Hebrew-only language policy in religious education

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Draft
To be published in *Language Policy*

Abstract
This article ethnographically analyzes the everyday negotiations of a language policy at a private religious educational institution whose explicit educative mission is the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs, values and practices. Specifically, it explores a Hebrew-only language policy at a Jewish day school located in New York City, and focuses on two interrelated questions: (1) how do students and teachers enact and challenge the Hebrew-only policy in daily classroom practice; (2) how does this policy become a cultural practice in the classroom, and to what effect? The analysis of these practices highlights the paradoxical nature of religious language policy in education. While the students and teachers agree that Hebrew language policy is critical to the educative mission of instilling Jewish identity and willfully adopt the policy, in practice, the policy presents challenges to teachers and students due to the variance in Hebrew proficiency among students and their teachers, and the complex reality of teaching a religious language that is not widely known or used in the community. This tension between ideology and enactment produces a unique set of cultural classroom practices that result in questionable linguistic achievements. However, at the same time, this enacted policy paradoxically reinforces the underlying goals of the policy: a reaffirmation and strengthening of the students' religious identity. The article concludes with a discussion about the importance of ethnographic research on language policy in religious educational settings.

Recent ethnographic research in the study of language planning and policy has focused critical attention on the ways in which policy is locally interpreted and implemented in a wide range of educational settings (Canagarajah, 2006; Hornberger & Johnson, 2011). This body of research demonstrates that ethnography offers a methodological lens to closely examine how language policies are negotiated, interpreted, and challenged in the daily microculture of schools and classrooms, and how these processes reproduce or transform the cultural structures in which they act. This ethnographic push has led scholars to theorize language educational policies as cultural constructs that shape and are shaped by political, ideological, and historical

considerations, often with significant consequences for indigenous and minority languages and their users (King, 2001; Ramanathan, 2005).

While the ethnography of language education policy has had significant influence on our understanding of multilingual education policy in state-run or publicly-funded schools, there have been far fewer ethnographic examinations of language policies in private religious educational settings. As such, a largely unexplored topic remains how religious educational institutions employ language policies regarding religious or sacred languages for specific pedagogical, theological, and social goals, and how these policies are experienced and negotiated in everyday classroom practices and interactions. As pivotal sites in the construction, maintenance, and reproduction of worldviews and values that reach across individuals, families, communities, and nations, religious educational contexts are an important site for language policy research.

While a tradition of ethnographic research in religious language education has been slow to develop (for exceptions, see Fader, 2001; Cristillo, 2004), the topics of religion and language policy are far from strangers in the history of language policy and planning. Indeed, some of the earliest scholarly works in language policy research explored the role of religious institutions in the maintenance of minority languages for ethnic minorities, as well as the effects of religious language on the development of national languages (Fishman, 1966; Spolsky, 1977; Cooper, 1989; Schiffman, 1996). More recently, there has been a growing collection of insightful ethnographic research examining the socializing activities of multilingual communicative and literacy practices in religious schooling contexts (Baquedano Lopez, 2000; Moore, 2004; Fader, 2009; Peele-Eady, 2011). These studies have illuminated the role of language(s) in mediating and negotiating religious socialization, and have underscored the implicit and explicit role of

language planning and policy in communal and religious identification. Hence, Ferguson's (1996) argument that "all religious belief systems include some beliefs about language" (p. 66) underscores the need for scholars to better understand the interconnections between language policy and religious educational practices.

This paper examines these connections by ethnographically analyzing the everyday negotiations of language policy in classroom discourse at a private religious educational institution whose explicit educative mission is the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs, values, and practices. Specifically, I explore a Hebrew-only language policy at a Jewish day school located in New York City, and focus on two interrelated questions: (1) how do students and teachers enact and challenge the Hebrew-only policy in daily classroom practice; and (2) how does this policy become a cultural practice in the classroom, and to what effect?

To address these questions, I discuss multiple ideologies attached to the Hebrew language and show how these ideologies are embedded in Jewish educational practices. I then briefly discuss the emergence of non-Orthodox day school education within a socio-historical context. Following this, I analyze the enactment and negotiation of the Hebrew-only policy in day-to-day classroom life, showing that this policy is a cultural practice that is both locally reproduced and locally resisted. I conclude with a discussion about the role of language policy in religious educational settings.

My analysis highlights the paradoxical nature of religious language policy in education. Specifically, I argue that the students and teachers widely embrace the Hebrew-only policy, agreeing that Hebrew language education is critical to the educative mission of instilling Jewish identity. However, in practice, the policy presents challenges to teachers and students due to varied Hebrew proficiency among students and their teachers, and the complex reality of

teaching and learning a language that is not widely known or used in the community. This tension between ideology and enactment produces a unique set of cultural practices in the school that results in questionable language learning achievements, but that paradoxically reinforces the underlying goals of the policy: a reaffirmation and strengthening of the students' sense of Jewishness. More specifically, the ideological underpinnings of the language policy construct and sustain a culture of teaching and learning practices that enable the policy to be simultaneously a failure and a success.

