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A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic

A Reference Grammar of Modern Standard Arabic is a comprehensive handbook on the structure of Arabic. Keeping technical terminology to a minimum, it provides a detailed yet accessible overview of Modern Standard Arabic in which the essential aspects of its phonology, morphology, and syntax can be readily looked up and understood. Accompanied by extensive carefully chosen examples, it will prove invaluable as a practical guide for supporting students' textbooks, classroom work, or self-study and will also be a useful resource for scholars and professionals wishing to develop an understanding of the key features of the language. Grammar notes are numbered for ease of reference, and a section on how to use an Arabic dictionary is included, as well as helpful glossaries of Arabic and English linguistic terms and a useful bibliography. Clearly structured and systematically organized, this book is set to become the standard guide to the grammar of contemporary Arabic.

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I am especially indebted to His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, Sultan of Oman, who generously endowed the position I occupy at Georgetown University, and whose patronage of study and research about Arabic language, literature, and culture is well known and widely respected. It is for this reason that I dedicate this book, with profound gratitude, to His Majesty.

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Preface

This basic reference grammar is intended as a handbook for the general learner – a step on the way toward greater understanding of the Arabic language. Many excellent and effective textbooks for teaching Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) exist, as well as published research on a range of topics in Arabic linguistics (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, variation theory), but information in English on MSA grammatical topics tends to be scattered, and if a complete answer to a question regarding contemporary usage is needed, sometimes a number of sources need to be consulted.

The idea behind this reference grammar is to gather together in one work the essentials of MSA in such a way that fundamental elements of structure can be readily looked up and illustrated. It is intended primarily for learners of MSA as a practical guide for supporting their textbook lessons, classroom work, or self-study. This book is not intended in any way to supplant the exhaustive and profound analyses of classical and literary Arabic such as those by Wright (1896, reprint 1967) and Cantarino (1974–76). Those monumental books stand on their own and are irreplaceable reference works. This book is a work of considerably more modest goals and proportions.

1 Goals

This book is not designed to cover the entire field of literary or classical Arabic grammar. A comprehensive accounting of Arabic grammar is an undertaking of great complexity and depth, of competing indigenous paradigms (Basran and Kufan), of several dimensions (diachronic, synchronic, comparative), and of theoretical investigation across the spectrum of contemporary linguistic fields (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis).

The Arabic language is a vast treasure-house of linguistic and literary resources that extend back into the first millennium. Its grammatical tradition is over a thousand years old and contains resources of extraordinary depth and sophistication. Works in English such as Lane's dictionary (1863, reprint 1984), Wehr's dictionary (fourth edition, 1979), Wright's grammar (1896, reprint 1967), and

Howell's grammar (reprint 1986) are seminal contributions in English to understanding the wealth of the Arabic linguistic tradition. Yet, for the neophyte, for the average learner, or for the non-specialized linguist, easily usable reference works are still needed. This is, therefore, not a comprehensive reference grammar covering the full range of grammatical structures in both Classical and Modern Standard Arabic; rather, it centers on the essentials of modern written Arabic likely to be encountered in contemporary Arabic expository prose.

2 Methodology

The choices of explanations, examples, and layouts of paradigms in this book are pragmatically motivated rather than theoretically motivated and are not intended to reflect a particular grammatical or theoretical approach. I have been eclectic in providing descriptions of Arabic language features and structures, always with the intent of providing the most efficient access to Arabic forms and structures for English speakers. For example, I have assigned numbers to noun declensions for ease of reference. Also, I refer throughout the text to "past tense" and "present tense" verbs rather than "perfect" tense and "imperfect" tense verbs, although this has not been standard practice for Arabic textbooks or grammars.¹ I refer to the "locative adverbs" (*Zuruuf makaan wa-Zuruuf zamaan*) as "semi-prepositions" (following Kouloughli 1994) because it captures their similarities to prepositions.²

Many Arabic terms and classifications, however, such as the "sisters of *'inna*" and the "sisters of *kaan-a*" are highly useful and pragmatic ways of organizing and presenting morphological and syntactic information, even to nonnative speakers of Arabic, so they have been retained. I have endeavored to provide both English and Arabic technical terms for categorized phenomena.

