

MORPHOSYNTACTIC STRUCTURES OF FISH NAMES IN TUNISIAN ARABIC: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The topic of morphological structures of fish names in Arabic dialects remains dramatically understudied. However, one of the most relevant studies on fish names in Arabic dialects was carried out by Giovanni Oman. His work *L'ittionimia nei Paesi Arabi del Mediterraneo* (1966) is the richest collection of data that we have on the subject, covering an area stretching from Morocco to Lebanon. While devoting a small number of articles to their etymology, Oman did not attempt a study of the morphological structures of fish names. This paper analyzes the four most common morphosyntactic structures of fish names in Tunisian dialects. Where possible, the etymology of the names, whether certain or hypothetical, will be provided. The data used in this study are taken from Oman's work (1966) in Tunisia and from the author's personal research, conducted in October 2018.

Keywords: *Linguistics, Dialectology, Tunisian Arabic, Fish Names, Morphology, Morphosyntax, Etymology.*

Introduction

The study of fish names and, more generally, of the lexicon pertaining to sea and seafaring, has aroused, in the last few years, a renewed interest, especially after the revival of the *Atlante Linguistico Mediterraneo (ALM)* project. This project, launched in 1956, aims to collect and analyze the maritime lexicon of the Mediterranean coasts. Scholars who took part in *ALM*, additionally continued their research independently, often publishing works of great interest for the field of lexicography. One of such scholars was Giovanni Oman, who carried out 22 fieldwork campaigns as part of the *ALM* committee and published *L'ittionimia nei Paesi Arabi del Mediterraneo* in 1966. He later continued his research beyond the *ALM* project, whose results have been published in *L'ittionimia nei Paesi Arabi dei Mari Rosso, Arabico e del Golfo Persico (o Arabico)* in 1992. Although precious for our understanding of fish names in the Arabic language, Oman's work would greatly benefit from a detailed linguistic analysis, shedding light on the morphological aspects and the etymologies of the fish names collected.

This case study will focus on Tunisian fish names contained in Oman's *L'ittionimia nei Paesi Arabi del Mediterraneo*, carrying out an in-depth formal analysis of the corpus collected, based on the greater amount of dialectological information

concerning the dialects of Tunis¹, Mahdia, Djerba and Kerkennah Islands where Oman conducted his research. This study, moreover, tries to partially fill the lacuna represented by the lack of any linguistic analysis in Oman's work, focusing on the common and recurring morphosyntactic structures used in Tunisian Arabic to name marine species. The analysis of Oman's corpus has been integrated by the fish names recorded by Fathi Talmoudi (1981) in the city of Susa and by an interview, conducted by the author with a native speaker of Chebba who resides in Italy and is stably employed in the fishing industry. Therefore, our final corpus collects more than 300 fish names registered on the Tunisian coasts of Tunis, Susa, Mahdia, Chebba, Sfax, Kerkennah Islands and Djerba.

Without the pretension of being exhaustive, this work aims at shedding light on a still understudied area of research, contributing to the knowledge of fish names in Tunisian Arabic dialects.

The synthetic genitive structure

According to anthropological linguistics studies (Cardona 1976, 1985; Foley 1997), it is well accepted that naming practices provide valuable insights into the social and linguistic perceptions of people. Particularly, studies on fish names provide details about the social and historical circumstances of their emergence, and their users.

In naming conventions, it is common that speakers reuse names of objects or animals already known to designate new ones (Cardona 1985: 51-52). Indeed, in naming marine species, fishermen often denominate them using the names of similar terrestrial animals. Because speakers are probably more accustomed to terrestrial animals, which they have known for longer, it is likely easier for them to associate newly discovered marine species to animals with which they are familiar. Starting from this assumption, we can explain the first two morphosyntactic structures analyzed.

The first one is the synthetic genitive structure, or construct state, formed by the juxtaposition of two terms. The first of the two terms is the defined noun and it always corresponds to an already known terrestrial animal's name. The second one is the determiner and it is always *al-bħar* "of the sea". There are 12 fish names in our corpus which constitute the following internal structure:

[*terrestrial animal's name* DEFINED NOUN + *al-bħar* DETERMINER] FISH NAME

1. *babbūš al-bħar*, "sea snail", is the most common name of mollusks having a shell² throughout Tunisia. Aquilina (1969: 101) considers *babbūš* as a collective noun from the berber *bellelūš*. Nevertheless, the romance origin (< lat. *babōsus*) is more plausible (Brunot 1920: 3; Prémare 1993: 136; Behnstedt-Woidich 2011: 375; Aguadé 2018: 35).

