

# Agreement patterns in Omani Arabic: Sociolinguistic conditioning and diachronic developments

*Simone Bettega*

## Abstract

This article treats the sociolinguistic factors, which play a role in determining agreement variation in Omani Arabic. Though the prescriptive rules of Standard Arabic are found to have an influence, this is by no means the only factor at play, and the type of variation observed in the data is (also) motivated by language-internal dynamics. The influence of more prestigious spoken varieties is also found to have a role in determining agreement. In the concluding paragraph, some insights are offered on how these factors could help in reconstructing the historical development of agreement patterns in Arabic.

KEYWORDS: OMANI ARABIC, GULF ARABIC, AGREEMENT, DIACHRONIC MORPHOSYNTAX

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## Affiliation

University of Torino, Italy  
email: bet.simo@hotmail.it

## 1 Introduction

This article deals with two largely under-researched topics: the first one is Omani Arabic, a dialect (or, more precisely, a bundle of dialects) which, up to this day, has received limited attention from scholars.<sup>1</sup> The second topic addressed here is agreement in Arabic, in particular the kind of agreement triggered by plural controllers.<sup>2</sup> A promising line of research concerning agreement in Arabic was introduced by Charles Ferguson in his famous 1989 article, intended as a response to Versteegh's Pidginization Hypothesis (see Versteegh, 1984). It is in this work that Ferguson introduced the two labels 'strict' and 'deflected' agreement, which will be also employed in the course of this paper.<sup>3</sup> In Ferguson's (1989:9) own words, in the case of strict agreement 'some category that is overtly or inherently present in the "controller" (subject or head-noun) is copied in the "target" (verb, noun-modifier)'. On the contrary, we have deflected agreement when 'a plural controller is associated with a feminine singular target'. Ferguson's hypotheses on the evolution of the Arabic agreement system through time were later elaborated on and expanded by one of his students, Kirk Belnap, in a series of works (Belnap, 1991, 1993; Belnap and Shabaneh, 1992; Belnap and Gee, 1994) in which the author(s) focused mainly on Cairene Arabic and Classical/Standard Arabic. Since then, however, little research has been carried out on the agreement systems of other varieties of Arabic, and a thorough comparative study on the subject based on cross dialectal data is still missing (although some reflections on the topic appear in Brustad, 2000). The present paper is intended as a first step in that direction: in particular, the data presented in the next paragraphs is of particular comparative interest since it concerns a dialect which, unlike many of the more well-known Arabic varieties, still retains gender distinction in the plural forms of the adjective, verb and pronoun.<sup>4</sup> Although the focus of the present paper is agreement patterns in Omani Arabic, parallels will be drawn between this and other varieties based on the available data, in particular Cairene Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and early varieties of written Arabic. In the concluding paragraph, the possible implications of these comparisons will be discussed and evaluated. Although a general overview of the main characteristics of agreement in Omani Arabic will be presented, this article is specifically concerned with the possible influence of sociolinguistic factors on agreement in Arabic dialects, and the role these might have played in its evolution over time. For a more thorough treatment of the typological characteristics of agreement patterns in Omani Arabic, see Bettega (2017).

## 2 The data

The present study is based on the analysis of audio material drawn from the popular Omani TV show *Yōm u-yōm* (يوم ويوم). *Yōm u-yōm* is a computer animated sitcom which revolves around the daily lives of a number of characters, each speaking a different variety of Omani Arabic (see Holes, 1989, for a discussion of the dialect geography of Oman). The fact that different dialects are used in the show is of little concern to us here, since retention of gender distinction in the plural is a feature common to all varieties of Omani Arabic (and analysis of the data showed that the relative percentage of targets bearing strict/deflected agreement was similar in the speech of all characters).<sup>5</sup> However, some characters do occasionally appear in the show who are not speakers of Omani Arabic: these have not been considered for the purpose of the present research. Likewise, the rare occasions in which one of the characters switched from Omani to plain Standard Arabic (when reading aloud a written text, for instance, or speaking in a very formal context) were excluded from the database. The sample on which this study is based consists of 25 episodes from *Yōm u-yōm*'s second season (aired during the month of Ramadan in 2012). Each episode lasts between ten and fifteen minutes, thus giving a total of around five hours of audio material. Analysis of said material yielded a corpus of 181 plural controllers, with 270 corresponding targets. It is important to note that in this kind of text type the most pronounced localisms are likely to be eschewed in favour of more standard/regionally koinic forms. This is a fact that, as we will see, is likely to have an impact on the kind of agreement which obtains in a given context, although its role might have been overestimated in previous literature. Lexical conditioning on agreement will be the topic of the next paragraph.

## 3 Lexical conditioning as the basis for agreement variation in spoken Arabic

As we have seen, studies dealing with the topic of agreement patterns in spoken Arabic are few. In particular, almost no study on agreement exists which focuses on a dialect where gender distinction in the plural is still existent (but see n. 4). One partial exception is represented by Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987): in this article, the two scholars analyse the way lexical conditioning influences agreement with nonhuman referents in a rural dialect of northern Jordan. Northern Jordanian Arabic, they claim, has two basic types of agreement systems for plural nonhuman referents: feminine singular (i.e. deflected) agreement, and feminine plural (i.e. strict) agreement. This, as we will see, is the case for Omani Arabic as well. So, what causes variation between these two possible agreement patterns?

