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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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;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. Marcais (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, vielded 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 (*sāqil* 'rational' according to the terminology employed by traditional Arab grammarians). Plural controllers designating nonhuman entities (*gavr* Sāqil 'non-rational'), on the contrary, systematically trigger feminine singular

 $<sup>^{2}</sup>$  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>&</sup>lt;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 insomuch 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;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 employed interchangeably in the present paper.

<sup>&</sup>lt;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  $s \dot{g} \bar{a} r$  (broken plural) in attributive position.<sup>6</sup>

- P	1	σ	
0	• ;	5	•

1.	yabdu	t-tri	s i	b-ŗwāḥ-hum	yu <u>ḍ</u> oṛbu	l-magrūna					
	(32.11–12) <sup>7</sup> 3.start.M.PL		-man.PL 1	by-selves-them.M	3.play.M.PL	DEF-flute					
	The men start playing the flute by themselves.										
2.	ŗ-ŗāžəl	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) an	nd the other men g	o out.						
3.	ikūnu	ţnēn	išeddu	ktūf	bas <u>d</u> -hum (3	2.13)					
	3.be.M.PL	two	3.grab.M.PL	shoulder.PL	some-them.M						
	They are tw	vo 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>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that  $s\dot{g}ar$  is the only possible form of non-feminine plural, as the sound plural \*sgirin is ungrammatical. The occurrence of the broken plural, thus, cannot be really considered as an exception.

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



	Number	Targets	Fem. Pl.	Masc. Pl.	Br. Pl.	F. Sg.
Fem. Pl.	39	99	62	35	1	1
Controllers			(62,6%)	(35,4%)	(1%)	(1%)
Chains of fem.	2	8	6	2	-	-
controllers			(75%)	(25%)		

Table 1. Agreement with feminine plural human controllers

Despite the fact that all varieties of FA preserve gender distinction in the plural of verbs, pronouns and adjectives, in fact, approximately one third of the targets controlled by feminine plural human controllers display agreement in the masculine plural, sometimes in the same sentence.

	e.g.					
4.	žan	n-neswān	fi	<u> </u> hōš	el-maṛa	
	came.3.F.PL	DEF-woman.I	PL in	house	DEF-woman	
	idīru	l-Sers	J	vōm-ēn (1	0.10–11)	
	3.make.M.PL	DEF-wedd	ing c	lay-DU		
	The women	came to the	bride's h	ouse to	celebrate the w	redding for two
	days.					
5.	ižu	n-nesāwīn	i	wāţō	l-hen	l-bēt;
	3.come.M.PL	DEF-woman	n.PL 3	unload.M.	PL for-them.I	F DEF-tent
	yugo§den	yəbnen	f	əl-bēt.	(22.8–9)	
	3.stay.F.PL	3.build.F.PL	PREP	DEF-ter	ıt	
	The women	arrive and (	(the men)	) unload	for them the	tent. They (the
	women) set	up the tent.				
6.	w ən-nesi	āwīn ida	uxxlen	dboe	š-hen bī-rōḥ	- <i>hen</i> (22.10–11)
	and DEF-wo	man.PL 3.b	ring.in.F.PL	stuff-1	their.F by-self-	-their.F
	And the wor	men bring the	eir stuff i	n by ther	nselves.	
7	umm ha	u rāv āt	ha	hann	lli vəhnan	al hāt

7.	umm-ha	и	xāw-āt-ha	hənn	əlli	yəbnan	əl-bēt,
	mother-her	and	sister-F.PL-her	they.F	REL	3.build.F.PL	DEF-tent
	idaxxəlō-ha		l-əl-bēt	и	tug§od	(49.8–9)	
	3.let.in.M.PL-h	ner	to-DEF-tent	and	3.F.stay.S	SG	
	Her mother	and h	ner sisters are th	e ones	who set	up the tent,	(then) let her

into the tent and she stays.

