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Foreign Influences on Modern Hebrew¹

Abstract

Nowadays Hebrew is the main official language spoken in Israel (beside Arabic and English) and *lingua franca* of Jews living in the diaspora. It has undergone some significant changes and has been exposed to influences from other languages throughout all the stages of its development – since the Biblical times, through the Babylonian exile, the Middle Ages, the *Haskala* period, its revival in the 19th century, till the modern times. Despite not being used for every-day conversation for more than two thousand years, Hebrew kept developing in literature (mostly liturgical) due to its constant contact with numerous languages that were spoken by Jews: Aramaic, Arabic, Ladino, Yiddish and others. Nowadays it is developing dynamically and, as some authors claim, is losing its Semitic nature – although the grammar is still based mainly on Ancient Hebrew, numerous foreign lexical, syntactical and phonological influences may easily be observed in Modern Hebrew. This paper is an attempt to explain the reason for such diversity of influences in Hebrew, with special focus on Israeli Hebrew. Some examples of foreign components in the colloquial language will be presented, mostly of Yiddish, Russian and Arabic origin.

Keywords: Modern Hebrew, Israeli Hebrew, *Israelit*, slang, languages in contact

¹ This article is based on my paper “*NU, YA`ALLAH!* Some Remarks on Colloquial Israeli Hebrew”, presented at *The Second Annual Conference of the European Association of Israel Studies*, SOAS, University of London, 2013.

Introduction

The revival of the Hebrew language was the most successful instance of any language revitalization in history and, most of all, a magnificent realisation of Zionist ideology. Its phenomenon lies in the fact that after about 2000 years of not being used for speaking, Modern Hebrew is nowadays an independent and vivid language, used in various areas of life and by all representatives of social strata. There is the Hebrew of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, which is normative and correct; Hebrew of the ultraorthodox Jews, the army jargon, professional jargons, Hebrew of foreign workers in Israel, Hebrew of criminals and the language of simple people in the street.

Eliezer Ben Yehuda and other “fathers” of spoken Hebrew were its “guards”, who took care of its purity and correctness. Nowadays, although the Academy of the Hebrew language is working hard on coining new words and setting rules, the language lives its own life, absorbing and creating words and expressions that Eliezer Ben Yehuda would have turned over in his grave if he heard them.

As spoken Hebrew is a relatively young language, the research on it is also pioneering. Till the 1970s there were numerous studies on literary Hebrew, but research on the colloquial language was concerned needless.² In those days, Hebrew linguists dealt rather with describing the language norm than its reality. A corpus of spoken Hebrew has not been assembled up to now, yet works on the first comprehensive corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew have been initiated at Tel Aviv University.³

In the last years the interest in the spoken language has been growing and some scholars turn to research both normative language and colloquialisms, as well as errors.⁴ The research of slang is a relatively new, but dynamically developing branch.⁵

In order to study the status and essence of spoken Hebrew, we should ask the question: how did Hebrew become an official language of Palestine (Eretz Israel) and later – The State of Israel?

² Pioneering studies on colloquial Hebrew: Haim Blanc, *Keta shel dibur ivri israeli*, “Leshonenu” 21 (1957–1958), pp. 33–39; Haim Rabin, *Ivrit meduberet lifney 124 shana*, “Leshonenu La-Am” 26 (1963–1964), pp. 227–233; Haim B. Rosen, *Contemporary Hebrew*, Mouton the Hague, Paris 1977.

³ The works are conducted under supervision of Shlomo Izre’el (see: Shlomo Izre’el, Benjamin Hary, Giora Rahav, *Designing CoSIH: The Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew*, “International Journal of Corpus Linguistics” 6(2) (2001), pp. 171–197).

⁴ Ya’akov Ben Tolila, *Ha-ivrit ha-meduberet*, “Leshonenu La-Am” 40–41 (1989–1990), pp. 266–278; Shmuel Bolozky, *Shonut fonologit ve-morfologit ba-ivrit ha-meduberet*, in: *Medabrim ivrit*, Teuda 18, Tel-Aviv 2002–2003, pp. 353–374; Esther Borochofsky Bar-Aba, *Describing Spoken Hebrew: Some Reflections and Suggestions*, in: Haim E. Cohen (ed.), *Modern Hebrew: Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, The Academy of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem 2009, pp. 229–247; Esther Borochofsky Bar-Aba, *Ha-ivrit ha-meduberet*, Mosad Bialik, Jerusalem 2010; Maya Fruchtmann, *Ha-ivrit ha-meduberet – hebetim u-megamot (skira)*, “Hed Ha-Ulpan Ha-Hadash” 89 Spring (2006), pp. 102–113; Ora Schwarzwald (Rodrigue), *Prakim be-morfologia ivrit*, Open University of Israel, Tel-Aviv 2002.

