

## **ON SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT IN EDUCATED SPOKEN ARABIC IN ALGERIA**

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Algeria which is a multilingual speech community<sup>1</sup> is characterised by a sharp diglossia as far as the Arabic language is concerned. The communicative gap between the H variety and the L one is so big that it is very hard, not to say impossible, for an AA (Algerian Arabic) speaker to understand a piece of language in SA (Standard Arabic) if he had not been initiated to it either through school, the mosque or any other means. However, as Ferguson (1959) puts it, the communicative tensions between H and L can be reduced by the use of the middle language “al luṛa lwuṣṭa” which is more commonly called Educated Spoken Arabic.

Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) as it is developing in Algeria presents one facet of language

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<sup>1</sup> Besides Arabic, there exists Tamazight (Berber) which is gaining sociolinguistic importance and French which is still considered as a prestigious language.

change that takes place in all societies of the world. Being linguistically heterogeneous, the Maghrib in general and Algeria in particular has been (and is still) subject to situations of language contact, borrowing, etc. It is amidst these situations that ESA, which has always been defined as a mixture of Standard Arabic (SA) and colloquial Arabic, has emerged. In the present paper, an observation of the ways Algerian ESA speakers manage, or at least try to, to combine standard rules and colloquial ones. The subject of the present paper is the process of subject/verb agreement in ESA. However it was thought to be helpful to give a slight idea of one the most frequent sentence structure in Arabic.

### **The Sentence Structure**

While the sentence structure in SA is complex and has a lot of variants that of Algerian Arabic (AA) turns most frequently around the basic SVO (Subject-Verb-object) one. Even if it is not the only sentence structure Algerian speakers make use of, the SVO pattern deserves a special treatment because it is one on which SA and AA do not agree, the former having a more widespread VSO pattern. The following examples illustrate what has just been said:

(1) / ʔakala muḥammadun al xubza/ (SA)

V                      S                      O

“ ate Muhammad (the) bread” (lit.)

(2) /muḥammad kla lxubz/ (AA)

S V O

“Muhammad ate (the) bread”

As can be noticed, the sentence structure is VSO in e.g.(1) while it is SVO in e.g.(2). However, as already stated, the two above-cited patterns are not the only ones existing in SA and AA. The reason why it has been felt more interesting to concentrate on the basic sentence pattern is that Algerian educated speakers have a tendency to use very frequently what they feel as simple and avoid complex combinations and structures.

In this sense, ESA speakers show a bigger tendency towards using the AA SVO pattern. Consider the following example:

(3) / lwaqt jalʕab dawr kbiir/

S V O (C)

“Time plays a big role”

The use of this sentence structure in ESA affects the rules of subject / verb agreement.

## 2. Subject /Verb Agreement:

The agreement between the subject and the verb in terms of number and gender is generally determined

by the position of the verb in relation to its subject. We shall now examine this point in both the nominal sentence and the verbal one.

### **2.1. In the Nominal Sentence (NS):**

The nominal sentence is traditionally known as that which starts with a part of speech other than the verb. This is a case where SA and AA follow the same rule and procedure as far subject / verb agreement is concerned. In both codes<sup>2</sup> the verb agrees with the subject's number and gender.

(4) / arraʔiissu ʔalqaa xiṭaaban /            SA

“The president made a speech”

(5) /arraajas daar diskuur (or) xiṭaab/    AA

In examples the verbs, /ʔalqaa/ in e.g. (4) and /daar/ in e.g. (5), are conjugated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, singular, masculine following the subject's number and gender. This sentence has been produced by an Algerian educated speaker as:

(6) / arra ʔiis lqa xiṭaab/

Thus, the same procedure is used by ESA speakers since as can be seen in example (6) the verb /lqa/ is conjugated in agreement with the subject

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<sup>2</sup> The terms « code » and « variety » are used here to refer to any linguistic system, regardless of its status.

/arraʔiis/ which is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, singular, masculine. The same thing holds true when the subject is feminine:

- (7) /lFamʕijja ntææbat aʔdʒaaʔha/  
“the assembly elected its members”

Here, the verb /ntææbat/ follows the subject /lFamʕijja/ in that it is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, singular, feminine.

However, an exception to this rule is made with the dual and sometimes with the feminine plural. This can be explained by the need to simplify the rules of SA which are quite complex. The following are instances of such simplifications:

- (8) /alliqaaʔaan Falbu Famhur ʔafiir/  
“The two matches drained a big crowd”

The dual subject /alliqaaʔaan/ is followed by a plural verb /Falbu/. It is worth mentioning at this stage that ESA speakers show a large tendency towards the avoidance of dual forms and their replacement with plural ones unless a special emphasis is made on the dual for one reason or another.

Another case in which SA and AA do not agree in relation to subject/verb agreement is the use of the plural verb. Unlike in SA where a feminine plural subject is followed by a feminine plural verb, in AA it is followed by a masculine plural verb. Consider the following instances:

(9) /Imasraḥijjaat naalat ʔiʔFaab alFumhuur/ (SA)  
“the plays pleased the spectators”

(10) /Imasraḥijjaat ʔaFbu nnaas/ (AA)

In sentence (9), the verb /naalat/ is feminine in agreement with the subject /almasraḥijjat/ while it is masculine in sentence (10).

There seems to be an oscillation between the two above rules in ESA. The following two examples are cases in point:

(11) /laḥzaab rafḍat lqaanuun/  
“the parties refused the law”

(12) /laḥzaab rafḍu lqanuun/

The subject in both examples is feminine, but it is followed by a feminine verb in sentence (11), and by a masculine one in example (12).

The verbal sentence also is of interest as to subject / verb agreement in ESA.

## 2.2. In the Verbal sentence:

The verbal sentence presents differences from SA to AA in the sense that in SA the verb is all the time singular regardless of the subject's number whereas in AA it agrees with the subject's number.

(13) /qarrara ʔaʕḍaʔu al munaḍḍama/

“the members of the organisation decided”

Notice that in this SA sentence the verb /qarrara/ is singular, masculine while the subject /ʔaʕḍaʔu/ is plural masculine. On the contrary, the verb in AA generally agrees with the subject's number and gender:

(14) /Gaaf lfilm/      “he saw the film”

(15) /ħabbsu lxadma/

“they (the workers) stopped working”

In these AA examples the two verbs /Gaaf/ and /ħabbsu/ agrees with their understated subjects, respectively, /huwa/ “he” and /lxaddæma/ “the workers”.

As far as the verbal is concerned, ESA speakers show a high degree between the two forms i.e. SA and AA. Therefore it quite usual to hear utterances the following:

(16) /rafʕu lmutaʕaahiriin laafitaat/

“the demonstrators raised placards”

where the subject and the verb agree on both number and gender.

(17) / tanaaqaG ruʔasaaʔ lʔaħzaab mʕa rraʔiis/

“the party leaders discussed with the president”.

Where the singular verb /tanaaqaG/ precedes a plural subject /ruʔasaaʔ/.

An important remark which should be made here is that the verb in example (16) which is standard has a dialectal morphological structure which is illustrated by the loss the pre-final vowel /a/<sup>3</sup> while it is retained in its SA form in example (17).

What we can conclude from the above survey of the subject verb agreement in ESA is that a process of simplification of the rules of standard Arabic



Is taking form through the blending of AA and SA. The reasons for such simplifications are numerous, but the most important of which are certainly the need of the educated Algerians to be understood by the uneducated and, also in a lot of instances, the non-mastery of the complex rules of SA by these educated people themselves.

3. This is a case of inter-lingual loan-blend in which a SA verb is given an AA morphological form

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