

1 Is Hebrew an endangered language?

Two questions

When people learn that I am a linguist, the first question they ask me is: how many languages do you know? Once I have successfully dodged an answer, the next question depends on where I am. At conferences dealing with language policy, one of the first questions people ask me is about the revitalization of Hebrew, and what I can tell them about it so that they can use the information to deal with the problem of the endangerment of their heritage languages.

Once you judge a language not by how many speakers it still has but by the age of the youngest speaker, you know it is in trouble. Joshua Fishman, one of the leading experts in the field of the sociology of language, defines the lowest stage of language maintenance as when it is known only by old isolated individuals without anyone to speak to.¹ This was the situation with Eyak, a language once spoken by natives of Alaska; Michael Krauss, a linguist who studied it, said he knew only two old women who could speak it, and they hadn't talked to each for many years; both have since died. Eyak had started to disappear when members of the tribe began to switch to Tlingit, a language that now has about 400 speakers in the United States and Canada, most of whom are now bilingual in English. All over the world, speakers of the many languages that are endangered are trying to restore their use, which is why they ask about what they call the miracle of the rebirth of Hebrew. I tell them about the special conditions that made this possible and warn them how hard a task they are facing.

At home in Israel, I am asked a different question: is Hebrew itself in danger? Has the immigration of 1 million Russian speakers made it less likely to survive? Do all the English words we hear in Hebrew mean that it is threatened? And what about English-language TV, and computers, and the way that children slip English words and phrases into their conversations? And how, the president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language has recently asked, can we prevent the universities from using so much English and forcing the students to use it?² And might the fact that Arabic is legally recognized as an official language detract from Hebrew's status? After all, didn't we lose Hebrew once, during the

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Babylonian exile, and again, more seriously, after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and in the Diaspora?

My first simple answer is that Hebrew is alive and well, and no more threatened than any other language of a small, vital nation. In the rest of this chapter, I flesh out this answer by describing what I call the *sociolinguistic ecology* of Israel, the complex network of communication that Hebrew dominates while sharing it in part with many other language varieties. To do this, I use a model that helps us understand the way that language varieties divide up a communication habitat.

First, I need to give two preliminary definitions. To start, I take the most obvious and common meaning of a *language* to include all the varieties to which the name may be attached; thus, *English* includes all the varieties,³ including the historical and obsolete, such as the languages of *Beowulf* and Chaucer, and the modern dialects (Texan and Irish and Australian and Indian⁴), which may or may not be mutually intelligible. In this approach *Hebrew* includes the classical biblical language (as it changed over the epochs when it was spoken and written) and its later descendants: Mishnaic Hebrew (which I accept represents a later, more colloquial variety and not an artificial language of the rabbis), and the various medieval and Enlightenment versions, and all the varieties of Modern Israeli Hebrew (General or Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Yemenite, or whatever), with all their lexical and grammatical changes and ethnic and social dialects and accents. I will be more precise when it seems relevant, and make clear when I am talking about the kinds of mixed varieties that occur as when, for instance, English- or Spanish-speaking immigrants to Israel use the language, or when their children switch between Hebrew and their heritage language.

Second, I start by assuming the widest possible meaning for *Jews*, leaving for others the difficult question of whether we are referring to a people, a religion, a nation, a culture, or a civilization, or whatever other label seems appropriate.⁵ As you read, you will come to realize that I have much more elaborate and complex definitions for these basic terms, but they shouldn't hold us up.

Sociolinguistic ecology

Although my first jobs were as a language teacher, my academic research was in applied linguistics and language testing. As time went on, I developed an interest in sociolinguistics, a field that deals with the uses of the varieties of language in a social setting, finishing up with my current preoccupation with language policy. I have published two recent books on the topic, *Language Policy*⁶ and *Language Management*,⁷ and I have also just edited *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*,⁸ with thirty-two chapters written by colleagues who are experts in the many parts of the field. This focus explains

my lack of expertise in formal linguistics, such as grammar and historical language change, and my need to rely on experts in those areas.

