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# Gender and Number Agreement in Early Christian Arabic Manuscripts: A Historically 'Middle' Feature

**Abstract** The topic of gender and number agreement in Arabic has garnered significant interest in recent years, culminating in the recent monograph by Bettega and D'Anna (2023). The picture that has emerged from these studies is of a system, shared by ancient and modern corpora, in which plural heads can trigger either feminine singular or plural agreement, depending on a variety of pragmatic factors (such as, e.g., animacy and individuation). Further, the Classical/Modern Standard Arabic rule of obligatory feminine singular agreement with inanimate plural heads represents a departure from this system. Unlike the significant coverage that corpora like the Quran and modern Arabic dialects have attracted, gender and number agreement in Middle Arabic corpora have received virtually no thorough study. In this paper, I investigate gender and number agreement in five early Christian Arabic manuscripts—four gospel translations and one original composition—showing that, contrary to previous discussions, the distribution attests the same ancient system found elsewhere. I also consider whether Greek, the source language of three of the four translations, had a significant effect on the realization of this feature in Arabic. I argue that it did not. I conclude that this system likely reflects a productive one in the speech communities from which the scribes originated, although with evidence of interaction with another register or registers.

**Keywords** Christian Arabic, Middle Arabic, gender and number agreement, Arabic historical linguistics

## 1 Introduction

Several aspects of gender and number agreement vary across the Semitic languages. For that reason, it is surprisingly difficult to reconstruct the Proto-Semitic system with confidence (Huehnergard 2019: §4.5; Pat-El 2019: 84–85). Gender and number agreement in Arabic is most notable for the phenomenon known as 'deflected agreement', in which inanimate plural nouns trigger FSG agreement, as well as for the fact that verbs that precede their subjects exhibit

gender but not number agreement. Both phenomena, however, became rules only in Islamic-era Classical and Modern Standard Arabic, and only truly ubiquitous in the latter. Studies of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* poetry corpus, the Quran, and modern dialects have demonstrated a more dynamic system, in which plural nouns of any animacy can trigger FSG agreement, depending upon a variety of pragmatic and semantic factors such as animacy, individuation and saliency (Belnap 1991; 1999; Belnap and Gee 1994; Brustad 2000; Hanitsch 2022; Bettega and D'Anna 2023). Debates continue about the origin of obligatory FSG agreement in Classical/Modern Standard Arabic, with most scholars connecting it to the influence from either Persian (Bettega and D'Anna 2023: §3.6; D'Anna and Benkato 2024) or Greek (Belnap and Gee 1994) respectively. Noticeably absent in both the study of gender and number agreement in Arabic and its development on the one hand, as well as testing the theory of (especially Greek) influence on Arabic literary style on the other, is any thorough and quantitative study of early Middle Arabic corpora.

Middle Arabic texts are in general understudied in the area of syntax. Virtually all discussions of the grammar of the various corpora considered Middle Arabic follow the methodology of Joshua Blau (1966–1967 for Christian Arabic; 1999 for Judaeo-Arabic) and Simon Hopkins (1984 for the early Arabic papyri). While both nominally considered Middle Arabic to be a historical phase of the language, like Middle German or Middle English, they in practice believed that the Arabic of the pre-Islamic period was essentially identical to the language of the poetry and the Quran [= Classical Arabic], and that most of the salient differences between Classical Arabic and the modern dialects occurred quite early on, before most of the earliest Middle Arabic texts had been composed (cf. Blau 1966–1967: 45–50). The descriptions they produced are thus mainly lists of non-Classical features that, when they occur in original compositions, are considered either colloquialisms or hyper-corrections. Scholars who have worked on translations into Arabic have tended to assume that many non-Classical Arabic/Middle Arabic features are due to overly-literal renderings of the source language, in violation of purportedly 'natural' Arabic (Blau 1966–1967: 20; Hary 2009: §3; Kashouh 2012: 6–8; Vollandt 2018). Although there is no doubt that many examples adduced in these works reflect genuine influence of the source text, the question of naturalness is, I argue here, not so straightforward as is often presented. Ultimately, the problem from a methodological perspective is that what is treated as 'natural' Arabic is virtually always Classical Arabic. When it comes to gender and number agreement, however, Classical and Modern Standard Arabic are, as Bettega and D'Anna (2023: §2.5) show, the 'odd ones out' when compared with both ancient and modern Arabic corpora. It thus remains to be determined the extent to which any corpus of Middle Arabic texts attests a consistent pattern of gender and number agreement, whether that pattern looks like Classical Arabic, the ancient and modern non-Classical corpora mentioned above, or reflect a combina-

tion of source language influence, colloquial influence, and hyper-corrections, as has traditionally been claimed.

One corpus that holds significant potential to expand our understanding of the nature and development of the gender and number system, especially those aspects identified as most unusual in Arabic, is the early corpus of Christian manuscripts produced in Arabic in the monasteries in Palestine, southern Syria, and the Sinai. For one thing, we have many manuscripts from the 9th and 10th centuries CE, written while the intellectual movement that resulted in the eventual codification of Classical Arabic was both geographically distant and still coalescing, and before it can be reasonably expected to have exerted the kind of influence often assumed (Al-Jallad 2020: 69–73; van Putten 2023: §8). The manuscripts also consist of multiple genres, among which are both original compositions and translations from Greek and Syriac. No systematic treatment of any of these manuscripts, nor the corpus as a whole, has so far been undertaken.[1] We may therefore learn about the pattern(s) of gender and number agreement in some of our

[1] Blau's three-volume grammar (1966–1967: §177–§190) does provide significant discussion of various features encountered in these manuscripts, and reference to various observations therein are included below, where relevant. However, Blau's treatment is neither systematic nor quantitative. In fact, his description consists mainly of lists of non-Classical features and examples, often with no consideration of their distribution within any particular manuscript. Blau famously assumed that Classical Arabic was virtually identical to most varieties of pre-Islamic Arabic, and would be the only logical target of even the monks in monasteries; thus, any non-Classical features would represent either dialecticisms (defined implicitly as those features attested in modern dialects) or otherwise were pseudo-corrections (see, e.g., already Blau 1961: 209–212). Virtually every scholar writing about gender and number agreement in Christian Arabic texts since has simply followed Blau, often virtually word-for-word. For example, Blau opens his discussion of concord by arguing that '[t]here exists a marked tendency to bring the preceding verb into strict concord in number with its subject' (1966–1967: 275). Now note the following descriptions, all of which were published after Blau's work. Knutsson begins stating that '[w]hile in Classical Arabic a verb preceding its subject […] is put in the singular […] there is in Middle Arabic a clear tendency to let the preceding verb agree in number with its following subject' (1974: 149). Bengtsson puts it in this way: 'In MA [=Middle Arabic] texts there is a tendency […] to assign to the introductory predicate in a verbal sentence the same number as the following subject' (1995: 143). More recently, in the entry on 'Christian Middle Arabic' in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, Grand'Henry writes that '[…] in Middle Arabic the preceding verb tends to agree in number with the following subject' (2006: 386). Hjälm (2016: §9.8.1) provides brief mention of gender and number agreement, noting several trends that will be discussed below. However, she likewise assumes a target of Classical Arabic, and relies on Blau's grammar for an explanation of the non-Classical features. It is therefore not an exaggeration to suggest that Blau's methods and assumptions are still fully embedded in the ways most scholars have approached the linguistic description of Middle Arabic texts, even when they claim to have rejected one or another of them. As we will see, many of these oft-repeated claims are simply incorrect.

earliest non-Quranic Islamic-era manuscripts, as well as test the degree to which there is evidence of Greek influence on its realization.

In this article, I undertake a thorough study of gender and number agreement in five early manuscripts using a corpus-based approach in order to offer a quantitative description, especially of aspects over which there is significant debate, namely of SG vs. PL agreement with PL nouns, the status of FPL agreement, and the status of Dual agreement. The five manuscripts consist of four Gospel translations, three from Greek *Vorlagen* and one from Syriac, as well as an original composition produced (if not originally composed) by the same scribe as one of the Gospel manuscripts. I show that the distribution of gender and number agreement in the corpus manifests the same basic system attested in both ancient and modern Arabic. Further, I will argue that there is no evidence that the scribes who produced these manuscripts were attempting to replicate Classical Arabic rules. Finally, I evaluate the evidence for influence from Greek, especially the *schema attikôn* wherein neuter plural nouns trigger singular verbal agreement, and conclude that there is no clear evidence for an effect. I tentatively suggest that, with a few possible exceptions, the agreement system attested in these manuscripts likely reflects living grammar, typical of at least some contemporary spoken Arabic of the time, rather than a codified or standardized one. In so doing, I problematize the applicability of both the regnant frameworks for understanding Middle Arabic to this corpus and argue for a more appropriate alternative in the case of early monastic Christian Arabic texts.

## 2 Manuscript description and methodological approach

The manuscripts included in this study were selected for several reasons. First and foremost, they are among the earliest Christian Arabic manuscripts produced, dating from the the 9th/10th centuries CE. Indeed, each has played a significant role in the study of the formation of an Arab Christian identity, as well as the genesis and nature of Christian Arabic literary production. Second, they are relatively long, which allows a significant number of tokens of each category under study to be collected. Third, they are available digitally online. Finally, they include both translations (which in fact characterizes many early Christian Arabic manuscripts) and an original composition. A list of the manuscripts with relevant data is included here; note the abbreviations of each manuscript, which will be used throughout the paper:

All of the Sinai Arabic manuscripts are digitized and freely available to the public.[2]

[2] All manuscripts available and accessed for this study can be found here: https://sinaimanuscripts.library.ucla.edu/.

| MS | Contents | No. of folia | Date | Provenance | Author |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sinai Arabic MS 74 (SAr. 74) | Gospels | 254 | 9th CE | Monastery of Mar Sabas (?)[3] | Unknown |
| Sinai Arabic MS 72 (SAr. 72) | Gospels | 119 | 897 CE[4] | Monastery of Mar Chariton | Stephen of Ramlah |
| Sinai Arabic MS 75 (SAr. 75) | Gospels | 223 | ca. late 9th CE | Monastery of Mar Chariton | Unknown |
| Sinai Arabic MS 70 (SAr. 70) | Gospels | 113 | 9th CE[5] | Unknown | Unknown |
| British Library Oriental MS 4950[6] (BL 4950) | Two Theological Treatises | 237 | 867 or 877 CE[7] | Monastery of Mar Chariton | Stephen of Ramlah |

Table 1. List of manuscripts and relevant information

[3] Hjälm and Tarras (2023: 136, 143) tentatively suggest that SAr. 74 was produced at Mar Sabas on paleographical grounds. They argue that there are distinct characteristics of manuscripts known to have been produced at Mar Sabas and Mar Chariton respectively that suggest SAr. 74 was likely produced at Mar Sabas. They likewise note paleographical similarities between SAr. 74 and 10th century CE manuscripts. Thus, the dating of the manuscript itself remains somewhat tentative. As we will see, however, the grammatical nature of the text is relatively archaic compared with, e.g., SAr. 72 and SAr. 75.

[4] Colophon on f. 118v.

[5] Kashouh (2012: 124) asserts that the manuscript is 'from [the] early ninth century', though without providing much justification for this opinion (other than, perhaps, the presence of the qāf with a single dot below). In her study of the paleography of early Christian Arabic manuscripts, Hjälm (2020: 62) suggests that the 9th–century CE dating is plausible from a paleographic perspective, although she notes that 'there is no paleographical particularity that in my opinion firmly places this hand in the early ninth century though it might be a ninth-century hand'. Thus the 9th century CE dating should be viewed as tentative.

