Studies in Jewish Culture in Honour of Chone Shmeruk

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כמנהג אשכנז ופולין
ספר יובל לחנא שמרוק

קובץ מחקרים בתרבות יהודית

עורכים
ישראל ברטל, חוה טורניאנסקי, עזרא מנדלסון

מרכז זלמן שזר לתולדות ישראל

The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History
Jerusalem 1993

The Role of Russian and Yiddish
in the Crystallization of Modern Hebrew

by
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[I]

The structure of relations between Hebrew and Yiddish in Eastern Europe throughout the ages was that of high *vs.* low culture. This division of labour manifested itself on all levels of verbal and textual activities. On the level of textual activities, which partly overlap what today we would label "literature", transferring a text from one language to the other meant either canonizing it (in the case of transfer from Yiddish to Hebrew), or popularizing it (in the case of transfer from Hebrew to Yiddish).[1]

1   For example, see I. Even-Zohar, "Aspects of the Hebrew-Yiddish Polysystem", *Ha-Sifrut*, 35–36 (1986), n. 1 (Hebrew). For more details, see C. Shmeruk, *Yiddish Literature — Aspects of Its History*, Tel Aviv 1977 (Hebrew); idem, "The Call to the Prophet", *Ha-Sifrut*, 2 (1969), pp. 241–244; idem, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature — A Case Study in the Mutual Relations of Two Cultural Traditions*, Jerusalem 1985.

[II]

One of the governing principles operating within one diglossic cultural polysystem is that there is never confusion between the different carriers (vehicles) of the different functions of culture. The division of labour is accepted to such a degree that expecting the one to function instead of the other is absolutely unthinkable for the people-in-the-culture.

Depending on the situation, an attempted transgression may be considered either a punishable violation of good order, or ridiculous and therefore negligible. Thus, while depicting quotidian life in Hebrew and employing it to represent colloquial speech seemed perfectly natural for such a writer as Mendele Moykher-Sforim,[2] the idea of transforming Hebrew into a full-fledged vernacular seemed both ridiculous and outrageous to him. Hebrew was to remain a vehicle exclusively of high culture and to be confined to the written medium only. Only in this capacity did Hebrew have the power to bring canonizatión to one's work, which was what Mendele sought after 1896. To use Hebrew instead of Yiddish was to debase it and rob it of its status. The opposite holds true of the ideology, gradually emerging during the nineteenth century, which strove to autonomize Yiddish and liberate it from its dependency upon Hebrew.

[III]

This very strict division of labour did not restrict, however, either deliberate or non-deliberate mutual usage of both languages. Embedding Yiddish in a Hebrew text, or *vice versa*, had various functions and established conventions. But this kind of mutual utilization was not symmetrical; while Yiddish constituted, as Harshav has suggested,[3] "an

2   Pseudonym of S.J. Abramowitch (1836?–1917), a founding father of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literatures. While oscillating for years between the two, he decidedly stopped writing Yiddish in 1886 to devote himself completely to Hebrew.
3   B. Harshav (Hrushovski), "On the Nature of the Yiddish Language in Its Historical Contexts," *Ha-Sifrut*, 35–36 (1986), pp. 5–45 (Hebrew).

open system" — and therefore both permitted and encouraged embedding of any elements whatsoever from Hebrew (as well as from certain other languages) — Hebrew allowed for only a restricted number of loan categories. The pressing need, however, to cope with ever-changing functions within the culture could leave Hebrew untouched without its becoming obsolete and useless. As a result, *indirect* use of Yiddish by Hebrew became the governing principle.[4] No doubt, a large part of this can be attributed to deficient linguistic proficiency. Yet, this is is by no means an exhaustive explanation, since we have to admit, I believe, that individual shortcomings often overlapped shortcomings of the language itself vis-à-vis the new conditions to which it had either to adapt itself or to fall.

