THE MORPHOLOGY OF MEHRI QISHN DIALECT IN YEMEN

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A STUDY ON THE MORPHOLOGY OF MEHRI OF QISHN DIALECT IN YEMEN

by

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<td>1</td>
<td>first person</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>second person</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>third person</td>
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<td>//</td>
<td>phonemic transcription</td>
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<td>[]</td>
<td>phonetic transcription</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘‘</td>
<td>English translation of Mehri forms</td>
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<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td>prefix and suffix morpheme boundary</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt; &gt;</td>
<td>infix morpheme boundary</td>
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<tr>
<td>=</td>
<td>clitic morpheme boundary</td>
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<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>consonant in templatic representation</td>
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<tr>
<td>√</td>
<td>root morpheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>→</td>
<td>become, change into</td>
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<tr>
<td>~</td>
<td>cluster</td>
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<tr>
<td>.</td>
<td>boundary of syllable</td>
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# LIST OF ABBREVIATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>singular</td>
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<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>plural</td>
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<tr>
<td>c.</td>
<td>common gender</td>
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<td>m.</td>
<td>masculine</td>
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<tr>
<td>f.</td>
<td>feminine</td>
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<tr>
<td>suff.</td>
<td>suffix</td>
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<td>pref.</td>
<td>prefix</td>
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<td>perf.</td>
<td>perfective</td>
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<td>imperf.</td>
<td>Imperfective</td>
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<td>pass.</td>
<td>passive</td>
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<td>subjunctive</td>
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<td>subj.</td>
<td>subject</td>
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<td>obj.</td>
<td>objective</td>
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<td>imp.</td>
<td>imperative</td>
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<td>comp.</td>
<td>comparative</td>
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<tr>
<td>fut.</td>
<td>future</td>
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<tr>
<td>procl.</td>
<td>proclitic</td>
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<tr>
<td>encl.</td>
<td>enclitic</td>
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<tr>
<td>poss.</td>
<td>possessive</td>
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<tr>
<td>prep.</td>
<td>preposition</td>
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<tr>
<td>dem.</td>
<td>demonstrative</td>
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<td>prog.</td>
<td>progressive</td>
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<tr>
<td>rel.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MQ</td>
<td>Mehri Qishn</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Modern South Arabian languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESA</td>
<td>Epigraphic South Arabian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>International Phonetic Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IA</td>
<td>Item and Arrangement Model</td>
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IP  Item and Process Model
WP  Word and Paradigm Model
OCP  Obligatory Contour Principle
C  consonant
V  vowel
n  noun
conn.  connective
accus.  accusative
asp.  aspectual
temp.  temporal
comp.  comparative
emph.  emphatic
part.  particle
quant.  quantifier
part.  Particle
prever.  preverbal
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS & SEMINARS


Morfologi Dialek Mehri Qishn di Yemen

ABSTRAK

Teori Perangkaian dalam Morfologi Semitik (morfologi akar kata dan corak), Model Percubaan Deskriptif Sinkronik dan pendekatan eklektik IP+WP. Maklumat yang diperolehi daripada data morfologi dalam kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa MQ suatu bahasa yang berdasarkan sistem akar kata tri-konsonan dalam lingkungan morfologi akar kata dan corak. Akar kata itu sendiri tidak mempunyai sebarang makna yang mutlak, tetapi lebih merupakan sebagai satu set akar kata yang mengandungi tiga konsonan yang bermungkinan membawa lingkungan makna yang tertentu (Kramer, 2005). Akar kata tersebut hendaklah dimasukkan ke dalam corak terbitan, yang terdiri daripada huruf-huruf vokal di antara setiap konsonan dan kadangkala mengandungi juga penambahan imbuhan, bagi membolehkan maknanya menjadi nyata. Sebagai tambahan, MQ mempunyai peranti pembentukan kata kedua seperti struktur kata dasar dan akhiran, yang menghubungkan kata akhiran pada suatu teras, yang pada kebiasaannya merupakan suatu perkataan, seperti yang terdapat dalam bahasa Inggiris. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa MQ adalah satu bahasa Semitik yang mempunyai ciri-ciri sintetik yang tinggi, yang kaya dengan unsur-unsur morfologi. Sistem kata kerja dan frasa namanya adalah sangat mudah berubah-ubah, dengan kata awalan dan kata akhiran sebagai penunjuk kategori bagi kelas-kelas seperti orang, nombor, gender dan kala kata kerja. Morfologi terbitannya juga kaya dan mempunyai pelbagai kata terbitan tambahan yang terdiri daripada berbagai jenis struktur di samping mempunyai kata akar, kata dasar dan alomorf imbuhan yang sangat kompleks. Akhir sekali, implikasi pedagogi dan
penyelidikan selanjutnya dicadangkan untuk mendapatkan pemahaman yang lebih menyeluruh terhadap sistem linguistik dan kedudukan MQ itu sendiri di samping mendapatkan garis panduan ke arah pemeliharaan MQ.
The Morphology of Mehri Qishn Dialect in Yemen

