Consonant Cluster and Syllable Structure in Mehri language

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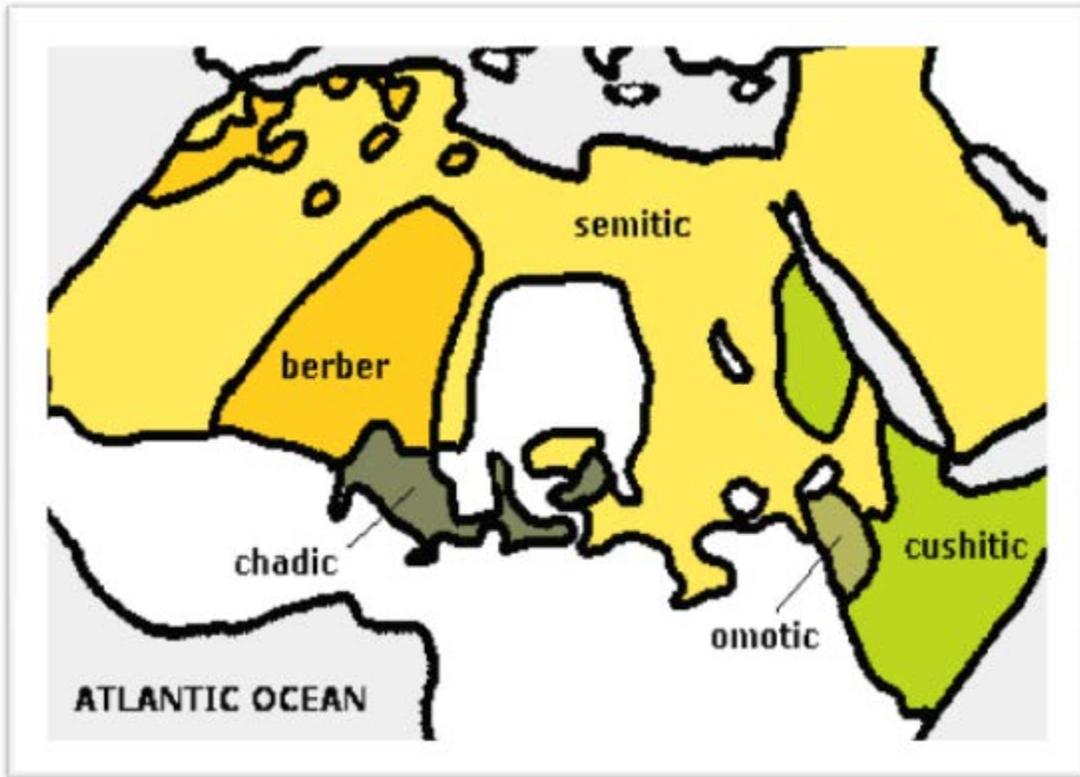Department of Linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, AMU

Abstract- This paper is a discussion on the consonant clusters and syllable structure found inMehri language, spoken in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, in the Republic of Yemen, by the Mahrainhabitants in the desert steppe of Yemen, and in Oman particularly in the mountains of Dhofarand in the Omani desert plateau in Sultanate of Oman. Mehri language is a Modern South Arabian language (MSALs) that descended from the Semitic languages of the Afro-Asiatic language family. This paper gives concise study of consonant clusters in Mehri language. There are two types of consonant clusters in the language; initial and final clusters. Initial clusters in Mehri are formed by combining voiced bilabial nasal /m/ with voiced alveolar stop/d/ or voiced alveolar approximant/l/. Also by combining voiced alveolar nasal /n/ with voiceless uvular fricative/ χ / or voiceless labio-dental fricative /f/. And final cluster by combining voiced bilabial glide /w/ and voiced palatal glide/j/ with /b/, /k/,/ɫ/./f/,/b/, /t/, /n/and /l/.Only two consonant is permitted to form cluster in initial and final. Mehri has two kinds of syllables: open syllables (CV), (CV:) and closed syllables (CVC), (CV: C), (CVCC). Mehri has three patterns of syllables: Monosyllabic forms, Disyllabic forms, Trisyllabic forms.

