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The Structure of Mehri

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0 Introduction

0.1 Background

0.1.1 Modern South Arabian

The six so-called Modern South Arabian languages (henceforth MSAL) belong to the Semitic language family and are believed to be either southern members of the west Semitic branch (Rubin 2010: 7; Moscati et al 1969) or eastern members of the south Semitic branch (Faber 1997: 6). Of the six MSAL, Mehri has the largest number of speakers and is spoken over the widest area – across eastern Yemen from Qishn in the west into Dhofar in Oman and up into the southern extremities of central Saudi Arabia. The other five MSAL are Soqoṭri, spoken exclusively on the Yemeni island of Soqatra; Šherēt, also known as Jibbāli, spoken within Dhofar in Oman; Ḥarsūsi, spoken in Jiddat al-Ḥarāsīs in Oman; Hobyōt, spoken in a small area straddling the border of Yemen and Oman; and the highly endangered Baṭḥari, spoken by a handful of speakers in a small region of Dhofar. The number of speakers of Mehri is particularly difficult to estimate, partly because it is spoken within three separate states, and partly because the number of speakers is not equal to the number of Mehri tribal members: many Mehris, particularly in Yemen, no longer speak Mehri and many speakers lack complete competence in Mehri. Estimates range from 100,000 to 180,000 (cf. e.g. Rubin 2010: 1; Sam Liebhaber, p.c.). The number of speakers of the other MSAL are estimated at 60,000 for Soqoṭri, between 10–30,000 for Šherēt, under 1,000 each for Ḥarsūsi and Hobyōt, and under 100 for Baṭḥari.

0.1.2 Background to the study

This is the first study of the linguistic structure of Mehri based primarily on first-hand fieldwork data since the two grammatical studies by the Viennese Expedition in the early twentieth century (Jahn 1905; Bittner 1909–1914). The syntax of Wagner (1953) took as data material collected by the Viennese Expedition in the early twentieth century, and Rubin's (2010) *The Mehri language of Oman* is based on Johnstone's texts published by Stroomer (1999). This is also the first comparative description of two Mehri dialects, and the first grammatical description of the eastern Yemeni dialect of Mehri, Mahriyōt, spoken in Ḥawf: Wagner (1953) examines western Yemeni Mehri, and Rubin (2010) the Mehri of the Omani Najd (Mehreyyet).

The initial idea behind this project was to focus on the syntax of the eastern Yemeni dialect of Mahriyōt, following the publication of Sima (2009) and my own work with Sima's informants in Ḥawf and al-Ghaydhah in eastern Yemen in 2008.

Projects rarely materialise as first envisaged, however, and for two principal reasons the syntax of Mahriyōt became a comparative study of the structure of Mahriyōt and Mehreyyet, the Mehri of Oman. The political situation in Yemen in 2009–2010 which left me waiting for a research permit to revisit Mahrah coincided with the kind and completely unexpected offer to help me find accommodation and language consultants in Salalah by Saeed Ahmed bar Ngēma al-Mahri. I spent a month in Salalah December 2009–January 2010. After this visit working closely with Mehreyyet language consultants, I realised that many aspects of the syntax, morphology and phonology of Mehreyyet had not been covered in publications to date due, principally, to the type of materials referred to – narrative texts covering a limited number of topics. This meant that many features of Mehreyyet were absent in linguistic descriptions to date, including constraints on, and the range and frequency of, asyndetic coordination, the syntax and range of relative use, the form and function of diminutive numerals, the form of the definite article in Mehreyyet, the distinction between morphological and syntactic definiteness, wider use of the conditional mood than previously assumed, and constraints on monopartite versus bipartite negation. In terms of the phonology, Johnstone’s texts in Stroomer (1999) had been delivered in reading style, often almost word-by-word, thus failing to capture typical connected speech phenomena such as long vowel shortening, degemination, syncope and epenthesis. Furthermore, interesting cross-dialectal differences in morphological categories and sub-categories highlighted the need for a comparative study of morphology. It was at this time that the focus of my work changed from the study of a single dialect to a comparative study of Mahriyōt and Mehreyyet. I followed up the initial fieldwork with three separate 4–6 week fieldwork periods in Dhofar in March 2010, September 2010 and January 2011. In May 2011, Mohammed al-Mahri came to Salford for five weeks to check the texts and examples, and to provide further syntactic and instrumental phonetic data.

