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## Agreement with plural controllers in Fezzānī Arabic

### Abstract

The present paper investigates agreement patterns with plural controllers in Fezzani Arabic (southwestern Libya). During the last three decades, research has proved that the agreement system found in Classical Arabic is the result of a process of standardization, while agreement in the dialects feature the same type of variation observed in pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'an. Nonhuman plural controllers, in particular, strictly require feminine singular agreement in Classical Arabic, while feminine singular alternates with feminine plural agreement in the pre-Islamic texts and the Qur'an. Most contemporary dialects exhibit a great range of variation in this field. Fezzani Arabic largely favors plural (syntactic) agreement with plural controllers. Syntactic agreement is systematic with human controllers and it represents the most frequent choice also with nonhuman ones. The main factor triggering feminine singular agreement is not humanness, but individuation. Within this conservative syntactic behavior, finally, masculine plural seems to be eroding feminine plural agreement with both feminine human and nonhuman controllers, for sociolinguistic reasons that still need to be investigated.

### Keywords

Libyan dialects, agreement, Arabic linguistics, Arabic dialectology, Fezzan.

### 1. Introduction

This article will describe agreement with plural controllers in the Arabic dialects of Fezzan (henceforth, FA). Fezzan (Ar. *Fazzān* < Lat. *Phazania*) is the southwestern, mostly desert province of contemporary Libya. Its dialects represent a particularly conservative variety of Bedouin Libyan Arabic and have recently been the object of a renewed scientific interest, sparked by the publication of a collection of ethnographic texts dating back to the Fifties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ph. Marçais 2001). A number of contributions have, since

then, investigated the phonology, morphology (Caubet 2004) and syntax (Caubet 2017, D'Anna 2017, 2018) of the varieties exemplified in the texts, yet more work still needs to be done, including the collection of new data. The present paper will attempt a description of agreement patterns with plural controllers, a topic that has raised considerable interest in the last three decades, after Ferguson (1989) first used it in his famous response to Versteegh's theory of pidginization. In the following ten years, Belnap (1991, 1993, and 1999), Belnap and Gee (1994) and Belnap and Shabaneh (1992) investigated the topic from a diachronic perspective, highlighting the similarity between agreement in pre-Islamic Arabic<sup>1</sup> and the contemporary dialects, with a specific emphasis on Cairene. Belnap and Gee (1994), in particular, demonstrated that the system found in Classical Arabic is the result of a process of standardization that did not affect the spoken varieties, even though the standardizing influence of MSA can be detected today, as showed by Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987). Despite the similarities that link pre-Islamic Arabic to the contemporary dialects, the dialects themselves show a high degree of variation, which called for the necessity of detailed contributions investigating agreement in other areas of the Arabic dialectal continuum. Apart from the already mentioned contribution by Owens and Bany-Yasin (1987) concerning Jordanian Arabic, Holes (2016) includes a whole chapter devoted to agreement patterns in Bahraini dialects, while Bettega (2018) investigates agreement in Omani Arabic, advancing the interesting hypothesis that links variation in the modern dialects to the loss of gender distinction in the plural that affected a large part of them, especially in urban areas. North African dialects have received less attention, but Procházka and Gabsi (2017) and Ritt-Benmimoun (2017) provide a description of agreement in Tunisia, covering respectively the dialect of the capital and the Bedouin varieties spoken in the Nifzāwa region.

While the works previously cited approach the topic from a historical and typological perspective, agreement has received considerable attention from syntacticians as well. Aoun, Benmamoun, and Choueiri (2010) addresses the issue of asymmetries between VSO and SVO order, suggesting that number does not surface in VS order because the verb and the postverbal subject form a prosodic unity, which in turn makes the lexical subject an exponent of the number feature on the verb. The issue of asymmetry between VSO and SVO is tackled also in Aoun and Benmamoun (1999), with particular regard to the differences between MSA and the modern dialects. Hoyt (2002), finally, investigates impersonal agreement in Palestinian rural Arabic, with particular reference to existential sentences and controllers preceded by different types of modifiers.

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<sup>1</sup> The pre-Islamic texts analyzed were all poetry, with the addition of a selection of chapters from the Qur'an.

