

## GENDER OF UNMARKED FEMININE NOUNS IN BENI HAMMOU

FATMA KHERBACHE

Professor, Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Abou Bekr Belkaid, Tlemcen, Algeria

### ABSTRACT

All languages refer to gender as feminine and masculine. Arabic as one of these languages distinguishes between feminine and masculine genders. In Arabic<sup>1</sup> feminine words have the ending ‘-a’ to be different from masculine words which carry no suffix and thus are unmarked for gender: *ḥaṣra* ‘stone’, and *warda* ‘rose’ are examples of feminine nouns having ‘-a’ at the end, while *ṭabla* ‘plate’ and *kursi* ‘chair’ are masculine nouns without being marked. However, there are cases where the feminine nouns are unmarked and the decision about whether a noun is feminine or masculine is hard.

This paper is intended to examine variation in the unmarked feminine nouns in Beni Hammou Arabic (BHA), a spoken variety in Beni Hammou, a village among the thirteen villages<sup>2</sup> that form the valley of Beni Snous which is an area situated on the Algero- Moroccan confines, 600 km North West of Algeria and 35km far from Tlemcen. Classical Arabic (CA) is considered here as a reference point by which the variation in question in this paper is to be compared.

**KEYWORDS:** Unmarked Feminine Nouns, Variation, Masculine, Feminine

### INTRODUCTION

Two gender categories are distinguished in CA, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), and modern Arabic dialects (MAD) as well: masculine and feminine. The masculine singular noun is a base or unmarked form. It may be *aqi:qi* and includes all animate beings of male sex such as *ʿabij* ‘child’, *dḥamal* ‘male camel’, as it can also be figurative such as *layl* ‘night’. The feminine noun may be *aqi:qi*.

This category includes all animate beings of female sex such as *imra* ‘woman’, *baqara* ‘cow’. It may be also *lafʿe*: ‘by form’, i.e. marked words ending in *ta*: *marbu:ʿa*, *alif maqʿu:ra*, and *alif mamdu:da* such as *ʿa:wila* ‘table’ *buʿra*: ‘good news’ *ʿahra*: ‘desert’.

The feminine noun can also be *maʿnawi* ‘by meaning’ and includes nouns which are unmarked for example *ʿaru:s* ‘bride’, *ʿadCu:z* ‘old woman’. However, there are some unmarked feminine nouns in Arabic which are treated as both masculine and feminine. The major problem raised in the unmarked feminine nouns, as stated by Procházka (2004: 237), is the paucity of their corpus and even their diachronic development has not been to date taken into consideration by dialectologists.

In Beni Hammou, some nouns are grammatically unmarked and hence treated differently in terms of gender. Even at a regional level, some of these nouns are said to be feminine in BHA, whereas in other neighbouring varieties they are considered masculine. Sometimes we find the opposite.

<sup>1</sup> Arabic here is used to refer to both CA and modern Arabic dialects (MAD).

<sup>2</sup> The thirteen adjacent villages making up the valley of Beni Snous are: Tafessera, Tlata (also called Mghanine), Zahra, Beni Bahdel, Keddara, Beni Hammou (the village under investigation), Khémis, Ouled Moussa, Ouled Arbi, Beni Achir, Beni Zidaz, Ajdir Sidi Larbi, and Mazzer.

## GENDER OF UNMARKED FEMININE NOUNS IN CA

The problem of gender in CA as well as in MAD is that there are some feminine nouns which have no marker. However, the situation is not alike in both varieties for in CA studies of feminine nouns lacking the marker have been carried out, whereas in MDA this problem has not been solved yet. In this context, Procházka (ibid) claims:

*'Although word gender studies have been done for Classical Arabic (= CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (= MSA), such investigations have not yet been done in comparative Arabic dialectology.'*

Procházka (2004:237-238)

Fisher and Jastrow (1980:88) add that even the famous *Handbuch der arabischen Dialekte* does not detail the gender of Arabic nouns<sup>3</sup>. Procházka (ibid) shows in his study that MAD are interestingly considered to be homogeneous and highly diversified at the same time. Based on previous studies and on the holy Qur'an in which gender of some unmarked nouns is mentioned, we list some unmarked nouns which are either masculine or feminine in CA.

