

I-MAG Scheme for TRANSCRIBING ARABIC PHONEMES

Updated November, 2005

By **Hayat Alyaqout**

or more correctly:
'Hayaat Alyaa'qoot

— hayat@i-mag.org

Transliterating Arabic sounds into English writing system has always been problematic. This stems from the fact that Arabic has nine consonant sounds that are not found in English. And Although the Arabic alphabet has 28 letters while the English one has 26, the English alphabet has several repeated sounds; k, q, and sometimes c all denote the same sound for instance. We should thus pay attention to the difference between a grapheme; the smallest written unit or in other words a letter, and a phoneme; the smallest unit of sound. K, q, and c - in certain cases - are thus three graphemes but all represent one phoneme; /k/.

The same problem exists when it comes to vowels. Arabic has two types of vowels:

1. **Tense vowels**, and there are three of them. Combining tense vowels is possible to create new sets of vowels. Tense vowels can be combined with lax vowels as well;

2. **Al'harakaat** (الحركات) or what could be loosely called **lax vowels**. They are milder versions of the three tense vowels plus some other representations. Lax vowels are represented by diacritics marks placed on the letter that they affect, although they are not – most of the time – written out explicitly and it is left to the reader to assume to right 'harakah. What makes things more complicated is that lax vowels can affect tense vowels creating a new pronunciation of the vowel.

The International Phonetics Association (I.P.A.) has a comprehensive transcription scheme that explains the way on how to transcribe every sound modern languages have. The system is excellent, yet it is neither normal-reader-friendly nor keyboard-friendly, and subsequently does not cater for the needs of a normal reader and a normal publication.

The task of devising an expressive and easy-to-understand scheme to transcribe Arabic phonemes is necessary, but is not necessarily



easy. And what we have in hand is quite unsatisfactory, as it does not always reflect the real pronunciation of the Arabic sounds in addition to the lack of standardisation that is dangerously prevalent. Indeed, most attempts wither away simply because of the apathy or because of the ultraconservative nature of some who think that “if it’s not broken, don’t fix it.” The ways used

to transcribe Arabic sounds are not broken, yet they are not up to the pressing need. I know that many would resent my suggestion to write “Islam” and “Allaah” instead of “Islam” and “Allah” that have been unanimously used for decades if not centuries, but who said that unanimity always means correctness?

Here is a preliminary scheme fol-

lowed by some reflections on the matter. From this issue of I-MAG and on, we shall follow this phonemes transcription scheme.

All suggestions and contributions are welcome and will be published in I-MAG since discourse is the only path for successful ventures. I hope that Allaah accepts this effort and grants us all sincerity and success.

CONSONANTS

PHONEME IN ARABIC	PHONEME DESCRIPTION	INTERNATIONAL PHONETICS ASSOCIATION SCHEME	I-MAG SCHEME
1. ح	Devoiced pharyngeal fricative sound.	/ħ/	'h (h preceded by an single ending quote) As in mu'hammad مُحَمَّد
2. خ	Velar fricative sound.	/χ/ or /x/	'k As in 'kaleefah خليفة
3. ك	Velarised /s/	/ṣ/ or /sʲ/	's (s preceded by an single ending quote) As in 'saadi'q صادق
4. ض	Velarised /d/	/ḍ/	'd As in 'diyaa-ضياء
5. ط	Velarised /t/	/ṭ/	't (t preceded by an single ending quote) As in 'taari'q طارق
6. ظ	Velarised /ð/ (ð as in the first sound of them)	/ð̣/	'th (th preceded by an single ending quote) As in 'thilaal ظلال
7. ع	Voiced pharyngeal fricative sound.	/ʕ/ or superscripted / ^c /	' (a single opening quote) As in 'aly عَلِيّ and 'eed عيد
8. غ	Uvular fricative sound.	/ʁ/ or /ɣ/	'g As in 'gaafir غافر
9. ق	Uvular fricative sound.	/q/ or /G/	'q (q preceded by an single ending quote) as in 'Qura~n قرآن
10. ث / ذ	Interdental fricative sounds. /θ/ is devoiced while /ð/ is voiced.	/θ/ as in “three” and /ð̣/ as in “that”	th as in thalaathah ثلاثة th> as in th>immah ذمة

TENSE VOWELS

VOWEL		I-MAG REPRESENTATION	
1.	ا الألف Alif	(الألف الممدودة) Always in the middle of an utterance. The letter before it as affected by a fat'hah.	aa as in salaam سلام
		ا At the end of the utterance	a as in huna هنا
		ي (الألف المقصورة) مصطفي	a as in Mu's'tafa مصطفى
.2	ء الهمزة Hamzah	Plosive glottal (or laryngeal) sound represented as /ʔ/ in the I.P.A. transcription scheme.	
		أ أ + فتحة أ + ضمة أ + كسرة = إ ا (همزة وصل)	a as in amal أمل ou as in oumمي أمي i as in it'qaan إتقان i ibtisaam ابتسام
		آ آ = أ + آ = ا +	a~ as a~maal آمال and a~آل a~ and 'Qura~n قرآن
		ِ (In medium or final position)	- as in wa-d وأد and bara-برأ
		ء ئ ، ئ ، ئ ؤ ء	- as in kuf-كفاء and shay-شيء - as in mi-th>anah مئذنة، madaa-n مدائن shaa'ti-شاطيء - as in ro-yah رؤية aa- as in baraa-براء and in shaa- Allaah إن شاء الله

