

Syrian Arabic grammatical reference sheet

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This is a brief grammatical summary of the variety of Arabic spoken in the Damascus area in Syria. It is intended to be used for quick reference. For a more detailed grammatical description, see A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic (Cowell, Georgetown University Press, 2005), to which page references are provided in the margin. The transcription system is based on Alif Baa (Brustad et al., Georgetown University Press, 2010), extended with the vowels e/ee and o/oo. The Arabic writing represent written Syrian Arabic vernacular, as used in text messaging, advertisement, etc. There is some variation in this form of writing, especially in the degree to which Standard Arabic orthography is retained.

1 Phonemics

1.1 Consonants

ʾ	ا	D	ض
b	ب	T	ط
t	ت	(DH)	ظ
(th)	ث	ʿ	ع
j	ج	gh	غ
H	ح	f	ف
kh	خ	(q)	ق
d	د	k	ك
(dh)	ذ	l	ل
r	ر	m	م
z	ز	n	ن
s	س	h	ه
sh	ش	w	و
S	ص	y	ي

Phonemes within parenthesis are specific to Standard Arabic and are not part of the Syrian Arabic phonemic system. Their respective letters are however commonly used in Syrian-Standard cognates in written vernacular.¹

1.2 Vowels

¹For the us connected letter forms, see *The Arabic Writing System* (<http://andreasmhallberg.github.io/documents/arabic-letters-and-vowel-markers.tex.pdf>)

Short	Long	
i	ii	ي
u	uu	و
a	aa	ا
e	ee	ي
o	oo	و

Only long vowels have an orthographic representation. Vowel diacritics are generally not used in written Arabic vernacular.

1.3 Standard to Syrian phonemic conversion rules

ay → ee	bayt	→ beet	بيت
aw → oo	yawm	→ yoom	يوم
q → ʾ	daqiiqa	→ daʾiiʾa	دقيقة
th → t	thalatha	→ tlaate	ثلاثة
(s)	mathalan	→ masalan	مثلا
dh → d	dhahab	→ dahab	ذهب
(z)	idha	→ iza	إذا
DH → D	DHuhr	→ Duhr	ظهر

These conversion rules represent regular sound relations in Standard–Syrian cognates. Written Syrian Arabic often reflect Standard Arabic orthography. Standard Arabic pronunciation is often retained in formal or literary words (*dimuqraaTiyye*) and in non-Syrian Arabic place names (*al-qaahira* ‘Cairo’). Standard Arabic *th* and *dh* are in these context rendered *s* and *z* respectively.

2 Pronouns

2.1 Personal pronouns

Indep.	Attached	متصل	منفصل
<i>ana</i>	-i (-ya)	ي	انا
<i>inti</i>	-ak (-k)	ك	انت
<i>inta</i>	-ik (-ki)	ك (كي)	انتي
<i>huwwe</i>	-u (-h)	هو/ه (ه)	هو
<i>hiyye</i>	-a (-ha)	ها ²	هي
<i>niHna</i>	-na	نا	نحننا
<i>intu</i>	-kon	كن	انتو
<i>hunnen</i>	-on (-hun)	هن (هن)	هنن

The forms in parenthesis are used on words with final vowel: *aʿTaa-ki* ‘he gave you’. Attached pronouns are used for

prep. compl.	<i>maʿ-u</i>	‘with-him’
possession	<i>ktaab-u</i>	‘his book’
direct object	<i>katabt-u</i>	‘I wrote it’
indirect object	<i>katabt-l-u</i>	‘I wrote for him’ ³

The connective *-l-* ‘for’ for indirect objects may take the form *-el-* to prevent consonant clusters: *katabt-el-kun* ‘I wrote for you (pl.)’.

(48of)

2.2 Demonstrative pronouns

	Proximal	Distant	قريب	بعيد
Masc.	<i>haada</i>	<i>hadaak</i>	هاد	هداك
Fem.	<i>haay</i>	<i>hadiik</i>	هاي	هديك
Pl.	<i>hadool</i>	<i>haadooliik</i>	هدول	هدولييك

(552)

²The *h* in *ها* is only pronounced if used with a word ending in a vowel.

³A direct object may then be added with the word *yaa-*: *katabt-l-ak yaa-h* ‘I wrote it for you’.

