

The Revival of the Hebrew Language

Jeff Kaufman

December 25, 2005

1 Introduction

Looking at Hebrew in Israel today, it is hard to believe that in a century Hebrew has gone from being a dead language with no native speakers to an active living language with over 5 million. It was this surprising and unique growth that interested me in Hebrew and its revival. I wanted to look at this success and see what aspects of this revival effort could be applied to other efforts.

Like every other person who has written about revival of Hebrew, I will begin by clarifying my use of the term *dead*. The state of the Hebrew language prior to the revival I will deal with below, but the important thing is that Hebrew was spoken and used by tens of thousands of people. Even many dying languages cannot claim anything like that. Some people use *dead* to mean “gone out of use in *all* forms of communication”, [1, p11] and it is common to believe that a dead language is one not spoken by anyone. When I use the term *dead* here, then, I want to be clear that I mean it in the weaker sense of “a language with no native speakers”.

It is also important to treat carefully the role of Ben Yehuda in the revival. He is often called “the father of Modern Hebrew”, but it was not something he organized. He provided a force to start things moving and was active in many central and important projects, but the revival effort itself was very decentralized. It is often easier to think of a movement if we can put a face on it and call one man the leader, but here if not in most places that is not the case. This is important for prospective language revivers to realize, as many hear about Ben Yehuda and think “if he (alone) can revive a language, so can I”. I discuss further on in what cases it is practical to try to revive a language, but it was not the work of one person. He acted as a catalyst and kept things moving, but ultimately it was the individual speakers who revived the language and they did it mostly without the control or guidance of any leader.

One final thing that I want to make clear from the start is that what is spoken now in Israel is Modern Hebrew, a new language, distinct from that of the Torah and all the varieties of Hebrew that went before. This is another thing that people who want to revive a language need to realize; that the language people end up speaking has very little chance of being the same as the one to be revived. This is probably acceptable if the goal is to get people speaking the same distinct language. On the other hand, if the intent is instead to preserve and expand a possibly sacred language of the ancestors, a successful revival would likely result in a different enough language being spoken that those who had wished to revive it would not be pleased with the result.

2 The pre-revival state of Hebrew

In an examination of the Hebrew revival we should start with a look at the prior state of Hebrew. One very important factor in Hebrew’s being a reviveable language is that while it was dead it was not at all gone. In status it was mostly a religious language, but it had other spheres of use. In written form there were many varieties, each with much literature and much vocabulary. Hebrew lacked terms for many aspects of modern life, but this was remedied, as explained below.

2.1 The varieties of Hebrew

Hebrew has many varieties and subvarieties, but in examining candidate words for revival Ben Yehuda and others looked at three groups. The earliest and most well known is Biblical Hebrew, the Hebrew of the Torah. Because this is writing from a religious document, it is very formal and mostly removed from everyday life.[1, 124]. In that, it was not ideal for everyday use. It was very well respected, though, and Jews everywhere heard it in the synagogue. Biblical Hebrew is also always written fully vocalized,¹ and so is well preserved. There, however, are only about eight thousand unique words in the Torah[1, p15], though, so some other sources would be needed for a usable spoken Hebrew.

The later language of the Mishna, Talmud, and Midrasha comprise Talmudic Hebrew.² Their forms were more adaptable to everyday life, as they themselves dealt more with everyday life. They were considered by some to be perversions or corruptions of Biblical Hebrew, though, and so there was some resistance to their use.

In medieval Europe and then later during the enlightenment, Hebrew was used in a written form as a scholarly and literary language, much like Latin. Writers wanted to use pure Biblical Hebrew, but its limited vocabulary was often restricting. Writers would use words from Talmudic Hebrew, take loan words from the local vernacular, and build new ones off old roots³. These expansions were denounced by some as blasphemous, and some even objected to the application of Hebrew to secular affairs, but they gave the later revivers precedents. The words introduced here were generally useful, but there was much variation among writers so many useful terms never made it into Modern Hebrew.

The Jews of Yemen also had their own form of Hebrew, predictably called Yemenite Hebrew. It is considered to be the most phonologically conservative of the surviving varieties as it has a unique sound for each consonant save one. It was not, however, used as a source for Modern Hebrew. This may be because Ben Yehuda and others did not know about it or perhaps that they did not properly examine it, but regardless, it was not used.

