

Arabic-Hebrew Language-Switching and Cultural Identity

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Abstract: *The phenomenon of Arabic-Hebrew language-switching is increasingly prevalent among the Palestinian Arabs in "Israel". This is a preliminary investigative study of Arabic-Hebrew language-switching which deals with the analysis of randomly selected pieces of discourse collected, for the purpose of the study, from various sectors of the Palestinian Arab population. The paper includes three main sections in which an attempt is made to answer the following three questions: (i) which parts of the community use language-switching distinctively in their everyday communication, (ii) what is the nature of such usage and the reasons behind it, and (iii) what is the relationship between language-switching and cultural identity?*

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of Arabic-Hebrew Language switching became widespread 15-20 years after the establishment of "Israel", i.e. during the sixties and henceforth. This phenomenon has diversified reasons and backgrounds; therefore, it is difficult to trace and investigate with comprehensiveness.

Language-switching between Arabic and Hebrew only exists among the Arabic speaking community who tend to switch to Hebrew in their normal everyday conversation. Given the unprestigious semi-official status of Arabic (Brosh 1993), Hebrew preponderates in many manifestations and contexts. One of those is switching which is an act of shifting to use Hebrew, basically within Arabic utterances by interlocutors regardless of topic, setting, purpose or mood (Kachru 1977). However, it is important to note that this act of shifting (switching) is not only one of borrowing and cannot be linguistically qualified as such. Borrowing refers to using one language of items that originated in another (Abdelali & Eirlys 1983). Haugen (1956:40) defines switching as the act of "a bilingual introduces a completely unassimilated word from another language into his speech". This description precisely applies to the phenomenon of Arabic – Hebrew language-switching (code-switching) where strings of Hebrew are introduced into the Arabic utterance, but none of these words are part of Arabic or have become part of it.

Switching to Hebrew is very difficult to explain in most cases except in the framework of language and cultural identity. Only in very few cases, as Gumpertz (1976:7) puts it, "one could trace a speaker's inability to find words to express what he/she wants to say" in his own language- here Arabic.

The first section of this paper gives a brief account of the social make-up of the Arab community. Then an attempt is made to single out interlocutors who frequently use language-switching from the aggregate of the community. The process of identifying such interlocutors is based on field observations and on the result of the analysis of the pieces of discourse. Finally, the factors that affect the choice of "switching" among certain groups of the community are discussed.

The second section first presents the methodology of data collection. Then it discusses excerpts chosen from the discourse under investigation. In this discussion special attention is given to linguistic analysis of the examples cited in the study. In addition, the study focuses on the communicative input of the Hebrew utterances. The possible reasons believed to underlie the language-switching behavior are also considered.

"Cultural alienation versus cultural identification" is the main theme of the third section which touches upon the socio-political, economic, and educational factors that contribute to and consolidate the existence of language-switching. The closing paragraphs of this section, and the paper, are primarily conclusions and evaluative remarks on the Arabic-Hebrew language-switching phenomenon.

2. Research background

The investigation under question takes place in a community which is considered "a minority" by most Arab community members and the aggregate of the Jewish community. The Arab community within the green line makes up nearly 20% of the total population. All members of the community speak colloquial Palestinian Arabic as a mother tongue which is second in rank after Hebrew.

A type of narrow scale switching from Arabic into Hebrew prevailed during the period after the establishment of "Israel" in 1948. The fifties and sixties produced a generation that heavily depended on the Israeli market for work. This matter led to interaction between the Arab community and the Jewish one. The need to communicate was a necessary requirement for the Arab workers, and thus there was no choice for them but to acquire Hebrew. According to Lefkowitz (2004:146) "Palestinians feel necessity and pressure to speak Hebrew in the working world. It is in the workplace that one finds Palestinians code-switching between Arabic and Hebrew, and it is in the workplace-even in Arab sector workplaces- that use of Hebrew becomes an active and creative part of the Palestinian repertoire." In addition, the young generations acquired Hebrew through formal education at school. Spolsky (1999:164) notes that Hebrew became "dominant among the indigenous Arabic of the minority" and because "there was no provision for tertiary education in Arabic, it became essential for any Arab wanting higher education or employment outside the community to acquire Hebrew"(p 169).

