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# Language in Jewish Society

Towards a  
New Understanding

**John Myhill**

## Language in Jewish Society

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# **Language in Jewish Society**

## **Towards a New Understanding**

John Myhill

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## ***Glossary***

<b>Aliyah:</b>	Wave of immigration to the homeland.
<b>Ganzfried's Kitsur:</b>	A 19th century popular guide to the observance of Jewish laws and customs.
<b>Halakha:</b>	Current interpretation of Jewish Law.
<b>Hasidic movement:</b>	This was the origin of what is popularly referred to today as Ultra-Orthodoxy. It began in the 18th century and was centered around particular charismatic rabbis: it was a rebellion against what was perceived as the excessive scholasticism of traditional Judaism and emphasized the connection of the individual with God.
<b>Haskalah:</b>	Jewish Enlightenment (18th–19th century)
<b>Lubavitchers:</b>	One of the Hasidic sects.
<b>Maskilim:</b>	These were intellectuals during the Jewish Enlightenment in the 18th and 19th centuries.
<b>Midrashim:</b>	Stories made up using Biblical characters.
<b>Mishnaic times:</b>	Approximately the 150 years after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE).
<b>Mitnagdim:</b>	Traditional Jews who rejected the Hasidic Movement.
<b>Shtetl:</b>	Traditional Eastern European Jewish village.
<b>Shulxan Arux:</b>	A 16th century popular guide to the observance of Jewish laws and customs.
<b>Targumim:</b>	Aramaic translations of sacred writings originally in Hebrew.

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<b>Sofrim:</b>	Collections of rabbinical writings from the first half of the first millennium CE.
<b>Talmud:</b>	Aramaic text of interpretations of the Bible which is used as the basis for Jewish law.
<b>Torah:</b>	Five Books of Moses.
<b>Yishuv:</b>	Jewish settlement in the homeland.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

On the road from Mt Tabor to the Sea of Galilee, about 4 km past the turnoff from highway 65, there is a sign by the road:

כפר כמא מורשת צ'רקסית

КѠАР КАМА АДЫГЭ КЪЫКІЭННІГЭР

Kfar Kama Circassian Heritage

The first time I drove past this sign, on a family outing, I remembered that I had heard that some Circassians, fleeing from their homeland in the Caucasus when the Russians conquered them in the 1860s, had settled in Israel. As a linguist and someone interested in language and cultural maintenance in general, I wanted to learn more about the situation of this language and group. Circassian is one of the three attested Northwest Caucasian languages (along with Abkhaz and the now-extinct Ubykh). The Northwest Caucasian languages are perhaps related to the 30-odd Northeast Caucasian languages (perhaps not) but not demonstrably related to any other languages in the world, and the Northern Caucasian languages, in general, are practically legendary among linguists for their staggeringly complex consonant inventories (typically between 60 and 80 different consonant phonemes), amazingly limited vowel inventories (with some languages having been analyzed as having only two distinctive vowel phonemes), and typologically unusual syntactic and morphological structure.

All are also practically in serious danger of disappearing in the next few hundred years. It would not be an exaggeration to say that these languages are a monument to what the human mouth can pronounce and their loss would represent a significant decline in the diversity of human language. Their homeland is occupied by the Russians, they have no independent country at all, they have only a limited written history, and they have a relatively small number of speakers, with the Circassians being the largest group (numbering perhaps three million but with the great majority of them scattered around the Middle East and most of their speakers in this area having switched to Turkish or Arabic as their mother tongue).

Knowing this situation, I expected a visit to Kfar Kama to be similar to visiting Native American reservations in the United States. Like many other American linguists, I have made many such visits, hoping to find some vitality in the language and culture and being disappointed to find only some tourist businesses and perhaps a small museum showing relics of what was once there and members of the group speaking the majority language among themselves and admitting ruefully that actually neither they nor anyone else below the age of, say, 70, could speak their ancestral language at all. In fact, a drive around Kfar Kama suggested that perhaps the Circassian language and culture were not even this vital: there seemed to be no tourist attractions or even signs in Circassian, other than the one by the highway. It looked like a pleasant middle-class town, not exotic in the least, if anything more similar to a Jewish town than an Arab one, though the Circassians are Muslims.

Later on, however, when I heard a lecture on the situation of the Israeli Circassians by a researcher at the University of Haifa, Isabelle Kreindler, and talked about them with her and her coworker Marsha Bensoussan, I discovered that my evaluation had been completely mistaken (see Kreindler *et al.* 1995). In fact, the Israeli Circassians in both Kfar Kama and another village, Reikhania, maintain Circassian as their native language essentially categorically, even among the youngest children. This is the case in spite of the fact that they number only about 3,000, they are educated in Hebrew<sup>1</sup>, and Circassian communities elsewhere in the Middle East, though far larger than that in Israel, have already switched to another native language (Turkish or Arabic) or are in the midst of an apparently irreversible development in this direction.<sup>2</sup> Kreindler *et al.*, reported cases of Circassians from Turkey visiting Israel and literally crying with happiness on seeing and hearing even children speaking Circassian: they had assumed that Circassian would inevitably die as a living language in the diaspora, while the fate of the minority of Circassians who live in their homeland is unclear.

The lack of tourist attractions in Kfar Kama dedicated to Circassian ethnicity turned out to reflect not the complete lack of vitality of the community as a distinctively Circassian entity but exactly the reverse: such attractions only start to appear when a culture is locally dying and the thought would never occur to an Israeli Circassian that his/her culture is locally dying. The sign on the road is, in fact, no more than an announcement: we are Circassians (not, e.g., Jews, Arabs or Druze).

Credit for the remarkable maintenance of Circassian as a living language in Israel must, of course, go, first and foremost, to Israeli Circassians themselves. But the fact remains that Circassian is dying everywhere else in the Circassian diaspora, in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, the United States, etc. and it is not even doing very well in the homeland. It is clear that

there is something different about Israel in this regard. As I will demonstrate in the course of this book, what is different is the attitude of Israelis towards language and identity. Because of this attitude, there is categorical support among Israelis of all groups for the indefinite maintenance of non-Jewish minority languages such as Circassian. This, in turn, results from general attitudes which Jews characteristically have about language and identity, in a way which I will describe and discuss in detail later.

One Friday night in the early 1990s, my wife, young daughter, and I had dinner at the house of Aharon and Esther Goldstein in Ann Arbor, Michigan, two Lubavitcher Jews, along with perhaps a dozen other people who had attended the evening Shabbat service at Chabad House. The Goldsteins had been sent from New York City by the Lubavitcher group in order to provide the Jewish community of Ann Arbor, and particularly university students, with a type of Jewish environment they would otherwise be unlikely to come into contact with. Although the Lubavitchers are, in principle, dedicated to getting more Jews to become Ultra-Orthodox like themselves or, at least, more religiously observant, in practice the Goldsteins appeared to be having almost no success at all in this area, if this was indeed what they were trying to do. Aside from special occasions such as Passover, where many American Jews simply want to go to whatever kind of Jewish activity is locally available, and perhaps 10 local observant Jews who came on a semi-regular basis (who were mostly not Ultra-Orthodox), the only participants at Chabad House services were local people like us who came once every few months basically out of curiosity and for a change from the normal routine.

When we arrived at the Goldsteins' house, we met their seven children (aged at the time between four and fifteen, if I remember correctly) and were surprised to hear that the younger ones (below seven or so) barely spoke English and that with a strong non-native accent. We quickly realized that they were speaking Yiddish to each other and that the parents also spoke Yiddish to them. The children above the age of eleven or so, however, were speaking mostly English among themselves and the parents spoke English to them and to each other. The children in-between seemed to mix Yiddish and English in relatively equal amounts.

Intrigued, I observed their behavior during the evening and, in the next week or two, paid a visit to Rabbi Goldstein to inquire about the linguistic situation in his family. He informed me matter of factly that their younger children only speak Yiddish, because he and his wife made a conscious effort to 'give them something a little different' by speaking only Yiddish to them. When I questioned him about why the older children spoke English, he thought for a few seconds and then said that when they got to be 7 or 8,

they would begin to speak English to them, since they would need it. When I asked what would happen to their Yiddish in the future, he said that in the private schools to which all Ultra-Orthodox children go, they would continue to use Yiddish with their teachers (though less and less with their age peers) and when they got married and had their own children (which would presumably be not too long), they would speak only Yiddish to them. When I asked if he was confident that this would happen, he replied, why not? That was the way it always worked in his community. He did not seem to be tremendously concerned with whether Yiddish would be maintained in the family in this way, though it was not clear if this was out of confidence that it would or a feeling that it was not very important.

All seven Goldstein children were born in Ann Arbor, in a community with essentially no Yiddish speakers at all other than their parents. From the age of 6, they attended an Ultra-Orthodox school near Detroit, about 45 minutes away by bus. Having in the last 10 years learned much more about the language situation of Ultra-Orthodox American Jews (see, e.g., Fishman, 1991; Isaacs, 1999), I am quite certain that they are continuing to use Yiddish more or less as their father had suggested would happen. In a world where so many languages are dying, it is truly remarkable that Yiddish is surviving in this way, without official status in any country, with its speakers geographically surrounded by speakers of other languages. The situation of the Goldsteins is particularly dramatic, because of their isolation from other Yiddish speakers but it is only an extreme version of what is going on in most Ultra-Orthodox communities in the diaspora. This situation too is a result of distinctive Jewish views about language which will be discussed and explained in the course of this book.

My childhood best friend, and the best man at my wedding, Dennis King, was born in New York City in 1956 and lived there until he was 18. His parents had emigrated from Europe, his father from Vienna and his mother from Prague, and when I met Dennis when we were both 12, he told me that his family was Protestant. Both of his parents were native speakers of German, they spoke German to each other and they strongly encouraged both Dennis and his twin sister Wendy to study German (Wendy ultimately majored in German in college). They made frequent trips to 'the old country' and it was quite apparent that Mrs King, in particular, regarded European culture in general, and German culture in particular, as vastly superior to American culture and she regretted having to live in such a culturally backward place as the United States.

However, when Dennis and Wendy were 20, their parents told them that, in fact, they were Jews and had left Europe in 1938; presumably many

or all of their relatives who had remained in Europe had been killed by the Nazis – that is the Germans.

Incredibly (it seemed to me), in the case of Mrs King, at least as far as could be determined from anything she said, this did not seem to have any effect at all upon her identification of herself as a 'German' (not a 'Czech' although she came from Prague, since German and not Czech was her native language) and her idolization of German culture. In the case of Mr. King, there was less overt evidence that he considered German society to represent the best of all possible worlds but I never heard any statement suggesting that he regarded himself as a Jew rather than a German (other than the revelation to Dennis and Wendy), although this fact was responsible for his moving to America and presumably for the murder of numerous relatives of his. To all appearances, he and his wife always regarded themselves, first and foremost, as Germans because this was their native language: their religious affiliation and their ancestry could only have appeared to them to have been an accident, a very unfortunate accident.

This pattern of 'mistaken identity' and its consequences are common to many Jews; they also result from Jewish attitudes towards language and identity which are distinct from those of many non-Jewish groups.

My older daughter Shayna, who is 11 years old as I write this, was born in the United States: her mother is a Korean-Japanese and Shayna is, therefore, not Jewish. Hebrew is not her first language: she spoke English and (limited) Japanese at home until we moved to Israel when she was three years old. She is not an Israeli citizen (though naturalization would not be a problem) because she is not Jewish and I was not an Israeli citizen when she was born; I, however, am Jewish and I am an Israeli citizen. Nevertheless, it is clear that, in terms of the popular understanding of Israeli identity, Shayna is basically an Israeli (and her younger sister Merona, who was born in Israel, still more so), while I am not.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of Jewishness and citizenship status, the fact that I moved to Israel at the age of 38, while Shayna moved at the age of three, and the associated difference in our level of fluency in Hebrew (among other factors which I will discuss in the course of this book) make her more 'Israeli' than I will ever be. Thus, although Jewishness and Israeliness are linked in general thinking, they are far from isomorphic and a major reason for this is the very different roles which language plays in the construction of these identities.

From second grade, one of the main texts Shayna has used in school was the Bible, even though she attends a secular public school. The language she speaks most in her day-to-day life had no native speakers 120 years ago; the school which she attends, Nili primary school in Zichron Yaakov, was the second in the country to adopt the practice of teaching in Hebrew,



which was the tactic most directly responsible for the revival of the language as a mother tongue, which remains an event unique in human history.

These are several examples of linguistic phenomena associated with Jewish society which are likely to strike American and European non-Jews as distinctive. This book presents in detail the intellectual and historical background, the experiences which Jews have had and the ways in which they have thought against which these phenomena and others can be understood and seen as normal, as they are by people inside the Jewish community.

There has been a tendency in writing about Jews to adopt one of two approaches: to either (1) report 'just the facts' with no evaluation or comparative perspective or (2) focus upon some distinctive characteristic or experience of Jews and attribute this to some unique attribute of Jews, also with no comparative perspective (other than comparing Jews to non-Jews). The former approach is particularly characteristic of secular Jewish writing (generally directed at other Jews), including the great majority of the references to Jewish studies in this book. The latter approach is characteristic of a number of genres, for example writing about anti-Semitism as a manifestation of pure evil (e.g. Weinreich, 1946; Prager and Telushkin, 1985; Goldhagen, 1996; Stav, 1999), writing about test scores and intellectual achievement as a product of Jews' supposed intellectual superiority (e.g. Domb, 1990) or attributing unique and supernatural attributes to Jewish languages (e.g. Chomsky, 1957, Glazerson, 1991)). This type of writing is characteristic of, on the one hand, traditional Jewish religious writing or, on the other hand, writings directed towards non-Jews or towards Jews who live in a more mixed social setting.

Writings using the first approach do not explain the general patterns in how Jews have thought about language because they assume that the reader is fully familiar with these patterns. Writings using the second approach do not explain these patterns because the writer and readers are more interested in the phenomenon itself and the assignment of attributes to Jews than in understanding why Jews, as opposed to other people, should have such attributes (or, for that matter, the extent to which Jews are really 'unique' in this way).

The present book will take a different approach to this problem, on the one hand, it will be similar to that of Patai (1971, 1977) in that I will be comparing Jewish societies in different times and places in order to look for general patterns; and, on the other hand, it will be similar to that of Nisan (1991) and Kotkin (1992) in that I will be comparing Jewish and non-Jewish societies from a typological perspective.<sup>4</sup> Rather than exclusively writing from the viewpoint of an 'insider' or the viewpoint of an 'outsider', I will attempt to move between these different perspectives. In order to do this, it

will be necessary to take several steps back from making the superficial comments which the average person is likely to make when encountering manifestations of an unfamiliar way of thinking, in order to see the assumptions which lie behind these manifestations, assumptions which are typically unstated, even in academic writings.

Although my focus will be on language, I have found, in 20 years of teaching sociolinguistics to mixed populations of American Jews and non-Jews at various universities in the United States and mixed populations of Jews and Arabs at the University of Haifa, that the distinctive ways in which Jews have thought about language are inextricably tied to the distinctive ways in which Jews have thought about other topics, such as religion, ethnicity and citizenship; and that all of these need to be considered together. I will, therefore, begin my discussion in the next section with what will probably seem like a fairly long digression about matters whose connection with language may not be immediately apparent. I ask the reader to trust that the relevance of this discussion to language will become apparent in the course of this book.

A major goal of this study will be to identify and systematically summarize general trends in the ways in which Jews have thought about social aspects of language. This brings up the issue of what it is that I mean by 'the ways in which Jews have thought'. It is of course the case that Jews are and have always been a diverse lot in many respects. Nevertheless, particularly in pre-modern times, it is possible to identify readily a number of features which can be said to represent general patterns in how Jews have thought about the relationship between language, identity and society, for example, the idea that Hebrew is the sacred language of the Jews and that it is more strongly associated with Jewish identity than any other languages which Jews happen to be speaking at any given point in time, or the idea that religious affiliation and ancestry are the definitive elements of Jewish identity. I take such traditional views as the starting point for my discussion and I will assume that the ways in which Jews think in modern times as well, to the extent that they are distinctively Jewish, are derived in one way or another from these traditional views.

Analysis of distinctive patterns in the ways in which Jews address issues related to language in modern times is rendered problematic by the fact that Jews have by no means agreed upon how to apply these traditional views to the modern world. A variety of positions associated with Jews in modern times can be and have been taken as the logical modern interpretation of these traditional views and it would be unrealistic to claim that only one of these positions represents an authentic continuity with the manner in which Jews have thought about the relationship between language and society in the past. In cases in which different groups of

Jews have reacted to developments in modern times in different ways, I will make every reasonable effort to understand each of these different reactions as representing a continuity of traditional Jewish thought of one sort or another and state my historical generalizations about the nature of Jewish thinking appropriately. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that, in some cases, people who are Jews have simply adopted thinking which does not represent a continuation of any historical Jewish pattern at all.<sup>5</sup>

This brings up the related issue of the influence of non-Jewish ideas. While not denying that there are distinctive modes in which Jews have thought about issues related to language and society, it is also clear that Jews are commonly affected by ideas originating among Gentiles, in some cases adopting ideas from Gentiles wholesale while in others adopting a Gentile form to one or another traditional Jewish way of thinking. This can happen either because, not infrequently, Jews have come to the conclusion that certain ideas produced by certain Gentile groups are worthy of imitation or adoption or because Jews have known that they will have to deal with these ideas in one way or another, like it or not. My approach, in this respect, is similar to that of Patai (1971, 1977). In many cases, the influence of Gentile ideas is not immediately apparent because the external form is quite different; conversely, in other cases, Jews may seem to borrow a Gentile idea directly but, by adapting it to Jewish society, ultimately give it an entirely different function. As Weinreich (1981: 110) puts it, 'more often than not, it appears, the distance between Jewish and non-Jewish patterns is created not by a difference in the ingredients proper but rather by the way they are interpreted as elements of a given system'.

If we want to account for both modern and pre-modern data, then, it is necessary to develop an understanding of general patterns in how Jews have thought about the relationship between language and society which is sensitive to the effect of outside influences. However, it is also necessary to recognize that some modes of thought which might superficially appear to be foreign have actually been integrated into Jewish life in a manner which reflects historical continuity of one sort or another. Many cases of this type will be noted in the course of my discussion and I will just mention a few of these here for the sake of exemplification.

For example, many Eastern European Jews in modern times, particularly between 1880 and 1920, were caught up in the general (Gentile) enthusiasm of the time for developing languages with both colloquial and formal written registers as markers of group identity. In this context, some Jews took it upon themselves to develop Yiddish, which had previously been basically a spoken language, as a written language as well, while other

Jews took it upon themselves to develop Hebrew which had, for some time, been only a written language, as a colloquial language as well.

Of those Jews who developed Yiddish, some of these simply adopted non-Jewish ideas without any attempt to integrate them into traditional Jewish thinking. Thus for example, as we will see in Chapter 3, the most extreme exponents of Yiddishism, who contended that the Jewish identity should literally be defined in terms of speaking Yiddish, such as Matisyohu Mieses and Chaim Zhitlovsky, must be said to have borrowed Gentile ideas directly, since defining identity in terms of spoken language was common for non-Jews at the time but had no precedent in Jewish history. In contrast, there were other supporters of Yiddish, such as Y.L. Peretz, who did much to develop the language not because it served as the main marker of Jewish identity but rather because it was an invaluable tool for educating the Jewish masses and these have clear antecedents in traditional Jewish thought such as support for Aramaic in Talmudic times.

Nevertheless, even when Yiddish was developed as a literary language in the second half of the 19th century, most Jews did not accept it immediately as a 'real language' distinct from German (see Chapter 3). This only happened later, particularly after the Second World War, when Yiddish began to die as a spoken language (at least in the secular community) and this is in line with the traditional Jewish view, which I will discuss at some length, that a 'real' language is a dead or dying language, particularly if it has been sanctified by some tragic event (and the Holocaust certainly fits the bill for Yiddish), as happened to Hebrew with the destruction of Jewish sovereignty, Aramaic with the demise of Babylonian Jewry, and Ladino with the Expulsion from Spain.

Those Jews who were more concerned with developing Hebrew in modern times similarly put Hebrew to sociolinguistic usages which were consistent with one or another traditional manner of Jewish thinking. One possibility was reviving Hebrew as a spoken language in the ancestral homeland (see Chapter 2); this was consistent with both the situation in ancient times and also the Jewish custom of using Hebrew as a *lingua franca* in the homeland after it had died as a living language. However, since Hebrew was revived, Israeli linguists have displayed relatively little interest in studying it as a living language (compared with linguists studying, e.g., English, Spanish, etc. (see Chapter 4)). This is again consistent with the traditional Jewish idea that living languages should not be the focus of serious study.

Another issue in modern times has been the use to which Hebrew is put in the diaspora and here, too, we see a continuation of traditional Jewish patterns. It has generally been assumed that the average Jew should have some exposure to Hebrew even if s/he does not achieve any level of real

competence in the language and even if this has no practical purpose at all. In the past, this was manifested in education designed to teach basic prayers; this continues to some extent today, particularly in religious circles, but for secular Jews modern twists have been added such as university classes in Israeli Hebrew which result more in the student feeling more Jewish than in acquiring actual practical knowledge of Hebrew (see Chapter 2).

Thus, even in a modern context in which outward appearances have changed, it is possible to find continuities with more traditional ways of thinking, if the generalizations about the nature of how Jews have thought about the relationship between language and society are stated at the appropriate level of abstraction.

Although a considerable emphasis in this book will be to investigate how Jews have thought about the relationship between language and society, I will not be taking the position that there is anything unique about Jews in this regard (except in the trivial sense that all groups are unique in one way or another). On the contrary, I will make every effort to identify cases where other peoples show thinking which is similar to that of Jews and to establish a typology within which this is just a way in which people can think about the relationship between language, identity and society.

I will argue, for example, that with regard to attitudes about language and identity (in the sense of peoplehood), traditional Jewish thought is generally quite similar to that of certain other groups, particularly Middle Eastern groups such as the Copts, Maronites, and Samaritans (though not Arabs)<sup>6</sup> but also non-Middle Eastern groups such as the Sikhs and Gypsies – Jews have traditionally believed that the language they use most for regular secular purposes is not a central component of their individual identity. With regard to linguistic prescriptivism, however, Jews have chosen an approach which is quite similar to that of the Arabs, Sinhalese and Icelandic people but quite different from that of speakers of, e.g., English, French or Spanish, in that they have regarded linguistic ‘correctness’ as unrelated to social status or prestige.

The framework which I will adopt will, in this sense, be similar to that of Smith (1991), Kotkin (1992) and Cohen (1997), who have established typologies for ethnic groups which challenge the European/American conceptualization of ‘normal’ peoplehood which has been developed by European/American researchers. Though these studies deal with different areas than those with which I will be concerned with here (Smith deals with national identity in general, Kotkin focuses on business and Cohen is concerned with diasporas), they are written in the same spirit as the present study in that they move towards a more inclusive and realistic understanding of the concept of peoplehood.

It is my hope that this book will be of interest and use to people interested

in understanding particular historical developments and phenomena related to language involving the Jewish people, such as those I have mentioned here, as well as the approaches which Jews have taken to the relationship between language and society. For non-Jews (and perhaps some Jews removed from mainstream Jewish society), it may provide an understanding of the various ways in which Jews think and have thought in the past, because there is, in my experience, only the vaguest knowledge in this regard on the part of most non-Jews; for Jews who are more fully integrated into Jewish communities, it may help explain why non-Jews have acted in the way they have, because although Jews are often aware at some abstract level that non-Jews with whom they come into contact tend to think about, e.g., the relationship between language and identity, in a fundamentally different way, for all but the clearest cases they have generally not thought systematically about the implications of this difference for inter-group interaction.

Aside from these concerns which are specific to Jews, however, the current book may provide food for thought for those who are concerned with language ecology. Linguists, and those concerned with the preservation of cultural diversity in general, are alarmed at the prospect of mass extinction of the great majority of the world's languages (Krauss, 1992). The great majority of the world's languages are literally in danger of disappearing within the next few hundred years. Many have disappeared already, for many others their decline seems to be irreversible and, generally speaking, the social pressures leading to the disappearance of any and all minority languages in a given country seem to be so powerful that linguists and language advocates alike often have no idea of how to stem them.

However, as we have already seen, there appears to be something in Jewish thought and behavior which is effective in resisting this trend. The survival of Israeli Circassian and diaspora Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish in what might seem to be hopeless circumstances and the revival of Hebrew as an everyday language after it had not served this function for close to two millennia give some reason for hope that, in many cases, the trend towards language disappearance can be halted or reversed. In order to learn from such cases, however, it is necessary to look beyond the specific circumstances, to reject any thought that these developments had anything to do with any specific or unique characteristics of the Jewish people or the languages involved, to discover the abstract properties, values and ideas which have made these developments possible and to attempt to determine how these might be productively applied to other cases which differ in specific details.

Similarly, linguistic prescriptivism is approaching a state of crisis. Traditional ideologies about the inherent superiority of the prescriptively 'correct' version of languages such as English have been discredited intel-

lectually in recent years (see, e.g., Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 1975; Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Joseph, 1987; Crowley, 1991; Mugglestone, 1995, *inter alia*) but it is unclear what to put in their place. While it is true that the great majority of people are still attached to prescriptivism in one way or another, it has lost its intellectual justification and support and it is only being held up by an institutional momentum (similar to the way in which traditional monarchies were maintained by an institutional momentum in much of Europe long after they had been ideologically discredited in the Enlightenment).

To inform students and readers that Standard English is an oppressive and artificial construct which unfairly helps the elite and punishes the lower classes by demanding that they change their speech and adopt the speech of the elite or suffer serious economic consequences – as is standard fare in sociolinguistic writings about languages such as English today – may be entirely accurate in a technical sense but it does nothing to suggest a productive response to the problem. It merely presents the non-elite with the straightforward and terrible choice of sacrificing their chances for economic prosperity or of selling out.

The reason for this bleak picture is that ‘linguistic correctness’ has been constructed in western societies as inherently and necessarily based upon the language of the elite, so that the only possible way to avoid favoring the elite is to do away with the concept of ‘linguistic correctness’ altogether. Such a plan can only be described as unrealistically utopian and even those most fervently opposed to traditional prescriptivism have never outlined in any detail how the actual elimination of prescriptivism might conceivably be implemented. As we will see in Chapter 4, however, the situation of Israeli Hebrew (and Arabic, Sinhala and Icelandic) offers an alternative conceptualization of ‘correctness’, one which is not based upon élitism and a study of this conceptualization may suggest how linguists working on languages such as English might reform the conception of linguistic prescriptivism in their own societies rather than attempting to eliminate it altogether.

Finally, by presenting the ways in which Jews have thought about the relationship between language and society in a comprehensive comparative framework for the purposes of understanding it as being ‘normal’ within certain parameters, I will, in effect, also be presenting the modes of thinking of groups which I will compare with Jews in one way or another as being ‘normal’. This is, I believe, important, because these other groups, particularly Middle Eastern minorities such as the Maronites and Copts, have suffered even more than Jews have from ‘intellectual colonization’, that is being understood from the point of view of purely western thinking which is entirely inappropriate to their situation and history. This is not to say that the various groups I will discuss are identical to Jews or to each other according to all the relevant parameters, but at least they can be seen



as being representative of the same general type and it is important that this be seen as a type rather than as something deviant, unique or incomprehensible.

In the following section, I turn to consideration of the role of language in Jewish identity, an understanding of which is central to the discussion of Jewish sociolinguistic behavior which is the focus of this book.

## Language and Jewish Identity

Let us begin with a general framework of the potential variables according to which members of a group can define who belongs to the group.<sup>7</sup> We can distinguish four basic variables:

- (1) personal ancestry/race,
- (2) religious affiliation/beliefs/tradition/lifestyle,
- (3) native/everyday language and
- (4) citizenship/livingplace.

As we will see in the course of the following discussion, each of these variables can also be defined in various ways (e.g. variable (1) can refer to physical appearance (including, e.g., skin color), identity of both parents, identity of father, identity of mother, identity of any one of four grandparents, etc.)) but at least we can distinguish these four general variables.

For Jews, it is variables (1) and (2) which are definitive of identity as a Jew (we will later see that 'language' and 'land' are also relevant but not as central variables and not as formulated in (3) and (4)). One is a Jew if and only if (a) one's mother is a Jew<sup>8</sup> or (b) one has gone through a formal conversion ceremony. It makes no difference at all what one's native or everyday language is, and it makes no difference at all what one's citizenship is or where one lives (see, e.g., Baron, 1964). For the purposes of the present book, it is of particular significance that spoken language is not central to Jewish identity, in spite of the fact that it is believed by many if not most Europeans and Americans that spoken language is the main criterion for membership in a group (see, e.g., Edwards, 1985, 1994a).

This point about Jews is made by the American writers Prager and Telushkin and the Israeli author A.B. Yehoshua:

Between 70 and 1948, Israel the nation existed while Israel the state did not exist. To non-Jews and even to many Jews, the nationhood of the Jews is usually the most perplexing aspect of Judaism. This confusion about Jewish nationhood is understandable. For one thing, one normally associates a national group with a land and a state, and for nearly two thousand years the Jews have lived without their state and almost all Jews lived in exile from their land. A second source of



confusion is that the Jews constitute the only group in the modern world that is both a religion and a nation. For both these reasons they are unique, a uniqueness which of itself often renders the Jews suspect in the eyes of others.' (Prager & Telushkin, 1985: 35)

The Jewish people (*'am*) is an androgynous creature. This is a people which contains an element of peoplehood and an element of religion. But it is actually not a people and not a religion but something problematic in between. Let us again ask the old question: What happened there at the unknown Mt Sinai? Was there a melting or a welding between the Israelite religion and the Israelite nationality (*le'um*)? The indications that we get from the definition of the foundation of the people are contradictory. The definition of the Jew, which is the most ancient, says in fact that there was a welding and not a melting. If a Jew is defined as the son of a Jewish mother and not as someone who believes in the Torah of Moses, then the basis of the definition is national. On the other hand, there is an opposing indication which hints that nevertheless there was a melting of religion and nationality and not only a welding. If a Jew changes his religion, he removes himself from the people. And if a non-Jew wants to join the [Jewish] people, he has to do this through a religious conversion. This means that the religion is the necessary atom in the nucleus of identity. (Yehoshua, 1999: 13–4; my translation)

These quotes and the discussion thus far give a good idea of both the basic facts and the basic problems of contemporary thinking about Jewish identity (particularly the balance between religious and ancestral identity) and how these relate to non-Jewish identity. Before proceeding to more detailed discussion, however, it is necessary here to make a number of preliminary comments.

First, it is becoming quite popular these days to emphasize that individuals have multiple identities, meaning that they satisfy criteria for membership in more than one group (see, e.g., Lewis, 1998). I, for example, have an identity as a Jew (by virtue of ancestry and religious affiliation), an American (by virtue of citizenship and, secondarily, because English is my native language) and an Israeli (by virtue of living-place and my other citizenship, as well as my religious affiliation as a Jew). Nevertheless, individual people will typically emphasize some of their multiple identities more than others, being affected in this by both individual preferences and societal factors; for example, my Israeli identity is formal rather than substantive, being mitigated by the fact that I only moved to Israel at the age of 38 and, consequently, my Hebrew is far from native, so that I would

certainly not primarily identify myself, or be identified by others, as an Israeli. To say that an individual person is a member of a given group does not imply that s/he is not a member of any other group, nor does it suggest to which of these groups s/he is seen as primarily belonging.

Second, these quotes are embedded in a European/American frame of reference, according to which the 'normal' conception of identity has religion and ancestry as independent components. In this frame of reference, those who understand the Jewish conception of identity perceive it as 'abnormal', 'androgynous', etc. This is not because the European/American conception of identity is universal or even predominant but rather because even intellectual Europeans and Americans (and Jews!) typically know extremely little about groups in other parts of the world. In fact, as I will argue in the next section, with respect to their general conception of identity, Jews are generally like almost all other peoples whose origins are in the Middle East (e.g. Maronites, Copts,<sup>9</sup> Jacobites, Armenians, Turks, Samaritans, Chaldeans, and Modern Assyrians – though not Arabs) and some non-Middle Eastern groups as well (e.g. Sikhs and Gypsies) but writers such as Prager and Telushkin (and even Israeli Jews such as Yehoshua) simply do not know much about such groups and, therefore, make naïve statements about Jewish 'uniqueness'.<sup>10</sup>

The average Jew does not think of 'being a Jew' as involving a 'fusion' of the two disparate conceptions of ancestry and religious affiliation any more than the average American thinks of 'being an American' as involving a 'fusion' of, e.g., speaking English and living in the United States. It is only when a comparative perspective is called for, as in a book like the present work, when it is necessary to understand and explain the nature of Jewish identity in non-Jewish terms, that this is perceived as involving a 'fusion'.

Third, it must be understood that criterion (2) (religious affiliation/beliefs/tradition/lifestyle) can refer to a variety of related but not identical phenomena. For Jews, it refers to religious affiliation in particular. Whereas some religious groups demand that their followers, in principle at least, hold certain beliefs (e.g. believing that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, believing that Mohammad is the final prophet, etc.), being a Jew requires no beliefs at all; for example, a Jew who does not believe in God is still equally a Jew – except that it excludes those beliefs which would make one a Christian or a Muslim.

Fourth, I will argue that the present conception of Jewish identity did not come into existence at Mt Sinai or at any similarly vague point in the mythological past. Rather, it developed in the several hundred years between the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE and the institutionalization of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman

Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries. In fact, it was during this same general time period, and for more or less the same reasons, that the other dissident Middle Eastern groups on the scene at the time (e.g. the Copts, Jacobites, Armenians, and Samaritans) developed their present-day conceptualization of identity, which is similarly a 'fusion' of peoplehood and religion.

Fifth, because of differences in definitions of conceptions of identity, terms such as English *people*, *ethnicity* and Hebrew *'am* and *le'um* are inherently problematic: they mean different things to different people but people almost never realize that this is the case and so misunderstandings are common. It is necessary then to specify that 'nation' as used by Prager and Telushkin (and in Jewish contexts in general) refers specifically to personal ancestry, not everyday language.

This is part of a more general problem. The European conceptualization of 'nation' which began to develop in the second half of the 18th century was, naturally enough, based upon European models, focusing particularly upon everyday language and/or citizenship/living-place (typically tied in some vague fashion to ancestry). It is for this reason that, for example, Stalin claimed that the Jews are not a nation, because they do not have a territory or a common language (Harshav, 1993: 82: in fact, in the sacred realm, Jews have both but they do not necessarily live in the territory and they do not necessarily speak the language). Christian European groups generally only began to conceive of themselves as and coalesce into what Anderson (1983) has referred to as 'imagined communities'—nations—in relatively recent times and they naturally, therefore, conceive of 'nationhood' as being associated with various properties which have only become relevant in modern times, these having to do with the rise of the merchant class, citizenship, rebellion against the monarchy and ecclesiastical hierarchies, etc.

Given this understanding, how could any European 'nation' be traced back more than a few hundred years? In such circumstances, any connection between a present-day European nation and a group existing, say, a thousand years ago could only be vague. Which group existing in 1000 CE corresponded to present-day 'Germans'? The people living in the area of present-day Germany? The people speaking a language with some resemblance to present-day German? Conquests, language shift, population movements and other historical developments ensure that no such clear correspondence can be identified.

For Jews, however, the situation is quite different. For more than 1500 years (some would argue even longer), there has always been a group of people in Europe identified as 'Jews' and clearly marked off from other Europeans in terms of law, marriage, customs, religious practices, etc. This

is not the case for, e.g., 'Frenchmen', 'Germans', 'Italians', etc. Given the overwhelming restrictions on conversions to Judaism in traditional Christian Europe, essentially the only way that one could be a Jew was by having a Jewish mother, ensuring the ancestral continuity of the group known as Jews. Clear evidence of this is the fact that the great majority of Jewish communities share more genetic similarities with each other than they do with neighboring non-Jewish communities (as demonstrated by research such as that of Livshits *et al.* (1991)), so that, for example, German Jews are genetically much more similar to Iranian Jews than they are to German non-Jews, while Moroccan Jews are much more similar to Georgian Jews than they are to Moroccan non-Jews.<sup>11</sup>

Because Europeans and Americans tend to think of 'nationhood' as something which sprang out of thin air in modern times, because it is difficult for them to conceptualize nationhood independent of the specific characteristically modern developments associated with their own group's nationalistic movements, even explaining Jewish continuity since pre-modern times to a Euro-American audience requires the considerable work of deconstructing the popular notion of 'nation' in these societies and showing its Eurocentric bias. I would refer interested readers particularly to Smith (1991) as a typologically extensive study of this type.

This is not to deny, however, that modernization has produced a crisis in Jewish identity which has led many Jews to re-evaluate the significance of the traditional criteria for Jewish identity. As previously described, a central theme of the present book will be how Jews have confronted the crisis of modernization in terms of language policy and behavior. In so doing, they have been generally guided by the traditional Jewish understanding of identity but this has been both modified by changing times and adapted due to changing needs and by no means has there been uniform agreement of how to do this. I will return to this matter in more depth later in this chapter.

Jews, then, have defined Jewish identity primarily in terms of ancestry and religious affiliation. Other groups define their identity differently. For Arabs, at least according to a traditional Pan-Arab Nationalist position, it is criterion (3) (native/everyday language), being a native speaker of Arabic or using Arabic as one's everyday language, which defines one as an 'Arab', regardless of ancestry, religious affiliation or citizenship.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, for Americans, it is criterion (4), United States citizenship, which basically defines one as an 'American', regardless of ancestry, religious affiliation or native/everyday language. There are also groups which emphasize criterion (1) (personal ancestry/race) but not (2) (religious affiliation/beliefs/tradition/lifestyle (e.g. American Blacks) or criterion (2) but not (1) (this is clearest for 'new religions' such as Scientology).

In the following discussion, I will present and elaborate a typology of definitions of identity within which the Jewish conception can be situated, but for now we can simply note that the choice Jews have made to define Jewish identity in terms of criteria (1) and (2) to the exclusion of (or at least the suppression of) (3) and (4) is just one possible choice a group can make.

In a discussion of Jewish sociolinguistics, what is most important here is variable (3) – being a ‘Jew’ does not necessarily imply anything at all about one’s native/everyday language. By far the most widely spoken languages among Jews today are Hebrew and English but there are also a fairly large number of Jewish speakers of Russian, French, Yiddish, Spanish and Hungarian and a reasonable number of speakers of other languages. In addition, and more significantly, although some languages are clearly perceived as ‘Jewish languages’ (in particular Hebrew and Yiddish), there is no general idea that one is ‘more of a Jew’, ‘a better Jew’ or even ‘a prototypical Jew’ if one speaks a ‘Jewish language’ as opposed to a non-Jewish language.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss, in some detail, various aspects of the Jewish conception of identity. As I have previously noted, it is only possible to understand the role of language in Jewish identity in the context of a discussion of Jewish identity in general, so I will first discuss non-linguistic factors before turning to language.

### **Non-linguistic aspects of Jewish identity: Ancestry and religious identity<sup>13</sup>**

The distinction between personal ancestry and religion – whether a group is a ‘people’ or a ‘religion’ – is a very complex one and it is rendered more complex and more difficult to discuss in some circles because of a mistaken belief that the distinction between these variables is clear-cut. The reason for this belief is that, for Europeans and Americans in general, these have been assumed to be largely or entirely independent parameters of identity, e.g. if a person is a Dutch Catholic, this means that his/her ethnicity is Dutch and his/her religion is Catholic.

This view, however, is inconsistent with the traditional conceptualization of identity among Jews (and some other groups, particularly but not exclusively in the Middle East), according to which ethnic/ancestral affiliation and religious affiliation are conceptualized as inseparable: a certain ancestral identity assumes a certain religious affiliation and *vice versa* – a person who is ethnically Jewish is necessarily affiliated with the Jewish religion and *vice versa*. Going along with this view of the inseparability of ancestral and religious affiliation, we find a number of other aspects of the conceptualization of ancestral identity and religious identity which might

seem unfamiliar or counterintuitive to a typical, e.g., American or Frenchman, and I will discuss these here.

Before proceeding, however, I should note the importance of this issue to the topic of language. Jews have been able to retain a relatively stable group identity through 2500 years of geographical, political and linguistic division particularly because their conception of identity is reinforced through ties of both ancestry and religious affiliation.

Ancestral ties without religious ties can in certain circumstances, be frail; an ancestral group X in which some of its members adopt the religious practices of external group Y while others adopt the religious practices of external group Z is likely to be split when there is a larger struggle between groups Y and Z. An ancestrally defined minority group which is not religiously distinctive is, other things being equal, more vulnerable to complete assimilation and disappearance than is a similar group which is religiously distinctive. Consider, for example, the case of indigenous minority peoples who have lost their distinctive languages and adopted the mainstream religion, retaining only an ancestral conception of group identity, e.g. many Native American groups, as opposed to groups which similarly have no distinctive spoken language but which have maintained a distinctive religious affiliation, e.g. American Jews.

Conversely, religious ties without ancestral ties can also be frail in certain circumstances. A religious group composed of a variety of different ancestral groups may find that their histories are sufficiently different or even antagonistic that they can no longer identify with each other (as in the case of, e.g., Pakistan compared with Bangladesh).

These splits may be rare but over the course of hundreds or thousands of years, they will eventually happen. A group tied together in both ways, however, will be much less vulnerable to total assimilation.

The distinctive sociolinguistic features of Jewish societies are directly tied to the multiplexity and associated strength and durability of Jewish distinctiveness. Jews were able to revive Hebrew as a living language after 2000 years only because they literally perceived themselves as the same (ancestrally related) people as the Jews who spoke Hebrew in Biblical times. Ultra-Orthodox Jews are able to maintain Yiddish as their everyday language in what appear to be extremely adverse circumstances because they see themselves as radically and discretely different from the people around them. Non-Jewish minority languages in Israel are categorically maintained because the Jewish majority sees the distinction in 'peoplehood' between themselves and non-Jewish Israelis to be so strong as to override their common citizenship, at least in terms of everyday language usage. I will return to these themes at greater length later.

As previously noted, Jewish identity is primarily defined in terms of

both personal ancestry and religious affiliation. Particularly in Western European and American societies, there is unfortunately a tendency for people (even many Jews) to overlook the ancestral component of Jewish identity and focus on the religious component. It must be emphasized from the beginning, therefore, that the overwhelming majority of Jews identify themselves as Jews for ancestral reasons, specifically because their mothers are Jews, rather than because of their religious beliefs, and that, furthermore, as I have noted earlier, there is clear genetic evidence that ancestry has been central to Jewish identity for some time (e.g. Bonn -Tamir *et al.*, 1979; Bonn -Tamir, 1985; Livshits *et al.*, 1991).

The ancestral and, hence, involuntary nature of Jewishness as opposed to Christianness is manifested in a variety of ways. In typical American usage, for example, if one is referred to as a 'Christian', this suggests that one believes in God, one has had some sort of confirmation or adult baptism ceremony in which one formally accepts Jesus Christ as one's personal savior, etc. But there is no parallel to this in Jewish identity; to say that someone is 'Jewish' does not suggest that s/he believes in God, observes Jewish religious law or has been barmitzvahed.

This distinction is manifested in other ways as well. For Jewish Americans, for example, particularly the non-Orthodox who make up the overwhelming majority, continuity of the people is an issue of central concern, and more general concern is expressed that the rate of intermarriage is too high than that faith in the Jewish religion is too low. Many Jews join a synagogue when they have had children and leave the synagogue after the children have been barmitzvahed. For American Christians, however, joining a church is a statement of personal faith.

Conversion to or away from Judaism is possible and this has led many people to the incorrect belief that Jews, like Christians, are basically a religious group rather than a people. However, Jews and Christians have different attitudes towards conversion. When people at Reform synagogues today speak about an 'outreach' program, they are normally referring to reaching out to non-Jewish relatives of congregation members, particularly to non-Jews married to Jews, and a very high proportion of the converts to Judaism have been motivated by being married to a Jew and an interest in having a religiously unified family. Thus, conversion to Judaism is conceptualized as something like joining a very large extended family, the Jewish people. Conversion to Christianity, in contrast, is conceptualized as an expression of individual religious faith, and Christian outreach programs are typically directed at strangers or at least people not related to congregation members.

Another distinguishing point is that, historically, Jews have, to varying extents (depending upon time and place), believed that, although one can



convert to being a Jew, one cannot convert away from being a Jew: ancestral identity as a Jew supersedes religious identity as a Jew in this case. Part of this imbalance is due to the fact that historically many Jews have been forced to convert or die and there was a feeling that people should not be cut off from the Jewish people for choosing conversion in such a case.

My point here is not that Jews do not care about religious belief: they do but there are no positive requirements of belief necessary or even relevant to Jewish identity. To a significant extent, it is Jewish religious affiliation, which in the overwhelmingly majority of cases is determined by ancestral criteria, which determines identity as a Jew.

The fact that Jewish identity is defined ancestrally as well as in terms of religious affiliation is crucial to the present study because it is impossible to understand Jewish sociolinguistic behavior unless it is understood that Jews are an ancestrally-defined group. It will, therefore, be necessary here to explain why it is that, for many Western Europeans and Americans at least, Jews are commonly misunderstood to be a purely religious group.

As I have previously noted, since the Enlightenment, Western Europeans and Americans have viewed ancestry and religious affiliation as independent components of identity: one is born with a certain ancestry and through personal preference one chooses a certain religious affiliation. Blacks, Caucasians, Chinese, etc., are assumed to be ancestral groups; Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, etc., are assumed to be religious groups. There is, therefore, a natural tendency among Western Europeans and Americans to assume that Jews must be either an ancestral group or a religious group, and there has been a natural tendency for less traditional Jews living in contact with Western Europeans and Americans to be encouraged to adopt a similar view.

Why have Western Europeans and Americans tended to categorize Jews as a religious group rather than an ancestral group? This has been motivated by factors in both the Christian and Jewish communities. On the Christian side, as I have noted earlier, there is a recognition that conversion to and from Judaism is possible but generally not an understanding that Jews conceptualize conversion in a way different from Christians.

Aside from this, Western Europeans and Americans have, for some time, associated ancestry with race and they associate race with immediately perceivable physical differences, e.g. Black *versus* Caucasian *versus* Oriental, etc. This was presumably originally motivated by a desire to justify colonization and slavery so that, e.g., a low-born White American could keep a Black American as a slave or an English commoner could have a higher social status than a colonized Chinese in Hong Kong, a situation which could only come about in a situation in which people were categorized more according to their readily observable physical characteristics



than the status of their immediate ancestors. This view has carried over to the present: in the United States today, as noted in an editorial in *Tikkun* magazine (March–April 1999, p. 10), ‘who gets labeled ‘white’ and who gets labeled ‘person of color’ derives not from the color of one’s skin . . . but from the degree to which one has been a victim of Western colonialist oppression.’<sup>14</sup> Since Jews are generally not so clearly distinctive physically, at least in terms of external appearance, they are generally not categorized as being a separate ‘race’ and since they are not categorized as a separate ‘race’, the ancestral component of Jewish identity is not generally perceptually salient in these societies (though Nazi Germany obviously constitutes a clear exception to this general trend).

Among American and Western European Jews as well, there has also been a reluctance to acknowledge overtly the ancestral basis of Jewish identity, particularly among less traditional Jews. As noted by Goldsmith (1998: 12):

the Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment, beginning in the 18th century] . . . called into question the exclusive hegemony of Torah or traditional religious culture as the overriding preoccupation of the Jewish mind [and] caused a rift in the symbiosis of peoplehood and religion that had been the hallmark of Jewish civilization for millennia . . . In Western Europe . . . [t]he growth of Reform, Orthodoxy, and the Historical School of Judaism went hand in hand with cultural assimilation . . . It was sustained by the rise of the Science of Judaism or modern Jewish historical and literary scholarship which set out to prove to Jew and non-Jew alike that only the Jewish religious heritage separated them.

Since these same people downgraded the literal significance of the Jewish religious heritage, their understanding of the difference between Jew and Gentile became scant indeed, as would befit an ideology of cultural assimilation. However, ‘In Eastern Europe . . . it was precisely the populist and peoplehood aspects of Judaism that came to be emphasized’ (Goldsmith, 1998: 12).<sup>15</sup> This same split continues among secular Jews to the present, with American Jews for the most part having inherited the Western European perspective and Israeli Jews for the most part having inherited the Eastern European perspective (thus, many secular Israeli Jews express some discomfort with the idea that Jews are a religious group, parallel to the discomfort which some secular American Jews express with the idea that Jews are an ancestral group).

The general pattern has been, then, for many Western Europeans and Americans to tend to view Jews as a religious group rather than an ancestral group. This view is totally inconsistent with the actual facts of Jewish identity, because, as noted previously, for the overwhelming

majority of Jews their Jewishness is still determined by ancestral factors: some people are perhaps reluctant to admit this but this is undeniably the situation.

It cannot be denied, however, that this view is, in some cases, being supported by actual changes in behavior. Conversions to Judaism, even in the absence of family attachments (e.g. Madonna), are more common than they have been for about two millennia. Particularly among Reform Jews, who have recently accepted the idea that people can be Jewish if their father but not mother is Jewish, there is some sort of a feeling that 'choosing' to be Jewish or choosing to raise one's children as Jewish can, to a certain extent, influence one's degree of Jewishness, independent of traditional ancestral criteria. It is certainly possible that this trend will continue to grow stronger in the future. For the present, however, it represents a peripheral phenomenon which does not change the general conceptualization of Jewish identity, which, in the main, remains the traditional one.

It can be said, then, that Jewish identity continues to be defined in terms of both ancestry and religious affiliation, although this fact has been obscured in some cases to observers, even some Jews, whose worldview has been conditioned by developments in modern European and American (and, as we will see, Arab) society. I will return to the issue of the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish understandings of identity, focusing upon how and why the situation has developed the way it has in modern times, later.

### **Linguistic aspects of Jewish identity**

In this section, I turn to the role of language in Jewish identity. Jewish identity has not been traditionally related to everyday language: it has, however, been related to a sacred language and writing system. In addition, it has become common in recent years to analyze some of the linguistic forms used by Jews as constituting distinctive 'Jewish languages'.

#### *Sacred language and identity*

Although Jews have generally not accepted the idea that their identity is defined by everyday language, they have accepted the idea that their identity is associated with their sacred language, Classical Hebrew (and, to a lesser extent, Aramaic). Although it might be argued that the same might be said of traditional Catholic and Muslim identity (with respect to Latin and Classical Arabic respectively), in fact Hebrew was traditionally a far more vital part of the life of the average Jew than Latin or Classical Arabic was for the average Catholic or Muslim. Until the last few hundred years, very few Christians or Muslims could read at all and, in general, they knew extremely little of their sacred languages, but at least basic literacy in

Classical Hebrew has been widespread among Jews for 2000 years. I would not overstate this point, because certainly many Jews (particularly women) have had only a limited knowledge of Classical Hebrew and this is even more so the case in the diaspora today but, in principle, this has always been a (secondary) component of Jewish identity. I will return to this matter in more detail later.

### *The Hebrew-Aramaic alphabet*

Jews have throughout history often written with the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet (traditionally called *‘ashuri* (Assyrian) by Jews), not just Hebrew and Aramaic but other languages as well (e.g. Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, etc.) and this must be taken as a significant, though secondary, component of Jewish identity. This sort of situation is not at all uncommon, e.g. Serbo-Croatian can be written with the Latin scripts by (Catholic) Croats or with the Cyrillic script by (Orthodox) Serbs, Hindi-Urdu can be written with the Persian/Arabic script by Muslims or with the Devanagari script by Hindus, Spanish was written in the Arabic script by Spanish-speaking Muslims in Spain, etc. The script-based component of Jewish identity has been getting weaker in the last few hundred years: though the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet is still used to write languages which have been spoken continuously by a significant number of Jews for some time, Jews have not used the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet to write languages which they have only begun speaking natively in the last few hundred years. Thus, although there are many Jews today speaking, e.g., English, Russian and French, these are never written with the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet.

As much as the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet is today associated with Jews, however, it was not the earliest one which Jews used. Previously, Jews wrote with the Paleo-Hebrew script, which was derived directly from the Proto-Canaanite/Phoenician writing system (the first alphabet) and first used to write Hebrew in the 12th or 11th century BCE, beginning to diverge from these other scripts in the ninth century BCE. The neighboring Arameans also adopted the Proto-Canaanite/Phoenician script and used it to write Aramaic beginning in the 11th or 10th century BCE and their script began to develop its own distinctive features in the middle of the eighth century BCE (Naveh, 1975: 30). Though the Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic alphabets differed from each other in some respects, in particular in that a number of Aramaic letters were essentially simpler versions of Paleo-Hebrew letters, their common ancestry was clear in the forms of the letters, the functions of the letters, the number of the letters and the order of the letters (Naveh 1975: 32).

Following the Babylonian Conquest in the sixth century BCE, the Jews

began a centuries-long process of shifting to Aramaic, the regional *lingua franca*, as their everyday spoken language (Chapter 2) and the same social forces led to their beginning to adopt the Aramaic alphabet as well (the Talmud attributes this to the time of Ezra in the fifth century BCE (Naveh, 1975: 43)), at first for writing Aramaic and later for writing Hebrew as well. The earliest writing of Hebrew using the Hebrew-Aramaic script appears to date from the third century BCE (Naveh, 1975: 43), although a general paucity of Hebrew writings which can be dated between the end of the Judean monarchy and the Hasmonean Kingdom leaves details of this shift unclear (see Diringer, 1958).

Around the time that Jews began writing Hebrew in the Aramaic script, a wide variety of versions of the Aramaic script began to develop among other peoples of the area, including Nabataean (the ancestor of the Arabic script), Palmyrene, Syriac, Mandaic and others (Naveh, 1975: 36). In the course of the next few hundred years, the Jewish version of Aramaic writing distinguished itself from these other scripts by developing into the distinctive Hebrew-Aramaic script ('Square Hebrew') which we know today and Jews came to use this script more and more and the Paleo-Hebrew script less and less, until after the Bar Kochba revolt (135 CE), when the latter dropped out of used among Jews altogether (Naveh, 1975: 30) (the Samaritans have continued to use a version of the Paleo-Hebrew script and the modern State of Israel uses this script on some coins and stamps).

The distinctive changes which Jews made to the Hebrew-Aramaic alphabet after they adopted it were significantly greater than the differences between the Aramaic and Paleo-Hebrew alphabets when they borrowed the former. In fact, because at the time the Aramaic script was borrowed it was similar to the Paleo-Hebrew script for all but seven letters and for these seven letters (*he*, *zayin*, *xet*, *tet*, *yud*, *samex* and *tsadi*), the Aramaic letter was essentially a simplified version of the Hebrew letter (Naveh, 1975: 32), it might technically be more accurate to say that, rather than adopting the Aramaic script, Jews between the ninth century BCE and the second century CE developed the Proto-Canaanite/Phoenician script into the modern Jewish (Hebrew-Aramaic) script and one part of this development was the adoption of the simplified (Aramaic) form of seven letters.

#### *Everyday language, Jewish identity and 'Jewish languages'*

Since they first switched from Hebrew to Aramaic and Greek about 2000 years ago, in many places and at many times, Jews have shifted to a new everyday language, taking the language of their Gentile neighbors, sometimes modifying it considerably (particularly by using words from

Hebrew, Aramaic and other languages which they have previously spoken but in other ways as well), sometimes speaking it much as the Gentiles have, sometimes switching from their previous everyday language very quickly, and sometimes maintaining it for longer. In cases in which Hebrew and Aramaic words have been retained in Jewish usage, this may have been through contact with texts in these languages (see, e.g., Weinreich, 1928, 1939, 1973), through continuous transmission, that is, continuous usage of these words (e.g. Katz [1985] proposes that Yiddish was first spoken by immigrants from Aramaic-speaking areas who directly incorporated Aramaic and Hebrew words into their Germanic speech) or through a combination of the two.

In some cases, Jewish speakers of a language have, for one reason or another, been physically separated from non-Jewish users of the language, so that the Jewish version has developed in a distinctive fashion even for, e.g., phonological or morphological features (e.g. Judeo-Spanish in the Ottoman Empire, brought by Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and, therefore, separated from non-Jewish Spanish). In some cases, Jews have retained a language for longer than their non-Jewish neighbors, resulting, at least temporarily, in a locally distinctive Jewish version (e.g. Greek-speaking Jews in Rome in the early centuries of the Christian era retained Greek for a century or two longer before switching to Latin than Greek-speaking non-Jews did (Kahane & Kahane, 1979)). In addition, Jews have often written their versions of languages with the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet rather than with the alphabet used by non-Jews (see, e.g., Diringer, 1948: 208; Wexler, 1981: 105–6).

The statement that ‘Jews have switched from one spoken language to another through history’ as a feature of Jewish behavior must be understood in the context of the Jewish conceptualization of identity. Jews can ‘switch languages’ because, even if they change their everyday language, it has been understood that they remain Jews, since everyday language is not a primary component of Jewish identity. However, for European groups lacking a distinctive and unique religious affiliation, a shift in everyday language has characteristically been associated with assimilation and the local disappearance of the group. For example, waves of non-Jewish speakers of Germanic languages, identified e.g., as, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Saxons, Jutes, Normans, etc. who settled in and invaded various places in Europe (e.g. which are now in France, Italy, England, etc.) became linguistically assimilated and disappeared as distinctive entities in the places to which they moved. Jews, in contrast, have tended to remain a distinctive group even after they have been assimilated in terms of everyday language.

It is, therefore, inaccurate to state that it is a distinctive characteristic of

Jews as opposed to European peoples that they tend to switch their everyday language. What is more distinctive is that Jews tend to switch their everyday language but still remain a distinctive group, which is a direct consequence of their conceptualization of Jewish identity.

One of the most interesting aspects of Jewish sociolinguistic behavior is the relationship between the Jewish and non-Jewish variants of a language and the question of whether the Jewish variant constitutes a distinctive language or a variant of the Gentile version – e.g. is Yiddish a dialect of German or a distinctive language in its own right? – and similarly for Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Greek, etc. Before addressing this issue, it must be made clear that everyday language has never been a defining feature of Jewish identity as it has been with, e.g., Arab, German, Hungarian, Macedonian or Ukrainian identity; that is, aside from idiosyncratic individual opinions, at no point in time has the question of whether a ‘Jewish version’ constitutes a distinctive language been decisive in terms of Jews’ self-categorization as Jews. Jews have been Jews because of their ancestry and religious affiliation, regardless of their everyday language.

Nevertheless, particularly in the last 120 years, many Jews have developed the idea that everyday language should be a supplementary part of Jewish identity, that Jews should speak distinctive ‘Jewish languages’ – although if they do not, they are no less Jewish. As we will see in detail later in this chapter and in Chapter 3, this idea was developed in response to contact with European non-Jews who were propagating an ideology according to which everyday language is the defining feature of personal identity and though Jews were not persuaded to adopt this position directly, many did accept a modified version of it.

We can identify two particular results of this. First, it ultimately led to the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2. Second, this led Jews to begin to analyze Jewish versions of Gentile languages such as German, Arabic and Spanish as distinct languages rather than as being ‘derived’ from the Gentile language. According to this thinking, Yiddish is a language distinct from German, Judeo-Arabic is a language distinct from Arabic, Judeo-Spanish is a language distinct from Spanish, etc., so that Jews who speak these languages are speaking distinctive Jewish languages and, thus, their Jewish identity is reflected in their distinctive everyday language. This movement has made significant progress in conceptually distinguishing Jewish languages from generally similar non-Jewish languages, with the result that, in a world where ethnic distinctiveness is often equated (by non-Jews at least) with distinctiveness in everyday language, Jews are perceived as being a more clearly distinctive ethnic group.

At the practical level, however, it is clear that the movement to re-

analyze 'Jewish versions' as distinctive 'Jewish languages' has not in itself inspired Jews to change their everyday linguistic behavior: at the same time that Jewish linguists have been arguing that certain Jewish versions of languages are distinctive languages, Jews, in general, have been switching away from these to clearly non-Jewish languages as their everyday language. Thus, as noted by Goldsmith (1998: 15), 'The theory of Yiddishism [using everyday Yiddish as a central component of Jewish identity] failed to inspire the kind of devotion from its followers that would lead to institutionalization and deliberate planning for the future' (and this from a devout supporter of Yiddishism).

There are only two cases today in which Jews are showing great loyalty to a specifically Jewish language and, in both of these cases, the maintenance of the Jewish language is embedded in an ideology of which everyday language is clearly a secondary part.

First, as we have seen earlier (and as will be discussed at more length in Chapter 3), Yiddish is alive and relatively well as an everyday language of Jews only in the Ultra-Orthodox community (in various countries, e.g. the United States, Canada, England and Belgium, although it is generally not doing as well in Israel [see Isaacs, 1998]). Among the Ultra-Orthodox, there is no question that (their interpretation of) Jewish religion is incomparably more important to Jewish identity than is everyday language. Their success in maintaining Yiddish as an everyday language has only been possible because this idea is part of a more general movement centered on religion, not language: the survival of Yiddish is essentially an epiphenomenon. This is not to deny that some Ultra-Orthodox Jews view the ability to speak Yiddish in a positive way but this is only because this suggests that one comes from a traditional Ultra-Orthodox family,<sup>16</sup> not because of the intrinsic value of Yiddish.

