

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Three Couplets from pre-Islamic Poetry



Wisdom of Reading Pre-Islāmic Poetry

Pre-Islāmic poetry is mostly very difficult to understand. The difficulty lies in its unfamiliar diction. But we do find in them couplets which are easy.

Students of Arabic must familiarize themselves with some specimens of pre-Islāmic poetry because it represents the language which was prevalent at the time of the revelation of the Glorious Qur'ān. 

When ibn 'Abbās (رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهُمَا) was asked regarding lexical and grammatical aspects of the Glorious Qur'ān, he would quote from pre-Islāmic poetry to prove his point. 

1. Couplets by الأَعْشَى

The following two couplets are by the great pre-Islāmic poet al-Aʿshā (الأَعْشَى). He died in 7 AH, but he did not accept Islām.

It was the convention of the pre-Islāmic poets to commence the *qaṣīdah* with a mention of the beloved. But this was only a convention, and mostly did not represent real life.

The following couplet is the beginning of his *qaṣīdah*:



وَدَّعْ هُرَيْرَةَ إِنَّ الرِّكْبَ مُرْتَحِلٌ
فَهَلْ تُطِيقُ وَدَاعاً أَيُّهَا الرَّجُلُ

Bid farewell to Hurayrah

For the caravan is about to set out.

But can you really say goodbye (to her), man?

Lexical and Grammatical Notes

هُرَيْرَةٌ is the name of the beloved.

(1) وَدَّعَ يُودِّعُ تَوَدِّعًا (ii), to bid goodbye, to say farewell.

Bāb فَعَّلَ has an *ism al-maṣḍar* on the pattern of فَعَالٌ, e.g.:

سَلَّمَ → سَلَامٌ

كَلَّمَ → كَلَامٌ

طَلَّقَ → طَلَاقٌ

وَدَّعَ → وِدَاعٌ

(Urdu speakers pronounce وِدَاعٌ with a *kasrah* which is wrong).

(2) رَكْبٌ, a group of people travelling together, a caravan.

رَكْبٌ is the plural of رَاكِبٌ (a rider).

It is on the pattern of فَعَّلَ. There are some other words also which have their plural on this pattern, e.g.:

صَحْبٌ plural of صَاحِبٌ (companion).

These words are part of اسمُ الجَمْعِ which can be treated as singular or plural.

Note:

 ...إِنَّ الرَّكْبَ مُرْتَحِلٌ

where مُرْتَحِلٌ is masculine singular.

(3) رَحَلَ رَحِيلاً (a-a), to depart, to set out.

ارْتَحَلَ ارْتِحَالاً (viii) also has the same meaning.

رَحْلَةٌ means *journey*. This word occurs in the following *āyahs*:

 لِيَأْتِيَهُمْ قُرَيْشٌ ۖ إِيْلَافِهِمْ رِحْلَةَ الشِّتَاءِ وَالصَّيْفِ .

In modern Arabic this word is used to mean 'flight' as in

رَقْمُ الرَّحْلَةِ 'flight number'.

أُلْغِيَتْ هَذِهِ الرَّحْلَةُ 'This flight has been cancelled'.



(4) أَطَاقَ الشَّيْءَ إِطَاقَةً (iv), to be able (to do).

طَاقَةٌ, strength (ability to do something).



2. Second Couplet by الأَعْشى

The following couplet is one of those in which the poet describes his beloved.


 كَأَنَّ مَشِيَّتَهَا مِنْ بَيْتِ جَارَتِهَا
 مَرُّ السَّحَابَةِ : لَا رَيْثٌ وَلَا عَجَلٌ

Her gait (while returning) from her neighbour's house

Is as if it is the passage of a piece of cloud:

Neither slow nor fast.

Lexical and Grammatical Notes

(1) **مَشِيَّةٌ** is **مَصْدَرُ الْهَيْئَةِ** which describes the mode of an action like **جَلْسَةٌ**, way of sitting.

(2) **سَحَابٌ** (cloud) is **اسْمُ الْجِنْسِ الْجَمْعِيِّ**, and a piece of cloud is **سَحَابَةٌ**.

Here are some more examples:

 ○ **جُبْنٌ** (cheese) → **جُبْنَةٌ** (a piece of cheese). 

 ○ **زُبْدٌ** (butter) → **زُبْدَةٌ** (a portion of butter). 

Note that in countable nouns, the addition of *tā' marbūṭah* to a **اسْمُ الْجِنْسِ الْجَمْعِيِّ** renders it singular,

e.g.: **تَمْرٌ** / **تَمْرَةٌ**,



and in uncountable nouns it signifies 'a piece of' or 'a portion of'.

(3) رَيْثٌ is the *maṣdar* of رَاثَ يَرِيثُ, to be slow.

The form which is used more often is تَرَيَّثَ (v).

(4) عَجَلٌ يَعْجَلُ عَجَلًا، وَعَجَلَةٌ (i-a), to be in a hurry.

Here is a proverb in which both these words are used:

رُبَّ عَجَلَةٍ وَهَبَتْ رَيْثًا، i.e.:

Many a hasty step results in slow action.

It is like the English proverb: *Haste makes waste.*

Here is another proverb:

فِي التَّائِي السَّلَامَةُ وَفِي الْعَجَلَةِ النَّدَامَةُ.

There is safety in deliberation and regret in haste.

Here is an *āyah* with عَجَلَ :

﴿وَعَجَلْتُ إِلَيْكَ رَبِّ لِتَرْضَى﴾. 

I have hastened to You, my Lord, that You might be well pleased.
(Q20:54).

(5) **مَشِيَّةٌ** is the *ism* of **كَأَنَّ**, and that is why it is *manṣūb*, and the *khabar* of **كَأَنَّ** is **مَرٌّ**.



3. Couplet by **لَبِيدٌ**

Here is a beautiful couplet by another pre-Islāmic poet **لَبِيدٌ** wherein the words **رَيْثٌ** and **عَجَلٌ** occur.

Labīd died in 41 AH after he became a Muslim:



إِنَّ تَقْوَى رَبِّنَا خَيْرُ نَفْلٍ
وَبِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ رَيْثِي وَالْعَجَلُ

Being conscience of our Lord is the best booty.

(This consciousness lies in the knowledge that) my actions
- whether slow or fast – take place only with Allāh's
permission.

Lexical and Grammatical Notes

نَفْلٌ, booty, spoils of war.

Its plural is أَنْفَالٌ which is the name of the 8th *sūrah*.



Baḥr of al-A‘shā's *Qaṣīdah*

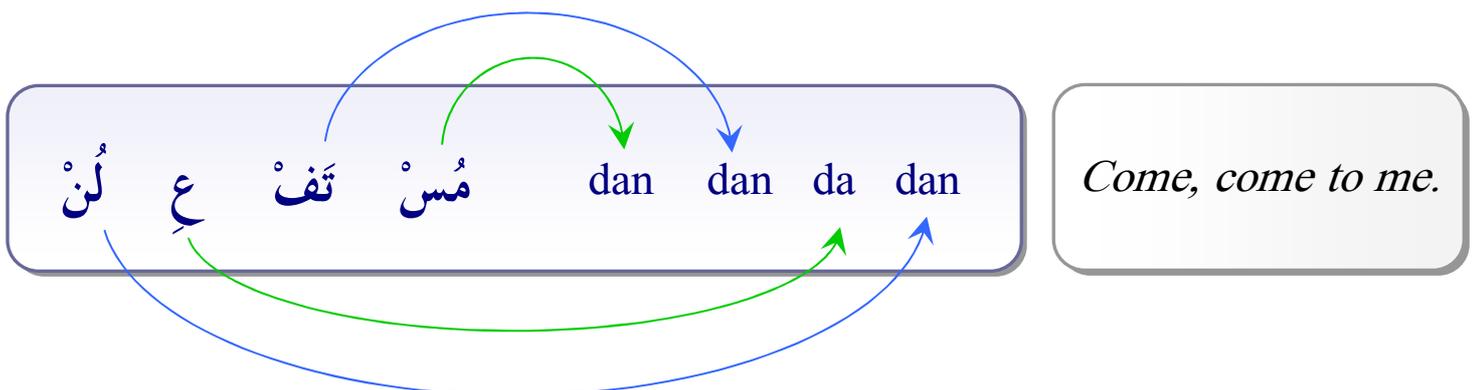
The *baḥr* of al-A‘shā's *qaṣīdah* is الْبَسِيطُ.

It has the following feet:

مُسْتَفْعَلُنْ ◊ فَاعِلُنْ ◊ مُسْتَفْعَلُنْ ◊ فَاعِلُنْ ◊ مُسْتَفْعَلُنْ ←

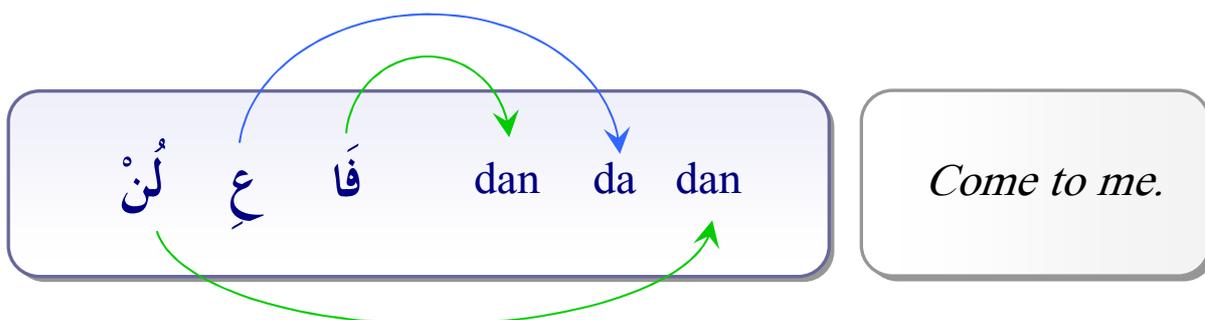
◊ مُسْتَفْعَلُنْ is phonetically: dan-dan-da-dan.

