

Phonologic and Semantic Considerations of Grammatical Gender in Moroccan Arabic and English Code-Switching. A Levelling Phenomenon.

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ABSTRACT. In this paper¹ I analyse grammatical gender and I examine Moroccan Arabic (henceforth MA) to English code-switching occurring between a modifier and a noun and how the gendered MA vs ungendered English dynamic allows accommodation for a form of convergent flexibility. Here, in MA and English bilingual utterances, if an English noun ends in an /a/ the speaker will assign an MA feminine marker /a/ in the adjoining adjective (Adj) as in *kæmera kbīra* ‘big camera’. The same can be said if the English noun is devoid of an /a/ final sound as in ‘coffee’ which will then be marked for masculine in its adjectival gender in the MA as in *coffee zwīn* ‘nice coffee’. Here then, phonological shape accounts for grammatical concord and this is generally agreed upon by speakers in natural conversation. However, sometimes such phonological gender assignment is not always as transparently defined and MA speakers instead select a semantic frame application to nouns, irrespective of phonological shape and such semanticisation is transferred across from the MA L1. Such assignment rules force the speakers in bilingual conversation to somehow ‘agree’ on noun assignment giving rise to either phonologically or semantically attributed MA adjectives and at times, there is feminine-masculine-feminine alternation until the end result is ‘levelled’ and agreed upon by both speakers. The main criterion here is absolute grammatical agreement which is essential in MA discourse and it is found that code switchers have strong grammatical intuitions of male or female-specific lexicality.

1 Introduction

Hockett’s (1958) definition of gender is that of classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words (1958: 231). However, this paper further analyses the physical loading of gender with phonological markings as well as semantic

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mapping and this is irrespective of associated words. It is only recently that grammatical gender has been considered and researched as a core linguistic category. Early work addressed the linguistic category of grammatical gender (Arndt 1970, Poplack 1982, Radford 1988) focusing on the host language semantic equivalent and links with phonological shape of host language words. Poplack's research denied that micro language variation amongst a single speech community exists and that there is a general unanimous agreement amongst speakers (1980:25). Many approaches to grammatical assignment often attempted to assign gender assignment rules as in Tucker, Lambert & Rigault (1977) where in describing gender assignment for French, simplified it as being reflective of the natives speaker's competence in being able to trace back the noun from its terminal phone (1977:62). In a paper comparing Arabic and English speakers, Clarke, Losoff, McCracken and Still (1981) asked informants to assign genders to a series of English nouns and found assignment of the masculine gender was given to nouns which are masculine in Arabic. In this paper semantic mapping with concept association is a frequent occurrence amongst Arabic and English speakers, but is more transparently evident amongst fluent or first generation speakers of Arabic. It is evident that grammatical gender assignment is one of the last aspects of second language acquisition to be mastered. Whether it is *le terre* or *la terre* in French is often a stumbling block for L2 learners. It appears, then, that the mastery of grammatical gender is an indicator of language fluency (see Hawkins and Chan 1997 for their failed functional features hypothesis) and part of the native speaker's competency. Many researchers have investigated this grammatical category in L2 acquisition (Fransechina 2005) and have found that transparent features on N heads are attainable throughout one's life and not subject to a 'critical period' for learning a language. The main criteria are feature mapping, semantic or phonological assignment and their faithfulness to the usual settings and parameters of Universal Grammar. This paper then is an examination of grammatical gender amongst the British Moroccan speakers and their faithfulness to either phonological or semantic assignment systems and the assignment choice in terms of assignment systems and the compromise default of levelling.

2 Setting and methodology

In the 1960s a few Moroccans came to the UK from three major parts of Morocco: Oujda, the Larache region and Dar al Bayḍa (Casablanca). The motive for migration was work-related and chiefly, manual labour was being offered to Moroccan citizens together with the prospect of a better standard of living and education. Moroccan migration to the UK in the 20th Century can be categorised into four phases (Cherti 2006, p.c.). The first wave, which is the most significant, started in the 1960s and was characterised by the emigration of unskilled labourers who originated mostly from the northern part of Morocco, more specifically the Jbala region (Khmiss Sahel, Beni Garfet, Beni Arouss), Larache, Tetouan, Tangiers and the surrounding areas, with a smaller community from Meknes and a larger exodus from Oujda. Family reunification then followed from

the early 1970s onwards with mainly wives and young children. The third wave started in the 1980s with young semi-skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, mostly from Casablanca, Larache and Oujda. The fourth wave started in the early 1990s with the emigration of highly skilled Moroccan professionals both from Morocco itself and France. A large majority of these most recent immigrants currently work in the finance sector in London.

