

Default Number and Gender in Arabic Verbal Agreement

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Abstract

This paper delves into the intricate details of agreement in number and gender in both Standard Arabic and other Arabic dialects. Although Standard Arabic is the variety understood by all Arabic speakers and serves as the language of literacy, scientific discourse, and religious practice, the diversity of Arabic extends far beyond Standard Arabic. It encompasses a wide range of dialects that differ significantly across regions and communities. The primary objective of this paper is to explore the concept of default number and gender in Arabic varieties, with a specific focus on investigating agreement in number and gender within subject-verb (SV) and verb-subject (VS) word order alternations. This investigation is crucial, as this variation in word order is evident in both Arabic varieties and Standard Arabic. The study is based on original data elicited through sentence judgment tasks with ten native speakers of the Northern variety of Saudi Arabic. The findings suggest that in verbal agreement, default number and gender are influenced not only by word order but also by factors such as the subject's number and its reference to human entities. These patterns are interpreted within the frameworks of markedness theory and the animacy hierarchy, which help explain why singular and masculine forms function as unmarked defaults and why human referents trigger fuller agreement. By exploring these dynamics, the paper aims to enhance understanding of verbal agreement in Arabic, offering insights into the intricate interplay of default number and gender within this linguistic framework.

Keywords: Arabic, default, number, gender, verbal agreement, morphology

1. Introduction

While Standard Arabic serves as the formal language for literature, science, religion, and official settings, it is rarely used in everyday communication. Instead, Arabic speakers across the Arab world employ distinct regional dialects, which vary significantly by geography and sociolinguistic context (Al-Shammari, 2023). Given these linguistic variations, this paper compares number and gender agreement in Standard Arabic and selected dialects to highlight key similarities and structural differences.

This study has three primary objectives. First, it provides a comprehensive analysis of nominal and verbal sentence structures. Second, it investigates number and gender agreement across subject-verb (SV) and verb-subject (VS) word orders, both of which are attested in Standard Arabic and regional varieties (Al-Shammari, 2023; Himmelreich, 2023). Third, it explores the default features that govern verbal agreement in VS constructions across different Arabic dialects (Himmelreich, 2023).

The working hypothesis is that agreement patterns in Arabic are not solely determined by syntactic structure (i.e., word order) but are also influenced by semantic factors such as humanness and grammatical number (Rouillier, 2023).

To investigate this hypothesis, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the alternation between subject-verb (SV) and verb-subject (VS) word order affect number and gender agreement patterns in both Standard Arabic and selected Arabic dialects?
2. To what extent does the grammatical gender of the subject trigger default number and gender agreement in VS constructions, particularly when the subject is non-human or inanimate?

To further elaborate, in SV order, the verb and the subject agree together under spec-head agreement as in 1b in which, the T(Note 2) is phi-complete. As a result, there is a full agreement between the subject and the verb. However, in VS order, the T lacks number or all phi-features(Note 3) thus phi-incomplete. At this stage, before spell-out, the default features are established, and full agreement between the subject and the verb does not surface (Alahdal, 2021).

In Standard Arabic, partial agreement occurs in VS word order, where the verb agrees with the subject only in gender and person, as seen in 1a. In contrast, full agreement in gender, number, and person occurs in SV word order, as shown in 1b.

In Arabic, the spec-head agreement(Note 4) is more relevant to agreement than government relationship even though gender and person are preserved. According to Benmamoun (1992), only under the spec-head agreement can gender agreement occur. According to Van Gelderen (1996), the SV word order occurs when the subject moves to the head position, allowing for spec-head agreement between the subject and the verb. In contrast, the VS word order arises when only the verb moves, leaving a placeholder in the specifier (SPEC) position to establish agreement. However, because the placeholder lacks full specification, the verb must wait for the noun phrase (NP) subject to join it in order to complete the feature-checking process. In other word, when a placeholder occupies the Specifier (Spec-TP) position, it does not carry full ϕ -features (e.g., person, number) needed for agreement with the verb. Instead, the verb "waits" for the actual noun or noun phrase (e.g., a book) to join the structure and provide the missing features. This process ensures that the verb agrees with the true subject of the clause (the post-verbal NP) rather than the placeholder. According to Van Gelderen, this mechanism operates by categorizing verb features into two types: number as a strong feature and gender as a weak feature. It is important to note that Van Gelderen's explanation applies only to Standard Arabic and does not account for other varieties of Arabic.