[IV]

In the course of the nineteenth century, when Hebrew became more and more a vehicle of secular — or semi-secular — culture, while the nature of relations with Yiddish did not change in principle, various changes occurred precisely in the proportions between direct and indirect, deliberate and non-deliberate use. The *Haskalah* movement rejected what it called "rabbinical style", a rejection that involved elimination of the Yiddish component, both direct and indirect, to a large extent. It has even been argued that it was precisely the tinge of Yiddish, perceived through the characteristic components of post-biblical Hebrew which already constituted established elements in Yiddish, that played a decisive role in this rejection.

Yet, after a certain period of time the rejection had exhausted its

advantages, and general cultural needs, as well as particular literary needs, recycled Yiddish overwhelmingly into Hebrew writing. Mendele, who played the major role in this process, not only reintroduced most of the traditional techniques that had been rejected formerly by the *Haskalah* movement, but went much farther in deliberately using Yiddish through indirect loans on *all* levels, most of all, although most imperceptibly, on the level of intonational organization of the language. The effect, as we know, must have been electrifying in the sense that Mendele's language, contrary to the high-falutin and sterile *Haskalah* pseudo-biblical style, was perceived as vivid, natural and contemporary, although it would be a mistake to believe it was enthusiastically acclaimed, let alone embraced, by everybody. Indeed, sharp criticism was voiced by purists, most forcefully by Druyanov.[5]

Mendele, as I have suggested in various papers,[6] created a major new option and legitimized it, thus making it possible for a new generation to adopt it, not as a novelty one had to fight for, but as an established element of accepted repertoire. Brenner, Gnessin and a host of other writers now had at their disposal a sophisticated and powerful device for authentication of reported speech, as well as other desirable elements.

[V]

Side by side with the employment of Yiddish by Hebrew, which in principle did not constitute any change of relations between the two, a new source

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4   A fascinating question in this context is whether at least some of these transferred Yiddishisms into Hebrew were not items originally transferred from old spoken Hebrew to a chain of subsequent Jewish vernaculars, whose ultimate link was Yiddish, as intuitively suggested so powerfully by Bialik: H.N. Bialik, "Hevle lashon"[Language Labours], in: *Collected Writings*, Tel Aviv 1930, II, pp. 111–123. This suggestion was recently partly supported with much sophisticated and ingenious evidence by D. Katz, "The Semitic Component in Yiddish — An Ancient Linguistic Heritage", *Ha-Sifrut*, 35–36 (1986), pp. 228–251 (Hebrew).

5   See A. Druyanov, "Shalom Yaaqov Abramovich", *Masuot* (Odessa), 1919, pp. 551–580, esp. pp. 575–579.

6   See I. Even-Zohar, "The Nature and Functionalization of the Language of Literature under Diglossia", *Ha-Sifrut*, 2 (1970), pp. 286–303 (Hebrew; English summary pp. 443–446); idem, "Russian and Hebrew — The Case of a Dependent Polysystem", in: *Papers in Historical Poetics*, Tel Aviv 1978, pp. 63–74; idem, "The Emergence of Speech Organisers in a Renovated Language — The Case of Hebrew Void Pragmatic Connectives", in: N.E. Enkvist (ed.), *Impromptu Speech — A Symposium*, Åbo 1982, pp. 179–193; idem, "Russian VPC's in Hebrew Literary Language", *Theoretical Linguistics*, IX (1982), No. 1, pp. 11–16; idem, "Aspects" (above, n. 1). For revised versions, see I. Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies (Poetics Today*, XI:1), Durham 1990.

