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DEVELOPING RESOURCES FOR MODERN SOUTH ARABIAN LANGUAGES

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Introduction

This chapter describes public engagement during and beyond a Leverhulme Trust-funded project Documentation and Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Modern South Arabian (DEAMSA) (January 2013–December 2016). The documentation project did not include public engagement as an explicit strategy; however, from the outset, the project team insisted on wide community participation and full engagement with the various Modern South Arabian (MSAL) communities. The public engagement aspects of the project have resulted in significant linguistic and socio-cultural benefits for the participants and other community members. DEAMSA involved community speakers in a project to document and disseminate information about the languages, their cultures and ecosystems, designed to extend well beyond the lifetime of the western researchers. Public engagement included language revitalisation through script, production of children's e-books, raising the status of the languages, upskilling of community members involved in the project, joint dissemination of research findings with native speakers, documentation of threatened legacy and culture, public lectures, a podcast for the British Academy on Language and Nature, training workshops, international courses on language and nature held in Dhofar and, since the first Covid-19 lockdown, online international workshops through Zoom on language and nature in Southern Arabia.

The DEAMSA research objectives, to produce open-access multimedia archives of the MSAL spoken in Oman and mainland Yemen, were motivated by the degree of endangerment of the MSAL languages and their associated cultures and ecosystems. The academic investigators were Janet Watson (PI), Miranda Morris and Domenyk Eades. The project team included a large number of Modern South Arabian speakers, who acted as local researchers, data collectors,

transcribers and translators and Saeed al–Mahri, the local administrator. Research outputs included five multimedia archives housed at the Endangered Languages Archive Repository (ELAR) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London (see Watson and Morris 2016a; 2016b); articles and chapters on the lexicon, phonetics and phonology and gesture of the languages; an article on fieldwork methods (Watson et al. 2019); outreach articles; a comparative cultural glossary across all six Modern South Arabian Languages (Morris et al. 2019); and a pedagogical grammar of Mehri (Watson et al. 2020). In this chapter, note that first person switches from 'I' to 'we' and back again through the chapter. 'I' refers to the first author, and 'we' refers either to both authors or to the DEAMSA research team.

This chapter begins by situating the MSAL and mentioning key issues relating to language endangerment. Section 2 discusses the types of public engagement conducted under the headings: Language revitalisation: Through script; Language revitalisation: Raising language status; Community training and upskilling; Documenting threatened culture and legacy; Training courses; Annual courses on language and nature; and Online international workshops on language and nature in Southern Arabia. Section 3 describes the challenges and opportunities of public engagement in relation to language documentation. Section 4 describes the practicalities of public engagement in relation to Modern South Arabian. In the conclusion, we present public engagement 'top tips.'

Modern South Arabian

The Modern South Arabian Languages, Mehri, Soqotri, Śḥerēt (also known in the literature as Jibbāli or Shahri), Ḥarsūsi, Hobyōt and Baṭḥari, are unwritten Semitic languages spoken by minority populations in south-east Yemen, southern Oman and the fringes of southern and eastern Saudi Arabia. The term 'Modern South Arabian' was adopted to differentiate the MSAL from the long-extinct 'Old South Arabian' languages. The MSAL belong to the South Semitic branch of the Semitic language family, which also includes Ethiopian Semitic. This is distinguished from the Central Semitic branch, which includes the more widely known Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew. The MSAL are believed to be the remnants of a pre-Arabic substratum that once stretched over the whole of southern Arabia, and across the Red Sea, into the highlands and littoral of East Africa.