In contrast, the agreement patterns found in some non-standard varieties of Arabic seem to challenge the idea that agreement is sensitive to word order (Aoun et al., 1994). The case of Moroccan Arabic (MA) and Lebanese Arabic (LA) as the following examples from (Aoun et al., 1994) shows full agreement in both word orders.

Table 1. Examples of Agreement from Moroccan Arabic

2) a.	*N?as	l-wlaad.
	slept.3s	the-children
	"The children slept."	
b.	L-wlaad	nais-u.
	the-children	slept-3P
	"The children slept."	
c.	Na?su	la-wlaad.
	slept.3p	the-children
	"The children slept."	
d.	*La-wlaad	n?as.
	the-children	slept.3s
	"The children slept."	

Tables 1 and 2, which present data from Moroccan and Lebanese Arabic, show that the verb fully agrees with the subject in both word orders, as demonstrated in examples (2), (3b), and (3c). These examples highlight differences in agreement patterns between Standard Arabic and other Arabic varieties, reinforcing the paper's hypothesis that word order affects number and gender agreement in certain dialects. Furthermore, this influence may vary depending on the specific Arabic variety.

Table 2. Examples of Agreement from Lebanese Arabic

- 3) a. *Neem la-wlaad.
 slept.3s the-children
 “The children slept.”
- b. Lo-wlaad neemo.
 the-children slept.3p
 “The children slept.”
- c. Neemo la-wlaad.
 slept.3p the-children
 “The children slept.”
- d. *L-wlaad neem.
 the-children slept.3s
 “The children slept.”

Based on Greenberg’s (1963) Universals 32(Note 5), the subject and verb are expected to agree in both number and gender. This is inconsistent with Arabic where in VS word order, there is partial agreement only in gender but not in number. On the other hand, Universal 33(Note 6) aligns with Arabic, as in the VS order, when the verb precedes the subject, it consistently appears in the singular form and agrees only in gender, not in number. However, according to Aoun et al. (1994), when a conjoined subject precedes the verb, full agreement may occur in Lebanese and Moroccan Arabic. In contrast, in Standard Arabic, the verb agrees with the subject only in gender, not in number. In all three varieties, when the verb precedes a conjoined subject, one option is for the verb to agree with the first member of the conjoined subject. In Standard Arabic, another option is for the verb to agree in gender with the first noun phrase. In Lebanese and Moroccan Arabic, the verb may fully agree with the first member of the conjoined phrase. However, the findings of Aoun et al. (1994) regarding Lebanese and Moroccan Arabic cannot be generalized to other varieties of Arabic due to the significant differences among these varieties. According to Albirini et al. (2013), the masculine singular may function as the default category in Arabic for several reasons: it is the simplest form, one of the earliest acquired in first-language (L1) acquisition, and commonly used by less proficient Arabic learners as a strategy to minimize errors in production. Alshammari’s (2015) findings on Saudi Arabic align with studies on other Arabic varieties spoken in Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, and Egypt (Aoun et al., 1994), reinforcing the notion that the singular masculine may serve as a default feature across different Arabic dialects. The preference for the less marked masculine form over the feminine form is consistent with findings from other Arabic varieties, including Lebanese, Moroccan, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Saudi Arabic (Aljenaie, 2010). Prévost and White (2000) explained that inaccuracies in number and gender agreement among French and German L2 learners arise from difficulties in the overt realization of morphology rather than from a lack of functional categories or features related to tense and agreement. This suggests that such errors result from missing inflection rather than a syntactic deficit. Similarly, this explanation could account for the use of the singular masculine form in Arabic varieties, where learners may rely on it as a default due to inflectional gaps.

Based on the aforementioned literature, this investigation identifies several inconsistencies that require further exploration:

1. **Word Order and Dialect-Specific Agreement:** Word order influences number and gender agreement in some Arabic varieties, suggesting that agreement patterns might be dialect-specific.
2. **Interplay Between Number and Gender:** Number, in addition to word order, affects gender agreement, highlighting a complex interaction that warrants deeper analysis.

3. **Unaddressed Influencing Factors:** None of the reviewed articles examine other potential factors affecting the use of default gender and number in verbal agreement, such as animacy vs. inanimacy, \pm human reference, and the numerical complexity of the subject.

These gaps emphasize the need for a more nuanced and encompassing approach to understanding verbal agreement in Arabic varieties.

