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Judeo-Arabic and the Semiotics of Migration: From the Heteroglossia of Maimonides to Present Diglossic Landscapes

Riassunto

Al centro dello studio della diglossia nelle comunità di lingua araba vi è la questione se tale fenomeno sia intrinseco all'arabo o il risultato del contatto linguistico avvenuto dopo le conquiste islamiche. Mentre alcuni negano l'esistenza di una diglossia pre-islamica, i testi egiziani e siriani del IX e X secolo documentano l'uso dell'arabo colloquiale, specialmente negli scritti non musulmani. Questo articolo sostiene che la negazione di una diglossia precoce derivi in parte dall'emarginazione degli etnoletti arabi come il giudeo-arabo, spesso oscurati per sostenere l'arabo classico come standard puro, riflesso di un'etnia pura. Utilizzato dalle comunità ebraiche già prima dell'Islam, il giudeo-arabo incarna l'ibridità e la molteplicità culturale, eppure viene etichettato come "deviante". Attraverso l'analisi di testi in giudeo-arabo maimonideo e tunisino, questo saggio mostra come la lingua negozi l'identità, la diaspora e la mobilità ebraica. La loro natura eteroglossica segna l'appropriazione dell'arabo come lingua ebraica e rispecchia le più ampie pratiche di commutazione di scrittura giudeo-linguistiche come linguemi dell'alterità. Il giudeo-arabo emerge così come un sito semiotico di migrazione e memoria.

Abstract

Central to the study of diglossia¹ in Arabic-speaking communities is whether this phenomenon is inherent to Arabic or a result of language

¹ See Ferguson 1959.

contact after the Islamic conquests. While some deny pre-Islamic diglossia², 9th- to 10th-century Egyptian and Syrian texts document the use of colloquial Arabic, especially in non-Muslim writings³. This paper argues that denying early diglossia stems partly from marginalizing Arabic ethnolects such as Judeo-Arabic, often obscured to uphold Classical Arabic as the pure standard, reflecting a pure ethnicity⁴. Used by Jewish communities before Islam, Judeo-Arabic embodies hybridity and cultural multiplicity yet is labeled “deviant”⁵. Through Maimonidean and Tunisian Judeo-Arabic texts, this paper shows how language negotiates identity, diaspora, and Jewish mobility. Their heteroglossic nature marks Arabic’s appropriation as a Jewish language⁶ and mirrors broader Judeo-linguistic script-switching practices as linguemes of otherness. Judeo-Arabic thus emerges as a semiotic site of migration and memory.

Parole chiave: diglossia, giudeo-arabo, ibridità, identità, migrazione, diaspora

Keywords: diglossia, Judeo-Arabic, hybridity, identity, migration, diaspora

Introduction

The present paper relies on Charles A. Ferguson’s *Diglossia* paper (1959). Though not the first to use the term to describe the Arab speech communities, Ferguson is often credited with providing a detailed description of it. Prior to Ferguson, William Marçais (1930) provided an appraisal of the diglossic situation from a pedagogical standpoint. He used the term to describe the sociolinguistic situation where two varieties of the same language co-exist with clearly demarcated functions. The varieties are H (High) which is the standard language, and L (Low) which is the dialect. Marçais likened the diglossic speech communities to a *beast* with two heads. Although the appraisal given by Marçais is deemed colonialist by some, some Arabic speakers continue to share his view.

² See Blau 1973; Fück 1952.

³ See Corriente 1976; Hopkins 1978; Holes 2004.

⁴ See Thomas 1991.

⁵ See Al-Sharkawi 2017.

⁶ See Goitein 1970.

This linguistic situation in the Arab world has interested several linguists⁷. Later work, by Joshua Fishman (1967), argued that diglossia can be extended to include not only varieties of one language but also two unrelated languages in a complementary distribution in a speech community. In this case, the distinguishing feature would be that each code serves «functions distinct from those considered appropriate for the other»⁸. Despite the appeal of Fishman's extension of diglossia to multilingual communities, a central element to diglossia is the perception of the members of the speech community that the L variety *does not exist*⁹. This obscuring of a variety is rooted in linguistic purism that views only one code as legitimate¹⁰. Thus, denying diglossic reality is not a laymen practice but is rooted in previous research which viewed diglossia as a corruption of the standard and a byproduct of the expansion of the Islamic Empire¹¹. However, uncovered medieval texts have shown that a vernacular form of Arabic was in use by non-Muslims, making Christian and Judeo-Arabic a counter-archive to diglossia's historiography. Such findings have problematized earlier definitions of diglossia¹², prompting a revisiting of the Fergusonian strata.

1. *Pre-Islamic varieties and the quest for purity*

1.1 *Denial of early diglossia*

The origins of Arabic diglossia remain a central and contentious subject in Arabic historical linguistics. This debate has often been presented by traditional scholarship in binary terms, whereby one pole views diglossia as a pre-Islamic linguistic reality inherent to the Arabophone world, the other pole advances that diglossia came about as an offspring of language

⁷ See Blau 1977; Ferguson 1959; Versteegh 2014.

⁸ Fishman 1967, p. 29.

⁹ See Ferguson 1959.

¹⁰ See Thomas 1991.

¹¹ See Blau 1977.

¹² See Al-Wer 2013.

contact, through a process of pidginization and creolization¹³.

Underpinning the former are Fück (1950), Blau (1977) and Versteegh (2004), who argue that Arabs used the literary language found in pre-Islamic poetry in their quotidian interactions. Fück argues that the Arabic language had only witnessed significant change after leaving the peninsula. In Blau's words, «no diglossia existed before Islam»¹⁴; rather, «New Arabic» was the result of a «corrupting influence on the part of the population of the conquered territories»¹⁵.

Pre-Islamic literature reports that Mecca was a site of intertribal contact, for commercial and cultural exchange. Abdulkafi Albirini notes that a «koine typically appears with the migration of speakers of mutually intelligible varieties to new settlements [which] involves, for example, the migration of rural and Bedouin workers into the city»¹⁶.

