

# South Arabian and Yemeni Dialects<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

It has traditionally been assumed that with the Islamic conquests Arabic overwhelmed the original ancient languages of the Peninsula, leaving the language situation in the south-western Arabian Peninsula as one in which dialects of Arabic are tinged, to a greater or lesser degree, with substrate features of the ancient South Arabian languages. The ancient Arab grammarians had clear ideas concerning the difference between the non-Arabic languages of the Peninsula and Arabic, including the *-t* feminine nominal ending in all states and *-n* versus the *-l* definite article.. Today, however, we read about ‘Arabic’ dialects that exhibit large proportions of ‘non-Arabic’ features. Here I compare phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic data from several contemporary varieties spoken within historical Yemen – within the borders of current Yemen into southern ‘Asīr – with data from Ancient South Arabian, Sabaean, and Modern South Arabian, Mehri, as spoken in the far east of Yemen. On the basis of these comparisons I suggest that Arabic may not have replaced all the ancient languages of the Peninsula, and that we may be witnessing the rediscovery of descendants of the ancient languages.

The Yemeni and ‘Asīri dialects considered are:

Yemen: Rāziḥīt, Minabbih, Xašir, San‘ani, Ġaylḥabbān

‘Asīr: Rijāl Alma’, Abha, Faifi

**Keywords:** *Arabic, Semitic, Ancient South Arabian, Modern South Arabian, lateral sibilants, relative clauses*

## 1. PHONOLOGICAL LINKS BETWEEN SOUTH ARABIAN AND YEMENI DIALECTS

In this section, I consider reflexes of the sibilants and the emphatics, total anticipatory assimilation of /n/, and glottalisation in pre-pausal position.

### 1.1 Lateral sibilants and affricates

Lateral sibilants are a feature of Modern South Arabian and Biblical Hebrew. On the basis of lateral cognates in Biblical Hebrew and Modern South Arabian, it is considered probable that Ancient South Arabian *s*<sup>2</sup> had a lateral articulation (cf. Beeston 1984, Sima 2001, Steiner 1977). Within Yemen, a slightly lateralised reflex (realisation) of \*š is attested in Rāziḥīt. The reflex of \*ḏ until recently was a voiceless lateral affricate in Rāziḥīt<sup>2</sup> in traditional words.<sup>3</sup> Among older speakers it remains a lateral fricative in Rijāl Alma’ and in Ġaylḥabbān in the Hadramawt (Habtour 1988). There are indications that the non-plosive emphatics may originally have been realized as affricates in some Semitic languages (Steiner 1982). Beside the lateral affricate reflex of \*ḏ in Rāziḥīt, a non-pharyngealised /st/ reflex of the emphatic sibilant is attested in a number of north Yemeni dialects (Behnstedt 1987a, 1998) and in Faifi – e.g. *stayfin* ‘summer’ (Yahya Asiri p.c.). On the basis of frequent similar sound changes in Egyptian Arabic, Biblical Hebrew and Syriac, Behnstedt (1987a:8–9, 1998, cf. also Steiner 1982) suggests that /st/ may have originally been an

affricate \*ts which was subject to metathesis, making affrication in these varieties the phonetic correlate of emphasis.

### 1.2 Assimilation of /n/

Total anticipatory assimilation of /n/ to non-guttural consonants is a productive phonological process in Rāziḥīt, as in: *našar* – *yiššur* ‘to set out in the evening’, *nagal* – *yiggul* ‘to extract’, *našad* – *yiššud* ‘to ask’, *iθnēn* ~ *θattē* ‘two m., f.’ (Sab. *ṭty*), but *anḥa* ‘we’ (consider also *ssān* ‘man’ *ssānih* ‘woman’, etymologically related to \*ʔinsān, cf. Behnstedt 1987a:98). Assimilation of /n/ is now historical in Mehri,<sup>4</sup> with evidence of assimilation in lexicalised forms only, as in: *k’annūn* ‘small m.s.’ *k’annatt* ‘small f.s.’. Total anticipatory assimilation of /n/ was a regular occurrence in mid-Sabaeen and late-Sabaeen, as evidenced by the frequent defective spellings of certain words, such as: *ʔfs* < *ʔnfs*, *bt* < *bnt*, *ʔtt* < *ʔntt* (Stein 2003:19, cf. also Beeston 1984:11). A comparative frequency count of defective versus full spellings in mid- and late-Sabaeen inscriptions indicates that /n/ assimilation became an increasingly common process in the language, particularly in the area around Mārib and the central Yemeni highlands (Stein 2003:20).

