Toward an understanding of Hebrew language education:
Ideologies, emotions, and identity

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the practices of teaching and learning Hebrew language at a non-Orthodox Jewish day school, showing the ways that Hebrew language ideologies intersect with categories of emotions, affect, and identity. Drawing from a corpus of ethnographic data collected over an 18-month period, this paper examines the ways in which local interpretations of what being Jewish entails for seventh and eighth grade students and their teachers are intricately tied to their feelings and beliefs regarding the Hebrew language. While predominant language ideologies explicitly support the importance of Hebrew at their school and within the Jewish community at large, and identify Hebrew as a marker of Jewishness, in practice feelings about the language are complex and entangled with conflicting beliefs about how Jewish identity is expressed in a variety of languages and practices. Ethnographic investigation of language use in religious educational settings is crucial to providing a lens through which to view these complex interrelationships between ideologies of languages, modes of representation, and religious identity.

Introduction

Hebrew language literacy practices have always played a salient role in the construction, maintenance, and transmission of Jewish identity. As a marker indexing religious practices, nationalistic ideologies, cultural affiliations, and diaspora imaginations, Hebrew holds a dominating place in the transmission of Jewish cultural and religious cultural practices. In Israel and in the diaspora, across most Jewish denominations, Hebrew is identified as the sacred language of liturgy and prayer, the language of the State of Israel, and the international language that symbolizes Jewish unity. When put together, these language ideologies, what Schieffelin and Doucet (1998: 300) refer to as “the cultural beliefs that underlie language practices, choices, and

attitudes of a people” give shape to a constellation of ideas and values attached to the Hebrew language, its use, and its importance to Jewish life. More than just a sacred or heritage language, Hebrew is a locus where ideologies of language, religion, culture, and nationalism all converge, creating in that convergence a discursive space in which Jewishness is defined and practiced.

In this article, I examine Hebrew language ideologies as a means of gaining insight into the cultural logic by which American Jews make connections between ideas about language and categories of emotions, affect, and identity (Gal 1998). Recent developments in the anthropological and linguistic understanding of affect, mood, and feelings in language have led scholars in recent years to pay closer attention to the interconnections among emotion, language, and social life (Besnier 1990; Ochs and Schieffelin 1989; Wilce 2009). In this article, I interrogate this connection through the analysis of adolescent Hebrew language learners attending a non-Orthodox Jewish day school located in New York City. Specifically, I analyze the ways the students and faculty situate Hebrew in the context of learning to be Jewish, and the ways in which the language is locally defined and explicitly talked about in different classroom activities.

Drawing from a corpus of ethnographic and linguistic data collected over an 18-month period at a non-Orthodox Jewish day school, I show that the classroom language practices provide a lens for understanding how Hebrew authenticates a localized brand of religious and cultural identity. I will show that while prevailing language ideologies explicitly support the importance of Hebrew at their school and within the Jewish community at large, in practice feelings about the language are complex and entangled with beliefs about how Jewish identity is articulated and performed.

The ties that bind: Hebrew and Jewish life

The association of Hebrew and Judaism has a strong historical, spiritual, and emotional presence in Jewish consciousness. Hebrew is sacred not only because it is the language of divine revelation, the immutable language of the Torah, and the authentic language of the majority of canonical prayers, but also because it is perceived as the linguistic glue that has sustained Jewish life across the millennia. While scholarship has revealed that throughout history, Jewish people have maintained a pattern of triglossia, using Jewish languages (i.e., Yiddish, Judeo-French, Ladino) as the language of the community and home, and a co-territorial vernacular (i.e., Greek, Arabic, or English) as the language of communication with non-Jews, Biblical Hebrew (*lashon hakodesh*) has been maintained for prayers, blessings and literacy purposes, and has played a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of dispersed Jewish communities throughout history (Spolsky 1997; Spolsky and Benor 2006).

Even today, the belief that Hebrew is at the core of the preservation of the diasporic peoplehood is embedded in a Jewish cultural worldview that valorizes its status as “The People of the Book,” even as other languages, such as Aramaic are commonly found in the canonical sacred texts. Likewise, other vernacular languages, such as English and Yiddish, have occupied significant roles in the ways in which Jewish people live their daily lives. It is a linguistic ideology such as this that bolsters the belief that an English speaking teacher in New York, a Russian speaking scientist in Moscow, an Amharic speaking farmer in Ethiopia, and a Yiddish speaking Hasidic rabbi in Israel can locate themselves within an imagined spiritual community (Anderson 1983), firmly

linked because of the knowledge and use of liturgical Hebrew. To paraphrase a widely noted sentiment, it is not the people who have maintained the language, but the language that has sustained the people (Heilman 1987; Holtz 1984). Most clearly, the power of this assumption can be best gauged by the fact that knowledge of liturgical Hebrew has often been taken as a proxy of one's Jewishness.

