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# *BLOWING OFF THE DUST: TOWARDS SALVAGING THE FORGOTTEN MEHRI TONGUE IN SAUDI ARABIA*

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**Abstract**

Drawing on the fields of the language planning and policy (LPP) and language revitalisation, the main purpose of the paper at hand is to propose a tentative action plan which could prove useful in salvaging the endangered language of Mehri from falling into disuse in Saudi Arabia. The paper considers the work and efforts of pioneering researchers within the field of language revitalisation, who have been researching the case of Mehri language in Yemen and Oman as well as other key literature on LPP, language revitalisation, documentation and descriptive linguistics. It later shifts to discuss some practical solutions to preserving the language spoken by the Mehri tribe that live in Saudi Arabia. It also reviews a number of terms and definitions which are of key relevance to the topic. For a successful language revitalisation of Mehri to be achieved within the Saudi context, the proposed action plan argues for the application of three LPP strategies, encompassing each of corpus, status and acquisition planning.

**Keywords:** language planning and policy, language revitalisation, endangered languages, documentation and description

## Introduction

Most of the world's minority languages today are susceptible to extinction at an alarming rate. Experts predict that at least half the world's seven thousand languages will cease to exist by the end of 21st century (Thomason, 2015, p. 2). Generally speaking, natural disasters, conflicts and annihilations, overt repression, and the irrepressible economic, political, and cultural hegemony are among the main causes which have led to language endangerment (Sallabank, 2012, pp. 5-6). One of the main reasons as to why salvaging endangered languages constitutes a great concern today emerges from the fact that every time a language falls out of use, irreplaceable parts of a unique culture and heritage disappears from the beautiful mosaic of our diverse planet. 'knowledge of ceremonies, mythology, environment, technology, language skills, songs and linguistics artefacts' (Tsunoda, 2006, p. 162) are examples of such cultural aspects that could be lost. Additionally, the demise of languages on some occasions can be even linked to the loss of biological diversity. Thomason (2015: 2) suggests 'the world's languages as a group, are the more severely threatened than three vertebrate taxa: mammals, birds or reptiles. Languages globally, are at least as endangered as the most highly threatened vertebrate taxon, the amphibians.' Furthermore, Wright (2004, p. 219) proposes promotion of diversity, ensuring the cultural and historical continuity of groups, the fact that languages are believed to be an integral and pivotal part of peoples' identities, and the irreplaceable source of information which languages may provide for humanity are the four main reasons as to why people should step in and work together to stop the demise of languages from occurring.

The protection of minority languages has been an issue in the field of LPP which has produced a body of research on linguistic human rights. Such work is carried out by linguists collaborating with LPP scholars within organisations such as UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security

and Co-operation in Europe and the United Nations with the purposes of framing agreements whereby the linguistic rights of minority groups are acknowledged and respected:

> *Another aspect of LPLP interest in minority issues is the growing commitment to the preservation and restitution of languages with small and diminishing numbers of speakers. This area has always attracted linguists, but in the past the study of small languages was primarily in the cause of linguistic understanding; it was felt that the cataloguing of all human languages would reveal evidence for universal grammar or would illuminate the working of human linguistic faculty. The focus now has evolved to encompass the rights issue alongside conservation. A number of scholar, including Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Fernand de Varennes, Nancy Hornberger, Miklos Kontra have used the sociolinguistic work to support the right of speakers of these languages to continue use them* (Wright, 2004, p. 12).

Mehri is an example of an endangered minority language, and the case to be discussed. Mehri is a member of the Modern South Arabian languages group (MSAL), spoken by the Mehri tribes in Yemen, Oman, and presently Saudi Arabia. According to UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (Moseley, 2010), Mehri is classified as 'definitely endangered', as it is only spoken in a small community and has no known written tradition. Language revitalisation efforts and cases of empirical work within the domain of documentary and descriptive linguistics in Oman and Yemen, suggest that there is still a glimmer of hope to salvage the language under question within Saudi Arabia. This can be, perhaps, by capitalising on the previous academic work and efforts conducted in Oman and Yemen and by also undertaking a bottom-up community-based language planning efforts, something the paper at hand will aim to discuss. To this end, key terms and definitions are firstly discussed, followed by a review of important literature and relevant studies. A tentative action plan will be presented in the end.

# 1 Literature review

## 1.1 Terms and definitions

The discussion of the revitalisation of endangered languages entails firstly a clear understanding of "language planning and policy'' as the former constitutes one of the major goals of the latter. Conversely, LPP can also occur as part of the efforts made to preserve or revive endangered languages, as communities attempt to react to language endangerment. Language planning can be defined as the 'deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes' (Cooper, 1989, p. 45). Such a process is mostly carried out by governments and states (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997, p. xi) whose task, according to Shohamy (2006, p. 49), is to specifically decide on the type of language(s) 'that people will know in a given nation'. Such efforts in this sense, can be referred to as macro-planning. However, LPP initiatives can also derive from grass-roots (at the micro level) and be administered by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or community-based initiatives (Baldauf, 1994; Hornberger, 1996; Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997). Around the world, and on a daily basis, decisions concerning LPP are being reached, either formally by governments or informally by experts or community leaders aiming at influencing the right to use or preserve languages and affect others' statuses and vitalities.

A more relevant description, which seems to suit this study, depicts language planning as a domain seeking to respond 'to a perceived language problem or issue', and allow specialists to explore the possible options which can be made available to them by speakers on the basis of which, a set of potential actions can be recommended (Eastman, 1983, p. 2). Though, defining language planning as a solution for language seems more appropriate to me. Cooper (1989, p. 35), however, thinks it is 'not wrong' but 'misleading' as the focus of language planning should not be based on 'efforts to solve language problems but rather as efforts to influence language behaviour.'

Language policy, however, in the words of Kaplan and Baldauf (1997, p. 3) is the 'deliberate (although not always overt) future oriented change in systems of language code and/or speaking in a societal

context'. In other words, the range of beliefs, ideologies, and regulations which contain language practices and 'management decisions of a community or polity' are what constitute language policy (Spolsky, 2004, p. 9). According to (Bugarski, 1992, p. 18) ideologies that underpin language planning actions are mostly associated with language polices, principles, and decisions that reflect relationships between communities and their 'verbal repertoire communitive potential' As for this study, language policy includes efforts that are both deliberate and organised, serving to unravel language problems which are, in most cases, socially, politically, and/or economically-orientated (Poon, 2000, p. 116).

It is the researcher's belief that it is sometimes difficult to tell where planning should start and policy should end. On the issue of formal and informal LPP, Wright (2004, p. 1) argues that although the introduction of formal LPP is fairly recent, the informal practice dates as far back as language itself.

Furthermore, in her identification of reach and directions of LPP domains which are more relevant to endangered languages, Sallabank (2011, p. 278) outlines that policy being an official top-down process taking the form of positions, principles, decisions, strategies whilst planning being a bottom-up direction focusing on specific first level measures and practices to support languages with the recognition that such measures and practices can also be top-down. Top-down and bottom-up language approaches do not seem to differ much in their description from macro versus micro-planning as, again, the former means that decisions are taken at an official level whilst the other by the community itself (Jones, 2015).