language — and culture — emerged during the nineteenth century as a decisive factor for both, namely, Russian. In "Russian and Hebrew", "Aspects of the Hebrew-Yiddish Polysystem" and "Gnessin's Dialogue and its Russian Models"[7] I have attempted to sketch the historical relations chiefly between Hebrew and Russian but also, in less detail, between Yiddish and Russian. Although the relations of Hebrew with Russian can be traced back to the Middle Ages, and although there is a considerable Slavic element in Eastern Yiddish, neither Hebrew nor Yiddish made direct contact with literary Russian before the nineteenth century. Each made intensive but different use of literary Russian. For Yiddish, the problem was not lack of repertoire per se, but lack of stylization and simulation procedures through which such a potential repertoire might successfully be established and developed. Contrary to popular belief, the process of stylizing and/or simulating a vernacular for standardized literary use is *not* a free and painlessly non-mediated process. The making of New Yiddish, which constituted a remarkable break with the past, and the employment of this new language for a host of genres to which it had not been adapted, very much depended on the source of these new genres, namely Russian. Russian did not provide Yiddish with completely new elements, but rather functioned as both a pointer and a legitimizer for employing domestic items. Thus, domestic items often were identified and recognized as suitable in the first place, due to their parallel existence in literary (stylized, not colloquial) Russian. Only then could they be legitimized for use.[8]

For Hebrew, however, Russian played a different role, although the outcome on the formal level may look the same. Hebrew did not need Russian as a medium for either detection or legitimization of already extant elements, but rather as a primary source of such elements, to which

it eventually supplied domesticated elements from its own historical repertoire. Thus, reported speech often became a simulation, through domestication, of Russian literary dialogue, with the purpose of indicating the characters' colloquial speech, which, in many cases, had by that time already become Russian. The Hebrew reader could appreciate this novelty by identifying the characters' speech as "authentic" and "natural", and therefore "realistic", thanks to his knowledge of the Russian conventions. This very powerful relationship between Hebrew and Russian has undergone a series of transformations, where the major distinctions between the phases can be formulated as varying degrees of readiness to make the Russian features overt or covert. While in one period the governing technique was maximal disguise, in another period it was maximal overtness.[9] Prose and poetry also behave differently, even during the same period. Last but not least, it should be stressed that one of the most remarkable features of this relationship consists of its strong institutionalization. As I have demonstrated in other studies,[10] the deliberate use of Russian, whether overtly or covertly, continued long after Hebrew and Russian ceased to maintain any direct contact, manifesting itself in translation as well as in original work produced by people who had no knowledge of Russian at all.

[VI]

These kinds of utilization must be understood within the framework of the diglossic (or triglossic) situation. It is only within such a structure that division of labour can be maintained without confusion. Therefore, we must bear in mind — and this is a point often overlooked because the conditions of Hebrew have changed so drastically — that all procedures were carried out within that division of labour. Thus, developing tools for

7   See Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (above, n. 6).

8   The "existence" of an item in one of the repertoires available to a system does not necessarily cause its identification as an adequate candidate for imposing on it a certain function. A different system — either within the given polysystem or outside — can be a "detector" of such potential candidates in the first place, then legitimize them for use through prestige.

9   On phases and periods in the Hebrew-Russian relationship, see Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (above, n. 6), "Russian and Hebrew — The Case of a Dependent Polysystem", pp. 79–84.

10   See Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (above, n. 6).

reporting speech in the Hebrew novel was not designed as a measure to liberate Hebrew from its partners by creating a domestic stock with which it would be able to operate in independent colloquial speech. Whether the repertoire actually elaborated eventually was utilized or not in the course of putting Hebrew back in use for everyday speech is, therefore, an altogether different matter, and not necessarily connected with the circumstances under which this repertoire was created.

Using Yiddish and Russian by Hebrew, deliberately or non-deliberately, directly or indirectly, made it possible to go on using it as a written language within the traditional role assigned to it, a role that did not change even when Hebrew transgressed the range of domains to which it had been confined in the pre-secular stages of its history. Thus, whatever procedures might have been adopted, promoted, or rejected by the language *qua* language throughout its literary history during nineteenth century, none can be accounted for in isolation from the economy of literary functions to which it was subordinated. In other words, we are dealing with a system of literary solutions, not a system of linguistic solutions purporting to cope with a variety of socio-cultural necessities. Thus, some of the key generators for linguistic behaviour turn out to be such parameters as composition, segmentation and concatenation, formal organization of stresses and sounds (rhymes and rhythms), and so on. All of these, and many more, must be investigated and analysed in the context of the state of the literary polysystem and its stratificational factors, the level of accomplishment of repertoire, that is the availability of ready-made models, and the availability of devices for innovation and change. In short, the history of Hebrew during its diglossic periods is overwhelmingly the history of its literature.

