

The Olive Tree Dictionary

A Transliterated Dictionary of Conversational Eastern Arabic (Palestinian)

by J. Elihay

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<http://www.meforum.org/1690/the-olive-tree-dictionary>

Privileging the Vernacular

The normal order of language acquisition by native users of Arabic—and this being the case since the earliest decades of the Arab-Islamic conquest and the consequent Arabization of the Near East—was native dialects first, then, as formal schooling began, classical or (in recent times) what is called modern standard Arabic, or MSA. A good analogy illustrating this diglossia, which is still extant in the modern Middle East, would be in medieval France, where Frenchmen were born into a variety of un-codified vernacular languages (commonly referred to as French dialects of Latin or regional patois), then learned Latin as they embarked on their formal schooling.

Curiously, when it comes to the study of Arabic in the West, this natural order of language acquisition is reversed. This is so mainly because, up until the seventeenth century, European interest in the Arabic language emanated from strictly scholarly objectives where learning classical Arabic was a tool by which Christian theologians approached the Hebrew Bible in the original Hebrew rather than in the heretofore established Greek and Latin translations. Indeed, Kees Versteegh, one of today's leading Arabic language historians, notes that until the seventeenth century, most Western Arabists "did not even know about the existence of ... colloquial language[s],"^[1] let alone did they express interest in learning them.

Even today, attention to colloquial Arabic (*'ammiya*) is viewed by many language purists and Arab nationalists as an imperialist scheme to splinter the Arab world and undermine its unity. This ignores the fact that classical and modern standard Arabic are never anywhere used as spontaneous forms of speech but are limited to certain academic, religious, and formal institutional frameworks and then only out of prepared texts. Vernacular variants are denigrated as lowly, deformed speech patterns unworthy of being studied, codified, or taught. Even those untrained in the rigors of MSA are emotionally and culturally conditioned to malign their own native speech forms and to revere MSA as the hallowed and definitive vector of Arabness and Islam.

This bias is compounded by a well-nigh complete absence of adequate vernacular teaching tools and source materials. But that may begin to change with the appearance of Elihay's monumental *Olive Tree Dictionary*. This reference book is a refreshingly novel, broadminded, and reformist outlook on Arabic language acquisition and a recognition of all dialectal variants as legitimate speech forms worthy of intellectualization, codification, and formal teaching and learning. Although by no means the first of its kind, Elihay's work is a seminal, ambitious, and meticulously ordered 767-page lexicon of transliterated Palestinian vernacular that should prove an invaluable resource not only for those seeking to learn or study colloquial Palestinian, but also those interested in the Lebanese, Syrian, and Jordanian variants of Arabic.

Although recognizing the tenor and significance of MSA, Elihay is unafraid of privileging vernacular

languages and stressing their intrinsic vitality, power, and importance as primary tools of discourse and communicative competence. His exhaustive didactic enterprise seeks to codify a dynamic, complex, sophisticated, and vigorous language of culture, not some illegitimate dialectal half-breed. His dictionary provides an invaluable resource for a spoken language heretofore considered "corrupt" and "ungrammatical." Elihay considers the Palestinian vernacular a "national means of daily communication" without which "it is impossible to live [among] ... and communicate with" Palestinians.[\[2\]](#)

Decades of privileging modern standard Arabic as the only legitimate language form has produced generations of Arabic students with inadequate verbal communicative competency. The *Olive Tree Dictionary* offers an alternative to Arabic-as-usual and could revolutionize Arabic instruction among native English-speakers, extricating them from the demagogically and pedagogically flawed monopoly of MSA.

In his preface, Elihay notes that when native users of Arabic write their colloquial variants—often in informal contexts—they generally do so in an adapted Arabic script that can be understood and accurately read only by those already familiar with that particular spoken language.[\[3\]](#) He maintains that the Arabic script does not offer an adequate rendering of the wide range of sounds, both consonants and vowels, used in the Levantine dialects. Consequently, the *Olive Tree Dictionary* uses a modified English transcription, which, although at times distracting by its clutter of symbols, diacritics, and accents, offers a truly accurate rendition of Levantine sounds and pronunciation nuances. (One wonders why Elihay did not adopt the simpler, trimmer, more logical, and more elegant Aklian script, a variant of Roman letters (see Table A); his dictionary, already so audacious, could have completed the revolution to the audacious Aklian script.)