Relevant to language policy aimed at the particular scope of the study (that is to protect minority language), is an important discussion about the three "orientations" regarding language policy, developed by Ruiz (1984) and endorsed by scholars such as Sallabank (2011) and Wright (2004):

1) Language as a problem: in this sense, multilingualism is seen to be something leading to a lack of social cohesion and pushing toward racial conflict. Researchers who adopt this orientation, associate endangered languages with poverty and disadvantage.

2) Language as a right: this is where there exists participation in society through the national mother tongue. Those who follow this orientation understand the need to provide educational resources, translators and so on and so forth. This can be expensive and may result in conflicts.
3) Language as a resource: here multilingualism is understood as an important element with the help of which, the capacities of society increase, the status of such groups who are thought to be subordinate improves, the local culture and economy are promoted and awareness of other opinions and mutual respect are encouraged, and hence, domination is dismissed. It is therefore, endangered language communities are regarded and valued as sources of uniqueness.

Maintaining endangered languages is one of the concerns addressed by LPP practitioners in recent decades. Language endangerment refers to a language 'that is not expected to outlive the present century' (Spolsky, 2004, p. 189). Krauss (2007) views an endangered language which is not going to be used by children. Batibo (2005, p. 62) states that the term represents any language coming under threat of extinction, and adds that a shrinking number of speakers, the fact that younger generations are not encouraged to speak a language, the reduced domains of use, or the continuous non-functionality of a language due to too much erosion and structural simplification are possible reasons why languages may come under threat. As for language death, Sallabank (2012, p. 100) defines it as the 'end point in the process of language endangerment' when a language is not spoken anymore. Furthermore, Campbell (1994, p. 1961) describes the death of a language as 'loss' that occurs during language contact situations as speakers of a less dominant language gradually shift towards a more dominant one. It should be noted that there are other terms which have been used to synonymously refer to "language loss'' such as, "language extinction". Sometimes benign terms such as "sleeping/dormant language" are used in substitution of unpleasantly sounding ones such as "dead language". Authors sometimes decide to use certain terms like "dying language" and "extinct language" to indicate the worst fate of an endangered language (Thomason, 2015). As for language maintenance and shift, both can be described respectively as 'the process and pursuit of intergenerational linguistic continuity' (Fishman, 1989, p.

177) and shift being a process whereby habitual use of a given language is substituted by habitual use of a different one (Gal, 1979, p. 1).

Finally, this paper intends to propose each of corpus, status and acquisition planning, as LPP strategies, useful in salvaging, in this case, Mehri. Hence, very brief descriptions of these strategies are worth including here, although they will be elaborated on in detail as the focus of the paper orients towards an action plan. Corpus planning is employed for modifying 'the nature of the language itself, and changing the corpus as it were' through changes in structure, vocabulary, and orthography (Kloss, 1969, p. 181). Serving as a prerequisite for corpus planning are two other important strategies known as documentation and description. Documentation is 'concerned with the methods, tools, and theoretical underpinnings for compiling a representative and lasting multipurpose record of a natural language or one of its varieties' (Gippert *et al.*, 2006) while description 'typically involves the production of grammars, dictionaries, and collections of texts' and 'provides an understanding of language at a more abstract level' (Austin and Lenore, 2007, pp. 13 - 14). As for two other language planning strategies, Cooper (1990, p. 120) defines status planning as efforts undertaken 'to regulate the demand for given verbal resources'. Acquisition planning, in the words of Jones (2015, p. xiv), describes such activities carried out for the purpose of 'increasing the number of speakers of a given language or variety in question.'

### 1.2 The Mehri language in Oman, Yemen and Saudi: history, census and endangerment

Mehri is a minority language known as a member of a Semitic language group of six languages, referred to as Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL) (Rubin, 2010; Watson, 2012). The MSAL group is understood to be affiliated to either one of the two Semitic branches: eastern (Moscati et al. 1969; Rubin, 2010; Hetzron, 2013), or western (Faber, 1997).

Hetzron (2013, p. 378) explains that there are about 200.000 Arabs that live in the south of Arabia who speak MSAL as their heritage languages. MSAL according to Hetzron is different enough from Arabic that the inter-comprehension between the speakers of MSAL versus those who speak Arabic is impossible.

The majority of speakers of all the six language groups MSAL are Mehri as it is used across large land areas, stretching from the east of Yemen into western Oman, and expanding further up into the southern parts of Saudi Arabia (Watson, 2012, p. 1; Hetzron, 2013, p. 378).

UNESCO provides a more recent census that determines the number of its speakers and refers to estimates conducted by Johnstone (1970), Johnstone and Smith (1987) and Simeone-Senelle (1997). However, such census appears to be very old. In addition, the census appears to be referring to authors who have considered the case of Mehri language community which is spoken only in Yemen and Oman, and ignores the one spoken in Saudi Arabia. To balance this, it was best to draw on those estimates proposed by other scholars and researches as well whose names will be mentioned underneath.

According to the linguist, J. C. E. Watson[1], the fact that Mehri is spoken by people who live in three Arab states has made the task of estimating the number of speakers challenging. She adds that the actual number of Mehri speakers is not equivalent to that of the tribal members, which adds more difficulty to estimating the total number of speakers. Furthermore, she (2011b) suggests many Mehris in Yemen no longer speak Mehri, or lack complete competence in the language. Estimates range from 100,000 to 180,000. Castagna (2012), however, approximated 100,000 Mehri speakers in all of Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, as agreed by Hetzron (2013). It is the personal view of the author of this paper that the task of coming up with a more accurate estimation of Mehri speakers is a difficult task considering the political turmoil which has been escalating in Yemen over the past few years.

[1] The academic profile of Professor Janet C. E. Watson is available at: https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/profile/20043/1168/janet_c.e._watson

### *1.2.1 Mehri speech community in Saudi Arabia*

In Saudi Arabia, according to Almakrami (2015), it is reported that the population of Mehri people is around 20,000: those in the southern region of the country, in the city of Sharoorah and particularly in Alkharkhir, known for being the capital city of the Mehri tribe in Saudi Arabia. Almakrami also adds that for different reasons most of them are believed to be in poverty and with little education; they are more likely to be 'working rather than attending public schools' (ibid, p. 2230)

> *In 1985, it was mentioned that Mehri people were given the permission to settle down in Saudi Arabia. During that time, there was a political negotiation between the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the government of Yemen. Before that time, Mehri people used to travel without restrictions across the three countries Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen. After that date, because of political and sovereignty issues, Mehri people were geographically divided into three groups belonging to three different countries. In Saudi Arabia, Mehri people live in the southern region of Saudi Arabia that is in the northern border of Yemen* (Almakrami 2015, p. 2231)

It is also worth pointing out that the Mehri tribes follow a Bedouin lifestyle and they are known for being camel herders. One of the most common challenges facing Mehri people in Saudi Arabia nowadays is that some of them are experiencing difficulty in acquiring national identity cards which imposes some difficulty on them accessing healthcare or education (Phillips, 2001, p. 250; Alghunaim, 2006; Alshehri, 2013; Aldarsoni, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, Mehri, like other MSAL languages, is predominantly oral which has no known written tradition among native speakers (Senelle and Claude, 2013, p. 1). According to UNISO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework (Moseley, 2010), Mehri is categorised as amongst those languages which are 'definitely endangered', which means: 'children no longer learn the

language as mother tongue in the home'. Furthermore, Senelle and Claude (2013, p. 15) conclude that all of the MSAL languages including Mehri 'are endangered to variable degree' emphasising the great necessity for conducting more extensive research. Mehri has also exhibited a substantial amount of change concerning its social status, as stated by Sima (2001). Alrowsa (2014), in his PhD thesis, also mentions that although Mehri is still spoken, it is, unfortunately, endangered.

