

## What leads to a miraculous preservation of sounds and meanings: A comparative study of Classical Arabic phonology

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### Abstract

*This study aims to find the linguistic features and patterns which help Classical Arabic words retain their original sounds and meanings. The eminent features discussed are vowel and consonant variation, dependence on vowels, tone, stress, structural ambiguity, and lexical density of Arabic words with comparison to English language. The findings reveal that Quranic Arabic has fewer vowels that can change the meaning hence which can be classed as vowel phonemes. This is a great advantage, as it reduces the dependence on vowel sounds to change the minimal pairs. Fewer vowels means that the Arabic language can be properly taught with accuracy of sounds and their articulation, as the manner and place of articulation for consonants is easier to teach and explain as compared to vowels. Moreover, Quranic Arabic has specialized system of diacritics, which change, add, or modify meanings. Their presence helps ensure correct tone and fixity in allowed accents. The study also finds that translation of Quranic words into English language cannot be done easily as one to one equivalence of words is not possible.*

**Keywords:** Classical Arabic, vowel, consonants, tone, stress, structural ambiguity

### Introduction

Phonology is a study of the sound patterns that occur within languages. Some linguists include phonetics, the study of the production and description of speech sounds, within the study of phonology. This study finds incidences of sounds and morphology to make them comparable with orthographical patterns of Arabic and English languages. The aim is to find the linguistic features and to make them comparable.

It is assumed that codification and standardization would help preserve any language, as orthography leads to fixity of rules and sound patterns. However, the excerpts of old English are not pronounced the same way as they used to be in the past. So, there must be something other than orthography that would enable a language sustain its morphology and sound patterns. All

other languages come across changes in their sound patterns, and semantic meanings due to multiple reasons including; language contact, language shift, code switching etc. However, some languages can resist change in their morphological and syntactic structures. Moreover, greater dependence on vowel sounds as compared to the consonant can also lead to a swift change in pronunciation as there are no fixed manner and place of articulation of vowels.

### **Research Question**

How far the linguistic features of Classical Arabic and English language are comparable?

### **Literature Review**

When knowledge is documented in written form, it gives permanence to meanings associated with their respective ideas. Literacy helps advance intellectual and social development. Documented ideas of previous generations aid in the development of philosophy, the way we know it (Biber , 1991). Written language is given precedence over spoken language in literary and academic circles, yet in the latter half of the twentieth century, linguists considered spoken language as primary and written language as secondary. According to Sapir (1921) written language is the visual symbolism of what is spoken. Bloomfield (1933) opines that written expressions cannot be equated with language as they just record spoken language in terms of visible marks. In the same way Hall opines that as speech is considered to be fundamental, writings are secondary and derivative. Postal (1966) considers writing as a crude way of showing language structures, that does not have a direct relation to the phenomenon of language itself. Fillmore (1981) believes that communication in written form is derived from face-to-face conversation. Aronoff (1985) opines that written language is an artifact of the true language which in actual is spoken.

A study based on the Vai people of Liberia shows that indigenously developed writing system used for non-academic purposes other than formal schooling is used to become in that society. There are other members of community who learn Arabic to study Quran, or English from government schools to serve various functions in their communities (Scribner & Cole, 1981). They observed that learning of Quran greatly improves the ability of memorization. However, words keep on losing their sounds, and even meanings over time (Brinton et al, 2005).

### **Discussion:**

The Arabic Alphabet consists of 28 letters, only 3 of which are vowels ا ( corresponds to A), و ( corresponds to U or W), ي (Corresponds to I or Y). Long Arabic vowels produce sounds of double a (aa), double i (ii), and double u (uu). They simply lengthen the sounds of short vowels. Long vowels are combinations of short vowel symbols and 3 letters of the English alphabets.

A vowel is any sound with no audible noise produced by constriction in the vocal tract, and consonant is a sound with audible noise produced by a constriction. According to English phonology, a vowel is the base or nucleus of a syllable. A vowel forms a link between the two consonant sounds. Vowel is one of a class of speech sounds in the articulation of which the oral part of the breath channel is not blocked and is not constricted enough to cause audible friction broadly, it is the one most prominent sound in a syllable (Roach, 1988).

Properties of consonants include; manner of articulation, place of articulation, and voicing. There are six manners of articulation: Stop, Fricative, Affricate, Nasal, Liquid, and Glide. There are seven places of articulation: Bilabial, Labiodental, Dental, Alveolar, Palatal, Velar, and Glottal. Voicing includes voiced/voiceless sounds. Properties of vowels include; lip rounding (rounded or spread), tongue height (high, mid, or low), and tongue position (front, mid, or back). The English language has 26 letters of the alphabet which represents 44 sounds. Among these 44 sounds, there are 20 vowels and 24 consonant sounds (Roach, 1988). There are no sounds for the alphabets such as q, and x. There is one sound for a combination of alphabets such as sh- and ch-. Some consonants are becoming silent in connected speech of English language. For instance, consider the following words; handsome, cupcake, little, hour, heir. All these features do not enable the readers to have uniform pronunciation of English phonemes. Moreover, they add on in multiplicity and variations in pronunciation within various dialects.

There were five different dialects of Middle English during the medieval age. These include; Kentish, Southern, Northern, East-Midland and West-Midland (Nedelius, 2019). Chaucer used East Midland Dialect. Consider for example the word knight, from Chaucer's time till now, its pronunciation has changed considerably. It is important to observe the obsolete sound such as /x/ in knight. Moreover /k/ is silent. There is a considerable change in both orthography and pronunciation of this word. Languages with the passage of time come towards reduction, as differentiation in various consonants is becoming negligible.

Speakers of Urdu language are also unable to differentiate between various sounds for which bilinguals do not have an English alternative. Differentiation in various consonants is becoming negligible. For instance, Urdu speaking children who do not have exposure of Arabic, may have problem in differentiating ظ, ز, ض, ذ. Those Urdu speaking bilinguals equate these four sounds with simply /z/. However, Quranic Arabic is miraculously preserved both in terms of orthography, sound, and meanings.

Some facts about Quranic Arabic reveal that fewer vowel sound means, lesser dependence on vowels to generate meanings. All 28 consonants have proper place and manner of articulation, which means they can be taught to new learners. For instance, ك can be taught, whereas the difference between the triphthongs in hour and air cannot be explained easily with the help of tongue height, lip rounding to new learners.

Vowels in Arabic are marked through a better system of diacritics, known as aerab. Once such a diacritic is Madd, which prolongs a sound. A prolonged sound may mean that there is emphasis on the word on which this diacritic is placed. It may mean the meaning of that word is emphasized. When a same ayah contains binaries and Madd is placed on one of the binary then it would mean that that binary is preferred out of the two complimentary.

Consider for instance example 1. 36:47

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ أَنْفِقُوا مِمَّا رَزَقَكُمُ اللَّهُ قَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا أَنْطَعِمُ مَنْ لَوْ يَشَاءُ اللَّهُ أَطَعَمَهُ إِنَّ أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا فِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ ٤٧

in this verse there is mentioned a pair of binaries; those who believed and those who were nonbelievers. A small Madd is placed on the word Aminoo which means the believers. This diacritic did not change the meaning but added something to it by modifying tone of the reciter through prolonging sound. So, even the style of recitation is preserved with the help of this diacritic.

## Tone

The meanings are sometimes conveyed through the tone. For instance, consider the following example 2;

- a) I *never* went to the park with you.
- b) I never went to the park with *you*.

Although these two sentences look alike, there is no method in English orthography to differentiate between these two sentences having altogether different meanings.

Sometimes, junctures can also add or change meanings. Consider the following example 3.

- a) *Six tea cups*
- b) *Sixty cups*

These two expressions could be a slip of tongue away from creating confusions. However, in Quran the system of all diacritics and even stops, convey the fixity of allowed styles of pronunciations

## Structural Ambiguity

Consider the following example 4;

Flying plane is dangerous.

There are two meanings of the above utterance, which is due to the structural ambiguity caused by the function of the word flying which could be a verb or an adjective. On the other hand, the following utterance from the Quran can convey so many meanings in a simple morpheme. Example 5,

وَأَسْتَغْفِرِي 12:29

In order to translate this single Arabic morpheme, a complete sentence in English is to be formed, which would mean, “you one woman should seek forgiveness form (Allah).” This one word of Quranic Arabic contains; Action verb, imperative mood, singularity, feminine gender, meaning, and tense. If we take an action verb such as sing from the English language it does not convey, the gender of the doer of action, nor the number of persons doing it. The tense and mood are also not represented unless the word is placed somewhere in a sentence. This leads to the inability of many languages to accurately translate Quranic words in one to on relation. Moreover, the Arabic morpheme attaching so many information to it does not require any particular context for clearer understanding. As a comparison the example 4 contains a fairly large sentence but it has structural ambiguity. s

Semantic equivalence with Arabic is impossible. Lion in Arabic has more than 300 nouns, among those 300 nouns, there are adjectives that are considered as nouns as they are commonly used to describe Lion. The following list is just a brief reflection of this phenomenon. Example 6;

Assad أسد

Ossama أسامة

Hamza حمزة

Hizabr هزبر

Dhirgham ضرغام

Arandas عرندس

La'ith ليث

Sab'e سبع

kaswara قصورة

There is the actual naming of 'Lion' as an animal species, and there are also the poetic and descriptive naming, such as 'King', 'grand', 'loud roar', 'Cesar/Qaisar', 'mane' etc.

Still there is room for creativity as you could also create one, and people will understand what you are talking about, say 'Golden eyes of a predator', to Arabs you either mean an eagle or a lion, and from context they understand what you're saying. It has more than 300 words in Arabic, and in some dictionaries that is 500, as its name. On the other hand, in English there are fewer words: lion(s), lioness(es), cub(s).

## Conclusion

Quranic Arabic is preserved in its original form primarily due to its sounds system and patterns, aerab, stops, bari and choti madd, and stops are documented in written form in the holy Quran. This means that the pronunciation of Quranic words cannot be altered. All over the world the dead or dying languages are losing their speakers due to lack of codification, standardization, and documentation. Quranic Arabic has specialized and sophisticated morphological and grammatical rules, and specialized vocabulary, that enable the speaker to use minimum words to convey maximum meanings.

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