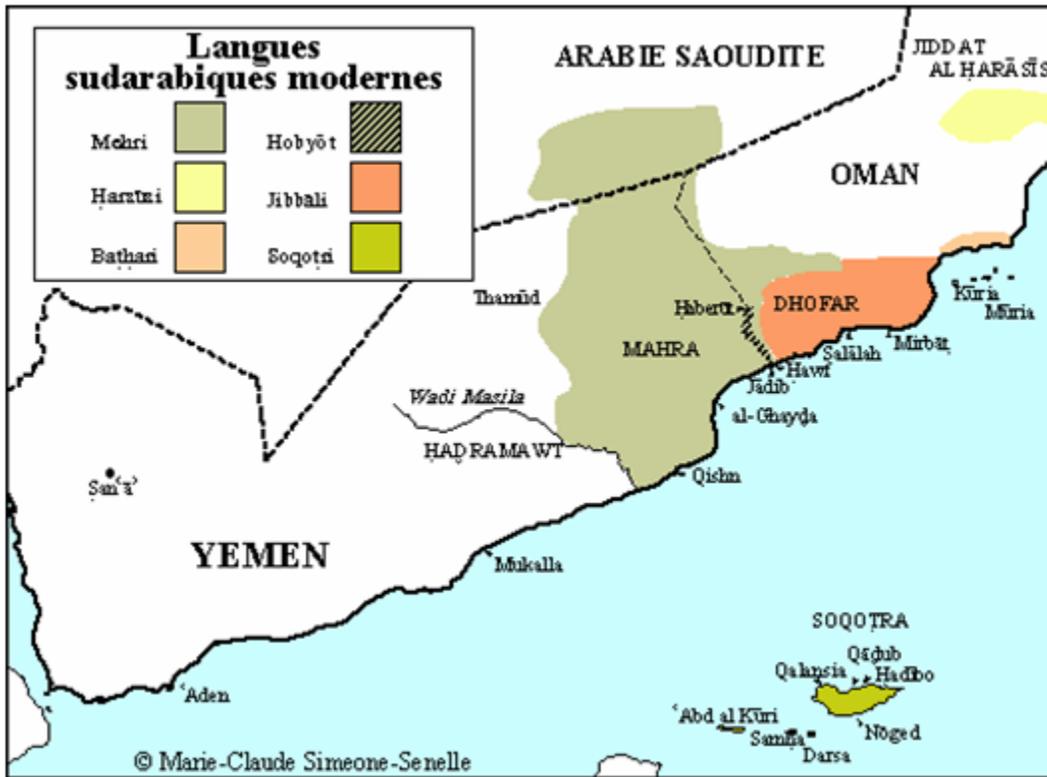*Index Terms*- Consonant Clusters, Syllable Structure, MehriLanguage.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mehri language belongs to Semitic group of language. Mehri is a language in the south of the Arabian Peninsula, in the Republic of Yemen, and the Mahrainhabitants in the desert steppe of Yemen, and in Oman particularly in the mountains of Dhofarand in the Omani desert plateau in Sultanate of Oman. Mehri language is a Modern South Arabian language (MSALs) that descended from the Semitic languages of the Afro-Asiatic language family. Mehriis spoken by about more than 200.000 people in the Republic of Yemen, in the eastern governorate (Almahrah), Sultanate of Oman particularly in Dhofar and Saudi Arabia in the desert of AL-Rua AL-Khali.

Mehri language is in the endangered list of languages, because the influence and dominance of Arabic language and most of Mehri speakers are shifting to the dominant language Arabic. Mehri language named, (mehriyyet) spoken by thousands of speakers. Mehri is widespread language spoken by three Mahra tribes, and some in the mountains of Dhofar in Oman. The majority of speakers live in Yemen in the eastern governorate of Mahra, whereas the others live in Oman in the mountains of Dhofar. Watson (2012) describes in her book Mehri Structure the consonant and vowels in two dialects Mehreyyet and Mehriyo:t.

