

**LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND LANGUAGE SHIFT  
IN THE GROUP OF GERMAN SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS  
OF THE THIRTIES TO PALESTINE (ISRAEL)**

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**Abstract:** It was found that the degree and rapidity of shift to Hebrew depended on: cultural background, age at time of immigration and ideological motivation. Most of the interviewees consider their knowledge of Hebrew sufficient for their needs. Nevertheless, in spite of their satisfactory involvement in society, they are not satisfied with their integration in modern Hebrew culture. They consider the Hebrew writing system to have been an obstacle. Many feel a certain sense of frustration, as they were cut off from the culture they grew up in, and have not internalized the modern Hebrew culture to a sufficient degree.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics; Immigrants; Modern Hebrew; Attitude towards German; Shift to Hebrew; Proficiency in Hebrew; Code Switching.

Sixty years have passed since the wave of German-Jewish immigrants known as the 'Fifth Aliya' came to Palestine. A certain urgency is now felt to gather and document evidence that can be provided by living witnesses. In 1989 Prof. Anne Betten from Germany started a research project, intended initially to analyze the type of spoken German preserved in a community having very little contact with the German language as it has developed and was shaped over the years by political events. Some 160 people were interviewed and around 400 recorded hours were stored on cassettes.

The members of the group we researched have a few factors in common: all are Jewish, they were raised in a German-speaking environment, and they emigrated to Palestine between 1932 and 1940. Their age at the time of the interview varies between 65 and 95.

As the main objective was to record spoken language, the interviewers did not have a fixed questionnaire, and most of the recordings were of informal and often very casual conversations. Nevertheless, certain subjects came up repeatedly like childhood and youth memories, the parental home, events after Hitler's rise to power, emigration or flight respectively, impressions and experiences in the new country. Up till now 2 books have been published from the material, one for the general reader, entitled "Wir sind die Letzten. Fragt uns aus" (Betten and Du-nour, 1995) and the second in Niemeyer's PHONAI series, "Sprachbewahrung nach der Emigration" (Betten, 1995) - which was accompanied by a compact disk. A second volume of this book - which will also include a more detailed version of this article - is due to be published in 1998.

This paper deals with the sociolinguistic aspect, the question of maintenance of the German language and the shift to Hebrew, as described and evaluated by the interviewees themselves. For the last hundred years Jews from all over the world have been immigrating to the 'Land of Israel', seeking to settle in their homeland. Some were motivated by the idea of building that homeland, most by necessity to find a haven and refuge.

Rapid political, demographic, economic, social and cultural changes ensued. But first of all the language situation on the whole was subject to a complete revolution.

The shift to using modern Hebrew as the main language spoken by the Jewish community in Palestine in everyday life and especially in public life was a highly successful, continuous process. In spite of constant immigration from many countries (mainly from eastern Europe) it was nearly completed by the early 30's, when the wave of the German speaking immigration of the 30's arrived after Hitler's rise to power.

It seemed that our subjects clung to their mother tongue more than the earlier immigrants, and shifted less easily to full use of the country's common language. Even now, 60 years after their immigration, these issue is fraught with emotional overtones: they analyzed their attitude toward the German language, they spoke of their proficiency in Hebrew, of their experiences and traumas, how they feel about their cultural identity, what language they spoke and speak in different social situations, to what extent they pass the language on to their children, etc.

We have tried here to capture some of the facts and provide some explanations.

Most east European Jews had some kind of Jewish education and knew some Hebrew (at least the written language). Practically everybody knew Yiddish. Even the most secular among them had either religious parents or at least grandparents.

The German Jews were different. The percentage of people who had nearly no previous contact with Hebrew was rather great. Jews in Germany were granted emancipation in the mid-19th century, and since then had made great efforts to be integrated into German life and culture. In the early 20th century there were various degrees of attachment to Jewish religion and culture. One could find strictly orthodox, traditional, liberal, assimilated, and very assimilated families. We found that the subjects of our research group, too, grew up in all kinds of homes.

