

## The Language Planning Question in the Middle East

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### Abstract :

*As its title indicates, the present paper attempts to investigate the language planning question in Palestine as well as the development of a Palestinian language education policy for foreign language teaching. In fact, after 1948 the Jordanian curriculum was in force in the West Bank, and the Egyptian curriculum in the Gaza Strip, even during Israeli occupation. Only very recently were attempts starting to be made in order to define an independent language policy. Accordingly, this paper will endeavour to shed light on the educational policy meant for foreign languages teaching.*

**Keywords:** language planning, educational policy, educational curricula.

### ملخص:

كما يشير العنوان، تحاول هذه المقالة دراسة إشكالية التخطيط اللغوي في فلسطين وكذلك وضع سياسة لغوية فلسطينية لتعليم اللغات الأجنبية. فبعد عام 1948 كان المنهاج الأردني معمولاً به في الضفة الغربية، والمنهاج المصري في قطاع غزة، حتى أثناء الاحتلال الإسرائيلي. إلا مؤخراً جداً، بدأت محاولات في تحديد سياسة لغة مستقلة. على هذا الأساس، فإن هذا المقال هو محاولة لتسليط الضوء على السياسة التعليمية المخصصة لتعليم اللغات الأجنبية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التخطيط اللغوي، السياسة التعليمية، المناهج التربوية.

## 2. Introduction

For many centuries, Palestine has been the cradle of many cultures and religions throughout the Islamic as well as Christian crusades. Consequently, its sociolinguistic and cultural heritage has been deeply affected and influenced by many languages, different cultures and beliefs. Accordingly, the present article will endeavour to highlight the basic characteristics of language planning in Palestine in an attempt to understand the main components which constitute its linguistic map. The aim is to investigate the developments of foreign language education policies in Palestine, at a time when the establishment of a Palestinian state has become a real option, and when, following the Oslo agreements the Palestinians became responsible for Palestinian education.

### 2. A Socio-Historical Background of Languages in Palestine

With the spread of Islam during the first decades of the seventh century CE, Syria, including Palestine, was conquered by the Arabs. Arabic replaced the Syrian Aramaic language. Ever since, Arabic has been the native language of the Palestinian Arabs. During the Crusades, French, German, and English were used. However, the language of daily communication was Arabic. The Franciscan Fathers who came to Palestine after the Crusades introduced the teaching of Italian among Christians in Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

In 1517 Palestine was conquered by the Ottoman Turks who ruled the country till 1917. Ayish et al (1983) indicate that during Ottoman rule, Turkish was the official language of the government. During the Ottoman rule, the Arabic language was weakened. However, the nineteenth century witnessed a cultural renaissance due to Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and Syria in 1799. This renaissance developed during the Egyptian rule of Mohammed Ali and his son Ibrahim. Arabic gained additional strength as a result of the opening of Western missionary schools in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine<sup>1</sup>. In this connection, Maoz (1975) reports that there was an unending competition among the various Christian churches. Each church taught its own language: French or Italian (Catholics), English (Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Quakers), German (Lutheran), and Russian (Orthodox). Spolsky and Cooper (1991) give a lucid account of Palestinian multilingualism in Jerusalem where the following languages were used in the late nineteenth century: Spoken Arabic, Classical Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Latin, French, Armenian, English and German. Towards the end of Ottoman rule in the Arab countries (including Palestine), Turkish was made the official language and Arabic was discouraged as an educational language.<sup>2</sup>

During the British Mandatory period in Palestine, English became the main language of the government. However, in spite of the fact that the communities, Arabic and Jewish, operated their own separate school systems, there exists a language contact, generally with the Jews learning Arabic.

In 1948 Israel was established on most of Mandatory Palestine with the exception of the central hilly part, known as the West Bank of Jordan (which was annexed to Jordan), and a small enclave to the South adjoining Egypt, known as the Gaza Strip, which was administered by Egypt. Arabic is the official language of Jordan and Egypt<sup>3</sup>. English was and is the only foreign language taught at Palestinian government schools<sup>4</sup>. In private schools, French, German, and Spanish are taught in addition to English. Similarly in the Gaza Strip, English is the only foreign language taught at government schools. The Jordanian and Egyptian curricula were in effect in the West Bank and Gaza respectively during the Israeli occupation of these areas from 1967 till 1994. It is important to note that during the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, English served as a *lingua franca* between Palestinians who did not know Hebrew and Israelis who did not know Arabic. English is therefore viewed as a neutral language<sup>5</sup>.

