



Arabic Language Throughout the Ages and Its Contribution To Protect Heritage of World Knowledge

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Abstract: Arabic is a very old and viable language. Millions of people use it in their day to day life. In the past it has preserved a vast knowledge of the world e.g. Indian, Greek, Persian etc. from ruination and decay and contributed to various fields of science and literature such as prose, poetry, medicine, mathematics, optics, astronomy and so on and so forth. It reached to its zenith during the Abbasside period and achieved the status of Langua Franca. It lost its glory because of unrest in Spain and Mongol and Turkish invasion from East and went through a relative stagnation. Its revival begun when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt in 1879 A.D. and now it has become world most attractive language than other in view of providing better opportunity of work and life style after discovery of oil in Arab world.

Keywords: Arabic Language, its Flexibility to translate Greek and Indian philosophy and science, its contribution to the fields of science and knowledge.

Arabic is a very old and rich language. Millions of people use Arabic as their mother tongue. There is around 25 countries on the globe where Arabic is being used as an official language. Its domain does not stop at the boundaries of the Arab phone area but goes beyond that. The word "Arab" means "nomad", which makes sense that Arabic originated from nomadic tribes in the desert regions of the Arabian Peninsula. It is written from right to left, in a cursive style, and includes 28 letters. Arabic belongs to the "Semitic" group of languages and is closely related to Hebrew and Aramaic.

It is worth mentioning that an inscription of Arabic found in the Syrian desert dating back to the fourth century A.D. The pre-Islamic Arab tribes who lived in the Arabian peninsula and neighboring regions had a thriving oral poetic tradition. But it was not systematically collected and recorded in written form until the eighth century A.D.

The two basic sources of Islam, the Holy Quran and the Sunnah, are available in the Arabic language as the Holy Quran was revealed on Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) through the Angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-three years, 610-632 A.D. and mother tongue of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) was Arabic in which he would talk, give sermons and order his followers to do something. All Muslims are required to use Arabic in their prayer. It is remarkable that this language has been preserved through the ages because of Holy Quran and Sunnah.

Under the Umayyad dynasty (661-750 A.D.), with Damascus as the center of power, Arabic continued its tradition of excellence. It enriched its literature with translations from Persian and other languages, and acquired new terminology in various fields of study such as linguistics, philosophy, and theology. Though Umayyads laid the ground for scientific inquiry but they focused mainly on Islamic law, early medicines and astronomy. They relied heavily on Syrian and Persian physicians irrespective of their cast and religion as Christian and Jews physicians were privileged to be court physicians. It is reported that Khalid bin Walid turned to science and knowledge when he failed to achieve caliphship. He therefore, brought chemistry teachers from Alexandrian school of Egypt who taught him chemistry and translated it into Arabic for him¹.

Under the Abbasid rule from Baghdad (750-1258 A.D.), Arabic literature reached its zenith. Linguistic studies achieved a new level of sophistication. Abbasid caliphs especially Abu Jafar Mansur paid attention toward the knowledge and established a scientific institution named Baitul Hikmah (house of wisdom). He sent delegation to Greece to bring scholarly works of Greek philosophers. During his period so many scholars, Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims, Christians and Jews even Indians proceeded to Baghdad and participated in this intellectual movement. Under his patronage, they translated valuable knowledge of Greece, Rome, India and

¹ Tarikhul Adabil Arabi, Hasan Zayyat, P. 149

Byzantine into Arabic. Appreciating the role played by Abu J'afar al-Mansur in rendering scholarly works into Arabic language and employing scholars from different regions, Arab historian Saeed al-Andalusi said: "much of the credit for this goes to the founder of Baghdad. There was a surge in spirit and an awakening in intelligence. The first of this dynasty to cultivate science was the second caliph, Abu Jafar al-Mansur. He was- May Allah have mercy on him- in addition to his profound knowledge of logic and law, very interested in philosophy and observational astronomy; he was fond of both and of the people who worked in these fields"².

Ibn Nadim a famous scholar in Abbasid period has written in his well known book "Al-Fehrist" that Yahya Bin Khalid Barmaki -who was very close to Caliph Harun Al-Rasheed and a Philomath invited prominent Indian physicians such as Kanaka, Manka Abindhan, Sanghal, Saleh Bin Bhel, etc. to Baghdad. They played a key role in the fields of medicines even Ibn Bhel was made as director of a hospital in Baghdad. It is reported that so many books on medical science were translated into Arabic in Sushrut Sanhita, Charaka Sanhita are remarkable.³ Apart from this, Indian books related to mathematics, Astronomy, etc. were also translated into Arabic.

This intellectual movement continued till al-M'amun al-Rasheed came to power. He was known as philosopher and Philomath caliph. He proved this practically when he remained in Merv capital of Khurasan approximately six years and involved himself in acquiring knowledge and giving his minister al-Fazal bin Al-Sahal full authority to run the caliphate from its capital Baghdad. Being a scholar and knowledge lover, he paid much attention to carry forward the scholarly movement of Arab scholars and allocated a big amount of money to render world knowledge into Arabic language. Thus his era is considered to be an era of science and knowledge. Because of Abbasids thrust for acquiring world knowledge and efforts of Arab scholars, world knowledge has been preserved from decay. They paved the way for the modern science and put indelible marks not only on literature but on science and technology too such as optic, surgery, medicine navigation, astrology, etc.

Because of Abbasside caliphs support and patronage, great scientists, literary figures emerged in Bagdad whose books have been widely read and cited by western writers. Ibn Al-Haytham, Al-Razi, Al-Kindi, Al-Jahiz, Hunayn ibn Ishaq Al-Ibadi, etc. were at the forefront of them. As for Ibn Al-Haytham, his comprehensive works on optics are considered not only a new theory of vision but important discussions of the propagation, reflection and refraction of light and colour too. Islamic world is indebted more to Hunayn ibn Ishaq Ibad and his team of translators than others. They together made the most important medical writings of Greeks available in Arabic and established a solid foundation for Arabic medicines by devising a distinctive methodology. Hunayn ibn Ishaq Ibad has written a systematic manual on ophthalmology complete with diagrams⁴.

Arab's contribution to arts and science in Spain was not less than what their brethren did in Baghdad. They are considered to be torch bearer of Europe when it was in dark age. They ruled in Spain approximately 7 hundred years during which great Arab scholars appeared. They not only made a powerful impact on Spain but contributed to world intellectual heritage too. Within a short period of time roughly from 1056 to 1269, some greatest personalities in Muslim Spain came forward and surprised the world with their inventions and findings such as Al-Bakri and Idrisi in geography, Ibn Zuhr (Latinized name Avenzoar) in medicine and surgery, Abu Bakar Muhammed Bin Yahya better known as Avempace in medicine, mathematics and astronomy, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Ibn Tufayl in philosophy, Ibn Arabi of Murcia in mysticism, so on and so forth⁵. Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi Latinized name (Abulcasis) was an Arab Andalusian physician, surgeon and chemist. He is considered to be one of the greatest surgeon of the middle age and known as "father of modern surgery". Commenting on the invention and contribution of Az-Zahrawi, Arabic editor of world Health Organization Salah Galal said:

"The greatest achievements in medieval surgery, however, are attributed to Az-Zahrawi of Moorish Spain. An important part of his medical encyclopedia, The Book of Concessions, deals with obstetrics, pediatrics, and midwifery, as well as with general human anatomy. The surgical part of the encyclopedia contains a discussion of cauterization, the treatment of wounds, the extracting of arrows, oral hygiene, and the setting of bones in simple and compound fractures

He used antiseptics in the treatment of wounds and skin injuries; devised sutures from animal intestines, silk, wool, and other substances; and developed techniques to widen urinary passages and explore body cavities surgically. His surgery contained about 200 surgical instruments that he himself designed and depicted in his writings. Such instruments, with modifications, were later used by many surgeons in Christendom as well as in Islam"⁶

It is remarkable that Arabic has been able to cope with new arts and new science because of its flexibility and succeeded to render intellectual expression successfully. Apart from this, new scientific terminologies were also invented, a task for which Arabic proved to be highly adept. The great scientist of 11th century al-Bairuni has described Arabic language as the most suited language for the scientific expression. Admiring the potentiality of Arabic language, in the preface of the book "The Legacy of Islam" notable scholar Alfred Guillaume has said:

"Arabic is the Greek of the Semitic world, and it was a fortunate thing for Islam that its message was delivered at a time when Arabic was potentially at its zenith. Aramaic was a poverty-stricken tongue compared with Arabic, and not even classical Hebrew at its best could rival Arabic in its astonishing elasticity. From its own inner resources it could evolve by autogenous processes the mot just which new arts and new sciences demanded for their intellectual expression"⁷.