ABSTRACT

This study describes the morphology of Mehri Qishn (henceforth, MQ) in Yemen. MQ is one of the six Modern South Arabian unwritten languages, related to the southern branch of the western Semitic family. It is considered as an endangered language. Specifically, this descriptive study aimed: (1) to identify the morphological items (morphemes, morphs, etc.) of Mehri Qishn dialect, (2) to describe the phonemic shapes of Mehri Qishn dialect morphemes, (3) to describe how Mehri Qishn dialect morphemes are internally formed and distributed. The study adopted the ethnographic qualitative design. It involved 10 key informants out of 35 of different ages selected by judgment sampling. The data on MQ morphology were elicited by following Swadesh list, informal interview, participant observation, and oral morphology questionnaire which were designed and adapted from Dahl’s, (1985) and Bouquiaux and Thomas questionnaires (1992). A number of models and a theory were adopted as the basis for research design and for describing the morphological data of the study. They include Nonconcatenative Theory of Semitic Morphology (Root and Pattern Morphology), Synchronic Descriptive Experimental Model, and Item and Process (henceforth, IP) and Word and Paradigm (henceforth, WP) Eclectic Approach. The elicited morphological data of the study revealed that MQ is based on a tri-consonantal root system within Root and Pattern Morphology. Roots themselves have no definite meaning, but
rather a root set of three consonants carries a range of potential meanings (Kramer, 2005). A root must be placed into a derivational pattern, which consists of vowels between each consonant and sometimes the addition of affixes, in order for the meaning to be realized. Additionally, MQ has a second word-formation device i.e. the stem-and-suffix structure, which attaches a suffix to a base, usually a word, as in English. The findings showed that MQ is a highly synthetic Semitic language with a rich morphology. The verbal and nominal systems are highly inflectional, with prefixes and suffixes indicating categories such as person, number, gender and tense for verbs. Derivational morphology is also rich and varied with a large array of derivational affixes of various structures and with an extremely complex root, stem and affix allomorphy. Finally, pedagogical implications and further research are suggested to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the linguistic system and situation of MQ and a guideline towards MQ preservation.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the general background to the study, which includes the historical background of Modern South Arabian languages. It introduces the discovery of Modern South Arabian languages, its genetic family and its classification within the Afro-Asiatic superfamily, Mehri language and its speakers. The chapter includes the statement of the problem under study, the significance of the study, the limitations of the study and the purpose of study including research questions and objectives.

1.2 The Historical Background of Modern South Arabian Languages

The discovery of a number of languages in various regions of the Arabian Peninsula has put an end to the controversy over the diversity of these languages. Many inscriptions have been found in the northern and north-western parts of the Peninsula testifying to the former existence, in these parts, of languages including Safatic, Lihyanic, Thamudic, and Nabataen (Al-Mashani, 1999; Bakalla, 1981). In the southern parts, inscriptions of a wide variety have been identified by linguists as Minaic, Sabaic, Hadramitic, and Qatabanic. While all these languages are now extinct, they can still be traced not only in the inscriptions but certain features of them also in colloquial Yemeni Arabic and in all probability the Modern South Arabian (henceforth, MSA) languages (Ibid, Hujailan, 2003). Versteegh (1997)
expressed the probability that Mehri goes back to a spoken variety of these languages.

The South Arabian languages may have remained the spoken languages, yet they could not last long against the overwhelming influence of classical Arabic and its dialects (Hujailan, 2003). The latter swept away and replaced the southern language in the whole of Yemen and the South of the Arabian Peninsula, except the MSA languages (Al-Mashani, 1999). To be exact, what remains of the Sayhadic languages of South Arabia is to be found in the contemporary Yemeni dialects, which are mostly derivatives of classical Arabic in regard to general structure.

Over the last two centuries, Western linguists and scholars have exerted much effort in deciphering and studying these languages as a facet of their more general interest in the study of Semitic languages. The Arab linguists, on the other hand, while recognizing the existence of these languages and dialects, unfortunately have not studied them in the way that Western linguists have. For instance, the famous Arab linguist Abu ‘Amr b. al-‘Ala (1989) stated, as cited in Al-Mashani (1999), Al-dhofari (1999) and Al-Mekhlafi (2001), that the tongue of Himyar, as well as that of the furthest parts of Yemen (aqasi al-Yemen) and their Arabic, do not belong to the Arabic of the North. Himyar (or Himyaritic) refers to the languages of those Arabs who are mentioned in the old South Arabian sources and who settled in this region, South Arabia (Versteeg, 1997). Al-Hamadani (1983) shared the same view with Abu ‘Amr (1989), although he is a Yemeni historian and
linguist. Al-Mashani (1999) commented that in spite of the fact that the Arabs are considered as one group, they have different tongues and there is a variance among them in pronunciation and utterance. Further, Ibn Jinni (1952) wrote that it was undoubttable that the language of Himyar is completely different from that of Ibnay Nizar, which refers to the North Arabic (Ibid). Finally, in referring to Himyar, Ibn Manzur (1990) stated that they have languages and expressions which deviate from the dialects of other Arabs. Katzner (2002) referred to the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula where the people speak a number of dialects known collectively as South Arabic. Katzner (2002) affirmed that these dialects differ so greatly from the Arabic of the north that South Arabic is often considered a separate language. By South Arabic Katzner (2002) unquestionably meant the MSA languages. Because there is no intercomprehension between the speakers of these languages and the speakers of north Arabic they are therefore considered as distinct and separate languages.

There is a great scarcity of information about the ancient languages of South Arabia (Al-Mashani, 1999). The unavailability of this information would not help in giving a clear scope of the historical study of the ancient Arabian languages. As long as the present study is only concerned with the morphology of Mehri language in its present status, this scarcity would not have much effect on it. Indeed, it is not necessary to know the history of a language in order to be able to describe it as a synchronic investigation does not necessarily presuppose diachronic investigation (Langacker, 1972; Al-Saaran, 1998). Kastovsky (2005)
assumed that only after a synchronic description has been provided one can look at the history of the patterns characterising a synchronic system.

There are several factors that helped to preserve the Mehris in the most southern part of South Arabia. One of these factors is that Al-Mahrah region lay too far away from the centers of classical Arabic and its dialects (Hujailan, 2003). A very long distance stretches between Al-Mahrah and the nearest such centers, Hadrami cities and Hejaz, a distance covered by extensive deserts, very high mountains, plains, and very deep valleys.

The staple foods of the Mehri people are meat, fish in coastal areas, millet, and seasonal crops (Hofstede, 1998). This has also been a major factor in keeping the tribes isolated from outside events and influences of change. Since there have been no pressing circumstances compelling them to mix with outsiders, their language has not been subject to changes. Even should tribesmen go to make purchases outside their territories, their dialogue will be very limited. It will not go beyond questions about provisions and the answers to those questions. According to Crystal (2000), in most settings, clusters of factors interact in preserving the languages of minority communities. Crystal (2000) drew on the conclusion of a researcher’s report on the Ugong of Thailand that a language survives in geographical areas which are relatively isolated; the communities there are more likely to be economically self-sufficient and to have little contact with outside groups.
The tribes in this region have a high degree of self-respect and feeling of personal nobility, and so they greatly value their adherence to their own languages. The value that they attach to their history and culture is related to their feeling of purity and distinction from others (Ibid). Had it not been for the natives' tenacious adherence to their language, it would not have lasted and survived against classical Arabic and its dialects and other influences for change.

It can be said that there was never sufficient opportunity for classical Arabic and its dialects to constitute a real threat to the Mehris, comparable to the way in which classical Arabic obliterated the Sayhadic languages and dialects in different regions of Yemen. Although scholars admit the existence of a south Arabian language different from that of Modar, they seem to have done nothing to study it even from an exploratory point of view as contemporary scholars and researchers do. According to Al-Mashani (1999), our original knowledge of the Sayhadic languages is derived from Islamic sources and it remained sparse for many centuries because it was based on what was copied from early Arab scholars. The information obtained from the sources amounts to no more than brief descriptions and prefabricated, premature judgments, which are not founded on comparative studies or sufficient data.

While there is only very limited information about the Mehris in Arabic sources, nevertheless there is sufficient information to conclude that they are contemporary south Arabian languages used throughout a very remote area at the end of the southern Arabian Peninsula. As pointed out by Al-Mashani (1999) this is
unsurprising if we consider the scant regard paid by these Arabic sources to those Sayhadian languages and dialects which are more famous than Mehris. Most of the material in these Arabic sources about the Mehris is confined to noting the difficulty it presents to outsiders and to remarking on its oddness and certain selected characteristics. All these remarks are evidently based on insufficient knowledge.

No doubt, MSA languages of today are not identical with the ancient ones as it is not possible for a language to remain unaltered over such a long course of time. The language of any society is subject to the changes that necessarily occur. No society will remain immune from these changes (Crystal, 2000). Modern Mehri, for instance, is not the same as that which existed during the ages of Himyar (Ali, 1989). This region, South Arabia, has undergone many social and economic forces, together with many different political events, since the emergence of Islam. These events and forces must have had considerable effects on the language and social structure in this Mehri region (Ibid).

In referring to the linguistic situation in the Arabian Peninsula, Versteegh (1997) described the south Arabian languages as the only foreign languages in the region, which were no longer used in its epigraphic form but some varieties, known as the Modern South Arabian languages, must have remained in use as colloquial languages spoken today by some tens of thousands of speakers in the provinces of Mahra (Yemen) and Dhofar (Oman), and on the Island of Soqotra. Nurse and Philippsen (2003) went astray in the identification of the language spoken in the Island of Soqotra. They described it as “a longstanding Swahili-speaking
community on the island of Soqotra, off the Somali coast but technically part of the Republic of South Yemen.” (Ibid, p. 1). Nurse and Philippson (2003) stumbled on geographic confusion when they named a Semitic language i.e. Soqotri, as a Swahili although the natives of the island are Arab Yemenis speaking a MSA language belonging to the Afro-Asiatic languages. This contradiction reflects the negligence, by linguistic scholars, into which MSA languages have been put.

There are conflicting opinions regarding the terminological meaning of the word ‘Mahrah’. Is it a name of a man, of a geographic region, or of a group of tribes (Ali, 1989)? Many writers in search for its origin direct their effort into genealogy and kinship believing that the name must have been derived from a name of a family, or the forefather of the particular community, etc (Al-Aidaroos, 1996). The Mehri region today refers to a certain geographic location, and also to a group of tribes. According to Ali (1989) and Hujailan (2003), the Mehri people claim that they are descended from a historic personality (Mahrah Bin Amr Bin Hidan) whose name, due to his powerful and influential authority and high esteem, has been used to denote a number of tribes dwelling in the southern and eastern-southern coasts of the Arabian Peninsula. The land, which is inhabited by these tribes, is called Al-Mahrah. The name ‘Mahrah’ is restricted today to the district of Mahrah, one of the 20 districts of the Republic of Yemen.

Al-Aidaroos (1996) argued that this attribute or relation happens to exist sometimes, but not everywhere and in every field, and if it happens, it may not be
the only factor. Al-Aidaroos (1996) had the opinion that it was not necessary to relate it to a particular name of a person.

The Mahrah tribes occupy an extent of country exceeding that of any other tribe in the southeastern part of Arabia. According to Carter (1847, p. 339), the limits of their coast are generally allowed to be the opening of the great Wadi Masilah “… on the S.W, in 51 13’ E. long, and the town of Damkot, in the Bay of Al Kamer, "on the N.E, in 52 47’, E. long", giving them a coast-line of about 135 miles…”

Like the other great tribes, they have their divisions, their subdivisions, and their families or baits. Regarding their characteristic features, Carter (1847, p.340) described them that "they are by no means a handsome race, for their features are for the most part short and irregular, their eyes small, sunken, black, and piercing, with a cunning and very frequently a sinister expression of countenance." When two Mehris meet each other, as a salutation they touch each others’ fingers and bring their noses in contact with each other, side by side, and at the same time gently, though audibly, inhale the air through their nostrils (Ibid).

1.3 Afro-Asiatic languages

Mehri is an unwritten Semitic language of the South-Semitic subgroup. It belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family of languages, which have about 350 million speakers (Comrie, 2001; Katzner, 2002; Downing, 2004), as illustrated in Figure.1.1 below, – about three fourths of whom are in Africa, the rest in the
Middle East (Bender et al, 1976; Katzner, 2002) – which has several major branches: Semitic (including languages such as Arabic); Berber; Chadic (including languages such as Hausa); Cushitic (including languages such as Somali); Ancient Egyptian, whose modern descendants, Coptic, is preserved as a liturgical language; and Omotic (of which the most important is Wolaytta) (Rowan, 2006). South Semitic – which includes MSA languages and several extinct languages – are related in some aspects to Ethiopian languages (Ibid), as illustrated in the Figures 1.1 and 1.2 below:

