

Distinctive Sounds System in Mehri Language Used in Al- Wasaa', Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: This research aims to examine the sounds in the Mehri language in Al- Wasaa' in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia that has no counterparts in Arabic sounds. The study primarily depends on a descriptive and analytical approach which lies upon describing the distinctive sounds. By interviewing six females (aged 17 to 60). In order to know different aspects of their live, eight males (aged 14 to 60) were interviewed, some of them were educated and others are not, who are living in Al- Wasaa'. The findings of the research revealed five sounds that have no counterparts in the Arabic language which are ʃ , ʂ , k , z , ʂ consonants in Mehri language.

Keywords: Modern South Arabian Languages (MSAL), endangered language, Second language.

Introduction:

"O mankind, we have created you of a male and female and appointed your castes and tribes that you may recognize one another. Verily he has greater respect with God who is possessed of greater courtesy¹⁹. God is All- Aware²⁰" (Surah Al- Hujraat, 13).

There are many differences between us such as color, religion, ethnicity, gender, class status etc. Yet, Allah has created us comprehensively to complete each other. Amazingly, the most noticeable difference is the diverse languages. This distinctive form of communication and interaction often makes us wonder how it started, why and what it actually is. Technically, languages are a code which embodies a conventional rule-base of a rational system. It is mainly used to communicate and to express indignation and annoyance as well as admiration and respect (Holmes, 2012).

In the Middle East, there are a lot of languages that are still in use. Unfortunately, over a period of time, some of the languages have become extinct. Moreover, the so- called six Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL), Mehri, Harsusi, Bathari, Hobyot, Jibbali, and Soqotri belong to the Semitic language; a branch of the Afro- Asiatic language which is considered as a superfamily originating from the middle east (Watson, 2012). They differ enough from Arabic to make the communication between them somehow impossible (Simeone- Senelle, 2010). However, it was agreed that Mehri has the largest number of speakers

among these modern South Arabian languages “about 136, 000 speakers⁽¹⁾” (Simeone- Senelle, 2010). It is spoken over the widespread zone crosswise over eastern Yemen from Qishn in the west into Dhofar in Oman and up into the southern furthest points of focal Saudi Arabia (Watson, 2012).

MSLs are pinpoint as the following:



Figure (1) southern side of Arabian Peninsula

Europeans were the first scholars who studied and attracted to the Mehri language. If we ever talked about MSAL; we have to mention James Wellsted, an English Lieutenant in Majesty’s Indian Navy. He discovered the existence of a new branch of the Semitic language family. Moreover, he sheds light on this language and grabs the attention of Europeans to search deeply (Rubin, 2012).

The Mehri tribes rooted from Qudaa'a (Belhaf, 2016). Moreover, "Qudaa'a and the name Mehri evolved from Muhra bin Hydan bin Amro bin Murah bin Zaid bin Malik bin Hemir" (Alandulasi, 1928). Incidentally, the Mehri people being referred to as Mahra. Some scholars refer to them as Aad Alsaliha because they descended from Aad's nation.⁽²⁾

In addition, Mehri language has a rich dialectology for which phonetic, sociological and topographical parameters are significant. However, Johnstone recognized two varieties: the Southern Mehri spoken in the governorate of Mahra in Yemen and the Najd Mehri spoken in the governorate of Dhofar in Oman. The local speakers in Yemen allude to Mehriyet [mehriyêt] for the varieties spoken in the western part between Ras

(1)- As indicated by SIL estimation (2000). Population add up to for all nations is 135, 800. 70, 600 speakers in Yemen, 50, 800 in Oman and 14, 400 in Kuwait. They don't specify the Mahra speakers living in Kenya and Tanzania. The Yemenite estimation gathered by a NGO in 2007 shows different result, it demonstrates 88, 600 Mehri speakers in Yemen.

(2) I would like to thank Ahmad bin Abdullah Al- mehri, who wrote a descriptive article about Mehri language for this paper, which clarified some confusions I faced at the beginning.

Fartak and the channel Masila, and Mehriyot [mehriyōt] for the varieties spoken in the far- eastern piece of Mahra until the outskirts with Oman (Simeone- Senelle, 2010).

On the contrary, the dialect in Oman is named Mehriyyet [mehriyyêt]. Inside every variety, there is additionally a qualification between the tongue talked on the drift by the villagers and that talked by the Bedouins in the hinterland (Simeone- Senelle, 2010).

