

## **The Vitality of the Arabic Language in Israel from a Sociolinguistic Perspective**

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### **1. Background**

At its founding, Israel was declared an ethnic national state. The definition and perception of Israel as an ethnic Jewish State is reflected in its **monolingual ideology** and institutional disregard for the multicultural reality. "While Israel has operated essentially as a Type I monolingual country<sup>2</sup> since its independence in 1948, it is multilingual in fact and in history." (Spolsky and Shohamy 1999a: 96.)

Arabic in Israel is a unique case. It was the main language of the area until the establishment of the State of Israel, after which, because of the changing political circumstances, it became a secondary language. Despite Arabic being legally recognized as an official language in Israel, it is not a competing partner in a dyadic bilingual state, according to the classification posited by Lambert (1999; see note 2).

Arabic is the mother tongue and national language of Palestinian citizens of Israel, who comprise about one-fifth of the population of Israel. Arabic serves as the sole official language of the Arab countries neighboring Israel and enjoys a special prestige in Islamic states. Arabic is likewise a community language among a not-insignificant percentage of Mizrahi Jews.

Relatively few works so far have dealt extensively with Arabic in Israel (Landau, 1987; Koplewitz, 1992; Spolsky, 1994; Spolsky and Shohamy, 1999a, 1999b; Amara, 1999, 2002a, 2006; Amara and Mari', 1999, 2001, 2002; Saban and Amara, 2002). Landau (1987) compares Hebrew and Arabic in the State of Israel. Although Landau gives special attention to the relevant political aspects, he treats Arabic in Israel as any other minority-majority situation in the world, ignoring the uniqueness of the political situation of Israel and its emerging language ideologies. Koplewitz's (1992) article is largely descriptive. He provides a good picture of the sociolinguistic situation of Arabic in Israel, emphasizing language practices, but the relevant political issues receive little attention. Spolsky (1994) discusses the situation of Arabic in Israel. However, though he states his intention to survey the nature and effect of language policy on the status of the Arabic language in Israel, the focus of his study is on language education policies. Here, too, as in Koplewitz's article, the political situation and related language ideologies and their relevance to Arabic are not emphasized. In later works of Spolsky and Shohamy (1999a, 1999b) political issues are raised and dealt with seriously.

However, in all of these studies it was not made clear how the changing political situation brought about the decline of the role of Arabic and its vitality in the public sphere in Israel. Only in more recent works (Amara 1999, 2002a, 2006; Amara and Mari', 1999, 2001, 2002; Saban and Amara, 2002) have the social-political and legal issues been examined in depth.

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<sup>2</sup> Lambert (1999) discusses three types of countries categorized according to language policies as follows. Type I: Linguistically homogeneous countries (e.g., Japan), in which there are minorities, but these are small demographically, and even marginal socially and geographically in the country. Type II: Dyadic countries (e.g., Canada and Belgium), in which there are two or three relatively equal ethno-linguistic groups. Type III: Mosaic countries (e.g., India and Nigeria), comprising many ethnic groups which are relatively significant.

This paper examines the Arabic language in Israel from a sociolinguistic perspective, considering the changing socio-political situation and its repercussions for Arabic, and thereby gaining insights about the language's current vitality in Israel.

## **2. Ethnolinguistic Vitality**

From the Arab conquest in the seventh century, Arabic became the dominant language in Palestine. At the same time, other languages performed important functions. In Ottoman Palestine, Turkish was the official language of the government and was learned by local people who came in contact with Turkish officials or who themselves served as officials (Ayish, et al. 1983). A not-insignificant number of European languages (such as French, Italian, German, Russian and Greek) had a religious status, and other languages were also studied for the purpose of communicating with Christian pilgrims (Gonzales, 1992). European missionaries set up schools in the larger cities, such as Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Jaffa and Nazareth, and taught English, Italian, German, Spanish and Russian (Maoz, 1975). Multilingualism was especially common in these larger cities. For example, in Jerusalem at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, languages used in addition to Arabic included Turkish, Greek, Yiddish, English, German, Latin and Aramaic. Many people, especially those living in the cities, were bilingual or multilingual (Spolsky and Cooper, 1991).

The end of the Ottoman rule in Palestine in 1917 brought about far-reaching changes in all areas, including language. The British Mandate (1922-1948) in Palestine strengthened the status of Hebrew, by then established as the revived language of the Jewish community, and it became an official language alongside Arabic and English. In private schools Arabic, French and Italian were also taught.

