

The Arabic Language and its Impact on the Culture of Non-Arabic-Speaking Islamic Nations

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Abstract

This research aims to shed light on the impact of the Arabic language on the culture of Islamic nations that do not use Arabic as their primary language. Arabic holds a unique position, being a sacred religious language closely tied to Islam. It is the language of the Holy Qur'an, the Prophetic Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic law (Sharia), as well as the language of Islamic rituals and worship. Therefore, it has had a direct influence on the culture of all Islamic nations. The research problem lies in the perception held by some scholars and researchers who believe that Arabic is a weak language imposed by Arab conquerors on other peoples, that it lacks civilizational depth, is unsuitable for modern science and civilisation, and has left no notable cultural impact on those nations. This study refutes such claims. Among the objectives of the research are to demonstrate the value and greatness of the Arabic language, to highlight its impact on the culture of Islamic nations, and to establish that learning Arabic is a religious and civilizational necessity. The study adopts the descriptive-analytical method, which focuses on accurately describing the phenomenon and then analysing it in a scholarly manner.

Keywords: Arabic Language, Impact, Culture, Science and Civilisation, Islamic Identity

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the teaching of the Arabic language to non-native speakers has witnessed a remarkable surge in interest among various nationalities and peoples, particularly non-Arab Islamic nations. This is especially evident in Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and many others across this vast continent. This growing attention is by no means surprising, for Arabic is a language that transcends continents, generations, and epochs. It has extended far beyond the narrow confines of the Arab world to encompass the vast horizons of the Islamic world, which includes fifty-seven countries spread across the continents of the Old World.

God Almighty has endowed this great language with distinctive features that have elevated its status from the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) until the end of time. These features, or rather, these virtues, have enabled it to withstand and endure despite the countless conspiracies orchestrated against it. Like immovable mountains, it has stood firm, breaking the blades of those who sought to obliterate it. Their primary objective was to marginalise, and even eradicate, the language of the Qur'anic text, the Prophetic Sunnah, and the entire corpus of Islamic heritage. Had they succeeded, future generations would have been severed from their Qur'an, their Prophet's teachings, and their rich cultural and civilizational legacy. This would have ultimately undermined Arab and Islamic unity and weakened the bond of faith among the peoples of the Muslim world.

The survival and resilience of Arabic can be attributed partly to its intrinsic qualities as a language, including its profound semantic depth, expressive capacity, and stylistic richness, which enable it to articulate a vast range of contexts and situations beyond measure. Equally, its endurance stems from divine honour and distinction, as God chose it to be the language of His final revelation, His final Messenger, and His final Book, the Noble Qur'an. By preserving the Qur'an, God has implicitly guaranteed the preservation of Arabic itself, as He declares: *"Indeed, it is We who sent down the Reminder, and indeed, We will surely preserve it"* (al-Hijr 15:9).

The exalted status of Arabic was further elevated by the Qur'an, which established it as the language of Islam's most important rituals, prayer, supplication, and other acts of worship, all conducted in the language of the Qur'an. Thus, Arabic has become inseparable from the Islamic creed. Ibn Taymiyyah stated: *"Indeed, the Arabic language is part of the religion, and understanding it is an obligation. It is obligatory to understand the Qur'an and Sunnah, and they cannot be fully understood without knowledge of the Arabic language. Moreover, that which is required to fulfil an obligation becomes itself obligatory"* (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1999).

This assertion leads al-Tha'libī to affirm: *"Engaging in its study is part of the religion itself"* (al-Tha'libī, 2000). The Qur'an is revealed in Arabic, and its complete comprehension, both in meaning and in clarity, can only be attained through the very language in which it was revealed: *"Indeed, it is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds. The Trustworthy Spirit has brought it down upon your heart so that you may be among the warners, in a clear Arabic tongue"* (al-Shu'arā' 26:192–195).

Islamic history, as well as practical reality, confirms that when non-Arab peoples embraced Islam in large numbers, they eagerly pursued the study of Arabic. Many of them rose to become eminent scholars and pioneers in fields such as Islamic law, exegesis, hadith, and the Arabic language itself, figures such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Rāzī, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and Sībawayh (Khuja, 2012). This phenomenon was not limited to the classical period. In modern times, great scholars such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nadwī also mastered Arabic and became intellectual leaders in Arabic and Islamic culture. This chain of devoted Muslim scholars from non-Arab backgrounds has never ceased and will not cease throughout history, despite the numerous challenges they have encountered. Indeed, diligence, perseverance, and determination yield extraordinary results, for the religion of God shall always prevail. He appoints individuals, both Arabs and non-Arabs, to defend and elucidate His message. This is

a divine law that will remain in effect until the Day of Judgment. As our esteemed professor, Dr. ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm Ḥassān (Professor of Rhetoric, Literary Criticism, and Comparative Literature, Faculty of Dār al-‘Ulūm, Cairo University) once remarked in a postgraduate seminar: *“No people have embraced Islam and subsequently abandoned it except through their own disappearance as a people.”* This statement provides irrefutable evidence that Islam is the religion of pure human nature (*fiṭrah*) and the true religion, as described by our Lord in the Qur’an.

