

Usage of Arabic vocabularies in Indian Languages: A linguistic overview

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Abstract

Adopting Arabic vocabulary in Indian languages reflects a rich history of cultural, religious and trade interactions between the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent. This linguistic integration, facilitated by historical factors such as Islamic influence, Persian mediation and commercial exchanges, has enriched Indian languages like Urdu, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, Malayalam, Tamil, and others. This study explores the historical context of this influence, from early trade and the spread of Islam to the Persian-mediated introduction of Arabic words during Islamic rule in India. Arabic words permeate various domains, including religion like 'Allah', 'Roza', administration like 'Qazi,' 'Diwan', commerce like 'Hisaab', 'Rizq', and daily life words like 'Kitab', 'Sabun'. Phonetic and morphological adaptations, such as sound changes and hybridization, demonstrate the seamless assimilation of Arabic words into Indian linguistic frameworks. Regional variations reveal a deeper imprint in Urdu and South Indian Muslim dialects, while everyday usage showcases Arabic's integration across India's diverse linguistic landscape. The study underscores Arabic's enduring legacy in Indian languages, reflecting the subcontinent's rich history of cultural and linguistic pluralism.

Keywords: Arabic vocabulary, Indian language, Linguistics, Trade, Culture, History

Introduction:

The usage of Arabic vocabulary in Indian languages reflects a long history of cultural, religious, and trade interactions between the Indian subcontinent and the Arab world. This linguistic exchange, spanning centuries, has enriched many Indian languages, including Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Malayalam, Tamil, and Kannada, among others. Here's an overview of how Arabic words have integrated into Indian languages:

Historical Context

India's long history of cultural and economic exchanges with the Arab world has left a profound impact on its languages, particularly in the vocabulary associated with trade and commerce. From the medieval period, Arab traders, explorers, and settlers established strong maritime connections with the Indian subcontinent, bringing with them not just goods but also linguistic influences. This interaction has significantly enriched Indian languages, especially in coastal regions like Kerala, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu, as well as in the broader linguistic landscapes of Hindi, Urdu, and Marathi.

The Arab presence in India dates back to the pre-Islamic era, but it became more pronounced during the Islamic Golden Age and the expansion of the Abbasid Caliphate. Arab traders frequented the ports of Malabar, Konkan, and Gujarat, exchanging spices, textiles, and precious stones for goods like dates, pearls, and horses. With commerce serving as the bridge, Arabic vocabulary naturally integrated into local Indian languages.

Arabic Vocabulary in Indian Trade and Commerce

Many Arabic terms related to trade, administration, and finance became a part of Indian languages through these interactions. Some examples include:

1. **Accountancy and Measurement:** Words like "*hisab*" (account), "*rizq*" (provision or livelihood), and "*maal*" (wealth or goods) have become commonplace in trade-related discussions across India.
2. **Currency and Banking:** Terms such as "*dinar*" (currency) and "*dirham*" (a silver coin) entered the lexicon, reflecting their relevance in medieval Indian economic practices.
3. **Trade Goods:** Arabic-origin words for commodities such as "*zafran*" (saffron), "*ambar*" (ambergris), and "*anbar*" (perfume or musk) signify the exchange of high-value goods.
4. **Maritime Trade:** Nautical terms like "*markab*" (ship) and "*nakhoda*" (ship captain) reflect the maritime expertise brought by Arab traders.

The Role of Persian as a Conduit

During the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, Persian, heavily influenced by Arabic, served as the lingua franca of administration and trade. This facilitated the further assimilation of Arabic-derived terms into Indian languages, particularly Urdu and Hindi. Words like "*bazaar*" (market), "*karz*" (loan), and "*tajir*" (merchant) are notable examples.

Regional Integration

The coastal languages of India, such as Malayalam, have a particularly high concentration of Arabic-origin words due to the historical presence of Arab traders. In Malayalam, words like "*pattini*" (captain) and "*buhari*" (furnace) are widely used. Similarly, Gujarati, a prominent trading language, has adopted Arabic words such as "*safa*" (document) and "*wadi*" (valley or enclosure).

Islamic Influence: The influence of Arabic vocabulary on Indian languages is a direct result of historical Islamic presence and cultural exchange in the Indian subcontinent. Starting from the early medieval period, the advent of Islam and the subsequent establishment of Islamic empires, such as the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire, facilitated the integration of Arabic into local linguistic traditions. This influence was particularly pronounced in administrative, religious, and intellectual domains, leaving a lasting imprint on several Indian languages, including Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, and Malayalam.

