

## Using Arabic Synonyms

Designed for those who have already developed a basic competence in Arabic, this comprehensive synonyms guide aims to broaden and improve learners' vocabulary by helping them find the right word for the right context. Presenting words of related meaning together, it provides a range of options which will help avoid repetition and improve style, and enables students to develop a deeper awareness of the subtle differences in meaning and usage of different words. Each entry is illustrated with authentic examples of the synonyms in use, showing their unique meanings and grammatical properties, and enabling students to quickly recognize them in real-life contexts. The book is complete with two clear indexes, in English and Arabic, enabling the reader to instantly and easily locate any word. An essential reference for college and undergraduate students, their teachers, and other language professionals seeking a clear, user-friendly guide to Arabic vocabulary and its usage.

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# Abbreviations

1	word used only in one or more dialects, not in Standard Arabic
2	word shared by Standard Arabic and one or more dialects
3	word used only in Standard Arabic, not in the dialects
acc	accusative
adj	adjective
adv	adverb
AP	active participle
Coll	Colloquial Arabic (marks words used in both Eg and Lev)
D	daily (this word appears in the newspaper almost every day)
def	definite
Eg	Egyptian Arabic
esp.	especially
fem	feminine
Gulf	Gulf Arabic
incl.	including
indef	indefinite
Lev	Levantine Arabic
M	monthly (this word appears in the newspaper about once a month)
m&f	masculine and feminine
n	noun
neg	negative
pass	passive
pl	plural
prep	preposition
sb	somebody
sing	singular
sth	something
usu.	usually
VN	Verbal Noun
W	weekly (this word appears in the newspaper about once a week)



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# Introduction

This book is not a synonym dictionary, although it resembles one in several respects. Rather, it is a vocabulary building tool for advanced English speaking learners of Arabic. The idea behind the book, and the series of which it is a part, is that grouping words with similar or related meanings is a good way for students to rapidly expand their vocabularies. Advanced learners should be familiar with one or more of the more common words in each set, and will then be exposed to some of the relatively less common but still important related words. For example, they are likely to know the word بيت 'house,' but need to be exposed to مسكن, دار and منزل as well. Considering these words together, as a single set, provides clear advantages to the vocabulary building process. These words are 'near' but not 'exact' synonyms, and students need to get an idea of how the words are related to each other, to what extent they are actually interchangeable, what the similarities and differences are, what the relative frequency of use is, what collocational preferences might apply, and what the linguistic 'level' of each word is. This is the kind of information that this book is designed to provide.

## Item Choice

Arabic has a relatively large number of words, and writers of Arabic seem particularly to delight in using a variety of words for a single concept. This has resulted in a very large number of synonyms and 'near' synonyms in the language. Considerations of space, cost and usability make it impossible to provide anything approaching complete coverage. In discussing how to make a useful selection of words in the least arbitrary way possible, we decided to focus on a specific learning goal for students, and organize our choices in relation to that goal. Arabic is a difficult language for most English speaking learners, and second and even third year students often still have difficulty reading authentic texts fluently. Although most students have the eventual goal of reading a wide variety of both modern and medieval literary and non-literary texts, our experience has shown that if students can develop fluency in reading a single type of text, that fluency can become the basis for reading in other genres. We chose, therefore, the goal of students becoming fluent readers of the Arabic language press as the basis for this book. Although students will encounter a broad range of vocabulary and styles in the press, in relation to literary texts the vocabulary of the press is somewhat restricted. Had we chosen to include literary texts, the book would have to have been hundreds of pages longer. We therefore chose the words of this book



specifically to help students gain the vocabulary necessary to become fluent and sophisticated readers of the Arabic press.

### Arabic Varieties

Arabic has a large number of varieties that differ significantly from each other. Classical Arabic religious and literary prose is quite distinct from what is often termed Modern Standard Arabic, which itself can be divided into Modern Literary Arabic and Modern Newspaper Arabic. Spoken dialects vary dramatically from country to country and even from town to town, in addition to the ‘mixed’ varieties (often referred to as Educated Spoken Arabic) which combine features of local dialects and Modern Standard Arabic. Finally, there is even some evidence that the Modern Standard Arabic used in particular countries is not identical to that used in others. Most of these varieties share a basic vocabulary base, but differ from each other both in the less common and the most common words.

