Grammar Hints for Arabic

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All languages have rules which tell us how words are formed and how they are put together into sentences. These rules are the 'grammar' of the language. Different languages have different rules. Native speakers acquire the grammar of their language starting from childhood naturally. Any native speaker can tell you whether a sentence is possible or impossible in that language although he/she may not be able to tell you the rules or reasons why something is ungrammatical in a learned fashion. If you are learning a foreign language you have to learn the rules in a much more conscious way. You may not be given the grammatical rules in the class because class contact time is reserved for the production of the target language, but you should work at home, on your own, with a grammar book regularly. In fact your grammar book should be your ‘best friend’ if you are learning a foreign language.

Grammar books contain unfamiliar technical terms. Don't be put off by them. They're simply tools for talking about particular features of grammar. Once you know what they mean, you'll find them handy and easy to use.

This short reference grammar of Arabic will be useful for you to remember and look up some of the terms used in the language teaching text books. So let us start.
PARTS OF SPEECH

Arab grammarians traditionally break down the words into three categories:

- Noun
- Verb
- Particle

Nouns

Nouns have gender, i.e. they are either masculine ("a he") or feminine ("a she"); there is no "it."

Nouns are names of people, animals, and things (e.g. Maha, cat, book; ﻛﺘﺎب، ﻣﻬﺎ). 

NOTE: Determiners

Determiners are 'small' words used with nouns to relate a noun to a particular context or situation. There are several kinds of determiners, and the most important ones are definite articles (the), indefinite articles (a, an), demonstratives (this, these, that, those) and possessive determiners (my, your, his, her, its, our, their).

Nouns can be indefinite, whereby a noun is referred to in a non-specific way (a cat, a book, a girl; ﺑﻨﺖ، ﻛﺘﺎب، ﺔﻗﻄ) or definite (Maha, the cat, the girl; ﻛﺘﺎب، ﻣﻬﺎ). The most general way of making a noun definite is to add the definite article the ال to an. indefinite noun as shown above.

Proper names, such as names of people (John, Henry, Mary) are definite as are names of places and countries (Egypt, France, Cairo, Baghdad).

The following are also considered to be nouns:

- Subject Pronouns (he, she, I; ﻫﻮ، ﻫﻲ، ﺛﻢ) take the place of a noun and any other words which are grouped around that noun to form a unit in the sentence. THEY ARE CONSIDERED TO BE DEFINITE NOUNS.
In English the pronouns are categorized as follows:

- **Singular**
  - 1st person = I
  - 2nd person = you
  - 3rd person = he/she

- **Plural**
  - 1st person = we
  - 2nd person = you
  - 3rd person = they

- **Object pronouns** such as “me, you, him, her, them,” are added as suffixes to the verb in Arabic “he hit me; هو ضربني.”

- **Demonstrative pronouns** pick out a specific item or set(s) of items, but, in addition, they 'point' to them, demonstrating what is being referred to (this, that, those; هذا/هذة، ذلك/تلك، هؤلاء):
  - This boy هذا الولد
  - This girl هذه البنية
  - That boy ذلك الولد
  - That girl تلك البنين
  - Those boys هؤلاء الأولاد
  - Those girls هؤلاء البنات

- **Possessive determiners (pronouns)** express who or what something belongs to (e.g. my apple, your book, his pen, her car, its colour). In many traditional grammar books you will find the term 'possessive pronoun' instead of possessive determiner. This is unhelpful, because possessive pronouns are different from possessive determiners. In English, for example, most of them look different and can't be placed in the same position in a sentence (e.g. possessive determiner: That's my book; possessive pronoun: That book is mine). Note, too, that the possessive determiner (and, as it happens, the possessive pronoun) we use for things or animate beings whose sex we don't know is its (e.g. The dog's tail is long, but its legs are short). There's no apostrophe in this word - after all, you wouldn't think of writing hi's or he's instead of his! (The form it's, by the way, is short for it is.)

In Arabic the possessive pronoun (my, your, our) is attached to the noun as a suffix (at the end of the word):

- My boy ولدي
Relative pronouns introduce relative clauses, and they usually refer back to a noun in the main clause of a sentence (e.g. This is the car that I want to buy - that refers back to car. The cinema where we are meeting is in the town centre - where refers back to cinema).

Adjectives, which give further information about a noun and usually come before the noun in an English sentence (e.g. a big apple, a good film, a fast car). In Arabic, adjectives always follow the noun they describe and agree in definiteness, gender and number:

- A big car
- A small boy
- The big car
- The small boy

Adverbs, which further describe the action of verbs (e.g. he sang well, she read the document carefully, we walked slowly, the horse runs fast). Note that some words like quick and fast can be either adjectives or adverbs in English. They sometimes translate differently in a foreign language - so be careful with the dictionary.

Verbs

Verbs express the action (or sometimes a process or a state) in the sentence. Verbs can be transitive (taking an object: I ate the apple.) or intransitive (no object: I walk to work). [Please see “object” below]

There is no infinitive form in Arabic. Examples of infinitives in English are: to be, to have, to go, to study.

The forms of verbs can also indicate a number of other grammatical notions (called grammatical categories), i.e., voice, tense and mood.

- Voice

Voice indicates the perspective of an event which is being adopted by the speaker. Active voice is the “normal” way of using a verb (The tiger ate
the little boy - the tiger actively did something to something else), while passive voice is the other way round (The little boy was eaten by the tiger - the little boy had something done to him).

