Yonatan Mendel, *The Creation of Israeli Arabic: Political and Security Considerations in the Making of Arabic Language Studies in Israel*
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LESSONS FOR EAVESDROPPERS

Languages get twisted around many tongues. Arabic, in its Modern Standard form, is one of only two non-European languages with official status at the UN (Chinese is the other), and the official language of 27 states and territories across Africa and Western Asia, where this formal register is used together with other, variable, spoken registers including the vernacular forms of Arabic. In November 2015, another type of Arabic resounded in the Israeli Knesset: three minutes' worth of threats and vituperation delivered by Yinon Magal, an elected member of the ultra-nationalist Jewish Home Party. Magal served in the Special Operations unit of Israeli Military Intelligence and has a degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The speech he gave was the result of a language-education programme that Yonatan Mendel calls 'Israeli Arabic'. Mendel's book, based on a dissertation at Cambridge, offers a detailed study of its custodians' aims and pedagogic methods. Mendel is an Israeli scholar probably best known outside his homeland for his revealing portraits of it in the *London Review of Books*; he has also provided a striking city study of Jerusalem for NLR. For *The Creation of Israeli Arabic* he has mined the archives of the Israeli Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Education, the Prime Minister's Office, the IDF and two Arabic-teaching colleges, uncovering some real gems in the process.

Mendel begins with a long-run survey of the Jewish people's relations with the Arabic language. Though few Israeli-born Jews are able to speak it today, for centuries Arabic was the idiom of Jewish communities living around the Mediterranean and indeed much Jewish scholarship was produced in medieval Arabic: notably this was the case with Maimonides' writing. Arabic was, of course, the predominant spoken language of

Ottoman Palestine, of which Jewish communities were a part, and the small number of East European religious Jews who came to live there before the rise of Zionism suffered economically partly as a result of not knowing Arabic. They produced the first Yiddish–Arabic dictionary in 1839.

From the late nineteenth century, Zionist immigrant organizations in Palestine also stressed the importance of learning the majority's language: criteria for membership in the Zionist defence squad, Hashomer, included proficiency in 'guns, horsemanship, Arabic'. One stream in the movement for the revival of Hebrew drew heavily on the work of Arabic enlightenment intellectuals in coining modern terms—*railway* and so forth—from the Arabic root system, seeing it as a common Semitic lexical reservoir. There was, to be sure, an element of essentialist re-framing here: 'These are not foreign roots', argued Eli'ezer Ben-Yehuda, the Lithuanian-born father of modern Hebrew, in 1912. 'They are not even Arabic roots. They are our roots. They are the roots that we lost, and now we are coming back to find them.' The issue divided the movement: Tunisian-born Nissim Malul argued that the Jews in Palestine should 'consolidate our Semitic identity and not obfuscate it with European culture'. Others deplored such 'Levantinization', Herzl famously arguing that Zionism should serve as an outpost of European culture against 'oriental barbarism'. From this standpoint, Arabic was no longer the language of the neighbour but the language of the enemy, to be spoken in a tone of command.

Mendel sees this harder approach crystallizing with the 1936–39 Arab Revolt, crushed by the British, after the acceleration of European-Jewish immigration with the rise of Nazism in Europe. In 1941 the Jewish Agency (JA), the quasi-state body of the Mandate era, appointed Yisrael Ben-Zeev as its Education Department's supervisor of Arabic teaching in Zionist schools which ran their own, European-modelled curriculum. With the backing of the JA's intelligence service, Ben-Zeev introduced colloquial Arabic to the curriculum, at the expense of literary engagements. He clashed in particular with the notable Damascus-born scholar Eliyahu Habuba, who taught Arabic Studies at the prestigious Hebrew Reali School of Haifa: Habuba's methods might be suitable for a European university, but the Zionists required Arabic 'for specifically practical needs'. Ben-Zeev's curriculum stressed basic vocabulary and the rote learning of simple Arabic sentences, so settler farmers could talk to their neighbours. Yet with the founding of the State of Israel after the militarized land-grab and ethnic cleansing of 1948, these 'practical needs' lessened, with fewer day-to-day contacts between the two peoples. From the 1950s, Israeli parents and school-students shunned non-compulsory Arabic classes, regarding it as a low-prestige language compared to French or English. Ben-Zeev also began to complain of a shortage of Arabic teachers—despite the fact that, thanks to waves of Arab-Jewish

