

Arabic in German? The German Origins of Arabic Instruction in Israel

Yonatan Mendel

Abstract: This article will focus on the roots of Arabic instruction in Jewish society at the end of the Ottoman period in Palestine and in Mandatory Palestine. I shall center my attention on two leading institutions: The Reali Hebrew School in Haifa that was established in 1913 and rapidly became the leading school for the teaching of Arabic in Jewish society in Palestine; and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, established in 1925 and, beginning in 1926, founded the only academic center for the teaching of Islam and Arabic – the School of Oriental Studies. I shall show how these two institutions drew upon the classic philological approach to the teaching of Arabic that stemmed from the transmission of oriental knowledge from Germany to Palestine and was founded by Jewish academics who had been educated at German universities. I shall further claim that over the course of time – from the 1940s and more rapidly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 – the dominant approach to the teaching of Arabic changed into centering more on practical usage and less on classical German philology, but nonetheless the basic principles of the instructional framework remained that of German philology.

Abstract: Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit den Anfängen des Arabischunterrichts in der jüdischen Gemeinschaft gegen Ende der osmanischen Herrschaft in Palästina sowie im britischen Mandatsgebiet Palästina. Dabei liegt der Fokus auf zwei maßgeblichen Institutionen: der hebräischen Reali-Schule in Haifa, die 1913 gegründet wurde und sich schnell zur führenden Einrichtung für den Arabischunterricht in der jüdischen Gesellschaft Palästinas entwickelte, und der Hebräischen Universität Jerusalem, die 1925 gegründet wurde und ab 1926 das einzige akademische Institut für das Studium des Islam und des Arabischen aufbaute – die Schule für Orientalistik. Der Artikel zeigt, wie diese beiden Institutionen auf den klassisch-philologischen Ansatz für die Lehre des Arabischen zurückgriffen, der durch die Migration jüdischer, an deutschen Universitäten ausgebildeter Akademiker und deren Arabisch- und Islamkenntnisse nach Palästina gelangte. Weiter wird ausgeführt, wie sich in den 1940er Jahren und insbesondere nach der Gründung des Staats Israel im Jahr 1948 der vorherrschende Ansatz für den Arabischunterricht wandelte: fortan wurde sich mehr auf den praktischen Gebrauch der Sprache konzentriert und weniger auf die klassische deutsche Philologie.

lologie, nichtsdestotrotz blieben jedoch die Grundprinzipien des Lehrkonzepts die der deutschen Philologie.

Titel: Arabisch auf Deutsch? Die deutschen Ursprünge des Arabischunterrichts in Israel

Keywords:

Arabic Studies, Oriental Studies, British Mandate Palestine, Jewish-Arab Relations, Zionism

Arabistik, Orientalistik, Britisches Mandatsgebiet Palästina, jüdisch-arabische Beziehungen, Zionismus

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Dr. Andrea Kirchner for her kind assistance in the translation of German texts mentioned in the article.

1. 'Arabic as Latin': The Teaching of Arabic in the Hebrew Reali School

The story of Arabic in the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa is significant owing to the fact that during the British Mandate in Palestine the school became the leading institution for the teaching of Arabic in the Jewish education system (Mendel 2015). For instance, the school insisted on continuing to teach Arabic even during periods when other schools ceased to do so, and in the field of Arabic it was the first to create Arabic textbooks designated to Jewish students in the Hebrew education system in the country. Furthermore, from the German perspective, not only were the school's founders products of German universities, but so were the roots of its establishment.

The Reali School initially grew out of the Avtalia school founded in 1907 that was the first Hebrew school in Haifa. In 1911, the association titled *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, a German-Jewish aid foundation that had no links to Zionism, whose aim was to promote the level of education in the Jewish community in the country, appropriated the Avtalia School. The educational goals of the aid society, together with the foreign policy of the German emperor of the time who wished to expand German influence in the Middle East, was to establish an institute of higher scientific education in Haifa (*Technicum*) and to transform Avtalia into a *Realschule* – a Reali school for technical knowledge and practical studies, including experience in the sciences – that would feed into the *Technicum*.¹

The obstacle to the foundation of the two educational institutions with their German orientation was the in-principle decision about the language. The

¹ See, Halperin (1970) and Spolsky (1996: 186-187).

administrators of the aid society believed that the main language of instruction in the *Technicum* and the *Realschule* should be German, and they took this position because “Hebrew was not sufficiently developed to teach the sciences” and because the German language was “a cultural language that could serve as a bridge [between residents of Palestine] to the scientific developments of the modern age” (Bentwich 1960: 27). This decision to use German as the language of instruction incited the ‘language war’ between the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, then headed by Dr. Paul Nathan, and Zionist supporters of Hebrew, among whom were Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and David Yellin of the Hebrew Language Academy.

In the light of these events the prospective principal, Dr. Arthur Biram, a promising educator aged just 36, who had previously worked in the Berlin high school, *Berlinisches Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster*, and had accepted the offer of the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden* to become principal of the *Realschule* in Haifa, postponed his arrival in Palestine. Following the language war and upon grasping the dominance of the German language in the school, Biram cancelled his preparations to arrive in Haifa. Only in 1913, when it became known to him that the die had been cast and that Hebrew would be the language of instruction and the school would be called The Hebrew Reali School, did he embark upon his final preparations and left Berlin on his way to Haifa (see, Meltser 2004: 104).

