

Integrated Arabic - Overview

Arabic is the language spoken by over 200 million people throughout the Middle East and North Africa. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations, the language of Islam and its holy book the Qur'aan, and the language in which some of the world's greatest works of literature, science and history have been written. Many events of global importance--political, economic, social and religious--take place in the Arab world, and the amount of foreign interest and involvement in the region is ever increasing.

Yet Arabic is not a widely-studied language in Europe and the West, and where it is studied it tends to be studied--and taught--badly. We believe there are two major reasons for this:

1. There are a number of fundamental misconceptions about the nature of Arabic and its teaching as a foreign language, both among Arabs and in the West;
2. There is a dreadful paucity of good, modern and interesting teaching and reference material at the disposal of students and teachers.

One of the fundamental misconceptions is that Arabic is an impossibly difficult language. While it is true that Arabic is not an Indo-European language and contains many features and complexities that speakers of European languages find alien and challenging, it is not nearly as unfathomable and mysterious as it is often made out to be. Arabic grammar is regular, the vocabulary has an inherent logic and ordering that often makes it possible to guess the meaning of a word, and the script--however squiggly it may look--can be learned in a few hours. Pronunciation is difficult, but is a matter of drill and practice: there is no intellectual barrier to be surmounted.

We are convinced that a good part of this reputation as a fearsomely difficult language is due to the lack of good, accessible textbooks and other materials, and indeed to the lack of good teaching methods (although thankfully this is beginning to change).

The other major misconception concerns the nature of Arabic itself. Modern Arabic falls into two distinct parts: the formal, written language which is shared throughout the Arab world, and the colloquial dialects, which are restricted to a particular country or region. The former is known as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA or *fusha*), the latter we will refer to as the Colloquials (*ʿamiyya*). MSA is used in modern literature, the press, radio and television, and in formal occasions, conferences, speeches and so on. The Colloquials are used in everyday life: at work, in the home, with friends, in songs, plays, movies and soap operas.

The misconception is this: that one is learning "Arabic" by learning just one or the other. Outside the Middle East, especially in universities, it is almost certain that what is meant by "Arabic" is MSA. It is often argued that MSA is the "true" Arabic, and that since it is universally understood in the Arab world from Iraq to Morocco it is not necessary or desirable to deal with the Colloquials. Arabs themselves often perpetuate this myth, dismissing their own dialect as "slang", lower-class, or uneducated speech and insisting that foreigners learn MSA.

None of this is true. While it is possible to communicate with almost any Arab in MSA, it is often unnatural and awkward to do so, and the communication will be mostly one-way. Speaking only MSA is a little like being unable to speak English, only to read and write it, and to communicate by writing on a notepad and showing it to people. There will be no shortage of people willing to write things down for you, but it is hardly a natural way to communicate, and you will miss a lot. To be restricted to MSA is to miss out on the idiom, colour and humour of everyday language, on songs, jokes, stories, movies and other aspects of popular culture. You will not be talking to friends and colleagues in their native language.

Similarly, it is quite common for foreigners who find themselves in an Arab country to learn the local Colloquial, eschewing the supposedly more difficult MSA. For them, newspapers, books, television and radio news, and even road signs, will remain forever inaccessible.

We believe that speaking Arabic means speaking both MSA and at least one Colloquial dialect, as the Arabs do; adjusting your language to the situation. If you give a speech to a business gathering, you speak in MSA. In a formal meeting, you might speak a mixture of MSA and Colloquial. With colleagues at the office, you would speak mainly Colloquial, depending on the topic. In social settings, Colloquial is almost universal, and attempting to direct a taxi driver in MSA is a waste of time.

The problem for the foreign student, unfortunately, is that the differences between MSA and the Colloquials, and among the Colloquials themselves, are not trivial. Another problem, which leads us to the second of our two points above, is that as far as we are aware no textbook or teaching system exists which teaches MSA and a Colloquial in an integrated and coordinated way.

