

Introduction

Lily Kahn

This volume is devoted to the diverse array of spoken and written language varieties that have been employed by Jews in the Diaspora from antiquity until the twenty-first century. The volume grew out of a UCL Institute of Jewish Studies two-day conference dedicated to Jewish languages held in July 2016. The conference and the resulting volume are the product of an increasing recognition in recent years of Jewish languages and linguistics as an important field of academic enquiry. This heightened awareness is evidenced by the establishment in 2013 of Brill's *Journal of Jewish Languages*, a peer-reviewed forum for theoretical and descriptive research into historical and present-day Jewish linguistic varieties, and by the recent or forthcoming publication of several volumes providing systematic overviews of Jewish languages, namely Kahn and Rubin (2016), Hary and Benor (2018), and Edzard and Tirosh-Becker (2018), in addition to a number of studies devoted to more overarching and theoretical issues relating to Jewish languages such as Myhill (2004), Benor and Spolsky (2006), Benor (2008), and Spolsky (2014).

The present volume is designed to complement the above works by examining a number of particular issues relating to individual historical and current Jewish language varieties, while simultaneously highlighting a range of broader themes that can be seen to emerge from the specific case studies. The volume is divided into five parts, each showcasing a different aspect of the history of Diaspora Jewish languages and each drawing attention to different wider concerns relating to them. The five parts are devoted to the following themes: Jewish languages in dialogue with sacred Jewish texts; Jewish languages in contact with the co-territorial non-Jewish languages; Jewish vernacular traditions; the status of Jewish languages in the twenty-first century; and theoretical issues relating to Jewish language research.

Part 1, Jewish Languages and Sacred Texts, examines the close relationship between the Hebrew Bible and vernacular Jewish languages, as well as the production of new sacred Jewish texts in these languages. It underscores the continuous engagement between Jewish languages and sacred texts in different historical and cultural contexts. This engagement can take the form of a) new sacred texts composed in Jewish languages and b) the translation of Hebrew sacred texts into Jewish vernaculars. Aramaic set the trend for both these types of textual production, as Alinda Damsma shows us in her survey of the history of scholarship on the Aramaic of the Zohar (a central text of Jewish mysticism believed to have been composed in thirteenth-century Spain) and its relationship to earlier forms of Aramaic from Palestine and Babylonia used in the composition of the Targums (Aramaic expansive translations of the Hebrew Bible). Damsma's contribution is complemented by Henryk Jankowski's overview of the history of translations of the Hebrew Bible into Crimean Karaim, a Turkic language variety used by the Karaite community in the Crimea. Jankowski's article includes a discussion of translation strategies observable in Karaim Bible translations, and highlights the ways in which these often resemble those found in the Targums (e.g. avoidance of anthropomorphism in descriptions of God). Together, Damsma and Jankowski show us how Jewish vernacular and literary traditions from very different linguistic, historical, and geographical settings contribute to an ongoing dialogue with the Hebrew Bible and to the enrichment of the Jewish textual canon.

Part 2, Jewish Languages in Contact, considers some of the ways in which Jewish languages have interacted with and contributed to the languages of the surrounding non-Jewish cultures, as well as the ways in which the use of code switching can serve as a vehicle for negotiating Jewish identity. As in the case of Aramaic and Karaim, here two languages from

very different contexts – medieval Judeo-Arabic from the Cairo Genizah and Yiddish in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungary – serve as case studies illustrating these broader points. Meira Polliack examines the sociolinguistic implications of the use of single-script mixed-code (Hebrew and Arabic) texts from the Cairo Genizah, arguing that Judeo-Arabic functioned as a marker of cultural difference and that the manipulation of Hebrew or Arabic script in addition to code switching within a single text allowed Jews to express complex nuances of identity, designating the role of the writers and intended audiences as distinct from the surrounding majority culture. Szonja Komoróczy addresses similar issues in her article on the linguistic shift that Hungarian Jews underwent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereby Yiddish was gradually abandoned in favour of Hungarian. In the decades after it ceased to be a vernacular, traces of Yiddish continued to be attested in the speech of Hungarian Jews, and the language was often associated with particular social contexts, frequently appearing in satirical writing and in ironic settings, with code switching featured prominently as a technique for achieving a comic effect. Polliack and Komoróczy draw attention to the prominence of bilingualism in the context of Jewish linguistic practices, and underscore the fact that the use of different language varieties is intrinsically intertwined with different aspects of Diaspora Jewish cultural identity.

