

Stories of Words: Arabic Words



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Learning About Words

What were your first words? A baby born into an English-speaking home might say “mama” and “dada.” A baby born into an Arabic-speaking home might say “mama” and “baba.”

Babies’ first words in many countries sound quite similar. That’s because babies tend to make some sounds earlier than others. The “m” sound is one of the first sounds babies say, for example, because it’s made just by putting their lips together.

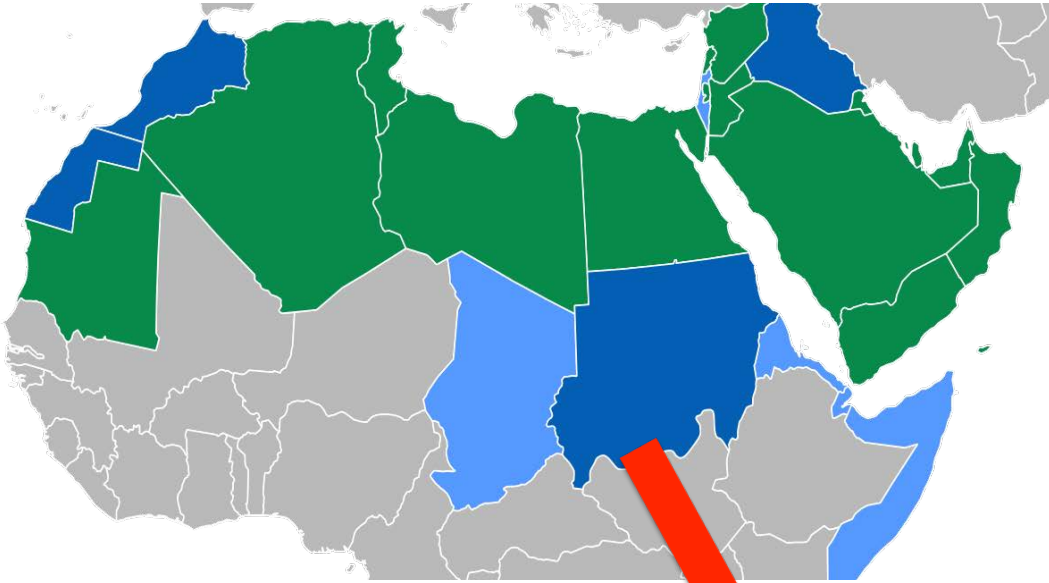
As they grow, babies learn the language of their family and their area. Babies in English-speaking homes learn to say “sister” and “brother” to name the other children in their family. Babies in Arabic-speaking homes learn to say “ukht” and “akh.”



In early times, travel was difficult, so people stayed near their home. Later, they began to be aware of other areas and other people, and they began to trade with them.

Traders who spoke Arabic traveled to many areas to sell and buy goods. Later, Europeans learned about items such as rugs and spices that were available in Arabic-speaking countries, so they journeyed to these lands to buy them.

In order to trade with each other, both English-speaking and Arabic-speaking people had to learn at least some of each others' language. They adopted words that described new goods and environments. That's why many English words have Arabic roots.



You may think that most of the Arabic words that came into English refer to animals and customs that are unique to countries in northern Africa and the Middle East, where Arabic is the primary language. But you're in for some surprises, too. You might be using words with Arabic roots every day to describe the world around you.



Arabic is the primary, or first, language for almost 300 million people in the world. This map shows countries in which Arabic is the primary language. As you can see, these countries are in the northern Africa or in an area between Europe and Africa called the Middle East.

1

COUNTING MADE EASY

You've probably counted from 1 to 10 hundreds of times. Although we call these numbers Arabic numerals, this number system was invented in India. An Arabic scholar wrote about using this system to add and subtract numbers. Then, when his books were translated into Latin, Europeans realized that this system was easier to use than the Roman numbering system they'd been using. The idea of using a different set of characters to describe numbers changed the study of mathematics.





Roman numerals are written as letters, so the number five, for example, was written as *V*, and the number eight was written as *VIII*. You can still see Roman numerals today on some clocks and on the numbers of special events, but mostly we use Arabic numerals.

This Arabic scholar, whose name was Muhammed ibn-Musa al-Khwarizm, wrote about other mathematical ideas, too. One of his books was called *Al-jabr w'al muqabalah*. Translated into English, the title is *The Compendious Book on Calculation by Completion and Balancing*. Over time, the book came to be referred to by the first word in the Arabic title, *Al-jabr*, which came to be the word *algebra*. When you solve algebra problems, you use many different symbols, so it makes sense that the word *algebra* means “joining broken parts.”

