



Safeguarding the Voices of Ras Al Khaimah Through Language Documentation

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Executive Summary

Ras Al Khaimah serves as a key meeting point for encountering two Arabic dialects: Shihhi Arabic and Gulf Arabic. Shihhi Arabic is generally not understood by most Emiratis, leading some Shihhi Arabic speakers to adjust their speech or adopt Gulf Arabic as their everyday language. In time, adjusted speech patterns can lead to the assimilation of one dialect into another and the loss of diverse forms of Arabic. Comparing previous scholarly literature with new evidence from 30 interviews with Emiratis and Omanis, this study demonstrates ongoing dynamic changes in Ras Al Khaimah's Shihhi Arabic dialects. Furthermore, analysis of UNESCO criteria shows that documentation of Shihhi Arabic is in a "fragmentary" state. Research in its current state only describes Shihhi Arabic in partial detail. Shihhi Arabic in Ras Al Khaimah is a crucial facet of the Emirati linguistic landscape and documenting it will benefit Emiratis by facilitating the preservation of cultural knowledge. This policy paper concludes with policy recommendations to help preserve Shihhi Arabic and safeguard Ras Al Khaimah's cultural

Introduction

In 2014, I moved to the Gulf region and began studying Standard Arabic at Qatar University. After two years, I was privileged with another opportunity to pursue an intensive master's degree program in descriptive linguistics at the University of North Dakota. It was during that time that I noticed the differences within Gulf Arabic, and my interest in the language began to deepen. Gulf Arabic, Omani Arabic, and Shihhi Arabic are much more than "accents," and under the wider umbrella of Arabic, each can justifiably be described as its own language (Eberhard et al., 2020).

Over time, the phrase *al-lugha al-'arabiya bahar*, which translates to "the Arabic language is an ocean", has become clearer to me. Despite my new understanding

of the depth and complexities of Classical Arabic, the breadth and intricacies of modern Arabic dialects, and my intensive study of the language, I still do not understand all dialects of Arabic. Moreover, having learned one dialect does not mean I understand others. Yet my continuous struggle and dedication to maintain fluency in Arabic has led my curiosity into deeper inquiry. Exploring the diversity of spoken Arabic reveals its richness but also helps explain why it is so rarely studied in academic research.

Shihhi Arabic is an understudied dialect. In comparing it with other Arabic dialects more widely integrated in media and language sciences, it appears to be less understood by other Arabs. This observation became the basis of my doctoral research project, which aimed to compare the spoken Arabic dialects of the Northern Emirates.¹

¹ The Northern Emirates here includes Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Ras Al Khaimah, and Fujairah.

I conducted a detailed comparison by recording a specimen of each dialect and checking each recording for a number of language features, which are outlined in linguistic research (‘Ubayd, 2013; Shockley, 2024). This comparison will enhance our scientific understanding of the characteristics that differentiate Shihhi Arabic from other Arabic dialects, as well as the common features they share. Understanding the differences in dialects of spoken Arabic can provide an indispensable window into Arabian history, society, and culture.

Therefore, to contribute to our understanding of Shihhi Arabic, this policy paper is based on data gathered through a dialect survey conducted in the Northern Emirates and in Musandam, Oman, between January 2023 and February 2024. After further contextualizing Shihhi Arabic among the other Arabic dialects of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I present evidence that certain Shihhi Arabic dialects are changing. I utilize the UNESCO criteria for language vitality to assess these changes and conclude with policy recommendations which would benefit speakers of Shihhi Arabic by preserving an important element of Emirati heritage.

Shihhi Arabic: An Understudied Dialect

Shihhi Arabic is a diverse cluster of Arabic dialects and is specifically spoken in northern Ras Al Khaimah and the neighboring Musandam, Oman (Shockley, 2024). Shihhi Arabic is not mutually intelligible with the Arabic dialects spoken by most Emiratis and Omanis; this means that if people from both groups speak their native dialects without modification, they will not be able to understand each other. However, evidence from this research suggests that some Shihhi Arabic speakers are gradually shifting from their own speech patterns and instead integrating speech patterns that are mostly used in Gulf Arabic. Interviews with Shihhi Arabic speakers demonstrate clearly that most tend to find work in urban settings where Gulf Arabic is the dialect of choice, causing them to shift from Shihhi Arabic to Gulf Arabic.

According to Eberhard et al. (2020), Shihhi Arabic is classified as a “stable” language. However, there is evidence that Shihhi Arabic is facing threats to its stability. Interviews with Shihhi speakers in Ras Al

Khaimah point to concerns on the lack of language stability. Evidence suggests a potential threat due to language change (i.e., changes in Shihhi Arabic itself) and language shift (i.e., shifting to Gulf Arabic or another language; see Holmes & Wilson, 2022).

According to global language trends, like global biodiversity, language diversity is also under threat (Bromham et al., 2022). A UNESCO expert group reported that more than half of the world’s languages are losing speakers (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2) and predictions suggest that the rate of language loss will triple over the next 40 years (Bromham et al., 2022). Under the language frameworks developed by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, the linguistic documentation of Shihhi Arabic could be rated as “fragmentary”, a rating of 2 out of 5, where 1 means “inadequate” and 5 means “superlative” (UNESCO, 2003, p.16). The criteria for this rating is discussed in the next section.

To preserve an integral piece of Ras Al Khaimah’s cultural knowledge, it is imperative to begin formally documenting Shihhi Arabic, including its vocabulary, style, storytelling, structure and grammar. Efforts to prevent future endangerment and to safeguard the language from extinction (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2) require developing a public and accessible record of Shihhi Arabic and enhancing the social value of its speakers.

Background of Gulf Arabic and Shihhi Arabic

Linguists understand that the Arabic language is a vast spectrum that consists of various groups of dialects (Eberhard et al., 2020; Hammarström et al., 2023). For example, it is common knowledge that the Arabic dialect of an Omani would be different from the dialect of a Bahraini. However, even within a country a wide variety of dialects exist, such as in the UAE.

In Ras Al Khaimah, Gulf Arabic and Shihhi Arabic are the two primary Arabic dialects spoken. Gulf Arabic is spoken by roughly 10 million people who reside along the Arabian Gulf coast from Ras Al Khaimah to Kuwait and parts of the coast of Iran (Eberhard et al., 2020; cf. Johnstone, 1967). Shihhi Arabic is spoken by nearly 40,000 people who

reside in Ras Al Khaimah and across its northern border, in Musandam, Oman (Eberhard et al., 2020). Although Gulf Arabic and Shihhi Arabic are defined as Arabic, the differences within their word pronunciations (phonology), grammar (morphology), vocabulary (lexicon), meaning (semantics), and word order (syntax) are vast enough to label them as two separate languages, making it necessary to evaluate them separately (Shockley, 2024).

Gulf Arabic is a relatively well-documented language. Linguists evaluate the quality of documentation by checking the availability, quality, and how recent publications about the language are (UNESCO, 2003). Gulf Arabic, particularly in the UAE, has been documented through various instructional books (e.g., Feghali, 2008), glossaries (al-Matrūshī 2001, 2019; al-Rumaythī, 2017; al-Qamzī, 2021), dictionaries (Qafisheh, 1997; Hanzal, 1998), and grammatical descriptions (Johnstone, 1967; Qafisheh, 1977; Leung et al., 2021). While many of these works are in English, there has been a recent increase in publications in Arabic. Numerous books and pamphlets are now available in Arabic, focusing on various aspects of local heritage (pearl fishing, traditional crafts, embroidery, wildlife, architecture, camels, etc.), many of which contain glossaries or word lists. Due to the steady flow of grammar studies and dictionaries about the dialect, the documentation of Gulf Arabic may be regarded as “superlative”, the highest of the six categories (UNESCO, 2003, p.16).

While Gulf Arabic (often referred to as “Emirati Arabic”) is well-documented, it represents only one part of the

larger mosaic of dialects spoken in Ras Al Khaimah. Only a few publications document Shihhi Arabic in any capacity. Maryam Bayshak has done a number of presentations on Shihhi Arabic and raised awareness of this issue (Zacharias, 2013; Ghazal, 2016). Hanzal (1987) also includes a word list with a few notes. There is one detailed article with a valuable glossary (Jayakar, 1904), a small word list (Bin Ghubbash, 2004), and one specialized thesis (Bernabela, 2011). Al-Shihhī (2015) is an important contribution with a list of over 300 words with references. Moreover, in recent years, a few journal articles have appeared (Bettega & Gasparini, 2022; Anonby et al., 2022; Shockley, 2024), mainly addressing the comparative dimensions of Shihhi Arabic within Arabic dialectology. Of these, only two (Al-Shihhī, 2015 & Shockley, 2024) include any data from the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah. Due to the paucity and brevity of these publications (only one book-length treatment), the documentation of Shihhi Arabic may be justifiably regarded as “fragmentary”, receiving a grade 2 out of 5 (UNESCO, 2003, p.16).

Comparing Arabic Dialects in Ras Al Khaimah

To highlight the vast and intricate nature of the Arabic language, this section explores a comparison of greetings commonly used across Ras Al Khaimah (see Table 1). Evidence from interviews conducted shows that at least seven different greetings are used in Ras Al

Table 1. Greetings in Ras Al Khaimah Dialects

Arabic Greeting	Meaning	Recorded in	Comments
sh-ḥāl-ik? (to man) sh-ḥāl-ich? (to woman)	how are you?	Al Dhait	typical of the UAE
shu ‘ilūm-ik? shu ‘ilūm-ich?	what’s your news?	Al Dhait	typical of the UAE’s Central Region
‘ilūm-ik? ‘ilūm-ich?	(what’s) your news?	Al Jazeera Al Hamra	shortened from the above
wayn dār-ik? wayn dār-ish?	where is your house?	Rams	dated local greeting, related to seasonal migration
hōmā ‘lūm-ik? hōmā ‘lūm-ish?	what’s your news?	al-Qīr (Al Jeer)	typical of Shihhi Arabic
shī lu ‘akhbōr?	isn’t there news?	Shamal	local greeting (Shihhi Arabic)
shī la ‘akhbōr?	isn’t there news?	al-Ashkar (Shamal area)	local greeting (Shihhi Arabic)

Khaimah alone. The first three listed greetings are used throughout the UAE. The other four are greetings I've only recorded in northern Ras Al Khaimah and would not be widely used in other regions of the UAE.

The greeting *wayn dār-ik?* (literally, “where is your house?”) is not in Shihhi Arabic, but the encoded meaning carries cultural knowledge local to northern Ras Al Khaimah. It is a reminder of the past when those such as the Ru'ūs al-Jibāl tribe and the people of Rams practiced seasonal migration. Though the words themselves are Gulf Arabic, the cultural meaning is specific to northern Ras Al Khaimah. Table 2 further showcases differences in basic vocabulary found within Ras Al Khaimah, split between three groups: Gulf Arabic (spoken from Al Dhait to Rams), coastal

Shihhi Arabic (e.g., Ghalilah, Al Jeer), and inland Shihhi Arabic (around Jabal Yanis and Jabal Jais). All of the Gulf Arabic examples would be readily understood by Emiratis in Abu Dhabi and Dubai; most of the Shihhi Arabic examples here would not.

It is clear from the table that Shihhi Arabic speakers, as speakers of a less understood dialect, have to heavily adapt their native speech patterns to be able to hold conversations in Gulf cities, including in southern Ras Al Khaimah. Even where similar words are used between the dialects, there are also major differences in pronunciation between Ras Al Khaimah's dialects, shown in Table 3. This is yet another difference in language that inclines Shihhi Arabic speakers to modify their speech to be understood by most Emiratis.

Table 2. Sample of Vocabulary Differences in Ras Al Khaimah

English	Gulf Arabic (Ras Al Khaimah)	Shihhi Arabic (coast)	Shihhi Arabic (inland)
he goes	yisīr	yimshay	yinhay
he brings	ywaddī	ywaddī	yahtī
rain	mutar	sayl	sayl
old	jidīm	dihrī	dihrī
yesterday	'ams	'āmis ~ 'astam	'astam
how?	kēf	kankī	kī
what is this?	shū hā? ~ shū hādha?	hūmā hōdā?	mu dō?
who is this?	mnū hādha?	man hōdā?	mān dō?

Table 3. Sample of Pronunciation Differences in Ras Al Khaimah

English	Gulf Arabic (Ras Al Khaimah)	Shihhi Arabic (coast)	Shihhi Arabic (inland)
coffee	ghawah ~ gahwah	qahwī	qahwah
sun	shams	shāmis, shamis	shimis, shimish
winter	shita	'ishtī	ishta
water	māy	'ilmō	'ilmō, 'ilmā
tooth	zirs	diris	wiris
I	'ana	'ana	'ōna, 'ūna
you (m.)	'intih, 'int	'antī	'inta
you (f.)	'intī	'antīn	'antīn
we	nihna, nihin	hnīn, nahnīn	hnīn

Therefore, to ensure Shihhi Arabic is accurately documented for future generation, this study aims to identify systematic differences in pronunciation. Understanding the structure of Shihhi Arabic dialects in the context of a dialect comparison will clarify to what extent Shihhi Arabic is changing in Ras Al Khaimah. Ultimately, changes in language point to changes taking place in Ras Al Khaimah's society as a whole and studying them will help build policies that place equal value on the various social groups of the UAE.

Methodology

This research project is situated in the areas of language documentation and comparative dialectology. Language documentation is a linguistics subfield that focuses on making a record (audio, video, or written) of a human language or dialect and describing its grammar. Comparative dialectology means the scientific study of closely related forms of language (such as Shihhi Arabic and Gulf Arabic). The two research questions the study aimed to answer were:

1. What is the range of diversity in the Arabic dialects of the Northern Emirates and Musandam?
2. How do these dialects compare to other Arabian dialects?

Using a mixed-methods approach, data was gathered from 32 speakers in 29 locations throughout the study area, stratified between three subregions (Gulf coast, Hajar Mountains, and Ru'ūs al-Jibāl). Eleven of these were Shihhi Arabic speakers, and eight of them were from Ras Al Khaimah. Locations were carefully selected to search for dialects that have never been documented in any scientific literature. Data was gathered in the form of word lists (translations of selected words elicited from the participant) and texts (continuous speech, usually in the narrative genre).

For word list recordings, speakers of various Emirati and Omani dialects were recruited through the principal investigator's personal network, with additional assistance from teachers and colleagues at the American University of Sharjah, the Sharjah Institute of Heritage (Kalba Branch), and the Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research in Ras

Al Khaimah. Thirty interviews were conducted, twenty-eight of them face to face, and two of them remotely due to the preference of the interviewees. Two of the interviews involved two participants each, bringing the total number of participants to thirty-two.

Participants translated word lists into various Arabic dialects, which were compared with information gathered by transcribing local television and YouTube interviews from 30 additional locations. News interviews were conducted by Sharjah TV, Sharqiya Kalba, and Oman News Center. Emirati television shows include the comedy *Shabeeh al-Reeh*, produced in Ras Al Khaimah, as well as *Duroob wa-Qura* ("Paths and Villages"). YouTube interviews were primarily taken from influencers Rehaab al-Dhanhani (Diba al-Fujairah, UAE) and Muhammad Ahmad bin Faruq al-Shihhi (Al Jadi, Oman). Both influencers travel locally in the Northern Emirates and Musandam and extensively document aspects of local heritage and history. All the recordings feature interactions between Emiratis and Omanis, conducted entirely in vernacular Arabic, making them suitable material for a basic language survey.

Language Change in Ras Al Khaimah

In an important overview of pronunciation in Emirati dialects, 'Ubayd (2013) has thoroughly cataloged sound changes within Shihhi Arabic. Several of the sound changes that 'Ubayd assesses as widespread a decade ago, were only rarely attested in the current study, even among older speakers. This suggests dialect leveling is occurring so much that ten years has shifted the language's geography. Dialect leveling means a loss of dialect variation such that older generations have various ways of speaking compared to younger generations who have fewer or only one. 'Ubayd's notes on pronunciation in Emirati dialects have been systematically organized and simplified in Table 4, with a focus on Ras Al Khaimah's dialects.

Sound changes highlighted in yellow are used by major social groups and thus would sound curious but understandable to the majority of Emiratis; sound changes highlighted in blue are local, subdialectal sound changes that would only occur in a few groups

or villages, and thus would be likely to be subject to stigma. Unsurprisingly, it was difficult to find evidence of the sound changes highlighted in blue, even in interviews conducted by Emiratis. In today’s social landscape, speakers of these local dialects probably are accustomed to modifying their dialect on a day-to-day basis. Evidence from Ras Al Khaimah dialects points to a pattern of minority dialects (especially certain dialects of Shihhi Arabic) being slowly replaced by majority dialects (namely, Gulf Arabic). This section will discuss three examples of how this is taking place in the pronunciation of Arabic in Ras Al Khaimah.

Across the entire study area (the northern Emirates and Musandam), dialect change was found to be most consequential in the areas of Shamal and al-Burayrāt, where speakers are moving away from the local speech patterns recorded by ‘Ubayd. The first example comes from variation in the pronunciation of q (a sound not present in English). Most Shihhi Arabic speakers call “coffee” *qahwa* (or *qahwī*), but some speakers in the Shamal area repeatedly used the Gulf Arabic pronunciation *gahwa*. In this case, the Shihhi Arabic form is more like Standard Arabic in its pronunciation of q. It is Gulf Arabic, and not Shihhi Arabic, that varies from Standard Arabic by saying *gahwa* rather than

qahwa. This demonstrates that Shihhi Arabic is over time progressively patterning towards Gulf Arabic as it is spoken in the community, not Standard Arabic as it is written and learned in school.

A second piece of evidence comes from alternations between *th* and *t*. Shihhi Arabic speakers in general replace *th* with *t*, and most Gulf Arabic speakers do not. In conversation, certain Shihhi Arabic speakers in Ras Al Khaimah sometimes replaced *t* with *th*, even where *t* was the Standard Arabic form, modifying their speech toward Gulf Arabic. This is known as “hypercorrection”, and it indicates that speakers are unnaturally over-accommodating their speech toward a more prestigious dialect. ‘Ubayd also documents several examples of hypercorrection that reverse prevailing dialect patterns, shown above in Table 3. Hypercorrection occurs most frequently just outside Ras Al Khaimah city, in the transition zone between Shihhi Arabic and Gulf Arabic.²

For example, Holes (2005) writes that in Ras Al Khaimah, many in past generations frequently changed *th* to *f* (e.g., *falj* for “ice” instead of *thalj*), but al-Rumaythī (2017) records that newer generations do not do this, but instead sometimes change *f* to *th*. For example, some

Table 4. Consonant Pronunciation in Emirati Dialects

Standard Arabic	*dh	*th	*‘	*ḍ	*gh	*q	*k
Dhuhūrī	d	t	’	w, gh	’	q	k
Habsi (northern)	d	t	’	b	’	k	ch, q
Habsi (southern)	d	t	’	b	’	q	k
Shihhi (inland)	d	t	’	b	’, q	q	k
Shihhi (coastal)	d	t	’	w	’, q	q	k
Shimaili (Shamal)	d	t	’	ḍ	gh	k	ch
Al Jazeera Al Hamra	d	t	‘	ẓ	gh	q	k
Khatt (Naqbi), Habhab (Sharqi)	dh	th	‘	ẓ	gh	q	k
Ras Al Khaimah City	dh	th, f	‘	ẓ	gh	g, j	k, ch
Sea of Oman coast	d	t	‘	ḍ	gh	q	k
Mountain areas	dh	th	‘	ẓ	gh	g	k
Gulf coast	dh	th	‘	ẓ	gh	g, j	k, ch

² A current example of hypercorrection from American English would be the common overuse of “I” where “me” is the historically correct form, e.g., “The photographer took a photo of my friend and I”, where the prescriptively correct sentence should be, “The photographer took a photo of my friend and me.”

say *thimāl allāh* (“in God’s safekeeping”) instead of *fi ‘amān allāh*. Such a reversal of pronunciation patterns points to the conclusion that Ras Al Khaimah’s Arabic dialects have been in flux as the agricultural village economy transforms into a coastal, urban lifestyle.

Emiratis in general, including Shihhi Arabic speakers, are progressively leaving village life for city life. Following family and work opportunities, many Shihhi Arabic speakers find themselves in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, or Muscat, where they are forced to communicate in Gulf Arabic or even English daily. Many Shihhi Arabic speakers contrasted their dialect competency with that of their grandparents; many even evaluated themselves as only partially competent in the language after long periods of stay outside of Ras Al Khaimah.

Aside from urbanization, the social factors driving these changes are not entirely clear. Unequal prestige among dialects likely plays a significant role. With around 10 million speakers, Gulf Arabic now has an active role in television and social media and is widely recognizable outside the Gulf region. Shihhi Arabic, however, is very hard to encounter in television or social media.

Finally, language change is not limited to Shihhi Arabic. There are also Gulf Arabic speakers in Ras Al Khaimah who inconsistently replace the sound *th* with *t* (shown in Table 5). ‘Ubayd (2013) wrote that this was once common in southern Ras Al Khaimah, such as Al Jazeera Al Hamra, but it only occurred a few times in this study. This discrepancy is another indicator that dialect leveling has been slowly taking place in Ras Al Khaimah, probably for several generations, not only in Shihhi Arabic but also among Gulf Arabic speakers in Ras Al Khaimah,

whose dialect once differed slightly from other Gulf Arabic dialects. Examples from primary data are seen in Table 5, where you will see that Arabic speakers in Ras Al Khaimah pronounce *dh* as *d* and *th* as *t*, but it is not done consistently. Unexpected forms are highlighted in yellow to show inconsistencies in pronunciation.

The geographic distribution of this variation shows that contact between language groups is gradually causing the speakers of minority dialects of Arabic to accommodate toward majority forms of Gulf Arabic. Urban Gulf Arabic speakers in the city of Ras Al Khaimah speak somewhat differently than their grandparents’ generation; evidence points to a larger generational gap for Shihhi Arabic speakers.

Examples in this section have shown that changes are taking place *within* Ras Al Khaimah dialects, both Gulf Arabic and Shihhi Arabic; we now turn to the possibility that newer generations are also using Shihhi Arabic less than previous generations, with Shihhi Arabic speakers instead adopting Gulf Arabic as a day-to-day language.

Language Shift in Ras Al Khaimah

The term, language shift, refers to members of a community choosing to speak a dominant language rather than their mother tongue. The next two sections will break down evidence of changes in the vitality or Shihhi Arabic. The vitality of Shihhi Arabic will be analyzed using objective criteria for spoken language vitality outlined by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group

Table 5. *th* replaced with *t* in Ras Al Khaimah’s Arabic Dialects

Dialect Group	Location	“heavy”	“he took”	“two”	“ear”
Standard	—	thaqīl	‘akhadh	‘ithnayn	‘udhun
Gulf	Al Dhait	thijīl ~ tijīl	khadh	thinayn	‘idhin
Gulf	Rams	thijīl	khad	ithnayn	‘idhnayī
Shihhi	Sayh al-Burayrāt	thaqīl ~ taqīl	khad	tnayn	dayn
Shihhi	al-Qīr (Al Jeer)	taqīl	khad	tnayn	dawānī

on Endangered Languages (UNESCO, 2003). Six criteria are commented on below:

1) Intergenerational language transmission: While arranging interviews, many younger speakers of Shihhi Arabic hesitated, doubting their own proficiency in the language. At first, this seemed like a convenient excuse; in hindsight, it was a widespread concern during fieldwork. It was very common for anyone below middle age to note that an older relative would be more knowledgeable about the dialect.

2) Absolute number of speakers and proportion within the total population: Shihhi Arabic is spoken by about 40,000 speakers, relative to about 10 million Gulf Arabic speakers, and roughly 300 million speakers of all varieties of Arabic (Eberhard et al. 2020).

3) Proportion within the total population: Shihhi Arabic is certainly not outnumbered in Ru'ūs al-Jibāl towns and villages, where it predominates across a large and contiguous area; it is dramatically outnumbered, however, when Shihhi Arabic speakers commute into larger cities for work opportunities.

4) Trends in existing language domains: The loss of domains is perhaps the most alarming feature of Shihhi Arabic. “Domains” is used here for the spheres of life in which a language is typically used, such as work, religion, home, recreation, and media. Some Shihhi Arabic speakers spoke of only using Shihhi Arabic at home; others described themselves as using Gulf Arabic throughout everyday interactions. As the UNESCO document states, “children become *semi-speakers* of their own language (*receptive bilinguals*)” (2003, p. 9). This is reflective of the reality for many speakers of Shihhi Arabic who have left Ras Al Khaimah’s mountain villages for economic opportunities.

5) Use in new domains: Shihhi Arabic is practically absent from Emirati and Omani television. Public social media presence is also quite rare in Shihhi Arabic, but it does occur. It is considered unusual, even for a Shihhi Arabic speaker, to speak the dialect on social media.

6) Materials for language education and literacy: As with other varieties of Arabic, education and literacy are considered the domain of Standard Arabic, and writing in Shihhi Arabic is mainly relegated to informal conversations via online media.

Though this has been far from a complete sociolinguistic assessment, the above evidence indicates that the vitality of Shihhi Arabic in Ras Al Khaimah may be changing from “stable” to “threatened”. Despite several negative trends discussed above, many in Ras Al Khaimah hold strongly positive attitudes towards maintenance of Shihhi Arabic, a reason for optimism. Fortunately, there are also a variety of possible policy responses that are relatively simple to enact.

Policy Recommendations

A few key policy recommendations are detailed in this section. The field of descriptive linguistics has honed tools and methods for documenting languages, and not all of them require specialist knowledge. What they do require is community support. Language documentation should benefit the community of speakers of the language, as it is the preservation of their heritage.

Recording and archiving texts (i.e., continuous speech or dialogue) is probably the easiest recommendation to enact as it requires little or no intervention from trained linguists. Additionally, UNESCO describes texts as “of central importance” in language documentation (2003, p.16). In language documentation, a “text” can be an annotated video, audio recording, or transcription of continuous speech, of any length, whether it be oral history, ethnography, narrative, myths, riddles, conversations, proverbs or poems. Al Qasimi Foundation also has experience in producing high-quality oral histories with bilingual transcriptions. This is, therefore, a relatively low-cost first step. Texts in any Shihhi Arabic dialect would be irreplaceable; however, the “transitional” dialects mentioned above (Rams, Shamal, al-Burayrāt) might be of special interest as they seem to be the most threatened by language change.

Linguistic description is relatively simple to enact. It is helpful for speakers of a minority language to understand that their spoken language is systematic, just as majority languages and written languages are. This increases the legitimacy of the language, in addition to its obvious scientific merit. In time, linguistic description could also dovetail with the creation of accessible technologies that can be used

in education, such as speech-to-text applications. Description could be helpful for Shihhi Arabic, which is only partly described and largely unstudied in Ras Al Khaimah. Short descriptions of transitional dialects in Ras Al Khaimah could also be valuable as evidence points to ongoing change in these dialects in addition to Shihhi Arabic dialects.

Documentation raises the status of a language, but this status can become unequal if certain communities or dialects are excluded. Great interest in Shihhi Arabic exists among western scholars, but most western studies have been produced from Musandam, Oman (Jayakar, 1904; Bernabela, 2011, etc.). This geographic imbalance could in time have consequences if one dialect gains social prestige or representation in the media. It would therefore be ideal for linguistic description to move apace in both nations.

Moreover, many studies are also only available in English. Highly popular and well-known books and studies on Arabic dialects should ideally be either in Arabic, or bilingual (Arabic and English), to ensure that the speakers of the language are able to engage with documentation and description of their language.

Gathering vocabulary (or lexicography) is another important way of documenting a language. Lexicography is rather open-ended, so a clear goal has to be determined. This can start with simple word lists, such as those I have recorded and transcribed in the preparation for this study; however, the production of a high-quality dictionary or lexicon is a work that could easily require years of focused labor. Dictionaries have the power to serve as a repository of local knowledge and thus are worth considering. Such a project would be redundant for small, local dialects or transitional dialects of Gulf Arabic, but could be a great boon for Shihhi Arabic as a group.

In recent years, lexicography projects for minority languages have shifted towards the use of web and mobile applications, including many that focus on Arabic and Arabic dialects (e.g., Abouzahr, 2020). The shift from print media to digital media means that dictionary projects can be completed with less monetary investment; they can also be made immediately available to the community if that community has Internet access. The use of digital media also has the

potential to accelerate community checking, and a dictionary application can be piloted in phases for both checking and to test community buy-in.

Language policy is also mentioned in the UNESCO document. The policy of the UAE may be regarded as one of “passive assimilation”: Arabic is the official language of the UAE, but “no explicit policy exists for minority languages” (UNESCO, 2003, p.14). Given the high status of Standard Arabic in Gulf countries, it is not expected that the UAE would adopt legal protections for what is popularly regarded as a mere “dialect”. However, given that government initiatives have produced many publications documenting “Emirati dialect” (Gulf Arabic in the UAE), it would restore some parity to fund similar efforts on Shihhi Arabic, of whatever scale.

Ultimately, it is up to the members of the community to decide whether a large-scale project such as a dictionary or a substantial text archive is worthwhile, since they would collaborate in its production. Community members would also benefit greatly from the documentation of their heritage. Since interest in Arabic dialects in general, and Shihhi Arabic in particular, is quite high among linguists, it is possible that it is already only a matter of time before Shihhi Arabic is extensively documented.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Arabic Transliteration Guide

This paper follows the Library of Congress style for the Romanization of Arabic.

Arabic Letter	Transliteration	Explanation
ب	b	
ج	j	Similar to “j” in “John.”
د	d	
ه	h	
و	w	
ز	z	
ح	ḥ	A sound not present in English, similar to “h” but further back in the throat (a voiceless pharyngeal fricative).
ط	ṭ	A sound not present in English, similar to “t” but with the back of the mouth slightly constricted.
ي	y	
ك	k	
ل	l	
م	m	
ن	n	
س	s	
ع	ʿ	A “guttural” sound not present in English or most European languages, articulated very far back in the throat (a voiced pharyngeal approximant).
ف	f	
ص	ṣ	A sound not present in English, similar to “s” but with the back of the mouth slightly constricted.

Arabic Letter	Transliteration	Explanation
ق	q	A sound not present in English, similar to 'k' but articulated further back in the throat.
ر	r	Similar to "r" in Spanish "ahora."
ش	sh	
ت	t	
ث	th	
خ	kh	A sound not present in English; similar to "ch" in "chutzpah" or "loch", but articulated further back in the throat (a voiceless uvular fricative).
ذ	dh	Similar to "th" in "this," "they."
ض	ḍ	A sound not present in English, similar to "d" but with the back of the mouth slightly constricted.
ظ	ẓ	A sound not present in English, similar to "th" in 'this' but with the back of the mouth slightly constricted.
غ	gh	A sound not present in English, similar to "r" in the French pronunciation of "Paris" (a voiced uvular fricative).
ء	ʾ	A glottal stop, which occurs at the beginning of the vowel in "uh oh."
ا	ā	
آ	ay	
إ	ē	Similar to "e" in "bed" but typically longer.
إِ	ī	
أ	aw	
أَ	ō	Similar to "o" in "bode" but typically longer.
أُ	ū	Similar to "u" in "rude."

Appendix 2: Characteristic Sound Changes in Emirati Arabic Dialects

This paper follows the Library of Congress style for the Romanization of Arabic.

Arabic Letter	Transliteration	Gulf Arabic	Shihhi Arabic
ا	ʾ		
ب	b		
ج	j	y	y or j
د	d		
هـ	h		
و	w		
ز	z		
ح	ħ		
ط	ṭ		
ي	y		
ك	k	k, ch	
ل	l		
م	m		
ن	n		
س	s		
ع	ʿ		ʿ
ف	f		

Arabic Letter	Transliteration	Gulf Arabic	Shihhi Arabic
ص	ṣ		
ق	q	g, j	
ر	r		
ش	sh		
ت	t		
ث	th		t
خ	kh		
ذ	dh		d
ض	ḍ	ḷ	ḍ, w, or b
ظ	ẓ		ḍ, w, or b
غ	gh		
ء	ʾ		

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