In Yemen, the Mehri variety of the antiquated recorded capital of Mahra, Qishn, is profoundly valued, more than Al- Ghaydha region. In the customary writing, basically in verse, the Bedouin variety from any region outperforms the villager variety. Furthermore, Mehri has no official status, neither in Oman nor in Yemen (Simeone- Senelle, 2010).

Arabic is a language utilized for authoritarian lingua franca (organization, school, armed force, exchange ...). It is also a widely used language (a vehicular variety) amongst Arabic and Mehri local speakers or even between Mehri local speakers and local speakers of another MSAL. Thus, adequately being unique to avert shared understanding. When Mahra in Qishn meet a Jibbali or Hobyot local speaker they should turn to Arabic (Simeone- Senelle, 2010). For instance, local speakers utilize their mother tongue for private purposes, with family members or with speakers who have the same language. Moreover, they utilize their language to pass on the customary writing, like verses or stories to the coming and youth generation. In any case, it is to be noted that the verse and poetical competing match is an abstract sort still used by the Mahra individuals conceived in the 50s (Simeone- Senelle, 2010). However, it is diminishing among the youthful speakers. The stories and the Proverbs are imperiled, particularly in towns and urban areas where the TV has ended up being used everywhere (Simeone- Senelle, 2010).

In particular, they use Arabic for many reasons. For example, they use it to make suitable communication with other tribes as well as having the desire to speak another language of the branch of the western Semitic family. Categorically, it is an unwritten Semitic language of the Modern South Arabian group. Consequently, more orally than the written form. Flourishing up till now, it is a matter of status not to lose valuable cultural practices, such as oral histories, traditional songs, and poetry. Furthermore, one can imagine, how as a matter of resource, they teach their children their mother tongue without a written form. They cannot listen to it on the radio or the television. They are even unable to read it in the newspapers, they are only able to use it with their family and relatives.

Significance of the Study and the Research Questions:

Based on the foundations of the vision of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia 2030 that provide for the Arab and Islamic depth of the kingdom, where Mehri language is considered as one of the components of the Arab and Islamic society. This is a connected line with the dimensions of the duties of this article to shed the lights

on our culture. This paper aims to examine the sounds in the Mehri language in Al- Wasaa' in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia that has no counterparts in Arabic. The study primarily depends on a descriptive and analytical approach which lies upon describing the distinctive sounds that have been found in the Mehri language in Al- Wasaa'.

METHODOLOGY:

The researcher used the descriptive and analytical methodology. Which depends on the study of reality or phenomenon as it exists in reality, and describe it precisely through the qualitative expression that describes the phenomenon and explains its characteristics, or quantitative expression that gives a numerical description, to reach a general conclusions examine the sounds in the Mehri language in Al- Wasaa' in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia that has no counterparts in Arabic.

Participants:

The researcher used the intentional sample due to the lack of sample number and difficulty of access. The researcher focused on ages between (15- 60) because they speak their language fluently and know the correct pronunciation.

The participants of the study were a Sample of six females (aged 17 to 60) who do not suffer from any health issues were participated from Al- Wasaa'. It is a region located on the West of Al- Bat'haa' path that leads to The United Arab Emirates, on Al- Bat'haa' Haradh Riyadh's road, northeast the Rub' Al- Khali desert. In addition, two of the participants (aged 50 and 60) are illiterate. The participant (aged 35) studied only at the literacy school for only one year. On the other hand, the participant (aged 22) finished studying the elementary level at school. Moreover, the participant (aged 25) studied only two years; one year at the literacy school then she moved to study at the elementary school for only one year. Finally, the participant (aged 17) years old is a high school student in her first year

Instruments and Collection of the Data:

The study primarily depends on a descriptive and analytical approach which lies upon describing the distinctive sounds by direct personal interviewing and using I- phone 6 as a tool through Voice Memos to record their interviewing. The researcher used content analysis card which is provided by Dr. Munira Al- Azraqi 'member of English Department at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University'. The validity and reliability of the content analysis card were demonstrated by specialists in English sound

Data entry and analysis:

By direct personal interviewing and using I- phone 6 as a tool through Voice Memos to record their interviewing. The records were two sections, males and females. The females section's duration was (01:43:29), and the males section's duration was (01:59:34). The sample members were given a paper containing a list of words. Each word had a distinctive initial sound and another word contained the same sound occurring in the middle of the word. By backing to the records and writing the sound transcriptions of words that were listed. Then applied the content analysis card to examine the sounds

Results:

Each language has its own sounds that may differ and make that language unique from other languages. Sometimes languages might have similar sounds, yet they show discrepancies in some cases. However, one language could have more than on dialects that make a misinterpretation of sounds. (Omar, 1997) presented elements that may help us differentiate each sound from others while producing, which are:

- 1- Loudness.
- 2- Pitch.
- 3- Timbre.

Technically, South Arabian language consonants system is the closest to the Proto- Semitic reconstructed system (Simeone- Senelle, 1997). Amazingly, the Mehri language has almost the same sounds that are used in the Arabic language; both of them rooted from MSAL. The two basic dialect groups use them with some exceptions in which they occur in a word.

The following table shows the distinctive sounds that are found in Mehri language in Al- Wasaa':

Table (1) distinctive sounds that are found in Mehri language in Al- Wasaa

	<u>Labial</u>	<u>Labiodental</u>	<u>Dental</u>	<u>Alveolar</u>	<u>Palato- Alveolar</u>	<u>Palatal</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Stops</u>								
Voiced							ḳ	
Voiceless								
<u>Fricative</u>								
Voiced						š		
Voiceless				ʃ	ʃ			
<u>Emphatic</u>				ʃ		ṣ̌	ḳ	

	Labial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Palato-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Affricate								
Voiced					ž			
Voicedless								
Lateral					š	ṣ̌		

The consonant / ž/, IPA [ʤ] :

It characterized as voiced palate- Alveolar affricate. When the vocal folds are narrow the consonant is produced by using the body of the tongue with the back of the alveolar ridge. There is stop then the air is released with friction. Also there is a slow motion separation for the movement of articulating organs. Moreover, the upper and the lower teeth are close. It is found in the initial lexeme such as the word žefy "Elbow". Or we can find it twice and the long vowel occurs between them like the word ažiz "Coccyx".

The consonant /ž / can be represented as:

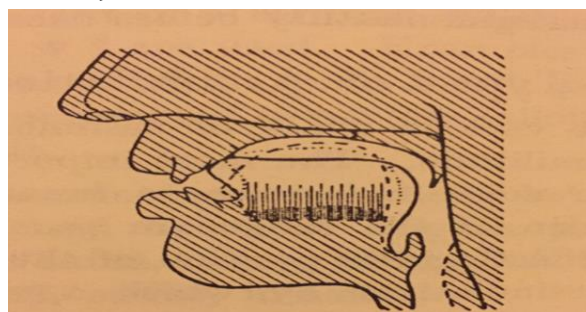


figure (2) how consonant /z/ can be represented

The consonant / š/, IPA [ṣ] :

It is considered as a rare consonant because it has sibilant and to explain its weakly intervocalically; it occurs on neutral position among /s/ and /z/ . Characterized as a voiceless emphatic alveolar fricative. The tip and the blade of the tongue touches the upper and the lower teeth and likewise closely. To illustrate:

(Table (2) comprises of several examples of words contain the sound /š/)

Mehri lexemes	Meaning in English
bxoş	I feel pain
şāri	Stand up (command)
şēlih	Fat (adjective)

Mehri lexemes	Meaning in English
miḥṣāt	Natural spring (noun)
ṣawwa[r]	Rock (noun)
ṣā[r]	Gazelle
ṣē[r]	Gazelles

Although the same sound has occurred in different occasions yet, it remains the same.

