

علم الصرف

An Introduction to the Science of Morphology



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Definition: The literal meaning of Sarf (صرف) ¹ means to change, however, in the discipline of grammar, has become a technical term signifying the morphology of Arabic words. Sarf is the science dealing with changes in the patterns and forms of **words** in order to derive different meanings. This study involves hundreds of patterns and forms of words that indicate their origin, derivation, construction and meaning.

The majority of words in the Arabic language can undergo a prolific process of derivation whereby one word can become the sources of literally hundreds of derived words. The science of Sarf deals with both verbs and nouns as can be demonstrated by the following 2 examples:

From the following word عِلْمٌ (knowledge) we can get some of the following words:

عِلْمٌ يَعْلَمُ إِعْلَمَ عَلِمَ مُعَلِّمٌ عَالِمٌ

From right to left these words have the following meaning: He knew s.th, He knows s.th, Know!, it is known, Teacher, One who knows.

Without making any substantial changes we have 6 new words derived from the same word. The first 4 words are verbs whilst the last 2 are nouns. As shown, the process of derivation occurs in both verbs and nouns.

Another example is the word رَجُلٌ (man). From it we can get the following words

رَجُلَانِ رَجَالٌ رَجُلَيْنِ

From right to left these words have the following meaning: 2 men, Men (plural), a small man

The benefit of Sarf: It is of great importance that the student engages in the science of Sarf in order to become familiar with the Arabic word and nuances of its meaning. This science is the foundation of a student first establishes in his quest for mastery of the Arabic language. With careful study, memorization and practice, a strong knowledge of the Arabic is an objective well within reach. With this foundation the study of Arabic grammar (Nahw) will be made easier. With these 2 branches (Sarf and Nahw), a student can gain a comprehensive knowledge of the Arabic language.

Preliminary discussions:

ا ب ت ث ج ح خ د ذ ر ز س
ش
ص ض ط ظ ع غ ف ق ك ل م ن
ه و ي ء

In the Arabic language we have 28 letters and they are all consonants.

The short vowels are not considered separate letters and therefore are not part of the alphabet.

Short vowels are three and they, together with the long vowels correspond to a, e, i, o, and u. A short vowel is called a حَرَكَةٌ. In order to indicate that a consonant is followed by a short vowel in pronunciation, the matching symbol from those given below is placed on top or underneath the letter. Any letter with a حَرَكَةٌ is called متَحَرِّكٌ.

The three حركات are:

ضَمَّة : ُ - corresponds to a short ‘o’ or ‘u’ in English. The letter with this is said to be

مَضموم

فَتْحَة : َ - corresponds to a short ‘a’ in English. The adjective is مَفتوح

كَسْرَة : ِ - corresponds to a short ‘e’ or ‘i’ in English. The adjective is مَکسور

Absence of vowel is called سُكُون (ْ). If a letter is ساکن (i.e. has a سُكُون) on it, this would mean it is the final consonant in a syllable. By definition, a syllable is the sound produced by coupling at least one consonant and one vowel. Consonants alone cannot be pronounced. For

instance, try pronouncing the letter ‘d’ without adding a vowel to it! The moment a sound comes out, one realizes it’s either ‘da’, ‘du’ or the like, which has been pronounced, not just the letter ‘d’ by itself. The reality is that all consonants need to be coupled with vowels in order to become syllables and thus pronounceable. This is the nature of human utterance. So this is the bare minimum requirement: you have at least one consonant and a vowel. Often however, syllables may be comprised of two consonants with a vowel between them, such as in ‘run’. In terms of Arabic grammatical terminology, the second consonant (i.e. the one upon which the sound of the syllable stops) is said to have a سُكُون on it. For instance, in the word ‘run’, we would say the ‘n’ has a ساكن.

In English, when a consonant is doubled in the same word, meaning the first syllable ends in the same letter that the second syllable starts with (e.g. Runny ‘Run-ny’), both consonants are written separately. When this happens in Arabic, the letter is only written once, and the symbol ّ is placed upon it to indicate duplication in pronunciation. This pronouncing of the letter twice, first with a ‘sukoon’, and then with a حركه, is called تَشْدِيد or شَدَّة, and the letter is said to be مُشَدَّد (e.g. the ب in تَبَّت is مُشَدَّد). Unlike the short vowels of the language, long vowels are actually considered letters. They are referred to as weak letters or حُرُوفُ الْعِلَّة. They are also three in number: ا, ي, and و, and are essentially stretches in the fathah, dhammah and kasrah respectively.

Patterns and Suffixes

In the Arabic language, meanings are established by placing base letters side by side in designated patterns. Mostly all combinations of three consonants have been assigned distinct meanings and whenever those consonants appear in a given word, depending on the vowels associated with the base letter meaning, will be conveyed in a unique way. For instance, the base letters ش, ر, and ك express the meaning of ‘to thank’. In Arabic, there are literally dozens of ways to vowel these three letters, some of which include the addition of ‘non-base’ letters. All of these patterns carry distinct meanings, such as the various simple, continuous, and perfect tenses of past, present, and future. Depending on the particular pattern, the base-letter meaning of

“thanking” will be expressed in a unique way. For instance, شَكَرَ (he thanked), شُكِرَ (was thanked), يَشْكُرُ (he thanks, is thanking, or will thank), شَاكِرٌ (thankful), مَشْكُورٌ (thanked i.e., appreciated), اُشْكُرْ (thank!) and many, many others.

1. Tasreef is another term used synonymously with Sarf and they both mean morphology