

the Arab World IN THE CLASSROOM

CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARAB STUDIES • GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

TEACHING MODULE NO. 3

The Arabic Language

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Introduction

Arabic is one of the major languages of the world. It is spoken by over 200 million people, and it is the official language of some twenty countries. In addition, since Arabic is the language of the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an, it is a language of great religious significance to hundreds of millions of Muslim people throughout the world, both Arab and non-Arab.

The countries where Arabic is spoken cover a very large geographical area, extending all the way across North Africa, and covering most of the Arabian Peninsula and a large area north of it. In Africa these countries include Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and the Sudan; in the Arabian Peninsula, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates; and, farther north, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Arabic is also spoken by the Palestinian Arabs and by small communities of Arabs in other countries.

Languages are grouped together in language "families," and languages in the same family are said to be "related." This means that all languages in a given family are presumed to have developed from a single, original language, each language within the family having changed in different ways over long periods of time. Arabic belongs to the Semitic language family, and is by far the largest member of that group. Other Semitic languages include Hebrew, now spoken in Israel; Amharic, spoken in Ethiopia; Akkadian, spoken by the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians but now dead; and Aramaic, the language spoken in the Holy Land at the time of Christ, and still used by the inhabitants of a few villages in Syria. Today Arabic is spoken in most of those areas where other Semitic languages were previously spoken. English, in contrast, is a member of the Indo-European group of languages, as are French, German, Italian, and Persian, among others.

The various Semitic languages display considerable similarities in syntax, sounds, vocabulary, and grammar. This similarity can be illustrated by comparing some words of Arabic and Hebrew, both in the Semitic family. The word for "peace" in Arabic is *salaam* and in Hebrew *shalom*; the word for "tongue, language" in Arabic is *lisaan* and in Hebrew *lashon*; and the word for "year" in Arabic is *sana* and in Hebrew *shana*. Not all words in the two languages are this much alike, of course, but there are enough similar ones to make the relationship unmistakable. All the Semitic languages show similarities of this general kind. From these linguistic facts it is possible to conclude that

at one time there was a single "Proto-Semitic" language, from which all the later Semitic languages developed, and a single Semitic people speaking that language. Exactly when this period was, and where these people lived, we do not know. We can be sure that it was more than five thousand years ago, as the earliest written records we have of a Semitic language (Akkadian) date from around 2500 B.C.; however, that branch of Semitic was even then quite different from the others. As to the dwelling-place of the Semitic people before their split into different groups, we can only conjecture—perhaps in the Arabian Peninsula, perhaps in Mesopotamia, perhaps elsewhere.

The History of Arabic

What about the origins of Arabic itself? Again the details are shrouded in the time before historical records when oral tradition prevailed. Prior to the seventh century, Arabic was predominantly an oral language. Histories, biographies, and poetry were memorized and transmitted orally from one generation to the next. Various attempts were made to adapt different scripts to Arabic, but this was not finally accomplished until the eighth century and the rise of Islam. At some stage after the division of the original Semitic people into different groups, the language of one of these groups gradually developed into a language we would recognize as Arabic, and this early form of Arabic was undoubtedly spoken by these people for many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years before the date of the earliest written records. The first actual bit of written

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A Selection of English Words from Arabic

admiral	calendar	gazelle	sash
alchemy	caliber	gauze	satin
alcohol	candy	hazard	sherbet
alcove	caraway	jar	sofa
alfalfa	check	julep	sugar
algebra	check-mate	magazine	sumac
alkali	chiffon	marzipan	syrup
almanac	cipher	mattress	tambourine
amber	coffee	mohair	tariff
arsenal	cotton	muslin	traffic
average	crimson	racquet	zenith
azure	damask	ream	zero
boraz	elixir	saffron	

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Arabic thus far discovered is an inscription, made in 328 A.D., consisting of only a few words. A few other inscriptions dating from about two hundred years later have been found, but the main record of written Arabic begins with the seventh century and the birth of Islam. Let us turn now to that scene.

