

Arabic, a Love Language to the People of the Gulf

by multiple authors*

**This article was written collaboratively by five company workers in Oman and the United Arab Emirates who have formally studied Arabic and worked in the Gulf for ten or more years. The lead writer is a woman; two other women and two men also contributed.*

The Arabian Gulf

The population dynamics of the Arabian Gulf are vastly diverse and perpetually in a state of fluctuation. In many ways, I see the citizens of these oil-wealthy countries as log runners – those who attempt to keep precarious balance by running forward and then back-peddling, while the log beneath them is being swept along by the flow of the river. They embrace progress with delicious terror, hungry for the temporary satisfaction

that it brings, but anxious about the effects it is having on their culture. In the arenas of trade and commerce, they have always connected with the broader world, but since the discovery of oil, there has been an unprecedented vulnerability to both the positive and negative effects of globalization. Their safeguards to maintaining their identity have primarily been Islam and the Arabic language.

The value of Arabic language

Some of the obvious outcomes of these changes are greater job opportunities and a growing usage of English as the lingua franca in the public domain. In light of this, questions are being raised as to whether it is expedient for company workers to minister among Gulf Arabs in English and/or whether it is essential to invest time, money and energy on Arabic training. Some of our colleagues would say yes to both, but would want to add qualifiers to our existing language study requirement. Others of us maintain that in order to have

effective witness among the majority of Gulf Arabs, to disciple them in their heart language and see the establishment of local churches, it is essential that we continue to equip our workers with a firm foundation in Arabic. There is also merit in promoting the study of some of the other common mother tongues spoken in the Gulf, such as Swahili, Farsi and Baluchi – but that is not the focus of this paper.

In preparation for writing this, I began to search for reactions of Gulf

Arabs towards the issue of language in globalization. Subsequently, I came across an article by a Saudi man who attempted to apply for a tourist visa to Britain. He became frustrated because the British Consulate would not accept his bank statement in Arabic and his bank wouldn't issue him one in English. He wrote,

I felt subject to strong provocation that someone was trying to tell me that even in my country, my national language is not welcome or respected and that foreign languages dominate, even when it comes to submitting a bank statement. I wish the British Embassy had shown some respect for the language of this country and accepted Arabic. I wish there were some among the embassy staff who speak and understand the language.¹

I have witnessed this frustration numerous times among women friends who return from the hospital frustrated because they couldn't communicate with the doctor or confused by the reports written in English. Sometimes they call me to come over to translate an email or text message that they don't understand. Most recently, I saw it in a junior college where students asked me to come and explain to their teachers something that they had not been

able to communicate. We have all had those frustrating moments, but few of us face them regularly within our home countries.

Another worker expressed his experience this way:

A working knowledge of conversational Arabic is very helpful with contact evangelism and initiating new friendships, especially when considering the region's demographics. The United Arab Emirates is estimated to have a population of 4.9 million in 2006 with only 20% being Emirati.² The remaining 80% are expatriate Arab, Iranian, Baluch, Asian and Western. Thus, the indigenous population is accustomed to being a minority within their own country and maintaining its cultural identity amid a myriad of other foreign cultures. As a westerner, the use of Arabic allows me to quickly open a bridge of trust between the indigenous culture and my own. Specifically, most of the national population tends to ignore the people around them until they hear a simple Arabic greeting. That greeting demands a response and initiates a conversation, which is the beginning of a relationship.

¹ Khaled Al-Sulaiman/Okaz. *English vs. Arabic*, Arab News: Wednesday 4 December 2002, <http://www.arabnews.com/services/print/print.asp?artid=20848&d=4&m=12&y=2002&hl=English%20vs.%20Arabic> (Accessed August 25, 2008).

² Library of Congress - Federal Research Division. *Country profile of the United Arab Emirates*. July 2007, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/UAE.pdf> (accessed August 28, 2008).