Hebrew and Jewish education

Hebrew has always maintained a significant presence in Judaism and in Jewish life. Because it has historically evolved over the centuries as a result of language contact and geographic dispersion of its speakers, its use and significance has varied widely over time. Hebrew encompasses four varieties – Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, and Modern – each linked to a distinct socio-historical period (Chomsky, 1957; Myhill, 2004). The diachronic aspect reminds us that Hebrew, in all of its varieties, has figured prominently in the evolution of Judaism as a culture and religion, and equally important, has a central place in how contemporary Jewish life is defined and maintained. Biblical Hebrew, the *lingua-sacra*, is the language of divine revelation, the immutable language of the Torah, and a marker of iconic sacredness. Mishnaic and Medieval Hebrew (or Rabbinic Hebrew) were widely used in the second and third centuries for scholarly and rabbinic texts (i.e., Talmud), while Modern Hebrew (also referred to as Israeli Hebrew) is the product of the Zionist project in the second half of the nineteenth century.[1] While many elements of Biblical Hebrew have been incorporated into Modern Hebrew, the distance

[1] At present, Modern Hebrew is spoken as a native language by some 5.4 million people in Israel and by approximately 2-3 million Jewish and non-Jewish people around the world.

between the varieties is substantial, referred to by one scholar as the distance between "Shakespeare's and today's English" (Gold, 1989, p. 370). At the same time, what makes Hebrew so unique is that the varieties are never far removed from the variable ways in which Jewish people have chosen to construct and sustain a religious, ethnic, or national identification. In that Hebrew stretches across the three distinct pillars of contemporary Judaism -- religion, nationalism, and peoplehood -- it is deeply embedded in the spiritual, political, and cultural practices of contemporary Jews.

That it is even possible to discuss a Hebrew culture, despite the fact that language subsumes many varieties and that there is a sizable contingent that is not part of its vernacular speech community or may not be religiously oriented, speaks volumes about the power and function of Hebrew ideology. This ideological attachment is not unique; language researchers have similarly shown that lack of linguistic competence does not necessarily preclude or obfuscate the emotional feelings that people attach to a language they perceive as their own (Canagarajah, 2008; Nicholas, 2009). What sets Hebrew apart is that having an affective or ideological relationship with Hebrew without having command of the language epitomizes a larger trend in contemporary American Jewish culture. The majority of Jews living outside of Israel have limited exposure to Hebrew outside of the religious classroom and/or synagogue, do not speak Modern Hebrew, and have varying degrees of liturgical proficiency or Hebrew literacy. Yet there are many who profess a profound and genuine attachment to Hebrew, and do not see their lack of fluency as inimical to their desire to claim it as ancestral property (Avni, 2011). [2]

[2] While the focus of this paper is on Hebrew language policy in a diasporic context, the force of Hebrew ideology in Israel, as a matter of educational and social policy and practice, has been well documented (Bachi, 1956; Fellman, 1973; Spolsky, 1991; Harshav, 1993; Ben Rafael, 1994; Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999; Shohamy, 2006). Collectively,

It is in this disparity that we grasp the powerful dimensions of Hebrew language ideologies. More than just its instrumental value as a language of communication, Hebrew is perceived as that which encodes Jewishness,[3] reveals divinity, and is endowed with a capacity to transcend Jewish ethnic, national, and racial difference in ways that no other language can (Avni, 2008). If as Jeffrey Sandler (2006) argues, that Yiddish -- the Jewish Ashkenazi vernacular prior to the Second World War, spoken today by ultra-Orthodox Jews as a language of daily life -- has come to "function as a synecdoche for the otherness of Jewish culture, language, traditions and society" (p. 7), it is possible to argue that Hebrew functions as a metonymical bridge across disparities that exist among the global Jewish community. To draw from Anderson's evocative notion, Hebrew has been ideologically imagined, and in turn, semiotically implicated in the production of a transnational peoplehood (Anderson, 1983).

Jewish day school education

Given the pragmatic and ideological dimensions of Hebrew, it is clear why Hebrew figures so prominently in American Jewish education. For contemporary Jewish educators in the

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these works show that political, cultural, and social considerations were deeply implicated in the choice to make Hebrew (and not Yiddish) the main language of the Jewish community in Palestine and later in the modern state of Israel. This monolingual ideology has had far reaching effects on the language practices of immigrants, Arabs and Jews living within the country.

Hebrew ideology has also imbued social, educational, and language policy in the United States throughout the 1900s. The American Hebraists, drawing from the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement in Europe, pushed for the widespread use of Hebrew in the Jewish community, seeing it as a means of limiting internal Jewish multilingualism in the United States in the early 20th century. While their ultimate goal of an American Hebrew-speaking community was not reached, the Hebraists were instrumental in creating Hebrew literary societies and a Hebrew press, promoting the *ivrit b'ivrit* (i.e., teaching Hebrew in Hebrew) methodology, introducing Hebrew education into Jewish summer camping, turning synagogue-based religious programs into Hebrew schools, and advocating for the teaching of Hebrew in public schools throughout the United States (Mintz, 1993a, 1993b).

[3] Gematria, a word that derives from the Greek word geometry, refers to Hebrew numerology popular in Jewish mysticism. Within this system, each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet is assigned a numerical value, and the values of the letter in a word are added to arrive at the word's numerical significance.

