

The phonetics and phonology of emphatics in Mehri

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Until 1970, Ethio-Semitic was believed to be the only Semitic language sub-family in which emphatic consonants were realised as ejectives. Since the work of T.M. Johnstone, however, ejectives have been recognised as a South Semitic feature, attested not only in Ethio-Semitic, but also in Modern South Arabian (MSAL).

This paper starts by considering why it took so long to identify ejective emphatics in MSAL. Works based on fieldwork of the Viennese expedition in the early twentieth century (e.g. Jahn 1902, Müller 1909, Bittner 1909) and Bertram Thomas (Thomas 1937, Leslau 1947), describe emphasis in MSAL as similar to, but less salient than, emphasis in Arabic. In some works following Johnstone (1970), the MSAL emphatics are described as post-glottalised (Johnstone 1975, 1987, Simeone-Senelle 1997), with the strength of glottalic release said to depend on phonological context. In other works, post-glottalisation is said to be restricted to the emphatic oral stops (as in Soqotri) and, for dialects of other Modern South Arabian languages, in the process of becoming pharyngealised-uvularised (Lonnet 2009).

In this paper, we investigate the nature of 'emphasis' in the Mahriyōt dialect of Mehri, spoken in eastern Yemen, since in this dialect the emphatics are not always realised as ejectives. We consider views of native speakers of an eastern Yemeni dialect of Mehri, examine the acoustic phonetics and phonological patterning of the emphatics in this dialect, and take a comparative look at aspects of the sound system of San'ani Arabic. We show that the realisation of the emphatics in this dialect as either ejective or pharyngealised-uvularised is dependent on position. Lastly, we consider the hypothesis that the phonetic correlates of emphasis in Mehri have been misinterpreted, and that this misinterpretation may have been due at least in part to a failure to recognise the phonological patterning of the emphatics in at least some dialects of Mehri.

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