

Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun (ed.)

Tunisian and Libyan Arabic Dialects  
Common Trends – Recent Developments – Diachronic Aspects

PRENSAS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

TUNISIAN and Libyan Arabic Dialects : Common Trends – Recent Developments – Diachronic Aspects / Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun (ed.).

— Zaragoza : Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2017

389 p. ; 24 cm. — (Estudios de Dialectología Árabe ; 13)

ISBN 978-84-16933-98-3

1. Lengua árabe–Dialectos. 2. Lengua árabe–Túnez. 3. Lengua árabe–Libia

RITT-BENMIMOUN, Veronika

811.411.21'282(611)

811.411.21'282(612)

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(Vicerrectorado de Cultura y Política Social)

1.ª edición, 2017

Diseño gráfico: Victor M. Lahuerta

Colección Estudios de Dialectología Árabe, n.º 13

Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza. Edificio de Ciencias Geológicas, c/ Pedro Cerbuna, 12, 50009 Zaragoza, España. Tel.: 976 761 330. Fax: 976 761 063  
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Impreso en España

Imprime: Servicio de Publicaciones. Universidad de Zaragoza

D.L.: Z xxx-2017

# Agreement with Plural Heads in Tunisian Arabic: The Urban North

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## 1. Introduction

This article is an attempt to determine agreement in urban Tunisian Arabic, particularly in the contemporary dialect of the capital Tunis. The original dialect of the city of Tunis as described by Singer 1984 has been the main source for what we can label a pan-Tunisian *koiné*. By *koiné* we mean the linguistic variety that is largely understood by most if not all Tunisians. Speakers of dialects other than those spoken in the large cities of the northern and eastern coast usually tend to switch to this *koiné* when addressing urban dialect speakers, even if they are not completely fluent in it.<sup>1</sup> It is also the variety of Tunisian Arabic which is widely used in all kinds of media outside of official occasions that require Standard Arabic. Thus one can hear it in talk shows, informal interviews, local TV series, pop songs etc. Increasingly it is also written, especially in advertisements, cartoons, and caricatures. Many young people write dialectal Arabic in informal settings such as Facebook, Twitter, and text messages.

Our research is carried out in the framework of a three-year project titled “Linguistic Dynamics in the Greater Tunis Area: A Corpus-based Approach”, designated TUNICO.<sup>2</sup> As the title of our project suggests, it aims to produce a

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<sup>1</sup> See Gibson 2002 and Procházka & Ritt-Benmimoun 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The project is financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), project number P 25706-G23, and based at the Institute of Oriental Studies, University of Vienna, and the Austrian Centre for Digital Humanities, hosted at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. For more details see <https://tunico.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/> and <https://vicav.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/>.

digital corpus of transcribed texts in the Arabic dialect of Tunis. To be more specific, we mean to build a corpus of Tunis Arabic as spoken by young people below the age of thirty. This corpus as well as other publications will serve as sources for a dictionary we are producing which presently contains about 7,000 entries.

The focus of this article is on agreement with plural head nouns. We analyze the way adjectives, verbs, and anaphoric pronouns agree with different categories of plural nouns. Agreement patterns are, without doubt, an interesting field in Arabic syntax and thus are mentioned in almost every description dealing with the syntax of an Arabic dialect. However, many chapters on agreement only consider overall tendencies and thus are restricted to statements like “nouns denoting human beings usually agree in number and gender with all components in the clause; nouns denoting inanimate subjects can agree with adjectives, verbs, and pronouns in the plural or in the feminine singular.”<sup>3</sup> Assertions like this perfectly describe the general tendency but fail to explain the significant degree of variation in agreement that exists in most Arabic dialects.

Recent linguistic findings indicate that a mere morpho-syntactic approach is not sufficient to explain agreement relation, because agreement also must be regarded as a discourse phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> To see agreement relations as links between discourse information structures helps to understand deflected agreement, i.e. those cases where the controller is in conflict with the target. A discourse-linking approach to agreement is particularly helpful in analyzing situations in which the speakers are able to choose among alternative agreement patterns which are clearly not based on morpho-syntactic constructs.<sup>5</sup> Many studies on agreement patterns in Arabic make at least partial use of the findings of discourse-linking theory. In-depth studies on agreement patterns were carried out by Soltan 2006, Benmamoun 2000, and particularly Kirk Belnap, who investigated Classical and Modern Standard Arabic (Belnap & Gee 1994; Belnap 1999) as well as Egyptian Arabic (Belnap 1993). The latter variety is also treated in detail in Woidich 2006. Mohammad 2000 and Aoun, Benmamoun, and Sportiche 1994 and 1999 mainly analyze first conjunct agreement in verb-subject sentences in Palestinian and Lebanese, and Moroccan, Arabic, respectively. Brustad 2000 dedicated a whole chapter of *Syntax of Spoken Arabic* to agreement in Gulf, Syrian, Egyptian, and Moroccan Arabic; but her main focus was on heads denoting humans and she gave very few examples involving inanimate plural nouns. Bahloul 2006 only marginally covers spoken Arabic, ignor-

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<sup>3</sup> A few of many examples are Grotzfeld 1965: 97 for Damascus, and Erwin 1963: 323 for Baghdad.

<sup>4</sup> See Barlow 1992 (which includes a long chapter on Modern Standard Arabic), Barlow 1999, Corbett 2006: 197-205.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Barlow 1999: 194.

ing most of the relevant literature on the subject. Two recent studies that significantly broaden our knowledge on agreement in Arabic dialects are Hanitsch 2011, which deals with agreement variation in inanimate nouns in Damascene Arabic and includes comparative remarks on some other dialects, and Holes 2016, a monograph containing a corpus-based in-depth analysis of agreement as found in the two varieties of Arabic spoken in Bahrain (Holes 2016: 326-354).

