

Mapping Grassroots Initiatives in the Creation of Gender-Inclusive and Nonbinary Hebrew

Dr. Avital Karpman
University of Maryland

Abstract

This paper will map and explore new nonbinary Hebrew grammar creation initiatives that have recently sprung forth in various U.S. educational settings. The strictly binary nature of Hebrew grammar requires language users to designate masculine or feminine gender in all pronouns and affiliated grammar forms, and this poses a challenge to those who identify as gender- nonconforming. There is no research or guidance for language instructors, and very few resources or networks to share newly-invented forms. Using qualitative data collection methods, this project sought out young innovators in this field who have created grammar workarounds that expand binary Hebrew gender. Participants working at sleepaway summer camps, religious communities, postsecondary programs and social media groups shared their

experiences and ideas in in-depth interviews and related programmatic and textual materials. This research aims to elevate the voices of individuals who are creating new avenues for authentic self-expression and inclusive communication.

Keywords: Nonbinary, transgender, Hebrew, gender-inclusive grammar, Diaspora

Introduction

Language is influenced by the ecosystem in which it is situated and by the sociocultural demands of the current moment. This is particularly true for modern Hebrew, the “poster child” of language revival that progressed from a non-spoken, religious text to a highly-adaptable means of contemporary oral and written communication in Israel and other Diasporic communities. Hebrew’s grammar follows a strict gender-binary, with people and objects receiving a masculine or feminine label. This is a challenge for those language users who identify as trans or nonbinary. Despite the need for a gender-neutral or alternative grammar for individuals who are gender nonconforming, there is no standardized, widely-accepted norm; rather, small, local initiatives have sprung up in the past two or three years based on immediate needs for expression of self-identification. Language is influenced by the ecosystem in which it is situated and by the sociocultural demands of the

current moment. This is particularly true for modern Hebrew, the “poster child” of language revival that progressed from a non-spoken, religious text to a highly-adaptable means of contemporary oral and written communication in Israel and other Diasporic communities. Hebrew’s grammar follows a strict gender-binary, with people and objects receiving a masculine or feminine label. This is a challenge for those language users who identify as trans or nonbinary. Despite the need for a gender-neutral or alternative grammar for individuals who are gender nonconforming, there is no standardized, widely-accepted norm; rather, small, local initiatives have sprung up in the past two or three years based on immediate needs for expression of self-identification.

There is a scarcity of academic research about gender-inclusive grammar in less commonly taught languages, and virtually nothing published on Hebrew. Very little research has focused on practical applications and implications of gender in the foreign language classroom, and

thus, Hebrew is an ideal test case and model for other languages with similar properties. Without further study of this phenomenon, gender nonconforming students will have difficulty with an authentic means of self-expression or knowledge of how others navigate similar situations.

This project aimed to map the nascent movements that have come up with workarounds to address the lack of gender-inclusion in Hebrew, and to document their progress. This paper will describe the data collection process, including multiple in-depth interviews with 9 leaders involved with these new language initiatives and the analysis of documents such as promotional materials, liturgy, and language classroom materials. The culmination of these interviews and textual analysis was a conference that took place in March, 2022 at the University of Maryland entitled, “Gender-Inclusive and Nonbinary Hebrew: Innovations and Classroom Applications^[1].” This data is useful in mapping

and characterizing a language movement in its infancy at this critical moment in history.

Hebrew and Gender

In Hebrew, nouns, verbs, pronouns and adjectives must agree in gender and number and unlike languages such as English, whose first- and second-person pronouns and verbs do not connote gender, Hebrew ascribes masculine or feminine gender to all pronouns and subjects and the verbs and nouns that accompany them (for example: the English “Are you going to work?” and response “Yes, I am going to work,” are gender neutral, but in Hebrew, “*Atah holek la’avodah?*” and “*Ken, ani holek la’avodah*” must designate a gender, in this case masculine, to the pronouns and verbs: “you,” “I,” and “going.” Also, “*avodah*” or “work” is a grammatically feminine noun, although one not matched with the gender of the speaker or listener). In addition, addresses to a crowd, group, or classroom default to the masculine form. While any mixed-gender group, even, for example, a group of 20 women

and one man, will be addressed in the masculine form, groups in which the genders of members are unknown, such as in a speech or television broadcast's address to a viewing audience, will still be addressed in masculine form as a default. In recent years, however, several individuals in the Israeli public eye have made efforts to include the feminine in addresses to groups (Shomer, 2022).

