

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PAST TENSE VERB MORPHOLOGY IN ARABIC AND VIETNAMESE

1. ABSTRACT

This study conducts a comparative analysis of past tense verb morphology between Arabic (an inflectional language) and Vietnamese (an isolating language). By examining twelve grammatical persons, the paper elucidates the mechanism of integrating subject information into verbal suffixes in Arabic, contrasted with the analytic mechanism based on function words and personal pronouns in Vietnamese. The results indicate that while Arabic achieves conciseness through morphological inflection, Vietnamese prioritizes socio-pragmatic flexibility. This research provides a systematic framework to assist learners in effectively transitioning their cognitive approach from lexico-syntactic structures to morpho-grammatical constructions.

Keywords: Comparative linguistics, Arabic, Vietnamese, verb morphology, past tense, 12 grammatical persons.

2. INTRODUCTION

The typological differences between Arabic and Vietnamese create significant barriers in language acquisition. Arabic, belonging to the Semitic branch, is renowned for its root-and-pattern system, where information regarding person, number, and gender is encoded directly into the verb. Conversely, Vietnamese, an Austroasiatic language, is a quintessential example of an isolating language where words do not undergo morphological changes. This study focuses on the past tense (*Al-Fi'l Al-Maadi*) to analyze how these two systems resolve the identification of the acting entity, thereby offering academic insights into the equivalence between morphemes and vocabulary.

3. METHODS

The study employs a descriptive and direct comparative method. The verb "to write" (*K-T-B* - كتب) is selected as a model due to its prevalence and standard trilateral structure. Twelve conjugated forms of this verb in the past tense are placed alongside equivalent Vietnamese structures. The analysis centers on two axes: the Morphological Axis (Arabic suffixes) and the Pragmatic Axis (the Vietnamese address system).

4. DETAILED RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The past tense verb system in Arabic is constructed based on the tight integration between the verbal root and morphological suffixes, creating a unit that carries multi-

34 layered information. Below is a detailed survey across twelve grammatical persons.

35 **4.1. First Person Singular (I)**

36 As the starting point of the inflectional system, the first person singular is where the
37 subject directly asserts their individual presence in the action.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -tu	Katab- tu (كُتِبْتُ)
Vietnamese	Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Tôi đã viết

38 In Arabic, the suffix *-tu* is not merely a phonetic unit but a functional morpheme that
39 encapsulates both categories of person and number. When attached to the root, it
40 eliminates the need for independent pronouns in most communicative contexts. In
41 Vietnamese, the mechanism is entirely reversed, relying on a lexico-syntactic structure to
42 disaggregate meanings: the pronoun "tôi" identifies the subject, and the particle "đã"
43 locates the action in time. This contrast demonstrates the morphological economy of
44 Arabic against the structural transparency of Vietnamese vocabulary, illustrating the
45 transition from bound morphemes to independent lexical entities.

46 **4.2. First Person Plural (We)**

47 The transition from the individual "I" to a collective subject is achieved through the
48 plural morpheme of the first person.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -na	Katab- na (كُتِبْنَا)
Vietnamese	Plural Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Chúng tôi/ta đã viết

49 The appearance of the suffix *-na* in Arabic creates a morphological unity for any group of

50 subjects that includes the speaker, regardless of inclusivity or exclusivity. However, when
 51 contrasted with Vietnamese, we find a deeper lexical differentiation where the speaker
 52 must choose between "chúng ta" (inclusive) and "chúng tôi" (exclusive). This reflects that
 53 while Arabic is more complex in verbal inflection, Vietnamese possesses a higher lexical
 54 resolution in defining the boundaries of the communicative community, showing that
 55 Arabic focuses on numerical morphology while Vietnamese prioritizes social interaction.