These previous studies not only demonstrated that there is significant variation in agreement among the different Arabic dialects, they also proved that agreement is only partially triggered by such formal criteria as [ $\pm$ HUMAN] and is sensitive to non-syntactic discourse information. Thus agreement is in part controlled by the speakers, who can choose between several options to vary what we can call perceptual salience and textual prominence which are “strongly associated with discourse rather than syntactic or semantic structures” (Barlow 1992: 235). As we shall see, the most important factors in agreement with plural nouns are the nuances between, first, “individuation and collectivity” (Brustad 2000: 57) and, second, “concreteness and abstractness”. These conceptual criteria are linked to other aspects, above all animacy and definiteness.

Our study is a modest attempt to widen our knowledge about hitherto-neglected agreement patterns in Tunisian Arabic. Hans Stumme’s *Grammatik des tunisischen Arabisch nebst Glossar* contains some brief notes (p. 152) that are especially interesting in the light of diachronic development. Singer’s monumental work is mainly restricted to phonology and morphology and thus only states that human subjects, including collectives, agree with the plural whereas all others agree with the plural or feminine singular (Singer 1984: 465). Talmoudi 1980: 83 briefly covers verbal agreement in the dialect of Sousse, stating that the plurals of things or animals may agree with the plural or feminine singular. This variation also occurs with collectives denoting human beings, whereas collectives of small animals invariably agree with the feminine singular. He makes no further attempt to explain which criteria this variation relies on.

Our results are based upon data taken mainly from two text collections. The first is our own corpus of ten hours of transcribed texts from recordings made during two long field trips to Tunis in 2013 and 2014. Examples from this corpus, which comprises almost 100,000 items, are indicated by the abbreviation TUNICO followed by the title of the text.<sup>6</sup> Our second source is the very useful Tunisian Arabic Corpus *Tunisiya* compiled by Karen McNeil and

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<sup>6</sup> The majority of the texts are (will be) available online on <https://tunico.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/>. The examples are labelled by the title of the text in question unless they belong to the *unpublished* data.

Miled Faiza. This corpus contains more than 800,000 words and mainly consists of data from social network platforms, blogs, and television productions. Because *Tunisiya* provides the material only in Arabic script, all examples taken from it were transcribed by us.<sup>7</sup> The data of these two corpora were supplemented by material elicited from native speakers mainly to test possible agreement variation in sentences from our corpora. Our conclusions rely on a non-trivial number of samples and thus can be regarded as significant<sup>8</sup>, though we wish to make clear that they are not the result of an exhaustive statistical analysis.

We present the data in two main categories and two subcategories. The main categories are (1) animate subjects, sub-divided into human beings and animals, and (2) inanimate subjects, sub-divided into concrete and abstract nouns. The adjectives in Tunis Arabic possess masculine and feminine singular cases and a common plural for both genders. Plural forms can be internal or external ending in *-īn*. The external feminine plural morpheme *-āt* is only used in nominalized adjectives that denote female humans (Singer 1984: 468) and therefore is not relevant to our study. Verbs and pronouns exhibit the same categories, i.e. there is no feminine plural as it exists in the Bedouin dialects of southern Tunisia (cf. Ritt-Benmimoun in this volume).

To describe variation in agreement we use the terms ‘strict’ and ‘deflected’ as widely employed in studies on Arabic agreement patterns. ‘Strict agreement’ means agreement with the plural, whereas ‘deflected agreement’ means agreement with the feminine singular. In conformity with other linguistic studies (e.g. Barlow 1992), we use the terms ‘controller’ and ‘target’, the former being the “source” (in our case a plural noun) that transfers its specifications to other elements in the clause and beyond. To make variation clearer to the reader, plural words and morphemes are in italics, and feminine singular in bold script. Glosses are given only for those features of the examples relevant to the topic.

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<sup>7</sup> Many texts in the *Tunisiya* corpus exhibit more or less strong influences of Modern Standard Arabic. Such passages, i.e. all those which clearly follow the syntactic rules of MSA, are not taken into account in this study.

<sup>8</sup> We analyzed c. 300 heads (130 human, 31 animal, 137 inanimate). Belnap’s study is based on 500 heads (1993: 99). Holes 2016: 327 analyzed 49 human and 131 non-human head-types.

## 2. Animate Subjects

### 2.1. Human Beings

#### 2.1.1. Strict agreement

In Tunis Arabic, strict agreement with nouns denoting human beings is by far the most frequent pattern. As the following examples show, this strict agreement is overwhelmingly the norm for both highly individuated, morphologically marked heads, and for less specific, morphologically indefinite heads.

Highly specific head nouns denoting persons are abundant in the two corpora. They all follow the norm and show strict agreement, so it will suffice to present one typical example.

#### (1) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3628/>)

ya	wlīdi	li- <i>bnāt</i>	iṣ- <i>ṣgār</i>	<i>hādūma</i>	mā-ʔāš-š	<i>ysāʔd-ū-k</i>
		DF-NOUN.PL	DF-ADJ.PL	DEM.PL		IPF-PL-2SG
‘O my son, these little girls do not fit you any longer.’						

In this sentence, the plural head noun *li-bnāt* ‘the girls’ clearly refers to a specific group of girls known to the person addressed. Moreover, it precedes all its targets and is prominently marked by the demonstrative pronoun *hādūma* and a qualifying attribute.

In Tunis Arabic there is a clear tendency to strict agreement even if the controller is a collective plural and the discourse contains general assertions about an unspecified group of people.

#### (2) TUNICO – *Souq Salesman I*

l- <i>almān</i>	aʕazz	<i>kliyūn-āt</i>	<i>xāṭir-hum</i>	il-qaṭʔa	illi
DF-NOUN.PL		NOUN-PL	because-3PL		
<i>yhibb-ū-ha</i>		<i>yaʕrʔ-u</i>	qdarha	šnuwwa	
IPF-PL-3FSG		IPF-PL			
‘The Germans are the best customers because they know the value of the piece they want.’					

Example (3) illustrates that the collective *li-mgārba* ‘the Moroccans’ not only controls all targets that follow but also the preceding verbal predicate.