The governing authority tasked with monitoring language standards and making judgments about new words and forms is the Academy of the Hebrew Language, a body founded in 1890 and known then as the Hebrew Language Council (Fellman, 1974). The Academy is housed at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and its language decisions are binding for government and federally-funded entities, including public radio and television broadcasting. Historically, this unit was tasked to resurrect the Hebrew language as a vernacular and revamp or create missing terms needed for modern communication. Today, the body releases new vocabulary related to technology or modern innovations

for which there are no Hebrew terms, and corrects misconceptions about pronunciation or conjugation. When contacted in 2021 for their feedback to this study on the issues of nonbinary and gender-neutral forms, they responded that they are not considering the issue, although in recent months said they have established a task force to examine it.

Questions

I embarked on a research mission to determine who, particularly in the United States, is working on issues of gender and foreign language education in Hebrew as well as other languages. I searched on the internet and through several online periodicals, and received word-of-mouth recommendations from some of the first participants I contacted for individuals who could participate in interviews. I used the following overarching questions:

1. What are the language learning experiences and personal narratives of the transgender and nonbinary Hebrew

learners who created new grammar alternatives? How did they navigate communication in Hebrew learning settings?

2. What initiatives developed from the experiences and challenges of learners and educators to create a nonbinary, neutral Hebrew grammar form? Whom do they serve or affect? Are they widely known? How are they refined and implemented?

3. How are these initiatives changing over time? How are these changes received? What challenges occur in these learning settings? What lessons were learned?

Pedagogical Need and Background

As a Hebrew language professor and program director at the University of Maryland (UMD), I have taught students who identify as transgender or nonbinary, and they have come to me with questions about using alternatives to binary grammar forms. In a communicative language course, from the very first class, gender is assigned based on assumptions of others' appearances, voices, clothing and mannerisms when we

introduce ourselves and surroundings. Educators must decide how to impart a language and culture in its most representative and authentic form, according to what one would experience in the target language culture (in this case Israel and other Hebrew-speaking environments).

Colleagues were similarly concerned and I found no information from the Academy of the Hebrew Language or from published articles on the topic, save for a handful of journalistic pieces. I set out to map and compile a narrative foundation and historical account of this emerging field and connect individuals with resources and networks currently unknown to one another. Overall, my aim was to learn more in order to create a comfortable classroom environment conducive to learning and adequately support gender nonconforming students of Hebrew and other languages.

Relevant Terminology

Several terms must be clarified in order to understand the scope and details of the experiences of participants of this

study. “Gender-inclusive” and “gender-expansive” are used interchangeably in this field, although the former connotes an inclusion and acceptance of a variety of genders other than the masculine form, and the latter indicates a goal to expand gender forms beyond what is currently available. In Hebrew, the terms *ivrit meurevet* (“mixed Hebrew”), *ivrit rav migdarit* (“multi-gender Hebrew”), *ivrit kollel migdar* (“gender-inclusive Hebrew”) are used interchangeably. Related to these terms is “nonbinary” for language outside of the binary of the male or female but not restricted to a strict third form with its own rigid rules (some participants said a strict third gender form would be as unhelpful as remaining within a gender binary of male or female).

“Gender- nonconforming” connotes individuals who do not identify or conform as male, female or any gender. “Trans” or “transgender” connotes an individual whose gender identity or expression does not align with their birth sex. In some cases, trans individuals use binary pronouns (male or female) and in other cases, they use nonbinary

language. In many cases, these individuals alter their pronouns of self-expression in accordance with the knowledge and comfort levels of their interlocutors (for example, within an LGBT community group familiar with these concepts, they might use nonbinary language, but in a quick interaction with a stranger, or in a community less accepting of gender nonconformity, they might speak differently). In discussions of modern Hebrew usage, “Diaspora” refers to any community of Jews outside of Israel.

Sociolinguistics and “Change from Below/Within”

According to sociolinguistics, language use is a symbolic representation of social behavior and human interaction. Societal aspects shape how language dialects are used by particular speech communities: the medium of language is the message or the content (Fishman, 1972). The study of language is inseparable from the study of social life because language patterns influence thought processes and vice versa: language is loaded with nuance that reflects social markers

such as class, race, gender, age or ethnicity and ideology about how it should be used in society (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). Linguistic behaviors are therefore influenced by speakers' thought processes, social interactions and senses of identity. Labov's *change from below/within* (2007) is relevant in understanding the impetus inside the gender-nonconforming community to change language norms in relation to external and dominant forces that make up "change from above." These sociolinguistic concepts provide context for this project and demonstrate that when there is no available language to express neutral or nonbinary gender constructs, the existence of those constructs necessitates an evolution of language.

