

Book Review

Benjamin P. Kantor. 2023. *The Standard Language Ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic Grammarians of the 'Abbasid Period*. (Cambridge Semitic Languages and Cultures, 21). Cambridge UK: Open Book Publishers.

Reviewed by [Jeffrey Heath, University of Michigan](#)

Although Hebrew and Arab grammarians get equal airtime in this book and are jointly featured in its title, Kantor's main interest is directional. How, he asks, did Hebrew grammarians mirror concepts and practices established previously in the Arab tradition? Although direct influence is the main explanation, one could argue for a small incremental element of what biologists call "convergent evolution" since their circumstances were so similar.

Arab grammar began in the 8th Century with Sibawayhi and others organizing and systematizing material from the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic poetry, supplemented by data from recent and living speakers. By the 10th Century, Ibn Al-Sarrāj and his contemporaries were dealing with a closed classical-sacred corpus, an already formidable grammatical tradition, and the increasing divergence of vernacular Arabic from classical models. Their focus accordingly shifted to prescriptive standardization.

By the time Hebrew grammar got going (10th Century) with Saadia Gaon and others, Hebrew had long since become confined to liturgical and (in Palestine) poetic usage. These grammarians worked under Arab rule and mainly in Arabic-speaking centers, from Palestine to Andalus. Most of the early works on Hebrew grammar were written in Judeo-Arabic and made use of Arabic grammatical terminology and concepts. It was only much later, after the Iberian expulsions, that such works were regularly written in Hebrew in order to reach readers in France and Italy.

The originality of Kantor's work is his systematic application of the overlapping theories of language ideology and enregisterment picked up from linguistic anthropology of the period 1995-2010. Chapter 3 (pp. 18-39) is a primer in this literature, and its vocabulary pervades the book. The core concepts include a) (classical) language and its texts as a communally shared cultural patrimony, b) hand-wringing by purists about the post-classical proliferation of loanwords and general degradation of the language in current oral (e.g. sermonic) and written production, c) a favorable spotlight on exemplary speakers and writers of the past and present (including of course the authors of grammatical treatises), and d) performance.

Of these, (a-c) fit together nicely, while (d) is a bit of a wild card. The linguistic anthropological passages cited in connection with (a-c) often smack of an outdated associationist psychology, as suggested by the buzzwords "enregisterment" and "indexicality".

In recent decades, linguistic anthropologists have developed a framework, known as enregisterment, for explaining how various social meanings (e.g., prestige) come to be associated with various linguistic forms and choices. Sets of such linguistic choices are what may be understood as language varieties. Central to this framework is the concept of indexicality. When a sign—a linguistic form, a gesture, a particular appearance, etc.—co-occurs with its meaning, it is considered indexical.

Johnstone [*reference omitted*] cites as an analogy the sound of thunder, which, because it typically co-occurs with a storm in the physical world, can be used by itself to conjure the idea of a storm in a staged play." (pp. 27-28)

Likewise:

"...we will use the term 'transference' to refer to cases in which the social types associated with certain linguistic signs are shifted to other social reference points that may be thought to co-occur with those same signs. A clear example of this phenomenon would be how a particular language variety associated with a limited group of speakers comes to be associated with a much wider demographic of which they are a part. In many cases, this is due to the fact that those outside of the group and the wider demographic might have much more exposure to the limited group, which they might mistakenly perceive as representative of the wider demographic." (p. 34)

This book only rarely strays into sociophonetics, but one short speculative passage reveals the same associationist tendency:

"Similarly, while pronouncing the Arabic letter ق as [g] may simply indicate that one is a resident of Zarqa, residents of Amman that pronounce ق as [g] may sound more masculine (and less urban) in that context, where most pronounce ق as the glottal stop [ʔ]." (p. 29)

While [g] does indeed often "sound less urban" (i.e. more rural or beduin) in Arabic dialectology, it also usually "sounds" female rather than male (Rosenhouse 1995), probably because of its effects on the sound-symbolically significant formant structure of following vowels. This is a case where associationism conflicts with the "natural" sociolinguistic value of a phonetic feature.

The static metonymy ("associated with", "co-occur") in the quoted passages above contrasts sharply with the dynamism of performance: the mesmerizing collective incantation of scriptural passages and hymns, the composition and recitation of poetry, the eloquence of a sermon or formal speech. Kantor tries to integrate performance into the general rubric of ideology. However, speaking of the Koran and the Tanesh as "cultural" property doesn't quite catch how it is sacralized and sonically experienced by worshipers. His valuable discussion of the Hebrew *piyyut* poetic tradition, practiced by non-mother-tongue individuals from the 4th Century through to the time of Saadia (10th Century), brings out tensions between iconoclastic creativity and classicist conformity:

"... *piyyut* poetry has its own distinct style. Many of its apparent morphological distinctives involve the expansion and extension of rare or unusual forms already attested in the Bible. ... *piyyut* is known for inventing new words and making multitudinous obscure allusions." (p. 60)

Similarly, Kantor's excellent analysis of the concept of *faṣāḥah* and related vocabulary in both Arab and Hebrew grammarians brings out the tension between the contextual senses 'clarity' (lack of ambiguity or obscurity) and the essentially performative 'eloquence'. Speaking of which, Kantor's writing is exceptionally clear and reader-friendly, with no hint

of “multitudinous obscure allusions.” The frequent extended quotations in Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and Hebrew are translated into English, and Judeo-Arabic forms in Hebrew orthography are paired with parenthesized Arabic transcriptions. This is a very readable and well-researched book on an interesting topic.¹

One issue that would benefit from further study is the idea that the classical language is more grammatically “logical” or at least internally consistent than its later nonclassical or vulgar forms. This is touched on in the discussion of *qiyās* ‘systematic analogy’ in connection with the confusion of Hebrew hollow and final-weak verb forms decried by the 10th Century grammarian Judah ben David Hayyūj (p. 135).

Reference

Rosenhouse, Judith. 1995. “Features of Women’s Speech in Arabic Dialects: An Interim Survey.” *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of l’Association Internationale pour la Dialectologie Arabe (Cambridge, England 10–14 September 1995)*, pp. 207–16. Cambridge: Middle East Centre, University of Cambridge.

¹ Your reviewer’s assiduous hunt for editing peccadillos has hit home only once: two articles by Solomon Skoss are correctly cited as Skoss 1952a and 1952b in the main text, but in the bibliography they are listed under Michael Silverstein (who immediately precedes Skoss in alphabetical order).