

# **History of Hebrew & Jewish languages: Cultural, historical and linguistic aspects**

(Preliminary) syllabus  
*Summer 2014*

## **Details**

Course code: LING S215 01 (Su14)  
Meeting: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 1.00–3.15 (H5A), class room t.b.a.  
Instructor: Tamás Biró  
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## **Description**

The Jewish culture has always been in a very intimate relationship to texts and language. But what language did the Jews actually speak? Did King David converse in Biblical Hebrew? How did the vernacular turn into the language of the rabbinic literature? Why could a dead language flourish in the Middle Ages? How did Yiddish and other Jewish languages emerge? Is it self-evident that Hebrew became the language of the modern State of Israel? By looking at the history of the languages of the Jews, this course will offer a unique perspective on social and cultural aspects of Jewish history.

The course will offer an overview of the history of the Hebrew language and the Jewish languages, as well as an introduction to a multitude of linguistic methodologies. The historical-comparative method will be discussed to locate Hebrew among the Semitic languages. The family tree model will be contrasted to the wave model when discussing the Northwest Semitic continuum. Biblical Hebrew can be approached by traditional philology as much as by generative linguistics. Understanding rabbinical and medieval Hebrew requires the perspective of the sociolinguist. Modern Hebrew has been posing constant challenges to contemporary linguistic theories since the MA thesis of Noam Chomsky to the problem of opacity in Optimality Theory.

The course requires no familiarity with linguistics, and no knowledge of Hebrew, although any of these will prove beneficial. Attendees will however be expected to have at least a superficial knowledge of Jewish history. The course does not teach Hebrew, but provides a familiarity with interesting phenomena in Semitic languages. The course does not teach a specific linguistic framework, but explain why we should keep our minds open to a plethora of methodologies.

## Requirements

**Class participation** (10%): Students are expected to actively participate in the discussions in class, including discussions based on the assigned readings.

**Written homework** (20%): Each day, there will be a short assignment due by the next class. Unless a good reason is provided, the homework must be handed in on paper in class. Very often, the homework will be based on the readings. For maximum points, a student must submit ten out of the twelve assignments (2% each).

**In-class midterm exam** (30%): An in-class exam during the Friday class of week 3, focussing on the readings in the first three weeks. Graduate students will receive one additional question.

**Final examination** (40%): An open-book final test on the last day, testing whether the student knows what and where to look up, and whether the student has acquired familiarity with the methods and phenomena discussed. A subset of the exam will be related to the weekly assignments. Graduate students will receive one additional question.

In weeks 1-2, Bennett's *Comparative Semitic Linguistics* will be used as a semi-textbook. Beyond that, however, the course is not based on a single textbook, but on a selection of articles and book chapters made available to the students.

## Academic honesty

Yale does not tolerate plagiarism, and Yale policy will be fully enforced. For more information, refer to <http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/cheating-plagiarism-and-documentation>. Useful resources on citing include <http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/using-sources> and <http://writing.yalecollege.yale.edu/advice-students>. Please feel free to consult the lecturer in case of doubts.

## Tentative course outline

### Week 1

#### *Semitic languages and the comparative-historical method*

- Monday: Introduction: on linguisticses.  
Wednesday: Semitic languages and the family tree model.  
Friday: Comparative reconstruction (phonology): features and phonemes.

### Week 2

#### *Biblical Hebrew and the North-West Semitic languages*

- Monday: North-West Semitic languages and the wave model.  
Nominal cases and sound laws.  
Wednesday: Biblical Hebrew vs. Tiberian Hebrew: how did King David speak?  
Comparative reconstruction (morphology): pronouns and suffixes.  
Friday: Internal reconstruction: what can be learnt from allophony?  
Allophony, as seen by the historical linguist, the structural linguist and the generative linguist.

