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Word-Accent and Syllable-Structure in Modern Standard Arabic

T.Balasubramanian

Sultan Qaboos University
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Abstract

A rather common feature of 'Arabic English' is what can be called misplaced accent. A closer look at such instances of misplaced lexical accent suggested the presence of neat patterns. Native speakers of Arabic do not accentuate English polysyllabic words with a haphazard choice of the syllable to be accented. This suggestion led to an analysis of hundreds of Arabic polysyllabic words. This analysis consisted of asking a number of unsophisticated native speakers of Arabic to pronounce Arabic polysyllabic words. The analysis led to the division of Arabic syllables into light and heavy (laghu and guru as described in the ancient Indian work, Taitreeya Praatishaakhyā [taiːtrɪja praːtɪʃɑːkʰja], a phonetic treatise of the Yajur Veda). Analysing Arabic polysyllabic words as being made up of light and heavy syllables helps us establish rules for word-accent in Arabic. This analysis established the fact that in Arabic, syllable-weight determines lexical accent. This paper first establishes the importance of word-accent both for English and Arabic for the criterion of intelligibility of words and then gives an account of the types of Arabic polysyllabic words analysed and the results obtained.

Keywords: Word-accent, syllable-structure, light, heavy and superheavy syllables.
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Introductory

This paper presents the results of an investigation done over a period of two years, an investigation concerning word-accent in Arabic, done in Al-Hodeidah (Republic of Yemen) and Muscat (Sultanate of Oman). The phenomenon of word-accent was examined with the help of native speakers of Arabic, who served the researcher as informants. Forty native speakers of Arabic, educated as well as uneducated, were asked to pronounce a number of Arabic words made up of more than two syllables each, with a view to ascertaining which syllable of each of the words was accented by them. None of the informants chosen had any knowledge of linguistics or phonetics. Such unsophisticated informants were chosen to ascertain that their pronunciation of the words would be spontaneous and natural.

Literature Review

Word-accent in Arabic has been the subject of discussion in several books and papers. A number of works were consulted before attempting the present analysis of word-accent in Arabic. The first is a Ph.D dissertation by Abdo (1969). This, according to Brame, (1971) is "the first …discussion of Arabic to be formulated in the generative framework." Abdo's conclusion is that in Arabic polysyllabic words (a) the last strong cluster (either a syllable of the structure VCC or V: -- a syllable made up of a short vowel and a consonant cluster or a syllable made up of a long vowel) is accented; (b) if there is no such cluster, the antepenultimate syllable of words with three or more syllables and the first syllable of disyllabic words are stressed.
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The second work is a book by Ryding, (2005). Ryding’s thesis is that "stress in Modern Standard Arabic is predictable and addresses to some general rules based on syllable-structure…. In full-form pronunciation, Modern Standard Arabic stress falls either on the second or third syllable from the end of the word and on the final syllable of a word if that syllable is a super-strong one (CVCC or CVVC)."

de Jong and Zawaydeh (1999) have analysed Jordanian Arabic and based their findings on the pronunciation of four speakers of the Jordanian dialect. They examined the durational and fundamental frequency correlates of stress and concluded that "speakers exhibit extensive final lengthening effects and a smaller effect of stress and penultimate lengthening. Stress lengthening correlates with higher first formants, while penultimate lengthening does not."

Halpern (2009) is of the view that stress rules found in grammar books are often "incomplete, inaccurate and ambiguous." He has formulated a few rules for stress in Arabic, based on the structure in Arabic words made up of two or more syllables.

Motivated by the findings of these researchers, particularly by those of Ryding and Halpern, that stress in Arabic is straightforward and predictable, the present research was undertaken.

The syllable at the phonetic and phonological levels

In this paper the term word-accent refers to prominence, a phonetic and phonological quality that covers a syllable. While discussing syllables, one has to distinguish between two levels of analysis – analysis at the phonetic level and analysis at the phonological level. At the phonetic level, one syllable receives more prominence than another because its constituent elements show "higher pitch or
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greater loudness or greater duration or greater excursion from the neutral disposition of the vocal tract "(Laver, 1994,511). This description obviously compares two syllables of identical structure. The syllable that is more prominent because of the exaggeration in value of any of the four phonetic parameters listed above is said to receive more stress.

