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# Language Usage among Palestinian and Jewish English-Language Learners in Israel: Some Considerations for Multicultural Contexts

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## Abstract

This article addresses some of the repercussions of language usage among Palestinian and Jewish English-language learners—in particular, Hebrew-language usage, Arabic-language usage, and English-language usage. The research is based on findings from a year-long qualitative study involving ninth-grade English-language learners in three secular, State-run schools in Jerusalem; one is defined as a monolingual majority school (Hebrew-English), the second is defined as a monolingual minority school (Arabic-English), and the third is defined as an integrated, bilingual minority-majority school (Arabic-Hebrew-English). Issues of empowerment and disempowerment are examined at length in an attempt to critically examine presuppositions with regard to both local language use and the use of English in the Israeli context.

**Key words: Language Usage, Power, Bilingualism, Arabic, Hebrew, English**

## Introduction

In his article in the New York Times, "What if we occupied language?" H. Samy Alim warns us "to be ever-mindful about how language both empowers and oppresses, unifies and isolates" (2011). Indeed, language is not only a major marker of status and of symbolic power, but it also distinguishes one social group from another (Crystal, 2003; Wenger, 1998). In particular, in multilingual and multicultural contexts, the use of one language over another constitutes more than a mere linguistic utterance. To varying degrees, the use of a particular language facilitates the construction of certain identity, status, and social categorizations (Fishman, 1999). In describing the relationship between cultural/ethnic identity and language, Toribio (2006) suggests that language is a key signifier of group membership, a cue for ethnic categorization, and a means of in-group cohesion (p. 138). Moreover, language usage—be it in local or international contexts, has multiple linguistic as well as economic and cultural repercussions.

In the broadest sense, this article deals with some of the implications of language usage among Palestinian and Jewish English-language learners in Israel. More specifically, it presents findings related to Hebrew-, Arabic-, and English-language usage that emerged out of a year-long study involving ninth-grade English-language learners in three secular State-run schools in Jerusalem; one is defined as a monolingual majority school (Hebrew-English), the second is defined as a monolingual minority school (Arabic-English), and the third is defined as an

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integrated, bilingual minority-majority school (Arabic-Hebrew-English). All three schools are located in Jerusalem and function partially or fully under the auspices of the Israeli Ministry of Education.

In this paper, I first consider language usage in each of the research settings. I then present a comparative analysis of a portion of the findings. This synthesis of conclusions provides a platform for examining similarities and differences that emerged between the schools and across linguistic and ethnic lines. Expressions of empowerment and disempowerment emerged out of sometimes unlikely circumstances—thereby challenging presuppositions regarding both local language use and the use of English in the Israeli context.

## Methodology

The research methods that informed this study are anchored in qualitative and ethnographic traditions. In this section, I elaborate on the population under study, the data collection instruments, and the collection and analysis of the data.

### Study Participants

The students who participated in this inquiry were all ninth-grade students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). I chose to focus on students in the ninth grade because they are expected to have acquired a moderate level of proficiency in English according to the standards set by the Israeli Ministry of Education. At the same time, however, they are not yet overloaded with the curricular materials related to the Bagrut (Israel's matriculation exams). Table (1) delineates demographic and linguistic information concerning participants from all three schools:

**Table 1. Study Participants**

| School | Class Size | Students who Participated in the Study (N) | Age | Gender | | Student Identified Religion | Student Identified L1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | M | M | F | | |
| Monolingual Majority School (Hebrew-English) | 35 | 25 | 14-15 | 13 | 12 | Jewish (25) | Hebrew (23)<br>Spanish (1)<br>German (1) |
| Monolingual Minority School (Arabic-English) | 42 | 21 | 14-15 | 9 | 12 | Christian (3)<br>Muslim (18) | Arabic (21) |
| Bilingual Minority-Majority School (Arabic-Hebrew-English) | 18 | 14 | 14-15 | 5 | 9 | Jewish (4)<br>Christian (4)<br>Muslim (6)<br>Russian (1) | Hebrew (3)<br>Arabic (8)<br>English (2)<br>Russian (1) |

## Data Collection & Analysis

This study involved the use of three qualitative research techniques, including (1) weekly preliminary classroom observations, (2) in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews, and (3) focus group activities. Table 2 outlines the principal methods of data collection and the distribution of procedures in each school setting.