**Table 1: Gender of Unmarked Feminine Nouns in CA**

Words	Classical Form and Gender
⊙Ba:b⊙ 'door'	⊙Ba:b+un⊙→ masculine
⊙rri:⊙ 'wind'	⊙⊙æ+rri: +u⊙→ feminine
⊙rC★l⊙ 'foot'	/riC+l+un/→feminine
⊙jed⊙ 'hand'	/jad+un/→feminine
⊙↓har⊙ 'back'	/ahr+un/→masculine
⊙l+⊙udmi⊙ 'knife'	/s⊙kki:n+un/→masculine
⊙l+bi:t⊙ 'room'	/urfat+un/→feminine
⊙l+mal⊙ 'salt'	/★l+ mil u/→masculine
⊙l+⊙ubz⊙ 'bread'	/★l+⊙ubzu/→masculine
⊙↓↓o⊙ 'light'	/↓w⊙+un/→masculine
⊙ssma⊙ 'sky'	/sama:⊙+un/→feminine

## GENDER VARIATION OF UNMARKED FEMININE NOUNS IN BHA

The sample population is made up of a hundred and twenty informants consisting of: sixty males and sixty females. During our investigation, we observed that the speakers refer to many Arabic nouns sometimes as feminine and sometimes as masculine. For this reason, we selected a number of words which we found subject to variation among the speakers of Beni Snous and even in comparison with CA and some neighbouring varieties. These words are body parts which are frequently used in this speech community, in addition to some other nouns: ⊙rC★l⊙ 'foot', ⊙jed⊙ 'hand', ⊙↓har⊙ 'back', ⊙l+⊙udmi⊙ 'knife', ⊙l+mel⊙ 'salt', ⊙l+⊙ubz⊙ 'bread', ⊙rri:⊙ 'wind', ⊙bi:t⊙ 'room', ⊙Ba:b⊙ 'door', ⊙ssma⊙ 'sky', and ⊙↓↓o⊙ 'light'.

As we examined the gender of these nouns we found that variation does not exist in all of them. The results showed that all the informants tend to consider the following nouns as feminine: ⊙Ba:b⊙ 'door', ⊙l+⊙udmi⊙ 'knife',

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Procházka, S (2004: 238).

⊕l+mel ✱ ‘salt’, ⊕l+✱ubz ✱ ‘bread’, ⊕ssma ✱ ‘sky’<sup>4</sup>. The use of these nouns shows an extreme opposition to CA in terms of gender i.e. they are considered to be feminine in BHA, while in CA they are treated as masculine. For the following two nouns the opposite is true: the informants treat them as masculine whereas they are feminine in CA: ⊕rri: ✱ ‘wind’, ⊕l+bi:t ✱ ‘room’. Because of the insufficient data in dialectological studies concerning gender of nouns in Arabic dialects, we compared our data with gender of these nouns in CA. The following table summarizes these findings:

Table 2: Gender of Unmarked Feminine Nouns: BHA vs. CA

Words	Form and Gender in CA	Gender in BHA
⊕Ba:b ✱ ‘door’	⊕Ba:b+un ✱ → masculine	feminine
⊕rri: ✱ ‘wind’	⊕ri: +un ✱ → feminine	masculine
⊕l+✱udmi ✱ ‘knife’	/s ✱kki:n+un/ → masculine	feminine
⊕l+bi:t ✱ ‘room’	/urfat+un/ → feminine	masculine
⊕l+mal ✱ ‘salt’	/★l+ mil u/ → masculine	feminine
⊕l+✱ubz ✱ ‘bread’	/★l+✱ubzu/ → masculine	feminine
⊕↓↓o ✱ ‘light’	/↓w ✱+un/ → masculine	feminine
⊕ssma ✱ ‘sky’	/sama: ✱+un/ → feminine	feminine

However, for body parts, the next results show variation in the use of these nouns which are treated as masculine and feminine at the same time:

Table 3: Gender Variation of Body Parts

	Masculine	Feminine
⊕rC ★l ✱ ‘foot’	66.33%	33.67%
⊕jed ✱ ‘hand’	54.83%	45.17%
⊕↓har ✱ ‘back’	10%	90%

In fact, most of the speakers tend to treat ⊕jed ✱ ‘hand’ and ⊕rC ★l ✱ ‘foot’ as masculine, whereas for ⊕↓har ✱ ‘back’ as feminine. This assertion is clearly shown in figure 1.