[6] BL 4950 was briefly made available as part of a larger project of digitization by the British Library. However, due to a hacker attack, it is no longer available. I was thankfully able to gain access to a digital copy of the manuscript, provided by Peter Tarras, whom I thank very much for such a valuable service.

[7] Colophon on f. 197v. The manuscript is typically dated by scholars to 876/7 CE (e.g., Griffith 1986: 137; Hjälm and Tarras 2023: 126). However, Swanson (1993) argues for a date a decade earlier, i.e., 867 CE.

The first part of this paper will treat the topic of gender and number agreement in the four gospel manuscripts. Hikmat Kashouh (2012) has shown that the four gospel manuscripts included in this study reflect three different early gospel translations, one including SAr. 74 and SAr. 72 (Family A, from a Greek *Vorlage*), a second consisting of SAr. 75 (Family C, Greek *Vorlage* but with a number of Peshitta readings), and a third consisting of SAr. 70 (Family D, Peshitta *Vorlage*).

The second part of the paper compares the data from the Gospel manuscripts with that taken from a famous theological treatise, composed originally in Arabic and attested in the first 197 folia of BL 4950.[8] The treatise is most frequently referred to in the secondary sources as *Summa Theoligiae Arabica*, based on a phrase in Arabic repeated throughout the text, *ǧumlat wuǧūh al-ʾīmān* 'a summation of the ways of the faith' (f. 2r *et passim*). As the name suggests, the *Summa* covers a wide array of topics over 25 chapters,[9] and is meant for Christians that might give Islam too much credence (cf. Hoyland 2007: 165–169). More significant for our purposes, in addition to the fact that the *Summa* is an original composition, rather than a translation, is that BL 4950 was written by the same scribe, Stephen of Ramlah, who produced SAr. 72.[10] While it is not entirely clear whether Stephen merely copied the text or in fact authored it, both Blau (1962: 102) and Griffith (1986/1992: 137) put forth arguments affirming his authorship. Thus, we have the relatively rare ability to compare the grammars of two different texts from two different text types—a translation and an original composition—written by the same author.[11]

The data from each manuscript was collected as follows. Every instance of an eligible form—namely, plural controllers with a modifier (on which, see Section 3 below)—from approximately the first 25% of each manuscript was collected and coded in an excel spreadsheet, with all relevant data noted. It is to a description of the data, and methods for its categorization, that we now turn.

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[8] The second theological treatise contained in BL 4950 is an apologetic tract, written by Theodore Abū Qurrah, promoting the continued practice of venerating images of Christ and the saints.

[9] See Sidney Griffith (1986/1992: 134–138; also Hoyland 2007: 160–161) for an overview of the contents of the *Summa*, as well as for information on the theological and ecclesiological contexts for its composition.

[10] The same text of the *Summa* is also attested in another manuscript, St. Andrews MS 14 (StA 14), on which see Hoyland (2007).

[11] Hoyland (2007: 164–165) problematizes this claim, however, by comparing the wording regarding the length of time from the 'establishment [or realization] of Christianity' to the author's day in BL 4950 and StA 14. Ultimately, whether Stephen was the original author, or rather a compiler, as Griffith (1986/1992: 132) posited, is not all that significant, for the reason that—as I have shown elsewhere (Stokes 2023a: §4, pp. 14–32)—there is a great deal of evidence that compilers and copyists felt quite free to update the language of a text they were copying.

## 3 Agreement in the early Gospel manuscripts

In the discussions of the data below, I have adopted the terms used in Bettega and D'Anna (2023), using the term *controller* for the head noun and *target* to refer to one of the following types of modifiers: verbs, adjectives (attributive or predicative), personal pronouns, demonstratives pronouns, and relative pronouns. The major sources of variation in the corpora under investigation here compared to other Arabic corpora (such as, e.g., the pre-Islamic poetry, the Quran, Classical and Modern Standard Arabic, as well as modern dialects) are the following (see, e.g., Bettega and D'Anna 2023: xvii–xxi *et passim*):

1. FSG vs. plural agreement with plural and collective controllers
2. FPL agreement
3. dual agreement

Thus, the sections below will begin with an examination of the distribution of FSG vs. plural target agreement with plural controllers, followed by the distribution of FPL targets in relation to the gender and animacy of their controllers, and finally dual controllers and the agreement they trigger.

As noted already above, the data presented here is drawn from roughly the first 25% of each Gospel manuscript, which in each manuscript spans all of the Gospel of Matthew and the opening chapters of the Gospel of Mark, approximately. Note that only plural and collective controllers are included here. This is because (non-collective) singular nouns trigger consistent and predictable agreement, and these patterns are uncontroversial. The main variation occurs in the target agreement with plural controllers, as well as collectives, the latter of which can be morphologically MSG (e.g., *šaʿb*, *nās*) or FSG (e.g., *ʾumma*, *ǧamāʿa*), FPL (e.g., *ǧamāʿāt*) or BPL (e.g., *ǧumūʿ*, *ʾumam*). I collected every example of plural and collective nouns that are modified by any kind of target, noting relevant morphological and semantic information (e.g., gender, number, and animacy). I then categorized the kind of each target that modifies it, noting its type (adjective, verb, pronoun, etc.) and morphological information (gender and number). Finally, I have categorized targets by their position relative to the controller, i.e., whether they are pre-controller or post-controller. Since the factor of position plays a significant role, especially in the agreement attested by verbal targets, I present post-controller data first, followed by pre-controller data.

### 3.1 Post-controller data

I begin with post-controller data, both because it is more common than instances in which targets occurred before controllers, and because, as Bettega and D'Anna argue, post-controller position in Arabic can be considered the more canonical one (2023: 147).

#### 3.1.1 Singular target agreement with plural controllers

The controllers included in this study include human plurals, human collectives, plurals of divine beings (angels, demons, spirits, etc.), animal plurals, and inanimate plurals. Targets are: verbs, adjectives (either attributive or predicative), personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, and relative pronouns. The total number of targets that modify an eligible controller in each manuscript is given in Table 2:

| MS | Adj | Verb | PN | Dem PN | Rel PN | Number of eligible targets |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 121 | 257 | 141 | 3 | 13 | 535 |
| SAr. 72 | 88 | 223 | 124 | 5 | 17 | 457 |
| SAr. 75 | 80 | 298 | 140 | – | 24 | 542 |
| SAr. 70 | 76 | 288 | 132 | 7 | 23 | 526 |

Table 2. Number of eligible post-controller targets

Plural controllers in every category of animacy can trigger SG target agreement. While MSG target agreement occurs (see below), FSG agreement is by far the more common kind of singular agreement with plural controllers. The frequency of FSG vs. PL targets across the cline of animacy can be seen in Table 3.

Several trends across the manuscripts are clear from this data set. First, in general, the lower the animacy, the more likely FSG agreement is. The pattern in these manuscripts thus comports with the 'Animacy Hierarchy', described typologically by Corbett (2006) and first applied by Belnap (e.g., 1999: 178–180) to Arabic. As in Belnap's study, as well as several others (cf. Bettega and D'Anna 2023: §2.3.4.2), in the present corpus nouns higher on the hierarchy—which stretches from humans on the high end, followed by animals, and lastly inanimate objects on the low end—are less likely to trigger FSG agreement than those lower on the continuum. The main exception to this is in SAr. 70, where

| MS | Human | Human Coll. | Divine | Animal | Animal Coll. | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 4/237 (2%) | 29/126 (23%) | 17/32 (53%) | 14/40 (35%) | 5/9 (56%) | 69/91 (76%) |
| SAr. 72 | 1/195 (<1%) | 19/116 (16%) | 3/12 (25%) | 6/18 (33%) | 11/18 (61%) | 64/98 (65%) |
| SAr. 75 | 1/277 (<1%) | 9/130 (7%) | 0/15 | 9/22 (41%) | 5/11 (46%) | 54/87 (62%) |
| SAr. 70 | 25/296 (9%) | 21/97 (22%) | 7/17 (41%) | 16/19 (84%) | 6/7 (86%) | 53/90 (59%) |

Table 3. Number/percentage of FSG target agreement based on animacy category

plural animal controllers trigger FSG agreement more frequently than inanimate controllers. Second, collective controllers are more likely to trigger FSG agreement than plural controllers. Finally, at least one example of FSG agreement with human plural controllers is attested in each MS, and in SAr. 70 it is rather common, not to mention that multiple human collectives trigger FSG agreement in each MS.

Notably, although inanimate controllers more often than not trigger FSG, the Classical Arabic rule of obligatory FSG agreement with inanimate plural controllers is not characteristic of the agreement system attested in these manuscripts. Further investigation of the types of target agreement with inanimate PL controllers is, however, revelatory:

| MS | MSG | FSG | MDU | FDU | MPL | FPL | BPL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 6 | 69 | 1 | 2 | 4 | – | 9 |
| SAr. 72 | 8 | 64 | 4 | 2 | 10 | 2 | 8 |
| SAr. 75 | 5 | 54 | 10 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 7 |
| SAr. 70 | 10 | 53 | 9 | 4 | 5 | 2 | 6 |

Table 4. Types of target agreement w/inanimate PL controllers

FSG target agreement with dual and plural inanimate controllers is in general the most common. MPL targets occur with controllers that, while technically inanimate, are symbolic of a group of people, i.e., cities, etc:[12]

> SAr. 72, f. 4v حينيذ خرجت اليه اروسليم وكل اليهوديه وجميع كوره الأردن و**كانوا يصبطغون** منه في نهر الأردن **ويعترفون** بخطاياهم
> At that time Jerusalem and all of Judea and all of the region of the Jordan river went out and they were being baptized by him [John] in the Jordan river and confessing their sins.

One significant difference between the system attested in these manuscripts on the one hand, and those of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*s, the Quran, and modern gender-distinguishing dialects on the other, is that most PL target agreement with inanimate dual and PL controllers is dual or MPL, rather than FPL. We will discuss this trend further below (see Section 3.1.2, and diachronic implications in Section 5).

It is not always clear what the semantics/pragmatics of FSG versus PL agreement for each animacy category are. For example, note the following two examples from the same MS where the same controller triggers two different agreement patterns:

> SAr. 70, f. 9v احتفظوا من الانبيا **الكذابه التي تاتيكم** بلباس الخرفان
> Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing […]

> SAr. 70, f. 28v ويقوموا انبيا **كذابين** كثير
> And many false prophets will arise […]

In general, however, FSG seems to occur in contexts where the focus is on the group as an unindividuated whole, and PL is more common when the plurality of the group—as a group of individuals—is in focus. This distinction accords with what numerous other studies of the phenomenon of FSG agreement with PL controllers in ancient and modern Arabic corpora have found (Belnap 1993; 1999; Belnap and Gee 1994; Brustad 2000: 52–69; Hanitsch 2021; 2022; Bettega and D'Anna 2023). It is therefore not surprising that human and animal plural controllers less commonly trigger FSG than their collective counterparts, since they are by definition likelier to be individuated than inanimate nouns. Note the following contrastive examples:

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[12] Note that here and throughout this paper I copy the Arabic text as close to how it appears in the manuscript as is possible given font limitations.

Human PL:

SAr. 74, f. 7r لانهم هاكذا طردوا الانبيا قبلكم **التي كانت**
Because they persecuted the prophets who were before you in the same way […]

SAr. 74, f. 13v احذروا من الانبيا بلباس خرفان **الكذابين الذين ياتونكم**
Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing […]

Human Coll.:

SAr. 72, f. 33v ومعه جماعات **كثيره**
And a great crowd was with him […]

SAr. 72, f. 11r. فلما ابصروا الجماعات **عجبوا وسبحوا** الله
And when the crowds saw [what Jesus had done] they were amazed and praised God.