United States, Hebrew knowledge and use are directly linked to an educative mission, which in modern times has been defined as strengthening and building Jewish identity as a means of ensuring intergenerational Jewish continuity (Krasner, 2006). Moshe Greenberg, a leading Jewish educator, echoes the sentiments of many others when he writes "Hebrew must be acquired in order for the Jewish heritage to be transmitted in all its force" (2003, p. 130). This heritage is multidimensional and includes access to canonical sacred texts and liturgy, as well as nationalistic and religious practices and ideologies connected to representations of Israel, both as historic homeland and modern-day nation state. In fact, among American Jewish educators who believe that identification with Israel is an essential component of Jewish identity, there is a growing sense that knowledge and use of Modern Hebrew can serve as a linguistic bridge between these two large centers of contemporary Jewish life, which have in recent years shown signs of mutual estrangement (Mittleberg, 1999; Phillips, Lengyel & Saxe, 2002).

Whether as a language of sacredness or as an idiom of Zionist (re)affirmation, Hebrew's ubiquitous presence in almost all Jewish educational contexts underscores its perceived instrumental role in educating the next generation of Jewish youth. This connection between Hebrew education and Jewish vitality cannot be understated; the value invested in Hebrew as the underwriter of Jewish vitality is the reason that many educators identify Hebrew as the DNA of Jewish education (Avni, 2008). In recent times, Hebrew language teaching in the United States and aboard (Pomson & Deitcher, 2009) has garnered considerable attention due to the growth of day schools that encompass full day, dual curriculum K-12 schools. In 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).[4]

Day schools have figured prominently in Orthodox communities throughout much of the 20th century, but their explosive growth among members of other denominations and the unaffiliated can be attributed to a perceived "crisis of continuity" that emerged in the 1990s.[5] In response, communal and religious leaders set out to influence how young adults and children felt about being Jewish, believing that stronger identification would yield a stronger commitment to carry on a Jewish lifestyle, which would ultimately buffer the appeal of assimilation and result in the continuation of Jewish life in the United States. This survivalist agenda resulted in the focus on the non-Orthodox day school as a centerpiece of Jewish communal efforts to instill and strengthen identity (Sarna, 2004; Wertheimer, 1999). Hence, though not a 20th century invention, the contemporary non-Orthodox Jewish day school with its twofold focus on identity formation and religious socialization is distinctly modern (Vermeer, 2009).

Jewish day schools are not part of a centralized educational system. That is to say, there is no one single governing authority that determines curricula or policy for all schools, making it difficult, if not impossible, to definitively categorize Jewish day school education (Avni &

[4] These enrollment figures represent students attending a wide variety of schools that reflect the denominational differences across the American Jewish religious spectrum. In the US, there are presently three main Jewish religious movements or denominations -- Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism – for which four categories of day schools exist. Three align to the specific denominations and one is explicitly transdenominational and often referred to as community day schools.

[5] In 1991, a widely distributed demographic survey documented a weakened commitment to Jewish religious, cultural, and ethnic practices, especially among the young (The Commission on Jewish Education in North America, 1991). Similar to the seismic effect of *A Nation at Risk* that roused state and local educational leaders to make far-reaching changes in educational policy, this report was taken as a wake-up call to Jewish leaders across the US.

Menken, in press).[6] For this reason, curricular policies of these schools vary according to religious and ideological orientations of the communities that they serve. What is important to note is that for the overwhelming majority of schools, Hebrew language education is a core component of the Jewish studies curricula, as it is seen as crucial to the teaching and learning of religious literacy, on one hand, and the social project of safeguarding Jewish continuity and transmitting Jewish religious and cultural identification, on the other (Avni, 2008). Yet despite its ubiquity, ethnographic investigations into Hebrew language policies in American Jewish educational contexts have been extremely rare (for exceptions, see Bekerman, 1999; Jakar, 1995; Reimer, 1997), with a discernible gap in day school education research.

Research method and context

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 New York City. This primary aim of the original study was to examine how language practices framed and structured the production and socialization of religious and cultural identification (Avni, 2008). For 18 months, between 2004 and 2006, I closely followed a cohort 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.[7] The students and teachers were largely from Ashkenazi, middle-class backgrounds, and lived in various

[6] RAVSAK, the Jewish Community Day School Network, and Torah Umesorah, the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, are two organizations that provide resources and pedagogical support for nondenominational schools and Orthodox schools, respectively.

[7] While my role as researcher at the school was clearly defined, because of my academic and professional training in second language teaching, I volunteered to work with several students on English and Hebrew literacy skills.

neighborhoods throughout New York City. Hebrew was not a native language for any of the participants, except for two students who were the children of Israeli expatriates and one native-born Israeli teacher. 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 data was supplemented with semi-formal interviews with students, faculty, and members of the administration, individual and group feedback sessions, and the collection of policy and curricular documents and students' written class work. The interviews were conducted in English according to qualitative ethnographic principles (Seidman, 1991; Spradley, 1979) whereby I allowed the participants to tell their stories without binding the interview to a fixed agenda of questions. All interviews and feedback sessions 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. For the paper at hand, I examined why and how Hebrew was brought up in certain contexts, what metalinguistic comments students and teachers made, and how the teaching and learning of Hebrew were structured, framed and challenged.