Stress can also be considered as a phonological property of the syllable. Using two degrees of phonological stress, we can draw a distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables. This stress is referred to as word-stress or lexical stress. The term accent or word-accent is also used by linguists for the concept of lexical stress. Throughout this paper, the term word-accent is used in this sense.

Word-accent and intelligibility in English and Arabic

Word-accent seems to play a prominent part in both English and Arabic, in the sense that a misplaced accent (accent placed on the wrong syllable of a polysyllabic word) can (and does) render a word unintelligible to a native-speaker listener of both the languages. To cite two examples, Bansal (1976) in his monograph of the intelligibility of Indian English has pointed out the case of twenty native speakers of English, none of whom was able to recognize the word director pronounced by an Indian speaker of English. The Indian speaker pronounced the word as /ˈdɪrektə/ (with the accent on the first syllable), instead of as /dɪˈrɛktə/ (with the accent on the second syllable). Nineteen out of the twenty native-speaker listeners identified the word as character. There are, no doubt, strong segmental clues differentiating the first syllables of these two words (aspirated voiceless velar plosive [kʰ] and open long vowel [æ] in the word character as against the voiced alveolar
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the very short and much closer vowel [ɪ] in the word director. In spite of these segmental clues, 95% of the listeners identified the word as character, obviously led by the fact that the word character receives the accent on the first syllable. (The twentieth listener couldn't identify the word at all!).

The second example pertains to Adeni Arabic. A native speaker of Arabic did not recognize the Arabic word meaning yoghurt (the word < قليل ، with the accent on the second syllable) when the word was pronounced with the accent on the first syllable. The voiceless uvular plosive and the velarized voiceless denti-alveolar plosive were pronounced with native-speaker precision, but the native speaker of Arabic just did not recognize the word just because of the accent placed on the wrong syllable.

Word-accent in the English speech of Arabic speakers

It is not uncommon to hear native-speakers of Arabic pronounce English polysyllabic words with the accent on the wrong syllable. For example, the present writer, in his nearly thirty years of teaching English to Arabic learners, has heard the following pronunciations: (in the examples given below and elsewhere in this paper, the segmental differences between the native-English versions and the "Arabic-English" versions are not indicated because segmental differences between native English and "Arabic-English" fall outside the scope of this paper.)

*orange* pronounced /ɔːˈrændʒ/
*village* pronounced /ˈvɪlɪdʒ/
*hotel* pronounced /ˈhoːtəl/
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canteen pronounced /ˈkænti:n/
doctor pronounced /dəkˈtʌr/
carton pronounced /ˈkærən/ 
forgot pronounced /ˈfɔːrɡət/

Prompted and rather intrigued by the fact that the English polysyllabic words, pronounced with the accent on the wrong syllable by scorers of native speakers of Arabic, invariably contained a long vowel in the syllable accented by them, some work was undertaken to study word-accent in Arabic. The study revealed certain fascinating facts about word-accent in Arabic. This paper presents some of these facts and the rules governing this important suprasegmental feature of Arabic.

Syllable-structures in Arabic

An earlier study done in collaboration with an Adeni native speaker of Arabic (Salim, 1982) revealed that modern (colloquial as well as classical) Arabic has just three syllable-structures, barring very few examples of syllables of the structure \( V \) (just the nucleus without any releasing or arresting consonants and the nucleus is invariably the long front open vowel /\( a:/ \) as in <آديا> / \( aːˈdæːb/ 'arts' ). The three commonly occurring syllable-structures, the study revealed, are CV (as in <\( ل > /\( l\( a:/ 'no' ), CVC (as in <\( سوق > /\( sʊːq:/ 'market' ) and CVCC (as in <\( ينس > /\( bɪnːt\( / 'girl' ). The nucleus or the V element in a syllable can be either a short vowel or a long vowel/diphthong. The three basic syllable-structures of Arabic can be enlarged into six. Representing a short vowel by the symbol V and a long vowel/diphthong by the symbol V\( \text{̇} \), the possible syllable-structures in Arabic are:

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(i) CV, (ii) CV:, (iii) CVC, (iv) CV:C, (v) CVCC and (vi) CV:CC. Of these, syllables of the structure CV:CC don't exist in the language.

Methodology employed

To study word-accent in Arabic, it was found convenient to categorise syllables into light and heavy, following ancient Sanskrit tradition. In the ancient Sanskrit treatise entitled Taitreeya Pratishaakyaa ( /ˈtɑːɪtrɪːjaː prɑːtɪʃɑːkʰjɑː/ ), a phonetic treatise on the Yajur Veda (/ˈjɑːdʒur vɑːdɑː/), the terms laghu (/ˈlɑːɡhu/ light) and guru (/ˈɡɜːru/ heavy) have been used with reference to the weight of the syllables. A light syllable is one with a short vowel or a short vowel followed by a single consonant. A heavy syllable is one with a long vowel or a diphthong, or a short vowel followed by a consonant cluster. Thus a syllable of the structure CV or CVC is light and a syllable of the structure CV: and CVCC is heavy.

In terms of quantity, a light syllable is said to constitute one maatra (mora in the terminology used by Trubetskoy, 1939).

To categorise Arabic syllables for studying the word-accentual patterns in the language, a further syllable-category was added – superheavy. Superheavy syllables are those made up of a long vowel or a diphthong, followed by an arresting consonant. Thus, <نبي> ( /ˈnaːbi/ 'prophet') and <قوي> ( /ˈqaːwi/ 'strong') are made up of two light syllables each; the monosyllables <من> ( /ˈmɪn/ 'who' and <كم> ( /ˈkɑːm/ 'how much, how many') are also light syllables; the first syllables of < واحد> ( /waːhiːd/ 'one' and <ثاني> ( /θɑːni/ 'another') and the monosyllables <درس>
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( /dars/ 'lesson') and ( /nafs/ 'soul') are heavy; the monosyllables ( باب) ( /ba:b/ 'door') and ( /nu:r/ 'light') and the second syllables of the words ( /rah-ma:n/ 'merciful') and ( /madz-nu:n/ 'madman') are superheavy.

Scores of Arabic words that occur in the spontaneous day-to-day speech of native speakers of Arabic were chosen and native speakers of Yemeni and Omani Arabic were asked to pronounce them. The words were listened to very carefully and transcribed, using IPA symbols. In the transcriptions, word-accent was marked. The transcribed versions of the words were then analysed and divided into various categories, depending upon the structures of the syllables the words were made up of. The analysis showed that word-accent in Arabic does depend upon syllable-structure.

Findings

A number of Arabic words made up of more than one syllable each, were listed and the syllables in each of these words were examined in terms of their structure and, therefore, in terms of their being light, heavy or superheavy. The syllable in each word that receives the accent was examined and the correlation between word-accent and syllable-structure was analysed. In the examples cited here and elsewhere in this paper, word-accent has been marked on the basis of the pronunciation of the words by the forty informants. In some of these examples, the V element is one of the syllabic consonants /m/, /n/, /l/ or /ɾ/.

Type 1: Disyllabic words made up of two light syllables of the structure CV-CV
### Rule 1: Disyllabic words made up of two light syllables take the accent on the first syllable.

### Type 2: Disyllabic words made up of two light syllables of the structure CVC-CVC:
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ستة  
/siṭ-tah/  'six'

جدة  
/dʒid-dah/  'Jeddah city'

دفتر  
/daf-ṭar/  'note-book'

فلل  
/ fil-fil/  'pepper'

مكتب  
/mak-tāb/  'office'

ببل  
/bulbul/  'nightingale'

فندق  
/fun-duq/  'hotel'

سکر  
/suq-kar/  'sugar'

ازرق  
/ʔaz-raq/  'blue'

 منزل  
/man-zil/  'house'

مشهور  
/muʃ-huːr/  'well-known'

Rule 2: Rule 1 framed earlier applies to this set of words.

Type 3: Disyllabic words made up of two light syllables of the structure CV – CVC

مفك  
/ma-fak/  'tin-opener'
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Rule 3: Rule 1 formulated earlier applies to this set of words as well.

On the basis of the three types of words analysed so far (disyllabic words of the structures CV-CV, CVC-CVC, and CV-CVC) we can conclude that Arabic polysyllabic words made up of two syllables of equal weight take the accent on the penultimate syllable.

