Drori on Sokoloff and Berg, 'What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew (and What It Means to Americans)'

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In her 2018 novella, “The Hebrew Teacher,” the California-based Hebrew writer Maya Arad animates the debate at the heart of the same-year anthology, What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew. Edited by Naomi B. Sokoloff and Nancy E. Berg, this anthology explores what it means to teach and learn modern Hebrew in the United States today and why the number of Hebrew students in universities across the Anglo-American world has dwindled over the past few decades. Arad’s satirical novella deals with similar questions and could have easily made it into the anthology had it not been written in Hebrew, primarily for an Israeli readership. Both the novella and anthology engage with questions of language politics and cultural transfer, examining the changes that Hebrew studies in North America have undergone in the past few decades. Yet while Arad’s protagonist is an Israeli expat who fails to reckon with the impact of globalization and war in the Middle East on Hebrew studies in the United States, most contributors to What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew are American professors of Hebrew willing to tackle, some more explicitly than others, the ties between international politics and foreign-language study. Their essays are complemented by the personal accounts of three literary figures, Dara Horn, Ilan Stavans, and Robert Whitehill-Bashan, who tell their stories of living with or through Hebrew in non-Hebrew-speaking contexts.

As Arad’s protagonist gradually understands in “The Hebrew Teacher,” competing perceptions of Israel and of Jewish history inevitably shape much of the debate around studying modern Hebrew in the United States today. When faced with a decline in enrollment in her Hebrew courses, this protagonist wonders whether the reason behind the waning numbers goes beyond the general weakening of the humanities in our age of professionalism and neoliberal economics. Had this fictional character read Sokoloff and Berg’s introduction to What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew, she would have been given a multilayered explanation: First, there is “assimilation,” which has “pulled” American Jews “in many disparate directions” (p. 8). Then, there is the growing interest in Arabic, a language Berg and Sokoloff discuss as seemingly more useful from the dual viewpoint of world demographics and national security. Finally, there is the ascendancy of English as a borderless lingua franca and a broadly understood language in present-day Israel. All of these factors turn Hebrew literacy and proficiency into redundant goals in the eyes of many Americans.

In Alan Mintz’s essay for the anthology, written as a memoir, the very notion of proficiency is broken down into its components: “understanding speech, producing speech, reading comprehension, and...
writing.” Mintz shows how open-ended each of these skills can be, reflecting on his own struggle to attain what others may call “near native” knowledge of Hebrew. He also boldly challenges the idea that Hebrew is “native” to modern Israel more than it belongs to other locales: “When it comes to Hebrew,” Mintz proclaims, “nativeness is an invention.... A particular style of orientalized Hebrew spoken in the youth movements in the Yishuv in the 1930s and 1940s succeeded in conferring upon itself the designation ‘native.’ Other styles of Hebrew spoken in Europe and America were marginalized and deemed less authentic” (p. 222).

Mintz’s persuasive claim about Hebrew’s history is developed in Nancy E. Berg’s essay, “The Anxiety of Authenticity.” Berg confesses her inferiority complex vis-à-vis Israeli scholars of Hebrew language and literature, eventually determining that as “non-natives,” those who came late to modern Hebrew are uniquely positioned to investigate its vibrant literary canon from afar. Berg intimates that the entry of a larger number of Israeli scholars and language instructors into the realm of American Hebrew and Jewish studies has generated anxiety among the “non-natives.” Yet it can be as liberating for Israelis as it is for Americans to view Hebrew the way Mintz does, as a language whose history is long and multifaceted and whose study unavoidably shifts as it moves across time and space.

What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew wages a campaign against parochialism. Adriana X. Jacobs and Adam Rovner present particularly strong narratives about shifting perspectives, analyzing poems they have discussed with disparate groups of students in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Both Jacobs and Rovner show that talking about Hebrew means talking about translation, dwelling on the transition of specific words and phrases from one language to another and tackling the social and political history of Hebrew translation.