Total assimilation of /n/ to a following sonorant is a common process in languages of the world, including in dialects of Arabic (cf. Watson 2002). Assimilation of /n/ to a following obstruent, however, is not. The occasional results of assimilation of /n/ in Andalusian, with examples such as */att/* ‘you m.s.’ < \**anta* and */kittarál/* ‘you would see’ < \**kint tara*, Corriente (1989:97) considers to be a sign of South Arabian influence. The result of assimilation of /n/ to a following obstruent is found in a very few lexicalised forms in various Arabic dialects – notably in the words *bint* > *bitt* ‘girl’ and *kunt* > *kutt* ‘I/you m.s. was/were’ (Egyptian) and *kunta* > *kutta* ‘I/you m.s. was/were’ (Sudanese). Toll (1983:11) notes a few instances of /n/ assimilation to obstruents in the Ḥijāzi dialect of Ghāmid: assimilation to /x/, /š/ and /t/ apparently involving the preposition */min/* ‘from’, and assimilation to /z/ in the word \**manzal* [manzal] ‘house’. Before labials and velars, /n/ assimilates in place only (e.g. [jambīya] ‘dagger’, [zumbil] ‘basket’, [muḥ kull] ‘of all’). To my knowledge, no (other) recorded dialect of Arabic exhibits productive total anticipatory assimilation of /n/.

### 1.3 Pausal glottalisation

In common with many Yemeni dialects spoken in the Central Highlands (Behnstedt 1985, Naīm-Sanbar 1994, Naīm 2009), the western mountain range and southern ‘Asīr, Mehri devoices and pre-glottalises pre-pausal consonants, and post-glottalises pre-pausal vowels (Simeone-Senelle 1997; Watson and Asiri 2007, 2008). Pausal glottalisation in these varieties results in glottalised (ejective) oral stops, pre-glottalised fricatives and pre-glottalised and, at least partially, devoiced sonorants. Examples include: San’ani and Rijāl Alma’: *dagʔk* < */dagīg/* ‘flour’; Rijāl Alma’: *xālīt* < */xālid/* ‘Khalid [proper noun]’; Mehri: *ḡayʔf* < */ḡayḡ/* ‘man’, *bi-ḥāwēʔ* < */bi-ḥāwēl/* ‘firstly’.

## 2. MORPHOLOGICAL LINKS BETWEEN SOUTH ARABIAN AND YEMENI DIALECTS

Morphological links between South Arabian and Yemeni dialects have long been recognised (Retsö 2000). These include the indeclinable relative marker *d-*, the *k*-perfect verbal endings for first singular and second persons, the *-t* feminine nominal ending in absolute and definite states as well as the construct, and the nasal definite articles *n-* and *m-*.

### 2.1 The indeclinable relative marker *d-* in Sabaean

The indeclinable relative marker *d-* in Sabaean (Beeston 1984:41, Stein 2003:150) and Mehri (Sima 2005, Watson 2009) is recorded for a large number of Yemeni dialects in the north and south of the central mountain range (Behnstedt 1985) and in eastern dialects (Behnstedt 2001). Consider the examples from Rāziḥīt, Mehri and Sabaean:

Rāziḥīt: *min hōh dī tzawwaj bi-wāḥdah sānah / dī kānic timuḥḥā* ‘who was it who married a woman, the one you used to beat up?’

