Israel: An Analysis of Language

Without any particular topic in mind, I let myself enjoy the first day or two in Israel. As I dozed in and out of sleep on the trip to Ramat Rachel and the bus ride to Central Jerusalem, I was somewhat awestruck at a combination of the scenery and my own stupidity. How could I have forgotten the consciously different street signs of Israel? How could I forget my fellow classmates graduate research project that analyzes the presence of three different languages, with three different pronunciations, used to describe the exact same locations? The signs represent the cultural struggle of coexistence so accurately, that I felt without a doubt, the language of this complex country was a perfect topic to analyze. What I didn’t expect was how far reaching the effects of language were in the culture, education, politics, and identity of this country.

So naturally, my observations began with the road signs of Israel. In the majority of Israel, the street signs read in three different languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and English. The order, however, depends primarily on the location. On main highways and predominantly Jewish areas, the order of languages on official government signs is Hebrew first, Arabic Second, and English last. However, when we walked to the Lions Gate to the Old City through East Jerusalem, the order of the first two languages switched. The same order existed in Palestinian areas of the Wadi Ara. On a literacy level of analysis, the order of language based on the majority of the population makes perfect sense. However, when factoring in pride, the order of language begins to get a bit hazy. Let’s take a look at the signs of stores and privately owned businesses. In East Jerusalem, I noticed some stores with English words above the Hebrew words. Other businesses had no Hebrew words at all. Is this just advertising strategy? Or rather a statement? To be honest,
I don’t know. It could be just the way it is. In the Jewish quarter, I saw similar signs, with little to no Arabic. When I asked a Jewish grocery store owner why he had no Arabic in his store, he said it was because he had no Arab customers. When I asked why he thought he had no Arab customers, he looked at me like I was a stupid tourist and if his answer was the most obvious thing in the world: he said, “Because this is the Jewish quarter.” In this sense, the language of store signs is representative of the political borders that define Jerusalem. Outside of Jerusalem, in a jewelry shop close to Jaffa St. and Ben Yehuda St., I asked the storeowner if he had any Arab customers. He said not many but a few. I then asked if any bought from him. He said even fewer, not because of the political situation, but because they think it is too expensive. I then asked what language they communicated in. Again, I was shocked because it turns out they didn’t speak Hebrew or Arabic, but rather English. Therefore, I found out again that it is a bad thing to define any and all examples of something; sure, some store owners, show language discrimination based on the political environment, yet then again, there are others that have a type of shopper based on more innocent qualifications.

Now let’s move past the inanimate objects and get to the people themselves. It is important to analyze the languages of the populations in general. Before I stumble on this dangerous territory, I would like to declare that if there’s one thing I have learned in Israel, it is that generalizing groups and ideals are probably the worst thing anyone could do. Despite my gut feeling to not generalize anything, I feel that with this topic of language, it is necessary to make distinctions between groups in order to understand more. First off, it is a safe bet to say that most Jewish Israelis (if not all) speak Hebrew as their first language. In the same manner, most Arab Israelis (if not all) speak Arabic as their first language. The same is true of Arab Palestinians.
With all due respect, these languages differentiations are not that interesting. What is most interesting is the difference between the languages within these populations.

For secular Jews, Hebrew is spoken the majority of the time with a little bit of English when need be. According to the ministry of education Arabic is in the required curriculum. Yet when talking to secular Jews ages 17-21, I found out that Arabic is merely a distant memory. Many times when I asked about their Arabic education, they paused or said “ehhh” in an attempt to think about their elementary education. Then, when I asked if they knew any Arabic words, they were at an even greater loss. It’s no wonder that none of these teenagers/ young adults had any Arab friends. Yet, when they admitted this, I received many interesting concessions. A 17-year-old boy said, “No I don’t have any Arab friends, but my Dad works with many of them.” A 19-year-old girl on vacation from the Army said, “I know Arabic, but I have friends in the special Arabic division of the IDF.” I began to wonder, why exactly were these kids compelled to explain their lack of Arab friends and Arabic skills to a Jewish American student? Was it due to a sense of guilt? Or was it because I am an outsider? In my opinion, I think the concessions these secular Jews provided me were an attempt to demonstrate the peaceful nature these people want to represent. These Jews are the ones that go in the army, the ones that are in the news, and the ones that are scrutinized for morality issues with considerations to the conflict. Therefore, I think by asking questions that showed flaws in the Jewish representation of tolerance, these people felt compelled to compensate by giving me examples of Jews they know that do have direct contact with the Palestinians.