Additionally, the *Olive Tree Dictionary*, unlike existing Arabic and dialectal lexicons, does not make use of the traditional Semitic root structure in ordering vocabulary. In conventional language dictionaries of Semitic languages, words must be reduced to their triliteral root-noun form before they and their derivatives can be located in the dictionary. Elihay has ordered his lexicon alphabetically; a boon to learners unfamiliar with Arabic grammar and Semitic root systems, especially those unfamiliar with MSA.

Contrary to comparable transliterated vernacular lexicons[\[4\]](#)—generally slim, abbreviated volumes that often burden learners with overdrawn lists of synonyms, seldom given in context, and with phrases unsuitable for language newcomers—the *Olive Tree Dictionary* is a colossal, yet user-friendly reference book that draws upon Elihay's lifelong interactions with the polyglot Levant as well as his intimate knowledge of its peoples. It effectively synthesizes earlier works in the field: from A. Barthélémy's influential 1935 *Dictionnaire Arabe-Français (Dialectes de Syrie: Alep, Damas, Liban, Jérusalem)*[\[5\]](#) to Elihay's own foundational 1967 *Cours d'arabe parlé*, to his 1973 *Dictionnaire de l'arabe parlé palestinien*,[\[6\]](#) culminating in a 1999 Arabic-Hebrew dictionary, a precursor, foundation, and template to the present work. The *Olive Tree Dictionary's* 9000 entries provide some 17,000 authentic phrases and idiomatic expressions sifted from the real daily lives of Palestinian vernacular users—making new vocabulary acquisition an enlightening cultural and idiomatic undertaking. Thus does *The Olive Tree Dictionary* make for an indispensable tool for anyone serious about learning, speaking, and understanding the Levantine vernacular languages and the cultures that spawned them.

Aklian Script

Ç	caleef	ا	F	fe
B	be		V	ve
P	pe		Q	qaaf
T	te		L	laam
T	tahh		M	miim
J	jiin		N	nuun
X	xe	ح	H	he
K	ke	خ	W	waaw
D	daal		A	a
D	daad		A	a
R	re		I	i
Z	zayn		E	e
Z	zahh		E	e
S	siin		O	o
S	saad		U	u (ou)
C	ciin	ش	U	u
Y	yayn	ع	Y	ye
G	gayn	غ		
G	ge	(guè)		

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- [1] Kees Versteegh, "History of Arabic Language Teaching," in Kassem Wahba, et. al, *Handbook for Arabic Language Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), p. 7.
- [2] J. Elihay, *The Olive Tree Dictionary*, p. 1.
- [3] Actually, some Lebanese, since the late 1950s, have been rendering their own vernacular language in an adapted Roman script. For a sampling of publications using what is commonly referred to as the Aklian script, see the Lebanese weekly newspaper *Lebnaan* (Beirut), vol. VIII: 372 to vol. XIII: 635, Mar. 25, 1983-Sept. 9, 1988; Saïd Akl, *Yaara* (Beirut: Librairie Antoine, 1961); Saïd Akl, *Ƴactariim* (Beirut: Dergham, 1999), Kamal Charaabi, *Ceqspiir, Roomyo w Julyeet* (Beirut: Çajmal Qetub el Ƴaalam, 1968); Salah Labaqi, *Marjuuxt el Çamar* (Beirut: Çajmal Qetub el Ƴaalam, 1969); Maar Yuxanna, *L Çenjiil* (Beirut: Çajmal Qetub el Ƴaalam, 1970). Additionally, Lebanese-American linguist Roger Makhoul is currently at work on the first Lebanese lexicon to be produced entirely in the Aklian script.
- [4] See, for example, Karl Stowasser, *A Dictionary of Syrian Arabic (English-Arabic)* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004); Richard Harrell, *A Dictionary of Moroccan Arabic (Moroccan-English-Moroccan)* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004).
- [5] Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1935.
- [6] Paris: Klincksieck, 1973.