

Body Part Words in English and Arabic: A Contrastive Study*

Abdul Sahib Mehdi Ali
University of Sharjah

Abstract: *This paper explores the main characteristics of body part words (BPWs) in Arabic and English with a view to bringing into focus the main aspects of similarity and difference between the two languages in this area. In particular, the author seeks to highlight the fact that, even though the topic in question is universal, the two languages often represent reality in different ways. In the course of the discussion, copious evidence is provided to illustrate and support this fact.*

1. Introduction

Body parts words (henceforth BPWs) are well known for the high frequency of their occurrence in all languages. In addition to their basic functions (as names of the parts of the body), they lend themselves to being used in large numbers of set phrases where the referents are not the actual body parts they usually designate but objects, notions, and phenomena that bear some resemblance to them in terms of shape, position, and/or function. These words are also interesting in that they provide valuable information as to how a particular language views reality, and the conceptual system in terms of which the speakers of that language think and act. These and other related issues acquire special importance when looked at from the point of view of more than one language (in this case Arabic and English). Such an investigation, it is hoped, will shed light on both the general characteristics of these words and their language-specific features. In the following discussion, a number of cases are cited and discussed to illustrate the aforementioned issues. (For a list of the symbols representing Arabic sounds in this article, see Appendix: Transliteration System)

2. The Two Languages Compared

Given the objective nature of the present sphere, i.e. the human body, it is natural for different languages to have a lot in common with one another concerning the behavior of their respective BPWs. However, differences

and mismatches may prove to be too many and too significant to be overlooked or belittled, as is the case between Arabic and English. On many occasions one cannot speak of one-to-one correspondence between the two languages; it is frequently the case that they view reality differently, each in its own way. This is an area of investigation where hasty generalization is bound to lead to a great deal of misunderstanding and confusion, a lesson which translators and second language learners are bound to learn during the early stages of their training. The following discussion aims at illustrating these points.

2.1 BPWs in figurative expressions

A major characteristic of BPWs is their tendency to be used in figurative expressions. Arabic and English abound in such expressions, which are found in almost all social activities and at all levels of formality (Ali 2002). It is noted on many occasions that the meaning of a particular BPW is extended in both languages to express more or less the same idea. For example, English head and its Arabic counterpart raʿs are both used to mean, among other things, 'leader', 'chief', and 'president'. Similarly, English face and Arabic wajh, are used to convey such notions as 'fame', 'importance', 'distinction', 'prominence', and the like (e.g., English television face and Arabic wujūhu n-nās, 'leading personalities'). Here are some more examples of almost identical expressions in English and Arabic.

1. 'My heart was in my throat' / 'waʿid zāgati l-ʿabṣāru wa balaḡati l-qulūbu l-hanājir (Qur'anic verse: 'when the eyes grew wild and the hearts reached to the throats') – sudden fear or surprise due to a distressing or terrifying situation.
2. 'My heart bleeds' / 'inna qalbī yanzufu daman' – emotional concern.
3. Tongue-tied/maṣqūdu l-lisān – not being able to speak due to emotional disturbance such as embarrassment or shyness.
4. To give full rein to one's tongue / ʿaṭlaqa l-ṣināna li-lisānih – to allow an emotion or feeling to be expressed fully.
5. Right arm/ad-dirāʾu l-ʿaiman- a valued assistant, one the value of whose aid is comparable to one's own right arm.
6. Foothold/mauṭiʿu qadam- a position from which you can start to make progress.
7. To stick/poke one's nose into.../yadussu ʿanfahu fī...- to meddle, interfere, or show too much interest in private matters that do not concern one.