#### (3) TUNICO – *Artist in Café V*

<i>yuqtl-ū-ni</i>	āna	li- <i>mgārba</i>	<i>xāṭir</i>	<i>mḥāʔd-īn</i>	ʕa-l-ašāla
IPF-PL		DF-NOUN.PL		PART-PL	
<i>mtāḥ-hum</i>	et	en mēme temps		modernes	
GEN.EXP-3PL					
‘The Moroccans impress me because they preserve their cultural heritage while at the same time are modern.’					

Although the quantifier *bařša* ‘many’ followed by an indefinite noun indicates very low individuation, we find strict agreement in example (4). For the speaker the generic ‘people’ seems to become particularized by the following *minna* ‘from us’, which apparently suggests to her people whose histories are familiar to her. Thus all following components that refer to the head noun *nās* are in the plural.

(4) TUNICO – *Artist in Caf  IV*

bařša	<i>nās</i>	minna	m-illi	<i>mā-hum-š</i>	<i>qār-īn</i>	droit	w-kull...	bāš
many	NOUN.IDF.PL			NEG-3PL-NEG	AP-PL			
<i>yitfarrf-u</i>								
IPF-PL								
‘Many of our people who have not studied law and so on will learn [something about it].’								

Strict agreement is, however, also found in sentences that lack any kind of specificity. In example (5) the speaker uses a plural verb referring to two indefinite head nouns following the predicate, although in his preceding sentence he used the singular masculine.

(5) TUNICO – *Rapper*

waļļāhi	la-ʕđīm	ʔawwil	mařra	awwil	mařra	ywaqqaf-ni	– škūn?
						IPF.3MSG	who?
<i>waqqf-ū-ni</i>	bařša	<i>bnāt</i>	w-bařša	<i>wlād</i>			
PF-PL-1SG	many	IDF.NOUN.PL	many	IDF.NOUN.PL			
‘By God! For the first time they stopped me. — Who? — Many girls and many boys stopped me.’							

As can be seen from examples (3) and (5), word order only marginally affects agreement in Tunis Arabic because strict agreement is found in S-V and V-S clauses alike. Even auxiliary verbs that precede their subject usually appear in their plural forms.

(6) Tunisiya – Folktale (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3666/>)

<i>bdā-u</i>	n- <i>nās</i>	<i>žāy-īn</i>	il-lil	il-kull	<i>ysallm-u</i>	ʕlīh
PF-PL	DF-NOUN.PL	AP-PL			IPF-PL	
‘The people started to come and the whole night greeted him.’						

There are very few examples in the corpora where the first component of a compound predicate agrees with the feminine singular and it may be no accident that in the following case the noun denotes a group of females and expresses a very low degree of specificity, speaking about ‘women’ in a very generic sense.



(7) TUNICO – *Rapper*

qbal	<b>kān-it</b>	in- <i>nās</i>	b-šifa	šamma	<i>hūma</i>	“brrbrrrbr” [...]	<i>yqattš-u</i>
	PF-FSG	DF-NOUN.PL			3PL		IPF-PL
w- <i>ṭayyš-u</i>							
IPF-PL							
‘In former times the women used to gossip.’							

Quantification always involves strict agreement whether or not the group is further individuated.<sup>9</sup> This can be explained by the fact that any countable group is perceived as consisting of different individuals.

(8) TUNICO – *Activist in Šit-in*

fi-šahd	bin	šalī	<i>kān-u</i>	šāšra	<i>ṭalaba</i>	<i>mawžūd-in</i>	fi-kullīya
			PF-PL	NUM	NOUN.PL	PP-PL	
šāšra	<i>ṭalaba</i>	<i>w-mašzūl-in</i>					
NUM	NOUN.PL	PP-PL					
‘In the era of Ben Ali there were ten students present in a faculty; ten students who were detached ( <i>sc.</i> nobody cared for them).’							

## 2.1.2. Deflected and mixed agreement: Generality and collectivity

Feminine singular agreement with human head nouns is not the absolute exception in Tunis Arabic. However, at least according to our data, it is not very frequent and seems to be restricted to the two nouns *nās* and *šbād* in their collective sense of ‘people’. There is also a clear correlation between feminine singular agreement and the occurrence of *famma* ‘there is/ there are’ and *kull* ‘all’ because both words emphasize generality and collectivity.

(9) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3623/>)

famma	<i>nās</i>	<b>t-ḥibb</b>	<b>t-waššil</b>	message	w-mā-šāwin- <b>ha</b>	ḥadd
	NOUN.IDF.PL	FSG-IPF	FSG-IPF		NEG-PF-3FSG	
‘There were people who wanted to transmit a message but nobody helped them.’						

(10) Tunisiya – Internet Forum (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/143/>)

kān	<b>žā-t</b>	in- <i>nās</i>	il-kull	<b>tu-ḥkum</b>	šlā	l-šabd
	PF-FSG	DF-NOUN.PL		FSG-IPF		
‘If all the people would judge the others.’						

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Holes 2016: 346f.

The quantifier *baṣša* ‘many, a lot’ likewise fosters feminine singular agreement. Unless *baṣša*-phrases are further specified – as in example (4) – they characterize a vaguely large number of undifferentiated people. Contrary to the tendency that distance from the head noun<sup>10</sup> often induces strict agreement,<sup>11</sup> in the following example the subject *baṣša ṣbād* triggers feminine singular agreement of a series of verbs.

(11) TUNICO – *Rapper*

<i>baṣša</i>	<i>ṣbād</i>	<i>xūya</i>	<i>taḥt</i>	<i>ḥiss</i>	<i>miss</i>	<b>w-ti-bda</b>	<b>ti-tṣahḥaṭ</b>
many	NOUN.IDF.PL					FSG-IPF	FSG-IPF
<b>w-t-lahḥis</b>							
FSG-IPF							
‘Many people, my brother, are guileful and they begin to behave hypocritically and to brown-nose.’							

There are a few examples showing mixed agreement in coordinated clauses. As in other dialects (see e.g. Holes 2016: 334-338), mixed agreement occurs in certain common patterns. Particularly frequent is deflected agreement in a short sentence with V-S word order that is followed by a sentence with strict agreement to the same controller. Thus in example (12) the first part, which consists of finite verb, the head noun, and an active participle, introduces new information about an undifferentiated mass of people whereas in the following hypotactic clause the speaker formally pluralizes and partially individualizes the members of this group.

