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JEWISH INTRAGROUP CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN THE UNIVERSITY HEBREW CLASS

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AS A HEBREW LANGUAGE TEACHER and language acquisition researcher living in North America, I have found myself thinking deeply about how my commitment to the Hebrew language affects and creates my sense of Jewish identity. I spent time as a young child in Israel, where I was immersed in the Hebrew language and Israeli culture. When I eventually returned to Canada with my family, the ability to communicatively function in modern Hebrew marked me as different from my peers. Using a qualitative, ethnographic methodological framework based in emergent, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I investigated the attitudes and feelings of individuals who participated in an advanced, undergraduate modern Hebrew class at a large Canadian university.¹ How did others living in the Canadian Jewish Diaspora negotiate their dual linguistic, national, and cultural loyalties?

I entered the research field with three key questions. First, what framework of ethnic identity did participants structure in their lives? Rather than define identity specifically as Jewish identity, I chose the term “ethnic identity” to ensure freedom and flexibility in defining senses of self while limiting the subject area to the notion of shared ancestry, lineage, or heritage. Second, I asked how Hebrew language fit into participants’ frameworks of ethnic identity. Because the students, professor, and I committed time and effort to the study, teaching, or practice of the language, it clearly held a place of priority in our lives, and, I hypothesized, our ethnic identities. Third, I wondered

1. See Feuer, A. (2008). *Who Does This Language Belong To? Personal Narratives of Language Claim and Identity*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.

how these perceptions of the importance of Hebrew would be manifested in social interactions in the Hebrew classroom. In retrospect, I realize that underneath these initial questions, I was truly interested in how participants viewed Hebrew in negotiating a life in the Diaspora; more specifically, whether these individuals managed to build a sense of comfort, satisfaction, and belonging in Canada with my assumption of their deep connection to the Hebrew language and its indelible link to Israeli culture.

Position of the Researcher

I entered the field with a decidedly emic, or insider perspective (Trappes-Lomax, 2004). While I was unfamiliar with the particular experiences and dynamics of those in the Hebrew class, I had an understanding of the Diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities, and of the experience of being a Hebrew learner and teacher. After moving from Israel as a young child, I attended and graduated from a Canadian Jewish day school. I moved to Israel after graduation where I worked, studied, and solidified my mastery of the Hebrew language. As a child, I had felt a sense of difference because I perceived that those in my community did not know or particularly care about the daily routines, traditions, customs and problems of Israelis; most had never visited Israel, and even those who did connected to Israel in a more abstract and symbolic way through monetary donations, political support, and views of the country as the abstract spiritual and cultural homeland. In Israel, my Hebrew fluency was a membership key to the society of Israelis that allowed me to experience and share their cultural knowledge. I was eager to elicit the feelings and attitudes of those in similar positions who likewise, placed Hebrew in a primary role in the constructions of their Jewish identities.

Theoretical Basis and Review of Literature

Johnson's (2004) dialogic sociolinguistic theory was the theoretical impetus for this work. Combining elements of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1981) and Bakhtin's literary theory (1981), Johnson offered a new model of second language learning that emphasizes the importance of communicative dialogism in acquiring a new language. The Vygotskian notion that social language interactions develop and influence thought combines with Bakhtin's theory of dialogism that states that all language exists in response to expectations and assumptions about the interlocutor, and is shared by others based on context, culture, and relationships. Moving forward from this point, I posited that not only does language acquisition depend on the linguistic and social interactions with others within and outside of the group, but that the construction of *identi-*

ty (and in this case, Jewish identity) is similarly *acquired*, like language, through social dialogue and interaction. Dialogues with others both in and outside of the minority community dictate how we impose identities on others, and these dialogues are employed in how we understand our senses of self.

There have been no prior studies that specifically and empirically examine the complexities of identity formation among Hebrew language learners. However, several studies in second and foreign language contexts provide a useful background to frame the present study.

Tse (1998; 2000) examined the ethnic identity rejection and repossession among Asian American heritage language speakers who inhabit a stage prevalent in childhood and adolescence of “ethnic ambivalence” or “ethnic evasion.” Alvarez, Bliss, and Vigil (2001) determined a similar sense of confusion among Cuban Americans who expressed a connection to their Spanish heritage language, among other cultural artifacts of their community, but felt disconnected from the oppressive Cubans governing their homeland.

Interviews of 100 Chilean-Swedish teens and their parents by King and Ganuza (2005) found that participants had a “double identity” based on their language switching between Spanish among family and friends and Swedish with members of the dominant linguistic group. Schecter and Bayley (1997) determined that Mexican-American bilingual children defined themselves according to Mexican or American allegiances based on the value placed upon the languages by their parents, and by their relationships with minority and majority group members.