**Table 2.** Data Collection Breakdown

| School | Interviews | Focus Groups |
|---|---|---|
| Monolingual Majority School (Hebrew-English) | 10 | 4 |
| Monolingual Minority School (Arabic-English) | 12 | 3 |
| Bilingual Minority-Majority School (Arabic-Hebrew-English) | 13 | 5 |
| Total | 35 | 12 |

Rationale Underlying the Data Collection Instruments Employed in the Study

I opted to utilize preliminary observations, qualitative interviews, and focus group sessions in part because of my intention to conduct what Fairclough (2001) defines as a "critical language study" (CLS). This approach entails the critical analysis of discourse samples with themes and coding subsequently being drawn inductively from the data. As Fairclough (2001) further elaborates, "*critical* is used in the special sense of aiming to show up connections which may be hidden from people—such as the connections between language, power and ideology" (p. 5). These connections and themes of saliency cannot be determined or imposed upon the study in advance. Rather, they must be constructed and co-constructed as the empirical work proceeds (Punch, 1998). A CLS approach to language study also constantly bears in mind the immediate and broader context of the study. As such, my analysis of the collected data strove to take into account individual discourse alongside the extensive historical, political, socio-cultural, and economic factors at play.

The data for the study were collected over the course of one academic school year. Initial contact with the principals and teachers commenced during the previous school year, and permissions and bureaucratic procedures vis-à-vis the Israeli Ministry of Education were arranged prior to the beginning of the school year. During the initial stages of the research, I conducted preliminary classroom observations in all three schools. I then proceeded with the individual, semi-structured interviews and the focus group sessions. Whenever possible, I interviewed the students in English. However, depending on the students' proficiency in English and their willingness to converse in English, I also made use of the students' L1 (first language) and encouraged them to proceed in whichever language they preferred. In the monolingual-minority school, I employed an L1 Arabic speaker to assist me with the interviews and focus

groups. While I have studied and am familiar with basic colloquial Palestinian Arabic, my language skills were not proficient enough to conduct the research unassisted.

All collected discourse was recorded using a digital voice recorder. Additionally, the focus group activities were videotaped and digitally recorded. The discourse was then partially or fully transcribed, analyzed, and coded according to qualitative and ethnographic principles (Tracy, 2001).

Despite the scope of methodologies employed for this study and my use of methodological triangulation (preliminary observations, interviews, and focus group sessions), there are a number of limitations I wish to mention with respect to both the study population and the employed methodologies.

Regarding the study population, the discourse collected represents a specific subset of Israeli society that may or may not be applicable to rest of the country. Qualitative research in general aims to describe the experiences of particular communities or sub-communities rather than quantify their experiences or generalize them to other populations (for further discussion, see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Nevertheless, within the data collected, it is important to emphasize that all study participants reside in Jerusalem—a fact that uniquely colors their perspectives and experiences to varying degrees. This may be particularly true for the L1 Arabic speakers, who have been part of distinct, outstanding historical/contextual processes not experienced by Palestinian Israelis residing in other parts of the country.

With respect to the participants from the bilingual minority-majority school, it is necessary to acknowledge that their representation was less than that of the participants from the monolingual schools. This was especially true for the number of L1 Hebrew speakers and Jewish participants. This stems from the fact that class size in the minority-majority school was generally smaller than in the other schools, as well as from the fact that the Jewish students tended to leave the school in the sixth or seventh grade, and consequently their representation in the higher grades was proportionally less. While these factors do not affect the reliability of the collected data, they do affect the accessibility, breadth, and diversity of available discourse.

As concerns the limitations of the employed methodologies, there are two outstanding factors that I wish to address in particular. The first pertains to my decision to use English as the medium for the interviews and focus groups. Although the students were given the option to use their L1, most of them seemed to view the interviews and focus groups as extensions of their English classes and opted to speak English. While they exhibited a wide range of proficiency levels, for some participants, the decision to conduct the research in English affected their ability to express themselves fully. If and when additional research is conducted, it would be worthwhile reconsidering the advantages and disadvantages of English versus local language use.

The second limitation I would like to mention pertains to my levels of language proficiency and the use of a translator for interviews and focus groups involving L1 Arabic speakers. At times, the translator took the liberty to rephrase a question or answer or to inject additional

comments. This additional voice and perspective undoubtedly played a role in the conversation dynamic and the manner in which the interviews and focus groups unfolded. To a degree, I dealt with this limitation by subsequently employing a different Arabic speaker to back-translate and re-translate excerpts of the discourse. Few discrepancies emerged between the on-sight translator's translation and the second translator's translation.