[VII]

The significance of this formulation becomes apparent, I hope, when one turns to the period during which Hebrew was gradually made a spoken ("living") vernacular. This is normally referred to as its "revival". Distressingly, this label has been taken so literally, that many normally well-informed linguists — to say nothing of the uninformed — have been led to believe that Hebrew had indeed become a "dead" language, or that it had been confined to "liturgical use only", which, as we know, is utter nonsense in view of its widespread use, on the one hand, as an everyday standard-written language, and, on the other, as embedded within other vernaculars.

There is another, more important misconception, caused not by ignorance, but rather by naïveté and lack of research. This is the belief that Hebrew was brought to life again by utilizing literary language in speech. All that was needed, according to this account, was the simple employment of the written text in speech: the transformation of letters to sounds. When one looks at the state of the language in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries one cannot avoid being impressed by the highly developed repertoire that was now in principle accessible to the potential speaker. Ideally, one might think, the phraseology of quotidian language had actually been prepared in the literary dialogues; nothing should have been simpler than adopting them as they were. Yet, no such direct employment seems to have taken place in reality. In creating the modern vernacular, literary language was exploited as only one of several sources. What had been developed to cope with literary problems remained solutions to literary problems, and persisted as such for decades within the literary system and its adjacent activities — such as the theater and public political discourse — with very little impact, if any, on colloquial language. Solutions for the latter were found more often than not in almost complete disregard of what literature made available.

[VIII]

To be sure, the discrepancy between literary language and the vernacular that eventually manifested itself in everyday Hebrew can only in part be attributed to deficient proficiency. Admittedly, the degree of control that one can achieve in writing a language is higher than in speaking it, especially in a language with no native speakers to turn to as authorities in matters of usage. But I believe that we must conclude from the available

evidence that the elaborated literary stock only partly coincided with the speech situations people encountered in everyday life. Moreover, when Hebrew was first put into use again in speech by the Jerusalemite circle of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, and later by some of the new Jewish colonies in Palestine, the literary language they were familiar with and the literary taste they cherished belonged to an outdated stage from the point of view of the contemporary East-European centre of Hebrew literature. Reading Ben Yehuda's journals and periodicals, not least the one for children, 'Olam Qatan, issued 7 times during the years 1893–1894, as well as other everyday texts of the period — including school compositions, letters, and reports — one is struck by the archaic flavour of the language adopted in Palestine in comparison with the new style and modernized (post-biblical) grammar currently accepted in the major literary centre abroad. The rather outspoken contempt which the Russian centre of Hebrew letters in Odessa heaped on Ben Yehuda, his journals, language and literary style is undoubtedly connected with the general disrepute into which the once dominant *Haskalah* norms, now considered backward and unsophisticated, had fallen.[11]

This criticism of the literary-written version of Palestinian Hebrew was also coupled with skepticism towards the new vernacular. People as dissimilar as Aḥad Ha-Am and Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner expressed their dissatisfaction with Palestinian Hebrew. On the strength of their descriptions of Palestinian Hebrew, however biased, as well as other, perhaps more objective testimony, it seems clear that however "alive" contemporaries might have considered it to be, spoken Hebrew fell far short of the possibilities literary language could offer. In contradistinction to the literary language, its phraseology (stock of collocations) derived from various sources, among which Yiddish figured prominently, chiefly through loan-translations.