During the British Mandatory period in Palestine, English was the main language of government. However, in spite of the fact that the Palestinian and Jewish communities had separate school systems, there was language contact, generally through Jews learning Arabic. English served both the Palestinian and Jewish communities as a language of wider communication.

However, since the establishment of Israel, the sociolinguistic landscape has changed tremendously. Spolsky and Shohamy (1999a: 5-6) describe in general the language practices in the Israel of today as follows:

Most Israelis understand and speak Hebrew. The exceptions are older Arabs and recent immigrants, and of course the tourists and foreign workers. Most Israeli Palestinian Arabs speak Arabic as their first language and use it at home and in their towns and villages, but they use Hebrew at work and in other settings. Recent immigrants still use their immigrant languages in the home and the immediate neighborhood. Many longer-settled immigrants speak their own languages occasionally in homes and the community settings. Code switching is common among all the groups. Among *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) Jews, Hasidim (members of sects, created originally in the late eighteenth century in Eastern Europe, who from tight enclaves around a prestigious religious leader or Rebbe) especially but also some Ashkenazim (Jews from Germany and Poland and their descendants) continue to use Yiddish in education and other settings. Tourists and foreign workers use their own languages and when they cannot use them or Hebrew, try English as a substitute. Most government business and economic life is conducted in Hebrew, except in some localities. Most schooling is conducted in Hebrew. The two exceptions are the Israeli schools in the Arab sector which use

Arabic and the Hasidic *haredi* schools, which encourage their pupils to switch from Hebrew to Yiddish.

Hebrew is the dominant language in the country and Arabic is an important language only for the Palestinian minority, which plays scarcely any role in the national public sphere.

In light of the post-1948 socio-political reality, in which Palestinian-Arabs have become a marginalized minority in Israel, will they succeed to maintain Arabic, their native language? If the answer is positive, then to what degree and in which domains will Arabic be used? Or, conversely, will the socio-political reality shift to Hebrew, the language of the dominant majority in Israel?

A useful framework for the investigation of the vitality of the Arabic language in Israel is the model of 'ethnolinguistic vitality' introduced by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977). The model proposes a group of societal variables, providing structural factors which promote or impede the long-term maintenance of the language of an ethnic group. The variables are clustered under three main headings: (1) status factors; (2) demographic variables; and (3) institutional support factors.

The model argues that the greater the vitality possessed by ethnolinguistic groups, the more they will be able to preserve their collective social identity and maintain their native language in various domains of life. In contrast, those ethnolinguistic groups that have little (or no) vitality may lose their unique collective identity and native language.

## **2.1 Status Factors**

Under status factors, Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) discuss the group's economic wealth, social status, and the symbolic status of its language.

The economic status of a minority language is likely to be a key element in language vitality. Palestinians in Israel, who constitute an indigenous and national minority, are considered a minority of low socio-economic status (Smootha, 2005). "The standard of living of large strata among them stands substantially below the average of the Jewish population while the definition of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people entails preferential treatment in several respects for the Jewish majority and its symbols." (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hecht, 2006: 13.)

The Israeli policy of land expropriation resulted in the loss of agricultural lands among Palestinian peasants,<sup>3</sup> many of whom became paid workers in Jewish-owned agriculture or industry. Over time, Palestinians in Israel became dependent on the Jewish majority that dominated the economy and the array of national opportunities (Rosenfeld, 1978).

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<sup>3</sup> Private lands which had been owned by Arabs during the British Mandate were reduced to a third as a result of land expropriations by Israel (Abu-Kishk, 1981). Most of these lands were expropriated during the first ten years of the State of Israel as a result of the rigid control exercised over Arab citizens of Israel through the imposition of military rule over them. In addition, the government passed laws and manipulated laws and regulations from the British Mandate period, and even Ottoman laws, in order to expropriate Arab lands. One of the laws, "The Absentees' Property Law," passed in 1950, allowed for the expropriation of lands of Palestinian refugees. The lands of refugees who remained in Israel, known by the oxymoronic term "present-absentees," were also appropriated (Cohen, 1989).

Over the course of the years, no local economic base developed in Arab communities that served as a substitute for agriculture. In 1988 it was reported that there were 400 manufacturing units. Most of these units were small factories (such as textile plants or hardware stores) operating at a low technological level, together employing just 6% of the Arab work force in Israel (Jubran, 1988: 30).