*minān nagalū dī kānām bū bēt jaddīh salī* ‘Where did they come from, those who lived in Grandfather Ali’s house ...’ (Watson et al. 2006b)

Mehri: *šaxbār d-bār sābk’ūk b-sānn* ‘Frag den, der dir schon an Alter voran ist’ (Sima 2005:86)

*ḥābū d-šihām lhāytān māḳān yaḡarmān lhāytān* ‘lit: people who have many cows slaughter cows’

Sabaean: *šlmnhn dt dḥbn d-šftt mr’-hmw’ lmqh* J 706/3–5 ‘(... hat) die (weibliche) Statuette aus Bronze (gewidmet), welche sie ihrem Herrn ’LMQH versprochen hat’ (Stein 2003:150)

*ʿfrs<sup>1</sup>m/d-hrgw* ‘horses which they slaughtered’ (Beeston 1984:43)

### 2.2 The *k*-perfect 1s and 2

The *k*-perfect first singular and second person subject suffixes is a feature of Yemeni dialects of the western mountain range (Behnstedt 1985, 1987a, 1987b), Mehri (Simeone-Senelle 1997), Sabaean, Minaean (Stein 2003:25), Himyaritic and Ethio-Semitic. In the varieties under consideration here, the *k*-perfect is attested in Rāziḥīt and varieties to the west of Ṣaḥdah. It is not attested in the ‘Asīri varieties of Faiḥi or Rijāl Alma’, and indeed, from the information we have to hand, does not appear to feature north of the present-day Yemeni–Saudi border.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.3 The *-t* feminine ending

The *-t* feminine ending is attested for many nouns in Rāziḥīt, always in the definite and construct states, but, as in Mehri, Sabaean and Geez, also in the absolute state in many basic nouns. Consider the examples below:

*baʃd sā ʃit* ‘after an hour’, *jahwit* ‘small room on lower floor for animals’, *dēmit* ‘kitchen’, *iḥ-ḥalgit* ‘the series’, *ik-kaḍbit* ‘the lie’; cp. Mehri: *sālfāt* ‘story’, *ʃaydīt* ‘sardine’

In the adjective class, Rāziḥīt deals with feminine gender in three ways: feminine gender is not explicitly marked on verbal participles, in some non-participle adjectives feminine is marked by final *-ah*, and in other non-participle adjectives by final *-īt* in all three states – absolute, definite and construct. Adjectives that take final *-īt* include all the *nisba* adjectives and a small set of non-*nisba* adjectives:

*bunnīt* ‘brown’, *aʃlīt* ‘original’, *gudēmīt* ‘old’, *lahjah rāziḥīt* ‘Razihit dialect’ (Watson et al. 2006a, 2006b); cp. Mehri: *lbōn – lābnīt* ‘white m. – f.’, *ʃwēr – ʃawrīt* ‘blind m. – f.’

The *-t* feminine ending in all states was a salient feature distinguishing the ancient Arabian languages from Arabic: the King of Himyar is legendarily said to have expressed the absence of Arabic in his language with the words: *laysa ʃindanā ʃarabiyyat* ‘there is no Arabic amongst us’ where it is explained that, unlike in Arabic, *-t* is not dropped in pause (Rabin 1951:34). Native speakers of Rāziḥīt explicitly compare their language with what they describe as *Yamanīt* – varieties spoken outside the area – mentioning as shibboleth the second person singular independent pronouns – the forms *ant/a* and *antī* distinguish *Yamanīt* from Rāziḥīt *ak* and *ać*.

### 3. LEXICAL LINKS BETWEEN SOUTH ARABIAN AND YEMENI DIALECTS

#### 3.1 Function words and particles

Function words are very rarely borrowed. Here we see that a large number of function words, including particles, adverbs and prepositions, are shared between either Ancient or Modern South Arabian and Yemeni dialects.

