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Gender and Number Agreement in Arabic,
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The book to be discussed here represents an exhausting and systematic work on agreements in written and spoken Arabic. In the framework of the volume, the authors have long discussed the synchronic description of these agreement systems, and the diachronic question of how they evolved. In the introductory note (pp. XVII-XXI), the authors introduce the topic with a summary of each chapter of the book. The book under review is consisted of five chapters.

The first chapter is dedicated to a critical survey of the studies on agreement in Arabic. It is divided into three sections. The first one examines the studies on agreement in Old Arabic

and in New Arabic. According to the authors (pp. 1-2, note 2) NA deals with the varieties of spoken Arabic evolved from an earlier OA stage; as regards OA, the authors correctly use this label, for their work, referring to Classical Arabic as codified by the first Arab grammars.¹ Bettega and D'Anna review important studies on agreement,² particularly, two main traits are commonly found in NA and OA texts: singular agreement with plural controllers in verbs occurring before their subjects and feminine singular agreement with plural nonhuman controllers. They mention a third feature,³ *scilicet* the OA pattern F.PL. agreement with non-human plural controllers. The second section of

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¹ The matter is more complex since OA is also the name for the pre-Islamic Arabic language of the oldest epigraphic texts written in many scripts like Nabataean, Himaic, Safaitic and even Greek, before the fifth century AD. See the *Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia* (OCIANA) at <http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/>, in particular the section related to Epigraphic Old Arabic with an extended bibliography.

² They do not find entirely satisfying the conclusions reached in these studies on agreement. Particularly, they disagree with Versteegh's (1984) “complete agreement” between substantive and adjective regardless of the (in)animateness of the substantive in the modern dialects; they state that agreement is “complete”: «only with respect to the feature of number, but things become more complicated when gender is taken into account» (p. 5). They are right since some dialect employ F.PL. agreement with plural controllers that are masculine in the singular.

³ This feature sporadically appears in the studies they reviewed.

the first chapter deals with agreement in written Arabic quoting Killean's hypothesis⁴ that F.SG. agreement with plural controllers represents a sort of neuter agreement (p. 10). As regards agreement in Classical Arabic, the authors show a list with all the possible agreement patterns provided by Reckendorf (1895) including Wright's survey (1896, 2:288-299).⁵ The authors focus their attention on the studies on the broken (or internal) plurals in Arabic⁶ and Afroasiatic mentioning the major studies on this topic and stating that Ratcliffe's survey (1998) is considered the exhausting work providing the major theories on the origin of broken plurals in Semitic. The last section of the first chapter treats the small number of studies about agreement in spoken Arabic; the authors carefully examine them in turn.

The second chapter provides a detailed description of the various agreement systems that are employed in Arabic. It is divided into three main sections. The first section is dedicated to a methodical discussion about the ways

in which modern linguistic theory defines and investigates the categories of gender and agreement.⁷ The second section focuses on the morphological markers that Arabic possesses to create gender and number – the “building blocks” of agreement, as the authors mention (p. 33). In all varieties of written Arabic (§ 2.2.1) gender and number are marked on the verb, the two sets of pronouns, the inflection of nominals (noun and adjectives), relative pronouns and demonstratives⁸; differently, varieties of Spoken Arabic can be divided into two types: gender-distinguishing (§2.2.2) and non-distinguishing varieties (§2.2.3). In the former, the verbal, pronominal and adjectival paradigms are similar to those of written Arabic and dual forms are no longer present. The authors wisely choose Najdi Arabic as representative of the whole group providing satisfactory tables (tables 2.8-2.11) about Najdi Arabic verbal inflection, independent and bound pronouns, demonstratives, and nominal inflection⁹. Non-distinguishing varieties are all dialects spoken

⁴ See Killean 1968.

⁵ Wright describes in good detail agreement patterns in Classical Arabic. He mentions the possibility of F.PL. agreement with nonhuman plural controllers and F.SG. agreement with broken plurals, independently of the nature of the controller (p. 11).

⁶ The authors correctly argue that the raising of broken plural is considered one of the major factors in the evolution of Arabic agreement system (p. 13).

⁷ The authors follow the linguistic practice of referring to element X as the *controller* (which is normally a noun), and the element Y as the *target*. The information that stems from the *controller* is found on the *target* in many types with reference to number, gender, person, and other categories. But the goal of the volume is the investigation of the two features of number and gender in Arabic.