More generally, the quality of published materials for learning Arabic is universally poor. Quite apart from the problem of failing to consider the whole of Arabic rather than just MSA or Colloquial, currently available Arabic texts tend to be old-fashioned, unclear, uninspiring and dull. Example text passages or dialogues are often inauthentic, illustrate an unrealistic use of language (MSA used in chatting with a friend, for example), or cover material irrelevant to the likely needs of the modern student. Grammatical explanations tend to be over-complicated and couched in the style of 19th century English grammars. The few more progressive and engaging texts-- notably those published by the American University in Cairo--are spoiled by very poor typography and production. The contrast with the materials available for other "exotic" languages such as Japanese, which arguably are of lesser global importance, is surprising and disappointing.

This book was initially designed as the first of a series entitled *Integrated Arabic* which was to be designed to redress these problems. *Integrated Arabic* was to initially consist of three modules: Modern Standard Arabic, Syrian Colloquial Arabic, and Egyptian Colloquial Arabic with a view to later add additional modules for the other major colloquial dialects (Gulf, North African, and Iraqi). The modules were to be designed to be used simultaneously, sequentially or individually, according to the preferences and circumstances of the student. The idea was that for maximum benefit the student simultaneously use the MSA module with one of the Colloquial modules. The modules could also be used alone as a self-contained course, or as an adjunct to an Arabic course at a college or other institution.

While each module was to be self-contained, the key to the concept was the integration between the modules. Grammatical concepts were to be covered in parallel, so that the student could compare similarities and identify differences between MSA and Colloquial while developing a feel for the common root of both forms of the language. Vocabulary was also, as far as possible, to be developed in parallel. But most importantly, the material presented in the dialogues and text passages in the MSA module was to be the type of material that would be expressed in MSA in the Arab world, and the material in the Colloquial modules is material appropriate to Colloquial expression. Thus, a particular grammatical point would be illustrated in a chapter in the MSA module by a passage dealing with politics, society, economics, geography, history, etc, in the form of a newspaper article or excerpt from a speech, for example. In the equivalent chapter in the Colloquial modules, the same or similar point would be illustrated by a dialogue from everyday life--at work, shopping, travelling, talking with friends--wherever possible involving the same topic or theme as the MSA text.

That was the original, ambitious plan, unfortunately, our lives took over and have led us on different paths as we have been forced to put the other modules on hold indefinitely. We do,

however, encourage other students of Arabic to adopt our method and structure and create their own modules to share.

We have endeavoured to make the modules as interesting, entertaining and relevant as possible, and adhere to the highest standards of clarity and readability in typography and layout (although we have not yet been able to cleanly convert to PDF the METimes font used to transliterate the Arabic). We have also tried to accommodate a range of learning styles: extensive exercises and drills are included for those who want them; the modules are designed to be equally suitable for those who prefer to work quickly through a number of chapters to get a feel for the concepts, before going back to wrestle with the details. The tapes which accompany each module are an indispensable part of the course.

Unfortunately we cannot provide the final vital ingredient for the successful study of Arabic: a good teacher. These are difficult to find, but they do exist. We hope that *Integrated Arabic* will provoke more interest in the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language, and encourage Arabic teachers to develop new techniques and materials, train others to teach, and start to present Arabic as it should be presented: as a rich, appealing, useful and above all conquerable language.

About This Book

Syrian Colloquial Arabic deals with modern colloquial Arabic as it is spoken in Syria*, with an emphasis on practical, everyday language useful to the foreign resident.

The book leads you through a variety of real-life situations, and the language necessary to deal with them--directing a taxi, negotiating for a hotel room, haggling with the greengrocer, speaking on the telephone, and so on. This practical material has been carefully fitted to a structured exposition of SCA grammar.

You may use it for self-study, with a teacher or in a class. Many of the exercises are designed to be done with another person, so if you are studying alone it is worthwhile getting a Syrian friend or teacher to help you from time to time if possible.

The book also covers basic reading and writing. While written Arabic is generally Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), an ability to read road and shop signs, Arabic numbers, restaurant menus and bills, and to write one's name and telephone number is a valuable skill for the Colloquial Arabic speaker. While the book is fully transliterated and can be used without learning to read Arabic, we recommend making the extra effort as this will assist you if you go on to study MSA.

Syrian Colloquial Arabic is designed to be a handy reference even after you have finished the course. It therefore contains much more vocabulary than you should try to memorise in one go. We recommend that you select only five or six vocabulary items in each exercise or list to memorise, and learn the others as you need them.

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* There are a number of differing regional dialects in Syria. This book is generally based on the dialect spoken in Damascus, which is understood throughout Syria.