

Syrian Arabic grammatical summary

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This grammar is under construction. The following topics are planned to be added:

- syllable structure
- exclamations
- imperative
- dual
- gender

- gender and number congruency
- the possessive exponent
- verbal uses of participles
- defective, double, and hollow verbs

1 Introduction

This is a short pedagogical summary of the variety of Arabic spoken in the Damascus area. It is intended to be used for quick reference and overview for beginner to intermediate language learners. It was written as a complement to the Syrian-Arabic material in *Al-Kitaab fii Ta'allun al-ʿArabiyya* (Brustad et al., Georgetown University Press, 2013) but can be used independently. Parts of it are based on *A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic* (Georgetown University Press, 2005 [1964]), to which the reader is referred for a detailed and comprehensive grammar.

This grammar uses a simplified transcription (see Phonology) adapted from *Alif Baa* (Brustad et al., Georgetown University Press, 2010). Examples in Arabic script represent written vernacular as used in text messaging, advertisement, etc. There is a considerable variation in vernacular orthography, especially in the extent to which Standard Arabic spelling is followed, and forms that differ from those presented here are therefore common.

For corrections or suggestions on improvements, please contact the author.¹

2 Phonology

2.1 Consonants

ʾ	ء	<i>D</i>	ض
<i>b</i>	ب	<i>T</i>	ط
<i>t</i>	ت	(<i>DH</i>)	ظ
(<i>th</i>)	ث	<i>c</i>	ع
<i>j</i>	ج	<i>gh</i>	غ
<i>H</i>	ح	<i>f</i>	ف
<i>kh</i>	خ	(<i>q</i>)	ق
<i>d</i>	د	<i>k</i>	ك
(<i>dh</i>)	ذ	<i>l</i>	ل
<i>r</i>	ر	<i>m</i>	م
<i>z</i>	ز	<i>n</i>	ن
<i>s</i>	س	<i>h</i>	ه
<i>sh</i>	ش	<i>w</i>	و
<i>S</i>	ص	<i>y</i>	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.²

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²For the use of connected letter-forms, see *The Arabic Writing System* (available for download at <http://andreamhallberg.github.io/documents/>).

2.2 Vowels

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

Note:

- Only long vowels have an orthographic representation.
- *i* and *u* occur primarily in word final position as part of inflections (*beet-i* ‘my house’, *bye^emal-u* ‘they do’).
- The vowel here represented as *e* is generally realized as *schwa* [ə].
- There are no diphthongs in Syrian Arabic. The Standard Arabic diphthongs *ay* and *aw* correspond in Syrian Arabic to the long vowels *ee* and *oo* respectively.

2.3 Standard to Syrian phonemic conversion rules

These conversion rules represent regular sound relations in Standard–Syrian cognates. Standard Arabic pronunciation is often retained in formal or literary words (*dimuqraaTiyye*) and in non-Syrian Arabic place names (*il-qaahira* ‘Cairo’). Standard Arabic *th* and *dh* are normally realized as *s* and *z* respectively for such words.

<i>aw</i>	→	<i>oo</i>	<i>yawm</i>	→	<i>yoom</i>	يوم	day
<i>ay</i>	→	<i>ee</i>	<i>bayn</i>	→	<i>been</i>	بين	between
<i>q</i>	→	ʔ	<i>daqiiqa</i>	→	<i>daʔiiʔa</i>	دقيقة	minute
<i>DH</i>	→	<i>D</i>	<i>DHuhr</i>	→	<i>Duhr</i>	ظهر	noon
ʔ	→	ø	<i>masaaʔ</i>	→	<i>masa</i>	مساء	evening
<i>th</i>	→	<i>t</i>	<i>thalaatha</i>	→	<i>tlaate</i>	ثلاثة	three
		(<i>s</i>)	<i>mathalan</i>	→	<i>masalan</i>	مثلا	for example
<i>dh</i>	→	<i>d</i>	<i>dhahab</i>	→	<i>dahab</i>	ذهب	gold
		(<i>z</i>)	<i>idha</i>	→	<i>iza</i>	إذا	if

3 Pronouns

3.1 Personal pronouns

	Independent	Attached		متصل	منفصل
I	<i>ana</i>	<i>-i</i>	<i>(-ya)</i>	ي	انا
you (m.s.)	<i>enti</i>	<i>-ak</i>	<i>(-k)</i>	ك	انت
you (f.s.)	<i>enta</i>	<i>-ik</i>	<i>(-ki)</i>	ك (كي)	انتني
he	<i>huuwe</i>	<i>-o</i>	<i>(-h)</i>	و (ه)	هو
she	<i>hiyye</i>	<i>-a</i>	<i>(-ha)</i>	ها	هي
we	<i>neHna</i>	<i>-na</i>		نا	نحننا
you (pl.)	<i>intu</i>	<i>-kon</i>		كن	انتو
they	<i>honnen</i>	<i>-on</i>	<i>(-hon)</i>	ن (هن)	هنن

Forms in parenthesis are used with words with final vowel: *a^eTaa-ki* ‘he gave you (f.)’.

