

**Phonological variation in Baghdadi Judeo-Arabic:
Orthographic evidence from three 18th–20th century pop lit texts**

Much of the discussion of linguistic features and processes in Judeo-Arabic is grounded in the analysis of written texts, often (but not exclusively) in Hebrew orthography, e.g., Blau (1965 and onwards). Some attention has also been given to synchronic descriptions and analyses of Jewish dialects of Arabic originating from audio-recorded speech, Arnold & Bar-Moshe (2017). And several bona fide sociolinguistic works, which analyze written texts, oral data, or both, are available, e.g., Hary (2009), and the very important work by Blanc (1964), which delves into dialectal variation among the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities of Baghdad.

The current paper includes an analysis of three popular literature texts from Baghdad of the late 18th to early 20th centuries, all written in Hebrew characters. Because Hebrew letters are not the accepted standard with which to write texts in Arabic, using this writing system lends itself more easily to overtly conveying linguistic features that distinguish whatever variety is written from other varieties of Arabic, including Classical Arabic. Conversely, it is the very lack of standardization, along with the inherent paucity of the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet compared to the 28-letter Arabic alphabet, that renders the interpretation of certain linguistic variables somewhat fuzzy. This uncertainty is often mitigated in the texts chosen for this study, as the genre in which they are written explicitly caters to a readership less familiar with Classical Arabic.

By cross-referencing works in Arabic dialectology and sociolinguistics with philological analyses based on corpora of Judeo-Arabic, we are able to discern several phonological and morpho-phonological features and processes represented in these three texts. For example:

1. Apparent merger of the two voiced pharyngealized coronal obstruents /dʕ/ and /ðʕ/ – illustrated through the use of the modified Hebrew character ם to denote both historical Arabic phonemes.
2. Raising of the historical Arabic vocalic phoneme /a:/ to something between /e:/ and /i:/ – as can be concluded from the use of the Hebrew *mater lectionis* ם (as opposed to the expected ן).
3. Deletion of the initial glottal fricative /h/ in the pronominal suffix *-ha*; this is apparent in the omission of ה, the Hebrew character that typically denoted the phoneme /h/.
4. Emphasis spread, i.e., assimilation of secondary pharyngeal articulation, as in: *sultʕa:n* → *sʕultʕa:n* ‘king, sultan.’

Several morphological, syntactic, and lexical features of Iraqi Arabic are also apparent in the texts, and in fact reflected more transparently in writing, e.g.:

5. Use of the verbal N-stem to represent passive voice.
6. Invariable use of complementizer *lla:ði*, where Classical Arabic would inflect this morpheme for number and gender.
7. Non-standard use of lexical items, e.g., *fard*, whose classical meaning is ‘individual,’ but which means ‘the same...’ in Iraqi Arabic and neighboring dialects.

The variety of Arabic represented in texts such as these offers as close an approximation as one could hope for of the Arabic spoken by Jews in Baghdad during the time period in which they were written, and in many respects open a window into features of Mesopotamian Arabic more broadly. The Jewish, and other non-Muslim, dialects of Iraq are highly endangered, and it is through a careful analysis of linguistic phenomena in such ‘Middle Arabic’ texts that their reconstruction is possible.

References

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