

علم الصرف

The Basics of Morphology



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Patterns and Suffixes

In the Arabic language, meanings are established by placing base letters side by side in selected patterns. Mostly all combinations of three consonants have been assigned distinct meanings

e.g. ك ت ب. Words with these letters in this particular order have the meaning associated with writing.

In Arabic there are literally dozens, if not hundreds of ways to vowel those three letters, some of which include the addition of ‘**non-base**’ letters. Depending on the particular pattern, the base-letter meaning of “writing”, will be expressed in a unique way. For instance, كَتَبَ (he wrote), كُتِبَ (it was written), يَكْتُبُ (he writes, is writing or will write), كَاتِبٌ (writer), مَكْتَبٌ (desk i.e. place of writing), اُكْتُبْ (write!) and many, many others.

Conjugation Tables

In all languages, verbs are conjugated to reflect three aspects of their subjects:

Gender — Masculine or Feminine

Plurality — Singular, Dual (unlike English, Arabic also has separate forms to indicate on two of something) and Plural (3 or more), and

Person — Third person, Second person and First person.

This process in English is fairly simple due to the reflection occurring via a separate pronoun. Table 1-A shows what this would look like.

Person	Conjugation	Gender	Plurality
3 rd	He slept	Masculine	Singular
	She slept	Feminine	
	They slept	Masculine or Feminine	Plural
2 nd	You slept	Masculine or Feminine	Singular or Plural
1 st	I slept	Masculine or Feminine	Singular
	We Slept		Plural

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-A : Conjugation of English Verbs

As you can see from Table 1-A, the “slept” stays the same through-out, and only the pronoun *which is a separate word altogether* changes (to reflect those three aspects). In Arabic the three aspects are indicated not by separate words, but by designated letters which are added to the end of the verb as suffixes. These suffixes or designated letters ARE the pronouns and because they are not separate words, verb conjugation is more complex than in English. A great portion of Arabic Morphology is devoted to memorizing the tables that result from MULTIPLYING those three aspects mentioned above (i.e. gender, plurality, and person). In Arabic there are only two genders, **meaning Arabic has no ‘it’**. All non-human things are categorized as either masculine or feminine.

As mentioned above, plurality includes singular, dual and plural. Multiplying the gender (2) with plurality (3), will give us 6. Then taking this 6 and multiplying it with third person, second person, and first person (3), gives us 18. The complete breakdown is shown in Table 1-B.

Person	Gender	Plurality	English Equivalent	#
3 rd	Masculine	Singular	He	1
		Dual (2)	They (M2)	2
		Plural (>2)	They (M>2)	3
	Feminine	Singular	She	4
		Dual (2)	They (F2)	5
		Plural (>2)	They (F>2)	6
2 nd	Masculine	Singular	You (M)	7
		Dual (2)	You (M2)	8
		Plural (>2)	You (M>2)	9
	Feminine	Singular	You (F)	10
		Dual (2)	You (F2)	11
		Plural (>2)	You (F>2)	12
1 st	Masculine	Singular	I (M/F)	13
		Dual (2)	We (M/F≥2)	14
		Plural (>2)	We	15
	Feminine	Singular	I	16
		Dual (2)	We	17
		Plural (>2)	We	18

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.-B : Conjugation of Arabic Verbs – All Possibilities

Due to the fact that EVERY subject will need a gender, plurality AND a person, we look at the total combinations that result from multiplying the above. It comes to 18, six for each of the third, second and first persons. For most conjugations there are separate suffixes. However, occasionally, like in almost all languages, two or more conjugations are condensed into one. In Arabic this condensing happens in the first person i.e. ‘I’ and ‘We’, thus reducing the number from 18 to 14. This is because there are no separate dual forms (just singular and plural). Also, gender becomes irrelevant. Therefore, number 13 will be singular first person: ‘I’ and number 14 will be plural first person: ‘We’ (see Table 1-B on the previous page). Each form of the conjugation table is called a صيغة (“seegha”).

Active vs. Passive Voice

The next thing which is of importance would be what they call active and passive voice. For all actions that require objects (transitive verbs), the verb can either be active or passive. Active is when the verb is directed at the subject which is also mentioned e.g. he helped; whereas in the passive voice the verb is directed towards the object and the subject is missing e.g. he was helped. In Sarf, there are separate conjugation tables for each of the active and passive voices, 14 conjugations per table. In the active table, those designated letters we talked about earlier reflect the three aspects, gender etc. of the subject, while in the passive table it's the object whose three aspects are being reflected.

Essential Note

The scholars of Sarf have used the most basic base letters in terms of meaning as models for all of the patterns to be discussed through out the science. The three 'model' letters are ف , ع , and ل . The meaning associated with these letters is the very simple meaning of 'to do'.

When you have your three letters ready for constructing (they can be any three letters taken from a dictionary), you may now vowel them accordingly and produce the intended compound meaning. This is similar to how a tailor will have many different paper cut-outs of shirts and pants in order to facilitate and simplify his work. Nobody ever attempts to wear the cut-out. Rather they wait until some garment etc. is produced. Likewise, for example, when we say the model pattern for the active past tense verb for tri-literal verbs is فَعَلَ, and for the passive voice it is فُعِلَ, literal translation of each conjugation is never the purpose. Therefore, throughout these discussions we will be only giving the patterns and conjugation tables.

And with Allah is all success!