Attached pronouns are used for:

possession	<i>ктааб-о</i>	‘his book’
prepositional complements	<i>ма^e-о</i>	‘with-him’
direct objects	<i>катабт-о</i>	‘I wrote it’
indirect objects	<i>катабт-л-о</i>	‘I wrote for him’

The connective *-l-* ‘for’ for indirect objects may take the form *-el-* to prevent consonant clusters: *катабт-ел-кон* ‘I wrote for you (pl.)’. A direct object may then be added with the word *yaa-*: *катабт-л-ак yaa-ha* ‘I wrote it (fem.) for you’.

3.2 Demonstrative pronouns

	Close	Distant	بعيد	قريب
m.s.	<i>haada</i>	<i>hadaak(e)</i>	هداك	هاذا
f.s.	<i>haay(e)</i>	<i>hadiik(e)</i>	هديك	هاي
pl.	<i>hadool(e)</i>	<i>haadooliik</i>	هدوليك	هدول

Note:

- Several forms have a stylistic variant with final *e*.
- *haada* has a shortened form, *haad*, used only at the end of phrases: *shuu haad?* ‘What is this?’.
- The distant plural pronoun has several variants not listed above, including *hadook*, *hadenk*, and *hadenken*.

4 Nouns

Nouns are inflected for number and definiteness, and most animate nouns (referring to humans or animals) are also inflected for gender.

4.1 Plural

There are four ways to form plural: *irregular*, *regular masculine*, *regular feminine*, and *general human*:

		Singular	Plural		جمع	مفرد
Irrergula		<i>beet</i>	<i>buywut</i>	house	بيوت	بيت
Regular masculine	<i>-iin</i>	<i>muslim</i>	<i>muslemiin</i>	muslim	مسلمين	مسلم
Regular feminine	<i>-aat</i>	<i>sheghle</i>	<i>sheghlaat</i>	thing	شغلات	شغلة
General human	<i>-(iyy)e</i>	<i>eraaqi</i>	<i>eraaqiyye</i>	Iraqi	عراقية	عراقي

5 Prepositions

<i>a-</i>	ع	to
<i>ala/alee-</i>	على/عليه	on
<i>and</i>	عند	with, at
<i>been</i>	بين	between
<i>been/beenaat-</i>	بين/بينات	among
<i>bi-/fi-</i>	ب/في	in, at
<i>men</i>	من	from
<i>Hadd</i>	حد	next to
<i>foo³</i>	فوق	above
<i>taHt</i>	تحت	below
<i>ma^c</i>	مع	with
<i>wara</i>	ورا	behind
<i>uddaam</i>	قدام	in front of
<i>la-/el-</i>	ل/لـ	for (ownership)

For the prepositions with two alternate forms, the first is used with nouns and the second with pronouns:

<i>bi-l-beet</i>	بالبيت	‘in the house’
<i>fi-h</i>	فيه	‘in it’

6 Question words

<i>shuu?</i>	شو؟	what?
<i>miin?</i>	مين؟	who?
<i>eemta?</i>	ايمتى؟	when?
<i>kiif?</i>	كيف؟	how?
<i>ween?</i>	وين؟	where?
<i>leesh?</i>	ليش؟	why?
<i>addeesh?</i>	قديش؟	how much?
<i>kam?</i>	كم؟	how many?

Question words are normally clause-initial, and may be preceded by a preposition:

ma^c miin^c am taHki? ‘Who are you talking to?’

Only *ween* and *kiif* take attached pronouns:

<i>ween-ak?</i>	وينك؟	‘Where are you?’
<i>kiif-ak?</i>	كيفك؟	‘How are you?’

Yes/no-question are formed with rising intonation.