Algebra involves the study of symbols and the rules for using these symbols. Certain sets of rules in algebra are called algorithms. *Algorithm* is another word that comes from Arabic. It's a reference to the Arabic scholar you read about, Muhammed ibn-Musa al-Khwarizm.



$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

When the Europeans started using words such as *algebra* and *algorithm*, they didn't understand that the word *al-*, which is at the beginning of these words, could be translated into English as the word *the*. In Arabic, then, the word that describes a kind of mathematics is *jabara* and *al-* was added to mean a particular kind of mathematics. So, when people say "the algebra book" in English, they are actually saying "the the mathematics book."

Here are some other words in English from Arab in which the word *al-* means "the."

English Word	Arabic Word	Arabic Meaning
albatross	al-ghattas	sea eagle
alfafa	al-fisfisa	food for a horse
albacore	al-bakara	milk cow (because of the size of the fish)
alkali	al-qaliy	ashes

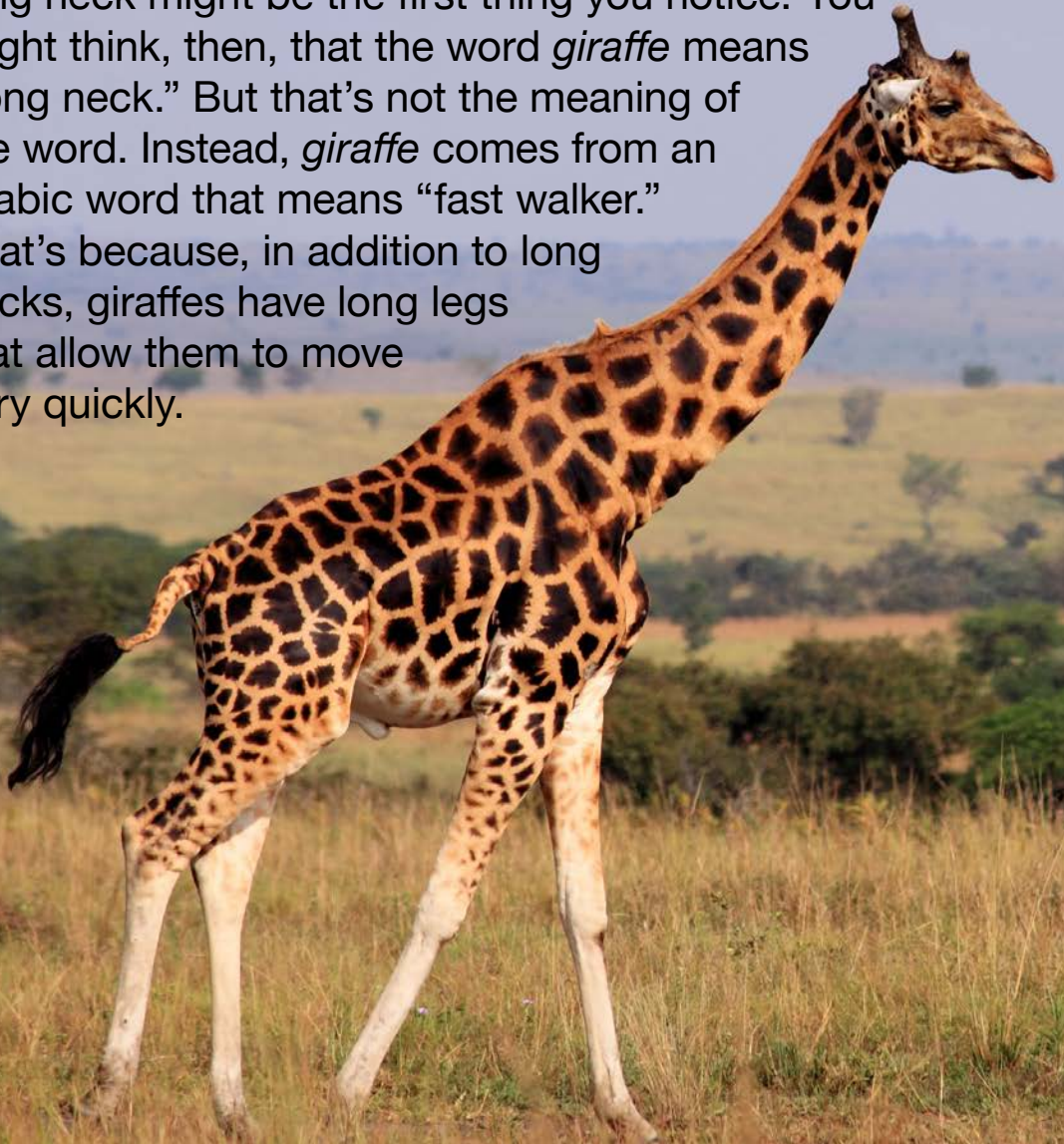


2

STRANGE ANIMALS

When Europeans visited northern Africa and the Middle East, they saw animals that looked very strange to them. One of these animals was the giraffe. Nothing that looked like a giraffe lived anywhere in Europe.

What looks most unusual to you about a giraffe? Its long neck might be the first thing you notice. You might think, then, that the word *giraffe* means “long neck.” But that’s not the meaning of the word. Instead, *giraffe* comes from an Arabic word that means “fast walker.” That’s because, in addition to long necks, giraffes have long legs that allow them to move very quickly.



Another animal Europeans had never seen before is the camel. The word *camel* seems to be related to the Arabic word *jamalla*. You might think that that word means “a big bump or hump,” because that might be the first thing you notice about this animal. But here’s another surprise: *camel* actually means “to bear or carry.” Instead of describing how camels look, their name describes how camels are used in the desert: to carry people and cargo.

Like people in many parts of the world, Europeans raised cattle, sheep and goats. Animals of this type, which eat grass and have hoofs, also lived in Africa and the Middle East. They looked very different in those places, though. One of these animals was a type of antelope called a gazelle. The word *gazelle* is also an Arabic word. It means “wild goat.”



