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Language, Culture and the Environment: Documenting traditional language and culture in Dhofar

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The Modern South Arabian languages are six endangered Semitic languages spoken in the southern extremities of the Arabian Peninsula: eastern Yemen, southern Oman, Jiddat al-Harasis, the island of Soqotra and southern and eastern portions of Saudi Arabia. These are: Mehri, spoken over the largest area, spanning eastern Yemen, southern Oman and reaching into southern and eastern Saudi Arabia; Shahri (also known by some speakers as Jibbali), spoken in the mountains and coastal regions of Dhofar; Hobyot, spoken in a small area spanning the Yemen–Oman border; Harsusi, spoken in Jiddat al-Harasis; the few Bathari speakers based around the coast of eastern Dhofar; and Soqotri, spoken on the island of Soqotra. Of these, Hobyot and Harsusi are often judged on linguistic grounds to be dialects of Mehri. In this paper, we do not broach the issue of what constitutes a 'dialect' or a 'language'.

Traditionally, the Mahrah and Harasis were nomadic camel and goat herders; the mountain and coastal-based Jibbali/Shahri speakers led a more settled existence, built temporary shelters and herded cows and goats in the mountains, and fished on the coast; the Batahirah kept goats and camels and lived predominantly from fishing; Hobyot speakers on the coast practised fishing and in the mountains herded cows, camels and goats. Multilingualism between the communities has always been the norm, at least in terms of comprehension. In border regions, it is common, for example, for Mehri speakers to speak Mehri and Shahri speakers to respond in Shahri, with perfect mutual comprehension. The languages vary in endangerment from critical to moderate. In terms of speaker numbers they range from 12 to 20 for Bathari to over 180,000 for Mehri. The precise number of speakers is, however, impossible to determine with any accuracy: there are no census figures relating to MSAL speakers specifically, and many members of the language communities no longer speak the languages fluently or at all.

The languages lack any traditional script, which means any script-based education or communication is conducted through Arabic. Since the 1970s, the spread of Arabic has meant that the MSAL are subject to erosion, and that discourse markers in particular are frequently replaced by Arabic expressions. Thus we observe, for example, Arabic maṯalan 'for example' in place of Shahri gens and Mehri hīs or hōbah; lākin 'but' in place of Shahri duʰn and Mehri lahinnah; tamām 'fine' in place of Shahri ḥayšōf and Mehri histaww or xayban. Language erosion has been hastened by rapid social change and the collapse of traditional cultural activities. Until the 1970s, there were no schools or hospitals in the region, transport was by foot, water was collected by foot from natural sources, and people lived in caves and brushwood or stone huts they constructed themselves. Today the region enjoys all the trappings of the modern age. Younger generations no longer require, have or understand the extensive knowledge and practical skills of their elders and much earlier expertise has been lost or is disregarded, with imported alternatives replacing locally manufactured items. Traditional methods of natural resource and water management are no longer passed to the next generation, and significant degradation of the environment has occurred, with overgrazing and mismanagement of increasingly scarce water supplies, and on the coast severe overfishing. One result is that plants and animals that once played a significant role in everyday life are now extinct or rare. Language and culture are intrinsically linked, and this loss of traditional knowledge, skills and habitat is one of the key factors in language endangerment across the globe, particularly, but not exclusively, in the lexis.

Losing the link between culture, environment and language essentially results in lack of comprehension of non-literal language, such as metaphors, similes and metonymy, since

metaphors and similes are frequently culture or environment specific. In case the reader may think we are talking of peripheral linguistic phenomena here, note that a typical speaker employs around 5.88 non-literal expressions in five minutes of speech (Tosey, Sullivan & Meyer 2013), and many expressions we take to be literal are, in fact, non-literal (Traxler 2012). Let us take a few examples of non-literal language from Mehri: a man may be described as *xahēh sīmar* 'he looks like a *sīmar* [tree]', encapsulating height, uprightness, slenderness and a shock of hair. A child may be compared to *śēḥaz* 'frankincense' because of their clinging nature. Terms are frequently introduced on first encounter of an object through extension in meaning: thus, *ḳalīfūt* in eastern Yemeni Mehri has the secondary sense of 'spoon'. Its original sense of 'bark [tree]' and the knowledge that bark was used in the recent past as an eating implement is lost on many of the younger generation. Grammatical particles frequently emerge from an extension in function of words with a concrete sense: thus, axah 'appears to be' in phrases such as aġiggīt ḏīmah xasēh bōkar 'that girl has the stature of a young female camel' is a functional extension of the noun xahh 'mouth' (xoh in Shahri) – the mouth may be the first part of a person that is seen and that from which first judgements are made; similarly, the mirative particle *śaf*, attested in Mehri and Shahri in the sense of 'it transpired' (Johnstone 1987/2006), is a metaphorical extension of the noun *śaff* 'track, print'.[i] Many younger speakers use *śaf* accurately in sentences such as: *śīnak ġayg akabh ḥaybak śafh axxaylak* 'I saw a man I thought was your father, but he turned out to be your uncle', but fail to appreciate the link between this particle and the vital social importance of tracking in the past: from sight someone may initially believe they are following a particular camel, but on examination of the tracks discover they are tracking a camel from a different herd. The track reveals identity, and the ability to track may determine life or death.

The MSAL are threatened by intense social, economic, cultural and environmental change, and even where the languages continue to be spoken, the significance behind many terms may be lost through urbanisation and modernisation: The positive connotations of *rwāġāb* 'branch [diminutive]', used to describe a young woman with height, slenderness and freshness, of bʕayr 'bull camel' to describe a strong, well-built man, of gizyɛrōt 'little old milking animal' to describe a woman affectionately, and of ḳayśar 'leopard' to describe a man of renowned bravery and strength may be lost in a society which no longer relates closely to the environment and livestock.

In a push to document and revive interest in the languages and cultures of Dhofar, our [Leverhulme-funded project](#) is conducting audio, audio-visual, photographic and textual documentation of the Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL) spoken in Oman and mainland Yemen. We have also recently produced culture-specific e-books in the languages for Mehri and Shahri-speaking children. In our plans to document and revitalise the MSAL, we recognise that success can only occur with the direct contribution and interest of community members. The UK investigators see themselves as part of a catalyst, decreasing their direct involvement as community members become more involved. To date the project has recruited over 100 speakers, several data collectors, local transcribers and translators for work into Arabic, data interpreters, and a principal local researcher who has been part of the project since its inception. We believe that our project could be used as a template for further projects to document language varieties and the language of culture and the environment throughout the Gulf region.

References
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i As pointed out by Khalid Ruweya al-Mahri.