

Language in Israel: Policy, practice, and ideology

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Introduction. A century after the beginning of a process of revitalization and revernacularization of Hebrew, we can attempt to trace the nature of policy and ideology and their effects on language practice in Israel. Supported by a strong ideology, Hebrew was established as the main language of the Jewish community in Palestine. As the principal language of the new state of Israel, Hebrew became dominant among the indigenous Arabic of the minority and the forty or so Jewish and coterritorial languages brought in by the huge numbers of immigrants. In its beginning, it overcame challenges of two world languages (German and French), but more recently is uneasily beginning to share major functions with English. At the same time, recently resistance efforts from Russian (with 800,000 recent immigrants) and Amharic, as well as the nominally official Arabic, are bolstering a growing ideological acceptance of multilingualism. Looking at this single but complex case within this model suggests ways of analyzing other problems of language in our time.

Distinguishing language practice, policy, and ideology. It is a great honor and pleasure to be able to participate again in a Georgetown Round Table, and an even greater privilege to share in the fiftieth anniversary of this major institution. I still remember warmly my first Round Table, just over thirty years ago (Spolsky 1968), when I had my first opportunity to address the distinguished audience gathered for this key event and to hear the exciting presentations and discussions that took place (Alatis 1968). It is a mark of the gap between the state of knowledge in our field and the state of practice in our society in matters affecting language education that many of the papers I heard then could well be repeated today, their messages about bilingualism and non-standard varieties and language education still ignored by much of the public. But rather than attempting to trace this issue through the recent tangled history of the bilingual education enterprise in the United States, I will talk today about the development of language policy over the past century in Palestine and Israel, with the goal of presenting a model of analysis that might be useful in other cases.

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Let me start with a definition of the terms in my title. Under the term “languages” I include identifiable dialects and varieties. The very names of these varieties are controversial and ambiguous—many of the nearly extinct Jewish languages brought from the Diaspora now seem to have as many names as they have speakers. And a name like “Hebrew” or “Arabic” covers a wide range of varieties—historical, functional, social—that cries out for finer definition. By Israel, I refer to the current state, its borders awaiting definition, and to the historically preceding British Mandate and Ottoman region of Palestine.

It is also beneficial, I believe, to differentiate the terms “language practice,” “language ideology,” and “language policy.” Language practice I define as the ethnography of communication, following Hymes (1974), or, to phrase it differently, the agreed linguistic repertoire of a defined speech community. Language ideology is a term I borrow from Silverstein (1979) through Dorian (1998) to mean the beliefs of members of a speech community about what their language practice should be, and language policy I define narrowly as any effort by someone who has or claims authority to modify the language practice or language ideology of other people. From this point of view, it is important to notice that linguistic hegemonies, such as the English hegemony studied by Phillipson (1992), fit under my definition of language practice or ideology. Planned linguistic imperialism and formally developed status or corpus or acquisition or diffusion activities (Cooper 1989), as so well described for French in Ager (1999), are what constitute language policy.

Essentially, then, I want to track the changes in language practice and ideology in one small but complex country over the past century or so and ask to what extent any changes can be accounted for by explicit policies or to what extent they were the results of demographic and political and economic and social changes.

The languages involved—a century ago and today. One oversimplified way to look at the topic might be to depict the language practice a hundred years ago and compare it to the present situation (Spolsky and Cooper 1991). In describing the language situation in late Ottoman Palestine, one would start with the Arabic spoken by the majority population, broken up into local dialects clustering into three broad groups, Bedouin, village, and urban. In Jerusalem, a city that already had a majority Jewish population, the indigenous Sephardi Jews also spoke Arabic alongside their intracommunity Ladino, and the rapidly swelling Ashkenazi population was starting to learn Arabic for intercommunity purposes (Kosover 1966) while maintaining Yiddish and a number of East European coteritorial vernaculars within their remarkably splintered community. The official language of government was Turkish, but knowledge of it tended to be limited to clerks and soldiers. Literacy in Classical Arabic was not widespread. A number of European languages had their special niches—English and German in the Protestant Mission, Russian as language of pilgrims, French as an elite language of high