Historical Background

The Islamic presence in India began as early as the 7th century with Arab merchants and missionaries arriving on the Malabar Coast. However, the significant incorporation of Arabic vocabulary into Indian languages occurred during the establishment of Islamic rule, which began with the Delhi Sultanate in the 12th century and flourished under the Mughal Empire. Arabic served as the liturgical language of Islam and, through Persian—a language heavily influenced by Arabic—gained further prominence in administration, education, and culture.

Mechanisms of Arabic Vocabulary Integration

Religious Texts and Practices: Arabic entered Indian languages through the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic religious practices. Terms like "*Allah*" (God), "*Salah*" (prayer), "*Zakat*" (charity), and "*Roza*" (fasting) became an integral part of religious and social discourse.

Administration and Governance: Arabic vocabulary was introduced into administrative

terminology, often mediated through Persian. Words such as "*hukum*" (order), "*qazi*" (judge), "*diwan*" (office or council), and "*amal*" (work or action) became widely used. Terms such as *Haq* (right), *Wazir* (minister), *Qazi* (judge), *Diwan* (office), and *Amir* (commander) entered languages like Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali during Islamic rule.

Education and Scholarship: Islamic Madrasas were instrumental in teaching Arabic for religious and scientific studies. Terms like "*ilm*" (knowledge), "*maktab*" (school), and "*kitab*" (book) spread through these educational networks.

Cultural Exchange: The Islamic influence on Indian art, architecture, and literature facilitated the adoption of Arabic terms into local vernaculars, especially in poetry and prose.

Impact on Specific Indian Languages

1. **Urdu:** As a language that evolved during the Islamic rule in India, Urdu exhibits the highest concentration of Arabic vocabulary. Words like "*insaan*" (human), "*adab*" (etiquette), "*safar*" (journey), and "*shukriya*" (gratitude) are common in Urdu's lexicon.
2. **Hindi:** Though Hindi has its roots in Sanskrit, Arabic words entered its vocabulary via Urdu and Persian. Terms such as "*kitab*" (book), "*Allah*" (God), and "*hukum*" (order) are now an integral part of spoken and literary Hindi.
3. **Malayalam:** The historical ties between the Malabar Coast and the Arab world led to significant Arabic influence on Malayalam. Religious and trade-related terms, such as "*namaskaram*" (greetings), derived from Arabic customs, and "*niskaram*" (prayer), demonstrate this impact.
4. **Bengali:** During the Bengal Sultanate, Arabic terms entered Bengali primarily through Persian. Words like "*amal*" (action), "*rizq*" (livelihood), and "*zamin*" (land) reflect this integration.

Domains of Influence

Religious Vocabulary: The Quran and other Islamic scriptures, written in Arabic, contributed to the incorporation of Arabic terms into the lexicon of Indian Muslims and others interacting with Islamic culture. Words like *Allah* (God), *Salat* (prayer), *Siyam* (fast), *Dua* (prayer/supplication), *Zakat* (almsgiving), and *Hajj* (pilgrimage) are commonly used in Indian languages, especially in Islamic religious contexts.

The influence of Arabic is particularly pronounced in Islamic religious practices across India. Words like "*iman*" (faith), "*dua*" (supplication), and "*masjid*" (mosque) are used widely, even among non-Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Legal and Judicial Terms: The Islamic legal system introduced Arabic terms like "*sharia*" (law), "*Shahid*" (witness), and "*qazi*" (judge), which became embedded in local legal practices.

Scientific and Scholarly Terms:

Arabic's contribution to fields like medicine, mathematics, and astronomy during the Islamic Golden Age influenced Indian scholarly terminology. Words like *Algebra* (*al-jabr*) and *Zero* (*sifr*) came through Arabic.

Everyday Speech: Many Arabic-origin words became part of colloquial language across India, transcending religious boundaries. Words like "*marzi*" (will), "*khobar*" (news), and "*hal*" (condition) are examples. Many Arabic-origin words, often filtered through Persian or Urdu, have become part of everyday language. Examples include:

Hindi/Urdu: *Kitab* (book), *Qalam* (pen), *Sabun* (soap), *Mehman* (guest). Bengali: *Hawa* (air), *Rozgar* (employment), *Shukur* (gratitude). Tamil/Malayalam: *Nabi* (Prophet), *Salam* (peace/greeting).

Arabic Phonetic and Morphological Adaptations in Indian Languages

The cultural and linguistic exchange between the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent has profoundly shaped the phonetics and morphology of several Indian languages.

Arabic has historically influenced Indian languages through trade, religion, and conquest. This influence is most prominently observed in the incorporation of the Arabic lexicon into Indian languages. The adaptations of Arabic words involve systematic phonetic and morphological changes necessitated by the structural constraints and phonological rules of the recipient languages. The following points investigate these changes and highlight their implications for linguistic theory and historical linguistics.

