FEMININE PLURALS IN HAUSA: A CASE OF SYNTACTIC OVERCORRECTION

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The problem of gender in Hausa has been discussed at some length in a number of recent papers. Parsons, in his series of extensive discussions, and Schachter, in his transformational treatment of the problem, have both taken for granted the well-known fact that syntactically Hausa has no masculine/feminine distinction in the plural. 'Hausa makes, maximally, a three-way distinction: masculine-singular, feminine-singular, and plural.' This three-way contrast can be illustrated by constructions with 'adjectival' concord.4

1. YARINYA gajeriya ce. 'The girl is short.'—f-sg
2. yaro gajere ne. 'The boy is short.'—m-sg
3. yara gajeru ne. 'The boys/children are short.'—pl
4. 'yam mata gajeru ne. 'The girls are short.'

While gender concord is maximally a three-term system, many syntactic constructions exhibit only a two-way contrast, merging all plurals with masculine singulat regardless of the gender of the underlying singular noun. Expressed in a more traditional manner, we can simply say that all plurals in Hausa are masculine.5 The syntactic merger of plurals with masculine-singulat and the resultant two-way system is illustrated by constructions with the stabilizer ne/ce and the linker n/r.6

5. YARINYA ce. 'It's a girl.'
6. yaro ne. 'It's a boy.'—f-sg (ce)
7. yara ne. 'They're boys/children.'—m-sg & pl (ne)
8. 'yam mata ne. 'They're girls.'
9. YARINYA j sa. 'His girl.'—f-sg (r)
10. yarən sa. 'His boy.'
11. yaran sa. 'His boys/children.'—m-sg & pl (n)
12. 'yam matan sa. 'His girls.'

A common feature of 'substandard' Hausa spoken outside the central Kano-Katsina area is the lack of adherence to certain gender concord rules. As one departs further away from [the] centres of 'pure' Hausa, there is observable an increasing tendency to ignore feminine forms and concords, especially with the Genitive Copula and the Stabilizer . . .7 I would here like to report the case of a Hausa speaker who

3. Schachter, p. 34.
4. Adopting Schachter's convention, nouns which normally govern feminine concord are written in capital letters.
5. R. C. Abraham, The Language of the Hausa People, London (1958), p. 5 'All plurals are Masculine grammatically, no matter what the logical sex may be'. F. W. Taylor, A Practical Hausa Grammar, Oxford (1959), p. 8 'Plural nouns are always masculine'.
6. The term linker is used for what Parsons calls the genitive copula.
recognizes a gender distinction not found in standard Hausa. Instead of losing feminizing forms and concords, this native speaker, who comes from an area peripheral to central Hausaland, goes beyond the normal distinctions of the standard dialect and distinguishes between masculine and feminine plurals. In just those cases where a plural form is derived from a feminine singular noun and ends in the vowel /a/, the usual final vowel of feminine singular nouns and adjectives, this speaker uses the feminine linker ṛ in place of the proper form n.

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{feminine-plural}^{16} & \text{feminine-singular} \\
(13) \ hulun\text{na}_r \ sa & \text{HUL\text{A}_r} \ sa \quad \text{‘his cap’} \\
(14) \ k\text{a}\text{fa}\text{f}u\text{w}\text{a}_{\text{ta}} & \text{KA}\text{F\text{A}_r} \ ta \quad \text{‘her foot’} \\
(15) \ s\text{h}e\text{k}\text{u}\text{n}\text{a}_r \ su & \text{SHEK\text{A}_r} \ su \quad \text{‘their nest’} \\
(16) \ r\text{i}g\text{u}\text{m}\text{a}_r \ Mus\text{a} & \text{RIG\text{A}_r} \ Mus\text{a} \quad \text{‘Musa’s robe’}
\end{array}
\]

The correct n linker is used with all other plurals, including those formed from feminine-singular nouns but not ending in /a/ as well as plurals ending in /a/ formed from masculine-singular nouns.

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{plural} & \text{feminine-singular} \\
(17) \ w\text{u}k\text{a}k\text{e}_r \ sa & \text{WUK\text{A}_r} \ sa \quad \text{‘his knife’} \\
(18) \ o\text{w}a\text{k}\text{i}_r \ ta & \text{AKWI\text{A}_r} \ ta \quad \text{‘her she-goat’}
\end{array}
\]

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{masculine-singular} \\
(19) \ d\text{a}k\text{u}\text{n}\text{a}_r \ sa & \text{dak\text{i}_r} \ sa \quad \text{‘his room’} \\
(20) \ t\text{u}h\text{u}\text{n}\text{a}_r \ ta & \text{tu\text{u}_r} \ ta \quad \text{‘her pitcher’}
\end{array}
\]

Although the ṛ linker was the preferred form for ‘feminine-plural’ nouns, the informant did recognize the n linker as a possible alternative. However, when an n linker was accepted with ‘feminine-plurals’ it was assumed that the corresponding singular form would also take an n linker, i.e. the use of the n linker with ‘feminine-plurals’ was viewed as part of a common substandard gender system which ignores feminine concord altogether. Thus if n is substituted for ṛ in examples (13) to (16) it must be equally substituted in both columns.