When we say that German Jews were assimilated, we have to ask: assimilated to what? Principally to that part of German culture they respected, admired, and could identify with - mainly music, literature - and language. Jews figure among the most prominent German

authors and intellectuals of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. They were not truly integrated into German society, but acculturated. German culture was their fatherland. CULTURE in capital letters was a major value in their life.

It is not difficult to understand why, upon reaching a semi-'primitive' land, whose standard of 'civilization' was much lower than the one they were accustomed to, and whose culture was quite strange to a great some of them, they clung to their cultural legacy. Even those who adapted easily to the local culture did not give up their cultural heritage.

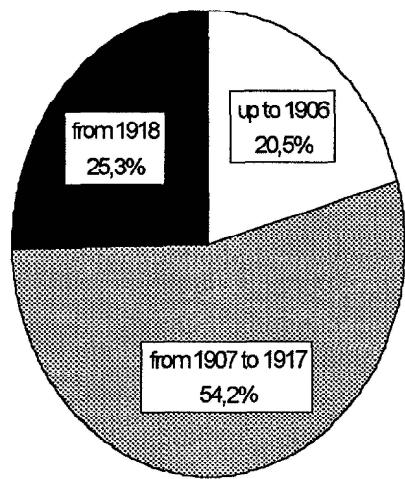
The group we refer to was a relatively large addition of around 70 to a population of 450 thousand, most of them arriving within a few years, between 1933 and the beginning of the Second World War in 1939. So it is not surprising that older people, with no Hebrew background, or people who did not enter into a profession where they needed the language, could get along very well without learning it. German newspapers were published; in entire localities, like Naharia for instance, and neighborhoods in Tel-Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem, one could hear for many years mainly German spoken in shops, cafes etc.

Nevertheless, there was a dilemma from the start. There was public pressure to speak Hebrew. It was directed against any foreign language, especially against Yiddish. Later, as the horrors of the Nazi regime became known, opposition to speaking German became stronger. German language newspapers were attacked, even bombed. Many of our subjects tried to refrain from speaking German, but later rationalized that it was the language of Heine, Goethe and Schiller, that language and nation were not one, and that speaking German did not mean that they identified with the German nation.

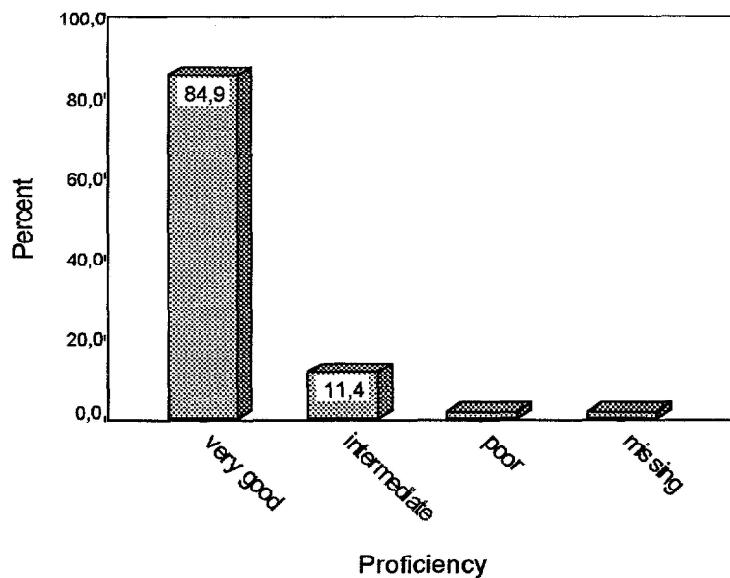
After the war, as the enormity of the Holocaust shocked people to the core of their being, some stopped speaking German altogether, even within the family. Most of all, as they started to travel again, they refrained from speaking German abroad, because they didn't want to be identified as Germans, and they did not want to talk to Germans. Hostility to the German language and culture lasted for many years, and has still not disappeared entirely.