![Map Showing the Distribution of Afro-Asiatic Languages](http://www.answers.com/afroasiatic)
In addition to Arabic and Hebrew, the Semitic languages include the Ethiopic language: Amharic, Tigrinya, Tigre, Gurage, and Harare. Modern South Arabian languages include Mehri, Jibbali, Jaddat Alharasis, Soqotri, Batharic, and Hobyot spoken in Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia as illustrated in Figure 1.2 below. Arabic dwarfs all the others in number of speakers (about 230 million) and is the official language of more than 15 countries (Katzner, 2002). The Berber languages are spoken in North Africa. There are about 12 million speakers in all: 7 million in Morocco, 3 million in Algeria, one million in Niger, 750,000 in Mali, and much smaller numbers in other countries (Ibid). The Cushitic languages are spoken mainly in Ethiopia and Somalia. According to Katzner (2002), they also extend into Eritrea, Sudan, and Kenya. In Ethiopia they are spoken by about half the population, while in Somalia the Somali language is spoken everywhere. Oromo, Sidamo, and Hadiyya as well as Somali belong too to the Cushitic languages in Ethiopia (Rowan, 2006), in addition to Beja spoken in southern Sudan and Afar spoken in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Oromo and Somali have a number of speakers in Kenya. At present Somali and Oromo are the only Cushitic languages with a formal system of writing (Katzner, 2002).
Figure. 1.2: A Family-Tree Diagram of Language Families, Hetzron and Bender (1976)

It can be noted from the above diagram that MSA languages are grouped together with the Semitic languages of Ethiopia and the Sayhadic languages (also called Epigraphic South Arabian or Old South Arabic) in the South Semitic branch. This subgrouping, as pointed out by Hetzron and Bender (1976), is justified by the shared feature of the presence of a vowel following the first consonant in the verb-form known as the imperfect.

1.3.1 An Overview of MSA Languages

The MSA languages are spoken in the south of Oman (Dhofar) and the southeast of Yemen (Al-Mahrah) (Appleyard, 2002). The name is slightly
misleading as they are not dialects of Arabic (Simeone-Senelle, 1997). The languages are grouped together with the Semitic languages of Ethiopia and the Sayhadic languages (also called Epigraphic South Arabian or Old South Arabian languages) in the South Semitic branch as shown previously. Mehri, Soqotri, Jibbali, Bathari, Harsusi and Hobyot belong to the MSA languages (Leslau, 1946, 1970; Stroomer, 1996) as shown in Figure 1.3 below. About 140,000 to 200,000 speakers speak these languages (Ali, 1989; Simeone-Senelle, 1997). Three of MSA are spoken in the Republic of Yemen: in the south and eastern part, in the province of Mahrah (Mehri and Hobyot) and in the island of Soqotra and the adjacent Abd-Al-Kuri small islands and Samha (Soqotri) (Simeone-Senelle, 1998, 2003). Four are spoken in the Sultanate of Oman, in the west in Dhofar (Mehri, Hobyot, Bathari, and Jibbali) and in Jiddat Al-Haras (Harsus) (Ibid).

The extent to which research has been carried out on the languages varies from language to language. Around 1900 many stories and some poems in Mehri (Southern dialect group), Jibbali and Soqotri were collected and published (Jahn 1902, Müller 1902, 1905, 1907, as cited in Hofstede (1998) and Amshoosh (2001). Until recently, extensive research has been carried out on Soqotri (Naumkin, 1998; Johnstone, 1968; Fox, 1975) and Mehri (Simeone-Senelle, 1997; Al-Aidaroos 1996, 1999, 2001; Sima, 2002) and to a lesser extent on Jibbali (Matthews, 1969; Johnstone, 1980; Hofstede, 1998) and Harsus (Johnstone, 1970).
Despite what the name might suggest, the MSA languages are different enough from Arabic to make intercomprehension impossible between speakers of any of the MSA and Arabic speakers (Simeone-Senelle, 1997, Amshoosh, 2001). Moreover, intercomprehension between the speakers of MSA is not possible. A speaker of Soqotri cannot understand a Mehri or Jibbali speaker except by an interpreter. The word ‘Mehris’ is sometimes metaphorically and commonly used to refer to the MSA (Al-Aidaroos, 2001). They are considered to be endangered languages due to the predominance and influence of Yemeni and Omani Arabic in all aspects of the life of the Mehri population (Hofstede, 1998; Al-Mashani, 1999; Amshoosh, 2001); the fact that was affirmed by Crystal (2000) when pinpointing
the factors which change the people’s culture. Crystal (2000) considered the circles of influence, of one culture on the other, to have become wider and wider. The language of the dominant culture infiltrates everywhere in three broad stages (Ibid). According to Crystal (2000), the first is large pressure, which can come from political, social, or economic sources, on the people to speak the dominant language. Regardless of the source of the pressure, the second stage is a period of emerging bilingualism. Additionally this bilingualism starts to decline, with the old language giving way to the new. Finally, the third stage turns up in which the younger generation becomes increasingly proficient in the new language, as mentioned by Crystal (2000), finding their first language less relevant to their new needs.

