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Neo-Lebanese

A Lebanese alphabet.

"What is literature? It is the entrapment of eternity in a word, a sip of wine, a mere drop that intoxicates the mind." - Saïd Akl

What is the number 7? A weird question to ask, but most Lebanese, as well as other 'Arabophones' (Arabic speakers), will think of the Arabic letter "٧". This is due to our de facto use of Arabizi script; a composition of Latin letters and Arabic numerals to communicate through text for casual matters. That being said, not Arabic nor Arabizi are neither standardised nor capable of incorporating the versatility of the Lebanese vernacular. This is where my proposal for a Latin-based Lebanese alphabet comes in to remedy the faults of the aforementioned scripts; inspired by the orthographic work of Lebanese poet and visionary, Saïd Akl, as well as thinkers such as [Hsen Andil](#), [Henri Zaq](#), and [Roger Makhlouf](#). I based the alphabet itself on the Maltese, Berber-Latin, and Kurdish-Latin (Kurmanji) models.



Skip to **The Neo-Lebanese Orthography** section for the alphabet.



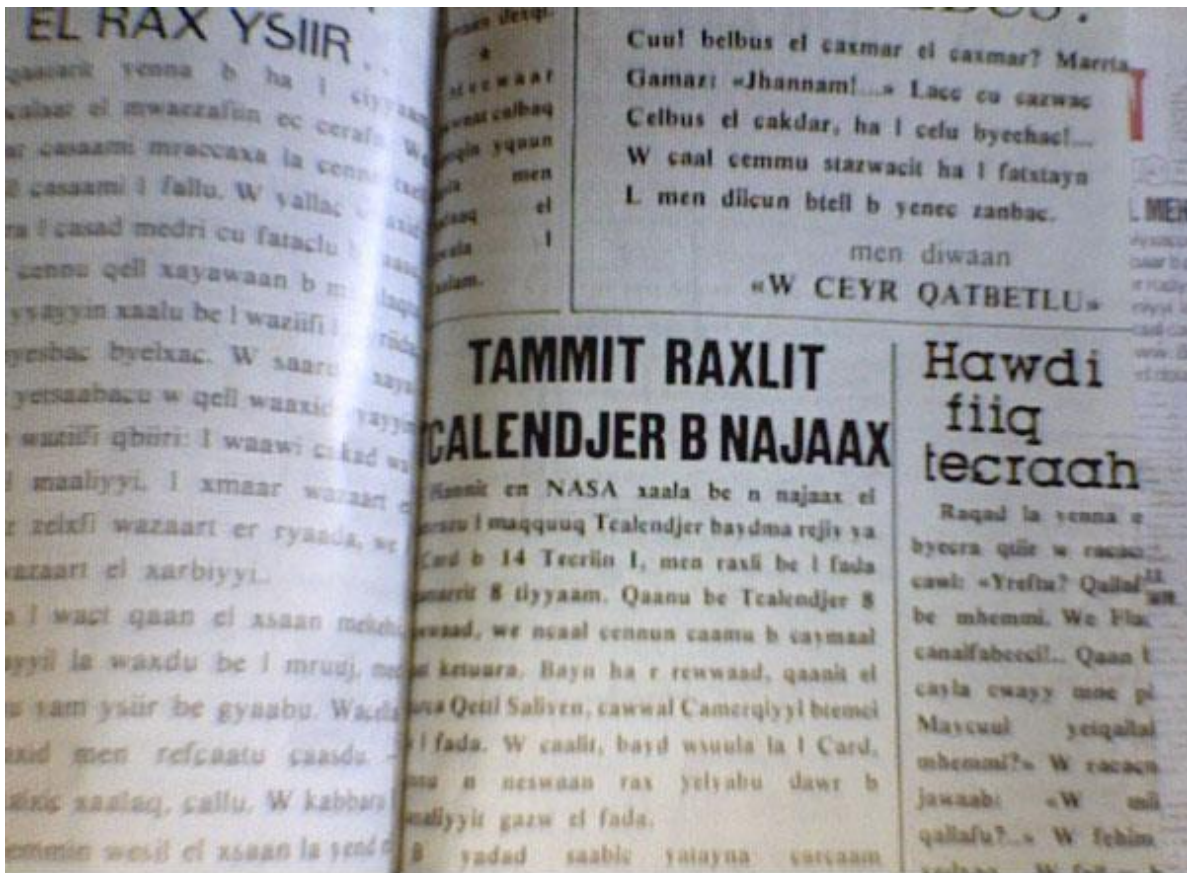
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I. Introduction

