An Investigation into the Use of Endangered Languages in Different Domains in the Southern Society of Oman

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to investigate the languages used in various domains (different settings) in the southern society of Oman and explores the possibility to what extent these languages will be preserved in the future. A number of 40 people from different age groups from the southern Omani society were involved in this study who speak Arabic, Jibbali, and Mehri. Through using a questionnaire and following a thematic analysis, the findings revealed that both Jibbali and Mehri are used in informal domains within most age groups. Some younger participants were found to already be shifting their language use towards Arabic, even with their family and friends, which is an indication of a gradual shift from these minority languages to Arabic in the southern community which are unlikely to be maintained. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Omani government take proactive actions to protect minority languages in Oman as encouraging and enabling their use in classrooms, as well as by creating linguistic corpora of these languages that can be used as learning resources.*

KEYWORDS: Oman, Minority languages, Endangered languages, Jibbali, Mehri, Arabic.

INTRODUCTION

Research on multilingual communities has captured the attention of many sociolinguists. Sebba (2011: 445) defines societal multilingualism as the existence of two or more languages 'at a level of social organization beyond the individual or nuclear family'. Reasons behind the emergence of multilingual societies are various and complex; however, immigration, colonialism and mobility are some of the main factors (Stavans and Hoffmann, 2015). One of these multilingual societies is the Southern Omani society. Oman is a country in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula, and homeland to some minority languages such as Jibbali and Mehri, which are spoken in the south. Although these languages are used by some daily, they are viewed as endangered (AlJahdhami, 2015).

The current study aims to investigate the languages used in different domains in the southern society of Oman and explores how likely they are to be maintained in future. First, some relevant studies related to multilingualism are explored. Then, the methodology (study design, participant selection and data collection) is presented. Finally, findings from the questionnaire method employed are analysed before being discussed in light of current literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diglossia

In many countries around the world, it is considered the norm for individuals to speak multiple languages for different purposes in different contexts; one language or more at home, another in the town, and another perhaps for communication with the international world (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2014). An example for this is presented by the Indian sociolinguistic, Mohanty, who states he uses Oriya at home while English at his work, Bengali when communicating with the housekeepers and Sanskrit when practising his religion (2006, cited in Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2014). Those different settings are called *domains,* defined as 'the social and physical setting in which speakers find themselves' (Meyerhoff, 2011: 121). The use of different languages in different domains within a community is described as *diglossia.*

Diglossia was first identified by Ferguson (1959), who used the term to refer to the use of two or more varieties of the same language in different contextual situations, each having its own functions. He proposed the term 'high' variety (H) (high status) and 'low' variety (L) (low status) to distinguish languages used in different domains: there are situations where H is used (e.g, educational institutions), and others where L is used (e.g., home) (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2014). In Oman, standard Arabic (H) is used in formal domains such as university lectures and the media, while colloquial Arabic (L) is used with family and friends (Al-Issa, 2020). However, Fishman (1972) broadened Ferguson's concept of diglossia to involve not only varieties of language, but actual languages and styles as well. An example for this can be seen in Tunisia, where standard Arabic and French are H, and Tunisian Arabic is L (Romaine, 2001). Although the notion of diglossia has been useful in the study of multilingualism in a variety of societies, its legitimacy as a linguistic practise has been questioned (Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2014); Albirini (2011) revealed that speakers code swich between standard Arabic and dialectal Arabic in the same context, which contradicts Ferguson's concept of diglossia.

Factors Affecting Language Choice

Fishman (1965) and Holmes (2013) state there are three main factors that influence language choice in speech communities in a particular domain. Firstly, the interlocutor's religion, sex, age and ethnicity are influential factors. In their study on the influence of gender and ethnicity on 498 young Malaysians from different ethnicities, Granhemat and Abdullah (2017) found that ethnicity was a major determinant in language choice more than gender. Secondly, the setting – where the conversation takes place. Finally, topic, given that 'some topics are somehow handled better in one language than another' (Fishman, 1965: 71). Holmes (2013) highlights that in some countries, which predominantly use English in education, students prefer to speak in English when discussing their university subjects. Bhatia and Ritchie (2012) also noted that there are situations where relationships become an even more influential factor, despite the setting. For example, they assert that some students may speak to each other in Quechua outside of the school context, yet continue to speak it *inside* school, when they are expected to speak Spanish; this suggests in some scenarios, individuals' relationships dictate language use rather than the setting. Yet there are other situations where setting takes priority over relationships; minority language speakers of Gujarati in the UK may speak English in most domains because the setting they are in requires the use of English in order to be understood (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2012).

