

Rethinking Agreement in Spoken Arabic: The Question of Gender

Simone Bettega

Università di Torino

simone.bettega@unito.it

Abstract

This paper proposes a re-discussion of the question of the number of genders in Arabic. Only varieties of Arabic that display gender distinction in the plural are considered here. In these varieties, it is argued, all nouns fall into one of three distinct agreement classes (or genders), and this in spite of the fact that only two separate genders surface at the morphological level. In other words, a discrepancy exists between the number of target genders and that of controller genders. This situation is not unique to Arabic, and finds parallels in other languages of the world. In addition, the article discusses the role of feminine singular agreement with plural controllers. This type of agreement is not restricted to any particular controller type and always exists in variation with plural agreement. Therefore, it is not to be regarded as a separate agreement category, but rather as an indicator of the referent's level of individuation. Finally, the last section of the article concentrates on the possible diachronic implications of the analysis proposed above

Keywords

agreement – gender – Arabic linguistics – Najd

1 Introduction

In the course of this paper, I will argue that the question of the number of genders in Spoken Arabic (SA), far from being self-evident, warrants re-examination. If linguistic gender manifests itself not only through morphology, but also by means of syntactic agreement, then the commonly held view

according to which Arabic has two genders (masculine and feminine, henceforth M. and F.) cannot be regarded as a satisfactory linguistic description. This holds true for all varieties of Arabic which still retain gender distinction in the plural: these will be the focus of the present article, and will be referred to using the shorthand term “gender-distinguishing varieties”.¹ Dialects of Arabic which do not distinguish gender in the plural, rather than displaying less complex agreement systems, should be considered as exponents of a different kind of complexity, and as such worthy of separate treatment.

In § 2 I will briefly review the existing literature on the topic of agreement in SA, discussing how, in the course of time, number, rather than gender, came to be the main variable in focus in these studies. In § 3 I will provide a quantitative analysis of agreement patterns in a corpus of Najdi Arabic texts, before attempting a re-assessment of the question of the number of genders in this and the other gender-distinguishing dialects based on the evidence presented.

2 A Short History of the Study of Agreement in Spoken Arabic

The basis for a systematic study of agreement patterns in SA was laid in a series of foundational works all published in the last three decades of the 20th century. Each of these works would prove fundamental in informing the understanding of this subject in later scholarship, giving rise to an array of terminological and methodological tools still currently in use.

The first of these works was Haim Blanc’s seminal study on duals and pseudo-duals in SA. Blanc (1970: 49–53) was the first, and one of the few, to look at agreement in a cross-dialectal perspective, providing a wealth of comparative data from several different varieties. He was also among the first to point out a fundamental fact, often overlooked in later works on the subject. Moving from the consideration that in many dialects plural agreement is often the norm (or, if not, at least an option) with non-human plural controllers, Blanc noted how, in some gender-distinguishing dialects, *feminine* plural agreement is commonly associated with irrational referents. This latter consideration was, unfortunately, confined to a brief footnote (fn. 30, p. 50) and dismissed by Blanc himself as “irrelevant for this discussion” (that is, his discussion on the kind of agreement duals and pseudo-duals tend to attract).

1 As opposed to ‘non-distinguishing’ ones. Obviously this distinction is only valid when referring to gender marking in the plural, since all varieties of SA distinguish gender in the singular, at least in the third person.

Two decades after the publication of Blanc's study, a second important work dealing with the topic of agreement in Arabic appeared: Ferguson's 1989 article on grammatical agreement in Classical Arabic and the modern dialects, intended as a response to Versteegh (1984). Though this was not directly the object of Ferguson's critique, in his work Versteegh (1984: 103–5) addressed the question of agreement as well, noting how, in particular, "in the modern dialects there is a tendency towards complete agreement between substantive and adjective, regardless of the (in)animateness of the substantive". This is a position often encountered in the literature on SA.² However, it is not clear what is meant here by "complete" agreement: if one is to understand a type of agreement where all the information about the gender and number of the controller is also present on the target, then the definition is intrinsically problematic, because non-distinguishing dialects simply lack the morphological means to produce such an agreement, while distinguishing ones, as we have seen, often employ F.PL. agreement even with masculine non-human plural controllers.³ In other words, "complete" agreement is always possible in SA with respect to the feature⁴ of number, but it becomes more problematic when gender is taken in consideration. It is relevant to note that Versteegh was, at the time of writing, well aware of Blanc's remarks on the topic of agreement, since he himself refers to them in his work. Versteegh, however, seems to follow Blanc's lead in considering the distinction between M. and F. plural

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- 2 See for instance the very similar comments in Caubet, Simeone-Senelle, Vanhove (1989: 60): "dans les dialectes qui possèdent des formes verbales différenciées en genre au pluriel, l'accord se fait automatiquement: si le sujet est féminin pluriel, le verbe est au féminin pluriel, ni la place du sujet par rapport au verbe, ni la nature du sujet (animé ou inanimé) n'interviennent". This is, again, an oversimplification, since (as already said and as will be discussed below) it is not only F.PL. subjects who take F.PL. agreement, but also a great number of inanimate ones not marked for feminine. This obviously poses the question of how we define a "feminine plural subject" (on the basis of its morphological form, the type of agreement it triggers, or the biological sex of its referent in the real world?). See note 3 and § 3.2 below.
- 3 When I say "masculine non-human plural controllers", I refer to non-human plural controllers that, in the singular, would attract masculine agreement. One might argue, obviously, that these controllers cannot be regarded as "masculine" when they appear in the plural, no more than they can be regarded as "feminine" when they appear in the singular. Words whose gender varies depending on the number they stand in exist in several languages of the world (see Corbett 1991: 170 for some examples and a discussion). Such words are normally very rare, however, and are to be considered as exceptional lexical items. As I will argue in § 3.2, this is not the case with Arabic, where these nouns number in the thousands and are to be regarded as a separate agreement class.
- 4 In the course of this paper I will adopt the terminology employed by Corbett (2006), and will therefore refer to agreement controllers, agreement targets, agreement features and agreement conditions.

agreement unimportant, thus inaugurating a long series of studies which will overlook the significance of this distinction.

The primacy of the feature of number over that of gender was eventually sanctioned by the introduction of the dichotomy between “strict” versus “deflected” agreement (Ferguson 1989: 9), which went unchallenged by subsequent scholarship on the subject (including the works of Belnap and Brustad cited below, and, more recently, Holes 2016; Procházka, Gabsi 2016; Ritt-Benmimoun 2016; D’Anna 2017 and forth.; Bettega 2018). Ferguson defined “strict” agreement as a type of agreement in which “some category that is overtly or inherently present in the ‘controller’ (subject or head-noun) is copied in the ‘target’ (verb, noun-modifier)”. We have “deflected” agreement, on the other hand, when “a plural controller is associated with a feminine singular target”.