## Results

As was mentioned in the introduction, this article addresses language usage among three linguistically diverse populations: (1) monolingual majority students (Hebrew-English), (2) monolingual minority students (Arabic-English) and (3) bilingual minority-majority students (Arabic-Hebrew-English). I address each of the researched groups separately and then compare and contrast the findings. This paper seeks to shed light on and deconstruct some of the unforeseen sociolinguistic consequences associated with language usage in multicultural contexts.

### Language Usage: Monolingual Majority Students

Language usage among the monolingual majority students reflected a range of sociolinguistic consequences pertaining to Hebrew, Arabic, and English. While those participants functioned primarily in Hebrew-dominant contexts, student discourse indicated that both Arabic and English were also a part of participants' linguistic repertoire in passive as well as active ways.

With respect to Hebrew, the participants said that this was first and foremost their L1. They used Hebrew in their day-to-day lives and as a language of wider communication (LWC) in the local arena. They identified Hebrew as the primary language for routine activities such as going to the mall, calling a friend on the phone, or communicating with people. In addition to Hebrew being their means of daily communication, they identified Hebrew as "*their own language*", and usage of the language translated to a personal identification and commitment to the language.

The student discourse also suggested that participants perceived Hebrew-language usage as demarcating communal or national identification. They argued that language unifies a country and symbolizes national and cultural identity. According to the students, every nation has, and should make use of, its own language; for people living in Israel, that language is Hebrew. Knowledge and use of Hebrew emerged as a medium through which to convey national allegiances.

With respect to Arabic usage, the student discourse was less straightforward. The students said that they functioned in Hebrew-speaking contexts, and their discourse clearly showed that they ultimately viewed Hebrew as the most important language in Israel. They also maintained that their encounters with Arabic and Arabic speakers were minimal. When interactions did occur, participants said that they reverted to Hebrew because Arabic speakers, for the most part, know Hebrew well. Participants who knew or studied Arabic claimed that they perceived the

language to be esoteric and difficult, and that they did not have many opportunities to use it. It is worthwhile mentioning that this lack of usage was not correlated with resentment or prejudice against Arabic. The students were simply very frank about the fact that their acquisition of Arabic was limited, while Palestinian Israelis' mastery of Hebrew was excellent. Therefore, the obvious language of communication was Hebrew.

On the one hand, the students advocated the use of Hebrew in most circumstances; on the other, they acknowledged that Arabic is present and used on various levels in many different arenas in Israel. They valued the language and advocated its use by Jewish Israelis.

Some monolingual majority students also linked the knowledge and use of Arabic to coexistence, respect, and "shalom" [peace]. Students suggested that in order to be fair and balanced, Jews need to speak Arabic in the same way that Palestinians speak Hebrew. While this perspective was not articulated by all of the participants, there were several students who said that knowledge and use of Arabic was imperative for peace and reconciliation between Jews and Palestinians. Ironically, as will be discussed in the section addressing monolingual minority students, Arabic speakers ascribed little or no significance to Jews using Arabic, whereas Hebrew speakers identified Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism as a critical component of coexistence.

With respect to English-language usage, the students described the numerous opportunities they had for using English. They encountered the language in local, international, and technological arenas. The discourse showed that the students primarily used English in what Kachru (1992) refers to as "the expanding circle". In other words, they employed varieties of English in effectively EFL contexts in order to communicate with speakers of other languages. Furthermore, they indicated that in the local context, they sometimes needed to revert to English-language usage. In particular, they referred to situations in which they needed to communicate with people who did not speak Hebrew, such as tourists or visitors from abroad. Finally, students spoke at length about the need to use English in the cyber arena when using technology and Internet applications.

The students expressed a real and palpable need to use English in a variety of contexts and settings. Moreover, the use of the language was identified with power, prestige, and success. Nevertheless, unlike Hebrew and Arabic, English was regarded as an outside entity, separate and different from the local languages. Students did not award the same emotional/ethnic value to English usage that they did to Hebrew, and to a degree, Arabic. Although they desired proficiency in English, they were not willing to relinquish national allegiances which, among other symbols, were exemplified through Hebrew- and Arabic-language usage.

## Language Usage: Monolingual Minority Students

Language usage for monolingual minority students reflected ongoing negotiations between L1 maintenance, local linguistic demands, and global linguistic needs. The monolingual minority participants indicated that Arabic was their L1. They used the language primarily

in their home and school environments. However, in the local public arena, Hebrew was the predominant language, while in the global and cyber arenas, English was the predominant language. More so than their L1 Hebrew speaking counterparts, L1 Arabic speakers needed to maintain a heightened level of linguistic sensitivity regarding which language to use in each particular context.