Language endangerment

Traditionally spoken by (semi-)nomadic communities in southern Arabia, since the 1970s the MSAL have been threatened by Islamisation and accompanying Arabisation, lack of direct government support, sedentarisation, urbanisation, migration to and from the region, modern technology and rapid depletion of ecosystems through desertification. After the bitterly fought Dhofar war (1963–75), the Oman government stressed social and cultural unity rather than diversity

(al-Azri 2010), purposefully neglecting MSAL languages and cultures. In Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia today, the official language is Arabic: of education, government, the media and commerce. Being in competition with another more widely spoken and literate language is a common problem for purely oral languages. However, in the case of the MSAL, the official language in question is Arabic. As this is also the language of the Qurʔān, and one which Muslims (nearly a quarter of the world's population) work hard to learn and understand, it means that these six minority languages are competing with an extremely high-prestige language.

The six languages of the MSAL group are not equally endangered: all languages apart from Baṭhari are typically the language of the home; and speakers of the more prestigious Mehri, Śḥerēt and Soqoṭri maintain considerable pride in their languages. With the exception of figures for speakers of Soqoṭri and Baṭhari, the figures given below are best estimates, as census figures are not available for numbers of speakers of particular languages or members of particular ethnic groups (Watson, Morris et al. 2019: 84).

i. Mehri is the most widespread language, spoken by people of the Mahra tribes in Oman, Yemen, and parts of southern and eastern Saudi Arabia. The Mahra tribe are estimated to be some 200,000 people, although the actual number of those among them who speak Mehri is impossible to estimate since the language is spoken across three state boundaries, and many Mahra no longer speak Mehri.

ii. Soqoṭri, spoken exclusively in the islands of the Soqoṭra Archipelago, a World Heritage Site, has some 100,000 speakers (Kogan and Bulakh 2019).

iii. Śḥerēt, spoken by a variety of tribes within the Dhofar region of Oman, has between 30,000–50,000 speakers.

iv. Ḥarsūsi, formerly spoken by members of the Ḥarsūsi tribe across the Jiddat al-Ḥarāsīs in central Oman, has around 2,000 speakers.

v. Hobyōt, spoken by a variety of tribes on both sides of the Yemeni / Omani border, has around 1,000 speakers.

vi. Baṭhari, spoken by members of the Baṭhari tribe, who live along the shore opposite the Al-Ḥallānīyah islands and in the desert plateau above, has less than 20 speakers.

The areas in which the MSAL are still spoken are the only regions within the Arabian Peninsula to have retained the Semitic languages spoken prior to the spread of Islam and the subsequent Arabisation of the Peninsula. In all other communities, Arabic appears to have superseded the original languages. As such, the documentation and description of the MSAL is of crucial importance to understanding the historical development of the Semitic language family as a whole. It is also of importance to the MSAL speakers, both in terms of providing a body of material relating to their communities that they can watch and listen to, allowing them to listen to or see often older members of their

tribes and families, and enabling them to participate in joint presentations and publications.

These languages are noted for their retention of ancient Semitic phonological and grammatical features that have disappeared from other Semitic languages, suggesting that the MSAL are the oldest extant Semitic languages. Retained linguistic features include:

a) In the consonantal phonology, a contrast of three plain voiceless sibilants (s-like sounds), known to have existed in Ancient South Arabian, of which one is a lateral sibilant. In Mehri, for example, *šəff* 'to fart silently' with a palato-alveolar sibilant, pronounced as in English 'sh' in 'sheep,' contrasts with *śəff* 'to want' with a lateral sibilant, pronounced similarly to Welsh 'll' in words such as *llid* 'song'; and *śkawn* 'thorns,' with a lateral sibilant, contrasts with *skawn* 'they m. lived in' with an alveolar sibilant, pronounced as in English 's' in 'soul' (Watson et al. 2020).

b) In the pronoun system, contrast of the dual with singular and plural in all persons. In Mehri, for example, *akay* 'we two' contrasts with *hōh* 'I' and *nḥāh* 'we.' Similarly, *atay* 'you two' contrasts with *hēt* 'you singular (s.)' and *atēm* 'you masculine plural (m.pl.)' and *atēn* 'you feminine plural (f.pl.)' (Rubin 2010; Watson 2012). Within the Semitic language family, no other purely spoken language retains the dual pronoun, and the long-extinct Ugaritic is apparently the only other Semitic language to have exhibited a first-person dual pronoun.