Animal PL:

SAr. 74, f. 45r تجدان اتان مربوط وعفوا معها حلو**هما** وقربو**هما**
You will find a colt tied up and a foal with it, so untie them both and bring them both.

SAr. 74, f. 45r وقربوا الاتان والعفوا فوضعوا ثيابهم **عليها** وجلسوا **عليها**
Then they brought the colt and foal and they put their garments on them and sat on them.

Animal Coll.:

SAr. 75, f. 18v ليفرحن به اكثر من التسع والتسعين لم **تضل** **التي**
He will surely rejoice more over it [the lost sheep; Ar. *ḫārūf*] than the 99 who did not wander off.

SAr. 75, f. 7v انظروا الي طير السما **انهم** لا **يزرعون** ولا **يحصدون** ولا **يجمعون** في الاهرا
Look at the birds of the air; they do not sew nor harvest nor store up in storehouses […]

Inanimate PL:

SAr. 72, f. 30r وقوات السما **تتزلزل**
The powers of the heavens will shake.

SAr. 72, f. 10v من هو هذا الذي ان الريح والبحر **يطيعاه**
Who is this man whom the wind and the sea obey?

and

SAr. 75, f. 20r فاحفظ الوصايا قال له ايشي **هي**
'So keep the commandments,' and he said, 'What are they'?

SAr. 75, f. 5v فكل من نقض واحده من **هاولي** الوصايا **الصغار**
Everyone who abrogates one of these minor laws […]

For each pair, the instance of each controller that triggers FSG agreement occurs in a context in which the focus is on the whole, or the generic reference to the entity, whereas each instance of PL agreement is found in contexts where the focus is either on the specific entity, or it is otherwise highly salient in the narrative.

Another relevant factor is the distance between target and controller. The general trend is that the farther from the controller the target occurs, the likelier it is to attest PL agreement. Blau (1966–1967: 278) already noticed this trend, although he attributes the variation in this regard as 'due to the inconsistent nature of ASP [=Ancient South Palestinian]'. This phenomenon is now widely known from Arabic corpora, pre-modern and modern, from the Quran (Hanitsch 2022: §4.2) to modern Cairene Arabic (Belnap 1991: 86–87). Bettega and D'Anna (2023: §2.3.3.4.5) expand on these studies and show that the same pattern is ubiquitous, or nearly so, across multiple modern varieties. Examples are attested across the animacy spectrum, but cluster especially in the case of collective nouns:

SAr. 74, f. 63v أجاب الشعب **كله وقالوا**
The whole people answered and said […]

SAr. 74, f. 56v فتجتمع الأمم **كلها** بين يديه فيفرز **بعضهم** من بعض
Then all the nations will gather before him, and he will differentiate between them.

SAr. 72, f. 14r حينيذ بدا يعُير المدُن **التي فيها** كانت اكثر قواته **انهم** لم **يتوبوا**
Then he began to wander around to the cities in which most of his miracles were done but they did not repent.

SAr. 75, f. 16v فاتاه جموع **كثيره معهم** مخلعين وخرس
Then a large crowd came to him, and with them were lame and mute […]

SAr. 70, f.18r **تقدمت** تلاميده **فوجدت** جسده **وقبرته** واتوا **واخبروا** يسوع
Then his [John's] disciples went and found his body and buried it, and then they came and told Jesus.

SAr. 70, f. 33v اخذت رووس الكهنه الفضه **وقالت** لا يحل ان نضعها في بيت القربان لانها ثمن دم **وتشاوروا واشتروا** بها قريه فخار

The chief priests took the silver and said, 'It is not lawful for us to put the silver with the offerings because it is a blood wage,' so they plotted together and bought with it a plot of land known as the 'potter's field.'

It is important to note that the morphology of human plural controllers, whether sound or broken, is strongly correlated with FSG target agreement. Specifically, FSG target agreement, when triggered by human plural controllers, almost always occurs with broken plurals rather than sound masculine or feminine human plurals:

| MS | Broken PL | MPL | FPL |
|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 21/21 (100%) | – | – |
| SAr. 72 | 4/4 (100%) | – | – |
| SAr. 75 | 1/1 | – | – |
| SAr. 70 | 29/31 (94%) | 1/31 (3%) | 1/31 (3%) |

Table 5. Number/percentage of human and divine PL controllers w/FSG agreement by PL type

This is in agreement with Belnap's findings for modern Cairene Arabic (1999: 174), and comports with the typological pattern of most corpora, ancient and modern, in which gender is distinguished in the plural (cf. Bettega and D'Anna 2023: §2.3.4.1; see also pp. 157–159). Of course, BPL is by far more common than sound PL morphology on nouns, so a greater number of examples from a larger corpus is needed before establishing statistical tendencies in the data.

A third relevant factor for FSG agreement with plural controllers is target type. FSG agreement is not evenly distributed across target type:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 62/121 (51%) | 48/257 (19%) | 23/141 (16%) | 0/3 | 6/13 (46%) |
| SAr. 72 | 37/88 (42%) | 37/223 (17%) | 19/124 (15%) | 3/5 (60%) | 8/17 (47%) |
| SAr. 75 | 23/80 (29%) | 24/298 (8%) | 16/140 (11%) | – | 15/24 (63%) |
| SAr. 70 | 33/76 (43%) | 57/288 (20%) | 20/132 (15%) | 3/7 (43%) | 15/23 (65%) |

Table 6. Number/percentage FSG target agreement by target type

Overall, adjectives are more likely to attest FSG agreement than verbs, which in turn are slightly more likely to attest FSG agreement than personal pronouns (except in SAr. 75). Interestingly, however, in half the manuscripts relative pronouns are most likely of any kind of target to attest FSG agreement with plural and collective controllers. Demonstratives are the most variable, but in half of the four manuscripts included here they also frequently attest FSG agreement. This pattern, with adjectives more likely than either verbs or personal pronouns to attest FSG agreement, is what Bettega and D'Anna (2023: 263) found for modern dialects, and the opposite of what they found for the pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran. In the latter two corpora, they show that personal pronouns were much likelier to attest FSG agreement, followed by verbs, with adjectives least likely. Implications of this will be discussed below.

While the above trend—adjectives being most likely to attest FSG agreement, personal pronouns least likely—holds when all the data are considered together, breaking down the data by animacy is again revelatory. It turns out, the higher up the animacy continuum you go, the stronger the trend of ADJs > Verbs > PNs. See the following datasets:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 1/39 (3%) | 1/121 (<1%) | 1/71 (1%) | 0/1 | 1/5 (20%) |
| SAr. 72 | 0/29 | 1/101 (1%) | 0/57 | 0/1 | 0/7 |
| SAr. 75 | 1/32 (3%) | 0/172 (<1%) | 0/68 | – | 0/5 |
| SAr. 70 | 3/28 (11%) | 17/181 (9%) | 3/79 (4%) | 2/5 (40%) | 0/3 |

Table 7. Number/percentage of FSG targets of human PL controllers

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 18/25 (72%) | 7/62 (11%) | 4/37 (11%) | – | 1/1 (100%) |
| SAr. 72 | 14/23 (61%) | 3/63 (5%) | 1/28 (4%) | – | 1/2 (50%) |
| SAr. 75 | 4/16 (25%) | 3/75 (4%) | 2/35 (6%) | – | 0/4 |
| SAr. 70 | 10/17 (59%) | 8/49 (16%) | 3/28 (11%) | 0/1 | 0/2 |

Table 8. Number/percentage of FSG targets of human collective controllers

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 6/6 (100%) | 5/20 (25%) | 3/14 (21%) | – | – |
| SAr. 72 | 4/4 (100%) | 1/5 (20%) | 1/9 (11%) | – | – |
| SAr. 75 | 6/6 (100%) | 5/12 (42%) | 1/13 (8%) | | 2/2 (100%) |
| SAr. 70 | 2/4 (50%) +BPL 3/4 (75%) | 7/8 (86%) | 4/4 (100%) | | 3/3 (100%) |

Table 9. Number/percentage of FSG targets of animal PL controllers

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 32/43 (74%) | 21/27 (78%) | 13/14 (93%) | 0/1 | 3/6 (50%) |
| SAr. 72 | 18/30 (60%) | 23/34 (68%) | 15/24 (63%) | 3/4 (75%) | 5/6 (83%) |
| SAr. 75 | 12/24 (50%) | 16/28 (57%) | 13/22 (59%) | – | 13/13 (100%) |
| SAr. 70 | 16/24 (67%) | 18/34 (53%) | 6/16 (38%) | 1/1 (100%) | 12/15 (8%) |

Table 10. Number/percentage of FSG targets of inanimate PL controllers

These data show that the tendency for adjectives modifying plural animate controllers to attest FSG agreement relative to verbs and pronouns is much higher than with inanimates, where verbs and pronouns remain as likely—if not more so—to attest FSG agreement. The only clear counterexample of this is with SAr. 70, where the modern dialectal trend is attested in each animacy category. The diachronic implications of this will be discussed further below (Section 5).

Before considering the categories of FPL and Dual agreement, it is worth noting that MSG agreement with plural controllers occurs in each manuscript. Although these instances constitute a minority, they are not rare, as Table 11 shows:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 14/121 (12%) | 6/257 (2%) | 1/141 (<1%) | 0/3 | 3/13 (23%) |
| SAr. 72 | 8/88 (9%) | 7/223 (3%) | 3/124 (2%) | 1/5 (20%) | 4/17 (24%) |
| SAr. 75 | 11/80 (14%) | 3/298 (1%) | 1/140 (<1%) | – | 0/24 |
| SAr. 70 | 11/76 (15%) | 12/288 (4%) | 1/132 (<1%) | 0/7 | 2/23 (9%) |

Table 11. MSG agreement by target type

Of the adjectives that occur, the vast majority are either *kaṭīr* or *qalīl*. In SAr. 74, 14/14 (100%) are one of these two; in SAr. 72, 8/8 (100%) are one of these two; in SAr. 75, 11/12 (92%) are one of these two; and in SAr. 70, 10/11 (91%) are one of these two. Interestingly, unlike FSG agreement, the animacy of the controller does not seem to correlate with an increase in MSG agreement; the vast majority of controllers are either human PL or collective nouns. Further, the targets can be either attributive or predicative. See the following examples:

SAr. 74, f. 35r فتقدمت اليه جماعات **كثير** ومعهم كسح وخرس وعماه وزمنا واخرين **كثير**
Then many crowds came to him, and with them were lame, and mute, and blind, and many others.

SAr. 74, f. 43v لانه المدعون **كثير** والمختارين **قليل**
For many are the called, but few are the chosen.

SAr. 72, f. 33v فتقدموا شهود **كثير**
Then many witnesses came forward […]

SAr. 72, f. 12r والعمالين **قليل**
And the workers are few […]

SAr. 75, f. 9r فلما كان المسا قربوا اليه مجانين **كثير** فاخرج شياطينهم
And when it was evening, they brought before him many demon-possessed people, then he cast out their demons.

SAr. 75, f. 22v فان المدعيين **كثير** والمختارين **قليل**
Those who are called are many, but those chosen are few.

SAr. 70, f. 19v قالوا له سبعه وحيتان **قليل** صغار
And they replied to him, ‘seven [loaves of bread], and a few small fish.’

SAr. 70, f. 26v الدين دُعوا **كثير** والمخُتارين **قليل**
Those who have been called are many, but the chosen are few.

Blau (1966–1967: 282–283) observed this tendency, and points out that other examples exist, most of which are *faʿīl* pattern adjectives. This led him to consider these nouns as ‘invariable in gender’ (Blau 1966–1967: 282–283). This appears to be the case with the adjective *qalīl*; however, *kaṭīr* regularly inflects for FSG and sound MPL:

SAr. 74, f. 24v فتبعه جماعات كثيره فشفاهم كلهم
Then many crowds followed him and he healed them.

