



Heritage Voices: Language – Arabic

About the Arabic Language

Arabic, a branch of the Semitic language family, is the mother tongue of more than 200 million people worldwide. Ranked fourth in number of speakers (after Chinese, English, and Spanish) (Lewis, 2009), Arabic is also one of the official languages of the United Nations. It is widely spoken in the Middle East, North Africa, and the region of the African horn. [The League of Arab States](#) lists 22 countries where Arabic is the (or one of the) official languages.

Classical and Modern Standard Arabic

Arabic is divided into two standard varieties: Classical Arabic (CA) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). CA is the traditional variety of the language that is used in classical writings. It is a fixed variety, the use of which is almost entirely restricted to academic circles interested in classical literature (pre-Islamic literature) and theology. MSA, on the other hand, is a more modern descendant of CA. It is the variety now taught in schools and universities and used in official political discourse, contemporary literature, newspapers, and the media in general.

Varieties of Arabic

Use of Arabic represents a case of diglossia. MSA is quite different from the varieties spoken across the Middle East and North Africa, and dialect variation is a linguistic phenomenon in all of the countries in which Arabic is an official language. Most of these varieties are mutually intelligible, although the differences among them (e.g., Iraqi Arabic and Moroccan Arabic) in some cases include phonology, morphology, syntax, and the lexicon.

In general, the varieties of Arabic can be divided into five categories (Alosh, 2010): (1) Arabian (spoken in the Arabian Peninsula, known as *دول الخليج*), (2) Iraqi (spoken in Iraq and Iraqi diaspora communities), (3) Levantine Arabic (spoken in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, an area historically known as *biladu 'ashaam* بلاد الشام), (4) Egyptian (spoken in Egypt and Sudan), (5) and North African (spoken in Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunis, known as the Maghreb *دول المغرب العربي*). Comoros, Djibouti, and Somalia are usually not included in lists of countries where Arabic is spoken, because although Arabic is one of the official languages of each of these countries, it is usually used as a liturgical language or often as a second language taught formally in schools. The Arabic used in these countries can be classified as MSA or even Classical Arabic (Alosh, 2010).

Form and Structure of MSA

Arabic is written from right to left, and the Arabic alphabet is made up of 28 letters. The shape of each letter changes according to its position in the word. Most letters take different forms when they occur in isolation or in front, middle, or end positions. For example, ب /b/ takes the following shapes in different positions.

- In isolation, ب
- In front position بـ, as in بارد "cold"
- In middle position ـبـ, as in صبر "patience"
- In end position ـب, as in كُتِبَ "books"

Like other Semitic languages, Arabic "is marked by a limited vocalic system and a rich consonantal system" (Watson, 2002, p.1). The only vowels in Arabic are *a*, *i*, and *u*, which exist in short and long forms. The short vowels, when added to the script, are indicated with diacritic marks. Table 1 shows the Arabic consonantal system (Versteegh, 2001; Arabic symbols have been added).

	Voiceless	Voiced	Nasal	Velarized	Lateral	Trill
Labial	f ف	b ب	m م			
Interdental	t̪ ث	d̪ ذ		ɟ ظ		
Dental	s س	z ز	n ن	ʂ ص	l ل	
Alveolar	t ت	d د		ɟ ط	ɖ ض	r ر
Pre-palatal	ʃ ش	ç ج				
Post-palatal	k ك	q ق				
Velar	ħ خ	g غ				
Pharyngeal	ħ ح	ʕ ع				
Laryngeal	ʕ ء	h ه				

Table 1: Arabic Consonantal System

Arabic word formation is based on root-and-pattern morphology. The root is made up of two, three, or four consonants, which are used to derive different words. For example, the root KTB, "writing," is used to derive other words, such as KiTaab (book), MaKtuub (written), KaaTiB (writer), and MaKTab (office) (Watson, 2002, p.3).

Arabic Calligraphy

Arabic calligraphy is the artistic production of the Arabic script. The art of calligraphy goes back hundreds of years and has developed as one of the major forms of Islamic art. The Kufic style was used primarily to write the Koran until the 10th century, when several scripts developed in Baghdad and were refined and followed by other scripts across the centuries.

The different scripts used today have been developed in response to the needs and purposes of their time and place. Graceful scripts were used for writing poetry, while scripts that were easy to read and write were used for correspondence (Kvernen, 2009).

Arabic in the United States

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were 1.6 million Arab Americans in the United States, a 34% increase from the 2000 count (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b).

However, the Arab American Institute (2011) suggests that the number is closer to 3.5 million. Over 850,000 residents of the United States speak Arabic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a).

The learning of Arabic in schools has increased significantly since the early 2000s in public and private schools, community-based and parochial language programs, and universities. Federal initiatives focused on critical languages have had a significant impact on the offering and studying of Arabic. (See discussion in Bale, in press, 2014).

Spotlight on Arabic Speakers

This section describes experiences of three Arabic speakers who live in the United States: Nasser Elsaleh, Josue Chahin, and Alaa Kamel.

Nasser Elsaleh



Nasser Elsaleh was born and raised in the United States. His parents are originally from Lebanon. They went to school in the United States before they met each other and got married. Nasser is an undergraduate student at California State University, San Bernardino.

