

Arabic of Yemen, Lemma 3, 14, Country Profiles

Arabic dialects in Yemen are spoken as a mother tongue in most parts of the country, except in the eastern province of Mahra and on the island of Soqatra, where modern South Arabian languages are the native languages of the inhabitants. The Yemeni Arabic dialects are characterized by a great diversity and by a number of unique traits, unfound elsewhere in the Arabic speaking community. Although not the best known Arabic varieties, some of them have been studied since the end of the 19th century. In the center of the country (the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen), the first descriptions are due to the Swedish scholar Carlo de Landberg (1901, 1905, 1909, 1913, 1920-43) for the sultanates of Ḥaḍramawt, Fadlī, High and Low 'Awlaqī, 'Awādīl and the tribal Confederacy of Daṭīnah (today, all but Ḥaḍramawt, are situated in Abyan province). The first dictionary (English – Arabic, in Arabic script) was published by Stace (1893) for the dialect of Aden. A few decades later, during the British domination, Emerson and Ghanem (1943a, 1943b) wrote a grammar with exercises about the same variety. In the western part of the country (the former Yemen Arab Republic, previously an independent Imamate), during the 1930-s, Arabic dialects were studied by the Italian scholar Rossi (1938, 1939) in Sanaa and a few other places, and, later on, by the Yemeni scholars Nāmī (1946), Al-Akwa' (1968) and Šarafaddīn (1970). Landberg's publications on

Ḥaḍramawt and Daṭīnah Arabic are still unequaled today and have hardly been updated. Since then, only short studies have been carried out and no study of a similar scale has been achieved in these areas. The opening of Yemen since the 1970-s has allowed linguistic fieldwork to be carried out again and made it possible to supplement the previous studies. The dialects of the western part of the country were the first to be investigated on a larger scale by western researchers such as Diem (1973), Diem and Radenberg (1994), Jastrow (1984), Behnstedt (1985, 1987, 1992, 1993), Bettini (1985), Prochazka (1987). Their studies, in particular the dialectal Atlas of Behnstedt and his monographs, followed later on by those of Al-Selwi (1987) on the medieval Yemeni lexicon, Watson (1993, 1996) on Sanaa, and the publications of a few others such as Naīm-Sanbar (1994) and Simeone-Senelle (1996a, 1996b), have enriched and updated our knowledge of this geographical zone. As for the center, it is only in the late 1980-s, early 1990-s that studies about undescribed dialects were undertaken by a Yemeni researcher Habtoor (1989-90) for the valley of Ġayl Ḥabbān in Šabwa province and by myself, for the mountainous areas of Yāfi‘ and Ḍāla‘ (Vanhove 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1997). Fodor’s (1970) short monograph of Lahej dialect, the only available publication based on the speech of migrants just settled in Egypt, must also be mentioned. Another important source of documentation on Yemeni Arabic are the studies undertaken by Goitein (1960, 1970) and Piamenta (1990-91) about the speech of Yemeni

Jewish migrants in Israel and the manuscripts, written in Hebrew script, they brought with them. For the purpose of this presentation, my unpublished fieldwork data for Aden, Lahej, Abyan, Mukeyras and Ḥaḍramawt areas are also used.

Today, our better knowledge of the Yemeni Arabic varieties, although still fragmented, shows that the dialectal limits do not strictly correspond to the political boundaries of the 20th century.

From the available data, it is possible to draw a typological classification (see map). It is still provisional because of the lack of data in many places, and some of the geographical limits are still vague, particularly in the central part of the country where no extensive study has been achieved yet.

For the former Yemen Arab Republic in the west, Behnstedt (1985) proposed, after Diem (1973) with some slight modifications, a division into 11 main types (with subdivisions), named after geographical zones, but in one instance:

1. Tihāmah dialects
2. *-k* dialects (they include the ‘southern mountain range’ type of Diem)
3. Ḥugarīyah dialects
- 4a. Jabal Wašḥah
- 4b. alMaḥābišah (4a and 4b are transition zones sharing features with both zones 1 and 5a)

- 5a. Northern high plateau
- 5b. Arḥab
- 6. Sanaa and central mountains
- 7. Southern high plateau
- 8. Mārib and alBayḍā' dialects (former south-east dialects)
- 9. Northern high plateau 2 (perhaps a transition zone between 5a, 5b and 11)
- 10. alJawf dialects (former north-east dialects)
- 11. Ṣa'dah.

