Teaching spoken Arabic
A diacritized Arabic alphabet in informal writing

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0. Introduction

Probably, one of the biggest challenges that non-native learners encounter when they start to study Arabic is the complex sociolinguistic situation. This was described by Ferguson (1959, p. 336) in terms of *diglossia*, which is "a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language [...] there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety". According to Ferguson's dichotomy, the High variety (H) is used for official activities, religious sermons and political speeches, whereas dialect(s), or low variety (L) is the language of everyday conversation. Despite this division, many authors felt that the diglossic theory is unsuitable in describing the reality of Arabic. Indeed, they attempted to define a range of intermediate levels between H and L. Just to mention some authors: Blanc identified five levels (1960, p. 85): classical, modified classical, semi-literary or elevated colloquial, koineised colloquial and plain colloquial; Cowan (1968) examined Modern Standard Arabic (MSA); Cadora (1965) pointed to three coexisting spoken languages, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Intercommon Spoken Arabic (ISA) and Dialectal Arabic (DA).

A noteworthy contribution to the study of the Arabic linguistic situation was made by an Egyptian sociolinguist, S. Badawī, who described it as a *continuum* of five different levels that could interact and "contain elements which exist also in one or more levels, but in varying proportions" (Badawī and Hinds, 1991, p. VIII). Actually, Badawī does not consider these levels as discrete varieties, but he resorts to the metaphor of a rainbow: there are areas of crisp colour, which represent the "core" of a level, and areas where these colours merge and these represent "melted" areas between levels. The five levels described by Badawī (1973) are: *fuṣḥā at-turāṯ* ("Heritage" Arabic or Traditional Classical Arabic), *fuṣḥā al-ʿaṣr* (contemporary classical literary Arabic), *ʿāmmiyyat al-muṯaqqafīn* (vernacular of the cultured, i.e. "well-educated"), *ʿāmmiyyat al-mutanawwirīn* (vernacular of the educated), *ʿāmmiyyat al-ʿummuyyīn* (vernacular of the illiterate). It is interesting to notice that Badawī describes also the possibility of an actual oral usage for each of these levels. Thus, *fuṣḥā al-ʿaṣr* is a "written record [...] that can be also read in public and only a few can try – sometimes with some success – to speak

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extemporaneously in the same linguistic 'level' and with the grammatical constraints of the written language" (1973, p. 127). The *'āmmiyyat al-muṯaqqafīn*, instead, is the vernacular that "moves towards *fuṣḥā* and reaches a degree where it becomes able to express, orally, contemporary culture" (1973, p. 149). Bassiouney describes this level as "a colloquial influenced by MSA which may be used for serious discussion, *but is not normally written*[2]. [...] It is also the language used in formal teaching at the Egyptian Universities, [...] and it is becoming the medium of instruction in Egyptian class-rooms" (2009, p. 15). The *'āmmiyyat al-mutanawwirīn* (vernacular of the educated), is commented by Bassiouney as "the everyday language that people educated to a basic level use with family and friends. It may occur on TV in a discussion of 'non-intellectual' topics. Cultured and well-educated people also use it when talking in a relaxed fashion about non-serious topics" (2009, p. 15).

The term of Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) was introduced by El Hassan (1977) and discussed by Mitchell in his studies. This latter describes ESA as a mixed form that is "maintained" by the interaction between the written Arabic and the vernacular. Mitchell (1986, p. 7-32) argues that ESA responds to the needs of educated Arab people from different countries to converse on topics that cannot be discussed in regional vernacular. Being a shared means of communication, this variety is influenced by classical literary Arabic, especially in structure and vocabulary as this knowledge is what the educated Arabs have in common. According to Mitchell, pan-Arabic ESA would be understood everywhere even if differences will appear regionally.

This short and not exhaustive review of some main definitions of spoken and written varieties of Arabic intends to give just an idea of how complex the linguistic situation of Arabic is. For the sake of simplicity and convenience, I will use only two generic terms in this paper: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Spoken Arabic (SA). By MSA I mean generally the contemporary *fuṣḥā*, i.e. the written formal language that is used in written forms of communication (formal correspondence), in written genres (literatures, media) and at some formal occasions (e.g. media broadcasts, political speeches, religious sermons). Whereas SA refers to the variety that Arabs use in oral communication, whether it is a Colloquial Arabic used for everyday-life situations and all interpersonal interactions, or ESA used to discuss more elevated topics.

Not so long ago, SA was often (and is still) stigmatized by most Arabs themselves as less prestigious than *fuṣḥā* even though they use it in everyday communication almost all the time. MSA was used for almost every form of written communication, even in informal contexts (such as personal letters) while SA was used for almost every kind of oral communication. Obviously, the capacity to express oneself writing in MSA is strictly connected to the level of literacy, but writing in SA was generally not accepted. The new aspect that has emerged in recent decades is that SA, which was originally used only orally, starts to appear also as

2. Emphasis is mine.

written form. Mitchell points out that "there are signs that an Egyptian written language is struggling to emerge" (1962, p. 11) and Meileses (1980) subdivides a Sub-Standard Arabic (SsA) into both spoken and written, and defines what he calls Informal Written Arabic (IWA).

