**Languages in Contact: The Influence of Arabic on Modern Israeli Hebrew Slang**

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**Abstract**: Ongoing contact between the Arabic and Hebrew languages in the Land of Israel has engendered interesting linguistic phenomena in a variety of different fields. Prominent among these is entrance of words of Arabic origin into modern Hebrew slang. Lexical borrowing from one language to another has existed since ancient times. However, the complex reality in Israel, particularly the phenomenon of bilingualism, has contributed to the enrichment of the Hebrew vocabulary, on all levels, with words drawn from Arabic. The use of slang words of Arabic origin is not the exclusive preserve of any specific population, but can be found among all Hebrew speakers, in both the written and spoken languages, in the media and on social networks. Most slang words of Arabic origin undergo changes in the semantic sphere, and some are employed in a metaphoric sense. These words are declined according to Hebrew rules, but their declension for gender, number, the construct case, and definiteness is usually irregular. The use of slang words meets linguistic functions required by speakers: they contribute to broadening forms of word formation and allow the derivation of new values, the borrowing of expressions, extensions of meaning, and so forth. Regular morphology, alien sounds, borrowed consonants, an unusual social structure, and arbitrary patterns of definiteness are just some of the more prominent characteristics of slang words of Arabic origin in Modern Hebrew. Slang changes according to fashion, is influenced by its surroundings, and can be found in a variety of forms in the language of politicians and statespeople, correspondents and interviewees, and all members of the language community.

**A. Introduction**: Discussion of Hebrew slang in general, and slang of Arabic origin in particular, since the establishment of Israel has been significantly enriched by the growing use among Jews of slang of Arabic origin. Linguistic scholars tend to define the concept of “slang” as a collection of strange words – vulgar language that creeps into standard language, impairing the articulacy of the language and its clarity of expression (Yannai, 1990). Conversely, others argue that slang is the birthplace of new words, changing constantly, and constituting evidence of a natural language or a type of language current among people who are young in age or in spirit. The use of slang constitutes a deliberate deviation from institutionalized and standard language, and accordingly represents a voluntary and deliberate register (Nir, 1999). Slang can be seen as a sociolinguistic mechanism that enables speakers to depart from social formality and make utterances that are not otherwise permitted by social norms (Rosenthal, 2008). Sapan defines slang as words and expressions on the margins of the spoken language that are considered improper and unworthy of inclusion in decent or formal speech (Sapan, 1974). Nir notes that slang is not characterized solely by the use of substandard forms; indeed, it is sometimes accompanied by a certain sense of intellectual superiority, not only in lexical terms but particularly in various aspects of grammar (Nir, 2003). Muchnik (2001) defines slang explicitly as substandard language used in unofficial situations by diverse groups of speakers, including young people, students, soldiers, professionals, the elderly, and so forth. However, she adds that recently slang has noticeably entered into the speech of other population sectors.

Hebrew slang enjoyed particular attention in the Israeli consciousness thanks to the vigorous work of Dan Ben-Amotz and Netiva Ben-Yehuda, who undertook a historical enterprise whose success exceeded expectations (Ben-Amotz & Ben-Yehuda, 1972). This is process is not unusual in the history of languages and is a natural phenomenon. Today, cub reporters make extensive use of common slang, a practice that has become a norm of journalistic writing and is also accepted by younger editors (Rosenblum, 1992).

Hebrew-speaking Israeli society uses slang expressions extensively; this is illustrated by the growing use of slang by many politicians for social purposes. Over the past decade, slang has entered into the language of media, advertising, and even literature (Rosenthal, 2008). No external body can determine which slang word will be adopted and which will be rejected. The speakers are exclusively responsible for determining the fate of migrant and new words. Very few slang words become part of the standard language, but many of them show resilience in their slang function—words drawn from Arabic particularly so.

Initially, slang words were collated in separate dictionaries, such as Ben-Amotz & Ben-Yehuda (1972); Ahiasaf, Radar et al. (1993), Rubik & Rosenthal (2005), and Eeta Yisraeli (2005). Later, slang words entered into the Even Shoshan dictionary (2004 edition), which included numerous slang terms. Some of these slang dictionaries preserve forgotten words, many of which are no longer in use, while at the same time new words have entered into the language from every possible direction and field. This highlights one of the features of spoken Hebrew as a language that often reflects the social changes experienced by the Jewish people, particularly in the Land of Israel. Thus Hebrew dictionaries also reflect sociolinguistic changes.

**B, Israeli slang:** One of the key questions raised by study of Israeli slang is why words such as telephone, ????, fax, and television, that entered Hebrew from English, have been accepted in Hebrew as standard words in the language, whereas words that entered from Arabic, such as *deẖilak*, *saẖbi*, and *maskhara*, were repelled to the margins of the language (Muchnik, 2004; Haramati, 2000). Israeli Hebrew slang has been influenced mainly by English, Yiddish, and Arabic. Initially, Yiddish was the most influential language, but today it has been surpassed by Arabic, due to the protracted contact between the two languages in the Israeli domain.[[1]](#footnote-1) Since the 1990s, there has been a noticeable increase in slang of Arabic origin, which is present in impressive proportions in the group of emotional words, greetings, exclamations, and curses (Dana, 2008).[[2]](#footnote-2) The encounter between the Israelis and the Arabs who lived in the country had a profound influence on slang, leading to the adoption of words such as *deẖilak*, *inshallah*, *saẖtein*, *mabsut*, *aẖla*, *ahbal*, *majnun*, *fadiẖa*, *kasaẖ*, and *freẖa*. A significant portion of the Hebrew slang vocabulary has its origins in colloquial Arabic (Netzer, 2007; Marai, 2008).[[3]](#footnote-3) It is difficult to find a Hebrew speaker who does not use greetings of Arabic origin, despite the fact that expressions of politeness constitute a social value in every civilization, and although every culture has a different definition as to what is considered polite. Hebrew has also been influenced by slang of English origin; in particular, many English words were absorbed during the British Mandate period. Words and phrases such as “fifty-fifty” and “tremp” (i.e. “tramp,” meaning “hitchhike”) remain from this period. During the 1970s, Hebrew was influenced by words borrowed from English through the field of rock and pop music, while in the 1990s new technology served as the vehicle of transmission (Fischerman, 2004; Koren, 2010-2011).

1. Sapan’s study (1963) found borrowings at a level of 40 percent from Yiddish, 39 percent from Arabic, and very small percentages from European languages such as English, Russian, and French. An updated study might yield different results due to the significant changes in Israeli society over recent decades. Rosenthal (2005) claims that 35 percent of the slang vocabulary can be attributed to Arabic, 31 percent to English, and only 21 percent to Yiddish. It would seem that the dwindling of the generation connected to Yiddish has led to a reduction in the use of slang from Yiddish in favor of the contact with the Arab population. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dana lists diverse curses that have passed from Arabic to Hebrew, with phonological changes and even metathesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Netzer (2007) categories slang according to its sources, discussing the Arabic source. Marai provides an impressive review of the forms of integration of Arabic in Israeli slang, arguing that to date the Arabic source has been mentioned only in footnotes that cannot paint the full picture. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)