Ferguson’s definition of strict agreement works very well for the analysis of non-distinguishing dialects, because in such dialects a plural controller can only attract two types of agreement (i.e. generic plural or feminine singular, that is, strict or deflected).⁵ It is no coincidence, in this sense, that Ferguson first introduced the two terms in his textbook of Damascene Arabic (Ferguson *et al.* 1961). When it comes to gender-distinguishing dialects, though, the use of the label “strict” only tells us that the agreement is plural, without providing any information with respect to gender.⁶ Probably, the fact that the two labels “strict” and “deflected” were conceived for the description of a dialect which had no gender distinction in the plural should have dissuaded scholars to apply them indiscriminately to any variety of SA; this was not the case, however, and the term “strict” ended up being equated to “plural” throughout all subsequent literature, thus giving rise to a series of misunderstandings concerning the nature of agreement in SA. In particular, the problem with the adoption of this terminology is that it automatically renders any type of variation other than singular/plural variation irrelevant, because it makes analysis

5 Of course, this is without taking into consideration the possibility of total neutralization of agreement in the case of a verb preceding its subject. Ferguson (1989: 13) termed this “equivocal” agreement and recognized it as a separate, cross-linguistically very common phenomenon. In most varieties of Arabic, verbal targets preceding their controllers have a much higher chance of attracting singular (instead of plural) agreement. In the course of this paper I will not address the question of word order as a condition of agreement in SA, if not marginally in § 3.2. For a general treatment of the subject from a typological perspective, one can refer to Corbett (2006: 176ff).

6 Though Ferguson—to the best of my knowledge—never made any specific claim as to this point, Belnap, who worked under his supervision as a PhD student, made clear that “strict agreement [...] means plural form targets occurring with plural controllers, however, grammatical gender of target and controller may or may not be the same” (Belnap, Shabaneh 1992).

“blind”, so to speak, to the potential meaningfulness of gender variation in plural agreement. This point is central to my argument and I will elaborate on it in more depth in § 3. Before moving to that, however, it is necessary to introduce two last works which figure importantly in the history of the study of agreement in SA: Kirk Belnap’s analysis of agreement patterns in the dialect of Cairo and Kristen Brustad’s comparative study of the syntax of Arabic dialects.

Completed only two years after the publication of Ferguson’s article, Belnap’s 1991 dissertation relied heavily on the terminology and methodology introduced in the former. Belnap’s work remains, to this day, one of the most thorough analyses ever produced of agreement patterns in an Arabic dialect, and its sound methodological approach has been later adopted, with varying degrees of accuracy, in a number of other studies. While Belnap’s work has undoubtedly paved the way for most subsequent research on the subject, its being focused on a non-distinguishing dialect further reinforced the perception that variation in number, rather than gender, was the main relevant feature to be investigated.

This is well exemplified in Brustad’s (2000) comparative work on the syntax of SA. Brustad’s study has had the great merit of casting the issue of agreement in a wider, cross-dialectal perspective (although again, of the four varieties she analyzes in her book, none distinguishes gender in the plural). Just like Belnap’s, Brustad’s work was to prove influential for subsequent studies of agreement in SA: in particular, the concept of individuation has since then been employed in several papers on the subject. The term individuation (or salience) has been in use for quite some time among typologists, in an attempt to explain a variety of phenomena. Comrie (1989: 199), while discussing animacy as a conceptual category which interacts importantly with language structure, focuses on the relation which exists between animacy and salience/individuation. “Salience relates to the way in which certain actants present in a situation are seized on by humans as foci of attention, only subsequently attention being paid to less salient, less individuated objects [...]. Salience is not treated as a primitive in itself, but rather as the result of the interaction of a number of factors, such as animacy in the strict sense, definiteness, singularity, concreteness, assignability of a proper name”. In her book, Brustad (2000: 22–25) maintains that individuation is responsible for the apparently erratic agreement patterns of plural nouns in SA, because agreement can be used to contrast “collectivity or generality” with “heterogeneity and particularity” (numerals below ten, in particular, apparently tend to emphasize the latter).

In conclusion, up to this moment I have tried to show how, in studies about agreement patterns in SA, number came to be the main variable in focus rather than gender. In § 3, I will discuss how a re-evaluation of the importance of the

feature of gender could lead to a better understanding of the nature of agreement in Arabic. In the next section, I will offer a brief survey of the existing studies on agreement in SA, which focus specifically on gender-distinguishing varieties.

2.1 *Agreement Patterns in Gender-Distinguishing Dialects*

As already noted by Herin and Al-Wer (2013: 66–7), studies on the agreement patterns of gender-distinguishing dialects are few.

Blanc (1970: 50, fns. 30 and 31) provides very limited information about the dialect of Bukhara, stating that plural nouns systematically require plural agreement, and that non-human plural controllers in particular systematically attract F.PL. agreement.

Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987) analyze the agreement rules associated with plural nonhuman nouns in a rural dialect of northern Jordan. The hypothesis they put forward is that variation between F.SG. and F.PL. agreement with these controllers is determined by the influence that Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) has on the dialect. In other words, loanwords from MSA would tend to be borrowed in the dialect together with the prescriptive agreement rule which dictates F.SG. agreement with plural nonhuman controllers.⁷ “Pure” dialectal items, on the contrary, would systematically attract F.PL. agreement. In Bettega (2018) I have discussed how, although Owens’ and Bani-Yasin’s analysis works well in explaining much of the variation they observe in their texts, it does not account for the whole of it. In particular, a good number of “purely” dialectal lexical items referring to nonhuman entities, and even some controllers denoting human referents, appear in their data set which trigger F.SG. agreement. In light of all the studies that have since then appeared on the topic, it seems safe to assume that this type of oscillation is connected with the level of individuation of the referent.

Herin and Al-Wer (2013), working on another gender-distinguishing Jordanian dialect (that of Salt), come to conclusions similar to those of Owens and Bani-Yasin, with the difference that they suggest the dialect of the capital Amman as the source of the “innovative” rule which associates items scoring low on the individuation scale with F.SG. agreement. In other words, Herin and Al-Wer maintain, in the same way as Owens and Bani-Yasin did, that F.PL. agreement with nonhuman plural controllers is the “original” dialectal rule. The association of plural nouns scoring low on the individuation scale with F.SG. agreement is an innovation caused by contact with prestigious urban varieties in which this pattern is attested.

⁷ An almost identical remark appears in Caubet, Simeone-Senelle, Vanhove (1989: 60).

In Ritt-Benmimoun (2016), the author focuses on agreement patterns in the Bedouin dialects of Southern Tunisia. This article has the great merit of being the first to apply the methodologies developed by Belnap and Brustad to a dialect which still distinguishes gender in the plural (though it does not provide statistical data).⁸ The results of Ritt-Benmimoun's analysis clearly show that 1) it is only masculine human plural controllers which trigger M.PL. agreement, otherwise 2) all other types of plural controllers (human feminine, animal and inanimate) attract F.PL. agreement; however 3) controllers of both type (1) and (2) can trigger F.SG. agreement if they score low on the individuation scale. This last point can hardly be considered an innovation caused by contact with a neighboring urban variety, since in the local prestigious variety, the dialect of Tunis, F.SG. agreement with plural human controllers appears to be rarer (Procházka, Gabsi 2016).⁹

Finally, D'Anna (2017) investigates agreement patterns in Libyan Fezzani Arabic, and his study has the merit of including quantitative data. D'Anna's results are, on the whole, comparable with those of Ritt-Benmimoun, with the important difference that the use of F.SG. agreement seems to be much more limited, being mainly restricted to collectives and only rarely extended to "proper" plurals, in particular human ones. As was the case with Bedouin Tunisian dialects (fn. 9), Fezzani Arabic seems to be undergoing a process of morphological erosion that causes F.PL. forms to be often replaced by M.PL. ones.

Summing this up, a number of clear trends emerge from studies of agreement patterns in gender-distinguishing dialects, the most important of which being that in all these dialects nonhuman referents are systematically associated with F.PL. agreement (as is the case with human feminine controllers; human masculine controllers, on the other hand, are the only ones to attract M.PL. agreement). In addition to this, all plural controllers can, at least theoretically, be associated with F.SG. agreement when they are perceived as non-individuated, though the extent to which this type of agreement actually occurs varies from dialect to dialect and from one controller type to another.

