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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS		v
LIST OF TABLES		xiv
LIST OF FIGURES		xviii
LIST OF PLATES		xxi
LIST OF SYMBOLS		xxii
LIST OF ABBREVIATION		xxiii
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS & SEMINARS		xxv
ABSTRAK		xxvi
ABSTRACT		xxix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION		
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	The Historical Background of Modern South Arabian Languages	1
1.3	Afro-Asiatic Languages	8
	1.3.1 An Overview of MSA	11
	1.3.1.1 Jibali	16
	1.3.1.2 Soqotri	17
	1.3.1.3 Bathari	17
	1.3.1.4 Harsusi	18
	1.3.1.5 Hobyot	18
	1.3.1.6 Mehri	19
1.4	The Writing System of MSA	20
1.5	The Statement of the Problem	21
1.6	The Purpose of the Study	28
	1.6.1 Research Questions	28

1.7 The Significance of the Study 29
1.8 The Limitations of the Study 31
1.9 Definition of Terms 32
1.10 Summary 35

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction 36
2.2 Morphology and its Basic Concepts 36
2.3 Morphological Operations 41
2.4 Overview of Approaches to Morphological Descriptions 43
2.4.1 Traditional Approaches 43
2.4.2 The Autosegmental Phonology Theory 48
2.4.3 Theory of Nonconcatenative Templatic Morphology 51
2.5 Fieldwork Synchronic Descriptive Models 62
2.6 Previous Linguistic Studies on MSA Languages 66
2.6.1 MSA Languages 66
2.6.2 Previous Linguistic Studies on MQ 70
2.7 The Conceptual Framework of the Study 75
2.8 Summary 77

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction 78
3.2 Research Design 79
3.3 Samples and Sample Selection 83
3.4 Data Sources 90
3.5 Instrumentation and Data Gathering Procedures 94
3.6 Method of Analysis 103

CHAPTER 4: PHONOLOGICAL DATA: MQ PHONOLOGY

4.1 Introduction 105

4.2 Phonology 105

4.2.1 Inventory of Distinctive Phonemes 106

4.2.1.1 Consonants 107

4.2.1.1.1 Description of Consonant Phonemes 111

4.2.1.1.2 Plosives or Stops 113

4.2.1.1.3 Nasals 114

4.2.1.1.4 Fricatives 115

4.2.1.1.5 Approximants 120

4.2.1.1.6 Ejectives 122

4.2.1.2 Vowels 125

4.2.1.2.1 Vowel Length 126

4.3 Phonological Alternations 127

4.3.1 Indiscriminate Alternations of /uː/ and /ɔː/ 128

4.3.2 Environmentally Conditioned Nasalization of Vowels 128

4.4 Phonotactics 129

4.4.1 Syllable Structure and Types 129

4.4.1.1 Syllable Structure 129

4.4.1.2 Syllable Types 131

4.4.2 Word Structure 133

4.4.2.1 MQ Consonant Clusters 133

4.4.2.2 Monosyllabic Words 148

4.4.2.3 Disyllabic Words 148

4.4.2.4 Tri-Syllabic Words 148

4.4.2.5 Quadri-Syllabic Words 149

4.4.3 Distribution of Phonemes 151

4.4.3.1 Final Syllables 153

4.4.3.2 Pre-Final Syllables 154

4.4.3.2.1 The Penultimate Syllable in Disyllabic

Words 154
4.4.3.2.2 Pre-Final Syllables in Tri-Syllabic Words 155
4.4.3.2.3 Pre-Final Syllables in Quadri-Syllabic Words 156
4.5 Prosodic Features 157
4.6 Summary 164