Second, the ideology of 'everyday language and identity' was clearly instrumental in the revival of Hebrew as an everyday language (as will be discussed in Chapter 2) but here also this was only as part of a movement which placed greater emphasis on another aspect of identity, namely living-place. The revival of Hebrew only came about as part of the Zionist movement, and today the idea that 'Jews should speak Hebrew as their everyday language' only applies to Israel: there is no idea (among Israeli or non-Israeli Jews) that Jews outside of Israel should speak Hebrew as their everyday language.

Thus, it is important not to overestimate the importance of Jews' speaking distinctive languages (or, more accurately in most cases, analyzing languages which Jews speak as being distinctive) for Jewish identity: it is not central and never has been. Nevertheless, Jews have, in recent times, clearly been concerned with being able to claim that at least some Jews



speak (or spoke) distinctive 'Jewish languages'. In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to begin to address the issue of what a 'Jewish language' is, to which I now turn.

*What is a 'Jewish language'?* In reading articles about Jewish socio-linguistics, one commonly encounters the term 'Jewish language' (e.g. Birnbaum, 1944; Weinreich, 1973; Levi, 1979; Wexler, 1981; Blau, 1997) and/or derivative concepts. Thus, e.g., Weinreich (1973) lists as Jewish languages (Judeo-)Arabic, Aramaic, French, Georgian, Greek, Italian, Karaite, Krimchak, Latin, Persian, Provençal, Slavic, Spanish, Tadjik, Tat and Yiddish while Levi (1979) adds Berber and Kurdish but leaves out Karaite, Latin, and Tadjik, etc.

It is not clear, however, what the term 'Jewish language' is supposed to mean (see discussion in, e.g., Fishman, 1985b). This is all the more problematic because its reference is commonly taken to be simply self-evident, which is far from being the case. In its simplest sense, one might suggest that anything which Jews speak is a 'Jewish language' simply by virtue of the fact that Jews speak it; thus, we could speak of Jews speaking today 'Judeo-English', 'Judeo-Russian', etc. In practice, however, no one to my knowledge has suggested that 'Judeo-English' and 'Judeo-Russian' are distinctive languages but it is not clear in an objective sense why this is the case.<sup>17</sup> Thus, some 'Jewish versions' are, for one reason or another, perceived as more distinctive than others. In addition to this, it is clear that intellectuals, in general, and linguists, in particular, have a greater tendency to refer to a 'Jewish version' as being a distinctive language.

The problematicity of the question of 'What is a Jewish language?' must be understood as part of the problematicity of the general question 'What is a [distinctive] language?' There is no purely linguistic definition of what a 'language' is: this is a matter which is negotiated socially, intellectually and politically (see, e.g., Rabin, 1981). It is not simply a matter of linguistic distinctiveness. Swedish, Norwegian and Danish differ fairly minimally, yet they are considered to be distinctive languages and, similarly Macedonian compared with Bulgarian, Czech with Slovak, Russian with Ukrainian with Byelorussian, etc. In such cases, in which one or both sides has an interest in presenting minimally differentiated linguistic forms as representing distinctive 'languages', relatively minor differences may be focused upon, particularly in the selection of a standard, in order to emphasize distinctiveness and present something as being a different 'language' rather than a 'dialect' of another language.

However, when the political goal is unification or, at least, a strengthened sense of solidarity, the same 'language' may show enormous variation, to the point of rendering mutual intelligibility difficult or even



impossible. Thus, various dialects of Italian differ enormously, yet they are popularly considered to be a single 'language' and similarly German, Arabic, Chinese, etc.

The question of 'What is a [distinctive] language', then, cannot be given any universal answer: in each case, a variety of factors dictate the boundaries of a 'language', and linguistic criteria are only part of these. In practice, political considerations are usually central – something is considered to be a different 'language' in the context of an ideology associated with political independence or at least autonomy (e.g. Norwegian/Danish, Ukrainian/Russian, etc.): in the oft-quoted saying of Max Weinreich, 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy'. Political considerations in such cases focus general public attention upon the question of whether something is or is not a distinctive language and make a definitive answer more likely. There are cases which are similar to 'Jewish languages' in the sense that it is clear that religious identity underlies the view that the language is different, e.g. Serbian (spoken by Orthodox) as opposed to Croatian (spoken by Catholics) or Hindi (spoken by Hindus) as opposed to Urdu (spoken by Muslims) but even in these cases, there is a relationship with actual political borders (or such borders are liable to come into existence).

For 'Jewish languages', however, the situation is different. No political boundaries are going to be redrawn according to whether Yiddish is considered a language distinct from German or whether Judeo-Spanish is a language distinct from Spanish. The result of this is that there is a lack of clarity in discussions involving Jewish languages.

Thus, in an effort to give scientific structuralist criteria justifying the independence of Jewish languages from non-Jewish languages, Weinreich (1954, 1959) develops the idea that Jewish languages involve a 'fusion' of a Hebrew–Aramaic component with a native component. Similarly, Rabin (1981) regards borrowing from classical Hebrew and Aramaic to be the main characteristic of 'Jewish languages' but he refrains from making a specific list and arguing individual cases. In contrast, Wexler (1981) states only that the use of large numbers of Hebrew–Aramaic words is not definitive of a Jewish language and the use of the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet is also not definitive but he makes no effort to say what is definitive (he says, e.g., 'unique' and 'distinctive' but this is vague and begs the questions of 'How unique?' and 'How distinctive?'). Birnbaum (1944: 58) states that 'when two forms of speech are essentially unlike, they can safely be called independent languages', although it is by no means clear what general yardstick of 'unlikeness' to apply or how to determine the 'essential' nature of the language or dialect under consideration objectively (see also Fishman [1981c] for a similarly unclear definition).

In the absence of clear political consequences and criteria, we can only

conclude that, if individuals choose to refer to something as a 'Jewish language' based upon whatever criteria they deem important, they are free to do so. Linguists do not spend their time arguing over whether Norwegian and Swedish are different languages and there is no more point in their arguing over whether, e.g., Arabic and Judeo-Arabic are different languages. For sociolinguistic projects such as the present book, the goal is not to determine whether or not something is a 'distinctive language' in an objective linguistic sense but rather to investigate the factors governing whether it is regarded and treated as a distinctive language.

There has, then, been a movement in the past 120 years which has been led by secular intellectuals to re-analyse 'Jewish versions' as being distinctive 'Jewish languages'. We find a religious version of the same theme (attributing a different quality to a language because Jews use it) in Ultra-Orthodox writings; for example, the sage R. Shneur Zalman:

explains that these non-Hebrew languages are elevated to holiness by the religious devotion of the Jews. Scattered in exile, they speak the languages of the nations of the world and use those languages for their daily affairs. When the Jew prays 'with self-sacrifice' and also uses the Gentile language for discussion of Torah, he elevates it to a higher level. (Loewenthal, 1993:181)

We can interpret this as a Jewish response to the ideology of everyday language and identity, the idea that everyday language should match personal identity, which has spread from (non-Jewish) Europe since the late 18th century and which will be discussed in detail later, with the difference that while (non-Jewish) European thinkers have interpreted this to mean that labels for personal identity should be redefined so as to match everyday language (e.g. a speaker of Czech who is considered primarily a subject of the Habsburg Monarchy should be relabeled as primarily a Czech), usually for the purposes of motivating political change, Jewish thinkers have interpreted this to mean the reverse, that the labels for language should be changed so as to match personal identity, so that, e.g., 'the Jewish dialect of German' should be relabeled as a distinctive Jewish language, Yiddish, so as to match the Jewish identity of its speakers. Jews apparently have had no particular motivation for this at all beyond vaguely retaining conceptual autonomy.<sup>18</sup> We will return to discuss Jewish languages in depth in chapter 3.

### **Jews who do not accept Jewish criteria of identity**

There are, of course, Jews who do not believe that ancestry and religious affiliation should be or are central to individual identity while native/ everyday language and citizenship are not. Though they would acknowledge that they are of Jewish ancestry and technically have Jewish religious

affiliation, they would claim that they view these as peripheral aspects of their identity in comparison with, e.g., their status as Americans by virtue of their American citizenship or, in cases such as Mrs King (see earlier) their status as Germans by virtue of having German as their native and main language. These people would either not identify themselves as Jews at all, or would identify themselves only secondarily as Jews (and primarily as Americans, Frenchmen, Englishmen, etc. – or Israelis!). They would, however, continue to be identified as Jews by mainstream Jews. Evidently, such people's beliefs have, in one way or another, been affected by the values of the non-Jewish people they live around, who, in many places, have come in the last several hundred years to believe that personal identity should naturally be defined in terms of citizenship and/or native language.

### **Conclusion: Language and Jewish identity**

In this section, I have discussed the Jewish conception of identity, showing how it is essentially defined in terms of ancestry and religious affiliation – in fact, particular understandings of ancestral and religious identity. This has been frequently misunderstood by people viewing Jews from the standpoint of western societies in which identity is conceptualized in a different way. Even non-linguistic aspects of Jewish identity are important to understanding Jewish sociolinguistic behavior, most significantly because they allow Jews to shift to a different everyday language without any suggestion that this changes their identity as Jews. The fact that Jews conceptualize themselves as a people as well as a religious group will turn out to be crucial in understanding how Jews have reacted in modern times to ideologies propagated by non-Jews relating to everyday language. In the following section, I will turn to discussing these issues in comparative and historical perspective.

### **Jewish Language and Identity in Comparative and Historical Perspective**

I have noted earlier that Jewish identity is primarily defined in terms of religious affiliation and ancestry. In this section, I will consider how this conception of identity has historically developed and compare Jews in this respect with other groups. I will first discuss Jews and other groups of this general type, which I will refer to as religious+ancestral. I will focus upon other Middle Eastern peoples who are similar to Jews in this respect, describing the historical experience which has resulted in these groups adopting this understanding of identity and I will also note non-Middle

Eastern groups of this general type. I will then turn to considering other types of groups, who define their identities in different ways.

### **Jews and other religious+ancestral groups**

This general type is common in groups originating in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Aside from Jews, groups of this type include Armenians (numbering about 6.6 million [Cohen, 1997]), Assyrians (Nestoreans)/Chaldeans (about 2 million [Phares, 1995]), Copts (about 9 million [Karas, 1986]), Jacobites (a.k.a. Syrian Orthodox, about 200,000 [Verghese, 1969]), Maronites (about 1.8 million [Wessels, 1995]), and Samaritans (about 600 [Arnon, 1999]).<sup>19</sup> As such groups constitute the clearest evidence for the non-uniqueness of Jewish thinking about identity and the clearest cases for meaningful comparison with Jews, I will discuss them here at some length.

All of these groups have in common the fact that their homelands (and in cases in which some of them have lived outside their homeland, most or all of the other areas they have lived in as well) have been politically controlled for 1500 years by universalistic religions, either the official Christianity of the Roman Empire (or its descendents) or Islam, which have encouraged members of these groups to convert to the dominant religion and, in effect, forbidden conversion to the minority religions, so that, in practice, the only way that one has been able to become a member of these groups has been by being born into them. They have, therefore, become strictly endogamous and ancestry plays a central role in their identity (see, e.g., Nisan, 1991: 10).<sup>20</sup> Like Jews, other groups of this type emphasize the ancestral relationship between members of the group and the affiliation of all members to a single religion (which is prototypically institutionally distinct from the religion of any other group), allowing members to join or leave the group in the guise of 'conversion' only under extremely limited circumstances, generally because of intermarriage, which again shows the basically ancestral nature of the group. Thus, as Toynbee notes with regards to Christians (and the same could be said for Jews), 'In the Near East a church is merely the foremost aspect of a nationality' (Toynbee, 1916: 617–8; see also Smith, 1991: 33–7).

Elon (1980: 20), in identifying the Christianization of the Roman Empire as the major turning point of Jewish history, ending 'a tradition and a policy of [religious] toleration', states:

With the ascendancy of Christianity, bringing in its train the achievement of temporal power by the Church and the Christianization of the State, the position of the Jews began to be undercut. Action taken against them was taken at first by the clergy (the *episkopi*) and the

populace responsive to their leadership; and then finally by the government, by means of Imperial legislation. To be sure, this change did not come about all at once. It took almost a century from the conversion to Christianity of Constantine the Great, followed shortly thereafter by the Council of Nicaea, until the publication of those Imperial rescripts that did so much to curtail the rights of the Jewish community, and to reduce the religious freedom and civil status of the individual Jew. During the intervening years, the aggressively Catholic image of the State became more and more pronounced, culminating in the official prohibition and vigorous suppression of all pagan religions and deviant Christian sects.'

As noted by Elon, it was not only Jews who were drastically affected by this development. The Roman Empire at the time dominated a number of different peoples in the area: aside from the Jews, there were also the Samaritans, the Egyptians, the Armenians and the Arameans (called 'Syrians' in Greek). The Jews and the Samaritans both spoke Aramaic at the time and were already distinguished by their distinctive religions. Between the fifth and the seventh centuries, the Egyptians, Armenians and (non-Jewish/Samaritan) Arameans all developed distinctive, heretical and ethnic versions of Christianity which distinguished them from both the Greeks and the Romans.

In the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern, three doctrinally distinct versions of Christianity developed regarding the nature of Christ – without going into the theological details, these can be called the Chalcedonian, Monophysite and Nestorian doctrines. It was, for some time, a matter of personal preference which doctrine an individual adopted and there was only a statistical correlation between ethnicity and doctrine. By the mid-sixth century, however, the situation had become sufficiently polarized that it was possible to speak of national churches coalescing around one or another doctrine so that, with few exceptions, it was possible to determine which doctrine an individual Christian accepted based upon his/her ethnicity.

Thus, Greeks and Romans accepted the Chalcedonian doctrine, while Egyptians and Armenians accepted the Monophysite doctrine. Arameans, however, were split, with some accepting the Chalcedonian doctrine and, hence, being affiliated with the Church of the Empire, others accepting the Monophysite doctrine and forming the Syrian (Jacobite) Church and still others, particularly in the Persian Empire, accepting the Nestorian doctrine and coming to constitute what is known as the Church of the East (later referred to as [Moderns] Assyrians or, in cases where they have in modern times acknowledged the supremacy of the Catholic Pope, Chaldeans). A

further doctrinal split in the late seventh century separated the Maronites from the Jacobites.<sup>21</sup>

Prior to the imposition of Roman Christianity, these groups in their religious guises were open to converts and, in some cases, even actively evangelized. Indeed, genetic evidence shows that both Jews (wherever they live) and Modern Assyrians are remarkably similar to Iraqi Arabic-speaking Muslims (though all differ much more from Arabic speakers from the Arabian peninsula than from each other), suggesting that there was considerable mixing of the populations in the historical North Semitic-speaking areas prior to the Arab invasions (Livshits *et al.*, 1991: 136; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.*, 1994: 244). However, just as with Jews, 1500 years of Catholic and Muslim domination, which actively encouraged conversion to the 'great religions' and literally forbade conversion to a 'small religion', have reshaped their identity and turned them into religious+ancestral groups.

Such groups have been able to survive for a considerable length of time as distinctive entities even without a state, common living-place or common everyday language. Although ancestry is for almost all members of the group the reason that they are members, religion and associated traditions have also been important in promoting group cohesiveness. As noted by Smith (1991: 34):

In the case of diaspora communities, as of sects-turned-ethnies like the Druse, Samaritans, Maronites, and Sikhs,<sup>22</sup> religious rituals, liturgy, and hierarchies have played a powerful conserving role, ensuring a high degree of formal continuity between generations and from community to community. Add to this the separating power of sacred languages and scripts, texts and calendars, and the apparent mystery of millennial diaspora survival appears soluble.

As I have discussed with regard to Jews, particularly because during the times when the modern concept of 'nationality' or 'people' was developed, these groups did not meet the two popular nationality / peoplehood criteria of sharing a citizenship / livingplace and/or sharing an everyday modernized language, there has been an unfortunate tendency to consider them to be not really peoples but rather religious groups (fitting them into the Procrustean bed of modern European identity types). This idea has, in some cases, even spread to members of the groups themselves, in spite of the fact that, in practice, almost every member of the group is a member because of personal ancestry.

In fact, these groups still have territorial and linguistic aspects to their identity of these groups, though this is not necessarily reflected in their contemporary situation. Each of them has a sacred ancestral homeland and a

sacred ancestral language, though they generally have not lived in the first or spoken the second. As Harshav (1993: 82) notes, for example, 'subjectively, in their own mythology and literature, the Jews had never abandoned their ties to that land and had never neglected the Hebrew language'. As we will see in the following sections, we find the same pattern for other religious+ancestral groups, with similar variation from place to place and from individual to individual (see, e.g., Moosa, 1986; Karas, 1986).

*Ideology of territory among religious+ancestral groups*

In the case of Jews, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 2, the return to using Hebrew as an everyday language could not have taken place independently of the movement to return to the land of Israel.<sup>23</sup> It is, therefore, important to consider territorial ideology among groups of this type, particularly because recent developments have made it clear how radically this ideology has been misunderstood by Europeans and Americans, who have tended to interpret it as literally religious rather than basically historical and nationalistic (again as part of the general tendency to misunderstand religious+ancestral groups such as Jews to be purely religious groups).

Each of the religious+ancestral groups in the Middle East has an area which is simultaneously their ancestral homeland and the location of their sacred sites. This situation came about as the result of the conquest and continued occupation of the ancestral homeland at some point in the past by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Turks: the indigenous peoples living there were scattered (often being expelled or taken off as slaves) and/or stopped constituting a clear majority in the homeland and the relationship between the individual and the territory of the group was transferred away from the concrete world to the abstract, spiritual realm, where the invaders and occupiers could not affect it in the same way.

For Jews and Samaritans, this territory corresponds in a general sense to the land of Israel (though the focus for Jews is Jerusalem while the focus for Samaritans is in Samaria). For Armenians, it corresponds to what is now Armenia and large sections of Eastern Turkey (where most Armenians lived until they were massacred by the Turks in 1915). For Copts, it corresponds, in general, to what is now Egypt; for Maronites, it corresponds to what is now Lebanon; for Assyrians and Chaldeans, it corresponds to what is now Northern Iraq, Northwestern Iran and far Eastern Turkey (the Assyrians in the latter were massacred or fled during the First World War). Each of these areas is understood to be the sacred homeland of each member of the respective people, even if they do not live there and even if they have never in their lives lived there.



*Linguistic ideology of religion+ancestry groups*

Just as these groups lost control of their ancestral homeland, they have also lost or are in the process of losing their ancestral spoken language. The Copts and the Maronites finished switching from their ancestral languages (Egyptian and Aramaic respectively) to Arabic several hundred years ago, and the same change is now underway among Jacobites, Chaldeans and Assyrians, who previously spoke Aramaic.

In the past, many Armenians living in what is now Turkey spoke Turkish rather than Armenian, and in more recent times, particularly in the last 100 years, Armenians in the diaspora have switched to a variety of everyday languages, e.g. Russian, Arabic, English and French. Jews and Samaritans switched from Hebrew to Aramaic (or in some cases, Greek) as their everyday language some time around the beginning of the Common Era (see Chapter 2) and then to Arabic and other languages more than a thousand years ago.

Nevertheless, these groups have maintained their ancestral language as their sacred language, the language used for prayer, religious practices, in general, and scholarship. They therefore express the linguistic aspect of their identity through this sacred language rather than through their everyday language. For Jews and Samaritans, this sacred language is Hebrew (though Jews use the alphabet originally associated with Aramaic while Samaritans retain the older Hebrew alphabet: Jews also have Aramaic as a sacred language). For Copts, this is Coptic (Egyptian); for Maronites, Syrians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans, this is Aramaic (also known as Syriac in its sacred Christian form); and for Armenians, this is Classical Armenian.

Thus, just as they have sanctified their ancestral homeland and developed an ideology according to which it remains the homeland even of members of the group who have never been there (as, for example, Palestinian Arabs have done with the land of the British Mandate of Palestine today), so the language which they spoke at the time is sanctified as their group and sacred language and it keeps this role even if they change to another everyday language. Even if they maintain a variety of their ancestral language as their spoken language, an earlier form is nevertheless kept as the sacred or 'real' form of the language. Just as attachment to homeland can be expressed by pilgrimages, attachment to the group language can be expressed by using it for religious purposes, scholarship, intergroup communication in particular circumstances, etc. Just as actual living-place and citizenship do not affect the status of people as members of these groups, so spoken language also has no effect upon this status. The contemporary phenomena which are important to their identity are not territorial or linguistic but rather immediate ancestry and present religious



affiliation. Because Jews have traditionally emphasized this parallel treatment between sacred language and sacred territory, Hebrew could only have been revived as a living language in the ancestral homeland. I will return to this matter in Chapter 2.

As with sanctification of the ancestral land, sanctification of the ancestral language was a response to being conquered: using this language as a sacred rather than an everyday language was not seen as good in itself but rather the best that could be done to maintain group identity in a difficult situation. For many members of these groups, it would be preferable to put the group language to greater usage, if circumstances would allow it. This was the motivation for Jewish Zionists to switch back to Hebrew as their everyday language; similarly, some Samaritans have also switched back to Hebrew as their everyday language and some Armenians whose community had not spoken Armenian for hundreds of years (e.g. in Jerusalem) have also recently switched back to Armenian. Maronites are similarly dreaming of reviving Aramaic as their spoken language:

Thus, at long last, the Maronite Church has begun to realize and appreciate the importance of the Syriac tradition to its 'national' existence. Both the Arabization and the Latinization of the Maronite Church have been detrimental to the true Syriac-Aramaic identity of the Maronites . . . The Maronites have all the necessary resources to revive once more the noble Syriac language and Syriac traditions which are the pride of the Syrian Church of Antioch. (Moosa 1986: 277–8)

Coptic leaders such as Pope Shenouda have expressed similar ideas (see, e.g., Solihin, 1991: 73) but, of course, such plans have received no support in countries politically dominated by Muslims.

It might be argued that the tendency for groups of this type to switch back to the distinctive group language shows that, in fact, they do take everyday language to be an important part of their identity – after all, they are choosing to switch to an everyday language which matches their identity. The difference here is that their ideology is that they may view it as preferable, other things being equal, for them to speak their group/ancestral language as their everyday language. This is very different from an ideology which would claim that everyday language itself determines identity, which is basic to, e.g., Arab identity.

#### *Other groups of the religious+ancestral type*

Outside of the Middle East, the only group of which I am aware which clearly fits this general description is the Sikhs (see the comparison between Jews and Sikhs in Cohen [1997]). Sikhism was founded around 1500 by Guru Nanak in North India, and it took elements from the two

neighboring religions, Hindu and Islam, but it can be clearly distinguished from both. Like other groups of this type, Sikhs have a sacred language (Punjabi) and a sacred homeland (in the Punjab on the India-Pakistani border) but the great majority of Sikhs live outside the homeland in a diaspora situation. Unlike the Jews, Copts, Armenians, etc., Sikhs did not originally constitute a distinct ethnic group which was conquered by an empire supporting a 'big religion' but rather arose as a new development in an area where other religions were already established. However, unlike many relatively new religions (e.g. Bahaism); Sikhism has become ancestral+religious rather than basically evangelical (i.e. purely religious).

It would also be reasonable to include Gypsies in this general type. Gypsies have no common language, many speak a local non-Gypsy language (e.g. in Hungary and England), others speak a variant of a non-Gypsy language (e.g. Spanish and Romanian (Boiash)), while still others speak one of a variety of Indic languages, e.g. Roma, Sinti (Manush), Lalleri, etc. (Cohn, 1973). In addition, they resemble other groups of this type by living in a diaspora situation. There are, however, a number of noticeable differences. For one thing, for Gypsies it is not 'religious affiliation' which is crucial to identity as a 'Gypsy' but rather 'tradition/lifestyle'; Gypsies are generally likely to adopt nominally the formal religious affiliation of neighboring groups without this having any effect upon their status as 'Gypsies' but it is clearly understood that 'Gypsies' live a certain lifestyle. In addition, Gypsies have no 'homeland' in the same sense (they ultimately came from India but typically seem to have no consciousness or even awareness of this) and no sacred language (in fact, they typically do not even write their languages).

Turks also share some similarities with the groups discussed here, though not as many as they used to. In Ottoman times, 'Turk' could refer to any Muslim in an Ottoman context, regardless of language, and even today 'Christian Turk', 'Greek Turk', 'Armenian Turk', etc., remain oxymorons, even for people who speak Turkish. Thus, religious affiliation has been a necessary criterion of Turkish identity, as with groups such as Jews.

Ancestral affiliation, however, has been somewhat more problematic. Obviously Turkish speakers originally shared no more general ancestral relations with Muslim Circassians, Daghestanians and Albanians than they shared with Christian Georgians, Armenians and Greeks, though the legal possibility of intermarrying with the former at least meant that there were sometimes family relations: ancestral connections between 'Turks' were, therefore, less clear than in the case of, e.g., Jews, Maronites, Copts, Armenians, etc.

Linguistically too there was only some similarity between 'Turks' in the traditional understanding and in groups such as Jews. A 'Turk' could, it is

true, speak a wide variety of languages and still be a 'Turk' but while, e.g., for Jews this was the result of common ancestors who moved to different areas and whose descendants adopted different languages, for 'Turks' this was the result of ancestrally unrelated peoples adopting a single religion and thereby coming to see themselves as constituting in some sense a united people. In addition, Turks have not had a concept of a sacred language which is 'theirs' in the same sense that Jews do.

In the present day, Turkish identity has come to be more clearly different in type from that of groups such as Jews. There is a growing tendency to avoid this term for people who do not speak a Turkic language and who do not live in Turkey, e.g. for Bosnians and Daghestanians (although this usage is by no means unknown today). However, inside Turkey, 'Turk' is still commonly applied to people of Kurdish and Circassian ancestry, many of whom have, in fact, switched to Turkish as their everyday language (though they are often referred to as 'Turks' even if they have not). It must be said, however, that Kurds are increasingly likely to reject being referred to as 'Mountain Turks' and this terminology is coming to be perceived as politically incorrect in some circles. Thus, it can be seen that the concept of 'Turk' has been significantly affected by ideologies relating identity to citizenship and language.

Greek identity also historically was of the religious+ancestral type, as people considered 'Greeks' were scattered around the Eastern Mediterranean area and not uncommonly spoke something other than Greek (e.g. Turkish in Anatolia) as their everyday language. However, because of their imperial legacy, on the one hand, and the frequent lack of clear institutional boundaries between the various Eastern Orthodox denominations, on the other, the match between religious and ethnic affiliation was never as close as it was for Jews, Armenians, Maronites or Copts, so that there have been Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox who have not been considered by anyone to be ethnic Greeks and, conversely, there have been, Greek- or even Russian-speaking Russian Orthodox people who have been considered to be ethnic Greeks. Today, with the foundation of an independent Greek state, there is a tendency for diaspora Greeks to move to Greece and switch to Greek as their spoken language: as a result, Greek identity is coming to be more similar to the religious+ancestral+everyday language type which is characteristic of Eastern Europe, which I will describe in the following section.

### **Other types**

I will briefly describe here other types of groups so that they can be systematically compared with Jews and other groups of the religious+ancestral types. In addition, a general understanding of the differences in

attitude towards the relationship between language and identity among peoples in different parts of the world will be helpful in understanding why Jews from different areas have tended to adopt somewhat different modern interpretations of Jewish identity.

Purely religious groups, in which individual members can be of any ancestry or citizenship, live anywhere, and speak any language, are particularly common in Western Europe and the Americas, although they are currently spreading to other parts of the world through missionary activity. Groups of this type include Catholics, Anglicans, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, etc. We can also categorize Muslims (and its subtypes Sunnis and Shiites), Bahais, etc. as religious groups, as well as Buddhists in some places (e.g. Sri Lanka), although, in other places, Buddhism tends to be more of a philosophy than a marker of identity (e.g. Japan). Such groups may have a particular sacred language but even if they do, it is not necessarily their ancestral language so that they may not feel it to be a symbol of their national identity. They therefore will not be motivated by its sacred status to revive it as a living language.<sup>24</sup>

Particularly in Eastern Europe, there are a number of groups which are similar to Jews and other religious+ancestral groups except that they are also strongly associated with a particular everyday language and a particularly contemporary living-place. We can include Poles, Slovenians and Croatians (always or almost always Catholics) and Serbs, Bulgarians and Macedonians (always or almost always Orthodox) in this type. As previously noted, it may also be possible to include Greeks in this type, particularly in recent times. If we compare the linguistic behavior of these groups with that of religious+ancestral groups, we find that the former place more value on their everyday language and correspondingly less value on any 'sacred' languages they may have, and their contemporary living-place corresponds to their homeland (which may not be the case for religious+ancestral groups, who can live in a diaspora situation and have a 'sacred' homeland which they may not live in). In particular, Eastern European groups seem to have no interest in 'returning' a religious language or an ancestral language to everyday use. Old Church Slavonic remains as a dead language of religion with no ethnic significance. As a result, we do not find group identity surviving indefinitely in a widespread diaspora, as is the case with Middle Eastern groups.<sup>25</sup>

There are also strongly citizenship-based identities such as those of English-speaking countries and France. An American or a Frenchman may be of any religion and have any ancestry; in principle, s/he may speak any language, though, in practice, there is a very strong expectation regarding a particular language (nevertheless, speaking Spanish as one's

main language does not literally disqualify one as an American in the way that being a Christian literally disqualifies one as a Jew; see, for example, Renan's denial of the centrality of language in his *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* [Psichari, 1947]).

Other groups define their identity in terms of sharing what is understood to be the same spoken language. These groups do not have a common religious affiliation, citizenship or language, although they can have some sort of ahistoric myth of a common ancestry which has no actual basis in reality (see discussion in Chapter 4). Germans and Arabs are two groups of this type, at least in the original formulation of their nationalist ideology in the beginning of the 19th and 20th centuries respectively.

It is not an accident that the two great tragedies in modern Jewish history, the Holocaust and the Arab–Israeli conflict, have each involved relations between Jews and groups who have focused upon an understanding of identity based upon sharing a common spoken language, because such groups are maximally distinct from Jews in terms of their understanding of identity. Unlike Jews, they have been resistant to the idea that religious affiliation is central to ethnic identity (since Germans can be Catholic or Protestant while Arabs can be Muslims or Christians). To the extent that they believe that speaking a common spoken language suggests having a common ancestry, they feel threatened and confused by Jews who can speak their language (German or Arabic) while claiming and having a different ancestry, and, to the extent that they believe that spoken language independent of ancestry determines ethnicity, they are confused and disturbed by claims that Jews, who do not share a common language, constitute a single ethnic group.<sup>26</sup>

I will return to the relationship between Jews and language-based ethnicities in Chapter 4 when I discuss how differences in understanding of the relationship between language and identity have played a role in the Holocaust and the Arab–Israeli conflict.

## Language and Jewish Identity in Modern Times

We have seen in the previous two sections that there are a number of ways of conceptualizing identity and that Jews fit into a general traditional Middle Eastern understanding of identity, while Europeans have a different understanding with some variation from group to group: Arabs are more like Europeans than other Middle Eastern groups in this respect. In this section, we will see how these ways of thinking have developed in modern times.

In the last several hundred years, communities all over the world have been affected by the development and acceptance of concepts and

phenomena such as egalitarianism, national identity and the need for mass literacy. Europeans and Arabs recognized that incorporating these ideas into their thinking and societies would result in contradictions and conflicts with their traditional institutions, and that resolving these contradictions and conflicts would involve completely redefining their traditional understanding of identity and overthrowing these institutions. However, for Jews, as for most other ancestral+religious groups, these new concepts were not so transparently and irreconcilably incompatible with their own traditional institutions and understandings of identity as to necessitate a revolution in this regard, so that they did not initially feel the same pressing need for change. Nevertheless, when Europeans and Arabs changed their thinking and restructured their societies accordingly, the position of Jews in these restructured societies was re-evaluated according to the new ideologies, with disastrous results which we will see, and Jews had no choice but to respond to this by adapting – though not fundamentally changing – their own thinking regarding identity.

In this section, we will see how these differences have led to the typological situation described earlier as well as to the two pivotal crises in modern Jewish history, the Holocaust and the Arab–Israeli conflict. In addition, the changes in thinking described here are related to Jewish thinkers developing the concept of ‘Jewish languages’, which will be considered in depth in Chapter 3.

### **The historical development of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity**

Before the 18th century, it was the first two criteria listed at the beginning of this chapter, personal ancestry/race and religious affiliation/beliefs/tradition/lifestyle, which were generally most important in society in Europe and the Middle East, both in terms of political organization and in terms of individual identity. In a general sense, these are the same parameters which were, and have continued to be, central to Jewish identity. However, both the specific interpretations of these parameters and the general sociohistorical context in which they were embedded were quite different in Jewish and non-Jewish society (and there was also variation in this regard within different non-Jewish societies) and, as a result, developments regarding these parameters of identity and political organization in Jewish and non-Jewish society have been very different.

Stated most generally, we can say that, in the first wave of nationalism, non-Jewish Europeans came to emphasize two new parameters of identity, native/everyday language and/or citizenship/living place, and correspondingly to de-emphasize and/or reinterpret the other two parameters I have identified, religion and ancestry, with different non-Jewish societies

interpreting these parameters in somewhat different ways and placing different relative emphasis on them. European Jews, however, only came to adopt these parameters to any extent at all at a relatively late date and even when they did, their interpretation of them was quite different from that of non-Jews: the importance which they placed on them was almost always subordinate to other parameters of Jewish identity.

The developments to which I am referring to correspond to the Enlightenment (in relation to the concept of the importance of citizenship), Romanticism (in relation to the concept of the importance of native/ everyday language) and, in general, the rise of nationalism, with various conceptions of citizenship and everyday language playing more or less central roles in various formulations of nationalism.

As argued by Anderson (1983), identity and political organizations had previously been built around the religious community and the dynastic realm (e.g. the Catholic Church and the Habsburg Monarchy, Sunni Islam and the Ottoman Empire, etc.) but, by the second half of the 18th century, these ideologies and institutions had been weakened by a variety of factors. The development of science and the corresponding ebb in religious belief in many circles called into question the ideological basis for religious identity, religious authority and the divine right to rule. Increasing contacts with lands which had hitherto been either legendary or completely unknown revealed to Europeans the enormous variety in possible human societies – the ones which they had taken as representing the natural order (their own) being only one possibility. Aside from this, they brought to Europe vast quantities of material and fungible wealth, much of which found its way into the hands of people who were not associated with the traditional institutions of power and who used it to turn themselves into an increasingly restless middle class.

Anderson focuses particularly upon the long-term effect of the invention of the printing press, which made mass – or at least widespread – literacy possible, which, in turn, encouraged commercial endeavors aimed at a broad readership on a scale far beyond what had previously been possible. Given the fact that only a limited number of Christian Europeans could read Latin, the market for Latin readership was quickly saturated and it only made good business sense to tap the potentially vast sources of readership in the hitherto comparatively undeveloped vernacular languages. The Catholic Church offered what resistance it could but, in the course of the next several hundred years, the vernacular languages made inexorable process and finally displaced the sacred Christian languages.

This development was accompanied and supported by various trends in different fields. By the late 18th century, when nationalism was beginning to become increasingly significant, linguistics came into its own as a field of



research. William Jones discovered and demonstrated the relationship of Sanskrit to the European languages, Jean Champollion deciphered ancient Egyptian, and an entire array of linguists emerged as students of and champions of vernacular languages, producing the first Russian dictionary (1789–94), historical grammar of Czech (1792), Russian grammar (1802), Ukrainian grammar (1819), Norwegian grammar (1848), etc. (Seton-Watson, 1977). At the same time, literature in an increasing variety of vernacular languages became more and more widespread.

On the philosophical side, these years saw the development of what I am calling the ideology of everyday/native language-and-identity, whose first great exponent was Herder (1744–1803) (see the discussion in Fishman [1972]). An early statement reflecting this ideology comes from Schleiermacher: ‘Only one language is firmly implanted in an individual. Only to one does he belong entirely no matter how many he learns subsequently’ (quoted in Kedourie, 1961: 63). This ‘one language’ refers to the mother tongue. In the course of the development of this ideology, ‘the mother tongue became almost sacred, the mysterious vehicle for all the national endeavors’ (Jaszi, 1929: 262, quoted in Fishman, 1972: 45) and ‘[I]t was felt that “in its mother tongue every people honors itself; in the treasury of its speech is contained the charter of its cultural history”’ (Ludwig Jahn, quoted in Fishman, 1972: 45). This movement has its inheritors today, e.g. Joshua Fishman, who has written: ‘This soul (the essence of a nationality) is not only reflected and protected by the mother tongue, but, in a sense, *the mother tongue is itself an aspect of the soul*, a part of the soul, if not the soul made manifest’ (Fishman, 1972: 46; emphasis in original).

Thus, as religious and royal authority faded and the institutions and identity based upon this authority broke up, new loyalty groups coalesced around the vernacular languages. In summary, ‘the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation’ (Anderson, 1983: 49).

Aside from language, the rise of nationalism was also associated with the spread of a number of political ideas related to the Enlightenment, in particular individual rights, citizenship, egalitarianism and the emancipation of groups whose participation in society had hitherto been restricted. In the framework used in the previous section, this development was related to the development of the ideology of citizenship-and-identity. In a certain sense, this ideology competed with the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, with the citizenship-and-identity ideology being generally stronger in Western Europe and the everyday-language-and-identity ideology being generally stronger in Eastern Europe. In another sense, however, the two combined in various ways to form various types of



the new ideology of nationalism, which came to replace the old ideologies based upon religious and monarchic/ancestral identity and institutions. As noted by Anderson (1983: 16), 'the concept [of the nation] was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm'.

We can, in general, sum up the goals of the new ideologies of everyday-language-and-identity and citizenship-and-identity as follows:

- (1) to delegitimize hereditary power (i.e. the aristocracy), which was seen as corrupt and arbitrary;
- (2) to take power away from ecclesiastical authorities, who were seen as corrupt and arbitrary;
- (3) to encourage people to have loyalty to the state rather than to the aristocracy or the church;
- (4) to politically unify speakers of what was constructed as a single spoken language;
- (5) to legitimize nationalist movements and delegitimize empires in which speakers of one language dominated speakers of another language, by encouraging speakers of languages whose groups were out of power to identify with their linguistic group rather than with the empire;
- (6) to encourage the spread of literacy among the masses by writing in something resembling the everyday language of the people rather than some arcane sacred language such as Latin, Old Church Slavonic or Byzantine Greek, known only to the elite of the church and (possible some members of) the aristocracy;
- (7) to embarrass/delegitimize the aristocracy of Central and Eastern European countries who spoke among themselves some other pan-aristocratic language (particularly French or German) rather than the language of their subjects.

Several hundred years later, we may say that the ideas of citizenship-and-identity and everyday-language-and-identity have been remarkably successful in coming to dominate their rivals in Europe and the Americas. The aristocracy has been eliminated or neutralized; arcane tongues have been practically done away with (even in Catholic services in the last 40 years); churches have lost an enormous amount of their political power; Germany and Italy have each been unified on the basis of a constructed common language; and the Habsburg, Ottoman and Romanov Empires have been broken up into large numbers of independent countries more or less along the lines of everyday language.

This is not to say that religious affiliation and ancestry were completely eliminated as bases for personal identity in Europe. Though Romanticism

exalted the unity of the ethnic collective and discredited the ancestral basis for aristocratic privilege, it also allowed and even encouraged conceptual differentiation of distinct ancestrally defined peoples, while Enlightenment ideas could similarly be manipulated so as to give a pseudo-scientific basis for racist ideas, including reinterpretation of the religious distinction between Christian and Jew as a racial one: arguments based upon both of these ideologies could be and were formulated to support slavery, colonization and the Holocaust, and it was not until the aftermath of the Second World War that these dangers were widely recognized. Even today, it is obvious that racism is still a significant force, while religious identity appears to be experiencing something of a resurgence. Nevertheless, it is clear that, after the two World Wars, ideologies of citizenship-and-identity and everyday-language-and-identity have generally come to dominate European thought today, with the former being stronger in Western Europe and the latter being stronger in Eastern Europe, while ancestral and religious affiliation are seen as more peripheral aspects of identity.

There has been something of a change in the conceptualization of the relationship between the ideology of language-and-identity and the ideology of ancestry-and-identity since the former began to emerge in the second half of the 18th century. At the time, there was some idea that a common language implied a common ancestry. One reason for this was that clearly ancestrally distinctive groups in European society, e.g. Jews, Irish (as opposed to English), Bretons (as opposed to French), etc., were often still relatively distinctive in terms of spoken language at the time, at least in terms of the groups immediately surrounding them, so that there appeared to be a fairly clear isomorphic relationship between spoken language and ancestry. However, as time went by and these groups switched to mainstream languages, it became increasingly implausible to equate language and ancestry.

Another reason for this was that at the time very few people outside of the aristocracy had any idea of what their personal ancestry was more than a few generations back and any sort of scientific classification or understanding of racial identity could only have been highly schematic and vague. For the proto-elites, who were in any case not really sure of what their ancestral identity was, it was easier to simply categorize themselves according to language and then claim that this 'naturally' reflected ancestral identity as well. However, as the scientific possibility of actual racial classification developed, on the one hand, and more systematic record-keeping revealed the extent to which people speaking the same language might well have completely distinct ancestries, on the other hand, it became increasingly apparent that linguistic and ancestral identity were clearly distinct parameters.

### **The Jewish response**

The reaction of Jews to the ideologies of everyday-language-and-identity and citizenship-and-identity has been mixed. Of course, some Jews have, for one reason or another, been intent upon leaving the Jewish community and the ideologies of citizenship-and-identity and everyday-language-and-identity were in theory perfectly suited to allow them to essentially reaffiliate, by gaining citizenship and learning to speak a non-Jewish language. Such Jews have regarded their Jewish ancestry and religious affiliation as less important than their citizenship- and/or everyday-language-based identity. Most Jews, however, have not adopted this approach but rather have continued to regard their Jewish identity as more important than or at least as equally important as their citizenship-and/or everyday-language-based identity.

Why have most Jews not rejected these traditional criteria? Most generally, as noted by Goldsmith (1998: 14), 'While the primacy of language became the foundation of nationalism for many peoples, it could never serve as such for the Jewish people. Jewish group consciousness emerged millenia before modern nationalism emphasized either territorial or linguistic uniformity as prerequisites of nationhood' (see also Smith, 1991: 48–50). That is, Jews did not need these new ideologies to develop a group consciousness, because they already had a group consciousness based upon other ideologies.

Anderson (1983: 19) also presents an interesting if speculative argument that European Christians, who had previously had quite specific beliefs regarding the fate and continuity of the soul after death, had this belief seriously shaken by the progress of science. They therefore felt a need to develop a new understanding of identity which involved a sense of continuity after death which could replace traditional Christian belief, and the concept of the nation/people as an entity which survived the deaths of individual members was well suited to this function. In this sense too, Jews would have been different from European Christians, in that Jews had developed the modern ways of thinking in the relevant ways long before European Christians did – Jewish group consciousness has, in any case, always given Jews a feeling of continuity without direct reference to religious belief and Jewish religious belief, has never made much in the way of specific claims about the afterlife which scientific advances might call into question – and for these reasons, Jews did not feel the same need to overturn their existing system of thought as European Christians did.

Other factors also contributed to Jews being considerably less enthusiastic about these new ideologies of identity than Christians were. In attempting to understand this difference, it is important to note that, although the parameters of identity which were coming to be discredited in

Christian society were generally similar to traditional Jewish parameters of identity, they did differ in some significant ways.

The personal ancestry parameter, for example, was discredited in Christian society because it was associated with divine right to rule, that is, dividing people in a single society into different ancestral groups for the purpose of legitimizing the dominance of one ancestral group over another. This ran foul of Enlightenment ideals of intrasocietal equality.

For Jewish identity, however, the ancestral parameter of identity has historically served not to legitimize aristocratic rule but rather as a mechanism for the survival of the group. Since the rise of Christianity and Islam, it has generally been practically impossible to convert to Judaism, so that the only way for the Jewish people to continue to exist has been by adopting an ancestral understanding of Jewish identity. Hereditary privilege has not, however, played nearly as great a role in promoting societal inequality in Jewish society as it has in European Christian society, so Jews concerned with equality had less motivation to discredit ancestrally-based criteria of identity: there had been no Jewish kings to overthrow in 2000 years. It is highly significant in this regard that Elon (1980) notes that there were marked changes in the Jewish conceptualization of the relationship between ancestry and identity in the several hundred years following the destruction of the Second Temple, when Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire and, as I have previously argued, the modern understanding of Jewish identity developed:

Still another process of consolidation took place at the *social* level, involving the elimination of hereditary status, of privilege based on birth. The effects of this become noticeable towards the end of our period, with the erosion of social distinctions derived from family origin (*yuhasin*). During Temple times, and for a while thereafter, there were circles for whom the family tree was of prime importance. These people tried to avoid marriages with 'families of inferior status.' But the social situation in later tannaitic [= Mishnaic – J.M.] times practically wiped out such distinctions, thus curing the nation of a serious social defect . . . On the other hand, there were those whom the process of consolidation now excluded altogether from the Jewish fold, such as the descendants of foreign slaves called *netinim*, who had for generations been a lowly caste. The generalization we can make is that, during the first stage of our period, there was a growing tendency among the surviving Jews to drop such elements, while at the same time obliterating all distinctions among the rest of the people. (pp. 26–7; emphasis in the original)

What happened, then, was that the primary role of ancestry as a determinative factor of personal identity among Jews changed from categorizing

Jews according to a social hierarchy to distinguishing clearly between people who were ancestrally Jewish and people (including *netinim*) who were not ancestrally Jewish.<sup>27</sup> This situation has continued to the present day, so that Jews generally see no necessary contradiction between ancestral determination of identity and social equality and, for this reason, the spread of the ideology of egalitarianism, which thoroughly discredited the European Christian conceptualization of the ancestral component of identity, had relatively little effect upon its Jewish counterpart.

The situation was similar regarding the religious component of Jewish identity. Jewish ecclesiastical authorities have never had anything near the political power which Christian authorities have had (among other reasons because they were often constrained by the laws of the Christians they lived among) and while both Christian and Jewish authorities have been criticized for religious inflexibility, Christian authorities have been further discredited by accusations of political, moral and material corruption, which has not been the case for Jewish authorities (although this is changing to some extent in Israel today). There was no Jewish state until 1948 and no possibility of a Jewish state in Europe at all, so that there was no motivation for a movement to transfer loyalty from the rabbinate to the state (although this too has become an issue in Israel recently). Thus, while I would not discount the criticisms of inflexibility directed at the Jewish religious establishment, there was nothing like the desire to overthrow it which appeared among the Christians.

In addition, whereas for Christians, the traditional religious component of identity was focused specifically on beliefs, for Jews this was focused more on practice. Thus, when scientific advances cast traditional religious beliefs into doubt, this was vastly more of a problem for traditional Christian identity than it was for traditional Jewish identity. Manifestations of Jewish religious identity can easily be maintained in a secular context as traditions (the proverbial 'it's a tradition in our family to light candles on Friday evening') or even individual tastes (the proverbial 'I'm not observant, I just happen to not like pork') but it is obviously considerably more problematic for many people to reconcile a belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God with a scientific worldview.

The ideology of everyday-language-and-identity also did not hold the same appeal to Jews as it did for European Christians. Loyalty to an everyday Jewish language such as Yiddish was unlikely to have resulted in an independent Jewish state or even territorial autonomy in Europe as happened with, e.g., Hungary and Czechoslovakia, so political motivation was lacking. To be sure, as we will see in Chapter 3, there were non-political motivations for Jews to adopt an ideology according to which they saw Yiddish as the central component of their Jewish identity, but these could

not have been expected to result in this ideology having the widespread appeal of similar movements among European Christians, for whom independence or autonomy was a realistic and attractive goal and, hence, a powerful motivation for adopting this ideology.

There was also a significant difference between Jewish and Christian interpretations of traditional language-based parameters of identity. In the late 18th century, both groups had sacred languages which were viewed as auxiliary components of their identity but practically all male Jews (and a not insignificant number of female Jews) know a significant amount of basic Hebrew, while the overwhelming majority of Christians were completely illiterate. Whatever connection Christians had with each other due to Latin was only through their religious belief 'that the bilingual intelligentsia, by mediating between Latin and the vernacular, mediated between earth and heaven' (Anderson, 1983: 23), so that when this belief crumbled and the rise of the printing press spelled the doom of Latin – 'the sacred communities integrated by old sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralized, and territorialized' (Anderson, 1983: 25): At the same time, as the vernacular languages correspondingly rose, readers in these languages:

gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally-imagined community. (Anderson, 1983: 47)

To Jews, however, reading the holy language (and the national language), albeit at a relatively basic level, was already literally an everyday occurrence, which tied all Jews together and had done so for more than 2000 years, without any intervention from religious leaders or need for recourse to vernacular languages. As Goldsmith (1972: 307) notes: 'Unlike Latin, which was the sacred language of Christendom, but completely divorced from the national aspirations of the peoples of Europe, Hebrew was the historic national language of Jewry.'

Thus, in general, although not an insignificant number of Jews did find many attractive things in these new ideologies and the societies they were current in, Jews simply did not have the same motivation as Christians did to abandon their traditional ancestry- and religion-based ideologies of identity in favor of the new everyday-language- and citizenship-based ideologies of identity. This was only to be expected: after all, these new ideologies were developed and propagated by Christians in order to address problems in their own societies.

To be sure, these ideologies did offer relief, at least in principle (and at least for the moment), from the various forms of prejudice which Jews had experienced and this, in itself, must have made them seem quite attractive to many Jews. In particular, the opportunity to participate on remotely equal footing in enjoying the material spoils of the colonial empires which the Western European Christians were building was obviously extremely attractive to many Jews.

However, the cost of literally denying the importance of ancestry and religious affiliation was that one would cease to regard oneself as a Jew and that one would be set adrift in the non-Jewish world where one was an outsider. Moreover, even the insiders in this world seemed to be reinventing themselves constantly and utterly confused about their identities, which made the prospect of complete conceptual re-ethnicization still less appealing.

However, although Jews for the most part did not adopt the new ideologies in anything like the form in which Gentiles did, these ideologies have still had a significant effect upon Jewish thought and activity. As we will see, this has typically taken the form of assigning to everyday language or citizenship a clearly secondary and derivative role in Jewish identity – but a role nevertheless. This has not, in itself, had a significant effect upon the basic nature of Jewish identity today: what has been significant, however, is that Jews have not agreed upon how to integrate these secondary components into Jewish identity and this is causing an ideological fragmentation of the Jewish community, even among those who would maintain that their Jewishness is the central component of their personal identity.

One enormous problem in this regard is that, in places which proved to be relatively open to Jews, particularly North American and Western European societies, the two new ideologies penetrated Jewish thought deeply and created a conflict with the 'latent' criteria for Jewish identity, namely the abstract attachment of Jews with Hebrew and the land of Israel. Some Jews were convinced by Gentile arguments that if they did have an identity-based attachment to a language, it should be with a living language rather than a dead one, with a language which they spoke rather than a language which their ancestors spoke; and that if they did have an identity-based attachment to a territory, it should be the territory in which they lived and the country of which they were citizens, not a territory in which their ancestors lived long ago. Thus, identity-based attachments to, e.g., American citizenship and the Dutch language not only constituted an alternative non-Jewish identity, they also undermined abstract attachments to the land of Israel and to Hebrew.

Many Jews have, therefore, concluded that being Jewish has no or almost no connection to either the Hebrew language or the land of Israel, so



that among diaspora Jews there has been an unprecedented drop in practical knowledge of Hebrew among Jews (see Chapter 2) and an equally unprecedented indifference or, in some cases, even hostility to a Jewish presence in the land of Israel (particularly if it is close to Jewish holy sites on the West Bank). This has resulted in a situation in which such Jews are maintaining their identity as Jews but the content of their 'Jewishness' seems to be fairly thin (as is inevitably the case when a given understanding of group identity is historically shallow) and assimilation is a real danger.

Other reactions have been possible and the array of choices has split the Jewish communities of Europe and the Americas. Some Jews, particularly among secular Ashkenazim in the late 19th and early 20th century, have decided that Yiddish, which was at the time a living language for them, should serve a role for Jews parallel to the role which everyday languages were coming to serve in Gentile groups. Other Jews, particularly after the Second World War, have developed the concept of 'Jewish languages' (which will be the topic of Chapter 3), which uses the ideology of language-and-identity to reinforce the distinctiveness of Jewish identity by claiming that, even in many cases in which Jews and Gentiles speak in a mutually intelligible manner, they are speaking different languages, e.g. a Jewish language such as Yiddish or Ladino as opposed to a Gentile language such as German or Spanish. However, many other Jews have concluded that if identity should be reflected in everyday language and citizenship/livingplace, then they, as Jews, should be speaking Hebrew as their everyday language and living in a Jewish state in the land of Israel, which has resulted in the revival of Hebrew as a living language, the Zionist movement and the development of an Israeli identity; I will return to discuss this matter in more depth in Chapter 2.

And many Jews – very many – are torn between these various positions.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this introductory chapter how Jews relate language and identity, how this conception has developed and changed over time and how the Jewish conception of identity follows naturally from the historical experience of the Jewish people in developing a way to maintain their identity even though their homeland had been conquered and dominated by foreign powers for almost 2000 years. In this sense Jews are by no means unique but are rather generally similar to most neighboring groups who have had a similar historical experience (see, e.g., Smith, 1991: 33–7). With this as background, we can now turn in following chapters to a consideration of various Jewish sociolinguistic phenomena.



## Notes

1. The Circassians in Reikhania recently chose to switch from Arabic to Hebrew as their language of instruction; the Circassians in Kfar Kama have been schooled in Hebrew for some time.
2. Reikhania does have people who speak Arabic as their native language but these people are ethnic Arabs whose community has never spoken Circassian (Isabelle Kreindler, personal communication).
3. These and other statements I will make regarding how 'Israeli identity' is conceptualized (particularly in Chapter 4) are based upon extensive discussions I have had on this topic with a large number of Israelis, including class discussions I have led.
4. In the sense of combining analysis of sociolinguistic phenomena which are specifically Jewish with typological comparison, my approach may be seen as similar to that of Fishman (1972, 1978, 1981a, b, c, 1987, 1991, *inter alia*). Fishman's ideological approach, however, which views language as necessarily and universally being at the core of ethnic identity (see, e.g., Fishman, 1972: 46, 1991: 22–3, 46), is, I will argue at length, based upon non-Jewish ideas and is not consonant with the ways in which Jews, in general, have thought about the relationship between language and identity, and, in fact, Fishman explicitly states that, from the viewpoint of his ideology, Jews are not 'normal' (e.g. Fishman, 1978). It seems to me that willfully adopting for the study of a particular society an analytical framework within which that society is seen as abnormal is scientifically irresponsible and methodologically indefensible. My own approach, like that of Nisan (1991), Kotkin (1992), and Cohen (1997), takes Jewish behavior as being 'normal' behavior of a certain type and, as a result, the conclusions which I reach and, in fact, the entire nature of my discussion will be entirely different from Fishman's.
5. For those researchers primarily interested in contextualizing ideas or narratives in terms of the power of those who advocate them rather than their actual substance or their historical status, it is of course possible to categorize ideas or narratives as 'hegemonic', 'dominant', 'minority', 'subversive', etc., producing a sterile analysis which predictably implies a value judgment favoring whatever ideas or narratives happen to be 'subversive' in a given context over whatever ideas or narratives happen to be 'hegemonic' in that context (if it implies anything at all), independent of any consideration of the ideas themselves. I will not be taking this approach here.
6. I am here referring to a classical Pan-Arab Nationalist position, according to which being an 'Arab' is defined as having the Arabic language as one's main language of daily written and spoken usage. I will discuss this matter at length in Chapter 4.
7. By 'groups' here I refer to sets of people who can constitute a complete self-contained community. People can also be divided into other types of groups within a community, according to variables such as gender, age, and occupation.
8. Some communities (e.g. the Ethiopian Jewish communities) have traced Judaism through the father rather than the mother. In very recent years, Reform Judaism has recognized someone as Jewish if either parent is Jewish. In some countries (e.g. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union), non-Jews have defined people as 'Jews' according to broader ancestral criteria (e.g. having a single Jewish grandparent or even great-grandparent).
9. In this and following cases, I am using the term 'Copts' to refer specifically to

Egyptian Copts, not Ethiopian Copts. Though Ethiopian Copts only became institutionally independent of Egyptian Copts in the 20th century, they have been distinguished clearly from Egyptian Copts throughout history in terms of race, geographical separation, political separation and spoken language, and so represent a distinctive group. It is my impression that Ethiopian Copts do not regard themselves as being a unified people in the way that Egyptian Copts do, particularly because they are distinguished from each other today by spoken language, which is not the case for Egyptian Copts.