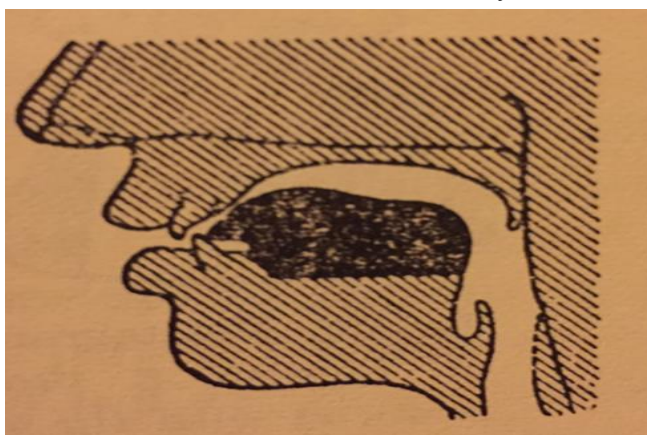


Figure (3) illustrates the description of the sound (Jones, 1976)⁽³⁾

/k/ consonant, IPA[k']:

Voiceless velar emphatic stop. It is produced by blocking the air by pressing the back of the tongue against the soft palate as a result, the airstream cannot pass through the mouth for a while. Amazingly, it is not either /g/ nor /k/ occurring within these two sounds. People were used to call such consonant as "the old /g/". For instance,

Table (3) consists of terms in Mehri language and its translation in Arabic

Mehri lexemes	Meaning in English
ḥūmiḵ	Wounded (Adjective)
ḵannawn	Small ms (Noun)
tādūḵ ḥibriš	A women who breastfeed her son
hādḵi ḥibriš	Breastfeed your son (command)
ṣatūḵak	I miss you

5- This picture has taken from Jones, D. (1976). An outline of English phonetics. (1st ed.). Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press. As it has similar description of the production of the consonant.

These examples have been showed the consonant occurring on some certain occasions such as initial, final and within other consonants yet, it remained the same pronunciation in all cases.

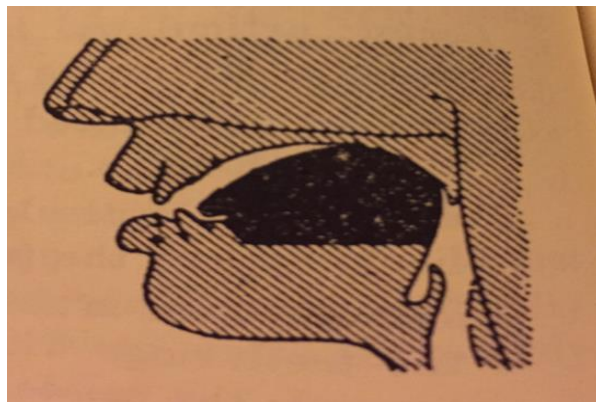


figure (4) re- describes how the /k/is produced (Jones, 1976)⁽⁴⁾

/ʃ/, IPA [ʃ]:

Describe as voiceless (when the vocal folds are a part without vibration), palato- alveolar fricative, lateral. Produced when the front part of the tongue touch the alveolar ridge.

Table (4) represents a list of words in Mehri language have the sound /ʃ/)

Mehri lexemes	Meaning in English
Śirgōt	Sunshine
ŚaŚayt	Three (number)
Śitmīḵ	Buy (verb)
Śamḵ	Sell (verb)
ani baŚa(r)	I am sick.
yaŚtūm	Buying (verb progressive)

Further explanation as the following:

6- This picture has taken from Jones, D. (1976). An outline of English phonetics. (1st ed.). Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press. As it has similar description of the production of the ḵ consonant.

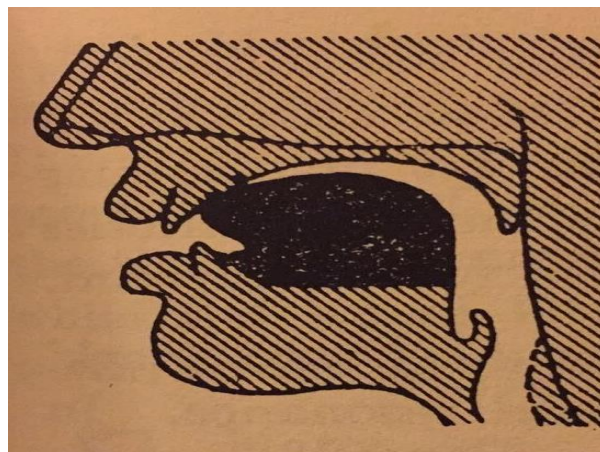


Figure (5) shows the production of the sound (Jones, 1976)⁽⁵⁾

/š. / consonant, IPA [t̪ʰ], voiced palatal lateral emphatic. Produced with hessing. Such sound might be pronounced as pharyngealised lateral sonorant.

