

THE VICTORY OF HEBREW

It may not be what Eliezer Ben-Yehuda imagined, but modern Hebrew has emerged as a vibrant, flexible language

By Joanna Paraszczuk

“YOU WANT me to eggplantize you? Eh?” Oved Daniel grunts, brandishing a pair of tarnished serving tongs.

This request is neither a threat nor part of a bizarre initiation ceremony (well, perhaps it could be considered the latter). Daniel is the owner of Oved’s, a renowned *sabich* stand in Givatayim, where he proudly serves up the quintessentially Israeli street food snack of fried eggplant, hard-boiled egg, tehina, hummus, salad and spicy sauce, all stuffed into a fresh pita.

Feeling that Hebrew did not possess sufficient vocabulary to properly serve and order *sabich*, Daniel simply went ahead and coined new verbs including *lebatzel* (“onionize”), *lehatzil* (“eggplantize”) and *lebatzbetz* (“to add a hard-boiled egg”).

Students of Hebrew will not find any of these words in the dictionary or in their well-thumbed copies of “501 Hebrew Verbs.” They have never been discussed by the Academy of the Hebrew Language, nor are they taught in any language school. Yet without doubt they are now a part of the Hebrew vernacular, at least in the greater Tel Aviv area. And they reflect an important – and untranslatable – aspect of popular culture: a reverent love of street food, elevated to performance art.

Street Hebrew, as spoken at Oved’s, provides a unique and important window into contemporary Israeli culture, says Guy Sharett, a Hebrew teacher and tour guide who founded his own company, Streetwise Hebrew, to better

acquaint his students – many of whom he dubs “ulpan and Hebrew school survivors” – with this important aspect of the language.

Sharett believes that since language is an expression of culture, by examining the Hebrew spoken by ordinary Israelis, and the “language artifacts” they leave behind in terms of advertisements, posters, pop songs, and graffiti, students of Hebrew can put a metaphorical finger on the rapidly beating pulse of contemporary Israeli life.

Part of Sharett’s unique curriculum involves deciphering the hieroglyphics of street Hebrew in south Tel Aviv’s Florentin neighborhood, which is at once an artsy, bohemian secular enclave, and a working-class area overflowing with small factories, carpentry workshops and tiny synagogues.

When I join up with Sharett in the middle of one of his Florentin tours, he is clutching a small whiteboard and pointing at a wall outside a Frenkel Street furniture store, upon which a single Hebrew word is written: *hipsterim* (hipsters).

It doesn’t look like much, but Sharett insists to his rapt students – a family from Florida – that this one word can offer insight into trends in Hebrew language and Israeli culture. First of all, he notes, the graffiti artist has taken an English slang word — hipster — and instantly Hebraized it by adding the Hebrew plural ending *im*.

But there is another layer here. The artist has added the Hebrew letter *ayin*, a blatant Yiddishism, to the spelling. “Why? Because Yid-

dish is cool again,” says Sharett.

Incorporating Yiddish style into Hebrew is part of Israeli hipster culture, a way of reclaiming the past as trendy – just like vintage clothes and music styles.

Yiddish is not the only “foreign” language whose presence has crept into every day, spoken Hebrew. As Sharett points out, the streets of Tel Aviv – and just about everywhere else in Israel – are lined with stores whose names and signage are in English. Why? Because many Israelis see English as trendy and cool, whereas Hebrew is “provincial and bad,” Sharett believes.

“The Tel Aviv Municipality says that 50 percent of signage should be in Hebrew, but no one cares. It’s a bit sad. After all, people fought so hard for the Hebrew language,” he laments.

That words and phrases from the “dying language” of Yiddish would become trendy and that English shop signs would predominate in the first Hebrew city would surely have driven the early Hebrew revivalists into a frenzy.

DURING THE 1920s and 1930s, the so-called *Gedud Meginei Hasafa* (The Language Defenders Regiment) would patrol the streets chanting their motto of “*ivri, daber ivrit!*” (“Jew, speak Hebrew!”), terrorizing Yiddish-speakers by causing disturbances at theater gatherings, and tearing down signs written in foreign languages like English.

The reviver of modern Hebrew himself, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, insisted that his baby son hear only Hebrew, famously flying into a terri-

Guy Sharett points out a portrait of the late singer Zohar 'The King' Argov during his tour of south Tel Aviv's Florentin neighborhood where he deciphers the hieroglyphics of street Hebrew



Language

ble rage when his wife, Dvora, dared to sing a Russian lullaby to the child (she was afraid he would grow up mute).

