The Languages of the Jews

A Sociolinguistic History

BERNARD SPOLSKY

CAMBRIDGE

The Languages of the Jews

Historical sociolinguistics is a comparatively new area of research, investigating difficult questions about language varieties and choices in speech and writing. Jewish historical sociolinguistics is rich in unanswered questions: when does a language become "Jewish"? What was the origin of Yiddish? How much Hebrew did the average Jew know over the centuries? How was Hebrew re-established as a vernacular and a dominant language? This book explores these and other questions, and shows the extent of scholarly disagreement over the answers. It shows the value of adding a sociolinguistic perspective to issues commonly ignored in standard histories. This is a vivid commentary on Jewish survival and Jewish speech communities, and is essential reading for students and researchers interested in the study of Middle Eastern languages, Jewish Studies, and sociolinguistics.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107699953

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First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Spolsky, Bernard.
The languages of the Jews : a sociolinguistic history / Bernard Spolsky.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-107-05544-5
1. Jews – Languages – History. 2. Sociolinguistics. 3. Jews – History.
I. Title.
PJ5061.S66 2014
408.9924–dc23

2013043052

ISBN 978-1-107-05544-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-107-69995-3 Paperback

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For Ellen

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Preface and acknowledgments

I started working on the topic of this book thirty years ago, shortly after I returned to Israel and began to think about the multilingual society I was again living in. A first paper[1] broached the field for me, and exposed me to the challenge of studying the sociolinguistic ecology of no longer existing communities. That was my first attempt at historical sociolinguistics; there were further essays in the genre within two later books, *The Languages of Jerusalem*[2] and *The Languages of Israel*.[3] The present book seems to me a natural next step, filling in the gaps between the history in the former and the contemporary survey in the latter.

The title should make it clear that I am going beyond the concern with Jewish languages (such as Yiddish and Ladino), the study of which was opened seriously by Max Weinreich and has been continued by a large group of scholars (they appear on the website www.jewish-languages.org), to ask about any of the "co-territorial" varieties – as Weinreich called them – that have become the vernacular or standard languages used by Jewish communities. This perspective will challenge me to consider when a variety adopted and used by Jews has been sufficiently modified to justify calling it a "Jewish language".

The book sets out to combine a brief history of the Jewish people with a history of the sociolinguistic ecologies that resulted from this history, and thus forms a continuing study of language loyalty, as Joshua Fishman called it in his pioneering work on language shift, loss, maintenance, death, and revival.[4] By force of circumstances, ever since the Babylonian exile in the sixth century before the Common Era, and even more since the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish state by the Romans and the dispersion of Jews throughout the ancient world, exacerbated by regular expulsions by Christians and Muslims alike, resulting in even wider geographical spread and contact with even more languages, Jews have been individually plurilingual and collectively multilingual, held together over these three millennia by their devotion to and use of the original Jewish language: Hebrew.

Hebrew having been limited to liturgy, scholarship, and literacy for centuries, the story of its revernacularization and revitalization as the dominant language of the renewed Jewish state of Israel is seen as a model for many

groups threatened with the loss of their own heritage languages. This book, focused as it is on Jewish language use, provides an opportunity to explore many of the most significant issues and processes in the theory of language policy and the practice of language management as relevant to endangered languages.

I began these studies in conversations and collaboration with the late Robert Cooper and with Elana Shohamy, and was encouraged to persevere with historical sociolinguistics by Christina Bratt Paulston. As will become apparent to anyone who glances at the endnotes and the references, this book is built on the research and scholarship of a large number of others, to whom I must offer my deepest gratitude. While I sometimes take issue with their opinions, I cannot ignore their findings, and depend on the data they have published. Of these, Fishman has obviously been the first and most important. There are others whose names crop up regularly and whose leadership has been critical. Weinreich was clearly the major scholar in the field, and the new edition of his classic study, more than doubled in size to include the notes, has been invaluable.

Although I wrote most of this book in Jerusalem, some of the revision was done in quiet moments looking out over the hills of Tuscany, where I was spending a fortnight with the family. Several days were devoted to trips to some of the walled cities, and twice we visited Lucca, an obviously prosperous town with a wall that can be comfortably walked or biked around. There is no trace of the Kalonymus family, whose ancestor moved from Lucca to help establish the Ashkenazi community in Metz, playing a key role in the development of Loter. The only trace we noted of Jewish presence was a *gelateria* whose ice cream was reputed to be kosher. Only in Rome and Milan are there still large and active Jewish Italian communities. Even Rome, the largest and oldest community, turns out to have had a very embittered history. Jews in Rome were crowded into a tiny area on the banks of the river Tiber. When the synagogue was rebuilt at the end of the nineteenth century, it was modeled on a church building, for there were no Jews in Italy who had been allowed to study or practice architecture or engineering. After a brief period of emancipation at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Fascist regime lowered the civil status of Jews. Since the end of Fascism, there have been brief moments of glory (the visit of a Pope to the synagogue) and horror (the bombing of the synagogue), confirming the fragility of Jewish life there.

What this trip reminded me of is the virtual absence of Jews from many of the sites described in this book. The Jews of central and eastern Europe were finally exterminated by the Nazis with the help of local anti-Semites, many Jews who survived the Holocaust and Stalinist oppression in the Soviet Union have now emigrated to Israel, and almost all Jews in Arab and Muslim lands have also been driven out. Only in western Europe do Jewish communities survive,

dealing with new restrictions on Jewish observance, such as a ban on the kosher killing of animals and on circumcision. And liberal democratic western Europe, after a brief period of regret at its share in the Holocaust, now resumes anti-Jewish activities disguised as defense of freedom fighters. So, too, have the Jewish varieties of language that grew in Europe and the Middle East disappeared, with the destruction of their speakers or the assimilation of survivors.

This is an appropriate place to thank Andrew Winnard and his colleagues at Cambridge University Press, who have guided the publication of this and my three preceding books. I thank also the three anonymous scholars who read and approved the proposal, making a number of useful suggestions, which I have incorporated. I thank Judith Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin for permission to use their maps. I want also to pay tribute to the search engines (especially Google and Google Scholar) that helped me find sources and the digital records of books and articles, which saved me hours of library work and yards of home shelf space. With the aid of a computer and the internet, I have been able to accomplish in fifteen months what would have taken a lifetime when I first started academic work.