The Lebanese vernacular has been around for a very long time. During that period, we've witnessed a multitude of scripts, script adaptations, and alterations in spelling in order to accommodate our country's unique language and accents. Even in recent years, pioneers such as Saïd Akl attempted to Romanise Lebanese. Unfortunately, his ideas were too early - or perhaps too late - for his time. Whether it is by employing the Latin alphabet with extra letters to account for vowels and our unique phonology, or by utilizing 'Arabizi'; the Arabic-Latin informal hybrid Internet alphabet, the debate must be sparked regarding the question of the Lebanese language & script. Shying away from the political viewpoint of it all, a language is the main vehicle of culture, social interactions, and even the entire outlook of a society, and that's why, as many groups from our region have done, this piece will attempt to address each of these queries and offer an outline or an alternative way towards writing down our colloquial speech. I'll add that this is just a template or a way for us to advance forwards in solving these problems and in no ways an end all proposal. What matters is that it is discussed so that we, the Lebanese people, can solve this problem - as one.



a. The Faults of Current Scripts.

It is due to the flaws of current scripts that we resort to making new ones. Arabic and Arabizi may have once served their purpose as our de facto scripts at different times throughout history, but now, if they don't reform to expedite communication, they are going to stall our progression as a society back.

A. Arabic:

Arabic script is believed to have been in use in Lebanon since around the 7th century CE when the Arabic language itself was first introduced to the Levant. However, because of Arabism and Arabic traditionalists, the script has resisted accustoming to the Arabic vernaculars, unlike the Persian and the Sorani Kurdish Arabic orthographies, for example. This makes it a burden to read; "written Arabic is problematic", says LAU professor of Arabic Literature Latif Zeitouni. He claims that Arabic script is being replaced by Arabizi as improvisation that keeps the language active online.²

Vowels:

Arabic short vowels, like the vowels of most Semitic languages, are not written except in the form of diacritics (harakat)³. This is considered tedious, and is ignored by most

² (Zeitouni)

³ (Freiha)



people on most occasions, even in formal matters. This causes ambiguity and confusion. An example would be an English speaker writing like this;

`f I wrt ths `rtcl lk ths,

If I wrote this article like this, you'll probably understand most of it, but if you're not as skilled at the script it's going to be very gruelling.

A study conducted by Abu-Rabia and Salftey⁴ challenged this. The 2 chosen Arabic speaking groups, one skilled at reading Arabic and one that isn't, were tested for their reading comprehension of Arabic words and texts when they're voweled (with harakat) and unvoweled (without harakat). The results showed that the differences between normal and poor readers were consistent in all of the aforementioned reading conditions, and that both types of readers improved their reading if the words were voweled. Ergo, the interactions of readers by vowels were significant, showing the importance of vowels for all readers in Arabic orthography. The uncontextual and unvoweled words in it are taxing, even for proficient readers. "Their failure in this reading situation shows that unvowelising isolated Arabic words greatly reduce reading accuracy, in contrast to languages written in the Latin alphabet."⁵

⁴ (Abu-Rabia and Salftey)

⁵ (Abu-Rabia and Salftey)



Arabic also doesn't represent Lebanese vowels properly. Lebanese *Imala*, where the long 'a' vowels turn into long 'e' vowels⁶, is still shown as an Alif "ا" in Arabic. It also adds ambiguity in some words ending with suffix -ي that are an [e/ɪ] in Lebanese, or in the *Tah Marboutah* "ة" which is sometimes an [e/ɪ] as well.

