HEBREW AND YIDDISH IN MELBOURNE

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1.0. THE LANGUAGE IN SOCIETY

1.1. Hebrew and Yiddish

A century ago, anyone publishing a book on languages would have allocated Hebrew and Yiddish to different chapters. During the heyday of philology, research concentrated on the genetic relationship between languages. On this basis one might examine the state of Hebrew together with that of Arabic, Maltese and Assyrian. All of these Semitic languages are at present used by sizeable though very distinct communities in Melbourne. On the same basis Yiddish would be bracketed with German, Dutch, and indeed English — Melbourne's major Germanic languages.

Popular confusion of Hebrew with Yiddish is due to both being associated with Jews and both being written with the same alphabetic characters (though these do not always represent the same sounds).

1.2. The relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish

This century, academic interest has shifted strongly towards the study of the current state of society. This is evident in the popularity of such disciplines as Sociology, Linguistics and Sociolinguistics. Research in these fields has brought about a growth of interest in the situation where people in the one community habitually use one language or variety of language for certain communicative domains and another for others. These varieties have been labeled H and L.

In the traditional Jewish society Hebrew and Yiddish stood in this relationship, Hebrew being the H variety and Yiddish the L variety. Max Weinreich (1953) calls the relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish 'internal bilingualism'. Ferguson (1959) describes four societies in which an esteemed variety of a language and a more popular variety of the same language are maintained in this type of complementary distribution. Ferguson coined the term 'diglossia' for the situation which he described. Fishman (1981:744) argues that the two notions are essentially identical.

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1.3. Modern society and diglossia

Diglossia is a useful modus vivendi for a society with deep-seated social divisions. However, its association with traditional stratified societies has made it anathema to the development of modern egalitarianism. Hence, the development of democracy may well be associated with the ousting of Latin by state and church. In Europe, the establishment of nation states was associated with the expansion of vernaculars to fulfil all communicative functions.

On the basis of this background it might have been expected that Yiddish was destined to become the sole national language of the Jewish people. Indeed many expected this, and in the late 19th century a movement developed to facilitate the extension of Yiddish to all domains of intracommunal communication. However, feelings for Hebrew were strong, and a counter-movement aiming at extending the use of Hebrew to all domains vigorously took up the cudgels. In the *yishuv*, the Jewish communities which later established the State of Israel, Hebrew won this battle during the 1920s.

Both these movements tended to be secular though not entirely so. The preservation of traditional religion went together with other aspects of convervatism, and the maintenance of diglossia, particularly in the synagogue and school, may truly be the mark of ultra-orthodoxy.

As a result of the acceptance of Israeli Hebrew (I propose to refer to it as 'Ivrit') as Israel's dominant language, the diaspora came to accept that it could be used for all domains and should therefore be taught as a vernacular — Ivrit. Thus in most sectors of the Jewish communities the diglossic structure was crumbling.

1.4. Hebrew and Ivrit

Popular opinion distinguishes between Hebrew and Ivrit on the basis of pronunciation. This is clearly a factor which, given the historical circumstances of the revival, was inevitable (Klarberg 1970a). However, Ivrit as a variety of Hebrew is not only distinct phonetically, it also has identifiable items of vocabulary and syntax. Even proper nouns are distinct (Klarberg 1981). Thus popular demand for a particular variety may be satisfied by reading a classical text in the appropriate phonetic pattern for Ivrit (this is quite common) or an Israeli text known as Ashkenazic (this is less common). Indeed written material may draw on varieties of the language from many periods of its history. As a result there is no clear line between the two varieties.

2.0. HISTORIC BACKGROUND

2.1. The early Jewish community of Melbourne

The growth of Jewish population during the first century of Melbourne's existence (1834-1934) was slow, not quite reaching 10,000 (Klarberg 1976). Synagogues and schools were established as were the traditional charitable institutions.

2.2. The position of Hebrew

During most of this period Hebrew maintained its traditional position as the language of ritual. (A study of the challenges to this situation would provide an understanding of the antecedents to the establishment of Liberal Judaism in this country.) It was also used for traditional scholarship, a number of books in Hebrew having been at least partly written in Australia. Some rabbis corresponded in Hebrew too. As the language of the synagogue it was taught both at the part-time schools and at the day school to children from the earliest age of attendance. The goal was to be able to follow services in the prayer book and translate passages from the classical texts. The variety of Hebrew which the Jewish settlers brought with them from central and eastern Europe was Ashkenazic.