8 Though reference to Brustad's work was already present in Herin's dissertation on the dialect of Salt (see Herin 2010: 289).

9 Though the influence of Tunis Arabic in the southern dialects investigated by Ritt-Benmimoun is manifest in another agreement-related phenomenon, i.e. the increasingly common substitution of F.PL. forms with the corresponding M.PL. ones. Far from being restricted to Bedouin Tunisian varieties, this process of morphological erosion has been reported for virtually all dialects which still retain gender distinction in the plural.

3 Rethinking Gender Systems in Spoken Arabic

In the course of this paragraph, I will discuss how the inclusion of gender in the plural as a relevant variable could alter the synchronic description that we make of the agreement systems in gender-distinguishing varieties of SA, as well as their typological classification. In particular, in § 3.1 I will provide more data by analyzing a corpus of Najdi texts, adding to the evidence presented in § 2.1, while in § 3.2 I will attempt some generalizations based on said evidence.

3.1 *Agreement Patterns in Najdi Arabic*

Najdi Arabic is one of the most important varieties of Arabic that still retain gender distinction in the plural (in terms of number of speakers, geographical diffusion and sociolinguistic prestige, at least within the territories in which it is spoken). In spite of the fact that Najdi Arabic has been the object of several detailed and comprehensive studies—most of them authored by Bruce Ingham, whose thorough grammar of the dialect stands out as exemplary in the field—its agreement system remains in need of accurate description. Ingham (1994: 62) notes that “the most general rule is that [...] the plural of a noun with a non-human referent takes feminine singular concord”; however, he adds that such controllers can also attract F.PL. agreement, and provides several examples (Ingham 1994: 64–65). In general, he remarks that “the picture with regard to this system is not at all clear” (*ibid.*: 61).

In order to deepen our knowledge of these dialects’ agreement systems, I ran a quick statistical analysis on a corpus formed by a number of Najdi texts published by several different authors. Concerning this topic, a number of caveats are in order.

First of all, Najdi Arabic was selected as a case study because it is one of the few gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic for which a consistent number of published texts exists. In particular, my corpus is composed of all the prose texts which appear in Ingham (1980, 1982*a*, 1986, 1994), Kurpershoek (1993) and Sawayan (1992). Kurpershoek’s (1994–2005) monumental work in five volumes was not included in the corpus. Volumes 1 to 3 mainly contain poetic material, which was excluded from the present analysis. The few prose texts that appear in these volumes have been analyzed, but were discarded since they contain no nonhuman plural noun controlling agreement targets.¹⁰

10 Since the corpus presented here already contained more than 200 agreement targets depending on nonhuman controllers, the huge amount of narrative material contained in Kurpershoek’s fourth volume was excluded as well. Selected extracts from this volume

Secondly, as already remarked, poetic materials were purposely left out of the database on which the present analysis is based. Most of the texts, however, consist of oral narratives dealing with the topic of Bedouin life in the pre-oil era,¹¹ and, as such, their style is somehow rhetorical. This point is important, in that the pragmatics of a text can influence speaker choices with respect to agreement (this is particularly true when categories such as saliency and individuation are taken into account, see § 2). The possible effects that a preponderance of narrative texts might have had on the data are discussed at the very end of § 3.1.2.

Finally, Najdi Arabic cannot be thought of as a monolithic entity with no internal variation. Ingham (1994: 5) actually distinguishes four different sub-varieties of this dialect (namely: Northern Najdi, Central Najdi, mixed Central-Northern Najdi and Southern Najdi). The existing material for each of these sub-varieties, however, was too scarce for any meaningful quantitative treatment, so that for the sake of the present analysis all the texts have been analyzed together. In particular, my dataset did not include any Southern Najdi material, since the only available text representative of this variety (a ʕAǧmāni text included in Ingham 1982*a*) does not contain any target depending on a nonhuman plural controller.¹² Dhafiri (mixed Central-Northern) material was scarce as well, being based only on the short texts which appear in Ingham (1982*b*, 1986). The other two subgroupings are more richly represented, but even in this case, it was difficult to notice any major difference between them in terms of agreement behavior. It is my impression that, as far as agreement patterns are concerned, Najdi Arabic as a whole is relatively homogeneous. This finds further confirmation in the results yielded by analysis of similar corpora in other, unrelated dialects of SA, which are comparable to those I present here (here as well, see the discussion at the end of § 3.1.2).

With these premises in mind, we can now move on to examine the results of data analysis. These will be presented in the two following subsections, each devoted to a different type of controller.

3.1.1 Agreement with Human Plural Controllers in Najdi Arabic

Human controllers in the corpus have not been made the object of statistical analysis, since this would have been of little significance. These controllers

are, however, in the process of being analyzed, and an expanded version of the corpus will appear in a book-length study of agreement in Arabic, which I am currently working on together with Luca D'Anna (University of Mississippi).

11 A few dialogues appear among Ingham's data.

12 Āl Murrah texts have not been included, since in this dialect F.PL. morphological markers have been lost (see Ingham 1994: 66).

numbered in the thousands, and the overwhelming majority attracted M.PL. agreement, as in examples (1) and (2):¹³

- 1) *ar=rǧāl al=awwil-īn*, “The ancients”
(lit. “the men the first-M.PL”; Sawayan 1992: 138).
- 2) *gām-aw ḥatta xwān=ih yixz-ūn ḡalē=h*, “Even his brothers started to revile him”
(lit. “started-M.PL even brothers=his revile-M.PL on=him”; Ingham 1982a: 113).

Human controllers referring to groups consisting exclusively of women were very rare in the texts, but when they appeared, they predictably triggered F.PL. agreement, as in (3) and (4):

- 3) *l=ḥarīm [...] ḥin mxallš-āt=in zihbuww-āt=ihum*, “The women [...] prepared the provisions (for the men)”
(lit. “the women [...] they.F.PL prepared-F.PL provisions=their”; Sawayan 1992: 150).
- 4) *ṭalaṭ banāt ḡa-nn [...] yḡāyid-inn ubū=ḥin*, “Three daughters came [...] to visit their father”
(lit. “three daughters came-F.PL to visit.F.PL father=their.F.PL”; Ingham 1980).

Mixed groups of people containing both men and women (or groups of individuals whose gender is unspecified) always attracted M.PL. agreement, as in (5), (6) and (7):

- 5) *nādi l=ḡyāl u=xallī=**hum** yistiḡidd-ūn*, “Call the children and let them get ready”
(lit. “call the children and let them.M.PL prepare-M.PL”; Ingham 1994: 151).

13 The transcriptions and glosses of all the examples have been adapted, while the original translations have been maintained. A more literal translation has been provided in brackets, however, along with references to the original source. Relevant morphological elements marking gender and number have been highlighted in bold.

- 6) *al=misilmīn mā=hum bi=ygaṣṣir-ū*, “The Muslims, they do not forsake (their friends)”
(lit. “the muslims not=they.M.PL forsake-M.PL”; Ingham 1982a: 113).
- 7) *al=atrāk [...] ṣind=hum*, “The Turks [...] they had ...”
(lit. “the turks [...] with=them.M.PL”; Ingham 1982a: 103).