Cognates of *ḡayr* are attested in most, if not all, Arabic dialects in the sense of ‘apart from, except’ (Procházka 1993:219, Naīm 2009:153-4 for San’ani). In Mehri and Yemeni dialects generally,<sup>6</sup> cognates of *ḡayr* have the additional, and more common, sense of ‘only, just; but’. Examples include:

San’ani: *anā ḡarr gult* ‘I only said’

*jit ḡar tit ʃarras* ‘she came only to celebrate a wedding’ (Piamenta 1991:363)

Mehri: *ār wallah mān ldā ʃ* ‘but, by God, I don’t know’

*w-ḍömäh ykūn ār bā-šḡayr käll snīna* ‘that used to be only in the mountains in the past’

*šī* functions as an existential, predominantly in negative clauses, and in questions and conditionals. It also has the sense of ‘either .. or’; ‘some’:

Mehri: *hīn nukšam šī amṭāl ka-ḥbunyān ḥāyām lyōm* ‘wenn uns dann in diesen Tagen einige Sprichwörter mit unseren Kindern (zusammen) einfallen’ (Sima 2005)

Mehri: *šī bōh w-šī bōh* ‘some here, some there’

*šīki šī lā* ‘neither of us have anything’

*šī fšē* ‘is there any lunch?’

San’ani: *šī yawm šī yawmayn* ‘either one or two days’

*šī xubz* ‘is there any bread?’

Rāziḥīt: *mā kān jō bē šī brāk wi-hīh* ‘weren’t there any water cisterns at all?’

### Prepositions

Rāziḥīt and Faifi: *bū* ‘in’ = Mehri *b-*, ASA *b-* (Beeston 1984:54)

Rāziḥīt: *si/sa/siwān* ‘to, towards’ = ASA *s<sup>1</sup>n*, *s<sup>1</sup>nn*, *s<sup>1</sup>wn*, *s<sup>3</sup>n*, *bs<sup>3</sup>n* (Beeston 1984:58, Sima 2001:256)

*farrēna sā hūd am-dirāj w-n-nās kullām farrū sī ṭall* ‘we escaped to Hūd am-Dirāj and everyone else escaped there’

*sīwān farrēkum* ‘where did you (m.pl.) escape to?’ (Watson et al. 2006b)

### Adverbs

Mehri: *sēhāl* ‘a little’, cp. San’ani etc. *sahl* ‘don’t worry’

Yemeni and Mehri: *fīsa* ‘quickly’

*yōm*, *ywm/ym* ‘when’ ASA (cf. Beeston 1984) and Rāziḥīt

In a note to her study of future particles in Arabic dialects, Taine-Chaikh (2004) proposes to extend the research to include future particles in other Hamito-Semitic languages; she mentions the future particle *med* in Hobyot, but not its use outside the Modern South Arabian languages. Until relatively recently not recorded in this sense outside the Modern South Arabian languages, we are now aware of reflexes of *mayd* either side of the Yemeni–Saudi border. There are slight syntactic and semantic inter-variety differences in the use of this form – in Mehri *mād* may stand alone or take a following pronoun suffix followed by a verb in the subjunctive, in Rāziḥīt *mēd* takes what appears to be the definite article (*im-mēd*) followed by a verb, noun or pronoun, while in Rijāl Alma’ *mēd* takes a following noun or verb; in questions, (*im-*)*mēd* may stand phrase-finally in both Rāziḥīt and Rijāl Alma’. In semantic terms, Mehri *mād* functions mainly as a future particle with possible volition overtones, whereas Rāziḥīt and Rijāl Alma’ *mēd* functions as a future/volition particle. Consider the examples below:

Mehri: *mād +/- pronoun suffix + verb*

*mād yaḥmāl sfēr lā* ‘he won’t cope with the travel’

*mādy laḡyībās hōk* ‘I’ll leave it for you’

*hīn mād yaxlāṭh ḥīrēz w-dējār* 'if one wants to mix it with rice'

Rāziḥīt: *im-mēd* + verb/noun/pronoun

*lā māni m-mēd aǧid baḏa'ah* 'No, I don't want to go to Baḏa'ah'

*wallāh immēd yilḥag yišārṣōh lō kkōh bū majlis al-ʔamin* 'he would want to follow him to sue him even if it brought him to the Security Council' (Watson et al. 2006b)

Rijāl Alma': *mēd* + noun/verb

*anā mēd im-xitāb* 'I want the book'

*anā mēd amšī* 'I want to go'

*mantah mēd* 'what do you m.s. want?' (Yahya Asiri p.c.)

