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A NEW VISION FOR ISRAELI HEBREW

Theoretical and practical implications of analyzing Israel's main language as a semi-engineered Semito-European hybrid language

A language is an abstract ensemble of idiolects – as well as sociolects, dialects and so on – rather than an entity per se. It is more like a species than an organism. Still, the genetic classification of Israeli Hebrew as a consistent entity has preoccupied linguists since the language emerged about 120 years ago. As a consequence, Israeli Hebrew affords insights into the politics and evolution not only of language, but also of linguistics. The author of this article maintains that the language spoken in Israel today is a semi-engineered Semito-European hybrid language. Whatever one chooses to call it, one should acknowledge, and celebrate, its complexity.

One of the greatest Reasons why so few People understand themselves is that most Writers are always teaching Men what they should be, and hardly ever trouble their heads with telling them what they really are. (Mandeville 25)

1. Background

Hebrew was spoken by the Jewish people after the so-called “conquest of Canaan” (c. thirteenth century BCE). Following a gradual decline (e.g., Jesus was a native speaker of Aramaic rather than Hebrew), it ceased to be spoken by the second century CE. The failed Bar-Kokhba Revolt against the Romans in Judaea in CE 132–135 marks the symbolic end of the period of spoken Hebrew. For more than 1,700 years thereafter, Hebrew was comatose – either a “sleeping beauty” or “walking dead.” It served as a liturgical and literary language and occasionally also as a *lingua franca* for Jews of the diaspora, but not as a mother tongue. The formation of so-called “Israeli Hebrew” (cf. *Israeli* in Zuckermann, “Review,” *Ha'ivrit kemitos*, “‘Abba’”; I shall not discuss glottonyms here) was facilitated at the end of the nineteenth century by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922) (the most famous “revivalist”), school teachers and others to further the Zionist cause. Earlier, during the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) period of the 1770s and 1880s, writers such as Mendele Mokher Sfarim (Shalom Abramowitsch) produced works and neologisms that

eventually contributed to Israeli Hebrew. However, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the language was first spoken.

During the past century, Israeli Hebrew has become the official language of Israel, acting as the primary mode of communication throughout all state and local institutions and in all domains of public and private life. Yet, with the growing diversification of Israeli society, it has come also to highlight the very absence of a unitary civic culture among citizens, who, unfortunately, seem increasingly to share only their language. As a result of distinctive characteristics, such as the lack of a continuous chain of native speakers from Old Hebrew to Israeli Hebrew, Israeli Hebrew presents the linguist with a unique laboratory in which to examine a wider set of theoretical problems concerning language genesis and evolution, social issues such as language and politics, and also practical matters such as whether or not it is possible to revive a no-longer-spoken language.

A language is an abstract ensemble of idiolects – as well as sociolects, dialects and so on – rather than an entity *per se*. It is more like a species than an organism. “Linguistic change is inadvertent, a consequence of ‘imperfect replication’ in the interactions of individual speakers as they adapt their communicative strategies to one another or to new needs” (Mufwene 11). Still, linguists attempt to generalize about communal languages and, in fact, the genetic classification of Israeli Hebrew has preoccupied scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century. The still regnant (also pregnant, in my view) traditional view suggests that it is Semitic: (Biblical/Mishnaic) Hebrew revived (e.g., Rabin). Educators, scholars and politicians have propagated this view.

There are four existing studies that my research seeks to complement: Harshav, Horvath and Wexler, Kuzar, and Wexler. Whereas Harshav’s and Kuzar’s books are invaluable for cultural studies, they do not provide a linguistic theory about the genesis of Israel’s main language. The study proposed here could be considered a response to Kuzar’s as yet unanswered plea that: “In order to understand how Israeli Hebrew emerged, a fresh perspective is needed, free of revivalist preconceptions” (Kuzar 120). Horvath and Wexler do propose a linguistic program that reacts against revivalism. Considering Israeli Hebrew as Indo-European, they argue that it is Yiddish “relexified” – that is, Yiddish with Hebrew vocabulary. However, my own hypothesis, which is neither anti-revivalist nor mono-parental, rejects relexification and suggests a new theory of Israeli Hebrew genesis: hybridization. My multi-parental perspective allows a novel approach to analyzing the grammar of Israeli Hebrew. It challenges the four existing “Modern Hebrew” grammars published in English: Berman and Bolozky, L. Glinert, Schwarzwald, and Coffin and Bolozky.

