
Introduction

Learning Moroccan Arabic

Even under the best conditions, learning a new language can be challenging. Add to this challenge the rigors of Peace Corps training, and you're faced with what will be one of the most demanding—and rewarding—aspects of your Peace Corps experience: learning to communicate to Moroccans in their own language. But it can be done. And rest assured that you can do it. Here are a few reasons why:

- **You are immersed in the language:** Some people may need to hear a word three times to remember it; others may need thirty. Learning Moroccan Arabic while living and training with Moroccans gives you the chance to hear the language used again and again.
- **You have daily language classes with Moroccan teachers:** You're not only immersed in the language; you also have the opportunity to receive feedback from native speakers on the many questions that predictably crop up when one learns a new language.
- **Peace Corps has over forty years of experience in Morocco:** Your training, including this manual, benefits from the collective experience gained by training thousands of Americans to live and work in Morocco. You will benefit from and contribute to that legacy.

Despite these advantages, at times you may still feel like the task of learning Moroccan Arabic is too much to handle. Remember that volunteers *like you* having been doing it for decades, however. One of the most rewarding aspects of your time will be communicating with Moroccans in Arabic, surprising them and yourself with how well you know the language. When that time arrives, your hard work will have been worth it.

Transcription of Moroccan Arabic

In order for trainees to move quickly into Moroccan Arabic (also called “Darija”), Peace Corps uses a system of transcription that substitutes characters of the Latin alphabet (a, b, c, d, . . .) for characters from Arabic script (ا, ب, ت, ج, . . .). With this system, it isn't necessary for a trainee to learn all of Arabic script before he or she begins to learn the language. On the contrary, once you become familiar with the system of transcription, you will be able to “read” and “write” Moroccan Arabic fairly quickly—using characters you are familiar with. You will *also* learn Arabic script during training, but with transcription it isn't necessary to know it right away. Throughout the book, therefore, you will always see both the original Arabic script *and* the transcription. **Becoming familiar with the Peace Corps' system of transcription is one of the best things you can do, early on, to help yourself learn Moroccan Arabic. Practicing the different sounds of Moroccan Arabic until you can reproduce them is another.** This introduction is intended mainly to help you get started with the system of transcription, and as a result it will mention only briefly the different sounds of Arabic. However, a fuller explanation can be found on page 157.

Sounds You Already Know

The large majority of consonants in Moroccan Arabic are similar to sounds that we have in English. The vowels in Arabic are also similar to English vowels. In the following table, each transcription character that represents a sound **you already know** will be explained. The sounds are **not necessarily what you may expect**, but each character was matched with a sound for good reasons.

Transcription Character	Arabic Character	Description
a	ا / آ / إ	sometimes the /ä/ in “father,” sometimes the /a/ in “mad”
b	ب	the normal English sound /b/
d	د	the normal English sound /d/
e	ـِ / إ	the short “e” sound /e/ as in “met” (this transcription character is not used)

2 • Moroccan Arabic

		often, only when confusion would be caused by using the transcription character “a”)
f	ف	the normal English sound /f/
g	گ	the normal English sound /g/ as in “go”
h	ه	the normal English sound /h/ as in “hi.”
i	ي / ِ	the long “ee” sound /ē/ as in “meet”
j	ج	the /zh/ sound represented by the ‘s’ in “pleasure”
k	ك	the normal English sound /k/
l	ل	the normal English sound /l/
m	م	the normal English sound /m/
n	ن	the normal English sound /n/
o	و	the long “o” sound /ō/ as in “bone” (this transcription character is not used often, mainly for French words that have entered Moroccan Arabic)
p	پ	the normal English sound /p/
r	ر	this is not the normal English “r,” but a “flap” similar to the Spanish “r” or to the sound Americans make when they quickly say “gotta” as in “I gotta go.”
s	س	the normal English sound /s/
t	ت	the normal English sound /t/
u	و	the long “oo” sound /ū/ as in “food”
v	ث	the normal English sound /v/
w	و	the normal English sound /w/
y	ي	the normal English sound /y/
z	ز	the normal English sound /z/
š	ش	the normal English sound /sh/ as in “she”
Some vowel combinations		
ay	اي	the “ay” as in “say”
au	او	the “ow” as in “cow”
iu	يو	the “ee you” as in “see you later”

New Sounds

There are eight consonants in Moroccan Arabic that we do not have in English. It may take you some time to be able to pronounce these correctly. At this point, what’s important is that you learn the

4 • Moroccan Arabic

In these instances, the hyphen **does not necessarily indicate a change in pronunciation**. The hyphen is there to make it easy for you to *see* when a definite article is being used, for example, or which verb is being used. It is a visual indicator, not an indicator of pronunciation. Sometimes the rhythm of speech may seem to break with the hyphen; other times the letters before and after the hyphen will be pronounced together.

Another symbol you will sometimes see is the **apostrophe** ('). When you see an apostrophe, it indicates a “glottal stop,” which is the break between vowels as heard in the English exclamation “uh oh.” That is to say, if you see an apostrophe you should not connect the sounds before the apostrophe with the sounds after the apostrophe. Pronounce them with a break in the middle.

Words & Syllables Without Vowels

Sometimes you will see syllables or even whole words without any vowels written in them. This is normal in Moroccan Arabic. To the English speaker, however, this seems impossible, since we have always been taught that all words must contain a vowel sound. Which side is correct? Well, in a sense they both are. In reality, it is indeed possible to pronounce consonants together without articulating a vowel sound; we do it a lot in English at the beginning of words. Think about the word *street*. We pronounce three consonants—*s*, *t*, and *r*—without any vowels between them. So it is possible. The only challenge with Arabic is that the consonant combinations are new for English speakers (we don't put the /sh/ sound next to the /m/ sound, for example, but in Arabic they do).

However, try for a moment to pronounce *only* the letters “str,” not the whole word “street.” In this case, most English speakers will hear something that *sounds like* the word “stir.” With certain consonant combinations, that is to say, it sounds to the English speaker like there is a vowel in the middle, even if there isn't. The “vowel” is in reality just the normal sound made as one consonant sound transitions to another.

Part of learning Moroccan Arabic is becoming comfortable with new consonant combinations *and* practicing those combinations without necessarily placing a vowel in the middle. The transcription words, you will notice, only include characters for vowels when there really is a vowel in the word. It may seem difficult at first, but it is better to accustom yourself to this as early as you can.

Why Not Just Write “sh”?

A final point about the transcription. At times it may seem overly complicated to someone beginning Moroccan Arabic. For example, why doesn't it just use “sh” for the /sh/ sound? The answer is this: every sound must have just a single character to represent it. Why? Well, in Arabic it is normal for the /h/ sound to follow the /s/ sound. If we used “sh” to represent the /sh/ sound, there would not be any way to represent an /s/ plus /h/ sound, because it too would look like “sh.” Using the symbol š to represent /sh/ makes it possible to represent /s/ plus /h/ and /sh/ plus /h/ (yes, in Arabic both these combinations are used).

All of this concerns a larger point: **the transcription system used in this book may appear complex at first, but it has been carefully thought out** and in the end it is the easiest system possible. That said, the sooner you can make the transition to reading Arabic script, the easier it will be to pronounce Arabic correctly.