10. Israeli Jews, even highly educated ones, have only the vaguest idea about the nature of groups in other countries in the Middle East such as the Copts and Maronites and tend to regard them as religious groups rather than as also being ancestral (like Jews). I believe that this is because Israeli Jews equate these groups with Israeli Arabic-speaking Christians, who are almost all Greek Orthodox or Catholic and (unlike, e.g., the Copts and the Maronites) who really are a purely religious group and not a nation.
11. This is not, however, true for every Jewish community. Yemenite Jews, in particular, appear to form an 'isolate' in the sense of being quite distinct genetically from Jews elsewhere and relatively similar (though not too similar) to Yemenite non-Jews. Presumably this reflects a rare case of a conversion of large numbers of non-Jews to Judaism at some point in the past (Bonné-Tamir, 1985; Livshits *et al.* 1991: 135–7), most plausibly during the Jewish kingdom in Yemen in the fifth century (Bonné-Tamir *et al.* 1979: 330). Within the historical North Semitic area (present-day Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq at least), Jews seem to be genetically quite similar to non-Jews. Thus, although Iraqi Jews are close to European and (to a slightly lesser extent) North African Jews, they are even closer to Iraqi non-Jews; in fact, Iraqi non-Jews are very genetically close to both Polish Jews and Moroccan Jews, closer than the latter are to each other (Livshits *et al.*, 1991: 136). This most likely reflects a considerable mixing of Jewish and non-Jewish populations in the Middle East prior to the Muslim conquests, which sent the Jewish population, which had been centered in Babylonia, to various mostly westward locations (Bonné-Tamir *et al.*, 1979: 331). For ABO blood type, unlike most other genetic markers, Jews tend to share features of co-resident non-Jews more than Jews elsewhere in the world. This appears to be the result of a general property of ABO blood type of correlating with resistance to certain diseases which are prevalent in certain areas, so that there is local selection of ABO blood type over a period of time which is, to some extent, independent of ancestry (Ammerman & Cavalli-Sforza, 1984: 95–8).
12. This is what people who identify themselves as Arabs will almost invariably publicly assert, although this definition turns out to be problematic with respect to people who might be considered to be Arabic-speaking Jews as well as some other non-Muslim groups such as Maronites and Copts: I will return to this matter in Chapter 4.
13. I will consider the relationship between citizenship (specifically Israeli citizenship) and Jewish identity in Chapter 4.
14. Presumably what the writer means to say is 'which groups get labelled 'white'' rather than 'which individuals get labelled "white"': an individual American Black will be considered to be a member of an oppressed group by virtue of oppression against Blacks in general rather than oppression which s/he has personally experienced.
15. In Germany, it has traditionally been politically correct to insist that the Jews are

- a religious group rather than a people and politically incorrect to insist that the Jews are a people rather than a religious group (both views are, of course, factually incorrect but the third possibility, that Jews are both, would require adjusting one's understanding to the actual thinking of actual Jews rather than to the exigencies of a German-internal discourse).
16. Chris Hutton (personal communication, 2002) has reported this trend to me.
  17. See Gold (1985) for a discussion of the characteristic features of what he calls 'Jewish English': he refers to this as a 'lect' rather than a 'language'.
  18. This is true for the question of 'What is a Jewish language?'; however, as we will see in Chapter 2, goals of national independence did play a role in the program to revive Hebrew as a spoken language.
  19. I would not include under this heading the Melkites of Antioch and Jerusalem, who are religiously Greek Orthodox (some have also become affiliated with Rome in the last few hundred years) but are not ethnically Greek (they appear to have been basically ethnic Arameans, like the Jacobites and Maronites, who unlike these groups joined the Great Church rather than an ethnic Aramean church). As opposed to other Arabic-speaking Christians (e.g. Maronites and Copts), Melkites long ago abandoned their ancestral tongue as their sacred language, turning to Greek and basically identify themselves as 'Arabs' today (see, e.g., Wessels [1995: 62], who identifies them as 'the most Arab of the Christians'). Some of the labels I am using are controversial; for example, many of the people whom I am calling 'Copts' would prefer to be called 'Egyptians' to reflect the fact that they are the original inhabitants of Egypt, while referring to the demographically and politically dominant Muslims, the descendants of the Arab conquerors of Egypt in the seventh century and converts, as 'Arabs', 'Egyptian Arabs' or 'Egyptian Muslims' reflecting their historical status as invaders.
  20. A good portion of the Armenian people were actually under the rule of Persia rather than the Roman/Byzantine Empire after their Christianization in the fourth century until the Arab conquest in the seventh century. It happened that during this time Persia as well was controlled by a regime, the Sasanians, which had an official religion (in this case Zoroastrianism) and persecuted dissenters (Walker, 1980, Garsoian, 1997a,b)).
  21. See Moosa (1986) for a refutation of the view that Maronites accepted the Council of Chalcedon. He also argues, however, that the Maronites did not become distinct from other Syrian groups until the eighth century CE.
  22. I would also include Sikhs in this typological group, though they are not Middle Eastern. The Druze are an 11th century offshoot of Islam: other than very recent immigrants to countries like the United States, they have essentially categorically maintained Arabic, their ancestral language, as their spoken language. In a certain sense, they can also be considered religious+ancestral groups, although because almost none of them has switched away from speaking Arabic, there is no clear reason for not saying that they are a religious+ancestry+everyday language group.
  23. I will generally use the term 'land of Israel' to refer to what Jews historically called (in various languages) 'the land of our fathers/ancestors' or 'the Holy Land', terms which would sound strange in present-day non-religious writing such as the present book (as I have mentioned, for the Samaritans this term has a broader geographical reference). The currently popular term 'Palestine' has not been used by Jews to refer to this territory and it has only been used by non-Jews

- during those two periods of time (first by Romans in response to the revolts of the first and second centuries CE and then by British and Arabs in the 20th century) during which Jewish military resistance, or the prospect of Jewish military resistance, led non-Jews who had conquered the territory to give it a non-Jewish name as part of an ideology denying the historical connection of Jewish people to the land (the Romans coined the term after the ancient Philistines, who had disappeared from the scene by the time the Romans conquered the area).
24. The language of the Koran has, in some sense, been 'revived' as Modern Standard Arabic but, significantly, this is only among people of what is conceived as the Arab ethnicity (including Christians), not among Muslims in general.
  25. Although I have stated here that everyday language is a characteristic central feature of the groups discussed in this section, people whose parents have recently immigrated, e.g. to the United States from Poland, may still consider themselves to be 'Polish' in some sense even if they basically do not speak Polish or live in Poland. It might be argued that those Middle Eastern groups which have only begun to switch away from their ancestral languages in recent times – particularly the Chaldeans, Assyrians and, to some extent, the Armenians – might in theory be put in the same category. I am not doing this here because I believe that there is a fundamental distinction between these types which will become apparent only after this process has been developed further. To the extent that Eastern European groups in the diaspora retain their ancestral identity independent of everyday language, they do this out of family loyalty and this does not last for more than a generation; however, Middle Eastern groups view their ancestral identity as much more essential and they can retain it indefinitely, regardless of whether they switch their everyday language.
  26. The same sort of problem comes up for the Arabic-speaking religious+ancestral groups discussed earlier, e.g. Maronites and Copts, in that Muslims will typically claim that these people are 'Arabs' on the basis of their spoken language but members of the religious+ancestral groups themselves will normally deny being 'Arabs'. This has been associated with tensions between these groups and Muslims, most notably during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), which first broke out because Maronites did not allow Palestinians to use Lebanon as a base for attacks against Israel, thereby showing insufficient commitment to the Arab cause (see Phares, 1995). This problem does not arise for Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics, who almost invariably consider themselves to be 'Arabs' (see fn. 19).
  27. A remnant of this survives in the ancestrally defined Cohens and Levites, though this does not have social significance in the normal sense today (it can, however, have legal importance, for example in restricting marriage with converts).

## Chapter 2

# Hebrew

Hebrew is generally conceptualized as *the* Jewish language, and it must be the starting point of any discussion of 'Jewish languages'.<sup>1</sup> It has a written history dating back about 3000 years and it has gone through major changes in its sociolinguistic status during this time, including being revived as a vernacular language approximately two millenia after it disappeared in this function, a development with no parallel in human history. It continues to be used as a ritual language and as a symbol of Jewish identity in the diaspora.

### Hebrew as the Language of Ancient Israel

According to traditional scholarship, which, at one point, assumed that everything in the Bible was true and, more recently, has taken the position that what is written in the Bible is true unless there is good reason to believe otherwise (that is the Bible is a source like any other), Hebrew was originally the language of the Canaanites, the people living in (approximately) what is now Israel, and Jews adopted this language around the time when Abraham and his family moved to Canaan, as recounted in Genesis. Judging from the area they supposedly migrated from and the fact that they were referred to with the epithet 'wandering Aramean' (Deuteronomy 26:5), it can be supposed that their native language had been Aramaic. Another significant piece of evidence comes from Genesis 31:47, where Jacob and his father-in-law Laban build a cairn as a testament to an oath they are swearing, with Jacob, whose grandfather Abraham had emigrated to Canaan from Aram, referring to it with the Hebrew *gal'ed* and Laban, his kinsman who had remained in Aram, using the Aramaic equivalent *yegar sahadutha*. Sa'adya Gaon wrote in the Middle Ages in his Commentary on the *Sefer yetsira* (p. 45) that Aramaic was 'the language of the fathers' (quoted in Patai, 1977: 545).

Patai guesses that Abraham's family gradually switched from Aramaic to Hebrew over the course of four generations (Patai, 1977: 43). Such a reconstruction does not rest on very sound historical evidence and Gaon's

assertion regarding Aramaic was by no means universally accepted by other traditional Jewish scholars; however, arguments against Jews having an Aramaic ancestry have equally little historical support. In short, it is not very clear what the historical truth is. In terms of times when the historical record is clearer, Hebrew is the earliest spoken language of the Jews but it is possible that the Biblical account reflects some earlier stage when they or some subsection of their population spoke Aramaic.

It is clear, however, that Hebrew was not simply 'the language of the Jews' in ancient times. It is referred to as 'the language of Canaan' (Isaiah, 19: 18) and there is no reason to believe that the language of Jews and at least some non-Jews in Canaan (e.g. Amorites, Jebusites, Zidonites, etc.) differed in any significant way. Chomsky (1957: 44–5) states that *'ivri* [Hebrew] was intended to have geographic rather than a national/ethnic reference (meaning presumably that it refers generally to people living in an area rather than any specific people), while Patai (1971: 111) notes that 'Hebrew' in the Bible is used only to refer to people (including non-Jews), never the language. Thus, the earliest recorded usage of 'Hebrew' seems to refer to a group of neighboring peoples, of which the *bney yisra'el* (a.k.a. Jews) were one; only later, when the spoken language had died and been maintained only by Jews as a sacred language,<sup>2</sup> did the term come to refer to the sacred language of the Jews.

Hebrew was, therefore, not historically a Jewish language in the sense that it was spoken equally – and perhaps originally – by non-Jews. These other peoples, however, have long since disappeared from the historical records, presumably absorbed in the various waves of conquest which have swept the area, leaving the Jews as the only group using Hebrew. If the biblical account of Jews being originally Arameans is true, then this means that their adoption of the Hebrew of the Canaanites was only the first instance of a historical process through which Jews have adopted the everyday language of other peoples, which has been repeated many times up to the present date: what distinguishes Hebrew is that, in this case, the language disappeared entirely among non-Jews and so came to be associated particularly with Jews.

In the Second Temple Period, Jews initially continued to write Hebrew in the archaizing style associated with the First Temple Period even as spoken Hebrew continued to develop and change. It was only with the Maccabean revolt in the second century that the written language – known as Mishnaic Hebrew – again began to catch up with the spoken language (Fellman, 1985: 28–9). Such developments are universally common, as with, for example, the Slavic languages: Slavic vernacular writing developed in the 9th–11th centuries during periods of national expansion by the Bulgarians, Serbs and proto-Russians, the Slavic language ossified during foreign

(particularly Muslim) overlordship, and then vernacular writing reappeared beginning in the late 1700s in the context of modern nationalistic movements.

## The Death of Hebrew as a Spoken Language

The Babylonians ended Jewish independence in 586 BCE and though the actual period of Babylonian control was relatively short, it ushered in a period during which Aramaic, which functioned as an administrative language of the Babylonian Empire and as the *lingua franca* of the Middle East in general at the time, came to replace Hebrew as the everyday language of Jews. Two hundred and sixty years later, the invasion of Alexander the Great left the Middle East under Greek control, 260 years after that the area was taken by the Romans and another 200 years later, after a considerable number of attempts to resist resulted in catastrophic defeats, terrible loss of life and exile, the Jews resigned themselves to foreign domination of their homeland for the indefinite future.

As a result of these changes, Jews began to switch away from Hebrew as their everyday language, with the rate of change and the language switched to varying from place to place. First, they began to switch to Aramaic, then Aramaic and Greek competed and later Latin entered the picture as well. This development was facilitated by the fact that when the Jewish homeland was conquered on various occasions, the fierceness of the resistance put up by the Jewish defenders as well as the general practice of the day resulted in many Jews being taken away into exile or slavery in various places around the various empires involved, while many others left more voluntarily as a result of the decline in living conditions in their homeland. Thus, Jews outside of the homeland came under intense demographic pressure from speakers of other languages.

The speed with which the Jews switched away from Hebrew to other everyday languages is, to say the least, widely disputed, both because of the paucity of clear records and, one may imagine, because of the symbolic significance of the matter. The Talmudic sages claimed that already in the time of Ezra (fifth century BCE) Jews already needed Aramaic translations of the Bible (Babylonian Talmud Meg. 3a). This appears to be supported by the following quote from Nehemiah 8: 5–8.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people . . . and Yeshua . . . and the Levites caused the people to understand the Torah; and the people stood in their places. So they read in the book, in the Torah of God, distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.



In contrast, Chomsky (1957: 206–17) argues against this view, ultimately claiming that ‘there is indeed ample evidence to indicate that the Hebrew language did not die out as the vernacular of the Jewish masses till several centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple [in 70 CE – J.M.], not only in Judea but even in Galilee . . . and in Babylonia’ (p. 215). Patai (1977: 58), however, claims that Jews in the homeland and in Babylonia had switched to Aramaic as a colloquial language by the first century BCE. Fellman (1973: 12) believes that the switch away from Hebrew took place around 200 CE (Kutscher [1982: 148] more or less concurs with this opinion). Sáenz-Badillos (1993: 113), however, believes that not only Babylonian Jews and returnees from Babylonia but other Jews as well, at least in Galil and Samaria (though not Judah), had switched to Aramaic as their daily language before the coming of the Greeks in 332 BCE.

Suffice it to say that a review of the literature on the topic suggests that it is extremely unclear exactly or even approximately when Hebrew disappeared as a vernacular language among Jews. Traditional claims that this took place shortly after the Babylonian Exile are based upon oral tradition written down perhaps 1000 years after the fact. It should also be considered that the Talmudists making these claims were themselves native speakers of and writing in Aramaic, so they might have some interest in ascribing as great antiquity as possible to the Jews’ adoption of Aramaic.

At the other extreme, Chomsky’s claims that Hebrew survived as the Jewish vernacular for 900 years or more after the Babylonian Exile – even in Babylonia – are on no firmer footing: they are based upon the fact that at least some Jews seemed to have used Hebrew in a fluent and colloquial fashion for a long time after the exile (and, it must be said, upon quotes without bibliographical references from ‘one rabbi’ or ‘another rabbinic statement’ [e.g. Chomsky, 1957: 217]). This argument is specious: there are tens of millions of people today who can use English (for example) in a fluent and colloquial fashion even though it is not their native language. In addition, it is clear that Chomsky, in a book he chose to entitle *Hebrew: The Eternal Language*, in which he assigned to Hebrew a unique metaphysical status, would have an ideological interest in an argument suggesting that Jews held onto Hebrew for as long as possible, no less than Talmudic sages would have been interested in suggesting the reverse.

Spolsky (1989a) offers what appears to be a balanced position on the development of language use among Jews following the Babylonian conquest. He finds that in the homeland under Roman occupation in the first century, for example, Hebrew appears to have been still spoken by some Jews (particularly in villages in Judah), though all apparently knew Aramaic and some higher-status people and residents of coastal cities knew Greek. In written language, Greek was used for government,



Hebrew for ritual purposes (although there were Aramaic translations of the Bible) and Aramaic for trade and law.

While the length of maintenance of Hebrew in the homeland and Babylonia is a matter of debate, there is agreement (even from Chomsky) that the Egyptian Jewish community, which dated from 600 BCE and which rivaled the Babylonian Jewish community in terms of size (Alexandria had one million Jews at the beginning of the Christian Era), switched away from Hebrew quite quickly. Chomsky notes that already in 410 BCE when Egyptian Jews sent letters to the High Priest in Jerusalem appealing for help in dealing with the native Egyptians, they wrote in Aramaic, not Hebrew, and when the Greeks came 80 years later, the Jews switched to Greek fairly quickly.

## Hebrew as a Sacred Language

When Hebrew died as a spoken language, it became a sacred language. The Hebrew language itself, particularly the Hebrew of the Bible and even more particularly the Hebrew of the Five Books of Moses, became the object of metaphysical study and speculation. The order of the letters in the text and the alphabet, the shapes of the letters, the numerical values of the letters (e.g. *alef* = 1, *bet* = 2, etc.), permutations of the letters in roots, the metaphysical significance of, e.g., voicing or pharyngealization, cryptographic analysis of the Biblical text (substituting letters for other letters according to fixed formulas, reading the text backwards letter for letter, reading letters at certain intervals in the text, etc.) – all of these were investigated in Hebrew specifically because Hebrew was assumed to have a unique metaphysical status (Glazerson, 1991).

In this esoteric function, Hebrew has generally functioned for Jews in a way similar to that of Classical Arabic for Muslims, Latin for Catholics, etc. Some differences should be noted, however. It has been a general principle for Jews that nothing – absolutely nothing – in the original Biblical text should be changed (added or subtracted) which might affect its interpretation (this was particularly important for cryptographic analyses), even when there might appear to be grammatical or spelling mistakes: all sorts of annotations and diacritics were routinely added, particularly to aid in the pronunciation of the vowels after Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language, but the original text could not be changed.

There is, thus, incredibly little variation found in existing Jewish manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the Pentateuch: existing Hebrew versions of the Pentateuch show variations in only nine out of more than 300,000 letters, as compared with more than 15,000 variations in the much shorter New Testament texts (Satinover, 1997: 51). Unlike Christians, Jews

did not (until recent times) simply discard commandments as being purely legal or formal: this is not to say that no commandments have ever been taken 'off the books', but doing so has traditionally required an enormous amount of justification and argumentation based upon other interpretations of sacred texts. However, unlike Muslims, Jews do not 'correct' what might appear to be grammatical mistakes or inconsistencies in the original text.

After spoken Hebrew disappeared, it was decided to develop a system of marking basic Hebrew texts with a variety of diacritics so as to make the correct (supposed historical) pronunciation clear, particularly indicating vowels, gemination of consonants, whether certain consonants should be pronounced as stops or fricatives, pauses and intonation. This was done because of (1) the ritual importance of reading Hebrew out loud, (2) the fact that basic Hebrew writing makes very limited and unsystematic use of vowels and does not mark certain not-always-easily-predictable alternations in consonants and (3) the idea that the original text of the Bible could not be changed. The notation which was developed in response to these needs has come to be known as Masoretic (derived from the root meaning 'tradition' or 'pass on'). Three different Masoretic systems developed and these have come to be known as Tiberian (the most important), the Babylonian and the Palestinian (see Sáenz-Badillos, 1993: Ch. 4). In practice, this attempt to maintain a fixed pronunciation of Hebrew (predictably) did not entirely succeed and different Jewish communities ultimately developed different traditions of pronunciation, but the diacritic system did at least put some restraints on this variation.

The average Jew has had incomparably more contact with his (or, to a lesser extent, her) sacred language than has the average Muslim or Christian. Jewish practice has always placed great importance upon basic early literacy in Hebrew. This has been central to Jewish education for at least 2000 years, so that basic literacy was widespread in Jewish communities even at times when only a tiny percentage of Christians and Muslims could read at all. It should be emphasized, however, that basic literacy in Hebrew was taken as the norm for Jewish boys/men, not girls/women. If we compare this to present-day standards, this system was of course sexist but, in terms of general societal literacy, it was quite progressive in comparison with what was going on in other religious communities.

The idea that the average Jew should come into regular contact with Hebrew at least in traditional religious contexts has in recent times even been explicitly formulated as a philosophy within the Hasidic movement:

In Hasidism teachings *about* language, in particular about Hebrew, became an important instrument in striving to communicate the

intense spirituality and sense of 'radiance' which was perceived by the Hasidic masters and which they sought to transmit to others. Through these teachings, the sacred tongue became a vehicle to impart overt intimations of 'holiness' to those for whom encounter with Hebrew texts was a natural part of everyday life. (Loewenthal, 1993: 168)

It must be emphasized that it is only basic Hebrew literacy which can be said to have been central to general Jewish education over the years. The average man (= male) could understand simple and familiar texts, particularly if they were widely and frequently read and referred to throughout the community, e.g. well-known and frequently-recited prayers, parts of the Bible, Rashi's 11th century commentary on the Bible, Caro's *Shulchan arux* (published in 1565, a practical guide to Jewish observance and law and commentaries on it) and Danzig's *Xayey adam* (1810) and Gansfried's *Kitsur* (1864), which had similar functions; typically, however, he could not, understand much of non-basic new texts without a translation.

Advanced literacy in Hebrew (e.g. the ability to read and understand entirely unfamiliar and relatively complex texts) has been generally limited to an elite. Thus, Stampfer (1993: 134) reports that, in pre-modern Eastern Europe, almost all Hebrew writings were either for basic ritual purposes or directed to a (fairly small) learned audience. Hebrew was generally perceived as the language of basic literacy: Aramaic, in contrast, was more associated with higher scholarship, as it was the language of the two most important advanced texts, the Talmud and the Zohar (Scholem, 1946, Stampfer, 1993).

The uses to which Hebrew has been put over the years have varied from one Jewish community and one time to another. About the most which can be said by way of generalization is that there has always been an emphasis on being able to read and vocalize the Bible in Hebrew (at home as well as in the synagogue), though often only understanding it though translations, and being able to pray in Hebrew. In practice, the daily prayers have been overwhelmingly in Hebrew but prayers in other languages have often found their way into the services, and the Mishna, in fact, states that prayers (including the Shma') and the after-meal grace may be said in any language. In addition, some of the most personally significant prayers, particularly the Kaddish (the prayer for the dead) and the Kol Nidre (the prayer with which vows are sealed on Yom Kippur, with the proviso that all vows which one cannot keep after having made a sincere effort are null and void) are partly or entirely in Aramaic. The degree of dominance of Hebrew in religious services has varied from community to community. Harris (1994: 124), for example, notes that while Ashkenazic communities in Eastern Europe used only Hebrew (not Yiddish) for such functions,

Sephardic communities used some Judeo-Spanish. However, sermons, the oral presentation of unfamiliar material, have normally been in the vernacular languages.

In order to ensure a wide understanding of the simple meanings of the Biblical text, which are viewed as no less important than the mystical meanings, Jews have been translating the Bible into vernacular languages for almost 2000 years and Jews have often had basic literacy skills in the vernacular as well (this tended to be more characteristic of women, compensating, to some extent, for the far greater education which men received in Hebrew). However, Jews have also consistently insisted upon the primacy of the original Hebrew text and have given it a prominent ritual function and this has resulted in considerable ambivalence regarding the translation of such sacred materials into vernacular languages. On the one hand, there is a clear recognition that no translation can capture everything which is in the original, as reflected in the rabbinical statement that the day the Torah was translated into Greek 'was as grievous as the day the [Golden] Calf was made, for the Torah could not be translated properly' (Sofrim, 1:7); on the other hand, at worst, translations have been seen as a necessary evil and, at best, 'the translation into the non-Hebrew language is affirmed, not only as something positive, but as holy in its own right' (Loewenthal, 1993: 185).

It is important to note that the impossibility of translating the Bible went beyond the standard difficulties in translating a text. All of the elaborate cryptographic techniques of searching for hidden meanings in the Biblical text were lost in the translation – but nevertheless if the translation could at least help the average Jew to understand the most basic meaning of the text, it was seen as worth it.

This ambivalence about translating the Hebrew Bible and the resulting balance between use of the original text and use of translations is one of the hallmarks of Jewish sociolinguistic practice and distinguishes it from both Christian and Muslim thinking, which tends to be more extreme in one direction or the other in this regard.<sup>3</sup> Catholics and Muslims have only begun translating their sacred writings for the masses at all in the last few generations, with the result that the overwhelming majority of Catholics and Muslims through history have been illiterate and have not had the slightest first-hand idea of the meaning of what was written in their sacred books. Protestants, on the other hand, have adopted the opposite extreme position by translating texts and prayers into vernacular languages and encouraging mass literacy in these languages, so that the actual language of the original text is essentially unused, unknown and irrelevant (cf. the proverbial [to my knowledge apocryphal] justification for an English-only policy in the United States: 'If English was good enough for Our Lord Jesus

Christ, it's good enough for me!'). Jews have consistently steered a middle course in this respect, maintaining some of the original language even though (perhaps because!) this adds a note of mystification but also insisting on usage of the vernacular to insure comprehension.

As Chomsky (1957: 158) notes, 'Traditional Judaism has always endeavored to bring the masses of the people in possession of the Word of God [i.e. it has focused upon making the Word of God the property of, and intelligible to, the entire Jewish people – J.M.], and not to allow it to become the monopoly of the professional clergy or priesthood'. The general theme of reading a Biblical passage in Hebrew to an assembly, some of whom understand very little of it in the original, and then giving a translation and/or explanation of the passage in the vernacular has been an astonishingly consistent component of Jewish sociolinguistic behavior for perhaps 2500 years. Babylonian Jews in the time of Ezra whose native language was (evidently) Aramaic, American Jews today whose native language is English, even Reform Jews who generally understand almost no Hebrew at all and practically all Jews in between have practiced some version of this ceremony.

We find some of the same patterns in secular education in Israel today, even after enormous social changes, including the revival of Hebrew as a vernacular language. As I have noted in Chapter 1, Israeli students who speak Hebrew as their native language, even in secular schools, learn to read the Hebrew Bible from the second grade but because the language of the Bible is so different from their colloquial language, they often cannot understand a passage they read very well until the teacher explains it to them. In addition, in secular Israeli society today as in traditional Jewish society, Hebrew is considered to be the language of basic texts and education but advanced students are expected to be able to read and understand highly valued texts in another language. Traditionally that language was Aramaic but for secular Israelis today that language is English. I would not want to carry this comparison too far – obviously there are vastly more Israelis today with an advanced knowledge of Hebrew than there were Jews with a comparable knowledge in traditional Eastern Europe – but, in a general sense, there are a number of parallels in the situations.

Aside from these functions related to ritual and basic literacy, Hebrew has also served as the Pan-Jewish language, the medium for use between Jews who do not share another common language and also for Jews when they do share a common language but want, for one reason or another, to use a maximally distinct Jewish language (e.g. if they want to be certain that non-Jews will not understand what is being said).

For example, Hebrew was commonly used in everyday speech between Jews who did not share a common language, particularly among different

communities and travellers in the Holy Land but in other places as well (see examples in Chomsky 1957: 217–21). In addition, important works originally written by Jews in other languages would be translated into Hebrew to reach a wider Jewish audience. For example, though Maimonides originally wrote most of his works in Judeo-Arabic, they were soon translated into Hebrew for the benefit of those Jews who lived outside Arabic-speaking areas. In general, when Jews wanted to write for a general Jewish audience, Hebrew allowed for the widest readership; for example, the German Maskilim (propagators of the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment) around 1800 who were interested in reaching European Jews, in general, with writing which was secular or which even encouraged assimilation, used Hebrew because that was the language which would reach the widest variety of Jews (Spiegel, 1962). This use of Hebrew as a pan-Jewish language meant that the language retained a register of common everyday usage even after it died as a mother tongue, which is likely to be the explanation for what appear to be colloquial usages which have led some scholars (e.g. Chomsky) to believe that Hebrew survived as a native language longer than it really did (Kutscher, 1982: 117).

Other than basic education, rituals and *lingua franca* functions, the uses to which Hebrew has been put have varied considerably from case to case, depending upon the nature of the community, the nature of the surrounding non-Jewish community and the Jews' relationship with it. Poetry was often written in Hebrew, most notably *piyyutim*, liturgical poems originating in the middle of the first millennium CE in the homeland (see Kutscher, 1982: 155–8), and the poetry of Jews in Muslim Spain, which was of a wide range of types not at all limited to religious topics (see Patai, 1977: 113–22). Hebrew was used among proponents of the German Haskalah (Enlightenment) in the late 18th and early 19th century in functions which were consciously intended to parallel those of non-Jewish languages, and even to encourage assimilation in some cases (Kutscher, 1982: 183–6; Shavit, 1993).

As might be expected, much of religious writing has been done in Hebrew, and the written versions of sermons given in the vernacular, directed to a more elite audience, have traditionally been in Hebrew (see, e.g., Stampfer, 1993: 135) but even in this area other languages have frequently been used.

The Talmud, for example, was written in Aramaic. Speakers of Judeo-Arabic, including Maimonides, generally used this language rather than Hebrew for religious writings but they began to switch to Hebrew for this function when Arabic culture declined in the 13th century (Patai, 1977: 100, 127). Even mysticism has not necessarily been associated with Hebrew: the most important book of Kabbala, the Zohar, which 'alone among the whole

of post-Talmudic rabbinical literature . . . became a canonical text, which for a period of several centuries actually ranked with the Bible and the Talmud' (Scholem, 1946: 156), was written in Aramaic, although at the time and place (it was apparently written in the 13th century by a Spanish Jew named Moses de Leon), Hebrew would have been the normal language to use for religious writings. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's *Tales of Ancient Days*, dating from the early 19th century, which are probably the most widely read and most broadly influential Hasidic texts (particularly as they are well known even outside of Hasidic circles, having been popularized by Buber's translation [Buber, 1922]), were originally told in Yiddish and, though published editions had both Yiddish and Hebrew versions, translators were always aware that Yiddish was the original and strove to change the Hebrew so as to best render the original Yiddish, not the other way around (Steinsaltz, 1985: xxii-iv).

In fact, it is my belief – although this would be difficult to prove objectively – that there has been a tendency among Jews (perhaps even more than among non-Jews, at least historically) to feel that something which is truly inspired should be written down in the writer's native language, whether or not this happens to be Hebrew. Particularly striking evidence for this is the case of the Zohar, which de Leon originally distributed claiming it to be long-lost writings of the second century CE sage Simeon bar Yohai, whose native language was believed at the time to have been Aramaic.

In some cases, Jews' knowledge of Hebrew has deteriorated. Harris (1994: 124) notes that this was the case in the later years of the Ottoman Empire, so that Judeo-Spanish was sometimes even used for prayers. Most notorious, however, is the case of Alexandria around the beginning of the Common Era, where the enormous Hellenized Jewish population, including such prominent writers as Philo, were more or less ignorant of Hebrew. As Chomsky writes in his characteristically unequivocal fashion:

[The Alexandrian Jews] committed one serious error: they came to regard the Greek version of the Bible as the Torah and the Greek language as their language. They recited their prayers in Greek. They adopted Greek as the language of their culture and religion . . . They attempted to transfer the 'content' of Judaism into a Greek 'vessel,' and they thereby doomed themselves to assimilation and ultimate extinction . . . There were close to a million Jews in Alexandria at the beginning of the Christian Era. Yet, when Cyril and his monks undertook to cleanse the city from the unbelieving Jews in 412 CE, there were only 40,000 Jews left there to be liquidated. (Chomsky, 1957: 213)

Not everyone would agree upon the necessity of the cause-and-effect relationship here. But the empirical facts are clear: the huge Jewish community



of Alexandria knew little or no Hebrew and while that fact in itself did not directly synchronically affect their status as Jews, over the course of several hundred years they did literally fade out of history. American Jews, with their limited knowledge of Hebrew, are thus likely to be highly sensitive to comparisons between their community and that of Alexandria (see Shaked, 1993).

It should be noted that, as with other sacred languages, Hebrew continued to develop even after it was no longer spoken as a vernacular language. The version of spoken Hebrew which developed under the influence of Aramaic after the Babylonian Exile, known today as Rabbinic Hebrew, came several hundred years later to replace Biblical Hebrew as a literary language and it continued in this function after vernacular Hebrew disappeared. Following the Arab conquest, Hebrew changed further as it began to be used for new functions, including liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) and later for more secular works such as scientific treatises: this stage is known as Medieval Hebrew (see Sáenz-Badillos, 1993). In the following section, I turn to more recent developments.

## **Diaspora Hebrew and the Modern European Ideology of Language and Identity**

As noted by Stampfer (1993), in pre-modern times, writings in Hebrew were either quite basic or aimed at a small elite. Creative and non-basic writing aimed at a wider literate audience, with Jews as with non-Jews in Europe, is a relatively recent phenomenon. With modernization, however, this situation changed (see Anderson [1983] and discussion in Chapter 1) and modernized Jews, like non-Jews, began writing more elaborate works for a wider audience on a wider scale. This was the time of the development of the language-and-identity ideology in its modern form, and, thus, just as Germans would, according to this ideology, naturally write to a broader audience in German, Hungarians in Hungarian, Czechs in Czech, Russians in Russian, etc. (replacing earlier sacred languages such as Latin or Old Church Slavonic), it followed that modern Jews, if they wished to write qua Jews at all, should write in some 'Jewish language'. When this movement originated in German-speaking areas in the late 18th century, Hebrew was taken as the natural Jewish language to develop but as the movement spread to Eastern Europe in the course of the 19th century, Yiddish too became a candidate for this.

To be sure, Hebrew presented a special sort of problem. For non-Jewish European languages (and for Yiddish), the purpose was to develop the vernacular language in 'high' functions so as to replace classical and foreign languages. For Hebrew, however, the purpose was to develop a classical language for more modern functions. Thus, the most striking feature of this



new Hebrew at the time was not the fact that it was written at all but rather that it was consciously used in modern and non-traditional contexts. Nevertheless, in a general sense, it could still be said that the goal of the program to develop Hebrew was similar to that of developing vernacular languages (although there was no idea initially of reviving Hebrew as a spoken language – this only began to develop in the late 19th century).

In addition, just as non-Jews came to take language as central to their identity, so some Jews, to the extent that they were affected by non-Jewish ideas, came to take Hebrew as having a more central role in Jewish identity. As Shavit (1993) writes of the Berlin Haskalah, the movement which represented the beginning of this process for Jews around 1800:

[its] practical intention from the outset was to create and propagate a 'new Hebrew language' to function alongside other languages . . . In Haskalah doctrine, language now attained new status as a central element in a Jew's identity and in his consciousness of historical continuity . . . The achievement of the Berlin Haskalah was not only to prove that Hebrew could act as a modern cultural medium. With this proof went a carefully argued ideology that saw Hebrew as a secular national tongue, 'secular' not in the sense of an essentially scriptural medium that also happens to be integrated into national life, but of a medium by which Jews could develop the full spectrum of national secular culture, as an ultimate alternative to the traditional culture. (Shavit, 1993: 111, 121–22).

This movement generally proceeded from German-speaking areas to the east:

[The German Maskilim] believed that the general Jewish public at large, particularly in the East, would be satisfied with a 'modernization via Hebrew.' And this is indeed what happened in the second half of the nineteenth century, when many among the broad band of Jews open to the influence of modern culture received this culture via Hebrew. As Ahad Ha'am showed in his article 'Riv Ha-Leshonot' (The Language Conflict), in Haskalah times Hebrew was 'the beginning of knowledge' (Ahad Ha'am, 1930). (Shavit, 1993: 119)

Although Haskalah thinking was initially applied to Hebrew, as the movement spread eastward it came to be applied to Yiddish as well. Yiddish had not been a popular medium for writing during the Berlin Haskalah for two reasons: first, Jews there were already in the process of switching from Yiddish to German and, second, because German-speaking Jews tended to be assimilationist and affected by the Gentile impression that Hebrew was a great language (because it was the language of the Bible)

while Yiddish was a jargon still spoken by the poorer and more traditional Jews to the east (Shavit, 1993: 116–7).

However, when this movement spread eastward, Yiddish began to develop as a real rival to Hebrew, for the following reasons

- (1) Eastern European Jews still clearly had Yiddish as their main vernacular language.
- (2) Eastern European Jews were generally poorer and less educated and so had less knowledge of Hebrew.
- (3) Eastern European Jews were less concerned with the fact that Gentiles had respect for Hebrew but contempt for Yiddish.
- (4) Particularly after the 1870s, Yiddish gained in popularity in Eastern Europe through its association with the Communist movement, as it was taken as a real ‘language of the people’.

Hebrew, for its part, also gained a new ideological function in the second half of the 19th century through its association with what came to be known as the Zionist movement. Eastern European Jews, thus, chose to focus upon the development of Yiddish, Hebrew, both or neither, depending upon their own home and educational background and their ideological orientation.

The style of modernized literary Hebrew was also significant. Initially, the German Maskilim attempted to imitate Biblical style, avoiding Medieval usages as constituting ‘errors’. This was clearly done under the influence of non-Jewish thinking of the time, which had great respect for the Jews of Biblical times but only contempt (at best) for their descendants. The bizarre combination of ideologies reflected in this Hebrew, according to which it was supposed to be as modern as possible in terms of subject matter but, nevertheless, use Biblical idiom, meant that at the initial stage it was convoluted in the extreme (see, e.g., Shahevitch, 1965, Kutscher 1982) but it did serve the function of drawing a sharp line between the Hebrew of the Maskilim and the Hebrew of traditional (and more strictly religious) Jewish society (see, e.g., Bartal, 1993: 144) and, thus, beginning to create a distinctive modern form of the language.

By the second half of the 19th century, as modern literary Hebrew passed into Eastern Europe, its writers had loosened up and allowed a wider range of usages (including borrowings from Yiddish), resulting in a style which was more natural but still clearly distinct from that of the rabbinic establishment, and the idea that written Hebrew could serve as a vehicle for and a symbol of modern Jewish identity had reached Russia, where it was adopted by thinkers like the writer Peretz Smolenkin, who ‘propagated a cultural revival of the landless Jewish nation, in which

Hebrew – written Hebrew – would play a major role, similar to that of the land in normal nations’ (Kuzar, 2001: 58).

However, this eastward movement proceeded as a wave rather than an avalanche:

This new Hebrew spread from Germany to Hungary, Bohemia, and Moravia [and later to other places in Eastern Europe–J.M.]. In all these places it thrived for a short time, only to die once more. (Kutscher, 1982: 183)

The reason for this appears to have been that although Jews were willing to adopt some version of the language-and-identity ideology under very specific historical circumstances, this ideology was too alien to traditional Jewish thinking to become a stable central part of Jewish identity (see discussion in Shavit, 1993). Typically, there would be a wave of modernization in a particular community, a generation or two would grow up with both more or less a traditional Jewish school/home background (meaning knowledge of Hebrew) and enough contact with the non-Jewish world to feel the need to express their identity through literary activity in Hebrew and they would produce and/or consume modern Hebrew writings of one type or another. Then, in succeeding generations, they would entrust their children’s Jewish identity to the traditional criteria of ancestry and religious affiliation (though usually with limited religious observance), giving them a Gentile education with little Hebrew and the children would end up making very little use of Hebrew. As argued by Mandel (1993: 201):

[The Maskilim] had succeeded in giving themselves a modern education and in learning European languages while retaining a knowledge of, and attachment to, Hebrew, and they could not see why succeeding generations of Jews should not do the same. When they saw that their children were nonetheless abandoning Hebrew their only remedy was to reprove them and exhort them ever more fervently to mend their ways.

Such exhortation was, for the most part, in vain. Modernized Hebrew did not last long in terms of active usage in particular communities: rather it was, in effect, passed around from community to community through the 19th century. Towards the end of the 19th century, it reached the Jews of Eastern Europe, the last to go through the Enlightenment, and it became apparent that it was getting to the end of its rope: there were no other large further-eastward groups of Jews in Europe for whom Hebrew could serve as a vehicle of modernization, aside from which, as we will see in Chapter 3, it was coming under increasing pressure from Yiddish in Eastern Europe.

Not long after this, modernized Hebrew effectively disappeared as a literary language of Europe.

The ultimate failure of the attempt to apply the European ideology of language and identity to Hebrew in the diaspora should be analyzed in comparison with the successful application of this ideology to European languages such as German, Hungarian and Czech, which were consciously developed to serve as the national emblem of a particular non-Jewish people. In the case of diaspora Hebrew, this process did not work for very long, for a number of reasons. First, as noted earlier, Jews are generally not interested in putting language at the center of their identity as Jews. Second, unlike the Gentile languages, Hebrew had no native speakers (at the time) and was, therefore, dependent upon the school system for its survival. Third, Hebrew had no independent or even locally autonomous government which could support its educational use in a modern secular context, so that within a generation or two of leaving traditional Jewish life, Jews received all of their education in the local non-Jewish language and Hebrew was reduced to more symbolic usages. While there is no question that, in terms of effect upon concept of identity, these symbolic usages were important, they nevertheless could not constitute 'a medium by which Jews could develop the full spectrum of national secular culture' (Shavit, 1993: 122).

As we will see in the following section, the development of Hebrew begun with the Enlightenment was ultimately a crucial step in the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language in the land of Israel. In Eastern Europe, however, this movement petered out at the end of the 19th century just as it had petered out in Germany 100 years earlier.

## **The Revival of Hebrew**

Today, Hebrew is the main public language of the Jewish population of Israel, numbering about five million people, and the native language of a clear majority of these, aside from being known well and used daily by the great majority of non-Jewish Israeli citizens, mostly native speakers of Arabic. This is a drastic change from the situation in 1880 when it had no native speakers at all. In this section, I will discuss why and how this has come about.

Before turning to the specific developments involved, some general comments about popular perceptions and scholarly writings about the revival of Hebrew are in order. Fellman (1973) and Kuzar (2001) are undoubtedly correct in their assessment that there has been, in general, far too much emphasis on the 'miraculous' nature of the revival of Hebrew and far too little emphasis on attempting to figure out exactly what happened

and why it happened (see, e.g., discussion in Kuzar, 2001: 85–92). In fact, typical popular writings on the topic suggest that such an understanding is inherently impossible.

However, one also detects in more scholarly writings about Hebrew the reverse tendency, the tendency to claim that the revival of Hebrew was really nothing special at all, just another example of a certain well-known phenomenon, for example Wexler's (1990) claim that Hebrew is relexified Yiddish which is relexified Judeo-Sorbian (see the refutation in, e.g., Goldenberg [1996]) or Izre'el's (1985) claim that the revival of Hebrew was similar to pidginization or creolization, which is transparently unrealistic to anyone who is familiar with actual pidgins or creoles. While I agree that, in order to understand the revival, it must be compared to something, I believe that, to date, the comparisons which have been suggested have been based more upon the desire to reject the popular 'miraculous' notion of the revival of Hebrew in as dramatic a fashion as possible (e.g. in Wexler's case with the claim that Modern Hebrew is really a Slavic language, in Izre'el's case with the barely less absurd claim that Modern Hebrew is a creole) than upon actual similarity to the linguistic phenomena which have been proposed.

It is necessary to state clearly at the outset: that the revival of Hebrew is, as far as we know, an event unique in human history. There has never before or since been a case of what I am referring to as a 'revival', a natural language which was previously spoken by native speakers, then ceased to have native speakers, and then came again to have an entire community of speakers – in fact an entire nation of native speakers. This is simply an undeniable empirical fact. There have, of course, been languages which were seriously endangered but which appear to be making a comeback (e.g. Catalan) but this is quite a different matter, because they always retained a significant stock of native speakers.

I am quite confident that other languages will, in the future, also be revived as Hebrew has been revived but this has not yet happened and so the data regarding the circumstances under which a revival is possible are not yet available to us. The uniqueness (so far) of the revival of Hebrew makes any attempt to relate it to other events difficult – but not impossible. A wide variety of causal explanations may be given, based upon certain similarities between this event and others and, in fact, anyone who is attempting to scientifically analyze the revival of Hebrew has no choice but to suggest that a certain explanation or combination of explanations, related to independent observations about human language, is responsible. However, at this stage, we simply cannot say for sure which explanation for the revival of Hebrew is the correct one. Note, however, that the statement that 'we cannot at present explain why it was possible to

revive Hebrew in such and such circumstances' does not imply that the revival is an eternally inexplicable miracle: it only means that, at present, lacking other cases of language revival which are really similar, we have no way of knowing for sure which of a number of possible explanations is the correct one.

With these considerations in mind, I will in the course of this chapter add my own two cents' worth of opinions regarding which factors seem to me to have been particularly significant in making the revival of Hebrew possible and which do not.

Another point which must be made from the outset is that Modern Hebrew is, by no means, identical to the language of the Bible or the Mishna: it is not today and it was not when it was revived 100 years ago. It is true that the prescriptive norm is 'officially', in theory and in many cases in practice, based upon a mixture of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew (this will be discussed in Chapter 4) but there is also a considerable influence of intervening stages of Hebrew as well as *ad hoc* prescriptive decisions in modern times and the spoken language has developed independently of the prescriptive norm both during the time the language was being revived and in the last 100 years, as is inevitable in any human language.

However, while it is completely unrealistic to claim that Modern Hebrew is the same as Biblical Hebrew, and while Hebrew prescriptive linguists, like prescriptive linguists everywhere, tend to speak in dramatic and hyperbolic terms regarding 'deficiencies' in popular usage (while Hebrew descriptive linguists, likely descriptive linguists everywhere, gloat over these differences in similarly hyperbolic terms, rejoicing in the dashing of the prescriptivists' hopes), it is also important not to exaggerate the differences. Although a few of the verbal forms have disappeared, most have been retained. Although some simplification of subject-verb agreement has taken place in the everyday spoken language (particularly combining masculine and feminine forms in the plurals), the verbal agreement system is still fully intact; although increasing numbers of speakers are abandoning gender agreement between number and noun, agreement between adjective and noun is as strong as ever. Although a significant number of speakers are reassigning the gender of a few nouns, the gender system is fully intact. Although many speakers are confused about (or indifferent to) the distinctions between certain conjugational classes in the prescriptive norm, the basic system of verbal morphology is unchanged.

Anyone wanting to learn modern colloquial spoken Hebrew (let alone prescriptively 'correct' Hebrew) must learn a very complex morphological system in comparison with that of, e.g., Romance or Germanic languages, so that it is quite unrealistic to refer to modern Hebrew as being a 'creole' or having undergone some sort of creolization process in the past (as in, e.g.,

Izre'el, 1985). In a real creolization process, gender distinctions, tense distinctions, verbal conjugations, agreement, all are jettisoned lock, stock and barrel. The historical reason for this difference is quite simple: Modern Hebrew has been taught through the schools, while in creolization processes the children who 'invent' the creole have no effective schooling in the language at all. While the Hebrew knowledge of the teachers has certainly not been of the highest quality (see Bar-Adon 1975), at least they have known agreement patterns, gender distinctions, etc.. The amount of simplification which has taken place should not be exaggerated (however tempting it may be to set the record straight in as dramatic a fashion as possible regarding the fallibility of Hebrew teachers and the fact that Modern Hebrew speakers do not speak the same language as that written in the Bible).

The term 'revival' itself (Hebrew *txia*) is problematic. Kuzar (2001) identifies a 'revivalist' ideology with the 'miraculous' school of research (which can, in fact, hardly be called research at all) and, therefore, rejects it; however, he also notes that there are those who believe that Hebrew has not been 'revived' because Modern Hebrew speakers do not correctly follow prescriptive rules. Alternatively, other researchers have claimed that Hebrew was not 'revived' because 'it was never really dead' (e.g. Chomsky, 1957; Cooper, 1989; Spolsky, 1989b) – it was always in active usage. While this is clearly true, this does not necessarily mean that the word 'revival' cannot be applied to this case. It depends upon how the word 'dead' is used when applied to language.

In my (fairly extensive) experience of speaking to non-Jews around the world about language ecology, it is clear that, when applied to languages today, 'dead' normally means 'having no native speakers', regardless of the other uses to which the language is put. There is no question, for example, that Irish is considered to be in serious danger of 'dying' even though its status in schools in Ireland is quite secure. I have found that if I use the term 'revival' to speak about the Hebrew case, non-Jews (both professionals and laymen) understand correctly what is meant by this term – that, for a long time, Hebrew had no native speakers and now it has native speakers.<sup>4</sup> However, when speaking to a non-Jewish audience, a statement such as 'Hebrew was never really dead' leads predictably to confusion and misunderstandings, because it is taken to mean that there were always native speakers of Hebrew. For this reason, and because I am, to a large extent, directing this book at readers who are not specialists in Jewish linguistics, I am insisting upon using the term 'revival' here.

Research into the revival of Hebrew must, therefore, be directed at attempting to discover how this admittedly (thus far) unique event could have occurred given what we know about human language and society



while, at the same time, acknowledging that specifically because this event is thus far unique, we cannot at this stage really be sure about why it happened. Aside from the theoretical motivation for this research, however, it is also necessary to keep in mind practical considerations. There are an enormous number of dead, dying or seriously endangered languages in the world today and, unfortunately, it looks like the situation is only going to get worse in the short run (see, e.g., Krauss, 1992). It is necessary that we face the fact that, no matter what we do, in the next few hundred years an enormous number of the world's languages are going to die (come to have no native speakers) and for them to have a future, they will have to go through a process similar, at least in a general sense, to that which Hebrew has gone through.

Thus, the case of the revival of Hebrew can be taken as inspirational in the sense that it will show that it is possible for a dead language to be revived and it can also be taken as instructive in that it can at least suggest how this can be accomplished, although, as noted earlier, it is going to be unclear for some time exactly which factors were instrumental in the revival of Hebrew and which were not (see, e.g., Myhill, 2001). I will focus my presentation, then, upon speculation as to which factors led to the revival of Hebrew. Such speculations must be taken with (more than) a grain of salt both in terms of explanation and replicability: any suggestion that the revival of Hebrew was possible because of the presence of a certain factor will naturally suggest that Hebrew could not have been revived in a case where this factor was not present. I will suggest, then, a wide variety of factors which may have facilitated the revival of Hebrew but I do not mean by this that the revival would have been impossible if all of these factors had not held. There is simply no way of knowing at this stage.

In addition, although it may, in fact, turn out to be the case that a wide variety of factors were responsible for the revival of Hebrew and the absence of any one of these factors would have rendered the revival impossible at the time, this does not necessarily mean that Hebrew would never be revived. Jews waited around 2000 years for the right combination of circumstances to arise through which such 'miraculous' events such as the revival of Hebrew and a sovereign state in their ancestral homeland could be brought about and if a people survives as a people and waits long enough for a certain combination of circumstances, they will eventually come about (and will likely be perceived by some as 'miraculous' afterwards). Thus, as important as the combination of circumstances allowing for the revival of Hebrew to take place may be, it is still more important that Jews were able to survive as a coherent group in order to be able to wait so long for these circumstances to coincide.



With all of these caveats in mind, I now turn to consideration of the historical development of the revival of Hebrew.

### **Ben-Yehuda and the motivation for the revival of Hebrew**

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda is commonly regarded as the prime mover in the revival of spoken Hebrew: more or less the only thing Israeli schoolchildren are taught about the revival of spoken Hebrew and the only thing that the average Israeli knows about it is that Ben-Yehuda did it pretty much single-handed (see, e.g., St John, 1952). In particular, Ben-Yehuda is said to have begun the revival of Hebrew by insisting on speaking only Hebrew to his son, who, therefore, became the first native speaker of Hebrew in two millenia or so, and to have singlehandedly written a dictionary of Hebrew which effectively transformed it into a real modern language.

These two claims about what Ben-Yehuda did are, in a literal sense, correct. However, it is obvious to serious researchers that Ben-Yehuda's role in the revival of Hebrew was vastly less important, in terms of practical accomplishments, than is popularly believed (see, e.g., Fellman, 1973). For example, it cannot be said that the movement to revive Hebrew literally developed around Ben-Yehuda.

Although Ben-Yehuda set up residence in Jerusalem at the very beginning of the Zionist movement (before it was even known as Zionism and 15 years before Herzl came to have a central place in the movement) and remained there to do all his work, the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language first took place in the agricultural communities established by later immigrants: Jerusalem was practically the last place to adopt Hebrew. Not only that, but the model of parents teaching Hebrew to their children was adopted by almost no-one else: in the actual process of reviving the language, parents almost invariably learned to speak the language from their children rather than the other way around. Ben-Yehuda's dictionary, while undeniably an amazing accomplishment for a single person, was only published and available to the public sometime after Hebrew was revived as a spoken language, aside from the fact that it was hardly a model of the lexicographer's art or science (Ben-Yehuda had no formal training in linguistics or lexicography).

The inflated status of Ben-Yehuda in the popular imagination has led serious researchers to devote considerable effort to debunking myths about him (see, e.g., Fellman, 1973; Haramati, 1978; Harshav, 1993) and, at times, this has even degenerated into almost personal bitterness against him (see, e.g., Fishman, 1991, discussed in Myhill, 1999a). Still, reconsideration of the reconsideration of the myth of Ben-Yehuda has led to the conclusion that he was, in fact, of great importance to the revival of Hebrew, though not as much as traditionally thought.

For example, as noted by Kuzar (2001: 119), '[W]ithout Ben-Yehuda's publicized insistence on bringing up his son only in Hebrew, no one would have known that it was possible'. This is absolutely true. Similarly, even if Ben-Yehuda's dictionary had been of practical use to no one at all in the course of the revival of the language (which is perhaps not much of an exaggeration of what actually happened), the very fact that he was known to be working on it while the revival was going on changed the popular image of Hebrew from being a 'dead' language to being one in which 'anything can be said'. As Fellman (1973: 134) writes, '[Ben-Yehuda's dictionary] proved to some skeptics that Hebrew was a language like every other language, since it now possessed a lexicon on which it could be based. For many people believe that a language is based on its dictionary'. Professional academic linguists, of course, recognize the naivety of the idea that a language is based upon its dictionary and are likely to admit only through clenched teeth that a dictionary, even a truly bad dictionary, can change public perceptions about what is a 'real language' and what is not but that is the reality of the situation.

But beyond the psychological effect of publicity about intrafamily language policy and dictionary-making, Ben-Yehuda must be identified as being undeniably the originator and publicizer of the idea that Hebrew could be revived as a spoken language in the first place. It may be argued that such an idea was 'in the air' in any case but it was Ben-Yehuda who first publicly, demonstratively and (most importantly) insistently suggested it. He was willing to be known as someone who would literally devote his life to a cause which seemed to be an impossible dream.

Under these circumstances, it seems that any attempt to answer the question of why Hebrew was revived as a spoken tongue (as opposed to how it was revived, to which I will turn in the following section) must take as a starting point Ben-Yehuda's motivation, considered, of course, in its general intellectual milieu.

In all sources of which I am aware, there is no idea that Ben-Yehuda was motivated by what might be seen today as considerations of language ecology. Rather, his motivation seems to have been purely nationalistic, in the most basic sense: it was the survival of the Jewish people.

Morag (1993: 210) notes that Ben-Yehuda's most celebrated article *She'ela nixbada* ('A Serious Question') 'primarily addresses not the topic of language but the issue of achieving the ends of nationalism; language is a means towards these ends'. As argued in Mandel (1993), by 1880, Ben-Yehuda had come to the conclusion that the Jewish people had no future in Europe. Open societies were developing, members of minority groups were educated in the language of the majority and Jews were everywhere in the minority there and, thus, doomed to assimilation: 'It is a law of

nature, for they are the many and we are the few; they are the ocean and we are the drop . . . ' (Ben-Yehuda, 1880: 298). He saw as the only solution to this problem the resettlement of the ancestral homeland, where the Jews could constitute a local majority: 'If we wish, then, to prevent Israel's name from being blotted out completely, we must do something . . . and that is – settlement of the Land of Israel' (Ben-Yehuda, 1879: 364–5). But this would not be enough: in the land of Israel, at the time under Ottoman rule and with a non-Jewish Arabic-speaking majority, the Jews would still be in a minority if they did not have their own state, and they would face the same problem:

In his first article [*She'ela nixbada*], written when he was twenty-one, Ben Yehuda traced the growth of nationalism in Europe and sought a definition of this term, applying this definition then to the case of the Jews in Europe. Ben Yehuda did this, as he was particularly interested in forming a definition of European nationalism, for he felt that the downfall of the Ottoman Empire was imminent. Further, if the Jewish people could form a state in Palestine acceptable to both France and England, the main interested parties in the area, this state would receive their backing and thus international recognition. The question, then, for Ben Yehuda, was: what characteristics qualified as attributes for a nation-state. One attribute, perhaps the main distinctive feature of the Europe of Ben Yehuda's time and certainly the most important for our purposes here, was that of a common spoken language. (Fellman, 1973: 22)

This was, of course, the result of the propagation of the ideology of language-and-identity by European non-Jews in the last century or so (see Chapter 1). It appears that Ben-Yehuda did not himself believe that a common spoken language was a necessary component of 'peoplehood'. In reply to a claim by Ludwig Philipson, an exponent of the Berlin Haskalah, that '[R]eal national life is indispensibly tied together with a common language. The Jews, however, do not have one' (Philipson, 1878: 372), Ben-Yehuda argued that

nationality does not necessitate unilingualism. Belgium, Switzerland, France—all have speakers of minority languages, yet they do not cease to be members of their respective nations. 'We, the Hebrews, even have an advantage over them, for we do possess now a language in which we can write anything we wish, and we can even speak it, if only we want to' [Ben-Yehuda] . . . Ben-Yehuda clearly refuses to accept a linguistic basis for nationhood; he merely suggests that even according to Philipson's logic the Jews have an advantage over the Swiss, for they have a common written language, which can be activated in speech at

will, when the need arises, whereas the Swiss share no language at all. Nevertheless, Ben-Yehuda is aware of the problem raised by his argument: the days that all Jews knew Hebrew are gone. (Kuzar, 2001: 79)

Thus, regardless of Ben-Yehuda's personal feelings about the importance of having a common language in terms of nationality, he recognized that as long as Jews were in a situation in which Europeans were the dominant group, they would have to strengthen their national position vis a vis this ideology. Given that he was thinking in terms of the land of Israel, it is natural that he viewed Hebrew, not Yiddish, as the key to the future of the Jewish people.

In fact, as demonstrated by Mandel (1993), Ben-Yehuda did not initially think that reviving spoken Hebrew would be necessary to achieve these political goals. He soon perceived, however, that current social conditions would not allow Hebrew to survive long if it were only a literary language. Since Jews were now going to school in non-Jewish languages, they were not getting the same level of Hebrew education as the earlier Maskilim had, and in the land of Israel as well at the time, where various philanthropic organizations had set up schools for Jews, these schools were conducted in French, German or English. Ben-Yehuda, thus, concluded that, in order for Hebrew to survive (so that the Jews in the land of Israel would be recognized as a people worthy of their own state), it would be necessary for it to be revived as a spoken language and to do this, it should be used as the language of instruction in the schools there (Mandel, 1993: 199). This is, in fact, what ultimately happened.

It is important to distinguish Ben-Yehuda's thinking from that of other trends of the time which interacted with it but which were conceptually distinct. The idea of developing Hebrew to be the national language of the Jewish people was, of course, derived from Haskalah thinking which began in Germany almost a century before (and in a more general sense from the whole European intellectual milieu of the time) and even the idea of teaching in Hebrew, though it had not been put into practice before, cannot be attributed exclusively to Ben-Yehuda (see, e.g., Haramati, 1978). Ben-Yehuda was original, however, in suggesting that Hebrew be developed specifically in the land of Israel.

The idea of Jews moving to the land of Israel was certainly known at the time but Ben-Yehuda was the first to suggest that this be combined with a program to revive Hebrew. In addition, the typical motivation for Jews to move to the land of Israel around 1880 was avoiding persecution rather than avoiding assimilation and both the Jews who moved and the organizations which helped them there were motivated by short-term need rather

than a serious long-term policy. However, as noted by Mandel (1993: 193), 'anti-Semitism seems to have played no part in the process by which [Ben-Yehuda] reached [his Jewish-nationalist views]': he was more of an immigrant than a refugee, and he arrived before the Russian pogroms of 1881 which brought the First Aliyah (wave of immigration) to the land of Israel and long before Herzl was convinced by the Dreyfus affair that European anti-Semitism was incurable. Ben-Yehuda was clearly ahead of his time (though not entirely alone) in his conviction that emigration to the land of Israel was the only long-term solution to the problem of the survival of the Jewish people and, in this respect, he can be considered as one of the 'forerunners of Zionism' (Katz, 1971).

The uniqueness of Ben-Yehuda's thinking was not in these particular ideas taken individually, then, but rather in putting them together into a package which could produce a practical result. Emigration to the land of Israel would provide relief from persecution, while attempts to maintain or revive Hebrew in the diaspora would provide a short-term basis for Jewish identity in the modern world, but each of these programs alone, without the other, would not protect against assimilation in the long run. Together, however, they would result in a Jewish nation-state which could preserve the Jewish people.

It must be recognized that Ben-Yehuda was enormously influenced by non-Jewish ideologies, particularly Slavic nationalism, although it is difficult to tell to what extent he really believed these ideologies himself and to what extent he was adopting/adapting them to the case of the Jewish people for practical purposes. The development of a language for the purposes of claiming 'peoplehood' and thereby strengthening claims to the right of independence was a common tactic among Eastern European peoples at the time (see, e.g., Rabin, 1986), though of course in practice, as I have noted, such cases amounted to the opposite of what Ben-Yehuda advocated (Gentiles typically took a spoken language which was ideologically felt to be the 'core' of their identity and gave it 'high' usages, while Ben-Yehuda advocated taking a language which already had 'high' usages and making it a spoken language). In fact, Ben-Yehuda was not merely influenced by Slavic nationalist ideas: as he wrote 40 years later, he was literally himself a Slavic nationalist before turning his efforts to the Jewish cause (see Mandel, 1993: 194–5, Kuzar, 2001):

As nihilism was capturing my soul, I got further removed from Jews and all Jewish matters, which started to seem to me so little and insignificant compared to the great Russian people! Gradually, one after the other, almost all the strings that fasten every Jew to the whole Jewish people were severed. Nothing Jewish captured my interest, and I felt

myself – or at least I imagined to have felt myself – a complete Russian. (Ben-Yehuda, (1917/8) 1943: 7, quoted in Kuzar, 2001: 56)

He claimed, however, to have been saved from nihilism by his love for the Hebrew language, which he never lost (Ben-Yehuda (1917/8) 1943: 7). He identified his decision to commit his life to its ultimate course as taking place on a certain night (which Mandel [1993] places in 1877) when he was enthralled by the prospect of the Russians defeating the Turks and liberating the Bulgarians (their Slavic brothers) from Turkish rule:

And once again it came to pass at midnight.

After several hours of reading the newspapers and pondering the issue of the Bulgarians and their future liberation, all of a sudden as if lightning flashed before my eyes, and my thought flew from the Ford of Shipka in the Balkans to the Fords of the Jordan in the Land of Israel, and I heard a strange internal voice calling unto me:

The revival of Israel and its tongue in the land of our forefathers!

This was the dream. (Ben Yehuda, (1917/8) 1943: 9, quoted in Kuzar, 2001: 62)

Kuzar (2001: 64) makes the important point that

[T]he decision to act politically for the revival of Israel in the land of its forefathers could have been easily carried out in Ben-Yehuda's home milieu from a comfortable armchair in one of the intellectual salons of the intelligentsia by an essayist making verbal commitments to these causes. This is what many *haskala* authors were doing. But this did not satisfy Ben-Yehuda's [Russian] nihilist ethos, which survived in him despite the change of allegiances. To struggle still meant to him to take personal responsibility and to act, to 'self-realize here and now'.

So Ben-Yehuda, having made something of a name for himself with his articles, set off for the ancestral homeland to attempt to carry out the project he envisaged.

### **How Hebrew was revived**

As I have noted, the actions which Ben-Yehuda undertook to revive the language had only limited practical effect, although their symbolic significance for the revival program was considerable. I will begin this section by discussing Ben-Yehuda's activities before turning to those practical steps taken by others which constituted the actual spadework of reviving Hebrew.

