

# 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,<sup>1</sup> in his series of extensive discussions, and Schachter,<sup>2</sup> 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.'<sup>3</sup> This three-way contrast can be illustrated by constructions with 'adjectival' concord.<sup>4</sup>

- |                                  |                                |      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|------|
| (1) <i>YARINYA gajeriya ce.</i>  | 'The girl is short.'           | f-sg |
| (2) <i>yaro gajere ne.</i>       | 'The boy is short.'            | m-sg |
| (3) <i>yara gajeru ne.</i>       | 'The boys/children are short.' | } pl |
| (4) ' <i>yam mata gajeru ne.</i> | '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 singulars 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.<sup>5</sup> The syntactic merger of plurals with masculine-singulars and the resultant two-way system is illustrated by constructions with the stabilizer *ne/ce* and the linker *n/r*.<sup>6</sup>

- |                             |                          |                           |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| (5) <i>YARINYA ce.</i>      | 'It's a girl.'           | f-sg ( <i>ce</i> )        |
| (6) <i>yaro ne.</i>         | 'It's a boy.'            | } m-sg & pl ( <i>ne</i> ) |
| (7) <i>yara ne.</i>         | 'They're boys/children.' |                           |
| (8) ' <i>yam mata ne.</i>   | 'They're girls.'         |                           |
| (9) <i>YARINYA r sa.</i>    | 'His girl.'              | f-sg ( <i>r</i> )         |
| (10) <i>yaron sa.</i>       | 'His boy.'               | } m-sg & pl ( <i>n</i> )  |
| (11) <i>yaran sa.</i>       | 'His boys/children.'     |                           |
| (12) ' <i>yam matan sa.</i> | '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 . . .'<sup>7</sup> I would here like to report the case of a Hausa speaker who

<sup>1</sup> F. W. Parsons, 'An introduction to gender in Hausa', *ALS* (= *African Language Studies*), I (1960), 116-136; 'The operation of gender in Hausa: the personal pronouns and genitive copula', *ALS*, II (1961), 100-124; 'The operation of gender in Hausa: stabilizer, dependent nominals and qualifiers', *ALS*, IV (1963), 166-207.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Schachter, 'A generative account of Hausa *ne/ce*', *J. African Languages*, V (1966), 34-53.

<sup>3</sup> Schachter, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Adopting Schachter's convention, nouns which normally govern feminine concord are written in capital letters.

<sup>5</sup> R. C. Abraham, *The Language of the Hausa People*, London (1959), 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'.

<sup>6</sup> The term linker is used for what Parsons calls the genitive copula.

<sup>7</sup> Parsons, 'An introduction . . .' p. 117, fn.

recognizes a gender distinction not found in standard Hausa. Instead of losing feminine 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.<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> this speaker uses the feminine linker *r* in place of the proper form *n*.

'feminine-plural' <sup>10</sup>		feminine-singular	
(13)	<i>hulunar sa</i> 'his caps'	<i>HULAr sa</i> 'his cap'	
(14)	<i>kafafuwar ta</i> 'her feet'	<i>KAFAr ta</i> 'her foot'	
(15)	<i>shekunar su</i> 'their nests'	<i>SHEKAr su</i> 'their nest'	
(16)	<i>rigunar Musa</i> 'Musa's robes'	<i>RIGAr Musa</i> 'Musa's robe'	

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.

plural		feminine-singular	
(17)	<i>wukaken sa</i> 'his knives'	<i>WUKAr sa</i> 'his knife'	
(18)	<i>awakin ta</i> 'her goats'	<i>AKWIYAr ta</i> 'her she-goat'	
plural		masculine-singular	
(19)	<i>dakunan sa</i> 'his room'	<i>dakin sa</i> 'his room'	
(20)	<i>tulunan ta</i> 'her pitchers'	<i>tulun ta</i> 'her pitcher'	

Although the *r* 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 *r* in examples (13) to (16) it must be equally substituted in both columns.

- (13a) *hulunan sa* / *HULAn sa*  
 (14a) *kafafuwan ta* / *KAFAn ta*  
 (15a) *shekunan su* / *SHEKAn su*  
 (16a) *rigunan Musa* / *RIGAn Musa*

The use of the *r* 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) *kafafuwar ta ne suka ci wuta.* 'Her feet were burnt.'

<sup>8</sup> 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.

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

<sup>10</sup> The term 'feminine-plural' hereafter refers to those plurals with which my informant normally uses an *r* 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.<sup>11</sup> The usual examples given for this process are phonological, but the concept is equally applicable to syntactic innovation.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 singular nouns 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

$$hulunan sa \text{ should } = hulunar sa$$

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

<sup>11</sup> Other terms are 'hypercorrection' and 'hyperurbanism'. See E. H. Sturtevant, *An Introduction to Linguistic Science*, New Haven (1947), pp. 80–82, and Charles F. Hockett, *A Course in Modern Linguistics*, New York (1958), p. 436.

<sup>12</sup> For an outstanding sociolinguistic study of a phonological problem, see William Labov, 'Hypercorrection by the lower middle class as a factor in linguistic change', in W. Bright (ed.) *Proceedings of the U.C.L.A. Sociolinguistics Conference, 1964*, The Hague (1966), pp. 84–113.

<sup>13</sup> 'It is noteworthy that the Hausas themselves, even those who have no notion of formal grammar, are very conscious of gender in their language . . .' Parsons, 'An introduction . . .', p. 117, fn.