Historical Context of Arabic Influence

The interaction between Arabs and the Indian subcontinent dates back to the pre-Islamic period, intensifying during the Islamic conquests and the establishment of trade routes. The introduction of Arabic as a religious language, particularly through Islam, played a significant role in embedding Arabic words into Indian linguistic frameworks.

Phonetic Adaptations

Phonetic adaptations occur when the phonemes of Arabic words are adjusted to fit the phonological inventory of Indian languages. This section examines common patterns of adaptation:

Consonantal Adjustments

- Arabic emphatic consonants (ظ, ض, ص, ط) are often replaced by their non-emphatic counterparts in Indian languages. For example, صلاة (*salāt*) becomes सलात ('*salāt*') in Hindi.
- The voiced pharyngeal fricative /ع/ and voiceless pharyngeal fricative /ح/ are frequently replaced with glottal or velar sounds, e.g., علم (*ilm*) becomes ग्यान ('*gyān*') in Sanskritized contexts.

Vowel Adjustments

- Arabic's short vowels (ا, إ, -) are often elongated or substituted to conform to Indian syllabic structure. For instance, درس (*dars*) becomes दर्स (*dars*) in Hindi and Urdu, with vowel length maintained.

Morphological Adaptations

Morphological adaptations involve the modification of Arabic words to align with the inflectional and derivational systems of Indian languages. This section examines these processes:

Pluralization

Arabic plurals, particularly broken plurals, are often replaced by regular pluralization patterns in Indian languages. For example, the Arabic plural كتب (*kutub*) becomes किताबें (*kitābēn*) in Hindi and Urdu.

Suffixation

Arabic words are often adapted with Indian suffixes to mark grammatical categories. For instance, the Arabic word خليفة (*khalīfa*) becomes खलीफा ('*khalīfa*') in Hindi, with no suffix

change, but derivatives like *خलीفتی* (*'khalīfatī'*) follow Indian suffixation norms.

Sound Changes:

Arabic **qaf** becomes /k/ or /kh/ in many Indian languages. For example, **Qalam** becomes **Kalam**. **Ain** /ʕ/ is often dropped or simplified, e.g., **Adab** (manners) in Arabic is pronounced similarly in Urdu and Hindi without the guttural sound.

Hybridization:

New hybrid terms are formed, e.g., **Qanoon banana** (to make law) in Hindi combines Arabic '**Qanoon**' (law) with Hindi '**Banana**' (to make).

Sociolinguistic Factors: Sociolinguistic factors also play a crucial role in the adaptation process. Prestige, the context of usage, and the domain (religion, trade, administration) significantly influence whether the Arabic lexicon is integrated wholesale or undergoes significant modification.

Case Studies: To illustrate these phonetic and morphological adaptations, this paper examines specific case studies:

- **Urdu:** Retains Arabic phonology relatively intact due to its Persian-Arabic script.
- **Hindi:** Phonetically simplifies the Arabic lexicon due to its Devanagari script.
- **Bengali:** Adapts Arabic words to fit its softer phonological system, e.g., '*namaz*' for الصلاة.
- **Tamil:** Incorporates Arabic words while adhering to Dravidian phonotactics, e.g., '*sabha*' for سبحة (*subḥa*).

Implications for Linguistic Theory: The study of Arabic adaptations in Indian languages sheds light on universal processes of language contact and borrowing. It also emphasizes the role of phonological constraints and sociocultural context in shaping language change.

Regional Variations in the Adaptation of Arabic Vocabulary

1. North India:

Urdu, a language heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic, retains the most Arabic vocabulary. Hindi, sharing much of its lexicon with Urdu, also uses Arabic-origin words, though less frequently in modern standard Hindi.

2. South India:

In Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka, Arabic influence is evident in Muslim communities' languages. The **Mappila** dialect of Malayalam has many Arabic terms due to centuries of Islamic learning and trade.

3. Eastern India:

Bengali contains Arabic loanwords primarily in religious and administrative contexts, often via Persian or Urdu. Words like **Duniya** (world) and **Iman** (faith) are common.

Urdu: Urdu, closely associated with Islamic culture in India, reflects a substantial integration of Arabic vocabulary. The Persian-Arabic script used in Urdu preserves many Arabic phonemes, such as /q/ and /ʕ/, which are often absent in other Indian languages. Words like *قلم* (*qalam*, "pen") and *علم* (*'ilm*, "knowledge") are directly borrowed with minimal phonological adjustment.