Other linguistic features of interest to the MSAL include:

c) A highly non-concatenative morphological system. By non-concatenation we mean that many inflections are expressed within the word stem rather than as explicit suffixes or prefixes. Thus, in Mehri while *tḥōm* means 'you m.s./she want(s),' *tḥaym* with a change in the vowel of the verb stem means either 'you f.s. want' or 'you m.pl. want.' In Śḥerēt, the difference between masculine and feminine in some adjectives is indicated by an 'o' vowel in the masculine, and 'i' vowel in the feminine, as in the word for 'green,' *śəśror* in the masculine, *śəśrir* in the feminine, and the word for 'cold,' *ḳaṣmun*, in the masculine, and *ḳaṣmin* in the feminine (cf. Rubin 2014).

d) A great deal of syncretism, particularly in the verb system. By 'syncretism,' we mean that one particular form can indicate two or more morphological categories. Thus, in all the MSAL, the basic form of the perfect verb indicates both third person m.s. and third person f.pl., as in Mehri: *śīni* 'he/they f. saw' and *əssōfər* 'he/they f. travelled.' In Śḥerēt, this syncretism goes even further, with the basic form of the perfect verb indicating third m.s. and third m.pl. and third f.pl. Within the imperfect verb, certain verbal forms show syncretism for many more morphological categories. Thus, in the indicative of the verb *abōṣər* 'to go around twilight' in Mehri the form

tābaṣrən stands for all second persons – you m.s., you f.s., you m.pl., you f.pl., 'you go around twilight' – and for third f.s. and f.pl., thus 'she goes around twilight' and 'they f. go around twilight' (Watson, al-Mahri et al. in press).

e) The development of consonants not attested in other Semitic languages. These include the emphatic counterpart of ś (pronounced as 'sh'), ṣ́, in all the MSAL. Thus, Mehri, *fəśś* 'to release air' with a plain final 'š' contrasts with *fəṣ́ṣ́* 'to press hard' with an emphatic 'ṣ̌.' Śḥerēt has developed more consonants than the other MSAL, and contrasts *four* plain voiceless sibilants: in addition to s, ś and š, it has alveo-palatal sibilant produced with lip protrusion, which is commonly transcribed as s̃. Thus, *šum* 'they m.' contrasts with *s̃ohum* 'with them m.' Śḥerēt also has a voiced lateral sibilant allophone of /l/, commonly transcribed in academic work as ź, as in *iź īrun* [owners goats] 'goat owners.'

f) Finally, when using a possessive pronoun with a noun, Mehri, Śḥerēt and Ḥarsūsi, in contrast to other Semitic languages, require the definite article (Simeone-Senelle 1997: 389): Mehri *wōz* 'goat' becomes *ḥōz* 'the goat' and 'my goat' then takes the pronoun suffix *-i* to give *ḥōzi* [the-goat-mine] 'my goat.'

Language revitalisation: through script

Arabic speakers in southern Arabia frequently refer to the MSAL as 'dialects' of Arabic. This is not because Arabic speakers can, without training, understand the MSAL, or because the languages are linguistically close; this is rather because in Arabic the term *luġah* 'language' contrasts with *lahjah* (roughly translated as 'dialect'), where *luġah* denotes a language variety with a formally adopted script and *lahjah* a language variety without a script. At a time when mobile phones, and later smartphones, were becoming part of the culture, writing was becoming more important among the MSAL communities. Before 2013, texting between MSAL speakers was almost always in Arabic. Therefore, the first task of DEAMSA was to produce an Arabic-based orthography; this would both raise the status of the MSAL and produce a means of disseminating them in written form. The decision to opt for an Arabic-based orthography was made on the basis that practically all MSAL speakers under the age of 50 had been educated to some degree in Arabic and were familiar with the Arabic script.

