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Methods of Lexical Expansion in the Geonic Period: A Window onto the Cultural World of the Jewish Communities

Ruth Stern

Introduction

This paper deals with Geonic Hebrew in a bid to gain insight into the cultural world of the Jews during this period. It also seeks to demonstrate that investigating the methods of lexical expansion in Geonic writing can shed light on the cultural context of Jewish life in this era.¹ To this end, the paper examines two Hebrew lexical innovations found in the Geonic letters, which show that the Jews of the period were at a juncture between the Hebrew-Aramaic world and the Arabic world.

In the dawn of their history and for many centuries afterward, Hebrew was the native language of the Jewish people and served as their spoken and written tongue in all domains of life. This situation changed in the Second Temple period, when the Aramaic-speaking exiles from Babylon returned to the Land of Israel. In this period Aramaic began to slowly replace Hebrew as the spoken language until the latter eventually fell out of use as a vernacular and Aramaic became the native tongue of most of the Jewish population. The written language used by the Jews also changed over the years. Although the early books of the Bible, and later also the Mishna, were written in Hebrew, the late biblical books of Ezra and Daniel

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1 For similar works, see e.g., Olman 2013, Rosén 1954.

were written in Aramaic, and the Talmuds too were written in Aramaic laced with sentences in Hebrew.²

The Muslim conquest in the seventh century ushered in a new period in Jewish historiography and culture. Before this conquest, the majority of Jews lived in two empires: the Byzantine Empire in the west and the Persian one in the east. With the Muslim conquest, most of the Jews were reunited under Arab-Islamic rule. Within a few generations, most of the surrounding populations converted to Islam and adopted the customs of the ruling Arab minority, as well as its Arabic language. The Jews, who became economically and culturally integrated in the Muslim society, likewise adopted Arabic as their spoken tongue, so that Aramaic was no longer the native language of the Jewish population.³

It was precisely at this juncture – with the Muslim conquest and the shift from Aramaic to Arabic as the Jews' spoken tongue – that the Geonic period began. However, in contrast to Aramaic, which had previously superseded Hebrew in both speech and writing, Arabic now replaced Aramaic as the vernacular but not as the main language of writing. Since they were the languages of the classical Hebrew sources (the Bible, the Mishna, the Midrash and the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds), Hebrew and Aramaic had both attained a sacred status. Therefore, in the Geonic period and later, these languages retained their role as the main written languages of the Jewish people, whereas Arabic did not become a sacred written language of the Jewish communities.

Another difference between the Geonic period and the earlier periods is that, until the Geonic era, the Jews had mostly used the same language for speaking and writing (first Hebrew and later Aramaic).⁴ But from that period onward there was a clear distinction between the vernacular and the language of writing and literature. In most cases, the spoken language was the Jewish version of the local vernacular,⁵ whereas the written tongue was

2 Kutscher 1982, Sáenz-Badillos 1993.

3 Ben-Sasson 1997, Cohen 1994, Fischel 1937, Frank 1995.

4 Although it should be mentioned that the Talmuds and the Agadaic Midrashim are written in Hebrew and Aramaic, but it remains unclear whether Hebrew was still spoken during the period of their composition.

5 There were exceptions to this, such as Yiddish spoken in Slavic areas or Ladino/Judesmo spoken in non-Spanish areas.

generally Hebrew or Hebrew mixed with Aramaic.⁶ Thus, Geonic works such as *Halakhot Pesukot*, *Halakhot Gedolot* and the *She'iltot* were written Aramaic laced with Hebrew, whereas the Geonic commentary on the Order of Tohorot, the commentaries of Rav Hai Gaon and Rav Sherira Gaon on the Talmud, various *piyyutim* and other works were written in Hebrew. In addition, Hebrew translations of Aramaic texts were produced, such as *Hilkhot Re'u* and *Vehizhir*.⁷

Although Arabic was not the main language of writing, certain Geonic works were nevertheless composed in it. Some of the responsa and letters, for example, were written in Judeo-Arabic. Halakhic monographs of the period were also written in this language. The apparent reason is that the genre developed under the influence of scientific writing models originating in Ancient Greece, which became part of Arab and Islamic culture and thus became known to the Jews of the Islamic lands. It is precisely because they were written in Arabic that most of the Geonic monographs vanished almost completely from the bookshelves of Jewish scholars once the center of the Jewish world moved to Christian Europe in the 12th century.⁸ Due to their sanctity, Hebrew and Aramaic continued to serve as the general Jewish language of writing and literature throughout the Middle Ages, whereas Arabic and other languages were only used for writing by the particular communities that spoke them.⁹

