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Facilitating the Learning of Arabic for Devotional Studies

Taysir Ta'allum al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah li al-Dirāsah al-Ta'abbudiyyah

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Lesson 5 - Additional Resources (Idāfah)

Intro to Grammar: Conjunctions

One of the most common grammatical constructions in the Arabic language is the **conjoining of two or more nouns together**, referred to in Arabic as ***iḍāfah*** (إضافة).

An *iḍāfah* can be of two types: **definite** and **indefinite**. A **definite *iḍāfah*** is defined by its **last term** either being a **proper noun** (such as a person's name or a pronoun like "his" or "hers") or a **definite noun** (signified by the presence of ال). Whether definite or indefinite, **the first term** of an *iḍāfah* is ***always an indefinite noun***. Let's look at some examples.

على ألسنة المرسلين

"on the tongues of the Messengers" - **Reading #1**

In this example, from **reading #1**, we have a particle proceeding an two nouns conjoined: an *iḍāfah*. The the first noun, ألسنة is an ***indefinite noun***. The second noun, المرسلين is a **definite noun** because it has the ال before مرسلين.

والتين والزيتون وطور سينين

"By the fig and the olive, by Mt. Sinai" - **Surah al-Tin v.1-2**

In this example we have the first two verses of Surah al-Tin. The first verse are two **oaths** being sworn by Allah with the particle و on two separate nouns: الزيتون and التين. This و is the واو القسم, the “waw of oath swearing” which causes the noun being sworn by to be *majrur*, or possessed (most typically taking a **kasrah**). The second verse is also an oath but unlike the first, it’s being sworn on an *idāfah*. Leaving off the و we have two nouns conjoined: سينين and طور. The word سينين “Sinai” is a proper noun (the name of a place) and so **does not have** ال in front of it. But this is still **definite idāfah** (lit. “Mt. Sinai”).

An example of an **indefinite idāfah** would be from the thirteenth verse of **Surah al-Balad** (90: 13),

فَلَا اقْتَحَمَ الْعَقَبَةَ وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْعَقَبَةُ **فَلْ** رَقَبَةً

*“But [mankind] has not braved the steep ascent. What will convey to you what the steep ascent is? It is freeing **a slave**.” - Surah al-Balad v.11-13*

Note that our *idāfah*, the thirteenth verse, has no ال on the final noun رَقَبَةً. This means that since both nouns are **indefinite** then the entire *idāfah* is **indefinite**. It is rendered “freeing **a slave**” not “free the slave”.

And even though our focus in this course is Qur’anic Arabic and the Arabic used in devotional texts, let’s look quickly at another couple of examples.

مكتبة الإمام ومكتبة إمام

*“**The** Imam’s office” and “**an** imam’s office.”*

The first part of our example has a **definite noun** الإمام whereas the second part has an **indefinite noun**, إمام.

There are also some words, especially words not native to Arabic, which cannot take declension (meaning they take no vowelings on the final letter). For example,

ليست ديترويت عاصمة ميشيغان

“Detroit is not the capital of Michigan.”

Both the words “Detroit” and “Michigan” are not native to Arabic. They will not take vowelings on the end so even though the phrase عاصمة ميشيغان, “the capital of Michigan” is an *idāfah* (a **definite idāfah** because “Michigan” is a proper noun of a place), it does not take a **kasrah** on the ن at the end of ميشيغان.

As a side note, as we also explore more about nouns, we’ll see that there are some non-Arabic words in the Qur’an (such as names like Ibrahim and Fir’awn) that only take **two vowelings** at the end: إبراهيم and إبراهيم for example. In Surah Al ‘Imran, Allah says,

مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ يَهُودِيًّا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًّا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُّسْلِمًا
وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

“Ibrahim was neither a Jew nor a Christian. but a man of pure natural belief – a Muslim. He was not one of the idolaters.” - Surah Al ‘Imran v.67

In this verse, Ibrahim is the **subject** and hence has a **ḍammah** on the final letter (as we’ve said, a noun with **ḍammah** is the sign of it being the **subject**). Whereas in Surah al-Nisa’, Allah says,

وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِّمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَاتَّبَعَ
مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۚ وَاتَّخَذَ اللَّهُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ خَلِيلًا

*“Who could have a better religion than someone who submits himself completely to Allah and is an excellent person, following the religion of Ibrahim, a man of pure natural belief? Allah **took** Ibrahim as an intimate friend.” - Surah al-Nisa’ v.125*

In this verse, Ibrahim is the **direct object** and hence has a **fathah** on the final letter (as we’ve said, a noun with **fathah** is the sign of it being the **direct object**). The tricky part is that when nouns like these are also either **the second term of an idāfah** or **acted upon by a particle of possession**, they also take **fathah**. Let’s see.

فِيهِ آيَاتٌ بَيِّنَاتٌ مَّقَامُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ^{صَلَّى} وَمَنْ دَخَلَهُ كَانَ آمِنًا وَلِلَّهِ
عَلَى النَّاسِ حِجُّ الْبَيْتِ مَنْ اسْتَطَاعَ إِلَيْهِ سَبِيلًا وَمَنْ كَفَرَ
فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ

“The people with the strongest claim to Ibrahim are those who followed him and this Prophet and those who have iman. Allah is the Protector of the muminun.” - Surah Al ‘Imran v.97

Here we have the name Ibrahim as the **second term** of an *idāfah*. The first term, مقام, or “station/rank” is an **indefinite noun** and then **possesses** our second term, إبراهيم. But words like this, what we can think of as “Arabized” or “Qur’anically Arabized” (unlike Michigan, which is not mentioned in the Qur’an) only take two vowelings. So here, in the **mood of possession**, it takes a **fathah**.

إِنَّ أَوْلَى النَّاسِ بِإِبْرَاهِيمَ لَلَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ وَهَذَا النَّبِيُّ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
وَاللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

“The people with the strongest claim to Ibrahim are those who followed him and this Prophet and those who have iman. Allah is the Protector of the muminun.” - Surah Al ‘Imran v.68

Similarly in **mood**, this case has إبراهيم being acted upon by a **particle**: بِ. The result is the same: a **fathah** on the final letter in إبراهيم. In fact, if

we look at our **third reading** on ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, we’ll see the same being used on two “Arabized” words:

وُلِدَ فِي جَرْجَانَ وَهِيَ مَدِينَةٌ مَعْرُوفَةٌ بَيْنَ طَبْرِسْتَانَ وَخُرَاسَانَ

“He was born in Jurjan, it is a town known to be located between Tabaristan and Khorasan.” - **Reading #3: The Key Book Pertaining to Morphology: A Bio of ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī**

Even though Tabaristan and Khorasan are not mentioned in the Qur’an, the names have been Arabized, mainly because Persian has so many borrowed words from Arabic.