The co-occurrence of plural agreement with human controllers, however, is not an absolute rule. Ingham (1994: 63) notes that it is possible for plural or collective nouns denoting human beings to take F.SG. agreement.¹⁴ As I have said, plural agreement was by far the most common type of agreement with human controllers in the texts: however, several dozen targets appeared in the corpus depending on human controllers and showing F.SG. agreement. As Ingham remarks, many of these controllers are more appropriately described as collectives. For the sake of the present discussion I will adopt an *ad hoc* definition of collective, based on morphological and semantic criteria, and aimed at distinguishing actual plurals from elements of a different nature. I mean by collective a noun which is semantically referred to a group or plurality of some sort, and that however is not morphologically a plural (either because an actual plural, and sometimes a singulative, can be derived from it, or because it exists in a single invariable form which cannot be inflected for plural or singular or singulative).

Human collectives in Najdi Arabic (as in other varieties of SA) can attract both M.PL. and F.SG. agreement. In example (8) we see the most typical of these controllers, the word *nās* “people”, attracting F.SG. agreement on three verbal targets:

- 8) *nās ti-dbaḥ nās ti-tbax nās ti-nfax*, “Some people were slaughtering [sheep], and others cooking, and others pounding [coffee beans]”
(lit. “people F.SG-slaughtering, people F.SG-cooking, people F.SG-pounding”; Ingham 1982a: 142–43).

In example (9), *nās* attracts F.SG. agreement in the verb which precedes it, but M.PL. agreement in the one that follows. I have already hinted at the fact that

14 Far from being restricted to Najdi dialects, this phenomenon is common to (almost?) all varieties of SA, including non-distinguishing ones. Belnap (1991: 62, 65), for instance, gives examples of F.SG. agreement co-occurring with both apophonic and suffixal human plurals in Cairene Arabic.

word order can affect the type of agreement which obtains in (§ 2, note 5). Far from being idiosyncratic, this represents a typologically common behavior:

- 9) *w=ta-fraḥ ṣād an-nās w=ya-rčib-ūn miṣ=uh*, “The men were overjoyed and rode with him”
 (lit. “and F.SG-rejoiced the people and [they] rode-M.PL with=him”; Sowayan 1992: 92)

In example (10) we can see another very common factor having an effect on agreement, namely distance between controller and target. The word *ṣarab* attracts F.SG. agreement in the first two verbs, but when another subject is mentioned, the verbs that follows—which refers back to *ṣarab*—bears M.PL. agreement instead:

- 10) *wa=l=ṣarab t-banni byūt=ah wi=t-ḥafr al=ma. bēṭ mindif=in*
w=ya-ḥafr-ūn=uh, “the people were setting up their tents and clearing the water wells. Bēṭ had been buried and they were digging it clear”
 (lit. “and the people F.SG-building tents=their.F.SG and F.SG-digging the water. bēṭ was buried and [they] digging-M.PL it”; Sowayan 1992: 102).

In examples (11) and (12) two morphologically masculine singular controllers (*gōm* “crowd, people, tribe” and *ṣālam* “world”, but also “people, crowd, multitude”) attract F.SG. agreement:

- 11) *tifassar-t gōm=uh*, “The troops dwindled”
 (lit. “dwindled-F.SG people=his”; Sowayan 1992: 150)
- 12) *ṣālam-in ma ti-ḥṣa*, “multitudes that could not be counted”
 (lit. “multitude not F.SG-be counted”; Sowayan 1992: 160).

Referring to the following example, Ingham notes that F.SG. agreement is common with nouns denoting tribal units:

- 13) *ṣār-at āl-ḍufīr hu šēx=ah ḥamdān u=gām-at t-āxiḍ ray=u*, “Ḥamdān became shaikh of the Ḍhafīr and they began to follow his leadership”
 (lit. “became-F.SG the ḍufīr he shaikh=their.F.SG ḥamdān and [they] started-F.SG F.SG-following leadership=his”; Ingham 1982b: 253).

Note how the plural of the word “tribe” (*gubāyil*) triggers F.SG. agreement in the following example:

- 14) *al=gubāyil ta-mši maʕ aṭ=ṭumaʕ*, “These tribes were driven by the desire for gain”
 (lit. “the tribes F.SG-walked with greed”; Ingham 1986: 51).

Finally, in example (15), we see a proper plural denoting human beings triggering F.SG. agreement. Here is obviously the very low individuation of the controller the factor which influences agreement:

- 15) *ar=rǧāl ti-dīm ar=rǧāl*, “Men subdue men”
 (lit. “the men F.SG-subdue the men”; Sawayan 1992: 138).

3.1.2 Agreement with Nonhuman Plural Controllers in Najdi Arabic
 The corpus of Najdi text I analyzed contained 206 agreement targets depending on 128 nonhuman controllers which were either collectives or true morphological plurals. Of these targets, 8 (3,9%) showed M.SG. agreement, 15 (7,3%) showed M.PL. agreement, 116 (56,3%) showed F.SG. agreement, and 63 (30,6%) showed F.PL. agreement. The remaining 4 targets were adjectives with apophonic plural forms which possess no inherent gender.

At first sight, these percentages would seem to confirm Ingham’s statement that nonhuman plurals are normally associated with F.SG. agreement, although F.PL. agreement represents a relatively common alternative. However, these figures have, *per se*, little meaning, and must be analyzed in light of the different types of controllers and agreement conditions we are considering. Furthermore, minor percentages of masculine agreement (both singular and plural) have to be accounted for.

Let us first consider the various types of controller that appear in the corpus. 47 of the 128 controllers in our texts are actually collectives (according to the definition given in § 3.1.1). 79 targets depend on these controllers. Of these, 4 (5,1%) show M.SG. agreement, 8 (10,1%) show M.PL. agreement, 54 (68,4%) show F.SG. agreement, and 11 (13,9%) show F.PL. agreement. The remaining 2 targets are adjectives with apophonic plural forms.

It is possible to see how singular agreement appears to be strongly connected with collective nouns (73,8% of the total targets depending on these controllers show singular agreement). In particular, half of the targets in the corpus that show M.SG. agreement depend on a collective controller (4 out of 8).¹⁵ These controllers, however, attract F.SG. agreement in the vast majority

15 The remaining four are occurrences of almost grammaticalized elements which tend to no longer show any type of agreement, namely the participles *bāgi* “remaining, left” and

of cases, to the point that the rare occurrences of M.SG. agreement should probably be regarded as occasional “slips of the tongue” on the part of the speaker, triggered by the fact that collectives are morphologically similar to masculine singular controllers (i.e. they show no outward sign of feminine or plural inflection).

Consider for instance the word *bill* or *ibil* “camels”, which almost systematically attracts F.SG. agreement (15 out of 17 targets), as in example (16), but which appears once triggering M.SG. agreement instead (example 17):

- 16) *al=bill* [...] *ahal=ha xallū=ha ta-srah*, “The camels [...] their owners let them graze”
 (lit. “the camels [...] family=their.F.SG let=them.F.SG F.SG-graze”; Kurpershoek 1993: 54)
- 17) *min hu=l=u ha=l=bill hāda?*, “Whose are these camels?”
 (lit. “who he=to=him these=the=camels this.M.SG”, Ingham 1986b: 64).

