

Zadjali: The Dying Language

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Abstract

Spoken by a small tribal community of few hundred members, Zadjali is one of several minority languages spoken in Oman. Academic work concerned with endangered languages in Arabia makes no reference to Zadjali as a language, let alone addressing its endangered status. The minor number of Zadjali speakers with good language proficiency, their age group as well as the meager inter-generational transmission intrigue a crucial question regarding its vitality in the course of time as they, accompanied with other factors, appear to pose danger to Zadjali. Due to its lexical resemblance to nearby languages spoken in the vicinity, namely Baluchi and Sindhi, it is often mistakenly considered a dialect of either Baluchi or Sindhi rather than a language of its own. On this ground, the focus of this paper is two-fold. It aims at shedding light on Zadjali's genetic affiliation, its origin and future status so that notice is brought to such threatened language. It also argues that Zadjali is a language of its own rather than a dialect of Baluchi or Sindhi, contrary to the widespread misconception concerning its genetic affiliation. Using the Swadesh's 100 word list, findings show that despite the existence of lexical resemblance between Zadjali and both Baluchi and Sindhi, mutual intelligibility to Zadjali is impossible to Baluchi and Sindhi speakers, giving evidence that Zadjali is a dialect of none of these languages but rather a language of its own.

Keywords: Oman, Zadjali, Indo-Iranian, Minority languages, Baluchi, Sindhi.

I.

Introduction

Although Arabic language makes the national language of Oman, the country exhibits a wide diversity of indigenous languages spoken by ethnic groups that are strongly woven to the social fabric of Oman. These languages belong to three distinct language families: Indo-Iranian Languages, Modern South Arabian Languages and Bantu Languages (Al Jahdhami, 2013; Al Jahdhami, 2015). Peterson (2004) stated that fourteen different languages were spoken in the Suqof Matrah in Muscat, the capital of Oman, during the eighties of the twentieth century. He also made reference to indigenous languages spoken in Oman listing Baluchi, Lawati, Zadjali, Guirati, Swahili, Jabbali (Qarawi as he named it), Mehri, Hibyot, Bathari, Hikmani and Harsusi. Side by side with Arabic, the first widely used language in Oman, these languages are spoken by minority ethnic groups in different areas of Oman with different numbers of speakers. Al Jahdhami (2015) classified minority languages in Oman into three main categories: definitely endangered, severely endangered and critically endangered languages mainly based on the number of speakers' base, their age, and the vitality of inter-generational transmission to younger generations.

Zadjali is not an exception to the aforesaid languages as it falls into the critically endangered group due to its slight number of speakers' base as opposed to those of other languages in Oman, speakers' age, restricted domain of use, and the evident nonchalance regarding inter-generational transmission. The bulk of Zadjali speakers belong to the elderly age group, most of whom do not seem to show much concern to passing out their ethnic group language to their offspring. By large, Zadjali is mistakenly considered, even among some Zadjalis, a dialect of Baluchi, an Indo-Iranian language spoken in Pakistan, Iran, Oman, Afghanistan and other dispersed areas (Spooner, 2012). Such view is based on the lexical resemblance of Zadjali to Baluchi and to the fact that Zadjalis are considered to be part of the Baluchi ethnic group. Likewise, it is invigorated by language shift of a considerable number of Zadjalis to Baluchi.

Others, on the other hand, consider Zadjali a dialect of Sindhi rather than Baluchi owing to the lexical cognates it shares with Sindhi, an Indo-Aryan Language of the Indo-Iranian family spoken mainly in Pakistan (Mahar & Memon, 2009). Both notions, however, can be proven wrong, for speakers of both Baluchi and Sindhi proved to have a very slight word recognition from the Swadesh's 100 word list of Zadjali in addition to unintelligibility to Zadjali simple sentences.

