Arabic as a Jewish Language
— A Note on Similarities between Modern Hebrew and Modern Standard Arabic —

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Abstract

This is a note or sketch on similarities between two Semitic languages: modern Hebrew and modern standard Arabic. They have a lot in common: triliteral structure of a word, conjugation, pronoun, etc. The two languages, however, have some striking differences: vocabulary, plural forms of nouns, syntactic structure like infinitive and subjunctive, etc.

The author has pursued Amos Oz’s literary works and his critical essays dealing with the current situations in Israel. In order to have comprehensive grasp of his world, it would be essential to know of the linguistic situation in Israel.

Keywords: communication between two peoples, Semitic languages, Hebrew, Arabic

1 Arabic as a Jewish language

Let the author begin this note with two scenes in stories by Amos Oz, a world-famous novelist in Israel:

1) In “Panther in the Basement” (1995), whose story develops within a year before the state of Israel is established, a Jewish family in Israel – a father, mother, and their only twelve-year-old son – discuss if and how Jews can forgive crimes against them, especially ones committed by Hitler and his men.

2) In “My Michael” (1968), there appear two Palestine Arabs who, once neighbors and playmates of a Jewish girl, a main character of the novel, now work as terrorists against the state of Israel run by Jews.

The two terms, forgiveness and terrorism, are often mentioned in discussing the situation of Palestine. Jews and Arabs in Israel have had to, during the past 60 years, live next to each other in struggles. We wonder how they communicate with each other. What is the language, first of all, used in communication?

Jews speak Hebrew, and Arabs speak Arabic. Both are official languages in Israel; Hebrew is obviously the dominating language. Whether they like it or not, Arabs in Israel have to, for jobs and life, speak Hebrew. How about Jews? Do they manage to speak Arabic? Eliezer Ben-Rafael (2001) reports that, although they learn basic Arabic at school and Arabic is on in television, radio, and newspapers, most Jews cannot speak Arabic. He then points out three factors of why they cannot:

Learning Arabic is never presented in reference to the fact that this is also one of the major diaspora languages, that a large part of Jewish civilization has been written in Arabic as a language of origin. Recognizing Arabic as a Jewish language could mean encouraging parochial cultures and a pluralization of the society. (P196)

The essential comment here is the last one. If Arabic education to Jewish children were done in the concept of “recognizing Arabic as a Jewish language”, the situation in Israel would undergo a drastic, dramatic change.

The purpose of this note is to recognize Arabic and Hebrew as Semitic languages, to recognize Arabic as a Jewish language. The author refers to modern Hebrew and modern standard Arabic.

2 Similarities between the two languages

Below are shown some striking similarities between modern Hebrew and modern standard Arabic.
triliteral structure of a word

The concept of 'writing' is expressed in three letters: k – t – b. ³

- Hebrew: katav ⁴, ⁵ (← He wrote.)
- Arabic: kataba

(2) conjugation

The form, taken according to number, person, gender, are similar:

- Hebrew / Arabic
- Hebrew
  - katavti / katabti : You (male) wrote
  - katavta / katabta : You (female) wrote
  - katavnu / katabna : We wrote
  - ktavten / katabbana : You (female) wrote

- Arabic
  - kataba
  - katabu
  - kataba

(3) present participle

kotev / katib

(4) pronoun

ani / ana : I

- Hebrew
  - ata / anta : you (male)
  - at / anti : you (female)
  - hu / huwa : he
  - hi / hiya : she
  - anakhnu / nakhnu (we)
  - atem / antum : you (male, plural)
  - aten / antuna : you (female, plural)
  - hem / hum : they (male)
  - hen / huna : they (female)

- Arabic
  - kum / khen : your (male)
  - kunna / khenna : your (female)

(5) genitive pronoun in a suffixed form

- Hebrew
  - -i / -i : my
  - -ekh / -ki : your (female)
  - -o / -hu : his

- Arabic
  - -kha / -ka : your (male)
  - -henn / -huna : their (male)
  - -hanna / -hunna : their (female)

(6) interrogative pronoun or adverb

- Hebrew
  - ma / ma : what
  - mi / man : who
  - matai / mata : when
  - lama / limatha : for what, why

- Arabic
  - ain / aina : where
  - kama / kam : how many (much)

(7) preposition

- Hebrew
  - be / bi : in
  - le / li : for, to
  - 'al / 'ala : on

- Arabic
  - takhat / takhta : under

(8) feminine form of a noun

- Hebrew
  - talmid

- Arabic
  - talmida / talmida / ta'lib / ta'liba

Some examples are shown below in sentences.

- Hebrew
  - a. ma ze ?/ ma hadha ? (What's this ?)
  - b. min-'ain 'ata ? / min 'aina 'anta ?
  - (From where are you ? = Where are you from?)
  - c. shmi .../ 'ismi ... / (My name is ...)
  - d. 'ezkor otkha tamid / sa-'adkurut-ka da'a'iman. (I remember you always.)

3 Differences between the two languages

Two distinct differences are shown:

(9) vocabulary

In spite of some similarities in vocabulary, examples of which are the names of the parts of the body, we are surprised that there are many distinct words between the two languages. This applies to nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

(10) plural forms

It is frustrating that most Arabic nouns, at least masculine nouns, have irregular plural forms:

- Hebrew
  - bait
  - wallad
  - kita:b

- Arabic
  - buyu:t
  - awlad
  - kutub

(11) infinitive vs. subjunctive

Like in English, expressions with infinitives are very common in Hebrew, while Arabic has no infinitive form of a verb; instead Arabic makes use of subjunctive...
constructions.

I want to see you.

(I want to see you.)

**4 for future study**

In order to investigate how Jews and Arabs have daily communication with each other in the situation in which both Hebrew and Arabic are given the status of the official language, it must be made clear how the two languages have developed distinct vocabulary, plural forms and constructions of infinitive vs. subjunctive.

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**Footnotes**

1 For some Jews Arabic was a diaspora language, which is why Jews from Yemen pronounce some sounds as Arabs do.

2 “Modern standard Arabic” is different from several Arabic dialects spoken in 21 countries. It is, on the one hand, written Arabic, and, on the other, Arabic spoken by announcers.

3 In Semitic languages a word and sentence are written from right to left. In this note, however, they are shown from left to write, for convenience.

4 Transcription according to “CD Express - Modern Hebrew” (2005) and “CD - Express:Arabic” (2002)

5 In Hebrew sounds [b] and [v] are complementary, while in Arabic appears only [b].

6 Henceforth, examples are shown, first Hebrew, second Arabic.

7 Arabic does not distinguish between present and future tense. For future tense a prefix sa- is used.

8 Modern Hebrew present participle is used as present tense.

**References**


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