## 2. Data and methodology

The present work is based on the data collected from the 15 prose texts included in Ph. Marçais (2001). The ethnographic texts were collected from speakers of different ages and locations, in a period stretching from 1949 to 1970. Despite revealing quite a uniform dialectal type, Caubet (2004: 69) classified the varieties there represented into nomadic and sedentary, mainly based on the preservation of interdental phonemes or lack thereof. The fifteen texts, of various length, yielded 158 controllers (counting morphological plurals, chains and collectives, all of which will be treated separately) and 373 targets. The samples were thus coded for different factors concerning the type of target and agreement, the type of controller, word order and the distance between controller and target.<sup>2</sup>

The two terms CONTROLLER and TARGET have been borrowed from Corbett (2006: 4), which defines the controller as ‘the element which determines the agreement (say the subject noun phrase)’, while the target is ‘the element whose form is determined by agreement’. The syntactic context in which agreement occurs is the DOMAIN, while FEATURES are those properties of the target and the controller with respect to which there is agreement (e.g. gender and number). The other factors that usually affect agreement choices, such as word order, are called CONDITIONS (Corbett 2006: 4–5).<sup>3</sup>

## 3. Agreement with plural controllers in Early, Classical and dialectal Arabic

The study of agreement patterns with plural controllers is particularly interesting due to the wide variation attested in different varieties of Arabic, both synchronically and diachronically. The most straightforward system, in this respect, is that of Classical Arabic (henceforward CA). Verbal, nominal and pronominal targets agree with plural controllers in gender (masculine or feminine) and number (singular, dual or plural) when controllers designate human beings (*ʕāqil* ‘rational’ according to the terminology employed by traditional Arab grammarians). Plural controllers designating nonhuman entities (*ġayr ʕāqil* ‘non-rational’), on the contrary, systematically trigger feminine singular

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<sup>2</sup> The Excel spreadsheet was designed by the friend and colleague Simone Bettega, to whom I am indebted, and its employment has the additional merit of making the results obtained for different dialects easily comparable.

<sup>3</sup> This terminology is by no means the only one employed in scientific works dealing with agreement. The terms controller and target, in fact, are replaced by HEAD NOUN and CONCORDANT in Owens and Bani-Yassin (1987) and by HEAD and AGREEMENT LOCUS in Belnap (1993).

agreement. As evidenced in Belnap (1991) and Belnap and Gee (1994), the system of CA and Modern Standard Arabic (henceforward MSA) is the result of a process of generalization and standardization occurred in the first centuries of the Islamic period. Documents dating back to the pre-Islamic period (mainly poetic texts) and to the early Islamic one (mainly the Qur'an), in fact, display a similar type of variation to that found in contemporary dialects. Plural controllers, in particular, used to trigger plural (feminine or broken) or feminine singular agreement based on a variety of factors. These two options have been usually defined, following Ferguson (1989), as STRICT vs DEFLECTED agreement. In my opinion, the definition of SYNTACTIC vs SEMANTIC agreement, employed by Corbett (2006: 155) and in the typological literature (but also occurring in Ferguson's article), is more useful inasmuch as it helps us to shed light on the reasons behind such a choice. Syntactic agreement, thus, is 'agreement consistent with the form of the controller', while semantic one is 'agreement consistent with its meaning'.<sup>4</sup> The factors influencing the choice between syntactic and semantic agreement include properties of the controller (humanness, animacy, concreteness, specificity) but also other conditions, such as word order. Brustad (2000: 22–25) introduces the idea that these features move the controller along an individuation continuum that influence, in its turn, agreement choices. It is worth mentioning, however, that purely morphological properties of the controller (e.g. the fact that it features a sound vs a broken plural) also affect agreement choices (Ferguson 1989: 9; Belnap and Gee 1994: 132; Bettega 2018).

The standardization process that affected CA and MSA, making feminine singular the only possible choice with nonhuman plurals, left the dialects largely untouched, so that most contemporary varieties of spoken Arabic still display a wide range of possible agreement choices, the patterns of which need to be investigated.<sup>5</sup> Given the variety already emerging from the descriptions hitherto available, a necessary step for the advancement of our understanding of agreement in Arabic, both synchronically and diachronically, consists in providing contributions based on reliable data and shared methodological tools. This paper will analyze agreement with plural controllers in FA, taking into consideration different type of controllers (human, nonhuman and inanimate), of targets (attributive adjectives, adjectives in predicate position, verbal predicates and anaphoric pronouns) and conditions such as distance and word order. Comparative references to other varieties of Arabic will be made to highlight similarities and differences.