My corpus for this paper is made up of a total of 15 migrant and British-born Moroccans in the UK. All speakers I recorded are bilingual with variations in fluency and skill. I used two interview sets of questioning; one for British-born Moroccans and the other for Moroccan-born. Questions asked were alternated between English and MA with some interrogatives in MA which were then qualified by an English discourse particle or vice versa to enhance the switching and to highlight noun and adjective agreement.

3 Gender contexts

In monolingual MA discourse, the noun and adjective have to agree and concord identically maps features specifications of an adjective with the noun it modifies². Lexically referential equivalents are also to be found in human nouns and most obviously in kinship terms, *walid* (m) ‘father’ and its equivalent *walida* (f) ‘mother’), *xaal* (m) ‘maternal uncle’, *xaala* (f) ‘maternal uncle’ with other non-kinship terms being modified for the feminine with the morphological addition of *-a* such as *mumurid* (m) ‘nurse’ and *mumarrida* (f) ‘nurse’, *usted* (m) ‘teacher’ and *usteda* (f) ‘teacher’ therefore highlighting formulaic feature mapping:

(1)	Feminine ----- Feminine	}	<i>kalb</i>	<i>kbir</i>
	Masculine ----- Masculine		dog	big
	Singular ----- Singular		noun (MASC) Sing	Adj (MASC) Sing

Other MA nouns which are masculine can be modified to the feminine in terms of usage are the commonly used MA diminutives which are normally terms of endearment, speaking to children or sweetening phrases:

(2)	Noun	Gloss	Gender	Diminutive	Gender
	<i>ħaluf</i>	pig	MASC	<i>ħlilifa</i> (<i>little piglet</i>)	FEM
	<i>galb</i>	heart	MASC	<i>gliliba</i> (<i>little heart</i>)	FEM

² Not only is concord mapping essential for grammatical gender but also in number as well as pronouns, prepositions and verbs.

Switching between a modifier in language A and a noun in language B is becoming increasingly common across all generation groups of bilingual MA/English speakers and grammatical gender switching is prevalent amongst British-born *and* Moroccan-born bilinguals irrespective of fluency.

4 Phonological mapping

Concord in MA identically maps the above feature specifications of an adjective with the noun it modifies where feminine nouns are morphologically marked for gender and carry the feminine suffix *-a* and in contrast, masculine nouns carry a zero suffix and are devoid of any such markings. Words in MA then follow a strict morphological ordering and are either masculine or feminine:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| (3) | Aspects of the feminine | Aspects of the masculine |
| | <i>kura</i> ‘ball’ | <i>fuul</i> ‘beans’ |
| | <i>xubza</i> ‘bread’ | <i>tapsi</i> ‘plate’ |
| | <i>qmaja</i> ‘shirt’ | <i>ktaab</i> ‘book’ |
| (4) | <i>a rajul</i> <i>l kbir</i> | <i>ya skun qudam i</i> |
| | the man (MASC) the big (MASC) (ASP) lives | in front me |
| | ‘the big man lives in front of me’ | |
| (5) | <i>al ward-a</i> <i>a zina</i> | |
| | the flower (FEM) DEF pretty (FEM) | |
| | ‘the pretty flower’ | |
| (6) | * <i>assarjum ma zela mwasaxa</i> | |
| | window only still dirty FEM | |
| | ‘the window is still dirty’ | |

Lack of concord as (6) above, then, is ill-formed and hence not uttered, as *sarjum* is masculine and the modifying verb and adjective should also be masculine *ma zel mwasax*. As we have seen MA, unlike English, has a two-gender system and so MA verbs, adjectives and anaphoric pronouns always show gender agreement with MA adjectives always following the noun together with corresponding features specifications of number and gender:

MA masculine agreement

- | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|-----------|------------|--------------|----------------|
| (7) | <i>šət</i> | <i>wahed a</i> | <i>rajul</i> | <i>fi</i> | <i>sūq</i> | <i>yabiḡ</i> | <i>karmuus</i> |
| | see.1 | DET | DEF | man | in | market | sell 1SG figs |
| | ‘I saw a man in the market selling figs’ | | | | | | |