Because of our focus on the language of the press, the language described in the book, therefore, leans most heavily toward Modern Newspaper Arabic. However, since Arabic newspapers cover a broad range of subjects and styles, we were able to include some Modern Literary Arabic, a little classically tinged religious Arabic, and some dialectal Arabic. The idea was to include items that are actually used with relative frequency in the press, no matter what they might be labeled; since there are religious articles, reviews of literary works, and a certain amount of colloquial vocabulary used in our corpus, some items that might not seem to ‘fit’ under the heading ‘Newspaper Arabic’ are still quite common in real newspapers.

The basic corpus from which the frequency information and the examples were derived consisted of a full year of *Al-Ahram* newspaper (Egypt, 1999), and a full year of *Al-Hayat* (1997), the latter being a Saudi-owned paper published in London with a readership that spans the Arab World, but which historically and editorially has been associated with Lebanon, and a majority of whose writers are Lebanese. A very small number of examples were taken from other Arabic newspapers and internet news sites, but the overwhelming majority of them appeared in one of these two newspapers.

### Organization of the Book

For each set of words a head word was chosen, either because it was the most common of the items, or the one most centrally related to the basic idea of the semantic field in question. The head words are listed in bold at the top of the set of words, along with an English gloss to give an idea of the nature of the semantic field. The head words are organized alphabetically by root throughout the book. At the top of each page the Arabic root of the head word that begins on that page is given for reference purposes.

Under each head word is the list of words related to that semantic field (including the head word). These are listed alphabetically by root under the head word. Each word is provided with a set of English glosses, occasionally along with some grammatical information related to the use of that word. Also

provided is information about the stylistic level of each word, and its frequency in the newspaper corpus. Finally, a set of examples derived from the corpus is given that illustrates the use of the word.

### Examples

The examples will likely be the most helpful part of this book for students, and the richest source of information. They consist of a set of sentences organized into a paragraph but otherwise unrelated to each other. In a few cases, like the names of positions or of organizations, phrases rather than sentences are given. Since sentences in newspapers tend to be long and complex, these sentences have sometimes been slightly changed so that they can stand on their own in this context. However, we made an effort to provide enough context so that an imaginative student could easily grasp where such a sentence might be used. In general, more of each sentence was given than would have been necessary to minimally illustrate the use of the word so as to provide as rich a context as possible given space limitations.

It is from the examples that students should note important collocations, and particular ‘skewings’ in the meaning and use of particular words related to each other. If more than one example of a particular collocation is given, it typically means that this represents one of the most frequent usages of that word.

One problem in using a newspaper corpus for such a work is that it can become dated, particularly with references to events that were current in the years from which the newspapers were taken. However, instead of avoiding such references, in this work we embraced them, on the idea that specific events provide a clearer and more helpful context for understanding language than abstract or general contexts do. It is never imperative to identify the event being referred to in order to understand the sentence, but it is helpful to do so. It is thus helpful to bear in mind some of the events of the late 1990s to which reference was commonly made in the press: the death of Princess Diana, the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the crash of the Egypt Air flight out of the United States, the terrorist attack on tourists in Luxor, the virtual civil war between Islamic extremists and the government in Algeria, the pope’s visit to Lebanon, the Clinton impeachment proceedings, weapons of mass destruction inspections in Iraq, the ongoing Arab/Israeli conflict, and the election of a ‘quasi’ Islamic government in secular Turkey, for example. Sports and business concerns also are commonly the context of many of the sentences, and readers should be aware of the importance of soccer in the Arab world, and of the interplay between public and private sectors which plays such an important role in Arab World business affairs.