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<sup>4</sup> We are not yet sure whether syntactic / semantic and strict / deflected actually define the same type of agreement in all cases (similar concerns are expressed in Belnap 1991: 88). Since, however, dialectological literature concerning Arabic freely employs the two sets, they will be employed interchangeably in the present paper.

<sup>5</sup> In some dialects, in fact, other types of generalizations have taken place. Moroccan Arabic, for instance, tends to require syntactic agreement with all plural controllers, even though rare exceptions occur (Harrell 2004: 158).

## 4. Human controllers

### 4.1. Masculine human controllers

Masculine human controllers represent, in Marçais' texts, the most straightforward category. Our corpus contains 21 masculine human plural controllers, 6 conjoined ones of various types (chains formed by two singular controllers, one singular and one plural, one singular and one dual, one plural and one collective) and 2 morphological duals. The 30 resulting controllers feature a total number of 91 targets, all of which display strict agreement in the masculine plural, with the exception of a single occurrence of the adjective *šġār* (broken plural) in attributive position.<sup>6</sup>

e.g.

1. *yabdu*      *t-trīs*      *b-ṛwāḥ-hum*      *yudorbu*      *l-magrūna*  
(32.11–12)<sup>7</sup>  
3.start.M.PL      DEF-man.PL      by-selves-them.M      3.play.M.PL      DEF-flute

The men start playing the flute by themselves.

2. *ṛ-ṛāžəl*      *w*      *ət-trīs*      *l-oxr-ēn*      *yuxoržu* (49.10)  
DEF-man      and      DEF-man.PL      DEF-other-PL.M      3.go.out.M.PL

The man (i.e. the husband) and the other men go out.

3. *ikūnu*      *tnēn*      *išeddu*      *ktūf*      *bašd-hum* (32.13)  
3.be.M.PL      two      3.grab.M.PL      shoulder.PL      some-them.M

They are two who grab each other's shoulders.

As evident from sample 1, word order does not affect agreement in this case. The corpus contains 13 targets featuring VS structure, all of which feature strict masculine plural agreement.

### 4.2. Feminine human controllers

The situation is more nuanced as far as feminine human controllers are concerned. The corpus contains 39 feminine human plural controllers and 2 chains, controlling 107 targets. There is almost no variation concerning number, since only an isolated feminine singular target occurs, while gender varies to a greater extent, as evident from the following table.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that *šġār* is the only possible form of non-feminine plural, as the sound plural *\*šġārīn* is ungrammatical. The occurrence of the broken plural, thus, cannot be really considered as an exception.

<sup>7</sup> All the samples are drawn from Marçais (2001). The numbers in brackets indicate the page and line(s) in which the sample is found.



this actually happens only in 9 out of 37 occurrences. Another factor worth investigating is the distance between controller and target. In the case of strict agreement in the feminine plural, in fact, the average distance is 3,63 words, while it is 4,08 words for masculine agreement. While the difference in itself might not be great, samples like 4 and 7 definitely show cases in which a subject controls multiple targets, with the closest one agreeing in the feminine plural and the farthest in the masculine. Chains of feminine controllers, finally, do not behave differently from feminine plural controllers.

Variation between masculine and feminine plural agreement is probably linked to the gradual loss of gender distinction in the plural. This feature is still preserved by the vast majority of Libyan dialects, while Tripoli Arabic has lost it. Comparative research with larger corpora, thus, would definitely help to shed light on the phenomenon.

#### 4.3. *Nās*

The controller *nās* ‘people’ is analyzed separately, within the class of human heads, by both Belnap (1993: 101) and Bettega (2018). In Belnap (1993) it triggers agreement in the feminine singular in the 39% of the samples collected, showing similar percentages (31,3%) in Bettega (2018). If we move to the two Maghrebi varieties so far investigated, percentages of agreement in the feminine singular are higher (47,2%) in the Bedouin Tunisian dialects described by Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 272), while Procházka and Gabsi (2017) does not provide statistics, generally mentioning the possibility of feminine singular agreement. *Nās* represents an exception also in CA, allowing feminine singular agreement despite designing a rational entity. In this case, the collective and non-individuated nature of the noun prevails over the feature [+human] that triggers syntactic agreement in CA.

