Sexist Language in Arabic: The Case of Qatar
University Academic and Administrative Staff

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the impact of possible
sex-based differences in Arabic. It deals
with the awareness and recognition of sexist
attitudes in Arabic. A special questionnaire
was prepared for this purpose. The first part
of the questionnaire posits fives questions
with answer choices which reflect respondents'
attitudes towards Arabic as a sexist language.
The second part includes eight statements
which are rated on the part of respondents as
sexist in certain degrees and whether these
statements are appropriate or not. To reach
conclusions about the presence of sexism in
Arabic, this study refers to the definition of
sexism, studies and experiments related to
sexist language, sexism in Arabic, and finally
a case study about Arabic as a sexist
language.

I.   *Introduction:*

The issue of sexism in language has been
investigated by many linguists. In an article about
early childhood experiences of acquiring the English
language, Sheldon (1990) talks about a component of
socializing children to their gender roles; she says
(1990:4) about the English language :"Our language
reflects *sexist,* *male-centered* *attitudes* that

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perpetuate trivialization, marginalization, and invisibility of female experience".

It is quite important for this study to clearly define what is meant by sexism and sexist language. When language is used to discriminate between females and males, making both females and males unequal based on gender only, it is a form of sexist language. Sexism is a term used to refer to the idea of male superiority by referring to females as inferiors to males intellectually and psychologically. Today, sexism is challenged through movements such as Women's Rights Movement and other such movements to erase, among other issues, language discrimination against the female gender. Nevertheless, sexist language is still present in many cultures of the world. In many ways, sexism can influence the different roles that men and women occupy in societies. Thus, gender-biased languages can be found in many parts of the world. English and Arabic are two examples of gender biased languages.

In English, for example, many studies have shown that sexism certainly does exist. Vardell (1985) researches the ways in which the English language discriminates between the two-sexes as in pronouns; the generic use of `man! as a male referent, descriptions of women on the basis of their physical appearance rather than their individual accomplishments, the non-parallel use of labels and titles for males and females, the order of male / female paired terms where male terms are listed first, and other areas. Harrigan and Lucic (1988) state that the idea of gender in pronouns was not very much in favor for the National Organization of Women Members and psychology students who prefer a sex-neutral pronoun usage in English. Tarnove (1988) is in favor of non-sexist English language especially in the American media; in her opinion, there should be a sex equal adapted language. Sheldon (1990) has reached the conclusion that the English language reflects sexist, male centered attitudes which trivialize females; in addition, she states that there is a fundamental need for change in language use to improve women's roles. McMinn et

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al (1990) have investigated if a sexist language in the written form can be linked to a sexist language in the oral form among other areas like traditional views of sex roles, psychological androgyny, and Christian beliefs. They carried out two experiments, the first tested written sexist language and the second measured sexist language in three essays. The conclusions they reached were: people who use sexist language in the written form were more likely than others to use sexist language in oral form in some responses. These experiments support the presence of sexist language. Haiman (1991) discusses the usage of sexist expressions by men against women in a school context, both in the classroom and on the school grounds, he describes them as expressing viewpoints yet derogatory.

All of these studies prove in different ways that sexism, as an issue, is found in English; and that English is a language which is biased for the masculine gender and against the feminine one.

II. *Types of Sexist Language:*

Generally and frequently a sexist language is biased for the masculine gender and against the feminine gender. Many studies concerned with sexist language have shown evidence for male-biased language.

There are recognized types of sexist language. In one type the language ambiguously refers to one sex (normally the masculine) when meaning both sexes, such as "a student, a staff member, the leader, Man" in English. In another type, the language refers to one sex in situations that could apply to either sex based on occupational groups as in "a Male Nurse or a Lady Doctor" which are terms we hear today in English. A different type can be represented in a statement that shows as the norm one sex and therefore leaves out the other sex as in the English words "Scientists or Members". A fourth type of sexist language is the one where stereotypes are supported on the basis of sex, for example, the usage of the term ‖ Housewife" in English. The last type where sexist language deals with non-parallel

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masculines and feminines in a parallel situation, as with " Prince / Princess" which is found in English.