The Meccan koine, which Kees Versteegh calls the «poetic koine»¹⁷, may have evolved as an incorporation of different features from different dialects. In his view, though this koine is a superposed register serving a literary function, it is not a distinct language unintelligible to tribes outside Mecca¹⁸. Corriente (1976) argues that the poetic koine has been established as a variety even before the emergence of Islam. In fact, he notes that the grammarians' endeavor towards a uniform standard led to the obscuring of non-koinised varieties, which would have resulted in a rather different description of Old Arabic. Nevertheless, Versteegh firmly maintains that «the dialects are the regional varieties of that same language»¹⁹.

The main argument in support of poetic koine and colloquial Arabic homogeneity was that Arab grammarians at that time verified matters of grammaticality through illiterate Bedouin informants²⁰. Michael Zwettler writes that philologists seeking

¹³ See Versteegh 2004.

¹⁴ Blau 1977, p. 16.

¹⁵ Versteegh 1984, p. 5.

¹⁶ Albirini 2016, p. 180.

¹⁷ Versteegh 1984, p. 1.

¹⁸ See Corriente 1976, Versteegh 1984.

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 2

²⁰ See Holes 2004.

linguistic correctness from Bedouins at that time were after an «*arabi:ya*»²¹ found in Classical poetry and can only be provided by the Bedouins since they maintained a tradition of oral poetry.

Clive Holes argues that pre-Islamic poetry supports the possibility of having a vernacular alongside Classical Arabic that was used daily. He writes that pre-Islamic poetry represented a refined style that cannot be considered identical to a coeval spoken form. Indeed, poetic form does not represent a «linguistic monolith» but rather «shows vestigial evidence of a heterogeneous origin»²².

The traditional model – championing linguistic homogeneity in pre-Islamic Arabic – has been challenged by recent epigraphic linguistic research. Scholars such as Ahmad al-Jallad and Marijn van Putten, working with previously understudied Safaitic, Hismaic, and early Quranic materials, argue for a more diverse pre-Islamic Arabic linguistic landscape than the koine theory allows²³. Al-Jallad writes that subsuming all varieties of Arabic before and after Islam «creates an artificial uniformity across space and time»²⁴. Al-Jallad's and van Putten's work suggests that what was later codified as Classical Arabic was one among several related dialects, and that features typical of so-called “New” or “Middle” Arabic have much deeper roots in the Peninsula²⁵. This new paradigm shifts the debate from whether diglossia existed to how we conceptualize linguistic variation in early Arabic. Al-Jallad argues that ascertaining the existence of pre-Islamic diglossia may be difficult, though evidence supports a form of code-switching²⁶. The relationship between spoken and written forms was complex as well, though perhaps not necessarily in the rigid, ideological form of later diglossia.

Cyril Glassé commented on the tight link between the faith and the language: «Muslims consider the Koran to be holy scripture only in the original Arabic of its revelation [...]. This relates to the

²¹ Zwettler 1978, p. 134.

²² Holes 2004, p. 13.

²³ See Al-Jallad 2020; van Putten 2022.

²⁴ Al-Jallad 2020, p. 3.

²⁵ Al-Jallad 2019, p. 23

²⁶ Ivi, p. 24.

notion of Arabic as a “sacred language”»²⁷. Likewise, Ibn Jinnī (10th c. BE) qualified the Arabic language as «honourable» several times in his book *al-Khaṣāʾiṣ*. This created a ethnolinguistic-cum-religious bond that permeates the literature of early theological scholars. Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1368 CE), a famed theologian, dedicated a chapter to al-raṭānah (speaking in one’s non-native tongue). He wrote that the act of speaking in a foreign tongue was a *makruh* (disliked). Ibn Taymiyya elaborated that the Arabic language was the sigil of Islam and its people who must not adopt the language and, by extension, the habits of the Ajam (non-Arabs) lest that weakened their faith. In fact, he insisted that the Arabic language was in itself part of the religion and that knowing it was an obligation to the pious Muslim.

The rapid geographical expansion and contact with a multitude of languages and ethnicities gave birth to this hyperfixation on purity. The frequent contact with speakers of other languages (Berbers, Copts, Persians, Turks, etc.) rendered the maintenance of a pristine Arabic lexicon an arduous mission. Furthermore, the codification of the language was simultaneous to laying the foundations of the state; it was not merely a purification of the lexicon from the intruding elements (*dakhīl*), it was also an act of protecting a “pure” culture.

1.2 *Arabic and puristic ethnolinguistic ideology*

With the rise of the Abbasid Caliphate (8th-13th c CE), multi-ethnic commingling heightened the need for language purification. The Caliphate was known for including Persians in the administration and encouraging translation. Yet, tensions between the Arabs and non-Arabs, present since the Umayyad Caliphate, persisted. Albirini writes «that many of the treatises that were written by Arab intellectuals in this period [Abbasid] focused on the unique *ethnic identity* of the Arabs by highlighting their eloquent language and their “pure” ancestry»²⁸.

²⁷ Glassé 1989, p. 56.

²⁸ Albirini 2016, p. 126.

The emphasis on pure language and pure ancestry was inextricable, as one testified to the other. George Thomas writes that linguistic purism concerns mainly standard languages and the process of codifying them. He draws attention to the interrelation of «puristic attitudes and the cultural *ethos* of a speech community at various stages of its development»²⁹. Prior to Thomas, Joshua Fishman aptly remarked that «language is the recorder of paternity, the expresser of patrimony and the carrier of phenomenology»³⁰. Thus, linguistic purism and language purification is an assertion and a safeguarding of a pure «*sacro-sanct*» bloodline, and an inviolable faith:

Purism is essentially a campaign waged against the perceived “bastardisation” or “hybridization” of a language [...]. But it is somehow implicit [...] that there is some inherent virtue in being a thoroughbred rather than a mongrel, legitimate rather than a bastard³¹.