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
(13a) \ hulun\text{na}_r \ sa / \text{HUL\text{A}_r} \ sa \\
(14a) \ k\text{a}\text{fa}\text{f}u\text{w}\text{a}_{\text{ta}} / \text{KA}\text{F\text{A}_r} \ ta \\
(15a) \ s\text{h}e\text{k}\text{u}\text{n}\text{a}_r \ su / \text{SHEK\text{A}_r} \ su \\
(16a) \ r\text{i}g\text{u}\text{m}\text{a}_r \ Mus\text{a} / \text{RIG\text{A}_r} \ Mus\text{a}
\end{array}
\]

The use of the ṛ linker with feminine-plurals was not paralleled by the use of the feminine stabilizer ce with these same words. The informant used ne with all plurals. A sentence containing both a linker and a stabilizer could thus exhibit inconsistency in concord. Note the following utterance:

\[
(21) \ k\text{a}\text{fa}\text{f}u\text{w}\text{a}_{\text{ta}} \ ne \ s\text{u}k\text{a} \ ci \ w\text{u}t\text{a} \quad \text{‘Her feet were burnt.’}
\]

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8 The informant, Haroun Al Rashid Adamu, is a native Hausa speaker, born and raised in Makurdi, Benue Province, Northern Nigeria. His father is a Fulani from Kano and his mother is a Hausa from Gobir.

9 Almost all feminine nouns end in /a/, but not all nouns ending in /a/ are feminine. The exceptions, however, are very few.

10 The term ‘feminine-plural’ hereafter refers to those plurals with which my informant normally uses an ṛ linker.
In this actually spoken example the word *kafafuwa* governs both the feminine linker *r* and the masculine stabilizer *ne*!

The informant's recognition of a separate category 'feminine-plural' can best be understood as an example of a type of analogic change referred to as overcorrection.\(^{11}\) The usual examples given for this process are phonological, but the concept is equally applicable to syntactic innovation.\(^{12}\) Overcorrection refers to a process whereby speakers attempt to 'correct' their speech habits to conform to the dictates of some more prestigious dialect, and in so doing erroneously extend the correction to words or constructions where it is not applicable. This process presupposes the existence of dialect differences within a speech community and some awareness on the part of native speakers of these differences.

It has commonly been noted that speakers of standard Hausa are aware of gender-concord rules and recognize substitutions of masculine for feminine concord either as dialect markers or simply as mistakes.\(^{13}\) What has not been noted is that Hausa speakers from peripheral areas (such as Makurdi, the home of my informant) are not necessarily ignorant of the gender distinctions which they themselves do not make. On the contrary, they are aware of these distinctions and regard adherence to them as a mark of dialects other than their own. Some speakers, moreover, who have had greater contact with standard Hausa (perhaps through relatives, education, or travel) will be aware that the commonly used *n* linker (for example) in their own dialect is an 'incorrect' replacement for the correct form *r*. That is, not only may they freely substitute *r* for *n* with feminine nouns, but this will be 'good' Hausa. The preference for *r* is in no way supported by statistical frequency in the speech community (it may in fact be very rare) but rather is based on a notion of correct vs. incorrect.

The speaker who normally hears *HULAN* *sa* (for example) learns to say the 'correct' form *HULAR* *sa* by the use of a concord-correction rule for feminine nouns. The problem of identifying feminine nouns is simplified by the fact that feminine singulars in Hausa are phonologically marked—they end in /a/. It is easy to see how the rule requiring the use of *r* with feminine singulars could also be extended to feminine plural nouns ending in the normal feminine marker /a/. The rule is simply made to apply to all feminine nouns ending in /a/ without reference to number. If

\[
HULAN \ _{sa} = HULAR \ _{sa}
\]

then it follows logically that

\[
Hulan\ *sa* \text{ should } = Hulun\ *sa*
\]

The use of the *r* linker with a feminine plural noun ending in /a/ is thus an overcorrection, extended erroneously to plurals on the analogy of the proper correction of feminine singular forms. The result is the creation of a category 'feminine-plural' which does not exist in the standard dialect that served as the model for the correction. In the

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\(^{13}\) 'It is noteworthy that the Hausas themselves, even those who have no notion of formal grammar, are very conscious of gender in their language ...' Farsans, 'An introduction ...', p. 117, fn.
following diagram the overcorrected gender system is contrasted with the gender systems of standard and substandard Hausa.

![Diagram showing gender distinctions in Hausa](image)

**Fig. 1.**—Standard Hausa maximally distinguishes three gender categories. In linking constructions, plurals merge with masculine singulars. Certain varieties of substandard Hausa lose the gender distinction in the singular so that there is a simple singular/plural dichotomy. In linking constructions, all nouns merge into a single category. The over-corrected Hausa described in this paper maximally distinguishes three gender categories. However, in linking constructions a small sub-set of plurals, the ‘feminine-plurals’, merge with feminine singulars rather than with masculine singulars.

**Summary.**—It has been known for over a century that Hausa has no gender distinction in the plural. This paper reports the discovery of feminine distinction in the plural by a native Hausa speaker of Makurdi, a peripheral Hausa area. This remarkable innovation is explained in terms of syntactic overcorrection, an important but poorly documented mechanism of language change.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{14}\) Dr. David Arnott (personal communication) reports observing a similar phenomenon in the Hausa spoken by a Tiv government messenger in 1942. The messenger was aware that Hausa has gender distinction, such as Tiv does not have, and knew that this distinction was observed *inter alia* in a *ya/ta* distinction in the subject pronoun; but he confused the two and wrongly used *ya* referring to a feminine noun and *ta* to a masculine noun, e.g.,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hausa as normally spoken by Tiv at that time</th>
<th>Arnott’s Messenger’s Hausa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Standard Hausa</em></td>
<td><em>Arnott’s</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>matarsa ta zo</em></td>
<td><em>matansu ya zo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>mijin ya zo</em></td>
<td><em>mijin ya zo</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. = ‘his wife came’</td>
<td>2. = ‘the husband came’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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