CHAPTER 5: MORPHOLOGICAL DATA: WORD FORMATION IN MQ

5.1 Introduction 166
5.2 Word Formation 168
5.2.1 Morphological Units 170
5.2.1.1 Roots 171
5.2.1.1.1 The phonemic Shape of Roots 172
5.2.1.2 Stems 174
5.2.1.3 Bases 175
5.2.1.4 Lexemes 176
5.2.1.5 Affixes (A ffixational Morphemes) 177
5.2.1.5.1 Inflectional Affixes 177
5.2.1.5.2 Derivational Affixes 192
5.3 Affixation 194
5.3.1 Non-Concatenative Affixation 194
5.3.2 Concatenative Affixation 196
5.4 Clitics and Cliticization 197
5.4.1 Proclitics 199
5.4.2 Enclitics 203
5.5 Root and Pattern Morphology of Mehri Qishn 206
5.6 Segmental Processes in MQ 209
5.6.1 Stem Modification 209
5.6.1.1 Substitution of Segments 210
5.6.1.1.1 Apophony 210

5.6.1.1.2 Suppletion 211
5.6.1.1.3 Reduplication 212
5.6.1.1.4 Subtractive Morphology 216
5.6.1.1.5 Consonant-Vowel Compensatory Metathesis in MQ 217
5.6.1.1.6 Replacive Morphology 218
5.7 Summary 218

CHAPTER 6: MORPHOLOGICAL DATA: NOMINAL WORD CLASSES

6.1 Introduction 220
6.2 Nouns 220
6.2.1 The Phonemic Shape of Singular Noun Morphemes 225
6.2.2 The Plural Nouns in MQ 228
6.2.3 The Phonemic Shape of Internal Plural Nouns 230
6.3 Verb-to-Noun Derivation 235
6.3.1 Nominalising /eɪn/ 235
6.4 Adjective-to-Noun Derivation 236
6.4.1 Nominalising /eɪn/ 236
6.5 Diminutive Nouns in MQ 238
6.6 Pronouns 239
6.6.1 Subject Personal Pronouns 240
6.6.1.1 Independent Subject Pronouns 241
6.6.1.2 Pronominal Subject Suffixes 243
6.6.1.3 Pronominal Subject Prefixes 246
6.6.2 Object Pronouns 248
6.6.2.1 Object Pronominal Suffixes 249
6.6.3 Demonstrative Pronouns 254
6.6.4 Possessive Pronouns 257
6.6.4.1 Nominal Possession 260

6.7 Numerals and Quantifiers 261
6.7.1 Numerals 261
6.7.1.1 Ordinal Numbers 264
6.7.2 Quantifiers 265
6.8 Interrogatives 265
6.8.1 Person-Questioning /mɔːn/ 266
6.8.2 Time Questioning /miːtən/ , /heɪɬən mɪn wæk'ət/ 266
6.8.3 Item / Situation-Questioning /hɛh/, /heɪɬən/ 266
6.8.4 Reason-Questioning /dəkɔːh/ 267
6.8.5 Manner-Questioning /hɪbɒh/ 267
6.8.6 Location-Questioning /hɔːn/ 268
6.8.7 Number-Questioning /kɛm/ 268
6.9 Co-Ordinating Morphemes 269
6.9.1 Masculine Relative Marker /deɪd/ 269
6.9.2 The Feminine Relative Marker /diːd/ 270
6.10 Nominal Particles 271
6.10.1 The Connective Particle /wə/ /w-/ 272
6.10.2 The Adverbial Particle /w/ 273
6.10.2 The Conditional Particle /wən, ʔən/, /lk'əʔ/, /hæm/ 273
6.10.3 The Particle /də/, /dɪ/ 274
6.10.4 The Particle /bɛ/ /b-/ 275
6.10.5 The Particle /ʃ-/ 277
6.10.6 The Particle /hɛ/ /h-/ 279
6.10.7 The Particle /ʔə/ 281
6.10.8 The Particle /t-/ 281
6.10.9 The Particle /kɛ/ 281
6.10.10 The Particle /l-/ 282

6.10.11 The Particle /bəʁɐɪɹ/ ‘without’ 283
6.10.12 The Particle /ʔæl/ ‘round’ 283
6.10.13 The Particle /ʔʌɹ/ 284
6.10.14 The Negative Particle /læ/ 284
6.10.15 The Adversative Particle /liːkən/ ‘but’ 285
6.10.16 The Particle /mɪn/ 285
6.10.17 The Particle /bɛɹ, bəɹ/ 287
6.10.18 Particles of Nominal Origin 288
6.10.18.1 The Word /bæʔəd/ ‘after’ 289
6.10.18.2 The Word /bəsɛbbiːt/ 289
6.10.18.3 The Word /t’əɹ/ 289
6.10.18.4 The Word /nχælɪ/ 290
6.10.18.5 The Word /fənuːn/ /fɔːn/ 291
6.10.18.6 The Word /sɪɹ/ 292
6.10.19 The Particle /ʔæd/ 293
6.10.20 The Particle /luːð/ ‘towards’ 294
6.10.21 Equation /ʔəs/ 295
6.11 Adjectives 296
6.11.1 The Phonemic Shapes of Singular Adjective Morphemes 297
6.11.2 The Feminine Singular Adjectives 299
6.11.3 The Plural Adjectives 299
6.11.4 The Phonemic Shapes of Internal Plural Adjectives 301
6.12 Summary 302

CHAPTER 7: MORPHOLOGICAL DATA: VERBAL WORD CLASSES

7.1 Introduction 304

7.2 Verbs 306

7.2.1 The Verbal Stem Morphology 309

7.2.1.1 The Root 309

7.2.1.1.1 Bi-Consonantal Roots C1C2 311

7.2.1.1.2 Tri-Consonantal Roots C1C2C3 315

7.2.1.1.3 Quadri-Consonantal Roots C1C2C3C4 317

7.2.1.2 The Vocalic Pattern Morpheme 318

7.2.1.3 The Verb Stem Templates 320

7.2.1.3.1 Verbal Word Pattern I 322

7.2.1.3.2. Verbal Word Pattern II 322

7.2.1.3.3 Verbal Word Pattern III 325

7.2.1.4 The Derived Word Patterns 327

7.2.1.4.1 The Derived Word Pattern I
də(ɪ)C1u(ɔ)ːC2əC3 328

7.2.1.4.2 The Derived Word Pattern II
də(ɪ)C1C2i(u, ɔ)ːC3 329

7.2.1.4.3 The Derived Word Pattern III C1ɛtC2əC3 330

7.2.1.4.4 The Derived Word Pattern V
(hə-)C1C2ɔːC3 331

7.2.1.4.5 The Derived Word Pattern VI
ʃəC1C2ɔ(u)ːC3 332

7.2. 2 Verbal Paradigms: The Perfective, Imperfective and Future Forms 333

7.2. 3 The Active and Passive Voice in MQ 345

7.2. 4 The Future Verb 349

7.2. 5 The Reflexives 358

7.2. 6 The Reciprocal Verbs 360

7.2. 7 The Comparative Verb Formation in MQ 362
7.2. 8 Noun-to-Verb Derivation 365
7.2. 9 Adjective-to-Verb Derivation 367
7.2.10 Temporal Verbs 368
7.3 Auxiliaries and Adverbs 369
7.3.1 Modal Auxiliaries 369
7.3.2 Negation Marker 369
7.3.3 Emphasis 371
7.3.4 Adverbs 372
7.4 Summary 373

CHAPTER 8: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

8.1 Introduction 376
8.2 Summary 376
8.3 Conclusion 381
8.4 An Account of the Current Dissertation Contributions 386
8.5 Pedagogical Implications 387
8.6 Implications for Future Research 389

BIBLIOGRAPHY 390

APPENDIX

Page

Appendix A Oral Morphology Questionnaire 413
Appendix B Swadesh List 426
Appendix C Pictures from Qishn 432

LIST OF TABLES

		Page
Table 3.1	Profile of Mehri Informants	88
Table 4.1	Pulmonary Consonant Inventory	109
Table 4.2	Nonpulmonary Ejective Consonant Inventory	109
Table 4.3	Exemplification of MQ Consonants	110
Table 4.4	Distribution of MQ Plosives	113
Table 4.5	Distribution of MQ Nasals	114
Table 4.6	Distribution of MQ Fricatives	119
Table 4.7	Distribution of MQ Approximants	122
Table 4.8	Distribution of MQ Ejectives	124
Table 4.9	Vowel Inventory	125
Table 4.10	Exemplification of MQ Vowels	126
Table 4.11	Exemplification of some MQ Long Vowels	127
Table 4.12	Syllable Types in MQ	132
Table 4.13	Consonant Clusters in MQ	134
Table 4.14	Attested Consonant Clusters of MQ	135
Table 4.15	Word Structure in MQ	150
Table 4.16	Vowel Distribution in MQ	152
Table 4.17	Consonant Distribution in MQ	152
Table 4.18	Distribution of Nucleus Vowels in Mono and Disyllabic Words	153
Table 4.19	Stress Placement in Disyllabic MQ Words	160
Table 4.20	Stress Placement in Tri-Syllabic MQ Words	161
Table 4.21	Stress Placement in Quadri-Syllabic Words	161
Table 5.1	The Morphemic Components of the Verbal Stem in MQ	175
Table 5.2	MQ Gender Markers	180
Table 5.3	MQ Possessive Gender Markers	181
Table 5.4	MQ Number Markers	182

Table 5.5	MQ Person Markers in the Imperfective	184
Table 5.6	MQ Person Markers in the Perfective	185
Table 5.7	MQ Person Markers in the Imperative	186
Table 5.8	MQ Object Markers	187
Table 5.9	Stem and Suffix Structures (Linear Affixation)	197
Table 5.10	Forms of MQ Proclitics	200
Table 5.11	Forms of MQ Perfect and Subject Enclitics	203
Table 5.12	Accusative Object Enclitics	205
Table 5.13	An Illustration of some of the Derivations of the Root [ltʁ]	206
Table 5.14	Vowel Alternations (Apophony) in MQ	211
Table 5.15	Suppletive Plural Forms in MQ	212
Table 5.16	Subtractive Forms in MQ	216
Table 6.1	External (Suffixed) Plural Nouns in MQ	229
Table 6.2	Distribution and Phonemic Shapes of Internal Plurals	231
Table 6.3	Plural Nouns with Glides /j, w/	233
Table 6.4	Internal Plurals Prefixed by h-	234
Table 6.5	Independent Subject Pronouns in MQ	242
Table 6.6	Subject Pronoun Allomorphs Conjugation in MQ	245
Table 6.7	Subject Pronoun Prefix Allomorphs Conjugation in MQ	247
Table 6.8	Object Pronominal Allomorphs in MQ	249
Table 6.9	Indirect Object Singular Pronominal Suffix Allomorphs	251
Table 6.10	Indirect Object Plural Pronominal Suffix Allomorphs	251
Table 6.11	Conjugations of the Perfective Active Verb (√ɬn)	253
Table 6.12	Conjugations of the Perfect Active Verb (√ɬn) in Answer to 'who saw me, you …' e.g. mɔːn ɬɪnjiː, ɬɪnjuːk? Ali ɬɪnjiː ' Ali saw me, you, etc.'	254
Table 6.13	Person Singular Possessive Pronouns in MQ	258
Table 6.14	Person Plural Possessive Pronouns in MQ	259
Table 6.15	MQ Cardinal Numerals	262
Table 6.16	MQ Ordinal Numerals	264