As evident from samples 4 and 5, word order does not play any significant role here. In 4, the target (a verb) preceding the controller agrees in the feminine plural, while the one following it (again, a verb) agrees in the masculine plural. In 5, the opposite occurs. While instances of reduced agreement (i.e. agreement in number but not in gender)<sup>8</sup> might have been expected to occur in VS order,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Corbett (2006: 204) defines reduced agreement simply as agreement '...in which not all of the normal distinctions are made'. He also provides examples (e.g. Dutch) in which targets



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  $n\bar{as}$  '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  $n\bar{as}$ , 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  $n\bar{as}$  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.  $i \underline{z} \overline{u}$   $n - n \overline{a} s$   $l - oxr - \overline{a} t$   $i \underline{h} \overline{a} \underline{d} u$ 3.come.M.PL DEF-people DEF-other-F.PL 3.build.side.by.side.M.PL  $b \overline{c} t - a$  (28.11) tent-his The other people come and build their tent beside his.

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



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

Table 2. Agreement with nās

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  $f\bar{i}$ -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.	и	fī-h	nās	тах	csūsa	b-ət-taġsīl	yiġoslu			
	and	in-him	people	spec	ialized.F.SG	in-DEF-washing	3.wash.M.PL			
	b-əl-ma w		eș-ș	sābūn (56.8)						
	by-DE	EF-water	and	DEF	F-soap					
	And	there are	e people	speci	alizing in was	shing who wash (t	he corpse) with			
	wate	r and so	ap.							
10.	и	yegṛo	L	kull	ən-nās (58.2	21)				
	and	3.read.M	I.PL	all	DEF-people					
	And everybody reads.									

Generally speaking, when  $n\bar{a}s$  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-may	vyit	ižū-hum		en-nās				
	and	people	DEF-de	ad	3.come.M.PL-them.M		DEF-people				
	l-oxr-	ēn (58.12	2)								
	DEF-other-M.PL										
	And the other people come to the family of the deceased.										
12.	n-nās		uk-kull	lli	fōg	el-magbara	ižu				
	DEF-p	eople	DEF-all	REL	over	DEF-tomb	3.come.M.PL				
	l-el-g	abªŗ	el-xāli	(58.5-6	5)						
	to-DEI	F-grave	DEF-em	pty							
	Everybody who is over the tomb come to the empty grave.										



13.  $n-n\bar{a}s$  f  $e\bar{s}-\bar{s}a\bar{s}ra$   $k\bar{a}n-hum$   $y\bar{a}sr-\bar{n}n$  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.	baʕd	en-nās		taṛḥal		w	ižu		l-el-m	ōḏaʕ	
	after	DEF-peo	ople	3.F.leave.S	GG	and	3.come.M	.PL	to-DEF	-place	
	elli	$i \qquad b-ihatto fi-h (22.70)$									
	REL FUT-3.unload.M.PL in-him										
	Then people leave and come to the place in which they are going to settle.										
15.	teltəm	m	en-nā	S	f	əž-žām	nos	w	ižību		
	3.F.gath	er.SG	DEF-p	eople	in	DEF-mo	osque	and	3.bring	.M.PL	
	settīn	<u></u> hīzəb	gōŗār	ı (58.20-	-21)						
	sixty	part	Qur'ar	ı							
	People	gather	in the 1	nosque a	and b	ring six	kty passa	ges fro	om the	Qur'an.	
16.	en-nās	-	Smā-ba	Sḍ-ha	ya	ţo _	užūh	-hum		gedā	
	DEF-pe	ople	with-som	e-her	3.giv	ve.M.PL	face.F	L-them	.Μ	towards	
	l-gəbla	a (58.10)	)								
	DEF-qil	bla									
	People together turn their faces towards the <i>qibla</i> .										
	- <b>F</b>	0					1				

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  $n\bar{a}s$  agrees in the feminine singular.

17.	ba§dēn	iži	n-nās	tarfas (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  $n\bar{as}$  together with other names indicating groups of male



persons or mixed people, i.e. ražzala "man.PL", ražazl" "man.PL", rzal" "man.PL", rzal" "man.PL", dirr "children", rzal "beople" and others. All the controllers belonging to this group can take agreement in the feminine singular, while in FA this happens only with nas. 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.

	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%)	-

Table 3. Agreement patterns with nonhuman animate controllers

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) ( $sg\bar{a}r$  "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 Sand-ak žedyān txāf Salē-hen īda sġār. тn at-vou goat.PL little.PL 2.fear.M.SG on-them.F and if from marbūt-āt ər-ruffa ikūnu f f en-now. PASS.PTCP.tie-F.PL DEF-section DEF-heat 3.be.M.PL in in *əd-dell* (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.