¹ The fish names collected by Michel Bariche (2012) in Tunisian Arabic of the capital, Tunis, were integrated in the present work.

² The noun is also used in Rabat. According to Brunot, *babbūš al-bħar* is a «terme général pour désigner les coquillages en hélice, peu usité à Rabat. Appartient plutôt au vocabulaire algérien» (1920:3).

2. *bhīm (əl-)bħar*, “sea donkey”, defines the thresher (Alopiidae *Alopias vulpinus*)³ in Mahdia. In Maghrebi Arabic (Beaussier 2006: 80) *bhīm* means «âne, baudet» and *bhīma* means «ânesse» or «animal irraisonnable, bête». According to Prémare (1993: 330), in Moroccan Arabic *bhīma* is the name of the ocean sunfish (Molidae *Mola mola*) and it is a calque from the Spanish *mula*.
3. *tmar (əl-)bħar* [<Ar. **tamr* (sing.), *tamra* (coll.) “date”], “sea date”, is the common name of the date mussel (Mytilidae *Lithophaga lithophaga*) in Chebba. Aquilina (1969: 95) proposes the etymology < Ar. **tamra* “fruits” for the Maltese equivalent fish name *tamla*. Nevertheless, “fruits” seems to be a too generic semantic referent for this specific marine species. Above all, it is not convincing since the shell of this mollusk is similar to the color and the shape of a date.
4. *ħžār (əl-)bħar* [< Ar. **ħağār* (sing.), **ahğār* (pl.) “stone, rock”], “sea stone”, is the common oyster (Ostreidae *Ostrea edulis*) in Chebba. The colors and the texture of the shell remind those of a rock or a reef.
5. *ħnāš (əl-)bħar* (< Ar. **ħanaš* “snake”), “sea snake”, denominates the painted eel (Ophichthidae *Echelus myrus*) in Chebba. Nevertheless, several marine species, characterized by an eel-like body, are generally called *ħnāš* in Tunisian Arabic.
6. *ħšān əl-bħar*: (<Ar. **ħiṣān al-baħr*), “sea horse”, is the name of the long-snouted seahorse (Syngnathidae *Hippocampus guttulatus*) in Tunisia. The name clearly originates from its shape, since it resembles a horse.
7. *zəbb əl-bħar* (< Ar. **zubb* “penis”), “sea penis”, is the holothurian’s name (Holothuriidae *Holothuria*). This species is soft bodied, invertebrate and more or less lengthened. Consequently, the holothurian is named *zəbb əl-bħar* in Mahdia and Chebba for his resemblance to the penis. Nevertheless, *zəbb* is a word taboo in Arabic language and our informant avoided using it, out of respect.
8. *zīz əl-bħar* (< Ar. **zīz* “cicada”), “sea cicada”, defines the lesser slipper lobster (Scyllaridae *Scyllarus arctus*) and the Mediterranean slipper lobster (Scyllaridae *Scyllarides latus*), since the sharp sound resembles that of a cicada. This name is widely used in Tunis and Chebba.
9. *fīl əl-bħar* (< Ar. **fīl* “elephant”), “sea elephant”, is the name of the lobster (Nephropidae *Homarus gammarus*) and the monk-seal (Phocidae *Monachus monachus*) in Chebba. Concerning the lobster, it is pointed out that the etymology of the fish name “sea elephant” is shared in the Italian name *elefante di mare* and in the Maltese one *iljunfant*. Regarding the monk-seal, *fīl* is probably used as a hyperbole to denominate his powerful body.
10. *qīṭə əl-bħar* [< Ar. **qīṭṭ* (sing.), *qīṭəṭ* (coll.) “cat”], “sea cat”, names the smooth hound (Triakidae *Mustelus mustelus*) in Tunis, Mahdia and Kerkennah. The fish names *qāṭṭūs (əl-)bħar* in Tunis and Mahdia or *gāṭṭūs əl-bħar* in Chebba indicate the lesser spotted dogfish (Scyliorhinidae *Scyliorhinus canicula*) and the nursehound (Scyliorhinidae *Scyliorhinus stellaris*). Regarding *qāṭṭūs/gāṭṭūs əl-bħar*, we suppose a hybrid etymology from the Latin *cattus* “cat” and the Arabic **qīṭṭ* “cat”. According to Gibson (2009: 570), *qāṭṭūs* is a Latin loan-word coming

