

How this dictionary came into existence

"We speak Tounsi here," my Tunisian host said to me after I spoke an Arabic phrase I had learned on the internet. "It's also called Derja. It means something like 'Everyday language.'"

We were standing at the entrance of the Hannibal Residence, an apartment complex along the Corniche in La Marsa, Tunisia. It was July 2021. And I had just arrived in the richly historic North African country a couple days before; I would be staying in the country for the next 12 weeks.

My travel to Tunisia was part of a new journey and project I had embarked on — Ithaca Bound. At its core, Ithaca Bound was and continues to document the Mediterranean Basin. A year earlier I had a premonition of Ithaca Bound and that I needed to pursue life and this project in the Mediterranean in a pursuit of bringing the Mediterranean lifestyle to people around the world—including myself—regardless of where one lived.

And Tunisia was my first stop on, what I hadn't realize at the time, would be a 23-month uninterrupted voyage around the Mediterranean that would take me, and my dog Trevor (who travelled with me for this entire first voyage), to 11 countries and territories on all three Mediterranean continents which included: Türkiye, Lebanon, Spain, Greece, Malta, Tunisia, Egypt & others.

The challenge learning Arabic in an Arabic country

I was fascinated with Arabic so prior to arriving in Tunisia I researched some basic Arabic words and phrases and intended to begin learning Arabic while I was in Tunisia. What my host pointed out though, and many have learned, or will learn, when they visit an Arabic-oriented country, is that almost all the countries have vastly different dialects from each other. So, although in most or all Arabic countries, which includes Tunisia, students formerly learn Standard Arabic (*Al lougha al 3arabeya al fos7a* / اللغة العربية الفصحى or Fos7a / فصحي for short) in school, their mother tongue—the form of communication they are speaking with their parents, when playing

with friends on the street, etc.—is Tunisian Arabic. And Tunisian Arabic is what is indigenously referred to as *Derja* or *Tounsi*.²

What makes learning a *Derja* (The word *Derja* is only used to refer to local Arabic dialects in Maghrebi countries—the broader Arabic word is *Lahja* / لهجة, which means "Dialect") even more difficult is that, surprisingly, in 2021 when I arrived in Tunisia, there was almost no English to Tunisian Arabic translation content publicly available. You may ask how that is possible. And I asked the same question too. And what was explained to me by a Tunisian is that, first, Tunisian Arabic isn't taught to Tunisians in school. In the standard educational system, *Fos7a* is taught first, followed by French at Grades 2 or 3 and English at Grades 4 or 5. (depending on the region) But there is no formal teaching, at the time of this writing, in the Tunisian school system for Tunisian Arabic. And what a couple Tunisian team members on this project further explained to me is that, despite Tunisian Arabic being hundreds of years in age, it wasn't a common practice to actually *write* in Tunisian Arabic until about 25 years ago. Again, you might ask, "How is this possible?" And as it was explained, the actual *writing down* of Tunisian Arabic only began with the advent of Facebook and text messaging. Prior to social technologies like social media, there was never a need for anyone to write in *Tounsi*—it was solely the form of communication that people would use in day-to-day speech in their homes and communities.

And so, in 2021, with a strong desire to learn Tunisian Arabic, and with little resources to do so, I realized: I needed to learn Tunisian Arabic from the Tunisians themselves.

Beginning to study

For several days, I would sit at a corner cafe across from my residential building in La Marsa writing words on a sheet of paper. Guess what language I was studying? No, it wasn't Arabic. It was French! Because so many people around me didn't speak English, I felt the only way to learn Tunisian Arabic was to learn French so that I could engage more deeply with Tunisians and learn Tunisian Arabic

² *Derja* / درجة is derived from Moroccan Arabic. Moroccans call their dialect of Arabic *Derja* too.

that way. (Basically, establishing a Lingua franca—a common language, but not our native languages, between us) But you can imagine the impracticality of such a quest (And especially within a 12-week time frame to be in the country)—Basically, learning a language to learn a language!

And so, it wasn't until I started developing friendships with actual Tunisians, and they began teaching me words and phrases, that I began learning Tunisian Arabic. First, it was a *épicerie* owner in La Marsa (who resided in Bizerte or in Tunisian Arabic, *Benzert*) who saw my genuine curiosity in Tounsi. The first word he taught me was *B9adech?* / *بقداش؟*, which means "How much?" (in the article below *Numbers as letters*, we cover what the use of numbers in words mean) The *9 / ع* isn't a pronunciation in English so I would pronounce it closer to *Kadech* which sounded too close to *7addech* which means the number "Eleven"! The owner of Porto Coffee and a dapper, middle-aged male barista taught me *Ta3tini* shortly after which means "Give me". (It seems strange in English, but yes, essentially, when ordering something, like coffee or food, the word *Ta3tini*, which means "Give me", is acceptable to say. For example, *Ta3tini 9ahwa* means "Give me a coffee" and is akin to our English of, "Can I have a coffee?") And then my friend Sabrine, who I had met on the Corniche, worked with me and we filled several pages of English to Tunisian Arabic translations. With much emotion a few weeks later, as we were parting ways as I was preparing to leave La Marsa, the last thing she ever wrote on one of these pieces of paper was, "Never stop learning Tounsi".

The idea of Ithaca Bound Languages

And so, my time in Tunisia came to an end. And after 12 weeks I continued the first voyage and set off to live in Türkiye, Spain, and then Egypt. And each time I would arrive in a country with a strong desire to speak the local language or dialect, at least to a basic level. But each time I was confronted with needing to start the learning process from scratch again. (Yes, I would walk around places like Istanbul and Cairo with a sheet of paper and pen jotting down Turkish and Egyptian Arabic) It was through these travels that a platform called Ithaca Bound Languages took shape—a platform that would document the languages and dialects of the

Mediterranean Basin. And interestingly, it would be the locals who would share their native languages on the platform: Assisting me and others to learn their language, at least to a basic degree. (A term for this is "Taxi talk", as Professor Louise Hitchcock, The University of Melbourne, described it on a previous Ithaca Bound podcast episode, as she reflected on her own time doing field work in Syria) If one could know, let's say, 200 basic words of a language or dialect, then on the day of arrival in that new country, a traveller could engage with locals in *their* language. And when one does that, the traveller becomes someone who's not the norm in that neighbourhood (E.g., Tunisians almost exclusively only meet travellers who speak French and English). When you travel and engage with locals in their language, you become someone who is fascinating to locals and someone that, to them, would be enjoyable to engage more with. And when that happens, experiences and moments of authentic connection occur more rapidly.

Missing a bus in Tunisia on my arrival back

In April 2022, I arrived back in Tunisia and was set to head to the beautiful northern coastal city of Benzert, which was recommended to me on my first visit. Leaving the Tunis-Carthage International Airport with Trevor and my luggage, I watched the bus that went to Benzert set into motion and trail off—I missed it by 45 seconds! I approached a worker near the bus stop who only spoke Arabic. I didn't quite understand what he was trying to convey to me but I got the sense that I should wait around for what bus would appear next. I sat down on a nearby bench.

About 20 minutes later, as if out of nowhere, a young man in his early twenties appeared. He engaged too with the same worker (in Tunisian Arabic, of course) and then sat down on the bench next to me. I asked him about the bus. As it turned out, the previous bus was the last one to Benzert that day. But he explained that another bus was coming that would take us to a city about 20 minutes from Benzert. From there we could take a taxi into Benzert. This young man, who was fluent in Tunisian Arabic, French and English and I travelled together. After arriving in Benzert by taxi, his father (who was a retired police officer) then drove me to the

neighbourhood of the home I rented that week which was situated along the city's beautiful Old Port. (Known by locals as *Vieux Port* or *Bort el 9dim*) This young man's name was Amine and he ended up being the first contributor to provide English to Tunisian Arabic translation content to the Ithaca Bound Languages project. Ithaca Bound Languages would launch a mere two months after this first meeting.

The formation of Ithaca Bound Languages

Starting with Amine whose Tunisian, and Jack Jizmejian, an ambitious young Lebanese man I met in Beirut a month earlier, translation content began to appear at Ithacaboundlanguages.com. It started with Tunisian and Lebanese Arabic and over the next two years the number of contributors to the project grew to 56 people—Passionate people who have contributed their hearts, time and knowledge in producing translation content across the languages and dialects of Tunisian Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, Lebanese Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Greek, Spanish & Turkish. At the time of this writing there are 10,940 pages of content with recordings and over 50,000 statements translated in these languages. And of that, 4,780 of the pages are Tunisian Arabic (6,022 principal words and phrases) with over 20,000 statements translated.

And in the last 12 months (April 2024 to March 2025), the IBL project has assisted approximately 91,000 users globally learn the languages and dialects of the Mediterranean Basin.

The formation of this dictionary

The hardest part of creating a dictionary is producing its content. Because Ithaca Bound Languages was already underway, which intrinsically had a large and growing database of English to Tunisian Arabic content, it made perfect sense to create a dictionary—A treatment of Tunisian Arabic at a size and publication standard that hadn't yet been done. And so, the idea behind bringing a dictionary to life—this dictionary you're holding—was to use Ithaca Bound Languages as the source material, and further add an editorial advisory team of seven Tunisians, who were previous or current contributors to the project, whom would provide

further editorial review and feedback to the material that would reach final print.

Speaking Arabic is a delight, and Tunisian Arabic is a wonderful dialect that is beautiful when heard and enjoyable to speak. A Moroccan once said to me (while in Morocco) that when Tunisians speak, it's as if they are singing.

With the assistance of Ithaca Bound Languages available online to listen to recordings, and with this steadfast resource in your hands, you really can substantially advance your knowledge of Tunisian Arabic. And like my friend Sabine wrote to me on that fateful first trip to Tunisia in 2021, I too will write it to you: Never stop learning Tounsi.

I wish you a marvellous journey,



Andrew Schiestel

Ithaca Bound