Furthermore, Wardhaugh and Fuller (2014: 98) noted that 'speech accommodation' can be one factor of language choice, as 'speakers sometimes try to accommodate to the expectations that others have of them when they speak' and they shift to using another code/style to be socially accepted in a group.

Language Shift and Maintenance
Individuals' language choices, made on a daily basis in multilingual communities, have an impact on the longevity of languages in the long-term. Language shift can happen when bilingualism is on course to eventually become monolingual, generating a new, hybrid language (Romaine, 2001). Taking the same example of Gujarati speakers in the UK, in English-speaking countries such as England and Australia, speaking fluent English is a sign of successful assimilation; consequently, immigrant families of Gujarati gradually shift from using their native language to using English, which means over time they may lose their mother tongue in two to three generations (Holmes, 2013: 54). Moreover, political, economic and social changes can occur within speech communities, which may also contribute to language shift. For example, Farsi is the dominant, official language in all domains in Iran, which threatens minority languages as it enables limited opportunities for minority languages to be practised outside of formal domains (Holmes, 2013).

Multilingualism in Oman
Oman is a multilingual country embracing Indo-Iranian languages (e.g., Balochi), Modern South Arabian languages (e.g., Jibbali) and Bantu languages (e.g., Swahili). Some of these languages, such as Balochi, have emerged because of political and historical events, such as when the Portuguese occupied the capital of Oman, Muscat, for around 160 years, leading to the Balochi soldiers from Iran helping to expel the Portuguese (Al-Issa, 2020). This event resulted in many of these soldiers inhabiting parts of Oman, leading to the existence of various bilingual communities that speak both Arabic and Balochi. Furthermore, historically, trade operations between Oman and Africa, especially Zanzibar, resulted in the emergence of Bantu languages such as Swahili in Oman. Those languages are mainly used in domestic domains, alongside Arabic (AlJahdhami, 2015).

Among these multilingual communities is the Dhofari society. Dhofar is a governorate in the south of Oman, where people speak tribal languages: Jibbali and Mehri alongside Arabic. Jibbali is a Semitic language (Rubin, 2014), and literally means 'the language of mountain' (Rubin, 2014). It does not have a written form and has various distinct pronunciations that do not exist in Arabic (Al-Issa, 2020). Mehri is another Semitic language spoken within the same society that is originally spoken in the Al-Mahrah governorate in Yemen, which borders the southern part of Oman (Rubin, 2010). Both languages have their own dialects that differ from one region to another within the Dhofari society (Rubin, 2010). According to AlJahdhami (2015, cited in Al-Issa, 2020), the number of Jibbali speakers is approximately 55,000 and the number of Mehri speakers around 77,000. Nevertheless, the UNESCO (2010) classified those languages as being endangered due to the decreasing number of their speakers and the lack of desire from younger generations to learn those languages. Yet despite their endangered status, there is no study that has examined the use of those languages in different domains in the southern society of Oman. The most recent research that shed light on the minority languages in Oman was conducted by AlJahdhami (2015). However, the aim of this paper was only to provide brief information about the minority languages in Oman, the estimated number of their speakers, and how likely they will be endangered. Thus, this study is not wholly relevant to the current paper. Other researchers, however, have investigated the grammatical structures of the Jibbali (Al-Kathiri and Dufour, 2020; Rubin, 2014, 2015) and Mehri (Al-Qumairi, Taha and Arifin, 2020; Rubin, 2010, 2011,

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2018) languages. Thus, there is no research investigating the use and spread of these languages within the southern Omani community – a gap that needs to be filled if their use in future is to be predicted and, ultimately, preserved. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to the field of linguistics in Oman by focusing specifically on two prominent (if endangered) minority languages within southern Oman: Jibbali and Mehri. As a result, investigating this issue leads to the following questions:

- In what domains are different languages used in southern Oman?
- How likely is it that those languages will be maintained/spoken in the future?