⁵ Nissan Netzer, *Hebrew in Jeans. The Image of Hebrew Slang*, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva 2007; Ruvik Rosenthal, *The Language Arena*, Am Oved, Israel 2001; Ruvik Rosenthal, *Dictionary of Israeli Slang*, Keter Books, Israel 2006; Ruvik Rosenthal, *The Lexicon of Life. Israeli Sociolects & Jargon*, Keter Books, Israel 2007.

Hebrew is one of the oldest languages in the world. It had been spoken in ancient Israel till the period of Babylonian exile (586 BCE), when Old Aramaic became the dominant language in the region. During the Roman dominance in Palestine – around the 1st century CE (after the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple), it started to die out as a spoken language. However, the language was still used in prayers, in liturgic poetry, blessings and weekly Bible readings. It was *lingua franca* for Jews living all over the world. There are numerous views concerning the time at which so-called Modern Hebrew began. Some authors claim it came into being in the 18th century, in *Haskala* period, when secular literature in Hebrew started to be written.⁶

In the diaspora, Hebrew was used by Jewish communities for written communication and literature, and since 1785 it had been producing modern, secular literature in Eastern Europe. Although the language was not used for daily purposes till the 19th century, it was developing, while being influenced by other languages that Jews were using: Aramaic, Arabic, European languages, Yiddish, Ladino and other.

The revival of the Hebrew language is strongly connected with the aspirations of the Jewish people to establish their own state. The Jewish State was Theodor Herzl's idea and ambition. In his manifesto "The Jewish State"⁷ he described the new Jewish land as a multi-language place. The Jews were supposed to speak all the languages that they used in their previous countries, beside Yiddish and Hebrew (Yiddish was thought to be the language of the diaspora and Hebrew seemed useless to the author, due to lack of vocabulary needed for every-day communication).

In 1881, Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1858–1922) came to Palestine and since then the renewed use of Hebrew as spoken language of the whole community has been dated. Hebrew was spoken in Palestine mainly by the Jews. However, the language was quite poor and simple, in fact it was used as a pidgin. Ben Yehuda was able to converse in Hebrew with the Jews he met.⁸ The main problem in implementing Hebrew into everyday life was lack of vocabulary. Many words needed for everyday life simply did not exist: *train, bomb, bicycle, orchestra, exercise, clock, gun, sock, electricity, newspaper, watch, kitchen* and others. The language was not sufficient to talk about technologies, therefore finding Hebrew words to denote all objects and ideas of at least normal life was an urgent necessity.⁹

In those times, many Palestine inhabitants refused to speak Hebrew at home, although they were using the language outside home.¹⁰

⁶ The most outstanding Hebrew writers in these days were Mendele Mocher-Sforim, Haim Nachman Bialik, Abraham Mapu and Yehudah Leib Gordon.

⁷ Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State. An Attempt at a Modern Solution of the Jewish Question*, New York 1904.

⁸ Mordechai Mishor, *Tchivat ha-lashon – ha-omnam nes?*, "Leshonenu La-Am" 40–41 (1989–1990), pp. 208–214.

⁹ More studies on Hebrew language revival: Uzzi Ornan, *How Old Is Revived Hebrew?*, in: Haim E. Cohen (ed.), *Modern Hebrew: Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, The Academy of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem 2009, pp. 3–16; Yaakov Pellman, *Eliezer Ben Yehuda ve-tchivat ha-lashon ha-ivrit*, "Leshonenu La-Am" 40–41 (1989–1990), pp. 215–221.

¹⁰ Haim Rabin, *Ma hayta tchivat ha-lashon ha-ivrit?*, in: *Linguistic Studies. Collected Papers in Hebrew and Semitic Languages*, The Academy of the Hebrew Language, The Bialik Institute, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 359–376.

Ben Yehuda was reviving the language by giving a new life to ancient Hebrew words: from the Bible, Mishna and Talmud, as well as medieval literature. Then, he coined new words based on Semitic and European languages or formed acronyms and gave them new meanings. Finally, he created new grammatical patterns to insert the Semitic (Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic) stems. Ben Yehuda created or revived about 300 words. Even though most of them did not catch on, Eliezer Ben Yehuda's work was not in vain – mainly due to giving a boost to speaking the language in public as well as at home, or coining new words which were needed. Choosing Hebrew as official language of a new-born State of Israel in 1948 was a natural consequence of his activity.

