Agreement in Tunisian Arabic and the collective-distributive distinction

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The puzzle Like their sound plural (SP) counterparts, the ɸ-features of broken plurals (BP) subjects in Tunisian Arabic (TA) normally agree with the verb in gender and number but, as seen in (1), they can also fail to agree with the verb. *Rjel* 'men' is masculine plural while the verb is unexpectedly inflected in the feminine singular (in Standard Arabic, this is only possible with non-humans). Is this a case of agreement failure?

(1)   El   rjel   xerj-u   / xerj-et
       The man.BP go.outPERF-3.MASC.PL / go.outPERF-3.FEM.SG
       'The men went out.'   [Tunisian Arabic]

The proposal First, we show that the contrast in (1), gives rise to a semantic alternation, as first observed by Zabbal (2002), where masc plur agreement has a distributive interpretation, while fem sing agreement receives a collective interpretation. We build on Zabbal's (2002) insights but re-evaluate them in light of recent developments in the syntax and semantics of plurality and distributivity, and we add relevant data showing that the collective-distributive contrast seen in (1) is not tied to the nature of the predicate.

Zabbal makes a distinction between plurals denoting groups (g-plurals) and plurals denoting sums (s-plurals). He first argues that the g-plural is associated with N (making it lexical and derivational) while the s-plural is under Num (inflectional). We provide arguments and evidence for his second proposal, briefly introduced towards the end of his thesis, namely that the g-plural is in fact inflectional and thus not under N. In particular, we strengthen his intuition that the singulative is realized under the same head as the group reading. However, inspired by Borer (2005) and a number of authors, we identify this functional projection as Div and, contrary to what Zabbal proposes, we argue that SPs are in complementary distribution with BPs under Div where the singulative can also be found.

We also show that non-matching broken plurals are not hybrid nouns in the sense of Landau (2016) and others (den Dikken 2001, Wechsler Zlatić 2003, Danon 2011, Smith 2015). Landau argues that hybrid nouns can trigger semantic agreement on the verb, with the semantic (INDEX) ɸ-features differing from the morphological (CONCORD) ɸ-features. This proposal, although sound for the Hebrew data he reviews, cannot apply to our data, since verbs in TA turn out to consistently agree with grammatical (not semantic) gender (in (1) 'men' is semantically masc).

Next, we show that the distributive/collective contrast seen in (1) has nothing to do with the nature of the predicate. The application of the group operator that forms a group out of a set of individuals is free (de Vries 2015). Fem sing agreement is also possible with distributive predicates and masc pl agreement is also possible with collective predicates. This shows that the contrast between masc/pl and fem/sing agreement is related to how the subject noun is viewed by the speaker (as a homogeneous group versus a set of individuals) rather than closely tied to the predicate as in the case of the English collective-distributive distinction.

Finally, we end the paper with a set of arguments that there is a position just above Div that hosts different kinds of plurals (double plurals, plurals of singualtives), arguing more generally that number can be distributed along the nominal spine (see also Harbour 2008, Wiltschko 2008, 2012, Butler 2012, Mathieu 2013, Gillon 2015, Kramer 2016).

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