Egyptian Arabic Pronunciation

Egyptian Colloquial Arabic is a spoken dialect with no official status or rules of orthography. Egyptians tend to borrow spelling conventions from MSA with some accommodations to account for ECA pronunciation. Arabic script, however, is ill suited to show the actual pronunciation of ECA and the sound changes that occur when words are inflected. Even if you are comfortable with Arabic script, it is advised that you pay close attention to the phonemic transcription to determine the exact pronunciation of words and phrases.

CONSONANTS

The following sounds are also found in English and should pose no difficulties for learners:

			examples
b	ب	[b] as in **b**ed	*bána* بنَى *(build)*
d	د	[d̪] as in **d**og, but with the tongue touching the back of the upper teeth	*dáras* درس *(study)*
f	ف	[f] as in **f**our	*fāz* فاز *(win)*
g	ج	[g] as in **g**as	*gíri* جِرى *(run)*
h	ه	[h] as in **h**ouse	*hágam* هجم *(attack)*
k	ك	[k] as in **k**id	*kal* كل *(eat)*
l	ل	[l] a light ***l*** as in **l**ove; but in the word الله [ɬ] a dark, velarized ***l*** as in ye**ll**.	*líbis* لِبِس *(get dressed)*
m	م	[m] as in **m**oon	*māt* مات *(die)*
n	ن	[n] as in **n**ice	*nísi* نِسي *(forget)*
s	س ث	[s] as in **s**un	*sāb* ساب *(leave)*
š	ش	[š] as in **sh**ow	*šakk* شكّ *(doubt)*
t	ت	[t̪] as in **t**ie, but with the tongue touching the back of the upper teeth	*taff* تفّ *(spit)*
w	و	[w] as in **w**ord	*wárra* ورَّى *(show)*
y	ي	[j] as in **y**es	*yíktib* يِكْتِب *(he writes)*

z	ز ذ	[z] as in **z**oo	*zār* زار *(visit)*
ž	ج	[ʒ] as in plea**s**ure and bei**g**e; used in foreign borrowings and sometimes written چ to distinguish it from ج [g].	*žim* جيم *(gym)*
v	ف	[v] (sometimes spelled ڤ) and [p] (پ) appear in some foreign borrowings, but may also be pronounced [f] and [b], respectively, by many speakers	*seven ap* سڤن اپ *(7 Up)*
p	ب		

The following sounds have no equivalent in English and require special attention. However, some exist in other languages you may be familiar with.

r	ر	[r] tapped (flapped) as in the Spanish ca**r**a, or the Scottish pronunciation of t**r**ee	*ráma* رمَى *(throw)*
ɣ	غ	[ɣ] very similar to a guttural ***r*** as in the French Pa**r**is, or the German **r**ot	*ɣāb* غاب *(be absent)*
x	خ	[x] as in the German do**ch**, Spanish ro**j**o, or Scottish lo**ch**	*xad* خد *(take)*
q	ق	[q] like ***k*** but further back, almost in the throat, with the tongue touching the uvula	*qād* قاد *(lead)*
ħ	ح	[ħ] like a strong, breathy ***h***, as if you were trying to fog up a window	*ħáfar* حفر *(dig)*
ʒ	ع	[ʕ] a voiced glottal stop, as if you had opened your mouth under water and constricted your throat to prevent choking and then released the constriction with a sigh	*ʒírif* عِرِف *(know)*
ʔ	ء ق	[ʔ] an unvoiced glottal stop, as [ʕ] above, but with a wispy, unvoiced sigh; or more simply put, like the constriction separating the vowels in uh-oh	*ʔíbil* قِبِل *(accept)* *ʔáʒlan* أعْلن *(announce)*

The following sounds also have no equivalent in English but are emphatic versions of otherwise familiar sounds. An emphatic consonant is produced by pulling the tongue back toward the pharynx (throat), spreading the sides of the tongue wide as if you wanted to bite down on both sides of your tongue, and producing a good puff of air from the lungs.

