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Aaron D. Rubin, *A Unique Hebrew Glossary from India: An Analysis of Judeo-Urdu*, Gorgias Press, xii + 134 pages

This book on a Jewish language usage in India is a significant contribution to scholarship on Jews in India, a small niche in the much broader fields of South Asian Studies and Jewish Studies. The author, Aaron Rubin, is a scholar of Jewish Studies and the co-editor (along with Lily Kahn) of the *Handbook of Jewish Languages* (Brill, 2016), a well-qualified scholar to describe a Jewish language variety. The language variety described in this book and defined as Judeo-Urdu, is found in a small textual corpus compiled in Bombay in the late nineteenth century. Rubin presents in brief the four existing Judeo-Urdu texts (pp. 1–2) and focuses for the rest of the book on one of these texts: a glossary of Hebrew words with their Urdu/Hindi equivalents written in the Hebrew script, as stated in the first part of the title of the book: “A Unique Hebrew Glossary from India”. Rubin provides a minute description of the lexical and morphological features for 171 Hebrew words and their Urdu/Hindi equivalents contained in the 31-page Hebrew-Urdu glossary. This description aims at identifying non-standard forms, the existence of which is a typical feature of Jewish languages (p. 6). Rubin organizes the book accordingly, beginning with a detailed description of the lexical data (pp. 9–42), namely the word list contained in the Hebrew-Urdu glossary, followed by two chapters on orthography, phonology, and morphology (pp. 43–82), and a conclusion (83–86). The book is appended by word indices (pp. 89–96) and a useful and beautifully set section of plates presenting color images of the 31 pages of the glossary and the title pages of four other manuscripts found in the corpus (pp. 99–134).

Rubin explains the definition of the language variety as Judeo-Urdu, convincingly arguing in favor of the term Urdu, rather than Hindi or Hindustani (5–6). What is less convincing, though, is the term “Judeo-“ in the definition, despite the common practice in the field of Jewish languages to define any language written in the Hebrew script as “Judeo-“ or “Jewish”. Can we really attribute the concept of a “language variety”, or a regiolect, to use Benjamin Hary’s terminology (Brill 2009:12–13) to a seemingly brief episodic moment of textual productivity, somewhat frozen in time in the form of a very limited number and volume of texts (and manuscripts)? Rubin seems to be taking this for granted, as he leaves aside questions regarding the historical and socioreligious circumstances of the language community producing the texts. In his concluding remarks, though, Rubin argues that Judeo-Urdu is more than a pidgin, or “Bazaar Hindustani” (p. 85), since the two other texts found in this corpus—*Laila Majnu* and *Indar Sabhā*—are plays written in literary Urdu, which is atypical of Pidgin languages (pp. 86–7). It is indeed atypical of pidgin languages to be even put into writing (except for contemporary social media posts and tweets). In this sense, categorizing the linguistic contents of the corpus as a pidgin does seem inappropriate.

However, the transcription of the two popular Urdu plays into the Hebrew script might be a sporadic, short-lived attempt at cultural adaptation rather than an evidence for an emerging Jewish dialect born of a substantial exposure of Urdu speakers to Hebrew (or Judeo-Arabic) literature. *Layla and Majnūn* (or *Leyli o Majnun* by the twelfth century Persian poet Neẓāmi of Ganja) has its roots in the Persian and Arab worlds since the twelfth century (at least) and its branches in a many translations and adaptations in the Muslim world. The other play, the *Indar Sabhā*, is also based on a popular Urdu play, *Inder Sabha*, of the mid-nineteenth century by the Urdu poet Agha Hasan

Amanat. The mere fact that the two plays were transcribed in the Hebrew script attests, at best, to their popularity and to the assimilation of certain Baghdadi Jewish families in the Urdu-speaking milieu of British India. In my opinion, this is insufficient evidence to attest for a Judeo-Urdu language variety that is more literary than Bazaar Hindustani. That said, further research and future new findings, might very well support Rubin's classification of the language found in the small corpus as "Judeo-" or Jewish.

The descriptive grammar of the language variety in question is as comprehensive as might be expected from the limited corpus on which it is based. The book for its greater part includes a detailed list of the entries found in the Hebrew-Urdu glossary containing words and some short phrases. Rubin remarks that it "is linguistically the most interesting" (p. 2) of the texts in the corpus, with no further explanation to justify his choice, leaving the reader curious as to what might be found in (or unfounded by) the remaining texts in the corpus. For the glossary, however, Rubin masterfully provides the fullest possible linguistic description based on his impressive knowledge of Classical Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, as well as on descriptive grammars of "substandard" varieties of Hindi. This is indeed a commendable effort, especially in the context of dialects and regional varieties of Hindi and Urdu. It is enlightening to learn, for example, of the Calcutta Hindi dialect (p. 55 fn. 14), and of the peculiar pronominal usage *apaṇ* for the "royal we" (p. 59). Rubin's meticulous inquiry even identifies a dialectical feature unique to the language variety under investigation that is the extensive usage of the lexeme *lok* (lit. people) as a plural marker extending beyond its conventional usage with animate, human referents to inanimate nouns (p. 86).

The textual evidence, however, is too slim for assuming the evolution of a distinctively Jewish language variety, unless one presumes the mere existence of a few manuscripts suffices for categorizing this documented Urdu as "Judeo-" or "Jewish". While scholars of Jewish languages define a Jewish language variety—spoken or written—as any language incorporating Hebrew (or Aramaic) on any subject and in any given volume of texts, general linguists, would rather have more evidence to support and substantiate the linguistic analysis of that specific language variety (cf. Hary and Bunin-Benor 2018:1–5). The glossary that forms the prime database for the book can at best attest for an initial contact between an Urdu/Hindi dialect and Hebrew, perhaps for didactic purposes. As for the other texts in the corpus, Rubin states, "the language of the plays is close to the literary Urdu from which they were transcribed" (p. 6), and casually provides relevant data from the plays (p. 46, f.n. 10; p. 51, f.n. 12). More information about their linguistic features is required for considering how far it is from the sub-standard Urdu/Hindi dialect that characterizes the Hebrew-Urdu glossary.

Remarkably, the glossary peculiarly lacks any coherent method of organization, as amply stated in the book (pp. 6, 9, 11, 20, 66). Rubin refrains from speculating on the rationale guiding the composition of the text: was it written for teaching an Urdu/Hindi speaker the vocabulary of Hebrew sacred texts? Does it relate in any way to the production of the Urdu plays in the Hebrew script? How similar or dissimilar is it in its content and form to the other text called "*bol'*" (conversation)? Certainly, the book's merit is in introducing material and data that can provoke such questions and many more regarding the sociohistorical circumstances that engendered the Urdu texts in the Hebrew script. Hopefully, further research of the texts will shed light on the little-

explored linguistic practices of Bombay Jewish community, and the sociocultural interactions of Jews in British India with Urdu, Hindi, and Marathi speakers.

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