Does your classroom have a pet gerbil? Gerbils are common pets for North American children. The pet gerbils available today originally came from Mongolia, in China, but some types of gerbils came from Africa and India, too. These wild gerbils look like small furry rats with long tails and small ears. They are sometimes known as “desert rats.” In Arabic, *yarbu* was the name given to these animals. When English-speaking travelers heard this word, they thought the word was *gerbil*.



3

NEW FOODS & COLORS

What's your favorite fruit? Is it oranges or cherries? The words *orange* and *cherry* are the names of delicious foods, but they are also the names of colors. Many other words that name fruits are associated with colors, too, and some of these come from lands where Arabic is spoken.



Many plants grew in northern Africa and the Middle East that were not native to the colder climates of Europe. To Europeans, the fruits of these plants and the colors of these fruits were also unique. When European travelers took the fruits home, the names for the colors of particular fruits also entered the English language.

It might be hard to imagine today, but one fruit that was strange to European travelers was the orange.

Originally, this fruit came from India. Sailors who stopped in India carried home orange seeds. Arabic farmers then grew orange trees, which they called the naranj. When the naranj was brought to England, it was called the orange. This fruit had a color like nothing else that was known at the time. Eventually, the word *orange* came to be associated both with the fruit and its color.



Oranges are a type of citrus fruit. Another citrus fruit whose name comes from Arabic is the lemon. The Arabic word *laimun* was originally used for both lemons and limes. Eventually, though, *laimun* was used for only lemons. It also came to be associated with the color lemon yellow.



Another fruit that came from the Middle East was the peach. In Arabic, the word *peach* means “Persian apple” because the fruit was originally grown in the Persian Empire. The fruit became so popular that the pale pink-orange color also came to be called peach.



Apricots were also originally grown in the Persian Empire. In Arabic, the word *apricot* comes from an Arabic word that means “early-ripe, ripe in summer.” Like the word *peach*, the word *apricot* is now associated with a shade of pink-orange.

One color with a name that came from Arabic does not refer to a fruit. That is crimson, which is a deep red. The word *crimson* comes from the Arabic word *qirmiz*, which originally meant “worm produced.” In the Arabic world, the shell of an insect was used to dye fabric a deep red. The name of the process of dyeing the fabric became the name of the color.