There are reasons why some sentences in a language are considered sexist. For example, the reference in a sentence to males and females by using the masculine gender only makes that sentence sexist (e.g. "student" in English or "Al-talib: a student" in Arabic). If an occupational group which includes both sexes (e.g. "teaching staff members" in English or "Adaa Haiat Al-Tadrees: Teaching staff member" in Arabic) is referred to in a sentence by one sex as a norm, then that sentence is sexist. The use of non-inclusive terms (e.g. "man" in English or "Al-rajul: the man" in Arabic) for groups made of the two genders make sentences sexist. When non-parallel terms for males and females (e.g. "girls" in English or "Al-banat: the girls" in Arabic) are used in a statement it becomes sexist. Sometimes sexist sentences include one gender used overtly in reference to one occupational group performed usually by the opposite sex (e.g. "male-nurse" in English or "momarith: Nurse-masc." in Arabic). In other statements there may be reinforcement of stereotypes (e.g. "housewife" in English or "Rabat-bate: housewife" in Arabic) which may possibly make one gender inferior to the other. The concentration on the appearance of females is another attempt to make a sentence become sexist in some respect.

III. Sexist Language in Arabic:

Not many studies have been made about sexism in language as an issue in Arabic. However, the most detailed one is that of Mahmoud (1993) where he discusses a number of areas showing the effect of the role of sexism in Arabic. Since this paper addresses sexism in Arabic, it is of considerable significance to shed some light on the status of the women and the feminine gender in Arabic.

In Arab societies women are silent in the sense that their presence is hardly felt in language although the Arabic language has a clear system of

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masculine and feminine gender. This silence appears in more than one form. Women are viewed as an image drawn by the society where they are always swept by the masculine forms in the language. In speech, for example, which is considered normally a social means, women are represented as these beings existing in the society; and not as separate beings from men. And while speech itself, through its users, differentiates between one speaker and another, the phonological and syntactic forms of Arabic determine the way in which users of Arabic enter women in the language. Consequently, speech does not always reflect what a speaker wants to say, but rather it represents what is socially accepted on one hand, and how it appears to the society on the other. The Arabic language views man (the being) as the measurement from which the feminine gender is derived. Accordingly, speech is designed and organized on the basis of this sample (the man), where the masculine form is the basic one and the feminine is only a derivation of it.

This type of grammatical derivations, having their social foundation, led to the silencing of women in more than one social area in the society. Silencing women means that the masculine forms are used to refer to both masculine and feminine genders. This is proved all the time by the masculinity of the man. And although women are present physically in the Arabic society, the culture of silence which is the product of several centuries did not allow them to make an equal linguistic or social presence such as that of the man.

Mahmoud (1993:39) states that (translation): " The history of the language (the Arabic language) is a masculine one in authority, sovereignty, and in regulating and controlling the society; and Arabic is a masculine language not a feminine one". Arabic, in all of its roles and social levels, according to Mahmoud, uses the masculine form as a measurement addressing the man; while the woman is surrounded by silence without anything to refer to her. Languages in general have semantic and signal systems. In Arabic, these systems refer to the

social presence of both men and women in the society; masculinity, for example, is superior and femininity is almost not present. There is a grammatical rule in Arabic which clearly states that when a sentence includes males and females together as it subject, the plural system of the subject will take the masculine gender; in addition, the verb which is performed by that subject will be conjugated for the masculine, too. For instance, for any sentence, in Arabic which includes men and women as its subject, the verb of the sentence is conjugated for the masculine, e.g. "ten women and one man went the show"[1]. The verb in this sentence must be conjugated for the plural masculine form, because this is a rule in the grammar of Arabic. This type of sentence structure emphasizes that Arabic is a sexist language for the masculine gender and against the feminine gender because masculine forms are used as the basic ones from which the feminine forms are derived. This type of rule in Arabic ignores the feminine presence of women as separate from the men.

Societies usually tend to be sexist for the masculine gender. But in general, Arabic is based on several stages through which social values and regulators were formed. A language is not simply a group of words and structures of grammar but also a social being which needs a long time to be understood and absorbed. Arabic as a language does not need to be introduced without giving it a special linguistic exception in the areas of structure and speech. For instance, the first person singular always has the masculine gender (a proof man's superiority - sexism).