In the year 600 A.D. almost all the speakers of Arabic were living in what we now know as the Arabian Peninsula, some in towns like Mecca and Medina, and others, probably the majority, in the countryside and the vast desert areas. All these people spoke Arabic; it was not all the same kind of Arabic, however, but rather a number of different dialects. In most cases these were not so different that the various townsmen and tribesmen could not understand each other; but there were different regional accents and, here and there, different meanings for words—very much as in the case today of an English-speaker from New York and one from Alabama, or one from Kansas City and one from London. At this stage of development, Arabic reflected the needs of a community that led a predominantly desert way of life. For example, there were many synonyms for words such as “camel” or “caravan”—common features of everyday life in the desert. In addition to these various local or tribal dialects, there was another variety of Arabic, prevalent in a large part of the Peninsula, called the Standard Poetic Language (SPL), which had a very specialized use: the recitation of poetry. This may seem unimportant until we remember that, for the Arabs of those days, listening to poetry was one of the main forms of entertainment. There were professional poetry-reciters who learned many long poems by heart and traveled from place to place. They were always eagerly welcomed, and the people gathered around fires in the evening and listened with rapt attention to hour after hour of poetry—about love, or heroic deeds, or the beauties of nature. The SPL, the variety of Arabic in which these poems were composed and recited, was probably not the same as any of the dialects spoken at the time, but it had some features of several of them. It is not known whether SPL was used for any purpose other than poetry (for example, as a medium of communication between people speaking different dialects) but it was certainly greatly admired as a beautiful and inspiring form of Arabic.

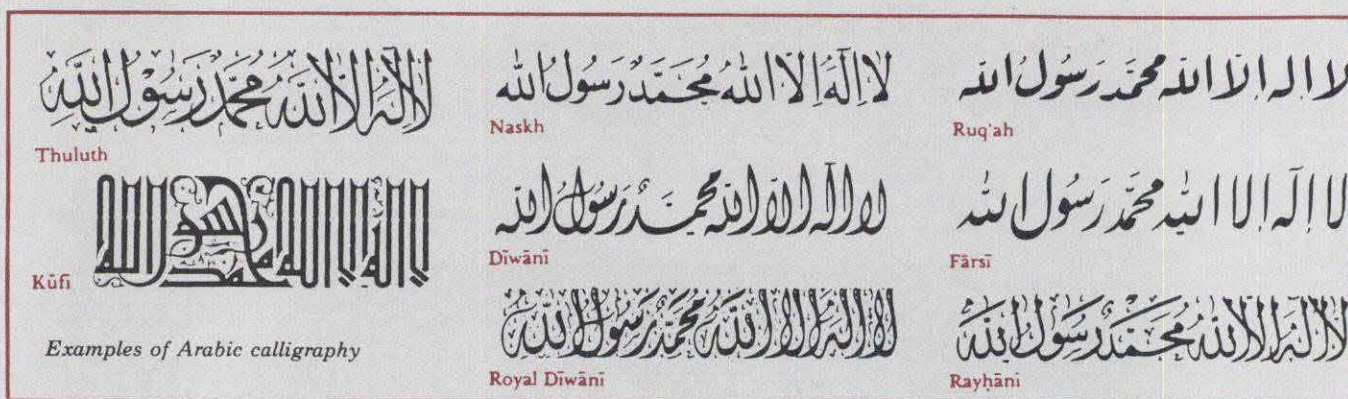
Onto this scene arrived the prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, whose main work was accomplished during the first third of the seventh century. According to Islamic belief, Muhammad was visited on many occasions by the angel Gabriel, who revealed to him the word of God. These divine messages remained etched into Muhammad's memory and were passed on by him to an ever-growing group of followers. Some of the followers began to put the messages into written form and somewhat later these writings were collected and became what we now know as the Qur'an—the holy book of Islam. In what variety of Arabic were the messages received and transmitted? Some have argued that it was in Muhammad's own dialect, that of the Quraysh tribe to which he belonged, and it is true that the language of the Qur'an contains some characteristic traces of this dialect. It seems more likely, however, that the language of the Qur'anic messages was the Standard Poetic Language of the time—a variety of Arabic which was understood and appreciated by large numbers of people whatever their own dialects. In any case, the language of the Qur'an, in the almost fourteen centuries since it was first heard, has always been viewed by Muslim Arabs as the supreme standard of linguistic excellence and beauty. This variety

of Arabic—the language of the Qur'an and of the old poems—is known as “classical Arabic,” and it is still in use today. With the emergence of Islam and the subsequent Arab-Muslim conquests, Arabic spread to the vast areas incorporated into the Islamic Empire: North Africa, most of the Middle East, and much of modern-day Spain and Portugal. This period of expansion, from the seventh to the tenth century, was one of linguistic flux and cultural diffusion and blending. As a result, the arts and sciences flourished. The literature and philosophy of this period are still considered superior to anything produced in Arabic since that time. Sciences like mathematics, medicine, and geography flourished, and linguists produced Arabic grammars that are still relied on today.