With regard to M.PL. agreement occurring with nonhuman collectives, this is normally triggered by these nouns being used metaphorically to refer to human beings. This appears to be particularly frequent in the case of the word *xēl* “horses”, which is normally employed to refer to the actual mounts, but can sometimes refer to the men who ride them (and is therefore better translated as “cavalry”). Compare for instance example (18), where *xēl* attracts F.SG. agreement (as it normally does, with 20 targets out of 37), with (19) below:

- 18) *xēl=i glayyl-ah w=šāḥḥ=in fī=ha*, “I only have a few horses and have to be sparing with them”
 (lit. “horses=my few-F.SG and=spare with=them.F.SG”; Kurpershoek 1993: 49)
- 19) *wu=hum yirdūn. yōm wrid-aw, al=xēl, gāl ...*, “And so they marched. As the horsemen rode, he said ...”
 (lit. “and they marched. When [they] had marched.M.PL, the horsemen, he said ...”; Kurpershoek 1993: 57).

wāǧid “many, a lot” (lit. “present, existing”). Apart from these exceptional elements, M.SG. agreement is never an option with proper plural controllers.

Even when clearly denoting human beings, however, *xēl* can still attract F.SG. agreement, thus showing once more the high degree of dependency that exists between F.SG. agreement and collectiveness (be it human or nonhuman).

All in all, as we have seen, targets depending on nonhuman collectives are largely the preserve of F.SG. agreement. F.PL. agreement is also possible, though rarer. As was the case with human collectives, an increase in distance between controller and target can sometimes prompt a variation in the agreement patterns of collective nouns. Consider for instance the behavior of *bill* in (20), where only the fourth and most distant pronoun shows F.PL. agreement instead of F.SG.:

- 20) *w=yāxd al=bill. xad=ah ma hu mn al=ma, xad=ah mn al=falāyh, ma maṣ=h alla r=riḥyān. w=yiḡī=k minčf=in bi=hin*, “He took the camels. He took them not from the wells, he took them from the desert pasture where they were attended only by the herdsmen. He drove them back home”
 (lit. “and he took the camels. He took=them.F.SG not he from the water, he took=them.F.SG from the desert, not with=them.F.SG but the herdsmen. And he came, returning from the raid with=them.F.PL”; Sowayan 1992: 130).

Quantification is another element which strongly favors plural agreement, especially when numerals below ten are involved. Consider for instance the behavior of the word *xēl* when accompanied by the numeral two:

- 21) *xēl-ih ma ḡār tintēn w-allah ma nīb āxd-in min=hin šī-n*, “The two of them are the only horses he has. By God, I am not going to take anything from him”
 (lit. “horses=his not but two and by God I am not going to take from=them.F.PL a thing”; Kurpershoek 1993: 50).

If we now turn to the remaining 81 nonhuman, non-collective plural controllers, we see that among the 127 related targets 4 attract M.SG. agreement (3,2%, these have already been discussed in note 15), 7 attract M.PL. agreement (5,5%), 62 attract F.SG. agreement (48,8%) and 52 F.PL. agreement (40,9%). The remaining 2 targets are adjectives with apophonic plural forms.

It is immediately evident that proper plurals favor F.PL. agreement much more than collectives do, and that F.SG. agreement is less common with this type of controllers. All in all, if we dismiss the few instances of M.PL. agreement

as the result of a metaphorical use of some nonhuman plural,¹⁶ we see that there are only two possible agreement options for this type of controllers: F.PL. or F.SG. (the latter being slightly favored). What are the reasons behind a speaker's opting for either one of these two forms?

Firstly, the question of word order has to be considered. I have already mentioned word order (see note 5 above) as one of the most important factors involved in determining the type of agreement which obtains, not only in Arabic, but crosslinguistically. Our Najdi data offer further evidence in support of this: of the 127 targets depending on nonhuman plural controllers we are presently considering, 28 precede their controller. Of these, 19 show F.SG. agreement, and only 7 F.PL. agreement. Conversely, among the targets which follow their controller, F.SG. and F.PL. agreement are more or less evenly distributed (43 and 45 occurrences each, respectively).

As we have seen, distance between target and controller (in terms of phonological words) is another crosslinguistically relevant factor. The likelihood of plural agreement with plural controllers increases with greater distance between the controller and target. Belnap (1991: 86) links this phenomenon to the notion of recoverability of information. Unfortunately, our dataset is too small to offer statistically significant evidence of this for each possible increase of lexical distance. However, it is possible to glimpse this trend by comparing the two groups of targets occurring after their controller at shorter distances (1 to 3 words) versus those occurring at longer distances (4 to 8 words).¹⁷ In the first group, 31 targets show F.SG. agreement and 27 show F.PL. agreement. In the second group, conversely, 12 targets show F.PL. agreement and only 3 show F.SG. agreement (in particular, no target at a distance of 6 or more words from its controller shows F.SG. agreement).

Finally, as already discussed (§ 2), in the literature on the topic of agreement (and agreement in Arabic in particular) references to the importance of individuation abound. In our texts it is possible to observe this as well. Note, for instance, how controllers referred to animals (two horses in the case of

16 Admittedly, a very few occurrences of M.PL. agreement with nonhuman controllers appear in the texts for which no explanation seems to be at hand. As noted above (§ 2.1), and as will be discussed below (§ 3.2), no gender-distinguishing variety of SA seems to be unaffected by this type of variation, which is probably to be regarded as an incipient process of morphological erosion.

17 16 targets appeared in the context of the few dialogical interactions contained in the corpus which referred back to a controller previously mentioned by a different speaker. These have been excluded from the present analysis.

example 22) always attract F.PL. agreement when the proper names of the animals are specified:

- 22) *ta-xayyar fi krūš w=rabda, šan=hin*, “I offer you either Krūš or Rabda, there they are”
 (lit. “you choose between krūš and rabda, there=they.F.PL”; Kurpershoek 1993: 50).

Obviously another factor influencing agreement in (22) might be quantification (i.e. the horses being referred to are just two). Quantification, as already seen, contributes to raise the level of individuation of the referent, as long as the quantifier is a numeral lower than ten (this is because the referents being few in number helps highlighting the singularity of each, while vast amounts of objects/individuals tend to be perceived as undifferentiated collectivities):

- 23) *ixd-I ha=l=xams [riyālāt] hādōli u=xall-ī=hin maš=ič*, “Take these five [riyāls] and keep them with you”
 (lit. “take these=five [riyāls] these.F.PL and keep=them.F.PL with=you”; Ingham 1994: 153).

In example (23) we also see physical prominence at work, since the speaker is obviously keeping the money in his hand at the moment of speaking. Note also how textual prominence (the activities referred to being in focus), combined with low quantification, positively affects the level of individuation of the controller even when this is represented by a chain of abstract concepts (example (24) is an excerpt from a dialogue in which two speakers are discussing which of two possible alternative activities is the best):

- 24) *ayyi=hin aḥsan? aḥsan tašat-k la=l=barr walla ḡayyat=k hnayya?*,
 “Which of them is best? Is it best to go out to the desert or to come here?”
 (lit. “which=them.F.PL best? best going=your to the desert or coming=your here?”; Ingham 1982: 118).

Otherwise, abstract controllers almost systematically appear to attract F.SG. agreement:

- 25) *hādi [...]* *umūr riyāliyy-ah u=ma l=ku fī=ha šalāqah*, “These [...] are manly matters and you have no connection with them”
 (lit. “these.F.SG [...] matters manly-F.SG and=not to=you in=them.F.SG relation”; Ingham 1994: 162)

- 26) *as-suwālif twīl-it=in ʕarīd-ih*, “Narratives are long and wide”
 (lit. “stories long-F.SG wide-F.SG”; Sowayan 1992: 86).

