Non-Human Plurals

Summary:

Non-Human Plurals

One of the most distinctive rules of Arabic is that all non-human plurals (books, horses, cities, ideas, etc.) are treated as feminine singular, in all regards. This means they will take feminine singular adjectives:

Plural Singular

بيت كبير بيوت كبيرة

سيارة جميلة سيارات جميلة

As you see, even though house is masculine and car is feminine, when they are made plural, they both take the feminine singular adjective. This doesn’t affect the meaning at all. Those phrases still say “big houses” and “beautiful cars”.

Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSN79ysDYw4

More Detail Below:

**ALL PLURAL NOUNS WHICH DO NOT REFER TO HUMAN BEINGS ARE CONSIDERED TO BE GRAMMATICALLY FEMININE SINGULAR IN MODERN STANDARD ARABIC**. This rule is difficult for Americans to accept. In fact, sometimes native speakers of Arabic who come to this country while they are young have trouble with this rule when they learn how to read and write Arabic. But this rule can be internalized with practice.

This rule does not just apply to adjectives. Anything that has to agree in some way with a non-human plural will always be feminine singular. Thus pronouns, demonstratives, and verbs will always be put in the feminine singular whenever they must agree with a non-human plural. Here are some examples:

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| 1. I read many articles in these newspapers. | ١. قرأتُ مقالات كثيرة في هذه الجرائد. |
| 2. Did you read these articles? Yes, I read them. They are great. | ٢. هل قرأت هذه المقالات؟ نعم, قرأتُها. هي ممتازة. |
| 3. These important articles were published in these Magazines. | ٣. صدرت هذه المقالات الهمة في هذه المجلات. |

In sentence 1 we see that the plural of جريدة is modified by the feminine singular demonstrative هذه. The demonstrative هذه will be used with any non-human plural (regardless of the gender of the singular of that noun). Thus هذه الكتب means “these books.”

We see that in the response to the question in sentence 2 the person is saying “Yes, I read them.” He is using the direct object pronoun ها, which is feminine singular, to refer to “the articles.” ([Direct object pronouns](http://allthearabicyouneverlearnedthefirsttimearound.com/p1/p1-ch5/direct-object-pronouns/) are discussed below.) Then the speaker says that the articles are excellent. He uses the feminine singular pronoun هي to refer to them and uses a feminine singular adjective in the predicate which refers to هي but which would be used to refer to مقالات as in: هذه المقالات ممتازة

In sentence 3 the verb صدر is used. It is an intransitive verb meaning “to be published.” المقالات is the subject of the sentence, so the verb must be feminine singular. Note that even if المقالات were written before the verb, the verb would still be in the feminine singular.

So now you should have the idea that any non-human noun, when it is made plural, will have feminine singular agreement at all times. Be sure to know that this applies to all non-human plural nouns, irrespective of the gender of the noun in the singular. Thus, if we replaced مقالات in the sentences above with the word كتب which is the plural of the masculine كتاب , there would be no changes to any of the sentences.

You must learn this rule and work to become accustomed to it. When you read or hear MSA, this rule will be very helpful to your understanding of what you are reading or hearing.

Thus when words in Arabic are said to agree for number and gender you must take into account the rules regarding non-human plurals.