One well-known step which Ben-Yehuda took was to insist that, from the moment of their arrival in the land of Israel in 1881, he and his wife

Dvora speak only Hebrew to each other and to their children. This turned out to be difficult, however, because Ben-Yehuda's own Hebrew was by no means fluent and, in particular, his knowledge of everyday terms was poor indeed, while Dvora's was far more limited even than that. Stories abound as to the extent to which communication within the family in Hebrew was often very low in referential content, members of the family 'cheated' by using other languages and Ben-Yehuda resorted to bizarre tactics in an attempt to enforce the sole use of Hebrew (see, e.g., Klausner, 1939; Ben-Avi, 1961; Fellman, 1973) but suffice it to say that, sure enough, young Itamar grew up with Hebrew as his first language, though he only produced his first sentences at the age of four. After all, it does not take much knowledge of a language to be able to speak it to a child up to the age of four.

In addition, although Ben-Yehuda himself seems at first to have been relatively ignorant of basic words in Hebrew, the fact is that Hebrew as it was generally known to Jews at the time was by no means a language restricted to high-flown intellectual functions. In particular, the basic Hebrew texts known to and used by a wide audience for the purposes of properly following Jewish rituals and laws, the most recently popular of which was Ganzfried's *Kitsur*, contained usages of a wide variety of basic words which could be invaluable in speaking the language with children (see Glinert 1987, 1991). In practice, according to Fellman (1973), Ben-Yehuda only convinced four other families to follow his example at home, so that in terms of direct practical results this step did not produce much. Nevertheless, it was invaluable in terms of convincing people that it was, in fact, literally possible to have a Hebrew-speaking household in modern times.

Ben-Yehuda's other two main initiatives were the publication of a Hebrew-language weekly newspaper, *Hatsvi*, and researching and writing a dictionary, *The Dictionary of the Hebrew Language, Ancient and Modern*. There were already Hebrew language newspapers at the time, both in Europe and the land of Israel, but they were aimed at either highbrow Maskilim or traditional religiously-oriented readers. Ben-Yehuda, however, intentionally wrote a newspaper modeled after normal secular newspapers of the day aimed at a general audience, which necessitated developing a large number of new words and taking a large number of old words out of mothballs. It cannot be said that the newspaper manifested the most elegant Hebrew writing imaginable or that it was maximally efficient in terms of introducing new words (see Fellman, 1973: 118–26) but neither did it have much competition in terms of secular newspapers in the area at the time. It is clear that it was of some benefit in terms of getting local Jews to read and treat Hebrew as an everyday language suitable for treating any



topic, at least until Ben-Yehuda began to focus his attention on his comprehensive dictionary around 1900.

The dictionary served extremely little practical function in the revival, as it only appeared after the crucial stage in the revival had already been passed. Of considerably more practical use to the revival were simple multilingual pocket dictionaries between (Modern) Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian which Ben-Yehuda began to publish in 1899. It is important to note that the ideology behind Ben-Yehuda's lexicography, both in the words he introduced (or often coined) in his newspaper and in his dictionaries, was to provide words, not to prescribe word usage: prescriptivism only started to enter the picture in a significant way after the language was revived (see Fellman, 1973; Kuzar, 2001).

Ben-Yehuda also made organizational efforts on two fronts: the organization of Hebrew-speaking societies and a Modern Hebrew Language Council. Neither of these, however, had much of an effect upon the revival of the language itself, although the Language Council came to play a significant role after the language was revived.

All in all, it can be said that Ben-Yehuda's role, and his success, lay in publicly calling for Hebrew to be revived as a spoken language and in eliminating, through tireless if not necessarily particularly skilful work, a number of the potential excuses which people might use to convince themselves and others that it simply was not possible. If people claimed that it was absurd to think that a child in modern times could speak Hebrew as his/her first language, one could point to Itamar; if people claimed that Hebrew was only suitable for high or religious functions, one could point to *Hatsvi*; and if people claimed that Hebrew lacked the words for certain concepts, one could at least reply that 'Ben-Yehuda is working on it'. As anyone who has worked with language-revival or language-maintenance programs can testify, defeatism in wide sections of the populace for a wide range of (typically unfounded) reasons is an enormous obstacle, and for one person to do so much singlehandedly to overcome arguments which the typical person might advance is an amazing accomplishment.

This said, I must concur with the consensus of scholarly opinion (e.g. Fellman, 1973; Fishman, 1991; Kuzar, 2001) that Ben-Yehuda had very little role in the actual nuts-and-bolts of the revival of the language. The key to the revival of Hebrew was using Hebrew as the medium of teaching ('the Direct Method') in primary schools (beginning in 1886), then pre-schools (beginning in 1894), then high school (beginning in 1904) and finally the Technion, the first Israeli university (beginning in 1913). The ideology behind this was stated most eloquently in 1892 by the pioneer Hebrew teacher David Yudelevitsh:



Right now, the nation of Israel has no Hebrew courthouses, community or government centers, marketplace or stock market, no country and no commercial place on the face of the earth we can point to: here we shall employ and develop and persist in speaking Hebrew so we can get used to it, and it will become a language spoken in our mouths. None of that do we have, and we have no place where we can speak in our language about daily experience. Just one corner, one small place is left us, where there is hope, where all our faith lies that the language will emerge from there and be spoken by the sons and daughters of Israel who will then be able to bring it to the marketplace, to commerce, to community centers, to all walks of life—and that place is the school. (Quoted in Karmi, 1986: 80–1)

These schools functioned basically like what are called today ‘immersion’ schools in North America and Europe, in which children are educated in a language which is neither their home language nor the local ‘mainstream’ language (in fact, they were, to my knowledge, the first regular schools of this type anywhere in the world), except that their ultimate goal was monolingualism not bilingualism. These programs began specifically in the agricultural settlements founded by immigrants from Eastern Europe (e.g. Rishon Letzion and Zixron Ya’akov), and only spread to the cities some time later. Ben-Yehuda had himself advocated this and the three months he taught Hebrew in a primary school in Jerusalem in 1883 showed that it was possible (he had to stop when his health began to fail). While there were not enough competent speakers of conversational Hebrew to make it practical to teach Hebrew regularly from parent to child, there were enough to allow teaching Hebrew from teacher to student; or, more concretely, given that in the early 1880s essentially no-one had the ability to speak fluent Hebrew of the sort necessary to teach a class in it, even to primary school children, it was only the teachers, for whom acquiring the ability to teach in Hebrew was (or became) part of their job, who had the time to do this.

It was these people, ‘the last of the Hebrew-literate beys-medresh and yeshiva boys’, as Glinert (1993a: 228) puts it, who were directly responsible for the revival of Hebrew. In the early years, the situation of these teachers was extremely difficult: they lacked teaching materials, their conversational Hebrew was not great, and they frequently had little background in any kind of teaching at all. In order to make up for their lack of vocabulary, they commonly invented words on their own and this, of course, resulted in an enormous diversity of usages among them and, consequently, among the children. As one such teacher, David Yellin, wrote:

Every teacher had a French or Russian teaching book of his own, and

according to it he organized his Hebrew work . . . New teaching books were not yet available . . . terms needed for teaching did not exist. Every village teacher was an Academy member with regard to creating words according to his taste, and everyone, of course, used his own creations. Every village school was a world unto itself in its curriculum, teaching and artificial words for every subject. (Yellin, 1928: 141)

A writer in *Hatsvi* noted in 1901 (Hurvitz, 1901):

The person who passes through our country . . . will hear in each and every settlement a different language . . . In almost every settlement the most commonly talked-about things are called by different names or with different vowelings. Here they say *gir* ['chalk'] and here *neter* and here *karton*. This one says *xeret* ['letter'] and this one *mixtav*. One says *shmurat ayin* or '*af'af* ['eyelash'] and another, *risim*. In one school it is called a *bima* ['teacher's podium'], in another a *katedra* and in another a *makteva*. This one says *sargel* ['ruler'] and that one *sirgal*, this one *safsel* ['bench'] and that one *safsal* . . . (etc.)

The lack of general centralized planning involved in the revival of the language cannot be overestimated. I would agree entirely with Nahir's (1998: 336) assessment that 'it is altogether historically unjustified to label the process as language planning, at least according to current definitions'. The activity of the Hebrew Language Council during this time was limited to attempting to standardize pronunciation and unsystematically suggesting words for usage (which, in any case, individuals were doing on their own on a larger scale than the Council possibly could) and, in the time between 1891 and 1904, the most crucial years of the revival, it did not even convene. Eventually, starting around 1911, after the language had been revived, the Council got involved in attempting to put some order on things but this was irrelevant to the process of the revival itself (Kuzar, 2001: 133).

Nevertheless, the work of the teachers and the ideological support given for the revival of the language, particularly by parents who were willing, in fact anxious, to make their children's language the home language and essentially learn it from them, was enough. Nahir (1998: 353) describes the revival of Hebrew as involving what he calls "'micro language planning", in which the potential speakers, highly motivated, constituted "teams" of non-centralized, individual "micro language planning agents" operating in "language planning cells"' (see also Dagut, 1985). By the early 1890s, children were speaking Hebrew in schools on agricultural settlements; ten years later, they were speaking it outside of schools on these settlements to each other, though still usually as a second language; ten years after that,

there were already a significant number of native speakers (Nahir, 1988; Spolsky, 1989b). The 1916 census showed that 40% of the Jews in the *yishuv* (Jewish settlement in the land of Israel; 34,000 out of 85,000) and 75% of the young Jews claimed Hebrew as their first or only language (Bachi, 1955).

Aside from its increasing dominance in the usage of individual children, Hebrew also expanded from its original base in the agricultural settlements, to which as late as 1903 it was still largely restricted, being the language of instruction for only about 5% of the children in the country, to take over the entire (Jewish non-Ultra-Orthodox) school system of the *yishuv* ten years later, which involved displacing French, German and English as the language of instruction. However, dramatic as this expansion was, particularly the triumph of Hebrew over the Western European languages in institutions of higher education, there was nothing particularly special about it: it is quite common for languages to expand their domain of usage and many 'little' languages at the time were displacing the languages of large empires in higher functions. What was unique (to date) about the process was the initial revival of Hebrew as a spoken language on the early Zionist agricultural settlements: nothing of this type had happened before and nothing of this type has happened since.

### **Why was it possible to revive Hebrew?**

To this crucial question, several proposals have been offered. To begin with, there are a number of misconceptions about the revival of Hebrew which are associated with commonly advanced but inadequate explanations. One misconception among non-linguists is that Hebrew was revived because it had the full support of the Israeli government: this is clearly not true, as the language was fully revived at least 30 years before the state of Israel even existed. Another transparently incorrect account I have heard from non-specialists is that it was revived as part of a fundamentalist religious movement, which is clearly wrong, as it was specifically revived among people who were rejecting traditional Jewish religious life. In fact, the traditional conservative religious settlements resisted the revival for some time. Another misunderstanding is that Hebrew was never really dead in the first place, that it always had at least some native speakers, as the result of misleading statements by people like Chomsky, as I have discussed earlier.

A less transparently incorrect explanation is related to the fact that Jews in the land of Israel spoke a diversity of languages and needed a common *lingua franca* (see, e.g., Cooper, 1989; Nahir, 1998). While there is no doubt that historically non-native Hebrew served as a *lingua franca* for Jews in the land of Israel and that, at the time Hebrew was revived, Jews there spoke a wide variety of languages, in fact in the places where Hebrew was revived

the Jews basically spoke Yiddish among themselves and, therefore, needed no *lingua franca* (Nahir, 1988; Spolsky, 1989b). Multilingual cities such as Jerusalem lagged far behind in this development. It is clear that later, after there was already a generation of native speakers of Hebrew in the agricultural settlements and the language had spread to the cities, and particularly during the avalanche of immigration which accompanied and followed the founding of the state half a century later, the *lingua franca* function of Hebrew was beneficial to its spread. It also stands to reason that, on many occasions, the first Direct Method teachers would have turned to local usage of Hebrew as a foreign language for words they did not know how to say, but in terms of actual practical need to speak Hebrew for lack of another means of communication, this cannot be said to have been much of a factor in the initial revival of the language.

Related to this account is the incorrect belief that Hebrew was revived in large cities, where people were more cosmopolitan and needed a common language and also more educated. I have heard this from specialists in Native American languages who, thus, believe that the case of Hebrew is fundamentally different from that of the endangered languages they are working on themselves. This too is clearly not the case: Hebrew was first revived in more or less monolingual small settlements which had even fewer residents than many Native American reservations.

The explanation for the revival of Hebrew must be sought elsewhere. I will now turn to other factors which I believe were more significant.

### *Knowledge of Hebrew*

It has been claimed that the Jews who revived Hebrew already knew the language, or at least had a strong background in it (e.g. Chomsky, 1957; Cooper, 1989). As we have seen, the application of the European ideology of language and identity to Hebrew beginning with the Enlightenment in Western Europe and moving into Eastern Europe in the second half of the 19th century did not ultimately last long in the diaspora but it did, at a crucial time, produce a supply of Jews with a strong knowledge of a relatively modernized version of Hebrew. As Glinert (1993a: 228) puts it:

If one wishes to know where all this [European modernized Hebrew – J.M.] has gone, it has quite literally gone to Israel. With the last of their strength, the last of the Hebrew-literate beys-medresh and yeshiva boys brought it and taught it as spoken Hebrew (how precisely they did it, no one in all truth knows). Had the revival of spoken Hebrew had to wait one more generation, we should almost certainly still be waiting.

As Glinert notes, the traditional Jewish education which the revivers of Hebrew had was invaluable in the revival of Hebrew, to the extent that a gen-

eration later such a revival might have been impossible. Most crucially, Hebrew had at least a number of the levels needed to function as a full-fledged language at the time: thanks to the Maskilim and to religious writings, it had a high literary and formal level (unlike, e.g., Native American languages today) and, thanks to popular basic texts such as Ganzfried's *Kitsur*, it had a basic level (unlike, e.g., Latin) – what it lacked was a modern level and this the teachers and Ben-Yehuda had to more or less make up. The seriousness of this task should not be underestimated. Reading the accounts of teachers at the time, there is no doubt that they had to work very very hard. It is clear, however, that at least they had – or at least there were resources through which they could acquire – the necessary linguistic knowledge for the task.

Still, although some knowledge of Hebrew on the part of the teachers was indispensable to the revival of Hebrew, it is clear that (1) their conversational Hebrew, especially at the beginning, was not strong at all and (2) in any case, knowledge of Hebrew could only be a necessary condition for the revival, not a sufficient one. Certainly the early teachers of Hebrew were no better equipped than, e.g., teachers of Irish in Ireland today are. Additional factors must be considered to explain why Hebrew could be revived.

#### *The revival of Hebrew and immigration*

To my mind, it is, in general, the model of immigration to a country in which education is purely in the national language rather than the immigrant language which provides the most apt comparison to the revival of Hebrew (see Nahir, 1998: 349). In a certain sense, it can even be said that the revival of Hebrew was simply another case of immigrants switching to the language of the country to which they move – with the difference being that prior to their arrival Hebrew was only 'the language of the country' in an abstract sense.

Advocates of language maintenance are all too familiar with the devastating effects upon immigrant languages of public schooling which is monolingual in the mainstream language. Typically (though not invariably), children who spoke only an immigrant language to their parents and with their small friends will not only learn the mainstream language when they attend school in it but before long they will begin speaking it even to peers who know the immigrant language as well. It is perhaps one of the most shocking, unnerving and counterintuitive experiences a parent can have to hear one's children, to whom one has spoken one language since their birth, speaking to each other, in one's presence, fluently, unself-consciously and far better than one could ever hope to do oneself, in a different language but this is, in fact, a completely routine occurrence in immigrant families.

It is necessary to consider in this light the contribution of the parents. Aside from those with a particularly strong Hebrew background, they essentially learned the spoken language from their children. This is not an easy thing to do, particularly psychologically. However, it is also not necessarily so unusual: in more or less any situation in which a family immigrates, the children normally learn the language faster than their parents and, in many situations, the parents' main opportunity for regular verbal interaction in the language of the country is with their children. This is likely to be the case any time the parents can get by professionally with relatively minimal knowledge of the national language but the children would prefer not to speak the immigrant language even at home. Prior to the 1980s, for example, there were *kibbutzim* founded by adults who were all speakers of one immigrant language (e.g. English or Spanish) who were allowed by *kibbutz* rules to speak the immigrant language to each other but only Hebrew (not the immigrant language) to their children. Their experience in 'learning the language from their children' was quite comparable to that of the parents of the first native speakers of Modern Hebrew (in fact, it was probably generally even more difficult, as their Hebrew was typically quite weak indeed).

As a rule, we can say that adult immigrants to a new country are characteristically highly motivated to learn the language of their new country, even if this means largely learning it from their children and, in this respect the parents of the first native speakers of Modern Hebrew were unusual as parents but not as immigrant parents. In relation to this, Mandel (1980) argues that the revival of Hebrew was possible because it took place in communities of immigrants, all of whom were highly ideologically motivated in terms of having a favorable attitude towards Hebrew (after all, they had chosen to immigrate). Thus, there were few or no 'slackers' who with their inertia would hold back the revival of Hebrew. This contrasts with the situation of such languages as Irish or Welsh today (or, for that matter, Hebrew in Europe at the time of the revival), where there are certainly a good number of language enthusiasts but they are demographically mixed with people who are considerably less motivated. By contrast, anyone who has visited such places as Native American reservations or *Gaeltachts* in Ireland or the Basque region in Spain has had the experience of finding and talking at length with language enthusiasts who speak of their dreams and plans and who are frustrated by the indifference or even resistance of their neighbors.

Also significant in this regard is the status of Yiddish (see, e.g., Harshav, 1993: 108; Nahir, 1998: 342). It is normal in cases of immigration that the immigrants regard the language they associate with the country to which they have immigrated more highly than the language of the country from

which they have emigrated. After all, they have chosen to leave one country and move to another and such an effort requires considerable motivation independent of considerations of language. In the case in question, this meant that these immigrants to the land of Israel would naturally regard Hebrew more favorably than they regarded Yiddish. In relation to this, it is clear that Yiddish suffered from a significant image problem at the time, and although it is true that many European languages at the time were undergoing a very serious legitimization program, in the case of Yiddish this had not made nearly as much progress in the 1880s as it would 30 years later (see Chapter 3).

This is crucial because it appears that even very young children seem to be highly sensitive to the general prestige accorded a language in the social milieu in which they grow up and they modify their linguistic behavior accordingly. For example, pre-school children in Israel whose parents are native speakers of English will freely speak English to them in front of their non-English-speaking friends, while Israeli children of the same age whose parents are native speakers of Amharic will typically insist on speaking Hebrew to them in front of their friends (even Amharic-speaking ones), even if the parents' Hebrew is very poor indeed: children seem to be able to sense that English is a prestigious language while Amharic is not without being explicitly told this.

Still, ideology can be consciously manipulated and children can be 'fooled'. As previously mentioned, it was, until the 1980s, quite normal in Israel for even English-speaking parents to insist on speaking only Hebrew to their children, with the result that the children did not discover that English is an enormously prestigious language until it was, so to speak, too late and they had lost the opportunity to be native bilinguals.

It cannot be denied, of course, that there is one drastic difference between the revival of Hebrew and a typical immigration situation: the early Hebrew teachers simply did not know Hebrew very well, so that the actual spoken form of the 'mainstream' language was, to a certain extent, being learned by the teachers only slightly earlier than it was being learned by the students (although it is not clear the extent to which the students were aware of this). The teachers must have been highly motivated indeed to have been able to stay ahead of the students in this process. I will turn to this matter in the following section.

#### *The motivation of the teachers*

It is possible that the teachers had gone through thought processes similar to Ben-Yehuda's or read his writings: it is not clear to what extent this might be the case. What does seem clear, however, is that they must have adopted something like the ideology of everyday-language-and-



identity, which, I have argued, is not consistent with traditional Jewish thinking. However, they could not have adopted it in its typical European form, because, if they had, they would have devoted themselves to the spoken Jewish language, Yiddish, rather than to Hebrew: aside from being the typical European manifestation of this ideology, it was the native language of the great majority of them, so it simply would have been much less work for them. It appears that what they did, rather, was to take the dominant Eastern European ideology associating everyday language with not only religious affiliation but also living-place/citizenship (see Chapter 1) and apply it to themselves as residents of the homeland, so that they would naturally associate living in the land of Israel with speaking Hebrew (see also Sivan, 1980; Nahir, 1998: 343): the Jews who wanted to use this ideology to develop Yiddish, however, stayed behind in Europe.

The revival of spoken Hebrew thus satisfied the need of the immigrants to be both Jewish and modern, just as did the ideology of nationalism based upon their ancestral homeland (O'Brien, 1986: 48). They would only have been so strongly motivated to choose such a course of action if they were, in some sense, desperate, perhaps not necessarily in the universal sense that Ben-Yehuda was (seeing no other future for the Jewish people in general) but at least in the personal sense of seeing no other solution to their own identity crisis – in other words, they had despaired of Judaism in its traditional form (which is not to say that they had necessarily given up on Jewish religion in general but rather that they saw no future in how it was traditionally practiced at the time).

As previously noted, advocates of Hebrew in the *yishuv* did not face significant opposition from Yiddish, because the Eastern European proponents of Yiddish stayed behind in Eastern Europe. There was, however, significant opposition from Western European Jews who took it as their goal to 'civilize' the Eastern European Jews through philanthropical organizations by teaching them in (and teaching them) a 'civilized' language such as French, German or English: it was these languages that revived Hebrew was competing against in the non-traditional communities. Western European Jews had addressed the problem of modernization by accepting, to a large extent, the idea of citizenship-and-identity and by developing a new organized form of Jewish religious practice (Reform Judaism) which could be integrated into a modern lifestyle. As Western Europeans, they were, in any case, less taken with the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity and formulated their program for the Jewish future without taking it into consideration, so that the thought of going to the trouble of reviving Hebrew would have been unlikely to occur to them (cf. Herzl's (1896: 88) naïve statement that 'Who among us has sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that



language? Such a thing cannot be done', written well after the revival of Hebrew was already underway).

The other main opposition to the revival of Hebrew in the *yishuv* came from traditional religious Jews. For some time, these Jews regarded both Zionism and the revival of Hebrew with suspicion and even hostility, because of their generally conservative bent, because these movements were undertaken by modernized Jews and because they could be taken as violating religious tenets. Even in 1916, when Hebrew had been revived in the rest of the country and 40% of the *yishuv* spoke Hebrew as a native language, only 3% of the Jews in the Holy Cities (including Ben-Yehuda's home base of Jerusalem) could speak Hebrew (Bachi, 1955) and even today there are Ultra-Orthodox groups in Israel who reject spoken Hebrew (Poll, 1980). It was only when the movement succeeded that religious Jews got on the bandwagon and decided that secular Jews had unwittingly done God's work.

This is not to say that religious groups have not been affected by the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity. As we will see in Chapter 3, the maintenance of Yiddish as a spoken language in the Ultra-Orthodox community can presumably be traced to contact with this idea among non-Jews, just as their dress is modeled upon non-Jewish dress of several hundred years ago. Particularly because the founders of their movement were native speakers of Yiddish, distinctive usage of Yiddish as a spoken language fitted better with Ultra-Orthodox ideology than did the transformation of Hebrew into a secular language. Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel have for the most part eventually accepted Modern Hebrew but they would not have instituted a process of reviving it on their own.

#### *Age of exposure to Hebrew*

If a single practical step appears to have been decisive in the revival of Hebrew as a living language, it was the introduction in the mid-1890s of Hebrew 'preparatories', which children would attend for a year or two before entering elementary school, the purpose of which was to expose the children intensively to Hebrew at a very young age. The Hebrew-speaking elementary schools which opened in the mid-1880s were not enough: Nahir (1988) notes that, in 1891, it was written that '[E]ven the Hebrew school graduates, who were already more or less fluent in the language, mostly stopped speaking Hebrew when they were away from school, especially at home' (Smilansky, 1930: 9). Although the Hebrew primary schools opened in the 1880s were certainly effective in teaching the students Hebrew, they still faced the obstacle of having to begin first-grade teaching to students in a language which the students did not know and which they

could perceive was not the language of the community (Nahir, 1988). This was changed entirely by the pre-schools:

As to the effect on the revival of the language among the children . . . the kindergartens did wonders. Thanks to them alone Hebrew became the language the youngsters used almost regularly, and when they entered school they could continue to develop their potential naturally and persistently. Moreover, now these children became the most effective vehicle for spreading Hebrew speech amongst their families. (Azaryahu, 1933: 79)

Ben-Yehuda's son Itamar reported after visiting a pre-school in 1902 that 'they speak Hebrew . . . and in three months!' (Ben-Avi, 1902: 110). A 1902 letter to the editor of the newspaper *Hazixroni* writes that, in the settlement Zixron Ya'akov,

at last our teachers have now prevailed and Hebrew is dominant in our settlement. [You] will find speakers of Hebrew not only among the students at school but among the settlement's young men and women as well, although they did not know the language before; I was one of them. (*Hazixroni*, 1902: 242; see also Zuta 1929)

It appears, then, that it was the introduction of Hebrew-speaking pre-schools in the mid-1890s, mainly in the agricultural immigrant settlements, which got the revival of Hebrew off the ground. This runs counter to the view of Harshav (1993), who believes that the key step came only with the Second Aliyah, beginning in 1904, whose immigrants were more highly ideologically motivated than those of the First Aliyah. A review of the evidence presented in, e.g., Nahir (1988, 1998) (some of which I have already quoted) suggests, however, that Hebrew had already been effectively revived in the speech of children below the age of 10 prior to the arrival of the immigrants of the Second Aliyah, though only in a very limited number of settlements (perhaps 5% of them), that is, those settlements in which the immigrants of the First Aliyah had managed to take control of the schools. The immigrants of the Second Aliyah were far more effective in terms of imposing Hebrew-medium education upon large segments of the *yishuv*, and this resulted in an enormous spread of revived Hebrew (see later), but the actual initial revival itself appears to have been accomplished at the tail end of the First Aliyah.

#### *Taking control of the schools*

The revival of Hebrew was only possible because its proponents were able to put their programs into practice in the schools. As previously noted, they encountered resistance to this chiefly from the Western European

philanthropic organizations which had been established to help needy Jews and to introduce them to the wonders of Western European culture through education in French, German, and English, through the Alliance schools, schools sponsored by the Rothschild family and the Hilfsverein schools.

The First Aliyah, which began in 1883, was made up largely (though not entirely) of refugees from Russian pogroms who were motivated more by need than by ideology and they were dependent upon help from philanthropists. As a result, though they did manage to impose Hebrew on the schools of the agricultural settlements which were their own strongholds, routing the Rothschild's officials, teachers and French-language policy and, after the introduction of the Hebrew-medium preschools, reviving the language among small children in these settlements, they were reluctant to take more aggressive action and, consequently, 20 years after their arrival, Hebrew-medium schools were still limited to these settlements.

The Second Aliyah, on the other hand, beginning in 1904, was motivated less by immediate need and more by ideology: they challenged the language policy of the philanthropic organizations directly and ultimately overthrew it altogether (Fellman, 1973). The culmination of this was a strike against the Texnion (the first university in the *yishuv*), which was supposed to open in 1913 with classes in German and this strike spread around the country and resulted in not only the Texnion but the entire *yishuv* (except for the Ultra-Orthodox) adopting thenceforth the policy that education for Jews, at all levels, should be basically in Hebrew. The Western European organizations did not like this (not least because their teachers simply could not teach in Hebrew at the time) but they were forced to accede. This policy has been followed to the present day: unlike neighboring countries such as Egypt, Lebanon or Turkey, there are no universities in Israel, not even private ones, giving instruction in any language but Hebrew.

I will not go through the details here of the 'Language Wars' which resulted in Hebrew displacing all other languages for (Jewish) education (see, e.g., Chomsky, 1957; Fellman, 1973). Suffice it to say that, in discussing the culmination of these 'wars', Rabin (1967: 15) writes that '[F]or the first time a Jewish group acted towards its spoken language in the same way that European nations would have acted towards their national languages'. Not to discount the drama of the conflict, I would have to agree with Rabin's bland portrayal. Once Hebrew was revived, it was inevitable that it would replace the colonial languages in education at all levels in the *yishuv*, because the population there at the time was composed overwhelmingly of immigrants from Eastern Europe who, as Eastern Europeans, were

conscious of their identity, conscious of the role of language in that identity (at least in their homeland) and unwilling to be educated in the language of some other people if they had a choice.

Finally, a factor which I regard as crucial to the revival of Hebrew but which has not been considered at length (though Nahir [1998: 336] mentions this briefly) is the attitude of the Ottoman government to the exclusive use of Hebrew in the schools: they appear to have been completely indifferent. Accounts of the revival of Hebrew make only the most peripheral mention of involvement of the Ottoman government. The Jews seem to have been free to use whatever system of education they saw fit. This has simply not been the case with most governments, either at the time the revival took place or in more recent times.

This might be attributed to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was approaching a state of collapse at the time. However, it is significant to note in this regard that, as we will see in the next chapter, there had been a general pattern in the Ottoman Empire of Jews not assimilating linguistically; for example, in generally Turkish-speaking areas of the Ottoman Empire, which contained a large number of Jews who had been living there for around 400 years, the Jews spoke Judeo-Spanish as their everyday language and they had never learned to read Turkish, even in large cities such as Istanbul (Harris, 1994). Even towards the end, the Ottomans were by no means unwilling or unable to take strong steps to counter what they considered subversive action – for example, they arbitrarily cut off immigration of Jews to the land of Israel periodically, to say nothing of the massacre of the Armenians living in what is now Turkey – but they evidently did not consider the everyday usage and teaching of foreign languages, even to the exclusion of Turkish, to be subversive.<sup>5</sup>

It is not fashionable these days to give Turks, either in their Ottoman or modern guise, credit for any sort of liberalism but facts must be acknowledged: Hebrew was revived on Ottoman territory and there is every reason to believe that, as far as the Turks were concerned at least, it could have been revived even in Istanbul and even at the height of Ottoman power. However, it could never have been revived in Europe at the time and it could never have been revived had the Arabs had control of the territory at the time and imposed the language policies they have imposed in other countries, which have been totally directed towards linguistic assimilation of all minorities regardless of their religious affiliation (see Chapter 4).

Thus, Hebrew was revived as the living language of the Jewish community in the ancestral homeland. In the diaspora, in contrast, as we will see in the following section, Hebrew has not fared so well.

## Diaspora Hebrew Today

It would be difficult to describe the practical Hebrew knowledge of diaspora Jews today as anything other than abysmal.<sup>6</sup> Though it might be possible to find particular Jewish communities in the past with a comparably minimal knowledge of Hebrew, the overall situation in the diaspora today is undoubtedly beyond compare in this respect. Thus Cohen 1993:296 writes of the 'eclipse of Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people'. Lipstadt (1993: 308) writes: 'We are a people of the book who cannot read the book in its original language. To say that virtually none of the major leaders of the American Jewish community are fluent in Hebrew is to state the obvious'. She quotes a study (by Steven M. Cohen) finding that, among American Jews, 41% of the Orthodox, 9% of the Conservative and 5% of the Reform and 'just Jewish' groups report having even a minimal competence in Hebrew, numbers which are particularly significant given the relatively small proportion of Orthodox in the American Jewish community (perhaps 10% of the population).

Knowledge of Hebrew is given little emphasis in the Jewish identity of American Jews today and there is a general feeling that efforts by diaspora Jews to foster Hebrew knowledge have been essentially given up by the overwhelming majority of people. As noted by Cohen (1993: 296): 'The various experiments to create pockets of intense Hebrew involvement, through literary groups or clubs, through summer camps, through intense efforts at Hebrew education of children, are in retreat.'

Similarly, as noted by Shaked (1993: 278),

like their ancestors in distant Spain, New York Jews also write Jewish philosophy in the Gentile vernacular, but no one believes that these works must be translated into Hebrew by today's Ibn-Tibbon [12th–13th century Arabic-to-Hebrew translators in Provence – J.M.] in order to assure their survival.

Outside of Ultra-Orthodox circles, Hebrew plays almost no role in intellectual Judaism in the diaspora: even rabbinical study and writings are based upon translations and non-Jewish languages, particularly English.

One trend which appears to be in the reverse direction has been a steady increase in the number of Jews who are studying Hebrew at the university in the United States since the 1960s (Band, 1993; Morahg, 1993).<sup>7</sup> However, as Morahg notes, university students characteristically only study Hebrew for a few semesters before dropping out and, in any case, the total number of these students is fairly low.

Certainly, in reading academic papers on the status of Hebrew in America (in, e.g., Mintz, 1993), the overall impression is one of nostalgia for

days when Hebrew played a more active part of American Jewish life (or at least when there were hopes that Hebrew could play an active part in American Jewish life), urgent calls for American Jews to take Hebrew more seriously, frustration over the inability of university Hebrew study to be more successful than it has been and suggestions as to how this situation might be improved, which sound especially plaintive in view of the fact that foreign language programs in American universities, in general, are almost completely ineffective in producing students who have much practical knowledge of the language they study. Whatever problems are preventing Hebrew university programs from being more successful are endemic to American culture and are unlikely to be solved with ideas of marketing or presentation.

This said, it should be emphasized that the situation can be understood differently, in a way that is not nearly so negative. To a certain extent, the absolute gloom-and-doom surrounding discussion of the status of Hebrew among American Jews is a product of these Jews having unknowingly adopted non-Jewish ideas regarding how a language should be used, specifically the idea of focusing upon proficiency rather than symbolism, which can clearly be traced to the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, according to which individual Jews should be able to put Hebrew, the language representing their identity as Jews, to everyday practical use. Thus, American culture, in general, supports the idea that the value of contact with foreign languages can be measured in terms of acquisition of practical knowledge and success in practical use of these languages, and most of the research by Jewish Americans on the status of Hebrew in the United States, such as the articles referred to here, take this point of view: they judge (correctly) that practical knowledge and usage of Hebrew among American Jews is abysmal and conclude that this is a serious problem.

While not denying that it would be nice to see some improvement in this area, I must point out that a comparison with the status of Hebrew in historical diaspora communities suggests that, to a certain extent, the negative evaluation of the situation of Hebrew among diaspora Jewry today is a consequence of the great majority of diaspora Jews having abandoned the traditional Jewish understanding of how diaspora Hebrew should be used. As is clear from research on, e.g., traditional Eastern European Jewry (e.g. Stampfer, 1993) or Ottoman Jewry (e.g. Harris, 1994), the overwhelming majority of 'traditional' (pre-Enlightenment) Jews did not have anything remotely resembling an advanced practical knowledge of Hebrew: they could recite a voweled text and they could understand texts to a good extent if they used simple language and/or were well known and repeated frequently but that was about it for all but a small elite.

As I have previously noted (and see Kutscher, 1982; Shavit, 1993), the Enlightenment produced a generation or two of Jews in each area who were enlightened enough to want to master a 'high' language but still tied enough to Jewish tradition that they actually had some Hebrew education and wanted their high language to be Hebrew rather than a non-Jewish language. However, this was an illusion: these groups soon lost contact with Hebrew and became assimilated in terms of practical linguistic knowledge. Diaspora Jews who are nostalgic for the days when 'their great-grandparents really knew Hebrew' (i.e. could read and write advanced Hebrew) seem to be unaware of the fact that their great-grandparents' grandparents were probably unable to do much more than recite Hebrew prayers and read the Hebrew Bible and the *Shulchan Arux*.

Contrary to what seems to be current popular opinion, a practical advanced working knowledge of literary Hebrew has not traditionally been a significant aspect of individual Jewish identity: it was traditionally assumed that each community should have some people who knew Hebrew well but this was not important to individual Jews. Even the idea that a practical working knowledge of literary Hebrew should be important to individual Jewish identity can clearly be traced to the propagation (by non-Jews) of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity since the late 18th century. Part of the gloom surrounding most evaluations of the status of diaspora Hebrew today can be traced to adoption of this idea, which has led to an exaggerated perception of the importance of an advanced knowledge of Hebrew to individual Jewish identity and a corresponding (unpleasant) feeling that diaspora Jews are losing their Jewishness as a result of their lack of practical knowledge of Hebrew.

To give a striking example of this, in decrying the Hebrew knowledge of Jews in New York City today, whom he compares with Jews in Alexandria between the third century BCE and the second century CE, Shaked (1993: 281) notes that 'the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the works of Maimonides, and the Zohar are appearing in new translations, and people refer to them as though they were the original', resulting in 'a translated Jewish culture almost completely lacking the integrity of the original'. This appears to be a powerful argument that American Jews need to learn Hebrew in more depth, until it is recalled that the original versions of these texts were, in any case, not written in Hebrew but rather in Aramaic and Judeo-Arabic so that, if the goal is to experience important texts in the original language, widespread advanced knowledge of Hebrew has never in itself been the key to a Jewish culture with more 'integrity'.

Rather than an advanced practical knowledge of Hebrew, traditional Jewish thinking has emphasized three usages of Hebrew, namely (1) religious usages, (2) early basic literacy and (3) as a *lingua franca* for Jews. To



be sure, even in these three areas, knowledge of Hebrew among diaspora Jews has doubtless hit an all-time low but the situation is not nearly as bad as a proficiency-based evaluation would suggest, and a more historically authentic picture of the comparative status of diaspora Hebrew today will emerge if we consider the situation with regards to these types of usages rather than practical ability *per se*.

All three of these usages have come under considerable pressure in the diaspora in recent times. Ritual usages have declined as active participation in religious rituals has declined, basic literacy in Hebrew has been rendered more difficult by mandatory schooling in non-Jewish languages (combined, it must be said, with a lack of willingness to support or patronize private Jewish schools among the non-Orthodox population) and the *lingua franca* use of Hebrew has all but disappeared as a result of the spread of English as an international language suitable for use by all peoples, Jews included.

Nevertheless, the sentiment to continue the traditional usages of Hebrew is still clearly there in the Jewish populace at large (though more in principle than in practice). Morahg (1993: 201), for example, reports that a survey of 322 University of Wisconsin students studying Hebrew found that

[W]hen asked to indicate and rank the areas in which they anticipated using Hebrew later in their life, the students demonstrated a very cogent sense of their cultural realities. Of the eleven options that were offered, the three areas of future Hebrew usage that were most frequently selected and most highly ranked were:

1. Travel to Israel.
2. Educating your children.
3. Religious services.

This, to me, is a precise distillation of the essential functions of Hebrew in the lives of American Jews.

Not coincidentally, these three areas correspond to the three basic traditional usages of Hebrew by diaspora Jews which I have posited (travel to Israel = Jewish *lingua franca*, educating your children = basic literacy, religious services = ritual usages) and this is a very encouraging sign that American Jews, in general, really are concerned with continuing the historical pattern of diaspora Hebrew usage.

Similarly, Glinert (1993b: 250) argues that, for British Jews (and I would note that the situation is clearly similar for American Jews), Hebrew is a 'quasilect', defined as follows:



A quasilect is used for salient cultural purposes, with the following features: (a) users are unable to use it for open-ended active linguistic communication; (b) users are unable to use it for open-ended receptive linguistic communication; and typically (c) users do not know of this variety being currently used as a normal language; (d) users know of this variety having once been used as a normal language.

Glinert claims that

. . . while any hopes of Israeli Hebrew becoming a second language have been chilled by the realities of the school timetable and foreign-language teaching techniques, and by the sheer physical separation of Israel from the overwhelming majority of local Jews . . . [w]ithin this context, the future of the Anglo-Jewish Hebrew quasilect appears a stable one. (p. 260)

I would propose, then, that in order to have a realistic idea of the status of diaspora Hebrew, it would be best to focus upon the three traditional functions of diaspora Hebrew rather than unrealistic expectations based upon the (borrowed) ideology of everyday-language-and-identity.

### **Ritual usages**

With regard to ritual usages of Hebrew in the diaspora, the situation is not nearly as good as it was 200 years ago and there is no hope that it will ever even approach this level again, but it is not terrible and, in the last generation or two, it seems to be actually improving. As Glinert (1993b) notes, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox prayer services are almost completely in Hebrew, though only a relatively small proportion of diaspora Jews belong to these groups. The more progressive branches of Judaism (Reform and Conservative), which have far more members in the diaspora, do use a significant amount of Hebrew in their prayers, though this varies from congregation to congregation, and singing (which can occupy a considerable portion of the service) is almost always in Hebrew. Additionally, and significantly, there is a weekly Torah reading in the service in Hebrew and even in progressive congregations this is characteristically done by a member of the congregation (who is called to the podium in Hebrew with his/her Hebrew name) rather than the rabbi, with the result that the member called to read must prepare his/her Hebrew for the public occasion.

It is particularly important to note that, though the progressive movements in their early years seriously limited their use of Hebrew, their ideology has changed in the last several generations and there is a clear and conscious increase in the use of Hebrew among these groups (Plaut, 1963;

Meyer, 1988). In fact, it can be said that even among the Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox the status of ritual Hebrew is improving, as women in these communities are taught considerably more Hebrew than they used to be.

The factor which is responsible for the decrease in ritual usages of Hebrew in the last several hundred years is, of course, the shift away from Orthodoxy to progressive movements and non-affiliation. Most significantly, the progressive movements have completely de-emphasized reciting the Amidah, a fairly lengthy set of Hebrew prayers traditionally recited three times a day. These movements are, to some extent, reversing their previous positions and increasing their use of Hebrew at least in Shabbat services, and this trend is likely to continue in the future but it is not realistic to expect too much improvement in this area.

## Education

With regards to educating children, earlier programs such as afternoon schools, Sunday schools and Hebrew summer camps have petered out (and, as noted by Wisse (1993), even where they still exist they place less emphasis on Hebrew than they did in the past). However, Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox day schools in the diaspora continue to teach Hebrew in a more or less traditional way: again, however, this only amounts to a small proportion of Jewish children today.

One interesting way in which Jews are adapting their behavior to the American situation in terms of Hebrew education is the bar/bat-mitzvah ceremony for 13-year-old boys and 12-year-old girls. While the role of this ceremony in present-day American Jewish life clearly reflects the influence of the neighboring non-Jewish culture (the Christian confirmation ceremony having served as the model for the importance of the ceremony to American Jewish identity) and the child's motivation for preparing for and participating in the ceremony is as American as could be imagined (s/he receives a large number of gifts), the form and details of the ceremony itself are distinctively Jewish and represent a continuation of Jewish values.

Whereas an American Christian affirms a commitment to Jesus and the Christian religion, the Jewish bar/bat-mitzvah affirms a commitment to the Jewish people (see Chapter 1). And whereas the Christian confirmation ceremony requires no knowledge of any language other than English, Hebrew plays a central role in the bar/bat-mitzvah. Even in Reform congregations, a central part of this ceremony is an extended Hebrew Torah reading for which the bar/bat-mitzvah must prepare for some time. While it is true that the level of Hebrew required for this ceremony is not very great, it is not insignificant either and the knowledge acquired during the preparation for the ceremony serves as the basis of the Hebrew knowledge

of a significant number of American Jews, particularly in the Reform movement. I do not know of numbers but it is my impression that the number of Jewish children having a bar/bat-mitzvah has increased significantly in the last generation (particularly because it was pretty much restricted to boys before). While it is true that the children typically abandon Hebrew study entirely immediately after the ceremony, they also typically begin attending synagogue again some time later, when they are starting a family of their own and, at that time, they are able to remember enough Hebrew to be able to participate in the Hebrew prayers with the rest of the congregation.

There is also some limited effort at pre-school education in Hebrew. American Jews, even non-Orthodox ones, sometimes read extremely simple Hebrew books to small children. Jewish daycare centers typically teach some Hebrew words to children and this appears to be having an increasingly strong effect, particularly because it seems that a growing number of non-observant (and, in some cases, even non-Jewish) parents who would not, for one reason or another, send their children to Jewish private schools from first grade nevertheless are interested in having their children go to specifically Jewish daycare centers. It must be said, however, that American Jews are still doing vastly less in this area than could be imagined. Unlike the ritual usage of Hebrew, which is supported by the ideology of religious institutions, and the *lingua franca* usage of Hebrew, which is supported by the ideology of solidarity with Israel, the early-literacy usage of Hebrew is not supported by any particular ideological movement. I will return to this matter in Chapter 4.

### ***Lingua franca* usages**

Here the situation of Hebrew has declined drastically. English has become the *lingua franca* for Jews as much as for non-Jews today (see, e.g., Lipstadt, 1993) (as opposed to the situation in pre-modern times, when European Christians used Latin as a *lingua franca* but Jews did not). In theory, as noted in Morahg (1993), American Jews are interested in learning Hebrew to use on trips to Israel but, in practice, the English of Israelis, in general, is improving by leaps and bounds while the practical Hebrew of American Jews, in general, is, if anything, getting worse and the result of this is that, unless American Jews remain in Israel for several years and/or spend their time with those Israelis whose English is particularly weak (whom they are not likely to meet during, e.g., a junior year abroad or a stay on a kibbutz), they will not normally spend much time speaking Hebrew with their fellow Jews.

Nor, I must say, does the attitude of Israeli Jews necessarily help the situation. Whereas speakers of languages such as Spanish or Italian are fre-

quently only too happy to limp along in a conversation in their language with an American with whom they could more easily communicate in English, Israelis tend not to see the purpose in this (although they seem to be more willing with people with whom speaking Hebrew has some novelty effect, e.g. Japanese or Chinese, even if it is clear that they can also speak English). American Jews tend to claim that Israeli Jews refuse to speak in Hebrew to them because they like to show off their knowledge of English, and this may be a factor, but I believe that a much more common motivation (as for much Israeli behavior) is simply impatience. And outside of Israel, *lingua franca* usages of Hebrew between Jews are very rare indeed.

The situation is different for Russian-speaking immigrants to Israel, because their English is typically very weak (much weaker than native Israelis) and because almost no native Israelis know Russian. Such people do make extensive use of Hebrew as a *lingua franca*. This is quite different, however, from the historical situation in that they are using Hebrew as a *lingua franca qua* immigrants rather than *qua* Jews (and, in fact, many of them are not legally Jewish according to traditional Jewish and Israeli law). People in a similar situation in Israel today include many non-Jewish guest workers from, e.g., Romania, China, Thailand, etc., who have been in Israel for a few years, whose Hebrew is, therefore, often better than their English and who, therefore, use Hebrew rather than English to communicate with people outside of their groups (there are many older Israeli Arabs in this situation as well). It is, for example, not uncommon to hear Thai and Chinese guest workers in Israel speaking to each other in (typically limited) Hebrew and, in such cases, Hebrew is undeniably being used as a *lingua franca* but it is not being used as a Jewish *lingua franca*.

Thus, the traditional usage of Hebrew as a *lingua franca* among Jews is declining and I cannot see this situation changing in the foreseeable future. The material incentive for Israeli Jews to learn and practice their English is too great and any kind of incentive for non-Israeli Jews to learn conversational Hebrew is too small. Perhaps repeated calls by diaspora Jewish organizations to encourage Israelis to participate in the Israeli experience of Jewish visitors from the diaspora by trying hard to talk to them in Hebrew rather than switching immediately to English would be helpful.

## Conclusion

In a general sense, Hebrew can be considered to be a sacred language like other sacred languages: it was spoken as a vernacular at some time in the past, it died as a spoken language, it produced a body of writings both before and after it died and it has been seen as having a special metaphysi-

cal status. This general similarity should not, however, conceal the crucial differences between the status of Hebrew for Jews as opposed to Latin for Catholics, Sanskrit for Hindus, Classical Arabic for Muslims, etc. For Jews, Hebrew has been not only a sacred language but also a national language. Minimal knowledge of Hebrew, including basic literacy, has been a crucial feature of individual Jewish identity and this idea – and feeling – has traditionally been inculcated in Jews from a very early age. Before young Jewish children could understand in a more abstract way what it is to be Jewish, they could understand that Hebrew meant something special to them, even though they did not speak it as their native language.

Aside from this, its revival as a vernacular language makes Hebrew sociolinguistically unique. This revival is, to date, a unique event in human history, one which should be subjected to vastly more (rational) study than it has been, particularly because of the worldwide crisis of endangered languages. We have seen that it may be related to a variety of factors, some of them individual (e.g. the personal example of Ben-Yehuda), some of them practical (e.g. the cooperative attitude of the Ottoman government) and some of them historical (e.g. the fact that a modernized Hebrew had already, to some extent, been developed). It was not a miracle. It can, in a certain sense, be fit into a general historic trend but, at the same time, it was not something which followed automatically from any historical trend.

Most interesting perhaps to a student of history is the fact that, in retrospect, it is clear that Modern Hebrew began with the efforts of Jews of the German Haskalah to develop a modern literary form of Hebrew but these people could not, at the time, have had the slightest idea, intention or desire to bring such a thing about. The idea of Zionism would have seemed absurd at the end of the 18th century and, if anything, these Jews were themselves focused on assimilation (see Spiegel, 1962; Kutscher, 1982). However, Ben-Yehuda and other revivers of Hebrew recognized several generations later that the time was ripe for action and, in fact, they could not afford to wait: they were themselves as diametrically ideologically opposed to the German Maskilim as could be imagined, yet the work of the Maskilim was indispensable to what they did and if ideological differences had been allowed to dictate their course of action, an historical opportunity would have been missed. Recognition of historical opportunity resulting in unity of purpose does not produce miracles: it does, however, produce events which are perceived as miracles.

## Notes

1. There have been claims that Hebrew is not a 'Jewish language', e.g. Ornan (1985). The basis for this argument is the claim that the very concept of 'Jewishness' is inherently associated with the diaspora, while 'Jewish languages' are,

by (one) definition, creations of the diaspora. Indeed, the Hebrew word for 'Jew', *yehudi*, is not used in the Bible with reference to what would today be considered the Jewish people until after the Babylonian conquest, when the diaspora began. Prior to this, the group is referred to as 'Hebrews', a term which could also include other Canaanites peoples or the more specific 'people' (*'am*)/sons (*bney*) of Israel.' Thus, by this thinking, although the 'sons of Israel' and the 'Jews' were ancestrally obviously the same people, the 'sons of Israel' became 'Jews' when they went into exile. When the Jews spoke Hebrew as their native language, they were not 'Jews' but (a kind of) 'Hebrews' so that Hebrew is not a Jewish language. The obvious flaw in this reasoning is that even in exile the Jews made extensive use of Hebrew: the most that could realistically be claimed is that living Hebrew is not a Jewish language. There is undeniably a certain logic to this claim but it must be said that the overwhelming majority of Jews would reject it out of hand as simply being absurd.

2. This is actually not quite true; the Samaritans have also maintained Hebrew as a sacred language, though they write it in a different script (the original Hebrew script).
3. Regarding Aramaic, Jews have generally favored the approach of mystification and reserving knowledge for the elite in a way which parallels Catholic and Muslim thinking (see Chapter 3).
4. I am assuming here that Biblical/Mishnaic Hebrew and Modern/Israeli Hebrew are the 'same language' and this, in itself, can be denied by any one who has one or another reason for doing so, in the same way that anyone could deny, for one reason or another, that Old English, Middle English and Modern English are the 'same language'. Linguistically, at least, there does not seem to be any motivation for doing this in the case of Hebrew. Being 'the same language' today generally means 'sharing a common standard written language' or at least having an extremely similar standard written language (as with, e.g., American English compared with British English); thus, the German of Germany, Austria and Switzerland are all considered to be the same language, 'German', because they have the same written standard, while the languages of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are considered to be distinct from each other because they have different written standards. Since the standard for written Israeli Hebrew is based, to a large extent, on Biblical/Mishnaic Hebrew (see Rabin, 1983: 48), it must be considered, in this sense, to represent the same language. In terms of spoken language as well, as far as can be determined, Israeli Hebrew is far more similar to Biblical Hebrew than, e.g., Modern English is to Old English. It would, of course, be possible to make an *ad hoc* provision in the definition of 'language' stipulating that a 'language' must be spoken continuously as a native language. This would have the result of defining Israeli/Modern Hebrew as being a different 'language' from Biblical/Mishnaic Hebrew but this cannot be tested against the understanding of the meaning of 'language' in comparable cases because there are no comparable cases.
5. This was the general Ottoman policy towards non-Muslims. Towards Muslims, however, Turkish was emphasized to the exclusion of other languages, aside from religious usages of Arabic. This policy of allowing greater autonomy to non-Muslims was characteristic of the Ottoman Empire and has continued in Turkish policy today (see Chapter 4).
6. This statement excludes Israelis who are living in the diaspora, who continue to use Modern Hebrew just as any expatriate group would use the language of

their native country. Robert Cooper informs me (personal communication, 2002), for example, that readers of Israeli Hebrew newspapers in the San Fernando Valley in California number 30,000.

7. It should be noted, however, that historically Hebrew was taught in its classical form to non-Jews in mainstream American universities (it was required at Harvard in the 18th century), though this has decreased as these universities have become more markedly secular in orientation (Band, 1993).



## Chapter 3

# Other Jewish languages

Jews have spoken many languages in the diaspora. In earlier times, Jews only considered Hebrew and Aramaic to be ‘real languages’: until recent time, the Jewish languages I will focus on here (Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish) as well as others (e.g. Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Greek, etc.) were not. Two primary reasons may be adduced for this. The first reason is that Jews regarded Hebrew and Aramaic as being sacred, while the other languages which Jews spoke were seen as profane. There was a typical diglossic relationship, with Hebrew and Aramaic being H (high languages used for formal and written functions) and Jewish vernacular languages being L (low languages used for informal spoken functions). The second reason is that languages such as Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish were seen as ‘varieties’ of Gentile languages and not uncommonly ‘debased varieties’ at that, rather than as distinctive languages in their own right.

However, one of the striking features of Jewish sociolinguistics in recent times, particularly since the Second World War, has been the trend to study Jewish vernaculars and writings, analyzing and presenting them as distinctive ‘Jewish languages’, as I noted in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I will discuss a number of Jewish languages, the phenomenon of Jewish languages in general and its significance.

## Aramaic

Aramaic is traditionally viewed as the ‘other sacred language’ of the Jews. As far as can be reconstructed, Aramaic was the language of the indigenous people living in approximately what is today Syria (‘Syria’ itself is the Greek word for the indigenous term ‘Aram’). The first written records of Aramaic date from the 11th or 10th century BCE. In spite of the fact that the Arameans were not a great power (in fact they were never even politically unified), their language spread as a second language among other Northern Semitic groups (Babylonians, (ancient) Assyrians, Phoenicians, Canaanites (including Jews), etc.) until by at least the eighth century BCE, it served as the *lingua franca* of the Near East (Fitzmyer, 1979: 6).

As noted in Chapter 2, at least according to the Bible, Abraham was an Aramean whose family adopted Hebrew when they moved to Canaan. The first historically recorded use of Aramaic in the land of Israel was in the ninth century BCE (in the time of the First Temple) and, as I have mentioned in Chapter 2, after the Babylonian invasion, Jews began to switch to Aramaic as their everyday language, although it is not clear exactly when this switch took place in each location. Aside from Hebrew, Aramaic also faced competition from Greek following the conquest of the Near East by Alexander in the fourth century BCE, although it seems clear that, as a home language, Greek was restricted to ethnically Greek representatives of the Empire and the indigenous elite.

As Aramaic became an increasingly powerful force in Jewish life, it came into competition with Hebrew in terms of both usage and ideology. It is important to note that Aramaic entered the scene before the decisive events of the first several centuries of the Common Era formed the modern Jewish conception of identity and, hence, it was able to compete with Hebrew on a level which other languages could not. Also contributing to the special status of Aramaic were the Biblical account suggesting that it was the original language of Abraham's family, the fact that Jews borrowed the Aramaic alphabet (see Chapter 1) and the fact that Aramaic, although originally associated with a certain people, to a large extent functioned as a non-ethnic *lingua franca* by the time the Jews adopted it. Chomsky gives a sample of the Hebrew versus Aramaic controversy:

Rab, the founder of Jewish learning in Babylonia (third century BCE), maintained that Aramaic was the language used by Adam and that, accordingly, it preceded the Hebrew language. Rabbi Hanina observed that the reason the Jews were exiled to Babylon, rather than to any other country, was that the Babylonian language (Aramaic) was akin to the language of the Torah. This attitude toward Aramaic was not, however, shared by other rabbis. Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, for example, remonstrated against its use in Palestine, while a Babylonian Amora of three generations later, Rab Joseph, was equally opposed to its use even in Babylonia. Both Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Johanan (third century CE) went as far as to object to praying in Aramaic. (Chomsky, 1957: 159)

The use of Aramaic in prayers was indeed controversial. It was common to argue against this practice by claiming that the angels could not understand Aramaic but only Hebrew; however, this argument could also be turned around, e.g., reciting of the Kaddish (a prayer praising God, most typically associated with praying for the dead) in Aramaic was justified by saying that, if the angels understood its meaning, they might not convey it up to Heaven (Lehnardt, 1999: 305). Aside from such metaphysical issues,

another relevant factor was that, as Jews switched to Aramaic as their spoken language, they could understand prayers considerably better if they were in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. The result of all of this was that there was a good deal of variation in which language prayers were (and could be) said for some time, just as there is today among, e.g., American Jews. Ultimately, the great majority of the prayers which have survived are in Hebrew but some Aramaic prayers remain and it is significant that among these are two prayers which are intensely personal, the Kaddish and the Kol Nidre (see Chapter 2).

Aside from prayers, the switch to Aramaic as a spoken language also meant that Jews could not understand the Bible in its original Hebrew. The custom therefore developed of reading the Bible in Hebrew and then giving a translation or explanation of the passage in Aramaic. Initially this was supposed to be done only orally but eventually Aramaic translations (Targumim) were written down and, in fact, the Targumim eventually gained a sacred status of their own (Chomsky, 1957: 158–9).

Putting the Targumim in writing was part of a general process of Aramaic coming to compete with Hebrew as a written language as well. From the third century BCE, Jews began writing serious works in Aramaic as well as in Hebrew, including religious poems, wisdom literature and even half of the book of Daniel, which was ultimately taken as part of the Biblical canon (Patai, 1977: 77–8). Midrashim written in the first millennium CE were frequently written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Most significantly, the Talmud (both the Babylonian version and the Jerusalem version), the compendium of interpretations of the Bible written between the fourth and eighth centuries CE, was mostly written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

Among less mainstream Jews, Aramaic competed with Greek rather than Hebrew (Patai, 1977:59). Josephus originally wrote the Jewish Wars in Aramaic but this version was lost and only the Greek translation has survived (Fitzmyer, 1979:34; Patai, 1977:84). Christians commonly assume that Aramaic was the native language of Jesus Christ and the Jewish community of which he was a member and that Aramaic may have been the original language of parts of the New Testament.

Following the Arab conquests in the seventh century, Jews in the areas conquered by the Arabs switched fairly quickly from Aramaic to Arabic, apparently within a few generations, as both their colloquial language and (in competition with Hebrew) their written language. The final codification of the Talmud took place a few generations after the Arab conquest (Patai, 1977: 96): poetry, legal and religious writings, and literature continued to be largely in Aramaic for a few centuries before reverting to Hebrew (Patai, 1971: 114). After this, creative use of Aramaic among Jews basically ended.

There were, however, two significant exceptions to this. First, spoken Aramaic survived among Jews in the territory which is today northern Iraq and contiguous areas of Turkey and Iran up to the 20th century (when Jews in this area almost entirely left, mostly moving to Israel, where they are switching to Hebrew). Second, Aramaic was used as the language of the *Zohar*, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century work which became the key text of the Kabbala and which, at least between the 15th and 17th centuries, was regarded as a text comparable in importance to the Bible and the Talmud (Scholem, 1946).

Aside from this, Aramaic remained in ritual usage, just as Hebrew did. It continued to be used for certain prayers and the Targumim were, for some time, still read in the synagogues alongside the Hebrew originals, though they had lost their practical function.

More significantly, however, Aramaic came to be associated with high scholarly functions. When Aramaic was a living language among large numbers of Jews, it was regarded as being not nearly as exalted as Hebrew. However, after it died for the practical purposes of almost all Jews, it became, in a certain sense, even more exalted than Hebrew. Particularly (but not only) in Europe, Jews came to see the Bible as a basic text which should be accessible to everyone, or at least every male, while the Talmud and the *Zohar* came to be considered more advanced texts which were reserved for the intellectual elite. Aramaic, being the language of these texts, was, in this sense, even 'higher' than Hebrew and knowledge of it was indispensable for scholars and students of the most advanced fields of Jewish study, namely law and mysticism (Patai, 1977: 136, 367; Stampfer, 1993). The pattern was, therefore, that students would first learn Hebrew and then Aramaic, with only the most promising students studying long enough to achieve some mastery of (reading) Aramaic: for the great majority of students, the Talmud could only be understood through Rashi's (Hebrew) commentary.

It can, in fact, be argued that it is Aramaic, not Hebrew, which has served a role in Jewish society most similar to that of the sacred languages of other peoples, such as Latin, Old Church Slavonic and Sanskrit. Once the Talmud was written, to a significant extent it replaced the Bible as the authoritative text of Judaism, not in terms of ideology but in terms of practice.<sup>1</sup> As far as Jewish law was concerned, the average Jew could not simply look in the Bible and figure out what the law should be, because, in many cases, the Talmud, in effect, 'overruled' the Bible, typically through some sophistry (this was usually in the name of what would be considered today to be a 'good cause', where a literal reading of the Bible would result in a ruling which was too harsh). However, the average Jew also could not participate in Talmudic interpretation and debate, because (1) very few people knew Aramaic well and (2) until very recently, when Adin Steinsaltz began pub-

lishing a translation, the Talmud (unlike the Bible) was never translated – and, it should be noted, Steinsaltz has been criticized for undertaking this translation on the grounds that ‘it demystifies the Talmud and enables anyone to study it’ (Stampfer, 1993: 138, fn. 29).