I will be more confident in standing by my own judgment applying generalizations I have developed studying specific language situations and dealing with language policy. The model I am finding most useful for this is a *sociolinguistic ecology*; Einar Haugen⁹ introduced the term and the biological evolutionary metaphor, with language varieties seen as competing for dominance in the many habitats of language use in a society.

It is hard to define the limits of the objects of study. What do we mean by “the Jewish world”, which includes Israel?¹⁰ In this chapter, I am dealing specifically with Israel. But how do we treat non-Jews in Israel and Jews in the Diaspora? Perhaps the fact that there is now a state in which Hebrew is one of the official languages as well as the dominant variety changes the picture considerably and means we do not need to worry about its survival in a diaspora community. But diaspora communities can be important, especially when they are all that is left, as Cook Island Māori is now spoken mainly in New Zealand. For a sociolinguist, the loss of language use in a diaspora community may be as relevant as in the homeland, for our interest is in a community of speakers. For a linguist worried about Russian language endangerment, the fact that Russian-speaking immigrants to Israel are slowly moving to Hebrew is irrelevant, as the language continues in the Russian Federation. So what happens to Hebrew in the United States is important, but not vital for the survival of the language.

There are two different linguistic approaches to defining communities. The classic approach in the work of the structural linguists was to talk about a *language* community, such as the English-speaking world, or *la francophonie*, or all the speakers of a language whether or not they were ever in contact. For sociolinguists, the more useful unit has been the *speech* community, a term invented by John Gumperz¹¹ and quickly picked up by his colleagues¹² and exploited by William Labov in his study of New York City as a speech community.¹³ Labov suggests, and others agree, that it is not important that all the members of a speech community use the same language varieties but, rather, that they share the same values for the varieties: New Yorkers don’t need to be able to imitate a Brooklyn accent, but to be able to recognize one. Dell Hymes, who has defined speech community as the “concurrence of rules of grammar and rules of use”,¹⁴ emphasizes its social nature: one should start with the community and its means of expression rather than with a language.¹⁵

Communities and demographics

When we are interested in language maintenance and loss, the first question is: who uses it? To answer the question about the current stability of Hebrew, it helps to distinguish between Israel (where it is the official and dominant

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language and is passed on to babies) and the Diaspora (where it is associated with Israel and with Jewish education and religious practice, but depends for its survival on schools and immigrants from Israel).

Within Israel there are a number of distinct communities, each including smaller ones. A first division might be made between Jews, Arabs, and foreigners. Jews in Israel can be divided sociolinguistically between native-born and immigrants. They also divide between a general group (secular and modern orthodox) and *Haredim* (ultra-orthodox), although modern orthodox and *Haredim* share education in older varieties of Hebrew and use of religious terms.¹⁶

Another division, cutting across the first, is between *Ashkenazim* (those whose ancestors came via Europe), *Sephardim* (descended from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 who moved to the Ottoman Empire or north Africa), and *Mizrahim* (north African or Middle Eastern Jews whose ancestors lived in Arabic-speaking countries until they escaped or were expelled). Immigrants divide up linguistically between those who have been here for long enough to learn Hebrew and those whose immigration is more recent; among their children, a critical difference is between those who have been in Israel for six or seven years and more recent arrivals. They also divide up according to country of origin, with major groupings from Russia, Ethiopia, France, the United States and England, and South America added to the earlier groups from eastern Europe and Arab countries.

Israeli Arabs too need to be more finely defined; one useful division is between city dwellers, in regular contact with Jews or working in Jewish businesses, and villagers or those living in Arab towns. Another relevant division is between the Muslim majority and the Christian minorities, who add other languages (Armenian, Turkish, Syriac, or Aramaic, for instance). Two important groups are Bedouin and Druze, both of whom may serve in the army and therefore know more Hebrew.

