

ARABISMS IN HEBREW

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Introduction

Scholars are accustomed to divide the history of the Hebrew language into five main periods: the Biblical period, the time of the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Hebrew used in the Middle ages, the Revival era and contemporary Israeli Hebrew¹.

However, during these stages there were other sub-periods' which had their own characteristic features, and which are not of less importance, whenever they are examined, both synchronically or diachronically, mainly because of their linguistic position as a connecting link between the main periods. For example, the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls (from about the 1st century B.C. to 1st century A.D.); the language of the *Piyyut* (probably from the 3rd-4th century A.D.) or the Hebrew of the Enlightenment period (from the end of the 18th until the end of the 19th century). Moreover, since Hebrew has, during its long history, been in close contact with other languages, the contribution of the latter to the former has often been of great significance. Consequently, it has never ceased to adopt phonemes, morphemes, grammatical patterns, syntactic structures and meanings, and indeed foreign words in their original or a slightly modified form, adapting, often smoothly, to the Hebrew pattern system. This tendency has equally applied to oral and written Hebrew, though spoken Hebrew had largely been replaced, from the Second Temple to the Revival era, first by Aramaic and later by other local languages or Jewish vernaculars, such as Judaeo-Arabic, Yiddish and Ladino.

Foreign words had been borrowed from the earliest stage of the language. Thus, we find in Biblical Hebrew many borrowed words from Semitic languages such as Accadian, Aramaic, etc., as well as non-Semitic languages, such as Sumerian, Hittite, Philistine, Greek and Sanskrit. The Hebrew of the Mishnah and the Talmud, however, contained many Aramaic, Persian, Greek and Latin words, while Mediaeval Hebrew, which was mainly used in Spain, across the Mediterranean and the Near East was mainly influenced by Arabic, and in the northern part of Europe, by French, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian and the like. This influence has continued uninterruptedly over many centuries and is, in fact, continuing in our present time,

¹ For a detailed discussion of these stages, see Chomsky 1967, Rabin 1973, Kutscher 1982 and more recently Saenz-Badillos 1993.

when the vocabulary of Israeli Hebrew is expanding² *inter alia* by adopting many foreign words, mainly from English.

Hebrew versus Arabic

When examining the contacts between these two Semitic languages, one can immediately discern that Arabic has influenced Hebrew during three, out of the five periods mentioned above, that is to say, the Middle Ages, the Revival era and contemporary Israeli Hebrew. However, if during the Middle Ages the Hebrew used by Jews who lived under Islam acquired Arabic morphological and syntactic patterns as well as Arabic words and meanings, the influence of Arabic over Hebrew during the Revival era and contemporary Hebrew is mainly confined to semantics, while original Hebrew moulds, patterns and structures have been and are being employed. It is noteworthy, however, that during all these three periods the contribution of Arabic has been more significant in prose, while poetry, both religious and secular, has generally remained intact, except for few Arabic words and calques which have managed to infiltrate the poetical works of medieval and modern poets. On the other hand, the strict rules of Arabic prosody were applied to medieval Hebrew poetry to the extent that Arabic metres and rhyme were used in Hebrew too³. It is also worth mentioning that while Arabic had contributed to literary Hebrew in the Middle Ages and the Revival era, its influence on modern Hebrew is mainly confined to Hebrew slang (Avineri 1964: 456-459), though we may find rather a large number of Arabisms in modern Hebrew literature, where Israeli writers, who wish to gain credibility, incorporate Arabic phrases and idioms in their descriptions and dialogues, especially when the plot takes place in an Arab environment, or when the protagonists are Arabic speakers.

The causes for the influence

Since both Arabic and Hebrew have been in contact for centuries, and since Jews, who, for many years were living under Muslim rule, or in the vicinity of Arabic speakers, spoke Arabic too, and since the Arabic dictionary is the richest of all other Semitic languages, it is not surprising that Arabic has influenced, and still is influencing Hebrew.

There are two main reasons for the borrowing of Arabic words, phrases and in particular meanings: cognizant and non-cognizant. Cognizant borrowing occurs when Arabic words and phrases are deliberately and knowingly incorporated in Hebrew,

² For more details regarding foreign words in Hebrew, see, e.g. Tur-Sinai 1935, Klausner 1957 and Avineri 1964: 36-58, Avineri 1964: 338-343.