2. A new approach to the genesis of Israeli Hebrew

My research attempts to develop an innovative approach to the study of language genesis and contact linguistics. It starts from the hypothesis that Israeli Hebrew is a hybrid language, both Semitic and Indo-European. I argue that both Hebrew and Yiddish act as its primary contributors, accompanied by an array of secondary contributors: Arabic, Russian, Polish, German, Judaeo-Spanish (“Ladino”), English and so on. Figure 1 summarizes my theory.

The ultimate question, ignored by almost all Israeli linguists (who insist on “revival only”), is whether or not it is possible to bring a no longer spoken language back to life

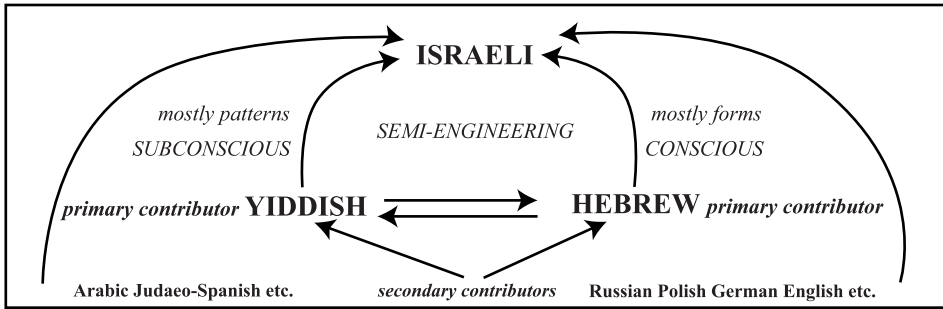


FIGURE 1 The intricate genesis of Israeli with its various contributors.

without the occurrence of cross-fertilization with the revivalists' mother tongue(s). The advantage of my balanced, multiple causation approach is that it recognizes within Israeli Hebrew the continuity not only of liturgical Hebrew, but also of the mother tongue(s) of the founder generation (mostly Yiddish). Such a shift in perspective facilitates a new era in Israeli linguistics; existing publications will have to be re-examined and revised as they have assumed that Israeli Hebrew is the same as Hebrew (see the "Hebrew Continued" approach below).

The binary nature of Israeli Hebrew has important theoretical implications for historical linguistics, sociolinguistics, language contact, language planning and engineering, revival/survival, linguistic genetics and typology, creolistics and mixed languages. Thus, my research supplements influential works such as Clyne (*Dynamics*), Heine and Kuteva, Winford, Mühlhäusler, Myers-Scotton (*Duelling Languages, Contact Linguistics*), Aikhenvald, Aikhenvald and Dixon, Weinreich, Appel and Muysken, and Muysken. I argue that genetic affiliation – at least in the case of (semi-) engineered (semi- because the impact of the revivalists' mother tongues was often subconscious), "non-genetic" languages (cf. Thomason and Kaufman) – is not discrete, but rather a continuous line. Thus, a language can be, for example, 40 per cent Hebrew, 40 per cent Yiddish, 10 per cent Polish, 10 per cent Russian, 10 per cent English, 7 per cent Arabic, 5 per cent German, 5 per cent Judaeo-Spanish and so forth. Consequently, neither the comparative method of reconstruction (cf. Hock; Anttila; McMahon) nor *mutatis mutandis* – the notorious comparative lexico-statistics (cf. Swadesh) – though useful in many cases, can explain the "genetics" (the study of how languages came to be) of *all* languages. At this point, the Congruence Principle becomes useful.¹ By acknowledging the possibility of overlapping, multiple contributors, it weakens the *Stammbaum* (family tree) Model,² casts light on the complex genesis of Israeli Hebrew and explains why the sum of the figures above can – and usually does – amount to more than 100 per cent. Such a conclusion adds new aspects to the important assertion that: "It may not be possible to show conclusively for any particular innovation that it results from genetic inheritance rather than [that] it is motivated by contact with another language" (Dench 113–114).

My project may contribute to the "mixed language debate" (Matras and Bakker). What is a "mixed language"? One might argue that every language is mixed to some extent (cf. Schuchardt; Hjelmslev). For example, English was influenced by non-Germanic languages such as French. However, the term "mixed (intertwined, split) language" in linguistics specifically means a "non-genetic language," such as Michif, Ma'a and Mednij Aleut, which is not a creole or a pidgin and which often arises in bilingual

settings as markers of ethnic separateness. In other words, as a result of a conscious effort by a community, it is a natural language (a mother tongue) that – as opposed to “normal languages” – does not descend from a single ancestor, but has instead been assembled by combining large chunks of material from two or more existing languages.

