

**Introduction  
to Hebrew Linguistics**  
(‘Inleiding Hebreeuwse Taalkunde’)  
UvA, Week 6, March 10, 2011

Medieval Hebrew  
and the Judeo-languages

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# Hebrew: prehistory and four periods

0. Proto-Semitic, proto-NW-Semitic  
proto-Canaanite, “proto-Hebrew”

1. Biblical Hebrew

Pre-classical BH, classical BH, post-exilic BH; Qumran  
Masoretic Hebrew = Tiberian Hebrew

2. Mishnaic/Rabbinic Hebrew

3. Medieval Hebrew – dead or alive?

4. Modern Hebrew, Israeli Hebrew (Israeli language)

Haskala, language revival, contemporary IH

Medieval Hebrew:

Dead or alive?

No native speakers of Hebrew  
& most varieties of Hebrew:  
Is it a paradox or a necessity?

# Medieval Hebrew: varieties

## First dimension: **Time**

- Gaonic period: approx. 600 – 1038, in Babylonia/Iraq
  - Byzantium: Palestine, South Italy, etc.
- “Classical” Middle Ages: 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century:  
Spain & North Africa ; France & Germany
- Late Middle Ages, Renaissance: 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> century  
New places: e.g., Southern France / Provence, Italy...  
Post-1492: Tzfat / Safed in Palestine; Poland & Lithuania...
- Early modern period, Baroque: 17<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century  
Polish territories, Prague, Amsterdam, Italy, Thessalonica..

# Medieval Hebrew: varieties

## Second dimension: **Geography**

- “Ashkenaz”: approx. “the Christian world”
  - “Ashkenaz 1” (10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> c.): Germany (& Northern France)
  - “Ashkenaz 2” (since 14<sup>th</sup> c.): Poland (& Lithuania)
  - “Ashkenazi Diaspora” (post 1648-49): Amsterdam...
- “Sepharad”: approx. “the Muslim world”
  - Spain → after 1492: Mediterranean area, A’dam, London...
- “In-between” areas: Italy, Provence, Balkan, etc.
- Else: Yemen, Persia, Central Asia, etc.  
Karaite communities; Samaritan communities; etc.

# Medieval Hebrew: varieties

## Third dimension: **Genres**

- Poetry
  - Piyyutim = liturgical poems; zmirot = para-liturgical songs
  - Secular poetry
- Prose
  - Religious literature: commentaries on Bible and Talmud, halakhic codices, responsa, mystical literature...
  - Semi-religious prose (historiography, itineraries, folklore...)
  - Philosophy, science (medicine, astronomy, linguistics...)
  - Translation of the above (from [Judeo-]Arabic, Latin, etc.)
- Private documents

# Medieval Hebrew: varieties

## Fourth dimension: **Native tongue of the author**

- Late antiquity: Aramaic or Greek
- Arabic, Judeo-Arabic
- Judeo-languages, such as Judeo-Romance languages, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Persian, etc.
- 19<sup>th</sup> century: (literary) German, Dutch, English, French...

# Medieval Hebrew: varieties

Fifth dimension: **which Hebrew served as model**

- Biblical Hebrew
  - Mishnaic Hebrew
  - Talmudic Hebrew-Aramaic code switching
  - Tibbonite Hebrew:  
12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> c. in Provence: Ibn-Tibbon family of translators.
- + stronger vs. weaker interference of native language.
- + conservative vs. innovative language use.

# Medieval Hebrew: example

Rashi's commentaries:

- On the Bible: pure Hebrew (almost copy-paste from midrashim)  
ובשכבך - יכול אפילו שכב בחצי היום תלמוד לומר ובקומך.  
יכול אפילו עמד בחצי הלילה, תלמוד לומר בשבתך בביתך  
ובלכתך בדרך. דרך ארץ דברה תורה, זמן שכיבה וזמן  
קימה:
- On the Babylonian Talmud: Hebrew-Aramaic  
code switching. “Randomly mixed languages”? No!  
Usually Hebrew is the matrix language (*base*), into which  
Aramaic words, phrases, expressions, quotations are  
inserted.

# Medieval Hebrew: example

Problem: need for new vocabulary, especially in philosophical and scientific texts. Options:

- Broaden the *semantic field* of Biblical (or Rabbinic) Hebrew words with new meaning.
- Translate Arabic (or Latin) expression to (B or R) Hebrew.
- Use Arabic/Latin words with Hebrew characters.
- Invent totally new words.

Different authors/translators use different solutions. Which one will survive to latter generations? Who is influential? Which one is used in Modern Hebrew?

# Medieval Hebrew: example

## Varieties of pronunciation:

- Gutturals ( $\nu$  and  $\eta$ ): surviving in Arabic speaking context, not in Europe. But  $\nu$  in Italy, Netherlands: [ç] > [ŋ].
- “*Begad-kefat* letters”
- Vowels: vowel shifts
  - E.g., kamats: [ā] > [ō] (Ashkenazim, Yemenites; Tiberian H?)
  - [u] > [i] and [ō] > [ū] (Polish), etc.
- Vowels: diphthongization of long vowels:
  - E.g., [ō] > [ow] (Western Ashkenazi) [oy] (Eastern Ashkenazi)
  - [ē] > [ey] (Eastern Ashkenazi)

The Judeo-languages:  
The real native languages of the Jews

# Judeo-languages: what are they?

What is a Judeo-language?