With the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority in Gaza and Jericho in 1994, and in 1995 and 1996 in major West Bank cities, the multilingual situation remained essentially unchanged. However, some changes in relation to teaching English, Hebrew and other European languages were observed<sup>6</sup>. In brief, the existence of so many diverse languages in the Palestinian linguistic repertoire is due to several factors such as political developments, studying abroad, immigration and resettlement, trade, tourism, travel, and the founding of several religious missionaries and institutions.

Let us first examine the linguistic situation of major languages notably Palestinian Arabic, English and Hebrew, then review the status of modern European languages such as French, Spanish, German, Italian, and Russian, and finally look briefly at minority languages such as Assyrian, Armenian, Greek, Coptic, and Latin.

## 2.1 English

English is by far the most widely known and used foreign language among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The spread of English began with the British Mandate in Palestine after World War I. English was the main language of government<sup>7</sup>. English became the first official language of Palestine: English, Arabic, and Hebrew were mentioned in that order as the languages of official documents. Its legal status was defined in 1922 in the King's Orders in Council<sup>8</sup>. During the past three decades there has been a

huge increase in the use and diffusion of English. What Abu-Lughod (1997) describes applies to Palestine: "The ever-increasing demand for individuals who are adequately proficient in English makes the issue more acutely felt". The importance of English in the lives of individuals, groups, and institutions in our region hardly needs to be underscored

Today English is the main language for international communication and for overcoming barriers to the flow of information, goods, and people across national boundaries, and the language for which there is the strongest local demand. By the early 1970s, the effects of the process of globalization were obvious. The demand for English has continued to grow: it serves as a language for access to business, science, education and travel.

During Israeli rule of the West Bank 1967-1995 and Gaza 1967-1994, the Jordanian and Egyptian systems of education were kept intact. This applies also to the English language curriculum used in these two Palestinian areas. English is taught at the Palestinian universities for several reasons. English is a required subject for all first-year university students. English is also a Faculty of Arts requirement at these universities when students take courses in English language and literature. Furthermore, English is the medium of instruction in the sciences and mathematics at all universities and in some disciplines, such as nursing, business, political science and cultural studies, at some Palestinian universities

The relationship between high school students' achievement in English and their motivation to learn English was investigated by Bakir (1996). Her findings emphasized the importance of motivation in accounting for success or failure in learning English. Instrumental motivation was a factor since students sought the social advantages of learning English.

The relationship between students' attitudes towards English and their achievement scores at the secondary stage in Nablus, in the West Bank, was investigated by Shakhshir (1996). In this study achievement scores of students who had positive attitudes towards learning English, towards the English language teaching situation at their schools, and towards the culture of English-speaking peoples were better than those who had negative attitudes towards these three factors.

The implications of the importance of English for the Palestinians are that there is a socioeconomic value of English, that the culture of the language should be taught, and since English is the universal language of the modern world, it should be taught from the first grade and this means that there will be more for English and more jobs for English language teachers in Palestine.

The first *Palestinian Curriculum for General Education* (1996) emphasized the fact that English has occupied a prominent place in school curricula in Palestine for many years. English has been chosen as the required second language of Palestinian students since it is the dominant international language. The proposed Palestinian curriculum criticizes the existing English curriculum in the West Bank, which is based on that of Jordan and the English curriculum in Gaza, which follows the Egyptian system. It calls for a Palestinian English language curriculum, which emphasizes the Palestinian situation and experience. The curriculum recommends the teaching of English in view of the heavy involvement of the Palestinians with the modern world. As such, it proposes enabling Palestinians to “read, write, speak and appreciate English as a world language by teaching it throughout all twelve years of education.” The new curriculum is different from the ones prevalent in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for more than three decades in three important ways:

- English is perceived as the language of modernity. In order for Palestinians to achieve modernity, English is an important vehicle.
- English is a world language. Since the Palestinians are in a transition state, and at a stage of State formation, Palestinians perceive English as a window on the world.
- The proposal to teach English from the first grade in all Palestinian schools, government as well as private, is completely different from the current situation, and very courageous in comparison with other Arab countries.

## 2.2 Hebrew

Some older Palestinians learned Hebrew during the British Mandate through contacts with the Jews. This use of Hebrew by Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza came to an end after the 1948 war, with the establishment of the State of Israel, and the attachment of the West Bank to Jordan and the Gaza Strip to Egypt.

With the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967 by Israel, contact between Palestinians in these two areas and Israelis was re-established. Many Palestinians learned Hebrew informally, as it became the main language of business and trade between Israelis and Palestinians. In addition, thousands of Palestinian workers flocked to the Israeli labour market where they acquired knowledge of spoken, but not written, Hebrew.