Prior Research on Hebrew, Foreign Language Education and Gender

No academic research has been published on gender-inclusive or -neutral Hebrew in the language classroom. A handful of newspaper articles profiled The Nonbinary Hebrew Project, a student-instructor collaboration that resulted in creation of a

third, neutral gender; “This is Not an Ulpan,” a gender-inclusive Hebrew program in Israel; and the experiences of several community members involved with re-writing liturgy (Berger, 2019; Sales, 2018; Ghert-Zand, 2018). Relatedly, the Ivrita plugin allows websites to typologically address users with masculine, feminine or non-specified gender words (Stub, 2021) and the Multi-Gender Hebrew^[2] project created new font lettering that encompasses male and female gender and has been adopted on signage in Israel and the U.S.. Muchnik’s *The Gender Challenge of Hebrew* (2015) focused on historical and biblical examinations of gender and provides further background, although does not relate to current pedagogical issues.

A handful of studies in other foreign language learning settings have begun to address these issues (for example, Peters, 2020; Knisely, 2020; Del Cano, 2019; Pio & Viana da Silva, 2019; Mitchell, 2018). Because of the scarcity

of research about gender nonconforming students in the foreign language class, it is necessary to cast a wider net and provide context for the present study. There has been an examination of sexism and gender bias in English language textbooks (for example, Menegatti & Rubini, 2017 and Bauer, Holmes & Warren, 2006) and efforts to move past a default to masculine pronouns and forms to include feminine or neutral grammar. This study contributes to the intellectual landscape by demonstrating how language innovations in Hebrew are implemented to serve the needs of students of all gender identities.

Research Methods and Data Collection

This project employs qualitative research methods that allow for themes to emerge through participants' in-depth experiences (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005). Data collection through narratives allow participants to "burrow deeply into the narratives of experience, as stories are told and re-told in order to make new meaning of their

knowledge-in-practice" (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2013, p. 1118). I used a protocol that combines open-ended and semi-structured questions (Kvale, 1996) based on the general question topics in the project description section. Nine individuals who have been at the forefront of gender-inclusive Hebrew grammar creation were interviewed. Some were known to me through media interviews and professional networks and others were recommended to me by participants. These individuals consented to provide their names as primary sources for this study: Tal Janner-Klausner, Eyal Rivlin, Lior Gross, Jen Braveman, Erika Kushner, brin solomon, Dov Wiener, Michal Shomer, and Rabbi Abby Stein.

Data collection consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant and follow-up conversations or emails. Additionally, individuals shared written documents such as course syllabi, lesson plans, classroom materials, liturgy, promotional materials, and signage that reflect gender-inclusive Hebrew. Throughout and following data

collection, I continuously transcribed, coded, and analyzed interviews, observation notes, and documents.

Dedoose qualitative data management software was used to code, analyze and identify prominent topics and themes (LeCompte & Preissle 1993; Miles & Huberman 1994), and I refined these themes after initial data analysis. The interview findings below are categorized according to groupings used in Dedoose software. I used the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to compare transcripts, returning to participants to ask for clarification or elaboration as new themes emerge from other interviews. In analyzing classroom assignments and communications, I used textual analysis to focus on the specific language used in interactions as well as the larger social networking implications of that language (Fairclough, 2003).

In-Depth Interviews: Description of Participants

The research study began with initial outreach, in-depth interviews, follow up, and analysis of relevant documentation

(including website, lesson plans, liturgy drafts and commentary) of individuals who have worked to create and use gender-inclusive Hebrew in various settings in the U.S. (and in some cases, Israel):

Tal Janner-Klausner is the coordinator of Hebrew teaching at This is Not an Ulpan, a school that teaches Hebrew and Arabic and is based on the principles of critical pedagogy. *Michal Shomer* is a visual communication designer and creator of Multi-Gender Hebrew – a new set of innovative all-inclusive Hebrew letters. *Abby Stein* is a rabbi, author, educator first openly transgender woman who was raised in a Hasidic community. Abby is the author of *Becoming Eve: My Journey from Ultraorthodox Rabbi to Transgender Woman* (2019). *brin solomon*^[3] is a liturgist, playwright, composer, and librettist who authored the Inclusive Siddur Project, an attempt to imagine one form that a fully de-gendered, de-stigmatized Jewish liturgy might take. *Dov Wiener* is a high school teacher and researcher who wrote “American Judaism