However, there are cases where the two languages vary in the figurative meanings they associate with a particular BPW. A whole set of examples

can be given, which illustrate the aforementioned fact that every language reflects reality in its own way. In English, but not in Arabic, walls and mountains have feet; clocks and watches have hands; wheat and corn have ears; storms and cyclones have eyes; planes and rockets have noses; bags and rivers have mouths; journeys, races and allegations have legs; coins have heads (and tails); shoes have tongues, etc. Arabic too has its own constructions that reflect its own way of viewing reality. Consider, for example, the use of the terms raʿs (head), lisān (tongue), and wajh (face) in the following constructions:

- raʿsu s-sana (lit. year-head) New Year
- raʿsu l-māl (lit. money-head) capital
- raʿsu l-ʿāfāt (lit. head of all evils) primary evil.
- ruʿūsu l-ʿaṣābiṣ (lit. finger-/toe-heads) tiptoes- -
- lisānu l-ḥāl (lit. tongue of the situation/condition/circumstance) the language which things themselves speak, silent language (as distinguished from the spoken word).
- lisānu ṣ-ṣuḥuf (lit tongue of the press), e.g. ‘Ṣalā lisāni ṣ-ṣuḥuf’ - through the organ of the press.
- wajhu l-ḥaqīqa (lit. face of the truth), as in ‘ṣawwaha wajha l-ḥaqīqa’ - to distort (the face) of the truth.
- wajhu š-šibh/š-šabah (lit. face of resemblance) point/aspect of resemblance.
- wajhu d-dahr/n-nahār (lit. face of time/day) beginning of ...

Notice that the two languages may also differ in the type of BPWs they employ in the figurative expression of a certain meaning. The aforementioned meanings of fame, distinction, and prominence associated with English face and Arabic wajh are more or less similarly conveyed in Arabic, but not in English, by three other BPWs, namely ʿayn (eye), ʿanf (nose), and ṣadr (chest). Consider the following examples:

1. ʿaʿyān (pl. of ʿayn) -people of distinction, important personalities, leaders, notables, e.g. ‘min ʿaʿyāni l-mujtamaʿ’ - one of the leading personalities of society.
2. majlisu l-ʿaʿyān -Council of the Notables; senate (Iraq, Jordan).
3. ʿuyūnu š-šiṣr -gems of poetry, the choicest (most important, most interesting) works of poetry.
4. ‘qaumun humu l-ʿanfu wa-l-ʿadnābu dūnahumu...’ - (an Arabic verse: ‘My fellow tribesmen who to other people are as the nose (of a camel) to its tail’, the implication being that the former is more important than the latter).
5. ṣadru d-dār/d-diwān/l-majlis - one who occupies the highest position in the house, assembly, council.

6. ṣadāra - chairmanship, preeminence, precedence

2.2 Body-related notions and concepts

There are cases where the two languages express more or less the same notion or feeling, but by reference to different parts of the body. In English, for example, if something, say a poem, is very much better than a collection of other poems, it is/stands 'head and shoulders above them'; in Arabic, on the other hand, it is 'min Ṣuyūni (eyes) š-šiṢr' (i.e. of the choicest works of poetry). Here are some more examples:

- In English, 'to put your shoulder to the wheel' is to start to work with great effort and determination. This idea is similarly expressed in Arabic but where the body part sāṢid ('forearm') rather than katif ('shoulder') is involved: 'šammara Ṣan sāṢidi l-jidd' (lit. to bare the arm of seriousness and diligence).
- If you are a person who is willing to respect ideas, opinions or behavior that are different from your own, you are a broadminded or open-minded person in English, and one who is rahbu ṣ-ṣadr or wāsiṢu ṣ-ṣadr (lit. having a broad chest) in Arabic.
- A person who is being talked about by everyone, is one whose name is 'on everyone's lips' in English but on everyone's tongue (lisān) in Arabic.
- A pickpocket has to be 'light-fingered in English but light-handed (xaffu l-yad) in Arabic.
- In English, the idea of doing something in open defiance of someone, or in spite of danger from something may find its expression in the phrase 'in the teeth of...' (e.g. to pass a law in the teeth of public protest). In Arabic, on the other hand, if you act in defiance of someone or something (e.g. fate), you do so 'in spite of their nose' (raġma ?anf...), not teeth.
- 'A pain in the neck' is, in English, a continual cause of annoyance, an unbearable individual or situation. Such a person or situation, however, is described in Arabic in terms of being 'a thorn in one's side' (xāšira), not neck (šaukatun fī xāširatih), the latter being also existent in English.
- "A helping hand is at the end of your arm" is an English moral quote involving the names of two parts of the body. The idea expressed by this quote is that one must depend on oneself and not count on others for help or aid, an idea also conveyed by the advisory "Stand on your own two feet". The same idea is expressed in Arabic by a parallel quote, where again the names of two, but this time different body parts are involved: "mā ḥakka jildaka mitlu žifrik" (lit. nothing would scratch your skin better than your own nail).
- In English, if you 'have a finger in something', you are involved and concerned in it; you share guilt, responsibility, or blame with others. In Arabic, on the other hand, what you have in that thing is not a finger (?iṣbaṢ) but a rib (ḍilṢ) ('laka ḍilṢun fih').