All MSAL have consonantal phonemes which are not attested in Standard Arabic; therefore, additional characters had to be adopted from Unicode. In order to produce a unified script, characters were adopted for Śḥerēt, the MSAL with most consonants, of which a subset were taken for the other languages. The characters were shared for computer use by local researchers in the DEAMSA project. The local researchers used the new orthography to transcribe the audio and audio-visual material collected. In 2020, a keyboard for Mehri was produced through GBoard. Even where additional characters are not available for speakers, texting in Mehri and Śḥerēt is increasingly adopted, with speakers using the underspecified Arabic keyboard: for example, the character ث denotes

both interdental /ṯ/ and lateral /ś/; the character ص denotes both emphatic /ṣ/ and emphatic /ṣ̌/; and the character چ denotes both velar /g/ and the voiced palato-alveolar fricative /ž/. Comments from MSAL texters include: '[T]exting in Mehri is one of the most important outcomes of the project [DEAMSA]… Now a large number of Mehri and Shehri speakers text in their native languages.' 'I never used to write [Mehri]… Now when I want to send something to my parents or my friends, I write to them in Mehri and they understand it and write back to me in Mehri.' Over 60 community members use the new script to communicate on social media, which has led to the establishment of WhatsApp groups, as one of the texters writes: 'Now me and my friends have a WhatsApp group and we write to each other in Mehri.' By facilitating an Arabic-based orthography for the languages, the DEAMSA project was able to give something back to the communities.

From 2015, the new script has been used to produce children's e-books. The books provide illustrations, text in the new script and voiceover by Abdullah al-Mahri for Mehri and Faisal al-Mahri for Śḥerēt. Two of the books were published in *Language & Ecology* (al-Mahri and Watson 2020; al-Mahri, Watson and Eades 2020b), a journal that publishes work in any language of the world. In autumn 2022, the first actual children's book, translated as Selim and his shadow, was published with illustrations by Domenyk Eades through Peculiar Press.

Language revitalisation: raising language status

DEAMSA promoted language revitalisation by encouraging speakers to speak and write their language. Through the project, older, illiterate community members became teachers of MSAL, posting voice messages in response to queries from younger speakers on WhatsApp groups. Younger community members now teach the languages to their children. One of the local researchers wrote: 'The young generation had felt that Mehri was irrelevant… [then] they wondered: "Why are British people interested in studying our language? It must be of great historic importance."'

DEAMSA raised the profile and status of the languages amongst speakers themselves and in the wider Arab community and was influential in establishing the Mehri Center for Studies and Research (MCSR) in al-Ghaydhah, Yemen, of which Watson is the only non-Mehri, non-Yemeni committee member. According to the MCSR, 'this project has aided [Mehri] greatly though winning international recognition for it and allowing it to participate in research projects with globally recognised academic institutions.'

Revitalisation had a particularly marked effect on the small, low-status Bathari community. The attitudes of Bathari speakers towards their language changed markedly during the project. Anna Zacharias of *The National* wrote: 'Khalifa Al Bathari expressed great pride [in] his work with the linguists and said the community's renewed interest and respect for Bathari stemmed from the attention

shown by researchers. This was repeated to me independently by several women from Shuwaimiyyah, who proudly named relatives interviewed by academics.'

Community training and upskilling

DEAMSA played a significant role in upskilling community members, many with little or no schooling, providing them with transferable skills in data collection, digital recording, digital tools, project management, training of others, research dissemination and production.

Community training

Fifteen community members were trained to induct other community members in language documentation, ethical methods, use of the new script, and translation. Comments from MSAL community members include: 'I have learned how to document and write the language.' 'I learnt how to use... ELAAN [sic]... PRAAT and Tool Box... and I liked that.' Ahmed and Ali al-Mahri with Watson co-trained Mehri speakers in the documentation of biocultural diversity in al-Mahrah, who produced their own archive for ELAR (https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI10949120), collecting 202 audio/audio-visual files from 21 speakers representing 7 tribal groups and 5 dialects (al-Qumairi and Watson 2020).

