

Hebrew: The Transition of an Ancient Liturgical Language to a Modern Vernacular

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (May 2021)



Conversation Among Artists, Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner, 1912

The Israeli postage stamp on the right shows the historical roots of the languages through the age of the Bible at the bottom and its growth through the periods of the Talmud, the Middle Ages and in modern times at the surface. The roots are marked with “new” words that made their appearance for the first time at these various eras and were incorporated into the language.



For a time, a lively rivalry existed between Hebrew and Yiddish, and competed for the loyalty of several generations of literary figures, writers, playwrights and philosophers. Supporters boldly proclaimed Yiddish as a “Jewish National Language” at a famous conference in Czernowitz in 1908, pointing to the tremendous numerical superiority of Yiddish speakers. Hebraists, on the other hand, at their 1913 Vienna conference laid claim to Hebrew as the Jewish national language, emphasizing the superiority of its historical continuity, the immense prestige of the Bible, its influence upon much of European literature, and its venerable age.

Yet, apart from the political difficulties in trying to establish a Jewish state, many linguists (concerned

observers as well as the perennial cynics and pessimists), doubted that Hebrew, a language that had been “frozen” or “dormant” and endured almost entirely in written form, could meet the needs of a modern society. Hebrew grew in power and prestige due to territorial concentration through immigration (aliya) to Mandatory Palestine and was a better “fit,” to achieve a national sense of identity for many immigrants from diverse cultural backgrounds, than Yiddish. It is hard to imagine a more persuasive Zionist argument than that the Land of Israel “speaks” Hebrew through the countless inscriptions uncovered on parchment, stone, clay, papyrus, and wood. Nevertheless, the drawbacks involved in its transformation to become the vernacular of the State of Israel in the twentieth century were readily evident. They were (and continue to be):

- *The narrow range of vowel sounds and the paucity of vowel combinations (diphthongs), as well as the elimination of several guttural consonants unfamiliar to speakers of Indo-European languages. The result is a poor match between speech and spelling.*
- *An alphabet that is unable to properly represent vowels by individual letters, creating serious problems both of reading comprehension and pronunciation.*
- *The need to develop a new vocabulary and appropriate word derivations based on the indigenous “roots” of Hebrew.*
- *The difficulties of a Semitic-based grammar with unfamiliar constructions for speakers of European languages.*
- *In addition, the right to left direction in contrast to European languages using the Latin alphabet makes it difficult to portray, adjust margins and align such different languages on the same page without special computer programs. It will surprise many readers who no doubt still regard Jews” as the “People of the Book,” that the ancient alphabet,*

*never fully modernized, still poses a number of difficulties for literacy such as the right to left direction of the text, the absence of capital letters, the attachment of the prepositions and article to the words they relate to and the similar shape of many letters with few extending below or above the line, as well as the slower speed of reading in the right to left direction.**

The examples below show a Hebrew text (without vowel signs) as used for most books and newspapers. Beneath it, is the fully voweled system with *nikkud* (vowel signs, created in the 9th and 10th century of the Common Era by scribe-scholars in the town of Tiberias by the Sea of Galilee). In such a text, with these signs are placed below, above or midway among the letters and used in poetry, children's books, the Torah scroll and beginners' textbooks in the Diaspora.

Without vowels

כל בני האדם נולדו בני חורין ושווים בערכם ובזכויותיהם.
כולם חוננו בתבונה ובמצפון, לפיכך חובה עליהם לנהוג
איש ברעהו ברוח של אחוה.

With vowels

כָּל בְּנֵי הָאָדָם נוֹלְדוּ בְּנֵי חוֹרִין וְשׁוּוִים בְּעֶרְכָם
וּבְזִכוּיֹתֵיהֶם. כָּלֵם חוֹנְנוּ בְּתְבוּנָה וּבְמִצְפּוֹן, לְפִיכֵךְ
חֻבָּה עֲלֵיהֶם לְנִהוּג אִישׁ בְּרֵעֵהוּ בְרוּחַ שֶׁל אַחְוָה.

Most Jews who are perfectly able to follow the synagogue service from prayer books with nikkud are unable to read simple texts in the modern language from an Israeli newspaper or book. The bestselling recent novel in Finnish (*The Unknown Soldier* by Väinö Linna) in Finland with a population similar to Israel has sold more than 800,000 copies, compared to less than 150,000 of the best-selling novel in Hebrew, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* by Amos Oz (in more than 20 foreign language translations, it has sold close

to a million!)

Attempts to introduce a more convenient alphabet were attempted numerous times including Latinization. They all failed to attract any significant support due to the emotional attachment formed over the centuries to the Hebrew alphabet. It was too great a change that would have made access to more than two thousand, five hundred years of historical continuity in danger. Imagine how many texts would have to be re-typeset with a new alphabet! Ironically, the newspaper Deror which appeared for about a year (1929) was edited by Itamar ben-Avi, the son of the great Hebrew scholar Eliezer Ben-Yehuda who was instrumental in the revival and modernization of the language.

Attempt at Latinization: 1929 issue of *Deror* (Liberty)



In his memoir *Promise and Fulfillment*, Arthur Koestler wrote, "The only way to avoid the dangers of cultural isolation and stagnation seems to be the Latinization (aka. Romanization) of the obsolete and cumbersome alphabet. If this revolutionary measure could be carried out in backward Turkey, one would have expected it to meet with little resistance in

this predominantly European community.”

In both Turkey and Malta, nationalist leaders saw the great advantages of Latinization and implemented the radical change in alphabets from the Arabic to the Latin ones which had been used for centuries. In Israel however, tradition and religious sentiments proved much stronger than utilitarian arguments. This is ironic, due to the fact that the modernization of Hebrew in all other aspects was the prime example followed by other nationalist movements (See *Israel Review of Arts and Letters*