At the same time, the revival and spread of Modern Hebrew, a process that began in Eastern Europe during the 19th century and came to fruition as a result of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, has underscored the aspects of the Hebrew language that are detached from religious and spiritual context. As a cultural and national marker, Jewish leaders, ranging from Ahad Ha'am to Isaac Berkson, have argued that maintaining a vital ethnic culture in the diaspora is contingent upon the existence of a cultural center in which Modern Hebrew plays a significant role. In Mintz's words,

> Hebrew language — its literature and culture — constitutes the true index to what is timelessly important throughout the past and heterogeneous history of Jewish civilization. Language and mind are at the center, not religion. What is preserved in Hebrew, that is, in the multivalent historical layers of the language as it selectively accumulates meanings and grows in complexity, is what is worth preserving. To know Hebrew is therefore to become a master of Jewish civilization in its most perfected distillation. (Mintz 1993: 59)

Clearly, Hebrew is more than just a means of expressing spirituality and articulating a nationalistic vision; it is the repository of everything that is Jewish.

These two major dimensions of the role of the Hebrew language for Jewish people, taken together, constitute a striking dialectic: on one hand, the sanctity of the Hebrew language is what has maintained Jewish cohesiveness across time and space; on the other hand, Hebrew is endowed with a cultural purpose and has performative value in social reality. That is to say, Hebrew is a living language that enables Jewish cultural and

religious practices to be performed across time and space. At the crux of this linguistic paradox are two facets of Hebrew that are crucial to remember. First, despite the term's ubiquity in religious, educational, and cultural polemics, Hebrew is not a singular, monolithic code; rather, it is an umbrella term that subsumes numerous varieties — Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval and Modern — each linked to a distinct socio-historical period (Chomsky 1957; Mintz 1993; Myhill 2003). As the language has historically evolved, it has been shaped by language contact forces as well as by the geographic dispersion of its speakers. For this reason, although many elements of Biblical Hebrew have been incorporated into Modern Hebrew, the distance between the varieties remains substantial (Chomsky 1957) -- referred to by one scholar as the distance between "Shakespeare's and today's English" (Gold 1989: 370). Arguably, knowledge in one or all of these Hebrew varieties offers its users access to different discourses and communities.

All of this leads to the second equally important component of Hebrew that is key to understanding the role of the language in association with its affective factors: though Hebrew and Jewishness might be inextricably linked historically and culturally, defining this category is complex, if not impossible. Jewishness, as the phenomenon of being Jewish has been named, has slipped "within and among the categories of race, nation, religion, and culture" (Itzkovitz 1997: 180) and remains "an amorphous concept" (Heilman 1995) involving God, ethnicity and nation. For this reason, it is not only the diachronic dimension of the language that must be contended with when one speaks about its use, but also the synchronic representational acts that the varieties of Hebrew are called upon to perform for different communities with wide ranging systems of beliefs, values, and practices. From observant (ultra-orthodox to ultra-liberal) to secular

(and everything in between), Jewish people appropriate and utilize Hebrew in a variety of ways in the ongoing interactional work of constructing, maintaining, and expressing Jewish selfhood. In some regards, then, Hebrew is a language called upon by its users to multitask, in that it must simultaneously perform varying roles for its different users.

Seen in this way, Hebrew is not a single signifier, but rather has multiple roles as referent, icon, and performative. Referentially, the words have denotative meaning, performatively, they imbue a speech event with symbolic, spiritual, and religious meaning, and iconically, they mark written or spoken discourse as Jewish. Even though the overwhelming majority of Jewish people worldwide today are not native Modern Hebrew speakers and may have limited liturgical proficiency, Hebrew can evoke and enable Jewishness to be practiced, performed, and expressed, while at the same time maintain its role as an icon of faith, tradition, and heritage. In this way, it is both signifier and signified.

