Book Reviews

OLSZOWY-SCHLANGER, Judith and César MECHÁN-HAMANN. 2024. *Jewish Languages and Book Culture*. Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing. 256 pages. ISBN 978-1851246328.

Jews throughout the diaspora have been compelled to adopt the languages of their hosts, while maintaining a foothold in their original language of Hebrew.[1] Because, among other reasons, they were often restricted from

1. Hebrew, the Northwest Semitic Language that dates back some three thousand years and makes up most of the Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, has always bound the Jewish people together as a nation no matter how scattered they've been largely because of expulsions by others, including the major exiles of antiquity, the last perpetrated by the Roman Empire, which in 70 CE destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and in 135 CE defeated the final Jewish rebellion against it, the Bar Kokhba revolt, leaving the Jews in some combination of forced exile from their native Eretz Yisrael (אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל), or Land of Israel, and captivity and subjugation — they've always maintained a continuous presence there — "effectively [ending] Jewish state history in antiquity" (SACHAR 2013, 18–20; JOHNSON 1987, 143; see also SCHEINDLIN 2000, 25–49 for a brief account of the origins of the Jewish diaspora). While Hebrew, long referred to as *leshon ha-kodesh* (לְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ), 'the holy tongue', then began to wane in use as a spoken language, it continued to be used as a written language for religious and pedagogical purposes (GLINERT 2018, 41–42). It was fully revived as a spoken language as a direct result of a renewed Zionism in the nineteenth century, which gave Jews hope — as they continued to experience oppression and horrors throughout the diaspora, most tragically the Russian pogroms — for a safe and welcome place of their own in their native homeland, and ultimately saw Hebrew prevail over Yiddish to become the linguistic symbol of that envisioned restoral of self-determination (JOHNSON 1987, 374–75; HALKIN 2002). The linguist Eliezer ben Yehuda, who'd immigrated to Jerusalem during the First Aliyah (1882–1903) — the first major wave of Jewish immigration to Eretz Yisrael, then controlled by the Ottoman Empire — was the principal advocate for the adoption of Hebrew, and as more and more Jews in Eretz Yisrael adopted it, including those who'd been there already and those who immigrated there during the First and subsequent Aliyot, Hebrew proved most practical and viable in modern life (JOHNSON 1987, 540). In 1922 it was recognized by the British Mandate as an official language of the region, along with Arabic and English. And in 1948 it

fully integrating into the societies of their hosts before the emancipation,[2] they developed dialects of these host languages. And the dialects came to differ from other dialects of the same languages to varying extents (Benor n.d.). These dialects are called Jewish languages.[3]

In a set of expository essays, *Jewish Languages and Book Culture* celebrates this long history of linguistic creativity by showcasing several Jewish languages in all their variety and richness. Its authors comment on a slew of relevant manuscripts and printed documents in the Bodleian Library from antiquity to the emancipation. And they explain that the book culture indicated by this impressive collection blurred the lines between texts of daily social life and religious, exegetical, and philosophical texts, resulting in an alternative to the *diglossia* of diasporic Jewish communities that saw vernacular languages used for the former 'low' category of texts and Hebrew for the latter 'high' category of texts (7–8, 3).

The editors of the book, Judith Olszowy-Schlanger and César Mechán-Hamann, organize it according to the different Jewish languages they chose to highlight, six of seventeen extant in the Bodleian: Aramaic (or Judeo-Aramaic), Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, Judeo-French, Judeo-Italian, and Yiddish, in that order. But they could have organized it, to a different effect, by the degrees to which Jewish languages are independent linguistic entities. All Jewish languages contain elements of Hebrew or Aramaic, are written in Hebrew letters, and began as dialects of other languages. But sometimes these dialects evolved so much they became unintelligible to speakers of their related dialects. And other Jewish languages did not (2).

The fully independent Jewish languages of the first category emerged in Jewish communities as they continued to migrate from their early diasporic homes. These languages often retained ancient features of their originating languages, even as those originating languages gradually lost those features over time. The editors aptly apply the term *language*

---

became an official language, along with Arabic, of the modern Jewish state, the State of Israel, upon its founding, and now it is spoken by millions worldwide.

2. The Jewish emancipation took place between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was the process by which discriminatory laws and other forms of sanctioned restriction against Jews that had been in place for centuries in Europe were gradually lifted: see Sorkin 2019 for a comprehensive account of the Jewish emancipation and Johnson 1987, 311–421 for a brief one.
3. Today, some Jewish languages are extinct, and many that aren't are endangered, but according to Sarah Benor (n.d.) this endangerment "has led to some 'postvernacular engagement' — people interacting with and celebrating a language even when they have limited speaking ability".

museum to these Jewish languages because they hold linguistic artifacts of the history of other languages (2–3).