- /wēde/ 'valley': Written /wādy/ <وادي> in Arabic
- /bêle/ 'my mind': Written /bâly/ <بالي> in Arabic
- /birriyye/ 'wilderness': Written /birriyya/ <برية> in Arabic

Moreover, there is a lack of a decent distinction between the letter *W*, a long *o*, a long *u*, an *o*, and a *u*; all being portrayed as a *Ḍamma* "ُ", or *Wāw* "و", or a combination of the two. This only makes unvoweled texts even harder to read.

Consonants:

Arabic letters have contextual letterforms. This means that most letters have four different forms depending on where they are in the word. You need to learn around 100 letter forms to perfect it!

Furthermore, the Arabic consonants "ث", "ذ", and "ق" are regularly pronounced differently in Lebanese than they are in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), yet they are written the same.⁷

⁶ (Levin)

⁷ (Lebanese Arabic Institute)



For "ث":

In Lebanese Arabic, "ث" is pronounced as an /s/ (e.g. *Sawra* for <ثورة>) or in some cases a /t/ (e.g. *Tlête* for <ثلاثة>) instead of a /θ/.

For "ذ":

In Lebanese Arabic, "ذ" is pronounced as a /z/ (e.g. *Kizib* for <كذب>) or in some cases /d/ (e.g. *Dêl* for <ذيل>) instead of a /ð/.

For "ق":

In Lebanese Arabic, "ق" is pronounced as a /ʔ/ which is the glottal stop i.e. Hamza "ء" (e.g. *ʔalaʔ* for <قلق>) instead of a /q/. An exception, however, is Druze speech, where it tends to conserve the literary Arabic /q/.⁸

B. Arabizi:

Arabizi is a combination of English/French letters with Arabic numerals to compensate for the lack of some Arabic sounds in the Latin alphabet. This quasi-alphabet is widely used online, especially amongst the younger generations in Arabic countries. This style of text, however, is incredibly susceptible to capriciousness as a result of orthographic variation due to accents, dialects, and personal writing styles.⁹

⁸ (Versteegh and Eid)

⁹ (Grenoble and Whaley) pg. 141



Vowels:

In Arabizi, there is no clear indication of what the vowels are without context. There is no distinction between *e*, *i*, *long i* and *long e*. For example, "kerse" can be interpreted as either 'catastrophe' <كارثة> or 'chair' <كرسي>.

Also, *long a* vowels tend to not be represented at all, with words like "khaf" that can be interpreted as 'he got scared' <خاف> with a *long a*, or 'lessened' <خف> with a *short a*.

Generally, Arabizi vowels lack much-needed standardisation to be considered concise and accurate orthography.

Consonants:

Arabizi famously uses numbers to compensate for the lack of some Arabic consonants in the English/French keyboard. The usage of numbers is not only unaesthetic and impractical, but also inconsistent, since some users tend to avoid using numbers altogether, which results in yet more heteronyms and confusion.

Arabizi script also can't differentiate between a *sh* (ش), *gh* (غ), or *kh* (خ) sound and the sounds of *s* (س), *g* (گ), *k* (ك), and *h* (ه) separately.

- Ashal: Confused as <اشل> instead of <اسهل>.
- Eshar: Confused as <إشر> instead of <إسهر>.

There is no uniform distinction with Arabizi. Users must

rely on context clues to decipher the script's erraticism.

II. The Neo-Lebanese Orthography.

The main driver behind proposing a new orthography, put simply, is the inability of the current orthographies to properly survive the modern era. At this time, the Lebanese use two scripts to communicate through text; the Arabic and the Latin scripts. While traditionalists and progressionists alike may have a bias towards one or the other, it is more important to have a standard Lebanese script to fully encompass the Lebanese vernacular, regardless of which script we base it upon.

This means that for Lebanese to be written as it's pronounced, a coherent orthography is required. Uniformity of writing also helps the Lebanese language gain more prestige and functional domains.¹⁰ This can mean that Lebanese can assume the role of official use like in schools and books, or even in legal matters in the future perhaps. For this reason, I propose the following Latin alphabet. Note that the orthographic rules may not be worth the time or effort for some, so I suggest using just the letters at the very least! (How to download keyboard at the end).