In later years most people changed their attitude to some extent. Many new friendships were started up with younger people or with people who could prove their anti-nazi past. Some people, though not all by any means, started again travelling to Germany.

Although most people did not abandon the German language completely, the picture we get from our material is that most members of the group eventually acquired a good degree of functional competence in Hebrew. Most of the older immigrants, who had never learned Hebrew, had already passed away. Nevertheless, we had a good percentage of very old people in our group, as can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1: Division according to date of birth of subjects

20,5 % of the subjects were born before 1906, which means that at the time of the interviews (1989-1994) they were well over 80 years old.

Table 2: Proficiency of subjects in speaking Hebrew

As can be seen from Table 2, most people consider that they speak Hebrew well enough, and only a very tiny percentage consider their Hebrew speaking abilities poor. But looking at Table 3 will show that there is a big discrepancy between the proficiency in speaking and that in reading and writing.

**Table 3: Proficiency in Hebrew speaking, reading and writing**

	good	intermediate	poor	missing
speaking	84,9%	11,4%	2,6%	2,1%
reading	47,0%	30,7%	18,1%	4,3%
writing	44,6%	27,1%	22,3%	6,0%

We did not actually test the proficiency and the data is according to self-evaluation. This is a bit problematic, as different people evaluate their proficiency differently, depending on different standards, individual self expectations etc.

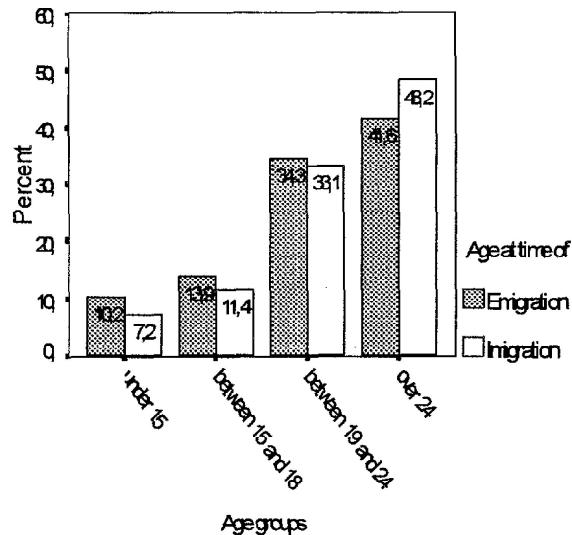
By combining the 3 kinds of proficiency we can see that nearly 50 % of the subjects evaluate their Hebrew as good in all 3 categories. When it comes to reading and writing the self-estimation is a bit shaky.

They came as young people, lived an active life, used Hebrew for all purposes, some of them taught, published articles, often had important positions in administration and government, and still they feel that they 'manque' a really deep knowledge of the language, that they stayed on the surface. Some have a kind of self-image of 'illiteracy' in all languages.

Even those who have evaluated their reading and writing as good state that when it comes to reading literature they feel that they lack a deeper understanding and associations in the cultural world, in order to 'really' understand everything, as they have not studied 'all Hebrew sources' - meaning the Bible, the Mishna, the Talmud and all the rest. This kind of dissatisfaction is mostly due to the high value they attribute to *culture*.

In previous studies (Bachi, 1956; Hoffman and Fisherman, 1972) it has been established that the three most important factors in the rapidity of the shift were age/length of stay, pre-knowledge of the language, and motivation. The greatest progress in language acquisition is made in the first 3 years after immigration. After that, the amount of knowledge changes only slightly. This is not exactly so in our case. At this late stage, the element of length of stay is neutralized, but we know that some people improved their proficiency in the language after many years, through their children, or through studies at a more advanced age.