SAr. 74, f. 71r وخطاين متكين مع يسوع ومع تلاميذه لانهم كانوا كتيرين فلحقوه
And sinners (were) reclining with Jesus and with his disciples, because they were many, and they joined him.

SAr. 72, f. 10v فرق من خنازير كثيره ترعا
A herd of many pigs being pastured […]

SAr. 75, f. 21r اتبعه جموع كثيره
Many crowds followed him.

MSG target agreement with FSG and PL controllers occurs in a small minority of cases in three of the four manuscripts with relative pronouns as well:

SAr. 74, f. 51r انكم تشبهوا مقابر مشيده **الذي** ترا من خارج حسنه ومن داخل مملوه عظام موتا وكل قذر
You are like beautiful graves, which appear from the outside beautiful, but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and every filth.

SAr. 72, f. 24r وان يسوع قال لهم امين أقول لكم انكم **الذي** اتبعتموني
And Jesus said to them, 'Amen I say to you who have followed me […]'

SAr. 70, f. 9v وما ادق الباب واضيق الطريق **الدي** تبلغ الي الحياه
How small the gate and narrow the path that leads to life.

Both of these perhaps anticipate phenomena that are well-known in modern dialects, where **kaṭīr* and **qalīl* are used as quantifiers (i.e., *nās ktīr* and *ktīr nās* 'many people' and *nās ʾlīl* and *ʾlīl nās* 'a few people' in Jerusalem Arabic; Rosenhouse 2007: 489), and dialects such as Andalusi Arabic, in which the relative pronoun is an invariable *allaḍī* (Corriente 2006: 106).[13]

[13] It should be noted, though, that adjectives of the patterns *faʿīl* and *faʿūl* can be invariable even in Classical Arabic corpora, including in the Quran: 42. 17 اللهُ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ وَالْمِيزَانَ وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ لَعَلَّ السَّاعَةَ قَرِيبٌ 'It is Allah who has revealed the book with the truth and the balance of justice, perhaps the hour is near.' I thank Marijn van Putten for alerting me to this and other examples of the same phenomenon in corpora unanimously considered Classical Arabic.

### 3.1.2 FPL target agreement

FPL target agreement varies considerably across Arabic varieties and corpora. In Classical and Modern Standard Arabic, FPL target agreement occurs only when the controller is a human feminine plural. As Bettega and D'Anna (2023: §2.5) demonstrate, however, Classical and Modern Standard Arabic are in fact the exception. In the corpora of the pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran, as well as a significant number of geographically widespread modern Arabic dialects, FPL agreement with controllers with different degrees of animacy, including inanimate, are attested (Bettega and D'Anna 2023: §2.3.3 & §2.4). At the same time, many modern dialects reflect the loss of FPL target agreement, and most of these dialects attest a common plural that is usually the historically sound MPL (Bettega and D'Anna 2023: §2.3.7).[14]

Against this background, the distribution of FPL in these Gospel manuscripts is interesting. FPL agreement occurs in each of the four manuscripts. The greatest number of these occur with human FPL controllers, followed by the category of human collectives. A small minority occurs with divine PL, animal PL, and inanimate PL controllers:

| MS | Human PL | Divine | Human Coll. | Animal | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 41/41 (100%) | – | – | – | – |
| SAr. 72 | 36/68 (53%) | – | 29/68 (43%) | 1/68 (2%) | 2/68 (2%) |
| SAr. 75 | 52/67 (78%) | – | 11/67 (16%) | – | 4/67 (6%) |
| SAr. 70 | 43/51 (84%) | 1/51 (2%) | 5/51 (10%) | – | 2/51 (4%) |

Table 12. FPL targets and the animacy of their controllers

The inanimate controllers that trigger FPL agreement are typically salient in the narrative: of the eight FPL targets of inanimate PL controllers, five (5/8–63%) are verbal predicates:

> SAr. 75, f. 12r لو كانت في صور وصيدا الايات التي **كن** فيكما لعسا ان كانتا تتوبان بالمسح والرماد
> If the signs that were [done] among you had been [done] in Tyre and Sidon, then perhaps they would have repented with anointing and ashes.

[14] The authors describe systems that diverge from this general trend in §2.3.8. These are, however, a relatively small minority of cases compared with the categories described here.

SAr. 70, f. 10r ونزل المطر وجرت الأنهار وهبت الرياح **فاقبلن** على دلك البيت فسقط
The rain fell, and the rivers overflowed, and the wind blew, and they came upon that house and it fell.

In SAr. 72, two examples of FPL pronominal agreement with inanimate plural controllers occur. One instance is in agreement with a noun written جنون, which is a plural form used to translate the Greek τα κρινα *ta krīna*, 'lilies of the field': SAr. 72, f. 8v اقول لكم ولا سليمن في كل مجده لم يكتسى كواحده منهن 'I tell you that not even Solomon in all of his glory was not clothed like one of these.' Perhaps the number (واحده) serving as a quantifier here played a role in the use of the FPL (see, e.g., Brustad 2000: 23–25). The second modifies the sound feminine plural *mamlakāt*, even though it occurs with the quantifier *kull*, which typically increases the likelihood of FSG agreement, rather than PL: SAr. 72, f. 5v فاوراه كل مملكات العالم ومجدهن 'And he showed him all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory.' Here again, the fact that the controller refers to entities that symbolize people perhaps triggered FPL rather than FSG agreement.

Though FPL target agreement is mostly reserved for human feminine controllers, such controllers do not ubiquitously trigger FPL agreement. In fact, even with controllers referring to groups of females, MPL agreement is not uncommon, although the relative percentages vary from manuscript to manuscript:

| MS | FPL | MPL |
|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 41/69 (59%) | 28/69 (41%) |
| SAr. 72 | 31/38 (82%) | 2/38 (5%) |
| SAr. 75 | 36/48 (75%) | 5/48 (10%) |
| SAr. 70 | 37/49 (76%) | 9/49 (18%) |

Table 13. Number/type of targets with morphologically and semantically FPL controllers[15]

These data suggest that the FPL was increasingly restricted to human referents, especially human feminine plurals, but the MPL (and to a much lesser degree, BPL) was spreading at its expense. This expansion of the MPL into contexts with FPL controllers does not occur equally in all contexts, however. It is most common in 2nd person verbal contexts:

[15] Some morphologically and/or semantically FPL controllers trigger BPL agreement. They are included in the total number (denominator), which is why not all numerators add up to 100%.

حينيذ قمنه العذاري كلهن وزيتن مصابيحهن اما الحمقا فلقين العقلا قايلين **اعطونا** من **زيتكم** SAr. 74, f. 55
Then all of the virgins arose and put oil in their lamps; as for the foolish virgins, they went to the wise ones, saying 'give us some of your oil.'

فلما احتبس الختن نعسن كلهن ورقدن فلما كان نصف الليل عرض صوت يقول بان هذا الختن قد جا **فاخرجوا** في لقايه SAr. 72, f. 30v
But when the bridegroom was delayed, [the virgins] grew sleepy and they all fell asleep. But when it was midnight, a voice called out, 'Look, the bridegroom has arrived, go out to meet him!'

فاجبن الحليمات فقلن عسيته لا يكفينا واياكن اذهبن الي الباعه فاشترين **لكم** SAr. 75, f. 25v
And the wise [virgins] answered and said, 'this [oil] might not be enough for us, so you go to the seller and buy some for yourselves.

فقلن الجاهلات للحكيمات اعطينا من **زيتكم** SAr. 70, f. 30r
Then they said to the wise virgins, 'Give us some of your oil.'

In each manuscript, the tendency to use MPL instead of FPL with a group of females surfaces in second-person contexts more so than third-person ones. This is consistent with what Bettega and D'Anna found in the corpora they investigated (2023: §5.2). Diachronic implications of this observation will be discussed below (Section 5).

### 3.1.3 Dual target agreement

Unlike FPL agreement, which is retained in many modern dialects, dual agreement is largely a pre-modern phenomenon, having been mostly lost in modern dialects as a productive target agreement pattern. In the Gospel manuscripts studied here, the dual is productive; however, as with FPL, dual controllers occasionally trigger PL target agreement. In each manuscript, however, dual target agreement with dual controllers is more common than not:

| MS | Dual targets/total |
|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 62/94 (66%) |
| SAr. 72 | 76/103 (74%) |
| SAr. 75 | 113/132 (86%) |
| SAr. 70 | 111/127 (87%) |

Table 14. Number/percentage of dual controllers with dual targets out of total

In each of the four manuscripts, verbs are less likely than pronouns to exhibit Dual agreement, and more likely to exhibit plural agreement (usually MPL). Adjectives are most variable:

| MS | Adjective | Verb | PN | Dem PN | Rel PN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 3/3 (100%) | 29/51 (57%) | 30/39 (77%) | 1/1 (100%) | – |
| SAr. 72 | 4/6 (67%) | 35/53 (66%) | 36/43 (84%) | 1/1 (100%) | – |
| SAr. 75 | 11/13 (85%) | 56/70 (80%) | 47/50 (94%) | – | 1/1 (100%) |
| SAr. 70 | 6/9 (67%) | 58/68 (85%) | 46/48 (96%) | 1/2 (50%) | – |

Table 15. Instances of dual agreement by agreement category

Here again, distance from the controller could be a factor in determining whether (especially verbal) agreement is Dual or PL, with more distance increasing the likelihood of PL agreement:

> SAr. 74, f. 18v فلما **خرجا شاعوه** في كل تلك الارض
> And when they left [the area], they told about him throughout the region.

> SAr. 74, f. 44v فاذا اعماوين جالسين علي الطريق فلما **سمعا** بان يسوع جايز **صاحوا**
> And behold, two blind men were sitting on the road, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted.

> SAr. 70, f. 24v ارسل يسوع رجلين من تلاميده وقال لهما انطلقا الي هده القريه وتجدا اتان مربوطه ومعها جحش **حلوها** واتيا بها
> Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go to this village and you will find a colt tied up, and with her is a foal; untie them and bring them.'

### 3.2 Pre-controller data

The rule in standardized Arabic by which pre-controller verbal targets agree with their heads in gender but not number—being obligatorily singular—is well-known. As Brustad (2000: 67) notes, however, this neutralization of number agreement is characteristic, though not obligatory, in modern dialects as well. In their comprehensive review of modern dialects, Bettega and D'Anna (2023: §2.3.9) found that the data, where sufficient to allow statistical analysis, largely supported Brustad's contention. Concerning the corpus of early Christian Arabic, including the four Gospel manuscripts under study here, Blau (1966–1967: 275) claims that 'There

exists a marked tendency to bring the preceding verb into strict concord in number with its subject.' This claim of course would lead the reader to expect a situation in which the unmarked agreement pattern of pre-controller verbal targets is full number agreement. Somewhat confusingly, however, Blau claims in the very next sentence that '[…] at least partly through the influence of CA [= Classical Arabic], even verbs preceding subjects denoting several *persons* […] remain in the singular' (Blau 1966–1967: 275, emphasis original); however, '[v]ery frequent are verbs in the plural, when following subjects designate several persons' (Blau 1966–1967: 276). Of course, Blau is not wrong that both patterns appear, but the description unfortunately offers little help determining what patterns, if any, characterize the distribution within and across categories.

