

Introduction to the Arabic Language

Arabic is the fifth most spoken language in the world (just after English) with approximately 200 million native speakers. Originating in the Arabian Peninsula, the Arabic language spread far and wide beginning in the 7th century when Arab-Islamic armies quickly conquered gigantic swathes of land from Spain in the west to Central Asia in the east, and created an Islamic empire, or “Khalifate”. The language of this empire, particularly in matters of religion, was Arabic, the language, according to tradition, in which the Qur’an was revealed to Mohammed. Although the days of such an empire are long gone, the inhabitants of the majority these lands continue to take pride in speaking Arabic, the language of both Islam, and Arab national identity.

Currently Arabic has three major branches that need to be considered before studying the language:

- **Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)** – Called Fusha in Arabic (meaning “the most eloquent”), MSA is the standard literary language used by Arabs for writing and in formal speech. This is the language Arabs learn in school, read in books and newspapers, hear on newscasts, and speak in official situations. The news station Al-Jazeera is one of many examples of a channel that broadcasts in Modern Standard Arabic. If you are to study Arabic in a university or in any academic language program, it will most likely be MSA.
- **Colloquial Arabic** – Colloquial Arabic goes by many different names and is the language spoken in everyday life. Divided into many dialects, according to geography, colloquial Arabic differs in varying degrees from the Standard, or Classical versions of the language. An example of this variance is Moroccan Arabic, which is very different from MSA, and includes many loan words from French, Berber, Spanish and other languages. Colloquial Arabic is also the language most often used for music. If you are planning on communicating with people most effectively in Arabic, speaking their dialect of colloquial Arabic is the best way to go. Learning one dialect makes it very easy to learn others, and is a vital part of being a well-rounded Arabic speaker.
- **Classical or Qur’anic Arabic** – Classical Arabic is the language of the Qur’an and is now primarily studied for religious reasons, particularly the reading of early Islamic texts. It is essentially the medieval dialect of Arabic spoken in the Hijaz (West Arabia), in the 7th century, and is the precursor to MSA. In the Arabic world there is usually little distinction between Classical Arabic and MSA, and both are often referred to as Fusha, “the most eloquent”.

Quick Facts:

Arabic is a Semitic language, putting it in the same family with Hebrew, and Aramaic. Arabic is based primarily on three letter roots that convey a general meaning, and are manipulated to convey a specific meaning. Arabic is written in a calligraphic line from right to left, with the shape, breaks and dots changing according to each letter. There are also vowels placed above and below the words, but these will be absent in most literature as it is assumed you know the words already. Arabic can be intimidating at first, but with a little time and effort, you will discover the rewards of this beautiful language.