Our corpus includes 19 occurrences of *nās*, controlling 51 targets. Agreement occurs in the two genders and the two numbers, contrarily to what happens in the Southern Tunisian dialects described by Ritt-Benmimoun (2017: 268), in which *nās* never triggers agreement in the feminine plural. The reasons behind this agreement choice are not clear, but a possibility could be a shift to the (feminine) plural from the original possibility of feminine singular agreement, triggered by analogy with the usual occurrence of plural agreement.

- e.g.
- |    |             |              |                 |                           |
|----|-------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| 8. | <i>ižū</i>  | <i>n-nās</i> | <i>l-oxr-āt</i> | <i>iḥādu</i>              |
|    | 3.come.M.PL | DEF-people   | DEF-other-F.PL  | 3.build.side.by.side.M.PL |
- bēt-a* (28.11)  
tent-his  
The other people come and build their tent beside his.

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preceding the controller and located in the same prosodic domain take reduced (or weakened) agreement.

Table 2. Agreement with *nās*

	Masc. Sg.	Masc. Pl.	Fem. Sg.	Fem. Pl.
<i>nās</i>	1 (1,96%)	39 (76,47%)	9 (17,64%)	2 (3,92%)

Despite the limited number of samples, the percentage of agreement in the feminine singular is the lowest so far observed. Among the few samples of agreement in the feminine singular, one co-occurs with the existential *fī-h* ‘there is’ (9), as evidenced in Procházka and Gabsi (2017: 245) for urban Tunisian dialects, where the existential is *famma*. Quantifiers such as *kull* ‘all’ (10), on the other sides, do not seem to trigger feminine singular agreement.

e.g.

9. *u fī-h nās maxsūsa b-ət-taḡsīl yīḡoslu*  
 and in-him people specialized.F.SG in-DEF-washing 3.wash.M.PL  
*b-əl-ma w eṣ-ṣābūn* (56.8)  
 by-DEF-water and DEF-soap

And there are people specializing in washing who wash (the corpse) with water and soap.

10. *u yegro kull ən-nās* (58.21)  
 and 3.read.M.PL all DEF-people  
 And everybody reads.

Generally speaking, when *nās* is specified, for instance by a genitive construction (11), a relative sentence (12) or a locative (13), agreement is systematically in the masculine plural. Such an agreement pattern is difficult to define as either strict or syntactic agreement in Corbett’s perspective, since the controller is not morphologically plural. As will be evident from paragraph 5, collectives referring to animals systematically take feminine singular agreement (unless other conditioning factors intervene), so that the feature [+human] is here responsible for plural agreement.

e.g.

11. *u nās el-mayyit iżū-hum en-nās*  
 and people DEF-dead 3.come.M.PL-them.M DEF-people  
*l-oxr-ēn* (58.12)  
 DEF-other-M.PL

And the other people come to the family of the deceased.

12. *n-nās uk-kull lli fōḡ el-magbara iżu*  
 DEF-people DEF-all REL over DEF-tomb 3.come.M.PL  
*l-el-gab<sup>a</sup>r el-xāli* (58.5-6)  
 to-DEF-grave DEF-empty

Everybody who is over the tomb come to the empty grave.

13. *n-nās* *f* *eš-šaʿra* *kān-hum* *yāsr-īn* *twalli* (55.27)  
 DEF-people in DEF-street if-them.M many-M.PL 3.F.go.back.SG  
 If there are too many people in the streets she (i.e. the woman) goes back.

Mixed agreement occurs quite regularly, as evidenced by (14), (15) and (16). Procházka and Gabsi (2017: 246) correctly accounts for this phenomenon, stating that the first target, immediately preceding or following the controller and taking feminine singular agreement, introduces new information concerning a non-individuated mass of people. The speaker then individuates the members of the group he is talking about, consequently switching to the masculine plural. The same phenomenon is described, with reference to human controllers in Bahreini dialects, by Holes (2016: 334–335).

14. *baʿd* *en-nās* *tarḥal* *w* *ižu* *l-el-mōḍaʿ*  
 after DEF-people 3.F.leave.SG and 3.come.M.PL to-DEF-place  
*elli b-iḥaṭṭo fī-h* (22.70)  
 REL FUT-3.unload.M.PL in-him

Then people leave and come to the place in which they are going to settle.