It is not an easy matter to trace the imprint of Yiddish on Hebrew during the years of emergence and fermentation. Most evidence is by now completely lost; written sources are only partly reliable, and even if the role of Yiddish was substantial in the very beginning, official condemnation of Yiddish or quasi-Yiddish features has succeeded in eliminating much of it. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between official written language and the actual vernacular cannot be ignored. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the colloquial language was not recognized by the establishment; indeed, it is not really recognized even today. Various items that are unmistakably of Yiddish origin, such as interjections, void pragmatic connectives, either directly borrowed, like *nu*, or disguised, like *az*;[12] various specific tones (the rise-fall tone[13] the syllable-doubling tone[14]) and intonational patterns at large, and — above all — the semiotic models of interaction, are all still there, in various degrees, in our actual spoken Hebrew. I would, therefore, like to argue that under the pressure of immediate speech situations confronting inexperienced new speakers, only a minuscule portion of the highly developed literary repertoire could be utilized or even remembered by them. What appeared, both consciously and unconsciously, deliberately and non-deliberately, to be more immediately accessible in the great majority of cases was the actual old vernacular, that is, Yiddish.

That this is no wild surmise can be gathered from our general knowledge of the relations that may obtain between a new language and its predecessor in a given community. A comparable case to Hebrew is the Italian one, which is so much more fully researched and documented, although in many ways perhaps less dramatic. The Italian case, in its totality as well as in the particular relations between local dialects and literary Italian, seems to support what is surmised above about the relations between Yiddish and spoken Hebrew. The Italians united as a

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11 The situation reversed itself sometimes during the 1920's, when Eastern Europe became a periphery of Hebrew letters, while Palestine took the lead. At this point, archaic grammar was more prevalent in the Hebrew texts produced in Poland (Russia had annihilated Hebrew culture by that time) than in parallel texts in Palestine, though change there lagged in children's literature, both original and translated.

12 See Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (above, n. 6), "Void Connectives".
13 U. Weinreich, "Note on the Yiddish Rise-Fall Intonation Contour", in: M. Halle et al. (eds.), *For Roman Jakobson,* The Hague 1956, pp. 633–643; J.C. Catford, *A Linguistic Theory of Translation,* London 1965, p. 54.
14 Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (above, n. 6), pp. 167–184.

nation and started using a literary language, which only very slowly has become their natural tongue, but they did not have to move into a new territory in order to establish their new statehood.[15] Michael Zand, even though he was remote from the actual realities of spoken Hebrew — still living in the Soviet Union without access to modern Hebrew — boldly suggested the substratum relation hypothesis.[16]

[IX]

It is an accepted hypothesis that speech has at least several fundamental exigencies that no written notation can supply. A written text does not compel one to make clear-cut decisions about pronunciation, but there is no possibility of speaking without having made such decisions. Ben Yehuda decided to select pronunciation the remotest from his own East-European ("Ashkenazi") pronunciation, which by contiguity recalled the spoken vernacular, Yiddish, namely, the so-called Sephardi (Spanish-Portuguese) pronunciation. As we know, it was not implemented at once, and even when it eventually gained ground, it never freed itself of a host of phonetic and para-phonetic features that partly overlapped those of the old vernacular.[17]

However, para-phonetic, mainly intonational patterns seem to have been of even greater importance in the long run. As we know, most elements of intonation are neither easily controllable nor even easily identifiable, especially in the case of modern spoken Hebrew, when there was no background against which intonation could be perceived as either

15   For a detailed description and analysis of the Italian case, see T. de Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita,* Rome–Bari 1984.