There are also foreigners; not just large numbers of tourists and pilgrims, but also many workers from Africa or Asia, who may be documented or not. Foreign workers are commonly employed either in agriculture or the building industry, or as caregivers.¹⁷

The language practices of these communities are not hard to guess (which is just as well, because, in the absence of a language question on the Israeli census, it can only be guessed or derived from small focused studies or from the language questions included in the 2011 Social Survey, which I discuss later).

Native-born Jews and their children are most likely to have Hebrew as their mother tongue (the language in which their parents spoke to them when they were growing up) and to use it regularly. Most *Haredim* now know and use Hebrew, but some sects of *Hasidim*¹⁸ still use or favor the use of Yiddish as a way of keeping separate from the Hebrew-speaking Zionists who serve in the army and whose taxes and charity subsidize their large and largely unemployed

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families. Many older immigrants still use their heritage languages, such as Polish or Yiddish and various forms of Judeo-Arabic; most are bilingual in Hebrew, and their heritage languages incorporate many Hebraisms. More recent immigrants are likely to be proficient in their heritage languages, such as English, French, Russian, Spanish, or Amharic, but their children are becoming increasingly proficient in Hebrew, and after six or seven years in Israel are similar to native-born (the Beta Israel are an exception). Palestinian Arabs from the Arab towns and villages tend to speak Palestinian Arabic, but, with increasing education or with employment in the general sector, are likely to develop proficiency in Hebrew; those from the mixed towns are commonly bilingual in Palestinian Arabic and Hebrew; their schooling has included classical or Qur'anic Arabic.

Foreign workers in agriculture have minimal Hebrew (their foremen act as interpreters) and continue to use their native languages, whether Thai or an African language. Those employed as caregivers (many from the Philippines) or in hotels and restaurants will have learned some Hebrew or picked up the language of their employers.

Cutting across these divisions are some general tendencies. Arab women and *Haredi* men are less likely to be employed in the workforce, and so less likely to be proficient in spoken Hebrew. Druze and those Bedouin who serve in the army will be more proficient in Hebrew than other Palestinian Arabs. Immigrants who live in closer contact with their compatriots (in Russian neighborhoods such as Ashkelon, or French neighborhoods such as Netanya, or English neighborhoods such as Raanana, Bet Shemesh, or Efrat) are more likely to keep using their heritage language in public as well as private, and some of their children will still speak a heritage language.

But Modern Israeli Hebrew remains the dominant, normal, and unmarked language of Israel. If we had a language census, it would still be by far the most common language, as it was in 1983, when there were estimated to be 2,166,973 people speaking it, compared to 667,810 speakers of Palestinian Arabic, 199,780 speakers of English, 189,220 speakers of Yiddish, 116,690 speakers of Romanian, 107,335 speakers of French, and 101,065 speakers of Russian (an extra 1 million or so arrived in the 1990s, making it the second largest language), listing only those over 100,000. If we are worrying about numbers alone, with the current 6 to 7 million estimated speakers and a higher proportion of younger than older speakers, the Hebrew language seems relatively safe in Israel. The 2011 Social Survey supports this view.

2011 Social Survey

There are at last some data available on native languages and language use in Israel.¹⁹ Since 2002 the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics has conducted the

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annual Social Survey on a sample of Israelis aged twenty years and over. Each year the questions have included 100 items covering the main areas of life, and each year an additional module has been added dealing with one or two specific topics. In 2011 the two added topics were studies during a lifetime and the use of language. This second topic provides the first survey data since the language question in the 1983 census, although the questions and the population were not comparable: the 1983 question asked about language knowledge and dealt with people over fifteen, while the 2011 survey focused on native language and language use in a population over the age of twenty.²⁰

The questionnaire named eight languages: Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian, Amharic, French, Spanish, and Yiddish. There are a number of interesting changes in the ranking of the languages from the 1983 census. Hebrew remains first, though the number calling it their native tongue now stands at 49 percent (but 61 percent among Jews, compared to 59 percent in the 1983 census), and Russian²¹ native speakers are now 15 percent, compared to a total of 5 percent in the census. Arabic remains unchanged at 18 percent, and Yiddish has dropped to 2 percent, while English and French have risen to 2 percent. Among Jews, about 75 percent report very good proficiency in Hebrew. Filling out forms in Hebrew is a problem for 27 percent of the sample and for 45 percent of the Arabs.