As language is very representative of cultural norms, it is no surprise that secular Jews differ from Ultra Orthodox Jews in their use of language. Since religious texts indicate that
Hebrew is the holy language of the chosen people, many ultra orthodox Jews choose not to speak Hebrew on days besides the Sabbath. Therefore, interestingly enough, the second language (whether it be English or Yiddish) of many Ultra Orthodox Jews is much stronger than the second language of secular, less religious Jews. Unfortunately, however, Ultra Orthodox education does not provide students with any exposure to Arabic. Yet for some reason that I still can’t grasp, the education budget still supports this style, making it completely unnecessary for Ultra Orthodox Jews to learn anything about the Arab people they are so against. In my opinion, the lack of knowledge about Palestinian culture, represented by a lack of Arabic knowledge, is one of many contributions to the hateful and unreasonably discriminatory actions of the Ultra Orthodox.

In a weird twist of events, the Arab Israelis’ collective knowledge of the second language (Hebrew), is equally if not more competent, than that of the Ultra Orthodox Jews. As Nadia pointed out, there is still plenty of room for improvement. Not every Arab living in the State of Israel speaks Hebrew. In fact, Nadia pointed out that many Arab Israelis have a hard time getting into Israeli’s University because of their lack of Hebrew. However, compared to their Jewish counterparts, the Arab Israeli’s competence of Hebrew is astounding. Most attribute this fact to the Arab Israeli’s identity as a minority group. When discussing this discrepancy with my new friend Ori, a secular Jew from Jerusalem, he said, “They know Hebrew because they work with us.” When I responded with “Doesn’t that mean we should learn Arabic in order to work with them?” he was left at a loss. Obviously, there is a huge double standard. The truth is that even nonscholars, such as bus driver Ghaly, speak fluent Hebrew, while the Jewish bus driver en route
to Ramat Rachel does not speak Arabic. While I believe this is a great attribute to the Arab
community, I don’t understand how the Jewish community cannot make an equal effort.

On the other hand, the Palestinian Arabs knowledge of Hebrew is definitely not like their
Israeli counterparts. Many do not speak fluent Hebrew, only enough to get through the security
checkpoints. A perfect example of this is Naghram. Only this semester did she begin her formal
Hebrew education. Although I understand the lack of Hebrew knowledge for this group of
people, as they are not a part of the State of Israel and they look to other Arabic speaking
countries for guidance, I do believe that without the Hebrew language, there are even more
obstacles to overcome for these people to eventually find peace. As David Grossman points out
in his book, the ability for Arab Israelis to speak Hebrew provides rifts between their families
across the border.

So after defining the previous groups, I finally get to tell you about the most interesting
group of people when it comes to language analysis. These people are in fact the immigrants. For
me, an English speaking Jew, the stories of people who come here to live not knowing any
Hebrew is amazing. I think it takes some major guts. That is why I was so impressed with the
immigration center in Ashdod. I know I kept repeating myself when asking about ulpan, yet I
couldn’t help myself. Even Nadia, a woman with no religious ties, learned Hebrew in 6 months!
Something I naïvely thought was that most Jews who immigrate to Israel are from America. Boy
was I wrong. As I have told you before, I have heard at least 4 different languages on the same
bus ride, and none being English. Therefore, while I was doing research, I realized that the lack
of English for some is not due to one’s intelligence or attention in school, but rather the fact that
English is many people’s third and fourth languages.
An important linguistic aspect of these people is the language uses between the first and second generations. When talking to Ana, an orthodox 16-year-old girl, she was telling how her family moved to Israel from France. While I thought her English was very good, she said that her Hebrew was better, and her French was actually the best. This I could not believe. Then when I asked her about her family, she told me something interesting. She said the best part about the language gap between the generations is that the older generation can still learn from younger generation as much as the younger generation learns from older generation. For example, Ana said that her younger third generation cousins love to spend time with their grandparents because they get to teach them Hebrew. Same thing is true with my Israeli friends back home. They love being able to speak in English to their parents, and learn Hebrew as well.

