

# 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

















