Language and Politics in Israel: Between History, Community, and Territoriality

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Abstract. Language has played a significant role in the politics of Israel. The question of what language was to be used in the Jewish community in Palestine and in a future Jewish state was a subject of debate among Zionists in Europe since the early 20th century. It became exacerbated with the growing immigration and has been a focus of public policy since 1948. Hebrew has become the “established” national language of Israel and the primary vehicle of intergroup communication; nevertheless, that country has had to deal with a number of minority languages, including Arabic, Yiddish, English, and Russian. Each of these languages has fulfilled an important role and each has been linked to specific identitarian functions, such as religious, ethnic, ideological, territorial, and transnational. This paper attempts to examine these linkages and their political aspects in detail.

“Littie by little, Isaac uprooted his mind from his hometown and was getting used to the conditions of the land…And just as he had grown accustomed to the climate of the Land, so he also grew accustomed to her language, and mingled Arabic and Russian words in his speech, whether he spoke Yiddish or whether he spoke Hebrew, like all our comrades in the Land.”

S.Y. Agnon, Tmol Shilshom (Only Yesterday).

Introduction

Language has played an important role in the establishment of the state in Israel, the integration of its citizens, and the development of national consciousness. Hebrew is the major official language of the country, and the overwhelming majority of its citizens speak it. At the same time, Israel is a polyglot country. Given the ethnic and religious mix of its society, there have been other languages that have retained a varying degree of importance.

During the early years of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, the issue of language was not settled. A number of languages vied for adoption as the dominant language of the community. Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, who knew little Hebrew, did not envisage the population of a future Jewish state as speaking Hebrew, because he did not regard it as a useful language. (He once asked impatiently, “How can one buy a railway ticket in Hebrew?”). “He wanted many official languages, especially English and German. He was not interested in a romantic revival of Hebrew nor in the recreation of the ‘historical Hebrew peasant’ as were the Zionists of Eastern Europe” (Elon 1971: 36). He imagined that the language of the reconstituted Jewish state would be German (which was promoted by the Hilfsverein, a philanthropic organization...
that maintained a number of schools in Palestine), or perhaps some other European language; indeed, some of the founders of the Israel Institute of Technology (Technion) thought that its language of instruction should be German. Baron Edmond Rothschild, the promoter of Palestinian viticulture, favored French as the language of the Yishuv, as did the Alliance Israelite Universelle, which also supported several schools in Palestine. Hebrew as the language of instruction was the overwhelming choice of schoolteachers in the Yishuv in the early 20th century, and they won out as the result of a strike. Hebrew was the logical choice of a majority of Jewish settlers, because it was the only language common to both Ashkenazim and Sephardim.1

At a conference in Czernowitz, Romania in 1908, both Hebrew and Yiddish were recognized as “national” languages of the Jewish people. In fact, at the first Zionist conference, which had taken place in Basel, Switzerland ten years earlier, a form of Yiddish was the major language of the proceedings. Many of the founders of the Yishuv, including the members of the Second Aliya (the immigration wave of the first decade of the 20th century), were native Yiddish speakers. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, regarded as Israel’s “national” poet, although he lectured widely in Hebrew, often spoke Yiddish at home and with selected literary friends (even after he settled in Palestine in 1924 (Aberbach 1988: 28). He had made his name in the diaspora, and his Hebrew was heavily Ashkenazi in his use of cultural references and patterns of pronunciation such that contemporary Israelis have some difficulty understanding his poetry (which has recently been “translated” into modern Hebrew).

The generation of the Second Aliya (1880s-1920s) was primarily Yiddish-speaking but learned Hebrew as a second language. Many of their offspring, born in Israel, spoke Hebrew as a native language and were often unilingual; they might have picked up fragments of Yiddish and/or Russian from their parents, but did not speak it, or did not want to speak it. At the same time, their Hebrew was influenced, however subtly, by Yiddish in terms of the inflection, stress, and idioms of the Hebrew as it developed in the Yishuv. Yet at no time was Yiddish, the language of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, seriously in contention as the language of a future Jewish state in Palestine.

With the influx to Palestine of immigrants from Europe after World War II, a large proportion of whom spoke Yiddish, there were growing fears that this language would challenge the preeminence of Hebrew. In the early 1950s, Yiddish theater and publications were outlawed; Yiddish was regarded as below standard from cultural and literary perspectives. Yiddish was detested by David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, who regarded it as a diaspora and ghetto jargon and referred to it as a mishmash (Elon 1971: 311). More importantly, it was not considered appropriate for the Jewish population in its entirety, which included Sephardim, Yemenites, and other non-Ashkenazim, who did not know Yiddish.

The fear of competition from Yiddish was reflected in a ruthless campaign by Zionist intellectuals and politicians during the Mandate to stamp out that language (Katz 2007: 310ff.). This campaign included a successful effort to prevent the creation of a chair for Yiddish (albeit taught in Hebrew) at the Hebrew University, and a decision of Israeli authorities early during statehood to stop using Yiddish in municipal offices, the media, the theater, and other public arenas.

In 1948, Hebrew became the “national” language of Israel; in 1982, it became Israel’s “official” language. Today, Hebrew is firmly established as the national language
of Israel, and it is the dominant one, spoken by the overwhelming majority of Israeli citizens. Nevertheless, there continues to be a concern for maintaining its status, owing to three challenges: (1) the small size of the country, and the need to be connected with an increasingly globalized science, technology, and commerce, and hence the need to master one of the global linguae francae, especially English; (2) the multiethnic and multicultural nature of Israel’s society and the rapidly changing texture of its population due to immigration; and (3) the growing pressure of Arabic.

The officialization of Hebrew was expected by many to be a departure from the diaspora situation. Diaspora communities were polyglot; while some diasporans spoke one or another Jewish language—Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and so on—others did not, but all spoke the languages of their hostlands. To the extent that the reestablishment of a Jewish state would normalize the Jewish condition and “negate” the diaspora, it would normalize the linguistic situation of Jews, i.e., would lead to unilingualism. Indeed, many inhabitants of some of the early kibbutzim and moshavim (collective and cooperative settlements respectively) spoke only Hebrew. But they were a distinct minority. In the second half of the 20th century, there was a significant growth of a unilingual Hebrew-speaking native-born Jewish population. But with the decline of the kibbutz; the growth of immigration especially from Russia, Latin America, and a number of English-speaking countries; and in response to an increasingly globalized economy, multilingualism reasserted itself. Moreover, the fact that there were Arab speakers in the country and that the majority of Jews in Palestine were immigrants or descendants of immigrants who grew up speaking a diaspora language made it difficult to maintain a unilingual environment. While Hebrew is firmly established as the national language of Israel, it has never enjoyed a monopoly and it is increasingly challenged by other languages.

A Profusion of Languages
One of the most widely cited books on language in Israel (Spolsky and Shohamy 1999: 3-4) lists about twenty languages other than Hebrew and Arabic spoken in Israel by more than two thousand individuals each. Another author (Grimes 1996) lists ten languages other than Hebrew and Standard Arabic spoken in 1996 by at least 100,000 people each, which included, in descending order, the following: Russian, Judeo-Moroccan Arabic, Romanian, Yiddish, Judeo-Iraqi Arabic, Ladino and Spanish, English, and Polish. The figures today are undoubtedly lower today, since many speakers of these languages (other than English) were over 40, and more than ten years have elapsed. Nevertheless, it is clear that Israel continues to be a polyglot country. Many polyglots speak Hebrew as well, and they resort to code-switching depending on the context and the environment; thus while they speak Israeli Hebrew at work, they may speak their mother tongue at home. Among the languages listed above, the following are the most important: Hebrew: Arabic, Russian, French, Yiddish, and English.

