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What's in a word?

TALYA HALKIN, THE JEURSALEM POST Jul. 29, 2004

Is the ongoing effort to preserve and develop the Hebrew language heroic or quixotic?

Have you ever found yourself lying wide awake in the dark, combing your mind for a stubborn word that continued to elude you as you pursued it with growing desperation?

What, I wondered, tossing and turning in the humid heat of a recent July night, was the Hebrew equivalent for "jet lag?" The answer, alas, came only after I had spent another sleepless night trying to convince my body that it would soon be time to get up in Tel Aviv, not to go out for a late dinner in Manhattan.

"Ya'efet."

Ayelet Bezalel, a thin, curly-haired young woman, pronounced the term matter-of-factly when I sat down the following morning in her small office at the Academy of the Hebrew Language. Surrounded by dictionaries and grammar books, Bezalel is one of several researchers at the academy's Scientific Secretariat who answer queries from the public.

"It's a word whose root has to do with flying and speed, like the English 'jet,'" she explains. "The verbal pattern, which is that of diseases such as ademet (measles), is also that of ayefet, which means fatigue."

Located in a quiet corner of Hebrew University's Givat Ram campus, the academy is housed in two unimposing buildings surrounded by Jerusalem pines. The green lawn and wilting rose bushes leading up to the main entrance exude an atmosphere of somnolent well-being. Yet as the present state of contemporary Hebrew becomes a subject of increasing public concern, the status and functions of the academy itself have been opened up for debate.

The nature of this government-mandated institution, which was created with the founding of the state to replace the existing Language Council, remains vague and abstract in the minds of many Israelis. In the popular imagination, it often appears as a

tyrannical body locked away in an ivory tower, where it busies itself with issuing arbitrary and unnecessary linguistic decrees.

In reality, the academy is ruled by a 32-member assembly composed of language experts and writers - including Amos Oz and, until recently, the late Naomi Shemer. It is led by a president, who is currently Prof. Moshe Bar-Asher. The Scientific Secretariat, which is now headed by Dr. Ruth Gadish, oversees a little less than half of the academy's activity. Its chief function is to coin new Hebrew words and rule on grammatical questions - a process that is undertaken by a diverse group of committees. Once they are approved by the assembly members, these terms, rules and regulations become the official standard for spoken and written Hebrew.

FEW PEOPLE are aware of the fact that more than half of the academy's activity revolves around the compilation of a historical dictionary. The project, which was initiated in 1969, was conceived of as the Hebrew equivalent to the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language.

The scholars working on the ancient part of the dictionary, which is based on an analysis of every Hebrew text published before 1750, have so far analyzed five and a half million words. The scholars working on the modern part of the dictionary, which picks up in the mid-18th century and ends in 1947, are up to three million words.

Approximately 20 people currently work on the dictionary project. Due to budgetary difficulties (the budget is provided in its entirety by the Ministry of Education), most of them work part time. Over the past 30 years, researchers have gone over approximately a third of the literary corpus that has been designated for examination.

Doron Rubinstein, who coordinates the dictionary's modern literature department, reads dictionaries with the kind of pleasure that other people get from a good crime novel.

"Not everyone can do this," he admits, swiveling around in his chair to survey his office shelves. The names "Agnon" and "Brenner" popped out from among rows of neatly labeled cardboard folders.

A quiet young man with a shy, gentle smile, Rubinstein says he used to think of himself "as an anti-norm guy," and had poked his share of fun at the academy before he started working there.

"You either escape from here after a week or you leave on a stretcher for your retirement. You really have to love it," he

says.

"The Scientific Secretariat," he explains, "deals with what should be. We deal with what is. They would give an F in grammar to a lot of our writers, who made unacceptable mistakes according to the academy's contemporary standards.

"Rabbinical language never followed grammar rules closely. At the turn of the 19th century, students of Hebrew grammar risked excommunication. If you go and look at the notices posted today on the walls of Mea She'arim, you will see the same kinds of grammatical inconsistencies."

Rubinstein points out that today, one of the reasons for decreasing public knowledge of many of the sources that have gone into the making of the historical dictionary is the political divide between secular and religious Israeli Jews.

