JUDEO-GREEK OR GREEK SPOKEN BY JEWS?

Cyril Aslanov

Research on Jewish languages has been deeply influenced by Max Weinreich’s monumental work on the history of Yiddish.¹ Besides for his comprehensive survey of the mechanisms of crystallization of Yiddish, this scholar allowed himself to project the fusion (oyfshmelsung) model,² which was legitimate as far as Yiddish was concerned, to other Jewish languages of which he seems to have had only a second-hand knowledge. This methodological bias led him to assume that throughout the ages, the Greek-speaking Jews developed a specific language, the status of which toward general Greek was comparable to the status of Yiddish toward the German dialects. He called Yavanic (yevonish) this specific Judeo-Greek language conceived as an uninterrupted entity.³

Weinreich’s seminal assumption was adopted by Paul Wexler, whose Explorations in Judeo-Slavic Linguistics assumes the existence of a well-crystallized Judeo-Greek throughout the High Middle Ages.⁴ However, the data he collected to illustrate the impact of this lost language on Central and Eastern European Jewish and Gentile languages are very heterogeneous. Furthermore, few of them are reliable. Most of the time, this scholar points to phenomena that go back to the influence of Hellenic Christianity on the languages of the Balkans or Eastern Europe.⁵

A significant turning point in Judeo-Greek studies is Nicholas de Lange’s edition of Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah.⁶ Although

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² Weinreich, Geshikhte, I, 32–42 = Weinreich, History, 29–38.
⁵ As in the case of παρασκευή “Friday” to which Wexler devotes a long development. See Wexler, ibid., 19–23. Needless to say, all his examples can be considered the result of Hellenization without any Jewish intermediary.
⁶ N. de Lange, Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah, (Tübingen, 1996).
most of these texts are written in Hebrew, they are occasionally interspersed with Greek words or phrases that are almost always written in Hebrew letters. I would like to focus on these valuable pieces of evidence in order to try to answer two questions:

1. Can we consider the Greek component of the material gathered by de Lange a crystallized language of its own, irreducible to the coterritorial dialects of Demotic Greek?
2. Does this material that can tentatively be dated from the tenth to the twelfth century display any continuity toward earlier or later stages of Greek-speaking Jewry?

In order to answer the first question, I would like to apply the parameters formulated by Chaim Rabin (from an external sociolinguistic viewpoint) or by Moshe Bar-Asher (from the internal perspective of linguistic hybridization). As for the second question, it should be treated more specifically from the perspective of Greek linguistics. We should determine whether the continuity between late antique, medieval, and modern Jewish Greek (or Judeo-Greek) might be ascribed to the particular dynamics that can be observed from the viewpoint of Jewish interlinguistics. Or, alternatively, does every period where a specifically Jewish blend of Greek is attested constitute a case of its own, the apparent affinity between them being only the result of the remarkable continuity characteristic of the history of the Greek language in general? If the second branch of the alternative is correct, each stage of Jewish Greek should be considered a specification of the coterritorial variety of general Greek rather than the continuation of the previous stage of Judeo-Greek.

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7 The only continuous Greek text is a translation of the Ecclesiastes. See de Lange, op. cit., 71–8.
8 See ibid., Preface.