3 Prepositions

'and	عند	with, at
'a-	ع	to
'ala ⁴	على	on
men	من	from
Hadd	حد	next to
foo'	فوق	above
taHt	تحت	below
ma'	مع	with
wara	ورا	behind
'uddaam	قدام	in front of

w.noun/w.pronoun

bi-/fi-	بـ/فيـ	in, at
la-/el-	لـ/لـ	for (ownership)
been/beenaat-	بين/بينات	between, among

The latter three prepositions have two separate forms for use with nouns and pronouns respectively:

bi-l-bayt	بالبيت	'in the house'
fi-h	فيه	'in it'

(176ff)

4 Question words

shuu?	شو؟	what?
miin?	مين؟	who?
eemta?	ايمتى؟	when?
kiif?	كيف؟	how?
ween?	وين؟	where?
leesh?	ليش؟	why?

Yes/no question formed with rising intonation, or with an elongated clause-final syllable. *Ween* and *kiif* take attached pronouns:

ween-ak?	وينك؟	'where are you?'
kiif-ak?	كيفك؟	'how are you?'

(379)

5 Verbs

⁴ 'ala becomes 'alee-عليه when used with a pronominal suffix: 'alee-ha 'on it/her'.

5.1 Inflection

	Non-past	Past	المضارع	الماضي
I	<i>i-ktib</i>	<i>katab-t</i>	اكتب	كتبت
you (ms.)	<i>ti-ktib</i>	<i>katab-t</i>	تكتب	كتبت
you (fs.)	<i>ti-ktib-i</i>	<i>katab-ti</i>	تكتبي	كتبتني
he	<i>yi-ktib</i>	<i>katab</i>	يكتب	كتب
she	<i>ti-ktib</i>	<i>katab-it</i>	تكتب	كتبت
we	<i>ni-ktib</i>	<i>katab-na</i>	نكتب	كتبنا
you (pl.)	<i>ti-ktib-u</i>	<i>katab-tu</i>	تكتبو	كتبتم
they	<i>yi-ktib-u</i>	<i>katab-u</i>	يكتبو	كتبوا

The pronoun is often omitted. The non-past verb is always preceded by one of the following:

<i>b</i> ⁵	بـ	habitual, generalities	(320)
'am	عم	progressive	
<i>Ha-/raH</i>	ح/رح	future	
<i>laazim</i>	لازم	'have to'	

or an auxiliary verb, in which case both the auxiliary and the main verb are inflected for person:

<i>biddu yiktib</i>	بدو يكتب	'he wants to write'
<i>byiHibb yiktib</i>	بيحب يكتب	'he likes to write'
<i>kaan yiktib</i>	كان يكتب	'he was writing'

5.2 Kaan

	Non-past	Past	المضارع	الماضي
I	<i>i-kuun</i>	<i>kent</i>	اكون	كنت
you (ms.)	<i>ti-kuun</i>	<i>kent</i>	تكون	كنت
you (fs.)	<i>ti-kuun-i</i>	<i>kent-i</i>	تكوني	كنتني
he	<i>yi-kuun</i>	<i>kaan</i>	يكون	كان
she	<i>ti-kuun</i>	<i>kaan-it</i>	تكون	كانت
we	<i>ni-kuun</i>	<i>ken-na</i>	نكون	كانا
you (pl.)	<i>ti-kuun-u</i>	<i>ken-tu</i>	تكونو	كانتم
they	<i>yi-kuun-u</i>	<i>kaan-u</i>	يكونو	كانوا

Kaan is used

- to place equational (verb-less) clauses in past tense: *kaan aHmad Taaleb* 'Ahmad was a student'
- with verbs to express a past ongoing event: *aHmad kaan ('am) yidrus* 'Ahmed was writing'

5.3 Pseudo-verbs

<i>bidd-</i>	بد	'want'
'ind-	عند	'has'
<i>fii</i>	في	'there is'

The pseudo-verbs are negated as verbs with *maa* but do not follow normal person and tense inflection. *bidd-* and *'und-* are inflected for person with attached pronouns, like nouns (*bidd-u* 'he wants'; *'ind-u* 'he has'). *fii* is not inflected for person. The pseudo-verbs are inflected for past with the auxiliary verb *kaan*.

