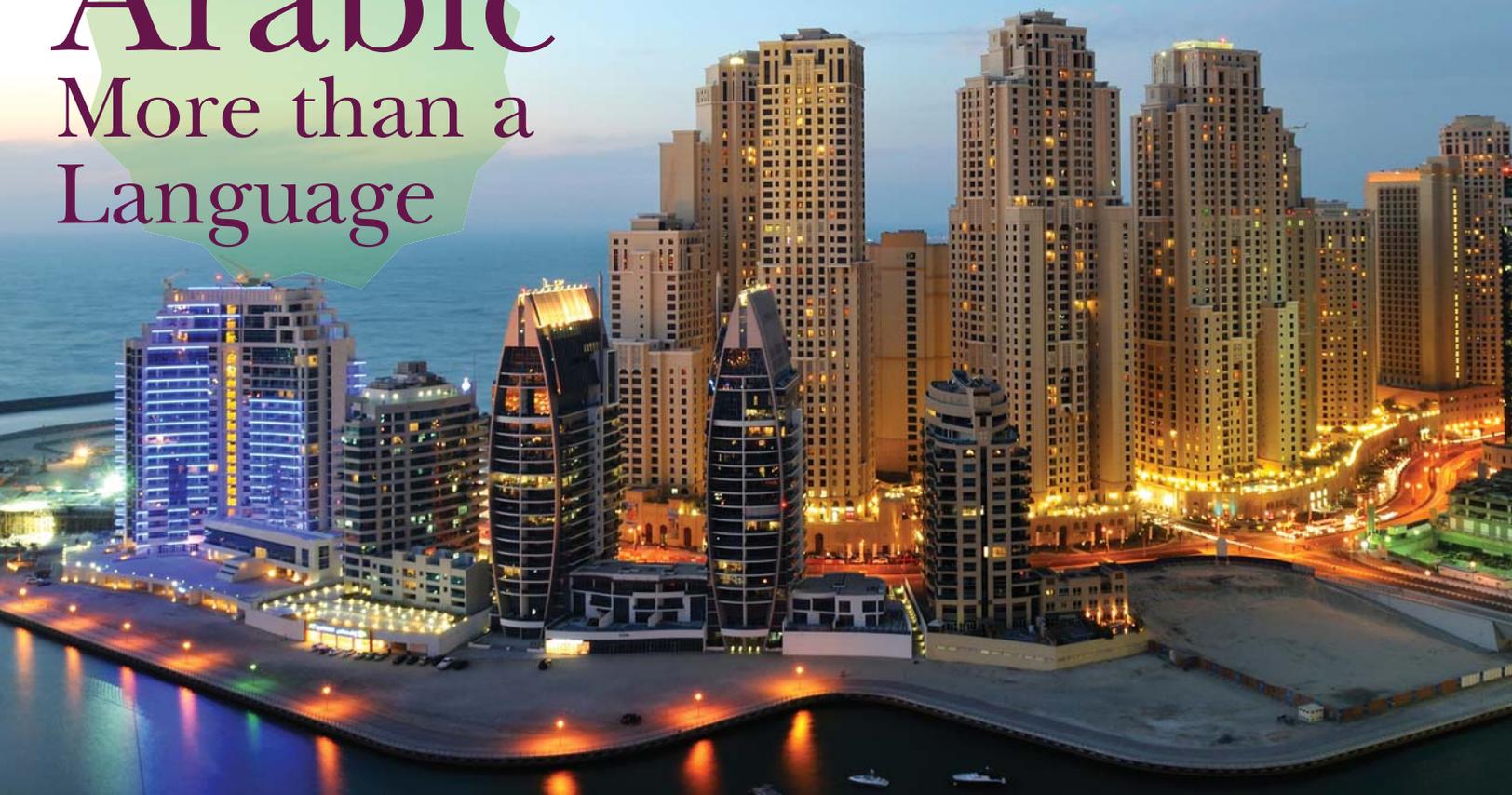


Jennifer Rosen analyzes
the challenge of learning Arabic

Arabic

More than a Language



After years of dismal school experiences resulting in little

other than a good accent and intense performance anxiety, I discovered, fairly recently, the natural methods that allowed me to acquire French and Italian to a relatively fluent level. I also dabbled in Spanish and German enough to read and understand moderately well. I thought I had the language thing pretty well conquered. That was before Arabic brought me to my knees.

I don't mean that in a bad way. I live by the credo that every year one should start as a rank beginner at something new, and preferably, humiliating. Whether sport, craft, hobby or language, the key thing is that you are humbled. It should remind you of what it's like to look silly, feel stupid and frustrated, and should force you to confront your demons right up until the glorious moment when everything clicks. What can I say? Some people ride roller coasters.

