



Plurality in Urdu is a somewhat complicated topic, both in terms of morphology and idiom. Urdu grammarians distinguish between two cases when discussing plurality in Urdu. The first is the direct case. The second is the oblique case. The direct case is used when plural nouns are not modified by a postposition. The oblique case is used when they are. Postpositions are words like میں [meñ] (in), کا [kā] (of), and سے [se] (from, than) and earn their grammatical name by the fact that they come after the nouns that they modify—e.g., دل میں [dil meñ] (in the heart).

Masculine and feminine nouns follow different rules of pluralization in the direct case and each gender of noun follows different rules depending on its ending. In discussing these endings, grammarians often distinguish between “marked” and “unmarked” nouns. This can be a bit misleading, since there are some cases in which words that are pluralized according to the rule for unmarked feminine nouns are, in fact, regularly feminine and thus can be considered “marked” in a sense. For example, certain patterns of Arabic nouns (e.g., those in the same pattern as تصویر [tasvīr] (image)) and forms of Persian nouns (e.g., verbal nouns ending in ش [ish] such as خواہش [khvāhish] (desire)) are always feminine and thus “marked.” However, they are pluralized according to the rules for what are here called “unmarked feminine nouns” by suffixing یں in the direct case—hence, تصویریں [tasvīreñ] (images) and خواہشیں [khvāhishēñ] (desires). However, in this module, when we speak of marked and unmarked nouns, we will follow convention.

Marked masculine nouns are those that end in an ā sound, whether spelled with ا [ā] or آ [ā]. Unmarked masculine nouns are those that end in any other letter. Marked feminine nouns are those that end in ی [ī]. Unmarked feminine nouns are those that end in any other letter.

In the direct case, marked masculine nouns are pluralized by changing ا or آ [ā] to ے [e].

لڑکا	[laṛkā] (boy)	←	لڑکے	[laṛke] (boys)
ستارہ	[sitārā] (star)	←	ستارے	[sitāre] (stars)

Conversely, unmarked masculine nouns do not change:

ایک لفظ	[ek lafz] (one word)	←	دو لفظ	[do lafz] (two words)
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Marked feminine nouns are pluralized by suffixing یں to ی [ī]. The suffixation changes the pronunciation of ی from ī to y preceded by a short i.

لڑکی	[laṛkī] (girl)	←	لڑکیاں	[laṛkiyāñ] (girls)
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Unmarked feminine nouns are pluralized by suffixing بی [eñ] to the word.

صورت [sūrat] (form) ← صورتیں [sūrateñ] (forms)

All plural nouns in the oblique case (that is, those modified by a postposition) end in وں [oñ]. The only exception is in the case of words that are already plural according to another pluralization system (see, for example, the notes on Arabic plurals, below).

In the following, I have used the postposition میں [meñ] (in; among) for the sake of example.

Marked masculine nouns drop the ے [e] ending and replace it with وں [oñ]

لڑکے [laṛke] (boys) ← لڑکوں میں [laṛkoñ meñ] (among boys)

ستارے [sitāre] (stars) ← ستاروں میں [sitāroñ meñ] (among stars)

Unmarked masculine nouns simply take وں [oñ] as a suffix.

دو لفظ [do lafz](two words) ← دو لفظوں میں [do lafzoñ meñ] (in two words)

Marked feminine nouns drop their ان [āñ] ending and replace it with وں [oñ]

لڑکیاں [laṛkiyāñ] (girls) ← لڑکیوں میں [laṛkiyoñ meñ] (among girls)

Unmarked feminine nouns drop بی [eñ] and replace it with وں [oñ].

صورتیں [sūrateñ] (in forms, cases) ← صورتوں میں [sūratoñ meñ] (in forms, cases)

Urdu Plurality and Time Words

Words marking time do not in standard Urdu take the oblique plural suffix وں [oñ] when their number is specified.

دو سال [do sāl] (two years) ← دو سال سے [do sāl se] (for two years)

In Standard Urdu, the oblique plural suffix is reserved for cases in which the number of units measuring time is unspecified.

دو سال سے [do sāl se] (for two years) ← سالوں سے [sāloñ se] (for [unspecified, countless] years)

Likewise, the postposition is dropped in idioms where a particular number is unspecified. For example,

ان دنوں [in dinoñ] (these days, nowadays)

Arabic Plural Forms

Urdu observes Arabic plural forms in many loanwords. Linguists typically distinguish two kinds of Arabic plurals. The first are those that are formed by suffixation. The second are often called “broken plurals,” since they are formed by breaking singular forms of words apart with the prefixation, infixation, and suffixation of vowels. Here follow two of the most common forms of each type of plural.

Arabic Plural Suffixes

The most common Arabic plural suffix for inanimate objects is ات [āt]. In most cases, it is simply suffixed to the end of a noun.

خیال [khayāl] (idea, thought) ← خیالات [khayālāt] (ideas, thoughts)

In some cases, suffixation requires either ت [t] or ء [ā] to be dropped from the end of the singular noun. The reason for this is that these two letters render the Arabic suffix ة, which is only rarely used in Urdu, but is common in Arabic, in which it is pronounced either *t* or *ā* depending on its use. Arabic drops ة when suffixing ات, and Urdu applies the same rule to Arabic nouns ending in ت [t] or ء [ā] where these letters represent what would, in Arabic, be ة. For example,

صفت [sifat] (attribute; adjective) ← صفات [sifāt] (attributes; adjectives)

درجہ [darjā] (degree, rank) ← درجات [darjāt] (degrees, ranks)

The suffix is also used with Persian words.

خواہش [khvāhish] (wish, desire) ← خواہشات [khvāhishāt] (wishes, desires)

Following Arabic, Urdu uses the suffix ین [īn] with nouns referring to sentient beings. For example,

مصنف [musannif] (writer) ← مصنفین [musannifīn] (writers)

Arabic Broken Plurals

Arabic forms plurals by breaking apart words with regular patterns of prefixation, infixation, and suffixation to the three (and sometimes four) root letters that characterize Arabic words. Urdu borrows and applies dozens of such “broken” plural patterns from Arabic. Here are two of the most common ones.

The first pattern prefixes ۱ [a] to the first letter of the root and infixes ۱ [ā] between the second and third root letters. For example,

لفظ [lafz] (word) ← الفاظ [alfāz] (words)
 فکر [fīkr] (thought; worry) ← فکرا [afkār] (thoughts, worries)

The second pattern infixes ۱ [u] between the first and second root letters and و [ū] between the second and third.

حرف [harf] (letter) ← حروف [hurūf] (letters)
 علم [ilm] (knowledge, sciences) ← علوم [ulūm] (fields of knowledge, sciences)

Note that it is typically considered incorrect and inelegant to suffix the oblique plural ending ۱ [oñ] to nouns that already show plurality. Hence, خیالاتوں میں [k̄hayālātōñ meñ] (“in thoughts”) is considered redundant, incorrect, and inelegant.

In some cases, the difference between the Arabic plural and the standard Urdu plural may mark a difference in meaning. Consider the following

خبر [k̄habar] (a piece of news) ← خبریں [k̄habareñ] (news)
 اخبار [aḵhbār] (newspaper)

In the second case, the Arabic plural is treated as singular noun in Urdu. This and similar cases, the appropriate plural suffixes are used.

اخبار [aḵhbār] (newspaper) ← اخبارات [aḵhbārāt] (newspapers)
 ← اخباروں میں [aḵhbāroñ meñ] (in newspapers)