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The grammatical gender of personal pronouns in English and Arabic: A contrastive perspective

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Abstract--The manuscript adeptly demonstrates that all human languages utilize grammatical gender as a pivotal characteristic. Nonetheless, the extent of this differentiation is not uniform across languages. For instance, some natural languages classify two genders, specifically masculine and feminine, by employing proper nouns or personal pronouns, which may function to signify the grammatical gender of various terms within the scope of this study. There are robust arguments positing that gender differentiation in communication may engender particular stylistic subtleties that reflect the sociocultural backgrounds of the speakers of those languages. This study aspires to establish a comprehensive methodology for analyzing the grammatical genders of personal pronouns in both English and Arabic, taking advantage of a contrastive framework. Both languages offer grammatical descriptions of these pronouns. A significant aspect of this paper involves a comprehensive presentation of the similarities and disparities through various examples that encompass the entire spectrum of personal pronouns across different grammatical categories. Additionally, a structured contrastive analysis of personal pronouns in the selected languages is offered, to uncover fundamental concepts related to intracultural linguistic variation. The study also provides valuable insights for scholars studying English and Arabic. A considerable amount of data is displayed in several examples as part of direct instructional material. This data has been acquired from reputable sources, including Google Scholar, Google Books, and other academic repositories.

Keywords--Language, Free Pronouns, Bound Pronouns, Contrastive Analysis, Grammatical Elements.

1. Introduction

Each language possesses distinct personal pronouns categorized by various grammatical gender systems, which frequently correlate with biological sex, exemplified by masculine, feminine, and neuter classifications. The established terminology for these three genders—rooted in ancient Indo-European languages—naturally reflects the connection that conventional grammar has established between gender and sex (Conrod, 2022).

However, the term ‘gender’ itself originates from an exceedingly broad term denoting ‘type’ or ‘class’ (genus in Latin). The three genders identified in Latin and Greek correspond to the principal noun classes recognized in grammatical contexts (Lyons, 1995).

This research examines the category of personal pronouns in Arabic and English, as well as the relationship between personal pronouns and speech dynamics. Both languages feature three personal pronouns: the first, second, and third. The first-person pronoun refers to the speaker at the moment of utterance (Fischer et al., 1980).

The second-person pronoun is predominantly employed to refer to the individual being addressed (the addressee) during the act of communication. The third-person pronoun is designated for a category that is neither the addressee nor the speaker, commonly referred to as the ‘absentee pronoun.’ In both languages, personal pronouns indicating the speaker are more readily identified than those for the addressee, while absentee pronouns command comparatively less recognition due to the absence of their referents at the time of speaking (Lyons, 1995).

Nonetheless, grammatical gender demonstrates variation between the two languages in terms of the types of personal pronouns utilized. Notably, Arabic includes bound pronouns, which are affixed to nouns, verbs, and particles, and such constructions lack a direct counterpart in English. Furthermore, the systems governing a person demonstrate distinctions in gender, number, and case (Ali, 1995).

1.1 The First-Person Pronouns

In the English language, there is a distinct type of free first-person pronoun that is used, while Arabic possesses a variety of both free and bound alternatives that provide greater flexibility. Both languages have singular and plural forms that do not distinguish between genders. However, it is important to note that English and Arabic show notable case distinctions in their use (Al-Samraee, 2000; Halliday & Hassan, 2013). To illustrate this in Arabic, we can provide some examples: (1) انا طالبة "anā ṭālibah" (feminine singular, indicating a female student); (2) انا طالب "anā ṭālib" (masculine singular, indicating a male student); (3) نحن طالبات "naḥnu ṭālibāt" (feminine plural, indicating female students); (4) نحن طلاب "naḥnu ṭullāb" (masculine plural, indicating male students).

In addition to these free forms, we also have bound pronouns such as (5) اكلت التفاحة "akaltu al-tuffāḥah" (I ate the apple, applicable for both masculine and feminine in singular form); (6) اكلنا التفاح "akalnā al-tufāḥ" (We ate the apples, irrespective of masculine or feminine in plural form).