Motivation for learning Arabic

It bears mentioning that the process of language learning encompasses far more than just vocabulary and grammar. It gives workers an impetus to engage and bond with their new host culture. Over the years, we have seen many workers come to the region with good intentions to reach out to locals, but because they were not encouraged to study Arabic, they became overwhelmed by the language and cultural barriers and got involved with expatriate groups instead.

The greatest motivation for learning the language was expressed by another worker when he challenged us with these thoughts:

We often try to motivate people to learn another language using the language of empowerment. We talk about all the things we will be able to do with the language, as well as the advantages that will accompany this empowerment. Indeed, this is a reality. The Arabs even have a saying for this empowerment, 'He who learns the language of a people is protected from their evil.'

However, as Christians we have a higher motivating force: love. In 1 Corinthians 16:14 we are reminded, 'Let all that you do be done in love.' Earlier in chapter 13, Paul, a polyglot himself, said, 'If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don't have love,

I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.'³

Paul was not minimizing the importance of using other languages or even the supernatural gift of tongues. Rather, he was emphasizing that the key ingredient in any communication and relationship is love. Certainly, we can demonstrate love using any language – or even without language. Yet, our tendency is to communicate love to people on our own terms and in a way that makes *us* feel loved. Language learning can perhaps be summed up as using the 'terms' of others and communicating in a way that makes *them* feel loved. It is through this relational trust that the gospel is expressed. A Bahraini believer once told us that throughout the Arab world, people make their favourite national dishes using the same basic ingredients, but each country spices it just a little differently. He said, 'When you are communicating truth to your local friends, cook it the way they like it.'

We come to these Arab lands as strangers and foreigners, separated from the people by the curse and confusion of Babel. The separation is real and profound. Historical linguistics tells us that one of the primary reasons that languages diverge is due to wilful social separation. People intentionally distinguish themselves

from other groups by modifying the way they speak or by holding on to certain peculiarities. Thus begins the fragmentation of societies according to accent, dialect and language.

Conversely, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation, so we work to break down the walls that separate us. We should not be content to just bring our knowledge of the truth; our lives should demonstrate humility as well. In contrast to our distant ancestors who built Babel through pride, we come humbly, as children, asking to be taught and

to be initiated into the world of Arabic-speaking people. In English, we come as experts, but in Arabic, we come as children. In English, we come as strangers asking Arabs to make the effort to meet us in *our* world, but in Arabic, we come as guests asking to join *their* world.

In 1 Corinthians 14:10-11, we read, 'It is true that there are all kinds of languages in the world. And they all have meaning. But if I don't understand what someone is saying, I am a stranger to that person. And that person is a stranger to me.' ⁴

Arabic in evangelism, discipleship and church planting

Language is topic dependent

In the Gulf, English is the language used in business and academia. There is also a pidgin form of English that is widely used in negotiations between diverse language groups. However, it must be noted that both a lingua franca and a pidgin language are topic dependent. In other words, though a person may be able to conduct business in English, he may not be able to talk about spiritual things in English. For example, some university students asked their professor (a worker) to describe Christian fasting. They also requested that he use Arabic for better understanding. Particularly when discussing spiritual topics, Arabic is widely considered to be the divine language. In my experience, I have found that even fluent English

speakers revert to their heart language when they converse with their family and share joy or deep sorrow. I visit one family in which all of the family members speak English fluently, yet in seven years I have never heard them speak in English with each other.

