

## **ATHBHEOCHAN EABHRAIS IOSRAEIL: CEACHT DON GHAEILGE?**

**Shlomo Izre'el**

The title above, adopted from a book with this title of by Dr. Muiris Ó Laoire, is the title of a public lecture (Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, August 7, 2005) discussing the social and cultural background of the emergence of Modern Hebrew in both its written and spoken medium. The linguistic aspects of the emergence of spoken Hebrew are the subject matter of a follow-up workshop (August 8, 2005). In both events, the details of what is usually referred to as the revival of Hebrew are brought up so as to suggest implications for a possible revival of Irish.

Hebrew was spoken in Palestine during the biblical times and until the beginning of the Christian era. Today Hebrew is the vernacular of the Jews in Israel and Israel's official language (along with Arabic). About half of the Israeli population — two thirds of the Jewish populations — have Hebrew as their mother tongue. This was not so until the late nineteenth century, when the first waves of Zionist immigration have started to arrive in Palestine after almost two millennia of Jewish dispersion in the Diaspora. The introduction of Hebrew speech in Palestine at the turn of the twentieth century is most commonly referred to as the revival of Hebrew.

However, although not used as an everyday, all-purpose vernacular, pre-twentieth century Hebrew must not be regarded a dead language. During the many centuries of Jewish existence in Diaspora, Hebrew was used as the language of liturgy and religious studies. It also served for writing secular literature, notably during the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century.

Furthermore, Hebrew was used as the Jewish inter-communal language, also in the spoken medium, both in the Diaspora and in Palestine. Eretz Israel "The Land of Israel" always attracted the Jews. Jews from all over the world were visiting Palestine, sometimes settling there, especially since the late eighteenth century. So, it was in Palestine where Jews of various communities and from different linguistic backgrounds came into contact, that the need for a common language of interaction was especially felt. This inter-communal language could only be Hebrew, the common language shared by the dispersed Jewish people all over the world.

The emergence of spoken Hebrew had been preceded by the secularization of Hebrew literature and by a significant spread of written Hebrew materials carrying the new spirit of the Enlightenment movement of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. This spread of Hebrew in the written medium further involved its modernization.

Some nationalistic movements in Europe in the nineteenth century spurred the idea of the national revival of the Jewish people in Palestine. In consequence, a call was raised for the revival of the Hebrew language as a prerequisite for the Jewish national revival.

The conditions for the so-called revival of Hebrew in Palestine were most favorable. The new idealistic immigrants were impelled to make Hebrew their language not only as a means of inter-communal communication, but also as a matter of principle. By 1916-18 more than 75% of the young population in the new settlements in Palestine were using Hebrew as their main or only way of communication, and the number of native speakers of Hebrew steadily grew.

The first wave of immigration to Palestine started in the early 1880s. While some steps towards the vernacularization of Hebrew were taken during that early period, it was not until the second wave of immigration, between 1904 and 1914, that Hebrew indeed emerged as a true vernacular and as a native tongue. The socio-cultural factors that brought about this change can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Some prior Hebrew background, mainly as a written language, but also as a means for inter-communal communication;
- (2) Critical mass of immigrants;
- (3) Idealism, both nationalistic and linguistic: making Hebrew the only language of communication;
- (4) Popular enforcement of using Hebrew;
- (5) Necessity: the need for inter-communal communication on a large-scale basis;

(6) The role of children at school — in and out of class — and at home.

The lesson for Irish revival must be taken from here as regards the socio-cultural factors of the vernacularization of Hebrew. There is one major factor missing for the success of Irish revival, which is necessity, viz., the need for inter-communal communication. In Ireland, English is a powerful obstacle to the spread of Irish. Can nationalistic idealism, which was another major factor in the revival of Hebrew, be made a necessity in Ireland?

While the socio-cultural factors of the emergence of spoken Hebrew have been fairly well studied, there is very limited knowledge of the *linguistic* issues involved. In other words, questions such as how was it possible for the emergence of spoken Hebrew to occur from the linguistic point of view are only now beginning to be raised. This is why the emergence of Israeli Hebrew is regarded as a revival and as a miracle that has happened only once in the history of languages.

The emergence of Hebrew as a spoken language was not a revival of a dead language, but a creation of a new language. While words and phrases were available from all historical periods of written Hebrew, the structure of the emerging language was not and could not have been based upon a Hebrew structure, because learning a second language and using it in speech as rapidly as the vernacularization of Hebrew occurred, must have been heavily influenced by the respective native tongues of the newcomers. The generators of the newly emerged Hebrew were, however, the first group who had Hebrew as their mother-tongue, namely the children born during the first one or two decades of the twentieth century. They were using Hebrew freely, acquiring it from a lesser input of their parents and other adults, from their teachers at schools (also with a lesser input of the spoken medium), and from the need to enhance large-scale communication with their peers.

The restructuring of existing elements of a language is not a unique phenomenon. Other languages have emerged in a similar way, by rapidly building and restructuring existing materials from other languages. The process of emergence of new languages that acquire native speakers is known as "Creolization". This is the process through which Creole languages have emerged worldwide. The best-known examples include the languages of the Caribbean, among which are the English-based Jamaican Creole and the French-based Haitian Creole.

It has recently been suggested by Mr. Séamas Céitinn that in order to enable the spread of Irish, one needs to simplify the language. Here too one can take a lesson from the emergence of the Israeli Hebrew spoken vernacular. The restructuring of lexical elements in Israeli Hebrew, as is the case in Creole languages, was made on the basis of languages other than the target language, in our case: Hebrew. The other languages in this play are the mother tongues of speakers who acquire the target language. In the case of Hebrew, most of the restructuring was made on the basis of Indo-European languages, notably Yiddish (basically, a Jewish form of German).

What usually happens when two or more languages come into contact — beside direct influence of one language on the other — is also some simplification in the form of the language and some reduction of structural elements. One example of such changes in Israeli Hebrew is the avoidance, in many cases, from the execution of a phenomenon of linguistic variation which very resembles Irish initial lenition. This is, indeed, one of a few phonetic complications of Irish that Mr. Céitinn has suggested to eliminate from the language in order to make it easier to acquire as a second language. In Hebrew, this kind of change has occurred naturally. Can this be planned in the case of Irish?

In sum, I see two major obstacles for the revival of Irish at this time: one socio-cultural, another seems to be linguistic. On the socio-cultural side, the Irish case lacks the need for the shift from using English to using Irish. On the linguistic side, one may wish to impose changes on the language for easier acquisition as a second language. This may turn out to be an even more severe obstacle put on the part of linguistic purists. This, of course, is not a linguistic obstacle but yet another socio-cultural one. The history of Hebrew tells us that language per se is an innocent construct: it poses no obstacles on its own part.

Let the future tell us whether the use of Irish as a vernacular and as a mother tongue can spread. After all, Irish — more than Hebrew — has never died.