The Arabic Language Today

What is the language situation in the present-day Arab world? It is a very interesting one, and somewhat different from that of the English-speaking countries. In every Arab community, two varieties of Arabic are to be found. The first is colloquial Arabic, or the local spoken dialect. This is the language that everyone in the community learns as a child. It is used for daily conversation by everyone, educated and illiterate alike. It is the variety of language a person uses in talking to family and friends, in shopping, in carrying on trade or business—in short, for all the usual activities of daily life. Colloquial Arabic is mainly a medium of *spoken* communication; very little is ever written in a colloquial dialect. The second variety is classical Arabic [today sometimes also called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)]. This is virtually the same as the Arabic of Muhammad's day, although of course a large number of new words have been added for objects and concepts not known thirteen centuries ago and the grammar has been simplified. This variety of Arabic is the principal medium of *written* communication. Almost everything written or printed is in this form of Arabic: books, magazines, newspapers, signs and public notices, government documents, business correspondence, and even personal letters. When children go to school and learn to read and write, it is Modern Standard Arabic they are taught. Although the spoken local dialects differ from place to place, in some cases considerably, Modern Standard Arabic is the same throughout the vast area of the Arabic-speaking world; therefore, any literate Arab can read anything written by any other Arab. Moreover, since classical Arabic has changed so little since Muhammad's time, Arabs today can read Arabic written in the seventh or eighth century without too much difficulty. This is quite different from the situation in English, as we cannot read Old English texts without special study, as though for a foreign language.

Although Modern Standard Arabic is the medium of written communication in the Arab world, it is also used, in certain circumstances, for oral communication. Whereas a local dialect is used for situations of everyday life, as mentioned above, Modern Standard Arabic is spoken in formal settings. It is the form of Arabic most often heard on radio and television, in news broadcasts and speeches. Modern Standard Arabic is the language of sermons in mosques and churches, of university lectures, of legislative deliberations, and in short, whenever a degree of solemnity or formality seems appropriate. It is also used in meetings and conferences involving people from different Arab countries; since it is a *standard* language, the same everywhere in the Arab world, all the participants can communicate



with each other no matter what colloquial dialect they use at home. Dialects, on the other hand, have no written form and vary considerably. Each Arab country has a recognizable local dialect with regional variations.

How different are the local dialects from each other, and how different are they all from Modern Standard Arabic? The answer to the first question depends on geography. In general, neighboring dialects tend to be very similar, and dialects separated by great distances tend to be much more different. Arabs can understand nearby dialects easily, and they can understand at least something of all dialects; but the degree of comprehension decreases with distance, so that two people from opposite ends of the Arab world, each speaking his own dialect, probably would have some difficulties understanding each other. The answer to the second question is that each local dialect has some features that are like Modern Standard Arabic and some that are different. The following chart illustrates some of the similarities and differences:

ENGLISH	MSA	BAGHDAD LOCAL	DAMASCUS LOCAL	CAIRO LOCAL
book	kitaab	ktaab	ktaab	kitaab
milk	haliib	haliib	haliib	laban
many	kathiir	hwaaya	kthiir	kitiir
tomorrow	ghadan	baachir	bikra	bukra
who	man	minu	miin	miin

The Root-and-Pattern System

One of the most striking features of Semitic languages in general, and of Arabic in particular, is the root-and-pattern system. Let us explain how this system works by using examples from Modern Standard Arabic. The great majority of Arabic words consists of two interlocking elements: a root and a pattern. The root is typically three consonants in a certain order. For example, in the word for "book," which is *kitaab*, the root K-T-B is associated with the idea of writing. The same root occurs in *kitaaba* ("act of writing"), *maktab* ("office"), and *kaatib* ("writer"). Another root, D-R-S, which has to do with the idea of studying, occurs in *diraasa* ("act of studying"), *madrasa* ("school"), and *mudarris* ("teacher"). In Arabic dictionaries, words are listed according to their root rather than their first letter; thus both *kaatib* ("writer") and *maktab* ("office") will be found under the K's, as the root of both is K-T-B.

The pattern of a word is the way the root letters are arranged. Thus the pattern of *kaatib* ("writer") is -aa-i- (the hyphens show where the root letters can go), and the pattern of *maktab* ("office") is ma-a-. Patterns, too, have a kind of meaning which is not related to a particular action, state,

or thing, like roots, but which make the general meaning of a root more specific in certain ways. For example, the meaning of the pattern -aa-i- can be "person who does (the act indicated by the root)." The following words all have this pattern (but different roots):

kaatib	"writer"
saakin	"inhabitant"
saabih	"swimmer"

Another example: the pattern ma-a- generally means "place where (the action indicated by the root) goes on." The following words all have this pattern:

maktab	"office"
maskan	"dwelling-place"
masbah	"swimming pool"

Thus the meaning of the root and the meaning of the pattern combine to form the precise meaning of the whole word. This system is a big help to the student of Arabic in building up vocabulary and in understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words. For example, if you know the first pattern illustrated above, and you know that the root H-K-M has to do with judging, then you can guess that the new word *haakim* means "a judge."

