

The Lingualism Orthographic System

In Lingualism materials, we do our best to keep spelling consistent and in line with whichever spelling variant seems to be the most widely used. Our orthographic policies have evolved over time, so that you may see exceptions in older materials, but these will eventually be updated to match the current system.

Arabic script doesn't always represent the exact pronunciation of Egyptian Arabic. When words take prefixes and suffixes, certain sound changes occur. Vowels are lengthened, shortened, or elided according to certain rules. The quality of vowels changes depending on adjacent consonants. Consonants can also become voiced or devoiced in certain positions. None of this is explicitly reflected in the Arabic script, but with the help of diacritics *and* knowledge of the rules of Egyptian Arabic phonology, you can determine nearly any given word's pronunciation from the Arabic script.

For example, *gāb* جاب ('he brought') contains a long vowel, which is shortened when it is made negative: *ma-gábš* مجابش ('he didn't bring'). This happens when a syllable ends in two consonants (here: *_bš*). But even though the vowel has been shortened, Egyptians still write the word with alif (ا).

Notable Consonants

Most consonants in Egyptian Arabic are pronounced as they are in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)*. But how do Egyptians spell words that have markedly different pronunciation from MSA? Basically, if a word has a cognate in MSA, the spelling will mirror that word.

However, there are a couple of exceptions and notable cases. Let's take a look:

ث

Egyptian Arabic does not have the *t* ([θ] as in English **thin**) sound of MSA. This sound usually becomes *s* in Egyptian Arabic cognates, and sometimes *t*. When pronounced *s*, the original spelling with ث is kept. (It is not spelled with س.) But when it is pronounced *t*, it is written ت.

sánya ثَانِيَة (second)–from MSA

tāni تَانِي another–from MSA

ذ

The same applies to ذ, which is pronounced *ḏ* ([ḏ] as in English **th**at) in MSA but *z* or *d* in Egyptian Arabic. The spelling is retained when it is pronounced *z*. (It is not written as ج.) But it is written د when pronounced *d*.

záki ذكي clever—from MSA
xad أخذ he took—from MSA

ق

In Egyptian Arabic, qaaf (ق) is pronounced as a glottal stop, as if it were hamza (ء), in the majority of words, but it is still written as ق. In some everyday words (as well as in more formal words borrowed from MSA), ق is pronounced *q*. Since the spelling won't help you determine whether the pronunciation is *q* or ʔ, you should refer to phonemic transcription or audio when in doubt.

ج

This letter has a distinctive pronunciation in Egyptian Arabic: *g* ([g] as in English **g**as), instead of MSA's *j* ([dʒ] as in English **j**am).

gamīl جميل beautiful (vs. MSA *jamīl* جميل)

** Some consonant sounds vary somewhat in quality from MSA, but these subtle differences are handled in Egyptian Arabic Pronunciation.*

Foreign Letters

Some additional letters are optionally used to represent foreign sounds in words borrowed from other languages. These letters have three dots instead of one. Most people don't bother with them, so you'll just need to know when, for example, a **ب** is actually pronounced *p*. One of the most common uses of these foreign letters seen on the streets in Egypt is *garāḏ* جراج (garage). Of course, you can also see it spelled جراج. Companies often use foreign letters in their brand names to encourage a pronunciation truer to the original.

ف (or ف) ڤودافون Vodafone

پ (or ب) ڤ سڤن ٲ Seven-Up

چ (or ج) ڙ ([ʒ] as in English vision) ٲل ڇي LG

Dots or No Dots?

Egyptians are known to have a habit of omitting dots on final **ي** and **ة**, writing **ى** and **ه** instead. You may even notice that some Egyptians seem to use the **ي** and **ى** keys (and **ة** and **ه** keys) interchangeably so that you'll see **ي** with dots when it really should be **ى** and is pronounced -a. For example, you might see **على** ('on') written **علي** and **عليه** ('on it') may be written **عليه**. But these inconsistencies reflect people's difficulties finding the right key on the keyboard rather than an intentional style.

We had been mimicking the habit of omitting dots in most Egyptian Arabic Lingualism materials in the past, but as of 2020, we have changed our policy, by popular demand, to write go back to writing dots. Going forward, we will use dotted **ي** and **ة**, and past materials will eventually be updated as new editions.

When *taa marbuuta* is pronounced *t* as the first part of an *idaafa* construction, a *sukuun* is added:
ة:

3arabíyyit irrāgil العربية الرجل the man's car

Hamza

Another habit of Egyptians is to omit the seated hamzas (above or below alif). In Lingualism materials, they were previously not written on alif at the beginning of a word, but going forward we will be writing hamza.

ána أنا I (previously انا)

ínta إِنْتَ you (previously اِنْتَ)

Ā is normally written even at the beginning of a word in Lingualism materials (but not consistently by Egyptians):

āxir آخِر final

qurʾān قُرْآن Quran

Separate or attached?