Table 6.17	The Particle /bɛ/ with Pronominal Affixes	276
Table 6.18	The Particle /ʃ-/ with Pronominal Affixes	279
Table 6.19	The Particle /hn-/ with Pronominal Affixes	280
Table 6.20	The Particle /mɪn/ with Pronominal Affixes	287
Table 6.21	The Particle /bɛɹ/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	288
Table 6.22	The Particle /təɹ'/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	290
Table 6.23	The Particle /nχælɪ/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	291
Table 6.24	The Particle /fənuːn/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	292
Table 6.25	The Particle /sɪɹ/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	293
Table 6.26	The Particle /ʔæd/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	294
Table 6.27	The Particle /luːð/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes	295
Table 6.28	External (Suffixed) Plural Adjectives in MQ	300
Table 7.1	Conjugations of Weak Radical Verbal Perfective Forms √twj	313
Table 7.2	Conjugations of Weak Radical Verbal Imperfective Forms √twj	314
Table 7.3	Distribution of ʃ- Derivational Morpheme with Perfective Verb /sɛbt'/	326
Table 7.4	Verbal Word Patterns in MQ	333
Table 7.5	Perfective Verb (Type A) Paradigm	335
Table 7.6	Imperfective Verb (Type A) Paradigm	337
Table 7.7	Indicative Imperfective Verb (Type B) Paradigm	340
Table 7.8	Subjunctive Imperfective Verb (Type A) Paradigm	341
Table 7.9	Conjugations of the Bi-Consonantal Active Perfective Verb /bæɹ/	346
Table 7.10	Conjugations of the Bi-Consonantal Active Imperfective Verb	348
Table 7.11	Conjugations of the Suffixed Future Active Verb	350

Table 7.12 Conjugations of the Suffixed Future Active Verb (√twj) 354
Table 7.13 Conjugations of the Suffixed Future Active Verb (√χzw) 355
Table 7.14 Conjugations of the Reflexive (ħnɛf ‘self) 359
Table 7.15 MQ Temporal Verbs 368
Table 7.16 The Particle /mkɔːn/ Conjugations with Pronominal Affixes 373

LIST OF FIGURES

		Page
Figure. 1.1	Map Showing the Distribution of Afro-Asiatic Languages (http://www.answers.com/afroasiatic)	9
Figure.1.2	A Family-Tree Diagram of Language Families, Hetzron and Bender (1976)	11
Figure.1.3	The Geographic Locations of MSA, Simeone-Senelle (1997)	13
Figure. 2.1	Autosegmental Skeleton from Katamba (1993)	50
Figure.2.2	Multi-Linear Representation of the Complex Form [batar] 'cut' from Boudelaa and Marslen-Wilson (2004)	52
Figure.2.3	Non-Linear Representation of the Arabic Verb 'kutiba'	54
Figure.2.4	Left-to-Right Association Principles of V Slots	55
Figure. 2.5	Morphemic Tier Representation in an Autosegmental Framework	58
Figure.2.6	Synchronic Descriptive Models (Kibrik, 1977; Milroy, 1987)	63
Figure.2.7	The Conceptual Framework of the Study	76
Figure.3.1	The Procedural Steps of the Research Design	83
Figure. 4.1	The Universal Structure of the Syllable, Scheer and Szigetvari (2005) and Tallerman (2006).	130
Figure.4.2	Common Syllable Structure in MQ	131
Figure.4.3	The Metrical Diagrams of Bilabial Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	136
Figure.4.4	The Metrical Diagrams of Labiodentals Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	137
Figure.4.5	The Metrical Diagrams of Alveolar Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	140
Figure.4.6	The Metrical Diagrams of Post Alveolar Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	141

