

ENGLISH VERSUS HEBREW IN ISRAEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The Jerusalem Report of October 10, 2000 carries an article entitled “Is Hebrew Dying Again?” It adds: “The growing predominance of English in Israeli academia and high tech has led to a renewed debate over whether Hebrew is in danger” (p. 46)

The land that is now Israel has had a long period of ever changing multilingualism. At the end of the nineteenth century, when Israel was part of the Ottoman Empire, the language of government, limited mainly to officials and soldiers, was Turkish, while the population spoke local dialects of Arabic. Classical Arabic was the written language of the educated elite. Local Jews also spoke a variety of Arabic. Sephardic Jews spoke Arabic, but within their own community, they spoke Judezmo, also known as Ladino, which developed from Renaissance Spanish (The Ottoman Empire had welcomed Jews expelled from Spain in 1492). German was encouraged at schools as official German government policy. The *Alliance Israélite Universelle* encouraged the use of French, and the Baron de Rothschild provided great assistance to struggling Jewish colonies. Russian Jews, fleeing the officially sanctioned pogroms of Czarist Russia, spoke Yiddish, a German dialect written with Hebrew characters. Among Zionist Jews, there was a very successful movement to restore Hebrew, until then used mainly as a liturgical language, as the spoken language of the Jews.

The Turks, having been defeated in the First World War, lost to the British, the area then called Palestine. The British established their mandate over Palestine in 1917. By the Balfour Declaration the British had already expressed support for the establishment of a Jewish homeland within the Palestine mandate. (Transjordan was not to be included in the Jewish homeland). The British made English the main language of administration, but they also bolstered the status of Hebrew. German schools were closed and the teachers were interned. The British were persuaded that Hebrew was the language of the Jewish population; the Mandate, therefore, recognized Hebrew as an official language, alongside Arabic and English. Education was left to the Arab and Jewish communities, which used their own language for instruction, but also taught English.

When Israel was created as an independent state in 1948, all mandatory laws remained in effect unless they were amended. English, however, was dropped as an official language, thus leaving only Hebrew and Arabic as official. Nevertheless, all three languages appeared on coins and stamps. Laws were translated into English and Arabic. Under special conditions lawyers may plead their cases in English. In the educational system the place of English as the first foreign language to be taught is explicitly recognized.

English acquired its impetus under the British mandate between 1917 and 1948, when it served as the main language of government. In the first years of Israel's independence, there was some consideration for replacing English with French; but that possibility was soon abandoned. The effects of globalization have increased the importance of English. English provides access to business, science, education and travel, as well as to the large Jewish diaspora in the United States and the Commonwealth. After 1968, a large number of English-speaking immigrants came to Israel. About forty percent of teachers of English in Jewish high schools are native speakers of English, a figure that is probably unmatched in any other non-English educational system. Some forty percent of students start English in the third grade, and many start even earlier. Hebrew speakers consider English the language they most need to learn, while Arabic and Russian speakers place it second, after Hebrew (Spolsky, 143-145).

The Jerusalem Report cites a joke that has circulated in academia for years: Why can't Got get tenure? The answer is that He has only one publication to his name, and that is in Hebrew. Students and faculty have always needed English for research, for keeping up with the latest developments and for contact with colleagues overseas. Now the proliferation of English in academia has taken on unprecedented importance. It is increasingly replacing Hebrew in theses, conferences and journals, even in Jewish studies and the humanities.

At the Weizmann Institute, Israel's top institution of scientific research of scientific research, all classes are taught in English. Yivsam Azgad, a spokesman for the Institute explained: "Hebrew is the language of speech and administration at the Weizmann Institute. The science itself is done in English, including all instruction, which is based at the Institute's Feinberg Graduate School. Considering that science is international and this is an era of globalization, what would be the point of having a scientific journal in Hebrew if the whole purpose is to bring the information to the world?"

In the exact sciences the rapid development of concepts and findings, as well as the collaborative nature of much research has led to a situation in which Israeli scientists may speak Hebrew in the cafeteria, but must use English exclusively in the laboratory.

In high tech, English is the language of the global village. E-mail, the Internet, cable and satellite television add to the amount of English that comes pouring into households. One Tel Aviv archeology professor, David Ussishkin, decided in 1996 to challenge the system by applying, in Hebrew, to the Israel Academy of Science for a grant for an archeological dig at the Biblical site of Lakhish. The Academy asked him to resubmit the proposal in English. He then took the case to court, but lost. The Supreme Court agreed with the Academy that they needed to show the proposal to scholars abroad who did not know Hebrew. Ussishkin chose not to reapply in English.