¹⁰ (Grenoble and Whaley) pg. 140



A. The Alphabet:

A a	Â â	B b	C c	Č č	D d	Ḑ ḑ	E e	Ê ê	Ɛ ɛ
a	long a	be	hamze	ča	de	ḑa	e	long e	ɛa
[a, ʌ]	[ā, ɔ̃]	[b]	[ʔ]	[tʃ]	[d]	[dʕ]	[e, ɪ]	[ē]	[ɛ]
ا	اَ	ب	ق or ء	ش	د	ض	ه	اِ	ع
F f	G g	Ğ ğ	H h	Ḥ ḥ	I i	J j	K k	L l	M m
fa	ge	ğa	he	ḥa	long i	je	ke	la	mim
[f]	[g]	[ɣ]	[h]	[ħ]	[ī]	[ʒ]	[k]	[l]	[m]
ف	گ	غ	ه	ح	يِ	ج	ك	ل	م
N n	O o	Ô ô	P p	Q q	R r	S s	Ş ş	T t	Ṭ ṭ
nun	o	long o	pe	qa	re	se	şa	te	ṭa
[n]	[o]	[ō]	[p]	[q]	[r]	[s]	[sʕ]	[t]	[tʕ]
ن	و	وِ	پ	ق	ر	س	ص	ت	ط
U u	V v	W w	X x	Y y	Z z	Ẓ ẓ			
long u	ve	wa	xa	ya	ze	za			
[ū]	[v]	[w]	[x]	[j]	[z]	[zʕ]			
وِ	ف	و	خ	ي	ز	ظ			

37 Letters:
29 Consonants
8 Vowels

B. The Vowels:

In Neo-Lebanese, there are 3 short vowels (a, e, & o), and 5 long ones (â, ê, ô, i, & u). The choice of the diacritic (circumflex ˆ) is inspired by the vowels from the Kurdish-Latin alphabet (used by Kurmanjis). As [Rodrigue Risk](#) once suggested, this diacritic is to be called a “Lebbêde” in Neo-Lebanese, referencing the traditional Phoenician-Lebanese headwear.



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The Short Vowels:

The short vowels are equivalent to the Harakat (diacritics) in Arabic, but with Lebanese phonetics (refer to alphabet figure). They are inclusive to allophonic variance between Lebanese accents.

The letters *i* & *u* are long vowels in Neo-Lebanese and thus must be used accordingly. An exception to this, however, are the shortened suffixes.¹²

- Min: Who <مين>
- Čufo: Look! (to multiple people) <شوفوا>
- Men: From <مين>
- Ruḥo: His soul <روحوه>
- Meče: He walked <مشي>
- Mêče: OK or Was walking <ماشي>
- Ma/Wala či: Nothing <ما/ولا شي>
- Club/Qlub: Hearts <قلوب>

The Long Vowels:

The long vowels in Neo-Lebanese are the Arabic *Alf* (long a), *Wāw* (long u), and *Ya'* (long i) in addition to a *long o* and *long e* that don't exist in current Arabic writing.

¹¹ Picture adapted from World LEBANESE DABKE Championship

¹² Refer to **The Shortened Suffixes** section

The Shortened Suffixes:

1) The -Iyye:

The suffix “-iyye/-eyye” is shortened to an “-ie” since the *i* is a long vowel in Neo-Lebanese.

- Lebnênie (لبنانية)
- Eşaṣabie (عصبية)
- Ḍayeāwie (ضيعاوية)
- Berrie (برية)
- Aḍie/Qaḍie (قضية)

2) The -Uha/-Oua:

The suffix “-uha/-oua” is shortened to an “ua” since the *u* is also a long vowel in Neo-Lebanese.

- Saracua/Saraq¹³: They stole it (سرقوها)
- Eammarua: They built it (عمروها)
- Čabrua: Tell her! (خبروها)
- Čabbua: They hid her/it (خبوها)

3) The -Iha/Iya:

The suffix “-Iha/Iya” is shortened to an “-ia” also since the *i* is a long vowel.