Yiddish
Yiddish and Hebrew have had a reciprocal relationship for generations. Hebrew has constituted a large proportion of Yiddish vocabulary, and those growing up with Yiddish had a reading familiarity with Hebrew. Conversely, many Hebrew writers of the early 20th century were imbued with Yiddish culture, and their stories reflect Yiddish turns of
phrase. The first language of a large proportion of the immigrants from Eastern Europe between the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century was Yiddish, and their Hebrew idiom and pronunciation were heavily influenced by Yiddish. As Dovid Katz (2007: 322) put it, in exaggerated fashion, “much of Modern Hebrew [was] in fact straight translated Yiddish rather than the language of Moses, Isaiah, and Job.” But since then, Modern Hebrew has been subjected to many other linguistic influences.

In any case, Hebrew has clearly won the linguistic contest. Most Yiddish speakers have accepted this result, although they do occasionally complain of “triumphalism” (see Fishman 2001: 628). But this triumph is a qualified one, for Yiddish is in one way or another embedded in Israeli Hebrew. The influence of Yiddish persists in the verbal fragments and idioms of a number of older Hebrew writers, such as Bialik, Agnon, and Hazaz, and can be found even in the language of contemporary Israel-born writers such as Amos Oz; and numerous Yiddish words are found in Hebrew slang. In more recent years, efforts have been made to preserve Yiddish for its symbolic and cultural values. These efforts have included the translation of Yiddish classics into Hebrew; the publication of Di Goldene Keyt, the foremost Yiddish literary review; the performance of Yiddish plays on stage or TV, either in the original or translation; and the broadcasting of Yiddish songs. This has been done, not for state-building, nation-building, or social communication, but for maintaining a connection with the Jewish (diaspora) past—and perhaps also in tacit acknowledgment of Israel’s own “diasporic” condition in a global sense. Several universities have chairs in Yiddish, and the language is offered as an elective in a number of secondary schools. The revalorization of Yiddish in Israel since 1967, has been a largely academic pursuit, and it has regained a certain stature as a “heritage” language (as have Ladino and other Jewish languages), especially for those concerned with collective identity and history. This development represents an ironic reversal of function: Yiddish, formerly despised as a folk language in the diaspora, has become a language of scholars and archivists in Israel.

The preservation of Yiddish is more than symbolic or academic. In addition to the members of the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta who continue to speak Yiddish on a daily basis, there are many Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Jews, known as Haredim, and several groups of Hasidim where the language is widely spoken, as well as individuals affiliated with “Lithuanian” yeshivot (talmudical academies). According to one estimate (Katz 2007: 323), the Haredi community accounts for 10 percent of the Jewish population of Israel, and its growth rate is expected to remain very high. The continuing importance of Yiddish and its association with Orthodox Judaism has been reflected recently in the marketing of a Yiddish-language GPS gadget in certain taxicabs in Jerusalem, Bnei-Brak and other cities with significant numbers of Yiddish speakers, devices that point specifically to places of religious interest (Bezalel 2009).

Arabic

The status of the Hebrew and Arabic languages was defined originally by Article 82 of the Palestine Order-in-Council, Article 82, which was published in 1922 at the beginning of the British Mandate. The wording of the article is as follows:

All ordinances, official notices and official forms of the government and all official notices of local authorities and municipalities in areas to be prescribed by order of the High Commissioner, shall be published in English, Arabic, and Hebrew. The three languages may
be used in debates and discussions in the Legislative Council, and subject to any regulations to be made from time to time, in the government offices and the Law Courts (Kretzmer 1990: 165).

After the State of Israel was proclaimed, this article was never officially revoked; but a government decree, Law and Government Ordinance of 1948 (section 15(b), nullified the obligatory use of English. This meant that both Hebrew and Arabic remained official. The first postage stamps issued after the Declaration of Independence bore the designation, in Hebrew and Arabic, of “Hebrew Post” (Doar Ivri) because they were printed before the official name of the new state had been decided.

In 1952 and several times thereafter, private members’ bills were introduced in the Knesset stipulating Hebrew as the only official language were defeated. In practice, however, Hebrew is the primary official language of Israel. In June 2008, members of the Knesset belonging to several political parties introduced a bill to demote Arabic to the status of “secondary language.” This was in response to a demand by Arab citizens for a change in the Israeli flag and national anthem to make them less Jewish. Left-wing members of parliament opposed the bill, but many others favored it to prevent Israel from becoming a binational state.

Israel, however, remains formally bilingual; the status of Arabic as an official language is manifested, inter alia, by the fact that Arab members of the Knesset (Parliament) may use it in that chamber (although few have done so) and that Knesset debates, are published simultaneously in Arabic. In principle, government ministries, the courts, and the relevant national and local authorities are supposed to use both languages. But in reality, Arabs must speak Hebrew if they wish to be fully listened to.

Laws are enacted, promulgated, and interpreted by the courts in Hebrew; and where there are versions of laws and ordinances in two languages, the Hebrew version is binding. Although laws and regulations must be translated into Arabic, this process may be slow, and (except for regulations specifically applying to the Arab population) failure to translate them does not invalidate them. Furthermore, the Nationality Law of 1952 provides that in order to obtain Israeli citizenship by naturalization, an applicant must demonstrate “some knowledge of Hebrew” (Kretzmer 1990: 165-166). This evidently does not apply to Jewish immigrants, who (under the Law of Return) are granted citizenship automatically. According to one observer,

the State of Israel fosters a pluralistic society with respect to everything that pertains to culture and language. In accordance with this, it has been determined that both Hebrew and Arabic are official languages [when it concerns] the Knesset; postage stamps, coins, and bills carry both languages; street signs and government office signs are written in both languages; and radio and television broadcast in both languages…. [and] Arabic is the official language of instruction in all schools at all levels in places where Arabs constitute a majority (Landau 1981: 200-201).

At the same time, Arabs resent the fact that in practice Arabic is less “equal” than Hebrew. Hebrew is obligatory in Arab schools, while Arabic is an elective in Jewish schools. Knesset debates appear in Hebrew only, and statutes are often translated into Arabic after considerable delay. Finally, petitions addressed to government offices in Arabic are often not answered (ibid).
The language of instruction in Arab schools is Arabic, but pupils begin to learn Hebrew in the fourth grade. The study of Hebrew is necessary for integration into the Israeli society, economy, and polity; but a full mastery of that language requires exposure to Hebrew literature, and this often generates serious controversy. “The literary program of Hebrew] includes parts of the Bible as an essential layer of understanding the Hebrew language and Jewish culture. This fact leads to misunderstanding and to the argument that the Arab students are being taught Judaism” (Winter 1981: 177).

Most Israeli Arabs, however, have a pragmatic approach to Hebrew. They do not equate learning Hebrew with undermining their faith in Islam or with liking Israelis (Suleiman 2004: 142). At the same time, they speak Hebrew to be accepted as Israelis, and they speak Arabic to affirm their specific identity. Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism is much more widespread among Arabs than among Jews in Israel. According to a survey conducted 20 years ago, 74.2% of Arabs could speak Hebrew in 1988 (62.3% in 1976), but only 31.1% of Jews could speak Arabic (37.2% in 1980); and 71.8% of Arabs could read and write Hebrew, whereas only 14.8% of Jews could read and write Arabic. In 1988, more than half of the Arabs polled were readers of Hebrew newspapers and nearly as many read papers in both languages (Smooha 1992: 38f). It is a reasonable assumption that since then Hebrew-Arab bilingualism has grown among the Arabs due to pragmatism as well as growing secularism, while it has decreased among Jews, as the number of Jewish immigrants from the Middle East has declined.