19.	ī₫a	Sand-a	nyāg		mōlā-h	yatalg	<b>z-</b> a	<i>fī-hen</i> (36.5)		
	if	at-him	she.camel.H	PL	master-his	3.M.rel	ease.SG-him	in-them.F		
	If he has she-camels, his (i.e. of the camel) master releases him among them.									
20.	lə-b	Sāir	əlli	xand	ab-hən	-	yətəlfən (40.1	8)		
	DEF	-camel.PL	REL	stole	.3.M.SG-them	.F	3.be.lost.F.PL			
	The camels that he stole are lost.									

Sample (18) is paradigmatic of the complexity of agreement choices. The controller is morphologically a broken plural, and so is the attributive adjective that immediately follows it. While the clitic pronoun -hen 'them.F' and the adjectival past participle marbūt-āt 'PASS.PTCP.tie-F.PL' in predicative position agree in the feminine plural, however, the verb *ikūnu* '3.be.M.PL' located between them takes masculine plural agreement. The tendency of participles to take 'the externally inflected form with  $-\bar{a}t$  [likely a mark of individuation] even when all other concordants show masculine plural agreement' has already been noted by Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 274). The reason why the verb ikūnu agrees in the masculine plural despite being located between two feminine plural targets, however, is not clear.

At the other end of the continuum of individuation, collective controllers trigger agreement in the feminine singular in 21 out of 27 occurrences. We have chosen two long samples from our corpus to show that targets, even when located at a great distance from their controller, continue to agree in the feminine singular, while distance from controller usually triggers agreement in the plural (Procházka and Gabsi 2017: 246; Brustad 2000: 58).9

e.g.

21. *īda l-ġanam* if w

DEF-hail DEF-goat DEF-out hit 3.M.SG-her 3.finish.M.SG-her īda l-el-het xaššat hatta iži and if entered.3.F.SG to-DEF-tent even 3.M.come.SG mā-valhag-ha b-šev (20.9–12)

tagg-ha

by-thing NEG-3.M.reach.SG-her

el-barra

If the goats are outside and hail hits them, it kills them. If they enter the tent, even if it hails, it does not reach them.

r-rešād

ikamməl-ha.

r-rešād

DEF-hail

22.	iži		l-əl-bəll	f	əl-məfl	а	и	ya§raf-ha		ibəl
	3.M.co	ome.SG	to-DEF-car	nel in	DEF-pas	ture	and	3.M.know.So	G-her	camel
	mən:	ižī-ha	,	f	əl-lēl		bāit-a			
	who	3.M.co	me.SG-her	in	DEF-night		ACT.PT	CP.spend.the.r	night-F.	SG
	и	u rāsē-ha rā		gəd,		yugron		mən-ha	a ba	əSāyər
	and	nd shepherd-her ACT			T.PTCP.sleep.M.SG 3.N			G from-her	r ca	mel.PL

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The term syntactic agreement would be here problematic, since the controller is a collective noun and not a plural.



w isog-hən (40.12–13)

and 3.M.guide.SG-them.F

He comes to the herd of camels in the pasture and he knows whom they belong to; he comes to them at night, while they are spending the night there, he fastens some camels from it (i.e. the herd) and guide them.

Sample 22 is particularly interesting, as it shows how switching from a controller seen as an indistinct mass to an individuated one (in this case, the morphologically broken plural basavar "camels") immediately triggers (feminine) plural agreement. The informant is here speaking of a rustler who goes to the place where camels (*al-ball* "DEF-camels", collective) are kept at night. At this point, the speaker says that he takes some camels (*basavar*, broken plural) from the herd and he guides them. The collective *al-ball* controls 5 targets, all of which agree in the feminine singular. The object pronoun immediately following the plural *basavar*, on the contrary, is in the feminine plural.

Agreement in the feminine singular for collective controllers features one single exception (23) in our corpus, which is worth some discussion. The collective  $sab\bar{b}$  "horses" controls 6 targets, 1 in pre-subject and 5 in post-subject position. While the verb in VS order agrees in the masculine singular, the other 5 targets all agree in the masculine plural. The controller  $sab\bar{b}b$  collectively designates horses. In this case, however, the speakers adds that the horses arrive  $b-ez-z\bar{c}z$  "by-DEF-two", which inevitably entails a higher degree of individuation. As soon as individuation steps in, thus, agreement switches to the plural. It is worth mentioning, finally, that it is probably not a case that the only occurrence of agreement in the plural concerns horses, while all the other examples refer to other kinds of less valued livestock. The great consideration in which horses are held in the Bedouin environment in which these texts originated, in fact, probably move them higher into the continuum of animacy that goes all the way from inanimate objects to human beings.