"The situation in Israel today," he says, "is such that certain sectors have claimed ownership of the Holy Scriptures. School children aren't interested in touching this stuff, because they see it as a form of religious coercion.

"Whether we need this dictionary is a good question," Rubinstein says, putting down a 19th-century scientific textbook from which he had just read an excerpt on zoology in a voice filled with genuine excitement.

"For me, this project is culturally important," he says.

"Language represents culture, and this kind of project is the only way to understand the history and development of the Hebrew language. As far as I'm concerned, God is in the details."

LINGUISTS MAKE a basic distinction between what they call "prescriptive" and "descriptive" linguistics. Generally speaking, prescriptive linguists believe that language must be regulated by establishing rules and laws for standard usage, and by correcting usage that deviates from these norms. By contrast, descriptive linguists generally uphold that languages possess an internal logic that structures their development, and with which there is little or no need to interfere. They focus not on distinctions between correct and incorrect usage of language, but on variations that have to do with gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Eventually, they believe, such variants will - or will not - reach standardization naturally.

The distinctions between these two linguistic approaches are especially poignant in the case of modern Hebrew, which quickly acquired its own distinct vocabulary and rules. To the

more conservative advocates of the prescriptive approach, contemporary Hebrew is sliding down a slippery slope towards pidginization - a process of simplification in which grammatical complexities are taken apart, foreign words are allowed to intrude freely, and complex linguistic registers are abandoned.

Zohar Shavit, a professor of literature who teaches at Tel Aviv University's Department of Cultural Sciences and is a member of the city council, has no doubt that contemporary Hebrew requires a prescriptive standard. Recently, Shavit made headlines by initiating a petition for the enforcement of a hitherto ignored municipal bylaw that would obligate commercial establishments in Tel Aviv to display signs bearing their business names in Hebrew letters. Last week, the petition was accepted by the Tel Aviv municipality, which will immediately begin enforcing the law.

"I think language is an essential element in creating a society with a clearly-defined nucleus," she explains. "Currently, Israel is filled with people who dream of obtaining a foreign passport. I see this attitude as stemming from a lack of self-respect and a depleted awareness of our own capabilities. Strong, dominant cultures know how to protect their language and heritage. Precisely because we are more vulnerable, we have to make an extra effort to protect ourselves."

Shavit is not intent upon coercing Hebrew speakers into adapting official standards in colloquial speech. She is, however, vexed by the fact that people make colloquial mistakes out of ignorance rather than choice, and blames both the educational system and the academic world for not training fluent Hebrew speakers.

"The study of Hebrew is limited and the demands upon students decrease every year," she says.

Academics, she adds, "regard Hebrew with a combination of apathy and scorn." Not only are they not required to publish in Hebrew, she points out, but Hebrew publications are considered less prestigious.

No European country, Shavit adds, would allow political leaders, professors, or media personalities to make the kinds of mistakes that Israelis tolerate on a daily basis.

IN THE first two decades following Israeli independence, writers, politicians and linguists struggled to create standards for colloquial Hebrew, which were reverently studied by the general public and by the media alike. The turning point came in the early Seventies, when written standards began to be

overthrown by new Israeli poets such as Natan Zach. Members of the Palmah generation had already sown the seeds of this linguistic revolution. Two of them, Dan Ben-Amotz and Netiva Ben-Yehuda, came out in the early Seventies with the first volume of a dictionary of spoken Hebrew.

"Its publication," the writer Ruvik Rosenthal notes in his book The Language Arena, "was a turning point after which it was no longer possible to relegate spoken Hebrew to its previously secondary status."

Ben-Yehuda, who is today in her mid-80s, holds court every morning at a lone cafe' table placed outside a grocery store on Jerusalem's Rehov Hapalmah, which she has named "Cafe' Netiva." When I arrived there last week, I found her chatting with two friends, dressed in one of her signature purple outfits. A jumble of rings and amulets hung from numerous chains around her neck.

Ben-Yehuda, as she will gladly explain, is not a descendant of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who was instrumental in the founding of standard modern Hebrew.