immigration from Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Yemen and Morocco, Arab Jews would make up the majority of the Jewish population of Israel by the early 1970s. Other than teaching, the principal source of employment for educated Arabic-speaking Israelis was Military Intelligence. For the most part, of course, these were Arab Jews who had brought their language with them from their native lands. *The Creation of Israeli Arabic* quotes a 1960s joke about the IDF's Unit 8200, a signals-monitoring outfit, comprising eight European and 200 Iraqi Jews. Mendel has reported elsewhere how Arab Jews working as undercover agents were taught to 'behave as Arabs' in order to glean information, or to 'pass for' Arabs while spreading alarming rumours. Thus Arabness was made to feel like something foreign even to those who were, actually, Arabs. They could have simply had coffee in Jaffa, but instead they had to be instructed to have coffee in Jaffa *like an Arab*. Yet this estrangement had unintended consequences. Growing up in a European-dominated country, the second-generation Arab Jews—classified as *Mizrahi* ('Eastern') by Zionist immigration authorities—fought to prove their Jewishness and Israeliness by differentiating themselves from the Palestinians. They did not acquire Arabic as a mother tongue; like the European Jews, they saw it as a foreign language, associated with low socio-economic status. Thus when the first generation began to retire from Military Intelligence in the late 1960s and early 70s, the shortage of Arabic speakers in the relevant departments became acute. (The 'de-Arabization' process has gone full circle: today Tel Aviv's Babylonian Jewry Heritage Centre offers a course in 'spoken Jewish Iraqi', which the third and fourth generations, secure in their Israeli status, can study as part of their 'hybridized heritage', without even mentioning the A-word.)

The second turning point in Mendel's account comes with the shock of Israel's near-defeat in the 1973 War, saved only by the US airlift. Intelligence failure was blamed for the fact that the IDF had been caught off-guard. Golda Meir and her Defence Minister Moshe Dayan were forced to resign. The Agranat Commission established to investigate the debacle—some of its findings are still secret—held the top IDF and intelligence chiefs responsible, and was harshly critical not only of Military Intelligence but also Mossad and the Research Department of the Foreign Ministry. ('The Egyptian desk was run by an experienced woman', confessed a top Foreign Office official. 'But the Syrian and Iraqi desks were run by a person who, as far as I know, does not speak Arabic.') The new Intelligence Chief, Shlomo Gazit, appointed in 1974, initiated a concerted effort to raise the level of Arabic-speaking recruits. A Military Intelligence 'Unit for the Encouragement of Oriental Studies', Telem, was set up within the Ministry of Education, and Arabic-language teachers were encouraged to report promising pupils. Lapid, the Military Intelligence general in charge of Telem, insisted the country needed

250 men every year with a good knowledge of Arabic—able to 'understand in a few seconds what the enemy says'. At the same time, the paucity of language teachers was addressed by drafting female military-service conscripts into an IDF-funded Soldier-Teacher programme: after an 8-month crash course, the young women were sent off to teach Arabic in schools in the process of 'securitization' of the education system. Importantly, for Mendel, these new initiatives came wrapped in an official ideology of 'security and peace-seeking'. Gazit spelled this out in a 1976 foreword to a new textbook, *Colloquial Eretz-Yisraeli Arabic*: the language would not only be a 'tool' for eavesdroppers and interrogators, but would 'lay the foundation for peace-making', through the broadest possible 'dialogue and discussion'.

