

## Hybridity versus Revivability: The Genesis of the Israeli Language

**Prof Ghil'ad Zuckermann  
(University of Queensland)**

The aim of this lecture is to suggest that due to the ubiquitous phenomenon of multiple causation, the revival of a no-longer spoken language is unlikely without cross-fertilization from the revivalists' mother tongue(s). Thus, one should expect revival efforts to result in a language with a hybrid genetic and typological character. It will be argued that Israeli - a 120 year-old language, somewhat misleadingly a.k.a. 'Modern Hebrew' - is simultaneously Afro-Asiatic (Semitic) and Indo-European (Germanic/Slavonic/Romance): Both Hebrew (an important liturgical and literary language) and Yiddish (the revivalists' mother tongue) act as its 'primary contributors', with numerous other contributors such as Russian and Polish.

Almost all Hebrew revivalists, e.g. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (born Perelman), were native Yiddish-speakers. But they wished to speak Hebrew with Semitic grammar and pronunciation - like Arabs. However, their attempts (1) to deny their (more recent) roots in search of Biblical ancientness, (2) negate diasporism and disown the 'weak, persecuted' exilic Jew, and (3) avoid hybridity (as reflected in Slavonized, Romance/Semitic-influenced, Germanic Yiddish itself, which they despised) failed. Although they have engaged in a campaign for linguistic purity, the emerging Israeli language often mirrors the very components the revivalists sought to erase. Thus, the study of Israeli casts light on the dynamics between language and culture in general, and in particular into the role of language as a source of collective self-perception.

Multiple causation is manifested in the Congruence Principle, according to which if a feature exists in more than one contributing language, it is more likely to persist in the emerging language. This lecture will discuss multiple causation in (1) constituent order, (2) tense system, (3) copula enhancement, (4) calquing, and (5) phono-semantic matching in Israeli. It will suggest that the reality of linguistic genesis is far more complex than a simple family tree system allows. 'Revived' languages are unlikely to have a single parent.

Generally speaking, whereas most forms of Israeli are Semitic, many of its patterns are European. It will be proposed that (1) Whereas Hebrew was synthetic, Israeli - following Yiddish etc. - is much more analytic; (2) Israeli is a *habere* language (cf. Latin *habere* 'to have', taking the direct object), in stark contrast to Hebrew; (3) European languages sometimes dictate the gender of Israeli coinages; (4) The (hidden) productivity and semantics of the allegedly completely Hebrew system of Israeli verb-templates are, in fact, often European; (5) In Hebrew there was a polarity-of-gender agreement between nouns and numerals, e.g. 'éser banót 'ten girls' versus 'asar-á baním 'ten (feminine) boys'. In Israeli there is a simpler - European - system, e.g. éser banót 'ten girls', éser baním 'ten boys'; (6) Yiddish has shaped the semantics of the Israeli verbal system in the case of inchoativity; (7) The Israeli proclitics *be-* 'in', *le-* 'to' and *mi-/me* 'from', as well as the coordinating conjunction *ve-* 'and', are phonologically less dependent than in Hebrew; (8) Word-formation in Israeli abounds with European mechanisms such as portmanteau blending.

Israeli possesses distinctive socio-historical characteristics such as the lack of a continuous chain of native speakers from spoken Hebrew to Israeli, the non-Semitic mother tongues spoken by the revivalists, and the European impact on literary Hebrew. Consequently, it presents the linguist with a unique laboratory in which to examine a wider set of theoretical problems concerning language genesis and hybridity, social issues like language vis-à-vis politics, and practical matters, e.g. whether it is possible to revive a no-longer spoken language. The multisourced nature of Israeli and the role of the Congruence Principle in its genesis have implications for historical linguistics, language planning and the study of language, culture and identity.

**Further reading:**

[http://www.zuckermann.org/pdf/Hybridity\\_versus\\_Revivability.pdf](http://www.zuckermann.org/pdf/Hybridity_versus_Revivability.pdf)

<http://www.zuckermann.org/pdf/new-vision.pdf>

**ABOUT THE SPEAKER:**

Ghil'ad ZUCKERMANN, D.Phil. (Oxford), M.A. (Tel Aviv) (summa cum laude), is Associate Professor and Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Queensland, Australia. He has been Gulbenkian Research Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, has taught in Singapore, Israel, England and USA; and has held research posts in Bellagio (Italy), Austin (Texas), Melbourne and Tokyo. His publications - in English, Israeli, Italian, Yiddish, Spanish, German, Russian and Chinese - include the books *Language Contact and Lexical Enrichment in Israeli Hebrew* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and *Israelit Safa Yafa* (Israeli, a Beautiful Language, Am Oved, 2008). He is currently working on two further books: (1) *Language Genesis and Multiple Causation*, and (2) *Language, Religion and Identity*. His website is <http://www.zuckermann.org>