TENSE VOWELS, CONTINUED

3.	<p>و الواو Waaw /w/</p>	<p>Combing w with other tense vowels:</p> <p>و + ا و + ي و + و</p> <p>Combing w with lax vowels:</p> <p>و + فتحة و + ضمة و + ضمة (الواو الممدودة) و + كسرة و + سكون و + شدة (و + و)</p>	<p>waa as in waa'sil واصل way as in way'h ويح or wy as in samaawy سماويّ woo as in Dawood داوود and 'taawoos طاووس wa as in waleed وليد wu as in wud ود and wus' وسع oo as in roo'h روح wi as in widaad وداد aw is in mawt موت ww as in nawwaar نوار</p>
4.	<p>ي الياء Yaa- /y/</p>	<p>Combing y with other tense vowels:</p> <p>ي + ا ي (مفتوحة) + و ي (مضمومة) + و (مضمومة)</p> <p>Combing y with lax vowels:</p> <p>ي + فتحة ي + ضمة ي + كسرة (الياء الممدودة) ي + سكون ي + شدة (ي + ي)</p>	<p>yaa as in yaaseen ياسين yaw as in yawm يوم or yoo as in Yoosuf يوسف ya as in yamshi يمشى yu yumkin يمكن ee as in 'hadeeth حديث ay as in bayt بيت (and not the bait as pronounced in most dialects) yy as in sayyid سيد</p>

LAX VOWELS (DIACRITIC MARKS)

LAX VOWEL		REPRESENTATION IN ARABIC	I-MAG SCHEME
1.	Kasrah كسرة	Represented as: ِ	i as in ri'haab رِحاب (written underneath ِ)
2.	'Dammah ضمة	Represented as: ُ	u as in Yoosuf يُوُسُف (written above ُ)
3.	Fat'hah فتحة	Represented as: َ	a as in Mu'hammad مُحَمَّد (written above the second َ)
4.	Sukoon سكون	Represented as: ْ	Sukoon means silences and it thus means there is no diacritic mark affecting the sound. When the sukoon is placed on a vowel, it changes its pronunciation. (written above the letter)
5.	Shaddah شدة (Gemination)	Represented as: ّ	Doubling the letter whether a consonant or a vowel when written above the letter in question i.e. Mu'hammad مُحَمَّد, Makkah مَكَّة and Fawwaaz فَوَّاز (written above the letter)



REFLECTIONS

The Odyssey of "Al"

"Al" which commonly appears in family names in Arabic as well as being the definite article meaning "the" should not be hyphenated in both cases. For instance, we write Ala'q'sa and not Al-A'q'sa.

1. "Al" - as a part of family names - originally came from the word "Ahl" أهل (folks of family in Arabic) and then was clipped to "a~l" آل , and at a later stage to "Al" ال. In I-MAG we shall stick to the final stage of development; "Al." "Al" in Arabic is integrated in the family name and is not a separate entity and should not thus be hyphenated in English.

2. "Al" as the definite article should be also integrated in the word. Arabic is known to blend morphemes (the smallest units of grammar) and make them integral parts of the words. In English for example, we do not spell "unable" as "un-able" because the morpheme "un" is a bound morpheme (cannot stand alone) and thus became a part of the word, but we spell "the" as a separate word because "the" is a free morpheme in English (can stand alone). In Arabic, the definite article is a bound morpheme and cannot stand alone and is thus always integrated in the word.

Why "Y" and not "I"?

Yaa- Annisbah ياء النسبة in Arabic is added to the end of nouns to coin relational adjectives as is always geminated. Y is more representative of this gemination than i. So, we write Al'araby not Al'arabi, Attoonisy not Attonisi.

Writing Right

We transcribe according to how we pronounce; we write assalaam not alsalaam, arrazy not alrazy. A non-native speaker is not concerned with how we write the word in Arabic, but with how we pronounce it.

Compound Proper Names

1- Names prefixed with 'abd and similar words:

'Abd Arra'hmaan, 'Abd Allaah, 'Abd Alwadood, Waly Arra'hmaan, and Sajjad Arra'hmaan. Each part is written separately because in Arabic each one of them is a separate word. The germination should be represented. Some use 'Abdur Ra'hmaan for instance, and this is the perfection way because in Arabic 'Abdar Ra'hmaan and 'Abdir Ra'hmaan are also possible. So, it is safer to use the most neutral form 'Abd Arra'hmaan.

2- Names suffixed by "Deen":

Noor Addeen, Shihaab Addeen, Ni'tham Adeen.

3- Names with Aboo, Aba, Abi:

Aboo Bakr and Aboo Hurayrah. Abu is always used since abi and aba are used for grammatical conditions that are restricted to Arabic.

Be Fair with the H:

When a word ends with an h, it should be always transcribed as such; Fa'timah not Fa'tima and Ousaamah not Ousaama.

Dark L:

Dark l is spelled as double l as in Allaah.

Names:

In I-MAG we respect the way people spell their names and we thus do not impose this transcription system neither on our team nor on our writers or guests when it comes to names transcription. Nevertheless, we provide the transcription of all the names that appear in I-MAG between square brackets, this is done with the first time a name appears in an article or interview. This will convey the real pronunciation of the name to the reader and in the same time respects the spelling people use for their names.

Cyber Attempts:

In cyberspace, a system for transcribing Arabic sounds was devised. It uses English numbers to denote Arabic sounds. "7" for instance is used to transcribe (ح) sound due to the similarity of their shape. So 'Hayaat would be 7ayaat.

It's not known who devised that system, but it's gaining popularity in Internet-based informal communications.

For more information, read this report: <http://www.aawsat.com/default.asp?issue=8780&page=internet&article=141010>

THIS BOOKLET IS AVAILABLE FOR DOWNLOAD AT:

WWW.I-MAG.ORG/ARABIC.PDF