Since the reunification of Yemen, some of the geographical designations have become inappropriate. Because those of zones 8 and 10 could be misleading, they have been re-labeled here. In a recent work, Behnstedt (2001:23) groups together the Jawf and Mārib dialects (but seemingly not alBayḍā') and considers them as "Bedouin-type dialects intermediate between those of the highlands, North Arabian dialects and those of the south-east of the Arabian peninsula (Ḥaḍramawt, Ḍufār, 'Umān)." So, it seems this classification could be reduced to 10 types.

Furthermore, it is now known that a few of the above mentioned groups extend further east. In particular, the *-k* perfect dialectal zone (zone 2) goes on into Ḍāla' and Yāfi', two areas located in Ḍāla' province, the northern part of Lahej province and the west of Abyan. The same type of dialectal enclave as in the west is found in the city of Ḍāla' itself, i.e. dialects with a final *-tu* in the 1st

person singular perfect, a feature considered as typical of the Ḥuḡarīyah (zone 3), but also found in the city of Ta‘izz for instance. Diem (1973:149) supposed that zones 2a and 3 may “have originally been one connected group, from which the Ḥuḡarīyeh dialects split off in loosing – perhaps owing to a greater accessibility of the region – the common *k*-perfect and adopting instead the *t*-perfect.”

The Tihāmah dialectal zone extends further to the south into Lahej province, but as I have only data for alṢabbēha (= Tōr alBāha), a village situated to the west of Lahej city, it is not mentioned on the map.

The dialect of Mukeyras, situated on the high plateau to the north of Abyan province, near alBayḏā’ city, shows a number of similarities with zone 8, e.g. the article with /m/ (/am/ in Mukeyras, /im/ in alBayḏā’) or the change /*q/ > /g/. But to group them together is still debatable because of the scarce data, the possibility of contact phenomena, and some significant differences, such as the change from pharyngeal /ʕ/ to laryngeal /ʔ/.

In addition to these 11 (or 10) types, it is possible to recognize at least 5 more main dialectal zones, with sub-groupings, exclusively located in the former People’s Democratic Republic. These are:

12. Lahej
13. Aden
14. Ġayl Ḥabbān

15. Abyan (which includes the Daṭīnah dialects described by Landberg)

16. Ḥaḍramawt.

Ḥaḍrami dialects share some features with other varieties spoken in the Arabian Peninsula, in particular the palatalization of /*g/ into /y/ (a feature which anyhow cuts across the dialect boundaries, see Johnstone 1965), but it seems there are enough differences to set them apart as a dialectal entity of its own. It must be pointed out that the extreme diversity of Yemeni dialects prevents, in many instances, mutual understanding. For example, it is not possible for other Yemeni speakers, even the closest neighbors, to understand uneducated Tihāmi, Ṣa‘di or Yāfi‘i speakers, nor are the three dialects mutually understandable. If dialectal continuity and transition zones do exist in some parts of Yemen, this country could be best characterized as a zone of discontinuities.

The above dialectal classification is founded on a number of phonetic, phonological, morphological and, to a lesser extent, lexical isoglosses, some of which have already been mentioned. A few others can be added. Diem (1973), in spite of a lot of common features, sets apart Sanaa and the central mountains from the northern high plateau zone, because, among other things, of the perfect flexion in the 2nd and 3rd persons plural (/sirtain/ and /sārain/ vs /sirtin(na)/ and /sirna/ ‘you, they went’), and from the southern high plateau zone because of the relative pronoun which is /ḍi/ (instead of /allaḍi/ in Sanaa).

The coastal plain of the Tihāmah is characterized by the remarkable ending /-an/ in the perfect 3fsg, the definite article /am-/, the indefinite article /-un/, the negative adverb /dawʔ/ ~ /daʔ/ ~ /duwwayy/ ‘no’ (in the south) close to the Sabaic and Himyaritic forms (an ill-known language which Rabin (1951:2) considers to be “basically an Arabic dialect of the Yemenite type, but with some archaic features, and with a great deal of South-Arabian loanwords.”), etc.