3. Methodology and Dataset

The data analyzed in this study comes from the Northern dialect of Saudi Arabia, specifically a variety spoken in the Northern border region. It is important to note that this dialect is not spoken by all individuals living in the North, but by a specific group within the region. To ensure accuracy, 10 native speakers of this particular variety were consulted to evaluate all the sentences used in the tests.

The ten participants in the study are adult native speakers of the northern variety of Saudi Arabic, all sharing a similar sociolinguistic background. They speak a specific regional dialect from northern Saudi Arabia. The participants have varied educational levels: several have completed college education, one holds a PhD, and two are high school graduates. The age ranges from 26 to 60.

3.1 Methodology

The study used an elicitation-based approach. Participants were presented with a series of test sentences reflecting different grammatical structures. These included:

1. Number and gender agreement in SV and VS word order.
2. Agreement patterns with conjoined subjects.

Each participant was asked to judge the grammaticality and naturalness of these sentences, and to offer corrections where applicable. Their responses were recorded and analyzed to identify patterns of agreement and divergence from Standard Arabic norms. The data was then categorized and coded for syntactic and semantic features such as word order, number, gender, and animacy.

4. Analysis

4.1 Number – Gender Agreement in SV and VS Word Order

The data in this test is divided into agreement with {-human} and agreement with {+human} subject. The examples in Table 3 are for the verbal agreement with {-human} subject.

Table 3. Verbal Agreement with Human Subject in Northern Variety of Saudi Arabic

4) a. Alkutub	extafat
The books.plural.masculine	disappeared-past.singular.feminine
“The books disappeared.”	
b. Extafat	alkutub
disappeared-past.singular.feminine	the books.plural.masculine
“The books disappeared.”	
c. Alqetarat	taharakt
The-trains.plural.feminine	moved-past.singular.feminine
“The trains moved.”	
5). a. akala-t	al?usud/ akala-t
Ate.past.singular.feminine	the lions.plural.masculine./

Ate.past.singular.feminine
 “The lions ate.”

b. akala-t

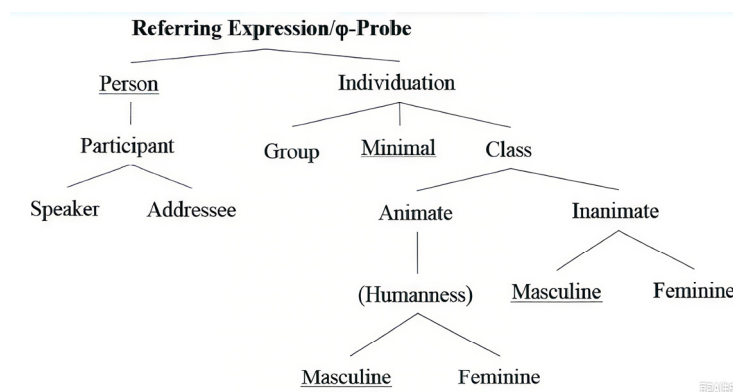
Ate-past.singular.feminine
 “The female lions ate.”

allabuat/akalat

the female lions.plural.feminine./Ate.past.singular.feminine

Based on the analysis of the sentences and the judgments of native speakers, the results indicate that when the subject is a non-human plural, the verb remains singular and feminine in both SV and VS word orders. Additionally, when the subject is a non-human masculine plural, as seen in example 5a, there is no agreement between the subject and the verb in either word order. However, when the subject is a non-human feminine plural, as in example 5b, there is partial agreement in gender only, regardless of word order. This pattern is also found in Standard Arabic (SA), where partial agreement occurs when the subject is a non-human plural feminine, while no agreement is observed when the subject is a non-human plural masculine.

According to Harley and Ritter's (2002) feature geometry, the $[\pm\text{human}]$ feature takes precedence over gender in the hierarchical structure of feature representation. In Arabic, this principle is reflected in the feature geometry, as shown in Figure 1, adapted from Alwahibi (2020).



Note. Default gender values: for $[+ \text{human}] \rightarrow$ masculine, and for $[-\text{human}] \rightarrow$ feminine in Arabic.

Figure 1. Arabic Feature Geometry, Adapted from Alwahibi (2020)

For both the $[\pm\text{human}]$ singular subject, there is always a full agreement in number and gender in both word orders. In 6a, where the subject is $+\text{human}$ singular, a full agreement surfaces in both word orders. In 6b, the subject is $-\text{human}$ singular, a full agreement also surfaces in both word orders (see Table 4).

