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HEBREW UNDER ENGLISH RULE

The language politics of Mandate Palestine

Liora R. Halperin

The Yishuv, the Jewish community of Palestine before 1948, is typically regarded both by boosters and critics as external to broader patterns of collective development in the Middle Eastern mandated territories. This is particularly true around the politics of language. While the majority Arab populations of the British Mandates in the Middle East learned in British-run schools, Zionist scholarship emphasizes that the Yishuv's autonomous school system marked a departure from the patterns of dependence and subordination characteristic of the Jewish diasporic experience as well as the European-run Jewish schools of late Ottoman Palestine.¹

But an emphasis, both by insiders and observers, on the growth of autonomous institutions in anticipation of eventual independence has obscured the extent to which the Yishuv both remained dependent on British bureaucratic structures, much like other Middle Eastern elites, and experienced similar language pressures as a result.² This chapter demonstrates that the Yishuv, though notable for its relative autonomy and public disdain for English, was not unique in the role it accorded English in practice. The Yishuv used English in communication with the Mandate government in Palestine and acknowledged, both explicitly and through linguistic practice, the extent to which its hegemony was limited by the Mandate context in which it operated.

The history of Zionist language politics has largely been read in light of Jewish immigration trends and the intracommunal jostling between Hebrew and Yiddish and other European languages.³ In the common narrative, this diversity of tongues gave way, under nationalist pressure, British support, and the force of Hebrew institutions, to a Hebrew-dominant society. In practice, however, the all-Hebrew diktat of many Zionist institutions disguised a widespread, if conditional, tolerance of language diversity – not quite the “federation of tongues” Theodor Herzl imagined would characterize Jewish Palestine,⁴ but a society in which a widespread commitment to Hebrew could leave room for alternative language practices in particular social and professional spheres.⁵

The phenomenon of Zionist English study is thus best understood not as a break from Zionist linguistic orthodoxy, but as a product of the broader context of the Mandates, in which – as in other imperial contexts – communal elites, often with preferential access to the mandatory authorities, negotiated between the ideal of national self-definition and the imperatives of interaction with the state.⁶

On 1 October 1920, a notice appeared in the *Official Gazette of Palestine* on “The Use of Official Languages.” It stated that “English, Arabic, and Hebrew are recognized as the official languages of Palestine,” specifying that:

All Government ordinances, official notices and forms will be published in the above languages. Correspondence may be addressed to any Government Department in any of these languages. Correspondence will be issued from Government departments in whichever of the languages is practically convenient.

This document, and clarifications published in 1922 and 1923, spawned jubilation in the Jewish community – and concern in the local Arab population. Enthusiasm for the newly official status of Hebrew was wrapped up in the broader British commitment – enshrined in the Balfour Declaration – to give attention to the Jews’ cultural claims and political aspirations. Thanks to this policy, Zionists, though a tiny minority in Palestine, could theoretically use Hebrew even in communication with the British – and they sometimes did try. “The [Tel Aviv municipality] tried to impose Hebrew on the officials of the British Mandate,” says Zohar Shavit, insisting that the municipality’s commitment to Hebrew was far-reaching.⁷ Moreover, decades of institutional growth promised new linguistic autonomy for a set of Zionist institutions founded just after the war: the Zionist Commission in March 1918, the Histadrut (General Labour Federation) in December 1920, and the municipality of Tel Aviv in May 1921. If Jews could carry out their administrative business in their own language, many believed, gone would be the days when they would dwell as a minority under the rule of another nation, reminded of their subordinate status every time they went to fill out forms, pay taxes, or send mail.

However, mandatory laws, while they promised qualified autonomy, did not usher in a period of full independence – linguistic or otherwise. The labor leader Hayim Arlosoroff admitted in 1928 that “the Jewish National Home must develop in the presence of the English. Many are the obstacles on this path.”⁸ Attempts to use and promote Hebrew, even within circles committed to Hebrew, occurred in a broader multilingual space. From an activist standpoint, this meant language clashes and battles for language rights. But the nationalist emphasis on the promotion and protection of Hebrew distorts the pervasiveness of selective English use by certain members of a community living and conducting its day-to-day activities – including manifestly Zionist activities – under British rule. Further, it obscures the extent to which Zionists, despite the preferential treatment they received, were part of a regional ecosystem of bureaucratic language politics in which most actors of a certain class simply took for granted that English learning was a necessity.⁹

While few Jews knew English in the early years of the Mandate, over time most conflicts arose not from lack of knowledge, but from the politics of bilingualism. The issue, in other words, was not primarily that Zionists were unable to speak the language of power, but that a significant enough number *were* able to do so – thanks to language training of one kind or another – but felt pressure from nationalist elements not to. In such an environment, the politics of Hebrew-English bilingualism were marked by deliberate decisions, occasions for compromise, and tensions between maintaining hard-line positions and opting for procedurally easier courses of action.

The remainder of this chapter considers the various ways in which clerks, translators, English learners, and aspirants to the cultural cachet of English responded to the British presence in ways which appeared to violate national orthodoxies, but which were both strategic and rational. Their attempts at accommodation, it argues, are emblematic of the broader tensions of interwar Zionism. We should resist the temptation to understand English speakers as collaborators, uninterested in the national cause, or as nationalists looking to undermine the British apparatus from within.

As we will see, deploying English was both a means to forward Zionist aims through bureaucratic interaction, and a persistent reminder of the Jewish community's not fully autonomous status under the Mandate.

Furthermore, such linguistic negotiations are a reminder of the ways in which Zionism, despite its putative break with the Jewish past, contained significant elements of continuity. Palestine was far from the first setting in which Jews found themselves under the rule of another government, found multilingual skills serviceable in bureaucratic contexts, and negotiated relationships with a government that was wary of granting new rights or recognizing existing rights. Jews, writes Yuri Slezkine, were the prime "professional internal strangers," who had a level of literacy that usually exceeded that of their surrounding cultures and naturally became "trained linguists, negotiators, translators, and mystifiers."¹⁰ This diasporic characterization, according to Slezkine, was modified by the Zionist project, but his claim of rupture is not fully accurate. In Palestine, too, a language of power was functionally useful for a Jewish minority population and became a necessary tool in doing business.