Upon examination of their data, Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987:708) conclude that ‘the sets of words triggering one agreement pattern or the other are lexically distinct: f. sg. is by and large associated with nouns of S[tandard] A[arabic] provenance, f. pl. with Col[loquial Arabic]’. Although their analysis appears solid on a general level, the two authors themselves admit that some inconsistencies appear within their data. This is most prominently the case with morphologically ‘broken’<sup>6</sup> plural forms (especially Colloquial ones), which appear to optionally trigger feminine singular or feminine plural agreement (Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:712, 719, 725). Sound plurals, on the contrary, tend to behave more regularly: Standard ones almost systematically trigger feminine singular agreement, while Colloquial ones are almost systematically associated with feminine plural agreement. Exceptions, however, exist for this category as well (Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:712, 718–719, 721, 735 n. 18).<sup>7</sup> The two authors offer no explanation as to the possible motivation behind such discrepancies and, although noting a similar variation for some broken *human* controllers in their corpus, they refrain from addressing the issue (Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:733 n. 7). If we try a categorization similar to that of Owens and Bani-Yasin for the nonhuman controllers in our data, we obtain the results shown in Table 1. It is important to note that Owens and Bani-Yasin classified as Standard any item which contained *at least one* Standard feature; in Table 1, on the contrary, we have kept purely Standard and purely Colloquial items separated from those elements which are characterized by an admixture of Standard and Colloquial features. This was done in order to circumvent the problem of what Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987:726) termed ‘borderline’ items, that is, items which are either originally Standard, but have now become widespread in everyday speech, or that have identical forms in both Standard and Colloquial Arabic.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1.** Nonhuman plural controllers and lexical conditioning.

<b>Targets</b>	<b>Showing deflected agreement</b>	<b>Showing strict agreement</b>
Targets depending on a Standard controller	42 (97.7%)	1 (2.3%)
Targets depending on a mixed (Standard + Colloquial) controller	54 (74%)	19 (26%)
Targets depending on a Colloquial controller	45 (47.4%)	50 (52.6%)
Total targets	141	70

As can be seen from the table, a connection seems to exist between the lexical nature of the controller and the kind of agreement which obtains: the more Standard the controller, the more likely deflected agreement is to occur. In particular, deflected agreement with purely Standard controllers appears to be almost categorical.<sup>9</sup> A considerable amount of variation is found, however, in the kind of agreement triggered by purely Colloquial and by ‘hybrid’ Standard/ Colloquial controllers. A good example of this variation is represented by (1) and (2) below, where the morphologically plural and purely Colloquial controller *aġrāz*, ‘stuff, things’, triggers first deflected and then strict agreement (note that the two examples are drawn from the speech of the same character):

(1)

*rūḥ*    *u-ana*                      *ba-rsil-l-ak*                      *mēsāg*  
 go    CONJ=PRON.1SG    FUT.1SG-send=PREP=PRON.2SG.M    message  
*bi-l-aġrāz*                      *illi*                      *n-aḥtāg-ha*  
 PREP=ART=**stuff**    rel                      PRES.1PL-need=**PRON.3SG.F**  
 ‘Go, and I will send you a message with the **stuff** that we need (**it**)’

(2)

*ana*                      *bāġy-a*                      *a-naqq*                      *u-a-xtār*  
 PRON.1SG    want.PART-SG.F                      PRES.1SG-pick    CONJ=PRES.1SG-choose  
*l-aġrāz*                      *bi-nafs-ī*                      *yaʕnī*                      *t-waddī-nī*  
 ART=**stuff**    PREP=self-PRON.1SG    INTERJ                      PRES.2SG.M-bring=PRON.1SG  
*maʕā-ak*                      *u-a-štrī-hən*  
 PREP=PRON.2SG.M    CONJ=PRES.1SG-buy=**PRON.3PL.F**  
 ‘I want to pick and choose the **things** by myself, I mean, bring me with you and I will buy **them**’

It would seem that lexical conditioning is here interfering with other factors inducing variation in agreement patterns: therefore, Owens’ and Bani-Yasin’s (1987:731) claim that ‘were these [i.e. Standard] nouns suddenly removed from the language it is most likely that the SA agreement rule itself would disappear’ seems hardly tenable. In particular, the definition ‘SA agreement rule’ is inappropriate: deflected agreement with nonhuman plural controllers appears to be an inherent feature of the grammar of the Colloquial variety (in this case, Omani Arabic) as well as of the Standard one, the difference between the two being that in the latter the rule is (allegedly) categorical, while in the former it is not (on this point, see also n. 16).

Up to this moment, we have seen how lexical conditioning does actually play a role in determining agreement, though this is by no means the only factor at play. Ritt-Benmimoun (2016:280–281) comes to similar conclusions. Belnap's (1993) study of agreement in Cairene Arabic investigated other possible phenomena inducing variation. To an analysis of his work we shall presently turn.

#### 4 Some remarks on controller- and target-related factors influencing agreement

In his thorough investigation of agreement variation in Cairene Arabic, Belnap (1993) analysed a number of factors which he deemed capable of influencing agreement patterns. Belnap employed a variable rule program to hierarchically rank these factors with respect to their ability to affect agreement. In the course of this paragraph, we will focus on the two factors which Belnap found to have the greatest effect on the kind of agreement which obtains (respectively, controller type and distance between target and controller). We will then have a quick look at two other factors, specificity and concreteness (for a more detailed analysis of the role of these and other factors in Omani Arabic, see Bettega, 2017). We will begin with the first of these factors: controller type is here defined as the combination of two characteristics: animacy (that is, humanness or nonhumanness)<sup>10</sup> of the controller and the morphological nature of the plural (broken or sound). In our data, the analysis of agreement variation in relation to the controller type yielded the results shown in Table 2:<sup>11</sup>

**Table 2.** Controller type and agreement.

Targets	Deflected Agreement	Strict Agreement	Total
Targets depending on nonhuman broken controllers	57 (68.7%)	26 (31.3%)	83
Targets depending on nonhuman sound controllers	45 (68.2%)	21 (31.8%)	66
Targets depending on the collective <i>nās</i>	5 (31.3%)	11 (68.7%)	16
Targets depending on human broken controllers	1 (2%)	48 (98%)	49
Targets depending on human sound controllers	0 (0%)	16 (100%)	16

As can be seen from the table, strict agreement is almost categorical with human controllers – examples (3) and (4) – although one example can be found of a human broken plural attracting deflected agreement (5):

(3)

*lā-wlād ha-l-yōm-ēn mṭabbg-īn wuyūh-hum*  
 ART=**kid.PL** DEM=ART=day-DUAL stick.AP-**PL.M** face.PL=**PRON.3PL.M**  
*fi-l-āybād*  
 PREP=ART=ipad

‘**Kids** these days, they keep **their** faces **stuck** to the i-pad’ (lit. ‘they are **sticking their** faces’)

(4)

*bnāt ha-l-yōm-ēn maḥḥad yi-ṣarāf əl-ḥīn ēš*  
**girl.PL** DEM=ART=day-DUAL nobody PRES.3SG.M-know now what  
*yi-bā-n*  
 PRES.3-want.**3PL.F**

‘**Girls** these days, nobody knows what **they** want now’

(5)

*əl-awādām illi māttaxar-a ṣalā d-dwām*  
 ART=**persons** REL be.late.PART-**SG.F** PREP ART=work

‘The **people** who [**are**] **late** for work’ (lit. ‘who [**is**] late for work’)

Nonhuman controllers, on the other hand, show no such well-defined tendency: around one third of all targets depending on nonhuman controllers (either broken or sound) show strict agreement. The collective *nās* ‘people’, appears to pattern in between these two extremes, with a predilection for strict agreement. In the following examples we see two non-human controllers triggering deflected (6) and strict (7) agreement, followed by an occurrence of *nās* triggering deflected agreement (8):

(6)

*ayyām-ak ṣār-at maṣdūd-a*  
**day.PL**=PRON.2SG.M become-PAST.3SG.F numbered-**SG.F**

‘Your days are numbered’

(7)

*əs-suwār-āt illi štarē-tī-ḥən min-ni*  
 ART=**bracelet-PL.F** REL buy-PAST.2SG.F=**PRON.3PL.F** PREP=PRON.1SG

‘The **bracelets** that you bought (**them**) from me’

(8)

*šūf*                      *in-nās*                      *kēf*                      *ba-t-gī*  
 see.IMP.2SG.M      ART=**people**              how                      FUT=**3SG.F-come**  
 ‘Wait and see, **people** will **come**’ (lit. ‘see the **people**, how [they] will **come**!’)

Our results are comparable with Belnap’s (1993:101), with two important differences: first, the percentage of human broken controllers triggering deflected agreement in Belnap’s corpus was significantly higher (24 out of 149, that is, 16%). Second, the percentage of nonhuman controllers triggering strict agreement in his corpus was significantly lower (13 out of 140, or 9%, for targets depending on sound controllers, and 17 out of 208, or 8%, for targets depending on broken controllers). These discrepancies will be discussed in the concluding paragraph of the present paper. For the moment, the kind of variation in the agreement patterns associated with nonhuman controllers in our data still remains to be accounted for. As we have seen, Belnap found distance between target and controller to be the second factor influencing agreement in terms of strength of effect. If we run a comparable analysis on our data, we obtain the results shown in Table 3 (distance is expressed in terms of phonological words from target to controller; negative numbers indicate a target occurring before its controller):<sup>12</sup>

**Table 3.** Distance between target and controller (all controller types).<sup>13</sup>

Distance from controller	Total targets	Targets showing neutralized /deflected agreement
-2 or -3	11	6 (54.5%)
-1	35	22 (62.9%)
1	67	52 (76.1%)
2	48	18 (37.5%)
3 or 4	38	13 (34.2%)
5, 6 or 7	32	5 (15.6%)
Between 8 and 31	27	3 (11.1%)

As can be seen, there is an almost categorical rule connecting the kind of agreement which obtains to the distance between a controller and the targets preceding or following it: the further the target, the less likely it is to bear deflected agreement (with the targets preceding their head at a distance of two or more words having a much higher probability of attracting deflected or neutralized agreement than those following it). Consider for instance example (9), where mixed agreement occurs in two different targets depending on the same controller:



(9)

*lā-mḥawwal-āt*                      *māṭghayyar-a*                      *fōq taḥt*                      *u-mā šād*  
 ART=telephone.extension-**PL.F** change.PART-**SG.F** up down                      CONJ=NEG yet  
*ḥafiz-na-hin*

memorize-PAST.1PL=**PRON.3PL.F**

‘The **telephone extensions have changed** (lit. ‘has changed’) completely and we haven’t memorized **them** yet’

In examples (1) and (2) above, as well, distance between target and controller seems to have a role in triggering deflected agreement in one case, and strict agreement in the other. Agreement is, then, influenced by the relative distance between target and controller. But is this the only factor prompting the kind of variation we observe in the case of nonhuman controllers?

