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**Hebrew as heritage: The work of language in religious and communal continuity**

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**Abstract**

While Hebrew education maintains a dominant position in Jewish educational contexts, little research has looked at what the practice of Hebrew language education looks like on a daily basis. Drawing from an 18-month ethnography of junior high school students attending a private non-Orthodox all day school, this article critically examines the ways in which Hebrew was thought about and used in the classroom and during a two-week school-sponsored trip to Israel. Specifically, the article examines the multiple meanings that students and faculty infused into their use of Hebrew through their ideologies, words, and actions. It shows that the students and teachers draw upon Hebrew language ideologies in their daily practices, invariably appropriating them in complex and unexpected ways. This article concludes with a discussion on the relationship between heritage language learning and communal efforts to ensure continuity.

**Research Highlights**

- This paper provides an ethnographic analysis of the teaching of Hebrew in non-Orthodox Jewish day school education.

- It demonstrates that Hebrew created a learning context in which Jewishness and communal boundaries were created, reified, and challenged.

- It shows that Hebrew was paradoxically absent in some activities stressing Jewish identity, and its use was not always indexical of Jewishness.

- It argues for a critical reconsideration of the role of heritage language education in communal continuity efforts.

## 1. Introduction

As researchers have long noted, heritage language schools in the United States have served as an important site for the teaching of heritage language skills and cultural values to children from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds (Bradunas & Topping, 1988; Cummins, 1994; Garcia, forthcoming; Peyton et al., 2001).[i] Writing over 30 years ago about the crucial role of heritage language schools in fostering and augmenting cultural continuity and survival, Fishman (1980) argues that, "language and ethnicity continued to be viewed as crucially and eternally interrelated. The ethnic mother tongue, which may or may not be the personal mother tongue, is viewed as a causal dynamo from which ethnic greatness and authenticity are derived *with certainty*" (p. 237, italics added). Since this time, the purpose of heritage language schools has changed little. Language instruction is still perceived by many ethnic, minority, and religious communities as an integral and essential part of a larger effort to ensure the intergenerational transmission of cultural bodies of knowledge, values, and beliefs (Fishman, 2001; McCarty, 2002).

Yet in many regards, the model of heritage language education stands in direct contradiction to more contemporary understandings of cultural sustainability and reproduction. In recent years, scholars from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives have argued against the conceptualization of culture as a stable, fixed, and relatively unproblematic body of knowledge that can be easily transmitted from one generation to the next (Bekerman & Kopelowitz, 2008). Rather, the processes of cultural acquisition are now seen as dynamic, protean, and emergent; it is the process by which individuals create meaning by drawing on cultural forms as they act in social, material, and political spaces, and in doing so produce themselves as certain kinds of culturally and historically located persons (Schieffelin, 1990). This paradigmatic shift has

resulted in a compelling collection of scholarship that closely examines how cultural practices are made meaningful, negotiated, or resisted through interactional, discursive, and linguistic practices (Baquedano-Lopez, 1998; He, 2003). As a site of cultural transmission and socialization, the heritage language school offers a unique opportunity to understand the interrelationships of identity formation, cultural transmission, and language acquisition. What has been taken as *a priori* in many ethnic, diasporic, minority, and religious communities -- that knowledge, maintenance, or revival of a heritage language is critical in constructing identity and ensuring cultural sustainability– needs to be critically examined and empirically documented.

In this article, I employ an innovative approach to interrogating the connection between heritage language and identity construction. Specifically, I examine a case of heritage language acquisition that has largely escaped scholarly scrutiny -- the teaching and learning of Hebrew. While Hebrew does not clearly fit into one of the three types of heritage languages that Fishman (2001) delineates in that it is neither an immigrant, indigenous, or colonial language, nor are its students raised in a home where Hebrew is spoken as the language of communication, its learners have a cultural, religious, and historical connection to the language. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork of a cohort of seventh and eighth grade language learners attending a non-Orthodox Jewish day school, I critically examine situated language use in an educational setting in which the Hebrew language is explicitly taught as a means of passing on the rituals, traditions, and beliefs of Judaism.

While it is widely recognized and well documented that Hebrew is a primary component of Jewish educational practices because of its centrality in Jewish spiritual and cultural life, I choose to back away from this face-value assumption and instead look at the multiple meanings that the students and faculty infuse into the language through their beliefs, words, and actions. In

this sense, I am flipping the theoretical lens in approaching the teaching and learning of a heritage language, and asking not what students are able to do (or not do) with the language, but rather investigating what kinds of work a heritage language does for its learners. I choose this way of conceptualizing my approach because my interest here is not in the linguistic competence of the students, but rather in the enactment of ideologies as a means of understanding the relation of language and talk to broader social processes. Not only does this approach move us beyond linguistic models that assume an unmediated link between language learning and identity formation, but it allows us to focuses on the semiotic and discursive practices through which individuals use (or choose not to use) a heritage language in the process of constructing and negotiating a collective sense of self.

In this article I discuss multiple "working" of Hebrew in the classroom. First, I show how Hebrew acts as a performative in that its use changes the social structure of the classroom. Next, I argue that Hebrew works to define and create communal boundaries that differentiate Jews and non-Jews along a linguistic axis. Finally, I look at the use of other languages in the classroom in order to examine how the absence or lack of Hebrew also works to create an ideological space in which Jewishness is negotiated. Taken together, I show how the students and teachers draw upon Hebrew language ideologies in their daily practices, invariably appropriating them in complex and unexpected ways. As such, choices about when and how to use Hebrew offer a unique opportunity to problematize the role of heritage language education in strengthening and sustaining communal identity.

## 2. Background: Hebrew and its ideologies

Judaism is a religion steeped in language practices and language beliefs. That is to say, to a large extent, the practice of Judaism can be defined through its distinctiveness in the ways in

which languages and texts are recruited, employed, and regimented in religious and cultural practices (Boyarin, 1993; him and, 1997; Heilman, 1987). Whether it is a consideration of the language of ritual performance or daily interactions (Benor, 2004; Fader, 2009; Tannen, 1981), the role of language in nation-building (Myhill, 2004), or the highly marked and self-conscious uses of linguistic resources, including when, how, and by whom prayers are recited or the ways in which sacred texts are handled and stored, the "textuality of the Jewish condition" (Steiner, 1985, p. 5) is a central means by which religious and cultural Judaism is determined and sustained.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Jewish tradition has a lot to say about Hebrew -- a language that theologically and culturally occupies a place of privilege and power in defining authentic Jewish practice and traditions (Avni, 2008). However, what is important to recognize is that Hebrew is not a singular, monolithic code; rather, it is an umbrella term that subsumes multiple varieties -- Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, and Modern -- each linked to a distinct socio-historic period (Chomsky 1957).[ii] It is the very fact that Hebrew indexes both antiquity and modernity that has transformed it into a locus where ideologies of religion, culture, and nationalism all converge, creating in that convergence a discursive space in which Jewishness is defined and practiced.

In that one aspect of Hebrew language ideology underscores the centrality of Hebrew knowledge as itself constituting a collective Jewish identity, it would be easy to assume that Hebrew is widely known in the American Jewish community. However, this is not the case at all. While acquiring a rudimentary literacy in liturgical Hebrew has been an inherent feature of the American Jewish experience, English has staked an unequivocal claim as the language in which Jewishness is articulated in the United States (Benor, 2009). Increasingly, American Jews along the denominational spectrum find themselves in the paradoxical situation of acknowledging the

primacy of Hebrew as "their" language, while simultaneously experiencing its texts predominantly in translation (Shaked, 1993). This "linguistic disinheritance" (Wirth-Nesher, 2006, p. 18) not only pertains to liturgical Hebrew, but equally applies to Modern Hebrew, a variety the vast majority of American Jews do not know well (Morahg, 1993). [iii]

Likewise, given the linguistic variation within the Hebrew language, as well as the complex historical trajectory of Judaism throughout the world, it would be a mistake to assume that there is a monolithic Hebrew language ideology, or that all Jews ascribe to the same system of beliefs in regard to the role of the Hebrew language as a means of articulating Jewish meaning. Case in point: while Reform Judaism in America have minimized the amount of liturgical Hebrew in worship and have incorporated more English in order to be more inclusive, ultraorthodox Hasidic Jews in Israel and abroad strictly maintain Hebrew as a holy language and use Yiddish as their daily vernacular. Certainly, uses of and beliefs about Hebrew differ invariably across geographic, denominational, and ethnic Jewish groups. What is however most striking about Hebrew language ideologies is that the multiplicity of representational acts that Hebrew is called upon to perform is never far removed from the variable ways in which Jewish people choose to construct and sustain a religious, ethnic, spiritual or national identification. As a semiotic marker, Hebrew is a language of meaningful contours that can be infinitely drawn across the three distinct poles of Judaism – religion, nationalism, and peoplehood – which bridge faith, culture, and identity.

For these reasons, Hebrew is intricately interwoven with Jewish educational practices. In practice this means that ideologies attached to Hebrew inform and shape pedagogical and theological philosophies and policies regarding what it means to be an "educated Jew" in America (Avni & Menken, in press). Though the reasons for learning Hebrew vary widely

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among different Jewish educational institutions, children are typically exposed to the multiple varieties throughout their educational trajectory.[iv] Surprisingly though, while the discourse of Hebrew language education is saturated with assumptions and beliefs regarding the role of Hebrew in maintaining, strengthening, and ensuring religious continuity, almost no empirical research of daily practices exists to validate or repudiate these assumptions.

**3. Jewish day school education in the United States**

Though publicly-financed schools continue to be the default educational arrangement for most American children, private all day schools have thrived as religious communities have recognized their value in creating all-day educational contexts in which religious beliefs are affirmed and reinforced. This has certainly been the case for the non-Orthodox Jewish community, which over the past several decades has chosen to make the day school the centerpiece of communal, educational, and philanthropic efforts to strengthen individual and collective Jewish identity (Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, 2007). While in the early 1900s American Jews believed "Jewishness was something almost innate" and that "schools need not, and in all probability, could not instill it" the need for formal and explicit Jewish education became more apparent as the Jewish community became more integrated and assimilated into mainstream American secular culture throughout the 20th century ( Ibid, p.17). Already in the mid-1900s Jewish identity was perceived as not "a matter of course, but of choice"-- underscoring the sociological fact that the intergenerational transmission of religious values and faith could no longer be taken for granted and that remaining Jewish was no longer a given, but a decision. Wertheimer captures this shift from ascribed to achieved identity when he writes that non-Orthodox Jewish communities recognized that "for such a choice to be made, a

sense of particularity and belonging" had to be instilled by the "intentional enterprise of instruction" (p. 17). Hence, formal Jewish educational programs were born.[v]

Though private religious schools are not a 20th century invention, the contemporary non-Orthodox Jewish day school is distinctly and often self-consciously modern. Its creation and growth can be traced to the nexus of philanthropists, communal leaders, and educators who sought to put into practice an effective pedagogical model in order to counter the perceived "crisis of continuity" that came to a peak in the 1990s (The Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1991). Observing that social-structural boundaries such as ethnic neighborhoods and endogamous marriages could no longer be relied on to perpetuate Jewish group distinctiveness, communal leaders came to see the primary basis for Jewish continuity resting in the free choice of each individual to decide to associate with the group. Hence, they set out to influence how individuals felt about being Jewish, believing that stronger identification would result in securing the future of American Jewry (Krasner, 2006). At the core of this response was the belief that psychological experiences (i.e., strengthening emerging identity of its children) would yield demonstrable sociological effects (i.e., group continuity) (Kelner, 2002).