Figure.4.7	The Metrical Diagrams of Velar Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	142
Figure.4.8	The Metrical Diagrams of Uvular Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	142
Figure. 4.9	The Metrical Diagrams of Pharyngeal Onset Clusters in MQ	141
Figure. 4.10	The Metrical Diagrams of Glottal Onset and Coda Clusters in MQ	143
Figure. 4.11	The Metrical Diagrams of Ejective Onset and Coda Clusters Clusters in MQ	145
Figure. 4.12	MQ Violations of OCP	147
Figure. 4.13	Rhyme-Weight Languages, Source from Ewen and Hulst (2001)	162
Figure. 5.1	Non-Linear Representation of MQ Verb Stem	174
Figure. 5.2	Non-Linear Affixation in MQ	195
Figure. 5.3	Non-Linear Representation of Root and Pattern Forms	208
Figure. 5.4	Nominal Reduplication in MQ, Adapted from Katamba (1993)	215
Figure. 6.1	A Non-Linear Representation of Feminine Plural Noun Pattern in MQ	232
Figure. 6.2	Templatic Representation of MQ Deverbal Nouns	236
Figure. 6.3	Templatic Representation of MQ Deadjectival Nouns	237
Figure. 6.4	Diminutive Noun Pattern in MQ	239
Figure. 6.5	MQ Pronoun Categorization	240
Figure. 7.1	The Structured Lexical Entry of MQ (Adapted from Zohra et al. (1998)	306
Figure. 7.2	Non-Linear Representation of a Typical MQ Verb	310
Figure. 7.3	Non-Linear Representation of MQ Verbal Word Pattern II Type A	324
Figure. 7.4	Non-Linear Representation of MQ Verbal Word Pattern II Type B	327
Figure. 7.5	Non-Linear Representation of MQ Verbal Word Pattern III	327

Figure. 7.6 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Derived Verbal Word Pattern I 329
Figure. 7.7 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Derived Verbal Word Pattern II 329
Figure. 7.8 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Derived Verbal Word Pattern III 330
Figure. 7.9 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Derived Verbal Word Pattern V 331
Figure. 7.10 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Derived Verbal Word Pattern VI 332
Figure. 7.11 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Future Verb Type 1 351
Figure. 7.12 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Future Verb Type II 352
Figure. 7.13 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Future Verb Type III 353
Figure. 7.14 Non-Linear Representation of MQ Reciprocal Verb 361
Figure. 7.15 Comparative I Forms in MQ 363
Figure. 7.16 Comparative II Forms in MQ 364
Figure. 7.17 Comparative I & II Forms in MQ 364
Figure. 7.18 MQ Verb Description 362
Figure. 7.19 Templatic Representation of MQ Denominal Verb 366
Figure. 7.20 Templatic Representation of MQ Deadjectival Verb 367
Figure. 7.21 Templatic Representation of MQ Deadjectival Verb 368

LIST OF PLATES

Plate 3.1	The Informant Rowaih, 89 Years Old	88
Plate 3.2	An Afternoon Mehri Social Gathering	89
Plate 3.3	One of the Social Gatherings of Old Mehri Natives Frequently Attended by the Researcher	89
Plate 8.1	Scenes from Qishn District	432
Plate 8.2	The Ancient Part of Qishn	433

LIST OF SYMBOLS

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
/ /	phonemic transcription
[ ]	phonetic transcription
‘ ‘	English translation of Mehri forms
-	prefix and suffix morpheme boundary
< >	infix morpheme boundary
=	clitic morpheme boundary
.	consonant in templatic representation
√	root morpheme
→	become, change into
‿	cluster
.	boundary of syllable

LIST OF ABBREVIATION

sg.	singular
pl.	plural
c.	common gender
m.	masculine
f.	feminine
suff.	suffix
pref.	prefix
perf.	perfective
imperf.	Imperfective
pass.	passive
subjun.	subjunctive
subj.	subject
obj.	objective
imp.	imperative
comp.	comparative.
fut.	future
procl.	proclitic
encl.	enclitic
poss.	possessive
prep.	preposition
dem.	demonstrative
prog.	progressive
rel.	relative
MQ	Mehri Qishn
MSA	Modern South Arabian languages
ESA	Epigraphic South Arabian
IPA	International Phonetic Association
IA	Item and Arrangement Model

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

Alfadly, Hassan, Alias Abd. Ghani and Salasiah, Che Lah (2006). Root and Pattern Morphology of Mehri of Qishn. Paper presented at *Proceedings of Oriental Cocosda 2006, International Conference on Speech Databases and Assessment,* 9 – 11 December, Malaysia.