In a mixed language *par excellence*, large and monolithic blocks of material are imported wholesale from each of the ancestral languages. Thus, while the verbal system of Michif is entirely Cree, its nominal system is entirely French (see Bakker). *Sui generis* Israeli Hebrew is markedly different: the impact of Yiddish and Standard Average European³ is apparent in *all* the components of the language, but usually in *patterns* rather than in *forms* (see Zuckermann, “Abba”). Moreover, Israeli Hebrew demonstrates a unique and spectacular split between morphology and phonology. Whereas most Israeli Hebrew morphological forms (e.g., discontinuously conjugated verbs) are Hebrew, the phonetics and phonology of Israeli Hebrew – and of these very forms in particular – are European. One of the reasons for overlooking this split is the axiom that morphology, rather than phonology, is the most important component in genetic classification. In fact, such a morpho-phonological split is not apparent in most languages of the world and is definitely rare in “genetic” languages. Israeli Hebrew’s “non-geneticness” makes it a hybrid language.

While “classic mixed languages,” such as Michif and Mednij Aleut, involve living mother tongues, Hebrew, a primary contributor to Israeli Hebrew, was clinically dead when Israeli Hebrew emerged. That said, Lachoudisch – the term actually being traceable to Hebrew *lašhōn + qodEsh*, “language + holiness” (denoting the “holy language,” referring to “Hebrew”) – might be an exception. It was used as a secret argot until the twentieth century in Schopfloch (a village in Bavaria, Germany, district of Central Franconia (Mittelfranken), close to Rothenburg). Its grammar was Germanic, but its lexicon was based on German Ashkenazic Hebrew (sometimes via Yiddish) (cf. Klepsch). Ashkenazic Hebrew was not a mother tongue for the Jewish traders who spoke Lachoudisch. However, whereas in the case of Lachoudisch only the lexicon came from a dormant language, “sleeping beauty” Hebrew provided Israeli Hebrew with morphological forms as well as lexical items.

Israeli Hebrew makes available for scrutiny the politics not only of language, but also of linguistics. It is not just Israeli Hebrew that is regarded as *lašhōn + qodEsh*. The process of its emergence is also endowed with a sanctity that has so far forbidden any historicization. While existing grammars describe Israeli Hebrew as Hebrew, I hope to produce a new grammar of the language of Israelis. Although revivalists have engaged in a campaign for linguistic purity and *shlilat hagola* (negation of Diaspora), the language they created often mirrors the very hybridity and cultural differences they sought to erase. The study of Israeli Hebrew as such, rather than as “Modern Hebrew,” offers unique insights into the dynamics between language and culture in general and into the role of language as a source of collective self-perception in particular.

Some of the conclusions of my research, which *inter alia* compares revival attempts in Welsh, Breton, Cornish and Māori, are useful to linguists (e.g., Amery, “Heritage,” “Ours to Keep,” *Warrabarna Kaurna*; Clyne, “Shift from Immigrant Languages”; Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift, Threatened Languages*; Thieberger) and community leaders seeking to apply the lessons of Israeli Hebrew to the revival of no-longer-spoken languages. “Revitalized Māori” (rather than “revived”, as it has never been dead, cf. Reedy; Benton and Benton), for example, is losing typical Polynesian cross-referencing, which makes

older Māori people complain that they cannot understand the young. My basic argument is that when one revives a language, even at best one should expect to end up with a hybrid. My research involves an intensive collection and systematic analysis of data about Israeli Hebrew today, as well as in its critical phase of emergence (i.e., at the *fin de siècle*) and throughout the twentieth century. I examine the radical impact of Yiddish, other European languages and – importantly – Standard Average European, on the one hand, and Hebrew, Arabic and other Semitic languages, on the other, across a spectrum of linguistic domains: phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and lexis.

I have already laid the foundations for the lexical and semantic aspects of this program, especially with regard to prevalent mechanisms of camouflaged – rather than overt – “borrowing” such as calquing and “phono-semantic matching” (see Zuckermann, *Language Contact*, “Cultural Hybridity”). On the other hand, I have examined the European impact on Israeli Hebrew phonetics and phonology, *inter alia*, allowing for the suffering of Israeli dyslexics coping with a language with European sounds that uses Hebrew orthography (Zuckermann, “Abba”). To name but few germane European traits: the consonant inventory of most Israeli Hebrew idiolects and sociolects shows neutralization of the pharyngeals פ, פּ and פֿ, as well as neutralization of בּ, פּ, הּ, and חּ. Israeli Hebrew syllable structure, (C)(C)(C)V(C)(C)(C), is very different from that of Hebrew: CV(X)(C). Most Israelis do not spirantize the [b], [k], [p] after *be-*, *ke-* and *le-* (see below). Israeli Hebrew intonation is very Yiddish.