Research co-production

In total, 51 project presentations in mainland Europe, UK, US, Arabia and (during COVID-19 lockdown) online were delivered jointly with community members, endowing them with presentational skills. Ali al-Mahri writes: 'I enjoyed [giving] lectures very much, especially when I saw the reaction of the participants hearing these languages.' MSAL speakers co-produced six publications, providing them with the skills and confidence to produce their own academic papers. Abdullah al-Mahri was centrally involved in all collaborative outputs, including the children's e-books mentioned above.

Making women's voices heard

Muslim women are traditionally reluctant to record their own voices, or have their names mentioned publicly. The project recorded 25 women who now act as teachers of MSAL heritage to their younger relatives. MSAL women co-produced two pieces of underpinning research: three MSAL-speaking women collaborated on Morris et al. (2019), and Bxayta al-Mahri, a monolingual Mehri woman, collaborated additionally on *Tǝghamk Āfyǝt: A course in Mehri of Dhofar* (Watson et al. 2020). As a result, Bxayta now enjoys enhanced status as the 'dictionary' of her community.

Documenting threatened culture and legacy

One of the principal aims of the project was to document dying and past cultural practices. Yahya al-Mahri, one of the Mehri project participants, wrote: 'The Mehri language is the product of a profound culture and history and… [would] gradually [face] the prospect of near extinction without the devoted efforts of academics like… Bart Peter (Daughter of Peter (Watson)).' The project gave younger local research assistants insights into the pre-motorised past and increased their interest in learning about it. Said Baquir, a bilingual Hobyōt–Śḥerēt project participant, wrote: 'Listening to the recordings… made me realise what our communities have lost in terms of skill and knowledge and has opened my eyes to how altered and degraded our environment has become.'

The MSAL archives produced by the DEAMSA team, linked in Ethnologue OLAC[1] provide the largest bank of audio/audio-visual data for any endangered Semitic language family. This enabled MSAL community members and the public outside the region to engage with cultural and linguistic material. During 2014–2019, the Mehri and Śḥerēt archives were visited 4,560 and 3,133 times respectively, by community members, the UK public, UNESCO staff, people with an interest in flora and fauna and researchers. Mandana Seyfeddinipur, director of the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme at SOAS wrote: 'This collection is an exceptional resource for scholars and is having a substantial impact scientifically.' Legacy work continued with the British Library, whose catalogue according to Dr Sue Davies of the British Library 'now includes the content of the 20 [MSAL] sound recordings you assisted us with, making them accessible to the general public.' The British Library have thus been able 'to reconnect a portion of these sound recordings with the family members of the speakers featured in them, continuing the collaborative and proactive cataloguing process.'

Training courses

Through work conducted on language documentation, I was invited to host training workshops in Oman and Qatar. Workshops were held for academics and professionals from Northern Oman in Salalah, August 2018, students and professionals from Qatar at Qatar University, February 2018, and academics from Sohar University, Oman and community members from the Musandam Peninsula online through Zoom in October 2020. The August 2018 workshop was run together with Ali al-Mahri, a native speaker of Mehri and Śḥerēt. The October 2020 workshop was run together with Stephanie Petit, an archivist from the Endangered Languages Archive Repository, SOAS. These workshops enabled me to engage with Arabic-speaking academics and professionals about the MSAL languages, cultures and ecosystems, and relate findings to other indigenous languages spoken in the Arabian Peninsula.

Annual courses on language and nature

In January 2018, 2019 and 2020, ten-day courses on Mehri: Language and Nature were held in Salalah, Dhofar and run by Watson and Ali al-Mahri; in August 2018, a five-day course on Mehri: Documentation, Language and Nature was run by Watson and al-Mahri for academics and professionals from northern Oman; in October 2020, a ten-session online course was run by Watson and Stephanie Petit to train researchers from northern Oman and the Musandam Peninsula in the documentation and analysis of the endangered Kumzāri language. Each course had between four and nine participants. The courses stressed the symbiotic link between indigenous languages, cultures and ecosystems, with morning sessions dealing with grammar and lexis and afternoon sessions using the language in the natural environment. By 2020, Watson and al-Mahri had trained people from 14 different countries, ranging from Canada to Japan.

