Documenting and analysing the Modern South Arabian Languages in Oman: the OmanSaM project

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General background

1.1. An understudied language family

THE SOUTH of the Arabian Peninsula is home to six languages from a drastically understudied branch of the Semitic family. The Modern South Arabian Languages (MSAL) include Soqoṭri - spoken on the island of Soqotra (Yemen), Mehri and Hobyōt - spoken both in Yemen and Oman, and Jibbāli, Ḥarsūsi and Baṭḥari that are spoken only in the Sultanate of Oman. The Sultanate of Oman, in particular the Dhofar governorate, thus represents a privileged place for studying these languages.

MSAL are spoken languages, with no written tradition. Since there is no official census, it is difficult to evaluate the number of speakers of these languages. They are however all registered as endangered languages by the reference sources (e.g. ethnologue.com and UNESCO).

The existence of MSAL was brought to light in the 19th and 20th centuries: Soqoṭri in Wellstedt (1835), Jibbāli in Hulton (1836) and Fresnel (1838), Mehri in

Wellstedt (1840), Ḥarsūsi and Baṭḥari in Thomas (1937) and Hobyōt in Johnstone (1981). As of today, they are still largely understudied in the field of linguistics. In recent years, however, a small group of scholars and linguists has given new impulse to the field of MSAL studies.

1.2. State of the art

Mehri and Jibbāli are the two main MSAL in the Sultanate of Oman, spoken and transmitted to younger generations in Dhofar.[1]

As for Mehri, the division between Yemen and Oman roughly corresponds to the two major dialectal varieties. Yemeni Mehri has been documented and studied since the early 20th century. Important milestones include the work of the Austrian *Südarabische Expedition*, that of Lonnet & Simeone-Senelle's *Mission française d'enquête linguistique au Sud-Yémen* (from 1982 on) and that of A. Sima (1969-2004), an Austrian scholar based in Heidelberg, who conducted fieldwork in Yemen between 2001 and 2004. Omani Mehri is known thanks to the invaluable work by T. M. Johnstone (1924-1983) from the London School of Oriental and African Studies (many articles and dictionaries in the 1970's and 1980's, e.g., Johnstone 1975, †1987); Rubin 2010 and Watson 2012 are important recent studies. The documentation on Baṭḥari reduces to Bertram (1937), unpublished notes by Johnstone and Morris, and one article published by Morris. The main source of information on Ḥarsūsi is Johnstone's Harsusi Lexicon (1977). The literature on Jibbāli is drastically scarce: the main sources are Johnstone 1981 and Rubin 2014. Finally, the significant publication on Hobyōt is Nakano 2013.

1.3. The urgent need for further study

Despite the valuable work of the researchers cited above, the information on MSAL is still incomplete. In particular, the data currently available do not result from systematic elicitation, but rather from "free", naturalistic recordings (conversations, stories, etc.). Such documents are, of course, extremely useful but they fall short of providing the systematic information the linguist needs to test his/her generalizations. The OmanSaM project (omansam.huma-num.fr) aimed at changing this situation by (a) asking questions relevant to the agenda of current theoretical research and (b) employing the latest tools of linguistic research.

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OmanSaM

2.1. Aims and methods

OmanSaM was a project of fundamental research, funded by the French *Agence Nationale de la Recherche*. It gathered linguists based in France and Switzerland between October 2013 and September 2017 (http://www.agence-nationale-recherche. fr/Projet-ANR-13-BSH2-0001): Sabrina Bendjaballah, Julien Dufour, Radwa Fathi, Antoine Lonnet, Sylvain Pierré, Clément Plancq, Rachid Ridouane, Philippe Ségéral and Ur Shlonsky.

The first aim of OmanSaM was to establish a stable empirical basis for linguistic investigation. Without such a basis, we cannot correctly understand the grammar of MSAL and draw conclusions on central issues pertaining to the structure of these languages. This basis also serves a more general aim of the OmanSaM project, namely, the documentation and preservation of the world's immaterial patrimony. In accordance with this objective, OmanSaM members deployed systematic elicitation procedures with native speakers of Mehri, Jibbāli and Hobyōt. Several fieldwork trips were carried out in Oman, in the Dhofar governorate, as well as in France and in Switzerland with native speakers hosted by the project.

