

Chapter 1

The Arabic You Already Know

In This Chapter

- ▶ Recognizing what you may already know
- ▶ Introducing the Arabic alphabet
- ▶ Talking Arabic like the locals
- ▶ Getting acquainted with everyday Arabic

Let me مرحبا (*mar-hah-ba*) (*welcome*) you to the wonderful world of Arabic! Arabic is the official language of more than 20 countries and is spoken by more than 300 million people across the globe. It's the language in which the Koran, the Holy Book in Islam, was revealed and written, and a large majority of the more than 1.3 billion Muslims across the world study Arabic in order to read the Koran and to fulfill their religious duties. By speaking Arabic, you get access to people and places from Morocco to Indonesia.

In this chapter, I ease you into Arabic by showing you some familiar English words that trace their roots to Arabic. You discover the Arabic alphabet and its beautiful letters, and I give you tips on how to pronounce those letters so that you can sound like a native speaker. Part of exploring a new language is discovering a new culture and a new way of looking at things, so in this first chapter of the second edition of *Arabic For Dummies*, you begin your discovery of Arabic and its unique characteristics.

Taking Stock of What's Familiar

If English is your primary language, part of grasping a new لغة (*lu.ghah*) (*language*) is creating connections between the كلمات (*ka.li.māt*) (*words*) of the language, in this case Arabic and English. You may be surprised to hear that quite a few English words trace their origins to Arabic. For example, did you know that “magazine,” “candy,” and “coffee” are actually Arabic words? Table 1-1 lists some familiar English words with Arabic origins.

Table 1-1 Arabic Origins of English Words		
English	Arabic Origin	Arabic Meaning
admiral	أمير البحر (a.mīr al-baḥr)	Ruler of the Sea
alcohol	الكحول (al-ku.ḥul)	a mixture of powdered antimony
alcove	القبة (al-qub.bah)	a dome or arch
algebra	الجبر (al-jabr)	to reduce or consolidate
almanac	المناخ (al-ma.nākh)	a calendar
arsenal	دار السلاح (dār as-si.lāḥ)	house of weapons
azure	اللازورد (al-lā.za.ward)	lapis lazuli
candy	سكر القصب (suk-kar al-qa-ṣab)	cane sugar
coffee	قهوة (qah.wa)	coffee
cotton	قطن (quṭn)	cotton
elixir	إكسير (ik.sīr)	philosopher's stone
gazelle	غزال (gha.zāl)	gazelle
hazard	زهر (zahr)	dice
magazine	المخزن (al-makh.zan)	a storehouse
saffron	زعفران (za'.fa.rān)	saffron
Sahara	الصحراء (aṣ-ṣaḥ.rā')	to drink
sherbet	شربات (shar. bāt)	dessert
sofa	صوفا (ṣo.fā)	a cushion
sugar	سكر (suk.kar)	sugar
zero	صفر (ṣifr)	zero

As you can see from the table, Arabic has had a major influence on the English language. Some English words such as “admiral” and “arsenal” have an indirect Arabic origin, whereas others, such as “coffee” and “cotton,” are exact matches. The influence runs the other way, too, especially when it comes to relatively contemporary terms. For example, the word تلفزيون (ti-li-fiz-yōn) (*television*) comes straight from the word “television.” As is often the case with languages, Arabic and English tend to influence each other, which is what makes studying them so much fun.

Discovering the Arabic Alphabet

Unlike English and other Romance languages, you write and read Arabic from right to left. Like English, Arabic has both vowels and consonants, but the vowels in Arabic aren't actual letters. Rather, Arabic vowels are symbols that you place on top of or below consonants to create certain sounds. As for consonants, Arabic has 28 different consonants, and each one is represented by a letter. In order to vocalize these letters, you place a vowel above or below the particular consonant. For example, when you put a فتحة (*fat.ḥah*), a vowel representing the “ah” sound, above the consonant representing the letter “b,” you get the sound “bah.” When you take the same consonant and use a كسرة (*kas.rah*), which represents the short “i” sound, you get the sound “big.”

