

# Ramadan Kareem! Or: Urban Etiquette for Monolinguals

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Muslims around the world were celebrating the holy month of Ramadan recently and the greeting *de jour* here in Abu Dhabi was *Ramadan Kareem!*, which literally translates as “Ramadan is generous.” *Ramadan Kareem!* is one of the many Arabic expressions that the vast majority of Abu Dhabi residents use in their English. Some of my personal favorites include *yanni* (“you know”), *yallah* (“come on, let’s go, just do it”), *chalas* (“finished, over, done”), *Inshallah* (“God willing”), *al-hamdulillah* (“Thank God”), *Mashallah* (“Congratulations!” literally “God’s gift/will/blessing”) and, of course, *shokran* (“Thank you!”).

According to the [CIA World Fact Book](#), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the country in the world with the highest immigration rate: around 19% of the population are Emirati nationals and everyone else here is an immigrant. Around 50% of the population are South East Asians, 23% are Arabs and Iranians, and 8% come from elsewhere. With these kinds of population statistics it is hardly surprising that Abu Dhabi is a very multilingual place and pretty much everyone learns to speak bits and pieces of other languages. In their book chapter about “[Teen life in the United Arab Emirates](#)”, the authors write that all young people in this country grow up bi- or multilingual “except the children of Western expatriates who remain monolingual” (p. 239). I find that very puzzling – not the statement, but the actual fact. I have no doubts that the observation itself is correct – many of my American, Australian and British acquaintances who have raised children in Abu Dhabi or Dubai confirm that their children haven’t learnt Arabic (nor any other language). It’s the fact itself that I find puzzling.

So, here is a research challenge: much has been written about how people learn second or additional languages but has anyone ever researched how some people manage to **not** learn other languages despite being surrounded by them? If there’s any budding sociolinguist in search of a PhD project out there: “Not learning to speak another language:” an ethnographic study of Western expatriates’ language trajectories in the UAE (or any other multilingual context of your choice)” is a PhD study I’d love to supervise.

In the meantime, I wouldn’t be worth my salt if I didn’t have some preliminary observations to offer. It all seems to start with willfully ignoring the existence of languages other than English. Many English speakers tell me “no one here speaks Arabic.” Hello?! Around 40% of the population of the UAE (see above) are native Arabic speakers. Surely, that’s not exactly a negligible quantity. And how can you overlook all those Arabic (and English, i.e. bilingual) streets signs and billboards and ads and other signage in the public space?

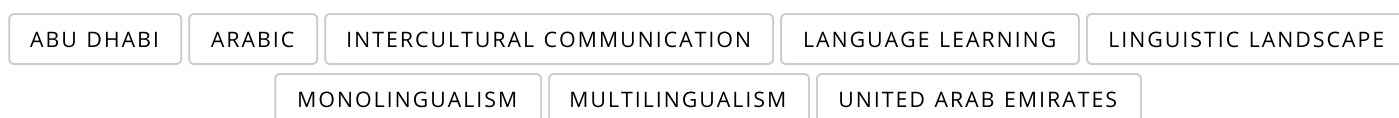
If I point out any of those, then I get the response “oh yeah, but everybody speaks English.” That is certainly true (to various degrees) but – seeing that all these people around the world make an effort to speak English, why is it that monolingual English speakers (and, I hasten to add, the monolinguals of some other language) find it so hard to extend the same courtesy to speakers of other languages? So, I declare that greetings,

congratulations, apologies, and thank-yous in the language of the person you are speaking to are *de rigueur* for any self-respecting contemporary urbanite!

And, in my experience, starting with those everyday expressions is the first step to learning how to speak another language: fake it till you make it!

## References

Caesar, J., & Badry, F. (2003). United Arab Emirates. In A. A. Mahdī (Ed.), *Teen life in the Middle East* (pp. 229-246). Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press.



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