culture. In addition, French diffusion policies had instituted the language in schools in new Jewish agricultural settlements, where it was just starting to be replaced by Hebrew. Similar policies were inaugurating German in modern schools in Jewish towns. A hundred years ago, the ideologically supported movement for the revitalization and revernacularization of Hebrew was just getting under way in the new Jewish agricultural settlements, with support from afar by a few ideologues like Eliezer Ben Yehuda in Jerusalem (Fellman 1973).

A century later, the linguistic landscape is quite different (Ben-Rafael 1994; Spolsky and Shohamy 1999). Arabic continues—entrenched—as the main language (spoken and written) of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza (the region gradually coming under the control of the Palestinian Authority). For the Israeli Palestinian Arabic speakers who live within the green line, it is the language of home, education (as far as the end of high school), and community, but the Arabic spoken by Israeli Arabs is markedly influenced by Hebrew, a language in which most of them are bilingual and which is the language of higher education and work for many (Amara 1999). For Israel as a whole, Hebrew has become the dominant and dominating language for almost all private and public activities—the language of home, radio and television, government, education (up to the highest level), business, the army, and the health services. Only in marginalized niches (among some Hassidic sects, in Arab villages, among recent immigrants, foreign workers, and tourists, and in the two Circassian villages) does one find speech communities that function virtually without Hebrew. All but the most recent immigrant languages (those brought from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia) now tend to be restricted to older speakers and to use in the home or ethnic enclaves. Given the large number of recent immigrants, there are still strong clusters of Russian and Amharic speakers, but there are clear indications that members of the younger generation are already moving to Hebrew. German in public use is minimal; French holds on, thanks mainly to the major metropolitan diffusion efforts as a peripheral cultural and school language, but even the schools founded by the Alliance Israélite Universelle give it second place to English. As in so much of the world, English has moved to the status of the major second language, to be used for education and culture and commerce and wider communication, and perceived as a necessary skill once Hebrew has been mastered.

How much was this complete change in a hundred years the result of direct language policy and how much was it the working of a myriad of factors concerned with the far-reaching demographic and social and political changes that have taken place over the past century?

The revitalization of Hebrew. The most obvious phenomenon that deserves careful study is the revitalization (Spolsky 1991, 1996a) and revernacularization (Fishman 1991) of Hebrew and the development of its current hegemony. Many scholars are tempted to treat this as the successful culmination

of a long established policy. When one looks closer, however, one finds nothing to compare with say the millennium of French language policy activities documented in Ager (1996, 1999). True, a century or so ago Hebrew was selected as the symbolic national language (Mandel 1993) of a territorial nationalist movement (Zionism) at the same time that Yiddish was being selected as the symbolic national language of a competing largely nonterritorial nationalist movement (Fishman 1982, 1991). This ideological choice, although never proclaimed at a founding congress (Glinert 1993), led to a number of critical local policy decisions. One was the decision in a number of Jewish agricultural settlements in Ottoman Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century to replace French and Yiddish with Hebrew as language of instruction in the elementary school grades. A decade later, a second was the decision of one section of the labor movement in Palestine to use Hebrew rather than Yiddish for its publications. At the same time, the founding members of the new collective settlements were deciding to make Hebrew the language for all public use in the settlement, including the collective and public children's house. Shortly after, when the first new city of Tel Aviv was founded, its charter proclaimed that the city was to be hygienic and Hebrew-speaking (Harshav 1993). Individual schools, including high schools, founded by the originally German-diffusionist *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden* also switched in these early years of the century to Hebrew as language of instruction (Wahl 1996).