Legitimacy in the Arab context was manifest through *nasab*, *i.e.* tracing an uninterrupted genealogical line via the father/mother. Robert G. Hoyland (2001) presents evidence of matrilineal genealogy in pre-Islamic Arabia though he concedes that this was not a universal practice. In a patrilineal community such as the Arab-Muslim one, the genealogy of the mother mattered very little³². The bloodlines were secured through the fathers who legitimated their offspring. This is in concordance with the Quran (33:5) explicitly stating the superiority of paternity to maternity. Moreover, the hadith/legal maxim stating that the «child belongs to the conjugal bed» solidified paternity as a legal status more than a biological one.

This has made the Arab-Muslim purist tendency at once genealogical/legal and religious³³. Thomas writes that genealogical purity as a notion can only be understood in absolutes. One is either pure or not, legitimate or not. One may argue that Islam provided this overarching sanctifying quality where it absolved

²⁹ Thomas 1991, p. 2.

³⁰ Fishman 1977, p. 25.

³¹ Thomas 1991, pp. 22-23.

³² See Dabbagh 2019.

³³ See Thomas 1991.

its adherents of their “mongrel” ethnicity and bestowed upon them the “desired” Arabness.

Therefore *lahn* (solecism) was intolerable, particularly among the elite society of the Abbasid Caliphate. Yasir Suleiman notes that it was common for the Umayyad elite to send their male offspring into the desert with Bedouins, to “straighten” their crooked speech because «incorrectness in speech among the elite [was] a blemish or fault that could impugn a person’s moral character»³⁴. John C. Eisele considers the *topos* of purity representing a valorised aspect of Arabic culture:

The topos of purity on the other hand involves the valorization of Arabic as the source of Arab ethnicity, and “remote Bedouins” as the most faithful transmitters of that ethnic tradition. It at first valorized “orality” in the transmission³⁵, but with the development of the written tradition and its associated topos of continuity, however, the tradition quickly came to valorize specific written sources over oral sources, stigmatizing “foreign” (or non-Arab) ethnicities, urban language, and eventually the spoken language, or “colloquial dialects”³⁶.

It is plausible, based on the aforementioned literature, that the fervent attachment to the Arabic language and the obscuring of non-Arab origin, coupled by the reliance on native informants practised by non-Arab grammarians such as Sibawayh (8th c CE), Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī (10th c CE) and Ibn Manẓūr (13th c CE), was an attempt towards legitimising their own position as Muslims and as scholars within a culture that did not dissociate ethnicity from language and religion.

1.3 Marginalization of Christian and Judeo-Arabic: Linguistic “deviance” as site of identity

The work of Simon Hopkins (1978) on Middle Arabic is referenced profusely by Holes (2004). The papyri analyzed by Hopkins have lent support to the existence of a diglossic speech community within the “home” of Arabic before its exporta-

³⁴ Suleiman 2011, p. 204.

³⁵ See Al-Jallad 2020.

³⁶ Eisele 2013, pp. 28-29.

tion outside the peninsula. Holes reports on the analysis conducted by Hopkins on a large collection from Syria and Egypt mainly, dating back to the 9th-10th century CE. The weight of these findings is due to the nature of the documents which were mainly «private and business letters, property deeds, marriage contracts, administrative surveys, lists and registers, passports, petitions, tax receipts, demands for payment, etc»³⁷. The nature of these items makes it unlikely for the documents to have been purposefully embellished for artistic value, neither by the author nor the later proprietor of the document, especially that they were intended for personal use.

Holes makes an important observation regarding the script on the papyri explaining that it was cumbersome to analyze, for it lacked diacritical points distinguishing letters, as well as any vowel marks. Hopkins dates his data back to the 9th-10th century CE, during which time ad-Du'alī (7th c CE) had already introduced his diacritic system, as well as al-Farāhīdī's (8th c CE) much simpler system. Likewise, Sibawayh's (8th c CE) *al-Kitāb* (The Book) had already been two centuries old. The crux of the matter is that these documents, created by literate individuals, have deviated from an "ideal" and have escaped the "correction" of the standard.

Hopkins makes valuable observations regarding the deviations:

In almost every case in which the language of the Arabic papyri deviates from CA [Classical Arabic], it deviates unmistakably in the direction of Middle Arabic, typologically akin to most of the modern colloquials [...]. A large proportion of the features attested later in mediaeval *Jewish*, *Christian* and, to a lesser extent, Muslim Middle Arabic, many of which are familiar today from modern dialects, occur here for the first time³⁸.

Within the aforementioned revised framework, evidence from early Jewish and Christian communities becomes crucial. Their written records, often in distinct scripts, frequently escaped the prescriptive norms applied to Islamic religious and literary texts, thereby preserving fossilized traces of contemporary

³⁷ Holes 2018, p. 9.

³⁸ Hopkins 1978, LXXVII; emphasis added.

spoken usage. These non-Muslim corpora act as a vital counter-archive, empirically challenging narratives of a monolithic, unchanging “Classical” Arabic.

Treatises on Jewish philosophy and liturgy have circulated before the rise of Islam; however, the monumental work on Judaic liturgy *The Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-ḥā’irīn*) was produced under Islamic rule by Maimonides (12th-13th c CE), a Jewish scholar born in Cordoba and exiled to North Africa. Muhammad Al-Sharkawi remarks that despite his learnedness, Maimonides «willingly wrote texts in *deviant* Middle Arabic style»³⁹. This observation by Al-Sharkawi, coupled with his assumption that the majority of Jews and Christians are of «non-Arab origin» and «unfamiliar with Arab culture» and language, is shortsighted for it not only argues that colloquialisms are a mark of non-Arab descent, but it also furthers the myth that all Arabs were/are Muslim⁴⁰.

In his book *A History of The Jews of Arabia*, Gordon Newby cites the work of S.D. Goitein (1970) who writes that «the Hebrew language developed its grammar and vocabulary on the model of the Arab language. [...] *Arabic itself became a Jewish language*»⁴¹.