ḍ	ض	[dˁ] emphatic ***d***	*ḍárab* ضرب *(hit)*
ṣ	ص	[sˁ] emphatic ***s***	*ṣamm* صمّ *(memorize)*
ṭ	ط	[tˁ] emphatic ***t***	*ṭáwa* طوَى *(fold)*
ẓ	ظ	[zˁ] emphatic ***z***	*ẓann* ظنّ *(believe)*

VOWELS

			examples
a	ـَ	[æ] normally as in c**a**t (but with the jaw not quite as lowered as in English); [a] as in st**o**ck when in the same syllable with ***ɦ*** or ***ʒ*** (with the tongue lower than [æ]); usually [ɑ] as in f**a**ther (but shorter) when in the same word as ***q, ḍ, ṣ, ṭ, ẓ,*** or, in most cases, ***r***	*kátab* كتب *(write)* *ma-bá3š* مباعْش *(he didn't sell)* *ḍárab* ضرب *(hit)* *ɣáṣab* غصب *(force)*
ā	ـَا	[æ:] / [a:] / [ɑ:] as with ***a*** above but longer	*nām* نام *(sleep)* *gā3* جاع *(get hungry)* *qād* قاد *(lead)*
ē	ـَي	[e:] as in pl**ay** (but without the glide to [j])	*malēt* ملْيْت *(I filled)*
ᵊ		[ə] as in tick**e**t. In ECA, ᵊ is inserted to avoid three adjacent consonants.	*kúntᵊ hína* كُنْت هِنا *(I was here)*
i	ـِ	[ɪ] as in k**i**d; [ɛ] as in b**e**d when in the same syllable with ***ɦ*** or ***ʒ***; when in the same word as ***q, ḍ, ṣ, ṭ,*** or ***ẓ,*** [ɨ] with the tongue pulled back a bit	*3ílim* عِلِم *(know)* *biyíɦsib* بِيِحْسِب *(he calculates)* *itẓāhir* اتْظاهِر *(protest)*

ī	ـِي	[i:] as in ski; [ɛ:] and [ɨ:] as with **i** above (but longer)	*biygīb* بِيْجيب *(he brings)* *biybī3* بِيْبيع *(he sells)* *3āqib* عاقِب *(punish)*
ō	ـُو	[o:] as with **o** above but longer	*nōm* نوْم *(sleep)*
u	ـُ	[ʊ] as in b**oo**k; [o] as in kn**ow** (but shorter and without the glide to [w]) when in the same syllable with ***ɦ*** or ***3***	*yúṭlub* يُطْلُب *(he orders)* *inbā3u* اِنْباعوا *(they sold)*
ū	ـُو	[u:] as in m**oo**n; [o:] as in kn**ow** (but without the glide to [w]) when in the same syllable with ***ɦ*** or ***3***	*bitšūf* بِتْشوف *(you see)* *maba3ūš* مباعوش *(they didn't sell)*

SOUND CHANGES

A lot of the changes which occur in conjugated ECA verbs are due to the rules of syllable structure and stress. The rules are summarized here using phonemic transcription only, as the Arabic script does not reflect these changes.

Vowel Shortening

When a suffix beginning in a consonant is added immediately after a syllable containing a long vowel, or when a suffix causes the stressed syllable to move, the long vowel is shortened. This is because a long vowel can only exist in a stressed syllable and cannot be followed by two consonants.

bagīb + ha = bagībha → ***bagíbha***	I bring it
ma + nām + š = ma-nāmš → ***ma-námš***	he didn't sleep
sāfir + t = sāfírt → ***safírt***	you traveled
nisīt + ni = nisītni → ***nisítni***	you forgot me

A long **ē** is shortened to **i**.

ma + ɦabbēt + š = ma-ɦabbētš → ***ma-ɦabbítš*** I didn't love

Vowel Lengthening

A final vowel is lengthened when certain suffixes are added to a word ending in a short vowel.

ma + ráma + š = ma-rámaš → ***ma-ramāš***	he didn't throw
3ámalu + u = 3ámaluu → ***3amalū***	they did it
nísi + t = nísit → ***nisīt***	you forgot

Vowel Elision

A short, unstressed **i** (or **u**) is elided (that is, omitted) from a word when its omission would not result in a series of three adjacent consonants, in other words, when the vowel is both preceded and followed by a single consonant only. This does not happen in a final syllable, and it only happens in the first syllable if the preceding word ends in a vowel.

