

PLURALISATION IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF NOMINAL MORPHOLOGY

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Abstract

Language is a dynamic and evolving system, capable of both growth and decline. It serves as a primary medium through which human beings communicate and express their identities. Although individual languages may differ significantly, they also exhibit structural and functional similarities. This study examines the morphological processes involved in plural formation in nouns through a contrastive analysis of English and Arabic. A qualitative methodology was employed, and data were analysed from various texts presenting nouns in their singular forms across both languages. Five texts were selected, representing everyday expressions commonly used by native speakers. The findings reveal that while both English and Arabic employ suffixation in plural formation, their morphological strategies differ notably. These differences and similarities have important implications for second language acquisition. The results suggest that knowledge of the morphological patterns in one language may facilitate the teaching and learning of another, particularly with regard to grammatical categories such as pluralisation. Furthermore, the study identifies potential difficulties that language learners may face when transferring morphological rules across languages. By highlighting both convergences and divergences in plural formation, this research contributes to a broader understanding of cross-linguistic influence and offers pedagogical insights for language instruction and curriculum development.

Keywords: Arabic language, contrastive analysis, English language, morphological processes

Introduction

Language is a dynamic and evolving system through which humans communicate and express their identity. While languages differ significantly across the globe, they also share universal features -structural, functional, and cognitive. One such feature is pluralisation, or the morphological expression of number, which is present in nearly all natural languages. Although the means of forming plurals vary, the need to distinguish between singular and multiple items is universal. This study is situated within the field of contrastive linguistics, which has gained prominence for its role in comparing linguistic structures across languages. Despite its growing relevance, contrastive analysis remains relatively underexplored, particularly because many individuals are not bilingual or multilingual, and even those who are often do not closely examine the similarities and differences between languages.

By conducting a contrastive study of pluralisation in English and Arabic, this paper seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the morphological processes involved in forming plurals, while also identifying shared features and divergences between the two languages.

The concept of language universals provides the theoretical backdrop for this investigation. Language universals refer to the features commonly found across all languages, such as number, tense, or grammatical categories (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Chomsky (1981) describes these universals as part of a biologically rooted *universal grammar*, while Greenberg (1963) focuses on identifying typological features that recur across languages. According to Malmkjaer (2005), language universals can be either *formal*, relating to shared grammatical structures, or *substantive*, concerning the content and application of linguistic rules. These

frameworks allow linguists to assess whether a phenomenon such as pluralisation functions similarly across language systems or reflects deep structural differences.

In the context of Arabic, plural formation is more complex than in English, comprising three grammatical categories: singular, dual, and plural (Alihawary, 2016). The dual form, marked by suffixes such as *-āni* or *-ayn*, is unique to formal Arabic and is absent in many informal dialects (Wightwick & Gaafar, 2024). Arabic plurals are generally classified as sound plurals—formed via affixation—and broken plurals, formed through internal modifications to the root structure. Fischer (2002) notes that pluralisation in Arabic is not merely a matter of number; it also involves shifts in grammatical case and meaning. Masculine and feminine plurals are distinguished by specific suffixes: for instance, the sound masculine plural takes *-ūna* (subject) and *-īna* (object), while the sound feminine plural uses *-ātun* and *-ātin*. English, by contrast, exhibits a relatively regular system of pluralisation, primarily through the use of suffixes such as *-s*, *-es*, *-ves*, and *-ies* (Herring, 2016; Jacobs, 2019). Nevertheless, it also includes a number of irregular forms (*man/men*, *foot/feet*) and unmarked plurals (*deer*, *sheep*). Some nouns, like *physics*, are always singular, while others, such as *cattle*, *police*, and *clergy*, exist only in the plural form (PC Das, 2025).

Given these contrasts, this study seeks to explore the pluralisation processes in English and Arabic through a contrastive morphological analysis, using qualitative methods to examine data drawn from everyday expressions of native speakers. By identifying the similarities and differences in plural formation between the two languages, this research provides insight into the broader phenomenon of cross-linguistic influence. It also highlights the implications of these differences for language learners, particularly with regard to grammatical categories that do not translate directly across linguistic systems. Ultimately, the study contributes to our understanding of language universals and offers practical applications for second-language teaching and learning.

Contrastive Linguistic Theory

Contrastive Linguistic Theory is concerned with the systematic analysis and comparison of the similarities and differences between two or more languages. When applied to the study of pluralisation, this theory facilitates the identification of the various morphological strategies used to form plurals across languages. It also allows for the recognition of both shared and divergent features in plural formation, providing insight into the structural patterns of each language.