Whereas several studies analyzed elements of hybrid identity between ethnic and dominant monoliths, the following studies probe more deeply into in- and out-group complexities of identity. Lotherington’s (2001) study observed complex identities of Chinese teachers and students due to differences in country and region of origin, connection to Chinese, and ability in the Chinese language and specific dialects. Auer (2005) suggested a broader framework in social group identification among Turkish-German bilinguals in Germany. He noted that a particular group of females who spoke German-Turkish code-switch were not necessarily a homogenous group as typically discussed in previous studies. For example, one Persian female spoke German-Turkish code-switch as a *Muslim* (rather than Turkish) identifier among members of her social group.

There is a lack of empirical, and more specifically, qualitative sociological research examining the experience of Hebrew language learners in the Diaspora. Although several scholars have presented think-pieces with prescriptive offerings regarding improving the state of modern Hebrew

teaching in the United States (Raphaeli, 1993; Jacobson, 1993; Zisenwine, 1997; Morahg, 2002), these works do not present the voices and attitudes of those participating in Hebrew study. Meanwhile, research among Israelis demonstrates the function of the Hebrew language as a marker of identification and group membership (Auron, 1997; Kaufman, 2000). According to Kaufman, Israeli immigrants to the United States usually do not establish communal ties to organizations and most do not participate in religious activities. Thus, Hebrew is their primary means of Jewish identification.

In wide-scale surveys of Jewish identification, survey protocol often includes categories determining levels of religiosity such as ritual, holiday and Sabbath observance, adherence to laws of the Torah and oral law; those related to the nation such as familiarity and attachment to Israel; and questions regarding cultural or ethnic connections such as membership in communal organizations, and association with Jewish philanthropies (Cohen, 1986; 2005; Schiff 1997; 1999; Auron, 1997). These studies attempted to describe and define the state of the American Jewish identity or to demonstrate a correlation between Jewish education and subsequent strong adult Jewish behavior and identification. These studies generally grouped modern Hebrew ability with attachment to Israel or did not mention it at all. In the present study, participants placed a high value and priority on modern Hebrew language study; thus it was evidently an important part of their lives (and possibly the only or one of the only markedly “Jewish” activities in which they were involved). Yet, some may have identified as strongly committed Jews despite being unaffiliated with various elements included in the term “Jewish life” mentioned in previous scholarly texts. Survey protocol, the criteria that determine strong Jewish identity, are constructed according to the perspective of surveyors, and with no room for participant explication of the reasons behind their responses.

The present investigation aims to elucidate the previously unheard voices of those committed to the advanced study and usage of Hebrew and to understand how ownership of the language contributes to Jewish identity constructions.

Methodology

The Hebrew class consisted of ten female and five male students. Most students were 19 or 20 years old, and one student was 26. The course was held twice a week, for two hours. The professor closely followed the textbook *‘ivrit: havanah vehaba’ah* (Veyl, Piurko, and Farstei, 1983), and throughout the semester, each student was required to prepare an oral lecture on any academic topic of choice. The study included one semester of participant-observation,

an in-depth, semi-structured, focus group interview, and individual interviews with ten students and the professor. I conducted the individual interviews with the nine students who attended the class in which the focus group interview was held, and then purposely selected Seth, the tenth student participant, to represent a broader range of experiences. This student was selected because of his religious observance and American background. I then interviewed the professor of the course. I obtained consent from all classroom members and wrote detailed notes as I observed classes, and structured questions based on linguistic and social behaviors of the students and professor. Throughout the study, I emphasized that participants could communicate with me in Hebrew or in English, and followed the lead of the students in choosing my language of communication. After recording discussions with participants, I transcribed and coded their responses. Using the constant comparison method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I continuously re-analyzed transcripts in relation to others and returned to participants for clarification or additional information. I coded observation notes and transcripts to create and analyze the emerged themes.

First Impressions in the Field

An abundance of cultural nuances and social rules shaped the atmosphere and content of the class. Students sat in divided social and language groups, and throughout the class, conversations were conducted in diversely accented Hebrew and English, and Hebrew-English mixes or code-switch. Students in this class were Canadian-born graduates of Jewish day schools; former USSR-born immigrants to Canada who lived previously in Israel; children of Israeli emigrants; and students born in Canada or elsewhere with no or limited previous elementary or secondary formal Hebrew education who progressed to an advanced level in university. In addition to the varieties of nationalities, levels and denominations of religious observance were similarly diverse among students. There existed a sharp physical and psychological divide as the class was separated by labels that would later emerge: “Israeli” and “Canadian.”

Upon entering the field, I took note of these two distinct groups in the class. My groupings were based on features of their speech: the Israelis spoke quickly, fluently, and unconscious of their language, which they used as a means of expression. The Canadians spoke slowly and laboriously in Hebrew with much English code-switching and pauses, aware and distracted by the mechanics of their language. However, the Canadians’ literacy levels were usually stronger than those of the Israelis. Particularly, day school graduates

and the observant students who devoted time each week to biblical and rabbinic textual study possessed high literacy proficiency. Those who called themselves and were called Israelis spoke a sort of “teenager” Hebrew: a non-standard form that seemed to be fossilized at the time they left Israel as early teenagers. For example, several females repeated the following phrase: “*yesh male anashim baḥeder*” [There are full of people in the room] rather than “*haḥeder male anashim*” [The room is full of people] or “*yesh harbeh anashim baḥeder*” [There are many people in the room]. When the professor corrected them, they stubbornly refused to change these speech idiolects; instead, they seemed to cling to these fossilizations as speech characteristics of their particular Jewish sub-groups. Although I originally classified several students as “Russian,” I later retracted this category because though they spoke with what I perceived to be Russian phonological accent features, they did not mention their Russian identity in group discussions and did not explicitly refer to themselves using this label. Instead, they frequently asserted their Israeli identities:

Yana (student): *tishm’i*— [Listen—]

Aviva (professor): *tishm’i? ani poḥedet mimekh* [Listen? I’m scared of you].

Yana: [LAUGHTER] *kitah shel israelim* [A class of Israelis].

At this point, Yana motioned to students Marina and Tatiana who sat beside her, attributing her forceful manner of speaking to her Israeliness. Interestingly, though declared to be Israelis among their classroom peers, in individual interviews, several of these students defined themselves as primarily Russian or Russian-Israeli. This aligns with postmodern perception of identity as fluid, constantly changing, and contextually relative.

Although among the “Canadian” students were one American-born and one South-African born student, those in the class constantly referred to the Canadian/Israeli dichotomy. National labelings of “Canadian” and “Israeli” referred not entirely or necessarily to nationality, but often to linguistic communicative ability. These two groups of students sat on opposite ends of the room and rarely spoke to members outside their respective sub-groups. After observing identities asserted in classroom interactions and the focus group interview, I asked participants individually to define their ethnic identifications for purposes of triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The following chart provides background information on this study’s participants:

TABLE 1
 NAMES, BACKGROUNDS, STATED ETHNIC IDENTITIES,
 AND PRESENTATION TOPICS OF INTERVIEWED PARTICIPANTS.

NAME	BACKGROUND	STATED ETHNIC IDENTITIES	PRESENTATION TOPICS
Meg	- Born in South Africa - Moved to Canada at age 5	1. Jewish 2. Jewish from South Africa 3. Canadian	The relationship between the state of Israel and Jews in the Diaspora
Yana	- Born in former U.S.S.R. - Moved to Israel at age 6 - Moved to Canada at age 14	1. Russian-Israeli 2. Israeli	The religious movements of Judaism and the religious vs. secular rift
Ravit	- Born in Israel - Moved to Canada at age 11	1. An Israeli who has been Canadianized	The effect of army service on Israeli youth
Amy	- Born and raised in Canada	1. A secular Jew	Palestinians' perspectives on Zionism
Naomi	- Born and raised in Canada	1. A Jewish Canadian with very strong ties to Israel	Anti-Semitism in France
Marina	- Born in former U.S.S.R. - Moved to Israel at age 5 - Moved to Canada at age 17	1. Israeli 2. Jewish 3. Russian ("not Canadian")	Holocaust deniers
Tatiana	- Born in former U.S.S.R. - Moved to Israel at age 7 - Moved to Canada at age 14	1. Russian 2. Israeli 3. Canadian	Representations of Jews in American films
Moshe	- Born and raised in Canada	1. One who is struggling to be a religious, observant Jew	<i>hasidut</i> (Hasidism) and the Ba'al Shem Tov

Adam	- Born and raised in Canada	1. Jewish 2. Zionist	Why U.S. Republicans are most supportive of Israel and most deserving of U.S. Jews' political support
Seth	- Born in New Jersey - Raised in Canada and the U.S.	1. American Jew	Controversial issues in <i>halakha</i> (Jewish rabbinic law)
Prof.: Aviva	- Born and raised in Israel - Moved to Canada after marriage in her 20s	1. Jewish-Israeli 2. Canadian	

Results

After data collection and coding was complete, analysis of the records yielded two primary themes in relation to language and identity formation. The first, more peripheral theme was that of convergence of identities. In this case, Hebrew was used as a tool to unite as a worldwide Jewish community, or as a membership key for unique Jewish sub-groups that will be discussed later in the chapter. More dominant was the theme of divergence of identities, in which Hebrew communication or learning determined specific definitions of being Jewish, typically through Othering those in opposing sub-groups.

