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Reginald Engelbach

Some Suggestions on the Transcription of European Words into the Arabic Alphabet.

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SOME SUGGESTIONS

ON THE

TRANSCRIPTION OF EUROPEAN WORDS

INTO THE ARABIC ALPHABET

BY

R. ENGELBACH.

European and other foreign words are now daily playing a greater part in the literature of Egypt. Geography, Medicine, Natural Science, History and many other subjects, previously taught in English or French, are now, rightly, taught in the native tongue; yet the Arabic alphabet, though thoroughly suitable for writing that language, is hopelessly inadequate to transcribe any but purely Arabic words. Capital letters have been invented, for which I must say that I do not see the necessity, yet no system has been approved, or—so my Egyptian colleagues inform me—even devised, to enrich the Arabic alphabet sufficiently to enable it to express, more or less accurately, the host of foreign words in general use which, when transcribed into Arabic, are often unrecognisable when read, unless the reader knows the correct pronunciation. This defect is felt most of all in the school atlases, where accuracy of transcription is obviously of first importance, and almost equally so in scientific works containing Latin and Greek technical terms. Makeshifts for some of the foreign consonants are in use, but, whereas the European

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languages—among which English, French and German are by far the most important from a scientific point of view—use at least eight long and eight short vowels, the Arabic alphabet, when fully 'pointed', can express definitely but three long and three short.

In modern Egyptian maps of Europe a hybrid system of transcription is in use. In some cases the vowels, at least the principal ones, are represented by ا, doing duty for *a*, و for *o* and *u* and ى for *i* and *e*, whether these vowels, are long or short. In other cases, which to my mind are more satisfactory, the short vowels are represented by the points and only the long vowels by ا, و and ى. An example of the first system is تشكوسلوفا كيا 'Tchekoslovakia' and of the second is سَرِدِنيه 'Sardinia', both transcriptions being from the same map.

For Arabic, or, for that matter, any other language, to expect to be able to transcribe every nuance of vowel-sound in English, French and German is, of course, out of the question; but if it could be brought to express eight long and eight short vowel sounds, instead of three, that would be amply sufficient for all practical purposes.

It is, of course, easy to invent diacritical marks to increase the number of vowel-sounds, but certain considerations must, in my opinion, be borne in mind if the system proposed is to have any likelihood of success. First, the existing diacritical signs—the *fatḥa, kasra* and *ḍamma*—must not be changed; secondly, the new signs should bear some resemblance to the old ones to which they are most nearly akin, and thirdly, the new short vowels must increase their length and function as initials by exactly the same process as those at present in use.

The smallest change which can be made in the existing vowel-signs is to turn them the reverse way round—*i. e.* back to front—or to write them below instead of above the consonant. These two processes, the second of which can only be applied to the *ḍamma,* provide five extra vowel-sounds, making eight in all.

Following is a list of English, French and German place-names with the Arabic transcriptions I propose. I have inserted the *sukun* when necessary, but have only expressed in the transcriptions the vowels given in italics in the European originals.

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SOUND.	ENGLISH.		FRENCH.		GERMAN.	
Short a..	Ramsgate	رَمْزْجت	Calais	كَلى	Hamburg	هَمْبرج
Long a..	Dunbar	دنْبَار	Bâle	بَال	Baden	بَادن
Short e..	Denbigh	دِنْبى	Brest	بْرِسْت	Berlin	بِرْلين
Long e..	Paisley	پيزْلى	Seine	سين	Bremen	بْرِيمن
Short i..	Tilbury	تِلْبرى	Limoges	لِموژ	Minden	مِنْدن
Long i..	Deal	دِيل	Nîmes	نِيم	Kiel	كِيل
Short o..	Bolton [1]	بْلْتن	Moselle	مْزل	Bonn	بْن
Long o..	Dover	دْوڤر	Rhône	رْون	Posen	پْوزن
Short u..	Fulham	فُلْهم	Bourges	بُرْژ	Kulm	كُلْم
Long u..	Poole	پُول	Nemours	نمُور	Ruhr	رُور
Short ö..	Munster [2]	مِنْستر	Meurthe	مِرْت	Köln	كِلْن
Long ö..	— [3]	—	Meuse	مِوز	Königsberg	كِونجْزبرج
Short ü..	—	—	Bruxelles	بْرِسل	München	مِنْخن
Long ü..	—	—	Bruges	بْرِوژ	Düren	دِورن

[1] The English equivalent to the French and German short *o* is rare, but has to be distinguished from the common short *o* (*not*). See p. 4.

[2] The usual sound of the *fatḥa* appears to be midway between this value of the English *u* (*but*) and that of short a (*bat*). To my ear the *u* in question is close to, though not identical with the French short *eu* and the German short *ö*.

