

Grammar Hints for Arabic

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All languages have rules which tell us how words are formed and how they are put together into sentences. These rules are the 'grammar' of the language. Different languages have different rules. Native speakers acquire the grammar of their language starting from childhood naturally. Any native speaker can tell you whether a sentence is possible or impossible in that language although he/she may not be able to tell you the rules or reasons why something is ungrammatical in a learned fashion. If you are learning a foreign language you have to learn the rules in a much more conscious way. You may not be given the grammatical rules in the class because class contact time is reserved for the production of the target language, but you should work at home, on your own, with a grammar book regularly. In fact your grammar book should be your 'best friend' if you are learning a foreign language.

Grammar books contain unfamiliar technical terms. Don't be put off by them. They're simply tools for talking about particular features of grammar. Once you know what they mean, you'll find them handy and easy to use.

This short reference grammar of Arabic will be useful for you to remember and look up some of the terms used in the language teaching text books. So let us start.

PARTS OF SPEECH

Arab grammarians traditionally break down the words into three categories:

- Noun الاسم
- Verb الفعل
- Particle الحرف

Nouns الاسماء

Nouns have gender, i.e. they are either masculine مذكر (“a he”) or feminine مؤنث “a she”; there is no “it.”

Nouns are names of people, animals, and things (e.g. Maha, cat, book; مها ، قطة ، كتاب).

NOTE: Determiners

Determiners are 'small' words used with nouns to relate a noun to a particular context or situation. There are several kinds of determiners, and the most important ones are **definite articles** (the), **indefinite articles** (a, an), **demonstratives** (this, these, that, those) and **possessive determiners** (*my, your, his, her, its, our, their*).

Nouns can be *indefinite*, whereby a noun is referred to in a non-specific way (a cat, a book, a girl; بنت ، كتاب ، قطة) or *definite* (Maha, the cat, the girl; مها ، القطة ، الكتاب). The most general way of making a noun *definite* is to add the *definite article* **the** ال to an *indefinite noun* as shown above.

Proper names, such as names of people (John, Henry, Mary) are *definite* as are names of places and countries (Egypt, France, Cairo, Baghdad).

The following are also considered to be nouns:

- **Subject Pronouns** الضمير/الضمائر (he, she, I; هو ، هي ، انا), take the place of a noun and any other words which are grouped around that noun to form a unit in the sentence. **THEY ARE CONSIDERED TO BE DEFINITE NOUNS.**

In English the pronouns are categorized as follows:

- **Singular**
 - 1st person = I
 - 2nd person = you
 - 3rd person = he/she
- **Plural**
 - 1st person = we
 - 2nd person = you
 - 3rd person = they
- **Object pronouns** ضمائر النصب such as “me, you, him, her, them,” are added as suffixes to the verb in Arabic “he hit me; هو ضربني .
- **Demonstrative pronouns** اسماء/اسماء الاشارة pick out a specific item or set(s) of items, but, in addition, they 'point' to them, demonstrating what is being referred to (this, that, those; هؤلاء ، ذلك/تلك ، هذا/هذه):
 - This boy هذا الولد
 - This girl هذه البنت
 - That boy ذلك الولد
 - That girl تلك البنت
 - Those boys هؤلاء الاولاد
 - Those girls هؤلاء البنات
- **Possessive determiners (pronouns)** قلص تمل ا رى امض ل ا لصل تمل ا رى ماض ل ا express who or what something belongs to (e.g. **my** apple, **your** book, **his** pen, **her** car, **its** colour). In many traditional grammar books you will find the term 'possessive pronoun' instead of possessive determiner. This is unhelpful, because possessive pronouns are different from possessive determiners. In English, for example, most of them look different and can't be placed in the same position in a sentence (e.g. possessive determiner: *That's my book*; possessive pronoun: *That book is mine*). Note, too, that the possessive determiner (and, as it happens, the possessive pronoun) we use for things or animate beings whose sex we don't know is its (e.g. *The dog's tail is long, but its legs are short*). There's no apostrophe in this word - after all, you wouldn't think of writing *hi's* or *he's* instead of *his*! (The form *it's*, by the way, is short for *it is*.)

