

## Judaeo-Catalan: in search of a mediaeval dialect that never was

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The idea that there once existed a mediaeval dialect of Catalan specific to Jews living in Catalan-speaking areas has been accepted and reported in various sources with little critical scrutiny. There is, however, no strong linguistic evidence in support of this view, but rather the contrary. This article consists of an analysis of a Hebrew document from Gerona that dates from the mid-fifteenth century and includes a large number of Catalan words that clearly demonstrate not only the Catalonian provenance of the Jewish writer of the document but also an absolute correspondence, in all lexical, morphological, and phonetic elements that can be detected, with what we know about the local form of the Catalan language at the time. The study of this remarkable Hebrew-Catalan document can only lead to the conclusion that a Judaeo-Catalan dialect, distinct from that of Christian speakers of Catalan, never existed.

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### 1. The history of an idea

What language was spoken by Jews living in Catalan-speaking areas of the Iberian Peninsula during the middle ages? Under the entry “judeocatalà,” the *Gran enciclopèdia catalana*, a major source of information about Catalan culture, says the following:

An early Jewish dialect of Catalan, the spoken and literary variants of which must be distinguished from the form of the dialect found in literal translations of Hebrew texts. After the expulsion of 1492 all traces of this spoken and written Jewish Catalan disappear, and earlier documents and reports do not allow us to establish any secure typological feature other than an abundance of Hebrew words and expressions. It seems that in Old Catalonia the dialect was also somewhat archaic. Until the end of the fifteenth century in the area of Majorca and perhaps around Valencia the use of a dialectal form of Arabic also survived in Jewish communities, alongside, and probably influencing, Catalan. The syntactic, morphological, and lexical characteristics of the Catalan that emerges from literal translations of Hebrew texts by Catalonian Jews and *conversos* (two *siddurim*, a psalter, works of astrology, etc.) are the same as those found in connection with this type of literary activity in all Romance languages.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Antic dialecte del català propi dels jueus catalans. Cal distingir-hi el que corresponia a la llengua parlada i el literari de les traduccions calcades de l’hebreu. Després del 1492 es perd tot rastre del català parlat i escrit pels jueus catalans, i els escassos documents i notícies anteriors no permeten d’establir-ne cap tipologia segura, si no és l’abundor de mots i d’expressions hebreus. Sembla que a la Catalunya Vella es caracteritzava també per un cert deix d’arcaïsmes. A Mallorca, i potser al País Valencià, fins a la fi del s. XV es mantingué vigent, entre els jueus, al costat del català, l’àrab vulgar, amb probables interferències. Les característiques



In such a context we have to ask how we can know what the normal spoken language of people who almost always used a different language for writing was. The evidence is scarce. Some Latin accounts of judicial processes report more or less verbatim the words of Jewish witnesses and, accordingly, clearly demonstrate that the language they used differed in no way from that employed by the rest of the population. A 1416 document from Gerona includes the following declaration:

Interrogato quomodo sit. Et dixit que ex eo quia ipse testes die mercurii proxime preterita hora meridiei recepit unum nuncium judeum qui dixit eidem testes in eius propria domo constituo talia vel familia verba. Sényer, en Nassim Ferrer e en Bonet Vidall, juheus de Gerona, me tremeten assi a vós qui us preguen que anets entró a casa lur ab un parpall. E aquest testimoni pensant-se segons aferma per lo sagrament que fet ha que volguessen per rahó de fer quolque stablia, pres un seu parpall e ana-se'n ab lo dit juheu missatjer, lo qual ha nom Maymon lo menor. E cont foren al cal, trobaren aquí los dits Nassim Ferrer e Bonet Vidal, juheus, qui digueren a ell testimoni o deponent que puia en una casa que era aquí dins lo cal unt posave lo algutzir del senyor príncep de Gerona, qui-l demanave e volia perlar ab ell. E de fet ell testimoni se'n puia ab los dits juheus la unt posave lo dit algutzir e cont foren aquí los dits juheus digueren al dit algutzir: "Mossèn, veus ací lo prom mestre de cases." E lo dit algutzir tantost dix ell testimoni que ell li manave que'l seguí. E que per son preu, no-s paertís d'ell. E de fet aquest testimoni fou amenat por lo dit algutzir a la sinaguoga e a part detràs la dita sinaguoga passant per casa de na ... juhia unt ha una scala de pedrar, foren en un portal qui respon a la dita sinaguoga de part detràs lo qual solia esser tencaht e lavors trobaren-lo que novelament lo havien ubert e per aquell portall intraren dintre lo pati de la sinaguoga unt és lo pati e lo bayn ço és [...].