In the past two decades, proponents have evinced a strong commitment to day school education, focusing their attention on building, financially supporting, and strengthening the teaching practices of these educational institutions in which youth can be immersed in an all-day educational experience wherein the main identity lies in being Jewish.[vi] The growing numbers of non-Orthodox Jewish day schools, though diverse in their ideologies and structures, and decentralized in their greater organization, present themselves as high-quality educational institutions that offer a dual curriculum of secular and religious studies to children from a wide range of religious backgrounds (Avni & Menken, in press).

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In this sense, the contemporary non-Orthodox Jewish day school emerged as a reactionary measure "to serve as the critical setting for the transmission – in a highly self-conscious and deliberate fashion – of a Jewish identity that could withstand the corrosive effects of modern society" (Wertheimer, 1999, p. 18). Remove the word "Jewish" and one could easily sum up the experience of other ethnic, minority, and religious groups in the United States that have turned to educational institutions as a buffer against perceived encroaching assimilatory processes.[vii] Equally important, this shift from inheritable to transmittable identity reflects a set of agreed-upon beliefs regarding the purpose of religious and heritage schools and what they can ostensibly accomplish. The first of which is the understanding that "being" a particular religion or ethnicity is more than just ascribed identity, but rather requires a deliberate action of some sort. Second is the belief that schools are sites in which this agentive process can be put into practice and where identity can be delineated and transmitted. Finally is the position that this social process of strengthening identification can guard against assimilatory pressures.

In short, the non-Orthodox day school, whose purpose is to effect demonstrable change in the ways that the students think, feel, and behave**,** is squarely and unabashedly in the *habitus* business (Bourdieu, 1977). As such, it has two primary educational missions. On one level, it is concerned with how its students are produced as guardians, performers, and experts of a particular body of Jewish knowledge. At the same time, on a broader level, it is concerned with how this production of learners results in the (re)production of Jewish cultural and religious continuity. For both goals, Hebrew education is perceived as pivotal.

## 4. Context of study and methods

The data discussed in this article are drawn from a larger ethnography carried out at Rothberg School (pseudonym), a non-Orthodox Jewish day school (grades 6-8) established in the

mid-1990s in Manhattan (Avni, 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b).[viii] Though affiliated with the United

Synagogues of Conservative Judaism -- the association of Conservative congregations in North

America, the school attracts students and teachers that represent a wide range of levels of Jewish

ethnicity, observance, and religiosity.[ix] The primary aim of the original study was to examine

how language practices framed and structured the production and socialization of religious and

cultural identification. For 18 months, between 2004 and 2006, I closely followed one class—a

group of co-ed students (9 boys and 3 girls) and seven teachers (2 males and 5 females) through

seventh and eighth grade observing their school experiences, including secular and religious

lessons, prayer services, free-time activities, and a two-week trip to Israel.[x] The students and

teachers were largely from Ashkenazi, middle-class backgrounds, and lived in various

neighborhoods throughout New York City. Hebrew was only a native language for one native-

born Israeli teacher and two students who were the children of Israeli expatriates. In addition to

daily observations, I took detailed fieldnotes, and audio recorded over 400 hours of interactions.

Many of these recordings were transcribed.

This corpus of classroom recorded data was supplemented with semi-formal interviews

conducted in English with students, faculty, and members of the administration. All interviews

were audiotaped and fully transcribed. The transcribed data were carefully analyzed, looking for

patterns and thematic issues of relevance, which were then coded so as to allow for further

analysis. In order to verify my interpretations and get an additional level of data, I conducted

individual and group feedback sessions in which students and faculty were asked to respond to

some of the recorded data and provide additional insight. Finally, I collected the school's

marketing material and policy and curricular documents, as well as the students' written class

work.

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The analytic lens for this study draws heavily from the language socialization research paradigm (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002), and particularly how it has been applied to second language learning contexts (Duff, 2011). With its emphasis on interactions between students and teachers, this theoretical framework is particularly relevant for analyzing how students are socialized to practices, beliefs, and expectations of their communities through language, while also being socialized to community-specific language ideologies and ways of thinking about and engaging in language and literacy practices. Along with ethnographic focus on the everyday, this paradigm reveals the processes by which particular ways of thinking and acting are negotiated, reproduced, stigmatized, or validated.

While scholarship in the sociology of American schooling has shown that schools are critical sites for understanding the politics of the processes of cultural production and change, with notable exception (Fader, 2009; Baquedano-Lopez, 1998; Peele-Eady, 2011), little research has been conducted in religious educational settings on the ways in which everyday language practices and ideologies inform and interact with beliefs about child-raising, schooling, cultural continuity, and multilingualism. An ethnographic focus on how youth on the cusp of adolescence navigate, take on, and redefine cultural practices and expectations through linguistic and other semiotic means merges contemporary approaches to examining youth culture and contemporary schooling (Mendoza-Denton, 2008). A central focus of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the complex ways in which young teenagers draw upon, think about, and utilize Hebrew in the process of learning to be members of a religious diasporic community through the integration of interdisciplinary research in the sociology of schooling, linguistic anthropology, and Jewish ethnography.

At Rothberg, Hebrew occupied a significant place in the cultural, educational, and religious landscape. The curriculum was divided into secular and Jewish studies, with the latter including Hebrew language education, the study of Biblical and rabbinic texts, Jewish holidays, prayer, and Israel education. Modern Hebrew was taught for at least 50 minutes every day; moreover, Rothberg had an official language policy of teaching Hebrew in Hebrew, making Modern Hebrew both the content and medium of instruction. In addition, students studied older varieties of Hebrew every day for at least one hour during the study of sacred texts and prayer. Put together, the Hebrew language and Jewish studies curriculum was firmly rooted in the centuries-old tradition of teaching Hebrew (in all of its varieties) as a means of transmitting Jewishness (a cultural/social sense of selfhood and collectivity ) as well as Judaism (a religious community).