Table (5) has a list of words of the sound /š. /

Mehri lexemes	Meaning in English
ḳēš.ar	Tiger (noun)
Rumš.ōn	Ramadan (month of Islamic calendar)
Š.arkūm	Cheek (noun)
miḳrāš.	Snuffler (noun)
Fiš.āt	Silver (adjective)

Discussion:

The Mehri language features characterized likewise any language, yet it has a discriminative feature which is "Emphatic" a traditional semitists term (Watson, 2012). Moreover, Semitists predominately consider it a term which is partly obscure (Rubin, 2012). (Jahn, 1902) considered Mehri emphatic identically like Arabic emphatic, providing if less silent. Moreover, these consonants were recognized by Johnstone at first to be emphatic in Mehri likewise in the other MSA languages (Rubin, 2012). Mehri emphatics have been classified by Simeone- Senelle (1997) to be neutral, anyhow, in terms of voicing and to have both characteristics voiced and voiceless allophones. These ṣ, š, ṣ̌, ž, ḳ consonants were examined by many Western and Arab scholars in a matter of phonetics or phonology.

7- This picture has taken from Jones, D. (1976). An outline of English phonetics. (1st ed.). Cambridge [u.a.]: Cambridge Univ. Press. As it has similar description of the production of theš consonant.

Examination of Mehri sounds that have no counterparts with Arabic in Al- Wass'a revealed with five sounds ṣ , ṣ , k , z , ṣ consonants. As here, we have classified $/k/$ as voiceless velar emphatic stop as in kḥṣar (tiger), yet Rubin (2012) has classified it the same but differ in a matter of voicing to be glottalic instead of voiced, whilst (Serjeant, 1957) corresponded with our study. Watson (2016) referred to it as stable pronunciation as an emphatic. Comparable, it is emphatic velar stop yet in some cases, it occurs either emphatic or not (Watson, 2012). It was clarified as velar stop glottalic by (Al- Rowsa, 2014). (Bisher, 2000) argued the Arabic consonant $/k/$ issue, which said it may pronounce overtly in some contexts to be $/g/$ in Arabic if the context is derived spontaneously. As a result, this argumentation may prove the existence of $/k/$.

Another sound which is $/ṣ/$ is classified as voiced palatal emphatic as in ṣarkūm (Cheek). (Belhaf, 2015) described it as fricative diagonally has some sort of diffusion and this description was coinciding of what have been described by (Sibawayh, 2014). Whilst (Watson, 2012) represented it as emphatic lateral fricative and considered lateral sonorant. (Bisher, 2000) in his book (Aylim Alaswat) pointed out that the consonant ḍ is not serve or related only for Arabic language as we all used to recall "The language of ḍad ". Yet, it has some effect on other languages or agreed on its existence in other MSL, although, it may have features that differ from the Arabic ḍ . Consequently, (Anees, 1970) in his book (Al- lughah bayn Al- qumiah wa Al- alamiah) added that the reason behind specialized Arabic language with the consonant ḍ is only a matter of populism neither concrete. On the other hand (Watson, 2012) has described $/ṣ/$ as voiceless lateral fricative which is identical with what have been described in Al- Wasaa'. Furthermore, (Rubin, 2012) classified this consonant the same way. Amazingly, both consonants $/ṣ/$ and $/ṣ/$ are pronounced by passing the nonstop air through both jaws and sometimes only one side of the lower jaw.

However, the consonant $/ṣ/$ in this paper described as voiceless emphatic alveolar fricative. Whilst Rubin, (2012) describes it as glottalic palate alveolar fricative, however, Watson, (2012) gave another description which emphatic alveolar fricative is nevertheless, in some occasions it occurs as affricate and glottalic. On the other hand, (Belhaf, 2016) described it as fricative. Here we have to shed light on $/ṣ/$ because it has some conflicts. For example, the word ṣawwa[r] (Rock); the $/ṣ/$ consonant was not explicit if it is Mehri sound or it is the same Arabic consonant $/ṣ/$, yet the Arabic $/ṣ/$ is not existed in Mehri beforehand as the participants said in Al- Wasaa'. Arab linguists placed the Arabic $/ṣ/$, $/z/$ and $/s/$ at a position were follow the producer of $/d/$ $/t/$ and $/t/$ in matter of fronting (Bisher, 2000). Consequently, for that study, we may explain the existence of $/ṣ/$ in Mehri language. Anyhow, the consonant $/z/$ characterized as voiced palate-Alveolar affricate. In addition, these phonemes showed discrepancies and some sort identification because Mehri language still under the spot, a lot of scholars are studying and investigating the secrets lay on its structures.