While the first part-time school to teach Ivrit was established in the 1930s there are reports of groups employing a tutor to instruct them in the newly revived language even earlier.

2.3. The position of German

While English appears to have been the dominant language from the beginning (it was used both for synagogue records and instruction in the Jewish day school (Goldman 1954)), it was German rather than Yiddish that appears to have had the next most important place in the community of that era.

In the 1860s a German newspaper was seen as a useful medium for reaching Jewish customers. 'For several months before the Jewish holidays, two businessmen Levy (Leichardt St., City) and Wolff (Collingwood) would announce on the front page of *Germania*, that they were taking orders for Matzos (unleavened bread)'. (Clyne, forthcoming).

Hebrew prayer books with German instructions and translation were popular. The fact that Louis Monasch (the father of Sir John Monash — the family anglicised the spelling of the name) acted as the Australian agent for the Monasch Press in Germany explains the abundance of Hebrew/German prayer books from that press among old collections of Jewish books in this country (Rabbi R. Lubofsky, personal communication).

2.4. The position of Yiddish

Though Yiddish may well also have been used during this period, possibly as a home vernacular or for preaching in some synagogues, it was only in the 1930s that Yiddish manifested itself through the establishment of a weekly newspaper and a part-time school (Klarberg 1970a).

3.0. GROWTH

During the following half century (1934-1984) the Jewish population of Melbourne more than tripled to over 30,000. Most of the increase occurred following the second world war between the censuses of 1947 and 1961. The new settlers brought with them a marked diversity of expressions of Jewishness that had developed in Europe during the previous decades.

The increase in numbers, diversity of focusses of Jewish identity, and encouragement of expressions of ethnic diversity by agencies of the dominant host groups, led to unprecedented growth in many areas where Hebrew and/or Yiddish were important. Many new synagogues, and a plethora of organisations, including seven day schools, were established. Many of the organisations and at least two of the schools were secular.

4.0. THE CURRENT SCENE

4.1. The schools

By far the major manifestation of community language activity takes place in the schools. With over 4,000 children attending the eight day schools and perhaps another 1,000 or so attending part-time classes, education is clearly the largest community enterprise. All of these children are exposed to at least one variety of Hebrew and some also to Yiddish. All the schools, irrespective of their ideological persuasion, commence their language program in kindergarten.

4.1.1. Ivrit — a vernacular

At Bialik College (the secular Zionist school) this is the only form of language teaching and a central part of the overall Jewish studies program. At King David (the Reform religious school) language is regarded as a less central element in Jewish education but in practice much the same place is given to the teaching of Ivrit. Sholem Aleichem (the Yiddishist secular school) also teaches Ivrit — as a second vernacular.

Mount Scopus College (the communally owned school), Yavneh (Zionist Orthodox) and Beth Rivkah (Lubavitch girls), all teach Ivrit. They also all teach significant amounts of classical texts — from the Bible, prayer book, and elsewhere. At Mount Scopus and Yavneh these are invariably read as Ivrit. The extent to which children are made aware of the fact that they are studying different varieties depends largely on the individual teacher. At Beth Rivkah it is policy (not rigidly enforced) to read these texts in Ashkenazic. Yeshivah (Lubavitch boys) divides its day into two major time-table segments, sacred and secular (Bullivant 1978). Ivrit is allocated time within the secular segment.

During 1984 Ivrit was introduced at Doncaster Park State Primary School. There was some unease in the community that this might serve to undermine the Jewish day schools. However the more likely effect is that the inclusion of ethnic options will in future be viewed much as optional religious instruction was in past decades. Parents will feel that it is 'nice' that the system recognises minority groups but that the quantity and quality of the provision is such that those parents who are serious about the subject will continue to obtain supplementary tuition elsewhere.

4.1.2. Hebrew — a language of study and prayer

All the schools teach their pupils about the traditional Jewish holidays. In this framework appropriate passages of traditional texts such as verses from the Bible or prayers and blessings may be recited. How much of this is done varies with the degree of emphasis which each school places on religious practice.