The second factor is the social status of a language, or its prestige value. The social status of a language is a powerful factor in language vitality. "When a majority language is seen as giving higher social status and more political power, a shift towards the majority language may occur." (Baker, 1993: 52.)

As in the economic sphere, political changes are reflected also in the social structure. Two principal processes operate within Palestinian society in Israel: Modernization and changes in family patterns.

Contact with the Jewish population, which is the most significant agent of modernization among Palestinians in Israel, has intensified over the years. Palestinians in Israel are simultaneously undergoing through a process of developing Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism and biculturalism (familiarity with the Jewish culture). This process is connected to exposure to the mass media both in Arabic (originating from the Arab world) and Hebrew (Smoocha, 1989; Al-Haj, 1996: 25).

The patterns of Palestinian family life have also undergone substantial change. The shift from peasantry to work in the general labor market has brought about a loosening of the ties of the extended family, privacy (within the nuclear family) has increased, and patriarchal rule has been weakened (Al-Haj, 1996: 23-25).

Economic change has also engendered considerable transformations with regard to the class differences within the Palestinian population in Israel. As Al-Haj (1996: 21) explains:

The transfer of the economic dependency center from the local to the national level meant a diminution in the class structure of the Arab population, including a blurring of the class differences between the Hamulas [extended families] and within them. As a result, Hamulas whose importance in the past was minor because of their inferior economic status are starting today to compete for control of the local centers of power.

Palestinian society in Israel also went through a broad process of politicization, connected to a deep change in the basis of identity, from a traditional local identity (based on the village and Hamula) to a national identity (Palestinian and Arab). Awareness increased among Palestinians of their status and of being a national minority in Israel (Mi'ari 1987; Amara & Kabaha 1996). In many areas, the traditional leadership was replaced by a young and educated leadership (Rouhana 1989; Al-Haj 1996).

The third factor is a language's symbolic status. Here, an examination of the status of Arabic in Israel reveals conspicuous contradictions. Arabic, alongside Hebrew, is an official language of the state, but functions as such almost exclusively at the declarative level.

In spite of the current status and situation of Arabic in Israel, however, Palestinians in Israel perceive Arabic as one of the most salient markers of their Palestinian identity. Arabic is also viewed as a significant indication of their pan-Arab identity, as was confirmed by a recent study carried out by Amara and Mari (2002), using an

anonymous survey of attitudes among 999 respondents (students at Arabic-language high schools and colleges from various geographical regions in Israel). The respondents perceived the symbolic aspect of Arabic as the most important aspect, giving the highest rating to five statements relating to the symbolic importance of Arabic (such, as “my national language”, “proud of the Arabic language”, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

In summary, Palestinians in Israel are almost completely economically dependent on the Jewish majority, and Arabic is assigned a low value in the Israeli language market. With regard to language status, despite being recognized as an official language of Israel, Arabic does not enjoy a high status within the state. On the other hand, however, Palestinians in Israel themselves perceive Arabic as an important marker of their national and pan-Arab identities. Thus, an examination of status factors reveals that the Arabic language in Israel has a low-to-medium level of vitality.

## **2.2 Demographic Variables**

The demographic variables in Giles, Bourhis and Taylor's model of 'ethnolinguistic vitality' concern the number of speakers of a certain language within a particular area, the geographic distribution of a language minority group, and the number of mixed inter-language marriages.

In general, the larger the ethnolinguistic minority is numerically, the more vitality its members will exhibit and the better will be the chances for that group to survive as a collective entity (Giles et al 1977: 313). The Arab-Palestinian minority in Israel constitutes a significant numerical minority in the country. There are more than 1,200,000 Palestinians in Israel, accounting for around 19% of the total population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Furthermore, there are approximately 3,500,000 Arabic-speaking Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem, occupied by Israel in 1967. Arabic is likewise a community language of hundreds of thousands of Mizrahi Jews: As many as half of the Jewish population in Israel originates from Arabic-speaking countries. In addition, Israel is a Hebrew island in Arabic sea, surrounded by Arabic-speaking countries.

As for the second factor, geographic distribution, the Palestinians live principally in three areas: The Little Triangle in the center of the country, the Galilee and Haifa District to the north, and the Naqab (Negev) in the south. The overwhelming majority of Palestinians in Israel (around 90%) live in Arab villages and towns and 10% live in what are called mixed towns and cities. However, even in mixed towns and cities, they mainly live in separate neighborhoods. Socio-linguistically, this means that Palestinians in Israel use Arabic as their community language in many domains of life.

