

# ARABIC LANGUAGE

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**Language and Identity.** Arab identity in modern times and throughout much of Arab history meant being a native speaker of Arabic rather than being racially or genetically Arab. Given the nature of the Islamic expansion into the Middle East and North Africa, the Arab portion of the gene pool in Egypt, Morocco, or Lebanon, for example, is probably quite small, probably far less than 10%. It is the Arabic language that ties the region together culturally. The Arabic linguistic situation is complex, a fact that is sometimes obscured by the fact that all of its varieties are termed simply "Arabic." Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and classical Arabic literature, served in the Islamic world the role that Latin served in medieval Christendom. It was the language of prayer and of most religious discourse, and of most academic discourse in the religious sciences, literature and the arts, as well as non-religious sciences such as mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and so on. This written language remained relatively unified until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though it did change over time, as did Latin. Written Arabic change significantly, however, with the arrival of newspapers, radio, television, and the translation of European language materials into Arabic, creating modern standard Arabic. The modern written language retains many features of classical Arabic grammar but has changed quite a bit in style, including a great deal of innovated vocabulary and calques on English and French idioms and grammatical constructions. It eschewed many of the popular rhetorical figures of pre-modern Arabic, especially the frequent use of rhyming and rhythmically parallel phrases that were often semantically redundant. Modern Standard Arabic is an artificial language of sorts, in that it is only used in writing and formal speech and is not the native language of any Arab and must be learned in school.

**Arabic Dialects.** The Arabic dialects differ radically from classical Arabic and modern standard Arabic, somewhat less than Italian, French, and Spanish differ from Latin, but much more than the various varieties of Spanish differ from each other. Like Latin, Classical and Modern Standard Arabic are both inflected languages, in which the various cases of the noun are distinguished by particular endings, while the modern dialects, like the Romance languages, have across the board jettisoned the inflection of nouns. In many areas of the Islamic Empire, Arabic replaced the local languages. Coptic died out by the sixteenth century in Egypt; Nubian survives in Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan. In what are now Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Arabic replaced various dialects of Aramaic. The small Aramaic-speaking communities that remain are Jewish and Christian villages and small communities in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Persian and Kurdish, which have survived as major languages, are the major exceptions in the Middle East. The spread of Turkish in the northern tier of the Middle East postdates the expansion of the Islamic Empire in the early centuries. In North Africa, Berber language is dying out in Libya, Tunisia, and the Oases of Egypt but remain strong in Algeria and Morocco, where significant portions of the population continue to be raised as native speakers of several Berber languages. Each Arabic dialect is influenced to some extent by the substrate (the languages that existed before Arabic became widespread), such as Aramaic in Syria and Iraq and Berber in North Africa, as well as by the languages imposed by foreign regimes, such as Turkish in Arab regions that were formerly under Ottoman domination, or by the colonial powers, such as French in Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, English in Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq, and Italian in Libya. Though the Arabic dialects differ from each other, most Arabs can communicate through a complex mix of standard Arabic and elements of their own and other dialects. In the mid-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Egyptian Arabic became something like a lingua franca in the Arab world on account of the influence of

Egyptian radio, music, television, and cinema throughout the Arab nations, as well as Gamal Abdel Nasser's policy of sending Egyptian graduates to teach throughout the Arab world in elementary and high schools. Since the 1990s, satellite television has changed the linguistic situation radically by exposing Arabs everywhere to a variety of dialects, including Syrian, Lebanese, and Gulf dialects, even on the same talk show, where guests from several nations are made to interact with each other.

## Questions

Hammond stresses the divide between high and low culture in the Arab World. Does a similar divide exist in the United States? Compare and contrast the two situations. Who are the representatives of high culture, and why do they criticise low culture so much?

What is the Great Qur'an Debate (Hammond, pp. 73-78), and why is it important?

Describe the ways in which Ramadan has been commercialized.

In order to show high status, Arab families often spend enormous sums on weddings. What are some of the things on which they spend this money?

McDonalds does not represent the same thing in the Arab World that it does in the United States. How and why does this difference exist?

How do sensationalism and paranoia affect the press in the Arab World?

## Reading

Eickelmann, *The Middle East*.

Chapter 8: Change in Practical Ideologies: Self, Gender, and Ethnicity, pp. 179-227.

Chapter 9: The Cultural Order of Complex Societies, pp. 228-254.

Chapter 10: Islam and the "Religions of the Book," pp. 255-338.

Chapter 11: State Authority and Society, pp. 339-395.

Hammond, *Popular Culture*.

Chapter 1: Culture and Politics in the Arab World Today, pp. 1-52.

Chapter 2: The Arabic Language: The Key to Arab Identity, pp. 53-78.

Chapter 4: Arab Consumer Culture: The Packaging of People and Places, 107-136.

Chapter 9: The Trials and Tribulations of the Arabic Press, pp. 237-62.

## Further Reading

Beeston, A.F.L. *The Arabic Language Today*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006.

Gully, Adrian. *The Culture of Letter-Writing in Pre-Modern Islamic Society*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.

Haeri, Niloofar. *Sacred Language, Ordinary People: Dilemmas of Culture and Politics in Egypt*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Hourani, Albert. *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Stetkevych, Jaroslav. *The Modern Arabic Literary Language*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006.

Suleiman, Yasir. *The Arabic Language and National Identity: A Study in Ideology*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2003.

Tahtawi, Rifa`ah Rafi`. *An Imam in Paris: Al-Tahtawi's Visit to France 1826-1831*. Trans. Daniel L. Newman. London: Saqi, 2011.