There are those, both traditionalists and non-traditionalists, who will no doubt disagree with the mode of presentation and grammatical descriptions used in this book. However, since this text is aimed at learners and interested laypeople as well as linguists, I hope that the categories devised and the descriptions and examples provided will be useful, readable, and readily understandable. Transliteration is provided for all examples so that readers who do not have a grasp of Arabic script may have access to phonological structure.

3 The database

This reference grammar is based on contemporary expository prose, chiefly but not exclusively from Arabic newspapers and magazines, as the main resource for

¹ See the rationale for this choice in Chapter 21 on verb inflection, section 1.2.2.

² *Grammaire de l'arabe d'aujourd'hui*, D. E. Kouloughli refers to *Zuruuf makaan wa-Zuruuf zamaan* as "quasi-prépositions." (152).

topics and examples of current everyday Arabic writing practice. The grammatical description that emerges therefore calibrates closely with contemporary written usage. Media Arabic was chosen as a main source of data for this text because of its contemporaneity, its coverage of many different topics, and the extemporaneous nature of daily reporting and editing. As a primary source of information about and from the Arab world, newspaper and magazine language reflects Arab editorial and public opinion and topics of current interest.³ Various subject matter and texts were covered, ranging from interviews, book reviews, feature stories, religion and culture, and sports reports, to straight news reports and editorials. In addition to newspapers, other sources used for data collection included contemporary novels and nonfiction. This is therefore strictly a descriptive grammar that seeks to describe MSA as it is within the parameters noted above, and not to evaluate it or compare it with earlier or more elegant and elaborate forms of the written language.

There are doubtless those who would assert that the ordinariness of media language causes it to lack the beauty and expressiveness of literary Arabic, and therefore that it is unrepresentative of the great cultural and literary achievements of the Arabs.⁴ To those I would reply that the very ordinariness of this type of language is what makes it valuable to learners because it represents a widely used and understood standard of written expression. As Owens and Bani-Yasin (1987, 736) note, “the average Arab is probably more exposed to this style than to most others, such as academic or literary writing.” In fact, it is a vital and emergent form of written language, being created and recreated on a daily basis, covering issues from the mundane to the extraordinary. With limited time to prepare its presentation style, media Arabic reflects more closely than other forms of the written language the strategies and structures of spontaneous expression.⁵

Media Arabic is straightforward enough in its content and style to form the basis for advanced levels of proficiency and comprehension, to expand vocabulary, to create confidence in understanding a wide range of topics, and particu-

³ Media discourse is described by Bell and Garrett (1998, 3) as “a rich resource of readily accessible data for research and teaching” and its usage “influences and represents people’s use of and attitudes towards language in a speech community.” They also state that “the media reflect and influence the formation and expression of culture, politics and social life” (1998, 4).

⁴ Cantarino, for example, in the introduction to his major work, *The Syntax of Modern Arabic Prose*, vol. I, states that in compiling his illustrative materials, he consulted a variety of literary sources, but “Newspapers have generally been disregarded, since Arabic journalism – like most news writing around the world – does not necessarily offer the best or most representative standard of literary language” (1974, 1:x).

⁵ The discipline of “media discourse research” or “media discourse analysis” is a rapidly growing one in linguistics. See Cotter 2001 for an overview of developments in this field. See also the cogent discussion of Arabic newspapers and the teaching of MSA in Taha 1995, and Mehall 1999.

larly to provide clear reference points for issues of structural accuracy.⁶ As Widdowson has stated, students whose future contexts of use are broad and not clearly predictable need fundamental exposure to “a language of wider communication, a language of maximal generality or projection value” (1988, 7). I see media language as a cornerstone of linguistic and cultural literacy in Arabic; a medium which can be a useful goal in itself, but also a partial and practical goal for those who ultimately aim to study the Arabic literary tradition in all its elegance, diversity, and richness.

