

An Arabic learning PDF with a crash course on the Arabic alphabet and a 33-page special addendum covering secrets of the Arabic language embedded within its grammar, vocabulary, etymology and everywhere else

The Beginner's Guide To Arabic

by Mohtanick Jamil

اللغة العربية

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GUIDE TO STUDYING ARABIC	3
WHY STUDY ARABIC	3
HOW TO STUDY ARABIC	6
WHERE TO STUDY ARABIC	9
WHAT YOU NEED BEFORE YOU START	10
THE ARABIC ALPHABET	11
INTRODUCTION TO THE ALPHABET	11
THE LETTERS	14
THE VOWELS	23
SOME BASIC VOCABULARY	26
RESOURCES FOR LEARNING ARABIC	33
ONLINE	33
RECOMMENDED BOOKS	35
JOIN OUR 3-PART MINI-CLASS	37
WHY IS ARABIC HARD?	37
HERE'S WHAT YOU'LL LEARN	38
OUR NEWSLETTERS	41

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Guide to Studying Arabic

Why Study Arabic

Arabic is spoken as a mother tongue by between 250 and 400 million people across 25 countries. Over a billion people can read the script even if they can't understand the language. And Arabic happens to be one of the official languages of the United Nations. Therefore, many people learn the language for formal reasons.

At about 1,500 years old, Arabic also happens to be a very old language. It was the language of scholarship throughout the rule of the Islamic empires – a period of well over 1,000 years from the 7th century right down to the 19th and even 20th. The greatest books of medicine, geology, law, philosophy, and basically any subject you can imagine were all written in the finest Arabic. Therefore, many of the most advanced people in their fields of study learn Arabic for scientific and anthropological reasons.

Arabic is also the language of the Qur'an (the Islamic holy book). It doesn't matter what your beliefs are, the Qur'an is unequivocally, undeniably and undoubtedly the greatest form of Arabic literature, and indeed the greatest form of literature, period. The beauty of this piece of literature is, in fact, quite

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literally, **miraculous**. Therefore, tens of millions of people learn this language to witness firsthand the beauty and miracle that is The Qur'an... religious reasons.



In fact, emphasis has been placed on studying the Arabic language by the Prophet (PBUH) himself when he said to the effect: learn the Arabic language as you learn the Islamic obligations and practices. His companions, who, remember, were Arabs, used to learn Arabic despite the fact that it was their mother tongue. They used to say: teach your children Arabic. They used to correct each other's grammar. They would consider it unacceptable to make a grammatical mistake. And the scholars that followed them in later centuries all emphasized learning Arabic. Imam Abu Hanifa said to the effect: I would've made learning this language compulsory had I not deemed it difficult on the people.

That is because

1. in order to truly understand the message of God as it was revealed, one must understand it in the very language it was revealed, and
2. the Qur'an is a literary miracle – really, a full blown miracle – and in order to witness it, you need to simply learn the language and you will witness a miracle with your very own eyes



When the tribe of Qureish in ancient Arabia sent their most infamous debater to the Prophet (PBUH), the debater barked and barked and barked. He was enthusiastic and completely vicious. His mission was to completely overtake the Prophet (PBUH) and he was relentless. But when he finished, the Prophet (PBUH) recited a few verses of the Qur'an, upon which tears started to flow from the debater's eyes and he had to cover the Prophet's (PBUH) mouth because he couldn't take any more. Would you like to taste the same beauty that made that debater cry?

How To Study Arabic



How you study the language depends largely on why you're studying it. If you're studying the language to be able to communicate informally with friends, for example, then the best place to start for this purpose is to enrol in a short term class (about 6 months to 1 year) where you will be taught a colloquial dialect of Arabic. There are many dialects, but the Egyptian is most popular and most widely recognized.

Whether the course is in person or online doesn't make a difference in our opinion. But the course must have a live teacher of native Arabic descent, offer plenty of conversational practice and place high emphasis on out-of-class work. These are courses that get their students to watch subtitled movies, pair them with native speakers for practice and even offer exchange programs.

If you are studying the language for formal purposes, on the other hand, you will need a more formal regiment. You will be relying more on books and placing more attention on grammar rather than your ability to speak fluently. The ability to speak casually and fluently will come later. And the studies will last longer than a year or two; perhaps as much as 4 years.

Most universities and colleges offer Arabic language courses. Some even span 3 or 4 years. Most of these are quite good and will give you a firm grounding in Modern Standard Arabic to the

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point where you can eventually acquire a formal position such as translator, etc. But remember, just because there is more emphasis on grammar, doesn't mean you don't have to practice. You will need to set aside several hours for practice and eventually work on your ability to converse in Arabic.

A note of caution: The wrong thing to do when studying Arabic formally is to purchase a few books and start learning on your own. Many books claim that you can use them for self-learning, but let's get real. What you need is a medium or long term course with plenty of hours of instruction and lots of practice on your own time. Pick the course and/or book that's most convenient for you, but don't try to do it all on your own.

Finally, if you are studying Arabic in order to understand the Qur'an or works of classical scholarship, you will need to master Classical Arabic. There are several courses around the world that offer mastery in Classical Arabic, but it is not worth quitting your job and joining these schools full time. What is best is a medium or long term online course with teacher interaction. You will be relying heavily on books and will need to prepare for each lesson by reading ahead before classes.

You will cover at least 5 different subjects just on the Classical Arabic language:

1. Grammar – phrases and sentences
2. Morphology and Etymology – verbs and conjugation

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3. Cantillation – pronunciation
4. Literature – practice, exposure to different styles of writing, idioms
5. Logic – a prerequisite for further studies
6. Rhetoric – literary devices and beautifying speech
7. Poetry – an understanding of Arabic poetry and culture

Where To Study Arabic



As mentioned, the wrong thing to do is to try and study on your own. You need to join a class. If you study informal or formal Arabic, a university or college course is usually the safest bet. Find a college near you and read up on their Arabic programs. There are a few good online courses out there, but they are a bit dodgy and not necessarily as well established.

If you are studying Classical Arabic, you probably have only two choices: 1) join a full time program that will require you to take a few years off of work and pause your life, or 2) take a part-time course online.

You may be thinking of attending a college or university course part time or learning from a native speaker for Classical Arabic. **But don't be fooled.** Although Modern Standard Arabic and Classical Arabic are very similar, understanding the Qur'an and the depths of Classical Arabic cannot be done so easily; universities are not equipped to deal with this and native Arabs don't necessarily understand the language at this level.

You need the absolute best education by the absolute best teachers in the most advanced manner. Regular courses can't give that to you and native Arabs speak the language but they don't necessarily understand its most intricate details... you need a proper method.

What You Need Before You Start

Most courses and books assume you already know the alphabet and can read and write Arabic. And to a large extent, this is a valid assumption because most students have been reading the Qur'an since childhood.

But not all students are Muslim and have been reading since childhood. Moreover, when learning the Qur'an as a child, most Muslim children were not taught in a correct manner. It is vitally important to learn reading and writing skills even if you already read the Qur'an.

Here we have given you just a basic crash course on the Arabic alphabet and reading/writing to get you started. You are highly encouraged to take a course on Arabic script. Remember, even if you read the Qur'an **or even if you are an Arab**, if your goal is to understand the Qur'an then you need the most advanced Arabic. And reading, writing and the alphabet are no exception... you need to relearn these things the right way.

To take the Arabic alphabet crash course, scroll to the next section.

The Arabic Alphabet

Introduction to the Alphabet

- Arabic is read from right to left
- Almost all the letters in an Arabic word are joined together like hand writing
- Some letters can't join because of their shape, but we'll see them as they come
- There are 29 letters in the Arabic alphabet
- There is no such thing as capital letters versus small letters
- There is no such thing as printing versus hand writing , Arabic is all hand writing
- All the letters in the alphabet are consonants
- Vowels are separate marks that go on top or underneath these letters
- The letters are shown on the next page

ج Jeem (J)	ث Thaa (TH)	ت Taa (T)	ب Baa (B)	ا Aleph (A)
ر Raa (R)	ذ Dhaal (DH)	د Daal (D)	خ Khaa (KH)	ح Haa (H)
ض Daad (D)	ص Saad (S)	ش Sheen (SH)	س Seen (S)	ز Zaa (Z)
ف Faa (F)	غ Ghein (GH)	ع Ein (?)	ظ Zaa (Z)	ط Taa (T)
ن Noon (N)	م Meem (M)	ل Laam (L)	ك Kaaf (K)	ق Qaaf (Q)
	ي Yaa (Y)	ء Hamza (A)	ه Haa (H)	و Waw (W)

- Each letter has 4 forms (which look very similar to each other)
 - when you write the letter by itself
 - when it comes in the beginning of a word
 - when it comes in the middle of a word
 - when it comes at the end of a word
- The forms you saw in the chart above are when the letter is by itself
 - here's an example of the letter Baa in all 4 forms

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ب	ب	ب	ب

- These are the vowels in the language

◌ِ	◌َ	◌ُ
Kasra (E)	Fat-ha (A)	Damma (U)
◌ِ◌ِ	◌َ◌َ	◌ُ◌ُ
2 Kasra (EN)	2 Fat-ha (AN)	2 Damma (UN)
ي	ا	و
Yaa (EE)	Aleph (AA)	Waw (UU)

 Yaa Leen (EI)		 Waw Leen (AW)
--	--	--

The Letters

- The first letter of the Arabic alphabet is Aleph
- Remember that all 29 letters in the alphabet are consonants... well, this is not exactly true for Aleph. Aleph doesn't have its own sound; it is used to stretch the short A vowel to form the long AA vowel
- This is how the Aleph looks in the four cases

end	middle	beginning of a word	by itself
ل	. ل	. ا	ا

- Notice that the Aleph cannot connect to the letter after it. There will be a small gap between the Aleph and the next letter
- Aleph is one of 6 letters that cannot connect to the following letter. The other 5 will be discussed later
- The next letters of the Arabic alphabet are Baa, Taa and Thaa

- We are grouping these letters together because the basic shape of the letters looks the same; only the dots are different
- Baa corresponds to the English B
- Taa corresponds to the English T, but it's softer
- Thaa corresponds to the combination TH, as in "thank"
- The 4 forms of these letters are the same; the only difference is the number and position of dots

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ب	بـ	ب	ب
ت	تـ	ت	ت
ث	ثـ	ث	ث

- The next letters are Jeem, Haa and Khaa
- Jeem corresponds to the English J
- Haa corresponds to the English H, but it's much more throaty
- Khaa corresponds to the combination KH
- In writing, Jeem, Haa and Khaa each have the same body, as follows

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ج	ج	ج	ج
ح	ح	ح	ح
خ	خ	خ	خ

- The next letters of the alphabet are Daal and Dhaal
- Daal sounds like the letter D in English, but softer
- Dhaal sounds like the combination TH, as in “that”
- This is how these two letters look in their 4 forms.
- Notice that Daal and Dhaal do NOT connect to the following letter

end	middle	beginning	by itself
د	د	د	د
ذ	ذ	ذ	ذ

- The next letters of the alphabet are Raa and Zeiy
- Raa sounds somewhat like the letter R in English
- Zeiy sounds like the letter Z in English

- The name of the letter Zeiy is sometimes pronounced Zeiy (“Zaa-ee”) or even Zayen (“Zaa-yen”)
- Raa and Zeiy have the same body
- Raa and Zeiy do NOT connect to the following letter

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ر	ر -	- ر	ر
ز	ز -	- ز	ز

- The next letters of the alphabet are Seen and Sheen
- Seen is equivalent to the letter S
- Sheen is equivalent to the combination SH
- Seen and Sheen look very similar except that Seen has no dots and Sheen has 3 dots on top

end	middle	beginning	by itself
س	س	س	س
ش	ش	ش	ش

- The next letters of the Arabic alphabet are Saad and Daad
- Saad sounds like the letter S, but it has more of a whistle

- Daad sounds like the letter D, but much, much thicker and deeper sounding
- Saad and Daad look very similar except that Saad has no dots and Daad has one dot on top

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ص	ص	ص	ص
ض	ض	ض	ض

- The next letters of the Arabic alphabet are Taa and Zaa
- Taa is not the same as the one we saw earlier
- It sounds like the letter T, but it is much, much thicker sounding
- Zaa is not the same as the one we saw earlier
- It sounds like the letter Z, but it is much, much thicker sounding
- Taa and Zaa look very similar except that Taa has no dots and Zaa has one dot on top

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ط	ط	ط	ط

ظ	ظ	ظ	ظ
---	---	---	---

- The next letters of the Arabic alphabet are Ein and Ghein
- Ein doesn't have an English equivalent; it is a very throat sound
- Ghein sounds like the combination GH, like the noise when you gargle
- Ein and Ghein look very similar except that Ein has no dots and Ghein has one dot on top

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ع	ع	ع	ع
غ	غ	غ	غ

- The next letters of the Arabic alphabet are Faa, Qaaf and Kaaf
- Faa is equivalent to the English letter F
- Qaaf is represented by the letter Q; it sounds like K except it's more throaty
- Kaaf is equivalent to the English letter K
- This is what these letters look like in all 4 forms

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ف	ف	ف	ف
ق	ق	ق	ق
ك	ك	ك	ك

- The next letters of the Arabic alphabet are Laam, Meem and Noon
- Laam is equivalent to the English letter L
- Meem is equivalent to the English letter M
- Noon is equivalent to the English letter N
- This is what these letters look like in all 4 forms

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ل	ل	ل	ل
م	م	م	م
ن	ن	ن	ن

- When Laam is followed by Aleph, the Aleph curves a bit, like this

لا

- Another speciality is the word Allah... which is written very uniquely, as follows
Aleph, Laam, Laam, Aleph, Haa (which we haven't seen yet)

الله

- The rest of the letters of the Arabic alphabet are Waw, Haa, Hamza and Yaa
- Waw is equivalent to the English letter W
- Haa is equivalent to the English letter H, not to be confused with the Haa we saw earlier
- Hamza is equivalent to the English letter A, as in “apple” (not considered a vowel, though)
- Yaa is equivalent to the English letter Y
- This is what these letters look like in all 4 forms

end	middle	beginning	by itself
و	ـو	ـو	و

ه	ه	ه	ه
			ء أ إ ؤ ئ
ي	ي	ي	ي

- Sometimes Haa is written with 2 dots on top; this is actually the letter Taa
- This can only happen at the end of a word

end	middle	beginning	by itself
ة			ة

- Writing Hamza is very complicated, so we'll leave it for now
- But essentially, it can be written by itself, on top of a Waw, on top of an Yaa, or on top or below an Aleph
- You will sometimes see Yaa without its dots; this is actually an Aleph
- This can only happen at the end of a word



end	middle	beginning	by itself
ى			ى

The Vowels

◌ِ Kasra (E)	◌َ Fat-ha (A)	◌ُ Damma (U)
◌ِ◌ِ 2 Kasra (EN)	◌َ◌َ 2 Fat-ha (AN)	◌ُ◌ُ 2 Damma (UN)
يِ Yaa (EE)	ا Aleph (AA)	وِ Waw (UU)
يِ◌ِ Yaa Leen (EI)		وِ◌ِ Waw Leen (AW)

- Arabic has 3 short vowels: U, A and E/I
- These are marks that go on top or underneath a letter
- If a letter has a vowel, it means that vowel comes after that letter
- You can “double” these vowels; this will add the sound of the letter N at the end
- This doubling can only happen at the end of a word

- If a letter has no vowel after it, we put a special symbol on top of that letter to indicate this
- This symbol is called a Sukoon
- If there is a letter with a Sukoon, then the same letter in the same word again, the two letters will be written as one and a special symbol will be placed on top of the letter to indicate this
- This symbol is called the Shadda
- The vowel of the second letter is placed on top of underneath the Shadda, not on top of underneath the letter itself

	
Shadda (same letter twice)	Sukoon (no vowel)

- The letters Aleph, Waw and Yaa can act as long vowels
- The Aleph stretches the Fat-ha vowel to form a long AA sound
- The Waw stretches the Damma vowel to form a long OO sound
- The Yaa stretches the Kasra vowel to form a long EE sound
- So Aleph must always have a Fat-ha before it
- Similarly if Waw is acting as a long vowel, it will have a Sukoon on it and a Damma before it

- And if Yaa is acting as a long vowel, it will have a Sukoon on it and a Kasra before it
- Waw and Yaa can also act as semi-vowels
- Waw can form the semi-vowel AW / OW, as in “Howl”
- Yaa can form the semi-vowel EI, as in Hussein
- This will happen if they have a Sukoon and a Fat-ha before them

Some Basic Vocabulary

General Conversation

<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
السلام عليكم	as-salaam alaeikum	peace be with you (formal greeting)
كيف حالك؟	keifa haaluk	how are things? (formal)
ازيك	e-zayyak	what's up? (informal)
الحمد لله	al-hamdu lillah	praise God (formal answer)
أنا بخير	ana bi kheir	I'm good (formal answer)
تمام / كل تمام	tamaam / kullu tamaam	everything's good (informal answer)
قويس	q-wayyis	fine / pretty good (informal answer)
شو أخبار العمل؟	shoo akhbaar al-amal	how's work? (informal)
السلام عليكم	as-salaam alaeikum	peace be with you (formal goodbye)

مع السلامة	ma'as-salaama	bye (literally: with safety) (semi-formal)
بعدين	ba'dein	later (see you later) (informal)
في ما بعد	fee maa ba'd	after/in a while (informal)
من أين أنت	min ayna anta	where are you from? (formal)
أنت من فين/وين	anta min fein/wein	where are you from? (informal)
ما الساعة؟	mas-saa'a	what time is it? (formal)
الساعة كم؟	as-saa'at kam	what time is it? (informal)

Travelling

<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
مطار	mataar	airport
طيارة	tayyaara	airplane
وصول	wusool	arrival
مغادرة	mughaadara	departure

المجارك	al-majaarik	customs
متاع	mataa'	luggage
جواز السفر	jawaaz as-safar	passport
تأشيرة	ta'sheera	visa
تذكرة	tazkira	flight ticket
فندق	funduq	hotel
استقبال	istiqbaal	reception
مفتاح	miftaah	key
غرفة	ghurfa	room
صراف	sarraaf	currency exchange

Asking Questions

<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
ما ...؟	maa	what is ...?
من ...؟	man	who is ...?
أين ...؟	ayna	where is ...?

متى ...؟	mataa	when is ...?
كم ...؟	kam	how much is ...?
كم هذا؟	kam haaza	how much is this?
كيف ...؟	keifa	how ...?
لماذا؟	li maaza	why
الساعة المحلية	as-saa'al mahalliya	the current time

Counting & Numbers

<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
واحد	waahid	1
اثنان	ithnaan / ithnein	2
ثلاثة	thalaatha	3
أربعة	arba'a	4
خمسة	khamsa	5
ستة	sitta	6
سبعة	sab'a	7

ثمانية	thamaania	8
تسعة	tis'a	9
عشرة	ashara	10
أحد عشر	ahada ashar	11
اثنا عشر	ithna ashar	12
ثلاثة عشر	thalaatha ashar	13
أربعة عشر	arba'a ashar	14
... عشر	... ashar	...-teen
عشرين	ishreen	20
ثلاثين	thalaatheen	30
أربعين	arba'een	40
خمسين	khamseen	50
ستين	sitteen	60
سبعين	sab'een	70
ثمانين	thamaaneen	80

تسعين	tis'een	90
مائة / مئة	mi-a	100
و	wa wahid wa ishreen	and (1 and 20 = 21)
<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
١	waahid	1
٢	ithnaan / ithnein	2
٣	thalaatha	3
٤	arba'a	4
٥	khamsa	5
٦	sitta	6
٧	sab'a	7
٨	thamaania	8
٩	tis'a	9
١٠	ashara	10

Other

<i>Arabic</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
اسمك إيه؟	ismak eh	what's your name? (informal)
مطعم	mat'am	restaurant
حمام	hammaam	bathroom
أجرة	ujra	taxi

Resources for Learning Arabic



Online

1 <http://www.shariahprogram.ca/Arabic-alphabet.shtml>

Description: A great series of lessons on learning to read and write Arabic from scratch. The lessons are fun to read, very easy to go through and take you step by step at your own pace. Lessons include audio and exercises are provided. It has been called one of the best free Arabic alphabet courses on the Internet! Try it yourself.

Audience: Beginners

Price: FREE

2 <http://www.learnarabic.ca>

Description: Go from knowing absolutely nothing about Arabic to reading, writing and pronouncing better than scholars through this video course. Watch with the family at your own time. Go as slow or as fast as you want. Learn to pronounce each and every letter perfectly, watch how to write each letter, get step-by-step guidance on learning how to read sentences. This is a great investment for any serious student of classical Arabic.

Audience: Beginners; also good for intermediate
Price: Check website for price

3 <http://www.shariahprogram.ca>

Description: A world class course for students who already know how to read Arabic. This is what beginners, intermediates and even advanced students go to Syria for. This is one of the hottest courses for learning Arabic. Get live instruction on grammar, morphology, literature, analysis of Qur'an and much more through this online course. Take the trial and see for yourself.

Audience: Beginners, intermediate and advanced
Price: Check website for price

4 <http://www.learnarabiconline.com>

Description: A huge collection of approximately 100 tutorials on all aspects of classical Arabic grammar, morphology, syntax and other topics. A perfect studying aid for intermediate students and a great refresher for advanced students.

Audience: Intermediate
Price: FREE

5 <http://www.youtube.com/user/ArabicLikeABoss>

Description: A YouTube channel with short videos on topics in Arabic rhetoric (Balaagha). There is nothing

quite like this on the Internet. The most advanced topics in Arabic rhetoric are presented in a way that is accessible to everyone. Get insight into the most amazing aspects of this language and learn to see the beauty in the Qur'an. Subscribe today.

Audience: Advanced (but also interesting for intermediate and beginners)

Price: FREE

Recommended Books

1 [Alif Baa With Multimedia: Introduction to Arabic Letters and Sounds \(Arabic Edition\)](#)

Description: The first in a series of books that deal with Modern Standard Arabic, and even some Egyptian colloquial. This volume goes through reading, writing and pronunciation. Improve your penmanship and learn some new vocabulary while you're at it.

2 [Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya with DVDs: A Textbook for Beginning Arabic, Part One](#)

Description: The second book in the series that deals with Modern Standard Arabic for beginners. It takes several months to go through this book, but it is

well worth the effort. The lessons are well calculated and the exercises are very powerful.



3 [Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya with DVDs: A Textbook for Arabic, Part Two](#)

Description: The third book in the series for intermediate students.

4 [Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allum al-'Arabiyya with DVDs: A Textbook for Arabic, Part Three](#)

Description: The third book in the series for intermediate students.

5 [Hans Wehr dictionary](#)

Description: The most popular dictionary for the Arabic language, suitable for modern Arabic as well as classical. If you're several months into your courses, you will not be moving on without this gem.

Join our 3-Part Mini-Class

Why Is Arabic Hard?

How many times have you asked, “Why is learning Arabic so hard even though it’s supposed to be easy?”

A few? A dozen? At least once?

And how many times have you found an answer that gave you hope in your own ability to master it?

Exactly. Because HERE is your answer.

If you’re looking to understand the Qur’an when you stand in prayers this upcoming Ramadan, you NEED to attend this free mini-class.

I’m offering a free web-class packed with more than an entire YEAR’s worth of university Arabic.

<https://www.learnarabiconline.com/21-days/free-miniclass>

Yes, because Arabic has a CORE and CENTRAL theme that can be taught in an incredibly short period of time.

Knowing this CORE puts you head and shoulders ahead of other students who spend YEARS studying the language as a series of disconnected rules and long lists of vocabulary.



Did you know that the majority of meanings in Arabic don't come from words.

They come from:

1. Vowels
2. Patterns
3. grammatical structures

Here's What You'll Learn

In this free web-class, you will learn how to master the core of how Arabic actually works by focusing on the mechanism that governs the conveyance of “Non-word meanings”.

What in other languages requires separate words to communicate, Arabic does it through single vowels, entire configurations of vowels (what we call patterns) and grammatical structures.

That is, the “way” in which words are combined together results in meaning above and beyond the meanings you get from the individual words.

I'll share with you:

- How to END low motivation and eliminate confusion surrounding the language.
- The NEW way to master vocabulary without tedious memorization
- How to reduce the entire language into just two issues: “sequence not determining grammar” and the “lack of ‘is’ issue”.
- How the Arabic language resolves these two issues through 2 very simple solutions that can be summarized in a sentence each.
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See you on the other side.

Warmest salaams,

Yusuf Mullan

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Our Newsletters

We are thrilled that you decided to join our community of Arabic language enthusiasts! We want you to be on your way to understanding Arabic and the Qur'an.

As you may know, we send out a monthly newsletter, and because we value your membership in this community so much, we want to make available to you all the issues of this newsletter that you've missed. It's just our way of saying THANK YOU and WELCOME.

Scroll down to see the past issues of our newsletter, The Caravan Press.

The Significance of the Arabic Language

By Mohtanick Jamil

Popularity:

Arabic is an official language in over 25 countries across North Africa and the Middle East, putting it in third place behind English and French.

Arabic is also one of the 5 official languages of the UN.



It boasts between 300 and 400 million native speakers and has over 1.2 billion people that can read its script.

This language was spoken in its classical form as early as 2 millennia ago and remains vibrant in cultures spanning 2 continents as well as in scholarly circles as the liturgical language of Islam. As such, Arabic has enjoyed countless millions of works of scholarship throughout the centuries.

Arabic has also contributed to many other languages. It has given English, for instance, the following familiar words: admiral,

alcohol, algebra, algorithm, almanac, apricot, arsenal, candy, chemistry, coffee, cotton, gazelle, giraffe, hazard, lemon, lime, magazine, racket, safari, sofa, sugar, syrup, zero and many others.

Calligraphy:



The Arabic script is a very unique and magnificent form of art. Few other languages have ventured to take their calligraphy to this extent, to the point where it becomes art in its own right.

The various forms of calligraphy are basically divided into 6 types. *Naskh* is the simplest and most straightforward. *Muhaqqaq* and *Rayhani* are also quite simple excepting that letter endings are exaggerated and extended. *Riqa* and *Tawqi* are characterised by long lines and large loops. And *thuluth* is arguably the most exaggerated of all the above major forms.