Yiddish is one example. It arose around the tenth century in Jewish communities living in German-speaking regions, and was influenced by Hebrew, Aramaic, and Romance languages, as Oren Cohen Roman informs us (159).[4] But it spread to Eastern Europe, where it met Slavic languages, while carrying with it early features of German that are no longer part of German (3). Roman makes a point to say further that what we call Yiddish today was in the past called German by nineteenth-century scholars who failed to acknowledge or recognize distinctive traits in it. As modern scholarship shows, it not only contained these traits that distinguish it from German — and it did so well before the time of these scholars — but also came in a written standard, which "dictated the misuse of Slavic borrowings", Roman says, that united western and eastern dialects (160). If anything, perhaps certain aspects of it may be said to be more German than German, given its status as a language museum. The Yiddish manuscripts Roman exhibits from the Bodleian's collection range in date from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, and he discusses certain ones falling into the categories of liturgy and bible translations, ethical guides, belles-lettres, and remedy books. Yiddish manuscripts, he also importantly observes, were sometimes written for and by women and were owned by women, serving, as other Jewish language texts did, to break down gender divides in Jewish book culture (165–75).

With printed Yiddish, from the early days of printing onward, comes material knowledge about the Jewish printing process in Ashkenazi culture — paratexts list sellers and craftsmen, provide information about printers and authors, and describe the lives of patrons (181–82). The less educated, who had little knowledge of Hebrew, enjoyed exposure to age-old religious writings via printed Yiddish translations, adaptations, rewritings, and compilations of these writings, though they still often had to go to the private libraries of rabbis and other distinguished community members to access them (183). The Bodleian has over ninety Yiddish translations of

4. See Shandler 2020, 6–16 for a discussion of the history of various theories about the precise origins of the language, none of which are definitive, although most of which accept the basic model of Max Weinreich that "conceptualizes Yiddish as a discrete language from the start, distinguished by the established practice of diaspora Jews forging their own vernaculars through contact with their neighbors' languages . . . [r]ather than positioning Yiddish as diverging from medieval German" (Shandler 2020, 10).

the Hebrew Bible and over two hundred editions of Yiddish prayer books. It also houses a great deal of mystical texts written in Yiddish, and as Jean Baumgarten explains in this chapter on the theme of printed Yiddish as a mirror of Ashkenazi culture, "the popularization and vernacularization of Kabbalah encouraged the reception and propagation of dissident, even heretical, trends such as Sabbateanism and, in the eighteenth century, the pietistic practices of Hasidism" (199). Printed Yiddish also reflected increasing secularization of Ashkenazi Jews, who incorporated qualities of the literature of neighboring cultures into their writings (196). In the nineteenth century, a secular Yiddish book trade thrived among Eastern European Jews, helping to increase the language's usage (Johnson 1987, 338). Some eleven million out of about sixteen and a half million Jews in the world spoke Yiddish at its peak just before the Holocaust, during which about six million Jews, including half of all Yiddish speakers in the world, were murdered by the Nazi German regime (Rojanski 2020, 3; Shandler 2020, 117). And subsequently, Yiddish usage sharply declined even further, but it's still very much alive today, with about six hundred thousand Yiddish speakers in the world ("Yiddish FAQs" n.d.).

Ladino achieved independent status as well, and it, too, serves as a language museum. Before the 1492 Alhambra Decree, which forced the Jews of Spain to either convert to Christianity or leave and was the culmination of years of religious persecution against them, a written language called Ladino had congealed in Jewish communities. It was mainly used as a calque language for word-by-word translations of the Hebrew Bible into Old Spanish, but some scholars have argued that it differs enough from the local vernaculars spoken by these Jews that it constitutes something more (93). Regardless, after 1492, when Jews who wished to continue practicing their religion migrated to the Ottoman Empire and parts of Europe outside of Spain, it perforce evolved into its own language (107). It consists of mostly Old Spanish words and is governed essentially by Spanish grammar, but mixed into its lexicon are words from Hebrew, Aramaic, Turkish, and other languages.[5] As a language museum, it also retains certain linguistic features of Iberian Romance languages that modern Spanish does not (2). In *Jewish Languages and Book Culture*, Esperanza Alfonso mainly traces and comments on the Bodleian's collection of Ladino medieval and early modern manuscripts that come in the form of translations and glosses of

5. See Bunis 2018, especially sections 2 and 3, for a discussion of Ladino's historical development, linguistic structures, influences, and features that make it an independent language.

sacred texts as well as liturgical texts (93–105). Katja Šmid presents a variety of post-medieval Ladino manuscripts — medical manuscripts, a family letter, and a paraliturgical poem — along with Ladino and partially Ladino books in the Bodleian, including Hebrew Bible translations, Hebrew Bibles with Ladino glosses, printed Kabbalistic writings, writings pertaining to Halakha, or Jewish legal literature, ethical books, and even works written in Ladino by Christian missionaries operating in the Ottoman Empire (107–19).

