



## Phonological Changes in Classical Arabic to Modern Arabic: A Historical Review

### التغيرات الفونولوجية من العربية الكلاسيكية إلى العربية الحديثة: مراجعة تاريخية

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#### ABSTRACT

The phonology of the Arabic language, both classical and modern, is recognized for its richness and deep complexity, influenced by religious texts and traditional linguistic schools. However, research on the phonological changes from Classical Arabic to Modern Arabic remains limited and has not been extensively explored. This study aims to examine the main phonological changes that have occurred from Classical Arabic to Modern Arabic, focusing on shifts in the pronunciation of consonants and vowels as well as the social, political, and cultural factors influencing these changes. The research method employed is a literature review with a historical approach, encompassing the analysis of literature from various historical, linguistic, and classical and modern texts. The findings reveal that the major phonological changes include shifts in the pronunciation of several consonants and vowels. Additionally, it was found that social factors such as urbanization and contact with foreign languages, as well as political and cultural factors such as the spread of Islam and administrative changes, have influenced the evolution of Arabic phonology. These results provide a deeper understanding of the evolution of the Arabic language and the factors influencing it.

**Keywords:** Classical Arabic Phonology, Modern Arabic Phonology.

#### مستخلص البحث

يتميز علم الأصوات في اللغة العربية، في مرحلتها الكلاسيكية والحديثة، ببراءٍ وتعقيدٍ ملحوظين، متأثرًا بالنصوص الدينية والتيارات اللغوية التقليدية. ومع ذلك، لا تزال الدراسات المتعلقة بالتغيرات الفونولوجية من العربية الكلاسيكية إلى العربية الحديثة محدودة ولم تُستكشف بعمقٍ كافٍ. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل أبرز التغيرات الفونولوجية التي طرأت في هذا الانتقال، مع التركيز على التحولات في نطق الصوامت والصوائت، فضلاً عن العوامل الاجتماعية والسياسية والثقافية المؤثرة فيها. وتعتمد الدراسة على المنهج المكتبي ذي المقاربة التاريخية، من خلال تحليل الأدبيات المستمدة من مصادر تاريخية ولسانية متنوعة، إضافة إلى نصوص كلاسيكية وحديثة. وتُظهر النتائج أن التغيرات الفونولوجية الرئيسية تتمثل في تحولات في نطق بعض الصوامت والصوائت. كما تبين أن العوامل الاجتماعية، مثل التحضر والاحتكاك باللغات الأجنبية، إلى جانب العوامل السياسية والثقافية، مثل انتشار الإسلام والتغيرات الإدارية، قد أسهمت في تطور فونولوجيا اللغة العربية. وتُسهم هذه النتائج في تعميق الفهم لمسار تطور اللغة العربية والعوامل المؤثرة فيها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفونولوجيا العربية الكلاسيكية، الفونولوجيا العربية الحديثة.

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## INTRODUCTION

Initially, Arabic was a communication tool used by the Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula (Arman et al., 2021). However, today, Arabic has become one of the languages with many speakers and has become an international communication tool, even becoming the official language in 22 countries (Zainuri, 2019). Despite this, historical evidence of the Arabic language only began to be recorded two centuries before Islam, although Arabic itself existed before the advent of Islam. For Muslims, Arabic holds a special status because of its use in the Quran and in religious practices such as prayer, supplication, Quranic recitation, and other religious rituals (Suroiyah & Zakiyah, 2021). Because of this, in Indonesia, a country with a Muslim majority, proficiency in Arabic is considered essential for every Muslim. This has led to the establishment of many educational institutions dedicated to teaching Arabic for religious and other purposes (Sauri, 2020).

Arabic language proficiency is generally assessed based on mastery of four language skills: listening (*maharah al-istima'*), speaking (*maharah al-kalam*), reading (*maharah al-qiraah*), and writing (*maharah al-kitabah*). Among these four skills, speaking is often given more attention as it is commonly used as a measure of a person's Arabic proficiency (Wulandari, 2020). However, each of these skills plays a crucial role in mastering Arabic and cannot be separated as they are interrelated. For non-Arabic learners, acquiring proficiency in Arabic requires habituation in using the language in daily activities. Language ability is, after all, a result of habituation (language is a habit). In Indonesia, Arabic is a compulsory subject that students must take. However, there are still many challenges in its implementation because the Arabic language system as the target language is quite different from Indonesian as the native language (Zainuri, 2019). Common challenges are often found in the phonological aspect. This occurs due to the significant differences in sound correspondence, as many Arabic sounds do not have equivalents in Indonesian, making it difficult for learners to pronounce Arabic sounds fluently and correctly (Rohman, 2022).

As mentioned earlier regarding the four language skills, listening (*maharatul istima'*) and speaking (*maharatul kalam*) skills must be mastered first before the other skills. In this regard, a person's understanding of Arabic phonology significantly impacts their proficiency in these areas. With a good understanding of phonology, the

communication process involving listening and speaking skills will also proceed smoothly (M. S. B. Hidayat, 2019). The purpose of communication is for the listener to understand the message or meaning being conveyed. To achieve this goal, a solid understanding of phonology is essential (Sholihin, 2020).

Phonology is a branch of linguistics that focuses on studying the sounds produced by human speech organs. In Arabic, phonology is known as *al-ashwat*, which is the plural form of the word *shout*, meaning sound or voice (Hidayatulloh et al., 2023). The sounds studied in phonology are only those produced by human speech organs, generated through the movement of the diaphragm and other vocal organs such as the mouth and nose. These sounds are then perceived by the human auditory system through the medium of air (Sholihin, 2020). The primary focus of phonological study is on the pronunciation sounds produced by an individual when articulating the sounds of a language and distinguishing those pronunciation sounds. Therefore, the discussion of phonology will always involve direct interaction between individuals, involving a person's skills in listening and speaking (Hidayatulloh et al., 2023). Phonology addresses the processes involved in sound formation, sound changes, and sound reception (Sholihin, 2020). Phonology emphasizes that a language sound must be pronounced fluently and correctly so that the message being conveyed can be understood by the listener (Hidayat, 2019).

The objects of phonological study are phonetics and phonemics. Sounds studied in phonology, based on their function, are divided into two types: sounds considered for their role as meaning differentiators (phonemics) and sounds not considered for their role as meaning differentiators (phonetics) (Nasikin et al., 2023). Phonetic discussion is classified into three types: articulatory phonetics, acoustic phonetics, and auditory phonetics. Articulatory phonetics studies the speech organs, body parts, and movements that contribute to sound production. Acoustic phonetics studies the physical properties of sounds, including discussions on frequency, amplitude, and resonance. Auditory phonetics examines sounds as they are perceived by the human auditory system (Sholihin, 2020).

In the discussion of sounds viewed from their role as meaning differentiators (phonemics), the scope includes consonant sounds (*shawamit*) and vowel sounds (*shawait*). Consonant sounds are derived from the Arabic alphabet, while vowel

sounds are not derived from vowel letters because Arabic does not have vowel letters. Consonant sounds in Arabic are identified using harakat, which consist of six types: (a) short and long fathah, (i) short and long kasrah, and (u) short and long dhamah (Sholihin, 2020).

Understanding the phonological aspects in learning a foreign language is crucial to avoid pronunciation errors that can alter meaning (Marlina, 2019). Therefore, the author has written this paper with the aim of providing knowledge about Arabic phonology from a historical perspective so that readers can better understand and appreciate the history of Arabic phonology. Accordingly, the research questions this paper seeks to answer are: How have the pronunciation of Arabic consonants and vowels changed from the classical to the modern period? What social, political, and cultural factors have influenced the phonological changes in Arabic from the classical to the modern period?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This historical research is employed to trace and analyze the phonological changes that have occurred in the Arabic language from the classical period to the modern period. This method involves several systematic stages (Hidayat, 2020): First, data is collected from various primary and secondary sources, including classical and modern texts, manuscripts, history books, and relevant scholarly articles. These sources are selected based on their credibility and relevance to the research topic. Second, after the data is collected, source criticism is conducted to assess the authenticity, accuracy, and relevance of the data. Source criticism includes an analysis of the authors, the context of the writing, and the purpose of the texts. Third, data analysis is performed by comparing the phonological changes that have occurred across different periods in the history of the Arabic language. This process includes identifying and classifying the phonetic and phonological changes found in the collected sources. Fourth, the results of the data analysis are interpreted to identify patterns of change and the factors influencing these changes. This interpretation also considers the social, political, and cultural contexts that may have influenced the evolution of Arabic phonology. Fifth, based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, conclusions are drawn regarding the phonological changes that occurred from Classical Arabic to Modern Arabic. These

conclusions are then discussed in a broader context to provide deeper insights into the evolution of the Arabic language. By using the historical method, this research offers a comprehensive overview of the phonological changes in Arabic and the factors contributing to these changes.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Classical Arabic Phonology

Many authors have conducted research on Arabic phonology and documented their findings in scholarly works, resulting in a wealth of literature on the subject. Phonology deals with sounds, which play a crucial role in direct interactions (oral communication). Without sound, there can be no interaction (Marlina, 2019). The role of phonology in language skills is particularly interesting to explore, especially from a historical perspective. The Arabic phonology, or *al-ashwat*, known today has undergone significant changes and continues to adapt to the needs of its speakers. Originally, Arabic was only used by the people of the Arabian Peninsula (Arman et al., 2021), but today, Arabic can be used by non-Arab speakers. This indicates many changes in its development, particularly in the phonological aspect, which has made Arabic accessible for communication by non-Arab speakers.