But it was major influence from other regions such as Persia which gave even more outrageous exaggeration to the script, making it the marvel that it is today.

Liturgy:

The two sources of Islamic scholarship are the holy Qur'an and the codified tradition of the Prophet (PBUH). Both sources are in the Arabic language. And the first generations of disciples were also Arabs. As such, most of Islamic scholarship is done within the confines of this language.

Moreover, history sees many Arabs obliging other Arabs to learn their own language and listing consequences for not taking the study seriously.

The Prophet (PBUH) himself mentioned: learn Arabic as you learn the [Islamic] obligations and rites.

Several of the Prophet's (PBUH) disciples repeated this sentiment in other words. Imam Shafi'i, an Arab, mentioned once to his Arabic students: what scares me most is a student who refuses to learn Arabic grammar... Imam Abu Hanifa is recorded to have said that he would have made learning Arabic (even for native speakers) an obligation had he deemed it feasible.

The Secrets of Arabic:

In most languages, it would be considered silly to ask certain grammar questions. For example, asking why the suffix 'er', as in 'teacher', is two letters, why these two letters in particular, why in the order E then R and why at the end of the word. It's silly to ask these.

But Arabic is an extraordinarily deep language and it answers questions just like these about its own grammar. These questions and answers are actually completely memorising and are closely kept secrets of the language. They will blow your mind away to the point where you will yearn to learn the language. Stay tuned for the next issue where we ask and answer one of these questions.

Secrets of the Arabic Language

By Mohtanick Jamil

Introduction:

Arabic is an ancient language with secrets embedded in its grammar, vocabulary, etymology and everywhere else. It is like an old castle with secret passageways that lead to splendid treasures.

The language keeps these secrets very clandestine, so very few people know about them. But in this issue, we are going to share one of those secrets with you.

This one secret is just the tip of the iceberg. Imagine yourself learning these secrets more and more being so enthralled with them that you feel like quitting your day job and studying the language full time. And this is something unique to this magnificent tongue.

Remember the ER example:

In a previous issue, recall how we talked about how silly it would be to ask questions regarding English affixes (suffixes and prefixes), for example.

Take the ER that comes at the ends of words like ‘teacher’ and turns the word ‘teach’ into the person who does the ‘teach’-ing.

Imagine how silly someone would sound if they asked why the ER was two letters, why it was these two letters in particular and not any others, why it was E then R as opposed to R then E, or why the ER came at the end as opposed to the E in the beginning and the R at the end or any other scheme.

Asking this is not appropriate in any language. The answer will be that it just is the way it is. But in Arabic, we can ask these questions and we will get amazing answers. To truly appreciate these answers, it would be great if we already spoke Arabic, but let’s dive into this anyway.

The Structure of an Arabic Word is Related to it’s Meaning:

This is the first secret of the Arabic language. The letters a word contains, the order of the letters, the position of those letters, etc, all have some relationship with what the word means.

And there are so many examples and manifestations of this secret even in everyday Arabic. We can write entire books on just this one secret. But let’s focus on one example.

Example:

We can take almost any Arabic verb and add ST to the beginning of it. For example, we can add ST to the beginning of fa-hi-ma (to understand). The resulting word is pronounced is-taf-ha-ma (to ask a question).

Adding ST to the beginning of an Arabic verb changing the meaning of the verb so that, instead of doing the action, now we are looking to do it. So fa-hi-ma means to understand, but is-taf-ha-ma means to look for understanding, to seek understanding, to ask for understanding, etc etc. This is commonly translated as 'to ask a question'.

Notice how the ST indicates on seeking and the fa-ha-ma indicates on understanding (in this example). Just like how the letters 't e a c h' indicate on teaching and the ER indicates on the one who does it.

Now we can ask some seemingly silly questions like: why does it have to be two letters? Why ST and not anything else? Why ST and not TS? Why are they at the beginning, instead of one at the beginning and the other at the end, the other in the middle, one in the middle and the other at the end, etc, etc?

Let's answer the last question: why is the Arabic ST affixed at the beginning of a word?

To answer this, remember the secret we learned: the way a word is structured in Arabic has a relationship with a word's meaning.

Now, when you look for understanding, what happens first, the understanding or the looking? Obviously, first you seek the understanding and then you *have* the understanding. So, just like how the seeking comes before the understanding in real life, so too does the ST come before the fa-ha-ma in the word.

Other examples:

Not impressed? Well stay tuned for the next issue where we give another example that is even more spellbinding than this.

Secrets of the Arabic Language (continued)

By Mohtanick Jamil

Remember the Secret?

Recall from a previous issue one of the basic secrets of the Arabic language: the structure of a word indicates on the meanings and nuances of that word.

We saw an example of this in the Arabic prefix ST. This prefix is used on verbs to change the meaning such that, instead of doing the action, we now look to do it. We asked why the ST comes at the beginning of the word and the answer was incredible. When you look to do an action, first you do the looking and then you do the action. Since the ST affords the looking meaning and the rest of the word affords the action, naturally the ST comes first. Amazing!

Another Application of the Secret:

Another manifestation of this secret, apart from the positioning of letters, is the duplication of letters. When letters in a word are duplicated (or come twice), this duplication in the word occurs in concert with a duplication in the meaning.

For example, the word qa-ta-a means to cut. Now, when you cut something, you make one motion and the job is done. Another word in the language is qat-ta-a. This word means to chop, mince or dice. Now, when you chop something, you don't just cut it in one motion; you apply repeated cuts until the thing is finely minced. So notice how the duplication of the letter T in the word occurred in concert with a duplication (or multiplication) in the meaning. Incredible!

An Incredible Example of this Application:

But the language actually goes even deeper than this. It takes into consideration the type of duplication. This type of duplication, then, occurs in concert with a similar type of duplication in the meaning. Let's take the word sar-ra as an example. This word means for a bee to buzz. Notice that there is a duplication in this word on the R. And notice further that there is also a duplication in the meaning; a bee buzzes its wings repeatedly in order to be able to fly, it doesn't just move them once.

Now there's another, very similar, word in the language which is sar-sa-ra. This word means for a falcon to stridulate (chirp). Notice that there is a duplication in this word as well, but this duplication is of a different type. The duplication is on sar, which is not a single letter like we saw in the case of sar-ra.

Now sar-sa-ra means for a falcon to chirp. And how does a falcon chirp? It makes a few successive chirps, stops for a bit and repeats the chirping.

You see how the duplication in sar-ra was highly localized on a single letter, and how that occurred in concert with a duplication in the meaning which was very quick and rushed. And how the duplication in the word sar-sa-ra was more spread out, and how that occurred in concert with a duplication in the meaning which was similarly spread out and occurred with pauses.