Goitein points out that Arabic itself was used by the Jewish community in Arabia. In *Observations About an Early Judaeo-Arabic* (1971) Newby uses the account of *The Expedition of Abdūllah ibn Atīk*, a companion of Muhammad, who was sent to assassinate Salām bin Abī’l-Huqayq. Key to the selection of Ibn Atīk for this expedition was his knowledge of *al-yahūdiyya* (Jewish language). This appellation does not refer to Hebrew but rather to a variety in which Ibn Atīk spoke (*yarṭunu bil-yahūdiyyati*: spoke in a Jewish non-native tongue). Newby points out that *al-yahūdiyya* «was, to Arab ears, a dialect or jargon of Arabic rather than a foreign language like Hebrew or Aramaic»⁴². A similar account about Zayd ibn Thābit being

³⁹ Al-Sharkawi 2017, p. 135; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 137.

⁴¹ Qtd. in Newby 1988, p. 107.

⁴² Newby 1971, p. 219.

tasked with translating Jewish script to Muhammad testifies to the miniscule difference between the two languages. Michael Lecker writes that «the Prophet's order that Zayd should learn *kitāb yahūd* (Jewish script) was given shortly after the Hijra, following the Prophet's examination of the boy's command of Qur'an»⁴³. According to Newby this is another evidence favouring the argument that *al-yahūdiya* (Judeo-Arabic) was only a dialect of Arabic, written in Hebrew letters. Indeed, «if these writings were in *yahūdiya* Arabic, that is, Arabic written in non-Arabic script, with some additional vocabulary borrowed from Hebrew, Aramaic, and possibly other languages, Zaid's feat would not have been impossible»⁴⁴.

Christian Julien Robin and Jason Harris have demonstrated that from the end of the first century BCE to 570 CE the kingdom of Ḥimyar was «the principal power in ancient Yemen, and even served for three centuries [...] as the principal power on the Arabian Peninsula»⁴⁵. They elaborate that the written language of Ḥimyar was Sabaic, the South Arabian language closest to Arabic, «although distinguishable in several ways»⁴⁶. In fact, the language spoken by the Ḥimyarites «in medieval times is merely a dialect of Arabic»⁴⁷. It may be argued that this Ḥimyaritic language was the *yahūdiya* mentioned in early Islamic documents, i.e. Judeo-Arabic.

In his work on the Cairo Geniza, Goitein underlines the role of non-Muslim Arabic texts in documenting the vernacular. Indeed, all documents in the Geniza were in Hebrew script, «irrespective of the language used»⁴⁸, with several scripts. In fact, this habit of judaizing a language was rooted in the faith, as the script was «hallowed by one's own religion»⁴⁹.

⁴³ Lecker 1998, p. 267.

⁴⁴ Newby 1971, p. 220.

⁴⁵ Robin and Harris 2021, p. 295.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Goitein 1999, p. 17.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 18.

2. *Script and Scripture: Talisman and semiosis of multilingualism*

2.1 *The Script/Scripture as Talisman/Sign*

The perception of the scripture as holy, and by extension the language of the faith as holy, is shared by Jews and Muslims. Daniella Talmon-Heller comments on the likeness of treating the Torah and the Quran as «not only the most sacred *texts* in the Jewish and in the Muslim traditions respectively, but also [as] extremely venerated tangible *objects* in the religious thought and practice»⁵⁰. The handling of the texts, from touching and safekeeping to discarding, followed strict rules of conduct. Talmon-Heller explains that this veneration of scripture rendered any representation thereof «talismanic»; in fact, «images of the Torah and Qur'ān were employed as symbols – of divine presence and might, of the faith, and of the religious community»⁵¹.

Yona Dureau defines the talisman as «an object or a parchment bearing a text or an image meant to either protect the bearer, or endow him with precise powers»⁵²; it is at same time an object and a sign, as well as a semiotic object of study. What is unique to the talisman is its ability to blend the sacredness of the text, the sacredness of the script, and the supremacy of orality. Dureau writes: «In the case of a talisman, the holiness of the oral text written on it gives it an eternal quality of orality, and the text is perceived as endlessly being spoken out, if not heard, once it is written down. [...] The holy oral text of a talisman for example, remains holy and oral even if it is written down»⁵³.

The talismanic nature of the texts were related not only to the language but also to the script itself. Talmon-Heller comments on the importance of the script in which the Torah was written. In fact, «Ašuri (Assyrian) [script] became [so] firmly associated with the divine revelation [that] Talmudic scholars

⁵⁰ Talmon-Heller 2016, p. 211.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Dureau 2002, p. 23.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 26.

not only formulated the demand that the Torah be written only in Assyrian script, they also specified in detail the form of letters»⁵⁴. Moreover, Maimonides insisted that the Torah must be copied in *Ktav Ashuri*⁵⁵.

It is evident that the script itself is imbued with the holiness of the language, hence the insistence on a specific script over another. This points to the work of Dejan Ivković on the semiotics of multilingualism. He argues that the presence of «a word, a grapheme, a spelling convention or an accent– associated with a respective language, in a specific context, is itself a sign»⁵⁶. He goes on to explain that a linguistic sign may index an entire linguistic system and thus become a semiotic sign, such as stylizing Latin letters to resemble the Arabic script:

In code-switching, what is actually being juxtaposed, however, are not “whole” languages, as this would be practically impossible, but the elements (e.g., a particular lexeme, grapheme, phrase, an accent) – here referred to as linguemes – emblematic and indexical of the linguistic variety that in turn partake in supralinguistic meaning production⁵⁷.

This lingueme becomes a unit of multilingual semiosis. Ivković calls it a primitive semiotic and semantic unit, «associated with a particular language variety. It is a construct serving to explain and analyze the surface structure of multilingual interaction»⁵⁸. He gives the example of using diacritics from Language A on a text from Language B such as the umlaut on a non-German text which serves as a «distinctive unit of multilingual semiosis in situ, indexing the quality of Germanness»⁵⁹. Thus, linguemes become flags that differentiate a language from another, by virtue of foregrounding «a particular linguistic system [...] the very fact that the message is written in Language A AND Language B [...] takes over the spotlight»⁶⁰. The concluding remarks of Ivković are of particular relevance to the discussion at hand. He

⁵⁴ Talmon-Heller 2016, p. 224.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ Ivković 2017, pp. 89-90.

⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 95.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 103.

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. 104.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 107.

states that the act of multilingual semiosis is an act of «linguistic otherness» performed through the juxtaposition of a variety against a dominant matrix itself which at once signals otherness and symbiosis, to a degree. This invites a reflection on linguistic systems traditionally deemed distinct. Nevertheless, «in the semiotic sense, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of linguistic voices [i.e. heteroglossia] is multi language-alism»⁶¹.

2.2 The Cairo Geniza between heteroglossia, movement and semiotic multilingualism

The Cairo Geniza was a room attached to the synagogue in Fustat (Cairo), the capital of Fatimid Egypt (969-1171). Goitein (1999) writes that the extent of what the Geniza held of invaluable documents was only discovered during renovations in the 19th century. Ironically, the Geniza, a centuries' old repository of language is today «scattered throughout the world»⁶².

In true heteroglossic nature, several of the Geniza documents function as a palimpsest, constantly used and reused, rendering any stratigraphy impossible. Regardless of the final text obtained, the echoes of the previous one persist. Vyacheslav Ivanov defines heteroglossia as «the simultaneous use of different kinds of speech or other *signs*, the tension between them, and their conflicting relationship within one text»⁶³. Ivanov further elaborates that this «parallel or simultaneous use of different signs and images belonging to partly opposed or conflicting spheres»⁶⁴ is a human practice rather than a behavior of a given culture. Consequently, culture – in its broader sense – is a «thick tapestry of interwoven sign systems»⁶⁵. These observations go hand in hand with those of Ivković mentioned above.

Examining the Judeo-Arabic texts in the Cairo Geniza reveals this symbiosis of signs, Hebrew and Arab, to create a text that

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 123.

⁶² Ivi, p. 13.

⁶³ Ivanov 1999, p. 100; emphasis added.

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 101.

⁶⁵ Orr 1986, p. 814.

is neither-nor. In Bakhtinian terms, the text is «half-ours and half-someone else's»⁶⁶. Benjamin H. Hary (1992) uses the term “multiglossia” to describe the use of two varieties of the same language side by side in the same community. Hary distinguished five periods of Judeo-Arabic: Pre-Islamic, Early (8th/9th-10th centuries CE), Classical (10th-15th centuries CE), Later (15th-19th centuries CE), and Modern Judeo-Arabic (20th century CE). It is the Classical Judeo-Arabic texts produced by medieval Jewish authors that forms the bulk of the Cairo Geniza⁶⁷.

The difficulty faced by Hopkins in annotating the papyrus dating from the 9th and 10th centuries CE (belonging to Early Judeo-Arabic) may be due to the authors' precedence given to the influential works of Saadya Gaon (892-942 CE). His Arabic translation of the Pentateuch had a monumental influence upon «learned circles of mediaeval Jewry, [...] and] the general Jewish public as well. [...] reading [his] translation became an integral part of the Sabbath service»⁶⁸. The widespread influence of this work led to the adoption of a standard Judeo-Arabic orthography which corresponds to Classical Judeo-Arabic Script.

Joshua Blau and Simon Hopkins (1984) explicitly state that Judeo-Arabic texts in their spelling reflected both Arabic and Hebrew influence thus, echoing Bakhtinian terms and rendering the text half-Arab, half-Jewish. They point to the Jewish scribes' imitation of the orthography of classical Arabic and the application of polyphony whereby one Hebrew letter corresponded to two Arabic ones. Indeed, «even vowel signs, when they are marked, are more often Arabic than Hebrew. CJAS [Classical Judeo-Arabic Script], then, for the most part bears upon itself the heavy imprint of the orthography of classical Arabic»⁶⁹.

While the text itself is heteroglossic in nature, the script becomes a two-fold lingueme. Indeed, the Hebrew letters (*Ktav Ashuri*) are a juxtaposed system onto an Arabic matrix, upon which Arabic diacritics (*naqṭ* and *i'rāb*) are juxtaposed, such as

⁶⁶ Bakhtin 1981, p. 345.

⁶⁷ Blau and Hopkins 1984.

⁶⁸ Ivi, p. 15.

⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 11.

script in sanctifying the very text in which it is written⁷¹. In fact, he declares that Jews are forbidden from reading texts that are not written in Assyrian (*Ktav Ashuri*) or Hebrew script.

It is important to clarify here the difference between “nation” and “nation-state” in Jewish and Arab terms. The word *ummah* and its Hebrew cognate (אומה) designate a people and/or a nation. Yasir Suleiman (2003) writes that «Arab nationalism [treats] language as one of the major ingredients in nation-formation [...] which sets them apart from other nations»⁷². The understanding of nationalism in Jewish and Muslim terms goes beyond geopolitical borders to designate a number of ethno-linguistic aspects binding a community together regardless of distance. Stuart D. E. Weeks argues:

In a rush to deny the claim of modern nationalism to be ancient, scholars have [...] overlooked the nationalistic aspects of Israelite identity [...] post-exilic Judaism bears a very strong resemblance to the modern “nation.” Such nations depend upon a sense of primary community that goes beyond locality and established political structures [...] The Jews [...] placed a high premium on the written word, and possessed texts which authoritatively set out rights, duties and history of the people⁷³.

As elaborated above, the text is sacred by virtue of the language and of the sanctified script. Furthermore, the text is the vassal containing the history of the nation. Consequently, traveling outside the text is an act of border crossing, i.e. code-switching and script-switching is an act of migration.

Blau argues that, although some scholars believe that the use of the Arabic language even in writing Jewish text may be motivated by a desire to reach a wider audience, the more plausible argument is that Arabic was the more natural language to Jews in the Arab world after the decline of Aramaic. Nevertheless, Blau and Hopkins state that knowledge of the Arabic script was «a rare accomplishment»⁷⁴ among Medieval Arab Jews. Commenting on the Maimonidean text, he writes:

⁷¹ See Goitein 1999.

⁷² Suleiman 2013, p. 117.

⁷³ Meeks 2002, pp. 156-157.

⁷⁴ Blau and Hopkins 1984, p. 13.