(And he was questioned. And he said that he himself was witness to the fact that on the previous Wednesday he had received a Jewish messenger at his own house, who pronounced the following words: Sir, Nassim Ferrer and Bonet Vidal, Jews of Gerona, have sent me thus to you and ask you that you go to their house with a lever. And this witness, thinking, as he declares in the sworn testimony that he has made, that they were wanting it in order to make some kind of stable, took a lever of his and went with the aforementioned Jewish messenger, who went by the name of Maimon the younger. And when they came to the Jewish quarter they found there the aforementioned Jews, Nassim Ferrer and Bonet Vidal, who said to the witness or deponent that he should go up to a house that was there inside the Jewish quarter, where the bailiff of the lord prince of Gerona was, who had called for him and was wanting to speak with him. And indeed the witness went up with the aforementioned Jews there where the aforementioned bailiff was. And [indeed] when they went there the aforementioned Jews said to the aforementioned bailiff: "My lord, here is the master mason." And the aforementioned bailiff immediately said to the witness that he was ordering him to follow him. And that by his honour he should not part from him. And in fact, the said witness was conducted by the aforementioned bailiff to the synagogue and to the back part of the aforementioned synagogue, passing through the house of my lady [...] the Jewess, where there is a set of stone steps, they came to a doorway that leads to the said synagogue from behind, which used to be closed up, and they found that again it had been opened, and by that doorway they entered into the courtyard of the synagogue where the courtyard and the bath are, that is [...].<sup>9</sup>

The language in which the fifteenth-century Jews of Gerona expressed themselves is, thus, exactly the same as we find in documents compiled by Christians of the same period.<sup>10</sup> The same may be said of all mediaeval documents in which verbatim quotations of Jews appear.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Archivo Diocesano de Gerona, Section C, "Procesos varios," 1458–71, inventory book 2/281. The item comprises legal testimonies relating to the closure of one of Gerona's synagogues because it occupied ground on which a chapel dedicated to St. Laurence had once stood.

<sup>10</sup> Feliu and Ferrer, "Escriure en català."

<sup>11</sup> Llobet, "El català parlat pels jueus," which includes transcriptions of thirty-four judicial documents in Latin that report verbatim the words of Jewish parties in Catalan. The form of Catalan used is exactly the same as that of the rest of the population. Rabella, *Un matrimoni desavingut*, has shown that the language reflected in judicial trials is as close as possible to that of the spoken language: "La tria d'un



Complementary linguistic evidence may be derived from the analysis of mediaeval texts in Hebrew from Catalan-speaking areas: Catalan words always appear in non-literary documents, revealing the everyday spoken language of the texts' Jewish authors.<sup>12</sup>

A document of exceptional interest for this study was recently uncovered. It consists of a set of pages that register payments made to and from the treasurer of the Jewish community of Gerona between 1 January 1443 and 1 January 1444.<sup>13</sup> The material, comprising ten sheets, was preserved intact thanks to the fact that a notary had them bound into a collection of legal documents from the year 1445.<sup>14</sup> Had this not happened, the material might well have suffered the same fate as that of many other Hebrew documents from Gerona and been used to pad out the parchment bindings of fifteenth-century notarial documents.<sup>15</sup>

Jucef ben Zabara's<sup>16</sup> records of accounts pertaining to the Jewish community of Gerona are of great linguistic interest because they employ Hebrew interspersed with a large number of Catalan

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procés criminal s'ha de relacionar directament amb la voluntat d'apropar-se a un registre de llengua tan proper a la llengua parlada antiga com sigui possible" (The election of a criminal trial must be directly related to the willingness to approach a record of languages as close as possible to the ancient spoken language) (10); "la còpia en estil directe només s'empra en aquells moments en els quals la importància del fet concret que s'està declarant fa necessària la còpia exacta de les paraules que utilitza el testimoni" (the copy in direct style is only used for those times when the importance of what you are saying necessitates an exact copy of the words used by the witness) (126); "aquest registre [el registre coloquial] és el més interessant lingüísticament per poder conèixer algunes de les característiques de la llengua parlada antiga, perquè reproduïx de manera força – i en alguns casos molt – fidel les formes lingüístiques emprades pels declarants en la seva intervenció oral" (the colloquial register is the most interesting from a linguistic point of view in order to meet some of the features of the ancient spoken language, because it reproduces very faithfully the words used by the witnesses in their oral presentation) (130); "Un estudi sistemàtic dels fragments en estil directe ens demostra que els escriptors l'empraven en aquells moments cabdals de la declaració dels testimonis i dels acusats: quan consideraven que les paraules exactes tenien molta importància, no solament pel que deien sinó també per com ho deien. D'aquesta manera veiem com hi havia una cura especial en la còpia d'aquests fragments" (A systematic study of the fragments in a direct style shows that scribes used it when they felt that the exact words were very important, not only for what they said but as it is said. Thus we have had a special interest in the copy of these fragments) (130).