As for central Yemen, tables 1 and 2 hereafter show the main distinctive criteria taken into consideration. Each one is followed by a discussion.

<i>Proto-Arabic</i>	<i>Yāfi’</i> (2)	<i>Dāla’</i> (2)	<i>Dāla’</i> <i>city</i> (3)	<i>Mukeyras</i> (?)	<i>Lahej</i> (12)	<i>Aden</i> (13)	<i>Ḥabbān</i> (14)	<i>Abyan</i> (15)	<i>Ḥaḍramawt</i> (16)
*g	g	g	g	d ^y	g	g	j	g	y (j, ž)
*q	q/ɣ/ʕ	q/ɣ	q	g	q	q	g	q/ɣ (ʕ)	g
*ḡ	ɣ/q/ʔ (ʕ)	ɣ/ʔ	ḡ	ḡ	ɣ/q/ʔ	ḡ	ḡ	ɣ/q/ʔ (ʕ)	ḡ
*ʕ	ʕ (ʔ)	ʕ	ʕ	ʔ (ʕ)	ʕ	ʕ	ʕ	ʕ/ʔ	ʕ
*ḏ	ḏ (ḏ)	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ
*ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ	ḏ (ḏ)	ḏ
interdentals	+	+	+	+	+	–	+	+(f)	+(f)
*k > š	+	–	+	+	+	–	+	+	+
emphasis	+	+	+	+	+	–	+	+/-	+

Table 1: Main consonantal reflexes

(The data in between brackets belong either to a restricted number of sub-groups or to lost variants; slashes indicate phonetic variants).

1. The various degrees of affrication and palatalization for /*g/, so common in western Yemen, are rarer in the center, with the noticeable exceptions of Ḥaḍramawt, Ġayl Ḥabbān and Mukeyras. It seems the south-west of the

country, from the Tihāmah coast up to Abyan, forms a sort of enclave in the Yemen where the reconstructed Semitic velar stop /*g/ was preserved.

2. Unlike in west Yemen (Behnstedt 1985:41), [q], [ɣ] and [ʁ] are not in complementary distribution in the center. All three allophones (only the first two ones for /ġ/) are free variants, often for both /*q/ and /*ġ/.

3. /ġ/ has an additional allophone which it does not share with /q/, i.e. the laryngeal stop [ʔ], or, in Yāfi‘ and Ḍala‘, a velarized [ʔ] whose velar trait

spreads to all the consonants of a word (e.g. [ʔaħaħaħ] for /ġanam/ ‘goat’,

[maʔʔeħ] for /maġreb/ ‘west’ (this ‘emphatic’ characteristic of the laryngeal

stop is not described by Landberg for Abyan and Fodor for Lahej). It is

possible, although not certain, that the voiced velar fricative /ġ/ has undergone a

change to a laryngeal stop, retaining and spreading the velar, i.e. emphatic, trait.

This may have been thwarted by sociolinguistic factors as well as phonetic ones

(e.g. the fricative allophone [ġ] of /q/). Today, [ʔ] is stigmatized. Only the elder

people use it frequently, while it is only retained in a few words by the younger

generations.

4. The [ʔ] variant for /q/ in Abyan, mentioned to me by a Yemeni colleague for

a coastal village, needs to be checked. Whatever the real status of this variant,

phonetically it would not be surprising: Landberg (1901:271) reports, for

Ḥaḍrami and classical Arabic, an alternation between the pharyngeal and the

uvular in the verb meaning ‘can’, /ṭāʕ/ and /ṭāq/ respectively, and an alternation [q] ~ [ʕ] is attested in classical Aramaic script (possibly through an emphatic velar fricative allophone [ɣ] of /q/ (Cohen, 1988:85), for the reflex of the Semitic emphatic fricative lateral phoneme *λ, corresponding to Arabic ḍād (not to *q).

5. As for the coalescence of /ġ/ with /ʕ/ in Abyan, although it is often noted by Landberg a century ago, it seems now to be quickly disappearing, at least in the ten places I surveyed in 1989 and 1991. A trace of the phenomenon is still found in cases of hypercorrection, such as [ɣazaf] for [ʕazaf] ‘wickerwork’.