Classical Arabic phonology is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of sounds in the Arabic language during the classical period, the era when the language was first codified in written form and used in formal contexts such as religion, literature, and science. One of the main characteristics of classical Arabic phonology is the detailed attention given to the sounds of the language, known as *'ilm al-ashwat*. The phonetic aspect of classical Arabic phonology involves the analysis of vowel and consonant sounds, including how these sounds are produced by the human speech organs. Sounds in classical Arabic are categorized based on their place of articulation (*makhraj*) and manner of articulation (*sifat*).

In classical Arabic phonology, each sound plays a significant role in distinguishing word meanings (phonemics). For example, the difference between the sounds /d/ (ض) and /d<sup>h</sup>/ (ظ) can significantly alter the meaning of a word. Additionally, classical Arabic phonology includes the study of phonemes, which are sounds that can differentiate word meanings in the language. In classical Arabic, there

are 28 consonant phonemes and 3 primary vowel phonemes that form the foundation of all words. Careful attention to these sound distinctions is essential for maintaining clarity in communication and precision in conveying meaning, especially in the context of religious texts such as the Qur'an, where proper pronunciation is crucial.

Classical Arabic phonology is not only important in a linguistic context but also in the preservation of culture and religion. As the language of the Qur'an, the correct pronunciation of classical Arabic sounds is considered an act of worship in Islamic tradition. Therefore, the discipline of tajwid has developed as a specialized field that teaches the correct rules of pronunciation. Moreover, classical Arabic phonology has influenced the development of Arabic literature, where rhythm, rhyme, and meter in classical poetry heavily rely on specific sound patterns. Through continued education and practice, classical Arabic phonology is studied and preserved, ensuring that key aspects of this language remain alive in modern usage.

### **Modern Arabic Phonology**

Modern Arabic phonology has undergone various changes compared to classical Arabic phonology, evolving with the times and through interaction with other cultures and languages. This modern phonology reflects adaptations to the need for more dynamic and flexible communication. One of the main changes is in the phonetic aspect, where some classical sounds have been simplified or modified. For instance, in everyday dialects, many modern Arabic speakers do not distinguish between the sounds /d<sup>ɛ</sup>/ (ظ) and /ð<sup>ɛ</sup>/ (ض), which were clearly differentiated in classical Arabic. These changes are often intended to facilitate communication in more diverse and less formal social contexts.

Modern Arabic is characterized by a diversity of dialects that reflect geographical and social variations. These dialects, such as Egyptian, Levantine, Maghrebi, and Gulf, have phonological systems that differ from the standard Arabic (fusha). Each dialect has its own way of pronouncing certain sounds, and some dialects even add or omit phonemes present in classical Arabic. For example, the Levantine dialect tends to replace the classical sound /q/ (ق) with a glottal stop /ʔ/ or /k/, depending on the context. These phonemic variations reflect local adaptations in pronunciation and demonstrate how modern Arabic continues to evolve.

This dialectal variation in modern Arabic parallels diachronic phonological restructuring observed in other languages, such as Nicaraguan Sign Language, which shows that semantic and social factors critically shape classifier systems and phonological distinctions (Davis & Brentari, 2025).

Modern Arabic, often referred to as "amiyyah," was first used by Egyptians for communication. In modern Arabic, there have been many changes that have been adapted to its speakers (Amran et al., 2021). Modern Arabic, also known as "amiyyah," has phonological features that distinguish it from classical Arabic (fusha), including the following: a) Vowel sounds at the end of words are not pronounced (pausal form), for example, كَتَبَ (kataba) becomes كَتَبْ (katab); b) The vowel in the definite article "al" at the beginning of a word is softened, for example, الْوَلَدُ (al-waladu) becomes الْوَلَدُ (/i/el-wálad/); c) There is substitution of letters in pronunciation, such as: the letter (ت) changing to (ت), as in the example (ثلاثة) becoming (تلاثة), and the letter (ض) changing to (ظ), such as in the word (ضبط) becoming (ظبط), and vice versa in the word (ظهر) becoming (ضهر). These letter substitutions occur due to the closeness of their articulation points (*makhrajul huruf*) (Nurcholisho, 2021). Such phoneme substitution exemplifies historical sound shifts also observed in Najdi Arabic, where changes in the articulation of /k/ and /q/ reveal systematic and regional influences (Mahzari, 2023).