15. *teltamm* *en-nās* *f* *až-žāmoʿ* *w* *ižību*  
 3.F.gather.SG DEF-people in DEF-mosque and 3.bring.M.PL  
*settīn ḥīzab gōrān* (58.20–21)  
 sixty part Qur'an

People gather in the mosque and bring sixty passages from the Qur'an.

16. *en-nās* *ʕmā-baʿd-ha* *yaʿṣo* *užūh-hum* *gedā*  
 DEF-people with-some-her 3.give.M.PL face.PL-them.M towards  
*l-gābla* (58.10)  
 DEF-qibla

People together turn their faces towards the *qibla*.

Interestingly, no counterexample occurs to this tendency, yet in (16) we have a sample of mixed agreement in which the first target, a verb in VS word order, takes default agreement in the masculine singular, while the verb immediately following *nās* agrees in the feminine singular.

17. *baʿdēn* *iži* *n-nās* *tarfaʿ* (56.15)  
 then 3.M.come.SG DEF-people 3.F.carry.SG  
 Then people come and carry (the coffin).

What emerges from our data, in conclusion, is a much stronger tendency towards agreement in the masculine plural and the possibility, although only two samples occur, of agreement in the feminine plural. Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 268), moreover, classifies *nās* together with other names indicating groups of male

persons or mixed people, i.e. *raẓẓāla* “man.PL”, *raẓāẓīl* “man.PL”, *ʾrẓāl* “man.PL”, *ḡirr* “children”, *ʾʿbād* “people” and others. All the controllers belonging to this group can take agreement in the feminine singular, while in FA this happens only with *nās*. Plural nouns designing male humans, as seen above, systematically trigger syntactic agreement.

## 5. Nonhuman animate controllers

Our corpus includes a small sample of nonhuman animate controllers: 8 morphological plurals, 14 collectives and 3 chains. Interestingly, we can form a subgroup of chains of collectives, featuring 6 controllers. The total number of targets depending on these controllers is 60 and agreement takes place as follows.

Table 3. Agreement patterns with nonhuman animate controllers

	Targets	Masc. Sg.	Masc. Pl.	Fem. Sg.	Fem. Pl.	Br. Pl.
Plural (8)	17	-	6 (35,29%)	-	9 (52,94%)	2 (11,76%)
Coll. (8)	27	1 (3,7%)	5 (18,51%)	21 (77,77%)	-	-
Chains of coll. (6)	8	2 (25%)	-	6 (75%)	-	-
Chains (3)	8	2 (25%)	-	-	6 (75%)	-

With morphologically plural controllers, syntactic agreement in the plural is systematic, while the reasons behind the choice between masculine and feminine plural are not obvious here. The two occurrences of broken plural, as evident from the sample in (18) (*ṣḡār* “little.PL), are adjectives that do not usually feature a sound plural, so that they do not constitute a real exception.

e.g.

18. *w* *īḡa* *ʕand-ak* *ẓedyān* *ṣḡār*, *txāf* *ʕalē-hen* *mn*  
 and if at-you goat.PL little.PL 2.fear.M.SG on-them.F from  
*en-now*, *ikūnu* *maṛbūt-āt* *f* *ər-ruffa* *f*  
 DEF-heat 3.be.M.PL PASS.PTCP.tie-F.PL in DEF-section in  
*əd-ḡell* (20.16–18)

DEF-shadow

If you have young goats and you fear about them because of the heat, they stay tied in a section (of the tent) in the shadow.







of a singular noun or a dual appears in the series, the agreement must be plural' (emphasis in the original). Our data indicates that, at least in FA, chains of nonhuman collectives behave like a single collective controller, requiring feminine singular agreement, even though masculine singular one rarely occurs in locative constructions such as 28.

e.g.

26. *ʕand-a l-bəll w əl-ḡanam yāsra* (20.7–8)  
 at-him DEF-camel and DEF-goats plentiful-F.SG

He has plenty of camels and goats.

27. *əl-bəll w əl-ḡanam mā-lāgat-š ma tākəl* (28.14–15)  
 DEF-camels and DEF-goats NEG-found.3.F.SG-NEG REL 3.F.eat.SG

The camels and the goats do not find anything to eat.

