

## **“The new field of Afro-Asian (Silk Road) linguistics and the benefits for the reconstruction of Eastern and Western Slavic languages”**

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The spread of Iranian art forms to Europe, Central Asia, India, China and Japan are well known from archaeology and art historians. The spread of religions either from Iran or by Iranians—such as Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism—have also been discussed, but, strangely, almost only in one direction—from Iran to the East. The main carriers of these influences were Iranian merchants, including especially Iranian Jewish merchants. Linguistic issues along the Silk Roads have generally been ignored. My talk today will introduce a new topic of cultural diffusion: “Silk Road linguistics”, which will deal with two types of multilingualism and language creation:

(i) Contacts among languages spoken or written along the international “Silk Roads”—encompassing the vast territory between the German lands and (a) the Chinese and Southeast Asian lands, and from the former, also Korea and Japan, as well as (b) the Iberian and African lands and (c) Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. These contacts have led to the rise of isoglosses linking Afro-Eurasian languages. As a consequence, numerous puzzles in the histories of individual Silk Road languages can find better solutions within a broad Afro-Eurasian, rather than narrow monolingual, context.

The present paper suggests how the Jewish trade languages—between the 9-13<sup>th</sup> centuries—can elucidate many topics in the histories of the Jewish languages themselves, as well as in the histories of their non-Jewish contact languages—especially Slavic and German. For example, Yiddish, of special interest here, is itself a Slavic language with a cryptic, largely “German-like” lexicon, which holds a major key to identifying overt and covert Asian influences in other Western and Eastern Slavic languages and in German. Yiddish can even shed light on specifically Japanese phenomena, such as *bai bai suru*, *maimai suru* ‘to buy and sell’, *butsubutsu kōkan suru* ‘to exchange (things)’, *ume* ‘plums’, *sai shin-no* ‘careful, prudent’, conjoined nouns (e.g. ‘father-mother’ = ‘parents’ without a conjunction)—all of which belong in isoglosses that include Eastern and Western Slavic languages, German, Iranian, and sometimes also Mongolian, Turkic languages and Arabic, *inter alia*.

(ii) New languages and cryptic lexicons of trade were created by peripatetic Jewish merchants around the 9<sup>th</sup> century in response to intensive trade opportunities, granted by special trading privileges from the Holy Roman Empire in Western Europe and the Tang dynasty in China in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century—almost simultaneously.

At the center of our present attention is the genesis of Yiddish, along with Judaized Iranian and Turkic languages, in the Khazar empire (destroyed by Kievan Rus’ in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century). The Iranian (first the Soghdians, and later, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Persians) were the most important long-distance traders on the Silk Roads—and among them, the Iranian Jews played a very significant role, because (a) they were a neutral group at a time when religious hostility obstructed trade between Christians and Muslims, and between the latter and Buddhists and Hindus; (b) they were highly literate and multilingual. Another similarly neutral group was pagan merchants, such as the mixed Scandinavian-Eastern Slavo-Rus’ confederation which operated out of the Eastern Slavic lands (Russia, Belarus’ and Ukraine of today) but only as far east as Baghdad. The international Jewish trade guild accepted Roma (Gypsies) and other Indians, and pre-Christian Slavs; the *raison d’être* of the guild was a common profession, not a common religion or ethnicity—though a common Judaic identity did develop in time which recommended or required conversion to “Judaism”, an Irano-Palestinian religion shaped by the majority non-Judaists. Hence, Jews today are multiethnic.

The trade languages were intended to be solely for the use of peripatetic merchants of a common linguistic affiliation. However, since Jewish merchants were always in close contact with co-religionists speaking other, often mutually unintelligible, languages (Judeo-Arabic,

-Berber, -Iranian, -Turkic, -Slavic, -Georgian, -Romance and -Chinese), it became imperative to create a common lexical corpus of Hebraisms and Hebroidisms to facilitate communication among those merchants. All the “Old Jewish languages” contributed to the cryptic lexicon, but it appears that Slavic Yiddish speakers predominated in its formation.

During the past 10-15 years I have discovered an enormous, hitherto overlooked, Asian, mainly Iranian, component in Slavic Yiddish and Jewish culture (over 4200 examples), suggesting that the dominant component in the ethnogenesis of the Jews was also Iranian and Slavic. Slavists have explored links with Iranian languages almost exclusively in the framework of the Common Slavic period of the early first millennium A.D., if at all (Kortmann and van den Auwera 2011 make very little reference to Persian or Iranian in general).

Western linguists also often dismiss Iranian linguistic impact on European languages during the migration period of the first millennium A.D.; e.g. the articles in Kortmann and van der Auwera (eds.) (2011) make very little reference to Persian or Iranian in general. Slavists have. But Silk Road linguistics shows that Iranian deposited a largely hidden Iranian (and Turkic) imprint in Slavic and German long after that date due to the spread of mixed “tribal confederations”; in addition to the Jews, see the Iranian ethno-glottonyms, Serbs, Sorbs, Croats, Obodrites, Czechs, *inter alia*. Hence, Silk Road linguistics is quintessentially a topic for Slavists and Iranianists, and Yiddish can be a “litmus test” for uncovering an Asian imprint in Slavic and German.

I believe that Silk Road linguistics also offers us a golden opportunity to understand how cryptic trade languages and lexicons are created. Aside from the Old Jewish languages, we have precious little attestation of cryptic mercantile speech. Rus’ merchants left no records. Moreover, the cryptic Jewish languages appear to be the oldest known surviving examples.

With Silk Road linguistics, we can appreciate how Arabs, Iranians, Chinese, Turks and Slavs, together and separately, maintained the Silk Roads and stimulated the rise of Old Jewish languages, which they provided with significant linguistic enrichment.

#### Reference:

B.Kortmann and J. van den Auwera (eds.) (2011). *The languages and linguistics of Europe. A comprehensive guide*, 159-178. Berlin-Boston.