

Spelling Arabic Personal Names in English

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Abstract

Scholarly journals and other academic institutions which publish on Arabic and/or Islamic issues tend to enforce their house guidelines on transliterating Arabic terms and names. Most guidelines require the use of special characters, macrons, etc., which academics cannot but follow if they want to be published. The guidelines, however, are not uniform across the board of journals. Despite the mandated adherence to the guidelines, the requirement apparently does not apply to the (English) spelling of the name(s) of the author(s) themselves. Different authors, whose first and/or family/last names are spelled in exactly the same way in Arabic, may spell their names in English in diverse ways. This article looks at how 103 individual Arab authors in sixteen English medium journals spell their own names. The survey covered the past four years/volumes. Using linguistic principles from phonology, morphology, word boundary, and Arabic orthography (in contrast to English orthography), this researcher proposes an account for the obvious diversity in name spelling by Arab writers.

Keywords : names, orthography, Romanization, transcription, transliteration

1. Introduction

“Is this the ‘correct’ way to write my name in English?” is a question that has frequently been asked this researcher by many Arab learners of English as a foreign language. On the other end of the issue, this researcher has also been frequently asked by native speakers of English about the ‘correct’ way of vocalizing an Arabic name spelled in English orthography. The one to one relationship of letters to sounds in the spelling of foreign names is only a desired wish. Professional and academic organizations have proposed numerous universal schemes of representing foreign scripts and revised them over time. The first proposal by the International Phonetic Association of the late nineteenth century, dubbed as ‘visible speech’, went into the fifth edition in 2005. (ipa.org 2014) The (British) Royal Asiatic Society also suggested a set of guidelines for dealing with the conversion of scripts such as Sanskrit and Arabic into the English writing system in the late nineteenth century. More recently, libraries, e.g., the Library of (US) Congress, and library associations, news reporting agencies, programmers of machine translation software, Google maps specialists, and cell phone companies have had to address the same issues, each institution for its particular goals, services, and topics. (Anonymous 1934; Wedderburn 2011; Whitaker 2011; Ellis 2012; ARAN 2013; Anonymous 2014)

In the academic publishing sphere, journals dealing with topics such as Arab and Islamic history, culture, media, languages, and religion, ask their contributors to follow the house guidelines on writing Arabic names and special terminology. Authors comply with this requirement. However, there is not a single set of guidelines that is accepted and used by all concerned, and because of this variation, some revise their systems, (Rietbroek 2010). The journals and publishers of similar nature and content do not, however, require authors to spell their own names according to the guidelines.

It is the issue of how Arab authors spell their own names (in English) that is the focus in this article. For one thing, some complexities of representation in the guidelines, such as the use of diacritics and macrons, have been described as ‘cumbersome’ (Rietbroek 2010, 2) and abiding by them is restricted to spelling the names in the body of the texts. Tolerance by the publishers appreciated, authors with the same first or last/family name in Arabic, nonetheless, do not follow a single standard but write their name(s) in different ways. One example, the name محمد, may suffice at this point for the spelling of their first name (although some have it as family name too). The following ways have been identified in the sample for this study: *Mohamad, Mohammad, Mohammed, Muhammad*. Other studies have found other ways of writing the name in English including Muslims from other nations. (Ellis 2012: 8) The spell check in the Microsoft word document gives four different spelling options for this name. For variation in the spelling of the family/last name, the name حسن, is an example. The following different ways have been found: *Hassan* and *Hasan*. At the surface, the differences in spelling Arabic names as in the examples above may give the impression of a lack of underlying principles. However, insights from some linguistic and orthographic issues in both Arabic and English can clarify why some prefer to use one spelling to other ways of spelling.

2 Hypothesis

The present research proposes that under most instances of variation that have been observed, a particular sociolinguistic principle or another one pertaining to Arabic or English is at work.

3. Arabic Phonological and Graphological Parameters

Nine linguistic aspects/features about Arabic form the theoretical foundation for the explanation of variation in this paper.

3.1 Written words in Arabic consist of letters that are joined to each other, basically similar to writing in print in English, with some qualifications that are mentioned below. (See 4 below.) A sequence of disjoined letters such as ن ص ر does not make a word but a string of letters as in UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) in English (vocalized as *youneitchseeare*). To become a word, the above sequence must have the joined form نصر. This is a sequence of three consonant letters and the unrepresented (short) vowels are supplied by the literate reader according to the linguistic context (similar to the convention in writing Hebrew). If any one of the three long vowels, on the other hand, is part of the word, the vowel is represented in the word by a letter, e.g., ناصر or نصير etc.

