Chapter 1

You Already Know a Little Arabic

In This Chapter

- Discovering English words that come from Arabic
- Figuring out the Arabic alphabet
- Sounding like a native speaker

MarHaba (*mahr-hah-bah;* welcome) to the wonderful world of Arabic! Arabic is the official language of over 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 over 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. (For more on Arabic's role in history, see the sidebar "Arabic's historical importance.")

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 *Arabic For Dummies,* you begin your discovery of Arabic and its unique characteristics.

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Taking Stock of What's Familiar

If English is your primary language, part of grasping a new **lougha** (*loo-rah;* language) is creating connections between the **kalimaat** (*kah-lee-maht;* words) of the **lougha,** 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.

Arabic's historical importance

During the Middle Ages, when Europe was plunged into the Dark Ages, Arab scholars and historians translated and preserved most of the works of the Greek scholars, thereby preserving some of the greatest intellectual achievements that are the cornerstone of Western civilization!

Table 1-1 Arabic Origins of English Words

English	*Arabic Origin*	*Arabic Meaning*
admiral	amir al-baHr	Ruler of the Sea
alcohol	al-kuHul	a mixture of powdered antimony
alcove	al-qubba	a dome or arch
algebra	al-jabr	to reduce or consolidate
almanac	al-manakh	a calendar
arsenal	daar As-SinaaH	house of manufacture
azure	al-azward	lapis lazuli
candy	qand	cane sugar
coffee	qahwa	coffee
cotton	quTun	cotton
elixir	al-iksiir	philosopher's stone
gazelle	ghazaal	gazelle
hazard	az-zahr	dice
magazine	al-makhzan	a storehouse; a place of storage
mattress	matraH	a place where things are thrown
ream	rizma	a bundle
saffron	za'fran	saffron
Sahara	SaHraa'	desert
satin	zaytuun	Arabic name for a Chinese city

English	*Arabic Origin*	*Arabic Meaning*
sherbet	sharaba	to drink
sofa	Sofaa	a cushion
sugar	sukkar	sugar
zero	Sifr	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 **tilifizyuun** (*tee-lee-fee-zee-yoon;* television) comes straight from the word "television." As is often the case with languages, Arabic and English tend to influence each other, and that's 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 **fatHa,** 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 **kasra,** which represents the "ee" sound, you get the sound "bee."

All about vowels

Arabic has three main vowels. Luckily, they're very simple to pronounce because they're similar to English vowels. However, it's important 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:

- **fatHah:** The first main vowel in Arabic is called a **fatHa** *(feht-hah).* A **fatHa** is the equivalent of the short "a" in "hat" or "cat." Occasionally, a **fatHa** also sounds like the short "e" in "bet" or "set." Much like the other vowels, the way you pronounce a **fatHa** depends on what consonants come before or after it. In Arabic script, the **fatHa** 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 **kalb** (*kah-leb;* dog) or **walad** (*wah-lahd;* boy).
- **damma:** The second main Arabic vowel is the **damma** *(dah-mah).* A **damma** 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 **funduq** (*foon-dook;* hotel) or **suHub** (*soo-hoob;* clouds).
- **kasra:** The third main vowel in Arabic is the **kasra** *(kahs-rah),* which sounds like the long "e" in "feet" or "treat." The **kasra** is written the same way as a **fatHa** — as a small horizontal line — except that it goes underneath the consonant. In English transcription, it's written as an "i," as in **bint** (*bee-neht;* girl) or **'islaam** (*ees-lahm;* Islam).

Double vowels

One type of vowel derivative is the double vowel, which is known in Arabic as **tanwiin** *(tahn-ween).* The process of **tanwiin** 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 fatHa: tanwiin** with **fatHa** creates the "an" sound, as in **'ahlan wa sahlan** (*ahel-an wah sahel-an;* Hi).
- **Double damma: tanwiin** with **damma** creates the "oun" sound. For example, **kouratoun** (*koo-rah-toon;* ball) contains a double **damma**.
- **Double kasra: tanwiin** with **kasra** makes the "een" sound, as in **SafHatin** (*sahf-hah-teen;* page).