Because of the emphasis on Jewish autonomy and resistance against the British, linguistic activities often receive only oblique references in the archival record – mentions of language-learning bonuses in the British archives, requests for work from young Jews who stressed their language capabilities in their applications, and recollections of those who remembered the behavior of their friends, relatives, and neighbors. Above all, however, the extent of English use is visible in correspondence protesting it. Through the archival record, and in its gaps, we see how the emerging Hebrew bureaucracy remained subordinate to the British mandatory state. This subordination was repeatedly experienced in linguistic terms, and it was often accepted out of recognition that English had a real, if delimited, place in the life in the Yishuv.

Emotionally distant and politically suspect, the British in Palestine had no great personal relationship with the bulk of the Yishuv. The journalist Mordecai Ben-Hillel Ha-Cohen spoke of a "conceptual difference" between Jews and Britons that led to "mutual miscomprehension."¹¹ British soldiers, usually in Palestine for short stints, rarely became integrated into their environments and lived in 'ghettos' of their own, according to one study of British life in Palestine.¹² Isaac Abbady, the head of the Mandate government's Chief Translation Office until 1944, concluded that the spiritual and mental distance between the Jewish and the British rendered any real closeness impossible.¹³

Scholars, moreover, have tended to emphasize the relative unimportance of English to the Yishuv before the Second World War and factors that "impeded the spread of the imperial language and . . . reduced the impact of this period of British rule," including the official status of Hebrew and the existence of a Hebrew school system.¹⁴ Ralph Potson, aide to the High Commissioner from 1931 to 1938, recalled that "there was virtually no mixing between the British and Palestinian Arabs and very little with the Jews at all." A. J. Sherman surmises that "[o]ne factor certainly was language: almost none of the British knew Hebrew . . . and knowledge of English was relatively rare among Jews."¹⁵

If, in this narrative, the British were largely absent and irrelevant, an alternate narrative implies an antagonistic British presence caused by the government's regular and egregious denials of Hebrew's official status and breaches of promises to provide the language full bureaucratic support. In this line of thinking, ill-intentioned British civil servants again and again snubbed Hebrew in settings where it should have been prominent and Zionists were forced to fight for their language rights, both to the British and internally, among Jews. Thus, wrote Arlosoroff in 1928, "in daily life the manager of the post office is the one who decides whether Hebrew will dominate in his office in practice or only in the official formulations of the Mandate."¹⁶ Zionist organizations protested in response to these continual breaches in nearly every corner of

mandatory administration, from tax forms to municipal services in Jewish areas to courtrooms to the *Official Gazette*. We find letters complaining about the lack of Hebrew in railway regulations, about a eulogy for Lord Balfour given only in English, about various types of forms printed in English and Arabic only, about non-Hebrew-speaking clerks at the immigration department, and about stamps in passports that did not have Hebrew on them.¹⁷

Protests were directed not only at the British, but also at recalcitrant Jews. In demonstrating clerks' activism to promote Zionist economic and political platforms, David De Vries cites a 1935 letter to the clerks' bulletin, *Pinkas*, which asked rhetorically: "is it not common among some of our [[Jewish] managers to respect the English speaker and scorn the clerk who knows 'only' Hebrew, be it the most perfect?"¹⁸ This letter's author presented himself as a national hero baring his bosses' less-than-admirable language practices. Such nationalist clerks, in seeking positions in the British government bureaucracy, felt that they were promoting Jewish interests more broadly and the principle of Hebrew labor in particular, by occupying positions that might otherwise have gone to Arabs.¹⁹ In Isaac Abbady's assessment, Jewish service in the British government in Palestine was one of the "most important achievements for national independence . . . along with the recognition of Hebrew as a governmental language."²⁰ In this sense, clerical work could be a nationalist act in its own right.

Taken together, these efforts create the impression of a devoted, activist population unsympathetic to lapses or missteps, unremitting in its demands that Hebrew be made an option in all bureaucratic or administrative instances, and insistent that clerical work should serve nationalist aims. In reality, however, overt activism was relatively rare and Jewish bureaucrats, like Arab bureaucrats, understood that English was a straightforward necessity for their work. If a disconnect between ideals and reality provoked the protests outlined above, it also dictated a day-to-day set of linguistic relations that did not conform to stated ideals and that – English letter by English letter – perennially reminded members of the Yishuv that the goal of making Hebrew reign in all sectors of the Yishuv would necessarily be limited.

By 1946, 13.4 per cent of the Jewish workforce, or 22,000 workers, were clerks.²¹ English was generally the language of work for civil servants, even in offices that dealt mainly with Jewish constituents, and British policy stated that candidates whose customary tongue was other than English must pass a language exam before being admitted to the civil service or to the legal profession.²² In many cases, they could receive bonuses for passing exams.²³ The incentives worked. Enough British civil-service personnel were taking the exams – and passing them – that the amount allotted for bonuses proved insufficient. There were 130 candidates that had passed the language examinations in 1933, "a number considerably in excess of expectations."²⁴

The great emphasis on English derived from the fact that the British Mandate apparatus in Palestine, despite its official commitments to a trilingual policy, was never fully equipped to operate in Hebrew. According to the Palestine Royal Commission Report of 1937, out of the 270 British officers in the First Division of the Civil Service in Palestine in the mid-1930s, only six could speak Hebrew.²⁵ This meant that if Jews were to integrate to any extent whatsoever into the British bureaucratic system, it was incumbent on them to improve their knowledge of English.

The multilingual policy put in place by the British created great administrative strain. In 1932, George Antonius called attention to the bloated bureaucracy of the Mandate government, which he said caused not only a waste of time, but "a crop of misunderstandings, of bewildering errors, and in certain cases, of miscarriages of justice."²⁶ But this bloated apparatus also created jobs, demanding, as Sir Ronald Storrs wrote, "an ever-increasing staff of Hebrew interpreters, translators, stenographers, typists, printers, and administrative officers, all supported by the tax-paying majority."²⁷ One of the most important ways that multilingual Jews served the British government was by working as translators.

