Institution: University of Salford
Unit of Assessment: D28 Modern Languages and Linguistics
Title of case study: The languages and culture of southern Arabia
1. Summary of the impact
Mehri is an endangered, unwritten Modern South Arabian language (MSAL) spoken in Yemen and Oman. It is estimated that Mehri will succumb to Arabic as a vibrant language within the next three generations, hence Mehri is critically endangered. Salford research has led to the revitalisation of the language through involving language community members in its documentation, the innovative use of modern technologies such as email, SMS text messaging, blogs and tweets to transmit it in new forms, develop a script, and enhance the visibility of the language and the culture in which it developed, within the community and internationally.
2. Underpinning research
The key researchers and positions they held at the institution at the time of the research are as follows: Professor Janet Watson, Professor of Arabic Linguistics (2005-2012). This research, which has been conducted from 2006 focuses on the endangered Modern South Arabian languages spoken in Yemen and Oman, the relationship between these languages and the extant and extinct Semitic languages in this area, and the oral and cultural traditions of the speakers of these languages.

- Watson's research, funded by a Heidelberg University Visiting Professorship (2006) and a Leverhulme Research Fellowship (2007-8), was initially focused on the documentation of the sound structure of Yemeni Mehri (Watson & Asiri 2008, Watson & Bellem 2010, 2011) and of Mehri oral traditions and literature and cultural practices as represented in a body of Yemeni Mehri oral texts (Watson/Sima 2009). This research is complemented by research on the syntactic and morphological structure of Omani and Yemeni Mehri, funded by a British Academy Senior Research Fellowship (2010-11) (Watson 2009, Watson 2012). The latter research is based on data collected by Watson and members of the language community. This data includes a corpus of SMS text and email messages. Watson has been conducting fieldwork since December 2009 in Oman because the political situation in Yemen precludes further fieldwork in this area.

- As a result of research on the structure of Mehri, and in particular, the adjectival system, Watson has documented adjectival terms applied to camels, including stages of life and colour (cf. Eades & Watson in press). At the same time, work on the documentation of oral traditions and culture has yielded an improved understanding of the significance and role of the camel to the Mehri people. This research is reported in conference papers delivered at the Camel Conference at SOAS, London in May 2011, and The 3rd Conference of the International Society of Camelid Research and Development, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman by Watson, Eades and Muhammad Al-Mahri (a Mehri camel herder).

- Watson has engaged in a variety of activities which raise the profile of Mehri and Yemeni Arabic in Yemen, the Gulf and the UK. These include media appearances and interviews in Yemen (Radio San'a 23 July 2002) and the UK (Radio Newcastle, 15 March 2002); lectures in San'a, Yemen (including one presided over by the Minister for Social Affairs, Dr Abd al-Karim al-Arhabi) and in London 2004 (British Museum Study Day); an invited talk on 'Language and Heritage: Collecting oral tales and stories in Mehri' at the Workshop on recording intangible heritage on the UNESCO representative list. Abu Dhabi Culture & Heritage, Abu Dhabi in March 2011; and invited talks on travel by Mehris to the Hajj (Muslim pilgrimage) in the pre-motorised era at a public conference Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam attached to the Hajj exhibition at the British Museum (January 2012-April 2012) in March 2012, and the Historical Association of Oman, Muscat and Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat in April 2012.

3. References to the research

Key outputs

1. J. Watson, D. Eades & Mohammad al-Mahri, '*Camel culture and camel terminology amongst the Omani Bedouin*'J Semitic Studies, 2013 58 (1): 169-186. DOI
2. *The Structure of Mehri*, pp. xxvix + 479, 2012, Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden (Semitica Viva, Bd. 52), ISBN 978-3-447-06736-2.
3. Watson, J & Bellem, A, '*Glottalisation and neutralisation in Yemeni Arabic and Mehri: An acoustic study'*. 2011, With A. Bellem. In: B. Heselwood & Z. Hassan (eds) Arabic Instrumental Phonetics, Benjamins: Amsterdam. 235–256. URL
4. A. Sima, *Mehri-Texte aus der jemenitischen Sharqīyah: Transkribiert unter Mitwirkung von ʕAskari Hugayrān Saʕd*, 2009 edited, annotated and introduced by Janet C.E. Watson & Werner Arnold. Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden. URL
5. '*Pre-pausal devoicing and glottalisation in varieties of the south-western Arabian Peninsula'*. With Yahya Asiri. In: M. Embarki (ed.) Arabic and its Varieties: Phonetic and Prosodic Aspects, 2008, Languages & Linguistics, 22: 17–38. URL
6. 2002 Social Issues in Popular Yemeni Culture (in Arabic and English). With Abd al-Rahman Mutahhar. Al-Sabahi Press: San'a. URL