Two languages that fall into the second category of Jewish languages, those that were dialects that never became languages of their own, are Judeo-Aramaic and Judeo-Arabic. After most of the Judeans — later referred to as Jews — were exiled to Babylonia in the sixth century BCE, they began to take up Aramaic, which had previously been merely a foreign tongue to them, and which would come to supply the alphabet for Hebrew. Small parts of the Hebrew Bible, mainly sections of the younger books of Ezra and Daniel, were written in Aramaic, and scholars Hector M. Patmore, Schlomi Efrati, and Jeroen Verrijssen point to Bodleian-held papyri and ostraca produced by Jews from Elephantine to argue that Jews used Aramaic for non-religious matters as early as the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (31). The Bodleian also contains other important Aramaic works written by Jews, such as the Aramaic Levi Document, a pseudepigraphic work from the third or second century BCE, parts of which were discovered in the Cairo Genizah and the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as works of rabbinic literature — Talmudic manuscripts, for example — Targums, or Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible used in liturgy, and tosefta, marginal glosses that amounted to "additions and expansions" of the canonical Targums — additions and expansions that veered considerably from the biblical text itself (31–47).

Spoken Aramaic, like spoken Hebrew, fell out of use by Jews, but as a written language for them, like Hebrew again, it lived on, in a few mystical texts before the rise of Kabbalah, then in the texts of the *Zohar* by thirteenth and fourteenth century Kabbalists in Castile. It lived on as a written language, but Daniel Abrams, in his chapter on Kabbalistic Aramaic, argues that these Kabbalists used it to share in what they saw as the oral conversation that took place between Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai and his disciples in second century Galilee, so it was still ultimately valued for its orality. Abrams says, "For the Kabbalists, Aramaic [was] Hebrew in exile, but an exilic language that could bring them home to a time and place when oral culture was seen to be at its most vibrant and productive state" (49). Such a view, though, is not shared by all scholars of the *Zohar*.

Arthur Green, for example, contends that Aramaic was used for the *Zohar* because Kabbalists knew Aramaic was obscure to their readership and such an obscure language would lend an air of mysteriousness to the work, underscoring its secretive nature (Green 2004, 170–71).

Abrams recounts another scholarly disagreement worth mentioning that concerns the Aramaic dialect of the *Zohar*. In a 1939 lecture, a foundational scholar of the work, Gershom Scholem, commented that this Aramaic of the *Zohar* was "artificial". And Abrams laments that younger scholars misconstrued the comment to mean Scholem was diminishing the stature of the *Zohar*. Abrams contends rather that Scholem, in his research into the identity of the author of its primary text, the *Book of the Zohar*, was simply expressing his appreciation for the inventiveness of the language and in general of medieval texts written in Aramaic. The controversy would determine the direction of much subsequent scholarship, which sought to show that the language of the *Zohar* was "the natural or organic outgrowth of authentic literary contributions for the canon of the Jewish people" (59). But Abrams notes emphatically that the question was not important to the Kabbalists, who rather "distinguished between Hebrew and Aramaic writing as an indicator of what might be authentic . . ." (56–59). Later Kabbalists, up through the twentieth century, also wrote their works in Aramaic, but not as imitators of the *Zohar*, Abrams argues, rather as self-conscious participants in a rabbinic tradition dating back to the time of the Talmud. Abrams annotates a few key documents in the Bodleian produced by such contributors to this Aramaic Kabbalistic canon as Abraham ha-Levi, Joseph Karo, Isaac Luria, and Naftali Bacharach (60–67).

Arabic is perhaps less known as a language of Jews than Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, or Aramaic. But some epigraphic evidence shows that the Jews' use of Arabic goes back to at least the first century BCE, when Arabian tribes had settled in southern Judea and Transjordan, long before Islamic expansion during the seventh and eighth centuries CE. During these later centuries, Arabic slowly became the lingua franca of the region that included roughly what is present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Egypt and North Africa, replacing Aramaic, Greek, and Coptic (72). Ronny Vollandt, who writes about this in the chapter on classical Judeo-Arabic books, explains that Judeo-Arabic refers to the varieties of Arabic that developed in Jewish communities at this time. He invokes a group of materials to show that Jews wrote such Judeo-Arabic in both Hebrew and Arabic script and sometimes transliterated works from one to the other (74–75). He argues that in conjunction with the spread of Arabic in Jewish communities came

the embrace of new forms of writing, both material and non-material — the codex and single-author compositions on singular topics, respectively, the latter initiating new disciplines of learning (80). And he comments on a few of the most significant of these works in the Bodleian: a prominent Hebrew grammar book written in Arabic by a Karaite scholar and a Hebrew-Arabic dictionary written by another Karaite scholar — the Karaites were a Jewish non-rabbinic religious movement that began in the eighth century — as well as drafts of Maimonides's commentary on the original work of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah, some drafts written by him between 1161 and 1168, some by others that were corrected and authorized by him under the practice of *ijaza* (84–90).