Cultural Identity

Our desire is to see entire households and tribes come to Christ. For this reason, it is important to consider that the individual that we meet in our work place represents a family and tribe of people who are anxiously trying to maintain their identity amid a continuous current of change. The good news that we share with that individual needs to be such that he can then share with his family and friends. It is implicit that we must not

alienate a new believer from his family by seemingly westernizing him. English is the language of progress and the future. Yet that 'future' is alarmingly western. At Christmas time the malls are decorated with trees and ornaments, the cinemas predominately show English films and the youth are enamoured with western icons and culture. Even the terms 'Christian' and 'westerner' are interchangeable. One proverb of the Southern Gulf says, 'There is nothing too difficult for a Christian.' This is used to assert that in less than twenty years, villages of the desert coast have been built into world-class international cities by westerners. Thus, Christianity is tied to the West even though Jesus and the early church originated here in the Middle East. By using Arabic to share the gospel, pray and quote Scripture, we can model a new way to know God within an Arabian context.

Oral language ability versus literary English

Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.'⁵ Therefore, God's written word is a key tool for discipleship and growth. It is not reasonable to assume that, even though many Gulf Arabs are conversational in English, they have the same proficiency in literary English. There have been Gulf Arabs who have come to faith in Christ through

the medium of English, but then requested discipleship and Bible studies in Arabic. Recently, I sat with a new believer and her English-speaking friend who had led her to the Lord. Although the new believer is fluent in English, I noticed that she followed along on the Arabic side of her Arabic/English Bible as her friend read in English. Another worker has emphasized the importance of Arabic Scripture memory in discipleship. Committing Bible verses to memory is essential as new believers learn to pray, worship and declare God's promises in the midst of spiritual attack. We must keep in mind that new believers from a Muslim background are not accustomed to praying and worshipping God in their own words. Just as our Lord Jesus quoted Scripture in the face of temptation, our new brothers and sisters need to stand on the authority of Scripture when they face persecution and to be equipped to give an answer for the hope that is within them.

Worship

A heart of worship is a clear indication that someone is a new creation in Christ. John 4:23, 24 says, 'Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.'⁶

⁵ *New International Version*

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Scripture teaches that true worship springs forth from the spirit, from deep within the soul of the believer. When the heart cries out to God, whether in song or prayer or poetry or prose, it will most likely cry out in its own tongue. We must encourage our new brothers and sisters to express themselves to God from their hearts and in their own language.

Corporate worship and church planting

Our primary purpose for being in the Gulf is to see Gulf Arabs glorify God and enjoy Him forever. We believe that there will be Saudis, Kuwaitis, Qataris, Bahrainis, Emiratis and Omanis in number worshipping around the throne of God. This side of heaven, we pray that we will see them

gather together to worship in spirit and in truth and to establish churches that will withstand certain persecution and remain through economic change. The existing expatriate churches offer us a glimpse of the vast diversity that personifies the body of Christ, but their presence in the Gulf is not secure and their styles of worship are foreign. However, the emergence of local fellowships of believers who study God's Word and worship in local dialect would diminish the perception that the new believers have left their culture and language in order to embrace a western religion. We long to see a national church planted on a firm foundation that will last until the return of Christ.

The future of company workers in the Gulf

The Arabic language continues to be an integral part of Arabian life and culture. As language learners, we have the opportunity to consecrate it to God and offer it as a love gift to our hosts. With it, we can communicate the heart of the Father to be reconciled to his children in Arabia. It offers us a means by which we stand out from the masses that have come to these countries for personal gain. In the future it may be an anchor for the local church when it enters the storms of persecution. For all of these reasons, our company has maintained its commitment to train its workers in the local language. There are many mission organiza-

tions effectively ministering in the Gulf, but to my knowledge, none of them requires its workers to commit to two years of language study. On the field we work closely together with workers from various agencies and with varied language abilities. We appreciate each other's gifting and learn from one another. As a result of our language training, our workers have been able to offer leadership in the Gulf by setting up and directing a language school, writing and teaching spiritual Arabic courses, coordinating follow-up, offering chaplaincy services to nationals in hospitals, leading church-planting teams, discipling people in Arabic, organizing outreach

and a host of other ministries. In the future, we pray that we will be used by God in an even greater capacity to help our local brothers and sisters become rooted and established in love, that they may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that

they may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. We ask this of him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. ⁷

Response 1: English can work!

by Abu Bill

Abu Bill is a colleague who studied Arabic formally. He, with his family, has lived and worked in two countries of the Gulf for almost twenty years.