It is worth noting that, in Lingualism materials, the following prepositions and conjunctions are written separately (that is, with a space) from the word following them:

wi و and

fa/fā فا so (In older Lingualism materials, it is sometimes written attached as ف.)

mi مِ from (optional short form of مِنْ before definite article)

3a ع on (short version of the word عَلَى)

The following prepositions and particles are attached (that is, written without a space) to the following word:

ma- م not: *ma-katábš* مَكْتَبْش he didn't write

ha- ه will. It is sometimes written ح by Egyptians, but most people now use ه, as this is how it is more commonly pronounced these days in Cairo. (In Alexandria, this prefix is still commonly pronounced ح.)

bi- بِ in, at, with

It is common to see و written by Egyptians either separate or attached depending on individual preferences. Likewise, some م and هـ may be written separate as ما and ها (or حا), respectively.

Other spelling conventions

Shadda

Shadda is used instead of writing double consonants, following the rule in MSA. Most Egyptians also do this, so:

ba3átt بعْتُ I sent (and not بعَّتْ).

?úlli قولِّي (not قوللى) tell me

Exception: *ílli* اللى (that, which, who) is written with two lam (ل), as the first two letters were originally the definite article.

Hollow verbs

Follow MSA rules for shortening the vowel of certain past tense forms:

ruft رُحْتُ I went (although many Egyptians tend to write a waw: رُوحت.)

Diacritics

Tanwiin

Tanwiin sits on a final alif (In MSA, it should precede the following consonant, although some people disagree. In Egypt, the majority of people write it on the final alif, and so we've mimicked this habit in Lingualism materials.): *ahyānan* أحياناً sometimes

Default omissions

Fatha: By far the most common vowel in Egyptian Arabic is the short vowel *a*, which is represented in Arabic script by fatha (َ). In Lingualism materials, the fatha is normally omitted.

So, if you see a consonant without tashkeel, you can assume it is an unwritten fatha. This is done to avoid redundancy and making the text look cluttered. Fatha is, however, written adjacent to waw (و) and yaa (ي) when they are pronounced as consonants (w and y, respectively) in order to distinguish them from long vowels:

wálad وَلَد boy

yá3ni يَعْنِي that is...

ḥawāli حَوَالِي about, around

ḥayāti حَيَاتِي my life

In the rare cases where a word-final short *a* is not represented by *ʾ* or *ʿ*, the fatha is written:

3a عَ on

má3a مَعَ with

húwwa هُوَ he

Sukuun: Egyptian Arabic does not have i3raab (grammatical declensions). Compare ECA *kitāb* كِتَاب (book) with MSA *kitābun* كِتَابٌ. This implies that the final consonant would be written with a sukuun (كِتَابٌ), but, again, this is omitted to avoid redundancy. You can assume that a final consonant has an unwritten sukuun.

Long vowels are not preceded by harakat (short vowel marks):

nām نَام he slept—not نَامَ

mīn مِين who—not مِينَ

rūḥ رُوح go—not رُوحَ

The definite article ال is written without tashkeel (instead of اَل). This is done to avoid clutter: *ilbēt* الْبَيْت the house (not اَلْبَيْت); *iššáms* الشَّمْس the sun (not اَلشَّمْس).

This also applies to *illi* اللى that, which, who.

(See [Egyptian Arabic Pronunciation](#) for details on the pronunciation rules for the definite article.)

Glides

ي and و can represent various sounds. As the long vowels *ī* and *ū*, they are not preceded by harakat. (See above.)

They can also represent two long vowel sounds not present in MSA: *ē* and *ō*. These are written with sukuun to distinguish them from the cardinal long vowels:

dēn دَيْن debt (vs. *dīn* دِين religion)

fō? فَوْق above (vs. *fū?* فَوْق surpass)

As true diphthongs, fatha is written (وَ and يَ) to distinguish them from the above cases:

yáwmi يَوْمِي daily (vs. *yōmi* يَوْمِي my day)

haykūn هَيَكُون he will be

In summary:

wa وَ

aw أَوْ

ō أَوْ

ī يَ

ya يَ

ay أَيْ

ē عَ

ū وُ

Shadda

Shadda is written as in MSA, even at the end of a word where we don't actually hear the consonant pronounced twice. Why? It is perceived to be a double consonant and the shadda helps in word recognition. If, for example, a suffix is added, you would hear the consonant pronounced twice. Also, two consonants at the end of a syllable affect word stress.

baḥībba بَحِيبَّ (I love). Without the double consonant, the stress would incorrectly fall on the first syllable (*báḥib* بَحِيب). Although you can't hear the consonant pronounced twice when the word is in isolation, you can when it precedes another word in context:

baḥībba mámti بَحِيبَّ مَامْتِي I love my mom.