Hindi: While Hindi has borrowed extensively from Arabic, it adapts the vocabulary to fit the phonological constraints of the Devanagari script and local pronunciation norms. For instance, the Arabic *علم* (*'ilm*) becomes *ज्ञान* (*gyān*, "knowledge"), replacing the pharyngeal

sounds with local equivalents. Similarly, words like دعوت (*da'wat*, "invitation") are phonetically simplified as दावत (*dawat*).

Bengali: In Bengali, Arabic vocabulary is adapted to the softer phonological system of the language. For example, Arabic مسجد (*masjid*, "mosque") becomes মসজিদ (*mosjid*), and نماز (*namaz*, "prayer") is retained with minor phonetic adjustments. The adaptations reflect both phonetic simplification and integration into the local morphological framework.

Tamil: The Dravidian language Tamil incorporates Arabic vocabulary primarily through trade and Islamic cultural influence. Words such as سفينة (*safinah*, "ship") adapt as சம்பலங்கம் (*sampalankam*), aligning with Tamil phonotactics and morphology. The adaptation process often involves significant phonological transformation to accommodate Tamil's lack of certain consonants.

Malayalam: Malayalam, heavily influenced by centuries of Arab trade and cultural exchange, demonstrates profound integration of Arabic vocabulary. The language retains much of the original phonological structure of Arabic words, such as قرآن (*qur'an*, "Quran") as കുറാൻ (*kurān*). Arabic terms are often adapted with minimal modification due to Malayalam's flexible phonological inventory.

Linguistic Mechanisms of Adaptation

Phonological Adjustments: Phonological adaptation involves the substitution of non-native Arabic phonemes with local equivalents. The pharyngeal fricatives /ع/ and /ح/ are replaced or omitted in most Indian languages, while emphatic consonants like /ط/ and /ص/ are rendered as their plain counterparts.

Morphological Integration: Arabic nouns and verbs are frequently integrated into Indian morphological frameworks. For example, the Arabic plural suffix ون (*ūn*) is replaced with regional plural markers such as Hindi's ेँ (*ēñ*) or Tamil's கள் (*kal'*).

Semantic Shifts: Semantic shifts occur when Arabic words acquire new meanings in Indian contexts. For example, the Arabic word حساب (*hisab*, "calculation") has come to mean "account" or "bill" in many Indian languages.

Sociolinguistic Influences: Regional variations in Arabic vocabulary adaptation are influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as:

- **Religious Practices:** Languages spoken by Muslim communities, like Urdu and Malayalam, preserve Arabic vocabulary more faithfully.
- **Script:** The use of different scripts, such as Devanagari for Hindi and Nastaliq for Urdu, affects phonological fidelity.
- **Cultural Contact:** Regions with stronger Arab trade connections, like Kerala, exhibit more extensive borrowing.

1.1. Contemporary Usage

1. **Cultural Integration:** Many Arabic words are now so deeply integrated into Indian languages that their foreign origin is no longer recognized by everyday speakers.
2. **Media and Literature:** Arabic vocabulary is prevalent in Urdu poetry and Bollywood music, reflecting themes of love, faith, and spirituality.
3. **Religious Practice:** Arabic remains central to Islamic religious practices, influencing vernacular languages in areas with significant Muslim populations.

1.1. Conclusion

In conclusion, the influence of Arabic vocabulary on Indian languages is a fascinating and multifaceted phenomenon that underscores the historical, cultural, and linguistic interplay between the Arab world and the Indian subcontinent. The historical routes of trade, migration, and cultural exchange facilitated the introduction of Arabic lexical items into various Indian languages, enriching their lexicons and diversifying their expressive capacities.

This linguistic borrowing is particularly evident in languages such as Urdu, Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, and Bengali, where Arabic terms have been adapted to meet the phonological and morphological norms of these languages. These borrowed terms often reflect domains of religion, administration, commerce, and education, mirroring the contexts in which Arabic-speaking communities interacted with local populations.

The study of Arabic vocabulary in Indian languages not only highlights the dynamism of language evolution but also emphasizes the cultural hybridity that characterizes South Asian societies. This phenomenon is a testament to the adaptability and openness of languages in absorbing and integrating elements from other linguistic systems.

Future research could further explore the sociolinguistic dimensions of this borrowing, such as the role of Arabic-derived terms in shaping identity, power dynamics, and linguistic prestige within Indian communities. Moreover, comparative studies could delve into how these borrowed terms have evolved differently across various regions and dialects of the Indian subcontinent, providing a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and outcomes of language contact.

Overall, the presence of Arabic vocabulary in Indian languages serves as a compelling example of the interconnectedness of human societies, as reflected in the shared and evolving nature of their linguistic heritage.

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