While the Palestinians were, at least until the first Intifada, closely integrated into the Israeli labour market, it was for the most part only in agriculture or construction, where the degree of Hebrew knowledge required was limited<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, the Intifada did have an important influence on the spread of Hebrew among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, as Hebrew was taught in prisons by fellow-prisoners.

The spread of Hebrew among Palestinians has been mainly instrumentally motivated<sup>10</sup>. They explain that knowledge of Hebrew in Jerusalem was inversely correlated with education, for it was those who were willing to work in hotels and restaurants, in the building industry, and in the market place who learned Hebrew. Educated Arabs who worked inside their own community in professional roles were able to continue to function effectively without Hebrew. In the West Bank and Gaza, then, the primary function of Hebrew has been instrumental and work-related.

Hebrew is also taught at schools such as the Terra Sancta School in Bethlehem as well as in all Palestinian universities, where it is attached to the Arabic department and offered as either a required course or an elective. The introduction of Hebrew was dictated by the current situation in the West Bank and Gaza and by the peace process. Hebrew was also introduced on instructions from the Palestinian National Authority. The rationale for teaching Hebrew is that it is used in business and politics with the Israelis as well as for coexistence between Arabs and Jews.

The effectiveness of teaching Hebrew at the university level was criticized by Hamed (1995). He claimed that the students learned the basics of Hebrew but they could not speak it well. The Palestinian worker who experienced life in Israeli society can speak Hebrew much better than the student who learns Hebrew at the University.

In sum, though Hebrew is an important language in the Palestinian linguistic repertoire, the language is mainly learned informally through a direct contact with Israeli Jews, mainly at work, in commercial transactions, and in prisons. Its formal learning is extremely limited, and confined to basic courses at Palestinian universities and other institutions.

The drastic change in the proposed Palestinian curriculum is in teaching a third language. In the Palestinian public schools, two languages are taught: Arabic and English. It is proposed to provide a third language competence: a world language such as French, or Hebrew as a functional language of the region. Considering Hebrew as a possibility for teaching as a third language is extremely interesting, given that Hebrew is the language of the Israeli occupation in Palestine. However, the fact that Palestinians are ready to consider

teaching Hebrew seriously is a sign of the significance and high linguistic value of this language for Palestinians.

Unlike English, teaching Hebrew is suggested in what is called ‘ the take-off stage ’in the last three years of schooling. It is clear that in the new policy English enjoys a unique status among foreign languages.

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### 2.3 European Languages

The existence of modern European languages in the linguistic repertoire of Palestine is attributable to several factors, namely, immigration, tourism, travel, study abroad, European missionaries, and European cultural centers such as the British Council, the French Cultural Centers, and the Palestinian-Greek Friendship Society.

Noting that in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a proliferation of primary, secondary, and vocational schools established by Italian, French, German, and American missionaries. The first mission school in Palestine in the nineteenth century came with the establishment of the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem in 1847.

The Russians<sup>11</sup> came to Palestine and established Al-Maskobiyyah in Jerusalem in 1856. They also opened a teachers’ seminary in Nazareth in 1886. Maoz (1975) points out that the German Templars established schools in Haifa, Jaffa, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The Protestant Mission under Bishop Gobat built two schools in Jerusalem.

In addition to language instruction in Arabic and English, required for all students at all Palestinian institutions of higher education, various foreign languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian are also taught, but in general these languages are not mandatory. Thus at Bethlehem University French is offered as a general elective as well as a minor for English majors. However in the Tourist Guides’ Program at Bethlehem University, French, German, and Spanish, in addition to English and Hebrew, are required courses. At the center for languages and translation in Bir Zeit University, French, German, and Spanish are taught.

The objectives of teaching the various European languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Italian include the use of these languages in the future careers of the students, especially in hotel management and tourism. Furthermore, these languages are useful for students who intend to study in European countries, use academic and scientific texts and become acquainted with European culture.

In addition to private schools and the Palestinian universities, which promote Palestinian multilingualism, there are also other instructional sources. The various monasteries teach languages other than those taught at schools and universities. Thus the Franciscan Fathers teach Latin and Italian for monks and the Greek Orthodox teach Greek and Russian in their monasteries.

## 2.4 Ancient Languages

In addition to Latin and Greek discussed above there are other languages that are used by small-sized Christian denominations in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. These languages are Armenian, Assyrian, Coptic and Abyssinian.

There has been an Armenian minority group in Palestine since the fourth century CE<sup>12</sup>. Many Armenians immigrated to Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine after the Ottoman massacres of the Armenians and the Assyrians in Turkey in 1908.