The Israeli work market during the fifties, sixties and early seventies was so tempting to the 'native Arab' that most of the young during this period

neglected education for a work that pays much above the living standard they are used to. Nevertheless, during the late seventies and during the eighties, interest in education was somehow revived. Nowadays, education is viewed differently. It is considered a requirement and an important life necessity. The generations of the seventies, and thereafter, acquired Hebrew in a more formal fashion. Also the need for interaction and communication with the Jewish community continued.

2.1 Interlocutors who frequently use code-switching

At present, there are two main generations within the Arab community: the first which is by large uneducated and the second which is educated. Many members of the Arab community, mostly males, who were in direct contact with the Hebraic community have acquired Hebrew for communicative purposes. They brought with them terms and expressions that were eventually acquired by the rest of the Arab community: the old, and the young.

From the above, we can single out three types of population whose relationship to Hebrew depends on the practical need to use it:

- An old generation among which switching is not felt and who possess more ties with their past and cultural heritage.
- A middle generation who acquired the language as a result of their intensive contact with the Jewish community, and who use Hebrew at work and at home.
- A new generation who acquired Hebrew by means of education and contact, and who need Hebrew to fulfill their daily communicative needs.

Switching used by the first generation is characterized as being sporadic that encompassed words and sometimes expressions. However, it contains phrases and short strings in the second generation and longer and more complex ones in the third.

The second generation in addition to the third generation are the ones using switching more frequently. The third generation is most exposed to Hebrew, learnt it at school, and inter-acted with it through media and other means. Therefore, the Hebrew repertoire of this generation is inevitably larger, and this fact affects the cognitive psyche of such persons thus contributing to a more frequent tendency to switch.

Gender also plays an important role in switching. Males tend to switch more than females. In his study, (1999:157) Amara notes that “male use of lexical items from Hebrew was 3 times higher than females: 0.9% - 0.3% respectively”.

Language switching in the Arab community varies from one location to another i.e. it is less in isolated villages with 100% Arab population than in urban mixed communities such as Jaffa, Haifa, Lud and other mixed towns where switching tends to be more systematic.

2.2 Factors that affect the choice of switching

Switching from Arabic into Hebrew seems *prima facie* habitual and automatic, i.e., interlocutors are basically not aware of the shift to Hebrew unless their attention is drawn to that fact. Yet, there are many major factors that affect the choice to switch or not to on the part of the interlocutor. Some of these factors are related to culture which is the focus of this study.

2.2.1 Education

Education is a very important factor in switching in general, and it is so in particular because it has been noticed that the more the members of the community are educated, the more they tend to switch. But, it seems that higher education gives a reverse result, i.e., less tendency to switch is frequent among members with university education. Perhaps, this is to do with the degree of knowledge of Hebrew and its formal learning which starts at an early age – in the third scholastic year in Arab villages and earlier in mixed towns- and the linguistic and cultural awareness in case of higher education. Uneducated members of the community who are in direct contact with Hebrew for reasons of employment and work tend to switch more than the educated; on the other hand, the educated tend to switch more than the uneducated who are not in direct contact with Hebrew.

2.2.2 Setting restrictions

The factors that might affect a normal verbal message apply to a message with a switching component. Some of these are: (i) context particulars such as situation (school, work, home... etc.) and presence of other interlocutors (e.g. Hebrew monolinguals); (ii) subject particulars such as scientific, religious, social, etc.; and (iii) Participant particulars such as age, sex, education, etc. Other context factors which are directly related to switching and to Arabic – Hebrew in particular are:

- Presence of an interlocutor who does not understand Hebrew where respect to such an individual might prevent another from switching.
- Topic of conversation, for example, a conversation over a religious matter might include much less incidents of switching than another over a work matter or a political one. This can be attributed to the fact that Arabic is (a material sancta) preserved by its holiness (Fishman 2006: 255)
- Situation: observation of interlocutors at work, at Jewish community sites, indicated that such interlocutors use switching more at work than back at home.