The monolingual minority students participating in this study manifested varying degrees of proficiency in Hebrew. Although Hebrew was not utilized in any of the interviews or focus groups, the students intermittently referred to their ability to use Hebrew, and most identified Hebrew as their L2. Even students who identified their L2 as English noted that there were times when they could not revert to using English. They mentioned that when they went places in Israel, the Hebrew speakers with whom they interacted often did not know English, let alone Arabic. Therefore, they had to use Hebrew.

The student discourse concerning Hebrew usage encompassed a wide spectrum of emotions ranging from acceptance to indifference to refutation. Some students expressed resentment at having to use Hebrew all the time. They said that they did not like using Hebrew or learning the language. At the end of the spectrum were students who said they felt "seized" and "occupied" by Hebrew and, whenever possible, they opted to use English. As will be discussed below, students who were highly proficient in English claimed to have a viable alternative to Hebrew—one that was usually sufficient for interactions in the local arena and vital for interactions in the global arena.

While some students indicated a desire to reject and rebel against the local regime, including its manifestations through the use of Hebrew, others identified Hebrew usage as a tool for empowerment. Using Hebrew during interactions that involved Jewish and Palestinian Israelis emerged as a way of demonstrating and maintaining power. Participants were well aware of the fact that most Jewish Israelis do not know Arabic, and therefore fluency in Hebrew was a way for them to maintain the upper hand. Students described this as a "we know your language but you don't know ours" phenomenon.

With respect to Arabic usage, the participants indicated that they used Arabic to communicate with other Arabic speakers and to voice personal emotions. However, in the broader local contexts (i.e., the supermarket, the bank, or the mall) and in interactions involving Jews, they were unequivocal about the fact that they could not and did not use Arabic. The discourse was divided between students who said that they used Hebrew and students who said that they used English. What was highly evident from the collected discourse was that the students did not feel that they could use Arabic.

The discourse showed that the participants not only felt that they *could not* use Arabic, but also that they *should not* use Arabic in encounters involving Jewish Israelis. In fact, some students said they viewed Jewish Israelis using Arabic as something negative and undesirable. Knowledge and use of Arabic by a Jew symbolized further occupation and disempowerment. Moreover, any Jew knowing or wanting to know Arabic was probably learning it for military

purposes or in order to be able to work for Israeli intelligence, and certainly not for peaceful or communicative reasons.

While the use of Arabic was important for students from the monolingual majority school (i.e., the Jewish participants), the students from the monolingual minority school (i.e., the Palestinians) did not indicate a preference for the use of Arabic. Instead, they opted to speak English or Hebrew during encounters involving Jewish Israelis.

With respect to English usage, the monolingual minority students described numerous circumstances in which English usage was warranted. The students mentioned their need to use English in the international, local, and cyber spheres. Many of them had traveled outside of the region, and they furnished examples of times when they needed English or could imagine themselves hypothetically needing English. That said, unlike the students from the monolingual majority school, the monolingual minority students did not rely solely on English when traveling outside of Israel. In fact, several students explained that when they traveled to countries in the region such as Egypt or Jordan, they used Arabic. English was used as a LWC only when other linguistic options were not available. Moreover, while the participants did indicate needing to use English internationally, their usage of English was more crucial in the local and cyber arenas.

In the local sphere, the use of English served as both a means of communication and a means of exerting power. For some participants, the use of English was a pragmatic choice because they did not speak Hebrew very well. For others, in a manner similar to Hebrew, English usage served as a means of exerting power. English usage in Arabic-Hebrew interactions became not only a means of leveling the playing field but, in some cases, of giving Palestinian Israelis the upper hand. In this particular context, English usage provided emancipation from occupation. It is worthwhile emphasizing that this "emancipation" came not from a sense that English was a neutral language, but rather from the students' impression that Jewish Israelis do not speak English particularly well—certainly not as well as Palestinian Israelis. As such, English usage provided the Palestinian participants with leverage. It emerged as a way to be "better than the Jews". It also functioned as a tool for circumventing Hebrew and the multiple connotations that can accompany Hebrew usage.

Ultimately, the monolingual minority students considered both Hebrew usage and English usage to be associated with leverage and empowerment. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to suggest that the presence and use of two languages of power (Hebrew and English) constituted empowerment alone. In fact, the participants suggested the existence of a kind of linguistic "tug of war" characterized by a vacillation between their cultural/emotional/ideological commitments on the one hand, and their sought after, often very practical, ambitions on the other. At times, the participants had to compromise their levels of proficiency in their L1 in order to excel at Hebrew and at English. In general, the students indicated an aspiration for trilingualism—the ability to use and navigate among all three languages.