While the students and teachers did not always completely agree on their language ideologies and practices, and tensions did surface regarding the purpose and implementation of specific Hebrew language policies (see Avni, 2012a, 2012b for examples), rigorous ethnographic attention allowed me to understand not only how the students and teachers' complex beliefs about Hebrew took shape over time, but also how these beliefs came to affect the ways in which Hebrew was learned, talked about, and utilized in different contexts and for different aims. In the following sections, I looked more closely at how Hebrew was used (or not) in daily classroom practices, and show that its use did not always work in expected ways.

**5. Results: The semiotic complexity of Hebrew**

**5.1. Hebrew as performative**

First elaborated by the philosopher of language J.L. Austin (1962), the concept of performativity theorizes that certain utterances do not simply describe pre-existing states of

affair, but rather bring these states into existence. This notion of talk as a type of action that changes social reality was further developed by Judith Butler (1997), who argues that social identities are not just pre-existing attributes of individuals that their behavior expresses, but are actually brought into being and sustained through repeated actions that individuals perform. I draw on this understanding of performativity in order to elaborate how imputed ideologies of Hebrew authenticity worked in everyday classroom discourse to turn ordinary classroom activities into Jewish acts of religious and cultural significance. Put differently, I show how the social identity of "Jewish" emerged in the classroom and how it was fostered and sustained through everyday language practices and linguistic choices rooted in language ideologies. In this way of thinking, Hebrew performed identity by serving as a medium in which Jewishness was made visible and socially meaningful.

To begin, the commitment to Hebrew language education was a central component of the Jewish studies curriculum, and was firmly linked to beliefs about what Jewish education entails. This ideological association between Hebrew language learning and Jewish education was not only underscored in the significant amount of time that students spent learning and reading the different varieties of Hebrew every day, but also in metapragmatic themes that periodically surfaced in classroom discussions regarding the importance of Hebrew within the school. One such discussion took place during break time, in which I had the opportunity to sit with some of the students and talk more explicitly about the role of Hebrew in their education.

> Sharon: But, let me ask you guys, do you think that there could be a day school without any Hebrew classes? I mean, could there be a day school without Hebrew?
> Ira: I don't understand what you mean. What, what, what do you mean?
> Sharon: I mean, what would you think if the teachers here decided to stop teaching Hebrew? Would you still be getting a good Jewish education?

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| Benji: | That makes no sense. Why would they stop teaching Hebrew? Do you know something that we don't know? 'Cause my parents will be pretty pissed. I mean... |
| Sharon: | They're not going to stop, don't worry. You still have your test this afternoon. (Laughter). I'm just talking hypothetically. You know, can there be a day school that doesn't teach Hebrew? |
| Adam: | No. Like, duh, of course not. It's like, what's the point? |
| Phil: | Yeah, like, if we don't learn it, who is going to? |
| Aaron: | I still don't get the question. Are you saying that *you* don't think that we should learn Hebrew? |
| Sharon: | No, not at all. That's not what I mean. |
| Benji: | Oh good. Because I was really confused. I mean, I thought you said you were Jewish. (Transcript, April 19, 2005) |

In this interaction, we see that Hebrew worked to delineate the boundaries of Jewish education. So strong was the students' association between Hebrew and their educational mission that they were unable to conceive of a Jewish educational experience without Hebrew. Benji's final comment, 'I thought you said you were Jewish,' suggests that my very questioning of this link invalidated my status as religious insider.[xi] In short, this dialogue offers a lens for seeing how Hebrew was encoded as a site and practice of authentic Jewishness, with particular pertinence for the philosophical and practical considerations of what gets taught and by whom.

The ideology of Hebrew as Jewish authenticator could also be seen in the educational policy regarding the use of translation when reading sacred Jewish texts – a cornerstone component of Jewish studies curriculum at the school. In addition to the Hebrew-only language policy in which teachers and students were strongly encouraged to speak Modern Hebrew during Hebrew language classes (Avni, 2012a), there was also an explicit policy that stressed the use of Biblical Hebrew (*loshyn kodesh*) over that of the vernacular, English, during scriptural learning and prayer recitation. Hence, students were reprimanded for using translated editions of the Hebrew Bible. However, due to their varied level of linguistic proficiency, they often had difficulties fully comprehending what they were reading. Despite these challenges, it was

believed that the benefits of studying the texts in Hebrew outweighed the pedagogical disadvantages. In the headmaster's words, "once you are able to function with the actual text to do other things, as opposed to a translation facsimile of the text, then you are already working at a level of authenticity that you couldn't work before." This belief in the authenticity of the "original" was echoed by the seventh grade Bible teacher, who when talking about her aversion to the use of translated texts in her class argued, "I think it is important for them to learn how to read text (in the original) and learn text as part of Jewish education." These comments suggest that it is not just the Hebrew content that gave the learning experience authenticity, but it was the actual process of learning how to read the sacred texts in its original language that imbued the pedagogical activity with legitimacy (Avni, 2012b). In this regard, Hebrew performed an authenticating role that transformed a literacy practice into a site of Jewish identification negotiation.

Finally, Hebrew use was encoded in a discourse of ethics that was semiotically linked with culturally appropriate ways of acting. Specifically, Hebrew worked to index the moral interpretation of an activity, which was then metapragmatically linked with conceptualizations of Jewishness. As is customary in American Judaism, all students at Rothberg had two names: a secular name for everyday use and a Hebrew name for religious purposes. Following this, the school policy was to use English names in secular classes (e.g., math, science, social studies) and Hebrew in religious classes (e.g., Hebrew and Judaic studies). One infraction to this policy occurred when Robert, a math teacher, approached four boys sitting at their desks during recess and said, "Benyamin, Moshe, Shmuel and Yitzhak, is it true what I've heard about the disappearing food?" Immediately the boys recognized that they had been caught taking (in their words, "just trying out") some of the food that had been purchased for the school-wide holiday

party. Since he always used their English names (i.e., Benji, Matt, Sam, and Isaac), his linguistic choice to use Hebrew suggests that he was fully aware that the students would felicitously interpret his words with the gravitas that he intended. As a performative, Hebrew shifted the accusation into a discursive space in which a type of behavior was marked as deviant. The intended effect was validated by both Robert, who later confided in an interview that he was so angry at the boys that he had used their Hebrew names as a way of letting them know that he "meant business," as well as by one of the students, Sam, who told me that hearing Robert use his Hebrew name, Shmuel, made him understand the extent of his inappropriate actions. Or as he put it, "Usually I'm proud to use my Hebrew name, but when Robert used it, I knew I had really messed up."

In summary, what these examples suggest is that Hebrew played a significant role in constituting certain acts as Jewish with all its moral loadings. More than the referential value of its words, the shared affective, symbolic, and ideological values repeatedly attached to Hebrew enabled its users to utilize the language as a semiotic resource that changed the social reality of the classroom in religiously and socially meaningful ways. The focus on the role of Hebrew in authenticating and validating particular ways of being educated, studying texts, and behaving shows how Jewishness was discursively constructed and negotiated in this classroom context. As a performative, therefore, Hebrew produced the categories by which these students could organize and make sense of their Jewishness, identities, and practices.

**5.2. Hebrew as boundary marker**

Arguably, any communal heritage school thrives on the essentialization of difference. That is to say, the success of a given community to successfully socialize its children to a particular body of knowledge and practices is predicated to a large degree on its ability to define

who they are vis-à-vis others. However, Rothberg, as a fairly representative model of contemporary non-Orthodox Jewish day school education, faced a distinctive challenge in defining these boundaries for two reasons. On one hand, the students were highly engaged in secular and popular culture. They watched reality shows on television, read popular teenage fiction, spent their free time on the Internet, and participated in secular leisurely and academic pursuits. On the other hand, given that the student body came from families that represented a wide spectrum of levels of Jewish religiosity and observance (i.e., following Jewish dietary laws, attending synagogue, observing Sabbath laws), the school often had to thread the proverbial needle of defining Judaism in ways which were simultaneously pluralistic, inclusive, and traditional enough to appeal to the wide diversity within the school. It is perhaps for this reason that at Rothberg, Hebrew was often the site in which notions of us/them were determined and validated. One of the ways the school strengthened the students' sense of Jewish collectivity and selfhood was to continually reinforce and articulate a heightened sense of difference between Rothberg and neighboring public school students (perceived as secular and non-Jewish). Hebrew, as a signifier of Jewishness, therefore worked at the school to discursively achieve this goal by creating communal boundaries and defining social categories of difference between Jews and non-Jews.

Notions of insiderness and cohesiveness were linked to the knowledge of Hebrew through the trope of Hebrew as unifier. In practical terms, this belief that Hebrew belongs to the Jewish people and is what unites them across time and space was articulated in an interview with Rachel, the seventh grade Hebrew teacher.

> You know, for my own personal experience I have many stories where Hebrew really came in handy. You know I was stuck in Paris over *Shavuot* (holiday) and I need a place to go, and I hear Hebrew on the street. I don't know a word of French, but I can start speaking Hebrew. I can get to where I need to go, etc. I was in Istanbul for *Purim*

(holiday) and you go to a *shul* (synagogue) and it is like the same *tefillah* (prayers), the same *megillah* (prayer read on Purim), the same, like, there is something really nice and comforting about that, and I think really exciting about that that it makes sense that a people should have a language, you know.

This juxtaposition of Hebrew and peoplehood was also instantiated in many stories that weaved their way into the tapestry of classroom experiences. Hence, when students spoke about how they felt "one with the Jewish people" during a public Memorial Day ceremony when they were in Israel, they focused on their depth of feeling upon hearing Hebrew being used to honor the fallen soldiers, despite their lack of linguistic fluency to actually understand the Hebrew being used. The very fact that the students assigned such emotive qualities to its use suggests that at the symbolic level, a shared response and sensibility was linguistically mediated and achieved (Avni, 2011). These stories quickly became part of the folklore of the classroom, and reinforced a notion that knowledge and use of Hebrew marked a distinctly Jewish collective identity.

Another way in which the trope of Hebrew as unifier was articulated was through a series of value-laden binary oppositions (e.g., Jewish/non-Jewish; Hebrew speakers/non Hebrew speakers; real/fake; insiders/outsiders) that defined Hebrew as an authenticating marker differentiating between insiders and others. To illustrate how this dichotomization played out, I offer two classroom interactions that took place in response to the use of Hebrew in popular American media at the time. The first centers on the pop superstar Madonna, who in the late 1990s became a student of Kabbalah, or Jewish mysticism.[xii] In 2005, during the time of this study, she released an album called *Confessions on the Dance Floor* in which the lyrics of one of the songs, Isaac, included the words of the Hebrew poem *Im Nin'alu*, written in the 17th century by a mystic, Rabbi Shalom Shabazi. It was this song that Sarah, one of the students, brought into class to share with the rest of the students during recess and led her to announce:

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| Sarah: | So it's not enough that she's like the richest woman in the world, now she wants to be Jewish also. I mean, just changing your name and thinking you know *kabbalah* doesn't give you the right to… |
| Ben: | Yeah, right. She's Jewish like I'm the pope. |
| Sam: | Pope Ben. Hey, you both have a *kippah*. (laughter) |
| Sharon: | So you don't like the song? |
| Isaac: | It's got a cool name at least. |
| Sarah: | It's not about the song. Seriously, she can't just use Hebrew in any way she wants. It's just wrong. |

From this short interaction, we can see that Sarah considers Madonna's use of Hebrew in her lyrics as illegitimate and fraudulent. Though she did not explicitly say it at the time, later in speaking with her about her comment, she reinforced her displeasure with people who utilized Hebrew as a trendy commodity that in her view, "cheapened the language" and "insulted Jews, even if they weren't religious." Implicit in her response is an underlying belief that Jews are the rightful owners of Hebrew, and that they must protect against its misappropriation by non-Jews (or those trying to pass as Jews) who may have different motivations or intentions.

While it might be possible to think that Sarah's problem with Madonna's Hebrew lyrics was because it debased the language and blurred the lines between the sacred and profane, this argument is unsustainable in light of her comments several months later in regards to the irreverent use of Hebrew in the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. In this 2006 release, Jewish actor Sacha Baron Cohen played the sexist and homophobic title character that employed Hebrew for what was supposed to be his native language of Kazakhstan. When I asked Sarah if she thought it was okay that Borat was using Hebrew in this puckish way, she replied that she thought the movie was "hysterical and amazing," and that the real humor in the movie was the cleverness of the conceit; that is, that most of the audience (who were presumably not Hebrew speakers and not aware of Cohen's level of Jewish religiosity) didn't get his subversive linguistic game. Paradoxically, the irony of a

Hebrew-speaking anti-Semite reinforced her ideological positioning of Hebrew as a language that differentiates between Jews and non-Jews. Much like the argument put forth by minority groups that see in their appropriation of historically offensive words a source of empowerment (Asim, 2008), Sarah saw in Borat's subversive and transgressive use of Hebrew a means of establishing insider/outsider status. Again, Sarah did not categorically reject these celebrities' uses of Hebrew in secular culture (i.e., a pop song and a Hollywood movie) as just a matter of inappropriate intention, a point she made clear in a follow-up conversation in which I pushed her to explain these two comments. What specifically peeved her was Madonna's appropriation of a language that was not, in her words, "hers to play around with"; whereas Cohen, by dint of his being "one of us" had "earned the right to use Hebrew to make fun of others." In short, that Madonna could not use Hebrew in her songs, but that Sacha Baron Cohen could in his film reflects a complex logic that underlies the role of Hebrew as both a marker of insiderness and difference. In this representational space linking religion, popular culture, and identity, semiotic ideologies, particularly about what language does and who can use it, played a crucial mediating role (Keane, 2007).

Finally, we get a glimpse of these ideologies at work during the school-sponsored trip to Israel in which the students bought many souvenirs. While many of the students purchased T-shirts with Hebraized lettering of American products and places (e.g., Coca-Cola, Brooklyn), by far the most popular T-shirt was a plain white shirt with four "Hebrew" words on it in black letters.

Figure 1: Picture of "Hebrew" t-shirt souvenir

Because the chosen font imitates the calligraphic curves and serifs of traditional Hebrew lettering, only upon careful observation would a person notice that the words were not actually

written in Hebrew, but rather in upside down English letters. As a linguistic trick of the eye, this interlingual playfulness is an interesting case of bivalency—what Woolard (1997) refers to as the use of words that could "belong equally to both (linguistic) codes" (p. 8). To appreciate its liminality, observers of this shirt must have some knowledge of both English and Hebrew (at least at the orthographic level). On one level, purchasing this shirt was pure adolescent indulgence, in that the students knew they were transgressing a rule regarding the use of curse words, but would not get in trouble for wearing it. On a more symbolic level, though, it is possible to argue that this T-shirt, through its orthographic choice, indexed insider/outsider boundary markers. While some lacking Hebrew literacy (including many American Jews who are able to decode Hebrew text, but not comprehend its meaning) might read this text and mistakenly assign it spiritual or religious importance, those with Hebrew knowledge (like themselves) would quickly see its subversiveness and perceive its humor. In this case, the materiality of this t-shirt embodied difference, as wearers of this cultural artifact were symbolically and physically on the inside of this joke.

The case of Madonna's use of Hebrew lyrics, Borat's verbal manipulations, and an interlingual t-shirt highlight the ways in which Hebrew functioned as a site of difference and offers a lens for examining the relationship between religious identification, language, and material culture. Rather than being a sacred language of prayer or a modern language of communication, Hebrew worked to legitimize, authenticate, and delineate what (or who) was Jewish, and what was not. Seen in this way, knowledge of Hebrew was not just a measure of linguistic proficiency, but also one of cultural proficiency: what it means to be on the inside or outside of this cultural group.

**5.3. The indeterminacy of Hebrew**

Up to this point I have argued that the use of Hebrew performed an authenticating role in constructing Jewishness and created a sense of community predicated on ideologies of difference. Taken together, they suggest that Hebrew was employed to construct and negotiate a Jewish sense of selfhood and collective consciousness. However, as most language researchers note, it is necessary to tread gingerly when considering the connection between language and a socially defined construct such as Jewishness. To say that Hebrew enabled a form of Jewish consciousness and sensibility to be expressed is not the same thing as saying that Jewishness was always articulated in or through its use. It is at this point that I want to examine when Hebrew was not at work, or in other words, absent from interactions. To do this, I present examples in which Hebrew was not used, even though its use might have been expected and would have been completely acceptable.

To begin, one of the most surprising discoveries was that despite the strongly held belief that Hebrew connected Jews across time and space, in reality, it was not used in most opportunities to speak with native Hebrew speakers. For example, while Noam, a boy who arrived from Israel at the beginning of eighth grade, offered the students an excellent chance to practice their Hebrew, they persisted in speaking with him in English, even downright rejecting his requests to speak Hebrew. Linguistically ostracized, Noam was not alone. The Israeli security guards at the school were virtually ignored and Israelis visiting the school conducted all their activities in English. Moreover, this absence of Hebrew extended beyond the classroom walls; during the trip to Israel the absence of Hebrew was palpably felt when the students interacted with Hebrew speaking Israeli youth who had to "break their teeth" in order to have a meaningful conversation about everyday topics like music and videogames. Additionally, Hebrew-speaking

tour guides spoke to the students in English, and all written material distributed on the trip was prepared or translated into English.

This almost complete avoidance of Modern Hebrew in the one place in the world in which it is spoken as a native language is paradoxically curious, particularly given the broader context of Israel-America relations and the place of Hebrew as a minor language in the global sense. On one hand, many leaders in the Jewish community strongly call for the learning of Modern Hebrew so that these two large and influential Jewish communities can strengthen their commitments and grow closer. At the same time, since Hebrew is not a well known or high status language throughout the world, and has a relatively minor presence in the linguistic landscape of the United States, there were limited opportunities for the students to speak Hebrew outside of the classroom in New York, Yet, in Israel the students did not take advantage of the limitless opportunities to put into practice what they studied assiduously in the classroom.

Two possible, but not mutually exclusive, ideas might explain this linguistic lacuna; first, in some ways Hebrew was perceived as a barrier that might prevent students from experiencing the full range of emotion that English could enable, and second, being in Israel, the historical and spiritual center of Jewish life, made the need for Hebrew redundant. The latter presupposes that the act of setting out toward the sacred center was itself perceived as a performance of identity, irrespective of which languages were spoken. Both interpretations were underscored in a conversation with the two Israeli counselors who accompanied the group throughout the two weeks during the trip. After a staff meeting one evening, I asked them (in Hebrew) about the overall lack of Hebrew on the trip, questioning whether it was intentional or coincidental. In response, they claimed that though they knew that the students spoke Hebrew, their job was to educate diaspora Jews into a particular way of thinking about the Jewish homeland through

visual, embodied, and experiential experiences. Although Hebrew was clearly part of the Zionist ideology, they felt that they could achieve their goals better in English. Asked if they could ever envision a trip with American Jewish day school students conducted wholly in Hebrew, Vered, the female guide, responded tongue in cheek "Even if you will it, it will remain a dream"[xiii] suggesting that American Jews would always remain in some type of linguistic exile -- never able to fully experience their spiritual homeland in its native language.[xiv]

Collectively, these complex language ideologies, intricately tied up with notions of diaspora and nationalistic identifications, resulted in a highly Jewish, but Hebrew-lite experience. Despite spending at least a quarter of their school day in the classroom engaged in communicative and textual-based activities using the various varieties of Hebrew, even the students with Modern Hebrew proficiency ordered their lunches at the McDonald's in Tel Aviv in English, squealing, "I'm lovin' it" at the opportunity to partake in a kosher happy meal. Likewise, one student acknowledged in a written assignment that at the Western Wall in Jerusalem he opted to say not just "the same Hebrew prayers we say every day" but rather "our own English prayers" which "made the experience all the more meaningful." This paradox raises fundamental questions about how Hebrew (in its different varieties) works for American Jews when they are in the United States and when they are in Israel. While in the former, liturgical Hebrew is one of the salient markers of Jewish knowledge and identification and the means through which spirituality and religiosity are achieved, in the latter, Hebrew becomes just one of many available semiotic means within the travel experience that enables them to experience Jewish authenticity (Kelner, 2002). Put differently, in New York, Hebrew acted as authenticator of Jewish meaning and content; in Israel, Jewishness was presupposed and therefore inherent in everything the students did on their trip.[xv]

Yet another time in which Hebrew seemed to work as a redundancy was during the three-week classroom unit on the Holocaust, arguably one of the defining events of modern Judaism. Except for two occasions --  explaining the use of the word *Shoah* to differentiate this historical event from other genocides, and discussing the naming of the Holocaust Museum (*Yad Vashem*) in Israel – Hebrew was conspicuously absent in this core component of the Judaic Studies curriculum. And while it might be argued that Hebrew did not necessarily belong in a unit about the Holocaust, it is interesting to note that Yiddish – the vernacular of the Eastern European Jewish population during World War II– was also absent. As was the case with the lack of Hebrew use in Israel, this absence suggests that an activity could be deeply saturated in Jewish content without the use of any Jewish language.

Finally, if Hebrew was not always necessary to evoke Jewishness, the corollary was also true; the use of Hebrew did not itself construct a Jewish reality. For example, one of the favorite recess activities was for the students to learn the Hebrew words for things like flatulence and belching. At the same time, Josh, an aspiring artist, used cursive Hebrew in his comic strips as the invented language of his alien creatures because he thought the orthography looked "cool and mysterious." For him, as he discussed in a feedback session, Hebrew did not signify the spiritual, the national, or the cultural, but rather proved to be an especially productive mode of cultural creativity. In both cases, the symbolic value of the language did not isolate the students from life's vicissitudes, or guarantee that it would always be used in a religiously meaningful way. All in all, these examples remind us that linguistic choices are not always intended as acts of identity. Rather, the propensity of language to circulate and be decontextualized and then recontextualized into new contexts (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) poses practical and theoretical

challenges to the ideological anchoring of Hebrew as the language of spirituality, and to those who perceived it as a proxy of one's Jewishness.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to examine the use of Hebrew in a non-Orthodox Jewish day school setting. Drawing from ethnographic detail, I have shown that Hebrew worked to highlight the saliency of Jewishness in an activity, as well as to construct and negotiate communal boundaries between Jews and others. Concurrently, the lack of Hebrew in particular activities in the classroom and in Israel did not prevent the construction of Jewishness, nor did the employment of Hebrew always establish index Jewish ideas or values. In short, Hebrew could both evoke Jewishness and be tangential to this evocation.