In her study of the syntax of spoken Arabic, Brustad (2000:22–25) builds on Khan’s (1984) idea that certain grammatical features can affect the syntactic behaviour of nouns, moving them backward or forward along an ‘individuation continuum’ and thus affecting the range of syntactic markers those nouns can attract. Due to space constraints, we are limited here to the analysis of two such features, namely concreteness and specificity.<sup>14</sup> These two categories are not easily associated with any explicit formal marker, and, in the case of specificity, not easily described in terms of a binary opposition. We loosely define specificity as ‘the extent to which the speaker has a specific entity in mind’, along with Brustad (2000:24). We followed Belnap’s (1991:76) lead in coding each head of the corpus as either specific, non-specific or unclear.<sup>15</sup> This categorization must, of course, be regarded as tentative, and a more in-depth study is needed on this point: however, in most cases the context of the utterance made it possible to determine with reasonable accuracy whether the speaker had a specific referent in mind or not. Concreteness, on the other hand, was strictly defined as the inherent property of the head noun to refer to a tangible, material entity.<sup>16</sup> The results of the statistical analysis we ran for each of these two categories are shown in Tables 4 and 5:<sup>17</sup>

**Table 4.** Concreteness and agreement (nonhuman controllers only).

	<b>Out of 82 controllers attracting deflected agreement</b>	<b>Out of 45 controllers attracting strict agreement</b>
Inherently concrete controllers	34 (41.5%)	32 (71.1%)

**Table 5.** Specificity and agreement (nonhuman controllers only).

	<b>Out of 80 controllers attracting deflected agreement</b>	<b>Out of 43 controllers attracting strict agreement</b>
Inherently specific controllers	22 (32.5%)	23 (53.5%)

As can be seen from the tables, inherently specific controllers have 21% more chance of triggering strict agreement, and concrete heads have 29.6% more chance than abstract ones of attracting plural agreement. A relation seems to exist between specificity/concreteness and agreement, although not as statistically relevant as that connected to other factors, such as head type and distance. Obviously, more studies are needed on this point, involving a bigger sample as well as different text types: it has to be noted, however, that Belnap's (1991:77, 81) analysis of the same variables in Cairene Arabic yielded comparable results. In examples (10) and (11), we see two occurrences of the word *ašyā* 'things', triggering different types of agreement. Note that, in (10), the reference is to a list of very specific items (a lamp, an air conditioner and a washing machine) which are broken and which the speaker is asking her husband to fix. In (11), conversely, the speaker is referring to the food he is supposed to offer to the people gathered in his house for a funeral. Here the reference is generic, concerning the traditional dishes that are customary for the host to offer his guest on such an occasion.<sup>18</sup>

(10)

*ašyā*                                      *hāḍḗla*                                      *muxtarb-ūt*  
**thing.PL**                                      **DEM.PL**                                      broken-**PL.F**

'These things [are] broken'

(11)

*min*   *wēn*   *a-yīb*                      *lā-flūs*                      *ḥal*                      *ha-l-ašyā*  
 PREP where   PRES.1SG-take   ART=money   PREP   DEM=ART=**thing.PL**

*kəll-ha*

all=**PRON.3SG.F**

'From where do I take the money for all those things?'

In this paragraph, we have seen how certain factors inherently tied to the morphological, semantic and pragmatic status of the controller, as well as its relative position with respect to the target(s), can affect agreement type in Omani Arabic. Some references have been made to Cairene Arabic as well. Before moving on to a discussion of the phenomena hitherto analysed, however, we will have to address briefly the question of agreement patterns in written varieties of Arabic.

## 5 Agreement in MSA and early varieties of written Arabic

As far as prescriptive grammars are concerned, the MSA agreement system is quite straightforward, with singular, dual or plural nouns taking singular, dual or plural agreement respectively (masculine or feminine, depending on their inherent gender).<sup>19</sup> The main exception to this rule is represented by nonhuman plural heads: regardless of their inherent gender, nonhuman plural heads always take feminine singular (i.e. deflected) agreement. Predictably enough, when one turns to the actual use of language, violations of the norm are easily found. In their comprehensive grammar of MSA, Badawi, Carter and Gully (2004:102–109, 352–358) note how inconsistencies in the application of agreement rules are relatively common, especially when collective nouns are considered,<sup>20</sup> or nouns accompanied by qualifiers such as *all*, *many*, *some* and *few*. The three authors, however, stop short of providing an explanation for this kind of variation. A more thorough analysis of the question is found in Belnap and Shabaneh (1992): in this article, the two scholars examine variation of agreement patterns with nonhuman controllers in a corpus of 90,000 words made up of texts from different historical periods and of varying types. The corpus was expanded in a subsequent article (Belnap and Gee, 1994), in order for it to include more samples of pre- and early Islamic poetry and prose.<sup>21</sup> Upon analysis of this material, the two authors come to the conclusion that ‘the pre-modern materials in the corpus [...] show considerable variation. There is much more broken and feminine plural agreement with nonhuman controllers in the earliest sample, pre-Islamic poetry, than in the later works, medieval and modern’ (Belnap and Shabaneh, 1992:255). This would seem to confirm Beeston’s observation that ‘the use of the feminine singular concord with “irrational” substantives is a neologism in Arabic which only gradually won its way to becoming the norm’ (Beeston, 1975:65–66, quoted in Belnap and Shabaneh, 1992:255). These conclusions, of course, raise a number of questions: for instance, what prompted this kind of linguistic change, and why is it that the same type of variation that we find in the earliest samples of written Arabic appears in many modern vernaculars? These issues will be addressed in the concluding paragraph of this work.

