

A Grammar of Colloquial Arabic

An Arabic Scrip Addendum to T.F. Mitchel Teach Yourself Colloquial Arabic. A revival project to make this excellent body of work meaningfully usable for the next generations of Egyptian Arabic learners.

Pronunciation of Vowels

General

Of the six vowels (**a, α, e, i, o, u**), three (**i, e, a**) are articulated in the front of the mouth and three (**α, o, u**) in the back: the tongue becomes flatter in the mouth or at a greater distance from the roof of the mouth as it moves from **i** through **e** to **a** and, conversely, moves towards the roof of the mouth in the back series from **a** through **o** to **u**; the degree of opening, measurable roughly by the distance between the top and bottom teeth, is greatest for the open vowels (**a, α**) and least for the close vowels (**i, u**). The lips arc spread for **i** and **e**, neutral for **a** and **α**, rounded for **o** and (especially) **u**.

Vowel-length

Vowels occur both short and long; when pronouncing a long vowel, give it at least twice the length given to its single counterpart; cf., for example, صدف **Sádaf** *sea-shells* and صادف **Sáadif** *he chanced upon*.

Two principal rules govern the occurrence of long vowels:

(1) they occur only in prominent or stressed syllables, cf. ماسك **máasik** *holding* but ماسكهم **masíkhum** *holding them*;

(2) they do not occur in closed syllables, i.e. type CVVC, where C consonant and VV = long vowel, unless the syllable is final, cf. منديل **manadíil** *handkerchiefs* but منديلها **manadíilha** *her handkerchiefs*.

Note: It will be seen that if a vowel is pronounced short, then it is written short, even where grammar and lexicon would suggest a long vowel.

Contrary to rule (1), long vowels sometimes occur in non-prominent syllables in loans from written Arabic, e.g. **3adátan** عادة or **3aadátan** *usually*, القاهرة **ilqahíra** or **ilqaahíra** *Cairo*. The vowel in such cases is not as long as in prominent syllables (cf. **3áamil** عامل *workman*) but is distinctly longer than the short counterpart. This possibility of incremental length has been indicated where appropriate in the transcription by the use of brackets, i.e. **3a(a)dátan**, عادة **ilqa(a)híra**. Loans from the written language also account for a few exceptions to rule (2). Most educated speakers make a difference of vowel-length between **3ámmi** عمي *my uncle* and **3áammi** عالمي *ignorant* (a "learned" form) and also between **3amm** عم *uncle* and **3aamm** عام *public, general* (cf. **3aam** عام *year*); in neither **3áammi** عالمي nor **3aamm** عام is the vowel pronounced as long as in, say, **3áamil** عامل where it occurs in an open syllable. Again, contrary to rule (2), a vowel which is generally short and corresponds to a long vowel in related forms is sometimes pronounced very long when the word containing it is singled out for special emphasis, e.g. دي غالية جدا **di Gáalya giddan!** *that's terribly dear!*, cf. the more usual غالية **Gálya** (masc. غالي **Gáli**). Taking the language as a whole, however, exceptions to both rules are extremely rare. Finally, it may be noted that the style of utterance on which the transcription in this book is based is slow colloquial; in rapid style, vowels are commonly pronounced long only before a pause.

Vowel-quality

In English we "slur" the vowel-sounds in the majority of syllables which are non-prominent or unstressed. Consider the vowels italicized in "*the Queen of England*" or "*from head to foot*". This must be avoided at all costs in Arabic; each vowel should be clearly pronounced, each syllable given its due rhythmic weight. For this among other reasons, do not

try to speak too rapidly at first -- the formation of good habits early on will save a lot of trouble later. Vowels will now be considered in turn from the point of view of the quality to be associated with them.