Hebrew-Arabic bilingualism for both the Jewish and the Arab population is both a desired goal and an official commitment. But it is not symmetrical in practice. Hebrew is required for graduation in Arab secondary schools; but courses in Arabic are compulsory only in grades 7-10 in Jewish schools. In most Jewish schools it is treated as an elective, and only about half of the graduates of Jewish schools end up with an adequate knowledge of Arabic.²

It is generally admitted that Arabic-language television and radio programs in Israel are inadequate: events affecting Arabic citizens are underreported both in the Hebrew press and Hebrew-language TV and radio. There is an Israeli Arab-language press, to which the majority of the Arabs listen, but it is not of high quality (Lefkowitz 2004: 177f). Therefore, many Arabs are forced to watch Jordanian TV and buy Jordanian papers, which are more expensive. In order to minimize the anti-Israel slant of the media of Israel’s neighbors, there is pressure to improve the Arabic-language media in Israel.

While among Jews, Judeo-Arabic has almost disappeared in favor of Hebrew even among the Sephardic Jews in the four walled towns—Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias and Safad—who spoke mainly Arabic in pre-1929 Palestine (Talmon 2000: 201), standard Arabic has been replaced among Arabs by an Israel-centered Arabic dialect.³ However, Palestinian nationalists, in particular those who stress Arab unity, have tried, with questionable success, to immunize Arabic against Israeli influence. There is now a distinct Israeli pronunciation of Arabic by Muslims, and an Israeli Arabic, which is infused with Hebrew words (Lefkowitz 2004: 153; Spolsky/Shohamy 1999: 107). The Hebrew influence is particularly strong on the Arabic spoken by the Druze, the most “Israelized” Arabs.

Israel’s Arab citizens periodically demand absolute equality of Arabic and Hebrew. In A Future Vision for the Palestinian Arabs in Israel, a report prepared by the National Committee of Arab Mayors in 2007, and in documents issued by other Arab
organizations (Halkin 2009: 33), the demand is made to demote Hebrew from the official language to one of two official languages, the other being Arabic, so that Arab Israelis can live their lives as citizens using Arabic exclusively, in the same way that Jewish Israelis can avoid knowing any Arabic.

There have been gradual steps toward granting Arabic parity with Hebrew, most recently (2006) by the enactment of a law for the establishment of an Arabic Language Academy. This institution will be parallel to the Hebrew Language Academy and, like academies for the preservation of Yiddish and Ladino, will be publicly funded. It is to have a multiple purpose: to promote literacy in Arabic among the Arab population, to standardize Palestinian/Israeli Arabic, and to act as a cultural bridge between the Jewish and Arab communities. Nevertheless, Hebrew retains an explicitly superior status. This has been confirmed by the Israel Supreme Court, which has held that Israel is above all a Hebrew state, and that while its Arab minority has the right to preserve its language, the state is under no obligation to help it along. In short, “the Hebrew language is a cornerstone in the definition of Israel as a sovereign state” (Zameret 2007).

There is probably another reason for the refusal so far to grant complete equality to Arabic: the fear that the officialization of Arabic would buttress a separate ethnonational identity and undermine political unity. Given the Arabs’ considerably higher birthrate, such a policy would ultimately make their language dominant and lead to the demotion of Hebrew to a de facto minority position. In granting total equality, moreover, Israel would go further than other countries in dealing with the position of minority languages. Defenders of the official policy of Hebrew dominance compare their country with other countries with respect to the treatment of minority languages—e.g., Turkey, Finland, Romania, Italy, Russia/USSR, and India—each of which has a single dominant language.

French
The French language occupies an important place in Israel. The country has more than 300,000 francophones, of whom about 120,000 were born in France or one of its former North African colonies; and many of them maintain dual citizenship. There has been an increasingly open identification with the French cultural-linguistic heritage. The vast majority of them are Sephardim and are religious or “traditional” Jews—in contrast to the Ashkenazim, who are secular and tend to have English as their second language—and do not belong to the political, economic, or cultural elite (Bahloul 2009). Cultural authorities in France have encouraged the maintenance of francophonie in Israel, (most recently (March 23, 2009) by a “journée de la francophonie.” This effort has been hampered by the one-sided pro-Arab policy position of France since the mid-1960s, and especially its foreign ministry. Israel is not a member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, despite the fact that the number of French speakers in Israel is much greater than in Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, and several other countries, which are members). It is for these reasons that there is a reluctance to promote the teaching of the French language.

German
The rise of Hitler in the early 1930s brought many German-speaking immigrants to Palestine from Germany and Austria. These immigrants, known as Aliya Hadasha (the
New Aliya) brought with them a language of which they were proud, which they used widely at home and taught to their children. Many of them regarded Palestine as a temporary haven. They judged the German language and culture to be superior to Hebrew, which reflected an “oriental” culture—a view analogous to the later complaints of Russian immigrants about Israeli provincialism. German was the language of Herzl and of his book, The Judenstaat; the native language of Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem and the language of many first-generation Hebrew University academicians. But after the Holocaust, one could no longer regard the culture that spoke German as a model of “high culture,” and the descendants of the Yekkim (as German Jews were called, often disdainfully) no longer bothered to learn it. Still, the German language could often be heard among the audience at symphony performances as late as in the 1960s and 1970s. A significant number of German Jews left Israel after 1948 for the U.S. and Canada; some have (re-)acquired German citizenship, and a few have even returned to Germany.

**Russian**

Since the mass immigration of Jews from the former Soviet Union in the past two decades, Russian has become the most widely used foreign language after English among Israeli Jews. There are more than a million Russian-speaking Jews in Israel, i.e., more than in the former Soviet Union. The majority of these immigrants have learned Hebrew very quickly, yet they have remained a Russian speech community: while using Hebrew in the public sphere, they have continued to speak Russian with their family and friends, albeit a language heavily tinged with Hebrew expressions (Ben-Rafael and Peres 2005: 133.). Russian continues to be the preferred language of the immigrants as a cultural community, the main reason being the nature of the Hebrew instruction the immigrants have received. The normal *ulpan* (intensive Hebrew course) stresses functional, colloquial Hebrew, but does not teach literature; it does not pay adequate attention to the cultural elements of the language, much of it based on classical writings, especially the Bible—the kind of Hebrew that is inculcated (at least ideally) in native-born Israelis in their early schooling. Hence Russian remains the immigrants’ major cultural language (Niznik 2003: 355-357; Remennik 2003: 370f). Even if Biblical allusions were part of the Russian immigrants’ *ulpan* experience, these might fall on deaf ears, given their enforced estrangement from religion during the Soviet period and their lack of exposure to the culture of Hebrew writers of Russian origin, a consequence of the Soviet suppression of Jewish culture. In addition, Russian immigrants’ low opinion of the sabras’ presumed lack of culture has contributed to the Russians’ desire to maintain their native language in Israel. That language—and the culture it reflects—is considered more prestigious and less provincial than Hebrew; moreover, it is associated with the desire to maintain links with Russia and connections with friends and relatives there. The affirmation of Russian culture and language by immigrants from Russia is also a way of indicating resentment of their low socio-economic status in Israel, and to compensate for it (Ben-Rafael 2005: 132). Yet attempts by some immigrants to make Russian the third national language after Hebrew and Arabic have gained little support among the immigrants (Niznik 2003: 361, 367). At the same time, Russian immigrants oppose the policy of the “melting pot” (*mizug galuyot*) for both cultural and political reasons. They visit Russia often, and consider themselves a “transnational” community, which gives them a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the Israeli Jewish community (Remennik 2003: 372).
The Russian-language community has asserted itself politically via two “ethnic” political parties, Yisrael Ba’aliya, which received six seats in the Knesset elections of 1999, and Yisrael Beiteinu, whose Knesset representation increased from two seats in 2005 to 15 in the 2009 elections. The growing political clout of that community has been reflected in pressure to teach Russian in schools (in order to provide employment for Russian teachers). It has also been reflected in relatively hawkish foreign policy attitudes. In short, the Russian immigrants’ cultural affinities and homeland nostalgia are counterbalanced by a distrust of Russian leaders’ intentions vis-à-vis Israel.

