LANGUAGE POLICY IN ISRAEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY: THE CASE OF ARABIC IN PUBLIC SPACE

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Abstract: The focus in the present paper is on Arabic Language use on road signs in Israel in 21st century. Legally, both Hebrew and Arabic have a status as official language, based on Article 82 of the Palestine Order in Council, 1922 of Mandatory Palestine. This order was incorporated into Israeli legislation in 1948. The equal legal status of the two languages is merely theoretical. In 2008 was proposed a bill in Israeli Parliament to remove Arabic's status as an official language.The public space as a focus of attention in language policy as well as in language use is a relatively new area of attention, and refers to specific language objects as road signs and street names. It uses as an arena for conducting battles for national identity, recognition, and self-expression. The use of Arabic in the public space on the road signs was not provided until the Supreme Court in 2002 ruled that Arabic must also be included on signs in cities where a significant number of Arabs live. In the years since that ruling changes in practice of language are harder to account for. The linguistic landscape remained mostly Hebrew and English. Anti-Arabic vandalism has appeared in mixed cities, such as Akko and Jerusalem. In 2009 the Israeli media revealed that nationalist groups have been spraying over Arabic names on road signs. On the other hand the Palestinian Authority project to place non-Hebrew road signs throughout the West Bank. In 2009 the Israeli transport minister suggested to change the orthography of city names on road signs so that they are transliterations of the Hebrew name. In 2011 the Supreme Court held a hearing on a motion for contempt of court and implementation of the court's ruling from 2002.

Keywords: linguistic landscape, language policy, minority, Arabic, road signs, Israel, Hebrew

1. INTRODUCTION

Language Policy, in its most basic sense, refers to the actions taken by a state to regulate the status of the languages spoken in its territory. Beyond this descriptive level, this area of study is concerned with the processes and mechanisms which influence language policy decisions and their implementation. This includes, for instance, the role that ideologies and orientations towards languages and their users play in the creation and implementation of language policies, or the ways in which language policies are used to maintain, promote or establish the sociopolitical position of majority and minority linguistic groups. "Language in the public space" refers to all language items that are displayed to transmit symbolic messages as to the legitimacy, relevance, priority and standards of languages and the people and groups they represent. The public space as a focus of attention in language policy as well in language use is a relatively new area of attention, as most research on language use tends to focus primarily on speakers and not on their environments (Shohamy, 2006). The definition given by Landry and Bourhis (1997) is the following:

> The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration.

Thus they are concerned with the use of language in its written form in the public sphere. It refers to language that is visible in a specified area (Bourhis, Landry, 2002). The

study of the linguistic landscape is a relatively new development. It enjoys a growing interest in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

Of the endless and unlimited number of language items to be found in the public space, this paper will focus on one type of mechanism displayed in the public space: linguistic landscape. In this paper will be examined one specific language object that mark the public sphere: the case of road signs in first decade of 21st century.

2. THE STATUS OF ARABIC LANGUAGE IN ISRAEL

Arabic is the mother tongue of the heterogeneous Arab minority, which make up some 24 percent of Israel's population (about 1,8 million in 2010). Although defined collectively as Arab citizens of Israel, they include a number of different, primarily Arabic-speaking groups, each with distinct characteristics (Shafrir, 2011). Legally, both Hebrew and Arabic have a status as official language. The fundamental document to establish the official status of the languages goes back to the period of Mandatory Palestine. Article 82 of the Palestine Order in Council, 1922 under the subtitle "official languages". The state of Israel has never enacted a statute which clearly establishes its official languages. The main change to Article 82 was enacted by the Israeli Parliament in Section 15B of the Law and Government Ordinance-1948, which eliminates English as an official language, leaving two official languages – Arabic and Hebrew. This order dictates the comprehensive Hebrew-Arabic bilingual conduct of state authorities. In practice, Arabic's public position in Israel is marginal, and Hebrew enjoys almost absolute dominance in Israeli public spheres. (Yitzhaki, 2008).

The Arabic is much less employed in official documents and dealings than Hebrew, but the presence of Arabic in Israel nevertheless real. In all universities one finds departments of Arabic. In April 2012 was announced the establishment of a university campus in the Bedouin city of Rahat. Arabic is supported by daily TV and radio broadcasting, daily newspapers and periodicals. Arabic is the teaching language of the Arabic educational system from kindergarten to teachers' colleges. Moreover, in the Hebrew-speaking school system Arabic is an optional third language. On the other hand, Hebrew is obligatory from the third grade on in Arabic-speaking schools. The high competence which Arab students generally achieve in Hebrew – the wide majority of Arabs under forty know Hebrew well – contrasts with the feeble dedication of many Israeli Jews to the learning of Arabic in the Hebrew educational system (Ben-Raphael, 1994). The determinant factor of inter-group interaction is the dominant culture, which legitimizes a linguistic and cultural pluralistic model of majority-minority relations. Within this context Arabic is by no means held in high respect by the majority, which tends to downgrade its value. The underprivileged status of Arabs in Israel and other factors explain why Arabic is most often left out of the Jews cultural repertoire – even though it is diffused by schools. On the other hand, the minority which is dependent on the language majority is determined to acquire it. The price it pays for this enrichment is the downgrading of the social value of its own language (Ben-Raphael, 1994).