Here I would like to take the opportunity to examine the culture differences in America and Israel via language. Many times when I was eavesdropping on your phone conversations, I heard you say “Ani yodea.” I believe this sums up the Israeli culture of opinion very well. Most Israelis have something to say about everything, and something very strong at that. Yet here, I found that when I asked difficult questions to English speakers from America, many times, their answers were plagued with watered down opinions and “I don’t know.” For example, the leader of our tour at the Yeshiva Center found it very uncomfortable to answer my questions, and therefore, responded more than once with “I don’t know.” True, I see your point that he is representing a certain organization and therefore, doesn’t want to say anything too political, yet I cannot help but feel that some of his uncertainty comes from his American identity. Another example is Mark Rosenberg. When we asked him questions, I felt that his overall answers were not as strong or convincing as Edith Rosenthal’s. For example, when I asked why he moved to
Israel, he said, “this is the state of the Jewish people, and I like the Mediterranean lifestyle.” For me, adding the second phrase devalued the importance of the first. However, every single Israeli answers the same question with “this is the state of the Jewish people, period.” For me, the latter is more convincing.

Around the end of the first week here, I was getting very frustrated with this topic of language. I felt that I understood the groups of people and the languages they spoke, but I also felt many times during my interviews that people did not understand the implications of my questions. I felt unsatisfied with the straightforward and flat answers I had been receiving. One night after Molly and I had had an hour-long conversation with a teenage orthodox girl in Holy Bagel, we were discussing some of the things we found interesting about the conversation. That’s when Molly told me something I never quite noticed before that completely changed my approach to my topic. She asked me, “Do you ever notice the way Charles and Yap talk?” I of course didn’t and asked what she meant by that. She said, “The thing about Charles and Yap, and many people who take up English as a second language, is that they talk with such eloquence because their diction is so simple.” She continued by telling me how Charles is so much more sincere in his descriptions and expressions because he truly means what he says, instead of the native English speaker’s tendency to use filler and over descriptive words. For example, when I asked Charles about his girlfriend, his response was, “she’s the most beautiful girl in the world to me.” There was no sense of irony in his tone, and there wasn’t the feeling that he was saying that just because he was supposed to. Instead, his comment really was the truth. Therefore, I realized the straightforward and flat opinions I had been receiving from people really weren’t so
uninteresting. Instead, I realized, that by forcing interviews in English, the simple responses were not a representation of these peoples opinions, because I truly believe the opinions I have encountered in Israel are extremely complex, but rather the simple answers were used as a means of expressing these complex opinions in a way that they could be shared with an outsider as myself.

For example, there was a girl named Ana in Holy Bagel. She was a 16-year-old Orthodox Jew. Her story was not that odd, for she lived in a Jewish village 20 minutes outside of Israel, and went to an all girls high school. She hung out in Holy Bagel because that was where her boyfriend worked. Unfortunately, I will probably forget most of the one-hour conversation we had. Yet, I can say without a doubt, there are two things I don’t think I will ever forget about this conversation. First, when I asked her about the Palestinian and Israeli conflict, her response was definitely not the norm. She began by telling a story about her Jewish neighbor whom an Arab shot. However, at the end of her response, she said the following phrase: “I don’t care.” This notion struck me as extremely odd. Later that night, I called my Israeli friend Mike and asked him about this response. Just as I had thought, he had said that it was very strange, for almost every Jew living in the state of Israel has an idea or opinion about the conflict. However, it took meeting Abraham at the Arab Research Center to actually understand what the young girl had meant. When he talked about the sticky situation of the Arab Israeli’s and their potential modes of action, the one that struck me the most was the action of freezing oneself. Abraham had said for some, the way to survive is to not engage in the problem as a whole and therefore freeze yourself in your role in society, because it is just too hard to pick a side. At this description, I realized this is what Ana was describing when she said, “I don’t care.” For her, I think it is too
hard for her to choose between her morality and her fear- morality being her desire to find peace with the Arabs through compromise, and fear representing her desire to silence the Arabs with force. In America, the phrase “I don’t care” represents a lack of interest or desire in a particular matter. As is the entire theme of this class, the complexity of the situation is not something to be taken lightly. Therefore, I don’t think the notion “I don’t care” said by this young girl was meant to hold the connotation that she takes the conflict as a light matter. Rather, this declaration and choice of diction was meant to describe the inability many Israelis feel to proceed further.