In two schools, however, this is the central part of the program of Jewish studies. The boys at both Yeshivah and Adass Israel (Central European ultra-orthodox) spend many hours reading and translating classical texts. At Yeshivah the language of instruction is English. At Adass Israel an effort is made to maintain Yiddish as the language of instruction — and translation. The products of these schools can read and comprehend fairly difficult texts by the age of 11 or 12. The girls' religious studies program at Adass Israel is far less intense.

4.1.3. Yiddish — a vernacular

While the boys classes at Adass Israel use Yiddish as a language of instruction only, at Sholem Aleichem and Mount Scopus it is taught as a target language. The small number of pupils enrolled at the first two, and the number opting for Yiddish when it is offered at Mount Scopus, appear to be a measure of the popularity of Yiddish in the community.

4.2. Places of worship

In the Reform temples it is policy for all Hebrew reading to be carried out as Ivrit. In the middle-of-the-road orthodox synagogues there is ambivalence on this issue. As one moves to the right on the traditionalist spectrum, opposition to reading prayers (or any part of the service) as Ivrit becomes stronger. The likelihood of preaching in Yiddish rather than English follows the same pattern.

4.3. Libraries

It is in the libraries that the distinction between traditional Hebrew and Ivrit as literary languages can be nicely demonstrated. The State Public Library has fairly extensive holdings of rabbinical literature in Hebrew. At the St. Kilda municipal library, which caters for Melbourne's largest Jewish population, the 'Hebrew' paperbacks on the shelves are clearly Ivrit. There are also shelves of Yiddish books at the St. Kilda library. None of these collections is in heavy demand.

4.4. The theatre

The Yiddish theatre has regular seasons. When a play is staged thousands of people attend, indicating support going far beyond the numbers who enrol their children in Yiddish school. It is clear that this is an area of Yiddish culture with particular support.

4.5. Radio

There are weekly radio programs in both Yiddish and Ivrit. Both are geared to the Jewish community at large rather than any particular faction. An effort is made to maintain standards of pronunciation. For Ivrit, Israel provides the norm while for Yiddish, the Lithuanian dialect is the standard. As most script-readers are speakers of other dialects the standard is not always adhered to.

5.0. DISCUSSION

In the traditional society Hebrew was an H language and therefore commanded a certain amount of prestige. Yiddish was an L language rarely taught before the Yiddishist movement commenced its compaign to suit it for all domains.

Here as in many other areas of society previously institutionalised rules prevail. Hebrew remains the H language utilised in worship and taught at school. Its place at rites of passage — on Bar-mitsva and wedding invitations and on tombstones — has been noted elsewhere (Klarberg 1976). Yiddish the L language must compete with other languages of communication be they German or English.

Tim McNamara has observed that Israelis in Australia tend not to choose to speak Ivrit, regarding it very much as an L language (personal communication). It is a common observation among teachers of both Hebrew and Ivrit that children from traditional homes tend to do better at them than do others. It may be that the H status of Hebrew motivates these children in their studies of both varieties. Even if the children are aware of the distinction there may well be a halo effect which tells them that knowledge of any variety of Hebrew is important for their Jewishness.

I have argued elsewhere that the status of the teacher affects the attitude of the pupils (Klarberg 1979). Here I am adding that the status of the subject is inextricably bound up with the status of the teacher. Schools belong to the same part of culture as do H languages. It is therefore perceived as appropriate to teach H languages and difficult to teach L languages at school.[1] By presenting Hebrew as the language of Israelis — not a particularly high status group — the teaching of Hebrew is made more difficult and indeed its survival even in the limited form of an H language, further endangered.

In the development of Community Language courses it must be remembered that students resent having the wool pulled over their collective eyes. While linguists may have a predilection for studying stigmatised varieties of languages, students planning to work in teaching and various government services do not. They must be taught to accord full respect to the communications of their fellow human beings no matter what variety of language is employed. However their own communication needs to be appropriate to their status as educated members of society.

NOTE

1. We noted that Ivrit as a vernacular was central to policy at Bialik. The difficulty of teaching an L language contributed to the many problems the school experienced. Hence the announcement of negotiations to absorb (Australian Jewish News, August 2nd and 9th 1985) by Mount Scopus College should not be surprising.

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