God loves the diversity of languages in Arabia

The Arab world is richly diverse linguistically. In France, I met for a time with some North African believers who spoke French but not Arabic. I heard Algerians mixing French and Arabic in each sentence. In Jordan, many want to practice their English, but in the Gulf, they use English to communicate with the many expatriates (whether from India, the Philippines or elsewhere), who in most Gulf countries are in the majority.

Within each country there is a wide spectrum of diversity. Urban locals can be quite different from rural locals. There are different ethnic groups, different origins, different

home languages, different social levels, different sects and kinds of Muslims, different priorities and degrees of loyalty to various aspects of culture – of which language is a part.

Which heart language?

Some Gulf locals prefer Farsi, Baluchi or Swahili to Arabic. When our children, at age four, began attending one of the many private bilingual, English-Arabic schools for Gulf locals, they were not the only ones who were weak in Arabic! Many locals find it difficult to read Arabic. Some locals even prefer English to Arabic as a heart language! One Omani

⁷ Ephesians 3:17-21, adapted from the *New International Version*

mother at a parent-teacher meeting asked my wife what the Gulf local principal was saying in Arabic. English is prominent in the Gulf: in the work place, in the shops and even in the homes with expatriate maids. Movies and popular culture are dominated by English. Half of the population is young – many of them are being raised in English.

Many choose progress and English over tradition and Arabic

Two supreme values war in much of Arabia: progress – economic and technological development, associated with the West and the English language – and Islamic and Arabic tradition. While some try to hold on to both, and others seek a return to Islam, many vote with their feet for progress and English. English is seen as one of the most important factors in ‘getting ahead’ educationally, vocationally and materially. Most universities in the Gulf – whether they are government-run or one of the many new private universities – teach most subjects in English, not to speak of the fact that many Gulf locals study in English in universities abroad. Some Gulf families speak to their children in English, the language of youth and of the future.

In many Gulf countries, locals in the middle and upper classes send their children, from the age of four, to private bilingual schools, which teach in English half of the day and in Arabic the other half of the day; then at the age of nine or ten, these schools teach in English for eighty per cent of

the school day. Many of the western expatriate (English only) schools have Gulf locals for twenty per cent of their students. Locals who cannot afford these schools send their children to one of the many Indian-run (English only) schools. I remember once seeing students in their British school uniforms at a fast-food restaurant, male and female teenagers obviously interacting and horse playing as westerners will – then noticing as I came closer that they were Gulf locals! Some of these may find difficulties fitting in culturally (like some of our children may) – but their heart language is English.

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Some Gulf local university girls wanted to study the Bible – but their missionary lady friend didn’t get it. She tried to get them to study the Bible in Arabic, but they preferred the Bible in their heart language, English. One local young man is a driver, without much of a future. He prefers reading the Bible with his missionary friend in English – in his case, because he wants to learn the Bible and also learn English.

English can work!

Good Arabic might help a few to become insiders, but being an outsider also has its advantages. While a local might copy how an Arabic

speaker prays and teaches, a local learning in English knows he needs to adapt it to his own language and culture, in his own way. An expatriate without Arabic will not be as tempted to lead a group of converts meeting in Arabic who are looking for a leader, but will instead help one of them to lead.

Some of us, having learned French or Arabic, find we can share the gospel and worship in a second language. Likewise, a Gulf local may be able to understand and pray in English.

Christ has sent many different servants to reach Gulf locals, each with different gifts and abilities, different backgrounds and ages, different training and time commitments. Christians in expatriate churches – Indians, Filipinos, Westerners and so on – are welcoming Gulf locals to Christ (probably more than we are), even though they don't have the advantage of our training. May there be more expatriates in the Gulf, more with Arabic and also more without, who

love Christ and love Gulf locals, and who can share the Good News with them using the language of love.