2.2 Spoken usage of Hebrew

Hebrew was, of course, still used religiously. All boys had to learn to read Biblical Hebrew so they would be able to read the Torah when they became a Bar Mitzvah. Study of the Mishna, Talmud, and Midrash was also very common. The focus was the ability to read the text, but Hebrew was used verbally for much instruction. Biblical Hebrew was also used during standard services and for prayers, so it was familiar and widespread. In Palestine and other places where Jews met without another common language, a reduced form of Hebrew was used for communication. Some analysis of this usage in Palestine is presented in the next section.

3 Ben Yehuda and the idea of revival

Ben Yehuda was a Lithuanian Jew, born in 1857. As was standard for young boys, he began to study Hebrew and the Torah at age three. By the age of twelve he had been studying in Hebrew for nine years and had read most of the Torah, Mishna, and Talmud, giving him much familiarity with both Biblical and Talmudic

¹The normal written form of Hebrew indicates only the consonants. Without the vowels it can be understood, but there are many ambiguities. There is a vocalization system where niqqud (vowel markings) are added around the consonants to indicate which vowels should be used. This system is slower and so is used only where proper interpretation is very important, such as in the Torah. The Mishna and Talmud, in addition to more common writings such as newspapers generally do not include vocalization.

²Some authors treat these as three separate forms, but to the people looking over these texts for Hebrew words to use and adapt what mattered in their classification was that they were pre-medieval and post Biblical.

³Hebrew, as a Semitic language, is a language of roots. That is, sets of consonants have a general meaning associated with them. Distinct words are formed by different additions of vowels to these roots. To make a new word, one could take an related root and add a new set of vowels. Alternately, it would be possible to put together new roots, though this was never done.[3, p4]

Hebrew. His parents hoped he would become a rabbi, and sent him to a nearby seminary. At the seminary he continued to study Hebrew, and was exposed to the Hebrew of the enlightenment, including secular writing. He later learned French, German, and Russian and was sent to Dünaberg for more education. There he read the *Ha-Shahar*, from which he learned of Hebrew nationalism and realized that the revival of Hebrew in Palestine could protect and unite the Jews of the Diaspora against external assimilation.

Upon graduation he went to Paris to study at the Sorbonne. There he studied many things, including the history and politics of the middle east, but the one that had the most lasting effect was Hebrew. Specifically, his advanced Hebrew classes taught in Hebrew. It was this use of Hebrew in a spoken form that convinced him fully that the revival of Hebrew as the language of a nation was practical. From Paris he went to Algiers, and there he had only Hebrew for a language in common with the Jews. In Algiers got much practice in using Hebrew in secular contexts for normal communication.

While in Paris, and then later in Algiers, Ben Yehuda published several articles in the Hebrew language press. He tried to convince people of the practicality of Hebrew as a reborn spoken language and of how a Hebrew revival in Palestine would keep the Jewish youth from deserting Judiasm for the national cultures. Despite receiving a mixed response, he decided to go to Palestine and try to effect this revival.

4 Palestine and immigration

The Palestine in which Ben Yehuda arrived in 1881 was 54% Jewish. Jews were divided into two main ethnic and cultural groups, the Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The Ashkenazic Jews were mostly from eastern Europe while the Sephardic Jews were generally Mediterranean. The two groups had different languages, different pronunciations of Hebrew, different cultures, and differing status.

The Ashkenazim were all immigrants or the children of immigrants, and almost none before 1820. Many were there for study and were supported by (and hence dependent on) foreign funds. They generally spoke Yiddish and had a Yiddish influenced pronunciation of Hebrew. They were also not a unified community, but split up by which part of eastern Europe they were from. The Sephardim in Palestine, by contrast, generally had been there for generations. They spoke Ladino and Arabic and were generally in better positions in society. [1, p29] The Sephardic pronunciation was likely the prestige accent.

Arabic was the default language of the cities, and within their enclaves the different groups used their own languages. When Jews of different groups needed to talk to each other, though, they would use Hebrew with a Sephardic pronunciation. [1, p28] As a result, when Ben Yehuda arrived in Palestine he was able to use Hebrew with most of the Jews there. The Sephardic Jews were used to speaking Hebrew with non-Sephardic Jews, and while Ben Yehuda could speak Yiddish he did not let this be known so the Ashkenazim were also willing to speak to him in Hebrew. [1, p31]

The vocabulary of this simplified Market Hebrew was very restricted and used in a roundabout way in an effort to apply it to modern things and the grammar was a hybrid of Biblical and Talmudic Hebrew. Many aspects of the language, especially the vowels and the syntax, varied by speaker as people were influenced by their native languages. [1, p31] This Hebrew is probably properly a pidgin, as it was not a full language but a restricted form used by groups that did not have another common language.

