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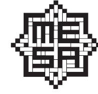

CRITICAL ESSAY

Revisiting Multilingualism in the Ottoman Empire

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Evliya Çelebi (d. after 1685), in his *Seyahatname*, *Book of Travels*, completed circa 1683, records a host of languages and dialects spoken within the Ottoman Empire at the time and provides practical word lists in transcription, especially for those less familiar to his Turkophone audience, such as Hungarian in the western borderlands and varieties of Kurdish in the eastern regions.[1] Evliya also remarks of places where he met bilingual speakers. For instance, about the city of Ohrid in the central province of Rumelia, he informs us that, though its people mainly speak Greek or Bulgarian, they could converse in "elegant Turkish," some in a "very urbane and witty" manner typical of Ottoman literati.[2] Yet curiously, about the capital of Istanbul, his hometown, Evliya says nothing specific about any interaction, besides that he had learned "fluent Greek and Latin" from a Christian goldsmith, to be able to read certain chronicles, and in exchange instructed Persian to the craftsman.[3]

We begin with mention of Evliya to highlight his *Seyahatname* as a linguistic work, among many things, and his interest in local vernaculars in more remote parts of the imperial realm, and even in everyday bilingualism in places closer to the capital. But we do so also to call attention to the fact that when it came to studying a learned or written language that was deemed "foreign" or non-canonical for a Muslim and thus not taught in an Islamic institutional setting, like Greek or Latin, Evliya's goal was mainly the acquisition of knowledge and not actual literary engagement. That should not be surprising. Evliya himself

[1] Evliya provides word lists for nearly thirty non-Turkish languages and dialects, including some spoken outside the imperial borders. Robert Dankoff, "The Languages of the World According to Evliya Çelebi," in *From Mahmud Kaşgari to Evliya Çelebi: Studies in Middle Turkic and Ottoman Literatures* (Istanbul: ISIS), 277–90. On Evliya's list for Hungarian, see Tibor Halasi-Kun, "Evliya Çelebi as Linguist," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* ¾ (1979–80): 376–82; for his list of the Kurdish dialects, see Martin van Bruinessen, "Les Kurdes et leur langue au XVIIIème siècle: Notes d'Evliya Çelebi sur dialectes kurdes," *Studia Kurdica* 1–5 (1988): 13–34.

[2] Robert Dankoff and Robert Elsie, eds. and trans., *Evliya Çelebi in Albania and Adjacent Regions (Kosovo, Montenegro, Ohrid): The Relevant Sections of the* Seyahatname (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 216–17.

[3] Robert Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 27. By "Latin" (*lisān-ı Lātīnī*), Evliya probably meant Italian.

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was a Muslim and an Ottoman literati, Turkophone in speech, and received an education appropriate to his religious affiliation and social rank, which entailed a training in Arabic and Persian to the extent that he could give instruction at least in their elevated varieties. In addition, he was expected to engage with the respective literatures, and as a testament to that, the *Seyahat-name* is replete with Arabic and particularly Persian literary references.

Nevertheless, Evliya's training in elevated varieties of Arabic and Persian, standard for Ottoman literati, did not concern the express use of the vernacular for any literary purpose. The Turkish of these elites, as is invariably brought up, was an amalgam of Arabic and Persian, estranged from the vernacular. In view of that, it is telling in her essay on "Ottoman Languages," for the period 1600–1800, Christine Woodhead does not apply the term "multilingual" to literary activities in Turkish, or for that matter in any other language. Rather, Woodhead simply characterizes the Ottoman Empire as "polyglot" and counts Turkish as one of a handful of learned languages then extant in different linguistic communities, together with Arabic itself, Armenian, Greek, Hebrew, and Church Slavonic, which not only gave rise to a "form of *diglossia*," where the written version of a said language was "virtually unintelligible" to many speakers of its own vernacular, but by extension also limited literary contact between different communities.[4]

The role of diglossic barriers in limiting literary contact has generally led scholars to turn their focus to the post-1800 period. In his comprehensive assessment of the long nineteenth century, Johann Strauss observes that the literary activities of different communities, despite divisions in language, script, and religion, grew in contact with the spread of print, mediated through the translation of western works, primarily in French, which had become a common language of the educated classes across communities. Of more direct literary contact, Strauss singles out the interests and activities of Turkophone Greek Orthodox and Armenians who were familiar with "Turkish folk-literature and even novels" via transcription. But he still concedes that the works of contemporary non-Muslim writers remained largely "*terra incognita* for Ottoman men of letters," and that the situation was similar in reverse, with the exception of Turkophones, either monolingual or bilingual.[5] Hence the picture we get of literary contact for the post-1800 period, while wider, is still demarcated along linguistic lines and further entangled with print.

The picture for the period, however, becomes complicated when we go beyond the print culture of different communities. As a case in point, the interest of Turkophone Armenians in "Turkish folk-literature" probably dates back much earlier than the nineteenth century, as suggested by a surviving collection of minstrel poetry in both Armenian and Turkish, recorded in Armenian script and in manuscript form.[6] The existence of this sort of compilation

[4] Christine Woodhead, "Ottoman Languages," in *The Ottoman World*, eds. Christine Woodhead (London: Routledge, 2012), 146–47.

[5] Johann Strauss, "Who Read What in the Ottoman Empire? (19th–20th Centuries)," *Middle Eastern Literatures* 6 (2003): 53–55.