However, some erosion of Arabic is more perceptible in Jewish-Palestinian mixed towns and cities, in which Hebrew has become the dominant language among many Palestinians. Many Palestinian students in these towns and cities even choose to study in Jewish schools, where the language of instruction is Hebrew. Even in mixed

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<sup>4</sup> In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to read statements and indicate to what degree they agreed with them. Each statement gave five options: 1– agree very much; 2– agree; 3– agree to a certain point; 4– do not agree; 5– do not agree at all. The purpose was to examine the respondents' positions concerning Arabic, Hebrew, English and French. The statements focused on various aspects of the languages: the symbolic aspect, language mixing, language choice, language education, essentialness of the language in the eyes of the speaker, language use for pragmatic purposes, linguistic knowledge, general knowledge, the cultural and political importance of the language, political importance and the prestige that the language grants to the user.

kindergartens, where Palestinian and Jewish children are taught together, the dominant language of instruction is Hebrew. This is also reflected in the linguistic landscape of the mixed towns and cities, where Hebrew is the prevalent language on both private and public signs and in public announcements. This is also the case among both Arab Druze and Bedouin soldiers who serve in the Israeli army, and who are extensively exposed to and influenced by Hebrew. These soldiers use a lot of code-switching (between Arabic and Hebrew), and in many cases use mainly Hebrew among themselves.

The third factor is the number of mixed inter-language marriages. There are very few cases of mixed marriages between Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel. As Arraf (2003: 237) explains:

In Israel, however, endogamy is the norm, whereas mixed marriages are the exception. In fact, mixed marriages are not only rare, but also socially deviant. A consequent effect of such a pattern of social separation on language behavior can perhaps be gauged objectively by the extent to which a language, Arabic in this case, is passed from one generation to the next.

In short, in contrast to status factors, the analysis of demographic factors indicates a medium-to-high vitality of the Arabic language. Arabic is the language of the home, the language of the community (with some erosion in mixed cities and among those serving in the Israeli army), and it is passed on from one generation to another.

### **2.3 Institutional Support Factors**

Another set of factors which significantly affect the vitality of a minority language relate to the institutional support which the language receives. The relevant institutions include "national, regional, and local government, religious and cultural organizations, mass media... and not least education." (Baker, 1993: 53.) The more minority group members and their language are well-represented in the various institutions, the more the minority language is used vitally and thus maintained.

At the national level, while Hebrew and Arabic are both recognized official languages in Israel, the state of Israel and Israeli society are not publicly bilingual. The status accorded to Arabic in Israeli law is devoid of any practical significance in Israeli public life. For all intents and purposes, Hebrew is the sole language of Israeli civic life, and it is in Hebrew that the Israeli public domain "speaks". It is the language of the bureaucracy, of higher education, almost exclusively that of the domestic electronic media and, most importantly, it is the language of those sectors of the labor market that are open to the minority. The main significance of the status of Arabic in Israel lies, then, not in its relation to society as a whole, but in the extent to which it protects the internal life of the minority, especially with regard to the right to education in the minority tongue (Saban and Amara 2002).

Though Palestinians in Israel run their community affairs through the local government, they do not exercise full control over their community because of the centralist character of the Israeli government, through which it intervenes heavily in local affairs. Because of their intensive and constant communication with the government, Palestinian councils and municipalities use Hebrew in all official documents. Most communication with members of the Palestinian community is bilingual, undertaken in Hebrew and Arabic (see Amara, 2006).

As for religious institutions, the Muslim institutions are only operated in classical Arabic. In addition to classical Arabic, Christian institutions use other languages,

such as Greek and Latin, depending on their religious affiliation. Hebrew is not used in religious institutions.

Arabic is also the main language used in the cultural organizations of Palestinian citizens in Israel, with both Arabic and Hebrew being used by some of the organizations which deal with Palestinian-Jewish relations.

For decades, Palestinians in Israel were dependent on the Israeli mass media. The Arabic language is "meagerly represented in radio and television, as it is subject to the control of Israel Broadcasting Authority which assigns most of the time to transmission and telecast in the Hebrew language." (Arraf, 2003: 239.) The Israel Broadcasting Authority, in addition to Hebrew and other foreign language programs, transmits an Arabic radio program for most hours of the day and one hour daily of television programs in Arabic. However, in the last decade, the situation has been drastically changed by the appearance of the new Arab satellite television channels, such as the Aljazeera network, together with local Arabic radio networks, which enjoy credibility and attract a high number of viewers and listeners (see Jamal, 2006). Thus, the new television channels and radio networks have served to enhance the vitality of the Arabic language in Israel.

