

The Importance of the Arabic Language and How to Study It

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The Importance of the Arabic Language

The importance of the Arabic language is obvious to every Muslim because we find many verses in the Qur’ān highlighting the excellence of the Arabic language. Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) said in Sūrah Yūsuf,

﴿ إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ ﴾

“Verily, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’ān in order that you may understand.”

[Sūrah Yūsuf 12:2]

Likewise, Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) said,

﴿ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا غَيْرَ ذِي عِوَجٍ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ ﴾

“An Arabic Qur’ān, without any crookedness (therein) in order that they may avoid all evil which Allāh has ordered them to avoid, fear Him and keep their duty to Him.” [Sūrah az-

Zumar 39:28]

Allāh (عز وجل) also said,

﴿ كِتَابٌ فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴾

“A Book whereof the Verses are explained in detail; a Qur’ān in Arabic for people who know.” [Sūrah Fuṣṣilat 41:3]

In speaking about the excellence of the Arabic language, Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah (رحمه الله) quoted Imām ash-Shāfi‘ī (رحمه الله) as saying, “The language that Allāh chose was the language of the Arab. Allāh revealed His Mighty Book in Arabic and He made Arabic the language of the seal of His Prophets, Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). And for this reason, we say that everyone who is able to learn the Arabic language should do so, as it is the best language.”

The Qur’ān al-Karīm that was revealed in Arabic is the greatest of miracles that prove the prophethood of our Prophet Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم). Unfortunately, many of the people become engrossed in talking about scientific conclusions based upon modern-day science and forget that the greatest miracle given to Prophet Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) was the Qur’ān, as we find in al-Bukhārī and Muslim. The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said, “Every Prophet was given miracles, which resulted in people believing, and I had been given revelation that Allāh revealed to me, and I hope that I have the most followers from among them on the Day of Resurrection.”

Likewise, he received other established miracles besides this, but the Qur’ān was the greatest of them. To the extent that Allāh (عز وجل) challenged the eloquent and intelligent ones from amongst the Arabs to produce something like it, and they have not been able to produce anything similar to it up until today. The Qur’ān that Allāh (عز وجل) revealed in the Arabic language that we recite today, the Qur’ān, which is the Speech of Allāh, uncreated; it is the Qur’ān that Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) revealed to Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and Muḥammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) taught his Companions, and the Companions taught the Tābi‘ūn (their students) and the Tābi‘ūn taught the Atba‘ at-Tābi‘īn (their students), all the way until today. The Qur’ān

has been preserved, there is no other book like this on the face of this earth. This is the biggest and greatest miracle that exists, highlighting the excellence of the Arabic language.

Allāh (عز وجل) said (and there are many āyāt similar to this),

وَإِنْ كُنْتُمْ فِي رَيْبٍ مِّمَّا نَزَّلْنَا عَلَىٰ عَبْدِنَا فَأْتُوا بِسُورَةٍ مِّثْلِهِ وَادْعُوا شُهَدَاءَكُمْ مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ ﴿٢٣﴾

صٰدِقِيْنَ ﴿٢٣﴾

“And if you (O unbelievers) are in doubt about (the truthfulness of) what We have sent down upon Our servant (Muḥammad), then produce a chapter of its like and call upon your witnesses (and your deities) besides Allāh (as your supporters and helpers in this endeavour), if you are truthful.” [Sūrah al-Baqarah 2:23]

They have not been able to bring anything like it up until today. The Qur’ān—Alḥamdulillāh—has been preserved in the language that it was revealed: the Arabic language.

To the extent that Musaylamah al-Kadhdhāb, who appeared in the time of the Companions and claimed to receive revelation from Allāh (عز وجل), that which he recited was so ludicrous and foolish that when the Ṣaḥābah heard it they said, “We know for certainty that you are indeed a liar.”

The Goal of Studying the Arabic Language

As it relates to studying the Arabic language, then as our Shaykh, Shaykh Muqbil (رحمه الله) used to say, that the people are to be divided into three categories as it pertains to their pursuit of the Arabic language:

1. Those who go to extremes and specialise in the Arabic language and do not understand that Arabic is a means and it is not a goal.

You have individuals, as mentioned by Ibn al-Jawzī (رحمه الله) in *Tablīs Iblīs*, who went to extremes in learning Arabic but because they went to extremes in learning the Arabic language, they missed out on the understanding of Ḥadīth, Fiqh, Tafsīr and the like of these things.

We find in Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim that the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) asked the slave girl, “Where is Allāh?” And she said, “Above the heavens.” And he said, “Who am I?” And she said, “You are the Messenger of Allāh.” And the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said, “Free her, for verily she is a believer”, showing that this answer was correct and likewise this question was correct. You have individuals in our time who have PhDs from some Islamic universities and you ask them where is Allāh and some of them will say in every place, which we know is false and rejected. Thus, their specialising in Arabic does not benefit them in the slightest. Likewise, you have others who say Allāh (عز وجل) does not have a place, and you have others who misinterpret the Qur’ān. Allāh (عز وجل) said,

﴿الرَّحْمَنُ عَلَى الْعَرْشِ اسْتَوَى﴾

“The Most Beneficent (Allāh) Istawá (rose over) the (Mighty) Throne (in a manner that suits His Majesty).” [Sūrah Ṭā Hā 20:5]

They say Istawá means Istawlá (to conquer), and this is not known in the Arabic language. That is why al-Bukhārī in his Ṣaḥīḥ mentions that Mujāhid mentioned that the meaning of Istawá is to rise. That is what is known from the Arabic language and that is what is known from the Ṣaḥābah and the Tābi‘ūn and the Salaf, all of them.

As for this word, the meaning of Istawá to be Istawlá, then the origin of that is from a non-Muslim, not even a Muslim. So that is an example of those who learn and specialise in Arabic but it does not benefit them.

2. Those who turn away from learning Arabic.

They are negligent in learning Arabic, and that is a mistake.

3. Those who are balanced and study what is required of the Arabic language but they focus upon the knowledge of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, and through these individuals Allāh preserved the religion because they recognise that Arabic is a means. The goal is to understand the Qur'ān and the Sunnah with the correct understanding.

My advice [i.e., Shaykh Muqbil] to the students of beneficial knowledge who are not infatuated with university degrees and certificates, is to focus upon learning Arabic and to show concern for learning it by calling others to study it properly, seeking the reward from Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى). Because the student who is strong in the Arabic language will find that the other sciences of the religion will be easy, by the Will of Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى).

Shaykh al-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah (رحمه الله) said talking about the importance of learning the Arabic language, “It is known that learning the Arabic language and teaching it is a communal obligation, and the Salaf used to discipline their children for using slang...” And know, that there is no such thing as an ‘Ālim (scholar) of Islām that does not know the Arabic language, as mentioned by all of the scholars of Islām. This does not exist and it is not possible because how can a person read the Qur'ān and understand it and extract rulings and benefits if they do not know the language it was revealed in? How can someone study the Sunnah of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) and benefit from it and extract rulings and benefits if they do not know the Arabic language, because the Sunnah is in Arabic. How can someone access all of

the classical works of Tafsīr, because not all of them have been translated. Even the Tafsīr of Ibn Kathīr that we have in English is a summary of the Tafsīr of Ibn Kathīr; it is not the complete translation of Ibn Kathīr. How can someone read *Tafsīr at-Ṭabarī*, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* and the other books of tafāsir except that they know the Arabic language.

How can a person read the books of the Salaf—some have been translated but not all of them—except with knowledge of the Arabic language? The goal behind learning Arabic is to understand the Qur’ān and the Sunnah correctly with the understanding of the Ṣaḥābah.

The Method of Studying the Arabic Language

It should be known that in order to become proficient in the Arabic language and to speak correctly without grammatical errors, the two main sciences when learning Arabic are:

1. ‘Ilmun-Naḥw (Syntax), which is the study of the grammatical rules, which is knowledge of the principles of the Arabic language that highlight the case/state of the end of the Arabic words when placed in sentences.
2. ‘Ilmuṣ-Ṣarf (Morphology), which is the principles governing the formation of words.

For example, when you open the Madīnah book, the first thing you find is هذا بيت, this is Nawḥ. It is known as الجملة الإسمية (a sentence that starts with a noun).

Aṣ-Ṣarf for example:

كتب (Fi’lul-Māḍī)

يكتب (Fi’lul-Muḍāri‘)

اكتب (Fi’lul-Amr)

كتابة (Maṣdar)

كاتب (Ism Fā'il)

مكتوب (Ism Maf'ul)

مكتب (desk)

Likewise, for those who do not know Arabic, an important part of learning the language is also mufradāt (vocabulary). Someone who does not know Arabic may ask what books should they study. Again, if you ask this question to different people, they will give different answers based upon their method of study or how they learnt the language or their experience, and other secondary factors.

I would advise to study the Madīnah books 1,2 and 3 and the complimentary books that cover other subjects such as conversation and other important topics. The reason why I advise with these books is that the Madīnah series—not that they are perfect because Allāh (عز وجل) refused to give perfection to any book except His Book—introduce these three things (i.e., Grammar, Morphology and Vocabulary). Additionally, they focus a lot on religious terms, which remember, the goal of learning Arabic is to correctly understand the Qur'ān and the Sunnah with the understanding of the Salaf of this Ummah. When a person studies the Madīnah books, they familiarise themselves with many religious terms and Alḥamdulillāh, those books do not comprise of anything that goes against the Qur'ān and the Sunnah (according to my knowledge).

In addition to that, another way to improve your language after you study the Madīnah books or in the process when you have the ability to read some basic Arabic books is to choose a simple book like the explanation of *The Three Fundamental Principles* of Shaykh Muḥammad Ibn Ṣāliḥ al-'Uthaymīn (رحمه الله) with a reliable translation like that of Shaykh Abū Talḥah (رحمه الله) and then compare your translation to his translation. This will help to

implement the principles of Naḥw, Ṣarf and further develop your vocabulary. You develop vocabulary by using it in the correct context. If you come across new words when reading, write them down in a notebook that you can keep in your pocket or some people may use their cell phone, and also write the sentence so you can use it properly. Because some people write words but the context that they use the word in is wrong and when you hear it, it does not sound right because it is not spoken in that way, even though when you look at a dictionary the word may mean something that you think is correct but the Arab do not use it in this fashion. That is one of the ways to avoid it.

There is no better feeling when you are praying behind the imām or when you are reading the Book of Allāh (عز وجل) and you can understand it and it penetrates your heart, as we find mentioned by one of the Companions that when he heard the Qur’ān being recited his heart almost flew out of his chest because of the effect of the Qur’ān. There is no better feeling than hearing the Qur’ān being recited and understanding it and reflecting over it.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymīn (رحمه الله) mentioned as an encouragement to the student of knowledge that when they read āyāt to maybe make a note of some benefits and then look to see if any of the scholars of Tafsīr mentioned this. Imagine the ni’mah of that. You think of a benefit you have never read but you see Ibn Kathīr mentioned exactly the same thing or you find that Ṭabarī or Sa’dī or Shawkānī or Baghawī or other than them mentioned the same thing, and the tafsīr is salīm.

Learning the Arabic language to understand the Qur’ān and the Sunnah correctly, seeking the Face of Allāh (عز وجل) is ‘ibādah (worship), and if the person is sincere, they will be rewarded for it.

Guidelines and Tips for Learning Arabic

1. Ikhilās (sincerity).

Make it your intention that you are learning it seeking the Face of Allāh (عز وجل) so you can understand the Qur’ān and the Sunnah, and you seek the reward from Allāh (عز وجل). You are not doing it to boast, pretend or show off but to understand and implement the religion of Allāh correctly. What is done for Allāh will remain and benefit; if it is done for other than Allāh (عز وجل), it will collapse and perish.

2. Be consistent and dedicated in your pursuit of learning the Arabic language.

Allāh (عز وجل) said,

﴿يُحْيِي خُذِ الْكِتَابَ بِقُوَّةٍ﴾

“O Yaḥyá! Take the Book with determination.” [Sūrah Maryam 19: 12]

The most beloved of actions to Allāh are those done most consistently even if they are few. Persevere until you finish the Madīnah series. Alḥamdulillāh many brothers and sisters from the People of the Sunnah are teaching it so you do not have any need to learn with the People of Innovation. As Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymīn (رحمه الله) said, not even the Arabic language should be studied with the People of Innovation. Persevere until you reach your goal of understanding and becoming proficient in the Arabic language. The one who perseveres and puts forth effort, they will reach their goal. You cannot be lazy and inconsistent; that person will not learn and be proficient in the language like that. Rather, be consistent, even if you can only do it a few times a week. Continuously persevere until you get, and once you get it, Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى) will make it easy for you, and if Allāh makes it easy for you, you will never find it difficult. Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymīn (رحمه الله) mentioned that there was a famous scholar of Arabic grammar and he found studying Arabic difficult and was on the verge of giving up.

He was watching ants trying to climb up a wall and he noticed how they would climb and maybe they would fall but they would persevere and continue until they reached their destination. So he said, if the ant can persevere, then I can persevere and be patient in my pursuit of learning Arabic, and he went back to the study of the Arabic language and he became an imām in the Arabic sciences.

If an ant can do it, then so can I, but how bad do we want it? How great is our thirst for it? If we wanted it and that was the most important goal and objective for us as it relates to learning or occupying ourselves with things outside of the commands of Allāh (عز وجل), then we would put forth the effort.

3. Revise, revise, revise.

Continuously revise. Carry a notebook with the vocabulary and different verb patterns. Once you complete the Madīnah series, a lot of work is upon you. You have individuals who may have studied various texts but are still weak in Arabic. One of the reasons for that is because they are lazy as it relates to their independent study. Read on your own; and a person should enjoy reading because Arabic is a very beautiful, rich language, and that is why people are tempted to go to extremes, but you have to remain balanced and remember the goal, which is to understand the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

4. Take your time and do not be hasty.

Take your time and understand what you are studying, make sure you have comprehended and do not rush. The Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said, “Patient deliberation is from Allāh and hastiness is from the shayṭān (devil).”