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[1] The Arabic sentence transcribed phonetically as follows(the key of the symbols of transcription is in Appendix 1):

[a rat nisa? wa r d ul wa:hid ahbu: ila l rd]

ten women and man one go-masc-pl to the show

IV.   A Case Study at Qatar University:

This study attempts to investigate the issue of sexism in Arabic from the perspective of one category in the society. It is an attempt to find out whether members of different Arab societies consider sexism present in Arabic. This is done by asking respondents several questions about their attitudes towards the Arabic language with respect to sexism. This can be referred to in details in Part I in the following section. This study, also, tries to investigate through a number of statements sexist issues practised in Arabic. These exhibit, for example, whether respondents consider Arabic (in some statements) biased for the masculine gender; if an occupational group is referred to by the usage of one sex only; if Arabic uses non-inclusive terms which signify sexism; if there is reinforcement of one sex over the other through the usage of certain stereotypes existing in the society; if non-parallel terms for males and females give a sexist reference; and if one gender form refers to a certain occupation. Furthermore, this study attemts to find out which gender is biased for or against in Arabic.

In this study it is taken into account that the informational evidence is taken from a very small sample which represents the society with few of its different Arab nationalities, in specific it is the society found in the setting of Qatar University. Thus, the results of the study could be significant and consequently lead to further investigation of the same topic.

A.   Method:

The Sample: a random sample of 40 university staff members (21 males and 19 females) at Qatar University was chosen from the faculties of Education, Humanities, Science, and the library. Table (I) presents the frequency distribution of the staff affiliation, nationality and university positions for the male female groups in the sample.

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Table (I)

Sample   Description of the Survey Participants. (Frequency and Percentage (in parenthesis) of own-sex sample)

	Female	Male	Total
Place of Work	%	%	%
Fac.of Education	4 (21)	5 (23.75)	9 (22.50)
Fac. of Humanities	2 (10.50)	8 (38)	10 (25)
Fac. of Science	9 (47.25)	3 (14.25)	12 (30)
The Library	4 (21)	5 (23.75)	9 (22.50)
Nationality			
Qatari	15 (88)	7 (33.25)	22 (55)
Egyptian	4 (21)	8 (38)	12 (30)
Sudanese	- (0)	3 (14.25)	3 (07.50)
Other*	- (0)	3 (14.25)	3 (07.50)
University Position			
Professor	2 (10.50)	4 (19)	6 (15)
Associate Prof.	3 (15.75)	4 (19)	7 (17.50)
Lecturer	3 (15.75)	6 (28.50)	9 (22.50)
Academic Specialist	3 (15.75)	- (0)	3 (07.50)
Head of Admin Dpt.	1 (05.25)	1 (04.75)	2 (05)
Librarian	2 (10.50)	4 (19)	6 (15)
Admin. Staff Mem.	3 (15.75)	- (0)	3 (07.50)
Lab Tech.	1 (05.25)	1 (04.75)	2 (05)
Secretary	1 (05.25)	1 (04.75)	2 (05)

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*   Other   nationalities   were   Jordanian, Syrian, and Algerian.

Measures: The survey consists of two parts. Part I surveyed subjects' attitudes to sexist language and their perception of their own usage of language.   In part II the subjects were asked to rate how sexist eight statements were based on a scale of 1-4 (1= not at all and 4= very).

Part I. consists of five questions which reveal the attitudes of the data population towards sexist language. The five questions have choices as answers. They are as follows:

1.   To what extent do you consider sexist language a problem in Arabic?
      A.   not at all sexist.
      B.   somewhat sexist.
      C.   to a large extent.

2.   To what extent do you feel that some students are negatively affected by sexist language?
      A.   not at all sexist.
      B.   somewhat sexist.
      C.   to a large extent.

3.   To what extent do you think is our usage of Arabic is sexist inside the university?
      A.   usually sexist.
      B.   somewhat sexist.
      C.   sexist.

4.   Did your own usage of Arabic change during the last few years?"
      A.   became less sexist.
      B.   didn't change.
      C.   became more sexist.