The teaching of Arabic was of prime importance to Dr. Arthur Biram, due to his familiarity with the language from his studies in Germany. He was an educator, born in Saxony, holding two doctorates – one in classical languages and the other in Islamic philosophy (*Ilm al-Kalām*) from Berlin University. He was a product of German oriental-philological research from which perspective he studied Oriental studies and Arabic and Islam, alongside a focus on the study of Judaism which he viewed as closely related subjects. The German oriental expertise placed an emphasis on the combined study of Semitic languages and religion, and viewed biblical studies as the “motivating factor for the study of Islam” and as Islam being a derivative of Judaism (Heschel 2012: 91).

This academic background shaped Biram’s teaching philosophy which emphasized humanistic values with a focus on Judaic studies and the encounter between Judaism and Islam, and whose goal was to create a new generation of students who would be “pioneers of the national endeavor” (Ashkenazi 2013: 20-21). In this context, the fact that the Reali School was a Hebrew school under the direction of a German-Jewish orientalist, a graduate of the German academic system, provides an explanation for the centrality of different school subjects and pedagogic principles in the school, including the centrality of the study of Arabic in the school.

From the outset, the Reali school’s approach to Arabic studies differed from the approach of other schools in the Jewish community in Palestine because of

the great emphasis placed on Arabic and because Arabic was a compulsory subject. Biram's unique attention to Arabic studies was not just related to the relationship between Jews and Arabs. Biram had additional reasons that stemmed directly from the German-Orientalist approach which combined the study of grammar, classical texts, and the connection between Judaism and Islam. Biram's notion was that through the medium of Arabic studies, students would be able to gain access to Jewish philosophical and intellectual works created in the Arab and Muslim world, especially during the Golden Age, and that thereby students would be exposed to the Jewish past, with a Zionist focus. His aim was that by means of the study of the Arabic language students would come to know the interactions of Jews and Muslims with humanistic values and with the cultural values that had prospered in the Muslim societies in which Jewish philosophers were active.²

At the same time, Biram's approach to the study of Arabic had an additional dimension with a German orientation; this was his perception that Arabic was the "Latin of the Middle East", a concept that was in accord with German Orientalist perceptions regarding the search for the Latin of the East, and locating it in the notion of Arabic. According to this perception, the study of Arabic grammar and its linguistic rules in an organized and rigid manner would have a positive, constructive influence on formal education in Jewish society. In this context, learning the concept of *I'rāb* (عَرَابٌ – syntactical analysis and final vocalization in accordance with the syntactical function of each word in the sentence – in Arabic grammar was equivalent to learning the Latin declensions, as the attempt was made to harmonize the grammar of vernacular languages in Europe (English, French, German) with classical Latin grammar. Biram's approach viewed this Latin orientation as the ultimate endpoint for language pedagogy. In other words, Arabic was for him a super-framework that could provide a Jewish student in Palestine what Latin had provided the German student in Germany. Biram, therefore, drew an analogy between the importance of Latin in European schools and the importance of Arabic in Jewish schools in Palestine, a situation that, of necessity, would improve the precision of thought of students.³ At many of the teachers' meetings at the Reali School Biram's perception found a direct echo – "Arabic must be transformed into the Latin of the East!" – and he emphasized this in the context of the importance of the compulsory study of correct Arabic grammar in schools in the context of familiarization with the structure of the language and its contribution to familiarization with Hebrew (Halperin 1970: 442).

² See, for example, Milson (1996: 177).

³ Mentioned in Kister, Meir (1956): Summary: Arabic Teaching in High School. In: *Yedi'ot la-morim: Hebrew Reali School's Teachers Journal* (March 1956), pp. 123-124. Found in: The Hebrew Reali School Archive, Haifa.

The metaphor of Latin in connection with the study of Arabic in the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa was reiterated many times during the initial decades of the school. For example, I have found out that this was mentioned in different official reports. One of them was the 1930 Official Report of the Reali School, in which it was mentioned that the goal of the teaching of Arabic was to delve into the language by means of the grammar and to derive inspiration and structure of Arabic from another language – Latin – and from another framework – European schools. The report affirms, “if we are able to base our teaching of the Arabic language through its clear, rigid grammatical forms, *this language will play the same role in our school as Latin does in a middle school in Europe*”.⁴ In other words, it has the same duality – or dissonance – that appeared earlier in Biram’s comments about the need to relate to Arabic as the Latin of the Middle East. On the one hand, this accorded a superior place to Arabic as a language that would strengthen the scholastic approach to language and grammar and would be able to join up with the civilization that existed in the region in the distant past. On the other hand, this was a comparison of a language of importance that had current speakers and culture with the framework of a language of importance and speakers and culture from the past. Moreover, in addition to this, there was a perception that wished to advance European educational logics – “the value that Latin had in European high schools” – to a school located in the Middle East that, in this case, wished to teach the language of the majority of the residents of Palestine (some 90-95 percent) who are of Oriental descent and thus not European.

Another example of the German context for the teaching of Arabic in schools is to be found in the teacher who led the field in the 1930s. Biram sought out a teacher who would be able to advance the teaching of Arabic as he believed it ought to be taught, and in 1933 he welcomed with open arms Dr. Martin (Meir) Plessner, a promising German-Jewish scholar of Oriental studies as the teacher of Arabic in the Reali School shortly after his arrival in Palestine. Plessner had received his education at some of the leading institutions of education for Oriental studies in Germany. He was born in Posen in 1900 and had specialized in Semitic languages and Islamic studies at Berlin University. Furthermore, he had completed his doctorate at Breslau University with his doctoral dissertation on *Der Oikonomikos des Neopythagoreers Bryson und sein Einfluss auf die Islamische Wissenschaft*⁵ which dealt with the translation into Arabic of a 4th century BCE work of economics by the Greek philosopher Bryson, named in Arabic *Tadbīr Al-Manzil* (household management). The dissertation was written under the supervision of Prof. Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and it is important

⁴ In Fifth Annual Report 1929/1930, Hebrew Reali School Archive in Haifa 3236/8.45, p. 9 [emphasis Y.M.].