I want also to acknowledge the love, devotion, patience, and questions of my wife, Ellen Spolsky, over the half-century we have shared, especially as she has been distracted from her own writings by my regular demands for her attention.
Given the pressures of publication and the continuing developments of the field, additional information and updates can be found at www.cambridge.org/spolsky.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Ashkenazim (singular *Ashkenazi*)	Jews from Europe
Beta Israel	Jews from Ethiopia
Halacha	Jewish religious law and practice
Haredim (singular *Haredi*)	fundamentalist or ultra-orthodox Jews
Hasidim (singular *Hasid*)	members of one of the sects of orthodox Judaism following a movement founded in the eighteenth century; sects are usually named after the town of their first leader, such as Lubavitcher, Satmar, or Belz
Heder	traditional Jewish elementary school
Leshon hakodesh (Hebrew; *loshn koydesh*, Yiddish)	Hebrew or Hebrew–Aramaic, sacred language
Mishnah	early (third century CE) compilation of commentaries and interpretation of the Torah
Mizrahim (singular *Mizrahi*)	Jews from north Africa and Arab countries
Sephardim (singular *Sephardi*)	Jews originating from Spain or Portugal
Teiku	Talmudic term meaning "The question has not been resolved"

1 Is Hebrew an endangered language?

Two questions

When people learn that I am a linguist, the first question they ask me is: how many languages do you know? Once I have successfully dodged an answer, the next question depends on where I am. At conferences dealing with language policy, one of the first questions people ask me is about the revitalization of Hebrew, and what I can tell them about it so that they can use the information to deal with the problem of the endangerment of their heritage languages.

Once you judge a language not by how many speakers it still has but by the age of the youngest speaker, you know it is in trouble. Joshua Fishman, one of the leading experts in the field of the sociology of language, defines the lowest stage of language maintenance as when it is known only by old isolated individuals without anyone to speak to.[1] This was the situation with Eyak, a language once spoken by natives of Alaska; Michael Krauss, a linguist who studied it, said he knew only two old women who could speak it, and they hadn't talked to each for many years; both have since died. Eyak had started to disappear when members of the tribe began to switch to Tlingit, a language that now has about 400 speakers in the United States and Canada, most of whom are now bilingual in English. All over the world, speakers of the many languages that are endangered are trying to restore their use, which is why they ask about what they call the miracle of the rebirth of Hebrew. I tell them about the special conditions that made this possible and warn them how hard a task they are facing.

At home in Israel, I am asked a different question: is Hebrew itself in danger? Has the immigration of 1 million Russian speakers made it less likely to survive? Do all the English words we hear in Hebrew mean that it is threatened? And what about English-language TV, and computers, and the way that children slip English words and phrases into their conversations? And how, the president of the Academy of the Hebrew Language has recently asked, can we prevent the universities from using so much English and forcing the students to use it?[2] And might the fact that Arabic is legally recognized as an official language detract from Hebrew's status? After all, didn't we lose Hebrew once, during the

Babylonian exile, and again, more seriously, after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and in the Diaspora?

My first simple answer is that Hebrew is alive and well, and no more threatened than any other language of a small, vital nation. In the rest of this chapter, I flesh out this answer by describing what I call the *sociolinguistic ecology* of Israel, the complex network of communication that Hebrew dominates while sharing it in part with many other language varieties. To do this, I use a model that helps us understand the way that language varieties divide up a communication habitat.

First, I need to give two preliminary definitions. To start, I take the most obvious and common meaning of a *language* to include all the varieties to which the name may be attached; thus, *English* includes all the varieties,[3] including the historical and obsolete, such as the languages of *Beowulf* and Chaucer, and the modern dialects (Texan and Irish and Australian and Indian[4]), which may or may not be mutually intelligible. In this approach *Hebrew* includes the classical biblical language (as it changed over the epochs when it was spoken and written) and its later descendants: Mishnaic Hebrew (which I accept represents a later, more colloquial variety and not an artificial language of the rabbis), and the various medieval and Enlightenment versions, and all the varieties of Modern Israeli Hebrew (General or Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Yemenite, or whatever), with all their lexical and grammatical changes and ethnic and social dialects and accents. I will be more precise when it seems relevant, and make clear when I am talking about the kinds of mixed varieties that occur as when, for instance, English- or Spanish-speaking immigrants to Israel use the language, or when their children switch between Hebrew and their heritage language.

Second, I start by assuming the widest possible meaning for *Jews*, leaving for others the difficult question of whether we are referring to a people, a religion, a nation, a culture, or a civilization, or whatever other label seems appropriate.[5] As you read, you will come to realize that I have much more elaborate and complex definitions for these basic terms, but they shouldn't hold us up.

Sociolinguistic ecology

Although my first jobs were as a language teacher, my academic research was in applied linguistics and language testing. As time went on, I developed an interest in sociolinguistics, a field that deals with the uses of the varieties of language in a social setting, finishing up with my current preoccupation with language policy. I have published two recent books on the topic, *Language Policy*[6] and *Language Management*,[7] and I have also just edited *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*,[8] with thirty-two chapters written by colleagues who are experts in the many parts of the field. This focus explains

my lack of expertise in formal linguistics, such as grammar and historical language change, and my need to rely on experts in those areas.

I will be more confident in standing by my own judgment applying generalizations I have developed studying specific language situations and dealing with language policy. The model I am finding most useful for this is a *sociolinguistic ecology*; Einar Haugen[9] introduced the term and the biological evolutionary metaphor, with language varieties seen as competing for dominance in the many habitats of language use in a society.

It is hard to define the limits of the objects of study. What do we mean by "the Jewish world", which includes Israel?[10] In this chapter, I am dealing specifically with Israel. But how do we treat non-Jews in Israel and Jews in the Diaspora? Perhaps the fact that there is now a state in which Hebrew is one of the official languages as well as the dominant variety changes the picture considerably and means we do not need to worry about its survival in a diaspora community. But diaspora communities can be important, especially when they are all that is left, as Cook Island Māori is now spoken mainly in New Zealand. For a sociolinguist, the loss of language use in a diaspora community may be as relevant as in the homeland, for our interest is in a community of speakers. For a linguist worried about Russian language endangerment, the fact that Russian-speaking immigrants to Israel are slowly moving to Hebrew is irrelevant, as the language continues in the Russian Federation. So what happens to Hebrew in the United States is important, but not vital for the survival of the language.

There are two different linguistic approaches to defining communities. The classic approach in the work of the structural linguists was to talk about a *language* community, such as the English-speaking world, or *la francophonie*, or all the speakers of a language whether or not they were ever in contact. For sociolinguists, the more useful unit has been the *speech* community, a term invented by John Gumperz[11] and quickly picked up by his colleagues[12] and exploited by William Labov in his study of New York City as a speech community.[13] Labov suggests, and others agree, that it is not important that all the members of a speech community use the same language varieties but, rather, that they share the same values for the varieties: New Yorkers don't need to be able to imitate a Brooklyn accent, but to be able to recognize one. Dell Hymes, who has defined speech community as the "concurrence of rules of grammar and rules of use",[14] emphasizes its social nature: one should start with the community and its means of expression rather than with a language.[15]

Communities and demographics

When we are interested in language maintenance and loss, the first question is: who uses it? To answer the question about the current stability of Hebrew, it helps to distinguish between Israel (where it is the official and dominant

language and is passed on to babies) and the Diaspora (where it is associated with Israel and with Jewish education and religious practice, but depends for its survival on schools and immigrants from Israel).

Within Israel there are a number of distinct communities, each including smaller ones. A first division might be made between Jews, Arabs, and foreigners. Jews in Israel can be divided sociolinguistically between native-born and immigrants. They also divide between a general group (secular and modern orthodox) and *Haredim* (ultra-orthodox), although modern orthodox and *Haredim* share education in older varieties of Hebrew and use of religious terms.[16]

Another division, cutting across the first, is between *Ashkenazim* (those whose ancestors came via Europe), *Sephardim* (descended from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 who moved to the Ottoman Empire or north Africa), and *Mizrahim* (north African or Middle Eastern Jews whose ancestors lived in Arabic-speaking countries until they escaped or were expelled). Immigrants divide up linguistically between those who have been here for long enough to learn Hebrew and those whose immigration is more recent; among their children, a critical difference is between those who have been in Israel for six or seven years and more recent arrivals. They also divide up according to country of origin, with major groupings from Russia, Ethiopia, France, the United States and England, and South America added to the earlier groups from eastern Europe and Arab countries.

Israeli Arabs too need to be more finely defined; one useful division is between city dwellers, in regular contact with Jews or working in Jewish businesses, and villagers or those living in Arab towns. Another relevant division is between the Muslim majority and the Christian minorities, who add other languages (Armenian, Turkish, Syriac, or Aramaic, for instance). Two important groups are Bedouin and Druze, both of whom may serve in the army and therefore know more Hebrew.

There are also foreigners; not just large numbers of tourists and pilgrims, but also many workers from Africa or Asia, who may be documented or not. Foreign workers are commonly employed either in agriculture or the building industry, or as caregivers.[17]

The language practices of these communities are not hard to guess (which is just as well, because, in the absence of a language question on the Israeli census, it can only be guessed or derived from small focused studies or from the language questions included in the 2011 Social Survey, which I discuss later.

Native-born Jews and their children are most likely to have Hebrew as their mother tongue (the language in which their parents spoke to them when they were growing up) and to use it regularly. Most *Haredim* now know and use Hebrew, but some sects of *Hasidim*[18] still use or favor the use of Yiddish as a way of keeping separate from the Hebrew-speaking Zionists who serve in the army and whose taxes and charity subsidize their large and largely unemployed

families. Many older immigrants still use their heritage languages, such as Polish or Yiddish and various forms of Judeo-Arabic; most are bilingual in Hebrew, and their heritage languages incorporate many Hebraisms. More recent immigrants are likely to be proficient in their heritage languages, such as English, French, Russian, Spanish, or Amharic, but their children are becoming increasingly proficient in Hebrew, and after six or seven years in Israel are similar to native-born (the Beta Israel are an exception). Palestinian Arabs from the Arab towns and villages tend to speak Palestinian Arabic, but, with increasing education or with employment in the general sector, are likely to develop proficiency in Hebrew; those from the mixed towns are commonly bilingual in Palestinian Arabic and Hebrew; their schooling has included classical or Qur'anic Arabic.

Foreign workers in agriculture have minimal Hebrew (their foremen act as interpreters) and continue to use their native languages, whether Thai or an African language. Those employed as caregivers (many from the Philippines) or in hotels and restaurants will have learned some Hebrew or picked up the language of their employers.

Cutting across these divisions are some general tendencies. Arab women and *Haredi* men are less likely to be employed in the workforce, and so less likely to be proficient in spoken Hebrew. Druze and those Bedouin who serve in the army will be more proficient in Hebrew than other Palestinian Arabs. Immigrants who live in closer contact with their compatriots (in Russian neighborhoods such as Ashkelon, or French neighborhoods such as Netanya, or English neighborhoods such as Raanana, Bet Shemesh, or Efrat) are more likely to keep using their heritage language in public as well as private, and some of their children will still speak a heritage language.

But Modern Israeli Hebrew remains the dominant, normal, and unmarked language of Israel. If we had a language census, it would still be by far the most common language, as it was in 1983, when there were estimated to be 2,166,973 people speaking it, compared to 667,810 speakers of Palestinian Arabic, 199,780 speakers of English, 189,220 speakers of Yiddish, 116,690 speakers of Romanian, 107,335 speakers of French, and 101,065 speakers of Russian (an extra 1 million or so arrived in the 1990s, making it the second largest language), listing only those over 100,000. If we are worrying about numbers alone, with the current 6 to 7 million estimated speakers and a higher proportion of younger than older speakers, the Hebrew language seems relatively safe in Israel. The 2011 Social Survey supports this view.

2011 Social Survey

There are at last some data available on native languages and language use in Israel.[19] Since 2002 the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics has conducted the

annual Social Survey on a sample of Israelis aged twenty years and over. Each year the questions have included 100 items covering the main areas of life, and each year an additional module has been added dealing with one or two specific topics. In 2011 the two added topics were studies during a lifetime and the use of language. This second topic provides the first survey data since the language question in the 1983 census, although the questions and the population were not comparable: the 1983 question asked about language knowledge and dealt with people over fifteen, while the 2011 survey focused on native language and language use in a population over the age of twenty.[20]

The questionnaire named eight languages: Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian, Amharic, French, Spanish, and Yiddish. There are a number of interesting changes in the ranking of the languages from the 1983 census. Hebrew remains first, though the number calling it their native tongue now stands at 49 percent (but 61 percent among Jews, compared to 59 percent in the 1983 census), and Russian[21] native speakers are now 15 percent, compared to a total of 5 percent in the census. Arabic remains unchanged at 18 percent, and Yiddish has dropped to 2 percent, while English and French have risen to 2 percent. Among Jews, about 75 percent report very good proficiency in Hebrew. Filling out forms in Hebrew is a problem for 27 percent of the sample and for 45 percent of the Arabs.

As well as the native speakers counts, there were questions on language use. Among Arabs, 98 percent speak Arabic at home, but 4 percent also speak Hebrew there. Of those who are employed, 79 percent use Hebrew at work, but only 20 percent use only Hebrew; 79 percent use Arabic at work, but only 16 percent use only Arabic.

Among those born in the former Soviet Union, 88 percent speak Russian at home, and 48 percent speak only Russian at home; 48 percent speak Hebrew at home, and 8 percent speak only Hebrew at home. Of those former Soviet Jews[22] who are employed, 93 percent speak Hebrew at work, and 32 percent speak only Hebrew at work, but 57 percent speak Russian at work, and 6 percent speak only Russian at work. Employment and knowledge of Hebrew are closely connected. Most former Soviet Jews (87 percent) continue to speak Russian with their friends, but 38 percent speak only Russian with friends; 9 percent speak only Hebrew with friends.