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Morfologi Dialek Mehri Qishn di Yemen

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menerangkan tentang morfologi Mehri Qishn (diringkaskan sebagai MQ) di Yemen. MQ merupakan salah satu daripada enam Bahasa Moden Arab Selatan yang tidak mempunyai tulisan khusus, yang mempunyai pertalian dengan rumpun Semitik barat cawangan selatan. Ia dianggap sebagai bahasa yang diancam kepupusan. Secara khususnya, kajian yang bersifat deskriptif ini bertujuan: (1) untuk mengenalpasti unsur-unsur morfologi (morfem-morfem, bentuk-bentuk linguistik dan lain-lain) dalam dialek MQ, (2) untuk menerangkan bentuk-bentuk fonem pada morfem-morfem dialek MQ, (3) untuk menerangkan bagaimana morfem-morfem dialek MQ terbentuk dan dibahagi-bahagikan di dalam lingkungannya. Kajian ini mengadaptasikan kaedah etnografik yang berbentuk kualitatif. Ia melibatkan lebih kurang sepuluh orang pemberi maklumat (informan) daripada sejumlah 35 orang yang terdiri daripada pelbagai peringkat umur, yang dipilih berdasarkan persampelan secara pertimbangan (pengadilan). Data-data dalam morfologi MQ telah diperolehi dengan menggunakan kaedah berikut: Senarai Swadesh, temubual informal, pemerhatian peserta (participant observation) suatu soalselidik morfologi lisan yang direka dan diadaptasi daripada soalselidik Dahl's (1985) dan Bouquiaux dan Thomas (1992) khusus untuk tujuan ini. Beberapa model dan teori juga telah diadaptasikan sebagai dasar kepada kaedah penyelidikan dan juga untuk menerangkan data morfologi dalam kajian ini. Ini termasuklah

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 Inggeris. 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 undoubtable 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 Sayhadic 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 Philippson (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:

Figure.1.1: Map Showing the Distribution of Afro-Asiatic Languages
Source: 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).