⁵ The Economics of Neo-Pythagorean of Bryson and its influence on Islamic science (Heidelberg, 1928).

to note that Plessner was also connected to the department of Oriental studies in the Berlin State Library and to its head, Prof. Gotthold Weil, who later became a leading professor at the Hebrew University.

At the beginning of 1933, with the rise of the Nazis to power, Plessner was dismissed from all his academic positions and in April 1933, he immigrated to Palestine. The extensive knowledge Plessner had of Semitic languages and his excellence in Oriental studies, the Greek heritage in Islam, and particularly Arabic grammar came to Biram's attention.

Biram knew of Plessner's academic prowess as a polymath. No less important was the fact that he knew they had a shared point of view of their common ideological and pedagogical elements. This was not only an outcome of their common place of origin, but also stemmed from their joint legacy of Oriental studies as it was taught in German institutions with its emphasis on philology and its belief that the focus on grammar also had relevant practical significance for the understanding of a language, as well as additional educational value due to its disciplinary and acculturating influence on thought (see, Wokoeck 2009: 107).

The approach that was common to both of them led to the strengthening of grammatical study of Arabic instruction in the Reali School. This was a philological turning point that went hand in hand with the education and academic habitat of Dr. Biram, together with his belief that an emphasis on grammar would also lead to the shaping of other values, such as discipline and meticulousness amongst the students. This inflection point was reinforced with the arrival of Plessner at the school and was reflected in the project that Biram charged him with from his very first day there: the compilation of a comprehensive Arabic grammar for Jewish students in Palestine, a project which Biram had desired for over a decade.

In 1935, Plessner completed his textbook. The book, entitled *Arabic Grammar: a Handbook for Hebrew schools*, was published that year by the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa's publishing company, and explicitly presented the German philological approach (Mendel 2016). First, the book was dedicated to Plessner's advisor Gotthelf Bergsträsser (1886-1933), one of the foremost German philologists of Semitic languages in the twentieth century.

In his introduction, Plessner laid out the rationale of the book that echoed German philological logics. For example, he stated that "the great precision with which the Arabs build their sentences makes Arabic a unique device for training the Hebrew child in logical thought. It is due to this understanding that we have explained syntactic elements – in contrast to the accepted methods of the Arabs – from the logical perspective of the basis of scientific work carried out in Europe in the previous century" (Plessner 1935: iv).

The German philological approach of the book is expressed in its contents, particularly in the tables of verbs, but also in the selection of sources that

Plessner mentions as the basis for writing the book. Alongside the pedagogical explanation, the strong German influence is apparent in the examples drawn on in the first textbook on Arabic intended for Hebrew students. Plessner states: “The Arabic examples in the syntactic part of the book are mostly drawn from the following: *Arabische Grammatik* by Adolf Socin-Brockleman, 8th edition (Berlin, 1918); *Die syntaktischen Verhältnisse des Arabischen* by Hermann Reckendorf (Leiden, 1895); *Arabische Syntax* by Hermann Reckendorf (Heidelberg, 1921).” (Ibid.)

These academic genealogies, together with the personal and academic dedication to Bergsträsser, and the rationale of the book constitute evidence of the German philological approach to the study of Arabic that was the main approach of the book, its importance and its unique features. In addressing these academic sources, Halperin notes that “this line that is drawn from Theodor Nöldeke through Reckendorf to Plessner exemplifies the long-standing influence on Orientalist thinking of the mid-nineteenth century in Palestine and well into the twentieth century” (Halperin 2005: 62-63).

Immediately after its publication, Plessner’s textbook was put to use in the Reali School in Haifa, and shortly thereafter it was also used in other schools around the country. The correspondence between Plessner and Richard Koebner – a historian who played a major role in the establishment of the Department of History at the Hebrew University, and who, like Plessner, was also born in Germany, had studied at Breslau University and Berlin University, and had been forced to leave his homeland after the rise of the Nazis in 1933 – makes his genuine excitement perceptible. Shortly after the publication of the textbook it became apparent that Plessner was proud of his work at the school. He made mention in his letter of the great pressure of work Biram demanded.⁶ Elsewhere, when Plessner was focusing on updating the Arabic Grammar textbook, his pride in the innovative project was palpable. Plessner writes, “Hier im Lande bin ich auch Schulbuchautor geworden und habe eine arabische Schulgrammatik in hebräischer Sprache verfaßt, ein Novum auch für Palästina”.⁷ It was, indeed, an important milestone in the study of Arabic in Palestine with its special emphasis on grammar.

Plessner’s textbook was to be challenged by the local, practical approach led by Palestinian-born Zionist scholars who were linked to the Zionist leadership and desired to advance a more practical study of Arabic that would be useful to the Zionist enterprise. But despite the fact that the pure grammatical approach was deeply entrenched in the textbook, it did not become dominant in its field,

⁶ Mentioned in Plessner’s letter to Koebner, 09.11.1936, Central Zionist Archives CZA A-530/39.