In Arabic the possessive pronoun (my, your, our) is attached to the noun as a suffix (at the end of the word):

- My boy ولدي

- His cat قطته
 - Their girl بنتهم
 - Your book كتابك
- **Relative pronouns** introduce **relative clauses**, and they usually refer back to a noun in the main clause of a sentence (e.g. *This is the car **that** I want to buy* - *that* refers back to *car*. *The cinema **where** we are meeting is in the town centre* - *where* refers back to *cinema*).
 - **Adjectives**, which give further information about a noun and usually come before the noun in an English sentence (e.g. *a **big** apple, a **good** film, a **fast** car*). In Arabic, adjectives always follow the noun they describe and agree in definiteness, gender and number:
 - A big car سيارة كبيرة
 - A small boy ولد صغير
 - The big car السيارة الكبيرة
 - The small boy الولد الصغير
 - **Adverbs**, which further describe the action of verbs (e.g. *he sang **well**, she read the document **carefully**, we walked **slowly**, the horse runs **fast***). Note that some words like *quick* and *fast* can be either adjectives or adverbs in English. They sometimes translate differently in a foreign language - so be careful with the dictionary.

Verbs الأفعال

Verbs express the action (or sometimes a process or a state) in the sentence. Verbs can be transitive (taking an object: I ate the apple.) or intransitive (no object: I walk to work). [*Please see “object” below*]

There is no *infinitive* form in Arabic. Examples of *infinitives* in English are: to be, to have, to go, to study.

The forms of verbs can also indicate a number of other grammatical notions (called **grammatical categories**), i.e., **voice**, **tense** and **mood**.

- **Voice**

Voice indicates the perspective of an event which is being adopted by the speaker. **Active voice** is the “normal” way of using a verb (The tiger **ate**

the little boy - the tiger *actively* did something to something else), while **passive voice** is the other way round (The little boy **was eaten** by the tiger - the little boy had something *done* to him).

- **Tenses**

Tenses give some indication of time. Most languages distinguish between the broad categories of **present** (e.g. I **play** tennis. You **are reading** a book), **past** (e.g. I **played** tennis. You **were reading** a book) and **future** (e.g. I **will play** tennis. You **will be reading** a book). Some languages have further subdivisions within each of these categories. In Arabic there are two tenses: past (or perfect) and present (or imperfect), e.g., He went, he goes; يذهب ، يذهب.

- **Mood**

Mood tells us what the speaker's attitude is to what s/he is saying. The mood of the verb indicates whether the speaker is telling someone to do something (**imperative** mood) or whether s/he is reporting what someone else has said, or whether the speaker is talking about possibly unreal conditions (**subjunctive**).

- The **indicative** mood is the most general mood. It is used to make statements, ask questions, etc. (e.g. I **live** in Manchester. **Can** you speak Russian?)
- The **imperative** mood is used to give instructions or orders (e.g. **Turn** left. **Go** away!). In Arabic the imperative verbs (as well as others) are in the **jussive** mood.
- The **subjunctive** mood is something we are not particularly aware of in English. We say: “If I **were** you” rather than “If I **was** you,” and this is a subjunctive. In other languages, the subjunctive is used much more frequently, usually indicating doubt, a tentative opinion, unreal conditions etc. The rules for when to use the subjunctive and in what tense need to be studied for each language separately.

Particles الحروف

These consist of “short” words such as

- Prepositions such as: from, to, in; من ، الى ، في
- Subjunctive particles such as: أن ، ل- ، لن
- Jussive particles such as: لم ، لا
- Negative particles such: ما ، لا

The Sentence الجملة

Sentences

There are two types of **sentences** in Arabic:

- The verbal sentence, **الجملة الفعلية**, whose definition is a sentence that **begins with a verb** even if there is a particle before the verb.
 - درس احمد
 - ما درست مريم
 - يدرس احمد
 - لا تدرس مريم
- All other sentences are considered nominal sentences even if there is a particle before noun or pronoun.
 - احمد طالب
 - مريم تدرس في نيويورك
 - هو استاذ
 - هم في تونس
 - عندي كتاب
 - ان احمد ولدي
 - ليس احمد في الجامعة

In summary, *I ate the apple* is a sentence. Even *She has eaten* is a sentence because it contains a verb (*has*) and a subject (*She*). But *Eating the apple* is not a sentence but rather a **phrase**, because there is no verb; the meaning is not complete.