To help you get a better grasp of the different letters in the alphabet, I explain in the following sections vowels and consonants.

All about vowels

Arabic has three main vowels. Luckily, they're very simple to pronounce because they're similar to English vowels. However, you need to realize that Arabic also has vowel derivatives that are as important as the main vowels. These vowel derivatives fall into three categories: *double vowels*, *long vowels*, and *diphthongs*. In this section, I walk you through all the different vowels, vowel derivatives, and vowel combinations.

Main vowels

The three main Arabic vowels are

- ✔ **فتحة (*fat.ḥah*):** The first main vowel in Arabic is called فتحة (*fat-hah*). A فتحة is the equivalent of the short “a” in “apple.” Occasionally, a فتحة also sounds like the short “e” in “bet” or “set.” Much like the other vowels, the way you pronounce a فتحة depends on what consonants come before or after it. In Arabic script, the فتحة is written as a small horizontal line above a consonant. In English transcription, which I use in this book, it's simply represented by the letter “a,” as in the words كلب (*kalb*) (*dog*) and ولد (*wa.lad*) (*boy*).
- ✔ **ضمة (*dam.mah*):** The second main Arabic vowel is the ضمة (*dam.mah*). This vowel sounds like the “uh” in “foot” or “book.” In Arabic script, it's written like a tiny backward “e” above a particular consonant. In English transcription, it's represented by the letter “u,” as in فندق (*fun.duq*) (*hotel*) or سحب (*su.ḥub*) (*clouds*).

- ✓ **كسرة (*kas.rah*):** The third main vowel in Arabic is the كسرة (*kas-rah*), which sounds like the long “e” in “feet” or “treat.” This vowel is written the same way as a فتحة — as a small horizontal line — except that it goes underneath the consonant. In English transcription, it’s written as an “i,” as in بنت (*bint*) (*girl*) or إسلام (*is.lām*) (*Islam*).

Double vowels

One type of vowel derivative is the double vowel, which is known in Arabic as تنوين (*tan.wīn*). The process of تنوين is a fairly simple one: Basically, you take a main vowel and place the same vowel right next to it, thus creating two vowels, or a double vowel. The sound that the double vowel makes depends on the main vowel that’s doubled. Here are all possible combinations of double vowels:

- ✓ **Double *fat.ḥa*:** تنوين with فتحة creates the “an” sound, as in أهلاً وسهلاً (*ah. lan wa.sah.lan*) (*Hi*).
- ✓ **Double *ḍam.mha*:** تنوين with ضمة creates the “un” sound. For example, كرة (*ku.ra.tun*) (*ball*) contains a double ضمة.
- ✓ **Double *kasra*:** تنوين with كسرة makes the “in” sound, as in صفحة (*ṣaf.ḥa.tin*) (*page*).

Long vowels

Long vowels are derivatives that elongate the main vowels. Arabic is a very poetic and musical language, so a musical metaphor is appropriate. Think of the difference between long vowels and short (main) vowels in terms of a musical beat, and you should be able to differentiate between them much easier. If a main vowel lasts for one beat, then its long vowel equivalent lasts for two beats. Whereas you create double vowels by writing two main vowels next to each other, you create long vowels by adding a letter to one of the main vowels. Each main vowel has a corresponding consonant that elongates it. Here are a few examples to help you get your head around this long-vowel process:

- ✓ To create a long vowel form of a فتحة, you attach an ألف (*a.lif*) to the consonant that the فتحة is associated with. In English transcription, the long فتحة form is written as “aa,” such as in كتاب (*ki.tāb*) (*book*) or باب (*bāb*) (*door*). The “aa” means that you hold the vowel sound for two beats as opposed to one.
- ✓ The long vowel form of ضمة is obtained by attaching a واو (*wāw*) to the consonant with the ضمة. This addition elongates the vowel “uh” into a more pronounced “uu,” such as in نور (*nūr*) (*light*) or غول (*ghūl*) (*ghost*). Make sure you hold the “uu” vowel for two beats and not one.

