

What's in a vowel? Selected problem areas in the phonology of Tunisian Arabic

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Tunisian Arabic is a spoken dialect of Arabic belonging to the Maghrebi group of dialects of North Africa. Like all colloquial dialects of Arabic, it exists as a low prestige language variant in a diglossic relation with the high prestige Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Generally speaking, Tunisian it is not one of the more widely studied or documented colloquial dialects of Arabic, and what published work there is, both scholarly and pedagogic, is not very consistent in terms of phonology. Different sources, all mainly describing the dialect of the capital, offer divergent treatments of pharyngealized consonants; some sources claim they have partly or largely disappeared while others claim a number of innovative pharyngealized consonants that do not occur in MSA. There is also variation in the number of phonemic vowels reported and their distribution. Some sources posit vowels where others do not (as in the definite article, reported as *l-* or *él-* in different sources). All this made the chance to use Tunisian Arabic in a field methods class, with a native speaker from the capital, an exciting opportunity. While the broad outlines of the phonemic system quickly fell into place, a number of complications make settling some basic questions more difficult. The most interesting of these is the question of whether [e] and [a] belong to the same or different phonemes. The analysis presented will show that while the difference is mostly one of complementary distribution, there are some minimal pairs that show they belong to different phonemes in some environments. This represents a major break from other Maghrebi dialects which reduce the number of vowels from MSA. A hypothesis will be presented on how this new vowel distinction arose from the neutralization of some consonant distinctions. The question of how to best capture the distinction in phonemic transcription will also be discussed as will other difficulties in describing the vowel system, including interference from MSA and French.