56 4.3. Second Person Singular - Masculine (You - Male)

57 The second person singular introduces the category of gender, a pivotal morphological
 58 feature in Arabic.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -ta	Katab- ta (كَتَبْتَ)
Vietnamese	Honorific/Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Anh/Em đã viết

59 Arabic grammaticizes masculine gender through the suffix *-ta*, an internal transformation
 60 process that requires no external support. Meanwhile, Vietnamese embeds this
 61 information into its kinship-based address system, where using "anh" or "em" identifies
 62 gender while simultaneously establishing a social hierarchy. Consequently, the
 63 equivalence here reflects a cognitive shift from pure gender classification to status-based
 64 classification, creating a unique intersection between rigid grammatical categories and
 65 flexible honorific cultures.

66 4.4. Second Person Singular - Feminine (You - Female)

67 Gender opposition is most clearly depicted when the direct interlocutor is female.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -ti	Katab- ti (كَتَبْتِ)

Vietnamese	Honorific/Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Chi/Em đã viết
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68 With just a change of the vowel from *-ta* to *-ti*, Arabic completely redefines the intended
69 subject of the action. In Vietnamese, the verb remains entirely invariant, and the burden
70 of identification is shifted to pronouns such as "chị" or "em." The phonetic precision of
71 the Arabic morpheme creates a tight system of opposition, forcing the learner to maintain
72 an awareness of the interlocutor's gender, which Vietnamese handles by leveraging its
73 flexible lexical system to express equivalent meanings.

74 **4.5. Second Person Dual (You Two)**

75 The dual number is a unique morphological feature, creating an intermediate numerical
76 category between singular and plural in Arabic.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -tuma	Katab- tuma (كَتَبْتُمَا)
Vietnamese	Number "hai" + Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Hai bạn/anh chị đã viết

77 The form *-tuma* serves as a highly grammaticized numerical specifier. Vietnamese, not
78 possessing a dual morphological form, must utilize a lexicalization method through the
79 number "hai" combined with a pronoun. This contrast shows that Arabic expresses
80 quantity through rigid morphological rules, whereas Vietnamese relies on lexical
81 assembly, making the dual number a cognitive barrier where learners must adapt to using
82 specific suffixes instead of numerical quantifiers.

83 **4.6. Second Person Plural - Masculine (You - All Male/Mixed)**

84 When the scale of the subject group increases, Arabic transitions to the formal plural
85 morphology for the masculine gender.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -tum	Katab- tum (كُتِبْتُمْ)
Vietnamese	Plural Marker + Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Các anh/bạn đã viết

86 The suffix *-tum* characterizes the masculine generalization in Arabic, often applied to
87 gender-mixed groups. In Vietnamese, the lexical structure "các + pronoun" provides a
88 flexible mechanism for group designation. The morphological transition from the dual -
89 *tuma* to the plural *-tum* reflects the principle of **Linguistic Economy** through the
90 optimization of syllabic length: the language prioritizes a shorter form that carries a
91 broader information capacity. This demonstrates the efficiency of the inflectional system
92 in Arabic compared to the transparent lexical markers used in Vietnamese to manage
93 numerical information.

94 **4.7. Second Person Plural - Feminine (You - All Female)**

95 Opposite the generalization of the masculine group, a group consisting entirely of female
96 subjects possesses a distinct and gender-marked form.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -tunna	Katab- tunna (كُتِبْتُنَّ)
Vietnamese	Plural Marker + Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Các chị/em đã viết

97 The suffix *-tunna*, with its geminate consonant, creates a powerful phonetic nuance,
98 asserting the absolute gender of the acting subject. Vietnamese handles this by combining
99 the plural marker with corresponding feminine pronouns. Consequently, we observe that
100 while Vietnamese maintains the neutrality of the verb, Arabic compels the speaker to
101 maintain gender awareness in every morphological change, testifying to the high degree
102 of specialization in the Semitic inflectional system.

103 **4.8. Third Person Singular - Masculine (He)**

104 Moving to the third person, we encounter the most basic form of the Arabic verb, which
 105 serves as the starting point for all other transformations.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root (Often ending in -a)	Katab- a (كَتَبَ)
Vietnamese	3rd Person Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Anh ấy đã viết

106 The form *Katab-a* is the most minimalist unit, often considered the "zero-suffix" form in
 107 the past tense system. In Vietnamese, identifying the third person depends entirely on the
 108 distant pronoun system. The correlation between the "zero form" of Arabic and the
 109 "detached pronoun" of Vietnamese reflects two different approaches to establishing a
 110 subject absent from the conversation, while identifying the masculine singular as the
 111 most crucial morphological reference point for constructing the entire Arabic verbal
 112 system.

