

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Leeds		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> D26		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Saving and revitalising endangered Southern Arabian languages		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2008-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Janet C.E. Watson	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Leadership Chair Language at Leeds	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> May 2013–date
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2013–date		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL) are purely oral languages facing extinction. Traditionally spoken by (semi-)nomadic communities in southern Arabia, they are threatened by increasing Islamisation, lack of government support, sedentarisation, urbanisation, modern technology and rapid depletion of ecosystems through desertification.</p> <p>This project developed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arabic-based orthography;</li> <li>• multimedia archives;</li> <li>• e-books for children;</li> <li>• community training in documentation in Oman and Yemen;</li> </ul> <p>As a result:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the status of MSAL has been enriched among speakers and beyond;</li> <li>• MSAL speakers now use community-led WhatsApp groups to discuss the languages;</li> <li>• both male and female community members collaborate in ongoing academic and outreach presentations and publications.</li> </ul>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The MSAL are the most endangered sub-family of Semitic languages, ranging on <a href="#">Ethnologue</a> (an authoritative resource on world languages) from 'nearly extinct' to 'shifting'. Speaker numbers are approximately 12 (Bathari), 1,000 (Harsusi, Hobyot), 30,000 (Shehret), 60,000 (Soqotri), and 200,000 (Mehri). All MSAL speakers are tribe members.</p> <p>Although research has been conducted on MSAL since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the majority of publications involve very few speakers, do not examine differences between the many varieties, and have not appreciated the relationship between the languages and the cultures and ecosystems in which they have emerged. The originality of Watson's contribution to the MSAL lies in her work with over 200 speakers from different tribes and regions, recognition of the link with the natural environment, and active collaboration with native speakers.</p> <p>The research insights and findings underpinning the research date back to 2008, when Watson first began work on MSAL. She worked on the documentation of Mehri, the most widespread of the six MSAL, co-editing a book of Mehri texts in 2009 <b>[G1]</b> and authoring <i>Structure of Mehri</i> in 2012 <b>[G2]</b>.</p> <p>Between 2013 and 2016 <b>[G3]</b>, Watson led a community-based project to document the MSAL spoken in Oman and Yemen. This project produced audio/audio-visual archives for five of the</p>		

MSAL, consisting of 225 hours of audio data, 20 hours of film data, 800 still photographs and 100 hours of transcription and translation into Arabic and English, which are now publicly available through the Endangered Languages Archive Repository (ELAR), SOAS. Watson was the primary researcher for the Mehri dataset [2] and the Shehret dataset [3], and used the material which they contain to develop an orthography for all MSAL. She was then also able to collect new material written using this script and incorporate it into the dataset.

The project funded by [G3] recorded topics reflecting the loss of local culture and ecosystems; this was the last period of time to contact people who had experienced both the pre-motorised past (pre-1970s) and the motorised, industrialised present. Part of the documentation included digitisation of Miranda Morris' legacy audio and still photographic material from the 1970s and 1980s [D]. This material, in four of the languages, has been played back to current speakers, leading to fruitful discussions with native speakers and community leaders about linguistic, cultural and ecosystem changes within Southern Arabia. This has included awareness of the extent to which humans interacted directly with the natural environment – in a way younger people no longer do – for example, increased awareness of the loss of flora and the need to address overgrazing and desertification [A]. This led to publications, for example, on the differences in terminology associated with camel husbandry across languages spoken in northern and southern Oman [1] and the symbiotic relationship between endangered languages and the natural environment in which they emerge [4], as well as further funded research [G4, G5].

[G3] also supported the production of a comparative cultural glossary across all six MSAL [5]; and the first pedagogical grammar of Mehri [6]. Ongoing research on the Phonetics and Phonology of Mehri and Shehret is now supported by [G6].

### 3. References to the research

#### Publications:

1. 2013 Janet C.E. Watson, Domenyk Eades, Muhammad al-Mahri. 'Camel culture and camel terminology amongst the Omani Bedouin'. In *Journal of Semitic Studies* 58: 169–186.
2. 2016a Janet C.E. Watson, Miranda J. Morris. *Documentation of the Modern South Arabian Languages: Mehri. ID: Mehri (0307)*. London: SOAS. Endangered Languages Archive, ELAR. URL: <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI976775>
3. 2016b Janet C.E. Watson, Miranda J. Morris. *Documentation of the Modern South Arabian Languages: Shehret. ID: Shehret (0308)*. London: SOAS. Endangered Languages Archive, ELAR. URL: <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI972274>
4. 2017 Janet C.E. Watson, Abdullah al-Mahri. 'Language and nature in Dhofar'. In: S. Bettega & F. Gasparini (eds), *RiCOGNIZIONI. Rivisti di Lingue e Letterature straniere e Culture modern*. 87–103. University of Turin.
5. 2019 Janet C.E. Watson, M. Morris, with D. Eades & native speakers. *A Comparative Cultural Glossary across the Modern South Arabian Language Family*. Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement series: OUP: Oxford.
6. 2020 Janet C.E. Watson, Abdullah al-Mahri, Ali al-Mahri, Bxayta Musallam al-Mahri & Ahmed al-Mahri. *Taghamk āfyat: A course in Mehri of Dhofar*. Harrassowitz, Semitica Didactica series.

