1 | 2.8% |
| **Total** |  |  | **36** | **100%** |

As the table indicates, collective nouns used to refer to individuals are most often found in two categories: a group of people who work together and a group of people in general.

It can be seen that "a circle", "a party", "a bevy", "a crew" and "a troupe" share the same lowest percentages at 2.1%. "A tribe", "bunch", "a crowd", "a cast" and "a company" have slightly higher figures, but the highest figure is for "a group" and "a team", at almost 11.1%.

Indeed, "a group" is the most often used collective noun and may be employed in the majority of circumstances. In addition, there are a variety of collective nouns that may be used to represent a group of individuals congregating, including "a choir", "a company", "a crowd", "a bunch". These collective nouns, on the other hand, cannot be employed arbitrarily. Rather than that, they must be accompanied by a particular word that corresponds to their meaning.

Moreover, while portraying a group of individuals, English authors seem to take into account the group's social position, age, and attitude. For instance, when referring to a group of children, English authors use the phrase "a lot of children." By comparison, "a company of troops" refers to a group of soldiers. Collective nouns may effectively convey the writers' social standing or attitude toward their characters (Collective nouns, n.d.; Vocabulary, 2015).

Table 2. A summary of English Collective Nouns used for Animals

| | Collective Nouns | Head Nouns | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Collective Nouns denoting mammals and marsupials** | A herd | cows | 3 | 10% |
| | | red deer | | |
| | A team | horses | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A string | horses | 1 | 3.3% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting birds** | A flock | birds | 3 | 10% |
| | A gaggle | geese | 2 | 6.7% |
| | A skein | geese | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A raft | ducks | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A brace | ducks | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A flight | birds | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A rookery | penguins | 1 | 3.3% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting fish** | A school | fish | 4 | 12.1% |
| | | goldfish | | |
| | A shoal | sperm whales | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A troop | dogfish | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A swarm | eels | 1 | 3.3% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting reptiles and amphibians** | A pit | snakes | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A nest | snakes | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A den | snakes | 1 | 3.3% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting invertebrates** | An army | caterpillars | 2 | 6.7% |
| | | ants | | |
| | A colony | ants | 1 | 3.3% |
| | A hive | bees | 2 | 6.7% |
| **Total** | | | **30** | **100%** |

In terms of animals, out of 100 samples are taken from English short tales, 30 instances include collective nouns indicating a group of animals, with birds accounting for the majority (33.2 percent). Following this figure are collective nouns for fish (22 percent). Collective nouns indicating mammals and marsupials and collective nouns signifying invertebrates both account for 16.7 percent of the total.

In terms of mammals and marsupials, "a herd" possesses the highest percentage at 10%, whereas "a team" and "a string" also share the lowest figure, at almost 3.3%. When it comes to birds, around 10% of collective nouns used are "a flock," while the figure of "a gaggle" is slightly lower at 6.7%. Moreover, "A raft", "a brace", "a skein", "a flight" and "a rookery" have the lowest figure with only 3.3 percent of the total.

Regarded as collective nouns denoting fish, "a school" is commonly used for many fish in the sea and has the largest percentage, with 12.1% of the total, while the proportion of "a shoal" and "a swarm" approximately stands at the same level. Concerning reptiles and amphibians, "a pit", "a net" and "a den" are both collective nouns used for denoting a group of snakes moving in the same direction. However, each collective noun only appears once in the sample. Finally, in respect of invertebrates, "an army" and "a hive" account for the same rate with 6.7%, whereas the collective noun "a colony" makes up for only half of this amount.

The table above also demonstrates that the English collective nouns for animals may be divided into a variety of categories based on the creatures' characteristics. In the context of animals, the collective word "a herd" is often used. Typical instances are "a herd of cows" and "a herd of deer." Meanwhile, the English refer to a group of birds soaring in the sky as "a flock of birds."

Furthermore, a group of fish swimming in the water refers to "a school of fish" or "a shoal of fish". The term "a swarm" refers to a big group of insects traveling in the same direction. Furthermore, there are many additional collective nouns that may be used to characterize each animal kind.