Uncovering the answers to these questions will help facilitate a greater understanding of the dynamics of these languages and their use within twenty-first century southern Omani society. This understanding will consequently assist the Omani government to safeguard the use of these languages by putting in place certain practices, plans and interventions to preserve and promote the use of these languages, which is inextricably linked to their speakers' identity (Thomason, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

For the purpose of this study, a questionnaire was used to collect data in a short time and enable the researcher to access as many participants as possible (Holmes and Hazen, 2013). The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, so it could be sent electronically through WhatsApp due to the geographical distance between the participants and the researcher. The questionnaire items were written adopting Fishman's (1972) domains of language use model (cited in Holmes 2013, see Appendix 1, Table 1). The questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was divided into three sections: 1) demographic information, such as gender, age and sex; 2) five open-ended questions about the languages the participant spoke in different domains; and 3) two open-ended questions aiming to explore the participants' attitudes regarding the maintenance of the concerned languages.

However, some domains suggested by Fishman (1972) have been slightly modified to meet the cultural background of the participants (see Appendix 1, Table 2). The questionnaire was written in Arabic so participants could easily respond to the questions. Data received from Google Forms were then coded in Excel and analysed using descriptive statistics.

Participants

Only southern Omanis were chosen as participants in this study since the study's focus is on the southern Omani society. The questionnaire was sent to my network on WhatsApp to different age groups and genders. A potential issue was the difficulty of reaching the older generation, who may be less familiar with using mobile phones to respond to questionnaires – some may even be illiterate; therefore, a contact was selected that had access to a pool of older participants that she knows personally from the region. This contact explained the aim of the study to gather interest and consent, and to read the questions out for participants to answer. For confidentiality and ethical purposes, all participants' consent was required. 40 respondents in total were collected: 10 participants (5 males and 5 females) from each group age.
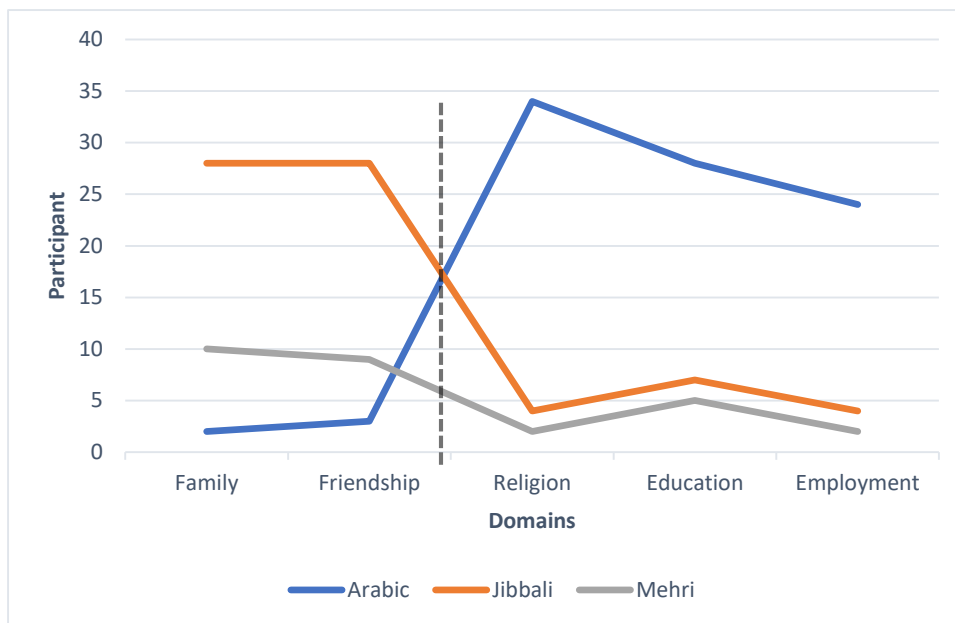
Figure 1. Domains of Language Use in Omani Southern Society

FINDINGS

The first objective of this study was to examine how these languages are used in different domains. As shown in figure 1, there has been a notable switch in the use of Arabic, from informal domains (friendship and family domains) to formal domains (employment, education and religion). Arabic is more dominant in formal domains, while Jibbali and Mehri are used in informal domains.