## 6 Discussion

Belnap (1993:116) concludes his article on agreement patterns in Cairene Arabic by noting how ‘the agreement system of Cairene (and other dialects) is far richer than that of its standardized cousin, MSA’. He also remarks how comparison between his Cairene data and his and Shabaneh’s study on agreement in early written texts suggests that ‘it is not the spoken language which underwent drastic

changes but the written'. In this paper, we have provided further evidence that many modern Arabic dialects do in fact possess a more complex agreement system than that of MSA, a system that bears striking similarities with the one which characterized pre- and early Islamic prose and poetry. In this respect, the agreement system of Omani Arabic resembles that of archaic Arabic texts even more than the one in use in Cairene, and this is because, as we have seen, all Omani varieties retain gender distinction in the plural (a distinction which has, conversely, been lost in Cairene, as well as in many of the major dialects of North Africa and the Levant). This might be a point worth expanding. In a previous section of the present article, we have seen how our Omani data showed a more marked tendency for strict agreement to occur with nonhuman controllers (around 31%) than Belnap's data on Cairene did (between 8% and 9%). The reason for this discrepancy is unclear, but it is certainly not the result of standardization.<sup>22</sup> One possible explanation could actually reside in the loss of gender distinction in the plural. If we can postulate that dialects such as Cairene have evolved from varieties which have, at some point in the past, lost gender distinction in the plural (with the morphological markers that once denoted masculine gender becoming genderless markers of mere plurality), then this would imply a shift from a system where both singular and plural markers of feminine gender were employed to refer to a plurality of entities characterized by low or zero animacy, to one where one of these two options (i.e. feminine plural) was lost. This loss would have produced a major rearrangement of the agreement system, with three possible outcomes: 1) the same kind of variation between singular and plural agreement persisted, with masculine plural morphemes taking up the role of feminine plural ones; 2) oscillation between feminine singular and feminine plural agreement with nonhuman controllers collapsed into non-optional feminine singular agreement; and 3) oscillation between feminine singular and feminine plural agreement with nonhuman controllers collapsed into non-optional masculine plural agreement (now the only option for *all* kinds of plural agreement).<sup>23</sup> These three extremes are, of course, theoretical abstractions: however, it is interesting to note how many modern dialects have at least a *tendency* towards one of these extremes. In Cairene, as we have seen, agreement with nonhuman controllers is largely the preserve of feminine singular morphology, and the same appears to hold true for Damascus Arabic (Cowell, 1964; however, no statistical data is available for Damascene). In Moroccan, conversely, 'there are a few rare cases of inanimate plural nouns taking feminine singular agreement [...]. Only isolated idioms and stereotyped phrases require this type of agreement' which, at any rate, is normally 'interchangeable with regular plural agreement' (Harrell, 2004:158).<sup>24</sup> It would seem, then, that Cairene and Damascene Arabic have moved towards a

type 2 system, while Moroccan has moved towards a type 3 system. However, in all these dialects variation is still present to a greater or lesser degree (type 1). Omani Arabic is idiosyncratic in that it shows no such marked tendency, since in this dialect gender distinction in the plural is still operative. This is not to say, of course, that agreement patterns in Omani Arabic have not changed through time, although it is unlikely that we will ever be able to measure the extent of such change. In this respect, however, a comparison with Gulf Arabic may be of particular interest. The case of Gulf Arabic is remarkable because the loss of gender distinction in the plural in this dialect can be dated with precision (and, as it turns out, it represents a relatively recent innovation). The kind of Arabic spoken today on the shores of the Arabian Peninsula, from Kuwait to the United Arab Emirates, was ‘imported’ into the area between two and three centuries ago as the result of a migratory process which brought Najdi (i.e. Central Arabian) nomads to settle along the coasts of the Gulf. Ingham (1982:33) has noted how comparison of the dialects of inner Arabia with those of the Gulf littoral reveals that the latter ‘have reduced a number of contrasts still extant in the dialects of the interior’ (including gender distinction in the plural). It would seem that, as a consequence of this process of morphological simplification, the agreement system of Gulf Arabic is now in a state of flux. Holes (1990:155–156) writes that the gender of plural nouns is ‘a complex issue, and is subject to much individual and communal variation’. He reports four possible systems for marking agreement with plural controllers in the dialects of the Gulf Area, noting however that speakers tend to vary between two or more of these systems in an apparently random fashion (in light of this comment, Brustad has correctly questioned the possibility of referring to them as ‘systems’; see Brustad, 2000:53). In a more recent work, Holes (2016:326–353) has provided a detailed account of agreement variation in Bahraini varieties. Unfortunately, no study is available at present which compares agreement patterns in dialects which lost gender distinction in the plural a long time ago (such as Cairene or Damascene), dialects which have lost it only recently (such as Gulf Arabic) and dialects where this distinction is still operating (such as Omani Arabic or the Bedouin Tunisian varieties described in Ritt-Benmimoun, 2016). Such a study could yield precious information on how, and to what extent, the kind of morphological rearrangement described above can affect the agreement system.<sup>25</sup> It is interesting to note how the loss of gender distinction in the plural has begun to affect even the allegedly more ‘conservative’ Omani varieties.<sup>26</sup> More than 25 years ago, Holes (1989:449) was already reporting the fact that many Omanis, especially those living in the Capital Area, ‘tend to replace some of these typically Omani speech tendencies with their Gulf equivalents, as in the now widespread replacement of feminine plurals by