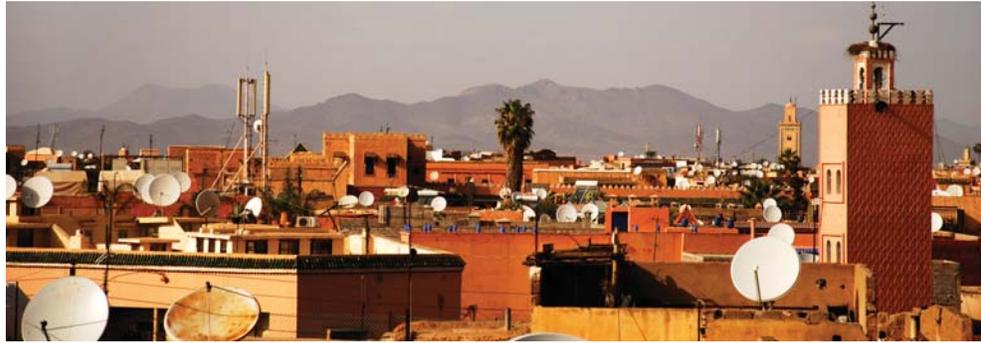
The problem is not that Arabic is harder than other languages, nor that its sounds and structures are so far removed from the Romance and Teutonic models familiar to Anglophones that they might as well have come from the moon. Because I firmly believe that your brain has what it takes to learn any language and will do so in its own order and time, and therefore no one tongue is harder than any other. No, the challenges with Arabic are of a different sort.

Problem 1:

Arabic is not one language but many; at the very least,

you could call it six. What native speakers refer to as dialects are about as different from each other as is Italian from Spanish, so you might as well call them different languages. When the heads of state of Morocco want to talk to their counterparts in the Gulf they do it in English; their versions of Arabic are mutually unintelligible.

So, to start with, you have to choose one. But unless you are planning a sojourn in a particular area, which one do you choose? The main categories are Egyptian, Levantine, Gulf, Iraqi and Maghrebi. I'd stay away from the last. It's the oddest of the group, what Romanian is to Italian, French and Spanish. It is also often mixed with French, which not only complicates things but, if you happen to speak French and you're conversing with an Algerian, when the going gets tough you'll be tempted to default to the easier language. Iraqi Arabic has an obvious allure to some at the moment. Levantine Arabic, spoken in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and other parts of the Mediterranean is probably closest to the "classical" version we're about to discuss. And Egyptian Arabic is getting more and more widespread due to its use in movies and pop songs.



Problem 2:
You've picked one. Good. But your troubles are just beginning.

Because that dialect is just for speaking. If you're planning to read anything, or write, or watch the news on TV, you must also learn MSA or Modern Standard Arabic.

MSA, also known as *Fusha*, is somewhere between the language of the Qu'ran and what's spoken on the street today. It's in the nature of languages to be constantly changing, which is why we don't talk like Hamlet, and why he didn't talk like Beowulf. But writing puts the brakes on all that. Written language, by showing how things used to be, causes every generation to be certain that thanks to current sloppy usage, their language is going to the dogs. The seductive official-ness of writing makes people think the written version is somehow better or higher, while the way they talk at home and on the streets is shameful, bad and low.

It isn't, of course. It's merely an example of language doing what languages do: changing. So you get a picture of Mother Fusha in the middle, trying in vain to collect her little dialects who continue to wander, despite her entreaties and threats, further and further away from the family center and then proceed to hobnob and mingle with unrelated strangers and in the most heinous cases, breed with them. Meanwhile, MSA is the language of government and of the TV news anchor.

The thought might have occurred to you: "Why not just learn MSA and then I can communicate with anyone?" Indeed, MSA is all some schools teach. Unfortunately this just won't cut it on the street. Not only will native speakers laugh in your face and do worse behind your back, but they probably won't understand you. And you, unquestionably, will not understand them. Because besides shaving off many of the unwieldy suffixes of MSA, the dialects also add or substitute a great deal of new vocabulary, different methods of negation, and lots more that makes them as opaque to MSA students as to those who don't know their *alif* from their *baa*. So, at minimum you've got to learn one dialect as well as MSA.

MSA is also the language of reading and writing.
 Which brings us to...

Problem 3:
I love to read. The bulk of my acquisition in other languages

has come from reading. But it doesn't work that way in Arabic for a couple of reasons. For one thing, no one writes in dialect, only in MSA. It would be as if French, Italian and Spanish speakers read and wrote only in Latin. Even the most colloquial, naturalistic street scene is rendered in the haute-formality of MSA. You'll need to read, of course, but it won't help you learn the spoken language.

The other reading problem is the alphabet. It's a beautiful alphabet that goes from right to left. It makes a terrific secret code and when people see you reading and writing it they are terribly impressed. But it has no vowels. Well, it does, but the Qu'ran bogarts them all, leaving everyone else to make do without. This means that when you come upon a word spelled *ktb*, you don't know if it wants to be *aktab*, *keetab*, *kutub*, *ketabtu*, *kataban*, or something else you haven't learned yet. Each has a different meaning and pronunciation. So, if you're reading aloud, you can screw up doubly. Arabic speakers figure it out by context. But woe to those who hardly know the language. It's a tough system even for native Arabic speakers who have the benefit of words, meanings and sayings to clue them in. The literacy rate in Turkey soared from 20 to 90 percent when they traded in the Arabic alphabet for the Roman one.

Problem 4:
Input. I have amassed an enormous collection of Arabic
 content comprising audio, video, music, textbooks, magazines, books, programs, games and links to copious online resources. There is almost nothing for the very beginner to read. The written content I've found falls into one of four categories:

1. Textbooks, grammar exercises.
2. Easy picture books for three-year olds, mostly about cuddly animals in pants.
3. Real, live, grownup books which are going to be waaaaayyy too hard for a long time. (I started right in on this stuff in Spanish, French, German and Italian, with no trouble. Believe me, it's different with Arabic.)
4. Islam.