

The Arabic Language

Arabic ranks sixth in the world's league table of languages, with an estimated 186 million native speakers. As the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, it is also widely used throughout the Muslim world. It belongs to the Semitic group of languages which also includes Hebrew and Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia.

There are many Arabic dialects. Classical Arabic – the language of the Qur'an – was originally the dialect of Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia. An adapted form of this, known as Modern Standard Arabic, is used in books, newspapers, on television and radio, in the mosques, and in conversation between educated Arabs from different countries (for example at international conferences).



Learning Arabic certainly takes time and practice, but there are not many irregularities in the grammar. It's much less complicated than Latin, and probably simpler than German, too.

There are 28 consonants and three vowels – a, i, u – which can be short or long. Some of the sounds are unique to Arabic and difficult for foreigners to pronounce exactly, though you should be able to make yourself understood.

The normal word order of a sentence is verb/subject/object. The function of nouns in a sentence can also be distinguished by case-endings (marks above the last letter of a word) but these are usually found only in the Qur'an or school textbooks.

Feminine nouns add the suffix ...*aat* to form the plural but masculine nouns generally have a "broken" plural which involves changing vowels in the middle of the word: *kitaab* ("book"); *kutub* ("books").

Arabic has very few irregular verbs and does not use "is" or "are" at all in the present tense: "the king good" means "the king is good". Subtle alterations in the basic meaning of a verb are made by adding to the root. These changes follow regular rules, giving ten possible "verb forms" (though in practice only three or four exist for most verbs. The root k-s-r produces:

- form I *kasara*, "he broke"
- form II *kassara*, "he smashed to bits"
- form VII *inkasara*, "it was broken up"

Arabic is the primary language of more than 20 countries, from Morocco to Iraq and throughout the Arabian Peninsula. It is the first language of over 195 million people, and at least another 35 million speak it as a second language. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official language throughout the Arab world, and in its written form it is relatively consistent across national boundaries.

Today, words of Arabic origin can be found in some European languages such as Italian and Spanish, due to periods of Arab reign in those countries. English words of Arabic origin include algebra, alcohol, mosque, tariff, alcove, magazine, elixir, sultan and cotton.

Learning Modern Standard Arabic can be challenging. The sound system is completely different from Germanic and Romance languages. Arabic pronunciation includes a variety of distinctive guttural sounds that are formed in a different way than most words in European languages. Arabic grammar, however, is relatively straightforward. There are only two verb tenses, and Arabic verbs are regular in conjugation. There are cases for Arabic nouns, but only three: nominative, genitive, and accusative. These aspects of the language compensate for some of the difficulties non-native speakers may experience when learning Arabic pronunciation and reading.

The Arabic writing system is quite different from the English system. The Arabic alphabet consists of 28 letters that change shape depending on their position within a word and the letters by which they are surrounded. Some Arabic letters must be connected to other letters; others may stand alone. Arabic vowels are indicated by marks above and below the consonants, but in some texts such as newspapers and magazines, these marks are omitted. Additionally, there are no special forms, such as the use of capital letters in English, to indicate proper nouns or the beginning of a sentence. A good way to begin learning Arabic is by learning the Arabic alphabet and the rules that govern spelling. After all, Arabic writing is more than just a system of communication; it is considered to be an art form.

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