As for the language spoken by Mehris who have migrated and settled in Saudi Arabia, Watson cautioned in her speech to the first Linguistics in Arabia conference, held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, that there is a very slim chance for a number of MSAL languages (including the Mehri which also includes the one spoken by a small community living in the far south-eastern edge of Saudi Arabia) to endure for another 50 years (Key Notes, 2013). The absence of a literature tradition, according to Watson, is jeopardising the existence of those languages altogether, which is a major problem. However, she expressed some optimism about the language being able to survive and linguists are doing their best to salvage the language, but this poses a challenge with the absence of a writing system. The more unsettling reality, however, is that of all the endangered languages that exist in the Arab world, none seems to have been successfully revitalised thus far, according to UNESCO, including Mehri.

## 1.3 Previous work on Mehri

### *1.3.1 Documentation and description of Mehri*

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, almost all the work done on Mehri is restricted to language documentation and description. Although there exists some reasonable language planning and revitalising efforts to protect the language from falling into disuse in Yemen and Oman, discussed later, literature that explicitly refers to this is limited and seems to omit LPP, although briefly referring to it. That being said, documentary and descriptive linguistics that have been conducted thus far on Mehri are contributing to language planning, and fall within corpus planning to be more precise (Haugen,

1966; Wright, 2004; Sallabank, 2011).The objective behind language documentation is to construct lasting, well-organised corpora which can be referred to for various purposes including language and culture revitalization. However, documentation is ideally juxtaposed with description; and, it is essential for any documentation projects to rely on the application of theoretical and descriptive linguistic techniques so as to, a) ascertain the usability of those projects, for instance, by enabling researchers to secure accessible language entry points though transcription, translation and annotation (Woodbury *et al.*, 2003; Austin and Lenore, 2007; Austin, 2010; Austin, 2016).

> *It is only through linguistic analysis that we can discover that some crucial speech genre, lexical form, grammatical paradigm or sentence construction is missing or under-represented in the documentary record. Without good analysis, recorded audio and video materials do not serve as data for any community of potential users*
> (Austin and Lenore 2007, p. 22, cited in Austin, 2010, p. 23)

According to Austin (2010, p. 23) both activities complement each another and share goals and outcomes, as documentation's support for description has the potential 'to reduce the risk that it is sterile, opaque and untestable (as well as making it perceivable for future generations and valuable for language support activities including revitalisation).'

Since the early 1900s, Mehri has been subject to documentation, in terms of grammatical studies, dialectology and syntax. Examples can be referred to in studies carried out by Jahn (1902), Müller (1902), Müller (1907), Bittner (1909), Hein (1909), Hein and Müller (1909), Johnstone (1987) and Wagner (1953). More recently, Mehri has been witnessing an increasing body of work produced by renowned researchers and scholars as in Castagna (2012; see also Rubin, 2010; Senelle and Claude, 2013; Stroomer, 1999; Johnstone and Stroomer, 1999; Lonnet and Simeone-Senelle, 1997), whereby the language was documented, in grammatical and phonological terms. This is mostly seen in the work of researchers such as Watson (2010), among others, e.g. Sima and Watson (2009); Watson (2010);

Watson and Bellem (2010); Watson (2011a); Watson and Al-Azraqi (2011); Watson and Bellem (2011); Watson (2011b); Eades *et al*.(2012); Watson (2012); Eades *et al*.(2013); Watson (2013); Watson and Rowlett (2013); Elmaz and Watson (2014); Watson (2014); Watson and Al-Mahri (2015); Watson and Heselwood (2016); Watson and Al-Mahri (2017a); Watson and Al-Mahri (2017b); and, Wilson and Watson (2017). Mehri has also had the attention of doctoral projects in which it was scrutinised for its syntactic and morphological features, as in the work of Alrowsa (2014), Alfadly (2007), and Al-Qumairi (2013). Almakrami (2015) has also examined one of the Mehri dialectics in relation to the language's components. In another example (Balhaf, 2015), Mehri has been studied with regard to a number of features that have been retained in the language, until today. There have also been a number of books written about the language addressing component features, including Balhaf (2016) and Rubin (2010). Finally, there have also been a number of recent seminars and conferences on documentation and ethnolinguistic analysis of the MSAL languages, including Mehri.[2]

As mentioned earlier, the above-mentioned body of work conducted on Mehri serves as major step towards successful reinvigoration of the language.

### *1.3.2 Community-based LPP efforts*

#### *1.3.2.1 MSAL project in Oman and Yemen*

In relation to LPP efforts, it is important to emphasise that, generally, minority languages in the Arab world, appear to have been mostly ignored. Fortunately, however, for Mehri and some other MSAL languages, there have been some relatively language planning endeavours to salvage such languages, comprising mainly community-based project, although, not referred to as language planning per se. A good example is a project[3] co-led by J. C.E. Watson (principal investigator) along with: Miranda

[2] The list of conference presentations on MSAL and many other information are available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125219/modern_south_arabian_languages/2374/events

[3] Details of the project are available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/homepage/462/modern_south_arabian_languages

Morris, Domenyk Eades and Alex Bellem[4] who work with native speakers of such languages with the aim of documenting and conserving Merhi and other MSAL languages, as well as stimulating interest in them (Watson and Morris, 2015).

In an editorial they published as part of *The Middle East in London*, a bi-monthly magazine with an affiliation to the London Middle East Institute (LMEI), SOAS[5], the researchers mention:

> *The project aims to promote language revitalisation by encouraging speakers to speak their language and to write it, with the hopes that they, in turn, will encourage their children to speak their own language as well as Arabic and will teach them to write it. The aim is to raise the profile and status of the languages not only amongst speakers themselves but also in the wider Arab community* (Watson and Morris, 2015, p. 10)

The project was financed by the Leverhulme Trust, 2013-2016, and has taken place in Oman and Yemen. Although meant to be a three-year project, it has been the hope of Watson and Morris that the project will continue to be run by the MSAL language communities themselves long after the researchers' involvement has ended.[6] The project aims principally at providing textual, audio, audio-visual and photographic documentation of the above-named languages (Watson and Morris, 2015).

