

Simone Bettega and Luca D'Anna. 2023. *Gender and Number Agreement in Arabic* (“*Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 109*”). Leiden: Brill. 407 pages. ISBN 978-90-04-52723-2. EUR 157.94.

This book by Bettega and D'Anna represents a unique attempt at addressing from multiple perspectives a well-known feature of Modern Arabic syntax: namely, the rule dictating feminine singular agreement with non-human masculine plural controllers. As emerges in the very first paragraphs of this almost four hundred pages essay, there are several interrelated questions that arise around, perhaps, one of the most salient traits of Modern Standard Arabic and of several contemporary dialects. Such questions concern both the synchronic distribution of this agreement pattern, and its historical origins. Moreover, the authors call the scholarly attention on a more specific aspect: if we consider synchronic variation across spoken dialects or diachronic language change in written Arabic sources from different periods, everywhere F.SG is attested, it is far from categorical and there is always some degree of language-internal variation, also within inanimate nouns. This is why, when possible, corpus data and frequency distributions are taken into account as potential indicators of ongoing tendencies in specific dialects or written varieties. Such tendencies are analysed by the authors in the light of the typological-functional paradigm, as they ultimately identify a major rationale for the emergence of F.SG agreement in the animacy/individuation scale.

The first chapter (1-27) presents a critical overview of the available readership on agreement in Arabic, especially in relation with gender and number, with a distinction also between works on written Arabic vs spoken varieties. Most of the accounts discussed by the authors are rooted in the tradition of Arabic or Semitic linguistics, and at this point the different terminologies used by single (groups of) scholars may engender perplexity among readers who are unacquainted with this field. Bettega and D'Anna, though, are aware of jargon-related problems and almost immediately introduce their own terminology, which is used consistently throughout the book. An important point in this respect, which goes far beyond mere terminology and returns throughout the entire book, is the identification of an ideal division between gender-distinguishing and non-distinguishing dialects, which means dialects that retain the distinction between masculine and feminine in plural verbs, adjectives and pronouns, and dialects that have lost this distinction. This categorisation is functional to the description of gender/agreement systems and provides a major interpretive key of the variation observed within Arabic grammar, especially in that it cuts across other traditional distinctions such as that between bedouin and sedentary dialects. The authors claim in fact that due to the societal changes that have involved bedouin—as well as sedentary—communities throughout the centuries, it is no

longer possible to categorically associate either of these communities with specific linguistic features, which makes the distinction itself inadequate for the investigation of this phenomenon.

Chapter 2 (28-177), the longest of the whole book, departs from the tradition of Arabic linguistics and seeks to root the description of agreement patterns in the light of the categories of general linguistics. Specifically, most of the discussion is actually based on the works by Greville Corbett on gender, number and agreement which are, in turn, couched within the functional-typological paradigm. The authors present a thorough account of agreement across different varieties of Arabic. More precisely, they cover written Arabic as well as all dialects for which a description of agreement is available. Whenever possible, they rely on self-collected data and in some cases expand on previous studies, as is the case for example with the account of Najdi texts. Based on this survey, 6 major types of gender-agreement patterns are identified, which represents an important generalisation that is, to my knowledge, unprecedented in this field of studies. Moreover, an interesting result is also represented by the fact that in the varieties for which corpus data are available agreement with plural non-human controllers has a probabilistic nature, and is better definable in terms of synchronic variation patterns.

Chapters 3 (178-276), 4 (277-324) and 5 (325-376) tackle the description of agreement from a diachronic perspective. Chapter 3 presents first an overview of agreement-related phenomena within the Semitic family and in the Afroasiatic phylum. Most of the discussion concentrates on the presence of broken, or internal, plurals which appear to be one of the major factors driving the changes observed in Arabic. The authors in fact demonstrate the presence of ongoing change since the times of pre-Islamic poetry. The authors contend that the origin of F.SG agreement reside in the different semantic connotation that characterizes nouns that take broken plurals, which bear a semantic nuance of non-individuation. In the pre-Islamic period, broken plurals, where gender is not overtly marked, started spreading as an alternative strategy for plural marking, with respect to the use of M.PL and F.PL suffixes. In Bettega and D'Anna's interpretation, broken plurals were first associated as a strategy for plural marking in non-individuated nouns, and this is actually the domain in which F.SG agreement in the plural is supposed to have been first developed. At a later stage, this opposition based on individuation was then resemanticised in terms of a *human / non-human* opposition, which gives us the situation of Classical and Modern Standard Arabic. Crucially, an overview of Arabic traditional grammar reveals that this rule was formalised at a relatively later stage, in the works of Nasif Al-Yazigi, dating back to the 19th century. All this discussion is of paramount importance also for what concerns the interpretation of agreement in spoken dialects: the authors are able to demonstrate that F.SG

agreement must be regarded as a conservative feature, perhaps possibly favoured by contact with MSA, but to a lesser extent than what others have argued.

As should have emerged from this summary, one of the key points of this book is that, being informed on a great variety of sources, it provides a rich information on virtually any variety of Arabic as far as agreement is concerned. It presents in fact a wide-scoping research, in that the synchrony and diachrony of agreement in Classical Arabic, MSA and spoken dialects addressed. Moreover, the book benefits from insights from different complementary subfields of linguistics: on the one hand, the tradition of Arabic linguistics, on the other, multiple approaches within theoretical linguistics. Part of the analysis is specifically couched in the typological-functional paradigm, where notions such as *target* and *controller gender*, or the animacy hierarchy were first formulated. Moreover, considerable parts of the analysis adopt a quantitative corpus based methodology that, as said, is particularly useful to conceptualize agreement patterns in terms of language variation rather than as a categorical rule. A possible development in this respect would be to test the conclusions reached in this work with the use of inferential statistical models.

While the book globally locates at the intersection between Arabic linguistics and dialectology on the one hand, and theoretical linguistics on the other hand—and in fact provides a significant contribution in both fields—readers who are acquainted with Arabic linguistics or dialectology will still find themselves much more at ease than theoretical linguists. Key concepts in Arabic grammar, such as the definition itself of broken plurals, or *nisba* adjectives, are taken for granted to some extent, or, at least, a reader unfamiliar with salient features of Arabic grammar could want to know more, in order to fully benefit of the authors' discussion. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the book provides an important contribution to both Arabic and theoretical linguistics, as it offers and systematizes original discoveries on the rise and diffusion of F.SG in Arabic that improve not only our knowledge of this language but also of the functioning and diachronic evolution of agreement patterns in the world languages.

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