

# The cultural and linguistic diversity of modern Maghrebi Judeo-Arabic dialects

## Responsable

**Wiktor Gebski**  
(University of Cambridge)

**Mercredi 12 juillet 2023**  
**14h30-16h30**  
**Salle Clio 035**

## Intervenants

**Luca D'Anna**  
(Université de Naples  
L'Orientale)

**Eduardo Balbo**  
(Université de Naples  
L'Orientale)

**Wiktor Gebski**  
(University of Cambridge)

**Ofra Tirosh-Becker**  
(The Hebrew University  
of Jerusalem)

## Résumé de l'atelier

Arabic was spoken by North African Jews from the advent of Islam in the region up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century when almost all Jewish communities migrated to the newly established state of Israel or Europe. Virtually all varieties of Judeo-Arabic belong to the so-called non-*Hilālī*, sedentary dialects, and therefore form the oldest layer of Arabic spoken in the region. The proposed panel aims at exploring the cultural and linguistic heritage of North African Jewry, with a particular focus on modern dialects. All four papers are based on extensive fieldwork, during which the panelists recorded the last native speakers of Libyan, Tunisian, and Algerian Jewish Arabic. Wiktor Gebski's paper is focusing on the oral culture of the Jews of Gabes (Southern Tunisia). It offers invaluable insight into the narrative techniques and word order strategies utilized within the discourse. Ofra Tirosh-Becker, on the other hand, analyses the written genres of Algerian Judeo-Arabic from diachronic and synchronic perspectives, comparing their linguistic features to medieval, as well as dialectological sources. With this unique and novel approach, Ofra's paper casts light not only on the linguistic aspects of Algerian Judeo-Arabic but also on various aspects of the literary culture produced in it. Luca D'Anna in his paper reassesses the development of Libyan Judeo-Arabic through the lens of socio-cultural interactions between various Jewish communities. To this end, he analyses linguistic findings against historical events, attempting to elucidate some peculiarities of Jewish Libyan dialects. Finally, Eduardo Balbo's paper focuses on the Judeo-Arabic of Tunis spoken in the diaspora (Israel). In his sociolinguistic research, he investigates the social status of the Tunisian community in Israel and the linguistic phenomena in Tunisian Judeo-Arabic triggered by language contact with Israeli Hebrew.

## Programme

### Luca D'Anna

#### *Libyan Judeo-Arabic from a Historical Perspective*

In the present paper, Libyan Judeo-Arabic dialects are seen from a historical perspective, offering a reassessment of their position within the dialect geography of North Africa and highlighting the way in which they can help reconstruct the linguistic history of Libya. The information coming from the existing literature is updated on the basis of new research, with particular regard to the type of Arabic dialects currently and historically spoken in Libya and fresh data on Judeo-Arabic varieties. In the paper, we argue that the three different types of Maghrebi dialects were historically spoken in Libya: two different sedentary types and a Bedouin one. After the 11<sup>th</sup> century, however, the employment of

the sedentary varieties was restricted to members of Jewish communities, and thus reinterpreted as a religiolect. The complex network of social and cultural interactions between different Jewish communities during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, then, is responsible for the unique characteristics of some Libyan Judeo-Arabic dialects, whose peculiarities can only be explained in the light of their connections with other, sometimes distant, varieties. When, in 1967, the last Jews were expelled from Libya, only Bedouin dialects continued to be spoken in the country.

### **Eduardo Balbo**

#### *Sociolinguistic Aspects of Language Contact in Israel: the Case of the Spoken Judeo-Arabic Variety of Tunis*

Starting from 1948, the steady process of immigration of speakers of Jewish languages to the newly founded State of Israel led speakers of Maghrebi Judeo-Arabic dialects (JADs) and their multilingual repertoires to come into contact with other languages. Due to this contact, Maghrebi JADs speakers gradually shifted from their heritage languages to the dominant one – namely modern Hebrew. The spoken Judeo-Arabic variety of Tunis (TJA) is one of the most suitable candidates to carry out a sociolinguistic study aimed at analyzing the dynamics of language contact between Maghrebi JADs in the diaspora and other dominant languages. This variety had already been documented in its original state prior to the disappearance of the community by David Cohen. His monograph thus gives us a solid benchmark against which to compare data collected in more recent times. However, the analysis of TJA from a sociolinguistic perspective in a diasporic context represents one of the desiderata of research in JudeoArabic languages. In this talk, I will analyze the status of Maghrebi JADs in Israel, with a particular focus on TJA. The data gathered consist of seven interviews with six speakers from Tunis who now reside in Israel. The runtime of these documents is approximately 3 hours and 30 minutes and they show occurrences of language contact phenomena, shedding light on the status of TJA as an endangered heritage language in Israel. Moving from a sociolinguistic perspective that looks at heritage and immigrant languages with a language contact approach, I focus on ethnolinguistic vitality and language contact phenomena in JADs (specifically TJA) spoken in the diaspora (Israel), with a focus on discourse-related phenomena (in particular, code-switching).

### **Wiktor GebSKI**

#### *Jewish Folktales from Gabes (Southern Tunisia): Literary and Linguistic Notes*

Jewish dialects across North Africa attest to a rich and diverse oral culture, which over centuries has been passed down from one generation to another. Never written or codified, folktales, stories, and religious narratives were memorised and performed predominantly by women within their households. The aim of the present paper is twofold. Firstly, it offers an overview of the main characteristics of the oral Jewish culture in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, focusing primarily on the dialect of Gabes (Southern Tunisia). In this part, I discuss the main motives occurring in selected dialects, which, in turn, reflect the social reality of the Jewish communities in the Maghreb and shed light on their relationship with Muslim neighbours. Secondly, the linguistic analysis of a selected folktale demonstrates how word order and different types of sentences are utilized within the framework of a narrative. Based on a pragmatic analysis, it is argued that SVO and Topic-Comment sentences are typologically distinct and fulfil different discourse functions. The data for this paper was collected during several stints of fieldwork in Israel and France from the last native speakers of Maghrebi Judeo-Arabic.

### **Ofra Tirosh-Becker**

#### *Reflection of Dialectal and Conservative Language Phenomena in Algerian Judeo-Arabic Texts*

Judeo-Arabic was the language used by Algerian Jews for centuries. French colonization in 1830 marked the beginning of its gradual weakening as

French became the dominant language among Algerian Jews. With the emigration of the Jews following Algeria's independence in 1962, Algerian Judeo-Arabic became an endangered language preserved only by elderly speakers. I had the fortune of extensively recording such speakers for many years. Fortunately, this Jewish community was literally very prolific, and we have a large collection of published texts in Algerian Judeo-Arabic. These texts range over different genres, from Bible translations (*sharh*) and liturgical texts to weekly newspapers and translations of Western novels. In my presentation, I will demonstrate the varying balance of dialectal vs. conservative linguistic features in different textual genres. These will be analyzed against the backdrop of the spoken dialect on the one hand, and medieval Judeo-Arabic on the other. The study uses the TAJA (Tagged Algerian Judeo-Arabic) corpus developed by my research group for this comprehensive cross-genre analysis.