Vowel omission occurs when ***-it*** (the third person feminine singular ***(híyya)*** suffix of the perfect tense) or ***-u*** (the third person plural ***(húmma)*** suffix of the perfect tense) is added to a sound measure I verb containing **i**:

šírib + it = šíribit → ***šírbit***	she drank

Notice that the elision may create two adjacent consonants following a long vowel, in which case the long vowel must be shortened. In the second example, it is the feminine form of an active participle in which elision occurs.

sāfir + it = sāfirit → *sāfrit* → ***sáfrit***	she traveled
kātib + a = kātiba → *kātba* → ***kátba***	writing

Elision can also take place with the addition of a prefix. That is, the **i** of the imperfect prefixes ***ni-, ti-,*** and ***yi-*** is elided when the imperfect prefix ***bi-,*** the negative prefix ***ma-,*** or the future prefix ***ha-*** is added, as long as the elision would not result in three adjacent consonants.

ha + nifákkar = hanifákkar → ***hanfákkar***	we'll think
ma + yisāfir + š = ma-yisāfirš → ***ma-ysafírš***	he doesn't travel
bi + yitárgim = biyitárgim → ***biytárgim***	he translates
ha + tiʔūl = hatiʔūl → ***hatʔūl***	you'll speak

bi + tiḥíbb = bitiḥíbb → ***bitḥíbb*** she loves

An originally long vowel is normally not elided, even after it has become short because of a shift in stress. An exception occurs in the following verb:

ma + tīgi + š = ma-tīgiš → *ma-tigīš* → ***ma-tgīš*** she doesn't come

Elision can occur in the first syllable of a word if the preceding word ends in a vowel, as long as this would not result in three adjacent consonants (as in the second example below).

híyya bitúskun → ***híyya btúskun***	she lives
húwwa biyḥíbb → ***húwwa biyḥíbb***	he loves

Vowel Insertion (Epenthesis)

A short vowel is inserted when a suffix or a following word would create a situation with three adjacent consonants. ***i*** is inserted between two consonants and the negative suffix **-š** or indirect object pronouns. Direct object pronouns may take ***a, i,*** or ***u***.

ma + ʔúlt + š = ma-ʔúltš → ***ma-ʔúltiš***	I didn't say
gibt + li = gibtli → ***gibtíli***	you brought (to) me
šuft + ni = šúftni → ***šuftíni***	you saw me
šuft + ha = šúftha → ***šuftáha***	I saw her
šuft + ku = šúftku → ***šuftúku***	I saw you (pl.)

Vowel insertion can also occur between word boundaries. When a word ends in two consonants and the next word begins with a consonant, ***ə*** is inserted to avoid three adjacent consonants.

biyḥíbb bint → ***biyḥíbbᵊ bint***	He loves a girl.
ʔúlt ʔē → ***ʔúltᵊ ʔē***	What did you say?

Once ***ə*** is inserted, the vowel of the first syllable of the following word may be a candidate for elision.

kúntᵊ mišīt → ***kúntᵊ mšīt***	I had walked
kúntᵊ bitúskun → ***kúntᵊ btúskun***	you were living

Consonant Assimilation

A voiced consonant immediately preceding an unvoiced consonant tends to become unvoiced. The table below shows such consonants in pairs—voiced consonants in the left column and their voiceless counterparts on the right. The change is not reflected in writing, either in Arabic script or the phonemic transcription used in this book.