This situation, whereby the language of writing and culture differs significantly from the vernacular, is not unique to the Jewish communities in the Interim Period. It exists to this day in the case of Arabic, Modern Greek and many other languages, and is regarded as a kind of diglossia.¹⁰

6 The main difference in this context was between the Jewish communities in Palestine and in Babylon. The latter used Aramaic mixed with Hebrew for original halakhic writings and for translations, whereas the former used Hebrew for original halakhic writings, and also translated Aramaic works into Hebrew. See Breuer 2020, pp.3-4.

7 Brody 1998, pp. 137-232.

8 Brody 1998, pp. 249-266. Only monographs that were translated into Hebrew remained familiar to the Jewish scholars.

9 Breuer 2020, pp. 3-4.

10 Téné (1983, pp. 245-251, 1985, p. 112) was the first to apply the notion of diglossia to the linguistic situation of the Jews in the Middle Ages. Bar-Asher Siegal (2021) wrote extensively about the importance of this concept.

This term describes a situation whereby two linguistic systems coexist within the same speech community: a "high" language (H) and a "low" language (L), which differ in their function. In many cases, H is the language of literature and culture, whereas L is the everyday vernacular.¹¹

The Geonic period is thus situated at a juncture between two worlds: the Hebrew-Aramaic one and the Arabic one.¹² This liminal period was almost unknown before the discovery of the Cairo Genizah in the late 19th century. The Genizah documents shed considerable light on individual and collective life in this era, on the society, communities and economic institutions of the Jews under Islamic rule.¹³ These documents formed the basis for many studies, but, as for the Geonic language in which they are written, there is still much to explore and discover.

This paper investigates the methods of lexical expansion in the Geonic period through an examination of two new nouns attested in the Geonic letters. These nouns reflect the contribution of Arabic, the spoken vernacular, and of Aramaic, the language of culture, to the expansion of the Hebrew lexicon in this period. They also demonstrate certain lexical developments that occurred in Hebrew independently, without any connection to the contact languages, thus showing that Hebrew underwent autonomous evolution even when it functioned only as a language of culture and not as a spoken tongue.¹⁴ This tripartite encounter of languages – Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic – reflects the cultural and social situation of the Jews under Islamic rule in this period: though they were economically, socially and culturally integrated in Muslim society, they also cultivated their own religion, customs and autonomous community life.

11 Ferguson 1959.

12 Brody 1998, pp. 138.

13 The most well-known and comprehensive study of the social history of the Jews in the lands of Islam, as reflected in the Cairo Genizah documents, is Goitein 1967-1993.

14 For more on this issue, see Bar-Asher Siegal 2020a, Bar-Asher Siegal 2021. Bar-Asher Siegal argues that, from a psycho-linguistic point of view, the acquisition of Hebrew as a literary language during the Interim Period was similar to the acquisition of a second language. According to him, just as second language acquisition involves independent processes that are unaffected by either the source language or the target language, the acquisition of Hebrew during the Interim Period involved internal processes that were unaffected by the other languages spoken in the Jews' surroundings.

The two words discussed in this paper, attested in the Geonic letters of the Cairo Genizah, are very rare nouns found nowhere else. Despite this, their authenticity is not doubted, since many of the letters are autographs, and many others are texts that were not frequently copied and thus were not corrupted by scribes.

'Od

The first of these innovations is the noun *'od*, which occurs four times in the Geonic letters included in Maagarim, the database of the Historical Dictionary Project. All four instances occur at the closing of the letter:¹⁵

1. ואם יש לאדירינו החבר **אוד** ושאלה. יזכירה לנו למלאות הפצו.

And if our great *haver* has a **need** or a question, he¹⁶ should ask us to meet his request (Yosef ha-Cohen ben Shlomo Gaon, Palestine, 11th century; Philadelphia, Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, Halper, 392)

2. ואם יש לאח **אוד** וחשה יודיע.