If Ben-Yehuda were to join Sharett on one of his tours, he would surely insist that Hebrew — the language and by extension the culture — was being weakened by the intrusion of foreign slang terms. But is this really the case?

Absolutely not, says Ruvik Rosenthal, a writer and the author of books on Israeli slang and Hebrew idioms.

As we sip coffee (*kafeh* in Hebrew, another imported word) in his book-lined Tel Aviv apartment, Rosenthal points out that even in Talmudic times, Jewish scholars complained that Hebrew — even then considered *lashon hakodesh* (the holy language) — was “polluted” by foreign terms (at that time, the invader was not Yiddish or English, but Greek).

“What kept Hebrew strong was its flexibility,” Rosenthal tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “The language can easily adopt new words and transform them into Hebrew words.”

Oded Daniel, with his self-made *sabich* vocabulary, would surely agree. However, Rosenthal believes that what makes Hebrew strong is not so much its linguistic flexibility, but its cultural characteristics.

First, Hebrew is the language of the Bible, “the most important book in civilization,” Rosenthal says. “The Jews have survived as a nation, a culture and a religion. There is a mutual relationship between language and culture. That was true even when Hebrew was not a living language,” he explains.

Modern Hebrew is a “product of Zionism,” Rosenthal adds.

“Yiddish was the language of exile, the antithesis of Zionism, so it could not be the language of the Jews in Israel,” he says.

While he does not believe that Hebrew’s revival was “miraculous,” Rosenthal describes it as a “unique phenomenon. That a small language could come back and become a living language — that has never happened before,” he says.

While Rosenthal believes that the revival of modern Hebrew has been a success story, he also admits that the language is also “full of imports.”

This is particularly true in the case of slang and colloquial Hebrew. Around half of the Israeli idioms Rosenthal has listed in his book are not native, but have entered into Hebrew from other languages, he says.

The main reason why there are so many foreign words in street Hebrew is because “slang is not bound by ideology,” Rosenthal explains.

Like Sharett, Rosenthal believes that Israeli

slang terms and idioms are a gateway to the country’s culture. “You can try to protect the standard language — but slang is outside the system. You can’t tell people not to use slang,” he adds.

Most Israeli slang uses foreign terms simply because Israeli culture is so young, Rosenthal believes. “You can create a lot of new words, but you can’t create culture. That takes time,” he says, leafing thoughtfully through his book on Hebrew idioms.

PERHAPS ELIEZER BEN-YEHUDA WOULD BE PROUD OF HOW HEBREW HAS DEVELOPED

According to Rosenthal, there are three main influences on Hebrew slang: Yiddish, English, and Arabic. However, the balance between these three influences has changed over the years.

In the 1950s, around half of Israeli slang terms came from Arabic, with some 40 percent from Yiddish. English has gained in popularity, though Arabic has remained — surprisingly, given the tensions between Arabs and Jews — a very important influence.

Arabic is the “queen of Hebrew slang,” Rosenthal says. Its influence on Hebrew began as far back as the British Mandate, when young Jews wanted to distance themselves from Yiddish, the language of their parents. Arabic was a natural choice, because as well as surrounding the Jews, it is also rich in colorful and delightfully offensive curse words.

Yet, in typical fashion, even though Israelis took a great deal of Arabic words, they have invested them with a new, Hebrew meaning.

The ubiquitous slang word, *ars*, for example, a crude and derogatory term for an Israeli redneck, started life as an Egyptian Arabic word meaning “pimp.”

SOMETIMES HEBREW slang mixes together borrowed and Hebraized Arabic terms with Yiddish slang words to produce something as Israeli as *sabich*.

Rosenthal recalls a recent billboard advertisement for an insurance company, which used a phrase that would certainly be unintelligible to ulpan and *heder* students: *sahbak lo frier*. In Arabic, *sahbak* means “your friend” but, in Hebrew, it has taken on the meaning of “yours truly” and also used to convey a sense of Israeli informality, of a flat

hierarchy where everyone is at the same level. *Frier* is Yiddish for “sucker,” an oft-discussed concept in the Jewish state, and something that Israelis will go to lengths to avoid being or seeming. The advertisement, therefore, implies that your ordinary, man-on-the-street Israeli is smart and can’t be taken in.

Rosenthal shares Sharett’s view that the influence of such foreign words on Hebrew is not harming the language. Rather, this is a natural process that all languages go through, they say.