My methodology of typological analysis encompasses all linguistic components including syntax and morphology. It follows the accepted principles of empirical, inductive typological comparison, which involves establishing grammatical categories and construction types for a language on language internal criteria, and then recognizing correspondences with other languages on the basis of semantic and functional properties. The analysis is cast within the well-established functionalist framework that is the foundation for major typological studies (cf. Dixon; Aikhenvald).⁴ Some people believe that language consists only of “nouns and sound” (see Wertheim for an account of such perceptions in the Tatar language). Forms – rather than patterns – are more visible and thus more accessible to the unsophisticated language analyst. My research demonstrates, for example, that the (often invisible) productivity, semantics and mindset of the allegedly completely Hebrew verb-pattern system of Israeli Hebrew actually reflect European languages.

However, my work is not restricted to typology; it also aims to re-write comprehensively the history of the genesis of Israel’s main language. For various reasons, there has never been any serious comprehensive research analyzing unedited diaries, personal letters and session protocols of first kibbutzim and moshavim (different types of communities). Such research could give us a crucial, albeit indirect (recordings would have been much better) testimony about the “revivalists’” language, the input from the non-native parents on which the first native Israeli Hebrew speakers based their new language.

3. The “Hebrew mythology”

Through an objective, empirical study of the grammar of Israeli Hebrew, one can establish whether it is a hybrid language – both Semitic and Indo-European. My

grammatical conclusions challenge the main linguistic assumptions that traditionalists (and in some cases revisionists) take for granted. A brief outline of five of these assumptions follows.

3.1 *The Stammbaum Model versus my Congruence Principle Approach*

The *Stammbaum* (family tree) Model insists that *every* language has only one parent. The reality of linguistic genesis, however, is far more complex than a simple family tree system allows. It might well be the case that “each language has a single parent . . . in the normal course of linguistic evolution” (Dixon 11–13), but not in the case of a new hybrid language resulting from “semi-engineering.” Thus, the comparative historical methodology cannot explain the intricate genesis of Israeli Hebrew.

An important principle that casts light on this complex genesis is the “Congruence Principle” (cf. Zuckermann, *Language Contact, Ha'ivrit kemitos*): *If a feature exists in more than one contributing language, it is more likely to persist in the target language.* Mufwene’s concepts of “feature pool” and “feature competition” are most germane here. Thus, the AVO(E)/SV(E) constituent order of Israeli Hebrew might be based simultaneously on that of Standard Average European and on the marked order (for emphasis/contrast) of Mishnaic Hebrew (rather than (early) Biblical Hebrew).⁵

What makes the genetics of Israeli Hebrew grammar so complex is the fact that the combination of Semitic and Indo-European influences is a phenomenon occurring already within the primary (and secondary) contributors to Israeli Hebrew. Yiddish, a Germanic language with Romance, Hebrew and Aramaic substrata (and with most dialects having undergone Slavonicization), was shaped by Hebrew and Aramaic. On the other hand, Indo-European languages such as Greek played a role in pre-medieval Hebrew. Moreover, before the emergence of Israeli Hebrew, Yiddish and other European languages influenced medieval and maskilic variants of Hebrew (see E. Glinert), which, in turn, influenced Israeli Hebrew (in tandem with the European contribution).

3.2 *The “Hebrew Continued” Approach versus my Founder Principle Approach*

Most Israelis (including linguists) believe that their language differs from Biblical Hebrew in the same way as the English of the American novelist John Grisham (b. 1955) is different from that of William Shakespeare, let alone Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343–1400). Others might refer you to the Greek spoken in today’s Athens in contrast to that of Aristophanes (c. 448–380 BC) or Thucydides (c. 460–400 BC) or the language of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. From time to time it is alleged that Hebrew never died (e.g., Haramati, *Ivrit khayá, Ivrit safá*; Chomsky 218). It is true that, throughout its *literary* history, Hebrew was used as an occasional *lingua franca*. However, between the second and nineteenth centuries it was no one’s mother tongue, and I believe that the development of a literary language is very different from that of a fully-fledged native language. Still, there are many linguists who, though rejecting the “eternal spoken Hebrew mythology,” still explain every linguistic feature in Israeli Hebrew as if Hebrew did not die. Goldenberg (151–158), for example, suggests that Israeli Hebrew pronunciation originates from internal convergence and divergence within Hebrew. I wonder, however, how a *literary* language can be subject to the same *phonetic* and *phonological*

processes (rather than analyses) as a mother tongue. I argue, rather, that the Israeli Hebrew sound system continues the (strikingly similar) phonetics and phonology of Yiddish, the native language of almost all the revivalists. These revivalists very much wished to speak Hebrew, with Semitic grammar and pronunciation, like Arabs. However, they could not avoid the Ashkenazic mindset – and consonants – arising from their European background.