2.3. Lexical gaps and mismatches

Lack of one-to-one correspondence between the two languages is also evidenced by the fact that the two languages may vary in the way they divide the human body into its constituent parts. Two words in one language may thus be found to correspond to a single word in the other. For example, English wrist covers both *rusġ* (wrist) and *maṣṣam* (the place on the forearm where a bracelet is worn, cf. English wristwatch). A similar case in point, this time in the reverse direction, is Arabic *ʔiṣbaṣ*, which covers both finger and toe.

There are also cases where certain parts of the body may have special terms to designate them in one language but not in the other. The following words, which refer to certain body parts in Arabic, have no direct equivalents in English, at least ordinary everyday English. Instead of specific proper nouns, English uses common nouns or descriptive nominal constructions to designate those parts:

- *ʔarnaba* -tip of the nose.
- *dalq* -tip of the tongue.
- *jīd* - front part of the neck.
- *naḥr* -upper part of the chest.
- *maʔq* (pl. *maʔāqin*)-inner corner of the eye.
- *šidq* -corner of the mouth (e.g. *ḍaḥika bi-milʔi šidqaih* – ‘to grin from ear to ear’)
- *ʔaxmaṣ* - hollow part of the sole/ foot. (Compare English ‘from head to foot/toe’ with Arabic ‘*min qimmatih r-raʔsi ʔilā ʔaxmaṣih l-qadam*’ -from the top of the head to the hollow of the foot).
- *hiḍn* -breast, bosom between the outstretched arms (e.g. ‘*qabilahu bi-l-ʔaḥḍān*’ he received him with open arms). (Al-Yaziji, 1984; Al-Mungid fī l-Luġati wal-ʔaṣṣalāh, 1987)

2.3.1 Collocational mismatches

Further evidence of the lack of one-to-one correspondence between Arabic BPWs and their English “equivalents” is furnished by differences in the collocability of these words with other words, and the collocational meanings they express. Consider the following three sets of examples, where BPWs collocate with three categories of terms, namely color, temperature, and measurement:

(a) Collocations involving color terms:

The following are some representative examples:

1. A person's face that is pale because of illness, fear, or anger, is a 'white face' in English (e.g. Her face was white with fury), but a 'yellow' one (wajhun ?aşfar) in Arabic, and so is a smile (dihkatun şafra?). A 'white face' in Arabic, on the other hand, is not necessarily white in color, but one whose owner is made happy, e.g. 'bayyada l-lāhu wajhah' (lit. 'May God whiten his face')- 'May God make him happy'. Similarly, a 'black face' is not necessarily one whose color is black, but one whose owner is brought into disgrace.
2. In Arabic, but not in English, if you have a 'white hand' (yadun baidā?), you are a kind, generous person, or one who is versed, skilled, or experienced in something.
3. In English lily-, yellow-, and white-livered are references to a cowardly and timid person. In Arabic, however, the organ in question, i.e. 'kabid', collocates with the color word 'black' (e.g. ?swadu l-kabid) to mean 'enemy'.