This sort of mystification of a sacred language and restricting access to authoritative texts is generally similar to the way Latin has been used by the Catholic Church over the years: ultimately, Jewish religious leaders, like Christian religious leaders, preferred to keep the most practically significant texts beyond the understanding of the masses. This point further underscores the fact that it is the symbolic connection between Hebrew and the average Jew which has of particular importance to Jews. Chomsky’s claim, mentioned earlier, that Judaism has always been concerned with bringing the Word of God to the masses rather than keeping it as the exclusive property of the priesthood, is correct so far as it goes: what he does not mention is that the literal Word of God was frequently subjected to (for want of a better word) deconstruction so that a literal understanding of it did not necessarily result in the average Jew being able to overthrow rabbinical judgements whenever he spotted an inconsistency. This does not mean that students were discouraged from questioning apparent inconsistencies – quite the contrary – but it does mean that one could not expect one’s reinterpretations to be taken seriously unless one were familiar with all the relevant sources – and this meant knowing not only Hebrew but also Aramaic.

We can identify other parallels as well between Aramaic and Latin. Just as Latin served for some time as the ‘general’ sacred language of a number of European peoples, so Aramaic can be said to have served as a ‘general’ sacred language of a number of Middle Eastern peoples, particularly those whose homelands lie in what is today Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq – not only Jews but also Maronites, Jacobites, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Samaritans. Before the destruction of the First Temple in the sixth century BCE, these peoples spoke one or another North Semitic language – Hebrew, Phoenician, Babylonian, Assyrian and Aramaic being the main ones, with Aramaic coming to serve as a *lingua franca*. As their homelands were conquered by, in turn, the Persians, Greeks and Romans, these peoples switched to Aramaic as their everyday language and, with the old linguistic distinctions erased and their homelands under foreign rule, they reconstituted peoples based upon a combination of ancestral and religious affiliations (see Chapter 1). When the Arabs later conquered this area, these peoples began to switch to Arabic as their everyday language but all have retained Classical Aramaic as a sacred language (in some sacred guises it is also known as Syriac), because this was the language they spoke when they

developed the conceptualization of peoplehood which they have to the present day.

The fact that Jews have Aramaic as a sacred language must then be understood as being part of a larger pattern of all North Semitic peoples having Aramaic – their *lingua franca* at least between the eighth century BCE and the seventh century CE – as a sacred language. What has been different about Jews is that they have also retained the language they spoke before they spoke Aramaic (Hebrew) as a second sacred language, whereas Phoenician, Babylonian and Assyrian were not retained in this way. The reason for this is that the concept of the Jewish people was continued from times before they switched to Aramaic as their everyday language, while the concept of, e.g., the Maronite and Chaldean peoples was only developed after spoken Aramaic had replaced other North Semitic languages.

### **Jewish Aramaic in modern times**

It can be said that Aramaic has been the big loser among Jewish languages in modern times: Hebrew has been revived as a living language, Jewish languages such as Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic are, to varying extents, coming to be treated as revered cultural objects even as (perhaps because) they are losing native speakers but Jewish Aramaic is simply disappearing without fanfare or nostalgia. It remains as the language of the Talmud, the Zohar, small sections of the Bible and a number of prayers but the number of Jews with a working knowledge of written Aramaic is declining (particularly because of the new availability of translations of the Talmud). As a spoken language, it is still spoken by a not insignificant number of Jews (numbering in the thousands at least), but these (mainly immigrants from Iraq and Turkey living in Israel) are not passing the language on to their children and spoken Aramaic can be expected to die among Jews in the next generation or two.

The decline in the importance of written Aramaic can be taken as further evidence for its functional similarity to Latin in the Catholic Church. Since the Arab conquests, Aramaic has never been emotionally felt to be the language of the average Jew: it was too intellectual, too arcane, too esoteric. In a certain sense, the presence and function of Aramaic in itself made Hebrew seem more homey by comparison and worked to increase the affective bonds between Hebrew and the average Jew, in the same way that Russian (even Standard Russian) seemed more homey than Old Church Slavonic or French (even Standard French) seemed more homey than Latin.

It does seem that Aramaic will continue to play a more and more marginal role in Jewish life. It will continue to be used in certain prayers and advanced scholars (both religious and secular) will study it in order to

be able to understand the original Talmud and the Zohar better. But for the bulk of Jews, English is replacing Aramaic as the language of higher study, just as it is replacing Hebrew as the language of pan-Jewish communication.

As translations of the Talmud and the Zohar come to be more commonly used, knowledge of the original language will become less important. This is because these texts are taken as having a different status from the Bible. The Bible was traditionally taken to be the Word of God, so that infinite layers of meaning were assumed to lie in the text itself and not a single letter could be changed, added or subtracted. Translation was allowed to convey the basic meaning but it was understood that no translation could serve anything like the full purpose of the original. However, the Talmud and the Zohar may be truly inspired but they are not seen as being the Word of God in the same sense: translation is, thus, not seen as inherently impossible as it is with the Bible.

However, Aramaic may have more vitality than is apparent at present. The Zohar, for example, was written in Aramaic more than 500 years after the mass of Middle Eastern Jews had stopped speaking or writing it and it remained as a central Jewish text, to be studied in the original, for hundreds of years after it was written (Scholem, 1946). The language still has a very powerful hold on those people who are given to mysticism. Another such interruption of vitality is by no means impossible.

### **The status of Aramaic as a Jewish language**

As noted already, the name 'Aramaic' is applied equally to the language of some non-Jews. However, as opposed to Yiddish, Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic, where there is a clear ideological effort led by intellectuals, particularly linguists, to distinguish the Jewish version of the language from the non-Jewish version, there seems to be little concern with doing the same for Aramaic. I have seen the term 'Judeo-Aramaic' used but it is still perfectly acceptable in all circles to refer to Judeo-Aramaic as simply being 'Aramaic' (whereas it is totally unacceptable today to refer to Yiddish as 'German', rare for anyone to refer to Judeo-Arabic as 'Arabic' and at least intellectuals are likely to refer to Judeo-Spanish as 'Ladino' rather than 'Spanish' or a cognate of this). I am, therefore, following this practice in this section. However, it is certainly true that Judeo-Aramaic differs from other forms of Aramaic in the usual way that Jewish languages typically differ from non-Jewish languages (in terms of borrowing from Hebrew and writing with the Jewish alphabet, which, although derived from the alphabet used by non-Jews to write Aramaic, has developed in a distinctive fashion from that of non-Jews).

The lack of general concern with distinguishing Judeo-Aramaic from



other forms of Aramaic may stem from several factors. First, many Jews are simply not aware that there are non-Jews who have used and continue to use Aramaic: they assume that the term 'Aramaic' already denotes an inherently Jewish language. Alternatively, even if people do know that non-Jews have used Aramaic, they may not know that there are still non-Jews who use Aramaic (I have met Aramaic-speaking Jews from Turkey like this), so that again the need to distinguish from non-Jewish usage is not an ideological point.

Second, because Hebrew and Aramaic are closely related and structurally similar languages, because they have been in such close contact and, therefore, have been borrowing from each other for so long and because Jews write Aramaic with the same pointing as is used for Hebrew, the fact that Judeo-Aramaic is a typical 'Jewish language' in the sense of having borrowed many Hebrew words is not as salient as it is in the case of, e.g., Yiddish. For example, Jews (even Israeli Jews) will sometimes recite prayers or sections of prayers which are in Aramaic under the mistaken impression that they are reading some peculiar ancient form of Hebrew and even non-Jewish Aramaic contains so many words which look like Hebrew words that it is not clear to a non-specialist whether they are cognates or borrowings.

Third, (Judeo-)Aramaic, unlike Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish, is already perceived as a fully legitimate (if not particularly vital) language and, therefore, there is no need to make an ideological point of legitimizing it and 'liberating' it from its conceptual bondage to a non-Jewish language. Fourth, and perhaps most important, speakers of Judeo-Aramaic are neither numerous nor motivated to bring about a change in their public image as are, e.g., speakers of Judeo-Arabic; in fact, many Jews do not seem to even be aware of the fact that there are still Jewish speakers of Aramaic.

For all of these reasons, Aramaic is not considered to be as important as the other Jewish languages to modern sociolinguists concerned with interpreting the ideology of language-and-identity in a Jewish context. The situation is quite different with the languages which I will discuss in the following sections of this chapter.

### **Why did Jews switch from the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet to the Hebrew-Aramaic alphabet?**

It is quite striking that Jews changed from their original writing system to one based upon the Aramaic alphabet, particularly given their absolute aversion to any other changes in the Biblical text that this script was used to write and the fact that there has been no comparable effect upon Hebrew from the script of any language other than Aramaic. It is worthwhile, then,

to inquire why the Aramaic script alone (which later developed into the Hebrew–Aramaic script) could have been accepted by Jews.

I am venturing into some speculation here but my best guess would be that the Aramaic script had some significant advantages but no actual disadvantages from the Jewish perspective, whereas other scripts which Jews might have adopted all had significant disadvantages. We can identify the following factors:

- (1) As noted in Chapter 1, the Aramaic script was simpler than the Paleo-Hebrew script for a number of letters and similar for the remainder. The significance of this factor is even reflected in Sanhedrin 21b/22a in the claim that it was actually the Aramaic script which was originally used in the biblical text (this seems to be clearly counter to the historical facts) but when the Jews sinned their script was made ‘splinter-like’ (see Diringer, 1958:128).
- (2) At the time the Aramaic script was being borrowed, Jews were, in any case, switching to Aramaic as their everyday language and Jewish society was being incorporated into empires which used Aramaic as their local *lingua franca* (written as well as spoken), so that Jews literate in Aramaic could simply use the same alphabet for Hebrew.
- (3) As Naveh (1975:32) points out, the Aramaic script at the time was used by many different peoples and had no particular sentiment or national feelings tied to it; Jews using it, therefore, did not feel they were taking ‘someone else’s script’.
- (4) The Aramaic script had the same number of letters in the same order with approximately the same phonetic values as the corresponding Hebrew letters. Therefore, sacred texts (particularly the five books of Moses) for which the exact order of letters was absolutely crucial for various mystical interpretations could simply be copied letter for letter: this would have been impossible with, e.g., the Greek or Latin alphabets.

I would, therefore, agree with Diringer (1958: 132) when he states that the Aramaic alphabet was adopted ‘to preserve the essence of Judaism, the Torah’. I would add to this the stipulation that the essence of Judaism is not only the Torah but also the idea that Jews, in general, should be able to read the Torah relatively easily. I would, however, have some reservations about his addition ‘and the unity of the Jewish people’; in fact, as Diringer argues himself, it seems that the Aramaic script was first adopted by the cultural elite in the Babylonian exile while the Jews remaining in the homeland continued to use the Paleo-Hebrew script, so that initially at least the adoption of the Aramaic script, in fact, split the people in terms of the alphabet with which they wrote. However, the Aramaic script seems to

have been adopted back in the homeland without significant opposition, so it seems safe to say that at least introducing the Aramaic script did not cause much of a rift, certainly nothing comparable to what would have happened with any other script at a later time.

This development indicates that, except for the Biblical text as an interpretable object, Jews have not taken linguistic conservatism as something having value in itself, and since changing the shapes of the letters did not interfere with the interpretation of the Bible, there was no *a priori* reason to reject this. This can be contrasted to the reaction of the Samaritans who, to a much greater extent, embrace conservatism as a principle (as their Hebrew name *Shomronim*, from the root shin-mem-resch 'guard, keep, preserve' suggests) and who, therefore, never adopted the Aramaic script, just as they never accepted prophets after Moses and reject the possibility of living outside of the land of Israel.

In any case, the adoption of the Aramaic script for writing Hebrew is as clear an indication as could be imagined of the intimate attachment Jews have had to Aramaic over the years: even if no other connection to Aramaic were maintained, the alphabet will always be a concrete reminder that Jewish culture as we know it grew out of Aramean civilization.

## Judeo-Arabic

The Arab armies swept across and conquered much of the Middle East (including the Jewish homeland), North Africa, and southern Spain in the seventh and eighth centuries. The subjugated peoples were under immediate pressure to use Arabic and, by the present day, most of them have switched to Arabic as their everyday language.

The most resistant groups (in terms of vernacular language) have been the (Aramaic-speaking) Chaldeans, Assyrians, Jacobites, Jews and (Kurdish-speaking) Kurds of what is now Northern Iraq, Southeastern Turkey, and contiguous areas of Syria, and the Berbers of North Africa: to varying degrees, these groups have retained their non-Arabic vernaculars to the present day, although they are weakening under relentless assimilatory pressure from the politically dominant Arabs. The previously Aramaic-speaking Maronites (primarily living in Lebanon) and the Egyptian-speaking Copts completed switching to Arabic as a vernacular language several hundred years ago.

Jews (excluding the Aramaic-speaking Jews mentioned in the last paragraph) appear to have switched to what I will refer to as Judeo-Arabic (pending a later discussion) as their spoken language fairly quickly (Patai, 1977: 100), perhaps within 100 years of the Arab invasion. Not only that but Jews soon began to use Judeo-Arabic for a wide variety of writing

as well, including Bible translations, Midrashim, philosophy, mathematics, science, Hebrew grammar and even some halakha: Hebrew was still retained for most poetry and some yeshiva instruction (particularly in Spain), while Aramaic continued to be used for responsa (Patai, 1977: 100–3). Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), probably the single most influential Jewish thinker in the last millenium, wrote almost exclusively in Judeo-Arabic, his native language, although his works were, of course, translated into Hebrew.

Nevertheless, Jews have not shown much long-term loyalty to Judeo-Arabic; as with Aramaic, they switched away from productive use of Judeo-Arabic when political circumstances changed and, unlike Aramaic, they did not accord it any sacred status. As Arabic civilization began to decline, Jews stopped using Judeo-Arabic for scholarly and religious writings, switching back to Hebrew for these purposes. Jews in Spain abandoned Judeo-Arabic for high functions in the 13th century, while Jews in North Africa and the Middle East had done this by the 15th century (Patai, 1977: 100; Blau, 1997: 50). Nor did Jews show much more loyalty to spoken Judeo-Arabic but rather tended to abandon it not long after new conquerers arrived: Jews in Spain switched to Spanish as their vernacular as the Reconquest proceeded (Patai, 1977: 100), while higher-status Jews in North Africa often switched to French when this area began to be colonized by the French in the 19th century. Thus, in recent times, Judeo-Arabic has been a language of low prestige, used in writing for more basic functions and in speech by the non-elite strata of society.

Prior to the foundation of Israel, the great majority of Jews living in Arabic-speaking countries spoke Judeo-Arabic as their native language, although as previously mentioned, there had been something of a trend among the higher classes to switch to French in countries colonized by France. After moving to Israel, these Jews switched to Hebrew as their vernacular very quickly, so that, like Yiddish in the secular community, Judeo-Arabic is now increasingly restricted to older speakers (to be sure, the process of attrition is perhaps 10–20 years behind in the case of Judeo-Arabic because of the later average date of arrival of Judeo-Arabic speakers). In Morocco, the only Arabic-speaking country in which there is still a significant Jewish population, numbering about 18,000, Jews have tended to switch to French as their home language and use (Muslim) Arabic with their Muslim neighbors, so that again Judeo-Arabic is disappearing (Chetrit, 1985: 265–6). It is safe to say, then, that Judeo-Arabic will soon die as a vernacular language.

### **Why is Judeo-Arabic not a sacred language?**

The question arises as to why Judeo-Arabic has never been accorded the

status of a 'sacred language' for Jews. Why were Jews willing to go beyond Hebrew and take Aramaic as a sacred Jewish language but not to do the same for the language so many of them adopted after Aramaic? After all, many original Judeo-Arabic writings, particularly those of Sa'adya Gaon and Moses Maimonides, are very highly valued in Jewish religion and society. Possible explanations for this are:

- (1) Mainstream Jewish history proceeded through a Hebrew-speaking period in which all Jews spoke Hebrew, to an Aramaic-speaking period in which the overwhelming majority of Jews spoke Aramaic, to a period in which Jews spoke a variety of different languages, during which no individual spoken language, including Judeo-Arabic, had a comparable level of demographic dominance. This means that practically all Jews today have Aramaic-speaking ancestors, while a vastly smaller amount have Judeo-Arabic-speaking ancestors.<sup>2</sup>
- (2) Arabic was clearly perceived as the language of another people, the Arabs, so that the ethnically derivative nature of Judeo-Arabic was relatively clear. However, by the time the Talmud was written, Aramaic had been conceptually de-ethnicized by virtue of having spread as the vernacular language of a variety of groups.
- (3) There is a tradition in Genesis that the Jews were originally ethnically Arameans, so that Aramaic is inherently more closely tied to the Jewish people.
- (4) Jews had already adopted the Aramaic alphabet and wrote the Bible using it.
- (5) The linguistic relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic is obviously much closer than the linguistic relationship between Hebrew and Arabic.
- (6) The Talmud was, until recent times, seen by Jews as, for practical purposes, more authoritative than the Bible, in that Talmudic rulings commonly overruled commonsense readings of the Bible: the last schisms in Judaism, with the Karaites and the Samaritans, involved the Jews accepting the Talmud while the Karaites and Samaritans rejected it, so that it was the Talmud which essentially completed the definition of Judaism. It was, therefore, natural that the language of the Talmud should have a special status. As highly revered as the Judeo-Arabic texts of Gaon and Maimonides may be, they do not have the same status.

### **Is Judeo-Arabic a distinctive language?**

As with other 'Jewish languages', Judeo-Arabic is characterized by general (though by no means invariable (see Blau, 1997: 55–6)) use of the

Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet rather than the Arabic one. Additionally, written Judeo-Arabic was distinguished from Classical Arabic even at a very early stage by the use of a large number of Neo-Arabic features, due presumably to the fact that Jewish writers simply did not know Classical Arabic very well (because they did not ascribe to it such metaphysical value and were, therefore, not willing to go to such lengths to learn it). Thus, in terms of written language, the case for distinctiveness in Judeo-Arabic is at least as great as it is for other Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, particularly as the Gentile versions of the latter languages do not show a diglossic split comparable to that of Arabic.

On the spoken level, as with other ‘Jewish languages’, Judeo-Arabic is characterized by large numbers of loanwords from Hebrew and Aramaic. Thus, depending upon the frequency of these loanwords, spoken Judeo-Arabic can be more or less linguistically distinct from (non-Judeo-)Arabic. However, unlike Judeo-Spanish and, to a slightly lesser extent, Yiddish, Judeo-Arabic has only very rarely been spoken in an area which is clearly geographically separate from that of non-Jewish Arabic speakers, so that in terms of spoken language the actual linguistic differences (aside from lexicon) between Jewish and non-Jewish forms are minimal. Additionally, there are enormous differences between forms of non-Jewish Arabic spoken in different areas which are parallel to the differences between forms of Judeo-Arabic spoken in these areas. For example, in Morocco, Judeo-Arabic and non-Jewish Arabic are fairly similar to each other, and similarly in Iraq, Judeo-Arabic and non-Jewish Arabic are fairly similar to each other, but both Moroccan forms are quite different from both Iraqi forms. It is, therefore, problematic to claim that there are consistent linguistic differences associated with differences of religious affiliation.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Judeo-Arabic has made considerable progress in being considered as a language independent of non-Jewish Arabic. Among intellectuals, it has benefited in this regard by the general wave of enthusiasm for Jewish languages, though at a considerably later stage than Yiddish did. The study of Judeo-Arabic language and culture as a topic of research is clearly gaining momentum in recent years (see, e.g., articles in Golb, 1997; Chetrit, 1986, 1993, 1997; Bar-Asher, 1999). Particularly striking, however, is the fact that the feeling that Judeo-Arabic is a distinctive language has also penetrated popular thinking, at least in Israel, and that there has been little or no delay between the time when intellectuals accepted this idea and the time when people, in general, accepted it. This stands in clear contrast with the situations of Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish, where, as we will see in the following sections, the program to regard these as distinctive languages clearly emanated from the intellec-

tual community and took some time to reach the general populace. A number of reasons may be adduced for this:

- (1) Most significantly, there is the Arab–Israeli conflict. Because, as I have noted, being an ‘Arab’ is defined as being someone who speaks ‘Arabic’ as his/her native/everyday language, and since Arabs are perceived as being staunch enemies of Jews, speakers of Judeo-Arabic of all social and educational backgrounds have a natural tendency to claim that, whatever their language may be, it is not ‘Arabic’ – and of course non-Jewish speakers of Arabic are quite happy to support this view. Thus, an immigrant to Israel from Morocco will normally say that his/her native language is ‘Moroccan’ (Hebrew *marokai*), not ‘Arabic’ – even if it is very similar to Moroccan non-Jewish Arabic. However, there is no parallel desire for Judeo-Spanish speakers to distance themselves from Spanish in this way, while Yiddish speakers only had a strong reason to distance themselves from Germans after the Holocaust, long after Yiddish-speaking intellectuals had launched a movement to legitimize the language (see Chapter 3).
- (2) In the Israeli context, most versions of Judeo-Arabic are indeed clearly different from the local non-Jewish versions of Arabic. This is, of course, not because Judeo-Arabic is generally linguistically different from non-Judeo-Arabic but rather because the great majority of Judeo-Arabic speakers have moved to Israel from countries such as Morocco, Iraq, and Yemen, where the Arabic spoken is generally different from the Arabic spoken in Israel. Nevertheless, this can serve as a reasonable excuse for claiming that what they are speaking is not ‘Arabic’.
- (3) The most salient subethnic division in Jewish Israeli society is between the historically traditionally dominant Ashkenazic group and the resurgent Sephardic group. Sephardic Jews have been making considerable efforts and some progress in the last 25 years in challenging Ashkenazic political, intellectual, cultural, and economic hegemony, and legitimization of Judeo-Arabic, the immediate ancestral language of the great majority of Sephardic Jews, is part of this program.

There is, therefore, a feeling in Israel at least that Judeo-Arabic is a relatively hot topic, both in terms of intellectual interest and in terms of popular support. It must be said, however, that it is not clear how long this level of interest and involvement will last.

## Judeo-Spanish

When the Spanish reconquered the Iberian peninsula from the Arabs, a significant number of Arabic-speaking Jews came under Spanish rule, and



in the course of the several hundred years it took the Spanish to complete the Reconquest, the Jews of Spain switched to Spanish as their everyday language: I will refer to their language as Judeo-Spanish.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, they took Judeo-Spanish with them wherever they went. The majority went to the Ottoman Empire, to territories which are part of the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor, as well as to the land which is today Israel: a minority went to Western Europe, particularly Holland. The Ottoman Spanish Jews maintained Judeo-Spanish as their everyday language, with the full support of the Ottoman government. When Ottoman territory was transferred to the control of the new nationalistically oriented Balkan states in the 19th century and when the Turkish Republic itself was established following the First World War, the new governments were not nearly so supportive of the distinctive language of the Ottoman Jews, and its speakers began to switch intergenerationally to politically dominant languages. The Western European Spanish Jews switched sooner, having adopted other languages by the end of the 18th century. There are today about 60,000 speakers of Judeo-Spanish today, mostly in Israel and the United States, but these are essentially all over the age of 50 and the death of the language seems inevitable in the next generation or two (Harris, 1994).

To a great extent, we can distinguish two phases in the development of Judeo-Spanish, one before the Expulsion and one after. Before the Expulsion, Judeo-Spanish was used for speech and (from the 13th century) for translating texts from Hebrew and Aramaic in the Jewish alphabet (this is the original referent of the term 'Ladino', now sometimes used to refer to Judeo-Spanish in general) (Patai, 1977: 102). It seems that, at this time, spoken Judeo-Spanish differed from the Spanish of Gentiles only in the manner typical of Jewish languages, that is the use of loanwords from Hebrew and Aramaic and in being written with the Jewish alphabet. However, after the Expulsion, Judeo-Spanish began to be used for writing original literature, in both Western Europe, particularly Amsterdam, and the Ottoman territory. This included both religious and secular writings. In Amsterdam this peaked in the 17th century: Judeo-Spanish developed in the Ottoman Empire more slowly but lasted longer, with an active press since the mid-19th century and a peak in secular writing in the early 20th century (Altabé, 1977–8: 97 reports that at least 115 original works were written in Judeo-Spanish between 1900 and 1933). The best-known work written in Judeo-Spanish is the *Me'am Lo'ez*, a popular folk encyclopedia published in 1730 by Rabbi Jacob Huli.

Being isolated from other types of Spanish, Judeo-Spanish developed independently. Harris (1994) identifies a number of linguistic features which are characteristic of Judeo-Spanish which differentiate it from

Standard Spanish. In some cases, features of Judeo-Spanish are also commonly found in some non-standard (non-Jewish) Spanish dialects, such as raising unstressed vowels. Some, however, occur rarely if ever in non-Jewish Spanish dialects, particularly those which either (1) stem from influence of Balkan languages or Turkish, e.g. [u] becoming [v] following [a], [e] and [i] in some dialects, which seems to be due to contact with Greek; or (2) are archaisms which have been lost in Spanish, e.g. the distinction between [ʒ], [dʒ], and [ʃ], retention of initial [f], intervocalic [z], and the distinction between [b] and [v].

Additionally, aside from the usual Hebrew and Aramaic borrowings, Judeo-Spanish is also distinguished from non-Jewish Spanish by borrowings from co-territorial languages, e.g. Turkish, Greek, Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian. The degree to which these languages have exerted an effect upon Judeo-Spanish has varied from place to place and from time to time.

### **The life-cycle of Judeo-Spanish**

The Jews did not necessarily all flock from Arabic to Spanish with the Reconquest. Though Toledo was captured from the Arabs in 1085, Jews there were still speaking Arabic in the 14th century (Patai, 1977: 101). However, the existence of Ladino texts from the 13th century showed that at least some Jews must have had Spanish as their vernacular language by this time. The switch to spoken Spanish was probably relatively slow because of the extremely gradual nature of the Reconquest itself: it was by no means clear at the time what the long-term outcome would be. With regards to the written language, the transition to Spanish was even slower. Written Arabic began dropping out of use among Spanish Jews here around 1200 but, other than translated material and a very small number of original writings, Jews switched to writing in Hebrew rather than Spanish while they were in Spain (Patai, 1977: 102).

The fact that the descendants of the refugees from Spain in the Ottoman Empire maintained Judeo-Spanish for over 400 years, in almost no cases even learning to read and write Turkish, seems on the surface to be a fairly remarkable phenomenon (Harris, 1994: 40). It could not be attributed to backwardness, which is often the reason for maintaining minority languages, because the Jews constituted the economic elite of the society. Harris (1994) gives a number of reasons which contributed to this. The Ottoman Empire gave a great deal of autonomy to non-Muslim minorities in terms of schooling, religious freedom and law; in fact, this political system was so satisfactory to the Jewish population that it has essentially formed the basis for the legal system of the modern state of Israel (see Chapter 4). The Ottomans had no particular interest in assimilating religious minorities,<sup>3</sup> particularly because non-Muslims were required to pay much higher taxes.

Additionally, the different religious groups were separated into a variety of homogeneous but scattered communities, so that the Jewish population was concentrated in Jewish quarters (*Juderías*) in different cities. This meant that within these quarters they could maintain a basically Jewish life-style, including dominant use of Judeo-Spanish (it should be emphasized that such a geographical separation was also desired by the Jews for exactly this reason).

However, when Judeo-Spanish was in a different political environment, such as in the assimilationist Western European countries of the beginning of the 19th century, the nationalistic Eastern European countries of the late 19th century or the Turkish Republic after the First World War, it suffered serious attrition as a spoken language in a few generations. Harris (1994: 44) notes that the citizenship laws passed in the late years of the Ottoman Empire, which were accompanied by an effort to de-emphasize religious differences (Rodrigue, 1990: 32), drastically weakened the autonomy of the Jewish community and although (as in Germany in the late 18th century), the short-term effect of this Enlightenment movement was an increase in literary output in the Jewish language, the associated assimilative pressures meant that within a few generations the language was, for all intents and purposes, dead in the community.

Not all credit for the maintenance of Judeo-Spanish, however, can go to the Ottoman government. Although the Ottomans by no means encouraged linguistic assimilation, they did not particularly discourage it either and, in fact, large numbers of Greek speakers in Asia Minor did adopt Turkish as their everyday language in spite of the enormous antipathy they felt for the Turks (Vryonis, 1967). Another extremely significant factor appears to have been the attitude of the Spanish Jews themselves, who by all accounts regarded themselves as the elite of Ottoman society (Patai [1977] attributes this to the sense of pride which they had adopted from the Spanish). As noted by Harris (1994: 131–2), ‘the Sephardim constituted the dominant cultural and social group in the Balkans until the advent of nationalism in the 1800s’, and he even notes that it was not uncommon for non-Jews in the Ottoman Empire to know and use Judeo-Spanish for practical purposes.

### **Is Judeo-Spanish a distinctive language?**

In terms of spoken language, Judeo-Spanish is more clearly and consistently distinctive from non-Jewish Spanish than are Judeo-Arabic and Yiddish from their non-Jewish counterparts. The reason for this is simple: Judeo-Spanish speakers have been in a completely different geographical setting than essentially all non-Jewish Spanish speakers, while Judeo-Arabic speakers have almost always lived in the same area as non-Jewish

Arabic speakers, and Yiddish speakers have shared a general Slavic milieu with a significant number of non-Jewish German speakers. Intellectuals seem if anything more eager to recognize Judeo-Spanish as a distinctive language than Judeo-Arabic (see, e.g., Patai, 1977: 44). Nevertheless, in popular thinking, for non-linguistic reasons, Judeo-Spanish has clearly not made as much progress as Yiddish or even Judeo-Arabic towards being considered a distinctive language. According to a number of studies (e.g. Harris, 1994; Malinowski, 1979, 1982; Chumaceiro, 1982), the overwhelming majority of speakers of Judeo-Spanish identify it as 'Spanish' (or something meaning 'Spanish' in another language, e.g. 'Espanyol', 'Sfaradit', etc.): it is not understood to be a language distinct from (non-Jewish) Spanish.

Some, however, do use a distinctive name, Ladino. As I have mentioned, historically, this term referred more specifically to the written form of Judeo-Spanish (using the Jewish alphabet) particularly when it was used to translate texts from Hebrew (and more particularly to translate the Bible [Harris, 1994]). This term has come to be used by some speakers of Judeo-Spanish, particularly in the United States, though even there 'Spanish' is far more common (Harris 1994). In Israel and Turkey, the term 'Ladino' is either not used at all or recognized as a name used by outsiders and scholars (Malinowski, 1979, 1982; Chumaceiro, 1982). 'Judeo-Spanish' is generally recognized as an academic term (which is why I am using it here).

It seems clear, then, that the impetus for labeling Judeo-Spanish as being distinct from Spanish is coming from someone other than speakers of the language. This again reinforces the idea that it is intellectuals who are leading the movement to consider forms spoken by Jews to be distinctive languages. To give one striking example, Harris' book on Judeo-Spanish is entitled *Death of a Language*, showing as clearly as possible that he considers Judeo-Spanish to be a language – even though in the book itself he makes it clear that he recognizes that average speakers of Judeo-Spanish consider it to be simply 'Spanish' rather than a distinctive language.

## Yiddish

The origins of Yiddish are not clear. According to one theory, Yiddish began to be spoken by Jews who migrated from Northern France, where they had spoken a Romance-derived Jewish language, to the Rhine area, where they adopted the Germanic language of the local Gentiles but keeping, as was typically the case, a substantial stock of Hebrew and Aramaic words (and also a not insignificant number of the Romance words they had previously been using) (see, e.g., Goldsmith, 1972). However, Katz (1985) argues that the first Yiddish speakers were Aramaic Jews who

emigrated directly to German-speaking territory from the Middle East about a thousand years ago and quickly switched to speaking a basically Germanic language but with large numbers of Hebrew and Aramaic borrowings.

In either case, beginning in the 13th century, large numbers of Yiddish speakers began to move eastward, where they came into contact with non-Germanic languages, particularly Slavic. Later, many Jews moved back from Eastern Europe to Central and even Western Europe, bringing their Slavic-influenced Yiddish with them (Patai, 1971: 123–5). Ultimately this language spread throughout Ashkenazic Jewish communities in Northern Europe until, in the 17th century,

An Ashkenazi Jew could start out from Moscow, and in every city on the way all across the continent as far west as London he could talk to the Jews in his own mother tongue which was also theirs, could transact business with them, settle among them, and easily feel at home with them. (Patai, 1971: 127)

Today, although there is no question that Yiddish is structurally a Germanic language and the overwhelming majority of its words are of Germanic stock, it also retains a significant number of Hebrew, Aramaic, Slavic and even Romance words, as well as various borrowings from other co-territorial languages. In terms of syntax and pronunciation, it has some features more characteristic of Slavic languages than of Germanic languages. Some of these features were, however, also shared by varieties of German spoken by non-Jews in Slav-dominated Eastern Europe.

Before modern times, Yiddish could not be said to differ much in its general sociolinguistic parameters from other diaspora Jewish languages. Developments in Yiddish in the last several hundred years, however, are more distinctive and it is these I will focus on. The next section reviews efforts in the last several hundred years to legitimize Yiddish, to change its status from that of a jargon to that of a full-fledged language, that is, one with a full range of not only spoken but also written functions. I will then discuss how the demographic status of Yiddish has changed dramatically in recent years and finally I will consider the status of Yiddish today.

### **Legitimization of Yiddish**

In pre-modern times, Yiddish was no more respected than other diaspora languages. Today, however, Yiddish is almost universally regarded as being a real language, clearly distinct from German. Though there has been a movement to legitimize all diaspora languages, it is clear that Yiddish was the first to benefit from this and the process has gone farther with Yiddish than with other diaspora languages. In fact, it is no

exaggeration to state that programs to legitimize other diaspora languages were modeled upon the program to legitimize Yiddish (see, e.g., Fishman, 1981a: 2), and, it is, therefore, appropriate to discuss this process in some detail here.

The legitimization of Yiddish must be understood as part of a general process of legitimization of vernacular languages which began with the Reformation and which has continued to the present day. To a significant extent, it was influenced and motivated by the same factors which motivated this development among Christian Europeans, in particular the commercial possibilities developed by the printing press noted by Anderson (1983) (see Chapter 1) and the Protestant idea of translating texts from a sacred language into the vernacular to enable more people to understand them. As we have seen, even before the printing press and the Reformation, Jews (unlike Catholics) had, in principle, supported the idea of translating sacred materials into the vernaculars and Yiddish had been used since the 14th century in a limited way for translated materials, particularly the Bible and prayers. However, with added motivation coming from technology and the change in thinking among non-Jews, the use of written Yiddish began to expand significantly beginning in the 16th century, at the same time that a number of Christian vernaculars similarly began to develop an increased range and frequency of usage.

This trend of writing in the vernacular grew in the following centuries, as Yiddish became the medium for folktales, Bible translations and interpretations, pietistic writings and translations of mystical texts, although to be sure not without opposition similar in philosophy (although not in tactics) to what it encountered among Christians (see, e.g., Zinberg, 1981). Writings in Yiddish were for some time aimed at women, who got considerably less instruction in Hebrew than men did (e.g. Patai, 1971: 128, Stampfer, 1993: 134). Particularly important was the *Tzenerene*, which retold stories of the Bible with a commentary and which was staple reading material for Ashkenazic women from the 16th to 19th century. However, Yiddish writings were also popular among the numerous men who could not read advanced Hebrew very well either (Stampfer, 1993).

As both the Haskalah and the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity began to spread in the late 18th century, legitimization of Yiddish broke new ground in two directions. One of these was secular works written originally in Yiddish, where Yiddish was chosen to reach a wider Jewish audience (the usual reason for the spread of vernacular writing among Christians as well). In some of these, the clear intention of the author was to encourage assimilation but this very use of Yiddish, which the Maskilim regarded as symbolizing what Jews had to get away from, helped to establish it is an acceptable medium of highbrow communication: 'The

reformers, in their war against Yiddish, had to make use of Yiddish to prove that it was no language' (Birnbaum, 1979: 37). Additionally, a minority of the German Maskilim whose writings expressed reservations about wholesale assimilation used Yiddish in order to communicate in a medium which non-Jews could not readily understand (see Goldsmith, 1972: 16).

The second new direction for Yiddish was the result of the spread of the Hasidic movement, as its leaders enthusiastically encouraged the use of Yiddish in original prayers and writings (Goldsmith, 1972: 14–5). There was a clear parallel in this respect between Hasidism and Protestantism (although I do not know of any studies demonstrating a direct intellectual link), as both emphasized the use of vernaculars in order to strengthen the connection of the individual with God and to undermine the authority of existing Jewish and Christian institutions, which were perceived as being too distant from the common people and too focused on the use of sacred languages of which the knowledge among the common people was limited (in the case of Jews) or practically non-existent (in the case of Christians).

Ultimately, these two new trends were to evolve into the two areas of Yiddish vitality today, respectively the secular Yiddishist movement and the maintenance of Yiddish as the vernacular language of the Ultra-Orthodox community. However, mainstream Maskilim focused their linguistic efforts on the development of Hebrew (see Chapter 2), while mainstream religious Jews tended to maintain the traditional functions of Hebrew and Aramaic and make less written use of Yiddish.

It was particularly in Eastern Europe that secular Yiddishism developed in the second half of the 19th century. As noted by Birnbaum (1979), the nature of the problem of modernization faced by Eastern European Jews was quite different from that faced by Western European Jews. In Western Europe, the entire existence of the Jews as a distinctive group was not accepted and 'the problem [for Jews was] the relationship between the individual Jew and his Gentile environment' (Birnbaum, 1979: 25). In Eastern Europe, however, there was acceptance of the idea of the Jewish ethnic collective but the question was how this collective could fit into the wider society in a modern secular context:

The problem here was the relationship of that particular part of the Jewish nation to the Gentile nation of its surroundings, as part of the relationship of the Jewish nation to the nations of the world. The Jewish position was recognized to be what it actually was: unusual, abnormal. There was nothing new in that; the traditional conception had been that, too. But there was this difference: it was now no longer recognized as being part of God's plan. The secularized mind refused to accept



this . . . If the Jewish people had ceased to be like the others, then it must revert to normality. The secularized section became conscious secularizers . . . They regarded themselves as the vanguard of the new Jewish people, a nation in the making. Already in the early stages of this metamorphosis, the seeds of subsequent differentiation were present . . . One of the results of this metamorphosis was the birth of a new literature. (Birnbaum, 1979: 25)

Thus, in the course of the 19th century, as the Haskalah movement spread into Eastern Europe, secular writings in Yiddish came to be more and more common, just as happened with Hebrew (see Chapter 2). Yiddish here had the disadvantage of a less prestigious pedigree than Hebrew but a considerable advantage in marketing potential, in addition to being perceived as the language of the common Jewish people. The first successful Yiddish newspaper, *Kol Mevasser* (1862–71), which contained literary contributions by leading writers such as Mendele Mokher Seforim and Yitskhok-Yoel Linetsky, was originally intended to be in Hebrew but the publisher Alexander Zederbaum switched to Yiddish when the Hebrew version failed to sell (Goldsmith, 1972: 27). As with Christian vernaculars, financial considerations largely motivated people to write in Yiddish – often under pseudonyms, because of the stigma the language carried – but over the course of time, they developed the language for literary purposes and cultivated a more intellectual and aesthetic attachment to it.

As with similar movements at the time among non-Jews, the growth of modern literature in the language was accompanied by a defense of the language itself. Y. M. Lifshitz (1829–78) wrote an essay in *Kol Mevasser* calling Yiddish a ‘completely separate language’, compiled the first Yiddish–German and Yiddish–Russian dictionaries, and encouraged authors to write in Yiddish for its own sake (Goldsmith, 1972: 28–30). This movement of course met enormous resistance but it did begin to gather strength.

Initially, ideological resistance among intellectuals to the legitimization of Yiddish came from assimilationists. However, beginning in the 1870s, a number of factors began to aid the cause of Yiddish in Eastern Europe. First, the rise of communism as a popular ideology among Gentiles served to redirect the attentions of less traditional intellectual Jews. Rather than being largely focused upon simply assimilating and forgetting Yiddish altogether, many of them began to regard Yiddish in a new light. The fact that it was undeniably the everyday language of the common Jewish people in Eastern Europe, which had previously made it the object of scorn among practically all secular intellectuals, now gave it new prestige at least among Jewish communists. Additionally, Jewish communist intellectuals

who wanted to reach the Jewish masses with their ideas had little choice but to turn to Yiddish for this purpose, which often entailed them having to learn it themselves (see Goldsmith, 1972: Chapter 3). Second, the wave of persecution and pogroms in Eastern Europe in the early 1880s drastically weakened the assimilationist position there, both because of newfound disillusionment with Gentile society and because of the beginning of an exodus of the more passionate assimilationists to the United States, and increasing numbers of non-traditional Jews began to turn to Yiddish as a secular symbol of Jewish identity.

Writers such as Sholom Aleichem, Mordecai Spector and Y.L. Peretz produced literary anthologies including not only contemporary works by themselves and other writers but also earlier works by Yiddish writers who had not been sufficiently appreciated in their day. Ideological support for Yiddish also grew, particularly in the writings of the literary critic Joseph Judah Lerner (1847–1907), who claimed that it had ‘the precision of French, the depth of German, and the rigorousness of English’ (Goldsmith, 1972: 36). Such statements about the relative qualities of different languages were, of course, based upon no empirical evidence whatsoever but they were seen as providing legitimization after the fashion of the day.

As the assimilationist position weakened among intellectuals, the conflict between Yiddish and Hebrew heated up. Here Yiddish was claimed to be the language of the people and, was thus, supported by those with communist leanings, while the secularizing elite, who had been affected by more traditional Gentile ideas valuing Hebrew as the language of the Bible, favored Hebrew and attacked Yiddish as being a ‘jargon’ rather than a real language (see Birnbaum, 1979: 36–7). This split was strengthened by the fact that those who came into more contact with communist ideas were more likely to have more recent roots in lower-class Jewish society, which meant that in any case their Hebrew would be weaker, while more high-brow Jews would be likely to have less interest in communism but more knowledge of Hebrew.

By the turn of the century, Yiddish was making impressive progress. Yiddish literature was becoming more developed, more accepted and more popular and the Yiddish press was growing as well. There was also a marked change in the tone of support for Yiddish. Whereas earlier support of Yiddish was based upon how it could serve capitalist or communist ends and/or satisfy individual peoples’ proclivities (the desire of writers like Mokher Seformim to write in Yiddish, linguists like Lifshitz to research Yiddish and ideologues like Lerner to effuse over the literary qualities of the language), the focus now shifted to what Yiddish could do for the Jewish people. Conscious of the fact that Gentiles at the time took language

as the essential marker of peoplehood, some Jews began to see Yiddish as a way of demonstrating that the Jews too were a people:

It was only by affirming the national individuality of East European Jewry as expressed in the Yiddish language and its culture that the Bund was able to justify its 'separatist' position vis-a-vis other socialist parties. (Goldsmith, 1972: 73)

Nathan Birnbaum, who coined the term 'Yiddishism', argued that '[O]nly in the light of this despised Golus [exile] dialect can the people's full independence ripen and Jews win their second, higher national emancipation' (Mayzel, 1957: 57). Y.L. Peretz broke new ground in Yiddish literature, taking it out of the folksy contexts of the writings of Mendele and Sholom Aleichem and

preparing the groundwork for a new modern Jewish life in which Yiddish would become a modern Jewish language in the fullest sense. In Peretz' writings, Yiddish did appear to be transformed into a language capable of expressing the nervousness of urban life and the nuances of sophisticated modern thought. (Goldsmith, 1972: 138)

Although Peretz ultimately came to be the leading Yiddish cultural figure in the world, he did not actually establish himself as an ideological supporter of Yiddish until he was in his fifties, around the turn of the century, and even then he was quite sober, showing none of the effusiveness of typical earlier ideologues such as Lerner:

If we want to educate these three million Jews, we cannot wait until they acquire a thorough knowledge of other tongues . . . Whosoever wants to understand the Jewish people, whosoever wants to teach them, must be able to read and write Yiddish . . . No language is holy per se; no language is good or bad in itself. Language is a means whereby human beings communicate with each other and whereby the educated influence the uneducated. (Peretz, 1947: 334)

All of this, it should be noted, was within the bounds of traditional Jewish thinking about the place of language in Jewish identity – that it is a supplementary rather than definitive component. Some Yiddishists, however, went farther. For example, Matisyohu Mieses, a self-educated linguist who made a strong impression with his linguistic arguments for the legitimacy of Yiddish, claimed that language was 'the most important factor in the establishment of national identity' and believed that 'the two million assimilated Jews in Europe and America . . . did not belong to the Jewish nation. Only race and, at best, religion still bound them to East European Jewry' (Goldsmith, 1972: 218, 223–4). This was entirely counter

to traditional Jewish thinking, according to which 'race' and religion were specifically what makes one Jewish: it was directly taken from the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, which was so popular among Eastern Europeans of the time. Similarly, Chaim Zhitlovsky (1945: 191), the leading Yiddishist theoretician, wrote that

[A] Jew who lives in the language sphere of Yiddish can be a Jew by religion, a Christian by religion, of no religion or even against religion. He still remains a Jew . . .

And, conversely, 'he who does not know Yiddish is a goy' (quoted in Landis, 1981: 363).

The high point of the Yiddish movement was a conference held at Czernowitz (today in Ukraine, then in Bukovina, a possession of Austria) ostensibly called in order to establish a Yiddish language committee and raise the status of Yiddish to that of a 'normal' language. Seventy people, including most of the prominent leaders of the movement, registered for the conference. The conference was not particularly well organized and so many controversial issues were raised and discussed that it did not accomplish any concrete goals other than declaring Yiddish to be 'a [N.B. not 'the'] language of the Jewish people' (see Zhitlovsky, 1958) and showing that it was possible not only to hold an intellectual conference on Yiddish but also *in* Yiddish. The significance of having done this, however, should not be underestimated.

Mieses' lecture, in particular, delivered when he was only 23 years old and replete with scholarly arguments based upon comparative linguistic research, made a considerable impression upon the audience and it showed the extent to which non-specialists could be overawed by presentations which appeared intellectually authoritative (see, e.g., Kresel, 1957). It must be said, however, that Mieses no less than Ben-Yehuda was an amateur linguist in the full sense of the word and was not necessarily in full control of the comparative data on which he based his arguments on.[4]

While there was no actual follow-up to the Czernovitz Conference and its concrete accomplishments were limited, it can, to a significant extent, be said to mark a turning point in the status of Yiddish, since it at least produced an official-sounding statement from a committee of intellectuals that it was, in fact, a real language, and when we come down to brass tacks, that is about all that any academic conference intended to legitimize a language can do. Opposition to Yiddish was still quite significant (see, e.g., Fishman, 1981b) but the movement to legitimize the language was at least beginning to enter the mainstream and it even came to have some role in Soviet public schools until the early 1930s.

While I do not doubt the significance of these developments, it is

important to keep in mind that this program of legitimization was literally copied from similar and earlier movements by neighboring non-Jews. Consider, for example, a typical statement of devotion to Yiddishism:

Affording Yiddish the right to develop is a sacred national cause . . . Yiddish is our language with a distinct stamp of our spirit . . . The national essence is not in the bare words; it expresses itself in the internal construction, in the contents breathed into the acquired elements, in the phonetic form and, principally, in the entire sea of feelings, images, associations, jokes, etc. which have grown into the mute, blind, material. (Weinreich, *et al.*, 1931: 193, 163; quoted in Goldsmith, 1998: 13)

This was clearly modeled upon and is practically identical to statements written about Christian Central and Eastern European languages since the late 18th century (perhaps with the exception of the explicit reference to jokes, a staple of Yiddishism which is not so common in non-Jewish writing of this sort). Similarly, the narratives given by Yiddishists regarding the origins of Yiddish, which I have repeated here, designed mainly to give the language a pedigree and to distinguish it from German, are the same in essence as narratives previously given by non-Jewish nationalists in Eastern Europe, showing e.g., how, Ukrainian and Byelorussian had been differentiated from Russian, by similarly applying a 19th century nationalistic point of view to analysis of an earlier time period during which linguistic distinctions did not have the same significance.

While keeping this general similarity in mind, it is important, however, to note some differences in this respect between the situation of Yiddish and that of other vernacular languages of Central and Eastern Europe. Two of these are related to the 'phantom' aspects of Jewish identity: (1) the abstract connection with the land of Israel, which has the consequence that Jews tend not to be demographically concentrated in any other particular area, and (2) the abstract connection with Hebrew.

Jewish territorial identity has been specifically associated with the land of Israel to the exclusion of any other geographic area: Yiddish-speaking Jews, therefore, had no geographic 'focus' (see Harshav, 1993: 82). While there was a unit of land which could, e.g., be understood to be 'the land of the Ukrainians' and designated as an autonomous or independent region called 'Ukraine', so that 'the Ukrainian language' could then be understood as 'the language of the political entity known as the Ukraine', such a plan was not really possible with Yiddish since there was no natural place which might be designated as 'Yiddishland' (the homeland specifically associated with Yiddish speakers). Thus, whereas the development of Czech, Serbian and Ukrainian had very clear political goals – the establishment of

an independent or at least autonomous political entity – the development of Yiddish could only serve the more abstract function of representing Jewish identity in a ‘modern’ manner.<sup>5</sup> Aside from making the material purpose of Yiddish-based nationalism unclear, this problem ultimately made complete normalization of Yiddish impossible and doomed Yiddish as a vernacular language of secular Jews.

To be sure, for some time it might have appeared that this would not necessarily be such a problem: in the first ten years of the Soviet Union, for example, the Soviet government gave official support to all minority languages, even those without a clear territorial focus (see, e.g., Peltz, 1985). In the 1930s, however, this more or less ended and the general ideology in the area was directed towards linguistically assimilating all minorities who had not (on the basis of having both a ‘developed language’ and a clear geographical focus) been assigned a separate republic (see Estraiikh, 1999).

A second respect in which Yiddish was different from other Eastern European languages was the fact that it had a serious competitor from its own community, namely Hebrew. As we have seen in Chapter 2, many Jews responded to the ideology of language and identity by beginning to develop Hebrew for modern purposes, and this detracted support from Yiddish. This did not happen with the surrounding Eastern European languages, e.g. Ukrainian did not have to face competition from a modernized Church Slavonic. The reasons for this difference are obvious: while the Jewish masses did not generally know very complex Hebrew, at least they knew incomparably more than Ukrainians knew of Old Church Slavonic, aside from which Hebrew could be seen as a specifically Jewish language, while, Old Church Slavonic could not be seen as a specifically Ukrainian language.<sup>6</sup>

Most generally, as I have argued in Chapter 1, the purest form of Yiddishism, with the use of spoken Yiddish being the foundation of Jewish identity, is simply inconsistent with traditional Jewish thought and it has not acquired much of a following among modern Jews either. This does not mean that no Jews have ever accepted this form of Yiddishism (there were Jews, e.g. Miseses and Zhitlovsky, who did) but it appears to have been exceedingly rare at any time, whereas among European Gentiles such full-scale identification with one’s spoken language has been quite common in modern times.

As a result of these disadvantages, the program to legitimize Yiddish did not really gather momentum until relatively late and it has faced longer-term opposition than has the legitimization of such languages as Czech, Ukrainian and Serbian. It is, of course, always the case that legitimization programs run into initial opposition as the proto-‘real language’ is defamed as a jargon, a debased version of some other language, etc., but

with Yiddish this has been more intense and it has gone on for longer. Thus, it is relatively routine even in relatively modern times in writings about Yiddish directed towards a general audience to justify its status as a 'real language' and/or to dwell at length upon the writings of those who would unjustly defame it (see, e.g., articles in Fishman, 1981a).

However, it must be noted that Yiddish has had some advantages in terms of being recognized as a distinctive language (although these are characteristically not mentioned in the literature). The fact that it is written with the Hebrew–Aramaic alphabet clearly reinforced its conceptual distinctness from German (as in cases such as Serbian *versus* Croatian and Hindi *versus* Urdu), although of course this was only helpful to the extent that Yiddish was actually written. Additionally, however, and most significantly, while the Holocaust decimated the demographic base of Yiddish, it also resulted in German language and culture sinking so low in Jewish esteem that it provided an overwhelmingly powerful motivation for Jews to insist that, whatever Yiddish may be, it is not a form of German.

I would, in fact, argue (although it would be difficult to prove) that it is particularly the Holocaust which has sealed general public acceptance of Yiddish as a distinctive language. I do not mean to suggest that the enormous efforts at legitimization by Yiddish authors, linguists and Yiddishists, in general, were not effective in convincing people that Yiddish is a language distinct from German – there is no question that these efforts had a considerable effect upon the thinking of quite a few people and they got the ball rolling. Nevertheless, it is clear that even up to the Second World War, large numbers of Jews, particularly the 'less enlightened,' still viewed Yiddish as a 'debased' German and it was only when Jews began to absorb and process the significance of the Holocaust that the mass of them began to accept Yiddish as a language distinct from German (see Fishman, 1981c: 7).

In any case, the battle for the legitimization of Yiddish, that is, public recognition of its status as a real language, has ultimately been won, though it has taken longer than in the cases of other Eastern European languages such as Czech, Serbian and Ukrainian. At the same time, however, the battle of Yiddishists to keep Yiddish as a living language which is a symbol of Jewish identity has generally been lost: it is clear that Yiddish is dying as a vernacular language in the secular community, although it is still quite healthy among Ultra-Orthodox Jews. I will turn to these demographic developments in the following section.

### **The demographic decline of Yiddish**

From the situation in the 17th century described by Patai in the introduction to this chapter, in which Jews across Northern Europe more or less all



spoke Yiddish as their first language (with the exception of Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews in Holland), Yiddish gradually declined in a general West-to-East sweep in the course of the next 300 years, disappearing in Western Europe (including most German-speaking areas) by the beginning of the 19th century, then starting to decline in Eastern Europe as well, beginning with Hungary. In the Russian Empire, this process took longer: in 1897, 97% of the Jews of the Russia Empire still considered Yiddish to be their mother tongue but this decreased to Soviet figures of 73% in 1926 and 41% in 1939 and practical extinction in recent times (Estraikh, 1999: 5, 97).

The trend everywhere was for less traditional Jews to switch to either the co-territorial non-Jewish vernaculars or, in many cases, the language of the local non-Jewish elite even if they did not constitute the majority of the local non-Jewish population (e.g. sometimes German rather than Hungarian in Budapest, German rather than Czech in Prague, Russian rather than Ukrainian in Odessa, etc.). This was supported by assimilative pressure from the surrounding non-Jewish community and government but also by the fact that, for reasons discussed earlier, the program to legitimize Yiddish tended to lag a generation or two (and sometimes more) behind the program to legitimize the local non-Jewish language – even more so in the eyes of non-Jews.

This pattern was particularly strong in the cities. For example, in turn-of-the-century Russia, where practically all the non-urban Jews still spoke Yiddish as their native language, urban Jews were already speaking Russian in significant numbers. In St Petersburg, for example, 13% of the Jews spoke Russian natively in 1881, 29% in 1890 and 42% in 1910 and a similar development took place in Moscow and, at a somewhat later stage, in other urban centers (Estraikh, 1999: 13–4). This meant that, before long, the increasing trend towards urbanization, which accelerated drastically after the Revolution, was also associated with a demographic switch from Yiddish to Russian. Away from the large cities, however, Yiddish held on much longer: in 1926 in Ukraine, for example, even among the youngest speakers, over 90% of the population of villages and 80% of the population of urban centers with population under 50,000 still had Yiddish as a mother tongue (Estraikh, 1999: 31).

As is typical in such cases, public schools served as powerful instruments of linguistic assimilation. When the option of something other than traditional Jewish education (conducted in Yiddish) became available to Jews, many of whom had some desire to get out of the *shtetl* and into the modern world, this was for some time conducted only in a non-Jewish language and this put Jewish children in a situation in which they or their children were liable to switch to the non-Jewish language for everyday usage as well.

Because of the effect of schooling, mother-tongue statistics such as those I have referred to here underestimate the extent to which Russian penetrated the Jewish community; for example, the 1917 Kiev census showed that only 5.4% of the Jews had Russian as a mother tongue but 23.7% of them had Russian as their main 'everyday language', suggesting that a number of them had spoken Yiddish at home as small children but switched to Russian as they grew up and went to school (Leshtshinski, 1925: 53). This trend was still more marked in people with advanced schooling: a 1910 survey of Jewish college and university students in Kiev found that 22% of them never spoke Yiddish at the time of the study and another 46% spoke it only rarely (Estraikh, 1999: 16). Non-traditional educational programs conducted in Yiddish only became an option after the program to legitimize Yiddish had made some progress (in Russia after 1914 [Estraikh, 1999: 11]) and these programs were only supported in a meaningful way for a short period of time, most significantly being phased out in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Nevertheless, it would be a gross exaggeration to claim that Yiddish was effectively dead, even in secular circles, before the Holocaust. When the Second World War began, large numbers of Eastern European Jews – probably still a majority – still spoke Yiddish, either because they had, in one way or another, maintained a relatively traditional Jewish way of life, including traditional Jewish education, or because they had only been removed from this way of life for a generation or two and had not yet completely linguistically assimilated, or because, as a result of the program to legitimize Yiddish and develop it as a symbol of Jewish identity, they had made a conscious effort to hold onto Yiddish. Nevertheless, as communist ideology came to dominate Eastern Europe and, increasingly, be interpreted so as not to allow Jews the option of a traditional Jewish education and as the Soviet Union and later its Eastern European satellites adopted increasingly centralist language policy (not only towards Yiddish but towards all minority languages), circumstances arose in which vernacular Yiddish could not have survived in Eastern Europe even if the Holocaust had not taken place.

Here, too, it is important to note that the history of Yiddish can only be understood in terms of general historical trends. Just as the rise in interest in legitimizing Yiddish was brought about by trends in surrounding non-Jewish communities, culminating in the 1920s, so the decline in official support for Yiddish and its demographic demise beginning in the 1930s were also brought about by contact with Gentiles.

The ideology of everyday-language-and-identity permeated the thinking and activities of intellectuals in the 19th century and, in the early 20th century, it exploded into the public consciousness and remade the map of

Europe. The First World War represented the final collapse of the ideologies of the divine right to rule and religious authority, as the Habsburg (Catholic), Ottoman (Sunni Islam) and Romanov (Orthodox) empires all fell apart and were replaced by a large number of republics based upon particular everyday languages (e.g. Hungary, Poland, Albania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland) or closely related languages (Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia).

The fact that such a total reorganization could take place indicates that belief in the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity was at a fever pitch at the time. A widely held dream then was that all (linguistically defined) peoples would be able to develop their own language and have their own political 'space' – thus, all of the new independent republics of Central and Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union in its early years launched and began to carry out the most ambitious program in human history to analyze, write grammars and dictionaries of, give official support to and generally legitimize all minority languages of the country. This was the same time during which Hebrew was revived as a living language in Israel. Yiddish was caught up in this avalanche of enthusiasm.

But before long Europe began to turn away from this ideology. Already in the 1930s, the Soviet Union had adopted a policy of linguistic centralization (in particular, Russification), Nazi Germany decided that German-speaking Jews were not Germans after all and within a few generations, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia broke apart. Those languages which got on the legitimization bandwagon early, which were accepted and developed and which had a clearly-defined territory which could be assigned to them around 1920 – e.g. Ukrainian, Czech, Bulgarian, Estonian, etc. (and Hebrew!) – have emerged today associated with independent countries (in some cases after an intermediate period as a Soviet republic or as a linguistically autonomous region of Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia). In contrast, those languages for which the legitimization program began later and/or which could not be assigned a clearly defined territory, either because their speakers were inherently scattered or because their homeland had been demographically invaded by speakers of a mainstream language (e.g. Circassian, Mordvin, Karelian), do not today have their own countries and are in danger of disappearing because their speakers are under pressure to switch to the mainstream language in the countries in which they are spoken. Yiddish is one of the latter type.

It is fairly clear, then, that even had the Holocaust not taken place, Yiddish was doomed to disappear as an everyday language in Europe (outside of Ultra-Orthodox circles, which will be discussed later). Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that it was the Holocaust which literally wiped Yiddish out. A very large proportion of the Jews killed in the Holocaust –

probably more than half – were Yiddish speakers. Yiddish is conceptualized as ‘the language of the Holocaust’ and this has had a great effect upon how it is perceived by Jews today. I will return to this matter later.