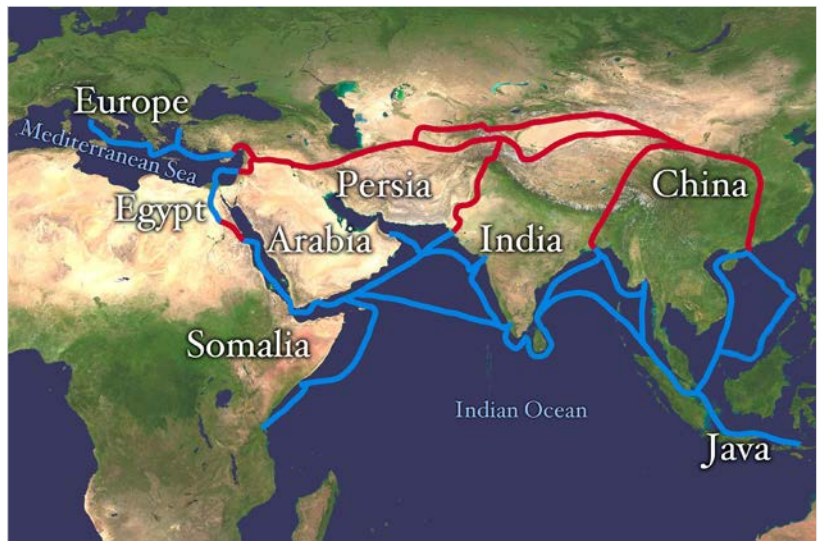


4

STAYING IN FASHION

Today, we go to a store to buy clothes, or we order them online. Centuries ago, stores were rare and, of course, there was no Internet.

From the time of the Roman Empire, traders traveled from the Middle East to China to find goods such as cloth and spices. Such trips took months or even years, as people traveled on horses or camels along rough roads and traded in many languages. Cloth from different countries was very valuable, and when they were brought back to Europe, many kinds of cloth kept the names that the Arabic traders used.



Have you read the labels on your jeans or shirts? How much of your clothing contains cotton? Cotton comes from the seed of a plant that grows in hot places. Arabic traders brought cotton to Europe from the Middle East and north Africa, where the fabric was called *alqoton*. If you remember from Chapter 1, the prefix *al-* means “the,” so you can see how the word became *cotton* in English.

If you want to sparkle, what do you wear? Maybe your last costume or party dress had sequins. Today, sequins are often made of plastic, but hundreds of years ago, they were made of metal, and even coins. Wealthy people wore sequins to show others how rich they were. It makes sense, then, that the word *sequin* came from the Arabic word *sikka*, which means “the machine that is used to cut coins from sheets of metal.”