³ English and scientific names of species are extracted from the *World Register of Marine Species* (WoRMS), <<http://www.marinespecies.org/index.php>>, last accessed 30 September 2018.

into Tunisian Arabic from Berber. These fish names probably spread in Tunisian Arabic in two different periods and both denominate two different marine species both characterized by sharp teeth and long whiskers.

11. *qənfūd əl-bħar* in Tunis or *gənfūd əl-bħar* (< Ar. **qunfud al-baħar*) in Chebba, Sfax, Mahdia and Kerkennah literally means “sea hedgehog”. The equivalent species, sea-urchin (Parechinidae *Paracentrotus lividus*), are typically spiny and globular echinoderms. The name “urchin” is an old world for hedgehog, which sea urchins resemble.
12. *kəlb əl-bħar* (< Ar. **kalb al-baħr*), “sea dog”, is a common name for sharks, smalltooth sand tigers (Odontaspidae *Odontaspis ferox*) and gulper sharks (Centrophoridae *Centrophorus granulosus*) throughout Tunisia, because of their sharp teeth similar to those of dogs.

The analytic genitive structure

The second morphosyntactic structure identified is expressed by means of a particular genitive exponent placed between the defined noun (terrestrial animal or item’s name) and the determiner (*əl-bħar* “of the sea”). This genitive exponent in Tunisian dialect is *mtā’*.

[*terrestrial item/animal’s name* DEFINED NOUN + *mtā’* GENITIVE EXPONENT + *əl-bħar* DETERMINER] FISH NAME

Our corpus includes the following examples:

13. *‘arūsa mtā’ lə-bħar* (< Ar. **arūsa* “young girl, bride”) literally means “bride of the sea”. This noun widespread in Mahdia corresponds to the star-fish (Asteriidae *Asterias*).
14. *šəžra mtā’ lə-bħar*⁴ (< Ar. **šağara* “tree”), “sea tree”, names the sea-fan (Gorgoniidae *Eunicella verrucosa*) in Chebba and Mahdia from its external shape remembering that of a tree and of its branches. Regarding this marine species, Oman (1966: 204) also noticed the name *žerr mtā’ lə-bħar*. Nevertheless, the meaning of the defined noun *žerr* is «action de tirer» (Beaussier 2006: 135) and it is not related to any characteristics of this species. We consequently suppose that *žerr* comes from *šžər* and it is the collective noun of *šəžra*. Indeed, the linguistic phenomenon of anticipatory assimilation can often occur in Tunisian dialects. Consequently, the voiceless postalveolar fricative /š/ could have changed the voiced postalveolar fricative /ž/ (*šžər* < *žər*). Therefore, Oman probably did not distinguish the collective noun *šžər*, transcribing the more similar phonetic Tunisian word *žerr*.
15. *mtā’ ər-rmal* (< Ar. **raml* “sand”), “the one of the sand”, is the name of the turbot (Scophthalmidae *Scophthalmus maximus*), the brill (Scophthalmidae *Scophthalmus rhombus*) and the wide-eyed flounder (Bothidae *Bothus podas*). This name derives from their ability to hide under the sandy seabed. This structure is widespread in Chebba and omits the defined noun.

⁴ The definite article *əl-* in the present analysis is transcribed also *lə-* depending on the linguistics production provided by our informant.

Kunya

The third morphosyntactic structure analyzed corresponds to the Arabic paedonomic, the so called *kunya*. This is a component of the Arabic name, a kind of epithet, referring to the bearer's first-born son or daughter. It is expressed by the use of 'abū "father" or 'umm "mother" in a genitive construction. Nevertheless, a *kunya* may metaphorically also be used as a nickname expressing a physical characteristic of an individual or his attachment to a certain thing. In his metaphoric use, the epithet exponent 'abū (in Tunisian Arabic > bū) means "the one of", rather than "father". Some structures of fish names collected in our corpus are related to this latter use, referring to certain details or body parts of the fish. This group of fish names analyzed could be considered as synecdoches, in which a term for a part of the marine species refers to their whole.