- Čallia: Keep her/it (خليها)
- Čabbia: Hid her/it (خبئها)
- Waṭṭia: Make her/it lower (وطئها)

The Epenthetic Vowel:

Epenthetic vowels within words are omitted, since they vary between Lebanese accents and are dropped in conjugations:

- Kalb not Kaleb/Kalib since it's kalbo not kalebo after conjugation.
- Mečk^{le} not Mečekle/Mečikle since it's Mečkeltek not Mečekeltek after conjugation.

¹³ Refer to **The Hamze** section

- Leɛbte not Lesebte
- Mehtre not Mehetre
- Akl not Akel
- ɛacl/ɛaql not ɛacel/ɛaqel

Note: *i* is a long *i*. A word like “Kalib” would be pronounced *kaleeb*. The only exception to the usage of *i* besides as a long vowel is only in some suffixes.¹⁴

Vowel Endings:

Although vowel endings technically represent long vowels in Arabic, they have been shortened in speech and so are written that way in Neo-Lebanese.

- Râḥo: They went <راحوا>
- Jebna: We brought <جبنا>
- Ktêbe: My book <كتابي>

However, a few exceptions to shortening are:

- Lê aka Lêsh: why <ليش>
- Jê aka Jêye: is coming <جايي>
- Hâ & Hê aka Hayda & Hayde: this <هذه/هذه>
- Xâ/Xô & Xê aka Xôd & Xede: take (in imperative form) <خذ>
- Jebnê: We brought him/it <جبناه>
- Lsebnê: We played him/it <لعبناه>

Or words that end with a long *i* or long *u*, since they are already long vowels as *i* and *u* in Neo-Lebanese:

- Či: Thing <شي>
- Ču: What <شو>
- Xalli: Keep him/it! <خليه>
- Xabbi: Hide him/it! <خبّيه>
- Xallu: They kept him/it <خلّوه>
- Xabbu: They hid him/it <خبّوه>

¹⁴ Refer to **The Shortened Suffixes** section

C. The Consonants:

The consonants in the script are largely based on Arabic romanisations (i.e. Arabic IPA), as well as the Tamazight Latin script.

Doubled Final Consonant:

Some words get a doubled final consonant since they're enforced (geminated) which means "shaddah". This only happens in words that have one syllable (monosyllabic) and a short vowel.

However, some of them aren't enforced. These are the ones that aren't enforced in speech. This can be shown by hypothetical conjugation to amplify gemination (E.g. Rabbo for Rabb; God), or preferably simply placing them before the definite article *El'*¹⁵ (The) or the conjunction *W* (And) as exhibited in the following examples.

Examples of enforced words:

- Bass (Only): Eṭine bass eč'čacfe l'zğire (Give me only the little piece)
- Emm (Mother): Emm el'kell (Mother of all)
- Bayy (Father) & Čabb (Man): Bayy eč'čabb (The man's father)
- Sabb (He cursed): Sabb el'malek (He cursed the king)
- Ḥabb (He loved): Ḥabb el'ğennêyye (He liked the song)
- Mayy (Water): Mayy w hawa (Water and air)
- Rabb (God): Rabb es'sama (God of the sky)

Examples of unenforced words:

- Men (From): Ana men eč'čmêl (I'm from the north)

¹⁵ Refer to **The Definite Article *el'*** section

- Bas (But): Ғelwe el'benêye bas mkassara (The building is nice but broken down)

The Hamze:

The *Hamze* (C/ء) is omitted if the word starts with a vowel and also replaces *Qa* (Q/ق) depending on the Lebanese accent.

- Ana (I, me)
- Ê (Yes)
- Alb/Qalb (Heart)
- Ime/Qime (Worth)
- Eza (If)
- Essa (Now; in some rural areas)
- Barca/Barqa (Lightning bolt)
- Aktar (More)
- Noçta/Noqta (Dot)
- Racye (My opinion)
- Emm (Mother)

D. The Definite Article *el'*:

The definite article is *El'* in Neo-Lebanese, which is equivalent to "the" in English. Its orthography is based on how it's written in Maltese; whether or not it follows a coronal consonant.