Age is also correlated with native language: only 18 percent of the respondents over sixty-five have Hebrew as a native language, 44 percent of those between forty-five and sixty-four, and 60 percent of those between twenty and forty-four. Jews generally claim stronger proficiency in Hebrew than Arabs, as do immigrants who arrived before 1990 than those who arrived later.

Proficiency in Hebrew is related to income, as shown in earlier studies of immigrants in many countries.[23] Among Arabs, the level of academic success is also related to proficiency in Hebrew; while Arab schools in Israel use Arabic as

the language of instruction, they also emphasize developing Hebrew-language skills. Ability in language is also related to employment; 82 percent of those Arabs with high levels of Hebrew proficiency are employed.

These new data clearly confirm the dominance of Hebrew in Israel. It is understandable that the addition of over 1 million immigrants from the Soviet Union in the 1990s changed the language balance towards Russian, but, remembering that setting the lowest age for the survey at twenty means that most of the Russian speakers included were born in the Soviet Union and that all Israeli schools teach in Hebrew only, we can see the shift of this population too towards Hebrew, with education and employment accounting for much of the change. With all the evidence showing that younger speakers are becoming Hebrew speakers, it seems reasonable to suggest that, without the continuing immigration of Russian speakers, the language will continue to decline over the next generations. The data also reveal the incursion of Hebrew into the Israeli Arab population: its relation to education and employment demonstrates the pragmatic pressures on the language practices of the community.

Domains

The numbers, then, are positive, but another way to estimate a language's stability is to list the domains in which it is used. Joshua Fishman introduced this concept in his major study of the Jersey City *barrio*.[24] A sociolinguistic domain, he suggests, has typical participants (defined by their roles), topics of conversation, and locations. For the New Jersey Spanish-speaking population, he identifies five significant domains. The first is family, in which typical participants are family members; the second is friendship; the third is religion, in which participants are priests and congregants; the next is education, with teachers and students; and the last is employment.[25] There turned out to be regularities of language choice in these situations, with Spanish most used for family and religion, and English for education and employment. This pattern, he argues, produces stable *diglossia*, a term he uses for the division of functions for language use equivalent to the cases of the stable contrast between the uses of standard German and Swiss German in Switzerland, or Classical Arabic and the regional varieties, or French and Creole in Haiti. That is to say, people are not just bilingual, but live in a speech community where there are defined rules for choosing a language.[26] When I go into a post office in my Jerusalem suburb, I expect to use Hebrew; when I meet a tourist, I expect to be addressed in English.

Applying the domain model to Israel, we find that the most common language for home and neighborhood use among Jews (except for recent and elderly immigrants and some Hasidim) is Hebrew. In new immigrant families that still use heritage languages, the children increasingly use Hebrew with each other, and even with their parents. Russian immigrant parents prefer to use

Russian with their children, but the majority permit switching. The children report that they use Russian with their parents half the time and with their grandparents all the time; only 10 percent use Hebrew with their parents. Over 40 percent use Hebrew with siblings, and 70 percent use Hebrew with the Russian-speaking peers who are their main friends.[27] Shulamit Kopeliovich has studied the families in one community of former Soviet Jews as their children bring Hebrew into the family and as the parents attempt (with varying degrees of success) to persuade the children to maintain their Russian.[28] Earlier studies confirmed this, reporting that children of Soviet immigrants were learning Hebrew rapidly.[29] Another study of the children of former Soviet immigrants found that it took six or seven years in Israel for Russian children to catch up with native-born children in Hebrew and mathematics scores.[30] The same study showed Beta Israel (Ethiopian) immigrant children took longer, as confirmed in evidence that the language of the home and the language used with children remains Amharic or Tigrinya.[31] In *Haredi* families most spoke Hebrew; mothers generally spoke to their children in Hebrew, but in some Hasidic groups there is encouragement of Yiddish. Boys start to learn Yiddish when they go to *heder* (ultra-orthodox state-funded but independent elementary schools, usually not following state curricula) and their sisters may be taught Yiddish as a subject when they go to school.[32] While French remains important to immigrants from north Africa, many of whom speak it, the children of these immigrants grow up speaking Hebrew but may be encouraged to learn French in school.[33]

For most Jewish immigrant children, the first outside pressure to speak Hebrew comes from peers who live in the neighborhood. The government policy of concentrating Ethiopian immigrants helps account for the slowness of assimilation of this group. The second outside pressure is the school, with pre-school programs having a major effect too. "The second generation of Russian-speaking immigrants are generally exposed to the L2 (Hebrew) as soon as they enter a kindergarten at ages two to three, with the result that Hebrew inevitably appears to be the socially and educationally dominant language."[34]

The rapid urbanization of so many communities throughout the world is a key factor in language endangerment and loss; in 1950 70 percent of the world's population was estimated to be rural, and 30 percent urban, but by 2050 these figures will probably be reversed. There are urban neighborhoods in Israel where languages other than Hebrew are heard in public, such as the Arab-speaking towns and villages of the Triangle and parts of Jaffa and Haifa, the centers of intensive Russian and Beta Israel settlement, the English or French immigrant suburbs, or the Haredi Yiddish enclaves.

Early studies[35] showed the use of English in some neighborhoods of Jerusalem, and, in a shopping street close to the center of the city, 14 percent of the conversations overheard were in English. Most of those using English

were native speakers, but only a half of those using Hebrew had grown up speaking it.[36] While these studies attest to the high status of English – something noted earlier in a study of the attitudes of high school students[37] – and its value as a second language among non-speakers of Hebrew,[38] they also make clear the public dominance of Hebrew, especially taking into account that most of the shopkeepers in the study were native speakers of Yiddish or Arabic. There are middle-class neighborhoods where French is heard in public (Netanya is an example), but the bulk of French speakers are of north African origin; in their neighborhoods, a north African variety of French and Moroccan Judeo-Arabic can be heard, especially from the elderly.[39] There are neighborhoods in Tel Aviv where one hears Yiddish from the elderly, but they are commonly bilingual and use Hebrew with their younger relatives. Varieties of Judeo-Arabic continue to be heard from older people, but the numbers are declining rapidly, as their children commonly speak an unmarked variety of Hebrew.[40] Other languages too will be heard, including the Spanish of the Latin American immigrants, and the Amharic and Tigrinya of Beta Israel and the African languages of non-Jewish economic refugees.

Palestinian Arabic is, of course, the unmarked language in Arab villages and towns and Arab neighborhoods of mixed cities, but in them there is gradual increase in the influence, and even use, of Hebrew. Israeli Palestinians are rapidly becoming bilingual, first borrowing Hebrew words and then code switching and developing bilingual proficiency.[41] There is not an analogical learning of Arabic by Hebrew-speakers, but a continuing loss of the Judeo-Arabic varieties brought by Jews from Iraq, north Africa and Egypt, and only a limited learning of school Arabic in many, but not all, schools.[42]

Public signage (commonly labeled “linguistic landscape”, though it usually refers to cityscape) often provides a clue to the sociolinguistic make-up of a neighborhood; it is strongly influenced, however, by the state of literacy in the language and the community, the existence of government (national or local) rules, and the advertising preferences of large national and international firms. As early as the 1960s scholars noted the intrusion of English into commercial signs in a West Jerusalem shopping street.[43] A study of signs in the Old City of Jerusalem showed the complexity of this phenomenon, with changes in language (dropping Hebrew from street signs in the Jordanian period, adding it to Arabic and English after the reunification of the city in 1967) and in the ordering of the languages (English, Arabic, and Hebrew under the Mandate; Hebrew, Arabic, and English under Israeli rule).[44] There were disputes over Arabic in signs in Upper Nazareth, considered a Jewish (therefore Hebrew) neighborhood by the local government but a mixed Arab–Jewish city by local Arabs and their organizations.[45] But Israeli neighborhoods are predominantly Hebrew, with marked exceptions of speaking and signs in other languages.

Education as a factor

Schooling is one of the most significant domains for language loss and maintenance, and the decision on a language of instruction as well as of other languages to teach is a crucial one. Commonly ignoring the logical and simple policy of using the language of the children, most national language education policies use this decision to manage language practices and beliefs.[46] The most significant step in the revitalization of Hebrew was the decision of some Yiddish-speaking immigrants to Ottoman Palestine in the late nineteenth century who had settled in small agricultural towns to replace French with Hebrew. The teachers, Yiddish speakers but literate in Hebrew, were called on to use Hebrew to talk about everyday life and to encourage their pupils to speak it all the time. This was adopted as school policy also in the kibbutzim founded in the early twentieth century and in the Jewish towns growing up at the time and in the Hebrew city of Tel Aviv. In particular, the schools of the *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*, an organization supported by German Jews to help Jewish communities, became the new centers for the restoration of the language and its modernization. While the schools of the *Haredim* continued to use Yiddish to teach their pupils, the Zionist schools taught all subjects in Hebrew at all levels.

A crisis came in 1913 when a plan was announced to start a tertiary institution, keeping Hebrew for humanities and Jewish studies but teaching science in the then current language of science, German. It was students and teachers from the high schools who led the demonstrations that are now known as the Language War. During World War I the German consul is reported to have encouraged teaching in German, but the British troops soon put a stop to that, enforcing under military government a decision to recognize Hebrew officially for the Jewish schools.[47]

Under the British Mandate, the government (underfunded, as were most aspects of the British Empire apart from military forces) left it to the Arab and Jewish communities to set up and pay for their own schools, though they required both systems to teach English as a second language. When in the 1920s, after the war, the Jewish tertiary institutions were established, both the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (note “Hebrew” in the name!) and the Haifa Technion adopted rules requiring teaching, examinations, and student writing to be in Hebrew. The result was that, at the time of the foundation of the state in 1948, when a decision (echoing Treaty of Versailles and League of Nations policies) was made to use Arabic or Hebrew in a school according to the make-up of the pupils, Israel already had an established policy of using Hebrew from pre-school level to university.

In the main, this continues to be the practice, with minor exceptions. Whereas many nations with larger and longer-established modern languages find it necessary to carry on advanced education in other languages (e.g. French is

still the language of secondary schools in north Africa, and many universities in Europe now teach in English,[48] almost all lecturing and student work in Israeli universities (except in the English and some other foreign-language departments) is in Hebrew, although, in the social sciences and sciences, more advanced courses require students to read material in English.[49] Lecturers are expected to publish and participate in conferences in international languages, and students to develop reading proficiency in them, but all levels of Jewish education (apart from Haredi schools, some of which favor Yiddish, and a few programs for foreign students) use Hebrew.

Other domains

Hebrew is, of course, firmly entrenched in Israeli Jewish religious life, not just as the sacred language of worship and study but also as the public language of most sermons, lessons, and announcements. There are a few exceptions, such as when sermons might be given in an immigrant language such as Russian, English, or French, but this is a rare phenomenon. In the Haredi community, the language of worship is also Hebrew (though with a different pronunciation), but, in many cases, the language of teaching for males is still – but decreasingly – likely to be Yiddish. Most ultra-orthodox schools for girls teach them Yiddish as a subject, but teach in Hebrew.

Thus, within the Jewish community, secular as well as religious, the sacred and traditional status of Hebrew reinforces its hegemonic position and its maintenance. For Muslims, worship and sermons are in Qur'anic Arabic. Palestinian Christians too are likely to use Arabic, especially now that the Catholic Church has permitted the vernacular. The tiny Armenian and Syrian Christian communities maintain Armenian and Syriac (a variety of Aramaic) as their heritage languages. Arab schools teach in Arabic. Two Circassian villages have language revival programs, but now use Hebrew in schools.[50]

After completing high school and before employment or university study, about a half of Israelis (men and women alike) serve for two or three years in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF); the main exceptions are Palestinian Israelis (except Druze and some Bedouin) and Haredim, most of whom continue to resist responsibilities to the state.[51] Although in the early days, after the mass immigrations, the sergeant's problem was the many languages spoken by his platoon, by now almost all recruits can be assumed to speak Hebrew, which is the regular language of the army, air force, navy, and border police in which they will serve. The IDF does test recruits for Hebrew proficiency, making a minimal level a prerequisite for promotion and professional training; it also provides Hebrew instruction for new immigrants and for others with low literacy, aiming that all will have achieved at least the level of high school graduation by the end of their service. The IDF encourages some other language training: it provides Arabic

instruction for its intelligence branch (supporting Arabic in Jewish schools as well), and English instruction for pilots and officers who will go overseas for training. Just as it played a major role in the teaching of Hebrew to immigrants in the early days of the state, so the army clearly continues to bolster the maintenance of the language.

Modern Israeli Hebrew is also firmly established as the language of the workplace. In stores, restaurants, factories, hospitals, and offices, it is the unmarked language, the one in which you normally address a stranger, and the first language offered by a telephone answering service.[52] There are exceptions: just as stores and restaurants throughout the world advertise that "English is spoken here" to encourage the tourist trade, so in a multilingual society such as Israel there are adjustments. Storekeepers try to match the languages of their customers: in the *shuk* (market) in the Old City of Jerusalem,[53] just as in the Ethiopian markets,[54] it is the seller who learns the language of the prospective buyer. Waiters and waitresses, and sales staff too, are often chosen for their ability to deal with the languages of their patrons. Hospitals exploit the plurilingualism of nurses and doctors to accommodate patients who do not know Hebrew, or rely on the Hebrew-speaking relatives who accompany them; in the wards, one hears Arabic and Russian regularly from the medical staff.