The figures below reveal that the participants use of languages in different domains differs according to age group.
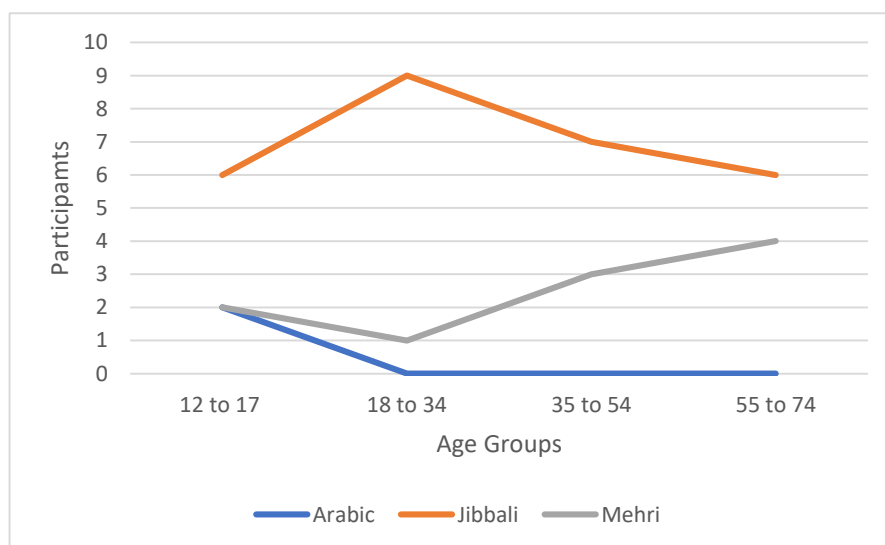

Figure 2. Language Use in Family Domain

As the results show in figure 2, Jibbali appears to dominate the family domain compared to Arabic and Mehri. Participants aged between mid-thirties to mid-seventies do not appear to use Arabic when speaking with their families, which indicates that tribal languages are still in use and exposed to their children. Interestingly, the only two participants that speak Arabic with their families were in age group 12-17, which indicates there might be a gradual shift to Arabic.
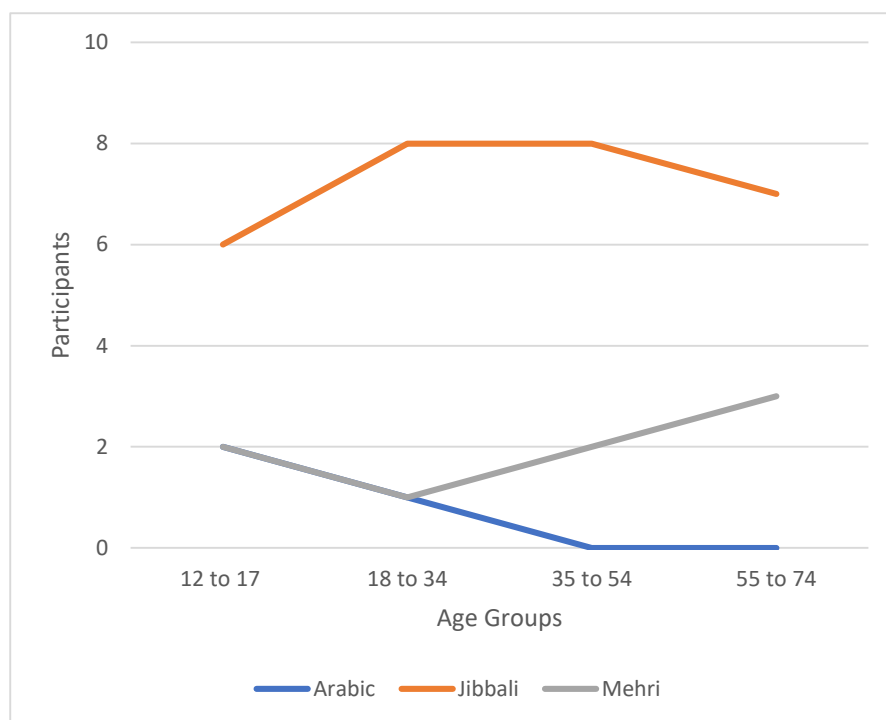