In other Yemeni varieties, reflexes of \**mayd* are also attested, but lack the sense of future/volition found in Mehri, Rāziḥīt and Rijāl Alma'. Consider here: Abha – *gāl mēdī* 'he said to me' (Yahya Asiri, p.c.) and San'ani – '*alā mayd* 'because of'.

### 3.2 Basic lexis

Rossi (1940) had already recognised the wealth of South Arabian terms in Yemeni dialects, particularly rich in the traditional semantic fields of architecture and agriculture. Behnstedt (1997) draws our attention to the fact that for terms relating to parts of the body correspondence between northern Arabic and Yemeni dialects lies between 30% and 60%. The correspondence for terms relating to the face between the two related, but distinctly separate, languages German and English is around 40%. The question to be asked here is, is there a certain correspondence percentage below which we can no longer describe two varieties as dialects of a single language?

In addition to the many shared ecological, architectural and agricultural terms noted by Behnstedt (1987a, 1988), Modern South Arabian and the northern Yemeni dialects have in common a plethora of verbs relating to 'to go' which differ according to the time of day the 'goer' sets out, and Rijāl Alma' has a reflex of \**bir* for 'son' and 'daughter'.<sup>7</sup> Consider the following examples:

Mehri: *bār/bārt* 'son of/daughter of', *ḥābrī* 'my son', *ḥbūn* 'sons'

Rijāl Alma': *bir/ibrah* 'son/daughter' (pl. *banāh* 'daughters')

Verbs of going which depend on the time of day in northern Yemen and Mehri include (cf. also Behnstedt 1987a for North Yemen, Asiri 2009 for Rijāl Almaʿ):

Mehri: *ǧsōm* 'to go early in the morning', *šūjūs* 'to go in the afternoon', *abōṣar* 'to go at twilight', *bṣār* 'to go at night'

Zabīd: *bāk* 'to go in the morning', *našar* 'to go in the period from mid-afternoon to nightfall' (Na'im 2010:242)

## Agricultural terms

*lē* ‘cow’ – Mehri, Rijāl Alma’, Faiḫi; *lāy(in)* Minabbih and *lāy* Xašir (Behnstedt 1987a, 1987b)

*šāriyah* RA, *s’ərrayt* M ‘animal hard to milk’ (Johnstone 1987)

Mehri: *šəxōf* ‘milk’, *šəxāf/yəšxōf* ‘to drink milk’; Rijāl Alma’: *šaxaf* ‘to drink quickly’<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. SYNTACTIC LINKS BETWEEN SOUTH ARABIAN AND YEMENI DIALECTS

Perhaps it is the syntactic links between two varieties which are most suggestive of common origin. Here I discuss agreement in relative clauses in Rijāl Alma’ and the construction SUBJECT+fā-/hā+PARTICIPLE in Rāziḫīt.

##### 4.1 Relative clauses in Rijāl Alma’

One of the few generally consistent differences between old Arabic and modern Arabic dialects which has, until recently, not been countered is the fact that while in Classical Arabic the relative marker agrees with the head noun in number and gender (and, in the dual, in case), the relative marker in modern Arabic dialects has a single indeclinable form – usually *illi* (cf. Retsö 1992:8). In Sabaeen, alongside the indeclinable *d-*, there is a relative marker that agrees in number and gender with the antecedent, as in:

*’wdn/’lys1t’rn* SAB375/1 ‘the lines of the inscription’ (Beeston 1962, 2005:48)

*br’ w-hgb’ b’r-hw t-š’bm* MAFRAY-Sāri’ 6/3 ‘(...) hat seinen Brunnen von Š’BM gebaut und wiederhergestellt’ (Stein 2003:146)