The formation of Israeli Hebrew was not the result of language contact between Hebrew and a prestigious, powerful superstratum such as English in the case of Arabic, or Kurdish in the case of Neo-Aramaic. Rather, *ab initio*, Israeli Hebrew had two primary contributors: Yiddish and Hebrew. While Kurdish is a superstratum of Neo-Aramaic, Yiddish is a primary contributor to Israeli Hebrew. The two cases are, therefore, not parallel. The emergence of Israeli Hebrew has to do with genesis rather than with evolution. Had the revivalists been Arabic-speaking Jews (e.g., from Morocco), Israeli Hebrew would have been a totally different language – both genetically and typologically, much more Semitic. The impact of the founder population on Israeli Hebrew is incomparable to that of later immigrants. This is the way in which Zelinsky (13–14) describes the influence of first settlements, from the point of view of cultural geography:

Whenever an empty territory undergoes settlement, or an earlier population is dislodged by invaders, the specific characteristics of the first group able to effect a viable self-perpetuating society are of crucial significance to the later social and cultural geography of the area, no matter how tiny the initial band of settlers may have been ... in terms of lasting impact, the activities of a few hundred, or even a few score, initial colonizers can mean much more for the cultural geography of a place than the contributions of tens of thousands of new immigrants generations later.

Harrison *et al.* discuss the “Founder Effect” in biology and human evolution, and Mufwene applies it as a creolistic tool to explain why the structural features of so-called “creoles” (which he regards as “normal languages” just like English) are largely predetermined by the characteristics of the languages spoken by the founder population – that is, by the first colonists. I propose the following “Founder Principle” in the context of Israeli Hebrew: *Yiddish is a primary contributor to Israeli Hebrew because it was the mother tongue of the vast majority of revivalists and first pioneers in Eretz Yisrael at the crucial period of the beginning of Israeli Hebrew.* The Founder Principle works because by the time later immigrations came to Israel, Israeli Hebrew had already consolidated the fundamental parts of its grammar. Thus, Moroccan Jews arriving in Israel in the 1950s had to learn a fully-fledged language (even though it often did not appear so to the Hebrew-obsessed language planners). Initially, they developed their own variety of Israeli Hebrew, but ultimately the influence of their mother tongue was relatively negligible. Wimsatt’s (“Genes,” “Generativity”) notion of “generative entrenchment” is of relevance here. As Mufwene (29) puts it: “[T]he oldest features have a greater chance of prevailing over some newer alternatives simply because they have acquired more and more carriers, hence more transmitters, with each additional generation of speakers.”

At the same time – and unlike anti-revivalist revisionists – I suggest that lethargic liturgical Hebrew, too, fulfills the criteria of a primary contributor for the following reasons. First, despite its 1,700 years without native speakers, it persisted as a most important cultural, literary and liturgical language throughout the generations. And

second, revivalists made a great effort to revive it and were, in fact, partly successful. For example, while Israeli Hebrew phonetics, phonology and syntax are primarily European, its morphology and basic vocabulary are mainly – albeit not exclusively – Semitic.

3.3 The Second Language as Mother Tongue Idea versus my Native Language Uniqueness Approach

Largely due to the “Chomskian revolution,” it is hard to find a linguist who would deny that there is a difference between the acquisition of a mother tongue and of a second language. The brain is congenitally equipped with a linguistic module responsible for the acquisition of our first language(s). No matter how intelligent we are, we acquire our mother tongue perfectly, given oral stimuli. This nativist principle supports the idea that native speakers do not make mistakes (see 3.5).

And yet, laymen and even some linguists continue to ignore the differences between first and second, as well as between spoken and literary languages. Blau makes a comparison between Israeli Hebrew and Modern Standard Arabic, claiming that the Western European influence on Israeli Hebrew is similar to the Western European influence on Modern Standard Arabic. He admits that Israeli Hebrew is more distant from Classical Hebrew than Modern Standard Arabic from Classical Arabic, but insists that the difference is quantitative rather than qualitative (Blau, *Renaissance*, 112). However, as he acknowledges, while Israeli Hebrew is a spoken mother tongue, Modern Standard Arabic – as opposed to the various vernacular Arabics and though an important means of (both spoken and written) communication – is not, a distinction that does not prevent some American universities from advertizing for professors with “native or near-native fluency in Modern Standard Arabic” (see *Linguist List*, 1 July 2004). On the other hand, many linguists classify Israeli Hebrew within the category of modernized Semitic *vernaculars*, just like Palestinian Arabic. However, comparing Israeli Hebrew to Semitic languages characterized by both Indo-European traits (like Israeli Hebrew) and a continuous chain of native speakers (unlike Israeli Hebrew) is problematic.

