
Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics

Immigrant Speech

(2,633 words)

(Sociolinguistic Aspects of the Language of Hebrew-Speaking Immigrant Children in Israel)

Conventional wisdom has it that immigrant parents speak to their children in their native language and that their children respond in the language of the host society. This phenomenon leads to a relatively rapid transition to the second language over a single generation. Language shift also contributes to the development of multiple identities (e.g., Portes and Schauffler 1994; Alba 1999; Weinreich and Saunderson 2003). These identities are maintained and/or modified throughout early childhood, later childhood, and adolescence.

Although Hebrew has succeeded, over the past century, in becoming the native language of most second-generation immigrants in Israel, to this day it is the first language of only half of Israel's 7.2 million citizens. This multilingual vitality in Israel makes Hebrew, paradoxically, a minority language within its own borders. Of the many immigrant communities, three are surveyed here for the sociolinguistic aspects of language acquisition in their Hebrew-speaking children: Russian-speaking (around 1,000,000 native speakers), English-speaking (around 250,000 native speakers), and Amharic-speaking communities (around 100,000 native speakers). These three populations represent varying cultures, attitudes to both the home language and to Hebrew, and socio-economic statuses.

1. Russian-Immigrant Children

The massive immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s created a rich ethnolinguistic community with its own economic, social, and political networks based on Russian language and culture, and with identity choices ranging from assimilation to separatism (Berry 1997). Using sociolinguistic surveys and interviews, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006) reported a strong desire to maintain Russian language and culture, perceived by the

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immigrants as a source of collective pride. Remennick (2003a; 2003b) points out, however, that “mastering and using Hebrew serves as a key trigger for the reshaping of immigrants’ identity to include new Israeli elements” and for successful integration within the host society. Thus, Russian is used within the family and community framework, while Hebrew is employed for social and civil integration.

Kopeliovich (2006) investigated child-parent interactions in Russian-Hebrew bilingual families, identifying four structurally distinct contact varieties. She reports a rapid shift away from Russian-language use among adolescents and children, alongside positive attitudes to their parents’ cultural heritage. Kopeliovich describes “the immigrant children’s dramatic dialogue with their family cultural and linguistic heritage, diachronic changes in attitudes ranging from total rejection of Russian to enthusiastic linguistic rebirth, and vivid bilingual practices”. The study reports major differences between siblings, showing effects of age, age at immigration, personality, experiences outside the home, peer pressure, and other factors influencing attitudes to Russian and Hebrew and the linguistic properties of their speech in Russian.

Similarly, adolescents studied by Burstein-Feldman (2008) exhibited language and behavior patterns typical of their Israeli-born peers, while at the same time expressing satisfaction with their being ‘different’ as a result of exposure to the ‘more cultured’ Russian values fostered by their families. This complex interplay of the two identities exhibited by immigrant children may have an impact on the future of Russian language maintenance in Israel.

Schwartz et al. (2009; 2010) found that, while Russian is the language used with adult family members, there is a strong, context-contingent, tendency for children to use both Hebrew and Russian. Children reported that they use Hebrew more often with older siblings than with parents. They further reported that success in the acquisition of Hebrew as a second language (L2; measured by lexical abilities) was dependent on their parents’ educational level, their parents’ educational experience in L2, and the length of the family’s residence in Israel, but not necessarily on socio-economic status. On the other hand, parent-child language choice, parental L2 proficiency, and children’s social milieu were not found to be significant factors.

In a series of studies grounded in both psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, combining language-use data and sociolinguistic interviews with experimental probes, Armon-Lotem et al. (2008) have examined identity and attitudes among bilingual Russian-Hebrew preschool children and their relationship to language acquisition. Using the constructs of language maintenance and shift, the studies focused on formal transitions from home to preschool, informal transitions from family to peers, and the development of collective identities. Language acquisition and language-use patterns, including lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic data, are used as a window into the child’s identity and attitudes. The transition from Russian-Hebrew bilingualism in the home to relative dominance in Hebrew follows a different course than that characteristic of other minorities in Israel. Despite the linguistic vitality of Russian due to its large number of speakers and residential enclaving, children from Russian-speaking homes become Hebrew-dominant more rapidly than Ethiopian immigrants and indigenous Arabic-speaking children in Israel.