Shaykh Muqbil (رحمه الله) always used to advise a person to focus upon the study of the book they are learning. It is better that you study a book properly and understand it

rather than jumping from book to book because that person may gather various benefits, but they have no foundation.

Learning Arabic is like building a house, you need to establish the foundation. And those who are learning Arabic from scratch, you have to learn al-Ḥurūf; take your time and learn how to pronounce them correctly. Become proficient in the Madīnah series and the accompanying books and likewise al-Ājrūmiyyah, at-Tuḥfah or any of the other explanations. As we said, learning Arabic is like building a house; establish the foundations correctly and firmly because if it is weak, you can decorate it luxuriously but that house will eventually collapse. And sometimes you can see that in people who try and speak Arabic; they say they have studied Arabic but the foundations are weak.

5. Surround yourself with brothers and sisters who have the same thirst and dedication for learning the Arabic language.

There is nothing like companionship in one's studies. Healthy, sincere competition. "A person is upon the religion of his friend; look to who you have taken as a friend." If your friend is dedicated and you are studying together and you are coming back as brothers or sisters that love one another and want good for one another and you test each other, that will aid you greatly to be consistent and dedicated, and you will enjoy it even more, by the Will of Allāh (سبحانه وتعالى).

6. Speak as much as you can and do not be shy, as there is no shyness or arrogance in knowledge.

We all make mistakes and we are all going to make mistakes, but in speaking is how we improve. When we speak, a person will correct us and there is nothing wrong with being corrected; that shows love and concern. There is no shyness and embarrassment in knowledge.

7. For the youth, learn it as young as possible.

As mentioned by Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah (رحمه الله), “...in opposition to the one who becomes accustomed to one language and then tries to change to another language later on, for verily this is more difficult.” It is possible, but it is harder. If you learn it while young it is like carving into a stone. But Alḥamdulillāh, even as an adult it can be done. If the orientalist and academics can learn it and compile dictionaries, then so can you. If they can produce an index for aḥādīth, then so can you. But a person has to put the effort forth. Whoever strives will find what they are looking for.

8. The Arabic language is a means, not the goal.

Some people focus only on the Arabic language and as mentioned by Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah (رحمه الله), that those who turn away from the Qur’ān and the Sunnah and rely upon the Arabic language, this is the way of the People of Innovation and Misguidance. That is why Imām Aḥmad (رحمه الله) used to say, the majority of the time when people make mistakes, it is because of false interpretation and analogical deductions. For this reason, you find the Mu‘tazilah and the Rāfiḍah Shī‘ah and other than them from the People of Innovation explaining the Qur’ān in accordance to their opinions and that which they wrongly interpret from the language. And you find that they do not rely upon the aḥādīth of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم), they do not rely upon the narrations of the Companions nor the narrations of their students, nor the narrations of the imāms of the Muslims. They do not rely upon the Sunnah nor upon the consensus of the Salaf and their narrations. They only rely upon their intellect and the language alone. And you find that they do not rely upon the books of Tafsīr, the books of Ḥadīth nor the books that contain the narrations of the Salaf. Rather,

they rely upon the books of Adab and Kalām...” [End of the speech of Shaykhul-Islām Ibn Taymiyyah]

Question: When someone has a command of the Arabic language, even as an Arab, what books do you advise that they study?

Answer: When we studied with Shaykh Muqbil (رحمه الله), the books that we would study, and again it may vary from place to place, but I am sure that it is very similar:

- *Al-Ājrūmiyyah*
- *At-Tuḥfatus-Saniyyah*, which is the explanation of *Al-Ājrūmiyyah*
- *Al-Kawākib*, which is the explanation of *Mutammimah al-Ājrūmiyyah* (the Completion of *Al-Ājrūmiyyah*)
- *Al-Qaṭr an-Nadá*
- *Alfiyah*

In addition to that, *Qawā'id al-I'rāb* of Ibn Hishām would be another book that would be studied, and other books apart from that but generally, that was the approach.

Some people like to go from *Al-Ājrūmiyyah* to *Al-Qaṭr an-Nadá*, but for someone who is a non-Arab that may be a bit of a jump. Shaykh Muqbil (رحمه الله) would encourage the students to perfect *Al-Qaṭr an-Nadá* and he would see that if a person completed that and completely grasped it and comprehended it then maybe that would suffice him, even from some of the other more detailed and difficult books. And Allāh knows best.

والحمد لله رب العالمين