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Plural Marking in Mahshahri, an Iranian Dialect on the Northern Coast of the Persian Gulf

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ABSTRACT

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In this article, the plural marker in the Mahshahri dialect is examined. Mahshahri is the native language of the people of Bandar-e Mahshahr. This dialect has close similarities with other Iranian language varieties spoken in southern Iran, particularly those of other southern cities of Khuzestan Province, and Iranian language varieties of Bushehr, Fars and Kohkiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad provinces. From a methodological point of view, this research is descriptive and analytical. The research data were mainly obtained through a questionnaire and by examining the text of a twenty-minute continuous speech from the Mahshahri dialect. The investigations carried out in this article show that the plural marker of Mahshahri is /-æɪ/, which, based on the phonetic environment of the base to which it is added, can have other allomorphic manifestations as well. The conducted studies also indicate that there are variations in the use of the plural marker in the Mahshahri dialect. These variations, in many cases, align with the replacement of the marker with its standard Persian counterparts. Therefore, the variations that can be seen in the use of the plural marker of Mahshahri can be considered in line with other current changes that are underway in the direction of leveling the dialect with standard Persian in Iran.

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1. Introduction

Bandar-e Mahshahr County lies in the southern part of Khuzestan Province in Iran. It has some interesting geographical features, as it is bordered by the Persian Gulf to the south, which gives it a coastal aspect. To the north, it shares a border with Ahvaz County, while Shadegan County lies to the west. To the east, it borders Ramshir, Omidiyeh, and Hendijan counties. The county covers an area of 1,908 square kilometers, and it has a population of 296,271 people (Statistical Yearbook of Khuzestan Province, 2019, p. 120). Mahshahr's immigrant-friendly status stems from the city's thriving oil and petrochemical industries and its strategic location on the shores of the Persian Gulf. The aforementioned factors have resulted in a notable increase in the city's population over the past century. Consequently, multiple languages are now spoken in the city. However, the natives of Bandar-e Mahshahr – the capital of Bandar-e Mahshahr county – speak a language variety that they call “Ma'shuri”¹ or “Mahshahri”. In this research, this language variety is referred to as “Mahshahri dialect” or simply “Mahshahri”.

Based on phonological, lexical, and structural characteristics, the Mahshahri dialect belongs to the southern sub-branch of “Western Iranian languages” (for Iranian languages, see Oranski, 2001, 2008; Windfuhr, 2009). The dialect has close similarities –in terms of vocabulary, some phonetic-phonological features, and morphology– with Luri and Bakhtiari language varieties. The similarity of Mahshahri with other southern Iranian dialects is evident. For instance, the Hendijani variety is closely related to Mahshahri, many lexical items of the Behbahani dialect are present in Mahshahri. Similarly, Bushehri and Ganavei language varieties share some similarities with Mahshahri. In addition to the city of Bandar-e Mahshahr, Mahshahri is also spoken in the villages of “Bonivar” and “Hadameh” in Bandar-e Mahshahr County, though it may have been more prevalent a few decades ago.

A linguistic examination of Mahshahri reveals intriguing lexical features. Specifically, a significant number of words from classical Persian poetry and prose remain in active use within the dialect. Among these are words such as /geft/ (“all”) and /pærænduf/ (“the night before the last night”). Examples of their usage appear in (1), (2), and (3), drawn from the works of Asadi Tusi (5th century A.D.), Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi (9th century A.D.), and Jalâl al-Dîn Muḥammad Rûmî (13th century A.D.), respectively.

1. gereftænd gordan be kin saxtæn dʒæhan ʔæz jælan geft pærdaxtæn²
“the braves started taking revenge/ to clear the world of all the powerful men of the other side”
2. gujædæt hæmi gærtʃe deraz ʔæst tora ʔomr bogzæfte femor tʃun duʃ-o pærænduf³ “he calls you although your life is long/ but consider it gone just like the last night and the night before”
3. pærænduf-o pærændif tʃesan bud xærabat begujid-o mætærsid ʔægær mæst-o xærabid⁴
“I don't know how was Kharabat in the night before and the night before the night before last night/ say it, and don't be afraid if you are drunk and fascinated”