**Table 4: Age of subjects at time of emigration and immigration**



There is a discrepancy between the age at time of emigration and the age at times of immigration. As a matter of fact, not all emigrants (in all age groups) went directly to Palestine. Some of them stayed for some time in some other country. Although we concentrated on people who came before the war, we have 15 subjects who came after 1947, which means they came several years after their emigration or flight.

We tried to see by crosstabulation which factors were significant for knowledge of the language in our group.

Table 5: Crosstabulation of 'age at time of immigration' and 'proficiency in Hebrew'

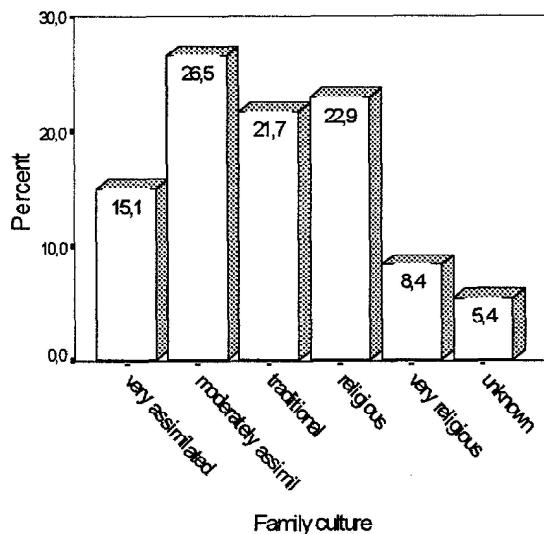
	good	intermediate in reading & writing	poor in reading & writing
under 15	100%		
15-18	58%	42%	
18-24	28%	72%	0,5%
over 24	37%	38%	24 %

We can see that all those who were under 15 years old have a perfect command of Hebrew. Among those who immigrated at the age between 15 and 18 (19 subjects), 58% have a perfect command of Hebrew, and 42% consider their reading and writing intermediate. Out of 73 subjects who were between 19 and 24, still 21 have a perfect command of Hebrew (28%), and 13 consider their reading and writing intermediate. Only 1 considers his writing as poor. Among those who were over 24, the number of people who speak, read and write well and intermediate still is much greater than of those who do it poorly, which means that in addition to age there are other factors which were active.

Pre-contact with the language was a very important factor. In our case, this means that our subjects learned Hebrew previous to immigration, either as children, youngsters or as adults.

The impression that pre-Holocaust German Jews were all assimilated and alienated from Jewish culture is not precise. There was a great variety in the degree of adherence to Jewish culture. There were synagogues, Jewish schools, rabbinical schools and academic institutes for Jewish studies. A table of the kind of families our subjects came from can be seen in

**Table 6: Degree of the attachment to Jewish religion and Jewish culture in the parental home**



In our opinion this breakdown of parental homes according to degree of observance is more or less true for the people who immigrated to Palestine, but not necessarily for all of German Jewry. We suppose that the percentage of assimilated families was, on the whole, greater than in our group. The very assimilated Jews found it hard to believe that they were in real danger. They kept hoping that things would blow over and return to normal. Those who were more connected with their Jewish roots made greater efforts to emigrate, and preferred emigration to Palestine than to another country.

To what extent did pre-contact with Hebrew exist and how did it influence language shift?

**Table 7: Hebrew learned in childhood and youth**

	no	a little	more	a lot	no answer	missing	total
percent	26,5	28,3	21,1	13,9	7,2	3,0	100

More than a quarter of the subjects had no previous contact with Hebrew, which means that they did not even learn the alphabet to read prayers.

Then there are those who attended 'Jewish religion classes', held either Sunday in the synagogue or parallel to Christian religion classes at school. There they learned the alphabet and some basic elements of their religion. These are probably those who declare that they had studied 'a little'.

Where did those who learned 'more' or 'a lot' learn the language?