As well as the native speakers counts, there were questions on language use. Among Arabs, 98 percent speak Arabic at home, but 4 percent also speak Hebrew there. Of those who are employed, 79 percent use Hebrew at work, but only 20 percent use only Hebrew; 79 percent use Arabic at work, but only 16 percent use only Arabic.

Among those born in the former Soviet Union, 88 percent speak Russian at home, and 48 percent speak only Russian at home; 48 percent speak Hebrew at home, and 8 percent speak only Hebrew at home. Of those former Soviet Jews²² who are employed, 93 percent speak Hebrew at work, and 32 percent speak only Hebrew at work, but 57 percent speak Russian at work, and 6 percent speak only Russian at work. Employment and knowledge of Hebrew are closely connected. Most former Soviet Jews (87 percent) continue to speak Russian with their friends, but 38 percent speak only Russian with friends; 9 percent speak only Hebrew with friends.

Age is also correlated with native language: only 18 percent of the respondents over sixty-five have Hebrew as a native language, 44 percent of those between forty-five and sixty-four, and 60 percent of those between twenty and forty-four. Jews generally claim stronger proficiency in Hebrew than Arabs, as do immigrants who arrived before 1990 than those who arrived later.

Proficiency in Hebrew is related to income, as shown in earlier studies of immigrants in many countries.²³ Among Arabs, the level of academic success is also related to proficiency in Hebrew; while Arab schools in Israel use Arabic as

the language of instruction, they also emphasize developing Hebrew-language skills. Ability in language is also related to employment; 82 percent of those Arabs with high levels of Hebrew proficiency are employed.

These new data clearly confirm the dominance of Hebrew in Israel. It is understandable that the addition of over 1 million immigrants from the Soviet Union in the 1990s changed the language balance towards Russian, but, remembering that setting the lowest age for the survey at twenty means that most of the Russian speakers included were born in the Soviet Union and that all Israeli schools teach in Hebrew only, we can see the shift of this population too towards Hebrew, with education and employment accounting for much of the change. With all the evidence showing that younger speakers are becoming Hebrew speakers, it seems reasonable to suggest that, without the continuing immigration of Russian speakers, the language will continue to decline over the next generations. The data also reveal the incursion of Hebrew into the Israeli Arab population: its relation to education and employment demonstrates the pragmatic pressures on the language practices of the community.

Domains

The numbers, then, are positive, but another way to estimate a language's stability is to list the domains in which it is used. Joshua Fishman introduced this concept in his major study of the Jersey City *barrio*.²⁴ A sociolinguistic domain, he suggests, has typical participants (defined by their roles), topics of conversation, and locations. For the New Jersey Spanish-speaking population, he identifies five significant domains. The first is family, in which typical participants are family members; the second is friendship; the third is religion, in which participants are priests and congregants; the next is education, with teachers and students; and the last is employment.²⁵ There turned out to be regularities of language choice in these situations, with Spanish most used for family and religion, and English for education and employment. This pattern, he argues, produces stable *diglossia*, a term he uses for the division of functions for language use equivalent to the cases of the stable contrast between the uses of standard German and Swiss German in Switzerland, or Classical Arabic and the regional varieties, or French and Creole in Haiti. That is to say, people are not just bilingual, but live in a speech community where there are defined rules for choosing a language.²⁶ When I go into a post office in my Jerusalem suburb, I expect to use Hebrew; when I meet a tourist, I expect to be addressed in English.

