

***Multilingualistic Societies & the Multilingualistic Mind Transnational Literatures in  
Premodern Times: Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino and other Jewish Languages.***

**Academic Report**

**1) Conceptual Framework and Scholarly Objectives of the Workshop**

On October 30 and 31, 2025, an international group of scholars met in Antwerp for a workshop titled *Multilingualistic Societies & the Multilingualistic Mind Transnational Literatures in Premodern Times: Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino and other Jewish Languages*, hosted by the Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp. This in-person workshop took place within the larger frameworks of the Scientific Research Network (SRN) “Literatures without Borders. A Historical-Comparative Study of Premodern Literary Transnationality” and RELICS (Researchers of European Literary Identities, Cosmopolitanism and the Schools), funded by the FWO (Research Foundation Flanders). Additional -- vital -- funding for this workshop came in the form of a conference grant from the EAJIS (European Association of Jewish Studies).

A central aim of SRN network “Literatures without Borders” is to strengthen links between international researchers around this overarching theme. Our subgroup of this network, scholars of Jewish languages, cultures and literatures, brought together experts from the University of Amsterdam, the University of Antwerp, the Hebrew University, Bar Ilan University, the Open University of Israel, the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the University of Basel, the University of Frankfurt, the University of Düsseldorf, the University of Leuven and the Research Network RELICS, which has its seat at the University of Ghent in Belgium.

In line with both our proposal and the goals of the Scientific Research Network, we discussed a set of pre-circulated reflections and primary sources, in our particular case in a range of (early) modern Jewish languages -- primarily Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, Judaeo-Arabic, but also Malayalam. Rather than hosting formal presentations of finished papers, we structured the workshop so as to facilitate discussion. We hosted a limited number of invited colleagues with expertise on (early) modern Jewish linguistics, literature and history. Our aim was to unravel the interplay of Jewish intertextualities, local inspiration, and trans-local networks. Jewish cultures in the early modern and modern periods being widely diasporic and inherently situational and contextual, the challenge for us was to pinpoint both ‘universalities,’ inner-Jewish commonalities, and ‘particular’ local differences. We deliberately sought to problematize both essentialist and constructionist approaches. In treating Jewish literatures as a fluid, porous corpus, our workshop and its participants from various disciplines took a poly-systemic approach. Interdisciplinarity, in other words, was not a framework we superimposed on the workshop, but one that emerged from our combined expertise and methodologies.

While the workshop was conceived as by invitation-only and behind closed doors, we also deliberately planned a public-facing evening lecture designed to share some of our insights with a broader public. This took place in the form of a keynote public lecture by Professor Carsten Wilke (Central European University, Vienna) which took place in the series of public lectures of the Institute of Jewish Studies, in the stately Tassis-Zaal of the Hof van Liere.

Finally, in our conception of the workshop, we hoped that the confrontation between Yiddish, Ladino, Judaeo-Arabic and other Jewish languages would lead to unexpected literary encounters and, ultimately, to a new perspective on the nature and dynamic of the (early) modern Jewish literary canon. Following through on our proposal, we invited scholars with different profiles and with expertise and skills in different fields and source-languages, and we actively attracted researchers at different stages of their careers. Furthermore, given the scope of our project, we curated a highly diverse workshop programme that reflected both the geographical range of our materials and collective expertise (including Europe, North-Africa and the Ottoman Empire) and linguistic range: by turning the lens on Yiddish, Ladino and Judaeo-Arabic, we prioritized understudied textual materials, including underrepresented genres such as broadsheets and other ephemera, everyday liturgy and popular manuals.

## 2) Structure of the Workshop and Overview of Sessions and Contributors

Our conference took place over two days, with presentations clustered in a series of panels.

The panels were structured as follows:

Thursday, 30 October 2025

- Introductory session

Theodor Dunkelgrün (University of Antwerp), “Multilinguistic Societies & the Multilinguistic Mind”

- Panel 1.

Michael Silber (Hebrew University), “Periodization of the Jewish Early Modern Era and The Rise of Jewish Languages”

Sayf Shems (Université Libre de Bruxelles) “Judeo-Arabic Without Borders: Language, Memory, and Identity in the Literary Culture of Iraqi Jews”

Roni Cohen (Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main), “A Book of Spells, a Hymn, and a Love Song: Two Yiddish Songs in a Magic Anthology”

- Panel 2

Claudia Rosenzweig (Bar Ilan University), “Paratexts in *Mayse-bukh*”

Katja Šmid (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas), “Paratexts of the best-selling collections of stories in light of some Ladino works”

Avriel Bar-Levav (The Open University of Israel), “The “ordinary” book in the early modern Jewish multilingual context”

- Panel 3

Harm den Boer (University of Basel), “The Spanish Bible translations produced among the Western Sephardim: a shared language of identity and return, and a basis for outward discussion.”