By quantifying the data, we can more accurately and meaningfully describe the patterns in the manuscripts. In so doing, we find that pre-controller targets of all kinds, including verbal targets, are far more commonly singular than plural:

| MS | Singular agreement/total |
|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 94/136 (70%) |
| SAr. 72 | 88/167 (53%) |
| SAr. 75 | 140/187 (75%) |
| SAr. 70 | 134/166 (81%) |

Table 16. Singular agreement on all pre-plural controller targets (MSG + FSG)

The data here thus comport with the data and trends attested in other non-standard varieties of Arabic: there is a strong trend for pre-controller targets to be singular, but it is certainly not obligatory. Breaking the data down by target problematizes Blau's initial claim of a 'marked tendency' for pre-controller verbs to display number agreement with the target head nouns:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PN | Dem | Rel PN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 6/6 (100%) | 76/110 (69%) | 0/4 | 12/16 (75%) | – |
| SAr. 72 | 3/3 (100%) | 75/150 (50%) | 0/1 | 10/12 (83%) | 1/1 |
| SAr. 75 | 2/4 (50%) | 128/163 (79%) | 0/1 | 11/19 (58%) | – |
| SAr. 70 | 3/4 (75%) | 117/146 (80%) | – | 14/16 (88%) | – |

Table 17. Singular (MSG & FSG) agreement by target type

As we can see, verbal targets are, except for SAr. 72, more likely to be singular than plural in general. But what about when degree of controller animacy is taken into consideration? Here, Blau's intuition that human plural subjects ('subjects designat[ing] several persons') tend to trigger plural agreement is more accurate, at least for two of the four manuscripts studied here:

| MS | Human | Human Coll. | Divine | Animal | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 22/46 (48%) | 21/36 (58%) | 3/4 (75%) | 3/3 (100%) | 27/27 (100%) |
| SAr. 72 | 25/90 (28%) | 22/32 (69%) | 1/1 (100%) | 4/4 (100%) | 25/25 (100%) |
| SAr. 75 | 64/91 (70%) | 29/35 (83%) | 1/2 (50%) | 6/6 (100%) | 28/29 (97%) |
| SAr. 70 | 59/84 (70%) | 26/30 (87%) | 4/4 (100%) | 4/4 (100%) | 23/24 (86%) |

Table 18. Pre-controller SG verbal target agreement by animacy

While there is considerable variation across the four manuscripts regarding the percentage of human plural controllers that trigger singular agreement, each manuscript displays the same trend, namely an increasing likelihood of singular agreement the farther down the animacy continuum the controller falls. As for inanimate controllers, singular agreement is nearly total; the only exceptions are SAr. 75 and SAr. 70, each of which has one instance of non-singular agreement:

> SAr. 75, f. 5v الي ان **تعبران** السما والأرض لا تعبر ايه واحده او حرفا واحدا من الناموس حتي يكون كل شي
> Until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or tittle will pass from the law until everything is complete.

> SAr. 70, f. 24v ومن ساعتهما **انفتحا** اعينهما فلحقاه
> And immediately their eyes opened and they followed him.

In the first instance, the dual is likely due to the salience of the subjects—heaven and earth—in the proclamation. In the latter example, the presence of dual subjects preceding likely led to the dual agreement on the verb. This is especially likely since the subject of the verb *infataḥā* 'they (du.) opened' is in fact a paucal plural, *ʾaʿyun*, and not a dual. Other than these two examples, pre-controller targets of inanimate nouns are always singular, as they are with animal controllers.

Lastly, the distribution of singular agreement with plural controllers—between MSG and FSG—is not equal across animacy categories:

| MS | MSG / FSG | Human | Human Coll. | Divine | Animal | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | MSG | 15 | 9 | – | 1 | 6 |
| | FSG | 7 | 12 | 3 | 2 | 21 |
| SAr. 72 | MSG | 20 | 12 | – | 1 | 9 |
| | FSG | 8 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 24 |
| SAr. 75 | MSG | 63 | 24 | 1 | 3 | 6 |
| | FSG | 1 | 8 | – | 4 | 31 |
| SAr. 70 | MSG | 36 | 14 | – | 2 | 7 |
| | FSG | 27 | 15 | 4 | 2 | 27 |

Table 19. MSG vs. FSG agreement by animacy

On the one hand, FSG agreement occurs in each manuscript with human PL controllers at least once, and in three of four manuscripts FSG agreement accounts for at least a third of the instances of singular agreement. There is thus again no consistent principle dictating FSG vs. MSG agreement in the corpus. On the other hand, there is a clear tendency across manuscripts for MSG to occur more frequently with human PL controllers, and FSG to occur with the less individuated (i.e., human collectives) and less animate.

### 3.3 Summary of Gospel agreement data

So far, we have seen that plural controllers can trigger singular agreement with post-controller targets. Most singular targets of plural controllers are FSG; however, MSG occurs in a minority of cases, typically with the adjectives *kaṯīr* 'many' and *qalīl* 'few'. Several factors that appear to influence the likelihood of singular agreement with post-controller targets were identified. First, the degree of saliency of the controller plays a role, with nouns that are generic or not salient more prone to receive FSG agreement than nouns that are highly salient in some way. The same is true of individuation, with plural nouns viewed as a whole being more likely to trigger FSG agreement than those where plurality is in focus. Second, animacy clearly plays a role in the selection of agreement. Nouns higher on the animacy continuum are less likely to receive FSG agreement than nouns lower on it. However, while some of the manuscripts (especially SAr. 75) almost never attest FSG target agreement with human plural nouns, each manuscript attests a (often sizable) number of inanimate nouns

that trigger PL agreement. The Classical/Modern Standard Arabic principle of obligatory FSG target agreement with plural inanimate controllers is not attested in the corpus. Third, the distance of the target from the controller seems to correlate with likelihood of singular or plural agreement, with targets farther from the controllers more likely to attest plural agreement than those closer to the controller. Finally, regarding which targets are most or least likely to attest FSG vs. plural agreement with plural controllers, we noted that, when all controller and target data were considered together, adjectives were usually most likely to attest FSG agreement, with demonstrative and relative pronouns variable but likewise frequently singular, followed by verbs and lastly personal pronouns. However, when broken down by animacy, we found that these patterns were very strong with human PL and collective controllers, controllers lower on the animacy continuum reflected the older pattern of personal pronouns being likeliest to attest FSG agreement, followed by verbs and lastly adjectives.

For pre-controller targets a rather different set of distributions is attested. We noted that each of the four manuscripts is characterized by a tendency for pre-controller targets to show singular agreement, although this varies most significantly by animacy of the controller. Specifically, the more animate the controller, the likelier it is to trigger plural agreement. This is most noticeable with verbal targets, which are, as expected, also the most numerous of pre-controller targets. Animacy was once again shown to have a significant impact on the likelihood of singular vs. plural agreement with verbal targets, with more animate nouns more likely to trigger plural agreement. Indeed, with only two exceptions out of all four manuscripts, pre-controller verbal targets attest singular agreement with all inanimate nouns. Finally, a trend wherein, of singular targets, MSG was likelier to occur with controllers higher on the animacy continuum, and FSG was likelier to occur with controllers on the low end of the continuum, is consistent across the four manuscripts. Here again, however, this is not hard and fast, and occurs in different proportions depending on the manuscript.

Each of these trends and patterns is known and familiar from the literature on various corpora of Arabic, from the pre-Islamic poetic corpus, the Quran, to modern Arabic dialects. Differences between certain features identified in the present corpus and other varieties and corpora of Arabic are naturally accounted for diachronically, as will be argued below in Section 5. Nevertheless, these texts are translations, and most scholars have attributed many of the differences between the grammar of these manuscripts and other (mostly Classical) ones to the impact of the language of the *Vorlage*. Before moving to a diachronic analysis of agreement in these texts, therefore, we must first determine whether the translators replicated grammatical patterns of their source texts or not.

### 3.4 The question of Greek influence

The fact that these Gospel manuscripts in Arabic—and indeed many of the other early Christian texts written in Arabic in the monasteries of Syria, Palestine, and the Sinai—are translations rather than original compositions in Arabic has led most scholars to conclude that the grammar of the texts, where they differ from Classical Arabic, is influenced to a great degree by the source languages, mostly either Greek or Syriac. Blau (1966–1967: 20) begins his three-volume description of the early Christian corpus by claiming that the language of the translations made from biblical texts is 'so awkward and literal that [it is] hardly worthy of being called Arabic at all'. Subsequent scholars have been perhaps less overtly negative in their evaluations of the language, yet nevertheless assert that the language is too influenced by the underlying source texts to be of much value for the general linguistic study of Arabic. For example, Rony Vollandt (2018: 454) contends that 'biblical translations often follow a grammar of their own, which is governed by a wish to imitate the exalted source text […] in a grammatically perplexing Arabic style that was not employed in any other literary genre.'

There is no doubt that some translators adopted a rather high degree of isomorphism in their translations, and this is especially reflected in word order and lexical selection. Nevertheless, the tendency to over-generalize and conflate certain domains of syntax and the lexicon with a text's 'grammar' is problematic. We should also avoid conflating 'style' and 'translation technique'. Aitken and Dhont make this point in the context of scholarly discussions of the language of the Septuagint and its place in the study of the history of Greek in a way that is *apropos* of the discussions of translated texts into Arabic and worth quoting here at length:

> […] 'literal translation' is often related to 'poor Greek,' and 'good Greek' is associated with 'free translations' […] While elements of 'freedom' […] may facilitate the translator's stylization of the Greek text, translation technique and style pertain to distinct aspects of language use in the Septuagint. The term 'translation technique' only refers to the nature of the relationship between the Hebrew source and its Greek rendering […] while 'style' pertains to a contextual characterization of a book's language and features within the realm of the Greek linguistic and textual world. (Aitken and Dhont 2023: 440)

The translation techniques of texts from Greek into Arabic by Melkite Christians in the monasteries of Palestine often replicate the word order of the *Vorlage*, although perhaps not as much as is suggested by the (rather general) characterizations in much of the literature. That is, the translation technique employed prioritizes reflecting the underlying text explicitly in the target lan-

guage. Yet even if the target language replicates, e.g., the word order of the underlying text in ways that are marked in the target language, this does not necessarily mean that these were 'unnatural' in the Arabic variety(ies) or register(s) used in the monasteries of Palestine (or outside them). By only comparing the structures of these texts with descriptions of Classical Arabic, the impression is created that anything that differs from Classical Arabic is by default 'unnatural' Arabic. However, as Brustad (2000: §10.3§–10.2) shows, word order in spoken registers of Arabic attest a whole host of non-VSO/SVO sentence structures by which speakers contrast or achieve various kinds of topicalization. This is not to say that the primary reason for a marked word order is other than the source language; rather, it is to argue against the assumption that such marked word orders would be inappropriate or felt to be unnatural in Arabic simply because of their rarity in Classical Arabic style. It is very likely that different authors adopted the same translation technique but differed over the stylistic preferences associated with rendering the source language into the target language.

In any event, a few examples will suffice to illustrate that the scribes of the MSS studied here are not merely copying agreement patterns directly from Greek. I have chosen to focus on possible Greek influence, since, as mentioned, it is especially common for translations from Greek to Arabic to be treated as deviant from 'real' Arabic (which implicitly and explicitly are identified with Classical Arabic).[16] With the exception of the *schema attikôn* phenomenon (discussed below), Greek targets agree with their controllers in gender (masculine, feminine, or dual) and number (singular or plural). A MPL controller will trigger MPL adjectival and pronominal agreement, and 3rd PL verbal agreement. As we have seen, this is not the case with the Arabic of these manuscripts. Note the following differences (all Greek examples taken from Nestle-Aland 28):

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[16] I assume translations from Greek are primarily what, e.g., Vollandt (2018) has in mind since, in his book on a Christian translation of the Pentateuch (2015), his review of the syntax of the translation concludes that there is a significant concern on the part of the translator to produce stylistically sophisticated Arabic, leading him to diverge from the Syriac *Vorlage* in numerous places (§8.1.11). Hjälm's study of Christian Arabic versions of Daniel found largely the same (2016: §9.9). On the other hand, Vollandt's discussion of the syntax of the Damascus Psalm Fragment, in an appendix to Al-Jallad (2020: esp. 106–108), emphasizes that the translation 'shows an uncompromising concern with rendering every individual element in the Greek *Vorlage* by a closely corresponding equivalent in the target language, *often at the expense of the stylistic and grammatical rules of Arabic*' (Al-Jallad 2020: 107; emphasis mine). In this section I have argued against using 'Classical Arabic' and 'Arabic' interchangeably. More importantly for the present discussion, no thorough study of the translation techniques and philosophies of the present manuscripts has to my knowledge been undertaken.

