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# The Standard Language Ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic Grammarians of the ʿAbbasid Period

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Cover image: A fragment of an unidentified dual-script (Hebrew and Arabic) grammatical-exegetical discussion from the Cairo Genizah (Cambridge University Library, T-S Ar. 31.26). Courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

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# 6. CONCLUSIONS

This book is not meant to be a comprehensive treatment of the language ideology of the medieval Hebrew grammarians who wrote in Judeo-Arabic. Nor does it even remotely attempt to be a substantial treatment of the language ideology of the Arabic grammarians of the Middle Ages. What we have focused on are lines of striking similarity between the language ideologies of the respective traditions during the ʿAbbasid period: language as a cultural possession (see chapter 4, §1.0), proper language determined by an ancient corpus (see chapter 4, §2.0), the 'fieldwork' *topos* (see chapter 4, §3.0), a performative register of language (see chapter 5, §1.0), the complaint tradition (see chapter 5, §2.0), and a negative attitude towards foreign languages (see chapter 5, §3.0).

These trends all serve to maintain and perpetuate a cohesive standard language ideology. By referring to the language as belonging to the 'Hebrews' or 'Arabs' (see chapter 4, §1.0), the language is affirmed as a cultural possession (see chapter 3, §2.1.1). Nevertheless, at least in the period during which most of the grammarians examined in this book conducted their work, these monikers refer not to the grammarians' contemporaries but rather to exemplary speakers of the past and ancient (sacred) corpora. The standard language is thus historicised (see chapter 3, §2.1.8) and conceived of as an abstract entity that exists outside of native speakers (see chapter 3, §2.1.3); as such, its proper form must be learned. The grammarians must thus make judgments regarding 'correct' or 'proper' language use (see chapter 4, §2.0).

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The role of the grammarian as language evaluator also implicitly serves to guide the process of enregisterment with respect to what and whom should be elevated as exemplary sources and speakers. One notable element in which this becomes instantiated is the 'fieldwork' *topos* in which the grammarians must venture out into a particular setting to collect linguistic examples from exemplary speakers among the commonfolk of a particular demographic, whether those chatting in the streets of Tiberias or the Bedouin of the desert (see chapter 4, §3.0). Overall, however, exemplary sources are characterised by the linguistic style of the ancient corpus, which is associated with performance language found in sacred texts, poetry, and speeches (see chapter 3, §3.0; chapter 5, §1.0). Someone proficient in the linguistic register of the sacred text (and ancient corpus) is thus regarded *faṣīḥ*. When surveying their own nation in the present day, however, the grammarians express grief at the widespread neglect of the language, as in the 'complaint tradition' (see chapter 3, §§2.1.4–2.1.5; chapter 5, §2.0). The emergence of grammar, which is a form of 'maintenance' of the standard language (see chapter 3, §§2.1.6–2.1.7), comes as a response to such widespread neglect. Over time, this complaint tradition takes on an ethnic sentiment (see chapter 3, §2.1.2), in which the influx of foreigners and/or foreign languages are regarded as a threat and negative influence on the purity of the standard language (see chapter 5, §3.0).

Such lines of similarity could have come about in a variety of ways. While they might be the result of direct influence or a wider shared cultural framework, it is also possible that they

merely reflect general trends common in standard language cultures. After all, the whole idea of a culture being possessed of a standard language ideology is that it can be characterised by a number of particular trends that arise in such settings. The idea that the language of a sacred text is treated as a cultural possession, for example, is hardly unique to Jewish or Arab culture. The same applies to complaining that the wider population has neglected the canonical standard language of the society. In fact, this is probably the case for most general aspects of a shared standard language ideology treated in this book.

At the same time, however, we should not overlook the specific details of how these six similar elements of a standard language ideology were instantiated in each of the societies. When we consider how sharply the ideology of the Hebrew grammarians often mirrors that of the Arabic grammarians, it would be plausible to posit at least a shared cultural framework—if not direct influence—as the best explanation for the similarity. Indeed, sometimes the specific instantiation of an element of standard language ideology is just too similar to be chalked up to mere parallel development. This is especially the case when the shared ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians of the ʿAbbasid period appears to conflict with the ideology of earlier Hebrew poets, etc. Indeed, there are at least several cases where we may suggest that the language ideology evidenced in the Arabic grammarians was transferred to and/or absorbed by the Hebrew grammarians who wrote in Judeo-Arabic during the ʿAbbasid period.

First, although the idea that the language of a sacred text would be a cultural possession and its grammar set the standard

for exemplary speakers is not unique to Jewish or Arab culture, the way in which this ideology takes shape and comes to be presented in the Hebrew grammarians is telling in a number of respects. When the grammarian has to judge which non-biblical poetry is eloquent, the specific language used—right down to the verbal root—exhibits a high degree of similarity across the traditions. Saadia, for example, may choose to cite someone מן כאן קולה **מרצ֫יא** (≈ من كان قوله **مرضيا**) 'whose saying **was pleasing**' and Sībawayh hears linguistic examples ممن عربيته **ترضى** 'from one whose Arabic **is pleasing**' (see chapter 4, §§1.0–2.0).

Moreover, the ideology surrounding what is determined by the Hebrew grammarians as acceptable or eloquent language for Hebrew poetry may also reflect influence from the ideology of the Arabic tradition. Prior to the emergence of Hebrew grammar towards the end of the first millennium, there was already a thriving and dynamic liturgical poetic tradition known as *piyyuṭ*. Although it was similar to Biblical Hebrew or Rabbinic Hebrew in many ways, it had its own distinct style that continued to develop over time. Some of its most characteristic non-biblical elements include regular rhyme and the extension of rare analogically derived morphology (Rand 2013; Rand 2014). It is striking, then, when Hebrew grammarians like Ḥayyūj correct 'mistakes' in the analogically formed conjugations of weak verbs (chapter 5, §2.1.2), which otherwise might be at home in *piyyuṭ*. Moreover, even though Saadia is willing on occasion to praise the poetry of famous *payṭanim* (e.g., Yose ben Yose, Yannai, Eleazar, Yehoshua, Phinehas), his own idea of what constitutes the best poetry is clearly characterised by a close imitation of biblical

style (see chapter 4, §2.1.3; chapter 5, §2.1.1). This movement away from a more diverse poetic tradition to stricter imitation of biblical style may be due to the influence of the ideology of the Arabic tradition, in which the *Qurʾān* and pre-Islamic poetry—though not without internal diversity, much more alike than Biblical Hebrew and *Payṭanic* Hebrew—serve as the corpus for the standard language. This may have swayed some of the Hebrew grammarians to an ideology that required poetry be composed in the 'classical' language.

Second, although a variety of opinions exist regarding the so-called 'fieldwork' motif exhibited in ʿEli ben Yehudah ha-Nazir, a strong case has been made that it is at least partly influenced by the literary *topos* attested in the Arabic tradition of seeking Bedouin informants in the desert. Even if ʿEli ben Yehudah was merely listening to a Hebrew component in the Aramaic vernacular and Hebrew liturgical recitation, he still frames his 'fieldwork' as sitting פי סאחאת טבריה ושוארעהא (≈ في ساحات طبرية وشوارعها) 'in the squares and streets of Tiberias' and listening to כלאם אלסוקה ואלעאמה (≈ كلام السوقة والعامة) 'the speech of the commonfolk and the general populace'. It is thus the elevation of the linguistic prestige of the commonfolk of a particular demographic—rather than that of scholars—that may reflect some infiltration of the literary *topos* of the Arabic tradition. Just as the Arabic grammarians elevate the linguistic status of the Bedouin, so too ʿEli ben Yehudah ha-Nazir and other Hebrew grammarians set up the commonfolk of Tiberias as an exemplary source for linguistic data. In each tradition, the geography of the respective

locales is even credited for the pure language of their inhabitants (see chapter 4, §3.0).

Third, even though the practical purpose of the Hebrew grammarians' work was biblical literacy, they sometimes frame their work as addressing deficiencies in a productive performance language culture. On occasion, such framings resemble how the Arabic grammatical tradition presents the performance language culture of *kalām al-ʿarab*. Note that the contexts in which the people make grammatical errors with weak verbs cited by Ḥayyūj (see chapter 5, §1.1.2), namely في خطبهم وأشعارهم 'in their speeches and poems', is reminiscent of al-Khalīl's association of *kalām al-ʿarab* with أشعار 'poems', أمثال 'proverbs', and مخاطبات 'formal speeches' (see chapter 5, §1.2.1). In reality, Hebrew speeches delivered in the synagogue and liturgical poetry were probably closer in style to Rabbinic Hebrew and *Payṭanic* Hebrew than Biblical Hebrew—and had been for a long time. The sudden emphasis on conforming speeches and poetry to biblical style might thus be a result of exposure to the Arabic grammatical tradition. In other words, while associating *al-ʿarabiyya* with contemporary performance contexts was a more organic element of Arabic language ideology, expecting productive performances in Biblical Hebrew style marked a sudden shift in what the linguistic practice and expectations of the Hebrew tradition had been for many centuries. This sudden shift may thus betray the strong presence of language ideologies endemic to the Arabic tradition. Though not afforded much more than a passing comment in the present book, the trend of advocating for everyday speech to be

carried out in the standard language—or lamenting that it was not—is also relevant for this point.