Soledad Castaño Santos (University of Basel), “Challenges in developing Digital Humanities projects: Mapping the Scriptures in Western Sephardic Literature project”

- Panel 4

Daniella Zaidman-Mauer (Universiteit van Amsterdam), “Two Faces of a Plague Tractate: Hebrew and Yiddish Paratexts in Frankfurt an der Oder, 1771”

Marion Aptroot (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf), “Early Modern “Musterverk”?”

- Public evening keynote lecture

Carsten Wilke (Central European University, Vienna ), “A Jew in Calvinist Antwerp: The Literary Enigma of the ‘Marrakesh Dialogues’”

Friday, 31 October 2025

- Panel 5

Carsten Wilke (Central European University, Vienna), “Hebrew Inscriptions in Kerala, India: Sample from a Research Mission”

Simon Smets (KU Leuven), a presentation on Early Modern Latin and Greek Paraphrases of Psalm 2 (part of Smets' own work in progress) and an overview of the work of the RELICS network.

- Final roundtable discussion

### 3) Key Themes and Scholarly Conversations

The topics and threads of our discussion were rich and manifold, and in the end included, besides Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino, not only Judaeo-Arabic but even bilingual Hebrew-Malayalam texts.

To introduce the main *Leitmotifs* of the workshop and set them in a wider framework of the diasporic history of Jewish literatures, Theodor Dunkelgrün discussed the way the *longue durée* history of the material text of the Hebrew Bible reflected centuries of cultural interaction with Islamicate and Christian civilizations among which Jews lived. Dunkelgrün discussed in detail several manuscripts that demonstrate and illuminate Jewish familiarity with both the

Qur'an and the Latin Vulgate Bible, and the way Jewish diasporic multilingualism has shaped the way Jews have read their own sacred scriptures but also the corpora of others.

Contact with wider, majority cultures and languages continued to form one main theme throughout the workshop, and here our discussions focused on dynamics of confrontation and attraction, resistance and adoption. Exemplary here was Katja Šmid's discussion. Classical collections of stories originating in the East, such as the Panchatantra, the Arabian Nights, Sendebār, and The Book of the Prince and the Ascetic, were introduced to European literatures through numerous translations during the Middle Ages. Stories or narratives (denominated *ma'asiyot*, *mešalim* or *cuentos* in Judeo-Spanish texts) appeared in Ladino as standalone booklets or collections of stories mostly between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. In spite of some important studies that have been carried out on these stories, in general, the adaptations of stories into the vernaculars have not been sufficiently studied until now. Šmid examined Ladino paratexts that came along with the following collections of stories: *Qol mevasser* (Salonika, 1765 and 1852); *Sefer Ben ha-melekh ve-ha-nazir* (Salonika, 1849 and 1880), which was translated from Hebrew into Ladino by Salonikan Rabbi Yitshak Bekhor Amarachi, translator and author of several Sephardic works of moral and didactic content; and three Ladino versions of Sendebār that have been identified so far: *Mešalim del Rey Sendebār* (Constantinople, 1869); *El rey Sandebār y sus consejeros* (Constantinople, 1880); and *Sentipa el filósofo y el hijo del rey Sandebār* (Salonika, 1910). This presentation formed part of a larger work in progress aiming to shed light on the important role of Sephardic translators, their translations and adaptations of these classical collections of stories, its content, context, purpose and reception among the Ladino readership at the time of their publication.

Another, connected common theme was the experience of exile, and the way language can come to serve a diaspora of exiles as an archive of memory, whether in the Spanish/Ladino biblical translation at the heart of the of the Sephardi diaspora (Den Boer, Castaño) or the Judeo-Arabic of the novels written by the modern diaspora of Iraqi Jews in Israel, France and Montreal. In a discussion drawn from ground-breaking doctoral research on the representation of the Other in Iraqi Jewish literature, Sayf Shems's contribution explored the transnational nature of Judeo-Arabic as both a premodern Jewish language and a modern vehicle of cultural memory among Iraqi Jews. Long before the 20th-century, Judeo-Arabic served as a vital medium for religious, legal, and philosophical expression in Jewish communities from Mosul to Basra, and across trade and scholarly networks extending into the Ottoman Empire, Persia, North Africa, and India. While often marginalized in broader narratives of Jewish literary history, Judeo-Arabic functioned as a linguistic and cultural bridge between Jewish traditions and the surrounding Arab-Islamic world. Shems considered how the premodern Judeo-Arabic tradition is evoked and reconfigured in 20th-century texts by authors such as Shimon Ballas and Samir Naqqash. These writers—fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew—engage with a multilingual heritage that defies national and linguistic boundaries. Their work reflects a cultural memory rooted in the Judeo-Arabic textual tradition, while also grappling with displacement, migration, and the erasure of Arab-Jewish identities in modern nation-states. Through close readings and discussion of select texts, Shems illuminated fundamental ways in which Judeo-Arabic operates not merely as a historical language, but as a transregional cultural archive. In doing so, he highlighted the importance of including Middle Eastern Jewish experiences in broader discussions of minor Jewish languages and literatures. Shems's presentation encouraged dialogue on how multilingualism and border-crossing literatures can challenge dominant national narratives and foster new comparative frameworks.

