

THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

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1950 yılında Şanlıurfa'da doğdu. 1969 yılında Diyarbakır İmam-Hatip Lisesini bitirdi. Erzurum Yüksek İslâm Enstitüsü'nü 1973, A.Ü. Edebiyat Fak. İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı bölümünü 1974 yılında bitirdi. 1975 yılında doktora yapmak üzere İngiltere'ye gitti. 1977'de Edinburgh Üniversitesi'nin Arapça ve İslâmî Araştırmalar Bölümüne kabul edildi. "Theology and Tafsir in the Major Works of Fakh al-Din al-Razi" adlı teziyle doktor oldu. İngiltere dönüşü çeşitli Yüksek Okul ve Fakültelerde okutmanlık yaptı. İslâm Kültürü ve Felsefesi alanında araştırmaları bulunan Yasin CEYLAN, halen ODTÜ Yabancı Diller Yüksek Okulu Modern Diller Bölümünde öğretim görevlisi olarak çalışmaktadır.

Arabic is the most important branch of the semitic languages. It is spoken by nearly 120 million people occupying an area extending from the Persian Gulf in the east to the Atlantic coast in the west. Its mainland is the Arabian Peninsula which is also the motherland of the Semitic race.

The Arabic language attained great importance with the emergence of Islam in the seventh century extending its influence on the languages and the cultures of various communities whose land were conquered by the believers of this new faith. As the Arabs came into contact with alien cultures, their language underwent two important developments. First, Arabic was analysed and its grammatical rules were set up mainly by the new converts of non-Arabic origin, in virtue of its being the language of the Qur'an. Secondly, it was enriched and diversified so that it could absorb new elements as a result of collision with alien cultures, and because of its being the language of the ruling class. If we study the philological works and the voluminous translations made in the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, we can easily realise the importance of these two developments.

The outcome of these two developments was that the studies on etymology and syntax of the Arabic language reached a very high level, to the extent that a modern philologist may wonder at the volume and the content of the work written on Arabic a millennium ago. On the

other hand, especially through exposure to new cultures Arabic became the language of philosophy and other sciences after it had been the language of poetry and revelation. Arabic was the language of scholars for centuries in the Muslim World just as Greek and Latin were the Languages of scholars in the Christian World. Many high ranking scholars of Turkish and Persian origin wrote their works in Arabic.

These developments in the Arabic language slowed down and then came to a standstill with the decline of Islamic civilization. However, at the beginning of the present century, after the independence of several Arab countries, Arabic reemerged as the language of an important part of the world. It is now the official language of 22 Arab countries and is considered as the most important factor for the unity of the Arab World. It has attained greater significance in international realm during the last decade because of the economic and strategic importance of oil which is the main asset of the Arabian deserts.

Arabic as the language of Islamic culture has always been taught as one of the important second languages in non-Arab Muslim countries. Being the language of the scripture it is also used in liturgy by millions of Muslims all over the world. The knowledge of Arabic is regarded as prerequisite for a student of Islamic studies. There are many departments of Arabic and Islamic culture in the European and American universities.

Many books in different languages have been written on how to teach Arabic as a foreign language. They are nearly unanimous either explicitly or implicitly on certain difficulties in the structure of the Arabic language which every learner has to face. These peculiarities can be divided into three main divisions: phonology, etymology and syntax.

PHONOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES:

With the exception of three letters (ا, ي, و) which can be used as long vowels all the rest of 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet are consonants. Like other Semitic languages Arabic is written and read from right to left. Vowels have no symbols in the Arabic alphabet. They can be shown by certain signs placed above or under consonants in a word. This is to facilitate pronunciation for a beginner or to illustrate the correct pronunciation of a word used in certain context. These signs are left out in normal usage. Thus a non-native may not read a text properly before he is acquainted with the vocabulary used in the text.

Out of 28 letters there are few which are difficult for a Turk to pronounce as these sounds are not also found in European languages. The gutturals such as ح (gh, h, kh) can hardly be articulated by a non-Arab. The Turkish students usually substitute these sounds with the nearest ones in Turkish. Similarly (ث, ذ, ذال) (th, dh, d, t, z) do not exist in Turkish. The correct pronunciation of these letters cannot be achieved before a long intercourse with the native speakers.

Another difficulty is that a Turkish student hardly differentiates between the following groups of sounds (ط, ظ, ذ, ذال, ز, ح, ج, ك, ق, كاف, قاف, كيم, قيم, كيم, قيم, كيم, قيم). Therefore when an Arabic sentence is read to him he sometimes mistakes one for the other. As a matter of fact the Arabs themselves mispronounce some letters especially in colloquial Arabic. They may even use sounds such as (ch) and (g) which do not exist in the alphabet. An explanation for this situation is that the evolution that can be observed in any language within a long period of time did not occur in Arabic, although this may not be true of the colloquial Arabic. Changes and alterations normally take place in the course of time in the structure of a language so that the above mentioned difficulties disappear. However, this process has been very slow in the case of Arabic and such difficulties which existed centuries ago still persist.

ETYMOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES

The main elements of speech in Arabic are divided into three categories: verbs, nouns, and particles. Verbs are mostly trilateral. However, they can take various forms through addition of certain letters to give various meanings. Although these patterns are well-defined and classified, there still remain two major difficulties for the learner. First, each pattern may have more than one meaning depending on the context. It can change a verb into transitive form, or emphasize the action the verb implies or express the intention of the agent to do the action the verb implies. For example, the pattern "Is-tif'al" may be used in ten different meanings. This usually causes confusion on the part of the learner.

Secondly, though any verb can take these forms grammatically it does not mean that all possible forms of them are part of the usage. This is also a source of great difficulty as it is scarcely possible for a foreigner to know which verb suits which pattern.

Another major difficulty is that the conjugated verbs may change their forms to the extent that it becomes difficult to guess their roots. This is particularly valid for the verbs which contain weak sounds such as (wa, ya, a). These letters may either change or disappear in the derived forms, thus casting ambiguity on their original roots. The difficulty is mostly felt when a certain derived form is being looked up in a dictionary. For, most Arabic dictionaries classify words according to their root forms. Derived forms are treated as the off-shoots of the root under the same item. Thus, a beginner may not be able to use such dictionaries until he is fully acquainted with the rules of derivation.

Morphology is an essential part of Arabic philology. A great deal of books have been written on the morphology of Arabic words both by Arabs and non-Arabs.

SYNTAX

There are two types of sentences in Arabic. Nominal sentences and verbal sentences. Verbal sentences are sentences which start with a verb. If the verb is placed after the subject it becomes a nominal sentence while causing no difference in meaning. However, in verbal sentences attention is focused on action rather than the agent.

No auxiliaries are used in Arabic in subject-predicate type of nominal sentences. The subject-predicate combination is a full sentence. Usually subject comes before predicate, but there are cases where they are inverted.

One of the major difficulties in Arabic sentence is how to determine the vowel sounds of the last letters of the words used in a sentence. As it has already been pointed out vowel symbols are not used in Arabic script. A word may have different vowels at different positions in a sentence. Therefore it is the reader who must determine the position of each word in a sentence and articulate it properly.

Another aspect of Arabic sentence is that it may be very long. This often causes confusion especially as to antecedents of many pronouns used in such sentences. This can be often observed in classical texts. Such ambiguous texts, often require commentary.

Sentence structure in Arabic was analysed in detail centuries ago. There were differences in approaches in determining the origin or the position of a word in sentence. These differences sometimes could lead scholars to extract different meanings from the same sentence. This is the case with the ambiguous expressions in the Qur'an. A great deal of commentaries have been written on the text of Qur'an, each applying a different method in the analysis of the text. Sometimes conflicting meanings are inferred from a verse. Every Commentator has his own justification for his commentary. Commentators often advance many grammatical proofs to verify their viewpoints. That is mainly because of the flexibility in the nature of the language.

Another important point of syntax in Arabic is that adjectives come after nouns. Modifying relative clauses are long and used frequently. It is especially difficult for a Turkish student to translate such long sentences into Turkish, for the sentence structures of the two languages are completely different. In Arabic, verbs change according to the gender of the subject. Words are either masculine or feminine, and agreement in gender is observed in nouns, pronouns, verbs and adjectives.

The morphological, phonological and syntactical complications of Arabic have been observed and analyzed for over a thousand years. Arabic has changed very little along the course of time, whereas in other major languages such changes have been more extensive and quicker. This unique aspect of Arabic can be explained in two ways: I) Conservatism in the nature of the Arab people. Traditions inherited from ancestors are revered and well-protected without change. Any novelty in the language is regarded as blasphemy and insult to the heritage of the forefathers. II) The belief that the Qur'an the Islamic scripture is the highest divine example of a literary text. The language and the style used in the Qur'an has been considered extraordinary and inaccessible by the poets and the literary men of all ages. To protect this text from change and to uphold it as the best achievement of

the Arabic language is considered unanimously an important religious duty. Imitation of the Qur'anic style and quoting expressions from the Qur'an is an indication of one's cultural background.

It is a practice frequently observed during conversation among cultured Arabs to quote verses from the Qur'an to support their claims or views.

These two traditions have prevented Arabic from taking an evolutionary course and consequently the syntactical, morphological and phonological difficulties and intricacies of the Arabic language have persisted and survived to our day. However, in the second half of the twentieth century there arose powerful literary movements in the Arab World, mostly inspired by European literary influences, which tended to bring about change in the Arabic language. As part of this new trend some new words have been derived and introduced into the language. Fortunately, there are so far signs that this change in the Arabic language is not proceeding along revolutionary lines as in the case of modern Turkish, but remaining within the bounds of moderation and common sense. As more intensified interaction is noticed between the official and literary and the colloquial Arabic. It is hoped that such trends will in years to come break the long-persisting conservatism of the classical Arabic and put it on a new track of evolutionary change.

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