

A MORPHONOLOGICAL SEMANTIC STUDY OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER IN IRAQI ARABIC-ENGLISH CODE-SWITCHING

Dr. Abbas Fadhil Albayati
Salahaddin University / Iraq- Erbil
College of Languages
English Department

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt at analyzing grammatical gender in code-switching from central Iraqi Arabic (henceforth IA) to English, specifically in the case of a head noun being modified by an adjective or another noun. Here we explore how the gendered IA interacts with the non-gendered English, resulting in accommodation for a form of convergent flexibility. For example, Iraqis speaking English as a foreign language will assign the IA feminine marker [a] to the adjective modifying an English noun, as in ‘ka:mira (camera) ʃibi:ra (big)’, if the English noun ends in an [a]. The same can be said if the English noun is devoid of a final [a] as in ‘mall’ which will then be marked for masculine in its adjectival gender in the IA as in ‘mɔ:l (mall) ʃibi:r (big)’.

Consequently, the morphonological shape accounts for grammatical concord and this is generally agreed upon by speakers in natural conversation. However, sometimes such morphonological gender assignment is not always so transparently defined and IA speakers instead select a semantic frame application to nouns, irrespective of their morphonological shape. Such semantic

processing of gender is transferred across from IA. Such assignment rules force the speakers in bilingual conversation to somehow agree on noun assignment giving rise to either morphonologically or semantically attributed IA 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 IA discourse, and it has been found that code switchers have strong grammatical intuitions of male or female-specific lexicality.

1. Introduction

Hockett (1958, p. 231) defines gender as the class membership of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words. However, the present paper analyses the physical loading of gender with morphonological markings as well as the semantic mapping that this necessitates, regardless of the associated words. It is only recently that grammatical gender has been considered and researched as a core linguistic category. Early work (e.g. Arndt, 1970; Poplack, 1982; Radford, 1988; Corbett, 1991) addressed the linguistic category of grammatical gender focusing on the semantics of certain words in a language (usually a host language) and its reflection on the morphonological shape of those words (also see Myers-Scotton, 1993).

Unlike English, IA is among the languages in which the terminal phone, i.e. the phonological shape, of the word is reflective of its gender. 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. They found that

assignment of the masculine gender was given to nouns that are masculine in Arabic. In this paper, semantic mapping with concept association is a frequent occurrence amongst IA and English speakers, but is more transparently evident amongst fluent or first generation speakers of IA. It is evident that grammatical gender assignment is one of the last aspects of second language acquisition to be mastered. For example, the use of 'le' or 'la' in French is often a stumbling block for learners of French as a foreign language, especially learners whose mother tongue makes no distinction between masculine and feminine nouns (see Tucker, Lambert, & Rigault, 1977).

It appears, then, that the mastery of grammatical gender is an indicator of language fluency (Hawkins & Chan, 1997), and is part of the native speaker's competency. Many researchers (e.g. Fransechina, 2005) have investigated this grammatical category in second language acquisition, and have found that transparent features of noun 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 morphonological assignment, and their faithfulness to the usual settings and parameters of Universal Grammar.

This paper then is an examination of the way IA speakers of English assign grammatical gender to English words while code-switching from IA to English, as well as an examination of the semantic bases of their choosing to assign a certain gender to a certain word.

2. Setting and Methodology

The corpus for this paper is made up of a total of 10 English speaking Iraqis and British-born Iraqis living in the UK. All the speakers that the researcher recorded are bilinguals with variations in fluency and skill. Two interview sets of questioning were used: One for British-born Iraqis and the other for Iraqis born and living in Iraq. The questions asked were alternated between English and IA with some interrogatives in IA which were then modified by an English discourse particle or vice versa to enhance the switching, and to highlight noun and adjective agreement.

3. Gender Contexts

As noted earlier, a feminine noun in IA is morphologically marked by the suffix [a], most obviously in kinship terms, as in the following:

- (1) wa:lɪd 'father' / wa:lɪda 'mother'.
- (2) xa:l 'maternal uncle' / xa:la 'maternal aunt'.

Moreover, an adjective has to agree with the noun it modifies in terms of gender as well as number, which requires the addition of the same feminine suffix, i.e. [a], to the adjective as well, e.g.

- (3) wa:lɪd ʕaɖi:m 'a great father' / wa:lɪda ʕaɖi:ma 'a great mother'.
- (4) xa:l ɥani:n 'a kind maternal uncle' / xa:la ɥani:na 'a kind maternal aunt'.