Using self-labeling and person-perception tasks to study language proficiency, ethnolinguistic/ethnic identity, and social preferences (Allard and Landry 1994; Sachdev et al. 2006; and Walters 2005) Armon-Lotem et al. (2008) have asked: To what extent is language proficiency related to ethnolinguistic/ethnic identity and social preferences for interacting with bilingual and monolingual speakers in different contexts? More specifically, they wanted to know whether children with high L2/Hebrew proficiency preferred labels reflecting more integration than lower proficiency children. For identity, children were asked: (a) "Who are you?" and given the following response options: Russian, Israeli, Jewish, 'ivri/ivritchke', new immigrant; (b) "How much do you agree with, like, and, when you grow up want to be 'Russian, Israeli, Russian-Israeli'?" Results showed that Russian identity was preferred over Israeli identity by the lower proficiency children (one third of the children performing more than 1.5 Standard Deviation below the monolingual norm on the Goralnik [1995] Hebrew-screening test), while Israeli identity was preferred by the higher proficiency group, but only for future identity ("When I grow up, I want to be . . ."). In direct questioning ("Who are you?"), more higher proficiency children overwhelmingly preferred the Israeli label (65 percent), while lower proficiency children showed a slight preference for the bicultural label. All children, regardless of language proficiency, preferred interaction with balanced bilinguals, and showed a slight (but in significant) preference for Hebrew-only and Hebrew-dominant friends.

Studies examining the impact of internal factors (age of L2 onset, length of L2 exposure) and external factors (parent education/occupation, birth order, family size) on L1/Russian and L2/Hebrew among a group with relatively homogeneous socio-economic status showed overall stronger relationships between internal factors and language measures than external factors (Oz et al. 2009; Armon-Lotem et al., forthcoming). Moreover, internal factors correlated solely with L2, while external factors (parents' education/occupation) correlated with both L1 and L2. External factors were found to play a role only in cohorts where socio-economic status was heterogeneous, with children of mothers with higher education or more prestigious occupation scoring better in both L1 and L2.

These studies also yielded insights into the influence of age of L2 exposure on L2 acquisition. Length of exposure was found to predict language proficiency, as determined by a standardized Hebrew-screening test (Goralnik 1995). Children exposed to L2 within the critical period for L2 acquisition (early sequential/successive bilinguals) did not differ significantly from children with L2 onset from birth (simultaneous bilinguals). On the other hand, L2 performance of children whose first exposure to L2 occurred after the critical period was found to be dependent on age of exposure, showing a divergence from those who began acquiring L2 within the critical period. Finally, despite this difference in age of onset, length of exposure to L2 correlated with success in L2.

2. Immigrant Children from English-Speaking Homes

While children with L1 Russian show that transitions in identity parallel the transition in language proficiency, immigrant children from English-speaking homes show less of a tendency to give up their home identity, reflecting the strong status of English in Israeli society.

English has always been an important language for international communication, and its prestige and cultural importance in Israeli society has increased over the past decades (Rafael 1994). While in the 1960s most immigrants from English-speaking countries dropped their English upon immigrating to Israel, since the 1980s there has been a growing body of parents who choose to speak English with their children, leading to the formation of 'Anglo-Saxon' communities in which the native language has become a marker of collective identity. This is salient in the findings of Joffe (2010), who studied the ethnolinguistic identity of children from English-speaking homes in one middle-class community in a town in central Israel. Her study shows that preschool children with more than two years of exposure to Hebrew show greater proficiency in English than in Hebrew and rate themselves as more proficient in English. They express negative attitudes toward Hebrew and Hebrew monolingual speakers, but nevertheless see themselves as bilinguals and see their future as Israelis.