In Rijāl Alma’, the relative marker always agrees in number and gender with the antecedent and, for three of the forms, appears to have the same reflexes as for late-Sabaeen.<sup>9</sup> Compare Rijāl Alma’ *dā* m.s., *tā* f.s., *wulā* human pl. and *mā* inanimate pl. (Asiri 2007) with forms presented by Stein (2003:150) in his summary table of the development of relative pronouns from early- to late-Sabaeen:

	m.s.	f.s.	nom.m.pl.	obl.m.pl.	f.pl.
aSab	<i>d-</i>	<i>dt</i>	<i>’l</i>	<i>&gt;</i>	<i>’lt</i>
mSab	<i>d-</i>	<i>dt</i>	<i>’lw</i>	<i>’ly</i>	<i>’lt</i>
spSab	<i>d-</i>	<i>t-</i>	<i>&lt;</i>	<i>’lht</i> ( <i>’lt</i> )	<i>&gt;</i>

Table 1: Sabaeen relative pronouns

Alongside the number/gender sensitive relative marker, observe that, unless functioning as a genitival attribute, a singular anaphoric pronoun is always absent, and a plural anaphoric pronoun mainly absent, in definite relative clauses in Rijāl Alma'. This holds not only for the verbal object or independent pronoun, as noted for Moroccan dialects (Elomari 1998), Ḥassāniyya (Taine-Chaikh 2004), and some other dialects of Arabic, e.g. Damascene (Fischer and Jastrow 1980:85), but also for the verbal subject markers. Always in the singular, and mostly in the plural, the default 3ms form of the verb is used in case the subject of the relative clause and the antecedent are co-referential:

*antah rayta m-walad dā šarad* 'have you seen the boy who ran away?'

*antah rayta m-brat tā šarad* 'have you seen the girl who ran away?'

*gābalt im-brat tā lisa yasma* 'I met the girl who can't hear'

*gābalt im-'uwāl wulā sarag/u m-maḥall* 'I met the boys who stole from the shop'

*im-maḥall mā bana/ha* 'the houses that he built' (Asiri 2007, 2008)

In Sabaeen, the anaphoric pronoun, unless the genitival attribute of a substantive, is often absent (from the examples given, apparently in both definite and indefinite relative clauses):

*s<sup>1</sup>b<sup>t</sup>/s<sup>1</sup>b<sup>w</sup>* 'expeditions which they made'

*'frs<sup>1</sup>m/d-hrgw* 'horses which they slaughtered' (Beeston 1984:43)

## 4.2 subject+fā-/hā-+active participle in Rāziḥīt

As discussed during a presentation in 2005 (Watson et al. 2006b), Rāziḥīt expresses the continuous through *fā-/fa-/hā-+ACTIVE PARTICIPLE*. The following examples are taken from the texts in Watson et al. (2006b):

*dī kānic fā-hābillāh iṣ-ṣubih* 'the one you were telling this morning'

*yarān dīyyah ṣalī ṭaḥmad fā-dā ṣ li-ṣāliḥ* 'Look, there's Ali Ahmad shouting for Saleh!'

*dalḥīn ṭac fā-mitābi ṣ iḥ-ḥalgit ṭac fā-mišabbiḥ lāh tih iḥ-ḥalgit bēn-tirēhā kull lēlah* 'Now, are you following the series on the television? Do you watch the series every night?'

Noting that *hā-* has the sense of 'in' in dialects spoken in the Ḥugariyyah and in Banī Minabbih (Behnstedt 1987a:218), an area to the north of Jabal Rāziḥ, we initially suggested *fā-* here to be a reflex of the preposition *fī* 'in'. This construction thus appears to be reminiscent of those found in other, unrelated, languages in which a preposition expressing the sense of 'in' precedes an uninflected verb form to express

the continuous – as in modern English *he was a' singing and a' dancing*, where *a'*, according to Collins Dictionary, has the sense of 'in', and contemporary dialectal German *ich bin beim/am Lesen* 'I am reading'. In a recent conversation, however, Peter Stein (p.c.) pointed to the similarity between the Rāziḥīt construction SUBJECT+fā-/hā-+ACTIVE PARTICIPLE and the SUBJECT+f-+PREDICATE (usually NOMEN+f-+VERBFORM) construction, in which *f-* comes between a fronted element and a verb, a construction well attested in Sabaean, but only rarely seen in Arabic (Nebes 1995).<sup>10</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

