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Endangered Languages in Arabia: Documentation Challenges

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Abstract : Modern South Arabian Languages (MSAL) belong to the Semitic language family and are believed to be either a southern member of the west Semitic branch (Rubin 2010; Moscati et al 1969) or an eastern member of the south Semitic branch (Faber 1997), (Watson 2012). They are six languages which are still spoken in southern Arabia. They are used in Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and in some of the Gulf states. Mehri is one of them however it has the highest number of speakers comparing to the other members of MSAL. It is used in Yemen, Oman, in parts of southern and eastern Saudi Arabia and in some of the Gulf states. The number of Mehri speakers is estimated at between 100,000 and 180,000. The problem that this language might face is that its speakers live in different places which are belonging to different countries. This might cause the language to change rapidly due to education and communication. There are some studies on Omani and Yemeni Mehri but not in Saudi Mehri. In the nineteenth century, travelers, western scholars and explorers played their parts in the discovery of these peoples and their languages. The historical turning point for the knowledge of the MSAL is 1898, when the Südarabische Expedition of the Imperial Academy of Vienna started. The three scholars, Müller, Jahn and Hein began their systematic collection of texts, which were later studied grammatically and lexically by Bittner (1908-1917), Jahn (1915), Leslau (1938) and Wagner (1953). Saudi Mehri has not been studied. This might be caused by the lack of information or the difficulty in collecting the data which this paper aims to shed light on.

Keywords : Modern South Arabian, Mehri, Saudi Arabia, endangered languages
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