

Multilingualism in Ottoman Manuscripts*

The multilingualism of the multiethnic and multireligious Ottoman Empire refers to the spoken language, the written language and the liturgical language, not to mention the many different dialects. A further aspect was the interrelation between script and language, which was sometimes based on practical considerations, served the social and religious affiliation, or was a political issue. Arabic speaking Jews partly used the Hebrew alphabet to write in Arabic, for example, while the Christian Orthodox Karamanlı made use of the Greek alphabet to write in Turkish. And in the course of Austria Hungary’s attempts at territorial annexation, the use of the Arabic script in Bosnia could also be seen as a political statement.

STEFANIE BRINKMANN is a senior research fellow in the Bibliotheca Arabica project (2018-2035) at the Saxon Academy of Sciences, Leipzig. After completing her Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Göttingen, she was a research assistant at the University of Leipzig (2004-2010). For many years she was a team member in two manuscript cataloguing projects at Leipzig University Library (funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG)). She has been a visiting professor at the Universities of Freiburg (2011-2012) and Hamburg (2014-2018). At the University of Hamburg, she was also Principal Investigator of a subproject (2016-2018) within the Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) “Manuscript Cultures in Asia, Africa and Europe”. For many years she was a board member of “The Islamic Manuscript Association”. Dr Brinkmann has published books and articles in the fields of hadith (especially hadith commentary, hadith manuscripts and material culture in hadith), manuscript studies and classical Arabic poetry.

“Thinking of all the unknown ibraries in the world fills everyone working with manuscripts with awe. When you discover new ones, you approach them very humbly. When Tarık Tüten contacted me and made me aware of the Hafız Ahmed Ağa Library, this is precisely what happened to me. Since then, I have been privileged to cooperate with Tarık and to discover, step by step, this rich collection, like leafing through a book. This includes discoveries for my own research, too. The conservation and preservation of these voices from the past is a huge merit of Tarık Tüten and the foundation. However, another decisive step has been taken, too: These treasures can best unfold their impact when known to many others. Through digitisation and online cataloguing (Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı) these manuscripts can now be studied in their historical contexts – with the multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary breadth that is best reflected in the “Conversation” project.”

Stefanie Brinkmann

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FIGURE 1: SUB HH“, Cod. orient. 100, p. 209.



FIGURE 2: SUB HH, Cod. orient. 149, p. 111.

The use of certain languages in manuscripts always depended on their thematic context: texts in documents produced by the Ottoman administration and in the field of jurisprudence were mainly written in Turkish. At the same time, the many multilingual Ottoman manuscripts show us how political, economical, juridical and social relations were organised in the empire. Since the ruling elite, their servants and a large part of the general population believed in Islam, it became inevitable for them all to study the Arabic language and adopt and impart Arabic Islamic literature. On the one hand, this resulted in turn in manuscripts on Arabic grammar and conversation being translated, paraphrased and explained, and led to many dictionaries being made that were needed to that end. On the other hand, the Quran and texts on Islamic law in Arabic were translated into Turkish (and other languages) and/or were commented on in these languages. There are also many multilingual prayer books, containing Arabic prayers accompanied by a Turkish commentary. Scientific works in Arabic, such as works on medicine, were annotated in different languages by later readers as well. As for literature, Persian and Arabic poetry was most influential; as with other genres, there are manuscripts containing texts in the original language that were translated into other languages, often interlinearly, and particularly into Turkish.

On the one hand, multilingualism appears in manuscripts where later users added annotations or amendments to the main text in different languages. An example of this can be seen in Cod. orient. 100, in which Arabic, Persian and Armenian annotations follow a medical work written in Arabic (FIGURE 1). Other examples are found in Cod. orient. 149, in which an Arabic text on grammar is followed by Turkish annotations in the righthand margin and a didactic verse in Persian at the bottom (FIGURE 2).



FIGURE 3: SUB HH, Cod. orient. 82, p. 289/290.

