

## Historical Phonology of Modern South Arabian – A new proposal

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The talk will address the historical phonology of the endangered Semitic languages of Southern Arabia, also called "Modern South Arabian", spoken mostly in Oman and Yemen. The three more wide-spread languages, Mehri, Jibbali and Soqotri, are spoken by 50,000–100,000 people each, while the other three, Hobyot, Harsusi, and Bathari are spoken by mere dozens to hundreds and considered to be critically endangered.

The main processes I will posit for Proto-Modern South Arabian are (a) the neutralization of vowel length, (b) the merger and optional subsequent elision of all historical high and unstressed vowels, and (c) the apparent opacity that can be observed in the reflexes of the raised Proto-Semitic \*/a/ vowel phoneme in stressed positions, whose reflex is sometimes back and round, and sometimes front. These rules will be justified by series of regular sound developments from common reconstructions of Proto-Semitic (see, for example, Huehnergard 2019).

Additional phenomena that will be supposed for the historical development of the phonology of these languages in order to explain alleged deviations from the aforementioned rules are vowel shifts (and stress shifts) around gutturals, and the notable instances of umlaut and ablaut, especially in the verbal system, considered foreign to Semitic languages.

The historical phonology of these languages has been rarely addressed ever since their discovery in the 1800s, although the synchronic study of these languages has witnessed great progress in the past decade, especially in the works of Rubin, Bendjaballah and Ségéral, Watson, and Naumkin and Kogan.

Although these works focus on morpho-phonological analyses on the synchronic level, they have laid crucial groundwork upon which diachronic work can be based, as shown thoroughly by the sole systematic diachronic attempt on the topic, the habilitation and collection of papers by Dufour (2016).

The talk will show, based mostly on Dufour (2016), that a wide-reaching analysis of vowel developments can be established for Modern South Arabian with relative ease and not too many assumptions. This can be achieved first and foremost by utilizing our vast knowledge of the morpho-phonological diachrony of other Semitic languages, mainly Ethio-Semitic, which will be argued to exhibit the closest affinity to Modern South Arabian. This can be achieved mainly thanks to the fact that the other Semitic language groups have been attested for thousands of years, which gives scholars time-depth and insight that are absent from Modern South Arabian, considering it was only discovered and first attested roughly two centuries ago.

### References:

Dufour, J. 2016. *Recherches sur le verbe sudarabique modern*. Habilitation, EPHE.

Huehnergard, J. 2019. Proto-Semitic. In: J. Huehnergard and N. Pat-El, *The Semitic Languages*, pp. 49–79. London: Routledge.