The multilingualism of Jewish diasporic culture was another key *Leitmotif*. Here Avri Bar Levav's and Marion Aptroot's presentation was exemplary. In his illuminating discussion of excerpts from Moshe Frankfurt's introduction to the Yiddish translation of Isaac Aboab's *Menorat ha-ma'or* (Amsterdam, 1721), Bar Levav shed light on the intersection of Sephardic and Ashkenazic language cultures and textual traditions in 18th century Amsterdam, while Aptroot explored the development of a library of non-learned "classics" in Yiddish. Aptroot and Bar Levav also connected their discussions to a further *Leitmotif* throughout several panels: a focus on *para-texts*, reflecting a trend within Book History more generally, and building on the work of the late Shlomo Berger.

Another topic the connected two speakers was a remarkable new Digital Humanities research project titled *MSSL: Mapping the Scriptures in Western Sephardic Literature*, funded by the Swiss National Council for Research 2022-2026. Den Boer and Castaño complemented each other's presentations in illuminating ways, in discussing their soon-to-be launched open source online version/database of the Spanish Bible translation printed in Ferrara in 1553 and subsequent editions of the TaNaKh and separate editions of Humashim and Haftarot, as well as of the Psalms and the Song of Songs, printed mainly in Amsterdam between 1611 and 1762. This database is meant to give an insight in the role, the textual history and the use of the Spanish Bible among the Western Sephardim and beyond -- a topic Den Boer has worked on for many years. Among the phenomena the database promises to illuminate are the choices translators made, their method, the textual changes, the consistencies and inconsistencies of these translations. The insights into this particular Bible translation from Hebrew into Spanish and its subsequent editions produced over three centuries in the so-called Western Sephardi Diaspora formed the basis for a study on the role of this Spanish translation in those communities of Iberian "New Jews" or former Conversos. It is in many ways the central text of the paradigmatic diasporic community.

All papers were original and insightful in their way, and cannot all be summarised here. But perhaps the most surprising and horizon-expanding in terms of Jewish Studies contribution was Carsten Wilke's a discussion of a recent research mission to South India, surveying Hebrew inscriptions and other Jewish source material to be included in the database "Interreligious Symbiosis in South India" destined for online publication by the Mar Chrysostom Chair at Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam, Kerala. Among several hundred Hebrew inscriptions that Wilke and his colleagues photographed, he selected 15 in a chronological range spanning seven centuries, from 1269 to 1964, including one Hebrew-Malayalam bilingual inscription. Comparing funerary inscriptions in South India, Yemen, and Apulia, Wilke sketched an incredibly broad overview of Jewish cemeteries of the Holy Roman and Ottoman empires and broadened the geographical horizons of all participants.

#### **4) Public Scholarship and Outreach: Keynote Lecture and Wider Engagement**

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## **5) Future Directions**

As a result of the workshop, several participants have discussed various plans for future collaborations and publications, including a further international conference, a special issue of a journal, and a book.

## **6) Final programme of the Workshop**

Programme

### **Thursday, 30 October 2025**

- 8.30 – 9.00 Welcome and coffee
- 9.00 – 9.30 Introduction (Theodor Dunkelgrün)
- 9.30 – 11.00 Session 1 (Michael Silber, Sayf Shems, Roni Cohen)
- 11.00 – 11.15 Coffee break
- 11.15 – 12.45 Session 2 (Daniella Zaidman-Mauer, Claudia Rosenzweig, Katja Šmid)
- 13.00 – 15.00 Lunch
- 15.00 – 16.00 Session 3 (Marion Aptroot, Avriel Bar-Levav)
- 16.00 – 16.30 Coffee break
- 16.30 – 17.30 Session 4 (Harm den Boer, Soledad Castaño)
- 17.45 – 19.30 Dinner
- 20.00 – 21.00 Public lecture: “A Jew in Calvinist Antwerp: The Literary Enigma of the  
‘Marrakesh Dialogues’” (Carsten Wilke)

### **Friday, 31 October 2025**

- 10.00 – 11.00 Session 5 (Carsten Wilke, Simon Smets)
- 11.00 – 11.15 Coffee break
- 11.15 – 12.00 Concluding discussion