The writing systems of English and Arabic are alike in that they both use an alphabet with two dozen or so letters (rather than thousands of characters like Chinese or Japanese), but they are otherwise quite different. The Arabic alphabet has 28 letters, and they look nothing at all like English letters. There are no capitals, but most of the letters have a slightly different shape depending on whether they are the first letter of the word, in the middle, or at the end. Arabic has six vowel sounds: a, u, i, and their long counterparts A, U, I. There are no letters for the short vowels, but only little diagonal dashes and curved marks which are written above or below the consonant letters. Generally, however, these marks are not written at all, so that the reader must know what short vowels to supply. This is not as hard as it sounds; it is as though English were written as follows:

Hs brthr wn sx slvr mdlr fr trck nd swmmng

This looks strange, but anyone who knows English can figure it out in a moment. The general context is a help here: in this sentence "trck" must be "track" and not "trick" or "truck." Another striking difference between English and Arabic is that Arabic is written from right to left.

In the Arab world beautiful writing, or calligraphy, is highly prized as a form of art, and it is used for decoration on public buildings and places where in the West one might see paintings or sculpture. In these decorations, which often consist of quotations from the Qur'an, the Arabic letters are gracefully intertwined to form pleasing patterns, and these form an important part of the design of the whole structure. Mosques, in particular, are decorated with different forms of Arabic calligraphy.

Arabic and Arabs in the United States

Since the end of the nineteenth century, many Arabs have immigrated to the United States and live in communities all across the country. It is estimated that there are now approximately three million Americans of Arab descent. While Arab-Americans, like other Americans, speak English as their first language, they are conscious of their heritage and try to keep Arabic alive in their schools and homes.

Prominent Arab-Americans include consumer advocate Ralph Nader, diplomat Philip Habib, heart surgeon Michael de Bakey, entertainers Danny Thomas and Jamie Farr, and White House chief of protocol Selwa Roosevelt. Perhaps the most illustrious Arab to immigrate to the United States was the writer Kahlil Gibran, who died in 1931. Gibran wrote in English and Arabic. His best-known English work, *The Prophet*, has been translated into Arabic and many other languages.

ha ح	jim ج	theh ث	teh ت	beh ب	alif ا
sin س	zin ز	ra ر	dhal ذ	dai د	kha خ
ain ع	DHa ظ	Ta ط	Dad ض	Sad ص	shin ش
mim م	lam ل	kal ك	qaf ق	feh ف	ghain غ
	yeh ي	waw و	heh ه	nun ن	

The Arabic Alphabet (read from right to left). A dot below the letter (as in ha) indicates it is aspirated. Capital letters indicate velarization.

Suggested Resources

The Arabic Alphabet (wall poster) and *Teaching Supplement*. AMIDEAST, 1100 17th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Arabic Language Handbook*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1967.

Beeston, A.F.L. *The Arabic Language Today*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 1970.

Salibi, Kamal. *A History of Arabia*. Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1980.

Classroom Activities

The questions below can be used for a written examination or as a quiz for class discussion. Possible answers to the questions are in *italics* for the teacher's use.

- Give the students a list of 15–20 words. About half the words should be English words derived from Arabic; the other half should be standard English words. Ask them to identify those Arabic-derived words.
- Have the students locate on a map 10 countries where Arabic is spoken.
- Have the students write a short essay describing how Arabic became the language of diverse cultures and geographical regions. *Arab/Islamic conquest of non-Arabic speaking regions; Arabic as language of science, arts, and diplomacy.*
- Ask students to name three Semitic languages and three Indo-European languages. *Semitic: Arabic, Hebrew, Amharic, Aramaic, Syriac, Mehri, Soqotri; Indo-European: English, German, French, Persian, Italian.*
- Ask the students to name five prominent Americans of Arab origin and their professions.

CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARAB STUDIES



The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS) is part of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. CCAS was established in 1975 to provide an Arab studies academic program and to engage in scholarly activity on Arab society and culture. In addition, it sponsors a lively public affairs program which includes a lecture and seminar series, an annual symposium, a research and publications program, and an information service for the news media and the community at large.

COMMUNITY RESOURCE SERVICE

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