6 Negation

<i>maa</i>	ما	verbs
<i>muu</i>	مو	non-verbal clauses
<i>la''a</i>	لاء	answering in the negative

⁵For 1pl. the *b-* prefix is partially assimilated and pronounced as *m*: *mniktib*. This is often reflected in Arabic orthography: منكتب.

	Verbal 'Ahmed '		Equational
Past	<i>aHmad maa daras</i>	أحمد ما درس	<i>aHmad maa kaan Taaleb</i>
Present	<i>aHmad maa byidrus</i>	أحمد ما بيدرس	<i>aHmad muu Taaleb</i>
Future	<i>aHmad maa ḥa-/raḥ yidrus</i>	أحمد ما ح/رح يدرس	<i>aHmad maa ḥa-/raḥ yikuun Taaleb</i>
			أحمد ما ح/رح يكين طالب

7 Numerals

	Absolute	Construct	غير مضاف	مضاف
1	<i>waaHid/wahde</i>		واحد/وحدة	
2	<i>itneen/tinteen</i>		اتنين/تنتين	
3	<i>tlaate</i>	<i>tlatt</i>	ثلاث	ثلاثة
4	<i>arba'a</i>	<i>arba'</i>	أربع	أربعة
5	<i>khamse</i>	<i>khamst</i>	خمس	خمسة
6	<i>sitte</i>	<i>sitt</i>	ست	ستة
7	<i>sab'a</i>	<i>sab'</i>	سبع	سبعة
8	<i>tmane</i>	<i>tman</i>	ثمان	ثمانة
9	<i>tis'a</i>	<i>tis'</i>	تسع	تسعة
10	<i>'ashara</i>	<i>'ashar</i>	عشر	عشرة
11	<i>idda'sh</i>	<i>idda'shar</i>	ادعشر	ادعش
12	<i>itna'sh</i>	<i>itna'shar</i>	اتنعشر	اتنعش
13	<i>tlata'sh</i>	<i>tlata'shar</i>	تلتعشر	تلتاعش
14	<i>arba'ta'sh</i>	<i>arba'ta'shar</i>	اربعتعشر	اربعتعش
15	<i>khamasta'sh</i>	<i>khamasta'shar</i>	خمستعشر	خمستعش
16	<i>sitta'sh</i>	<i>sitta'shar</i>	ستتعشر	ستعش
17	<i>sab'ata'sh</i>	<i>sab'ata'shar</i>	سبعتعشر	سبعتعش
18	<i>tmanta'sh</i>	<i>tmanta'shar</i>	بماتعشر	بماتعش
19	<i>tis'ata'sh</i>	<i>tis'ata'shar</i>	تسعتعشر	تسعتعش
20	<i>'ishriin</i>			عشرين
30	<i>tlaatiin</i>			ثلاثين
40	<i>arba'iin</i>			اربعين
50	<i>khamsiin</i>			خمين
60	<i>sittiin</i>			ستين
70	<i>sab'iin</i>			سبعين
80	<i>tmaaniin</i>			ثمانين
90	<i>tis'iin</i>			يسعين
100	<i>miyye</i>	<i>miit</i>		مية

The numerals *one* and *two* are used only for emphasis or contrast, or when ordering in restaurants (*itneen shaay* 'two tee'). Otherwise, the lone noun in singular or dual is used.

The *absolute* form of the numeral is used when it not followed by a noun, and the *construct* form when it followed by a noun: *tlatt awlaad* 'three boys.' Numerals 3–10 have a special construct form with a final *-t* when used with one of three nouns *ayyaam* 'days', *shuhuur* 'months', and *aalaaf* 'thousands': *khamst ayyam* 'five days'.

Numerals 11–19 are constructed of the unit number and the ending *-ta'sh*, with some irregularities in 11, 12, and 15. On the construct form the suffix *-ar* is added.

Centenials are constructed of the construct form of the unit and the ending *-iin*, with only 20 having an irregular form. In complex numbers, the unit number appears before the centennial in its absolute form. The unit and the centennial are connected with the conjunction *u-*: *sab'a u-tlaatin*, 'thirty-six'.

⁵The form *tinteen* is used in connection with feminine nouns.