Outside the Binary: The Growing Need for New Language” (2020). Jen Braveman is the former Executive Director of Habonim Dror Camp Moshava and oversaw the creation of gender-inclusive Hebrew. *Erica Kushner* is the *Mazkeirol Klaliol* (general director) at Habonim Dror North America. Erica is an educator and long-time camp participant and leader. *Eyal Rivlin* is an Associate Teaching Professor in the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and the director of the Hebrew Program there. He is the co-creator, along with *Lior Gross*, of the Nonbinary Hebrew Project.

Interview Findings

1. Israeli Versus Diaspora Hebrew

In many conversations with participants, the divide between modern Hebrew in Israel versus in the United States and elsewhere in the Jewish Diaspora loomed large. In Israel, Hebrew is the language of communication and must be comprehensible to any number of linguistic subgroups in the society, whereas in the U.S., Hebrew is used as a cultural in-group bonding agent (Benor, 2018; Avni, 2014; Feuer,

2009) and for purposes of prayer. Dov Wiener explained this phenomenon in more detail:

The reasons you use Hebrew in Israel and America are completely different. In Israel it's an everyday conversational language. In America it's almost exclusively liturgical, so those things don't necessarily have to have the same solutions. I do not see America coming to a place where Hebrew is spoken conversationally. I see it as a language that will continue to be liturgical. It's going to be a mostly insular community. How many of these kids are really going to make *aliyah*^[4]?

Self-expressing using a nonbinary grammar assumes mutual understanding and basic shared cultural, pragmatic and syntactic knowledge of forms. In a situation in which grammar is being invented, piloted and refined, mutual communication is possible only within the subgroups familiar with these issues and able and amenable to participate in dialogue as such. Therefore, the development of nonbinary

Hebrew is more complicated and complex in Israel where it is the first language of communication. Many participants discussed a tension between LGBT groups in Israel and the Diaspora with some firmly believing that the Israeli community should be the sole developers of new language forms.

Should this language be developed in Israel? The needs of communities that use Hebrew are different. A lot of people in the Diaspora are mostly using Hebrew in Jewish ritual but it's not necessarily the only language matrix through which they are experiencing the world. Whereas in Israel, it's everything. And you're using it 24/7 so how does that change what you are asking of the language and what the language is asking of you? Outside of Israel, and particularly where participants refer to as the Diaspora, Hebrew is less important as a vehicle to convey meaning or dialogue and more of a cultural marker or tool for prayer and liturgy (Lior Gross).

Jen Braveman, former executive director of Habonim Dror Camp Moshava in Maryland oversaw the resolution to introduce gender-neutral and gender-inclusive Hebrew in the U.S. chain of summer camps. Braveman acknowledges the challenge of using gender-neutral “camp” Hebrew in which common nouns were given both masculine and feminine endings or neutral endings (for example, *madrichol*, taking the Hebrew masculine word for “counselor,” *madrich*, but adding “*ol*” similar to the Hebrew word for “all,” indicating gender inclusion): “If you were having a more extensive conversation in Hebrew, there would be holes, but for the purposes of camp, that was really sufficient.” Erica Kushner, general director, said that some Israelis perceived the movement as, “entitled Americans changing the language.” Braveman explained the philosophy of the summer camps and how leaders decided to progress with language changes in the larger context of how they viewed their relationship with Israel:

Our philosophy in Habonim Dror about Israel is that as Jews we have a responsibility to care and work on social justice issues in Israel just as we do in North America. That is controversial for some Israelis who may say who are you to tell us what to do or think? You don't live here and you don't get to experience the fear and all the different pieces. We still teach the philosophy that as a Jewish person you are connected to Israel and you have a responsibility to make it a more just society.

Liturgist brin solomon concurred, and explained the role of change in the life of any language:

Language ultimately belongs to the people that use it. They are going to come up with the solutions that work for them. There can be a vibrancy, and these can both be the words of a living God. Over here, Jews do it this way, and over here, Jews do it this way and we're both Jews and that's fine. The world spins on.