5.   "Where does the pressure to change your usage of sexist language come from?"
      A.   the government.
      B.   university administration.
      C.   the society.
      D.   student activities.
      E.   particular students.

Part II. consists of eight statements which may be used by the academic and administrative staff members and students alike at Qatar university. These statements represent different types of sexist attitudes, based on the American Psychological Association guidelines (APA, 1983) and Malcolm et al (1990) studies.

The statements conform to the following transliterations[2]:

(1) [jəqlʌq ↓ worry-pres-masc-sg ʌl ↓ the ta:lib ↓ student-masc-sg ʌl ↓ the

ʕa:di ↓ normal-masc-sg fi ↓ in ʌl ↓ the dʒa:miʕəh ↓ university ʕəla: ↓ on

ʕʌdʌd ↓ number ʌl ↓ the sa:ʕa:t ↓ hours ʌləti: ↓ which jʌstəti:ʕ ↓ can-pres-masc-sg

ʌl ↓ the registeration ↓ in ↓ during ↓ the ʌl ↓ semester fʌʕl ↓

ʌl ↓ the wa:ḥid] ↓ one

"A university student worries about the number of credit hours he can register in a single semester"

(2) [saufə ↓ will jəqu:m ↓ make-pres-masc-sg ʌl ↓ the rʌʔi:s ↓ president wə ↓ and

hiləri: ↓ Hilary bi ↓ prep zija:rət ↓ visit(n) ʌmərikə ↓ America ʌl ↓ the dʒnu:bijəh] ↓ south

"The President and Hilary will visit South America"

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[2]   Phonetic key is in Appendix (1).

(3) [kʌθi:rʌn   ma: jətrik   ʌʕda:ʔ
      ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
     many   that leave-pres-masc-sg   members

    hajət ʌl   tʌdri:s zaudʒa:tihim li   muta:bʕət
      ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
     staff the teaching wives-their   for follow up

    ʕma:lehum da:xil   ʌl   dʒa:miʕ   ˥
      ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
    work-their inside the   university

    "Teaching staff members frequently leave their
    wives at home to do their jobs inside the
    university"

(4) [iʃtəmədə   rʌdʒul ʌl ʕʌsr ʌl ħʌdʒəri:
                          ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
    rely-pres-masc-sg   man   the age the stone

     k   i:r n   la: l   m l   l   j d wi:]
      ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
     many   on   the   work the manual

    "Cavemen relied basically on manual work"

(5) [jʌdʒib ʌl ʌxð   fi ʌl   iʃtiba:r   ʌnə
      ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
     must   the take(n) in the consideration that

    ʌl kʌθi:r minə ʌl bənə̈t   jufʌðln
     ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
    the many   of   the girls prefer-pres-fem-pl

    wʌða:ʔif ləha   muna:x ʕʌmʌl ha:diʔ]
      ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
    jobs   for which climate work calm

    "It must be taken into consideration that many
    women prefer a quiet work atmosphere"

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(6) [?ʌnqɣɣə   muməriɣ   ʃiflʌn   ʕʌn
    save-past-masc-sg   nurse-masc   child   by

    tɜri:q ʌl   tʌnəfus   ʌl   ʃina:ʃi   li
    way   the breathing the artificial   because

    wudʒu:dihi   fi: mauqiʃ   ʌl   ħadiθ]
    presence-his   in scene   the accident

"A male-nurse saved a child by CPR, because he
was   present at the scene of the accident"

(7) [qəli:lʌn ma: jʌnʃəbu   fikr
    little   that   flow-pres-pasv-masc-sg   thought

    rʌbət ʌl   be:t   ʃəla: ?umu:r   xa:ridʒəh   ʃʌn
    lady   the house on   things   out-fem   out

    ʌl   mʌnzil   miθl   muta:bəʃət   ma:
    the   house   like   follow up   that

            jʌdʒri: fi: duwʌl   ʌl   ʃa:ləm
    run-pres-masc-sg   in   countries the world

    ʌl   θa:liθ]
    the   third

"It is unlikely that a housewife will follow
what is happening in third world countries"