⁸ Especially the inflection of nominals in written Arabic presents the distinctions of gender and number for a total of six combinations which reflects Proto-Semitic, see for instance: Arabic M.SG. *muslim-un* “muslim”, F.SG. *muslim-at-un*, M.Dual *muslim-āni*, F.Dual *muslim-at-āni*, M.PL. *muslim-ūna*, F.PL. *muslim-āt-un*; Proto-Semitic M.SG. *ṭāb-um* “good”, F.SG. *ṭāb-at-um*, M.Dual *ṭāb-āna*, F.Dual *ṭāb-at-āna*, M.PL. *ṭāb-ūma*, F.PL. *ṭāb-āt-um*. It is worth to bear in mind that written Arabic, as a feature of Central Semitic, employs two types of nominal pluralization, i.e. the “sound” or “external” plural and “broken” or “internal” plural. Differently from North-West Semitic Languages, written Arabic's inflection of nominals with “external” plural is close to East Semitic Languages, as Akkadian. For example, in Biblical Hebrew the inflection of nominals is: M.SG. *ṭōb* “good”, F.SG. *ṭōb-ah*, M. and F.Dual are mainly restricted to substantives denoting time and those found in pairs (especially the dual parts of the body), M.PL. *ṭōb-īm*, F.PL. *ṭōb-ōt*. This elucidation is representative in view of a Semitic Linguistic comparison since in spoken varieties of Arabic the inflection of nominals is close to West Semitic languages.

⁹ The authors state that the vast majority of the Najdi texts consists of oral narratives dealing with the Bedouin life (p. 83).

in large urban centres as in Levant (i.e. Beirut, Jerusalem, Damascus), Egypt (Alexandria, Cairo) and practically all dialects of the western Maghreb. The authors choose Damascus Arabic providing the same tables of those of Najdi Arabic in view of a morphological comparison (tables 2.12-2.15). Differently from Damascus Arabic in the western Maghreb (§2.2.4) several dialects have lost gender distinction in the second person singular of the pronominal and/or verbal paradigm and in the plural.

In the third section the authors meticulously analyse several different agreements in spoken dialects: singular agreement (§2.3.1), plural agreement patterns in gender-distinguishing (§2.3.2-2.3.4) and non-distinguishing varieties (§2.3.5-2.3.7). As regards plural agreement in gender-distinguishing dialects, the authors focus their research on Judith Rosenhouse's study (1984) about "Bedouin" and "sedentary" dialects¹⁰, as a valid starting point; two main points arise: 1) Bedouin dialects preserve gender distinction in the plural and feminine plural agreement is often happens with animal controllers; 2) feminine singular agreement with plural controllers is common, particularly with human plural controllers. The authors are interested in knowing whether these traits are found in the descriptions of the gender-distinguishing dialects analysing all the varieties across the Arabic-speaking world (§2.3.2.1 - §2.3.2.16). The results of their survey show that there is not a single dialect in which F.PL. agreement with nonhuman plural controllers does not occur; in the case of F.SG. agreement with plural controllers, this type of agreement appears to be possible in all gender-distinguishing varieties. In general, across the Arabic continuum several different agreement systems are found. According to the authors nouns can be divided into three agreement

classes depending on both formal and semantic criteria. Biologically masculine human beings belong to Class I in which the agreement in the plural is masculine plural *-īn*. Biologically feminine human beings, nonhuman animates and inanimates all belong to Class II, while Class III is constituted of masculine nonhuman animates and inanimates; both classes take the feminine plural *-āt* in the agreement in the plural. As regards F.SG. agreement, it constitutes an alternative agreement option for plural controllers belonging to all three classes. The authors label this agreement system "Type A" (table 2.20)¹¹.

In sections from §2.3.5 to §2.3.7 plural agreement in non-distinguishing dialects have been analysed; it deals with those Arabic varieties that have lost gender distinction in the plural forms of the verb, adjective and pronoun. The majority of non-distinguishing dialects retains the F.SG. agreement with plural controllers. The authors label this system "Type B" (table 2.21). In other non-distinguishing dialects F.SG. agreement has disappeared (even if not completely) since only a simple option for plural agreement exists in all these dialects, called common plural; this system is named "Type C" (table 2.22).

In section §2.3.8 the authors conclude their survey of the functioning of agreement examining other Arabic varieties that do not belong to any of the types above mentioned. These dialects are labelled "divergent" varieties. Among these varieties the authors examine Ḥassāniyya (§2.3.8.2) where all controllers trigger the same agreement in the plural that they trigger in the singular, and Darfur Arabic (§2.3.8.3), where the entire gender system collapsed due to a prolonged contact with non-Semitic languages.

Section §2.4 offers a description of the

¹⁰ According to Arabic dialectologists gender distinction in the plural is one of the traits typically associated with Bedouin dialects.

¹¹ They provide interesting examples for each class taken by Najdi texts (pp. 113-115): Class I *al-rġāl al-awwāl-īn* "The ancients"; Class II: *ṭalaṭ banāt ġa-**nn** [...] y-ṣāyid-**inn** ubū-**hin*** "Three daughters came [...] to visit their father"; Class III: *al-byūt mafrūš-**āt*** "The tents were cleared of all grudges".

agreement system of the written forms of the language, starting with pre-Classical Arabic, i.e. Pre-Islamic Poetry (notably the seven canonical Mu‘allaqāt) and the Quran. The data show a considerable increase of F.SG. agreement with human controllers. Probably Arabic has progressively abandoned broken plural formation for adjectives¹².

In the third chapter the authors tackle the evolution of the agreement system of written Arabic from a Semitic diachronic perspective; in particular, they speculate that the appearance of F.SG. agreement with plural controllers was due to the spread of broken plurals (§3.1)¹³. According to the authors: «feminine singular agreement with plural controllers might have come into being because of the speaker’s need to “match” a type of agreement which was becoming widespread in adjectives but had no parallels in the other parts of speech» (p. 187).

Arabic seems to be the only Semitic language, in which broken plurals are attested, that developed feminine singular agreement with plural nouns.

Sections §3.1-3.7 investigate the development and the evolution of the agreement system of Arabic, based solely on written sources from the Proto-Central Semitic to the 10th century CE, with some reference to the situation of 13th century poetry; in particular, section §3.7 describes the standardization that occurred in Classical Arabic and the change of the agreement patterns.

The final section, §3.9, is devoted to a comparison of data from Pre-Islamic poetry (Najdi Nabaṭī Poetry)¹⁴ with a corpus of every-

day Najdi. In this respect the authors state: «the pattern emerging from contemporary spoken Najdi is to be considered as representative of gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic as a whole, although numbers may vary» (p. 271).

Chapter four provides a diachronic account of the conceptualization and evolution of agreement in traditional Arabic grammar in the works of the most influent scholars of the language in the period ranging from Sībawayh (760-796 CE) to Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq (1805-1887 CE). This chapter analyses two fundamental research questions: I) how Arabic grammarians described agreement with plural controllers¹⁵; II) when the standardization of F.SG. agreement with non-human plural controllers first explicitly spelled out.

As regards the two questions, the distinction between human and non-human controllers appears with the first grammars of Arabic, while the mandatory rule of F.SG. agreement was formalized within the 19th century.

In chapter five, the authors present their survey about two main topics in the spoken dialects of Arabic. The first one is devoted to the F.SG. agreement with plural controllers (§5.1) whether it should be considered as a modern innovation. The second one examines when and how Arabic dialects lost F.PL. agreement.

In conclusion, the authors provide an answer to the two topics. In the first one, F.SG. agreement is considered an old ancient retention. As regards the second topic, according to them, the loss of F.PL. developed through to extra-linguistic factors at different places and

¹² Data show a twofold relation between broken plurals and F.SG. In particular both F.SG. agreement with plural nouns and broken plural formations for adjectives seem to be considered as innovations in Semitic.

¹³ Proto-Semitic had a system of internal plurals which was subsequently lost twice; first by Akkadian, then by Northwest Semitic (See Huehnergard 2019: 59). Arabic shares the presence of broken plurals with Ethiopian and the South Arabian languages.

¹⁴ Nabaṭī Poetry is the traditional dialectal poetry of the Arabian Peninsula and neighboring areas.

¹⁵ It is important here when did the distinction between ‘*āqil* “rational” and ‘*gayr ‘āqil* “irrational” took place in determining agreement patterns.

times in the history of Arabic languages.

In the end, the thesis of the book is supported by a critical analysis of the existing bibliography, as is well demonstrated in the final bibliographical apparatus, which includes titles in Arabic, French, German, English, Spanish and Italian. Furthermore, the work is enriched with an index of languages, dialects, tribes and places, and with a series of well figures and tables, reflecting, as does the whole volume, the excellent editorial support provided to the authors by the publisher.

The book can be rated positively. The remarks are clear, and the details are put forward with the necessary conciseness. The authors are to be congratulated, as they have certainly made a further contribution to the interest into gender and number agreement in the spoken and written Arabic language. I recommend the book to the reader.

GLOSSES

F.Dual	feminine dual
F.PL.	feminine plural
F.SG.	feminine singular
M.Dual	masculine dual
M.PL.	masculine plural
M.SG.	masculine singular
NA	New Arabic
OA	Old Arabic

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