The analytic lens 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 as well as its focus on the everyday, 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. The approach taken in this paper builds on the work of Fader (2011) and Kulick and

Schieffelin (2004), who demonstrate that language socialization not only accounts for culturally predictable outcomes (i.e., social reproduction), but also for unexpected and unintended results (i.e., social change).

Creation and goals of Rothberg Hebrew language policy

Rothberg is affiliated with and receives financial and organizational support from the United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism -- the association of Conservative congregations in North America, today consisting of approximately 700 affiliated synagogues.[8] Within this large umbrella organization, there is a Department of Education, which establishes standards for schools, publishes curricula and books, and develops educational policy statements. In short, this organization is a governing body for Conservative Judaism in the United States.

As to how this organization views the role of Hebrew, one does not need to look very far. On its website, there is a page titled "Suggestions for Living a Conservative Jewish Life" in which it states that one of the things an "increasingly connected Conservative Jew" needs to do is study "to increase his or her knowledge of Hebrew" (Epstein, 2011). It further elaborates:

> Hebrew unites us with Jews across time and space. It is the eternal language of our people and connects us with Jews in Israel and throughout the world. It is also the Jewish language of prayer and study. Yet for many of us it is not a language but a series of letters we can read but not understand.
>
> - It is imperative that we not only maintain Hebrew in our services but that we each increase our knowledge of Hebrew as a language.
> - Take classes in Hebrew as a living language.
> - Study the prayers and their meanings.

[8] As one of the three major denominations in American Judaism, Conservative Judaism began in Germany in the mid-19th century as a reaction to the more liberal religious positions taken by Reform Judaism. Originally, it was conceived as a middle ground between Reform and Orthodox Judaism. Conservative Judaism took institutional form in the United States in the early 1900s.

- Plan to study at an *ulpan* in Israel.[9]

This policy statement explicitly defines what knowledge is valued, and what language practices are valorized within the framework of Conservative Judaism. It underscores the necessity for American Jews to know Hebrew as "a living language" that is used for more than just religious means, and even espouses particular ways of learning Hebrew (i.e., in intensive language courses). At the same time, it clearly states the need for learning the meaning of the prayers, and not just the ability to decode and recite them. Hence, not only does this document address status planning -- that is, what Hebrew should be used for, but it also touches on acquisition planning having to do with how the language will be acquired. It is, in one sense, a checklist of legitimate Jewish language practices for those who choose to affiliate with this denomination.

It is possible to see how this statement is reflected in the Hebrew language policy at Rothberg, in which Hebrew language was taught in the medium of Hebrew.[10] The Hebrew-only policy addressed *why* Hebrew should be studied, as well as *how* it should be studied. At the time of my study, there were no explicitly-stated language proficiency goals. During seventh grade, the teaching material was ad-hoc in nature and included teacher-constructed and photocopied worksheets, as well as material for teaching Hebrew Israeli immigrants.[11] The following year the

[9] An *ulpan* is an intensive Hebrew language immersion course. This type of language program was originally designed to teach Modern Hebrew to adult immigrants in Israel.

[10] Content area secular classes were taught in English at the middle school level. In the elementary school, located in a separate building, content classes were taught in a dual-language format. There was no explicitly stated policy for the use of Hebrew during breaks, lunch, or other informal spaces.

[11] It is important to note that at the time of my study (2004-2006), Rothberg middle school was relatively new; it had opened its doors in 2003 and graduated its first eighth grade class in 2006. As such, curriculum, school literature, and policy statements were being actively developed and rewritten at the time of my study.

school implemented the NETA program -- a highly-structured Hebrew language curriculum developed for American Jewish day schools. During Hebrew language classes, the primary focus was on Modern Hebrew; during Bible and rabbinic studies lessons, prayer lessons and holiday study, students read from sacred texts and worksheets written in a mixture of Hebrew varieties (as well as Aramaic).

According to the headmaster, Dr. Melamed, the Hebrew policy had multiple functions:

> Look, there are two big goals that we have, and it is hard to give priority to one over the other. One is for students to be conversant with the international Jewish language which is Hebrew and able to engage in conversation at a variety of levels with others with whom they share that language, but whom they don't share another language equally. The other is for the study of the language on a communicative level to have an impact on their ability to read texts, comprehend texts, read texts deeply, interact and transact with texts in the original.

These twofold goals of developing communicative and literacy skills were translated into a policy in which Hebrew was the content matter as well as the language of instruction in Hebrew language and Judaic Studies classes. It was believed that not only would this policy enable the students to be able to communicate with other Hebrew speakers across the world, but it would also ensure that they would be able to read the sacred texts with understanding. At the same time, this policy tapped into contemporary research in second language acquisition that stresses communicative practice. According to Rothberg promotional material,

> The approach used to teach Hebrew is the natural method of language study. This method makes use of the same principles of language learning by which students

> learn their native language: first, that language is best learned by hearing and speaking it in as rich and varied a communicative context as possible, and second, that oral language precedes written language.