B	C	Ĉ	D	Ḍ	Ɛ	F	G
ب	ء	ش	د	ض	ع	ف	گ
Ǧ	H	Ḥ	J	K	L	M	N
غ	ه	ح	ج	ك	ل	م	ن
P	Q	R	S	Ṣ	T	Ṭ	V
پ	ق	ر	س	ص	ت	ط	ف
W	X	Y	Z	Ẓ			
و	خ	ي	ز	ظ			

Solar Consonants
Lunar Consonants

Note: "ج" (J) is a Solar consonant in Lebanese but not in MSA due to the Lebanese equivalent being /ʒ/ (soft J) unlike the MSA /dʒ/ (hard J).

Lunar Consonant (Non-coronal):

1) If followed by a non-coronal consonant (called حروف

قمرية "Lunar letters"), the *El'* is written as it is:

- Kbir el'fil (كبير الفيل)
- Jept el'elbe (جبت العلية)
- El'kalb rfiq el'ensên (الكلب رفيق الانسان)

2) However, the article becomes an *l'* after a vowel in a sentence:

- Harabo l'êlam (هربوا العالم)
- Kele l'akl (كلي الاكل)

Solar Consonant (Coronal):

1) The article assimilates to a following coronal consonant (called *حروف شمسية* "Solar Letters"):

- D ed'dars (الدرس)
- Ḍ eḍ'ḍayṣa (الضيعة)
- J ej'jêč (الجيش)
- L el'lêl (الليل)
- N en'nhâr (النهار)
- R er'râs (الراس)
- S es'sensêl (السنسال)
- Č eč'čams (الشمس)
- Ş eş'şêf (المصيف)
- T et'trâb (التراب)
- Ṭ eṭ'ṭarîc (الطريق)
- Z ez'zars (الزرع)
- Ż ez'żolm (الظلم)

2) The assimilated article loses the vowel and apostrophe if it followed a vowel in the sentence.

- Nčâlla şşala macbule (إنشاء الله الصلى مقبولة)
- Hayde jjebne ṭaybe (هيدي الجبنة طيبة)
- El'mafatiḥ ea ttâwle (المفاتيح عالطاولة)
- Ḥa eshar ta ččams teṭlae (حإسهر تالشمس تطلع)
- Eja rrayyes (إجا الرئيس)

E. Loan Words & Letters:

Loan Words:

Loan words into Lebanese are "Libanised"; they will be written per Lebanese pronunciation and Neo-Lebanese orthography.

- Mêrsi (Merci)
- Dapras (To get depressed)
- Kawran (To catch Covid-19)
- Vitês (Vitesse)
- Muvi (Movie)
- Drâye (Diarrhoea)
- Frêz (Strawberry)
- Taksi/Sêrvis (Taxi/Service)
- Pârti (Party)

Loan Letters:

The letter Q may be considered “non-Lebanese” by some, however, it is a fact that it exists in Lebanese Druze as well as some other Lebanese towns, and so could be implemented in their writing if they chose so.

The sounds /v/ and /p/ are thought to be inexistent in native Lebanese words, however the /p/ sound forms if the letter B is followed by an unvoiced consonant and has no open/low vowel (a or o) behind it:

- Jepta (I got her): جبتهـا
- Psayne (Cat): بسيني
- Pčuf (I will see): بشوف

Preferably, the letter P is used in these places, but it is up to the writer to implement this.

III. Sample Text.

A. In English:

Once upon a time, there lived a king and a queen in a large castle. The king's name is Walid, and the queen is named Sarah. Walid was very strong and brave. He liked riding horses and swimming. Sarah was different. She was kind and cute, and preferred walking around in nature and listening to the birds chirping. They had a small cat called Wabar. They lived a nice life. The end.