## Language Usage: Bilingual Minority-Majority Students

Bilingual minority-majority students attend an integrated bilingual school characterized by ethnic diversity and constant language interchange among Hebrew, Arabic, and English. This multilingual context—in its own right and as a tool for comparison—sheds light on a wide range of sociolinguistic consequences pertaining to language usage in multicultural contexts.

The integrated bilingual school described in this study is modeled on a strong form of bilingual education called "two-way" or "dual language" programs (for further discussion, see Baker, 2006). Such programs aim to produce students who are bilingual and biliterate in both the majority and the minority languages. In the case of the Israeli context, Arabic and Hebrew are the target languages. To date, despite laudable efforts, the school has not been successful in achieving bilingualism for majority language speakers (i.e., L1 Hebrew speakers), and the lingua franca of the school is primarily Hebrew (Amara, 2005, *in Hebrew*). Outside of the school environment, in particular in the public sphere, the students also encounter a Hebrew-dominant context.

All of the participants talked about using Hebrew in their day-to-day lives. L1 Arabic speakers further explained that for the most part they used Hebrew in situations involving Jewish Israelis. They said that not only did they use Hebrew, but they *preferred* to speak Hebrew with Israeli Jews. Their reasoning behind this preference was principally utilitarian. The students mentioned that Arabic is a difficult language and that Jewish people do not usually know or use Arabic to the same extent that Palestinian Israelis know and use Hebrew. In order to maximize communication and efficiency, they maintained that Hebrew should be the default language. For all of the students from the bilingual minority-majority school, Hebrew emerged as the most widespread language of communication in the local context, and all involved parties seemed to accept this reality.

With respect to Arabic usage, the student discourse revealed Arabic to be an intricate part of the linguistic landscape of the school. As opposed to the monolingual schools participating in this study, language usage in the bilingual school is constantly at the forefront of declared curricular and pedagogical decisions (Amara, 2005, *in Hebrew*). The students demonstrated a heightened awareness of linguistic usage as compared to their monolingual counterparts. Nevertheless, the discourse showed that two-way Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism had not proliferated in the school context. Moreover, L1 Arabic speakers' opinions with regard to Arabic usage differed significantly from those of the L1 Hebrew speakers.

The L1 Arabic speakers all spoke about the need to use Arabic in their local environment. Arabic was the principal language for interactions in their homes, in their villages, and in their communities. In addition, they also referred to the need to use Arabic in the wider Arabic-speaking world. However, as mentioned previously, in the broader local context, L1 Arabic-speaking participants described the need to use Hebrew in order to function and communicate with people.

Unlike monolingual minority students, the Palestinian Israeli participants from the bilingual school indicated that they were fluent in Arabic and Hebrew. Because of their status as fully bilingual, they were able to choose which language they wished to use in the local public sphere. The choice of Arabic presented the students with a dilemma characterized by power and clout on the one hand and discrimination and subordination on the other.

Several students mentioned using Arabic with other Arabic speakers in public places where there were predominantly Hebrew speakers. They described the power conferred by being able to converse with their friends without the people around them understanding or intervening. They identified symbolic control in the fact that they could use Arabic at will, but when necessary, they could revert back to Hebrew, whereas their Jewish Israeli counterparts had to rely solely on Hebrew.

At the other end of the spectrum were bilingual minority students who were hesitant to use Arabic in local public places because of the connotations associated with Arabic usage. Students mentioned that people might be suspicious of them, think that they were terrorists, interrogate them, or respond to them unkindly. For bilingual minority students, Arabic usage constituted more than simply the use of the language. They mentioned both positive and negative unintended sociolinguistic consequences that had an effect on Arabic usage in the local arena.

L1 Hebrew speakers from the bilingual school made little reference to Arabic usage. When they did mention it, they generally qualified it by means of statements attesting to the fact that their desire to communicate and be understood overrode their efforts to make use of Arabic. They opted to use Hebrew in bilingual interactions because they identified it as the fastest and most efficient means of communication. Even though all of the bilingual majority students except for one indicated that they were proficient in Hebrew and Arabic, they rarely, if ever, used Arabic.

Although linguistic practice differed between L1 Hebrew speakers and L1 Arabic speakers from the bilingual minority-majority school, both cohorts recognized Arabic as a part of the local linguistic arena from a cultural point of view. They also seemed to accept the fact that L1 Hebrew speakers' knowledge of Arabic was primarily symbolic and that bilingual interactions generally occurred in Hebrew. Neither side reported being bothered by this reality, nor did a lack of bilingualism appear to be perceived as a barrier to conflict resolution and coexistence.

