MASTERING ARABIC GRAMMAR

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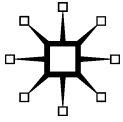
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Contents

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Introduction

What is Arabic 'grammar'?

Arabic 'grammar' will mean different things to different people.

To learners of Arabic as a foreign language it might mean the fundamentals of the language: whether there are genders, whether the noun or the adjective comes first, how the verb changes in the past and future, etc.

To more advanced Arabists and scholars it might mean the higher-level subtleties of Modern Standard or Classical Arabic.

To native speakers, it usually conjures up a subject studied at school, often hazily remembered lessons analysing sentences with a view to being able to spell and pronounce formal Arabic correctly.

What this book means by 'grammar' is a progressive knowledge of the structure of Arabic from the basic building blocks to some, but by no means all, of the more subtle nuances of Modern Standard Arabic.

Levels of formality

Learners of Arabic generally appreciate the difference between the various spoken Arabic dialects and the universal Modern Standard Arabic. What is not so well understood is that Modern Standard itself can be spoken and written at different levels of sophistication.

Although most Arabs can communicate in a form of standard Arabic and are aware that formal Arabic is pronounced with additional case endings, only scholars, media presenters and public speakers use these endings routinely.

This book includes **Case Notes** sections with additional explanations and activities covering the grammatical case

endings used in formal, literary and religious Arabic. These grammatical cases are similar to those found in languages such as German or Russian, but in Arabic are not usually pronounced in less formal contexts. You can use the book without reference to the **Case Notes** if you wish initially to acquire a more general understanding. Alternatively, you can study the **Case Notes** sections if you have an interest in this aspect of Arabic grammar and want to learn about it from the beginning.

How to use this book

This is a reference and activity book for all beginners and early intermediate students of Arabic, whether studying in a group or by themselves. The book can also be used independently to improve understanding of the basics of grammar or to gain an overview of the structure of the Arabic language.

The book has a built-in progression. Explanations and activities draw only on structures already covered in previous units. Work your way through the units and measure your progress step by step. Alternatively, if you are already studying Arabic you can use the relevant part of the book for extra practice on a particular point of grammar.

The main part of the book is divided into 20 units, each concentrating on an aspect of Arabic grammar. The units feature:

• clear structural explanations
• more than 100 stimulating activities to practise particular grammar points
• optional **Case Notes** explaining formal case endings (see above)
• end-of-unit **In Summary**, highlighting the most important points of the unit for easy reference.

Answers to all the activities are also included in the final section of the book.

Arabic script

It is beneficial to acquire familiarity with the Arabic script and the short vowel marks before studying this book. However, the complete alphabet is provided here for reference.

final	*medial*	*initial*	*isolated*	*letter*
ـا	ـا	ا	ا	ألف alif
ـب	ـبـ	بـ	ب	باء bā'
ـت	ـتـ	تـ	ت	تاء tā'
ـث	ـثـ	ثـ	ث	ثاء thā'
ـج	ـجـ	جـ	ج	جيم jīm
ـح	ـحـ	حـ	ح	حاء ḥā'
ـخ	ـخـ	خـ	خ	خاء khā'
ـد	ـد	د	د	دال dāl
ـذ	ـذ	ذ	ذ	ذال dhāl
ـر	ـر	ر	ر	راء rā'
ـز	ـز	ز	ز	زاى zāy
ـس	ـسـ	سـ	س	سين sīn
ـش	ـشـ	شـ	ش	شين shīn
ـص	ـصـ	صـ	ص	صاد ṣād
ـض	ـضـ	ضـ	ض	ضاد ḍād
ـط	ـطـ	طـ	ط	طاء ṭā'
ـظ	ـظـ	ظـ	ظ	ظاء ẓā'

final	medial	initial	isolated	letter
ـع	ـعـ	عـ	ع	ayn عين
ـغ	ـغـ	غـ	غ	ghayn غين
ـف	ـفـ	فـ	ف	’fā فاء
ـق	ـقـ	قـ	ق	qāf قاف
ـك	ـكـ	كـ	ك	kāf كاف
ـل	ـلـ	لـ	ل	lām لم
ـم	ـمـ	مـ	م	mīm ميم
ـن	ـنـ	نـ	ن	nūn نون
ـه	ـهـ	هـ	ه	’hā هاء
ـو	ـو	و	و	wāw واو
ـي	ـيـ	يـ	ي	’yā ياء

فتحة fatḥa	a dash above the letter, pronounced as a short 'a' after the letter, e.g. ...بَـ ba	
ضمّة ḍamma	a comma-shape above, pronounced as a short 'u' after the letter, e.g. ...بُـ bu	
كسرة kasra	a dash below, pronounced as a short 'i' after the letter, e.g. ...بِـ bi	
سكون sukūn	a small circle above showing that *no vowel* follows the letter, e.g. بِنْت bint (girl)	
شدّة shadda	a small 'w' shape above showing that the letter is *doubled*, e.g. بُنّ bunn (coffee beans)	
مدّة madda	a wavy symbol written over an alif and pronounced ā, e.g. آنسة ānisa (young woman)	

(Note: These symbols are not generally included in modern written Arabic. This book uses them where necessary for clarity.)

Fundamentals of Arabic grammar

1 The Arabic root system

Arabic is a language based on a system of 'roots'. In English, we often refer to the 'root' of a word to mean its origin, for example the root of the English word 'engineer' is the Latin *ingenium*, meaning 'skill'.

The Arabic root, or مصدر maṣdar, refers to the core meaning of a word. This core can usually be identified by three root consonants (non-vowels). For example, the sequence of three consonants س/ف/ر s/f/r (in this order, reading the Arabic script right to left) carries the meaning of 'travel'. A word which includes the sequence of letter س/ف/ر s/f/r is likely to have something to do with travelling. For example:

journey	سَفَر safar
he travels	يُسافر yusāfir
ambassador	سَفير safīr
traveller	مُسافِر musāfir
embassy	سِفارة sifāra

All these words are derived from the root س/ف/ر s/f/r. Notice how the root letters always appear in the same order. Any additional consonants or vowels before, after or between the root letters modify the meaning according to different general patterns. The feminine ending ة (tā' marbūṭa) is never part of the root and the most common additional consonants are م m, س s and ت t.

The emphasis on root consonants means that vowels, especially short vowels, are of secondary importance. The pronunciation often varies between Modern Standard Arabic and spoken dialects. For example, يكتب ('he writes') would be pronounced yaktub in Modern Standard, but could be yuktub or yiktib in dialect. The meaning is generally conveyed by the consonants rather than the vowels.

Much of Arabic grammar is concerned with how the root is manipulated to create different related meanings. As you become more familiar with the patterns and structures, you will be more able to identify the roots and to manipulate them yourself.

Activity 1

Can you identify the three root letters in each of the following sets of words? What do you think the general core meaning could be?

1   book   كِتاب kitāb

     office   مكتب maktab

     writer/clerk   كاتِب kātib

     library   مكتَبة maktaba

2   lesson   دَرس dars

     teacher   مُدَرِّس mudarris

     study   دِراسة dirāsa

     school   مَدرَسة madrasa

3   broken   مكسور maksūr

       fragmentation   تكسير taksīr

       it was broken   انكَسَر inkasar

       nut cracker   كسّارة kassāra

4   player   لاعِب lāعib

       playing field   ملعَب malعab

       toy   لُعبة luعba

       games   ألعاب alعāb

Words with doubled root letter

Some Arabic words have the same second and third root letters.
When this is the case, they are sometimes written together with
a shadda doubling sign (ــّ) and sometimes separately,
depending on the type of word:

> جديد jadīd (new) = *root letters* ج/د/د j/d/d

> كلّ kull (all) = *root letters* ك/ل/ل k/l/l

Words with four root letters

A few Arabic words have four root letters. Sometimes these are
four different letters, for example ترجمة tarjama (translation),
where the root letters are ت/ر/ج/م t/r/j/m, but often they are
a repeated pair, for example زَلزال zalzāl (earthquake), where
the root letters are ز/ل/ز/ل z/l/z/l.

Words of foreign origin

Gernerally loan words such as راديو rādyū (radio) or انتَرنَت
intarnat (internet) fall outside the Arabic root system.

✳ In summary

- Most Arabic words have a sequence of three root consonants which is connected with a particular core meaning.

- Vowels and consonants are added around the root to create related words and structures.

- The most common additional consonants are م m, س s and ت t.

- Some words have the same second and third root consonants and a few have four root consonants.

- Roots are the building blocks of the Arabic language and are helpful for guessing the meaning of vocabulary.

2 Gender: masculine and feminine

Arabic nouns (words that name people, objects or ideas) are either *masculine* مُذَكَّر (mudhakkar) or *feminine* مُؤَنَّث (mu'annath).

chair *(masculine)*	كُرسي kursī
table *(feminine)*	مائِدة māʾida

It is not difficult to tell the difference between masculine and feminine words. Feminine words usually fall into one of two categories:

1 Words with the feminine ending ة a (tāʾ marbūṭa), for example:

car	سَيَّارة sayyāra
bag	حَقيبة ḥaqība
aunt *(maternal)*	خالة khāla
nurse *(female)*	مُمَرِّضة mumarriḍa

2 Words referring to female people but not ending in ة a, for example:

girl	بِنت bint
mother	أُمّ umm