(b) Collocations involving temperature terms

- In English, a 'heartwarming' sight is one that gives you a feeling of happiness and pleasure, whereas in Arabic such a sight would be described in terms of being 'heart/chest-cooling' ('yutliju l-qalb/ş-şadr'). - In Arabic too the same meaning is expressed by other collocations involving the name of a third part of the body, namely 'ʿain' (eye) with another word expressing the idea of coolness: '?aqarra l-lāhu ʿainah' (lit. 'May God cool his eye') – May God make him happy; 'qarīru l-ʿain' (lit. 'cool-eyed') – happy, gratified, delighted; 'qurratu l-ʿain' (lit. 'coolness of the eye') – delight of the eye; joy, pleasure; darling.

(c) Collocations involving measurement terms

In both languages words like long/ṭawīl, short/qaṣīr, broad/wasiʿ, narrow/dayyiq, light/xafīf, heavy/taqīl, and their derivatives are used in collocational expressions involving body part words. This, however, does not necessarily mean that there is always one-to-one correspondence between the two languages in their choice of what measurement word to collocate with what BPW, or the kind of meaning a particular collocation has. Consider the following examples from Arabic and English, respectively:

(i) Arabic:

- *ṭawīlu/ qaṣīru l-bāṣ* (lit. having a long/short span of the outspread arms) i.e. mighty, powerful; capable, able; knowledgeable; generous./ powerless, helpless, impotent, incapable; stingy.
- *ṭawīlu l-lisān* (lit. long-tongued) insolent, impertinent, disrespectful.
- *ḍayyiqu ṣ-ṣadr* (lit. having a narrow chest) – vexed, annoyed, angry; upset, depressed; downcast.
- *ḍīqu l-yad / ḍīqu ḍāti l-yad* (lit. narrowness of the hand)- poverty, destitution.
- *wasiṣu ṣ-ṣadr* (lit. having a broad-chest) – patient, generous, magnanimous (cf. English ‘broad-minded’).
- *xaffu/taqīlu d-dam/r-rūḥ* (lit. having light/heavy blood/soul) – amiable, likeable, charming; cheerful, in high spirits/ insufferable, unpleasant, dull (person).

(ii) English:

- Long tongue – a slang name for one who gossips and tattles on others.
- Long face – an unhappy or complaining expression on the face
- Long-headed – a term denoting shrewdness, far-seeing, and discerning.
- Shorthanded – not having enough staff, workers, or helpers.
- Broad/narrow-minded – willing/unwilling to accept or understand new or different ideas, customs, etc.
- Light-hearted – not serious; amusing or entertaining.
- Light-headed – feeling slightly faint or dizzy.

2.4 Language-specific expressions

We have seen cases where the two languages use the names of the same or different body parts to express more or less the same figurative meaning (2.1 & 2.2) It is also often the case, however, that a body-related (mostly idiomatic) expression in one language has no equivalent in the other. In other words what is expressed figuratively or idiomatically in one language is either borrowed (through loan translation) or expressed non-figuratively in the other. (This is one of the problematic situations in translation where the use of an ordinary non-figurative expression in the target language fails to reproduce the forceful and extraordinarily powerful meaning of the source language figurative expression.) In English, For example, when you show undue discernment in making very minute distinctions, or when you pay too much attention to small differences, especially in an argument, you may be told that you are

splitting hairs. Such an expression is non-existent in Arabic, nor would it be understood by its native speakers through literal translation. The idiomatic expression split hairs, therefore, is rendered in Al-Mawrid, the most widely used English-Arabic dictionary, into ‘yujādilu fī ʔumūrin ṣaġīra’ (lit. to argue about trivial matters), which is a descriptive translation of the English idiom.

It is also sometimes the case that a certain body part may be used to represent reality far more frequently in one language than in the other. The name of the body part referred to in the previous paragraph, i.e. hair, occurs in a number of other expressions that are peculiar to English (see Bizub 1999: 1ff):

- Changing the way one parts one’s hair – indicating one’s deviation from usual behavior, action, or philosophy.
- “Get out of my hair!” – stop being bothersome.
- “Keep your hair on.” – do not be angry; remain calm.
- “Let your hair down.” – relax; be less reserved; behave freely.
- Neither hide nor hair of somebody/something – no trace of somebody/something.
- A hair of the dog (that bit you) – another alcoholic drink to cure the effects of the alcohol drunk previously.