Figure 3. Language Use in Friendship Domain

Figure 3 reveals that Jibbali also appears to dominate the friendship domain. The group age 12-17 still use Jibbali with their friends, although two participants from the same group use Arabic and this is maybe they cannot speak Jibbali nor Mehri. Surprisingly, there was a minor increase in Arabic users in the age group 18 to 34, and a slight decrease in Mehri users after the age of 34, resulting in an increase of Jibbali use. These switches (from Mehri to Jibbali and Jibbali to Arabic) may be because participants have friends from different backgrounds, and they attempt to accommodate to each other. Both age groups 35-54 and 55-74 do not use Arabic in informal domains.
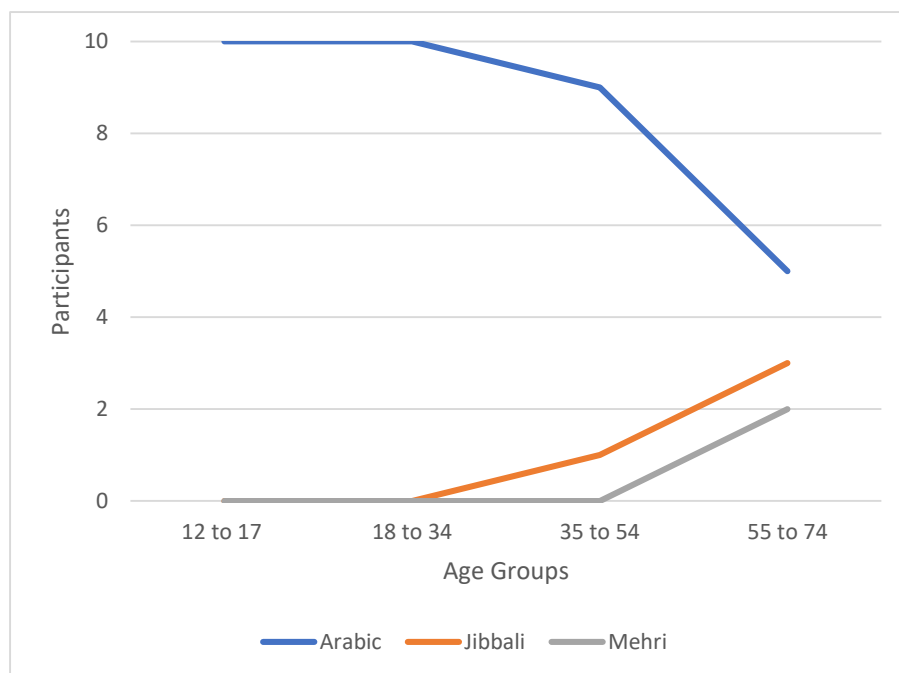
Figure 4. Language Use in Religion Domain

A drastic change in the results is shown in figure 4, revealing that both age groups 12-17 and 18-34 do not use Jibbali nor Mehri in their religious practices. This may be because religious topics are better discussed in Arabic as religious resources (e.g., the Quran) are written in Arabic. However, the use of Arabic starts to decline among the older generation, with half of all 55-74 year-olds relying on Jibbali or Mehri in their religious practices.

