

from Michael Craig Hillmann, *Persian for America(ns)*® Archives

The Letter 'Aléf

- At one point in Edward FitzGerald's *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (5th edition), the title character says:

A Hair perhaps divides the False and True; / Yes; and a single Alif were the clue—

Could you but find it—to the Treasure-house, / And peradventure to THE MASTER too; ...

As problematic as appreciation of the word “Alif” here may prove for some readers, the various and inconsistent, and “exception”-filled descriptions of the Persian letter 'aléf in Persian textbooks and manuals for speakers of English suggest that Farsi Persian's 'aléf is more problematic than Khayyám's. This lesson offers suggestions about the letter that may make it less problematic English-speaking learners of Persian.

§1. Here follow various distinctive and common uses of the letter 'aléf in word-initial, word-medial, and word-final position. Read the list and answer the questions in the boxes to the left.

1. Is the letter /'ayn/ a consonant?	/'ámmâ/ – /'abâ/	.۱. اَمَّا – عِبَا
2. Do the letters /'ayn/ and /aléf/ function identically in word-initial position?	/'eshâré/ – /'eshq/	.۲. اِشَارَه – عِشْق
3. If the consonant letter /'ayn/ represents a glottal stop and if word-initial /aléf/ and /'ayn/ function identically, does that make initial /'aléf/ a consonant representing a glottal stop?	/'omúr/ – 'obúr/	.۳. اُمُور – عُبُور
4. One common Persian word begins with /hamzé/ + /ye/ together pronounced /'i/. Does that suggest that the letter /aléf/ and /hamzé/ may serve the same function in some situations?	/'ide'/ – /'isaví/	.۴. اَيِدَه – عَيْسَوِي
5. When /hamzé/, which signals a glottal stop, and /'aléf/ function identically, does that make /'alef/ a glottal stop in such situations?	/'ut/ – /'ud/	.۵. اَوْت – اَو = او /'u/
	/'âj/	.۶. آج – آ = ا + ا /'â/
		.۷. اَيْنَجَا – ئِيدِرُوژِن
	/so'âl/	.۸. سَوَال – سَوَال = سو + ا + ا + ل
	/ejrâ'/, /ejrâ/	.۸. اِجْرَاء، اِجْرَا
	/hâttâ/ (=... = الف مقصوره)	.۹. حَتَّى = حَتَّا
	/re'âktór/	.۱۰. رَاكْتُور
	/ta'sís/ – /ta'lím/	.۱۱. تَأْسِيس – تَعْلِيم
	/mota'asséf/ /mote'asséf/	.۱۲. مُتَأَسَّف
	/manshá'/ – /manbá'/	.۱۲. مَنشَأ – مَنبَع

§3. The foregoing examples and commentary describe the letter 'aléf as a vowel letter when it appears unmarked word-medial and word-final position and as a consonant when it appears in word-initial and syllable initial position. That experts describes Persian syllables as of two basic sorts: CV and CVCC further supports the utility of construing the functions of the letter 'aléf as suggested above, contrary textbook commentary notwithstanding.

§3. Sections §1.4 and §1.6 in *Persian Reading and Writing* (Dunwoody Press, 2010) describe and illustrate vowel and consonantal uses of the four letters in the Persian alphabet that can represent vowel sounds: ا, و, ی, and ه.

1.4. Vowel Letters

The Tehran dialect of the Fârsi Persian language has nine vowel sounds: /â/, /u/, /i/, /a/, /o/, /e/, /ây/, /ow/, and /ay/.

§1.4.1. The three letters *aléf*, *vâv*, and *ye* can represent the vowel sounds /â/ (as in "pond"), /u/ (as in "flute"), and /i/ (as in "feet"), respectively, when these letters appear in the middle or at the end of a word, as in the following examples.

[bag]	/sâk/	ساک	.	[jazz]	/jâz/	جاز	←	/â/
[deluxe]	/luks/	لوکس	.	[foot (12")]	/fu/	فوت	←	/u/
[list]	/list/	لیست	.	[movie]	/film/	فیلم	←	/i/

A fourth letter used to represent a vowel sound is *he*, written either « ه » (final shape) or « ه » (independent shape), which can represent the vowel sound /...é/, [as in the English word "fed"], but only as the last letter of a word. The letter *he*, pronounced /é/, appears in these words.

سه	.	سوکسه	.	موزه	.	فیله	.	کافه
three		popularity /suksé/ sex appeal		museum /muzé/		filet /filé/		café /kâfé/

The letter *he* can also represent the sound /h/ [as in the English word "hot"] at the end of a word.

سیاه	.	کوه	.	کاه	.	ماه
black /siyâh/		mountain /kuh/		straw /kâh/		moon, month /mâh/

Word-final *he* usually represents the sound /é/ when it follows a consonant and the sound /h/ when it follows a vowel. The letter *he* is one of a handful of letters in the Persian alphabet which can represent more than one sound.