We can say, then, that the Yiddishist adaptation of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity was successful in the sense that it resulted in legitimizing Yiddish but unsuccessful in that secular Jews do not speak Yiddish as their everyday language any more today. In spite of this latter failure, however, during the time that it survived as a significant ideology, it was absolutely crucial in enabling many Jews to continue to identify themselves as Jews. During the critical period during which excitement over the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity was at a peak, e.g. 1880–1930, there were large numbers of less traditional Jews who were affected by the obsession of the surrounding Gentile societies with everyday language and who, therefore, felt reluctant to base their identity as Jews exclusively on the discredited (in the Gentile community) criteria of ancestry and religious affiliation. It was specifically their use of Yiddish and their acceptance of some form of the ideology of Yiddishism which made them able comfortably to identify themselves as Jews. Thus, even Simon Dubnow, who could hold fast to a traditional Jewish view and write that ‘to erect our entire national culture upon ‘Yiddishism’ means to cast off from us immediately millions of Jews who do not speak this language and to prepare millions of others for bankruptcy at a later date’ (Dubnow, 1958: 53; written in 1929) could also write (in 1909):

Let our relation to the ‘Jargon’ or, more correctly to Yiddish, be what it may, we dare not abandon one of the foundations of national unity in the very hour that the languages of the peoples around us rob our people of thousands and tens of thousands of its sons . . . (Dubnow, 1958: 190)

While Dubnow recognized that Jewish identity could not be based upon spoken language, he also recognized that, at the time he was writing, such was the power of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity in the Gentile population that any Jew who did not speak Yiddish was liable to consider him/herself to no longer be Jewish but rather a member of the group (e.g. Hungarian, Czech, etc.) whose language he spoke. For this reason alone, Dubnow argued, it was imperative that Jews develop Yiddish. This situation did not last for long – the Holocaust made it clear that racial and religious identity were still very important to European Gentiles after all, and Yiddish soon began to decline sharply as the everyday language of secular Jews – but this ideology did play an important if temporary role in Jewish continuity.

## Yiddish today

Yiddish has suffered enormous demographic losses since 1940 but it remains today as an important Jewish language for two reasons – its maintenance as a vernacular language in the Ultra-Orthodox community and its status as a ‘quasi-sacred’ language of Ashkenazic Jews; as I have previously noted, these represent the continuation of the two ‘branches’ of Yiddish legitimization which arose in response to the spread of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity in the 18th century, one religious and the other secular. I will discuss these phenomena in the next sections.

### *Maintenance of Yiddish among Ultra-Orthodox Jews*

Although Yiddish is all but dead among secular Jews, it has survived as the everyday language of most Ultra-Orthodox communities, particularly in the diaspora. There are still many Ultra-Orthodox communities – including the Goldstein family in Ann Arbor (see Chapter 1) – in which Yiddish is the main everyday language even of children.

The degree to which Yiddish has survived varies from community to community. Isaacs (1999) finds that Hasidic Jews maintain Yiddish more than Mitnagdim (the Ultra-Orthodox whose religious institutions are centered upon institutions more than individual rabbis), while Lubavitchers generally maintain Yiddish less than other Hasidic sects, presumably because they are more evangelistic and, therefore, have greater contact with the non-Ultra-Orthodox world. Israeli Ultra-Orthodox maintain Yiddish less than do Ultra-Orthodox in the diaspora (see Isaacs, 1998); however, the anti-Zionist *naturey karta* sect based in Jerusalem strongly maintains Yiddish, rejecting vernacular Hebrew because of its association with the state of Israel (Poll, 1980).

For the *naturey karta*, the ideological motivation for the maintenance of Yiddish is clear. In other cases, however, Ultra-Orthodox Jews do not seem to state explicitly why it is that they maintain vernacular Yiddish and treat the issue of Yiddish very matter-of-factly (see, e.g., Fishman, 1991; Chapter 7). At an ideological level, it is clear they regard the traditional Jewish criteria for identity (religion and ancestry) as far more important than everyday language. Any ideological explanation for their maintenance of Yiddish must, therefore, be more speculative but I will offer some thoughts here in this regard.

It has been argued that Yiddish has attained some sort of quasi-sacred status in Ultra-Orthodox thinking (see, e.g., Loewenthal, 1993: 187; Isaacs, 1999: 19). As Loewenthal (1993) notes, early Hasidism developed a tradition of teaching about language in which language is seen as a vehicle for sacredness and, as I have noted earlier, it is quite striking that this idea developed around the same time and in the same general geographical area

where non-Jews were developing and propagating an ideology according to which their national tongues were holy treasures which it was their sacred duty to preserve. Though, to my knowledge, Ultra-Orthodox thinkers have not explicitly linked this thinking to maintenance of vernacular Yiddish, it seems highly plausible that it plays a significant role at least at the unconscious level.

The suggestion that the Ultra-Orthodox movement has been so deeply influenced by Gentile ideas and behavior is likely to seem implausible and even sacrilegious to both Ultra-Orthodox Jews themselves and outsiders who may romanticize the uniqueness and originality of the Ultra-Orthodox community. Nevertheless, the indirect influence of non-Jewish Eastern European ideas cannot be ruled out as a factor in their maintenance of Yiddish. Ultra-Orthodox Jews today are either ignorant of the extra-Jewish influence on their movement or generally deny that such an influence exists but, in fact, it is clear that they have not necessarily been any less influenced by non-Jewish ideas and behavior than are secular Jews.

Patai's (1977) analysis of the origins of Hasidism has shown that this supposedly most authentically and purely Jewish religious movement was actually originally inspired by contact with and imitation of the religious behavior of Eastern European non-Jews. Thus, e.g., the relationship between the simple Hasidic follower, who is expected to be enthusiastic, relatively unlettered and not to think much, and his rebbe, who is expected to have special spiritual powers and to guide the Hasid in his every decision, is clearly based upon the ideal relationship between, e.g., the simple Ukrainian or Polish peasant and his/her priest. The Tales of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav do not explicitly mention any Jewish figures at all but rather take their basic characters (though not their spiritual themes) directly from Ukrainian folktales. Similarly, Hasidic dress is also a direct imitation of the dress of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern European nobility. The maintenance of Yiddish can be understood as another borrowing from non-Jewish society employed in a way so as to reinforce the barriers between Ultra-Orthodox Jews and outsiders.

It should be emphasized, however, that even if Ultra-Orthodox maintenance of Yiddish as a spoken language can be traced to the influence of the non-Jewish ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, Ultra-Orthodox Jews clearly take language as a distant second to religion in terms of importance: this is not the case for, e.g., Polish and Czech exponents of this ideology.

In terms of practical tactics which appear to be important in the maintenance of Yiddish, Ultra-Orthodox Jews are not normally opposed to learning and using the mainstream (non-Jewish) languages, even as part of

their school curriculum. A conscious effort is made to speak Yiddish as exclusively as possible to small children up until the age of about seven. After this, the parents and siblings are much less careful about avoiding the mainstream language and the children's schooling is about 50% in Yiddish and 50% in the mainstream language. This is possible because, in countries such as the United States, Canada, Belgium, and Israel, Ultra-Orthodox Jews have been allowed to run their own private schools and in these schools half of the education is done in Yiddish. In contrast, the Soviet Union did not allow such schools and, as a result, Yiddish (and the Ultra-Orthodox movement in general) did not survive there.

*Yiddish as a 'sacred language' among secular Ashkenazic Jews*

We have seen in Chapter 2 that when European Jews began to be affected by the ideology of language-and-identity, they had two languages to which they might apply this ideology, Hebrew and Yiddish, and, as noted by Glinert (1999: 4), this resulted in movements supporting both languages, though with drastically different results. There were various arguments for choosing each language in each situation but, in terms of everyday usage, the geographical factor proved most decisive: Hebrew won out in Israel, where it had historical roots and where there were Jews who did not speak Yiddish and had no historical association with it, while Yiddish did better in the diaspora. However, while Hebrew has survived in Israel, secular Yiddish was ultimately wiped out in Eastern Europe by the Holocaust and centralized language policy in the Soviet Union, Western Europe and the Americas. However, at the same time that Yiddish has lost out to Hebrew in the demographic struggle, it has been quite a different matter in terms of spiritual status.

Yiddishism has been a failure in its program to maintain or revive Yiddish as the everyday spoken language among Jews but it has resulted in a drastic transformation in the public image of Yiddish. Yiddish is now perceived as a fully legitimate language. In fact, we can say even more than this: the work Yiddishists have done has played a great role in transforming Yiddish into something which may be considered a 'modern sacred language' among secular Ashkenazic Jews. While Hebrew has replaced Yiddish as the most widely spoken Jewish language, Yiddish has, for many Ashkenazic Jews, replaced Hebrew as the language about which they feel the deepest emotions, which they regard as most important to their identity as Jews.

This has happened not only because the continued survival of Hebrew is now taken for granted while that of Yiddish is tenuous, a reversal of the situation 100 years ago, but also because of the circumstances of this change: As noted by Hadda (1997: 96) (among others), 'Yiddish did not die



out . . . it was murdered'; it is 'a language hallowed by the blood of martyrs' (Landis, 1981: 351). While it seems clear that, in any case, colloquial Yiddish would have been erased by another 50 years of centralized language policy in Eastern Europe, most secular Ashkenazic Jews in the United States, living as they are in an age and place in which victimhood is, for many people, the most powerful claim to moral righteousness, probably either do not know this or do not care, in terms of their perception of Yiddish. Indeed, it appears that just as earlier generations of Jews assigned a special metaphysical status to ancient (Hebrew-speaking) Jewish society, many present-day secular Ashkenazic Jews are doing the same with traditional Yiddish-speaking society:

the [Yiddish enthusiasts] I have encountered most frequently . . . see the language as the symbol of a saintly, satisfied, impossibly perfect society that existed at some point in the vague past. (Hadda, 1997: 98)

Additionally, the revival of Hebrew is associated with the rebirth of a Jewish state which for many Jews as well as non-Jews was accomplished in a way which (justifiably or not) has been the subject of considerable moral criticism, whereas Yiddish is clean of such potential stains.

This development must be distinguished from the modern Ultra-Orthodox conception of Yiddish as a sacred language (discussed earlier). For Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Yiddish is a living, everyday language: to the extent that it is sacred, it has been sanctified by the rabbis who have spoken it and written in it. For secular Ashkenazic Jews, in contrast, Yiddish is a foreign language of which they usually know little: to the extent that they regard it as 'sacred', it has been sanctified by the Holocaust and an idealized image of Jewish life in Eastern Europe prior to the Holocaust – including, of course, the legitimization work done by the secular Yiddishists.

In fact, it is probably not an exaggeration to say that, historically at least, a significant part of the appeal of Yiddish to secular Jews has lain specifically in the fact that it could be disassociated from – or even opposed to – the religious aspect of Jewish identity. We have seen that, as the Yiddishist movement was gathering momentum, Yiddish served for some people as something of a surrogate for the traditional religious criteria for Jewish identity. It is also significant in this regard that Yiddish was particularly associated with communism. To my knowledge, the only comparable case of a vernacular language movement being so strongly associated with communism was Demotic Greek, which was like Yiddish, and unlike other European languages, in having a 'sacred' competitor from within the same ethnic group (Katharevousa for Greeks, Hebrew for Jews; see fn. 6). The fact that many people felt that there was a natural, obvious or inherent relationship between vernacular languages and communism specifically when

those vernacular languages faced a fairly strong competitor from the sacred/religious sphere suggests that these people regarded religious institutions as the real enemy, one which had to be resisted both ideologically (through communism, the supremely anti-religious ideology of the time) and linguistically (through support for vernacular languages against their sacred competitors).

I do not mean to exaggerate the importance of Yiddish to secular Ashkenazic Jews as a whole: many care very little about Yiddish and the number who actually study Yiddish or use it is not very great. Still, this movement is a social phenomenon of some significance and I believe it is likely to grow in the future – although at the same time it is hard to believe that it will ever become very strong.

This trend is clearly much more significant in the United States than in Israel. As noted by Cohen (1993: 296), ‘the American Jewish community [is] . . . a culture where Yiddish has new panache and Hebrew can be left to the Israelis’. Yiddish is particularly appealing to Americans because the Holocaust has assumed such a central role in the identity of secular American Jews (Novick, 1999) and Yiddish is the linguistic component of this developing Holocaust-based identity. Yiddish also benefits from the general American pattern (by no means restricted to Jews) of the first generation of immigrants being more oriented towards assimilation while later generations are more ideologically comfortable having certain ‘ethnic’ components as part of their American identity (Isaacs 1999: 22). However, Yiddish is particularly unappealing to secular Israelis because they associate it with the Ultra-Orthodox community with whom they are so frequently at odds in political matters. The situation is different for American secular Jews, for many of whom the Ultra-Orthodox, being a tiny and not particularly assertive minority (in comparison with their cohort in Israel), either remain a complete abstraction or even convey a positive image of folksy authenticity.

My use of the term ‘sacred’ in reference to the status of Yiddish among secular Jews should be understood as being metaphorical in the sense that it is rare to hear secular Ashkenazic Jews in recent times use the word ‘sacred’ in reference to Yiddish or read it in any texts, for the obvious reason that they are secular people who would avoid using this word entirely. Nevertheless, I think that it is important to use this word to describe their feelings about Yiddish in order to underscore the fact that it appears that, within a certain stream of Ashkenazic Jewry, Yiddish is quite literally replacing Hebrew in its traditional sacred function. As I have noted, a traditional part of Jewish identity has been association with a dead, non-vernacular language (not a living everyday language). This sacred

language used to be Hebrew (and to some extent Aramaic): today, for many Jews, this 'sacred' language is Yiddish.

It is in this light that we can understand why Joshua Fishman is still writing books and articles practically begging Jews to use Yiddish more, even though the revival of Yiddish as a vernacular in the secular community is clearly hopeless. This is why there are performances of Yiddish theater and music even though the audience (and sometimes even the performers) know little of the language, why books are written 'In praise of Yiddish' (Samuel, 1971), why chairs of Yiddish studies are being funded, why Jonathan Boyarin insists on writing post-modern essays in Yiddish to audiences with whom he could much more easily communicate in English (Boyarin, 1996), etc. As noted by Roskies (1997: 26–7):

For the offspring of East European Jewry, the shtetl has become a kind of sacred space, sanctioned by the blood of the martyrs. In this scheme, Yiddish becomes a strictly liturgical medium, a language of lamentation.

Peltz (1998) points out that linguistic research on Yiddish even today focuses on 'dead', European, pre-Holocaust Yiddish, to the exclusion of the Yiddish spoken in more recent times in the United States. This may, at first blush, seem bizarre, particularly given the fact that in its European, pre-Holocaust guise, Yiddishism extolled and valued Yiddish specifically because it was a living, vital language (as opposed to Hebrew at the time), but, in fact, what has happened is that the Yiddishist movement itself has metamorphized from its beginnings as a late adaptation of an Eastern European language legitimization program to a language maintenance program to a modern version of the work of the linguists, scribes, poets and rabbis who turned Hebrew into a sacred language after it died as a vernacular.

Additionally, to the extent that it is secular and even anti-religious, it is understandable that Yiddishists tend to treat living, Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish as not being 'the real thing', as deviating from prescriptive norms based upon pre-Holocaust secular Yiddish (see, e.g., Isaacs, 1999). In this sense, the Yiddishist movement in its present guise, which superficially appears to have been a failure and which may be derided by both Zionists and the Ultra-Orthodox as both feeble and historically discontinuous, can actually be argued to be a more authentically Jewish response to the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity than either the revival of Hebrew by Zionists or the maintenance of vernacular Yiddish by the Ultra-Orthodox.

Yiddishism is generally one of a constellation of related and more or less compatible ideological alternatives to Zionism, on the one hand, and

Orthodoxy, on the other: it goes together well with either traditionalism (including non-fundamentalist religious observance) or 'do-it-yourself/pick-and-choose' observance, as well as emphasis on the Holocaust. To the extent that this understanding of Judaism develops, Yiddish – dead Yiddish – will be an important part of it. But it must be acknowledged that in terms of actual participation, this movement is relatively limited in its scope. My own belief is that this is because, although it is consistent with traditional Jewish thinking in giving greater value to a dead language than a living one, it is inconsistent with traditional Jewish thinking in assigning a greater relative importance to language itself than Jews normally do.

### **The future of Yiddish**

The future of Yiddish is unclear, both in terms of its status as a spoken language among Ultra-Orthodox Jews and its status as a new 'sacred' language for Ashkenazic Jews. Whatever vitality Yiddish shows is likely to be in the diaspora: Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel will probably continue to turn in increasing numbers to Hebrew (see Ben-Rafael 1994), while the 'sacred secular' appeal of Yiddish, being directly tied to the Holocaust, is far stronger in the diaspora than in Israel because the modern secular Holocaust-centered conception of Jewish identity is incomparably more popular in the diaspora, particularly in the United States, than it is in Israel (Novick, 1999).

If Novick is correct in his analysis of the motivation for the importance of the Holocaust in American Jewish life, that it is caused in large part by the general American 'cult of victimhood' which has arisen since the 1960s, the future of Yiddish as a 'sacred secular' language is likely to be tied to that of this cult of victimhood in American society in general. Stated less cynically, to the extent that Jews believe, or continue to believe, rightly or wrongly, that the Holocaust was a historically unique event of enormous metaphysical significance, and to the extent that they are supported in this belief by American society in general, they are likely to continue to assign to Yiddish a special metaphysical status, one which will ensure it a very lively future for a dead language.

### **Are 'Jewish Languages' a Unique Phenomenon?**

Wexler (1981: 99) claims that, with respect to having 'created unique variants of many coterritorial non-Jewish languages with which they came into contact . . . [I]n any typology of linguistic and cultural shift, the Jews occupy a unique position'. He argues that, although superficially the phenomenon of 'Jewish languages' might appear to resemble non-Jewish cases of language shift without loss of ethnic identity (he mentions Copts having

switched from Egyptian to Arabic), they are different in that 'the Jews have a tendency (a) to create a unique variant from the adopted co-territorial non-Jewish language, while (b) retaining written forms of Hebrew . . . and of Aramaic . . . as liturgical and literary languages and as potential sources of enrichment for the new vernaculars.'

This claim of the ostensible uniqueness of Jewish behavior seems problematic. We can cite, for example, the Turkish of Greeks in Asia Minor prior to 1922 (when they were moved to Greece as part of a population transfer) (see, e.g., Vryonis, 1967) or, conversely, the Greek of Turks in what is now Greece then, or the Malayalam of Assyrians in Kerala, the Hindi of Sikhs in New Delhi, the Arabic of Armenians in Jerusalem prior to the First World War or the Spanish of ex-Arabic-speaking Muslims in Spain prior to 1492, etc. In each of these cases, the communities have retained a distinctive liturgical language (the language associated with their religion) which was a source of enrichment for the new vernaculars. Could their variants be called 'unique', that is, distinctive languages as opposed to the co-territorial language spoken by people not of their group? As we have seen, whether they could or not would depend not so much upon how linguistically distinctive they are as upon whether people had an interest in considering them to be unique and separate 'languages' – if people had such an interest, then any linguistic differences could be emphasized, while if people had no such interest, then these differences could be de-emphasized.

To take the case Wexler mentions, that of the Copts, it certainly seems not unlikely that, particularly during the 800–1000 years following the Arab conquest of Egypt while Coptic was still, to some extent, a spoken language among Copts in addition to being their liturgical language, Copts generally spoke a distinctive version of Arabic ('Copto-Arabic'?) affected by their liturgical language, at least as distinctive as Jewish versions of Arabic which Wexler regards as being Jewish languages (similarly for 'Marono-Arabic', 'Jacobbo-Arabic' and 'Nestoreo-/Chaldeo-/Assyrio-Arabic' with influence from Aramaic rather than Coptic or Hebrew).

In fact, we cannot say that the actual linguistic situation of 'Jewish languages' is qualitatively different from such ostensible languages as 'Copto-Arabic', 'Assyrio-Malayalam' and 'Sikho-Hindi', because the relevant linguistic studies have not been done (at least to my knowledge). And this, I believe, is the key to what uniqueness may be found in the phenomenon of 'Jewish languages' – it appears to be only Jewish scholars who have taken it upon themselves to do the linguistic research associated with declaring their linguistic independence from languages on the basis of religious distinctiveness. It has been quite common to develop *Ausbau* (newly linguistically independent) languages in the last several hundred years (e.g. Faroese as opposed to Icelandic, Scots Gaelic as opposed to Irish,

Ukrainian as opposed to Russian, etc.) but this is normally based upon distinctions which are geographical (and ultimately political) rather than religious. It is possible that similar developments will take place in the future with other religiously distinctive groups.<sup>7</sup>

As noted earlier, the tendency to proclaim the existence of separate 'Jewish languages' can be traced to the Jewish interpretation of the ultimately non-Jewish ideology of everyday-language-and-identity. If a 'Jewish language' is declared to be linguistically independent of a similar non-Jewish language (e.g. Yiddish *versus* German), then this adds another criterion further distinguishing Jews from Gentiles, a criterion which is particularly significant in a milieu in which everyday language is taken as an important marker of identity. For one reason or another, Jews have felt more need to do this than have other groups for whom the basic linguistic facts may be generally similar.

In connection with this, it should be noted that there has been some research in European 'Gypsy languages' which generally parallels that which has been done in 'Jewish languages' in that non-Indic Gypsy languages spoken in Europe are presented as being related to other non-Gypsy languages but showing some linguistic differences and not necessarily being spoken in the same area as the non-Gypsy version (e.g. Cohn, 1973). It appears that what has happened here is that, when researchers coming from the European intellectual milieu (in which the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity was developed) have applied this ideology to the Jews and Gypsies (two groups with which they came into contact in Europe), one possible analysis has been that, regardless of the actual linguistic difference between Gentile/non-Gypsy versions, if Jews and Gypsies were distinctive peoples, then their languages must be distinctive as well (an alternative response to this situation among Europeans was to determine that Jews and Gypsies were not people in the normal sense of the word and to attempt to exterminate them, as will be discussed in Chapter 4).

Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that Gypsies are quite different from Jews in not having their own distinctive sacred language which can serve as input to their vernaculars. In this respect, Jews are more similar to other Middle Eastern groups such as Armenians, Copts, etc. For this reason, if research were done on these groups within the same conceptual framework, it would probably turn out that 'Jewish languages' are more similar to 'Armenian languages' and 'Coptic languages' than they are to 'Gypsy languages'.

In summary, we can say that as linguistic phenomena, 'Jewish languages' are probably not nearly as unique as Wexler makes them out to be: rather, what is (at the present time, at least) relatively unique about them is that a good number of Jewish linguists (including Wexler himself) have

gone out of their way to develop the conception of 'Jewish languages'. This is by no means to deride the significance of the concept of 'Jewish languages': every people has its distinctive cultural properties determined to a greater or lesser extent by its intellectual leaders.

### **Why Are There No New 'Jewish Languages'?**

As previously noted, those who have written about 'Jewish languages' have not given a general, objectively-applicable, non-circular definition of exactly what is a 'Jewish language' and what is not. However, if we observe the general behavior of such writers, the pattern seems to be that for any language which Jews began to speak more than, perhaps, 300 years ago, they are seen as having developed a distinct 'Jewish language', while for any language which Jews have begun to speak in the last few hundred years, this is not the case. Thus, in Wexler's (1981) extremely broad study of Jewish languages, the earliest case to which he refers of Jews switching to a non-Jewish language (rather than a Jewish version of Gentile language) is that of German in the 18th century, while the most recent clear case of a new Jewish language is a unique variety of Turkish among the Dönmes Jews, who spoke Judeo-Spanish and were forced to convert to Islam in the 17th century (Aeshcoly, 1937).<sup>8</sup> Similar patterns emerge from consideration of other studies such as Weinreich (1973) and Levi (1979).

The general perception which emerges, then, is that Jews are assumed to have spoken distinctive, 'Jewish', languages until several hundred years ago, at which point they began switching to non-Jewish languages. This is stated explicitly by Wexler (1981: 99), who writes that '[W]idespread shifts to non-Jewish languages throughout the world and to revived spoken Hebrew in Israel are now resulting in the obsolescence of contemporary Jewish languages and putting an end to 2600 years of Jewish language creation'.

I do not mean to state this in dogmatic terms, of course. Presumably if one were to identify a case in earlier times in which the Jewish form of a language seemed to be identical to a Gentile form, no one would claim that it was a 'Jewish language' solely by virtue of being used by Jews; conversely, if one were to find that, in some recent case of language shift, Jews had adopted a clearly distinctive version, this would be considered a new 'Jewish language'. There is no question that, through loans or calques from 'real' Jewish languages such as Hebrew, Aramaic and also Yiddish, many Jews are both continuing to show different usages (at least at the level of frequency) from non-Jews even in languages such as English and demonstrating interest in identifying and talking about these differences (see, e.g., Gold, 1985). Nevertheless, there seems to be an understanding that Jewish



usage of languages they have recently adopted has not resulted in the development of new Jewish languages.

While allowing that Jewish usage of any language was doubtless generally more distinctive from Gentile usage in the past than it is in the present, it is nevertheless difficult to avoid the conclusion that there is a general assumption that, whereas in the more distant past Jewish societies were practically invariably sufficiently separated from Gentile societies that distinctive Jewish languages would develop, this is no longer the case. Thus, for example, one can these days freely talk about Berberic or Judeo-Berber as a distinctive Jewish language without anyone feeling the need to ascertain exactly how different it was from non-Jewish Berber of the time – simply knowing that Jews spoke Berber a long time ago appears to be enough to convince people (or at least Jews) that Judeo-Berber was a distinctive language – but any claim about a recent distinctive ‘Judeo-English’ or ‘Judeo-Hungarian’ language would naturally be greeted with considerable skepticism.

One possible reason for this is related to the claim of Rabin (1981) that it is the Hebrew-Aramaic component that makes something a ‘Jewish language’. It is undeniably the case that diaspora Jews have vastly less knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic than they did in the past, so that they incorporate words from these languages into other languages they speak far less than they used to. However, Rabin’s criterion would not be accepted by many researchers (e.g. Wexler, 1981) and, additionally, even though Ultra-Orthodox Jews in, e.g., New York City do, in fact, make considerable use of Hebrew-Aramaic borrowings in their English, no one seems to be rushing out to declare this to be a distinctive ‘Judeo-English’.

I suspect that, in fact, the explanation for the perception that the age of Jewish language creation has ended lies outside of any objective linguistic facts: first of all because, in general, the question of what is a distinctive language can never be answered based upon objective linguistic facts; and, second of all, because, even though there are no objective and agreed-upon criteria for a language to be a Jewish language, there is nevertheless agreement that Jews are no longer creating new Jewish languages. It is clear that, for some reason, Jews have brought about a situation in which it is believed that Jews created distinctive languages in the past but are no longer creating distinctive new languages any more. I would attribute this to a combination of several factors:

*Factor 1:* Though both Jews and non-Jews have historically had a feeling that ‘real languages are dead languages’, Jews have never really abandoned this belief while non-Jews have. This is why 19<sup>th</sup>-century European Jews were able to continue to identify themselves with a ‘dead language’, Hebrew, at a time when their Gentile neighbors were casting off their

classical languages in favor of vernacular languages. In the same way, the idea that 'Jews are no longer creating Jewish languages' has the result that all 'Jewish languages' are dead or dying<sup>9</sup> and thus 'real languages' (in Jewish eyes) while forms considered not to be distinctive Jewish languages such as 'Judeo-English', 'Judeo-Russian', etc. are very much alive and thus not seen as 'real (distinctive) languages'. As Fishman 1981c: 7 puts it:

Yiddish was most often viewed as lacking in autonomy (and, therefore, not only a dialect but a 'corrupt German') when it did not lack vitality; but now, when its vitality is substantially impaired, its autonomy seems somehow to have mysteriously improved.

This is only a 'mystery' if one take an ideological position which involves the assumption that Jewish sociolinguistic behavior is, in some typological sense, 'abnormal', as, in fact, is characteristic of Fishman's position (see, e.g., Fishman, 1978; this volume, Chapter 1 fn. 4). I do not consider this to be a mystery at all. It is simply a continuation of traditional Jewish practice: Yiddish is now perceived by Jews as being a 'real language' specifically because it is perceived as being essentially dead.

*Factor 2:* If Jews were to emphasize that 'Judeo-English' and 'Judeo-Russian' are distinctive languages and/or to write them using the Hebrew-Aramaic script, this might render them more suspect in the eyes of the (non-Jewish) speakers of the non-Jewish versions of these languages. It is safer to displace Jewish distinctiveness to the past.<sup>10</sup>

*Factor 3:* This understanding of 'Jewish languages' fits in well with the trend in linguistics worldwide to study, document and legitimize dying languages on the widest scale in history. As a result of conceptualizing many Jewish versions as distinctive languages, it can be said that there are many dying Jewish languages as well but there is no parallel motivation to talk about 'Judeo-English' and 'Judeo-Russian' as being distinctive languages, because they are quite healthy. Thus, the concluding sentence of Wexler (1981) neatly brings together traditional Jewish concerns with a popular ecological theme in general linguistics today: 'Immediate research in comparative Jewish interlinguistics is imperative if a unique linguistic phenomenon is not to disappear, insufficiently recorded and explored.'

This account is, of course, speculative; it is clear, however, that the explanation for understanding the situation regarding 'Jewish languages' must lie in factors of this type rather than objective linguistic facts, because objective linguistic facts are never decisive in what is considered to be a 'language'.

## Flowering and Death

A striking pattern which we find repeatedly is that flowerings of writing in a given Jewish language consistently precede the death of the language in the relevant context soon after. In the 17th century, there was a considerable amount of writing in Judeo-Spanish by Jews in Amsterdam: there was at the time very little writing in Judeo-Spanish by the Jews of the Ottoman Empire. By 1800, Judeo-Spanish was effectively dead in Holland but still quite alive as a spoken language in the Ottoman Empire. Then, beginning in the second half of the 19th century, Ottoman Judeo-Spanish began to flourish in printing and literature: today this too is dying (Harris, 1994). The flowering of Hebrew literature in late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Germany preceded the loss of knowledge of Hebrew altogether among German Jews a few generations later (Shavit, 1993). Secular Yiddish writing reached a peak from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century: today Yiddish is essentially dead among secular Jews. The peak of writing in Judeo-Arabic was by Spanish Jews in the 12th century: a century after Maimonides wrote *The Guide for the Perplexed*, the most important writing in Judeo-Arabic, Jews in Spain no longer wrote in Arabic and many did not even speak it (Patai, 1977).

One can find a similar sort of pattern in earlier times. As noted by Patai (1977: 96),

the completion, or final codification, of the Talmud, which was to remain the mainstay of Jewish religion until the Enlightenment [and which remains the most important Jewish writing in Aramaic – J.M], took place about half a century after Babylonia (i.e. Iraq) had become Islamized and Arabized,

during the time when the overwhelming majority of Aramaic-speaking Jews were in the process of switching from Aramaic to Arabic as their spoken language. For that matter, the overwhelming majority of the material in the Hebrew Bible itself appears to have been written during and immediately preceding the time when Jews were coming under pressure to switch from Hebrew to Aramaic as their spoken language (although, as we have seen, it is not clear when this switch actually occurred). And it would not be unreasonable to suppose that the current interest in 'Jewish languages', which treats as 'Jewish languages' specifically those Jewish versions which are in imminent danger of dying while ignoring those which are not, is another example of the same general phenomenon.

I do not have a complete explanation for this but the pattern is so clear, unmistakable and repetitive in its general features that it cannot possibly be an accident. Jews seem to take the initiative to develop their spoken

language fully for written purposes during periods of crisis, when intimate contact with other cultures is providing the inspiration for intellectual synergies but when this same contact is, inevitably, going to result fairly soon in a radical change in Jewish linguistic behavior (switching to another spoken language).

The Hebrew Bible is, thus, the testament to the years of Jewish existence before encroachment by Aramaic- and Greek-speaking empires changed the political and linguistic reality in which Jews lived. The Aramaic Talmud is the testament to the following period when Jews spoke Aramaic before the Arab invasions; writings such as *The Guide for the Perplexed* are the testament to the life of the Jews in Muslim Spain before the Spanish Reconquest; and the writings of, e.g., Shalom Aleichem and Isaac Bashevis Singer are the testaments to the lives of Eastern European Jews before the Second World War, etc. In each case, the old language, the endangered or dying language, is the focus of intense and consciously Jewish creative activity: the new, everyday, spoken language, the wave of the future, is, for now, the language of the goyim and holds nothing for Jews *qua* Jews. But over the course of time, new attachments develop and the pattern repeats itself.

To my knowledge, this pattern seems to be distinctively Jewish, historically at least. Of course, any peak of cultural activity in any language will, by definition, be followed by a decline of some sort but, in the case of Jews, this decline is much more drastic. No such flowerings have preceded the death of, e.g., Aramaic among the Maronites, Greco-Turkish among the Greeks of Anatolia, the Germanic language of the Normans in Brittany and Sicily, etc.

There is, however, a clear trend of this type in very recent times in non-Jewish circles. As many peoples in the world are realizing that their languages are in imminent danger of disappearing, individuals and sometimes entire groups are beginning to (sometimes) become passionately concerned with them and to make all sorts of special efforts in relation to this, developing writing systems for the language, writing in it (poetry, literature, etc.), studying it, etc. The entire movement to save endangered languages, which is having a worldwide effect, can be understood in this light. The impetus for such movements and many of their products often come from outside the ethnic communities which are actually associated with the languages (e.g. from academic linguists) but, as time goes by, there is a clear trend towards indigenization of these ideas and activities.

## Catastrophe and Emotional Attachment

I would also hypothesize in relation to the discussion in the preceding section that Jews appear to develop a particular emotional attachment to

languages which are associated with a certain historical catastrophe. The four great catastrophes in Jewish history are the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in the sixth century BCE, the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in the first century CE, the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the Holocaust in the 20th century. The everyday languages spoken by Jews at the times of these disasters are, respectively, Hebrew, Aramaic, Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish and all of these have been treated by Jews in a very special manner. Hebrew and Aramaic are regarded by Jews as sacred languages; Judeo-Spanish survived remarkably well as the everyday language of Jews in the Ottoman Empire for more than 400 years and Yiddish is surviving remarkably well in Ultra-Orthodox communities today, as well as coming to be treated with increasing veneration by secular Jews. Other Jewish languages which are not associated with any particular overwhelming disaster, e.g. Judeo-Arabic, however excited individual academic researchers may get about them, do not seem to be held on to in the same way by the general Jewish populace.<sup>11</sup>

Here, too, Jewish behavior seems to be historically distinctive. The desire to specifically hold onto things which are historically associated with disaster is not at all common among the peoples of the world.<sup>12</sup> Other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, have sacred books which emphasize their ultimate triumph: the Hebrew Bible focuses on the defeat of the Jewish kingdoms and the expulsion of the Jews from their land. Jews regard Aramaic as a sacred language, even though it was brought by the Babylonians who destroyed the First Temple and took the Jews away into slavery and exile. They maintained Spanish in the Ottoman Empire for more than 400 years after the Spanish had expelled them. At least secular Ashkenazic diaspora Jews today are perhaps more attached to Yiddish than any other language even though – and perhaps specifically because – it was the language of most of the victims of the Holocaust and it is quite similar to the language of the instigators of the Holocaust.

## Prestige of Languages

It should also be acknowledged that the linguistic behavior of Jews in terms of everyday language usage can largely be explained in terms of the prestige associated with a language. In most circumstances, like most other peoples, when a prestigious new language appears on the scene, Jews are likely to embrace it. When the Arabs invaded and conquered the area, Jews switched to Arabic fairly quickly. When the Spanish began to take the Iberian Peninsula back from the Arabs, Jews did not generally show a great desire to hold onto Arabic (particularly not in writing). Jews in modern liberal societies in Western Europe and North America (with the exception

of the Ultra-Orthodox) have adopted non-Jewish vernaculars quite enthusiastically. Judeo-Arabic-speaking Jews in North Africa commonly switched to French as their everyday language fairly soon after the French colonized the area.

In those cases where Jews have maintained a Jewish language when surrounded by non-Jews who were politically dominant (e.g. Judeo-Spanish in the Ottoman Empire, Yiddish in Eastern Europe), the Jews have generally regarded themselves and their language as being associated with a 'higher' Western European culture in comparison with the non-Jews around them. In this respect, Jews do not seem to be different from other people in their behavior; in fact, if anything they may, in many cases, switch to a new prestigious language more easily because they feel less attachment to their old language – for example, Jews in Arabic-speaking French colonies, in general, switched to French faster and in greater numbers than did Muslims, because they were less attached to Arabic.

This explanation is related to and, in many cases, is mutually supportive of the explanation given in the previous section. When Jews have been rejected by a 'high' culture in some catastrophic or at least very unpleasant fashion, they have been forced to take refuge where they could, even in places controlled by groups generally perceived to be of 'lower' culture. In such situations, they have tended to maintain the language of the 'higher' culture by which they were rejected, and this can be explained as (a part of) commemorating the tragedy but also as maintaining some feeling of superiority in comparison with the non-Jews they later came to live amongst.<sup>13</sup> My feeling is that both of these factors help to support maintenance of the language, though undoubtedly the former motivation is more significant in traditional circles (where collective memory is more important) while the latter is more significant in progressive circles (where prestige is more important). However, in cases where a new conqueror has taken over an area in which Jews are living, Jews typically see no reason not to switch to their language, and similarly, when Jews choose to move to an area because it seems like a more attractive place to live (as opposed to being forced to take refuge), they seem to generally embrace the language of the new place.

## **Is Yiddish Qualitatively Different from Other Diaspora Languages?**

If, as I have argued earlier in this chapter, Yiddish has been elevated to the status of a 'sacred language' in the eyes of some Jews, the question arises as to whether it can be compared, in this sense, to the more traditional

sacred Jewish languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, and whether it is felt to be qualitatively different from other diaspora Jewish languages in this regard.

To the former question, I would argue that it can be compared in this way, with the following provisos:

- (1) The process of sanctification of Yiddish has, at this stage, not proceeded so far or been formalized as it has in the cases of Hebrew and Aramaic.
- (2) It is not clear how this process will develop in the future, in terms of who will regard Yiddish to be a sacred language, which specific usages this will involve and whether the Ultra-Orthodox community will continue to use Yiddish as a vernacular—to say nothing of the possibility that the process of sanctification may simply peter out.
- (3) In any case, there will undoubtedly always remain significant differences of one type or another between the status of Yiddish as a sacred language and the status of Hebrew and Aramaic as sacred languages. These considerations do not, however, negate the general similarity between the role which Yiddish appears to be developing and the roles which Hebrew and Aramaic had for so long prior to the revival of Hebrew. In each case, a language which is no longer spoken in the community has come to be regarded as more central to the identity of the members of the community than is their everyday language.

The question of the extent to which Yiddish is different in this respect from other diaspora languages is difficult and politically sensitive. There are various ways in which this situation might develop:

- (1) Yiddish may come to be seen as a sacred language of all Jews, not only Ashkenazic Jews (who have Yiddish-speaking ancestors) but also non-Ashkenazic Jews (who do not).
- (2) Each Jewish subcommunity may come to view as sacred its own ancestral diaspora Jewish language but not the ancestral diaspora Jewish languages of other subcommunities (e.g. Ashkenazic Jews would view Yiddish as a sacred language while Sephardic Jews would view Judeo-Arabic or Judeo-Spanish as being sacred).
- (3) Yiddish may come to be seen as a sacred language by Ashkenazic Jews, while non-Ashkenazic Jews do not view their ancestral diaspora languages as being sacred.
- (4) It may develop that, ultimately, none of the diaspora languages is viewed as sacred, even Yiddish.

At present, this development is still in progress, so it is not clear what will ultimately happen. What has occurred to date, however, appears to be that the process of sanctification of Yiddish is far ahead of the process of



sanctification of the other diaspora languages. This might appear to be consistent with the understanding of many Yiddishist Ashkenazic Jews, who evidently take scenario (1) (Yiddish coming to be seen as a sacred language of all Jews) as the normal development, e.g.

Yiddishism must no longer content itself with being a trend. It must become part of the Jewish consciousness of *every Jew* . . . Nothing less than the recognition of Yiddish culture as an essential component of Jewish identity for all Jews will suffice (Goldsmith, 1998: 21; emphasis added)

or

only these three [Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish] can be considered as truly Jewish languages. (Mark, 1981: 119)<sup>14</sup>

However, this does not necessarily suggest that scenario (1) will actually come to pass because, to my knowledge, it is more or less only Ashkenazic Jews who are beginning to treat Yiddish as being a sacred language – I do not know of any Sephardic Yiddishists.<sup>15</sup> This suggests that, from the Sephardic viewpoint, scenarios (2), (3) or (4) (rejecting Yiddish as a sacred language in their community, with or without sanctification of a Sephardic Jewish language) are more likely than (1). It is my impression that non-Ashkenazic Jews would, at the very least, not agree with the sentiment of the quotes from Goldsmith and Mark and some would be offended by them, as they assume not only that the ancestral Ashkenazic diaspora language has a greater metaphysical status than non-Ashkenazic diaspora languages but also that it has a greater status even for non-Ashkenazic Jews.

It is important to remember in this regard that Yiddish is different from Hebrew and Aramaic in that practically all Jews have Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking ancestors (see previous discussion in this chapter) but not all Jews have Yiddish-speaking ancestors. This being the case, the question then arises of how anyone could possibly regard scenario (1) as being reasonable. One possible answer to this question is that Yiddishists such as Goldsmith and Mark are ‘forgetting’ about non-Ashkenazic Jews, for one or more of the following reasons:

- (1) They live in a purely Ashkenazic environment and rarely, if ever, encounter non-Ashkenazic Jews.
- (2) Before the Holocaust, Ashkenazic Jews constituted the overwhelming majority of the world’s Jews and, in 1900, three-quarters of the Jews in the world spoke Yiddish (Tartakover, 1957: 210). It should be pointed out, however, that such a demographic preponderance was, histori-

cally speaking, a temporary aberration, resulting from a precipitous climb in the proportionate population of European Jewry beginning in the 17th century and ending with an even more precipitous drop in the mid-20th century.

- (3) They are exhibiting the arrogance towards non-Ashkenazic Jews of which Ashkenazic Jews are so often accused.

In today's world, where intellectual narrowness and lack of knowledge or thoughtfulness are not, in principle, accepted and where the demographic balance between Ashkenazic and non-Ashkenazic Jews is much more even than it was 100 years ago, such reasons are not going to carry much weight for very long.

There are, however, other, more legitimate reasons which might account for Yiddish ultimately coming to have a different status from other diaspora languages. First and foremost of these is the Holocaust. None of the other diaspora Jewish languages (in fact perhaps no language at all) is likely to be popularly associated with as dramatic a death as is Yiddish (even if, due to its maintenance in the Ultra-Orthodox community, it does not, in fact, entirely die as a vernacular). To many, this gives Yiddish enormous emotional, spiritual and even moral value.

Second is the fact that, as I have previously noted in this chapter, at least among secular Eastern European Jews between about 1880 and 1930, Yiddish really did play a central role in defining Jewish identity and, it might be argued, reminding many Jews who did not really feel comfortable with the traditional Jewish understanding of identity that they were still Jews. It is true that this was a temporary situation which was the product of a combination of unusual circumstances – in particular, that the area in which Yiddish was spoken was in the heart of Eastern Europe where the everyday-language-and-identity movement was at its strongest – but this is, nevertheless, more than can be said for any other Jewish vernacular language at any point in time.

Third, Yiddish far more than any other Jewish diaspora language benefited from the invention of the printing press and the associated popularization of writing and reading (Anderson, 1983; Stampfer, 1993). Thus, the sheer volume of authentic Yiddish texts and their popular exposure was far greater compared with that of other diaspora languages than even the demographic proportions of speakers of these languages would suggest.

It is for these reasons, I would suggest, that there may be some validity to the perception that Yiddish is or will ultimately come to be seen as metaphysically different from other diaspora Jewish languages. It seems to me highly unlikely, however, that such a view will ever be commonly accepted by non-Ashkenazic Jews.

It is possible, of course, that non-Ashkenazic Jews will also come to treat their ancestral diaspora languages as sacred to them, in a manner parallel to what Ashkenazic Jews are beginning to do (scenario (2)), in which case the situations of the different diaspora languages will continue to be parallel. This development is a plausible outcome if it turns out that the reason that Yiddish seems to be more 'sanctified' than other diaspora languages turns out to be simply due to the fact that Yiddish was spoken closer to the Eastern European epicenter of the language-and-identity ideology and, hence, got a 'head start' in the sanctification process. If this is the reason, the other diaspora languages may ultimately catch up with Yiddish in this respect. I would not rule this possibility out. In present-day Israeli sociolinguistics, one does sometimes feel that intellectuals are more excited about more recently legitimated diaspora languages such as Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish than they are about Yiddish, though this is not the situation in, e.g., the United States. It remains to be seen, however, whether this movement will develop much outside of intellectual spheres, as it has with Yiddish.

## Conclusion

The field of Jewish languages is open and developing. At scholarly conferences devoted to research of Jewish languages, there is typically a palpable sense of excitement and devotion to a cause – both intellectual and social – which is all too often lacking these days in other types of linguistics conferences. A certain amount of this may be attributed to the spirit of the times: one has the same general feeling at meetings of non-Jewish language ecology movements, for much the same reasons. It must be acknowledged, however, that, aside from Yiddish, this enthusiasm for study of Jewish languages is shared by non-intellectuals to a much more limited extent, because in Israel (where practically all people with an ancestral Jewish language other than Yiddish live today), the language to which people are switching, Hebrew, is one to which people can switch without feeling a loss of ethnic identity. In most other cases of language loss (e.g. of Native American languages), this entails a feeling of ethnic loss as well, because the language switched to has no relationship with one's ancestral ethnicity.

It remains to be seen what will happen when these Jewish languages are entirely lost as spoken languages, whether the research of Jewish languages will lose its energy. My own feeling is that, as least for a few generations following the death of these languages, enthusiasm for studying Jewish languages will not abate, specifically because of the traditional Jewish fascination with dead languages, which shows no signs at all of disappearing

in modern times: the more mundane and secure Hebrew becomes, the more a certain type of Jew will turn his or her attention to the study of other, newly dead or newly discovered, Jewish languages.

## Notes

1. That it was not inevitable that this should happen is shown by the fact that not only did the Samaritans reject the Talmud but the propagation of the Talmud brought about a schism in Judaism, with the Karaite sect rejecting the Talmud and continuing to base their laws on a more literal reading of the Bible.
2. I am excluding from 'mainstream Jewish history' groups which disappeared through assimilation, so that they did not leave descendants who identify themselves as Jews today, such as the Jews of Alexandria in the early Christian period, as well as lost tribes such as the Ethiopians.
3. A notorious exception to this was the policy of forced conversions of Christian children kidnapped to serve as the elite forces in the Ottoman army (the janissaries).
4. For example, he compared the legitimization of Yiddish for Jews whose heritage language was Hebrew to the legitimization of Norwegian for Norwegians whose heritage language was Finnish, confusing Finnish with Danish, not an unimpressive feat as these languages are not even genetically related to each other and the Danish and Finnish peoples had had no political relationship with each other for almost 400 years at the time (Goldsmith, 1972: 266).
5. The Soviet Union did, it is true, establish a Jewish Autonomous Region called Birobidjan in far eastern Siberia in the 1930s and there were some attempts to establish this as a geographical locus of Jewish nationality but there were never more than 50,000 Jews there and these attempts did not amount to much (see discussion in Estraiikh, 1999).
6. The one European case which was similar to Yiddish in this respect was Demotic Greek (see discussion later in this chapter), which similarly had a sacred/arcane rival from within the same ethnic community, namely Katharevousa. In both cases, a 'high' competitor resulted in acceptance of the 'low' language being delayed for much longer than was the case with otherwise comparable vernacular languages. Demotiki did not finally permanently replace Katharevousa until 1976 (Browning 1982).
7. It would not be surprising if the degree of linguistic distinctiveness of 'Jewish languages' turns out to be greater than some or all of these potentially comparable cases as a result of the generally greater knowledge which average Jews traditionally had of at least basic words in Hebrew compared with, e.g., Copts' or Maronites' knowledge of their sacred language, which would result in a larger component of words from the sacred language in spoken languages of Jews as opposed to other groups of this type. This is, however, pure speculation at this stage.
8. Wexler mentions a possible case of Jews speaking (plain) Hungarian in Saloniki in the 16th century (see Wexler, 1977: 195) and possible new cases of Judeo-French in Algeria in the 19th century (Giniger, 1954: 154–5) and Judeo-Slavic (Mises, 1915).
9. With the exception of Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish.
10. In fact, not only have Jews not continued to write new Jewish languages with the Jewish alphabet, they have even shown some tendency to switch away from

the Jewish alphabets with languages which had traditionally been written with it: Judeo-Spanish is now often written with the Latin alphabet (Harris, 1994: 198–9) and there was even a movement in the Soviet Union to write Yiddish in the Latin alphabet (Greenbaum, 1998: 25).

11. Language survival (whether as a sacred or a spoken language) appears to be a different matter from being considered as a distinctive language. Jews maintained Judeo-Spanish as a distinctive language for more than 400 years but do not generally regard it as a language distinct from Spanish; however, Jews generally consider Judeo-Arabic to be a distinctive language but seem to be switching away from it as fast as possible. My hypothesis is that survival is related to catastrophe (applying to Judeo-Spanish but not Judeo-Arabic), while conceptual distinctiveness is related to a desire to be clearly distinguished from non-Jewish speakers of the language (applying to Judeo-Arabic but not Judeo-Spanish).
12. The only non-Jewish example of this type which I know of is the intentional maintenance a South Netherlandish dialect as the basis of Standard Dutch following the fall of Flanders to the Spanish in the 1580s and the flight of the Flemish Protestants to the north.
13. Robert Cooper (personal communication, 2002) notes, however, that it is difficult to imagine that modern Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speakers have a general feeling of superiority with respect to host peoples in places like the United States. While it might be argued that they feel some religious sense of superiority, this seems qualitatively different from the feelings of, e.g., Judeo-Spanish-speaking Jews in the Ottoman Empire or German/Yiddish-speaking Jews in Eastern Europe.
14. Other interpretations of these quotes are admittedly possible. Goldsmith might be taken to mean that not only Yiddish but all diaspora languages should be taken as essential components of Jewish identity for all Jews (e.g. Judeo-Arabic should be an essential component of the identity of Ashkenazic Jews). This interpretation seems unlikely, however, as he himself does not seem to show the slightest interest in any diaspora language but Yiddish. Mark might be taken to mean that Yiddish is only important to Ashkenazic Jews while Hebrew and Aramaic are important to all Jews, but he does not state this anywhere, so the unmarked assumption is that he does mean to assign them parallel status.
15. There are Ultra-Orthodox Sephardic Jews today who are imitating Ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazic behavior in a variety of modes, for example dress (as pointed out to me by Robert Cooper (personal communication)), and this does extend not infrequently to a knowledge of Yiddish but this is use of Yiddish as a secondary component of a conception of Jewish identity focusing upon religious observance rather than ‘secular sanctification’ of Yiddish as found among Ashkenazic Yiddishists.

## Chapter 4

# ***Themes in Jewish Sociolinguistics***

In this chapter, I will discuss a number of other topics in Jewish sociolinguistics. In the first section, I will consider interactions between Jews and two groups which originally defined their national identities purely in terms of sharing a common everyday language, Germans and Arabs. The conflicts which Jews have had with these groups in modern times are a direct result of the differences in ideologies of identity between these groups and Jews. The second section will discuss various issues in Israeli sociolinguistics.

### **Conflicts with Everyday-Language-and-Identity Groups**

I have noted in Chapter 1 that there is a particular problem between Jews and groups who define their identity in terms of speaking a common language, as was the case for Germans and Arabs in the original formulations of their modern nationalist ideologies. For such groups, there is a conception of ethnic identity but this is not tied to religious affiliation or to citizenship (note, for comparison, that there is no parallel sense of 'people of English ethnicity' meaning 'all people who speak English' or 'people of French ethnicity' meaning 'all meaning who speak French'). Consequently, it is difficult for members of these groups to understand how Jews can be a 'normal people' (particularly in the case of Germans) or have the claims of a 'normal people' (particularly in the case of Arabs).

In an abstract sense, Jews are in a parallel situation with regards to language-based identities such as German or Arab and as with regards to citizenship-based identities such as French or American. The two 'new' criteria for identity (language and citizenship/living-place) are specifically those two criteria which Jews do not regard as central to Jewish identity. This might appear to allow for a convenient ambiguity: Jews could react to the propagation of these ideologies by claiming that, by the criteria of ancestry and religious affiliation, they will continue to be Jews, while by the criteria of everyday language or citizenship they will be something else, e.g. German-speaking Jews or Jewish-Americans. There is no logical con-

tradition and this would have made these ideologies seem, if not necessarily attractive to Jews, at least not so threatening.

The problem has been, however, that the ambiguity inherent in such a situation is likely to lead to the question of which part of each person's identity – Jewish ancestry and religion or non-Jewish language and citizenship – is more important. Thus even early in the process of attempting to build countries based upon the new ideologies, Gentiles were (or became) aware of the dual identity of their Jewish neighbors and regarded it with suspicion. We can see a typical example of this in an interaction in 1806 between a commission appointed by Napoleon to investigate the advisability of making Jews living in France French citizens and an assembly of French Jewish notables chosen by the French government to represent the Jewish people living in France. Napoleon's commissioners asked a variety of questions, e.g.

Were Frenchmen, in Jewish eyes, brethren, or were they strangers? Did a Jew born in France and treated as a citizen actually consider France his own country, one that he was bound to defend and whose laws he was bound to obey? . . . [The response of the Jewish notables to these questions] conveyed (and still conveys) not only their own uncertainty and their extreme anxiety to please but the essence of the very real dilemma in which they now found themselves. They declared, as firmly as they knew how, that France *was* their country and that the Jews of France *were* French patriots [and that I]ove of country is in the heart of Jews a sentiment so natural, so powerful, and so consonant with their religious opinions, that a French Jew considers himself in England, as among strangers, although he may be among Jews; and the case is the same with English Jews in France. (Vital, 1990: 16–7)

Commenting on this response, Vital notes:

This can hardly fail to strike modern ears as a less than fully candid and dignified, let alone courageous, reply. But it would be well to remember that these were somewhat frightened, anxious, and overawed people. (Vital 1990:17)

Vital presupposes (safely, I might add) that this answer from the Jewish representatives can be assumed to have been an exaggeration, wishful thinking or an outright misrepresentation, with individual Jews varying in this respect. In the terms of Anderson (1983), the French, having had their own traditional sense of community with their coreligionists shattered by various historical developments and attempting to adjust to and create a new reality along different lines, looked for the Jews to confirm that they felt the same way: in my terms, the Jews, whose traditional community had



been constructed of different materials and had, thus far, weathered the storm, pretended to go along with this.

Such are the pressures which have been exerted upon Jews to adopt, for practical purposes at least, some version of the new ideologies of identity. Some Jews, to be sure, have made such statements quite enthusiastically, happy to be able to show that they accept citizenship and/or native language as the main criteria for individual identity and, thus, are Jews only secondarily or not at all. However, it would be safe to say that the great majority of Jews who have expressed their feeling of belonging (on the basis of citizenship and/or everyday-language) to a non-Jewish group have done this appreciative of the fact that this statement says nothing at all about whether they regard themselves as Jews or not or about whether their Jewish or non-Jewish identity is more important to them. This is a very convenient ambiguity – but at times it can be and has been taken as deception.

As things have developed, this problem has been much more severe for Jews in these relations with language-and-identity groups than with citizenship-and-identity groups. The reason for this that that language-and-identity groups see themselves as representing an ethnic group, while citizenship-and-identity groups do not. To refer to someone as being both a German and a Jew or both an Arab and a Jew suggests that this person has two ethnic affiliations, which would seem to be logically impossible; however, to refer to someone as being both an American and a Jew or both a Frenchman and a Jew suggests only that the person has one citizenship-based identity and one ethnic identity and though this can certainly be perceived as creating a conflict of loyalty, it does not present as serious a conceptual problem.

A number of parallels emerge in comparison of German and Arab identity, which is not at all surprising considering that Arab nationalism was literally modeled after German nationalism (Chejne, 1969). As we will see, when the modern ideologies of German and Arab identity were originally formulated, religious affiliation was, in theory, irrelevant to membership in these groups: in fact, the group label itself was developed in part to bring together members of different religious groups. As I have noted, however, there was a problem with including Jews in either of these groups, because their religious affiliation was simultaneously an ethnic affiliation which should, in principle, have excluded other ethnic affiliations such as 'German' or 'Arab'. In practice, over the course of time, particularly but not exclusively due to complications in their relations with Jews, both Germans and Arabs began to 'readmit' religion as a criterion for identity, though at a more covert level (being overtly expressed as 'race' in Nazi thinking and through the reintroduction of Islamic law in Arab

thinking). Thus, although I have said that German and Arab identity have been defined in terms of language, this was only in the initial, formative stage of the modern conceptualization of their national identities: the situation became more complicated later on.

The views of Germans and Arabs towards the role of ancestry in their group identity have similarly been confused. When the ideologies of language-based German identity and Arab identity were originally developed, there was a naïve belief that sharing a common language meant sharing a common ancestry (see Polk, 1970; Olender, 1992). The Germans have since been disabused of this notion, although the route they have followed to arrive at this conclusion has been tortured indeed, as I will describe in the next section. The Arabs, in contrast, have not yet come to grips with the implausibility of this view: Israeli Arab students in my classes, for example, routinely claim that all Arabs are related by blood. I will discuss this later.

I will consider these matters in detail, dealing first with relations between Jews and Germans in the next section and then turning to relations between Jews and Arabs in the section after that.

### **Language, identity and the Holocaust**

It is common today to attribute the Holocaust to a combination of traditional anti-Semitism and the Nazi ideology of racial purity and this is, of course, true as far as it goes, but as an explanation it is trivial. Anti-Semitism of a traditional type, with traditional motivations and traditional justifications, of course played a role in the Holocaust but this sort of anti-Semitism had not led to actual programs aimed at complete extermination in the past and, in order to understand the Holocaust, it is necessary to understand why Nazi anti-Semitism was different. The ideology of racial purity played a role but it is also necessary to understand why the Nazis developed this ideology.

I will argue in this section that the Nazis' Final Solution was the result of specific features of German nationalism, developed, to a large extent, independent of their attitudes towards Jews, which led Germans to conclude that Jews were radically 'other' to the point of being unfit to live.

#### *German identity*

The modern ideology of everyday-language-and-identity was first developed by German thinkers such as Herder and Fichte in the second half of the 18th century (see, e.g., discussion in Edwards, 1994a: 131–2). 'German' identity was supposed to unify all Christian speakers of Germanic dialects in Continental Europe excluding The Netherlands and Denmark. Thus, Saxons, Bavarians, Austrians, Prussians and others,

including both Catholics and Protestants, encompassing speakers of an enormous range of dialects which were often mutually unintelligible, all were to be combined in a single 'German people'.

This 'people' was so lacking in any organic ethnic unity – linguistic (in terms of spoken language), religious or racial – that it would seem natural to ask why anyone would have thought of trying to unite them into a single ethnic group, particularly at a time when other groups (e.g. the Serbs, the Norwegians, the Czechs, the Hungarians, the Latvians, etc.) were coalescing into naturally cohesive and ethnically unified nationalities. Perhaps surprisingly, this question has never seriously been addressed: it appears, however, that the 'German' people were intended to be the human counterpart of a nationalistically based reinterpretation of the soon-to-be-defunct Holy Roman Empire, an understanding which is supported by Hitler's well-known claim that his Third Reich would last 1000 years, which was based upon the popular belief that the First Reich, the Holy Roman Empire, had, in fact, lasted for 1000 years, from 800 to 1800. The 'German' people also included, however, Germanic speakers who were living to the east of the Empire as an elite class in areas the majority of whose occupants were non-Germanic speakers, so that it was not even clear what the geographic territory associated with 'Germanness' was supposed to be.

Germans could have adopted other solutions to the problem of defining their national identity. They might have done what the Serbs and Croats did during the period of a united Yugoslavia, that is, they might have determined that even though they spoke the same language, they were distinctive peoples based upon their distinctive religions. They might have adopted the approach of the other Continental European speakers of Germanic languages, that is divided themselves into a variety of small but stable political entities like Holland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, who might ally in the face of a common threat (e.g. France), each with a language which is, in theory and in prescriptive norm, distinctive, even if they often do not differ markedly at the spoken level. Such options would in a general sense have been quite plausible at the time: external circumstances by no means forced the people who came to be known as the Germans to define their identity as they chose to.

In fact, in order to grasp the artificiality of the solution adopted by Germans to the problem of their national identity, it should be understood that statements such as 'the Germans are dialectally and religiously divided', though technically correct in a modern synchronic sense, are historically misleading. It would be more accurate to say that the concept of 'German' itself is a modern attempt to fuse together a widely diverse set of groups who have little in common from an ethnic point of view. The 'stretch' required to fuse together such a diverse set of people into a single

'ethnicity' was such that it could only be done by mystifying the concept of 'Germanness' to the extent that it lost all touch with reality and the result of this is that today 'German nationalism' is universally regarded as inherently more dangerous than any other type of nationalism.