#### Grants:

<b>G1.</b>	Janet C.E. Watson: Mehri texts, Leverhulme Research Fellowship, 2007–2008, £22,221.
<b>G2.</b>	Janet C.E. Watson: The Structure of Mehri, British Academy/Leverhulme Senior Research Fellowship, 2010–2011, £47,201.
<b>G3.</b>	Janet C.E. Watson, co-Is Miranda Morris, Alex Bellem, Domyk Eades: The Documentation and Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Modern South Arabian, Leverhulme Project Grant, January 2013–December 2016, £149,680.
<b>G4.</b>	Janet C.E. Watson, co-I Kaltham al-Ghanim: The Symbiotic Relationship between Language and Nature in Southern and Eastern Arabia, AHRC Network Grant, October 2017–September 2019, £44,254.
<b>G5.</b>	Janet C.E. Watson: Community Documentation of Biocultural Diversity in al-Mahrah, eastern Yemen, ELDP Project Grant, October 2017–March 2019, £10,000.
<b>G6.</b>	Janet C.E. Watson: The Phonetics and Phonology of Modern South Arabian: Focus on Mehri and Shehret, Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, October 2019–September 2021, £104,765.

#### 4. Details of the impact

Since the 1970s, the MSAL, their cultures and ecosystems have been threatened by sedentarisation, urbanisation, motorisation, education in Arabic, and migration to and from the region. After the Dhofar war (1963-75), the Oman government stressed social and cultural unity rather than diversity, purposefully neglecting MSAL languages and cultures.

Watson's research involved community speakers in a project to revitalise and disseminate information about the languages, designed to extend well beyond the lifetime of the western researchers. Watson's team gained the trust of both community members **[A, B, C, D, E, G]** and the authorities **[A, E, F]** by affiliating with no single tribe, involving 195 speakers from 10 different (sub-)tribes from 20 different language / dialect groups, sustaining contact with speakers and local researchers, and sharing findings openly.

The project has had the following impacts:

##### Language revitalisation: through script

The project developed an Arabic-based script for all MSAL, which was [made available online](#) and successfully disseminated among community members. Before 2013, texting between MSAL speakers was always in Arabic **[B, C]**. '[T]exting in Mehri is one of the most important outcomes of the project... Now there is a big number of Mehri and Shehri speakers text[ing] in their native languages.' **[B]** 'I never used to write [Mehri]... Now when I want to send something to my parents or my friends, I write to them in Mehri and they understand it and write back to me in Mehri.' **[C.2]** Over 60 community members use the new script to communicate on social media: 'Now me and my friends have a WhatsApp group and we write to each other in Mehri.' **[C.2]** In 2019, Google used Watson's script and word lists to create a Mehri GBoard for easy text entry on smartphones. Watson then supplied additional characters to a Google Senior Software Engineer allowing the Mehri GBoard to be upgraded to support Shehret as well **[I]**. [Five children's e-books](#) were also produced using the script **[D]**.

##### Language revitalisation: raising language status

The project promotes language revitalisation by encouraging speakers to speak and write their language. Older, illiterate community members have become teachers of MSAL **[C.3]**, posting voice messages in response to queries from younger speakers on WhatsApp groups. Younger community members now teach the languages to their children. 'The young generation had

felt that Mehri was irrelevant... [then] they wondered: "Why are British people interested in studying our language? It must be of great historic importance." [C.4]

This work raised the profile and status of the languages amongst speakers themselves and in the wider Arab community [B, G, H], and has been influential in establishing the Mehri Center for Studies and Research (MCSR) in Yemen [D, F], of which Watson is the only non-Mehri, non-Yemeni committee member. The MCSR says 'this project has aided [Mehri] greatly through winning international recognition for it and allowing it to participate in research projects with globally recognised academic institutions' [F].

