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HUNGARIAN LESSON

Hungarian Grammar 1 · Chapter 4 · Linking Vowels and Stem Changes

🔗 Linking Vowels and Stem Changes — Kötőhangzók és tőváltozások

*Harmony chooses between -ban and -ben. This chapter handles the other thing suffixes do: they sometimes bring a **linking vowel** with them, and they sometimes change the **stem** underneath. These two effects explain nearly every 'irregular' plural and accusative in a beginner's book. Most of them are regular once you know the type.*

> THE RULE IN ONE BOX
>
> A stem that ends in a consonant often needs a **linking vowel** (a, o, e or ö) before an ending that starts with a consonant: *ház* + *k* = *házak*. Some stems **change** when an ending is added: they shorten (*kéz* → *kezek*), drop a vowel (*tükör* → *tükrök*), or lengthen a final vowel (*alma* → *almák*).

The two endings we use as examples

The **plural** is *-k*, and the **accusative** (the object marker you know from *Kérek egy kávét*) is *-t*. After a vowel they attach directly (*kávé* → *kávék, kávét*), and after a consonant they usually need a linking vowel first (*kert* → *kertek, kertet*). The same linking vowels appear before possessive endings (*házam*, *kertem*, *könyvem*), so the patterns you learn here are reused again and again.

1. Which linking vowel? The four groups

STEM GROUP	LINKING VOWEL	PLURAL -K	ACCUSATIVE -T	EXAMPLE
Back, 'a' group (a small set)	a	-ak	-at	ház → házak · házat

STEM GROUP	LINKING VOWEL	PLURAL -K	ACCUSATIVE -T	EXAMPLE
Back, 'o' group (the larger set)	o	**-ok**	**-ot**	**ablak → ablakok · ablakot**
Front, unrounded	e	**-ek**	**-et**	**kert → kertek · kertet**
Front, rounded	ö (or e)	**-ök / -ek**	**-öt / -et**	**tükör → tükrök · tükröt**

> **The a/o split is a dictionary fact**
>
> Within back words, some take *-a-* (*házak, halak, házat, halat*) and most take *-o-* (*ablakok, napok, asztalok, vonatok*). The split is not predictable from the spelling, so learn the plural with the word. Dictionaries mark it; so should your vocabulary list. For rounded front words it is the same: *sörök* but *könyvek* (both have *ö*, but they differ).

2. After r, l, ny, s, sz and a few others: no linking vowel in the accusative

After some consonants the accusative -t attaches **straight on**, with no linking vowel. The plural still has its vowel. Compare:

WORD	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	LINKING VOWEL IN ACCUSATIVE?
ember	person	**emberek**	**embert**	no
asztal	table	**asztalok**	**asztalt**	no
tanár	teacher	**tanárok**	**tanárt**	no
lány	girl	**lányok**	**lányt**	no
város	town	**városok**	**várost**	no
orvos	doctor	**orvosok**	**orvost**	no

WORD	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	LINKING VOWEL IN ACCUSATIVE?
sör	beer	sörök	sört	no
ablak	window	ablakok	ablakot	yes
kert	garden	kertek	kertet	yes
könyv	book	könyvek	könyvet	yes

> **A tendency, not a law**
>
> Stems ending in **-r, -l, -ly, -ny, -s, -sz** mostly take the accusative *-t* directly; stems ending in **-k, -p, -t, -v, -g** usually take a linking vowel. There are a few exceptions in both directions, so treat this as a guide and check the dictionary for any word you will use often.

3. Shortening stems

A few very common nouns have a long vowel in the dictionary form that shortens when an ending is added. The change is regular for each word and it affects the plural, accusative, possessive and most of the cases.

DICTIONARY FORM	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	WHAT CHANGED
kéz	hand	kezek	kezet	é → e
víz	water	vizek	vizet	í → i
tűz	fire	tüzek	tüzet	ű → ü
nyár	summer	nyarak	nyarat	á → a
kenyér	bread	kenyerek	kenyeret	é → e

4. The v-stems

A few stems end in a long vowel that grows a **v** before the ending: they are common words, so worth learning as a small set.