(12) Tunisiya – Folktale (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3671/>)

<b>bdā-t</b>	<i>in-nās</i>	<b>dāzz-a</b>	<i>bāš</i>	<i>yitfaṣṣ-ū</i>	<i>l-kbārāt</i>	<i>mtāʿ</i>	<i>id-dawla</i>
PF-FSG	DF-NOUN.PL	AP-FSG		IPF-PL			
‘The people started to push in order to watch the “big ones” of the state.’							

Mixed patterns also occur with S-V word order in sentences that do not refer to past events but express general assertions. Again the first part contains the general statement about people as a collective whole, followed by a sentence which tells us what the individual members of this group are doing.

(13) TUNICO – *Fisherman and Neighbour*

<i>ṣbād</i>	<b>ti-mšī</b>	<b>ti-bda</b>	<b>ti-zrib</b>	<b>ti-zrib</b>	<i>w-yxamm-u</i>	<i>kān</i>
NOUN.IDF.PL	FSG-IPF	FSG-IPF	FSG-IPF	FSG-IPF	IPF-PL	
<i>f-li-flūs</i>	<i>w-māš-īn</i>	<i>žāy-īn</i>				
	AP-PL	AP-PL				
‘The people go and start to hurry up. They only think about money and they come and go.’						

<sup>10</sup> In the example the head noun is separated from its predicates by two phrases.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Brustad 2000: 58.

Deflected agreement of adjectives is even more restricted than with verbs and pronouns. In our whole corpus only *bāhya* and *ṭayyba* ‘good’ and *xāyba* ‘bad’ appear in combination with *nās* and—much less frequently—with *ʕbād*. Thus we can assume that phrases like *nās bāhya* ‘good people’ constitute idiomatic collocations and are not controlled by pragmatic discourse structures. This is further corroborated by the fact that in the more or less synonymous phrase *nās mlāḥ* plural agreement seems to be obligatory: \**nās mliḥa* was condemned as ungrammatical by all our informants.

(14) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3618/>)

tʕarraft	ʕlā	baʕša	ʕbād	bāhy-a	w-xāyb-a
		many	NOUN.IDF.PL	ADJ-FSG	ADJ-FSG
‘I met many good and many bad people.’					

## 2.2. Human Collectives

There are a few nouns which are morphologically masculine or feminine singular but denote a group of people.<sup>12</sup> Because of the small number of examples in the corpora, we can only state that *ʒmāʕa* ‘group’ shows a clear tendency towards plural agreement: this may be explained by the fact that this word has gained the meaning of ‘(group of) people’. Plural agreement is also frequent with *ahl* ‘people, inhabitants’, whereas *ʕāyla* ‘family’ occurs only with feminine singular, even if, as in example (21), it is in the plural.

(15) TUNICO – *Fisherman and Neighbour*

<i>yʕi-u</i>	<b>ʒmāʕa</b>	hirr hirr hirr	hirr hirr hirr	sāʕāt	
IPF-PL	NOUN.IDF.FSG				
nuqʕud	naḍḥak	ʕlā	<b>ʒmāʕa</b>	<i>yibdā-u</i>	<i>yvayys-u</i>
			NOUN.IDF.FSG	IPF-PL	IPF-PL
w- <i>ybuʕṣ-u</i>	ʕlā		bʕaḍ- <i>hum</i>		
IPF-PL	PART-3PL		PART-3PL		
‘A group comes (saying) bla bla bla bla bla bla; sometimes I laugh about a group (of people) that starts to show off and is just blowing smoke.’					

(16) TUNICO – *Souq Salesman III*

<i>yifʕhm-ū-ha</i>	kān	ʕʒmāʕt	is-sūq
IPF-PL-3FSG		NOUN.FSG	
‘Only the group ( <i>sc.</i> the vendors) of the market understand it.’			

<sup>12</sup> For Bahrein cf. Holes 2016: 338-341.

(17) TUNICO – *Artist in Café V*

maṛra	ʕaml-ū-lna	bṛākāž	iž-žmāfa	bāš
	PF-3PL-to.1PL		DF-NOUN.FSG	CONJ
°nʕāwnū- <i>hum</i>				
IPF.1PL-3PL				
‘Once a group assaulted us and wanted us “to help” them.’ <sup>13</sup>				

(18) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3643/>)

yā	wlayyid	il-luʕba	hāḍi	mūš	lik	rudd	bālik
lāzimha	žmāfa	šhāh	yimn-u	b-ṛabbi			
	NOUN.FSG	ADJ.PL	IPF-PL				
‘My dear, this game is not good for you! Be careful, it needs (a group of) strong people who believe in the Lord.’							

(19) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3621/>)

w-min	baʕd	ahl	il-ixtišās	hūma	lli
		NOUN.MSG		PRON-3PL	
bāš	yṭabbt-u	l-amṛ			
	IPF-PL				
‘And afterwards the experts (lit.: people of competence) are those who will verify the issue.’					

(20) Tunisiya – Folktale (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3666/>)

rudd	bālik	yā	b-il-qāsim	ṛā- <i>hum</i>
				PART-3PL
ahl	tūnis	ḡaššās-īn		
NOUN.MSG		NOUN-PL		
‘Take care Bil-Qāsim, the folks of Tunis are cheaters.’				

(21) TUNICO – *Activist in Sīt-in*

ʕyl	mā-ʕād-š	tnažžim	tqāwim	bāš...	bāš
NOUN.IDF.PL		IPF.FSG	IPF.FSG		
txalli	wlād- <b>ha</b>	ykamml-u	yaqr-u		
IPF.FSG	NOUN-3FSG				
‘Families are not capable of resisting anymore.... to let their kids finish school.’					

<sup>13</sup> They demanded from them clothes which were actually intended as gifts for the poor.