English
Spolsky and Shohamy point out that English remains dominant among the numerous foreign languages, and trumps Arabic in the Jewish schools. They discuss the various evolving (and sometimes contradictory) policies regarding instruction in languages other than Hebrew at various school levels, i.e., those at which mandatory teaching of English in Jewish “national” schools and mandatory teaching of Hebrew in Arab schools would take place; which elective language courses would be offered; and when.

English is the language of research and instruction at the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot and the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya; all major universities in Israel often refer to English-language texts and sources; and English is widely used in high-tech industries. It is uncertain whether this development generates a cosmopolitan-academic perspective as opposed to an Israeli “national-patriotic” one. Meanwhile, English has become so important that fears have been expressed of its becoming a threat to Hebrew (Spolsky/Shohamy 1999: 23) and, ultimately, to the identity of Israel.

The inroads of English have been significant as a superordinate language in an increasingly globalized society; this is attested by the use of Americanisms on television, in particular talk shows. Attitudes toward foreign words in Hebrew, especially English and other European languages are not uniform: cultural nationalism argues in favor of keeping Hebrew as pure as possible; but the exigencies of communication and the fact that a foreign word may be more exact than a parallel Hebrew one explain the usage of the former. It has been noted that such usage is higher among academics and their children and lowest among workers and farmers (Fisherman 2001). In the adoption of foreign words there is a descending order of preference: Biblical and Talmudic Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, and only then European languages. But many intellectuals and public figures have preferred accretions of European languages (and a pronunciation approximating those languages) because they have considered them more “elegant” (Harshav 1993: 160f). Furthermore, snobbish Israelis, especially public personalities, often prefer to use English equivalents to perfectly adequate Hebrew words. These developments have not transformed Hebrew into a “fusion” language like Yiddish. Nor was it “relexified,” in the sense that its language stock was systematically replaced, although there have been borrowings from many languages and word coinages based on analogies with European languages. Nevertheless, the influence of English vocabulary, idiom, and sentence structure has generated a language labeled by some as “Hebrish,” the Hebrew analogy to “Franglais,” a situation to which prescriptivists have reacted with indignation (Keinon 2000; Shaviv 2000; Traubman 2005). The spread of English has become so pervasive that, some fear, Hebrew-English bilingualism would become institutionalized and that English would interfere with the development of Hebrew, if not
eclipse it. In 1998, a lame-duck Knesset passed a law requiring radio stations to adhere to a quota of 50 percent Hebrew language songs broadcast on Voice of Israel Radio and Israel Army Radio. Ten years later, a bill was introduced to set a limit of 50 percent for songs in language other than Hebrew on radio stations in Israel was aimed primarily at English-language songs, in order to limit the “Americanization” of the language; and there is a debate about whether mandatory instruction in English should be limited.

Whatever the outcome of the debate, Israelis are likely to continue to be relatively permissive regarding English as well as other languages. This attitude stems from the desire to attract Jewish immigrants and from the fact that Hebrew is difficult to learn, especially for speakers of Indo-European languages. There have been attempts to “modernize” (or Europeanize) Hebrew spelling; one of these was that of Itamar Ben-Avi (the son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda), who referred to the reforms of Kemal Atatürk in advocating the introduction of the Latin alphabet. This effort failed, largely because it would have introduced almost insurmountable problems in mastering the language. But there have been a number of accommodations to modern needs, including the use of “full” spelling in books and newspapers and of vocalized texts for immigrants. Furthermore, there has been a selective Europeanization of sentence structure and idioms.

The Meanings and Social Dimensions of Language Use

The use of a specific language other than Hebrew, whether as a first or second language, is said by some observers to reflect the socioeconomic status of it speakers (Ben-Rafael 1994; Ben-Rafael in Herzog and Ben-Rafael 2001; Suleiman 2004: 154). In such a sociolinguistic pecking order, English is considered the prestigious language of the privileged, whereas French is the prestigious language of the underprivileged: once associated with the Rothschilds, but now with immigrants from Morocco. Yiddish is the non-prestigious language of a privileged category; and Arabic, the non-prestigious language of the underprivileged. This listing must be taken with a grain of salt, for it is neither complete—the Russian language, for example, is not dealt with—nor is it an entirely accurate sociolinguistic assessment. There are particular bilingual communities associated with certain localities, depending on the source of immigrants—such as Nahariyya, settled by speakers of German in the 1930s; Raanana, where “Anglo-Saxons” are concentrated; and Ashdod, where many French-speakers are found. The complexity of views regarding particular languages and their speakers is illustrated by countless jokes and anecdotes. Among the most popular were about the attachment of German Jews to their language; and about East-European-born American Jews visiting Israel and asking “what kind of Jewish state is this where people don’t speak Yiddish?”

Immigrant communities have enjoyed varying degrees of acceptance, depending not only on their social status but also on their language patterns, including accents. Russian immigrants—and the Russian accent in Hebrew—appear to be more easily accepted than “Anglo-Saxon” immigrants—and the Anglo-Saxon accent in Hebrew. As Lefkowitz (2004: 11) has put it:

American Jews . . . have a different status [than Russian Jews] in Israel. Lumped together with Jews from Britain, South Africa, and other English-speaking countries as Anglosaksonim, ‘Anglo-Saxons,’ Americans have both a superior symbolic status and a certain irrelevance. High status stems from their relative wealth; their prominence in academic, professional, and business elites; their association with the United States, Israel’s
major benefactor; and, not least, their mastery of English. Yet they are irrelevant because they are considered non-mainstream Israeli. Indeed, popular stereotypes construct ‘Anglo-Saxons’ as frayerim, ‘suckers,’ in contrast to the more aggressive Israelis. And the Americans’ disproportionate association with left-wing, peace-camp politics adds to their marginalization.

Many of the social categories listed above have overlapped, and, in the course of time, have fused. Yekkim are no longer a separately identifiable group; the linguistic preferences of “Anglo-Saxons” are not uniform; and the language patterns of non-Ashkenazi Jews, divided among Sephardim and immigrants from Yemen, North Africa, Iraq, and Iran, vary widely, depending on their social status, length of time in the country, and education. Some academics of varying backgrounds, especially deeply religious ones, try to speak a more formal “Sabbath Hebrew” (Ivrit shel Shabbat); whereas the Hebrew of secular immigrants who learned it a purely “functional” medium is devoid of idioms reflecting the biblical or post-biblical Jewish heritage. They have no particular emotional attachment to Hebrew—in contrast to the traditional, Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox Israelis, for whom the language has spiritual and cultural associations.

The Uses of Bilingualism

Bilingualism is becoming common among all citizens of Israel. Each of the languages discussed above has a raison d’être for its speakers. For Israel’s Arab citizens, learning Hebrew is a practical necessity. For its Jews, a knowledge of English is associated with global competition and upward mobility, but their motives for learning Arabic are more complex. Some are learning that language in order to deal with a possible internal threat by Arab citizens; this is true especially of members of the Israeli military, for whom it comes under the rubric of “knowing your enemy.” Others are learning it because they believe in coexistence (Lefkowitz 2004: 159). For immigrants from Russia, keeping their language is a matter of guarding their identity, which is closely bound up with Russian culture. For ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speakers, bilingualism is serves to make distinctions between the holy and the profane—to protect a religious way of life from the onslaughts of an increasingly secular culture.