Background to Jewish day schools

One site in which the role of Hebrew language is continuously being analyzed and challenged is in the arena of American Jewish education (Bekerman 1999; Glinert 1993; Morahg 1993; Ringvald and Mintz, 1999/2000; Rosen and Chomsky 1940; Shohamy 1999; Wisse 1993). While Hebrew language teaching in the United States has occupied a salient role in synagogue-based Hebrew schools and summer camps throughout much of the last four decades, it has garnered considerable attention in recent years in the United States due to the growth of the day school movement that encompasses full day, dual curriculum K-12 schools. For moderately affiliated Jewish parents and their children

living in areas with a strong Jewish presence, the non-Orthodox day school has become an increasingly important community of practice in the constellation of institutions connecting them to the broader Jewish community (Hyman 2008; Rauch 1984; Schick 2000; Wertheimer 1999). While historically the idea of a Jewish day school in America took root among the highly observant and Orthodox, the growing concern throughout the early and mid 1900s for safeguarding Jewish continuity and preventing the complete "Americanization" of second-generation, American-born Jewish children, along with a shift from universalistic concerns to a preoccupation with Jewish particularism ushered in a context ripe for sectarian education in the Jewish community (Wertheimer 1993). Between the two World Wars, the non-Orthodox American Jewish day school was created to balance the religious priorities of committed Jews with the demands for a high-quality secular education.

The potentiality of the day school model as a buffer against assimilatory pressures garnered further attention in the 1990s when a "crisis of continuity" was articulated in the guise of national demographic surveys documenting a weakened commitment to Jewish religious, cultural and ethnic practices, especially among the young (The Commission on Jewish Education in North America 1991). Rather than flounder on the shoals of paralysis in the face of perceived imminent disintegration of the American Jewish community, leaders opted to rethink its educational programs. As a result of these efforts, the non-Orthodox day school became a centerpiece of Jewish communal efforts, made possible by contemporary organizational capacities, pedagogical approaches, and increased societal acceptance of faith-based schooling throughout the United States (Sarna 2004; Wertheimer 1999). Though it is difficult to measure how the current

financial crisis in Jewish philanthropy will affect day school enrollment, as of 2000, approximately 200,000 students study in 700 schools across the United States (Schick, 2000).

As a non-centralized educational system, curricular policies of these schools vary according to religious and ideological orientations. Indeed, the goals are multidimensional, covering literacy in sacred texts, ritual observance, Jewish cultural identity, identification with the State of Israel, modern Jewish history, general academic excellence, and ethical and moral living (Fox, Scheffler and Marom 2003). As mentioned earlier, the multidimensional aspect of the Hebrew language has also resulted in a lack of a unified, coherent Hebrew language policy across these schools. Representing a wide spectrum of religious and philosophical ideologies, Jewish educators do not necessarily agree on one singular goal for Hebrew language learning, though there is agreement that Hebrew is critical to the social project of Jewish education in its formal and informal modes and a key component of transmitting Jewish religious and cultural identification.

The research site

Data for this article draws on ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork carried out at Rothberg School (pseudonym), a non-Orthodox Jewish K-8 day school established in the mid-1990s in New York City. For 18 months, between 2004 and 2006. I followed a class of coed students through seventh and eighth grade taking detailed and time-indexed fieldnotes and recording classroom interactions during Hebrew and Judaic study lessons, holiday celebrations, secular studies, breaks, school wide activities, and during a two-

week trip to Israel. This corpus of data was supplemented with interviews with students, faculty, and the administration.

The methodological approach was premised on a synecdochical assumption that Jewishness, like any social category, rarely fully reveals itself in all of its dimensions, but rather is signified in the revelations of its parts, discernible through the systematic observation and analysis of daily activities (Charme et al. 2008). Additionally, the study was guided by the language socialization research paradigm that sees that the processes of social reproduction are primarily realized through language, making everyday discursive practices a crucial locus of investigation (Ochs and Schieffelin1984; Schieffelin 1990).

Despite the pedagogical challenges of teaching a religious language that is not widely known in American society, nor the language of communication in the students' homes, the Rothberg faculty made it very clear that Hebrew occupied a significant place in the cultural, educational, and religious landscape of the school. For one, Hebrew was given visual expression at the school in a multitude of ways. Hebrew letters were seen on bulletin boards throughout the school celebrating upcoming holidays, displaying students' work, and making announcements. Hebrew writing was also visible on commercially made posters and student art projects located in the classrooms and throughout the hallways. Hebrew lettering was personalized and individualized through the garments and jewelry that the students wore to class on a daily basis; it was as common to see the boys wearing handmade *kippot* ‘skullcaps’ with their Hebrew names embroidered on the rim as it was to see the girls wearing necklaces with their Hebrew names attached.

Additionally, Hebrew was given verbal expression through different pedagogical and religious activities. It was common to hear Hebrew coming out of the various classrooms as students engaged in morning and afternoon prayer services, as well as during the recitation of blessings before and after their lunches. Likewise, it was not uncommon to hear the faculty intersperse Hebrew words, such as *tefilah* 'prayer', *kashrut* 'being kosher', *hafsaka* 'recess' in their English sentences. Most importantly, though, Hebrew maintained a constant presence in the school in that it was a designated part of the school curriculum; students were divided according to proficiency levels and studied Modern Hebrew language for at least one 45-minute period each day. In fact, the school had an official policy of teaching Hebrew language in Hebrew, a pedagogical method modeled on Hebrew language education in Israeli Hebrew language intensive courses. Teachers were expected to use as much Hebrew as possible in their Hebrew languages classes, even if they themselves were not native Hebrew speakers. Additionally, students were exposed to other varieties of Hebrew during their morning and afternoon prayer services, during their celebration of the Jewish calendar holidays, and during their Bible reading classes. With this background in mind, Hebrew learning at Rothberg included the following possibilities:

1. reading liturgy (primarily in Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew)
2. studying Bible (Biblical Hebrew)
3. studying Talmud (primarily Aramaic with some Biblical, Mishnaic and Medieval Hebrew)
4. learning and speaking Modern Hebrew as a foreign language

This wide array of Hebrew learning contexts underscores several facts. First, there was an explicitly demonstrated value attached to the teaching and learning of Hebrew in the school. Second, as an ethnographer, I was afforded many opportunities to examine the links between explicit language ideologies and beliefs, enacted language practices, and categories of emotionality and affect. In the remainder of this article, I examine these linkages by looking at how teachers and students talked about and used Hebrew in their daily classroom activities. The situated ethnographic analyses presented here provide insight into the ways in which cultural beliefs and linguistic ideologies were made transparent, performed, reproduced and challenged during the social transmission of religious education to the next generation of Jewish Hebrew users.

The discourse of Hebrew = Jewish

One of the most dominant tropes in the classroom discourse was a cluster of beliefs identifying Hebrew language as the iconic and linguistic representation of Jewishness. The implicit and explicit circulation of this trope was one way in which feelings about the role of Hebrew in Jewish culture and practice were made explicit in the classroom. This language ideology revolved around several rhetorical themes made visible through observation and interactions: (1) Hebrew is the proprietary language of the Jewish people (2) Jewish education is predicated on the learning of Hebrew; and (3) the Hebrew language is imbued with an authenticity that other languages lack in expressing one's Jewishness.

The linguistic anthropologist, Duranti (1997: 21) could have been giving expression to the feelings of most of the students and faculty when he wrote that "[t]o

speak a language means to be able to use sounds that allow us to participate in interactions with others by evoking a world that is usually larger than whatever we can see and touch at any given moment." Throughout my observations, I found that the students persistently identified Hebrew as one of the sole means through which they could connect to Israelis and Jews living throughout the diaspora. In this sense, they imbued Hebrew with a performative aspect, perceiving the use of the language as an activity that transversed ethnoreligious and national borders. Although they readily admitted that they hardly used Hebrew outside of the classroom or synagogue to speak with each other or with other members of the community, they felt strongly that in a hypothetical situation, Hebrew would be the cohesive glue that could bind them to other Jewish people. Indeed, this image of Hebrew connecting Jews was actualized in the story that Rachel, one of the young Judaic studies teachers, told her seventh grade class about her adventures as a backpacker in Europe. Being alone in Amsterdam on Friday afternoon prior to sunset, she recounted that she able to find a place to celebrate the Sabbath because she overheard several locals speaking Hebrew. Interestingly enough, since the majority of students came from Ashkenazi Jewish backgrounds, when I inquired into the role that Yiddish could play in bridging the national, social, or religious gaps between Jews around the world, all of the students categorically rejected this option. One student even asked me, with no irony intended, "What is that? I don't know what Yiddish is. Is it some kind of mix between Russian, German and Hebrew? We don't use that language in our *shul.*"