Under Ottoman rule, there was no central government interest in establishing language policy, but rather a tolerance of plurilingualism echoing the *millet* system (Karpat 1982), so that the small and growing secular Jewish community was left alone gradually to introduce Hebrew use into its institutions. The strength of the new ideology was asserted in the so-called language war of 1913, when a committee of the *Hilfsverein* planning a tertiary technical institute that would teach scientific subjects in German (using Hebrew for Jewish and general topics) was persuaded to change its mind. It was during the first World War that some very successful language policy activity took place, when the British were persuaded to ban German in the Palestine that they had conquered (Cohen 1918) and to set Hebrew as one of the three official languages, after English and Arabic, for the new mandate granted by the League of Nations after the war.

In practice, once the British Mandate over Palestine was in place, the government left the Jewish community of Palestine to conduct its own education. Its schools and educational institutions were free to institute local policies of Hebrew language use. Between 1923 and 1936, there was quite strong activity within the Jewish Yishuv to encourage the use of Hebrew. The active campaign for the diffusion of the language remained a central feature of Zionist and Israeli ideology. A youth legion formed in 1923 for the Protection of the Language continued its activities until 1936. During this critical period, strong campaigns were conducted against the two principal enemies, as Ussishkin identified them in this important

speech at the 1923 third national conference of the legion, English, and Yiddish. He attacked those who used English in order to assert their elite status and closeness to the British rulers. His bitterest complaints, however, were against Yiddish, and one of the major accomplishments of the legion was to block the establishment of a chair of Yiddish at the Hebrew University.

By 1948, then, the Hebrew monolingual ideology was so firm that 80% of the Jewish population of Palestine claimed to know Hebrew, and over half claimed to use it as their only language (Bachi 1956). The change from plurilingualism to ideological monolingualism had taken about fifty years.

With the establishment of the state of Israel, Hebrew gained a solid official status and full institutional backing, but it was quickly confronted by the challenge of dealing with a massive influx of non-Hebrew-speaking immigrants. The only formal change in policy of the new state was to drop English from the list of official languages set by the mandatory government, leaving Hebrew and Arabic. By 1953, the percentage of adult speakers of Hebrew had dropped to 53%. Major campaigns for teaching Hebrew to new immigrants stressed the centrality of the language to Israeli identity, although in fact the main educational programs were those in the schools. The adult education *ulplan* program for professionals begun in 1949 reached only about 10% of the adult immigrants during the first stage of absorption. Gradually, the new immigrants and their children came to accept the status of Hebrew, and by 1972, the proportion who said it was their principal language was back to 77% (Bachi 1974).

During the periods of mass immigration, the major drive for adults to learn Hebrew revolved around the pragmatic requirement to enter the workforce. The power of the pervading ideology supported local decisions to insist on Hebrew and to discourage public use of immigrant languages. There was relatively little resistance to this pressure. While the immigrant settlement patterns allowed for home and neighborhood language maintenance, contact with school and government developed strong pressure for acquisition of Hebrew. Ben-Rafael (1994) has documented the speed of loss of immigrant languages, showing how large numbers of North African Jewish immigrants gave up rapidly not just their Jewish varieties of Arabic but also the French they had more recently acquired. Apart from maintenance by old people (and some longer continuation in homes where there were still monolingual grandparents), most immigrant groups rapidly moved through bilingualism to largely Hebrew monolingualism. There were exceptions—the immigrants from Germany in the 1930s who were deeply committed to their adopted language and culture held on longer than most; and the ultra-orthodox enclaves, particularly Hassidim of the southern sects like Vishnitz, Belz, and Satmar, continued to use Yiddish and worked to restore it in the policies of their separatist school system when their children, too, became Hebrew speakers (Heilman 1992; Isaacs 1998, 1999).

Essentially, then, the Hebrew ideology was strong enough without the formal attempts at policy enforcement that had been prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s.

Newspapers were permitted in all the immigrant languages, and radio news was regularly broadcast in many of them. There were individual and local cases of pro-Hebrew policy, such as the reduction in the time allocated to Yiddish decried by Fishman and Fishman (1974), the insistence that dissertations at the Hebrew University be written only in Hebrew, and the failures to encourage maintenance of the immigrant languages. But no efforts were made to ban the use of other languages in communities felt to be marginal, such as the ultra-orthodox Jews or the Arabs.