It goes without saying that none of the sentiments reflected in the various sentences are necessarily those of the author or the publishers. The Arab press reflects a variety of points of view, and a number of these are reflected in these examples, including a few potentially embarrassing ones. Further, the Arab press takes a uniformly negative attitude toward the state of Israel, and this is naturally also reflected in many of the examples. Readers who are upset

by the content of one of the sentences are urged to calm down and realize that the goal here is to understand the Arabic press, not to change it. It is certain that there are as many Arab readers who would disagree with the sentences as would agree. They are not here to reflect some monolithic Arab sentiment, but only as examples of words used on particular occasions in particular contexts to represent particular, individual sentiments. It is our contention that even objectionable sentences can be very useful for language learning purposes.

### Dialectal Examples

Contrary to popular assumption, local dialects are used in the press to some extent. This means that to become completely fluent in reading the newspaper, one needs a basic familiarity with dialectal forms (Egyptian Arabic for the *Ahram*, Levantine and sometimes Gulf Arabic for *Al-Hayat*.) It was decided for this book to include the dialectal material at approximately the same rate it is included in the press. This means that it is a relatively small part of the book, but for important concepts (like ‘to want’) where the dialects differ from each other and from Standard Arabic, the press provides many examples of dialectal usage, which it was felt would be helpful for students. The dialectal examples are determined by the newspapers used for the corpus, and thus North African dialects are not represented at all, and Gulf and Iraqi only to a minor extent, but with many examples of Levantine and Egyptian usage.

### Level

Words carry social information for native speakers beyond their meaning. Some words are very formal and used only in certain formal settings, while others are more ‘down-to-earth’ or even vulgar. In the Arab world these social meanings are intimately connected to the Standard Arabic/Dialectal Arabic situation. Words in this book are thus ranked either:

‘1’, for words that are felt as purely dialectal words, even if used in a Standard Arabic context;

‘2’, for words that are equally at home in Standard Arabic or the spoken dialect (sometimes with slight changes); and

‘3’, for words that are clearly Standard only, and which carry a feeling of educated formality even if used in an otherwise dialectal context.

The problem with determining these rankings is that Arabs themselves do not agree on them, and words are not necessarily felt the same in different places. We decided to include them anyway since despite disagreement ‘around the edges’ we believe there is basic agreement on most words. These rankings were checked with various dictionaries which mark words as to level (such as the Hinds/Badawi *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*), but in the end are based on the judgements of a small set of linguistically sophisticated educated (Levantine) native speakers we consulted who were asked to do the ranking. Thus, although

these numbers should definitely be taken with a grain of salt, they will give students a basic idea of the social level of the words in question. Occasionally a word is ranked '1-2' to indicate that although technically it is a '2,' still native speakers often associate it with the colloquial level.

### Frequency

Word frequency information, particularly for Arabic, is notoriously unreliable, and depends on a host of factors. However, we feel that it is still very helpful for students to have the information. It is not enough to know that words have similar meanings, if one word is used ten times more frequently than the other. Very frequent words often have a wide variety of usage contexts, while very infrequent words are often limited to one or two specific contexts or collocations. Instead of giving exact frequency numbers, which are hard to interpret in any case, the rankings 'daily' (D), 'weekly' (W) and 'monthly' (M) are given. These are related to the corpus and have an obvious interpretation. Taking the *Ahram* as an example, a 'D' ranking means that if you read the *Ahram* every day for a year, you would likely run into this word almost every day, a 'W' ranking means you would run into it about once a week, and an 'M' ranking means you would see it about once a month (translating into a frequency per year of *Ahram* issues of about 365 or more, about 52 or more, and about 12 or more). Words with a frequency less than 'M' were not included in this book. Clearly, words with a 'D' ranking can be considered very frequent, while words with an 'M' ranking are quite infrequent, many times less than 'D'.