It has also to be kept in mind that text type can affect agreement to an extent. This was already referred to in § 3.1. When categories such as saliency are taken into consideration, it is obvious that a dialogue between two speakers talking about a number of objects which are presently visible to them will contain more perceptually salient controllers than a monological narrative about the deeds of long-dead Bedouin riders. Holes (2016: 334), commenting about agreement patterns in Bahraini Arabic (a non-distinguishing variety), makes a similar remark: “The likelihood of strict [i.e. plural] agreement is higher where the verb [...] describes an actual event, lower when it [...] describes habits or in unspecific terms what generally happens/used to happen”. In other words, the topic of the text, and therefore the type of text one considers, does have an impact on the overall chances of plural agreement. As we have seen, the vast majority of the material analyzed here is monological and narrative in nature. It is possible that the analysis of a corpus of texts of a different kind would yield higher percentages of F.PL. agreement. It has to be noted, however, that other studies, based on corpora of texts of a very different nature and belonging to different dialects, have all reached similar results. Bettega (2018) is based on data drawn from an Omani sit-com, where dialogical interaction is obviously the main speech type. Ritt-Benimoun (2016) deals with Bedouin dialects from Southern Tunisia, and is based on a heterogeneous collection of texts, which includes samples of unmonitored speech and elicited examples. A study by Bettega & Leitner on the Arabic dialects of Khuzestan, currently in preparation, relies on non-structured interviews dealing with a variety of topics, including folktales and discussions on the daily activities of the speakers. Despite these differences, all these studies point in the same direction: that F.PL. agreement is the norm whenever a nonhuman controller attracts plural agreement.

This is a point worth stressing: the scope of the present analysis is not to prove that plural agreement with nonhuman controllers is more common than singular agreement (although when the most prototypical type of target is considered, i.e. a non-collective target which follows its controller, it appears that plural agreement is at least as likely to occur as singular agreement is). The aim of my analysis is to provide *further* evidence of the fact that, in Najdi as well as in every other gender-distinguishing variety of SA, whenever plural agreement co-occurs with a nonhuman plural controller (be that collective or not), it is always *feminine* plural agreement, and not masculine.

I will now move on to discuss the implications that these considerations have on the way we describe and conceptualize gender and agreement in SA.

3.2 *How Many Genders?*

Up to this point, we have seen how, in all gender-distinguishing varieties of SA, nonhuman plural controllers systematically attract feminine (and not masculine) plural agreement. As far as I am aware, no variety of Arabic has ever been described in which gender distinction in the plural is retained and in which nonhuman plural controllers preferentially attract M.PL. agreement. In all likelihood, such a variety never existed.¹⁸

Two general exceptions exist to this rule. The first one is that, as we have seen, nonhuman plural controllers (and feminine human ones as well) can sometimes attract M.PL. instead of F.PL. agreement. It seems to me a consensus exists on this point, that this particular type of agreement is the result of contact with locally prestigious non-distinguishing varieties. All gender-distinguishing dialects seem to be affected by this influence, to a lesser or greater extent: the only possible exception is represented by those very few dialects that have not been in contact with other varieties of SA for a long time. This would seem to be the case of the Arabic dialect of Bukhara (according to what Blanc reports, see § 2.1 above), but more research is needed on this point since we do not have enough data concerning the status of agreement in these “peripheral” dialects.¹⁹ In general, however, this process of morphological erosion appears to be a common characteristic of SA, affecting all of its sub-varieties. In the most extreme cases, this has brought to the total disappearance of gender distinction in the plural, producing what I refer to as non-distinguishing varieties, and is now starting to affect the singular as well (in several dialects of the Maghreb, for instance, gender distinction is now lost in the second person singular of the verb and pronoun).

18 It has to be noted that in § 2.1 I only presented evidence drawn from studies dealing specifically with the topic of agreement. More evidence could be added by sieving through descriptive grammars of different varieties of Arabic (though information about agreement is not always as detailed as one might hope). In his grammar of Nigerian Arabic, for instance, Owens (1993: 50) makes an explicit connection between apophonic plurals not denoting human males and F.PL. agreement, and sparse remarks can be found linking non-human plurals in general and F.PL. agreement (see pp. 262, 264, 265). The same connection is apparently found in several Bedouin dialects of Sinai (De Jong 2011: 113, 192) and in Sanaani (Watson 1993: 213). Manfredi (2010: 227) notes how in Kordofanian Baggara Arabic plural nouns referring to animals take F.PL. agreement.

19 Also in the Khuzestani data gathered by Bettina Leitner of the University of Vienna (whom I thank for sharing this information with me), M.PL. agreement with nonhuman controllers appears to be very rare.

The second exception (of which we have seen plenty of examples in the Najdi data, and which will be addressed in more detail in § 3.2.1 below) is the possibility of F.S.G. agreement with plural controllers. It has to be kept in mind, however, that this option appears to cut across the category of humanness (in other words, it is a pattern which occurs with both human and non-human controllers, albeit more commonly with the latter). As we have seen, this agreement pattern seems to be connected with the referent’s low level of individuation.²⁰

If, then, we ignore the perturbation caused by the occasional substitution of F.PL. with M.PL. agreement, and if we set aside, for the moment, the possibility of F.S.G. agreement with plural controllers, the following scheme appears:

TABLE 1 Agreement with plural controllers in gender-distinguishing varieties

Type of controller	Agreement
Masculine human	Masculine plural
Others	Feminine plural

An important fact emerges from table 1, namely that both humanness and biological sex are relevant in determining the kind of agreement which a given plural controller will trigger. If we now add singular controllers to the picture, we obtain the following:

TABLE 2 Agreement with all types of controllers in gender-distinguishing varieties

Type of controller	Agreement
Masculine singular	Masculine singular
Feminine singular	Feminine singular
Masculine human plural	Masculine plural
Others	Feminine plural

20 Note that reference to F.S.G. agreement with human and nonhuman plural controllers can be found in all the works mentioned in § 2.1. It also appears to be a feature of Khuzestani Arabic.

As can be seen, table 2 is characterized by a strong asymmetry: humanness is a relevant factor in determining agreement in the case of plural controllers, but it plays no role in determining the type of agreement triggered by singular controllers. This asymmetry is the result, so to speak, of an optical illusion, in turn derived by the traditional classification of Arabic as a language with a binary gender system. This classification does actually stand to reason if one considers the morphological means that Arabic has at its disposal for marking gender. In other words, nominal and verbal morphology in Arabic are actually split into two sets of forms, conventionally labelled masculine and feminine (the same is true for personal pronouns and demonstratives). This is shown in table 3. The forms presented here are those typical of Najdi Arabic (as described by Ingham 1994: 23, 30), but this scheme is valid for almost all gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic (although the actual realization of the single morphemes can vary slightly):²¹

TABLE 3 Morphological markers of gender and number in Najdi Arabic

Nominal elements	Markers				Conventional definition
	Verbs (3rd persons only)		Pronouns		
	Prefix stem	Suffix stem	Independent	Suffix	
-∅	<i>ya-</i>	-∅	<i>hu</i>	<i>-ih</i>	masculine singular
<i>-a(t)</i>	<i>ta-</i>	<i>-at</i>	<i>hi</i>	<i>-ah</i>	feminine singular
<i>-īn</i>	<i>ya- ... -ūn</i>	<i>-aw</i>	<i>hum</i>	<i>-hum</i>	masculine plural
<i>-āt</i>	<i>ya- ... -in</i>	<i>-an</i>	<i>hin</i>	<i>-hin</i>	feminine plural

Note that, until now, I have employed the labels traditionally associated with the morphological markers typical of Arabic (i.e. masculine singular, masculine plural, and so on). Gender, however, is not simply a matter of morphology: to determine the number of genders in a given language, syntactic agreement has to be taken into consideration (for a concise discussion of the topic see Corbett 1991: 146 and Aikhenvald 2016: 14). In fact, if the array of morphological

21 Table 3 does not include the apophonic plurals of adjectives, which possess no overt gender distinction. In some dialects gender distinction in the plural can also be marked on demonstratives and, in rare cases, on certain grammaticalized prepositions. These have not been included in the table.

markers presented in table 3 seems to actually reflect a binary gender division, the syntactical distribution of the morphemes does not. On the basis of the type of agreement they attract, and irrespectively of what type of morphology they themselves display, nouns in gender-distinguishing varieties of SA can be grouped into three agreement classes.²² This is illustrated in table 4.