The case of Arabic shows much of the ambivalence. In 1948, the newly independent state of Israel took over the old British regulations that had set English, Arabic, and Hebrew as official languages for Mandatory Palestine but, as mentioned, dropped English from the list. In spite of this, official language use has maintained a *de facto* role for English, after Hebrew but before Arabic (Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad 1977). If government documents and public signs and notices are bilingual, they tend to be more often in Hebrew and English than in Hebrew and Arabic. But in spite of this, it is important to reiterate that Israel is one of the few non-Muslim countries where the Arabic language is officially recognized. There is an Arabic-language government radio station and the government television station broadcasts in Arabic three and a half hours a day. Arabic has remained the language of instruction in Arab and Druze schools, and it is taught in Jewish schools. In January 1948, four months before Israel was established, a recommendation brought to a meeting of the Education Committee proposed that the language of instruction should be Arabic for all Arab primary schools. These schools could choose to teach either Hebrew or English as a second language. Other formulas were proposed. The final decision reached at a meeting on May 12, 1948, two days before independence was proclaimed, laid down the principle that both minorities (Arab in the proposed Jewish state and Jewish in the anticipated Arab state) should have the right to elementary and secondary education in their own language and in accordance with their own traditional culture. As it happened, there was no Jewish minority left in the sections of Palestine over which Jordan and Egypt came to rule for the next twenty years, but this multilingual language policy was the one that was implemented for the Arabic-speaking minorities who remained in the new State of Israel. At the same time, because there was no provision for tertiary education in Arabic, it became essential for any Arab wanting higher education or employment outside the community to acquire Hebrew.

Changes in the last twenty-five years. It was in the 1970s, after the Six-Day War, that evidence started to accumulate of the weakening of the Zionist ideology that had built the community during the Mandate and that had helped integrate the mass immigrations of the first twenty years of statehood. From a linguistic point of view, the clearest sign of this has been the growing status and role of English.

Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad (1977) trace the early stages and Spolsky (1996b) describes and analyzes more recent developments. Part of this was the same kind of development as Fishman, Cooper, and Conrad (1977) and Fishman, Rubal-Lopez, and Conrad (1996) examined in other countries, the highly complex outcome of economics and globalization and the association of English with both. All of these have their effect in Israel, where the very success of Hebrew—a language restricted essentially to use within the country—naturally encouraged the need for an international language. In addition, the fact that the most active Jewish community outside Israel is English-speaking and the immigration of a significant number of English-speaking Jews strengthened the demand for English and the possibility of using it.

Even without the extra effects of more recent developments, the weakening of the Zionist ideology and the growing strength of English would no doubt have helped the growth of a new pluralism that has included some nominal recognition of multilingualism, as witness the newly founded and funded National Authorities for Yiddish and for Ladino. The beginning of the peace process played a major role too, providing encouragement for the teaching of Arabic in Jewish schools on the basis of its relevance in a peaceful Middle East. On top of this, the massive immigration of 75,000 Jews from Ethiopia and 800,000 from the former Soviet Union introduced major changes, not just in demography but also in linguistic ideology. The Ethiopian immigrants come from a quite different social and economic milieu, slowing down their integration. There are so many Russian speakers, and they are so convinced (like the German Jews before them) of the value of their culture and adopted language, that it is possible to argue for the beginnings of a major breach in the hegemony of Hebrew.

The new policy on language education (Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport 1995, 1996) does in fact accept multilingualism as a desirable goal. Although asserting the primacy of Hebrew, it gives full formal recognition to the values of Arabic and of immigrant and community and heritage languages, and the importance of international languages to build national capacity. Hebrew is the language of instruction in the Jewish sector and Arabic the language of instruction in the Arab sector (about 20% of the schools). Hebrew is to be taught as a second language in the Arab schools, and four years of Arabic are now mandatory in Jewish schools. Of the international languages, English is recognized as first, but French also has a special place as a permissible substitute for English or Arabic or as a second foreign language. The policy encourages teaching new immigrants in their mother tongue and proposes the development of schools that concentrate on languages.