- **a** - between the vowel sounds of "Standard" English *hat* and *hurt* or *had* and *herd*. Try to isolate the vowel in *had* and then make it sound a little like the vowel in *herd*; if the complete word *hat* is taken as a starting-point and made to sound something like *hurt* without going the whole way, the result should be an acceptable rendering of the Arabic هات **haat!** *fetch, bring!* Other examples are: درس **dáras** *he studied*, باب **baab** *door*, كتبة **kátaba** *clerks*, كتابة **kitáaba** *writing*. Remember to beware of any tendency to "slur", for example in the second or third syllable of **kátaba**.
- **α** - when short and in a closed syllable, between the vowels of Standard "English" *hut* and *hot*; when in an open syllable or when long, as the vowel of English *heart*. **α** occurs especially in the vicinity of the emphatic consonants.

Note: Since the quality of the emphatic a is determined by the consonant, it is (almost) always predictable when to pronounce emphatic a. So, in the phonetic transcript simply a is used and not the officially correct α.

صف **Saff** row, line, رصاص **ruSáaS** lead (metal), ضرب **Dárab** *he hit*, فضّى **fáDDa** *he emptied; silver*, حاضر **HáaDir** *certainly*, باط **baaT** *armpit*, بطن **baTn** *stomach*, ظنّ **Zann** *he thought, believed*, مضبوط **maZbúuT** *exact(ly)*. The vowel also commonly occurs in association with **r**, e.g. رفّ **raff** *shelf*, راح **ráaH** *he went*, راجل **ráaḡil** *man*, حفرة **Húfra** *hole*, برّاً **bárra** *outside*, برّاد **barráad** *fitter*, نار **náar** *fire*, but contrast the occurrence of **a** in, say, رايح **ráayih** *going*, راجع **ráagi3** *returning*, بارد **bard** *cold*, ورّى **wárra** *he showed*, فيران **firáan** *mice*. **a** is also regularly associated with **q**, e.g. قرية **qarya** *village*, القاهرة **ilqa(a)híra** *Cairo*, أقسام **aqsáam** *(administrative) departments*. It is not essential for the vowel immediately to precede or follow **D, S, T, Z, r** or **q**; cf. مطبخ **máTbx** *kitchen*, خالص **xáliS** *very, completely*, لفظ **lafZ** *pronunciation*, طورومبات **Turumbáat** *(petrol) pumps*, شربات **šarabáat** *socks*, مبروك **mabrúuk** *congratulations!*, القرآن **ilqur'áan** *the Koran*. The consonant context, moreover, is not an infallible guide to the quality of an associated open vowel, cf., for example, هبهب **hábbhab** *it barked*, مياه، مية، **máyya** *water*, etc., and numerous loans from foreign languages, as لمبة **lámbe** *lamp*, (sámak) **bakaláα** *cod*; cf., too, أمر **ámar** *he ordered* but 'ámar *moon*. Moreover, back vowels may be used with non-emphatic consonants which themselves must be clearly differentiated from emphatic counterparts, e.g. خدّر **xáddar** *he anaesthetized* but خضّر **xáDDar** *he trimmed (hair); watered (seedlings)*; although the vowel in the first syllable of **xáDDar** tends to be nearer than its counterpart in **xáddar** to the vowel of English *hot*, nevertheless both these Arabic vowels are back vowels and to be distinguished not so much from each other as both of them from **a**, cf. أندّه **ándah** *I call*, لكنة **lukándα** *hotel*, أنداف **ánDaf** *cleaner*. The distribution of **a** and **α** varies between men and women (see below), to some extent also between individuals, and notably between dialects. Cairene خاف **xaaf** *he was afraid*, for example, corresponds to خاف **xaaf** in Upper Egypt. A "Classical" pronunciation anywhere in the country conforms to the practice of Al-Azhar Mosque and University in Cairo and requires **α** in association with **x** and **G**, and also invariably with **r**, e.g. خال **xaal** *(maternal) uncle*, غايب **Gáayib** *absent*, فيران **fi(i)ráan** *mice*. Thus, a man using his "Classical" style at an appropriate time may be heard to say خادم **xáadim** but will certainly use **xáadim** *servant* on normal colloquial occasions. The difference **α** : **a** (usually in association with the consonantal distinction emphatic : non-emphatic) tends to relate to difference between the speech of men and women respectively. جراح **garráaH** *surgeon*, for example, is typically a woman's form, to which **garráαH** would usually correspond in men's speech.