Matthew 4:25:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| καὶ | **ἠκολούθησαν** | αὐτῷ | ὄχλοι | **πολλοὶ** |
| CONJ | followed-AOR-3PL | him | crowds-MPL | many-MPL |

And great crowds followed him.

cf.

SAr. 74 **وتبعه** جماعات **كثيره**

In this typical example, the Greek collective plural *oxloi* 'crowds' triggers plural agreement of both verbal and adjectival targets, whereas the Arabic plural collective *ǧamāʿāt* triggers singular agreement on both, likely due to the low saliency/individuation of the noun in context. In the next example, a similar phenomenon occurs with the Greek noun *angeloi* 'angels', and the Arabic equivalent *malāʾika*:

Matthew 4:11:

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| καὶ | ἰδοὺ | ἄγγελοι | **προσῆλθον** | καὶ | **διηκόνουν** | αὐτῷ |
| CONJ | behold-IMPV | angels-MPL | came-AOR-3PL | CONJ | served-AOR-3PL | him |

And behold, angels came and were serving him.

cf.

SAr. 74 فاذا الملايكه قد **تقدمت** اليه **وطالت تخدمه**

Again, *malāʾika* triggers FSG agreement of the verbs in Arabic, presumably because the individuation of the noun in context is low; the focus was on the fact that, once Satan had left Jesus, a group of angels came to minister to him. In Greek, only plural agreement was available. The Arabic translator could have slavishly followed that, but instead utilized an option that is stylistically appropriate in Arabic. This is not to say, of course, that the interaction between Arabic and Greek did not influence the linguistic decisions of the translators. It is axiomatic in translation studies that there is always *some* kind of translation effect (Laviosa-Braithwaite 2001: 288–291). But they are clearly not merely calquing the Greek without regard for the grammatical and stylistic patterns of whatever Arabic variety or register(s) they operated in.

A more promising line of investigation involves the way that certain grammatical rules in Greek more subtly interacted with patterns in Arabic to influence the decisions that translators made. In their study of the differences between agree-

ment in the pre-Islamic poetic corpus and the Quran on the one hand, and standardized Classical Arabic on the other, Belnap and Gee (1994: §4.1.2) suggest that authors of Arabic that were either speakers of Greek, or at least more practiced at it, might be influenced by a rule in Classical Greek whereby neuter plural nouns triggered singular agreement in verbs. Before considering this, it is important to highlight that, even in Classical Greek, this rule only applied to verbs; adjectives, pronouns, and definite articles all maintained number agreement (Luschnig 2007: 327). We have seen above that verbs are not the most likely target type to attest SG agreement, but rather adjectives or pronouns. Additionally, the rule had become less ubiquitous by the Hellenistic period. In the Greek of the New Testament, while the rule of neuter plural > singular verb was more common, plural verbal agreement was not rare (Wallace 2000: 177). And in the Greek text of the Gospel of Matthew—which forms the bulk of the text on which the Arabic versions included here are based—of the ten neuter plural subjects of verbs, only half trigger singular verbal agreement.[17]

Whether or not a neuter plural noun triggers singular or plural agreement in these texts, as well as papyri from the Hellenistic and later periods, was often determined by the degree of saliency/individuation of the noun in the text, which often correlated with degree of animacy (Smith and Melluish 1968/1970: 69; Wallace 2000: 177). This is often dubbed by scholars of the Septuagint and the New Testament as *constructio ad sensum*, or 'construction according to sense', agreement (Wallace 2000: 177). In his study of this feature in the Book of Revelation, for example, Moţ (2015: 181–185) reports many instances of plural agreement,[18] and that by far the largest group of neuter plural nouns that regularly trigger plural verbal agreement are nouns referring to groups of persons, human or divine, and including collective nouns. Thus, the system in the Greek well before the period in which our Christian Arabic texts were translated was more complex than it was in the Classical period, and in fact the system continued to evolve over time such that, by the modern period, Greek lacks the feature of singular agreement with neuter plural nouns entirely (Pighi, Del Grande, and Arias 1963: 312).

Obviously, the factors that apparently determined singular vs. plural agreement for neuter nouns are identical to those already identified by several scholars (discussed above) for Arabic singular vs. plural agreement with various

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[17] Mark likewise is split evenly, with four neuter plural subjects triggering plural verbs, and four triggering singular ones. The Gospel of John has only one plural verb with a neuter plural subject, and nine singular verbs. The combined works of Luke-Acts have roughly two-to-one ratio, with seven plural verbs to 15 singular ones. I thank Benjamin Kantor for his generosity in providing me these statistics and discussing their implications with me.

[18] Unfortunately, he does not include statistics nor a complete list of the nouns and the type of verbal agreement they trigger.

plural controllers. But it is worth pointing out and stressing that Belnap and Gee (1994) and Bettega and D'Anna (2023) each report such agreement in Arabic from the pre-Islamic period, as well as in the Quran. Thus, if Greek influence is responsible for a system in which saliency/individuation as well as animacy determine singular vs. plural target agreement with plural controllers, it must be posited to have begun quite early, certainly earlier than the period normally alleged, namely the late Umayyad/early Abbasid period. I am unaware of anyone who has proposed that the system of agreement in the pre-Islamic poetic corpus is due to Greek influence, yet, as we have seen, the one in the Christian Arabic manuscripts is very similar, and the differences similar to those between the ancient corpora and the modern dialects as argued by Bettega and D'Anna (e.g., in 2023: §5.1).

Even with these two overlapping semantic-syntactic systems of agreement, the scribes that produced the Arabic translations of the Greek New Testament often disagreed, as it were, with the *sensum* evident in the Greek text. For example, in Matthew 10:29, the Greek text attests a singular verb with a neuter plural verb that is translated in Arabic with the dual:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| οὐχὶ δύο | στρουθία | ἀσσαρίου | **πωλεῖται** |
| not two-NEUT-SG | sparrow-NEUT-PL | assarion-GEN-SG | be.sold-PRES-3SG |
| καὶ | ἓν | ἐξ | **αὐτῶν** |
| CONJ | one-NEUT-SG | from/of | them-NEUT-PL |

Are two sparrows not sold for one assarion? But one of them […]

SAr. 74 اليس عصفورين **يباعان** بفلسين وواحد **منهم**
SAr. 72 الياليس عصفوري **يباعان** برباط وواحد **منهما**
SAr. 75 اليس عصفورين **يباعا** بنوميه وواحد **منهما**

In each of the Arabic texts, the controller and target agreement in number (dual), probably due to the presence of the number *dūo* 'two' in Greek, which did not trigger plural agreement in Greek but did in Arabic. The presence of numbers below ten is associated in many corpora of Arabic with an increased likelihood of plural target agreement, even with less animate nouns (Brustad 2000: 23–25; Bettega and D'Anna 2023: 92). Note also that the neuter plural possessive pronoun *autōn* 'of them' is rendered either with the MPL (SAr. 74) or MDU (SAr. 72 and SAr. 75). In other places the Greek attests a plural verb whereas the Arabic attests singular agreement, as in Matthew 12:21:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| καὶ | τῷ | ὀνόματι | ἔθνη | ἐλπιοῦσιν |
| CONJ | ART-NEUT-SG | name-NEUT-SG | gentiles-NEUT-PL | hope-FUT-3PL |

And in his name gentiles will hope.

SAr. 74 والأمم **تترجا** اسمه
SAr. 72 والأمم **تترجا** اسمه
SAr. 75 ولاسمه الامم **ترتجي**

In some places, there is overlap in terms of verbal agreement, but the Arabic renders a Greek neuter plural adjective with a plural, as in Matthew 17:2:

| τὰ | δὲ | ἱμάτια | αὐτοῦ |
|---|---|---|---|
| ART-NEUT-PL | CONJ | clothes-NEUT-PL | his-MSG |
| ἐγένετο | | λευκὰ | |
| became-AOR-3SG | | white-NEUT-PL | |

And his clothes became white.

SAr. 74 وصارت ثيابه **بيض** كالضوا
SAr. 72 وصارت ثيابه **بيض** كالضوا
SAr. 75 وثيابه ابياضت كالنور

The verbs in each of the three manuscripts are 3FSG, but in SAr. 74 and SAr. 72, the adjective is plural *bīḍ* 'white', rather than FSG. Finally, in some places the Greek text attests plural verbal agreement and the Arabic follows suit, such as in Matthew 6:32:

| πάντα | γὰρ ταῦτα | τὰ | ἔθνη |
|---|---|---|---|
| all-NEUT-PL | DISJ-DEM-NEUT-PL | ART-NEUT-PL | nations-NEUT-PL |
| **ἐπιζητοῦσιν** | | | |
| seek-PRES-3PL | | | |

For all these (things) the nations eagerly seek.

SAr. 74 كل هذا الامم **يلتمسوا**
SAr. 72 كل هذا الامم **يلتمسون**
SAr. 75 فان كل هذا جميع امم العالم **يطلبوه**

Note in this last example, however, that the neuter plural demonstrative *tauta* 'these things' is rendered into Arabic not with a FSG, but instead the MSG demonstrative *hāḏā*.

I would suggest that, when there was overlap in the form of an option to use either singular or plural agreement, translators would often follow patterns in the Greek text. However, they did not do so automatically, and in any event, when that option was not available in Greek, where Greek plural agreement was present in a way that contravened the Arabic sensibilities of the translators, they by and large opted to maintain their own Arabic style, rather than jettison them in favor of a slavish grammatical replication of the source language.

The present discussion, however, is far from exhaustive and the topic deserves further study.

To conclude this discussion, it is first and foremost clear that the scribes that produced the manuscripts studied here did not merely replicate Greek grammar, at least as concerns gender and number agreement, thereby rendering an awkward or even senseless Arabic.[19] We examined the plausibility of the proposed by Belnap and Gee, namely that the Classical Greek practice of inflecting verbs of neuter plural controllers was so influential as to lead Greek-speaking translators to generalize a principle whereby FSG agreement with inanimate controllers became obligatory. We saw that, while basically ubiquitous in Attic Greek, the practice had given way already in the Hellenistic period to a more nuanced pattern of agreement that, like that reconstructed for Arabic (in Bettega and D'Anna 2023), was based on the interaction of saliency/individuation and animacy. When translating the Greek New Testament into Arabic, translators did indeed render numerous instances of Greek neuter plurals as either FSG or MSG in Arabic. That is also the case, however, for targets of Greek masculine and feminine plural controllers, which almost never trigger singular agreement in Greek. At the same time, it is not infrequent that the Arabic disagrees with the intuitions evident in the Greek text, rendering Greek singular verbs as plurals, and vice versa. Indeed, disagreements between the Greek and Arabic when it comes to adjectival and pronominal targets are quite common. We can therefore conclude that, while we cannot—and should not—dismiss any discussion of the influence of the source text and language on the translation, nevertheless the agreement system in the Arabic texts is at home in the continuum of Arabic and is not by and large the result of an imposition of Greek grammar on to Arabic.