With respect to English usage, the students from the bilingual minority-majority school mentioned numerous situations in which they needed to rely on English. They said that they had traveled outside of Israel either with their families or under the sponsorship of the school, and indicated that it was imperative to use English in the international arena. They also gave examples of times when they needed to interact with tourists or communicate with visitors in the local arena. In addition, bilingual students identified English as an international language and as an intermediary in the local arena between Hebrew/Arabic speakers and speakers of other languages.

English usage in the integrated bilingual school had additional implications not present in the monolingual schools. Specifically, student discourse suggested that the increasing presence and use of English alongside extensive Hebrew usage ultimately undermined Arabic usage. Generally speaking, the language of communication in the school between L1 Hebrew speakers and L1 Arabic speakers was Hebrew. That said, when confronted with situations in which Arabic speakers did not know Hebrew, the participants stated that they spoke English. Arabic was never used as a language of communication between L1 Hebrew speakers and L1 Arabic speakers. When Hebrew usage was not possible, English rather than Arabic became the default language. Moreover, L1 Hebrew speakers indicated that knowledge of English was a necessity whereas knowledge of Arabic was a nicety.

Within the integrated bilingual school context, proficiency in Arabic became nearly obsolete for Hebrew speakers and somewhat obsolete for Arabic speakers. The Hebrew speakers spoke mother-tongue Hebrew and they sought proficiency in English, while the Arabic speakers sought proficiency in Hebrew and in English and used Arabic solely in their home environment. English usage in the school context perpetuated a linguistic hierarchy whereby Hebrew was associated with success in the local arena, English was linked to success in the global arena, and Arabic carried little cultural capital.

Ultimately, the bilingual minority-majority students were extremely pragmatic regarding language usage. Although they studied in an educational context imbued with ideals and ideology, for the most part their linguistic choices reflected a utilitarian approach to languages, and pragmatics overrode politics and ideological principles.

## Discussions

The findings related to language usage support some unexpected sociolinguistic consequences and are linked to ongoing political and socioeconomic shifts. Here I will discuss several points related to local language usage (Hebrew and Arabic) and then discuss English language usage.

### Local Language Usage

The principal findings concerning Hebrew and Arabic usage address issues related to identity markers, power, and pragmatics. With respect to language usage and identity markers, the discourse from this study suggested that the participants perceived language as demarcating ethnicity and, to a degree, religion. The use of a particular language aligned speakers with a particular ethnic group. The identifications of Jew and Arab and their corresponding languages were particularly salient. On some level, the study participants all perpetuated binary rhetoric in which Hebrew speakers were equated with being Jewish, and Arabic speakers were equated with being Palestinian. That said, differences emerged between the identity perceptions articulated by monolingual students and those articulated by bilingual students.

For the monolingual students, language usage designated national allegiances. All monolingual students referenced nation-state jargon and found some expression of nation-state rhetoric through the use of Hebrew and/or Arabic. The monolingual majority students, in particular, correlated Hebrew usage with national identifications. Hebrew was perceived as the language of their country and was linked to the ideological symbols associated with the Jewish State. As regards Hebrew, the monolingual minority students mentioned both ideological and pragmatic nation-state inculcation. They indicated that whether they liked it or not, Hebrew was the language of their country and the only legitimate language of the State. They linked Arabic to Palestine and to symbols associated with their own independent nation.

In contrast to the monolingual students, the bilingual minority-majority students did not seem to be inculcated with nation-state ideology. Students were aware of the categorizations of Jews and Palestinians and made use of them. However, while their heritage languages were linked to culture, ethnicity, and, at times, religion, nation-state rhetoric was starkly absent from their discourse. This lack of nation-state rhetoric in the bilingual students' discourse did not mean that they identified less with Hebrew or Arabic than their monolingual counterparts. They simply linked their local languages to ethnic/cultural identifications rather than to national identifications. Whether this is a consequence of their bilingual/bicultural schooling or a combination of numerous educational forces requires additional investigation beyond the scope of this study. Certainly, the absence of national rhetoric begs further questions regarding socialization processes in integrated bilingual settings. Moreover, whether the absence of nation-state rhetoric can better advance notions of coexistence and conflict resolution in areas of intractable conflict is an additional consideration worthy of exploration if and when other comparative studies are conducted.