1.2 The Second Person Pronouns

In English, there exists only one second-person pronoun, while Arabic offers two distinct types (free and bound). Notably, these pronouns do not have distinctions related to gender or number, while Arabic provides a wealth of information regarding gender and encompasses singular, dual, and plural forms. The pronouns in Arabic have three cases: nominative, accusative, and genitive (Al-Saki 1977; Al-Samraey, 2000). In the English language, it is not mandatory to reference the gender of the addressee. To provide some examples, we consider the following: (7) انت طالب مجتهد "anta ṭālib mujtahid" (You are a clever student, in masculine singular form); (8) انت طالبة مجتهدة "anti ṭālibah mujtahidah" (You are a clever student, in feminine singular form); (9) انتما طالبان مجتهدان "antumā ṭālibān mujtahidān" (You both are clever students, masculine dual form); (10) انتم طلاب مجتهدون "antum ṭullāb mujtahidūn" (You are clever students, in masculine plural form). For nominative bound pronouns, we have: (11) اغلقت الباب "aghlaqtu al-bāb" (You locked the door, in masculine singular form); (12) اغلقتن الباب "aghlaqtun al-bāb" (You locked the door, in feminine plural form).

1.3 The Third Person Pronouns

In the English language, there are three distinct gender categories recognized (feminine, masculine, and neuter), while the Arabic language comprises two genders (feminine and masculine). When it comes to third-person pronouns, English has only free forms available, whereas in Arabic, there are both free and bound forms that include three numbers: singular, dual, and plural (Hassan, 2007; Haywood & Nahmad, 1993). To exemplify, consider the following Arabic sentences: (13) هو تلميذ مجتهد "huwa tilmīdh mujtahid" (He is a clever pupil, in masculine singular form); (14) هي تلميذة مجتهدة "hiya tilmīdhah mujtahidah" (She is a clever pupil, in feminine singular form); (15) هما تلميذان مجتهدان "humā tilmīdhān mujtahidān" (Both of them are clever pupils, in masculine dual form); (16) هما تلميذتان مجتهدتان "humā tilmīdhatān mujtahidatān" (Both of them are clever pupils, in feminine dual form); (17) هن تلميذات مجتهديات "hunna tilmīdhāt mujtahidāt" (They are clever pupils, in feminine plural form); (18) هم تلاميذ مجتهدون "hum talāmīdh mujtahidūn" (They are clever pupils, in masculine plural form). In addition to the free forms, there are also bound nominative pronouns, such as (19) انه محبوب "innahu maḥbūb" (He is beloved, in masculine singular form); (20) انها محبوبة "innahā maḥbūbah" (She is beloved, in feminine singular form); (21) انهن محبوبات "innahunna maḥbūbāt" (They are beloveds, in feminine plural form); (22) انهم محبوبون "innahum maḥbūbūn" (They are beloveds, in masculine plural form); (23) انهما محبوبان "innahumā maḥbūbān" (Both of them are beloveds, regardless of masculine or feminine in dual form).

2. The Concept of Grammatical Gender in Language

Grammatical gender constitutes a fundamental aspect of the morphosyntactic architecture of language, functioning by categorizing nouns into distinct classes or genders. It facilitates the concord between a noun and various gender-variable dependent elements both within and external to the noun phrase, including articles, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, numerals, and prepositions (Bellamy & Couto, 2022).

It is frequently noted that when selecting a pronoun to refer to a generic antecedent, the gender assigned to the pronoun typically aligns with that of the noun. However, it is important to recognize that grammatical gender is not the sole classification of gender. Notably, in Arabic—a language often characterized by a complex gender system—gender is predominantly lexical or referential rather than grammatical. In this context, gender is not morphologically indicated on the noun, resulting in a lack of agreement between the noun and other elements, such as adjectives or pronouns (Habib, 2021).

Arabic is traditionally classified as a 'gender language,' where there tends to be a significant alignment between a noun's lexical gender and its grammatical gender. However, in contrast to English, gender is not ascertained through morphemes on nouns, but rather through any constituent in the gender-variable satellite. This arbitrary concord may be superseded by alternative gender categories; for instance, adjectives such as 'Good,' 'Bad,' 'Clean,' and 'Happy'—as seen in the structure 'I am' followed by stative intransitive verbs—can possess masculine or feminine forms regardless of the gender of the noun, thereby being classified as having neutral or non-nominal gender (Alhafni et al., 2021).