**Tenses**

Tenses give some indication of time. Most languages distinguish between the broad categories of present (e.g. I play tennis. You are reading a book), past (e.g. I played tennis. You were reading a book) and future (e.g. I will play tennis. You will be reading a book). Some languages have further subdivisions within each of these categories. In Arabic there are two tenses: past (or perfect) and present (or imperfect), e.g., He went, he goes; ذهب، يذهب.

**Mood**

Mood tells us what the speaker's attitude is to what s/he is saying. The mood of the verb indicates whether the speaker is telling someone to do something (imperative mood) or whether s/he is reporting what someone else has said, or whether the speaker is talking about possibly unreal conditions (subjunctive).

- The indicative mood is the most general mood. It is used to make statements, ask questions, etc. (e.g. I live in Manchester. Can you speak Russian?)
- The imperative mood is used to give instructions or orders (e.g. Turn left. Go away!). In Arabic the imperative verbs (as well as others) are in the jussive mood.
- The subjunctive mood is something we are not particularly aware of in English. We say: “If I were you” rather than “If I was you,” and this is a subjunctive. In other languages, the subjunctive is used much more frequently, usually indicating doubt, a tentative opinion, unreal conditions etc. The rules for when to use the subjunctive and in what tense need to be studied for each language separately.

**Particles**

الحروف

These consist of “short” words such as

- Prepositions such as: from, to, in; من، الى، في
- Subjunctive particles such as: أن، لـ، لن
- Jussive particles such as: لم، لا
- Negative particles such: ما، لا
The Sentence

Sentences

There are two types of sentences in Arabic:

- The verbal sentence, الجملة الفعلية, whose definition is a sentence that begins with a verb even if there is a particle before the verb.
  - درس احمد
  - ما درست مريم
  - يدرس احمد
  - لا تدرس مريم

- All other sentences are considered nominal sentences even if there is a particle before noun or pronoun.
  - احمد طالب
  - مريم تدرس في نيويورك
  - هو استاذ
  - هم في تونس
  - عندي كتاب
  - ان احمد ولدي
  - ليس احمد في الجامعة

In summary, *I ate the apple* is a sentence. Even *She has eaten* is a sentence because it contains a verb (*has*) and a subject (*She*). But *Eating the apple* is not a sentence but rather a phrase, because there is no verb; the meaning is not complete.

A sentence consists of one or more clauses. Clauses are rather like sentences embedded inside a sentence. So, *Peter was reading a book* is a sentence consisting of just one clause, but *Peter was reading a book, while Pat was mending the car* is made up of two clauses.

The Subject

The subject of a sentence is normally who or what is being discussed. Most verbs need a subject and it's the subject which decides the form or the ending of the finite verb in most languages. In the sentence, *I am a teacher* - *I* is the subject, requiring the verb form to be *am* rather than *are* or *is*. Similarly, in *The horse runs fast* - *the horse* is the subject, which means that *runs* is the right verb form, while *run* isn't.

In Arabic, the subject of a جملة اسمية is called المبتدأ.
The subject of a جملة فعلية is called الفاعل

Objects المفعول به

Objects are other parts of the sentence which are required by the verb, in addition to the subject. Objects are often the person or thing affected by the action of the verb. In English, we can distinguish between direct objects and indirect objects.

- **A direct object** answers the question Who? or What? (I ate ... what?... the apple. I met him: I met ... who?...him - him is the direct object of met.) Verbs which take direct objects are known as transitive verbs. So in a dictionary the verbs eat and meet will be listed as vt (=verb transitive).
- **Indirect objects** don't answer straight questions, but indirect ones. I spoke to him - I spoke ... what? ... the answer could be English but is irrelevant here; I spoke ...who? ... can't be answered. I spoke ... to whom? ... to him (or, if 'to whom' strikes you as old-fashioned: Who did I speak to? to him). In this sentence, him is therefore an indirect object. Typically, if a verb has both a direct and an indirect object, the direct object is a thing directly affected by the action of the verb, and the indirect object is a person indirectly affected (often benefitting from the action in some way), cf. My friend (subject) gave her father (indirect object) the book (direct object).

Agents

Agents can appear with verbs in the passive voice. The little boy was eaten by the tiger - the little boy is the subject of this passive sentence, but the tiger is the agent, i.e. what or who is actually performing the action.

- **Transitive verbs** always have a direct object. But some verbs can be used either transitively or intransitively. Eat is one of these. In the sentence, Have you eaten your greens? the verb to eat is used transitively, whereas in Have you eaten? it is being used intransitively.
- **Intransitive verbs** are listed in a dictionary as vi (=verb intransitive). They do not have a direct object, but may have an indirect object. In the sentence, The horse runs fast there is no object at all, so run is an intransitive verb. But run can be used transitively in a sentence such as, The directors run the company. Here, the company answers the question - what? - so run functions as a transitive verb, but the meaning of run is completely different from the meaning it has in The horse runs fast. So if you are looking up run in the dictionary to translate into another language, take care to find the right meaning of run and refer to the abbreviations vt and vi.
Relative clauses

Relative clauses are one way of combining information from two separate sentences into one sentence. A relative pronoun is needed to provide the link: *That's the car. + I want to buy the car. = That's the car that I want to buy.* The relative pronoun that stops us from using the car twice. The main clause is *That's the car* and the relative clause is *that I want to buy* because it is dependent on the main clause and is introduced by a relative pronoun. Note that English allows relative clauses to be formed without a visible relative pronoun, e.g. *That's the car ___ I want to buy.* *She knows about the crime ___ he witnessed yesterday,* while languages such as German always require a relative pronoun to introduce a relative clause.