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Soqotri dialectology, and the evaluation of the language endangerment

To the memory of Saad ibn Malek

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Abstract :

Together with the other Modern South Arabian languages, Soqotri is related to the most ancient languages spoken in the Arabian peninsula. The study of Soqotri dialects has allowed to confirm or infirm many hypotheses concerning the evolution of the Semitic languages, and it has underlined the originality of Soqotri within the Modern South Arabian set. Moreover, the study of the dialectal situation, and its development are relevant to evaluate the degree of liveliness of the language today.

First, I shall present a brief overview of the sociolinguistic situation on the island of Soqotra, and the geographic distribution of the different Soqotri dialects. Then, in the light of data collected during my surveys (1985-2001) on the island, I shall try to describe the process of the erasing of dialectal characteristics, not only in vocabulary, but in phonology, morphology, and syntax. Even though Soqotri people still speak in Soqotri to each other, their language is affected by contacts with Arabic. Only some women and old men, in remote settlements, keep the use of their original dialectal variety. Because this process speeded up during the last years, Soqotri must be considered as an endangered language. The developing strategy of the Soqotra Archipelago needs also to include the language which is the means of passing on to future generations the traditions, arts and technics.

It is a matter of urgency to go on collecting more linguistic data concerning Soqotri, to enrich the corpus of traditional literature, to set up technical lexicons, in order to save a part of the Human patrimony in Southern Arabia.

Data and acknowledgements

The data quoted without author's name have been collected during my surveys on the Soqotri language, on the island of Soqotra (and for few of them on the mainland, in Aden and in the Hadramawt).

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the Yemenite authorities, and specially to the University of Aden, for having given a very efficient assistance and support to my work, since 1985. All my linguistic research on Soqotri is above all deeply indebted to the Soqotri native speakers, women, men and children, who welcomed me, gave their time and shared their knowledge with kindness and patience. I would like to thank particularly Abdallah Ghanem, Abdallatif Saad Amer, Said Ali Suleyman, Suleyman Ali, Saud, Salah 'Isa, Abdillah, and their families. They have shown a great interest in their language, history and traditional culture, and they have collaborated with enthusiasm and pedagogy; by this very fact, they have an important part in this research.

Introduction

Soqotri, with Mehri, Hobyot, Harsusi, Bathari, and Jibbali, belongs to the Modern South Arabian languages (= MSAL). Nowadays these languages are spoken in the Republic of Yemen and in the sultanate of Oman; they are related to the Southern branch of Western Semitic, as the Semitic languages of the Horn of Africa (spoken in Eritrea and Ethiopia). They are unwritten languages, related to the pre-islamic languages spoken in the Arabian Peninsula, and to the so-called Epigraphic South Arabian (= ESA), the carved languages on the monuments of the ancient kingdoms of *Arabia Felix*. However, the degree of relationship between the former (modern and unwritten languages) and the latter remains to date a matter of discussion. We ignore if the ancient written languages correspond to the languages spoken in the past, during the same period.

From a linguistic point of view, concerning the structure of the language, the MSAL are closer to the Afro-Semitic languages than to Arabic (Central Semitic). Despite historical contacts and a common culture, there is no mutual understanding between native speakers of Arabic and native speakers of any MSAL. Moreover, within the MSAL group, there is no mutual understanding between the native speakers of different Modern South Arabian mother tongues, and Arabic is the language of communication, used as a *lingua franca*.

Among the six MSAL, Soqotri is set apart, and not only for linguistic reasons. Soqotri was the first MSAL discovered in 1834, 170 years ago. It is the only MSAL to be spoken exclusively on islands (Soqotra, Abd-al-Kuri, Samha)¹. These islands are geographically nearer to Africa than to the Arabian coast, where other MSAL are spoken. In the past, the famous island was very isolated because of its location, its exposition to the two monsoons and the resulting rough sea for five months of the year, and the lack of safe bays. Because of the very hard living conditions on the island, many attempts of occupation came to a sudden end, and only the northern coast was concerned. The Haghier Central range, culminating at 1525 m., protected the inland.