In their aspiration to document and revitalise Mehri and other MSAL languages, Watson and Morris (2015) describe that it has always been their recognition that the success of their project is chiefly centred on the direct contribution of community members. The investigators regard themselves as catalysts, as they recruited over 100 speakers as well as data gatherers. Recruited from the community,

[4] The academic profiles of the co-investigators can be reached via the link below: https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125219/modern_south_arabian_languages
[5] SOAS University of London is specialising in the study of Asia, Africa and the Near and Middle East: https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/
[6] One this particular note, more details are available in link below: https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/download/1841/project_description_in_english

members have been transcribers and translators 'for work into Arabic, data interpreters, and a principal local researcher … has been part of the project since its inception' (Watson and Morris, 2015, p. 10).

The researchers explain that the majority of their older data collectors, as well as the speakers of these languages who have been employed have had very little, if any, level of education. However, this has not been much of a hurdle as several community members have received training on how to clarify the objectives of the project to their communities. They add that the members have also been trained in how to acquire informed ethical consent from speakers who wish to participate. Training has also been offered on using digital recorders and uploading materials into Dropbox files. In addition, members have received training in how to train fellow community members who do not know how to use digital recorders. Furthermore, the project has also helped in designing a new Arabic-based script for the MSAL languages as a means of assisting the community members to translate these languages into Arabic (Watson and Morris, 2015).

In demonstration of how engaged and keen the locals have been on this project, the researchers mention the example of Saeed Al-Mahri (Watson and Morris, 2015), a local Mehri speaker working with Watson and Morris, and a research assistant himself, besides delivering training to his fellow members about ways of conducting data collection, applying ethics, using digital recorders and transcription in the newly designed Arabic script with the purpose of translating from the MSAL languages into Arabic (Watson and Morris, 2015).

There are also local linguists who are also Mehri members have engaged in this particular project and co-authored with Watson and others, including Ali Al-Mahri, Eades *et al.*(2012); Watson and Al-Mahri (2017a); Abdullah Musallam Al-Mahri Watson and Al-Mahri (2015); Watson and Al-Mahri (2017b), Mohammed Ahmed Al-Mahri (Eades *et al.*, 2013) and Saeed Al-Qumairi (Al-Qumairi, 2013).[7] There

[7] Those are just a few examples of local linguists who are also Mehri speakers themselves.

are also many other local participants whose names and details can be viewed through a link provided in the footnote.[8]

In another example, so as to show how the Mehri community members in Oman have felt about the project and the way in which the project has succeeded in restoring their affinity to their native language and in encouraging them to become more attached to it, one of the members, Abdullah Al-Mahri, blogged the following which was published on one of the official webpages of the project:[9]

> *In the past, before this project about the Mehri language began, people felt an affinity to their language but they didn't realise that much of their language would die out with the old people. When Janet Bart Peter introduced us to the project, people gradually began to go back to their language. I didn't think about my language much until this project, and it has helped us enormously. Here in Dhofar, a group of Mahrah from Bayt Thuw'ar set up a WhatsApp group called Kulliyyat al-Lughah al-Mahriyyah. The group includes old people and people who really know (the language), and we can ask them about anything.*

The project has had community-based dissemination to academic bodies, schools and public groups, locally, regionally and, internationally, there have been several presentations delivered about the project:

> *Several have been presented with one or more community members, including lectures and workshops held in Paris, Erlangen, Frankfurt, Muscat, Salford, Jedda, Newcastle, Roehampton, Leeds and London. Presentations with community members raise the value of the project in the eyes of both audiences and local participants. This initiative has led to our co-presenters discussing the project with community*

[8] Details of MSAL project's participants are available at: https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125219/modern_south_arabian_languages/2367/participants

[9] Copy of the full blog is available at: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/downloads/file/2947/abdullah_al-mahris_fifth_blog

> *members throughout Dhofar and with academics and interested people outside Oman, and gaining respect and academic credibility* (Watson and Morris, 2015, p. 10).

The dissemination of such community-based academic work continues undertaken. To provide a few examples, the year 2017 alone has witnessed the presentation of a number of conference papers and proceedings, publications, all mentioned in section 1.3.1.[10]

Other recent activities this year, 2017, have also involved the establishment of the Mehri Centre for Research Studies in Yemen[11] as well as the publication of a special issue of the Journal of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics on the Description and Analysis of the Modern South Arabian Languages,[12] which goes to show how the community-based project has been active in disseminating its academic work on the documentation and revitalisation of MSAL languages, nationally and internationally.

#### *1.3.2.2 Takes on the project and relevant discussion*

The author's grasp of LPP activities, as discussed above, are seen in the fact that they have mostly focused on maintaining the Mehri that is spoken in Oman and Yemen, leaving Mehri in Saudi Arabia confined to the scrutiny of documentary and descriptive linguistics. This could be in part be because community members themselves (the Mehri speakers in Saudi Arabia), bearing in mind their living conditions highlighted earlier, have not been active enough in resisting language shift nor in promoting advocacy to salvage their own language from falling into disuse; LPP efforts rely a great deal on the affected societies themselves, and it should be from those speech communities where such initiatives and movements must begin rather than from governments. Hence, a bottom-up approach is advised

[10] These are presented in a list which can be quickly viewed at:
https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/125219/modern_south_arabian_languages/2374/events
[11] Mehri Center for Research and Studies in Yemen:
https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/news/article/5092/launch_of_the_mehri_center_for_research_and_studies
[12] Brill's Journal of Afroasiatic Languages and Linguistics on Modern South Arabian:
https://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/news/article/4991/brills_journal_of_afroasiatic_languages_and_linguistics_on_modern_south_arabian

(Wright, 2004; Hatoss 2006; Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Kaplan, 2005). Aside from the lack of LPP activities practised at the level of the Saudi state (macro-planning), which is certainly important, the absence of micro-level language planning exercised by community organisations (which do not exist) makes the revitalisation the Mehri in Saudi Arabia rather challenging. As far as this paper is concerned, the latter (micro-language-planning) is even more important to a successful language revitalisation process and one that makes all the difference to successful revitalisation. That is because micro-level language planning initiated by communities is not only indispensable in filling the gaps aimed at satisfying planning needs that official policies are unable fulfil, but are also equally important and complementary to overt official macro-level LPP as neither micro nor macro-planning is sufficient on its own (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Clyne, 2001; Hatoss, 2006). According to Kaplan, it is from among the population of the speakers or of their descendants where the stimulus for revitalisation arises and it is seldom that stimulus can arise from a local Ministry of Education. Such a ministry would in fact react, 'to varying degrees, to grass-roots pressure from the community (i.e. policy development is not actually a policy matter; rather it is a matter of assisting implementation' (Kaplan, 2005, p. 79).

Indeed, the role of communities in relation to language planning decisions, as opposed to those that derive from governments, has been even acknowledged and emphasised in a number of international policy documents including the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights (UDLR, 1996), article 8, which mentions:

> *All language communities have the right to organise and manage their own resources so as to ensure the use of their language in all functions within society, . . . (and) . . . all language communities are entitled to have at their disposal whatever means are necessary to ensure the transmission and continuity of their language.*

(CIEMEN / International PEN, 1996)

A note to be made on the linguistic rights of Mehri, as spoken by communities in Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen, is important to emphasize as the case here is approached through Ruiz's (1984) third orientation to addressing endangered minority languages as mentioned above, i.e. "language as a resource".

As for micro LPP activities in Oman and Yemen, it is the feeling of the researcher that such practices can be of benefit not just in preserving Mehri within Oman and Yemen, but could also in Saudi Arabia. Efforts have been until now taking the form of micro LPP activities carried out in isolation from macro-level support that comes from the Omani and Yemeni states. Unlike the Saudi context, there have been, thankfully, some community-initiated LPP activities which are very important. However, the need to interpret such efforts within the wider scope of overt macro-level LPP by the Omani and Yemeni governments cannot be overstressed: 'the intense interaction between government and community organisations plays the crucial role in the maintenance of the cultural and linguistic heritage in the community in question' (Hatoss, 2006, p. 288). Moreover, LPP activities administered by government should not be underestimated. It is worth restating that it is within governments 'where early language planning studies and practice had their roots … and it continues to be the site of the majority of LPP related studies' and it is within the governments where the notion of agency lies; that is task of assigning state personals to act as key actors in the process of language planning (Baldauf Jr, 2006, p. 148). The interaction between a state and a community goes to show that LPP can occur at micro or macro level, resonating with what has been suggested by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), and Spolsky (2004).

It is also understood that conflicts going in Yemen may be a significant reason why a top-down LPP may not currently been possible. Therefore, expectations must remain realistic regarding whether or not the Yemeni government will be willing to engage in LPP activities.

For the purpose of the study, one final point is worth pointing out, however, that in emphasising the significance macro-planning, it must be reminded that is also from the communities where the initiation for language planning needs to begin, and fitting to the Saudi context, as endorsed by the paper at hand (Wright, 2004; Hatoss 2006; Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Clyne, 2001).

> *The role of overt macro-level language policies in the maintenance of minority languages cannot be overemphasised. Still, contemporary minority communities find themselves in situations where the connections between governmentally backed and institutionalised policies on the one hand and their implementation and the utilisation of the potential benefits by the ethnolinguistic communities on the other hand need to be initiated from the communities themselves* (Hatoss, 2006, p. 287).

## 2 Action plan

As suggested in the literature above and the community-based project in section 1.3.2, it is worth pointing out that proposed solutions are centred on an understanding of the following key points:

a) LPP here is both a macro and micro matter and neither one nor the other is sufficient on its own.
b) It must, however, be initiated by an affected community and it is for that matter a bottom-up responsibility.
c) The population of speakers must be at the right level of enthusiasm and readiness towards proposed solutions and their implementations.
d) Community efforts can, for example, take the form of locally-based projects led by a group of national and international linguists and language planners working in collaboration with a community of speakers.
e) The proposed solutions must be realistic and appropriate in implementation to the context of Saudi Arabia.

f) The paper adopts the third orientation of language policy as proposed by Ruiz (1984) which views language as a "resource''.

g) The action plan aims to follow Wright's (2004) proposed stages to tackling the language problem starting by describing the problem and deciding on an endangerment scale and then shifts to propose language planning strategies which encompass conducting corpus planning: this entails codifying Mehri and standardising it; status planning: allocating the language to fit certain functional domains in an attempt to raise its status; and acquisition planning: educating speakers to use Mehri in both written and spoken forms which will further promote its status (Wright, 2004; Fishman, 2000).

h) Corpus planning and status planning are understood as two processes that are best performed hand-in-hand and simultaneously (Hornberger, 2006; Jones and Singh, 2005; Kloss, 1969; Fishman and García, 2011).

## 2.1 Getting practical

### *2.1.1 Classifying endangerment*

'Language endangerment is a matter of degree' (Tsunoda, 2006, p. 9). Languages all over the world sit on a continuum with those languages which are believed to be viable. Hence, according to Tsunoda, the classification of languages in accordance to the degree of "endangerment" can be conducted in a discrete manner. Although a number of linguists, such as Senelle and Claude (2013), and Watson (2012) and Sima (2001), have classified Mehri as being "endangered", it is also appropriate to consult a framework or model of classification outlined by an agency of experts on endangered languages. While there are many useful scales which can be referred to in guiding the assessment of language endangerment and vitality, such as the well-known scale Graded Intergenerational Disruption (GID) devised by Fishman (1991), the author personally chose UNESCO's *Language Vitality and Engagement Framework* (Tsunoda, 2006), as it provides a richer set of categories positioned at the

weaker end of the scale, as opposed to GID, and other scales, and has been used on a broader level, especially by UNESCO. Such a model appears to provide scales that can be easily applied to the case of Mehri and, most importantly, it builds on Wurm's frequently consulted scale (Wurm, 1996). It was also recommended by Thomason (2015, p. 4) as being predominantly known for providing a 'more elaborately fined-grained classification of language endangerment'. There are also other scales which are similar to some extent to that of UNESCO, e.g. Grenoble and Whaley (1998), albeit too condensed for conducting comprehensive of a large geographical area. For this reason, UNESCO's model is deemed the best option available.

#### *2.1.1.1 Solutions*

As far as the Saudi context is concerned, before embarking on any course of community-based (bottom-up) action, community members are best advised to pay careful heed to an important rule of thumb throughout the stages of planning: the community is advised to endeavour to uphold laws in Saudi Arabia all the way through the process, as often community-based actions that are carried out without state cooperation are often frowned upon. In addition, since Saudi Mehri community members will be recommended to be in contact with their fellow Mehri in Oman and Yemen, they will also be advised to be considerate of the laws enforced in those countries as well. It has been the personal observation of the researcher that some tribal-led activities in the region are sometimes exercised by individuals who have tendencies towards excessive enthusiasm for the tribe's affairs on the part of its members. Community members are, therefore, recommended to exercise a high level of compliance with laws and regulations enforced in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Oman, and that they should go about doing everything in a civilised and law-abiding fashion. Failure to do this could do away with efforts toward salvaging their own language.

**Stage 1: Calls for collaboration and initiating corpus and status planning; getting prepared:**

***a. Transnational collaboration among Mehri tribes***

The researcher recommends initiating a community-based movement among the Saudi Mehri, whereby they call upon their fellow tribesmen in Oman and Yemen to provide advice and assistance with respect to documentation and description as a perquisite for corpus planning of the language they share in common. Meanwhile, efforts calling for status planning are also expected to be initiated as these should go hand-in-hand with corpus planning. Each of these types of planning are listed here as part of stage 1 (whilst acquisition planning is stage 2). However, for organisational reasons and better readability of this paper, status planning is discussed in a separate section of its own, although it should still be understood as part of stage 1.