These syllables can be represented by the following English words: *Come, come to me*.



- ◆ **فَاعِلُنْ** is phonetically the same as above minus the initial *dan*.

So it is: dan-da-dan = *Come to me*.

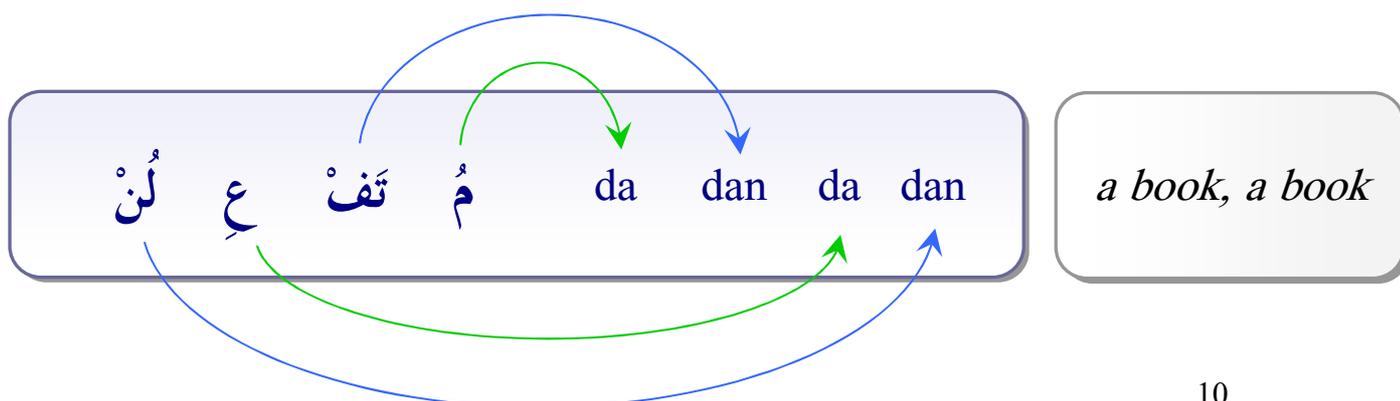


So, the phonetic content of this *baḥr* is:

Come, come to me, come to me; come, come to me, come to me.

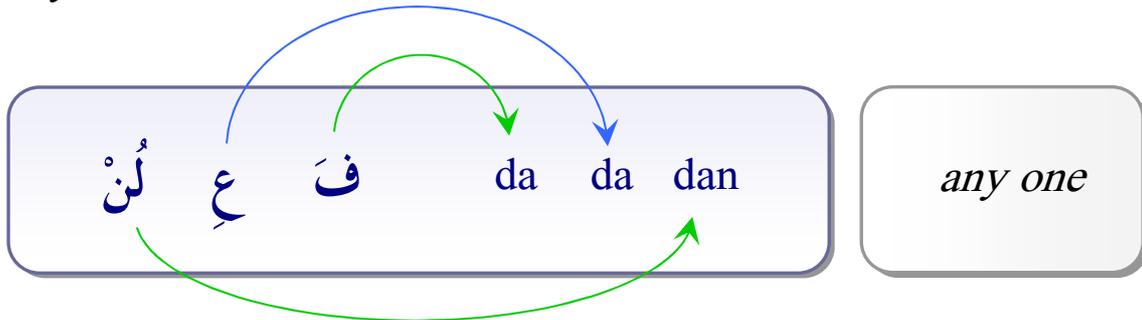
- ◆ **مُسْتَفْعِلُنْ** is shortened to **مُتَفَعِلُنْ** which is phonetically: da-dan-da-dan.

These syllables can be represented by the English words:
a book, a book.



- ◆ **فَاعِلُنْ** is shortened to **فَعِلُنْ** which is phonetically:
da-da-dan.

These syllables can be represented by the English word:
any one.



Anatomy of al-A'shā's *Qaṣīdah*

Here is an anatomy of al-A'shā's first couplet:

وَدَّعْ هُرَيْرَةَ إِنَّ الرِّكْبَ مُرْتَحِلٌ

وَدَّ دَعِ هُ رَيُّ

dan-dan-da-dan = *Come, come to me.*

رَ اَ اِنُّ

da-da-dan = *any one.*

نَرَكْ بَ مُرْ

dan-dan-da-dan = *Come, come to me.*

تَ حَ لُو

da-da-dan = *any one.*



فَهَلْ تُطِيقُ وَدَاعًا أَيُّهَا الرَّجُلُ

فَ هَلْ تَ طِي

da-dan-da-dan = *a book, a book.*

قُ وَ دَا

da-da-dan = *any one.*

عَنْ أَيُّ يُّ هَرْ

dan-dan-da-dan = *Come, come to me.*

رَ جُ لُو

da-da-dan = *any one.*