At first glance, this theoretical approach seems straightforward; however, it is crucial to keep in mind that the varieties of Hebrew needed to read Jewish sacred texts (i.e., Biblical and rabbinic Hebrew) are not the same as what is needed to have a conversation in Modern Hebrew. Given this linguistic reality, contemporary communicative approaches to second language acquisition may be important to the learning of Modern Hebrew, but are far less relevant to older varieties of Hebrew. In the next section, I discuss how this policy was interpreted and implemented within the school's educational mission.

Local enactment and reproduction of Hebrew-only policy

At Rothberg, the Hebrew-only policy was not an unwelcomed or top-down initiative. Rather, teachers and students were some of the policy's strongest advocates. Teachers did their best to implement the policy by maintaining a Hebrew environment in their classrooms, which often meant sanctioning the use of English, the students' native language. Indeed, teachers considered translating from Hebrew to English inappropriate, "remedial," and worthy of punitive actions (Avni, forthcoming). Additionally, teachers saw themselves as important agents in their students' process of learning to be educated Jews, and saw in Hebrew a critical locus of this process.

Students, likewise, perceived this policy as important and worthy of their efforts. This connection between Hebrew and Jewish education was underscored in one lively impromptu discussion during recess in which several of the students were discussing with the researcher why they thought learning Hebrew was important at their school. To a question whether there

could be a Jewish day school without Hebrew classes, the students responded with a trenchant rejection of this possibility and even questioned the researcher's Jewishness, for in their minds a "real" Jew would not even question this connection. This informal interaction highlights that students also attached great value to the teaching and learning of Hebrew at their school, and accepted and valued its role in their schooling. As their passionate reactions suggest, the Hebrew-only policy had in some ways become naturalized -- uncontested and uncontestable -- and seen as the legitimate way of doing Jewish education.

Given the general support that the policy had in the school, it was not surprising to see that it was successfully implemented on many levels. As a designated part of the school curriculum, all students studied Modern Hebrew every day for at least 50 minutes. Additionally, students heard and read older varieties of Hebrew in their Judaic studies classes. Hebrew also occupied a significant place in the linguistic landscape of the classroom. In its visual mode, Hebrew signs, commercially-made posters, and artwork were seen throughout the school. Likewise, students and teachers wore Hebrew lettering on clothing and jewelry. In the aural mode, it was not uncommon to hear Hebrew in daily prayer services and mealtime blessings, and interspersed within conversations. Though not all students enjoyed grappling with the orthographic, phonetic, or grammatical challenges of learning Hebrew, succinctly captured in one student's comment, "it's a language you love to know, but hate to learn," the policy was perceived as successful in making Hebrew a "living" language in the school.

Resistance and challenges to Hebrew-only policy

However, the intention to use Hebrew in various communicative ways did not always align with the complex reality of teaching and learning a language on a day-to-day basis. It is in this complexity that we see some challenges to the policy's local implementation. To begin,

students came from families spanning the spectrum of religious observation, so their exposure and commitment to Hebrew varied widely. While some students frequently attended weekly synagogue services, and therefore had more opportunities to interact with liturgical Hebrew, others attended synagogue infrequently. This same variability applied to their exposure to native Hebrew speakers in New York and in Israel. While some students had opportunities to speak and listen to Modern Hebrew outside of the classroom and frequently traveled to Israel, others did not. Likewise, while some students had started day school in kindergarten, other students had migrated to Rothberg after spending several years in the public schools, and had only recently begun studying Hebrew. Finally, finding suitable classroom pedagogical material was a struggle. While the learning of Hebrew literacy is an age-old practice, it is only relatively recently that high quality and professionally-developed teaching material has become readily available for the American market. Collectively, these factors led to a challenging classroom environment.

These challenges were brought up by one of the Hebrew teachers in a conversation we had regarding the learning objectives of the Hebrew language curriculum:

> I mean, I'll be honest, I'm not sure I know what they are. I'm trying to think. I mean, my sense and this is mostly from orientation in the beginning of the year is that, you know, teach the kids, you know, spoken Hebrew, you know. Kind of give them the skills to actually communicate and then have the kids really enjoy it, get a sense of language as a living experience, as a form of communication. Bring in as much movement, as much song, as much activity into the Hebrew language classes. I just feel like with a lot of those things I've run into problems when the 15 kids are in the classroom and there is literally no room to move.

Furthermore, one of the greatest challenges was that many of the teachers at the school were not native Hebrew speakers and had themselves acquired Modern Hebrew as students in day school, in synagogue supplementary programs (i.e., Hebrew school), or in immersion programs (i.e., *ulpan*) in Israel. Teachers tried to use Modern Hebrew as much as possible in their teaching, but made syntactic, phonological, semantic, and pragmatic errors. One of the Hebrew teachers jokingly referred to her error-laden Hebrew as a type of "language acquisition disability." Another teacher, Rachel, acknowledged this problem by stating,

> I don't feel that totally equipped personally in my own knowledge and skill with the language -- you know, a comprehensive understanding of the grammar, etc. So sometimes I just feel a little like uncertain which is a little frustrating.