In the domain of temporal expressions, words and combinations such as /dig/

1. This comes from “Ma'shur” the previous name of “Mahshahr”.

2. In Persian:

گرفتند گُردان به کین ساختن جهان از یلان گِشت برداختن

3. In Persian:

گویدت همی گرچه دراز است ترا عمر بگذشته شمَر یکسره چون دوش و پرنروش

4. In Persian:

پرنروش و پرندیش چسان بود خرابات بگوئید و مترسید اگر مست و خرابید

(“yesterday”), /pæriɡ/ (“the day before yesterday”), /pæs-pæriɡ/ (“the day before the day before yesterday”), /pɑr/ (“last year”), /pærjɑr/ (“two years ago”), /pæs-pærjɑr/ (“three years ago”), /duf/ (“last night”), /pæs-pærænduf/ (“the night before the night before the last night”), /pæsin/ (“evening”), /pæsin -e tæŋɡ/ (“the climax of the evening”) /bɒŋɡ-e ruz/ (“morning call to prayer”) etc. (Ghaissari, 2013, pp. 56-56) are still actively used in Mahshahri. This demonstrates that the dialect not only preserves many old Persian words but also retains Iranian equivalents instead of Arabic loanwords such as “ʔæsr” (“evening”) and (“ʔæzan”) (“call to prayer”) in standard Persian. The same phenomenon extends to other lexical fields within the dialect. Therefore, Mahshahri can be considered a treasure where numerous old Iranian words have been preserved.

From a syntactic and morphological perspective, some features of Mahshahri deserve special attention. For example, in this dialect, the negation element does not attach to the verb as a prefix, as it does in standard Persian, but appears as an independent element in the sentence. Two examples of such negation drawn from the story “hæfije hæft-sær” (“the Seven-Headed Viper”), which is one of the folkloric stories of Bandar-e Mahshahr (see Amini, 2024, Appendix 6, for the full text), can be seen below:

4. gof ke ʔi sær næ sær-e mo bi ke to pərondif.
 said that this head not head-of me was that you cut+it
 He said that this wasn't my head that you cut it
5. dʒævunæm goftef ʔi zærbæt næ zærbæt-e mo bid.
 the young man+also said this blow not blow-of me was
 The young man answered him that this blow was not mine either.

In (4) and (5), the negation element *næ* is not attached to the verb of as a prefix, namely, *bi* and *bid*; instead *sær-e mo* and *zærbæt-e mo* have separated it from the verb.¹ Among the morphological features of Mahshahri, we can mention the use of a plural marker which is not in use in standard Persian. In this research, the way this suffix is used in the Mahshahri dialect is studied, regarding two main questions: a) What is the main plural marker in the Mahshahri dialect? b) What explanation can be given for the use of a plural marker in Mahshahri different from those of standard and other varieties of Persian? To answer the questions, we will first review the literature, then introduce the research data and methodology. In the next step, we will introduce the main terms of the research, then analyze the data, and finally, in addition to the discussion we present, we will also express the results of the research.

2. Literature Review

It appears that there is limited research available on the Mahshahri dialect. Ghaissari (2011) conducted research on “Mahshahri proverbs”, which provides valuable data for examining the Mahshahri dialect. Ghaissari’s (2013) research on the “folk culture of Mahshahr” explores a range of topics, particularly focusing on the customs, lifestyles, and local games. The book includes a curated collection of Mahshahri poems, stories, and legends, offering valuable resources for studying the dialect. It appears that Nezarat (2017) is noted for providing an extensive compilation of vocabulary and expressions. In addition to these works, which provide useful data for linguistic research on the Mahshahri dialect, some studies are also available with a linguistic perspective on the Mahshahri dialect. Among them,

1. It seems that this way of negation in Mahshahri is of the kind we see in the second hemistich of the following verse of Rudaki (8th-9th A.D.):

/mord moradi næ hæmana ke mord mæрге tʃenan xadʒe næ karist xord/ “a Wiseman died, not a real death, since the death of such a sage is not something ordinary”

In Persian:

مُرد مرادی نه همانا که مُرد مرگ چنان خواجه نه کاریست خُرد

are Ebadi and Tavakoli (2012), Tavakli and Ebadi (2009), and Gorjian and Ebadi (2017), which examine the “phonological processes”, “verbs” and “noun phrases” of Mahshahri dialect, respectively. The research conducted by Amini (2024) focuses on the sociolinguistic aspects of the Mahshahri dialect, examining its current status and characteristics. In the process of introducing and describing this dialect, the study also addresses the use of its plural marker. In addition to these, the Mahshahri dialect is mentioned in some sources without being the subject of specific studies. For example, Dadras (2022) identifies Mahshahri as one of the Iranian dialects of Khuzestan.

The topic of some research, although not related to the Mahshahri dialect, is related to the topic of this study. Among these, is Mousavi (2023), who studied “definite articles, object markers, and plural morphemes in Bala Geriveh Luri dialect”. The study shows that in the Bala Geriveh Luri dialect, adding plural meaning to the base occurs via two suffixes /-ja/ and /-o/, which are the counterparts of /-ha/ and /-an/ plural suffixes in standard Persian. The author’s findings show that the same two plural suffixes are also used in the Khorramabad Luri variety, which Mousavi (2023) identifies as another main variety of Luri in Luristan Province. The plural suffix /-æɫ/, found in other Luri varieties, does not appear to be productive in the two Luri varieties under discussion.