Ben Yehuda and other revivors of Spoken Hebrew came from Europe (during the *aliyas*¹¹ of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century), most of them spoke Slavic languages and Yiddish as their mother tongues. After them came German speakers, who considerably impacted the language of architecture and science, later – newcomers from the Balkans who spoke Ladino. The pioneers, the builders of the country were supposed to speak fluent Hebrew in public, while subconsciously they were influencing Spoken Hebrew by their mother tongues, mainly Yiddish. Besides, the evident influence of Arabic, and in the last times – English, may be observed.

Arabic¹²

These two languages: Hebrew and Arabic have been in contact since the Middle Ages. Then numerous philosophic works of Rambam, Saadia Gaon and others were written in Judeo-Arabic. In this period, some Arabic words were borrowed and are still used in Modern Hebrew:

להן	LACHAN	tune, melody
מרכז	MERKAZ	centre
אופק	OPHEK	horizon, perspective

From the beginning of Zionism, many Arabic words were incorporated into Hebrew, especially into the slang. Eliezer Ben Yehuda derived from Arabic while looking for new words – he used Arabic words or stems to create new words. Also, Zionists used Arabic words in everyday language as a part of the process of becoming part of the Land of Israel.

¹¹ *Aliyah* – in Hebrew עלייה: ascent; immigration to Israel. Jewish immigrants have been coming to Palestine and Israel since the 19th century, motivated mostly by the Zionist ideology. *Aliyah* is an important element of the collective identity of Israeli society.

¹² More about the influence of Arabic on Modern Hebrew: Abed al-Rahman Mar'i, *Ha-aravit ve-ha-ivrit ba-metziyut ha-israelit*, in: Yotam Benziman (ed.) *Language as Culture: New Perspectives on Hebrew*, Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Israel 2013, pp. 164–181; Moty Rosen, *Lexicon of Hebrew Words Origins*, Reches, Israel 2011; Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Milon Even-Shoshan*, Am Oved, Israel 2003.

Nowadays, the Arabic influences are both due to Palestinian-Arabic neighbours and Jewish immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries. Let us follow several examples:

ואללה *WALLA!* In Arabic: *I swear to God*
In Hebrew slang: *Wow! Really?*

WALLA! in Hebrew is a very broad term that may express delight, irony, as well as astonishment, resulting from the context and the tone of the statement.

Here are some more examples of words which Hebrew took from Arabic:

פשלה	<i>FASHLA</i>	<i>set back, defeat; also: shame, blunder, screw up</i>
פדיחה	<i>FADICHA</i>	<i>shame, outrage</i>
אחלה	<i>ACHLA</i>	<i>cool, nice, great, awesome</i>
סבבה	<i>SABABA</i>	<i>cool</i>

Derived from Arabic *CABABA*: *longing, yearning; in colloquial Arabic: great, excellent*
One says *SABABA* when he wants to express satisfaction, contentment.

אינשאללה *INSHALLA* *God willing!*

An interesting word is פרהה *FRECHA* due to its origin and use. It is derived from the stem פרה, likewise the word אפרוה *EFROACH* – *chick*. The meanings of the word *FRECHA* are as following: *happy, joyful; pullet*. It can also be a female name. The word came to Hebrew from Arabic, probably thanks to Marrocan immigrants. In Hebrew slang *FRECHA* is a shallow young lady, looking and behaving cheap, unsophisticated and uneducated.

As it can be seen, Arabic-Hebrew contacts have a long history – since the Middle Ages, when Hebrew was borrowing some words from philosophic works in Arabic. The period of Zionist pioneers was also an important step in relations between these two languages – at that times Hebrew pioneers tend to use Arabic in order to underline their belongingness to the soil of Palestine. Nowadays we can observe mutual influences of these languages, while the Arabic component is rather used in lower-register Hebrew: colloquial, army jargon, slang or swear words.