In the past, there was no pervasive contact with other populations and languages on the island. The influence of Arabic is recent, and only part of the population, mainly

¹ In Oman, a Jibbali dialect is spoken on the island of Kuria-Muria.

inhabitants of Hadibo and its area were concerned. It follows that, up to the modern period, the Soqotri language underwent a specific internal development, without sizeable external influences. On the mainland, in Yemen and in Oman, for a very long period, each of the five MSAL has been in contact with another MSAL and with Arabic. Such a situation influenced the evolution of the concerned languages. Unlike the other MSAL, the Soqotri language has remained isolated for many centuries. The language preserved many linguistic features which disappeared from the other MSAL. The study of Soqotri allows us to know the MSAL group better, its place within Southern Semitic, and its relationship to Semitic as a whole, particularly to the ESA languages. Moreover, any language is the reflection of the culture of its native speakers and the means of passing on to future generations their traditions, arts and technics. It is thus quite logical that the developing strategy of the Soqotra Archipelago needs to take into account the language of the natives, and its dialects.

Dialectology

The study of dialects is a way to know better the internal structure of a language and its evolution. It may explain some obscure linguistic features of other languages within the same group, or the same family.

The diversity of Soqotri dialectology is surprisingly high when one considers the surface of the island (3625 km²), and the number of inhabitants (44.000)².

The topography of the island, and the way of life of inhabitants have favoured the linguistic diversity. The Soqotri dialectology is very rich. In some parts of the island, particularly in the remote places like in the Haghier range, the area of Diksam, Ras Sha'ab, *etc.*, the inhabitants have had minimal contacts with the capital Hadibo and with the outside world. In rural areas, the speakers have preserved exclusive linguistic features. The situation is changing very fast, mainly due to the contacts with Arabic. Whereas Soqotri is not the less investigated language of the MSAL, its very rich dialectology is hardly studied. It is urgent to carry on a research in this domain, to collect data on all the island and on Abd-al-Kuri, and save the language and the culture of which it bears witness.

Study of Soqotri and its dialects, the state of the art.

The situation of Soqotri in the nineteenth century

The first data on Soqotri were collected by James Raimond Wellstedt during his survey on and around Soqotra, from January, 10 to March, 7, 1834. They were published in 1835. Wellstedt collected toponyms, some tribe names, plant names, figures, but overall,

[he] "subjoined a copious vocabulary of words in general use among the Bedouins, by which I trust the scholar may be able to proceed in an inquiry that can scarcely fail to lead to most interesting results" (Wellstedt, Report: 155, Memoir: 211)

This list of 195 items and expressions in the *Report* (March 1835) was extended to 236 items in the *Memoir* (April & May 1835). The words are given in Soqotri (in Arabic

² Estimation of SAMP (Socotra Archipelago Masterplan project), quoted p. 2 of the booklet *Visitor Information*.

alphabet, and in Latin transliteration), with Arabic and English translations.³ It is very difficult to determine the exact origin of the data. Wellstedt surveyed the coasts and the interior of the island (*cf.* the map published at the end of the *Memoir*), but he neither specified from whom, nor from where he collected his data. We know that he was working with two guides: Hamed, who had a house in Tamarida (Hadibo), and Suleyman Muscaty who knew very well the tracks inside the island, and could communicate with the Bedouins; maybe, he helped to collect and to translate the vocabulary. Nothing is said about the mother tongue of these guides and language assistants. We guess only that they were able to speak Arabic, Soqotri and maybe English.

Wellstedt (*Report*: 155, *Memoir*: 211) notes that :

"The Socotran language is in general use even by those who permanently settled on the island ; and Arabic is only spoken by the merchants when transacting business with the traders who arrive in their buggalows"

He specifies (*Memoir*: 214):

"[...] I have preserved the name of Bedouin bestowed on the mountain-tribes, [...] I shall retain the name of Arabs, with which the remainder [...] have invested themselves. Under this designation, are included those who occupy Tamarida (= Hadibo), the villages of Cadhoop (= Qadhub) and Colesseah (= Qalansiya), and the greater part of the eastern portion of the island".