Figure 5. Language Use in Education Domain

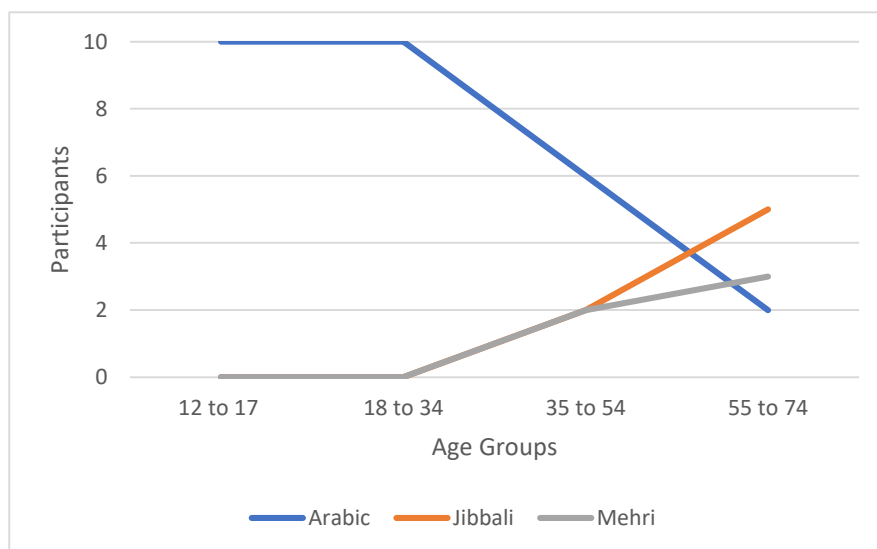According to figure 5 the first two age groups (12-17 and 18-34) only use Arabic in educational domains, as do the majority of participants in the age group 35-54; however, unlike the religion domain, there is a minor increase in the use of Jibbali and Mehri within the age group 35-54. This might be because this age group is the second generation to attend schools after the establishment of modern Oman in 1970, as speaking Arabic then was not mandatory. Moreover, Arabic is least used within the age group of 55-74 in the education domain, potentially because this age group did not complete their education.
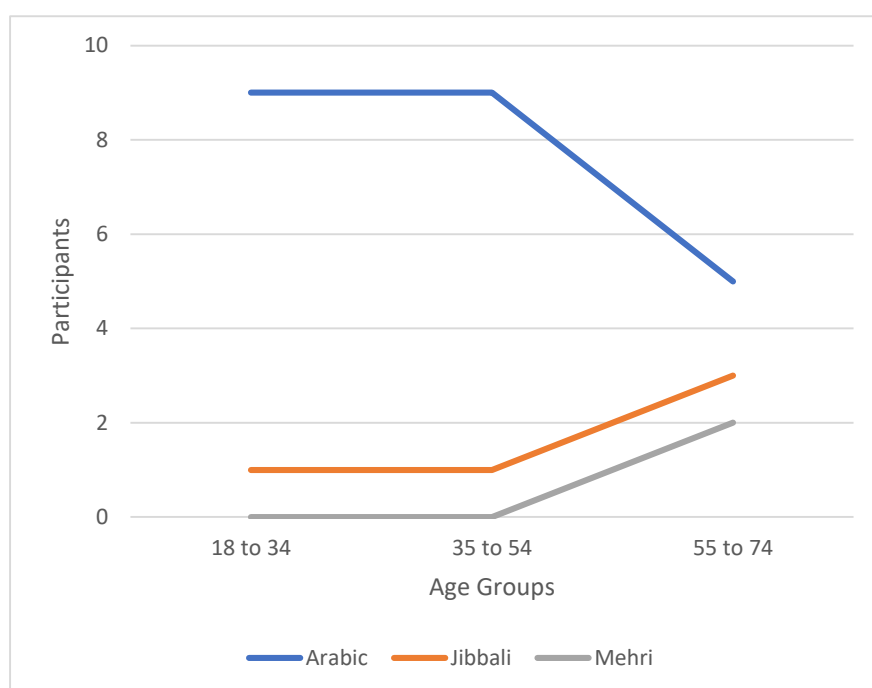

Figure 6. Language Use in Employment Domain

The age group 12-17 was not considered regarding the findings of the employment domain, given it is unlikely they were in employment. The results show that Arabic dominates both age groups 18-34 and 35-54, with limited use of Jibbali and no use of Mehri in those age groups.