In an extensive study of bilingual language-choice, language-mixing, and code-switching in American immigrant families in Israel, Blum-Kulka (1997) examined socialization patterns of language maintenance and language acculturation in dinner-time discourse. Blum-Kulka reported data from Kurland (1992) that indicated high variability across families in the use of English (from 30 to 96 percent), most showing high levels of English maintenance. Parents were reported to be the primary English maintenance agents, using more than 85 percent English with one another as well as with children. This was said to lead to a high use of English by children, more than 80 percent in speech to parents and more than 50 percent in speech to one another. Only speech to guests (most of them native Hebrew speakers) fell below the 50 percent level of English.

Blum-Kulka defines bilingual socialization as "bilingual practices in the processes of socialization as well as socialization toward balanced bilingualism" (1997:250). Bilingual practices are specified as the creation of a 'bilingual interactional style' in order to 'index familial cohesiveness' (ibid.:251) and are supported by linguistic as well as pragmatic data. Bilingual socialization is documented by: (a) high rates of English use by parents as well as children; (b) maintenance of English by parents; and (c) children's accommodation of parents' maintenance efforts. Blum-Kulka points out that English maintenance is supported by the fact that it is a high-prestige language "with cultural and instrumental benefits", but does note that bilingual socialization can be tension-bearing for parents as well as children. For parents, this discord comes from the high value Israeli society places on Hebrew and their need to accommodate other children and guests in that language. For immigrant children, the clash between English and Hebrew is said to be more acute since all "secondary language experience (school, peers, media)" competes with maintenance of the home language. This research and the abovementioned research on Russian-Hebrew immigrant children demonstrates the importance of social factors and socialization for language maintenance and shift.

3. Ethiopian-Immigrant Children

Unlike these first two populations, which have been studied extensively, the study of the sociolinguistic identity of children whose families migrated from Ethiopia is rather limited. This group is very different from the Russian-speaking children, for whom the home language and culture are strongly supported by the local community, and from the English-speaking population, which speaks a prestigious language as their L1. Children whose families migrated from Ethiopia do not benefit from community support of their L1 nor is their L1 considered prestigious. Nonetheless, as Stavans et al. (2009) point out, Ethiopian families most often maintain their L1 along with Hebrew, since even today 45 percent of parents cannot use Hebrew fluently. Thus, these children are born into a bilingual situation, where there is strong support for L1 maintenance in the early preschool years. With continued exposure to Hebrew throughout the educational system, this preference for L1 over L2 decreases, as parents also feel the need to support the L2/Hebrew in order to enhance the child's chances for academic success.

This transition from L1 to L2 support, and the limited involvement of parents of Ethiopian origin in the academic development of their children, is reflected in their ethnolinguistic identity. Miller and Yasso (2010) report that when a group of children of Ethiopian background was asked about their favorite food, only one child named an Ethiopian food, *injera*, while the other children tried to hide the fact that they ate traditional foods at home. Mothers in that study reported that children often hide the traditional foods when they have friends over. Schleifer (2003) found that, while Hebrew language and Israeli culture are dominant in the everyday life of children and adolescents of Ethiopian origin, their narratives reveal a set of values typical of the Ethiopian community. Over 50 percent of the children wrote about incidents in which they were not treated with respect, and their sense of honor was injured. Their narratives reflect daily insult, which might explain why recent studies show a transition in adolescent years from bicultural and even strong Israeli identity in childhood and early adolescence to strong Ethiopian identity in later adolescence. Notably, such dual identity with a reverse transition towards the home identity was also reported by Burstein-Feldman (2008) for adolescents from Russian-speaking homes.

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Cite this page

Armon-Lotem, Sharon, Altman, Carmit, Burstein, Zhanna and Walters, Joel, "Immigrant Speech", in: *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, Edited by: Geoffrey Khan. Consulted online on 28 March 2022 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2212-4241_ehll_EHLL_COM_00000026>

First published online: 2013

First print edition: 9789004176423