Here are some more examples of language-specific expressions from both languages:

(i) English

- To lay/put heads together- to think out a plan with other people.
- “Go soak your head!” – a brash retort expressing disagreement.
- “Go stand on your head!” – you’re disgusting!
- “Don’t bite my head off!” – don’t shout at me!
- Eye-opener – a drink or liquor early in the day, to help in getting started.
- A kick in the teeth – a very disappointing, unpleasant, or damaging action, event, etc.
- Breathing down one’s neck – closely scrutinizing or watching what someone is doing, in a way that makes them nervous or annoyed.
- Arm-twisting – a forceful persuasion. This expression has been rendered into Arabic ‘layyu ḍ-ḍirāṣ’, through loan translation.
- A slap on the wrist – a meager reprimand instead of a just punishment for a misdemeanor.
- To pull someone’s leg – to make playful fun of someone.
- A kick in the shins – a blow to one’s pride for an undeserved rebuke.

- “Your eyes are bigger than your stomach.” – you have served yourself more food than what is capable of being eaten.
- “Keep a stiff upper lip.” – remain calm in the face of a difficult situation.
- “Don’t cut off your nose to spite your face.” – don’t do something drastic that could harm you; don’t harm yourself while taking revenge on someone else.
- “Lend me your ears.” – listen to me.

(ii) Arabic

- mā hākadā tu?kalu l-katif – (lit. this is not the way the shoulder is eaten) that is certainly not the way to do it! That is no way to handle it (cf. English: ‘to know which side one’s bread is buttered’)
- Ṣalā r-ra?si wa-l-Ṣain – (lit. on the head and eye) with pleasure, gladly; at your service.
- Ṣalā ru?ūsi l-?ašhād – (lit. upon the heads of witnesses, viewers) in public, openly , for all the world to see.
- Ṣalā qadamin wa-sāq – (lit. on foot and leg) to be underway, in full swing, in full progress.
- banātu š-šadr – (lit. daughters of the chest) worries, fears, anxieties.
- bintu š-šafa (lit. daughter of the lip) word.
- baina žuhrānīhim/?žhurihim (lit amongst their backs) in their midst, among them.
- xalā lahu wajhu ṭ-ṭarīq (lit. to have the face of the road open for one)- his way was unobstructed, he had clear sailing.
- ?axada wajha l-Ṣarūsa (lit. to take the bride’s face)- to consummate marriage.
- ?axada bi-Ṣaini l-?iṢtibār – to take into consideration, take into account, allow for, keep in mind.

2.5 BPWs as a source of derivation

Both languages tend to use their respective BPWs in nominal as well as verbal constructions. However, verbal derivatives of BPWs are far more numerous, and, hence, more varied in meaning in Arabic than in English. This is largely due to the nature of the Arabic morphological system. Arabic roots can assume a wide variety of morphological patterns each with a certain type of function. In other words a root may have derived from it a set of other forms that are semantically related but functionally varied (Ali, 1987:8ff). Consider, for example, the following two BPWs and the derivatives they yield. (In English, this variation in meaning and function is often rendered, among other things, by phrasal verbs and compound constructions):

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(I) Wajh

- wajuha to be a man of distinction, belong to the notables
- wajjaha to raise to eminence, to honor; to turn one's face/turn/go to; to send, dispatch; to aim, direct, steer, guide
- wājaha to be opposite something, to face; to meet face to face, encounter someone; to see someone personally, speak personally to someone; to face (e.g. a problem); to withstand, defy (a danger); to stand up (to someone); to envisage, have in mind, consider (something), etc.
- awjaha to distinguish, honor
- tawajjaha to betake (oneself to), head (for), bend one's steps (toward); turn, apply (e.g. to someone for help)
- tawājaha (of two or more people) to face each other, meet face to face
- ?ittajaha to tend, be directed, be oriented (to, toward), be aimed , aim (at); to head, make (for); to turn, be turned (to someone/something), etc.