- **e** - a vowel approximately mid-way between the vowels in *bet* and *beet*. Pronouncing the vowel of English *bit* energetically and with spread lips usually produces the right result. The sound is common enough in English

dialects, for example in Devon and Southern Ireland. Take care not to pronounce **e** like the "ay" sound in *day* or *bait*. Examples بيت **beet** house, بيض **beeD** eggs. When short, **e** is difficult to distinguish from short **i** in the speech of many people, especially in rapid style (cf. بيتنا **bétna** our house and بتنا **bitna** we spent the night), but most educated speakers appear to make a slight difference and even in dialects where no distinction is made it would for most purposes be desirable to retain the transcribed difference between **bétna** and **bítna** in order to facilitate identification of the forms.

- **i** - when short, as in English *bit*, e.g. بنت **bint** girl, daughter; when long or final, approximately as in English *beet* but with more tension in the tongue and greater spreading of the lips, e.g. شيل **šil** remove!, tamállī always. An example which illustrates both qualities is كبير **kibiir** big, old. Before **-yya**, the vowel towards the quality of **e**, e.g. in مصرية **maSríyya** Egyptian (fem.).
- **ii** - pronounced short in accordance with the rules of vowel length, tends nevertheless to retain the quality described for **ii**, not non-final **i**; the qualities of **ii** and **i** in شيل **šil** remove (masc.)!, شيلهم **šilhum** remove (masc.) them, شيلي **šili** remove (fem.)!, شيليه **šilíh** remove (fem.) it (masc.)!, are substantially the same.
- **o** - between the vowels in *hawk* and *hook*. Pronounce the vowel of *hawk* with greater rounding and protrusion of the lips and an acceptable **o** should result. The sound is again common enough in English dialects, but neither the usual *o* of *no* nor the *ow* of *now* will do at all. Examples: فوق **foo'** above, upstairs, on top, مصوگر **miSoogar** registered. As between **e** and **i**, the difference between short **o** and **u** (see below) is greatly reduced in the speech of some, especially in rapid style.
- **u** - when short, as in English *put*, e.g. كتب **kútub** books; when long or final, approximately as *oo* in *food* but with greater tension and stronger rounding and protrusion of the lips, e.g. شوف **šuf** see!, ينسوا **yínsu** they forget. دخول **duxúul** entrance, entry, illustrates both qualities. Before **-wwa**, the vowel tends towards the quality of **o**, e.g. in هو **húwwa** he, it.
- Like **ii** (see above), **uu** may be regularly shortened in accordance with the rules of vowel-length, e.g. شوف **šuf** but شوفها **šúfha** look at her! In parallel with **ii**, **u** in **šúfha** may be pronounced as **uu** in **šúuf**, but equally, and in contrast with the usual practice concerning **ii**, **u** may be pronounced with the quality described for short non-final **u** above.

Diphthongs

A diphthong is a combination of two vowel sounds in the same syllable. English contains many diphthongs (cf. the pronunciation of *bay*, *by*, *boy*, *bough*, *bow* (ribbon), also *bear*, *beer*, and *boor*) and is sharply differentiated from Arabic in this respect. Diphthongization may occur notably in Egyptian Arabic when, following a vowel (especially **a** and **α**), **y** and **w** are either final or precede another consonant, circumstances in which they are often pronounced respectively as final **i** and **u**. As diphthongal elements, however, **y** and **w** should not be pronounced "lazily" as in the typical southern English pronunciation of, say, *hay* and *how* but, on the contrary, with energy and perceptible tension in the articulating organs; at the same time seek to make **y** as much as possible like the *y* of *yes* and to pronounce **w** with strong lip-rounding and protrusion - indeed, with many speakers, the sounds are so characterized by such features as to be consonantal rather than vocalic. Examples: لو **law** if, موجود **mawgúud** present, يوصل **yíwSal** he arrives, شاي **šaay** tea, طيار **Tayyáar** aeroplane