Within the Mandate government, this translation, by and large, occurred at the Central Translation Bureau in Jerusalem. From 1920 to 1945, the Central Translation Bureau's Hebrew division was headed by Isaac Abraham Abbady, a Jew of Syrian descent. Between 1945 and 1948, the office was run by Shmuel Yeivin, more widely known for his work as an archaeologist, who appears to have begun issuing yearly reports about the bureau's activities. In the year between July 1944 and June 1945, the Secretariat had 664 documents translated from Hebrew to English and 221 documents translated from English to Hebrew. The figures were nearly the same the following year, while in 1947, the Hebrew-English translations went up to 1,039.²⁸ Jewish translators were at the heart of much international communication being undertaken by the British. The polyglot nature of its staff, made up of Jews from various countries, meant that the Hebrew section of the Central Translation Bureau was also entrusted with doing occasional French, German, and Yiddish translations and serving as interpreters at interviews given by top British officials.²⁹ By 1947, on the eve of Israel's independence, the bureau had 13 officers, including nine permanent employees, and these numbers probably do not include the many translators hired in branch offices or translators who worked for Zionist institutions.³⁰ When we imagine extrapolating outwards, the number of English-speaking Jewish clerks in the Yishuv becomes even larger.

In general, translation services were not satisfactory, an indication that the bureaucratic apparatus would have been better served if more Jews were getting a better education in English; those that did have skills, though, trumpeted them. The General Manager of the Railway wanted translators who knew English as well as Arabic or Hebrew, were experienced in translation, and had knowledge of railway terminology: "Railways is not the only Department which is badly served in the matter of translations."³¹ The great and growing need for translators meant that many Jews who felt they had the linguistic skills for the job wrote to the Central Translation Bureau to apply for positions. They would generally apply in English, presumably to show off their English writing abilities. H. Modlinger called himself a "simple Palestinian citizen" who had a "thorough knowledge of three official languages and a Hebrew University education" and was applying eagerly, "knowing that your office offers a splendid future and permanent position to young and energetic men."³² Eliyahu Salamah seemed to have applied straight out of high school (at the Rehavia Gymnasium) and insisted that, "[a]side from school, I learned the English language privately as well."³³ A note appended to his application remarked: "He hasn't worked at all." The letters, including some recommendation letters written on behalf of candidates, indicate a pool of applicants who generally did not speak English as a native language, but built up their English knowledge through a combination of schoolwork, private lessons, study in England, and work in British offices and companies. This particular stock of letters, from 1946, demonstrate a commitment to English in bureaucratic spheres that grew over the years of the Mandate and reached a high point in the 1940s, even as suspicion of the British was growing within the Zionist community. British government employment was perceived as a real option for Jews, but an option that could be achieved only through proficiency in English.

The relative spread of English knowledge over the course of the Mandate period concerned some Jews not only for ideological reasons, but also because this trend meant less employment for Jewish translators. In 1942, a newspaper reported that the number of letters received in Hebrew by the Inspector's Office for Heavy Industry was declining as the numbers received in English (and German) were increasing. This "causes the denial of employment for many Hebrew workers who had been invited as translators and for whom there is no longer any need." Ultimately, the writer thought, the government would assume that Jews simply didn't need Hebrew language rights.³⁴ In a letter to the *Palestine Post*, a Jewish civil servant named Rigbi said that he worked in a government office that dealt with Jews 75 per cent of the time, but noted that only 10 per cent of his correspondence was in Hebrew, "simply because most of the persons in contact with this office think

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it wiser to write and speak English to its officers.”³⁵ The outcome of this situation, he claimed, was that clerks did not really have to know Hebrew and Jewish clerks who resigned could easily be replaced by Arabs. Rigbi was an advocate; he was writing to “[call] all those who had forgotten that Hebrew is also an official language to join in one common fight for one common language.”³⁶ Nonetheless, numbers from the Central Translation Office suggest that protest was not the general trend and English knowledge and use continued to increase.

Jews in the Mandate apparatus, who used English particularly frequently, were not the only Jews to confront situations of official language contact. Faced with a government both unwilling and logistically unable to deal with fully Hebrew correspondence, Jewish municipalities, parties, and organizations corresponded with British offices in English – sometimes, but not always, by ways of English translations. Some of the links between the Yishuv and the British were facilitated by British Jews or Jews who had spent some time in Britain. “Because English was my mother tongue,” wrote Max Nurock, a British Jew who worked with the Zionist Commission (the forerunner of the Jewish Agency), “I was naturally used as a liaison with the British occupying military authorities.”³⁷ But English-language contact was simply too important and widespread to be restricted to native English speakers. Overwhelmed by translation demands, the Mandate apparatus regularly asked Jewish institutions to provide their own English translations along with the Hebrew original. In 1925, the Principal Medical Office, Jaffa District, told the Tel Aviv municipality that providing English translations would be in its best interest: “The fact that Saturday is a Jewish holiday and Sunday a Christian holiday means that any letter written in Hebrew which arrives here after Friday morning is not dealt with until Monday morning.”³⁸ Other communications simply demanded the use of English. In 1927, the Southern District Commissioner wrote to the Tel Aviv municipality that, “I must regretfully inform you that I am unable to bear the cost of translating letters both from the Council into English and to the Council into Hebrew.” He offered the municipality the option either to write in Hebrew but receive replies only in English, or to attach English translations and to receive English and Hebrew replies.³⁹ In a further communication, the Southern District Commissioner wrote that while he was “fully sympathising with the Township’s [municipality’s] desire to conduct all its correspondence in Hebrew,” he “would suggest that a somewhat more liberal and tactful attitude should be adopted in the future. Tel Aviv is situated within a trilingual area and it is hardly possible to maintain that in that area English is a foreign language.”⁴⁰