28. *əl-ḡanam w-əl-bəḡar yabda fī ẓ̌tha* (26.13–14)  
 DEF-goats and DEF-cow.PL 3.M.begin.SG in side

The goats and cows are on one side.

Agreement patterns with nonhuman animate controllers, in conclusion, seem to be largely determined by the distinction between mass and individuated reference, at least as far as number is concerned. The position of the controller on the scale of animacy might have played a certain role in the different behavior of the collective *səbīb* “horses” compared to other kinds of less valued livestock, such as cows and camels, yet we have seen that individuation played a major role also in that case. Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 273–276) comes to similar conclusions as far as Southern Bedouin Tunisian dialects are concerned and so does Procházka and Gabsi (2017: 250) for Tunis Arabic. The latter, moreover, adds size as a conditioning factor in the choice of agreement patterns, observing that plurals of small animals (such as *fīrān* “mice”) invariably trigger agreement in the feminine singular, even when low numerals (>10) qualify the controller. Unfortunately, our corpus does not include any controller denoting small size animals, so that the impact of this factor in FA needs to be studied when new and more comprehensive data becomes available. Belnap’s (1993: 101) data for Cairene, finally, present a much higher frequency of agreement (67%) in the feminine singular with (broken) animal plurals, which is coherent with the general tendency of Cairene to favor the so-called deflected agreement in a greater number of contexts.

Another point is in need of more detailed research. If we agree with Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 273) in maintaining that feminine plural is the predominant agreement pattern with plural animate controllers, the partial shift to masculine plural that can be found in our data as well as in hers needs to be accounted for. This phenomenon should probably be investigated alongside the gradual shift to masculine plural agreement for targets depending on human female controllers, and might be equally linked to the slow and progressive loss of gender distinction in the plural.

## 6. Inanimate controllers

In the transition from pre-Classical to Classical Arabic, plural nouns denoting inanimate entities underwent, like all nonhuman controllers, a process of standardization that made agreement in the feminine singular nearly categorical (Belnap and Gee 1994). The process did not affect, at least not in this form, the spoken varieties that can be considered the ancestors of contemporary dialects, so that variation occurs also with inanimate controllers. The degree to which agreement choices vary with reference to inanimate controllers differ from dialect to dialect, while variation in itself is subject to the same conditioning factors already seen for other types of controllers. Procházka and Gabsi (2017) offers an exhaustive survey of how mass / individuated reference, specificity, abstractness / concreteness and even size and textual prominence condition agreement choices in the urban dialect of Tunis (Procházka and Gabsi 2017: 253–255). Building on Owens and Bani Yasin (1987), which describes the same phenomenon in Jordanian Arabic, the authors illustrate that MSA also has an influence on agreement choices, since loanwords from MSA often carry with them their mandatory agreement pattern in the feminine singular (Procházka and Gabsi 2017: 255–256).

Although all the above-mentioned conditioning factors are presumably at play in FA as well, our data probably presents the lowest degree of variation so far observed. The corpus includes 43 inanimate controllers, on which 64 targets depend. Table 4 reports a detailed survey of the different types of controllers, i.e. plurals, chains, duals and nouns quantified by numerals >10. A quick look at the total row, however, is sufficient to realize that only 3 targets out of 64 (4,68%) take feminine singular agreement. The figure is considerably lower than that of *nās* (17,64%), again suggesting that animacy is not the dominant conditioning factor in agreement choices.<sup>13</sup> Agreement in the plural, thus, is almost systematic also with inanimate nouns, with (lack of) individuation functioning as the most important factor in the few cases in which feminine singular agreement occurs. In (29), the informant is speaking about the things that every wealthy husband buys for a wife who has just given birth to a baby. Reference is here generic, and the genitive exponent *matāʿet*, controlled by *h<sup>a</sup>wāyž* “things”, takes feminine singular agreement:

<sup>13</sup> Holes (2016: 341) also noted that, ‘With plural non-human heads, strict agreement dominated even more than it did with human heads, though sub-categories of nouns could be distinguished in which the proportion of deflected agreements was somewhat higher.’