Over the course of the revival, there was a stream of Jewish immigrants from Europe. They are generally treated as two groups, the first and second aliyot⁴. The first aliyah consisted of about 35,000 Jews immigrating between 1882 and 1903. The second consisted of closer to 40,000 and covers the next ten years, from 1904 to 1914. Both aliyot consisted mostly of young idealistic urban Ashkenazim who had not done any farming before. Upon reaching Palestine most went into farming communities, and the first aliyah suffered much from lack of experience. By the time of the second aliyah started arriving things were more sorted out and the earlier immigrants were more experienced. The semi-isolated farming communities they formed turned out to be excellent for the growth of Hebrew, as they allowed a group of people to together make a switch to a language without needing the wider world to go along with them.

⁴Immigration after the revival period is also broken up into aliyot, but they aren't really relevant here.

5 The revival process

There were several major components to the revival process. Ben Yehuda viewed there as being seven, but the essential ones were:

- 1) Use of Hebrew in the home.
- 2) Use of Hebrew socially, among both adults and children.
- 3) Oversight by the Language Committee, and later, Language Academy.

5.1 Hebrew in the home

In order to get Hebrew to be spoken by the people in their daily life, some people had to start. Ben Yehuda and his wife agreed to make their house Hebrew only [1, p37], as an example and a test. In attempting to use Hebrew for daily tasks, they continually had to deal with the problem of things that did not exist at the time of the Torah and so which there were no Hebrew words for. They would coin new words from old roots as they went along, and slowly built up a vocabulary for daily use.

Even with this expanding vocabulary, it was a lot of work for them both. Ben Yehuda had worked with Hebrew most of his life, but he was not yet fluent in spoken Hebrew. His wife had to work even harder, as she had started learning to speak Hebrew just on the boat to Palestine. [1, p38]

Actually having native speakers of Hebrew was essential to its revival, and Ben Yehuda realized this. He convinced his wife that they should raise their newborn son to be a monolingual Hebrew speaker. Their son, Ben Avi, heard only Hebrew for the first seven years of his life. Almost all this Hebrew was spoken by his parents, with the occasional visitor. Probably as a result of this limited input, Ben Avi did not begin to speak until age four. [1, p39] This late onset was very worrying for his parents, especially his mother, as well as the people that looked to their household as an example. Until Ben Avi started to speak, no other family was willing to take the risk that their child might end up languageless.

Even after Ben Yehuda and his wife had shown that a Hebrew speaking household was practical, very few families decided to try. Switching to Hebrew was a lot of work, and few people felt as strongly enough about the revival to put in the huge effort. Additionally, not that many people yet had Hebrew good enough to use exclusively, and so there were not that many candidates. This part of the revival process, then, was not that useful until other parts of the process got people able to speak Hebrew well enough.

5.2 Social Hebrew

5.2.1 Hebrew in the school

Two years after arriving in Palestine, Ben Yehuda was approached by Nissim Bechar, principal of a school that had previously only taken Sephardic students. Bechar wanted to allow Ashkenazim as well, but was concerned about the language problem. He wanted Ben Yehuda to teach, and in Hebrew as a way to solve this problem. Ben Yehuda began teaching, fully in Hebrew, using the Berlitz method.⁵ After only a short time teaching, however, he fell ill and had to stop teaching. [1, p48]

In his months as a teacher he did not directly teach Hebrew to that many people, but by teaching fully in Hebrew he again made an example. Working as a teacher also put him in a position to influence many other teachers and he convinced many of the efficacy of the Berlitz method and of the practicality of a revival. These were excellent people to convince, as they were the ones most able to go out and make a change in Hebrew use, by using Hebrew in their classes.

⁵A newly invented system for language acquisition where students learned the target language by immersion with no grammatical or memorization component. This application of the Berlitz method was not a pure one, as the students already had a lot of experience with Hebrew grammar, but its participatory approach proved very effective.

The use of Hebrew in school caught on rapidly and the status of Hebrew had expanded such that the question was no longer “is it practical to teach completely in Hebrew?” but “which subjects should be in Hebrew?”. Nationalists wanted all subjects to be completely in Hebrew, while conservatives wanted just the Jewish subjects. [1, 55] Over time, more and more places switched to Hebrew only, and in places where Hebrew was used exclusively, young children quickly became fluent. These children very much liked Hebrew as it could often function as a private language. [1, p54]

That the children could consider Hebrew for a while as their own private language may have made it especially popular for them. The ability to converse without the understanding of adults is useful and fun, as is being good at something that your parents are struggling to learn. As it was essential that this next generation make a full switch to Hebrew, these factors were very important. This parent-child imbalance worked both ways, however, as parents would often want to learn more Hebrew once they realized how much their children were learning. And having fluent Hebrew speakers, in the form of children, around to practice with helped the adults learn too.