But, in Jabal Yazīdī, a village in the Yāfi‘ area, the merging of /ġ/ and /ʕ/ into /ʕ/ is still alive, although receding. Another change is still heard in the speech of Beduin women of the hamlet of Tuwa in Abyan: the merging of both /ġ/ and /ʕ/ into the laryngeal stop /ʔ/. Landberg was already pointing to the decline of the pronunciation of /ʕ/ as a laryngeal stop [ʔ]. It is even more true today.

6. Regarding ḍād and ḍā’, the dialects of Abyan and Ġayl Ḥabbān are the only ones to have kept the lateral trait of the Semitic emphatic fricative lateral phoneme *λ (the Arabic ḍād), which has become a velarized /l/ (/ʕaḷam/ ‘bones’). In some cities and villages of the Abyan zone, such as Mudia and Lawdar, it changed into a velarized /r/ (/ʕaṣam/ ‘bones’). Furthermore, Yemen is also the sole country where remnants of a distinction between the two Semitic

phonemes *λ and *ṭ are found. Jastrow (1980:106) interpreted Landberg's indication about Daṭīnah, as a distinction between /l/ and /ḏ/, but it seems to have disappeared today. [ḏ] is only a combinatory variant of /l/, before the resonants /l/, /r/ and /n/: [ḏofər] 'nail'. For Lahej dialect, Fodor's description shows a (non systematic) distinction between an emphatic voiced interdental /ḏ/ and a dental /ḏ/ (/baḏ/ 'some', /ḏalf/ 'claw'), and Behnstedt (1987:5) also mentions it for some sub-groups in the Ṣa'dah zone, with different realizations, respectively /ḏ/ and /ṭ/. It is not possible to find in the literature a single minimal pair to prove their phonological status, but ḏā' is a rare phoneme in Arabic anyway. Yemeni Arabic is also exceptional among Arabic varieties, for the affricated retroflex articulation [tʃ] of ḏād, as mentioned by Behnstedt (1987:5, 136) for some villages in the Ṣa'dah zone. Till then, retroflexion was thought to be only a Cushitic reflex of the old emphatic consonant.

7. The merging of the interdentals with the corresponding dentals is rare in Yemen, and is only mentioned as a regular change for alḤudaydah and Aden. Still, some dialects, which have preserved the interdentals, have fused /ḏ/ and /d/ into /d/, but only in a few words. Such is the case for Ġayl Ḥabbān and Ḍāla', where the relative pronoun is /di/ and not /ḏi/. Other sub-dialects, in Abyan and Ḥaḏramawt, have a fricative free variant [f] for the unvoiced

interdental /t/, which seems to be limited today to a few words, such as [dafīnah] for [daṭīnah] or [falāf] for [ṭalāt] ‘three’.

8. The change /k/ > /š/ concerns only the 2fsg pronominal suffix, and, for part of the *-k* dialects, also the flexion of the perfect 2fsg. It is noteworthy that in central Yemen, only Aden and Ḍāla‘ *-k* dialects have not undergone this quite common form of palatalization, absent only, in the western part of the country, in the Tihāmah, Ḥugarīyah and the southern *-k* dialects (2a) — and in 4 villages of the 5a zone (Behnstedt 1985:82). Therefore Ḍāla‘ *-k* dialects could be grouped with the sub-type of southern *-k* dialects, while the area of Yāfi‘ most probably constitutes an eastern sub-group (2e). Aden, thus, represents the foremost southern point of this morpho-phonetic retention.

10. Although not mentioned by previous authors, the loss of the emphatic trait is also a characteristic of the old Adeni dialect. But it is rapidly receding and it is only heard today in the speech of old residents of Crater, the city center, mainly old women. In Yāfi‘, as in Abyan, it is also a regressive feature, as already noticed by Landberg for Daṭīnah, but emphasis can still be very light, or even non-existent, in the speech of old women.