(8) [um   kʌlθu:m   saijidəh   səmra:?
    mother   Kulthom   lady-fem-sg   dark

ðʌʕiːfɘt   ʌl nʌʕr   lɘha: ?ʕaːniː
  ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓   ↓
weak-fem-sg the sight for whom   songs

ra:?iʕɘh   ]
  ↓
magnificent-fem-sg

"Umm Kulthum is a dark and short-sighted woman
who has magnificent songs"

Statements (5), (6) and (8) express positive
views of women but were expressed in sexist
language; this is done to control the possible views
that language is only sexist if it conveys a clear
negative message about one sex. Statement (7)
expresses a stereotype negative opinion of women.
The survey did not include non-sexist control
statements to avoid length of survey and prevent
biased responses. All respondents were asked to rate
how sexist is in each statement on a scale of 1-4:
(1) not at all; (2) slightly; (3) moderately; and
(4) very.

B.   *Data Analysis:*

The data in Parts I, and II were analysed.

Results:

Part I: Attitudes Towards Sexist Language and
Perception of Own Sexist Language Usage and Sources
of Pressure to Change:

Table (II) shows the frequency of distribution
for responses to the questions asked in part I of
the questionnaire. There was no significant
difference between males and females on how much
sexist language was rated as a problem, the highest
percentage of both males and females agreed that the
problem was moderate. There was also no significant
difference between males and females on to what

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extent the usage of Arabic is sexist inside the university; if their personal usage had changed; or on the source of pressure to use sexist language , the most common source of pressure was the society, university administration, other students.

There was a difference in responses between males and females on the extent felt to influence students negatively by sexist language. Almost half of the male population (25.6% of the entire sample male & female) felt that students are not affected at all by sexist language while the other half (23.7% of the entire sample) thought that students were moderately affected by sexist language. As for females more than half of the population (28.9% of the entire sample) felt that students were somewhat affected negatively by sexist language; and only a small percentage of females in the sample (13.2% females of the entire sample) thought that students were not negatively affected at all by sexist language.

Part II: Recognition of Language as Sexist:

Table (III) shows the percentage of the sample population whose responses were `non-sexist' in Part II of the questionnaire. This table shows that males have reported significantly more `non-sexist' responses than females for all sentences in Part II except for sentence (5).

This means that males are less aware of sexist language. In the questionnaire, the choice of sentences and statements imply sexism in the following different ways: Statement (1) implies sexist language because of the reference to the masculine gender only; statement (2) implies a term for occupational group; statement (3) refers to sex as the norm for an occupational group; statement (4) uses non-inclusive terms for groups for both genders; statement (5) uses non-parallel terms for males and females; statement (6) uses one gender form in reference to an occupation usually performed by the opposite gender; statement (7) reinforces a stereotype; and in statement (8) the concentration is on the appearance of females. Some of the

Table (II)
Responses to questionnaire: attitudes, self-report
use and sources of pressure for change in sexist

of same sex sample)

1: *To what extent do you consider sexist language a
    problem in Arabic?*

	Not at All Sexist	Somewhat Sexist	Large Extent
Females	5 (12.8)	13 (33.3)	1 (02.6)
Males*	6(15.4)	10 (25.6)	4 (10.3)

2: *To what extent do you feel that some students are
    negatively affected by sexist language?*

	Not at All Sexist	Somewhat Sexist	Large Extent
Females*	5 (13.2)	11 (28.9)	2 (05.3)
Males*	10 (26.3)	9 (23.7)	1 (02.6)

3: *To what extent do you think is our usage of Arabic
    is sexist inside the university?*

	Usually Sexist	Somewhat Sexist	Sexist
Females*	8 (20.5)	7 (17.9)	3 (07.7)
Males	10 (25.6)	7 (17.9)	4 (10.3)

*Question 4: Did your own usage of Arabic change during the last
    few years?*

	Less Sexist	No Change	More Sexist
Females	2 (05.0)	15 (37.5)	2 (05.0)
Males	7 (17.5)	14 (35.0)	0 (00.0)

5: *Where does the pressure to change your usage of
    sexist language come from?*

	Females**	Males***
Government	1 (02.5)	1 (02.5)
University Admin.	3 (07.5)	2 (05.0)
Society	10 (25.0)	13 (32.05)
Student Activity	0 (00.0)	1 (02.5)
Some Student	2 (05.0)	1 (02.5)

*   One person of sample population didn't answer this question.
**   Two persons of sample population didn't answer this question.
        Three persons of sample population didn't answer this
        question.

statements are obviously sexist and immediately identified by respondents; table III deals with the percentage of those who identified that the sentences as being `non-sexist'.

