



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Kantor, B.P. (2023) The standard language ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians of the 'Abbasid period

Putten, M. van

Citation

Putten, M. van. (2025). Review of Kantor, B.P. (2023) The standard language ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians of the 'Abbasid period. *Journal Of Semitic Studies*, 1-4.
doi:10.1093/jss/fgaf001

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4211961>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

BOOK REVIEW

BENJAMIN P. KANTOR, *The Standard Language Ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic Grammarians of the 'Abbasid Period*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023. 232 pages. €39,95 hardback. ISBN: 978-1-80511-184-9.

In this book, Benjamin Kantor aims to describe, contrast and compare the standard language ideology as it is reflected by the works of the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians of the Abbasid period. While the points of contact between the two respective grammatical traditions—exceedingly clear in their shared and calqued grammatical terminology—has received some attention, the effect this contact may have on similarities in linguistic ideology has not previously received the same attention. *The Standard Language Ideology of the Hebrew and Arabic Grammarians of the 'Abbasid Period* successfully fills this lacuna.

After an introduction and overview of the state of the field, Kantor introduces some theoretical underpinnings of standard language ideology (Chapter 3). These form the backdrop for the chapters to follow, which look at the situation of medieval grammatical works on Hebrew and Arabic. Near the end of Chapter 3, the author anticipates that 'we may find that the language ideology of the grammarians paints a picture at odds with what is known about Hebrew and Arabic of the Middle Ages from other sources' (39). This is indeed striking and Kantor lays out the picture masterfully in the following chapters.

Chapter 4 outlines three main features of the standard language ideology and its corpus: that the respective standard languages are believed to be 'cultural possessions' (§4.1), that the best language can be derived from 'exemplary ancient speakers' (§4.2) and that, somewhat surprisingly in light of the ancient speakers, grammarians can do 'fieldwork' collecting proper usage (§4.3).

Kantor clearly shows that while the ideal of standard languages—to Jews and Muslims alike—may be distant and difficult to achieve, these languages are nevertheless considered to be 'possessions' of 'the Hebrews' and 'the Arabs' alike. Perhaps typical for standard language ideology, but nevertheless striking, this possession does not mean that contemporary use represents the ideal of the language use. Both Hebrew and Arabic grammarians place the linguistic ideal in 'epic time' and themselves as the arbiters of 'correct language'.

For the Arabic grammatical tradition, however, one has to wonder whether the work's reliance on the corpus of the Qur'ān and Pre-Islamic poetry as representative of *kalām al-'arab* 'the speech of the Arabs' is not, perhaps, overstated. While it is true that both sources are cited often for proper usage, they are *far* outnumbered by examples of *qawluhum* 'their speech' and *qawluka* 'your speech', i.e. contrived example sentences to describe 'normal' usage. Pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān are typically invoked to defend unusual deviations from the norm. Because the poetry deviates from the norm more often than the Qur'ān, it is obviously cited more as a source. Therefore, contrary to the popular understanding of these citations, I believe poetry is cited so often because of its unusual and noteworthy use of language, rather than it being the envisioned linguistic ideal.

As an illustration of this principle of citing poetry when it is unusual, we can take the passive perfect of hollow verbs, which the grammarians know in three different

forms, *qīla*, *qūla* and *qūla*. The first two are not defended by al-Farrā' (*Luḡāt al-Qur'ān*, 14–15). *Qīla* is the form represented by Arabic (and Quranic) orthography, *qūla* is well attested in Quranic recitation (including in the reading of al-Kisā'ī—al-Farrā's teacher). But the form *qūla*, which conflicts with standard orthography and is unattested in Quranic recitation, is the form that requires a defense with a poetic citation: *wa-btuḍilat ḡadbē wa-'ummu r-rahḥāl*; *wa-qūla: lā 'ahla lahū wa-lā māl* 'an angry woman and mother of the nomad became exhausted; and it is said: He has no family and no money'. The early Abbasid grammarians hardly ever make explicit normative pronouncements about this kind of variation, but if what becomes the Classical standard is anything to go by, things that require defense through poetic citation are things that are fine for 'the Arabs of yore' to say—but are not something to be imitated.