	<i>Yāfi‘</i> (2)	<i>Ḍāla‘</i> (2)	<i>Ḍāla‘</i> <i>city</i> (3)	<i>Mukey- ras</i> (?)	<i>Lahej</i> (12)	<i>Aden</i> (13)	<i>Ḥabbān</i> (14)	<i>Abyan</i> (15)	<i>Ḥaḍram- awt</i> (16)
pr. 1 sg m / f	ana/ ani	ʔana/ ʔani	ana/ ani	ana	ʔana/ ʔani	ana	ʔana	ana	ana/ ani
pr. 1 pl	raḥna	(raḥna)	C1 = n	C1 = n	C1 = n	C1 = n	C1 = n	laḥna (ḥna)	C1 = n
impft. 1 pl	n-	n-	n-	?	n-	n-	l-	l- (n-)	n-
impft. C3 = w/y		yēbək							
impft. 2fpl 3mpl	-īn -ūn	-ī: -ū:	-ī -ū	? ?	? -ū	-ī -u	-īn -ūn	-ī/-īn -ū/-ūn	-in -ūn
pft. 1, 2 sg & pl	-k	-k	-tu	-t	-t	-t	-t	-t	-t
pft. 3 fsg	-ah	-ah	-ah	-vt	-at	-at	-vt	-vt	-vt
pft. 3msg C2 = C3		-iy	-a						
gender diff. in pl verbs	+	+	+	+	-	-	-	+	+
progressive particle	(bi-)	ya-/ta-/ qa-	la-	?	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
article	al-	al-	al-	am-	al-	al-	al-	am-/ um-	al-

Table 2: Morphological features

(The data in between brackets belong to a restricted number of sub-groups; slashes indicate sub-variants within the same zone — except in the second line).

1. The distinction between a masculine and a feminine form in the 1st independent pronoun, /ana/ vs /ani/, quite common in the west (Behnstedt 1985:71), is also found in central Yemen, in a zone which continues the western one. It is only marginal in Ḥaḍramawt.

2. The 1st person plural independent pronoun in central Yemen presents a unique feature, i.e. the change of the initial nasal /n/ to the resonants /l/ or /r/: /laḥna/, in part of Abyan, as already noted by Landberg, or /raḥna/ in Yāfi‘ and part of Ḍāla‘. /raḥna/ is not found in the other -k dialects of western Yemen.

3. The change of resonants has also affected the imperfect 1pl, but only for /l/, in part of Abyan dialects (/lənʃa/ ‘we forget’) and in Ġayl Ḥabbān (/lilʃab/ ‘we play’), a zone which has not undergone the change in the independent pronoun.
4. Yemen has both the vocalic and the nasal endings in the imperfect 2 and 3pl. In the west, the nasal ending is almost entirely restricted to north and center Tihāmah. In the center, it is found in Yāfi‘, Ġayl Ḥabbān, part of Abyan and Ḥaḍramawt. It is not sure that the geographical variant of Ḍāla‘, [-ĩ:] and [-ũ:], are reflexes of a nasal consonant; it could be a pausal nasalization quite common in the southern *-k* dialects (with the addition of [ŋ], Behnstedt, 1985:57).
5. The dialect of Gihaf, in Ḍāla‘, has another remarkable peculiarity in the form of the imperfect of verbs with a third semi-vowel /y/. It is restructured on the pattern of verbs with a first semi-vowel /w/ (with a different long vowel): /yēbək/ ‘he weeps’. Unique in Arabic, this analogical formation is known in Semitic, namely in Hebrew (Gesenius, 1910:211).
6. The *-k* perfect is typical of the high mountain range of Yemen. They share this feature with Himyaritic, which was spoken in the same mountainous area, and south-Semitic languages (south-Arabian sticks, Modern South-Arabian languages, Afro-Semitic). A substrate influence is thus possible.