Fourth, and finally, while the complaint tradition is common in standard language cultures, there are a few elements of its instantiation in the Hebrew and Arabic grammatical traditions that likely point to ideological influence of the latter on the former. In each tradition, the emergence of grammar is presented as a response to the deterioration or neglect of the standard language in performance contexts. The grammarians thus seek to restore to the people their bygone *faṣāḥa* 'eloquence'—synonymous with the linguistic register and style of the 'classical' language (see chapter 5, §2.0). Moreover, in the writings of numerous of the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians, the complaint tradition takes on an additional aspect in which neglect of the language is blamed on the influx of foreigners and/or foreign languages (see chapter 5, §3.0). In both traditions, we even find a lexical opposition between *ʿajam* 'foreigners' and *fuṣaḥāʾ* 'those that are eloquent'. While a negative attitude towards foreign languages is common in standard language cultures, the close parallels between the two traditions are striking.

Perhaps the most obvious evidence of Arabic ideological influence in the complaint tradition, however, is found in a passage from *Sefer Ha-Egron*. There, Saadia himself references an Arabic grammarian—possibly Abū al-ʿAbbās Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā, also known as Thaʿlab (d. 904 CE)—not as a source for terminology, concepts, or theory, but rather as analogous to his own context and mission (see chapter 5, §2.1.1). At the very least in this example, then, we have direct evidence of an Arabic grammarian

influencing how a Hebrew grammarian conceives of and presents his own work within his own context.

We know that the Hebrew grammarians regularly read and utilised the Arabic grammarians in their own writings (see chapter 2, §2.0), even if much of the work done in this area has focused on grammatical terms and concepts. It is entirely plausible, then, that the striking ideological similarities covered in this short book indicate that elements of the Arabic grammatical tradition absorbed into the Hebrew grammatical tradition include not only terms and concepts but a culture and language ideology as well.

We should be cautious, however, in drawing too many conclusions from the selective comparison presented in this book, which is by no means comprehensive. Given the scope of the present work, it would be difficult to prove anything more than that the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians of the ʿAbbasid period had a similar or shared cultural framework regarding language. Proving direct influence would require a much more careful historical analysis of the social, cultural, and educational contexts of each of the grammarians treated. It would also likely have to consider a rich diversity of ideologies within each tradition. Nevertheless, the present work has called attention to important aspects of a standard language ideology that appear to be shared, right down to nuanced details, between the Hebrew and Arabic grammatical traditions.

Given the increasing interest in the relevance of language ideology for its impact on academic research, we should also consider how the discipline of Hebrew Grammar—as we moderns

have inherited it—might still bear the imprint of the medieval Hebrew grammarians' language ideology. The treatment of loanwords, the description of verbal morphology with analogical root variation, and the systematisation of internal linguistic diversity are a few examples in which this impact may still be felt. That Biblical Hebrew has seen far more grammatical treatments published on it than either *Payṭanic* or Medieval Hebrew may also, to an extent, be traced back to the Hebrew grammarians' standard language ideology.

The presentation of 'Biblical Hebrew' as a uniform entity may also be regarded as ideologically driven, given the internal diversity within the corpus and the rich diversity of oral reading traditions. In fact, the equivalence drawn between the Tiberian vocalisation tradition and 'Biblical Hebrew' is itself a legacy of the standard language ideology of medieval Hebrew grammarians like Ḥayyūj. That modern translations of the Bible are based on the Tiberian vocalisation rather than the Babylonian vocalisation is also, at least in part, due to the language ideology of scholars who thought like al-Qirqisānī. That most students and scholars in Biblical Studies rely primarily on the Tiberian tradition for their research is also a fruit of this inherited culture.

Endeavouring to understand the language ideology and culture of the medieval Hebrew grammarians is thus not merely an academic exercise meant to shed light on the thought patterns of medieval scholars. Rather, given the unbroken link between the medieval Hebrew grammarians, early modern grammars like that of Gesenius, and contemporary Biblical Hebrew grammars and linguistic research, we should also constantly be considering how

the legacy of the medieval Hebrew grammarians' language ideology might be part of our own academic inheritance as well.