

Cambridge Language Sciences Annual Symposium 2022

What does language diversity mean for the past, present and future of humankind? 24 November 2022

Research Dialogue 1: Language, culture and identity: perspectives from historical linguistics and sociolinguistics

Defining boundaries and creating commonalities: the case of Jewish Arabic

[Esther-Miriam Wagner](#) (The Woolf Institute)

Because of living circumstances and social practices, Jewish communities around the world have produced distinct language forms, in speech and in writing, that differ substantially from surrounding registers. A prime example for this is Yiddish, a language which emerged from German but was transformed by language contact and other sociolinguistic processes to a degree that it became unintelligible to German speakers and is quite rightly classified as a language in its own right.

In the Arabic realm, social contact between Jewish and non-Jewish communities remained closer, in comparison to the European counterparts. Jewish forms of speaking are therefore often very similar to speech used by non-Jewish neighbours, such as in Cairo or Mosul. Notable exceptions are dialects where communal splits were caused by mass migration and change in prestige of spoken varieties. One such example is the Jewish dialect of Baghdad, which is close to Christian spoken Baghdadi but very different from Muslim speech.

Some of these features have prompted scholars to posit a specific Jewish Arabic, a 'macro Judaeo-Arabic', analogous to Yiddish, with a significant supra-territorial relationship between Jewish varieties across the Middle East. Others, such as Ella Shohat, have protested this and called such efforts a nationalist projection of Judaeo-Arabic, reflecting "an undergirding investment in dislocating Arab-Jews from their Arab past, as well as in partitioning Jewishness and Hebrew off from their affiliation with Arab/Muslim civilization".

In my talk, I will investigate these issues, also with respect to written forms of Jewish Arabic, commonly called Judaeo-Arabic, and evidence from various Arabic dialects. This will involve discussions of how and why the dialects differ, but also reflections of that on a local level, distinct language forms serve as identity markers and are being used to draw up communal boundaries.

All this will be investigated in a wider framework and linked to issues such as language diversity in past and present, with reference to how tolerance of ambiguity can be tied in with ideology, also exploring how a shared future might present itself through reflection of a mutual linguistic heritage.

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