The same applies to some non-kinship words such as:

- (5) mumarriɖ 'male nurse' / mumarriɖa 'female nurse'.
- (6) dukɒ:r 'male doctor' / dukɒ:ra 'female doctor'.

Most importantly, there are a plenty of nouns that are generally taken by the native speakers of IA to be feminine even though they are not morphonologically marked for the feminine gender. That these are feminine nouns is usually evidenced by the feminine adjectives (marked by [a]) modifying them, e.g.

(7) ga:ʕ ʕadla ‘a plain plot of land’.

(8) famis qawiyya ‘powerful sun rays’.

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that switching between a modifier in language A and a noun in language B is becoming increasingly common across all generation groups of bilingual IA/English speakers, and grammatical gender switching is prevalent amongst British-born and Iraqi-born bilinguals irrespective of fluency.

4. Morphonological Mapping

Concord in IA identically maps the above feature specifications of an adjective with the noun it modifies; feminine nouns are morphonologically marked for gender and carry the feminine suffix [a]. In contrast, masculine nouns carry a zero suffix and are devoid of any such markings. Words in IA then follow a strict morphonological ordering and are either masculine or feminine. Let us consider some representative examples:

(9)

Feminine Nouns

tə:ba 'ball'

ʕen 'eye'

i:d 'hand'

Masculine Nouns

qalam 'pen'

ma:ʕu:n 'plate'

kita:b 'book'

(10) ʔirrijja:l (the man) ga:ʕid (is sitting 'masculine verb') gidda:mi (in front of me).

(11) ʔilibnayya (the girl) ilhilwa (pretty 'feminine adjective') = The pretty girl.

(12) *ʔilmuʃkila (the problem 'feminine noun') biqat (remained 'feminine verb') mamahlu:l (unsolved 'masculine adjective').

There is lack of concord in (12); therefore, the sentence is ill-formed. The noun 'ilmuʃkila' and the verb 'biqat' are feminine, which requires that the adjective 'mamahlu:l' should also be feminine, i.e. 'mamahlu:la'. Unlike English, IA has a two-gender system; therefore, IA verbs, adjectives, and anaphoric pronouns have to show gender and number agreement, as in the following:

(13) ʃifit wa:hid (some man 'singular masculine') ga:ʕid (sitting 'singular masculine') yam ilba:b = I saw someone sitting by the door.

The indefinite pronoun 'wa:hid' is both singular and masculine and therefore agrees with the verb 'ga:ʕid', which is also singular and masculine.

The same application is valid in code-switched utterances where IA speakers cognitively determine the gender of an English noun. If the noun ends in [a], it is dealt with as a feminine noun;

otherwise, the noun is rendered masculine. The addressee continues the gender consideration in the same way. Let us consider the following dialogue:

(14)

Speaker 1:

- ʕammi: inta:ni *CD* (masculine noun) ra:ʔiʕ (masculine adjective) = My uncle gave me a wonderful CD.

Speaker 2:

- Wallha? ʔiʕsawwet bi:**h** (masculine pronoun)? = Really, what did you do to it?

The noun ‘*CD*’ above does not end in [a], which means that it is void of the feminine gender marker [a] in IA. The noun is therefore replaced by a masculine pronoun (in bold) in the second sentence. Cognitively, [qur**i**s^ʕ] in IA (meaning ‘*CD*’) is also masculine and the matching system here only shows morphonological concord mapping. Speaker 2 continues the same masculine agreement. So morphonological gender concord is matched across all grammatical generation groups. The following example shows feminine gender agreement:

(15)

Speaker 1:

- hai il *house* wa:sʕa (feminine adjective) u **hilua** (feminine adjective) = This house is large and nice.

Speaker 2:

- tri:d tift**ri:ha** (feminine pronoun)? = Do you want to buy it?

Although IA 'da:r' (meaning 'house') is devoid of a final [a], the cognitive application is [+feminine] and the modifiers are [+feminine] in IA (written in bold). This is because 'da:r' in IA is feminine and this semantic association spills over into its English counterpart.

We can therefore ascertain and conclude that in encoding information structure, morphonology (or morphophonemics) has more of a bearing over semantic association in determining the gender of English nouns. This is the case only if both the English noun and the IA noun map morphonologically. This is the prediction for all cases of IA-English code-switching. It is also unidirectional in the sense that, if an English noun ends in [a] , it will be [+feminine] in the IA, but, if an IA noun is either masculine or feminine, it has no bearing on the English adjective as there is no morphonological gender marking in English for adjectives. This significant morphonological 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 (cf. Myers-Scotton, 2002).