A fascinating feature that Kantor highlights in the following section (§4.3) is the 'Fieldwork' *Topos*. Both the Hebrew and Arabic grammatical traditions represent their respective languages as 'speech in use'—despite its authority lying in the past—that can actually be learned about by going 'out there' and conversing with its users (the Bedouin and Tiberians respectively). It is well known that the Arabic grammarians often use the imperfective verb form *yaqūlūna* 'they say', which seems to suggest that the language they describe is still in living use. Since Arabic grammarians never stop using such phraseology, basically up until the modern era, there is serious reason to doubt that such 'present tense' reports refer to living contemporary language. But it remains obscure when they represent living contemporary language, and when it becomes a *topos*. The imitation of this way of speaking by the Hebrew grammarians illustrates that it had become a *topos* by the 10th century CE when a Hebrew grammarian gave a report on the Hebrew of the common populace in Tiberias, even though Hebrew had been a purely literary language for many hundreds of years by that time.

Chapter 5 turns to the practical uses of language in society. The first section (§5.1) discusses how both the Hebrew and Arabic grammarians conceptualize their language as a 'performance register'. In this concept of 'performance register' the influence of Kantor's mentor, Kristen Brustad to whom the book is dedicated, can be felt. It is, however, somewhat frustrating that Brustad has not published very much of her own thinking on the matter that has so inspired the author. The present book at times reads as a commentary on a work that does not exist. For example, Brustad (2010) is cited five times throughout the book at quite consequential places, but this is an unpublished paper presented at the School of Abbasid Studies.

The conceptualization of the 'performance register' is not altogether clear to me. On the one hand, neither Hebrew nor Classical Arabic were the natural first languages of anyone in the Abbasid period, so any use of these languages would, by definition, be 'performed'. However, the way Kantor talks about the 'performance register', it seems that he means something else. Thus, he says that '*kalām al-'arab* and *al-'arabiyya* refer to the corpus and particular register (or variety) of the standard language, respectively' (113). This suggests to me that Kantor envisions there to be a standard language, and that *within* that language there is a special sub-variety dedicated to performance, while the 'standard language' is otherwise envisioned as a monolith more-or-less identical to the 'Classical Arabic' of modern textbooks. I do not see evidence for this understanding, and it imposes an ideological uniformity on Classical Arabic that the early grammarians show no evidence of supporting.

Part of this confusion seems to stem from misunderstandings that Kantor inherits from other authors. For example, Kantor (72, fn. 27) is seemingly misled by Brustad

(2016, 147) into thinking that the *fi 'immi l-kitāb* rather than *fi 'ummi l-kitāb* is an example of a 'divergence from the more narrow variation that was canonized in the tenth century'. In fact this is *part* of that 'narrow variation' as it is the canonical recitation of the readers of al-Kisā'i and Ḥamzah.

A dependence on earlier analysis can also be found in Kantor's reading of Sibawayh's *wa-l-ḥiḡāziyyatu hiya l-luḡatu l-'ulā l-quḍmā* as 'Hijazi is the first and oldest language variety' (72). While Kantor shows clear awareness that *luḡah* usually does not mean 'language' but rather '(dialect) variant' (113–4, fn. 52) or 'linguistic option,' he fails to realize that it is the relevant meaning here. Sibawayh says that *fa'ālī* female names are either uninflected (Hijazi form), or are treated as diptotes (Tamimi form), and that the 'Hijazi option is the first (of the two mentioned) and oldest linguistic option' (*wa-l-ḥiḡāziyyatu hiya l-luḡatu l-'ulā l-quḍmā*). Likewise, Sibawayh's *hiya l-luḡatu l-'arabiyyatu l-qadīmatu l-ḡayyidah* is not 'good old Arabic' (73, fn. 28 following Marogy and Carter). Rather, Sibawayh says that the Hijazi *urduḍ* and *lā tarduḍ* as opposed to the Tamimi *ruḍḍa* and *lā taruḍḍa* are 'the good, old, Arabic linguistic option'. To read into this an ideological general 'esteem for the Ḥijāzī dialect', following Carter, is incorrect.

After the discussion of performance, Kantor turns to the 'Complaint Tradition' (§5.2). As is common in standard language ideology, both the Hebrew and Arabic ideologies decry the loss of proficiency in the linguistic ideal among the masses. A striking feature of this complaint tradition is 'Ḥayyūj's insistence that the forms used by Menahem ben Saruq are "incorrect" reflect the codification of a "standard" language with more regularity even than the Bible itself'. Such extreme instantiations of standardization are rare in the Arabic tradition, but it is a shame that Kantor fails to mention the tradition, cited by al-Farrā' (*ma'ānī al-qur'ān*, II, 183), in which the prophet's wife 'Ā'ishah decries the unusual case inflection of the Qur'an in Q20:63 *'inna ḥadānī*, Q5:69 *'inna [...] ṣ-ṣābi'ūna* and Q4:162 *wa-lākini r-rāsiḥūna [...] wa-l-muḡīmīna ṣ-ṣalāta*.