### 2.3. Animals

Few instances involving animals are in the corpora. Thus our conclusions in this section are mainly based on elicited data and therefore less sound than those elsewhere. Several factors control agreement involving animals. If the head noun denotes a strongly individualized group of animals, or if the animals are specified in the sense that they are known to the speaker or are owned by a specific person, plural agreement is common, particularly with adjectives and pronouns (less so with verbs).

#### (22) TUNICO – unpublished

<i>hādūma</i>	<i>la-qtātis</i>	<i>iṣ-ṣḡār</i>	mtāʿ	žārna
DEM.PL	DF-NOUN.PL	DF-ADJ-PL		
‘These are the small cats of our neighbor.’				

Even in cases where the noun is highly salient and specified by a plural demonstrative pronoun, the verb may occur with deflected agreement.

#### (23) Tunisiya – TV Drama (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/7/>)

<i>hādūma</i>	<i>la-qtātis</i>	mā	<b>zāl-it</b>	<b>t-ākil</b>	li-frikassē
DEM.PL	DF-NOUN.PL	NEG	PF-FSG	FSG-IPF	
‘These cats still eat fricassee.’					

Examples (24a) and (24b) make it clear that strict agreement with verbs is mainly bound to the notion of specificity, in particular by the animal’s owner.

#### (24a) Elicited

<i>la-ḥsunna</i>	<b>ḥarḥ-it</b>	m-il-kūri
DF-NOUN.PL	PF-3FSG	
‘The horses escaped from the stable.’		

#### (24b) Elicited

<i>la-ḥsunna</i>	mtāʿna	<i>ḥarḥ-u</i>	m-il-kūri
DF-NOUN.PL		PF-PL	
‘Our horses escaped from the stable.’			

A morphological factor that affects agreement and will be further discussed in section 3.3.3 is that attributes and nominal predicates of highly salient plural head nouns may show deflected agreement if they are a participle rather than an adjective. Participles of derived stems<sup>14</sup> and passive participles of Form I verbs are particularly prone to deflected agreement.

<sup>14</sup> Tunis Arabic does not differentiate between active and passive participles of derived stems.

## (25) Elicited

<i>klāb</i>	žirānna	<i>kbār</i>	yāsir.	*klāb	žirānna	kbīr-a	yāsir*
NOUN.PL		ADJ.PL		NOUN.PL		ADJ-FSG	
‘Our neighbours’ dogs are very big.’				not accepted			

## (26) Elicited

<i>klāb</i>	žirānna	<i>msayyb-īn.</i>	or	<i>klāb</i>	žirānna	<b>msayyb-a</b>
NOUN.PL		AP-PL		NOUN.PL		AP-FSG
‘Our neighbours’ dogs are loose (and roaming).’						

As mentioned above, numbers add a sense of individuation to the members of a group. Thus we find plural agreement in almost all examples which contain a number even if the head noun that denotes an animal is not further specified – as in the following example, in which the two dogs may not be known to either the speaker or the listener.

(27) Tunisiya- Folktale (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3677/>)

yšūf	fi	zūz	<i>klāb</i>	<i>yitnābh-u</i>	ʕtā-hum	widnu	...
	NUM	NOUN.PL	IPF-PL	PF-3PL			
‘He used to see two dogs which barked at each other; he lent them his ear...’							

In examples (28) and (29) the head nouns both denote animals and are preceded by a number but nevertheless differ in agreement. These examples and interviews with informants suggest that the strong tendency towards strict agreement with heads that include numbers can be overridden by semantic factors because deflected agreement can correlate with small size. Thus plural agreement occurs especially with *ḥṣunna* ‘horses’, *bhāyim* ‘donkeys’, *žmāl* ‘camels’, *klāb* ‘dogs’, *ʕlālīs* ‘lambs’, and sometimes *qtātīs* ‘cats’, but never with *fīrān* ‘mice’.

## (28) Elicited

šuft	tlāṭa	<i>ḥṣunna</i>	<i>kbār</i>
	NUM	NOUN.PL	ADJ.PL
‘I saw three big horses.’			

## (29) Elicited

šuft	arḃʕa	<i>fīrān</i>	<b>kbīr-a</b>
	NUM	NOUN.PL	ADJ-FSG
‘I saw four big mice.’			

However, even with large animals, deflected agreement prevails in cases of very low specificity, particularly in broad general statements like examples (30) and (31a).

**(30) Elicited**

<i>la-ḥsunna</i>	<b>t-ākil</b>	il-gurṭ
DF-NOUN.PL	FSG-IPF	
‘Horses (usually) eat hay.’		

**(31a) Elicited**

<i>klāb</i>	tūnis	<b>sārḥ-a</b>
NOUN.IDF.PL		AP-FSG
‘The dogs of Tunis are straying.’		

Example (31b), uttered by a speaker who wants to draw the listener’s attention to a crowd of stray dogs, shows strict agreement because of the high degree of specificity.

**(31b) Elicited**

šūf!	<i>klāb</i>	tūnis	<b>sārḥ-īn</b>
	NOUN.IDF.PL		AP-PL
Look! The dogs of Tunis are straying.’			

Strict agreement seems to be the default case when animals serve as metaphors for humans, which mostly occurs pejoratively, because from the speaker’s point of view the word does not denote an animal but a person. Only in the first example below is the verb that precedes its subject in the masculine singular.

**(32) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3646/>)**

qānūn	irhābi	katb-u	<i>klāb</i>	zīn	il-ʿābidīn	bin	ʿlī
		PF-MSG-3SG	NOUN.PL				
<i>li-sīd-hum</i>							
for-master-3PL							
‘... an anti-terror law which the “dogs” of Zineddine Bin Ali wrote for their master.’							

**(33) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3614/>)**

yʿāyir	f-il-baṣar	ʔann- <i>hum</i>	<i>bhāym</i>	<i>mā-yifʿhm-u</i>	šayy
		CONJ-3PL	NOUN.PL	NEG-IPF-PL	
‘He insults the human race (by saying) that they are donkeys who do not understand anything.’					