2.2.3 Social factors

Among the social restrictions that contribute to the choice of switching are:

- absence of a cultural reservation which makes it, socially, not repugnant for some interlocutors to participate in or be present at switching interactions;

- certain sectors of the population spurn the use of switching (especially among the growing population of Islamic groups, and among educated patriots);
- respect to an interlocutor who does not understand Hebrew;
- refraining from switching in formal and/or serious situations e.g. speeches where switching might be considered socially inappropriate; and
- a tendency to switch to Hebrew in cases of taboo words is also present.

3 The study

3.1 Data and methodology

Given the investigative nature of this study, the data used mainly constitute extractions of free spontaneous conversations taking place in different natural communicative settings like home, work, school.

Most of the data was collected by informants (school teachers) living in various Arab communities in "Israel". It was first recorded, and then sorted out for the purpose of the study. Some examples, however, were collected by the researcher during in-group conversations.

The data was irregularly collected during two years. The informants recorded the utterances (in writing) in their respective languages and as they were uttered. No limitations were imposed on the process of collection except for those concerning length and duration of conversations due to the fact that the targeted examples were those which manifest switching without regard to type, length, or nature.

From the aggregate of the collected data, certain examples were particularly selected believing they would be appropriate to serve as tools to illustrate the analysis aimed at in this study.

The sample examples were analyzed from the perspective of "conversational analysis" suggested by Handel (1982:30) who defines it as "the study of social organization of talk by practices contained in the talk itself . . . (which) culminates in the specification of rules to which conversations and conversationalists are held normatively accountable.". In addition, a participant observation methodology was also employed in the analysis keeping in mind not to prejudice a personal view based on that. For simplicity and ease of reading, the examples cited below are **transliterated** using Arabic or English to replace Hebrew as the case may require. Hebrew words or their meanings are in bold wherever they occur.

3.2 Patterns and types of switching

3.2.1 Patterns of switching

Three major patterns of switching can be identified:

- Unreciprocal switching between young and old generations due to unintelligibility or other factors. In this case response in Arabic is unsystematic.
- Large scale vs. narrow scale switching: chunks and complete sentences against single words and expressions.
- Frequent usage vs. less frequent usage due to individual differences and other factors such as education, knowledge of Hebrew, cultural identification etc.

3.2.2 Types of switching

Switching can be of many types:

- (a) Inter-sentential switching (sometimes called "extra-sentential" switching) which occurs outside the sentence or the clause level i.e. at sentence or clause boundaries.
- (b) Intra-sentential switching which occurs within a sentence or a clause.
- (c) Tag-switching which is the switching of either a tag phrase or a word, or both.
- (d) Intra-word switching which occurs within a word itself, such as at a morpheme boundary.

Most of the Arabic Hebrew code-switching is of the intra-sentential type. However, within this type of switching, three main sub-groups can be identified:

(i) Switching proper, which is divided into two categories:

(a) **Focal switching** to spotlight parts of the conversation, e.g.

- كان الاجتماع عن الـ " دكيوم عرفي يهودي. "
- kan al idjtma' an al **dikiyoum aravi yahoudi** (The meeting was on the **Arab Jewish coexistence**)

(b) **General switching** that is prevalent all over the conversation and tends to be systematic, e.g.

- شو هل "بلجان!"
- Shou hal **balagan** (What a **chaos!**)

(ii) **Borrowing**: which is twofold:

(a) **Technical terms**, e.g.

- شو سوا بالنسبة " للمحشيف ... " بالنسبة " لذكرون بنيمي. "
- Shou sawa binisbeh **lilmahsheiv** ... binisbeh **lilzkaroun pnemi** (what has he done for the **computer** ... for the **RAM**.)
- "شوم دفار. "
- **Shom davar** (Nothing.)

(b) Fossilized expressions: Expressions such as the following are frequently heard:

- " (glida = **icecream**) جليدا " -
- " (Arnona = **real estate tax**) أرنوننا " -
- " (kobat holeem = **medical insurance fund**) كوبات حوليم " -
- " (kerin bitoh = **pension**) كيرن نيتوح " -
- " (beseider = **OK**) بسيدر " -

(iii) Quotations: No translation attempt is made by interlocutors where it is possible to do so, e.g.

