*Between Judeo-Arabic and Rabbinic and Medieval Hebrew: A Comparison between Maimonides’ Self-Translations of Sections from his Commentary on the Mishnah and from the Book of Commandments in* Mishneh Torah *and Their Thirteenth-Century Translations*

**Scientific Abstract**

After the sealing of the Talmud, few figures influenced the Jewish world as much as Maimonides (1138–1204). His halakhic and philosophical essays acquired a central status while he was still alive, and their importance has been universally acknowledged ever since. Most of Maimonides’ essays were written in the accepted literary language of his time, which was also his spoken tongue – Arabic. However, Maimonides wrote his treatise *Mishneh Torah*, which offered a reorganized presentation of all the halakhic material in the literature of the Sages and summarized his practical conclusions in a thematic manner, in a splendid and fluent Hebrew, employing the language of the Mishnah (according to his own testimony). This contrasts with the practice of earlier sages, who wrote their halakhic treatises either in Arabic (such as Rabbi Sa’adia Gaon) or in a mixture of Hebrew and Babylonian Aramaic (such as Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi).

The language of the *Mishneh Torah* exerted an influence for generations to come, not least because of the admiration for its outstanding language. In an interview held after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the author S.Y. Agnon, who wrote his books in Rabbinic Hebrew, commented: “The latest Hebrew writer who influenced me was Maimonides.”

If we include Maimonides’ written languages, we may suggest that he lived in a condition of triglossia. His work *Mishneh Torah* reflects the contact between all three language: the Arabic in which he wrote his other works, and in which, in all probability, he thought; the Talmudic Aramaic from which he translated thousands of quotes from the Sages; and the Hebrew stratum in the writings of the Sages.

This study concentrates on the contact between Hebrew and Arabic, and offers for the first time a systemic and exhaustive examination of the linguistic affinity between Maimonides’ Commentary on the Mishnah and his Book of Commandments, which he composed in Arabic during his twenties (the works were completed around 1168), and the *Mishneh Torah*, which he composed in Rabbinic Hebrew during his thirties (and completed around 1178). The *Mishneh Torah* includes hundreds of instances in which Maimonides translated his own comments in the Commentary on the Mishnah and the Book of Commandments into Rabbinic Hebrew. As a control group for Maimonides’ self-translations, we shall refer to the Hebrew translations of his Commentary on the Mishnah and the Book of Commandments prepared from the thirteenth century onward. The comparison of the parallel passages in Hebrew and Arabic will enhance our understanding of the influence Arabic exerted on the syntax and lexicon of Maimonides’ Hebrew, in particular, and Medieval Hebrew, in general. It will also cast light on the broader question concerning the linguistic awareness of writers whose works were influenced by language contact.

**Keywords:** Medieval Hebrew: Syntax and Lexicon; Rabbinic Hebrew; Judeo-Arabic; Self-translation; Language Contact

**Research Program**

**A. Scientific Background**

The study proposed here relates to three fields of knowledge: the study of translation, with an emphasis on self-translation; language contact – with an emphasis on the contact between Arabic and Medieval Hebrew; and, above all, the study of Arabicized Hebrew in general, and the unique language of Maimonides in particular. I shall present below the challenges encountered in each of these three fields and explain how the proposed study can contribute to advancing each of them.

i. Self-Translation

Several of the world’s greatest authors (such as Samuel Barclay Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov) translated their own works. In Hebrew literature, this phenomenon is most strongly associated with the Haskalah period, and particularly with Mendele Mocher Sefarim, who translated many of his own works from Yiddish to Hebrew. However, studies devoted to self-translation, whether in general literature (such as Grayson 1977 [No. 19 in the bibliography list]; Fitch 1988 [14]; Osimo 1999 [29]; Hokenson and Munson 2007 [21]) or Hebrew literature (such as Perry 1981 [31]; Dalmatzky-Fischler 2009 [97]; Frieden 2012 [14]), focused mainly on the literary and sociological aspects of the phenomenon, rather than its lingual and linguistic aspects.

Every translation differs from its source. Changes may, of course, be the result of the defective training of a translator who fails to understand properly the original and the author’s intent. Other changes, however, arte the product of the difficulty in finding a parallel form to the source that is identical in lexicon, syntax, and register in the target language. This difficulty is particularly common in the case of poetry or in instances involving plays on words and sound (Rabin 1958 [33]; Jakobson 1960 [23]). Accordingly, every translator is forced to confront the need to determine between adequacy and acceptability (Toury 2012: 79-80, 93-106 [39]). In a self-translation, the chance of a change relative to the original is greater, since the author is free to compose a new rendition of the work that is not faithful to the source. Some scholars have referred to self-translation as “allograph translation” – i.e. the author revises the target text (Maia et al. 2018: 77-78 [27]). For this reason, self-translation received little research interest until recent decades (Montini, 2010: 306 [28]). Conversely, other scholars have emphasized the author’s advantage as the best possible interpreter of their own work with all its contexts (Fitch 1988: 125 [13]; Jung 2002: 30 [24]).

The tension between faithfulness to the source and faithfulness to the target language has been well-documented in Hebrew culture. In the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 49a), the comment appears: “R. Judah said: If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he adds thereto, he is a blasphemer and a libeler.”

During the Middle Ages, disagreements emerged on this point between Maimonides and the translation R. Shmuel Ibn Tibbon, who while Maimonides was still alive began to translate his most important philosophical work, Guide to the Perplexed. Maimonides clarified in a letter to Ibn Tibbon, including examples, that he should prefer acceptability to faithfulness to the original. Despite this, Ibn Tibbon decided to remain faithful to the original even at the cost of a lack of grammatical faithfulness that is grating in the context of Hebrew grammar, and he rejected Maimonides’ proposed translations (Baneth 1952 [88]). As an author confident in his own interpretation of his text, Maimonides could surely have produced a pertinent and non-literal translation, whereas Ibn Tibbon, afraid of distorting the content, preferred a highly Arabicized and literal translation.

Linguistic research into self-translation should utilize the author’s own interpretation in order to clarify linguistic doubts in the translated text, while always being aware that the translation before us may actually be a revised composition rather than a faithful translation. The proposed study will compare Maimonides’ translations of sections in his Commentary on the Mishnah written in Arabic to the output of those who translated this material in the thirteenth century, offering an opportunity to examine the relationship between self-translation and regular translation.

**ii. Language Contact**

The full lexical borrowing of a foreign word can easily be identified. By contrast, external influence on grammar and syntax is much less obvious, and it is often difficult to determine whether a form is the product of language contact or internal development (Dench 2001: 131 [7]; Dixon 2001: 87 [8]). The difficulty is particularly acute in the case of contact between languages belonging to the same family, such as Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, which are all Semitic languages (Pat-El 2013 [30]). Another question worth asking concerns the mechanism for the influence of the contact language. A distinction is usually made between borrowing and interference (e.g. Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 37-45 [38]). Borrowing refers to the integration of elements from the foreign language in the mother tongue, while interference refers to the incomplete collective learning of a foreign language. Borrowing may be a conscious product of the desire for prestige, and its influence begins with the lexicon (phonological and syntactical influence requires a protracted period of contact). By contrast, interference is inherently subconscious, and its influence begins in the spheres of phonology and syntax. What happens when a native speaker of Judeo-Arabic (such as Maimonides) writes in a literary language (Mishnaic Hebrew) that he does not speak? To what extent will he be able to maintain the syntax of the literary language, and to what extent will it be influenced by his mother tongue – and in which spheres? This question touches on the unique status of Hebrew in the Middle Ages, as a written language without any speakers. Did its writers possess a systemic internal grammar, and did the language have characteristics similar to those of a spoken language? (Glinert 1988 [17]; Doron et al. 2019 [9]).

The research literature on translation in general, and the test case of Maimonides as proposed here, may cast light on these questions. A translation exposes a direct and unequivocal connection between syntactical structures in the source and target languages, clearly revealing areas in which s/he was influenced by the source languages and areas where s/he managed to avoid such influences.