Today most of the Armenians live in the Armenian monasteries in Jerusalem and Bethlehem<sup>13</sup>. They have many religious, social, and cultural institutions, all of which are located within the Armenian compound in the Old City of Jerusalem. Ironically, Armenians make up a good proportion of the speakers of Turkish in the Old City.

The Assyrians have a long history in Palestine. Their language resembles the Aramaic spoken in Palestine at the time of Christ. Like the Armenians, many Assyrians settled in Jerusalem and Bethlehem after the massacres by the Ottoman Turks in 1908. The Assyrians and the Armenians conduct their religious services in Aramaic and Armenian respectively. Assyrian is taught only at Assyrian religious institutions. Dweik (1986) points out that Armenian and Assyrian are mostly used at home, at school, in social clubs, in the church, in personal letters, and in informal conversation.

The Abyssinians were converted to Christianity in the fourth century CE and they came to Jerusalem after that date and established many churches and monasteries in Jerusalem. However, as Al-Arif (1961) noted, they lost most of these institutions. The



Abyssinians are the Christians of Ethiopia. They speak the Amharic language. Today there are tiny Abyssinian communities in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. They conduct their religious services in Geez.

The first Coptic groups came to Jerusalem in the middle of the fourth century CE<sup>14</sup>. Today, the Copts are mainly concentrated in Bethlehem and Jerusalem as tiny minorities. They conduct their church services in the Coptic language, which was used in Egypt before the Muslim Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century CE.

Unfortunately, though the proposed Palestinian curriculum is relatively progressive, it has ignored totally the Palestinian heritage languages. The inclusion of these languages in the Palestinian curriculum as heritage languages worth developing and teaching to native speakers and Palestinians interested in them would make the new Palestinian curriculum different, in many important ways, from what exists in the majority of the Arab countries.

### **3. The Status of Palestinian Arabic in Israel**

We therefore see a variety of conflicting facts about the intensity of contact between Arabic and Hebrew, and these facts intertwine with the already complex state of affairs regarding Arabic dialects in general and the local varieties in Israel and Palestine as a subset of the Arabic-speaking world. A fundamental difference is observed between the varieties of Palestinian Arabic (here after PA) which is spoken in the West Bank and those spoken in Israel. The former are more like the dialects in other Arab countries, while the latter is a minority language. In some countries minority Arabic is one of two or more official languages (only in Chad, Israel and Somalia<sup>15</sup>. Spolsky & Shohamy (1999:117) compare Arabic's secondary role in Israel to "that of Swedish in Finland or of French in Canada.

### **4. Conclusion**

Palestine is a fertile ground for the study of Palestinian multilingualism, which hitherto has not received attention from sociolinguists. In addition to Arabic (including Modern Standard Arabic and Palestinian Arabic) and English, the Palestinian linguistic repertoire includes Hebrew and various European languages such as French, Spanish, German, and Italian. The domains of these languages are educational institutions, places of work, immigration, tourism and travel.

Various factors contributed to the making of this colourful linguistic mosaic in Palestine. These factors include the rich ethnic and cultural heritage of Palestine,

educational institutions mostly private, contact with tourists and visitors, immigration and travel. The Palestinian National Authority has recently shown an interest in promoting Palestinian multilingualism with its intention to teach French in addition to English in public schools in the West Bank and Gaza.

It is obvious that education plays a role in the development of the identities of the people in Palestine more generally and that it will also play a role as an instrument in the development of a new Palestinian identity that is emerging with independence. That new identity will have many faces. As the New Curriculum shows, an international orientation is clearly part of it, and accordingly the learning and teaching of languages are a primary concern in that process. Knowledge of other foreign languages will be needed to maintain contacts with other parts of the world. This probably would largely contribute in the construction of the new Palestinian identity; the fantastic outcome of such various contacts with both the west as well as the middle east .

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Hassassian (1987).

<sup>2</sup> Ayish et al (1983).

<sup>3</sup> By Arabic, we mean the modern version of Classical Arabic.

<sup>4</sup> Tushyeh (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Al-Masri (1988).

<sup>6</sup> Abu-Lughod (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Dweik (1986).

<sup>8</sup> Fishman et al (1977)

<sup>9</sup> Spolsky (1997)

<sup>10</sup> Spolsky and Cooper (1991)

<sup>11</sup> Spolsky & Cooper (1991)

<sup>12</sup> Al-Arif (1961)

<sup>13</sup> Bannourah (1982)

<sup>14</sup> Al-Arif (1961).

<sup>15</sup> According to Spolsky & Shohamy (1999).