Applying the domain model to Israel, we find that the most common language for home and neighborhood use among Jews (except for recent and elderly immigrants and some Hasidim) is Hebrew. In new immigrant families that still use heritage languages, the children increasingly use Hebrew with each other, and even with their parents. Russian immigrant parents prefer to use

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Russian with their children, but the majority permit switching. The children report that they use Russian with their parents half the time and with their grandparents all the time; only 10 percent use Hebrew with their parents. Over 40 percent use Hebrew with siblings, and 70 percent use Hebrew with the Russian-speaking peers who are their main friends.²⁷ Shulamit Kopeliovich has studied the families in one community of former Soviet Jews as their children bring Hebrew into the family and as the parents attempt (with varying degrees of success) to persuade the children to maintain their Russian.²⁸ Earlier studies confirmed this, reporting that children of Soviet immigrants were learning Hebrew rapidly.²⁹ Another study of the children of former Soviet immigrants found that it took six or seven years in Israel for Russian children to catch up with native-born children in Hebrew and mathematics scores.³⁰ The same study showed Beta Israel (Ethiopian) immigrant children took longer, as confirmed in evidence that the language of the home and the language used with children remains Amharic or Tigrinya.³¹ In *Haredi* families most spoke Hebrew; mothers generally spoke to their children in Hebrew, but in some Hasidic groups there is encouragement of Yiddish. Boys start to learn Yiddish when they go to *heder* (ultra-orthodox state-funded but independent elementary schools, usually not following state curricula) and their sisters may be taught Yiddish as a subject when they go to school.³² While French remains important to immigrants from north Africa, many of whom speak it, the children of these immigrants grow up speaking Hebrew but may be encouraged to learn French in school.³³

For most Jewish immigrant children, the first outside pressure to speak Hebrew comes from peers who live in the neighborhood. The government policy of concentrating Ethiopian immigrants helps account for the slowness of assimilation of this group. The second outside pressure is the school, with pre-school programs having a major effect too. “The second generation of Russian-speaking immigrants are generally exposed to the L2 (Hebrew) as soon as they enter a kindergarten at ages two to three, with the result that Hebrew inevitably appears to be the socially and educationally dominant language.”³⁴

The rapid urbanization of so many communities throughout the world is a key factor in language endangerment and loss; in 1950 70 percent of the world’s population was estimated to be rural, and 30 percent urban, but by 2050 these figures will probably be reversed. There are urban neighborhoods in Israel where languages other than Hebrew are heard in public, such as the Arab-speaking towns and villages of the Triangle and parts of Jaffa and Haifa, the centers of intensive Russian and Beta Israel settlement, the English or French immigrant suburbs, or the Haredi Yiddish enclaves.

Early studies³⁵ showed the use of English in some neighborhoods of Jerusalem, and, in a shopping street close to the center of the city, 14 percent of the conversations overheard were in English. Most of those using English

were native speakers, but only a half of those using Hebrew had grown up speaking it.³⁶ While these studies attest to the high status of English – something noted earlier in a study of the attitudes of high school students³⁷ – and its value as a second language among non-speakers of Hebrew,³⁸ they also make clear the public dominance of Hebrew, especially taking into account that most of the shopkeepers in the study were native speakers of Yiddish or Arabic. There are middle-class neighborhoods where French is heard in public (Netanya is an example), but the bulk of French speakers are of north African origin; in their neighborhoods, a north African variety of French and Moroccan Judeo-Arabic can be heard, especially from the elderly.³⁹ There are neighborhoods in Tel Aviv where one hears Yiddish from the elderly, but they are commonly bilingual and use Hebrew with their younger relatives. Varieties of Judeo-Arabic continue to be heard from older people, but the numbers are declining rapidly, as their children commonly speak an unmarked variety of Hebrew.⁴⁰ Other languages too will be heard, including the Spanish of the Latin American immigrants, and the Amharic and Tigrinya of Beta Israel and the African languages of non-Jewish economic refugees.

