Review of the cumulative habilitation treatise

A history of the Karaim language during the period from the second half of the 17th century up to the second half of the 19th century (based on an analysis of newly discovered written sources)

by Dr. Michał Németh

The treatise under review consists of ten articles that deal with linguistic phenomena crucial for the historical development of Karaim, a nowadays very small and highly endangered Turkic language of the Kipchak subgroup used by Karaites, a religious community related to (or, depending on the point of view, belonging to) Judaism which accepts the Torah but rejects the Talmud. The treatise puts a focus on phonological and lexical issues but addresses morphological and syntactic questions as well. The phenomena are scrutinised with special regard to dialectal differences between western Karaim and Crimean Karaim and, in particular, the evolving split into the north-western and south-western subvarieties of western Karaim. The relevance of this study results from the fact that Karaim is the domain of relatively few specialists and thus hopelessly underresearched. More specifically, the study includes the oldest known western Karaim sources, which are of crucial importance for our understanding of the development of dialectal differences within the Karaim language. Thus, the treatise is a valuable contribution to the diachronic investigation of the development of Middle Karaim into Early Modern Karaim.
The Candidate makes available text passages of different age and from different locations by applying sound philological tools, and scrutinizes these texts for relevant linguistic features. A particular strength is that he does not only show which conclusions can be drawn from the linguistic material but also makes transparent which points cannot be solved, what remains to be investigated, and where the limits of his analysis are.

Article (1), *A historical phonology of Western Karaim: Alveolars and front labials in the south-western dialect* (2014), investigates the development of the labial vowels /Ø/ and /Ü/ into /e/ and /i/, respectively, a feature typical of modern south-western Karaim. The Candidate scrutinizes the status of the vowels in four versions of a *piyut* (liturgical hymn) from Halych starting with *Men zavally Israel*, one of which was copied around 1778, another shortly after 1805, and another two from between 1851 and 1866. On the basis of a comparative analysis he demonstrates that while the oldest of these texts preserves /Ø/ and /Ü/, the second oldest displays a variation in this respect, while both of the youngest versions are completely in line with the situation today. It is also shown that /Ø/ and /Ü/ are most persistent in initial syllables. A similar investigation is made for the shift /š/ to /s/, which is also characteristic of modern south-western Karaim, and reveals that this shift occurs roughly at the same time but is completed even a bit earlier: The only instances where /š/ is preserved in the second oldest text are three loan words of Persian origin. The article also discusses some more minute phonetical issues connected to these two shifts. As a result, the Candidate dates these shifts quite precisely to the end of the 18th century.

Article (2), *A historical phonology of Western Karaim: The evolution of consonant harmony in the north-western dialect* (2014), studies a phenomenon characteristic of modern north-western Karaim, namely the replacement of vowel harmony, a kind of progressively operating vowel assimilation typical for most Turkic languages (with specific mechanisms peculiar to individual languages), by consonant harmony, in other words a type of harmony where the opposition [palatal] versus [velar] has been transferred to the consonant system. There is a good deal of scientific debate on how to evaluate this phenomenon theoretically, and how to label it terminologically, which is addressed by the Candidate but not focused on. The breakthrough contribution of this article to our knowledge is that it dates the beginning of this harmony shift to the end of the 17th or beginning of the 18th century (cf. below, article (5)). Moreover, it is shown that in certain varieties the process must have been complete prior to the 1720s. The corpus for this study is one of the oldest then-known western Karaim texts, a Torah translation from Kukizów copied in 1720 (part of a Bible

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translation also used as the main text basis for Articles (6), (7), and (8)), which displays clear northwestern features (for example, /j/ in place of */ŋ/) and allows us to observe the harmony shift in progress. The analysis demands a good deal of graphematic consideration and astute reasoning as the Hebrew script is not always explicit regarding the question whether the feature [palatal] must be assigned to the vowel or to the consonant, a challenge excellently mastered by the Candidate, who also presents a possible scenario of a relative chronology of steps that ultimately resulted in an almost complete shift from vowel harmony to consonant harmony.

Instances of the morphological unit -p edî in western Karaim are investigated in Article (3), A historical morphology of Western Karaim: The -p edî past tense in the south-western dialect (2015). This item, which can be approximately labelled as a pluperfect and which is widely attested in other Turkic languages of the north-western (Kipchak) and south-eastern branch of Turkic as well, but described in a highly inconsistent way in terms of semantics in the grammar treatises, is only scarcely attested in Karaim and has not been investigated in the academic literature on Karaim before. The Candidate cites seven occurrences of this item in texts from the 18th–20th century and tries to identify the semantic value with the help of the context. He comes to the conclusion that its semantic status resembles -GAn edî (another pluperfect type) and -r edî (an imperfect) but admits that a reliable analysis is difficult due to its scarcity. The Reviewer basically shares this opinion but would like to add that from his own research on the cognate of this item in Modern Uyghur (2005) it appears that in this language, *-[p] edî (realized as -(I)vîdi) designates a postterminal aspect (in other terms, a perfect) with the additional feature that the validity of the event is cancelled at the time of speaking, an analysis which reconciles readings of recent completion with such of a remote past (cf. Németh’s summary of the Turcological literature on pp. 216–220) and would correspond quite well to the Karaim examples cited, including ex. (6) and (7), where the item combines with events which are no more true at the time of speaking. The article is a highly interesting contribution on a dying common Kipchak form which had previously escaped notice in Karaim studies.