Even if incipient forms of writing in SA appear in literature in the nineteenth century[3], especially in Egyptian literature, SA has started to be used in written form by a significant number of Arabs – whether cultured and educated – as a consequence of the proliferation of new forms of informal written communication. This new feature changes somehow the use that Badawī attributed to different varieties, since all vernacular varieties start to be also written and not only produced orally. This might be a transcription of a speech delivered orally (e.g. interviews, political speeches), literature genres in SA that are produced originally in written form, such as plays, scripts of sitcoms, comics, etc. In addition, there are new forms of Electronically-Mediated Communication (EMC) that are actually a kind of channel mixing. In this case, SA is written down as if spoken (sms, chat, social networks, and blogs).

1. Teaching spoken varieties

Since MSA is the formal prescriptive language and is mutually intelligible across the Arab world, the main stress in Arabic courses is generally on acquiring this variety. Mitchell warns students that "they must be prepared to meet the attitude, common in European centers of learning, that written language, probably literary, is alone worthy of study" (1962, p. 13). Traditional courses focused only on MSA prepare students to read texts and to understand grammar. These courses give access to printed material but do not enable the students to understand native speakers and speak with them, since MSA is not the variety used for oral communication. Starting from the 1970s, there has been a growing tendency to change this dominant trend and more attention has been paid to the necessity of developing speaking skills. Unfortunately, learners who are trained to develop speaking skills through dialogues in MSA that do not occur in real life cannot survive in an Arab-speaking environment, since SA is the variety used for basic communication functions. As a consequence, the issue of teaching spoken varieties besides the teaching MSA arises.

Al-Batal (1995) mentions that the Arabic Proficiency Guidelines[4] first published in 1985 – thus being an important event in Arabic language teaching since it highlights the importance of speaking skills – avoid the issue of diglossia and are based solely on the use of MSA. In the same article he discusses the importance of developing a "real oral proficiency" as "using MSA as the sole medium of speaking in class [...] creates a fake model of oral proficiency by presenting the

3. Just to mention a few early authors: Muḥammad ʻŪṯmān Ǧalāl (1829- 1898), ʻAbd Allāh Nadīm (1845-1896), Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī (1905-1992).
4. Allen, 1985.

students an artificial variety that is not used by the native speakers since no one uses MSA for daily-life situations" (1995, p. 123). He underlines the importance of an integrated approach, encourages teachers to use both MSA and SA in classroom, given that mixing varieties reflects the real use of native speakers. He also emphasizes that this integrated approach will require new instructional materials that could introduce the both varieties contemporaneously.

At the same time, learners have a great interest and will to study SA. A national survey in the USA shows that most students are interested in the study of Colloquial (Belnap, 1987). Palmer (2007) discusses the results of another survey administered to 650 students in 37 US institutions of higher education. It showed that 88 % of students learn Arabic to communicate with native speakers, but only 28 % of them are encouraged by their teachers to use SA in the classroom (2007, p. 116-117).

In this paper, I will not discuss the key issues in teaching SA, such as when to start, which Colloquial to select (Egyptian, Levantine, Northern African, etc.), in which order to introduce linguistic elements, or whether it is better to start with only SA, only MSA or if an integrated approach of both varieties is the best solution. What I am going to discuss is the need to provide non-native learners who study SA with useful tools that can help them to have written reference points. To acquire any language as L2, it is necessary to practice the main language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and CA cannot be an exception, even if it used mainly in oral communication. Learners who desire to study any form of SA will need written material – e.g., a textbook, a written dialogue, etc. – that can help them to fix in their mind lexicon and phonology. Hence, the dilemma is how to codify an oral language in a system of writing, so that it could be useful for teaching purposes.

2. Phonetic transcription *vs* Arabic alphabet

2.1. Phonetic transcription

The two possibilities of codifying SA in writing are by phonetic transcription or using the Arabic alphabet. Phonetic transcription is so far the most widely accepted way in codifying spoken varieties and dialects for scientific purposes, especially in dialectology. The main argument in favour of phonetic transcription is that it provides learners with exact and precise pronunciation and that the "familiarity with the live sound of the language is indispensable if practical application is contemplated" (Cowell, 2005, p. 2). Olivier Durand argues that phonetic transcription using the Roman alphabet is the only one acceptable in dialectology since the Arabic alphabet is unsuitable to convey the sounds – especially the vowels – of spoken varieties (Durand, 2009, p. 9). These assertions should be taken into account if phonetic transcription is used for *descriptive* and scientific purposes. It is useful in a reference grammar, but could be of little or no practical advantage in SA courses and textbooks. Studying Spoken Arabic language in phonetic transcription could be seen to be as strange as studying English or French in

transcription instead of normal graphic representation, though the alphabets of these languages do not always reflect the *live sound* of standard pronunciation. Thus, courses based on a phonetically transcribed Arabic are inconvenient for several reasons:

– Language skills: learning a language requires developing the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. Reading and writing are meant to be performed using the alphabet of the language and not the ability to read the phonetic representations of its sounds. The main objection to using Arabic alphabet in writing SA is that oral forms are not normally written and that natives do not use any graphic representation to write them down. As we argued above, this assertion is only partially true since native speakers, particularly recently, express themselves even in written forms of the SA. In addition, numerous fiction works were written in CA (especially in Egyptian Arabic), using only Arabic alphabet. Therefore, training students to read Spoken Arabic only in phonetic transcription will deny them access to these kinds of literature and other informal texts.

