

On the Contrastive Use of Plurals in Tunisian Arabic

The Arabic plural comes in two shapes, the sound plural (suffixation) and the broken plural (stem change). In traditional grammars of Arabic, this distinction is lexically based and nouns are assigned one plural shape or the other. However, a closer look at Tunisian Arabic data (henceforth, TA) reveals the following puzzle. In TA, some nouns can take both plural shapes, as shown in (1), where the noun *mefza* ‘goat’ can either be pluralized by stem change (1a) or suffixation (1b).

- (1) a. ken fallah ʕand-u ardh w chwayya **mefz-et.**
was farmer have-he land and few goat-fem.sp
‘He was a farmer who had a land and a few goats.’
- b. tfol i-rabbi f-el **mfiiz/*mefz-et.**
boy he-breed in-the goat.bp
‘A boy who breeds goats.’

The choice between the two plural shapes is, *prima facie*, phonologically motivated. Canonically-shaped nouns undergo a productive operation that results in broken plurals, while uncanonical nouns are only pluralized by suffixation (McCarthy & Prince, 1990). The variation of the type shown in (1) only happens in canonically-shaped nouns. I will show that this variation is semantically motivated. In other words, sound plurals give rise to a special meaning (*only*) when applied to canonical nouns. In example (1a), the canonically-shaped noun *mefza* ‘goat’ unexpectedly takes a sound plural and refers to a few goats. However, when it comes to referring to goats as a kind, only the broken plural can be used, as shown by the contrast between the two forms in (1b).

The sound plural denotes an individual and yields a paucal reading when applied to canonical nouns. This, I argue, is possible because Arabic grammar embeds a singulative system, an operation that creates units out of collective nouns. The relationship with the singulative is made obvious in the case under study, due to the fact that contrastive sound plurals are always of the feminine gender, which happens to also mark the singulative in Arabic. I use this as evidence to argue that the singulative operates on the noun before pluralization on a higher level, to then give an interpretation that is similar to the plural of the singulative (Mathieu 2014). A natural consequence of the idea that the sound plural can have a distinct purpose from that of the broken plural is that plurals can no longer be assigned the unique dividing function assumed by Borer (2005).

The present paper should be read in the context of recent literature on the syntax and semantics of plurals. Plural marking on nouns is traditionally associated with sum values. However, recent semantic trends suggest that plurals can also include reference to individuals in certain contexts (Krifka 1989, Sauerland 2003, Sauerland et al. 2005, Spector 2007, Zweig 2009, Bale 2011). The English plural is ambiguous between exclusive sum reference and individual-inclusive reference. Building on this previous literature about the semantic interpretation of the plural, I will argue that Tunisian Arabic has two different plurals that fill different syntactic functions, and hence propose that they must be represented on two distinct levels of the nominal spine, following the recent trend of researchers viewing number as distributed along the nominal spine (Acquaviva 2008; Harbour 2008; Wiltschko 2008, 2012; Butler 2012; Mathieu 2013, 2014; Kramer 2016), and more specifically Mathieu’s (2013, 2014) idea of a higher plural.

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