

Transliteration, Transcription and Sound Equivalents

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Trans.lit.er.ation is a mechanism to represent letters or words of one alphabet into the corresponding characters of another alphabet. However, no transliteration can exactly express the vocal difference between two languages. Besides, the inability of the characters of one language representing the exact pronunciations and sounds of another, there are specific difficulties in romanizing Arabic words. Compared to English, Arabic speech requires that the muscles of the vocal organs be kept taut which results in clearer speech, lips are much more mobile, stress is placed on producing the full sound of every word, transition from one sound to another is very rapid and vowels do not glide off into diphthong and voiced consonants.

There are ten characters in Arabic alphabet which do not have equivalents in English. These comprise: ث, ح, خ, ذ, ص, ض, ط, ظ, ع, غ. In English the same sounds are some times spelt in more than one way, and the same letter may be used to represent more than one sound, e.g. 'C' represent 'S' in 'face' but 'K' in 'cloth'. Arabic spellings are much more regular and one letter or symbol represents just one sound.

Over the years several attempts have been made to bridge the gap for transliterating the Arabic sound correctly into the English language. Currently, a combination of three different techniques are employed for transliteration of certain Arabic alphabets, which do not have an equivalent in the English language.

1. Placing a macron (-) over the English alphabets to indicate long vowels of the Arabic language; for example:

Im̄n ایمان Ras رسول Injīl انجيل

2. Placements of dots under certain English alphabets; for example:

Hajj حج Muḥammad مُحَمَّد Ṭawf طواف Ṣalāt صلاة

3. Underlining certain alphabet or combination of alphabets; for example:

Uthman عُثْمَان Ḥadīth حَدِيث

Notwithstanding the foregoing, there remains a considerable confusion in the systems in practice. A normally authoritative and careful encyclopedia employs, within the space of a dozen pages, three different versions of a

common name like ‘Quraish’. At least three more spellings of the word are commonly used, and another twelve spellings are theoretically justifiable according to the various principles of transliteration of Arabic.

A comparative matrix of eight systems of transliteration currently in vogue is presented in Table 1. While there is no apparent ambiguity in signifying certain letters with special signs, it is the sound equivalents and hence the pronunciation that presents the challenge. Thus, in practice building a usable romanization involves tradeoffs between Arabic and English characters. Pure transcriptions are generally not possible as Arabic contains sounds and distinctions alien to English.

Table 2 endeavors to specify the sound equivalent and the pronunciation of each letter. The choice of transliteration for this Study has been made for the one stated in Column 7 of Table 1 which is a mini variant of the Western Orientalist’s template. Table ‘A’ below presents a summary of the exercise.

Table A

Arabic Alphabet	Symbol	Representation	Transcription
ث	<u>th</u>	<u>Tha</u>	Sound between /s/ and /th/ as in thing, maths and teeth.
ح	<u>h</u>	<u>Ha</u>	a ‘harsher’ sound than the English initial /h/, and may occur medially and in word-final position as well. Sound is produced by expelling the air through a narrowed throat in much the same way as one tries to clear one’s throat
خ	<u>kh</u>	<u>Kha</u>	as /ch/ in Bach in German, and in Loch in Scottish, but rougher
ذ	<u>dh</u>	<u>Dh</u> l	Sound between /z/ and /th/ as in this, father, worthy and with.
ص	<u>s</u>	<u>S</u> d	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /sw/ or /s/ farther back in the mouth, with a hissing sound as in ‘bus’.
ض	<u>dz</u>	<u>Dz</u> d	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /d/ and /z/ farther back in the mouth.
ط	<u>t</u>	<u>Ta</u>	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /t/ farther back in the mouth, a little thicker pronunciation as for ‘tumble’
ظ	<u>z</u>	<u>Za</u>	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing ‘the’ farther back in the mouth; strongly articulated palatal /z/.
ع	‘a	‘Ayn	no close equivalent in English, a guttural sound in the back of the throat. [‘a] say a-a-a-ah and try to raise the lower part of throat in order to narrow the passage through which air is expelled
غ	<u>gh</u>	<u>Ghyn</u>	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it like the French /r/ in ‘rouge’, and /r/ of Paris. Guttural /g/ but soft; requires that the throat muscles be in gargling position.