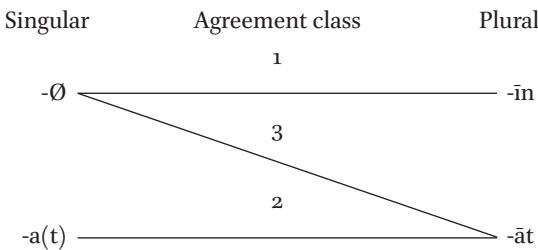
TABLE 4 Agreement classes in gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic

Class	Agreement in the singular	Agreement in the plural	Semantic fields
I	Masculine singular	Masculine plural	Biologically ^a masculine human beings
II	Feminine singular	Feminine plural	Biologically feminine human beings Nonhuman animates Inanimates
III	Masculine singular	Feminine plural	Nonhuman animates Inanimates

a The term “biologically” is here intended as opposed to “morphologically”, meaning that the biological sex of the real-world referent of a noun must not be confused with the type of agreement that noun triggers, or with the kind of morphology the noun itself displays.

This can be schematized as follows (in table 5 I have used as an example adjectival inflectional morphemes: they could be replaced with verbal inflectional morphemes or with pronouns, with identical results):

TABLE 5 Visual representation of agreement classes in gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic



22 For a definition of the concept of “agreement class”, and for a methodology for determining the number of agreement classes in a language, see Corbett (1991: 147–9).

I will now provide some examples for each class.²³ All the examples are taken by the Najdi texts analyzed in 3.1, but similar ones could be provided for any gender-distinguishing variety.

A typical example of a Class I noun is *raġġāl* “man”. Compare for instance example (27) with (1) above:

- 27) *raġġāl=in habb l=uh saṣad*, “A man in whose direction the wind of luck blew”
(lit. “a man blew to=him.M.SG the wind of luck”; Sowayan 1992: 86)

In (27) we see *raġġāl* triggering M.SG. agreement in the anaphoric pronoun, while in (1) the apophonic plural *rġāl* “men” triggers M.PL. agreement in the adjective which accompanies it.

Typical examples of Class II nouns are *hurma* “woman” and *bint* “girl”, the plurals of which we have seen triggering F.PL. agreement in examples (3) and (4) above. Compare those with (28) and (29):

- 28) *al=hurmah wāgf-ah*, “The woman had raised herself”
(lit. “the woman [was] standing-F.SG”; Kurpershoek 1993: 59)
- 29) *bint=ill=u mā māt-at illa grayyb*, “His daughter who only died recently”
(lit. “daughter=to=him not died-F.SG if not recently”, Ingham 1986: 82)

Consider also examples (30) and (31), where *nāga(t)* “she camel” and its (apophonic) plural *nyāg* attract F.SG. and F.PL. agreement respectively. These are exponents of the nonhuman members of Class II:

- 30) *an=nāgt alli ti-ġūz l=ak*, “The camel that strikes your fancy”
(lit. “the camel that F.SG-appeal to=you”; Sowayan 1992: 88)
- 31) *kill nyāg=ik [...] ma agbal=hin*, “All your camels [...] I would not accept them”
(lit. “all camels=your not accept=them.F.PL”; Sowayan 1992: 88).

23 The labels “Class I, II and III” are conventional, and could be replaced with, for instance, “Masculine, Feminine and Neuter”. Since a good deal of semantic overlapping exists, however, between Classes II and III, I prefer to stick to a more neutral terminology. From now on, I will use the labels “Masculine” and “Feminine” only to refer to the morphological markers themselves, as listed in table 3. I will use Agreement Class I, II and III to refer to the gender of controllers.

Finally, nouns such as *biṣīr* “male camel” (pl. *ibāṣīr*) and *bēt* “tent, house” (pl. *byūt*) are typical exponents of Class III. Compare (32) and (33), which are taken from Ingham’s own examples, and where the singular nouns attract M.SG agreement, with (34) and (35), which came from the Najdi texts I have analyzed in 3.2. Here the plural forms of these same nouns trigger F.PL. agreement:

- 32) *biṣīr=in ṣōd=in*, “A large male camel”
(lit. “a male camel large.M.SG; Ingham 1994: 50)
- 33) *bēt=ih kibīr*, “His house is large”
(lit. “house=his large.M.SG”; Ingham 1994: 37)
- 34) *ibāṣīr=na [...]* *tanhab=hin*, “Our camels [...] you take them”
(lit. “camels=our [...] you plunder=them.F.PL”; Sawayan 1992: 144)
- 35) *al=byūt mafrūš-āt*, “The tents were cleared of all grudges”
(lit. “the tents [were] cleared-F.PL”; Ingham 1982b: 253).

Far from being typologically unknown, such an agreement pattern is characteristic of a language whose gender system has been the source of much disagreement among scholars: Romanian. Corbett (1991: 150–53) solves the long-standing problem of the number of genders in Romanian by introducing a distinction between *controller gender* and *target gender*. Since three distinct agreement classes can be identified for Romanian, he claims, then three separate genders have to be recognized. However, it is not possible to claim that Romanian has three genders in the same way that, for instance, German or Tamil have three genders (where three distinct set of morphological markers exist for marking each one). Rather, it is possible to say that Romanian has three controller genders (that is, its nouns fall into three different agreement classes) but only two target genders (since there is no independent set of morphemes for marking class III). The same holds true for Najdi Arabic and, apparently, for all gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic.²⁴

Some typological considerations arise from the analysis I have proposed here: the first one is that the gender system of gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic is not a ‘purely’ formal one, but a mixed formal-semantic one. It has to be remembered that purely formal gender systems do not exist in natural

24 Attempts at describing the so-called Romanian neuters as nouns which have masculine gender when singular and feminine gender when plural had already been dismissed by Jakobson (1971: 188). See also note 3 above.

languages (by purely formal it is meant a system in which nouns are divided into two or more agreement classes on a phonological and/or morphological basis, with no connection whatsoever with their semantics; Corbett 1991: 33 ff.). Languages such as Italian or French, however, go a long way in the direction of pure formality, since in these languages every noun is assigned to one of two genders and, with the exception of human referents and some animal ones, this happens on a non-semantic basis. This is not the case for gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic, where members of Class I are identified on purely semantic grounds (biologically masculine human entities²⁵), and members of Classes II and III are identified on mixed formal/semantic grounds (nouns belonging to Class II can refer to biologically feminine human entities or nonhuman ones; nouns belonging to Class III are exclusively nonhuman).