Phonological changes in modern Arabic are also influenced by social and cultural factors. Urbanization, education, mass media, and globalization play significant roles in shaping new phonological patterns. The influence of foreign languages, particularly English and French, on vocabulary and pronunciation has also enriched modern Arabic phonology. In this context, many loanwords undergo phonetic adjustments to fit the Arabic sound system. Additionally, the phenomenon of using both amiyyah (everyday dialect) and fusha (standard) Arabic interchangeably, known as diglossia, also affects how Arabic sounds are articulated in different situations. Thus, modern Arabic phonology is a reflection of the ongoing evolution of the language, influenced by complex social and cultural interactions.

## **Changes in Pronunciation of Arabic Consonants and Vowels from the Classical Period to the Modern Period**

The Arabic language, as we know it today, according to linguists, emerged from the unification of the languages of the Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, although the exact period and reasons for its formation are not precisely known (Aziz & Dinata, 2019). In Arabic, there are two commonly used dialects: fusha and amiyah. Fusha Arabic is the standard Arabic language, as found in the Quran and scholarly writings. On the other hand, amiyah Arabic is non-standard or informal Arabic. This dialect is generally used by Arabs in their daily activities and interactions (Amran et al., 2021). Both fusha and amiyah are considered part of contemporary Arabic (Aziz & Dinata, 2019). The amiyah dialect originated from the influence of foreign languages on Arabic in Egypt, which was then adopted by Egyptians for communication. Subsequently, other Arabs imitated it, as it made Arabic conversation easier, gradually altering the rules and structure of fusha Arabic (Baroroh, 2023). According to their classification, Arabic is divided into two types: Classical Arabic and Modern Arabic (Amran et al., 2021).

The diversity of Arabic dialects is due to interactions with many foreign cultures and the increasing number of Arabic speakers. The widespread use of Arabic has led to changes in its rules and structure to meet the needs of its speakers. The general factors underlying the emergence of various dialects include political, social, geographical, and cultural influences (Hamzah et al., 2023).

According to Badawi, as cited in Aziz & Dinata, the fusha dialect is the formal language used in both spoken and written communication, as well as a designation for modern Arabic (Aziz & Dinata, 2019). The Arabic language continues to evolve with the times, and these changes can be observed in its structure and rules (Addaraini et al., 2022). Classical Arabic and Modern Arabic share the same source, which is Arabic itself. The difference between the two lies in the basis used for vocabulary development (Aziz & Dinata, 2019). Classical Arabic emerged during the pre-Islamic period, before the sixth century or the era before Islam. Modern Arabic is not significantly different from Classical Arabic, with the distinction being that the vocabulary of Modern Arabic is more aligned with contemporary developments, whereas the vocabulary of Classical Arabic was based on the customs of its society. This is because language can continuously adapt to the needs of its speakers (Aziz & Dinata, 2019). Modern Arabic is widely used in both digital and non-digital media, while Classical Arabic, which still

exists today, can be seen in the Quran, Hadith, and classical Arabic texts (Aziz & Dinata, 2019).

The Ottoman Dynasty is considered the most successful period of Islamic leadership until the reign of Suleiman, after which it gradually declined (Hasnahwati, 2020). The modernization of the Arab world began with the decline of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, which directly affected its territories, including Egypt. The Ottomans paid little attention to Egypt, leading to various adverse conditions and a state of decline in Egypt. This situation made Egypt a target for other nations to expand, such as the Europeans led by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798 AD, who invaded with 40,000 troops. The French invasion also brought prominent scholars and printing presses with the aim of gathering information about Egypt (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022). The arrival of Europeans in the Middle East was motivated by the desire to spread knowledge and engage in trade (Aziz & Dinata, 2019).