The second aim was to gain insight into major areas of the grammar: a) the phonetic and phonological analysis of ejective consonants and of geminate consonants, b) the morphological structure of the verbal and nominal system, c) the syntax of clauses and noun phrases, and d) the implications of the generalizations

established on the basis of the synchronic study of MSAL for the general typology of Semitic languages.

2.2. Results

This section provides a brief survey of the results obtained by the team of linguists involved in OmanSaM.

- *Documentation of the MSAL spoken in Oman.* A database is currently undergoing final testing under the supervision of Clément Plancq (CNRS). It includes data from Mehri, Jibbāli and Hobyōt . Figures are as follows (September 2017):
  - Mehri:
    - verbs: 3755 entries, 13325 forms
    - nouns: 1915 entries, 3404 forms
    - adjectives: 333 entries, 773 forms
  - Jibbāli:
    - verbs: 210 entries, 8156 forms
  - Hobyōt:
    - verbs: 898 entries, 2694 forms

The database provides various linguistic search criteria: grammatical features such as gender, tense/aspect, person, phonological features such as voicing, manner and place of articulation of consonants and morphological features such as verb type and root shape. Its web-based interface is hosted by the Huma-Num[2] platform at http://omansam.huma-num.fr. It will be made available to the public in the near future.

Phonetics and phonology of Mehri consonants. Mehri is interesting from a typological point of view because it exhibits ejective fricatives, which are rare segments. This rarity is generally attributed to aerodynamic constraints: the continuing flow of air necessary for the production of frication is incompatible with the increase of intraoral air pressure necessary for the production of ejectivity. The baseline of our study was to determine how native speakers solve the frication and ejectivity aerodynamic dilemma (Ridouane & Gendrot 2017).

Mehri and Jibbāli verbal and nominal morphology. The organisation of the Mehri and Jibbāli verb and noun systems is still poorly understood. This is due, we think, to an inaccurate analysis of the vowel and stress systems. In particular, we have shown that, contrary to other Semitic languages that make use of vowel lengthening (a → ā) as a grammatical marker, as in Classical Arabic *katab* "write" - *kātab* "correspond", long vowels in Omani Mehri are not grammatical markers (Bendjaballah & Ségéral 2017).

Syntax. Mehri and Jibbāli display a clause-final marker to express sentential negation. This is a surprising feature in the Semitic context and constitutes both a typological and analytic puzzle. It has been plausibly argued that in other (non-Semitic) languages with this feature, the negative particle is actually inserted in clause-initial position and the rest of the clause is then displaced to its left. Shlonsky 2017 investigates this hypothesis.

Further implications for the Semitic language family. OmanSaM has made it possible to obtain important results for the synchronic description of MSAL. The consequences are important also for the understanding of the morphology of Semitic languages in general, as convincingly shown by Dufour 2016 and Lonnet 2017. In particular, the identification of the "idle glottis effect" – i.e. the fact that two voiceless non ejective consonants may not be separated by an unstressed vowel – (Bendjaballah & Ségéral 2014), has been shown to be active in all MSAL, which makes it a good candidate for a feature of the hypothetical proto-language from which the MSA varieties evolved. Fathi's 2017 formal analysis of gender and number marking in Mehri has potentially far reaching consequences for our understanding of the representation of these grammatical categories and their interaction in the broader Semitic context. Finally, the work by the OmanSaM team on Mehri syntax opens a new perspective on comparative Semitic syntax.

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Conclusion

International involvement in the Middle East has had, overall, a disastrous impact. The renewed interest in MSAL by the international linguistics community, exemplified by the OmanSaM project, is

a small but encouraging step in the direction of peaceful and constructive research, bringing to light and valorizing minority languages and making them relevant to contemporary research in linguistics and related disciplines.

1) According to Miranda Morris, Baṭḥari "could be said to be a dead language" and Ḥarsūsi "is moribund" (http://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/bys/articles/morris07.htm, accessed September 2017).

2) Huma-Num (Humanités numériques) is a «Very large facility which aims to facilitate the digital turn in humanities and social sciences», see www.huma-num.fr.

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JSS – Journal of Semitic Studies
BJAALL – Brill's Journal of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics