

# SEMITIC DIALECTOLOGY



The **Institute of Semitic Studies at Freie Universität Berlin** specialises in comparative and fieldwork-based research on Semitic languages, with a particular emphasis on spoken varieties and dialectal diversity. Rooted in the tradition of Semitic dialectology, the Institute investigates both well-attested and understudied dialects of **Arabic**, **Aramaic**, **Maltese**, and the **Modern South Arabian languages**.

Research activities focus on the documentation of linguistic varieties through direct engagement with native speakers. This includes the creation of grammatical descriptions, corpora of oral texts, lexical resources, and the development of digital tools and platforms for language preservation and learning (<http://surayt.com/>).

Through its diverse projects, the Institute contributes to the preservation of endangered speech forms and to a deeper understanding of the internal variation, historical development, and complexity of the Semitic language family.

## The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Midyat (Miḏyoyo)

This long-term project documents the urban variety of Turoyo once spoken in the city of Midyat, in the Tur Abdin region of south-eastern Turkey. The full documentation is planned in three volumes: texts (2019), glossary (2024), and a grammar (in preparation), offering a comprehensive account of this historically stable yet now endangered dialect. Based on recordings collected over five decades from nine speakers, the first volume presents a diverse selection of transcribed and translated oral texts, covering topics such as daily life, local traditions, legends, and testimonies of the 1915 Sayfo genocide. The second volume provides fully annotated lexical entries, including grammatical information, example sentences, idiomatic expressions, and etymologies. The third volume, currently in preparation, will offer a detailed grammatical analysis.

Researchers: Shabo Talay, Otto Jastrow, Nikita Kuzin

## Documenting Jewish Arabic Dialects of Mesopotamia

The project ‘Excavating, documenting, and analyzing linguistic relics: What do the Jewish Arabic dialects of Mesopotamia teach us about the (linguistic) history of the region?’ investigates the underdocumented Jewish Arabic dialects of Mesopotamia, particularly those of the *qeltu* type spoken for over a millennium by Jewish communities in the region. Through fieldwork, the project aims to document these dialects and produce grammatical sketches and text samples where data permits. It also seeks to carry out a comparative analysis to identify features that distinguish the Jewish varieties from other *qeltu* dialects. The findings will contribute to our understanding of whether a Jewish dialect continuum once existed in Mesopotamia and the northern Levant, and whether these dialects share a common ancestor or were historically in contact.

Researcher: Assaf Bar-Moshe

## The Jewish Arabic Dialect of ṢĀna (Iraq)

This project documents the endangered Arabic dialect once spoken by the Jewish community of ṢĀna, a town on the Euphrates in western Iraq. Distinct from both the local Muslim variety and the Jewish dialect of Baghdad, Jewish Arabic of ṢĀna reflects centuries of linguistic and cultural exchange. As part of the *qeltu* group, it shows strong Bedouin influence from the surrounding Syro-Mesopotamian region. The study includes a detailed grammatical analysis and annotated oral texts that illuminate the community’s traditions, history, and everyday life.

Researcher: Assaf Bar-Moshe

## A Linguistic Atlas of Gozo (Malta)

The project investigates the dialectal diversity of Gozo, Malta’s smaller island, through extensive fieldwork and community-oriented research. Based on the methods of Arabic and Semitic dialectology, the project documents phonological, morphological, and lexical variation across Gozitan villages and localities. The findings are presented in a linguistic atlas, with detailed maps and commentary. A special focus is placed on traditional speech practices that are rapidly changing due to social and linguistic shifts. The atlas provides a comparative and diachronic perspective on Maltese as a Semitic language.

Researcher: Maciej Klimiuk

## Naming the Landscape in the Modern South Arabian Languages

This project explores how speakers of the endangered Modern South Arabian languages (MSAL) name and conceptualise their environment. Rapid urbanisation, Arabisation, unsustainable development, and climate change threaten both the natural landscape and the traditional knowledge systems tied to it. Focusing on toponymy and orientation, the project aims to document MSAL speakers’ spatial vocabulary and landscape ontology, preserving a fragile form of intangible cultural heritage and supporting efforts to maintain local ecological and linguistic knowledge.

Researcher: Fabio Gasparini

## The Arabic Dialect of Sine (Eastern Turkey)

This project documents the Arabic dialect of Sine (Oyuklu), a linguistic enclave in the Diyarbakır province and the only remaining Arabic-speaking village in the region. As part of the Anatolian branch of *qeltu* Arabic, the dialect shares features with neighbouring varieties — such as those of Diyarbakır and the now-extinct Kaṣbīye — but also displays distinctive innovations. The project offers new grammatical insights into one of the northernmost outposts of the Arabic-speaking world.

Researcher: Shabo Talay

## The Arabic Dialect of Hama (Syria)

This project reconstructs a now-extinct variety of urban Arabic once spoken in Hama (Syria). Initiated during a research fellowship in Heidelberg, the project began with the unexpected discovery of sixteen previously unpublished recordings attributed to Bernhard Lewin. These audio materials, alongside Lewin’s 1966 publication and Littmann’s 1924 study, form the basis for a full linguistic documentation. The result includes a detailed grammatical description, a glossary, and transcriptions of texts capturing a dialect that has since disappeared due to sociopolitical upheaval.

Researcher: Maciej Klimiuk

## Syrian Arabic–German Dictionary

This project aims to create the first comprehensive Syrian Arabic–German dictionary based on published texts from various dialects spoken across Syria. The project draws on a corpus of dialect texts from different genres, analysed manually due to the lack of digital editions. Each lemma will be arranged according to the Semitic root system, with full citation of attestations and German translations. While Syrian Arabic is relatively well documented compared to other dialects, a modern, text-based dictionary remains a scholarly desideratum. The project contributes both to Arabic dialectology and to intercultural understanding, particularly in light of the large Syrian diaspora in Germany.

Researchers: Zafer Youssef, Shabo Talay

## BASS — Berlin Archive of Semitic Studies

The ‘Berlin Archive of Semitic Studies (BASS)’ is an ongoing project aimed at creating a digital repository of audio recordings in a wide range of Semitic dialects. In addition to sound material — both previously published and unpublished — the archive will include transcriptions of selected recordings, offering researchers access to primary linguistic data. Future stages of the project will incorporate fieldwork notes and related documentation, making the archive a central resource for the study, teaching, and preservation of spoken Semitic varieties.

Researchers: Shabo Talay, Maciej Klimiuk, Ahmad Alkhaled

## Digitising and Analysing Heinz Grotzfeld’s Recordings

This project focuses on the preservation and digitisation of twelve surviving cassette tapes containing field recordings made or collected by Heinz Grotzfeld. These include rare data from northern and central Lebanese villages — notably from the Biqāṣ Valley, Mount Lebanon, and the Anti-Lebanon — as well as recordings from the region south of Tripoli. Among them are unique materials from Bišmizzīn, most likely recorded by Michel Jiha between 1958 and 1960. The archive also includes a tape with Muslim Arabic from Aleppo and Christian Arabic from Bloudan (Syria). In addition to digitisation, the project will provide metadata and transcriptions, ensuring the accessibility of this valuable legacy of early Semitic dialectological fieldwork.

Researchers: Maciej Klimiuk, Ahmad Alkhaled