Source: Table 1 and Table 2

Table 1
Current Systems of Transliteration

Arabic Alphabet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
ا	a	a	a		a	a	a	a
ب	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	
ت	t	t	t	t	t	t	t	
ث	th	th	th	th	th	<u>th</u>		<u>th</u>
ج	j	j	j	j	j	j	j	
ح	h	h	h	h	h	<u>h</u>	<u>h</u>	<u>h</u> <u>h</u>
خ	kh	kh	kh	kh	kh	<u>kh</u>		<u>kh</u>
د	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	
ذ	dh	dh	dh	dh	dh	<u>dh</u>		<u>dh</u>
ر	r	r	r	r	r	r	r	
ز	z	z	z	z	z	z	z	
س	s	s	s	s	s	s	s	
ش	sh	sh	sh	sh	sh	sh	sh	
ص	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	<u>ṣ</u>		ṣ ,
ض	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	ḍ	<u>ḍz</u>		Ḍ, d
ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	<u>ṭ</u>		ṭ
ظ	ẓ	<u>dh</u>	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	<u>ẓ</u>		<u>ẓ</u>
ع	'a	'a	'a	'a	'a	'a		'a
غ	gh	gh	gh	gh	gh	<u>gh</u>		<u>gh</u>
ف	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	
ق	q	q	q	q	q	q	q	q
ك	k	k	k	k	k	k	k	
ل	l	l	l	l	l	l	l	
م	m	m	m	m	m	m	m	
ن	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	
ه	h	h	h	h	h	h	h	
و	w	w	w	w	w	w	w	
ي	y	y	y	y	y	i	y	
ء	,	,	,	,	,	“	,	
آ	a	a	a		a	<u>a</u>		
إ	ī					<u>i</u>		
ؤ	ū					<u>u</u>		

Sources:

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Col. 5- 'Islamic Studies', Volume 51, No. 1, Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad, 2012

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Col. 7- Abdul Mannan Omar, 'Dictionary of the Holy Qur'an', DE. USA. 2010

Col. 8- webmaster@transliteration.org

Table 2

Arabic Alphabet	Representation	Transcription and Sound Equivalent
ا	Alif	Same as /A/ in English, short 'a' as in cat
ب	B	/b/ as in bell, but, rubber and tab
ت	T	Softer than /t/ as dental in Italian.
ث	<u>Tha</u>	Sound between /s/ and /th/ as in thing, maths and teeth.
ج	Jim	/j/ as in jam, jack and age
ح	<u>Ha</u>	a 'harsher' sound than the English initial /h/, and may occur medially and in word-final position as well. Sound is produced by expelling the air through a narrowed throat in much the same way as one tries to clear one's throat
خ	<u>Kha</u>	as /ch/ in Bach in German, and in Loch in Scottish, but rougher; sound is produced by bringing the tongue in to the position of /k/ as in 'key' while pronouncing a strong rasping /h/.
د	D l	Softer than /d/, the Italian 'dental'.
ذ	<u>Dh</u> l	Sound between /z/ and /th/ as in this, father, worthy and with.
ر	R	/r/ as in raw, art and rain, may also be a rolled r, as with Spanish words.
ز	Z y	/z/ as in zoo, easy, zip and zeal.
س	Sin	/s/ as in sound, service, messy and grass.
ش	Shin	as in ship, ashes, shape and rush
ص	<u>S</u> d	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it as /sw/ or /s/ farther back in the mouth, with a hissing sound as in 'bus'.
ض	<u>Dz</u> d	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /d/ and /z/ farther back in the mouth.
ط	<u>Ta</u>	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /t/ farther back in the mouth, a little thicker pronunciation as for 'tumble'
ظ	<u>Za</u>	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing 'the' farther back in the mouth; strongly articulated palatal /z/.
ع	'Ayn	no close equivalent in English, a guttural sound in the back of the throat. ['a] say a-a-a-ah and try to raise the lower part of throat in order to narrow the passage through which air is expelled
غ	<u>Ghyn</u>	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing it like the French /r/ in 'rouge', and /r/ of Paris. Guttural /g/ but soft; requires that the throat muscles be in gargling position.
ف	F	/f/ as in father, effort, first and muff
ق	Q f	no close equivalent in English, but may be approximated by pronouncing /k/ farther back in the mouth; strongly articulated guttural /k/ as in 'quail'.
ك	k f	/k/ as in king, buckle and kinetic
ل	L m	/l/ as in lap, hilly; in the word Allah, it becomes velarized as in ball
م	Mim	/m/ as in man, simple and memory
ن	Nun	/n/ as in net, nose and nickname.
ه	H	/h/ as in hat and hero, unlike /h/ in English, in Arabic/h/ is pronounced in medial and word-final positions as well.
و	W w	as in wet, wait and wheel.
ي	Y	as in yet, year and yacht.
ء	H mz h	glottal stop: may be closely approximated by pronouncing it like 't' in the Cockney English pronunciation of butter. bu'er, or the stop sound in uh-oh!
آ	<u>Ā</u>	longer 'a' as in cab (not as in cake)
إ	<u>Ī</u>	long e, as in eat, beef, seen and see
ؤ	<u>Ū</u>	long u, as in boot, food and too