29. *idā-kān hu rāžel gāder iżīb l-umm l-ulēd*  
 if he man wealthy 3.M.bring.SG to-mother DEF-child.DIM  
*sūriyya u malḥafa u l-ḥ<sup>a</sup>wāyž mātāḥ-<sup>e</sup>t daḡr er-rās (50.8–9)*  
 shirt and veil and DEF-thing.PL GEN-F.SG plait DEF-head  
 If he (i.e. the husband) is a wealthy man, he brings to the newborn's mother  
 a shirt, a veil and the necessary things to plait her hair.

In (30), the informant, again speaking of the *ḥawāiž* women use to plait their hair, makes a list of the things he has in mind, immediately triggering feminine plural agreement in the object pronoun *hen* “them.F”.

30. *l-ḥawāiž – gromfəl. šuššwar<sup>e</sup>d (...) bēš l-maṛa tuḡfor*  
 DEF-thing.PL cloves rose.water PURP DEF-woman 3.F.plait.SG  
*bī-hen šaḡar-ha (10.12–14)*  
 by-them.F hair-her  
 The things – cloves, rose water (...) for the woman to plait her hair with.

Table 4. Agreement with inanimate controllers

	Contr.	Targ.	M. Sg.	Masc. Pl.	Fem. Sg.	Fem. Pl.	Br. Pl.
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>64</b>	-	11 (17,18%)	3 (4,68%)	42 (65,62%)	8 (12,5%)
Plural	33	43	-	9	2	29	3
Chains	5	8	-	1	1	6	-
Dual	3	5	-	2	-	3	-
Quant. >10	2	8	-	4	-	4	-

This data, however, needs to be further analyzed in the light of the evidence coming from the existing literature. Taking into consideration the above-mentioned conditioning factors, it is worth noting that our corpus did not include any abstract controller nor, for instance, any noun denoting landscape forms, which rank particularly low in the individuation scale according to Ritt-Benmimoun (2017: 279). Influence from MSA can also be safely ruled out, since we have no loanword from Standard or Classical Arabic and the texts were collected in a period that predates the omnipresent influence of MSA through mass education, television and social media.

Even taking all these provisos into consideration, the data remains interesting, especially when compared to the dialect that is apparently located at the other end of the continuum. In Belnap's data for Cairene, in fact, inanimate sound plural controllers trigger feminine singular agreement 91% of the times, and



this observation, a quick look to our data shows that the 11 occurrences of masculine plural agreement consist of 5 pronouns and 6 verbs. No demonstrative or adjective, neither in attributive nor in predicative position, takes masculine plural agreement. The particular conservativeness of adjectives is also mentioned by Holes (2016: 341) for Bahraini dialects, which have generally lost feminine plural agreement but sporadically preserve it only with adjectives. This behavior faithfully reflects Corbett's agreement hierarchy, according to which,

For any controller that permits alternative agreements, as we move rightwards along the Agreement Hierarchy, the likelihood of agreement with greater semantic justification will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease) (Corbett 2006: 207).

The Agreement Hierarchy is:

attributive > predicate > relative pronoun > personal pronoun

Our data, thus, suggests a change in progress, slowly tending towards the replacement of feminine plural forms with masculine ones. The (probably sociolinguistic) reasons behind such a change remain to be investigated. All known Libyan dialects except the varieties spoken in Tripoli,<sup>14</sup> in fact, still preserve gender distinction in the plural, so that an influence of less conservative (i.e. lacking gender distinction in the plural) but more prestigious varieties is hard to account for.<sup>15</sup> New data, collected in different parts of Libya with younger informants, would probably help to shed light on the issue.

## 7. Conclusions

This paper has investigated patterns of agreement with plural controllers in Fezzani Arabic, following the traditional distinction in human, nonhuman animate and inanimate controllers. Other classes of controllers that are not morphologically plural, i.e. chains, collectives and the noun *nās* "people", were also analyzed. A quick glance to our data shows that, out of 373 targets, only 40 (10,72%) feature feminine singular agreement. This means that, generally speaking, FA largely prefers plural agreement with morphologically or semantically plural controllers.

Agreement with human controllers is quite straightforward. Male plural controllers systematically trigger syntactic agreement in the masculine plural,

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<sup>14</sup> The plural is here justified by the fact that, when the texts were collected, a Judeo-Arabic variety was still spoken in Tripoli alongside the Muslim one. See Yoda (2005).