**iii. Arabicized Hebrew and Maimonides’ Hebrew**

While the subject of language contact between Hebrew and Aramaic in the latter book of the Bible and in rabbinic language has received relatively extensive research interest, the study of contact between Hebrew and Arabic is far from completion. The only comprehensive study to date focusing on the influence of Arabic on Medieval Hebrew is a doctoral thesis written by Moshe Goshen-Gottstein in 1951 (and reprinted in 2006 [95]).

Research into Maimonides’ Hebrew is also incomplete. While Maimonides’ Judeo-Arabic has been the subject of comprehensive and in-depth studies (e.g. Blau 1961 [85], 1980 [82], 1999 [7], 2006 [68]; Hopkins 1991 [98], 1993 [99]), the examination of his Hebrew in the research literature is partial and far from exhaustive. The lexicon of *Mishneh Torah* was discussed by Bacher in the early twentieth century in two important but very concise and partial studies (1903 [3], 1914 [5]). Baneth (1935 [87]) discussed the philosophical lexicon in Maimonides’ Book of Knowledge, as well as the proposed translations of his own Guide to the Perplexed that appear in his letters to the Provencal translator Shmuel Ibn Tibbon (1952 [88]). Examples of Arabic influence on Maimonides’ Hebrew syntax may be found dispersed through Goshen-Gottstein’s study of Arabicized Hebrew (1965 [78]), but with very little analysis or discussion. Fink (1980 [11]) wrote a pioneering doctoral thesis exploring morphology and syntax, but despite its importance, this is also a very concise work replete with methodological difficulties. My own doctoral thesis (Ariel 2018 [75]) was devoted to the lexicon and syntax of the thirteenth book of *Mishneh Torah* – the Book of Laws. In addition to further clarifications and a reexamination of issues in the fields of lexicon and syntax, the thesis also includes discussions on issues that have not previously received any research attention – Maimonides’ linguistic awareness, as manifested in a comparison between the draft pages (autograph) of the Book of Law and its final version, and his own translation in the *Mishneh Torah* of his Arabic texts in the Commentary on the Mishnah . However, no exhaustive comparison has as yet been undertaken of all Maimonides’ translations from Arabic and Aramaic and their sources in his Arabic works and in the Babylonian Talmud. In the proposed study I will seek to concentrate on the contact between Arabic and Hebrew and to undertake a full and exhaustive examination of all the parallels between Maimonides’ Hebrew Commentary on the Mishnah and all thirteen books of the *Mishneh Torah*, written later in a fine Hebrew.

**B. Research Objectives and Expected Significance**

For the first time, the study seeks to examine in a systematic and comprehensive manner the linguistic affinity between Maimonides’ Commentary on the Mishnah (some 2,800 pages in the original Arabic edition and in the Hebrew translation of Rabbi Kafah [54]) and the Book of Commandments (347 pages in Rabbi Kafah’s edition [56]), written by Maimonides in Arabic (both works were completed in 1168), on the one hand, and on the other – the *Mishneh Torah* (approx. 800,000 words), written in Hebrew and completed in 1178.

I shall address the following key research questions:

1. The influence of the Arabic on syntax and vocabulary (lexicon, semantics, phraseology, and verbal reaction). In addition to describing each individual instance of influence, I will also examine which areas were more prone to Arabic influence than others, and why.

2. The deliberate avoidance of Arabic syntactical structures and their replacement with Hebrew structures, or the conscious and informed exploitation of Hebrew syntactical structures to fill in a syntactical lacuna in Hebrew.

3. A comparison between Maimonides’ Hebrew translations to the thirteenth-century translations of his commentary of the Mishnah and of the Book of Commandments.

The proposed study is particularly important due to the unique status of the research corpus, the comprehensive examination of the material, and the reliability of the findings.

**Importance of the research corpus** – the *Mishneh Torah* exerted an influence for generations to come, and the description of its language forms an important component in the history of the Hebrew language. Moreover, Maimonides was a writer with a high level of linguistic awareness who specifically declared his intention to write in rabbinic Hebrew (rather than biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, or Arabic), and who repeatedly edited his own language. Accordingly, the writer himself left us with a linguistic yardstick by which we can gauge his writing – an extremely rare phenomenon in the history of Hebrew prose.