113 **4.9. Third Person Singular - Feminine (She)**

114 To identify a female subject being discussed, Arabic utilizes a specific feminine suffix for
 115 the third person.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -at	Katab- at (كَتَبَتْ)
Vietnamese	3rd Person Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Cô ấy/Chị ấy đã viết

116 The suffix *-at* performs the function of gender classification while altering the rhythmic
 117 syllable structure of the word. Compared to Vietnamese, the change is limited to the
 118 choice of the noun/pronoun (e.g., "cô", "chị") without affecting the verbal structure. This

119 equivalence once again confirms the consistency in gender classification across Arabic
 120 grammatical persons, contrasted with the lexical flexibility and socio-contextual
 121 sensitivity of Vietnamese.

122 **4.10. Third Person Dual (Those Two)**

123 The dual number in the third person continues to exhibit complexity by distinguishing
 124 gender even within the verb form.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + -aa / -ata	Katab- aa / Katab- ata (كَتَبَا / كَتَبَتَا)
Vietnamese	Determiner Phrase + "đã" + Verb	Hai người họ đã viết

125 The separation between suffixes *-aa* and *-ata* requires absolute precision in identifying
 126 the subject. Vietnamese demonstrates lexical richness and flexibility by using noun
 127 phrases or specific quantifiers such as "hai người họ" (those two), "cả hai anh ấy" (both
 128 of them), or "hai chị ấy" to express the dual concept clearly. This comparison shows that
 129 while Arabic expresses sophisticated grammatical details through morphology,
 130 Vietnamese maximizes the expressive capacity of its isolating lexical system, proving the
 131 parallel between morphological specialization and lexical explicitness.

132 **4.11. Third Person Plural - Masculine (They - Male/Mixed)**

133 When referring to a group of absent male (or mixed) subjects, Arabic applies a
 134 characteristic plural masculine form.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -uu	Katab- uu (كَتَبُوا)

Vietnamese	Plural Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Họ đã viết
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135 The suffix *-uu* signifies collectivity and a phonetic open-endedness. Vietnamese uses the
 136 pronoun "họ," an invariant lexical unit. This contrast highlights the multi-layered
 137 information compression strategy of Arabic versus the analytical strategy of Vietnamese,
 138 where the notion of "plurality" is inherent in the pronoun rather than expressed through
 139 verbal change, thus establishing the third person plural masculine as the prevalent form
 140 for designating external groups.

141 **4.12. Third Person Plural - Feminine (They - Female)**

142 The system of twelve persons concludes with the form reserved for the group of women
 143 being discussed.

Language	Morphological / Lexical Structure	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -na	Katab- na (كَتَبْنَ)
Vietnamese	Plural Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Họ (nhóm nữ) đã viết

144 The short *-na* suffix here must be strictly distinguished from the long *-naa* of the first
 145 person. Vietnamese handles this through explanatory lexical methods if the gender of the
 146 "they" group needs to be clarified. This morphological overlap requires learners to have
 147 strong grammatical knowledge for decoding, while affirming the integrity of the Arabic
 148 morphological structure against the Vietnamese flexibility based on contextual analysis.

149 **5. CONCLUSION**

150 The comparison of twelve grammatical persons reveals a profound opposition in
 151 typological linguistic strategies. Arabic employs an **integrative strategy**, turning the verb
 152 into a multi-layered information carrier. Vietnamese employs a **disintegrative strategy**,
 153 keeping the verb pure and shifting the informational burden onto the pronoun system and
 154 syntactic order. Mastering these comparison tables helps learners understand how the
 155 worldview of each nation is encoded: one side in morphological precision, the other in

156 social flexibility.

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