– Practical reasons: learners who study SA are usually also exposed to MSA and in most cases, they start to learn MSA first and then move to SA at a later stage[5]. This means that they have a background in reading and writing in MSA using the Arabic alphabet, and they have already made an effort to achieve a fluent reading in Arabic. Using the same alphabet would avoid students wasting time in order to read (and understand) phonetic transcription. Moreover, if we consider that in an ideal situation, some teachers[6] suggest integrated courses of both MSA and SA, it would be more reasonable to use the same kind of writing for both.

– Varieties of one language: sociolinguistic studies indicate that MSA and different levels of spoken Arabic are not different idioms but co-existing and overlapping varieties of the same language. For this reason, Al-Batal criticizes some textbooks of colloquial Arabic as they "treated these dialects as something completely separate from MSA, rather than as an integral part of the Arabic language. Their use of phonetic transliteration reflected the perception that spoken Arabic and written Arabic were two distinct languages rather than two levels of one language" (1995, p. 118).

– Etymological considerations: different phonetic phenomena in various Arab countries could cause different phonological realizations of the same word. That means that even a familiar word – previously learned in MSA using the Arabic alphabet – could become unrecognizable to non-native learners when they are exposed to its different phonetic realization, or when they read it in phonetic transcription (e.g. MSA's *yaḥduṯu* vs SA's *yəḥdos*). This will mislead students' comprehension or make them learn two different words instead of realizing that the

5. The order of introducing MSA and SA is still a thorny issue that has given rise to numerous debates.
6. Younes, 1995, p. 233-255.

difference between MSA and SA lies in general phonological rules. Furthermore, the transcribed form not only does not allow learners to identify the correct root, but even misleads them to an erroneous one (e.g. *yəḥdos* suggests a <*ḥds*> root instead of the correct < *ḥdṯ*>).

– Different phonetic signs: different textbooks use different phonetic signs which are normally listed in the introduction. This might cause some confusion in those learners who need to consult more than one source.

– Diaphasic variations: the intermediate levels between the two poles of MSA and SA are characterized by a shared lexicon that belongs to both MSA and dialect. However, the morphophonological realization even of this shared vocabulary might be dialectal. Mazraani (1997, p. 33-38) discusses also possible close-to-dialect or close-to-MSA realizations. That means that SA could have more than one possible morphophonological realization of the same word, if the setting of the communicative situation changes. Therefore, there could not be a unified phonetic writing due to many different possible pronunciations. However, the common element of these different phonological and morphophonological realizations is the same etymological root, which could be better expressed in Arabic alphabet.

– Diatopic variations: SA differs from one country to another, and there are even some slight differences even in one dialectal area. A simple example could be made with a word ثقافة *ṯaqāfah* (culture), which is pronounced *saqāfe* in Syria, *sa'ēfe* in Lebanon and *sa'āfa/saqāfa* in Egypt, and *ṯaqāfa* in the Gulf and Iraq. Nevertheless, native speakers from these countries will still use the same graphical representation ثقافة to write down what they pronounce differently. At the same time, accurate and different phonetic representations of the same lexical item do not guide non-native learners to perceive that they deal with phonological variations of the same word.

2.2. Arabic alphabet

In this section I will investigate the possible advantages and disadvantages of using the Arabic alphabet in transcribing SA.

– Phonetics: the Arabic script has mostly a one to one correspondence to the phonemes of Arabic, and it represents the distinctive sounds of Classical Arabic and MSA (Gordon, 1970, p. 193-97). However, it lacks the necessary graphic signs that conform with some vowels and consonants of Arabic dialects, which I will discuss in the next section.

– Etymology: the awareness of native speakers to maintain the etymological and phonetic root despite the existence of numerous different pronunciations helps them to recognize the meaning. Their informal writings include characters representing phonemes whose pronunciations become modified in SA. Since native speakers have a prior acquired knowledge of the colloquial phonological realization(s), the phonetic accuracy of the graphic representation is not so much relevant for them. Similarly, maintaining the same written form (e.g. the same

writing for ثقافة *culture*) would conduct non-native learners – with a prior MSA knowledge – to the semantics of a certain lexical item, while phonetic transcription could deviate them. However, non-native learners will need some additional phonetic information in order to pronounce correctly the close-to-dialect realization of a certain lexical item. Otherwise, keeping MSA writing will suggest a MSA phonological realization.

