

THE LINGUISTIC CHARACTER OF SAADIA GAON'S TRANSLATION OF THE PENTATEUCH

by

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For Franz Rosenthal on his eighty-fifth birthday

Franz Rosenthal still belongs to the generation of the great Semitists who acted before the Second World War on German soil (for obvious reasons, I cannot speak of German Semitists). He published his *Die Sprache der palmyrenischen Inschriften* and *Aramaistische Forschung* as early as 1936 and 1939 respectively. It is a great honour, indeed, to participate in a *Festschrift* dedicated to a scholar of Rosenthal's stature. It is, to be sure, not without trepidation that contributors to the *Festschrift* select their papers, hoping to satisfy Rosenthal's critical mind. On the other hand, one can easily choose from any field of Semitistics, since Rosenthal's scholarly interests are almost unlimited.

I have selected a paper from the field of medieval Judaeo-Arabic, and shall attempt to reconstruct the linguistic character of the perhaps most influential work of this period.

1. The classical period of medieval Judaeo-Arabic extended between two poles, both represented by two geniuses, who even in this era abounding with great scholars and polymaths excelled in extraordinary intellectual and creative power. Saadia Gaon (882-942) ushered in classical Judeo-Arabic and moulded it in almost every field of Jewish and general scholarship, to reach with Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) towering peaks. Representing the culmination of Judeo-Arabic culture, it is Maimonides who symbolizes for us classical Judeo-Arabic culture, also because his Law Codex, written in Hebrew, continues to be used as a handbook of Jewish learning. His standing is well epitomized in the saying מֹשֶׁה עַד מֹשֶׁה לֹא קָם כְּמוֹשֶׁה 'since (the prophet) Moses till Moses (Maimonides) there was nobody like Moses (Maimonides)'. On the other hand, Saadia Gaon, although he initiated and decisively influenced and moulded almost every field of medieval Judaeo-Arabic culture, is less known. Abraham ibn Ezra, to be sure, aptly applied to him the Talmudic saying הַמְדַבְּרִים בְּכֹל מְקוֹם meaning both 'the foremost (scholar) in every field' and 'he who initiated every field'. Yet a great part of his literary heritage has been forgotten and it is only in the

last decades that his excellence has been fully recognized.

2. It goes without saying that for the linguistic investigation of medieval Judaeo-Arabic and the proper understanding of its language it is imperative to establish the linguistic usage of these two central figures of Judaeo-Arabic culture; the more so since medieval Judaeo-Arabic, as Middle Arabic in general, constitutes a whole range of styles with infinitely varied mixtures of classical Arabic and Neo-Arabic.¹ Therefore, very great differences obtain between works written in Judaeo-Arabic, and it is necessary to establish the linguistic character of Saadia's and Maimonides's works, which had such a great influence on Judaeo-Arabic culture in their language as well.

Maimonides's language has, indeed, been several times analyzed,² and we possess now many autographs,³ which enable us to determine Maimonides's linguistic usage even more accurately. On the other hand, no autographs stemming from Saadia have been preserved and it was, therefore, till now impossible to establish his linguistic usage with any precision. Now, however, after the libraries of the former Soviet Union have been opened to the scholarly world, Saadia's language may be, rather faithfully, reconstructed from Saadia's Pentateuch translation preserved in Ms. EBP. II C of the Russian National Library of St. Petersburg. Although it contains many lacunas and has not necessarily conserved the original text (thus, *inter alia*, some glosses have crept into the translation), it is of great importance, because it has been copied by the scribe Samuel b. Jacob, in whose writing also a manuscript that has been written in 1009 in Egypt is known. Careful analysis of this early manuscript, written only about seven decades after Saadia's death, enables us to reconstruct both the original version of the translation⁴ and Saadia's linguistic usage. Despite some deviations of our manuscript from the original version (as mentioned above), the linguistic structure reflected in it is so consistent that Saadia's original language can with certainty be reconstructed.

¹ By Neo-Arabic I designate the linguistic structure that characterizes modern Arabic dialects, yet emerged, at the latest, during the great Arab conquests.

² Cf. the bibliography adduced by S. Hopkins, in: H. Ben-Shammai, ed., *Hebrew and Arabic Studies*, Tel Aviv – Jerusalem 1993, pp. 233-34.