[6] See Kevork Pamukciyan, ed., "Ermeni Harfli Türkçe Elyazma Eski Bir Cönk: I," in *Folklor ve Etnografya Araştırmaları* (1984): 413–44; Kevork Pamukciyan, ed., "Ermeni Harfli Türkçe Elyazma Eski Bir Cönk: II," *Folklor ve Etnografya Araştırmaları* (1985): 275–309.

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indicates that interaction was far more diffuse and therefore should not be construed in rigid dichotomies, in terms of diglossia, of learned and popular, and especially of print and manuscript. It bears reminding that the spread of print did not outright displace manuscript production, which continued into the early twentieth century.

This essay seeks to intervene in the recent debates about Ottoman multilingualism. Our aim is not just to revisit the issue of literary contact in the long nineteenth century and the part played by particular reading communities in fostering it, which is amply documented. We instead offer a longer historical perspective, from the seventeenth century onward, to consider the issue in a broad manner in the multilingual spaces of the Ottoman Empire, with stress on the plural, to point to important continuities from the early modern to the modern era. We thus focus on the ways in which literary expression and practice across different communities interacted, intersected, and competed with one another within imperial, provincial, and transregional settings, particularly in light of current scholarship and our own research. Our frame is comparative, though circumscribed by our areas of expertise, and our choice of the seventeenth century as the point of departure is premised on the view that there then emerged a marked shift toward the use of the vernacular for literary purposes throughout the Empire. And we argue that the multiplicity of expression and practice seen then and after reflected complex language hierarchies, shaped not only by religion but also by local dynamics and transregional networks, which scholars nowadays attempt to unpack and understand.

Empire and Vernacular

That the Ottoman Empire was multilingual in character is not a matter of debate. Yet historical appraisals of literary practice remain rooted in a nationalist paradigm going back to German Romanticism and especially the ideas of Johann Gottfried Herder (d. 1803) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (d. 1814), who both held that vernacular language was the basic parameter that determined collective identification, or a people's affiliation to a national community. It is little wonder, then, that historians today still subscribe to a teleological and triumphalist narrative of progress, of language revival and literary and cultural renewal, at the end of which emerged the modern nation with its monolingual national literature. This narrative accordingly privileges modern works, principally in the form of the novel, that appeared in the nineteenth century. Moreover, a literary multilingualism that did not embrace a western language is seen as symbolic of cultural stagnation and decline.

We certainly view things differently and find it less productive to speak of a triumph of an individual language or a linguistic community. We are also keenly aware that our use of the term "community" is not without risk, since it implies a homogeneity, be it cultural or ethnic. At the same time, we do not use the term as a stand-in for *millet*, which presupposes strict segmentation along religious lines. As the case of Turkophone Armenians shows, boundaries were permeable and the linguistic situation more complex, despite

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the presence of language hierarchies within various communities. Regarding literary works, a text in a specific language can echo those in other languages: a poem in one language can be inspired by a genre originating in another; a translation can point to multiple conversations between speakers of diverse languages; and a newspaper article on language itself can similarly be in dialogue. Moreover, we accept that some texts and concepts were untranslatable and thus place emphasis on echoes and reflections in cultural zones of negotiation rather than the unambiguous transmission of texts from one language to another.

Multilingualism, of course, was not confined to the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Eric Durstetler, for instance, proposes that, for the early modern era, we think of the phenomenon as part and parcel of a Mediterranean linguistic ecosystem, with a variety of lingua francas that enabled "communication between speakers of different mother tongues."[7] We suggest, though, that such an ecosystem extended far beyond the Mediterranean world, if we consider Persian or Hebrew, each of which served as a literary lingua franca for speakers of diverse local vernaculars. And the circulation of literary works, in manuscript or print form, were not always decided upon a fixed canon. In recognition of that, scholarly attention has turned to providing a more accurate understanding of contemporary literary tastes and sensibilities, and contextualized preferences within particular communities of consumers and readers.

Recent discussions of early modern multilingualism, whether situated in Europe, the Mediterranean world, or the Ottoman Empire, and however nuanced and critical, continue to be indebted to the historical paradigm that Benedict Anderson first put forth four decades ago.[8] Anderson outlined a paradigm that accentuated the early modern transformations of holy tongues into vernaculars, as well as the secularization of politics, in which monarchs no longer represented divine authority. And those developments, in tandem with the spread of print capitalism and the expanded cultural options opened to readers by the circulation of periodicals and literary works, would over time cement the ability of the speakers of a vernacular language to imagine themselves as belonging to the same national community.

The problem with such a paradigm predicated on vernacularization and print capitalism is obvious for the Ottoman Empire in the pre-1800 period, when the press had yet to become prevalent. Post 1800, print capitalism acted in ways different from the ones prescribed by Anderson. With colonial expansion and imperial reforms, western languages entered more forcefully into public spheres through new educational and missionary institutions.

[7] Eric R. Durstetler, "Speaking in Tongues: Language and Communication in the Early Modern Mediterranean," *Past and Present* 217 (2012): 67–68. For a discussion of the linguistic ecosystem of Istanbul in the seventeenth century, see Éva Á. Csató, Bernt Brendemoen, Lars Johanson, Claudia Römer, and Heidi Stein, "The Linguistic Landscape of Istanbul in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Urban Mind: Cultural and Environmental Dynamics*, eds. Paul J. J. Sinclair, Güllog Nordquist, Frands Herschend, and Christian Isendahl (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2010), 415–39.

[8] See Peter Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Durstetler, "Speaking in Tongues"; Woodhead, "Ottoman Languages."

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These languages inspired new translation projects and modes of literary multilingualism that now included a western language, or a few. But in our view, the post-1800 period did not represent an unequivocal break from earlier practices, nor was it a period marked just by publications aimed at monolingual nation-building.