At the same time, that Hebrew clearly encoded Jewishness, and thereby metonymically represented the Jewish people was made evident in the ways in which the

students and teachers spoke about the perceived difficulty they attached to the learning of the language. While the students found the morphology and syntax of Modern Hebrew mind-boggling at times, they never swayed from their belief that Hebrew was the authentic language of the Jews, a language entrusted to their ancestors by the Creator for their special use. They may not have opted to use it as one of the languages of communication in their daily lives, but their sense of being chosen to carry on their linguistic heritage was reflected in unparalleled clarity in their expressions of pride, identity, and ownership. This notion was reflected in one student's expressed opinion that, "Hebrew is the language of the Jews. He listens to English when someone is praying who doesn't know Hebrew, but when you use Hebrew, God knows you're trying harder. He is really listening." This sense of metaphysical connection was also perhaps the reason that the students enjoyed being called by their Hebrew names (instead of their secular names), and why the boys proudly embroidered these names on their skullcaps while the girls wore necklaces with their Hebrew names attached as charms.

The theme of chosenness, then, particularly as interpreted in this context, affords a lens for viewing the students' feelings regarding community, identity, and difference. That they could speak, write, read, and understand a language with a different orthography, phonetic system, and grammar made them feel special as American teenagers and amplified their sense of belongingness to the Jewish people. Hebrew language practices, in this regard, evoked identification and reinforced religious difference at the same time that they reaffirmed communal borders separating Jews from non-Jews.

This perception of difference provided the contour within which the form, content, and objectives of day school education could be articulated and made visible. What I mean to suggest here is that students and faculty had strong feelings and beliefs about the role of Hebrew in Jewish education, and particularly its importance within their school. These feelings were confirmed during a classroom discussion in which the students expressed what they thought they should be learning at their school. Their invariant responses about the priority of learning Hebrew led to a lively discussion in which I took on the role of devil's advocate and pressed them to make the argument why Hebrew was important to their education. To this query, I received looks of befuddlement and amusement. In fact, the students could not even fathom the existence of a Jewish day school that did not teach Hebrew or a Jewish child who did not have the opportunity to study this language. So strong was their association between Hebrew and Jewish education that their inability to suspend their beliefs silenced some of them, angered others, and even caused one student to ask me, “I thought you said you were Jewish” — insinuating that no Jewish person would even ask this question.

The strong feelings linking Jewish education and Hebrew language learning were also encoded through metaphorical language. One such somatic metaphor was expressed by one of the faculty members who said, “Hebrew is in your soul; English comes from your mind,” stressing the metaphysical aspects between language and body, while downplaying its cognitive dimensions. Yet another teacher aptly summarized how he saw this connection by saying “Hebrew is the DNA of Jewish education,” an insightful metaphor because it offers a rich opportunity for exploring the affective meaning attached to the learning of Hebrew. Like biological DNA -- the genetic instructions utilized in the

development and functioning of all known living organisms -- Hebrew was perceived as the code or blueprint through which the production and reproduction of Jewish values, beliefs, and practices could take place. Accordingly, Hebrew was endowed with innate-like instructions needed to construct a Jewish life. Furthermore, just as the main role of DNA molecules is the long-term storage of information for genetic replication so that all living things can function, grow, and reproduce, Hebrew was unconditionally and wholly linked with the future survival of the Jewish people. What this metaphor suggests is that this organic association cannot be sundered, nor can its connection ever be rendered obsolete, no matter the historical, social or cultural changes. As a metaphor, it naturalizes and reifies the innate connection between language and continuity, identification, and attachment.

Were this sentiment expressed only once, I might have attributed it to an individual's aureate outburst of Hebrew sentimentalism. However, this was not the case. In fact, the underlying theme of the analogy was often repeated in various discursive manifestations. When, for example, the students complained about having to answer a question in Hebrew instead of in English during a Hebrew language class, the teacher made her beliefs about the signification of Hebrew as "something else" very clear. She immediately stopped what she was doing, turned her full attention to the grumbling student, and told him point-blank, "Without this (the use of Hebrew), it is not a Jewish day school. We can all go home." Finally, this connection was made abundantly clear when one of the students reminded me, "We speak Hebrew here; it is who we are."