During the medieval age upto the renaissance of Europe, Arabic language was language of science and technology. It achieved a status of lingua franca and no language could rival it in this regard. in view of this vast achievement of Arabic language, English monk

² The House of Wisdom, Lyons P. 11

³ Al-Fehrist, Ibn Nadeem, P. 435

⁴ The Unesco Courier "The Golden Age of Islam" P. 51

⁵ The Legacy of Islam P.10

⁶ The Unesco Courier "The Golden Age of Islam" P. 51

⁷ The Legacy of Islam P. VI

Roger Bacon has advised and inspired his followers to learn Arabic by saying “Almighty God bestows wisdom and knowledge whom it wants but Allah did not want this for Latin people. Allah bestowed this to Jews, Greeks and Arabs”⁸

In 1130 a school of Translation headed by Bishop Remand was established in Toledo in which famous Arabic travelogues were translated in Latin with the help of Jews. These translated books instilled life in Europeans . According to Dr. Clark, the number of translated books into Latin reached to 300 while other calculated it 400. Prominent English Historian Mullar has said in his book “Philosophy of the History” that the Arabic schools in Spain were sources of knowledge where European students were rushing from different parts of Europe to acquire the knowledge⁹. Stating how Arabic science, medicine, philosophy, etc. were transmitted, Arabic editor of world Health Organization’s Monthly World Health Salah Galal said:

“There is ample evidence that knowledge of Arabic science, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy was transmitted to Europe in written form, but very little evidence that engineering ideas were disseminated in this way. Technological ideas have frequently been carried from one culture to another by travelers’ reports, by the observations of commercial agents, and by direct contacts between craftsmen. Until modern times, such cross-fertilization was probably more frequent and more fruitful than written communications. Arabic culture, including its contributions to the life sciences, reached its highest stage of development between the 9th and the 11th centuries, and experienced a number of major revivals during the 12th and 13th centuries. During this period the West was just beginning to awaken from the Dark Ages”

A period of decline began in the eleventh century as the result of several factors including the start of the political unrest in Spain, Mongol and Turkish invasions from the East, and internal divisions within the Abbasid period. This marked a period of relative stagnation for Arabic although its status as the language of Islam was never threatened.

The nineteenth century saw the revival and development of Arabic as a viable modern language which began in Egypt and Syria and spread to the rest of the Arab world. It was started with the invasion of Napoleon Bonaparte on Egypt in 1798. The expedition provided and introduced first Arabic printing press to Egypt and the translation of numerous Western literary works into Arabic. This initial contact was continued by Muhammad Ali, an enlightened Egyptian ruler, who sent students to France and other countries to study various disciplines; they returned to Egypt as teachers and writers. Lebanese Christians have a remarkable contribution in modern Arabic language too as they had been maintaining a strong religious connection with some European groups as early as the seventeenth century. Other Western influences came from Arab immigrants to the southern and northern parts of Americas and from missionaries as the later established foreign languages institutes, mainly English and French for their propagandas in various parts of the Arab world.

Naguib Mahfouz, an Egyptian novelist, playwright and screenwriter, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1988 A.D., becoming the first Arabic writer to win literature's highest award. During the prize distribution ceremony the Swedish Academy said in its statement that Mr. Mahfouz, "through works rich in nuance - now clear-sightedly realistic, now evocatively ambiguous - has formed an Arabian narrative art that applies to all mankind."

⁸ Tarikhul Adabil Arabi, Ahmed Hasan Zayyat P. 378

⁹ Ibid P. 378-379

List of the Arabic Speaking Countries

1	Algeria
2	Bahrain
3	Egypt
4	Iraq
5	Jordan
6	Kuwait
7	Lebanon
8	Libya
9	Mauritania
10	Morocco
11	Oman
12	Palestine
13	Qatar
14	Saudi Arabia
15	Sudan
16	Syria
17	Tunisia
18	United Arab Emirates (UAE)
19	Yemen

In today's world, Arabic is of utmost important due to the economic significance of the oil producing Arab countries in the global scenario. Learning the Arabic language could open the doors to employment in the oil and travel industry. Knowing Arabic language could help us find a career in a variety of fields such as journalism, business and industry, education, finance and banking, translation and interpretation, consulting, foreign service and intelligence etc.

With the growing importance of Middle East in the International affairs there is a shortage of people who are well versed in Arabic language and culture. Apart from this, numerous business opportunities are available in the Arabic world as a result of the expansion of markets. Studying the Arabic language will give a person a cutting edge in his endeavor towards becoming an international businessman oriented Arab market.

It is worth mentioning that near about 85 lakhs Indian are working in Arab countries and contributing in the development of Indian economy by sending their money as a foreign exchange.

In a nutshell, Arabic language is a live and viable language. A vast number of people are using it as mother tongue as well as official language in their day to day life. In the past it has easily translated and adapted a vast body of knowledge whether it was from Greece, Persia, India or from elsewhere of the world. And thus It has preserved heritage of world knowledge and made a significant contribution to literature, mathematic, astronomy, medicine, surgery and so on. If its contribution would not been there, we could not be able to say "Dunya Meri Mutthi Mein" i.e the world is in my grasp.

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