³ For the establishment of Maimonides's language it is of no consequence whether the authoritative text in the facsimile edition of S. Sassoon in *Corpus Codicum Hebraicorum Medii Aevi*, Copenhagen 1956-66, is an autograph or was copied under Maimonides's guidance to be used by him. In both cases it reflects Maimonides's language.

⁴ I have dealt with this aspect in my paper in *Leshonenu*, 61 (1998), 111-130, where also the importance of this manuscript for the final recognition that, in the main, it was the Yemeni tradition, as against manuscripts written in Arabic characters, that preserved, more or less, the original form of Saadia's Pentateuch translation. M. Zucker, *Rav Saadya Gaon's Translation of the Torah*, New York 1959, pp. 310-13, was forced to rely only on two leaves of an ancient manuscript, written in 1012 (it is T-S Ar 21.183), in order to establish the reliability of the Yemenite tradition. Now our manuscript finally proves his claim.

3. The reconstruction of the original linguistic character of Saadia's Pentateuch translation is of extraordinary importance. It enables us to discern the language of the scholar who decisively influenced Judeo-Arabic culture from its very beginning, and to understand the linguistic structure of the work which was the standard translation of the *Torah*, used everywhere, the impact of which cannot be overestimated.⁵ Moreover, only the recognition of its linguistic system makes the correct understanding of its parts possible, as we shall attempt to show below, since the function of the parts depends on the character of the whole, and the same feature as a part of another system may have a quite different significance. It is to be hoped that this analysis will also contribute to the comprehension of the linguistic structure of post-classical Arabic in general, which can only be achieved by further similar detailed examinations of related texts.

4. It is evident that Saadia Gaon, who was the leading figure in so many literary fields, adapted his style to every genre. Nevertheless, it stands to reason that the differences between them were not extreme. Since, as we shall show, Saadia's Pentateuch translation is written in post-classical Arabic, with only slight Neo-Arabic admixture, it is likely to assume that all his writings contained only few Neo-Arabic elements and those occurring in later Saadianian texts are due to copyists, just as Neo-Arabic features found in later manuscripts of the Pentateuch translation are not original. This assumption is buttressed by the fact that Saadia's prayerbook too reflects a language close to classical Arabic, as a rule with few Neo-Arabic deviations only.⁶

In the light of the language of *Siddur*, which, as stated, was quite close to classical Arabic, one should not claim that the fact that the Pentateuch translation (also) addressed Muslims is of significance for the linguistic character of Saadia's Pentateuch translation. The information that Saadia directed his translation (also) to Muslims stems from Abraham ibn Ezra's (1089-1164) Pentateuch commentary to Genesis ii. 11,⁷ who contended that Saadia translated proper nouns into Arabic not by tradition but perhaps to honour the Lord, "because he translated the Pentateuch into the language and the script of the Arabs" (שתרגם התורה בלשון שמעאל ובכתיבתם) in order that people should not claim that in the Torah words⁸ occur unknown to us". It is quite clear that, in spite of ibn Ezra, the Pentateuch translation, in the main, addressed Jews, as proven by Saadia's Pentateuch commentary as well as by his interpretations according to

⁵ It even stands to reason that it was this translation that finally ousted the phonetic spelling; see J. Blau & S. Hopkins, 'On Early Judaeo-Arabic Orthography', *Zeitschrift für Arabische Linguistik* 12 (1984), 9-27.

⁶ See B.L. Joel, in I. Davidson, etc., *Siddur R. Saadja Gaon*, Jerusalem 1941 (quoted as *Siddur*), p. 53.

⁷ Cf. the bibliography adduced by J. Blau, *The Emergence and Linguistic Background of Judaeo-Arabic*, Oxford 1965, p. 39, n. 1.

⁸ In Hebrew מילות; the usual version מצודה does not fit.

Rabbinical law. Yet it seems that ibn Ezra had a (genuine) tradition that there existed a version addressing Muslims as well, written in Arabic characters, and from it he (wrongly) inferred that Saadia directed his translation originally to Muslims and, therefore, he was forced to translate the proper nouns. As a matter of fact, it seems,⁹ we possess now a document which can teach us which circumstances made Saadia to direct a version written in Arabic characters to Muslims.