His classification is not linguistic, and in the same paragraph, he adds that the 'Socotran Arabs', settled here, *"have adopted the same language and customs"* (as Socotran so-called Bedouins).

The vocabulary of the word-list was probably collected or corrected with the same informant.

The words have no characteristics of the western dialects (absence of velar fricatives (ğ and x): *ʕéyj* and not *ğayj* 'man', *ħararhen* and not *xárhen* 'a little'). Palatalization of /g/ occurs in some examples, as in some dialects from Haghier or Diksam: *yirbók* for */gárbaḵ*, *girbaḵ* 'savage cat'; *jemiher* for */gémhel/* 'camels'..., but it is also a characteristic feature of some Arabic dialects, as in Hadramawt (maybe the mother tongue of the translator?). No variant is given by Wellstedt.

41 words out of 236 were noted as Arabic loans by Wellstedt. Some are really Arabic as *beïdh* (*bayḍ*) 'eggs' (*kehélihen* in Soqotri) or *ʕajúz* 'old woman' (Soqotri *śibīb*), *thob* (*ʔob*) 'a shirt' (with interdental, absent from the Soqotri consonant system; *tob* in Soqotri means 'cloth'); many words belong to the old common Semitic vocabulary and are attested in both Arabic and Soqotri: *edahn* 'ears' (exactly *ʔidāhen*), *ʔašābiʕ* 'fingers' (*ʔašābeʕ*) etc.

The contact and influence of Arabic in the main coastal villages is obvious; however these examples could tend to prove that the informant's mother-tongue was an Arabic

³ The 236 words were re-edited with corrections and linguistic and ethnographic commentaries, by Simeone-Senelle (1991 & 1992).

dialect and not Soqotri. Unfortunately all the data give us but very few information on the real linguistic situation on the island.

The end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century

The historical turning point for the knowledge of the MSAL is the *Südarabische Expedition* of the Viennese Imperial Academy. 1898 is the beginning of the linguistic research on Mehri, Šxawri (a dialect of Jibbali, a language spoken in Oman), and Soqotri. The Viennese scientists began to collect, transcribe, comment, and translate literary texts. Concerning Soqotri, David-Heinrich Müller recorded texts on the island (during a survey in the Haghier (in Aduno pass), and on the *Gottfried*, the ship of the Expedition, then in Austria.

Müller (1905: vii) announces that the texts gathered in the second volume of *Soqotri-text* come from the western region of the island, while those of the first volume (1902) were from the eastern region. In the first volume, the texts were collected with six informants. For four of them, he specifies where they are born or living (1902: vii): one is from Qalansiya and his mother is ‘a Bedouin from the mountain’, one is from Abd-al-Kuri, and he translated into his dialect the tale *der Lebensbrunnen*, another is the *qadi* of Hawlaf, and he gave to Müller many proverbs and poems in ‘the dialect of the Bedouins of the Mountain’, finally some poems were dictated by a ‘Negro from Tamarida’. A young informant whose the origin we ignore translated some excerpts of the Bible and gave him variants of some texts collected with other speakers. A trader, ‘living the half of the year in Zanzibar’, has boarded the *Gottfried* at *ğubbet-šo‘ob* for five weeks, and checked some texts.

The whole collection of the second volume, is in fact based on one idiolect, because it was gathered from a single informant ‘Ali b. ‘Amer en-Nubhāni. He went with the scientist to Vienna where he stayed for six months (May-December 1902). Müller in the presentation of his informant (1905:viii) does not mention his place of origin, but in the description of the geography of the island (1905: 369), this speaker (l. 27-31) reports that he was born in *Kām* (like his father and grandfather), and after their parents' death, he went to *Dibeni*: both neighbouring villages are situated on the northern coast, some kilometres away to the East of Hawlef.

