



A naming of nouns

David Crystal considers the origins of English collective nouns, from a murder of crows to a clutch of mechanics



DAVID CRYSTAL

I imagine all languages have ways to talk about groups of animals, people and things, but I doubt any can match English for the range and variety of collective nouns that it has accumulated over the centuries. Some, such as a flock of birds, a herd of cows and a swarm of bees, date from Anglo-Saxon times. There weren't many of them then, so the ones that existed were used for all kinds of things – for instance, people talked about a herd of cranes, wrens, deer, swans, gnats and more.

These old collectives are so familiar now that we don't think twice about them. But we do think twice about the unexpected ones that were coined later, such as a murder of crows, a parliament of owls, and an unkindness of ravens. They have an obscure origin. Many are recorded for the first time in *The Book of St Albans*, one of the first English printed books, dated 1486. It was compiled by Dame Juliana, the prioress of Sopwell nunnery near St Albans in Hertfordshire. It contains a list of some 200 collective nouns.

Playful inventions

Some are traditional expressions, but most seem to be playful inventions. This is where we find a watch of nightingales, a charm of goldfinches, a muster of peacocks and dozens more. And the list goes well beyond animals. We find a doctrine of doctors, a superfluity of nouns, a sentence of judges and a diligence of

messengers. Several others appeared in 15th-century hunting manuals. Many of these expressions still appear today – particularly in literature and journalism – and of course what would a British pub quiz be without reference to an obscure collective noun or two!

Why do I call them 'playful'? Because coining collectives is a game people still happily play today, and human nature hasn't changed that much in 500 years. A great deal of entertainment can be derived from thinking up the funniest way of describing a group of 'X' – where X can be anything from astronauts to zoologists. What's the best collective noun for politicians, or undertakers, or estate agents? Competitions have produced some fine examples.

Language games

I collected as many as I could find a few years ago for my *Story of English in 100 Words*. The winners include an absence of waiters, a rash of dermatologists, a clutch of car mechanics, a vat of chancellors, a bout of estimates, a mass of priests and, my favourite (for its simplicity), a lot of auctioneers. And still they come. More recently I've encountered a crash of software, an annoyance of mobile phones and a bond of British secret agents.

Now the linguists are playing the game. Last year, the Chartered Institute of Linguists launched a competition to find a collective noun for linguists. What began as a light-hearted competition, inspired by Honorary President Jean Coussins, culminated in a celebration of linguistic creativity, as CIOL

BEYOND THE FLOCK: A 'murder of crows' (above) is a favourite among language lovers

members, the wider public and readers of *The Linguist* sent in their entries of words to describe language professionals.

Here are just a few of the entries: an alphabet, a babble, a Babel, a chatter, a lexicon and a polyphony of linguists. The winner was a glot of linguists. While not as lyrical as some, it has good roots – the Greek for 'tongue' – and it already describes linguistic groups, as in the multilingual polyglots and the lonelier monoglots.

CIOL can be proud of the fact that they have created a collective first. You'll have noticed that all the examples above are whole words. In the formula 'an X of Y', X is always a noun, in the singular, in its full form. There has never, to my knowledge, been a case where X is a part of a word. 'Glot' is what in linguistics is called a combining form. These are word elements that have a specific meaning but don't occur on their own, such as bio- and tele- initially, and -graph and -scope finally.

A glot of linguists. It rolls off the tongue very nicely, with the repeated 'l' sound, and it has a neat semantic association with lot – which is what collectives are all about. A good choice.

TL CIOL Vice President David Crystal is a lecturer, broadcaster and writer. Known for his English language research, he has written over 100 books.