An effort was made to use these frequency ratings to refer to the specific usage or meaning being referenced in the entry. Some very common words might show up with a 'W' or 'M' rating because the particular usage or meaning being described is less common than the other meanings of the word. The colloquial words (those marked '1') are a special case. We had no access to word frequency information about these words in the spoken dialects themselves, and since dialectal usage is quite infrequent in the newspapers in general, words that one knows to be very frequent still only show up in the newspapers at a low level of frequency. We therefore decided to mark all colloquial words with '1M.' This reflects the fact that in the newspapers they are not very frequent, but with the caveat that almost all the colloquial words that would make it into this book would be used daily in speakers' normal lives.

### English Meanings

We felt that the long lists of meanings given in many dictionaries are often less than helpful, since most of the words in the list represent only a very specific usage and not the main meaning. We decided, therefore, that for this work the meanings given would be somehow 'central' and broad, applying to most situations of use. We aimed for minimal rather than maximal definitions. Nuances of meaning, as well as differences between concrete and abstract, direct and extended usages, etc., are quite evident from the examples, and

are left to them. Students who desire a more detailed set of meanings for a particular word should consult a good dictionary.

### **Polysemy**

Arabic words (like those of other languages) often have a wide range of meanings; in many cases, only one of those is clearly related to the semantic field under consideration. When a word has a meaning that will not be considered, and which will not be illustrated in the examples, that extra meaning is put into square brackets. If that meaning will be illustrated under another head word, than a reference to that head word is given, also within the brackets.

### **Verb Valency**

Verbs, and some other words, relate to the words around them in particular ways, some taking direct objects, some taking prepositions, etc. There is often more variability in this than is commonly implied in dictionaries, but the information is still quite helpful. An effort has been made in this book to both mark and illustrate the various possibilities for each verb. Valency is marked in the English glosses in the following manner:

Intransitive verb (no object):

*to sing*;

Transitive verb:

*to sing sth; to hit sb; to sing (a song)*;

Optionally transitive or intransitive verbs:

*to sing (sth)*;

Verbs that take a preposition:

*to obtain* على;

Verbs that take both objects and prepositions:

*to entice sb* على / إلى *to do sth*;

Verbs that take a nominalized sentence complement:

*to decide sth* or أن *that*.

Because the examples from the corpus were often quite a bit more diverse in regard to verb valency than is represented in the common dictionaries, some of these become rather complicated. However, the alert reader will notice that there is almost always an example of each of the various options listed. It is perfectly possible to ignore the verb valency markings and just rely on the examples for usage information.

### **Indexes**

Two indexes are provided at the end of the book. The first lists all the English

words used in the book, and the second all the Arabic words. In each case the words refer to the head word entries under which that word may be found. These indexes allow the student to explore the work and find all references to particular areas of interest starting with either English meanings or Arabic vocabulary items. Because the reference is to head words only, the index should not be taken as an indication of the meanings of the words in question.

### Errors

Source materials, particularly newspapers, contain numerous errors. When these errors were obvious typos, they were corrected. However, it was felt that some of the errors reflected actual usage and usage variation, and were thus helpful as examples of what students would actually encounter in the press. Thus, odd spellings of foreign words, the incorrect placement of the *hamza*, the omission of the dots on some instances of the *taa' marbuuta* and the omission of the final *alif* that marks indefinite accusative objects were left as they appeared in the press in the few examples which contain such errors.

### Final Word

Although the claim that Arabic possesses a huge vocabulary compared to other languages remains speculative, there is no doubt that classical Arabic writing was very devoted to balanced phrases in which the repetition of similar ideas using different words was prized. In other words, Arabs loved synonyms. And although the hold of classical norms has relaxed considerably in modern Arabic prose, it is still certainly the case that one finds constant 'doublings' at the word, phrase and sentence levels, a stylistic preference that could only have increased pressure on the language to keep existing synonyms alive and to create new ones. When common 'doublings' appeared in the corpus, we have tried to include at least one example so that students can become familiar with this kind of style.

We hope that this book will encourage students not only to learn the words in the book, but also to notice how common synonyms are in Arabic usage, and to learn to leverage that understanding into more rapid and insightful vocabulary acquisition.