Similarities between language varieties may be due to chance – including similar lifestyle – language contact, or direct or common inheritance. An example of chance-induced similarity due to similar lifestyle may well be the use of different verbs in the sense of 'to go' depending on the time of day the 'goer' sets out. A lifestyle dependent on early rising for specific household or trading tasks and on the position of the sun is likely to result in a set of time-specific verbs, perhaps with the sense of the task attached. Thus, Rāziḥīt *barrah* has the specific sense of 'to collect firewood [early in the morning]'. Non-assimilatory phonological processes, including specific phrasal marking – in this case, pausal glottalisation – are likely to be due to language contact. Although pausal devoicing is very common in the world's languages, pausal glottalisation is not: it is attested in Thai and as a major phonetic feature in the south-west of the Arabian Peninsula (Watson and Asiri 2007). In other Arabic dialects in which it occurs – parts of Middle and Lower Egypt, parts of the Levant and Anatolia glottalisation affects a very limited set of domain-final segments (mainly / ʕ / and final vowels). It is in the inheritance-related similarities that we may see evidence of descendents of South Arabian; these will be reflected in a common basic lexicon, including prepositions and particles, common morphemes, exclusively shared syntactic constructions, and common agreement patterns in the syntax; they will also be shown in uniquely shared phonological processes – such as the productive total assimilation of /n/ to a following non-guttural consonant in Rāziḥīt, Sabaean and historically in Mehri, a process which is both rare in languages of the world and not attested in other 'Arabic' dialects.

The Yemeni varieties discussed in this paper have changed drastically within the lifetime of current speakers: the lateral affricate reflex of *ḍād* is now a phonological memory among Rāziḥīt speakers. Perhaps even more salient are changes observed in the syntax of Rijāl Alma', where young people have abandoned the gender/number sensitive relative marker in favour of invariable *illi*. Significantly, the use of *illi* goes hand in hand with the adoption of pan-regional syntax, lexemes and morphemes: the examples below show the package of features that accompany use of *illi* – the anaphoric pronoun in the definite relative clause, the definite article (for Rijāl Alma' *im-*) realised as *il-*, the 3fs perfect marker (for Rijāl Alma' *-an*) realised as *-at*, and pan-regional lexemes replacing dialect-specific lexemes (in these examples, *ant* 'you m.s.' in place of *antah*, *šif-t* 'saw-2.M.S.' in place of *rayt*, *bint* 'girl' in place of *(i)brah*, *fawg* 'upstairs' in place of *šilayn*).

*ant šift is-sayyārah illi řaddat* ‘have you (m.s.) seen the car that passed’

*samařt al-bint illi tamřī fawg* ‘I have heard the girl who is walking upstairs’  
(Asiri 2008)

In a paper entitled ‘Arabic dialectology: The state of the art’, Jastrow (2002) deplores the current academic trend of retreating from the world of living languages to ‘a kind of global chatroom’ and the abandonment of fieldwork. What we most need, he writes, is what is least likely to be carried out – namely extensive fieldwork in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, particularly in ‘Asīr, Najrān and Tihāma. Fieldwork is now being undertaken in ‘Asīr by Yahya Asiri and Munira Al-Azraqi. The data discussed in this paper, however, only underscore the urgency of Jastrow’s call. The more we learn about these varieties, the more urgent the need appears as it becomes ever clearer how important the data is and how quickly salient features are disappearing. Alongside continued advances in the study of Ancient South Arabian, timely research into varieties spoken in northern Yemen and southern ‘Asīr may continue to unearth linguistic features we thought had long ago died out and, perhaps, provide us with sufficient information to demonstrate with some degree of certainty that Arabic did not, as so frequently assumed, displace the original languages of the Peninsula.