A variety of views did not agree on a tight definition of an endangered language (Bloklane & Hasselblatt, 2003). Crystal (2000, p. 20) classified the degree of endangerment of a language through the interaction of a number of factors, among which are the size of the population and the community of speakers, the community’s internal organization, and the way it perceives its own language, the position of the language as an identity marker and the number of children who learn it as their first language.

Cahill (1999) stated it simply enough, as mentioned by Headland (2004, p. 3), that a language is endangered “[when] it is in fairly imminent danger of dying out.” Headland referred to two ways, which were stated by Cahill (1999), to quickly recognize when a language is on its way to death. One, shared also by Crystal
(2000), is when the children in the community are not speaking the language of their parents, and the other is when there are only a small number of people left in the ethnolinguistic community.

Wurm (1998, p. 192) gave a characteristic definition, as cited in Headland (2004), to the point that it is “when a language is moribund”, meaning that it is no longer being learned by children as their mother tongue. Grimes (2001) shared Wurm’s definition too. Nettle and Romaine (2000, p. 39) stated that “many languages are endangered that are not yet moribund.” Crystal’s (2000, p. 20) definition is more inclusive than Wurm’s: “spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favourable circumstances and with a growth in community support”. Krauss’s (1992) definition is yet more inclusive: that all languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers are endangered. Only 600 of the world’s languages (less than 10%) are considered as “safe” from extinction, defined as those still being learned by children (Sampat, 2001; Whaley, 2003). Grimes (2001, p. 45) documented 450 languages spoken today “that are so small that they are in the last stages of becoming extinct, with only a few elderly speakers left in each one.”

Wurm (1998, 2003 p.192,), as cited in Blokland and Hasselblatt (2003, p. 112), proposed a typology of threat which includes five levels:
1. potentially endangered languages are socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers;
2. endangered languages have few or no children learning the language, and the
youngest good speakers are young adults;
3. seriously endangered languages have youngest good speakers of age 50 or
older;
4. moribund languages have only a handful of good speakers left, most of whom
are very old;
5. extinct languages have no speakers left. Accordingly, endangered languages
tend to be used by their communities only rarely, being substituted by the dominant
external language in the majority of its social functions.

Based on these criteria, one can affirm that the Mehri language is
potentially endangered or seriously threatened, because there are only good native
speakers (all of whom older than fifty) who still command all the aspects of the
language; and it is beginning to lose child speakers. Arabic has become the
prestige language inside the community due to its social and economic
advantages. Actually, Mehri is spoken only by Mehri natives or by those who have
learnt it as a second language. External factors, however, place all languages of
Mahrah at a disadvantage. The prestige of Arabic is increasing, which tends to
suppress all the minority languages in the region.

1.3.1.1 Jibbali

Jibbali is spoken in Dhofar, Oman. The number of speakers was estimated
by Johnstone at about 5,000 (Johnstone, 1975, p. 94). However, Simeone-Senelle
(1997) estimated the total number at about 30-50,000. Traditionally, three dialect groups are distinguished: Eastern dialects (including the dialect of the al-Hallaniyyat Islands), Central dialects, and Western dialects (Johnstone, 1981). A dictionary of a Central dialect was published by Johnstone (1981). Two publications on Jibbali poetry have been published (Johnstone, 1972 and Morris, 1985).

1.3.1.2 Soqotri

Soqotri is spoken on the island of Soqotra. There are four dialect groups: the dialects spoken on the north coast, the dialects spoken on the south coast, the dialects spoken by Bedouins in the mountains in the centre of the island and the dialect spoken on Abd al-Kuri. The dialect spoken on the island Samha seems to be the same as the one on the west coast of Soqotra. The inhabitants of Soqotra are estimated at 50,000, those of Abd al-Kuri at about 250 and those of Samha at ten or a dozen Simeone-Senelle (1997, p. 379) following Naumkin (1988, pp. 342-359). In 1938, Leslau (1938) published a dictionary on Soqotri. Recently, more research has been carried out on the language and culture (Simeone-Senelle, 1997) and (Naumkin and Porchomovskij, 1981).

1.3.1.3 Bathari

Bathari is spoken in Oman on the coast facing the al-Hallaniyyat Islands, previously called the Kuria Muria Islands. Bathari is closely related to Mehri. The number of tribe members is estimated at about 300 (Morris, 1983) as cited in
Hofstede (1998). Not all of them speak Bathari; some of them speak only Mehri. The research carried out on this language is rather limited. The standard work on Bathari is written by Thomas (1937), but this should be treated with caution, as the transcription is sometimes misleading (Hofstede, 1998). Furthermore, Morris (1983) published an article discussing a Bathari poem. Some Bathari words were mentioned in Johnstone's Mehri Lexicon and Jibbali Lexicon (1981).