³ For a detailed discussion of the Arabic influence on Medieval Hebrew poetry, see e.g. Allony. Chs. 1 and 2, Bakon, Ch. 1.

usually to fill a gap. However, sometimes, mainly during the Middle Ages, some Arabic morphological patterns and syntactic structures had been introduced in Hebrew, though a Hebrew mould or construction had existed.

Thus we find thousands of examples of Arabisms in the original writings of famous authors (e.g. Maimonides), and in particular in translations from Arabic into Hebrew, which were often literal renderings of the Arabic original word or expression.

Moreover, since most of the prose which was composed by Jews in the Middle Ages was written in Judaeo-Arabic, and since this medium of communication was also used orally, it was only natural for Oriental Jews to think in Arabic moulds and to use them even in Hebrew. This should be termed as a non-cognizant influence. One should also add that since the science of Hebrew grammar and lexicography was usually discussed in comparison with that of Arabic, it is easy to understand the reasons for this influence. For even if we find similar structures in the language of the Old Testament and in post-Biblical Hebrew, there is no doubt that their existence in Arabic played a decisive role in motivating users of Hebrew to use Arabic morphological patterns and syntactic structures.

The types' of influence

a) *Phonetic influence*: A cursory glance at the Arabic words which entered Hebrew since the medieval period shows that the Hebrew phonetic system has hardly been affected by the wider system which is found in Arabic. It is therefore only in contemporary Hebrew where we find the sound ġ which entered the Hebrew system, probably because some Jewish Oriental communities (e.g. Yemenite Jews) sometimes pronounce the sound g in Hebrew as ġ, and since foreign words, which entered modern Hebrew from European languages, use sounds such as ġ (e.g. Jeep, Job, giraffe).

b) *Morphological influence*: though many of the verb, noun, adjective and adverb patterns in Arabic differ from those in Hebrew, because of their different vocalization systems, the contribution of Arabic is usually characterized by the inspiration given to Hebrew morphology to adopt certain patterns. The most striking example in Medieval Hebrew is the use of the Arabic *yā' an-nisba* (freely used in adjectives and adverbs which are derived from nouns) which although found in Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew, its wide use since Medieval Hebrew is no doubt the result of Arabic influence. For example: *ṭiv'ī* — natural; *ruḥanī* — spiritual; *gašmī* — physical. Or the suffix *ūt* which, following the Arabic suffix *iyā'*, is used to denote abstract nouns. E.g. *kammūt* — quantity; *eihūt* — quality; *metzi'ūt* — reality. (On the other hand, Arabic nouns ending with the suffix *ūt* are either borrowed from Aramaic/Syriac or patterned accordingly. E.g. *lābūt* — divinity; *ġabarūt* — might; *‘azamūt* — magnitude.) During the Revival period more words which contained the Arabic *yā' an-nisba* were coined by Eli'ezer Ben Yehuda (1858-

1922) and his colleagues. E.g. *rišmī* — official; *retzīnī* — serious. This practice is continuing in modern Hebrew, where nearly all nouns can in principal be turned into adjectives or adverbs by the addition of the suffix *yōd*.

Contemporary Hebrew slang contains a few Arabic patterns. E.g. the passive participle of the first form which is formed according to the pattern *maf'ūl*, e.g. *mabsūt* — happy; *mabrūk* — blessed; *mastūl* — drunk. An interesting example is the word *maskūn* which is a variation of the Arabic word *miskīn* — poor, miserable, which is found in literary Hebrew too as *misken*. However, by wrong analogy, the word is formed according to the pattern *maf'ūl*.

Another popular Arabic pattern in modern Hebrew slang is the elative *af'al*. Thus we find a number of examples such as: *akbar* — excellent; *aḥsan* — better, very good; *abbal* — stupid.

c) *Syntactic influence*. Arabic syntax influenced Hebrew word order only in medieval Hebrew writing, especially through translations from Arabic into Hebrew, where the Hebrew sentence was nearly always formed in accordance with the Arabic word order. Moreover, this influence is characterized by the adoption of many syntactic phenomena which are either rare in Hebrew or are not found at all, such as the absolute accusative, untrue *idāfa*, specification (*tamyīz*) and in particular, the use of prepositions, both with verbs and nouns as well as combined, which are typical of Arabic grammar and usage (Gottstein 1954, Klar 1954: 31-41). It seems that although the Jews in the Middle Ages were at home in the Hebrew sources, such as the Old Testament, the Mishnah and the Midrash, they seldom used their syntax and style, either orally or in writing, with the exception of poetry or special stylistic formulae of correspondence. On all other occasions Arabic syntax and style had been used, since Judaeo-Arabic was the major medium of communication. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the influence of the Arabic language over Hebrew was so strong that we often find structures which are in breach of the rules of Hebrew grammar. E.g. confused genders usually involving a noun in the masculine followed by an adjective in the feminine; sentences beginning with a conjunction or using the article in an indefinite structure⁴.