**(34) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3599/>)**

<i>hāk-li-bhāym</i>	illi	<i>qāʿd-īn</i>	<i>yṣaffq-ū-lik</i>	<i>yaḍʿḥk-ū-lik</i>
DEM-DF-NOUN.PL		AP-PL	IPF-PL-to.2SG	IPF-PL-to.2SG
<i>w-yaḍʿḥk-u</i>	ʿlik			
IPF-PL				
‘Those donkeys who applaud you (in fact) give you a laugh and laugh at you.’				

### 3. Inanimate Head Nouns

The agreement with plural head nouns denoting inanimate objects in principle follows the same lines of specificity, prominence, and collectivity as with animate nouns, with the striking differences that female singular agreement is much more frequent and that semantic, syntactic, and even morphological factors mingle with discourse structures and the concepts of “individual versus collective”. Because there is more variation with inanimate than with human head nouns, in the following sections we combine several approaches to explain the mechanisms that control agreement patterns.

#### 3.1. Agreement Hierarchy

Although agreement hierarchy as worked out by Barlow 1992: 136-137 and Corbett 2006: 205-237 deals with semantic versus syntactic agreement, it also well explains the underlying mechanisms of most of our findings. Strict agreement is common, in descending frequency, with demonstratives, attributive adjectives, and verbs. The nearly absolute plural agreement with demonstrative pronouns – even with French loans (see example 35) – cannot be explained only by their strong deictic character providing a high degree of prominence to the head noun. As examples (23) and (36) show, a left-located demonstrative pronoun does not necessarily lead to strict agreement in positions to the right. In cases like this, variation seems to be more related to morpho-syntactic principles than to information structure. Anaphoric pronouns as well as all elements that follow in a relative clause, which characterizes the head noun and thus individualizes it, are also accessible to plural agreement. The strict agreement with anaphoric elements is consistent with the findings of previous studies which proved that distance from the head noun fosters agreement concord (Brustad 2000: 58; Holes 2016: 334-338).

#### (35) TUNICO – *Rapper*

<i>hāḍūma</i>	<i>les</i>	<i>thèmes</i>	qbal	<i>kān-u</i>	<i>yitḍ<sup>3</sup>kr-u</i>
DEM.PL	DF	NOUN.PL		PF-PL	IPF-PL
‘These are the topics which were mentioned before.’					

#### (36) TUNICO – *unpublished*

<i>l-ayyāmāt</i>	<i>hāḍūma</i>	<b>ṭṣaddā-t</b>	<i>fīsaʕ</i>
DF-NOUN.PL	DEM.PL	PF-FSG	
‘These days have passed quickly.’			

#### (37) Tunisiya – Radio (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/24/>)

<i>naʕrif</i>	<i>ḥāž-āt</i>	<i>illi</i>	<i>ṭhibb-hum</i>
	NOUN.IDF-PL		IPF-3PL
‘I know things which you like.’			



(38) Tunisiya – Folktale (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3664/>)

muš	mumkin	yŕāwdu yilbsu			
hāk-la- <i>ħwāyīž</i>	li- <b>m</b> massx-a	lli	kān-u	lābsīn- <i>hum</i>	
DEM-DF-NOUN.PL	DF-PART-FSG			AP.PL-3PL	
‘It is not possible to wear again those dirty clothes which they have already worn.’					

### 3.2. Concrete versus Abstract

The semantics of the head noun plays a role because the plural of appellatives, particularly those of three-dimensional and tangible objects, exhibit a higher degree of particularization than abstract nouns and thus much more frequently trigger strict agreement.<sup>15</sup> Even indefinite nouns of this class which show only a rather low degree of individuation – as *ħwāyīž* ‘clothes’<sup>16</sup> in example (39) and the French loanword *CVs* in example (40) – frequently show strict agreement. Especially for definite and further specified nouns, such as those of examples (41-44), strict agreement is the default case and feminine singular agreement rejected by speakers of Tunis Arabic.

(39) TUNICO – *Artist in Café IV*

bāš	nišrīu	<i>ħwāyīž</i>	<i>ždud</i>
		NOUN.IDF.PL	ADJ.PL
‘We will buy new clothes.’			

(40) TUNICO – *Artist in Café IV*

bāš	°nžīb	des	<i>CVs</i>	<i>gālt-īn</i>
			IDF.NOUN.PL.	ADJ-PL
‘I will bring (to you) very bad CVs (of people who have applied for a post).’				

(41) TUNICO – *unpublished*

is- <i>srāwil</i>	li- <i>kbār</i>	nlawwah- <i>hum</i>
DF-NOUN.PL	DF-ADJ.PL	IPF-3PL
‘I throw away the too large trousers.’		

<sup>15</sup> Hanitsch 2011: 142 notes that in Damascene Arabic strict agreement with inanimate objects is most frequent when they denote things that are mobile, three-dimensional, solid. “Mobile” does not seem to be as important in Tunis Arabic because immobile things like “houses” also often trigger strict agreement.

<sup>16</sup> The noun *ħwāyīž* ‘clothes’ is not perceived as a collective in Tunis Arabic but occurs with plural agreement in almost all its appearances in our corpus. Plural nouns like *flūs* ‘money’ that have a collective meaning usually agree with the feminine singular, e.g., *mnīn žā-t li-flūs?* ‘Where did the money come from?’ (TUNICO – *Artist in Café 4*).

(42) TUNICO – *Two Friends in a Mall*

rīt- <i>hum</i>	awṛāq-ik	°tnažžim	°tnaḥḥī- <i>hum</i>	°tnažžim	txallī- <i>hum</i>
PF.2SG-3PL	NOUN.PL-2SG	IPF.2SG	IPF.2SG-3PL	IPF.2SG	IPF.2SG-3PL
‘Did you see your papers? You can take them away (or) you can leave them.’					

(43) Elicited

id- <i>dyār</i>	f-il-ḥūma	wāṭīn	/	ṣālīn	/	ḡālīn	/	mizyānīn
DF-NOUN.PL		ADJ.PL		ADJ.PL		ADJ.PL		ADJ.PL
‘The houses in our neighbourhood are low / high / expensive / beautiful.’								