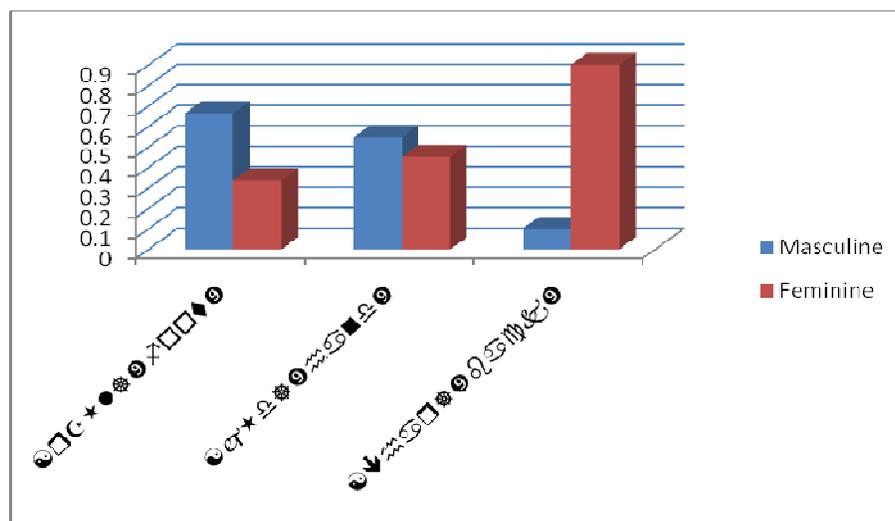


Figure 1: Gender Variation of Body Parts

<sup>4</sup> The word ⊕ssma ✱ ‘sky’ is considered as feminine in both CA and BHA.

Variation in these words can be attributed to the fact that many neighbouring dialects such as Tlemcen Arabic (TA) treat the gender of these nouns differently. A comparison is made between TA and BHA concerning these nouns in the following examples:

-⊙r★C-

-⊙↓hri # raha # t★wCa⊗ni in BHA vs. ⊙↓hri # rah # j★wdCa⊗ni in TA. ‘My back aches me’.

-⊙C at # ↓↓o: in BHA. vs. ⊙dCa # ↓↓o: in TA ‘light has come on’.

-⊙faj★n # “aha # l+udmi in BHA vs. ⊙faj # “e:h # l+udmi in TA. ‘Where is the knife?’

-⊙l+mel # ma●i # ml a # b★zza:f # f★ # ja:b in BHA vs.

⊙l+mel # ma●i # ml # b★zza:f # f★ # ja:b in TA. ‘Too much salt in cooking is not good’.

Similarly, the word ⊙ubz is feminine in BHA but masculine in TA. As we were talking with some women in Beni Hammou, we frequently heard this utterance ⊙l+ubz # l+ma⊗Cuna # b+smi:d # madC+● # k●ma # l+ma⊗Cuna # b★ # l+farina ‘bread baked with semolina is not as good as that baked with flour’.

To explain this gender mixing in nouns in BHA, we have to come back to the source which is CA where parts of the body are seen as feminine nouns, but dialectological studies have proved the opposite Procházka (2004). The majority of paired parts of the body in many Arabic dialects as well as in CA and MSA are referred to as masculine and some single body parts are feminine. Based on information given by Procházka (ibid), ⊙jed and ⊙rC★l are feminine in most Arabic dialects. But, in some urban dialects of the Maghreb, mainly, in Djidjelli and several dialects of Northern and South-Eastern Morocco the former is masculine. The latter is also masculine in some parts in Morocco. However, we tried to find the gender of the remaining words in other dialectological studies but unfortunately, it seems that gender of unmarked nouns study has not been accomplished yet.

In gross, we may say that though the slight variation which has been attested among speakers, the words ⊙rC★l and ⊙jed are for the majority of Beni Hammou speakers treated as masculine nouns while ⊙↓har is seen as feminine. In TA, ⊙↓har is said to be treated as masculine. The following table identifies the gender of the investigated body parts in CA and BHA:

**Table 4: Gender of Body Parts: BHA vs. CA**

Words	Form and Gender in CA	Gender in BHA
⊙rC★l ‘foot’	/r●C l+un/→feminine	masculine
⊙jed ‘hand’	/jad+un/→feminine	masculine
⊙↓har ‘back’	/ahr+un/→masculine	feminine

## CONCLUSIONS

The unmarked feminines investigated in this paper are comparatively insufficient. Though this field of study is so vast and interesting in showing variation in gender of some nouns from one region to another, but it has not to date intrigued Arabic dialectology. BHA nouns are highly varied in gender mainly with regard to CA. Strikingly, paired parts of the body which are normally feminine in CA, MSA, and the majority of MAD, are masculine in BHA, though not all the informants consider them as such. The variation attested among speakers concerning body parts can be attributed to the long dialect contact situations where the inhabitants are in daily contact with the neighbouring villages and towns which

treat these nouns differently in terms of gender. Many scholars argue that contact between dialects drives to linguistic variation and change in these dialects. For a long time the geographical barriers<sup>5</sup> isolated regions and hampered contact between them. Nowadays, these barriers disappeared because of technology and science developments which provided comfortable social conditions for a better living. Means of transports are now available to people who tend to move to other regions for several reasons such as working, learning, or travelling. This movement is obviously behind the attested variation of unmarked feminine nouns among Beni Hammou speakers.

The conclusion reached then, is that BHA speakers are likely to lose some of the linguistic characteristics of their dialect and hence, this latter is undergoing linguistic changes.

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<sup>5</sup> A river, mountain, ocean, or any other geographical feature that separate two regions from being in contact.