Judeo-Italian and Judeo-French are no less important Jewish languages that never fully became languages in their own right. Judeo-Italian, Martina Mampieri explains, without giving an origin date, is mostly a transliteration of various Italian dialects from different regions of Italy and even the Greek island of Corfu into Hebrew (139). But she shows that encounters of different Jewish communities in these areas because of continued migration of Jews led to these languages taking on traits of other languages besides Hebrew, such as Koine Greek and Yiddish (154). She comments on a selection of Judeo-Italian works from the Bodleian that span a multitude of genres, including poetry, which she says is the oldest in which the language in written form is currently attested, the earliest known Judeo-Italian work, an elegy, being from the twelfth or thirteenth century (147). The use of Judeo-Italian for Jewish works would gradually wane and Italian in Latin characters would take its place, and today, only one Judeo-Italian dialect is still in use, Judeo-Roman (155–56; RUBIN n.d.).

Judeo-French, unlike Judeo-Italian, is entirely dead. And perhaps it differs from its originating language, Old French, to a lesser extent than Judeo-Italian differs from Italian. Sandra Hajek and Judith Olszowy-Schlanger note that Romance linguist, Menaḥem Banitt, calls it 'a ghost language', no more than a transliteration of Old French into Hebrew, although others point to Hebrew loanwords that distinguish it (121). Judeo-French was used by Jews living in northern France, probably the most famous of whom is Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, or Rashi (1040–1105), who employed hundreds of Old French glosses called *le'azim* in his exegetical works. Hajek and Olszowy-Schlanger examine spelling, phonetic, and other linguistic phenomena that characterize such meetings of Old French and Hebrew in these and other manuscripts of various genres in the

Bodleian (122–37). The chapters on the other Jewish languages could have benefitted from similar intricate analyses.

Jewish Languages and Book Culture could be, in parts, a bit clearer and perhaps a little more expanded, especially in some of its articulations of the origins of these languages. And its expositions of the languages might have been accompanied by short discussions of Jewish philosophical, theological, or critical views on language in general — the *Zohar* certainly has much to offer in this regard — since what makes any language isn't only its material expression but also its users' reflections on it. But this important edited collection never falters in brilliantly projecting a kaleidoscopic image of Jewishness from antiquity to the emancipation, everywhere marked by ingenuity and adaptability but also absolute persistence in its essence and full expression.

Michael Fox
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Works Cited

Benor, Sarah Bunin. n.d. "Introduction to Jewish Languages". In *Jewish Language Website*, edited by Sarah Bunin Benor. Los Angeles: HUC Jewish Language Project. Accessed January 24, 2025. https://www.jewishlanguages.org/about.

Bunis, David M. 2018. "Judezmo (Ladino/Judeo-Spanish): Historical and Sociolinguistic Portrait". In *Languages in Jewish Communities, Past and Present*, edited by Benjamin Hary and Sarah Bunin Benor, 185–238. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

Glinert, Lewis. 2018. *The Story of Hebrew*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Green, Arthur. 2004. *A Guide to the Zohar*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Halkin, Hillel. 2002. "The Great Jewish Language War". *Commentary Magazine*. https://www.commentary.org/articles/hillel-halkin/the-great-jewish-language-war/.

Johnson, Paul. 1987. *A History of the Jews*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers.

Rojanski, Rachel. 2020. *Yiddish in Israel: A History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Rubin, Aaron. n.d. "Judeo-Italian". In *Jewish Language Website*, edited by Sarah Bunin Benor. Los Angeles: HUC Jewish Language Project. Accessed January 19, 2025. https://www.jewishlanguages.org/judeo-italian.

Sachar, Howard M. 2013. *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Sáenz-Badillos, Angel. 1996. *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

SCHEINDLIN, Raymond P. 2000. *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SHANDLER, Jeffrey. 2020. *Yiddish: Biography of a Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SORKIN, David. 2019. *Jewish Emancipation: A History Across Five Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

"Yiddish FAQs". n.d. Department of Jewish Studies — Rutgers University. Accessed January 26, 2025. https://jewishstudies.rutgers.edu/component/content/article/159-yiddish-faqs?Itemid=100120&catid=102.