After the French left Egypt, the country made significant progress thanks to the knowledge and printing technology brought by the French. Egypt then came under the rule of Muhammad Ali. Under Muhammad Ali's leadership, Egypt saw advancements in knowledge, including in Arabic literature (Pratama, 2023). The cultural interaction between Arabs and Western, particularly European, cultures continued after the French departure. This interaction occurred through Arab immigrants who returned after receiving education in the West and disseminated it (Aziz & Dinata, 2019). Muhammad Ali also focused on developing knowledge by sending many Egyptians to Europe for education (Pratama, 2023), developing educational institutions, advancing the newspaper industry, establishing printing industries, and promoting translation movements (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022). The interaction and blending of Arab culture with other foreign cultures in various ways marked the beginning of Arabic literature (Pratama, 2023). Arabic literature evolved because of specific discussions in the field of literature. The continuous influence of other nations gradually caused Arabic literature to lose its distinctive characteristics and identity, which led to the birth of Modern Arabic (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022) and the emergence of the first school of modern Arabic literature, known as the Neo-Classical movement. The influence of various cultures and foreign traditions, both directly and indirectly, has led Arabic literature into its modern phase (Pratama, 2023).

An example of the difference between Classical Arabic and Modern Arabic can be seen in the modern poem titled *Al-Umm* by Kahlil Gibran and the poem *Ikhtari* by Nizar Qabbani. In these two modern Arabic poems, it can be observed that in terms of content, they do not use the themes typical of Classical Arabic poetry. Furthermore, in terms of form, Modern Arabic poetry does not pay much attention to *wazan* (metrical patterns) (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022). For modern Arabic literature, the developments brought by the Neo-Classical movement did not contribute significantly and were even considered more traditional. This has prompted many young writers, influenced by more modern poetry, to move away from traditional constraints (Pratama, 2023).

Classical literature that emerged in the West was a renewal aimed at modernizing the West. In contrast, the revival of Classical literature led by Sami Al-Barumi in the East is seen as a reaction against the modernization of the Arab world. The resurgence of Classical literature aims to preserve the specific characteristics, rules, and structures of Classical Arabic before the modern era. In this way, Arabic can retain the authenticity of its literature while adapting to the times. This has been positively received by Arab writers (Ash Shidiqiyah, 2022).

### **Social, Political, and Cultural Factors Influencing Phonological Change in Arabic from the Classical Period to the Modern Period**

The development and evolution of the Arabic language have been influenced by several factors, including cultural, religious, socio-economic, and political factors. The advancement of Arab culture has led the Arab world to excel in various fields, such as technology, science, and civilization. In literature, this progress is marked by the emergence of new literary forms like novels and modern drama, which have impacted language use, including its phonological aspects. Modern poets and writers tend to use language closer to everyday dialects, emphasizing practical communication skills, thereby influencing how Arabic is taught and spoken (Harahap, 2021). In the context of phonological change shaped by social interaction, Lee et al. (2024) show that the frequency and nature of phonological input in child-directed speech evolves over time, possibly shaping phonological acquisition in successive generations.

Economic factors also play a role in the evolution of the Arabic language. As a communication tool, language is inseparable from various activities, particularly economic activities such as trade conducted by Arabs with other nations. This

interaction led to changes in Arabic to suit its speakers, ensuring smooth communication. Cross-national trade introduced new vocabulary from foreign languages into Arabic. Additionally, the exchange of workers contributed to the mixing of dialects, pronunciation, and the simplification of some complex sounds (Harahap, 2021).

In the political sphere, changes in the Arabic language can result from diplomatic relations between Arab countries and other nations internationally. Arabic is often used as a diplomatic language in many international organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), increasing its usage in global and international political contexts. Moreover, Westerners learn Arabic to acquire important information and gain political influence in the Middle East. They also collect numerous Arabic books to translate into Western languages (Harahap, 2021).

This study resonates with the diachronic typological approach described by Easterday & Bybee (2023), which emphasizes the role of inventory structure and typological dynamics in driving phonological change.

In conclusion, the evolution of the Arabic language is the result of various interacting factors. Cultural, socio-economic, and political factors all play a role and contribute to the changes occurring in Arabic in aspects such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

## CONCLUSION

Language is a vital tool for communication in human life, continually evolving to meet the demands of the times and the needs of its speakers. Each language has distinctive features in its phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Phonology, the study of speech sounds, plays a crucial role in direct interaction and encompasses both phonetics and phonemics, which distinguish the meanings of vowel and consonant sounds. In Arabic, phonology is connected to the dialects of *\*fusha\** and *\*amiyyah\**, which have emerged in response to the evolving times and the diverse needs of speakers. Cultural contact and the increasing number of non-Arabic speakers have altered the rules of Arabic usage, leading to the modernization of Arabic literature, which is more flexible compared to the standardized classical Arabic. This modernization, while introducing new vocabulary, has also spurred a revival of

classical Arabic literature as an effort to preserve the unique characteristics of the Arabic language, illustrating that the shift from classical to modern Arabic has had a significant impact on Arabic phonology.

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