Any credible answer to the enigma of Israeli Hebrew requires an exhaustive study of the manifold influence of Yiddish on this “*Altneulange*” (cf. Herzl’s *Altneuland*). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Yiddish and Hebrew were rivals to become the language of the future Jewish state. At first sight, it appears that Hebrew has won and that Yiddish after the Holocaust was destined to be spoken almost exclusively by Orthodox Jews and some eccentric academics. Yet, closer scrutiny challenges this perception. The victorious Hebrew may, after all, be partly Yiddish at heart. In other words, Yiddish survives beneath Israeli Hebrew phonetics, phonology, syntax, semantics, lexis and even morphology, although traditional and institutional linguists have been most reluctant to admit it.

3.4 The Mutual Intelligibility Assumption versus my “Translate the Bible to Israeli Hebrew” Approach

Frequently, new research emerges allegedly demonstrating how “bad” Israelis are at reading comprehension *vis-à-vis* pupils in other countries. I would like to explore whether these examinations test reading comprehension in (Old) Hebrew rather than

in Israeli Hebrew. The Mutual Intelligibility Assumption posits that Israel's main language is Hebrew because Israelis can understand Hebrew. Edward Ullendorff (personal communication) has claimed that the biblical Isaiah could have understood Israeli Hebrew. I am not convinced that this would have been the case. The reason Israelis can be expected to understand the Book of Isaiah – albeit still with difficulty – is surely because they study the Old Testament at school for eleven years, rather than because it is familiar to them from their daily conversation. Furthermore, Israelis read the Bible as if it were Israeli Hebrew and often therefore misunderstand it. When an Israeli reads “*yéled sha’ashu’ím*” in Jeremiah 31: 19 (King James 20), she or he does not understand it as “pleasant child” but rather as “playboy.” “*Bá’u baním ‘ad mashbér*” in Isaiah 37: 3 is interpreted by Israelis as “children arrived at a crisis” rather than as “children arrived at the mouth of the womb, to be born.” “*Kol ha’anashím hayyod’ím ki meqatṭrōt neshehém le’elohím ‘aḥerím*” in Jeremiah 44: 15 is understood by many Israelis as “all the men who know that their wives *are complaining* to other gods” rather than “all the men who knew that their wives *had burned incense* unto other gods.”⁶ Most importantly, the available examples are far from being only lexical (as in the above *faux amis*): Israelis are often incapable of recognizing moods, aspects and tenses in the Bible. Ask an Israeli what “*avaním shaḥaqué máyim*” (Job 14: 19) means and s/he or he will most likely tell you that the stones eroded the water. On second thought, she or he would guess that semantically this is impossible and that it must be the water which eroded the stones. Yet such an OVA constituent order⁷ is impossible in Israeli Hebrew. “*Nappila goralót wened’á*” (Jonah 1: 7) is thought to be rhetorical future rather than cohortative. By and large, Israelis are the worst students in *advanced* studies of the Bible, although almost all Israelis would disagree with this statement of mine: try telling Israel’s Ministry of Education that the Hebrew Bible should be translated into Israeli Hebrew . . .

Yet, Israeli children are told that the Hebrew Bible was written in their mother tongue. In other words, in Israeli primary schools, Hebrew and the mother tongue are, axiomatically, the very same. One cannot therefore expect Israelis easily to accept the idea that the two languages might be genetically different. In English terms, it is as if someone were to try to tell a native English-speaker that his or her mother tongue is not the same as Shakespeare’s. The difference is that between Shakespeare and the current native speaker of English there has been a continuous chain of native speakers. Between the biblical Isaiah and contemporary Israelis there has been no such chain, while the Jews have had many mother tongues other than Hebrew. On the other hand, even if Israelis understand some Hebrew, that does not mean that Israeli Hebrew is a direct continuation of Hebrew only. *Mutual intelligibility is not crucial in determining the genetic affiliation of a language.* After all, few speakers of Modern English understand Chaucer, but no one would claim that his language is genetically unrelated to contemporary English. By contrast, a Spanish-speaker *might* understand *some* Media Lengua (a mixed language spoken in Ecuador), which consists of Quechua grammar, but whose vocabulary is 93 per cent Spanish. Who would argue that Media Lengua is genetically (only) Spanish? In Thailand, I could understand a Thai person speaking to me in a sort of “pidgin English.” Does this make his speech genetically English?