By exception the journal *Harefuah*, the bi-weekly journal of the Israel Medical Association, is in Hebrew. Its editor, Professor Ya'acov Rotem, a pediatrician, is a

fervent advocate of Hebrew. He translates terminology not in common use, inventing terms when necessary. But doctors have a hard time with this journal. Shifra Mogiler-Ben Gur, a Hebrew University trained physician, notes that in this journal, *barkit* is defined as “glaucoma,” *sha’atot* as “cancers,” *ganahat hasimphonot* as “asthma.” Most people, she says, use the term “asthma.” She figures out what the words mean by looking at the English abstracts.

Dr. Dan Gibson of the Hebrew University’s School of Pharmacy says that in his field “the words don’t exist in Hebrew. You can’t possibly translate journals that come out once or twice a month. It isn’t worth it because there isn’t a large enough population that reads it. And you have to know English to work in this field.”

Microsoft, headquartered at Herzliyah, has issued a Hebrew Manual for users, but not for technicians. Shmuel Yair, the official in charge, says: “Most of the professional literature the technicians use is in English, and they know the terminology. If we translated the manual into Hebrew, it would confuse them” (*Jerusalem Report*, 26-37).

Some words of English origin, including *bank*, *telefon* and *lefaksess* (“to fax”) have become part of official Hebrew. There are slang borrowings like *ledaskess* (“to discuss”) and *heppening* (“happening,” “event”) (*Fodor’s Israel*, 1999). Frommer’s *Israel from \$45 a Day* says that English will be understood in virtually every shop, restaurant and hostel in the three major cities and in most other places. If English is not understood, look for the shopkeeper’s twelve-year-old son who is studying English in school. At any shopping mall one can hear young people comparing new *jeans* and *sneakerim* (“sneakers,” “running shoes”). They eat *hamburgerim* and *cheeps* (“chips”), use *chekkim* (“checks”) and may go into a *panika* at the thought of *overdrafts*. Car exhaust is *exoz*, *fen* is a “hair dryer,” derived from “fan.” (Surkes 1994). Ben-Rafael has suggested that Hebrew-English bilingualism is becoming a future possibility (Spolsky, 145). Yet, as Surkes notes, according to the Education Ministry, a third of the pupils who fail to obtain the Bagrut matriculation certificate lose it because of poor English skills.

The teaching of English as the principal foreign language is compulsory in state schools in both the Jewish and Arab sectors. The demand for English is very great. According to official policy, English is taught from the fifth to the twelfth grade. All universities require an examination in English for admission although teaching at the university level is in Hebrew (except for some scientific disciplines, as noted previously). All university disciplines assume that a student must be able to read English, although some students know how to evade this requirement.

People who know English do better economically, and they are very anxious for their children to learn English well. More and more parents have been requesting that English be taught as early as the third grade. In larger cities like Tel Aviv, eighty percent of the children start English in the third grade, and the necessary funds are found somehow. But there is a growing demand for the teaching of English to even younger children. The demand for teaching English in the first and second grade is even stronger in the Arab sector. A proposal was even made for immersion teaching of English in a

few subjects like music, art, nature and physical education because these subjects involve other “languages” such as body movement or drawing, which can be used for demonstration purposes. However, the Hebrew Language Academy objected, and the Minister of Education dropped the proposal (Spolsky, 30-31).

Most Israeli government officials and spokesmen know English well enough to make statements on television in English when they address audiences abroad, but their effectiveness has been questioned by two American public relations experts, Elias Buchwald and Marco Greenberg. For fifteen years, as specialists, sponsored by the American Jewish Congress, they have been running workshops for young Israeli envoys, but they complain that the inept top officials do not take their course. At one session, described in *The Jerusalem Report* of July 2, 2001 (30-31) an old “Saturday Night” spoof of “Sixty Minutes” is presented in which a Mike Wallace impersonator asks tough questions about whoopee cushions. Then the real Mike Wallace is presented in his interview of the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, about the Chinese human rights policy. Mr. Greenberg shows that the Chinese President dealt very effectively with a hostile interviewer. While Benjamin Netanyahu (whose native language is American English), is described as the “TV performer extraordinaire,” the highest ranking spokespeople, politicians and generals are derided by media professionals as too gruff, defensive and macho, and too inarticulate in English. Yet they refuse to take the media courses.