Consequently, while the gender of a noun in English and many Romance languages is inferred from accompanying adjectives or articles, establishing the gender in Arabic is more complex, as such lexically male or female nouns acquire the corresponding grammatical gender. Furthermore, it is observed that gender-variable dependent elements do not consistently align with the lexical gender of the noun. Although gender-variable dependent elements frequently correspond with the lexical gender of the noun, they often exhibit agreement with lexically male nouns irrespective of the gender classification of the noun itself (Abudaljuh, 2012).

3. Contrastive Analysis of Gendered Pronouns in English and Arabic

The realization of gender in the Arabic language is the most explicit compared to other languages. Gender distinctions can be seen in verb agreement, but mainly in the noun phrase where both the noun and its modifiers agree in gender, and in the pronominal system where personal, possessive, and relative pronouns all have gender (Saeed, 2003).

In general, gender systems encode different categories, and in many cases, gender distinction is made between masculine and feminine. The English language relies on the use of third-person generic pronouns when referring to an individual whose gender is not specified. These pronouns may or may not imply gender

neutrality. Historically, masculine generic pronouns have played the role of third-person pronouns in most English texts and contexts (Schulz et al., 2000).

In contemporary English, opinion is divided among prescriptive grammarians, linguists, feminist writers, and English language teachers either for the retention or replacement of masculine generic pronouns. Speakers from different speech communities that have no tradition of gender-neutral third-person singular pronouns like English third-person singular “they” tend to resort to a masculine or a feminine pronoun when the gender of the antecedent or pronoun is unspecified (Lauscher et al., 2022).

4. Analytical Framework and Conclusive Discussion

The examination of the data presented herein facilitates the conclusion that the comparative evaluations between the two languages substantiate the legitimacy of differentiation. In the context of grammatical gender, Arabic does not differentiate gender within the first-person pronoun; however, it does categorize second and third-person pronouns into two distinct genders—feminine and masculine. Conversely, English does not exhibit any gender distinction in its first- and second-person pronouns, yet it acknowledges three genders (feminine, masculine, and neuter) within its third-person pronouns (Younis Ali, 1993).

Additionally, English employs a singular type of free personal pronoun, whereas Arabic encompasses both free and bound forms. The number of personal pronouns varies between the two languages, with the first-person pronoun represented in both singular and plural forms. It is noteworthy that English’s second-person pronoun lacks a distinct numerical form, while Arabic specifies three forms (singular, dual, and plural). Similarly, the third-person pronoun in English distinguishes between singular and plural forms, in contrast to Arabic, which delineates three forms (singular, dual, and plural).

Both languages operate with three functional cases: nominative, accusative, and genitive. The incorporation of transliterations from Arabic is intended to provide a thorough understanding of these contrasting grammatical structures. It is pertinent to highlight that all personal pronouns have historically originated from the phenomenon of deixis, including person deixis (تعين الشخص "ta'yīn al-shakhṣ"), which includes pronouns such as 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'we', and 'they' ('anā, 'anta, 'anti, huwa, hiya, nahnu, and hum).

5. Conclusion

The research concludes by acknowledging that English personal pronouns often do not possess unambiguous gender markers, although they may alternatively indicate biological or arbitrary gender traits. This absence of gender indicators in English personal pronouns, in contrast to the defined gender distinctions present in Arabic pronouns, can be attributed to the distinct evolutionary paths concerning gender assignments in both linguistic systems. Within specific sociocultural contexts, men are frequently viewed as the primary beneficiaries of divine favor, whereas women are regarded as mere embellishments of existence, which leads to a conscious divergence from their male counterparts. This

sociocultural perception of male superiority has become deeply embedded in Arab culture, manifesting in daily interactions, customs, traditions, and crucially, in linguistic expressions.

In contrast, the examination of feminine forms has often emphasized issues of formal purity, with their use being more incidental than mandatory, particularly within mixed plural contexts. Although the feminine forms in both languages diverged semantically, they nonetheless shared implications of illegitimacy. Unlike Arabic, the English language was examined in a markedly syntagmatic manner in previous studies, which often failed to scrutinize personal pronouns rigorously. The analysis concluded that the derivative hypothesis regarding personal pronouns approached through the lens of generative grammar was inadequate in elucidating the observed phenomena. There is a clear necessity for a broader investigation into gender marking in personal pronouns, which should encompass considerations of form purity and bidirectional agreement.

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