

## Topic Page: [Arabic language](#)

Summary Article: **Arabic language**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

Major Semitic language of the Hamito-Semitic family of West Asia and North Africa, originating among the Arabs of the Arabian peninsula. It is spoken today by about 120 million people in the Middle East and North Africa. Arabic script is written from right to left.

The language has spread by way of conquest and trade as far west as Morocco and as far east as Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, and is also spoken in Arab communities scattered across the Western hemisphere. Forms of colloquial Arabic vary in the countries where it is the dominant language: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Arabic is also a language of religious and cultural significance in such other countries as Bangladesh, India, Iran, Israel, Pakistan, and Somalia. Arabic-speaking communities are growing in the USA and the West Indies.

**Consonantal roots** A feature of the language is its consonantal roots. The vast majority of Arabic words consist of three consonants containing a root idea. By adding various vowels and affixes, associated meanings can be derived. For example, *s-l-m* is the root for *salaam*, a greeting that implies peace; *Islam*, the creed of submission to God and calm acceptance of his will; and *Muslim*, one who submits to that will (a believer in Islam). The Koran, the sacred book of Islam, is 'for reading' by a *qari* ('reader') who is engaged in *qaraat* ('reading'). The 7th-century style of the Koran is the basis of classical Arabic (*al-lughatu al-fusha*).

**Further linguistic features** Classical or formal Arabic is characterized by the retention of many unique Semitic phonemes, for example, the pharyngeal consonants, 'ain, ha, and qaf, 'strangled' versions of *h* and *k*; and the 'emphatic' consonants, *d, t, s, z*, characterized by a lateral or 'l-coloured' pronunciation and by their marked effect on neighbouring vowels. No spoken Arabic dialect, however, contains all the sounds of classical Arabic, and pronunciation of this literary language may often be coloured by the speaker's local dialect.

The various persons and numbers of the verb are derived from the roots, for example, *kataba* 'he wrote', *aktubu* 'I was/am writing', *yaktubuna* 'they were/are writing'. There are no true tenses in Arabic, distinction in the verb being made only between completed or uncompleted actions, regardless of time, although particles and auxiliaries do provide a system of tenses similar to those in Western languages. The noun in Arabic is disconcertingly irregular, no hard and fast rule being available for predicting the plural of a singular noun. Thus *aqdam* is the plural of *qadam* ('foot'), *'uhud* the plural of *'ahd* ('contract'), and *asatidha* the plural of *ustadh* ('professor'). Such plurals, in reality collective nouns, have the further peculiarity of being grammatically feminine singular.

Arabic is written in an alphabet probably invented in 5th-century Arabia, and short vowels are usually omitted except in children's books and the sacred text of the Koran. This adds greatly to the difficulty of reading, as do the case endings of nouns which, while (ideally) pronounced when reading aloud, are not written and must be guessed from context according to rules learnt by heart. This also applies to Arabs since cases are no longer pronounced in the spoken language.

**Spoken forms and classical Arabic** The actual spoken forms of Arabic differ widely; an illiterate

Moroccan would not understand the conversation of an Egyptian, Iraqi, or Saudi Arabian, and uneducated members of the latter three countries would have difficulty in following one another. However, the linguistic unity of the Arab world is preserved (or its disunity concealed) by the use in broadcasting, journalism, films, printing, and education of classical Arabic. This scholars' language is, with rare exceptions, the only one used in writing and broadcasting; a phenomenon which, while preserving the forms of Arab unity, greatly hinders literacy campaigns, since it is barely intelligible to the uneducated.

Few Arabs would spontaneously speak the classical language in informal or intimate circumstances, although there is every possibility that a standard form of spoken Arabic is gradually emerging (at least throughout the Middle East), largely as a result of improved intercommunication within the Arab world and gradually increasing literacy rates in the individual countries.

**Words borrowed from Arabic** Arabic words borrowed into English usually relate to Islamic and Arab society and culture. Contact between the two languages dates from the Crusades (11th–13th centuries). At that time, for example, the founder of the *assassin* sect would tempt potential members with pleasures heightened by the use of *hashish*, experiences (seen as a foretaste of heaven) that took away their fear of death.

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## APA

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## Chicago

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## MLA

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