"Already in the Fifties," she says, adjusting her large glasses, "I understood that every language contains different registers that are spoken by different generations and sectors of the population, and I demanded that Hebrew be allowed to live a multi-layered life.

"Today," admits the co-author of Hebrew's first slang dictionary, "I don't understand a single word my own grandchildren pronounce. 'Speak so that Grandma can understand,' I tell them."

Ben-Yehuda smiles, clearly unperturbed by spoken Hebrew's refusal to come to a standstill.

"WE KNOW two things about language," the linguist Uri Horesh says later that week, in Tel Aviv. "At any given moment, there is language variation and language change. If we don't take snapshots of it as it evolves, we will be unable to understand changes when they occur."

Horesh, who is getting his PhD in Linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania, is currently teaching at Ben-Gurion University and researching the penetration of contemporary Hebrew into the language of native Arabic speakers in Israel. He represents the more radical wing of descriptive linguistics, which is fiercely opposed to any kind of imposed standardization.

"I don't object to the existence of the academy," he says. "What I don't like is its strategy of dictating what is right and wrong. I think the academy exercises a kind of stubborn prescriptivism that intrudes into the spoken language."

A native speaker of any given language, according to Horesh, cannot speak his mother tongue incorrectly.

"Research," he says, "shows that today 90 percent of Israeli children use only the feminine form of the number, with random variation. The academy will describe this as a mistake. For me, it's an indication that the language is changing. Within 50 years, it's very likely that this differentiation will remain only in written or scholarly Hebrew."

Linguistic and nationalistic conservatism usually go together, Horesh says, as is the case in France.

"I am always surprised by the fact that in Israel, linguistic conservatism comes from supposedly liberal people like Yossi Sarid, who recently published an article in Haaretz decrying Israelis' reduction of Hebrew to its lowest common denominator," he says.

Although scholars at the academy certainly do not advocate an anything-goes approach to spoken Hebrew, they are decidedly less combative than some people may imagine.

Dr. Mordechai Mishor, one of the academy's leading linguists, is by no means despairing about the state of contemporary Hebrew.

"We simply do not have enough of a historical perspective to know where it is headed," he explains. Mishor's office opens onto a library of imposing volumes belonging to the ancient section of the historical dictionary project, which he is responsible for.

"In general," he says, "one has to distinguish between the worldwide threat that globalization poses to many languages, and the particular struggle to invent new words for non-existing Hebrew ones."

Mishor, a slim man with a long white beard that swallows up a trickster's smile, believes the academy is doing the right thing by allowing spoken Hebrew to develop on its own and focusing on the more official registers of the language. The academy, he maintains, does not even want spoken language to approximate its own standards.

"That would be unhealthy," he says. "We are not a language

police."

A NEW and controversial proposal by Mishor, however, has been taken by some to represent an unnecessary form of linguistic control.

The proposal involves the system of vowel signs, known in Hebrew as nikud.

The Tiberian vowel system, as the standard form of nikud is known, involves eight vowel signs. Mishor's argument is that historically, only five or six of these vowels were regularly pronounced, as is the case in contemporary Hebrew. A number of facsimiles currently on display at the entrance to the academy attempt to prove the point. One of them, a Babylonian Talmud written according to Yemenite tradition, is missing the segol (which sounds roughly like the letter E in "end"), because Yemenite Jews traditionally pronounced it like the letter A in "arctic."

An adjacent manuscript of the Mishna from medieval Parma, in which the vowel signs accord with the pronunciation current at the time in Palestine, systematically replaces the patah, which sounds something like "ah," with a kamatz, which sounds more like the "aw" in "law."

Mishor's argument is that in contemporary Hebrew, these distinctions are similarly confounded. Proponents of Mishor's suggestion to drop two of the vowel signs that are traditionally confounded with one another see it as a way of reconciling the standard with the reality of the spoken language.

His opponents, however, see it as an unnecessary step to regulate a phenomenon that requires no regulation. It is enough, they point out, that native Hebrew speakers can read the ancient vowel system. They have no need to use it themselves, and changing it will render the ancient texts that already use it increasingly difficult to read.