Such responses from the British bureaucratic apparatus angered the Tel Aviv municipality and Jewish National Council, which regarded them as evidence of deliberate linguistic discrimination. The Jewish National Council thus wrote an incensed missive to the Chief Secretary of the Palestine Government in 1929 to complain that the Tax Department had refused to engage in Hebrew correspondence. The Yishuv, it said, would not give up on the importance of Hebrew “because of a lack of needed clerks.”⁴¹ But the rhetoric around British intransigence and Hebrew’s oppression didn’t change the basic linguistic situation: there were three official languages in Palestine and Hebrew was not chief among them except in a limited set of circles. In the end, the Yishuv did give up to some extent on the exclusivity of Hebrew, hiring translators and staff proficient in English. As early as 1919, the Haifa municipality made arrangements for translation services from Hebrew and Arabic to and from English.⁴²

Over the ensuing decades, employment inquiries flowed into the Tel Aviv municipality from those possessing language skills who hoped to gain employment in the city bureaucracy. A man by the name of Ezra David wrote to the Tel Aviv municipality in April 1935 (in English), offering his services as a clerk: “I am a Jew and aged about 21 years. I am well conversant in the three official languages: Hebrew, English, and Arabic, and hold excellent certificates and testimonials.”⁴³ David received a standard curt reply from the municipality, letting him know that letters

requesting work at the municipality should be written in Hebrew, the language of Tel Aviv. But passionate assertions of the municipality's monolingual policy did not result in a monolingual staff. Similar inquiries came in at other points during the Mandate period from people showing off their language skills. Shlomo Aharoni, who described himself as a 21-year-old Jew from Aden, wrote, "I know how to read, write and speak in the three official languages."⁴⁴ Shimon Taberski, who described himself as a new immigrant from Russia said in a request for work: "I know Hebrew and a little English (it will be just a few more months before I gain proficiency in the language)."⁴⁵ Some mentioned prior experience: L. Rotstein had previously worked as a correspondent in Hebrew, French, and English.⁴⁶ Others mentioned a whole range of language skills besides the official languages: Y. S. Sharafi from Tehran said he had "good knowledge of English, Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, and French."⁴⁷ Translators, it becomes clear, were essential employees at the municipality of the first Hebrew city, both despite the official language policy of the British mandatory Government and because of it. These translators worked in generally unregulated, unsupervised ways and are largely invisible to the historian except in cases where someone called attention to a problem with translation or when indignant employees protested the need for translation services in the first place.

It is clear that even those who endorsed the use of Hebrew understood the need for translators and the difficulties of communicating with the British mandatory state. "We considered it a national duty to address the authorities always and only in our language, in Hebrew," wrote Mordecai Ben-Hillel Ha-Cohen. "There was something demonstrative about this and there's no doubt that it prepared the ground for Hebrew being declared one of the legal languages of Palestine." However, he wrote, "[t]here was always a feeling of lack of understanding. We brought in translators, but it still felt like there was a lack of communication. However in Jerusalem, where there were some activists who knew the British language, there were better relations."⁴⁸ The use of English by Zionist organizations continued for this fundamental reason.

Citing the unique status of Hebrew, Yishuv institutions regularly discriminated against languages other than Hebrew in correspondence but nonetheless selectively used English under certain circumstances. The Tel Aviv municipal archives have folders full of non-Hebrew letters returned to their senders. While the typical response (in Hebrew) was brief – "please write to us in our official language, Hebrew" – other responses were more impatient, suggesting that no one would imagine writing a letter to a European municipality in anything other than the national language and that Tel Aviv should be no different. In 1940, the pro-Hebrew organization the Central Council for the Enforcement of Hebrew devised another means to convince Jewish institutions and individuals to write only in Hebrew; noting that many were not insisting on receiving correspondence in Hebrew, they gave them pro-Hebrew stickers to attach to their correspondence: "We respond only in Hebrew and only to letters written in Hebrew."⁴⁹

But the principle of Hebrew exclusivity was not evenly applied; evidence of exceptions lends insight into the impossibility, or at least the difficulty, of enforcing a fully Hebrew bureaucratic policy. Jewish immigrant languages – especially German and Yiddish – received continually harsh treatment. English, too, was rejected when the writer seemed not to have sufficient standing. The policy on English-language correspondence was more complicated, however, in cases of British and American businesses and of those who simply had no knowledge of Hebrew. The official position was straightforward; it was stated in a letter to a Jewish engineering company in Palestine expressing shock that "you continue to address us, the highest institution in the Hebrew city of Tel Aviv, in a foreign language. It might interest you in connection with this to know that even non-Jewish companies . . . see it as their duty to address us in our language."⁵⁰ In fact, non-Jewish companies were not at all meticulous in their Hebrew use and the Tel Aviv municipality nearly bent over backwards to accommodate their linguistic infractions. Israel Rokach,

chastised on another instance for his less-than-polite style in responding to a non-Hebrew letter from another constituent, appeared to have a rather more beseeching tone in his correspondence with the Shell Petroleum Company: “Now that the Shell interests in this country are increasing on a large scale . . . we consider it our duty both to you and to ourselves to point out that it is time that you adopt the system of addressing the members of the Jewish community or their representatives in their own language, Hebrew. The expense which this would entail would surely be warranted.”

A letter to the American Prudential Insurance Company, meanwhile, acknowledged that the request for Hebrew might seem untoward: “we would like to draw your attention to one little matter which, trivial though it may appear, is of great importance. It is the question of language.”⁵¹ The tone here was overwhelmingly deferential and respectful and Rokach, though he remained clear about the community’s desires, replied in English – something that would usually have been anathema. The municipality knew that it had to be careful not to be seen as too doctrinaire in its linguistic policy; the economic fortunes of the Yishuv and the city of Tel Aviv depended on maintaining positive relations with suppliers, commercial entities, and governmental offices.

The laws of the Mandate themselves provided a further defense for those who chose to write in English when they did not know Hebrew. A British Jew who was rebuked for writing to the Tel Aviv municipality in English had his attorney respond to the municipality’s claim that English was a “foreign language”: “My client is Mr. J.B. Amzalak who is a British citizen,” wrote the lawyer, “and has every right to use the British Language in this country.”⁵² After receiving a standard letter from the Tel Aviv municipality chastising him for writing a letter in English, Th. D. Schatz responded politely, in English: “May I remind you that there are three official languages in Palestine, which I assume are all known by you. Two of these languages are used on each of your letterheads and therefore I had to take the choice of one in which I can make myself understood.”⁵³

English, moreover, sometimes became a default lingua franca between the institutions of the Yishuv and Jewish immigrants, particularly those from Germany, who did not know Hebrew. Bruno Cohn, a German speaker, replied to a request for Hebrew correspondence saying that his knowledge of the language was not yet good enough to write a letter and thus, “as the English language is as well an official language in Palestine as the Hebrew language, I repeat my letter in English language [all errors *sic*].”⁵⁴ Using English in official correspondence, it seems, was not simply the product of individual initiative. The practice was explicitly sanctioned by the newspaper of the Union of German and Austrian Immigrants: “We repeat our appeal and demand: one who knows Hebrew to a greater or lesser extent must speak *only Hebrew* in public; otherwise, he may use the English language.”⁵⁵ English, because of its official status and growing international prestige, became available as a neutral tongue. But in its neutrality lay its threat: English had the capacity to supplant the linking function of Hebrew, to become the actual shared language of Jews.

At the outset of the Mandate period, few Jews knew English; this lack was felt nearly immediately. Mordecai Ben-Hillel Ha-Cohen wrote that the multiplicity of languages and lack of English knowledge on the part of Jews “did not work to our benefit.”⁵⁶ Activists could be indignant about English, but the demand for it was undeniable, as it held an increasingly important place for that class of Jewish workers who hoped to work in the clerical or bureaucratic sector. Those who wished to progress in this direction would go one of two ways: to a school of commerce, or to one of a range of other private programs offered to adults.

Some clerical staff studied English at one of Palestine’s growing number of commercial schools. Enrollment data indicates that these schools’ student bodies were often made up of mostly average, rather than high achieving, students, looking for training to get a decent job.⁵⁷ It appears that commercial schools did not attract the children of the wealthy or well connected, but middle-income or lower-income students.⁵⁸ Furthermore, a good number of the students at

the Safra School of Commerce in 1933 were new immigrants who were simultaneously enrolled in remedial Hebrew courses.⁵⁹ Finally, these schools were marked by a clear gender imbalance, as an inspector visiting the Safra School in 1942 noted on noticing the disproportionate number of girls amongst its students. “It appears,” he said, “that the girls tend to be the ones who aspire to clerical work and it is they who have the greater chance of realizing their aspirations.”⁶⁰ The predominance of women presumably arose from the demand for female secretaries and typists for office work. Though both male and female Jews reaped the benefits of English in the largely gender-segregated labor market, the propensity of women to seek English language skills may reflect a broader social division between men, understood to be at the heart of Hebrew-language institutions, and women, who – despite pressure to instruct the next generation in Hebrew – were more likely to be seen as preserving immigrant mother tongues and maintaining diasporic ties.⁶¹

While schooling was the most common way for some number of middle-class Jews to enter jobs in the Jewish or British bureaucracy, adults too old for the school system also availed themselves of English-study courses. In 1939, J. S. Bentwich, Chief Inspector for English in the Hebrew schools, received an inquiry from a London bookseller, noting an increased number of orders for books oriented toward English learning for adults and asking whether there were in fact language programs in Palestine teaching English to adult immigrants.⁶² In fact, Bentwich replied, there had indeed been several efforts to teach English to adults – some within the Yishuv itself. The Jewish Agency’s English Committee, in addition to its work developing an English-language curriculum for the Zionist schools, had also set up a committee to teach the language to adults and worked with the British Council to build a central, English library. Official British-Zionist partnerships represented only a small portion of the adult education in English. “The bulk of adult teaching is still done by private teachers, in small groups, and is practically unorganized.”⁶³

This unorganized adult English teaching, because it was carried out in private institutions with no link to the Zionist enterprise, is largely undocumented in the official Zionist archives. Nonetheless, what documents do survive indicate the existence of English courses at institutions called the Golden School of English in Tel Aviv, the Tel Aviv School of English, and Berlitz schools in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv.⁶⁴ English courses were also offered at the Hebrew University and the Workers’ Seminary in Jerusalem, the School of Law and Economics, Tel Aviv, and the Hebrew Technical Institute, Haifa.⁶⁵ An extract from a letter from C.A.F. Dundas to Lord Lloyd in 1941 noted that “[t]he Jaffa Institute [referring to the British Institute in Jaffa] and the Tel Aviv School of English are both making progress. The latter is, I think, rapidly becoming a real force in the life of the town.”⁶⁶

Adults seem to have signed up for these courses out of a vague, usually unrealized desire to improve their economic situation or gain the more intangible benefit of acquiring a connection to the ruling power. The director of the Tel Aviv School of English, corresponding with a woman who had previously expressed interest in the school, wrote encouragingly: “In a time like the present a knowledge of English is essential and may even be the factor that will decide your future.”⁶⁷ Whether or not this statement was true in this woman’s case, there was real demand for English courses. With the opening of a British Institute in Tel Aviv, potential students had a more developed option for English courses and cultural activities. It appears from British Institute statistics from May 1943 that 206 of its 749 students were of Polish origin, while another 145 were of German origin. These are small numbers relative to the total population, but it should be noted that there were waiting lists at the British Institute, an indication that demand for English courses exceeded supply.⁶⁸ Correspondence between one religious Zionist community, Kvutzat Rodges (later Yavneh), and the *Palestine Post*, the English-language newspaper in Palestine, requested that copies of newspapers be sent to serve kibbutz English classes for adults.⁶⁹ Some number of adults,

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the vast majority of whom, we can assume, had little exposure to English before they came to Palestine, were finding that they wanted some knowledge of English, regardless of their general commitment to the Hebrew project.