masculine plurals'. Although rare, examples of this kind appeared in our data as well: consider for instance (12), where a plural nonhuman controller attracts masculine plural agreement, and (13), where a feminine plural controller attracts masculine plural agreement:

(12)

*dōk-hum*                      *ʕuyūn-ak*                      *kēf*    *šār-u*  
 INTERJ=PRON.3PL.M    eye.PL=PRON.2SG.M    how    become-PAST.3PL.M  
 'Look at **them**, your **eyes**! What happened to **them**?'

(13)

*yimkən*                      *əl-gir-āt*                      *yi-g-u*  
 maybe                      ART=neighbor-PL.F                      PRES.3PL.M-come  
*yi-tqahw-u*                      *ʕind-ī*  
 PRES.3PL.M-drink.coffee    PREP=PRON.1SG  
 'Maybe the **neighbors (f.) will come (m.)** and **have coffee (m.)** with me'

If Holes is right in asserting that this kind of oscillation results from the influence of more prestigious local varieties (and there is now strong evidence suggesting that he is), then it would seem that agreement is affected by sociolinguistic factors on more than one level: not only because of the standardizing impact that MSA has on the language, as we have seen, but also due to the influence of prestigious non-standard varieties. Ritt-Benmimoun (2016:284) reports the same concerning the Bedouin Tunisian dialects that are the object of her study, which are affected by the more prestigious urban varieties.<sup>27</sup>

It would seem, in conclusion, that a kind of morphosyntactic shift is currently underway in Omani and Gulf Arabic which other dialects have undergone at an earlier period in time. It might be the case that the analysis of large corpora of data from these two varieties could help us to better understand this process, and to answer a number of fundamental questions. One of these questions, which we have partially addressed in this paragraph, is how the loss of a morphological category can affect the agreement behaviour of targets and controllers; a second one, of no less importance, is what prompted such morphosyntactic changes in the first place. This is an issue which has largely been left unaddressed even by those authors who have focused on the topic (see for instance Ingham, 1982). Lastly, the relation between the evolution of the agreement systems in the dialects and in MSA is not entirely clear (although Belnap and Gee, 1994, have provided some interesting insight concerning this point). In conclusion, after almost thirty years,

Ferguson's (1989:15) remarks on the subject still ring true: 'the history of Arabic agreement from O[ld] A[rabic] to N[ew] A[rabic] is undoubtedly a fascinating story, but one that would require sophisticated and persistent research to piece together and reconstruct'. The present paper is intended as a small step towards the solution of the vast jigsaw puzzle this history represents. However, as anticipated in the introduction of this article, a large-scale study comparing quantitative data drawn from typologically different dialects is still missing. Such a study, now long overdue, could provide us with a fundamental key to explain and understand the evolution of the Arabic agreement patterns over time, as well as that of the Arabic Languages at large.

## Notes

1. The first studies concerning Omani varieties were published right before or immediately after the turn of the last century: see Jayakar (1889) and Reinhardt (1894) for northern sedentary varieties, and Rhodokanakis (1911) for Dhofari Arabic. For the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Omani dialects have been pretty much neglected by the scholarly community (with the important exception of Holes, 1989). It was not until the last decade that the literature about Omani Arabic started to flourish again: see, among others, Holes (2008), Eades (2009, 2012), Eades and Persson (2013), Eades and Watson (2013) and Davey (2016).
2. This paper is concerned solely with the two agreement features of gender and number, and will not address the issue of definiteness (which is, at any rate, far less problematic). We follow the definition of agreement feature given by Corbett (2006). The labels 'target' and 'controller' come from the same source. We will employ these two labels throughout this paper, though some of the other authors who have worked on agreement in Arabic have used a different terminology (Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987, for instance, employed the definitions 'head noun' and 'concordant', after Carter, 1981, while Belnap, 1993, used 'head' and 'agreement locus').
3. Ferguson (1989:10) also mentions a third possible pattern of agreement, which he refers to as 'equivocal' agreement: this occurs 'when the target precedes the controller and is less specified than the controller in gender and number, typically being masculine singular regardless of whether the controller is feminine or plural'. Belnap (1991:59) more specifically refers to masculine singular agreement in a target preceding a non-masculine and/or non-singular controller as 'neutralized' agreement, which in his view '[does] not represent grammatical agreement, rather the lack thereof'. In this paper we will use the three labels 'strict', 'deflected' and 'neutralized' agreement as defined by Ferguson and Belnap, because their use is widespread in works dealing with agreement in Arabic (even though works dealing with agreement from a more general, typological perspective tend to employ a different terminology).