⁷ “Here in Palestine I have become the author of a textbook and I have compiled a textbook of Arabic grammar – something new in Palestine.” Letter from Plessner to Koebner (in German), 16.06.1936, CZA A-530/37.

but it constituted a framework for the field. In effect, a perusal of the various textbooks on learning Arabic that were published after the publication of this groundbreaking work uncovers the similarity between them, especially in the general structure of the books. For example, in the textbook for the study of Arabic by Israel Wolfensohn (Ben-Ze'ev), he explicitly refers to Plessner's book as one of the books on which his own book is based (Ben-Zeev 1994).

A similar pattern is found in Jochanan Kapliwatzky's Arabic textbook, *Arabic Language and Grammar* (1944). In this book, the table of contents is almost identical to that of Plessner's book, and some of the pedagogical expressions echo those of Plessner (e.g. the Hebrew term *klaley ha-neginah*, meaning *the rules of playing*, which was used by Plessner, and then by Kapliwatzky, to explain the way the Arabic letters should be pronounced). Plessner's influence is not always perceptible in other textbooks published subsequent to his; yet it is important to note that all textbooks for the study of Arabic grammar intended for Hebrew school children were published after his book. Even the textbook written by Eliyahu Habuba, another leading teacher of Arabic in the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa, which was titled *The New Teacher*, and appeared in 1938, contains acknowledgements to those who contributed to the writing of the book; among them was Plessner to whom he expressed his gratitude (Habuba 1938). It is fairly clear that Habuba drew many of his insights from Plessner's work. A testament to this, for example, is the table of letters (*ibid.*: 56) that seems to be almost an exact copy of the table that appears in Plessner's book.

Similar traces of Plessner's influence can be found in the textbooks written by Yoel Yosef Rivlin in 1938, *Lessons in Arabic Grammar*, approved by the education department of the Knesset Israel Jewish community in Palestine and by Jacob Landau in 1945 *Principles of the Arabic Language*.

My own research addresses the post-German phase of Arabic instruction in Jewish society and the consolidation of a new approach that was titled "the practical approach" (Mendel 2020). Nonetheless, within the education system's teaching of Arabic through Hebrew, the emphasis placed on syntactical and grammatical skills, the almost complete absence of Arabs among the teaching staff, decision makers and book authors are evidence that the framework of instruction was never abandoned and that traces of the German approach have remained in the field of Arabic teaching in Jewish society in modern Israel as well.

2. *The Hebrew University: An Institute of Oriental Studies that is German to its Core'*

When the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was founded on Mount Scopus in 1925, the question of the language to be used in central Jewish educational

institutions in Palestine had already been settled – at least in all things related to the language of instruction. More than a decade had passed since the ‘language war’ had swept through the Jewish community in Palestine and since the decision had been made that the language of instruction in the first academic institution in Palestine would be Hebrew and not German. This decision about the *Technicum*, which later became known as the *Technion* in Haifa, had an influence on other institutes, such as the *Realschule*, the case study that I have researched previously, which became the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa.

At the time of the founding of the Hebrew University in 1925, the name of the Institute of Oriental Studies had already been promulgated. This research institute, established in 1926, was intended to be the leading academic center for the teaching of the history of Islam and the societies of the region, as well as for languages and classical texts in Arabic. Its importance was considerable and, among other things, this found expression in the fact that Prof. Josef Horovitz, who was to become the head of the Institute, delivered one of the five scientific lectures that constituted part of the foundational events (see, Katz 2005: 152).

The Institute of Oriental Studies, established in 1926, was the third institute to be founded within the university, and was similar to the other two in terms of the intellectual origins of the founders – Jewish males, Ashkenazi, born in Europe (mainly in Germany) and educated at German universities. The founder of the Institute of Oriental Studies was the philologist and orientalist Prof. Josef Horovitz, who had been a professor in Frankfurt and continued to fulfill this role in tandem with his incumbency in Jerusalem. The other founders were a small group of scholars from Germany and the German-speaking world. Lavsky notes that “seven of the eight teachers in the first generation of the institute were graduates of German universities” (Lavsky 2003: 342). In effect the entire generation of the founders – except for Levi Billig who had studied classical Arabic at Cambridge University – had been educated at German universities.

The German-European roots of the Hebrew academic field have been mentioned earlier. For example, Gil Eyal mentions that, from the very outset, the scholars at the Institute had originated from German universities where they were trained as philologists (Eyal 2006). Amit Levy emphasized that over and above the majority of the founding generation of the Institute consisted of immigrants from German-speaking countries and had been educated at German universities (see, Levy 2021: 15-40).

The German approach to Oriental studies explicitly linked Arabic grammatical studies and classical Arabic texts, and favored basic training in schools of Latin and ancient Greek. According to Mangold-Will the importance of philologists increased during the nineteenth century when German Orientalists were required to create the field of Oriental studies as a separate entity, and hence needed scientific credibility that was made possible first and foremost through classical philological methodology (Mangold-Will 2014). In addition, she high-

lighted the approach that a meticulous study of the rules of the language – as was undertaken in Latin studies – also had advantages in the fields of behavior as it promoted discipline and precision.