What surfaces in this paper is that the practice of Hebrew use for American Jewish youth is uniquely configured, shaped not only by historical and religious beliefs, but also by uniquely contemporary labile patterns of multilingualism and more fluid notions of how language relates to identity. While heritage language pedagogy is distinguished by its essentialized understanding of the interrelation of language, literacy, culture, and identity as organic and mutually definitional, I show that this relationship is complex. The example of Hebrew language education has shown that the conflation of language learning and identity formation that has satiated the reductive transmission model of heritage language education may be too simplistic for understanding the role of language in building and strengthening a religious or ethnic consciousness. Rather, the uses of Hebrew examined in this article offer an argument for reconceptualizing heritage language as a semiotic system, in which its use may be conceived as a sensibility engaged at the symbolic level of meaning and as a performative, and not just as a means of communication and transmitting culture. In the case of Hebrew, the implications are

especially charged, given its considerable history as a language credited with defining, sustaining, or embodying the life of its speakers, of a peoplehood, and a religion.

Additionally, this paper underscores that Hebrew is not a single signifier, but is a polysemous marker, making interpretation of how it works essential for understanding the use (or lack thereof) in various contexts. That there is no one-to-one relationship between signified (Jewishness) and signifier (Hebrew) and that its use is not always predictable suggests that the knowledge of Hebrew alone cannot guarantee a Jewish identity, nor can it ensure cultural and religious sustainability. As Bekerman (1986) eloquently writes "Hebrew, although not totally independent of Jewishness, is not an exact calculus, a script, a finished choreography, that if imposed, exercised, or applied, enables Jewishness to be interpreted.  Hebrew cannot do this work by itself" (207).   For Jewish educators, and for heritage language educators at large, these findings should give pause to the instinct to put communal aspirations and hopes in one linguistic basket.

A closer look at the daily practices of heritage language teaching suggests that there are theoretical holes in the pedagogical philosophy purporting that the teaching and learning of heritage languages can ensure identity formation or "ethnic greatness and authenticity…with certainty" (Fishman, 1980, p. 237). This ideology that language by itself can ensure cultural sustainability attributes too much or too little significance to the language itself and not enough to the creative and socially meaningful work that the individuals do with their words and signs.

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Figure 1: Hebrew t-shirt

i I am defining heritage language school in this paper as community-based schools or programs that are privately organized rather than within the public education system. Community heritage language schools are created and organized by community members—families, community leaders, religious institutions, or civic organizations -- out of a community's desire to teach their language and culture. These schools are also referred to as ethnic mother tongue schools (Fishman, 1980), complementary schools (Creese et. al., 2006). In 1985, Fishman (2001) identified 6, 553 heritage language schools, teaching 145 different languages to over 600,000 children in the United States.

ii Biblical Hebrew (also referred to as Classical Hebrew) is the language of the Bible. Mishnaic Hebrew is a variation used by the rabbis in the second and third centuries for scholarly texts and liturgy. Medieval Hebrew emerged in the 7th century, and Modern Hebrew (also referred to as Israeli Hebrew) is the product of language revival efforts in the 19th century. It is the language spoken in the modern state of Israel. Though the varieties share a pattern of stems consistently typical of trilateral roots, from which nouns, adjectives, and verbs are formed in various ways, the distance between the varieties remains substantial.

iii The  New York Jewish Population Study of 1991 (Horowitz, 1993) found that of the one million Jews residing in New York City and 400,000 in suburban counties (Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester) more than one quarter claimed to speak Hebrew and 16% claimed that they could read a Hebrew newspaper.

iv See Bekerman (1986) and Jakar (1995) for studies into the teaching and learning of Modern Hebrew at Jewish sleep-away camps.

v Despite the push for day schools, supplementary Jewish education that meets on weekends and/or weekday afternoons continues to be a dominant model of formal Jewish education in the United States. It is estimated that 230,000 students study at the 2,000 – 2,100 supplementary schools located throughout the United States. One of the central goals of supplementary education is to teach Hebrew reading for participation in religious services and for bar/bat mitzvah celebrations (Wertheimer, 2008).

vi In the 2008-09, there were 228,174 students in 800 Jewish elementary and secondary day schools located in towns and cities across the United States (Schick, 2009).

vii Though this paper focuses on one type of educational context, the growing attention to supplementary schooling for ethnic, minority and religious education (Reyes, 2002; He, 2003) has focused scholarly attention on the ways in which linguistic and other semiotic means work in the construction, negotiation, and resistance of  hyphenated identities. This body of research suggests that heritage education for many ethnic groups is done in supplemental venues (i.e., afterschool or weekend programs).

viii The founding of the school in the mid 1990s was the result of a combined effort led by local rabbis, parents, and communal and organizational leaders in the New York City area. At its opening, the school had one kindergarten class using the facilities of a local synagogue. In the ensuing years, Rothberg increased its enrollment, added additional grades, and relocated into its own building. At the time of this study, the eighth grade class was the first cohort to graduate from the school. The average class size was approximately 16 students.

ix As one of the three major denominations in American Judaism, Conservative Judaism was conceived as a middle ground between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, and took institutional form in the United States in the early 1900s.

x Due to the size of the class, all of the students and their teachers agreed to participate in my study, and acted as focal participants.

xi Like other Jewish ethnographers working in Jewish communities (Fader, 2009), I had to address the tension of demarcating the line between being a researcher and religious insider. In my case, I attended Hebrew school as a young child and then learned Modern Hebrew as an adult living in Israel. I am not the product of day school education, and have limited experience in the study of sacred Jewish texts. Due to my Hebrew competency, the students and teachers accepted me as "one of them."

xii In 2004, it was widely reported that she had taken on the Hebrew name Esther in identification with the Biblical queen and had taken to wearing a red string bracelet as a visible sign of her commitment to mysticism.

xiii Vered's comment was an intentional play on the well-known quote by Theodore Herzl, father of political Zionism, *Im tirzu, ein zo agadah* (If you will it, it is no dream).

xiv Though this comment is directed to the use of Hebrew in Israel, Hebrew and Arabic are both official languages of the state of Israel.

xv This state of mind can be seen in the comment of one of the male students, who when asked to put on his head covering (*kippah*) several times in Israel, responded, "Why do I need to wear it here. Isn't it enough that we are in Israel?"