The British came to power before most Jews had command of Hebrew, let alone spoke it as their mother tongue, but their decision to declare Hebrew an official language of Palestine enshrined it as the mother tongue of the Jewish people. Organizations and individuals could press the British to uphold its language rules, citing linguistic discrimination; these sorts of campaigns are part of the heroic narrative of Hebrew revival. The real front of Mandate-era language wars, however, was internal. Jews attempted to convince other Jews that they needed to make Hebrew dominant in their professional lives, because if they did not, the British might subtly or overtly deny national rights to the Jewish people.

The external impression of Jewish linguistic solidarity could be fairly effective. Because the British did maintain a level of distance, most were aware mainly of activist Jews, and their writings thus tend to support the impression of ideological fervor – including linguistic fervor – in the Zionist camp. In October 1918, soon after the British took military control of Palestine, a young officer wrote to Colonel Huggett in the British Foreign Office commenting that, “if there is one point on which Jews here are fanatical, it is the language. Quiet, law-abiding, elderly citizens are able to go to prison rather than submit to a set-back of the Hebrew language.”⁷⁰ As the British military judge Horace Samuel wrote, picking up both the intensity and secularism of the pro-Hebrew movement: “The Hebrew language has not merely become a fetish, but has actually superseded Jehovah himself as an object of worship in the more advanced circles.”⁷¹ Jewish activists would by no means have wished to correct this perception. Maintaining an impression of Jewish devotion to Hebrew was an important part of the Zionist demand for rights, both linguistic and more broadly national.

Meanwhile, however, a different sort of story was unfolding. Over the course of the Mandate, the expansion of the bureaucratic apparatuses of the British mandatory state and the Yishuv opened up employment opportunities for those with the requisite language skills. In parallel, more and more organizations were founded to promote English learning. Attraction to English could be portrayed as the result of a stealth plot by the British – one writer suspected that “the rulers of the country, based on the principle of ‘divide and conquer,’ aspire to exploit the [linguistic] anarchy in order to impose English on the Yishuv” and accused Hebrew officers of not standing up to the British. The same writer, however, suggested later in his article that the fault might in fact lie internally: “A nation like ours needs to learn the healthy and independent secret of survival [*sod ha-kiyum*] from other nations. Look at England, whose language circles the whole world.”⁷²

In fact, the appeal of English, though it was conditioned by a particular bureaucratic configuration, transcended the walls of translation offices or clerical bureaus. Though some lawyers used English only occasionally, others used the language with impunity and even went so far as to impersonate the British. “They travelled to England, joined the English bar and returned as barristers with a wig on their head, since this was the outward mark of difference between . . . ‘native’ and [British] lawyers.”⁷³ A 1944 article by P. Azai (Pinhas Elad) in the newspaper *Haaretz* captures the complex dynamics of jealousy, mimicry, and interest wrapped up in the English language toward the end of the Mandate. English books had, according to the article, “made a lightning conquest of the display windows of the fancy stores”: the 20 bookstores selling foreign books before the war had mushroomed into 180 stores by 1944, 50 in Tel Aviv alone. Whereas before the war, consumers of English books were mainly “clerks and intellectuals,” those filling the roles discussed earlier in this chapter; during and after the war, “the chief purchaser is the public and, as is clear, the Jewish public.”⁷⁴ It was ironic, thought Azai, that the market would be

overrun by English books and newspapers “at an hour when every voice is talking about revival, about an independent Hebrew state.” Azai explained the incongruity of excessive English use, saying that the Yishuv had been overtaken by “a Levantine desire for cheap spiritual absorption into the ruling nation,” that is, a typically Eastern tendency to mix East and West in an inauthentic, culturally inferior way. This characterization, however, is historically inaccurate. The Yishuv was not swallowed by the great maw of British cultural imperialism – the Mandate system did not have that power. Rather, the selective use of English arose from both concrete material pressures and more diffuse global trends. The power of the English book was not only in its contents, banal or subversive as they were, but rather in the semiotic power of the English language as a symbol.

Though the language of power was in other respects tucked away in offices, out of sight and out of mind for the majority of the Yishuv, the language was by no means neutral. Over the course of 30 years of rule, English had emerged not only as the language of administration, but an arbiter of social power more broadly. It was the linguistic gateway toward individual and collective success, even within a society deeply committed to the principle of Hebrew exclusivity. This tension would persist through 1948 and beyond.

Notes

- 1 See for example Natan Efrati, *Mi-leshon yehidim li-leshon umah* (Jerusalem: Hebrew Language Academy, 2004); Joshua Blau, ed., *Ha-lashon ha-‘Ivrit be-hitpathutah uve-hithadeshutah* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy of Sciences, 1996). For an overview of scholarship on Hebrew’s rise to dominance, see Moshe Nahir, “Micro Language Planning and the Revival of Hebrew: A Schematic Framework,” *Language in Society* 27:3 (1998): 335–357. See also Raphael Nir, “Ma’amadah shel ha-lashon ha-‘Ivrit be-tahalikh ha-tehiyah ha-le’umit,” in *Toledot ha-yishuv ha-Yehudi be-Eretz Yisra’el me-az ha-‘aliyah ha-rishonah*, eds. Moshe Lissak and Zohar Shavit (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1998), 31–39.
- 2 See, for example, The Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1908), 293–298.
- 3 Efrati, *Mi-Leshon yehidim le-leshon umah*; Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Shlomo Karmi, *‘Am Ehad ve-safah ahat: tehiyah ha-lashon bi-re’iyah ben-tehumit: korot u-mekorot* (Tel Aviv: Israel Ministry of Defense, 1997).
- 4 Theodor Herzl, *The Jewish State* (Mineola: Dover, 1988), 146.
- 5 See my book, *Babel in Zion: Jews, Nationalism, and Language Diversity in Palestine, 1920–1948* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015)
- 6 The language negotiations of colonial servants are explored in, inter alia: Martin Klein, “African Participation in Colonial Rule,” in *Intermediaries, Interpreters, and Clerks: African Employees in the Making of Colonial Africa*, eds. Benjamin N. Lawrance, Emily Lynn Osborn, and Richard L. Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 273–285; Moradewun Adejunmobi, *Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-Native Languages in West Africa* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2004).
- 7 Zohar Shavit, “Tel Aviv Language Police,” in *Tel Aviv: The First Century*, eds. Maoz Azaryahu and S. Ilan Troen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 203.
- 8 Hayim Arlosoroff, “Ha-pekidut ha-Britit veba-bayit ha-le’umi [1928],” in *Kitve Hayim Arlosoroff*, 2nd ed., ed. Jacob Steinberg (Tel Aviv: A.J. Stybel, 1934), vol. 1: Homah shel zekhukhit, 80.
- 9 See, for example, Mudhakirat Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwazah, 1305 H-1404 H/1887 M-1984 M: *Sijill hafil bi-masirat al-harazah al-‘arabiyah wa-al-qadiyah al-Filastiniyah khilala qarn min al-zaman* (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993), vol. 1, 520.
- 10 Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 20.
- 11 Mordecai Ben-Hillel Ha-Cohen, “Eretz Yisra’el tahat shilton ha-tzava ha-Briti,” *Ha-Shiloah* 41 (1923–1924): 49.
- 12 Ari Joshua Sherman, *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine 1918–1948* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997).
- 13 Abbady’s first chapter is entitled “The Spiritual Distance.” It considers negative portrayals of Jewish people in English literature and a lack of British understanding of Jews’ desire for revival in their homeland.

