

Vowel Length in Arabic as a Function of Syllable Type

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Abstract

Vowel length is used phonologically in many languages of the world either within a dual system to distinguish between short vs. long vowels. Or it is used within a tripartite system to distinguish between: short, long, and overlong vowels; or simply to denote consonant and syllable type. Apart from this, vowel lengthening has a pragmatic function which is determined in the context of its use, for example to express exaggeration, denote distance, demonstrate size, etc. The paper proposes that another type of vowel overlength exists in Arabic. It is materialized through a phenomenon known as “madd” (i.e. vowel lengthening beyond its normal length), and it is restricted to the recitation of Quran, the holy book of Islam. Contrary to its pragmatic function, vowel lengthening in this case is systematic, in the sense that it takes place only when certain syllabic patterns and/or phonetic environments are satisfied. Two experimental evidences are produced: one from Contemporary Standard Arabic and the other from four contemporary professional Quran reciters to show the acoustic measurements of the overlong vowels as opposed to short and long vowels. The results of the experimental works are utilized to explain the moraic structures of the syllables in which the phenomenon of “madd” occurs. The author concludes that “madd” is a special mode of vocalization which is connected with Quran recitation, and that only experimental work can provide us with phonetic cues which help us to distinguish levels of vowel overlength as they appear typically in “madd”.

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