Part 3, *Jewish Vernacular Traditions*, focuses on Diaspora Jewish spoken languages, which have typically received little attention in comparison with the literary varieties mentioned above. The articles in this section again examine two very different speech forms – Jewish Berber from Morocco’s Atlas Mountains, and Jewish vernacular dialects from Italy – which together reveal some key wider points about oral Jewish languages. Rachid Ridouane provides an overview of the history and linguistic structure of Jewish Berber, highlighting the very close linguistic relationship between it and non-Jewish varieties of the language. This similarity is underscored by the close and enduring relationship between Berber-speaking Jews and Muslims in Morocco; the distinctive features of Jewish Berber are most highly concentrated in the domain of phonology. Ridouane’s survey of Jewish Berber is complemented by Maria Maddalena Colasuonno’s detailed examination of the phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical characteristics of various nineteenth-century Judeo-Italian spoken dialects (which, when written, employed the Latin alphabet). Colasuonno demonstrates that many of the Jewish dialects of Italian exhibit archaizing features when compared to their co-territorial non-Jewish counterparts; these can be attributed to the fact that throughout much of the period in which these dialects developed, the Italian Jews lived in relative social isolation from speakers of the corresponding non-Jewish dialects. (The presence of archaisms can be considered a typical characteristic of Jewish languages; see Spolsky and Benor 2006 and Benor 2008: 1072.) The juxtaposition of Ridouane’s and Colasuonno’s contributions is instructive as it illustrates the sociolinguistic variety found among vernacular Jewish languages: while Jewish Berber speakers enjoyed a close relationship and greater linguistic similarity with their non-Jewish neighbours, Jewish speakers of Italian dialects were typically more culturally distant from their non-Jewish counterparts, and this is reflected in their language. These two articles also highlight the broader issue of co-territoriality in Jewish languages. While three of the most prominent Jewish languages, Yiddish, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Aramaic (as composed by Jews living in Europe) have been geographically isolated from their non-Jewish sister languages throughout much of their history, Jewish Berber and Judeo-Italian are more typical Jewish languages in that they have traditionally been spoken in the same geographical region as the corresponding non-Jewish varieties. (See Benor 2008: 1070 for discussion of the issue of co-territoriality in Jewish languages.) Colasuonno’s work also highlights a broader theme in Jewish interlinguistics, namely the transmission of elements from one Diaspora Jewish language to another: thus, Judeo-Italian contains lexical elements derived from Ladino (as well as from Aramaic and Hebrew). Finally, Ridouane’s and Colasuonno’s contributions highlight

the important point that, although the use of Hebrew script is typically considered a salient feature of Jewish languages (as in the case of Aramaic, Karaim, Yiddish, and Judeo-Arabic), it is not always a necessary precondition for a language to be regarded as 'Jewish'; thence, in the varieties of Berber and Italian spoken by Jews we can see distinctive Jewish features despite the absence of Hebrew script (see Kahn and Rubin: 3 for further discussion of this point).