Above, the determiner *waḥed* ‘one/a’ is masculine and so agrees with *rajul* ‘man’ which is also masculine as well as the aspectual marker *ya*³. The same can be said of the below; *warda* ‘flower’ is feminine and so *mazīnt-ha* ‘beautiful’ is also feminine in line with noun-adjective concord

MA feminine agreement

- (8) *ʕatani warda mazint -ha*
give PAST, me rose FEM Sing. beautiful FEM Sing.
‘He gave me a beautiful rose’

The same application is valid in code-switched utterances where MA speakers cognitively determine the gender of an English noun (in natural discourse) and if it has a non /a/ noun-ending marker it is modified as masculine in the ML. The same is true if it the noun ends in an /a/ sound which will render it feminine in the ML. The addressee continues the gender in the same discourse. Consider the dialogue below where the phonology is ‘carried over’:

(9) Masculine agreement

Speaker 1:

- Dad *ʕatani waḥad al book mazin -u*
Dad gave PAST one DEF book lovely (MASC)
‘Dad gave me a lovely book’

Speaker 2:

- Baṣaḥ, fin dert **ih?** Dyel madrāsa walla kifeš?
really where put it masc of school or what
‘Really, where did you put it? Is it for school or what?’

‘Book’ above is devoid of a feminine sounding marker or an /a/ sound in the English and so is marked for masculine in the Arabic ML with a masculine pronoun (in bold). Cognitively, book in MA *kitab* is also masculine and the matching system here only shows phonological concord mapping. This is matched by Speaker 2 above that continues the same masculine agreement as a) ‘book’ in English is masculine in its shape (devoid of final ‘a’) and b) is also masculine in Arabic as in *kitab*. Here then, morphologically, phonological gender concord is matched across all generation groups:

(10) Feminine agreement

Speaker 1:

- šuft waḥad al big house, kbira wa zina*
1s see PAST – one DET big house, big fem and nice fem

³ Although this has a final –a this should not be confused with the feminine marker –a as with Arabic aspectual markers, *ya* is masculine and *ta* is feminine.

‘I saw a big house, it was big and beautiful’.

Speaker 2:

Liyeh, bġitu ta šriw ha? ħala haqaš šut waħd -a beautiful down the road

Why want ASP buy it fem because saw one fem

‘Why, do you want to buy it? Because I saw a beautiful one down the road’.

Although ‘house’ is devoid of a final /a/ sound, the cognitive application is +feminine and the modifiers are +feminine in MA (in bold). This is because ‘house’ *dār* in MA is feminine and this semantic association spills over into the English. In encoding information structure we can therefore, ascertain and conclude that:

- (i) Phonology has more of a bearing over semantic association in determining noun gender in English *only* if both the English noun and the MA noun map phonologically.

This is the prediction for all cases of MA/English CS. It is also uni-directional in the sense that, if an English noun has an /a/ sounding marker, it will be +feminine in the MA, but, if an MA noun is either masculine or feminine, it has no bearing on the English adjective as there is no gender marking in English. This significant phonological versus semantic negotiation has not been studied in detail at all. However, Boumans (1998) describes how assignment of Dutch feminine gender is associated with the noun’s phonological shape where the Dutch noun *agenda* would be feminine due to the final /a/. Here his analysis is strictly phonological with no mention of the semantic application as in principle [i] above.

5 Semantic mapping

Semantic considerations, however, are part of the micro information structure of the clause as it overtly expresses whether a phonological or semantic approach has been applied and shares the speaker’s own association with his private world. The process of grammaticalization conveys a phonologic → semantic transfer process or a semantic → phonologic transfer process. This in turn should provide us with a more psycholinguistic approach to code-switching where micro-negotiated discourse is analysed and evaluated. During my recordings I note that the sense of personal meaning of a noun is either, shared, divided and then negotiated. At this stage there is a levelling where the final gender assignment is determined by speaker 1, modified by speaker 2 and then fixed and agreed by both. However, we can conclude that phonological shape *-a* will almost always be the overriding feature in feminine gender assignment. Therefore, nouns such as ‘camera’, ‘drama’, ‘cola’ with clear phonological shapes will be marked for the

feminine in MA and agreed by both parties or levelled as such in natural discourse.