16   See M. Zand, "Idish kak substrat sovremennogo ivrita", *Semitskie jazyki,* II (1965), No. 1, pp. 221–242.

17   Among the most conspicuous phonetic features one can count the deeply rooted velar *r*, rather than the dental one, considered obligatory in Radio Hebrew since its very inception in the 1940's, and, although of less permanent — or stable — character, the partial or full diphthong *ei*, rather than *é*. For more details on phonetics, see Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (above, n. 6), "The Emergence of Native Hebrew Culture in Palestine, 1882–1948".

congruent or discordant. While several relatively isolated intonational features are discernible, such as the above-mentioned rise-fall tone (or end-of-string syllable-doubling), the origin of larger patterns of intonation is less detectable. Yet, the question of intonation is important not only because this aspect of the sound shape of language in the large sense makes its euphonic quality, but because intonation is a major constraint on other organizational levels of speech, chiefly syntactic structures and set phrases. Thus, the selection of elements and their ordering, concatenation and disjunctions in speech are dependent upon intonation no less than the other way around.

[X]

The role of higher vis-à-vis lower levels in all instances of transfer are now fully recognized in the literature. Since general questions of transfer are widely discussed in my other papers, I would here just like to emphasize my contention that it would be erroneous to look for transfer on the level of linguistic structure alone. I argued above that the nature of the language in Hebrew literature could not be accounted for unless one understood in what ways it was subordinated to the needs of literary functions, which had very little, perhaps next to nothing, to do with the interests and needs of an everyday tongue. Similarly, the penetration or rejection of particular items from one system to another is conditioned by the semiotic interests that can be achieved through such transfers. Items never migrate in isolation. To take literature again as an example, when nineteenth-century Hebrew writers made use of Russian verbal conventions, they also necessarily adopted at the same time large portions of the Russian models where these conventions belonged in the first place. Thus, the adoption of principles of characterization, scene construction, personal interaction and so on occurred together with the adoption of formal elements, either in original form or *via* domestication procedures. In other words, together with the *tools* of description — to mention one instance — one accepted the *principles* of description, that is, those principles that determine what can be recognized in the culture to be a legitimate model of the world.

If this analysis is valid for transfer on the literary level, it is doubly so for the colloquial activity. For, while one is able to learn grammar, dictionary, set phrases, and to some extent even pronunciation and perhaps some intonational features of a foreign language, one encounters often insurmountable difficulties in adopting patterns of interpersonal interaction to such an extent that would eliminate one's own automatized habits. If this is the case for the regular shift from one established language to another by an individual, how much more so is it the case when the language in question actually has no such patterns at its disposal. As we all know, these had to be invented for Hebrew, and since it is inconceivable that people should be able to invent something new without any connection to their old, efficient and well-established habits, it is no wonder that the semiotic repertoire in Plaestine, where Hebrew gradually was becoming a living vernacular, should be inherited from the previous cultural phase, where these patterns — at least as far as daily activities and interactions are concerned — had been vehicled chiefly by Yiddish.

In my other studies on this subject I tried to underline the difference between features that were officially recognized and others of which there hardly was any awareness at all. I contended that intonation was one of those unrecognized domains, which is why language purists could criticize what they considered "wrong grammatical constructions", but never got annoyed about intonation. It was only when a feature was recognized, for instance, as typical of Yiddish that it was objected to. Yet, the semiotic level — that is, the level of communication models available in the culture — was never identified with a specific language. Therefore, as long as a model did not disturb one or another new ideological point of view, it was not detected and could be peacefully perpetuated. It is for these reasons that when we translate texts such as the novels of Philip Roth into colloquial, *not* literary, Hebrew, we are sometimes struck by some astounding similarities between his Jewish-American variety of English and spoken Israeli Hebrew. Beside such details as various tones, set phrases and the like, the similarity consists of the semiotic structure of the text, which in concrete terms manifests itself on the level of argumentation (conversation negotiations), patterns of persuasion and influence, stock

attitudes towards events, joys and troubles, luck and misfortunes and the like. This is the most complicated, yet the most promising field of investigation, because it can give us clues to the functions not only of the Russian language vis-à-vis the Hebrew language, or of the Yiddish language vis-à-vis Hebrew, but of the *cultures* of which these languages are vehicles of expression.