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978-1-107-05544-5 - The Languages of the Jews: A Sociolinguistic History

Bernard Spolsky

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## The Languages of the Jews

Historical sociolinguistics is a comparatively new area of research, investigating difficult questions about language varieties and choices in speech and writing. Jewish historical sociolinguistics is rich in unanswered questions: when does a language become “Jewish”? What was the origin of Yiddish? How much Hebrew did the average Jew know over the centuries? How was Hebrew re-established as a vernacular and a dominant language? This book explores these and other questions, and shows the extent of scholarly disagreement over the answers. It shows the value of adding a sociolinguistic perspective to issues commonly ignored in standard histories. This is a vivid commentary on Jewish survival and Jewish speech communities, and is essential reading for students and researchers interested in the study of Middle Eastern languages, Jewish Studies, and sociolinguistics.

BERNARD SPOLSKY is Professor Emeritus of the English Department at Bar-Ilan University and editor of *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy* (2012).

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## Preface and acknowledgments

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I started working on the topic of this book thirty years ago, shortly after I returned to Israel and began to think about the multilingual society I was again living in. A first paper<sup>1</sup> broached the field for me, and exposed me to the challenge of studying the sociolinguistic ecology of no longer existing communities. That was my first attempt at historical sociolinguistics; there were further essays in the genre within two later books, *The Languages of Jerusalem*<sup>2</sup> and *The Languages of Israel*.<sup>3</sup> The present book seems to me a natural next step, filling in the gaps between the history in the former and the contemporary survey in the latter.

The title should make it clear that I am going beyond the concern with Jewish languages (such as Yiddish and Ladino), the study of which was opened seriously by Max Weinreich and has been continued by a large group of scholars (they appear on the website [www.jewish-languages.org](http://www.jewish-languages.org)), to ask about any of the “co-territorial” varieties – as Weinreich called them – that have become the vernacular or standard languages used by Jewish communities. This perspective will challenge me to consider when a variety adopted and used by Jews has been sufficiently modified to justify calling it a “Jewish language”.

The book sets out to combine a brief history of the Jewish people with a history of the sociolinguistic ecologies that resulted from this history, and thus forms a continuing study of language loyalty, as Joshua Fishman called it in his pioneering work on language shift, loss, maintenance, death, and revival.<sup>4</sup> By force of circumstances, ever since the Babylonian exile in the sixth century before the Common Era, and even more since the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish state by the Romans and the dispersion of Jews throughout the ancient world, exacerbated by regular expulsions by Christians and Muslims alike, resulting in even wider geographical spread and contact with even more languages, Jews have been individually plurilingual and collectively multilingual, held together over these three millennia by their devotion to and use of the original Jewish language: Hebrew.

Hebrew having been limited to liturgy, scholarship, and literacy for centuries, the story of its revernacularization and revitalization as the dominant language of the renewed Jewish state of Israel is seen as a model for many

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groups threatened with the loss of their own heritage languages. This book, focused as it is on Jewish language use, provides an opportunity to explore many of the most significant issues and processes in the theory of language policy and the practice of language management as relevant to endangered languages.

I began these studies in conversations and collaboration with the late Robert Cooper and with Elana Shohamy, and was encouraged to persevere with historical sociolinguistics by Christina Bratt Paulston. As will become apparent to anyone who glances at the endnotes and the references, this book is built on the research and scholarship of a large number of others, to whom I must offer my deepest gratitude. While I sometimes take issue with their opinions, I cannot ignore their findings, and depend on the data they have published. Of these, Fishman has obviously been the first and most important. There are others whose names crop up regularly and whose leadership has been critical. Weinreich was clearly the major scholar in the field, and the new edition of his classic study, more than doubled in size to include the notes, has been invaluable.

Although I wrote most of this book in Jerusalem, some of the revision was done in quiet moments looking out over the hills of Tuscany, where I was spending a fortnight with the family. Several days were devoted to trips to some of the walled cities, and twice we visited Lucca, an obviously prosperous town with a wall that can be comfortably walked or biked around. There is no trace of the Kalonymus family, whose ancestor moved from Lucca to help establish the Ashkenazi community in Metz, playing a key role in the development of Loter. The only trace we noted of Jewish presence was a *gelateria* whose ice cream was reputed to be kosher. Only in Rome and Milan are there still large and active Jewish Italian communities. Even Rome, the largest and oldest community, turns out to have had a very embittered history. Jews in Rome were crowded into a tiny area on the banks of the river Tiber. When the synagogue was rebuilt at the end of the nineteenth century, it was modeled on a church building, for there were no Jews in Italy who had been allowed to study or practice architecture or engineering. After a brief period of emancipation at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Fascist regime lowered the civil status of Jews. Since the end of Fascism, there have been brief moments of glory (the visit of a Pope to the synagogue) and horror (the bombing of the synagogue), confirming the fragility of Jewish life there.

What this trip reminded me of is the virtual absence of Jews from many of the sites described in this book. The Jews of central and eastern Europe were finally exterminated by the Nazis with the help of local anti-Semites, many Jews who survived the Holocaust and Stalinist oppression in the Soviet Union have now emigrated to Israel, and almost all Jews in Arab and Muslim lands have also been driven out. Only in western Europe do Jewish communities survive,

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dealing with new restrictions on Jewish observance, such as a ban on the kosher killing of animals and on circumcision. And liberal democratic western Europe, after a brief period of regret at its share in the Holocaust, now resumes anti-Jewish activities disguised as defense of freedom fighters. So, too, have the Jewish varieties of language that grew in Europe and the Middle East disappeared, with the destruction of their speakers or the assimilation of survivors.

This is an appropriate place to thank Andrew Winnard and his colleagues at Cambridge University Press, who have guided the publication of this and my three preceding books. I thank also the three anonymous scholars who read and approved the proposal, making a number of useful suggestions, which I have incorporated. I thank Judith Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin for permission to use their maps. I want also to pay tribute to the search engines (especially Google and Google Scholar) that helped me find sources and the digital records of books and articles, which saved me hours of library work and yards of home shelf space. With the aid of a computer and the internet, I have been able to accomplish in fifteen months what would have taken a lifetime when I first started academic work.

I want also to acknowledge the love, devotion, patience, and questions of my wife, Ellen Spolsky, over the half-century we have shared, especially as she has been distracted from her own writings by my regular demands for her attention. Given the pressures of publication and the continuing developments of the field, additional information and updates can be found at [www.cambridge.org/spolsky](http://www.cambridge.org/spolsky).

## Glossary

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<i>Ashkenazim</i> (singular <i>Ashkenazi</i> )	Jews from Europe
<i>Beta Israel</i>	Jews from Ethiopia
<i>Halacha</i>	Jewish religious law and practice
<i>Haredim</i> (singular <i>Haredi</i> )	fundamentalist or ultra-orthodox Jews
<i>Hasidim</i> (singular <i>Hasid</i> )	members of one of the sects of orthodox Judaism following a movement founded in the eighteenth century; sects are usually named after the town of their first leader, such as Lubavitcher, Satmar, or Belz
<i>Heder</i>	traditional Jewish elementary school
<i>Leshon hakodesh</i> (Hebrew; <i>loshn koydesh</i> , Yiddish)	Hebrew or Hebrew–Aramaic, sacred language
<i>Mishnah</i>	early (third century CE) compilation of commentaries and interpretation of the Torah
<i>Mizrahim</i> (singular <i>Mizrahi</i> )	Jews from north Africa and Arab countries
<i>Sephardim</i> (singular <i>Sephardi</i> )	Jews originating from Spain or Portugal
<i>Teiku</i>	Talmudic term meaning “The question has not been resolved”