Article 82 of the Palestine Order in Council-1922 appears under the title "official languages". It demands bilingual conduct in Hebrew and in Arabic in three areas: (1) The central authority (as far as the authorities are concerned and as far as the possibility to conduct their business in any one of these languages); (2) Official announcements of the local authority; and (3) Accessibility to the public service of the central authority, courts included. The demand for equal use in both its official languages is justified by the claim that this is the legitimate interpretation of the agreement. In other words, this approach grants a strict and unambiguous interpretation of the accord, according to which Hebrew and Arabic – both being under the same title of "official languages" – are entitled to equal use

by the authorities in the (very broad) areas defined. Moreover, any conduct that does not implement this principle is a blatant flouting of the rule of law. We will now exemplify this claim with the aid of several legal cases in which the matter of Arabic's official status constituted the basis of the petitioner's demand for the equal use of Hebrew and Arabic by the authorities (Yitzhaki, 2008).

3. DE JURE

The uncertainly about official status has been highlighted by three cases brought to the Israeli Supreme Court at the beginning of last decade. In the first, a group of Arabic-speaking inhabitants of Haifa sought to require the city authorities to add Arabic to signposts that are at present painted in Hebrew and English. In the second, the Ministry of Public Works was asked to add Arabic to highway signs. Decisions on these cases would have helped clarify just what the policy means. The fact that the accounts of the trials made no mention of official status is noteworthy. The first case was resolved without a formal decision of the court by an agreement on the part of the municipality to add trilingual signs over the next few years. In the second case, the court ruled that the signs were to be permitted on the basis that citizens were entitled to free expression, in the language of their choice. In the second, the Ministry agreed to make the change. The court has so far thus avoided any need to rule on the official status of the Arabic language. In the third, a local Arab developer asked to require the city authorities in Upper Nazareth to permit him to display advertising posters written only in Arabic, rather than enforcing a municipal code requiring that two-thirds of a poster be in Hebrew. For a long period the Jewish local authorities and some mixed local authorities declared linguistic restrictions upon private notices in the public domain. Usually, the bylaws carried the following instruction, a veritable graphic instruction of the hegemony of Hebrew:

A person will not publish a notice or present a sign unless licensed by the head of the local authority and according to the conditions of the license unless the notice or sign are (1) written in Hebrew, or (2) written partly in a foreign tongue and the Hebrew takes up at least two thirds of the top part of the spread and the Hebrew fonts are bigger than those of the foreign language.

The citation is of para 2(a) of a bylaw in Upper Nazareth (Advertisements and Notices) 1964. The paragraph, however, was revoked by the Supreme Court in the early 1990s. (Saban & Amana, 2002).

The most familiar legal case in this context is that of Adalah v. the Municipality of Tel-Aviv which dealt with the language of signs in Jewish-Arab mixed cities (HC 4112/99). In its petition to the Supreme Court, the petitioners requested that the Court require the respondent municipalities, all of which contain an Arab-minority population, to ensure that municipal signs be written in Arabic, and not only in Hebrew. The petitioners argued that the current practice, in which most of the signs are only in Hebrew, unlawfully discriminates against and affronts the dignity of the Arab minority, and breaches the statutory provision declaring Arabic, along with Hebrew, an official language of the State of Israel.

The respondent municipalities joined by the Attorney General, argued that there was no statutory requirement that all municipal signs be written also in Arabic; the decision whether to include Arabic was left to their discretion. In exercising proper discretion, which takes into account, inter alia, the public's needs and the special status of the Hebrew language in Israel, the conclusion that must be drawn is that bilingual signs are necessary on main thoroughfares and intersections, on warning and safety signs throughout the city, at public institutions, and also on streets in predominately Arab-populated neighborhoods. There is no general requirement of bilingual signs, they contended, in all areas of the respondent municipalities.

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By majority decision (Chief Justice Aharon Barak and Justice Dalia Dorner), the Supreme Court accepted the petition, and required the respondent municipalities to ensure that municipal signs in their communities be in both Hebrew and Arabic. In his argumentation Chief Justice Barak introduced for the first time a crucial distinction between a "homeland (native) minority" and "immigrant groups" and it included – for the first time – a recognition much desired by the Arab-Palestinian minority of its distinctness as a "native minority".

Chief Justice Barak held that: (1) From the date of the decision henceforth, new signs or signs that have replaced worn signs must be written in Arabic; (2) Old signs on main thoroughfares, at municipal institutions, and in neighborhoods with a significant Arab population will be changed to dual-language signs within two years from the day of the judgment; (3) The other signs in the respondent municipalities will be replaced by dual-language signs within four years from the day of the judgment. Justice Heshin dissented and held that the petition should be dismissed. He argued that it is not possible to find any existing legal source to require the respondent municipalities to add Arabic text on all signs within their jurisdiction.