The other thing I will not forget about this conversation was the repetition Ana had in describing two different opinions. When I asked her, an Orthodox Jew, how she felt about her neighbor being shot by an Arab, her response was: “It’s not human.” I wish this paper could speak to the weight and eloquence this phrase held because it truly was a comment full of weight. Later, Molly and I talked about our visit to Yad Vashem and what we learned. Interestingly enough, Ana made the following comment about the Holocaust: “It is not human.” Immediately, Molly and I looked at each other with light bulbs going off. I do not know if this girl realized she used the same description for the Nazis and the Arabs. Yet at that moment, it was so clear how language represented culture. In using the exact same description, the fear of the Holocaust reoccurring was extremely obvious. No, I do not think that Ana thought the Palestinians are going to systematically exterminate the Jews. What I do think, however, is that Ana believed the Palestinians to be a people that, like the Nazis, don’t like her based on her religion.

Something I wanted to slightly touch on was the concept of the other and its connectedness to language. I know entire projects are based on the topic of the other, so please
excuse this simple explanation. In this country, I noticed the words “they” and “us” are used a lot. When interviewing high school students on Ben Yehuda, I had a very hard time figuring out whom “they” was referring to. Was it the ultra orthodox? Was it the Arab Israelis? Was it the Arab Palestinians? Was it the members of Hamas? Again, it may just be the simplification of the English language, but in my opinion the use of “they” and “we” is a huge proponent of characterizing “the other.” An interesting observation I had was that Abraham of the Arab Research Institute was very conscious of identifying exactly whom “they” and “we” were referring to. For example, he would say “they, [pause] the Israeli Jews” or “they, [pause] our family in Palestine.” I believe this conscious effort of identifying pronouns is a direct cause of Abraham being a part of the Israeli “other.” If he was a part of the majority, like many of the high school students I interviewed, I do not know if he would be so inclined to identify himself properly.

Finally, my absolutely favorite part of this entire trip was our visit to Gesher a la Wadi. Again, I found that language there was not only a representation of culture, but also a representation of the better future. Let us start with the name of the school. Hassan told us that politically, there was too much controversy involved with calling the school an integrated Jewish and Arab school. Therefore, language, more specifically the label “bilingual,” was used to represent the situation of the school. Although it’s unfortunate the school cannot call itself what it truly is, I believe that like everything here, language is representative of culture and therefore, the meaning of “bilingual” is not lost on anyone. Everyone knows that bilingual means a Jewish Arab school and that is what is important. In my opinion, the school does the best job of using language as a means for tolerance. Earlier in this paper, I mentioned my frustrations with
different groups of Israeli society not working harder on understanding the language of “the other.” In this school however, this is not the case. All kids learn both languages in a systematic, non-biased way, and this allows them to communicate cooperatively, something politicians still have yet to do.

Not only in Israel, but everywhere around the world, language touches every aspect of life. Even in the U.S., language represents the culture of the times (ever heard the phrase “wazzup?”) Therefore, the reason why language analysis of the state of Israel is so interesting is because the culture and the people who live there is so interesting. I have learned so much from this trip, not just about language, but also about people and about myself, that I couldn’t even imagine missing this opportunity. Thanks for everything Yore!