A contribution of utmost relevance to the establishment of the chronology of dialectological diversification in western Karaim is Article (4), A historical phonology of Western Karaim: The process of its diversification into dialects (2015). This article is more than just a summary of the findings in Articles (1) and (2), although it benefits from them, as it adds data from further sources from the 17th–20th centuries and considers significantly more distinctive features, including the important */ŋ/ > /j/ shift typical of north-western Karaim, which is approximately dated to the second
half of the 17th century, and the shift of -men and -sen to -mLn and -sLn in north-western Karaim, which is dated to the late 19th century. The author arrives at a periodisation in which Middle Karaim evolves in the late 14th century and develops into Modern Karaim at the end of the 18th century, with a possible additional subdivision into Early Modern Karaim and present-day Modern Karaim, which might start around 1882 (4/181–182).

These findings are further supplemented and in several details refined with the help of data from numerous other, previously not considered sources in Article (5). A historical phonology of Western Karaim: The process of its diversification into dialects. Part 2: Supplementary data on the absolute and relative chronology of sound changes (2018). The data presented in this article reveals that the /ŋ/ > /j/ shift typical for the north-western dialect is already complete in the oldest known western Karaim texts copied in 1671, 1686, and between 1685 and 1700 (5/148). On the other hand, there is evidence (which, however, needs confirmation through further research) that the velar /ŋ/ was still preserved in the late 15th century, which would provide us with a terminus post quem (5/148). The findings of Article (2) regarding the harmony shift (also north-western dialect) are refined to the effect that the process can be observed as early as in the second half of the 17th century and continues up to the mid-18th century (5/148–149). The process of delabialisation of front vowels in the south-western dialect (cf. Article (1)) might, according to the findings of the present article, have lasted until the first decades of the 19th century, i.e. a bit longer than formerly supposed (5/153). The /ky/ ~ /ké/ alternation, an occasional phenomenon in the south-western dialect, is attested in a text copied in 1851, while the formerly known oldest attestations were from the 20th century (5/157).

Articles (6), (7), and (8) investigate a north-western Karaim Bible translation copied by Simcha ben Chananiel in Kukizów in 1720, one of the oldest north-western Karaim Bible translations known (Manuscript III-73): (6) An early North-Western Karaim Bible translation from 1720. Part 1: The Torah (2014); (7) An early North-Western Karaim Bible translation from 1720. Part 2: The Book of Ruth (2015); (8) An early North-Western Karaim Bible translation from 1720. Part 3: A contribution to the question of the stemma codicum of the Eupatorian print from 1841 (2015). As the Torah and the Ketuvim display different linguistic features (the language of the former being more archaic), the different parts are treated separately. From both parts, voluminous text samples are given in transcription and translation, together with annotations and linguistic remarks. As sample texts, the Parashah Yitro (Article 6) and the Book of Ruth (Article 7) are chosen. The
Candidate shows that despite the different linguistic features, both parts must have been copied by the same hand, a fact which allows for the assumption that the linguistic heterogeneity within the text results from different sources used by the copyist (6/112), or that Simcha ben Chananiel might even be the translator of the Ketuvim (7/51). The language peculiarities of the manuscript are compared to south-western and eastern Karaim text parallels from the 19th century. A detailed and systematic comparison between the north-western manuscript and a Crimean (eastern) Karaim printed version from 1841 (the Eupatorian print or "Gözleve Bible") is offered in Article (8). Among the wealth of results of this highly valuable set of articles, the Reviewer would like to highlight the finding that the Torah passages display the /el/ vs /al/ shift, the most reliable indicator of the north-western Karaim harmony shift in texts written in Hebrew script, as an ongoing process, while in the Ketuvim passages, the harmony shift appears to be complete. Comparison between Manuscript III-73 and the Eupatorian print reveals that while some passages seem to be very different from each other, many passages are so similar that both versions must be based on a common model, with phonetical, grammatical and lexical adaptations to the pertinent dialect. In fact, the Crimean version displays some western features, a fact that suggests that a western Karaim model might have been used under preparation of the Crimean version (8/113–114).