Nearly 25 % attended a Jewish school at one point or other of their lives. Although Hebrew was taught only as a written language, this provided quite a good basis for the future. But Hebrew was learned not only in schools: traditional or religious families who did not send their children to Jewish schools often hired tutors to teach them at home. The Zionistically oriented learned modern Hebrew with the Sephardic pronunciation either at home, at youth movements, in language courses, or in preparation centers for immigration. Some went to courses or even hired private teachers after they decided to emigrate to Palestine.

On crosstabulation of 72 subjects whose Hebrew is good in all 3 categories, and of 36 whose speaking is good, reading and writing is intermediate, who learned Hebrew in childhood and youth, we can see that this factor has the greatest influence on proficiency in reading and writing.

**Table 8: Crosstabulation of 'proficiency in Hebrew' and 'Hebrew learned in childhood and youth'**

	a lot	more	a little	none
good in all 3 categories	31%	25%	25%	19%
speaking good, reading & writing intermediate		34%	36%	30%

Of course those who were under 15 at time of immigration had often still opportunity to go to school and get at least a part of a Hebrew education. Some went back to higher education later in life. But a considerable part had never the opportunity to study the language in a formal way.

**Table 9: Place of learning Hebrew after immigration**

(out of 137 valid answers)

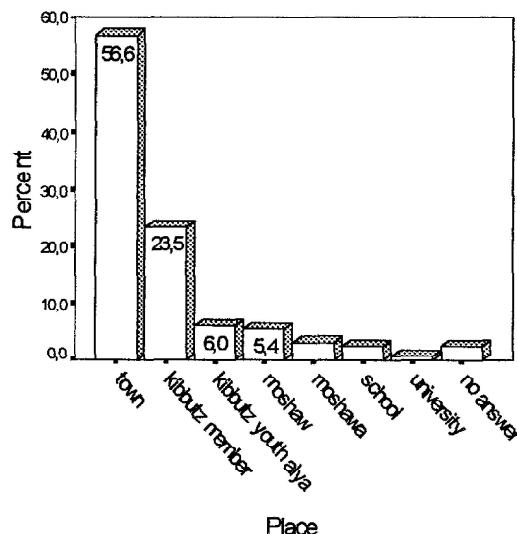
	formal institution	alone	everyday life	in courses	at work	total
percent	21,9	19,0	34,3	17,5	7,3	100,0

Beside the habitual pragmatic motives for language shift, which are valid in every immigration society, there were also ideological ones, which spurred many to make a special effort.

The idea of revitalizing Hebrew, as a spoken language, after being mostly a written and liturgical language for around 1600 years, coincided with the idea of turning the Jewish people into a modern political entity. This was partly in keeping with the European view of nationalism, which considered language the main mark of national identity, and with the idea of returning to the ancient mother land. At the end of the last century it was only a utopian idea, but after no more than 50 years it became reality, due to a stubborn struggle of elite groups, like teachers, political leaders etc. (Rabin, 1973; Fellman, 1974; Cooper, 1984). Many of the new immigrants have embraced the Zionist idea, either before immigration or after their arrival, and shifting to Hebrew was one of the symbols of their identification and integration. Even if in practice they did not always succeed completely, it was top priority in their program. This can

be seen by crosstabulations with beliefs before and after immigration, adherence to youth movements and political parties before emigration, and the importance of 'first place of integration' after immigration.

Table 10: First place of integration



75% of the people whose first place of integration was a kibbutz, are in the group of good proficiency in Hebrew reading and writing, compared to only 50% of those who settled in town. Even in a kibbutz where most members originated from Germany, they shifted very quickly to Hebrew, in concordance with the collective ethos.