Table 4. Agreement in Number and Gender with Human Subject

6) a. Safar	al-walad/	safar
Travelled-past.singular.masculine	the boy.singular.masculine	Travelled-past.singular.masculine
“The boy travelled.”		
b. a. Alkitab	extafa/	alkitab
The book.singular.masculine	disappeared.past.singular.masculine	The book.singular.masculine
“The book disappeared.”		

Table 5. Full Agreement in Number and Gender with - Human Subject

6) c. Alwaladin	safar-u/	alwaladin
The-boy.duboy.dual.masculine	travelled.past.plural.masculine	the-boy.dual.masculine
“The two boys tavelled.”		
d. Albanat	safar-u	/ albanat
The-girls.pl.fem	travelled.past.plural.masculine	The-girls.plural.feminine
“The girls travelled.”		
e. Akalu	alasadin/	akalu
Ate.past.plural.masculine	the lions.dual.masculine./	Ate.past.plural.masculine.
“The two lions ate.”		

In the examples 6c to 6e, masculine plural is used with both feminine and masculine plural and dual in both word orders. In 6c, the subject is +human dual masculine, and the verb is plural masculine, where there is agreement only in gender but not in number in both word order. In 6d, the subject is a +human plural feminine, while the verb is in the plural masculine form. In this case, agreement occurs in number but not in gender, regardless of word order. In 6e, the subject is –human dual masculine, and the verb still plural masculine. In this case, the plural masculine form is used with both -human dual and +human dual, as well as with +human plural masculine and feminine, in both word orders.

4.2 Conjoined Subject

Based on the analysis of the data and the judgment of the native speakers, the results showed that in both word orders when the conjoined nominals are singular - human and + human, there is agreement with gender of the most adjacent determiner phrase (DP).

According to native speakers' judgments, a conjoined subject can be treated as a dual subject, as illustrated in examples 8a and 8b (see Table 4). In these cases, the verb consistently appears in the plural masculine form, regardless of whether the subject precedes or follows the verb, as observed in the first test. This suggests that conjoined subjects, particularly those referring to human entities, can trigger plural masculine agreement due to their semantic and syntactic properties.

Table 6. Examples of Conjoined Subject in Northern Variety of Saudi Arabic

7) a. *Rah	Sara w Ahmed		
left-past.sing.masc	Sara and Ahmed		
“Sara and Ahmed left.”			
8) a. Al saiarah	w	alqetar	meḥ u
The car.sing.fem	and	the train.sing.masc	moved. Past.masc.pl
“The car and the train moved.”			
b. Meḥ u	Al saiarah	w	alqetar
moved-Past.masc.pl.	The car.sing.fem	And	the train.sing.masc
“The car and the train moved.”			

c. Meʃ-t	Al saiarah	w	alqetar	
moved-Past.sing.fem	The car.sing.fem	And	the train.sing.masc	
“The car and the train moved.”				
d. * Meʃ a	al saiarah	w	alqetar	
Moved-past.sing.masc	the car.sing.fem	and	the train.sing.masc.	
“The car and the train moved.”				
e. meʃ-t	alsayarat	w	alqetarat/	meʃ-t
Moved.past.sing.fem	the car.pl.fem	and	the train.pl.masc.	Moved.past.sing.fem
“The cars and the trains moved.”				

In contrast, as shown in example 8e, when the conjoined subject consists of a {-human} plural noun, the verb systematically takes the singular feminine form, irrespective of word order. This pattern aligns with the broader morphosyntactic rules of Arabic, where {-human} plurals are typically treated as grammatically singular and feminine in agreement. These findings highlight the role of animacy and default agreement patterns in Arabic verbal morphology.

5. Discussion

This study's findings contribute to ongoing debates on agreement asymmetries in Arabic and their theoretical implications within morphosyntactic theory, particularly in the areas of default agreement, animacy hierarchy, and markedness theory.

5.1 Default Number and Markedness

The evidence that the singular form functions as the default supports the theoretical assumption that singular is the unmarked grammatical number in Arabic (Harley & Ritter, 2002). This aligns with cross-linguistic findings where singular forms are cognitively simpler, more frequent, and acquired earlier by children and L2 learners (Borer, 2005). The use of singular verbs with conjoined or plural subjects in the Northern variety aligns with Al-Shammari (2023), suggesting that markedness plays a stronger role than syntactic configuration alone.