The theory proves particularly valuable in distinguishing between regular (or sound) plurals which typically follow predictable affixation rules and irregular (or broken) plurals, which involve more complex morphological transformations. By highlighting these differences, Contrastive Linguistic Theory offers a framework for understanding the challenges that language learners often encounter when acquiring pluralisation rules in a second language (Mun & Wenguo, 2014). The relevance of this theory to the present study lies in its focus on the comparative analysis of linguistic features, including grammatical categories such as number. By examining pluralisation in both English and Arabic, the study leverages contrastive analysis to uncover patterns that inform language learning, teaching, and cross-linguistic comprehension.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate pluralisation in English and Arabic through a contrastive analysis of nominal morphology. A set of texts was selected to represent singular noun usage in English and subsequently translated into Arabic. These texts were drawn from the everyday language use of native speakers to ensure naturalness and authenticity. Each selected text was transformed into its plural form in both English and Arabic. The resulting plural forms were then analysed using the principles of Contrastive Linguistic Theory, with particular attention paid to morphological structures and grammatical patterns. The analysis focused on identifying similarities and differences in plural formation between the two languages. The results were interpreted by clearly outlining

the processes involved in plural formation in each language. Although the limited number of texts used constitutes a constraint, the qualitative

method allowed for a detailed and in-depth understanding of the topic, making the findings meaningful and informative for linguistic analysis.

Data Presentation

Texts: Singular Sentences in English

1. The boy arrived at school with a friend
2. My teacher received good news yesterday.
3. A lady should know the reason for her action
4. An organised school will train a teacher and a student.
5. The hall has a by and a goose in it

Singular Sentences in Arabic

١- وَصَلَ الصَّبِيُّ إِلَى الْمَدْرَسَةِ مَعَ صَدِيقِهِ
٢- لَقَدْ تَلَقَّى مُعَلِّمِي خَبْرًا جَدِيدَةً أَمْسَ.
٣- يَنْبَغِي لِلسَّيِّدَةِ أَنْ تَعْرِفَ سَبَبَ تَصْرِفِهَا
٤- سَتَقُومُ الْمَدْرَسَةُ الْمُنَظَّمَةُ بِتَدْرِيبِ الْمُعَلِّمِ وَالطَّالِبِ
٥- الْقَاعَةُ فِيهَا وَلَدٌ وَآوْرَةٌ

Transliteration

1. Wasala Sobiyyu ilal madrasati ma'a sodiqihi
2. Laqod talqa Mu'alimi Khabaran jadeedatan amsi
3. Yanbagi lisayidati an ta'rifa saba tasrifih
4. Sataqumul madrasatu almunazamatu bitadribul mu'alima wataaliba
5. Alqa'atu fiha waladun wa awzatun

Data Analysis

The data presented are converted to plural for the identification of the formation of the plural in them. The analysis is in tabular form.

THE ENGLISH TEXTS

Text	The Plural Form	Type of Plural
1.	The boys arrived at schools with some friends	The use of suffix "S"
2.	Our teachers received some good news yesterday	The suffix "S"
3.	Some ladies should know the reasons for their actions	The suffix "S"
4.	Some organised schools will train some students and some teachers	The suffix "S"
5.	The halls have some boys and some geese.	The suffix "S" and internal changes

The Arabic Texts

Texts	The Plural Form	Type of Plural
Text 1	١- وَصَلَ الْأَوْلَادُ إِلَى الْمَدَارِسِ مَعَ بَعْضِ الْأَصْدِقَاءِ . Wasalal aolaadu ilal madaarisi ma'a ba'dhal asdiqaahi	Broken plurals containing some internal structures
Text 2	٢- لَقَدْ تَلَقَى مَعْلَمُونَا بَعْضَ الْأَعْبَاءِ الْحَدِيدَةِ أَمْسِي Lagod talqa Mu'alimuuna b'adhal akhbaara jadeedati amsi	Sound masculine plural ending in the suffix "in" (subject) (Mu'alimuun) akbaar – broken plural
Text 3	٣- يَجِبُ عَلَى بَعْضِ السَّيِّدَاتِ أَنْ يَعْرِفْنَ أَسْبَابَ تَصْرِفَاتِهِنَّ Yajibu 'ala b'adha sayyidaati an y'arifna asbaaba tasrifaatihina	Sayyidaati – sound feminine plural ending in suffix aat. Asbaab – broken
Text 4	٤- بَعْضُ الْمَدَارِسِ الْمُنْظَمَةِ سَتَقُومُ بِتَدْرِيبِ بَعْضِ الطَّلَبِ وَبَعْضِ الْأَعْمَالِ B'adhal madaarisil munzamatatu sataquumu bitadriibi b'adha tulaabi wa b'adhal mu'alimiina	Madaarisi – broken plural Tulaabi – broken plural Mu'alimuna – sound masculine plural in the objective case marked by the suffix "una"
Text 5	٥- الْقَاعَةُ فِيهَا بَعْضُ الْأَوْلَادِ وَالْأَوَّلَى Alqa'atu fiha b'adhal aolaadi wal aozi	Alqaa'aatu – sound feminine plural in the subject position. Marked by the suffix "aatu" 'Aolaadi and Alaozi – broken plurals