7 Verbs

7.1 Inflection

	Non-past	Past	المضارع	الماضي
I	<i>e-ktob</i>	<i>katab-t</i>	اكتب	كتب
you (ms.)	<i>t(e)-ktob</i>	<i>katab-t</i>	تكتب	كتب
you (fs.)	<i>t(e)-ktob-i</i>	<i>katab-ti</i>	تكتبي	كتبت
he	<i>ye-ktob</i>	<i>katab</i>	يكتب	كتب
she	<i>t(e)-ktob</i>	<i>katab-et</i>	تكتب	كتبت
we	<i>n(e)-ktob</i>	<i>katab-na</i>	نكتب	كتبنا
you (pl.)	<i>te-ktob-u</i>	<i>katab-tu</i>	تكتبو	كتبتم
they	<i>ye-ktob-u</i>	<i>katab-u</i>	يكتبو	كتبو

The pronoun is often omitted. The *e* in parenthesis is omitted on stems beginning with a single consonant *t-shuuf-i* ‘you (fs.) see’.

The non-past verb form is preceded by one of the following:

<i>b-</i>	ب	habitual, generalities
<i>‘am</i>	عم	ongoing (progressive)
<i>Ha-/raH</i>	ح/ح	future
<i>laazim</i>	لازم	‘have to’
auxiliary verb		see below

Note:

- For 1s, the initial letter *alif* ا is normally omitted when preceded by *b*: *bektob* يكتب.
- For 1pl. the *b-* prefix is partially assimilated and pronounced as *m*: *mniktib*. This is often reflected in orthography: منكتب.
- Some speakers combine *b-* and *‘am*: *‘am b-yektob*.

7.2 Auxiliary verbs

The main verb may be preceded by an auxiliary verb. Both the auxiliary and the main verb are inflected for person:

<i>beddo yektob</i>	يدويكتب	‘he wants to write’
<i>byeHebb yektob</i>	بيحب يكتب	‘he likes to write’
<i>kaan yektob</i>	كان يكتب	‘he was writing’
<i>Saar yektob</i>	صار يكتب	‘he began to write’

7.3 *Kaan* ‘was’

	Non-Past	Past	المضارع	الماضي
I	<i>e-kuun</i>	<i>kent</i>	اكون	كنت
you (ms.)	<i>te-kuun</i>	<i>kent</i>	تكون	كنت
you (fs.)	<i>te-kuun-i</i>	<i>kent-i</i>	تكوني	كنتي
he	<i>ye-kuun</i>	<i>kaan</i>	يكون	كان
she	<i>te-kuun</i>	<i>kaan-et</i>	تكون	كانت
we	<i>ne-kuun</i>	<i>ken-na</i>	نكون	كنا
you (pl.)	<i>te-kuun-u</i>	<i>ken-tu</i>	تكونو	كنتو
they	<i>ye-kuun-u</i>	<i>kaan-u</i>	يكونو	كانو

Kaan is used

1. to make a verb-less clause past or future tense:

aHmed kaan Taaleb ‘Ahmad was a student’
aHmed Ha-yekuun Taaleb ‘Ahmad will be a student’

2. to express a past ongoing (progressive) event:

aHmed kaan (^cam) yedros ‘Ahmed was studying’

7.4 Pseudo-verbs

<i>bedd-</i>	بد	‘want’
^c <i>and-</i>	عند	‘has’
<i>fii</i>	في	‘there is’

The pseudo-verbs are negated as verbs with *maa* (see Negation) but do not follow verbal person and tense inflection. *bedd-* and ^c*and-* are inflected for person with attached pronouns, like nouns, while *fii* is not inflected:

<i>bedd-a ktaab</i>	بدها كتاب	‘she wants a book’ [‘her wish is a book’]
^c <i>and-a ktaab</i>	عندها كتاب	‘she has a book’ [‘with her is a book’]
<i>fii ktaab</i>	في كتاب	‘there is a book’

Pseudo-verbs are inflected for tense with an auxiliary *kaan*:

<i>kaan ^cand-a ktaab</i>	كان عندها كتاب	‘She had a book’.
<i>Ha-yekuun ^cand-a ktaab</i>	سيكون عندها كتاب	‘She will have a book’.

8 Negation

<i>maa</i>	ما	verbs
<i>muu</i>	مو	non-verbal clauses

In effect, *muu* is used to negate verbless clauses in present tense, otherwise the negation *maa* is used:

	Verbal clause	Verbless (“is”) clause
Past	‘Ahmed is studying.’ <i>aHmed maa daras</i> أحمد ما درس	‘Ahmed is a student.’ <i>aHmed maa kaan Taaleb</i> أحمد ما كان طالب
Present	<i>aHmed maa byedrus</i> أحمد ما يدرس	<i>aHmed muu Taaleb</i> أحمد مو طالب
Future	<i>aHmed maa Ha-/raH yedrus</i> أحمد ما ح/رح يدرس	<i>aHmed maa Ha-/raH yekuun Taaleb</i> أحمد ما ح/رح يكيين طالب

8.1 *maa-n-*

maa- followed by a connecting *-n-* and an attached pronoun (*maan-i*, *maan-ak*, *maan-ik*, etc.) may be used to reply in the negative to a statement, question, or implication. For example,

maa-n-i ju^ʿaan ماني جوعان ‘I am not hungry’

can be used to answer someone saying that you are hungry, asking whether you are hungry, or urging you to eat.