What a magnificent language!

Other Beautiful Aspects of Arabic:

We can't share anymore secrets with you today. There are jaw-dropping secrets just waiting to be discovered and splendid bounties waiting to be seen, but you'll have to get there yourself before you can enjoy the fruits and truly appreciate them.

But we can share some other interesting aspects of Arabic without requiring deep knowledge of the language. One of the things people love hearing most about Arabic is the numerous amount of words it provides for a single meaning. For example, there are over half a dozen words in the Arabic language for fear. Each one is slightly different in its connotations and nuances and discussing these differences is something full of great pleasure and fun.

In the next issue, we'll take a look at the different words for fear in Arabic and how they differ from each other. In doing this, we'll discover just how accurate, clear and deep this tongue is.

Synonymy in Arabic

By Mohtanick Jamil

Synonymy:

There is a rule in Arabic which states that no two words or grammatical structures are the same. If you do have two seemingly synonymous words or structures, you can bet that there will be some difference between them, no matter how minute it may be.

This is part of the beauty of this language. It has words and expressions that serve such accurate purposes. It has a reservoir of vocabulary from which we can pick and choose in order to formulate our speech so that it is extremely clear, accurate and descriptive. There are words in Arabic that would take entire paragraphs to explain in other languages.

Every shade of human emotion, every nuance of an event, every style of action – all these things have dedicated words which are readily available. This is why the Qur'an has honoured this tongue with the title Lisanin Arabyin Mubin (a clear, Arabic language).

An Example:

Let's take the English word *fear*. English has a few synonyms for this, such as terror, horrification and others. Notice, now, that not all of these can be used interchangeably. For instance, you wouldn't say 'his terror of getting fired motivated him to do a great job.' This shows that there are slight differences between these words and they're not entirely synonymous.

Unlike in English, in Arabic these differences serve a very noble purpose: synonyms are used to highlight different aspects of one thing. We'll see an example of this towards the end of the article.

The word *khawf* is perhaps the most common word for *fear* in Arabic. *Khawf* is where you fear the occurrence of some upcoming event. It also implies that the thing being feared is (typically) something physical. This word is used for the fear of one's life, the fear of robbery, etc.

Another word is *wa-jas*. This is fear which is based on hearing some bad news. For example, when a student overhears his teacher saying to another teacher that he is close to failing, he feels *wa-jas*.

Another word is *khash-ya*. *Khash-ya* is the fear of, not a thing, but the implications of a thing. For instance, the *khash-ya* of losing

one's job means the fear of what that implies by way of lack of income and so forth.

Taq-wa is another word. This is the fear, again, not of a thing, but of the consequences of a thing. For instance, if someone has *taq-wa* of God, he fears the consequences of his own actions.

Another word is *khu-shoo*. This is not the feeling of fear, but the manifestation of fear on one's outer appearance. For example, when someone is given some frightening news, their eyes show that they are afraid. This expression is known as *khu-shoo*.

Now *hazr* means to have a type of fear that gives you extra strength and allows you to physically escape immediate danger.

Row is a shock; the initial terror that you feel when you are startled.

Wa-jal is a very deeply piercing fear that starts to take over your thoughts. Related to this is *rub*, which means to fear something to the extent that it causes you to lose your senses. *Rub* is often used when you fear someone as opposed to something. Similarly, *wa-jaf* is the fear that makes your heart pound and makes you wring your hands out of discontent

Finally, *Ra-hab* is the fear of disappointing someone. And *Ish-faaq* is the fear on behalf of someone else, as a mother fears for her children.

Now let's compare some of these using a single example. The *khawf* of losing your job is the fear that it might happen. The *wa-jas* is the fear you get when you overhear someone mention your poor performance to the boss. The *khash-ya* is the fear of not having an income. The *taq-wa* is the fear that motivates you to do a good job to avoid being fired. The *hazr* is the fear that makes you play dirty tricks to avoid/dodge being fired. The *wa-jal* is when the fear of being fired is all you think about. The *rub* is the fear you have of your boss calling you into his office. The *wa-jaf* is the fear that makes your heart pound when you're listening to him speak to you. The *ra-hab* is the fear of disappointing your family because of being fired. The *ish-faaq* is the fear of not being able to provide for them upon being fired.

Depending on which word you use, you can draw attention to various aspects of a thing. Isn't it beautiful?

Arabic Words And All Their Glory

By Mohtanick Jamil

One Meaning, Many Words:

In our last issue we saw how the Arabic word for fear, *Khawf*, had about a dozen synonyms. *Khawf* isn't the only word with so many synonyms; Arabic is replete with such synonymy where a single meaning can be expressed using dozens, and even hundreds, of words.

A common lore among Arabs is that there are 999 words in the language for Camel. Whether true or not, this is definitely believable given the language's richness and beauty.

Synonyms exist in Arabic to show something from slightly different angles, express emotions in slightly various shades, and so on. For example, the word Heart can be translated into Arabic as *Qalb* or as *Fu'aad*.

The word *Qalb* comes from the root Q-L-B which means to flip, whereas the word *Fu'aad* comes from the root F-A-D which means to become ignited and such. The heart is sometimes referred to as *Qalb* because a person's emotions, opinions and

overall mood can change from one to another in a split second. And sometimes the heart is referred to as *Fu'aad* in situations of intense emotion because such emotions resemble a blaze.

In fact, Allah (SWT) uses both of these words together in a commonly quoted verse of the Qur'an (28:10):

﴿ وَأَصْبَحَ فُؤَادُ أُمِّ مُوسَىٰ فَرِغًا ۚ إِن كَادَتْ لَتُبْدِي بِهِ لَوْلَا أَن رَّبَطْنَا عَلَىٰ قَلْبِهَا لِتَكُونَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴾

And the heart of the mother of Moses became void. She was night to expose Moses had We not strengthen her heart that she may be among the believers.

In the first usage, the word *Fu'aad* is being employed because a strong emotion is being depicted. And in the second case, the word *Qalb* is being employed because changing of an emotion or state of heart is being depicted.

One Word, Many Meanings:

Similar to the concept of one meaning having many words that can express it is the concept of one word having many different meanings.

Arabic has several words that have more than one meaning. Not only do they have more than one, in fact they have several. The word *Ein* is the most popularly quoted example for this.

Ein has over a dozen meanings, some of which are: eye, the essence of a thing, the entirety of a thing, the most important part of a thing, the part of a thing which is currently present, sentinel, spring (water), knee, non-destructive rain that lasts five or more days, corner, the sun, sun's ray, ready money, gold, a slight imbalance on a scale, Dinar, seven Dinars... and that's just the beginning!

In the Qur'an, the word *Ein* is most commonly used to mean 'eye' and 'spring'.

