

Lesson 2

Diptotes

When we speak of nunation, we are necessarily talking about triptotes—nouns (and adjectives) that show all three cases. For no apparent reason other than to complicate grammar, Arabic also has diptotes—nouns (and, again, also adjectives) that show only two cases: the nominative and the accusative.

Diptotes are never nunated. A diptote will behave grammatically the same as a triptote when it is definite or when it is any but the last term of a genitive construct; this means, of course, that it will never be nunated, since triptotes will also not be nunated when definite or in construct.

There is some predictability, fortunately, on what categories of words will be diptotes:

- a lot of broken plurals

ظُرَيْفٌ – ظُرَفَاءُ

مَكْتَبٌ – مَكَاتِبُ

عِرْقَلَةٌ – عِرَاقِلُ

- place names

بَغْدَادُ

دِمَشْقُ

لُبْنَانُ

- some proper names, both masculine and feminine

فَاطِمَةٌ

أَحْمَدُ

عَمْرُ

- relatives (about which more later)

أكبرُ

أجملُ

أجذُ

- colors and defects

أبيضُ

حمراءُ

أبكمُ

Plurals

English has one plural pattern (with allophonic variations) and a few irregular plurals (such as “feet,” “children”). Arabic is, to phrase it euphemistically, more creative. There are a couple of “sound”—i.e., regular—plural suffixes, and a disconcerting, but ultimately at least slightly predictable, array of “broken”—i.e., irregular—patterns.

The first of the two “sound” plural patterns is the sound masculine plural. This consists of a suffix of **ون**, which becomes **ين** in the accusative and genitive cases.

مندوبٌ – مندوبون/مندوبينَ

مؤمن – مؤمنون/مؤمنينَ

- Note that in the sound masculine plural, that fatha on the **ن** is invariable; case is reflected “internally”—i.e., in the long vowel preceding the **ن**.

- Note also that there is no nunation for sound masculine plurals.

مندوبون – المندوبونَ

مدرّسينَ – المدرّسينَ

- When a sound masculine plural is in construct with a following noun, it will shed the ن.

مندوبو الدول النامية...

Representatives of the developing countries ...

... من مدربي الجند الأستراليين ...

... from the trainers of the Australian soldiers ...

The sound feminine plural is formed by the addition of the suffix ات. This pattern is frequently seen with both feminine and masculine non-human nouns.

محاولة – محاولات

تهديد – تهديدات

When suffixed to pluralize a noun referring to persons, it can refer only to females.

طالبة – طالبات

مرضة – ممرضات

Remember that non-human plurals behave grammatically as feminine singular; we see this when we start describing the nouns with adjectives.

الطالبة شاطرة – الطالبات شاطرات.

But

الدبابة الألمانية ... – الدبابات الألمانية ...

التهديد الإسرائيلي ... – التهديدات الإسرائيلية ...

Note that the accusative of a sound feminine plural will be voweled the same as the genitive.

رأيت الطالبة – رأيت الطالبات

دمرت القنبلة الدبابة – دمرت القنبلة الدبابات

اشتري سيارة – اشتري سيارات

Broken plurals

There are numerous broken plural patterns. One is initially tempted to think there is no predictability to the broken plurals; with some exposure to the language, though, one begins to discern hints of meaning in the patterns. Eventually, one comes to the comforting realization that there is a finite number of patterns, however prodigious that number may be.

Some of the most common broken plural patterns are:

عَمِيدٌ – عُمَدَاءُ

رَئِيسٌ – رُؤَسَاءُ

Note that this very common pattern always refers to persons.

كَاتِبٌ – كُتَّابٌ

تَاجِرٌ – تُجَّارٌ

كَافِرٌ – كُفَّارٌ

This pattern also refers only to persons. The singular is the first measure active participle, which we'll encounter when we're looking at the derivations from verbs. As you will have noticed, this broken plural is not a diptote.

مَكْتَبٌ – مَكَاتِبُ

مُتَحَفٌ – مَتَاحِفُ

مَدْرَسَةٌ – مَدَارِسُ

This very common pattern comes from “nouns of place and time.”