- قال لي: " زي لو معينتي بخلال " -
- Qal li ze lo minanyiti bikhlal (he told me, "I am not interested in this at all".)

3.3 Analysis of excerpts

Although Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic, there are differences between them. These can be found almost on all Linguistic levels viz. phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics. The importance of such differences cannot be denied, still they are beyond the scope of the present study.

Following are selected examples cited to illustrate the code-switching phenomenon between Arabic and Hebrew. They are approached according to the main linguistic levels: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics.

3.3.1 Phonology:

Arabic speakers do not face any problem when pronouncing Hebrew words. On the contrary, because Arabic possesses more phonemes than Hebrew, it is easy for Arabs to master Hebrew pronunciation without noticeable difficulty.

3.3.2 Morphology and Grammar:

All the examples cited indicate that the Hebrew utterances when juxtaposed to Arabic do not usually preserve their grammar or their pure morphological form. Most cases show that the Arabic definite article 'AL' is used with the Hebrew utterances, e.g.

- رحت ع ال " هرتسآه"

Ruhet *al hartsa'a* (I went to *the lecture*.)

Other cases show that the morphology of Arabic is used with the Hebrew utterances e.g.

- بدو " يتكوفع " بعد شهرين

Bidu yetkova' ba'id shahreïn (he will get **tenure** after two months.)

The Arabic imperfect marker *ye* is used with the Hebrew word to make a verb.

□.□.3 أعطيني المفاتيح بدي " أسوفيلي سيفوفين "

A'teini el miftah bidi *asovivli seivouvein* (give me the car keys, I **want to take two rounds**.)

Here the Arabic *a* marker is also used with the Hebrew word (sevouv) also the possessive marker *li* and the dual marker *ein* are used with the Hebrew words. Such usage is basically an attempt to Arabicize the Hebrew items.

3.3.3 Syntax:

The Arabic syntax is the basic pattern within which Hebrew utterances are juxtaposed to Arabic ones. Full Hebrew utterances keep the Hebrew syntax. This is normal in all the situations where the mother tongue language (Arabic) is more dominant than the Target Language, e.g.

- طلبوا "مسبار تعدوت زيهوت" علشان التسجيل

- Talabu **misbar te'idot zihut** alashan et-tasjeel (They asked for **the number if the ID card** in order to register.)

In very rare cases where Hebrew utterances dominate the speech of two interlocutors, Hebrew syntax is used and Arabic utterances are juxtaposed to Hebrew, e.g.

- vi eikh halakh lakha hayom تركيب hamashkofim. ال kirot hayo yishirot?

Vi eikh halakh lakha hayom **tarkib** hamashkofim. **El** kirot hayo yishirot?

(How was your day (regarding) **fixing** the door (wood) frames. Were **the** walls straight?)

-لع

- La' (No), (Jabarin 1990).

In the above example the Arabic word "tarkib" is used in the first utterance, while the rest of the words are in Hebrew. The syntax is that of Hebrew and the Arabic word is forced into it. In the second sentence (question), only the Arabic definite article "El" is used which reflects a morphological dominance especially when it comes to using the definite article before the Hebrew words. The rest of the question maintains a Hebrew structure.

3.3.4 Semantics:

The semantic input of the Hebrew utterances in most of the examples cited, especially in situations where utterances spoken by uneducated interlocutors, explains the reason behind switching in such situations. Certain Hebrew utterances become essential to communication to the extent that if such utterances are replaced by Arabic counterparts, they will be unintelligible. In cases where Arabic counterparts are used the communicative channel is interrupted by a request for explanation e.g.

- ما كفافهنش "مناة" وحده، طلبو أخرى "مناة".

Ma kafahinesh **mana** wahadeh talabu ukhra **mana** (They did not settle for **one ration**, they asked for another **ration**.)

- ما بدهمش يعطوهم "ايشوريم".

Ma bidhumesh yi'tuhom **ishorim** (They didn't want to give them **permissions**)

The above examples show a kind of an inevitable usage of certain lexical items that have become so spread to the extent that using their Arabic counterparts can be looked at as either improper or even totally incomprehensible. However, switching to Hebrew cannot be always attributed to be a semantic or functional necessity. In cases where there are Arabic counterparts that are not used, the only explanation possible does not seem to be linguistic; it might well be psychological- related to a social stigma. Switching to Hebrew gives an impression of status, show-off, knowledge, and authority as opposed to lowness, not good looking, ignorance, and lack of authority.

When interlocutors refrain from switching, there is always self-realization and a strong impression of confidence, esteem and identity.

The following example which is an excerpt from a lengthy conversation between a customer and an apprentice in a carpentry (Jabarin 1990) may support the above argument.

- سلام عليكم...وين " ال بعل بيت"
 - Salam aleikom wein el **ba'al bait** (Hello, where is the **boss**?)
 - طلع يشتري مسامير " بلاداه أو زافويت لتسيبوي عيط " من عند ال "سوخان".
 - Teli' yishtri masamir **bladah 'u zaviyot litsiboy 'eit min 'ind el soukhan**
 (He went to buy **steel nails and frames for wood paint from the agent.**)
 - من عند مين؟
 - Min 'ind meen ? (where from?)
 - أنا عارف؟ في كثير " سوخنيم " بهالبلد .
 Ana 'arif fi chtheer **sokhaneem** fi hal balad (I don't know. There are many **agents** in this town.)
 - يمكن راح على " إزور هتسيا ".
 Yemchin rah 'ala **izour ha ta'asiya** (perhaps, he went to **the industrial zone.**)
 - إنت شو بدك؟
 - Inte sho biddak? (What do you want?)
 - جاي أوصي على " مزنون " مع " مدفيم ".
 - Jay awassi 'ala **maznoun ma' madafayem** (I'm here to order a **"buffet"** with **shelves.**)
 - طيب استنا شوي " بخول ريجع " رايح ييجي.
 Tayeb istana shway **bikhol reiga'** rah yidgi (OK, wait a little; he will be back **any minute.**)

In the above examples all the Hebrew utterances could have been replaced by Arabic counterparts. There is no reason at all to use any of them, be it functional or pragmatic. The setting in the above example is a carpentry in an Arab town, the two interlocutors are Arabs, and there are no other non-Arab interlocutors involved. It is very difficult to interpret this behavior in terms of necessity to

communicate. This practice, therefore, could be attributed to psychological and/or social reasons.

3.4. Reasons underlying the switching behavior

It seems that there are three basic reasons that might account for the language switching behavior among members of the Arab community in "Israel".

- **Communication**

The need to communicate easily and effectively leads to habitual switching which is reinforced by heavy use of Hebrew due to prolonged presence in Hebrew only situations. Interlocutors are usually affected by factors that make it difficult not to switch viz. (i) there is no normal restriction on switching except in certain cases (c.f. 1.3.3), (ii) certain terms have become part of the colloquial language, and thus Arabic counterparts may not be easily understood.

- **Social considerations**

Switching interlocutors tend to be affected by the social environment around them especially that which gives certain prestige to those who "know". Such an atmosphere, in its turn, imposes some influence on the psychological make-up of the interlocutors in such a way that they tend to show knowledge ability, prestige and expertise in their verbal interaction by resorting to switching (to Hebrew). Suleiman (2004:30-31) argues that "code-switching ... is an attempt at identity negotiation whereby the speaker seeks symbolically to ascribe to the self some of the attributes associated with a more prestigious group."

- **Linguistic Reasons**

In certain occasions interlocutors feel that their language is imperfect in that it lacks the means to fulfill the growing demand of scientific and technical expressions. Such distrust in the mother-tongue leads to an increased interest in the target language and eventually to switch to it.