5. Semantic Mapping

Semantic considerations, however, are part of the micro information structure of the clause as it overtly expresses whether a morphonological or semantic approach has been applied. Moreover,

this structure discloses the speaker's own association with the world.

The process of grammaticalization conveys a (mor)phonological-semantic transfer process or a semantic-(mor)phonological transfer process. This in turn should provide us with a more psycholinguistic approach to code-switching where micro-negotiated discourse is analysed and evaluated. Based on the researcher's observations, the personal sense of the meaning of a noun can be shared or divided. If it is divided, the interlocutors can negotiate it. At this stage, there is a levelling process, whereby the final gender assignment is determined by Speaker 1, modified by speaker 2, and then fixed and agreed upon by both. However, we can conclude that the morphonological shape (the final [a]) will almost always be the overriding feature in feminine gender assignment. This is why nouns such as 'camera', 'drama', 'cola', etc. that have clear morphonological shapes will be marked for the feminine in IA, 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, p. 309) concluded that mismatch of gender features cancels the derivation. However, this analysis only considered morphonological aspects of such feature checking. A cognitive application may override this morphonological feature and render a noun feminine due to its conceptualization as feminine in Arabic (see Clarke et al. 1981). Contrastively, in IA-English code-switching, other nouns are assigned a specific feminine gender marking due to a semantic application alone, irrespective of the

morphonological shape. For example, in IA nouns such ‘ʕen’ (= eye), ‘jimsi’ (= GMC), and ‘da:r’ (= house) are all considered feminine even though they lack the morphonological marking for feminine (see, Nortier, 1990; Boumans, 1998).

Therefore the information structure of such gender assignment to the English noun portrays how a semantic rather than a morphonological adaptation has been applied by the informant at that given moment. Let us consider the following example of semantic agreement:

(16)

Speaker 1:

- ʔahis *my spirit* la:yib (I feel my spirit restless = ‘I feel restless’)

Speaker 2:

- ʔa:ni ʔahis *my spirit* zahga:na (I feel my spirit boring = ‘I feel bored’)

Speaker 1:

- ʔa:ni hammena minil ba:rha *my spirit* zahga:na (I have also been feeling my spirit restless since yesterday = ‘I have also been feeling restless since yesterday’)

In the above example, Speaker 1 is British-born and assigns no feminine suffix to the adjective modifying ‘my spirit’, which translates into ‘ru:h’ in IA, in concord with the English morphonological shape of ‘self’ and ‘spirit’. However, Speaker 2 is Iraqi-born; therefore, he modifies the English ‘my spirit’ with a feminine IA adjective (zahga:na), even though its IA counterpart,

i.e. 'ru:h', lacks the feminine morphonological marking, i.e. a final [a]. He does so because 'ru:h' is conceptualized as feminine in IA, which 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 IA semantic applications may override the morphonological 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 generation groups. Iraqi-born migrants at times override morphonological 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 morphonological versus semantic pairing amongst the first group of speakers. This could be due to fluency, pragmatic, and cognitive semantic forces such as how the noun is perceived in the speaker's mind. Nevertheless, both groups switch between morphonological and semantic moulding with children adopting this skill very early. Such 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.

6. Summary and Conclusions

This paper has examined the innovative notion of semantic versus morphonological grammatical assignment and the differences borne out in terms of different generation groups amongst British-born and Iraqi-born bilinguals.

Grammatical gender concord, where speakers of both generation groups engage in the semantic application of lexical convergence, is essential amongst Arabic speakers. The data recorded shows, however, that Iraqi-born migrants are more skilled at this application than the British-born bilinguals and this is to be expected. In highlighting this phenomenon, where semantic gender overrides the morphonological gender, 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 IA and/or whether to apply morphonological or semantic agreement, particularly as convergence in IA is learnt very early.

This occasional trial and error process is most evident amongst second generation British-born Iraqis as opposed to the more fluent IA speakers. Concord across generations is then highlighted either semantically or morphonologically, and this is the crucial and salient aspect of this paper. The question here is whether the agreement relation is determined as semantic or morphonological.

Perhaps it is worth noting that agreement and matching of phonological and/or morphological features 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 IA and English code-switching amongst different generations of bilingual speakers.