1.3.1.4 Harsusi

Harsusi is mainly spoken in the Jiddat al-Harasis, Oman. The estimated number of the Harasis is not more than about 600 (Johnstone, 1977). Simeone-Senelle (1997) suggested that the number was probably larger at the time of Johnstone's visit. Many Harasis had left the region to go and work in oil wells (Simeone-Senelle, 1997). The language is, like Bathari, closely related to Mehri. Johnstone (1977) published a dictionary of Harsusi and also Thomas (1937) gave some information about Harsusi.

1.3.1.5 Hobyot

Hobyot is spoken around the border between Yemen and Oman. The estimated number of speakers is less than 100. The language displays characteristics of both Mehri and Jibbali. Arnold (1993, p. 24), cited in Hofstede (1998), concluded in his article that it can be regarded as an independant language. A few Hobyot words are mentioned in Johnstone's Mehri Lexicon and Jibbali Lexicon (1981).
1.3.1.6 Mehri

Mehri is the most widespread language, spoken nowadays by the Mahrah tribes (about 140,000 to 200,000 speakers) (Appleyard, 2002) and some Beyt Kathir, in the mountains of Dhofar in Oman, and in Yemen, in the far eastern governorate, on the coast, between the border of Oman and the eastern bank of Wadi Masilah; in the north-west of Yemen. Mehri is spoken as far as Thamud, on the border of the Rub'al-Khali (Simeone-Senelle, 1997). The Mehri variety in Oman is called Nagdi or Eastern Mehri (Mehrjuut), in the region of Dhofar in Oman. The other one in Yemen is called western Mehri (Mehrjiit), far east in the province of Mahra in Yemen (Simeone-Senelle, 1997). Speakers of Mehrjiit include all people in Mahra governorate except Hoaf, a town that links Mahra with Dhofar (Al-aidaroos, 1996). Western Mehri is subdivided into two groups: dialects spoken in the hinterland (Bedouins) and those spoken along the coast (villagers). This research will focus on the coastal dialect of Qishn, the former capital of the Mahra, which is very prestigious in Yemen (Ibid).

The Mehrjiit is in wide use in Qishn region, from Etab to Haswayn in the west to Ras Fartak in the east, in the towns and villages of the mountains and coastal plains such as Seihut (Ali, 1989). Mehrjiit is still a distinct entity and understood by many people in the region of Qishn, especially the older people. This is because while a very short time ago Mehrjiit was the spoken language of communication in certain quarters of Al-Mahrah, particularly the isolatable Qishn and its outskirts; it was the main language of communication between the MSA
native speakers and those who lived with them who spoke one or other language or dialect in Al-Mahrah.

1.4 The Writing System of MSA

The MSA languages possess a rich oral tradition, but not a written tradition. According to Hofstede (1998), presently, there exist two systems for writing the languages: one is the Arabic alphabet; the other is a modified Latin alphabet. Hofstede (1998) explained that the system, in which the Arabic alphabet is used, has two variants. In the most commonly used variant, only unmodified Arabic letters are used. This leads sometimes to problems as some letters are used for two phonemes. Users of this system are aware of this problem. Also the way in which Arabic vowels are written does not suffice for the wide variety in the MSA languages.

In the other variant, a modified Arabic alphabet is used. Dots are added to or omitted from an original Arabic letter (Ibid). The system for vowels is the same as in the first variant. One example of this kind of system is given in Simeone-Senelle and Lonnet (1985). Attempts to create such a system have come from native speakers and non-native speakers. Even in this modified system it is sometimes not possible to have a one-to-one representation. For example, it does not provide a letter for the Central Jibbali phonemes. (Ibid). Two other problems: the system is not standardized; and it is not always understood by outsiders.
At present, only the first, unmodified, system is used in publications and other writings. The second system, the modified Latin script, is the result of the mixture of modified Latin letters and IPA (Hofstede, 1998). There are some differences between languages/dialects with regard to occurring vowels and consonants. Eight colours of short vowel are distinguished (Ibid, Simeone-Sennele, 1997). Special graphs are used to mark labialized and lateral variants of dental obstruents, and diacritics for ejective and fricative consonants, as well as for nasalized, long and accented vowels. This system is now standardized. But, depending on the purpose of an article, one can decide to use a more phonetic script, i.e. closer to IPA, or a more phonological script, i.e. one closer to the Latin script (Ibid).

