

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SOCIOLOGY  
OF  
JEWISH LANGUAGES

EDITED BY

JOSHUA A. FISHMAN

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LEIDEN — E. J. BRILL — 1985

READINGS IN THE SOCIOLOGY  
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## HEBREW IS NOT A JEWISH LANGUAGE

UZZI ORNAN

*Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem*

1. On the face of it, a "Jewish language" can be defined as one that Jews speak among themselves. But this seems too broad a definition. It may include other languages which we would not want to call "Jewish languages"—those used in the same way both by Jews and their neighbors, anywhere in the world. For example, upper class British English is used by many Jews in Britain exactly as do their socially equal non-Jewish peers.

A more exact definition is required: "A Jewish language" is one that Jews speak only among themselves, and which is different from the one used outside their homes or neighborhoods. The condition of these Jews, then, would be diglottal. Of course, if a man lived and circulated only within his own neighborhood, he would use mainly a Jewish language. But such cases do not change the rule: "A Jewish language" is a language that Jews use together with another common language. Their diglotism is divided between "a Jewish language", on the one hand, and a common "gentile language" on the other.

2. With this definition in mind, we can now examine the uses of Hebrew in various societies.

a) In many Jewish families in Israel—especially immigrants still using some sort of Jewish language at home, the status of Hebrew, then, is that of the common language used outside—the language of the country; "the language of the gentiles."

The status of Hebrew in this case is no different from that of the Turkish language among the Jews in Izmir, where their Jewish language "at home" is the Spanish dialect (Ladino, Judesmo), while in the street, at school, to the authorities and with the general public they speak Turkish. Another example: Hebrew occupies the same place as does Spanish among many Jewish families in Argentina. The latter have a "home language" which is not Spanish but rather Yiddish.

b) In old-established Israeli families, Hebrew is the only language used—an all-encompassing language. With these families, too, we cannot say that Hebrew is used as a "Jewish language", for as we said, in order for a language to be considered a "Jewish language", it must be in use in the home and the neighborhood, while in more general surroundings a different one is used. Here, however, the language "in general use"—is the same as the "home language", just as "British English" in Great Britain

is not a "Jewish language" even though used by a considerable number of Jewish families, we cannot consider Hebrew in Israel a "Jewish language".

c) A number of Jewish communities use Hebrew in a different way: They do not use it as a "home language" opposed to the surrounding one (i.e. not as is the pattern of all the Jewish languages), nor as the "language of the gentiles", as do many families in Israel (especially the immigrant ones), nor even as "the all-encompassing language," as among the old established Israeli families, but rather they use it as one of the diglottic languages—not as the "home language," but mainly for prayer, or more exactly for cultural and religious communication. For hundreds, even thousands of years, up until about one hundred years ago, this was the principal use of the Hebrew language among most Jews. To this day there are various Jewish communities who still use it in this way, though to a lesser extent and on a more restricted scale than those of previous generations.

d) It is worthwhile mentioning here the communities of Israeli emigrants abroad—especially in the United States. Some of them use Hebrew as the "home language", but in this, they are no different from other immigrant communities, such as the Italians and the Poles who hold onto their native language for one or two generations after their arrival in their new homeland.

3. To sum up, in all the uses to which Hebrew is put, it is in no way similar to any "Jewish language". From a sociolinguistic standpoint, it cannot at all be considered a "Jewish language". Scrutiny of Israeli Hebrew is in this respect especially important. Here, we conclude that even if we consider *all* those using it as Jews, even then we could not define it, from a sociolinguistic aspect, as a "Jewish language", but rather as a "gentile language". This is especially so for many Jews living in the land of Israel—who have immigrated during the past few decades. For them Hebrew is clearly a "state language", i.e. a "language of the gentiles". One is therefore unable to include Hebrew among the "Jewish languages".

4. There is more to be said on this subject: The revival of Hebrew in Israel occurred about a hundred years ago, and was a movement to turn Hebrew from one of the Jewish diglottal languages to the main or sole language of the younger generations. This revival was in the nature of a revolt against the way of life of generations of Jews scattered in many countries in the diaspora, and against the continuing condition of diglottism. As we know, diglottism was a common and a normal phenomenon in many medieval societies, so there was nothing special about the Jews having their own language to speak among themselves or another for cultural communication. This is not found today in advanced societies in the modern world. The revolt against the Jewish way of life included rebellion against Jewish diglottism, and its purpose was to bring forth a

new nationality in the land of Israel. This nationality, like most others in the world, has its own national language which for its native sons is "an all-encompassing language".

The national Israeli society does not include Jews living outside its borders, Israelis, although biologically descended—most of them—from Jews living outside of Israel, are not "Jews living in Israel". They are of Israeli nationality. This too is not a rare phenomenon. Many newly independent nations have sprung up in the new world during the past few generations, and no one will deny the biological connection between them and the older societies on the other side of the ocean.

5. There is also, perhaps, some room for the claim that taking the subject of "Jewish languages" as a research topic on its own, is not a truly linguistic concern. The Jews speak many and varied languages, and there is no linguistic reason for studying these particular languages as a linguistic discipline on its own. If it were such, then we should also have to include in the same research Ukrainian, Armenian or Polish in the United States, and many other "home languages" of small communities living as minorities surrounded by people speaking a different tongue.

Of course there is common content in some or all of the Jewish languages. We can find and compare them in the literary works written in the various Jewish languages, or making parallel etymological comparisons of words of Hebrew or Aramaic origin. However it is doubtful if these points of similarity justify establishment of a *linguistic* subject such as "Jewish languages". Actually the real point in creating such a field of study is the interest in *Jews*, and the social manifestations arising from their way of life. In this case, the place of such a subject should not be in the field of linguistics but rather in the history, sociology or demography of the Jews in their countries of birth, over the generations.

6. We cannot, of course, force the future course of Israeli Hebrew. What is clear to me at this time is that from every aspect it does not belong to the "Jewish languages", and a linguist studying Hebrew linguistics cannot in any way count himself among those studying "Jewish languages".

## HEBREW