As al-Tha‘ālibī eloquently expressed: *“He who loves God loves His Messenger; he who loves the Prophet loves the Arabs; he who loves the Arabs loves the Arabic language, the language in which the best of Books was revealed to the best of humanity, both Arab and non-Arab. Whoever loves Arabic will devote himself to it, persevere in its study, and dedicate his energy to mastering it”* (al-Tha‘ālibī, 2000). This is a reality observable in the lives of people, especially to anyone who spends a considerable time in non-Arab Islamic countries. Upon close interaction with their morals, customs, and traditions, one will find that the overwhelming majority of their cultural practices are derived from the values and ethics of Islam. There is little distinction between them and Arab Muslims; many of their behaviours, attitudes, and social interactions mirror those of Arab societies. This further affirms the immutable reality: Arabic and Islam are inseparably intertwined, a truth that shall endure until the end of time.

The Influence of Arabic on Local Languages

The widespread adoption of the Arabic language by various Islamic populations following the Islamic conquests had a profound impact, leading to the integration of numerous Arabic terms into the local languages of these peoples. This phenomenon is well-documented in linguistic dictionaries and lexicons; few, if any, contain no Arabic-derived words. No other language, whether ancient or modern, has exerted a comparable influence. For instance, although Greek and Latin predate Arabic, their influence was largely confined to European languages. Similarly, in the modern era, English and French, despite being the languages of the two largest empires, have had a relatively limited impact on the languages of other nations. In contrast, Arabic, despite facing external challenges from its adversaries and internal neglect by some of its own speakers, has left a notable imprint on nearly one hundred languages and dialects spoken by highly advanced societies in Europe, the Americas, and Australia, as well as on fifty Asian and African peoples (Al-Yasou’i, 1953).

Raphael Nakhlah Al-Yasou’i attributed this influence to three main factors:

1. The spread of Islam across Asia, Africa, and several European regions.
2. The extensive Islamic conquests.
3. The influence of Islamic culture in Europe throughout the Middle Ages (Al-Yasou’i, 1953).

He emphasised that the recitation and comprehension of the Qur’an are contingent upon learning Arabic, especially since jurists, even in the present era, generally do not permit the translation of the Qur’an itself. However, they allow the translation of their meanings. This practice has preserved the sacredness and religious significance of the Arabic language.

In addition to religious motivations, political factors currently represent a direct impetus for learning Arabic, particularly among non-Islamic countries and peoples. The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent Arab Spring uprisings significantly increased interest

in learning the Arabic language. In the United States, for example, Arabic has become a critical component of national security. Former U.S. President George W. Bush initiated the National Security Language Initiative in 2006, involving three departments, Education, State, and Defence, as well as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Following this initiative, the number of students learning Arabic increased from 5,000 to 12,000 in 2007, and reached 50,000 by 2010, according to a study by the American *Modern Language Association*. A prior 2007 study by the *Association for the Study of Contemporary Languages in the United States* indicated that Arabic learners accounted for 93.3% of foreign language enrollment, representing the highest growth rate in foreign language education in the United States (Al-Naqqah, 1985).

This group of learners may be termed “new orientalists,” as they “study Arabic to analyse prevailing culture, understand the concepts shaping contemporary Arab thought and influencing societal orientations, and comprehend behavioural patterns of Arab peoples, thereby contributing substantially to informed decision-making among Western policymakers” (Ismail, 2015).

The influence of Arabic has not been limited to language alone; it has also shaped culture, customs, traditions, and ethical norms across the regions where it spread.

Challenges in Learning the Arabic Language

Despite its significance, learning and promoting the Arabic language face substantial obstacles. One of the foremost challenges, in my view, is the widespread misconception that Arabic is inherently complex, if not the most difficult, language to master. This perception was propagated by the enemies of Arabic, including colonial powers, their tools among orientalists, and their students among Arabists, to discourage learners and dissuade native speakers from studying it. Such strategies erected a psychological barrier between learners and the language.