5.2.2 Hebrew in the newspaper

When Ben Yehuda arrived in Palestine, there were no Hebrew-language newspapers. There had been Hebrew-language papers in Europe, but they were not general newspapers, instead focusing on Jewish issues while people got their general news from the local language papers. In Palestine there weren’t any papers at all, Arabic, Ladino, Yiddish, or otherwise, save those imported from Turkey, Europe, or elsewhere. [1, p56] Ben Yehuda realized that there was a market for a Hebrew paper to provide general news in Palestine, and founded *Ha-Zevi* in 1884, three years after arriving in Palestine.

For *Ha-Zevi*, Ben Yehuda decided to use a system he called Total Hebrew. While other Hebrew language papers used only Biblical Hebrew, using loan words from the local language where Biblical Hebrew did not suffice, Ben Yehuda filled the gaps with Talmudic and Medieval Hebrew. He chose words from sources the people that knew Biblical Hebrew well enough would also be familiar with. He would also coin words where the Hebrew sources did not suffice, both while working and at home. The final source for his Total Hebrew was the pidgin Market Hebrew. Here there were terms for everyday words like “please” and “thank you” that the older sources did not provide succinctly. [1, p60] In this way he was able to bring down the loan word use to 2%, compared to the 14% of most European papers. All three of his non-Biblical sources bothered some people, but the choice of Market Hebrew as a source was the most objectionable, with its being viewed as corrupted and lazy. He was the editor, however, and the religious leaders who objected did no more than object.

Ben Yehuda saw *Ha-Zevi* as a major tool for the spread of Hebrew, especially speakable Hebrew. He thought that people needed to have more words available to them, but he knew that people were generally resistant to accepting words that they were told were new. He would, then, include newly coined words without footnote, translation, or even vocalization, with the goal that people would pick them up from context. [1, p65] This was not all that useful, as without the vocalization people were not able to pronounce them. On the other hand, if he had vocalized them, they would have stood out visually and people wouldn’t have accepted them.

5.3 Language oversight organizations

In 1890, Ben Yehuda founded the Language Committee. It fell apart soon after, though, and was not begun again until 1903 when it was restarted as the Language Council. Its goal was to:

- Collect words from Biblical, Talmudic, Medieval, and Market Hebrew and put together a dictionary.
- Coin new words where needed.
- Standardize pronunciation.

Ben Yehuda had already begun a dictionary before founding the committee. In fact, one of the first things Ben Yehuda did upon reaching Palestine was to put together a small phrase book to make it easier to function in Hebrew. He had added words to it as he went, until it had become quite large. The dictionary grew out of this project and in many ways it showed that origin. One of the stranger things about the organization of the dictionary was that it was arraigned first by topic and then in alphabetical order. This was supposed to make it more practical for the person who knew very little Hebrew. This dictionary was useful to Ben Yehuda in the production of his newspaper, but as it was not completed until near the end of the revival, most people did not get much use out of it during the most important years of the revival. It was useful, though, after the revival was mostly complete as a force for standardization.

One of the initial goals of the council was to reduce the misuse of Hebrew by the new learners. In 1911 they put out a pamphlet called “Don’t say ... , say ...”, identifying the ninety-eight most common mistakes people were making and telling people what they should be saying instead. As is often the case with proscriptive documents from language academies, this one was apparently ignored, as even though the pamphlet was widely distributed and reproduced, nearly all the forms were still in use in the 1970s. [1, p88]

The council would often get requests from people who needed terms for certain subjects, such as teachers who wanted to cover a subject in their class for which a large number of needed terms did not yet exist. The problem was, they were a committee and as such were very slow. They took ten years, from the time they were re-begun in 1903 until 1913, before they published the first of their word lists, consisting of terms for clothing, plants, kindergarten, and sewing. [1, p93] By the time they got their act together enough to decide on words and publish them, people had been using their own coined terms for years.

