

Short vowel endings in modern spoken Arabic

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The following short essay is meant to be a practical study aid for students. I hope it will help to acquire a reasonable form of pronunciation of everyday formal Arabic, with view to the so-called "*tanwīn*" and "*irāb*" (تنوين and إعراب), as well as other short vowel endings mostly derived therefrom.

It seems to me that it is urgently necessary to deal with this problem because students of all ages, and in all forms of schools, from adult evening colleges to universities, are often left alone with it. There are many reasons for this unsatisfactory situation. Lack of attention is certainly one of these reasons, as researchers and teachers of Arabic have been neglecting this important question for decades.

It is not questioned here that a thorough knowledge of the old Arabic word endings is an asset for a deeper understanding of the Arabic language. Therefore, every future professional for Arabic must be recommended to carefully acquire this knowledge. The expert for Classical Arabic, but even the translator or interpreter for the modern language, cannot do without.

The problem is that the unreflected application of this knowledge to everyday situations would lead to an absurd, artificial kind of Arabic. This artificial Arabic has nothing to do with the normal natural communication habits of the Arabs, and it would be more than perplexing, or even ridiculous, to use it in the street, on the market place, in private situations, and even in official political or business communication. Of course, proper use of the correct form of language is not only a question of the old Arabic endings. It has to do with many other aspects of the language, but this short paper cannot deal with all these other aspects.

Therefore, the following short essay is just an account of the use of the old Arabic short vowel endings in the so-called formal spoken language (formal spoken Arabic, FSO)¹.

Unfortunately, it would be too simple just to state that these endings are always left out in the described context. Rather, their observance and non-observance follows a very complex, historically and socially grown mechanism. As a rule, native speakers apply this mechanism unconsciously, and learners of Arabic are still waiting for its thorough description.

However, some basic work has been accomplished (cf., e.g., Kästner, Hartmut: *Phonetik und Phonologie des modernen Hocharabisch*, Leipzig, 1981, chapter 4.4, pp.110f.). The following short remarks are based on some of these existing papers and books, and, above all, on my own lifelong personal experience with modern spoken Arabic, in direct contact with more or less educated Arab people of both sexes, mostly young, coming from nearly the entire Arab world.

1. The overall principle is that the old Arabic short vowel endings are dropped in most cases - which means that modern Arabic tends to use the pausal forms of the classical language even if the words in question stand in a context position. This loss of short vowel endings over a more or less long historical process is by no means a feature of Arabic alone. It is manifest in

¹ It should perhaps be mentioned here that FSO is not the form of language used, e.g., by TV newsreaders. The news presenters tend to use all the classical word endings.

Biblical Hebrew, and it has an interesting parallel in the step-by-step giving up of the "law of open syllables" in Slavic languages.

2. Short vowel endings are spoken in set phrases - including nunation if appropriate - e.g. الحمد لله - [al-ḥamdu li-l-lāh] or إلى حد ما - [ilā ḥaddin mā] or بشكل عام - [bi-šaklin ʿāmm], though the latter is occasionally also pronounced [bi-šakl ʿāmm]. The examples show that this does not apply to the last word of the group which stands in pre-pausal position. The short vowel ending of prepositions is often dropped even if they are used in set phrases, cf. قبل مدة - [qabl mudda], occasionally [qabla mudda] or قبل فترة - [qabl fatra], occasionally [qabla fatra]. A special case is حسن - [ḥasanun], as a declaration of consent, where case ending and nunation are always kept, although it is normally used in pre-pausal position (compare with طيب - [ṭayyib], with the same function, but always without case ending and nunation). With حسن, some speakers use accusative: حسناً - [ḥasanan]. Accusative is never used with طيب in this function. Some typical short words and particles never lose their short vowel ending, e.g. مع and ثم - [maʿa] and [ṭumma].