The Book of Ruth, key text of Articles (7) and (8), is also the text basis of Article (9), A Crimean Karaim handwritten translation of the Book of Ruth dating from before 1687, in which a Crimean Karaim translation of the Former Prophets and part of the Ketuvim from before 1687 (Manuscript JSul.III.02) is compared to the north-western manuscript III-73 from 1720 and the eastern print from 1841 in a critical edition. The study is important because it investigates the earliest known eastern and western Karaim Bible translations. It reveals that the Manuscript from before 1687 and the print from 1841 (both eastern Karaim) are strikingly similar, with differences mostly predictable from language-internal diachronic changes (9/199). This fact makes the idea that the Eupatorian print (or parts of it) might have been prepared on the basis of Manuscript JSul.III.02 seem possible (9/204).

Article (10), An early North-Western Karaim text dating from before 1700. A linguist’s contribution to the biography of Josef ha-Mashbir, offers an annotated transcription and translation of a peshat (exegetical text) starting with Jazyqlarymyz ulğajdylar bijikk’a astry, a short text authored by Josef ha-Mashbir, hazzan of the Karaim community of Halych from 1685–1700. This text, which is one of the oldest known western Karaim texts, displays clear north-western Karaim
language features, a fact which supports the idea that Josef ha-Mashbir’s mother tongue was northwestern Karaim and that he might originate from Lithuania (10/86).

Although a collection of articles, the treatise under review is remarkably consistent in terms of content and constitutes a textual whole. It sheds new light on the development of Middle Karaim into Early Modern Karaim with its three dialects, and on mutual influences among the dialects. It also pays tribute to changes resulting from contact to Slavic and Baltic languages as well as to other Turkic languages (such as Crimean Tatar and Oghuz). The results are relevant not only for the discipline of Karaim studies but for Turcology as a whole.

The Candidate shows that he masters both sound philological and linguistic methods excellently. A significant part of the corpus for his linguistic analysis consists of manuscripts discovered or identified by himself, and accessible only to very few insiders. Some of the texts constitute specimen of the oldest available Bible translations into Karaim varieties. The transcriptions are prepared meticulously, with great graphological skills, and thorough reflection on how to interpret the orthographic evidence. Making these texts available is of unmeasurable value for Turkic studies and a great merit by its own. With his linguistic evaluation of the data, then, the Candidate demonstrates his maturity in linguistic methods: His findings pertain to the domains of phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, and contact linguistics. They are presented in a methodologically transparent way, carefully reflected, and convincingly argued for. Wherever necessary, hypotheses are formulated with adequate caution. An extra strength, as the Reviewer must emphasize again, is that besides what we can know the Candidate mentions also what we cannot know or do not know yet. In doing so, he both offers perspectives for scientific debate and draws the reader’s attention to research desiderata. This critical spirit is a key qualification of a mature researcher.

Besides the linguistic and philological value of the treatise, it unearts also non-linguistic historical facts important for the cultural history of the Karaim communities and for the biographical knowledge about the bearers of this culture.

Other academic achievements: With three single-authored and one co-authored monographs and forty-seven scholarly articles on a broad variety of linguistic and Turcological topics, the Candidate demonstrates a breath-taking list of publications, especially in relation to his academic age. Given his relative youth, the sheer number of his academic output reveals that he is an extremely productive and prolific scholar. At the same time, the publications are of an excellent quality: In addition to the articles examined above, the Reviewer is familiar, e.g., with the Candidate’s

Besides his publications, the Candidate’s academic record is impressive as well. He has been a very active participant in academic conferences both within Poland and abroad, reading papers on a broad spectrum of topics, including etymology, Hungarian loanwords in Polish, Slavic loanwords in Karaim, and Karaim dialectology. His teaching experience includes courses on Hungarian grammar, practical Hungarian, diachronic grammar, Karaim language and philology, as well as general linguistics. He has also participated in activities for the promotion of science among an interested non-academic public, and in training activities for scholars. He has proven commitment for administrative tasks in faculty boards and other university committees, an important experience for anyone with aspirations towards a career within the university. He is an experienced reviewer and editor. The Candidate has also been highly successful in obtaining fellowships and third-party funds. These achievements *in toto* distinguish a talented, committed, and capable scholar.

Overall appraisal: The habilitation treatise under review tackles a period critical for the evolution of the Karaim dialects and for the development of Middle Karaim into early modern Karaim. It makes relevant, hitherto unknown or insufficiently examined sources accessible and provides a thorough linguistic analysis of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical phenomena. This study marks an original and valuable contribution to our understanding of the evolution of the Karaim dialects and constitutes an important source for Turkic studies. With this series of articles, the Candidate demonstrates his outstanding linguistic, philological and Turco logical qualification.

Based on the excellent academic quality of the treatise, its original contribution to the linguistic and philological research of the Karaim language and its relevance to Turkic studies in general, as well as considering the Candidate’s remarkable general academic profile, I recommend without reservation to confer Dr. Michál Németh the habilitation degree.

Mainz, September 8, 2019

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