In regard to vernacularization, scholarly attention has also concentrated on the post-1800 period when spoken varieties of languages became the main vehicle for literary expression, most conspicuously with modern western Armenian. Yet in a re-assessment of the issue, Michiel Leezenberg argues that a significant shift toward the use of the vernacular for literary purposes can initially be seen in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and throughout the Ottoman Empire. Leezenberg highlights the increasing use of Kurmanji Kurdish and Albanian for poetry among Muslim communities. He further remarks that none of the nascent vernacular traditions, if marked out by religion, betrays a sense of community "defined in primarily or exclusively linguistic terms."[9] Our next section, however, points to the fact that multilingual literary production accompanied and complemented the rise of the vernacular.

The Early Modern Scene

We begin the discussion with a parallel development Leezenberg observes for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries: a movement toward simplifying Turkish as a literary language, which he describes as a "vernacularization of sorts" in reverse.[10] We do indeed witness among some Ottoman literati a change in linguistic taste for a register of Turkish closer to the colloquial variety, most notably with Nedim (d. 1730) in poetry and even with Evliya Çelebi in prose. However, that change in taste hardly constituted a uniform movement motivated by a back-to-roots ideology. It came about primarily in reaction to the rhetorical excesses of the preceding generations of poet and writers and their preference for an idiom more inflected with Persian. Moreover, the change neither led to a valorization of an unadorned, plain style, nor resulted in a uniformity of practice.

A figure frequently cited as a bellwether of the change in linguistic taste is Osmanzade Taʾib (d. 1724), poet laureate under Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730). Taʾib adopted a simpler Turkish register for his verse and prose, and was a vocal proponent strictly in favor of it. Usually, though, poets and writers deployed different registers depending not only on personal preferences, but also on audience expectations, and at the individual level as well. For instance, Taʾib's peer Nabi (d. 1712) used a simpler register for poems intended for a less learned crowd, and composed verse and prose in an idiom highly inflected with Persian for fellow literati. And for literati just keen on Persian verse, Nabi also composed poems in Persian and compiled a collection, as a display of his

[9] Michiel Leezenberg, "The Vernacular Revolution: Reclaiming Early Modern Grammatical Traditions in the Ottoman Empire," *History of Humanities* 1 (2016): 261–62.

[10] Ibid., 260.

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literary bilingualism. However, he did not produce any poem in Arabic, despite his knowledge of it. That he did not do so points to the prestige Persian enjoyed among many Ottoman literati, especially for poetic practice. About his collection of lyric poems, composed in simpler Turkish, Nabi forcefully declares that "a [divan] of *gazel*s is not an Arabic dictionary."[11] About Persian, he made no similar statement.

The prestige Persian enjoyed extended to the wider public. Among the limited literary titles available for purchase from the printing house set up by Ibrahim Müteferrika (d. 1747) in Istanbul in 1726, two favorites were centuries-old epics in Persian, one in verse, the other in prose: Firdawsi's *Shah-nama* and an edition of the *Hamza-nama*, an epic recounting the exploits of the Prophet's uncle.[12] The *Hamza-nama*, particularly its Turkish adaptations, was a text regularly recited by storytellers at coffee houses in the capital, and the fact that the print edition was a bestseller of sorts shows that a shared popular taste did exist and that literary and social hierarchies did overlap. The enthusiasm for the *Hamza-nama* was also transregional, for it was quite popular then in Safavid Iran and Mughal India, and in various versions. In view of that, one wonders whether the print edition available for purchase was based on a version originating from the east.

Ottoman literati, of course, regardless of differences concerning stylistic register, often followed contemporary tastes and trends from the east, since they regarded the older Persian tradition as part of their heritage, and some readily embraced them. Yet their embrace was not passive, as one might assume, but rather a gesture of creative engagement. A good example of this is the emergence of a distinctively indigenous Turkish form of the Persian genre of the *saqi-nama*, wine poetry dedicated to the cupbearer, by the late seventeenth century. The emergence of an indigenous Turkish genre, which would continue to flourish well into the next century, begs the question of the appropriateness of seeing such a development in broad conceptual parameters, be it in terms of a "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" linked by Persian language and Islamic faith as Shahab Ahmed proposed, or of a "Persographia," with the stress put on mutual exchange and scribal practice over religion, that Nile Green offers in response.[13] This is not to say that these conceptualizations are not useful, but the vantage points overlook local cultural dynamics and literary agency.

[11] Hatice Aynur, "Ottoman Literature" in *The Cambridge History of Turkey, vol. 3: The Later Ottoman Empire, 1683–1839*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 486.

[12] The printing house was the first dedicated to publishing books in Arabic script and in multiple languages for mainly Turkophone consumers. Orlin Sabev, "The First Ottoman Turkish Printing Press Enterprise: Success or Failure?" in *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Dana Sajdi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 63–89.

[13] For a succinct overview of the broader issue of the "Persianate," see Sunil Sharma, Review of *The Persianate World*, ed. Nile Green (2019); *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Space*, eds. Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf, *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 28 (2019): 454–58; Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Green, ed., Introduction to *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 1–71.

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We certainly cannot speak of the Ottoman Empire in a comparable all-encompassing manner. There were a number of long-established and competing literary lingua francas, including Persian, and for non-Muslim communities the prestige of Turkish was generally confined to its value as an administrative language. Even so, there did appear an appreciation of Turkish as a literary language from the late seventeenth century onward. This is most evident with members of the Greek Orthodox Phanariot community, who learned the elevated Turkish needed for governmental posts and also acquired a taste for poetry in it.[14] Additionally, there is the unusual case of Eremia Čʿēlēpi (d. 1695), an Armenian literati living in Istanbul, who learned Turkish, as well as Greek, Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew, and had ties to Ottoman officials, hence his title "Çelebi." Eremia, a prolific author, wrote in Armenian and Armeno-Turkish, or Turkish in Armenian script. Of special interest is his poem "Stampōloy patmutʿiwn," "History of Constantinople," an extended poem composed in a simple register of Armenian and completed in 1684. The poem is less a history than a guide to the capital, with descriptions of the built cultural landscape.[15] Perhaps it is mere coincidence, but in basic pattern, Eremia's poem echoes the account of the city in Evliya's *Seyahat-name*, and each in a language closer to the vernacular.

That said, the literary impact of Turkish among Muslim communities varied according to province. It was predictably the strongest in Rumelia and Anatolia, and in adjacent provinces, where everyday bilingualism was common. The literary impact can be best seen in the poetry of the *bejtexhinj*, "couplet makers," in an elevated vernacular Albanian, which emerged in urban centers in the early eighteenth century. Their poetry, usually perceived as a form of popular vernacular verse, is instead notable for its learned currency. That is, the *bejtexhinj* followed poetic fashions prevailing in Istanbul.[16] However, the appeal of their poetry was limited due to the fact that local literati preferred verse in Turkish, because of its larger public capital. Later in the century, Mustafa Bašeskija (Şevki, d. 1809), a religious functionary in Sarajevo, composed a few poems in the Bosnian vernacular, but his eulogistic and elegiac compositions and chronograms were in Turkish.[17] And all are recorded in a journal he kept in Turkish. By contrast, in the far eastern provinces, particularly in the Kurdish-speaking regions, Turkish as a literary lingua franca had little if any bearing.

There was limited multilingual interaction as well in the Arab-speaking provinces. The obvious reason is the prestige of Arabic by virtue of being

[14] Johann Strauss, "Language and Power in the Late Ottoman Empire," in *Imperial Lineages and Legacies in the Eastern Mediterranean: Recording the Imprint of Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Rule*, ed. Rhoads Murphey (London: Routledge, 2017), 115–42.

[15] Peter Cowe, "Stampōloy patmutʻiwn," in *Christian-Muslim Relations 1500–1900*, ed. David Thomas, accessed Feb. 10, 2021, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2451-9537_cmrii_COM_27324.

[16] Robert Elsie, "Albanian Literature in the Modern Tradition: Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Albanian Writing in Arabic Script," *Oriens* 33 (1992): 287–306.

[17] Kerima Filan, "Life in Sarajevo in the Eighteenth Century (according to Mulla Mustafa's *mecmua*)," in *Living in the Ottoman Ecumenical Community: Essays in Honour of Suraiya Faroqhi*, eds. Vera Constantini and Markus Koller (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 317–45.

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the language of the Qurʾan and also of learning, in addition to the privileged position of the literary tradition for Arabophone Muslim communities. Furthermore, Arabic served as a lingua franca for Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond, be it for scholarship or commercial affairs. What interest there was in Turkish, then, was again mainly restricted to administrative purposes. Yet from the seventeenth century onward, some of the Muslim scholarly elite, especially of Damascus, gained a fluency in elevated Turkish as a result of both increased contact with local Ottoman officials and increased travel to Istanbul either for intellectual engagement or in search of patronage.[18]

Whether that development led to actual literary engagement remains an open question. Dana Sajdi, for instance, suggests the possibility that there may have been some interaction at the discursive level with respect to the widespread phenomenon of writing "author-centric" narratives, in Arabic and Turkish and in a mix of genres, beginning in the late seventeenth century.[19] Sajdi's suggestion is welcome, and the matter warrants further investigation. Yet also remarkable is what she documents for the literary scene in Damascus and the adjacent area in the course of the eighteenth century: the appearance of a newly literate class, of lower social rank, who preferred to write in a register of Arabic closer to the colloquial variety, particularly for prose. Their appearance makes clear that local dynamics cannot be ignored when it comes to the issue of multilingual literary interaction, let alone of the use of the vernacular.

Not all of the newly literate were Muslims, as Sajdi highlights in the example of the Greek Orthodox priest Mikhaʾil Burayk (fl. 1782) from Damascus, who wrote what she terms a "secular" chronicle.[20] We mention Burayk to draw attention to another development in the area that allowed him to write such a chronicle. In the seventeenth century, there was a significant rise in the learning of Arabic among Maronites and Greek Orthodox, first in Aleppo and then elsewhere, and partially spurred by Roman Catholic missionary activity. The rise in learning created what Abdulrazzak Patel calls an "inter-religious cultural space," in which newly literate Christians integrated elements of the Arabic literary tradition, identified as Muslim, into their own works.[21] The local dynamics, undeniably, was far more complex than that. But we draw attention to show that at least in one region literary engagement did indeed cross religious boundaries, and that it need not involve Turkish.

This brings us to a consideration of the place of Hebrew as an Ottoman language. Hebrew, of course, was the primary language of written communication that connected Jewish communities who spoke an array of languages locally,

[18] Michael Winter, "Cultural Ties between Istanbul and Ottoman Egypt," in *Frontiers of Ottoman Studies, vol. 1: State, Province and the West*, eds. Colin Imber and Keiko Kiyatoki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 187–202.

[19] Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 128–30.

[20] Ibid., 78.

[21] Abdulrazzak Patel, *The Arab Nahda: The Making of the Intellectual and Humanist Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 36.

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including long-standing Arabophone communities, from Cairo to Baghdad, whose members not only wrote works in Hebrew but also in Judeo-Arabic. Some members appear to have been quite conversant in the scholarly tradition in Arabic. As an example, Yosef Sambari (d. 1703), a historian and resident of Cairo, made use of well-known chronicles in Arabic for his account of Islam and the Jewish community in Egypt under Muslim rule up until to the Ottoman present in his *Divre Yosef*, *Sayings of Yosef*, produced in 1672.[22] In exploiting such sources, Sambari was not unique when compared to Evliya, who did the same for his own account of Egypt in the *Seyahat-name*. However, Sambari did not utilize works in Turkish, illustrating further the lack of fluency in Turkish among the learned at large, despite recorded attempts in the Geniza to learn the language.

The situation differed to a degree with the newer Sephardi community, who arrived in the Ottoman Empire in the late fifteenth century upon their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula and brought their own vernacular, Judeo-Spanish or Ladino, a language both spoken and written. The Sephardim also brought a Hebrew poetic tradition, rich with conventions adopted and assimilated from the Arabic tradition. This is not all that remarkable, since it was a tradition shared by other Jewish communities. Still, some members of the Sephardi community attempted to reinvigorate the tradition in a manner that might be less than expected. A case in point is Israel Najara (d. 1625), a rabbi and poet. Najara published a collection of poems in Hebrew that he modeled on popular Turkish *makam* song melodies, out of Safed in 1587, editions of which were produced within the Empire and outside in places like Salonica and Venice.[23]

Najara's collection of poems points to several things. First, cross-lingual interaction was not limited to daily conversation and interaction but also influenced elite culture, if not strictly literary or scholarly. Second, the wide circulation of his collection was facilitated by a network of printing houses established at the time by the Sephardi community in the Ottoman Empire. Also, that an edition was produced in Venice shows that there was an audience receptive to the kind of formal experiment that his work represented, since earlier Jewish poets in the Italian Peninsula integrated the sonnet and its prosodic structure into the poetic tradition. And lastly, contemporary sonnets circulated in the Empire, and it seems that Najara himself tried his hand at composing one.[24]

Poetic works were also in dialogue on topical matters of communal interest. For the seventeenth century, this is most apparent in critical works produced in reaction to Sabbatai Sevi (d. 1676), a kabbalist from Izmir who proclaimed to be the messiah in 1648, and his movement that swept Jewish communities

[22] Martin Jacobs, "An Ex-Sabbatean's Remorse? Sambari's Polemics against Islam," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 97 (2007): 347–78.

[23] Joseph Yahalom, "Hebrew Poetry and Its Turkish Background," in *Ottoman Melodies, Hebrew Hymns: A Sixteenth-Century Cross-Cultural Encounter*, with Andreas Tietze, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1995), 11–37.

[24] Dvora Bregman, *The Golden Way: The Hebrew Sonnet during the Renaissance and the Baroque*, trans. Ann Brener (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006).

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throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond into Europe. In the Italian Peninsula, for example, Immanuel Frances (d. after 1703), a rabbi and prolific author, published a collection of satirical poems out of Livorno in 1667, with a title that makes a pun on the self-proclaimed messiah's name and in view of his apostasy a year earlier: *Sevi Muddah* or the "Gazelle Banished." For his poems, Frances drew on reports that he received from Izmir.[25] More notably, he subverted the stock image of the gazelle, often signifying a beautiful cupbearer of wine, to mock Sabbatai: the gazelle now is the false cupbearer who intoxicated foolish Jewish hearts but "not by the blood of grapes."[26] Frances' invocation of the cupbearer, though tied to biblical prophetic references, would have made much sense to Ottoman literati then consumed with wine poetry and their audiences, which included state officials, had there been a translation of his poems into Turkish. And had the poems been in Persian and not in Hebrew, there might have been.

A Modern Scene Reconfigured

In the nineteenth century, patterns of multilingual interaction were altered and reconfigured to fit the changing political circumstances. A major development, of course, was the rise of nationalist sentiment that not only challenged the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, but also led intellectuals from different self-ascribed ethnic groups to articulate a collective identity based on a mother tongue and concomitantly to engage in projects of language revival and literary and cultural renewal. In response, state reforms were enacted, beginning with the Edict of Gülhane in 1839, to accommodate especially the rights of those subject populations, followed by a constitutional movement that advocated for equal Ottoman citizenry, which culminated in the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. These parallel developments, despite seemingly at odds, brought about increased topical and translational multilingual interaction, but previous notions of language hierarchies and older literary practices never disappeared.

Ottoman print capitalism was multilingual, particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The high degree of censorship and repression under Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) notwithstanding, newspapers circulated in a variety of languages, such as Arabic, Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, Ladino, and obviously Turkish. Furthermore, certain cities served as a transregional hub for both the production and distribution of literary works in different languages. Outside of Istanbul, for example, Alexandria was an important locale for the publication of works not only in Arabic but also in Greek. In this world of print products, mothers in Erzurum gleaned information on global developments in girls' education from a Armeno-Turkish newspaper published in Istanbul; activists in Mardin gathered updates about domestic

[25] Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Ṣevi: The Mystical Messiah*, 1626–1676, trans. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

[26] Simon Gershon Bernstein, ed., *Divan: le-Rabi ʿImanuʾel ben David Franses* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1932), 183.

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affairs from a Kurmanji Kurdish gazette out of Cairo; and rabbis in Baghdad read about the Anglo-Afghan conflict in Judeo-Arabic newspapers from Kolkata and Mumbai.[27] All of these reading practices corresponded to, and occurred in, an Ottoman milieu in which gender, education, politics, and war were discussed in the print media of the time.

Many of the print media that circulated in the Ottoman Empire were bilingual, even trilingual, and some with state support. One of the best known is the satirical weekly *Diyojen* (1870–73), which was produced in Istanbul, and in French, Turkish, and Greek. Moreover, official provincial gazettes were published in Turkish and other languages. For example, *Selanik* (1869–74) had versions in Bulgarian, Greek, and Ladino, and *al-Zawraʾ/ Zevraʾ* (1869–1917) appeared in Arabic and Turkish. Taking into account these type of periodicals, together with the general growth of the press, Fatma Müge Göçek proposed a while back, as an alternative to the Andersonian model, that the period witnessed the emergence of an "imagined Ottoman community."[28] Still, the trans-regional circulation of some periodicals raise the question of how cohesive that vision of a singular community ever was in practice. At the same time, periodicals that did contain multilingual content targeted specific communities, and not the wider public. One final example, further illustrating the problem of trying to pin down a publication strictly within an imperial frame, is the Syriac journal *Beth Nahrin* or "Mesopotamia" (1916–21) published by Naʿʿum Faʾiq (d. 1930), an Ottoman émigré in New Jersey, which included articles in Arabic and Turkish via transcription and whose primary audience was the Assyrian community in the Unites States.[29]

The increasing number of western-style educational institutions established throughout the Ottoman Empire, aided by the lack of an official language policy, from missionary schools and colleges to state-sponsored ones, generated new kinds of multilingual interaction, with French, German, Italian, and English being languages of instruction. In some state-sponsored institutions, the instruction was bilingual, French and Turkish. In addition, newly

[27] Masayuki Ueno, "One Script, Two languages: Garabed Panosian and His Armeno-Turkish Newspapers in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Middle Eastern Studies* 52 (2016): 605–22; Janet Klein, "Journalism Beyond Borders: The Bedirkhans and the First Kurdish Gazette, 1898–1902," in *The Kurdish Question Revisited*, eds. Gareth Stansfield and Mohammed Shareef (London: Hurst, 2017), 173–86; Orit Bashkin, "Why Did Baghdadi Jews Stop Writing to Their Brethren in Mainz?—Some Comments about the Reading Practices of Iraqi Jews in the Nineteenth Century," in *History of Printing and Publishing in the Languages and Countries of the Middle East*, ed. Philip Sadgrove (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 95–110.

[28] Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 125.

[29] Naures Atto, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses Among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011). Prior to his move to New Jersey in 1912, Faʾiq published a similarly trilingual journal entitled *Kawkab Madenho* or "Star of the East" (1910–1912) in his hometown of Diyarbakır. On his role in the Syriac literary revival, see Robert Isaf, "Awakening, or Watchfulness: Naum Faiq and Syriac Language Poetry at the Fall of the Ottoman Empire," in *Arabic and its Alternatives: Religious Minorities and their Languages in the Emerging Nation States of the Middle East (1920–1950)*, eds. Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Karène Sanchez-Summerer, and Tijmen C. Baarda (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 171–200.

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established learned societies required knowledge of at least one western language. Nationalist and proto-nationalist intellectuals who emerged in the public spheres, in fact, had to fend off claims that just western languages possessed the capacity to convey complex scientific ideas and concepts. So they worked with and against western languages: they compiled dictionaries, engaged in translating the Bible into local languages with missionaries and at European academies; produced Turkish, Arabic, and Syriac grammar books for European orientalists; and studied their works to learn about their own literatures and cultures. It was only in this context that an intellectual like Ruhi al-Khalidi (d. 1913), based in Jerusalem, was able to compare Arabic poetics to French in one of his Arabic publications.[30]

Thanks to instruction in western languages, especially French, translation projects consumed the public spheres: literal and loose translations, adaptions, and summations of works on history, popular science, social theory, and so on circulated in print media. Translated as well were novels, again mostly in French and initially serialized in periodicals, for example Alexandre Dumas's *Les Deux Diane* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The translations, in turn, introduced readers to a new form of fictional narrative, and writers promptly adopted and adapted this form of narrative and produced their own novels, which were likewise serialized at the start.[31] The adaptation of the novel into existing narrative traditions gave rise to what Marilyn Booth refers to as "hybrid genres" that were also shaped by translations of works diverse as Homer's *Iliad* and Daniel Dafoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and re-translations from one local language to another. Booth further suggests that the very act of translation constituted a lingua franca, a shared "mode of worlding the local."[32] Alternatively, Monica Ringer and Etienne Charrière emphasize translation as an act of imagining and implementing an "Ottoman modern" that was engaged with conversations taking place within different communities.[33] Aside from the question of how we ought to conceive of literary translation, let alone of translation on the whole, the efforts did lead to a new kind of multilingual interaction, particularly pertaining to the novel.

By the late nineteenth century, with the change in the linguistic landscape, debates arose about the appropriate use of the vernacular for literary purposes.

[30] Al-Khalidi's work was published in 1904 with the title *Tarikh ʿilm al-adab ʿinda al-Ifranj wa-al-ʿArab wa-Victor Hugo*.