Mishor, who is all but unwilling to discuss the proposal before its forthcoming publication in an academic journal, adamantly refuses to have his photograph taken.

"I have an interest in not becoming a public persona," he declares.

Although none are as radical as Mishor, a striking number of researchers at the academy are publicity-shy. Indeed, the interaction with them is reminiscent, at times, of a foray into an 18th-century Masonic lodge, whose members are torn between the willingness to introduce the visitor to their secret rituals

and the desire to protect their arcane corpus of knowledge.

Barak Dan, who is responsible, among other things, for examining the grammatical validity of potential new words, sees the academy's partial reluctance to expose itself to the public eye as a result of the rampant criticism it is often subject to.

"When the academy opposes a new word people blame it for conservatism," he says. "If it approves it, people often ridicule their choices or blame them for imposing themselves on the public. People here feel they are on a mission to serve the public, and we would like very much for people to know what we do," he says.

"We're not four old people sitting in a room and making random decisions. Our aim is to create as few gaps as possible between standard and colloquial Hebrew. Yet there is a part of the public that sees us as an archaic institution whose decisions have nothing to do with it, and is adamant about speaking and writing as it wishes."

NEVERTHELESS, THE kinds of urban legends the academy generates may be taken as a sign not only that people are preoccupied with the academy, but that they are consciously or unconsciously seeking its approval. One legend that generated a recent flurry of inquiries, for instance, involved a secret academy plan to cancel all gender differentiations.

Dr. Orly Albeck, who is responsible for the academy's on-line dictionary of new Hebrew terms, agrees that the large number of queries the academy receives from the public are a clear indication that "even people who get angry or make fun of us because of our decisions are following them closely, and have a desire to speak more precisely.

"It is clear to me that only a small percentage of the general public today is capable of exploiting Hebrew's linguistic resources," she says.

Still, Albeck underscores that "the academy only deals with standard Hebrew. Our decisions only apply to official institutions, and we do not stand in anyone's way when it comes to colloquial Hebrew."

Among the scientific secretaries who respond to inquiries from the public, Malka Zemeli is something of a legend in her own right. One of the academy's most seasoned employees, she resides in a Tel Aviv apartment where the absence of a phone line is, she insists, "a matter of principle." The only way to reach her directly is to call the hotline and hope you manage to

get through.

Zemeli, who fires back answers at her callers without the aid of dictionaries, grammar books or her colleagues, is busy non-stop.

In order to feel prepared for any kind of question, she tells me when I finally manage to get through to her, she reads more than a dozen newspapers every weekend.

"There are quite a number of people who contact us with terminology questions," she explains, the call-waiting signal beeping frantically in the background. "Others ask about grammar, gender, plural forms of nouns and construct cases. Many questions also have to do with the origin of compound words and expressions."

In addition to calls from the president's office and from translators, editors, teachers and lecturers, Zemeli speaks to people missing a word in a crossword puzzle, parents calling to find out why their child's grammar teacher docked them two points on a recent quiz, and teenagers calling during school breaks.

"Some people," she says, "beg me to be available at night to help them answer television quizzes."

In addition to her expertise in answering general inquiries, Zemeli has developed something of a reputation as a name consultant. She claims to be flooded with requests to help name nascent businesses and newborn children.

"Sometimes," she says proudly from the other end of the line, "The soon-to-be parents and I are in touch from the beginning to the end of the pregnancy. I've named all the children in certain families. One woman liked my suggestions so much, she gave her daughter both of the names I suggested."

Zemeli, who is a member of the committee for words in general use, makes a point of trying out new ideas for words on her callers.

"I have no desire for the academy to invent words that will lie around like useless coins. Like everything else, words have their good or bad fortune, but it's important for me that people love them. Otherwise, what would be the point?"

The key to everything

In The Joy of Language, his second book of essays on contemporary Hebrew, Ruvik Rosenthal offers an honest and refreshing look at how Israelis speak today. Rosenthal's first

book, The Language Arena, was named after his language column in Maariv's weekly magazine (both books are published by Am Oved).