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- 14 See Edward Ullendorff, "Hebrew in Mandatary [*sic*] Palestine" in *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda*, ed. William Horbury (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 302; Bernard Spolsky and Elana Shohamy, *The Languages of Israel: Policy, Ideology, and Practice* (Tonawanda: Multilingual Matters, 1999), 158–159.
- 15 Poston cited in Sherman, *Mandate Days*, 60.
- 16 Arlosoroff, "Ha-pekidut ha-Britit veba-bayit ha-le'umi [1928]," 74.
- 17 Bezalel Yaffé to Jaffa District Governor (English and Hebrew), 6 June 1923. CZA (Central Zionist Archives) S25/6311; Frederick Kisch to Chief Secretary, Government House, Jerusalem, 18 December 1923. CZA S25/6311; M[ordecai] Eliash, Histadrut 'orkhe ha-din ha-Yehudiyim be-Eretz Yisra'el, Protocol, Session A, 8 April 1928, 10; Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Ha-zilzul ba-lashon ha-'Ivrit u-Va'ad ha-lashon," Adar B, 1929, in *Devarim she-be-'al peh* (Tel Aviv: Devir), 132; Ariav, to Max Nurock, 8 October 1929. CZA S30/2040; Y. Ha-Timhoni, "Ha-'Ivrit ha-rishmit shel ha-'iton ha-rishmi," *Be'ayot lashon ve-tarbut: leket devarim shene'emnu ve-nikhtevu be-hodshe Adar Bet-Nisan 1946*, Jewish National Council Culture Department, CZA DD1/3250; Shmuel Yeivin, "Report on the Hebrew Section of the Central Translation Bureau for the year July 1944–June 1945." ISA (Israel State Archives) M 5078/120-9-4-9. For other correspondence around language infractions, see CZA S30/2039; CZA S25/6733; CZA S30/2041; CZA S6/4491; CZA S30/2042.
- 18 A. Argov, "Al hilufe pekidim," *Pinkas* 3 (October 1935): 24. In David De Vries, "National Construction of Occupational Identity: Jewish Clerks in British-Ruled Palestine," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39:2 (April 1997): 387.
- 19 Yaakov Re'uvani, "Ha-markiv ha-Yehudi be-manganon memshelet ha-mandat: hebetim kalkaliyim u-mediniyim," *Medinah, mimshal ve-yehasim benle'umiyim* 31 (1990): 48. Isaac Abbady, *Benenu le-ven ha-Anglim: nisayon le-nituah ma'arekhet ha-yehasim she-ben Anglim le-Yehudim u-ven Yehudim le-Anglim* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1947), 82–91.
- 20 Abbady, *Benenu le-ven ha-Anglim*, 89.
- 21 These numbers appear to include clerks in both Jewish and British settings; we can assume, though, that the numbers were much higher in Jewish institutions. Re'uvani, "Ha-markiv ha-yehudi be-manganon memshelet ha-mandat," 43.
- 22 "Extracts from Cyprus General Orders." ISA P 657/1; Language Examinations, 1936. TNA (The British National Archives) CO 733/320/13; Letter from Secretary, Council of Legal Studies, to seven recipients, 3 December 1936. ISA M 1288/5; "Law School English Test" (probably 1936), ISA M 1288/5.
- 23 "Regulations for the Payment of Language Allowances, 1926," ISA, M 334/4; Letter from C.F. Strickland to Chief Secretary, 7 March 1933. ISA M 125/12.
- 24 Sir Arthur Wauchope to Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 10 February 1934. Despatch No. 130, Reference No. 0/101/31. TNA CO 733/254/2.
- 25 Extract from Report of Royal Commission, n.d. [1937]. TNA CO 733/320/13.
- 26 George Antonius, "The Machinery of Government in Palestine," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 164 (November 1932): 60–61.
- 27 Ronald Storrs, *The Memoirs of Sir Ronald Storrs* (New York: Putnam, 1937), 374.
- 28 "Annex II, Correspondence, Circulars, etc. Translated for the Secretariat July 1944–June 1945"; "Annex II Correspondence, Circulars, etc. Translated for the Secretariat July 1945–June 1946." ISA M 5078/120-9-4-9.
- 29 Ibid.; Shmuel Yeivin, "Report on the Hebrew Section of the Central Translation Bureau for the year July 1944–June 1945," ISA M 5078/120-9-4-9; "Second Annual Report on the Hebrew Section of the Central Translation Bureau, July 1945–June 1946," 7 August 1946, ISA M 5078/120/9-4-9.
- 30 "Third Annual Report on the Hebrew Section of the Central Translation Bureau, July 1946–June 1947, 14 September 1947." ISA M 5078/120-9-4-9.
- 31 W. J. Farrell, "Memorandum on 'Translators,'" Department of Education, 16 October 1945. ISA M 5081/10.
- 32 H. Modlinger to Chief Interpreter, 26 November 1946. ISA M 4892/10.
- 33 Eliyahu Salamah to S. Yeivin, 29 September 1946. ISA M 4892/10.
- 34 Yehudah Even-Shemuel (Kaufmann), director of the Culture Department, Jewish National Council, to the Central Committee of the Union of Industrial Owners/Hitahadut ba'ale ha-ta'asiyah, 2 November 1942. CZA S25/6741.
- 35 Rigbi, "Letter to the Editor," *Palestine Post* 29 November 1945, 4. CZA S25/6741.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Max Nurock interview (by Bernard Wasserstein), 6 July 1970. OHD (Oral History Division, Hebrew University) 1(82) 1–2.
- 38 PMO Jaffa District to Dizengoff (English), 20 January 1925. TAMA (Tel Aviv Municipal Archive) 3/1B.