The findings from the older age group were similar to that of the religion domain, where approximately half of participants use Arabic.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis, the participant's responses regarding their attitudes towards their tribal languages were grouped into various themes. One theme found was that the status of Arabic as the official language, leading participants to perceive tribal languages as unimportant given they do not have the power to provide educational and job opportunities, like Arabic does. One participant from the age range 18-34 claimed: 'Arabic has been the most important factor to get education and job opportunities'. One participant viewed tribal languages as having no influence over their practical life; the participant aged from 35-54 stated: '…it is not necessary to teach our children our tribal languages because they do not have any impact on our academic and work life as Arabic does'.

Another participant from the 35-45-year-old age bracket believed that school and media are the predominant factors leading to young people speaking Arabic more than their tribal languages; he reported: 'as we have seen from today's generation, they use Arabic more than Jibbali and Mehri and this can be due to the impact of school and media as Arabic is officially used in those places'.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that speaking Jibbali and Mehri in a variety of domains may not be maintained and may gradually undergo a shift to Arabic within the next generations; this is indicated by the fact that two participants aged 12-17 already speak Arabic even in informal domains. This may be because Arabic dominates the education domain, as all subjects in Omani schools are taught in Arabic (Al-Issa, 2020). According to Fishman (2006: 320), education is 'a very useful and highly irreversible language-shift mechanism'; therefore, education permits language to infiltrate a society (Al-Issa, 2020). Additionally, Holmes (2013) highlights that education can be a contributing factor to language maintenance. As one participant reported, younger generations speak Arabic more than their tribal given that they spend at least a quarter of their day (if not more) learning different subjects in Arabic. AlJahdhami (2015) suggests that younger generations are less motivated to learn minority languages in Oman as they are heavily exposed to Arabic. This will lead to an overall decrease in the total number of speakers of those languages.

Media is another factor that can hinder the process of maintaining languages (Holmes, 2013), as all documentary programmes, films and news on mainstream media in Oman are presented in standard or colloquial Arabic, making it more dominant (Al-Issa); therefore, there is less exposure of Jibbali and Mehri to younger generations, who are responsible for the future maintenance of these languages. Cunliffe (2019) emphasised that social media such as WhatsApp can play a role in maintaining minority languages because they are used in speakers' everyday lives. Nevertheless, if a minority language is not utilized in social media, the language can be perceived as 'increasingly anachronistic and irrelevant' amongst young people (UNESCO, 2003, cited in Cunliffe, 2019: 452), confirming AlJahdhami's (2015) view that the younger generations lack motivation to speak their ethnic languages as they are viewed as obsolete.

Moreover, AlJahdhami (2015: 106) highlighted that some parents do not teach their children their ethnic languages so that 'their children harness the Arab identity instead of the ethnic group identity'. As revealed in this study, it can be surmised that even adults of Jibbali and Mehri are not keen to maintain their tribal languages by teaching them to their children. As one participant claimed, Jibbali and Mehri are not perceived to have any impact on their educational life, leading to negative attitudes towards these languages. Holmes (2013) emphasised that when minority language speakers hold positive attitudes towards their language and perceive it as being important, the language is likely to be maintained for longer. Since the participants in this study appeared to hold predominantly negative attitudes, their tribal languages are likely to be endangered.

The reason for some minority language speakers in Oman shifting towards speaking Arabic is that Arabic is the language most often required to integrate into the wider community and to enable individuals to access education and, most crucially, a job (AlJahdhami, 2015). This is similar to one of the participant's responses, who commented that Arabic is important for providing job opportunities. Being able to speak good Arabic may be a sign of a well-educated individual. As a

result, their priority was to master Arabic to gain better life opportunities, which naturally impacts on the preservation of minority languages.