Hence the German philological approach constituted the basis for the creation of the field of Arabic studies not only in the leading school in the country (the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa) but also in the leading academic institute in the country (The Institute of Oriental Studies in Jerusalem).⁸ As early as the 1920s, before the establishment of the Institute of Oriental Studies, it was possible to discern the explicit German philological context of the instruction. As mentioned, Prof. Josef Horovitz was the first head of the Institute, and wrote the foundational document of the Institute that was signed in Frankfurt on 14th May 1925.⁹ This document that was formulated after Horovitz's visit to Jerusalem and conversations held with the President of the University, Judah Leib Magnes, presents the outlines of the prospective institute and, in the context of this article, Horovitz illuminates his theoretical ideas about the German philological context for Arabic instruction (see, Mangold-Will 2016: 7-37).

In the document, entitled *Proposals for the Establishment of an Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, Horovitz wonders who could lead an Oriental institute like this in Palestine which then had a majority of about 90 percent Arab-Palestinians for whom Arabic was a mother tongue. In his view, "the head of the institute could only be an Arabist trained in Europe or the United States; because at present there are no scholars from the Orient who have full command of modern science".¹⁰ Nonetheless, according to him, the European or American model of Oriental studies could not be copied in its entirety because the institute is not being established in Europe where "written literary Arabic is more closely linked to classical Arabic and classical texts, but in Palestine where, like in Syria or Egypt even though to a lesser extent, written literary Arabic is also used for intellectual creativity".¹¹ In other words, Horovitz is unwilling to yield on the outlines of the institute, which must be a European institute operating in a Western philological framework, but he recognizes that some of the contents will have to change – there will be not only ancient classical historical texts but also more modern works that are related to the fact that the Institute is being founded in the heart of the Arab world. According to Horovitz, in order to avoid a separation between analysis of classical works in Arabic and contemporary works, the institute will have to add an Arab researcher to the

⁸ Later on, after 1948, it is possible to discern this approach in the field of Israel Oriental studies as well as in the field of Arabic teaching and in the Israeli approach to teaching the language (see, Eyal 2005; Mendel 2020; Uhlmann 2017).

⁹ Hebrew University Archive, File 1/91, Institute of Oriental Studies 1925-1927, Vorschläge für die Errichtung eines Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Jerusalem, Frankfurt, 14.05.1925 [in German].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

teaching staff who will deliver his lectures in Arabic, and later on they would consider bringing in old-style Muslim sheikhs (lit. “arabische Scheichs der alten Art einzustellen”¹²) who would teach different aspects of Islamic theology. However, with regard to the teaching of Arabic, there would be no need for any special changes to what is done in German, because “*the best solution would be to give the task to a lecturer who is familiar with the European methods of teaching Arabic*”.¹³

Horovitz also lists candidates for the position of head of the institute noting that they are all Arabists of Jewish extraction, from Europe or the United States. The list contained the names of nine professors, seven of whom were from Germany or whose supervisors were leading German philologists. Horovitz mentioned that he was interested that there be an Arab lecturer at the Institute but due to the small number of candidates and the small likelihood that they would move to a Hebrew and Zionist institute, the issue never came to fruition. Horovitz received the post of head of the Institute and he served in that position from its establishment in 1926 until his death in 1931, serving as ‘guest-director’ or ‘visiting-director’ since he continued to hold his permanent post at Frankfurt University.

So how is it possible to bridge the gap between the German-philological essence of the Institute of Oriental Studies in Jerusalem and the situation that we are faced with – a Jewish community in the East, in a country in which Arab Muslims are the overwhelming majority? And how should we understand Horovitz’s aspiration to change the structure of the Institute – for example, to bring in an Arab scholar or his preoccupation with Arabic in a contemporaneous context? In my opinion, while Horovitz’s words were sincere and were evidence of an optimal desire for the Institute which would be in correspondence with German institutes but would not be identical to them, it is impossible to disconnect what happened in reality; in other words, one cannot ignore the fact that at the end of the day the Institute did not hire an Arab academic then, and, in effect, only sixty years after the letter was written, the first Arab researcher was appointed (without tenure), and only 95 years after the letter was written the first Arab researcher (with tenure) was hired to the department of Arabic studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Shamir 2022).

The model of German philological research as well as the attitude to the field of Arabic teaching was very apparent in the Institute and its faculty. I shall note here only two of the first research projects of the Institute that became its flagship research – that were both rooted in meticulous study of classical texts. Furthermore, the fact that they were completed only decades later had an

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Compare with Sabina Mangold-Will: *Sheikh at the Hebrew University* (Workshop for Social History – Ha’aretz 16.10.2015) [emphasis Y.M.].

influence on the spirit of the Institute over time. One of the projects was directly connected to a German institute – the al-Balādhurī project. In the framework of this project – that was intended to continue for several more decades before it was collected in a research book – several of the Institute's scholars invested much effort in creating a scientific edition in Arabic of the book *Ansāb al-Ashrāf* (*Genealogies of the Nobles*) written by the 9th century Muslim historian Ahmad ibn Yahyā ibn Jābir al-Balādhurī (who was a prominent scholar in Baghdad during the period of the Abbasid Caliphs). This enormous project was originally started by the Oriental philologist Prof. Carl Heinrich Becker but, upon his entry into political life (after the First World War) and then his incumbency as a minister of culture in the Prussian government in 1925, he transferred the management of the project to Prof. Horovitz and the Institute of Oriental Studies in Jerusalem (see, Levy 2021: 41-42).

The other flagship project of the Institute of Oriental Studies was the creation of the *Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arab Poetry*. This was a huge project based on collecting and analyzing ancient verses; it required the meticulous work of the entire faculty of the Institute and involved cataloguing on cards each and every word of every verse in which they appeared. This project too was managed by Josef Horovitz (see, Eyal 2005). It was undeniably linked to the Institute's desire to position itself as a center for Oriental-European philology.