In the final section of this chapter, Kantor shows how the complaint tradition blames the influence of foreign languages (§5.3). For the discussion of the Hebrew grammarians, much is made of Saadia Gaon's translation of the Hebrew of Isaiah 32.4 *lāšon 'illaḡim* 'tongues of the stammerers' as *אלסן אלענם* and *ṣāḥot* as *al-faṣāḥah* 'eloquence'. Kantor understands *אלסן אלענם* as *'alsunu l-'aḡami* 'tongues of foreigners', which would suggest that foreignness stands in the way of *al-faṣāḥah*. However, considering that the adjective *'aḡam* does not just mean 'foreigner, Persian' but also 'to have a speech defect, be mute' one has to wonder whether *אלענם* is not the plural of this adjective, i.e. *'alsunu l-'uḡmi* 'the tongues of those defective of speech', which would render Saadia's translation a lot more literal, and remove the ideological implication. Even without this datum, the evidence adduced by Kantor is clear enough for both traditions.

In the conclusion (§6), Kantor summarizes the 'striking similarity between the language ideologies of the respective traditions during the 'Abbasid period'. He summarizes those striking similarities as: (1) language as a cultural possession, (2) proper language determined by an ancient corpus, (3) the 'fieldwork' *topos*, (4) a performative register of language, (5) the complaint tradition and (6) a negative attitude towards foreign languages.

As Kantor admits, a number of these features are typical for standard language ideology. He nevertheless argues 'we should not overlook the specific details of how these six similar elements of a standard language ideology were instantiated in each of the societies' (179). While for a number of cases it is perhaps debatable whether

the details are specific enough, I find myself in agreement with Kantor that ‘the emergence of grammar presented as a response to deterioration or neglect of the standard language’ (183) and that for the fieldwork *topos* ‘a strong case has been made that it is at least partly influenced by the literary *topos* in the Arabic tradition’ (181).

At the very end of the conclusion (184–186), Kantor provides an insightful reflection on how Hebrew standard language ideology still influences the way we view Hebrew today, for example through ‘[t]he presentation of “Biblical Hebrew” as a uniform entity’. I would like to add that this reflection also applies to how we view Classical Arabic. In my opinion, he does not always escape this ideological bias. For example, his statement that ‘the *Qurʾān* and pre-Islamic poetry—though not without internal diversity, [are] much more alike than Biblical Hebrew and *Payṭanic* Hebrew’ (181) perpetuates the ideology of the medieval grammarians that see the language of the *Qurʾān* and poetry as one and the same language. This view is often affirmed (as it is here), but hardly ever backed up by analysis or argument. While I am not familiar enough with *Payṭanic* Hebrew to judge whether it is indeed relatively further removed from Biblical Hebrew than the *Qurʾān* is from poetry, the two do not strike me as all that close. The pre-Islamic poetry displays notable variation in vocabulary, vowel system, syllable structure, inflectional morphology, the demonstrative system, pronominal morphology and syntax. Most of this variation does not appear in Quranic (or standard) Arabic prose at all. The insistent affirmation that the language of poetry and the *Qurʾān* are one and the same is not productive for meaningful linguistic description of either.

All in all, the book is highly engaging, supremely readable, and—as I have noticed by using it in my teaching—even accessible to students who may not know Hebrew or Arabic at all. This is a major achievement considering the technical nature of the primary sources Kantor engages with. This book will be a benchmark for future work. The criticisms of several details should be seen as evidence of how thought-provoking it is.

MARIJN VAN PUTTEN
LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

REFERENCES

- Farrāʾ, ʾAbū Zakariyyā Yahyā al-. 2014. *Kitāb fih Luġāt al-Qurʾān*. (Ġābir b. ʾAbd Allāh al-Sarīʿ (ed.), Published online.
— . 1983. *Maʾānī al-Qurʾān*. Muḥammad ʾAlī al-Naġġār and ʾAḥmad Yūsuf al-Naġātī (eds), Beirut: ʾĀlam al-Kutub.