Abstract

The Judeo-Arabic press of Tunis (1878-1948) reflects Tunisian Jewry’s lifestyles and spiritual worlds. Enlightened community members cultivated this rich treasure trove as part of the broader project they undertook to create splendid, distinctive and inspirational Judeo-Arabic writing. This study directs its attention to the language this press employed, concentrating its attention on forty Judeo-Arabic newspapers found in the collections of the National Library of Israel, the Ben Zvi Institute library, the Central Zionist Archives and other collections.

Amongst the Jewish communities in Islamic lands, Tunisia is the Jewish community that produced the most Jewish newspapers. Between 1878 and 1961, it produced one hundred and forty-three Jewish newspapers and journals: Seventy-nine in Judeo-Arabic, forty-eight in French and sixteen in Hebrew. The distinctiveness of the Tunisian Judeo-Arabic press is expressed in more than just its quantity. It is expressed in its language and I have dedicated my study to this important facet of it.

Through careful study of these newspapers in the first part of this study, especially the introductions their editors published in their initial issues, the general characteristics of Tunis’s Judeo-Arabic newspapers, including their structures and sections, their circulation, their format and their frequency of publication will be presented. Additionally, this section will convey the aims of Tunis’s maskilim and the goals they set when they established these newspapers, as well as the sources they drewn upon when composing news items for these newspapers.

The second part of this study constitutes its heart; it is wholly dedicated to the description, characterization, and analysis of the Judeo-Arabic language employed by Tunis’s maskilim in their newspapers. In this linguistic analysis, variations related to differences in newspaper publication dates and the different genres, including coverage and reporting, op-eds, serialized stories and advertisements, selected will be examined. After linguistic components are identified, classified, and analyzed, they will be compared with parallels in Maghrebian dialects, including the Judeo-Arabic and the Muslim Arabic dialects of the capital Tunis and with similar usages employed in other Judeo-Arabic texts, including texts from Tunisian Jewry’s literary treasures. Thus, these linguistic components will be contrasted with parallels found in medieval Judeo-Arabic texts.

Chapters treating spelling; pronunciation; noun, verb, and pronoun forms; syntax; lexicon are part and parcel of this study’s linguistic analysis. They help sketch out the standard linguistic form employed in Tunis’s Judeo-Arabic press. Tunis’s maskilim, who were devoted to their writing and expert in many languages, produced it by weaving distinct and varied elements together into a rich fabric. Analysis of these newspapers’ language reveals the linguistic layers present within it. These layers include literary Arabic whose presence is recognizable in the presence of Tanwin cases, and regular use of paired and broken plural forms not employed in Tunisian Jewry’s spoken dialect; the layer of Tunis’s spoken Judeo-Arabic dialect reflected in, among other things, interrogative words and conjunctions that are used in this Jewish dialect; the layer of the Muslim Arabic dialect of Tunis that testifies to the inspiration that Tunis’s Jewish enlighteners found in the literature of their Muslim neighbors. Among other things, this layer is reflected in the root type I-w/y verb conjugation, the use of auxiliary verbs, the plural morpheme, and the particles that distinguish this Muslim dialect.

Examination of the changes in the language of Tunis’s Judeo-Arabic press over time and across the different journalistic genres that employ it shows the linguistic strategies employed by Tunis’s maskilim, as well as how extralinguistic factors influenced their writing. This language also displays the widespread use of Hebrew and Romance components in the spoken Judeo-Arabic dialect of Tunis’s Jews, something that has gone largely undocumented and voices a diglossic tension between literary Arabic and the spoken dialect. This language provided the linguistic flexibility that enabled its authors to mold their language to fit different journalistic genres, and it also allowed Tunis’s maskilim to use morphemes and linguistic structures in such a way that they realized their aspiration to write in an original and dynamic language. This creativity is seen, for example, in the use of dual plural forms and the use of particles and adverbs found in Arabic prose and literature, as well as through the interweaving of intertextual references to Jewish sources that lend texts a unique literary and maskilic character.