And if the brother has a **need** or a requirement let him inform [us] (Shlomo ben Yehuda Gaon, Palestine, 10th-11th century; Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 10J 11.29-30)

3. אני מחכה לביאת כתבו. באשר יעשה עמו וכל הנהיה אצלכם. וכל **אוד**...

I await his letter about his affairs and everything that concerns you. And every **need**... (Shlomo ben Yehuda Gaon, Palestine, 1034-1035; Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 10J 10.9)

4. ותשובת כתבי אל תנדירה וכל **אוד** וחשה שיש לו יזכיר כי אני שש לכך.

And every **need** he may have, let him tell [me about it] for I am glad [to see to it] (Shmuel ha-Haver ben Moshe of Tyre, 10th-11th century; Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 10J 12.25).

Judging from the context, the general meaning of *'od* is "need" or "requirement". The authors all end their letters by asking the addressee if

15 The language of the letters' openings and closings, whether Hebrew or Aramaic, is often different from the language used in the rest of the letter. See Morgenstern 2002, Stern 2022.

16 Geonic Hebrew uses the third person as a polite form of address.

there is anything he needs. The plural form *'odot* is also attested in the Geonic letters (example 5) and in the Karaite literature (example 6):¹⁷

5. ובאו זהובים ששלחתם [...] והנשאר אצלנו הוצאנוהו בכל **אודותם** וכסותם ולא הגענו לכל צרכיהם

The gold coins you sent have arrived [...] And what remained we spent on all their **needs** and clothing, but could not furnish all their needs (Yehoshua ha-Cohen bar Yosef, 1029; Oxford, Bodleian Library, a.3/28 [2873])

6. לכל הפציהם ולכל **אודותם**

All their wishes and all their **needs** (David ben Yitzhak ha-Levi, 11th century; New York, JTS ENA 2697.26-27)

The noun *'od* is apparently borrowed from Arabic. The Arabic word *أَوْد* means "bending, burden," and thus also acquired the metaphorical meaning of "livelihood" or "subsistence." It appears in the expression *قَامَ بِأَوْدِهِ*, "to provide for someone's needs," "furnish someone with means of subsistence," and was also used this way in medieval Judeo-Arabic: *qāma 'awduhu* ("to make a living").¹⁸

Although the singular Hebrew noun *'od* was coined in the Geonic period, the plural form *'odot* is already attested in Biblical Hebrew. However, whereas in Geonic Hebrew *'odot* means "needs," in the Bible it means "matters, things, deeds." Moreover, the Biblical noun is morphologically confined to the plural form, and syntactically to the prepositional phrase *'al 'odot* ("about, with regards to"; lit. "on matters of, on the deeds of").¹⁹ For example:

7. ותרא שרה את בן הגר המצרית אשר ילדה לאברהם מצחק: ותאמר לאברהם. גרש האמה הזאת [...]

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore, she said to Abraham, "Cast out

17 Karaites generally wrote and spoke the same languages as Rabbanites, with the exception of the Karaites of eastern Europe, see Lasker 2022, pp. 199-201.

18 Ayalon & Shinar 1947, p. 13, Friedman 2016, pp. 787.

19 Even-Shoshan 1988, p. 23, Brown Driver & Briggs 1952, p. 15, Köhler & Baumgartner 1994-2000, I, p. 13

this bondwoman [...] And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight **because of** his son. (Gen 21, 9-11)

The coining of the word 'od/'odot actually involves two parallel processes of lexical expansion that took place in the Geonic period. The first was a process of lexical borrowing: the noun 'od was borrowed from Arabic into Hebrew and morphologically adapted to an existing Hebrew nominal pattern. The second process was one of semantic borrowing: the meaning of 'od was extended to the plural Hebrew form 'odot, which had existed for generations but with a different meaning. This semantic borrowing may have been unconscious, since the meaning of the Biblical word 'odot ("matters, things") is quite close to the new meaning ("needs"). The similarity is evident in the following example, from *Josippon*:²⁰

8. ויהיו המים ההמה [...] לכל **אודות** לשתות ולאופות לכבס ולרחוץ ולהשקות.
And that water [...] was used for all **things**: for drinking, baking, laundering, washing and irrigating.