However, collective usage may override the tendency to strict agreement with such appellatives. Thus most informants accept deflected agreement for the following sentences.

(44) Elicited

id- <i>dyār</i>	il-kull	wāṭy-a	/	ṣāly-a	/	ḡāly-a	/	mizyān-a
DF-NOUN.PL		ADJ-FSG		ADJ-FSG		ADJ-FSG		ADJ-FSG
‘All the houses are low / high / expensive / beautiful.’								

By contrast, abstract nouns usually exhibit deflected agreement even if highly salient and prominently marked by a following genitive or pronominal suffix.

(45) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3641/>)

ṭallaq	baʿd	mašākil	kbīr-a	ṣār-it-lu	mā	maṛtu
		NOUN.IDF.PL	ADJ-FSG	PF-FSG-TO.3MSG		
‘He divorced after the big problems which he had with his wife.’						

(46) TUNICO – *Activist in Sit-in*

il- <i>afkār</i>	ḥāḍiya	illi	ṭhibb	les	jeunes	mfaṛṭīn
DF-NOUN.PL	DEM.FSG					
‘These ideas that want young people to be dispersed.’						

(47) TUNICO – *unpublished*

<i>afkār-na</i>	bāhy-a
NOUN.PL-1PL	ADJ-FSG
‘Our thoughts are good.’	

In spite of their strong tendency towards deflected agreement, plural heads of abstract nouns may show strict agreement. Plural agreement is an option for the speaker if she or he intends to emphasize the individual components expressed by the plural abstract noun that acts as head of the clause. Such strict agreement is especially frequent in combination with numbers (examples 50 and 51a), but also found in other contexts – such as example (48), in which the speaker probably did not think of a general wish (that would be *ḥāžāt bāhya*) but had in mind more specific things like “many children, a nice car, a good job etc.” In example (40) above, it is clear that the speaker thinks of individual

CVs which she has read and disliked. Hence one can say that the intention of the speaker makes plural agreement possible whenever individuality is intended.

(48) Tunisiya – TV Drama (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/15/>)

nitmannā-l-hum	bařša	<i>ħāž-āt</i>	<i>bāh-in</i>
	many	NOUN.IDF-PL	ADJ-PL
‘I wish them many good things.’			

(49) TUNICO – *Artist in Café IV*

<i>ħādūma</i>	<i>l-asāmi</i>	lli	xlař-t	ʕli-hum
DEM.PL	DF-NOUN.PL	REL	PF-1SG	PREP-3PL
‘These are the names (of TV programs) which I witnessed (before the revolution).’				

(50) Tunisiya – TV Drama (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/15/>)

ʕandi	tlāřa	<i>ħilm-āt</i>	<i>kbār</i>	lū	kān	<i>yithaq-q-u</i>	nitsawwir	rūhi...
	NUM	NOUN-PL	ADJ.PL			IPF-PL		
‘I have three big dreams. <sup>17</sup> If they come true I imagine ...’								

(51a) Elicited

ʕandna	zūz	<i>mařākil</i>	<i>kbār</i>
	NUM	NOUN.IDF.PL	ADJ.PL
‘We have two big problems.’			

(51b) TUNICO – *unpublished*

ʕandna	<i>mařākil</i>	<b>kbīr-a</b>
	NOUN.IDF.PL	ADJ-FSG
‘We have big problems.’		

### 3.3. Additional Criteria

Other factors must be taken into account besides those discussed in the preceding sections to explain the variety of agreement patterns in Tunis Arabic. One that should not be underestimated is the role of Modern Standard Arabic with its strict agreement rules which prohibit any plural agreement except with human heads. This rule may especially have an effect on the agreement of abstract nouns since they are often loans from Standard Arabic. Owens & Bani-Yasin 1987 showed that agreement patterns in Northern Jordanian Arabic strictly conform to the head noun’s lexical domain. Loans from Standard Arabic overwhelmingly trigger feminine singular agreement whereas “pure” colloquial heads often show strict agreement (frequently feminine plural). The same rules are applicable *mutatis mutandis* for Tunis Arabic because we can

<sup>17</sup> But compare *ħlimt ħlām xāyb-a* ‘I had bad dreams’ with deflected agreement and even a different plural form of *ħilma* ‘dream’.

assume that the deflected agreement pattern of such head nouns is very familiar to the speakers who may hear phrases like *takālīf ġālya* ‘high costs’ or *marāhil kbīra* ‘big steps’ every day on TV or the radio. Deflected agreement in example (52) can also be explained by the standard / colloquial split. In this example the “big parties” are definitely viewed as separate entities but nevertheless consequently referred to by lexical items in feminine singular as required by the agreement rules of MSA.<sup>18</sup>

(52) Tunisiya – Web (<http://www.tunisiya.org/corpus/texts/3576/>)

il-ḥālāt	mtāʿ	<i>l-ahzāb</i>	li- <b>kbīr-a</b>	lli	ʿand- <b>ha</b>	l-quḍra
		DF-NOUN.PL	ADJ-FSG		PREP-3FSG	
bāš	<b>ti-ṭraššah</b>	fi	akṭar	min	wilāya	
	FSG-IPF					
‘The situation of the big parties which have the power to nominate candidates in more than one district...’						

Finally we briefly discuss some issues connected to the semantic or formal characteristics of adjectives. The following remarks are merely based on observations that we made when we scanned our data and require statistical analysis for confirmation.

A very obvious tendency found throughout the corpora is that adjectives denoting colours (e.g. *zruq* ‘blue’, *ḥmur* ‘red’, and *kḥul* ‘black’) mostly show plural agreement whether the controller is animate or inanimate.<sup>19</sup> Numerous examples in unmonitored speech convey the impression that internal plural forms of frequent adjectives such as *kbār* ‘big’, *šġār* ‘small’, *ždud* ‘new’ are more often found in strict agreement patterns than adjectives which are less frequent and/or have external plural formation. The same is even truer for participles, in particular passive participles of Form I and participles of derived stems, all of which exhibit a high degree of flexibility in agreement.