References

- Arndt, W. (1970). **Non-Random Assignment of Loan Words: German Noun Gender**. *Word* 26, 244-253.
- Boumans, L. (1998). **The Syntax of Code-Switching: Analysing Moroccan Arabic/Dutch Conversation**. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.
- Chomsky, N. (1995). **The Minimalist Program**. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Clarke, M.A, Losoff, A., McCracken, M., & Still, J. (1981). **Gender Perception in Arabic and English**. *Language Learning* 31(1), 159-169.
- Corbett, G. G. (1991). **Gender**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fransechina, F. (2005). **Fossilized Second Language Grammars: The Acquisition of Grammatical Gender**. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Hawkins, R., & Chan, Y. (1997). **The Partial Availability of Universal Grammar in Second Language Acquisition: The Failed Functional Features Hypothesis**. *Second Language Research* 13, 187-226.

- Hockett, C. F. (1958). **A Course in Modern Linguistics**. New York, NY: MacMillan.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (1993). **Duelling Languages: Grammatical Structures in Code-Switching**. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Myers-Scotton, C. (2002). **Contact Linguistics: Bilingual Encounters and Grammatical Outcomes**. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nortier, J. (1990). **Dutch-Moroccan Arabic Code-Switching**. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Poplack, S. (1982). **Competing Influences on Gender Assignment: Variable Process, Stable Outcome**. *Lingua* 57, 1-28.
- Radford, A. (1988). **Transformational Grammar**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tucker, G.R., Lambert, W.E., & Rigault, A. A. (1977). **The French Speaker's Skill with Grammatical Gender: An Example of Rule-Governed Behavior**. The Hague: Mouton.

Appendix I

The Iraqi Arabic Phonemes

A. Consonants

Letter	IPA
ء	[ʔ]
ا	[a:]
ب	[b]
ث	[p]
ت	[t]
ث	[θ]
ج	[dʒ]
ح	[h]
خ	[x]
د	[d]
ذ	[ð]
ر	[r]
ز	[z]
س	[s]
ش	[ʃ]
ص	[sʕ]
ض	[dʕ]
ط	[tʕ]

ظ	[ð ^ʕ] / [z ^ʕ]
ع	[ʕ] / [ʔ ^ʕ]
غ	[ɣ] / [ʁ]
ف	[f]
ق	[q]
ك	[k]
ط	[g]
ل	[l] , [l ^ʕ]
م	[m]
ن	[n]
ه	[h]
و	[w] , [u]
ي	[j] , [i]

B. Vowels

ا	[a:]
و	[u:]
ي	[i:]

الخلاصة

الدراسة الحالية محاولة لتحليل الجنس النحوي في التحول اللغوي بين الإنكليزية والعربية العراقية، لاسيما في حالة الاسم المعرف بصفة أو باسم آخر. يقوم الباحث باستكشاف التفاعل بين العربية العراقية التي تميز بين المذكر والمؤنث في هذه التركيبة النحوية واللغة الإنكليزية التي تفتقر إلى هكذا تمييز، ما يستدعي إيجاد صيغة من التسوية المرنة. فعلى سبيل المثال، العراقيون الناطقون باللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية يلصقون صفة مؤنثة بأي اسم إنكليزي ينتهي بالصوت [ا] ، كما في "كاميرا ضبيرة". والعكس صحيح عند انتهاء الاسم الإنكليزي بغير هذا الصوت، فمثلا كلمة "مول" الإنكليزية يتم إلحاقها بصفة غير مؤنثة كما في قولك "مول ضبير".

إن القول بأن التركيبة الصوتية للكلمة لها دور أساس في تحديد الوفاق النحوي، متفق عليه من لدن المشاركين في الخطاب، إلا أنه في بعض الأحيان الشكل الصوتي لا يكون دليلا على جنس الكلمة في العربية العراقية، ما يلزم معاملة اسم ما على أنه مذكر أو مؤنث في إطار دلالي، بعيدا عن الهيئة الصرفية الصوتية للاسم.

إن هذا التعاطي الدلالي مع الجنس النحوي تسدعيه العربية العراقية. قد يجهل بعض مستخدمي اللغتين الإنكليزية والعربية العراقية هذين الأساسين المختلفين في التعامل مع الأسماء من حيث تذكيرها أو تأنيثها، حينئذ يلجأون في تعاملهم مع جنس الأسماء إلى الاقتداء بمن هو أضلع في العربية العراقية وتصحيح أخطائهم في هذا الباب وفق تعامل ذلك المتكلم الضليع مع جنس الأسماء.