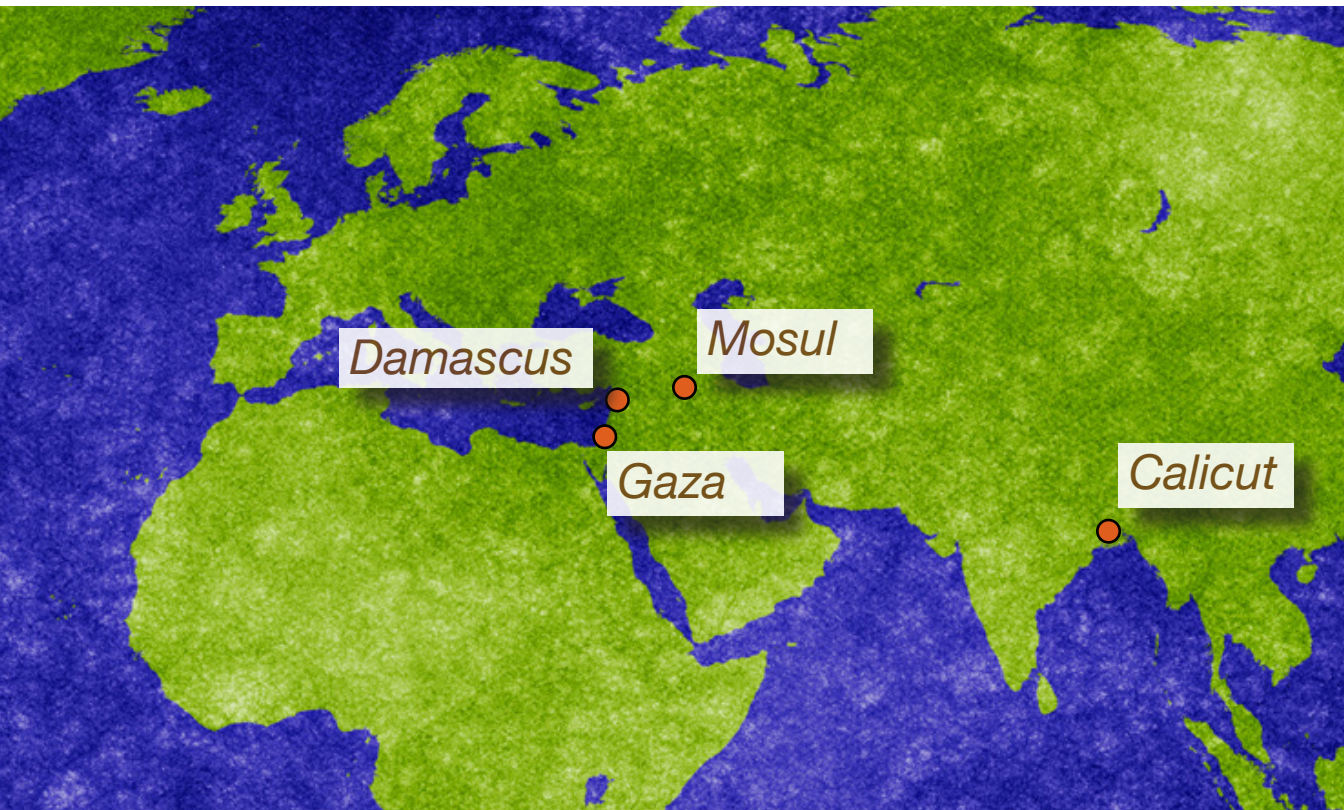


The Angora goat has curly, fuzzy hair, much like that of a sheepdog. Also like a sheepdog, the Angora goat's hair is very soft. When people discovered that it could keep them warm, they used Angora goat hair to make winter clothing. This wool came to be called mohair, which is from an Arabic word that means "select or choice" because it was so special.



Many of the fabrics you wear today are named for the city or town where the fabric was first made. Often, these towns were in places where the people spoke Arabic. The examples in the chart give the Arabic name of the town and the name now used in English for the fabric.

Kind of Fabric or Cloth	Arabic Name	Town Where the Cloth was Made
muslin	mussolo	Mosul, a city in present-day Iraq
calico	qaliqūt	Arabic name for a city in India called Calicut by the English
damask	dimashq	Arabic name for the city Dimashq, in Syria, called Damascus in English
gauze	ghazza	Gaza, a city in Palestine



5

SWEETS & TREATS

Like people, some plants prefer warm climates, while some prefer cool climates. The people of northern Africa, where it can be very hot, grew plants that the people of colder European climates had never seen. Through trade, however, Europeans learned about many of these plants.



One of these is sugar. Today we get sugar from two different kinds of plants: sugarcane and sugar beets.

Early Europeans, though, used honey to sweeten their foods. They didn't know about sugarcane because the plant requires warmer climates, which northern Africa provides.

European traders were amazed at how sugarcane was grown in large fields. Soon, they only wanted to sugarcanes too. Even the word *sugar* came from the Arabic word *sukkar*, which means "fine stones."



People from Arabic-speaking countries who had traveled to India discovered that the sweet juice from sugarcane could be boiled to form a thick, sticky liquid. This liquid, when left to harden, could be broken off and eaten as a treat. In India, the word for this type of treat was *khanda*, which meant “piece.” When *khanda* was adopted into Arabic, the word became *qandah*. In English, the word became *candy*.

The sugar from the sugarcane had other uses, too. When a great deal of sugar was added to water or other drinks, the liquid became thick and sweet. In Arabic, the drink was called *sharab*, or *syrup* in English.





Many adults in North America and Europe start their day with a cup of coffee. This was another plant that is grown in warm climates. Coffee came from the Kaffa region of northern Africa. One story about its origin is that shepherds there discovered that their goats started to “dance” and had more energy after eating beans from a local plant.