With respect to local language usage and power, both the use of Hebrew and the use of Arabic symbolized expressions of empowerment and disempowerment. The connotations associated with the use of Hebrew were not as negative or offensive as the Jewish Israeli students perceived them to be. Many L1 Arabic speakers indicated that they did not have a problem using and speaking Hebrew. Some expressed pride in the fact that they knew Hebrew well and could function successfully and flourish in Hebrew-dominant contexts. Fluency in Hebrew carried symbolic power that was connected to achievement and social mobility on the one hand and empowerment and legitimacy on the other. Hebrew usage emerged as a leveraging tool in ongoing majority-minority relations where Palestinian Israelis are frequently marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. Knowledge of Hebrew was perceived as empowering, and enabled the Palestinian Israeli participants to be on a par with or better than their Jewish Israeli counterparts.

Nevertheless, the use of Hebrew was not altogether positive: a few Palestinian Israeli students indicated that they did not like learning or using Hebrew, and that they felt "occupied" by the language and its connotations. In this respect, English was considered more neutral, more appropriate, less politically charged, and an international language. At the same time,

as will be discussed in the next section, this study has shown that the acquisition and use of English seems to negatively impact the linguistic equilibrium between Hebrew and Arabic and contribute to a language hierarchy that further marginalizes Arabic. Ultimately, any example of language use must be accompanied by a critical consciousness that bears in mind instances of the production and reproduction of power.

Regarding Arabic usage, bilingualism did not emerge as ameliorating, as was previously supposed by the Jewish Israeli participants. The latter emphasized the importance of Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism for all ethnic groups, whereas Palestinian Israelis were indifferent if not opposed to Jewish Israelis' use of Arabic. The students from the monolingual majority school mentioned that it was "not nice" that Palestinian Israelis knew and used Hebrew while Jewish Israelis did not know and use Arabic. They argued that in order to be fair and considerate, each ethnic group should learn the other's language. To a lesser degree, this perspective was also articulated by Jewish Israelis from the bilingual school.

In contrast, the Palestinian Israelis ascribed little or no importance to Jewish Israeli students using Arabic. In fact, in some cases, there were negative connotations symbolizing further occupation and disempowerment associated with Jewish students using or learning Arabic. By being the lone bilinguals (or trilinguals), the Palestinian Israelis maintained the upper hand.

This finding has implications for educational initiatives devoted to peace and coexistence in the Israeli/Palestinian context. Some of these educational programs invest in two-way / dual language bilingualism (Arabic-Hebrew) on the grounds that understanding and reconciliation can be achieved through proficiency in the other side's language. In fact, at least within the framework of this study and from the viewpoint of the Palestinian Israeli participants, the Jewish Israelis' use of Arabic was superfluous if not objectionable.

The benefits of dual language bilingual education for both majority and minority students have been well documented (see, for example, Baker, 2006; Siegel, 2003). However, in areas of intractable conflict, these language programs are "part of a wider society, such that equality of languages and resoluteness of purpose and mission can be difficult to deliver" (Baker, p. 238). Moreover, programs must deal with competing ambitions such as "English language fluency, high educational achievement and social mobility" (Baker, 2006, p. 238). Language acquisition for ideological or political purposes emerges as just one element of a complex picture.

The rationale underlying the investment in Jewish Israeli acquisition and use of Arabic could be said to be grounded in intergroup contact theory. This theoretical approach was first put forward by Allport as a way of reducing prejudice and intergroup conflict. Frequently referred to as "the contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1954), the theory states that intergroup contact with individual members of an out-group can lead to a more positive attitude toward the out-group as well as prejudice reduction. Specific conditions must be met in order for intergroup contact to be effective, including equal status (symmetry) among participants within the contact (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2005). In theory, Jewish Israeli acquisition and use of Arabic might be a symbolic means of generating equality or symmetry among

Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Israelis. In practice, attempts to promote and sustain linguistic symmetry seem to benefit the Jewish Israelis (they feel "good" and are able to satisfy their ideological principles), whereas Palestinian Israelis gain very little. In fact, they may end up feeling further disempowered.

The final point I wish to address concerning local language usage relates to pragmatics. The overarching sentiment articulated by all of the study participants indicates that practical considerations ultimately supersede ideology and niceties. The discourse from this study demonstrated that in the local context, all participants, regardless of their ethnicity or L1, need and make use of Hebrew. The language has come to dominate most local sector matters including those related to government, public administration, state policies, education, and the legal system. Hebrew is the language of study for all institutions of higher education within Israel proper, and proficiency is a prerequisite for many professional networks (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999).

While proceeding critically is always prudent, I would argue that empowerment ultimately prevails when all are schooled in the language of power. Therefore, it is advisable that initiatives espousing equality and change through multicultural/multilingual education emphasize the mastery of languages associated with power and clout. In the end, ideological aspirations and niceties are limited in their scope. Semblances of equality begin to emerge when all students have the choice to use a language that affords them the greatest communicative competency, social mobility, and power.