Taheri (2020) investigates “plural suffix /-gal/” in Iranian languages and asserts that, while the common plural suffixes /-an/ and /-ha/ in Iranian languages and dialects trace back to Middle and Ancient Persian, “... in several Iranian languages, we see a newly created plural suffix, /-gal/, which has no attested use in earlier periods of Iranian languages”. This suffix takes forms such as /-gal/ and its allomorphic variants /-yal/, /-al/ and /-ayl/, and functions as either a general plural marker or one restricted to specific noun classes. Taheri (2020) observes its emergence in “heterogeneous groups of Iranian languages” such as Bakhtiari, Boyrahmadi, Azerani¹, Ashtiyani, Amerei², Nayæi³, Eastern Balochi, and Southern Kurdish. This development results from the “grammaticalization” of /gal/ meaning “group, class,” which shares its root with the Persian word /gæɫ/ (‘herd’) (p. 213). Citing Heine (2003, p. 579), Taheri (2020) explains the grammaticalization process through four mechanisms: “desemanticization” (reduction in meaning), “context generalization,” “erosion or phonetic reduction,” and “deategorization” (p. 200).

He examines these in relation to the plural suffix /-gal/ across these varieties. Among other findings, Taheri concluded that “... in languages where /gal/ has fully grammaticalized, we witness the formation of /-yal/, /-al/ and /-ayl/ morphemes as a result of phonetic erosion” (p. 213). Korn (2022) identifies /-gal/ as a noun that has grammaticalized into a plural marker in Iranian languages (p. 469). This marker, he notes, is widely used in Luri, Bakhtiari, Kurdish, and some “Central dialects” as well as in the province of Fārs.⁴ Ansari et al. (2022) demonstrate that in the Mamasani Luri dialect, the plural suffixes /-æɫ/ and /-un/ are employed. The suffix /-æɫ/, in particular, is not only applicable to nouns and adjectives substitutable for nouns but also attaches to pronouns such as “we” and “you”. Thus, in this Luri variety from southern Iran, /-æɫ/ serves as a highly productive plural marker (p. 56).

Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari and Rezai-Baghbidi (2019) also show that the suffixes “-gal”, “-yal”, “-al” are used in Āmora’i, Āštiyāni, Bakhtiāri, Balochi, Burenjāni⁵, Davāni⁶, Laki, Darra-shahri⁷, Khājvandi-ye Kelārdasht⁸, Boyer-Ahmadi, Kohgiluya’i, Mamasani’i, Māsarmi,

1. The language of Azeran, a village in Kashan County, Iran

2. The language of Amere, a village in Qom County, Iran

3. The language of Nayæ, a village in Qom County, Iran

4. For grammaticalization, also see Heine and Kuteva (2002).

5. The language of Burenjan, a village in Kazerun County, Iran

6. The language of Davan, a village in Kazerun County

7. The language of Darre-shahr, a county in Ilam Province, Iran, its people mostly speaks Luri, but Laki is also

Pāpuni¹ and Somqāni². According to them, “-gal” is the third most frequent “plural marker” in “New West Iranian languages”, after “-ha” and “-an”. Quoting Nyberg (1974), Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari and Rezai-Baghbidi also expand on Taheri’s proposed root for “-gal” to say that this plural marker comes from “*gr̥da- ‘troop’ ... which originally designated a multitude of things” (pp. 161-162).

In this section, we reviewed the existing research on the Mahshahri dialect and some of the research on the plural marker in Iranian languages to find out whether the plural marker of Mahshahri was discussed in these studies. The review shows that no linguistic research has been done on the plural marker of the Mahshahri dialect to date. Therefore, conducting this research will fill the gap and increase our knowledge about the morphological elements Iranian languages use to encode plural meanings.

3. Data and Methodology

The main part of the research data is derived from the author’s research on the Mahshahri dialect. This data was collected using a questionnaire, consisting of a list of 100 words³ and 36 sentences of various syntactic structures, which was administered to the speakers of the Mahshahri dialect. Another source of the research data includes a roughly 20-minute’ video where a speaker recounted the folkloric story of “hæfije hæft-sær”. Since this file provides continuous, natural speech, it is highly valuable for linguistic studies of the Mahshahri dialect. A small amount of the data –the data of the “Hadameh Sofla”⁴ language variety– is derived from the data of the “Linguistic Atlas of Iran” in *the Research Institute for Cultural Heritage and Tourism*. These data were collected in 1978 as part of the “Farhansaz Project”⁵. Since these data come from about fifty years ago, they can be used to examine changes that have occurred in the last half-century in the Mahshahri dialect. To ensure the diversity of the research data, the study also examines the use of the plural marker in several books related to local literature and folklore of the Mahshahri dialect. The analysis, arguments, and discussions of this article focus on describing, investigating, and explaining the manifestations of the plural marker in the Mahshahri dialect. Therefore, this research is inductive in terms of methodology, and descriptive-analytical and explanatory in terms of method.

4. Terms and Definitions

In explaining the plural marker of Mahshahri, on the one hand, it is important to consider the historical process of the appearance of plural markers in Iranian languages to understand that the plural marker in question derives from the grammaticalization of one or two words. On the other hand, one must consider the effect of language contact since similar markers are also used in some other language varieties in southern Iran. Thus, their presence in Mahshahri may be influenced by such contact. These two points should be considered when explaining the different features of the dialect. In this section, the main terms and concepts used in the research are briefly introduced and explained based on the views of Haspelmath and Sims (2010). Before that, it should be noted that in linguistics, meaningful units smaller than “phrase” are studied in a branch called “morphology”⁶, a term that originates from biological

spoken in some villages of the county.

8. The language of Khājvandis, a Kurd tribe in Kelārdasht of Mazandaran Province, Iran, originally from the western provinces of Iran.

1. The language of villages Pāpun-e Olya and Pāpun-e Sofla, in Kuhchenar County, in Fars province.

2. The language of Somqān, a village in Kuhchenar County.

3. Swadesh word list

4. A village in Bandar-e Mahshahr County

5. The main goal of this project was to collect data from the language varieties of Iran’s villages with more than ten households.

6. According to Aronoff (1994), the term morphology was invented by Goethe, in the early years of the 19th century (p. 1).

sciences. In those sciences, this term refers to the study of the form of biological phenomena and elements. Language researchers in the 19th century borrowed this term from biology and used it to refer to the changes that occur in the form of words. Therefore, “in linguistics, this means the study of the shapes of words; not the phonological shape (which can be assumed to be fairly arbitrary) but rather systematic changes in shape related to changes in meaning; ...” (Bauer, 2003, p. 4). In other words, the main unit of morphological studies is “word,” which has led to the definition of morphology as “the study of the internal structure of words” (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010, p. 1). Nowadays, various theories and approaches are available for the study of word structure. These theories and approaches propose sets of concepts and categories that scholars largely accept or agree upon. It is evident that all such approaches consider the rules of combining the components of a “word”.

One of the pivotal concepts in morphology is “morpheme”, which is defined as “the smallest meaningful unit of language”. Each word can consist of one or more than one morpheme. A morpheme is a mental and abstract concept, and its objective phonetic realizations are termed as “morphs.” Since some morphemes may have different manifestations, various manifestations of a morpheme are called its “allomorphs”. For example, the main plural morpheme of English, plural -s (/z/), in the three English words “cats”, “dogs”, and “faces”, is realized as [s], [z], and [əz], respectively (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010, p. 22).

Morphemes are divided into two categories: “free morphemes,” which can stand alone as independent words (such as “good”, “eat” or “in”) and “bound morphemes” (such as “affixes” and “clitics”), which cannot exist independently (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010, pp. 196-197). Affixes are among the bound morphemes of language and are divided into two categories: “inflectional” and “derivational” affixes. In most languages, inflectional affixes add grammatical meaning related to concepts such as “number”, “case”, “gender”, “person”, “aspect” and “mood” to their “base” (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010, pp. 81-82). The base refers to the part of the word which an affix attaches to (Haspelmath & Sims, 2010, p. 20).

Based on the discussion above, the “plural marker” is an inflectional bound morpheme, which, as shown in the research analysis of this study, may have different phonetic realizations, depending on the base it attaches to. This marker adds the meaning of “more than one” to its base. However, in languages that have a “dual” meaning, alongside “singular” and “plural” meanings in their conceptual system (for example, Arabic), the concept of “plural” differs; here, the plural marker adds the meaning of “more than two” to the base. In several other languages of the world, the concept of “plural” may be even more complex (see Corbett, 2004). Nevertheless, in most languages of the world, “plural” stands in contrast to “singular”, and the plural marker also establishes the same distinction.

5. Data Analysis

As noted earlier, the Mahshahri dialect, in addition to being spoken in the city of Bandar-e Mahshahr, is or was also spoken by individuals in two villages of “Hadameh” and “Bonivar” of Bandare-e Mahshahr County. In this section, we present and analyze data from all three varieties of the dialect.

