



Case Endings in Standard Arabic

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Abstract

This study aims briefly at describing and analyzing some aspects of Case endings in Standard Arabic. This is because that Case seems to play a significant role in the grammar of not only Arabic but also in the grammar of many other languages. Many readers of this study might be wondering what Case is and why it is being dealt with.² In order to comprehend the notion of Case in Arabic, it is necessary to consider the language in which word order is not as stable as it is in the case of English.

In Arabic, an NP must have one of three Cases: nominative (NOM), accusative (ACC), or genitive (GEN) according to its position in a sentence. Many learners of Arabic as native or foreign speakers of the language may have no clear idea about Case system in the language. The rules of Case help these learners understand the proper structure of the language. Therefore, a distinction between three types of Case, i.e., Nominative Case, Accusative Case and Genitive Case, is to be dealt with for Arabic lexical NPs.

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² Case is the notion of grammar which is usually written with a capital letter 'C' as 'Case' to be distinguished from the ordinary word 'case'.



Questions of the Study

In order to be familiar with the nature of nominal Case and its mechanism in the structure of Arabic sentences, this research study seeks the answer for the following questions:

1. What is Case?
2. Why are we studying Case?
3. How many Case forms are there in Arabic? What are they? And how are they assigned to Arabic NPs?

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to deal with the discussion of the three different aspects of Case markers for Arabic nouns, i.e., Nominative Case, Accusative Case and Genitive Case. It also aims to prove that the rate of nominal Case marking differs widely in different positions of Arabic sentences. In brief, this study focuses on the difficulty of understanding Arabic Case system encountered by the learners of the language.

Problem of the Study

The Problem of the study lies in the fact that most of the Arabic learners, whether they are native or non-native speakers of the language, are not familiar with the final Case endings of NPs. Furthermore, some other learners of the language do not know how to differentiate subjects from objects in the Arabic sentences. In addition, some of them do not know what kind of Case is assigned to the subject or the object, and how it is assigned to any one of them.

Importance of the Study

The importance of the present study lies in the fact that identifying Case endings for the NPs in Arabic sentences properly enables learners to deal with the language easily regarding the different positions of these NPs in the sentences. In addition, it helps them use the language properly in a standard manner; the way to speak and write Standard Arabic. All in all, this paper is about Arabic Case system and its importance in the structure of Arabic grammar. It is merely a linguistic study for the different Cases of Arabic nouns. In this study, the researcher focuses on the study of Arabic Case system as “a language system.

This study would shed light on the nature of Case system in Arabic and its different aspects of Arabic NPs which the learners of the language may encounter. It provides a clear analysis of the three different Case forms of Arabic NPs supported with suitable examples. It also provides some results and finding derived the analysis of the topic. Finally, it suggests some recommendations for further research studies.



Introduction

Languages are different in the way they put words in a sentence. They are also different in the way governing the declension process of these words. The word order of a language is constructed by the dimension of the grammatical functions of Case.

Case is a distinctive grammatical category of words, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, etc., which reflects the grammatical functions carried out by these words in phrases, clauses, or sentences. In many languages, nouns take different inflectional forms depending on their positions and what type of Case they are in.

Some languages such as Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Hungarian, Hindi, and Arabic have comprehensive Case systems, with nouns, pronouns, and adjectives, all inflecting (usually by means of different suffixes) to mark their Case. English is an exception, the case in which it has largely lost its Case system, although its personal pronouns still have three different forms of Case represented by the nominative, accusative and genitive Cases that are used with personal pronouns only. There are many languages which have morphological Case forms for their nouns or pronouns.³ In English, the morphological Case is restricted only to pronouns, while the lexical NPs have an abstract Case.

In linguistic theory, Case has been usually treated as carrying direct information about the Noun Phrases (NPs) modified by the Case marker. Case theories were developed on the basis of configurational languages. Configurational languages identify grammatical relations through their syntactic structure (Nordlinger 1998). English is, for example, a configurational language as its word order tells us which of the NPs is the subject and which is the object.

In Arabic, Nouns and adjectives are declined for Case. This research will focus a great deal of attention on the Case of nouns only. If you are a new learner of the Arabic language, it may interest you to note that foreign students of this language have a very tough trouble with Case. Even though Case may appear to be an unfamiliar notion to learners, they should have little problem with it here. There are some languages which have more Cases than Arabic does and they are considerably more complex.