2. Self-Expression Versus Dialogic Communication

In discussing the problems of using nonbinary Hebrew in day-to-day communication in Israel, we arrive at the crux of this issue: the dual nature of language as a vehicle for self-expression, and as a way to convert one's thoughts into words in addition to a means for dialogic communication with interlocutors. In this way, creating a language form that is unique and authentic to oneself can be positive for feelings of self-worth and identity, but creates challenges in engaging with other interlocutors for whom these new forms are unknown and unfamiliar. In addition to formulating a system that converts thoughts to words, a significant purpose of language is using those words to convey meaning in dialogue with others.

When participants used new neutral, nonbinary forms, all expressed a deep awareness of their interlocutors and changed their language accordingly. In every interaction, they were constantly evaluating their conversation partners' familiarity with new terminology and grammar and tolerance

of the LGBT community, as well as adjacent factors like their age, geographic location and political affiliation in order to make decisions about how to present themselves. Bershtling (2014) describes the phenomenon as a type of codeswitching or bilingualism for rhetorical effect. Tal Janner-Klausner explained their decision-making process during linguistic interactions:

It's a complex navigation and depends who I'm talking to, where, when. I was over three years teaching Hebrew in a college in East Jerusalem, obviously *ze lo ba bachesbbon* (it's out of the question). In English you don't have to gender yourself. It's not the first thing I have to decide, whereas in Hebrew I have to decide straight away based on the situation. I have a different way of speaking depending on how close I am to someone or how much I trust them. It's like a register of formality but with gender. I know a lot of nonbinary and genderqueer people in Hebrew just pick a side. It's too much work to speak in *lashon*

meurevet (mixed language) and to explain it all the time and it's not comfortable to feel so different and to change their language. You have to be aware of how people will respond to you in different circumstances and choose accordingly.

Dov Wiener described methods of codeswitch gender-nonconfirming speakers employ: "As a queer person, you tend to have a tiered approach of identities where depending on who you're talking to, you explain yourself differently. I tend to use they/them because that's the most mainstream and the most accessible." Rivlin continued to outline the register system in Hebrew:

When I text with my siblings, they use a certain kind of Hebrew, and when I texted with my grandma when she was alive, there was a different kind of Hebrew, and there are many registers of the language, meaning they will hear many "mistakes" so to speak. I give students the different options and the rules. You might hear something like this on the street, and you

have the choice of the register of the language you speak. More important than the rules is that for some people, this binary system doesn't fit. And beyond that, women, half the population, is uncomfortable with some of the ways that Hebrew does things.

Wiener later explained the compounding issue of codeswitch and language choice with feelings of physical danger that can arise in transphobic and intolerant circles:

I've been wearing a kippah on and off for the past six years. This piece of fabric on my head puts me in the spotlight for people who want to do me harm. Having gender neutral forms in the classroom is similar to walking out with a kippah knowing that people could be terrible but doing it anyway because this is who I am and this is how I experience my spirituality.

3. Language Conservation Versus Language Growth

Every language grapples with the balance of how much to conserve linguistic norms and maintain what power structures deem to be the integrity of a language with allowances for growth and change. Hinkel (2018) defines *descriptive grammar* as the study of language rules as used in daily life by all of its speakers, including both standard and nonstandard varieties. In contrast, *prescriptive grammar* specifies how language should be used and implies a distinction between “good” and “bad” grammar. In the case of nonbinary Hebrew, participants described a tension, at times hostile and politically-charged, between a sense of maintaining the integrity of “good” or traditional, normative and Standard Hebrew and a progressive view of Hebrew as a dynamic and growing language. brin solomon described the process of reformulating Hebrew in the Jewish prayerbook’s liturgy:

I'm of two minds about this. I'm a copy editor, so I ask, what's the correct way to do it? What's the right form? On the other hand, as a playwright I like to play with language and make it weird. There's a real beauty to doing things that are not standard and not like everyone must be exactly the same. I think both of those things can co-exist. When the rabbis are talking about how you pray, they do say that every Amidah is supposed to end with a personal prayer in your own words. Different versions of Judaism haven't always done that. It's not a totally new thing we're doing without precedent. Two thousand years ago, people said this could be how we pray. Then we moved in another direction and now we're saying maybe we can look at that again.