In the data from approximately fifty years ago of the Mahshahri variety spoken in “Hadameh Sofla”, we see combinations such as /xorusæl-e sija/ (“black roosters”) and /ʔon zenæl/ (“those women”), demonstrating that /-æ/ is used to add the plural meaning to the base. Other examples such as /derætæl/ (“trees”), /betʃel-e xub/ (“good boys”), /doxteræl-e xub/ (“good girls”), /morqæl-e sijeh/ (“black chickens”), /ʔon mærdæl/ (“those men”), and /qajele / “cows” also show that the plural marker in question, in addition to /-æ/, has other allomorphs, such as /-el/ and /-el/.

6. fateme ?ixast gajele bedufene.

“Fatima wanted to milk the cows”

Further examination of the data reveals that the marker may have other manifestations as /-al/ in Mahshahri speech (examples (7), (8), and (9)).

7. mo hæruz ?onale binom ke daxele baq daren kar ?ikonen.

“I see them working in the garden every day”

8. mo dige ?onale nibinom.

“We don’t see them anymore”

9. ?onal ta je hæfte dige be dehe ma ?ijaje.

“They will come to our village in a week”

The more noteworthy point about the use of the plural marker in (7), (8), and (9) is that /?onal/ (“they”) seems to be derived from the addition of this marker to a modified form of the standard Persian singular distal demonstrative pronoun “آن” (“it/he/she”). This shows that the marker also works in the construction of plural demonstratives, and therefore is very productive. It should be mentioned that the distal demonstrative in the Mahshahri dialect is /vo/; and therefore, the use of a modified form of standard Persian distal demonstrative (that is, “آن”) in this dialect can be considered as one of the signs of Mahshahri being influenced by standard Persian. We will discuss this more later. However, it should be noted that the speaker of the Mahshahri variety of Hadameh Sofla has sometimes used /?onha/ as the equivalent of /?onal/ (“they”); and in the sentences he produced, “they” also appears as /?ona/ which is a shortened form of /?onha/ (examples (10), (11), and (12)).

10. ?ona dig kore hæsaenæ nediden.

“They did not see Hasan’s son yesterday”

11. ?ona hæni næraeftæ biden ke ma residim.

“They had not yet left when we arrived”

12. mo hæz t?i ke ?ikonom ?ona niræn.

“No matter what I do, they don’t go away”

Therefore, according to the data, we can say that in the language variety of Hadameh Sofla, we see a current change that can gradually replace its native plural marker with Persian plural markers (specifically, /-ha/ in written standard Persian, and /-a/ in spoken standard Persian). Since the available data on this language variety in the “Linguistic Atlas of Iran” were collected about 46 years ago, this change may have progressed further in the language variety.

As we saw above, in Mahshahri, the pronoun indicating “it” is /vo/. By adding the plural marker to this word, we reach the plural distal demonstrative in the dialect, i.e., /vonal/ “they”. The proximal demonstrative, i.e., “this”, in Mahshahri is /jo/, which becomes /jonol/, meaning “they”, by receiving the plural marker in question. It is clear that in /vonal/ and /jonol/ the allomorph /-al/ of the marker has appeared; and the consonant /n/ in these two words has the function of a mediating consonant because the “base” in both (i.e., /vo/ and /jo/) ends with a vowel, and if there is no mediating consonant, “vowel hiatus” occurs, which is not acceptable in many languages, including Iranian languages; and therefore, languages solve the problem through their phonological mechanisms (see Casali, 2011).

It seems that the use of /vonal/ and /jonol/ in the Mahshahri dialect is facing changes; on the one hand, the tendency to use /?ona/ and /?ina/ instead of them can be seen in the speech of the speakers, and as we pointed out, this seems to be the result of the influence of standard Persian on the dialect; and on the other hand, shortened versions of these two pronouns in the form of /vona/ and /jona/ can also be seen in the speech of the dialect’s speakers, likely as a consequence of the impact of standard Persian. Above, we saw some data from the Mahshahri variety of

Hadameh Sofla, in which the distal demonstrative is used. Regarding the data of the Mahshahri variety spoken in the city of Bandar-e Mahshahr, it can also be said that the use of /vona/ and /jona/ is not seen in all linguistic contexts; and at least according to the data gathered for this research, its use is limited to cases where the pronouns are followed by a direct object.

13. vona dig kore hæsaenæ nejdæn
“They did not see Hasan’s son yesterday”
14. vona fum xærdænæ rætene.
“They had dinner and left”
15. vona je hæfte dige ?ijan volatemun.
“They will come to our village in a week”
16. ?ægær vona ba boufun ?umædæn manæm begin.
“Let us know if they came with their father”
17. vona hæni næræfte biden ke ma residim.
“They had not yet left when we arrived”
18. sepænta jona ba bosfun ?umædæn.
“Sepanta, these came with their father”
19. mo dig-ε vonal-ε nibinom.
“We don’t see them anymore”
20. mo vonal-ε hærruz men baq ?ibinom ke daren kar ?ikonen.
“I see them working in the garden every day”
21. nikan bijo jonal-ε besun.
“Nikan, come and take these”
22. irana jonal-ε mej nixosi.
“Irana, didn’t you want these?”