There is a special group of words in Arabic that not only have multiple meanings, but multiple contradictory meanings. In other words, a single word with opposite meanings.

An example of such a word is *Baa'a*, which usually means to sell but can mean to buy. Similarly, *Raba'a* can mean to take residence as well as to travel far by foot. And the word *Akhfaa* usually means to hide, but can mean to expose; Allah (SWT) says:

﴿ إِنَّ السَّاعَةَ آتِيَةٌ أَكَادُ أُخْفِيهَا ﴾

Verily the Hour is coming. I am nigh to expose it.

One Word, Deep Meanings:

Finally, a single word in Arabic can have a meaning so deep that it would require full sentences or even paragraphs to explain in almost any other language. And this is not something rare or isolated. Just to get an idea of this, let's take the word *Nafasha* as an example. This means: for a herd of goats or sheep to graze in an open field during twilight hours or night without the supervision of the shepherd.

The Legendary Hamasa Poems

By Mohtanick Jamil

Arabic Poetry:

To the Arab of pre-Islamic and Islamic times, poetry was much more than what we think of it today. Not only was it a form of entertainment and art, but it was also used for practical purposes such as elegy, psychological warfare and even communication across enormous distances.

The greatest honour for the deceased - and indeed a form of immortality - would be continued elegy. The famous poetess Khansaa is well-known for honouring her deceased brother with poetry.

Wars and debates would be won and lost at the hands of poets who would lampoon their enemy tribes and honour their own tribe. Hassaan b. Thaabit did this for the prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Communication across great distances would be achieved through poetry. When sending messengers was not feasible, Arabs would craft poems embedded with a message. The poems

would then travel through word of mouth from tribe to tribe and eventually to the recipient. It was how Zaid, the adopted son of the Prophet (PBUH), found his birth parents.

It's no wonder, then, how rich our understanding is on this critical Arabian meme and just how much of it has been codified and preserved.

The Hamasa Collection:

The Hamasa is perhaps the single most famous anthology. Compiled in the 9th century by the renowned litterateur Abu Tammam, it contains poems from various pre-Islamic poets on topics of heroism and chivalry.

The Hamasa is such a supreme compilation, in fact, that its poems are used as literary proof and it is considered one of the highest authorities on the Arabic language.

A poet whose poetry is featured in the Hamasa is known as a Hamasi. Often you will find in books of grammar that a Hamasi said such-and-such. It is sufficient just to mention that someone is a Hamasi; that gives them all the credibility in the world!

And it is a great honour and advanced rite to study the Hamasa poems. So let us engage in this rite, too.

"As-Suyoofu Shuhoodun" by Hayyaan b. Rabi'a At-Taa'i:

لَقَدْ عَلِمَ الْقَبَائِلُ أَنَّ قَوْمِي
ذَوُو جِدِّ إِذَا لُبِسَ الْحَدِيدُ

Indeed all the tribes have come to know that my people
Are abundantly keen when the metal is adorned

وَأَنَا نِعَمَ أَحْلَاسُ الْقَوَائِي
إِذَا اسْتَعَرَ التَّنَافِرُ وَالنَّشِيدُ

And what magnificent saddles we are for rhythm and rhyme
When lampooning and hymnody come ablaze

وَأَنَا نَضْرِبُ الْمَلْحَاءَ حَتَّى
تُؤَيِّ وَالسُّيُوفُ لَنَا شُهُودُ

And that we strike down the battalions until
They are subdued, and the swords are our witnesses

This is a short Hamasi poem by a man named Hayyaan bin Rabi'a in which he lauds his tribe, the Bani Tay.

He starts in the first couplet by claiming that they are eager to fight when metal is adorned. By this he means when armour is worn and battles ensue. This is clearly in praise of their courage.

He then continues to the second couplet where he claims that they are saddles of rhyme. By this he means that they are well

versed in poetry. This is when lampooning and hymnody come ablaze, by which he means when poets get together to praise and insult each other in metric form.

And finally in the third couplet he returns back to the battlefield and claims that his tribe strikes down their enemy forces to which the swords themselves are witness. This, of course, is in praise of their valour and bravery and heroism.

Access to These Legendary Poems

It is such a fantastic feeling to read, translate and interpret these ancient and magnificent pieces. They are at the highest levels of Arabic, but to access them, one must command the basics first.

Majnun Layla

By Mohtanick Jamil

Introduction:

Although it's almost definitely fictional, the story of Majnun and Layla has been one of the most captivating and inspiring love stories of all time and it is a prize of Arabic literature.

Every man, woman and child in the Middle East is told a version of this tale at one point in their life. And despite their age, nationality and creed, everyone with a beating heart shares a moment of sympathy over this tragic and heart-warming story.

But it is far from just another simple legend of love. The story of Majnun and Layla has been interpreted as a religious and spiritual allegory. It has been used as a pedagogical tool for centuries and continues to inspire people all over the world. It has inspired hundreds of versions in various languages, countless poems, songs, dramas, operas and, in modern day, films as well. It remains one of the most prominent backbones of Arabic literature and perhaps the single most popular narrative to emerge from the Middle East.

The story can be traced as far back as the late 600's. The number of versions of the legend grew to over a hundred as it spread west through Africa and east to India and beyond. And each version of the story is wildly different from the rest. Even details such as the characters' true names are different.

However, below is a short rendition of this tale:

The Story of Majnun and Layla:

Once upon a time, a powerful man of wealth and honour is unable to have a son. He beseeches Allah constantly for a handsome boy until Allah finally grants him his wish. The new father, incredibly ecstatic and grateful, names his newborn son Qays bin Mulawwah.

As per his father's hopes, Qays grows into a boy of magnificent beauty.

At a tender age, the boy meets a beautiful girl named Layla and the two fall madly in love. They are inseparable and their affection towards each other goes unnoticed by no one.

Qays, however, eventually learns that Layla's father disapproves of their love and has already begun looking for suitors for Layla.

Layla emphatically refuses all suitors in fits of rage, but her father is adamant and she is eventually married off.

Upon news of her marriage, the moonstruck Qays goes completely insane. He loses his mind and takes to the deserts and jungles, living half-naked with animals and forgetting the civilities of life.

Qays' father attempts to bring him back to his senses; he takes him on a pilgrimage to Mecca. But Qays' madness only deepens and deteriorates. He slams his fists against the Ka'ba and prays for his love for Layla to grow more and more passionate.

Now known as Majnun (madman), he spends the rest of his life wandering aimlessly, composing poetry for his lost love.

People run into Majnun from time to time and record whatever they can of his passionate poetry. And to this day, the poetry of Majnun these passersby have written down remains to be some of the greatest works of all time. Filled with intense passions and deep emotions, it never fails to inspire the love-struck centuries later.