Though the only criteria for the assigned oral presentation were that the topic be academic and spur discussion, every student in the class, with one exception, chose a Jewishly-themed topic (the one exception was a student who was not interviewed and attended class sporadically—he majored in biology and discussed stem cell research). During discussions after presentations on topics such as anti-Semitism in France, Holocaust deniers, and the Palestinian perspective of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the class united against who they perceived to be the common “enemy” or external force of oppression. When students at this largely left-wing, politically active school viewed the mock “Israeli Apartheid Wall” demonstration in the school’s main rotunda, or saw necklace pendants in the shape of the state of Israel with “Palestine Forever” written inside for sale in the hallway, they passionately rallied in class and their identities converged: in unanimous agreement, they were all Jews.

However, within the more prevalent theme of divergence of identities, sub-groups of “Jews,” defined based on varied and at times conflicting charac-

teristics, emerged. When asked to define their ethnic identities in in-depth, individual interviews, all of the students placed in the “Canadian” group (named in spite of some birthplaces in the U.S. and South Africa, and explicit and reiterative statements that they did not feel a primary connection to Canada as Canadian) defined themselves primarily as Jewish. Jewish was at times modified with other sub-group definitions: “a secular Jew,” or a “Jew with strong ties to Israel.” The Israelis defined themselves primarily in terms of nation: Israeli or Russian-Israeli.

Denomination and religiosity played a role in the Canadians’ definitions of being Jewish. Naomi said, “I have always considered myself to be Conservative, but they would probably consider me Reform here.” Seth, who was the son of a Conservative rabbi, was engaged in more religious activities. He studied at a Conservative yeshiva in Israel for one year,² participated in biblical text study groups, and presented a lecture on aspects of Jewish law. He was considered to be “Orthodox” or “religious” by the Israeli students. In fact, in group discussions, the Israelis often stereotyped all of the Canadian students as Orthodox or religious. When I asked the Israelis why they thought the Canadians were in the Hebrew class, several assumed that they wanted to improve their proficiency to better read biblical and rabbinic texts.

Although Amy defined herself as a “secular Jew,” she structured her connection to Judaism communally through her past Jewish day schooling, youth group participation, and Jewish Education degree. Amy did not view secularism as a label that annulled Jewishness. She described her view of the Israelis’ religious frameworks:

They grew up in a country where a lot of their parents couldn’t grow up being Jewish, so being Jewish is a totally different definition than what being Jewish is for me. And also growing up in Israel, the weird thing about being in Israel is that you can be Jewish without being Jewish. It’s like in Canada, you can be Christian without being Christian. The Israeli people are not typically as Jewish, they’re just more culturally Jewish.

When I asked the Israelis to define their ethnic identities, several from the former U.S.S.R. emphasized that they were not Jewish, explicit in Yana’s comments:

2. A yeshiva is a Jewish institution for Torah study.

bate'udat zehut sheli katuv 'lo mezuhah' baqet'a shel hadat ki ima sheli notsrit ve'aba sheli yehudi. yesh harbeh aflagah, vehem bodqim et hate'udat zehut ve discriminate against me [On my identity card it says 'unidentified' in the religion section because my mother is Christian and my father is Jewish. There's a lot of discrimination, and they check my identity card and discriminate against me].

When asked to define her ethnic identity, Tatiana stated, "I wouldn't put Jewish because I'm not religious, so Russian, Israeli, Canadian." Tatiana equated Jewishness as religious Orthodoxy, yet when she was probed, discussed her connection to Judaism primarily as a connection to family members who were killed in the Holocaust.