Online international workshops on language and nature in Southern Arabia

The COVID-19 lockdown from March 2020 meant that face-to-face training would no longer be possible for the foreseeable future. The facilities offered by Zoom, and the felicitous decision of the Omani government to withdraw the ban on video meetings, opened an opportunity to engage regularly with a far wider public. From 23 March to 14 July 2020, online workshops on language and nature in Southern Arabia (https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/modern-south-arabian-languages /news/article/1525/professor-janet-watson-hosts-series-of-online-workshops) were held on a weekly basis; from 1 September to 15 December, workshops were held twice monthly; and from 12 January 2021, workshops were held once a month. The workshops focus on the link between language and nature. They were designed to include three to six presentations, with at least one presentation by a native speaker of MSAL or of Kumzāri, and encouragement of presentations shared between early career researchers and members of the language communities in southern Arabia. The workshops have had between 18 to 56 participants, with the average participation rate being 35. In total, 27 online workshops have been hosted to date. The workshops have been attended by members of the MSAL community, by members of the UK public, and by professionals from organisations such as the Environment Society, the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, the Let's Read Programme in Oman and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, making community members' knowledge of their flora, fauna and environment available to international and non-academic audiences.

Public lectures

Public lectures increased the range and number of people with whom we engaged in relation to the languages, cultures and ecosystems of southern Arabia. Public

lectures on language and nature in Dhofar were given by Watson and Ali al–Mahri to the Anglo–Omani Society in July 2020 and by Watson and Abdullah al–Mahri to the University of Leeds in November 2020. A public lecture was given to G20k on the language and culture of al–Mahrah, Yemen by Watson and Saeed al–Mahri.

Challenges and opportunities of public engagement in relation to Modern South Arabian

We encountered two major challenges of public engagement in relation to Modern South Arabian.

First, the MSAL are not official languages in either Oman or Yemen; among some native speakers and Arabic speakers of the region, they are frequently considered to be 'dialects' of Arabic and, thus, not to be taken seriously.

Secondly, as non–official languages, the name of one of the languages remains a subject of contention: Śḥerēt, the name we and our Śḥerēt-speaking collaborators believe the language should have on the basis of it being originally the language spoken in the *śḥer* 'the green mountains,' is contested by present-day speakers of the language from elsewhere. Various names have been associated with this language, with the term Śḥerēt falsely perceived by some to designate the 'non–tribal group of this name whose social position, now greatly improved, was until recent times rather lowly' (Johnstone 1981: xi).

The region does, however, offer significant opportunities. We found the openness of the MSAL language communities to engagement and collaboration of foremost importance. Eleven native speakers have regularly contributed to workshops, international lectures and guest talks. Several MSAL community members, once trained in digital recording and data management, recorded audio and video cultural events to be held in the multimedia archives.

The digital revolution has greatly facilitated public engagement. This includes the use of WhatsApp voice and text messages, WhatsApp groups and video calls and the simple, but effective, facilities offered by Zoom since early 2020.

Challenges and opportunities of public engagement in relation to the field of language documentation

Language documentation is often considered to be a niche subject, such that in the early days it was difficult to engage non-academics with the subject. However, digital technology has greatly facilitated dissemination of, and about, endangered languages. The possibility of producing and sharing video demonstrations of cultural activities makes the languages and their position in the world real.

Endangered languages across the globe are becoming increasingly important in academic research. UNESCO produced a list of five categories to define how endangered a language is (UNESCO 2017). The international press has published articles on the importance of endangered languages globally: e.g. 25 endangered languages you need to listen to before they disappear (The Independent: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/endangered-languages-dead-listen-speakers-audio-belarusian-wiradjuri-cornish-a8268196.html). Recent best-seller publications on the environmental humanities have stressed the relationship between language and nature, both in the UK and elsewhere, showing what we as a species may lose through the loss of language. These include popular works by Robert Macfarlane (2012, 2015, 2017, 2019); Isabella Tree (2018); Jay Griffiths (2006); William Fiennes (2001); Mark Cocker (2018) and Tristan Gooley (2014). These publications demonstrate that language endangerment is not restricted to languages with very few speakers but affects all languages. *The Lost Words*, authored by Robert Macfarlane and illustrated by Jackie Morris, was designed to give new life to nature words that had been culled from the Oxford Junior Dictionary (2017). Griffiths (2006), through her travels across the globe, argues that words typically borrowed from other languages among indigenous peoples frequently relate to measure and quantification, terms that have little relevance locally as the richness of the lexicon is more than adequate to describe culturally significant distinctions. Gooley (2014: 339), describing walking with the Dayak in Borneo, provides one of many examples of cultural differences in expressing direction and location.

The benefits of public engagement to the research

Engagement with native-speaker colleagues opened the team's eyes to aspects of the languages and cultures they may not otherwise have known about. This includes expressions of quantification: time in terms of position of the sun or depth of darkness; measure in terms of relative volume; herd sizes in terms of approximate numbers, but without using numbers. Close collaboration with native speakers has also enabled both the western researchers and the native speakers to hear slight phonetic differences that either change meaning or are allophonic: gemination of voiceless consonants to express definiteness in nominals – so slight at times that it is barely audible; in weak prosodic positions, frication of consonants described by other researchers as 'ejective'; lenition of /b/ to a bilabial fricative or sonorant; the length and number of short vowels in word-final position; and utterance-final silent consonants – consonants that are articulated, but lack any acoustic signal.

The practicalities of public engagement in relation to Modern South Arabian

The most important take-home message of working with indigenous language communities is 'Stay in touch!' The communities are part of your wider social

network, and many are friends. Digital technology, more than anything else, has provided the tools to make this possible. In addition to the online workshops, now hosted once a month, I stay in touch with my MSAL colleagues through WhatsApp and try to factor into my schedule virtual meetings through Zoom or WhatsApp video calls with someone from the community every week. They love to hear my news, as I do theirs – how my family is, places my husband and I visit during our long cycle rides, news of Covid-19 from the UK and their news from Oman, news of illness and death.

Training was conducted face-to-face during the period of the DEAMSA project, with trained researchers then training others. Since lockdown, training has been conducted virtually through Zoom. Zoom enables training to be conducted with people from several different locations and greatly cuts cost both in terms of economics and time. Zoom has also enabled us to engage with members of the public across the globe, disseminating information about the languages, cultures and ecosystems of the MSAL communities, demonstrating that their relationship with nature and ways of expressing that relationship are not unique to their communities but rather are part of the human condition: at some point in time, all languages had rich linguistic means of expressing the human–nature relationship.

Public engagement top tips

I (Janet) have five top tips, as below. Of these, tip number 5 is most important: remember that anyone can be your teacher. I remember eating lunch with my adopted family from Rabkut. The mother of the family said, 'Here you are, a professor, sitting on the floor and eating lunch with us.' I said, 'I may be a professor, but you are the professor of the professor.' Without my women friends, without Abdullah, Saeed, Said, Ali, Khalid, Musallam, Ahmed, Ibrahim, Yahya, Suhayl, Sulaiman, Abd al-Aziz and so many others, the research described in this chapter could not have been done, and the public engagement would have been meaningless.

- Be open.
- Never promise anything you don't feel you can deliver.
- Stay in touch.
- Acknowledge the contributions of all colleagues.
- Remember that anyone can be your teacher.

Note

1 http://www.language-archives.org/archive/ethnologue.com; *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* is a comprehensive reference work that catalogues all the world's known languages.