It seems as if Ben-Yehuda would have liked to have cancelled the heritage of the diaspora and would have been most content if Israelis spoke Biblical Hebrew. Had the Hebrew revival been successful, they would indeed have spoken a language closer to ancient Hebrew than Modern English is to Chaucer because they would have

bypassed more than 2,000 years of natural development. On the other hand, let us assume for a moment that Hebrew had not died as a spoken language by the second century CE and it continued to be the mother tongue of generations of Jews. They eventually returned to the Land of Israel, continuing to speak Hebrew. It might *well* be the case that *that* Hebrew would have differed more from Biblical Hebrew than does Israeli Hebrew, but this fact says nothing about the genetics of actual Israeli Hebrew.

3.5 *The Lazy, Mistaken Language Thesis versus my “Native Speakers Do Not Make Mistakes” Approach*

Israeli educators and politicians, as well as laymen, often argue that Israelis “slaughter” or “rape” their language by “lazily” speaking slovenly, “bad Hebrew,” full of “mistakes” (see, e.g., www.lashon.exe.co.il). Most Israelis say “*bekítá bet*” rather than the puristic “*bekhitá bet*” (“in the second grade”) (note the spirantization of the /k/ in the latter); “*éser shékel*” rather than “*asar-á shkal-ím*” (“ten shekels”) (the latter having a polarity-of-gender agreement – with a feminine numeral and a masculine plural noun); “*aní yaví*” rather than “*aní aví*” (“I will bring”) and so forth. Issues of language are so sensitive in Israel that politicians are often involved. In a session at the Israeli Parliament on 4 January 2005, then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon rebuked Israelis for using the etymologically Arabo-English hybrid expression “*yàla báy*” (lit. “let’s bye” – that is, “good-bye”), instead of “the most beautiful word” – “*shalóm*” (“peace,” “hello,” “goodbye”). In an article in the daily newspaper *Ha’aretz* (21 June 2004), the former prominent left-wing politician Yossi Sarid attacked common language like “*éser shékel*” as inarticulate and monstrous, and urged civilians to fight it and protect “Hebrew.”

Yet what such public figures are doing is trying to impose Hebrew grammar on Israelis’ speech, ignoring the fact that Israeli Hebrew has its own grammar, which is very different from that of Hebrew. For example, whereas the Hebrew phrase for “my grandfather” was “*sav-í*” (“grandfather + 1st person singular possessive”), in Israeli Hebrew it is “*sába shel-í*” (“grandfather of me”). Similarly, while Hebrew often used *smikhút* (construct state), in Israeli Hebrew it is much less common. In a construct state, two nouns are combined, the first being modified by the second. Compare the Hebrew construct-state “*’em ha-yéled*” (“mother the-child”) with the Israeli Hebrew phrase “*ha-íma shel ha-yéled*” (“the mother of the child”), both meaning “the child’s mother.” Similarly, note the position of the definite article “*ha*” in the Israeli Hebrew construct-state “*ha-òrekh dín*” (“the lawyer,” lit. “the arranger of law”) as opposed to the Hebrew construct-state “*’orékh ha-dín*.” Most Israeli pupils say “*l-a-bet séfer*” (“to the school,” lit. “to the house book”) rather than the puristic “*le-vét ha-séfer*.” Thus, Israeli Hebrew is far more analytic than Hebrew.

I remember a beloved primary-school teacher often lionizing the “right” pronunciation of the Sephardi Yitzhak Navon (former Israeli President) and *mizrahi* Eliahu Nawi (former Mayor of Be’er Sheva). In his famous song *Aní vesímon vemóiz hakatán*, Yossi Banay writes “*benaaléy shabat veková shel barét, vebeivrit yafá im áin veim khet*” (“With Sabbath shoes and a beret hat, and in beautiful Hebrew with Ayin and with Het”), referring to the Semitic pharyngeals א and ח, which most Israelis do not pronounce but are used, for example, by old Yemenite Jews. However, as the present study seeks to establish, the Yemenite pronunciation of “*áin*” and “*khet*” ([ʔ] and [ħ], respectively) should be

viewed as non-mainstream (cf. the charged term “non-standard”), exactly the opposite of what Israeli children (pronouncing [none] and [x]) are told.