The word 'odot is used here in its classical sense of "things, matters," for *Josippon* was composed in Italy and evinces no Arabic influences.²¹ But in this context, an Arabic-speaking Jew could have easily understood it as meaning "needs," without even noticing the semantic shift. The shift was thus made possible by the existence of bridging contexts of this sort, where both interpretations are available, which eventually resulted in a semantic change.²²

These two processes – the lexical borrowing and the semantic borrowing – produced the Geonic word 'od, which was a regular noun, not restricted morphologically or semantically like its Biblical counterpart. Its plural inflection 'od/'odot mirrored that of many other Hebrew nouns, such as *bor/borot* ("pit, hole"), *dor/dorot* ("generation"), etc. Yet this rare noun did not outlast the Geonic period. It is not attested in the later Interim Period, nor is it part of Hebrew today.

20 According to Maagarim.

21 Flusser 1980, II, pp. 84-98.

22 The term "bridging context" was coined by Evans and Wilkins (2000); see also Heine 2002, Diewals 2002. This shift can also be regarded as a case of semantic reanalysis (See Bar-Asher Siegal 2020c).

The linguistic development described here attests to the role of Arabic in the lives of the Jews in that period. As the spoken tongue of a large portion of the Jewish people, this language was the main source of Hebrew lexical expansion.²³

In addition to this lexical expansion under the influence of Arabic, the word *'odot* underwent another linguistic change in the Geonic period, an internal Hebrew development, independent of any contact language, which persists to this day. Since the noun *'odot* in the Bible is always preceded by the preposition *'al*, the word underwent a process of metonymy in which it lost its meaning and acquired the function of the preposition *'al*. This process of grammaticalization turned *'odot* into an independent preposition that does not have to follow *'al*, e.g.:

9. וכמו כן הודעתי **אודות** התשעה־עשר זהובים וחצי אשר נתאחרו עד הנה. כי הם תותרת החוב אשר ערב נשיאנו יהי לעד

I also spoke **about** the 19 and a half gold coins that are still due (Shlomo ben Yehuda Gaon, Palestine, 1029 [?]; Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 13J 15.1)

10. ובכל עת אנחנו שומעים **אודות** ארציכם וגדולת מלכה ישמרהו יוצרו
And we constantly hear **about** your land and the greatness of its king, may the Creator protect him (950-1000; St. Petersburg, Russian National Library, Yevr. II A 157)

'Odot in the role of an independent preposition persisted throughout the Interim Period, as shown in the following examples, and was inherited by Modern Hebrew:²⁴

11. הארכנו בענין זה כאן ובתשובותינו **אודות** העגונה מאוסטרהא
We discussed this at length here and in our answer **regarding** the *agunah* of Ostroh (16th-17th century, *Responsa Bayit Hadash, Kuntres Aharon* 7, Korets 1785, p. 9)

12. המה ראו כן תמהו **אודות** הקול שיצא על הגט

23 On lexical borrowing from Arabic during the Interim Period, see e.g., Goshen-Gottstein 2006, Sarfatti 1968 and many others.

24 Prescriptionists opposed this usage in Modern Hebrew; see for example Yaacov Rabbi, *Al ha-Mishmar*, April 30, 1976.

They saw and were puzzled by the announcement that was issued **regarding** the *get* (16th-17th century, *Responsa Mas'at Binyamin* 76, Jerusalem 2006, p. 228)

13. מלה אחת **אודות** מצב היהודים באשכנז

A word **about** the situation of the Jews in Ashkenaz (*Hashkafa*, February 22 1905)

Although the transformation of *'odot* from a noun into a preposition is a process of grammaticalization, we must be cautious about drawing far-reaching conclusions about the character of Hebrew during the Interim Period and the ability of its users to create new Hebrew grammar uninfluenced by the contact languages. This grammaticalization may indeed indicate that, despite its status as a literary language, Interim-Period Hebrew underwent true grammatical change independently of any foreign influence. Bar-Asher Siegal (2021) argues that Aramaic, as a literary language, underwent such grammatical change based on internal analogies. However, prepositions do not belong exclusively to the grammatical domain, but are in an intermediate position between the lexicon and the grammar.²⁵ Therefore, it is possible that the process discussed here is more lexical than grammatical in nature. Only a comprehensive study, examining multiple grammaticalization processes in Interim-Period Hebrew (if they can be found), will be able to determine whether this language experienced real grammatical change or only semantic shifts that do not amount to genuine grammatical development.