Map of Afro-Asiatic family

Map of the Geographic Locations of MSA (Simeone-Senelle, 1997)

Hackett (1955) who define the syllable "as the smallest unit in structure of an utterance". Daniel Jones (1918; 1972:55) said that "each sound which constitutes a peak of prominence is said to be syllabic and the word or phrase is said to contain as many syllables as there are peaks of prominence". Crystal David (2008) defines it "a unit of pronunciation typically larger than a single sound and smaller than a word".

In Mehri language, there are 31 consonants including eight plosives, two nasals, fifteenfricatives, three laterals, two glides and one rhotic. The tablepresented below shows the consonants ofMehri language withexemplification:

Sound	Word	Gloss
b	/ bi:r/	" well"
t	/tu:k/	"ate"
d	/dri:g/	"staircase"
k	/ktu:b/	" book"
g	/gi:d/	"good"
ʔ	/ʔalu:t/	"high"
tˤ	/ χle:tˤ /	" mix"
k'	/k'abi:n/	" crawling animal"
m	/mdi:t/	"sea winds"
n	/nfu:χ/	"swell"
f	/Fo:s/	"axe"
Ɵ	/Ɵawma/	"thirst"
ð	/ðe/	"the"
S	/shi:l/	"easy"
Z	/zbu:n/	"expensive"
ʃ	/ʃi:ba/	"seven"
χ	/xajer/	"good"
ʕ	/beʕe:li/	"herder, owner
ʁ	/ʁsu:m/	" went"
ðˤ	/ðˤajer/	"on"
ʃ	/ʃˤba:t/	"finger"
ħ	/ħu:z/	"goat"
h	/hi:t/	" you"
s'	/s'anwi:t/	"deaf (f) "
ʒ	/ʒambjet/	"dagger"
ʤ	/ʤa:r/	"detrimental"
ɫ	/ɫi:wo:tˤ/	"fire"
L	/ltu:ʁ/	" killed"
r	/raħmit/	" rain"
w	/warx/	"month"
j	/jikis/	" he gets"

Table 1:Consonants ofMehriLanguage

Furthermore, with respect to vowels,Mehri has 10 vowels, five short and five long vowels.
The following table shows the vowels ofMehri language with examples:

Sound	Word	Gloss
e	/ðehb/	"gold"
e:	/he:t/	"you"
i	/dinχiru:r/	" snoring"
i:	/shi:l/	"easy"
u	/ʃu:kuf/	"slept"
u:	/zbu:n/	" expensive"
o	/je:noka/	"come"
o:	/lo:m/	"last year"
a	/ kal/	"all"

a:	/ka:l/	"every "

Table 2: Vowels ofMehriLanguage

II. OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this paper are as follows:

- To investigate the occurrence of consonant clusters in Mehri language.

- To identify the most important concepts about consonant clusters and the syllable structure.

- To find out the patterns and types of a syllables and their structure in Mehri language.

- To identify the phonemic inventory of Mehri language.

- To evaluate the importance of Mehri language.

III. METHODOLOGY

Data collection for the present study was based mainly on qualitative criteria. The researchers applied several systematic techniques which included primary collection of data from the native speakers of Mehri. Secondarysources like books, journals, articles, etc.We alsoused further help in data collection.The data collected was then analyzed to reach to certain conclusions regarding Mehri language.