A fresh study of Mehreyyet also provided new insights into specific features of Mahriyōt: Mehreyyet, contrary to previous assumptions, geminates some initial aspirates (*ḡ, t, k, s, f*, etc.) in definite nouns, at least optionally; this, together with native-speaker judgements, suggests that the initial gemination of aspirates in nouns after certain particles in Mahriyōt noted in Sima (2009) is a remnant of definiteness marking. Interesting dialectal differences exist in all areas of the grammar and show Mahriyōt to occupy a stage between the conservative Mehreyyet and the least conservative western Yemeni Mehri.

Firstly, the realisation of the emphatics /k/, /s/ and /t/ is more consistently ejective in Mehreyyet than in either Mahriyōt or western Yemeni Mehri.

In terms of number marking, both Mehreyyet and Mahriyōt exhibit dual pronouns and dual verbal inflections in contrast to western Yemeni Mehri. However, Mehreyyet is the only dialect to exhibit a gender distinction in the third person dual verbal inflection.

In terms of object suffixation, the future participle in Mehreyyet may only take object pronouns indirectly through the accusative affix *ta-*,¹ in Mahriyōt, the masculine singular future participle may take a direct object pronoun, but all other future participles take an object pronoun indirectly through *ta-*. In the western Yemeni Mehri texts of the Viennese Expedition, by contrast, significantly more cases of direct suffixation are attested for both genders and numbers than indirect suffixation via *ta-*.

In Mahriyōt, objects may be suffixed to any verb, though indirect suffixation via *ta-* is preferred in the case of first and second person perfect; in the case of masculine plural verbs ending in *-am*, suffixation is almost invariably direct. In Mehreyyet, however, indirect suffixation is mandatory to all verb stems that end neither in 3fs *-ōt* or *-ēt/-āt*, nor a root consonant, nor a vowel/glide.

In terms of negation, Mahriyōt clearly occupies a stage between Mehreyyet and western Yemeni Mehri: Mehreyyet exhibits significantly more bipartite negation than Mahriyōt, and Mahriyōt exhibits bipartite negation in contexts for which only monopartite post-negation is possible in western Yemeni Mehri.

Mahriyōt also exhibits structures unattested in Mehreyyet, such as ‘What X!’ phrases reminiscent of Arabic: *maṭwalk* ‘How tall you m.s. are!’ and shows greater Arabic influence both in terms of the number of Arabic terms used, and the length and frequency of Arabic phrases within texts. For example, while Mehri cardinal numbers are typically used for both lower and higher cardinals in Mehreyyet, Mahriyōt speakers, in common with speakers of western Yemeni Mehri, almost invariably use Arabic numerals for cardinals above 10.

Spoken in and around the same area as Hobyōt, Mahriyōt, particularly the sub-dialect of Rēhan (Sima texts 76–110), shows influence in all areas of grammar from both Hobyōt and Šherēt. In the phonology, this is seen in the large number of short round vowels and the pharyngeal realisation of *ʕ. In the lexis, this influence is observed in words such as *lē* pl. *lhaytan* ‘cow’ (Šherēt *lē* pl. *lhōti*, Hobyōt *lē?* pl. *lhētə*, Simeone-Senelle 1997: 413), *nšarōmah* ‘now’ (Hobyōt *nāšanə*, Simeone-Senelle 1997: 393), *mant* ‘area’ (Hobyōt *mnt*, Šherēt *mut*), the occasional use of *xōm* ‘to want’ (Hobyōt *xōm*). In the syntax, one of the Mahriyōt constructions for the future *mad*-pronoun-subjunctive verb, also attested in Hobyōt (*med*), is unattested in either of the other main Mehri dialect groups. In terms of agreement, Mahriyōt in contrast with the majority of Mehreyyet dialects treats *lē* ‘cow’ as feminine, but its plural *lhaytan* ‘cows’ as masculine, as does Šherēt with *lhōti* and Hobyōt with *lhētə* (Simeone-Senelle 1997: 413).

0.2 The study

The study is a descriptive, data-driven account of the structure of two dialects of Mehri, with reference where appropriate to western Yemeni Mehri and four of the other five MSAL, Hobyōt, Šherēt, Ḥarsūsi and Soqoṭri. The book is divided into ten

1 Termed ‘particle’ in Simeone-Senelle (1997, etc.) and other works.