Therefore, Case refers to the form of a noun or an adjective it takes depending on its function in a sentence. For instance, a noun which functions as the subject of a sentence has a different Case than it would have if it were the object of that sentence. In general, different Cases are indicated by changes in the vowels attached to the ends of nouns and adjectives.

³ By morphological Case, we mean the overt Case form which is marked in the morphology of words.

In Arabic, there are three different Case endings. These Case endings are applied to most nouns and adjectives of the language. They are not applied to its pronouns nor do they apply to singular demonstratives. Case is not also applied at all to words used to form questions in Arabic.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to examine Case marking as a mechanism of the encoding of grammatical function in Arabic NPs as a concrete framework to demonstrate how the Case markers work to identify the grammatical functions of these NPs in a sentence.

First of all, we have to know what Case endings of Arabic nouns are, and how they operate in the structure of the language. Arabic nouns and adjectives are conjugated for Case. As for nouns, they are conjugated for Case according to their different positions in the sentences; Arabic adjectives are also conjugated for Case according to number, gender, and person when qualifying these nouns. This means that there must be an agreement between nouns and adjectives in Arabic regarding Case, opposite to English.⁴ Case endings of Arabic nouns are little markers known as *Harakaat* (movements). These movements are put on the final letters (morphemes) of nouns presenting the grammatical functions of these nouns. Arabic Case endings are represented by three diacritical marks. These types of diacritics are represented by these figures: ُ, َ, and ِ. The first one is called ‘dhamma’, the second ‘fat-ha’ and the third ‘kasra’ which are represented by the English short vowels /u/, /a/ and /i/ respectively. These three short vowels refer also to nominative, accusative and genitive Cases respectively.

Arabic Case endings are usually not written outside of the Holy Qur’an and children’s books. But you will hear news broadcasters pronouncing them; and if you want to speak the standard Arabic (al-fus-ha) well, it is very necessary to understand its Case markers. Each of these markers should refer to one of the following Cases — nominative (al-marfū3), accusative (al-manSūb) and genitive (al-majrūr). These three Cases are again represented by three diacritical marks, i.e., *dhamma*, *fat-ha* and *Kasra* respectively. They are called short vowels in Arabic, representing the English short vowels /u/, /i/ and /a/ respectively as represented in the following shapes: ُ َ ِ

Looking again at the above shapes of Arabic diacritical marks, on the left is the Nom. Case marker (dhamma). It resembles a tiny apostrophe (’) in English put at the final part of a noun, and it resembles the English short vowel /u/ to mark nouns in the Nom. Case. The second is the ACC. Case marker (fat-ha),

⁴ This study is concerned only with the Case endings of Arabic nouns.



which appears on the end of a noun NP, and it resembles the English short vowel /a/ to mark nouns in the ACC. Case. On the right side is the Gen. Case marker (kasra) placed below the final part of a noun and is uttered as the English short vowel /i/ to mark nouns in the Gen. Case. Consider the following examples for each Case respectively.

1. *al-qalam-u* fawqa *at-taawilat-i*.
the-pen- nom. on the-table-gen.
'The pen is on the table.'
2. *katab-a* mohammed-un *ad-dars-a*
wrote mohammed-nom. the-lesson- acc.
'Mohammed wrote the lesson.'
3. *dhahab-a* ahmed-u *ila al-maktabat-i*.
went ahmed-nom. to the-library-gen.
'Ahmed went to the library.'

In the above examples, we find that the noun *Al-qalam-u* 'the pen' in (1) is the subject of the sentence and takes the nominative Case *dhamma* represented by /u/. In (2), the noun *ad-dars-a* 'the lesson' is the object of the sentence and takes the accusative Case *fat-ha* represented by /a/. Finally, the noun *al-maktabat-i* 'the library' is preceded by the preposition *ila* 'to' and gets the genitive Case *kasra* represented by /i/.

Literature Review

Case system of the nouns of Arabic and many other languages such as English has become the subject of many researchers in and outside the Arab universities. Some of these researches dealt with Arabic Case system individually, while some others concentrated on the contrast between English from one side and Arabic from the other side. References can be attributed to Abu Seif (1967) on the NPs in English and Cairene Arabic; Hassani (1967) on the classification on the NPs of English and Arabic; Qafisheh (1968) on pre-nominal modifiers; Al-Safi (1972) on concord; El-Derwi (1967) on Number; Yassin (1977) on the genitive; Mehdi (1981) and Zughoul (1979) on prepositions; El-Sheikh (1963) on pronouns; Bulos (1960); and Tadors (1979) and Tochie (1983) on relatives.

In Arabic, all NPs must have one of three Cases: nominative (NOM), accusative (ACC), or genitive (GEN). Buckley (2004) gave a detailed description of the conditions for each of these three Cases in Arabic. He dealt with eight different classes of nominal Case expression. He took into account NOM as the default Case. He mentioned seven conditions for the NOM., twenty-five for ACC. and two for GEN. Holes (2004), in his study on structures, functions, and varieties of SA, reported that the native speakers of Arabic, in fact, are native



speakers of one of the Arabic dialects, all of which have lost Case. Recently, in their study on *Arabic Diacritization*, Habash and Rambow (2007) claimed that misunderstanding rate of Case goes down if the word-final diacritics (which include Case) need not be predicted. The same claim has been proved by some other researchers such as Nelken and Shieber (2005) and Zitouni et al. (2006). Habash and Rambow (2007) added that tagging-based approaches to Case verification are limited in their usefulness, and full diacritization for subsequent processing in a natural language processing application needs to perform more complex syntactic processing to restore Case diacritics. They asserted that options include using the out-put of a parser in determining Case.⁵

Types of Arabic Case Endings

There are a lot of morphological Case endings for NPs in Arabic represented by different diacritical markers. But we will discuss only three types of these diacritics, i.e., the Nominative Case, Accusative Case and Genitive Case. As we know, Arabic NPs are conjugated for Case according to their different positions in a sentence. Case indicates the state of an NP as a subject or an object of a sentence and how it takes its form according to its function and position in that sentence. This means that if the noun functions as the subject of a sentence, it will be assigned a different Case than it would get if it were the object of the same sentence. The different types of Case, as nom., acc., or gen., are marked by the diacritical marks annexed to the final parts of the nouns. Let's now go on to discuss three types of Case for the Arabic NPs separately.

1. The Nominative Case

The usual word-order in Arabic is for the subject to follow the verb followed by the object, or for the verb to follow the subject followed by the object. The nominative Case is used in an Arabic sentence primarily in two situations. The first is the subject of any sentence. That is to say, the subject of any sentence will always be in the nominative Case. The nom. Case is chiefly used to denote the subjective Case of Arabic NPs. It is, in other words, used to show that an NP is the subject of a sentence and it is in the nominative Case. The second state in which the Arabic noun gets a nom. Case is when it is used as the predicate of the nominal sentence.⁶

⁵ For more details go through Zughoul (2002).

⁶ In Arabic, there are two prominent types of sentences: 1. the verbal sentence which begins with the verb followed by the subject and the object respectively, and 2. the nominal sentence which begins with the subject followed by the verb and the object respectively.



As we mentioned earlier, the nom. Case of the Arabic NP is indicated by putting the nominative marker *dhamma* (the English short vowel /u/) above the final letter of the noun. Consider the following examples:

4. katab-a *al-walad-u* al-dars-a
wrote the-boy-nom. the-lesson-acc.
'The boy wrote the lesson.'
5. *al-walad-u* dhakiy-un
the boy-nom. intelligent-nom.
'The boy is intelligent.'

In the above examples, we have two different Arabic sentences. The example (4) represents a verbal sentence, while (5) denotes a nominal sentence. In (4), we notice that the NP *al-walad-u* 'the boy' is the subject of the verbal sentence and has a nom. Case. In (5), we also notice that the NP *al-walad-u* 'the boy' is also the subject of the nominal sentence and has a nom. Case. In both sentences, we see that the nom. Case of the subject *al-walad-u* 'the boy' is indicated by placing the diacritical mark *dhamma* (the English short vowel /u/), which is the nom. marker of the subjects in Arabic, over the final letter 'd' and get *al-walad-u*.

Notice that *al-walad-u* in the above examples is a definite noun, so it takes single *dhamma* ُ to indicate the nom. Case. But when the subject is an indefinite noun, we put double *dhammas* 'nunation' ُو over the last letter instead of one to indicate its nom. Case. This case is known as *tanween* in Arabic. Thus, the single *dhamma* is pronounced as the English short vowel /u/ and the double ones are pronounced as the English suffix '-un'. Thus, the nominative ending marker of the Arabic subject *al-walad-u* 'the-boy' as a definite noun is written as ُ and pronounced as /u/. Let's now consider the following example to show how the ending Case marker for the indefinite noun is pronounced regarding the nominative Case.

6. ahmed-u *walad-un* mujtahid-un.
ahmed-nom. a-boy-nom. hard-working-nom.
'Ahmed is a hardworking boy.'

The word *walad-un* 'a boy', in the above example (6), would have this Case marker form ُو (double *dhamma*) as it is an indefinite noun instead of ُ (a single *dhamma*) in *al-walad-u* as a definite noun. This text means the use of one *dhamma* with a tail instead of a single one. This kind of pronunciation for the indefinite Case marking ُو '-un' is literally called *nunation* 'tanween' meaning pronouncing the letter 'n' at the end of the noun.

Unlike English, there are no indefinite articles in Arabic; therefore, the *tanween* 'nunation' works the same purpose instead. In many situations, we use a

modification of the two *dhammas* as ُ instead of writing them both. This modification consists of the first *dhamma* being written, but with a tail attached to it to represent the presence of the second one. Consider also the following example.

7. al-walad-u mudarris-un
 the-boy-nom a-teacher-nom.
 ‘The boy is a teacher.’

In the above sentence, there are two NPs. The first one *al-walad-u* ‘the boy’ is a definite noun with a nom. Case as the subject of the sentence, whereas the second *mudarris-un* ‘a teacher’ is an indefinite noun with a nom. Case as the predicate of the same sentence. So, *al-walad-u* in the above examples is a definite noun, and it takes single *dhamma* ُ to indicate its nom. Case. But the noun *mudarris-un* is indefinite, and it takes double *dhammas* ‘nunnation’ ُ over the last letter instead of one to indicate its nom. Case. The second *dhamma* is uttered as ‘-n’ and is often represented by a little tail attached to the first *dhamma* as a sort of short hand. Thus, we notice that the nominative Case in Arabic sentences can be assigned to the Arabic NPs in two positions. First, if the NP is the subject of the sentence; second if it is used as a predicate of the same sentence.

The same procedure is also followed in the case of constructing the Arabic questions as we use only one *dhamma* in the case of definite nouns, and/or *tanween* ‘nunnation’ (the equivalent of the two *dhammas*) in the case of indefinite nouns. So, we write the *dhamma* with a tail to get ‘tanween’. Let’s change the affirmative sentence (7) into a question (8) and compare the results.

8. hal al-walad-u mudarris-un
 is the-boy-nom a-teacher-nom.
 ‘Is the boy is a teacher?’

The following table presents some examples to show the differences between the different types of Case marking shapes regarding definite and



indefinite nouns in Arabic as represented by the single and double diacritical marks respectively:

Case	Definite nouns	Meaning	Indefinite nouns	Meaning
Nom.	al-maktab-u	the-office	maktab-un	an-office
Acc.	al-maktab-a	the-office	maktab-an	an-office
Gen.	al-maktab-i	the-office	maktab-in	an-office
Nom.	al-walad-u	the-boy	walad-un	a-boy
Acc.	al-walad-a	the-boy	walad-an	a-boy
Gen.	al-walad-i	the-boy	walad-in	a-boy

Table-1 Shapes of Arabic Case Endings

2. The Accusative Case

The acc. Case is chiefly used to denote the objective Case of Arabic NPs. It is, in other words, used to show that an NP is the object of a sentence and it is in the acc. Case. The accusative Case of Arabic NPs is primarily applied to the objects of verbs. The acc. Case marker is indicated by *fat-ha* َ pronounced as the English short vowel /a/. Consider the following example.

9. qarat-u *al-kitab-a*
 read- I-nom. the-book- acc.
 ‘I read the book.’

In the above sentence, the NP *al-kitab-a* ‘the-book’ is the object of the sentence which has an acc. Case.⁷ The NP *al-kitab-a* ‘the book’ is also the object of the sentence and has an acc. Case. It is indicated by placing the diacritical mark *fat-ha* َ pronounced as the English short vowel /a/, which is the acc. marker of the objects in Arabic, over the final letter ‘b’ and gets *al-kitab-a*. Notice that *al-kitab-a* in the above example (9) is a definite noun, so it takes single *fat-ha* َ to indicate its acc. Case. But when the object is an indefinite noun, we put double *fat-ha* ً ‘nunation’ over the last letter instead of one to indicate its acc. Case. This case is known as *tanween* in Arabic. Consider also the following example.

10. qaraat-u *kitab-an.*
 read- I – nom. a-book-acc.
 ‘I read a book.’

⁷ The Arabic first personal pronoun *ana* ‘I’ does not appear in this sentence. Such pronouns are usually implicit in Arabic, though they are functioning as the subjects since the verb inflection tells us who/what the subject is.



As is clear from the above example (10), double *fat-ha* َ ‘nunnation’ *tanween* is used here on the final part of the NP *kitab-an* ‘a-book’ to indicate its acc. Case. That is to say, we are using double *fat-ha* instead of one to indicate the accusative Case when the object of the sentence is indefinite. The second *fat-ha* gives us the *nunnation*. To conclude, we use a single *fat-ha* if the noun is definite and is the object of the sentence as the NP *al-kitab-a* ‘the-book’ in (9), and *tanween* ‘double *fat-ha*’ if the noun is indefinite as the NP *kitab-an* ‘a-book’ in (10).

3. The Genitive Case

In this section, we will discuss the third type of Arabic Case endings, the gen. Case. As we know, there are two forms of the gen. Case in English, the first one is obtained by the use of an *apostrophe* and an *s* (’s) after a noun as in ‘the girl’s dress’, and the second form is constructed by using the preposition *of* as in ‘the dress of the girl’. By contrast, the genitive Case occurs in Arabic in two situations too. Both of these situations occur very often in the language. First, a noun following a preposition will always be in the genitive Case. The other time the genitive Case occurs is if a noun is the second or later term of an *idaafa* ‘the annexation’ as in ‘fustan-u l-bint-i’ (the dress (of) the girl). It is anticipated that some non-Arabic learners or speakers may have difficulties forming or identifying the gen. Case in Arabic.

The gen. Case is assigned to the Arabic NPs by the use of the Case marker *kasra* ِ or *kasrateen* (double *kasra*) ٍ on the final letter of the noun. That is to say, the genitive Case marker is one *kasra* if a noun is definite and two *kasras* if the noun is indefinite. The single *kasra* on the final part of the definite noun is pronounced as /i/, while the second *kasra* of the two *kasras* on the final part of the indefinite noun is pronounced as an ‘n’, just like the second *dhamma* in the nominative Case and the second *fat-ha* of the acc. Case.

The first situation of the gen. Case occurs when the noun is preceded by a preposition.⁸ Prepositions are responsible for assigning the gen. Case to the Arabic nouns. Consider the following examples.

11. dhahabt-u ila *al-mata'am-i*.
went-I-nom. to the-restaurant-gen.
'I went to the restaurant.'
12. dhahabt-u ila *mata'am-in*.
went-I-nom. to a-restaurant -gen.
'I went to a restaurant.'

⁸ A preposition is a word which comes before a noun in Arabic.



In the above examples, we find that the Arabic genitive Case marker is represented by a single *kasra* ِ on the word *al-mata'am-i* 'the restaurant' because it is a definite noun as in (11), and by two *kasras* 'tanween' ٍ on the word *mata'am-in* 'a restaurant' because it is an indefinite noun as in (12). The single *kasra* is pronounced as the English short vowel /i/, while these double *kasras* are pronounced as the English suffix '-in'.

The second form of the gen. Case is known as *idaafa*. The word *idaafa* means 'addition' or even 'annexation'. The *idaafa* is used to indicate possession in Arabic. In English, for example, we say 'John's book'. In Arabic, we say 'the book (of) John'. The *idaafa* is an extremely important construction in Arabic. It is very easy, basic, and absolutely necessary for any student of the language who wants ever to be able to do anything at all in Arabic. A number of students have had several years of Arabic but do not know the difference between an *idaafa* and a noun-adjective phrase. In fact, many students do not seem to know the mechanism of *idaafa* in Arabic.

Let's consider the following examples.

13. hadha bait-u *al-mudarris-i*.
 this the-house teacher-gen.
 'This is the teacher's house.'
14. hadha bait-u *mudarris-in*.
 this a-house teacher-gen.
 'This is a house of a teacher.'

In the above sentences, we have a standard two-term *idaafa* phrases in each sentence represented in (13) as *bait-u al-mudarris-i* 'the teacher's house' and in (14) as *bait-u mudarris-in* 'a teacher's house'. The first noun *bait-u* in each phrase is the thing possessed. It can be in any Case depending on its position in the sentence but never has *nunation* 'tanween' ٍ. The second noun of each *idaafa* is in the gen. Case.⁹ In (13), the genitive Case marker is represented by a single *kasra* ِ on the noun *al-mudarris-i* 'the teacher' because it is a definite noun, whereas it is represented by two *kasras* 'tanween' ٍ on the noun *mudarris-in* 'a teacher' because it is an indefinite noun as in (14).

Conclusion

Arabic has a distinctive morphological Case system which cannot be recognized in any other language. As we mentioned previously, Arabic has three

⁹ In an *idaafa*, the second term and any following terms are always genitive.



main morphological forms of Case. These forms are basically marked by changing the shape of the ends of words. That is to say, Arabic nouns are normally inflected for three Cases: nominative, genitive, and accusative. Cases fall under the topic of morphology because they are part of word structure; they are usually like suffixes attached to the word stem, and the nature of the word stem determines what form the suffix will take. In general, the Case markers in Arabic are short vowels: /u/ for nominative, /i/ for genitive and /a/ for accusative.

Arabic has several diacritical markers, referred to as short/small vowels in the language, which can be written over or under final letters to indicate the state of nouns as being the subjects or objects of sentences. Most ordinary Arabic scripts (texts) are written without diacritical markers because these diacritical markers are most of the time supposed to be guessed and suggested by a qualified reader. Furthermore, knowing the Case endings of Arabic is necessary in some Cases. The Holly Qur'an, for example, must be written with full diacritical marks to avoid any possible mistakes and ambiguity.

To conclude, Arabic diacritics with their names are the acc. marker [fat-ha] which is represented by the sign [َ], the nom. marker [dhamma] which is represented by the sign [ُ], and the gen. marker [kasra] which is represented by the sign [ِ]; [tanween] *fat-hateen* related to the acc. Case which is represented by the sign [ً], [tanween] *dhammateen* related to the nom. Case which is represented by the sign [ٌ], and [tanween] *kasrateen* related to the gen. Case which is represented by the sign [ٍ]. The nom. Case typically marks the subject function as an agent or a doer of an action; the acc. Case indicates the object in a sentence; and the gen. Case is used mainly in two ways: to mark the object of a preposition and to mark the possessor in a possessive structure.

Results and Findings

Throughout this study, we come to deduce that Case is a very important notion of grammar which plays a significant role in Arabic grammar. Although Arabic has a lot of morphological Case endings, this study has been confined to a limited number of grammatical facts, nom. Case, acc. Case, and gen. Case, assumed by these morphological endings for the NPs.

We have seen that there are three different types of Case in Arabic and how they are assigned to the NPs.

- Arabic is a distinctive language with its Case system.
- Because of its richness of inflection, Arabic has a distinctive Case system represented by overt Case endings for the NPs.



- The data shown in this study indicates that the rate of Case forms for the NPs differs widely according to the differences in the positions of these NPs in the Arabic sentences.

Recommendations

As has been mentioned earlier, there are a lot of morphological Case endings for NPs in Arabic represented by different diacritical markers. But this study has been confined to only three types of these diacritics, i.e., the Nominative Case, Accusative Case and Genitive Case. This study would be the first step for further researches in this field. So, the researcher would suggest and recommend the following forms of Arabic Case endings to be studied and investigated:

1. Jussive Case
2. Commutative Case.
3. Locative Case.
4. Dative Case.
5. Instrumental Case, a case which expresses means or agency.
6. The Case system of Arabic pronouns.

Concluding this study, it would be worthwhile for further research to investigate the Adjective Case endings in Arabic and the Noun-Adjective Case agreement regarding changes that the Arabic words undergo when changing from one position into another position in the sentence.

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