3. Case endings are often spoken where they allow word junction between a word starting with همزة الوصل and the word preceding it – namely with the definite article, e.g. in في البيت - [fi-l-baiti-l-ḡadīd] or in so-called idāfa-constructions where the second term has the definite article, e.g. عَبْدُ اللَّهِ - [ʿabdu-l-lāh], where it is important to know that the first term, if it is preceded by the vocative particle يا is accusative, e.g. يَا عَبْدَ اللَّهِ - [yā ʿabda-l-lāh]. Short vowel endings of verb forms, otherwise dropped, are likewise used if they allow word junction to be applied, e.g. رأيت الملك - [raʾaitu-l-malik]. Case endings of nouns are often left out in such case if a postponed adjective shall be stressed by separate pronunciation, e.g. هل رأيت الملك السعودي؟ - [hal raʾaita-l-malik as-saʿūdī].

4. Short vowel endings are often spoken if they precede initial همزة الوصل of VIIth, VIIIth and Xth stem verbs, including their respective verbal nouns - provided they are no case endings or they are not consciously considered to be such endings: بعد استعمال الدواء - [baʿda-stīʿmāl ad-dawāʾ], but occasionally also [baʿd istiʿmāl ad-dawāʾ].

5. Even the otherwise always omitted short vowels [-i-] and [-a-] of the dual and masculine plural endings are normally spoken if they precede همزة الوصل, e.g. المعلمين الجدد - [al-muʿallimīna-l-ḡudud]. Case endings determined by position are not so often used for this

purpose. والطبيب استخرج ضرس العقل, e.g., is spoken [wa-ṭ-ṭabīb istahraḡa dirs al-ʿaql] in most cases, and normally not [wa- ṭ-ṭabību-stahraḡa ḡirsa-l-ʿaql].

6. Initial همزة الوصل of nouns like ابن , امرأة , إسم etc. is no longer observed - cf. سيارة ابني - [sayyārat ibnī], not [sayyāratu-bnī]. As far as verbal nouns of the VIIth, VIIIth and Xth stems are concerned, cf. paragraph 4.

7. If a word ends with *tā' marbūṭa*, its preceding *fatḥa* is always used for word junction in everyday Arabic, e.g. السيارة الجديدة - [as-sayyāra-l-ḡadīda].

8. Furthermore, the accusative ending [-an] of indeterminate (undefined) nouns *used as adverbs* must always be pronounced e.g. خصوصاً - [ḡuṣūṣan] and مباشرةً - [mubāšaratan]. A common exception to this rule is مرة أخرى, where either [marratan uḡrā] or [marra uḡrā] is used, but the latter seems to be less common, though مرة ثانية - is often pronounced [marra tāniya]. In the case of يَوْمًا بَعْدَ يَوْمٍ, the pronunciation tends to be [yaum ba'd yaum], but يومياً is - of course! - always pronounced [yaumīyan].

9. The indeterminate object case accusative ending [-an] - as, e.g., in إشتريت كتابا - is regularly omitted: [ištaraīt kitāb].

10. Short vowel endings of verbs are normally omitted in both the perfect and the imperfect form: كتبت رسالة - [katabt risāla], أكتب رسالة - [aktub risāla]. However, this does not always apply to the perfect 3rd person singular masculine, where the omission or non-omission of the final [a] depends on situation and context. Short vowel endings of all verb forms are usually not omitted if they precede همزة الوصل.

11. If the elision of short vowel endings led to consonant clusters with difficult pronunciation these endings would usually not be omitted, but they are often strongly reduced in such case. The resulting [ə] can perhaps be compared with Hebrew Š^owa. This usually happens on nouns with enclitic pronouns, e.g. غرفتنا - [ḡurfatnā], but فندقكم - [funduqukum], [funduqəkum]. Educated speakers would tend to use the "correct" case vowel even when they speak quickly.

12. Last but not least, short vowel endings and *tanwīn* are always dropped - in accordance with classical pronunciation - if they precede a pause. There are very few exceptions to this rule, including the above mentioned حسن - [ḡasanun].

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