- ✓ To create a long vowel form of a كسرة, you attach a ياء (yā') to the consonant with the كسرة. Just as the ألف elongates the فتحة and the واو elongates the ضمة, the ياء elongates the كسرة. Some examples include the “ii” in words like كبير (ka.bīr) (*big*) and صغير (ṣa.ghīr) (*small*).

Table 1-2 shows the Arabic characters for the long vowels.

Table 1-2 Arabic Vowel Characters		
Arabic Character	Character's Name	Explanation
fat.ḥah	ألف ('alif)	To create a long vowel form of a فتحة
dḥam.mah	واو (wāw)	To create a long vowel form of a ضمة
kas.rah	ياء (yaa')	To create a long vowel form of a كسرة

Diphthongs

Diphthongs in Arabic are a special category of vowels because, in essence, they're monosyllabic sounds that begin with one vowel and “glide” into another vowel. A common example in English is the sound at the end of the word “toy.” Fortunately, Arabic has only two diphthong sounds used to distinguish between the ياء (yā') and the واو (wāw) forms of long vowels. In a nutshell, diphthongs in Arabic are used to elongate a vowel, which helps differentiate between certain words.



When you come across either of these two letters, one of the first questions to ask yourself is: “Is this a long vowel or a diphthong?” Making this determination is easy: When either the ياء or the واو is a diphthong, you see a سكون (su. kūn) above the consonant. A سكون is similar to the main vowels in that it's a little symbol (a small circle) that you place above the consonant. However, unlike the vowels, you don't vocalize the سكون — it's almost like a silent vowel. So when a واو or ياء has a سكون over it, you know that the sound is a diphthong. Here are some examples:

- ✓ واو diphthongs: يوم (yawm) (*day*); نوم (nawm) (*sleep*); صوت (ṣawt) (*noise*)
- ✓ ياء diphthongs: بيت (bayt) (*house*); عين ('ayn) (*eye*); ليل (layl) (*night*)

All about consonants

Arabic uses 28 different consonants, and each consonant is represented by a different letter. Because the Arabic alphabet is written in cursive, most of the letters connect with each other. For this reason, every single letter that

represents a consonant actually can be written four different ways depending on its position in a word — whether it's in the initial, medial, or final positions, or whether it stands alone. In English transcription of the Arabic script, all letters are case-sensitive.



The good news: Most of the consonants in Arabic have English equivalents. Unfortunately, a few Arabic consonants are quite foreign to nonnative speakers. Table 1-3 shows all 28 Arabic consonants, how they're written in Arabic, how they're transcribed in English, and how they sound. This table can help you pronounce the letters so that you sound like a native speaker.

Table 1-3 Arabic Consonants				
<i>Arabic Character</i>	<i>Letter Name</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Sounds Like</i>	<i>Example</i>
ا (a)	a-lif	Sounds like the "a" in "apple"	أب (ab)	father
ب (b)	bah	Sounds like the "b" in "baby"	باب (bāb)	door
ت (t)	tah	Sounds like the "t" in "table"	تلميذ (til. mīdh)	student
ث (th)	thah	Sounds like the "th" in "think"	ثلاثة (tha. lā.thah)	three
ج (j)	jīm	Sounds like the "j" in "measure"	جميل (ja.mīl)	pretty
ح (h)	ḥah	No equivalent in English; imagine the sound you make when you want to blow on your reading glasses (the soft, raspy noise)	حر (ḥar)	hot
خ (kh)	khah	Sounds a lot like "Bach" in German or "Baruch" in Hebrew	خوخ (khawkh)	peach
د (d)	dāl	Sounds like the "d" in "dog"	دار (dār)	house
ذ (dh)	dhāl	Sounds like the "th" in "those"	ذهب (dha. hab)	gold
ر (r)	rāʾ	Like the Spanish "r," rolled fast	رجل (ra.jul)	man