Conclusion:

The Mehri language used in Al- Wasaa' is considered as one of the MSAL endangered languages. Indeed, phonetics and phonology are important branches of linguistics, which emphasize the importance of comprehending any language. As here, some of Arabs do not know the existence of Mehri language so we have to start from the phonemes. The researcher illuminated the sounds in the Mehri language in Al- Wasaa' located in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia that have no counterparts in Arabic sounds. Phonetically, the sound is either vowel or consonant. This paper exhibits five sounds and their descriptions found in Mehri language spoken by mahra in Al- Wasaa' region.

These sounds as discussed above and showed below:

- The consonant / ʒ/, IPA [dʒ] characterized as voiced palate- Alveolar affricate.
- The phoneme / ʃ/, IPA [sʰ] considered as a rare consonant because it has sibilant among /s/ and /z / and described as a voiceless emphatic alveolar fricative.
- The phoneme /k/, IPA [kʰ] is voiceless emphatic velar stop.
- The consonant /ʃ/, IPA [ʃ] describe as voiceless palato- alveolar fricative lateral.
- The phoneme /ʃ/, IPA [ʃ], showed as palatal lateral emphatic.

Above all, as the data was collected from different speakers of different ages. It is important to shed light that during collecting the data; adults pronounced some words differently from the younger speakers. Consequently, this means that some of Mehri features are being lost among young mahra. For example, when the researcher asked them to pronounce the word *ṣōṭar* (a dates container made of pottery), however, young speaker could not understand the word at all unlike the old speaker who commented that it is an old word used by mahra which has no longer usages nowadays. This point derives us to an important issue which is the loss of Mehri language. Moreover, in the future, you may not see a lot of Mehri speakers because they lost the chance to use and practice it due to technological effects or they have moved on to live contemporary lives.

Moreover, there are words that they were used to know but cannot remember. Since their language makes them unique, it is none the less still a part of their identity. It can be referred to like a diamond that they are trying to keep its bright. Mehri people are very handy, peaceful and simple. You can consider them as a cohesive group because of endogamy. This may be the reason of how they succeed in keeping their language till now! Nevertheless, it is now considered as an endangered language that we have to document. The South Arabian languages may have remained the spoken languages, yet they could not last long against the overwhelming influence of Arabic and its dialects.

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Suggestions:

The findings of the study motivate us to document Mehri language as a part of MSAL and our culture in the Middle East. So, the researcher suggests and motivate to search deeply in Mehri language especially /s/ Arabic whether it exist in Mehri language or not. Indeed, each sub- tribe has its own dialect, so they differ in the pronunciation of consonants or only vowels and these differences can be studying in depth. For example, using long vowels constantly more than short vowels.

The researcher suggests studying the potential co- benefits of searching about endangered languages especially Mehri language.

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نظام الأصوات المميزة في اللغة المهريّة المستخدمة في منطقة الوسيح، المملكة العربية السعودية

الملخص: هدف هذا البحث إلى فحص الأصوات في اللغة المهريّة في منطقة الوسيح في المنطقة الشرقية من المملكة العربية السعودية والتي لا يوجد لها نظائر في الأصوات العربيّة. تعتمد الدراسة في المقام الأول على المنهج الوصفي التحليلي الذي يكمن في وصف الظاهرة كما هي موجودة في الواقع، ويصفها بدقة من خلال التعبير النوعي الذي يصفها ويوضح خصائصها. من خلال إجراء المقابلات مع عينة قصديّة تكونت من (6) إناث (من سن 17 إلى 60). و (8) من الذكور (الذين تتراوح أعمارهم بين 14 إلى 60)، يعيشون في منطقة الوسيح وباستخدام بطاقة التحليل كشفت نتائج البحث عن خمسة أصوات ليس لها نظير في اللغة العربيّة وهي s ، $š$ ، k ، z ، s الساكنة في اللغة المهريّة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغات العربيّة الجنوبيّة الحديثة، اللغات المهدة بالانقراض، اكتساب اللغة الثانية.