**Exhaustion of the material** – previous studies into Maimonides’ Hebrew have not taken advantage of the possibility to compare it to his Arabic in the Commentary on the Mishnah . For the first time, this study proposes an exhaustive and full comparison of all the synoptic passages in the *Mishneh Torah* and the Commentary on the Mishnah .

A side-product of this research will be the creation of a database including all the parallelisms between Maimonides’ Arabic Commentary on the Mishnah and his translations and adaptations in the *Mishneh Torah* (in the form of an online or print publication). This database will also be useful for scholars of the Talmud and Halakhah (cf. Adler 1987 [73] and other scholars who examine Maimonides’ writings from a non-linguistic perspective).

**Reliability of the findings** – when exceptional linguistic phenomena in the Hebrew have parallels in the Arabic original, this will prove that they reflect the influence of contact with Arabic rather than internal development in Hebrew.

**C. Detailed Description of the Proposed Research**

**i. Working Hypothesis**

The working hypothesis, based on my previous studies, is that in the field of lexicon there is a large degree of correlation between the language of the *Mishneh Torah* and rabbinic Hebrew, while Arabic mainly influenced semantics, the frequency of words that have parallels in Arabic, the use of biblical Hebrew, and verbal reaction. In the field of syntax, by contrast, the expectation is that a stronger influence of Arabic – the writer’s living language – will be found. Syntactical influence may be manifested in the importing of a completely new structure into the Hebrew of the *Mishneh Torah*, or in a dramatic increase in the frequency of use of a rare structure in rabbinic Hebrew that becomes commonplace in Maimonides’ Hebrew under the influence of Arabic. It may also be hypothesized that the use of prominent syntactical structures (such as a structure relating to a fixed lexical component) will show a relatively limited degree of consciousness, in contrast to abstract syntactical structures, in which the subconscious influence will be more extensive.

**ii. Research Design and Methods**

Research Design

**Years 1-2 – Locating parallels and creating the database**

• Year 1 – locating linguistic parallels between the *Mishneh Torah* and the Book of Commandments and the Commentary on the Mishnah (tractates *Tohorot* and *Zera`im*).

• Year 2 – locating linguistic parallels between the *Mishneh Torah* and the Commentary on the Mishnah (tractates *Mo`ed*, *Nashim*, *Neziqin*, and *Qodashim*).

• Each parallel that is identified will also be compared to the thirteenth-century Hebrew translations.

**Year 3 – Analyzing the parallels**

• Analyzing Arabic influences in the fields of lexicon, semantics, phraseology, verbal reaction, and syntax.

• Expanding the scrutiny of syntactical and lexical test cases located in the study by comparison to the *Mishneh Torah* as a whole and Maimonides’ Judeo-Arabic as a whole.

• Comparing the influence of Arabic on Hebrew in Maimonides with its influence on the contemporaneous thirteenth-century translators.

Methods

• In order to create the database, the entire Commentary on the Mishnah will be read in the Kafah edition (original and translation [54]).The comments in the Bitton edition of the Commentary on the Mishnah [45], which include references to the *Mishneh Torah*, will help enhance the efficiency of the location of parallels. At the same study, I will also examine the references to the Commentary on the Mishnah and the Book of Commandments in the editions of Frankel [51], Rabinovitch [57], and Makbili [49]. Any parallel where a proven linguistic similarity (lexical or syntactical) is found will be include in the database.

• In the second stage, I will examine the lexicon by comparison to the Concordance of Rabbinic Hebrew on the Historical Dictionary Project website [128] and to the alternate renditions in the medieval translations.