Arabic Character	Letter Name	Pronunciation	Sounds Like	Example
ز (z)	zāy	Sounds like the “z” in “zebra”	زوجة (zaw. jah)	wife
س (s)	sīn	Sounds like the “s” in “snake”	سمك (sa. mak)	fish
ش (sh)	shīn	Sounds like “sh” in “ship”	شمس (shams)	sun
ص (ṣ)	ṣād	A very deep “s” sound you can make if you open your mouth really wide and lower your jaw	صديق (ṣa. dīq)	friend
ض (ḍ)	ḍād	A very deep “d” sound; the exact sound as a ḍād except that you use a “ḍ” instead of an “d”	ضباب (ḍa. bāb)	fog
ط (ṭ)	tā’	A deep “t” sound; start off by saying a regular “t” and then lower your mouth to round	طبيب (ṭa. bīb)	doctor
ظ (ẓ)	ẓā	Take the “th” as in “those” and draw it to the back of your throat	ظهر (ẓaḥr)	back
ع (‘)	‘ayn	No equivalent; breathe heavily and consistently through your esophagus and then intermittently choke off the airflow to create staccato sound	عراق (‘i.rāq)	Iraq
غ (gh)	ghayn	Sounds like the French “r” in rendezvous	غريب (gha. rīb)	strange
ق (q)	qāf	Similar to “k,” but produced farther at the back of the throat; you should feel airflow being constricted	قهوة (qah. wah)	coffee

(continued)

Table 1-3 (continued)

Arabic Character	Letter Name	Pronunciation	Sounds Like	Example
ك (k)	kāf	Sounds like the “k” in “keeper”	كتب (<i>ku.tub</i>)	books
م (m)	mīm	Sounds like the “m” in “Mary”	مخزن (<i>makh.zan</i>)	storehouse
ن (n)	nūn	Sounds like the “n” in “no”	نظيف (<i>na.zīf</i>)	clean
ه (h)	haa’	Create by exhaling deeply; think of yourself as a marathoner who just finished a race and is breathing heavily	هو (<i>hu.wa</i>)	he
و (w)	wāw	Sounds like the “w” in “winner”	وزير (<i>wa.zīr</i>)	minister
ي (y)	yā’	Sounds like the “y” in “yes”	يمين (<i>ya.mīn</i>)	right

To sound as fluent as possible, memorize as many of the letters as you can and try to associate each letter with the Arabic words in which it appears. The trick to getting the pronunciation of some of these more exotic Arabic sounds is repetition, repetition, and even more repetition! That old saying, “Practice makes perfect” certainly applies to Arabic.

Speaking Arabic like a Native

In this section, I share a couple of tricks to help you focus on pronunciation of difficult letters that, if you can master, are sure to make you sound like a native speaker. Here are some difficult letters and some related words you should familiarize yourself with:

- ✓ أحمر (*aḥ.mar*) (red); حسن (*ḥa.san*) (man’s name); حوار (*ḥi.wār*) (conversation); حزين (*ḥa.zīn*) (sad)
- ✓ عجيب (*‘a.jīb*) (amazing); عزيمة (*‘a.zī.mah*) (determination); عريض (*‘a.rīḍ*) (wide)

- ✓ قف (qif) (*stop*); قرد (qird) (*monkey*); قوس (qaws) (*bow*)
- ✓ غضبان (ghaḍ.bān) (*angry*); غرفة (ghur.fah) (*room*); غدا (gha.dan) (*tomorrow*)



The difference between native Arabic speakers and nonnatives is enunciation. If you can enunciate your letters clearly — particularly the more difficult ones — you'll sound like you're fluent. Practice these words over and over until you feel comfortable repeating them really quickly and very distinctly. With practice, you can sound more like a native and less like someone who's just trying to pick up the language. Plus, memorizing these words not only helps with your pronunciation but also helps build your vocabulary.