[bū EPIPHET EXPONENT + quality/body part NUON] FISH NAME

16. *bū rās* [< Ar. *'abū ra's «à la grosse tête» (Beaussier 2006: 82)⁵], "the one of the head", is the name of the blackspot sea bream (Sparidae *Pagellus bogaraveo*) in Mahdia. The denomination probably refers to the big eyes and head of this marine species.
17. *bū sīf* (< Ar. *'abū sayf "the one of the sword") denotes the swordfish (Xiphiidae *Xiphias gladius*) throughout Tunisia. This species is characterized by a long, flat, pointed bill. The Mediterranean spearfish (Istiophoridae *Tetrapturus belone*) is also called *bū sīf* in Chebba, though it has a shorter bill than the swordfish.
18. *bū sinna* (< Ar. *'abū 'asinna), "the one of the teeth", is the name of the Atlantic bonito (Scombridae *Sarda sarda*) and the skipjack tuna (Scombridae *Katsuwonus pelamis*) in Tunisia. These species are distinguished from their relatives by a large mouth with several visible teeth⁶.
19. *bū škāra* (in Maghrebi Ar. *'abū šikāra "the one of the bag") this fish names denominates both the angler (Lophiidae *Lophius piscatorius*) and the blackbellied angler (Lophiidae *Lophius budegassa*) in Tunis and in Chebba because of their large heads and their enormous crescent-shaped mouths, resembling a big curved sack.
20. *bū dlāma* (<Ar. *'abū ḍulma), "the one of the darkness", is the name of the Mediterranean limpet (Patellidae *Patella caerulea*) and the common cockle (Cardiidae *Cerastoderma edule*) in Mahdia. According to Brunot (1920: 5), the Moroccan fish name *bū dlāna* recorded for the Mediterranean limpet is an ancient loan from the Italian *patella*. Nevertheless, this hypothetical etymology does not seem convincing. Regarding the dark color of these mollusk shells, Gâteau (1966: 187) also adds the fish name *kūk* "coke" for the common cockle.
21. *bū miṣḥa* (in Maghrebi Ar. *māṣḥa* means "hoe"⁷), "the one of the hoe", names the spottail mantis squillid (Squillide *Squilla mantis*) in Chebba. As our informant

⁵ Beaussier also adds the meaning «piè-grièche» (Beaussier 2006: 82) which is a genus of passerine birds know throughout Tunisia.

⁶ Our informant also explained us that fishermen usually call this species *bū sinna* because of its big teeth.

⁷ In Moroccan Arabic (Prémare 1999: 193) as in Libyan Arabic (Pereira 2010: 188) *miṣḥa* means "hoe".

explained during the interview, this marine species is able to dig deep lairs in mud and sand in which it lives and from which it ambushes its prey.

22. *bū māngār* (< Ar. *'abū minqār), “the one of the beak”, is the common name of the tope shark (Triakidae *Galeorhinus galeus*) in Mahdia. It is distinguished by its elongated snout reminding the beak of a bird.

The nominal pattern *C1aC2C2āC3(a)*

Among the Arabic patterns used to express the active participle, the intensive action form *C1aC2C2āC3(a)* is one of the most widespread in naming animals and, consequently, fish as well.