Maimonides (twelfth century) employed a language we can best call “Classical Arabic with Middle Arabic admixture” [...] in his comprehensive philosophical work *The Guide for the Perplexed*, addressed to a narrow circle from which Muslims were originally excluded, and in his Commentary to the Mishna, a work restricted, owing to its contents, to the Jewish community alone⁷⁵.

If the Commentary on the Mishneh Torah was intended, predominantly if not solely, to the Jewish community, this would suggest that the majority of the Jewish community spoke and read Judeo-Arabic. In this sense, the argument suggested by Blau gains strength, making this variety the one most accessible to the community at the time.

Geoffrey Khan reminds that Jews in Arabia have not only spoken Arabic but also composed poetry in it. He suggests that this Judaic vernacular was different in some extent from that of non-Jews «by virtue of the presence of Hebrew and Aramaic lexical elements, which were transferred, through cultural *contact*, to the non-Jewish population, and appeared in the Qur’ān and other early Arabic literature»⁷⁶. In the same vein, Hary (1992) argues that «Judeo-Arabic is not just a language, it is a Jewish language, typical of Jewish communities in the diaspora which adopted a local language and wrote it in Hebrew script with Hebrew and Aramaic elements penetrating the lexicon and the grammar»⁷⁷.

Hary’s observations point to the idea that the variety itself, in its heteroglossia, is diasporic, perpetually representing a state of exile and movement. *Dalālat al-ḥā’irīn*, as a text, moves across territories, intended to be sent in sections to Maimonides’s disciples, akin to the Geniza epistolary records. The Hebrew in which the treatise was written had to compensate for missing consonants, by using «diacritical points (as happened also, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Arabic letters when the Arabs adopted the Aramaic alphabet)»⁷⁸.

⁷⁵ Blau 1981, p. 25.

⁷⁶ Khan 2018, p. 149; emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Hary 1992, p. 105.

⁷⁸ Blau 1981, p. 34.

The original text from Commentary on the Mishneh Torah (a) and (b) displays the admixture of Arabic and Hebrew, showing not only additional diacritics to Hebrew letters, but also Arabic case markers as well as *hamza* (ء). These Arabic diacritics are also present in the *Dalālat al-ḥā'irīn*, though to a lesser extent:

- (a) ראי'ת בא'ן אתכל'ם ה'נא פי אצול כתי'רת מן אלאעתקאדאת
 رأي'ت بان اتكل'م هنا في اصول كثير' من الاعتقادات
- (b) אעל'ם א'ן אהל אלשריע'ה אכתלפ' אראה'ם , גליל'ת אלקד'ר גד'א
 اعلم ان اهل الشريعة اختلفت ارواهم , جليلة القدر جدا
- פל'ם קד'ר אללה באללפתראק ותו'גה'ת אלי ה'ת תו'גה'ת א'תארת מני תלך
 فلما قدر الله بالافتراق وتوجهت الى حيث توجهت اثار'ت مني تلك الاجتماعات عزيمة
- 79 فلما قدر الله بالافتراق وتوجهت الى حيث توجهت اثار'ت مني تلك الاجتماعات عزيمة

The extracts from Maimonides show the hybridity of signs. As Maimonides draws from two linguistic repertoires, one is inclined to conceive the linguistic practice as an instantiation of translanguaging «the selection of features from a continuous semiotic repertoire»⁸⁰. Tong-King Lee argues that translanguaging is not the alternation between two linguistic codes, devoid of meaning. Indeed, «translanguaging is informed by the notion of the translational (Lee 2015), a rhetorical figure that encapsulates various kinds of semiotic transference and border crossing [...]. The translational constitutes a space of hybridity»⁸¹.

The textual border crossing in Maimonidean texts mirrors a physical border crossing. Lee comments on the translanguaging practice as a challenge and a transcendence of borders, effectively turning them «into liminal zones of creativity and criticality»⁸². Relating the question of liminality and migration to Judeo-Arabic, Ella Shohat writes that the variety has become «a site of ethnolinguistic research into “uniquely Jewish” modes of speaking. Yet an inevitable sense of a “lost world” [...] has often relegated “Judeo Arabic language” to a vanishing uni-

⁷⁹ Friedländer 1951, p. 1; *ibidem*; Munk 2010, p. 793.

⁸⁰ Lee 2015, p. 442.

⁸¹ Ivi, p. 443.

⁸² Ivi, p. 463.

verse»⁸³. She argues that Judeo-Arabic «serves as a trope of identity, allegorizing, on a linguistic register, fraught itineraries of belonging»⁸⁴. Shohat analyses the question of Judeo-Arabic from a Bakhtinian perspective, pointing to the inherent heteroglossia and polyglossia of Arabic which intersects with «all the diverse forms of Arabic deployed by Jews»⁸⁵. The employment of Judeo-Arabic linguemes is then a manifest act of linguistic otherness, crossing between Jewishness and Arabness, and perpetually settling in neither.

The Commentary on the Mishneh Torah is indeed a «thick tapestry of interwoven sign systems» serving as an emblem of a culture of multitudes and a space of hybridity. Nevertheless, Blau maintains that Judeo-Arabic was the language of a diaspora. He argues that the use of the Hebrew script in writing in Arabic testifies to the «the barrier that separated the bulk of the Jewish population from Arab and Islamic culture»⁸⁶ despite its apparent «cultural symbiosis»⁸⁷. In fact, using «Hebrew characters, in writing Arabic, no doubt shows the partial detachment of Judaeo-Arabic culture from its environment»⁸⁸.

3.2 Later and modern Judeo-Arabic texts: Tunisian Judeo-Arabic and diglossia

Shohat comments on the perpetual displacement of the Jewish community, particularly Arab-Jews whose identity became problematic within Zionist ideology. In fact, «within Zionist ideology, the very term “Arab Jew” is an oxymoron, a conceptual impossibility»⁸⁹. Shohat points to the creation of the Mezrahi (מֶזְרָחִי “Easterner”) category as a mechanism of exclusion of the Arab-Jew.

⁸³ Shohat 2015, p. 17.

⁸⁴ Ivi, p. 19.

⁸⁵ Ivi, p. 22.

⁸⁶ Blau 1981, p. 34.