7. In central Yemen, the extension of the /-ah/ ending in the perfect 3 fsg, analogical to the nominal feminine ending, directly continues the zone of southern *-k* dialects and Ḥuḡarīyah dialects of western Yemen.
8. The vocalic ending in the perfect 3 msg for geminate verbs, typical of Tchadic and Sudanese Arabic, is also found sporadically in Yemen, mainly in Northern Tihāmāh. Behnstedt (1985:136) notes either /-a/, /-ī/ or /-ē/. In central Yemen, both Ḍāla‘ city and Ḍāla‘ share this feature, respectively with /-a/ and /-iy/: /ḥabba/ ‘he loved’, /šelliy/ ‘he took’.
9. The non distinction of gender in the plural verbal forms is rather rare in Yemen. In the west, it is mainly restricted to the Tihāmāh; in the center, three dialectal zones are concerned: Lahej, Aden and Ġayl Ḥabbān.
10. Central Yemen seems to use few particles to express the progressive, five only, as against some ten in the west, and they are limited to Ḍāla‘ city, Ḍāla‘ and Yāfi‘. But further research is needed. Two of the particles, /la-/ and /bi-/, are also used in the west, but /bi-/ is not frequent in most Yāfi‘i dialects, while it has become an obligatory marker of the imperfect (not of the progressive anymore) in the sub-variety of Jabal Yazīdī. Particles /ya-/, /ta-/ and /qa-/, particular to central Yemen, are geographical variants in the Ḍāla‘ zone.
11. The definite article with /m/ is used in a few areas in both western and central Yemen, and nowhere does it assimilate to any initial consonant of the

following noun: /am-ṣanīni/ ‘the little finger’ (Abyan). It is now receding.

Landberg (1909:286) for Upper ‘Awlaqī and Marxah in Abyan, and Behnstedt (1987) for the area of Ṣa‘dah, also mention an article /en-/ or /an-/, which corresponds to the old Himyaritic article.

12. Another morphological feature, not mentioned in table 2, is worth referring to, i.e. the existence of an internal passive for verbs of measure 1. It is more or less productive according to the dialect, but it is still quite common all over Yemen.

As for the lexicon, Yemeni dialects present a lot of peculiarities which can be found in the dictionaries mentioned in the bibliography. Some of them are traces of Himyaritic (of which very little is known) or of old South-Arabian languages, as already mentioned for /dawʔ/ ‘no’. For others, the form and/or the meaning are unknown in other Arabic varieties, e.g. /tqambas/ ‘sit down’ (Ṣa‘dah, Yāfi‘), /ḥusan/ ‘cat’ (Yāfi‘). There are also interesting cases of grammaticalization towards prepositions and adverbs: (Yāfi‘): /dōr/ ‘next to’ (< DWR), /rūs/ ‘on’ (< RʔS), /tī/ ‘like, as’ (< deictic), /ʔublah/ ‘together’ (cp. classical Arabic /ʔabala/ ‘to be numerous (camel)’).

Syntactic studies, apart from Watson (1993) for Sanaa dialect (→ lemma **), are still rare and fragmentary. Studies about negation, conditional and

concessive sentences, discourse particles and focalization in the Yāfi‘i dialects can be found in Vanhove (1996a, 1996b, 2000, 2002a) and for negation and verbs of movement in the Tihāmah dialects in Simeone-Senelle (1996a, 1996b). Landberg’s studies on Ḥaḍramawt and Daṭīnah contain also a number of interesting, although unorganized, observations in various syntactic domains.

As elsewhere in the Arab world, Yemeni dialects are submitted to a process of leveling, for various social reasons. So far, no systematic study of the linguistic outcomes of social changes has been undertaken, so, in addition to the previous scattered remarks, the following general comment is mainly based on my own observations in the central part of the country (Vanhove 1997, 2002b). Among the phonetic and morphological characteristics discussed above, only three features seem to resist even when speakers migrate to different places: the alternation [q] ~ [ɣ] for both /q/ and /ġ/ in Yāfi‘ and Abyan, the feminine 1st pronoun /ani/, and the presence or absence of gender opposition in verbal plural. Even the widespread /k/ > /š/ or the fusion of the interdental with the corresponding dental are slowly receding among educated people. On the whole, men are more likely to change their speech towards more koinic forms than women, but young educated women are also very sensitive, as is usually the case, to more ‘modern’ or ‘fashionable’ forms. In Yemen, the problem is to know how to characterize the koinè (or koinè-s). It seems the capital city Sanaa

is not a center of attraction, because of its too many peculiarities which sets it apart from any version of Modern Standard Arabic. Furthermore the influence of Egyptian Arabic is more limited than it was once thought. In the center of the country, province capitals, such as Aden or Mukalla, tend to be prestigious models but their sociolinguistic situation is quite complex and ill-known. In spite of the leveling process, Yemen is still a very conservative and fascinating dialectal area where a lot remains to be done and discovered.

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