d) *Semantic influence*. The Semantic influence is characterized by the borrowing of words, expressions and idioms and Hebraising them. This is achieved by three main methods:

1. The Arabic word has been transplanted in Hebrew verbatim, or with very minor changes, mainly by moulding it in accordance with the Hebrew pattern. For example:

Medieval Hebrew: *ofeq* (horizon); *aqlīm* (climate); *digdeg* (to tickle).

⁴ Cf. e.g. Avinery 1946: 457. See also the dictionaries of R. Sappan and D. Ben Amotz and N. Ben-Yehuda.

Revival period: *miḥtavah* (desk); *miṭbah* (kitchen); *zimzem* (to buzz)
 Modern Hebrew: *nabbūt* (baton); *bārid* (indifferent); *stannah šewayyeh* (wait a minute!)

2. The Arabic word has been moulded into different Hebrew patterns:

Medieval Hebrew: *kammūt* (*kammiyya*) — quantity;

Revival period: *mivraq* (*barqiyya*) — telegram;

Modern Hebrew: *hitkayyef* (*takayyaf*) — to enjoy oneself

3. Loan translation (= calque or borrowing of meaning): Loan translation occurs when an Arabic word, a collocation or an idiom is translated verbatim and transplanted in Hebrew. Through this process or practice existing Hebrew words acquire meanings of Arabic words in addition to their original meaning(s). This may be the result of some kinship between the two words or even resemblance of sound (assonance). For example:

Medieval Hebrew: *biggayon* — logic (Biblical Hebrew: a statement, Arabic: *mantiq* — logic from *nataqa* say, speak); *ḥag* — pilgrimage (Biblical Hebrew holiday, festival. Arabic — pilgrimage).

Revival period: *ṭappil* — parasite (Mishna'ic Hebrew *tafel* — unimportant. Arabic *ṭifl* child, *ṭufayliyy* — parasite, where the common denominator is the idea of being dependent on someone else).

Modern Hebrew: *ḥatīḥah* an attractive girl (Mishna'ic Hebrew: *ḥatīḥah* — a piece of something. Arabic *šaḳfeh* 'a piece; an attractive girl).

Has Arabic influence been significant?

There is no doubt that Arabic phonetics had a very little success in influencing the Hebrew phonetic system. This is because the latter, being a Semitic language, already includes most of the Arabic sounds, and those sounds which are mainly the interdental (*t̤* and *d̤*) and the emphatic (*s̤*, *d̤*, *t̤*, *z̤*, *q̤*) have long been assimilated with other sounds.

Arabic syntax has recorded some success but only during the Medieval period when translators, in particular, used to translate Arabic texts literally. The syntax which dominates the Revival and modern Hebrew periods is mainly an improved version of post-Biblical syntax.

The greatest area in which Arabic has been quite successful in influencing Hebrew is, understandably, semantics. This can be proved by the thousands of Arabic meanings and words which entered the Medieval Hebrew lexicon, but of which only a small number survived. Moreover, the attempt made by the personality with which the Revival period is mainly associated, Eli'ezer Ben Yehudah, to introduce hundreds of roots from Arabic to the Hebrew language (Piamenta 1961, Shvitiel 1985: 95-113), achieved a relative success, since many of these words were rejected by the Hebrew speakers of his time, who were more in favour of reviving Biblical and post-Biblical

words or borrowing from Aramaic, a Semitic language which has accompanied the Jews for a long time.

Contemporary Hebrew has borrowed and is still borrowing words and meanings from Arabic, but all these foreigners are still confined to the spoken stratum, with very few words which are used, mainly in dialogues, in modern Hebrew literature. However, the greatest influence on modern Hebrew is that of English, which has contributed to the Hebrew lexicon hundreds, if not thousands, of words and expressions either original or translated.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Hebrew is in debt to its sister the Arabic language, whose rich vocabulary has for over a millennium, penetrated and established itself in that of Hebrew. However, if in the Middle Ages we can certainly talk about influence, during the last hundred years one may only speak of the contribution of the Arabic language to Hebrew.

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