9 Numerals 1–100

	Independent	Counting	مضاف	غير مضاف
1	<i>waaHed</i> (m.)/ <i>waHde</i> (f.)			واحد/وحدة
2	<i>etneen</i> (m.)/ <i>tenteen</i> (f.)			اثنين/تنتين
3	<i>tlaate</i>	<i>tlatt</i>	ثلاث	ثلاثة
4	<i>arba^ca</i>	<i>arba^c</i>	أربع	أربعة
5	<i>khamse</i>	<i>khamse</i>	خمس	خمسة
6	<i>sette</i>	<i>sett</i>	ست	ستة
7	<i>sab^ca</i>	<i>sab^c</i>	سبع	سبعة
8	<i>tmaane</i>	<i>tman</i>	ثمان	ثمانة
9	<i>tes^ca</i>	<i>tes^c</i>	تسع	تسعة
10	<i>^cashara</i>	<i>^cashar</i>	عشر	عشرة
11	<i>edda^csh</i>	<i>edda^cshar</i>	ادعشر	ادعش
12	<i>eTna^csh</i>	<i>eTna^cshar</i>	اطنعشر	اطنعش
13	<i>tlaTa^csh</i>	<i>tlaTa^cshar</i>	تلاطعشر	تلاطعش
14	<i>arba^cTa^csh</i>	<i>arba^cTa^cshar</i>	اربعةطعشر	اربعةطعش
15	<i>khamasTa^csh</i>	<i>khamasTa^cshar</i>	خمسطةعشر	خمسطةعش
16	<i>seTTa^csh</i>	<i>seTTa^cshar</i>	سطعشر	سطعش
17	<i>sab^caTa^csh</i>	<i>sab^caTa^cshar</i>	سبعةطعشر	سبعةطعش
18	<i>tmanTa^csh</i>	<i>tmanTa^cshar</i>	تماطعشر	تماطعش
19	<i>tes^caTa^csh</i>	<i>tes^caTa^cshar</i>	تسعةطعشر	تسعةطعش
20	<i>^ceshriin</i>			عشرين
30	<i>tlaatiin</i>			ثلاثين
40	<i>arba^ciin</i>			اربعين
50	<i>khamsiin</i>			خمسين
60	<i>settiin</i>			ستين
70	<i>sab^ciin</i>			سبعين
80	<i>tmaaniin</i>			ثمانين
90	<i>tes^ciin</i>			يسعين
100	<i>miyye</i>	<i>miit</i>		مئة

The *independent* form of the numeral is used when it stands by itself and is not followed by a noun. The *counting* form is when the numeral is followed by counted a noun: *tlaate* ‘three’, but *tlatt ewlaad* ‘three boys.’

Note:

- 1–2 are used only for emphasis or contrast, or when ordering in restaurants and the like (*itneen shaay* ‘two tea’). Otherwise, the lone noun in singular or dual is used (*ktaab* ‘[a/one] book’; *ktabeen* ‘two books’). 1 and 2 are the only numerals that inflect for gender.
- 3–10 have a special form with a final *-t* when used with one of three following nouns:

<i>eyyaam</i>	'days'	(<i>khamst eyyam</i> 'five days')
<i>eshhur</i>	'months'	(<i>khamst eshhur</i> 'five months')
<i>aalaaf</i>	'thousands'	(<i>ashart aalaaf</i> 'ten thousand')

- For 3–10, the counted noun is in the plural: *tlatt kutub* 'three books', and for numerals above 10, it is in the singular: *idda^cashar ktaab* 'eleven book[s]'.¹
- 11–19 are constructed from the counting form of the unit number and the ending *-Ta^csh*, with irregularities in 11, 12, and 15.
- Decades (20, 30, etc.) are constructed from the counting form of the unit number and the ending *-iin*, with only 20 having an irregular form. In complex numbers, the unit in independent form appears before the decades with the two parts connected with *u-* 'and': *sab^ca u-tlaatiin*, 'thirty-six'.
- For numbers above one hundred there is no counting form for 100: *miyye u-tlaate kelime* '103 words'.