Revitalisation had a particularly marked effect on the small, low-status Bathari community (12 speakers). The attitudes of Bathari speakers towards their language changed markedly during the project. A journalist for *The National* writes: 'Khalifa Al Bathari expressed great pride {in} his work with the linguists and said the community's renewed interest and respect for Bathari stemmed from the attention shown by researchers. This was repeated to me independently by several women from Shuwaimiyyah, who proudly named relatives interviewed by academics.' [A]

### Community training and upskilling

Watson's project upskills community members, many with little or no schooling, providing them with transferable skills in data collection, digital recording, digital tools, project management, training of others, research dissemination and production [B, D].

#### *Community training*

15 community members were trained to induct other community members in language documentation, ethical methods, use of the new script, and translation. 'I have learned how to document and write the language.' [B.2] 'I learnt how to use... ELAAN... PRAAT and Tool Box... and I liked that' [C.3]. Two community members co-trained (with Watson) Mehri speakers in the documentation of biocultural diversity in al-Mahrah [D], who produced [their own archive for ELAR](#), collecting 202 audio/audio-visual files from 21 speakers representing 7 tribal groups and 5 dialects.

#### *Research co-production*

51 project presentations in mainland Europe, UK [D], USA, Arabia and online (during COVID lockdown) were delivered jointly with community members, endowing them with presentational skills. One writes: 'I enjoyed [giving] lectures very much, especially when I saw the reaction of the participants hearing these languages.' [B.4] MSAL speakers co-produced six publications, including [1, 4, 5, 6], providing them with the skills and confidence to produce their own academic papers. Another community member was centrally involved in all collaborative outputs, including children's e-books, two published in *Language & Ecology* (2020).

#### *Making women's voices heard*

Muslim women are traditionally reluctant to record their own voices, or have their names mentioned publicly. The project recorded 25 women who now act as teachers of MSAL heritage to their younger relatives. MSAL women co-produced two pieces of underpinning research: three MSAL-speaking women collaborated on [5], and one monolingual Mehri woman collaborated on [5, 6]. As a result, she now enjoys enhanced status as the 'dictionary' of her community.

### Documenting threatened culture and legacy

'The Mehri language is the product of a profound culture and history and... [would] gradually [face] the prospect of near extinction without the devoted efforts of academics like ... Bart Peter (Daughter of Peter (Watson))' [C.4]. The project gave younger local research assistants insights into the pre-motorised past and increased their interest in learning about it [A, B, C]. 'Listening to the recordings... made me realise what our communities have lost in terms of skill and knowledge and has opened my eyes to how altered and degraded our environment has become' [B].

Watson et al's MSAL archives, linked in [Ethnologue OLAC](#), provide the largest bank of audio/audio-visual data for any endangered Semitic language family. During 2014-2019, the Mehri and Shehret archives were visited 4,560 and 3,133 times respectively, by community members, the UK public, UNESCO staff, people with an interest in flora and fauna, and researchers. 'This collection is an exceptional resource for scholars and is having a substantial impact scientifically' [D]. Legacy work continued with the British Library, whose catalogue 'now includes the content of the 20 [MSAL] sound recordings you assisted us with, making them accessible to the general public'. The BL have thus been able 'to reconnect a portion of these sound recordings with the family members of the speakers featured in them, continuing the collaborative and proactive cataloguing process' [J].

Twenty-seven online workshops on [Language and Nature in Southern Arabia](#) hosted during COVID-19 lockdown [D], and attended by professionals from organisations including the Environment Society and Kew Gardens, have made community members' knowledge of their flora, fauna and environment available to international audiences.

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**A.** Letter from a journalist for *The National*, Arab Emirates, regarding online articles on overgrazing in Dhofar (<https://omancamels.thenational.ae/>), Oman and language loss in Dhofar (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/race-is-on-to-preserve-an-omani-language-spoken-by-17-people-1.957065>), February 2019

**B.** Letter from a local community researcher on the documentation project, with testimonials in Arabic from community members, March 2015

**C.** Emails and letters in Mehri using the new orthography and an additional testimony in Arabic, all from local community members, 2018-2020

**D.** Letter from the Director of the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, October 2020

**E.** Letter from the Oman Ambassador, Oman Embassy, London, March 2015

**F.** Letter from the Director of the Mehri Center for Studies and Research, October 2017

**G.** Email from a journalist for BBC Arabic regarding Arabic documentary and online article in Arabic about the MSAL (<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-46378843>), December 2018

**H.** Letter from the Senior Editor of Fanar media regarding online article about the MSAL (<https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2019/02/ancient-cousins-of-arabic-survive-in-oman-but-for-how-long/>), July 2019

**I.** Email from a Senior Software Engineer at Google regarding the Mehri and Shehret GBoard, January 2021

**J.** Letter from the manager of the British Library Unlocking our Sound Heritage project, July 2018