IV. CONSONANT CLUSTERS

A consonant cluster stands for a blend of two, three or more consonants in a sequence. Unlike many languages, consonant clusters in Mehri are very limited. It is interesting to note that three consonant clusters do not exist in Mehri. Only two consonant clusters is found in the language in both position, initial and final. Crystal(1994:74) claimed that consonants "are those units of sounds which function at margins of syllables, either singly or in cluster". Knowles (1993:68) saysthat some consonant clusters occur marginally in the syllable structure of English language with clusters as complex as (C) V (C) (C)(C)(C), as in the word "texts" /teksts/. In Mehri there are two types of consonant cluster: Initial and final clusters.

4.1. Initial Clusters

Initial clusters are formedwhen two or more consonants come together at the beginning of a syllable. In Mehri, only two consonant clusters come together in the initial position.

4.1.1. Nasal Consonant Sequences

Initial cluster in Mehri language are formed by combining voiced bilabial nasal /m/ with voiced alveolar stop/d/ or voiced alveolarlateral /l/.

For example: /mdi:t/   "sea winds"   /mduħ/ "praise"   /mdrat/   "slot shirt"
                /mla:jket/ "angels"   /mlayl/   "dull" /mle:ss/   "smooth"

From the examples above, it is observed that (md-), (ml-) can occur word-initially in the language. Moreover, some more consonant clusters are formed by combining voiced alveolar

nasal /n/ with voiceless uvular fricative/ χ / or voiceless labio-dental fricative /f/.

For example: /nχiru:r/   "he snorted"   /nχarah/   "dig" /nχal/   "under"
/nfu:χ/   "swell" /nfaiχ/   "harness" /nfe:s/   "wide"

4.1.2. ConsonantStop Sequences

Mehri language has the following consonant stop sequences/lt/, /dt/, /kt/.

Consonant plus/t/
For example:/ltu:ʁ/   "killed"
 /dthora/   "blood"
 /ktu:b/   "book"

4.2. FinalClusters

Clusters which appear at the end of a syllable constitute final clusters.Mehri has only two consonantclusters at the end of a syllable.

3.2.1.Glide Consonant Sequences

Final cluster in Mehrilanguageis formed by combining voiced bilabial glide /w/ orvoiced palate glide/j/ with consonants. Mehri has the followingglide consonantsequences /wb/,/wk/,/wɫ/./wf/,/jb/,/jt/,/jn/,/jl/.
Some examples of /w/ plus consonantare presented below:
/kawb/   "the wolf"
/sowḵ/"market"
/ħawɫ/"pound"
/gawf/"chest"
/j/ plus consonant
For example: /ħajb/"crowbar"
/jisajt/"nine"
/ferhajn/   "horse"
 /χajl/   "maternal uncle"

V. SYLLABLE STRUCTURE

In Mehri language, a syllable consists of a vowel with one or two consonants in initial position (onset) and one or two consonants in final position (coda).In Mehri, a syllable cannot exist without an onset but, a syllable can exist without coda.Ladefoged (1993:248) defines a syllable as "the smallest possible unit of speech", while George Yule (2006) calls it "a unit of sound consisting of vowel and optional consonants before or after the vowel".Syllables in Mehri language are divided into open and close.

5.1. Open Syllable

An open syllable may be constituted when thesyllable ends with vowel and the syllable consists of consonant (onset) and vowel. A few examples are cited below:
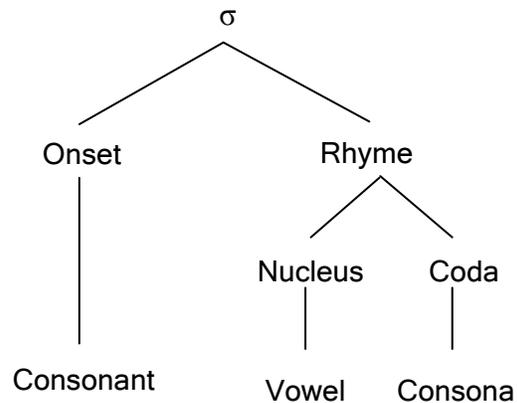
cv   /ðe/   "the"   /wa/
          "and"
cv: /ta:/   "till"   /ho:/
          "I"
cv.cv: /ħa.bu:/ "people"   /ħero:/
"head"

