

The Standard Language Ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic Grammarians of the 'Abbasid Period

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a discipline, the study of Biblical Hebrew grammar began largely among Arabic-speaking Jews of the Middle Ages. While the discipline has grown and evolved since then, the legacy of these first grammarians has had a lasting impact on how Biblical Hebrew is understood and taught to this day. Moreover, it is well established that the Hebrew grammatical tradition, in many ways, grew up out of and alongside the Arabic grammatical tradition. Many of the concepts present in Hebrew grammar today have their origins in Arabic grammatical concepts of the Middle Ages. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the conceptualisation of a triliteral root and verbal stems/patterns (*binyanim*).¹ It is no wonder, then, that so much scholarship has been devoted to documenting the medieval Hebrew grammarians' understanding and conceptualisation of Hebrew grammar.

And yet, as recent linguistic and anthropological work has shown, setting down 'the grammar' of a language can be as much an ideological or political activity as an academic one. In addition to the language itself, speech communities also share beliefs and attitudes *about* that language, and these can have a dramatic impact on what forms of the language one regards as acceptable and what sort of rules one imposes on and through their descrip-

¹ It is significant to note, however, that some of the early Hebrew grammarians did not actually conceive of the root and pattern in this way. It was Ḥayyūj who championed the triliteral root in the Hebrew tradition.

tion of the language. Nevertheless, despite the relevance of language beliefs and attitudes for the foundations of grammar, more attention could still be devoted to describing the beliefs and attitudes of the early Hebrew grammarians about Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew—that is, what linguistic anthropologists would call their ‘language ideology’—in a systematic way.

Indeed, while much work has been done on the interface between Hebrew and Arabic grammar and literature in the Middle Ages, these (ideological) aspects of language have yet to be treated theoretically or systematically, and are usually only discussed in isolation and/or as they relate to other wider topics. This less trodden area of scholarship is all the more apparent when we consider the fact that it may not have been only grammatical concepts or literary genres that the medieval Hebrew grammarians inherited from the Arabic grammatical tradition, but a way of thinking about language as well. If this is the case, then understanding the language ideology—rather, ideologies—of the Hebrew grammarians of the Middle Ages is essential to understanding the nature of their grammatical work and the wider sociolinguistic contexts in which it was carried out. It may even cause us to reconsider how we regard and interpret their grammatical descriptions of the language, which have come to impact many subsequent generations of students and scholars of Biblical Hebrew.

In this book, then, we will consider aspects of language ideology that appear to be shared between the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians of the Middle Ages, in particular those who were

active during the ‘Abbasid period. The corpus will primarily include introductions to various Hebrew grammatical treatises—or works that somehow relate to language—written by Hebrew grammarians. Because this book intends a comparison with the medieval Arabic language ideology, the corpus will be limited to those Hebrew grammarians who composed their works in Judeo-Arabic during the ‘Abbasid period (750–1258 CE), which witnessed the most significant developments for the codification of grammar in both traditions. Such a study is significant in that it sheds further light on the relationship between the language ideologies of the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians, whether that relationship is best described as one resulting from direct influence or merely as one resulting from a common language culture. It also places the ideological history of the Hebrew grammatical tradition within its wider (Arabic) cultural and sociolinguistic contexts.

After a brief overview of previous scholarship on the interface between Hebrew and Arabic grammar and literature in the Middle Ages (chapter 2), we will introduce the concept of language ideology as a theoretical framework (chapter 3). In particular, we will describe certain features of what has come to be regarded as a ‘standard language ideology’ (chapter 3, §2.1). This will serve as the analytical framework through which we will then treat several shared features of a standard language ideology among the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians. While more similarities could be found, we focus on six key points of ideological similarity in this book. First, we consider language as a cultural possession of its speakers (chapter 4, §1.0). Second, we look at

how certain ‘exemplary speakers’ of a fixed ancient corpus of texts serve as the standard for determining proper language use (chapter 4, §2.0). Third, we look at the ‘fieldwork’ *topos* of the grammarians venturing out ‘off the beaten path’ to find reliable contemporary informants (chapter 4, §3.0). Fourth, we call attention to the performative contexts with which the grammarians associate language use (chapter 5, §1.0). Fifth, we outline how the genesis of grammar is portrayed as a response to the deterioration of language proficiency among the masses (chapter 5, §2.0). Finally, we examine the negative attitude of the grammarians towards foreign languages and their influence on language proficiency (chapter 5, §3.0). Taken all together, these various strands of ideological similarity cohere to form what may be termed, following Milroy (2001, 530–31), a ‘standard language culture’ in each grammatical tradition.

While it lies beyond the scope of the present work to treat any of these topics comprehensively, this overview will demonstrate that the Arabic grammatical tradition influenced far more than the grammatical terms and concepts that would develop in the Hebrew grammatical tradition. Rather, it had a profound impact on the early Hebrew grammarians’ beliefs and attitudes about language and their language heritage itself. In turn, these beliefs and attitudes about the Hebrew language shaped how they described and established the grammar thereof.