Even more blunt about the plethora of foreign words in spoken Hebrew is Prof. Ghil’ad Zuckermann, a Hebrew language expert from the University of Adelaide in Australia. “Shift happens,” he quips, “especially when dealing with reclaimed languages.”

Zuckermann, whose controversial book, “Yisraelit Safa Yafa” (“Israeli Is a Beautiful Language”) argues that modern Hebrew is based on Yiddish as much as Biblical Hebrew and should therefore be named “Israeli,” says there is nothing wrong with foreign influences on Hebrew.

According to Zuckermann, modern Hebrew is a “genetically modified and semi-engineered” language. Instead of there being a “Yiddish revival” via slang, the *mameloshen* has always been ubiquitous in modern Hebrew, something he believes the boys of the Language Defenders Regiment ought to have thought of before they went around tearing down Yiddish billboards.

“These days, [Yiddish] is more accepted, as people realize more and more that Israeli is not as pure as some thought in the past,” he notes to *The Report*.

Zuckerman points out that, ironically, Yiddish — a Germanic language with considerable influence from Russian and other Slavic languages — was itself “shaped by Hebrew and Aramaic.”

And even Biblical Hebrew wasn’t particularly pure, but was influenced by Greek, he adds.

According to Zuckermann, it is Israelis — those who speak and communicate in Hebrew — who should have the ultimate say, as it were, in how their language develops. “The native speaker is the one who determines the nature of the language, not the Academy of the Hebrew Language,” he says.

But perhaps the Academy of the Hebrew Language thinks otherwise?

After all, it is the task of the Academy — the successor to Ben-Yehuda’s Language Committee — to add official new Hebrew words to the dictionary, and to safeguard the language.



ARIK SULTAN

Writer Ruvik Rosenthal says Hebrew's revival isn't a miracle, but it certainly is a unique phenomenon

“Hebrew is no different from any other spoken language that also has a written language,” says Prof. Steven E. Fassberg, a member of the Academy and a language expert from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Noting that the same complaints about youth language and street slang “weakening” the language are also heard in other Western countries, Fassberg tells *The Report* that spoken languages and slang terms always rush ahead of formal, written languages. The role of the Academy, according to Fassberg, is not to act as the “language police,” but to help the public come up with new terms for which there are no Hebrew words.

Often this involves creating new technical terms for various professions, such as medicine or engineering.

The Academy also answers public requests for new general vocabulary. The public is able to vote on new words, but there is no way of knowing if they will be accepted into general use.

Some of the words created by the Academy, such as *darkon* (passport) and *monit* (taxi), are now commonly used.

The fate of newer words — such as *misron* (text message) — is still undecided, with many Israelis still using the term *esemes*, from the English acronym SMS.

Regarding Yiddish, Fassberg agrees with Sharett that Israelis are less embarrassed by Yiddish terms because of a revival of interest in Jewish history and roots. There is also increasing interest, in Israel, in other Jewish languages, such as Ladino and Judeo-Arabic. This interest is expressing itself at a popular level, not just in the ivory towers of Israel’s universities, says Sharett from *Streetwise Hebrew*.

In the early days of Zionism, during the push to revive Hebrew, the first Israelis had wanted to obliterate the past in order to open up space for a new Jewish future in Herzl’s *Altneuland*. “Now Israelis are hungry for their past, and that hunger is expressing itself in language,” he adds.

As Israelis remake their heritage, they naturally incorporate foreign words into Hebrew, a sign that both the language and Israeli identity are strong.

Fassberg asserts that in fact Hebrew has emerged victorious from its dormant past.

Perhaps Ben-Yehuda would be proud of how Hebrew has developed. After all, one of his laments about Hebrew was that “the woman must penetrate Hebrew literature; only she can bring warmth, softness, flexibility, subtle, delicate and shifting hues into the dead, forgotten, old, dry and hard Hebrew language!”

That lament has been answered, I see, as Sharett leads us down the side of a tiny alleyway in Florentin, where, written on a sheet of iron, orange-brown with rust and crudely nailed over a glassless window, female poet Nitzan Mintz has stenciled a verse in beautiful Hebrew calligraphy.

*I removed tentacles from between sinks
Octopi yell,
They yell, they yell,
Don't yell, octopus,
Don't yell in my house*

The police caught Mintz as she stenciled the poem, Sharett says. “The cops had a debate over whether writing Hebrew poetry on the walls was vandalism or not,” he relates. “Eventually they decided it wasn’t. I guess Hebrew won.” ■