## English Language Usage

The principal findings concerning English usage also relate to notions of empowerment and disempowerment. Students from all three schools indicated that English was an indispensible tool in the international, local, and cyber arenas. They were acutely aware of the fact that the knowledge and use of English carried power. Proficiency in English served as an entryway to success, prosperity, and future achievements. Alongside this acknowledgment of the benefits of English, however, some cautionary discourse emerged.

In general, the students spoke favorably about their opportunities to use English in a variety of settings. That said, they indicated that English usage was positive only to a certain degree. It needed to be moderated, since too much of it constituted a threat to the identifications students associated with the local languages. Ultimately, the discourse suggested that English should be used with discretion and should not replace local languages and the cultural identifications they symbolize.

The presence and use of English also had an effect on the participants' declared proficiency in their local languages. At times, students indicated that they felt conflicted between their practical aspirations, including achieving proficiency in English, and their commitment to their local language. The acquisition and use of languages of power will never be exempt from sociolinguistic consequences, including the need to balance ethnic

commitments and professional/practical obligations. However, as much as possible—through policy, education and practice—the acquisition of a dominant or majority language should not come at the expense of heritage language maintenance. In part, we can promote linguistic justice by encouraging pedagogical measures that help ensure the acquisition of the language of power while recognizing indigenous/local languages as well as the local voice in *World Englishes.** 

Finally, findings from this study suggest that the presence and use of English contributes to the further marginalization of Arabic. In the Israeli context English is accorded high economic and social status (Shohamy, 2007). Hebrew, as the majority language in Israel and the language usually associated with local economic, social, and higher educational opportunities, is also accorded a high status. Arabic, although geographically dominant across the region, is largely accorded symbolic status within Israel proper and relegated to the margins (Amara & Al-Rahman, 2002; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). These differences in perceived language value tend to weaken the position of Arabic in Israel and negatively affect Arabic language usage (Uhlmann, 2011).

In the framework of this study, the Hebrew speakers indicated that they had little incentive to learn or use Arabic since they could fall back on English. The Arabic speakers said that they did not expect the Hebrew speakers to know Arabic and that they, too, relied on English when necessary. English usage ultimately threatened Arabic usage for both Jewish and Palestinian Israelis. Even in instances where both sides spoke Arabic, the language was not used.

Paradoxically, therefore, English usage, although often endorsed as neutral, sometimes results in detrimental consequences that are anything but neutral. To "blame" the language would be erroneous. However, educational initiatives implementing English language programs need to remain attentive to unexpected sociolinguistic consequences and their effects on proficiency and achievement in the local languages. These unforeseen consequences accompanying the acquisition and use of English ultimately support the notion that English is "simultaneously both a unifying and a diversifying force" (Brutt-Griffler & Davies, 2006, p. 11).

## Conclusion

This article has sought to address some of the sociolinguistic consequences of language usage as articulated by Palestinian and Jewish Israeli English-language learners. One of the underlining impetuses of this focus was my intention to challenge the notion that English is solely a neutral or international language. In fact, the acquisition and use of English constitutes a predicament characterized by linguistic emancipation on the one hand and linguistic hegemony on the other (Phan, 2005).

While English in many parts of the world is undergoing processes of denationalization and reappropriation, English speakers of other languages—including those participating in this study—continue to wrestle with competing priorities and representations of power transmitted through language usage. The discourse concerning language usage revealed subtleties and

complexities concerning the interplay between local languages and English. At times, the decision to use English compromised local language acquisition and/or proficiency and contributed to the marginalization of local languages. This article highlights the need to avoid blanket declarations of neutrality or lingua franca status and instead to proceed cautiously and critically.

Left unchecked, multilingual/multicultural contexts run the risk of reinforcing the status quo and reproducing the expressions of inequality and oppression they seek to ameliorate. This in-depth analysis of languages in practice aimed to enhance awareness of these expressions of disempowerment: uncovering them, deconstructing them, and ideally reducing their dissemination. We must proceed with care, ever aware of the presence of unforeseen consequences lurking among even the best-intended initiatives.

**Note**

* *World Englishes* is one of several taxonomies used to describe the linguistic spread of English throughout much of the world. *World Englishes* has produced an area of research concerned with the reexamination of English in local, global, and virtual contexts. (For further discussion, see Jenkins, 2006; Kachru, Kachru & Nelson, 2009.)

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