One of the major obstacles to a complete shift to Hebrew reading and writing is the Hebrew script and the Hebrew writing system. In addition to the fact that Hebrew script is different, it is written from right to left and usually without vowels. Readers have often to rely on context. On the other hand, words are short and combined with fixed morphemes. The native reader reads mostly blocks (or "gestalt"), and has difficulty switching over to a linear syllable system. Those who started reading in Latin script have great difficulty adjusting to the new system. Most of those who learned it at a later stage complain that they read much slower. One of the people formulated the problem quite nicely by saying: "You can't read Hebrew diagonally, you stay glued to every word". So most people limit their Hebrew reading to newspapers and rudimentary reading, including whatever they need for their profession. The elderly retired people tend to read simpler material. When it comes to relaxation, most people prefer to read English, where they have no difficulty with the letters, and where they can follow contemporary literature. The interesting thing is that the percentage of people who read German is not very great, and those who do, read mostly magazines. They have lost contact with German contemporary literature, and they feel estranged from the present day language.

By mere observation we can say that many members of our group switch easily from one language to the other, even in mid-sentence. We have summed up the different patterns of language use according to situation - in other words, who speaks to whom, when and in what language.

**Table 11: Language used in different situations**

	German	Hebrew	German and Hebrew
with spouse	59,3%	20,0%	15,3%
with friends	19,3%	23,6%	42,9%
working place	4,6%	47,7%	21,6%
with children	23,6%	42,4%	28,5%

English was not spoken among family or friends, but some 40% of our subjects remarked that they used it at the working place as a second language.

The percentage of people who spoke mostly German with their spouses is quite high, considering that not all spouses were from a German-speaking background (we estimate that at least 15% of those who came as young people were married to not German speaking partners).

Some families, where both partners came from German speaking origin, still insisted on speaking only Hebrew, or at least speaking only Hebrew in the presence of their children. They did it for ideological reasons, pro-Hebrew and anti-German feelings, or for private reasons, for instance: so that the children "should not think that we have secrets". But even these went back to speaking mostly German in older age, "after the children left the house". In the kibbutz the Hebrew speaking couples were more frequent.

It seems that the inner and intimate circle of friends consisted often of people from German speaking origin, as the percentage of people who spoke with friends 'only Hebrew' is not higher than the percentage of people who spoke it with their spouses. On the other hand the percentage of those who speak with their friends 'only German' is rather low. Most people remark that they speak with their friends either German or Hebrew, meaning they have also Hebrew speaking friends, or German and Hebrew, meaning that with intimate and old friends they often switch from one language to another.

The picture of language used at the working place is quite distinct. Most people spoke Hebrew, or Hebrew and other languages. 'Only' German at work was used specifically where it was needed, like dealing with German restitution claims. Hebrew and German were used with clients or co-workers in commerce, liberal professions etc.

The decision to speak with the children only German, only Hebrew or both languages was made for a variety of reasons.

Beside ideological reasons for speaking only Hebrew to the children, there were also educational principles. Different people believed in two opposing theories concerning language acquisition of small children a) you have to raise them in one language and teach them a second one in later years b) to teach them from the beginning more than one language. Many raised their children in both languages, sometimes deciding that each parent will speak to the child a different one. The presence of grandparents was an important factor in the knowledge of German in the second generation

The decision to speak with the children only Hebrew is understandable for people who knew very well Hebrew, but surprisingly enough we can find among these also people who do not speak it very well. Some people regretted this decision in later years. On the other hand, there

were people who knew Hebrew very well and still decided to speak with their children German, and also to teach them to read and write. The most common reasons for this decision was the wish to raise the child in a language that was intimate to the parent, and the feeling that the parents' Hebrew is not adequate enough and they didn't want to teach them 'bad Hebrew'.

How far did this generation succeed in handing down the German language to the next one? Almost all members of the second generation understand some German. But 20% neither speak, read nor write the language. On the other hand, some 23% speak, read and write German quite well. Many of these made use of this knowledge for studies or work. All the rest tend to speak more or less well but do not read, and especially do not write German.

Without having made a precise comparison, we can nevertheless say that what we have found in this study is more or less valid also for other immigration groups with 'high prestige languages' like French, English and Russian. Low prestige languages like Arabic, Polish, Romanian, etc. were much less maintained.

Very few third generation members know German, and those who do are products of a conscious effort by their grandparents, or they learned it just like any other foreign language.

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