### Week 3

#### *From Biblical Hebrew to Rabbinic Hebrew and diglossia*

- Monday: Inscriptions, literature and vernacular: a millennium of language history.  
On the sources available and those not available to historical linguists.  
Aramaic in a nutshell: on forms and roles of diglossia.  
Wednesday: Rabbinic Hebrew: a new genre requiring a new language?  
A broom and language death: non-linguistic sources in linguistics.  
Friday: Midterm in-class exam.

### Week 4

#### *Medieval Hebrew, Jewish languages, Yiddish and sociolinguistics*

- Monday: Medieval Hebrew: dead or alive? The role of language contact.  
Wednesday: Jewish languages: how does a new language emerge?  
Forms of code switching / code mixing.  
Friday: Yiddish: a case-study in the sociolinguistics of Jewish languages.

### Week 5

#### *Contemporary Hebrew, contemporary linguistics*

- Monday: Haskalah and Zionism: what language to speak in the Old-New Land?  
Hebrew in Israel: prescriptive norms and spontaneous developments.  
Wednesday: Is the Israeli language a Semitic language? – a post-modern discussion  
about linguistics concepts and their reception in society.  
Modern Hebrew in modern linguistics.  
Friday: Final open-book exam

## Preliminary bibliography

- Bennett, Patrick R. *Comparative Semitic linguistics: A manual*. Eisenbrauns, 1998.
- Benor, Sarah Bunin. Towards a New Understanding of Jewish Language in the Twenty-First Century. *Religion Compass* 2.6 (2008): 1062-1080.
- Coffin, Edna Amir, and Shmuel Bolozky. *A Reference Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge University Press, 2005. (NB: for those capable of reading the examples and paradigms in Hebrew letters!)
- Dekel, Nurit. The šif'el binyan in Israeli Hebrew: fiction or reality? *Leeds Working Papers in Linguistics and Phonetics* 14 (2009): 1-15.
- Dresher, BE. The prosodic basis of the Tiberian Hebrew system of accents. *Language* (1994): 1-52.
- Glinert, Lewis. *The Grammar of Modern Hebrew*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Harshav, Benjamin: 'Essay on Multilingualism'. In: Marvin Herzog et al. (eds.), *Eydes: Evidence of Yiddish Documented in European Societies, The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2008.
- Hetzron, Robert. Two principles of genetic reconstruction. *Lingua* 38.2 (1976): 89-108.
- Robert Hetzron, Alan S. Kaye, Paul Newman (and others). In: Bernard Comrie (ed.). *The Major Languages of South Asia, The Middle East and Africa*. Routledge: London, 1987.
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- Kautzsch, Emil and A. E. Cowley (eds.): *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. 2<sup>nd</sup> English edition, Oxford, 1910.
- Myhill, John. *Language in Jewish Society: Towards a new understanding*. Vol. 128. Multilingual Matters Limited, 2004.
- Naveh, Joseph. *Early History of the Alphabet: An introduction to West Semitic epigraphy and palaeography*. Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1982.
- Rabin, Chaim: *A Short History of the Hebrew Language*. Orot publication, 1973.
- Rosén, Haiim B. *Contemporary Hebrew*. The Hague [etc.]: Mouton, 1977.
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- Schwarzwald, Ora R. *Modern Hebrew*. (Languages of the World/Materials 127). Lincom Europa, 2001.
- Shimron, Joseph: 'Semitic languages: Are they really root-based?'. In: Idem (ed.): *Language Processing and Acquisition in Languages of Semitic, Root-based, Morphology*. J. Benjamins: Amsterdam 2002.
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- Zuckermann, Ghil'ad. "Abba, Why Was Professor Higgins Trying to Teach Eliza to Speak Like Our Cleaning Lady?": Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, Prescriptivism and the Real Sounds of the Israeli Language'. *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 19.
- Zuckermann, Ghil'ad. 'A New Vision for "Israeli Hebrew": Theoretical and Practical Implications of Analysing Israel's Main Language as a Semi-Engineered Semito-European Hybrid Language'. *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 5.1: 57-71.