

Micro-corpus codification in the Hebrew Revival



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Abstract:

In this paper, the author discusses the lexical codification work carried out in the Modern Hebrew Revival period. The development of Modern Hebrew may be viewed as consisting of three periods, in each of which at least one language planning "goal" has been sought. The first of these periods is that of "Language Revival" (1890-1914) in which the revival of that language in Palestine took place. At the beginning of its revival the Hebrew lexicon was so gravely inadequate for modern life—lacking words for concepts such as "tomato", "serious", and "newspaper"—that some leaders questioned the capacity of the language to be restored. Therefore, much corpus planning had to be done to fill that vast lexical gap. This aspect of the Revival was achieved through the cumulative efforts of educators, writers, translators, etc., as well as countless language-conscious individuals. This was carried out in various ways, retrieving old words and roots, creating new words from old words and roots, combining existing words, filling in pattern with root "fillers", borrowing words and roots, etc. All this arduous, seemingly endless campaign eventually paid off, and Hebrew is now a modern language, standardized and "normalized" in every respect.

1. Introduction

The development of Modern Hebrew may be viewed as consisting of three periods, in each of which at least one language planning "goal" has been sought. The first of these periods is that of "Language Revival" (1890-1914; Nahir, 1978; 1984), in which the revival of the Hebrew language in Palestine (now Israel) at the turn of the 20th century took place, and my discussion here will deal with this period. Much of the study of the Revival has focused on the status of the language, because the unprecedented transformation of the status of Hebrew from a language of religion back to a vernacular and a national language has been rightly viewed as the product of status planning (Nahir, 1998). Much corpus planning, however, was also involved. Restoring the status of the language was only going to succeed if its speakers would have an adequate code, most of all a lexicon, to communicate with. Here I will discuss the lexical codification work carried out in the Revival period, mostly by individuals, informally, even though a massive amount of lexical codification had been done previously by generations of writers in Hebrew, a language which never actually "died", but, following its demise two millennia ago, continued to be used as a "living written language". Despite these contributions, however, at the beginning of its revival the Hebrew lexicon was so gravely inadequate for modern life—lacking words for concepts such as "tomato", "a match", "serious", "polite", and "newspaper"—that some leaders questioned the capacity of the language to be restored.

I will define codification after Einar Haugen: "the work of a body or an individual who more or less knowledgeable, decides to give explicit, usually written, form to the [language] norm... chosen" (1983:271).

2. Macro-corpus planning. The Hebrew Language Committee

Predictably, the greatest obstacle to the adequacy of Hebrew as a full-fledged vernacular was the acute shortage of words, especially in the areas of daily modern life and in specialized areas such as science and technology. The best known and probably one of the greatest contributors to the solution of this problem was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1857-1922), who for many years was considered the "father" of the revival movement, until recently it has been realized that he had a significant impact on the language, but that was limited to its corpus.

Ben-Yehuda understood that the revival of Hebrew was not possible without adapting it to modern life. Therefore, in addition to his own work on the lexicon, to be discussed later, he and some friends established in Jerusalem in 1890 the Hebrew Language Committee, whose major task, other than spreading the spoken use of the language, would be to codify Hebrew in order to prepare it for its new function. A subcommittee was to search for existing words through Hebrew literature of all periods and to create new words where none existed. The Committee's major lexical sources would be: (1) primary sources—the Bible, Talmud, and later texts, especially of the Spanish period—, (2) words created by the Committee from existing roots, (3) words borrowed from Arabic, and (4) Hebrew words found in newly discovered archeological finds.

Less than a year after it was established, however, the Committee disbanded, though much of its work was continued by individuals, including Ben-Yehuda. As David Yelin, a colleague, later reported, the enterprise had become irreversible: "Even in those years the spoken language kept on expanding and new words were constantly established by scholars and sages, teachers and physicians, who needed the words for their writing... and who would then publish them. Many of them entered the spoken language, for they were needed. But these innovations were all haphazard, created by individuals and without a consensus" (Yelin, 1912; cited in Ben-Asher, 1977).

Thirteen years later, in 1903, a new Language Committee was formed by the newly established Hebrew Teachers Union, which recognized that innovations made by teachers, on an ad hoc basis, confused students moving between schools and even classrooms. An important function of the restored Committee, which retained the earlier policies, would be to assess and select words proposed by professionals, to whom it would turn for terminology lists in foreign languages in their respective areas.