## 4 Agreement in *Summa Theologiae Arabica*

The authors and compilers of many early Christian Arabic texts, and indeed those of most of the earliest Arabic Gospel manuscripts, are unknown to us. However, we are fortunate, thanks to colophons in both manuscripts, that we know that Stephen of Ramlah produced both SAr. 72 and BL 4950. The last 30 or so folia of the manuscript are a copy of a treatise by Theodore Abu Qurra; however, the first 197 folia consist of the treatise, discussed above, often called the *Summa Theologiae Arabica*. It is not known whether Stephen was the author of the entirety of the text, or perhaps compiled separate texts into the whole. Still, the fact that the same scribe produced two manuscripts with texts from two different genres—one a translation, the other an original composition—offers the opportunity to com-

[19] For such a claim, see, e.g., Blau, *Grammar of Christian Arabic*, 20: 'Most of the ChA [= Christian Arabic] texts are translations from Greek and Syriac, sometimes (especially the translations of the Holy Writ) *so awkward and literal that they are hardly worthy of being called Arabic at all*' (emphasis added).

pare the gender and number agreement between the two. I will not present all the possible data from BL 4950, but instead will briefly review the most salient contexts from our discussion above: SG vs. PL post-controller agreement by animacy and target type, as well as pre-controller target agreement trends.

Overall, the post-controller data display the same trends as the Gospel manuscripts studied in detail above:

| MS | SG targets/total targets |
|---|---|
| BL 4950 | 143/266 (54%) |

Table 20. SG targets out of all eligible targets

Animacy once again plays a significant role in the likelihood of FSG agreement with PL controllers. The same trend, following the animacy continuum where human PL controllers are least likely to trigger FSG agreement and inanimate PL controllers most likely, is attested in BL 4950. Still, a sizeable minority of targets of human PL controllers is FSG:

| MS | Human | Human Coll. | Spirit | Animals | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 4/237 (2%) | 29/126 (23%) | 17/32 (53%) | 14/40 (35%) | 69/91 (76%) |
| SAr. 72 | 1/195 (<1%) | 19/116 (16%) | 3/12 (25%) | 6/18 (33%) | 64/98 (65%) |
| SAr. 75 | 1/277 (<1%) | 9/130 (7%) | 0/15 | 9/22 (41%) | 54/87 (62%) |
| SAr. 70 | 25/296 (9%) | 21/97 (22%) | 7/17 (41%) | 16/19 (84%) | 53/90 (59%) |
| BL 4950 | 12/57 (21%) | 12/54 (22%) | 13/25 (52%) | – | 96/130 (74%) |

Table 21. Post-controller FSG targets w/PL controllers by animacy[20]

Interestingly, when the correlation between FSG target agreement and kind of human and divine PL form (sound MPL, sound FPL, and BPL) is examined, sound MPL and BPL are equally likely to trigger FSG, but FPL does not trigger it at all:

[20] An additional 3/57 SG targets of human PL controllers are MSG, and 7/130 SG targets of inanimate PL controllers in BL 4950 are MSG.

| MS | Sound MPL | Sound FPL | BPL |
|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | – | – | 21/21 (100%) |
| SAr. 72 | – | – | 4/4 (100%) |
| SAr. 75 | – | – | 1/1 (100%) |
| SAr. 70 | 1/31 (3%) | 1/31 (3%) | 29/31 (94%) |
| BL 4950 | 4/8 (50%) | 0/4 | 16/30 (53%) |

Table 22. FSG post-controller target agreement with PL human and divine controllers by PL type

Regarding the interaction of target type and FSG agreement frequency, adjectives, along with relative and demonstrative pronouns, were more likely than verbs and personal pronouns to attest FSG agreement:

| MS | Adjectives | Verb | PN | Rel. PN | Dem. PN |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 62/121 (51%) | 48/257 (19%) | 23/141 (16%) | 6/13 (46%) | 0/3 |
| SAr. 72 | 37/88 (42%) | 37/223 (17%) | 19/124 (15%) | 8/17 (47%) | 3/5 (60%) |
| SAr. 75 | 23/80 (29%) | 24/298 (8%) | 16/140 (11%) | 15/24 (63%) | – |
| SAr. 70 | 33/76 (43%) | 57/288 (20%) | 20/132 (15%) | 15/23 (65%) | 3/7 (43%) |
| BL 4950 | 29/43 (67%) | 26/67 (39%) | 61/131 (47%) | 15/22 (68%) | 3/4 (75%) |

Table 23. Post-controller FSG targets w/PL controllers by target type

However, there was once again a significant discrepancy between the strength of this trend depending on the animacy of the controller. With human collective nouns, for example, this trend was quite strong:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 18/25 (72%) | 7/62 (11%) | 4/37 (11%) | – | 1/1 (100%) |
| SAr. 72 | 14/23 (61%) | 3/63 (5%) | 1/28 (4%) | – | 1/2 (50%) |

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 75 | 4/16 (25%) | 3/75 (4%) | 2/35 (6%) | – | 0/4 |
| SAr. 70 | 10/17 (59%) | 8/49 (16%) | 3/28 (11%) | 0/1 | 0/2 |
| BL 4950 | 3/4 (75%) | 1/20 (5%) | 5/27 (19%) | 1/1 (100%) | 1/1 (100%) |

Table 24. Post-controller FSG targets w/human collective controllers by target type

With inanimate nouns, verbs and personal pronouns were much likelier to attest FSG agreement, with personal pronouns slightly more likely than even than adjectives:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 32/43 (74%) | 21/27 (78%) | 13/14 (93%) | 0/1 | 3/6 (50%) |
| SAr. 72 | 18/30 (60%) | 23/34 (68%) | 15/24 (63%) | 3/4 (75%) | 5/6 (83%) |
| SAr. 75 | 12/24 (50%) | 16/28 (57%) | 13/22 (59%) | – | 13/13 (100%) |
| SAr. 70 | 16/24 (67%) | 18/34 (53%) | 6/16 (38%) | 1/1 (100%) | 12/15 (8%) |
| BL 4950 | 21/29 (72%) | 12/18 (67%) | 52/68 (77%) | 2/2 (100%) | 14/14 (100%) |

Table 25. Post-controller FSG targets w/PL inanimate controllers by target type

Thus, the agreement system, while different in particulars (which might be due to genre effects—the topic is worth pursuing further), appears to attest the same system for post-controller targets as the Gospel manuscripts.

In terms of pre-controller targets, there are some similarities, but also some interesting differences between BL 4950 and the Gospel manuscripts. As with the Gospel manuscripts, most pre-controller targets are singular. In the case of BL 4950, in fact, the percentage is higher than any of the Gospel manuscripts:

| MS | Singular agreement/total |
|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 94/136 (70%) |
| SAr. 72 | 88/167 (53%) |

| MS | Singular agreement/total |
|---|---|
| SAr. 75 | 140/187 (75%) |
| SAr. 70 | 134/166 (81%) |
| BL 4950 | 63/73 (86%) |

Table 26. Number of singular pre-controller targets / total number of targets

The increase in percentage of SG target agreement relative to the Gospel manuscripts occurs in the category of verbal targets:

| MS | Adjectives | Verbs | PNs | Dem. PNs | Rel. PNs |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 6/6 (100%) | 76/110 (69%) | 0/4 | 12/16 (75%) | – |
| SAr. 72 | 3/3 (100%) | 75/150 (50%) | 0/1 | 10/12 (83%) | 1/1 |
| SAr. 75 | 2/4 (50%) | 128/163 (79%) | 0/1 | 11/19 (58%) | – |
| SAr. 70 | 3/4 (75%) | 117/146 (80%) | – | 14/16 (88%) | – |
| Summa | 3/3 (100%) | 51/54 (93%) | – | 9/15 (60%) | – |

Table 27. Pre-controller SG agreement by target type

Pre-controller verbal targets in the Gospel manuscripts were between 50% (SAr. 72) and 80% (SAr. 70) singular; BL 4950 attests 93%. When we break down verbal target agreement by animacy, we find the same basic trend as with Gospel manuscripts, namely that human collectives and inanimates pattern together as more likely to trigger SG agreement than human and divine PL controllers:

| MS | Human | Human Coll. | Spirit | Animals | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 74 | 22/46 (48%) | 21/36 (58%) | 3/4 (75%) | 3/3 (100%) | 27/27 (100%) |
| SAr. 72 | 25/90 (28%) | 22/32 (69%) | 1/1 (100%) | 4/4 (100%) | 25/25 (100%) |
| SAr. 75 | 64/91 (70%) | 29/35 (83%) | 1/2 (50%) | 6/6 (100%) | 28/29 (97%) |

| MS | Human | Human Coll. | Spirit | Animals | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SAr. 70 | 59/84 (70%) | 26/30 (87%) | 4/4 (100%) | 4/4 (100%) | 23/24 (86%) |
| Summa | 16/19 (84%) | 12/12 (100%) | 4/5 (80%) | – | 18/18 (100%) |

Table 28. Pre-controller SG verbal target by animacy

Finally, again just as we found with the Gospel manuscripts, the distribution of MSG and FSG agreement correlates with position on the animacy hierarchy. On the one hand, PL nouns that are higher on the animacy continuum are relatively evenly split between FSG and MSG. Still, individuation also apparently plays a role, at least for human PL vs. controller nouns, where the former are ever so slightly more likely to trigger MSG than FSG, whereas the latter showed the opposite. Non-human PL controllers overwhelmingly, though not ubiquitously, trigger FSG agreement:

| MS | MSG vs. FSG | Human | Human Coll. | Spirit | Animals | Inanimate |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Summa | MSG | 9 | 10 | – | – | 2 |
| | FSG | 8 | 13 | 4 | – | 26 |

Table 29. FSG vs. MSG by animacy

In conclusion, although there are some differences, the basic logic of the system of gender and number agreement with plural and collective nouns in BL 4950—an original composition in Arabic—is essentially the same one attested in the Arabic Gospel manuscripts included in this study. Of the several differences, perhaps the most salient one is the higher percentage of pre-controller SG targets in BL 4950 than in the Gospel manuscripts. This is especially the case since in SAr. 72, which Stephen of Ramlah also produced, the percentage of pre-controller SG targets is over 30% lower than in BL 4950. If Stephen in fact is the author of the *Summa*, the difference could be the result of different genres. The *Summa*, a theological treatise, is closer in this (and a few other) regards to the pattern of, e.g., the Quran (Hanitsch 2022). This is perhaps not all that surprising given that the *Summa* (and other early treatises, like SAr. 154—the so-called *Apologia*) directly engaged, even quoted, the Quran and Islamic critiques of Christianity in their defenses of Christian doctrine (Griffith 1986; Swanson 2014: 40–42). Closer study and comparison of different genres to determine possible register interactions in this literature is clearly warranted.

## 5 Discussion

Several scholars have reconstructed a system for the pre-Islamic corpora of Arabic (Belnap 1991; 1999; Belnap and Gee 1994; Hanistch 2022; Bettega and D'Anna 2023) that also appears to operate in those modern dialects that still distinguish gender in the plural (Belnap 1991; Brustad 2000; Bettega and D'Anna 2023). This gender and number agreement system is characterized by options for either FSG or PL agreement for plural and collective controllers, depending on factors such as animacy/saliency, target position, and target distance from controller. Bettega and D'Anna visualize this system as in Table 30:

| Agreement in the SG | Semantics | Agreement in the PL | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Individuated nouns | Un-individuated nouns |
| MSG | Human male | MPL | FSG (BPL adjectives) |
| FSG | Human female; non-human animates; inanimates | FPL | |
| MSG | Non-human animates; inanimates | FPL | |

Table 30. Agreement system in pre-Islamic and modern Arabic dialects (based on Bettega and D'Anna 2023: 162)

We have seen in the early Christian manuscripts studied here that the same factors noted above for non-standard Arabic affect SG vs. PL agreement with plural controllers in the same basic ways. Bettega and D'Anna describe a few ways in which the modern dialects, though sharing the same system logic as the ancient data, nevertheless differ from the distributional patterns attested in the ancient corpora. Particularly relevant for our purposes is the difference in likelihood of FSG target agreement depending on target type (ADJ vs. Verb vs. PN). They show that, while in the ancient corpora personal pronouns are most likely to attest FSG agreement, followed by verbs and then adjectives, in the modern dialectal data it is exactly the opposite. In the Christian manuscripts, the general trend patterns with the modern dialects, suggesting that the shift happened in some places quite early. However, we saw that animacy plays a large role in that trend: the higher the animacy, the likelier adjectives were of attesting FSG agreement. In a few manuscripts (such as SAr. 74), the ancient pattern is attested with inanimate controllers. Perhaps this shift began with human plural nouns and only subsequently was generalized to all animacy classes.