In the two volumes, many dialectal variants are mentioned, without precise localization. They are recorded in the *Lexique Soqotri* (Leslau, 1938) and taken in account by Bittner (1913-1918) and Wagner (1953, 1959) in their phonetic and grammatical studies.

At this stage, following Müller, two dialectal groups are distinguished on the northern coast: the western and oriental dialects.

The dialect of Abd-al-Kuri was set apart: it is very different from the other Soqotri dialects in phonetics, morphology, and syntax (*cf.* the Soqotri text with its translation into the dialect of Abd-al-Kuri, in Müller, 1902: 92-111), and this originality is confirmed by Naumkin (1988: 343) and by the French Linguistic Mission (Simeone-Senelle 1997: 380, 414). This variety of Soqotri is influenced by Hadrami Arabic, because of the regular trading of the Abd-al-Kuri fishermen with Hadramawt (Quşa‘ir area).

In the second mid of the 20th century

Johnstone published some articles on the phonology and morphology of Soqotri, and he annotated his personal *Lexique Soqotri* with many lexical variants (essentially from Hadibo, Qalansiya, Qadhub). As a matter of fact, from the second half of the 20th century, and particularly after the 70', new places were investigated on the island. The new collected data and the works by Naumkin, Porkhomovsky, and the French Mission highlighted a more complex and diversified dialectology.

Naumkin undertook fieldworks almost everywhere in the island (and in Abd-al-Kuri), and he worked with informants from the Haghier, particularly from the Di^ʿrho valley, and the villages of Dirismoyten and ^ʿAbub; in the region of Diksam (mountainous area adjacent to the western Haghier), in the villages of Hagefeno, Dirhemeten; in the ^ʿAbalhon valley, in the western part of Diksam. Unfortunately, the origin of the informants or of the data are not always specified, but the linguistic commentaries, following the transcribed and translated Soqotri text, are very precious for the evaluation of Soqotri dialectology.

The French Mission⁴, from 1985 to 1991, collected data on the Southern coast, in Noged, on the Northern coast in Qadhub, Ḥadibo, Šiq, ^ʿElha and Ḥawlef, in the piedmont of Ḥaghyer, in Ma^ʿnefo, in the Eastern region, in ras Mōmi, on the western coast, in Qalansiya. After 1991, I had the opportunity to enlarge the fieldwork and to collect new dialectal data: in J^ʿoʿ, in the eastern part, and in the western part of Haghier (area of Diksam), on the northern coast in the region of Mori, and again to Qadhub, for the recording new texts (tale and poems) and grammatical data. In 1996 and 2001, many data were also recorded in Hadibo, but from different dialects with informants from the town, from Ša^ʿb (Š^ʿab), on the western coast, and from Hendak (Ḥendaḵ) in Noged area. The main purpose of this collection is to compare the Soqotri dialects and to establish the dialectology of the island. Today, no specific study of this type has been carried out and my last survey (2001) pointed to the emergency of such a study, because the process of linguistic change appeared faster than expected few years ago.

Main results of the last dialectal surveys

As in all languages spoken in the world, the research on newly surveyed dialects provides important informations about the evolution of the language. This observation can be checked in Soqotri.

Only some results, among the most salient, are presented.

Phonology and Phonetic

— An exclusive and typical feature of Soqotri is the occurrence of a non-etymological and non-morphological *h* (in nouns and very rarely in verbs), called *parasite h*. This phenomenon may explain the parasite *h* attested in Minean, an ancient (epigraphic) South Arabian language. It is related to two phonetic traits of Soqotri: the rules of

⁴ The French Mission of Linguistic Survey on the MSAL spoken in Yemen included A. Lonnet and M-Cl. Simeone-Senelle, from 1985 to 1991, then from 1991 until now, Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle alone.

stress⁵ with a particular evolution for original long vowels, and the particular consonantal articulation (with the vocal cords apart at one end), called murmur or breathy voice, resulting in a [h] or a full /h/. This feature is confirmed by the data collected in all the surveyed dialects: Qadhub *ṣalálhen/ ṣalélihən* ‘small valley, small stream’; Hadibo *lib^hən* ‘white’, Zeriq (Haghyer) *ka^her / ka^héri* ‘house (sg. / dual)’, but plural *ka^héher*. The same speaker says (in Meyhihe): *ʕažētən* or *ʕažéh^htən* ‘women’, but in Hendaq (Noged) only *ʕažéhtən* is recorded.

