

Minority Languages in Oman



Linguistics

Keywords: Oman, Minority languages, Endangered languages, Indo-Iranian languages, Modern South Arabian languages.

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Abstract

Located in the southeastern part of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman is the homeland of several minority languages that belong to three language families. These are: Indo-Iranian languages (Kumzari, Lawati, Zadjali, Balochi); Modern South Arabian languages (Harsusi, Bathari, Hobyot, Mehri, and Jabbali), and Bantu languages (Swahili). Though some are spoken in other countries, most of these languages are peculiar to Omani ethnic groups speaking them as mother tongues side by side with Arabic. They differ in the number of their speakers ranging from thousands of speakers to a few hundred only in cases like Zadjali, Bathari and Hobyot, which plays a chief role on the degree of their endangerment. While some of such languages have been given some linguistic attention, others have not been given their due linguistic exploration yet. Chief among the latter are Kumzari, Harsusi, Zadjali, Bathari and Hobyot. On these grounds, the key concern of this paper is to provide an overall survey of minority languages spoken in Oman showing their geographical distribution in Oman, speakers of these language, estimated numbers of speakers and their level of endangerment with a view to consider these language and to spur further research on them.

1. Introduction

Oman is renowned for its rich linguistic diversity yielded by multi-ethnic groups conversing in both Arabic and ethnic group languages, a fact that sets them apart from their monolingual compatriots. Such bilingualism among these ethnic groups is incurred by the co-existence of these languages, mainly used in the home domain, side by side with Arabic whose use presides all spheres of life including the home domain. A considerable number of Omanis conversing in these ethnic languages are simultaneously bilingual in both Arabic and their ethnic language. It is not uncommon, however, to spot speakers who learn Arabic as their second language after they have solidified their knowledge of their ethnic language. Very rare cases can be found, however, of monolinguals who have opted for pure monolingualism in their ethnic languages. Noteworthy, language attrition of various extent is common among some members of these ethnic groups ranging from gradual decline of proficiency to passive or receptive knowledge of their ancestors' ethnic language. Such phenomenon is more observed among the younger generation who have much exposure to Arabic compared to their elderly speakers. The issue of identity has its role in augmenting such phenomenon yielding two dichotomous views on the link of ethnic language to identity; while some group members deeply relate ethnic language to their identity, others do not give much importance to the language factor in defining their identity. Largely speaking, all of the aforesaid languages have group members who no longer identify themselves as speakers of these languages or may frown upon being identified as speakers of these languages though they may not deny their connection to these groups which, in turn, feeds into the phenomenon of language attrition and level of endangerment.

2. Language Status

Questions of great concern to linguists interested in language endangerment are: what constitutes an endangered language, and what approach should be used in study such language (Brenzinger, 1998; Hetzron, 1997; Janse, 2003). Krauss (2007) argues that there is no consensus on a common definition of an endangered language since different aspects could be involved in defining the endangerment of a given language. While most definitions are primarily based on the number of native speakers and inter-generational transmission of language, the fact that aspects of language endangerment may differ from one language to another should be taken into account (Brenzinger, 1998). Such variation is also manifested in the different scales and classifications proposed to measure language endangerment whereby there seem to be a consensus on the ends of the scales but views may differ on those levels in between. Another view, on the other hand, maintains that assessing language endangerment could be problematic due to the involvement of different intertwined factors, and thus different

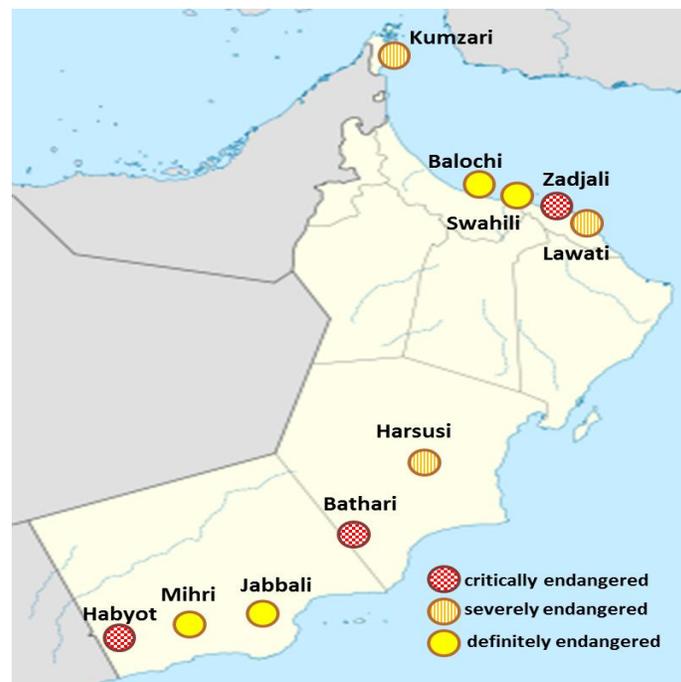
scales have been proposed to assess language vitality instead of language endangerment. Therefore, some researchers use terms ranging from 'safe' to 'extinct' such as Fishman (1998), Krauss (1998) and Warum (1991), whereas others opt for terms ranging from 'vital' to 'dead' such as Brinzinger (1998). Yet proponents of both views may use the same exact terms in different senses or they may use different terms to refer to the same stage of language endangerment, which shows the loss of terms such as healthy, vigorous, strong, flourishing, safe, stable, weakening, sick, at risk, threatened, disappearing, endangered, dying, moribund, nearly extinct, dead, extinct, to name a few. Similarly, research perspectives on language endangerment might differ from one language to another, and therefore the emphasis on saving an endangered language might vary accordingly (Faber, 1997; Morsel, 2006).

To this effect, the paper proposes some clear benchmarks for the classification of minority languages in Oman as an attempt to categorize each language on the basis of a clear designation of its status. As long as endangerment is concerned, three designations are proposed here: definitely endangered, severely endangered, and critically endangered. Definitely endangered as used here refers to language whose elder speakers may pass on the language to their posterity; children, however, may not use the language among themselves or may no longer learn the language as mother tongue at home leading to a gradual decrease in the inter-generational transmission. Severely endangered refers to languages used by grandparents and older generations, but some parents may not use it with their children or among themselves. The speaker base shrinks increasingly for some speakers shift towards other languages spoken in the area in addition to an observable decrease in the inter-generational transmission triggered by some parents' unconcern of passing on their ethnic group languages to younger generations. Critically endangered as presented here refers to languages used partially and infrequently by grandparents and older generations only, but they are not transmitted to younger generations in addition to its very small speaker base.

Endangerment of minority language in Oman could be attributed to one key factor though by different degrees in each single language. It is the gradual language shift from speakers' ethnic group's languages to Arabic owing to the fact that Arabic, contrary to ethnic group's languages, is the language that is needed to fit into the bigger community, to get education, and to have better jobs and social status in the bigger community. Language shift can be witnessed more among the younger generations due to their intense exposure to Arabic in comparison with their ancestry speakers. In addition, parents have their effect on language shift since there are cases of those who do not pass on the language to their posterity on the grounds that ethnic group languages are not as crucial as Arabic and English, the two languages needed to function in the national and international level respectively. The issue of identity also has its role in language shift; some parents wittingly do not pass their ethnic group's language to their offspring so that their children harness to the Arab identity instead of the ethnic group identity. This collectively has affected the number of speakers' base of these languages making them far from being safe languages. In this respect, an intriguing question was raised on how many speakers speak these languages. Rough estimates can be given to these numbers for dependable statistics on the number of speakers are not available. Overall, the estimated number of speakers differs from one language to another ranging from thousands of speakers in cases like Swahili, Kumzari and Balochi to a few hundred only in cases such as Zadjali, Bathari and Hobyot which, in turn, puts them at different levels of endangerment.

The following map depicts the biggest concentrations of these languages' speakers in Oman as well as their level of endangerment represented by three different circles. Plain circles illustrate definitely endangered languages, stripped circles illustrate severely endangered languages and dotted circles depict critically endangered languages.

Figure 1. Map showing distribution of minority languages in Oman & their level of endangerment



3. Overview

Scholarly work addressing languages in Oman are very scarce indeed let alone work geared towards the issue of language endangerment. Work particularly concerned with languages in the Arabian Peninsula or the Middle East has barely mentioned the existence of some languages spoken by some communities in Oman giving neither details about these languages nor about their speakers. In consideration of such fact, the following section gives an overall view of these languages and of their geographic distribution in Oman presenting them in an alphabetical order.

3.1 Bathari

Bathari or Bathari is one of five Modern South Arabian Languages spoken in Oman, a language group that branches from the Afro-Asiatic Language Family (Hetzron, 1997; Owens, 2007). Spoken by a tribal community called *Al Batarhah* 'Batharis', it is scattered over different cities in the provinces of Dhufar and Alwusta, namely in the coastal towns of Al-Shwaimia, Shalim, Alakbi, Sharbathat, Azakhar, Suqrah, and Alhalanyat Islands (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Though it has some structural and lexical resemblance with other nearby languages spoken in the vicinity such as Harsusi and Mehri, it is a language of its own for mutual intelligibility among these three languages is impossible. Its contact with Arabic, Mehri and Harsusi has influenced its lexicon having words borrowed and used in every day communication. Bathari was first mentioned by Bertram Thomas who visited Oman and wrote a paper about its linguistic diversity (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). The actual number of Bathari speakers is unknown; it is estimated, however, to be few hundred speakers which renders it one of the most endangered languages in Oman. Due to its small speakers' base and weak intergenerational transmission, Bathari can be classified as a critically endangered language.

3.2 *Balochi*

Balochi is an Indo-Iranian language spoken by the Balochi tribe mainly in the provinces of Muscat and AlBatina in addition to a smaller number of speakers dispersed over different areas of Oman. Although Balochi has thousands of speakers in Oman, it is not uncommon these days to find Balochi tribe members who do not identify themselves as speakers of Balochi. Apart from the Omani context, the language has a considerable number of speakers (millions of speakers) in other countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan known as the Baluchistan area which literally means the homeland of the Balochis. Balochi can be divided into two main dialects: eastern and western dialects which further divide into six other dialects. Balochi used to be a spoken language with no written form, but some linguists developed a writing system based on the Latin script and latter Arabic script was used to write Balochi (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). The decrease in language transmission to younger generations and the fact that some children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue mitigate against classifying it as safe language and hence make it a definitely endangered language.

3.3 *Habyot*

Habyot is a Modern South Arabian Language spoken in Dhufar, namely in a coastal mountain area near the Omani borders with Yemen. Habyot is believed to be a hybrid of both Mehri and Jabbali spoken in nearby areas owing to the structural and lexical resemblance incurred by its proximity to both languages spoken in the vicinity. It is, however, intelligible to none of them which gives support to its distinctiveness from both languages (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Just like several other languages in Oman, the actual number of Habyot speakers is unknown. A rough estimate is a few hundred speakers, most of whom are from the elderly age group. Such situation entails considerable danger to the existence of Habyot and makes it a critically endangered language.

3.4 *Harsusi*

Harsusi is a Modern South Arabian Language spoken by the Harsusi tribe in different parts of Alwusta such as Jidat Al-Harsusi, Budhami, Alagayz, Alghubrah in addition to a very small number of speakers in Alghudranah and Adam (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Some of its speakers believe that its name is derived from the Arabic word *Haris* 'guard'. Though it has some lexical similarity with Mehri and Bathari, Harsusi is a language of its own. Arabic has recently influenced the nowadays spoken Harsusi resulting in having Arabic words to be part of the Harsusi lexicon. Harsusi is believed to be first mentioned in scholarly work by Bertram Thomas. Years later, Tim Jhontone did field work on Harsusi and compiled a small Harsusi English dictionary based on his fieldwork (Stoomer & Johnstone, 2004). The number of Harsusi speakers is estimated to be few thousand speakers, but the observable shrink in its speakers' base brought about language shift makes it a severely endangered language.

3.5 *Jabbali*

Literally meaning 'the language of the mountain', Jabbali is also known as Shehri, a name that is given after the Shehri tribe that makes the bulk of its speakers. Unlike other Modern South Arabian Languages, Jabbali/Shehri is not peculiar to speakers of one single tribal community or ethnic group for it is spoken by different tribes and clans that dwell in the province of Dhufar. (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). It has thousands of speakers with several dialects that entail some lexical differences. In the early 1970s it was widely spoken in areas like Ouqad, Adahariz, Alhafa and Salalah, but the number of its speakers has been on the decrease. It is believed that the first scholarly work about Jabbali was done by the French Consul in Jeddah (KSA) late 19th century based on data he collected from some Jabbali speakers from Dhofar who were in a pilgrimage journey. Later a group of Austrian

researchers visited Dhufar and did a more elaborate work on Jabbali than that done by the French Consul (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Recently, some scientists have found some scripts written in a huge rock in Colorado written in a language similar to the Jabbali scripts found in Oman, which gives insight to the distribution of Jabbali speakers in areas other than those in Arabia. Though it is spoken by thousands of speakers, it can be classified as a definitely endangered language for the younger generations of its speakers do not show much concern to learning Jabbali which in turns has an effect on its speakers' base.

3.6 Kumzari

Kumzari is a Southwestern Iranian language that belongs to the Iranian language group which branches from the Indo-Iranian language family (Thomas, 1930; Anonby, 2003; Ozihel, 2011). It is mainly spoken in the mountain costal village of Kumzar, the name from which its name is derived (i.e Kumzari), located in the far part of the Musandam Peninsula (Al aghbari. 1992). Kumzari speakers are estimated to be around five thousand speakers mainly found in Kumzar. A smaller number of speakers is scattered over other cities such as Khasab and Bukha. Arabic and Persian have contributed a great deal to Kumzari in addition to other languages such as Urdu, Portuguese, Hindi and English (Thomas, 1930; The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Kumzari can be classified as a severely endangered language due to the fact that some younger Kumzaris do not learn their ethnic language as a mother tongue besides some parents' attitude towards intergenerational transmission which feeds into the decrease of its speakers' base.

3.7 Lawati

Lawati is an Indo-Iranian language spoken by the Lawati tribe mainly in the province of Muscat and a smaller number of speakers in the province of Albattina (Salman & Kharusi, 2011). The language is known among its speakers as 'Khojki', a derive from the word *Khojka* borrowed from Persian *xawajaw* which means a fellow member of the tribe (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Lawati used to be a written language at some point in time, but it ended up as a spoken language with no literary work about its structure or traditions. Just like its fellow languages in Oman, Lawati has been influenced by Arabic in so far as many Arabic words are used into Lawati, especially those from the Omani dialect. The actual number of Lawati speakers in Oman is unknown, but the number of the Lawatis is estimated to be few thousands; a considerable number of them, however, do not speak the language. The lack of concern to pass on the language to younger generations and the gradual shrink of its speakers' base make it a severely endangered language.

3.8 Mihri

Just like all the languages spoken in the Province of Dhufar, Mihri belongs to the Modern South Arabian Languages and shares some structural and lexical resemblance with nearby languages like Harsusi and Bathari (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Mehri is the widely spoken language in Dhufar as opposed to other minority languages having thousands of speakers in Shalim, Almazayonah, Thamrit, and Hasik (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Since the Mihris are known for their nomadic life in pursuit of livelihood, Mihri is also spoken in other nearby countries such as Yemen, Somalia and some countries of the Arabian Gulf. Although it has thousands of speakers, Mihri can be classified as a definitely endangered language owing to the shrink in its speakers' base and disinterest of some of the tribe members to learn the language.