A Sample of Majnun Layla Poems:

The story may be fictional, but the poems "Qays" wrote are definitely not. These are the pearls of Arabic literature. It's not so much the story as it is these passionate and emotional pearls of

love that sink into the hearts of people and make even Romeo and Juliet look like enemies!

Below is a snippet from a Majnun Layla poem said to be written by Qays bin Mulawwah. Something very noticeable in all his poems is the oft repeated name, Layla. It is said in Arabic that if you love something, you keep repeating its name and rarely do you use a pronoun to refer to it.

يَقُولُونَ لَيْلَى بِالْعِرَاقِ مَرِيضَةٌ فَيَا لَيْتَنِي كُنْتُ الطَّبِيبَ الْمَدَاوِيَا

They say Layla has taken ill in Iraq

Oh, woe, how I wish I was a doctor able to cure!

فَشَابَ بَنُو لَيْلَى وَشَابَ ابْنُ بِنْتِهَا وَحُرْقَةُ لَيْلَى فِي الْفُؤَادِ كَمَا هِيَ

The sons of Layla have grown old and so has her grandson

Yet the flame for Layla is still kindling in my heart as it always has
been

عَلَيَّ لَئِنْ لَأَقِيْتُ لَيْلَى بِخَلْوَةٍ زِيَارَةَ بَيْتِ اللَّهِ رِجْلَايَ حَافِيَا

If only I could meet Layla privately

I would vow a pilgrimage to the house of God, my feet bear

فَيَا رَبِّ إِذْ صَيَّرْتَ لَيْلَى هِيَ الْمَنَى فَرَزْنِي بِعَيْنَيْهَا كَمَا زَيَّنْتَهَا لِيَا

O my Lord, since you have made Layla my lifeblood
So make me beautiful in her eyes, too, as you have made her to
me

وَالْأَفْبَغِضُهَا إِلَيَّ وَأَهْلَهَا فَإِنِّي بَلِيْلَى قَدْ لَقَيْتُ الدَّوَاهِيَا

Else you might as well make her and her family hateful to me
For, in Layla, I have surely met my destruction

Above was just a short five couplets. But Arabic books of Adab are filled with these poems and commentary upon commentary. The story of Majnun and Layla may be steeped in mystery and questions, but it must have been something that inspired all this. It must have been some passion that wrote these poems. Whatever it was, whoever it was, their words have, and will continue to, echo through time.

One Thousand and One Nights

By Mohtanick Jamil

Introduction:

The legend of *One Thousand and One Nights* takes place over 1,500 years ago during the rule of the Sassanid empire. It begins with the Persian king Shahryar, who discovers the unfaithfulness of his brother's wife and, subsequently, the unfaithfulness of his own wife.

Having witnessed the scandals of two women in his very own family, Shahryar develops a distrust towards all women. So the king begins to marry woman after woman but he has each new bride executed the day after their wedding, before she has an opportunity to dishonour him.

Like this the king marries all the women until there is no virgin left for him to wed. The grand vizier, in charge of supplying the virgins, finally runs out and has none to offer. None except, of course, his very own daughter, Scheherazade.

Against her father's wishes, Scheherazade offers herself as the final bride of the pugnacious king. But being the cunning and

intelligent vizier's daughter that she is, she has a trick up her sleeve.

On the night of their wedding, Scheherazade begins to tell the king an engaging tale that swallows his attention and engulfs his imagination. With the king on the edge of his seat and hanging onto her every word, the sophisticated new bride reaches a cliff-hanger... but she does not finish her story; instead she promises to finish it the following night.

Intent on hearing the story to its end, the king is reluctantly forced to postpone the execution of his latest bride.

But each night, Scheherazade completes the previous tale, only to begin a new one and offer an excuse not to complete it until the subsequent night. And like this, one thousand and one such nights (more than two and a half years) go by and the bride remains living and well.

The Stories of Scheherazade:

The story of Shahryar and his cunning bride, Scheherazade, serves only as a backdrop. It is really the stories of Scheherazade themselves that make up what we know as *One Thousand and One Nights*.

These stories run the gamut from comedies, to love stories, to tragedies, to poetry, to adventures and heroism, to thrillers and horrors, to satires and far beyond.

They are filled with actual scenes mixed with make-believe geographies; historical facts dowsed in legendry and fantasy; real people mingled with mythical heroes, genies, mermaids and aliens.

The stories are well known for their literary beauty and interesting features. In particular, the epic is replete with the concept of a story within a story; it is a device employed continually by Scheherazade to ensure her ongoing survival. We often find stories within stories, and even stories within stories within stories.

The epic is so rich and captivating, in fact, that it is not only the most famous anthology of literature in the Middle East and Asia, but it plays an enormous role even in Western culture.

It is from *One Thousand and One Nights* where the story of Sinbad comes. We follow Sinbad on seven voyages across the seas and are taken to magical places along the way. We meet man-eating monsters, giant elephant-eating snakes and men that turn into birds once a month.

It is also from here where we get the story of Aladdin. Largely popularized by Disney in the 1990s, this story tells of sorcerers and emperors and magic and the journey of a young boy from poverty

to vast riches. It is also the source, to a large extent, of the Western understanding of genies.

Among the epic of *One Thousand and One Nights* is also the famous story of Ali Baba and the forty thieves. This is a tale of one honest man pitted against a barrage of forty ruthless thieves with access to a cave of magic and wondrous treasures. And it is from this story that we get the passphrase "open sesame" (Arabic: "افتح يا سمسم" / "iftaH ya simsim").

So famous are the *One Thousand and One Nights* throughout the world, in fact, that there is no one who hasn't heard at least one tale from the epic in some form or other. It has inspired translations in various languages, high-budget movies, musicals and so much more. The stories remain to be a rich source of folklore for many cultures.

Origin of the Stories:

The epic of *One Thousand and One Nights* is a collection of stories from Persian, Arab and North African cultures during a period of time between the 8th and 13th centuries during the Islamic/Arab golden age. As such, it is probably one of the most important anthologies in the entire world.

Compiled by various authors throughout the centuries, it has no fixed or authoritative form; various versions exist. The oldest

manuscripts found date back to 9th century Syria, but even these only contain approximately 300 tales and it is asserted that the epic was an ever-evolving work to which new stories were added by various authors as the centuries went by.

Today, the epic exists as a ten volume set of 1,001 tales. Translations exist in many languages, including several in English - among them is one by the well-known E.W. Lane - and the collection is readily available for purchase as well as free download.

It goes without saying that every serious student of Arabic language and Arabic culture ought to become intimately familiar with one of the most influential literary works to emerge from the Middle East. To understand it is to understand Arabic and its influence. To deny is to fail to penetrate the surface of this beautiful language.