In sentences (13) to (18) above, in all cases, /vona/ and /jona/ are used as the equivalent of “they” in standard Persian; and in (19) to (22), /vonal/ and /jonal/ are used, after which, in all four sentences, the object marker /-ε/ is used as a clitic. In explaining this, it may be said that /vonal/ and /jonal/, as the plural demonstratives of Mahshahri, are being simplified and losing their final consonant (“l”). And if these pronouns appear in their full form before the direct object marker, it is because the final “l” plays the part of a mediating consonant, that prevents a “hiatus” between the second vowel of these two pronouns (i.e., /a/) with /-ε/, which is object marker in the sentences in question.

The next noteworthy point about the plural marker of Mahshahri is that it sometimes appears added to lexical elements with a plural meaning, and sometimes it appears repeatedly in the speech of the speakers. For example, this marker is added to the “first-person plural pronoun”, and in the speech of “Bandaris” and “Qænævatis” (the two main clans native to Mahshahr, whose Mahshahri varieties show notable differences) appears as /manæ/ and /?imanæ/, respectively. Also, in addition to /vona/ and /vonal/, as we saw above, the third-person plural pronoun and plural distal demonstrative may also appear in the form of /vonalæ/ in the Bandar-e Mahshahri variety of the dialect. Here, the plural marker of Mahshahri is applied twice to the base (i.e., /vo/), comparable to doubling the plural in English for emphasis, such as “those-s”. In explaining this behavior in the morphology of Mahshahri –based on the author’s investigations and discussions he has had with the speakers of the dialect–two points should be noted. First, the duplicated use of the plural marker refers to a greater meaning. In other words, the group referred to by /vona/ is less numerous than the group referred to by /vonal/, and again the group referred to by /vonalæ/ is more numerous than the group referred to by /vonal/. For instance, a group of five individuals might be referred to as /vona/, a group of twenty as /vonal/, and a group of one hundred as /vonalæ/. Second, according to the speakers of the Mahshahri dialect

(from both the Bandaris and Qænaævatis), the plural form /vonɔlæ/ is now an archaic and rarely used form, primarily found in the speech of older speakers, while younger speakers rarely use it, even if they understand its meaning. According to the speakers, the use of /vonɔl/ is also decreasing in favor of /vonɔ/, which aligns with the analyses and explanations given above.¹

In the data gathered from the language variety of Bonivar-e Sofia, the use of the plural marker is also observed.

23. ʔæje vonɔ bej bovæleʃun ʔomɔʔæn xæbæremun konid.

“Let us know if they came with their father”

24. fateme ʔixas gajɛl-ɛ beduʃɛ.

“Fatima wanted to milk the cows”

In the Bonivari variety of Mahshahri, the plural form of the distal demonstrative appears as /vonɔl/, but in this variety of the dialect, /vonɔ/ is also widely used, as exemplified in (23). In (23) we can also see the pluralization of /bovæ/ (“father”) with the plural marker /-æ/. In (24), the plural form of /gɔ/ (“cow”) is the result of adding the marker /-ɛ/. However, since the base ends in a vowel, /j/ has also appeared in the word as a mediating phoneme to prevent vowel hiatus. Therefore, it can be said that in the Bonivari variety of Mahshahri, adding plural meaning to the base follows the same pattern as the other two varieties of the dialect.

Studying the cases of plural marker usage in the story “/hæfije hæft-sær/” also indicates the signs of an ongoing change in the use of the plural marker in Mahshahri. In the story, there are 53 instances of plural marker usage, which include words whose plural form is used several times in the text. These cases include nouns with an added plural marker, as well as distal and proximal demonstratives. In the category of nouns, the plural marker of Mahshahri can be seen in words /gusfændælemun/ (“our sheep”), /rustajijæ/ (“villagers”), /velatæ/ (“villages”), /betʃjæ/ (“children”) /ʔælæfæ/ (“grasses”), /tʃijæ/ (“things”), /xunijæ/ or /xuniʔæ/ (“houses”), /hejvunæ/ (“animals”), /houzæ/ (“ponds”), /segæ/ (“dogs”) and /gorgæ/ (“wolves”), showing that the plural marker /-æ/ applies to any noun, regardless of whether its referent is animate or inanimate. In the category of plural proximal and distal demonstratives, the text shows the usage of /ʔina/, /ʔinal/, and /jona/, as well as /vonɔ/ and /vonɔl/. Even though /-ɔ/ may represent a shortened form of /-al/ (one of the allomorphs of /-æ/), its usage in Mahshahri could be influenced by Persian. This is particularly evident since /ʔina/ and /ʔinal/ also appear in the data, resulting from adding the plural marker to the proximal demonstrative of standard Persian, /ʔin/. However, as discussed earlier, the native proximal demonstrative in Mahshahri is /jo/, whose plural form is /jonal/. A similar explanation applies to the plural form of the distal demonstrative of Mahshahri, which appears in the story “hæfije hæft-sær” as /vonɔ/ and /vonɔl/, alongside /ʔonɔ/, which is also found in the text.