5.2. Close Syllable

A close syllable is formed when the word ends with consonant and the syllable consists of consonant (onset), vowel and consonant (coda). To prove the point a few examples are presented below:

cvc   /ham/   "name   /ħarb/
          "war"
cv:c   /Fo:s/   " axe"   /he:t/
          "you"
cvcc   /teth/   "a woman"   /warx/"month"

There are three parts in a syllable: Onset, Rhyme (Nucleus) and Coda. The following diagram shows the occurrence of onset, nucleus and coda.
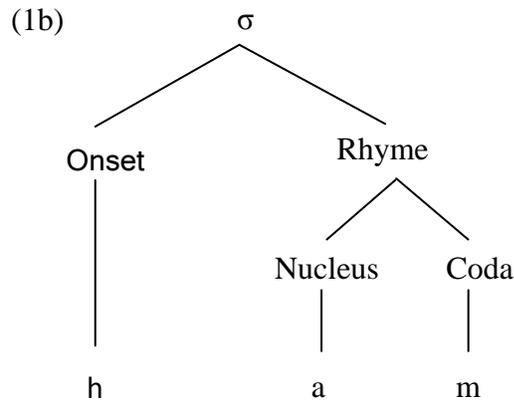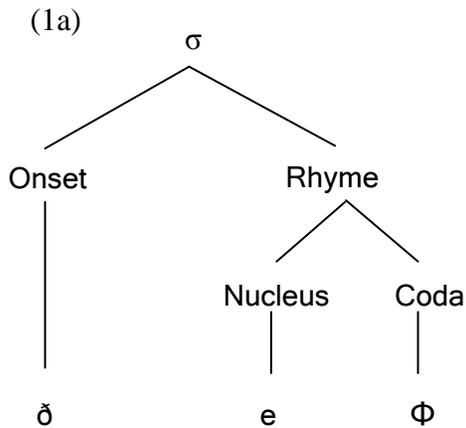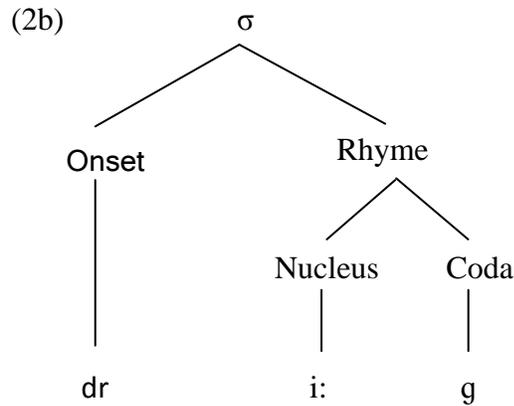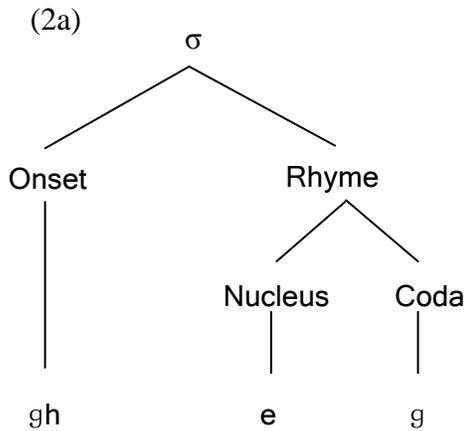
(Structureof the Syllable, April McMahon (2002))

5.3.Onset

In Mehri, all the consonant phonemes can occur in the beginning of the syllable. One or two consonants only can occur as an onset in Mehri language.There are two types of onset:

5.3.1. SimpleOnset: a)/ðe/   "the"b)/ham/   "name"
5.3.2. ComplexOnset:a) /gheg/   "a man" b)/dri:g/ "staircase**"**

(2a)