Assuming that Mehri people in Saudi Arabia (represented by their tribal leaders and other elite members[13] are keen enough on maintaining and promoting their heritage language, the first step forward is to cement tribal affinity and kinship which link them with fellow tribesmen in Oman and Yemen. Tribal leadership serves as a powerful element in the process which is not to be overlooked: Sheikhs and other elite members in Saudi Arabia and neighbouring states do enjoy a recognised and powerful social status enabling them to play a pivotal role in relations between individuals and central government, as well as initiating and contributing to effective and persuasive communication between other tribes in and across national borders. As for the Saudi context, capitalising on kinship and blood connections seems important as it is expected to yield more successful results, and in relatively short period of time: any tribal call for solidarity or assistance toward fulfilling a given course of action are in most cases heard and answered by the other fellow tribes' members both inside and outside the country. Another reason (which is more important) is to do with the fact that the Mehri community in Saudi Arabia will have the chance to be assisted by those who have been experiencing the most national and international academic attention in researching, documenting and salvaging their language.

[13] Those community members who enjoy important social status of some kind and can exert social influence such as famous academics, businessmen and poets etc.

In addition, those community members in Oman and Yemen have had the opportunity to take a lead and show more engagement in the protection and promotion of their language and, more significantly, have themselves already experienced and exercised community-based efforts. The have also worked in cooperation with relevant international bodies and researchers in the field of endangered language revitalisation. Furthermore, those members have had local linguistics in their midst with a focus on researching Mehri and other MSAL languages. An example of those are Ali Al-Mahri (Eades et al., 2012; Watson and Al-Mahri, 2017a) Abdullah Musallam Al-Mahri (Watson and Al-Mahri, 2015; Watson and Al-Mahri, 2017b), Mohammed Ahmed Al-Mahri (Eades et al., 2013) and Saeed Al-Qumairi (Al-Qumairi, 2013). There are also those who have received appropriate training in documenting and recording their language and transcribing it into Arabic (as seen in consideration of the project in section 1.3.2). Therefore, support and consultation coming from Omani and Yemeni Merhi communities are expected to be rewarding and worthwhile as they have a lot to share and offer to their co-ethnics in Saudi Arabia.

### *b. Using the help of national and international researchers on documentation and corpus planning*

Having gained the attention of fellow community members in Oman and Yemen who have been working with the MSAL project, including local Mehri linguists (as named in 1.3.2), such linguists can use their network of contacts to raise the issue with regional and international bodies (most preferably the same ones who have led the Omani and Yemeni MSAL project and have had much experience researching Mehri), for support and consultation.

Within Saudi Arabia, there are a number of renowned linguists who themselves have researched the language and who can be approached for assistance, if not viable for the Saudi Mehri community, then by the same Mehri linguists in Oman and Yemen who have relevant expertise. Examples are: Munira

Al-Azraqi who has worked with Watson in investigating the Mehri language in relation to its lateral fricatives and lateral emphatics (Watson and Al-Azraqi, 2011), Waleed Alrowsa, who has looked into question formation in Merhi (Alrowsa, 2014), Mohsen Almakrami with an interest in grammatical patterns (Almakrami, 2015) and Amer Balhalf who has written a book about Mehri's old linguistic elements (Balhaf, 2015).

After having obtained necessary regional and international attention, the task is handed to a team of Saudi linguists with specialism in documentary or descriptive linguistics (the likes of those mentioned above). The Saudi linguists together with representative members from the Saudi Mehri community, and under the supervision and consultation of experts from the Omani and Yemeni MSAL project, can begin to maximize the call for documentation and corpus planning so that it could reach as many interested linguists as possible inside and outside Saudi Arabia. A quick of way of doing this is through social media announcements e.g. Twitter, and Facebook etc. On Twitter, for instance, appealing hashtags can be created, coupled with linguistics-related accounts. Announcements can also be made known in coordination with national or international linguistics communities online, such as *@Saudi_Linguists*[14], *Arabic Linguistics Forum*[15] or *The Linguist List*,[16] as well as being disseminated at relevant local and international conferences.

## I. Corpus planning

### *Documentation and description as a prerequisite for corpus planning*

As discussed extensively in the literature above, particularly section (1.3.1), documentation is certainly a prerequisite for any stage of planning. Documentation aims at generating textual corpora that are long-lasting and well-organised and which can be later utilised for language revitalisation. It seeks to describe the phonological, morphological and syntactic features of a given language. It also aspires to

[14] https://twitter.com/Saudi_Linguists
[15] http://arabiclinguisticsforum.com/
[16] https://linguistlist.org/

create an acceptable orthographic system, compile, and print and/or provide online dictionaries. However, as emphasised in the above-mentioned section, documentation cannot suffice on its own in the pursuit of language revitalisation as it has to work together with descriptive linguistics, for any revitalisation endeavours (Woodbury et al., 2003; Austin and Lenore, 2007; Austin, 2010; Austin, 2016; Jones, 2005; Haugen, 1966; Wright, 2004).

As much as this job is important, it is believed to be less complex as resources have already been made available thanks to the extensive documentary and descriptive linguistics efforts which have been carried over many years in Oman and Yemen by several pioneering researchers whose huge body work are referred to in section (1.3.1). Added to that are other major activities aimed at salvaging Mehri and raising its status as have been initiated in Oman and Yemen. This is all seen in the MSAL community-based project discussed in section (1.3.2), led by J.C.E. Watson and co-investigators working with members from the Mehri community who then took matters into their own hands in demonstration of community involvement to protect and promote their language.

***Applying corpus planning strategies***

This strategy is primarily carried out by individuals with sufficient linguistic expertise in planning, who could be from Saudi, from neighbouring countries such as Oman and Yemen who have experienced a first-hand language revitalisation project, as in MSAL, or from overseas institutions.

Corpus planning refers to linguists' prescriptive intervention in the structure of a given language, whereby decisions are made in order to induce forms of the language. Such planning often emerges from beliefs relating to the adequacy of the language structure and the possibility of such language serving a certain functional domain(s) (Ferguson, 2006; Hornberger, 2006). Implementing corpus planning is crucial to the protection of endangered minority languages being the category that is of direct concern to language itself. It also encompasses areas and processes which are of first-hand relevance to salvaging endangered languages through 'documentation, codification, graphization,

standardisation, modernisation, orthography development and the production of grammars and dictionaries and the production of language-learning materials which are prerequisites for language-in-education planning (Sallabank, 2011 p. 279). With respect to this, corpus planning is expected to suffice in the protection of Merhi if involved the following processes: a graphization, standardisation and modernization:

- **Graphization**

In the case of Mehri, since the language does not have a written tradition, the employment of graphization by linguists is hoped to assist in developing, selecting and modifying a written form of the language and also supporting it by producing orthographic conventions. This step is crucial as the use of writing will make it possible for materials to be transmitted through generations. In addition, graphization will assist in developing a standard form against which other varieties of Mehri can be compared (Ferguson, 1968; Liddicoat, 2005).

Furthermore, creating a written form is believed to bring benefits to the Mehri speech community for two important reasons. The first one is the fact that the use of writing itself will add another medium to the repertoire of the Mehri speech community. A second advantage is understood in the fact that existence of scripts is hoped to lead the Mehri speech community into such folk beliefs that a written form of language is the ‘’real’’ one as opposed to the spoken form, which is in most cases going to be viewed as just a version of the written form; a belief which regards the written variety as more conservative and more innovative as opposed to the spoken variety which is unlike the former, less innovative and more vulnerable to change.