5.2 Default Gender and the Animacy Hierarchy

The consistent use of masculine gender as default, even with feminine or non-human subjects, reflects broader patterns in Arabic dialects (Fakih & Al-Sharif, 2017; Himmelreich, 2023). This phenomenon can be explained by the animacy hierarchy, which predicts that animacy and humanness influence agreement more strongly than surface grammatical features. The preference for masculine plural agreement, even when the subject is feminine or inanimate, supports the idea that animacy-sensitive agreement is semantically conditioned (Silverstein, 1976; Aissen, 2003).

5.3 Partial and Non-Agreement: Typological Implications

The partial agreement observed with non-human plural subjects in the Northern variety is consistent with patterns in Standard Arabic and other dialects, where deflected agreement occurs (i.e., feminine singular verb with non-human plural subject). Himmelreich (2023) and Al-Humairi (2023) describe this as a systemic feature in Arabic, reflecting an interaction between semantic agreement and syntactic agreement. In generative terms, this can be seen as a mismatch between ϕ -feature valuation at the interface (Chomsky, 2001).

5.4 Interaction of Word Order and Agreement

The findings challenge simplistic models of agreement based solely on word order (e.g., SV = full agreement; VS = partial agreement). While Standard Arabic conforms more to this binary, the Northern variety shows that other factors (humanness, number, lexical semantics) influence agreement patterns. This supports recent syntactic work (e.g., Himmelreich, 2023) that suggests agreement is distributed across multiple projections and is sensitive to both hierarchical structure and feature interpretability.

5.5 Dialectal Variation and Theoretical Generalization

The differences observed between Standard Arabic and the Northern variety of Saudi Arabic emphasize that dialect-specific morphosyntactic rules must be accounted for in any general theory of Arabic agreement. This finding aligns with Rouillier (2023), who argues for a microvariation framework in Arabic agreement studies, showing how even minor dialects reflect major theoretical challenges in formal grammar.

These findings underscore the highly dialect-specific nature of agreement patterns, which vary significantly across Arabic varieties. Collectively, these conclusions emphasize the complex interplay between word order, number, gender, and dialectal variation in Arabic subject-verb agreement.

6. Conclusion

This study examined number and gender agreement patterns in the Northern variety of Saudi Arabic, with a focus on SV and VS constructions. The findings highlight several key conclusions:

- The singular and masculine forms emerge as default values in verbal agreement across constructions, particularly with non-human and conjoined subjects.
- Word order alone does not fully determine agreement patterns; instead, semantic features such as humanness and number also play significant roles.
- In contrast to Standard Arabic, which displays a predictable alternation between full and partial agreement based on word order, the Northern dialect shows more fluid patterns, including widespread default and partial agreement.
- The study contributes to the broader theoretical understanding of agreement by showing that Arabic agreement is sensitive to both syntactic structure and semantic features, especially in dialectal contexts.

These findings support a view of Arabic agreement as a morphosyntactic system shaped by feature hierarchies, semantic constraints, and dialectal microvariation. Future research could expand the typological sample across additional Arabic dialects and test these patterns experimentally with L1 and L2 speakers.

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Notes

Note 1. The case system refers to grammatical markers that indicate the syntactic role of a noun (e.g., subject, object), while overt case marking explicitly shows these roles through visible morphological markers (e.g., suffixes or inflections). In Arabic, the case system uses overt case marking with vowel endings (e.g., -u for nominative, -a for accusative, -i for genitive) to indicate the syntactic roles of nouns.

Note 2. T in generative grammar, TT is typically the Tense head within the syntactic structure. It is part of the Tense Phrase (TTP), which encodes tense, agreement, and sometimes modality.

Note 3. ϕ -features (Phi-features): ϕ refers to the set of morphosyntactic features associated with agreement, such as: person (e.g., 1st, 2nd, 3rd), number (e.g., singular, plural), gender (e.g., masculine, feminine, neuter).

Note 4. Spec-Head Agreement refers to a syntactic mechanism in which agreement occurs between a phrase in the specifier position of a projection (e.g., Spec-TP) and the head of that projection (e.g., T).

Note 5. Universals 32 “whenever the verb agrees with a nominal subject or nominal object in gender, it also agrees in number”

Note 6. Universals 33 “When number agreement between the noun and verb is suspended and the rule is based on order, the case is always one in which the verb precedes, and the verb is in the singular”

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