[31] Reyhan Tutumlu and Ali Sedar, "A Distant Reading of the Ottoman/Turkish Serial Novel Tradition (1831–1908)," in *Nineteenth-Century Serial Narrative in Transnational Perspective, 1830–1860s: Popular Culture–Serial Culture*, eds. Daniel Stein and Lisanna Wiele (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 95–114; Samah Selim, *Popular Fiction, Translation and the Nahda in Egypt* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

[32] Marilyn Booth, ed., Introduction to *Migrating Texts: Circulating Translations around the Ottoman Mediterranean* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 43–44.

[33] Monica Ringer and Etienne Charrière, eds., Introduction to *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 6–7. For another assessment of Ottoman literary modernity, and in relation to translation, see Mehmet Fatih Uslu and Fatih Altuğ, eds., Introduction to *Tanzimat ve Edebiyat: Osmanlı İstanbul'da Modern Edebî Kültür* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2014), vii–xvi.

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In regard to Turkish, the debate revolved around a "collective anxiety about the written register of the … language," according to Zeynep Seviner.[34] That is, some Ottoman literati promoted the use of a simpler stylistic register to reach a now wider social array of readers, a product of the expansion of general education in Turkish at the time, while others preferred a register more inflected with Persian, or with Arabic, which was not a particularly unique phenomenon from a longer historical perspective. In either case, western literary impact, formal or generic, was not a matter of debate. And the use of a simpler register was more pronounced in prose than in poetry. A determined movement for the use of a pure Turkish in writing would appear only in the early twentieth century, heralded by the article "Yeni Lisan," "New Language," which was published by ʿÖmer Seyfeddin (d. 1920), a military officer, in 1911.[35]

At the time, the Ottoman literate classes continued to learn Persian, but it no longer enjoyed the earlier prestige. For self-identified modern Turkish writers, the preferred "foreign" linguistic resource for new types of literary expression was primarily French. Also then, among those writers, an interest developed in Arabic as a language worth studying on its own, and not for the sake of religion. And there were even writers who produced works in multiple languages, and thus not easily categorizable as a mere Turkish writer. The example of Şemseddin Sami Frashëri (d. 1904), a polyglot and prolific author of Muslim Albanian background and based in Istanbul, brings to fore a host of issues related to language, writing, and identity. Sami produced a new translation of *Les Misérables* in Turkish and a translation of *Robinson Crusoe*, based on a French translation; wrote a novel and several plays in Turkish, not all printed; published works on Arabic, in addition to an Arabic-Turkish dictionary; produced an alphabet for Albanian mainly in Latin script and hence wrote a grammar in Albanian. Moreover, he advocated for the use of a simpler register of Turkish, but saw fit to teach his children, including his daughters, how to read and write in Turkish, Arabic, and French.[36] Whether he taught them how to read and write in Albanian is not clear.

In fact, Sami produced many works on language. His works on Albanian and Turkish especially reflected a larger trend toward developing a modern philological science that played a pivotal role in constructing historical genealogies in terms of ethnicity and ultimately of nation. But in his case, Sami did not display a sense of identifying with a single community, either Albanian or Turkish.[37]

[34] Zeynep Seviner, "Thinking in French, Writing in Persian: Aesthetics, Intelligibility and the Literary Turkish of the 1890s," in *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel*, eds. Monica M. Ringer and Etienne Charrière, 19–36 (London: I.B. Tauris), 19.

[35] ʿÖmer Seyfeddin's article was published in *Genç Kalemler*, the first major nationalist journal, which was established in Salonica in 1910.

[36] George W. Gawrych, "Şemseddin Sami, Women, and Social Consciousness in the Late Ottoman Empire," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2010): 97–115.

[37] In the introduction to best-known work, his two-volume *Kamus-ı Türki*, published separately in 1899 and 1901, Sami speaks of belonging to both communities, linguistically to Turkish and

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The perilous study of language in connection with ethnicity, which gained dominance in Europe, had unexpected results in other Ottoman public spheres. In the Arabic context, intellectuals and writers thought about Arabic's relationship to Semitic languages such as Ethiopic or Geᶜez and Aramaic. While the study of languages brought with it the same kind of ethnic and also racial essentialism as it had in Europe, it also undid European systems of classification by breaking the boundaries between occidental and oriental languages and thus building conversations between Christians, Jews, and Muslims, based on a shared linguistic heritage.[38]

A case in point are the Arabic literary and cultural revival movements that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century. For Arabic writers, the movements represented a general awakening, or *al-Nahda*, though there were differences over the use of language, some preferring a simpler register of Arabic, others resorting to a neo-classical style. And some, in response to a civilizational discourse taking place both inside and outside the Ottoman Empire, further deliberated on Arabic's relationship to other Semitic cultures and sought to construct the image of a historically monumental civilization. This is quite apparent in the efforts of Butrus al-Bustani (d. 1883), a Protestant convert and a scholar based in Beirut, who translated the Bible into Arabic and considered the text as the core of his lexicographical project, in which he perceived Arabic, Hebrew, and Syriac as all sacred tongues.[39] Similarly, journals out of Beirut and Cairo, with a focus on literary and cultural topics, published articles that reflected on the fact that Arabic was only one of many Semitic languages, spoken by the Assyrian, Chaldean, and Jewish communities in the Empire. And as Annie Greene shows for the multilingual Iraqi public sphere, Arabic print products were often in dialogue with, and translated from, important Turkish, French, and Hebrew publications.[40]

Jews continued to read publications in a variety of languages, such as Hebrew, Ladino, French, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, Turkish, and Judeo-Turkish in a few short-lived newspapers. Print products in Hebrew fostered transregional and translational relations. Jews not only read but also wrote to Hebrew periodicals produced in Europe. Yet the multilingualism present in Jewish communities went beyond a local language and Hebrew, and could involve creative engagement. This is evidenced in the career of Yaᶜqub Sanuᶜ (d. 1912), a journalist from Cairo who is best known for his contributions to the development of Arabic theater and the satirical press in khedival Egypt. Sanuᶜ, however, was also a multilingual writer. He had studied in Livorno and wrote his first plays in Italian, which were reportedly performed in Genoa. And after his return to Cairo, and as a political exile in France, Sanuᶜ published in both French and

ethnically to Albanian. George W. Gawrych, *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874–1913* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

[38] Jonathan Marc Gribetz, "'Their Blood is Eastern': Shahin Makaryus and *Fin de Siècle* Arab Pride in the Jewish 'Race,'" *Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (2013): 143–61.

