This chapter examines the verbal systems of two Semitic languages spoken in Oman. According to Holes (2004), the Classical Arabic verbal system is primarily aspectual in nature, although in many modern Arabic dialects this has evolved into absolute tense systems. In many conservative Bedouin varieties of Arabic such as the Najdi dialect described by Ingham (1994), the aspectual system has largely been preserved. In this paper, we examine new data from two Semitic languages spoken in Oman: the Arabic dialect of the Šarqiyya region and the Modern South Arabian language, Mehri. It is shown that while the verbal systems differ in some respects, both systems are adequately described as aspectual, with tense implications determined by either context or the use of tense particles.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study is a contribution towards understanding Semitic verbal systems by presenting an analysis of new data from conservative varieties of two Semitic languages spoken in the south of the Arabian Peninsula. Our study discusses the verbal system of the Arabic dialect of the Šarqiyya region of Oman, a conservative Bedouin dialect similar in type to the dialects of inner Arabia,¹ and the verbal system of the Modern South Arabian language, Mehri. The Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL) are arguably the most conservative extant Semitic languages, since they preserve several features known to have existed in ancient Semitic languages that are lacking in other extant Semitic languages. These include: preservation in most varieties of dual number in pronouns, mood marking in the

¹ Within this particular dialect group some phonological and morphological variation can be found. For example, the 3rd person plural verbal inflection is realised as either -u or -ȣn. These formal contrasts are not relevant to the issue discussed in this chapter.
p-stem, distinction between three plain sibilants /s/, /š/ and /ś/ (corresponding to ancient s₁, s² and s³) of which /ś/ is a lateral fricative, and a distinction in all varieties between the cognate of Arabic َدād and َذ̣āʾ. In this chapter, we begin by discussing the issue of tense and aspect in relation to Classical Arabic and the modern Arabic dialects. We consider the form, and then the function, of the different verbal inflections; finally, we examine the expression of tense and aspect in Šarqiyya Arabic and Mehri through the use of affixes and particles.

2. Tense and Aspect in Arabic

2.1 Defining Tense and Aspect

Tense, (modality) and aspect are distinct conceptual categories that are “sometimes difficult to tease apart” (Payne 1997: 234). According to Comrie (1985: 9), tense is “a grammaticalised location in time”, where a state or event is viewed in relation to a specific time frame. Two different types of tense can be distinguished depending on whether the time frame coincides with the utterance time (absolute tense) or a contextually-determined time frame that may or may not coincide with the utterance time (relative tense). English and other European languages feature absolute tense systems, where verbal inflections indicate past, present and future in relation to the utterance time. In contrast, relative tense systems are not sensitive to utterance time. Comrie (1985: 56) defines relative tense systems as those “where the reference point for location of a situation is some point in time given by the context, not necessarily the present moment.” Relative tense involves the marking of either anteriority (i.e. preceding or following) with respect to the time frame, or simultaneity with the time frame. Comrie (1985: 56) remarks that:

…for relative tenses all that is required is the identification of a reference point, the range of potential reference points being in principle all those compatible with the given context. Thus, the present moment is, unless barred by context, always available as a reference point for relative tenses.

Aspect defines the internal event structure or stative semantics described by a predicate. Comrie (1976: 3) states that the two most basic aspectual distinctions—perfective and imperfective—constitute “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.” He distinguishes these categories as follows: