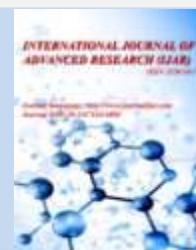




Journal Homepage: [-www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com)

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/22734
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/22734>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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

Van Thi Hanh Dung

1. University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 8 December 2025

Final Accepted: 10 January 2026

Published: February 2026

Key words:-

Comparative linguistics, Arabic, Vietnamese, verb morphology, past tense, 12 grammatical persons, linguistic typology.

Abstract

This study conducts a comprehensive comparative analysis of past tense verb morphology between Arabic, a primary representative of the Semitic inflectional (fusional) language family, and Vietnamese, a quintessential isolating (analytic) language of the Austroasiatic family. By examining the complete paradigm of twelve grammatical persons in the past tense (Al Fi'1 Al Maadi), the paper elucidates the complex mechanism of integrating subject information (person, number, and gender) into verbal suffixes in Arabic. This is contrasted with the Vietnamese analytic mechanism, which relies heavily on independent function words and a sophisticated system of personal pronouns and honorifics. The results indicate that while Arabic achieves high communicative efficiency and "morphological economy" through inflection, Vietnamese prioritizes "lexical transparency" and socio pragmatic flexibility. This research provides a systematic framework to assist learners and educators in effectively transitioning their cognitive approach from lexico syntactic structures to morpho-grammatical constructions.

"© 2026 by the Author(s). Published by IJAR under CC BY 4.0. Unrestricted use allowed with credit to the author."

Introduction:-

The typological classification of languages provides a fundamental framework for understanding the diverse mechanisms of human communication and the cognitive structures underlying language acquisition. Arabic and Vietnamese stand at opposite ends of the typological spectrum, presenting a unique case for contrastive linguistic study. Arabic, belonging to the Semitic branch of the Afroasiatic family, is renowned for its synthetic (inflectional) nature. It utilizes a unique "root-and-pattern" system where grammatical categories—including person, number, and gender—are encoded directly into the verbal structure through internal changes and suffixation. In contrast, Vietnamese, an Austroasiatic language, is a quintessential example of an analytic (isolating) language. Its morphology is characterized by invariant word forms; meanings that are expressed morphologically in other languages are disaggregated into separate lexical units in Vietnamese, such as tense markers and pronouns. This fundamental difference creates significant cognitive barriers for Vietnamese learners of Arabic, who must adapt to a system where a single word form carries multiple layers of grammatical meaning. While research exists on Arabic morphology and Vietnamese syntax independently, there is a significant research gap in direct contrastive studies between these two languages. Specifically, how these two systems resolve the identification of the acting entity in

Corresponding Author:-Van Thi Hanh Dung

Address:-University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City.

the past tense has not been systematically mapped. This study focuses on the past tense (Al-Fi'l Al-Maadi) to analyze the functional equivalence between Arabic bound morphemes and Vietnamese independent lexical items. By providing a detailed contrastive paradigm of the twelve grammatical persons, this research offers academic insights into linguistic transfer and seeks to facilitate a smoother pedagogical transition for learners.

Literature Review:-

The study of Arabic morphology has traditionally been grounded in the "Root-and-Pattern" theory, which posits that words are formed by interweaving a consonantal root (carrying core semantic meaning) with a vocalic pattern (carrying grammatical information). Al-Jarim and Amin (2014), in *Al-Nahw Al-Wadih*, provide a detailed account of these conjugations, focusing on the preservation of the root across various patterns. From a modern typological perspective, Comrie (1989) classifies Arabic as a "fusional" language, characterized by nonconcatenative morphology, where a single suffix often represents multiple grammatical categories simultaneously (e.g., the suffix -tu representing both 'first person' and 'singular'). Regarding Vietnamese, Thompson (1965) remains a cornerstone in understanding its isolating structure, emphasizing that the Vietnamese verb is strictly invariant. Nguyen (1997) further explores how Vietnamese manages temporal and aspectual relations through a system of "hur từ" (function words) like "đã," "đang," and "sẽ." Contrastive linguistics, as discussed by Odlin (1989), suggests that the "linguistic distance" between the native language (L1) and the target language (L2) is a primary factor in the difficulty of acquisition. When the L1 (Vietnamese) is analytic and the L2 (Arabic) is synthetic, the learner must not only learn new words but an entirely new way of organizing grammatical information. This study builds upon these theoretical foundations to explore how functional equivalence is established when a bound morpheme in Arabic is translated into a complex phrase in Vietnamese.