3.2 Only consonants and the three vowel letters (representing the three tense/long vowels) are written. (During early literacy training and in Quran texts, the three lax/short vowels are represented by super and subscript diacritics and the absence of short vowels between consonants is represented by a small superscript circle.) A rough demonstration from English (about the absence of vowels that native speakers of English can fill in as they read) would be this sentence: W cn rd ths sntnc wtht vwl ltrs= we can read this sentence without vowel letters.

3.3 The Arabic writing system has the feature that certain letters in the alphabet have different forms, depending on the place in the word where they occur: initial, medial, and final. Here are illustrative examples:

Letter	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
ع	عبد	بعد	باع
ا	ا	اصل	صال
هـ	هنا	فهـ	فاه
س	سال	مسار	راس

3.4 As can be seen in the above table, most letters in word medial position join on both their sides in the word to other letters. Only six letters do not join to the letter following them. However, spatial proximity of the following letter must be maintained. These letters are: ا د ذ ز و . (Pedersen 2008 presents a detailed table.) In some words, the letters may all be of those that do not join to the letter following them.. In such a case, the word is a sequence of disjoined but spatially close, individual letters, e.g., اروى، روان، رزق، زواوي، رزق،

3.5 Arabic phonology has the feature of long consonant, geminates. Gemination is represented by a single consonant letter and, if ambiguous, by a diacritic super script, which looks like the number 3 lying flat on its back َ . To native speakers of Arabic, the sound is long and is viewed as if it were a repetition of the sound itself regardless of the position of the letter within the word. In English, such consonant length can be produced and perceived at word initial morpheme/prefix morpheme boundary as in *immaterial, unknowable, illiterate, irregular*, but not in suffixes, e.g., *swimming, written, cutting*, or within the morpheme itself, e.g., *umbrella, letter*.

3.6 Standard Arabic is a case marking language, with suffixes indicating number and gender on nouns adjectives and verbs and tense on verbs.. In standard writing, however, the case on singular nouns does not appear because the mark is represented by suffix diacritical symbols and these do not appear in normal writing as indicated above.

3.7 Arabic is also a (grammatical and biological) gender marking language. Nouns or names that end in the singular with ة - /t/ with the case marker (as in sixth above) affixed to it are grammatically feminine in gender whether the reference is biologically female , e.g. سامية or grammatically feminine, e.g., طاولة . There are also nouns with a male reference which are grammatically marked as feminine, e.g., امية ، عكرمة . In their citation form (i.e., not in connected standard speech), the feminine marker is replaced to a low front short/lax vowel, which is phonetically a schwa sound. Therefore, a name like سميرة َ is vocalized/pronounced as سمير with the schwa sound following the final consonant. But in writing, the common practice in is to add the هـ letter after the final consonant letter, سميره ،

3.8 The definite article (ال) is always a prefix, not a word by itself as the case is with *the* in English. Phonologically, the /l/ sound assimilates completely in (standard and nonstandard) speech to the sound immediately after it if that sound is also made by the tip of the tongue; that is, both share the same active articulator.

3.9The basic sounds of the following English letters: *b t d r z s f k l m n h* and *w* have their roughly equivalent basic sound values in Arabic. Whereas English has five vowel letters (their combinatory use is not relevant to the issues here) Arabic has three vowel letters

4. Data Source

For this article, the first and last/family names of 103 Arab authors who have published at least once in one of

sixteen journals over the past four years are the source data. (Publications on Arabic proper names, e/g., Alghamdi (2010) and Al-Hadithi (2010) adopt a prescriptive orientation and address the Arab users of English in general, but these publications do not account for the varied choices in the names as such.

The names analyzed in this article are those of published authors. Most of the publications where these names appeared deal with Arabic in at least one respect. To maintain personal privacy of all authors, none of the names appears in its full form. Rather, the names have been taken as either first names or last/family names. Some authors share the same last/family name and in some cases the name could a first name for one author but a family name for another author, e.g., *Nasser*. The list of the journals is in the Appendix.

5. Population Specification

The names that have been identified in the journals do not include the names of Arab authors who come from countries that have been (heavily) influenced by French as a second language such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Djibouti, and Lebanon. Muslims from other countries, e.g., Turkey, Indonesia, Nigeria, etc., have also been precluded on grounds of precluding distracting influence from their writing systems.

6. Method

The names of 103 Arab authors as spelled in English have been classified according to one or more features in their English spelling. In Arabic spelling such names are written in one consistent spelling form. Each group of English spellings will be examined with reference to the theoretical framework drawn up above.