What the council did, surprisingly, was refocus themselves as arbiters. People who used the language for everyday matters found they needed words, and coined them as appropriate. There was some competition and natural standardization that happened to the terms, but there was also a huge amount of variation in terms. The council would look over the terms people had been using and choose the “best” one by a metric that took into account the source of the term,⁶ the amount of usage the term had, the ease of use of the term, and how well the term fit in with the rest of emerging Modern Hebrew. [3, p3] They then put the chosen terms in pamphlets they distributed to teachers and Ben Yehuda’s paper, *Ha-Zevi*.

This model of language oversight was very effective at standardizing the language, but did not do well with preserving old forms. Some people felt that the role of a language council should be to purify and refine the language of the people into something more. These people usually also felt that it was dangerous to accept terms from these other sources as official or standard, as people might as a result misinterpret the Torah. [3, p3] When the language council had followed this policy people just ignored the committee. The oversight method, in which the committee worked primarily at standardizing among terms already in use, seems to be what they needed to do if they wanted to be paid attention to.

The council also worked at standardizing pronunciation. They had a long series of debates and discussions in which they decided on the Sephardic pronunciation for Modern Hebrew. The people had already decided on this pronunciation, though, as it was the pronunciation of the Market Hebrew pidgin, which Modern Hebrew was growing from. It is likely that if the council had chosen Ashkenazic Hebrew, they would just have been ignored. As it was, the decision of the council gave the people using the Sephardic pronunciation something to point at if asked why not to use the Ashkenazic one.

6 Comparisons with other revivals and introductions

One might think that because the revival of Hebrew was possible, so must be revivals of other languages. No other attempt has had anywhere near the success of Hebrew, though. One major feature that people overlook is that Hebrew was no longer used *at all* in the domain in which it was brought back. In the case of most of these other languages, they are not dead but dying. And they are dying because their speakers are turning away from them towards the language of the media and of the dominant culture and society. The

⁶They preferred Biblical Hebrew over Talmudic Hebrew, Talmudic Hebrew over Arabic, Arabic over foreign languages.

forces that pull the youth away from the language are powerful, and they were not really ones Hebrew had to deal with.

In a strange way, being no longer used as a spoken language actually helped Hebrew. People were learning to speak a language that was not a low prestige language stomped upon by some dominant one, but instead a language with no status at all in spoken usage. In Palestine there also was no media or society at large to be competing with, especially for the youth out in the Kibbutzim, the farming communities set up by the socialist Russian immigrants of the second aliyah. There it was possible to get an entire community to start speaking Hebrew without external interference. Few if any modern language revivals are in this situation.

The revival of Hebrew was also helped by the massive numbers of young immigrants of the first and second aliyot. They got behind the revival and were willing to work to build a Jewish language to go along with their independent Jewish nation and identity. In the case of national language revivals this drive is often much less powerful and widespread. These immigrants also were coming to a new place with the intention of radically changing their way of life, from urban to agrarian. Changing their language along with all the rest was not that much more. In the case of a population that just wants to revitalize their language, there's not the symbolic and irreversible immigration to select the truly committed and put them in a place together. Instead, some dedicated people who want to change the language are together with many people who are open to the idea but not committed and some who are stubborn, far less ideal conditions.

We come back then to the question of when it is practical to revive a language in a given domain. It looks like, from the experience of the revivers of Hebrew, that there are several factors needed:

- Some dedicated organizers: Ben Yehuda, countless others.
- An idealistic and committed population: The aliyot.
- A way in which it is more useful to have the language than not, and correspondingly the absence of a larger language that could better fill that need: the Jews of Palestine lacked a common language, and none of the languages they did speak was well suited to become one.

Most other revival cases fail one or more of these. There is also the factor that there probably needs to be a domain in which the language to be revived can become exclusive. In other cases of revival, the languages were not intended to replace the dominant one, just supplement it as a culturally helpful second language.

References

- [1] Jack Fellman. *The revival of a classical tongue: Eliezer Ben Yehuda and the modern Hebrew language*. Mouton, The Hague, Netherlands, 1973.
- [2] Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale, editors. *The green book of language revitalization in practice*. San Diego, 2001.
- [3] Moshe Nahir. Micro-corpus codification in the Hebrew Revival. 2003. <http://www.uoc.edu/humfil/articles/eng/nahir0303/nahir0303.html>.
- [4] Chaim Rabin. The national idea and the revival of Hebrew. In Jehuda Reinharz and Anita Shapira, editors, *Essential papers on Zionism*. New York University Press, New York, NY, 1996.
- [5] Shalom Spiegel. *Hebrew reborn*. The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, PA, 1962.