Other derivatives include:

- wajhī facial, of the face
- wijha direction, trend, drift; course (of a ship); intention, design, objective; respect, regard
- wajāha distinction, esteem, credit, repute, prestige, standing; acceptability; soundness, well-foundedness, validity
- wijāhī contradictory (jurisprudence)
- wajīh (pl. wujahā?) notable, noted, eminent, distinguished; eminent man; leader; excellent, acceptable, sound
- wajīha (pl. wajīhāt) lady of high social standing
- tujāha (prep.) in front of, facing, opposite
- taujīh aiming, levelling, directing; controlling, leading, guiding; (methodical) instruction; (pl. taujīhāt) directive; allocation; transfer, assignment
- muwājaha opposition; meeting; facing, anticipation; encounter; confrontation; personal talk; audience; interview
- tawajjuh attention; trend; orientation; attitude; favoritism
- ?ittijāh (pl. ?ittijāhāt) direction; inclination, bent, drift; tendency; orientation; course (e.g. of a ship)
- wājīha (pl. wājīhāt) face, front; outside; show window
- muwajjih guide; pilot; instructor; controller
- muwajjah remote-controlled
- muttajih directed, tending, aiming at, bound for
- muttajah direction

(ii) 'ain

- Ṣayyana to individualize, particularize, specify, etc.; to fix, determine, appoint, etc.; to nominate, assign, designate, etc. ; to allot, allocate, appropriate (e.g. funds to somebody); to fix one's eyes on (something)
- Ṣāyana to view, see with one's own eyes, examine, inspect, survey
- taṢayyana to be destined, set aside, earmarked; to be appointed, assigned, nominated; to be specifically imposed (on someone), be incumbent (upon someone), be obligatory (for someone)

Other derivatives include:

- Ṣainī ocular, eye- (in compounds); real; corporeal, material (jurisprudence)
- Ṣainīya identity
- Ṣayyin easily crying, tearful
- Ṣayyina sample, specimen
- Ṣayyinī serving as a sample
- muṢāyana viewing, examination; inspection; surveillance, control; observation
- Ṣiyān (eye)witnessing; clear, evident, plain ('badā li-l-Ṣiyān' to come to sight, come in sight)
- muṢayyan (pl. mu'ayyanaat) fixed sum or amount of money
- muṢāyin spectator, onlooker, viewer
- maṢīn spring, fountain, source of water
- Ṣuwaina (pl. Ṣuwaināt) eyeglass
- Ṣaiyūn envious (having an evil eye)
- al-muṢayyan ox (named so because it has large eyes).

2.6 Specific verbs for specific parts of the body

Both Arabic and English prefer to use specific verbs for specific parts of the body to denote such actions as blowing, hitting, or touching. The following are examples from the two languages; English verbs are given in brackets.

- laṭama – to strike the face with the palm of the hand (to slap)
- lakama/ wakaza – to strike with the fist (to box, punch)
- lakaza – to push or touch somebody with one's elbow to draw their attention to something (to nudge).
- rafasa – to strike the chest with the foot.
- rakala – to strike with one foot (e.g. a horse to make it go faster) (to kick).
- rabata – to tap somebody gently with the open hand (to pat).
- ṭaṢana – to strike any part of the body with a pointed or sharp weapon, e.g. a spear, sword, knife, etc. (to stab).

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- nahaša – (of an animal) to make a sudden bite (to snap at somebody or something).
- Ṣaḍḍa – to grab or cut into something with the teeth (to bite).
- qabbala – to touch someone with your lips (to kiss).
- naṭaḥa – to push, thrust, or hit somebody or something deliberately with the head (to butt).