<sup>12</sup>Feliu, "Mots catalans," which lists over fifty Catalan words that appear in the various judgments, given in Hebrew, of the great jurist, Salomó ben Adret. See also Klein, *Hebrew Deeds*, 192, which lists fifteen Catalan words (apart from proper names) that appear in the eighteen Hebrew legal documents presented. Hebrew texts of a medical or botanical nature provide significant information on Catalan words transcribed with Hebrew characters. Feliu, "Les traduccions hebrees," which lists sixty-nine Catalan words (some slightly Latinized) transcribed with Hebrew letters in a Hebrew document of only 686 lines. A work edited by Lola Ferre, *Práctica de Johannes de Parma*, includes an extensive "Léxico hebreo español de términos técnicos" (Spanish Hebrew Lexicon of technical terms) (119–77), which provides another long list of Catalan words in Hebrew transcription.

It should be noted that in mediaeval documents written in Hebrew characters one cannot always distinguish Catalan and Provençal texts, as the two languages are so alike that they can hardly be differentiated when written in unvocalized Hebrew script. Because of this, three of the wedding songs edited by Riera i Sans (*Cants de noces dels jueus catalans*) had previously been categorized by Lazar as "Catalan-Provençal Wedding Songs (14th–15th Century)". Ferrer, "Les glosses romàniques," shows that with the disappearance of the Latin alphabet and of the orthographic conventions of Provençal/Occitan and Catalan, these two languages are practically indistinguishable.

<sup>13</sup>Published by Feliu, "Llibre de comptes de Jucef Zabara."

<sup>14</sup>Arxiu Històric de Girona, Notarial Gi 2.212.

<sup>15</sup>The importance of these fragments of Hebrew texts within the covers of notarial documents has led Professor Mauro Perani to label them as "the Gerona Genizah." The material will shortly be available on the Internet, so that scholars may easily consult the Hebrew fragments as they are recovered from the bindings of collections of legal documents held by the Arxiu Històric de Girona.

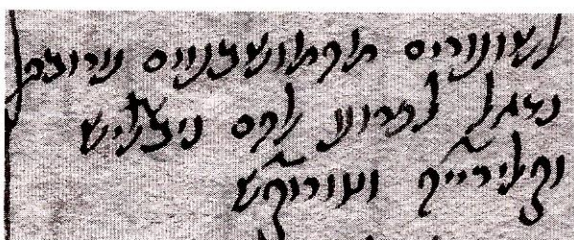
<sup>16</sup>Jucef ben Zabara converted to Christianity in January 1453, receiving the name of Joan-Narcís Sarriera. See Girbal, "Conversiones de judíos en Gerona," 37.



words reflecting the daily life of Jews and Christians of the period. In Gerona the continuous contact between members of the two communities is denounced by the city's jurors in a document from 1445:

Some time ago there began to take root between the Christians and Jews and Jewesses of this town an overly extensive and familiar co-existence, communication, and shared activity, which by order of Holy Mother Church cannot and should not be tolerated.<sup>17</sup>

Not only is such regular communication evidenced by the records of Zabara (who, as treasurer, notes payments to and from Jews and Christians in a context of relationships that must, at least at that time, have been quite normal) but also, concealed within the Hebrew structure of the text, a natural, consistent, and regular form of Catalan language. One entry, paragraph 70, is particularly significant:



lšw<sup>c</sup>rym mhmwšb<sup>c</sup>ym <sup>c</sup>rwbt nd<sup>c</sup>l lprw<sup>c</sup> lhm nyblyš wqlyryyh wšwrwqš

To the porters of the jurors, for their Christmas (*nadal*) box, give them *neules* (wafers), *clareya* (wine mixed with honey and spices), and *toroqs* (turrons).

Here we see that of the nine words written in Hebrew characters by the treasurer, four are Catalan. (Having said that, it is important to emphasize that this particular sequence, like Jucef b. Zabara's text as a whole, is entirely Hebrew in its grammar and should in no way be categorized as a Hebrew-Catalan hybrid. Such a hybrid would represent a phenomenon without precedent in the study of other Romance cultures.)

We believe, then, as already indicated, that the study of the Catalan words in this remarkable document is of very great interest. Detailed examination confirms that the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and even the phonetic forms represented by these words conform perfectly to the contemporary Catalan of Gerona, albeit with slight adaptations to Hebrew scribal practice. In some cases, moreover, they provide new material for the study of the historical development of Catalan, constituting our earliest support for the use of particular words or evidence for phonetic features that have generally been assumed but only rarely documented.

### 3. The document and its vocabulary

The text consists of ten pages, divided into seventy-five paragraphs that note payments made and received. A large number of Jews and Christians are mentioned by name, confirming the frequent contact between members of the two communities, as denounced by the 1445 text quoted above. Even excluding personal and family names, in our schematic document Catalan words appear 160

<sup>17</sup>"D'algun temps ençà, entre los cristians e juheus e juhies d'esta ciutat se fos introduïda massa contínua e familiar participació de star, conferir e participar ensemps, la qual cosa, per ordinació de sancta mare Església no-s pot n'és deu tollerar" (Regulations of 18 June 1445, published by Batlle Prats, "Ordenaciones relativas a los judíos gerundenses," 89).