23. *iži* s-səbīb yūgurnu b-ez-zōz ižu w 3.fasten.M.PL 3.M.come.SG DEF-horses by-DEF-two and 3.come.M.PL lāhd-īn *Sāl ež-žāSfa*<sup>10</sup> idayyeru mən-ha w ACT.PTCP.gallop-M.PL DEF-palanquin 3.move.away.M.PL from-her on and *ġādi* (6.12)<sup>11</sup> there

The horses arrive in pairs, galloping to the palanquin and moving away from it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For žāhfa "palanquin".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Considerations concerning occurrences of mixed agreement have already been made in 4.3 with regard to  $n\bar{as}$ . Sample (23), however, presents a situation that more closely resembles the structure



Chains help us to further clarify the situation. The 9 chains contained in the corpus, in fact, can be subdivided into chains of collective controllers (6 samples) and chains of singular / plural controllers (3 samples). Chains of singular or plural subjects control 8 targets, 6 of which feature agreement in the feminine plural, while in the 2 occurrences of masculine singular agreement (25) the speaker is probably making reference to a single constituent of the chain.

e.g.

24. en-nā§ža b-ālf-ēn ālāf. ən-nāga bi-xams w by-thousand-DU DEF-she.camel DEF-sheep and by-five thousand.PL əl-hadwi vəmši bī-hen l-es-serīr. li-mahallat er-ret*Sa*. DEF-Bedouin to-DEF-steppe, DEF-pasture 3.M.go.SG by-them.F to-place važSal l-hen sāreh itammən Sand-a u w and 3.M.make.SG for-them.F shepherd and 3.complete.F.PL at-him *Sām* (60.2–4) vear

The sheep (is sold) for two thousands and the she-camel for five thousands. The Bedouin goes with them to the steppe, to the grazing land, and finds them a shepherd, with whom they stay one year.

 $h\bar{a}\check{z}\bar{a}t$ -hum<sup>12</sup> b- $\check{a}\check{z}mal$  w-alla 25. kān žəml-ēn irəddū-hən u and if need-their.M by-camel camel-DU 3.return.M.PL-them.F or l-əl-b<sup>ə</sup>lād w l-a ižīhū *yākəl* (41.15) тā to-DEF-country and 3.bring.M.PL to-him REL 3.M.eat.SG And if they need a camel or two they return them to their place and bring them food.

The 6 chains of collective controllers, on the contrary, never trigger plural agreement. The 8 targets depending on this category of controllers, in fact, feature feminine singular agreement (6 occurrences) or masculine singular one (2 occurrences). Our data can thus add to what already observed by Belnap (1991: 81) for Cairene Arabic, i.e. that chains consisting only of plural forms behave like a single plural controller and thus allow feminine singular agreement, while chains of singular count nouns require plural agreement. Ferguson (1989: 88) also writes that, in Damascus Arabic, 'in a coordinate series of nouns serving as subjects, the agreeing verb or adjective may be feminine singular if ALL the nouns are non-human plural. If, however, even a single instance

AUX – SBJ – MAIN VERB described by Holes (2016: 340-341). In Holes' sample, the auxiliary took feminine singular agreement, while the main verb had masculine plural. Here the verb  $i\dot{z}i$ , which precedes  $y\bar{u}guinu$  without any complementizer or conjunction, agrees in the masculine singular, while the following targets take full agreement in the masculine plural.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> It is not clear how this  $h\bar{a}\bar{z}\bar{a}t$ -hum should be glossed. The following  $\bar{a}zmal$  'camel', in fact, is preceded by the preposition bi 'by' and cannot be the subject. It might be a case of an impersonal verb in the suffixal conjugation.



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.