In addition to the strongly held beliefs that Hebrew belongs to the Jewish people and is a constitutive component of Jewish education, a more complex semiotic logic was

discernible in ideologies of authenticity and epistemology. Authenticity, as most linguists argue, is a chameleon of a word, usually employed to camouflage unspoken culturally-constructed and ideological-driven beliefs regarding the moral, intellectual or aesthetic qualities of a language or its speakers; as a purely linguistic term, it has very little to do with the nuts and bolts of the language itself. Yet, in the localized belief system of this school, there were several layers of authenticity attached to Hebrew. On one level, students and teachers linked Hebrew to a type of cultural verisimilitude making the use of Hebrew appropriate for certain activities in which the Jewishness or moral dimension of an activity was stressed. While participating in a local *Yom HaZikaron* 'Memorial Day' ceremony in Israel, a day of commemoration in which almost all Israeli Jews pay respects to the fallen soldiers and victims of terrorist attacks, the students attentively listened to a one hour program entirely conducted in Hebrew. That the poetry readings and speeches were in Hebrew was not surprising given that it was taking place in Israel. However, what was perhaps unanticipated was the reaction of many of the students, who commented that had the proceedings been in English, it would not have carried the same emotional weight. Likewise, when standing at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the teacher requested from a small group of students to capture the mood of this extraordinary opportunity with Hebrew phrases.

Yet authenticity as a Hebrew ideology was not solely limited to the use of the language in Israel. Within the classroom in New York City, the faculty felt strongly that a Hebrew-only policy in the Hebrew language classroom was an ideal worth striving for, even if it resulted in students and teachers not being able to fully express themselves. Although all of the American-born teachers identified themselves as Hebrew speakers

and were highly knowledgeable Hebrew language users, they were not native speakers. They themselves had acquired the language either at Jewish day schools, institutions of higher education, or during study abroad programs in Israel. Moreover, there was heterogeneity in the proficiency levels of the students, ranging from beginners to near native speakers. This linguistic reality had a palpable effect on classroom discourse. Students and teachers mispronounced words, used incorrect semantic choices, and employed inaccurate grammatical structures. More importantly, though, this policy indirectly led to a hierarchization of form over content. That is to say, the medium of using Hebrew (form) was valorized over the message (content). Yet, as far as I knew, this policy was never questioned, reflecting a clear example of how affect can be located in language behavior.

At the same time, a second notion of authenticity was also present, having to do with authority and legitimacy. Over the course of my fieldwork, I had many opportunities to see the class deeply entrenched in the task of translating and interpreting Jewish sacred texts during Judaic studies classes. One of the tensions that inevitably surfaced during these challenging activities centered on the issue of how much English could be used before the activity became inauthentic or meaningless. This tension was clearly felt in discussions the class had regarding the necessity of praying in Hebrew and was equally discernible in the ways in which the teachers regimented the students' interpretations of the Bible. This tension bubbled to the surface during one lesson in which the students were reading an excerpt from the Bible in which God spoke to Moses. Though the students had been given the text in Biblical Hebrew, they wanted to read it in English. When the teacher saw that some of the students were going to use a translated copy, she

immediately grabbed it and accused them of “cheating.” In his defense, the student complained that it was unfair that he couldn't use a translated version. However, the teacher remarked, “That's fine. So on your report card it will say that Max and Matt and whoever needed it had an assisted *Chumash* ‘Bible’ program this year. They had an English Chumash program.” In this sense, reading the original language presupposed access to a higher level of authenticity and knowledge.

What is interesting about the short interaction is how it clearly articulated the teacher's feelings regarding the use of multilingual texts. In her mind, reading the Bible in English was tantamount to having a remedial curriculum and using English was an illegitimate activity, even to the point of considering it a type of fraud. Additionally, we see that what the students might have gained — in this case, a wider breath of understanding -- was outweighed by the importance of reading in Hebrew. This interaction's social value, exemplifying one instance of how Hebrew was perceived and acted on in the classroom, rests in the nexus of two types of feelings about language and the work it does: (1) that which is concerned with the face value of the language and (2) that which is perceived in its authenticity.

Counterdiscourses: ambivalence and resistance

As discussed earlier, the ideology of Hebrew distinction was a well-circulated trope within the classroom discourse. Central to this ideology was a tacitly agreed upon system of beliefs that intricately linked Hebrew to Jewish people, Jewish education, and authenticity. Yet, feelings about the use of Hebrew and its place in Jewish life were not always monolithic. Indeed, there were examples of resistance, what Hill (1998) refers to

as counterdiscourses, which reflected ambivalent feelings about the iconic, symbolic, and communicative dimensions of the language.