Key grants

7. 2007: Mehri: Grammar, texts and glossary, Leverhulme Trust, £22,221.00.Investigator: J Watson (100%).
8. 2010: Syntax of the Modern South Arabian Language, Mehri, British Academy, £47,206.00. Principal Investigator: J Watson (100%).
9. 2012: Documentation and ethnolinguistic analysis of the Modern South Arabian languages, Leverhulme Trust, £149,680.00. Principal Investigator: J Watson (60%). Co-Investigator: D Eades (40%).

4. Details of the impact

The stabilisation or rehabilitation of an endangered language requires processes involving the use of educational, political and social means to increase the number of its speakers. However, revitalisation of an endangered language cannot occur unless the language is first documented. Thus this project, which has resulted in a comprehensive descriptive account of Mehri sound structure, word structure and syntax (Watson 2012; Watson & Bellem 2010, 2011), a set of Mehri texts (Watson/ Sima 2009), and is developing a community-accessible database of oral texts is playing a significant role in allowing these revitalization processes to occur. In addition to this contribution, Watson's research has made a contribution to restoring the prestige of Mehri language and culture in the following ways:

- The involvement of the Mehri language community in the collection of data since December 2009 has raised the language community's awareness of both the precariousness and the value of Mehri language and culture.
- Of the six MSAL, Bathari is now extinct (Miranda Morris p.c.) and the other five – Mehri, Jibbali, Soqotri, Harsusi and Hobyot – are in various stages of endangerment. The observation of linguistic behaviour within Mahra indicates that Mehri is critically endangered. Census figures give an ethnic Mehri population of c. 180,000, but this belies the linguistic situation: as a MSAL, Mehri is neither written nor a language of the media. The prestige of Arabic coupled with urban migration has led to many Mehris losing competence in Mehri; even those living in remote villages are becoming increasingly bilingual in Arabic. Schooling is conducted solely in Arabic and children are banned from speaking Mehri on school grounds. Immigration of Yemeni Arabs into the province since unification in 1990 and increasingly in recent years has forced Arabic to be the main language of communication in Mehri towns.

- Because Mehri is a spoken language, Mehri has not until recently been used in new electronic media such as SMS text messaging and e-mail. Since January 2010, Watson has been communicating with Mehri speakers in Mehri using Arabic script in email and SMS text messaging. Watson has encouraged language consultants to use Arabic script in order to communicate Mehri data in text messages and emails.
- Between January 2010 and July 2012, Watson has built up a database of over 3,800 SMS messages. This has created a new cultural phenomenon in which Mehri speakers adapt the script with which they are accustomed (Arabic) in order to use Mehri in electronic communication.
- Watson's research on the sound structure of Mehri and Yemeni Arabic has resulted in a corpus of publicly accessible sound files (http://www.semarch.unihd.de/index.php43?LD_ID=5&lang=en).

The project has generated incremental impact in attracting additional funding for extension of the innovative research methodology, with an award of £149,680 from the Leverhulme Trust to develop the documentation and linguistic analysis of Sheret, Harsusi, Hobyot and Bathari. The project will also produce a 1,000 word comparative cultural glossary of the six Modern South Arabian languages (including Mehri and Soqotri), and develop categories for a comparative grammar of the language family.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

a) Testimonies from Mehri speakers/informants: *"In recent years, your (Watson's) tireless efforts on reviving Mehri by raising awareness about the importance of using Mehri in text messages has helped us native speakers to realize the importance of text messages as a way of keeping our language alive. Today, many Mehri speakers text each other in Mehri using Arabic script and they are so proud of their indigenous language. As a native speaker of Mehri, I am very optimistic that Mehri will survive by following such fruitful initiatives."*