Jordi Aguadé

The word for “nine” in Moroccan Arabic and other euphemisms related to numbers
CONTENTS

Y. Friedmann and S. Hopkins
Aryeh Levin: a scholarly biography

G. Ayoub
La description sémantique du verbe dans le Kitāb de Sibawayhi

I. Ferrando
Sibawayhi and the broken plural

K. Versteegh
Pidgin Arabic and arabi sa‘ab: the influence of the standard language in the history of Arabic

A. Sadan
The meaning of the technical term jawāb in Arabic grammar

A. Kasher
The terminology of vowels and i‘rāb in mediaeval Arabic grammatical tradition

Y. Peled
Sibawayhi’s Kitāb and the teaching of Arabic grammar

Sh. Alon
The sources of Ibn Manṣūr’s Lisān al-‘arab

J. Blau
New prepositions in mediaeval Judaeo-Arabic

O. Kapeliuk
Some special features of Ethio-Semitic morphology and syntax: inalienables and intimate relationship in Amharic

N. Basal
Mediaeval Jewish and Muslim cultures: an anonymous Judaeo-Arabic adaptation of Ibn Jinnī’s al-Luma‘

F. Corriente
‘Imālah and other phonemic and morphological features in sub-dialectal Andalusí Arabic
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J. Aguadé</td>
<td>The word for “nine” in Moroccan Arabic and other euphemisms related to numbers</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Bar-Asher</td>
<td>The Maghribi ṣahrī to Tractate Avot</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Muranyi</td>
<td>Eine islamische Rechtsfrage über Entschädigungen zwischen Muslimen und Christen. Ein Beitrag zur Textentwicklung und Textkritik in der Mudawwana</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**REVIEWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M. Muranyi</td>
<td>Adam Gacek. <em>The Arabic manuscript tradition. A glossary of technical terms and bibliography</em></td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE WORD FOR “NINE” IN MOROCCAN ARABIC AND OTHER EUPHEMISMS RELATED TO NUMBERS

Jordi Aguadé
Universidad de Cádiz

1.1. In congresses and workshops, dialectologists specializing in Morocco or Algeria often have to answer the following question, asked by colleagues not acquainted with Western North African dialects: “How can you explain that the word for “nine” in Maghribi Arabic is \( t\@s\ud \)?”

The answer is very simple: \( t\@s\ud \) means “you will be happy” and it is a euphemism in order to avoid \( t\@s\a \) which means “nine” but also “you will beg,” a highly impolite phrase. This euphemism is well-known; G.S. Colin, for instance, explained the word \( t\@s\ud \) as follows:

\[ n[om]/ de nombre neuf; le chiffre 9 [litt.: puisses-tu être heureux! euph. employé pour éviter \( t\@s\a \) qui sonne comme \( t\@s\ud \); puisses-tu être réduit à la mendicité]. \]

1.2. In Morocco the word \( t\@s\ud \) is widely used, and appears also in Berber dialects. In Algeria it is found mainly in the Western dialects

---

1From the root \( s\ud \); perfect \( s\a \), imperfect \( y\ud s\a \) in Morocco. In quotations from other authors (and in order to avoid confusion), I have here sometimes slightly simplified phonetic transcriptions, especially concerning vowels.

2Apud De Prémare, Dictionnaire, vol. 6, p. 100. As far as I can see, this etymology was at first formulated by W. Marçais in 1902 (cf. Tlemcen, pp. 156 and 284; cf. also W. Marçais, “L’euphémisme,” pp. 437–438).

3Cf. also Ph. Marçais, Esquisse, p. 174: “\( t\@s\ud \) et \( t\@s\ud \) sont) formes euphémistiques qui rattachent le nom à la racine \( s\ud \) qui exprime l’idée de ‘bonheur’.”

4See for instance Vicente, Anjra, p. 156; Caubet, L’arabe, vol. 1, p. 147; Aguadé &
In Mauritanian tas'ud is also unknown and only tas'a is used (in Hassaniya the verb s'a means “to plunder, to obtain booty”). Maltese has disgha (< tis'a).