- Language spoken by Jews?  
Well... not necessarily a separate language or language variety.
- Language written with Hebrew characters?  
Well... language does not depend on script.  
(E.g. Maimonides writing in literary Arabic language, but using Hebrew characters: is it Judeo-Arabic?)
- A typical language variety characteristic of the Jews:
  - Sociolect (“religiolect” / “ethnolect”)

# Judeo-languages: why?

Why does a Jewish language variety develop?

- **Social segregation:** automatic and/or voluntary and/or forced, especially inevitable in the medieval society.
- **Earlier Jewish languages:** when switching to a new language, population may keep features of the earlier language. E.g., Judeo-French in Yiddish *bentshn* (< *benedicere*), *leyenen* (< *legere / lire*).
- **Vocabulary related to Jewish culture:** e.g., Hebrew (and Aramaic) words related to religious practice, folklore, gastronomy, etc.
- **Language of education, culture and prestige:** expressions from Bible, Talmud, liturgy... constantly entering the language via rabbinic elite. Elite imitated by others. Using Talmudic expression = sign of being educated.

[ Open question: can Judeo-languages be considered as pidgin languages and/or creole languages? Ask me, if there is time...]

# Judeo-languages: three phases

How does a Jewish language variety develop?

- Phase 0:
  - Jews settle down in a new country. Learn the local language, within 1-2 generations. (Exception: phase 3.)
- Phase 1: (e.g., Yinglish, Judeo-Romance languages)
  - Jews develop their own spoken sociolect.
- Phase 2: Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian
  - Jews develop their own literary language variety, based on colloquial language, written with Hebrew characters.
- Phase 3: Yiddish and Ladino
  - Sociolect becomes an independently developing language, after moving to a new territory.

# Judeo-languages: examples

- Judeo-Aramaic:
  - Aramaic spoken in the antiquity.
  - Modern Judeo-Aramaic dialects.
- Judeo-Greek:
  - Hellenistic Jewish culture (3<sup>rd</sup> c. BCE – Byzantine times)
  - Yevanit (spoken in Greece until late 20<sup>th</sup> c.).
- Judeo-Arabic:
  - Varieties per country, similarly to dialects of Arabic.
  - Literary tradition in the middle ages: either follow the Arabic literary traditions, or write down (local) Jewish sociolect.
  - Spoken until today (mainly in Israel).

# Judeo-languages: examples

- Judeo-Romance languages:
  - Judeo-French: glosses in Rashi's commentaries.
  - Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Provencal etc.
- Ladino / Judesmo / Judeo-Spanish
  - Independently developing after expulsion in 1492.
  - Arabic, Turkish, Greek, etc. influence around the Mediterranean. Major cultural center: Thessalonica.
  - Communities preserving identity separate of local Judeo-Arabic or Judeo-Greek speaking communities.
- Judeo-Persian
- Karaim. Judeo-Berber. Tat. Judeo-Slavic. Etc.

# Judeo-language examples: Yiddish

- 11-14<sup>th</sup> c.: sociolect of (Southern) Middle High German.
- Hebrew, Aramaic, J-Greek and J-Romance inheritance.
- Hebrew and Aramaic: languages of rabbinic education.
- Since 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> century: gradual migration from German lands to Poland (& Lithuania) – Hence, Slavic influence.
- 18<sup>th</sup> c.: Poland partitioned: Russia, Prussia and Austria.
- Western Yiddish under German (and Dutch and Alsatian) influence, Eastern Yiddish under Slavic influence.  
Yet, continuous contact and migration between the two.
- 19<sup>th</sup> c.: German and Russian as languages of education.
- 20<sup>th</sup> c.: Migration to US: English influence, and *Yinglish*.

# End of the judeo-languages

- Smaller communities assimilating into larger ones:
  - For instance, Judeo-Slavic overtaken by Yiddish.
- Expulsions and gradual emigration:
  - End of Judeo-French: repeated expulsion of Jews from France, in the 13-14<sup>th</sup> century (final expulsion: 1394).
- Haskala: Yiddish considered as “bad German”, a “language without a grammar”, the “jargon” of the uneducated and superstitious Jews of the ghetto.
  - Population gradually switching: West Yiddish > Jüdischdeutsch > Hochdeutsch; Dutch Yiddish > Dutch; Alsatian Yiddish > French.
- Holocaust & migration to Israel: Judeo-Aramaic and Judeo-Persian dialects, Yevanit, etc. dying; decline of Ladino. Yiddish: (1) Charedi Yiddish; (2) College Yiddish.

# Medieval Hebrew: dead or alive? The Judeo-languages: the real languages of the Jews?

- If so, then: Why is Hebrew the language of the modern State of Israel? Could it have been German, Yiddish or Arabic? Answer: next week.
- **Reading:** Finish reading Rabin's book: Chapter 10 (revival) and chapter 11 (Israeli H).
- **Assignment:** See on separate sheet.

See you next week!