

The Arabic Language: The Glue That Binds the Arab World

by Zeina Azzam Seikaly*

If an Algerian, an Egyptian, a Syrian, and a Saudi Arabian are asked the question, “What makes you an Arab?” they will undoubtedly all include speaking Arabic in their answers. This language is indeed the glue that binds the Arab world, from Morocco to Kuwait. Arabic has played a significant role in the shared history of all Arabs, and it continues to provide Arab society with a cohesiveness and strong sense of identity.

Until the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE, Arabic was primarily an oral language. The Qur’an, Islam’s holy book, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic, thereby giving the language great religious significance. Muslims believe that to fully understand the message of the Qur’an, it must be read in its original language: Arabic. Thus, the importance of the Arabic language extends well beyond the borders of the Arab world. There are over one billion Muslims worldwide, and they all strive to learn Arabic in order to read and pray in the language of revelation.

The First Word: Recite

Muslims believe that the first word revealed to the Prophet Muhammad was *iqra*, or “recite.” This is the command that God gave to Muhammad when the Prophet began to receive the revelations, which were later compiled into the Qur’an. Literally, Qur’an means “recitation.” In fact, the verb *iqra* contains the three-letter root on which the word “Qur’an” is based—Q, R, and A (see “Root and Pattern System,” below). Muslims also interpret God’s command as enjoining humankind not only to learn to read and write, but also to gain a deeper understanding of life and spirituality through learning.

Three Forms of Arabic: Classical, Modern Standard, and Colloquial

The Qur’an became the fixed standard for Arabic, particularly for the written form of the language. Arabs consider the “Classical Arabic” of the Qur’an as the ultimate in linguistic beauty and perfection. The contemporary “Modern Standard Arabic,” based on the classical form of the language, is used in literature, print media, and formal communications such as news broadcasts. “Colloquial Arabic,” or locally spoken dialect, varies from country to country and region to region throughout the Arab world.

The written and spoken forms of Arabic are highly interrelated. In religious ceremonies or formal speeches or meetings, the written form of Arabic is employed orally. Modern Standard Arabic is used in television and radio news broadcasts across the Arab world, thus allowing Arabic speakers from countries as far apart as Lebanon and Morocco to understand one another. In conversation, however, Arabic speakers from different countries might encounter problems understanding one another when they speak in their respective local dialects. They could communicate in Modern Standard Arabic, a form usually reserved for formal occasions, but it might feel a bit awkward or stiff.

Although written Arabic has changed comparatively little since the seventh century, spoken Arabic has assumed many local and regional variations. It has also incorporated foreign words; for example, in the twentieth century, many new non-Arabic words have found their

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way into the language, particularly terms relating to modern technology. Although there are Modern Standard Arabic equivalents for “computer,” “telephone,” “television,” and “radio,” most Arabs, in speaking, will use the English or French versions of these words.

At the same time, Western languages have borrowed a plethora of words from Arabic. During its zenith, Islamic civilization was considered a center for scholarship, and Arabic was the medium for medicine and mathematics, philosophy, and astronomy. Words such as alcohol, algebra, admiral, alchemy, elixir, gauze, and magazine all derive from Arabic roots. Many of the names we call stars come from Arabic; examples include Betelgeuse and Rigel (both in the constellation Orion), Deneb (in Cygnus), Altair (in Aquila), and Aldebaran (in Taurus). In addition, the Spanish and Portuguese languages also contain a wealth of words of Arabic origin, owing to the flowering of Arab civilization in the Iberian peninsula from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries.

Characteristics of the Language

Arabic is a Semitic language, like Hebrew, Aramaic, and Amharic. It has 28 letters, many of which parallel letters in the Roman alphabet, and it is written from right to left (Arabic books are held so that the spine is on the right-hand side). Letters or sounds equivalent to P and V do not exist in Arabic. Conversely, many letter sounds in Arabic are unfamiliar to English speakers. For example, the guttural *`ayn* is produced by compressing the throat and has no equivalent in Western languages (in transliterated text it is often denoted by a backward apostrophe or a superscript “c”). The *ghayn* resembles a French “r,” and the *kha* sounds like a deep German “ch.” Some Arabic letters represent sounds that are written as two letters in English, such as the *sheen* that makes an “sh” sound, and the *tha* that makes a “th” sound. In fact, Arabic includes one letter for the sound “th” as it is pronounced in the word “thin,” and a different letter for the sound “th” as it is pronounced in the word “the.”