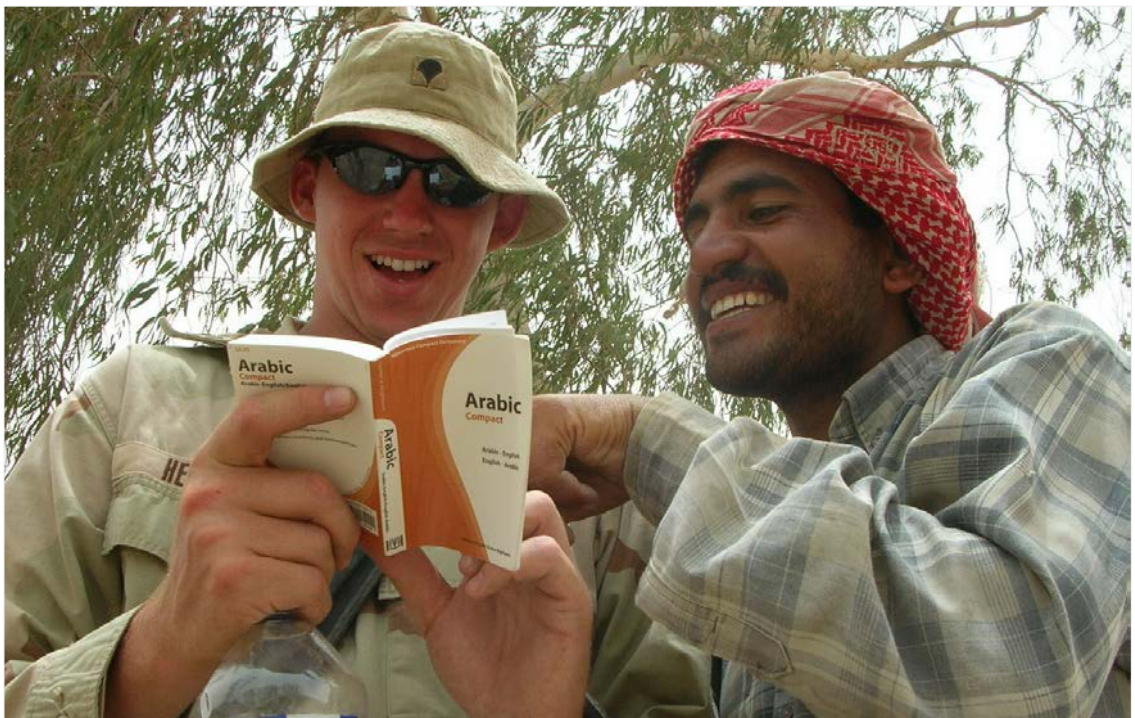
However it was discovered, though, people found that drinking it gave them more energy. That’s why people often drink it in the morning—to help them wake up.

In Arabic, coffee beans were known as qahweh, which is named either for the Kaffa region, or qahwat al-būnn, meaning “wine of the bean.”

Our Changing Language

Languages change for many reasons. One is that people often need new words to describe new things and new ideas that have come into their culture. Because of this, many words have long and diverse histories. Like people, words travel from one country to another during trade and exploration.

When Arabic-speaking traders encountered new products and ideas in their travels throughout the Mideast, Africa, and Asia, they picked up words from the languages in these areas. Then they gave them the sounds of their own language. In this way, words change pronunciations as they travel around the world.



زرافة

Arabic

zarafa

Arabic

girafe

French

jirafa

Spanish

giraffa

Italian

giraffe

English

girafa

Portuguese

Over time, as Arabic traders met Europeans, who spoke languages such as Spanish or French, the words changed again. By the time many of these words became part of English, they looked and sounded quite different from the original words.

Understanding a word's history can give you a sense of how it has "traveled" around the world and the many people who have used it and changed it. All of these things are part of a word's "story."

Glossary

algebra a form of mathematics that solves problems by using symbols to represent numbers. For example, if $x + 1 = 3$, you can figure out that $x = 2$.

algorithm a step-by-step method for solving a problem. For example, you can find the cost of a stack of books by adding all of their prices together.

Arabic numerals the number system we use most often, in which the numbers are written as 1, 2, 3, etc.

citrus fruit a type of fruit that has a lot of Vitamin C, such as oranges, lemons, limes, and grapefruits

climate the weather in an area over a long period of time

fabric cloth that is often created by weaving or knitting, such as cotton or wool

primary language the first language a person learns to speak

symbol a letter or picture that stands for something else. For example, 1 stands for the number one; also, a picture of a smiley face means someone is happy.

trade buying and selling goods



Think About It

- Today, we buy food and clothing from around the world. Look at the labels in your clothing and on the boxes of the foods you have at home, and find three countries where your things were made or grown. Locate those places on a map to find the journeys your things have taken.
- Describe one of the animals mentioned in this book. How is it like animals that you know? How is it different?
- Work with a friend to blend several colors of crayon or paint to make a new color. Create a name for your color, and explain why you chose that name.



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