⁸⁷ See Goitein 1970.

⁸⁸ Blau 1981, p. 38.

⁸⁹ Shohat 1999, p. 6.

David Cohen (1964) examines the origins and evolution of the distinct linguistic features of Tunisian Judeo-Arabic. He establishes the historical roots of the Jewish community in Tunisia, predating the Islamic period. Archaeological evidence attests to a prosperous community in Roman times, later reinforced by deportations from Judea (after 70 CE) and other Diaspora migrations. These newcomers joined an already significant Jewish presence in Carthage, which left a lasting cultural impact, seen in the persistence of Judaic traces among some Berber tribes⁹⁰.

Yaron Tsur (1987) describes the Tunisian Jewish community as an amalgamation of natives and Livornese, creating two categories: *Touansa* (Tunisian i.e. native) and Sephardic (ספרדי). The Sephardic Jewish community in Tunisia soon became the *Grāna* (from Leghorn), and gained prominence as the merchants of *Sūq El-Grāna* (the Grana Market), still operating today. Tsur argues that the «European element became interested in stressing the difference between itself and the Arabized element of Jewish society»⁹¹. Tsur's argument is weak when examining Judeo-Arabic writings from that era. Though no apparent schism was visible, the Jewish identity adopted was Tunisian Berber rather than an Arab or European one. This renders the category of Mezrahi difficult to account for. In this respect, Tunisian Jews considered themselves natives to the land (i.e. Arabicized but not Mezrahi).

Judeo-Arabic writings were quite common in pre-colonial Tunisia, and well into the 1930s. The writings appeared in popular newspapers issued in Judeo-Arabic and Arabic or French. The first periodical of this kind was called *Al-ʿamālah al-Tūnisiyyah*, founded in 1878 by Ibrahim Taieb, three years prior to the French colonization. Other newspapers were not only in Judeo-Arabic but precisely in Judeo-Tunisian Arabic, such as *Khalt Malt* (founded by Jacob Cohen in 1910), and *El-fnār mtaʿ Tūnis* (founded by Shalom Smaja in 1910). Jacob Cohen founded another periodical in 1904, called *Al-Shams* (אֶל־שָׁמֶשׁ in Judeo-Arabic). The opening lines of the first issue (1885) of *Al-Shams* display the polyglottic nature of Judeo-

⁹⁰ See Cohen 1964.

⁹¹ Tsur 1987, p. 72.

Arabic, now infused with the Tunisian element. The political director Shalom Guetta inaugurated the issue in a Muslim manner and in Hebrew script:

(a) באסם אלה א רהמאן א רהימ. רבי אפתה לנא פתהא מבינא⁹²
 (b) بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ. اللَّهُمَّ افْتَحْ لَنَا فَتْحًا مَبِينًا⁹³

These Tunisian Judeo-Arabic texts belong to Later Judeo-Arabic and Modern Judeo-Arabic. Geoffrey Khan (2017) observes that Early Judeo-Arabic Script spelled the language according to Hebrew and Aramaic typography by unvocalizing the *lamedh* of the definite article “Al-” (אֶל) before sun letters such as in (א רהמאן). This practice had decreased significantly with Classical Judeo-Arabic Script in which the definite article was «almost always spelled morphophonematically as ’alif+lām, irrespective of its actual pronunciation»⁹⁴. Khan comments on the dialectal intrusions of spelling in medieval script. Accordingly, one may assume that such “deviations” from classical orthography in Tunisian Judeo-Arabic are not relics of an earlier script but may rather be local vernacular markers.

Daniel Hagege’s work on the spread of Judeo-Arabic Tunisian literature (fig. 1) shows a novel peculiarity to Judeo-Arabic that may be reflective of this Tunisian variety. The text “should” be written as [אֶל], being the definite article in standard Arabic [Al-]. Wagner argues that the definite article in 18th- and 19th-century Judeo-Arabic records from the Geniza continued to be realized morphophonemically. However, the cover of Hagege’s book displays an unconventional realization of the definite article – the *Aleph* and *Lamed* ligature (אֶ) that is neither-nor:

(a) אנתשארא {א} כתאיב {א} יהודייה {א} ברבריייה {א} תונסייה
 (b) انتشار الكتاب اليهودية البربرية التونسية

⁹² Hagege and Shultz 1968, p. 51.

⁹³ These prayers echo the opening verses of Surah Al-Fath (48:1).

⁹⁴ Blau and Hopkins 1984, p. 10.

Fig. 1. Cover of Daniel Hagège's *Litterature Judeo-Arabe Tunisienne* (1939)⁹⁵



Hagège also used the ligature in his long-running (1913-1933) newspaper *La Gaïté Tunisienne* (*Al-Nozhah Al-Tūnisiyyah*). Moreover, religious texts were also written in Tunisian Judeo-Arabic (e.g. “אתוארך אאסראייה” *El-twārah Al-Isrāīleyyā*⁹⁶), unlike the Hebrew religious productions of medieval Arab-Jews.

Fig. 2. Daniel Hagège, «La Gaïté Tunisienne», cover 1913⁹⁷



Not unlike for Maimonides, the script lost most of its diacritic markers, except for the occasional *naqṭ* to mark Arabic sounds. Gemination was almost always realized by double spelling, and case markers such as *tanwīn* were dropped. What marks 19th- and 20th-century Tunisian Judeo-Arabic is its writing in dialect

⁹⁵ Hagège 1939.

⁹⁶ Falah 1887.