The Committee also assumed the task of resolving language queries from the public. A selection of letters sent to the Committee was recently published in the Hebrew Academy's Newsletter (*Akadem*, 7, 1995). In one, a kindergarten teacher requested help on terms of children's games and handicraft, and enclosed a list of her own proposals. In another, a school principal sent the Committee questions and proposals for terms in geometry. In still another, a gymnastics teacher sent his proposals and requested the Committee's comments and approval. A bank manager asked for terms for banking, and a group of Kibbutz members who could not agree on the "correct" form of a Hebrew expression requested the Committee's arbitration.

In 1912, the Committee decided to become active in preparing its own critically needed Hebrew terminologies. It first dealt with 150 terms in arithmetic, some proposed by teachers but mostly drawn from ancient literature. These were words for concepts such as "number", "digit", "addition", "subtraction", "multiplication", "division", "remainder", "sum", etc. Ten were created by the Committee, of which seven were accepted and are still in use. The next terminology lists were in gymnastics, sowing, food, and plants. In gymnastics, for example, the published list included words for "right turn!", "left turn!", "forward!", "(stand) at ease!", etc., also currently in general use.

Many more lists were soon published, dealing with terms for one subject at a time. They were viewed by professionals in the respective fields, and then brought for final approval by the Committee, prior to publication. In these lists, French and German translations were given next to each Hebrew term, with a notation indicating which of the eligible sources it had been drawn from.

The Committee had its critics too, who took exception to what they viewed as mass production of words, or "a word factory". Even Ahad Ha'am, the highly influential writer, thought that new words should only be created by writers and only as needed. The famed Shuy Agnon (later Nobel Laureate) called for more effort to draw words from existing sources, even though he, like other critics of word innovators, eventually used most of their innovations (Bar-Adon, 1977). One group objected to using words from the Bible if they did not survive in Mishnaic Hebrew, since they were "dead" by definition. This was rejected, and most of the approximately 800 biblical words in this group were actually revived. Another group claimed that giving biblical words or roots new meanings would cause the loss of their original meanings and later the misinterpretation of the Bible. This has, in fact, occurred in a significant number of words, e.g., /ratson/, 'pleasure', became 'will, wish'.

3. Micro-corpus planning. Informal lexical codification

The Language Committee's accomplishments were in fact rather limited. First, it focused largely on specialized terminologies required by professionals, scientists, and technicians, yet mostly even these terms, particularly the ones that were eventually accepted, were actually created by the respective users in the field, construction engineers, auto mechanics, librarians, office workers, etc., not by the Committee. Similarly, the lexical needs of the general public were mostly met by individuals—writers, public figures, and others, altogether outside the Committee (see Nahir, 1974). Most of the Committee's real function was considering terms created by the "public" and approving or disapproving them. Second, the Committee's role in the language revival was rather marginal as it did not exist until 1903, when the Revival was already well under way (Fellman, 1973).

Therefore, in a recent study (Nahir, 1998) I have suggested that in the absence of a central authority during at least half of the Revival period, it should be seen as a case of "micro-language planning", where potential users constituted "language planning agents" active in "language planning cells", such as a newspaper editor's office. I referred there to **status** planning in the Revival, but it is equally valid for the concurrent lexical codification, most of which was carried out by individuals, even when the Language Committee was in existence, mostly as a by-product of their main work. In fact, "non-deliberate" innovations, according to David Yelin, a founding member of the Committee, were accepted at a higher rate: "[They] are natural and are accepted by the public" (Yelin, 1912; cited in Ben-Asher, 1977).

The drive to meet the need for thousands of new words was significantly advanced by the Semitic-type morphology of Hebrew which proved highly conducive to coining new words from existing roots. All Hebrew verbs and most nouns and adjectives are derived from both a "root" and a "pattern". Roots are fitted into one or more of about seventy verb, noun, or adjective patterns existing in Modern Hebrew, often with added prefixes, suffixes or infixes. Any root can be fitted into any pattern in which it did not exist before, thereby creating a new word. All a word coiner needs to do is use existing roots and fit them into existing but as yet unused patterns. This typical feature multiplies the number of potential Hebrew words "waiting" to be created if and when the need arises. It also helps learners of Hebrew, since they can predict the meaning of an unknown word based on their acquaintance with its root and the pattern the root is fitted into. It follows that words deriving from a given root usually belong to the same or related semantic fields. Thus Hebrew has at least 32 words deriving from the root /x.v.r./, fitted into various patterns, all having the general meaning of "association", e.g., /xaver/, 'friend'; /xevra/, 'company'; /xibur/, 'composition', and even /maxberet/, 'notebook' (see Sivan, 1980). There are at least 35 words deriving from /p.k.d./, of which 24 were created in Modern Hebrew, e.g., /tifked/, 'to function'; /poked/, 'census taker'; /mifkada/, 'military headquarters'; /hafkada/

'deposit'; /pakid/, 'office worker'.

Most new word creation in the Revival, then, was the informal product of individuals, mostly in the process of solving communication problems in their work. Some were known literary figures or leaders, but countless lexical items were created by unidentified individuals, whose creation nevertheless has since become part of the Hebrew lexicon. We will discuss briefly some of the most prolific lexical innovators and the methods applied generally in the process of lexical codification.

3.1. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda

Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, mentioned earlier, was the most prominent and prolific codifier of the new Hebrew lexicon. Soon after arriving in Palestine as a young man in 1884, he published a newspaper, first as a weekly newspaper and later as a daily newspaper. The lexicon he used consisted either of words that existed in contemporary Hebrew literature or words which he drew from the Bible and other texts of the past two millennia, in addition to a number of words of his own creation, though only some of these were accepted in usage. Ben-Yehuda also compiled the first comprehensive Hebrew Dictionary, whose impact on the Revival, however, was rather limited since the first volume was only published in 1909, when the Revival was approximately five years from completion, and only half the Dictionary was completed by the end of the Revival. But Ben-Yehuda also made significant contributions to Hebrew codification by writing several school textbooks, translating literary works, and compiling several Russian-Hebrew dictionaries. In all of these he used the Hebrew words he had discovered or created for his newspapers and for his large Dictionary. His innovations which are still in use included words for "ice-cream", "omelette", "salami", "hamburger", "jam", "fashion", "bra", "gloves", "green house", "cauliflower", "cactus", "telegram", "an iron", "revolver", "front", "soldier", "invasion", "bomb", "manoeuvre", "exercise", etc.

Ben-Yehuda was successful in coining single words for concepts to replace the multi-word phrases produced by others, e.g., the equivalent of an elevator was "that which goes up and down", a pen, "a writing tool which we never have to dip [in ink]", a glove, "housing for the hand" or "shoe for the hand", a kitchen, "the cooking room". He was less successful, incidentally, when early in his career, in order to meet the pressing need for words, he suggested that new roots should be "invented" *ex nihilo*, then used as real ones. This was universally rejected and never brought up again.

Ben-Yehuda may be seen to have followed certain criteria in his lexical work:

- (1) His major source was the Bible, from which he drew dormant *words*, often assigning them new meanings (e.g., /kidma/, 'progress', from biblical Hebrew "east"), and *roots* (e.g., /ma'abada/, 'laboratory' from the root of biblical Hebrew /avad/, 'to work'), including ones he derived from biblical personal names (/ahad/, 'a.h.d', from Ohad, Ehud, cognate of Arabic "hawada", 'treat with kindness').
- (2) From the Mishnah he drew words, which he also used either with their original or new meanings, and roots to create new words (e.g., /mimxata/, 'handkerchief', from Mishnaic Hebrew "m.x.t.", 'removing soot').
- (3) He frequently drew on words and roots in Aramaic, in which some parts of the Bible and other Jewish texts were written, and shaped them into Hebrew patterns (such as /dayal/, 'steward', from Aramaic /dayala/, 'attendant, servant').
- (4) As a last resort, he turned to Arabic (e.g., /adiv/, 'polite', Arabic /adib/, 'good mannered'), from which he also borrowed a feature of Arabic morphology, the suffix /-iya/ for creating nouns from other nouns (e.g., /yamiya/, 'navy', from /yam/, 'sea'; /iriya/, 'city council', from /ir/, 'city').

While he drew from old texts thousands of words, the number of words Ben-Yehuda actually *created* was much smaller, and only a fraction were verbs. Of a total of 281 words he coined, 229 were nouns, 32 adjectives, and 20 verbs. It is increasingly accepted, therefore, that his major contribution to the Hebrew lexicon was his function as a retriever of a large number of words from old sources. Also, despite the small number of words he created, those he did meet acute lexical needs.

3.2. Itamar Ben-Avi

Itamar Ben-Avi, Ben-Yehuda's oldest son (Ben-Avi, "son of my father", may also be read, since he spells Avi as an acronym, as "son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda"), was a journalist and a writer like his father, and he too was often faced in his writing with concepts and objects for which Hebrew words did not exist. For some, foreign loans filled the gaps, but, probably due to his father's influence, he often created his own words, which amounted to thousands. Unlike his father, though, he restricted himself to coining words only as he needed them rather than as a scholarly activity. This may explain why, having met actual communicative needs, his innovations were accepted by users much more readily than were his father's.

Ben-Avi's favourite methods of coining words were: (1) Blending two existing words to create a third one. One typical blend consisted of /al/, 'not, non-', + noun, e.g., /al-xut/, 'wireless, radio communication' (/xut/, 'wire'). (2) Creating verbs from existing nouns or adjectives, e.g., /siben/, 'to soap', from /sabon/, 'soap'. (3) He was a pioneer in creating slang words, some lasting for decades, e.g., /mezupat/, 'lousy, rotten' (Arabic /zift/). All in all, Ben-Avi's contributions included words for many basic concepts, such as "car", "airplane", "flammable", "independent", and "pickpocket".

3.3. H. N. Bialik

H. N. Bialik, a highly acclaimed Poet Laureate, also created numerous words as he needed them for his work. He once wrote to a colleague that "the new words I coined - I did not create them deliberately, for their own sake, but they were created by themselves, while I was writing, and when they were needed" (cited in Veiss, 1982). Still, he was concerned that with innovations uncontrolled, the newly revived language might be overwhelmed. If new creations came into the language in too large numbers, they would "weaken" it and "disfigure" its appearance. A language is a living organism which develops very slowly, from within. He was also worried about the effects of borrowing. The "grammatical mechanism" of Hebrew, he asserted, did not allow its development through borrowing from foreign sources: "There is a need to construct new words... in the spirit of the language" (Ibid.). But above all, it was the old sources which had to be tapped to fill lexical gaps. According to some scholars (e.g., Sivan, 1980; Kutscher, 1982), Bialik had a unique ability to introduce new life into old, even ancient words, filling them with "vitality". He particularly favoured combinations of older words, which he used abundantly in both his poetry and prose. We can recognize two types in his innovations: new words and new combinations, blends, or compounds. Some of his innovations include:

(1) New words such as for "import" (/ycvu/ from /ba/, 'come'), and "camera" (/matslema/ from biblical Hebrew /tselem/, 'image').

(2) New combinations: (a) old, existing combinations to which he assigned new meanings, mostly removing from them their metaphorical value and using them literally (e.g., his /ayin yafa/, 'a pretty eye', vs. Talmudic Hebrew, "generosity"); (b) new combinations which are similar to old ones, which he modified slightly and assigned them new meanings, e.g., his /ycmey šimurim/, 'sleepless days', fashioned after

biblical /leyl šimurim/, 'a sleepless night'.

3.4. Other identifiable lexical innovators

Many others created new words—among them writers, journalists, educators, translators, publishers and editors—e.g., /naxat/, 'to land', /palaš/, 'to invade', by a leading journalist. A revered poet, Avraham Shlonsky, coined countless words as he needed them in translating foreign literary works into Hebrew. Israel's first Foreign Minister, Moshe Sharet, was considered to be the creator of the now established /darkon/, 'passport', and /ašra/, 'visa', but he later admitted that he had "ordered" them from someone else. He did create several other words, though, e.g., /takrit/, 'incident', from /kara/, 'happen', and /šmar-taf/, 'baby-sitter', from /šamar/, 'watch', and /taf/, 'infants'. David Remez, the first Israeli Minister of Transportation, created the still used /monit/, 'taxi', from /mana/, 'to count'.

4. Methods of lexical codification in the Hebrew Revival

Some of the major methods used in lexical codification may now be summarized:

- (1) Drawing words from old texts for use with their original meanings.
- (2) Drawing words from old sources and assigning them new meanings (/xashmal/, 'electricity'; /mexona/, 'machine', from biblical Hebrew "foundation", "basis", "stand"; /kidma/, 'progress', from biblical Hebrew "eastern or front side"; /totax/, from biblical Hebrew "bayonet").
- (3) Deriving roots from old sources and using them to create new words.
- (4) Using words drawn as above but as different parts of speech (verb>noun>adjective, etc.).
- (5) Reduction of expressions into single words while keeping their meanings (/klavlav/, 'small dog', for /kelev katan/; /milon/, 'dictionary', for /sefer milim/).
- (6) Borrowing from European languages, particularly from Yiddish (especially colloquialisms, /menadned/, 'nag'; /shprints/, 'spray'; /mashvits/, 'boast'; /epes/, 'something'; /fargen/, 'be happy with someone'; /kumzits/, 'sitting and singing around a bonfire'; /shnorer/, 'one who lives off others'), Russian (including suffixes, e.g., /-chik/ diminutive; /-nik/, 'one who belongs to a given group') and German, and from Arabic (including colloquialisms, e.g., /adiv/, 'polite'; /nadir/, 'rare'; /mabsut/, 'happy', 'content'; /chizbat/, 'exaggerated tale'; /xabibi/, 'my pal, buddy, mate'; /zift/, 'trash, no-good'; /kef/, 'fun') and Aramaic. Usually borrowed words went through a Hebraization process.
- (7) Loan-translation (e.g., /gibuy/, 'backing'; /kisuy/, 'coverage'; /gan-yeladim/, 'kindergarten'; /ituy/, 'timing'; /yisum/, 'application'; /saraf gšarim/, 'burn bridges'; /soxet dma'ot/, 'tear jerker').
- (8) Popular etymology (e.g., /matne'a/, 'starter', from the root /no'a/).

(9) Adding suffixes or infixes to create words of different patterns from existing words. Some of the major ones are:

/-ya/ (borrowed from Arabic) (e.g., /sifriya/, 'library', from /sefer/, 'book'; /mitriya/, 'umbrella', from /matar/, 'rain'; /irya/, 'city hall, municipality', from /ir/, 'city');

/-on/ (e.g., /aviron/, 'airplane', from /avir/, 'air', + /on/; /ša'on/, 'a watch', from /ša'a/, 'an hour'; /iton/, 'newspaper', from /et/, 'time'; /yarxon/, 'a monthly', from /yerax/, 'month');

/-an/, for profession, occupation or having certain characteristics (e.g., /ta'asyan/, 'industrialist', from /ta'asiya/, 'industry'; /kov'an/, 'hat maker', from /kova/, 'hat'; /batlan/, 'a loafer', from /batala/, 'idleness');

/-ay/, for trade or having certain features (e.g., /xašmelay/, 'electrician', from /xa šmal/, 'electricity'; /mexonay/, 'mechanic', from /mexona/, 'machine'; /turay/, 'a private (soldier)', from /tur/, 'column');

the pattern **/CaCaC/**, for profession or trade (e.g., /sapar/, 'barber'; /tabax/, 'cook');

the pattern **/CaCeCet/**, for diseases (e.g., /šaxefet/, 'TB'; /nazelet/, 'a cold');

the pattern **/maCCeC/**, for tools, etc. (e.g., /masmer/, 'a nail'; /mavreg/, 'screwdriver'; /matpen/, 'compass').

(10) Using one of a small number of consonants as prefixes to create new words from existing roots, e.g., initial **/t-/** (/tizmoret/, 'orchestra'; /titsroxet/, 'consumption'; /taklit/, '(music) record'; /tnu'a/, 'movement, traffic') and initial **/mi-/** (/miskal/, 'weight'; /mivrak/, 'cable, telegram'; /midgam/, 'sample'; /miršam/, 'prescription'; /mišmar/, 'guard (post)').

(11) Merging pairs of words into single words (e.g., /migdalor/, 'lighthouse', from /migdal/, 'tower', and /or/, 'light'; /madxom/, 'thermometre', from /mad/, 'measure', and /xom/, 'temperature'; /re'ino'a/, 'cinema', from /re'i/, 'sight', and /no'a/, 'movement').

5. Conclusion

The revivers of Hebrew at the turn of the 20th century had two monumental tasks. One involved the **status** of the language and called for bringing about a shift in Palestine's Jewish community from the use of the dominant Yiddish to Hebrew. The other involved the **corpus** of the language and called for its codification to allow its potential speakers to communicate freely in a modern world. A number of codification areas were involved, including the choice and harmonization between the different phonological systems. Decisions also had to be made on the unification of spelling and related issues. But crucial as these issues were in the process, they could not compare with the task of filling the vast lexical gap that existed in Hebrew. Like the shift to Hebrew, this aspect of the Revival was also achieved within 2.5 decades through the cumulative efforts of the "language planning agents" in the field—educators, writers, poets, translators, editors, etc.—as well as countless language-conscious individuals in and out of the technological occupations. This was carried out in various ways, retrieving old words and roots, creating new words from old words and roots, loan-translations, combining existing words, blending, filling in pattern with root "fillers", borrowing words and roots, etc. All this arduous, seemingly endless campaign eventually paid off, and Hebrew is now a modern language, standardized and "normalized" in every respect. When the Revival was completed about 1914, the drive has shifted to ensure that it keeps up with new developments in the modern world. As in all other developed, "mature" languages, codification in pursuit of lexical modernization is an ongoing process.

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