4 Contents

The book is arranged so that grammar notes are numbered and indexed for ease of reference; examples provided are based on information in the database. I have omitted or avoided names of persons and sometimes I have changed the content words to be less specific. For the most part, I have not created ad hoc examples; illustrations of syntactic structure are based on authentic usage. A section on how to use an Arabic dictionary is provided, as well as lists of Arabic and English technical terms, a bibliography that includes specialized and general works in Arabic, English, French, and German, and indexes based on Arabic terms and English terms.

Although I have tried to cover a wide range of aspects of contemporary written Arabic usage, there are bound to be lacunae, for which I am responsible. In terms of accuracy of description, the entire book has been submitted to native Arabic-speaking scholars and professional linguists for checking the grammatical descriptions and examples, but I alone am responsible for any shortcomings in that respect.

Procedures:

- Proper names have been left unvoiced on the final consonant, except where the voicing illustrates the grammatical point under discussion.
- For individual words or word groups taken out of context, the nominative case is used as the base or citation form.
- In giving English equivalents for Arabic structures, I have included in square brackets [] words inserted into English that are not present in the Arabic text but are necessary for understanding in English.
- I have included in parentheses and single quotes (‘ ’) a more or less exact wording in the Arabic text that does not appear in the English equivalent.

⁶ In his article “Broadcast news as a language standard,” Allan Bell discusses the central role of media in reinforcing and disseminating a prestige standard language, especially in multilingual, multi-dialectal, or diglossic societies. See Bell 1983.

- In running text, English equivalents of Arabic lexical items are referred to in single quotes “.
- In giving English equivalents for Arabic lexical items, essentially synonymous English meanings are separated by commas, whereas a semicolon separates equivalents with substantially different meanings.
- For purposes of brevity, in providing English equivalents of lexical items with broad semantic ranges, I have selected only one or two common meanings. These are not meant to be full definitions, only very basic glosses.

Abbreviations

acc.	accusative
adj.	adjective
adv.	adverb
AP	active participle
C	any consonant
CA	Classical Arabic
comp.	comparative
def.	definite
demons.	demonstrative pronoun
ESA	Educated Spoken Arabic
f./fem.	feminine
Fr.	French
FSA	Formal Spoken Arabic
fut.	future
g.	gender
gen.	genitive
imp.	imperative
indef.	indefinite
indic.	indicative
intr.	intransitive
lw	loanword
m./masc.	masculine
MSA	Modern Standard Arabic
n.	noun
neg.	negative
no.	number
nom.	nominative
NP	noun phrase
o.s.	one's self
obj.	object
p./pers.	person

pass.	passive
perf.	perfect
pers.	person
pl./plur.	plural
plup.	pluperfect
pos.	positive
PP	passive participle
pres.	present
pron.	pronoun
quad.	quadriliteral
QAP	quadriliteral active participle
QPP	quadriliteral passive participle
refl.	reflexive
rel. pron.	relative pronoun
s.o.	someone
s.th.	something
sg./sing.	singular
subj.	subjunctive
superl.	superlative
trans.	transitive
v.	verb
V	any short vowel
vd.	voiced
vl.	voiceless
VN	verbal noun (<i>maSdar</i>)
VP	verb phrase
VV	any long vowel

Other diacritics:

boldface words	indicate key words in examples (in examples)
boldface syllables	indicate primary word stress
–	morpheme boundary ¹

¹ For purposes of structural clarity I have indicated inflectional morpheme boundaries within words when possible. There are points where morpheme boundaries merge (as in the endings of defective verbs and nouns); in these cases I have omitted a specific boundary marker. I have also omitted the morpheme boundary marker before the *taa'* *marbuuTa* (*-at ~ -a*) and the sound feminine plural ending (*-aat*).

xxiv *List of abbreviations*

/	separates singular and plural forms of substantives and past/present citation forms of verbs, e.g., <i>dars/duruus</i> ‘lesson/s’ <i>daras-a/ya-drus-u</i> ‘to study’
//	encloses phonemic transcription
‘ ’	encloses glosses or translations
*	indicates a hypothetical or reconstructed form
~	‘alternates with; or’

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