A sentence consists of one or more clauses. **Clauses** are rather like sentences embedded inside a sentence. So, *Peter was reading a book* is a sentence consisting of just one clause, but *Peter was reading a book, while Pat was mending the car* is made up of two clauses.

The Subject المبتدأ والفاعل

The **subject** of a sentence is normally who or what is being discussed. Most verbs need a subject and it's the subject which decides the form or the ending of the finite verb in most languages. In the sentence, *I am a teacher* - *I* is the subject, requiring the verb form to be *am* rather than *are* or *is*. Similarly, in *The horse runs fast* - *the horse* is the subject, which means that *runs* is the right verb form, while *run* isn't.

In Arabic, the subject of a جملة اسمية is called المبتدأ.

The subject of a **جملة فعلية** is called **الفاعل**

Objects **المفعول به**

Objects are other parts of the sentence which are required by the verb, in addition to the subject. Objects are often the person or thing affected by the action of the verb. In English, we can distinguish between **direct objects** and **indirect objects**.

- A **direct object** answers the question Who? or What? (*I ate ... what?... the apple. I met him: I met ... who?...him - him* - *him* is the direct object of met.) Verbs which take direct objects are known as **transitive verbs**. So in a dictionary the verbs *eat* and *meet* will be listed as *vt* (=verb transitive).
- **Indirect objects** don't answer straight questions, but indirect ones. *I spoke to him - I spoke ... what? ... the answer could be English but is irrelevant here; I spoke ...who? ... can't be answered. I spoke ... to whom? ... to him* (or, if 'to whom' strikes you as old-fashioned: Who did I speak **to**? *to him*). In this sentence, *him* is therefore an indirect object. Typically, if a verb has both a direct and an indirect object, the direct object is a thing directly affected by the action of the verb, and the indirect object is a person indirectly affected (often benefitting from the action in some way), cf. *My friend* (subject) *gave her father* (indirect object) *the book* (direct object).

Agents

Agents can appear with verbs in the passive voice. *The little boy was eaten by the tiger - the little boy* is the subject of this passive sentence, but *the tiger* is the agent, i.e. what or who is actually performing the action.

- **Transitive verbs** always have a direct object. But some verbs can be used either transitively or intransitively. *Eat* is one of these. In the sentence, *Have you eaten your greens?* the verb *to eat* is used transitively, whereas in *Have you eaten?* it is being used intransitively.
- **Intransitive verbs** are listed in a dictionary as *vi* (=verb intransitive). They do not have a direct object, but may have an indirect object. In the sentence, *The horse runs fast* there is no object at all, so *run* is an intransitive verb. But *run* can be used transitively in a sentence such as, *The directors run the company*. Here, *the company* answers the question - what? - so *run* functions as a transitive verb, but the meaning of *run* is completely different from the meaning it has in *The horse runs fast*. So if you are looking up *run* in the dictionary to translate into another language, take care to find the right meaning of *run* and refer to the abbreviations *vt* and *vi*.

Relative clauses

Relative clauses are one way of combining information from two separate sentences into one sentence. A relative pronoun is needed to provide the link: *That's the car. + I want to buy the car. = That's the car that I want to buy.* The relative pronoun that stops us from using the car twice. The main clause is *That's the car* and the **relative clause** is *that I want to buy* because it is dependent on the main clause and is introduced by a relative pronoun. Note that English allows relative clauses to be formed without a visible relative pronoun, e.g. *That's the car ___ I want to buy. She knows about the crime ___ he witnessed yesterday*, while languages such as German always require a relative pronoun to introduce a relative clause.