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This voluminous textual edition is one of the most interesting works on Hebrew medieval linguistics, the *Kitāb faṣīḥ lughat al-ʾibrānīyyin* (Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews) by one of the greatest medieval scholars, Saʿadya Gaʿon. It has been published at a time of growing interest in medieval Hebrew linguistic works, thanks to the fact that more work has been done on the Karaite grammarians, of whom several were contemporaries of the (Rabbanite) Saʿadyah, since the opening of the Firkovitch collections of manuscripts in St. Petersburg to international scholarship. This has led to numerous discoveries of medieval Karaite grammatical texts and Bible translations, recently dealt with by, among many others, Geoffrey Khan and Meira Polliack, respectively. Saʿadya’s Karaite contemporaries had a different view regarding the base of the inflection of a verb, which according to them was the imperative; according to Saʿadya it was the infinitive (see p. 81)\(^1\).

Compared to his Karaite contemporaries, Saʿadya’s points of view are original because of the comparative tendency in his work: the comparisons he made with Arabic and the observations he made about universal language. We find this tendency also in his other works, for example, his translation of books of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic or his treatment of hapaxes in the Bible in his *Kitāb al-sabʿīn lafaẓa al-mufrada* (Book of Seventy Isolated [Hapax] Words). His Arabic commentary of *Sefer Yeṣira* (Book of Creation) and his earlier work, the *Sefer ha-Egron* (Book of Collection) contain his linguistic theories. Already in the Egron, Saʿadyah does not conceal his link with Arabic science in his motivation. He writes:

> In the same way as the Banū Ismāʿīl report that one of their notables saw some people who were not able to express themselves impeccably.

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\(^1\) The later Karaite Abū al-Faraj Hārūn, however, was of the same opinion as Saʿadya in this respect. See Geoffrey Khan, “The Early Karaite Grammatical Tradition,” in Judith Targarona and Angel Saenz Badillos, *Jewish Studies at the Turn of the 20th Century* (Leiden, 1999), pp. 72–80. See p. 75: “According to Abu al-Faraj, the base of the inflection of a verb is the infinitive. He rebuts the view that the base of inflection is the imperative. He states that this last view was held by Arabic grammarians (*al-nuḥāḥ*) of the Kufan school and also Hebrew grammarians in Iraq whom he refers to by the term *al-diqduqiyyūn*.”
cably in the [Classical] Arabic language (la yufsihuna) so that it made him sad, and he wrote for them a small treatise in a book that they could use as a guide to the pure [Classical] language, so I saw many Banū Isrā'īl who were not able to understand (lā yubsirīnā) the transmitted pure words of our language, and I felt myself obliged to compose a work in which I gathered most of the words. (P. 107; English translation from the Arabic is my own.)

In the case of the Arabs, the difficulty is that the speakers of the vernaculars were not able to *speak* the official and formal Classical Arabic language; in the case of the Jews, many were not able to *understand* the Biblical Hebrew language, let alone speak it.

Sa'adiah was undoubtedly also influenced by contemporary controversies concerning Arabic grammar. Some Arab grammarians believed that according to the Qur’an, God had given the names of things to Adam and thus language was a revelation (ilham) or a fixing (tawqif) by God of the names of the created things. Among those who thought along these lines was Abu ‘l-Ḥusayn Ahmad ibn Fāris (918–1004), who grounded his beliefs in early Islamic traditions. Their rationalist opponents were the adherents of the school of mutual consent or convention (istīlāḥ), according to whom language reflected human consensus on the significance and use of words. This theory was basically the heritage of the Mu’tazilites and the philosophers who were influenced by the teachings of Aristotle. To this group belonged the learned *adab* writer ‘Umar ibn Bahr al-Jāḥiz (d. 869) and the well-known philosopher and commentator on Aristotle, Abu Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 950). There is no doubt that Sa’adīya Gaon knew the works and the scholarship of his contemporaries and drew on them (see pp. 101ff.).