— The research in the far west part of Soqotra (Naumkin & Porkhomovsky, 1981, Simeone-Senelle, 1997) revealed phonological features, which lead to the reappraisal of some conclusion concerning the original consonant system of the ancient Semitic: the first assumptions were based on dialects studied before 1980. Now, it may be assumed that the merging of the velar fricatives /x/ and /ǰ/ with the pharyngeals /ħ/ and /ʕ/ is particular to some dialects only; in other dialects the velar fricatives do occur, even in native words:

Qalansiya *xǰmäh* (Qadhub *ḥǰmeh*) ‘five’; Qalansiya *ǰayǰ* (Hadibo *ʕeyǰ*) ‘man’.

A new feature, never attested before, was noted in my data collected in the area of Diksam in 2001. It points to the predominant unstable status of the pharyngeals in some Soqotri dialects. The initial /ʕ/ is articulated as a laryngeal [h], and /ħ/ > ø:

Diksam *hayǰ* ‘man’; *hāžəh* ‘woman’; *arírhən* (for *ħarírhən*) ‘a little’.

— The spirantization or affrication is a very widespread phonetic feature in many dialects, and not only in Hadibo (as already noted by the specialists).

Some examples of spirantization:

éfo > *éβo* (cf. Simeone: 1991, Lonnet et Simeone: 1997) in Hadibo; *rūǰed* > *rūyed* ‘name of a village’, *iǰodiḥen* > *iyodiḥen* ‘he comes’ in Diksam area (Rujed). In many dialects, included in Haghyer (Zeriq) and Diksam (Ḥiloho), one says *megāšə* ‘boys’, but *məžōše* in J^vo’, and *miyōše* in Rujed.

This phenomenon explains the following shifts: ʕ > h, ḥ > ø (cf. above), and b > ø in intervocalic position: *ʕeǰik* for /ʕeǰib^hk/ ‘I/you (m.sg.) want(ed)’; *ʕeǰékən* for /ʕeǰéb^hkən/ ‘you (pl.) want(ed)’.

The form *ʕik* ‘you (m.sg.) want’, in many dialects, is an example of the outcome of this process of spirantization, from /ʕeǰib^hk/ to the ultimate stage *ʕik* or *ʕič*, as in Rujed. We have no attestation of intermediate stages of this process. In Rujed, there are minimal morphemic pairs, with the opposition *ʕiǰ* (1st sg.) ‘I want(ed)’ vs *ʕič* ‘you (m.sg.) want(ed)’, vs *ʕiš* ‘she wants/wanted’.

// > (also transcribed ž): this realisation occurs almost systematically in every dialect for words such as *ət* ‘when, if’, and, at the beginning of some verbs, with the negation /al/ > a/ǰ (with modification of the vocalic timbre: /a/ > a/ǰ). This

⁵ Stress falls on the penultimate or antepenultimate syllable, in S. the unstressed vowel may be preserved by the *h* parasite.

lateralisation and weakening of // may be a morphophonological explanation for the different negative forms; in some dialects, the loss of *l* could depend on the initial phoneme of the verb, and not on the verbal mode (indicative *vs* prohibitive). So, in these dialects, there would be only one negative form, with two combinatory/contextual variants:

Ḥiloho: *a^yīte* ‘he does not eat’; *ɔ-ste* ‘don’t eat!’; *ɔl ʕek līte* <neg./ I want/ I eat (subj.)> ‘I don’t want to eat’. Compare with, in Mogar: *ɔl ʕik lafšē?* ‘I don’t want to eat’, *ɔl tsē!* ‘Don’t eat!’. But, in Zeriq (Haghyer): *a-tšemtel!* ‘don’t speak!’ *al tšamətol toh* ‘you (m.sg.) don’t speak with me’.