2.1. However, the fact that tas'ud is a euphemism and comes from the verb s'od “to be (or become) happy” does not solve all the questions related to this word. A significant difficulty arises immediately: l[ə]s'od “you will be happy” is the regular form for the 2nd person of the imperfect singular of this verb; this requires an explanation of the pattern tas'ud, with a long vowel a instead of o in the last syllable.

2.2. The German dialectologist Georg Kampffmeyer saw in this vowel a a parallelism to the first ten cardinal numbers in Ethiopian (Ge'ez). His theory is, however, not convincing at all. First, (as he himself remarks) in Ethiopian the vowel a appears at the end of the numerals (3–10 = šālāstu, ārba'tu, hāmestu, sedestu, sāb'atu, sāmanitu/sāmantu/ sāmantu, tēs'ātu/tēs'ātu, 'āšātu) and second, it is not easy to explain how such an Ethiopian feature came to surface in Morocco.

2.3. I think matters are not so complex and it is unnecessary to go to such great lengths when addressing this issue. In fact, the form tas'ud can be easily explained as a pattern shift from {1a23ı4} (= tas'od) to {1a23ı4} (= tas'ud), tas'od being understood not as a verb but rather as a quadriradical substantive and being the pattern {1a23ı4} (as well as its variants {1a23ı4} and {1a33ı4}) by far more common in Moroccan Arabic than {1a23ı4}.

---

Elyacoubi, Skūra, p. 116; Durand, Profilo, pp. 109–110; Heath, Jewish and Muslim dialects, pp. 464–465. However, the form tas'a is sometimes heard among rural speakers (Harrell, Reference grammar, p. 90, note 23).

W. Marçais, Saïda, p. 144. Cf. also Grand'Henry, Cherchell, p. 124 and Madouni, Dictionnaire, p. 82.


Diachronically Moroccan ā represents any short vowel in classical Arabic.

2.4. Examples of such a shift are numerous.\(^{11}\)

CA qūnṣūd > Moroccan qanṣūd “hedgehog”

CA hānṣūs > Moroccan hnsūs “beetle”

CA bhūnuq > Moroccan bhūnuq “cloth, veil”

CA bālbul > Moroccan bālbul “nightingale”\(^{12}\)

CA ḥūdūd > Moroccan ḥndūd “hoopoe”

CA ṣūmuṣūd > Moroccan ṣμṣūd “emerald”

CA qūnuqām > Moroccan qunqām “a kind of copper jug”

CA qūrbūz / gārbūz > Moroccan ḡrbūz “nasty, ugly black or Berber man”

CA miṣmīs > Moroccan ṣmṣīs “apricot”

CA ṣag ‘aq > Moroccan ṣaq ‘aq “magpie”

CA mīlraq > Moroccan ṣmrāq “ladder”

CA bānjar > Moroccan ḡnjar “curved dagger”

CA ḡālbal > Moroccan ḡlbal “ladder”

CA ṭufrūf > Moroccan ḡfrūf “curtain”

CA dāmīlāq > Moroccan ḡmīlāq “bracelet”

2.5. In my opinion these examples show clearly that it is reasonable to assume that the form tas’ūd is merely due to a shift from tas’ād to a more usual pattern.

3. It is well-known that euphemisms play an important role in all languages; North African Arabic dialects are of course not an exception; quite the opposite: in these dialects they are especially frequent and widespread. Some examples of common euphemisms in Moroccan Arabic are:\(^{16}\)

— ‘āfyā (= originally “health”) is the most common word for “fire” because nār (= originally “fire”) means “hell, hell-fire”;

— the žnūn “goblins, jinn” are called bū-mluk “the owners,” sūdātna and also siyūtna “our lords,” rāz l-māḥtīyga “the men of the hidden,” bū-ṣūdūd “the bountiful,” l-msalmin “the Moors,” etc.;

— a person who is blind is called bṣīr “sharp-eyed” (to avoid ‘ma “blind”)\(^{17}\);

\(^{11}\) However, there is also an important number of examples where the pattern {ṣaʾ2ṭṣ4} has been retained: ḡṣfūl “red pepper,” ṣnḥul “a kind of hyacinth,” ḡdrham “dirham,” ṣqḥob “scorpion,” ‘ṃḥb “ambergris,” ḡndqf/ ṣndqq “inn, warehouse,” etc.

\(^{12}\) The variant bālbal also exists; cf. De Prémare, Dictionnaire, vol. 1, p. 293.

\(^{13}\) The variants zuṭruṭūd, zmrγaγ, zmγaγ, zmrhoḍ also exist; cf. De Prémare, Dictionnaire, vol. 5, p. 373.


\(^{15}\) The variant ‘ṣq’ag also exists (De Prémare, Dictionnaire, vol. 9, p. 183).

\(^{16}\) The variant ‘ṣq’ag also exists (De Prémare, Dictionnaire, vol. 9, p. 183).

\(^{17}\) On this word, see also Fischer, “Arab. bṣīr” (with examples from medieval
— *řsās* “lead” is called *ḥṣif* “light”;
— the use of *sārāt* “key” (a word of Berber origin) instead of *maštāḥ* in many Moroccan dialects is the result of a peculiar semantic shift: *maštāḥ* (originally “key”) being the usual word for “needle” (to avoid *iḥra*), it was necessary to find a new term for “key” and so this Berber loanword has been borrowed.

4.1. As far as numbers are concerned, euphemisms are of course not restricted to *tša* “nine”; they are also common in connection with other numbers, as we can see in some interesting examples I will quote here.

The Finnish anthropologist Edvard Westermarck comments in his study *Ritual and belief in Morocco* that when measuring valuable goods (grain for instance) people try to impart to them as much *bāraka* as possible and to ward off evil influences and to avoid anything which might harm them. Thus when counting it is very common to use lucky words or phrases instead of the ordinary numerals and to take care not to mention dangerous numbers:

In the Ġarbiya I heard the following counting: — *Bárka mën állah, hādi bárka áin, hādi tlât'a, hādi ārb'a, hādi ḫamsa f 'ain yābis, hādi sēlt'a, hādi net'ménnau állah l-bāraka, hādi nīs'āw állah t-'āuba u l-ğofran, hādi 'ārṣa u șāb n-nīr rūsūlū llah, “Blessing from God, here two blessings, here three, here four, here five in the eye of the devil,” here six, here easy (instead of ‘seven’, which is called ‘difficult’ in the common phrase *sēb'a s'āiba*), here we wish for a blessing from God (instead of ‘eight’, *t'ményas*, on account of its phonetical re-
semblance to net‘mennau), here we ask God for repentance and forgiveness (instead of ‘nine’, ts‘a), here ten and the friends of the Prophet the apostle of God23.”

The Arabs from the Hiáina say, Bárka men āllāh, barkt‘aín, tlāt‘a, ārb‘a, u ārb‘a, ha sêt‘a, sáhla, net‘mennau l-ḥair ‘and āllāh, nes‘āu l-ḥair ‘and āllāh, ‘āsra ṣḥāb n-nbi, ḥādāš ḥot‘ sīdna Yūsef, āţnāš āţnāsār shar, “Blessing from God, two blessings, three, four, and four (instead of ‘five’), here six, easy (instead of ‘seven’), we wish for good from God (instead of ‘eight’), we beg for good from God (instead of ‘nine’), ten the friends of the Prophet, eleven, the brothers of our lord Yūsef, twelve twelve months.” Then the counting is continued in the ordinary manner except that all numbers containing either five or seven are avoided; thus instead of fifteen is said “and fourteen.”