Ḥašah

In discussing the word *'od*, one can hardly disregard a second rare noun that often co-occurs with it, evident in examples 2 and 4 above. Another recurring combination is *šorek we-ḥašah*, as in the following letter from 1021:

14. ותשובת אגרתי ימהר בטוב טיבו וכל צורך **והשח** ושלום וברכה לעד

And may he kindly answer my letter soon, and [I wish him the fulfilment of] every **need and requirement**, and peace and blessing forever (Yehuda 'Alluf [?], 1021; Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, P. Heid. Heb. 10)

25 See Corver & Van Riemsdijk 2001.

In addition to the unmistakable instances of this noun, there are also two uncertain instances:

15. אני מחכה לביאת כתבו. באשר יעשה עמו וכל הנהיה אצלכם. וכל אוד וכל .ש<.>ח

I await his letter about his affairs and everything that concerns you. And every **requirement** and need (Avraham ben Shlomo ben Yehuda Gaon, Palestine, 11th century; Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 10J 10.9)

16. ובאר שלומך והשחותיך וצרכיך

And tell me how you are and **your requirements** and **needs** (Rav Hai Gaon and Rav Sherira Gaon, before 1004; Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 16.95)

In the first of these instances (example 15), the word *hašah* seems to be garbled, perhaps confused with the word *ḥašaš* ("worry, concern"), but it is difficult to be certain because the paper is torn at that point. The second instance (example 16) is apparently the plural form *ḥašaḥoteka* ("your requirements"), similar to the following word *šraḳeka* ("your needs"). This interpretation seems likely given the similarity to the combinations *šoreḳ we-ḥašaḥ* and *'od we-ḥašaḥ* exemplified above. However, the word may also be an instance of the Aramaic singular noun *ḥašḥut*, attested in the Book of Ezra, which will be discussed below.

Like the Geonic innovation *'od, ḥašaḥ* means "need" or "requirement." The root *ḥ-š-ḥ*, meaning "need," exists already in Biblical Aramaic:

17. ענו שדרך מישך ועבד נגו ואמרין למלכא נבוכדנצר לא השחין אנחנה על דנה פתגם להתבותך

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, **we have no need** to answer you in this matter" (Dan 3, 16)

18. ומה השחין ובני תורין ודכרין ואמרין לעלון לאלה שמיא חנטין מלח חמר ומשח כמאמר כהניא די בירושלם להוא מתייב להם יום ביום די לא שלו

And **whatever they need**—young bulls, rams, and lambs for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the request of the priests who are in Jerusalem—let it be given them day by day without fail (Ezra 6, 9)

19. ושאר **חשיות** בית אלהך די יפל לך למנתן תנתן מן בית גנזי מלכא (עזרא ז, כ) – ושאר צורכי בית אלוהיך.

And whatever more may **be needed** for the house of your God, which you may have occasion to provide, pay for it from the king's treasury (Ezra 7, 20)

The root exists in Syriac as well,²⁶ and may go all the way back to Akkadian.²⁷ Hebrew apparently borrowed it from Aramaic during the Geonic period and molded it into a Hebrew nominal pattern. Alternatively, it may be a case of back-formation. The Biblical form *ḥašahin*, which occurs in the Book of Daniel, appears in two different variants in different manuscripts: with a *qamatz* beneath the first letter (*ḥāšahin* חֶשְׁחִין) or a *patah* (*ḥašahin* חֶשְׁחִין).²⁸ The variant with *qamatz* can be regarded as a verb-form, specifically the Qal plural active participle "we need." The variant with a *patah*, on the other hand, can be regarded as nominal form: the plural of the reconstructed singular form *ḥašah*. Hence, contemporary dictionaries are divided on whether the word should be classified as a verb or a noun.²⁹ It can be proposed that, in the Geonic period, *ḥašhin* was perceived as a plural noun, from which the singular *ḥašah* was then derived by back-formation.