M.R. Cohen and S. Somekh published an Egyptian document¹⁰ from the second half of the tenth century dealing with a translation made by a Jew of (Saadia's) 'Book of Prayers and Blessings' "into the language and the script of the Arabs" (בלפנט וכח ערבי) for the weekly learned court session (مَجْلِس) of the vizier Ibn Killis (d. 991), which was attended by adherents of all religions and in which Judaeo-Arabic texts in Arabic characters were discussed as well. In our opinion, such sessions were the *Sitz im Leben* in which also the need for the transliteration into Arabic characters of Saadia's translation arose. We imagine that the members of such sessions wanted to study the *Torah*, and they, naturally enough, had recourse to Saadia's standard translation, which was therefore transliterated into Arabic characters. Since, however, originally the translation was made in Hebrew script and addressed Jews only,¹¹ it was only later that the need for a version in Arabic letters arose, to be used in such sessions in which Muslims, Christians, and Jews took part. It stands, therefore, to reason that the fact that the translation was *later* transcribed into Arabic characters did not affect the linguistic level of the translation, which was, from the very beginning, quite high.

5. There are, to be sure, some, though comparatively few, deviations from (post-)classical Arabic in our manuscript. Yet when one weighs these exceptions against forms fitting the (post-)classical language, it becomes evident that, as a whole, Saadia used the closely knit system of post-classical Arabic.¹² The comparatively few deviations have, to a great extent, to be considered to stem from copyists, just as later copyists introduced more and more Neo-Arabic features into the later Yemeni manuscripts and changed their language from genuine post-classical Arabic to semi-classical Middle Arabic.

⁹ See J. Blau, in: M. Bar-Asher, *M. Breuer Festschrift*, Jerusalem 1992, pp. 634-36.

¹⁰ *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 80 (1990), pp. 285ff.

¹¹ Accordingly, Ibn Ezra's surmise that the translation of proper nouns was due to the existence of Muslim readers, though based on the genuine tradition of the existence of the Pentateuch translation transliterated into Arabic characters, was wrong.

¹² It is not easy to define post-classical Arabic as against Middle Arabic Standard. For the time being, as a working hypothesis, I would suggest that post-classical Arabic proper is almost (but only almost, see below) devoid of deviations in the field of orthography and morphology, whereas Middle Arabic Standard is written, as a whole, in a language quite close to post-classical Arabic as well, yet contains Neo-Arabic features also in the field of morphology (and sometimes also in orthography). Cf. J. Blau, *Studies in Middle Arabic and Its Judaeo-Arabic Variety*, Jerusalem 1988, p. 39, n. 2. The linguistic analysis of texts as the Pentateuch translation may enable us to define post-classical Arabic more exactly.

5.1. Saadia clearly preserves the case and mood system of classical Arabic.¹³ As to the case system, he adds the accusative *alif* to indefinite triptote nouns in the accusative and in the accusative only, and uses 'abū, 'axū etc. and the dual and sane masculine plural according to the rules of classical grammar. Nouns terminating in *alif mamdūda* when preceding pronominal suffixes, correctly reflect the classical case endings (e.g., Genesis iv 7 כְּטֹאֲרֵי; ix 5 דְּמֹאֲרֵי), a feature that disappeared from later manuscripts. As to the moods, Saadia applies classical standard to the alternation of *-ūna* : *-ū*, etc. as well as to that of *yaqūm(u/a)*: *yaqum*, and *yarmī (yarmiya)* : *yarmi*. The last feature is of special importance, since forms like *yaqum* (with short *u*) and *yarmi*, etc. (with short final vowel) according to classical grammar are sometimes attested even in late Yemeni manuscripts, no doubt a remainder from manuscripts in which, as in our manuscript, the moods were regulated by the rules of classical grammar. This finally proves that Saadia did not compose his translation in semi-classical Middle Arabic and the copyist of our manuscript "upgraded" it to genuine post-classical language. Saadia wrote his translation in post-classical Arabic, and it was the copyists, including the copyist of our manuscript, who introduced Neo-Arabic elements into it.