The choice of language has to do with opportunity structures, institutional facilitations and constraints, legal definitions, elite support, and the overall sociopolitical context. Thus, the more the Israeli Arabs are accepted as equal citizens, the more they are inclined to opt for Hebrew in their daily lives. The Arabic language will become increasingly important, however, no matter what the internal context, simply because of the immense political and demographic weight of the surrounding Arab world. Russian will maintain itself strongly as a second language for the foreseeable future, because of a continuing influx of immigrants from Russia and because of continuing contact with Russia—travel, visits from relatives, and cultural relations. French will diminish in importance because of declining immigration from France and because of tense, if not totally hostile, relations between France and Israel. Polish and Romanian will fade from the bilingual arena for lack of immigrant replenishment; and Amharic will disappear as a significant secondary language among Ethiopian immigrants even more quickly than European immigrant languages due to the weakness of their cultural elite.
Language and Ideology

Some linguists have argued that there is a relationship between the medium and the message—that each language reflects a particular pattern of thought and culture (May 2008: 133, 165). Thus, “Anglo-Saxons” are frequently said to be ambitious, pragmatic, and liberal, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s “American-style “market” ideology” is often associated with his accent-free American English. But that is far from arguing for a clear linguistic determinism. Immigrants from Germany and Austria in the 1930s were heavily identified with liberal rather than socialist parties, not because they spoke German but because they were overwhelmingly bourgeois. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union and, increasingly, former residents of France have tended to have hard-line foreign policy orientations, not because they speak Russian or French, but because of their experiences of anti-Semitism. The political orientations and voting patterns of Yiddish speakers and Jewish speakers of Arabic range across the ideological spectrum, and there is a deep ideological gulf between the nationalism and messianic Orthodoxy of English-speaking members of Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) and the secularism and cosmopolitanism of the “Anglo-Saxons” of Tel-Aviv.

Often enough, however, the relationship may be a reverse one: attitudes influence orientation to language. Thus, the degree of commitment to the State of Israel on the part of Arab citizens may influence their attainment of fluency in Hebrew; conversely, Arab students who enroll at the Collège des Frères or other French-language schools in Israel may well be motivated by France’s pro-Arab position in the Middle East conflict.

Intra-Hebrew Language Pluralism

The polyglossia of traditional Eastern European diaspora Jews—it embraced Hebrew, Aramaic, Yiddish, and the language of the host country—is replicated in Israel at least in part by a kind of “internal bilingualism.” Specifically, Ivrit, the modern, national, and quotidian Hebrew, coexists with Leshon haKodesh, the “Holy Tongue,” which is the Hebrew many ultra-Orthodox, anti-Zionist, and, often enough, Yiddish-speaking immigrants have been accustomed to. There is also what has been labeled “Yeshivish,” a kind of Ivrit spoken by students or graduates of Ashkenazi yeshivot that is heavily impregnated with religious vocabulary and turns of phrase. This applies in particular to the Haredi schools of the Mitnagdim, the opponents of Hassidism. The Haredim (“tremblers”) comprise several distinct groups ranging from the pro-Zionist Habad to the anti-Zionist Neturei Karta. All are increasingly Hebrew-speaking. But their schools do not teach Hebrew grammar, unless it is clearly related to Torah study; and they do not teach English, because that language is a conduit for secular culture (Baumel 2006: 133-134). They would like to teach Yiddish, but that would interfere with the Leshon haKodesh connected with Torah study. There are also gender factors in the use of Yiddish v. Hebrew; thus, among the Gerer (Gur) Hasidim, the men tend to know Yiddish—the mame loshn (literally “mother[’s] tongue”)—better than the women. There is an interesting differentiation of language use among both immigrant and native-born Haredim. Baumel (94-95) reports that while many Haredi men studying in yeshivot know Yiddish well because that language is a conduit for secular study, their wives and other female members of the community don’t know Yiddish well, if at all, and prefer to speak Hebrew. This is a reversal of the pattern prevailing in the Eastern European diaspora, where Hebrew was a “man’s language” because it was the language of prayer and study,
and women were confined to Yiddish, which was the woman’s language par excellence, because it was the language of the home.

There have been considerable variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, and frequency of daily use of Hebrew based on ethnicity and religiosity. The members of the ultra-Orthodox Neturei Karta, who do not recognize the legitimacy of the state, have traditionally refused to speak Hebrew for secular purposes; but that refusal is gradually moderated by necessity. Those who are in the labor force, especially women, use Israeli Hebrew ever more frequently, but with heavy borrowings from Yiddish. With the passing of generations, Haredi Hebrew is becoming less permeated with yeshiva idiom, less archaic, less Yiddish-influenced, and more “Israelized,” as the linguistic gap (as opposed to the cultural gap) between the ultra-Orthodox and the rest of Israeli society is narrowing (Ben-Rafael and Peres 2005: 63). Much depends on the influence of the rabbi, who serves as a role model when it comes to speech. In the European diaspora there were regional distinctions in the pronunciation of liturgical Hebrew, and some of them have been imported into Israel.

Diversity within the Hebrew language is particularly noticeable in the pronunciation patterns of the different Jewish “ethnic” communities. Among them, the Edot haMizrah or Mizrahim (the “oriental” groups), which extend from the Yemenites to the Moroccans, function as a bridge to the Arabs due to their knowledge of Arabic (or Judeo-Arabic) and their “Arabic” pronunciation of Hebrew (Lefkowitz 2004: 86-92). These differences are gradually diminishing as a consequence of the integrative mechanisms of the army, the media, public education, and popular culture. This process affects the Arabs as well, whose language is permeated with Israeli Hebrew expressions.

**The Functions of Hebrew**

Traditionally, Hebrew was regarded as indispensable for expressing the essence of Judaism. At various times, however, Hebrew served a multiplicity of purposes. In 18th century Germany, Moses Mendelssohn had envisaged it, not as a living language, but as a temporary medium for encouraging Jews to learn German and integrate into European culture (Dieckhoff 2004: 189). A similarly provisional role is performed by Russian-language newspapers in Israel, whose vocabulary is sprinkled with a constantly growing number of Hebrew words. Conversely, those who promoted the use of Hebrew from the mid-19th century onward thought of it as a way of obtaining cultural independence vis-à-vis Europe and as means of rapprochement with Middle Eastern Jewry (Aberbach 1988: 26.) In the second half of that century, the linkage between Hebraism and Jewish nationalism was emphasized (Sicker 1992: 95-99). To be sure, Hebrew has always been the national language of Jews as a people, regardless of whether it was associated with a political entity. But it needed to be revived and transplanted eventually to its ancestral soil. In order to do this, the number of Jews in Palestine had to be increased. For Rabbi Yehuda Hai Alkalai (Serbia, 1798-1878) the Hebrew language was to be the vehicle for redemption; in order to bring it about, Jews must be gathered from the four corners of the earth. But since they spoke different languages, they would not be able to communicate. Therefore they needed a common language, Hebrew, the historical language of the Jews. But Hebrew cannot be revived by a miracle or by natural means; therefore, an effort has to be made to do so. Similarly, David Gordon (1831-1886) linked Jewish nationalism and Hebraism by being one of the first to write articles on modern Zionism in Hebrew.
Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), a key figure in the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language and the author of the *Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, regarded colonization in Palestine not as an end in itself, that of “nation-building,” but as a means to language revival. For Ben-Yehuda, the purpose of the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language was to (re)establish a modern *nation*; but once the *state* was established, it standardized and officialized Hebrew.

For some Jews, Hebrew was not necessarily connected either with “state-building” in Palestine (or anywhere else) or with religion. For Aaron Lieberman (1845-1880), a socialist of Vilnius, Lithuania, Hebrew was to be used mainly for publishing socialist books to familiarize Jews with socialism (Sicker 1992:106). Possibly, his position was intended as an antidote to the Yiddish-speaking socialist and secularist diaspora autonomism incarnated by the Bundists. For secular Zionists, the language was to be a means of creating a substitute for the Jewish religion and even of rebelling against Judaism from within. This was true of the poet Shaul Tchernichovsky, who used his Hebrew poems to express his preference for Hellenism (Hirschfeld 2002: 1013f).

For the kibbutzniks of the early 20th century, Hebrew was the only medium needed to distance themselves from the literary/sedentary polyglossia characteristic of the diaspora; for Zionists, it was a substitute for Yiddish, a language of *galut* (Exile). For Hobsbawm (1983: 14; 1990: 54), Hebrew was an artificial language, “virtually invented,” presumably for the purpose of inventing a political ideology and building a nation, or nation-state. But Hebrew was not an invention *ex nihilo*: it was built upon biblical, Talmudic, and medieval Hebrew, and continues to be influenced by the polyglot context of the country, especially by the languages spoken by immigrants. It was merely revived as a spoken medium, and subsequently officialized. In this, Hebrew was no different from Czech, Flemish, Irish Gaelic, and Slovak. Indeed, all languages are artificial to the extent that they are standardized and gentrified; conversely, no language (except for Esperanto) is completely artificial since it is based on a previously existing idiom. Hebrew has become the language of the vast majority of Jewish Israelis, and the mother tongue of all who were born in the country. Thus, Israeli Hebrew changed rapidly due to diaspora influences and continuing immigration.

With the establishment of the state, Hebrew was used to legitimate the Jewish presence in Israel; a presence attested by archaeological finds with Hebrew inscriptions. Non-Zionists and post-Zionists viewed Hebrew as a territorially and politically defined language of communication, without reference to ethnicity or religion. Secularists who define Israeli identity in terms of language as well as political rights and obligations argue that Hebrew is not, and should not be, the exclusive language of Jewish Israelis. There are Arab Israelis whose habitual and preferred language is Hebrew rather than Arabic. This applies, inter alia, to Anton Shammas, an Arab citizen of Israel, who has written a best-seller in Hebrew, using that language, not as a Jewish language, but as the national language of Israel. The complicated relationship between ethnicity, cultural identity, citizenship, and language is also illustrated by the example of Emile Habiby, an Arab citizen of Israel, who articulates Israeli culture in Arabic. Both Shammas and Habiby accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel (see. Silberstein 1999: 129-145). For both, the Hebrew language serves as a binding medium in a political and territorial sense, not a religious one.
Language, Religion, and National Identity

The debate about the relationship among national identity, Israeli citizenship, religion, and language—and about how that relationship should be addressed by the educational establishment—continued after the establishment of Israel, and it has not ended (Zisenwine 1999). Hebrew is clearly indispensable for citizenship as well as national identity, but its connection with religion for today’s secular Israeli Jew is a matter of controversy. The Bible is studied in all (Jewish) Israeli public schools, including the “state” schools; but there are disagreements about how it should be done, and there is a question whether it can be studied merely as an important part of “national” literature with the religious (i.e., Jewish) element completely factored out. There is a close connection between Modern Hebrew and Judaism because that language is the most recent link in a chain that goes back to the Old Testament, and for that reason, most religiously observant Jews regard Hebrew as a quintessentially Jewish language. Thus, to separate the Hebrew language from the Bible, and the Bible from Judaism, is as difficult as to separate the Arabic language from the Qur’an, and the Qur’an from Islam.

Hebrew has been a primary vehicle for the expression of Jewish religious sentiment; at the same time, it is part of the founding myth of Israel; and that myth is part and parcel of historic Jewish aspirations—a fact expressed in the pre-state wording of Hatikva (The Hope). This anthem, which was to become the national anthem of Israel, refers to “the Jewish heart yearning for Zion and Jerusalem” and “the hope for a return to the land of our forefathers.” Can Arabs be part of that founding myth?

Some have argued that Hebrew should be thought of in territorial and political rather than religious terms—that it should be regarded as the language of all the inhabitants of the land rather than that of the Jews and Judaism. In other words, it is (or should be) language, not religion, that distinguishes Israel from other states. This point of view was reflected in the recent (April 2009) statement by Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, that he would not accept the definition of Israel as a Jewish state as a precondition for reconciliation between Israel and the Palestinians, but that he would not object to Israel’s naming itself “the Hebrew Socialist Republic” (Stern and Ravid 2009).

Would this be an acceptable proposition? Israeli Jews are increasingly secular; the number of atheists, anti-religious, and even anti-Zionists among them is increasing; and some would not object to a “de-Judaization” of the state, if not its dismantling, and its reconfiguration as a secular state, perhaps on the model of France, the United States, or Turkey, polities held together language rather than religion. But they would be articulating their positions in Hebrew. In such a situation, it may be possible to speak of the establishment of Hebrew as the Israeli national language as “the only triumph of Zionism” (Silberstein 1999: 134). But such a triumph would have negative consequences. Since the majority of Jews outside of Israel do not speak Hebrew (and their only connection with that language is religious) their relationship with country whose Jewish population is irreligious is severely compromised. Moreover, the triumph may not be permanent. The dominance of Hebrew cannot be protected without full state control by Jews, especially in face of pressures from a language spoken by millions of people nearby (as attested by the weakness of Irish Gaelic against the weight of the English language spoken by immediate neighbors). If the present high Arab birthrate continued, Muslims would sooner or later constitute the majority of Israel; in such a state, Hebrew
would be supplanted by Arabic as the dominant national language, and (since it is unlikely to be the only Arab-dominated state where Islam is totally neutralized) Judaism would end up being a barely tolerated minority religion. Hebrew would very likely be pushed aside, however gradually; and the secular Jewish population would have little incentive to fight for the maintenance of a language whose cultural-religious aspects have little meaning for them. In short, they would behave like most Jews in the diaspora: they would adopt the language of the majority for the same pragmatic reason that many Israelis today have learned English.

“Hebrewness” v. “Jewishness”
Traditionally Jewish and Hebrew identity were closely associated. But that association has become more ambiguous, and has been subjected to challenge. The “Canaanites” are Israelis of Jewish descent who insist upon their Middle Eastern, not Jewish, identity. A more complicated relationship is that of Hebrew-speaking Christians of Jewish origin, many of whom had settled in Israel after having been converted to Catholicism during World War II and who pray in Hebrew in Israeli churches but still identify with the Jewish people and even with Zionism.

Is Hebrew necessary for Jewish identity, even Zionist identity? After he settled in Israel, Abraham Sutzkever continued writing his poetry in Yiddish, not Hebrew. The poetry of Nelly Sachs expressed her Jewishness and Zionism in German, and so did that of Else Lasker-Schüler, who lived in Palestine for a number of years without learning Hebrew. Such cultural-linguistic tolerance is understandable for a country open to immigrants. But to what extent are non-Hebrew speakers accepted in its politics? Albert Einstein, who knew no Hebrew, was offered the presidency of Israel in 1951; Arkady Gaydamak, a Russian immigrant speaking no Hebrew at all, was a candidate for mayor of Jerusalem in 2008.8

There has been the notion of a “Hebrew culture” going beyond the Hebrew language (Schweid 1999: 9-11). It is often contrasted with “Jewish culture” (or Yiddishkeit), i.e., that of the diaspora. It encompasses literature, customs, holidays, an approach to pioneering (haluziut), and the nobility of physical, especially agricultural, labor—a Jewish culture specifically oriented toward, and based in, the pre-State Yishuv, and later, Israel (Liebman 1999: 45). But it is not a completely de-Judaized culture, since it includes religion in one form or another.

Even before the establishment of Israel, “Hebrew” was used as a euphemism for “Jewish” in many countries of the diaspora. For his readers in Germany Heinrich Heine wrote “Hebrew Melodies”; during World War II, the dog tags of Jewish soldiers in the U.S. Army were marked “H,” not “J”; and in Russian, Italian, and some other languages, the same terms are used for Hebrew and Jew[ish, e.g., yevrei and ebreo. According to Harshav (1993: 135f), “Hebrew [in the pre-state Yishuv] was not just a language but an omnibus label for a new kind of Jewish existence.” He reports that the slogan of Hapoel Hatzaïr, a leftist youth movement, was “Our world stands on three things: on Hebrew land, on Hebrew work, and on the Hebrew language.”9 In short, the very label of “Hebrew” had become a sort of fetish. But it was not really, at least not yet, the substitute for “Jewish” that it was to become later on, especially for the post-Zionists; it was merely the designation for a romanticized and “purified” Jewishness, purged of its diasporic dross.
Hebraization and its Critics

It is widely observed that Israeli culture is in its essentials a “Hebrew” culture. That observation, however, has not been accepted without criticism. Post-Zionist Israelis have criticized Hebrew culture for being too Jewish; and anti-Zionists have complained that the Hebrew taught in public schools is often accompanied by reference to the Bible and is therefore too Zionist (Silberstein 1999: 43f), and they have recommended a purely functional approach to language that is culturally and ideologically neutral. Some anti-Zionist former Israelis have criticized Israeli Hebrew culture for the opposite reason—that it is artificial because it is not Jewish enough. There is a Hebrew that has nothing to do with Jewish culture, nor, for that matter, with a specifically Hebrew culture, and it is growing; it is transnational, utilitarian, and commonplace, and includes, not only daily news reports and numerous translations of books from other languages, but Coca-Cola advertisements and “for sale” notices articulated in Hebrew. Critics have also pointed to the Hebraization of names—for instance, the changing of diaspora Jewish names, in particular those of elite figures, diplomats, prominent politicians, and intellectuals, to Hebrew ones. They argue that many of these names, “when first heard….sound Turkish, Indian or Arabic” and seem to have nothing to do with Jewishness (Beit-Hallahmi 1992: 124). These critics fail to point out that many of the diaspora names that were replaced were equally artificial, and were often foisted upon Jews by arbitrary Austro-Hungarian officials. Conversely, many diaspora Jews had Magyarized or Anglicized their names because these were too Jewish-sounding.

Others have posed the question whether the language spoken in Israel is, indeed, Hebrew. The rapid and, in the opinion of some, increasingly undisciplined growth of colloquial Hebrew has provoked part of the intellectual elite into a (largely losing) battle to keep the language pure and literate—analogous to the vain attempts of the Académie Française to arrest the spread of “franglais” (see Safran 1999). This development has led to a related question, posed by a number of Zionist and post-Zionist secularists, namely, whether Israeli Hebrew (Ivrit) is still Hebrew and whether the term “Israeli” (Yisraelit) is a necessary adjective to characterize contemporary Hebrew. The debate, which has revolved around the prescriptive v. descriptive approach to the language (see Spolsky and Shohamy 1999: 25; Zuckermann 2003: 205f), is at once a matter of substance and ideology. It is a fact that Israeli Hebrew is strongly influenced by Yiddish and other languages; but its resemblance to Talmudic, medieval, and even Biblical Hebrew is much greater than that of modern English is to Chaucer’s English. Modern Hebrew, to be sure, is not the language of the Pentateuch, nor that of the Babylonian sages; but it is still structurally the same and includes virtually all of the Biblical vocabulary. Many “classical” idioms are perpetuated in contemporary secular Hebrew, and a great deal of modern poetry contains Biblical allusions and references. A typical graduate of an Israeli secondary school has little trouble understanding “classical” Hebrew. At the same time, many young Israelis can no longer appreciate the religious and historical symbolism that classical Hebrew reflects, including its relationship to the Jewish past in Palestine (Kershner 2008).

More important, the vernacular language in Israel has changed—and continues to change—so rapidly and has incorporated so many foreign words that some secular, and especially post-Zionist, Israelis believe that they are justified in referring to Yisraelit as a
distinct language, one spoken by all Israelis, whether Jewish or not. But is it possible to separate the Hebrew language from its Jewish moorings—to imagine that language as a culturally, ethnically, and historically neutral medium? Even in its Yisraelit incarnation it cannot be completely divorced from the cultural baggage of Judaism, simply because the core of the language is still the vocabulary of the Bible. The quintessential, or vestigial, Jewishness of Hebrew is attested by the desire of Arab Israeli intellectuals to “un-Jew” that language (Silberstein 1999: 135).

Ernest Gellner (1988: 16) has remarked that “the idiom within which [man] was trained and within which he is effectively employable is his most precious possession, his real entrance-card to full citizenship.” This remark echoes the views of Abbé Grégoire, who equated loyalty to France with loyalty to the French language and who in 1794 advocated the eradication of patois (Ben-Rafael 1994: 17f). Clearly, this does not apply as much to Hebrew in Israel as it does to French in France, because citizenship is granted to a Jew automatically by virtue of his religious provenance. And what does “effective employment” mean? In postindustrial societies, many individuals who are employed in menial jobs do not speak the country’s dominant language; but it is arguable whether they are full citizens. The civic commitment of many Israeli Jews who have not mastered Hebrew is unquestioned; conversely, the patriotism of Israeli Arabs is often doubted even though they may be fluent in Hebrew. This includes those who are immersed in Israeli public life, such as members of the Knesset and the national executive, but who may not fully share the collective Israeli identity, which is intertwined with a Jewish identity.

The Basis of Language Choice
In most instances, a particular language is imposed upon individuals as part of their upbringing and social milieu. But there are many cases in which a person switches her language for purely instrumental reasons: to adapt to a new environment, to respond to economic opportunities, to acquire a new nationality.

Thus, although Yiddish continues to be used as much as Hebrew in individual homes in a number of Habad communities in Israel, its use is declining because Hebrew has been losing its “sacred” character in a modern and increasingly secular society (Baumel 2006: 10). A growing number of Haredim do not use Yiddish in their daily lives, or do not speak Yiddish at all, e.g., the Habad, Gerer, and Sephardi Haredim as well as the Mitnagdim (Baumel 2006: 2ff, 48ff). Moreover, not all Hebrew is considered sacred and therefore to be avoided for secular use. Some Haredim consider only Biblical Hebrew, and secondarily Talmudic Hebrew and Aramaic, as sacred or semi-sacred, but not Modern Hebrew, and they use it in for their mundane affairs.

There is a relationship between language use and public policy: the more the Haredi communities receive from the municipality or the national government, and the more they expect to receive (in terms of welfare allocations, job training, and family services), the more they are inclined to accept Modern Hebrew as having some kind of legitimacy. As late as 1994, more than 16 percent of the Jewish population used a language other than Hebrew (Ben Rafael 1994: 11). Most of these were immigrants from Arab-speaking countries, e.g., Yemen and Morocco, and they continued to speak one or another dialect of Judeo-Arabic in their Israeli homes, but these gradually died out under the pressure of their Israel-born and educated children, who used Hebrew in their daily lives (Talmon 2000: 209). The figures above have gradually declined; but the decline in
the use of non-Hebrew languages was reversed with the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia in the late 1980s. As for the Arab population, it is increasingly bilingual, especially the younger generation. There is some ambiguity: it is clear that young Arabs who have attended the Hebrew university and other “Jewish” universities are as fluent in Hebrew as in Arabic; but, as Spolsky and Shohamy (1999: 21) found, “Knowledge of Hebrew [among Arabs in Jerusalem] was inversely correlated with education, for it is those who are willing to work in hotels and restaurants and the building industry and in the marketplace who learn Hebrew. Educated Palestinians who work inside their own community in professional roles are able to continue to function effectively without Hebrew.”