In his introductory volume, Dotan demonstrates the uniqueness of Sa’adīya’s grammatical system, which consisted of the division of the letters into functional groups (eleven “radicals” and eleven “serviles”), the ramification of the noun, and the five principles fundamental to *every* language, such as the division of words into three categories: nouns, verbs, and particles—a division originating in the thought of ancient Greece, and a basic precept of Arabic. In Chapter 5 he deals with the definition of the various types of the syllable as a matter of general linguistics. Dotan shows how Sa’adīya went beyond the conceptual framework of his Arab teachers concerning the correspondence of a word to the idea signified, an issue which had been transferred from Greek philosophy to Islamic scholarship and which occupied an important place in the world of Arabic science among grammarians as well as theologians and philosophers in the 9th century. Sa’adīya raises the question of the origin of the language, disputing the view that nouns (names of substantives) are determined by nature, rather believing that they are determined by convention (istīlāḥ). The speakers of a language receive language forms as determined (ikhtiyār) by
the “institutor of the language” (wādī’ al-lugha). “This concept, which, to most Moslems, refers to God, for Saadya is an anonymous being (a man or a group of men) from the time of the origin of the language” (see pp. 102, 103).  

Thus:

The name is not, therefore, an inevitable outcome of the meaning of the object, for if the meaning of the object were to demand a specific name, there could be no difference between the languages of mankind, nor could an object be called by different names in different languages. Since every object has a different name in each language, there is proof that the names are not determined by any intrinsic meaning of the physical object, but are rather the result of consensus among people, and in every language a different name was agreed upon. Islamic scholars were interested mainly in the Arabic language and adhered to the Qur’an, whereas the writings of Saadya are formulated as generalizations and apply to all languages, or to human language in general, and not to the Hebrew language in particular, although he saw Hebrew as the first language.

A central concept in Sa’adya’s grammar is the “base” or “root,” by means of which words can be translated. Sa’adya uses all kinds of synonyms for this concept, such as ḥasl (origin), ṭabī’a (nature), ṭabī’ (nature), dhāt (essence), jawhar (substance), ’unsur (element), ’uss (base). Other forms of the word, called ḫarad (accident) or ḡar (branch) are derived from the base by affixation, namely, forms of plural, construct and inflections, and the entire verbal system. “Thus Sa’adya analyzes a complex form in search of its base: we-ha-mitnasse ‘and the exalted (literally: the one who exalts himself)’ (1 Chr 29:11) is parsed as the base se and the ramification ha-mitna. The latter in turn consists of its components: we conjunction, ha definite article, ḥ reflexive (li-li-idtirār), mi nominal (li-ism) participle, n omitted on affixation of preformatives. It should be noted that Sa’adya terms ḫarad the whole augmented form we-hamitnasse, and also the augmented part alone [we-ha-mitna] is so termed” (see pp. 528–531 of the edited text).

The first part of the introductory volume is dedicated to a survey of the life of Sa’adya. The second part deals with Sefer Shahut Leshon ha-’Ivrim and is subdivided into several sections: the history of the discovery of the book, the title and aim of the book, the time and place of composition, the organization and order of the work, i.e., the order and content of the chapters, the order of the manuscript pages, and the insertion of Manuscript L.

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This is followed by a discussion of the previous editions of the work. Dotan devotes special attention to Sa'adya's introduction to Chapter 3 of his work and tries to find evidence for the existence of multiple versions, which he deduces from the fact that there are different names for the chapters and different grammatical terminology. Sa'adya's chapter dealing with dagesh and rafeh consists of two versions, A and B, the differences between which are detailed by Dotan. Dotan also lists the references to work in other compositions, such as the commentary on the Sefer Yeşişa, Adoniyah's critical writings, the Kitāb nahw al-ʾibrāni, and other abridgments of Sa'adya's book. Finally, he looks at Sa'adya's work in historical perspective.

The third part of Volume 1 deals with Sa'adya's linguistic thinking and gives an introduction to his theories about, e.g., the origins of language and comparative linguistics. Part 4 deals with Sa'adya's grammatical theory: phonology, how the consonants are to be grouped together, and how the vowels are to be divided. Arabic names denoting case endings with the three Arabic vowels u, a, i are used to indicate the seven vowels in Hebrew, with specification of “great” and “small” and sometimes “middle”: thus are related ḥolem and shuruq (u); qames, patah and segol (a); and šere and hiriq (i). He deals also with the nature of shewa, vowel shifts, and vowel quantity. He then moves on to word formation, which is based on a system of base and root with different types of morphological ramifications, such as simple ramifications; alternation, i.e., contraction or augmentation; and creation by analogy, verbal voices and tenses. Finally, he covers context and pause. A scheme of the ramifications of the verb is given on page 139.