However, identical mapping of features specifications can be overridden if we apply a semantic association to the equation. Chomsky (1995) concluded that mismatch of gender features cancels the derivation (1995:309). However, this analysis only considered phonological aspects of such feature checking. A cognitive application may override this feature and render it feminine due to the feminine in the Arabic such as the nouns below. Contrastively, in MA/English code-switching, other nouns are assigned a specific feminine gender marking due to a *semantic* application alone irrespective of phonological shape:

(11)

ENG – Phonological	{	honey	<i>ʕasl</i>	door	<i>bāb</i>	house	<i>dār</i>	car	<i>tumubil</i>	}
MA	masc	-	masc	-	masc	-	masc	-	masc	
MA Semantic	fem		fem		fem		fem		fem	

Therefore information structure of such gender assignment to the English noun portrays how a semantic rather than phonological adaptation has been applied by the informant at that given moment:

Semantic Agreement:

(12) Speaker 1:

Ama, fin dər ti al honey, ʃet fi l cupboard wa ma laqitə - ʃ

Mum where put you DEF saw in DEF and NEG1 find NEG2

‘Mum where did you put the honey, I looked in the cupboard and didn’t find it’

Speaker 2:

ʃufi gballa, dər ha ʔema bi yedi al bārah

look well put it there with hand my DEF yesterday

‘Look properly, I put it there with my own hand yesterday’

Speaker 1

Yes, laqit ha

Yes, I found it FEM

Interestingly in [12] above, Speaker 1 is British-born and assigns a masculine affix */laqit/* in concord with the English phonological shape of ‘honey’. However, Speaker 2, a Moroccan-born speaker, even though ‘honey’ lacks the feminine phonological marking in English, assigns a feminine MA adjective as it is feminine in MA and this cancels out the phonology of English. Speaker 1, realising the semantic compatibility and the affiliation between target and

controller, agrees to this assignment rule, and in turn the modifier is levelled. Therefore, our further examination leads to the conclusion that:

- (ii) MA Semantic applications may override the morpho-phonological make-up of an English noun provided there is such direct semantic concord in that affiliation.

Approaching this analysis from a semantic perspective proves rather illuminating in terms of concord and generational groups. Moroccan-born migrants at times override phonological shapes and attach semantic interpretations to nouns more swiftly and accurately than British-born bilinguals. Observations show that this is the case for 95% of phonological versus semantic pairing amongst the first group of speakers. This could be due to fluency and pragmatic forces such as how the noun is perceived in the speaker's mind. Nevertheless, both groups switch between phonologic and semantic moulding with children adopting this skill very early on. Such seeming lack of correspondence at the beginning of bilingual discourse between two or more interlocutors is quickly agreed upon with one 'winning' and accommodation is adhered to by the fellow speakers in that group.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the innovative notion of semantic versus phonological grammatical assignment and the differences borne out in terms of different generational groups amongst British-born and Moroccan-born bilinguals. Grammatical gender and concord where speakers of both generation groups engage in the semantic application of lexical convergence is essential amongst Arabic speakers. Data recorded shows, however, that Moroccan-born migrants are more skilled at this application than British-born bilinguals and this is to be expected. In highlighting this phenomenon where semantic gender overrides the morpho-phonology, it caters for a wider perspective on accommodation hypotheses and concord in general. There is sometimes evidence of concord mismatch in this levelling phenomenon where speakers of different generations are unsure of gender assignment in MA and/or whether to apply phonological or semantic agreement particularly as convergence in MA is learnt very early on⁴. This, at times, trial and error process is most evident amongst second generation British-born Moroccans as opposed to the more fluent MA speakers⁵. Concord across generations then is highlighted either semantically or phonologically and this is the crucial and salient aspect of this paper. The onus is on whether the agreement relation is determined as semantic or phonological. Such gender

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis on child language acquisition, refer to Corbett, G (1991) chapter 4.2.

⁵ This has been widely observed in natural discourse between a Moroccan-born parent and British-born child where a repair process takes place. A prime example is if the child says *dār zīn* 'nice house' and the parent corrects by repeating *dār zwīna* 'nice house' adding the feminine phonological marker as *dār* is a feminine noun in MA.

agreement and the matching of features and morphological systems in natural bilingual discourse has been little researched in the general domain of code-switching but is fast gaining interest in linguistics as a grammatical category in its own right. Further research is needed to draw more detailed observations in order to make well-attested conclusions on the information structure of MA and English code-switching amongst different generations of bilingual speakers.

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