Last but not least is the institutional support factor of education. The decision of the State of Israel to allow Palestinians to use their mother tongue in their schools has contributed perhaps more than any other factor to the preservation of Arabic as the most important language in the sociolinguistic fabric of the Palestinian minority in Israel, and, it can be argued, an important language in the sociolinguistic fabric of Israel in general. This significant support has enhanced the vitality of Modern Standard Arabic at the individual and community levels, and resisted a significant language shift to the dominant language of the country, Hebrew.

The state of Arabic language education in Israel has been greatly influenced by the socio-political situation in the country and its language policies. An examination of the Arabic school curricula shows that, until 1980, in all programs the teaching goals were vague, lacking in any clear definitions to direct teachers. Arabic was treated not as a national mother tongue, but rather as a language to be learned like any other 'foreign' language, disconnected from its cultural and social contexts. Arabic was learned as a means of communication, and not as a means of expression or claiming identity. No good quality, culturally appropriate textbooks were available for the students, and no guide for teachers. In the latest curriculum, introduced in 1989, the declared goals are formulated in a detailed and professional form. Attention has been devoted to the importance of Arabic as the language which shapes the personality of the learner, and ways and methods of acquiring language skills are emphasized (Amara and Mar'i, 2002).

While Arabic is the language of instruction in the Arabic-language school system, however, this is not the case in higher education: With the exception of three institutions for teacher training in which Arabic is one of the languages of instruction, the overwhelming majority of Palestinian students study at Israeli universities in Hebrew. Attempts to establish an Arab university in Israel have so far been rejected, mainly for political reasons.

When many Palestinian graduates from Israeli universities become teachers, most of them lack the basic qualifications for teaching in Arabic, and therefore use numerous Hebrew terms and expressions. Some even teach exact sciences in Hebrew rather than Arabic (Amara, 1995).

In summary, Arabic is used in all Palestinian institutions in Israel. In some institutions dealing with Arab-Jewish relations, both Arabic and Hebrew are used. At the national level, Hebrew is the most dominant language and serves as a lingua franca for both Arabs and Jews. Thus, an examination of institutional factors reveals that the Arabic language in Israel has a medium level of vitality.

### **3. Conclusions**

In the reality of Israel, there are strong pressures towards 'Hebraization' not only among Jews but also among Palestinians. This is so since Palestinians use Hebrew in central areas of life such as in the workplace, in communications with government offices, in health institutions, higher education, the media, etc. Diglossia<sup>5</sup> a well-known phenomenon in Arabic-speaking countries, places a further burden on Palestinians in Israel, as Hebrew is the dominant language in the public sphere, including among Palestinians citizens of Israel.

However, in spite of the political transformations in the region, there has not been a significant language shift among the Palestinian population. It is possible that the most important factor for the vitality of Arabic in Israel was the decision by the education committee to continue the British policy of allowing Palestinian schools to use Arabic as their language of instruction. Beyond this, the success of Arabic in the national public sphere is very limited, and the hegemony of Hebrew is almost absolute. Today, when a Palestinian leaves his or her residence, he or she is almost unable to function without Hebrew. Hebrew is a vital necessity for effective functioning. Keeping Arabic as the language of instruction is what has helped to maintain Arabic in the Israeli sociolinguistic landscape as an important language, and it has preserved more than anything else the individual and national identity of the Palestinian within the Hebrew State.

As I have described elsewhere (Amara, 2002b), the Palestinian Arabs in Israel have opted for the strategy of linguistic integration rather than linguistic assimilation. On the one hand, they attempt to acquire high socio-linguistic competency in Hebrew in order to be connected to and easily function in the wider social network, which is mainly shaped by the majority culture. On the other hand, however, they preserve their Palestinian-Arab identity by maintaining their Arabic mother tongue.

Considering the status and use of Arabic both nationally and regionally, Arabic in Israel may overall be described as having a medium level of vitality. In Schmidt's (1990) terms it is a healthy language. It is a language transmitted from one generation to another and used in many contexts and domains.

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<sup>5</sup> "A diglossic situation exists in a society when it has two distinct codes which shows clear functional separation; that is, one code is employed in one set of circumstances and the other in an entirely different set." (Wardhaugh, 1993: 90.)



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