“Ever since I was born, my mother spoke to me in Arabic. Arabic was my first language, and I had to take a special program in elementary school to help me with my English. At the age of six, I was mixing up Arabic and English and sometimes using them in the same sentence. I was able to identify the letters and read some sentences in Arabic.

At age seven, I attended Sunday school at our local Mosque. I attended only a couple of months there and then dropped out, because it was too expensive. By the time I finished elementary school, I had forgotten how to read Arabic and how to speak it well. I would stutter in Arabic, and I wouldn't be able to find the right words to say. I hadn't been using it, and being in an English school, I had forgotten most of it. By high school I couldn't read one word in Arabic. My Arabic was terrible, but I would occasionally try to speak in Arabic slang with my mother and most of the times substitute words I had forgotten in Arabic with English. I did, however, always have an interest in Arabic, but my high school did not have any Arabic classes. Finally, in college, I signed up for my first Arabic class the very first quarter. It was the only class I was excited about, mainly because I felt as if I was discovering my past. With every letter thrown out at me, I was able to say to myself, “Oh yeah, I remember that.” I am so happy I am able to read and write again and to expand my vocabulary. It makes my parents proud that I am able to read the Arabic headlines in a newspaper or the captions that come up while they are watching Arabic television. This is my culture. I would like to be able to know my heritage language a bit better and, most importantly, to be able to read the Quran in Arabic from cover to cover and to understand it. I do understand that this will take a lot of work, but it's one of my many goals right now, and I really hope I will be able to achieve it.”

Spotlight on Arabic Speakers (continued)

Josue Chahin



Josue Chahin was born in the United States. His mother is from Honduras, and his father's roots go back to Palestine. Josue is an undergraduate student at California State University, San Bernardino.

"I was born in the U.S. and was raised with Spanish as my primary language. This was because it was the only language spoken in my household. The media was my first introduction to English, and I started learning English with Spanish before starting any schooling.

My grandmother tells me that my preschool teacher said to her how surprised she was by how I knew both English and Spanish, even though my family had enrolled me in a preschool class for children with Spanish as a primary language. Besides my last name (which I mispronounced), I had no experience with the Arabic language from my childhood until I started studying Arabic. My mother is from Honduras and came to the United States shortly before I was born. My father, of Palestinian origin, stayed in Honduras to manage his businesses.

I began learning Arabic in the fall of 2010, in university. I wish I had had some experience with learning Arabic in my childhood. To me, language is a very important aspect of life and provides a different way of thinking. The values of life can be seen within the structure of the language and in the nature of the words. It develops an understanding of the people who speak it. I researched my last name and found that it is of Arab origin, and so in college I felt inclined to take Arabic classes. My experience with learning Arabic in college has been an incredibly memorable one. The welcoming people and culture have made the language seem welcoming. I want to reach an understanding of Arabic, where it would feel like I had never studied it and that I was raised with the language since my childhood. Letters and sounds that had seemed foreign to me are now almost second nature. I want to become familiar with the language that I feel I am supposed to know, that it is my responsibility to know. The Arabic language filled the part of me that I feel was left unanswered in my childhood."

Spotlight on Arabic Speakers (continued)

Alaa Kamel



Alaa Kamel was born in the United States. Her parents are originally from Egypt.

"I was born in the United States; however, my parents frequently traveled to Egypt in my childhood. I learned to speak Arabic first. As children, my siblings and I were forbidden from speaking English at home. My mother's reasoning was that we will learn English because we live in the United States; Arabic was to be taught and spoken at home.

She was incredibly strict about it. I remember that we were only allowed to watch Arabic television, and we spent a lot of time with our Arabic friends from the Mosque. There were strict punishments for anyone who spoke English at home, like toys would be taken away, and we would be put in time out. Worst of all, we had to name vegetables in Arabic.

While living in Egypt for a period of four years, I attended a private school. One of the courses taught was Arabic. While living in the U.S., we were always attending Mosque functions and almost never missed Sunday school. As a child I hated my parents for being so strict and serious about Arabic. I thought it was nothing serious, but as I grew into my adulthood, I wish they were stricter about reading and writing. That would have been much more helpful in my Arabic learning experience in college today.

I am at an advantage in regards to understanding the spoken material and most of the reading, but when it comes to grammar and sentence structure, my classmates, who have had a formal Arabic education, are at an advantage. In addition to the fact that I am Egyptian and my graduate studies will involve extensive studies of the Middle East, I am simply fascinated by the language. Forms of expression in Arabic have no comparison. If it made sense, I would say that the words mean more, or they hold more weight. But that doesn't make sense, so I will say that the passion of the speaker is easier to find in Arabic than in English. I am a great fan of the English language, and I consider myself blessed because I am fluent in two almost opposing languages. English is a language that can move mountains, while Arabic is a language that is deeper than the ocean."

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[Search](#) for Arabic heritage language programs in the Alliance programs database.

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This Heritage Voice on Arabic was prepared by Ezzeddine Saidi for the Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), Washington DC. We appreciate the valuable input from Dr. Oraib Mango, Nasser Elsaleh, Josue Chahin, and Alaa Kamel.

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