This short paper will engage the ongoing debate about which methodologies should be used to produce a critical edition of the Zohar, the foundational text of Kabbalah. Recent scholarship on the textual history of the Zohar, which draws from both manuscripts and early print editions, has set the stage for this debate. Opposing traditional models that sought to produce a critical edition by harmonizing the various textual strata of the Zohar, scholars have suggested alternative approaches that would instead feature apparatuses to illuminate the reception, editing, and dissemination of these various textual strata.[[1]](#footnote-4) Building on these suggestions, several studies published in the past few years have considered various strategies for compiling the textual strata of the Zohar.

In the first part of the paper, I will briefly survey issues relating to the earliest textual witnesses of the Zohar, which demonstrate the dynamism and complexity of the earliest manuscript transmission processes. Then, in the main body of the paper, I will turn to exploring this dynamismthrough the prism of language by investigating textual variations in the use of Zoharic Aramaic across the various textual witnesses. I will argue that differences in the various versions of the text do not reflect minor changes and errors in the transmission process, but rather essential pieces of information that comprise additional witnesses to the complex processes of the Zohar’s dissemination. I suggest that to fully understand these processes of dissemination and transmission, it is crucial to consider fluctuations in the linguistic matrices of the various texts. I will conclude with a few preliminary remarks about the optimal approach to producing a critical edition of the Zohar based on the manuscripts.

It was in the final two decades of the thirteenth century, in Castile, that texts later identified as part of the Zoharic corpus first appeared. From that point on, these texts had an incredibly complicated history of transmission and reception. All that survives from the first century and a half after the Zohar appeared in the cities of Castile are a few witnesses that contain different texts that can be identified with passages of the Zohar. Further, critically considering each of the groups to which these fragments belong reveals significant differences between the Zohar that was printed as a book in Northern Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, on the one hand, and the manuscripts which ostensibly served as a basis for the earliest compilers and printers, on the other. These differences relate to the literary framework of the Zohar, among other things. What’s more, even the main documentary evidence in question is *indirect*, consisting of quotations from the Zoharin other works, Hebrew (mis)translations and paraphrases of Zoharic homilies, and sporadic references to Zoharic texts. *Direct* documentary evidence, i.e., surviving independent copies of long tracts from the Zohar, is vanishingly small in this period. In fact, the earliest extant direct witnesses date from nearly a century after the initial appearance of Zoharic texts and come from a locum as far as Byzantium. Later on, from the tail end of the fourteenth century until the first print runs of the Zohar in sixteenth-century northern Italy, the manuscript witnesses tend to separate into groups, each with common characteristics based on the location and period of transcription; that is, discrete documentary regions across the entire Mediterranean basin….

1. In particular, see Huss’ explicit discussion on the changing cultural reception of the Zohar over the course of generations, and his suggestion that a cause for this might be changes in the modes of dissemination and compilation of “Zoharic texts” until they were finally consolidated into the “Book of the Zohar.”… [↑](#footnote-ref-4)