7. Data classification, analysis and explanation of variation

7.1 The first group of Arabic names to examine in the data is the following: *Abdullah*, *Abdalla*, *Abdallah*. These three versions represent one normal spelling in Arabic عبد الله. This written form does not include any indication of the type of case for the first or second of the two words. Therefore, spelling the first word in English as *Abda* or *Abdu* has no morphological rationale. Turning to the use or no use of the 'h' at the end of the name in English, the use of the 'h' letter relies on the occurrence of the 'ه' letter at the end of the name. This way of spelling can be viewed as following a letter for letter transfer from one language (Arabic) into the other (English). On the other hand, the absence of the 'h' letter in the other case reflects actual pronunciation. It should be pointed out that the name consists of two free morphemes which have been combined to form one compound word as in 'classroom' in English. Furthermore, the third letter of عبد does not join to the following letter). Proper names which have 'Allah' as an integral part have appeared in the data as single words, e.g., *Hamdallah*.

7.2 Second, the names which contain the morpheme 'Abd', with the exception of names that have the term 'Allah', as mentioned at the end of the previous paragraph. In this group, the morpheme is followed in all cases in the data, but not in the absolute distribution in Arabic, by another free morpheme that expresses an attribute of God. How the morpheme 'Abd' and the attribute following it are transliterated exhibits obvious variation. Here are a few examples: *Abdelkader*, *Abdul Hakim*, *Nasser-Abdel*, *Abdel-Latif*, *Abdessamad*. In the first example, the whole (family or first) name is spelled as a single word; in the second example, the name appears in the form of two words. Another variation in the spelling of the 'Abd' group splits the word expressing God's attribute 'Al/Elatif' into two parts, one part containing the letter representing the /l/ sound and affixing it to the 'Abd' part, inserting a hyphen and then writing the word 'Latif'.

7.3 What stands out in this group of names is that none (in the sample) is spelled with a final 'i' letter in the 'Abd' part of the name, i.e., writing it as 'Abdi'. Reference to this point will be made below in the section on vowels.

7.4 Family/Last names in Arabic that have the initial part ابو/ have more than one transliteration in the data collected. Two points are relevant in this connection: vowel representation (which will be part of a point below) and the transliteration form status. In the theoretical section above, it was pointed that letters in Arabic words are strung together unless there a constraint on the letter joining principle. The Arabic letter ا does not join to the following letter, and hence, there is some difference among researchers concerning transferring the mandatory space between this part of the name in Arabic or not doing so. Three patterns have been identified. The first two forms are: *Abu xxx* and *Abuxxx*, *Abu Elhija* and *Abouelezz*, respectively. Each of the three choices has an underlying principle determining its form. For the independent *Abu*, the determining factor is the fact that it is a free morpheme, i.e., a word by itself. As for the joined *Abu*, the whole name is considered as a word with two parts that appear as such because of the writing constraint of not joining ا to the following letter. The third form for spelling ابو in English is the compromise form with a hyphen between the two parts, *Abu-xxx*, e.g., *Abu-Rmeileh*.