– Consonantic language: Arabic is a consonantic language, which means that short vowels could be theoretically omitted if the reader has a prior knowledge of how the words should be read. Short vowels are added to facilitate the teaching and learning of the prescriptive MSA vocalic patterns. This occurs even when the literary language is taught to native speakers at school. Diacritics are placed above and under the letters, in order to clarify the second level of disambiguation: the correct *prescriptive* pronunciation. For example, a Syrian native speaker will discover that the verb "to come back" which s/he is used to pronounce as *rəğe'* (C1əC2eC3) has a prescriptive vocalic pattern (C1aC2aC3a), hence it should be pronounced as *rağa'a*. A native speaker acquires naturally the first pattern and then learns the prescriptive one in formal teaching. In any case, the written forms of both patterns would reflect only the consonantical *ductus* <*rğ'*>. Later on, native speakers could even lose this formal pronunciation, but they will still recognize the word at reading (or at listening to the prescriptive form), since the consonant writing system shows only the root letters regardless to the vowels. Even a mistaken reading as e.g. ra*ği'a* will not obstacle the comprehension even if it does not fulfill prescriptive rules.

This discussion suggests that writing SA in Arabic alphabet (as native speakers do) might simplify some problems, but it causes others. Arabic script maintains clear indications to the semantics, especially in common lexicon between MSA and SA. However, this kind of writing has no reference to the real phonological realization of SA. Reading the example above (ثقافة), non-native learners who have some background in MSA would immediately understand that the word means *culture*, but they would not have any indication about how to pronounce its SA version as native speakers do.

2.3. Textbooks in Colloquial Arabic

Let us now consider just some examples of how the dilemma of transcribing oral varieties was faced by some authors. I examined three textbooks of Syrian Colloquial Arabic and each one had a different approach to the problem. In *Syrian Colloquial Arabic, a Functional Course*[7], the authors chose non-vocalized Arabic writing, but to supply learners with information about the phonology and to disambiguate the pronunciation, phonetic transcription is added.

Ex. 1 : *baɛdeen réjeɛ ɛa-l-beet bél baaṣ*[8] بعدين رجع عالبيت بالباص

7. Liddiacoat, Lennane, Abdul Rahim, 1998.
8. Original authors transcription.

In *Manuel du parler arabe moderne au Moyen-Orient*[9], short Arabic vowels were added even if they do not correspond to the exact pronunciation. The author's attempt was to help learners to reproduce more or less the live sound of SA without the aid of phonetic transcription, which is yet available. Applying Kassab's transcription the same example would be written as follows:

Ex. 2: *baɛdēn rəžeɛ ɛal-bēt bəl-bāṣ* بَعْدين رِجِعْ عَالبيتْ بِالباص

In *A Reference Grammar of Syrian Arabic*[10], only phonetic transcription was used without any reference to a possible writing in Arabic alphabet. The same sentence would be written as follows:

Ex. 3: *baʕdēn rəǧeʕ ʕal-bēt bəl-bāṣ*

In this last example, main focus is on the phonology. Learners cannot gain any reference to the common lexicon between MSA and SA as this writing does not rely the transcribed words to the etymological root of the proposed vocabulary. For example, the word *ʕal-bēt* could hardly suggest the meaning *to home*. Using the Arabic script عالبيت instead, would help learners to recognize at least the familiar word *home*, even if they would pronounce it *al-bayt* according to prescriptive MSA phonology.

At any rate, this approach is used in many practical courses in communication which main objective is to teach some short phrases and sentences about everyday needs and provide learners with survival level of proficiency. However, these methods, if used alone, do not enable learners to read any word in Arabic.

3. TWO LEVELS OF REPRESENTATION

The Arabic writing used in *fuṣḥā*, and consequentially the MSA, could be divided structurally into two levels of representation. The first is the consonantical skeleton, which registers only the consonants and the long vowels when they occur. It refers to the root and conveys the semantics, but this level does not include the reference to the vocalic patterns. Hence, homographs could occur and they are not intelligible until syntactic and semantic context is provided. For example, a word علم <*ʻlm*> could be read as *ʻalima*, *ʻallama*, *ʻulima*, *ʻilm(un)*, *ʻalam(un)* and each possible reading conveys a different meaning. To disambiguate the pronunciation, diacritics are added above or under each letter (عَلِمَ ، عَلَّمَ ، عُلِمَ ، عِلْمٌ ، عَلَمٌ).

When native speakers start to learn the written variety of Arabic, i.e. MSA, diacritics are largely used for didactical purposes. The short vowels guide them towards the correct reading and let them acquire the prescriptive vocalic patterns of MSA. Once this knowledge is consolidated, fewer diacritics are added until readers are able to read correctly a text that they are able to disambiguate. The non-native learners usually follow the same path.

9. Kassab, 1970.
10. Cowell, 2005.

On the other hand, when native speakers are asked to read an informal writing, they are able to disambiguate the pronunciation without any helping diacritics. Native speakers have already acquired the pronunciation naturally, and they use it as background knowledge. They do not start to read with the help of diacritics in order to produce correct pronunciation (as they do when reading *fuṣḥā*). They *know* the pronunciation as SA could be considered their mother tongue. If we should compare them to non-native learners it'd be obvious that the latter do not have any help to produce the correct vowels as informal writing includes only the consonantic level. This means that non-native learners should first construct this phonological knowledge in order to be able to read informal writing fluently with the close-to-dialect or dialect realization. Unreasonably, they are obliged to obtain this information through a completely different system, i.e. the phonetic transcription.