## NOTES

1. Thanks to the Leverhulme Trust for a research fellowship 2007–2008, during which time much of the research and writing of this paper took place. For their comments, I thank participants at the workshop, *Yemen: Bridging the gap between the past and the present*, Heidelberg, June 2007, participants at the Semitistik session of the *Deutsche Orientalistentag*, Freiburg, September 2007, students and staff at the University of Jena, November 2007, and University of Vienna, November 2010, where versions of this paper were presented. Thanks to Bonnie Glover Stalls for reading the paper and making pertinent comments with respect to Rāziḥīt – in particular with regard to the function of *im-mēd*, to Peter Stein for suggesting syntactic similarities between *fā-* in Rāziḥīt and Sabaeen, and to Norbert Nebes and Stephan Procházka for inviting me to present my findings at the Universities of Jena and Vienna respectively.

2. Behnstedt (1987a), on the basis of information from one informant in an-Naḍīr [sic], describes the reflexes of \*š and \* ḍ as retroflex. According to Bonnie Glover Stalls (p.c.), who spent several months conducting linguistic fieldwork in in-Naḍīr, these sounds are more lateral than retroflex, though the laterality of \*š is slight today, and may now be historical. A palatographic investigation would be useful at this point – with the palatograms showing the place of articulation, and the linguograms providing information about the tongue shape, including degree of laterality.

3. Behnstedt (1987a: 136) notes 160 forms with the pan-Yemeni voiced pharyngealised interdental fricative as opposed to 70 forms with the retroflex /č/. According to Bonnie Glover Stalls (p.c.), the voiceless lateral affricate reflex of *ḍād* is

present within the phonological memory of some present speakers but is no longer in current usage.

4. Unless otherwise noted, Mehri data is taken from the sound files recorded by Askari Hujayraan Saad and published on the Semitic Sound Archive, University of Heidelberg ([http://semitistik.uni-hd.de/askari/index\\_e.htm](http://semitistik.uni-hd.de/askari/index_e.htm)). The translations are my own.

5. An interesting observation made by Behnstedt (2007: 54) for dialects spoken within the political borders of Yemen is that the *m*-definite article never occurs in a *k*-dialect variety.

6. Also common in this sense in North African dialects, including Moroccan (Harrell and Sobelman 2006) and Ḥassānīya (Heath 2004: 177). We can assume a Yemeni connection here, since Yemenis were a significant part of the Islamic armies which conquered North Africa.

7. With realisation of /r/ in the singular but not in the plural, as in Mehri (and Aramaic)

8. The root /š-x-f/ may be onomatopoeic, reflecting the noise made by milk as it hits the milk pail during milking, and the slurping noise made by someone who drinks hastily.

9. Prochazka (1988: 46) mentions for Abha and al-Ṣaḥrā a relative that distinguishes number and gender, with the forms *dā* m.s., *tā* f.s. and *illi* c.pl. He does not mention an inanimate plural form, and, in contrast to Rijāl Alma', his examples show anaphoric verbal subject markers in the relative clause – *ir-rajjāl dā jā 'ams marīd* 'the man who came yesterday is ill', *il-mara tā jat 'ams marīdah* 'the woman who came yesterday is ill' and *in-nās illi jaw 'ams marḡān* 'the people who came yesterday are ill.' He also observes that the invariant relative *illi* is rapidly replacing the gender/number sensitive relative.

10. The construction *ʔammā ... fa-* in Arabic is not comparable to Sabaean NOMEN/PRÄPOSITIONALAUSTRUCK+f-+VERBFORM (Nebes 1995: 260, 184): in contrast to the Sabaean construction, Arabic *ʔammā ... fa-* is a topic–comment construction in which the isolation of the topic from the comment is reflected prosodically in that the two components constitute separate intonation phrases, and semantically in that a conditional-like relationship exists between the two components. In addition, the element following *ʔammā* has sentence-like characteristics, whereas the element preceding *f-* in Sabaean has phrasal characteristics.

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