



PERSPECTIVES ON...

Library Instruction for Romanized Hebrew[☆]

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ABSTRACT

University students, looking for records in Hebrew language in the library catalog, often face difficulties finding material due to the unfamiliarity with the Library of Congress rules for romanization. These difficulties may hinder their research results. This paper will present the findings of a study conducted at McGill University that investigated students' abilities to romanize Hebrew titles so they can consequently search these in the library catalog, and will show how library instruction can be a very successful tool for providing students with the knowledge they require in order to retrieve these titles.

Objective – This study examined the impact on students who attended a library workshop on the Library of Congress (LC) rules of Hebrew romanization. Although this group of users had knowledge of the Hebrew language, most of the bibliographic records on McGill University's online catalog are romanized. A lack of understanding of the rules involved in romanizing makes the retrieval of records more difficult due to the inexactitudes of the spelling.

Methods – The students enrolled in the course Advanced Hebrew at McGill University where selected for this study due to their knowledge of the Hebrew language. Students were asked to spell six Hebrew titles in romanized characters, a task that it is necessary to do in order to search for these titles in the catalog. This was followed by a presentation on the LC rules on romanizing the Hebrew language. Each student received a copy of the LC romanization table (see Appendix A) and with the table in hand and the explanation on how to apply it, students were asked to spell six different Hebrew titles.

Results – There was an 81% improvement in the accuracy of spelling six new Hebrew titles once the students were familiar with the romanization rules. We can consider this gain a very successful outcome that would benefit these students in their academic endeavors.

Limitations – One of the main limitations for this research was the small number of students (68.7% of the total enrolment for that course) that was present in the class on the day of the study. Another important limitation was the time allotted for this study. The students did not have time to practice the methodology for romanization. Right after the presentation of the LC rules, they were asked to answer the second questionnaire.

Conclusions – Spelling mistakes when searching for romanized Hebrew titles in the catalog can be diminished through a targeted library instruction workshop. This research demonstrated that being familiar with the romanization rules is an effective tool for increasing students' abilities to spell correctly and thus retrieve Hebrew bibliographic records.

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INTRODUCTION

Three days after my arrival from my native country to Montreal, Canada, I went to join the Jewish Public Library. As I approached the card catalog, I decided to look for a book on the holiday of Hanuka. As a new immigrant from Mexico City and having Spanish as my mother tongue, my first instinct was that the Hebrew word "Januca" would

start with the letter "J" when written in Roman characters¹. What I did not know was that there existed a major controversy over spellings, romanization, and transliterations. I wondered what kind of Jewish library this was if it did not even have a single book on the topic of "Januca". There was no "SEE ALSO" card, so it was easy to assume that the library was lacking books on basic Jewish subjects. It was only after Jewish stores began hanging "Happy Hanukah" signs on their windows that I realized that the spelling of certain Hebrew words was different in English than in Spanish.

Among our belongings we brought some prayer books that were transliterated in Mexico for Spanish speakers. As we started to buy

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¹ The pronunciation of the "J" letter in Spanish is the raspy version of the pronunciation of the letter "h" in the word "hot".

new books in Montreal, however, I began to notice the different ways of romanization. A prayer book geared for the French-speaking Sephardic community was romanized quite differently than the one intended for the English-speaking Ashkenazi community.

The way French, Spanish, German and other speakers transliterate Hebrew words is based on their sound values to the letters. This is the reason why, when I was searching for a book on Hanukah, my first instinct was to spell the word with the sound value familiar to me. As Weinberg (1976), in his book: *How do you spell Chanukah?* notes, “due to the different sounds which letters of the Latin alphabet have come to represent in the different languages, there exist distinct English, German or French spellings of Hebrew words which are used in these languages” (p. 12).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The terms romanization and transliteration are used, sometimes interchangeably, when referring to the spelling of a word in one language with the alphabet of another language. Yet there are differences in these two methods. Spalding (1977), the internationally renowned authority on cataloging at the Library of Congress, and editor of the *Anglo American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR), summarized these nuances: “romanization, is the general term for any method which converts names or text written in a non-roman writing system into the letters of the roman alphabet” (p. 5). In other words, romanization is a phonetic system that is achieved by spelling the sound of the word as close as possible to the orthography of a given roman alphabet language. By contrast, in transliteration, each letter on the non-roman alphabet is equated to one or more letters or diacritics of the roman alphabet.

Elizabeth Vernon (1996), Judaica Librarian at Harvard University, explains the adequate term to use in the case of Hebrew characters: “Romanization refers to the rendering of the text in non roman scripts into roman (Latin) characters. Although romanization is sometimes referred to as transliteration, this term is not completely accurate for the Hebrew and Arabic script languages because the rendering usually involves the supplying of vowels rather than the simple letter-by-letter substitution that the term transliteration implies” (p. 2).

For many years, academic libraries have used the Library of Congress romanization tables for languages using non roman alphabets. The ALA/LC tables are used predominantly by research and university libraries in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. The main advantage of romanizing Hebrew and other language entries is the integration of all records into a single catalog, thus allowing a user to retrieve a complete listing of all records under a subject heading in spite of the language of the document. Another advantage is that it allows library personnel who lack the knowledge of a language to access the bibliographic data.

However, there are also disadvantages in the use of romanization, mainly for the users. Hans Wellisch (1978) stated:

That romanization, when performed for bibliographic purposes, is an exercise in futility leading to bibliographic chaos rather than bibliographic control has been pointed out many times before, but complaints against the practice came mostly from readers, while librarians were either convinced that this was the best possible method of making works written in non-roman scripts accessible in Western catalogs and bibliographies or did not care too much as long as the smooth working of their libraries was assured by the systems. (p. 179–180).

Spalding (1977) was a strong opponent of the unified catalog: “Our readers of non-roman-alphabet materials would be much better served by separate catalogs of author and title entries in the written system they read than they are now by a unified catalog that requires them to figure out what cabalistic transformation into roman letters have been

made of the names and titles they could otherwise have found so easily” (p. 8).

El-Sherbini and Chen (2011) conducted a study on the language and script preferences of librarians and users when searching for and retrieving non-roman materials. One of their findings was the conclusion that “... users expressed frustration with the inconsistency in romanization, especially in Arabic and Hebrew languages... romanization frequently becomes a problem when the subject heading is a personal name, corporate body, or a geographic name” (p. 469). Spalding (1977) has the same opinion about romanization being a stumbling block: “Any romanization we use is at best an inconvenient hindrance and at worst a severe stumbling block between the reader and the book” (p. 7).

Although there are several articles about the hindrances and ambiguities of romanization and the difficulties for retrieving records, I was able to find only one article that involved testing students before and after a library instruction class on the mechanism of romanization: *Cyrillic Transliteration and Its Users*, by May Aissing (1995). The aim of that study was to examine the students’ reaction to online retrieval of Cyrillic script documents transliterated into roman letters in English language universities. That study, enabled Aissing to determine that “the use of transliteration in bibliographic records forms a barrier to access even for those skilled in the original script” (p. 217). Testing students in these skills showed that without knowing the transliteration table, none of the students would be able to conduct a 100% successful search (p. 212).

There are many studies that assess library instruction in general. Matthews (2007), in his book *Library Assessment in Higher Education*, summarized many research projects that were either supportive of library instruction as having a positive effect on student performance or non-supportive of this effect.

Many articles reinforce the correlation between library instruction and the GPA. Bowles-Terry (2012) confirmed a positive correlation between a higher GPA and information literacy instruction at the University of Wyoming, when this instruction was provided to students in upper year courses. As Wong & Cmor (2011) demonstrated in a study conducted at Honk Kong Baptist University to assess how library instruction impacts students’ course performance, when students attended five library workshops during the course of their program, there was a “strong association between higher number of workshops attended and higher GPA” (p. 9).

OBJECTIVE

Students registered for the Advanced Hebrew course already have knowledge of the Hebrew language. When searching for a Hebrew title in the McGill library catalog, students need to resort to the romanization of the title, a task that becomes more difficult if students are unfamiliar with the rules of romanization. The purpose of this study was to determine whether a library instruction session, focused entirely on the Library of Congress’ Hebrew romanization tables and its use, would have an effect on students’ abilities to search for Hebrew titles in the library catalog, in order to have more success in finding Hebrew language material in the library.

METHODS

Data was collected in the spring semester of the 2013 school year at McGill University, in Montreal, Quebec. The students taking the Advanced Hebrew course were selected to participate in the study. From a class of 16 students, 11 students were present on the day of the library instruction session. Although this is a very small sample, it represents the average size of students registered at an advanced Hebrew class at McGill University. Most of these students had English or French as their mother tongue. These students already had knowledge of the Hebrew language.

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