One area where this counterdiscourse was most apparent was when students prayed or talked about prayer. Though prayer services and the teaching of liturgical Hebrew were a central component of the curriculum, my observations revealed an undercurrent of ambiguity that existed in the way the students felt about prayer (as an abstract practice) and the language in which it was done. Put differently, the students expressed a tension between their desire to follow the prayer service in Hebrew and their need to impute their prayers with intention and emotionality that they believed the archaic Hebrew sometimes obstructed and which English enabled. In order to detangle this ambiguity, I explicitly asked the students to tell me about their prayers. Their responses showed that their prayers covered an extraordinary wide range of thoughts ranging from prayers for the messianic to more contemporary prayers (e.g., for the State of Israel) to personal requests (e.g., for the Yankees to win the World Series). While some students and faculty members could not decouple the form of the prayer (the language it was done in) from its content, not all of the students shared a concern about the imputed authenticity of praying in Hebrew. Sitting one day outside of the classroom, I mentioned to one male student that I had noticed that he seemed to really enjoy the afternoon prayer service earlier that day. In response, he furtively looked over his shoulder, leaned over as if to confide in me, and said that unlike most of the days, he had chosen to say his prayers in English because he felt that he was still "saying the same thing," and that sometimes he prayed in Hebrew and then said the prayers in English,

either looking at the translation or making up the rest. Another student, likewise, echoed this sentiment in his final paper about the class trip to Israel:

> But for obvious reasons whenever I go to Israel I always get a spiritual boost which can last me for as long as I let it. I feel I really felt this boost when we visited to the Western Wall (Kotel) and everybody just went up and said their prayers. This touched me because we weren't asked to say the same Hebrew prayers we say every day and don't understand, but our (sic) own English prayers. This made the experience all the more meaningful.

Clearly these comments evoke a contradictory belief system that challenges the hegemony of Hebrew as the language of prayer and the sole language to which a connection with the divine is established and maintained. While the students did not reject the notion that Hebrew as the language of the Jewish people, they equally did not dismiss the idea that multilingual language practices might open up other avenues of expressing and attaining spirituality.

In addition, the strong beliefs in the iconity of Hebrew as a marker of Jewishness were slightly tempered when the students and teachers spoke about their own experiences learning the language. Matt, for one, stated that though he thought it was cool to be able to learn the language of his ancestors and read the sacred texts, he did not necessarily enjoy Hebrew lessons, or understand the structure of the Hebrew language even though he had been studying it since he was a young boy. His friends, though, were far less diplomatic and much more critical. One referred to Hebrew lessons as “a living nightmare” because of the complexity of the grammar system, while another felt there was no need to spend six years learning Hebrew when you could spend those years “learning to cure a disease.” Yet another student chimed in claiming that they were spending too much of their day on it. In contrast to the trope that knowledge of Hebrew would enable an individual to identify one's home and community across spatio-temporal

space, these sentiments express a sense of limits, crouched in practical concerns regarding the cost of learning the language. In short, though the students were proud of their knowledge of this ancestral and sacred language for what it represented symbolically, their day-to-day experiences with the language expressed an opposing perspective, succinctly summed up in the comment, “It's a language you love to know but hate to learn.”

Feelings about the actual teaching and learning practices in the school were also subject to scrutiny and challenges to its authoritative status. That the Hebrew-only policy in the language classroom ostensibly privileged form over content did not escape the students' notice, particularly when they were unable to follow directions given in Hebrew or fully expressed their responses. This awareness was crystallized at the start of a Hebrew language class when I overhead a student mumble, “Here we go. Welcome to the mysterious world of Hebrew language class” and hum the UFO song. When questioned, he intimated that because the teachers persisted to speak only Hebrew when he and others did not understand made him feel like an alien visiting a world in which he was supposed to be familiar and native. Teachers also expressed uncertainty regarding the exclusiveness of Hebrew, suggesting that the realities of classroom teaching tempered their ideological commitments to the language.

Finally, there were subtle signs of a counterdiscourse to the belief that the knowledge of Hebrew was always a measure of one's Jewishness. The student who wrote in her final project “Jewish is really who I am; it is a huge part of me,” is the same one who often boasted about her low proficiency in Hebrew. Moreover, the student who was always the first to lead a prayer service resisted speaking Hebrew with the Israeli student

who arrived to the school during eighth grade. In fact, this resistance to speak Hebrew with Israelis was the norm, and not the exception. Despite the fact that the students spent on average a quarter of their day in the classroom engaged in activities using the various varieties of Hebrew, and despite their outward and explicit identification with being Jewish and with the Hebrew language, they did not readily seek opportunities to use their Hebrew during the class trip to Israel, nor did they pay much attention to the linguistic landscape while they were in Israel. In fact, when visiting a McDonalds in Tel Aviv, the students were delighted not by the fact that they could finally order a hamburger from a Hebrew menu at a fast food restaurant (a dream for many who had never had this opportunity in the United States given that most fast food restaurants are not kosher), but by the balloons they received with the slogan, “I'm lovin’ it” in English. Moreover, though visiting a military cemetery resulted in a profound moment of heightened Jewish pride and identification, the subsequent conversations with soldiers visiting the graveyard were carried out in English.