<sup>15</sup> For Eastern Libyan Arabic, see Owens (1984: 91); for Benghazi, Benkato (2014: 76, 84); for Miṣrāta, see D'Anna (2017b); for al-Khoms, see Benmoftah and Pereira (2017). The data collected in my personal database, moreover, confirms gender distinction in the plural also in Derna, al-Marj and Zliten.

despite all the potential conditioning factors that usually influence agreement choices (word order, mass vs individuated reference etc.). The same, with little difference, can be said of feminine plural controllers, which attract feminine singular agreement in one isolated occurrence, and of inanimate controllers, with only three occurrences (two of them are the genitive exponent *mtāʕ* and the third one is controlled by a chain of two uncountable nouns). Data concerning inanimate controllers, however, should be taken with a pinch of salt, since abstract nouns and other kinds of less individuated controllers are absent from our corpus.

The only two classes in which agreement in the feminine singular occurs with more frequency are the human controller *nās* ‘people’ and the targets controlled by collective nouns denoting animals. In the first case, feminine singular still alternates with masculine plural (isolated occurrences of masculine singular and even feminine plurals still occur), while in the second one agreement in the feminine singular is basically systematic. The difference between plural animal controllers and collective ones, from this perspective, is striking. Chains of collectives systematically trigger deflected agreement, while chains of singular or dual controllers require plural one. These facts lead us to the conclusion that in FA the decisive conditioning factor for agreement choices is mass vs individuated reference (or, in other word, individuation) and not humanness, as already noted by Ritt-Benmimoun (2017: 282) with reference to Southern Bedouin Tunisian dialects.

Saying that humanness does not represent the decisive factor for agreement choices, however, does not equate to saying that it has no role in them. As summarized by Holes (2016: 326), who builds on concepts expressed by Brustad (2000: 18–26, 52–61), ‘...several factors play a part in individuation: agency / animacy, definiteness, specificity, textual or physical prominence, qualification and quantification.’ Humanness, here, represents the higher degree in the scale of animacy. In a system heavily leaning towards plural (syntactic or strict) agreement, thus, the additional degree of individuation provided by the feature [+human] is enough to make it systematic with human plural controllers and prevalent with human collectives, such as *nās* (although *nās* is probably an atypical collective). The comparison between animal and human collectives, in fact, proves that feminine singular agreement is the rule with animal controllers, while it varies with masculine plural in the case of human ones.

From this point of view, FA appears like an even more conservative variety than the neighboring dialects spoken in the Nifzāwa oases of Southern Tunisia. While the latter allow feminine singular agreement with controllers generally denoting groups of people, such as *raʕḻāla* (Ritt-Benmimoun 2017: 268), this never happens in our corpus, where agreement in the feminine singular is restricted, as far as human controllers are concerned, to the controller *nās*. A direct comparison between the two varieties, however, is not possible, since

data for FA date back to approximately seventy years ago, before the processes of urbanization and mass education.

Within the context of this conservative syntactic behavior, in which feminine plural is still the prevalent choice for both human feminine and nonhuman (animate and inanimate) controllers, optional agreement in the masculine plural also occurs. This phenomenon has also been observed in the neighboring Bedouin varieties spoken in Tunisia (Ritt-Benmimoun 2017: 267, 282) and is not constrained by evident morphological or syntactical factors. Our corpus includes a number of sentences featuring a human feminine controller in which the closest target agrees in the feminine plural while farther ones switch to masculine plural, but this does not seem to be a decisive factor. Sociolinguistic factors are likely at play here that need to be investigated on the basis of larger corpora. Given that all known varieties of Libyan Arabic, with the exception of Tripoli Arabic, preserve gender distinction in the plural, a forthcoming study based on fresh data, collected from young informants in different towns, will help to shed light on the issue.

While agreement variation in FA can be effectively accounted for according to the trends so far described, it sometimes occur in ways that baffle our attempts at systematization, as already noted by Holes (2016: 353–354) for Bahrain. The only sample of feminine singular agreement with feminine human controllers, for instance, is the fourth in a series of eight targets depending on *nəsāwīn* ‘woman.PL’. The other seven agree in the (masculine) plural, and the writer cannot think of any possible reason behind this kind of variation. Despite a small number of cases in which free variation most likely occurs, however, this study has demonstrated that agreement in FA follows highly predictable patterns, already observed in other dialects but here represented in a particularly conservative version.

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