The choice between the Arabic and the modified Latin alphabet depends on the circumstances. The (unmodified) Arabic alphabet is used by the native speakers, and in publications written in Arabic. The modified Latin alphabet is used in publications which are not written in Arabic.

1.5 The Statement of the Problem

It is widely agreed that about half of the 6,500 languages spoken in the world today (Lehman, 1996; Ostler, 1999; Miyaoka, 2001; Whaley, 2003; Headland, 2004) are endangered to some degree. Due to the impact of urbanization, the spread of global communications, migration, government policies, and people’s negative evaluations of their languages and traditions, an increasing number of languages are no longer being learnt by children (Ibid). Today 96% of
the world’s population speaks just 4% of the languages, meaning that the vast bulk of languages have small and diminishing speech communities (Whaley, 2003). If nothing is done, most of these languages will become extinct within this century (Lehman, 1996; Ostler, 1999; Crystal, 2000; Whaley, 2003; Headland, 2004)

In 1992, the International Linguistics Congress in Quebec issued the following statement as cited in Crystal (2000, p. vii) and Janse and Tol (2003, p. xiv):

As the disappearance of any one language constitutes an irretrievable loss to mankind, it is for UNESCO a task of great urgency to respond to this situation by promoting and, if possible, sponsoring programs of linguistic organizations for the description in the form of grammars, dictionaries and texts, including the recording of oral literatures, of hitherto unstudied or inadequately documented endangered and dying languages.


Although its exact scope is not yet known, it is certain that the extinction of languages is progressing rapidly in many parts of the world, and it is of the highest importance the linguistic profession realize that it has to step up its descriptive efforts.

Annamalai (2000) reported that the Unesco recognized that the responsibility for action towards maintenance of languages lie with the Government, the Non-governmental Organizations, the Market, the Community, the Individual and the International bodies. Dixon’s view (1997, p. 144) of what needs to be done was stated in Newman (2003, p. 3) “The most important task in
linguistics today – indeed, the only really important task – is to get out in the field and describe languages, while this still can be done “

MSA research confronts several difficulties such as the recent discovery of these languages and the unavailability of any document dating back to before 1835 (Simeone-Sennele, 1999; Al-Mashani, 1999) when Soqotri was first discovered. Then the discovery of other MSA followed up until the 70s of the last century when Johnstone (1975) announced the existence of Hobyot language in Dhofar. Finally, the French expedition discovered the sixth Modern South Arabian language in the Yemeni region (Simeone-Sennele, 1999). There is not enough information about the nature of the social, economic, intellectual, and literary life in Mahrah in ancient times.

Research on the MSA languages is characterized to be on pace with the rapid influences exerted on these languages through their increasing connection with classical and colloquial Arabic, which is used for communication between the MSA natives and the Arabic speakers from Yemen and other Arab countries. Moreover, Arabic is the medium of instruction in schools and universities and it is used for communication between speakers of different languages. Therefore, it is not surprising that Arabic has a strong influence on the MSA languages. Versteegh (1997), Hofstede (1998) and Al-Aidaroos (1999) identified the threatened current state of MSA languages for the time being as they represented isolated forms that were never touched by Arabic influence until the modern period. This situation makes MSA more threatened to be extinct due to different factors: the spread of
media, governmental and private education, and transport (Al-Aidaroos, 1999) that are supported by the Yemeni government. Those facilities interconnected the far-reaching areas with the main cities. All these factors, as they have been elaborated before by Crystal (2000), work in helping the Arabic language to strongly influence the mother tongue of MSA natives; and to restrict and narrow down (Simeone-Senelle, 1999) the geographic stretches and domains in which MSA are utilized. Classical Arabic and its dialects have gradually supplanted and disinherited these regional languages. As is now obvious, it is currently in the process of eradicating all linguistic traces of any of the ancient languages in the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Thus Mehrjiit, the focal point of the current study, is threatened with extinction owing to the advancement of classical Arabic via the mass media and education.

According to Simeone-Senelle (1999), an MSA child, at age 7 or 8, must be ushered into the highly developed modern world in which he/she is compelled to use his/her mother tongue discontinuously. This may make him/her lose the ability to use it spontaneously and naturally at home. In consequence, Crystal (2000) expected that children stop talking to each other outside the home in their language and that within a generation - sometimes within a decade – “a healthy bilingualism within a family can slip into a self-conscious semilingualism and thence into a monolingualism which places that language one step nearer to extinction.” (Crystal, 2000, p. 79). Documenting these languages becomes essential and critical and the extinction of which may lead to the loss of part of Yemen’s legacy, which is a part of the Arabian Peninsula’s legacy and all