5.1.1. In the field of declension, the most conspicuous deviation from classical usage is the addition of the accusative *aleph* to diptote nouns standing in the accusative, especially to the plural forms *fa'alil/fa'alil*, a feature well attested in various branches of Middle Arabic, see the bibliography J. Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic*, Louvain 1966-67, p. 337, n. 73, who adduces this feature from the Qur'ān, for which see also E. Beck, *Orientalia*, 14 (1945), p. 36, further W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language*, 3rd edition, Cambridge 1896-98 (quoted as Wright), ii, 387; S. Hopkins, *Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic*, Oxford 1984, p. 337, n. 73. I would like to suggest that this feature reflects the post-classical extension of the accusative *alif* from forms in which it marked *-an* in indefinite (i.e., in triptote) nouns to mark also *-a* in such nouns (i.e., in diptote nouns). Since the case endings were spelt according to classical rules¹⁴ but not pronounced, the *aleph* was considered to mark the indefinite accusative and was used without regard to its pronunciation. Accordingly, these diptote nouns terminating in *aleph* occurring in this manuscript should be pronounced neither with final *-an*, contrary to the behavior of diptote nouns in classical Arabic, nor *-a*, since the case endings were, as a rule not

¹³ For references in this and the following paragraphs see *Leshonenu* (v. n.4).

¹⁴ In texts with many Neo-Arabic and pseudo-correct elements, however, it stands to reason that this *aleph* marks *-an* indeed, added pseudo-correctly to diptote nouns.

¹⁵ The rare Qur'ānic spelling *سلا ميلا*, on the other hand, occurring in a linguistic system that preserved the case endings, reflects the ending *-a*, as usual in diptote nouns, exceptionally spelled with *alif*. Since the spelling *سلا ميلا* in the Qur'ān is quite exceptional, it stands

pronounced,¹⁵ but rather not pronounced at all, reflecting some sort of *kətib* and *qərē*, since the final *aleph* has become a grammatical sign of the indefinite accusative.

5.1.1.2. Similarly, I am inclined to interpret spellings like Genesis xviii 16 יָנִס ‘going’, externally identical with classical orthography (= *ماضٍ*), as a related sort of *kətib* and *qərē*. Middle Arabic text tend to spell these nouns, ending in original **-iyun/-iyin*, with final *y*,¹⁶ and the fixed spelling habit of our manuscript to write these nouns in most cases without final *y* again shows the extent of the influence of classical grammar on Saadia. Yet although diachronically this spelling habit reflects the direct influence of classical Arabic, synchronically, in recitation, it was presumably pronounced with final *-i*,¹⁷ in accordance with the Neo-Arabic pronunciation. Again, the same feature occurring in different systems, may fulfil quite different functions.

5.1.2. In the field of the use of moods, one deviation from classical grammar stands out in relief: in the *jawāb al-ʿamr* construction, the indicative, rather than the jussive, is used. Had this feature occurred in a text in which Neo-Arabic elements are frequent, one would have attributed this usage to deficient knowledge of classical Arabic. In our text, however, exhibiting a good knowledge of classical Arabic, I am inclined to interpret it as genuine post classical construction. And, indeed, the status of *jawāb al-ʿamr* is somewhat shaky even in classical Arabic. Thus T. Nöldeke, in his edition of *Die Gedichte des ʿUrwa ibn Alward*, Göttingen 1863, p. 79, n. 1 states that ancient poets sometimes use the indicative instead of the jussive in *jawāb al-ʿamr* and adduces examples. This is also the case with ʿUmar ibn Abi Rabīʿa, see P. Schwarz, *Der Diwan des ʿUmar ibn Abi Rabīʿa*, Leipzig 1902-1909, Introduction, p. 132, who cites also one example from Qays ibn al-Mulawwah. Sibawayhi, *Kitāb*, ed. H. Derenbourg, Paris 1881-89, i, p. ٤٠٠, permits the use of the indicative instead of *jawāb al-ʿamr* by considering it independent of the preceding order (as *إيتني أتيك* ‘come to me so that I come to you’, as if *أتيك* were an independent sentence = *انا أتيك*). al-

to reason that it has not influenced Saadia’s orthography, although archaic spellings, as usual in the Qurʾān, are characteristic of Saadia’s orthography, as הוֹרִיָּה ‘Torah’ Deuteronomy xxxii 46; xxxiii 4 (preserved in the Yemeni tradition [where it is pronounced pseudo-correctly *tawriyya*], rather than in our manuscript), further חַיִּיה ‘life’, as well as the ancient orthographic habit not to mark long *ā* in the interior of the word, and the spelling אֶחָדֵיהֶם ‘one of them’ (for which cf. e.g. W. Diem, *Orientalia* 48 [1979], p. 239); for details see *Leshonenu* (v. n.4).

