CHAPTER TWO
JUDEO-ARABIC WITHIN THE JEWISH LINGUISTIC SPECTRUM

This chapter explores Judeo-Arabic within the framework of other Jewish religiolects. It reviews the history of this religiolect and analyzes its structure in some detail. It then discusses the language continuum employed by users of Judeo-Arabic and traces its diachronic evolution. The chapter also tackles some terminological issues, especially with respect to the denotation of Arabic-speaking Jews. Finally, the chapter discusses the state of Judeo-Arabic today.¹

An Overview of Judeo-Arabic
Judeo-Arabic is a religiolect (see pp. 12–13) that has been spoken and written in various forms by Jews throughout the Arabic-speaking world. Judeo-Arabic literature deals for the most part with Jewish topics, and is written by Jews for a Jewish readership. Several important features distinguish it from other varieties of Arabic. These include a mixture of elements of Classical and post-Classical Arabic, dialectal components, pseudocorrections, and pseudocorrections that have become standardized. In other words, it is a typical mixed variety. Judeo-Arabic also possesses a number of specific additional sociolinguistic and sociocultural features that set it apart: the use of Hebrew rather than Arabic characters, various traditions of Judeo-Arabic orthography, elements of Hebrew and Aramaic vocabulary and grammar,

¹ Some of the material in this chapter was published in different form in Hary 1992 and 2003.
and the style of the šarḥ in Judeo-Arabic texts.²

Judeo-Arabic speakers have been a topic of discussion academically and politically for many years in Israeli society. Many designations for speakers of Judeo-Arabic exist, including Mizrahim (muşarət, lit. “the communities of the East”), Sephardim (lit. “Spaniards”), and “Arab Jews.” Actually, the term Mizrahim, lit. “Easterners” (translated as “oriental Jews”) is of course a misnomer, since Moroccan Jews, for example, hardly count as being from the east, if the point of reference is Israel.³ The term Sephardim has its own problems. Strictly speaking, it refers to Jews whose ancestors had been expelled from the Iberian Peninsula, up to and especially in 1492, and who then settled in the Ottoman Empire and other countries. Although many Jews of the Ottoman Empire, especially in Arabic-speaking communities, adopted the religious ways and liturgical customs of the expellees from the Iberian Peninsula, pre-Sephardi traditions also survived in many areas, including North Africa. Finally, the term “Arab Jews,” attested historically in various documents but now used only sporadically, may be misleading because the word “Arab” could be perceived as an “ethnic” marker. This leads to three unresolved issues:

(i) The word “Arab” as an “ethnic” marker in the current Israeli sense did not exist historically or sociologically before the creation of modern Israel, so Arabic-speaking Jews in the past were conceptualizing something entirely different when designating themselves as “Arab Jews.”

(ii) The concept of “ethnicity” itself remains unclear in most contexts,

² The šarḥ is a genre composed of literal translations of Jewish religious sacred texts from Hebrew into Judeo-Arabic. The reference here is to the style of this genre, characterized by Hebrew and/or Aramaic interference. Another term for this style is “Hebraism.”

³ An imaginary line drawn diagonally across the Mediterranean, from the Strait of Gibraltar to the Black Sea, has historically distinguished the Jewish “west” (in fact, north) from the Jewish “east” (in fact, south). This raises a number of questions, such as: Who set this imaginary line? Who used it? For what purposes?