Mendel's main contention is that this military-education axis, still in place today, has been fundamentally determined not by 'peace-seeking' but by security goals, creating a method of Arabic-language instruction designed to alienate students from the Palestinians under Israel's dominion and from the Arab Middle East, and therefore also from any conception of peace that would be based on equality, rights, respect and integration. He backs this contention with detailed analyses of archived reports and correspondence between key actors, backed up by the statistics on Arabic-speaking students recruited straight into Military Intelligence units. He keeps a watchful eye on the permanently revolving doors between the IDF, the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Education. Stringing these archival nuggets into a chronological account that runs from the beginnings of Zionist settlement in Palestine, Mendel consistently returns to the theme of the military requiring more Arabic speakers from the schools, and the education department requiring more funding from the military, with both sides undermined by the unpopularity of Arabic amongst Israeli children, their parents and their teachers—a low rating that the very 'securitization' of Israeli Arabic feeds into, for scarcely anybody with linguistic ambitions at the age of twelve deliberately sets out to enter the murky world of phone-tapping, radio monitoring and prisoner interrogation.

Palestinians could not, by definition, be a part of the military-educational Arabic Studies axis, since they were the 'object' of the securitization project. Mendel provides a wonderful picture of this paradox from a 1960s visit by a group of 'Oriental-studies' students to Nazareth, a Palestinian city under Israeli military administration, in order to 'learn about Arabs'. They were accommodated in an army base and given a list of rules of behaviour drawn up by the Prime Minister's Office, including instructions to dress tidily, avoid voicing political opinions about 'the minority problem in the country' and refuse offers of food or gifts. The Palestinian journalist Atallah Mansour encountered the group and was given the list of rules by one of the boys. Mansour spontaneously read all thirteen rules out loud to them,

in Hebrew, and asked the boys what they thought of them. One responded: 'From these rules we understand we are in a hostile environment.' Yet as Mansour pointed out, hundreds of tourists came to Nazareth every day and no one harassed or attacked them: 'Is the aim of Arabic Studies in Israel to intimidate the pupils in order to prevent them from being in contact with the Arabs?'

If they were excluded from signals monitoring, plenty of Palestinians have, of course, worked for Israeli Military Intelligence in other ways, as detailed by Hillel Cohen in *Good Arabs* (2006). Yet Arab informants required Israeli handlers, and so the need remained for a supply of Jewish Israeli men, fitting the gendered and racialized stereotypes of Military Intelligence, and preferably 'sentiment-free', who could learn Arabic without making friends with people such as Mansour. (Mendel reveals that one of the laments of the recruiters was that not enough men, and too many women, studied Arabic for the needs of military intelligence; and the 'girls' could not always be prevented, alas, from forming 'an emotional relationship' with a Palestinian.) The main product of Israeli Arabic Studies, then, was 'fodder' for the security services. School textbooks are written 'by former Military Intelligence soldiers for future Military Intelligence soldiers', with grammatical examples such as 'Do not arrest that woman', 'The police do not know what the three kidnappers demand', or 'We arrested his father-in-law'. Mendel argues that the instrumentalization of Arabic Studies has become so banalized that Israeli students no longer notice that the curriculum has been manipulated for 'securitization' purposes, that it excludes any intellectual or cultural explorations of the language, or that native speakers are absent from the classroom. The upshot of this 'hidden curriculum' is an Israeli Arabic that creates distance, rather than understanding, valuing the 'passive' skills of reading or listening over those of speaking and writing. In Mendel's summary, it is 'a silent language that listens from afar, reconnoitring the Arab world through binoculars'.

Mendel's trawl of the archives proves beyond doubt his thesis that Israeli Arabic Studies are driven not by 'peace-seeking' but by security interests. How, more broadly, should the book be assessed? A weakness is the absence of any sustained comparative dimension, an important aspect in the current flourishing of settler-colonial studies. The politics of language is rarely absent from situations of conquest and occupation, and its knowledge has long permeated institutions—the School of Oriental and African Studies established to train administrators of the British Empire, and so forth. It is said that when Nixon proposed closing down Area Studies programmes at US universities, given the involvement of social-science students in anti-Vietnam War protests, the CIA responded that perhaps 98 per cent of Area Studies graduates espoused anti-war views, but an indispensable 2 per cent

went on to work for 'us', and for their sake the programmes ought to be preserved. Christopher Simpson's *Science of Coercion* (1994) and Bruce Cumings's essay 'Boundary Displacement' (1997) were early studies of the Cold War partnership between American university departments and US intelligence operations. And that was before we learned about the participation of members of the American Psychological Association in torture at Guantanamo Bay.