There are six vowel sounds in Arabic: a long “ee” as in “beet;” a short “i” as in “bit;” a long “aa” as in “man;” a short “a” as in “many;” a

long “oo” as in “boot;” and a short “u” as in “put.” The three long vowels (ee, aa, and oo) are designated by specific letters, and the short vowels are denoted by accent marks. Therefore, many Arabic words are written as a series of consonants, with accent marks accompanying the letters to indicate vowelizing. In everyday writing, these accents are often omitted; the reader recognizes the words as a result of experience as well as the context.

In addition to singular and plural constructs, Arabic has a form called “dual” that indicates precisely two of something. For example, a pen is *qalam*, two pens are *qalamayn*, and pens are *aqlaam*. As in French, Spanish, and many other languages, Arabic nouns are either feminine or masculine, and the verbs and adjectives that refer to them must agree in gender. In written Arabic, case endings are used to designate parts of speech (subject, object, prepositional phrase, etc.), in a similar fashion to Latin and German.

Arabic letters are strung together to form words in one way only; there is no distinction between printing and cursive, as there is in English. Neither are there capital and lowercase letters—all the letters are the same. The form of the letter, however, changes depending on its position (beginning, middle, end) in a word. Some connect only on one side, others on both. The letter shapes include loops and dots and other features that lend an artistic quality to the script (see “Arabic Calligraphy,” page 30).

Root and Pattern System

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Arabic is its regularity of form. Arabic words generally derive from three-letter roots that are modified according to specific rules in order to construct groups of words whose meanings relate to each other. Extensive word families are constructed in Arabic by adding prefixes, infixes (letters added inside the word), and suffixes to a three-letter root in a series of set patterns. In fact, when using an Arabic dictionary, one does not simply look up words alphabetically. The three-letter root must first be determined, and then it can be located alphabetically in the dictionary. Under the root, the different words that belong to that word family are listed.

On the next page are some of the words formed from the three-letter root JLS.

JaLaSa	to sit down
aJLaSa	to seat [someone]
JiLSa	manner of sitting
JuLuuS	[the act of] sitting down
iJLiS!	sit down!
JaLSa	meeting or gathering
JaLeeS	companion; participant in a social gathering (feminine is JaLeeSa)
maJLiS	session or council
muJaaLaSa	social exchange or communication

Arabic Names

Many Arab families continue to follow traditional naming customs. The firstborn son, for example, will name his own firstborn son after his father. As Arab society is patrilineal, girls and boys assume their father’s name for a middle name and take his last name as theirs. The names themselves all have meanings—frequently attributes of an admirable personality (e.g., Kareema means generous or noble; Zaki means intelligent). As in many parts of the world, Arabic names often denote a profession for which the family was once known, such as Haddad (Smith) or Khabbaz (Baker). Family names can also represent the family’s city or town of origin, such as Akkawi (from Akka, or Acre, in historic Palestine) or Homsî (from Homs, in Syria).

When reading Arab history, one often encounters the words Ibn (or Bin) and Bint, which mean “son of” and “daughter of,” respectively. Thus, Ibn Khaldun or Ibn Battuta indicate the Son of Khaldun and the Son of Battuta, and Zaynab Bint Jahsh means Zaynab, the Daughter of Jahsh. “Banu” or “Bani” is the plural of Ibn; therefore, Banu Hashim means the children (or descendants) of Hashim, and Bani Adam means the descendants of Adam. “Abu” means “father of” and “Umm” means “mother of;” thus, Abu Salamah and Umm Salamah are the parents of the son named Salamah.

In Islam, God (*Allah* in Arabic) has ninety-nine names, all describing His goodness and majesty.

These are attributes that are mentioned in the Qur’an and Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Many Arabic names are constructed by merging the word ‘Abd (meaning “servant of”) with one of the ninety-nine names. Therefore, ‘Abd Allah (often written in English as Abdallah, or Abdullah) means Servant of God. Here are some other examples. Note that the prefix “al” means “the.”

- ‘Abd al-Rahman—Servant of the Merciful
- ‘Abd al-Jabbar—Servant of the Almighty
- ‘Abd al-Hakeem—Servant of the Wise One

When these names are Anglicized, often they are written as Abdul Rahman and Abdul Jabbar. There is no right or wrong way to transliterate these names, as long as it is understood that “Abdul” does not usually stand alone as a name. Rather, it means “servant of the” and should be followed by one of the ninety-nine names of God.

Some other common Arabic names and their meanings are listed below.