	0									
26.	Sand-a	l-bəll	W	əl-ġanam	yāsra (2	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-	ġənam	mā-lāgat-š		та	tākəl (28.14–15)			
	DEF-came	ls and DE	F-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-ġənam	w-əl-bəş	aŗ	yabda	fī žīl	na (26.1	3–14)			
	DEF-goats	and DEF-	cow.PL	3.M.begin.SG	in sid	e				
	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 firan "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-Benimimoun (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  $m \partial t \bar{a} G^{e} t$ , controlled by  $h^{a} w \bar{a} v \bar{z}$  "things", takes feminine singular agreement:

<sup>&</sup>lt;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 ižīb l-umm l-ulēd if wealthv 3.M.bring.SG to-mother DEF-child.DIM he man sūrivva и malhəfa u *l*-*h*<sup>*a*</sup>*wāvž* mətā*S-*<sup>e</sup>t dafr *er-rās* (50.8–9) and DEF-thing.PL GEN-F.SG DEF-head shirt and veil plait 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 *hawāiž* 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-hawāiž – gromfəl. šuššwar<sup>e</sup>d (...) bēš l-mara tudfor*DEF-thing.PL cloves rose.water PURP DEF-woman 3.F.plait.SG *bī-hen šaSar-ha* (10.12–14)
by-them.F hair-her
The things – cloves, rose water (...) for the woman to plait her hair with.

	Contr.	Targ.	M. Sg.	Masc. Pl.	Fem. Sg.	Fem. Pl.	Br. Pl.
Total	43	64	-	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	-

Table 4. Agreement with inanimate controllers

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



inanimate broken plural ones reach 92% (Belnap 1993: 101). Unfortunately, neither Prochazka and Gabsi (2017) nor Ritt-Benimoun (2017) include statistics. Bettega (fthc.) also reports very high percentages of agreement in the feminine singular with targets depending on both nonhuman sound (68,2%) and broken (68,7%) controllers, despite admitting that influence from MSA might have played a role in his data.

Gender choices in the plural are also worth some additional considerations. As we have already seen with humans and nonhuman animates, inanimate controllers can trigger agreement both in the feminine and in the masculine plural. Feminine is the prevalent choice (65,62%) and the original one, at least based on the data from pre-Islamic Arabic (Belnap and Gee 1994: 127). Masculine plural occurs less frequently (17,18%) and seems to be innovative. Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 276) writes that, with regard to inanimate controllers, 'a masculine plural can replace a feminine plural any time'. She also reports a sample from an 18 year old girl, in which all the targets (depending on the inanimate controller *l-<sup>a</sup>mmāsīn* 'DEF-dishes') take masculine plural agreement. This might suggest that a change is in progress, involving a progressive switch from feminine to masculine agreement. Given that no purely grammatical reason can be adduced for this choice, sociolinguistic factors are probably at play here. Ritt-Benimoun (2017: 267) writes that speakers of the Bedouin varieties she is describing (Nifzāwa region of Southern Tunisia) are well aware of the fact that the feminine plural is a form almost exclusively retained in their dialect. so that they probably switched, during the interview, to the masculine forms in use both in the sedentary dialects and in most Bedouin ones (Ritt-Benmimoun 2017: 282).

In our data, masculine plural agreement also replaces feminine plural with no evident reason.

e.g.

- *Sošrīn* vabdu 31. hatta vabdu bēt məssātrāt, ACT.PTCP.be.lined-F.PL 3.M.begin.PL 3.M.begin.PL even twenty tent *mətgātrāt* (22.14–15) hatta ACT.PTCP.flank.each.other-F.PL even Until twenty tents, they are lined, and then we set them on the sides.
- 32.  $es-sn\bar{u}n$   $ida-k\bar{a}n$   $y\bar{u}z\bar{s}u...$  (14.14) DEF-tooth.PL if 3.M.hurt.PL If the teeth hurt...

In (31), *Sošrīn bēt* 'twenty tents' controls 4 targets, 2 verbs and 2 active participles in predicative position. Both verbs take masculine plural agreement and both participles take feminine plural. Ritt-Benmimoun (2017: 274) also notes that 'participles often show the externally inflected form with *-āt* even when all other concordants show masculine plural agreement'. Building on



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  $n\bar{a}s$  "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,

<sup>&</sup>lt;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>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> For Eastern Libyan Arabic, see Owens (1984: 91); for Benghazi, Benkato (2014: 76, 84); for Mişrāta, 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  $mt\bar{a}S$  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  $n\bar{as}$  '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  $n\bar{as}$  (although  $n\bar{as}$  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 ražžāla (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  $n\bar{a}s$ . 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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