[39] Rana Issa, "Arabic Language and Syro-Lebanese National Identity: Searching in Buṭrus al-Bustānī's *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 62 (2017): 465–83.

[40] Annie Leah Greene, "Provincial, Not Peripheral: Ottoman–Iraqi Intellectuals and Cultural Networks, 1863–1914" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2018).

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Arabic, and through his works helped to foster, according to Lital Levy, an "interdenominational community of Arabic-speaking intellectuals."[41]

Jewish communities outside the Ottoman Empire, in the Maghreb and especially the Indian subcontinent, also established newspapers in Judeo-Arabic. And routinely letters, essays, and news items concerning the Empire in these periodicals were written by local Jews, and often discussed aspects of modernity and reported about works of fiction and the articles they read in magazines in Arabic and Turkish. At the same time, the Judeo-Arabic press in the Maghreb and the Indian subcontinent reprinted stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*, circulated popular poems, and sang the praises of print and modern education. In a similar vein to the poetry of Immanuel Frances, if Arabophone Muslims or Christians were able to read such publications in transcription, they would make much sense.

Conclusion

In this essay, we pointed to a multilingual turn in the study of Ottoman societies and cultures and to a wide range of new studies, which explore the interactions between languages, literatures, and translation practices. The shift from a national and ethnocentric paradigm to a multilingual one, we believe, is germane to our historical understanding, and we hope that these scholarly efforts continue in the coming years. While many of us recognize the need to work within multilingual contexts, it is impossible to learn all the languages of the Empire. We can, however, train students to be attentive to those contexts in one or two languages (or more), and foster collaborative research projects that address the movement of texts, genres, and ideas in and between different languages. In other words, the fact that students learn a language as part of their training is important, but more attention should be placed on how they conceptualize the social, cultural, and literary connections between the languages they know and study. A fair amount of the current scholarship cited, especially for the modern era, comes from collaborative projects that explored questions similar to the ones we raised in this, such as the ones led by Marilyn Booth. Our own conversation and collaboration led us to discover similarities in two early modern travel accounts about the Holy Land, by comparing the accounts of Evliya Çelebi and a Karaite shopkeeper from Crimea.[42] Their narratives were similar, we note, because of the circulation of overlapping traditions about sacred sites in various languages. It is precisely this kind of comparative study that we advocate for, between texts from the imperial center and periphery that may seem at first glance to have very little in common.

We also think that focusing on Ottoman multilingualism(s) is an extremely productive way to gauge cultural production more broadly from different

[41] Lital Levy, "The *Nahḍa* and the *Haskala*: A Comparative Reading of 'Revival' and 'Reform,'" *Middle Eastern Literatures* (2013): 307.

[42] Orit Bashkin and Sooyong Kim, "An Ottoman Holy Land: Two Early Modern Travel Accounts and Imperial Subjectivity," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 39.2 (2021): 1–31.

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vantage points. At the same time, it is not our intention to ignore the state persecution and violence faced by non-dominant groups, religious and political, before and after the Revolution of 1908, and the intrusion of European powers and movements into internal affairs. Rather, we believe that such a focus helps in reconstructing the unique cultural lives of imperial subjects, which the rise of ethnic nationalism tried to obliterate. Moreover, the interest in the multilingual dimension of cultural production encompasses many fields today: comparative literature, history, sociolinguistics, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and so on. We therefore encourage interdisciplinary research projects that decenter ethnocentric perceptions of global developments and instead direct attention to the ways in which local practices interacted, intersected, and competed, and additionally the role of language in that regard.

We opened our essay with one traveler, and conclude with another, Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (d. 1806), a rabbi, scholar, and emissary from Jerusalem. Azulai went to western Europe via North Africa to raise funds for the Sephardi community of Hebron, and left a diary of his travels, *Maʿgal tov*, the "Good Journey," circa 1778. From what we can gather from an initial look at his diary, in particularly the European cites visited, like Frankfurt and Paris, Azulai experienced and perceived spaces not just from a Jewish but also a distinctively Ottoman lens.[43] Azulai's view of Europe is reminiscent of the account of Vienna by Evliya in his *Seyahat-name* and that of Paris by Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi (d. 1873) in his *rihla* of 1834, and thus his diary offers another vantage point to consider overlapping and changing views of Europe by travelers from the Ottoman Empire. To pursue this, we have to reconstruct the conversations Azulai was engaged in, within different communities and across several languages. And to ensure that the rabbi does not stay securely within the confines of Jewish Studies, but rather catches the attention of scholars in other fields, we need to design research agendas that enable us to compare the diverse visions of early modernity and modernity that emerged from a multilingual empire.

[43] Matthias B. Lehmann, "'Levantinos' and Other Jews: Reading H. Y. D. Azulai's Travel Diary," *Jewish Social Studies* 13.3 (2007): 1–34.

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