Discussion

The findings of this study support the theory of language universals (Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Finegan & Adams, 2024), showing that pluralisation is a shared grammatical feature across both English and Arabic. This reflects Chomsky's (as cited in Hess, 2022) view of universal grammar as an innate system common to all human languages. The analysis demonstrates that both languages predominantly form plurals through morphological processes involving suffixation, affirming the structural parallels highlighted by Malmkjaer (2005) in her categorisation of formal universals.

In English, plural nouns are commonly formed by adding the suffix –s or –es, with some irregular forms also present (Jacobs, 2019; Herring, 2016). Arabic likewise relies on suffixation for regular or sound plurals, but its

system is more complex, involving both gender and grammatical case distinctions (Alihawary, 2016; Wightwick & Gaafar, 2024). Specifically, Arabic uses suffixes such as –ūn or –īn for the sound masculine plural, and –ātu or –āti for the sound feminine plural. These findings are consistent with Fischer's (2002) assertion that pluralisation in Arabic also involves case-marking and shifts in meaning, beyond simple number transformation.

Both languages also exhibit broken or irregular plurals, which do not follow predictable suffixation patterns. This supports Corbett's (2000) view that while number is a universal feature, the means of expressing it vary greatly across languages. These morphological irregularities align with Denham and Lobeck's (2024) observation that pluralisation differs across languages in both method and complexity.

The implications of these findings are noteworthy. They affirm that pluralisation is a linguistic universal, present in both English and Arabic, and largely realised through suffixation. However, as El-Zawawy (2016) notes, even where structural similarities exist, meaningful differences remain across linguistic domains such as morphology and syntax. Arabic's case-sensitive plural forms, for instance, reflect grammatical features absent in English, offering further evidence for Greenberg's (as cited in Hess, 2022) emphasis on identifying both shared and distinct features across languages. This study also has pedagogical value, echoing Mun and Wenguo's (2014) argument that contrastive analysis helps identify the challenges language learners face when transferring grammatical rules between languages. Understanding the rules governing plural formation both regular and irregular can help teachers anticipate learner difficulties, particularly for Arabic speakers learning English, or vice versa. Nonetheless, the study has limitations. It focuses exclusively on noun pluralisation and does not extend the analysis to other word classes, such as adjectives or verbs, where number distinctions may also occur, particularly in Arabic. Additionally, the small number of texts used limits the generalisability of the findings. As PC Das (2025) suggests, exploring pluralisation across a broader range of linguistic contexts would provide a more comprehensive understanding of morphological diversity.

Conclusion

This study examined the similarities and differences in the methods of plural formation in English and Arabic nouns through the lens of

Contrastive Linguistic Theory. The findings revealed that both languages employ two principal strategies for forming plurals: regular morphological processes (primarily through suffixation) and irregular forms, known in Arabic as broken plurals. While there are overlapping features, notable differences were also observed. One key difference lies in the morphological complexity of Arabic, where plural formation is influenced by both case and gender factors that do not affect English pluralisation. Additionally, Arabic employs a wider range of plural suffixes depending on grammatical context, whereas English relies on a smaller, more predictable set of plural markers such as *-s* and *-es*. Both languages also include irregular forms that deviate from these patterns.

The implications of this study are significant for language learners and educators. Learners may encounter challenges when attempting to apply pluralisation rules from one language to another, particularly due to differences in morphological structure and grammatical constraints. Despite some shared features, pluralisation must be understood within the broader linguistic system of each language. This study was limited to the pluralisation of nouns in English and Arabic, based on texts drawn from everyday English usage and translated into Arabic. Other linguistic elements—such as pluralisation in adjectives or verbs, or broader syntactic and semantic contrasts—were not investigated. Future research is encouraged to explore these areas, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of cross-linguistic similarities and differences in grammar and morphology.

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