In Part 5 Dotan deals with terms and concepts and includes an alphabetical index of Arabic grammatical terms, and the places in the text where they occur.

The chapters of Sa'adya's work are then introduced (Part 6). The first chapter about letters (ahruf, Hebr. otiyyot) also deals with the possible combinations of consonants (see the scheme on p. 184). The second chapter is concerned with augmentation and contraction (al-tafkhim wa-il-ikhtīṣār; Hebr. ha-harḥava we-ha-qisṣur). Augmentation means the extension of the verbal root, e.g., reduplication of the root or quadriliterals. Contraction refers to the shortening of the verbal root especially when certain consonants of the root such as aleph, he, yod, nun, etc. are elided (see the schemes on pp. 186–188). The third chapter deals with inflection (al-taṣrīf; Hebr. nejīyyah) and its five forms. Here another scheme is included, in which Dotan compares the table of verbal composites according to Sa'adya with that according to Adoniyah (pp. 200–201). The fourth chapter is devoted to dagesh and rafeh (al-tashdid wa-il-irkhā) in versions A and B. The fifth deals with vowels (naghm; Hebr. tenuʾot) (tables on pp. 220–222), the sixth with shewa (al-jazm), the seventh with the letters waw,
aleph, he, het, and "ayin (al-ahruf WAHIF; Hebr. atiyot WAHIF), and the eighth with the rules of gutturals (shurut AHIF; kelale AHIF).

Part 7 deals with the process of editing the work: manuscripts of doubtful affiliation, methods of editing, and translation into Hebrew. This is followed by the bibliography and an explanation of the symbols used.

The second volume presents the textual edition in the order presented in the introductory volume, and contains also manuscript fragments dubiously attributed to Sa'adya. The textual edition is diplomatic. On the facing page is a Hebrew translation and interpretation with footnotes discussing the text as also compared with earlier partial editions, such as that by Skoss. The manuscript page has been accurately represented by retaining the original number of lines, which are also numbered. The many lacunae in the manuscript indicate how difficult it was for the editor to establish a correct reading and interpretation.

Of course, Dotan's edition presents us with new facts and better readings. He presumes that Sa'adya's grammar was written around 915–921, before he went to Baghdad (pp. 37–38); he wrote halakhic texts in his later periods when residing in Pumbedita and Sura, acting as a Gaon. That Sa'adya was not yet in Baghdad can be derived from his attitude toward the people of Iraq, which is evident from a quotation in which Sa'adya tells us about the different ways of writing the word indicating the sound shewa by the Jews of Iraq. They wrote it with a bet. Sa'adya Ga'on says: "Fa-sami'ahu min-hum ba'alu ahl al-'Iraq fa-tawhama-hu bey fa-qali sheba wa-laysa ka-dhalika" ("And some of the people of Iraq falsely imagined that it was a bey so that they said sheba, but it is not so"). The basis of this difference seems to be the different pronunciation of the /waw/, realized in Palestine (Ereš Israel) as a [v] and in Baghdad as [w] (with /bet/ realized as [b] and [v]), as attested by Misha'el ben Uzziel and David ibn Ibrrāhim al-Fāsi. This passage can now be understood by a better reading than the one Skoss offered. Skoss translated, "So some people of Iraq heard it from them and thought it was a Ba and they said al-Ba, but this is not so"). From Skoss's interpretation it was difficult to understand, because he read "al-ba" instead of "sheba." However, it must be admitted that the phrase is quite isolated being preceded by a missing passage and followed by a new chapter (see also the manuscript H, 26 a lines 28–29; pp. 444–445).

Finally, a word should be said about the full and comprehensive (79 pages) indices broken down by sources, biblical variants, works cited, Hebrew and non-Hebrew words, and a general index including, of course, grammatical terms. Dotan's work is an important one and we are very grateful to him for it.

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