Female Names

- Muna**—hope, wish
- Layla**—night
- Hanaan**—tenderness, compassion
- Karma**—grapevine
- Salwa**—comfort, consolation
- Sameera**—companion
- Noor**—light
- ‘Aysha**—alive, prosperous
- Ameena**—believer, having faith, peaceful
- Fatima**—daughter of Prophet Muhammad
- Khadeeja**—first wife of Prophet Muhammad

Male Names

- Shareef**—honorable
- Jameel**—handsome
- ‘Umar**—long life, thriving
- Rasheed**—rightly guided, sensible
- Saleem**—safe, faultless
- Fareed**—unique, unrivaled
- Ameen**—trustworthy, loyal
- Khaled**—everlasting, immortal
- Muhammad, Ahmad, Mahmoud**—praised
- ‘Ali**—exalted, elevated
- Hasan, Husayn**—handsome, superior

Biblical Names

Ibrahim —Abraham	Musa —Moses
Dawud —David	Yusef —Joseph
`Issa —Jesus	Hanna —John
Hawwa —Eve	Sarah —Sarah
Maryam —Mary	

Arabic Calligraphy

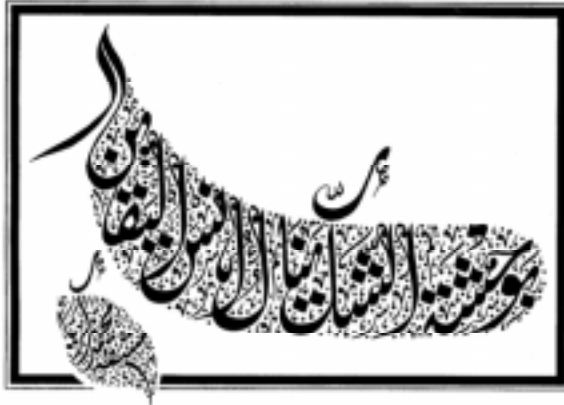
As mentioned earlier, the shapes of Arabic letters and the flowing style of the script endow the language with great artistic potential. Indeed, Arabic calligraphy is ubiquitous in the Islamic world and is found in both religious and secular environments.

A saying (*hadith*) attributed to Prophet Muhammad is, “Beautiful calligraphy gives truth more clarity.” As the Islamic community grew, calligraphy was adapted to different uses. For example, the writing of the Qur’an needed to be beautiful yet understandable. Because paper was expensive, compact script was preferred for business and personal correspondence. Ornamental calligraphy on buildings, metalwork, and textiles could be embellished extensively and rendered in a variety of styles—elegant and flowing, or angular and geometric. Calligraphic styles thus proliferated and continue to evolve to this day.

Some of the characteristics of Arabic calligraphy are proportionality, symmetry, repetition, and embellishment. The horizontal letters, like “*ba*” and “*seen*,” can be stretched out to fill a particular space or shape, or to add a dramatic quality. The vertical letters, like the “*alef*” and “*lam*,” can be elongated, slanted, or rendered in a perpendicular fashion. One can “feel” the script flowing in a particular direction. Loops, dots, and accent marks add interest, balance, and decoration, and contribute to an overall sense of regularity and harmony.

Arabic calligraphers sometimes construct calligrams—words or phrases that conform to specific shapes or figures, such as a rectangle or an animal. A calligram can also include “mirror writing,” in which the calligraphy of the word or phrase is a perfect mirror image on each side of an imaginary line of symmetry. These some-

times have a maze-like quality, at once enigmatic and aesthetically pleasing.



This beautifully embellished example of Arabic calligraphy is the work of Mohamad Zakariya. It is an Arabic proverb that translates, “In the midst of doubt, one finds certainty.”

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“The Arabic Language: The Glue That Binds the Arab World” by Zeina Azzam Seikaly is excerpted from the guidebook that accompanies AMIDEAST’s educational video *Young Voices from the Arab World: The Lives and Times of Five Teenagers*. This award-winning video conveys everyday aspects of Arab culture and society through the lives of five young people from Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, and Morocco. They take you into their homes, schools, places of worship, and favorite entertainment spots. Narration by noted radio personality Casey Kasem provides historical, geographical, and other background information. This excellent introduction to the Arab world was developed especially for classroom use in grades five through eight, but its lively presentation will appeal to a much broader audience.

The teacher’s guidebook includes the script, a video summary, country data and statistics, informational handouts on topics introduced in the video, an annotated bibliography of selected print and internet resources, regional recipes, a glossary of terms, and other supplementary information.

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