Yiddish¹³

Those who came with the Second Aliyah (1904–1913) and those who created modern Hebrew, were ashamed to speak Yiddish (although it was the mother tongue for most of them), however subconsciously influenced Hebrew with Yiddish vocabulary, syntax

¹³ More about the influence of Yiddish on Modern Hebrew: Simon Hopkins, *Ivrit ve-yiddish*, “Leshonenu La-Am” 40–41 (1989–1990), pp. 313–318; Rosen, *Lexicon of Hebrew Words Origins*; Even-Shoshan, *Milon Even-Shoshan*.

and phonology. Nowadays, while the Yiddish language is dying out, it is preserved in Hebrew, for example in a clause word order or Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation of some sounds or words. Yiddish words are adopted as a basis of formatting new words or creating other parts of speech. Numerous Yiddish sayings and proverbs are used in Hebrew translation or their original language version.¹⁴

Some very popular Yiddish-Hebrew words are for example:

ג'וק	<i>JOOK</i>	<i>bug, cockroach</i>
נודניק	<i>NUDNIK</i>	<i>nagger, fidget</i>
שפריץ	<i>SCHPRITZ</i>	<i>squirt</i>
שמונצס	<i>SHMONTZES</i>	<i>nonsense</i>
שוונג	<i>SHVUNG</i>	<i>swing, zest, verve</i>

Another influence of Yiddish can be seen in first names: instead of Hebrew *ICCHAK* someone may be called איציק *ITZIK*; instead of *SHMUEL* – שמוליק *SHMULIK*; *MOSHE* – מוישה *MOYSHE*.

A very frequent Hebrew suffix -ניק *-NIK* comes originally from Russian and Yiddish. It is added to a noun and stands for a person who belongs to any group (קיבוצניק *KIBUTZNIK* – *a kibbutz member*) or someone who does some job (שיפוּצניק *SHIPUTZNIK* – *a renovator, handyman*), or is used to emphasize somebody's personal traits, sometimes with humoristic or ironic connotation (נודניק *NUDNIK* – *a nagger, fidget*). Similarly, the diminutive suffix -צ'יק *-CHIK* also came to Hebrew from Russian through Yiddish, like in the word בהורצ'יק *BACHURCHIK* – *a boy, guy*.

Another diminutive ending is -לה *-LE*, as in the words: מיידלה *MEJDELE* (Yiddish and Hebrew: *young lady*), בובלה *BUBALE* (Hebrew *BUBA* – *doll*; *BUBALE* – *little doll*) or

אבאלה	<i>ABALE</i>	<i>pops, daddy.</i>
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The latter consists of אבא *ABA* *daddy, father* and suffix *-LE*. The whole statement is a vocative, slightly patronizing, but friendly expression, used when one turns to a friend of him or to an elder person.

The word פראייר/פרייר *FREIER* *looser*, although originally from Yiddish, is deeply rooted in Israeli culture – all Israelis do their best not to be *FREIERIM* *losers*: not to wait in a queue, not to pay too much, and to show how smart and resourceful they are. The word's origin is from German and Yiddish. Its first meaning was a free person, without any duties or obligations. The word also exists in Polish, in the same meaning as in Hebrew and Yiddish: a naive person.

The following word סטוץ *STUTZ* has obtained the meaning of *one night stand* in colloquial Hebrew. Its origin probably comes from Yiddish sentence עס טוט זיך *ES*

¹⁴ Maya Fruchtmann, *The Hebrew Dictionary of Cliches*, Korim, Israel 2002; Netzer, *Hebrew in Jeans*.

TUT ZICH (*something is happening*) or from מעשים זיך טוט עס *ES TUT ZICH MAJSIM* (*things are happening*).

One of the words that can make somebody who knows any Slavic language feel indignant and embarrassed is פיזדלוך *PIZDELOCH*. Although the meaning in Hebrew is very inoffensive (*in the middle of nowhere*), its literary translation may be pretty shocking. The word is a compound from the Russian word *PIZDA* (*cunt*) and the German word *LOCH* (*hole*). The whole compound's meaning is *cunt hole*, but in Hebrew (not like in Russian and other Slavic languages) it is not considered a vulgarity.

As Hebrew contributed a lot to Yiddish when it comes to vocabulary, so can many Yiddish influences be observed in Modern Hebrew. The above examples represent the most evident uses of Yiddish vocabulary, however its impact on Hebrew is far greater also when it comes syntax, phonology and phraseology.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, Yiddish is an inherent element of Israeli folklore which adds spice and humor to the statement.

English¹⁶

The position of the English language started to gain ground in Israel after Six Days War – during the years of the British Mandate in Palestine it was one of the three official languages in Palestine (besides Hebrew and Arabic), but not the favourite one. Nowadays, along with americanization of the Israeli culture, there are more and more English words, expressions and clichés.