The linguist Menahem Zevi Kaddari has criticized the young Israeli author Etgar Keret for using a “thin language” as opposed to Shmuel Yosef Agnon. When Agnon (13) wrote “*ishtó méta aláv*” (lit. “his wife died on him”), he meant “he became a widower.” When Keret says so, he means “his wife loves him very much.” Kaddari compares Keret to Agnon as if they wrote in two different registers of the same language. My hypothesis is that Keret is, in fact, writing in a different language. While Agnon attempts to write in (Mishnaic) Hebrew, which is obviously not his mother tongue (Yiddish), Keret writes authentically in his native Israeli Hebrew. Israelis are not less intelligent than their ancestors. Their language is not thin and their vocabulary not poor, only different. Educators imposing Hebrew grammar on Israelis’ speech ignore the fact that Israeli Hebrew has its own internal logic.

One could see in these rebukes the common nostalgia of a conservative older generation unhappy with “reckless” changes to the language (cf., for example, Aitchison; Hill). However, prescriptivism in Israeli Hebrew contradicts the usual model where there is an attempt to enforce the grammar and pronunciation of an elite social group. The late linguist Haim Blanc once took his young daughter to see an Israeli production of *My Fair Lady*. In this version, Professor Henry Higgins teaches Eliza Doolittle how to pronounce /r/ “properly” – that is, as the Hebrew alveolar trill [r] (characteristic of Sephardic Jews, who happen to have been socially disadvantaged) rather than as the Israeli lax uvular approximant [ʁ] (characteristic of Ashkenazic Jews, who have usually controlled key positions in society). “The **rain** in **Spain** stays **mainly** in the **plain**” is translated as “*barád yarád bidróm sfarád haérev*” (“Hail fell in southern Spain this evening”). At the end of the performance, Blanc’s daughter tellingly asked: “Daddy, why was Professor Higgins trying to teach Eliza to speak like our cleaning lady?”

The language spoken in Israel today is a beautiful hybrid language, marvellously demonstrating multiple causation throughout its genetics and typology. Whatever we choose to call it – Israeli, Hebrew, Israeli Hebrew, Spoken Israeli Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, Contemporary Hebrew, Jewish – we should acknowledge, and celebrate, its complexity.

Notes

1. If a linguistic feature (e.g., a specific constituent order) exists in more than one contributing language (i.e., there is congruence or overlapping), it is more likely to enter the target language.
2. The *Stammbaum* Model (i.e., the family tree model) was adopted by the Indo-Europeanist and theorist of language August Schleicher in the mid-nineteenth century. In this model, historical relations among languages are seen as similar to those between generations in a family tree. Accordingly, Indo-European is represented as a parent language from which Italic developed as one independent daughter language. Latin, in turn, is one independent daughter of Italic, and Italian an independent daughter of Latin. Thus, a language has only one source: English is Germanic, Hebrew is Semitic, French is Romance.

3. “Standard Average European” was Benjamin Lee Whorf’s term for a group of European languages including English, German and French, distinguished by a set of common categories of time, space and so on from many others. (The term has recently received more attention from Haspelmath (“How Young?,” “European Linguistic Area”) and Bernini and Ramat (1996): cf. European *Sprachbund* in Kuteva (1998).
4. I examine all grammatical features – for example, word classes, derivation between word classes, relationship between word classes and functional slot, marking of basic syntactic relations, copula clauses, peripheral constituents of a clause, noun phrase structure, possession, gender, shifters (e.g., pronouns and deictics), definiteness, number system, structure of predicate, non-spatial setting (tense, aspect), negation, commands, questions, derivations affecting core arguments, reflexives and reciprocals, comparative constructions, complementation, relative clauses, other types of subordinate clauses, coordination, pivots and switch-reference marking, and discourse characteristics and structure. Special attention is given to consonant and vowel inventory, syllable structure, lack of spirantization, stress, intonation; uprooting the Semitic root, tense system, inchoativity, imitating the gender of European words, possessive analyticization and weakening of the construct-state, decliticization-in-progress of the special proclitics *be-* “in,” *le-* “to,” *mi-/me-* “from,” *ve-* “and,” numeral “disagreement,” suffixes (e.g., *éser shékel* rather than *asará shkalím* “ten shekels”), auxiliary verbs, intransitivization; constituent order, *habere* structure, verb-subject disagreement, tautological infinitives increased use of copula, and blending word-formation.
5. A = subject of a transitive verb; V = verb; O = object; E = extended intransitive; constituent order = the order of the subject/verb/object in the sentence.
6. From my interviews with native Israeli Hebrew speakers.
7. Object Verb Subject-of-a-transitive-verb. A is the subject of a transitive verb. For example, in X killed Y, X is the A, killed is the verb and Y is the O = (object). However, in X died, X is the S (subject of an intransitive verb).

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