Table 3. A summary of English Collective Nouns used for Things (EnglishStudyPage, 2018).

| | Collective Nouns | Head Nouns | Number | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Collective Nouns denoting flowers** | A bouquet | flowers | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A bunch | flowers | 2 | 5.9% |
| | A basket | flowers | 2 | 5.9% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting vegetables** | A sack | potatoes | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A bunch | carrots | 3 | 8.8% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting fruits** | A bunch | grapes bananas | 3 | 8.8% |
| | A cluster | grapes | 2 | 5.9% |
| | A basket | fruits | 1 | 2.9% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting food and drink** | A bowl | rice | 2 | 5.9% |
| | A glass | water | 2 | 5.9% |
| | | milk | | |
| | A bottle | champagne | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A carton | orange juice | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A cup | coffee | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A box | cereal | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A dish | eggs | 1 | 2.9% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting objects** | A pile | money | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A wad | notes | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A tube | toothpaste | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A bunch | key | 1 | 2.9% |
| **Collective nouns denoting clothes** | A suit | clothes | 1 | 2.9% |
| | A pile | | 2 | 5.9% |
| **Collective Nouns denoting vehicle** | A fleet | ships | 3 | 8.8% |
| | | taxis | | |
| | | boats | | |
| **Total** | | | **34** | **100%** |

The table above summarizes the frequency with which English collective nouns denote things that occur. There are 34 instances of collective nouns being used for objects in the study's 100 samples. This figure is subdivided into seven subcategories: flowers (14.7 percent), vegetables (11.7 percent), fruits (17.6 percent), food and drink (26.3 percent), objects (11.6 percent), clothing (8.8 percent), and vehicles (8.8 percent).

Things have a range of collective nouns, including flowers, vegetables, fruits, food and drinks, objects, clothing, vehicles. On a semantic level, the English collective nouns for flowers include "a bunch of flowers" and "a bouquet of flowers." While the terms are frequently used interchangeably, some florists believe that a bunch is a loosely tied and uncomplicated arrangement of flowers, whereas a bouquet is a more carefully arranged

arrangement of flowers based on color, composition, height, and other factors, and is frequently wrapped in paper and tied with a ribbon.

There are no standard group nouns for the word "vegetables" in the English language. Numerous collective nouns are used to refer to particular types of vegetables, for example, a bunch of carrots or a hill of beans.

There are distinct collective nouns used to refer to certain types of fruits when it comes to fruits. For instance, a bunch of bananas and a bunch of grapes are referred to as "a bunch of bananas" and "a bunch of grapes," respectively. However, "a basket" is the most often used collective word for a collection of various fruits and flowers.

English collective nouns indicate food and drink by using containers such as a bowl, a dish, a bottle, or a box. Collective nouns for objects are similarly diverse in the English language since they vary according to the items referred to. The collective noun "vehicles" may be followed by "a fleet," for example, "a fleet of automobiles." The collective nouns for clothing may refer to "a suit" or "a pile."

Moreover, as shown in the previous tables, "a bunch" is a frequent collective noun that may refer to a group of people, vegetables, flowers, fruits, or other objects. "A group of youngsters", "a group of carrots", "a group of flowers", "a group of bananas", or "a group of keys" are all examples of groups.

In response to our study question, "What are the semantic characteristics of English collective nouns?" The present investigation's statistical findings indicate that collective nouns in English are used to describe humans, animals, and objects semantically. Collective nouns indicating individuals are classified into two subtypes: those signifying a group of people who work together and those denoting a group of people in general. The English language uses a variety of collective nouns to refer to a group of individuals who work together, depending on the job's qualities, such as "a staff of employers", "a cast of actors", or "a crew of sailors". By contrast, when English speakers refer to a group of people in general, they consider the social position, age, and attitude of the individuals they want to mention in order to employ the appropriate collective nouns for each topic and situation.

Animals, as a collective noun in English, may be divided into a variety of categories based on their characteristics. In the context of animals, the collective noun "a herd" is often used. Meanwhile, the English use the term "a flock" to refer to a group of birds flying in the sky. Additionally, a group of fish that swim in the water is regarded as "a school" or "a shoal". The term "swarm" refers to a huge group of insects. The collective nouns that refer to things come in a variety of forms, including flowers, vegetables, fruits, food and drink, objects, clothes, vehicles.

For the second research question, "What are measures for teaching and learning English vocabulary?" The study suggests that understanding semantic features will help learners comprehend and remember the contextual meanings of collective nouns. For teachers of English, findings from our investigations can provide an alternative approach to teaching English collective nouns. Moreover, it is observed from our study that, although English collective nouns are multiform, teachers can provide learners with an effective cognitive tool to deal with problems in learning vocabularies which can facilitate learners' confidence and independence in the classroom.

Obviously, the findings of the research prove that applying the characteristics of each group of collective nouns to teaching vocabulary related to collective nouns can effectively improve students' vocabulary memorization and engagement. The main reason is that English collective nouns would be easier to remember if they were categorized into small groups depending on their specific features. Besides, understanding the semantic features of collective nouns can also help students apply them in different contexts easily and more effectively (Rodney & Pullum, 2005). Thus, it is necessary to master the semantic features of English collective nouns in order to reach the desired goal of teaching and learning vocabulary.