voiced	voiceless	
b	**p**	*b* → *p:* ***katábt*** */katápt/*
d	**t**	*d* → *t:* ***rafádku*** */rafátku/*
ḍ	**ṭ**	*ḍ* → *ṭ:* ***ma-faraḍš*** */-raṭš/*
v	**f**	-
g	**k**	*g* → *k:* ***nahágti*** */nahákti/*
ɣ	**x**	*ɣ* → *x:* ***ballɣt*** */ balláxt/*
z	**s**	*z* → *s:* ***ħagázt*** */ħagást/*
ẓ	**ṣ**	*ẓ* → *ṣ:* ***ħafaẓt*** */ħafaṣt/*

The reverse is also true, so that a voiceless consonant followed by a voiced consonant may become voiced. Listen for such sound changes in the accompanying MP3s.

The prefix ***it-*** of many verbs is not only affected by the following consonant's voicing, but, in relaxed speech, it may be totally assimilated by a following ***d, ḍ, g, k, s, ṣ, š, ṭ, z,*** or ***ẓ***.

itdāra → */iddāra/*	be hidden
itḍárr → */iḍḍárr/*	be damaged
itgámma3 → */idgámma3 /* → */iggámma3 /*	come together
itkátab → */ikkátab/*	be written

itsállim → */issállim/*	receive
itṣāḥib → */iṣṣāḥib/*	become friends
itšárab → */iššárab/*	be drunk
itṭábax → */iṭṭábax/*	cook
itzáḥlaʔ → */idzáḥlaʔ/* → */izzáḥlaʔ/*	slip
itẓábaṭ → */idẓábaṭ/* → */iẓẓábaṭ/*	be adjusted

Assimilation in the Definite Article

In addition to natural assimilation through influence of adjacent consonants, Arabic also has special rules that govern whether the *l* (laam) of the definite article (ال *il-*) is pronounced or assimilated.

The default is to pronounce the *l* before consonants, including *ʔ,* and vowels. These consonants are collectively known as 'moon letters,' as the word moon قمر *ʔámar* begins with a letter from this group:

il- + ʔámar → *ilʔámar*	the moon
il- + bēt → *ilbēt*	the house

In the examples above, the definite article is simply added to a noun without any special sound change. However, when the definite article is added to a 'sun letter,' the *l* is not pronounced; instead, the initial consonant of that word is doubled (pronounced long/twice):

il- + šams → *iššáms*	the sun
il- + nūr → *innūr*	the light

The sun letters are: ت ث د ذ ر ز س ش ص ض ط ظ ل ن. Additionally, in Egypt Arabic, the definite article optionally assimilates before ج *g,* چ *ž,* ك *k,* and ق *q* (when pronounced q and not *ʔ*). This happens in casual, natural speech, but is often avoided in more careful, enunciated pronunciation:

il- + gúm3a → *iggúm3a* (or *ilgúm3a*)	Friday
il- + kitāb → *ikkitāb* (or *ilkitāb*)	the light

Vowel Assimilation

Two vowels cannot occur together. When the addition of a prefix or preceding word would result in such a case, one vowel is assimilated into the other. As seen in the last example below, this also applies across word boundaries in some cases.

ma- + itkátab + š = ma-itkátabš → ***ma-tkatábš***	it wasn't written
ma- + áktib + š = ma-áktibš → ***ma-ktíbš***	I don't write
ha- + áktib = haáktib → ***háktib***	I will write
yi- + istáxdim = yiistáxdim → ***yistáxdim***	he uses
ána + istaxdímt = ána istaxdímt → ***ána -staxdímt***	I used

Vowel assimilation also occurs with the final vowel a verb ends in ***a*** or ***u.*** Thi vowel is dropped when a suffix beginning with a vowel is added.

yímši + -u = yímšiu → ***yímšu***	they walk
tínsa + -i = tínsai → ***tínsi***	you (f.) forget
ráma + -u = rámau → ***rámu***	they threw
mála + -it = málait → ***málit***	she filled

When ***-it*** and ***-u*** are added to a verb ending in ***i,*** the ***i*** changes into a ***y.***

nísi + -it = nísiit → ***nísyit***	she forgot
míši + -u = míšiu → ***míšyu***	they walked