Accompanying this vision of who would comprise the German people was a vision of what the German people would do, which was no less than to redeem the human race, an accomplishment worthy of the heirs of the Holy Roman Empire:

Fichte, together with Kant and Herder, laid the intellectual foundations of 'German revolutionism,' a movement at once nationalistic and cosmopolitan in its aspiration to be the messenger of a universal 'revolution of humanity' . . . In this vision . . . the established doctrine of national character performed . . . the function of discovering 'Germanness' – German national identity and the German mission for the redemption of humanity. (Rose, 1990: 12, 15)

As Wagner wrote in *The Revolution* (1849):

The Revolution, redeemer and creator of a new world blessing . . . I, the Revolution, am the ever-rejuvenating, ever-fashioning Life . . . For I am Revolution, I am the ever-fashioning Life, I am the only God . . . The incarnated Revolution, the God become Man . . . proclaiming to all the world the new Gospel of Happiness. (Quoted in Rose, 1990: 15)

As can be seen, it was not easy to determine in a concrete way where this revolution was going to lead and such vagueness of destiny naturally befitted a 'people' whose ethnic unity was more or less a figment of its inventors' imaginations. There was no question, however, that German nationalists believed that their people were destined to do things which the world would not soon forget.

When the ideology associating the German language with German identity was first developed towards the end of the 18th century, Jews in German-speaking areas still generally spoke quite differently from Christians in these areas. Given that, in a primal way, peoplehood was conceptualized as sharing blood but there were, at the time, no scientific procedures for determining affinity of blood while there were scientific procedures for determining affinity of language (Olender, 1992), the ideology of language-and-identity seemed a reasonable way of determining peoplehood. This was particularly the case because there was, at the time, a clear general feeling that the Jews were a separate 'people' and this seemed to be supported by the fact that the Jews had a markedly different spoken language. However, as time went by, the Jews linguistically assimilated and a scientific (or pseudo-scientific) discourse about race developed,

problems with a strictly linguistic definition of ethnicity would become manifest.

*The program to assimilate the Jews*

The Jewish presence in Europe has always caused a problem for European thinkers. For Christians *qua* Christians, the problem was that the Jews had rejected Jesus and continued to reject him. The response to this was to allow Jews to live in a debased condition, which would serve to show the consequences of rejecting Jesus: crucially, there was also a belief that Jesus would only come again when the Jews had accepted him (e.g. Tal, 1975; Sharot, 1997). It, therefore, served the interests of those in power to have the Jews as a distinctive group.

This changed in modern times. Liberals living in Western European societies in which Jews were in the process of gaining citizenship and switching to non-Jewish languages believed that the ideology of citizenship and identity and/or the ideology of everyday language and identity would eliminate the Jews as a distinctive people or at least render their Jewish identity secondary. There was, as I have noted, concern about potential dual loyalties on the part of Jews but with the encouragement of Jews who were willing to make not-entirely-straightforward public statements suggesting that their Jewish identity was secondary or irrelevant to them, liberal Western Europeans felt that Jews would soon disappear as a distinctive group and Jews saw no immediate advantage in taking the trouble to disabuse them of this notion.

In England, it should be noted, thinkers such as John Locke had argued even in the 17th century, long before the Enlightenment on the Continent, that the solution to 'the Jewish problem' was simply to tolerate Jewish distinctiveness indefinitely (Prager & Telushkin, 1985: 134–5) and American thinkers generally adopted this philosophy. On the Continent, however, this possibility was not seriously considered and, as a consequence, the nature of criticism against traditional Jews in liberal circles changed in outward form. Older complaints against Jews as Christ-killers gave way to complaints that Jews were not necessarily behaving like 'reasonable' people, with Christians determining what was 'reasonable' in accordance with their own cultural norms (see, e.g. discussion in Rose, 1990).

Goldhagen (1996) notes that, in the late 18th and early 19th century, liberal Germans seemed to believe sincerely that the solution to the 'Jewish Problem' was to 'normalize' Jewish behavior, to get the Jews to behave like 'normal' people, the model for this being Wilhelm Von Dohm's *On the Civic Improvement of the Jews* (1781). A typical example of this ideology is a quote from a speech against political anti-Semitism by Professor Rudolf von Gneist in 1881: 'When the Jews will give up their distinctiveness, we shall

witness the final consummation of the emancipation' (quoted in Tal, 1975: 78–9).

On the linguistic front, there seemed to be evidence that such a development was, in fact, afoot. By the first few decades of the 19th century, German Jews had generally come to speak and write German just as their Christian compatriots did. This meant that there was now no linguistic basis for excluding Jews from the linguistically defined German people. Liberal thinkers could interpret this to mean that Jewish distinctiveness, in general, would disappear just as Jewish linguistic distinctiveness had disappeared and they would be swallowed into the German people. This was supported by the general societal attitude that language was the central component of identity.

At a superficial level, at least, this idea appeared to gain considerable ground in the course of the 19th century. Hitler remarks, for example, that when he came to Vienna in the first decade of the 20th century, he did not (yet) accept the idea that Jews were a different people and he rejected anti-Semitism because

[T]he Jew was still characterized for me by nothing but his religion, and therefore, on grounds of human tolerance, I maintained my rejection of religious attacks in this case as in others. (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 52)

Even allowing that Hitler's background may not have been as liberal as he presents it as being, this suggests that, in polite public discourse at least, it was felt that the program to assimilate the Jews through language was succeeding.

### *Disillusionment*

However, at a deeper, less liberal and less polite level, something very different was happening. The linguistic assimilation of the Jews to German society, which was more or less completed early in the 19th century, caused a serious conceptual problem in the nature of German identity. As we have seen, in the second half of the 18th century, a common spoken language could serve as a 'stand-in' for a demonstrable blood relationship in determining peoplehood because Jews, who were assumed not to share common blood with German-speaking Christians, also did not share the same spoken language: 'German identity' defined by language thus matched, on a local level at least, popular conceptions of 'German identity' defined by blood. When Jews came to speak German in the same way as Christians did, however, a clear conceptual problem arose, as they were no more related by blood to German-speaking Christians than they had been before.

The Germans' only responses to this seeming paradox were incoherent,

from Weber's (1968) claim that it is perceived ancestral relationship rather than actual ancestral relationship which is important to the Nazi attempts to determine scientifically who exactly had 'German blood' and who did not. This was inevitable given the fact that the ostensibly ethnic entity which they were attempting to rationalize, the 'German people,' had had from its inception no real ethnic rationale. Thus, the linguistic assimilation of the Jews in itself caused German-speaking Christians to feel confusion and uncertainty regarding their own identity.

Problems also became evident in the social behavior of Jews. In the second half of the 19th century, German-speaking Christians increasingly came to perceive that German Jews were, for the most part, not adopting their new everyday-language-based or citizenship-based identity and casting off their Jewish identity but rather adding a new identity without abandoning the old one or making it clear which of these identities was more important to them. Europe's 'Jewish problem' was evidently not going to be solved with the new ideologies of identity. Jews, in general, for reasons described in Chapter 1, were simply not as excited as Christian Europeans were about changing their conceptualization of identity and, thus, were not willing to give up their distinctive Jewish identity or to change their behavior enough to fit the conception of 'normalness' which was imposed upon them:

As Uriel Tal, the historian of Christian-Jewish relations in Germany, writes, 'the insistence of German Jewry on retaining its identity was contrary to the liberal views of material progress, spiritual enlightenment, and the goals of national destiny; the liberals therefore began to regard the Jews, the prototype of particularism, as the chief impediment to national and spiritual unity' [*Christians and Jews in Germany*, p. 296]. The Jews, by now [the end of the 19th century – J.M.] modern in every other way, confounded liberals by not responding to the new environmental conditions, as the liberals' redemptive social theory had promised. Liberals, shorn of their optimism, were left with the cultural model of Jews as aliens . . . (Goldhagen, 1996: 59)

However, because German identity had been initially conceptualized upon the basis of language and because, according to this ideology, German-speaking Jews were 'Germans', the liberal program would be followed as long as there seemed to be a decent chance that it would eventually result in the erasure of Jewish distinctiveness or until it otherwise became clear that things were not working out as had been hoped: in practice, this meant until after the First World War. But beginning in the second half of the 19th century, German thinkers began to consider other ways of defining German identity.



Because Germans felt unsure of what 'German' identity was supposed to consist of – who was part of their group – it was tempting to fall back upon a historically authentic understanding of who was not part of their group – Jews:

For nineteenth-century Germans, so unsure of their own 'Germanness', the Jewish Question was ultimately the German Question. It was, in effect, another way of asking 'What is German?' and receiving the satisfying answer – 'Whatever is not Jewish.' (Rose, 1990: 41)

The ideology of language-and-identity, however, had failed to exclude Jews, who had learned to speak German just as Christians did. In this situation, it was only natural that German thinkers would turn to popularized versions of Darwinian racial theories, which were new and fashionable at the time, in order to reformulate the definition of German identity so as to exclude Jews, particularly because Jews themselves clearly used ancestry as a basis for group identity (Rose, 1990).

These same racial theories also resulted in a general concern with principles of long-term survival, not only of species but also of peoples. Since German identity was defined in terms of speaking German, this meant that the survival of the German people in a given area meant the survival of the German language in a given area, and as minority German populations in, e.g. the United States and the Russian Empire, saw their education systems come increasingly under the control of centralized governments, the danger of degermanization loomed larger (see Hutton, 1999).

Thus, already before the First World War, Germans were moving towards putting the ancestral/racial criteria for Germanness in the forefront, as a means of ensuring the survival of the German people. Although, in retrospect, it seems strange that Germans would feel insecure about their ability to survive as a people, this fear appears more understandable in light of the fact that German national identity had been originally defined on the basis of language alone – not religion, not citizenship and not any rational definition of ancestry. In the modern world of centralized and universal education which was developing in the second half of the 19th century, language alone was a frail reed upon which to base ethnic identity. It depended upon the ability of speakers of a language to control their own educational system which, at the time, meant the ability to win wars.

The outcome of the First World War brought this crisis to a head. For the first time since Napoleon, the German armies were defeated. German speakers in the newly independent states of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia were in danger of being linguistically assimilated and hence, according to the traditional linguistic understanding of

German identity, degermanized. In fact, it is particularly with the theme of the danger of the degermanization of the German speakers of the ex-Austro-Hungarian Empire that Hitler opens *Mein Kampf*, rather than any discussion of his much better known concern with Jews (Hitler, (1971 [1925]: 3).

Basing German identity on the ideology of language-and-identity was not working out as well as had been planned. This ideology had not merely failed to bring about the hoped-for redemption to which the German people were supposed to lead the world, it had destroyed both the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Thanks to this ideology, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Yugoslavia were now all independent countries rather than having their territory governed largely or entirely by German-speaking people. Of the vast lands which Germans had controlled to the East, only East Prussia remained and this was not even connected to Germany. Furthermore, the scattered ethnic Germans who had been the elite of Eastern European society now found themselves as isolated minorities in new countries, liable to linguistic assimilation and hence, according to the ideology of language-and-identity, degermanization, and if they were linguistically transformed into, e.g., Hungarians or Poles or Czechs, the German presence in Eastern Europe would be literally erased and the territorial greatness of the German people would vanish into thin air. Given the messianic fantasies which lay at the heart of German nationalisms, this was not something the Germans could be expected to give up without a fight.

Worse still, the failure of the German armies to protect the Reich meant that even there foreigners might impose conditions upon Germans which could involve a threat to the German language and hence, according to the ideology of language-and-identity, the German people:

... people had gradually lost interest in the Germans living abroad ... Only a handful of Germans in the Reich had the slightest conception of the eternal and merciless struggle for the German language, German schools, and the German way of life. Only today, when the same deplorable misery is forced on many millions of Germans from the Reich, who under foreign rule dream of their common fatherland and strive, amid their longing, at least to preserve their holy right to their mother tongue, do wider circles understand what it means to be forced to fight for one's nationality. (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 11)

In such a situation, the ease with which Jews appeared to switch languages without losing their identity confused and alarmed the Germans, for whom switching languages was a matter of ethnic life and death:

As in so many areas, the explicit attacks on the Jews for their linguistic promiscuity were the projection of fears about the Germans' own ethnic weakness: were not Germans in the United States assimilating to English? How would they survive in the new states of Eastern Europe? . . . The German Jew who could speak 'perfect' German, who wrote literary German, who spoke a German dialect, was walking proof that the boundary was insecure, that the bounds of language were weak, and that it was possible to pass promiscuously from one language to another. (Hutton, 1999: 305)

At a time of such anxiety regarding the future of the German people, the very fact of the continued survival of the Jewish people without a common everyday language was a cause of marveling and fear to Germans:

The Jews were [seen as by German thinkers as] a special case and a unique threat, since their capacity for racial survival was superior to that of the Germans, and since they had no need of territory and no need of mother-tongue. (Hutton, 1999: 5–6)

The mightiest counterpart to the Aryan is represented by the Jew. In hardly any people in the world is the instinct of self-preservation developed more strongly than in the so-called 'chosen'. Of this, the mere fact of the survival of this race may be considered the best proof. Where is the people which in the last two thousand years has been exposed to so slight changes of inner disposition, character, etc., as the Jewish people? What people, finally, has gone through greater upheavals than this one – and nevertheless issued from the mightiest catastrophes of mankind unchanged? What an infinitely tough will to live and preserve the species speaks from these facts! (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 300)

In such a situation, German-speaking Jews appeared to pose a tremendous threat. The belief that German-speaking Jews were 'Germans' had entered mainstream thought, even at the same time that it was clear that Jews, to a significant extent, retained a distinctive ethnic identity. Furthermore, it appeared that the ethnic bond of Jewishness might be stronger than the ethnic bond of Germanness, so that these 'Germans' would ultimately owe their primary allegiance to the Jewish people and could be expected to erode the German people from the inside even as foreign powers attacked them from the outside. As noted by Rose (1990: 42):

Perhaps what more than anything was bound to rack up German insecurity and resentment to fever pitch was the outrageous fact that Jews had escaped from the ghetto, becoming 'German' in appearance but

still remaining Jews in a religious, or, more insidiously, in a social or psychological sense. With emancipation, it was no longer possible to distinguish sharply and unambiguously between 'German' and 'Jew'. Jews were not really Germans, but they were admitted as much by the state. When primal categories become blurred like this, the whole order of the world is thrown into doubt, and the hysterical temperament runs free.

As a result, Germans concluded in the aftermath of the First World War that although the German language had been the basis of German identity, it alone was not reliable. At this time, Germans were too deeply affected by Romanticism to be able to put the concept of 'peoplehood' behind that of 'citizenship', as Western European and North American countries were doing; but they were also too deeply religiously divided between Catholic and Protestant to be able to include religious affiliation directly as part of their definition of German peoplehood. Since language alone did not seem to be a secure criterion for identity in the indefinite future, only the ancestral criterion was left. It is in this context that it is possible to understand the manner in which German society at this time became obsessed with identity based upon 'blood' to an extent unprecedented in human history.

This did not mean, however, abandoning the everyday-language-and-identity ideology, which had become too thoroughly ingrained in German thinking to be exorcised. The problem was not perceived as being the ideology itself but rather the fact that, in some demonic way, Jews has managed to usurp the German language: if the problem of Jews speaking German could be eliminated, then things would be as they should be. Indeed, the concern with the German language grew stronger as Nazism developed:

In National Socialist Germany, the German language was the object of increasingly intense veneration by professional linguists committed to the notion of mother-tongue. These linguists believed it was their sacred duty to protect and preserve the mother-tongue, to contribute to the salvation of the German people itself and its liberation from history, hybridity, and social divisions, and the horrors of assimilation, thereby reconnecting it with the foundation of national Being. Reverence for the mother-tongue reached at points a mystical level. (Hutton, 1999: 6–7)

Thus, the definition of German identity in terms of everyday usage of the German language gave way to a language+race-based understanding of German identity which required the protection of the German language

from everyday usage by people who were not racially German – that is German-speaking Jews. The Nazi ideology of racially defining German identity was, therefore, only arrived at after (and in response to) the failure of an ideology which defined German identity in terms of language (see, e.g., Rose, 1990; Olender, 1992; Hutton, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

### *Jewish 'deceptiveness'*

As the idea developed that 'Jews were native speakers of German and were not Germans' (Hutton, 1999: 305) and that this was literally a violation of the natural order of things (since the everyday-language-and-identity ideology was accepted as 'natural'), Jewish use of German came to be perceived as inherently deceptive, since it suggested that Jews were something other than what they were. The theme of the Jew who 'deceives' Germans into believing that s/he is a fellow German through his/her use of the German language is commonly found in Nazi writings, e.g. Walter Frank identified 'the so-called 'noble,' 'educated,' 'German' Jew' as 'the most dangerous type of the alien parasite' (speech at the University of Berlin, 18 May, 1940, quoted in Weinreich, 1946: 57–8).

In the same vein, Hitler's narrative in *Mein Kampf* shows that he became an anti-Semite specifically as a result of coming to the conclusion that he had been deceived by Jews whom he had taken for Germans because of their ability to use the German language. When he moved to Vienna as a young man, he describes himself as being cosmopolitan and against anti-Semitism (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 52); it seems reasonable to take him at his word here, as one does not have the feeling reading *Mein Kampf* that Hitler was concerned with being politically correct when he wrote it) but he eventually came to be disgusted by the way the more cosmopolitan newspapers of Vienna worshiped French culture and rejected German culture, which drove him to reading the more anti-French (and anti-Semitic) local newspapers which he had initially rejected (pp. 54–5). Eventually, he realized that the francophile 'Germans' whose writings had so angered him were, in fact, Jews whom he had previously taken to be fellow Germans and whom, it could be expected, many other Germans would also take to be fellow Germans:

... the deeper I probed, the more the object of my former admiration shriveled. The style became more and more unbearable; I could not help rejecting the content as inwardly shallow and banal; the objectivity of expression now seemed to me more akin to lies than honest truth; and the writers were – Jews. (p. 58)

Hitler, among other Germans, therefore perceived that Jews were attempting to discredit and destroy German society from within, by in effect passing as Germans. It was this perceived deception which started Hitler

on the road from being 'a weak-kneed cosmopolitan' to becoming 'an anti-Semite' (p. 64).

The role of language in the 'deception' of the Jews is clearly shown in the following quote:

[discussing H's version of the history of Jews in the territory mainly occupied by German-speaking people] Within Jewry a change now begins to take place. Up till now they have been Jews; that is they attach no importance to appearing to be something else . . . At the time of Frederick the Great it still entered no one's head to regard the Jew as anything else but a 'foreign' people . . . But now all this was to change. In the course of more than a thousand years he has learned the language of the host people to such an extent that he now thinks he can venture in the future to emphasize his Judaism less and place his 'Germanism' more in the foreground; for ridiculous, nay, insane as it may seem at first, he nevertheless has the effrontery to turn 'Germanic,' in this case a 'German.' With this begins one of the most infamous deceptions that anyone could conceive of. Since of Germanism he possesses really nothing but the art of stammering its language – and in the most frightful way – but apart from this has never mixed with the Germans, *his whole Germanism rests on the language alone* (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 311; emphasis added)

Notwithstanding the vitriol in Hitler's comments, German-speaking Jews could not disagree with his observation that their 'German' identity was based entirely upon speaking the German language and that, in the course of the preceding several hundred years, they had publically emphasized their German identity more and their Jewish identity less.

It would be difficult to argue, however, that this had been an intentional deception on the part of the Jews – in fact, this was exactly what liberal Germans had wanted them to do in order to be accepted into German society. German-speaking Jews had not, however, in the privacy of their own communities and own thoughts, uniformly ceased to regard their German identity as more important than their Jewish identity: some had – e.g. Mrs. King (see discussion in Chapter 1) – but some had not and most had presumably assumed that there was no need to prioritize explicitly one identity over the other. But in the end, German society, like Napoleon's representatives in the anecdote discussed in earlier, felt a need to be sure of 'which side' the Jews were on and whereas the Jews' reluctance to commit themselves clearly one way or the other was interpreted in the early 19th century in the most 'favorable' light (in the eyes of non-Jews) in terms of their eventual complete assimilation, by the beginning of the 20th century it was coming to be interpreted in the most unfavorable light.

*The response*

For 'normal' ethnicities, Nazi thinking assigned particular roles (e.g. Poles and Ukrainians were mainly fit for unskilled labor), in accordance with Herder's belief that 'nearly all nations have their role to play' (Olender, 1992: 43). Jews, in contrast, were not perceived as a 'normal' people. Their linguistic promiscuity meant that they had literally had no human identity in the everyday-language-and-identity understanding of the word. Hitler did not claim that Jewish culture was inferior but rather that Jews had no culture of their own, being purely parasites, a central theme in Nazi thinking, e.g. 'the Jew [is] only and always a *parasite* in the body of other peoples' (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 304; emphasis in original, see also p. 150, pp. 301–3 and the quote from Walter Frank in the previous section etc.). In this situation, especially in a Darwinian struggle for survival, the most suitable course of action seemed to be to treat them as parasites, to exterminate them physically, which was ultimately the course of action decided upon.

This distinction is crucial to understanding the Nazi decision to exterminate the Jews. Nazis did not believe that Jews were inferior human beings; rather, they believed that, since human groups were 'naturally' identified according to their common everyday language, Jews were not human beings at all in the normal sense of the term. Like the mentally retarded who were the first targets of Nazi extermination, the existence of Jews was, so to speak, a 'mistake' which had to be corrected. It was ultimately lack of 'normal' criteria for identification of a group which determined who was to be exterminated.

In his discussion of the role of the ideology of the mother-tongue in Nazi thinking, Hutton (1999: 5) argues:

One key aspect of the ideology of the mother-tongue was its importance – in the context of Nazism – as an anti-Semitic ideology. For Jews were held to lack a sense of loyalty to their mother-tongue, and were therefore regarded as having an 'unnatural' relationship to language.

Discussing the writings of Peter Heinz Seraphim, the leading Nazi scholar of East European Jewry, Hutton notes that

the ideology of the living mother-tongue is at the heart of Seraphim's perception of Jewish abnormality . . . [Seraphim argues that Jews] change their language as they change their clothes. For them, language is merely a means of communication, it is not sacred to them the way the European languages are – unconsciously – sacred to their speakers.' (Hutton, 1999: 227)



Seraphim was, of course, correct in his assertion that (everyday) languages were not sacred to Jews in the way they were to Christians: in a European context, Jews were indeed abnormal in this respect. This difference in understanding the relationship between language and identity was one of the factors which led to the Holocaust.

Though Nazi ideologues and their predecessors talked about 'Semitic peoples' and 'Aryan/Indo-European peoples' in their popular anti-Jewish diatribes, the parameter Aryan/Indo-European *versus* Semitic, in fact, played no role in determining whom they attempted to exterminate. They decided to exterminate the Gypsies even though Gypsies were Aryans according to the generally understood definition at the time: what Gypsies had in common with Jews is that they were the only two peoples in German-speaking areas who did not take everyday language to be a central component of their identity (see Chapter 1). Conversely, Germans were also careful not to take a position against Arabs (with whom they in fact cooperated in the war effort), even though they recognized them as Semitic; thus *Der Weltkampf* (1941: 47) emphasized that

*it would be well for the sake of clarity if the European world in its struggle against the Jews always remained aware of this context and did not call the struggle, as hitherto, anti-Semitism.* Because it is directed not against peoples of Semitic tongue but against the unharmonious Near-Eastern-Oriental-Mediterranean Jew-people . . . (Quoted in Weinreich, 1946: 111; emphasis in original)

Nor was 'foreignness' or 'non-Europeanness' the crucial issue; the Hungarians, who had come to Europe more recently than the Jews and were non-Indo-European/Aryan to boot, were also not exterminated – in fact they were taken as allies of Germany.

Among ethnic groups, it was only Jews and Gypsies who were to be exterminated. What these two groups had and have in common is specifically that everyday language does not play a role in defining their identity and they lived in territory overlapping that of the Germans.<sup>2</sup>

### **Everyday language and identity and the Arab-Israeli conflict**

At present, the Arab-Israeli conflict is characterized to such an extent by conflicting territorial claims, conflicting claims of antecedence, conflicting claims of divine favor, mutual recriminations and general bad blood that the actual ideological motivation for the conflict has been obscured considerably. However, it is this particular issue which I want to address here.

The fundamental disagreement which has brought about the conflict and which continues to fuel it to the present day is the question of whether Jews have a legitimate right to a politically independent homeland: Jews

have said yes, Arabs have said no.<sup>3</sup> Why have Jews and Arabs disagreed on the basic question of whether Jews are entitled to an independent homeland?

For the sake of clarity, it is a good idea to clarify exactly which points Jews and Arabs have agreed upon and which points they have not agreed upon (I am referring here to the traditional Jewish understanding and to the prototypical Pan-Arab Nationalist position described in Chapter 1: not every Jew and not every Arab hold these positions). Jews and Arabs have agreed, in principle, that 'peoplehood/nationality', not religion, is the basis for an independent state, they have agreed that Judaism is a religion, they have agreed that Jews speak a wide variety of languages natively and they have agreed that Jews share ancestral ties with each other.<sup>4</sup>

Jews and Arabs have disagreed, however, on two crucial issues: (1) the definition of 'peoplehood/nationality', and (2) the relationship between 'peoplehood/nationality' and religion. As I have noted, Jews define 'peoplehood' according to ancestry and religious affiliation, while Arabs define 'peoplehood' according to language. Furthermore, Jews see 'peoplehood' and religious identity as inseparable and isomorphic – one's 'peoplehood' identity necessarily corresponds to one's religious identity – while Arabs see these as independent parameters. Thus, clause 20 of the Palestinian National Covenant states:

The Balfour Declaration, the Mandate for Palestine, and everything that has been based upon them, are deemed null and void. Claims of historical or religious ties of Jews with Palestine are incompatible with the facts of history and the true conception of what constitutes statehood. Judaism, being a religion, is not an independent nationality. Nor do Jews constitute a single nation with an identity of its own; they are citizens of the state to which they belong. (Translation taken from Stav, 1999: 79)

These differences have come through clearly and repeatedly in discussions which I have participated in and observed involving Jews and Arabs, particularly in sociolinguistic classes I have taught to mixed populations of Jewish and Arab students at the University of Haifa in which I have encouraged discussions of the relationship between language and identity. The Jews categorically agree that language is completely irrelevant to one's identity as a Jew. Those who identify themselves as Arabs have been categorical in their assertion that to be an Arab means to speak Arabic (except, as I will discuss later, in the case of Arabic-speaking Jews). Jews express skepticism that Christians and Muslims can be the same 'people', while Arabs express skepticism that non-Hebrew-speakers are really 'Jews' in the same sense.

*The basis of Arab identity*

Even more than German identity, Arab identity cannot be justified by any sort of organic unity. Aside from the fact that Arabs may have different religious affiliations, the spoken dialects of Arabic vary far more greatly even than German dialects, and furthermore, genetic evidence shows that the ancestral connection between different groups of 'Arabs' is extremely remote (e.g., Saudi, Yemenite, Iraqi, Jordanian, Egyptian and Libyan 'Arabs' are all more distant from each other than are e.g. Portuguese and Swedish or English and Russian [Cavalli-Sforza *et al.*, 1994]). Rather than organic unity, Arab identity has been based upon sharing Standard Arabic as a written language: this is the only way that such a diverse conglomerate could be claimed to represent a single 'people'.<sup>5</sup>

Just as 'German' identity was not based upon actual ethnic unity but rather a grand redemptive goal, the original motivation for defining 'Arab' identity was an interest in constructing an enormous conglomerate political entity in the territory of what is known today as 'the Arab World' (plus Israel) and through this to recreate the glory of Arab civilization in the second half of the first millennium (see, e.g., Chejne, 1969). Similarly, just as the conceptualization of German identity changed as German nationalist goals were frustrated, so the understanding of Arab identity is being transformed in response to the failure of Arabs to achieve their political goals.

*The situation of Arabic-speaking Jews*

Like German-speaking Jews, Arabic-speaking Jews (by which I mean, in this section, Jews who speak something linguistically similar to Arabic, although for one reason or another it might be referred to as something else such as 'Judeo-Arabic', as discussed in Chapter 3) were put in a difficult situation by the ideology of language-and-identity because their religious affiliation and ancestry suggested one identity while their spoken language suggested a different identity, one associated with a people who were at war with Jews.

There were Jewish communities in North Africa and present-day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel dating back to more than 1000 years before the Arabs invaded these areas in the seventh century CE. With the Arab conquest, almost all of the Jews living in these areas switched over the course of the next 12 centuries to Arabic as their native and everyday language (the exception being Aramaic-speaking Jews in what is today northern Iraq). In 1948, the population of Jews in predominantly Arabic-speaking countries was 864,000 (Gilbert, 1969): a small number were native speakers of Aramaic, Ladino, French and (Judeo-)Berber but the overwhelming majority were native speakers of Arabic and essentially all used Arabic as an everyday language. Thus, by the generally accepted definition

of Arab identity, they were 'Arabs' – just as by the generally accepted definition of German identity, German-speaking Jews had (previously) been considered to be 'Germans'.

The Zionist movement was initiated by Ashkenazic Jews (those who had settled in Northern Europe); Sephardic Jews (those who had settled in the Mediterranean area), including Arabic-speaking Jews, played very little part in any Zionist activities before the Second World War. During the early years of Zionism, a few Arabic-speaking Jews supported Zionism actively (in a small number of cases actually moving to the Jewish homeland) while some opposed it for one reason or another but it seems that the great majority would have been relatively happy to ignore it – there was for them at the time no inherent conflict between being an Arab and being a Jew.

As the Zionist movement developed, however, they increasingly became the target of attacks by Arabic-speaking non-Jews: there were an enormous number of mob attacks resulting in hundreds of deaths, destruction of property, looting and draconian governmental anti-Jewish measures (see, e.g., Gilbert, 1969). Such actions were focused on the Maghreb until the early 1930s but then spread to the Middle East as well, reaching a peak in 1947–49, around the time of the UN acceptance of the partition plan and the first Arab–Israeli War and continuing until almost the entire Jewish population had fled from Arabic-speaking countries. By 1974, Jews in Arabic-speaking countries numbered only 27,700, a decline of 97% (20,000 of them were in Morocco: they had remained there because Morocco had abolished exit visas in 1957). Somewhat over half of the Arabic-speaking Jews eventually moved to Israel (Gilbert, 1969).

It is by no means obvious that things had to have worked out this way. Muslims and Christian Arabs could have continued to regard Arabic-speaking Jews as fellow and equal Arabs and thought of the Zionists as 'something else' but they did not choose this course of action. Evidently, as with Germans, Arabs decided at a certain point that, in the case of Jews at least, everyday language was not as important to identity, and religious affiliation not as irrelevant, as their ideology seemed to suggest. I regularly witness this chain of reasoning among Israeli Arab students in my classes: I begin by asking them what defines 'Arab identity', they reply that it is everyday language, I ask if they are sure religious affiliation is not important, they say no, because an 'Arab' can be a Muslim, a Christian or a Druze and then I ask if an Arabic-speaking Jew is an 'Arab' and they must admit that the answer is no.<sup>6</sup>

The exclusion of Arabic-speaking Jews from Arab identity cannot be justified on the grounds that they are ancestrally distinct from other Arabs: they are no more distinct than Arabic-speaking Christians in that neither

can have Muslim ancestors and, furthermore, Arabs from the Levant are much closer genetically to Jews from the Levant than they are to Arabs from, e.g., Saudi Arabia (see, e.g., Bonn -Tamir, 1985; Cavalli-Sforza *et al.*, 1994), so that it is clear that ancestry, in itself, is irrelevant to the boundaries of Arab identity. Rather, the only explanation for the fact that the concept of ‘Jewish Arab’ has come to be seen as an oxymoron is that Arab identity was conceptualized as presupposing an acceptance of Muslim hegemony, and when it became clear the Arabic-speaking Jews were not going to do this, it was understood that this would result in them being considered as not being Arabs.

This analysis is supported by later developments as well. When it became apparent that the Arab states were not going to be able to destroy Israel by force and that the goals of Arabic nationalism were failing (particularly after the 1967 war), Arabs began to reconceptualize Arab identity so as to emphasize Islam more openly. Thus, Islamic fundamentalism began to rise, the power-sharing arrangement in Lebanon between Christians and Muslims collapsed, the rights of Arabic-speaking Christians began to be eroded and they began to leave the Middle East (Phares, 1995; Ye’or, 2002). Thus, in exactly the same way that German nationalists responded to the frustration of their ambitions by changing from a language-based definition of German identity to a race-based definition, so Arab nationalists are responding to their failures by turning from a language-based definition of Arab identity to a religion-based one. Therefore, although the official ‘party line’ regarding Arab identity is still focused upon language, it is becoming more and more difficult to reconcile this with the way in which people are actually behaving.<sup>7</sup>

## **Sociolinguistics in Israel Today**

Israeli society offer an opportunity to see how Jews design a language policy when they are more or less free to establish the rules themselves rather than being strongly constrained by factors entirely out of their control. At the same time, we can identify certain trends as representing a continuation of Jewish sociolinguistic patterns in the diaspora, on the one hand, as well as the geographical and historical setting of Israel, on the other. In this section, I will focus on three particular features of the sociolinguistic scene in Israel, minority language policy, the relationship between Hebrew and Israeli identity, and prescriptivism in Modern Hebrew.

### **Minority language policy**

With regards to its ‘Jewish population’ (which includes some people

who are not technically Jewish, e.g. those who have been entitled to receive Israeli citizenship automatically due to having a Jewish grandparent other than their mother's mother), Israel has a relatively normal language policy. Immigrants are given a considerable amount of help in learning Hebrew through language classes offered free of charge by the government. During the transition period (before they have adequately learned Hebrew), the government generally offers services to new immigrants in their languages. This takes the form of having government clerks in offices to which immigrants need to go who can speak the immigrant language, in some cases public school classes conducted in the immigrant language for a year or so after immigration, limited public television programs (basically informative) in the immigrant language and even the possibility of taking some matriculation exams in the immigrant language. Such help is particularly forthcoming to immigrants who are part of a large wave at a certain time with a similar language background (e.g. Russian-speaking immigrants in the early and mid-1990s), that is, when the cost/benefit ratio for such help is relatively low.

In comparative perspective, there is no question that Israel is relatively generous about giving linguistic help to new immigrants, certainly much more so than, e.g., the United States, France, Holland or Japan, both in terms of learning the national language and in terms of being able to get by in the immigrant language during the period of transition. This should be seen as part of a general Israeli policy of encouraging (Jewish) immigration and extending help to immigrants.

The Israeli government has not been very helpful, however, in terms of long-term support of immigrant languages. As in other countries, the traditional policy of Israel has been to encourage linguistic assimilation, and official usage of immigrant languages has been limited to the transitional period following immigration. Like their colleagues in other countries, Israeli researchers have investigated the linguistic aspect of the immigration experience and consequent bilingualism (see, e.g., Cooper & Danet 1980; Ben-Rafael, 1994, 2001; Shohamy & Spolsky, 1999; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999; Bentolila, 2001), in the last decade or so they have come to the conclusion that more long-term support should be given to immigrant languages (in terms of, e.g., enrichment classes), and these researchers have encouraged the government, with some success, to mend their ways. The ideological trend towards some maintenance of immigrant languages and away from *rak 'ivrit* ('only Hebrew') appears to have begun in the general population in the late 1970s but it was greatly reinforced by the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from the ex-Soviet Union with little or no background in Hebrew and, in many cases, motivation which was more materialist than Zionist.

Regarding English, it can be said that, in general, Israel has a typical language policy for a relatively economically developed country with a 'small' language (see, e.g., Spolsky, 1996a). English is a very important part of Israeli education, particularly because university students are expected to be able to read articles in English, and there are a lot of English-language television programs, with subtitles rather than dubbing being the norm (excluding children's shows), so that Israelis hear a lot of English. As a result, the general knowledge of English is much higher among Israelis than it is among, e.g., Germans, French, Spanish or Italians but not quite as high as among, e.g., Dutch, Danes and Swedes (due for the most part to the greater differences between the languages involved). Here, too, there is nothing very distinctive about Israeli policy.

What is distinctive about Israeli policy, however, is the treatment of and ideology towards 'permanent' minority languages associated with non-Jewish communities (see Myhill, 1999c). In order to understand this, we must take a step back and look at the general situation in the Middle East and how it has developed in recent times (see, e.g., Frazee, 1983; Lewis, 1995; Ye'or, 2002).

Under the Ottoman Empire, different religious groups were divided into millets (e.g. Jews, Armenians, Greek, Maronites, Copts, Sunni Muslims, etc.), each with a significant amount of legal autonomy. Everyday language was, to a large extent, regional, although there were cases of individual groups maintaining distinctive everyday languages (e.g. Jews maintaining Judeo-Spanish, Greeks maintaining Greek in far northern Anatolia, etc.). Thus, there was a Turkish-speaking area (including, e.g., Turkish-speaking Greeks and Armenians), a Greek-speaking area (including Greek-speaking Turks), an Arabic-speaking area (including some Arabic-speaking Jews, Armenians, Maronites and Copts), etc.

Today, we can identify five different groups in the area who have independent countries associated with them, namely Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Jews/Israelis and Turks. All of these have fully developed modern languages which are the official languages of these states and all of them basically speak this language as their main language wherever they are in the area (even outside of the country or countries associated with their language, e.g. Greeks in Turkey, Turks in Greece, Armenians in Arabic-speaking countries or Israel, Arabs in Israel). Other former millets, (e.g. Copts, Maronites, Jacobites, Nestorians) exist only as minorities in countries dominated by other people and they have no distinctive language rights.

The traditional millet system has been continued in different ways in different countries, and, in response to the development of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, language education policy has been part



of this. Groups which are of the same religion as the dominant group in a country are given essentially no special language rights and are expected to go to school in the language of the dominant group. Thus Kurdish, Circassian and Arabic have no status in Turkey, because they are spoken by Muslims and the Turks themselves are Muslims. Similarly, Berbers in Morocco and Algeria and Kurds in Iraq and Syria are schooled in Arabic, because they are Muslims. Macedonians in Greece are schooled in Greek because they are Christians; and Jews in Israel are schooled in Hebrew, whatever their native language background.

For religious minority groups, however, the situation is different for different groups. For Jews/Israelis, Turks, Greeks and Armenians, the millet system has been interpreted to mean that independent millets have their own countries (Israel, Turkey, Greece and Armenia) and modern developed languages, that they are educated in these languages if feasible and at least retain them in everyday usage (this being the effect of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity), and that individuals are expected to identify more naturally with their ethnic/religious group than with their citizenship (e.g. ethnically Greek citizens of Turkey are understood by everyone to identify themselves primarily as Greeks rather than as Turks). Therefore, Arabs and Armenians in Israel, Greeks and Armenians in Turkey, and Turks in Greece are educated in their own languages and continue to speak these as their everyday language. Here the millet form of identification has more or less continued, being weakened in some sense by a less pervasive religious establishment but strengthened by an almost categorical pattern of religious/millet affiliation correlating with everyday language (which was not the case before) and the existence of at least one independent state associated with the ethnic/religious group, even if not all individuals in an ethnic/religious group live in this state.

In Arabic-speaking countries, however, the situation is different. Non-Muslim groups who speak a language other than Arabic – Assyrians, Chaldeans and Jacobites who still speak Aramaic – are given no language rights at all and there is no provision for other indigenous non-Muslim groups who speak Arabic but have distinctive sacred languages – Copts and Maronites – to study or learn these languages. This situation should be understood as being unique in the area:<sup>8</sup> it follows naturally from the fact that, of the peoples of the Middle East, only Arabs accept the idea (in principle) that ethnic identity can cross religious boundaries (see earlier in this chapter), so that religious minorities do not constitute distinct peoples.

The development from Ottoman times to the present has, thus, entailed a number of linguistic developments. In particular, because of

the effect of the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, some groups which were previously distinguished by millet affiliation but not by everyday language are now also distinguished by language, often as part of population shifts. Thus, Arabic-speaking Jews moved back to Israel and switched to Hebrew, Arabic-speaking Armenians (in, e.g., Jerusalem) switched back to Armenian, Turkish-speaking Greeks moved to Greece and switched to Greek (and *vice versa* for Greek-speaking Turks), etc.

With this background in mind, we can now turn to consideration of religious minority languages in Israel (general discussion of the situation of these languages may be found in, e.g., Fisherman, 1972; Landau, 1987; Koplewitz, 1992; Spolsky, 1994; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999; Amara, 1999).

Out of a population of about six million Israelis, the largest linguistic minority by far is Arabic-speaking Muslims, Christians and Druze, who number about one million: other significant minorities are Armenians (about 5000) and Circassians (about 3000). In general, Israel may be grouped with countries which are relatively generous towards minority languages, e.g. Switzerland, Canada, Spain, Finland, etc., rather than those countries which give no permanent support even to indigenous minority languages, e.g. the United States, France, etc. But even when compared with countries such as Canada, a number of aspects of Israeli language policy are strikingly distinctive and these can be traced to the fact that it is basically a modern interpretation of the Ottoman millet system, the adoption of which can be attributed to some combination of inertia (as the land of Israel was under Ottoman control between the early 16th century and 1918) and its general consonance with traditional Jewish thinking, particularly the centrality of religious affiliation.

Although Israel is generally similar to other ex-Ottoman countries which have retained the millet system in terms of minority language policy, it is different in that the linguistically distinctive religious minorities constitute a fairly large proportion of the population of Israel, about 17%. In these other countries, there is almost an almost complete separation of the ethnic/religious groups and minority ethnic/religious groups are tiny in comparison. Thus, as a result of population flight/transfers/expulsions and the Turkish massacres of the Armenians, only about 1% of the population of Greece is now Turkish and less than 1% of the population of Turkey is now Greek or Armenian, while there are almost no Turks in the Republic of Cyprus and almost no Greeks in Northern Cyprus.

Smootha (1997: 268) argues that the political structure of Israel is not a liberal democracy along Western European or North American lines but rather an ethnic democracy, that is 'a new type of democratic political

system that combines democracy with institutionalized ethnic dominance'. He states:

Officially extending collective rights to the minority while denying it equal status, ethnic democracy differs from *liberal democracy*. It rejects the liberal principle of individual rather than group rights, meritocracy, nondiscrimination, imposition of a common culture and identity, and implicit pressure to assimilate. (Smootha, 1997: 270; italics in the original)<sup>9</sup>

We can see this idea as being derived from the millet system. There is a clear distinction made in Israeli policy and thinking between citizenship (corresponding to the 'democracy' component) and individual identity (corresponding to the 'ethnic' component). This distinction is much clearer than in European liberal democracies, where there is some feeling that the bestowal of citizenship fundamentally changes the identity of the individual, in the sense of superseding or at least competing with ethnic identity.

The most obvious evidence for this distinction is the fact that the country and citizenship label 'Israel' does not bear the same name as the ethnic group it is understood to be associated with ('Jews'). In connection with this, there is a common understanding that Israeli citizenship refers only to rights and obligations, not to identity (there is a concept of 'Israeli identity' but this is clearly distinct from 'Israeli citizenship' as I will discuss later). A striking exemplification of this distinction is the fact that in many contexts, when news reports refer to some incident involving an *ezrax yisra'eli*, literally 'Israeli citizen', it is understood that this is a euphemism for 'Israeli Arab'. In many class discussions I have initiated in classes I have taught to Israeli students (almost 40% of whom are Arabs in my department), there has been general agreement on all sides that Israeli citizens who are Arabic-speaking Muslims or Christians are Israelis in terms of their citizenship but not in terms of their identity.<sup>10</sup>

This ideology is reflected in language policy and the language situation in Israel in that it is assumed that in 'private', 'homey', 'local' functions for the minority community (where the 'ethnic' component is naturally more prominent), the minority language will dominate, while for more 'public', 'high', 'regional/national' functions (where the 'citizenship' component is naturally more prominent), the minority community will have to function in Hebrew.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, this general distinction is also found in countries like Canada and Switzerland but it is far more radical in Israel, because there is much more of an idea that the different groups should be kept distinct from each other in terms of features relating to their personal identity. We can identify a number of aspects of this general phenomenon, which I will discuss in the following subsections.

*Geographical distribution of the populations*

A significant feature of the language situation in Israel as opposed to, e.g., the United States and Canada regards segregation. In Israel, Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze live almost completely segregated from each other – that is one village will be Jewish, a neighboring village Muslim, the next Druze, etc. There are a few mixed cities (e.g. Jerusalem, Haifa, Acre) but only about 20% of the Arab population lives in such places and even there different groups are almost completely divided into separate neighborhoods (see Ben-Rafael & Brosh, 2001). This situation is supported by an ideology according to which it is normal for members of different religious groups to live in separate communities and it is abnormal to move into a community associated with a different religious group.

There is, for example, a Druze village close to the University of Haifa called Usfiya, which is pleasant, relatively middle-class and safe, with property values vastly cheaper than in comparable Jewish areas in Haifa but only a few Jewish families (less than 10) have thought to take advantage of this by moving there. The reason is not hostility – relations between Jews and Druze are quite friendly (Druze men serve in the Israeli army) – but simply that it would be regarded, on both sides, as highly abnormal for a Jewish family to move into a Druze village. Additionally, there is no Hebrew-language school there. In a hypothetical parallel situation in the United States, a group of Jewish parents would undoubtedly take this as a violation of their civil rights and sue the village, demanding that they open a Hebrew-language school, and an American court would surely support them, even though it would change the linguistic nature of the village and outrage the residents. In Israel, such a suit would be regarded as simply absurd and laughed out of court, with the reasoning that the family should have known in advance that they were moving into an Arabic-speaking village.

In fact, in recent years, the village has passed an ordinance making it illegal to sell property to people from outside the village, which is transparently designed to keep non-Druze and especially non-Arabic speakers (i.e. Jews) from establishing roots there (the few Jews already living there are exempt), presumably because the residents have become aware of the possibility of Jews being tempted to live there. This could be quite dangerous to the survival of Arabic in the village because even a relatively small number of Hebrew-speaking families could change the linguistic character of the village because presumably almost none of them would know Arabic while essentially all of the Druze know Hebrew, so that Hebrew would begin to serve as a *lingua franca*. In the United States, such an exclusionary ordinance would undoubtedly arouse indignation and provoke lawsuits,

particularly if the community were attractive enough that outsiders might otherwise want to live there, as is the case here.

The result of this ideology is that Arabic speakers have clearly demarcated territories where it is understood that Arabic will be the everyday language of the inhabitants and the language of municipal government. The status of Arabic as the dominant language in these areas thus cannot be threatened, even without specific laws to protect it. In a general sense, this is similar to the situation in, e.g., Canada, where it is (becoming) understood that French is the language of a certain area (Quebec) while English is the language of other areas (the rest of Canada). The difference is, however, that in Israel these 'language areas' are very small and scattered, so that an Israeli Arab who, for reasons such as work, needs to live near to a given area can almost invariably find an exclusively Arabic-speaking village or neighborhood in the area; this is not the case for a French speaker who gets a job in Vancouver or an English speaker who gets a job in Quebec City.

By the same token, this means that the largest 'Arab' unit is the municipality: there are no basically Arabic-speaking districts in Israel comparable to basically French-speaking Quebec or basically Catalan-speaking Catalonia. Thus, compared with the situation with minority languages, in Canada or Spain, Arabic is safer at 'lower' levels but receives less support at 'higher' levels.

#### *Ideological support for 'homey' usages of non-Jewish minority languages*

Israeli Jews have accepted the idea that everyday language is an integral part of Israeli identity so that 'Jews should speak Hebrew' as their everyday language but this idea is understood differently by Israelis than it is by European groups. The idea is not that Jews in general should speak Hebrew but rather that Jews living in Israel should speak Hebrew. When applied to minority groups in Israel, the logical converse of this ideology is that non-Jewish communities – every single member of these communities as part of their personal identity – should speak distinctive everyday languages. This is a linguistic interpretation of the Ottoman millet system, reinforced by the traditional Jewish idea that religious affiliation is a central component of individual identity. The consequences of this ideology in terms of multilingualism are perhaps most striking and well known in Jerusalem (see, e.g., Spolsky & Cooper, 1991) but, in fact, the same general pattern holds throughout the country. To my knowledge, this ideology has never been explicitly stated and I have never even heard Israelis discussing it (other than when I have intentionally initiated such discussions myself) but the consistency with which this principle is followed in practice suggests that the reason it is not discussed is that it is simply taken for granted.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, for example, it is assumed that Israeli Jews who speak a version of Arabic as their native language are going to assimilate to Hebrew-speaking society, because their religious affiliation is more important than their native language in terms of identity. Correspondingly, there is no idea that Israeli citizens who are Arabic-speaking Muslims 'should' speak Hebrew as their everyday language just because they happen to be Israeli citizens and there has never been such an idea (see discussion in, e.g., Ben-Rafael & Brosh, 2001). As a result of this ideology and policies supporting it, essentially no (non-Jewish) speakers of Arabic, Armenian or Circassian have had Hebrew as their native language (as discussed in Chapter 1).

Western countries, including liberal democracies, have proven unable to support stable communities of speakers of different languages over an extended period of time in the same region of a country without resorting to controversial and divisive laws. The problem appears to be that the concept of citizenship, when applied to liberal democracies, entails citizenship-identity subsuming the linguistic aspect of individual identity, part of the general assimilative pressure in liberal democracies of which Smootha (1997) writes. About the best which such liberal democracies have been able to do is to split into distinct and autonomous geographic subunits (e.g. separate Switzerland into various cantons, each with its own official language, separate Quebec from the rest of Canada, separate Catalonia from the rest of Spain, etc.), with a different language being dominant in each subunit but the result of this is that the subunits quickly begin to drift towards regional monolingualism as well.

For example, in Canada, attempts to protect French in Quebec legally have resulted in many laws which English-speaking residents of Quebec find oppressive (with the result that there has been a marked tendency for them to leave Quebec or assimilate to French) as well as the establishment of legal precedents suggesting that the federal government does not have the right to overrule provincial governments in matters of language policy. This, in turn, has led to an erosion of the rights of French speakers elsewhere in Canada and their linguistic assimilation. Thus, aside from bad blood, the movement to protect French has led directly to Canada moving towards being simply and clearly divided between French-speaking Quebec and the English-speaking rest of Canada (Edwards, 1994b). We find similar developments in Switzerland, Belgium, Spain, Finland, etc. This is not to say that bilingualism has entirely disappeared from such societies but the trend is certainly in this direction as certain everyday languages inevitably become increasingly dominant in large and contiguous geographical regions.

In Israel, however, Arabic speakers are scattered in a variety of places in the country and the government and popular ideology supports their

continued usage of Arabic as their everyday language in these different places. There is no idea, in either popular thinking or in government policy, that minority languages should be restricted to a certain contiguous subsection of the country. There is, therefore, in Israel none of the shifting from minority to majority languages which are so common in liberal democracies (with the understanding that 'minority' here is restricted to mean 'non-Jewish minority').

The situation of Israeli Circassians described in Chapter 1 represents in a particularly graphic way how Israeli society sharply distinguishes between strong support for 'homey' usages of minority languages and relatively weak support for official usages of these languages. Circassian is entirely healthy as a vernacular language in Israel even though it receives almost no official support at all, while in European and American countries, minority languages often have various showy public functions at the same time that the society embraces an ideology which is leading to their disappearance as home languages.

Thus, at the 'homey' level of basic maintenance, the status of (religious) minority languages in Israel is quite strong relative to the status of minority languages in liberal democracies. However, as we will see in the following sections, at 'higher' levels, minority languages in Israel are not treated so well.

#### *Lack of support for 'higher' usages of non-Jewish languages*

Though Arabic is in name at least an official language of Israel (and e.g. laws are supposed to be written in Arabic as well as Hebrew), this is far more decorative than substantive when compared with official minority languages in Western democracies (see, e.g., Brosh, 1988). With the exception of civil courts (to be discussed later), Arabic has no regional official usages in Israel comparable to e.g. the role of French in Quebec's provincial government, because the Arab sector has no governmental institutions above the level of the municipality.

As a result, apart from road signs (for which the situation has improved drastically in recent years), Arabic is practically non-existent outside of Arab municipalities. Government forms in Arabic are all too frequently lacking and public services such as gas bills, water bills, etc. are generally entirely or almost entirely in Hebrew. Speeches in the Knesset in Arabic are allowed by law but, in practice, exceedingly rare. Arabic-language state television is limited and often of not very high quality (although admittedly the latter might also be said of Hebrew-language state television). There are vastly fewer laws protecting Arabic in Israel than there are, e.g. protecting French in Canada. Although this can, to some extent, be traced to the fact that spoken Arabic has never been threatened in Israel in the way



that French has been threatened in Canada by the defection of (non-Jewish) speakers, so that there has not been such a need to pass laws to protect it, there is, nevertheless, undoubtedly also a much greater general reluctance to make explicit legal requirements regarding the status of Arabic in Israel.

### *Education*

The policy of basic support for minority languages is reflected particularly in the Arabic-language public schooling system. Arabic-speaking Muslims, Christians and Druze are educated in state schools through the medium of Arabic through the 12th grade, with Hebrew and English taught as foreign languages. This policy has essentially categorical support in the Jewish community and has never been seriously challenged. This support is particularly strong because of the geographical factors discussed earlier – Arab schools are scattered throughout the country so that, in practice, it almost never happens that Arabs are forced by geographical factors to attend school in Hebrew. In liberal democracies such as Canada or Switzerland, in contrast, it is quite common for people's choice of language of their children's schooling to be affected by geographic factors.

In education as in government, Arabic is comparatively neglected at higher levels. There are a very small number of Arabic-speaking colleges but no Arabic-speaking universities. In fact, even in Arabic language and literature departments in universities, in cases where the instructor and all or most of the class may be Arabs rather than Jews, instruction is almost always in Hebrew rather than Arabic (as opposed to English departments, where instruction is in English). This is vastly worse than the situation of, e.g., French in Canada or Switzerland or Catalan in Spain. As a result, Arab university students and graduates often resort to borrowing professional and technical terms from Hebrew and it is clear that their level of advanced Arabic knowledge is considerably more limited than that of their peers in purely Arabic-speaking countries.

In the Armenian community in Jerusalem, where children attend private religious schools, Armenian is the language of instruction (Azarya, 1984). In the two Circassian villages, where students go to public schools, Hebrew is used as the basic medium of instruction. This is the choice of the Circassian communities themselves, because their language does not have an extensive written tradition and there are few teaching materials and few or no teachers who can instruct in the language. Nevertheless, as I have noted, the language is maintained among ethnic Circassians in these villages essentially categorically.

*Courts*

An interesting phenomenon showing the importance of the parameter 'homey'/'public' to language usage in Israel is the distinction between civil and criminal law. Because civil law, at least in terms of personal status (relating to marriage, divorce, death, etc.), is more or less left to the individual religious communities, Muslims, Christians and Druze are free to conduct these matters in their civil courts in Arabic. In contrast, criminal law is entirely unified, which means that a situation can result where an Arab judge, Arab defendants and Arab lawyers are in theory compelled to conduct their business in Hebrew.

**Language and Israeli identity**

Every Jew is entitled to become an Israeli citizen by applying for citizenship, proving Jewish affiliation, moving to Israel and on arrival becoming, in theory, an Israeli citizen (in practice, this procedure takes a month or two). Israeli citizenship is not, however, equivalent to being a Jew: one can be a Jew without being an Israeli citizen, there is no idea that one is 'more Jewish' by virtue of being an Israeli citizen and one can be an Israeli citizen without being a Jew (as with Israeli Arabs). In fact, it is entirely possible and not at all uncommon for someone to be entitled to emigrate to Israel and automatically become an Israeli citizen on the basis of having one Jewish grandparent but, upon receiving an Israeli identity card, be listed on it as something other than Jewish, because the Jewish grandparent is not the mother's mother. Thus, Israeli citizenship has no inherent relationship to Jewish identity.

In this respect, the situation for Jews is, in some sense, different from the situation with some other groups who are generally similar to Jews in terms of identity, such as Greeks. Being 'Greek' is an ethnic label but also a citizenship and these can be seen as separate parameters of 'Greekness'. Ethnic Greeks who are Greek citizens are seen by many Greeks (though by no means all) as more 'Greek' than Greeks who do not have Greek citizenship and, conversely, some people who are not ethnic Greeks but are Greek citizens (e.g. Albanians) may be seen by some, to a certain extent, as 'Greek'. Not too much should be made of this distinction because, even in cases such as Greeks, it is clear to practically everyone that 'real' Greekness refers to ethnic affiliation not citizenship. However, the relationship between Jewish and Israeli identity does not even allow for this level of ambiguity (e.g. absolutely no one would claim that an Israeli Arab is a 'Jew' by virtue of having Israeli citizenship).<sup>13</sup>

Not only is Israeli citizenship logically distinct from Jewish identity, it is even logically distinct from Israeli identity (unlike, e.g., American citizenship and identity). Generally, if Israeli Jews are asked what feature they

think of when they think of 'Israeli identity', the first thing they will mention is 'living in Israel' but when then asked whether this includes Israeli Arabs, Armenians and Circassians, they will generally immediately concede that these groups are not included, so that this initial definition must not be correct. Israeli Arabs will agree, almost invariably stating that they are Israeli in terms of citizenship but not in terms of identity.<sup>14</sup>

Upon further questioning, it becomes apparent that, although there is no 'official' ideology regarding Israeli identity which people readily volunteer, those people who are considered 'Israelis' in terms of identity are associated with the mainstream Hebrew-speaking 'Jewish sector' of Israeli society, meaning most concretely that they or their children would go to Hebrew schools (rather than Arabic schools) and that they have lived in Israel for an extended period of time. Such people would necessarily speak Hebrew very well, typically as their main language, but they would not necessarily be Israeli citizens (my daughter Shayna is not, for example, (see Chapter 1)). Thus, 'Israeliness' is necessarily associated with linguistic assimilation to the mainstream Israeli language, i.e. Hebrew (see, e.g., Ben-Rafael, 1994, 2001; Spolsky, 1996b).

Israeli citizenship, being born in Israel, and legal Jewishness seem to be less important to Israeli identity than are integration into the Hebrew-speaking Jewish sector of Israeli society and associated knowledge of Hebrew. Thus, a Russian Jew who comes to Israel at an advanced age is generally conceptualized as a 'Russian' rather than as an 'Israeli', even if s/he is an Israeli citizen (similarly with 'Americans' or 'Ethiopians') and an Israeli Arab who is an Israeli citizen, was born in Israel, lived there his/her entire life and speaks excellent Hebrew (though Arabic is his/her mother tongue and the language in which s/he was mainly educated) is conceptualized as an 'Arab' rather than as an 'Israeli'. However, a person who emigrated to Israel with his Jewish father and non-Jewish mother or, for that matter, even a person with two non-Jewish parents who emigrated to Israel for idiosyncratic personal reasons (there are a number of devout Christians of this type) would be considered to be basically 'Israeli' if they went to Hebrew-language school from a young age, particularly if they have served in the army.

One can say that, with regards to citizenship, birthplace and legal Jewishness, there is something of a prototypicality effect such that a prototypical Israeli would have Israeli citizenship, be born in Israel and be legally Jewish (i.e. have a Jewish mother) but even if an individual is non-prototypical according to all three of these parameters, s/he will be considered to be basically an Israeli if s/he has gone to school in Hebrew from a young age and participates as a regular member of Hebrew-speaking society. S/he would certainly be more Israeli than a person who satisfies all

of these parameters but does not participate in Hebrew-speaking society, e.g. a Jew born in Israel who moved to the United States at the age of three who moves back to Israel at the age of 40 and basically lives in English-speaking circles there.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, even though living in Israel – or, more accurately, having lived in Israel for an extended period of time at some point in one's life – is considered the central component of Israeli identity and is the one which people will volunteer first, nevertheless, upon closer inspection, it develops that the Hebrew language is also an important – through derivative – component, more important than the traditional criteria for Jewish identity. 'Israeliness' and 'Jewishness' can be seen as referring to complementary parts of a person's identity, with 'Israeliness' basically referring to the linguistic component and the living-place/citizenship component (with more emphasis on the former) and 'Jewishness' basically referring to the ancestral component and the religious component.

Israeli identity can be understood as being a combination of the Ottoman millet concept with European-type nationalism. Exclusion of Arabs, Armenians and Circassians from Israeliness and encouraging them to maintain their own language reflect traditional Ottoman ethnic/religious divisions which were familiar to all of these groups, and the primacy of these divisions over citizenship in terms of identity is also found among other ex-Ottoman peoples. However, the fact that Israeli identity as opposed to non-Israeli Jewish identity is constructed around everyday language and living-place would appear to have been taken from European nationalism. Furthermore, the specific features of the conceptualization of Israeli identity – with religion and ancestry emphasized relatively more and citizenship emphasized relatively less – suggest that it is more similar to the understanding of identity in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. This is only to be expected, considering that the early Zionists came to Israel from Eastern Europe.