Teachers of Hebrew are seriously concerned about the expanding use of English. They have objected in particular to a proposal to teach art, music, nature and gymnastics in English. The president of the Hebrew Academy, Professor Moshe Bar-Asher, claimed that the proposal could be the thin end of a potentially disastrous wedge. “English is becoming the language of the intelligentsia, and Hebrew will be the language of the kitchen. There’s already a tendency, especially within university circles, to regard English as the language of culture; only three months ago (in 1994) the Hebrew University of Jerusalem decided that doctoral theses could be written in English.”

Professor Asher adds: “All countries understand that if you want to maintain a level of culture, you have to conduct teaching, education and research in the national language. Now they’re talking about subjects such as music and gym. Who is to say a future minister wouldn’t take it further? Start with something like this and in twenty to thirty years the Hebrew language will be dead.” He added that the use of English in subjects ordinarily taught in Hebrew would deprive children of important sets of Hebrew vocabulary. “People forget,” he adds, “that through publication in Hebrew they have an opportunity to influence society. Scientists also need to be connected to the people that live there.”

According to the *Jerusalem Report* writer, Shoshanna London Sappir, in the humanities and Jewish studies the choice between Hebrew and English can be “a wrenching dilemma.” But Hebrew is nonetheless “thriving” in literature, music and popular culture. Ruth Almagor Ramion, a member of the Academy and language consultant to the Israel Broadcast Authority, says: “Today Hebrew is a mature language, and it does not bother me that foreign words are used here and there. Today there is no

need to fight the language wars we had in the early days of the Hebrew revival eighty or fifty years ago,” Ruth Gadish, the Academy’s scientific secretary, staffs a hotline that takes questions on terminology and usage every day. She finds a huge demand for Hebrew. Some words have been coined recently, like *akva* for “aquifer” and *heznek* for “start-up.”

Gadish agrees that it is hard to predict which words will be accepted in the free market and that there will always be a “seepage” from English into Hebrew. But Hebrew is the native language of millions and the only language for many. For many who use English, it is a second language. “It is not the language in which they can express all their emotions and nuances. It is in fact hard for Hebrew speakers to learn English.”

Professor Yehoshua Blau, a past president of the Hebrew Academy, says: “Hebrew will stay alive precisely because people speak it at home, and they will continue to do so because it is the easiest thing to do. I believe in the tremendous power of human laziness” (*Jerusalem Report*, 47).

A study by Salim Abu-Rabia in *The Journal of Social Psychology* carried out with eighty-three Jewish eighth graders from two schools in southern Israel concludes that the motivation for Israeli students to learn a second language is instrumental rather than integrative. Students with positive attitudes toward the target language speakers and their culture are said to have integrative motivation. In instrumental motivation, the focus is on a more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement, as, for example, the usefulness of the language in obtaining a better job. The concept of integrativeness may be tempered by the fear that involvement with the language of the target group may produce alienation from one’s own group.

The author adds that while Israeli society seems supportive of the study of English, the educational policy of Israel encourages its citizens to assimilate into Israeli society as quickly as possible regardless of their native language and culture. Thus, Israeli students may be unconsciously limiting their aspirations to instrumental values. The fear of assimilation to English-western culture, Salim says, may be related to the Holocaust.

In my opinion, this kind of analysis is open to doubt and does not seem to be supported by other writers on the subject. Neither Britain nor the United States had any responsibility for the Holocaust. While there could be lingering resentment against Britain for its repudiation of the Jewish homeland shortly before the end of the mandate, the fact remains that the United States was the first power to recognize the state of Israel and has been diplomatically supportive ever since. English is also the language of the large and influential Jewish American diaspora, which does not speak Hebrew. Communication with this diaspora and the United States government remains vital for Israel’s future. Most Israeli politicians do speak in English addressing foreign audiences on television. It would make no sense to encourage native speakers of English to forget their language and make them study it again as a foreign language. Forty percent of teachers of English are in fact native speakers of English. At the United Nations Israel

has sought affiliation with the European group; today the German Federal Republic has been the strongest supporter of Israel, and there are more German visitors to Israel than visitors from any other European country. Israel does not seem to fear the west.

As one knows Hebrew is written from right to left. Musical notation in the western world is from left to right, and that is how it is done in Israel too. The Hebrew words beneath the notes therefore must also be written from left to right, contrary to normal practice.

When using English and referring to the western calendar, Israelis avoid the abbreviations BC (before Christ) and AD (*anno domini*, in the year of our Lord). AD becomes CE, common era, and BC becomes BCE, before the common era. We are therefore living in the year 2006 CE.

Unofficially, but in fact, English has become Israel's second language and is likely to remain so as long as English remains the dominant global language.

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