A few more words made up of syllables of equal weight were examined next.

Type 4: Trisyllabic words made up of three light syllables of the structure CVC-CVC-CVC

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{مستقبل} & /'\text{mus-}'\text{t}a\text{q-}\text{bal}/ & \text{'future'} \\
\text{مستتلقع} & /'\text{mus-}'\text{t}a\text{z-}\text{qa}f/ & \text{'a pool of dirty water'} \\
\text{يستغرفر} & /'\text{jas-}'\text{t}a\text{z-}\text{fir}/ & \text{'asks God for forgiveness'} \\
\text{يستعبد} & /'\text{jas-}'\text{t}a\text{q-}\text{bi}d/ & \text{'to enslave'} \\
\text{يستعمل} & /'\text{jas-}'\text{t}a\text{q-}\text{mil}/ & \text{'to use'}
\end{align*}
\]
Rule 4: Trisyllabic words made up of three light syllables take the accent on the second syllable.

A single rule can now be formulated, combining the rules framed so far. (Rule 5 given below).

Rule 5: Words made up of syllables of equal weight take the accent on the penultimate syllable.

Words made up of syllables of unequal weight were taken up for analysis next.

Type 5: Disyllabic words made up of one heavy and one light syllable of the structures CV:-CVC:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>بارد</td>
<td>/'ba:-riɣ/</td>
<td>'cold'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>واحد</td>
<td>/'wa:-hiɣ/</td>
<td>'one'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>سارق</td>
<td>/'sa:-riq/</td>
<td>'thief'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>شاعر</td>
<td>/'ʃa:-fiɾ/</td>
<td>'poet'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ثابت</td>
<td>/'θa:-biʃ/</td>
<td>'proper noun'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rule 6: Disyllabic words made up of syllables of unequal weight take the accent on the heavier of the two syllables.

Type 6: Disyllabic words made up of one heavy and one superheavy syllable of the structures CV:-CV:C

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transcription</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ساعات</td>
<td>/sa:'ʃa:t/</td>
<td>'clocks'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rule 7: Rule 6 formulated earlier applies to this set of words.

Type 7: Disyllabic words made up of one light and one superheavy syllable, of the structures CV - CV:C

كريم /ka-'ri:m/ 'generous'
رحيم /ra-'hi:m/ 'merciful'
شباب /ʃa-'ba:b/ 'young people'
سدود /su-'du:d/ 'dams'
تمام /ˈtɑːmaː/ 'fine'
بريد /ba 'riːd/ 'post'
حبب /ha-'biːb/ 'lover'
نبيب /la-'biːb/ 'intelligent'

Rule 8: Rule 6 formulated earlier applies to this set of words as well.
Type 8: Trisyllabic words made up of two light syllables and one superheavy syllable, of the structures CV-CV-CV\:C

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\begin{itemize}
  \item بقرات /\textipa{ba-qa-\textdagger}\textquoteleft ra\'t/ 'cows'
  \item بركات /\textipa{ba-ra-\textdagger}k\textquoteleft a:t/ 'blessings'
  \item ورقات /\textipa{wa-ra-\textdagger}q\textquoteleft a:t/ 'leaves'
\end{itemize}

Rule 9: Trisyllabic words made up of syllables of unequal weight take the accent on the heaviest of the three syllables.

Words of different syllable-structures:

\begin{itemize}
  \item ملابس /\textipa{ma-\textdagger}la:-bis/ 'clothes'
  \item امتحان /\textipa{ʔim- \textdagger}t\textquoteleft i-\textdagger}h\textquoteleft a:n 'examination'
  \item جمهور /\textipa{dʒum-\textdagger}hu:r/ 'audience'
  \item منازل /\textipa{ma-\textdagger}na:-zil/ 'houses'
\end{itemize}

In all these words, the heavier of the two, or the heaviest of the three, syllables takes the accent.

A general rule can be framed regarding word-accent in Arabic which will sum up all the rules framed so far.
General Rule: In Arabic words made up of more than one syllable, the heavier or the heaviest syllable takes the accent. If the word is made up of syllables of equal weight, the penultimate syllable takes the accent.

