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# “Prestigious plurals” and conjugational class variation

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## 1 Preliminaries

While the past 20 years have seen a number of innovative ways of modelling the organization of conjugational classes (Boyé 2000, Boyé & Bonami 2003, Ackerman & Malouf 2013, Stump 2016, Sims & Parker 2016, etc.), the role that variation plays in conjugational class organization is far less understood. In order to better understand the role that linguistic variation can play in the organization and composition of conjugational classes, I examine the case of plural formation in English and Persian/Tajik. While these phenomena are simple on the surface (e.g., English plurals are generally (though certainly not always) formed by the suffixation of [-s/z/əz], etc.), the actual details (especially those that are the result of language contact) show a much more fragmented situation. The details suggest the invocation of a “constellational” (Joseph & Janda 1986) model, which can then be visualized under a “network” model (Langacker 1987, Bybee 1995).

## 2 Pluralization in English and Persian/Tajik

In both English and Persian/Tajik noun pluralization, there is an overriding rule that can be applied to (nearly) all nouns in the language. While the vast majority of English nouns can be pluralized with the suffix /-s/, absolutely all Persian/Tajik nouns *can* be pluralized by the suffix *-hâ* (Perry 2005:63). While both languages have other native means of marking plurality (e.g., ablaut in English, the Persian/Tajik suffix *-ân* used mainly for animate nouns in the literary language, Lazard 2006:39), much of the complication of the plural marking system is the result of language contact. Both languages have a large foreign element in their lexicon; some foreign words maintain a plural form that follows the plural formation patterns of the (typically prestigious) source language. These “prestigious plurals” exist alongside variants with regularized plural morphology. For example many English speakers use *curricula* as a plural form of *curriculum* (< Latin), many speakers alternatively use *curriculum*s, and many speakers use both, where the choice of one or the other depends of formality and related considerations. Similar cases are seen in Persian/Tajik, where many nouns of Arabic origin (e.g., *ketâb* ‘book’) have multiple plural forms (*kotob* < Arabic, *ketâb-hâ* < Persian ‘books’), where the choice of one or the other is roughly equated with formality (Wei 1963:20, Perry 2015:65).

## 3 Theoretical concerns

The existence of “prestigious plurals” raises four key questions regarding the structure of the noun inflectional systems in question.

- What is the status of these cases in the system?
- What are the implications of these cases on organizational models?
- What are the implications of these cases on models of morphological change?
- How can traditional models of conjugational classes deal with variation?

When it comes to describing the morphological process(es) of pluralization in these languages, such instances tend to be set aside as “irregular”, and are treated as somehow external to the system being accounted for. However, cases of morphological change suggest this is not the case, as there are indeed instances in which a foreign pluralization pattern has been extended to other nouns. For example, some English speakers pluralize *process* and *bias* as *process*[iz] and *bias*[iz], respectively, following (though not entirely) a more “foreign” pattern (cf. *thesis~theses*, *crisis~crises*). Again, there are similar cases in Persian/Tajik where native words take Arabic plural morphology, e.g., the plural form of *mive* ‘fruit’ is frequently *mivejât*, which exists alongside *mive-hâ*). There are even cases where native Persian nouns follow an Arabic non-concatenative (i.e., “broken”) plural pattern (e.g., *ostâd* > *asâtid* ‘professors’). This demonstrates that the Arabic plurals are integrated sufficiently enough into the Persian/Tajik system where these patterns have been analogically extended to native words.

#### 4 Constellational/network models of conjugational classes

Taking into account their core similarities, the diversity in the patterns that English and Persian/Tajik nouns show, along with the variation that exists, suggests that the pluralization systems of the two languages be analysed under a constellational model, which has no problems in dealing with the existence of linguistic variation. Taking inspiration from Joseph & Janda (1986) and Langacker (1987), I pursue the fine-grained details and the observed patterns of variation that occur to better understand the range of pluralization patterns in English and Persian/Tajik and the principles by which they are organized. I consider data from a variety of sources, including the following corpora.

- English corpora:
  - Global Web-Based English (GloWbE) (1.9b words)
  - Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (560m words)
- Persian/Tajik corpora:
  - Uppsala Persian Corpus (2.6m words) (Seraji 2015)
  - Talkbank Persian Corpus (474m words)
  - Tajik Web Corpus (93m words)

I visualize the results using a network model to better understand the full complexity of a phenomenon that grammars too readily gloss over, particularly the role of variation in the system. See Figure 1 below for a preliminary network diagram of 25 Persian nouns, with frequencies taken from the Talkbank Persian Corpus.

English and Persian/Tajik pluralization join a growing list of phenomena, e.g., Sanskrit reduplication, Romance conjugational classes, etc., that can be understood under a constellational/network model, which can have implications for what we know about the scope of linguistic generalizations, and consequently, conjugational class organization and structure as well.

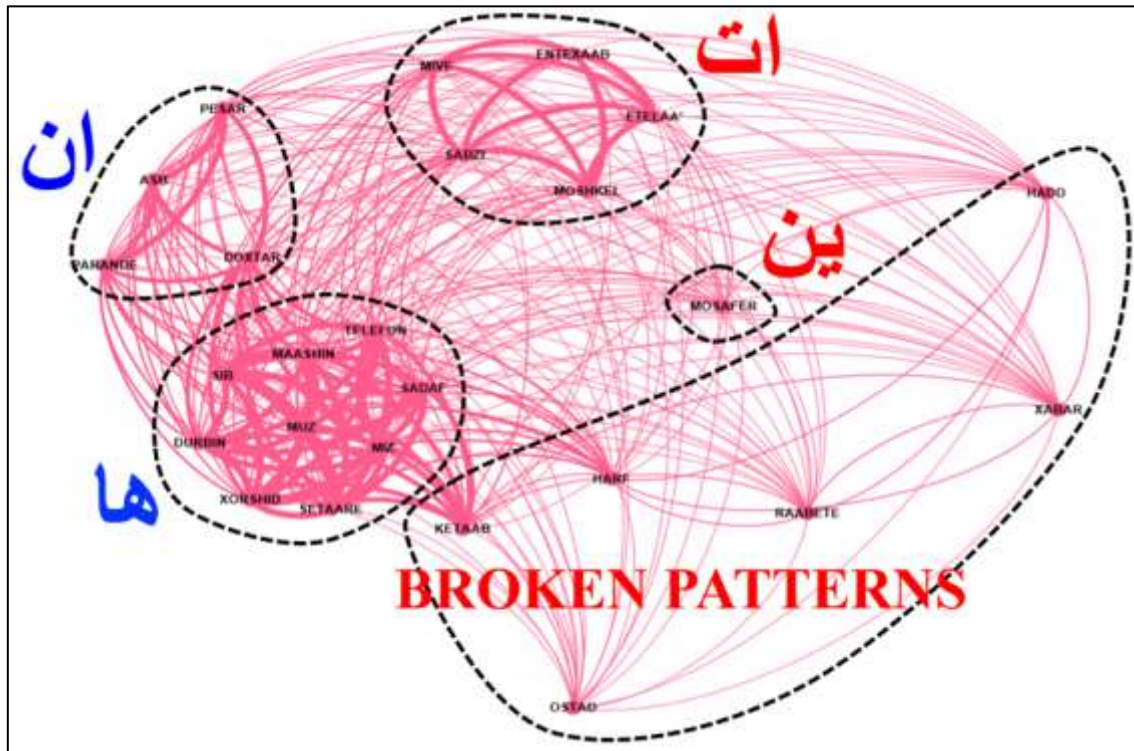


Figure 1: 25 Persian nouns, network model

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