⁹⁷ Hagège 1913.

in a quasi-uniform manner. I argue that the *Aleph* and *Lamed* ligature (אָ) was employed to signal the Tunisian pronunciation of the Arabic definite article “Al,” often syllabifying the vowel ([l]). This pronunciation is shared by Muslim Tunisians as well. Moreover, the final vowel “ah” was almost always realized as a (ה), and only realized as (ת) to match the colloquial pronunciation. The title of a Tunisian Judeo-Arabic song in (a) shows the further deviation from Classical Judeo-Arabic and its Classical Arabic emulation in (b):

(a) גָּנְאִית לְנֵאמִי חוּבְבֵךְ יֵא עֵינַאִיִּא

غناية ضناني حبك يا عينيّا

(b) אָגְנַאִיָּה אֶנְאֵמִי חֻבֵּךְ יֵא עֵינַאִי

أغنية أضناني حبك يا عيناوي⁹⁸

Hary (1992) makes the observation that Moroccan Jews distinguished their speech from Moroccan Muslims by calling their language «il-ʿarabiyya dyalna» (our Arabic) as opposed to the Arabic of the Muslims. Because the speakers of Judeo-Arabic consider it a separate tongue, this warrants its perception as a «separate ethnolect»⁹⁹. The *Aleph* and *Lamed* ligature (אָ) then serves as a lingueme flagging the juxtaposition of Arabic, Hebrew, and a Tunisian indigenous identity in one *text*.

Despite its clear vernacularization, Judeo-Arabic remained a language of multiplicity and of a diaspora evident in their self-differentiation from their Muslim compatriots as well as in their marginalization to clearly demarcated ghettos (*harat l-yihūd*; Jewish quarter). The separation is more palpable in the artistic scene of the Tunisian Jewish community, particularly during the French colonization (1881-1956), a practice that was considered inappropriate for Muslims at the time. Zubayr al-Turkī comments on the distinct phonology of Tunisian Jews, admitting that they have a separate dialect that is not fully comprehensible to Tunisian Muslims¹⁰⁰. An example of this Jewish dialect is singer Bichi Slama’s song *Khoz e-d-dibliz* (1934),

⁹⁸ Levy c. 1900.

⁹⁹ Hary 1992, p. 105.

¹⁰⁰ See Turkī 1967.

marked by a distinct pronunciation of what would be “*Khūdh il-Diblij*” (“take the bracelet”). However, several Jewish Tunisian singers using a “Muslim dialect” – such as Cheikh el-Afrit, Habiba Messika, and Raoul Journo – gained immense popularity. In Turki’s perception, these variations in Tunisian Judeo-Arabic language are a deviation or a corruption of the norm¹⁰¹.

Regardless, the Tunisian Judeo-Arabic dialect operated within a diglossic speech community, whereby the Tunisian Muslim mastered the Arabic script and the H (MSA) as well as the L (Muslim Tunisian Arabic). On the other hand, the Tunisian Jew was embedded within a sub-matrix; Tunisian Muslim Arabic was now the H variety while Tunisian Judeo-Arabic was the L variety¹⁰². In this sense, one may argue that

two linguistic registers emerged: one used among coreligionists, and another used with Muslims. No one would have thought to correct “Jewish phonetic errors” in a conversation between fellow Jews [...]. On the other hand, speaking like a Muslim among Muslims was in accordance with the natural order of things, the linguistic code¹⁰³.

The Tunisian Jew saw himself in his difference¹⁰⁴, evidenced by Hagège’s translation (1939) of “*Judeo-Arabe*” to “א היידיהיא, היירברב,” refusing to write Arab in Hebrew letters, an inconceivable antonymy¹⁰⁵. The texts of that era mirror Blau’s comments on the detachment of the Arab Jew from his Arab environment, preferring a Berber identity instead, and later on a French one for the Tunisian Jew. Figure 3 shows the headline of Zionist newspaper *Le Reveil Juif*, published in Tunisia in French between 1924 and 1940, cementing Shohat’s argument of the ideology’s refusal of an Arab Jew and his native Judeo-Arabic. The headline asks central questions related to the Tunisian Jewish identity: «What are we? Foreigners? Tunisians? We want to be “determined!”». The verb “être fixé” bears within it the absence of a stable identity and the desire to belong.

¹⁰¹ See Thomas 1991.

¹⁰² See Al-Wer 2013.

¹⁰³ Taïeb and Sayah 2003, p. 60.

¹⁰⁴ See Ivković’s linguistics of otherness.

¹⁰⁵ See Shohat 2015.

Fig. 3. Headline of *Le Reveil Juif* (5 June, 1925)¹⁰⁶

The anxiogenic nature of Judeo-Arabic¹⁰⁷ has rendered the “adoption” of an Arab identity problematic, in contrast to seeming symbiosis in Maimonidean time. The brief Nazi campaign in Tunisia prompted Tunisian Jews to migrate again, either West to France, or East, in search of another “home.” Raoul Journo, a Tunisian Jewish singer, left for France in 1965, after which he wrote one of his most popular songs, *Sellemt Fik Ya Blādī* (I let go of you, my homeland) in his native Judeo-Arabic, echoing the perpetual sense of displacement.

Conclusion

The debate over Arabic diglossia reveals deeper ideological tensions about linguistic purity and cultural legitimacy. While some scholars dismiss pre-Islamic diglossia, medieval vernacular texts from Egypt and Syria, alongside the prevalence of colloquial Arabic in non-Muslim writings challenge this narrative. This paper has argued that such denials stem from a marginalization of ethnolects like Judeo-Arabic, which disrupt the myth of Classical Arabic as a “pure” standard tied to an idealized ethnicity¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁶ «Que sommes-nous? Des étrangers? Des Tunisiens? Nous voulons être fixés!», «Le Reveil Juif», 5 June 1925, p. 1, digitized in *The Jewish Press in Arab Lands*, National Library of Israel.

¹⁰⁷ See Shohat 2015.

¹⁰⁸ See Thomas 1991.

The hybrid text of Maimonides, and Later and Modern Tunisian Judeo-Arabic texts written in Arabic with Hebrew script and diacritics, epitomize the negotiation of identity and diaspora consciousness through language. By appropriating Arabic as a Jewish language¹⁰⁹, these texts exemplify the heteroglossic strategies of Judeo-Arabic, the script's role as a *lingueme* signifying linguistic otherness and multiplicity, thus becoming a site of memory and identity. Ultimately, Judeo-Arabic is not merely a "deviant" dialect¹¹⁰, but a semiotic testament to multi-language-ism, migration and cultural hybridity.

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¹⁰⁹ See Goitein 1970.

¹¹⁰ See Al-Sharkawi 2017.

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