The picture Mendel paints would add some Israeli specificities to this bleak landscape. Given its militarized—not integrated—location in the Middle East, and its containment of Palestinians and other Arabs under its direct control, more like 98 per cent of Jewish Israeli students of Arabic will go on to work for the state and its military, while 2 per cent at best may go on to espouse anti-war views. The US Center for Advanced Study of Language at the University of Maryland, 'the first and only national resource dedicated to addressing the language needs of the Intelligence Community', must be green with envy. (In a welcome step for conscious self-positioning and academic transparency, Mendel prefaces his book with an acknowledgement that he himself is a member of the 2 per cent, having honed his Arabic as a decorated service-man in the Israeli Navy, before going on to refuse military reserve duty in the Occupied Territories.) Another feature specific to Israel, in this history of corruption of knowledge by power, is how young the process starts. In Warsaw Pact countries, Russian was taught in primary schools as the language of great literature; in Israel it is a taken-for-granted proposition that those children who opt to study Arabic do so for military use. *The Creation of Israeli Arabic* deserves a place on the bookshelf alongside Nurit Peled-Elhanan's *Palestine in Israeli School Books: Ideology and Propaganda in Education* (2012), for the clues it provides on the education system's role in making Israeli civilian and civic life so matter-of-factly securitized.

Although he invokes Bourdieu's 'field of forces' and Gramsci's ideological 'common sense', Mendel stresses at the outset that his is fundamentally an empiricist approach. Perhaps the greatest gift of his book is that it situates valuable translations of archival material in a broad historical context, with an intelligent eye for details—forms of address and letterheads, as well as euphemisms for the military occupation and civilian settlement of Palestinian lands. Yet it is a missed opportunity not to have framed these empirical findings within a wider history of ideologies. What Mendel misleadingly calls a 'type' of Arabic—'Israeli Arabic'—is more than a teaching method that privileges language comprehension (for monitoring Arab activities) over language production (for interacting with Arabic speakers). The 'Israeli Arabic' creation is an ideology in the Althusserian sense of linking experience with thought, and it needs to be understood in articulation

with other social practices, such as Zionist institution-building in colonized Palestine, which Mendel does discuss, and obligatory Army conscription at the age of 18 for the majority of Jewish Israelis. What is nearly missed, however, is the educational nation-building project of aligning one language with one people, on that one new land.

Mendel alludes to 'the Zionist decision to push for Hebrew unilingualism' and, in passing, to negative attitudes towards multi-lingualism. But this is insufficient if we want to understand the impact of language ideologies on the securitization of Arabic Studies. In 1949, a Ministry of Education official objected to devoting curriculum space to Arabic, arguing:

> If we want to take into consideration that we neighbour Arab people, then we should put more emphasis on sport and physical exercises. We will always be fewer than them. And we will always need to stand guard, and so be unable to dedicate too much time for study . . . instead, they should adapt to us and study Hebrew. We must free ourselves from the Diasporic inferiority.

The sign of 'Diasporic inferiority' here is multi-lingualism. The irony is that Moshe Dafna, the official who made this archetypically nationalist-monolingualist statement, had been born in what is now Ukraine and studied in Jerusalem, and had good command of at least three languages. In fact, multi-lingualism was a quality of the vast majority of European Jews who formed the early Zionist institutions. Their language skills enabled them to engage in diplomacy and study at various institutions across Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and made it easier for them to acquire yet another language: Modern Hebrew, in its Israeli guise. Yet rather than appreciating their own multi-lingualism, what many wanted to achieve was the simultaneously powerful and restrictive equation developed by nation-building projects in western Europe: the equation of one nation with one language. The rest of the world, where stable multi-lingualism is commonly the norm, has had to bear the consequences. (And even in Europe the project remains incomplete, notwithstanding heavy-handed language-standardization policies.)

Following the logic of what Aziza Khazzoom has called 'the great chain of Orientalism', we find here an aspect that is really specific to Israel. The Jews of Europe were among the first subjects of Orientalism, 'orientals' in Europe's midst, and their multi-lingualism was part of that supposed Oriental 'inferiority'. The motivation of Zionism was to redress that slight, to prove that the Jews were not 'Oriental', or at least not as much as those from the really Oriental 'Orient'—hence the chain, or cascade. In order to insert that distance between European Jews and the more 'Oriental', the structures of European educational institutions that constituted the othering of the 'Oriental' (here, Arabic) had to be replicated by Zionist institutions. And, to prove to be a nation 'like any other'—meaning like the ones who

were not tainted by 'Oriental-ness'—the 'nation' had to be moulded by the monolingual equation.

Mendel seems to forget that Modern Hebrew was actually a new language to many pupils in Jewish schools in early Mandate Palestine, who were likely to be speaking mostly Russian, German, Yiddish or Polish at home. He suggests that Arabic became their 'second foreign language', but from the pupils' point of view it would have been the third, coming after the 'foreign' language of Hebrew, which they learnt by institutional immersion, and then English. The oversight points to the success of the ideology that gave Modern Hebrew the status of *the* monolingual national language, purportedly not 'foreign' to these native Slavic and Germanic language speakers. Paradoxically, the ideology of monolingualism also helps to explain the decision to keep Arabic as one of two official languages of the newly established state, even as the Nakba was bringing about the mass forcible eviction of the speakers of that language. Under the Mandate, three official languages—English, Arabic, Hebrew—had been instituted; the State of Israel amended the rule to remove English from the roster, but Arabic remained. Yet its official-language status is only an 'anomaly', as Mendel calls it, if one occludes the 'one nation, one language' equation. Not being Jewish, the Palestinians and other Arabs—those remaining within the new state borders, despite the Nakba—could not be part of the one Hebrew-speaking nation, and consequently, in order to be kept out of that 'one nation', they had to kept out of the 'one language', and so another language was instituted for them. Clearly this was not a liberal stance, as the official recognition of minority languages sometimes indicates, because the Arab Jews could not simply keep *their* native Arabic: they were part of the one nation, being Jewish, so they had to abide by the one—Hebrew—language. According to the logic of this over-determined equation, if everyone had the same one language, officially, they would all be the same one nation, officially, and this had radical implications for equal citizenship that were, and continue to be, unacceptable to Israeli institutions.

Mendel himself, like everyone else, advocates a particular language ideology, which he makes clear throughout. He measures the failure of Arabic-language instruction in Israel not only against its own aims but against an ideal spelled out (in Arabic) in the dedication of his book: 'To the lovers of language and its spirit.' Elsewhere, he describes this spirit as 'the inherent cultural, educational and human value' of learning Arabic, as a key for 'entering and embracing the intellectual and civilian life of the majority of the people in the Middle East'. His sentimentalized opening account of the high-cultural and scientific production of Jews in Arab Andalusia—reminiscent of the pan-Arab nationalist trope harking back to the very same glory days—is meant to demonstrate that integrated Jewish participation

in the Middle East is not an impossibility. Yet the integrated, multi-lingual community Mendel imagines coming about, under a different constellation of power and ideology, would probably harbour experientially and materially grounded ideas on the uses of languages, rather than cherish references to Maimonides. That said, in the current world of Arabic-language instruction, operating under conditions of a lingering Orientalism in structures, creeping securitization in aims and inward-looking heritage education in outcomes, the spirit that motivates *The Creation of Israeli Arabic* makes a refreshing change.