2. History and Origin of Zadjali

Scholarly work addressing Zadjali language is very erratic and rare indeed. The very scanty references one could get a hand on about Zadjali mostly refer to it as a tribal community, mainly addressing its migration from its mother land to some other dispersed areas but rarely, if ever, making reference to the language spoken by such ethnic group. Zadjali the tribe is believed to comprise other subtribes under the big group such as: Bulfati, Jami, Rooja, Zamarani, Sardarhazi, Mobarki and Gadore, to name but a few. According to some traditions narrated by Zadjalis, the Zadjalis used to have a territory in Baluchistan, their mother land, but they were obliged to migrate to some other areas including Sind due to war that broke out between Zadjalis and some ethnic groups in the purlieu. Peterson (2004) cited that some Zadjali members lived in Pakistani Baluchistan and Sind as well as in Pakistani and Iranian Makran. It is not clear, though, if Zadjalis were originally Baluchis who migrated to Sind or rather Sinds who migrated to Baluchistan. Other Zadjalis, nevertheless, believe that they migrated from Persia as they consider themselves the descendants of the first king of Persia. Yet, other members believe that their lineage goes to Arab ancestors who migrated from Arabia and acquired a different language from that of their ancestors. Still others, however, consider themselves a sub-group of the bigger Baluchi ethnicity. In spite of having such diverse views, it is hard to vindicate one over another as they all seem to be subject to further research and scrutiny.

3. Genetic Affiliation

Zadjali is an Indo-Iranian language that exhibits lexical and structural resemblance to several Indo-Iranian languages such as Baluchi, Sindhi and Persian (Al Jahdhami, 2015). It is presumptuous, however, to claim which branch of the Indo-Iranian group it belongs to, whether the Iranian branch (i.e. Persian, Kurdish, Pashtu, Baluchi) or the Indo-Aryan (i.e. Sindhi, Urdu, Bengali, Panjabi). The name 'Zadjali' is believed to be derived from the word 'Zadjal' or 'Zadghal' which originally means 'the language of the ancestors' (Al Jahdhami, 2015). The term Zadjali, hence, is employed to refer to people who belong to such ethnic group as well as the mother tongue in which they converse. Speakers of Zadjali language are mainly found in Muscat and some parts of Al-Batina Province in the Sultanate of Oman. The precise number of Zadjali speakers cannot be vindicated due to the lack of reliable statistics on the exact number of speakers, but estimation says that they are few hundred speakers.

4. Language Status

A substantial number of the few hundred speakers of Zadjali falls into the elderly age group. Zadjali, as an ethnic group, has a bigger number of members than those who speak it, but it is unfortunate that a considerable number of Zadjalis no longer identify with Zadjali as language of identity. It is not infrequent to find Zadjalis who have passive knowledge of their ancestors' language or even those who have no contact whatsoever with Zadjali. The majority of those who converse in Zadjali do not seem to give much worth to the importance of intergenerational transmission of the language to younger generations. Such attitude is based on the fact that passing it to younger generations is of no instrumental nor social use since it is restricted to the home domain. Worse than that, a great number of Zadjali speakers have shifted to an nearby cousin language, Baluchi, which collectively add up to its critically endangered status (Al Jahdhami, 2015).

5. Language or Dialect

Zadjalis are mistakenly regarded as Baluchis or confused with some other ethnic groups like Ajams or Jats (Peterson, 2004). By the same token, their language is mostly considered a dialect of some language rather than a fully-fledged language of its own. A vast number of Omanis hold the belief that it is a dialect of Baluchi, an Indo-Iranian language of the Iranian branch (Spooner, 2012), for some Zadjalis believe that their ethnic group is traced back to the bigger Baluchi ethnicity. The fact that a big number of Zadjali speakers shifted to Baluchi, leaving their language at major risk, plays a key role in strengthening such prevailed misconception that Zadjali is a dialect of Baluchi that has diverged in some sorts both lexical and structure wise from the mother language. So do some Zadjali tribe members who have no knowledge of their ancestor's mother tongue; they consider it a

dialect of Baluchi that exhibits some phonological and lexical dissimilarity with the mother language, Baluchi. Some speakers, on the other hand, accept it as true that Zadjali is a dialect of Sindhi, an Indo-Aryan language of the Indo-Iranian family (Mahar & Memon, 2009) owing to the fact that it has some lexical resemblance to Sindhi. A broad line view, however, considers Zadjali a dialect that straddles the line between both Baluchi and Sindhi due to the lexical resemblance to both languages. These unsubstantiated views, however, can be proven wrong by the fact that all three languages are of the same language family (i.e. Indo-Iranian), and thus lexical and structural resemblance between them is an inevitable phenomenon that does not entitle one to be a dialect of the other. Failure of mutual intelligibility of both Baluchi and Sindhi speakers to Zadjali gives ample support to rebut such views.

6. Methodology

Native speakers of Zadjali, Baluchi and Sindhi were recorded providing the equivalents to the Swadesh's 100 word list in their ethnic languages. Words were phonemically transcribed as demonstrated in the underneath table. Speakers of Baluchi and Sindhi were asked to recognize Zadjali lexical items similar to those of their ethnic languages. Zadjali speakers were then asked to use some lexical items (those recognized by speakers of Baluchi and Sindhi) in simple sentences of their own while Baluchi and Sindhi speakers were asked to report any intelligibility to these sentences so that mutual intelligibility of Baluchi and Sindhi to Zadjali is measured. By the same token, Zadjali and Baluchi speakers were asked to recognize lexical items from Sindhi followed by mutual intelligibility tests of simple sentences that include recognized lexical items. Sindhi speakers were also asked to recognize similar lexical items from Baluchi, and to report mutual intelligibility to Baluchi simple sentences. It should be noted that most, if not all, Zadjali speakers in Oman, including those involved in the study, are speakers of Baluchi too; therefore, word recognition and tests used to measure mutual intelligibility of Zadjali speakers to Baluchi are disregarded in the study.

7. Findings

The following table shows the Swadesh's 100 word list and its equivalents in Zadjali, Baluchi, and Sindhi, respectively. Noteworthy is that subjects participating in the study are mainly from Muscat, Oman. Thus, speakers of other dialects of these languages, be it in or outside Oman, might exhibit slight differences in pronunciation or usage of lexical items. Words of Baluchi appearing in pairs represent Baluchi spoken in Al-Batina Province as opposed to the dialect spoken in Muscat the capital, respectively.

Table 1: The Swadesh's 100 word list in Zadjali, Baluchi and Sindhi.

S.No.	Swadesh's List	Zadjali	Baluchi	Sindhi
1	I	a:h	ma:/man	mōnki
2	you	tu	ta:/tə:	tōhan
3	we	asi	ma/sadʒi	asan
4	this	jɔ:h	e	hōn
5	that	hɔ:h	a:	tōh
6	who	ker	kaj/kaja	dʒɔ
7	what	sɔ:h	tʃi	tʃa
8	not	inna	na:	nah
9	all	ʃada:h	kəl/ drɔ:	sab ^h
10	many	gahta	ba:z	kitranʔi
11	one	hokɾɔh	jak	hak
12	two	ba:h	du/dɔ:	jah
13	big	wadɔ	mezan/mazan	wadi
14	long	dɛgɔ:h	dra:dʒ	ɖag^hɔ
15	small	nadkɔ:h	kesən/kasa:n	naniɾɔ
16	woman	za:lah	dʒenen / dʒan	awrat
17	man	mardagɔ:h	marden/mardan	msa:n
18	person	mahanuh	bemard/mardom	ma:ŋho
19	fish	matʃi	ma:hi/ ma:hig	matʃi
20	bird	kapɔdar	mɔrg	paki
21	dog	kɔtɔ:h	kotʃik/ kotʃek	kato
22	louse	bɔ:d	bɔ:t/ bɔ:d	banhah

23	tree	wan	draʃk	waŋ
24	seed	tə:hom	təm	badʒ
25	leaf	ban	ta:g	pepar
26	root	pa:ra	agənd	pa:ɾ
27	bark (of a tree)	puhand	pəst	tʰaɾ
28	skin	dʒild	pəst	galdʒɪ
29	flesh	bəʃɪ	gədzɪd/ gə:ft	gə:ft
30	blood	raʃ	hə:n	rat
31	bone	hadə	had	bə:n
32	grease	pig	pig	ɔ:sa:
33	egg	a:nu	heg	ana:
34	(animal) horn	kənt	kənt	sə:r
35	tail	dəm	bənd/ dəm	dəm
36	feather	faŋ	ba:l	kanab ⁶
37	hair	wa:r	pət/ mɪd	wa:r
38	head	matə:	sar	sar
39	ear	kan	gəʃ/ gə:ʃ	kan
40	eye	akah	tʃam	a:k^h
41	nose	nak	pə:z	nak
42	mouth	wa:t	daf/ dam	wa:t
43	tooth	dand	dantən/ danda:n	dand
44	tongue	dim	zwə:n/ zəba:n	zba:n
45	finger nail	nu	mərdə:naŋ/ na:kun	a:ŋɪr
46	foot	perə	pa:d	da:mɪn
47	knee	kə:da	kənd/ kən	gədin
48	hand	hat	dast	hat
49	belly	ped	la:f	aʃ ^h a:rdʒɪn
50	neck	kand	gardan	g ^h ɪtʃɪm
51	chest	hiki	gwa:r	sɪnə
52	heart	he	dɪl	dɪl
53	liver	dɪgar	dʒegar / dɪgar	dʒɪgar
54	drink (V)	bjesə	wa:rt/ waraɣɪ	pi:a:ŋ
55	eat (V)	kaisə	wa:/ waraɣɪ	ka:i:ŋ
56	bite (V)	dandalesə	gərtʃi/kasɪ	kitʃb ^h ɪnla
57	see (V)	naharesə	tʃa:ɾɪ/ tʃa:raɣɪ	dasi:ŋ
58	hear (V)	bəndesə	ɛʃkəʃtʃkanagɪ	bətɪ
59	know (V)	da:nəsə	zə:/ za:nagɪ	xabar
60	sleep (V)	səmmesə	wəpt / wapsaɣɪ	nandkarn
61	die (V)	maresə	mə/ maraɣɪ	marɪ
62	kill (V)	ma:resə	kəʃ/ kəʃaɣɪ	ma:ɾɪ
63	swim (V)	ʊŋ ^h resə	dʒəŋtʃtʃɛ/ zəʃə:dagɪ	tɪɾɪ
64	fly (V)	ba:rkaresə	ba:lɪkə/ba:lkanagɪ	ada:mɪŋ
65	walk (V)	gəresə	era: / laha:lawagɪ	dəʃaŋ
66	come (V)	atesə	a:tk/ pedar	ɪtʃɪ
67	lie (down) (V)	səmmesə	blet	hiʃ ^h leʃtɪpəŋ
68	sit (V)	bəhesə	bɪnd / nəndagɪ	wi:haŋ
69	stand (V)	pəjesə	ɛtʃa:θ/ ə:ʃtagɪ	pi:haŋ
70	give (V)	desə	da:θ/ deagɪ	dɪŋ
71	say (V)	təsə	wətʃɪ/ gə:ʃaɣɪ	tʃə:ŋ
72	sun	sezza	rutʃ	sag
73	moon	tʃa:n	ma:h	tʃand
74	star	ta:rə	esta:r/ setareh	ta:rə
75	water	pa:ni	a:f/a:p	pa:ŋi
76	rain	mi	ha:wəɾ/ hə:r	minhan
77	stone	mədkə	dək/ də:g	pi:ʃar
78	sand	reka	ha:k	w:ari?

79	earth	zamin	dɛgɑr/ zamin	zimin
80	cloud	dʒɑmbɑr	ɪstɪn/ kɑrkɑr	kɑkɑr
81	smoke	tɑh	kɛʃɪ	dɒnhɒn
82	fire	dɛrɔ	a:s	pɑ:hɑh
83	ash	sɑ:r	pɔr/ pɔ:r	rɑ:h
84	burn (V)	bɑ:ʃɛsɔ	sɔtk/ ɑsrɔkɑrɑgɪ	sɑ:ʃɑŋ
85	path	sɑllɔ	rɛh/ rɑ:hɑh	wɑ:t
86	mountain	tsɑbbɑr	kɑh/ kɔ:h	dʒɑbɑl
87	red	gɑhɑʃɔ	sɔhr/ sɔ:hɔ:r	dʒɑ:ʃɔ
88	green	ʃɪnz	sɑbz	sɑ:ʔɔ
89	yellow	pɪʃɔ	zɑrd	pɪlɔ
90	white	dɑhʊʃɔ	speθ/ sɑpɛt	ɑ:tʃɔ
91	black	kɑ:rɔ	sʃɑ:h	kɑ:rɔ
92	night	rɑ:t	ʃɑf	rɑ:t
93	hot	kɔsuwɪ	gɑrmɛ/ gɑrm	gɑrm
94	cold	kɑɖɪ	sɑ:rt/ sɑrd	b ^h ɑɖ ^h
95	full	vɑriwɪ	pɔrɛ/ pɔrɪ	mɑkmɑl
96	new	nɑwwɪ	nɔ:kɪ	nɑʔun
97	good	gɛgɪ	sɑ:rɛ/ ʃɑrɪ	sɑtɔ
98	round	gɔ:l	gɪrdɛ/ gɑrd	lɑkɪn
99	dry	sɔk^hɔwɪ	hɔʃkɛ/ hɔʃk	sɔkɪ
100	name	lɑ:lɔ	nɔm/ nɑ:m	nɑ:lɔ

Word recognition of Zadjali lexical items by Baluchi and Sindhi speakers does not seem to be substantial. Twenty three Zadjali lexical items in total were fully recognized by speakers of Baluchi and Sindhi versus twenty one lexical items partially recognized by the same speakers. (Recognized lexical items are shown in bold in the table underneath the concerned languages). Full recognition as used here refers to the fact that speakers could directly tell the meanings of lexical items without the need to guess their meanings via matching them with native ones that sound the same. Partial recognition, on the other hand, refers to the fact that speakers needed sometime to guess the meanings of lexical items by matching them with native ones that sound more or less the same.

Speakers of Baluchi were able to partially recognize six Zadjali words out of one hundred (i.e. you- negation marker 'not'- man- dog - seed- bone) as opposed to seven words fully recognized (i.e. louse -grease- (animal) horn - tail - tooth - liver- earth). Sindhi speakers, on the other hand, recognized more Zadjali words than Baluchi speakers did. They were able to partially recognize fifteen Zadjali words (i.e. we - that- negation marker 'not'- big - long - person - dog - tree-root - skin - egg-moon -yellow - dry- name) versus sixteen words fully recognized; interestingly most of latter are of body parts (i.e.fish- blood - tail - hair - ear - eye - nose - mouth - tooth - hand - liver - star - water - earth- black - night). The same exact words were equally recognized by Zadjali speakers from Sindhi. Fourteen words were mutually recognized by both Baluchi and Sindhi speakers of each other's language with five partially recognized (i.e. negation marker 'not' - one - dog-flesh - tongue) and nine fully recognized (i.e.what - tail- head - tooth - heart - liver - earth - cloud- hot). Lexical items recognized by speakers of all three languages are six: two partially recognized (i.e. negation marker 'not' - dog) and four fully recognized (i.e.tail - tooth - liver-earth).

As far as mutual intelligibility is concerned, speakers of both Baluchi and Sindhi had extreme difficulty in comprehending Zadjali sentences, and even expressed utter unintelligibility to some sentences in which recognized lexical items were used. Similarly, Zadjali speakers faced extreme difficulty or unintelligibility to Sindhi simple sentences. The same holds true for Baluchi and Sindhi speakers who exhibited abysmal unintelligibility to each other's sentences. Such minimal word recognition along with prevalent mutual unintelligibility to simple sentences in which recognized lexical items were used gives evidence that Zadjali is indeed a distinct language from both Baluchi and Sindhi even if it seems to share lexical items, though with different extents, with both languages. As a matter of fact, these languages are susceptible to exhibit such lexical resemblance since they belong to the same language family and have been spoken at the same proximity. Loan words and lexical cognates are likely to exist between languages that belong to the same language family and have some sort of language contact with one another.

8. Conclusion

The focus of the paper was on Zadjali, one of various minority languages spoken in Oman. The small number of speakers with good grasp of the language, their age group, its restricted use to the home domain, language shift to another proximate language in addition to the disinterest shown to inter-generational transmission of the language to younger generations have all contributed to its critically endangered status. It is erroneously assumed that Zadjali is a dialect of Baluchi or Sindhi rather than a language of its own due to the close lexical resemblance to these two languages. Word recognition of the Zadjali equivalents to the Swadesh's 100 word list by Baluchi and Sindhi speakers appeared to be very minimal, and mutual intelligibility to Zadjali simple sentences is almost impossible, a fact that refutes the notion prevailed among some Zadjalis and non-Zadjalis alike that Zadjali is a dialect of Baluchi or Sindhi rather than a language of its own. Such lexical resemblance is expected between languages that belong to the same language family and exist in the same proximity with some sort of language contact.

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