Table (III)

Frequency of rating a statement as `Non-Sexist' (Frequency and Percentage (in parentheses) of Own-Sex Sample)

Reason Considered Sexist and Example	Females		Males	
	n	(%)	n	(%)
Reference to the masculine gender only e.g. (1) "A university student worries about the	4	(21)	10	(47.5)
A term for an occupational group e.g. (2) "The President and Hilary will visit	4	(21)	11	(52)
Refers to sex as the norm for an occupational group e.g. (3) "Teaching staff members frequently leave their.....	2	(10.5)	8	(38)
Non-inclusive terms for groups for both genders e.g. (4) "Cavemen relied basically on manual work.	6	(31.5)	7	(33)
Non-parallel terms for males and females e.g. (5) "It must be taken into consideration that many	4	(21)	2	(9.5)
One gender form in reference to an occupation usually performed by the opposite gender e.g. (6) "A male-nurse saved a child by CPR, because	4	(21)	10	(47.5)

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Reinforces a stereotype e.g.
(7) "It is unlikely that   4   (21)   5   (23)
a housewife will follow ....

Concentration is on the
appearance of females e.g.
(8) "Umm Kulthum is a dark   6   (31.5)   8   (38)
and short-sighted woman ....

V. *Conclusion:*

Arabic, as other languages do, shows indications of sexism in the usage of the language. In Arabic, it is healthy and correct to use gender as reference for the masculine and feminine entities that exist in the language. But it is extremely unhealthy to use sexist language to prefer one sex over the other or to ignore one sex altogether.

From the case study in this paper and in the environment of Qatar University, it can be established that:

. Sexist language is used in Arabic without abusing either sex.

. In a University atmosphere sexist language is not used to discriminate between sexes as one better than the other, but rather to generalize.

. Men are more unaware of sexist language than women.

The pressure of using sexist language comes mostly from the society in the first place and then from university administration.

One recommendation can be brought up here is that university staff members are advised to encourage the use of non-sexist language, seminars about positive use of language should also be encouraged by university administration. Future studies should propose ways of dealing with offensive problems related to sexist language.

KEY TO SYMBOLS OF TRANSCRIPTION

1.   The Consonants:

IPA Symbol Employed	Arabic Equivalent	Phonetic Values of the Symbols
b	ب	a voiced bilabial stop.
p	ـ	a voiceless bilabial stop.
m	م	a voiced bilabial nasal.
w	و	a voiced bilabial approximant
f	ف	a voiceless labio-dental fricative.
ɤ	ذ	a voiced dental fricative.
θ	ث	a voiceless dental fricative.
ʕ	ع	a voiced phryngeal fricative.
h	ﺣ	a voiceless phryngeal fricative.
d	د	a voiced alveolar stop.
t	ت	a voiceless alveolar stop.
ṭ	ط	a voiceless pharyngealized alveolar stop.
z	ز	a voiced alveolar fricative.
ẓ	ض	a voiced pharyngealized dental fricative.
s	س	a voiceless alveolar fricative.
ṣ	ص	a voiceless pharyngealized alveolar fricative.
ʃ	ش	a voiceless palata fricative.
n	ن	a voiced alveolar nasal.
l	ل	a voiced alveolar lateral.
r	ر	a voiced alveolar trill.
dʒ	ج	a voiced palatal affricate.
tʃ	ـ	a voiceless palatal affricate.
j	ي	a voiced palatal approximant.
g		a voiced velar stop.
k	ك	a voiceless velar stop.
ɤ	غ	a voiced uvular fricative.
q	ق	a voiceless uvular stop.
x	خ	a voiceless uvular fricative.
ħ	ح	a voiceless glottal fricative.
?	ء	a glottal stop.

2. The Vowels:

The vowel system used in this paper is the one set by Daniel Jones (1972).

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