In practice, the picture is not as rosy as the policy suggests (Shohamy and Spolsky 1999; Spolsky and Shohamy 1998). The teaching of Arabic in Jewish schools is considered weak and unsatisfactory, and only half of the schools offer the minimum program—barely 2,000 pupils continue studying it to the end of

high school. Few if any schools offer programs in languages other than Hebrew, Arabic, English, and French. Most Russian is restricted to upper levels (for immigrant pupils who have just arrived) or to afternoon schools conducted by parents. Little if any funding has been provided to implement the new policy.

Nonetheless, the policy itself is further evidence of the growing respect for linguistic diversity and of the weakening of the ideologically backed Hebrew-only approach. Previously, such freedom of language choice was limited to minority groups (Arabs, Druze, Beduin, and Circassians) or to marginal ultra-orthodox Hassidim (who continued to choose Yiddish). Now, there is encouragement of the teaching of Yiddish and Ladino in state schools, boosted by the recent establishment by law of a National Authority for Yiddish and a National Authority for Ladino. New textbooks and curricula have just been published for Russian and Amharic. Curricula have been published for some half a dozen of the other languages chosen by tiny groups of students.

Some principles for language policy. Looking at the complexity of linguistic situations in the world today, one can readily understand the need regularly perceived for formal policy making. While there is reason to suspect that the effective power of the nation-state is diminishing, eroded by regional groupings like the European Union, or nibbled at by growing globalization, there continue to be regular attempts to enforce or resist nationalistically inspired efforts at monolingual hegemony.

While there are many reasons for individuals, groups, and governments to choose a specific language policy, attempting by it to modify the language ideology or practice of a specific community, I suggest that any reasonable policy needs to be based on two distinct and competing principles. The first of these is uncontroversial. It is to arrive at the most efficient method of communication. It underlies programs to encourage all citizens of a state to develop mastery of the most common language and to gain the individual plurilingual competence that will assure them of access to needed information and jobs. In Israel, this provides support for the major efforts to teach Hebrew. It underlies also the encouragement or teaching of Arabic, English, French, Russian, and many other languages that can contribute to individual or national language capacity, a term we take from Brecht and Walton (2000). This principle is essentially pragmatic and instrumental. It can be met in part by provision of linguistic services; for instance, Israeli banks made sure they had signs and forms in Russian and interpreters able to deal with the 800,000 recent immigrants.

The second principle, associated as it is with the powerful symbolic function of languages as repository and token of group or ethnic or religious or national identity, is of necessity more controversial, and the cause of the conflicts regularly associated with language policy. There are essentially two contradictory expressions of this principle. One common, but I believe ultimately flawed,

approach is what I will label the principle of “my language first” or of national (group) pride. In Israel, the strength with which this ideology was espoused by the early pioneers and the builders of the state made possible the unique revitalization and revernacularization of a language. Maintained unthinkingly after the goal of revival of Hebrew had been met, however, it led not just to the loss of many Jewish languages rich in tradition and culture, but also led to the serious weakening of national language capacity.

A better formulation of this second principle is starting to emerge, which I will characterize simply as respect for linguistic diversity or “my language alongside yours.” While recognizing the central place in Israeli society of Hebrew, both as the most practical lingua franca and as the symbolic embodiment of national identity, it would find ways to show respect or even offer support for the many other languages of the population. Clearly, the details of this action would depend on the nature of the other languages, the number of speakers, and the practical possibility of making provision for them. But starting from this point of view, rather than from an uncompromising effort to assert the superiority of a single language, offers a better chance at a fair and effective language policy. This, we firmly hope, is what is emerging in Israel and in many other parts of the world.

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