Almost ten years have passed since the court's ruling and more than six since the outer time range specified in the decision for compliance. However, the Municipality of Upper Nazareth has yet to comply with it. In April 2011, Israeli Supreme Court Justice Edmund Levy leveled scathing criticism at the lack of compliance with rulings handed down by the Supreme Court in the road signs case on a motion for contempt of court submitted by Adalah and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) against the Municipality of Upper Nazareth. The municipality has refused to place Arabic lettering on street signs within the jurisdictional borders of the city. During the hearing, the justices stated that the Municipality of Upper Nazareth was in clear contempt of court and must implement the court's ruling from 2002 immediately.

4. DE FACTO

An ongoing graffiti war that has transformed Israel's road signs into ideological battlefields began in 2002 after the Supreme Court ruling. In the years since that order, anti-Arabic vandalism has appeared in mixed cities, such as Acre, as well as on highway signs throughout the country — but it is said to be most prominent in Jerusalem. There residents have grown used to the Arabic translations of "Jehosaphat Street" or "Slow" being blotted out by black spray paint or covered up in ultra-nationalist bumper stickers. Arabic signs give them the feeling of bi-nationalism, that the Jews have no exclusive monopoly on the town.

Road signs in Israel are presently written in Hebrew, English, and Arabic, and feature the names used by each language. Jerusalem, for example, is identified as "Yerushalaim" in Hebrew, "Jerusalem" in English and "Al Quds" in Arabic; Nazareth, the city of Jesus's childhood, is "al Nasra" in Arabic and Natzrat in Hebrew. In addition, a wide variety of English and Arabic spellings can be found throughout the country, which Ministry officials say "reflect the vast changes and development in Israel's highways." Caesarea, for example, appears as Caesarea, Qesarya, Qesariyya and Ceysaria.

The transport minister announced in July 2009 that signs on all major roads in Israel, East Jerusalem and possibly parts of the West Bank would be "standardized", converting English and Arabic place names into straight transliterations of the Hebrew name. In the works for over a year, the new signs would still feature Hebrew, English and Arabic, but rely exclusively on Hebrew transliteration. In all three languages, for instance, Jerusalem will be Yerushalayim, Natzrat for Nazareth, Kesariya for Caesarea, and Yafo for Jaffa. Areas in the occupied West Bank where Israel exercises civil control would keep their Arabic road signs, so Nablus would not become the Hebrew Shechem.

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Israeli Arabs said it is an attempt to erase the Arabic language and heritage which predates the modern Israel. (Cook, 2009).

The United States is funding a Palestinian Authority project to place non-Hebrew road signs throughout West Bank. The PA plans to implement it in exclusively Israeli-controlled areas as well. The project was announced in September 2009 by PA transportation minister. It is the first of its kind since Jordan lost control of the area after the 1967 Six Day War. All roads and localities will appear in Arabic and English on the new signs; Hebrew will not appear (Fendel, 2009).

In August 2011 a Tel Aviv University student got 40 faculty members to sign a petition demanding that Arabic be added to signs on campus. He wrote: "Adding Arabic to signs will promote equality between Jews and Arabs within the university community by expressing mutual respect and conveying a message of acceptance and tolerance to hundreds of students, workers and Arabic-speaking citizens who visit our campus every day." (Khoury, 2011).

5. SUMMARY

A paper by Ben Rafael, Shohamy, Amara and Trumper-Hecht (2004) compares patterns of linguistic landscape in a number of Israeli cities and small towns, and in East Jerusalem. Of the eight localities, some are homogeneous and others mixed in terms of the groups that were studied. The study focuses on the degree of visibility on private and public signs of the three major languages: Hebrew, Arabic and English. There are different patterns in the various communities: Hebrew/English signs prevail in Jewish communities; Arabic/Hebrew in Israeli-Palestinian communities and Arabic/English in East Jerusalem.

Further analysis also gives expression to differences between public (top-down) and private (bottom-up) signs. Taken together the linguistic landscape is not a true reflection of the diversity of Israel's languages. Three sociological perspectives are used to develop a number of research questions. It is hypothesized that the linguistic landscape should be explainable in terms of power relations between dominant and subordinate groups. Further those identity markers of communities would imprint themselves strongly on the linguistic landscape and finally, that different languages vary in attractiveness to different audiences. It is in this perspective that they speak of linguistic landscape in terms of symbolic construction of the public space. (Gorter, 2006)

Linguistic landscape items are not faithfully representative of the linguistic repertoire typical of Israel's ethno linguistic diversity, but rather of those linguistic resources that individuals and institutions make use of in the public sphere. It is in this perspective that we speak of Linguistic landscape in terms of *symbolic construction of the public space* which we explain by context-dependent differential impacts of three different factors – *rational considerations* focusing on the signs' expected attractiveness to the public and clients; aspirations of actors to give expression to their identity through their choice of patterns that, in one way or another, represent their *presentation of self* to the public; and *power relations* that eventually exist behind choices of patterns where sociopolitical forces share relevant incompatible interests.

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