These reservations were articulated after one classroom lesson when the teacher decided to temporarily stop speaking Hebrew when giving pedagogical directions -- a pragmatic choice noted in other multilingual educational settings (Martin-Jones & Heller, 1996). After class when we got a chance to talk about her decision, she had the following to say:

> Cause I definitely notice a difference in the kids when I'm speaking Hebrew when I am speaking in English. Hands down across the board I would say that 95% of the – I don't know if I am projecting but I think that it's relatively palpable in terms of their attentiveness, their comfort. So the question is how much of that is a worthwhile sacrifice in the name of the Hebrew language. I think with these kids for, too many of them, it is too big of a sacrifice. I made that judgment call, I don't know if I'm right and I don't know if the school fully supports it.

However, the teacher's articulation of resistance must be interpreted within her other thoughts and actions. Less than 24 hours after her decision to use English for instructions, she

harshly reacted to the students' use of English during a different lesson with the comment, "Without this (Hebrew), it is not a Jewish day school. We can all go home." Her response effectively validated and reaffirmed the strong ideological link between Hebrew language and Jewish education, and repositioned her public self as a policy supporter.

Finally, some teachers and students questioned whether Biblical and Modern varieties of Hebrew should be equally stressed at the school. One teacher clearly felt that the emphasis should be on teaching older varieties of Hebrew since the educative mission of the school was religious in nature, and not nationalistic (i.e., the relocation to Israel). One student expressed pleasure in learning Hebrew, but resented spending so much time on Modern Hebrew instead of learning Spanish (another language taught at the school), because, in his words, "Unless we go to live in Israel, we won't really need Hebrew, unless we are part of the CIA." These comments highlight the fact that while there was overall support for the language policy, there were significant challenges to its implementation, which resulted in signs of resistance regarding its validity. Moreover, they underscore an innate tension that surfaces when language policy is embedded within religious education and called upon to serve multiple linguistic, pedagogical, and social goals.

Hebrew policy in the construction of cultural classroom practices

Up to this point, I have discussed the creation of the Hebrew-only policy at the school, the ways that faculty and students interpreted and enacted the policy, and the classroom realities that presented challenges to its daily implementation. My focus turns to examining the ways in which the policy affected and created the local culture of the classroom. In doing so, I draw from McCarty's (2011) understanding that policy is "best understood as a verb" (p. 2). My interest here is to examine not only the policy in practice, but also what practices the policy created, both

intended and unexpected, and how these practices were compatible with the policy's intentions and the overall educational mission of the school.

The Hebrew-only policy did not merely prescribe a way of teaching Hebrew or simply signify a change in language use from English to Hebrew. Rather, as it weaved its way through classroom practice, it constituted the very practices it was designed to address. Specifically, the policy constructed a liminal space in which the typical flow of classroom culture was disturbed and habitual assumptions about normal social relations were turned upside down. This socio-psychological shift was brought to my attention early in my fieldwork when one student mumbled to me under his breath at the start of his Hebrew class, "Here we go. Welcome to the mysterious world of Hebrew," and then began to hum a well known UFO melody. Later that week when I had a chance to ask him about his comment, he wasn't sure how to articulate what he meant, but he intimated that Hebrew classes operated according to some extra-ordinary norms that did not pertain to other classes. In his words, he sometimes felt like he was "an alien visiting a foreign planet" in which he did not know the rules. Here, I want to argue that the Hebrew-only policy was instrumental in creating this elusive and mysterious world because in its enactment, classroom norms were inverted.

One such norm centered on defining what knowledge was valued in the classroom. That is to say, loyalty to the use of Hebrew meant that often *how* something was taught took precedence over *what* was taught. In practice, the emphasis on the linguistic medium came at the expense of content, clarity, and comprehension. One striking example of this inversion occurred during a Hebrew lesson in which the teacher gave the seventh grade students a simplified biographical text written in Modern Hebrew about Theodore Herzl, founder of political Zionism. Once the students had finished reading and translating the text, the teacher wrote the word

chalom (dream) on the board, and asked the students to identify Herzl's dream for the Jewish people. Her directions explicitly asked them to use the word *chalom* in their responses. The lesson continued the following day in which the teacher asked the students to consider the dreams of other political or national leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. Again, the word *chalom* was used to identify how these cultural icons envisioned societal change. Finally, during the last day of this multi-part lesson, the students invested considerable time and effort creating posters titled, *hachalom sheli* (my dream), and wrote short sentences in Hebrew that reflected their dreams for themselves, their communities, and the world. During the following class, a handful of students presented their posters to the class, and with great pride, all of the posters were hung up on the walls around the classroom where they remained for many weeks.

In speaking with the students and teacher after the completion of this unit, I found that there was a great deal of satisfaction. From the teacher's perspective, this was a successful lesson because it utilized best practices of second language acquisition; it was content-driven and contextualized. The students were equally enthusiastic; they enjoyed integrating language and meaningful content, and wanted to learn Hebrew in this "fun way." Except that there was one small problem: the lesson focused on the use of the wrong word.