[*C1aC2C2āC3(a)*] FISH NAME

23. *ḥarrēga* (< Ar. *ḥurrāqa “burning, stinging”) is the name of the jellyfish (*Medusa*) and it refers to the distinctive stinging ability of this species. The noun *ḥarrēga* actually derives from the Arabic root *Ḥ-R-Q “to burn”. This fish name was recorded as *hurriqa* in Susa, *ḥarrēga* in Chebba, *ḥorrēga* in Sfax, *ḥarrīga* in Djerba and Kerkennah (Oman 1966: 202).
24. *gərrād* (< Ar. root *Q-R-Ḍ “to cut” or “to gnaw”) and his variants recorded in Tunisia denote the bluefish (Pomatomidae *Pomatomus saltatrix*) which boasts a single row of teeth, in each jaw, that are knife-edged and sharp.
25. *kəššāš/qəššēš* (realized also as *gəššēš* in Chebba < Ar. *qaššāš “small brush, rake, comb”) is the common name of the scorpionfish family (Scopaenidae) in Tunisia. These species are covered with sharp spines on their head and on its dorsal fin, resembling the bristles of a brush.
26. *məḥḥār* (< Maghrebi Ar. *maḥḥār «coquillage marin bivalve, ou coquille de bivalve ; peut désigner aussi tout l’animal» (Prémare (1999: 146) < Maghrebi Ar. *maḥḥara* «lisser, satiner le papier» (Beaussier 2006: 921)) refers to golden carpet shell (Veneridae *Polititapes aureus*) in Kerkennah and to dog-cockle (Glycymeridae *Glycymeris glycymeris*) in Mahdia.
27. *mərrād* denotes the transparent goby (Gobiidae *Aphia minuta*). In Beaussier, *mərrād* means «qui se traîne, jeunes sauterelles qui n’ont pas encore d’ailes» (2006: 927). Although the transparent goby has a small elongated body with short wings, it should be remembered that this species is fished by trawling. This method involves pulling a fishing net through the water behind one or more boats to catch the fishes. Nevertheless, the latter meaning is not reflected in the meaning of the formal structure of the active participle.
28. *nəššāfa* (< Ar. *naššāfa “sponge” < Ar. *našafa “to absorb, to dry”) is the name of the sea sponge (Spongiidae *Spongia officinalis*) in Mahdia, Kerkennah and Sfax. The variant *nəššēfa* (with the internal *imāla* variation *ā* > *ē*) was recorded in Chebba.

Concluding remarks

Starting from the analysis on our new corpus of more than 300 fish names collected in Tunisian Arabic, the present work sheds light on linguistic and etymological aspects in the field of fish names. This paper particularly pointed out four main morphosyntactic structures widespread throughout Tunisia:

1. The synthetic genitive structure, formed by the juxtaposition of a defined noun, corresponding to a known terrestrial animal's name, and the determiner *əl-bḥar* "of the sea": *babbūš əl-bḥar*, *bḥīm (əl-)bḥar*, *tmar (əl-)bḥar*, *ḥžar (əl-)bḥar*, *ḥnəš (əl-)bḥar*, *ḥṣān əl-bḥar*, *zəbb əl-bḥar*, *zīz əl-bḥar*, *fīl əl-bḥar*, *qtaṭ əl-bḥar*, *qaṭṭūs/gaṭṭūs (əl-bḥar)*, *qənḥūd/gənḥūd əl-bḥar*, *kəlb əl-bḥar*.
2. The analytic genitive structure expressed by means of the Tunisian genitive exponent *mtā'* placed between the defined noun (terrestrial animal or item's name) and the determiner (*əl-bḥar* "of the sea"): *mtā' ər-rmal*, *šəžra mtā' lə-bḥar/žerr mtā' lə-bḥar*, *'arūsa mtā' lə-bḥar*.
3. Thee *kunya* structure expressed by the use of *bū* ("the one of") in a genitive construction with a noun, referring to certain details or body parts of the fish: *bū rās*, *bū sīf*, *bū sinna*, *bū škāra*, *bū ḍlāma*, *bū məngār*, *bū miṣḥa*.
4. The intensive active participle pattern *C1aC2C2āC3(a)* which is the most widespread in naming animals: *gərrāḍ* (and his variants), *ḥarrēga* (and his variants), *kəššāš/qəššēš*, *məḥḥār*, *mərrād*, *nəššāfa/nəššēfa*.

As this case study has shown, anthropological linguistics studies are strongly related to the growth of knowledge and provides insights to the social, cultural and linguistic perceptions of native speakers. Nevertheless, the subject of zoonomy and the topic of their morphological structures in Arabic dialects remains dramatically understudied. Therefore, we hope that further comparative studies concerning other Arabic dialects will be carried out to examine this subject in-depth and to acquire, consequently, even more information on cultural and linguistic perceptions of Arabic native speakers.

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