Nahw - Singular, Dual, and Plural Nouns in Arabic

Arabic nouns can either be singular ( الجمهَرْدُ), dual (الْمُثْنِيَّ), or plural (الْجَمْعُ). This is depicted diagrammatically in the following chart (click to enlarge), with further subdivisions for the plural noun.

The Dual:
The dual can be constructed depending upon its grammatical state. Thus, the rule for constructing dual in رفع are different than the rules for constructing the dual in either نصب or جر. Below, we analyze these rules for constructing the dual of a noun in Arabic.

- When the noun is in رفع the dual is constructed by adding the letters ی and ن
  e.g. جَاءَ الطَّالِبَانِ (The two students came). In this structure the ی is basically the sign of كَسْرَة whereas the final ن and the corresponding كَسْرَة do not have a grammatical significance

- When the noun is in either نصب or جر, the dual is formed by adding a ين to the singular e.g.
  مَرَّتُ بِالطَّالِبَيْنِ (I saw the two students) or رَآيتُ الطَّالِبَيْنِ (I passed by the two students). In this case, the ی indicates both كَسْرَة and, as before, the final ن and
the corresponding فَتْحَة do not have a grammatical significance

Note on the use of Dual:

- If the verb precedes the فاعِل the verb must be singular, e.g. ذَهَبَ الْوَلُدَانُ (The two boys went)
- If the فاعِل precedes the verb then the verb should also be dual, e.g. الْوَلُدَانُ ذَهَبَا

The Plural:
As can be seen from the above diagram, there are two types of plurals in Arabic:

- اَلْجَمْعُ السَّالِمُ or the Sound Plural
- اَلْجَمْعُ المُكْسَرُ or the Broken Plural

The first category can further be divided into masculine or feminine genders.
The Sound Plural: This is formed from the singular by suffixing additional letters to it while retaining the original letters from the singular noun; thus the name Sound Plural. Below, we analyze rule for constructing the Sound Plurals.

Sound Masculine Plural:

- When the noun is in رفع the plural is constructed by adding the letters و and ن, with the ن having a فَتْحَة on it. In this structure the و is basically the sign of صَمْتُه whereas the final ن and the corresponding فَتْحَة do not have a grammatical significance. For example, جاءَ الْمُسْلِمُونَ (The Muslim men came)

- When the noun is in either نصب or جر, the plural is formed by adding a يِنْ تَ, preceded by a letter with a kasra, to the singular. For example, رَآيتُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ (I saw the Muslim men)
or مُرَّتٌ بِالْمُسْلِمِينَ (I passed by the Muslim men)

Sound Feminine Plural:

- When the noun is in رفع the plural is constructed by adding the letters ‌ٰ and ‌ٰ to the singular, with a ضمة on the ‌ٰ. For example، جاءت المُسلماتُ (The Muslim women came)

- When the noun is in either نصب or جر the plural is formed by adding the letters ‌ٰ and ‌ٰ to the singular، with a كسرة on the ‌ٰ in both the cases. For example، رأت المُسلمات (I saw the Muslim women) or مرت بِالمُسلمات (I passed by the Muslim women)

The Broken Plural:

This is called broken because it does not retain the structure of the singular noun i.e. it is formed by breaking up the singular noun. Thus، in this type of plural the singular is altered by changing its vowel or altering its letters. This is analogous to the English where we say Man-Men، Mouse-Mice، or Sheep-Sheep.

The broken plural in Arabic is based on different patterns and there is no one rule which governs the formation of the broken plural. These are best learned by exposure. Below، I list some of these patterns

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I hope this introduction to the Singular-Dual-Plural system in Arabic will be a good starting point for anyone trying to master this subject.