Thus, instead of saying *SHALOM* one says: הי *Hi!*, ביי *Bye!*. Instead of *BEWAKASHA* – פליז *please*; *BESEDER* – או קיי *O.K.*, אול רייט *all right*; *MOADON SPORT* – קנטרי קלאב *country club*; *MENAHHEL* – בוס *boss*; *SHMARTAF* – ביבי סיטר *baby sitter*; *TAARICH ACHARON* – דדליין *deadline*; to a waiter you give a טיפ *tip*, not a *TESHER*; after drinking alcohol one does not have *CHAMARMORET*, but האנגאובר *hangover*; instead of saying *ELOHIM ADIRIM!* one says או מיי גוד! *Oh, my God!*, ג'יזוס! *Jesus!*, קרייסט! *Jesus Christ!*

Many English words serve as a basis for formatting new Hebrew words. From the English verb *to delete* there has been formatted a Hebrew verb דילט *DILET* (in *pi`el* conjugation); *click* – הקליק *HIKLIK* (in *hif'il*); *chat* – צ'וטט *CHOTET* (in *poel*). From some English words new adjectives have been produced: אלטרנאטיווי *ALTERNATIVI alternative*, ספציפי *SPECIFI specific*; some have a narrower meaning in Hebrew than in English, like טריפ *TRIP: being under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, like LSD or to have hallucinations after taking drugs*.

¹⁵ Maya Fruchtman, *The Hebrew Dictionary of Cliches*.

¹⁶ More about English influences on Modern Hebrew: Chaya Fisherman, *Hishtakfut ha-anglit ba-ivrit bat zmanenu*, "Hed Ha-Ulpan Ha-Hadash" 90 Autumn (2006), pp. 112–125; Netzer, *Hebrew in Jeans*; Rosen, *Lexicon of Hebrew Words Origins*.

The Hebrew Word מאמי *MAMI* is an interesting example of meaning transfer. Its origin is English *mummy/mommy*, but in Hebrew it means *love, dear, darling, honey* and it is not used by a child towards his mother, but rather by lovers, close friends.

The word *bye!* can also be part of Arabic-English expression ביי יאללה *YALLAH BAY*, which means *come on, bye*. The Arabic word *YALLAH* is a exhortation or encouragement and together with the Yiddish word of the same meaning נו *NU* it creates an interesting medley: נו יאללה *NU, YALLAH!* that can be translated: *come on, quickly*.

As been exemplified, English is becoming an inherent part of Hebrew vocabulary, not only when it comes to professional language. Sometimes English words merge with Arabic or Hebrew ones and constitute new compounds, sometimes they are transformed into triconsonantal (less often tetraconsonantal) typical Semitic roots and form new Hebrew verbs or other parts of speech in accordance with Hebrew grammar rules.

Summary

The impact of other languages on Hebrew is enormous and sometimes very difficult to follow. There is no doubt that Israeli Hebrew is considerably different from Eliezer Ben Yehuda's vision in which he strived for a Semitic language par excellence – in fact, it is strongly influenced by English, Yiddish, Slavic languages, Arabic, Ladino, and many other languages that were or are in contact with Hebrew. Some authors even claim that for this reason it cannot be called Hebrew anymore, but rather Israeli – *ISRAELIT*.¹⁷ Some of them, like Wexler or Zuckerman, question its classification as a Semitic language or consider it Semitic, but one which emerged by creolization-like processes, and that is characterized by a significant European impact.¹⁸

Other languages and cultures have been influencing Hebrew particularly due to the long history of the Jewish people in the diaspora and to the openness of Israel to immigration. Undoubtedly, the main influence on Modern Spoken Hebrew was Yiddish, because it was the mother tongue of its main contributors. Other important languages are Arabic and English – the first one due to continuous contact between Jews and Arabs, initiated in the Middle Ages and refreshed in 19th century Palestine, which lasts up till now; whereas English has been influencing Hebrew in the recent times. There is still space for research on impact on the Hebrew language of the latest big *aliyas* from the former USSR and Ethiopia, as well as the status of the languages of foreign workers and refugees in Israel.

¹⁷ Ghil'ad Zuckerman, *Israelit safa yafa*, Am Oved, Israel 2008.

¹⁸ Izre'el, *Designing CoSIH*; Haim B. Rosen, *Israel Language Policy and Linguistics*, "Ariel" 25 (1969), pp. 48–63, Viewed 23 January 2018, http://www.adath-shalom.ca/israel_lang_policy_rosen.htm; Ora Schwarzwald (Rodrigue), *Israelit safa yafa*, "Oranim" 2 October (2009), pp. 97–99; Paul Wexler, *The Schizoid Nature of Modern Hebrew: A Slavic Language in Search of a Semitic Past*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1990; Zuckerman, *Israelit safa yafa*.