Most importantly, the two projects emphasized the classic philology of the Institute of Oriental Studies. In both cases they involved cataloguing and meticulous analysis of classical texts more than a thousand years old, using diachronic analysis of comparison between the versions and attempting to identify the original. These projects prove that, by and large, the German-Jewish research tradition was maintained, even with regard to the areas of research they covered and also regarding the research methods including comparison of texts, philological analysis, and more (Levy 2018). In effect the two flagship research projects constitute an example of the character of the Institute of Oriental Studies, and the research concentration of the Institute constitutes a clear intention to adopt the Oriental model as was customary at German universities: a focus on classical textual analysis of the 'high culture' of the ancient East and of oriental civilizations while promoting historical-philological research that would essentially be similar to classical studies in Europe (see, Katz 2014: 119). According to Katz (2014: 119), "the Institute was German to the core, both organizationally and essentially and in the contents of its research programs. In effect, its organizational structure replicated, to an extreme extent, the authoritarian configuration of research institutes in German universities."

An overview of the courses at the Institute of Oriental Studies during its first year of operation indicates its overall philological perception and the contexts of Arabic in particular. In a document written by the Institute of Oriental Studies concerning its summer semester that was due to begin on May 2,

1926, the conditions for acceptance were that applicants should possess a final diploma from a high school indicating appropriate knowledge of Hebrew and Arabic – that is, students having the ability to read original texts would be accepted as regular students and needed only to submit the relevant diplomas (see, Levy 2021: 45). The document indicates that the courses given during the semester would be as follows: David Zvi (Hartwig) Baneth would teach the course *Readings of the philosophical work, Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, by Abu Bakr Ibn Tufayl* (a twelfth century philosopher and theologian); Leo Aryeh Mayer would teach the course, *Palestine under Muslim Rule* and an additional course – *Modern Literature about Islamic Antiquities*; and Levi Billig would teach a course on Arabic literature (ibid.).

With regard to the teaching of Arabic, the document states that this would take place within the framework of a preparatory course and that this facet would come under the authority of S. D. Goitein and Yosef Yoel Rivlin. Both of them, it is important to note, wrote their doctorates under the supervision of Josef Horovitz in his role as professor of Semitic linguistics in the Oriental seminar at Frankfurt University (Goitein's doctorate dealt with prayer in Islam and Rivlin's with law in the Quran). The study of Arabic consisted of four types of courses: *Arabic for Beginners* (fundamentals of the language, syntax, grammar); *Readings of Arabic Chrestomathy for advanced students*; *The History of Islam and Muslim peoples – Part One*; a weekly *Recapitulation lesson* (ibid.).

It is possible to say that in the formative years and the years of establishing the Institute of Oriental Studies the German philological approach based on German *Orientalistik* took precedence with regard to the teaching of Arabic. The study of Arabic revolved around grammar and syntax on the one hand, and the philological approach revolving around a focus on the classical text was prominent – but not on the text itself but on the identification and analysis of the original text and the significance of originality, and in every case preoccupation with the text with a philological emphasis. In addition, the periods covered were mostly from the rise of Islam up to the twelfth century. In comparison with the study approach that had evolved in Germany for the teaching of Arabic in the nineteenth century, it is possible to find great similarity – in effect identity – between the teaching of Arabic in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century and that in Jerusalem in the 1920s.

In my research (Mendel 2020) I have shown that in the 1940s Western orientalist trends with a political Zionist context were added to the University curriculum. This was the core of Gil Eyal's research that showed how Jewish Orientalist expertise in Palestine was based on academic distancing and lack of academic openness: first, distancing in terms of time and focusing on early periods; second, distancing from the Arabs, which was expressed in the absence of Arabs at the Institute and the close linkage with European research; and third, distancing of the products of research from their consumers (see, Eyal

2006: 64). However, the following generation of Orientalists who were trained in the 1940s, had a different habitus. As Eyal describes in his research, in the 1940s young Orientalists of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University “crossed the boundary between academia and officialdom and took positions in the intelligence services of the Jewish community” (*ibid.*: 71).

When Prof. Menahem Milson summarized the activity of the Institute of Oriental Studies over the generations, he stated that “two unique qualities derived from the legacy of the founders continue to characterize the research and teaching of these subjects at the Hebrew University: a deep respect for the written text which, by its nature, dictates meticulous linguistic requirements; and separation between academic work and individual political inclinations” (Milson 1997: 588). It seems that this insight of Milson’s takes into account the German-philological overview of the Institute of Oriental Studies during the Mandate period and, to a great extent, in Israel too, but does not consider the national political implications of founding a German-Western institute in a society that lies at the heart of the Arab world and is at the center of a protracted conflict. Prof. Meir Kister who was accepted at the Institute of Oriental Studies in the 1940s and became one of its most influential lecturers, related in an interview to the fact that the logic that prevailed in the Institute was all about texts. Kister, who was a teacher at the Reali school as well as a professor at the Institute of Oriental Studies and was in charge of the expanded school curriculum in the 1950s, was also involved in projects that had security facets and is an important representative of that field. In his post-retirement interview he stated that to the best of his recall “all the teachers of Arabic that I had (at school and at university) were Jews of German extraction. With no exception. Perhaps besides one person.” When asked about the reasons, he answered “It is obvious, they were following the classical method of teaching classical Arabic – rigorous analysis, textual understanding, drawing conclusions based on science, and even today, up until the last moment that I taught and the last day that I wrote, I followed this method...Everything I said and wrote was always based on texts.”¹⁴