σ

Onset   Rhyme

Nucleus   Coda

ɡh   e   ɡ

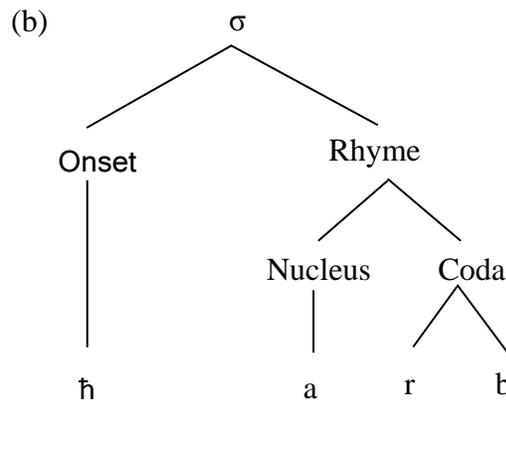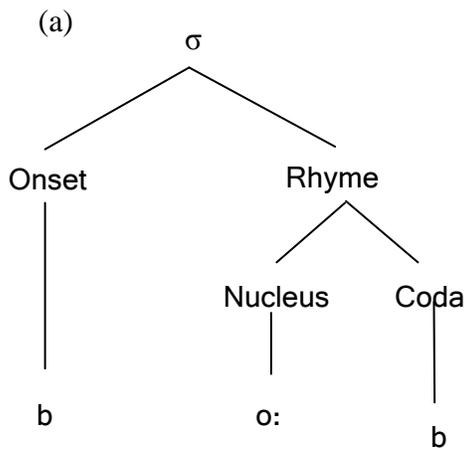(2b)

σ

Onset   Rhyme

Nucleus   Coda

dr   i: ɡ

5.4.Rhyme

Nucleus, is the most prominent part of the syllable.Nucleus is preceded by onset and followed by coda.In Mehri, it is observed that only one or two consonants occur before or after the nucleus. Kenstowicz (1994:252) discusses this unit in the following terms: "the syllable is believed to consist of an obligatory nucleus preceded by an optional consonantal onset and followed by an optional consonantal coda".

5.5.Coda

A consonant which comes after the vowel is called coda. In Mehri, only one or two consonants can occur as a coda.
For example: a) /bo:b/   "door"   b)/ħarb/   "war"

(a)

σ

Onset   Rhyme

Nucleus   Coda

b   o: b

(b)

σ

Onset   Rhyme

Nucleus   Coda

ħ   a   r   b

5.6.Syllabic Pattern

There are threeSyllabic patterns in Mehrilanguage.

5.6.1.Monosyllabic

cv   /ðe/   "the"   cvc   /ham/   "name"
cv:c   /bo:b/"door"   cv: /ta:/   "till
ccvc   /bkoh/   "cried"   ccv:c   /lbo:n"whit"
cvcc   /gawf/"chest"   cvcc   /ʃanx/   "rest"

3.6.2 Disyllabic

cvc.cv   /Өaw.ma/   "thirst" cvc.cvc
/kub.kob/   "stars"

cv.cvc   /hu.did/ "iron"   cv:c.cvc   /ha:r.wan/ "goats"
cv.cv: /ħa.bu: "people"   cv.cv
/qa.qa/   "sister"
cv.cvcc   /ji.sajt/ "nine"   cvccv:c
/raħ.mi:t/   "rain"

5.6.3.Trisyllabic

cvc.cv.cv:c   /din.xi.ru:r/   "snoring"   cv.cv.cvc/
/ʃa.fa.jem/   "grew"
cv.cv.cv:c   /χe.tˤe.ra:t/   "once"   cv.cv:.cv
/te.lo:.mi/   "then"

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the consonant clusters and syllabic structure found in Mehri language. As far as consonant clusters are concerned, it is found that they can occur both as initial and final clusters. With regards to the syllabic structure of Mehri, it is observed that the language has monosyllabic, disyllabic,andtrisyllabic forms.

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