مَكْتُوبٌ – مَكَاتِيبُ

مَقْهُوْمٌ – مَقَاهِيْمُ

مِفْتَاحٌ – مَفَاتِيحُ

This is also a common pattern. Note that the **ي** before the last consonant indicates there was a long vowel in the singular; that long vowel is most commonly a **و**, meaning that the singular was a first measure passive participle. It is important to note such distinctions, because you will encounter a lot of broken plurals, and the more familiar you are with such distinctions the more quickly you will be able to track down the singular in the dictionary.

تَقْرِيرٌ – تَقَارِيرُ

تَفْصِيلٌ – تَفَاصِيلُ

تَذْيِيرٌ – تَذَايِيرُ

This pluralization of the second measure verbal noun is a fairly common pattern.

عَامِلٌ – عَوَامِلُ

ثَابِتٌ – ثَوَابِتُ

ظَاهِرٌ – ظَوَاهِرُ

Like the one a few patterns above, this pattern is drawn from the first measure active participle. The earlier one always refers to persons; this pattern always refers to things.

كَتَبَةٌ – كَتَائِبُ

قَبِيلَةٌ – قَبَائِلُ

وَثِيقَةٌ – وَثَائِقُ

This pattern is quite common; it always refers to objects.

فُنْبُلَةٌ – فُنَابِلُ

عَرَقْلَةٌ – عَرَاقِلُ

جَوْهَرٌ – جَوَاهِرُ

While the above pattern looks similar to the one from the nouns-of-place-and-time pattern, you'll note that these do not start with a م. These plurals are drawn from quadrilaterals.

جُمْهُورٌ – جَمَاهِيرُ

قَانُونٌ – قَوَانِينُ

Also from quadrilaterals; again, the ي preceding the last consonant gives us the hint that there was a long vowel preceding the last consonant in the singular.

ضَحِيَّةٌ – ضَحَايَا

هَدِيَّةٌ – هَدَايَا

شَطِيَّةٌ – شَطَايَا

Not an extremely common pattern, but also not rare.

مَرِيضٌ – مَرَضَى

قَتِيلٌ – قَتْلَى

جَرِيحٌ – جَرَحَى

Only a few of these; they refer only to persons.

فُرْصَةٌ – فُرَصٌ

فِرْقَةٌ – فِرَقٌ

In the above pattern the vowel on the first radical is often but not always retained from the singular to the plural

جِهَازٌ - أَجْهَزَةٌ

نِظَامٌ - أَنْظِمَةٌ

رَغِيفٌ - أَرْغَفَةٌ

Another pattern that's not exceedingly common but also not rare.

خَبَرٌ - أَخْبَارٌ

فَلَمٌ - أَفْلَامٌ

This and the next pattern are among the most common broken plural patterns.

عِلْمٌ - عُلُومٌ

رَمَزٌ - رُمُوزٌ

أَمْرٌ - أُمُورٌ

Note that unlike many of the patterns, these last two are not diptotes.

There are a few other obscure patterns. With this list we've just given you should be able to handle just about any weird-looking plural you encounter. Remember to look for hints from the grammar: if a you're not sure whether a word is a singular or plural, don't forget that the plural of a non-human noun will behave grammatically as a feminine singular.

Exercises

Pluralize the underlined words in the following sentences, and make whatever changes become necessary in the rest of the sentence.

اجتمع مدير الشركة مع ممثل الحكومة لمناقشة الوضع الاقتصادي.

سبب الانفجار مشكلة كبيرة.

الطالبة الصينية اجتهدت في دراستها.

قدم المفتش عن أسلحة الدمار الشامل تقريراً مفصلاً لمجلس الأمن.

نقل الجريح إلى المستشفى.

الطائرة الروسية أفلعت من مطار موسكو.

الشاب اللبناني دافع عن نفسه حينما شن الجيش الإسرائيلي الحرب.

هو ارتكب جريمة فظيعة وحُكم عليه بالسجن.

المدرس اشترى كتاباً ألمانياً أثناء زيارته لبرلين.

طلبنا قاموساً عربياً من دار النشر.