A PHONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE HARSUSI CONSONANTS

BY

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HARSUSI is one of the Modern South Arabian languages, together with Mehri, Sheri and Soqotri. Spoken by less than 1,000 men, living in small communities (hefrōk), Harsusi is in fact a dialect of Mehri (although the Harāsī are of a different origin than the Mehra), but it is much more exposed to the pressure of modern Arabic than the Mehri language. Given the present sociolinguistic situation, it is likely that within a few generations Harsusi will be replaced by Arabic, more specifically by the Omani Arabic standard dialect.

Although research on the Modern South Arabian languages began in the nineteenth century, we still have few grammars and dictionaries of these languages. This is especially true for Harsusi: as a matter of fact, we have no grammar of this language and it is only recently that a lexicon of the Harsusi language was published. In the following I will present a phonological description of the consonantal system of Harsusi,

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3 T. M. JOHNSTONE, Harsusi Lexicon and English-Harsusi Word-List, London, 1977. This bilingual dictionary, which provides an almost exhaustive lexicon of the Harsusi language, is a very useful work, which has only a few minor defects, as I have pointed out in my review of the book (Linguistics 18, 1980, 939-941). Note that the grammatical and lexicological information contained in B. THOMAS, Four Strange Tongues from South Arabia, London, 1938, must be used with caution.

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from a synchronic point of view. The description is formulated in terms of articulatory features and it is based on the commonly used phonological criteria of economy and parallelism, and also on the criterion of morphophonological adaptation. The symbols are those of the recently revised International Phonetic Alphabet, with slight adaptations or additions where necessary (e.g. for the series of the emphatic sounds). The following sounds have a phonological status in Harsüsi, as can be seen from a number of constrastive positions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labio-Dental</th>
<th>Dental</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal Post-Alveolar</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Pharyngeal</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>plosive</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t b</td>
<td></td>
<td>k</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>?</td>
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<tr>
<td>fricative</td>
<td>f w</td>
<td>0 δ s z</td>
<td>j y</td>
<td>γ w h h</td>
<td>h h</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>emphatic</td>
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<td>ș だったので</td>
<td>§ q</td>
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<td>lateral</td>
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<td>nasal</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To this table the following remark should be added concerning the functional load of the phoneme /ʃ/. Although the emphatic palatal ș has a phonological status in Mehri and Şheri, it has a very restricted distribution in Harsüsi. It only occurs in the words hašba (plural

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4 For a few grammatical and lexical notes from a diachronic point of view see my review of Johnstone’s book mentioned in the preceding note.


6 Compare the following minimal pairs (I have mostly tried to use verbal roots, since these allow a series of distinctive oppositions): จรย์ «to be damp», จรย์ «to bleed»; นม «to thank», นม «to go down in the evening»; ฝอล «to separate», ฝอล «to arrive»; บกร «to utter the ‘Allah’ akbar formula», บกร «to bury», บจร «vulva»; รhm «to pity», รhm «to cover»; บร «to divide», บร «to sow», บร «to start up»; ทร «to regret», ดว «to pull up, to remove»; ทก «to stamp», ทก «to ride behind»; กระ «to let fall», กระ «to ram a gun»; asticsearch «to feel Labour pains», asticsearch «to shave», สถร «to shine, to appear», สถร «to stay awake»; ถmr «to say, to tell», ถmr «to sniff up», ถmr «to tame»; ทม «to look at», ทม «to be born»; เหิด «part, share», เหิด «right, truth», ทรง «heating-stone», ทรง «to fall»; -ken «you (suffix masc. pl.)»; -ken «you (suffix fem. pl.)»; -เ«and», -เ«verbal prefix Impf.

7 The phoneme ș should also have its place in the reconstruction of the phonological system of the ancestor of the modern South Arabian languages; note however that it had no phonological status in Epigraphic South Arabian (see A. F. L. Beeston, *A Descriptive Grammar of Epigraphic South Arabian*, London, 1962, p. 15).