B. In Neo-Lebanese:

Be yôm men el'eyyêm, kên fi malek w maleke eÿyčîn be aşr kbir. El'malek esmo Walid, wel'maleke esma Sâra. Walid kên ktir awe w abadây. Kên yhebb yerkab xêl w yetsabbaḥ. Sâra kênet ğêr. Kênet laṭife w ẓarife, w kênet tfaḍḍel tkazder be ṭṭabiea w tetsammae sa zaczacet el'saṣafir. Kên eandon psayne zġantura esma Wabar. Eêčo eiče ḥelwe. En'nehêye.

C. In Lebanese Arabic:

بيوم من الايام، كان في ملك وملكة عايشين بقصر كبير. الملك
 اسمه وليد، والملكة اسمها سارة. وليد كان كتير قوي وأبضاي. كان
 يحب يركب خيل ويتسبح. سارة كانت غير. كانت لطيفة وظريفة، وكانت
 تفضل تكزدر بالطبيعة وتسمع عزقزت العصافير. كان عندهن بسينة
 زغنتورة اسمها وبر. عاشوا عيشة حلوة. النهاية.

D. In Arabizi:

B yom men l iyyem, ken fi malek w maleke 3eyshin b aser kbir. L malek esmo Walid wel maleke esma Sarah. Walid ken ktir awe w abaday. Ken yheb yerkab l khel w yetsabbah. Sarah kenit gher. Kenit latife w zarife w kenit tfaddel tkazder bel tabi3a w tetsamma3 3a za2za2et l 3asafir. Ken 3andon bsayne zghantou-ra esma Wabar. 3esho 3ishe helwe. L niheye.

Note: all samples and word examples in this paper are written in my own Lebanese accent.

A. Conclusion.

In this paper we've discussed the issues the Lebanese language is facing with regards to its written text. We've mentioned viable solutions that have already been implemented by other languages from which we can take valuable lessons, and even adopt some solutions for our own writing style. This paper aims to serve as a guideline rather than as a list of demands to be implemented. It is an imperative that we, as a people, adopt measures like these. Either Latin script or Arabic script could be manipulated to rejuvenate our language, and thus maintain the main vehicle of our mesmerising culture. We must make sure it remains true to our methods of pronunciation rather than opt for the easy solution; the one that is no solution at all. The task weighs on us, as Lebanese people, to implement these much-needed changes in this often-forgotten field of our culture and society. Even if we're facing much bigger issues at hand, it's always better to address this issue before it increases in magnitude. Hopefully this paper will serve to engender interest in this subject and spark debate that will lead to a long-lasting and practical solution to our orthography.



B. Downloading the Alphabet.

A. On Phone:

This keyboard is available on both Android and Apple phones through the Microsoft SwiftKey keyboard app. After downloading it, add the "Kabyle" or "Taqbaylit" language in the app through its settings.

For Android:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.touchtype.swiftkey&hl=en>

For Apple:

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/microsoft-swiftkey-keyboard/id911813648>

B. On PC:

Unfortunately, this keyboard is unavailable on Mac laptops. Download using either of the following links then read the "guide" PDF, as it explains how to use the keyboard.

For Qwerty:

<http://www.akufi.org/en/tools/qwertylat2.html>

For Azerty:

<http://www.akufi.org/en/tools/azerty-fr.html>



How to use keyboard on PC:

Remember to switch languages to the one you downloaded above. You can do that by holding Left Alt+Shift on Windows.

- 1) The alternate letters are found by holding the Right-Hand Alt button and the English equivalent of the special letter.

Examples:

- Right Alt + H = Ĥ
- Right Alt + S = Š
- Right Alt + C = Č

- 2) The \mathcal{E} \mathcal{e} is the bracket "]" on your keyboard.

- 3) The Lebbêde diacritic $\hat{\text{e}}$ is the number 3 on the keyboard. It is typed before the vowel.

Button 3 + e = $\hat{\text{e}}$

- 4) To access the numbers, you need to hold the Shift button first, or simple use your numberpad.

- Shift + Button 3 = 3
- Shift + Button 7 = 7



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