- **Idiosyncratic factors**

Single individuals do not show consistency in their switching behavior. An interlocutor may wish to use switching for certain reasons on certain occasions while holding to the normal behavior on others. In addition to the reasons given above, one can add the following:

- Conveying a message to an interlocutor where a third one is not desired to share;
- Achieving an interactional task such as winning an argument; and
- Expressing emotion, anger, or other effective feelings.

4. Cultural alienation vs. cultural identification

The investigation under question is different in many ways from other similar studies which discuss language switching in that it does not take place in a total bilingual situation nor does it reflect systematic usage of switching, and in that it occurs in an area where two distinct cultures coexist; therefore, one cannot arrive at definite and final conclusions. Yet, one factor seems to prevail the switching behavior and can give a good explanation to it viz. the cultural factor.

Field observations reflect that language switching is mostly prevalent amongst uneducated interlocutors. Generally speaking, it seems that the more the interlocutors are educated and aware of their cultural heritage, the more they refrain from switching. Religion, on the other hand, which is the mirror of Arabic culture seems to play a very important factor in the switching behavior. Religious interlocutors are the ones who minimally resort to switching. Moreover, it is noticed that interlocutors (of one type) feel embarrassed once their attention is drawn to the fact that they are switching to Hebrew where it is not necessary to do so. Those who switch are generally unaware of this fact. "It's all done entirely un-self-consciously. One has the impression that if one were to ask the speakers why and when they switched to Hebrew, they wouldn't always be aware of having done so" (Philologos:2008). Un-switching, on the other hand, provides a sense of grounding and belonging. The preservation of culture and identity is manifested in the preservation of language, and there is certainly a strong linkage between language, culture and identity in the Arab sector in "Israel". Once the culture is alienated due to external (usually compulsory) reasons, the language identity is affected.

There are several factors that contribute to cultural alienation within the Arab community in "Israel"; the most important ones are:

- Education: until the present days, the education system in "Israel" deprives the Arab community from the basic cultural representations in the school curricula. Subjects like the Islamic religion (and other religions: Christianity) are not taught nor are the subjects that relate to the community culture such as History and Community Studies. Therefore, education does not allow enough freedom to the enrichment and identification of the local community culture.
- Sociopolitical factors: since Hebrew is the state language, important official positions, which are dominantly occupied by the Jewish community, demand knowledge of Hebrew. This will consolidate the Hebraic culture and spread it among minority communities. In addition, restricted political and ideological freedom within the Arab community in very rare cases contributes to the adoption of outside political ideologies.
- Economic Factors: The need to work, trade etc. makes the Arab community totally economically dependent on the Jewish sectors, and restricted ownership of land accelerates the shift to other market controlled crafts. This makes it difficult to adhere to local customs and easy to regard imported ones brought in by means of contact and communication.

There is no doubt that such factors contribute to cultural alienation through 'switching to Hebrew', and eventually to the decline of Arabic. Those who switch, look at Hebrew as a symbol of high status and as a key for modernization and progress. They are unaware that their cultural identity is affected once they switch to Hebrew. On the other hand, those who consciously

refrain from switching, have a strong awareness of their cultural identity, which seems to be stronger and more rooted.

5. Conclusions

Code-switching is a complex process that varies depending on the situation and reasons to do it. Linguistic functions and social aspects are crucial in code-switching. In addition, cultural aspects seem to play an important role in this process. Although the relationship between language switching and cultural identity may not be one to one, it is an obvious relation that cannot be passed by. To complete the picture that depicts the possible links between switching and cultural identity, we sum up by the following hypotheses:

- Refraining from using switching is an expression of cultural identity and vice-versa.
- Interlocutors who frequently and habitually switch do not value their language and culture.
- The acquisition of a foreign language and concomitantly traits of its culture comes on the expense of the mother language and its culture.
- Language maintenance is associated with cultural preservation and vice-versa.
- Consistent language switching in a community such as the one under investigation can lead to deculturalization and/ or to the creation of a type of "Creole" language that might replace the original mother tongue.

However, to better understand the phenomenon in question, the above hypotheses should be addressed by conducting deeper studies. The cultural implications associated with Arabic- Hebrew code-switching definitely needs further investigation given the unique setting in which the process takes place-conflict.

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