I shall offer one example to illustrate the importance of this comparison. In classical Hebrew, the verb *ʔeḥer* usually has the meaning of “to be late,” and more rarely “to delay.” It is generally an intransitive verb, more rarely transitive with a single object, and never appears with two objects. In the *Mishneh Torah*, however, it appears with two objects with the meaning “to prevent.” A comparison between the Hebrew in the *Mishneh Torah* and the Arabic in the Book of Commandments reveals the influence of the Arabic:

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| Book of Commandments (Arabic)  אלנהי אלד'י נהינא ען **אעאקהֿ אלרהן ען צאחבה** ענד חג'אתה אליה. | List of commandments at the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah*  שלא **למנוע העבוט מבעליו** העני בעת שהוא צריך לו.  Not to retain a pledge from a poor debtor when he requires it | Opening of the Laws of Borrowing and Deposit  שלא **יאחר המשכון מבעליו** העני בעת שהוא צריך לו. |

The Arabic verb *ʔaʕwaqa* (the root *ʕWQ* in form IV) has two objects – a direct object (*ṣāḥib*) and an indirect one (*rahn*); it can mean both “to delay” and “to prevent.” The comparison to the Book of Commandments easily shows that there has been a semantic loan here from Arabic to Hebrew, leading to a change in the verbal reaction of the Hebrew verb.

• The syntax will be examined by comparison to studies on the syntax of rabbinic Hebrew and by comparison to grammar works on Arabic syntax (classical and Jewish) and on medieval Hebrew. The study will also draw on Hebrew and Arabic databases, and in particular on the databases in the Historical Dictionary Project [128], regarding Hebrew, and the Judeo-Arabic databases on the website of the Friedberg Judeo-Arabic Project [129], regarding Maimonides’ Judeo-Arabic and Arabic.

I shall now give one example of Arabic syntactical influence, in this instance the lack of agreement between the comparative and the subject. The Laws of Rental state, discussing a donkey rented for walking in the valley that is then led into the mountains: “If it slips, then he [the renter] is liable, **since mishaps in the mountain are more than the valley.”** Two syntactical phenomena can be observed in this sentence: there is no agreement of number between the subject ***təqalot*** and the predicate ***yater***. In addition, the noun ***təqalot*** is omitted in the second half of the equation – the text does not state that mishaps in the mountain are more than ***mishaps*** in the valley, but simply “mishaps […] are more than the valley.” Both these phenomena can be seen in the Arabic original of the Commentary on the Mishnah: בין הו אן **אלעת'ראת פי אלג'באל אכת'ר מן אלסהל**. The Hebrew sentence in the *Mishneh Torah* is clearly a precise and literal translation of the Arabic one in the Commentary on the Mishnah. In the Arabic original there is no agreement of number between the comparative and the subject, according to the rules for the comparative and superlative in that language; the word **אלעת'ראת** is missing in the second half of the equation, and the same is true in the Hebrew of the *Mishneh torah*.

**ii. Preliminary Results**

I shall present below some prominent research findings from my previous studies:

Ariel 2015 [1] – one of the factors encouraging the use of biblical (rather than rabbinic) Hebrew is the translation, which encouraged the author to use terms from the biblical language rather than offer a free translation.

Ariel 2017 [2] – it can be proven that alongside instances when Maimonides was unaware of the influence of Arabic on his syntax (as presented at the beginning of the article), he used some Arabic syntactical constructions deliberately in order to fill an existing syntactical lacuna in rabbinic Hebrew. A clear test case of this is the Arabic construction *la-hū ʔan yafʕala* and its Hebrew translation *yeš l-o li-p̄ʕol* (“he is allowed.”) A comparison of the *Mishneh Torah* to the Commentary on the Mishnah clearly reveals the Arabic source (contrary to the opinion of Fink 1980 [11], who argued that this was an internal development in Hebrew). In many instances Maimonides copied the language of the Mishnah while changing the syntactical structure (the *benoni* form) to the above-mentioned Arabic structure, thus showing that he was aware of the change from rabbinic Hebrew. Conversely, in all the instances in which he translated the Commentary on the Mishnah and the Arabic structure implied obligation, rather than permission, Maimonides did not alter the Arabic structure, thus showing that his use of this structure was not only conscious but also cautious. The second test case discussed in this article, an infinitive + overt subject, shows that Maimonides used this structure (which is very rare in classical Hebrew and common in Maimonides’ Arabic) in a limited manner, mainly for stylistic purposes.