Herzl did not have a *chalom* regarding the future of the Jewish people; that is to say, the word *chalom* does not extend semantically to include the meaning of vision, which it does in English. Rather he had a *chazon* (vision). The teacher brought up this fact several weeks after the unit had been completed, in which she confided in me that at the time she had not been sure that it was the correct word, but didn't want to hesitate in "real time" and appear unsure to her students. Rather, she had made the split-second decision to use the word *chalom* because she felt

it was more important to use a Hebrew word than to say it in English, a decision that had implicitly prioritized the medium of the lesson (i.e., how it was taught) over the content (i.e., what was taught). However, at the time of our talk, she was wondering if I thought she should remove the posters from the walls in order to not compound an error that had begun to surface in the students' incorrect use of this word. With some remorse, she admitted that if she had taught the lesson in English, she would not have made this semantic error, but still considered the lesson highly successful. In the Austinian (1962) sense, the Hebrew language policy acted like a performative in that it was deeply implicated in the construction of cultural practices determining what types of knowledge were valorized.

Not only did the Hebrew-only policy play a role in determining the boundaries of knowledge, it also served as a catalyst for socially ambiguous classroom norms. Language usage errors, such as Herzl's dream, contributed to a detectable level of confusion circulating in the classroom. Because of the desire and expectation to speak Hebrew, students were often unable to understand each other and had difficulties understanding what was expected from them. The Hebrew-only policy contributed to this lack of clarity regarding classroom norms and expectations, and the impetus to use as much Hebrew as possible engendered moments of confusion in which the students and teachers were not sure which linguistic foot they were standing on.

However, it would be erroneous to portray the teachers as the single cause of confusion. If, as social scientists have argued persuasively, knowledge is socially distributed and co-constructed (Wenger, 1998) the same can be equally said about confusion. What I am arguing here is the cultural practice of negotiating confusion was achievable because of the students' complicity. This co-construction was made clear during one Hebrew class in which the teacher

mistakenly posed the question, "what are you doing," using the masculine form of the pronoun and verb (*ma ata oseh*) to Tamar, daughter of Israeli expatriates and fluent Hebrew speaker. What made this otherwise forgettable interaction extraordinary was that Tamar responded (*ani oseh*) using the masculine form of the verb. When Tamar heard her own response in her feedback session several days later, she smiled sheepishly. "You know" she confided, "I answered that way on purpose because I know how important it is for us to be taught in Hebrew, and I didn't want to make a big deal about this small mess up. It happens all the time, but I don't care." When I asked about other types of semantic or syntactic errors, she responded that sometimes they made her laugh, but usually she just ignored them, commenting, "It's like no big deal. I'm used to it." However, when questioned if this feeling extended to errors in her other classes, she immediately offered this advice: "If Robert (the math teacher), or anyone else for that matter, repeatedly says that two times two equals eight, he had better beware because we will jump down his throat in a second. I have zero tolerance for that kind of stupidity."

Her passionate response touches on several interesting points: one, to some degree, she was an active agent in the production of a Hebrew culture at the school in which medium was valorized over content; two, policy as a social practice does not always lead to felicitous or intended educational outcomes; and three, these self-sacrificing language practices semiotically performed an "act of identity" (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985). Tamar's choice to accept this confusion and play along can be seen as her way of authenticating her attachment to Hebrew language ideology and validating its underlying social goals of strengthening Jewish identity.

If, then, we try to decipher the cultural logic of Hebrew education at this school, we see that the use of Hebrew was not just a question of linguistic (in)competence, but rather one of cultural significance. Hornberger and Chick's (2001) work on the co-construction of school

safetalk is particularly enlightening in this regard. Looking at the collusive dimension of teacher learner interactions in two postcolonial contexts in which learners where taught through the medium of a language not their own, Hornberger and Chick show that in the face of oppressive discriminatory policies, teachers and students may opt for interactional practices that serve important social functions, but do not necessarily facilitate learning. Put differently, students and teachers "give priority to the social function of discourse over the academic function" of learning (p. 42). Similarly, the implementation of the Hebrew-only policy resulted in the creation and maintenance of safetime-like practices that enabled students and teachers to support a language policy that underscored social cohesion but that led to questionable linguistic achievements. While it is possible to argue that the institutional ideologies and policy regarding Hebrew education may have resulted in unfortunate or damaging consequences for the students' learning, it is equally plausible to argue that these practices did more than just help students and teachers navigate the world of Hebrew without getting caught "not knowing" (Hornberger, 1987). Instead, one could argue that in an unintended way, this language policy paradoxically created opportunities for the negotiation of knowledge and identity. That is to say, the very nature of using Hebrew, correctly or not, led to a heightened sense of Jewishness among the students, both individually and as a collective.

The fact that this social transformation took place as a result of an error-laden Hebrew has powerful linguistic, policy, and educational implications. On a sociolinguistic level, it raises compelling questions regarding the types of Hebrew that American Jews learn and use. While research on Jewish varieties of English has demonstrated how diaspora Jews have used language as a means of differentiating themselves from their non-Jewish neighbors (Benor, 2009), the findings of this study draw attention to the variant ways in which American Jews think about,

learn, and use Hebrew, and how these practices are distinct from native speakers of Hebrew in Israel and abroad (Kattan, 2009).