- **Standardisation**

Such a process involves one variety of a given language being selected to be the one which is favoured over other social and regional dialects of the language (Christian, 1988). In cases where dialects are believed to mutually intelligible, another approach is used which introduces a form that is poly-

phonemic and can be seen as one that best represents all the other dialects, however, with no spoken or standard form. When the decision falls on a certain variety, that variety is henceforth understood as ‘‘supra-dialectal’’ and the most appropriate form of the language (Ferguson, 1968). Generally speaking, if the Mehri speech community in Saudi Arabia aspires to achieve cohesion and survive the diversification of their own language which tends naturally to occur as the group grows in size, then there is a need for the language to be standardised. The chances are that differences will develop between sub-groups of Mehri. To avoid all this happening, in the written form, description of the standard form is promoted to ensure the maintenance of unity and comprehensibility (Wright, 2004)

- **Modernisation**

Such a process is undertaken when a language is urged to expand its resources as a means of meeting the demands of the modern world and its functions or what is known as ‘’elaboration’’ (Newmeyer, 1989). Elaboration, as referred to by Haugen (1983, p. 373, cited in Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997), takes place once a language has been codified so as ‘to continue the implementation if the norm to meet the functions of a new modern world’. ‘must meet the wide range of cultural demands put upon it in terms of both terminology and style, from those set by the technological, intellectual, and humanistic disciplines to those associated with the everyday and popular aspects of a culture’ (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997, p. 43).

In the case of Mehri, it is deemed to be a strategy that is salient in affecting its status through assisting the language to expend its lexicon in such a way that allows for discussion of contemporary topics, such as technology. It is therefore the task of language planners to focus on generating new lists and glossaries with the purpose of describing new technical items which enable Mehri to be used for a range of functions. More importantly, however, is ascertaining that such newly created terms are to be consistently used by the appropriate sector(s) it was chosen for. In order to support the rapid expansion

of Mehri's lexicon, it is advised that newly created terms are used in textbooks and professional publications and among specialists (Christian, 1988).

Although this is mentioned again when discussing status planning, researchers think that a very important domain in which Merhi could best serve and one in which would affect and promote its status is, perhaps, the military. That is to say Mehri could be used by the military as an obscure language as a means of secret military communication (e.g. during wartime) and hence can be taught in military school and academies. This justifies the need for Mehri to undergo elaboration whereby its linguistic resources expand so as to suit such a domain.

On that note, linguists should work closely with universities' research centres which have been known for providing necessary consultations to researchers and authors, in order to advise them regarding, for instance, the domains of language use. Of course, Mehri speakers should have a clear say in this matter (Wright, 2004).

## II. Status planning

As agreed above, corpus planning is undertaken separately from status planning as both are equally important. As the term suggests, the process of status planning encompasses strategies which primarily deal with the status of a language (Jones and Singh, 2005, p. 107); it focuses on 'the cultural and the legal actions which can be taken so as to promote any language under investigation' (Bartens, 2001, p. 29)

In a more comprehensive description, status planning is all about the allocation or reallocation of a given language to certain functional domains with an aim of affecting the position of a language as opposed to other languages. Such a task is chiefly carried out by government officials with greater knowledge of policy making (Edwards, 1996; Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Fishman, 2000).

In establishing a link between corpus and status planning, Jones and Singh (2005, p. 315) explain, whilst drawing on Kloss (1969, p. 18), that it is often perceived that status planning is the one that provides the impetus to corpus planning: the introduction of the language into a new (modern) domain 'may well precipitate the creation of new vocabulary.' Fishman and García (2011, p. 357) also endorse Kloss's (1969) point on seeing corpus planning and status planning as two sides of the same coin 'since there is no real corpus planning without functional status issues being uppermost in the minds of the planners'. Whilst corpus planning involves changes in the language itself, status planning is socio-political in nature and hence extra-linguistic. On this particular point, it should also be emphasised that status planning is a task that is conducted primarily by administrators and politicians, as opposed to linguists (Ferguson, 1968).

So as to help Mehri undergo such planning which is hoped to positively affect its status, the linguistics community along with the representative members from the Mehri community, who can speak on behalf of their tribe in Saudi Arabia, should raise the issue to state officials; discussions are hoped to take place between both parties about the possibility of assigning the language to occupy certain societal domains in which the language could be of use.

Such talks start between parties should, in the author's personal view, undergo three governmental bodies respectively: the Saudi Consultative Assembly (Shura Council)[17], the Saudi Council of Ministers[18] and the Saudi Royal Court[19].

Before doing this, linguists and the Mehri community are advised to start the case of status planning through Saudi universities: firstly, the case has to be raised and discussed between Saudi linguists and another group of more powerful actors who are also academics. Those could be, for instance, directors

[17] It is also known as Majlis Ash-Shura: the formal advisory body of Saudi Arabia: https://www.shura.gov.sa/wps/wcm/connect/shuraen/internet/home

[18] That is the Cabinet of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

[19] This is meant to be the King's office where important legislative matters submitted or initiated by royal decrees are negotiated.

of linguistics departments, deans' of schools or universities' chancellors. The latter group could be of support to the cause as some of them are members of the Shura Council due to their high government rank: this means they can easily present the case of Mehri during council meetings. The Council, in turn is expected to propose recommendations and forward them to the Saudi Council of Ministers whose task is to review and draft the proposal and forward it to the Saudi Royal Court, where the King's chief advisers for domestic politics have offices.

Once the Royal Court has received the case, top-down policies take effect. It is hoped, at this point, that a royal decree will be passed assigning Mehri to serve a certain functional domain(s) and one in which the language would be of relevant use. In addition, there are laws and policies which may as well be passed aiming to support revitalisation of Mehri in a variety of possible ways. Throughout the process, it is worth emphasising, however, the Merhi community represented by their elite members are advised to be involved as they are the ones who should have a clear and decisive say in the matter being the ultimate arbiters of the language revitalisation process (Wright, 2004, p. 230). Another point to stress is that the Saudi academic and Mehri communities are advised to keep in touch with experts from the Omani and Yemeni MSAL project for advice and support at each step of the language planning process.

In determining a language's status, and for that matter Mehri, there are four important attributes outlined by both Kloss (1968) and Stewart (1968) which need to be considered:

1) Language origin: whether the language is indigenous or believed to be imported.
2) Degree of standardisation: the degree to which there has been a development in setting formal norms defining what classifies as the appropriate use of language.
3) Judicial status: for instance, does the language classify as a *sole official*, *joint official*, *regional*, *promoted*, *tolerated* or *proscribed language*?

4) Vitality: this could be, for instance, the ratio or percentage of actual language users as opposed to another variable such as the total population.