### **Modern Hebrew prescriptivism**

Like any language, Modern Hebrew shows variation in usage, between different styles and between different usages. Because the language has not been spoken as a living language for very long, the dialectal situation is not typical. For one thing, clearly differentiated regional dialects of Hebrew have not been identified, and no one, including trained linguists, can identify where people come from on the basis of their language usages, although it seems reasonable to suppose that such differences may be developing. With regards to social class distinctions, a distinction has been drawn (see, e.g., Blanc, 1968; Yaeger-Dror, 1988) between 'Oriental Hebrew' and 'General Hebrew', with the former being spoken particularly

by Sephardim of the lower social classes and the latter being spoken by all Ashkenazim and also Sephardim of the higher social classes. It appears that the General dialect was developed by the basically Ashkenazic revivers of modern Hebrew and their offspring, while the Oriental dialect was developed by Jews who acquired Hebrew natively after moving to Israel from Arabic-speaking countries, affected by both their Arabic-speaking background and their version of non-native Hebrew. Members of the latter group who are undergoing the process commonly known as integrating into mainstream society, which corresponds to Ashkenazation and generally moving up in social class, tend to adopt features of the General dialect.

Some distinctions between the Oriental dialect and the General dialect are well known; in particular, the pronunciation of the letters xet, ayin and resh, which are pronounced as a voiceless pharyngeal fricative, a voiced pharyngeal fricative and an apical tap respectively in the Oriental dialect but as a voiceless uvular fricative, a glottal stop / zero and a voiced uvular fricative, respectively, in the General dialect (see, e.g., Bentolila, 1984; Yaeger-Dror, 1993). However, in comparison with languages such as English or Spanish, where individuals in particular social classes are fairly consistent at least at the quantitative level regarding the use of particular forms distinctive to their social class (e.g. Labov, 1966; Labov *et al.*, 1968, etc.), the situation in Modern Hebrew for many variables is considerably more chaotic, as individual speakers are to a large extent still resolving opacities in the grammar by resorting to individual *ad hoc* strategies rather than speaking established sociolects (see, e.g., Myhill & Shlizerman, 2002). I will give specific examples of this in the course of this section.

In many respects, Modern Hebrew prescriptivism is similar to prescriptivism in other languages (see, e.g., the discussion in Rabin, 1983). There are established 'experts' on what is 'correct' language and what is 'incorrect' language, they decry deviations from 'correct' usage, they may dream of a day when everyone will speak 'correct' Hebrew (or, alternatively, feel nostalgic about a time when everyone supposedly spoke 'correct' Hebrew), they discourage and/or decry any attempt to legitimize (or, in some cases, even investigate) the everyday language of native Hebrew speakers, they have a significant number of allies in various sectors of society who see them as upholding 'standards', which is assumed to be good, for reasons which are not entirely clear, etc.

Hebrew prescriptivists decry the fact that Hebrew speakers 'do not speak Hebrew correctly' just as English prescriptivists decry the fact that English speakers 'do not speak English correctly' just as French prescriptivists decry the fact that French speakers 'do not speak French correctly', etc. As with prescriptive linguists in other countries, out of ignorance of the actual situation in other languages, Hebrew prescriptivists

are often under the mistaken impression that their language is unusual in that its speakers fail to consistently follow prescriptive norms (cf. Henry Higgins' proverbial 'Why can't the English learn to speak?'). As with other languages, a substantial amount of criticism has been directed against these 'experts' by scientifically oriented linguists (see, e.g., Rabin, 1983; Kuzar, 2001 and references therein). Also as with other languages, there are different levels of formality, with more formal language also being more 'correct' (see, e.g., Blanc, 1968).<sup>16</sup> I am not going to be discussing this aspect of the prescriptivism situation at any length here, because, in these respects, Hebrew is pretty much like Standard Average European languages.

In terms of administrative structure, the prescriptive situation in Hebrew is somewhere between that of continental European languages such as French, German and Spanish, which have an official centralized language committee with broad powers, and that of English, where there is no centralization at all and normative rules are made by self-appointed experts whose only real authority is public acceptance of their proclamations. There is an official Hebrew Language Academy but it focuses upon standardization rather than normativization, supplying neologisms and establishing writing conventions but making no effort to enforce usage or even observe the extent to which its dictates are being carried out; in fact, its decisions are typically neither very well publicized nor scrupulously observed. Normative statements themselves are, however, presented (previously mostly in newspaper columns, more recently in booklets) by individual 'experts', who do not necessarily agree with each other (see Rabin, 1983: 49–50, 53–4).

All of this is fairly typical. However, in one particular respect, Modern Hebrew prescriptivism – the idea that some Hebrew usage is 'correct' while other usage is 'incorrect' – is unusual and different from almost all Standard Average European languages and, indeed, from almost all languages in the world: it is not in any way based particularly upon the usage of the elite. Although it is understood that General Hebrew and its users have more prestige than Oriental Hebrew and its users, this does not play any role in the selection of the prescriptive norm and, in fact, there are cases (to be described later) where it is particularly the Oriental form which is considered to be the prescriptively 'correct' one.

In English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish and almost all other European languages, however, a significant factor determining whether forms are considered to be 'correct' or 'incorrect' is the social status of the people who use them in their everyday speech. If a certain usage is characteristic of the everyday speech of higher-status people, then it will normally be considered 'correct', while if it is characteristic of the everyday speech of lower-status people, then it will be considered 'incorrect' (see, e.g.,

Trudgill, 1975; Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Mugglestone, 1995; etc.). It is, of course, the case that the specific parameters which associate people and speech with 'higher-status' or 'lower-status' vary from society to society, based upon ethnic background, urban *versus* rural, region, race, social class, etc., but it is clear, if we abstract away from the details of individual societies, that approval of forms specifically because they are used by higher-status speakers underlies a large number of prescriptive decisions in most languages.

Even in languages in which social status plays a major role in determining 'correctness', it cannot be said that status alone controls prescriptive judgments: these are affected by a variety of factors and, in many cases, prescriptive linguists simply make up rules off the top of their head with no social basis at all. Nor is it necessarily the case that, even when social status is a factor, prescriptive linguists will acknowledge this directly (although direct reference of this type is by no means unknown, as in the Spanish *norma culta* 'cultured norm', which is understood by everyone to refer directly to the speech of the highest social class).

Rather, in recent years, there is a tendency to arrive at the same conclusion in a more politically correct fashion. The prescriptive linguist views his/her job as simply ratifying general popular opinions (and prejudice), with a dash of token conservatism thrown in to give the appearance of rigor and since people naturally tend to generally admire the speech of higher-status people, then the speech of higher-status people is taken as the basis for the norm. If higher-status people begin to use prescriptively 'incorrect' forms, prescriptive linguists will typically object for a while (10–15 years?) before giving in and acknowledging that this usage has become 'acceptable'. This has, for example, happened recently with stranded prepositions in English (e.g. *the house that she lives in*). Distinctive lower-class usages, e.g. Black English invariant *be*, however, will always be rejected (see Myhill, 1999b).

Because popular bias has been a major factor in the determination of prescriptive norms in European languages, sociolinguists in these societies have taken it upon themselves to deconstruct the popular perception of prescriptivism, to show that it is simply a mask for class/race bias, that claims of the logical superiority of the standard language have no scientific basis and that prescriptivism as practiced in languages such as English is in itself morally reprehensible in that it gives official sanction to these biases (see, e.g., Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 1975; Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Joseph, 1987; Crowley, 1991; Mugglestone, 1995, *inter alia*). In fact, discrediting prescriptivism has been one of the central goals of sociolinguistics in western languages in general.

In Hebrew, the situation is very different. The social status of the people



associated with the use of a given form has nothing to do with whether it is judged to be prescriptively 'correct' or 'incorrect'. In theory, the Bible and the Mishna – that is, sources produced when Hebrew was a living language<sup>17</sup> – are the basis for 'correctness' in terms of syntax and morphology (in general, one can say that Mishnaic Hebrew is the model for syntax, while there is some leaning towards Biblical Hebrew for morphology, although here the differences are not so great), so that a form is considered 'correct' if it appears in these sources and 'incorrect' if it does not (see discussion in, e.g., Ben-Asher, 1967). Thus, prescribed alternations in verb conjugations for tense and person/number/gender of subject, singular/plural alternations in nouns and adjectives, gender alternations in adjectives, alternations in the form of the definite article depending upon the following sounds, etc., all of these have generally been based upon usage in the Bible and the Mishna, and Rabin (1983: 48) estimates that over 90% of the normative rulings are based upon references to these sources.

In practice, however, due to a variety of factors, not the least of which is that Biblical/Mishnaic usage itself was not always uniform, prescriptive decisions are often made on an *ad hoc* basis, with prescriptivists being influenced by a variety of factors upon which they do not necessarily agree among themselves and which they do not even always apply consistently individually. Thus, Ben-Asher (1967) finds that judgments can be affected by a desire to avoid ambiguity (motivating, e.g., the use of *-a* rather than *-et* in the present feminine single of the hiphil, the use of *me'itanu* rather than *mimenu* for 'from us', in order to avoid confusion with 'from him', etc.), avoiding borrowings, regularization of paradigms in the name of 'logic', popular usage, etc.

Without wading into the morass of cases and arguments advanced, we can say that what is striking about the discussion from the point of view of a Western European/North American linguist is that the social status of the people who actually use the various forms discussed is irrelevant. 'Popular usage', in general, is not infrequently taken into consideration in making prescriptive judgments but the question of *who* uses a form is irrelevant. If a form is totally obsolete for all users (as with many verb forms, e.g. the *va-consecutive* [see Peretz 1961]), it will not be prescribed and if it is clear that people, in general, have adopted a prescriptively 'incorrect' form (e.g. using *sherut* [service] as a feminine noun, although it was historically masculine), some prescriptivists may declare that it is acceptable. However, I do not know of any case in which there is any reason to believe that the purpose of consulting popular usage was specifically to ratify the usage of higher-status speakers and condemn the usage of lower-status speakers, as is routinely the case in the development of prescriptive norms

in languages such as English, Spanish and French. In fact, as noted by Rabin (1983: 50):

Hebrew does not have a language variety resembling the educated colloquial of most Western languages, and although there exist of course marked differences between the speech of the educated and the uneducated, both use largely the same non-normative grammatical colloquialisms.

As with languages which have been referred to as diglossic, such as Arabic, the significance to usage of being an 'educated' speaker of Hebrew is more that educated speakers are more capable of using 'elegant' and prescriptively correct Hebrew (or at least more correct Hebrew) in formal situations than that they are actually 'more prescriptively correct' even in their casual speech. Unlike languages such as English, the function of prescriptive rules is much less to differentiate between speakers of different social classes even in their casual speech than to provide a different register for usage in formal situations. All the same, Rabin's statement is perhaps a bit strong in that there are at least some shibboleths in everyday speech (e.g. *niseti* rather than *nisiti* for 'I tried') which result in actual stigmatization similar to that of, e.g., English *ain't* but these constitute only a very small proportion of the actual prescriptive rules. Additionally, there are cases where there are general statistical tendencies for people of different social classes to use different forms but, in almost all such cases, no positive or negative value is assigned to the use of one or another form (often because the actual correlation between usage and social class is not very strong).

To give a specific example of the relationship between prescriptivism and class dialects in Hebrew, I will discuss some cases of variation in verb morphology, where we find that a number of historically and prescriptively distinct morphological classes have fallen together in the everyday usage of many Hebrew speakers but higher-class and lower-class speakers have done this in different ways.

As discussed in Ravid (1995) and Myhill and Shlizerman (2002), prescriptive usage of hiphil (mostly causative) conjugation verbs involves considerably opacity, because of root radicals which disappear in this conjugation and because some pairs of consonants which used to be pronounced distinctively are no longer distinguished from each other in some dialects. As a result many speakers frequently do not follow prescriptive usage but rather simplify the system in one way or another.

For present-tense prescriptive forms, for example, some verbs have the prefix *me-* (e.g. *mevi'* [bring masc. sing.]) while others have the prefix *ma-* (e.g. *makir* [know (a person) (masc. sing.)]). However, the motivation for some verbs taking *me-* while others take *ma-* is not transparent and, as a

result, speakers tend to merge these two classes, either saying *me-* for both (*mevi'* and *mekir*) or *ma-* for both (*mavi'* and *makir*).<sup>18</sup> Although there is considerably variation and confusion, there is also a clear general tendency for higher-status speakers to use *me-* for both while lower-status speakers use *ma-* for both. As a result, in some cases (e.g. *mevi'*), it is higher-status speakers who more frequently use the prescriptively 'correct' form while, in other cases (e.g. *makir*), it is lower-status speakers who more frequently use the prescriptive 'correct' form. The latter situation is, by definition, impossible in a language such as English, in which 'correctness' is literally defined in terms of what higher-status speakers do. The same situation is also reflected by the fact that some speakers show a pattern of switching to *me-* when reading and supposedly on their 'best' linguistic behavior even when this results in switching from a prescriptively 'correct' form like *makir* to a prescriptively 'incorrect' form like *mekir* (Myhill & Shlizerman, 2002).

Similarly, for piel verbs in the past tense, there is confusion between verbs such as *nisiti* (I tried) and *mileti* (I filled). Prescriptively, the second vowel is [i] for the first group but [e] for the second but this is based upon an underlying third radical which is not pronounced and speakers, therefore, tend to confuse these forms, saying either *nisiti* and *militi* or *niseti* and *mileti*. Higher-status speakers tend to resolve this by using [i] for both forms (resulting in 'correct' *nisiti* but 'incorrect' *militi*) while lower-status speakers instead tend to use [e] for both forms (resulting in 'correct' *mileti* but 'incorrect' *niseti*) (see Ravid, 1995). Thus, the determination of what is 'correct' is again unrelated to the question of who uses which form.

It should be noted that, although Hebrew prescriptivists are indifferent to social class in their judgments, average Hebrew speakers, like speakers of any language, evaluate forms based upon the social status of the people who use them. Thus, in the previous examples, there is a tendency to stigmatize those usages which are both associated with lower/working-class speakers and prescriptively incorrect (e.g. *mavi'*, *niseti*), while those prescriptive errors which can be attributed to an overgeneralization based upon a desire to avoid these heavily stigmatized forms (e.g. *mekir*, *militi*), which are particularly characteristic of middle-class usage, are increasingly coming to be viewed as no big deal (if speakers recognize them to be prescriptive mistakes at all). This has no effect upon prescriptive judgments, however; *mekir* is just as 'incorrect' as *mavi'*.

For pronunciation as well, there is no idea that the 'correct' usage should be modeled upon the speech of the elite. As I have noted, there are three sounds for which there is sociolinguistically conditioned variation in pronunciation, corresponding to the letters xet ('correct' voiceless pharyngeal fricative [ħ]), 'incorrect' voiceless uvular fricative [χ]), ayin ('correct'

voiced pharyngeal fricative [ʕ]), 'incorrect' glottal stop or zero), and resh ('correct' alveolar flap [r], 'incorrect' voiced uvular fricative [ʁ] or trill [R]) (see, e.g., Bentolila, 1983; Gold, 1989; Yaeger-Dror, 1993). All three of the 'correct' forms are specifically associated with the everyday speech of lower-status ('Oriental') speakers, specifically lower-class and working-class Sephardim, while all of the 'incorrect' forms are specifically associated with the everyday speech of higher-status ('General') speakers, specifically Ashkenazim (but also most middle-class Sephardim, at least for *xet* and *ayin*).

Such a situation is impossible in a language such as English and is the product of the approach taken by the planners of Modern Hebrew. The various forms of (non-native) Hebrew which were in use when the language was first revived were all considered as possible sources for the 'correct' pronunciation, and Hebrew prescriptivists took some pronunciations from some dialects as 'correct' and others from other dialects, sometimes motivated by one factor and sometimes by another. The social class of the speakers associated with a given pronunciation never, however, affected the choice of which pronunciation was taken as 'correct'.

In the contemporary situation, as I have noted, Sephardic dialects happen to be more 'correct' in terms of pronunciation than Ashkenazic dialects but, contrary to popular belief (e.g. Blanc, 1968), this is not because traditional Sephardic pronunciation was generally taken as 'correct' but rather because Sephardic Jews have already adopted the features of 'correct' pronunciation taken from Ashkenazic dialects (of which there were a significant number),<sup>19</sup> while Ashkenazic Jews have not adopted all of the features of 'correct' pronunciation taken from Sephardic dialects. In the case of the adoption of the pharyngeal pronunciations of *xet* and *ayin* as the prescriptive norm, this might have reflected a desire to fit into the Middle Eastern *Sprachbund* by choosing sounds used in neighboring languages such as Arabic (see, e.g., Blanc, 1968) but, in other cases, sounds particularly associated with the Middle East were rejected as models for the prescriptive norm.<sup>20</sup> Some prescriptive decisions appeared to follow a kind of 'least common denominator' approach of taking the simpler or less typologically marked system but there were clear exceptions to this pattern as well.<sup>21</sup> There were, in fact, a variety of factors and arguments determining which of various forms in usage was chosen as the 'correct' one but in no case was this based upon the idea that the usage of the elite should be the model.

In Hebrew, then, prescriptive judgments about pronunciation, like prescriptive judgments about morphology, do not reflect popular prejudice but neither can they eliminate popular prejudice. Sephardic speakers, particularly middle-class ones, are increasingly using the Ashkenazic pro-

nunciation of *xet*, *ayin* and *resh*, especially the former two, even though they are prescriptively 'incorrect' because they are seen as more prestigious (see, e.g., Bentolila, 1984; Davis, 1984; Gold, 1989). Similarly, when students of mine have tested subjective reactions to accents, Sephardic accents (with the pharyngeal pronunciations of *xet* and *ayin* and the apical pronunciation of *resh*) have been consistently judged more negatively than Ashkenazic accents are, even if they are more 'correct'. As with forms such as *militi* and *mekir*, the non-pharyngeal pronunciations of *xet* and *ayin* and the uvular pronunciation of *resh* are seen as 'acceptable mistakes' because they are mistakes characteristic of the usage of higher-status speakers.

In a study showing the complexity of the sociolinguistic situation, Yaeger-Dror (1993) reports that, while purely Ashkenazic popular singers – who categorically used the uvular pronunciation of *resh* in their everyday speech – categorically switched to the apical pronunciation when they sang, in accordance with the prescriptive norm, Sephardic popular singers tended to switch to the prescriptively 'incorrect' uvular pronunciation of *resh* as they became more mainstream, even when they sang. Essentially, there are two sharply differing functions of the apical pronunciation of *resh*: one of them is the lower-status Sephardic usage while the other is the prescriptively 'correct' usage. They are pronounced the same and only context can suggest which of these a given occurrence of *resh* is (and even this may not be clear in every case). Therefore, an Ashkenazic singer who never uses apical *resh* in his/her everyday speech can switch to *resh* when s/he sings and be sure that this will be understood by the audience as being the 'correct' *resh* and not the 'lower-status' *resh*. However, a Sephardic singer who may actually uses apical (lower-status) *resh* sometimes in everyday speech may, in effect, be concerned that his/her apical *resh* when singing will be interpreted as being 'lower-status' *resh* rather than 'correct' *resh* and will, therefore, be inhibited from using it consistently.

The fact that speakers will often switch to 'incorrect' pronunciations which have more prestige does not mean, however, that prescriptive judgments have no effect at all. Though higher-status speakers will condemn lower-status speakers for saying *niseti*, they will not condemn them for the analogous *mileti*, because *mileti* is, after all, the prescriptively correct form. Similarly, though there is a general lack of enthusiasm for the Sephardic pronunciation, it is often mixed with a sense of respect for what is recognized as a more authentic and 'correct' usage (Gold, 1989). Were Hebrew prescriptivists to adopt the Western European strategy and declare all distinctive usages characteristic of higher-status people to be, by definition, 'correct' and all distinctive usages characteristic of lower-status people to be, by definition, 'incorrect', there is no question that stigmatization of lower-status usage would be far greater than it is.

Thus, prescriptivism is not the reactionary social force in Hebrew that it is in languages such as English. Indeed, it seems clear that, aside from the fact that Hebrew prescriptive linguists simply seem to make more rules than the average Hebrew speaker wants to deal with, they are if anything more liberal than society in general in the rules they make, which is the opposite of the case in Western European countries.

One striking example of this involves plural gender agreement. Historically, if even one male was in a group of people, the masculine plural form rather than the feminine had to be used: the feminine plural form was limited to cases in which all of the referents were feminine. The Hebrew Language Academy, however, has recently made an exception and overruled textual authority, declaring that masculine or feminine plurals should be chosen on the principle of 'majority rules', a relatively rare example of an attempt at political correctness in Israeli society. Hebrew speakers, however, do not take this seriously, and continue to follow the traditional rule (or even to use the masculine form even if all the referents are feminine). People have individual anecdotes about women they know who, evidently in the name of equality of the genders, follow this rule scrupulously but this is rare and the typical reaction to such behavior from men and women alike is amusement that someone could make such a big deal of something so insignificant.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The consequences of having a fair prescriptive norm*

The prescriptive system of Hebrew is more socially fair than that of languages such as English, Spanish or French, for which the standard is based upon the everyday usage of a certain elite and, to a significant extent, learning to 'speak correctly' for the great majority of speakers literally means learning to imitate the way that the elite use language naturally. Such a situation is unfair both in terms of requiring more actual work on the part of the non-elite and in terms of institutionalizing the idea that a certain group is inherently 'better' and more worthy of imitation than another group. As a result of this inequality, much of the work which has been done by sociolinguists in languages such as English has been directed towards deconstructing the concept of linguistic prescriptivism altogether (e.g. Labov, 1972; Aitchison, 1981; Milroy & Milroy, 1985; Joseph, 1987; Crowley, 1989; Cleary & Lund, 1993; Pinker, 1994; Battistella, 1999). Because the prescriptive system of Hebrew is basically societally fair, Israeli sociolinguists have not felt such a pressing urge to discredit Hebrew prescriptivism.

This does not mean that there is no tension between scientifically oriented linguists and prescriptive linguists in Hebrew-speaking society. Many of the same sorts of problems do arise; for example, there is the same

sort of resistance to study of the language as it is actually used, the same sort of mythologizing on the part of prescriptivists and the same sort of justified frustration on the part of scientifically-oriented linguists regarding the relatively prominent public profile of prescriptive linguistics (see, e.g., Rabin, 1983; Kuzar, 2001).

But whereas in Western European languages, it is routine for linguistic researchers to criticize prescriptive linguistics for being both scientifically unsound and societally unfair, only the former criticism has any resonance in Hebrew-speaking society. As a consequence, serious anti-prescriptive feeling is largely limited to scientifically-oriented linguists in Israel. Unlike the situation in English-speaking countries, anti-prescriptive ideology has not been integrated into the worldview of academics and non-academics who are aggrieved about various institutional biases. As noted by Rabin (1983: 50) 'There is very little antinormative feeling among the adult population of Israel.' The upside of this is that there are no significant populations of Hebrew speakers who view learning the standard language as selling out to the establishment (as is the case in, e.g., American English [Myhill, 1999b]). The downside is that it is more difficult to arouse popular indignation against the prescriptive establishment which, I suspect, has been the factor motivating dialectology of various types in western countries, with the result that there has been relatively little actual dialectological work on Modern Hebrew.

#### *Other languages with text-based prescriptive norms*

There are a few languages which have basically text-based prescriptive norms like Hebrew: the ones of which I am aware are Arabic, Icelandic and Sinhala. In each of these languages, the 'correct' language is, in theory, based upon a certain text or set of texts written some time in the fairly distant past. Standard Arabic is based upon the Koran (written in the seventh century CE), Standard Icelandic is based upon the Old Icelandic sagas (written in the ninth to eleventh century CE), and Standard Sinhala is based upon the sacred Buddhist writings in this language, which are also about 1000 years old (Haugen, 1968; Blau, 1981; Gair, 1998).

In many respects, Hebrew, Arabic, Icelandic and Sinhala appear to constitute a mixed bag. Hebrew and Arabic have obviously had considerable mutual influence but Icelandic and Sinhala have developed quite independent of them and of each other. Each of the four languages is associated with a different religion (Hebrew/Judaism, Arabic/Islam, Icelandic/Christianity, Sinhala/Buddhism). The authoritative Icelandic texts are basically narratives, the Arabic and Sinhala texts are philosophical/religious, and the Hebrew texts are a mixture of these. The Hebrew and Arabic texts have been at one time believed to have been dictated by God



(although this interpretation has changed recently, particularly for most Jews), while the Icelandic and Sinhala texts have never been the object of such a belief. Today's spoken Arabic and Sinhala have diverged enormously from the classical standard, Hebrew and Icelandic much less so. All of the languages are relatively old but not necessarily any older than other languages which have not developed such a conception of correctness (e.g. Persian, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, etc.).

If I were to make a guess as to what it is which these four languages have in common (aside from relative ancientness, which is perhaps necessary but not sufficient), I would suggest that the explanation which Gair (1998: 228) gives for the situation in Sinhala is on the right track and can be generalized:

Literary [Sinhala] is not clearly identified with and social group or cultural feature regarded negatively by a large share of the population ... Though it may have been advanced by a nativizing elite of sorts which in any event seems to have been widely respected and not resented, it is not the property of any caste, class, or group, save of course those educated in the vernacular. Furthermore, widespread education in Sinhala [a literacy rate of over 80%] is generalizing, not narrowing that group. Put otherwise, a command of that variety is a result of effort and ability, not opportunity or privilege.

It is particularly striking to note in this regard that Sinhala is the only Buddhist language on the Indian subcontinent and also the only one whose prescriptive norm is both text-based and neutral in terms of social class. This situation has not developed with any of the languages in the area spoken by Hindus, where the classical languages (particularly Sanskrit and Classical Tamil) have been regarded as essentially belonging to the priestly (Brahmin) caste (so that, e.g., standard Tamil is far closer to the speech of the Brahmins than to that of other castes). The situation in Sinhala is different because Buddhism eliminated the caste system. This is not to say that there has been no traditional association between certain groups of people and the use of Classical Sinhala but the borders have been incomparably more permeable than in the case of Hindu society.

Similarly for Hebrew, Icelandic and Arabic, the authoritative texts have never been regarded as the property of a subcaste but have rather been seen ideologically as 'belonging to all.' The destruction of the second temple in the first century CE and the consequent loss of power of the traditional priestly caste democratized Judaism as Buddhism democratized traditional Hindu culture. In Christianity, however, sacred texts in Latin, Greek, Old Church Slavonic, etc., were jealously guarded by the church hierarchies: the only European norm of this type is Icelandic, which is based upon

pre-Christian classical texts which have been more or less continuously known and read by all levels of society, never becoming associated with any particular group. Similarly, although it cannot be said that Islam has encouraged widespread literacy in its adherents, it is also true that it has not restricted literacy to a priestly caste, as it has no priesthood at all.

In languages where the classical texts were seen as the property of a subcaste (characteristic of Christianity and Hinduism but not Judaism, Islam, or Buddhist), democratization and the expansion of literacy have inevitably swept them away; when this subcaste lost its grip on power and was deposed, its language (Latin, Old Church Slavonic, Sanskrit, etc.) was thrown out with it and it was replaced with a new type of standard language based upon the usage of the new elite. The ideology of associating 'the language' with a certain subcaste was continued, though the proto-elite replaced the priestly caste and the idea of modeling the standard upon the usage of a certain section of society replaced the restriction of literacy to a certain section of society. This was essentially what happened with all of the vernacular languages of continental Europe, Greek being the most recent example (see Anderson, 1983; Browning, 1982; Frangoudaki, 1992; Cochran, 1997). However, in cases where the classical language was never seen as inherently associated with a certain subgroup, people did not feel any pressing need to eliminate it and it could instead be modernized.

This account is speculative. At present, research on this topic has been more or less on a case-by-case basis, with individual researchers working on individual languages and more or less taking it for granted that the ultimate determination of an ideology of 'correctness' was a historical necessity, leaving unanswered the question of why the situation has developed differently in different languages. A detailed comparative approach will be necessary to determine why things have developed as they have in different languages.

### **Conclusion: Language in Israeli society**

We have seen in this section a number of distinctive characteristics of sociolinguistics in Israel today. It should be emphasized, however, that Israeli researchers do not generally tend to focus upon the issues discussed here. It is far more typical for them to write about issues which are of interest to sociolinguistics in other countries, e.g. the status of immigrant minority languages, bilingualism, the fact that interaction between majority and minority language speakers is almost always in the majority language, etc. (see, e.g., Landau, 1987; Koplewitz, 1992; Shohamy & Spolsky, 1999; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999; articles in Herzog & Ben-Rafael, 2001, etc.) and it is clear that their research agendas are largely dictated by an interest in reaching and appealing to an international audience. This is in my opinion

unfortunate, because it means that typologically unusual and interesting characteristics of the Israeli sociolinguistic scene are either not discussed at all or only presented to an international audience in a decontextualized manner which minimizes their distinctiveness (as in, e.g., the discussion of Hebrew prescriptivism in Rabin [1983], or the discussion of the status of Arabic in Israel in Landau [1987] and Koplewitz [1992]).

However, it is important to note one area of sociolinguistic research which is quite popular in Europe and North America but which Israeli researchers have not taken up much, namely dialectology and the study of linguistic variation in general: a Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew has only begun to be developed in recent years<sup>23</sup> and the number of actual studies based upon empirical data in this area is comparatively very small (e.g. Schwarzwald, 1981, 1984; Bentolila, 1983, 1984; Davis, 1984; Yaeger-Dror, 1988, 1993, 1994; Peleg, 1992; there are also discourse analysis studies such as Olshtain and Blum-Kulka [1988], Blum-Kulka [1997] etc.). I do not think that this is simply a matter of Israeli research 'not catching up' with what is going on in other countries, because in other areas Israeli researchers are quick to pick up on trends elsewhere.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Israelis are simply not very interested in this type of research. Part of this may be attributed to the fact that Israeli Hebrew has not (yet) developed a variety of clearly distinguished sociolects or geographical dialects as exist in other languages but this cannot be the entire explanation. I suspect that this is another example of the historical Jewish tendency to be more interested in the study of 'dead' languages than living ones: the researchers who might in other countries devote themselves to studying Hebrew as it is used today are instead investigating and legitimizing dead or dying Jewish languages (see the conclusion to Chapter 3).

As previously suggested, I am generally supportive of the idea that research agendas in a given society should be dictated by issues of importance within that society rather than international trends and fads but, in the case of the lack of research of colloquial Israeli Hebrew, this has resulted in a situation in which we cannot draw too many conclusions about the effects of the relatively unique prescriptive system which has been adopted for the language because we have only the vaguest idea of what is going on in terms of actual usage. By adopting a fair prescriptive norm, Israelis are, in effect, conducting a social experiment of potentially considerable international importance, particularly given the enormous disillusionment which is being expressed in European and North American intellectual circles regarding their societies' traditional models of prescriptivism, to the extent that it is fairly common among English-speaking linguists to believe that it would better to eliminate prescriptivism altogether (see Myhill

(2004)); however, even Israeli linguists do not seem to be aware that this should be seen as an experiment and they do not seem to be very interested in its outcome. It is my hope that the current book may stir up some interest in pursuing this issue.

## Conclusion

I have summarized in this book the basic characteristics of Jewish sociolinguistic behavior and it is appropriate here to consider implications of this for future research and language planning.

## Language, identity, and nation

As shown in Anderson (1983), language has served as a central component in the modern conceptualization of identity. I have argued here that Jews (insofar as they have identified themselves as Jews) have rejected this thinking and this has been reinforced by specific events in recent Jewish history, in particular the Holocaust, which made it clear that German-speaking Jews were not really considered to be 'Germans', and the Arab-Israeli conflict, which made it clear that Arabic-speaking Jews were not really considered to be 'Arabs' (if necessary through the medium of claiming that whatever language they spoke was not to be considered 'Arabic'). But there is increasingly clear evidence from non-Jewish quarters as well that the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity, which reached the peak of its influence between 1880 and 1920, has been declining in importance in more recent times, as religious affiliation is again coming to be understood as being more important than language to individual identity. The picture emerges that most Jews (among other religious+ancestral groups) resisted this ideology particularly strongly and that eventually other groups began to lose their enthusiasm for it as well.

Already in the early 1920s, Great Britain and Ireland divided on lines of religion, not language (since the overwhelming majority of people on both sides of the division spoke English as their native language) and the same happened between Greece and Turkey, with Greek-speaking Muslims being considered 'Turks' and relocated to Turkey and Turkish-speaking Greek Orthodox being considered 'Greeks' and relocated to Greece (see Pentzopoulos, 1959, Lewis, 1998: 10–1). Following the Second World War, India and Pakistan were similarly partitioned along generally religious lines (Hindu *versus* Muslim), although the most widely spoken language of India and the official language of Pakistan were the same (Hindi-Urdu, the former being the Hindu designation and the latter the Muslim designation). Since the 1970s, the attempt to create a unified Lebanon based upon

combining Arabic-speaking Muslims and Arabic-speaking Christians has collapsed completely, to the point where the country no longer exists as an independent unit but is militarily occupied and politically controlled by Syria, with the blessing of the Arab world (Phares, 1995). Yugoslavia, which was constituted following the First World War and which was supposed to be united by the fact that various religious groups all spoke South Slavic languages – and the majority spoke Serbo-Croatian, a joint Orthodox–Catholic–Muslim language – disintegrated into its religious components in the 1990s.

In fact, cases where states whose citizens are religiously diverse but linguistically united have not fallen apart are rare and seem to be restricted to the combination of Protestant plus Catholic (as in Germany and Holland) and even this combination does not always work out, as can be seen by developments in Ireland.

Additionally, the value of the ideology of language and identity for language maintenance efforts seems questionable, if this refers to everyday language (see Myhill, 1999a). The problem is that such an ideology makes language loss irreversible, since as soon as children in a particular ancestral group no longer speak the language of that group, if the ideology of everyday-language-and-identity is followed, they then no longer belong to that group but rather to a different group, so that they will have no motivation to return to their ancestral language. Unfortunately, in the great majority of cases, people only become aware of the possibility of the disappearance of their ancestral language – and they only gain public sympathy for attempts to preserve it – when this generational loss is fairly far advanced. In such cases, a more promising ideology is to define ethnic identity primarily in terms of something other than language, e.g. ancestry, religious affiliation and/or living-place, and to make everyday language a secondary component of identity, so that rather than saying 'If you do not speak our language, you are already not one of us', one would say 'You are one of us even if you don't speak our language, but it would be nice if you did' (Myhill, 2001).

The key to understanding such remarkable cases as the revival of Hebrew and the survival of Yiddish in the Ultra-Orthodox community is specifically the fact that they have not been associated with movements which focused on language, in particular, but rather on some other aspect of Jewish identity. Such cases suggest that people who think that they can avoid problems associated with these other aspects of identity by focusing on language are mistaken and will be disappointed.

Finally, in the two cases I have discussed in which groups have attempted to base their identity upon everyday language to the exclusion of anything else, Germans and Arabs, these groups have grown disen-

chanted with this ideology when they did not achieve the desired goal and they have then turned to more destructive ideologies, Nazism in the case of Germans and Islamic fundamentalism in the case of Arabs. This is not a very encouraging record.

There is considerable reason, then, to believe that the ideology of everyday language and identity is simply not working, in terms of building stable nations and in terms of language ecology. People who are concerned with alternative approaches to these problems may be interested in investigating Jewish sociolinguistic behavior, as well as the sociolinguistic behavior of other groups who are generally similar to Jews in this respect. In particular, rather than conceptualizing the time when a language is dying (losing its native speakers) as being simply the end of the language and of the distinctive identity of the group, investing resources in trying to reverse the demographic decline of the language, it may be more productive to focus efforts during this time on developing a body of texts which can authentically represent the language in the future when it has no native speakers, a set of ritual uses to put the language to in the future and a concept of group membership which can survive into the indefinite future without a distinctive spoken language. Reviving the language as a living tongue will have to wait until circumstances for this are more favorable in one way or another (Myhill, 2001). This is how Jews preserved Hebrew as a sacred language until the time came when it was possible to revive it as a spoken language.

### **Prescriptivism**

It is clear that linguistic prescriptivism faces a significant ideological crisis in countries of Western Europe and North America. The idea of modeling 'correct' language upon the usage of the elite, which was established for some time, has come into direct conflict with the ideology of egalitarianism, and traditional prescriptivists have no defense against this criticism. However, the academic linguists who criticize traditional prescriptive linguistics seem to have no specific alternative proposal in mind. In a certain sense, the situation is similar to the clash in European thinking between the ideology of egalitarianism and the tradition of the divine right to rule. It was apparent for several hundred years that the divine right to rule was philosophically indefensible but it remained a factor for some time through sheer institutional inertia and the self-serving actions of those who benefited from it, until various historical developments conspired to make it possible to bring these institutions down. It seems reasonable to believe that the same thing will happen one day with linguistic prescriptivism in these countries and it may be worthwhile for people interested in investigating alternative forms of prescriptivism which will

not clash with egalitarianism to give some thought to the approach taken in languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, Sinhala and Icelandic by considering the possibility of developing new prescriptive norms which do not intrinsically favor one group over others.

### Early language usage

The importance of early language usage has come up at a number of times in this book and cannot be overestimated. As we have seen in Chapter 2, when Hebrew was the medium for education beginning in first grade, the children stopped using it when they left school: it was when Hebrew began to be used in preschools that children kept using it outside of school and it was revived as a living language. Even in a situation in which the preschool is the only place where a threatened or even dead language is used, one can convince very young children for a few crucial years that in the big world outside the home, this is the language that people use (immersion preschools have similarly proven to be of great use in attempts to revive Maori [Fishman, 1991]). Similarly in the case of Yiddish in the Ultra-Orthodox community, the program to maintain it involves speaking more or less exclusively in Yiddish to children until the age of about seven, after which they are secure enough in the language that no particular further attention is necessary (see Chapter 3).

But aside from this, given the generally weak situation of Hebrew in the diaspora and the fact that, for reasons which I have described in sections Chapter 2, ritual usage and *lingua franca* usage of Hebrew are not going to improve much in the future, it appears to be particularly the area of early language usage where steps can be taken which will significantly alter the status of diaspora Hebrew. Linguistic preparation for the bar/batmitzvah is better than nothing but traditional Jews did not wait until children were 13 years old to begin teaching them Hebrew: it was done as soon as it was cognitively possible. Consider, for example, the following passage from Patai (1977: 522):

When his children reached the age of three, [my] Grandfather began to teach them the Hebrew alphabet. In the store [he owned] they learned from him the Hebrew names of many articles which lined the shelves. Before my father was four, and his older sister five, they could read the Hebrew prayers fluently and had to recite them daily, aloud, to the satisfaction of their father, who listened to every word they uttered whether he was in the same room with them or in the adjoining store and sternly corrected them whenever they made a mistake. At four, my father began to attend the village heder, where within two years he finished the study of the Bible with Rashi's commentary. At six, he



began to study the Talmudic tractate of Baba Metzi'a, again with Rashi. A few months later, he had to start going also to the Roman Catholic elementary school of the village. Some thirty years later I, in turn, became the object of the millennial Jewish duty to 'teach them diligently unto thy children'.

Patai's father was born into a Hasidic family in 1882 in a Hungarian village. While his progress was undoubtedly unusual, his immersion in Hebrew literacy between the ages of three and six was typical of traditional (pre-Enlightenment) Jewish life. It was a very limited literacy, it did not result in children's Hebrew being native or even conversational and it very rarely developed into the ability to read advanced texts but its symbolic, psychological and ideological significance in terms of what it meant to be a Jew was enormous. Early literacy programs of this type have not received nearly the attention they have deserved among those concerned with diaspora Hebrew; nevertheless, I believe that it is in this area that modern society allows for the most realistic possibilities for expansion of the use of Hebrew among diaspora Jews.

Even if Jewish parents in the diaspora for one reason or another want to send their children to a public school rather than a Jewish private school, this still leaves several preschool years for observation of traditional Jewish patterns of early literacy in Hebrew (note that Patai's father attended Catholic school from the age of six). This is especially the case because such parents are frequently willing to send their children to Jewish day-care centers or even kindergartens, where a considerable amount of Hebrew can be introduced on an organized basis. And the parents themselves can be of significant help in teaching Hebrew to their children or at least adding some Hebrew to the child's environment, because it does not take much knowledge of a language to speak or read it to a four-year-old.

I believe that part of the explanation for why Jewish-American parents have not put much emphasis on early Hebrew education is that Americans generally believed through most of the 20th century that exposure to two languages from a young age would confuse children. There are, however, clear signs that these attitudes are changing, particularly among middle-class Americans. Additionally, a significant part of the problem is undoubtedly that English-speaking Jews at least are simply not aware of how much literacy can be taught to preschool children. This is particularly due to the nature of the English writing system, for which the relationship between orthographic symbol and phonetic sound is sufficiently opaque as to render it highly problematic for children below the age of six. Voweled Hebrew is almost completely consistent in this regard and, as someone who has wrestled with teaching small children to read Hebrew and English

(and who has extensively observed small children learning to read Japanese, which has a similarly purely phonetic system of writing, using only kana, a syllabary, for children), I can say that it is clear that small children can do much more with a writing system which is phonetically predictable.

### **The study of Jewish languages (other than Modern Hebrew)**

This is a topic which is likely to continue to be a central part of Jewish sociolinguistics for some time. I base this statement largely on the observation that, as I have noted at several points in this book, Jews seem to value languages particularly after they die as living languages and it seems clear that the same thing is happening today. If past developments are any indication, there should be at least a few generations of creative activity in this area, with the amount and duration of activity varying from language to language.

The status of Yiddish is different and, in some sense, unique and hence difficult to predict. On the one hand, its death in the secular community was so staggeringly and historically dramatic that it would seem to be an ideal case of a language sanctified by the circumstances of its demise, and this would suggest that it will be the object of a substantially greater level of research activity than other Jewish languages, both in terms of intensity and in terms of duration, extending even outside the Jewish community. This is, in fact, fairly consistent with developments to date.

But, on the other hand, Yiddish is actually not dead: not only that, it is likely to remain as the vernacular language of at least the great majority of the diaspora Ultra-Orthodox community into the indefinite future. It is not inconceivable that the secular American Jews who appear to be in the process of making the Holocaust the center of their Jewish identity will be sufficiently turned off to Yiddish by its continued association with the Ultra-Orthodox community that it will lose its appeal to them (or, alternatively, that those who are not turned off by the Ultra-Orthodox will become Ultra-Orthodox themselves and lose interest in the academic study of Jewish languages). This has not happened to date but this may be because there are still a few (very old) secular Yiddish speakers around, many of them Holocaust survivors no less, who are living embodiments of secular sanctity (so to speak) and when they are no longer on the scene the situation may change.

The study of Jewish languages is likely to have a growing effect as well upon researchers outside of the Jewish community, in two ways. First, one detects a growing nostalgia in non-Jewish circles in Europe for the days when Jews lived in their midst, and countries such as Germany, Spain, Poland, Greece and Hungary are beginning to re-evaluate the role which

Jews played in their history, in a basically positive sense. The study of Jewish languages would doubtless play a central role in such a development, particularly because, in no small number of cases, a significant amount of the early writing of European languages was, in fact, in their 'Jewish versions'. The most extreme case of this type is Germany, where there has been a trend in recent times for non-Jewish people to study Yiddish for personal enrichment (see, e.g., Aptroot, 1997) and similar developments may take place in other countries in the future.

Second, it would not be surprising if peoples besides Jews (and Gypsies) began to investigate languages in their own histories parallel to Jewish languages, such as I have mentioned in Chapter 3, e.g. the Turkish of Ottoman Greeks, the Hindi of Sikhs, the Arabic of Maronites, etc. This might develop directly out of contact with Jews but it could also arise from developments in thinking parallel to what Jews have gone through, that is, a recognition that religious/ancestral affiliation rather than native language is the central component of ethnic identity but, at the same time, a feeling that native language is a secondary component of ethnic identity, one which is worth studying. This, in effect, would be the reverse impulse of that just discussed – instead of Germans studying Yiddish because it is (again) perceived as one of the 'family of German languages' (emphasizing that the linguistic component is primary), they would study the native Russian of ancestral Germans living in Russia because these people would be 're-analyzed' as having been a distinctive Germano-Russian group (emphasizing that the ancestral component is primary) rather than simply people who had been degermanized when they lost their ancestral language.

I would expect that if such a trend develops, it will be within the field of diaspora studies (see, e.g., Kotkin, 1992; Cohen, 1997) but, to date, such studies have focused particularly on attrition of ancestral languages in diaspora communities (e.g. Young & Tran, 1999; Al-Khatib, 2001; Slavik, 2001), not the growth of new and distinctive 'hyphenated' languages. It may be that the same general historical forces resulting in the fact (or perception) that there are no new Jewish languages (see Chapter 3) may similarly lead to the feeling that new diaspora communities are not creating new and distinctive languages, in which case research of this type will focus instead upon dead hyphenated languages, as is the case in the study of Jewish languages.

### **Conclusion: The impact of ideas developed in Jewish societies**

In addressing a non-Jewish (or peripherally Jewish) audience in this book, it has been my hope that, aside from giving a greater understanding of Jewish sociolinguistic behavior, this work will also suggest, to some

readers, approaches which might be taken to sociolinguistic issues outside of the Jewish community, particularly in relation to the topics which I have mentioned in this section. It is perhaps appropriate to close here with some comments regarding factors which have historically shown themselves to be relevant in the propagation of such ideas in the Western European/American societies which will inevitably be the audience of an English book such as this.

Such societies appear to be more or less closed to ideas from sources which are perceived as 'foreign', treating them, at best, as curiosities (or, in more recent times, something which can be incorporated into a general relativist typological framework), when the cultures with which these ideas are associated are perceived as vital (living) political 'rivals'. However, when a given other culture is perceived as 'dead' – particularly when it is perceived as having died through the actions of Western Europeans – and when Western European society is itself in the process of overthrowing the old order which was responsible for (among other things) the death of this other culture, this culture can become the object of enormously intense study and veneration and, in fact, its thinking can become a central part of the new ideology which Western Europeans are developing. Thus, when Jews were a politically vital force in the Eastern Mediterranean, offering significant physical and ideological resistance to Roman colonization, their religion was regarded (at best) as being bizarre and idiosyncratic, yet within 200 years of the crushing of the final Jewish resistance in 135 CE, the Roman Empire itself adopted a modified version of the religion of the Jews and used it as the basis for organizing Western European society for more than a millenium.

Then, after this millenium, this process was repeated, with Greeks taking the place of Jews. In the Middle Ages, when the Byzantine Empire was the cultural and political heart of Europe, Western Europeans regarded the Greeks with jealousy and categorically rejected Greek thinking in both its ancient and Byzantine forms. When, however, as the Byzantine Empire was crushed by a combination of attacks by (Catholic) Crusaders from the west and Muslims from the east, intellectual feelings among Western Europeans for the Greeks softened, until the 15th century, when the Western Europeans abandoned the Greeks to the Turkish hordes. When Constantinople finally fell, Western intellectuals began to immerse themselves in study of the Greek classics which their society had for so long rejected, thereby beginning the Renaissance (see discussion in Geanakoplos, 1966).

The same process is well underway again today with regards to feelings towards European Jews. The unreasoning, intolerant and ignorant anti-Semitism which was characteristic of practically all continental European

thinkers before the Second World War, demanding from Jews complete assimilation at best and extermination at worst (see, e.g., Prager & Telushkin, 1985; Rose, 1990), which led to the Holocaust, has predictably (now that the European Jews are gone from the scene) been replaced by a new found appreciation of the values and ideas of pre-Second World War European Jews, particularly (but not only) among those groups who perceive themselves as most responsible for the Holocaust, that is the Germans.

However, negative feelings towards Israel on the part of Western Europeans are undoubtedly having the reverse effect, presumably in relation to the fact that Israel has not (at this stage) been erased from the map. Interesting and potentially valuable aspects of the Israeli sociolinguistic scene – in particular the revival of Hebrew and the categorical and unproblematic maintenance of non-Jewish minority languages without the need for legal coercion or discrete physical separation between the groups – are unfortunately not being seriously considered by Western European and American intellectuals. There is little doubt that mass media coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict is, at least at the unconscious level, influencing their thinking in a manner such that they are likely to feel that they should not make Israeli thinking and behavior a model for anything, in the same way that Jewish refusal to accept Roman rule peacefully and participate in emperor worship would have discouraged pre-Christian Roman intellectuals from considering the possible merits of Jewish religious thinking. In the same way, Byzantine insistence on allowing their priests to marry and rejecting the doctrine of original sin would have discouraged medieval Western European thinkers from reading Plato and Aristotle.

In retrospect, such intellectual prejudice and blindness are tragic and absurd. It is to be hoped that it will not be necessary for the Jewish people to suffer another disaster of enormous magnitude before the ideas they have at present will be taken seriously by other peoples. The problems faced by contemporary sociolinguistics, particularly in the area of language ecology, are too pressing to allow for such intellectual indulgences.

## Notes

1. In the second half of the 20th century, after they had seen the results of operationalizing these rigorous ancestral criteria for Germanness, Germans have had second (or third) thoughts regarding the ancestral component of German identity and, as a result, it has become possible, and even fashionable, for Germans to discover and publicly state that they do have some Jewish 'background', by which they mean ancestry.
2. Although I am focusing here on language, Germans' perception of the 'abnormality' of Jews and Gypsies was, by no means, restricted to their linguistic behavior: it was also based upon their territorial behavior, in my terminology,

the fact that citizenship/living-place is also not associated with Jewish and Gypsy group identity. This particular fact lent itself more concretely to metaphors about the supposed 'parasitic' nature of these peoples. However, in the case of territorial behavior, the Germans themselves were not on such firm ground, because, aside from their political dividedness, they had shown not much less tendency than Jews to spread themselves around Eastern Europe and North America, a fact presumably responsible for Hitler's defense of nomadism and convoluted argument that, if anything, nomadic behavior is more characteristic of 'Aryans' than Jews (Hitler, 1971[1925]: 304).

3. Recent events have made it clear, in fact, that this fundamental disagreement has not been resolved. Although the Oslo agreements of 1993 created the impression that Arabs had accepted the existence of Israel, it developed at the Camp David II negotiations of 2000 that Palestinians still insist that they will only recognize 'Israel' if four million additional Palestinians are given the right to live there if they wish, to join the five million Jews and one million Arabs already living there, so that the 'Israel' they will recognize is not a Jewish state.
4. Clear evidence that Arabs recognize that Jews share ancestral ties is their insistence that 'Zionism is racism' – for a group to be racist, it must be defined as ancestrally related.
5. Emphasis upon the Arabic language as a unifying factor was also intended to neutralize any separatist aspirations. According to this plan, (1) Muslims speaking Berber or Kurdish would be overawed by the traditional prestige of Arabic in Muslim circles, (2) the only surviving non-Muslim spoken language, Aramaic, was too demographically depleted to pose a threat, and (3) Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews, should they have ambitions to independence based upon claims of ethnic distinctiveness (as has happened with the Maronites), could be ideologically neutralized by claiming that they are ethnically Arabs on the basis of their spoken language (see Phares, 1995).
6. Or, alternatively, they redefine what 'the Arabic language' is on the basis of the religion of the speaker, as we have seen in Chapter 3.
7. To the extent that Arab identity is reconceptualized as necessarily including Islam, this would mean that Arabs acknowledge that religion can generally play a role in defining ethnic identity and this would eliminate one of the arguments Arabs make against the legitimacy of Israel – that religious identity is not a basis for nationhood. For this reason alone, it would be awkward for Arabs to make this change in understanding Arab identity explicit.
8. Arab-dominated countries also give no language rights to people of their own religious background who speak other languages – non-Arabic speaking Muslims, in particular Berbers, Kurds and Nubians – but this is standard practice in the Middle East.
9. I would argue that some of these features are more intrinsically characteristic of ethnic democracy than others. For example, although it is unquestionably the case that more Americans than Israelis are concerned at the ideological level with meritocracy and non-discrimination, Israelis, on the whole, are certainly by no means opposed to combating discrimination and this situation can certainly be expected to improve in the future as it has in the first 50 years of Israel's existence, without changing the nature of Israel's ethnic democracy. In addition to this, as anyone who has lived in, e.g., the United States for any length of time can easily testify, liberal democracies have their own internal contradictions, as having a liberal principle that discrimination should be eliminated hardly guar-

antees that this will, in fact, happen. It can easily result in programs which can be accused of being anti-meritocratic and discriminatory in the opposite direction. The other factors Smootha (1997) mentions, however – emphasis on group (as opposed to individual) rights and refraining from imposing a common culture and identity – are, indeed, central to ethnic democracy as opposed to liberal democracy.

10. As this book goes to press (May 2004), I should add that the most recent class discussions I have led involving Israeli Arabs and Jews have shown a striking change in this regard, with almost all Arab students expressing some feeling that they are 'Israelis' as a peripheral component of their identity (that is, their Israeli identity is not only formal). Although there have only been about 10 Arab students in each class and these are university students rather than a random sample of the population, the difference is quite striking in comparison to all previous discussions I have observed on this topic since 1995 (including a class I taught in Fall 2003), in which it was almost unheard of for even a single (non-Druze) Arabic speaker to express such a view. It is not clear why such a change should have taken place; the only possible explanation I can think of is that it may be related to the security fence which has been put up since last fall, which leaves the Israeli Arabs clearly on the Israeli side.
11. This is not the same as the traditional diglossic distinction between H and L, because Arabic is normally used by Israeli Arabs in high functions if they are in a local context, e.g. public speeches in Arab villages, sermons in mosques, etc.
12. In the years I have been living in Israel, I have initiated many discussions on whether speakers of such languages should use Hebrew as their everyday language and on only one occasion have I heard anyone express such a belief. This was from a Jew who had lived in France until he was 24 years old and had presumably absorbed the overwhelmingly assimilationist-oriented ideology of that country and the comment occurred during the Al-Aksa Intifada in the midst of a conversation in which he made a number of other similarly unrealistic proposals regarding policies towards Israel's Arab minority.
13. My observations in this section regarding how 'Israeli identity' is conceptualized are based upon extensive discussions I have had with many Israelis on this topic, particularly (but not only) class discussions devoted to this topic every time I have taught sociolinguistics in Israel (usually twice a year for the past eight years).
14. However, it is the case that conceptual (rather than legal) Israeli identity is clearly tied to Jewishness, although here it is perhaps more accurate to relate Israeli identity most strongly to going through the Hebrew school track in Israel rather than Jewishness *per se*; I will discuss this later.
15. In the numerous discussions in which I have participated on this topic (particularly in sociolinguistic classes I have taught), I have never heard an Arabic-speaking Muslim say that s/he is an 'Israeli' in terms of identity. I can recall perhaps two or three Arabic-speaking Christians who have made this statement out of about 50 with whom I have discussed this topic. Rarely, Israeli Jews will say that they consider Arabs to be 'Israelis' in terms of identity but when confronted with the fact that Arabs themselves reject this categorization, they will invariably back down. The interpretation given to such behavior from Arabs and other Jews alike is that such people are attempting to be polite and politically correct and were not previously aware that Arabs do not like to be considered 'Israelis' in terms of identity. The situation of Israeli Druze is less



- clear and many of them will deny being 'Arabs' (presumably because being a Druze, like being a Jew but unlike being a Muslim or a Christian, entails not only a religious identity but also an ethnic identity). To judge from the discussion in Ben-Rafael (1994: 173–6), some Druze may also identify themselves as 'Israelis' in terms of identity, although I personally have never heard any Druze make such a statement. On the Jewish side, it is clear that the Druze are perceived as more 'Israeli' in terms of identity than Arabic-speaking Muslims or Christians are, and I believe that Israeli Jews of practically all political persuasions feel embarrassed when confronted with complaints from Druze regarding their lack of full acceptance in Israeli society but the fact remains that they, nevertheless, do not consider Druze to be really fully-fledged 'Israelis' in terms of identity.
16. I would not state this too strongly: it is certainly possible to move to Israel at an advanced age, speak limited Hebrew and still be considered an Israeli in terms of identity. For example, Israelis seem to agree that Natan Sharansky would be considered an Israeli (albeit a 'Russian' as well), because he is a member of the Knesset and spent many years in prison in the Soviet Union for supporting Zionist causes, even though his Hebrew is heavily accented and fairly simple. But such cases are relatively rare.
  17. An interesting and significant exception to this is the tendency of some speakers, particularly younger speakers, to switch to [e] as the first vowel in the present and past tense of hiphil verbs when reading and presumably on their best linguistic behavior even when this results in them switching from a prescriptively correct form to a prescriptively incorrect form, e.g. from *makir* to *mekir* know [a person] (masc.) (Myhill & Shlizerman, 2002); I will discuss this phenomenon later.
  18. The establishment of the Bible and the Mishna as the basis for 'correct Hebrew' is not related to an ideology that the Bible is 'the word of God'. The planners of Modern Hebrew were avowedly secular, in some cases even anti-religious. In fact, the position of more religiously oriented Jews was that imposing a reconstructed form of Hebrew upon all Jews was an artificial, irreligious act. According to this thinking, each Jewish community had evolved its own form of Hebrew over the years and they should stick to these traditional usages rather than impose an artificial uniformity (see Poll, 1980). Religious Jews have, for the most part, given up on this ideological point over the past 100 years (although many still maintain distinctive usages in religious contexts such as prayers, particularly in the diaspora and the ultra-Orthodox community).
  19. This confusion is limited in the present tense to forms in which only two of the three underlying radicals appear on the surface in the hiphil. In the prescriptive norm, when the 'disappearing' radical is a vav or a yud in second position in the root, *me-* is used (*mevi* or *meziz* [move], etc.), while when it is a nun in first position, *ma-* is used (*makir*, *mapil* [drop], etc.). With other verb classes, *ma-* is always used and there is no confusion in the spoken language. In the past tense of hiphils, the situation is more confusing. Prescriptively, verbs taking *me-* in the present take *he-* in the past (e.g. *hevi* [he brought]), as do verbs with a 'guttural' first radical (e.g. *hexlit* [he decided]), while all others take *hi-* (e.g. *hikir* [he knew], *hixnis* [he put in]) but because of the 'disappearing' second radical in some forms and because of surface merger between 'guttural' and 'non-guttural' radicals in others, there is confusion in all forms, even regular ones, so that one hears not only 'correct' *hevi*, *hikir*, *hexlit* and *hixnis* but also 'incorrect' *hivi*, *hekir*, *hixlit* and *hexnis*. Higher-status speakers show a general tendency to

- use *he-* in all forms (e.g. *hevi'*, *hekir*, *hexlit*, *hexnis*) while lower-status speakers show a general tendency to use *hi-* in all forms (e.g. *hivi'*, *hikir*, *hixlit*, *hixnis*). As in the present tense, some speakers show a tendency to shift to [e] in reading style even when this results in switching from a prescriptively correct form to a prescriptively incorrect form (e.g. from *hikir* to *hekir*) (Myhill & Shlizerman, 2002).
20. A number of Ashkenazic pronunciations were taken as the prescriptive norm, for example the non-pharyngeal pronunciation of *kuf*, *tsadi* and *tet* (Morag, 1988: 193), morphophonemic alternations between stop and fricative pronunciation of *pe*, *bet* and *kaf* but not *daled* or *gimel* (Bar-Adon, 1975), shortening of long consonants and, pronunciation of *vav* as [v] rather than [w] (Morag, 1988: 193).
  21. For example, non-pharyngeal pronunciations were taken as the prescriptive norm for *kuf*, *tsadi* and *tet* (Morag, 1988: 193) and the choice of Ashkenazic [v] over Sephardic [w] can similarly be understood as a rejection of 'authentic' Middle Eastern usage because cognate Arabic words use [w] (Morag, 1988: 193).
  22. Examples of the 'least common denominator' approach are (1) choosing the five-vowel Sephardic system over the seven-vowel Ashkenazic system (Katz, 1993), (2) rejecting the Sephardic system distinguishing between long and short consonants in favor of the Ashkenazic system which had only short consonants and (3) choosing the invariant Sephardic pronunciation for tav as [t] over the Ashkenazic morphophonemic alternation between [t] and [s] (Morag, 1962; Schramm, 1964: 15). However, it was not always the case that the 'simpler' system was chosen, as the typologically marked pharyngeal pronunciations of xet and ayin were retained, as was the Ashkenazic alternation between [b] and [v] for bet (which some Sephardic dialects had merged as [b] (Bar-Adon, 1975)).
  23. I have, however, observed the 'incorrect' use of the feminine plural marker by 'normal' people in strongly 'feminine' social contexts, e.g. a ballet or flamenco teacher addressing a group of 20 students including a single male.
  24. See <http://spinoza.tau.ac.il/hci/dep/semitic/cosIsraeli Hebrew.html>.

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