Unlike the noun *'od*, which is unique to the Geonic period of Hebrew, *ḥašah* is possibly attested earlier, in a sixth-century *piyyut* by Yanai:

20. קר <שׁים הנקבעים במטה. **חשחו** כקבוע כוכבי מעלה. (Cambridge, Lewis-Gibson, Lit. II 18)

Yanai compares the Temple to the heavens, saying that the fixed beams of the Temple are like the stars fixed in the firmament. Alternatively, the form can be read as *ḥašhu*, a Qal past-tense verb

26 Sokoloff 2009, pp. 499-500. On the relationship between Geonic Aramaic and Syriac, see Bar-Asher Siegal 2020b, pp. 142-143. In this context it is pertinent to note that, when he was composing his dictionary *Kitab al-Hawi*, Hai Gaon sent his pupil to Christian scholars to ask how they translated a certain verse from the Book of Psalms into Syriac. See Greenbaum 1978, pp. 216-217, fn. 34.

27 And see Köhler & Baumgartner 1994-2000, p. 1881, and references therein.

28 Ginsburg 1926, p. 644.

29 Köhler & Baumgartner (1994-2000, p. 1881) classify it as both a verb and a noun, whereas Brown Driver & Briggs (1952, p. 1093) treat it as a verb.

meaning "were needed, were regarded." The beams of the Temple were regarded like the stars in the heaven.³⁰

The Geonic literature, then, provides three clear instances of the noun *ḥašah*, and two uncertain instances; another instance, perhaps of the noun *ḥašah* and perhaps of the verb, is attested in the *piyyut*. This distribution is not incidental, and reflects the affinity between the language of the *piyyut* and Geonic Hebrew, an affinity that stems from two factors. First, some authors of *piyyut* lived in the Geonic period, and some of the geonim – most notably Rav Saadia Gaon and Rav Hai Gaon – were themselves authors of *piyyut*. Second, in this period the Palestinian *piyyut* was known not only in Palestine itself but also in Babylon,³¹ so it is not surprising that the language of the Geonim was influenced by the language of the *piyyut*. The database of the Historical Dictionary Project yields some 250 nouns and verbs that are unique to these two linguistic periods. For example, the database lists three instances of the noun תאל *ta'al*, meaning "curse" or "illness", two from the *piyyut* and one from Geonic Hebrew. One of the instances from the *piyyut* occurs in Yanai – יתום תאל תחלואינו – "May the curse of our **illness** end"³² – and the other is from a *piyyut* by Eleazar ben Kalir: ולהעלות תעל לתאל תאבתה "you wished to cure the **disease**."³³ The Geonic instance occurs in a letter by Shlomo ben Yehuda Gaon: אבל הבטיח "but promised to cure the **disease**."³⁴ The last two examples feature the exact same sequence – להעלות תעל לתאל – despite being separated by hundreds of years.

The affinity between the language of the *piyyut* and the language of the Geonim is most noticeable in the openings and closings of letters. Most of these openings and closings comprise several lines of verse praising and exalting the addressee, and they often contain fixed formulas that recur in letters by different authors.³⁵

30 It should be mentioned that, in Ezra too, the root *ḥ-š-h* appears in the context of worship at the Temple. Rabinovitz (1987, p. 242) could not read this line in full, and presented it thus: "[ז... קר] שים הנקבעים במטה הש[וב כ] קבוע כוכבי מעלה."

31 Beer 1999.

32 Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 12.182.

33 Oxford, Bodleian Library, d.41 55-56 (2714).

34 Cambridge, University Library, T-S Collection, 10J 11.29-30.

35 Stern 2022, pp. 55, 62.

The coining of the word *ḥašah* reflects the status of Aramaic in the Interim Period as a language of culture, alongside Hebrew. In the Interim Period Aramaic was no longer spoken by Jews, but because the classical Jewish texts, especially the Talmuds, were written in Hebrew and Aramaic, both tongues became Jewish cultural languages. Aramaic thus remained a source of roots and words for expanding the Hebrew lexicon.

Conclusion

The two lexical innovations discussed in this paper shed light on the cultural and social world of the Jews in the Geonic period. In many ways, they were economically, socially, and culturally integrated into their surroundings, yet they also retained their own religion, customs and community autonomy. These two aspects – the social openness and the retaining of their Judaism – are also reflected in their methods they used in expanding their Hebrew lexicon. Although their spoken language was Arabic, the native tongue of the surrounding population, their written language remained Hebrew. And when they needed to expand the Hebrew lexicon, they utilized two sources: their Arabic vernacular and Aramaic, a language of culture, which was one of the components of their holy tongue.

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