Indeed, What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew is an illuminating book for translation studies scholars, or for anyone interested in the global circulation of texts, contexts, and ideology. Ilan Stavans’s essay, “Dying in Hebrew,” opens with a brief yet instructive discussion of translation, focusing on the English title of Stavans’s Spanish short story “Morirse está en hebreo.” When this story was adapted into a film, as Stavans recounts, the filmmakers marketed it as “My Mexican Shiva,” a title that assumes knowledge of Jewish rites. The same assumption could not be made in the Spanish-speaking world, as Spanish speakers often use the phrase “it’s in Hebrew” to convey that something is incomprehensible (p. 36).

Stavans also highlights one of the anthology’s overarching presuppositions: not all languages are born equal (p. 37). Some languages have accrued more symbolic capital than others throughout history; others have had to be formed and reformed by political leaders; still others have been revived, reinvigorated, standardized, or banned. Languages are also commonly perceived as more than tools for communication, representing identity, emotional familiarity, and cultural memory. While Stavans acknowledges the key place Hebrew occupies in his own mental landscape, he seeks to empty it of its psycho-political baggage when looking at it from the viewpoint of an activist for Palestinian rights: “I am dismayed by the fact that Hebrew, to its enemies, implies death. Actually, I hate that ‘it has enemies,’ as an activist told me in Gaza. How can a language have enemies?” (p. 49). If a language can be compared to one’s friend or kin, as Stavans argues in his essay, it can surely have enemies.

In another essay in the anthology about reconciling Hebrew’s contradictory “identities,” Wendy
Zierler acts out compellingly her ongoing attempt to understand what motivates Americans to study Hebrew. Wrestling with the concept of “heritage-related motivation” for language study, Zierler asks what Hebrew’s heritage is and why it does not appeal to all Jews. She notes that ambivalence about Israel’s “political and religious values” has distanced large parts of the American liberal Jewish community from Hebrew, suggesting that foreign language study both marks and is marked by one’s moral and ideological principles (p. 94).

Like Zierler, the novelist Dara Horn contemplates the ties between her religious-cultural background and her long-standing love of Hebrew. She tells the story of her career as a “professional Jewish nerd,” beginning with her habitual reading of the weekly Torah portion as a young girl and ending with her alleged revelation that her English novels’ Hebrew translations are in fact “the original” versions of the same texts (p. 35). Translation studies scholars may once again rejoice in the questions this statement raises. Horn seems to believe that Hebrew’s roots (pun intended) elevate it to the status of what Walter Benjamin has dubbed “pure language.”[1] Fetishizing Hebrew, Horn’s essay echoes the exclusionary poetics of canonical Hebrew writers like David Frishman, who insisted in the early 1900s that his translations of Friedrich Nietzsche and Lord Byron’s Bible-inspired works are “restorations” rather than derivative iterations.[2]

Less psychologically and politically loaded are Naomi Sokoloff, Hannah S. Pressman, and Sarah Bunin-Benor’s essays about learning, teaching, and disseminating Hebrew in the United States today. Sokoloff issues a call for the production of more language memoirs about Hebrew (in English), while Pressman and Bunin-Benor share pedagogical and research advice through their respective accounts of using digital tools for advancing Hebrew studies and of understanding the function of “immersion” and “infusion” in Hebrew-education programs. Bunin-Benor criticizes purism as an approach to language teaching, yet displays what can be deemed a purist view of Jewish national difference. She deploys the term “Jewish languages” uncritically, not taking into account recent works that have shown how this category reifies rather than problematizes the idea of Jewish difference.[3]

What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew invites the reader to think precisely about such questions of perspective and terminology, joining previous inquiries into Jewish language politics while also expanding them through first-person narratives. The combination of academic investigation and memoir makes this anthology a trove of insights about language, translation, and Jewish history. This combination is at its best in the pair of essays dedicated to Robert Whitehill-Bashan’s American Hebrew poetry. Whitehill-Bashan himself explains how writing in Hebrew has required him to strip away his defenses, whereas the scholar Michael Weingrad, interpreting Whitehill-Bashan’s work, claims that it embodies a kind of cultural and territorial schizophrenia. Whether one agrees with the use of the term “schizophrenia” to describe a bilingual state of being is beside the point. Like all other parts in What We Talk about When We Talk about Hebrew, Whitehill-Bashan and Weingrad’s essays encourage the reader to strip away her own defenses in order to reassess her attachment to any language, “native” or not.

Notes


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