DICTIONARY FORM	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	NOTE
ló	horse	**lovak**	**lovat**	ó → ov
tó	lake	**tavak**	**tavat**	ó → av
kő	stone	**kövek**	**követ**	ő → öv
szó	word	**szavak**	**szót**	plural has v, accusative singular does not

5. Vowel-dropping stems

A few two-syllable stems drop the second vowel before an ending that begins with a vowel. You can hear why: the stem is easier to say with one fewer syllable.

DICTIONARY FORM	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	POSSESSIVE (MY)
tükör	mirror	**tükrök**	**tükröt**	**tükröm**
bokor	bush	**bokrok**	**bokrot**	**bokrom**
majom	monkey	**majmok**	**majmot**	**majmom**
teher	load	**terhek**	**terhet**	**terhem**

6. Lengthening final vowels

A noun that ends in a short **a** or **e** lengthens it to **á** or **é** before an ending: the dictionary form is the only one with the short vowel.

DICTIONARY FORM	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	POSSESSIVE (MY)
alma	apple	**almák**	**almát**	**almám**

DICTIONARY FORM	MEANING	PLURAL	ACCUSATIVE	POSSESSIVE (MY)
szoba	room	szobák	szobát	szobám
iskola	school	iskolák	iskolát	iskolám
kefe	brush	kefék	kefét	kefém

Careful with e-final words

Words in **-a** lengthen in every form. Words in **-e** lengthen to **é** in the same way. Words that already end in a long vowel (*kávé, autó, hajó*) just add the ending: *kávék, autót, hajók*. Do not forget *fa* (tree), which follows the same lengthening rule: *fák, fát*.

A word that does several things at once

Real words can combine these effects. Work through them one at a time: *tükör* (mirror) drops its vowel and takes a linking vowel (*tükrök*); *víz* (water) shortens and takes a linking vowel (*vizet*); *alma* (apple) lengthens and then adds *-k* directly (*almák*).

In Use — Használatban

The rule in real sentences. Read each exchange aloud and spot the pattern.

① At home

A:

Milyen a lakásod?

What's your flat like?

B:

Három szobám és két nagy ablakom van.

I have three rooms and two big windows.

A:

Van tükröd is a szobában?

② Shopping

A:

Mit kérsz?

What would you like?

B:

Egy kis vizet és két almát.

A little water and two apples.

A:

Kenyeret is?

Bread too?

Is there a mirror in the room too?

B:

Igen, a falon van egy nagy tükör.

Yes, there's a big mirror on the wall.

B:

Igen, és három kávét!

Yes, and three coffees!

📋 Quick Reference — Gyorstábla

CHANGE	EXAMPLE	DICTIONARY TIP
Linking vowel a / o (back)	**házak** · **ablakok**	learn the plural with the noun
Linking vowel e / ö (front)	**kertek** · **sörök**	rounded stems vary (könyvek)
No linking vowel (r, l, ny, s …)	**embert** · **asztalt** · **lányt**	accusative only
Shortening	**kéz** → **kezek**	kéz, víz, tűz, nyár
v-stems	**ló** → **lovak**	ló, tó, kő, szó
Vowel dropping	**tükör** → **tükrök**	tükör, bokor, majom, teher
Lengthening	**alma** → **almák**	all nouns ending in short a / e

🖍️ Try It Yourself — Gyakorlás

Say the answer first, then click to check.

1. Plural of *ház*

▼ Show answer

házak. 'a' group.

2. Plural of *könyv*

▼ Show answer

könyvek. Front rounded, but takes -ek.

3. Plural of *kéz*

▼ Show answer

kezek. The long é shortens.

4. Plural of *tükör*

▼ Show answer

tükrök. The second vowel drops, and the linking vowel is ö.

5. Plural of *alma*

▼ Show answer

almák. The final a lengthens to á.

6. Accusative of *ablak*

▼ Show answer

ablakot. Linking o after k.

7. Accusative of *ember*

▼ Show answer

embert. No linking vowel after r.

8. Accusative of *asztal*

▼ Show answer

asztalt. No linking vowel after l.

9. Accusative of *lány*

▼ Show answer

lányt. No linking vowel after ny.

10. Accusative of *víz*

▼ Show answer

vizet. The long í shortens, and a linking e is added.

Coming up in Chapter 5: Consonant Changes at the Joins. Why *kéz + -val* is *kézzel*, not *kézval*, and how a suffix can change the sound next to it.