These two syntactical structures have been discussed in prior studies by important scholars who are fluent in Arabic, but who did not compare them to Maimonides’ Arabic writing (Fink 1980 [11], Rabin 2000 [32]). The absence of such a comparison led both scholars to interpret the structures erroneously as the product of internal Hebrew development. The study of these syntactical structures also reflects the importance of comparing Maimonides’ Hebrew to his Arabic as a condition for the reliability of the research.

My doctoral thesis (Ariel 2018 [75]) discussed additional syntactical structures and the lexicon in the Book of Laws, including their comparison to their sources in the rabbinic literature and in Maimonides’ Arabic writings. The thesis also examined the question of Maimonides’ linguistic awareness from an additional angle, based on the linguistic corrections he made to his draft of the *Mishneh Torah* (of which 20 pages have survived in the author’s handwriting). These corrections reflect his intense linguistic sensitivity. A selection of explorations into the Arabic influence on the lexicon of the Book of Laws in the *Mishneh Torah* is presented in Ariel 2019a [76]. Ariel 2019b [77] presents for the first time a comprehensive review of unpublished Genizah excerpts from the *Mishneh Torah* (autograph), and discusses the linguistic changes between these drafts and the final version of the text.

All the studies reflect a high level of linguistic awareness, as well as the importance of comparing the language of the *Mishneh Torah* to the Commentary on the Mishnah.

**iv. Conditions available to the researcher to undertake the research (detail personnel and infrastructures – including accessibility and availability)**

The proposed study continues my studies over recent years into Maimonides’ language. The careful reading of his texts (I have copied the Book of Commandments from the manuscripts and prepared a full concordance for this work as part of the Historical Dictionary Project of the Academy of the Hebrew Language). This familiarization will help me to progress rapidly with the study and to identify interesting phenomena for study.

In addition to my rights as a scholar at a research university, I will also have access to research assistants. Over the first two years they will help me to ensure that my study has exhausted all the parallels between the Commentary on the Mishnah and the *Mishneh Torah*, while in the final year they will help me to organize, analyze, and present the findings.

Alongside the research assistants, in the final year of the research I hope to teach a research seminar for master’s students focusing on an analysis of Maimonides’ Hebrew in the *Mishneh Torah* in light of the translations from the Commentary on the Mishnah and the Book of Commandments. The teaching work and discussions in the seminary sitting will also contribute to enriching the overall study.

**v. Pitfalls and Expected Results**

**Pitfalls**

• As mentioned above (§B), the scope of the corpuses I intend to compare in the proposed study is extremely large. During the course of the research, it is possible that I might realize that two years of research are not enough to exhaust all this material. In addition to the research assistants, with whose efficient help I hope I will be able to complete the research by the expected date, the research is also planned in a manner (§Cii) whereby the research will begin with the Book of Commandments, whose definitions can easily be compared to those in the commandments at the beginning of the *Mishneh Torah*, as well as the tractate of the Mishnah that offer the greatest potential to find parallels in the *Mishneh Torah* – *Tohorot*, which does not have a parallel section in either the Jerusalem or the Babylonian Talmud, and *Zera’im*, which has no Babylonian Talmud. In instances when the rabbinic literature is limited in scope, it may be assumed that Maimonides would be more likely to rely on his Commentary on the Mishnah when writing the *Mishneh Torah*. If it proves necessary to reduce the scope of the corpus, the research plan will ensure that the most interesting parts will be examined properly. In addition, and as required, the possibility will be examined of requesting an extension of the research by one additional year in order to exhaust the field.

**Expected Results**

• At the end of the study, the researchers will be in possession of a reliable database including all the parallels between the Commentary on the Mishnah and the *Mishneh Torah*. A “self-dictionary” of Maimonides will also be presented, ordered both according to the Arabic values and their Hebrew alternatives and by the Hebrew values and their Arabic origins. We will also be in possession of a list of syntactical structures influenced by the Arabic, and conversely a list of Arabic syntactical structures that were replaced by pure Hebrew syntactical structures. These databases will be published in digital or printed form.

• The test cases in lexicon and syntax will be studied comprehensively, through a comparison to the entire Arabic and Hebrew language of Maimonides in all his writings and through a comparison to medieval Judeo-Arabic and to Hebrew of different periods. This study will be presented as a scientific publication.