Long vowels

Long vowels are derivatives that elongate the main vowels. Seeing as Arabic is a very poetic and musical language, I believe a musical metaphor is in order here! 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 **fatHa,** you attach an **'alif** to the consonant that the **fatHa** is associated with. In English transcription, the long **fatHa** form is written as "aa," such as in **kitaab** (*kee-taab;* book) or **baab** (*bahb;* door). The "aa" means that you hold the vowel sound for two beats as opposed to one.
- The long vowel form of **damma** is obtained by attaching a **waaw** to the consonant with the **damma.** This addition elongates the vowel "uh" into a more pronounced "uu," such as in **nuur** (*noohr;* light) or **ghuul** (*roohl;* ghost). Make sure you hold the "uu" vowel for two beats and not one.
- To create a long vowel form of a **kasra,** you attach a **yaa'** to the consonant with the **kasra.** Just as the **'alif** elongates the **fatHa** and the **waaw** elongates the **damma,** the **yaa'** elongates the **kasra.** Some examples include the "ii" in words like **kabiir** (*kah-beer;* big) and **Saghiir** (*sah-reer;* small).

The Arabic characters for the long vowels are shown in Table 1-2.

Table 1-2 Arabic Vowel Characters

Arabic Character	*Name of the Character*	*Explanation*
ا	'alif	To create a long vowel form of a fatHa
و	waaw	To create a long vowel form of a damma
ي	yaa'	To create a long vowel form of a kasra

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 **yaa'** (ي) and the **waaw** (و) forms of long vowels. 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?" There's an easy way to determine which is which: When either the **yaa'** or the **waaw** is a diphthong, you see a **sukun** *(soo-koon)* above the consonant. A **sukun** 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 **sukun** — it's almost like a "silent" vowel. So when a **waaw** or **yaa'** has a **sukun** over it, you know that the sound is a diphthong! Here are some examples:

- **waaw** diphthongs: **yawm** (*yah-oom;* day); **nawm** (*nah-oom;* sleep); **Sawt** (*sah-oot;* noise)
- **yaa'** diphthongs: **bayt** (*bah-yet;* house); **'ayn** (*ah-yen;* eye); **layla** (*lah-ye-lah;* 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.



Thankfully, 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

Arabic Character	*Name of the Letter*	*Pronunciation*	*Sounds Like . . .*	*Example*
ا	'alif ('a)	ah-leef	Sounds like the "a" in "apple"	'ab (*ah-b;* father)
ب	baa' (b)	bah	Sounds like the "b" in "boy"	baab (*bahb;* door)
ت	taa' (t)	tah	Sounds like the "t" in "table"	tilmiidh (*teel-meez;* student)
ث	thaa' (th)	thah	Sounds like the "th" in "think"	thalaatha (*thah-lah-thah;* three)

Arabic Character	*Name of the Letter*	*Pronunciation*	*Sounds Like . . .*	*Example*
ج	jiim (j)	jeem	Sounds like the "j" in "measure"	jamiil (jah-meel; pretty)
ح	Haa' (H)	hah	No equivalent in English; imagine the sound you make when you want to blow on your reading glasses to clean them; that soft, raspy noise that comes out is the letter Haa'.	Harr (*hah-r;* hot)
خ	khaa' (kh)	khah	Sounds a lot like "Bach" in German or "Baruch" in Hebrew	khuukh (*kh-oo-kh;* peach)
د	daal (d)	dahl	Sounds like the "d" in dog	daar (*dah-r;* house)
ذ	dhaal (dh)	dhahl	Sounds like the "th" in "those"	dhahab (*thah-hab;* gold)
ر	raa' (r)	rah	Like the Spanish "r," rolled really fast	rajul (*rah-jool;* man)
ز	zaay (z)	zay	Sounds like the "z" in "zebra"	zawja (*zah-oo-ja;* wife)
س	siin (s)	seen	Sounds like the "s" in "snake"	samak (*sah-mahk;* fish)
ش	shiin (sh)	sheen	Sounds like the "sh" in "sheep"	shams (*shah-mes;* sun)
ص	Saad (S)	sahd	A very deep "s" sound you can make if you open your mouth really wide and lower your jaw	Sadiiq (*sah-deek;* friend)