Although Hebrew remains the dominant language of business, there are some obvious exceptions. Lawyers, for instance, are expected to learn English while at university, but it is mainly those who practice international law and handle real estate transactions for non-Israelis who actually use it in their professional life.[55] In the many start-up computer businesses, English is valued for its usefulness in selling and in collaborating with firms overseas, but Hebrew remains the common language of daily work. Agriculture is another exception, as it involves hiring Arab and foreign workers, but they too pick up some Hebrew from their employers and foremen.

All this is clearly reflected in the media. Although Israel has a remarkable number of foreign-language newspapers for new immigrants and tourists (five in Russian, three in English, one each in French and German), the high-circulation daily newspapers are in Hebrew (ten altogether; there are also four in Arabic). Radio stations too broadcast in the main in Hebrew, though there are short regular news broadcasts in other languages, and an Arabic language program. Israeli television channels are in Hebrew, with a Russian-language channel and Arabic broadcasts. Cable stations provide programs in many other languages, but they are regularly subtitled in Hebrew.

There is a strong Israeli film industry; foreign films are generally subtitled in Hebrew. Plays in Hebrew (original, classic, and translated) are regularly staged in Hebrew throughout the country. Now that computers can handle Hebrew script as well as Latin, the internet is no longer a force weakening Hebrew, although it adds to the appeal of English. While experimental apps are starting

to appear for Hebrew script for cellphones and iPads, there remain major problems, but young users have found ways to work around them. The publication of books in Hebrew continues to flourish, and popular works, translations from major languages as well as original Israeli literature, provide significant support for the language. There is thus a rich Israeli Hebrew culture, providing firm support for the language and also allowing access in translation to international literature and cultures.

All levels of government too are conducted in Hebrew. Members of local and city councils as well as legislators in the Knesset conduct their business in Hebrew, although there is a policy that permits Arab members of the Knesset to use Arabic if they give advance notice so that an interpreter can be provided. Citizens contact government agencies in Hebrew, but most provide telephone and computer services also in Arabic and Russian, and occasionally English. The police and the law courts operate in Hebrew, but provide interpreters when necessary. Laws and regulations are published first in Hebrew, but English, and later Arabic, translated versions are also available.

Hebrew is not endangered

Hebrew is firmly embedded in the Israeli sociolinguistic ecology, appearing to be healthy in all the domains we have looked at. Applying Fishman's *graded intergenerational disruption scale*,[56] Hebrew in Israel is to be rated beyond the highest level (stage 1), for it is designated by the national government as an *official language* and is politically independent. It does not need to be recreated from earlier writings (such as Cornish) or from socially isolated adults (as is the case with a large number of endangered languages). Its speakers are "socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active" and not beyond the childbearing age (as with the speakers of Māori in 1960 and most secular speakers of Yiddish and Judezmo and other Jewish languages today); rather, there is intergenerational oracy, as the majority are still brought up speaking the language even if their parents are immigrants or Haredim. There is Hebrew literacy in the home, the school, and the community (with a strong tradition of Hebrew literature, both popular and intellectual); it is required in compulsory elementary education (for Arabs as well as Jews); it is the most common language of the workplace; and it is used in governmental services and the mass media, including higher education. These considerations move it well beyond the level of threatened languages.

But what about its official status, and the fact that it shares this status with Arabic? The British government was persuaded in 1919 when establishing its rule over Ottoman Palestine (where Turkish had been the language of government) to add Arabic and Hebrew to its imperial English as official languages. Clearly, this did not mean that British officials under the Mandate were required

to work in either or both, but that, wherever the local population warranted, laws and regulations were to be published in one or both of the languages, and interpreters were to be provided for law courts and official contact with Arabic- and Hebrew-speaking citizens. The newly independent government of Israel dropped English from the list of official languages, but in practice English continued to be used in publishing translations of laws and regulations. The maintenance of Arabic as an official language did not change the status of Hebrew, which continues as the dominant, even hegemonic, language of the government. Arabic is not used in the Knesset (except with advance notice to the Speaker); its formal requirement as a second language in schools is widely ignored or weakly implemented; its inclusion on public signs depends on local decisions or on legal enforcement on highways where there is evidence of need, and on street signs in centers of Arab population. It appears symbolically on stamps and currency, but less than Hebrew and English.[57] There is no apparent threat to Hebrew, then, from continuing to list Arabic as the second official language.

This is not strange if one considers the use of the term "official" for languages. The Wikipedia definition is a good start: "An *official language* is a *language* that is given a special legal status in a particular country, state, or other jurisdiction. Typically a nation's official language will be the one used in that nation's courts, parliament, and administration." It goes on to point out that, in New Zealand, Māori, though a minority language spoken by 5 percent of the population, and Sign language, used by the Deaf community, are the only "official" languages; English is just taken for granted, as it is in England, the United States, and Australia. In Ireland, the fact that Irish has been the official language since independence has not moved it beyond minority status, and increasing immigration means that it will soon be passed by immigrant languages such as Chinese and Polish. Inclusion in a list of official languages does not guarantee widespread public use: Urdu, while the official language of Pakistan, has fewer native speakers than several non-official languages. Nor does listing two languages as official depend on or encourage national bilingualism. Nations such as Switzerland and Belgium turn out, on closer analysis, to be territorially divided. Each canton in Switzerland decides its own language policy, while Belgium is divided into a complex patchwork of regions where either French, Dutch, or German are required or permitted; only Brussels (actually a French-speaking enclave within a Flemish region) is officially bilingual. Finland remains officially bilingual, but Swedish (historically dominant) is now mainly regional. Canada's official bilingualism has been successful in persuading Québec, increasingly francophone after the departure of many English speakers, to remain in the confederation but not in successfully establishing French–English bilingualism all across the country: "les deux solitudes" continue. South Africa's listing of nine African languages alongside Afrikaans

and English in its constitution does not guarantee their use in higher functions. Tunisia's listing of Arabic as the only official language does not lead to its use in higher education.

There is thus no reason, other than the same nationalist mistrust that motivates the Official English movement in the United States to fear unofficial Spanish, to worry that the official status of Arabic is in any way a threat to Hebrew, which appears to be easily overcoming the potentially more serious challenges of global English and a million Russian-speaking immigrants.

My regular answer, then, to those who ask me is that Hebrew is not endangered or even threatened in any way, and its inclusion by Fishman in a book on "threatened languages" is related not to its current situation but to its success in "reversing language shift" and restoring language vitality, daily vernacular use, modernization, and cultivation, as befits a modern standard language of a small multilingual country, and providing a model for others.

