PROBLEMS OF THE DUAL IN SOQOTRI

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Soqotri is a language of the Southern group of the Semitic family, spoken on the island of Soqotra in the Indian Ocean. Other modern representatives of this group include the modern Ethiopian languages, and the closest relatives of Soqotri, Mehri and Shauri. Our knowledge of the Soqotri language is chiefly a product of a linguistic expedition to the island at the turn of the century.[1] The data from the texts published by this expedition were collated and edited by Wolf Leslau (1938). It is on Leslau's dictionary that this paper is based.

In this paper I will attempt a comparative and internal reconstruction of a group of Soqotri nouns which are attested in both their singular and dual forms. In order to carry out this reconstruction one must first be aware of several facts about this language. In Soqotri, accent is normally on the penultimate syllable, though there are some, apparently random, cases where the accent is earlier. In addition, Soqotri, as a Semitic language, is presumably descended from a parent language in which nouns were followed by a case ending with a short vowel, and in some forms by an n or m as well. In classical Arabic the case endings take the forms -un, -an, and -in for the indefinite nouns in the singular, and -u, -a, and -i for definite singular nouns. In Soqotri the case endings for singular and broken plural nouns have completely disappeared. Thus

morqah	meraqih	stick (sing. and plural)
rey	ir'es	head (sing. and plural)

That the dual suffix in Soqotri is -i can be seen from a number of nouns which have no other alternation between their singular and dual forms. For example

gadl -i	braid
berk -i	knee
?arhiyeb -i	kind of tree

In Classical Arabic, nouns appearing before major breaks take on the pausal form, which involves the drop of case endings for the singular and a change of the feminine marker from -at to -ah. For example, we have the following Classical Arabic words, in their full and pausal forms:

ṯawīlatun	ṯawīlah	table
mudarrisun	mudarris	teacher
luɣatun	luɣah	language

This pausal form has become widely generalized in Modern Standard Arabic. In spoken dialects this trend is carried further, and the final h of the pausal forms is dropped altogether.

In Soqotri nouns there is a similar phenomenon. As we have noted, the singular case endings have been dropped, evidently as a result of universal generalization of the pausal forms. However, Soqotri has several separate forms of the feminine ending:

-oh:	bioh	mother
-eh:	ḥegiyeh	wall
-ah:	mqeydah	big pot

The Classical Arabic pattern, with only one form of the feminine marker (-at) seems to be a reflection of the proto-Semitic situation. The origin, then, of the variety of forms in Soqotri is unclear.

The original t of the feminine is preserved in the dual, where it is followed by -i. In some cases, we find an alternation between an i in the dual form and an e in the singular. For example, we have

ʔeyreh	ʔeyriti	lake
šebeh	šebiti	rabbit

There seems to be no conditioning factor to explain the fact that some nouns ending in -eh change their e to i before the dual, while others, like ʔarhiyeb, do not. It seems most reasonable to explain the alternation as the result of phonetic split, due to a lowering of i to e before h, a change attested in Gothic and Old Norse, for example; cf. Wright 1954:27 and Gordon 1927:255. We can then reconstruct an original pattern with four variants of the feminine ending: -it, -et, -at, -ot, which, as the result of the lowering of i to e, is simplified to -eh, -ah, -oh in the singular.

There is, however, evidence to show that there has been a re-interpretation of this rule as one of raising--a regressive assimilation of the e to the following i.

The first piece of evidence which suggests that this may be the case is the relative size of the group showing this alternation compared to that with unchanged e. We have 13 words attested with the alternation,

and only six without it. This seems a likely result of the reanalysis of the alternation as a raising process, and of an incomplete spread of the resulting new rule to other words with the termination -eh. (This is, admittedly, a very weak argument, because of the small size of the corpus available and the element of chance involved.)

More substantial support for the theory that a variable raising rule is spreading across the language is provided by another group of nouns which show an alternation involving the insertion or deletion of a sequence eh.

	Singular	Dual	
(1)	kibehen	kibeni	jug
(2)	qarmehem	qarmemi	finger
(3)	miżeher	miżiri	court
(4)	'idbeher	'idbiri	bee
(5)	šibreher	šibriri	visible spot
(6)	šedehed	šididi	egg-white
(7)	fidehon	fidoni	mountain
(8)	tebehor	tebori	wall
(9)	firehim	firimi	girl
(10)	rebehon	rebeni	master
(11)	qehelihen	qahelini	egg

Table I: Singular and dual forms with VhV : V

These data suggest that originally there may have been a rule of the form:

(i) $\acute{V} \rightarrow ehV / VC_1^2$ -- C#

That is, when the originally penultimate and thus stressed vowel became final and thus lost its accent through deletion of case endings, it expanded compensatorially through addition of the group eh.[2] This change did not occur in the dual, since the dual ending kept the vowel in the accented penult.

This explanation, however, is not entirely adequate, since words like miżeher show i in the dual, in place of the e suggested by the singular in -eher. We might claim that in the original change, i and e converged in ehe, but this formulation is not independently motivated, and thus really does not explain anything. More importantly, our hypothesis of a variable rule raising e before the dual suffix -i can cover this alternation as well as that to which we have already applied it. In addition, this explanation will make it possible to account for

firehim, in which i alternates with ehi as the eh-insertion rule (1) predicts. On the other hand, a merger of i and e incorporated into the eh-insertion rule would predict that all instances of i should alternate with ehe, and thus would wrongly predict *firehem.