Palestinian Arabic is, of course, the unmarked language in Arab villages and towns and Arab neighborhoods of mixed cities, but in them there is gradual increase in the influence, and even use, of Hebrew. Israeli Palestinians are rapidly becoming bilingual, first borrowing Hebrew words and then code switching and developing bilingual proficiency.⁴¹ There is not an analogical learning of Arabic by Hebrew-speakers, but a continuing loss of the Judeo-Arabic varieties brought by Jews from Iraq, north Africa and Egypt, and only a limited learning of school Arabic in many, but not all, schools.⁴²

Public signage (commonly labeled “linguistic landscape”, though it usually refers to cityscape) often provides a clue to the sociolinguistic make-up of a neighborhood; it is strongly influenced, however, by the state of literacy in the language and the community, the existence of government (national or local) rules, and the advertising preferences of large national and international firms. As early as the 1960s scholars noted the intrusion of English into commercial signs in a West Jerusalem shopping street.⁴³ A study of signs in the Old City of Jerusalem showed the complexity of this phenomenon, with changes in language (dropping Hebrew from street signs in the Jordanian period, adding it to Arabic and English after the reunification of the city in 1967) and in the ordering of the languages (English, Arabic, and Hebrew under the Mandate; Hebrew, Arabic, and English under Israeli rule).⁴⁴ There were disputes over Arabic in signs in Upper Nazareth, considered a Jewish (therefore Hebrew) neighborhood by the local government but a mixed Arab–Jewish city by local Arabs and their organizations.⁴⁵ But Israeli neighborhoods are predominantly Hebrew, with marked exceptions of speaking and signs in other languages.

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Education as a factor

Schooling is one of the most significant domains for language loss and maintenance, and the decision on a language of instruction as well as of other languages to teach is a crucial one. Commonly ignoring the logical and simple policy of using the language of the children, most national language education policies use this decision to manage language practices and beliefs.⁴⁶ The most significant step in the revitalization of Hebrew was the decision of some Yiddish-speaking immigrants to Ottoman Palestine in the late nineteenth century who had settled in small agricultural towns to replace French with Hebrew. The teachers, Yiddish speakers but literate in Hebrew, were called on to use Hebrew to talk about everyday life and to encourage their pupils to speak it all the time. This was adopted as school policy also in the kibbutzim founded in the early twentieth century and in the Jewish towns growing up at the time and in the Hebrew city of Tel Aviv. In particular, the schools of the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, an organization supported by German Jews to help Jewish communities, became the new centers for the restoration of the language and its modernization. While the schools of the *Haredim* continued to use Yiddish to teach their pupils, the Zionist schools taught all subjects in Hebrew at all levels.

A crisis came in 1913 when a plan was announced to start a tertiary institution, keeping Hebrew for humanities and Jewish studies but teaching science in the then current language of science, German. It was students and teachers from the high schools who led the demonstrations that are now known as the Language War. During World War I the German consul is reported to have encouraged teaching in German, but the British troops soon put a stop to that, enforcing under military government a decision to recognize Hebrew officially for the Jewish schools.⁴⁷

Under the British Mandate, the government (underfunded, as were most aspects of the British Empire apart from military forces) left it to the Arab and Jewish communities to set up and pay for their own schools, though they required both systems to teach English as a second language. When in the 1920s, after the war, the Jewish tertiary institutions were established, both the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (note “Hebrew” in the name!) and the Haifa Technion adopted rules requiring teaching, examinations, and student writing to be in Hebrew. The result was that, at the time of the foundation of the state in 1948, when a decision (echoing Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations policies) was made to use Arabic or Hebrew in a school according to the make-up of the pupils, Israel already had an established policy of using Hebrew from pre-school level to university.

In the main, this continues to be the practice, with minor exceptions. Whereas many nations with larger and longer-established modern languages find it necessary to carry on advanced education in other languages (e.g. French is