— Weakening of the nasal final consonant: *ši-sen* > *si-s^ə* ‘with them (f.pl.)’ (this phenomenon is recorded in other MSAL, for example in Hobyot).

— Dissimilation of the palato-alveolar *š(i)-* (‘with’), when the suffix pronoun is f. (sg. and pl.), *-s/-sen*: *šis* > *sis* ‘with her’ (= Müller III, 64, 26, dialect from the northern coast, east of Hawlef); *šisən* > *sisən/si-s^ə* ‘with them (f.)’ (cf. *šéšin* in Müller II, 56, 19, in the same dialect of the eastern area of Ḥawlef).

— Assimilation of the dentals (the voiced dental becomes voiceless): *d-* > *t-* + pron. 2dual / 2pl., in the possessive construction:

di-ho ka^r <of-I/ house> ‘my house’, but *t-ti* </d-ti/ ‘your (dual)’, *t-ten* ‘your (pl.)’.

— The authors have noted the devoicing of the final /ʕ/, cf. *fezaḥ* for *feza^r* ‘much, many’. In the dialect of Ḥandaq (Noged), I noted that the same devoicing occurs also inside the word, in a consonantic cluster: *ko^rároh* ‘small house’, but plural *koḥrētən*.

Morphology

— Independent Pronouns

It is confirmed that the independent personal pronouns for the 2nd person singular, *ē* (m.) and *ī* (f.), are more widespread than *het* and *hit* (cf. Leslau 1938: 48). In my data, *het* and *hit* are specific to some dialects spoken in the area of Diksam, and in the far-western area (Qalansiya, Qafiz). In other places, the 2nd singular, m. and f., are *ē* and *ī*, and we note that, in the latter system, the subject pronouns are at the full form (with the suffix *-hən/hen/hin*).

— Connective particle

Another morphological particularity in the far-western dialect of Qafiz is the possessive construction. It is based, as in all Soqotri dialects, on the connective *d-*, followed by a pronoun, but in this dialect, the connective is variable (like the relative pronoun): *d-* with a singular, and *l-* with a plural:

dihet férham <of-pr.2msg./ girl> ‘your(msg.) girl’, *des* ‘her’..., but *lḥan*, ‘our’, *ltan* ‘your (pl.)’, *lyihan* ‘their (m.)’, *lisan* ‘their (f.)’.

This variation highlight the link between connective, deictic and relative pronoun. In other dialects, a grammaticalization process took place and the singular form was frozen as a connecting invariable particle *d-*.

— *Nominal dual*

The nominal dual *-in*, instead of *-i*⁶ is a specific feature to a 15 year old boy⁷ from Diksam. It maybe due to his idiolect, but the link with classical Arabic dual is interesting:

əsbáʕin ‘two fingers’; *baʕírin* ‘two camels’; *əśáfirōtin* ‘two birds’; *məkšāmin* ‘two boys’; but with colour names: *ʕaféri* ‘red (dual)’; *ħāri* ‘black (dual)’.

Syntax

— *Agreement*

In some dialects, the relative pronoun does not agree with plural:

le-ēfæ d-izeʕem bʕédəhən <deictic(pl.)-people/ rel.(sg)-they stay/ in-mountain> ‘this people who stays in the mountain’ (Rujed).

In remote places, old people use the verbal, nominal and pronominal dual:

eṭáyherö ho-w-d-eh kaka kalansiye <we go (1dual)/I-and-of-me/ brother/ Qalansiya> ‘I and my brother, we go to Qalansiya’,

but many native speakers (young people or people in contact with Arabic) do not use verbal dual regularly:

ʕeğbö təḥár (for *təḥárö*) <they want (3dual)/ go (subj. 3f.sg.) > ‘They (both) want to go’,

and they use plural pronouns instead of the dual form:

tten férhem <of-your (pl.)/girl> ‘your girl’ for *titi férhem* ‘your girl’ (to you both).

Many people in contact with Arabic tend to use plural in all cases (verb or pronoun). Only the nominal dual occurs regularly.

— *Negation*

Cf. above, about the phono-morphological explanation for the two forms of negation. In many dialects, the verbal negation is the same with indicative and prohibitive.

The present dialectal and sociolinguistic situation

Since the unification of Yemen (1990), the island has considerably developed, essentially the northern coast with a new airport, a new road from this modern airport to Ḥadibo, a wharf in Ḥawlef, and, in Ḥadibo, many buildings (public and private) with a Telephone Center, a new market, new schools, hotels, the new Soqotra Conservation Project building *etc.* The island is opened to the outside world. The increasing number of four-wheel cars makes the contact with the inland easier. The development of contacts inside and outside the island, the progress of schooling in Arabic, all these factors of modernisation have influenced, and changed the linguistic landscape of the

⁶ Except in some words such as colours.

⁷ I must note that this young did not understand Arabic well, he did never go to school, and he stayed regularly in Hadibo for short periods.

island. The change is spectacular. Today, the situation described in 1996 (Simeone-Senelle, 1997: 310) has to be reappraised and updated.

The noticeable differences in the new data allowed to distinguish six dialectal groups on Soqatra.

Two groups on the northern coast:

1) The urban dialect of the capital Ḥadibo, where the permanent contacts are increasing between Soqotri and other Yemenite citizens (Arabic or Mehri native speakers) or foreigners from Oman, Saudi Arabia, Africa. Arabic is the language of trading and communication in this town which was a big village only ten years ago. Many villagers or Bedouins, from coastal area and from Ḥaghier, come regularly there to sell their products (cattle, dates, aloe, pottery, ...).

From the numerous texts collected in the dialect of Ḥadibo since the beginning of the studies on the Soqotri language, it can be shown that the dialect is unstable because of the contacts between native speakers of different Soqotri dialects and Arabic. It would be interesting to describe the Soqotri variety used in this contact situation, and to evaluate its influence on the variety spoken by Soqotri natives from Ḥadibo.

2) The second group includes the dialects of the villages of the northern plain, near the capital-city. Some villages are inhabited by fishermen and some palm-date farmers, as in the Eastern part, in Šiq and Ḥawlef, and in the western part, in Qadhub. ʿElha (a few kilometres to the south-east of Ḥadibo), where people are living on date-palms and market gardening, may be included in this group. Many texts were collected in Qadhub, but data from other places are limited. The dialect of Qadhub is characterised by many lexical archaisms. The old people have preserved some pieces of traditional and ancient literature. Only religious poems show the influence of Arabic with many borrowings from classical Arabic vocabulary and Coranic expressions.

Then,

3) The mountain dialects, in the range of Ḥaghier, and in Diksam. These regions are not easy to reach. The people are living in villages, moving around in the same area, depending on the season (rain, wind); sometimes, they are living temporarily in caves. They are shepherds and cultivate some date-palms. In the past, they collected the resin of Dragon's-blood and sold it in Ḥadibo. The contacts with the coast are occasional, and only men are going to Ḥadibo. Many old people and women do not speak Arabic, some have a passive and approximate understanding of this language. Their dialect is famed as not being understood by other Soqotri speakers. In fact these dialects show many specific and original features.

4) The rural dialects of the eastern region, in Momi. The texts are relatively rare. The people are living essentially on date-palms, millet and they breed some cattle. In part of this area, they produce lime. This dialect has not been the subject of any specific studies.

5) The rural dialects of the western coast, in the Qalansiya area. The detailed study of the dialect of the village of Qalansiya by the French Mission revealed linguistic features unknown and unsuspected in Soqotri. These results (confirmed by my survey in 2001) contributed undoubtedly to a better knowledge of Soqotri and of the Semitic family as a

whole. (Simeone-Senelle 1997, Lonnet and Simeone-Senelle 1997). The whole area has to be investigated more intensively.