This approach which continued and was consolidated in Israel reflects the German philological framework that has remained the dominant framework for the location, teaching and perception about Arabic in Jewish society. It is my claim that even if some of the contents have changed and now include the study of modern texts and even the participation of Arabic-speaking Arab scholars, the field itself has remained Western, philological, traditional, and most importantly, isolated from the region and its inhabitants. This field was

¹⁴ From transcript of interview with Meir Kister, 16.03.1999. Interviewer Nathan Cohen, p. 16. The transcript is held in the department of oral documentation of the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University. I thank my colleague Amit Levy for sharing this document with me.

formed through the activity of major educational institutions that operated in the field, so that both the Hebrew Reali School and the Hebrew University constituted examples of the great influence of the German philological tradition on the study of Arabic, but also on the framework that has remained stable – even when its influence is no longer known to teachers and students of Arabic today.

3. Conclusion

When examining Arabic studies in Israel in the 21st century in the education system and in academia, a number of shortcomings can be identified. In both spheres it is clear that since the 1940s the dominant approach to the teaching of Arabic indeed changed into centering more on practical usage and less on the classical German philological model – especially due to processes of securitization and politicization that took place in the field (Mendel 2014). Nonetheless when we look at the framework of studies it is clear that the basic principles of the instructional framework remained that of German philology.

In the education system, in a recent research report Mendel et al. (2020) found that Arabic is a low status language and Jewish-Israelis regard Arabic as the 'language of the enemy,' but that this is not the only challenge: the report found that Arabic in the Jewish education system is also suffering from pedagogical challenges. In the same report, Amara (2020) writes that Arabic language education in the Jewish school system focuses on three skills: grammar, translation and memorization. He showed that significant educational efforts are devoted to studying the grammatical and linguistic features of literary Arabic as well as translation of texts. However, students spend virtually no time engaging in active learning skills such as speaking and free writing. In Amara's estimation, most Arabic teachers are Jewish-Israelis who are unable to teach an entire lesson in spoken Arabic. He concludes as follows with a direct critique of the German philological approach: "Arabic in Israel is taught as a dead language, like Latin, which is learned for the purpose of reading but not for speaking and communicating – and as far as possible from a living language." (Amara 2020: 19)

Kramarsky and Strichman (2020), who also looked at the education system in the same report, conducted interviews with high school students, and identified traditional pedagogy as the source of ongoing problems related to acquisition of Arabic in Israeli schools. They showed that while students expect Arabic language classes to allow them to 'live the language,' in practice, studies are focused on translation and memorization and students do not develop any active language skills (see, Kramarsky/Strichman 2020: 36). While the two researchers were impressed that the students wanted to learn Arabic within the

context of the social and political issues, they emphasize that studies of this nature are rare. Rather, the vast majority of lessons are dedicated to philological and grammatical skills such as verb conjugation and translation (*ibid.*: 37).

Academia suffers from some of the same lacuna as the education system in terms of Arabic language education. As in the school system, also in the academic sphere Arabic's inferior position can be attributed to its poor standing in the public sphere and governmental neglect. Yet a 2016 report focusing on Arabic in Israeli academia identified a number of ongoing shortcomings that are connected to pedagogy. The research found that, with the exception of academic courses taught in Arabic at the University of Haifa, Israeli universities conduct most Arabic language instruction in Hebrew (see, Amara et al. 2016: 25). Not surprisingly in light of this reality, both Jewish and Arab students are reluctant to speak Arabic. One of the lecturers who was interviewed for Amara's research explained that "much of our learning is conducted in Hebrew... I teach an advanced course and the Jewish students are hesitant to express themselves in Arabic... They get flustered when they are asked to speak Arabic or to express themselves in Arabic." (*Ibid.*: 26)

Amara et al.'s (2016) research demonstrates that the approach to Arabic instruction adopted by departments of Arabic language and literature reflect larger European philological and Orientalist attitudes. These attitudes have become mainstream, with one Arab lecturer interviewed for Amara's research asserting that "the Orientalist rationale assumes that Arabic is a language that must be studied and is not a language in which to carry out research" (*ibid.*: 27). Amara et al. (2016) further found that the way Arabic is taught at the university level differs from how other languages such as Hebrew or English are taught. Unlike instruction in English or Spanish literature, for example, in Arabic, class discussion is conducted in Hebrew and a considerable amount of time is devoted to translating texts into Hebrew. This is indicative of Arabic's inferior status and prevents Arab students from achieving prominence even in lessons and departments that are dedicated to their language.

All in all, challenges faced by Jewish Israelis who wish to study Arabic in the school system and in academia in the 21st century can be attributed to two primary problems. The first is political; this overarching and on-going challenge is due to the Israeli-Arab conflict, and as a result to the Jewish Israeli's negative perception of the Middle East, the Arab world, Arab culture, Palestinian citizens of Israel and related topics (Mendel 2014). This infuses attitudes towards Arabic rendering it unwanted and lacking in cultural capital. The second challenge is related to pedagogy; there seems to be a direct connection between the roots of language studies – as demonstrated here in the school system (e.g. the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa) and academia (e.g. the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) to current educational challenges. Thus the German philological roots of Arabic studies in the Jewish community have in-

deed had a dramatic and long-lasting influence over Arabic language studies in Israel. There seems to be dissonance between the classic orientation towards the language (which was seemingly unproblematic in late 19th century Germany) and use of the same grammatical orientation in Israel, in the heart of the Middle East, in the 21st century.