Yana had a very complex way of thinking about her Jewishness: "I'm actually not technically Jewish. My mother is Christian and my father is Jewish. So they're not religious at all. It was never, no tradition, very *mamash mishpahah hilonit* [a really secular family]." However, later in her interview she stated: "I feel a connection to Judaism because obviously, it's in my blood, even though I'm not fully Jewish. I do feel that way because I grew up in Israel." Yana seemed to first view the state of being Jewish as equivalent to observing Orthodox traditions while later defining her Jewishness as her connection to Israel. This latter association was elucidated in the group discussion during a controversial exchange:

Yana: im yesh benadam, ken, vehu lo medaber 'ivrit vecin lo shum qeshser lasafah, ken? ani lo yoda'at, keilu ani lo [If there's a person, yes, and he doesn't speak Hebrew and doesn't have any connection to the language, yes? I don't know, like, I don't—I] I don't control him, but I don't really accept him to be Jewish. He's Jewish, but like, I think that if you're Jewish you have to know Hebrew. If you don't then I'll still accept you as Jewish, but the way I'm going to feel about you is different. I'm not going to feel the same connection with somebody that doesn't understand the language.

Amy: Well, that's your connection to Judaism.

Here, Yana acknowledged an assumed general definition of Jewishness but believed that the true meaning of the term pertained to fluency in Hebrew, and possibly Israeliness. Amy's comment showed her open-minded understanding of various connectors to Judaism that create personal definitions of identity. After the class, Moshe, who was an observant Jew, voiced his concern to me about Yana's comments. He felt that her judgment of others' Jewishness

was unfair, especially because others did not discriminate against her based on her definition of Judaism and lack of religious involvement.

A further layer of complexity arose upon examination of Meg's comments. Meg defined herself as a religious Jew, with spirituality playing a large role in her life. She grew up in a "Conservadox" home and attended an Orthodox Hebrew school, but described an awakening in her life as she came to a personal relationship with God through a movement that believes in Jesus as the Jewish messiah. Whereas other participants mentioned a communal and social aspect of their connection with Judaism, Meg spoke of a personal spirituality as her foremost connection:

For me, Judaism was a little more individual. Whether or not people accept you, you know who you are. I took a year off, and thought, 'Let's—I'm going to find myself', right? I had family overseas who believed in *yeshua*³ and I always figured, all right, that's for them, they're just not very good Jews. And I went there, and I heard the testaments in their lives. And to hear that it was not just only about rules and traditions but that they were really experiencing a personal relationship with God through scriptures—that they would hear back. God of the scriptures was still alive today in a very real way.

Although Meg would not be considered "religious" by some in the Jewish community, she structured a deeply devout religious life for herself: she expressed a level of spirituality voiced not even by the most religiously observant students.

Discussion

After conducting this research in order to understand the complexities of Jewish identity formation, it became clear that participants used modern Hebrew as a way to negotiate and balance their lives in the Diaspora as both a unifier, connecting all Jews, or as a modifying identifier that marked them as different from others in the Jewish community. Additionally, I determined that Hebrew language and participating in the Hebrew class was a social activity. It was a component in the ways they structured their Jewish identities: how they fit into the larger Jewish community and separated themselves into smaller sub-groups. For the Israelis, speaking fossilized Hebrew was an exclusive membership key to the Israeli sub-group of the Canadian Jewish commu-

3. *yeshua* is believed to be the Hebrew name for Jesus.

nity. For the Canadians, it was part of a larger framework of Jewish life they constructed to distinguish themselves from the majority culture, and to more abstractly and symbolically connect as Jews. Both groups, at times, stereotyped and viewed the opposing sub-group as the Other. Although Hebrew wasn't often used to communicate, the simple act of learning the language was a Jewish identifier.

This phenomenon logically fits into the historical narrative of the Jews. Jews have a history of heteroglossia: speaking several languages in different contexts. Jews have always simultaneously strived to integrate with the majority culture while facing ethnic obliteration, either by dominant forces or from forces within the community. Jews have created sub-groups and stereotypes for the purpose of intragroup Othering and to strengthen individual and sub-group statuses. In the case of this study, participants asserted their and Others' identities through *language claiming*. Similar to land claims in which aboriginal peoples assert authentic ownership of a plot of land over a majority group to maintain minority group survival, these students claimed that the Hebrew language as more authentically "ours" rather than "theirs."

Because of students' complex backgrounds in which many were ostracized and felt a sense of not belonging in the mainstream Jewish community, they often clung to markers of difference such as language, secularity, religious denomination, or nationality to proclaim a marked difference from the conventional. The term "Jewish" took on many meanings, relative to personal experience and relative context or situation. Internal, intragroup Othering and division into Jewish sub-groups was related to the speaking or learning of Hebrew, as the language was being used as a tool to strengthen intragroup statuses and cement self- and other-identifications as true, authentic Jews.

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