(continued)

Table 1-3 *(continued)*

Arabic Character	*Name of the Letter*	*Pronunciation*	*Sounds Like . . .*	*Example*
ض	Daad (D)	dahd	A very deep "d" sound; the exact same sound as a Saad except that you use a "d" instead of an "s"	Dabaab (*dah-bahb;* fog)
ط	Taa' (T)	tah	A deep "t" sound; start off by saying a regular "t" and then lower your mouth to make it rounder	Tabiib (*tah-beeb;* doctor)
ظ	DHaa' (DH)	dhah	Take the "th" as in "those" and draw it to the back of your throat	DHahr (*dha-her;* back)
ع	'ayn (')	ayen	No equivalent in any of the Romance languages; produced at the very back of the throat. Breathe heavily and consistently through your esophagus and then intermittently choke off the airflow so that you create a staccato noise	iraaq (*ee-rahk;* Iraq)
غ	ghayn (gh)	ghayen	Sounds like the French "r" in "rendezvous"; it's created at the back of the throat	ghariib (*rah-reeb;* strange)
ف	faa' (f)	fah	Sounds like the "f" in "Frank"	funduq (*foon-dook;* hotel)
ق	qaaf (q)	qahf	Similar to the letter "k," but produced much farther at the back of the throat; you should feel airflow being constricted at the back of your throat	qahwa (*kah-wah;* coffee)

Arabic Character	*Name of the Letter*	*Pronunciation*	*Sounds Like . . .*	*Example*
ك	kaaf (k)	kahf	Sounds like the "k" in "keeper"	kutub (*koo-toob;* books)
ل	laam (l)	lahm	Sounds like the "l" in "llama"	lisaan (*lee-sahn;* tongue)
م	miim (m)	meem	Sounds like the "m" in "Mary"	Makhzan (*mah-khzan;* storehouse)
ن	nuun (n)	noon	Sounds like the "n" in "no"	naDHiif (*nah-dheef;* clean)
ه	haa' (h)	haah	Created by exhaling heavily; very different from the Haa' earlier in the list. (Think of yourself as a marathon runner who's just finished a long race and is breathing heavily through the lungs to replenish your oxygen.)	huwa (*hoo-wah;* him)
و	waaw (w)	wahw	Sounds like the "w" in "winner"	waziir (*wah-zeer;* minister)
ي	yaa' (y)	yaah	Sounds like the "y" in "yes"	yamiin (*yah-meen;* right)

So there you have it — all 28 different consonants in the Arabic alphabet! 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:

- **Haa': Hamraa'** (*hahm-raah;* red); **Hassan** (*hah-san;* man's name); **Hiwaar** (*hee-war;* conversation); **Haziin** (*hah-zeen;* sad)
- **'ayn: 'ajiib** (*ah-jeeb;* amazing); **'aziima** (*ah-zee-mah;* determination); **'ariiD** (*ah-reed;* wide)
- **qaaf: qif** (*kee-f;* stop); **qird** (*kee-red;* monkey); **qaws** (*kah-wes;* bow)
- **ghayn: ghaDbaan** (*rad-bahn;* angry); **ghurfa** (*goor-fah;* room); **ghadan** (*rah-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'll 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!

Addressing Arabic Transcription

The transcription I use in this book is a widely used and universally recognized method of transcribing Arabic to English. Students of Arabic across the United States and around the world use this method. It's very helpful for beginners because it allows you to speak the language without actually knowing how to read Arabic script.

In the transcription method used in this book, every letter in Arabic is represented by a letter in Roman script. It's important to note that this method is case-sensitive, which means that a lowercase Roman letter represents a different letter in the Arabic script than a capital Roman letter.



Transcription is a very helpful tool for beginners, but it's recommended that intermediate and advanced students of Arabic master the fundamentals of the Arabic script.