- 7.5 Another pattern of variation in choice concerns the family/last names that have the definite articles as prefixes, the *Al* group. This part of the name is an integral part of the word and its letter / ل / joins to what is after it. Once again as in the previous section, because English written words are units of spatially differentiated sequences of letters, it was found in the data, as expected, that different authors deal with the point in different ways. First, some authors have dispensed with it altogether, possibly in line with its being optional in informal/colloquial Arabic speech, e.g., *Dahhan, Saafin, Shiyab, Shunnaq*, and *Zyoud*. Other authors have kept it as part of the name but in four different forms: (1) In one form there is the use of the hyphen after the capitalized first letter, e.g., *Al-Khatib*, (2) capitalizing the first letter and without a hyphen, e.g., *Al Masry*, (3) without the capitalization of the first letter, e.g., *el-Husein, el-Nawawy*, and (4) considering the entire name as one word, e.g., *Elhallaq*. Hedden (2007) suggests alternatives but they are based on actual name spelling in English..
- 7.6 Although, gemination of consonants in English phonology within the word is limited to certain prefixes, the use of double letters is part of the system of English spelling. In Arabic, gemination is an aspect of phonology/pronunciation which is marked in writing only for beginners. Most authors whose names include a geminate consonant use double letters in spelling their names, e.g., *Abbas, Abbood, Aladdin, El Hajj, Muhammad, Hanna* (a male's name, the Arabic equivalent of John), *Khayyat, Nazzal, Aboelegg*. There are, however, fewer instances where the Arabic gemination is not reflected in the spelling of some authors, e.g., *Fawaz, Kamaluddin*, (in contrast with *Kamaluddin*) *Mohamed, Al-seghayer, Muhawi*.
- 7.7 Next in the survey, there is the spelling which reflects the author's dialectal (relating to dialect) pronunciation. For example, the following names are spelled differently by different authors: *Muhammed vs. Muhammad* (both names appeared in the same issue of a journal), *Ahmed vs. Ahmad, Amel vs. Amal, Ragab vs. Rajab, Al-ghamdi vs. Al-ghamidi, Heidar vs. Haydar, Feissal vs. Faissal*. These fourteen spellings are for the following seven names spelled in Arabic in the same order above as: *أمل، رجب، الغامدي، فيصل محمد احمد*. The dimension of local pronunciation difference is a regional reflex of the diglossia situation in Arabic, which can be equated with the standard non-standard in other languages. Here are two examples from English to illustrate the point: the pronunciation of the /t/ sound in words like *center* or *sentence*, and how Cockney speaker realize the /t/ in *but, bit*.
- 7.8 Further to the above, there is the variation in representing the /s/ sound in intervocalic (and vowel and sonorant consonant) contexts. (There is a /z/ sound in some groups' pronunciation of 'translation'). Native speakers of English may often read the Arabic names spelled as *Hasan, Islam, Muslim*, or *Asma* with a medial /z/ sound. Aware of this tendency, some Arab authors preempt it by using the ss sequence in spelling their names, e.g., *Hassan, Hussein, Bassioney, Bassma*.
- 7.9 As for the feminine marker suffix on names, it is represented in two ways. On the one hand, there is /ah/, as in *Bassmah, Fatmah*. This spelling maintains a trace of the feminine morpheme, /ah/. On the other hand, there is the pronunciation based spelling. The practice of some other authors takes the phonetic representation of the name (which does not include the /h/ sound) as in these names: *Magda, Munira, Samira, Sawalha*. This spelling has a vowel trace of the reduced feminine marker, /a/.
- 7.10 Finally, the spelling of vowel sounds mostly follows tendency for economy of letters, i.e., of using fewer vowel letters in English, whether the sound has a letter in Arabic or not. Several sub patterns have been identified in the data: one for the long vowel after the consonant followed by a short vowel after the second consonant, another for the short vowel after the first consonant followed by a long vowel after the second consonant, and a third for the long vowel after the first consonant followed by a long vowel after the second consonant. In the following names, the first vowel letter stands for a long vowel sound (which is given a letter in Arabic writing) and the second vowel sound (which is not given a letter in Arabic writing) is also given a letter in spelling the name in English: *Hafez, Hala, Naji, Saleh*. The opposite sequence of vowel length appears in these names, but the spelling in English reflects the previous pattern, viz., an English vowel letter for a vowel sound in Arabic, *Farid, Khalil, Munir, Noha, Salman, Walid*. The third sub pattern is illustrated in these names: *Naji, Musa*. In addition, a double letter sequence spelling for the second (long) vowel sound and letter in Arabic is used by some authors as in: *Alkatheery, Khaleel, Muneera, Reem*.
- 7.11 There appeared in the data a choice by some authors to remain within the one letter policy for all vowels as in: *Abdelhadi, Sawalha, Shehadeh, Munira*.
- 7.12 A variety of vowel spellings could not be accounted for by reference to the principles outlined

in the framework of classification for the data. The following vowel alternatives have been found: *Abu, Abo, Abou; Suleiman, Soliman; Nasrin, Nesreen, Housni, Hosney, Husny; Muneer, Mounir; Omar, Omer, Umar.*

8. Conclusion

In the context of the above mentioned set of principles on Arabic phonology and orthography, an order can be discerned (for most of the data) in what seems at the surface to be a situation without order. Can these principles be generalized to writing Arabic personal names in English? No definitive answer can be given. However, applied to a population of Arab academics of a larger size, similar results are more likely to appear than not because the population of this study is a special group of accomplished/published users of English. From this perspective, their representation of their own names may be viewed as worthy of being taken as a legitimate object of investigation. .

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Appendix

List of Journals Surveyed

Arab World English Journal
Arabic and Middle Eastern Literatures
Arabic Sciences and Philosophy
Arabica (Brill)
Asian EFL Journal
Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies
Contemporary Islam
International Journal of Arabic-English Studies
Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies
Journal of Arabic Literature
Journal of Islamic Studies
Journal of Middle East Media
Journal of Middle East Studies
Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (New Series)
Language Policy Journal
Names: A Journal of Onomastics
TESOL Arabia
Translation Journal
Translation Studies