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- 39 District Governor, Negev District, to the President of the Township of Tel Aviv (English), 19 May 1927. TAMA 4/140A.
- 40 Crosbie, Southern District Commissioner, Jaffa, 10 July 1927. TAMA 4/140A.
- 41 Letter from Jewish National Council (sender unclear) to Chief Secretary, Palestine Government, Jerusalem (Hebrew), 16 January 1929. CZA J1/70/2.
- 42 "Report on the Haifa Chamber of Commerce," 21 November 1919. CZA L3/20/1/.
- 43 Ezra David to Tel Aviv municipality, 14 April 1935. TAMA 4/140B.
- 44 Shlomo Aharoni to Meir Dizengoff, 18 January 1929. TAMA 3702A.
- 45 Simon Taberski to Tel Aviv municipality, 19 March 1930. TAMA 3702A.
- 46 To Vice Mayor, Tel Aviv municipality, 30 December 1930. TAMA 3702A.
- 47 Y. S. Sharafi to Mayor, Tel Aviv municipality, 26 January 1930. TAMA 3702A.
- 48 Ha-Cohen, "Eretz Yisra'el tahat shilton ha-tzava ha-Briti," 50.
- 49 "Shipur ha-lashon vеха-ketav." Education Archive 9.8/4 Folder 010. Also found in the archives of the Tel Aviv municipality at the Central Zionist archives, which indicates that they were distributed widely.
- 50 Letter from the Tel Aviv municipality to Palestine Engineering Company, October 1935. TAMA 4/140B.
- 51 Letter to the Shell Petroleum Company and the Prudential Insurance Company, 9 November 1934 (English). TAMA 4/140A.
- 52 Letter from S. O. Richardson, Solicitor to the District Commissioner, Southern District, Government Offices, Jaffa, 22 June 1927. TAMA 4/140A.
- 53 Th. D. Schatz to Mr Nedivi, 9 June 1940. TAMA 4/141B.
- 54 Dr Bruno Cohn to the Tel Aviv municipality, 30 January 1934. TAMA 4/140A; see also Max Tuchner to the Va'ad Ha-Kehilah, Haifa, 5 January 1943. HMA, Folder 5453.
- 55 *Mitteilungsblatt der Hitachduth Olej Germania we olej Austria*, 4:25, 21 June 1940, 3. TAMA 4/141B.
- 56 Ha-Cohen, "Eretz Yisra'el tahat shilton ha-tzava ha-Briti," 50.
- 57 Eliezer Rieger, Dokh 'al bikur be-vet ha-sefer ha-tikhoni le-mis'har, Tel Aviv, 9–11 Feb 1937. CZA J17/429.
- 58 These conclusions are borne out in alumni testimonials. Letter from Carmella Zuckerman, *Tzeror mikhtavim* (Tel Aviv: Safra School of Commerce, 1945), 21. Statement from Shulamit Yerushavski, *ibid.*, 28.
- 59 *Bet sefer Safra: likrat shenat ha-limudim 1933–4* (Tel Aviv: Safra School of Commerce, 1933), 24–25.
- 60 Y. Azaryahu, "Do'kh mi-bikuri be-vet ha-sefer la-mis'har 'Safra' be-Tel Aviv" based on visit from 2 Jan 1942. CZA J17/6576.
- 61 On the gendered nature of Hebrew language use and Yiddish-language maintenance, see Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Political of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)
- 62 Letter from Mr Allan Drinkwater, Longmans Green and Co. to J. S. Bentwich, Education Department, Jerusalem, Palestine, 20 February 1939. CZA J17/6645.
- 63 Letter from J. S. Bentwich to Mr Allan Drinkwater, Longmans Green and Co, 7 March 1939. CZA J17/6645.
- 64 On the Berlitz Schools in Palestine, see ISA M 170/36.
- 65 Letter from J. S. Bentwich to Mr Allan Drinkwater, Longmans Green and Co., 7 March 1939. CZA J17/6645.
- 66 Extract from a letter from C.A.F Dundas, Esq., Istanbul to Lord Lloyd, 25 January 1941. TNA BW 47/1.
- 67 Letter from Director, The Tel Aviv School of English, to Miss Yellin [n.d.] 1941? CZA A580/22.
- 68 "Statistics of Students, May/June/July/November 1943," The British Institute, Tel Aviv. TNA BW 47/10.
- 69 Correspondence from Kvutzat Rodges (later Yavneh), a religious Zionist community, and the Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad, En Harod, June–August 1937. CZA S24/91.
- 70 New Liaison Officer to the Zionist Commission, Jaffa, to the British Foreign Office, 13 October 1918. CZA L4/25.
- 71 Horace Barnett Samuel, *Unholy Memories of the Holy Land* (London: L. and Virginia Woolf, 1930), 20.
- 72 G. Sh. "Andralamusiyah Ieshonit," *Ha-Mashkif* 25 September 1945.
- 73 Assaf Likhovski, *Law and Identity in Mandate Palestine, Studies in Legal History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 154.
- 74 Pinhas Elad (penname P. Azai), "Ha-sefer ha-Angli kavash et ha-shuk ha-Eretz Yisre'eli," *Haaretz* 31 October 1944. CZA S71/2154.