4.2. In a text published in 1908, the French Arabist Edmond Doutté speaks about the reluctance of the Algerians to count and gives some very similar examples to those mentioned by his Finnish colleague:24

Une des formes les plus curieuses de cette répugnance se manifeste dans la manière de compter lorsqu’on mesure le grain, opération à caractère sacré. Voici, par exemple, comment on compte à El Qal’a (Oran); la personne qui compte doit être en état de pureté, et au lieu de dire: 1, 2, 3, etc., elle s’exprime ainsi: bismi Lllāh [sic!] (au nom de Dieu), pour “un”; barkateţa (deux bénédictions) pour “deux”; deţiat en nabi (hospitalité du Prophète, c’est-à-dire de 3 jours),25 pour “trois”; nerbah‘on26 in cha’ Āllāh (nous gagnerons, s’il plaît à Dieu), pour “quatre”; fi ‘aĩn Iblīs (dans l’œil du Diable), pour “cinq”; fi ‘aĩn ouldou (dans l’œil de son fils), pour “six”; ech cheb‘a27 men ‘and Āllāh (c’est Dieu qui nous rassasie),

23The Companions of the Prophet are of course more than ten (their biographies in the mediaeval Arabic sources fill several volumes); here the phrase ‘ten and the friends of the Prophet’ is an allusion to the so-called al-‘așara al-mubashšara ‘the ten promised paradise’, i.e. the ten Companions of Muhammad to whom the Prophet himself promised paradise while living (cf. art. “al-‘așara al-mubashšara” [A.J. Wensinck] in EI2).

24Doutté, Magie et religion, pp. 179–180. I have left unchanged the original transcription of the author.

25Allusion to a well-known saying: ḥaft on-Nbi talt ṯyaym, i.e. “the Prophet’s hospitality lasts (only) three days” (said of guests who abuse hospitality, equivalent to the English saying “fish and guests smell after three days”).

26I.e. nerbah; alliteration with the word rab‘a/arb‘a “four.”

27I.e. aš-kob‘a; alliteration with the word szb‘a “seven.”
pour “sept,” etc. . . . jusqu’à “douze,” pour lequel on dit: el kemāl ‘ala rebbī (la perfection pour Dieu).

4.3. For the Algerian town of Djidjelli (Jijel) and its surroundings, Philippe Marçais gives another important text: 28

Le dénombrement des quantités (mesure du grain par décalitre p. ex.) s’entoure, dans la région de Djidjelli comme ailleurs, de précautions prophylactiques : le sujet parlant évite l’usage brutal du terme propre, soit qu’il le déforme pour en faire une eulogie, soit qu’il l’emploie sans déformation dans une formule propitiatoire :

“un”: b-isma-līh ‘au nom de Dieu’, waḥd-ālīh “un seul Dieu”;
“deux”: la-ṣarika-lū ‘pas d’associé à Lui (Dieu);
“quatre”: ṭerboḥ (ou terboḥ) ‘gagne’ (ou ‘tu gagneras’);
“cinq”: fi-ʾin-eṣ-ṣetān ‘(cinq doits) dans l’œil de Satan’;
“six”: fi-ʾin-ṣbūn ‘dans l’œil de son fils’;
“sept”: teṣbo‘ ‘tu seras rassasié’;
“neuf”: tesd ‘tu seras heureux’.

4.4. Emile Laoust tells us that the Berbers in Rās l-Wād (Sūs) used to count the first ten measures in Arabic (bārkāt allāh, tnayn, tlāta, etc.) but in Berber (yan, sin krad, ukkūz, sommu, sōddis, etc.) the following ten: it seems that they believed the Arabic numerals could be beneficial for the grain, Arabic being the language of the Prophet. 29

5. Finally, it is necessary to remark that the majority of these euphemisms related to numbers are nowadays quite obsolete, especially among urban speakers. The majority of modern Moroccans, for instance, use τaṣʿūd in their everyday life and are perfectly aware that ḥomsa may be associated with the evil eye, but only very few people can remember ever having heard expressions like ḏyafṯ ʾon-Nbi or ṭer-ʾin ʾṣ-Ṣītān instead of tlāta “three” or ḥomsa “five,” etc. It seems that only peasants in rural areas sometimes continue to use such traditional euphemisms.

28 Ph. Marçais, Djidjelli, p. 423.
29 Laoust, Mots et choses, p. 402.
Bibliography


Harrell, R.S. A short reference grammar of Moroccan Arabic. Georgetown, Georgetown University School of Languages and Linguistics, 1962.


—. *Le dialecte arabe des Ulad Brahim de Saïda (Départ. d’Oran).* Paris, 1908.