At the same time, an analysis of enacted Hebrew language policy is important for theorizing how the success of enacted language policies is measured. If, as stated above, one of the central goals of the Hebrew language educational policy at the school was to build and strengthen the students' identification with Judaism and Jewish practices, this policy can be thought of as a successful failure. Though perhaps the language achievements were less than what the school had intended, measuring the success of the policy solely by the students' linguistic competency misses its broader social significance. That is to say, instead of seeing the policy as a checklist of what students could and could not do, the policy's implementation created an ideological space in which these teachers and students could make the teaching and learning of Hebrew meaningful to themselves and align the practices with the educative goals of the school. This paradox -- that even faulty Hebrew could transmit religious identity -- underscores the fact that language policy is more than just a demarcation of linguistic practices or a prescriptive method of why and how a language should be taught; rather, it is constitutive of cultural practices, which in turn can affect the ways in which individuals ascribe meaning, importance, and relevance to particular ways of thinking, learning, and doing.

Viewed in this way, the inconsistencies between the declared policy and actual classroom use point to the complexity of defining language policy in educational contexts in which religion, culture, and language are intertwined. In the case of Hebrew, we see that prevailing ideologies about the critical role of Hebrew in educational practices frame the creation and implementation of a language policy that enlists Hebrew as both an educational means and a social end. Put differently, Hebrew language policy is not only perceived as a way of transmitting Jewish

knowledge, but also defines the contours for what it means to be an educated Jew. As such, language policy can contribute to theories of social reproduction, as well as to theories of social change.

Conclusion

This article offers an ethnographic description of how teachers and students at a non-Orthodox Jewish day school experienced and negotiated a Hebrew language policy in everyday classroom practices and interactions, and specifically how the local enactment of language policy was integral to the negotiation of religious identity. Using ethnographic data, I argue that the school's mission of instilling Jewish identity and ensuring cultural and religious continuity was deeply influenced by language policy which in turn was determined by beliefs about the importance of Hebrew in how Jewish knowledge is delineated and expressed. While the Hebrew-only policy was widely supported in the school, it was hard to implement primarily due to variances in Hebrew proficiency among students and their teachers. Moreover, though the policy resulted in teachers and students' linguistic errors and moments of social ambiguity, this use of Hebrew paradoxically worked in ways so that the institutionalized mission of the school was achieved. These findings have implications for our understanding of how the local enactment of language policy is integral to the negotiation of religious identity.

The Hebrew-only case study shows how a religious community engages language educational planning in an effort to define legitimate religious practices and ensure its vitality and continuity. These are compelling tasks for Jewish educators who are faced with the challenge of providing contours to the ambiguous nature of what being Jewish means today given the wide range of interpretations and practices that coexist under the umbrella of American Judaism (Jacobs, forthcoming). In this light, questions about Hebrew use at this school (and

others like it) become questions about the kind of educated students the school hopes to produce within a wider Jewish community characterized by growing particularism and internal differentiation (Cohen & Eisen, 2000; Sarna, 2004), within an American society increasingly characterized by multilingual and cultural syncretism. In a broader context, questions about defining knowledge or socializing identity are not parochial considerations. Rather, they extend to a wide array of religious communities striving to ensure communal continuity through the teaching and learning of a sacred language and its accompanying literacy practices (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). Whether successful or not, we see that language policy and planning are never far removed from religious and cultural reproduction and change. In this sense, religious language educational policy is rooted in questions of local linguistic competence and use, on one hand, and entrenched in broader questions regarding the social condition of religious life in modern society, on the other.

This investigation of religious educational language policy also underscores the importance of ethnographic research in this subfield. While there is a substantial amount written about the structure, purpose, and challenges of Hebrew education (Spolsky; 1986; Glinert, 1999/2000; Morahg, 1999/2000; Goldberg, 2004), and although it is quite common to come by anecdotal evidence regarding the quality of these educational experiences, it is still quite rare to be provided with empirical data about what Hebrew education looks like in daily practice (for exception, see Jakar, 1995; Feuer, 2008). Ethnography, as a tool for illuminating sociocultural meaningful practices, offers a compensatory way to interrogate and convincingly document what surveys, questionnaires, and interviews obscure or miss. That is, ethnography of religious education in practice can illuminate not only how, when, and why certain language policies are

created and enacted, but also how, when, and why these policies are enacted differently from what was intended, or not at all, and to what end.

At this pivotal moment in which there is a growing interdisciplinary interest in the centrality of religious schooling in the United States (Lesko, 1988; Peskin, 1986; Bryk et al. 1993), ethnography is a means of exploring why individuals' or groups' expressed beliefs about the role of language and literacy practices in religious rituals and practice -- often explicitly articulated in language policy -- are incompatible with their language behavior or achievements, and equally important, how religious languages are implicated in the processes of social reproduction and change. Viewed in this way, the ethnographic study of language policy can become a prime site for interrogating how and why religious language and literacy practices are passed on, transformed, resisted, or challenged in the daily practices of educating the next generation of believers.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Shlomy Kattan, Kate Menken, and Sarah Nakamaru for their feedback, suggestions, and guidance on various drafts of this article. Thanks also to the CUNY Faculty Fellowship Publications Program and to four anonymous reviewers and the editors at *Language Policy* for such insightful and constructive comments.