**Ministries to the Arab world:
whatever it takes – even English!**

Our company is known for its depth in Arabic. May we also be known for our breadth, opening a door to those who for various reasons cannot dedicate themselves to years of full-time Arabic study, but who value our training in culture and Islamics, in missions and ministry, learning to learn and to teach in relationships of love. May we who are strong not look down on the weaker members, but give them extra honour as they fulfil their role in the Great Commission. May we have hundreds more missionaries who will make the effort to learn Arabic well. May we also have hundreds and even thousands more missionaries who will have a similar commitment to learning and ministry, using English and French to reach those they can. May Christ the Lord of the harvest be glorified as we each do our part to build His church.

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Response 2: Though at times difficult to fit in, learning Arabic gives opportunity to bless in every situation

by Daniel & Maria

Daniel and Maria studied Arabic for two years at the GAP institute, and then, not finding work, they changed careers in order to be able to return to the Gulf two years later. Formerly a researcher, Daniel has been teaching in an international school in the north of the Gulf for three years. Maria is a full-time mother of two boys. Both Daniel and Maria have relationships with people in their community.

Proficiency in Arabic remains an essential tool for any sort of long-term ministry in the Gulf region. While a high proportion of the local inhabitants may have a conversational level of English – especially if they are younger and educated at an international school or have studied overseas – as soon as any in-depth conversation starts, Arabic is their preferred medium. Any kind of spiritual conversation falls into this category. Of course, in order for the message to be communicated clearly, a reasonable level of Arabic proficiency is required, and from this perspective, a two-year commitment to full-time language study will certainly provide a solid foundation for subsequent self-study or tutor-assisted learning.

However, especially in the Gulf region, the job market is increasingly competitive and workers wanting to serve here are finding that their CVs have to be of the same standard as if they were applying for positions in their home countries. In addition, an increasing number of locals are re-

turning to their own countries after studying for higher degrees abroad or gaining international experience working abroad. These people can be applying for the same type of positions as our workers are applying for. So, the effect of a two-year gap in a CV for ‘full-time language/cultural study’ can be significant and, from a secular point of view, can decrease the applicant’s chance of success. Should we be more relaxed about the length of full-time language study on which we insist, and allow field leaders to judge individual cases on their own merits? What happens if a suitable job opening is found in the second year of language study, for example? Although a two-year study period will provide a solid foundation in Arabic, if a job is found and the worker has to move to another country, there will be a frustrating period of adjustment to a local spoken dialect – how long depends on the amount of time the job allows for him or her to concentrate on this. This may argue for a worker to find a position first, and then when he is in the country, to find some way to

study the language. However, this will obviously not be as efficient as a period of full-time study.

Our personal experience has been that, whatever the drawbacks, the time we spent studying Arabic full-time was time well spent, and it provided us with invaluable insights into and experiences of local culture, customs and traditions. At present, our ability to communicate in the local language quickly distinguishes us from the other western expatriates living here, and the ignorance or blatant disregard for local culture with which they are associated. Given the large numbers of expats working here in comparison to the number of local inhabitants, this is not an insignificant advantage. Other fellow-workers have served here without knowing Arabic and have made many significant relationships

with local friends. However, most of them felt frustrated at the limitations that a lack of Arabic placed on their ministry and so made attempts at learning it. Some of them also made huge cultural blunders that could easily have been avoided had they spent time learning the language somewhere in the region.

The ability to speak Arabic provides the opportunity to 'be a blessing in every situation'. Waiting in queues for official forms to be stamped, waiting for food to be cooked, trying to sort out bureaucratic problems in government offices or waiting to be served in a busy shop can all be transformed into times when we can share with people and show them something of the character of Christ - even if it is just a pleasant smile and a genuine thanks to a bored employee in a government ministry office.

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