If our impression is accurate, it means that in such cases agreement is based on a purely morphological criterion. We tested our hypothesis by consulting informants concerning examples from the corpora. They confirmed our impression that participles are more easily accepted with both plural and feminine singular agreement. We are aware, however, that this needs more statistical data to be substantiated. Agreement patterns based on morphological criteria are also reported from other Arabic dialects. Watson 1993: 213 states for the Yemeni dialect of Sanaa that “inanimate plurals are generally modified by

<sup>18</sup> For possible influences of MSA on agreement in the dialect of Sanaa see Watson 1993: 213.

<sup>19</sup> A similar tendency is found in Modern Standard Arabic.

adjectives in the broken plural”, but if “an adjective does not inflect for broken plural, a feminine singular adjective agrees with the inanimate noun”.<sup>20</sup>

(53) Elicited

šrīt	zūz	tālīfūn-āt	mkassr-īn	or	<b>mkassr-a</b>
	NUM	NOUN-PL	PART-PL		PART-FSG
‘I bought two broken telephones.’					

All informants accepted only *šrīt zūz tālīfūn-āt ždud / qdum* ‘I bought two new / old telephones’, and refused \**šrīt zūz tālīfūn-āt ždīd-a / qdīm-a*.

(54) TUNICO – Artist in Café V / elicited

īṭ-ṭful	sāqī-h	manfūx-īn	or	<b>manfūx-a</b>
	NOUN.PL-3SG	PART-PL		PART-FSG
‘The feet of the child are swollen.’				

All informants accepted *īṭ-ṭful sāqī-h nḍāf* ‘The feet of the child are clean’ but refused \**īṭ-ṭful sāqī-h nḍīf-a*.

#### 4. Summary and Conclusions

Tunis Arabic conforms to other Arabic dialects in that strict and deflected agreement choice largely depends on two closely interwoven factors. The first is what we can call the “animacy hierarchy” found in many languages of the world (Corbett 2006: 185): human → other animate → concrete inanimate → abstract inanimate. The second and, regarding variation, even more important factor is if the speaker perceives a plural head noun as a set of individual items/persons or as a collective. Kirk Belnap similarly found in Cairene Arabic “that the variation of deflected and strict agreement with all head nouns may be the result of an animacy or saliency hierarchy, and that agreement can function to indicate speaker perception of referents.” (Belnap 1993: 116).

There is symmetric pattern involving four factors of agreement in the dialect of Tunis. First: (1) plural agreement is the default case when the controller is a human head, and (2) feminine singular agreement is the default case when the controller is an abstract noun. Second, these two basic criteria are varied by (3) animated non-human heads, in particular animals, and (4) concrete head nouns that denote tangible, three-dimensional objects. Both show a tendency

<sup>20</sup> In the Yemeni variety there is, however, an additional category of feminine plural available which may be used to emphasize individualized plurals such as in *ṭigān wisx-āt* ‘dirty windows’ (Watson 1993: 214).

towards plural agreement<sup>21</sup> but on the whole the speaker has the choice of emphasizing (A) *individuality*, thus expressing the plural as a collection of scattered entities, or (B) *collectivity* and *generality*, thus expressing the plural as an agglomeration. (A) triggers plural agreement whereas (B) triggers deflected feminine singular agreement. As for animals our data indicates that size matters in the sense that strict agreement with words like ‘mice’ is not attested.

In categories (1) and (2) the default case may be overridden by special circumstances. If the speaker wishes to enhance the general character of a group of people, even human head nouns may agree with feminine singular; and if the speaker wants to stress the individual facets of ideas, wishes, and the like, even an abstract noun may agree with plural. Within a certain scope the question of deflected or strict agreement depends on the individual choice of the speaker.<sup>22</sup> Thus variation in agreement cannot always be explained: sometimes even the same speaker switches between the two options without obvious reasons. The same observation was made by Clive Holes, who states with regard to one of his examples that “there is no internal linguistic or logical explanation for this [agreement variation]” (Holes 2016: 354).

human	other animate		concrete inanimate		abstract
	/	\	/	\	
default PL	PL	FSG	default PL	FSG	default FSG
	individ.	collective		collective	
	definite	indefinite		grouped	
high degree of	(large	(small	high degree of		high degree of
collectivity FSG	animal)	animal)	collectivity FSG		individuality PL

Table 1

Word order only marginally affects agreement patterns. Holes 2016: 353 states for Bahrain that in “mixed agreement: there is a strong tendency to shift from deflected (SG) to strict (PL) agreement as the text develops, with strict agreement being favoured as the distance of the agreeing elements from the head noun increases.” He adds that his corpus contains no cases in which strict agreement shifts to deflected agreement with reference to the same head noun. Tunis Arabic, too, shows a slight tendency to plural agreement in right located items, in particular with anaphoric pronouns. However, there are also instances of agreement shift from plural to feminine singular which occurs when the head noun is modified by a demonstrative pronoun.

<sup>21</sup> Our findings suggest that during the past century Tunis Arabic has developed towards strict agreement, because Stumme 1896: 152 mentioned that in Tunis in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century every inanimate noun may agree with feminine singular.

<sup>22</sup> There are also individual preferences. One speaker in our TUNICO corpus, for instance, almost always uses feminine singular agreement with *nās* ‘people’, even when it refers to a known group of individual people.

Tunis Arabic as *the* representative linguistic variety of the urban north differs in some significant respects from the Bedouin south. These differences are discussed in detail in the following article by Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun. The degree of variation in agreement with inanimate nouns in Tunis Arabic is rather similar to what is found in Damascus, but much higher than in Cairo where deflected agreement is very common. Cairene Arabic, however, shows more variation than Tunis Arabic regarding human heads. In contrast to Moroccan Arabic, which has a strong tendency towards strict agreement, the dialect of Tunis leaves more choice to the speaker to conceive a plural as a collective or as a group of individual items or persons.

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- TUNICO – <https://tunico.acdh.oeaw.ac.at/>