In both of these examples, the lack of Hebrew use points to two possible, though not contradictory, possibilities. First, it suggests that being in Israel ironically made the use of Hebrew less necessary as a means of Jewish identification. I say ironic because the conventional wisdom would suggest that the use of Hebrew in the Jewish State would be one way in which a sense of diasporic identity could be fully realized. Yet, these examples draw attention to the fact that language can be displaced from place. The second possibility is that the use of Modern Hebrew, whether in the classroom or in Israel, was not perceived as the sole proxy for one's sense of Jewishness. Rather, this identification was achievable through other linguistic, embodied, and social practices.

What this suggests is that the various varieties of Hebrew serving multiple religious, ethnic, and cultural purposes causes its users to be come entangled in a web of feelings that defy a clear-cut alliance between emotion and language use.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the multilingual classroom language practices provide a lens for understanding the complex and ambiguous feelings regarding the use of Hebrew as a means of authenticating Jewish identity. While the belief that Hebrew is intrinsically valuable to the Jewish people is firmly established in the school through its institutional and curricula policies, and is generally recognized and accepted as truth by both students and teachers, its actual use in daily classroom activities shows that feelings about language do not always work in anticipated or predictable ways. In practice, how the students and teachers enact these beliefs is neither a matter of proving their linguistic mastery of the language nor simply a process of delineating its importance. Instead, how the students feel about the use of Hebrew in a range of contexts reflects multiple beliefs about how Jewish identity is expressed in a variety of languages and practices.

I have argued that local interpretation of what being Jewish entails in this context is essential to understanding why and how the students felt about their relationship with the Hebrew language. At times, students perceived Jewishness not merely in terms of specific content, but in terms of the form in which it was wrapped. That is to say, the medium (form) was valorized over the message (content). At the fulcrum of this belief was the notion of authenticity, and the specific belief that using Hebrew imbued an activity with a degree of Jewishness that other languages lacked. Yet in other contexts, interpretations of Jewishness resulted in a counterdiscourse that evoked, articulated, and

authenticated their identity through other linguistic and cultural means. Authenticity or the "real" Jewish way of interacting, in other words, was not experienced as a monolithic category, but rather, in terms of specific interpretive frameworks. In these circumstances, the reification of Hebrew as the authentic language of the Jews or the nucleus of Jewish education was often downplayed or ignored, so that other possible interpretations of Jewishness could be expressed.

One of the contributions that I believe this case study of Hebrew language learning can make to a discussion on the discursive mediation of feelings is the reminder that feelings are intricately tied to language ideologies or local assumptions about how language works (Fader 2001; Kulick 1992; Schieffelin 2007; Woolard 1998). I have shown that the feelings and emotional connections made with Hebrew are deeply rooted in symbolic systems of representation and in the multiple meanings ascribed to Jewishness, whether defined through religious, cultural or nationalistic identifications. As a sacred, heritage, and religious language, Hebrew is not a single signifier, but is a polysemous marker. Part of our challenge as language researchers, therefore, is to tease out in empirical and analytic terms the varying ways in which ideologies of language and discursive practices of sacred and heritage languages are linked to modes of representation and sense of self (Keane 1997). Thus, how one feels about a language is discursively tied to the acquisition of a set of cultural, national, and religious practices, values and beliefs that enable an individual to become identifiable as a certain kind of person within a particular culture (Schieffelin 1990).

For this reason, the use of ethnography is crucial to the theoretical work of uncovering the belief systems and feelings individuals, communities, and institutions

have about particular languages and their use in society. As faith-based schooling continues to grow in religious communities across the United States, it is especially important to do ethnographic research on those who are educating the next generation of believers, teachers, and those who are being educated to assume the mantle of traditional and cultural practices. Attending to language ideologies opens up a possibility for discussing how language mediates emotionality and identification in diverse and overlapping communities — religious, national, ethnic — and how individuals come to understand themselves in terms of that diversity.

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