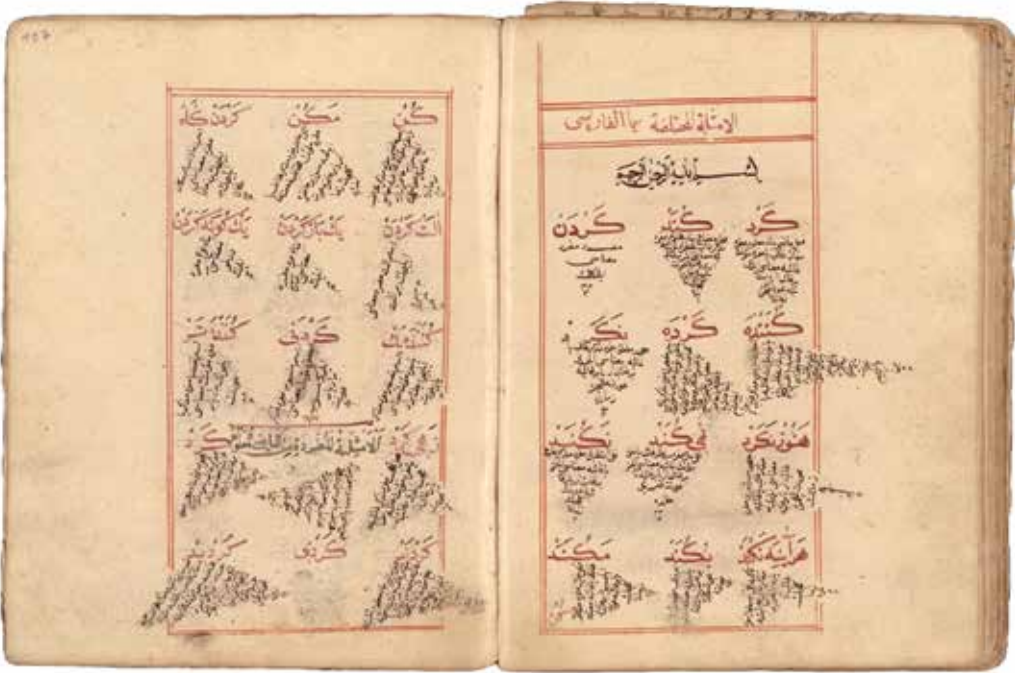
On the other hand, some manuscripts were designed for multilingual purposes right from the outset. Cod. orient. 82 is an impressive illustration of one – the Arabic text on the Islamic prayer was written with a particularly wide line spacing in order to put an interlinear Turkish translation into the blank space gained by that layout. An interlinear translation was added up to page 289, but from page 290 onwards, the line space reserved for the Turkish translation is blank (FIGURE 3). Other typical examples are found in Arabic Turkish prayer books which contain Islamic prayers in Arabic along with Turkish explanations (*şerh*).

In order to avoid confusion, annotations, and comments (written in other languages than the main text) were often put in the margin or between the lines of the main text, written diagonally, vertically, and sometimes even upside down (FIGURE 4). Other ways to visually differentiate between the main text and texts added in other languages were the use of different sizes or styles of a script and the use of ink in another colour. An example is Cod. orient. 523: the various inflections of the Persian word *kardan* ('to do', 'to make') appear in large red script, while the Turkish explanations are written underneath in a smaller black script and in a triangular shape (FIGURE 5).



FIGURE 4: SUB HH, Cod. orient. 81, fols. 2/3^r, Turkish and Arabic annotations in the margins and spaces between the lines (above)

FIGURE 5: SUB HH, Cod. orient. 523, fols. 106^v/107^r (below).



Part of multilingualism in manuscripts are the many multiplatform manuscripts, which either were prepared like this intentionally from the outset, and the composite volumes, which were bound together at a later stage. Cod. orient. 523 contains eight Persian, Arabic and Turkish texts, which were most probably intended to form a multilingual collection from the outset. Apparently, the aforementioned Cod. orient. 100 with its Arabic and Persian texts from the field of (folk) medicine was also supposed to be multilingual from the very beginning, but several leaves containing Turkish texts were added to it later.



FIGURE 6: Aḥmad Sūdī al-Busnawī, *Sharḥ-i Diwān-i Hāfez*, 1041.

Opening pages fols. 1^v/2^r; Seal of the Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library (above).

The original Persian verses supralined in red, followed by Turkish commentary, fols. 8^v/9^r (below)

Photos: T. Tuten



FIGURE 7: Qurʾān with Turkish translation and *Terceme-i Tafsir-i Abū al-Layth*, 1077/1666 and 1084/1673.

The interlinear Turkish translation in red ink, and the Turkish version of commentary in the margins.

*Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library 2, fols. 12^v/13^r (above), Hafiz Ahmed Agha Library 3, fols. 387^v/388^r (below)

Photos: T. Tuten





FIGURE 8: *Sharḥ-i Būstān*, Aḥmad Sūdī al-Busnawī, Hafız Ahmed Agha Library 1067, Opening pages, fols. 1^v/2^r (above with the library's seal), fols. 2^v/3^r (below). Turkish commentary on Sa'di's Būstān. The Persian is marked with a line above, in the margin, there are Persian verses with metrical information.

Photos: T. Tuten



Research into the use of language and script in the Ottoman Empire has already provided some valuable information on the empire's social history. Even so, many questions are still waiting to be answered. Among other topics to investigate, one could look into the question of how far multilingual manuscripts actually mirror 'linguistic reality', who produced and read or used texts of this kind, how scribal workshops were organised, and which language was required in a particular social context.

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Diwânê Melayê Cizîrî, A Kurdish divan (collection of poetry) written in Arabic script.
Milli Kütüphane, 5086/1



Mawlid an-Nabî, Kurdish devotional text from 1854 celebrating the birth of Prophet Muhammad,
written in Arabic script.
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Ms. or. oct. 1083.



Written in classical Syriac and transcribed by Church Fathers, this liturgical codex is palaeographically attributed to the 16th century. A marginal note indicates that it underwent conservation or repair in 1717.
Courtesy of Ancient Syriac Virgin Mary Church of Diyarbekir & Nil Baydar, Şifâhâne.
Photo: T. Tuten



Written in classical Syriac in the Monastery of Mor Abrohom and Hobel in Midyat in 1470, Beth-Gazo is a collection of church hymns and praises.
Courtesy of Ancient Syriac Virgin Mary Church of Diyarbekir & Nil Baydar, Şifâhâne.
Photo: T. Tuten