Methodology:-

This study employs a qualitative contrastive analysis (CA) design to investigate the morphological and syntactic structures of past tense verbs. The primary data consists of the morphological paradigms of the regular trilateral verb "K-T-B" (to write - كَتَبَ). This verb was selected as a "canonical model" due to its prevalence and standard structure, which allows for a clear analysis of suffixation without the phonetic complexities associated with "weak" (irregular) roots.

The analytical framework is organized along two primary axes:

1. **The Morphological Axis:** This focuses on the Arabic verbal system, specifically analyzing how bound morphemes (suffixes) are attached to the root to express the twelve grammatical persons.
2. **The Lexico-Syntactic Axis:** This focuses on the Vietnamese system, analyzing how independent lexical units—specifically the temporal marker "đã" and the pronoun/honorific system—combine to express equivalent meanings.

The study follows a systematic four-step contrastive process: (1) Description of the Arabic form, (2) Description of the Vietnamese equivalent, (3) Comparison of the encoding strategies, and (4) Discussion of pedagogical and pragmatic implications. This method ensures a comprehensive mapping of the points of convergence and divergence between the two systems.

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

First Person Singular (I):-

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

Language	Morphological Structure / Lexical	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -tu	Katab-tu(كَتَبْتُ)

Vietnamese	Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Tôi đã viết
-------------------	-----------------------	-------------

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

First Person Plural (We):-

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

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

The appearance of the suffix -na in Arabic creates a morphological unity for any group of subjects that includes the speaker, regardless of inclusivity or exclusivity. However, when contrasted with Vietnamese, we find a deeper lexical differentiation where the speaker must choose between "chúng ta" (inclusive) and "chúng tôi" (exclusive). This reflects that while Arabic is more complex in verbal inflection, Vietnamese possesses a higher lexical resolution in defining the boundaries of the communicative community, showing that Arabic focuses on numerical morphology while Vietnamese prioritizes social interaction.

Second Person Singular - Masculine (You - Male):-

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

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

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

Second Person Singular - Feminine (You - Female):-

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

Language	Morphological Structure / Lexical	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -ti	Katab-ti(كُتِبْتِ)
Vietnamese	Honorific/Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Chị/Em đã viết

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

Second Person Dual (You Two):-

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

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

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

Second Person Plural - Masculine (You - All Male/Mixed):-

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

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

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

Second Person Plural - Feminine (You - All Female):-

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

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

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

Third Person Singular - Masculine (He):-

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

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

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

Third Person Singular - Feminine (She):-

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

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

The suffix -at performs the function of gender classification while altering the rhythmic syllable structure of the word. Compared to Vietnamese, the change is limited to the choice of the noun/pronoun (e.g., "cô", "chị") without affecting the verbal structure. This equivalence once again confirms the consistency in gender classification across Arabic grammatical persons, contrasted with the lexical flexibility and socio-contextual sensitivity of Vietnamese.

Third Person Dual (Those Two):-

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

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

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

lexical explicitness.

Third Person Plural - Masculine (They - Male/Mixed):-

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

Language	Morphological Structure / Lexical	Specific Example
Arabic	Root + Suffix -uu	Katab- uu (كَتَبُوا)
Vietnamese	Plural Pronoun + "đã" + Verb	Họ đã viết

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

Third Person Plural - Feminine (They - Female):-

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

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

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

Conclusion:-

This comparative analysis of twelve grammatical persons in the past tense reveals a profound opposition in typological linguistic strategies. Arabic employs an integrative strategy, transforming the verb into a dense informational nucleus encoding person, number, and gender through bound morphological markers. Conversely, Vietnamese utilizes an analytic strategy, disaggregating these grammatical meanings into corresponding transparent lexical units—specifically temporal particles and a socio-contextual pronoun system. For Vietnamese learners, the primary challenge of acquiring Arabic is not merely memorizing suffixes, but undergoing a fundamental cognitive shift from a word-order-dependent logic to a morphological-dependency logic. Educators should emphasize the functional equivalence between Arabic suffixes and Vietnamese lexical phrases to facilitate this transition. Future research should expand this framework to include irregular (weak) verbs and present tense paradigms, as well as empirical studies on learner error patterns to further validate these findings.

References:-

1. لبنان: مؤسسة الرسالة ناشرون. علي الجارم ومصطفى أمين. (2014). النحو الواضح في قواعد اللغة العربية
2. مصر: المكتب العلمي للتأليف. فؤاد نعمة. (1998). ملخص قواعد اللغة العربية
3. Comrie, B. (1989). Language Universals and Linguistic Typology. University of Chicago Press.
4. Nguyen, T. C. (1997). Ngu phap tieng Viet (Vietnamese Grammar). National University Press, Hanoi.
5. Odlin, T. (1989). Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning. Cambridge University Press.
6. Thompson, L. C. (1965). A Vietnamese Grammar. University of Washington Press.