3.9 Swahili

Swahili or Kiswahili as known by its speakers belongs to the Bantu Language Family. Its name is believed to have originated from the classical Arabic word *Sawahili* or the Omani Arabic word *Swahil* meaning 'coast dweller' (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Several languages are believed to have contributed to the making of

Swahili such as Portuguese, Hindi, Persian, German and English in addition to Arabic, namely the Omani dialect, which has enriched Swahili with a considerable number of lexical items. Arabic lexicon have been borrowed through Swahili into other African languages such as Sukuma, Hausa, Yoruba, to name but a few. The effect of Arabic lexicon in Swahili can be witnessed in different spheres of life such as trade, jurisdiction, religion, navigation and politics (The Omani Encyclopedia, 2013). Unlike most minority languages spoken in Oman, it is a written language that used to be written in Arabic script, but latter Roman script instead was used to write Swahili. Though it is a dispersed language spoken by thousands of speakers in the province of Muscat and other cities all over Oman, it has hundred millions of speakers using it either as a mother tongue or as a lingua franca in African countries like Tanzania, Kenya, Congo, and Uganda. In the Omani context, however, Swahili can be classified as definitely endangered due to the decrease in the number of its younger speakers incurred by weak inter-generational transmission.

3.10 Zadjali

Resources addressing Zadjali language are indeed impossible to find despite the fact that it belongs to the same language family of Balochi and Kumzari (the Indo-Iranian Language Family). It is believed to be a mixture of Balochi, Sindi and Persian due to the lexical resemblance with these languages. Though some might consider it a dialect of Balochi based on its massive lexical resemblance to Balochi, it is a language of its own since mutual intelligibility between the two languages is impossible. Its speakers believe that its name is derived from the word *zadjal* or *zadghal*, literally meaning 'the language of the ancestors'. It is mainly spoken in the capital Muscat by an elderly age group. The actual number of its speakers is unknown indeed, but is estimated to be very few hundred speakers if not less, which incurs much danger to the existence of Zadjali language. A considerable number of Zadjalis have shifted to Balochi leaving their language at a critically endangered stage.

The following table gives a summary of language families minority languages belong to, their distribution in Oman, and the estimated number of their speakers.

Table 1: Language families, distribution and estimated number of speakers of minority languages in Oman

Language	Language Family	Distribution in Oman	Estimated Number of speakers
Bathari	Modern South Arabian	Provinces of Dhufar, and Alwusta	Few hundreds
Balochi	Indo-Iranian	Provinces of Muscat and Albatina, smaller number of speakers over other cities in Oman	Thousands of speakers
Harsusi	Modern South Arabian	The province of Alwusta	Few thousands
Habyot	Modern South Arabian	The province of Dhufar	Few hundreds
Jabbali	Modern South Arabian	The province of Dhufar	Thousands of speakers
Kumzari	Indo-Iranian	The province of Musandham	Few thousands
Lawati	Indo-Iranian	Province of Muscat and Albatina	Few thousands
Mihri	Modern South Arabian	The province of Dhufar	Thousands of speakers
Swahili	Bantu Languages	The province of Muscat and several other places over the country	Thousands of speakers
Zadjali	Indo-Iranian	The province of Muscat	Few hundreds

4. Conclusion

The paper has given an overall survey of minority languages spoken in Oman shedding light at their distribution in Oman, their speakers and estimated number of speakers. It proposed a three-level framework (i.e. definitely endangered, severally endangered and critically endangered) that describes the endangerment level of these languages in an endeavor to bring attention to these language. Such classification is mainly based on the extent of language inter-generational transmission, unconcern given to language use, and decrease in the number of speakers' base.

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