We posit, then, two separate developments, the second of which is not yet complete.

(i) $\acute{V} \rightarrow ehV/VC_1^2$ -- C#

(ii) e → i/-- Ci#

We emerge with four patterns:

	*firim	*firimi	*šibrer	*šibreri	*kiben	*kibeni	*tebor	*tebori
(i)	firehim	-	šibreher	-	kibehen	-	tebehor	-
(ii)	-	-	-	šibriri	-	-	-	-

This explanation, it should be pointed out, still leaves two words unaccounted for, rebehon and qehelihen. They may perhaps be due to inaccuracies in the transcription; in any case, a larger body of data would be needed before it could be hoped that a reasonable explication of these forms could be found.

We have seen in two distinct cases evidence of a variable rule which raises some instances of e before a dual suffix, while leaving others untouched. Additional evidence can be found in a few other words which show raising elsewhere than in the feminine marker:

maḥber	maḥbiri	hundred
te'e	ti'iti	sheep
'ed	'idi	hand
šelhel	šelili	little wadi

That this process is sporadic outside of the feminine suffix and cases of eh-insertion is shown by the existence of words like ?arḥiyeb which show no change in the dual (?arḥiyebi). As stated earlier, the origin of this rule seems to be the reinterpretation of the original rule, which lowered i to e before the h of the feminine suffix.

It still seems rather strange that the destressed vowels of words like mižer should have acquired an eh which leads to sequences of two successive syllables with short vowels, rather than simply being lengthened to [V:]. In order to shed some light on this, let us turn to another set of words, one of which we have just seen in another context.

Some nouns show an alternation in singular and dual forms which involves the presence or absence of h alone, rather than eh. Thus, alongside qarmehem-qarmemi we have qanther-qanteri. Similarly we find

šerher	šereri	spark
ther	teri	entrance
fa?har	fa?ari	young bull
šelhel	šelili	little wadi

We have no way of predicting which of these two forms (h or eh) will occur, if one appears at all. The h appears to be associated with a final liquid, but this is not a sufficient condition, there being some words with inserted eh which also conclude with liquids, such as šibreher and miżeher. There is no simple solution to this problem, but the following conjectural explanation appears to account for the facts well.

As a first step in our explanation, we will assume that forms like *qarmĕmV, concluding with a short vowel case ending, reacted initially to loss of their final vowels and the resultant shift of stress by a simple lengthening of the originally penultimate vowel. Thus, *qarmĕmV first became *qarmēm.

Soqotri has a number of words, such as sohor "thorn", and šcher "month", which contain the pattern VhV, and in which the h seems to be underlying. If, for some period in the past, a variable rule appeared which deleted h, sequences of the type VhV would have alternated with VV, that is V̄. The long vowels thus created would have merged with other long vowels, such as those resulting from compensatory lengthening in words like *qarmēm.

The surface alternations created by this variable rule now could be generalized to those forms which had long vowels from other sources, such as *qarmēm, on the basis of the model

ē : ehe

ē : X = ehe.

Notice that this cannot be considered a rule generalization, but must be a surface generalization. For the rule accounting for the model alternation ē : ehe is one of deletion of underlying /h/. Forms like *qarmēr, however, lack an underlying /h/ which can be deleted.

Subsequently, the variable rule deleting h apparently was again dropped from the grammar. On the other hand, the ehe of forms like *qarmehem,

not being derivable from underlying /ehe/ and thus not affected by this rule loss, remained and had to be accounted for by the synchronic grammar. Apparently this was done by a reinterpretation of ehe as eh + e, i.e. as eh-insertion, for this pattern has spread to several other nouns; cf. examples (7), (8), and (9) in Table I. Thus we have fidehon in place of the expected *fidohon, and firehim instead of *firihim. We can summarize these steps in the following tabular form.

	qarmémV	tebórV
loss of case endings	qarmēm	tebōr
analogical h-insertion	qarmehem	tebohor
spread of eh pattern	-	tebehor

The introduction of the h into a group of singulars provides what may be interpreted as a singular marker, in opposition to the -i which marks the dual. This encouraged one more analogical change, this time involving words like šelhel. If these words originally had h in both the singular and dual forms, it would have become variable like all others during the period of our posited h-deletion rule. When the h became stable again and/or emerged as a singular marker in forms like qarmehem, by analogy the h would have been retained in the singular (šelhel) and dropped in the dual, yielding *šeleli, and after raising šelili, the actual form.

By our hypothesis, then, a series of reanalyses of situations resulting from variability resulted in a new system of marking for number in this group of Soqotri nouns. This is particularly interesting since it involves an interplay of rule action and surface analogy. For a similar case see Hock 1975.. The role of variability in restructuring can be seen to be important in providing an explanation for this problem. I should add, however, one important caveat about this case. The material on which this paper is based was collected in an early expedition, and perhaps as a result, is hardly a model of consistency. It would be of great interest to have a new collection of data for checking purposes, to gather new forms, and to measure the progress of change in this language over the last three-quarters of a century.

NOTES

[1]The expedition of the Austrian Royal Academy of Science of 1899, the results of which are partly contained in Müller's Mehri und Soqotri Sprache.

[2]An attempt to account for this rather unnatural rule will be presented below.

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