4. While this paper was in preparation, Professor Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun was about to publish her own research on agreement in the dialects of Nifzāwa region in southern Tunisia (see Ritt-Benmimoun, 2016). These dialects, too, have preserved gender distinction in the plural. I am thankful to Professor Ritt-Benmimoun for sending me a pre-print version of her work.
5. See Holes (1989:448–449): ‘there is indeed a heterogeneous group of high frequency phonological and morphological characteristics which all, or virtually all, Omani dialects, B[edouin] or H[adari], have in common’. Among these, he cites ‘feminine plural verb, adjective and pronoun forms [which] occur regularly’. In addition, variation in agreement patterns has been reported for all varieties of Omani Arabic hitherto described, from Reinhardt’s (1894:70) work on northern sedentary dialects to Davey’s (2016:88) study on Coastal Dhofari Arabic.
6. Broken plurals are those which are formed by an alteration of the internal structure of the singular form. Sound plurals, on the contrary, are formed by regular suffixation.
7. Overall, Owens’ and Bani-Yasin’s classification of the various lexical items in their corpus as having a Standard or Colloquial origin seems to be questionable. The two authors admit that a number of borderline items exists, that is, items whose classification is doubtful. It would seem that, to an extent, the annexation of these items to one category or the other depended on whether or not this endorsed the authors’ conclusions (Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:726). Furthermore, their classification appears to be circular at times (that is, an item is assigned to the Standard or Colloquial set depending on which kind of agreement it triggers: Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:724–725). In addition, no convincing explanation is provided as to why many Colloquial broken plurals triggering feminine singular agreement have not been included in the figures presented in Tables 8 and 9 (Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:725).
8. Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987:719–721) based their distinction of lexical items on a number of phonological, morphological and semantic features, which included the realization of certain sounds, the syllabic structure of the word, the fact that a given meaning is found in Colloquial Arabic or not and so on. Unfortunately, due to space constraints, we cannot provide here the entire list of features on which our analysis is based (also because these features vary from dialect to dialect since, as we have said, different characters in the *Yōm u-yōm* employ different varieties of Omani Arabic). Our ‘mixed’ set of elements contains both items such as *mḥāzarāt* ‘lectures’ (from MSA *muḥādarāt*, with deletion of the first short unstressed vowel and substitution of the velarized voiced alveolar stop with a velarized voiced alveolar fricative) and items such as *ayyām* ‘days’, which has identical form in Standard and Colloquial.
9. This is by no means surprising, especially in light of Mejdell’s work on *luḡa wuṣṭā* (that is, code-mixing between Standard and spoken Arabic in semi-formal contexts). Mejdell sheds light on the constraints which forbid the formation of certain structures where morphological or lexical material from the two varieties juxtapose, and favour the emergence of others (according with the predictions of



the Dominant Language Hypothesis and the Matrix Language Frame model: see Mejdell, 2012:160–162). Note that Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987:721) already remarked how their material was characterized by ‘grammatical consistency’, that is, ‘the tendency of clusters of SA and Col features to occur with each other’.

10. Belnap divided the controllers in his corpus between human, animal and inanimate, and found animal controllers to pattern in between human and inanimate with respect to their probability of attracting deflected agreement. In our data only two animate, nonhuman controllers appeared, making this category statistically irrelevant, so the sample was simply divided in the two sets of human and nonhuman controllers.
11. We follow Belnap (1993:101) in his decision of analysing the collective *nās* separately from other heads. Note that of the 181 controllers constituting our corpus, 23 were not classifiable according to the broken/sound parameter, because they were either dual, quantified by a numeral higher than ten (and therefore morphologically singular), or consisting in a chain of conjoined controllers. In addition, five targets showing neutralized (i.e. masculine singular) agreement were removed from the total. Table 2 is therefore based on a sample of 158 controllers with 230 corresponding targets.
12. For the sake of comparability and completeness, we have decided to present the results of our analysis in the same way Belnap did in his 1993 article. We are of course aware of the fact that lumping together in the same chart targets occurring before and after their controller is methodologically problematic. A more detailed discussion of this point can be found in Bettega (2017). For the time being, it may be relevant to note how total neutralization of agreement in our data only occurs in the case of targets preceding their controllers.
13. In the corpus, a total of thirteen targets appear which refer back to a head previously mentioned by another speaker. In these cases calculating the distance between target and controller was impossible, and these targets have been excluded from Table 3. Eleven (84.6%) of these targets attracted plural agreement, while only two (15.4%) attracted deflected agreement.
14. Brustad’s original list also included textual and physical prominence, quantification, qualification and definiteness. A statistical analysis run for the last three found them to have a less marked influence on agreement than concreteness or specificity (if any at all; for more details, see Bettega, 2017). Brustad’s list also included animacy, which is basically equivalent to the category of humanness already discussed.
15. More specifically, four heads were deemed unclear and therefore excluded from our analysis. For this reason, the total number of controllers analysed in Table 5 is lower than that of Table 4. Working on Cairene Arabic, Belnap tried to bypass the problems connected with the inherent ambiguity of the category of specificity by administering his informants a psycholinguistic questionnaire. The results of the experiment also seem to endorse the hypothesis of a connection between agreement and specificity.

16. Admittedly, some ambiguity may arise here as well. For instance, throughout the corpus we classed the word *aflām* ‘films’, as abstract, though in this example we decided to code it as concrete instead, since the reference is clearly to the physical copies of the DVDs one can rent from a store: *aşlan aflām ər-rʕub muş min əl-mafrūz inna yaggrū-hən fi-l-istūdiwāt*, ‘As a matter of fact, horror **movies**, they shouldn’t be renting **them** in the shops’. In general, though, such ambiguous occurrences were few.
17. The number of total controllers under analysis here is 127: this includes four controllers which attracted mixed agreement, that is, both deflected and strict agreement in different targets. Those four controllers were calculated as one token each both in the right and in the left column of the two tables. Note that the occurrence of mixed agreement in our corpus appears to be always connected to the relative position of target and controller. The only example of mixed agreement occurring in Owens’ and Bani-Yasin’s data would seem to be related to word order as well (see Owens and Bani-Yasin, 1987:735 n. 16).
18. Note that Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987:735 n. 18) report seven occurrences of the word *şagl-āt* ‘things’, appearing in their corpus and triggering deflected agreement. This is in spite of the fact that ‘the word has a highly Col[loquial] “feel” to it, [...] and that it has the *-āt* suffix’. The authors comment that this is probably ‘a case of a Col[loquial] item being influenced by an SA agreement rule’. As an alternative explanation, we suggest that the word might have had non-specific reference in the original contexts (although these are not given, so it is impossible to check for the validity of such a hypothesis). This, however, is exactly the kind of lexical item with a rather generic meaning which one would expect to be characterized by low specificity.
19. With mixed genders the default agreement is masculine, except in the case of prenominal verbs, where the verb agrees with the element immediately following it. Note that, if the concordant is a verb preceding its subject, then agreement will be singular, regardless of the number of the head noun. Also, if the concordant is a verb preceding its subject, and the subject does not immediately follow the verb, then total neutralization of agreement may occur (that is, agreement can be masculine singular, regardless of the number *and* gender of the head noun).
20. In particular, for the collective *nās* ‘people’, they note how it ‘fluctuates between masc. and fem. sing.’ (Badawi, Carter and Gully, 2004:355).
21. The texts selected by Belnap and Shabaneh (1992:251–252) ‘represent literary and religious texts as well as texts from the modern press [...]. The corpus attempts to represent the major eras of the pre-Islamic period, the early Islamic period, the Classical period, and the modern era.’ More specifically, their sample consisted of material from the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Belnap and Gee (1994) more material from the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries was added.
22. The interviews from which Belnap’s data were drawn were conducted by native speakers, with the explicit aim of reducing the ‘observer’s paradox’ effect to a minimum (Belnap, 1991:47). Standardization may in fact be at work in the television material which we have used for our study of agreement in Omani Arabic (as we have shown in the paragraph on lexical conditioning, it actually

- is). However, this only means that the percentage of nonhuman plural controllers triggering strict agreement in spontaneous, informal speech might be even higher.
23. Throughout this paper, we have not addressed separately the category of ‘broken’ adjectives (that is, adjectives that form the plural in the same way as many nouns do; see n. 6). In our corpus, no instance of such adjectives was recorded: they do, however, figure importantly in Belnap’s and Shabaneh’s pre- and early Islamic material (which might partially account for the low percentage of adjectival targets showing deflected agreement in those texts). They also appear in Belnap’s Cairene data and, in general, their use is relatively common in many modern vernaculars. Further studies on agreement in Arabic should include the morphological status of the target among the factors which can influence agreement (although this category is only relevant to adjectives).
  24. Note that Moroccan Arabic does not distinguish gender in the plural of the verb and the pronoun, and only rarely in the adjective. ‘The feminine plural adjective, ending in *-āt*, is almost never used except in conjunction with a feminine plural noun ending in *-āt*, and even in this case its use is optional’ (Harell, 2004:157).
  25. Interestingly, Holes (2016:352) reports the presence, in Bahraini dialects of Najdi descent, of rare fossilized occurrences of adjectives showing feminine plural agreement.
  26. Holes (1989:449) explains this phenomenon in terms of an influence from the more prestigious dialects of the Northern Gulf. Interestingly, already Jayakar (1889:664) was reporting this at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It would seem, then, that the passage from a bipartite gender system to one where no distinction exists in the plural – if this is actually what is happening in Omani Arabic – is a process which proceeds at an extremely slow pace.
  27. This consideration, in turn, leaves us with a major unresolved question: should the general tendency – which apparently interests all Arabic dialects – to reduce gender distinction in the plural be considered as the result of contact or the consequence of multiple independent innovations, these in turn the outcome of a predisposition of the whole dialectal continuum towards this kind of shift? At present, our understanding of the history and nature of the Arabic dialects seems insufficient to answer such a question.

### About the author

Simone Bettega is post-doctoral researcher in linguistics and adjunct professor of Arabic dialectology in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Turin, Italy. His research is mainly focused on the linguistic and socio-linguistic reality of Eastern and South-Eastern Arabia. He is co-editor of the recent volume *Linguistic Studies in the Arabian Gulf*.

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