Part 4, *The Status of Jewish Languages in the Twenty-First Century*, focuses on the current position of Yiddish and Ladino, thereby drawing attention to a number of broader issues relating to endangered languages in the present day. Hilary Pomeroy provides a survey of the linguistic and literary history of Ladino before assessing the combination of factors, including the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, negative self-perception by speakers, the increasing dominance of French as a prestige language, and the decimation of speakers in the Holocaust, that led to the almost complete demise of Ladino in the twentieth century, and resulted in the present-day situation whereby the language is rarely spoken in the home or passed on to the younger generation. However, recent scholarly efforts to promote it have led to a resurgence of interest with a variety of academic programmes and initiatives aimed at fostering research in the field; this new development is a noteworthy one that sees the prestige accorded the language rising in tandem with its very demise as a vernacular. The role that speaker attitudes played in hastening the decline of Ladino has striking parallels in the fate of Yiddish in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Helen Beer examines this issue in depth, discussing the historical and contemporary marginalization of Yiddish (often by its own speakers) and the dichotomy between popular conceptions of the language as little more than a vehicle for jokes and curses with the reality of its vibrant and diverse literary and cultural legacy. She provides an overview of the CYSHO Yiddish school movement in interwar Poland as a case study of the richness of twentieth-century Yiddish-language cultural activity. Pomeroy's and Beer's contributions highlight the remarkable similarities in the trajectories of Yiddish and Ladino. The most prominent examples of non-co-territorial Jewish languages, both flourished in a geographical area distant from those in which they first emerged, developed an extremely rich oral and literary culture, and had an extensive speaker base, but over the course of the twentieth century became severely endangered. To varying extents, both languages have come to embody the phenomenon of post-vernacularity (see Shandler 2004 for discussion of this phenomenon with respect to Yiddish; see also Myhill 2004), whereby in the absence of large numbers of native speakers they have acquired certain stereotypical connotations. In the case of Yiddish, these connotations are often negative and trivializing, whereas in the case of Ladino they are more often linked to a positive expression of Sephardic identity, but in both cases the languages have become heavily loaded symbols of cultural nostalgia.

Finally, part 5, *Theoretical Approaches to Jewish Languages*, brings a more overarching perspective to our understanding of Diaspora communication systems and explicitly engages with the wider linguistic issues that they exemplify. One important such theme is the issue of mutual intelligibility: with notably few exceptions (e.g. Yiddish), the Jewish languages examined in this volume are completely, or largely, mutually intelligible with their co-territorial non-Jewish counterparts, despite the existence of certain distinctive phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical features within them. This mutual intelligibility raises the broader theoretical question of whether and to what extent these Jewish varieties can be termed 'languages' separate from their non-Jewish sister varieties. Esther-Miriam Wagner tackles this theoretical question by considering the case of modern Arabic as spoken by Jews. Pointing out that there is typically no clear-cut distinction between Jewish vernacular forms of Arabic and Christian or Muslim ones, Wagner highlights the fact that the boundaries between ethnolect, dialect, and language are often informed primarily by social, cultural, and political considerations rather than linguistic ones. The final contribution to the volume, by Frank Alvarez-Pereyre, draws together many of the issues raised in the other contributions and

situates them within a broader historical theoretical framework by providing a thorough overview of the history of Jewish interlinguistics and presenting a number of key typological points which should be taken into account in the analysis of Jewish languages.

Jewish Languages in Historical Perspective thus provides the reader with a number of in-depth case studies of various aspects of Jewish linguistic culture over the past two millennia, which together allow us to draw a number of broader observations regarding Jewish languages in general. Firstly, Jewish languages are often used as vehicles for engagement with Jewish sacred texts. Secondly, Jewish languages are typically spoken co-territorially with a closely related non-Jewish language; some of the most prominent Jewish languages, namely Yiddish, Ladino, and Aramaic, are exceptions to this trend. Thirdly, Jewish languages are often characterized by not only lexis deriving from Hebrew, but also from other Diaspora Jewish languages, as evidenced by the existence of Ladino elements in Judeo-Italian dialects. Fourthly, the use of Hebrew script is often, but not always, a defining feature of Jewish languages. Fifthly, Jewish languages, including the most well-known varieties, Yiddish and Ladino, are currently in a serious state of endangerment and often suffer from neglect including by their own heritage speakers. Sixthly, the high degree of mutual intelligibility between many Jewish languages and their non-Jewish sister languages raises wider theoretical questions regarding the nature of these languages, and how they may best be regarded from a linguistic, rather than cultural or political, standpoint. A final overarching theme emerging from the volume is that there is still a need for further investigation of the history, characteristics, and roles of the languages of the Jewish Diaspora. This is exemplified perhaps most tellingly in the fact that, as Beer argues, Yiddish, the largest Jewish language in terms of speaker numbers and diversity of literary production, is still the subject of much misinformation, and its literary riches remain very much under-examined. It is hoped that this volume will contribute to an enhanced understanding of the significance of Jewish languages as a field of enquiry.

References

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