The abovementioned considerations suggest that if a full-two-leveled representation in Arabic alphabet could be achieved also in SA, it would recreate the same situation to which the non-native learners are already got used. An informal writing enriched with diacritics would enable them to retrieve both semantic and phonological information. In the next section, I will discuss the main principles on which my proposal is based, its advantages, disadvantages and its practical application in teaching SA.

4. Diacritized Arabic in non-formal writing

The idea of enriching informal writing with a full system of diacritics comes from the need to provide a practical system that reproduces the same steps followed in reading a MSA text. The main goal was to achieve two levels of writing:

– consonantic-etymological level: this is close to the MSA formal writing as much as possible;

– phonetic level: this conveys by means of diacritics the correct pronunciation and helps non-native learners to get used to the phonological differences between MSA and SA.

The main principle of this system of writing is to keep – if possible – the generating grapheme and to add a diacritic in order to give a reference to the phonological modifications. In this way, the system keeps the etymological reference in a first level of representation, and at the same time, adds the necessary tools to reproduce a certain SA pronunciation.

I used *Scheherazade* font[11] which allows adding different diacritics maintaining the attachment between the letters. As a consequence, the choice of the diacritic for a certain phoneme was limited due to the constraints of the font itself. As it was not possible to create new signs, I was restricted with the already available ones and I tried to choose a logical correspondence between a diacritic and

11. Arabic Script Unicode Fonts: Copyright © 2004-2011, SIL International: [http://www.sil.org], with Reserved Font Names "Scheherazade" and "SIL".

the phoneme it refers to. Bearing in mind, that the finality of the system is to facilitate non-native learners, my attempt was to focus only on some main phenomena, in order to avoid that the system becomes complicated and impractical and hence, unusable.

As a starting point, I chose only one Spoken Arabic: the Levantine, particularly the Syrian colloquial. I examined the vowels and consonants of this spoken variety in order to identify those that are not represented in the MSA Arabic alphabet. These could be divided into two groups: phonemes that are not resented in MSA at all, as they are typical only of the spoken variety, e.g. /e/[12], /ē/, /o/, /ō/, /ẓ/, and the phonemes that are common for both MSA and CA but in SA they are sometimes generated from different graphemes, e.g. [t] < ث , [s] < ث, [ʔ] < ق.

4.1. Short vowels

Arabic formal writing has already some diacritical signs in order to disambiguate the short vowels of MSA, such as /a/, /i/, and /u/. The Levantine Colloquial that I took in exam is characterized by the existence of additional vowels which could be mainly identified as /o/, /e/ and /ə/. The choice of corresponding diacritics was ruled by their resemblance to the shape of the conventional phonetic sign and not to the original short vowel that they replace. For example the higher-mid back rounded vowel /o/ is represented with ◌ٜ as it is a half-circle, higher-mid front vowel /e/ is represented with ◌ٝ, and the higher-mid central vowel /ə/ is signed as ◌ٞ. The raised central vowel /ᵊ/ it could be represented as ◌ٟ if needed.

4.2. Long vowels

The same diacritics (see 4.1.) are used above the long vowels to mark the changes of the diphthongs /ay/ and /aw/ that are respectively monophthongized in [ō] and [ē]. If the diphthongization is conserved – e.g. in Lebanese SA –, the original MSA vocalization is kept. The same diacritic could be added above *alif* in order to mark the *imālah* phenomenon, since the open low vowel [ā] is raised to [e] or to [ɛ]. In this way, the original grapheme is kept and its phonetic change is also marked.

Applying only these diacritics we can already transcribe the former example as follows:

ba'dēn rəğe' 'al-bēt bəl-bāṣ	بَعدِيْن رَجْع عَالبِيْت بَالباص
Further examples:	
Mən kam yōm/ yawm	مَن كَم يوْم / يَوْم
Mā kānet hōn (Syr.)	ما كانْت هوْن
Mā kēnet hawn (Leb.)	ما كَانْت هَوْن

12. The two [ ] brackets refers to a phone, between two slashes / / refers to a phoneme, two angle brackets < > to a grapheme.

4.3. Plosive uvular /q/

In Levantine and Egyptian CA, this phoneme is usually modified into a plosive glottal [ʔ][13], which is normally represented with the Arabic grapheme *hamza* <ء>. Adding a small *hamza* as a diacritical sign under the <ق> will allow keeping the morphological root and marking the SA phonetic realization.

Examples:

ʔāl قال , ʔamīṣ قَميص ʔarīb قَريب ʔadīm قَديم ʔəṣṣa قِـصَّة

Yet, in some rural dialects, /q/ could change into voiced plosive velar sound [g]. This is marked as the same letter <ق> but with three dots above ڤ.

4.4. Dental fricatives /θ/, /ð/

These two phonemes are represented in Arabic alphabet with respectively <ث> and <ذ>. The phonological changes occur towards plosive dentals /θ/ > [t] and /ð/ > [d], or towards alveolar sibilants /θ/ > [s] and /ð/ > [z]. The following table shows how these changes are marked.

Plosive dentals		Alveolar sibililants	
/θ/ > [t]	ٹ < ث	/θ/ > [s]	ثّ < ث
/ð/ > [d]	ڍ < ذ	/ð/ > [z]	ذ < ذ

Table 1: Dental fricatives

In the first column, an added dot under the letter means that one original above-dot should be omitted. In other words, we need to omit one above-dot virtually, in order to have ت and د correspondingly[14]. The dot under in ڍ reminds of the etymological ذ which is dotted.

In the second column, the small *sīn* placed above the <ث> indicates that it should be pronounced as [s]. In this case /θ/ and /s/ could be considered as two possible realizations for same grapheme. The choice of double dotted ذ is just a default choice as there was no possibility to add a small *zā*' letter above < ذ >.

Examples:

saqāfe ثّقافة *sa'ēfe* ثّقِافْة *masalan* مَثّلاً *ktīr* كْـثِير

zōʔ ذوْق *zawʔ* ذَوْق *dahab* ذَهَب *ʔaxad* أخَذ

4.5. Pharyngealized consonants /dˤ/, /ðˤ/

These two phonemes are represented in Arabic alphabet with <ض> and <ظ>. Both phonemes could change into pharyngealized voiced fricative alveolar [zˤ]. At the same time, /ðˤ/ could be dentalized becoming [dˤ]or a fricative [zˤ]. It is important to notice that both pharyngealized phonemes /dˤ/and /ðˤ/ – that are repre-

13. This sound is described as a retracted tongue root glottal stop (IPA, 1999, p. 53).

14. Unfortunately, this font does not allow do adopt exactly the same shape for the both letters in order to have /ڍ/, as adding this dot does not permit other diacritics, e.g. the short vowel /a/ i.e. *fatḥa*.

sented with different Arabic graphemes – could have the same allophone [zˤ]. That means that the original graphemes should be kept at the consonantic level of representation. The following table shows how these changes are received in the diacritized alphabet.

<ض>		<ظ>	
/ dˤ / > [zˤ]	ض < ش	/ ðˤ / > [zˤ]	ظ < ظ
-	-	/ ðˤ / > [dˤ]	ظ < ظّ

Table 2: Pharyngealized consonants

The three dots above both letters indicates to the common allophone /zˤ/, while a hyphened *ṣād* ◌ً indicates that <ظ> should be pronounced as dentalized pharyngealized consonant.

Examples:

zˤālem ظالـم *mazˤbūtˤ* مضبوط *dˤall* > ظَلّ

4.6. CHANGES DUE TO GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS

In Syrian Colloquial some phonemes could change when they are part of a grammatical morpheme. These are mainly /m/ > [n] when it occurs in 2nd and 3rd m. pl. suffixes *-kum* and *-hum*, and /h/ > Ø when it occurs in 3rd person suffixes *-hu* and *-hā*. Yet this change is not stable and /h/ is preserved in some other areas of the Levant. To mark this change a hyphened small ◌ٮ above <م> is added and a dot under the <ه> as a sign that this grapheme should be omitted.

Examples:

ma'kon > مَعْكّـمْ *fīkon* > فيْكّـمْ *rfi'-a* > رْفيـقِـبها *ism-o* > اسْمّـبِهْ

5. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

– Unified system: dealing with two different varieties of the same language does not imply the use of two different systems. Thus, a normal Arabic alphabet would be used for MSA and the Diacritized Arabic Writing (DWA) for Spoken Arabic. Even if learning some new diacritics could demand additional effort from the learners, the two different realizations of the same word (رَجْع or رَجَعَ) would be expressed according to one principle: consonants plus diacritics. This would increase the learners' awareness to conceive both written and spoken Arabic as a whole.

– Language skills: DAW gives the possibility to reinforce all language skills. A well-built curriculum should include reading and writing activities as well as listening and speaking. DAW gives the possibility to enhance the vocabulary and perform written exercises built on SA vocabulary and grammar.

– Comprehension: DAW guides the students to the semantics of the written material, especially if they are learning SA in a "MSA first and a dialect later" approach. They could recognize the vocabulary that they already know and will

attempt to reproduce correctly the different phonological version. They could also retrieve the correct root from non familiar vocabulary, especially when some spoken forms are not lexical items unique to dialect, but phonologically modified form MSA.

– Didactic materials: the possibility to put SA in a written form solves the problem of the lack in didactic material. At the same time, this cuts the dependence of using only listening materials in a didactical unit, as written materials could be also introduced.

– Additional effort to learn DAW: the disadvantages of this system lie mainly in the need in some formal teaching of the system itself, especially if learners start first with SA and then move to MSA. But if inversed approach is chosen (which is also more frequent), it will be sufficient to familiarize only with some few additional signs.

– Different SA: for the moment of writing, the DAW was elaborated to convey the phonology of Levantine Spoken Arabic, especially the Syrian SA. A further research could allow applying it also to other Levantine varieties (Palestinian) and Egyptian Spoken Arabic with some slight modifications and additions.

6. Practical application

This system was experimented with a small group of students (twenty-five). The SA course lasted twelve weeks and most of students have previously studied MSA for at least three years. No one of them was firstly exposed to any spoken variety in formal teaching. Despite some initial difficulty in reading new diacritics, most of them have stated that they prefer DAW to the phonetic transcription. Their performance in reading a transcribed text in DAW system, even without a previous listening to the content, was very satisfactory and close to an authentic pronunciation. Even if some MSA "standard" pronunciation could be still monitored when reading, normally, students autonomously corrects themselves towards the nonstandard form of SA. On the other hand, when the same group of students were asked to read a dialogue transcribed in "plain" Arabic alphabet, their performance was closer to MSA phonology, even if they have listened the same unit in previous listening exercises. During the course, speaking activities were also supported by written dialogues and exercises.

At this point a further consideration should be made. This proposal does not aim to transform informal writing of the native speakers nor to normalize or codify it. In addition, it would be not necessary to use it through all the stages of learning SA. However, DAW could be a very useful tool especially at a first step of learning, or if courses of MSA and SA are held contemporaneously. Consequently, DAW could be introduced at first steps of learning SA, but when the basis of phonology and morphology of this variety is consolidated, diacritics could be eliminated gradually, so that learners could read informal writing without any additional signs as native speakers do.

7. Conclusion

The complex linguistic situation of Arabic language is probably the most difficult challenge that faces both teachers and students. In an integrated approach that exposes learners to both varieties – whether sequentially or simultaneously – a written support is needed. Albeit phonetic transcription provides learners with the exact pronunciation, it is not the practical solution for learning purposes. Diacritized Arabic Writing could be of a great help to learners with a previous MSA background, especially in the first stages of learning spoken varieties.

Appendix 1: Vowels and semivowels in DAW

Examples		Diacritized Arabic writing	Arabic alphabet	CA[15] phonetic transcription	MSA transliteration
Integrated Arabic writing	Phonetic transcription				
فَتَح	*fataħ*	ـَ	ـَ	*a*	*a*
خال	*xa:l*	ا	ا	*a:*	*ā*
كأُنْت	*ke:net*	أُ	-	*e:*	-
كانْت	*ka:net*	ـُـْ	-	*e*	-
بيْت	*be:t*	ـيْـ	-	*e:*	
رَجْع	*rəʤeʕ*	ـَـْ	-	*ə*	
بتْكْتبي	*btəkᵊtbi*	ـْـْ	-	ᵊ	
جُمعَة	*ʤumʕa*	ـُ	ـُ	*u*	*u*
شوف	*ʃu:f*	ـو	ـو	*u:*	*ū*
وَلد / واحْد	*walad / waːħed*	وَ/ وا	وَ/ وا	*wa / wa*	*w*
وِصال	*wisˁa:l*		وِ	*wi*	
وَصْل	*wəsˁel*	وَ	-	*wə*	
وْلاد	*wla:d*	وْ	وْ	*w*	
بَكْتُب	*bəktob*	ـَـْـُ	-	*o*	-
كوْل	*ko:l*	ـوْ	-	*o:*	
زِراعة بيِقول/بتاكلي	*ziraːʕa* *biʔuːl/ btaːkli*	ـِـ / ـِـ / ـي	ـِـ	*i*	*ı*
عيد	*ʕiːd*	ـيـ	ـيـ	*iː*	*ī*
يَعني/ هِيام/ أيّام	*yaʕni / hiyaːm/* *ʔayyaːm*	يَـ / يا / يّا	يَـ / يا / يّا	*ya / yaː / yyaː*	*y*
بْيُوصَل/يوْم	*byūsˁa l/ yoːm*	يُـ / يو / يوْ	يُـ / يُو / -	*yu / yuː / yoː*	
بْـيَـفتَح	*byəftaħ*	يَـ	-	*yə*	
نايْم/طَيّب	*naːyem /* *tᵊayyeb*	يْـ / يّـْ	-	*ye / yye*	

15. In this table IPA conventional signs are adopted.

Appendix 2: Consonants in DAW

Examples		Diacritized Arabic writing	Arabic alphabet	CA phonetic transcription	MSA transliteration
Integrated Arabic writing	Phonetic transcription				
بَعدِيْن	*baʕde:n*	ب	ب	*b*	*b*
پرۆڤة	*pro:va*	پ	ب	*p*	
بَنات	*bana:t*	ت	ت	*t*	*t*
ثورة	*θawrah*	ث	ث	*θ*	*ṯ*
مَـثَـل	*mətəl*	ثـ		*t*	
مَثَّلاً	*masalan*	ثّ		*s*	
جَمال	*ʤama:l*	ج	ج	*ʤ*	*ǧ*
چَمال	*ʒama:l*	چ		*ʒ*	
ڤَمال	*gama:l*	ڤ		*g*	
رُوح	*ru:ħ*	ح	ح	*ħ*	*ḥ*
دَخَل	*daxal*	خ	خ	*x*	□
دار	*da:r*	د	د	*d*	*d*
مَذَاق	*maða:q*	ذ	ذ	*ð*	*ḏ*
أخَبد	*ʔa□ad*	دِ		*d*	
إذا	*ʔiza*	ذ		*z*	
عَرَب	*ʕarab*	ر	ر	*r*	*r*
زَمان	*zama:n*	ز	ز	*z*	*z*
سَلام	*sala:m*	س	س	*s*	*s*
شَراب	*ʃara:b*	ش	ش	*ʃ*	*š*
صار	*sˁa:r*	ص	ص	*sˁ*	*ṣ*
ضَرَب	*dˁarab*	ض	ض	*dˁ*	*ḍ*
مَضْبُوط	*mazˁbu:tˁ*	ظ		*zˁ*	
طبيب	*tˁabi:b*	ط	ط	*tˁ*	*ṭ*
ظلام	*ðˁala:m*	ظ	ظ	*ðˁ*	*ẓ*
ظَلّ	*dˁall*	ظّ		*dˁ*	
عَظِيم	*ʕazˁi:m*	ظ		*zˁ*	
مَعْلُوم	*maʕlu:m*	ع	ع	*ʕ*	‘
غَلَط	*ɣalatˁ*	غ	غ	*ɣ*	*ġ*
فَتَح	*fataħ*	ف	ف	*f*	*f*
براڤو	*bra:vo*	ڤ		*v*	

أناقَة قِليل قاعْد	*ʔna:qa* *ʕali:l* *ga:ʕed*	ق قِ ڤ	ق	*q* *ʔ* *g*	*q*
حالَك حالگ	*ħa:lak* *ħa:latʃ*	ك گ	ك	*k* *ʧ*	*k*
لاعْب	*la:ʕeb*	ل	ل	*l*	*l*
شام مَعْكُمْ	*ʃa:m* *maʕkon*	م مْ	م	*m* *n*	*m*
نام	*na:m*	ن	ن	*n*	*n*
هِلال كْتابَها/شافَها	*hila:l* *kta:b-a / ʃa:f-a*	هـ ـهـ	هـ	*h* -	*h*
رَئيس شِيء/صَحْراء بْتـأْخُد	*ra'i:s* *ʃi:/ sˁaħra* *bta:xod*	ء ـِء ـأ	ء	*ʔ* - -	’

Some examples of transcription

كانْ فيهِ واحْد حَلَبي قِال لَهْ صاحْبُهْ: شَفْت مْبارْح مَرْتَكْ راكْبَة مَع رَجُل غَريب بْسيّارْتَك وعَمْ تْسوقِ بْسُرعَة. ردُّ الحَلَبي : مَش مَشْكَلْتُه، هِيْ بْتَعرْف تْسوقِ مْنيح[16]

شُو كانَت أوَّلْ شَغلْة بَعدَ الزَّواْج لَفَتَت لَك نَظَرِك إنّهِ... أنا غَلطانْة بْهالشَّخْص؟[17]

هَيّ الصُّوَر... شي بِيذَكِّرنا يَعني بالذّكرَيَات الحَلوْة. أَكِيد يَعني أنا كْثير بَـمْبَسْط وَقِتّ بْشُوف صُوَري أنا وصغيرْة. فَـ... حتَّى هَلَّأ يَعني... البَشْع يَلّلي هلّأ بْها الوَقِت مْثَلاً، عَم نَسْتَعمْل الدِّيجيتال. مْثَلاً عَم نَنْقِّلـّهمْ عَالكَمبْيُوتَر. عَم نَفْقِّد هَالشيء، فَـ... بْحَبّ أنا أَرجَع لَلصُّوَر دايْماً مْثَل كَنّا زَمان يَعني.[18]

16. This text is originally written as informal writing [http://syria.ahlamontada.com/t63-topic], diacritics are added.
17. A Lebanese conductor in a program *Kalām nawa'im*, 62, MBC TV.
18. A Syrian woman interviewed in the program *Ṣabāḥ al-□ayr*, 28 october 2011, Addounia TV.

سامُر: مَرحَبا ريم، كيفُك؟

ريم: الحَمْد اللّه، كَلْ شِي تَمام. إِنْتُ شو أَخْبارَك؟ كيف العيْلة وْالـوْلاد؟

سامُر: الوْلاد كَلّـهِمْ مْناح كْثير. نَشكُر اللّه. شو عَم تعـمْلي هوْن؟

ريم: طْلَـعْت آشتَري شْوَيّة غْراض لَلْبيْت. أنا بيْتي قِريب مَن هوْن. وْإنتُ ويْن رايْح؟

سامُر: أنا رايْح عَ المَكتَب. عَندي مَوْعُد مَع زْبون بَعْد نَصّ ساعة.

ريم: طَيّب. تْفَضَّلْ شِيء مَرَّة إنتُ والمَدام لَتَشْرَبوا فَنجان قِهوْة عَنَّا بَالبيْت.[19]

19. A dialogue used in classroom.

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