There are, of course, language problems. One is the need for Israelis – like most other residents of non-English-speaking countries – to learn English in order to maintain external commercial ties, to allow access to advanced science and technology, to conduct a successful tourist industry and to travel abroad, and in order to keep up connections with a non-Hebrew-speaking Jewish Diaspora. A second is a regrettable failure to develop the strength in proficiency in Arabic consistent with geographical location in the Middle East. A third is that the ideological strength of Hebrew has worked and continues to work against the rich plurilingualism in Jewish, immigrant, and international languages of the Jewish population. But, in spite of the universal tendency of Hebrew to be influenced by a global language such as English, and in spite of its generally benign tolerance of multilingualism, there are no real signs of a threat to the continued existence of reborn Hebrew.

At the same time, while deprecating the pessimism of the normativists and language activists and their anxiety for the survival and purity of the language, one cannot ignore the reasons for their concern, which will emerge in the rest of the book, or discount the value of their efforts to constantly draw attention to what they see as errors and impurities – efforts that help to encourage Hebrew language use and the maintenance of standard forms, or to defend the language. The Hebrew Language Academy seems to be doing a good job in making available the new terminology needed to keep the language up to date (I say "seems" because we have no hard evidence, since the studies in the 1970s, of the effect of their efforts).[58] Hebrew, like all other living languages, will continue to change, and, like all other languages of small states, will continue to be influenced by developments of the large international languages. But it is in no more danger than Czech, or Danish, or Hungarian.

That is a sketch of the current state of Hebrew within the Israeli sociolinguistic ecology. In the rest of the book, I explore how this situation

developed, answering finally the other question: how was Hebrew so successfully "revived"? As this is not a mystery novel, perhaps I should give away the solution, which will be that Hebrew was never really "dead"; with rare exceptions, it always played a central role among the many languages of the Jews. While it was not a spoken vernacular for about 1,900 years, it continued as a sacred and literary language throughout most of this period, and so was easily available for the renewed vernacular use that followed the return to Zion.

2 The emergence of Hebrew

> Teach your tongue to say “I do not know” lest you be caught in a falsehood.
> Tractate *Derech Eretz Zuta* (chapter 3)

Historical sociolinguistics and the puzzle of origins

A number of years ago two of the founders of the field of sociolinguistics,[1] Joshua Fishman and John Gumperz, were working together on a pioneering study of Spanish–English bilingualism in a Jersey City barrio.[2] From time to time they would argue over their findings. When challenged for evidence, Fishman (trained in statistics and sociology) would go to his office and bring back a ream of computer printout with analyses of multiple questionnaires. On other days, when Fishman challenged Gumperz (a field linguist and ethnographer), Gumperz would reply: “Last night at a party I heard someone say it.”[3] The claims in the last chapter about the current state of languages in Israel can be tested by either of these two methods of handling data: by statistical analysis of the results of surveys or questionnaires, or by ethnographic observation and interviews.

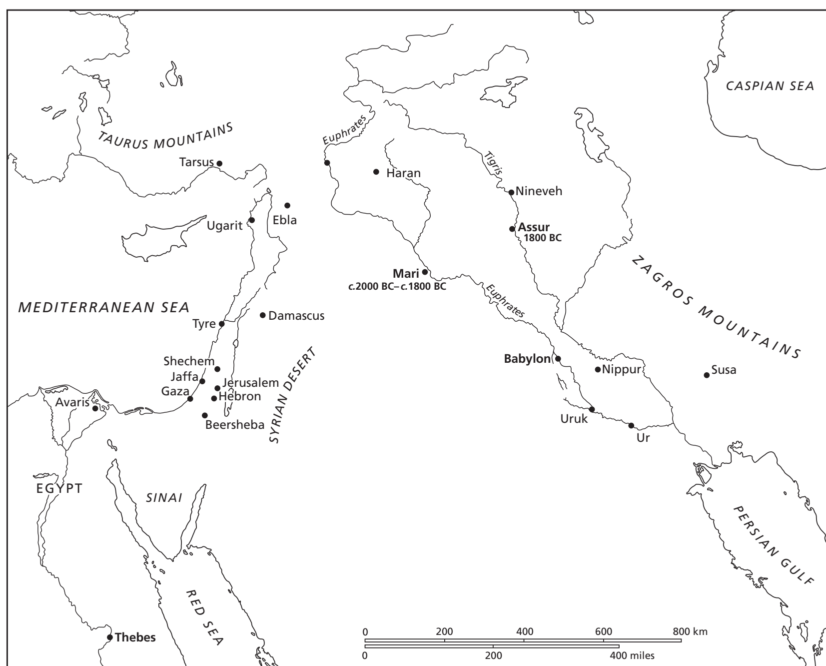
But, unfortunately, we do not have the data. At the end of Chapter 1, I was probably more certain than I should have been, for Israel has had no language question on the census since 1983. Israeli Hebrew language departments continue to discourage studies of Hebrew later than the Mishnaic period; Modern Hebrew, they assert, has not yet jelled.[4] So my personal assessment of the present sociolinguistic situation is open to debate, and my guess about the future can also be questioned, accounting for the nervousness of the president of the Hebrew Language Academy. But that is talking about something that could be checked, were there resources available for surveys or interviews. Neither of these methods is even conceivable for historical studies, especially in trying to reconstruct the sociolinguistic ecology of communities thousands of years ago.

Even when we move to periods when we assume humans had started to use language (and when this happened is still debated),[5] we face many difficulties. Our problem is the lack of evidence; we have no tape recordings of the spoken language and so must rely on the evidence (when it exists) of the written

records, which in alphabetical scripts are assumed to be related to the spoken form, but may largely misrepresent it. A related fallacy of many who study "linguistic landscape", which normally means public signs in the city, is to ignore the state of literacy of the population, so that they might easily misinterpret the language of signs. We will see this when we ask about how to interpret the languages of inscriptions of ancient Jewish communities: did the use of Greek on so many tombstones mean that this was the language people were speaking or was it, rather, the language preferred by engravers? Clearly, the further we go back in time, the more doubts we should have. We have to depend on the scholarly but debated reconstructions of historical linguists or our own sense of the probable sociolinguistic behavior of communities very different from our own, much smaller and with their own language attitudes. So, if I seem certain at times, feel free to doubt and question my version, and, if I seem doubtful, please forgive my hesitancy.

The question of how and when human language originated led in the nineteenth century to such exhausting debate that, in 1866, the Linguistic Society of Paris forbade further discussion of the issue; only towards the end of the twentieth century did the topic become a respectable one for speculation and study. Current views work within evolutionary theory, with the majority holding that it was a gradual process. A recent collected volume includes sixty-five chapters by experts in various fields – linguists, biologists, archeologists, ethologists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, psychologists, geneticists, paleontologists, and others.[6] While the details remain controversial, the weight of opinion seems to be that language, with its distinctive differences from animal communication systems, such as the various systems of combination (sounds into words, and words into sentences), first emerged over 200,000 years ago. But we have no hard evidence of language before the first Sumerian examples of writing, with pictographs emerging in Mesopotamia in the thirty-fifth century BCE (before the Common Era) and the first cuneiform writing found on clay tablets at Jemdet Nasr in the late 1920s. This kind of archeological evidence gives one picture; a second approach, established by the work of historical linguistics, has since the early nineteenth century endeavored to establish language histories by comparing existing languages and working backwards to determine early forms.[7] Our current views of language families and relationships come from this comparativist approach, checked with historical inscriptions and texts (see Map 1).

Traditionally, there were various theories of the original or Adamic language. The Bible assumed that it was Hebrew, with the creation of other languages a punishment at the incident of the Tower of Babel. The sixteenth-century Dutch humanist Johannes Goropius Becanos proposed that Antwerpian Brabantic, a Dutch dialect, was the original language.[8] Other seventeenth-century Dutch scholars argued that one people (the Germanic) did not come down from the



1 Biblical Israel in the ancient Middle East
Source: Brettler (2010).

Ark on Mount Ararat to Babel but chose a different route, so that the original language of the Garden of Eden stayed unchanged. The Turkish language reformer Mustafa Kemal was, for a time at least, convinced by the speculations of an Austrian linguist, Hermann F. Kvergić, that Turkish was the first language.[9] There is no agreement among linguists about the issue: Roger Lass[10] and other linguists are critical of the methods used to establish language super-families, and no one goes so far as proposing the form of a Proto-Sapiens (or Proto-Human) language; there is even disagreement as to whether there was one origin (monogenesis) or several (polygenesis).[11] In any event, our question is not the origin of language but the origin of Hebrew, just over three millennia ago.

What evidence, hard or soft, do we have of the languages being spoken in Canaan when Hebrew was born? To start, we depend on the work of archeologists, who find traces of written material in their excavations. There is written evidence, in tablets found at Amarna and elsewhere, that enables us to identify some of the languages being written by scribes at the time, over a thirty-year

span around 1380 BCE; they are mainly in cuneiform in Akkadian.[12] Seeing that Semitic scripts did not generally record vowels, we can only guess at pronunciation, or use comparative linguistic methods to try to reconstruct earlier versions of the languages that survived. The limitations of these data are clear: first, the remnants we have are preserved by chance. Another chance discovery, such as the fabulous troves found in the Cairo Genizah or the caves at Qumran, may one day lead to a revolutionary rewriting of major portions of linguistic history.

There is also the evidence of the Bible, the earliest manuscripts of which were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran and date perhaps from the second century BCE; there is an important Greek translation that dates from the fourth century CE, and other translations (such as one in Ge'ez, from Ethiopia) that seem to show reliable early variants. There is good reason to believe that there were various texts of the Bible as late as the Second Temple period: the texts at Qumran include multiple variants, and the Septuagint translation and the Samaritan Pentateuch show considerable differences from what was later the basis for the Masoretic text now accepted.[13] These differences suggest oral transmission, like the explanation now accepted for the composition of the works of Homer, and which we know to have been the case with the Talmud. Composed much earlier than the time they were written down, these texts were normalized by the Pharisees, so that after the destruction of Jerusalem a single text was preserved. Some argue that the decisions about which texts were preserved, and in which versions, reflect the ideologies of the two "orthodox" groups, Pharisaic Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.[14]

There are also major disputes among Bible scholars and archeologists over the date of the composition of the texts. The traditional religious view dates the Torah (the Pentateuch, the "Five Books of Moses") from the time of Moses in the fourteenth century BCE, and other books from then until 400 BCE. The documentary or Wellhausen theory[15] developed by nineteenth-century Bible scholars claims that it was combined from four (or more) separate sources, composed between 950 BCE and 500 BCE and edited later. Other views suggest that the Torah is made up of combinations of earlier fragments edited sometime between 900 BCE and 450 BCE. The other books of the Bible are assumed to have been composed between the eighth and fifth centuries BCE. In an intriguing analysis of the Book of Leviticus, the anthropologist Mary Douglas takes the position of "the largest scholarly consensus"[16] in accepting that Leviticus, like Deuteronomy, must have been redacted at a time of attempting to rebuild solidarity after the disasters of war, and accepts the fifth century BCE as the appropriate date.[17]

Obviously, each of these positions leads to different evaluations of the historical value of the written texts. Eyewitness accounts of incidents have been shown by psychologists to be questionable and often untrustworthy in

2 Divided monarchy
Source: Brettler (2010).

court;[18] if these stories were written many years after the event, they represent ideological interpretations of the past, with contemporary significance.

Dealing with the earlier periods, there are conflicting approaches to the agreement or otherwise between archeological and biblical accounts. Some scholars hold the view that the archeology confirms the Bible, while the "minimalists" build their theories on archeology and non-biblical sources alone: others take a more "centralist" position.[19] The detailed record keeping and editing and building of national scriptures such as the Bible are most likely to have occurred during a period of state building, and in the case of the Bible this happened not during the time of David but, rather, during the days of Josiah as king of Judah (see Map 2). The accounts that we have, in this view, are reflections of ideas of religious reform and the territorial ambitions of the kingdom of Judah at the end the seventh century BCE.[20]

Early Hebrew and language in the two kingdoms

From extant texts, linguists have attempted to reconstruct the existence and form of Hebrew as it developed over a period of many hundreds of years. But there are only a few rare references to the languages spoken at the time, and those refer to the language of Canaan and "Yehudit" (Jewish, or the language of Judah), but do not use the term "Hebrew". One needs to build a sociolinguistic description on the basis of minimal evidence.

Even at the more recent date of Roman Palestine, constructing a reasonable picture out of literary, epigraphic, and archeological sources proves a major challenge, though the sources are richer.[21] Here we find a mixture of Rabbinic texts in the Mishnah and Talmud, and accounts of life in the New Testament and by the Jewish historian Josephus. There are also papyri from the Judean desert and later synagogue and burial inscriptions. Especially important are the Dead Sea Scrolls and other writings such as the Apocrypha (in the Greek Bible) and Pseudepigrapha, preserved in Greek but not Hebrew or Aramaic originals, and even texts such as the Book of Enoch, preserved mainly in a Ge'ez version of the probably Aramaic original.[22] There has also been extensive archeology of major sites as well as evidence of daily life. But 1,000 years earlier, when we take the first shaping of Hebrew to have occurred, the evidence is much sparser.

We have archeology-based estimates of the population density. In the Late Bronze Age (1550 BCE to 1200 BCE) there was a drastic decrease in population in the region, which took place over a century as a result of military invasions, civil strife, and social breakdowns.[23] In the Early Iron Age, which followed, there was a dramatic increase in the number of settlements, as a consequence of clearing forests by fire, the building of terraces to provide better soil, and the solution of irrigation problems.[24] Based on the assumed ability of the land to