As stated above in the corpus planning section, a very suitable functional domain and one in which the researcher believes could be of good use is, for instance, the military. Indeed, the Saudi government could benefit a lot if Mehri is utilised as an obscure language for secret military and other forms of communications, thus resembling for instance, the case of the Navajo code talkers.[20] This paves the way for the language to be taught in military academies. The researcher also proposes two other functional domains for Mehri, out of ten other domains outlined by William Stewart, including Mehri as an *educational language* and *a school subject language*. Each of these functional domains is believed to be equally relevant and is likely to further raise the status of the language: as the first one means the language will have the opportunity to be used as a medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools situated in southern Saudi Arabia where Mehri people are concentrated (e.g. the Saudi cities of Alkharkhir and Sharoorah). The second will also provide the Mehri language with opportunity for being taught in secondary schools or universities across the country just like any other language. Teaching Merhi as subject language will not only contribute to raising its status but is also expected to bring much good to its prestige, a concept sometimes intertwined with language status: this will result in the language gaining more appreciation and recognition among Saudi students in addition to other languages being taught (Stewart, 1968; Cooper, 1990; Edwards, 1996).

**Stage 2: Acquisition planning**

Up to this point, state officials, language planners, linguists and the Mehri community are assumed to have been collaborating with one another and to have reached a point known as acquisition planning.

[20] Navajo language is one of the indigenous languages of North America. The U.S. government used Navajo code talkers to convey secret military communication during World War II.

Acquisition planning is understood as a form of planning most commonly administered by the state and less so by non-governmental organisations. It is done with the intention to influence aspects of language (e.g. language status) through education which is a crucial domain for language usage (Grenoble and Whaley, 2006; Liddicoat and Baldauf Jr, 2008). It 'is the term generally employed to describe the policies and strategies introduced to bring citizens to competence in the languages designated as 'national', 'official' or 'medium of education'' (Wright, 2004 p. 61)

One of the other reasons why Mehri has been classified as 'definitely endangered' is because it is not transmitted to the next generation. Therefore, acquisition planning becomes important as a means of increasing the number of speakers. As stated earlier, such steps can only be carried out after corpus planning has been undertaken, whereby dictionaries and language learning materials have been produced (Sallabank, 2011, p. 279) and after Mehri has undergone sufficient elaboration and has been assigned a certain functional domain(s). Bearing in mind the domains proposed above, the task now is expected to be handed over to the language-learning centres affiliated to the *Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the National Guard* as well as the *Saudi Ministry of Education*.

Starting with language-learning centres of military institutions, they will have responsibility to implement language skills training in which old and new military recruits will acquire Mehri. The purpose again is to utilise Mehri as an obscure language needed for secret military communications. As for the Ministry of Education, it is expected to introduce Mehri as a subject language to be acquired in all secondary schools and universities across the country as a subject language as opposed to other languages (e.g. English). This is all done as a means of making students develop an appreciation of the language. Furthermore and in a strategy that is exclusive in implementation in geographical locations where Mehri resides (namely in Alkharkhir and Sharoorah), Mehri is expected to be used as a language with an educational function: that is to be used as medium of instruction to further improve its status. In addition, the relevant government ministry is responsible for the recruitment of Mehri speakers and to provide them with necessary training and expertise to be able to teach the language. Otherwise, the

government may consider outsourcing experienced native Mehri teachers and experts, linguists and language planners who have been involved in the MSAL project in Oman and Yemen.

The language-learning centres associated to the National Guard and Ministry of Defense can in fact work together with the Ministry of Education considering it is the one typically in charge of making national language acquisition decisions and the one with a lot more experience. This is seen in the Ministry of Education being more experienced, for instance, in deciding on the appropriate amount and quality needed for teacher training, the involvement of local communities, deciding on suitable materials and the ways in which they will be incorporated into syllabi, establishing assessment systems for assessing performance and lastly deciding on financial costs (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997).

Since acquisition planning can also be done at the level of non-governmental organisations, the Saudi Mehri community members can work together with academics and experts in Saudi Arabia and from the MSAL projects in Oman and Yemen regarding how to go about teaching the language. One way to do this, perhaps, is by establishing privately-funded language centres.

**Conclusion**

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the topic has been challenging to approach due to the lack of previous LPP work applied, at least, within the vicinity of the Arabian Peninsula. In addition, the enormity of this matter may have not enabled the author of the paper at hand to cover all important and relevant aspects. What is worth pointing out, however, is that it is highly important to remember that any LPP solutions aimed to solve any language problem similar to the one discussed in this paper must be deemed suitable to the social, political, cultural, historical conditions of that context within which they will be implemented. For instance, when relating to linguistic or minority rights, addressing a language problem of a minority speech community residing in Saudi Arabia, Oman or Yemen, language planners are advised to treat the matter with caution and in ways that are most appropriate and considerate to the forms of governments in those countries. That is because the understanding of such

issues tends to be based on western models not necessarily applicable to non-Western countries that exercise forms of governments other than democracy (Kymlicka, 2002). In addition to ensuring more appropriateness which is hoped to guarantee the success of LPP efforts, there should be proper and frequent contact between the academic community (scholars and language planners) and those in charge of decision-making to ensure that the situational and economic conditions are feasible for such solutions to be implemented and to avoid decision-makers being faced with surprise (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997, p. 306). Furthermore, and considering that language issues are mostly known for being emotionally laden, solutions to be proposed have to be initially sold to the population with the purpose of finding out whether or not they will be accepted. Another point to stress is what is stated by Wright (2004, p. 230) in which she reminds scholars and planners that the "objects of LPP are also agents, and their choices are ultimately decisive in determining how language behaviour develops. Speakers themselves are the ultimate arbiters of language revitalisation, and other players need to be sensitive if they aspire to play a role'. What this stresses is that the success of language revitalisation is bound a great deal to the speech community itself; should they desire to give in to language shift which may appear to be serving their chances better, there is only a slim chance that language revitalisation will succeed in the long run. Activists of the minority group are also responsible for being sensitive and attentive to the say of the majority of the group. In this sense, they should accept the fact that their goals can be compromised if the rest of the group thought otherwise (e.g. not being committed to language revitalisation, favouring the shift and mutation of identity (Wright, 2004).

On another note, there are a number of major challenges that need to be considered. It is the researcher's belief that LPP and language revitalisation in a way remain foreign concepts in the Arab world and do not gain the attention of most linguists in the country. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that promoting them may seem a Herculean task which requires a great deal of time and effort. Perhaps, one way of treating this problem is by introducing such subjects to be taught in Saudi universities. Furthermore, the long and heavily centralised bureaucratic processes dominating both

academic institutions and governmental bodies in Saudi Arabia might hinder efforts to preserve the language in question: although the country's bureaucratic system has been largely digitalised, there is still a touch of the more traditional face-to-face approach which requires more time and effort for the process. In addition, an administrative lack of responsibility shown by some and the use of informal contacts renders the modern digitalised system partially ineffective.

However, while those challenges are real, protecting Mehri in Saudi Arabia at this point in time seems more promising and possible than ever. More recently, a number of unprecedentedly bold and deep reforms in societal and economic spheres have been launched resulting in vulnerable segments of the society being hugely empowered and supported, and governmental bodies becoming much more attentive and responsive to public concerns and societal needs. Therefore, provided there is enough enthusiasm and bottom-up action on the part of the Saudi Mehri community, there is a great likelihood that the Saudi government will come to their aid and support.

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