§1.4.2. *He*. The letter shapes « ه » or « ه », whether they represent the sound /e/ or the sound /h/, are the final and independent shapes, respectively, of a letter whose initial shape is « ه » and whose medial shape is « ه ». In its initial and medial shapes, the letter *he* always represents the sound /h/, as in the following words. In the following sample words, note the suffix « ها... », the most common pluralizing noun suffix in Persian. The « ها... » suffix takes the word stress or accent when added to a singular noun.

موزه ها	.	فیلمها = فیلم ها	.	هیپی	.	هال
museums		movies/films		hippie		hall
				ساکها = ساک ها		
				backs/sacks		

The plural suffix /hâ/ is always written separately after a word ending in /he/ representing /é/.

Here follow other words using the letter *he* to represent /h/ (anywhere in a word) and /é/ (at the end of a word).

هاکی	.	ماهی	.	موها	.	کوه ها، کوهها	.	جوجه - جوجه ها	.	لاله
hockey		fish		hair		mountains		chicken /jujé/		tulip /lâlé/

1.6. Aléf, Vâv, and Ye

All of the letters in the Persian alphabet are conventionally considered to represent consonant sounds. However, the kinds of words illustrated thus far demonstrate that the three letters *aléf*, *vâv*, and *ye*, when not the first letter of a word, may represent, respectively, the vowel sounds /â/, /u/, and /i/. And the letter « هـ », usually called *hé-ye do cheshm* [two-eyed *he*] often represents the sound /é/ when it is the last letter of a word (written « هـ » or « هـ »), .

§1.6.1. Except in the case of Arabic loanwords beginning with the letter 'ayn (described in Chapter §1.7.4), if a word begins with the vowel sounds /â/, /u/, or /i/, it is written as follows.

[Asia]	/âsiyâ/	آسیا	.	[free]	/âzâd/	آزاد	←	آ = ا + ا	←	/â/	۲۰
[August]	/ut/	اوت	.	[he/she, him/her]	/u/	او	←	او = و + ا	←	/u/	
[Italy]	/itâliyâ/	ایتالیا	.	[this]	/in/	این	←	ای = ی + ا	←	/i/	

When the letter *aléf* begins a word, it is considered a consonant, representing a soundless pause called a glottal stop. Thus, the word « آسیا », pronounced /âsiyâ/, begins with an *aléf* written horizontally representing /' followed by a second *aléf* representing the vowel sound /â/.

§1.6.2. When the letter *ye* begins a word, it represents a /y/ sound.

یونان	.	یاس	.	یاد	.	یا	۲۱
Greece		jasmine		memory		or	

The letter *ye* in the middle or at the end of a word can represent /i/, /y/, or /ay/ (as in the word "day"). For example:

[chemistry]	/shimi/	شیمی	.	[chic]	/shik/	شیک	←	/i/	۲۲
[truck]	/kâmyun/	کامیون	.	[Asian]	/âsiyây/	آسیایی	←	/y/	
[when?]	/kay/	کی	.	[cake]	/kayk/	کیک	←	/ay/	

When medial *aléf* precedes *ye* in the same syllable, the *ye* represents /y/ and combines with *aléf* to produce the sound /ây/ [as in the English word "sigh"]. For example, the Persian word for "tea" is « چای », pronounced /chây/.

§1.6.3. When the letter *vâv* begins a written word, it represents a /v/ sound.

ویتامین	.	ویسکی	.	ویزا	.	ویلا	.	وانیل	.	ویزیت	۲۳
vitamin		whiskey		visa		villa		vanilla		visit (to a doctor)	

/visk/

The letter *vâv* in the middle or at the end of a word can represent /u/, /v/, /o/ [as in the word "tote"], and /ow/ [as in the words "mow," "row," and "tow"]. For example:

[hair]	/mu/	مو	.	[museum]	/muzé/	موزه	←	/u/
[demon, devil]	/div/	دیو	.	[kiwi (fruit)]	/kiv/	کیوی	←	/v/
[two]	/do/	دو	.	[hot dog]	/sosís/	سوسیس	←	/o/
[wave]	/mowj/	موج	.	[soda water, soda]	/sowdâ/	سودا	←	/ow/

Read this list of European loanwords aloud. Each word features a « و » letter pronounced /o/ (as in the words "so" or "go"). Then listen to the audio recording of the list.

• تانگو • دیالوگ • سودا • سوسیالیست • سوسیالیستی •
 • سوسیالیسم • سوسیس • سونا • سونات • کیوسک • جوک •
 ماندولین • میلیون • یوگا • یویو • تونیک

English equivalents. Line 1 (from right to left): tango, dialogue, soda (water), socialist, socialistic. Line 2: socialism, hot dog, sauna, sonata, kiosk, waiter, joke, mandolin, million /miliyun/. Line 3: yoga, yo-yo, tunic/tonic.