

Sociolinguists sometimes imagine multicultural urban centers to be things of the present; such thinking, of course, betrays our own focus on synchronic studies and perhaps certain biases in our methods. This paper presents the historical case of language shift from Judeo-Arabic to French among the Jews of Tunis between WWI and WWII with an eye toward understanding how detailed study of language shift in other times and places, especially outside the West, can inform contemporary sociolinguistic understanding of language shift and of lects and languages in the city.

From their arrival in Tunisia sometime between the fall of the Temple and the second century CE, members of the Jewish community were multilingual and were motivated to adopt the dominant local language. With the advent of Islam in the seventh century, they became speakers of Arabic, developing a communal dialect termed Judeo-Arabic that persists today. Because of several waves of Jewish immigration—from Spain and Portugal following the Inquisition, from Livorno, Italy a century or so later, and then from all of Italy after it was unified in 1870—the Tunis Jewish community was quite complex socially, with status determined largely by recency of arrival; for much of the colonial period, it constituted 9% of the city's population.

Even before the colonial period (1881-1956), however, Tunisian Jews sought to learn Italian (if they did not already speak it) and later French. During the period of French colonization, modern schooling—provided by Protestant missionaries, Catholic religious orders, the colonial government, and the Alliance Israélite Universelle—became available to Jewish boys and girls of different social classes. Historical evidence demonstrates that Jewish families took advantage of these opportunities, educating their sons and daughters, though for different reasons. That both sexes received education in French permitted the Jewish community of Tunis to shift to French as a mother tongue in ways other Jewish communities and the Muslim communities across the country could not. In many cases, speaking French made French citizenship possible. Not surprisingly, when political events encouraged Jews to leave the country—the founding of Israel (1948), Tunisia's independence (1956), the expulsion of the French from the military base at Bizerte (1961), and the Six Day War in the Middle East (1967)—nearly all who were Francophone emigrated to France while poorer rural Jews and staunch Zionists left for Israel (Sebag 1991).

The details of this case have implications for how we understand the mechanisms of and motivations for language shift. The trajectory of the shift to French in Tunis (in contrast to whatever shift occurred in Algeria or Morocco) was tied to the intricate social structure of Tunis's Jewish community. Likewise, the shift was strongly and understandably gendered (Gal 1978) and related to local notions of the family and the individual and to particular institutions. Finally, the understandings of the incoming language as cultural capital were varied and contested, figuring into language ideologies that continue to influence linguistic variation and language choice in Tunis and Tunisia although a mere 1,300 Jews remain in the country today.