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Conclusion

Word-accent in Arabic is predictable, the accentuation being dependent on syllable-structure. This fact about Arabic will help teachers of English in the Arab world in teaching English speech to native speakers of Arabic. The mistakes Arabic speakers of English are likely to make when they pronounce polysyllabic words in English can be predicted and remedial measures taken. One other point is that in Modern Standard Arabic and in the different colloquial varieties, word-accent is non-phonemic. In English there are pairs of words like 'import' (noun) and 'im'port (verb) which are distinguished from each other by stress alone. There are no such examples in Arabic. Contrasting the students’ native language with the foreign language they are learning is always helpful to a teacher of the foreign language.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Dr Abdul Gabbar Al-Sharafi, my friend and colleague, for comments on an earlier version of this paper. My thanks in excess are also due to my students in Yemen and Oman, from whom I learnt about several phonetic and phonological features of Arabic. I thank my various informants without whose help this study would have been impossible.
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Appendix

Key to the Phonetic symbols used in the paper

All the phonetic symbols used in this paper to transcribe Arabic and English words are those found in the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association. Given below is a list of symbols and their three-term descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Phonetic symbol</th>
<th>Corresponding letter of the Arabic alphabet</th>
<th>Three-term description of the sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>Voiceless bilabial plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>ب</td>
<td>Voiced bilabial plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>ت</td>
<td>Voiceless denti-alveolar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>ṭ</td>
<td>ط</td>
<td>Voiceless velarised denti-alveolar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ɣ</td>
<td>د</td>
<td>Voiced dendi-alveolar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ẓ</td>
<td>ض</td>
<td>Voiced velarised dendi-alveolar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>ṭ</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>Voiceless alveolar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>د</td>
<td>Voiced alveolar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>ك</td>
<td>Voiceless velar plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>q</td>
<td>ق</td>
<td>Voiceless uvular plosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>ʔ</td>
<td>ء</td>
<td>Glottal plosive/glottal stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>dʒ</td>
<td>ج</td>
<td>Voiced palato-alveolar affricate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>م</td>
<td>Voiced bilabial nasal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>ن</td>
<td>Voiced alveolar nasal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>ف</td>
<td>Voiceless labio-dental fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>θ</td>
<td>ث</td>
<td>Voiceless inter-dental fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>đ</td>
<td>ذ</td>
<td>Voiced inter-dental fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>ﺷ</td>
<td>ط</td>
<td>Voiced velsarised inter-dental fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>ﺱ</td>
<td>س</td>
<td>Voiceless alveolar fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>ﺱ</td>
<td>ص</td>
<td>Voiceless velarised alveolar fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>ﺟ</td>
<td>ز</td>
<td>Voiced alveolar fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>ﺞ</td>
<td>ش</td>
<td>Voiceless palato-alveolar fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>ﺧ</td>
<td>خ</td>
<td>Voiceless uvular fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>ﺟ</td>
<td>غ</td>
<td>Voiced uvular fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>ﻩ</td>
<td>ح</td>
<td>Voiceless pharyngeal fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>ﻩ</td>
<td>ه</td>
<td>Voiceless glottal fricative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>ﺭ</td>
<td>ر</td>
<td>Voiced alveolar tap/trill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>ﻝ</td>
<td>ل</td>
<td>Voiced alveolar lateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>ﻩ</td>
<td>ع</td>
<td>Voiced pharyngeal approximant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>ﻲ</td>
<td>ي</td>
<td>Voiced palatal semi-vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>ﻰ</td>
<td>و</td>
<td>Voiced labio-velar semi-vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front close unrounded (long) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>ﺩ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front (centralized) unrounded vowel between close and half-close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front close unrounded(short) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front half-close unrounded (long) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front unrounded vowel between half-close and half-open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>ﺓ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front unrounded vowel just above open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front open unrounded (long) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>ﺓ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Front open unrounded (short) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>ﺓ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Back open unrounded (long) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Back half-close rounded (long) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Back half-close rounded (short) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Back close rounded (long) vowel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>ﻷ</td>
<td>ﺔ</td>
<td>Back close rounded (short) vowel</td>
</tr>
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</table>
WORD-ACCENT AND SYLLABLE-STRUCTURE

References


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