-ĀT
DRINK YOUR MILKS!
-ĀT AS INDIVIDUATION MARKER IN LEVANTINE ARABIC

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The suffix *-āt* is well known as a plural marker across varieties and registers of Arabic[1] for many feminine nouns, words of foreign origin, and certain other morphological classes of nouns with a fair degree of predictability.[2] Levantine Arabic yields, for example, *ḥayawān* 'animal' pl. *ḥayawānāt* and *bsayne* 'cat' pl. *bsaynāt*.[3] Two additional Levantine examples demonstrate the use of *-āt* as a plural for singulative nouns formed by adding *tā' marbūṭa* to generic and abstract nouns: *samke* 'a fish' pl. *samkāt* 'fishes' and *ṭabkha* 'a cooked dish' pl. *ṭabkhāt* 'dishes.'[4] The singulative form and meaning of nouns like *samke* and *ṭabkha* gives their *-āt* plurals a relatively high

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[1] This essay focuses on urban Levantine Arabic and relies exclusively on Lebanese informants, but occasional references will be made to other registers and varieties of Arabic for comparative purposes. I am grateful to the Al-Batal and Kasbani clans, Amina Mouazen, and Kamil Hamade for their enthusiastic participation as informants, thank Mahmoud Al-Batal and Rima Semaan for additional examples as well as invaluable comments and corrections, and retain responsibility for all errors myself.

[2] See Wright 1898, 197 and Fischer 2002, 39 and 126 for the classes of nouns that take *-āt* plurals in Classical Arabic. Wright remarks that some grammarians permit any word ending in feminine singular *-a(t)* to take the plural *-āt*.

[3] The transcription here is roughly phonemic, owing to the wide range of vowel phonemes in Levantine speech, and follows most of the conventions of Cowell 1964. On the phonetics of Levantine Arabic see Cowell 1964, 1–33 and Fischer and Jastrow 1980, 174–182. The symbol * indicates structures that informants rejected as ungrammatical or not used.

[4] Cowell uses the term singulative as an umbrella term for both the unit noun (*ism al-waḥda*) and the instance noun (*ism al-marra*), 1964, 297. It is convenient to group singulative nouns together in opposition to generic or collective nouns, and unnecessary for our purposes here to distinguish subcategories of either group; we are likewise not concerned here with abstract nouns; this *-āt* is not an abstract plural, as we shall see.

degree of individuation, meaning that they will tend to refer to specific, prominent, individual entities.[5] Each singulative noun has a corresponding generic or abstract noun from which it was formed; in formal Arabic, this generic noun often has its own broken plural (*jamʿ taksīr*). A full set of concrete nouns in formal Arabic thus includes a count singular and plural and a collective or mass singular and plural: *samaka* 'a fish' pl. *samakāt* 'fishes,' in contrast to *samak* 'fish (collectively)' pl. *asmāk* 'groups or types of fish.' Of these two types of plurals, *-āt* is associated with individuals and small numbers, the so-called *jamʿ al-qilla* 'the plural of paucity,' whereas broken plurals tend to refer to groups as collectives or large numbers, *jamʿ al-kathra* 'the plural of abundance,' in both Classical and Levantine Arabic.[6] In Levantine, *-āt* sometimes constitutes one of a pair of plurals of the same singular noun that have little apparent distinction in meaning and usage, such as *meṣriyyāt* or *maṣāri* 'money,' both plural forms of the obsolete Levantine singular *meṣriyye* 'an Egyptian coin.' Even if we identify the former as a plural of paucity and the latter as a plural of abundance, what does that mean? Is there some amount of money below which one uses *meṣriyyāt* and above which one uses *maṣāri*?

More often, Levantine generic nouns tend to take *-āt* plurals rather than broken plurals. A number of broken plurals of the pattern *afʿāl* are judged by my informants not to belong to the colloquial Levantine register: *asmāk '(types of) fish' and *awsākh '(piles of?) dirt' are both deemed to belong to the formal register only. A more typical Levantine pattern of generic word formation is a singular collective or generic noun, a singulative formed from that generic noun if appropriate semantically, and an *-āt* plural:

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[5] The individuation continuum is a proposed cluster of features of which nouns have a greater or lesser degree depending on both context and speaker perception. The features that constitute individuation include definiteness, specificity, agency, contextual (textual or physical) prominence, qualification, and quantification. Speakers tend to mark nouns that have a relatively high degree of individuation with certain "optional" nominal markers such as definite and indefinite specific articles or plural forms and agreement. See Khan 1988 and Brustad 2000, 18–26 and 52–61 for a more detailed discussion of these concepts.

[6] See for Levantine, Cowell 1964, 369, and for Classical Arabic, Fischer 2002, 53–64 and Wright 1898, 1:233–4. The paucity vs. abundance distinction in Classical Arabic is also associated with different types of broken plural patterns, with the patterns *afʿāl*, *afʿul*, *afʿila*, and *fiʿla* classified as plurals of paucity and the rest as plurals of abundance.