Additionally, our study of the categories of FPL and Dual target agreement suggests that, while both were used frequently, both are apparently at stages of loss. FPL agreement, for example, is attested primarily with human plural and collective nouns; PL agreement with inanimate nouns is mostly either BPL or (sound) MPL. Even when the controller is morphologically or semantically feminine PL, (sound) MPL agreement occurs in a significant minority of cases. Finally, instances in which either a Dual or FPL is warranted, yet a (sound) MPL is attested, are very often in second-person contexts, as in other corpora. It thus seems that the varieties reflected in these manuscripts reflect a stage on the path of development toward a single, generalized plural, namely the historical MPL. The Christian data from these manuscripts can be compared with the above table:

| Agreement in the SG | Semantics | Agreement in the PL | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Individuated Nouns | Un-Individuated Nouns |
| MSG | Human male | MPL | FSG (rare; controller typically BPL) |
| FSG | Human female; non-human animates; inanimates | FPL > MPL | FSG (likelier the lower the animacy) |
| MSG | Non-human animates; inanimates | MPL & BPL (FPL rare) | FSG |

Table 31. Agreement system attested in early Christian Arabic manuscripts

Regarding the question of the origin of the Classical Arabic rule wherein inanimate plural controllers obligatorily trigger FSG controller agreement, I have followed up on Belnap and Gee's (1994: 139–144) proposal that the so-called *schema attikôn*, in which neuter plural controllers trigger singular verbal agreement in Classical/Attic Greek, might have led Arabic authors and translators more familiar with Greek (or who indeed spoke Greek) to generalize what was originally only one possibility (FSG agreement with inanimate plural controllers). I have contended that, while one cannot rule out interference in certain cases, the translators were not merely replicating Greek patterns in their Arabic translations. In fact, it is not rare for them to disagree, rendering a singular verb in the Greek text with a plural verb in Arabic, or vice versa. Studying the many scientific and philosophical texts translated as part of the broader Graeco-Arabic translation movement in the Abbasid period would be worthwhile in this regard and remains a *desideratum*.

Overall, though, there is little reason to suspect either a concerted effort to write a foreign, formally codified register, or an attempt to replicate the grammar of the *Vorlage*, in the manuscripts studied here. The fact that the system attested matches in so many ways that attested in other ancient and modern non-standard corpora argues strongly against this lens for conceptualizing the grammar of these manuscripts, at least regarding this feature. My contention here is that the aspects of the agreement system in the Christian corpus studied here is best understood as reflecting an essentially living one. While impossible to know for sure, there is little reason to question that most of the patterns documented above characterized the dialects of the scribes and translators who produced the manuscripts. This is strengthened by the fact that, while the same system clearly underlies the manuscripts—and is in line with the ancient and modern evidence—the manuscripts differ in various ways. Such variation makes it unlikely that the system was primarily a learned one.

I thus suggest here that, as far as the feature of gender and number agreement is concerned, the linguistic status of these manuscripts can only be considered Middle Arabic in the traditional sense, namely that it attests a state of evolution between the ancient and modern dialects. Further, since it appears that FPL is in the process of extinction and MPL is in the process of expanding to take its place as a general plural marker, it appears that these manuscripts represent a variety (or varieties) that will eventually become non-gender distinguishing varieties (Bettega and D'Anna 2023: §2.3.5–§2.3.7):

*qaṣīda*—Old Ḥigāzī/Quranic—**Christian Arabic MSS**—modern (non-gender distinguishing) dialects

It should be noted and emphasized here that my intention is *not* to reify 'Christian Arabic' as a linguistic category; in fact, the point is just the opposite. The system of gender and number agreement attested here is the same one inherited by, e.g., the ancestors of the modern dialects.[21] Linguistic categories are defined by innovations, rather than retentions (cf. Hetzron 1976: 89). So far, despite previous attempts to establish its usefulness as a linguistic category, this has still not been established.[22] It is therefore my view that Christian Arabic when used to refer to

[21] This is also the case for other features, such as nominal case and verbal mood. On the former in the same corpus, see Stokes (2023b); on the latter, see Stokes (2024).

[22] Samir K. Samir (1982: 52–59) already disputed the existence of a distinct Christian Arabic language attested in these texts, which triggered a reply from Blau (2000) in which he reiterated his belief in the usefulness of Christian Arabic as a linguistic category. Blau's (2000: 55–57) reasons, however, fail to convince, not least because his main examples include a few purportedly Aramaic features on the living language, as well as Syriac literary influence. Both Samir and Blau agree that the language attested in the early Christian manuscripts as a distinct literary language. While it very well might be the case that the combination of features attested

pre-modern texts is, at this point at least, only suitable as a reference to corpora, for instance to designate corpora produced by Christians in monastic contexts for use by other congregations and monastic communities.[23]

It is worth spelling out the differences between the present proposal and the traditional definitions of Middle Arabic, whether a historical phase or sociolinguistic phenomenon. I have identified the gender and number agreement system as representing the same basic system attested in the pre-Islamic poetic corpus and the Quran, and which undergirds the systems attested in the modern dialects. As such, it is not innovative, and therefore does not serve as a diagnostic feature for a linguistic variety, as over against 'Old Arabic' or 'Neo-Arabic'. It is historically middle insofar as it represents an evolution *of the same system* from its manifestation in the ancient corpora to that attested in the modern ones. Thus, calling this feature a Middle Arabic feature means only that it represents one of very likely many pathways along which inherited Arabic features passed over the centuries as speakers changed the grammars they inherited. Crucially, this cannot and should not be described as the 'Middle Arabic gender and number agreement system', which would only be meaningful if that system were innovative relative to the ancient and modern one in some way.[24] The present study thus problema-

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in the corpus was not characteristic of any actual speech community, being thereby a literary, or perhaps rather 'learned' language, we have seen here that this nevertheless does not mean that any non-Classical features were not living features which themselves *were* characteristic of contemporary spoken Arabic. It is therefore very important to study features carefully and situate them within the context of other Arabic corpora, ancient and modern, in order to determine what features—if any—were separate conventional features of the register(s) of these monks, versus those that were likely more widespread and drawn from their native spoken grammars.

[23] Even this definition is not without problems, though it seems the least problematic usage of the term 'Christian Arabic'. Again, I am agnostic at this point as to whether or not the register(s) or variety(ies) of Arabic attested in these corpora—when all the features are considered together—constituted one(s) significantly different from contemporary speech communities in the Levant or Sinai. The point here throughout is that, at least regarding gender and number agreement, its distribution indicates that it was living and in the process of evolution toward a non-gender distinguishing dialect.

[24] For example, despite rightfully noting that Middle Arabic is really 'all the attested written layers of the language which can be defined as entirely belonging neither to Classical Arabic nor to colloquial Arabic' (Lentin 2008: 216), Lentin describes a single, overarching system of gender and number agreement for Middle Arabic as if it is a positively defined category, stating that:

> The system [of gender and number agreement in Middle Arabic] is mixed and complex. As in the colloquials, verbs and adjectives associated with nouns referring to nonhumans stand generally in the plural, as do those associated with nouns in the dual (referring to humans and nonhumans). Likewise, as in the colloquials, when the verb precedes its subject, it generally stands in the plural. As in the colloquials and in Ancient Arabic, some nouns referring to human groups have an agreement in the 'feminine singular.' But the concord patterns vary in the same passage and even within the same sentence. This is due to the play between the colloquials and the standard rules, but also, it seems, to the fact that once an explicit agreement has been made,

tizes the claim that we can describe a single Middle Arabic system, whatever the feature, as well as the idea that a non-Classical written text from the pre-modern period must of necessity have been situated along a cline at the top of which was Classical Arabic. At the same time, it highlights the importance of distinguishing any particular feature and its distribution from the others. It is of course very possible that one feature represented a living one in contemporary speech communities while another reflected a formalized style or register quite different from contemporary speech. Gender and number agreement in these manuscripts, as we have seen, fits well in the former category, but not very well in the latter.

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the sentence can go on with a less marked one, provided that the basic agreement is marked again whenever necessary. (Lentin 2008: 221–222)

However, most corpora that fit under the definition of a language 'entirely belonging neither to Classical Arabic nor to colloquial Arabic' have not been systematically described. And unless we demonstrate the presence of a system that distinguishes certain corpora against others, we should not speak of a system of Middle Arabic gender and number agreement.

## Appendix: Data Comparison of *qaṣīda*, Quran, and Christian MSS

For purposes of comparison, I have taken some of the data that has been quantified from Bettega and D'Anna on ancient and modern corpora for comparison with the Christian MSS. Data for *qaṣīda* poetry, Quran, and modern Najdi drawn from Bettega and D'Anna 2023: 207 (*qaṣīda* and Quran); 270 (modern Najdi):

| Animacy cline | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Text/MS | Human | Animal | Inanimate |
| *Muʿallaqāt* | 4/78 (5%) | 18/45 (40%) | 59/96 (62%) |
| Quran | 15/59 (25%) | 11/26 (42%) | 339/454 (75%) |
| Modern spoken Najdi | N/A | 62/127 (49%) | |
| SAr. 74 | 4/237 (2%) | 14/40 (35%) | 69/91 (76%) |
| SAr. 72 | 1/195 (<1%) | 6/18 (33%) | 64/98 (65%) |
| SAr. 75 | 1/277 (<1%) | 9/22 (41%) | 54/87 (62%) |
| SAr. 70 | 25/296 (9%) | 16/19 (84%) | 69/91 (76%) |
| BL 4950 | 12/57 (21%) | – | 96/130 (74%) |

Table 32. Comparison of effect of animacy on FSG post-controller agreement w/plural controllers

| Target type | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Text/MS | ADJs | Verbs | PNs |
| *Muʿallaqāt* | 4/21 (19%) | 21/50 (42%) | 57/68 (84%) |
| Quran | 63/120 (53%) | 54/72 (75%) | 228/268 (85%) |
| Modern spoken Najdi | 7/11 (64%) | 27/37 (73%) | 42/88 (48%) |
| SAr. 74 | 38/49 (78%) | 26/47 (55%) | 16/28 (57%) |
| SAr. 72 | 22/34 (65%) | 24/39 (62%) | 16/33 (49%) |

| Target type | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Text/MS | ADJs | Verbs | PNs |
| SAr. 75 | 18/30 (60%) | 21/40 (53%) | 14/35 (40%) |
| SAr. 70 | 18/28 (64%) | 25/42 (60%) | 10/20 (50%) |
| BL 4950 | 24/33 (73%) | 19/32 (59%) | 53/74 (72%) |

Table 33. FSG post-controller target agreement with non-human controllers

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## Abbreviations

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| BPL | broken plural | MS | manuscript |
| Coll. | collective | MSG | masculine singular |
| FPL | feminine plural | MSS | manuscripts |
| FSG | feminine singular | PL | plural |
| MPL | masculine plural | | |

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