From what has been presented above, the researchers recognize that understanding the true meaning of each set of collective nouns is the first technique for students learning English vocabulary connected to collective nouns (Magnus, 2001). By deeply understanding words, English users can make their vocabulary grow exponentially. Instead of memorizing words, try to understand them by looking at their semantic features to correctly use the head nouns attached to the collective nouns. Next, each student should maintain a personal lexicon when learning English vocabulary in general and collective nouns in particular (De Vires, 2018). By retaining a customized list of learned terms, students will have a convenient reference for subsequent study. Students are highly likely to wish to review recent vocabulary terms, and maintaining them in their own list is much more effective than referring to the dictionary each time. There are many methods for English speakers to maintain their own unique list of collective nouns. However, one option is to make a table and divide it into many groups of collective nouns. Furthermore, teachers can also design many worksheets in order for students to practice using collective nouns in different contexts. By doing this, students can improve their vocabulary effectively.

Compared to the previous research on collective nouns, the findings and pedagogical implications of the present study can have a significant contribution to learning and teaching English collective nouns effectively. To begin, this study has explored a new aspect of collective nouns, the semantic features, which have not been discussed before. In fact, the previous studies of many researchers, as mentioned in the literature review, have helped learners determine the subject-verb agreement with collective nouns. This paper aims to lay a basic theoretical foundation for categorizing collective nouns and understanding the characteristics of each group of collective nouns. As a result, it may help English learners remember collective nouns easily and effectively.

Secondly, as consulted from the literature review, there are some authors giving the definitions and the grammatical features of English collective nouns. However, mastering the grammatical features does not mean that students can use these kinds of nouns in specific contexts. Therefore, this research is expected to fill in this gap by providing the lexical choice of English collective nouns in particular situations.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of the action research, the following conclusions and implications are made. First, regarding semantic characteristics, we use English collective nouns from our gathered data to semantically represent humans, animals, and objects. Collective nouns indicating individuals are classified into two subtypes: those signifying a group of people who work together and those denoting a group of people in general. Animals, as a collective noun in English, may be divided into a variety of categories based on their characteristics. The collective nouns that refer to things come in a variety of forms, including flowers, vegetables, and fruits; food and drink; objects; and clothes and vehicles.

On the basis of the semantic characteristics of English collective nouns just discussed, certain consequences for teaching and collective learning nouns are also discovered. At first, this research will serve as a valuable resource for instructors. It provides the instructor with working knowledge or comprehension of collective nouns in general and the semantic characteristics of English collective nouns. Understanding the semantic characteristics of collective nouns in-depth enables instructors to be more confident and adaptable when teaching pupils how to learn collective nouns successfully. Furthermore, the findings of this study provide some linguistic characteristics of collective nouns and assist teachers in teaching writing skills, as teachers who are well versed in the semantic attributes of collective nouns can assist students in expressing their ideas logically and smoothly.

Additionally, this research will be very beneficial to language learners. A firm grasp of collective nouns enables students to expand their vocabularies and provides them with a solid foundation for improving their reading and writing skills, which may be needed in their curriculum or future employment. In fact, pupils' papers are often boring as a result of their repetitious features. Students seem to employ repeated phrases to describe groups of people, objects, or animals because they are unfamiliar with the collective nouns that may readily be substituted. Thus, instructors may assist students in expanding their vocabulary in order to increase their awareness of using collective nouns in writing and speaking. Additionally, by identifying the collocation of collective nouns or the way words mix to form a collective noun, students will be more likely to retain the vocabulary and therefore utilize it in reading comprehension, essay writing, and fluent and fluid speaking.

To summarize, the results of this research have many significant implications for future English practice and therefore undoubtedly contribute to the development of English learners' ability to communicate in English.

However, the study is constrained by a scarcity of reference materials and a shortage of linguistic competence. The study analyzes the semantic properties of collective nouns in short stories written in English. Some crucial features of collective nouns have been removed, including syntactic and pragmatic characteristics. Moreover, since the collective nouns studied in this thesis were culled from English short stories, the study cannot include all collective nouns present in English and other languages.

As a consequence, more systematic research is necessary to examine this possibility. Firstly, an investigation into translation procedures of Vietnamese collective nouns into English would be highly recommended so that Vietnamese learners of English can have a general

understanding of the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese. Besides, a study of pragmatic features of collective nouns in English and Vietnamese should also be conducted.

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