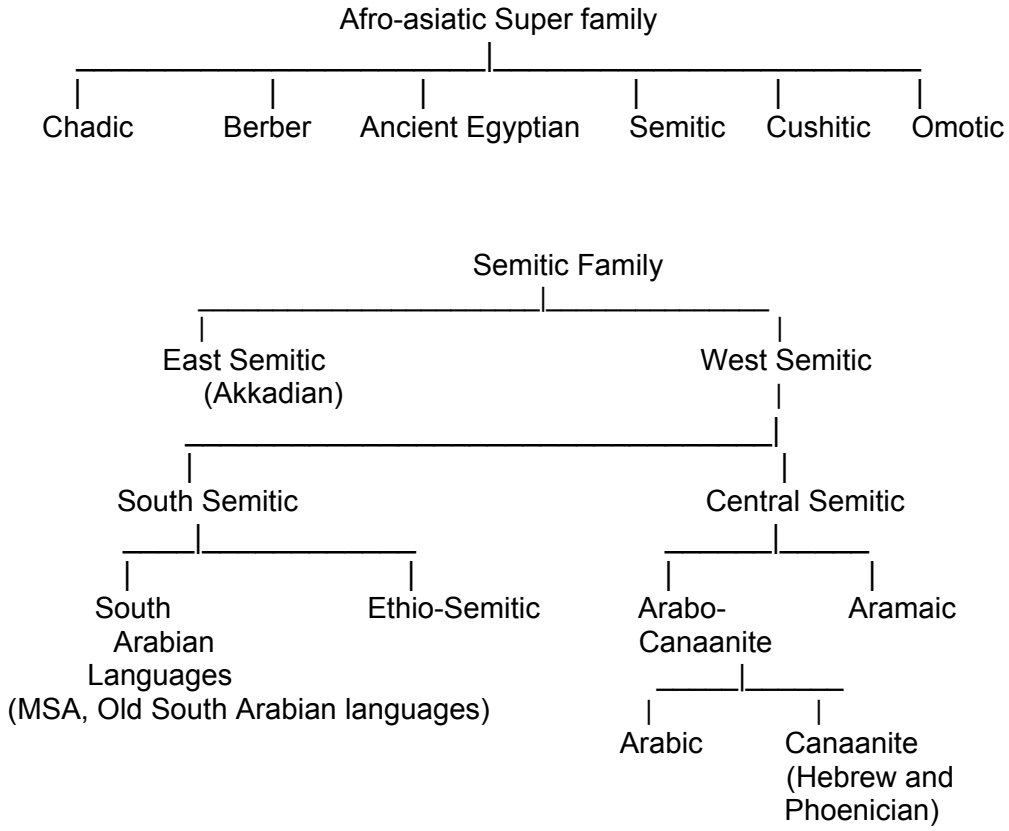

Figure. 1.2: A Family-Tree Diagram of Language Families, Hetzron and Bender (1976)

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 Figure1.3 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-Harasis (Harsusi) (Ibid).

The extent to which research has been carried out on the languages varies from language to language. Around l900 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 Harsusi (Johnstone, 1970).

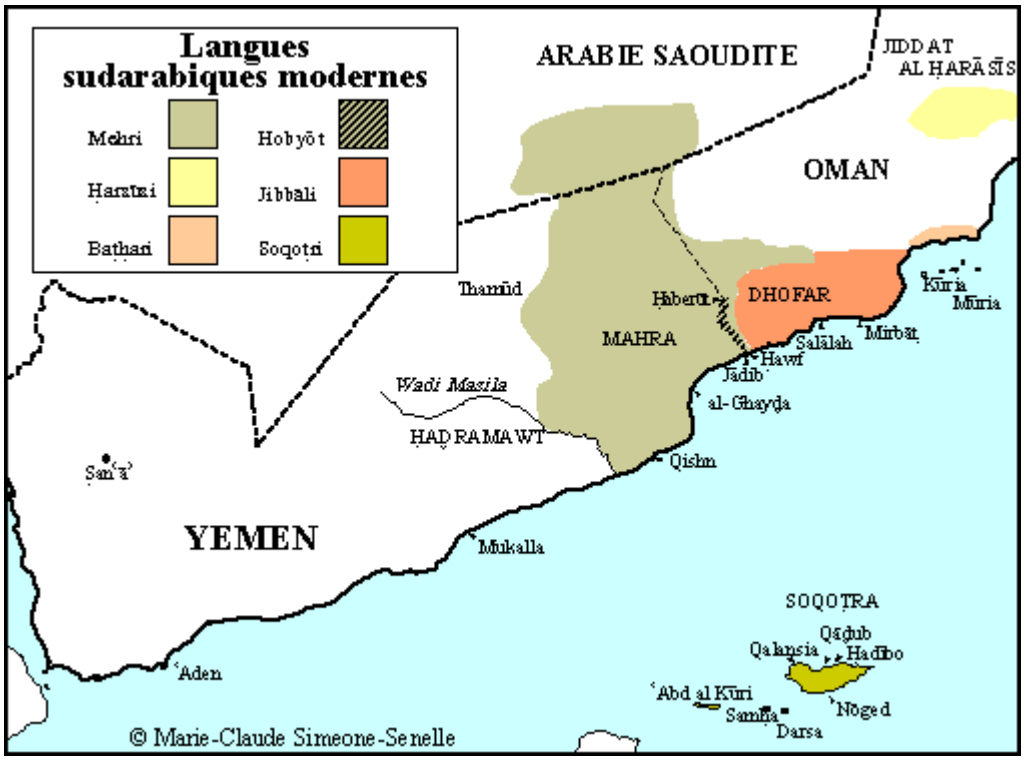

Figure.1.3: The Geographic Locations of MSA (Simeone-Senelle, 1997)

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 (Blokland & 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.

UNESCO responded by the adoption of 'Endangered Languages Project' – including the 'Red Book of Endangered Languages' – in November 1993 (Lehman, 1996). UNESCO, later on, published a report observing (Ibid):

> 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