¹⁶ In ancient papyri, to be sure, the spelling with final *-y* contrary to classical Arabic occurs only occasionally; see S. Hopkins, *Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic*, Oxford 1984, §82g.

¹⁷ Except in that minority of cases in which, in living speech, these nouns were pronounced with final consonant.—On the background of classical orthography, in which final vowels and even consonants (as in the case of nunation) are pronounced without being written, the addition of a final vowel not indicated in spelling, should not surprise.

Mubarrad, *al-Muqtaḍab*, ed. M. 'A. 'Uḍayma. Cairo 1385-86 A.H (cited as al-Mubarrad), ii, p. ٨٤, though he prefers *مُرَّهُ يَحْفَرُهَا* 'order him to dig it' to *مُرَّهُ يَحْفَرُهَا*, nevertheless permits the indicative as well and even finds three theoretical ways to justify it. Cf. also H. Reckendorf, *Arabische Syntax*, Heidelberg 1921, p. 492; E. Beck, *Orientalia*, 14 (1945), p. 366; and to some extent also T. Nöldeke, *Zur Grammatik des classischen Arabisch*, bearbeitet von A. Spitaler, Darmstadt 1963, p. 149, n. 73, end; Wright, ii, §252. It was, it seems, on this background that this construction tended to disappear from post-classical Arabic (if, indeed, this feature in our manuscript reflects a general post-classical trend).

6. As a rule, however, our manuscript adheres to the rules of classical grammar. Thus, in contradistinction to the bulk of Judaeo-Arabic texts, in which *אֱלֹהֵי* is invariable, our manuscript shows a marked tendency towards the agreement of *אֱלֹהֵי* with the antecedent in number and gender. Moreover, even such a small orthographic detail as the spelling of the usual forms of *alladī* with one *l*, the less usual ones with two, is preserved in our manuscript. Where the Yemeni tradition has *וְרִי* 'he shows' Genesis ii 19, our manuscript uses the classical form *וְרִי*; where *וְרִי* has penetrated our manuscript as well, it is, beyond doubt, due to changes by copyists.

Another case of strict adherence to the rules of classical grammar contrary to the usage of the bulk of Middle Arabic texts is the use of singular forms of verbs preceding a subject in the plural, whereas standard Middle Arabic texts, including also the Yemeni version of Saadia's Pentateuch translation, apply the plural. The use of the singular in our manuscript is no doubt an original feature, attesting to Saadia's intention to adhere to the rules of classical grammar, whereas the occasional application of the plural in our manuscript reflects changes due to copyists,¹⁸ which later altered the Yemeni version almost entirely.

7. In our manuscript the tendency prevails to form verbs *mediae geminatae* according to the structure of *mediae infirmae*. In Sibawayhi's view, ii, p. ٤٤٦, 7-8, § ٥٦, this formation is exceptional and not generally accepted:

هذا باب ما شذ من المضاعف فشبهه بباب أقمت وليس بمتلئب، وذلك قولهم
 أَحَسَّتْ يَرِيدُونَ أَحْسَسْتِ وَأَحْسَنَتْ وَأَحْسَنَ يَرِيدُونَ أَحْسَسْنَ
 'this is the chapter (dealing with) exceptional (forms) of *mediae geminatae* which were likened to the category of *mediae infirmae* and are not of general application, and these (forms are) that they say 'ahastu instead of 'ahsastu. and 'ahasna instead of 'ahsasna'.