This brings us to a second consideration, namely how do speakers know to which agreement class each noun belongs? We can say that controller gender is only partially overt in the dialects in question, since all nouns ending in *-a(t)* in the singular belong to Class II, but the remaining ones are distributed between classes I and III on mostly semantic grounds (plural nouns ending in *-īn* belong to Class I with virtually no exception; however, there is no formal way of determining if an apophonic plural will fall into Class I or III). In other words, the morphology of a noun is not, by itself, sufficient to determine to which agreement class it belongs.²⁶

So far, the description of the agreement system of gender-distinguishing varieties of SA appears relatively straightforward: however, a number of factors contribute to enhance its overall complexity. These factors have all been cursorily addressed above, and in particular they are: (a) the question of F.SG. agreement with plural controllers, (b) the question of adjectival apophonic plurals, (c) the occasional substitution of F.PL. forms with M.PL. ones, and (d) the effects of word order on agreement. Due to space constraints, I will not provide an in-depth analysis of factors (b) to (d) here, and I will limit myself to a discussion of (a).

25 Though occasional exceptions can occur in the case of higher animals. This is not typological uncommon (see e.g. Corbett 1991: 10 on Kannada).

26 Exceptions can be found even for Class II: an extremely small number of nouns exist which show an *-a(t)* ending in the singular but that still belong to Class I, such as *xalīfā* “caliph” or *nābiġa* “genius”. More numerous (though still not abundant) are those words which belong to Class II despite the fact that they do not show the ‘feminine’ ending *-a(t)*. These include both terms referring to biologically feminine human beings (such as *imm* “mother” or *ṣarūs* “bride”) and words denoting nonhuman entities (*šams* “sun”, *riĥ* “wind”, *īd* “hand” and so forth; see Procházka 2004 for an excellent treatment of the subject).

3.2.1 A Further Element of Complexity: Feminine Singular Agreement with Plural Controllers

As we have seen, it appears that in every gender-distinguishing dialect F.SG. agreement is an agreement option for plural nouns, although its frequency of use may vary. It would also appear that this type of agreement cuts across boundaries of gender and humanness. F.SG. agreement has been shown, over and over again in several varieties of Arabic, both gender-distinguishing and non, to be connected with low levels of individuation on the part of the referent. Our Najdi data appear to confirm this: incidence of F.SG. agreement is almost zero with non-collective human referents, relatively low with human collectives, higher with non-collective nonhuman referents, and very high with nonhuman collectives.²⁷

I would therefore deem it safe to posit that F.SG. agreement does not represent a separate agreement class, in the way Classes I, II and III do. Rather, it represents an alternative option for plural agreement, available to nouns belonging to all three classes—provided certain conditions obtain. This can be schematized as follows, by partial modification of table 4:

TABLE 6 Agreement in gender-distinguishing varieties of Arabic

Class	Agreement in the singular	Agreement in the plural		Semantic fields
		Individuated nouns	Non-individuated nouns	
I	Masculine singular	Masculine plural		Biologically masculine human beings
II	Feminine singular	Feminine plural	Feminine singular	Biologically feminine human beings Nonhuman animates Inanimates
III	Masculine singular	Feminine plural		Nonhuman animates Inanimates

²⁷ This type of distribution finds a parallel in the Animacy Hierarchy as discussed by typologists such as Corbett and Comrie. Compare it for instance with the somehow simplified schematization of the Hierarchy offered by Enger, Nessel (2011: 194): Human > Animals > Inanimate tangible objects > Abstractions and masses.

Obviously, table 6 is a simplistic schematization of a far more complex phenomenon. Individuation, as we have seen, is a loose definition for what is actually a bundle of interacting and overlapping factors (factors which include, among others, the semantics of the controller, so that members of Class I, for instance, have significantly lower chances of attracting F.SG. agreement than members of Class III). It is also true that different dialects seem to employ F.SG. agreement with different degrees of frequency, so that the scheme presented above would have to be adapted on a case-by-case basis in order to capture individual idiosyncrasies. However, it seems to me that it constitutes a good representation of the basic structure of the agreement systems in gender-distinguishing varieties of SA.

All of this leaves open a final question: what about non-distinguishing dialects? How many agreement classes can be recognized in that context? Does a schematization such as the one proposed above provide an adequate description of the agreement systems of these varieties?

A straightforward answer would seem to be “no”. The collapsing of the two morphological sets of the plural into a single, genderless set of forms makes our schematization useless when dealing with these dialects. One might be further lead to think that such a breakdown causes a decrease in the overall level of complexity of these dialects’ agreement system (when compared to gender-distinguishing ones). This may actually be the case for those varieties that make little or no use of F.SG. agreement. However, dialects in which F.SG. agreement has become almost generalized with inanimate controllers (as appears to be the case in Cairene, see Belnap 1991) present a more complex situation, since in the case of such varieties it is hard to maintain that F.SG. agreement represents a “deviation” from the otherwise prototypical plural agreement. It follows that at least two agreement patterns should be recognized for plural controllers (common plural and feminine singular), the main dividing factor being humanness or animacy. Cross-referenced with singular agreement patterns, this would again give rise to a rather complex set of possible combinations. Although this is undoubtedly a fascinating line of research, it is one that will have to be pursued in another paper.

4 Conclusions

In the course of this paper, I have tried to show how a rethinking of the way we conceptualize gender and agreement in Arabic is in order, if we hope to fully understand these categories in terms of their synchronic description.

In § 2, I have showed how number, rather than gender, came to be the main variable in focus in studies on agreement in SA. This depended mainly on the fact that these studies were almost exclusively focused on dialects with no gender distinction in the plural, though obviously the conceptual influence of MSA (where nonhuman controllers are precluded from any type of plural agreement) might have been another factor at play.

In § 2.1 I have summarized what is currently known about agreement in gender distinguishing varieties of Arabic. When such varieties are taken in consideration, it becomes clear that nonhuman plural controllers are systematically associated with feminine (and not masculine) plural agreement. No dialect has ever been described where this rule does not apply. Thus, as I have argued in § 3.2, the gender system of these varieties is better described as a tripartite one, in which three controller genders exist (though only two target genders are present, i.e. the third controller gender is not marked by an independent set of morphemes). I have labelled these three agreement classes Class I, II and III.

Nouns that belong to Class I are semantically circumscribed to masculine human referents: they attract M.SG. agreement in the singular, and M.PL. agreement in the plural. Class II encompasses all feminine human referents, though it includes many nonhuman ones: its members trigger F.SG. agreement in the singular, and F.PL. agreement in the plural. Class III is restricted to non-human referents (both animate and inanimate): members of this class attract M.SG. agreement in the singular and F.PL. agreement in the plural.

All three classes can, with various degree of probability, also attract F.SG. agreement in the plural when the level of individuation of the referent is low. This is particularly true of collective nouns. The ability to attract F.SG. agreement in the plural cuts across the categories of humanness and animacy and is not to be regarded as a separate agreement class.

Obviously, a number of questions remain open, regarding in particular the diachronic evolution of agreement in Arabic. Does the system described in this article represent an innovation, or is it to be thought of as an archaic trait?²⁸ When and why, conversely, did non-distinguishing varieties of Arabic

28 It is worth noting that the oldest Arabic texts that have been passed down to us (i.e. the pre-Islamic poetic corpus and the Quran) show an agreement system extremely similar to that described above for gender-distinguishing varieties of SA (Belnap, Shabaneh 1992, D'Anna forth.). This means that these agreement patterns were present in at least some varieties of Arabic in the 7th century. Taken together with the fact that we find similar patterns literally all over the Arabic-speaking world, from Tunisia through Southern Arabia to Uzbekistan, this would seem to suggest that—rather than being an innovation—this syntactical feature represents a relatively old shared retention.

first emerged? Finding an answer to these questions might provide us with precious insights on the history of the Arabic languages, and, therefore, it represents a fascinating topic for future research.

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