6) The Southern coastal dialects of Noged. The villages are scattered in the isolated and barren plain. The majority of the inhabitants are fishermen. This area has not been much investigated. The few linguistic data collected show interesting characteristics different from the other dialects (*cf.* above): it is essential to carry on the recording of literary texts and discourse, in order to undertake an accurate description of these dialects.

7) On the two islets, Abd-al-Kuri and Samha.

The data are rare for the dialect of Abd-al-Kuri. One long text was spelled to Müller, the translation of a tale; the edition on the same page of the two versions (Soqotri from Soqotra and in the dialect of Abd-al-Kuri) makes the comparison easy (Müller, 1902: 91-111). Naumkin collected some short pieces of poetry, during his 1985' survey, each word is clear and understood, but the general meaning is obscure (Naumkin, 1988: 271, 1993: 354). Few lexical, and grammatical data were recorded by the French Mission in 1989, in the Hadramawt (*cf.* Simeone-Senelle 1994), but no text. According to Naumkin (1988: 343, 344), the dialect of Abd-al-Kuri, '*does not come from any of the sub-dialects that are widespread on Socotra*', whereas the dialect of Samḥa, belongs to the western dialects of Soqotra. Nothing was collected and edited about the dialect of this islet.

Evolution of the situation

In a short period of 16 years, from my first survey on the island in 1985 until the last one in 2001, I have noted important changes in the linguistic situation. The progress of Arabic is obvious, and it was speed up after the 1990-s. It is related to schooling, to modernisation and to the economic development of the island, without forgetting the role of television in Ḥadibo and in villages like Qalansiya (many old women heard Arabic for the first time by looking at television).

The influence of Arabic is noticeable in the numeration system: seven years ago, Soqotri people, from the inland or remote places, used the Soqotri system of numeration from one to ten in commercial transactions with other Soqotri speakers in Ḥadibo. But, in 2001 in Ḥadibo, even old people used Arabic system, and it was very difficult to obtain the first ten numbers in Soqotri from young people. When they remember Soqotri, the syntax was often incorrect, and copied from Arabic.

Many young people in the town borrow from Arabic, and code-switch with Arabic; they do not remember any piece of literature, they ignore the heroes of traditional texts, and they do not understand any poem.

Changes are not only due to the contact with Arabic. There are also the result of dialectal contacts, and it is related to a social phenomenon. Some (conservative) dialects spoken in remote places are said to be incomprehensible or original. Native speakers, when they are dealing with speakers of other Soqotri dialects, tend to erase the *originality*, the characteristics of their speech. The specific features (phonetic, morphological, syntactic and lexical) are avoided. It would be very interesting to evaluate the degree of change (evolution and regression), to determine which domains are more stable or unstable in the dialects.

Concerning the present situation, there are two possibilities: a new variety of Soqotri will emerge from this contact situation or the Soqotri language will not be spoken in big villages or town, like Ḥadibo, and the scope of Soqotri will be narrowing to the remote inland places before extinction.

Conclusion

It is a matter of urgency to go on collecting more linguistic data by carrying on extensive and intensive linguistic surveys, to set up a linguistic atlas of Soqotra and of the two islets. At the same time, it is essential to enrich the corpus of traditional literature, and to set up technical lexicons. The knowledge of languages gives access to the culture (scientific, technical, literary, spiritual) of the native speakers, and it is part of the education of future generations, because of its pedagogical implications. It is well known that many problems in learning second language (Arabic for Soqotri speakers) can be avoided if teachers know the structure of the students' mother tongue.

The Soqotri people are conscious of the value of their language, they know that it is a very important part of the Yemenite and Arabian patrimony. As fauna, flora, arts and technics, the Soqotri language belongs to the Human patrimony, and as such it must be safeguarded.

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