[3] The English sound corresponding to the long *eu* and *ö* is only heard in the 'accepted' pronunciation of English in such combinations as *ur*, *ir*, *ear*, etc. (burr, bird, heard). Practically, all dialects of English, notably the Scotch, pronounce the *r*, though in many different ways. I am strongly of opinion that words such as these should be transcribed into Arabic with the short *ö* followed by *r*.

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It will be seen from the foregoing words that the *fatḥa* is, as before, lengthened by the *alif*, both the *kasra* and the reversed *kasra* by the *ye* and all the *ḍamma*-forms by the *waw*. The new forms can also be used as initials on the existing system in conjunction with *alif*, thus : أوبن ، ايـن ، إكسـتر ; *O*ban, *A*isne, *E*xeter, etc.

One possible 'point' has not been used, namely the reversed *fatḥa*, and two sounds—very important in English—are still without means of being transcribed. These are the short *o* in 'not' and the long *a* in 'ball'. To Egyptians, the latter sound is almost indistinguishable from the long *o* in 'bowl', but, if pronouncing dictionaries are, in the future, to be brought out in Arabic, a distinction is essential. I therefore suggest that the reversed *fatḥa* be used for the short *o* in question, which is lengthened by the *alif* to give the long *au*- or *a*-sound. To represent the long sound as an initial a reversed *madda* would have to be used. Thus we should have :

Boston.	بَسْـتن
*O*xford.	آكْسْفرد
Waterford.	واترفرد
*A*lbany.	آلبـنى

A difficulty in transcribing English, French and German words into Arabic is to decide whether a vowel is long or short. Unlike Arabic, the languages mentioned have a very high proportion of their vowels of intermediate length, and it is only an Arabic-speaking person who can decide whether, to his ear, an accented vowel of intermediate length should be transcribed by a long or a short vowel.

A vowel-sound which might have to be indicated in addition to those already mentioned is the 'fnrtive' intermediate vowel, more common in English and German than in French, which might roughly be described as the easiest or least conspicuous vowel which can be pronounced between any particular pair of consonants (bak*e*r, cur*a*te arbeit*e*n). Two methods suggest

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themselves for rendering this sound; the first is the omission of any point or the *sukun* on the consonant preceding it; the second is the use of an incompletely closed *sukun*.

If pronouncing distionaries are ever contemplated in the native script, means would be required to indicate where the stress or accent falls and perhaps to indicate where a vowel is of intermediate length. For the first, a vowel-point thicker than the normal might be used and for the latter a point larger then the normal. The need for such refinements, is however, still very far away.

If my system of indicating the additional vowels—or a modification of it —is ever adopted and taught, I am of opinion that, apart from the purely English sounds discussed above, either the French or German values of the vowels should be taken, in the schools, for the standard values of the new vowel-points, since the English vowels differ from the corresponding French and German vowels more than those of the last two differ from each other.

The consonants of the Arabic alphabet are none too suitable for rendering foreign names and words, but the Persian variants of the Arabic letters offer forms, which are generally known to Arabic-speaking peoples, to fill some of the lacunæ in the Arabic consonantal system; for instance, Persian provides چ for '*tch*', ژ for *zh* (azure, pleasure), پ for *p* and گ for *g* (*g*o) and ڤ has already become established as the equivalent of *v*. The ج offers a special difficulty; in Egypt it is pronounced in the official spoken dialect as hard *g*. Its classical form is English *j*, while, when read, it usually is pronounced as *zh*. I doubt whether the adoption of the Persian گ for hard *g* and the Arabic ج for *j* would find favour, though that is the logical solution. An alternative solution would be to reserve ج for hard *g*, and to invent a new variation of the ج for *j*, such as one with two dots below instead of one[1]. Further requirements are methods of expressing the French nasal *n* and perhaps also the sound represented in English and German by *ng* (si*ng*). For the first I suggest the use of medial and final *nun* but without any dot, thus ںـ, ـں. Thus 'matin' would be transcribed as مَتِں and 'printemps' as

[1] In modern Arabic atlases which I have consulted, تش is used instead of چ for *tch*. On this analogy it might be considered that دش or دژ should be used for English *j*. Double forms are, howerer, very clumsy.

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بْرِنْتَن. The *ng*-sound might, as it is now, be rendered by *n*+*g* نج or an unobjectionable form of the ج with an additional dot on the top — thus combining the *nun* and the *jîm* in one letter — could be devised.

In conclusion I wish to say that the system I propose is entirely tentative, and that I am very conscious of its defects. The moment, however, seems propitious for its introduction, since the addition of capital letters to the Arabic script will involve a considerable enlargement of the normal founts of type, the half-dozen new signs which my system requires could be introduced at the same time; further, since the capitals will make it necessary to reprint the school atlases, the occasion can be seized to ameliorate the very defective system of transcription now in use.

I wish to thank Aḥmad Eff. Saad, of my Department, for preparing the originals of the blocks on pages 3 and 4.

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