In the poems written in the Mahshahri dialect, the plural marker /-æ/ is also used with high frequency. For instance, consider the following two verses from Rafieyan (2016a, pp. 111-116):

25. nuxoda bæhref do ta ʔæz muhijæ ʔæz ʔi ræsmæ bæd be hale dʒouʃuvæ.

“The captain had two shares of the fish, this tradition was so bad for the seamen”

26. ʔæz ʔoutæj ræhtim dʒænbe jusefi doure xuræ jæk tor ʔæz pele næbi.

“From the same direction, we went to the bay of Yousefi, there was no sign of Pele fish around the bays”

1. The addition of a plural marker to lexical items with plural meaning can also be seen in standard Persian and some of the other Iranian languages and dialects in words such as /ʃomaha/ and /maha/, respectively mean “you+plural marker /-ha/ and “we+plural suffix /-ha/. In the Nannaji dialect (spoken in the village Nannaj of Malayer County, Iran), we also see the use of /ʃomana/ and /mana/, respectively meaning “you+mediating consonant “n” + plural marker “-a””.

In the two verses above, the underlined words demonstrate the use of the plural marker /-æɫ/. Examples include /bælæmæɫ/ (“canoes”), /ruzæɫ/ (“days”), /lobasæɫ/ (“clothes”), /dumæɫ/ (“fishery nets”), /ʃumæɫ/ (“dinners”), /hærfæɫ/ (“things said”) /ʔouvæɫ/ (“waters”), /muhiɟiræɫ/ (“fishermen”), which are among other plural forms found in Rafieyan's (2016a) poems. In the “Nari Jan” local song (Rafieyan, 2016b, p. 11), the same plural marker appears. For instance, it is used in the word /zalomæɫ/ “wrongdoers” in the following verse:

27. korbunije ʔahe delet douret begærdom zalomæɫ salomtæræn bat ʃært ʔibændom

“I am sorry for the bad feelings deep in your heart, wrongdoers have more health, I bet you on this”

Words such as /desæɫ/ (“hands”), /lopæɫ/ (“cheeks”), /tijæɫ/ (“eyes”), /lovæɫ/ (“lips”), /delæɫ/ (“hearts”), /reʔisæɫ/ (“bosses”), /doʃmænæɫ/ (“enemies”), /doxtæræɫ/ (“girls”), /hæmsadæjæɫ/ (“neighbors”), /ʔælmonijæɫ/ (“Germans”), /rusijæɫ/ (“Russians”), /qætæræɫ/ (“trains”), /dʒahelæɫ/ (“young people”), /xijæɫ/ (“relatives”), further illustrate the productive use of the plural marker /-æɫ/ in the Mahshahri dialect. These examples highlight that the marker applies uniformly to both native and borrowed words within the dialect. In Mahshahri poetry, there are occasional instances of /-an/ or /-ha/, which are the primary plural suffixes in standard Persian. For example, in (28), /mosæɫmunun/ is the plural form of /mosæɫmun/ (“Muslim”), where /-un/ is the spoken equivalent of /-an/. Similarly, in (29), /-ha/ appears in “dærjaha” (Rafieyan, 2016a, p. 148):

28. ʔigoftom namosæɫmun bivæfajæ mosæɫmunun refiqom doʃmænæɫ bid

“I said non-Muslims are unfaithful, oh Muslims my real enemy was my close friend”

29. næbidom fekre dærjaha-vo qolab ʃodom sæjad-o bimarom to kerdi

“I didn’t think of seas and hooks; I became a fisherman [because of your love] and I got sick, you did”

In one verse, we see the word /xæɫqæɟ/ “peoples” (Rafieyan, 2016b, p. 86), which is the plural form of /xæɫq/ (“people”), based on what is termed in Persian traditional grammars as “Jam’e mokasar” (literally means “broken plural”). This rule produces one of the irregular plural forms in Persian, introduced in the language because of long-term contact with Arabic. One may argue that such examples of standard Persian plural suffixes in Mahshahri poems arise from constraints imposed by verse structure and meter on the poet. This is particularly plausible because the art of literature in Iranian languages, as well as in many neighboring languages, is often under the influence of Persian literature—to varying degrees, and sometimes heavily.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