¹⁸ Sometimes it can be even demonstrated that the plural form is due to later change: Genesis xxxii 33 *לֹא יֹאכְלוּ בְנֵי אִשְׂרָאֵל* 'the children of Israel do not eat', where the double deviation of *יֹאכְלוּ* from classical grammar (not only plural instead of the singular but also *יֹאכְלוּ* instead of *יֹאכְלוּן*), whereas, see above, the manuscript, as a rule, adheres to the rules of classical grammar in the field of moods) represents it to be a later change due to copyists.

On the other hand, al-Mubarrad, i, p. ٢٤٥ does not stress the irregularity of these forms. He simply adduces them, without further comment, in the opening paragraph of the chapter dealing with forms of geminate verbs built according to the defective verbs. Nevertheless, one should not attach too much importance to it, since in the following he also cites, without further comment, geminate forms built according to the pattern of *verba ultimae infirmae*, a feature characteristic of Neo-Arabic. At any rate, the well-established occurrence of this feature in our manuscript *prima facie* indicates that in post-classical Arabic of the first millennium A.D., for some unknown reason, there was a tendency to form verbs *mediae geminatae* according to the structure of *mediae infirmae*.

8. In Middle Arabic texts the tendency prevails to substitute the fourth form for the perfect passive of the first form in *verba mediae infirmae* and *geminatae*.¹⁹ In the Yemeni tradition, therefore, 'he was returned' is expressed Exodus x 8 by رُدِّدَ ; yet our manuscript uses the classical form $\text{رُدِّ$.

9. The definite article is attached to the number annexed to the indefinite counted noun; it stands to reason that this feature is a genuine post-classical form characteristic of Saadia's language, and indeed, according to H. Reckendorf, *Die syntaktischen Verhältnisse des Arabischen*, Leiden 1895-98, p. 284, forms like الثلاثمائة are the only ones attested in classical Arabic.

10. It stands to reason that the shift of verbs *tertiaae hamzatae* to *tertiaae yā* in our manuscript is a genuine characteristic of our manuscript and not due to copyists. This is suggested by the fact that such verbs, when standing in the imperative or jussive, are built according to classical grammar (as Genesis xxiv 2 أَوْمِئْ = classical أَوْمِئْ 'point!'); were it a later feature owing to copyists, it would have been spelled with a long final vowel.

11. Since in our manuscript, contrary to Yemeni tradition, the rules of classical grammar regarding *'inna*, etc. are preserved (cf. e.g. Genesis vi 4 בְּעַד 'because after' as against the Yemeni tradition בְּעַד), I am inclined in cases like Genesis xviii 24; 30 יִגַּד 'perhaps there are' to assume that the original reading was, in accordance with classical grammar אֵן יִגַּד . And, indeed, Genesis xvi 2 our manuscript reads $\text{אֵן יִבְנֶה בֵּיתִי}$ 'perhaps my house will be built', whereas the Yemeni tradition, undoubtedly owing to copyists, has $\text{לְעֵל יִבְנֶה בֵּיתִי}$.

12. To sum up: we have attempted to reconstruct the original linguistic character of Saadia's Pentateuch translation by dint of the linguistic analysis of Ms. EBP. II C of the Russian National Library of St. Petersburg, written only about seven decades after Saadia's death and containing, as a rule, its original version. This enables us to discern for the first time, because of the lack of autographs,

¹⁹ See J. Blau, *A Grammar of Christian Arabic*, Louvain 1966-67, p. 160.

the original language of the scholar who decisively influenced Judaeo-Arabic culture from its very beginning, and to understand the linguistic structure of the work which was the standard translation of the *Torah*, used everywhere, the impact of which cannot be overestimated. Such a study is also imperative, because only the recognition of its whole linguistic system makes the correct understanding of its parts possible, since the function of the parts depends on the character of the whole, and the same feature as a part of another system may have a quite different significance. Moreover, this analysis also contributes to the comprehension of the linguistic structure of post-classical Arabic in general, which can only be achieved by further similar detailed examinations of related texts. The quite closely knit linguistic structure of our manuscript, as it comes to light by its analysis, reflects post-classical Arabic, which, as a rule, adheres to the rules of classical grammar. We have especially dealt with the very interesting cases of deviations from classical usage. Further studies dealing with related texts will show whether or not these deviations occur in post-classical texts in general or reflect Saadia's personal inclinations.