The above would lend support to those who argue that language choice is rational—that one language is replaced by another on the basis of concrete payoffs. But the fostering of Hebrew unilingualism by the kibbutzniks of the Second Aliya was based, not on cost-benefit considerations, but on ideology. The disdain for, and the official fight against, Yiddish after 1948 was based as much on pragmatism as on the identification of that language with the diaspora condition, one that the establishment of the State of Israel was supposed to negate. The bilingualism of the Aliya Hadasha of German Jews was based on a “cultural imaginary”—the belief that German culture was a superior one and hence that the German language was worth maintaining and perpetuating to offspring.

The nationalism of secular Israelis is not based on the religion or the Bible; rather, it is based on language as well as territoriality and/or political identity. In some cases it is associated with a “Hebraic” culture, or the search for such a culture, based on (non-Judaic or pre-Judaic) archeology (as in the case of the “Canaanites”), and even on “the invention of a mythic past” (Liebman 1999: 33); in other cases, it is oriented totally in the here and now. It has been argued that the secular Jewish Israeli’s emphasis on his Israelism—a result of the “normalization” of the Jewish condition—has produced the “Hebrew-speaking non-Jew” (Orr 1994: 23). I think it is premature to make such a statement; for the vast majority of secular Israelis, a specifically Jewish identity remains alive and reasserts itself as long as Israel feels itself globally isolated and regards the Jewish diaspora as its only reliable ally, and as long as anti-Israel attitudes are informed by, or fused with, with anti-Semitism, as they often are. Thus, while a shared identity with their fellow Arab citizens founded on language may be important for secular Israeli Jews, many of them trust non-Hebrew speaking Jews more than Arabs who are fluent in Hebrew. Perhaps they fear that language as a determinant of membership in a political community defined in territorial terms may ultimately be an unreliable one.

Toponyms and Ethnonyms
The politics of language is evinced not only in its official status but in the labeling of places and people (Safran 2008). Under the British Mandate, the Arabic names of towns and villages in Palestine predominated; and British pro-Arab biases were also reflected in the place designations of the Royal Geographical Society. With the establishment of Israel, Arabic names were replaced by biblical Hebrew ones names in order to reclaim Jewish historical legitimacy. (In a sense, Israelis did to names what Christians and Muslims had done before them when they transformed synagogues respectively into churches and mosques.) The first postage stamps of the new state of Israel, issued before
the name of that state was officially proclaimed, bore the designation *Doar Ivri*, “Hebrew Post(age).”

Ideological-theological biases have outlasted British rule and are manifested in several instances today. This is exemplified by synonyms for Israel such as “Holy Land” (preferred by Christians) and “Zionist entity” (used by several Muslim countries); and they are apparent in the designation “Haram el-Sharif” by pro-Arab (especially English) scholars and “Esplanade des Mosquées” by the French media for the “Temple Mount,” as the American and German media commonly refer to the site. The French refer to Israel as “*l’Etat hébreu,*” the Hebrew State—in part to define it in terms of the language spoken by its Jewish majority; and in part to present it in a negative light, i.e., as an “ethnocracy.”¹² Such a designation would, of course, no longer apply if the Arab minority had its way and Arabic attained full equality with Hebrew. In the meantime, however, externally generated ethnonyms may be internalized by Israeli Jews. This explains why the latter have gradually changed their designation from of Palestinian Arabs from *aravi* (Arab) to *falastinai* (Palestinian) and why secular Israeli Jews refer less to “Judea and Samaria” than to “the [occupied] territories” (*hashtahim*).

**Summing Up**

In a discussion of the relationship between language, political context, and collective ethnic or religious consciousness, there is the question of which is the dependent and which the independent variable. This is particularly applicable to the place of language in Israel. On the one hand, it can be argued that in fostering Hebrew as the official language, the state has made it the primary criterion of membership in the national community, trumping religion. And in so doing, it has demoted Jewishness as a criterion. On the other hand, for entitlement to immigration and citizenship (e.g., under the Law of Return), what counts is proof of being Jewish, not knowledge of Hebrew.

It has been said (Bloom 2008) that Israelis are not a text-centered people, and that the bilingualism of the diaspora, which included Arabic, Aramaic, Ladino, Persian, or Yiddish, has not been perpetuated in Israel. Yet multilingualism is very evident in the public arena. Hebrew-English markings, public notices, and commercials are common throughout the country. There are English-language telephone directories. Street signs are in Hebrew, Arabic, and English in Jerusalem and Akko, and selectively in Haifa; they are bilingual in the Old City of Jaffa, but elsewhere in Tel-Aviv only in certain places. Store front marquees and public notices in Hebrew/English and Hebrew/Russian are common in the major cities.

The multilingualism discussed above is an aspect of the cultural pluralism that prevails in a country whose society is periodically replenished by waves of immigrants. As immigration wanes, so will polyglossia. As a result, the bilingualism of habit will give way to one of necessity; it will maintain itself for a variety of reasons among Jewish Israelis, but there will be a kind of functional prioritizing. Thus, while knowing Arabic ties them to their geographical surroundings, knowing English ties them to the larger Jewish world. English will compete strongly with Hebrew not only because of the importance of the diaspora but, more importantly, because of the status of English as an international lingua franca and its preeminence in the fields of science and technology. It is assumed, however, that, barring unforeseen events, Hebrew will retain its primacy as the national language of Israel.
References


Notes

1 Ashkenazim are Jews originating in Central and Eastern Europe; Sephardim are the descendants of Jews from Spain and Portugal, most of whom had settled in North Africa, Greece, and the Ottoman Empire after the Inquisition.

2 There is an analogous imbalance in Belgium and Canada.

3 With a few exceptions, in particular in communities heavily settled by immigrants from Morocco (see Bentolila 2001:243f).

4 They point specifically to Spain, where Castilian the official language of the state; India, where Hindi and English are the two official national languages (although Hindi is spoken by only a third of the population); and Québec, where French is the official language of the province, although 20 percent are English speakers (Halkin 2009).
The French ambassador to Israel has assured the Israelis that France supports their country’s membership, but the French foreign office is not likely to press too actively for this in the face of opposition of Arab countries.

Many Israeli Hebrew authors were “Russian” in origin or background, but their experiences were for the most part pre-Soviet ones.

Compare the function of Yiddish in the United States, at least insofar as the *Daily Forward (Forverts)* was concerned: Abraham Cahan, its editor, used Yiddish (more specifically an increasingly Americanized version of it) to wean Jewish immigrants away from the Eastern European shtetl toward American culture and language.

Gaydamak insisted that “I don’t speak, I act,” which recalled to some the promise by the Israelites to Moses at Mount Sinai that “we will act and we will listen” (“na’aseh venishma”).

This is a paraphrase of the Talmudic saying, “The world stands on three pillars: “Torah learning, worship, and acts of loving-kindness” (*Pirkei Avot, Mishna Nezikin*).

Modern Hebrew, and especially contemporary slang, contains many expressions taken from Arabic, English, Russian, and Yiddish (see Rosenthal 2005; also Lefkowitz 2004: 137-138). Note that Arabic curse words in Hebrew are now competing with (earlier as well as more recent) ones in Russian.

The number of Haredim (hassidim and mitnagdim) is estimated at about 600,000 globally, out of 1.5 million Orthodox (Baumel 2006: 4).

It is difficult to think of analogies. The French do not refer to Spain, Poland, or Ireland as “l’Etat catholique” or to Saudi Arabia or Iran as “l’Etat musulman,” perhaps because there is more than one state where Roman Catholicism or Islam is the dominant religion.