We saw that /-æɫ/ is the plural marker of the Mahshahri dialect, with allomorphic variants such as /-el/ and /-ɛɫ/. The plural marker appears as a suffix and is highly productive in the dialect. Its use extends to both animate and inanimate nouns, as well as proximal (/jo/) and distal (/vo/) demonstratives. Regarding what Taheri (2020) has said about the grammaticalization process in Iranian languages, based on Heine (2003), it can be concluded that in Mahshahri, the plural suffix in question is in the final stage of grammaticalization. It only appears as /-æɫ/ and its allomorphic variants, with no sign of connection to its original source, “/gal/” (from the Iranian word /gæɫe/ meaning “herd”). In other words, in the current use of /-æɫ/ in Mahshahri, all four mechanisms of grammaticalization have contributed to transforming the noun /gæɫe/ into the plural suffix /-æɫ/.¹

1. Regarding the grammaticalization process that has led to the transformation of the word /gæɫe/ (“herd, flock”) into the plural marker /-gæɫ/ and finally /-æɫ/, it should be noted that it seems this was done first through the formation of inverted “ezafe” constructions) termed /ezafeje mæqlub/ («اضافة مقلوب») in traditional grammars of

We also saw that /-æɫ/ functions as a plural marker –with phonetic or allomorphic variations– in certain Luri dialects. However, today, this marker is no longer productively used in Luri varieties of the Luristan Province. Previous studies, as well as the author’s own findings, indicate that the marker remains in use in southern Luri varieties, particularly in Kohkiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. For instance, in Luri of Yasuj (the capital of the province), the plural forms of /kor/ (“boy”), /doʔæɾ/ (“girl”) and /noft/ (“nose”) are /koræɫ/, /doʔæɾæɫ/ and /noftæɫ/, respectively, demonstrating that plural marker in this variety is /-æɫ/. In some areas of this province, such as Lordegan, the marker appears as /-gæɫ/, and therefore, the word /kor/ is pluralized as /korgæɫ/. This evidence suggests that the plural suffix in question may have entered the Mahshahri dialect through contact with southern Luri varieties, particularly those from Kohkiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad region. The geographical proximity and long-standing language contact between these communities provide a plausible explanation. Mahshahr’s coastal location on the Persian Gulf has facilitated population movements particularly from geographically close cities and provinces such as those speaking southern Luri varieties. In other words, we can say that the use of the plural marker in question in the Mahshahri dialect is evidence of the long-term contact between the Mahshahri language community and Luri language communities of southern Iran, since borrowing morphological and syntactic patterns or orders –unlike borrowing lexical items– hardly happens in languages, and requires long-term contact between the two language communities and unilateral or bilateral deep impacts of languages. Examples of such influences and borrowings can be seen in the relationship between Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, and Uzbek and Tajiki Persian, which led to the entry of some morphological elements and syntactic patterns from Arabic into Persian and Turkish, or from Persian into Turkish, or Uzbek into Tajiki Persian and vice versa.

We also saw that there are cases in the data that can be considered as evidence of the Mahshahri being influenced by standard Persian in making the plural forms of the bases. Such influences can gradually reduce the productivity of /-æɫ/ in the dialect, and finally replace it with standard Persian plural markers; especially since Mahshahri has lost a large part of its distinguishing features and vocabulary items because of increasing impacts of standard Persian in recent decades.

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Persian) through moving the noun /gæɫ/ to the second position after its modifier, then /gæɫ/ has become a clitic, and finally a suffix to encode plurality. In some Iranian languages and dialects, relatively clear signs of this process can be seen now. For example, based on the studies of the author, in Nanaji dialect, the main plural marker is the suffix /-a/ (in words like /bæɾgɑ/ “leaves”, /zænɑ/ “women”, /pesæɾɑ/, /sængɑ/, etc.), but in the same dialect, we also see three inverted “ezafe” constructions of /bæɾæɟel/, /gæwɟel/, and /xæɾɟel/ that mean “lamb[s] herd”, “cow[s] herd” and “donkey[s] herd” respectively. And, all of these inverted ezafe constructions can be restated, and /gæɟej bæɾɑ/, /gæɟej gewɑ/, /gæɟej xæɾɑ/, literally mean “the herd of lambs”, “the herd of cows”, and “the herd of donkeys” respectively. Therefore, based on the arguments provided for the grammaticalization of /gæɫ/ to produce the third more frequent plural marker in the “New West Iranian Languages”, we can say that Nanaji is at the beginning of the process. However, knowing that now this language variety, like other Iranian language varieties, is under the influence of standard Persian, we can observe that the process will not develop further in the dialect, since /gɟel/ is not used in Nanaji as a plural marker, and the three mentioned examples are already archaic, and not in common use today.

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