Eschewing questions of grammatical rights and wrongs, Rosenthal draws a parallel between the state of Israeli Hebrew and that of Israeli culture. Both, he argues, are colorful, dynamic and chaotic, and both are in the process of attenuation.

Rosenthal's new book treats themes as diverse as the influence of foreign languages and of the military, the linguistic subcultures of the drug world, of sports, of dating and of the culinary world, and the language of different Israeli politicians, from Silvan Shalom to Shimon Peres.

"I think of Hebrew as a kind of Israeli salad," Rosenthal says. "It's an eclectic bunch of elements that has been tossed together, but they haven't ripened yet into a coherent whole. The language reflects the eclecticism and immaturity of Israeli culture, and at the same time a talent for absorption that is very Jewish."

In order to understand a language, he argues, you can't rely on dictionaries and grammar books.

"I think the spoken language is the key to everything," he says. "What doesn't enter into it does not get transmitted. Unfortunately, on an institutional level spoken Hebrew is still treated as a semi-juvenile child who may have to be left behind in school."

At the same time, Rosenthal contends that contemporary Hebrew is in danger of becoming superficial to the point of nothingness. Nevertheless, he says, he is opposed to linguistic policing.

"I don't see language as a realm in which problems can be solved by imposing laws. The French are not very successful at it, and Israeli culture is by definition very resistant to imposition of laws and standards."

"Some mistakes," Rosenthal says, "are ones we should try to uproot. Others may appear like mistakes, but are in fact legitimate forms of usage. The public, surprisingly, wants straight answers. When I tell people that both ways of saying something are legitimate, they are not happy."

Although language as Rosenthal sees it is an open, dynamic territory, he underscores that it must maintain its infrastructure in order to survive.

"Some people," he says, "claim that Hebrew is no longer a Semitic language, that it is a mixture of English and foreign influences, but I don't agree. I think the key without which Hebrew will no longer exist is its ability to create verbs even out of roots that have a foreign origin. If the root system disappears, Hebrew will disappear with it."

Typical Israeli speech, Rosenthal points out, is a mixture of vernacular, standard and slang.

"If the spoken language doesn't continue feeding into written Hebrew, the written language will lose its ability to influence the public," he says. "I think the dialogue between these different registers of Hebrew is vital."

A word is born

Within the Scientific Secretariat, the part of the academy that is responsible for coining new Hebrew words, a number of different committees cater to particular professional sectors, and their activities can last for up to 10 years. Some of them may reconvene as often as every decade to discuss new linguistic needs.

The members of each committee for professional terminology include both linguists and professionals such as doctors or finance experts. In most cases, requests for new words are initiated by the professionals themselves, due to a lack of Hebrew terms in their work environment.

In addition, a committee for words in general usage is responsible for coining words in everyday Hebrew.

"Currently," says Dr. Orly Albeck, "the committee for words in general usage is debating about the word 'spa.'"

In 1985, the academy had already decided on the Hebrew word "neveh-marpe," (literally "an oasis of healing"), but it came to feel the term was no longer appropriate.

"We don't follow people's queries methodically," Albeck explains, "but in this case we realized the questions about the Israeli equivalent of 'spa' were repeating themselves, and we understood that the spa at the Hyatt hotel was not going to call itself 'neveh-marpe.' Since Hebrew words are all coined from roots - three or four letters that form the basis of related nouns and verbs - the first step is to come up with an appropriate root. In the case of "spa," according to Albeck, one suggestion was the root e-d-n, which has to do with refinement and also with the Garden of Eden.

"Another suggestion," Albeck says, "was the root a-n-g, which

is associated with pleasure, but we decided it sounded too hedonistic. We're still debating.

"Words take time to ripen here," she adds.

Once a couple of ideas for a new word emerge from a committee's discussions, they are distributed among academy members for comment. At this point, suggestions for new words are posted on the academy's on-line database for new Hebrew words.

After a given committee comes up with a set of suggestions for new terms, they are sent to a committee for terminology that approves their grammatical validity. Finally, each word is voted upon by the assembly, whose members convene several times a year. Not every foreign word receives a Hebrew equivalent.

"We don't want to transform Hebrew into a reflection of foreign ideas," Albeck explains.

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