

BOOK REVIEWS

Edit Doron, Malka Rappaport Hovav, Yael Reshef & Moshe Taube, eds. *Language Contact, Continuity and Change in the Genesis of Modern Hebrew* (Linguistics Today 256). Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2019. Pp. 390. <https://doi.org/10.1075/la.256>

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Just a few generations ago Modern Hebrew (MH) had only a handful of native speakers and now it is the everyday language of millions and a national language in Israel. Yet written attestation of Hebrew goes back more than two millennia and its use as a literary language continued in Jewish communities throughout the ages after the language had ceased to be spoken in the 3rd century CE. Hebrew is thus an excellent example to examine issues of continuity and discontinuity in language transmission.

The book's principal take-away is that language can begin its life in a state of variation. A new language is thus neither a case of strict continuity from an ancestor language nor one of abrupt discontinuity. The extent of change and conventionalisation across generations will depend on the range of variants brought together by the founders. The contributors embark on a search for an integrative framework that can be applied to different types of change: from grammaticalisation, to contact-induced interference and shift, through to creolisation and on to language revitalisation.

In order to put the historical layers that impact on MH into context it is useful to review the periodization of Hebrew, which the editors outline in their Introduction (pp.1–31): Biblical Hebrew (BH) represents the era before Babylonian exile and the initial decline of Hebrew as a vernacular in the 6th century BCE. Rabbinic Hebrew (RH) is the language of the first post-biblical legal codex of Judaism (Mishna, Talmud) up to the 5th century CE. Medieval Hebrew consists of literary works and religious commentaries as well as administrative texts produced in Jewish communities in contact with Arabic and later with European languages. It is followed by pre-modern secular (Maskilic) and religious (Hasidic) text production in Europe from the late 18th century onwards. Early Modern Hebrew (EMH) designates the period between the 1880s and 1920s when speakers of other languages (immigrants to Palestine from central and eastern Europe and the Middle East) began to use Hebrew as a vernacular and to pass it on to the first generation of native speakers.

While national ideology in Israel celebrates MH as a revival of Classical (Biblical and Rabbinic) Hebrew, which it links to the Zionist project of so-called national revival culminating in statehood, many scholars have introduced a more critical perspective. Differences even between MH and BH have led to the adoption of a distinctive term for the language, Modern Hebrew (Glinert 1989) or Israeli Hebrew (Rosén 1969). This prompted discussion of internal variation and its correlation with demographics and the impact of substrate or heritage languages (Bar-Adon 1971; Ravid 1995; Matras & Schiff 2005). The notion of revival itself has been called into question owing to the continuity of Hebrew as an unspoken language, and the argument that the founder generation was motivated to create a lingua franca that did not necessarily adhere to the Classical model (Nahir 1998; Kuzar 2001). The latter process has been compared to the formation of pidgins-creoles (Izre'el 2002), while some have gone as far as describing MH as a re-lexified version of European heritage languages, particularly Yiddish (Wexler 1990; Zuckermann 2003).

The refreshing aspect of the volume under review is that it is not entangled in an ideological agenda aimed either at de-constructing the legitimacy of the revivalist claim or at reinforcing it. Instead it is informed strictly by linguistic corpora from different periods. The emerging theme is that the development of MH is characterised by variation at different points in time, which is a product of several factors: expanding domains of language use, the impact of contact languages, the availability of various textual traditions, and prescriptive and institutional interventions. This makes change and development dynamic and non-linear, as users of MH adopt forms from different sources and periods.

The volume features two batches of chapters, the first devoted to particular structural phenomena in MH and the second addressing theoretical issues based on other settings. Several contributions deal with the fate of EMH variants. Einat Gonen (pp.201–220) analyses a rare corpus of recordings with first-generation native speakers born between 1885–1925. She shows how EMH displayed greater instability of forms, including many that were discontinued in MH. Moshe Taube (pp.33–54) discusses the EMH existential construction accompanied by the preposition *ece* 'at', which competes with the MH existential accompanied by the preposition *le* 'to', both expressing possession, and Aynat Rubinstein (pp.55–93) examines the decline in the transition from EMH to MH of the modal use of existential constructions (akin to Spanish *hay que* 'it is necessary to'). Both suggest that some EMH constructions were influenced by heritage languages but did not continue into MH, failing to establish themselves more widely as the community of native speakers expanded.

Another group of chapters traces MH structures to different periods in Hebrew. Chanan Ariel (pp.117–142) discusses the generalisation of the future

tense as a (positive) imperative in the informal register of MH, showing that the development has its roots in RH though it is also driven by analogies to the (BH) negative imperative and possibly also by distribution similarities with Yiddish and varieties of Judeo-Arabic. Yael Reshef (pp. 179–199) lists features of colloquial MH that emerged in the pre-modern period of Hebrew writing from the late 18th century onwards. Edit Doron (pp. 221–256) shows how MH inherits structural pairs from BH and RH, the former being unmarked in MH and the latter marked. With respect to the relevant constructions (lexical items, conjunctions, word order variants, gerunds and infinitives) MH is thus closer to BH than to RH. From a diachronic perspective one might say that BH forms are reinstated in MH. This can be attributed to the fact that various layers in Hebrew did not succeed one another but remained available to users. The prominence of BH is a product of both conscious and unconscious choices made by individuals in leadership positions during the so-called revival or EMH period (in effect prescriptivism and language planning).

Two further chapters interpret changes in MH as influenced by contact. Avigail Tsirkin-Sadan (pp. 95–116) traces the grammaticalisation of concessive *adayin* ‘still’, arguing that its emergence in the late 1960s–1970s coincided with the growing impact of English. Malka Rapaport Hovav (143–178) contrasts BH, where manner and change in directional expressions such as ‘fly upward’ is encoded in the verb, with MH, where they are encoded in the satellite, and hypothesises that the change came about through the influence of European languages on the language of 19th-century Hebrew writers.

The second batch of contributions is opened by Brian Joseph (257–285) who makes the general point that contact-related change need not be considered as discontinuity in language development. The example of Judezmo features a language that is spoken in a different place by a different population (and written in a different script) but still continues major features of Iberian Spanish. That of diglossia in Greek demonstrates re-appropriation of earlier language features into Katharevousa for symbolic value, echoing a point made by Edit Doron with regard to MH.

Three of the chapters deal with converging idiolects. Drawing on examples from Saramaccan, Enoch O. Aboh (pp. 287–320) presents a view of Creole as a setting that allows users from a variety of backgrounds to appropriate vernacular features deriving from a variety of sources, giving rise to the cumulative effect of converging idiolects. Combining different sources of input in first language learning is not unique to creoles, however, and Aboh’s principal sound bite might be taken as suggesting that ‘everyone speaks a creolised language’. Discussing Light Walpiri, Carmel O’Shannessy (pp. 321–335) reviews the factors that allow children to accelerate language change or develop a ‘new way of speaking’. These

include variation in their home varieties, multiplex social networks and a sense of boundedness and motivation to share interactional styles that may lead to accommodation and regularisation. Irit Meir and Wendy Sandler (pp.337–363) compare variation and conventionalisation in Israeli Sign Language and in Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, the latter used by around 150 deaf people and several thousand hearing people in a Bedouin tribe in the Negev desert. Both languages are less than a century old and began in a state of variation, as Jewish immigrants brought elements of different European sign languages, while Al-Sayyid individuals introduced improvised signs in makeshift communication. ISL experienced greater conventionalisation through institutional support (dictionary, training of interpreters and educational facilities), which has been absent for ASBSL.

Asya Pereltsvaig (pp.365–386) concludes the book with a proposal that the prevalence of V2 order in Yiddish subordinated clauses (contrasting with V-final in German) may have been introduced by female converts speaking Slavic languages who married into Ashkenazic Jewish communities. The idea is driven by demographic models that seem to suggest that growth in the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic population cannot be explained without considering large-scale conversion specifically of females, who will have taken on their husbands' language but transferred constructions from their own language to their children.

The collection avoids explicit division between 'theory' and 'data' chapters or a uniform framework for analysis. The organisation in two batches of contributions is instead subtle and readers are invited to absorb the various arguments and extract an overall coherent message at their leisure. The one that resonates with me most is that a new language need not be regarded as either re-appropriation ('revival') of ancient structures, contact-induced re-structuring, creolisation, or an assembly of idiolects; it can combine all those factors, owing to the complexity of the founder generation and its diverse set of repertoires, ideologies, textual traditions and opportunities to interact in new domains.

There is some ambivalence nonetheless around the issue of contact, flagged in the book's title. Some of the chapters on Hebrew make explicit comparisons with potential contact languages, including translation in medieval texts. But overall there is considerable speculation when it comes to tracing the contact origin of MH constructions. This is often because evidence is hard to come by, and multiple explanations are on offer. For example, Tsirkin-Sadan's discussion of *adayin* 'still' reminds me of the grammaticalisation of the conjunction *ke'ilu* 'as if' and deixis *kaze* 'thus' as fillers (akin to English 'like'), first noted in the late 1980s. Is that just a natural development in the spoken language of what was by then the third generation of native speakers, triggered perhaps by imitation of an English style of youth speech with extensive use of fillers, or direct convergence to the emerging English filler 'like'? Another issue is the near-complete absence in

the book of any consideration of the (very tangible) impact of Judeo-Arabic and Neo-Aramaic substrates on colloquial MH (especially its Mizrahi variant), discussed at length in Matras and Schiff (2005). This bias in favour of European languages as substrate candidates (represented most blatantly in the works of Wexler 1990 and Zuckermann 2003, and to some extent already in Rosén 1969) is without a doubt related to a selective corpus examination, which favours written text, speeches, broadcasts and interviews with educated upper-middle-class individuals of Ashkenazi background or who have adopted the speech style of the Ashkenazi elite. This shows that there is still much to be done, and more diversity of corpora (and perhaps also of researchers with access to different communities) is needed in future studies. In the meantime, this volume certainly opens up a new era and a new epistemology in the study of MH, with foundational implications for the study of 'new languages' more generally.

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