References

Amara, Muhamad (2020): Arabic Teaching in the Jewish Society in Israel: Characteristics and Challenges. In: Yonatan Mendel/May Arow/Thabet Abu Rass/Gal Kramarski (eds.): *Arabs, Jews, Arabic: Arabic Teaching in Israel and its Challenges*. Jerusalem, pp. 12-28 [in Hebrew].

Amara, Muhamad/Donitsa-Schmidt, Smadar/Mar'i, Abd Al-Rahman (2016): Arabic in the Israeli Academy: Historical Absence, Current Challenges, and Future Possibilities. Jerusalem [in Hebrew].

Ashkenazi, Ofer (2013). The Biramschule in Context – The ‘German’ Influence on Jewish Body Culture in Mandate Palestine. In: *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 41, pp. 17-39.

Ben-Ze’ev, Israel (Wolfenson) (1994): Selected Chapters from the Arabic Literature. Jerusalem.

Bentwich, Joseph (1960): The Education in the State of Israel. Tel Aviv [in Hebrew].

Eyal, Gil (2006): The Disenchantment of the Orient Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State. Stanford.

Habuba, Eliyahou (1938): The New Teacher: Textbook for the Hebrew School System. Haifa.

Halperin, Liora R. (2005): The Arabic Question: Zionism and the Politics of Language in Palestine, 1918–1948. Massachusetts.

Halperin, Sara (1970): Dr. A. Biram and the Hebrew Reali School. Jerusalem [in Hebrew].

Heschel, Susannah (2012): German Jewish Scholarship on Islam as a Tool for De-Orientalizing Judaism. In: *New German Critique* 117 (Fall), pp. 91-107.

Katz, Shaul (2005): Gershom Scholem and his Early Work at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem: A Response to Yoseph Dan. In: *Katharsis* 3, pp. 144-163.

Katz, Shaul (2014): The Scion and Its Tree: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Its German Epistemological and Organizational Origins. In: Marcel Herbst (ed.): *The Institution of Science and the Science of Institutions*. Dordrecht, pp. 103-144.

Landau, Jacob (1945): *Principles of the Arabic Language*. Jerusalem.

Lavsky, Hagit (2003): The Meaning of the Establishment of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and its Place in the City’s Life during the British Mandate Period. In: Yehoushua Ben-Arieh (ed.): *Jerusalem and the British Mandate: Interaction and Legacy*. Jerusalem, pp. 335-350 [in Hebrew].

Levy, Amit (2021): *A New Orient: German-Jewish Oriental Studies in Palestine/Israel, 1926–1963*. Jerusalem.

Mangold-Will, Sabine (2014): Zur Etablierung der Orientalischen Philologie an den deutschen Universitäten. Anmerkungen zur Entstehung einer Disziplin. In: Wulf Oesterreicher/Maria Selig (eds.): *Geschichtlichkeit von Sprache und Text. Philologien, Disziplingenese, Wissenschaftshistoriographie*. Paderborn, pp. 115–129.

Mangold-Will, Sabine (2016): Josef Horovitz und die Gründung des Instituts für Arabische und Islamische Studien an der Hebräischen Universität in Jerusalem. Ein Orientalisches Seminar für Palästina. In: *Naharaim* 10(1), pp. 7–37.

Meltser, Efi (ed.; 2004): *Ninety Years to the Establishment of the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa*. Modi'in [in Hebrew].

Menahem Milson (2000): The Beginnings of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In: Shaul Katz/Michael Heyd (eds.): *The History of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Origins and Beginnings*. Jerusalem, pp. 575–588 [in Hebrew].

Mendel, Yonatan (2014): *The Creation of Israeli Arabic: Political and Security Consideration in the Making of Arabic Language Studies in Israel*. London.

Mendel, Yonatan (2015): From German Philology to Local Usability: The Emergence of 'Practical' Arabic in the Hebrew Reali School in Haifa 1913–48. In: *Middle Eastern Studies* 52(1), pp. 1–26.

Mendel, Yonatan (2016): German Orientalism, Arabic Grammar and the Jewish Education System: The Origins and Effect of Martin Plessner's 'Theory of Arabic Grammar'. In: *Naharaim* 10(1), pp. 57–77.

Mendel, Yonatan (2020): Language out of Place: Orientalism, Intelligence the Arabic Language. Jerusalem [in Hebrew].

Mendel, Yonatan/Arow, May/Abu Rass, Thabet/Kramarski, Gal (eds.; 2020): *Arabs, Jews, Arabic: Arabic Teaching in Israel and its Challenges*. Jerusalem.

Milson, Menahem (1996): The Beginnings of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In: *Judaism* 45(2) (Spring), pp. 169–183.

Plessner, Meir (Martin) (1935): *Theory of Arabic Grammar: Textbook for Hebrew Schools*. Haifa.

Shamir, Jonathan (2022): A Revolution in Arabic Studies Is Shaking Up Israeli Universities. In: *Haaretz* June 1, 2022; see online: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-06-01/ty-article-magazine/.premium/a-revolution-in-arabic-studies-is-shaking-up-israeli-universities/00000181-1e66-db47-a5dd-9f6f7fb40000> [November 3, 2023].

Spolsky, Bernard (1996): Hebrew and Israeli Identity. In: Yasir Suleiman (ed.): *Language and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*. Richmond, pp. 181–192.

Wokoeck, Ursula (2009): *German Orientalism: The Study of the Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945*. Oxon.