CONCLUSION

The current paper presented an overview of multilingualism and examined the languages used in southern Omani society in different domains through conducting a questionnaire involving Omani participants from different age groups. It was found both Jibbali and Mehri are used in informal domains within most age groups; however, some younger participants were found to already be shifting their language use towards Arabic, even with their family and friends, which indicates a gradual shift to Arabic in the southern community. It appears that these minority languages are unlikely to be maintained, as firstly most participants held negative attitudes towards maintaining their tribal languages, asserting that these languages would not help them gain educational and job opportunities in the same way as Arabic. Secondly, it was found that Arabic dominates the educational domain, which is deemed to be an important factor through which a language can be either maintained or lost. Jibbali and Mehri are not being taught in southern Omani schools, so they are likely not to be maintained, since participants are exposed only to Arabic in schools.

Implications and Recommendations
It is recommended that the Omani government should take active steps to preserve minority languages in Oman. This can be achieved through allowing and promoting their usage in schools and establishing linguistic corpora of these languages to be documented and referred to as a learning resource. Additionally, these languages could be integrated in the Omani media. For instance, some news, films and TV shows can be presented in Jibbali and/or Mehri to promote them in society and motivate younger people to speak them.

Limitations and Future Research
This study has uncovered some important findings; yet there are limitations to the study. These findings cannot be generalised to all southern Omani citizens, as the sample of the study was limited; therefore, a larger sample of participants is recommended in further research. Additionally, this study was conducted using only a questionnaire; in future, participants could be interviewed to explore their attitudes regarding their languages more fully, enabling participants to talk freely about the topic and allowing the researcher to expand/follow-up on any issues discussed. Moreover, the use of inferential statistics would have been beneficial to help assess how likely or not the results obtained were due to chance factors.

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Appendix (1)

Domain	Addressee	Setting	Topic	Variety/code
Family	Parent	Home	Planning a family party	
Friendship	Friend	beach	How to play beach tennis	
Religion	priest	church	Choosing the Sunday liturgy	
Education	Teacher	school	Solving a maths problem	
Employment	Employer	workplace	Applying for a promotion	

Table (1) Fishman's domain of language use

Domain	Addressee	Setting	Topic	code
Family	Parent	Home	Planning for a birthday party	
Friendship	Friend	Coffee shop	Daily routine	
Religion	Imam	Mosque	Quran interpretations	
Education	Teacher	school	Solving a maths problem	
Employment	Employer	workplace	Job performance report	

Table (2) The adopted Fishman's domain of language use

Appendix 2 (A)
Questionnaire

Section One: Demographical Information

Your Age group: 12-17 ☐   18-34 ☐   35-54 ☐   55-75 ☐
Gender: Female ☐   male ☐

Section Two: Language Use

1. What language/s do you use when speaking with your family at home? (e.g. planning for a birthday party).
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2. What language/s do you use when speaking with your friends at a coffee shop? (e.g. daily routines).
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3. What language/s do you use when speaking with the Imam in the Masjed (mosque) about religion matters? (e.g. Islamic rules, Quran interpretations).
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4. What language/s do you use when speaking with your teacher at school? (e.g. to solve a mathematical equation).
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5. What language/s do you use when speaking with your boss at work? (e.g. when you discuss about your performance report)
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6. From your point of view, how likely is these languages will be spoken in the future?
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7. Do you think it is important to ensure that these languages are passed on to future generations? (please provide reasons for your answer)
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Thank you for your participation ^_^

Appendix 3: Study Results

Domains	Age Group	Languages		
		Arabic	**Jibbali**	**Mehri**
Family	12 to 17	2	6	2
	18 to 34	0	9	1
	35 to 54	0	7	3
	55 to 74	0	6	4
Friendship	12 to 17	2	6	2
	18 to 34	1	8	1
	35 to 54	0	8	2
	55 to 74	0	7	3
Religion	12 to 17	10	0	0
	18 to 34	10	0	0
	35 to 54	9	1	0
	55 to 74	5	3	2
Education	12 to 17	10	0	0
	18 to 34	10	0	0
	35 to 54	6	2	2
	55 to 74	2	5	3
Employment	18 to 34	9	1	0
	35 to 54	9	1	0
	55 to 74	5	3	2