3. Conclusion

In addition to their basic meanings, BPWs play an important role in language; they constitute a source of enrichment by functioning as gap fillers when used figuratively to denote a multiplicity of objects, concepts, and phenomena. They are also tools of forceful expression, particularly when used in set phrases (collocational and idiomatic constructions). Equally importantly, these words shed light on the way a particular language views reality. Consequently any two languages may prove to have different representations of the world around them; the present study has furnished ample evidence of the fact that more often than not Arabic and English represent reality differently. What applies to one language, it has been shown, may not necessarily be applicable to another (you could ‘split hairs’ in English but not in Arabic); languages may differ even in the way they divide the human body into its constituent parts. A certain body part may be assigned a special name to designate it in one language, whereas it may be referred to indirectly (by using a descriptive nominal construction) in another. The same concept or notion may be expressed by being associated with a certain body part in one language, and another one in another language. Things may also go in the reverse direction: the same body part may stand for different concepts in different languages. Furthermore, BPWs provide ample evidence of the capriciousness of lexical cooccurrence. A BPW may co-occur with one word in one language, and with its opposite in another, while the meaning still remains the same (a happy piece of news is ‘heartwarming’ in English but ‘heart cooling’ in Arabic). The same collocation may constitute an idiomatic expression in one language, but not in the other: a ‘white face’ is necessarily white in color in English (because of illness, fear, surprise, etc.), whereas it is a sign of God-given happiness in Arabic.

Notes

* Notational Hints : In this article, the way a word is transcribed depends on whether it is used (a) in conjunction with other words or in context, or (b) as a citation form. In the former case, words are represented with their case endings, except those that occur finally, i.e. in pre-pausal form.

When used in isolation, on the other hand, words are deprived of their inflections. For example:

- in isolation: raʔs (head)

- in context: raʔsu l-māl (capital)

When attached to a word used in isolation, the initial glotal stop of the definite article 'ʔal-' will be dropped, and the remaining 'al-' will be separated from the word it defines by a dash, e.g. 'al-wajh' ('the face'). When prefixed to a word beginning with one of the so-called 'sun sounds' (t, t, d, d, r, z, s, ʔ, š, ʃ, ɗ, ʒ, l, n) the 'l' of the definite article is assimilated to the sound it is annexed to, e.g. 'al-ṣadr' (the chest) becomes 'aṣ-ṣadr'.

In junctural position the definite article may be represented by the letter 'l' or the letter it assimilates to only, as in 'xafifu l-yad' (light-fingered) and 'wāsiṣu ṣ-sadr' (broad-minded) respectively.

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Appendix: Transliteration System

The Arabic phonological system is represented in this article by the following list of symbols. (Adapted from Ali, 1987:xv-xvii)

Consonants

| Arabic letter | Symbol | Description |
|---------------|--------|-----------------------------------|
| ب | b | Voiced bilabial plosive |
| م | m | Voiced bilabial nasal |
| و | w | Voiced labio-velar semi-vowel |
| ف | f | Voiceless labio-dental fricative |
| ث | t | Voiceless interdental fricative |
| ذ | d | Voiced interdental fricative |
| ز | z | Voiced alveolar fricative |
| س | s | Voiceless alveolar fricative |
| ت | t | Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive |
| د | d | Voiced denti-alveolar plosive |
| ن | n | Voiced alveolar nasal |
| ر | r | Voiced apical trill |
| ل | l | Voiced apical lateral |
| ي | y | Voiced palatal semi-vowel |
| ج | j | Voiced alveo-palatal affricate |
| ش | š | Voiceless alveo-palatal fricative |
| ك | k | Voiceless velar plosive |
| ق | q | Voiceless uvular plosive |
| خ | x | Voiceless uvular fricative |

| | | |
|----|----|--|
| غ | g̤ | Voiced uvular fricative |
| ح | ħ | Voiceless pharyngeal fricative |
| ع | ʕ | Voiced pharyngeal fricative |
| ء | ʔ | Glotal stop |
| هـ | h | Voiceless glotal fricative |
| ط | t̤ | Voiceless velarized denti-alveolar plosive |
| ص | ʃ | Voiceless velarized alveolar fricative |
| ض | ɗ | Voiced velarized denti-alveolar plosive |
| ظ | ʒ | Voiced velarized interdental fricative |

Vowels

| | |
|---|--|
| i | Short, front unrounded vowel between close and half open |
| ī | Long, front, unrounded, close vowel |
| a | Short, open, front vowel |
| ā | Long, open, front vowel |
| u | Short, back, rounded vowel between close and half-open |
| ū | Long, close, rounded, back vowel |