For instance, Salama Musa adopted the orientalist William Luckox’s viewpoint, advocating the abandonment of Classical Arabic in favour of colloquial dialects for writing and academic study. Musa cites the opinions of predecessors and contemporaries dissatisfied with Classical Arabic, using his term “al-Fusha”, such as Qasim Amin and Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid. He justifies their dissatisfaction on two grounds: “first, its difficulty to learn, and second, its inability to fulfil our literary purposes” (Musa, 1928). Such a statement grossly misrepresents the Arabic language. Is there any language in the world incapable of expressing its speakers’ emotions or fulfilling their literary needs? Arabic, in particular, has conveyed the sentiments of its people for over two millennia, as evidenced by the rich corpus of Arabic literature, including pre-Islamic poetry and prose. Just as the Greeks left philosophy and wisdom in the works of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, and their disciples, the Arabs left literature as their enduring legacy. Arabs have historically shown profound love for their language, demonstrating unmatched skill in articulating meaning with beauty and artistic nuance. They appreciate expressive language as one appreciates fine cuisine. According to Abu Fhar Mahmoud Muhammad Shaker, ancient Western scholars reached “the peak of human eloquence as a whole” through Arabic (televised interview with Dr. Muhammad Muhammad Aboussi), directly refuting claims of its inadequacy.

Musa further asserts, without reservation, that learning Arabic is burdensome for students and fosters dislike: "But the reality that I do not dispute is that learning Arabic is arduous for students. Our students toil in schools to understand hundreds of its rules and emerge afterwards hating it, because they see no benefit beyond them" (Musa, 1928). This claim, however, is contradicted by reality. Thousands of international students at Al-Azhar successfully master Arabic, achieving scholarly proficiency equivalent to that of native speakers. Prominent figures such as Sheikh Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi, and Abu al-Hasan al-Nadwi exemplify non-Arab Muslim scholars who mastered the Arabic language, authored scholarly works, and became recognised authorities in Islamic knowledge.

The advocacy of Luckox and Musa's promotion of this viewpoint was not merely personal opinions or isolated efforts. They were integral components of a colonial strategy aimed at undermining Islam and its spirit, which stood in opposition to imperial ambitions. The primary objective in this regard was "to diminish the importance of the Arabic language and divert people from it by reviving local dialects in North Africa and colloquial languages, so that Muslims would not understand the Qur'an and their emotional engagement could be subdued" (Hussein, 1984). This strategy manifested in the promotion of colloquial speech over Classical Arabic. Dr. Louis Awad similarly noted this trend, openly encouraging colloquial poetry at the expense of classical forms.

Since the 1950s, colloquial poetry has gained prominence, supported by major Arab media outlets, including both visual media, such as television and later satellite channels, and print media, such as specialised newspapers and literary magazines, particularly in Egypt. Prominent young poets, including Ahmed Fouad Negm, Bayram al-Tunsi, and Abdul Rahman al-Abnudi, contributed to its dissemination. Some colloquial poems were popularised through singing by Umm Kulthum and the duo Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Imam, achieving widespread acclaim across the Arab world. Consequently, colloquial poetry emerged as a recognised literary school with specialised instructors, university courses, and topics for Master's and Doctoral theses.

This issue represents a significant threat to the Arabic language and classical poetry. Indeed, it could be argued that it poses a broader danger to Arabic and the entire Arab-Islamic heritage, including the Qur'an and Hadith.

Additional challenges include the tendency of younger generations to pursue fields aligned with labour market demands, such as computer engineering, business administration, medicine, and artificial intelligence, while showing limited interest in Arabic language studies and Islamic sciences, even in Arab countries.

Findings

The study reached several key findings, including:

- The Arabic language is powerful and influential, inherently carrying the seeds of its continuity and adaptability to all circumstances, conditions, and eras.
- Arabic has withstood numerous conspiracies aimed at erasing it or diminishing its prominence in Arab countries.
- The language has successfully served as the medium of Islamic knowledge and civilisation for over a thousand years.

- Arabic has been able to convey the intended meanings of the Almighty through various rhetorical, dialectical, philosophical, and intellectual methods.
- The Arabic language has profoundly influenced the culture of all Islamic peoples, shaping specific vocabulary, ethical norms, and traditions in speech and expression across diverse contexts.

Recommendations

The study recommends that Islamic governments in non-Arabic-speaking countries prioritise the teaching of Arabic as a language. Exceptional students should be offered fully funded scholarships by the government to study Arabic language and Islamic sciences, either in their home countries or in Arab countries such as Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and others, considering Arabic as a religious language closely tied to Islamic thought and heritage.

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