Janner-Klausner pointed out that in terms of gender, the language has already been changing:

Gender-equal Hebrew is something changing right now, like in the last five to 10 years there's been a sea change. Language is dynamic and changing. Ten years ago, it's true that in the vast majority of social and

administrative life in Israel, masculine was the default. That's not always true today. Not just Meirav Michaeli^[5] but Naftali Bennet and Netanyahu will use an equal form, like *bechorot* and *bechorim* (female and male voters) and *ezrachot* and *ezrachim* (female and male citizens) like it's in the mainstream. It's not the dominant form but it's no longer marginal.

In Bershtling's (2014) ethnographic work that followed six genderqueer individuals in Israel, she found that their grammar choices were acts of personal agency. Individuals discussed alternatives, such using the "wrong" gendered language as a subversive act, or speaking only in the future tense which showed the performative nature of gender in Hebrew and its relative meaninglessness. Bershtling's work demonstrated a dynamic relationship between social gender in language and people's position within it as she concluded, "Linguistic practices do indeed succeed in bypassing the obstacles of Hebrew, but concomitantly derive their

performative power from Hebrew’s binary rules” (5). Similarly, Rabbi Abby Stein described the practice of constantly interweaving gendered grammar within her religious services: “When I lead services, I am a rabbi, I always mix it up. Sometimes in the same *brachah*, in the same blessing, I use masculine and feminine verbs. Some people get annoyed by it.” In interviews, brin solomon discussed formulating new grammar liturgy that kept traditional melodies, rhythms and beats and Lior Gross spoke of trying out new words to see if they felt natural and “in our mouths,” in both cases aiming for a hybrid of norm conservation and language growth.

Eyal Rivlin, co-founder of the Nonbinary Hebrew Project, discussed his philosophy of language change in Hebrew:

I get into what I call the Eliezer Ben Yehuda^[6]

mindframe, like, what would Eliezer Ben Yehuda do if he was alive today? What would happen from within

the language, to create something that would feel organic to the language? I see the possibility of play within the language to create this. And, it's important to say, this is a great tool, even if you don't have nonbinary people you're talking to, it helps you learn Hebrew better, and giving people the option to be more creative and letting people know that it may be something they have to introduce if they encounter it.

Lior Gross went further to explain psychological and cultural implications of these warring mindsets:

I think there's pride in doing it right. I agree that there is this lineage, this strong line of like, this is the way we do it here. In that village over there, they do eat their chicken with dairy and that's what they do over there. Then being able to create a different type of answer and response to navigate each situation with the skills of deciding what works best here now, instead of saying, this is the way that it happens everywhere always because that's the way it's done.

There's a lot more evidence to the prior than the latter about how it happens. The instinct to say that's the way it has to be is one of constriction, that comes out of fear, that comes out of a scarcity mindset, that comes out of trauma. There's a larger movement toward the healing that has to happen for our community, intergenerational Jewish trauma that has happened all over the world, all over millenia that's been happening the past several decades and that is happening everywhere. That is a microcosm, a fractal of the larger expansion that's happening away from all sorts of pain that's held in all sorts of cultures and bodies and languages. If we can move toward this attitude of yeah, maybe let's try something new, and we might mess up and it'll be okay and it won't lead to our annihilation I think that giving ourselves the space and permission to do that by doing the healing of that trauma and not forcing ourselves that feels like doing

something too much too fast that will entrench the pain deeper is a really important component.

Wiener delved further into the theme of language conservation versus change in terms of users' conceptualizations of a third or gender-neutral form as actually contrary to the notion of growth and to the essence of nonbinariness:

It's very explicitly not rigid with rules. Queer culture is almost explicitly like, there are no rules. When you have something that says this is the rule, or if you are nonbinary, your option is THIS, it kind of breaks the idea of genderqueerness. They're making nonbinary a third gender option, you're a man, you're a woman, or your nonbinary. Being nonbinary means that you're not on the binaries, not that you're both or option #3. Having something that is set and official as a third gender option puts nonbinary people in a place they explicitly do not want to be in.

4. Hebrew Teaching and Critical Pedagogy

Interview participants spoke often about concepts of nonbinary and transgender individuals and invisibility and underrepresentation as a minority within a social and linguistic power structure. This theme presented itself in a variety of ways, but ultimately returned to notions of democratization of language use and learning, and the importance of critical pedagogy, noted by Rabbi Abby Stein: “Words have an impact and relate to how we treat people.” Knisely & Paiz (2021) discuss the critical need to create space in language classes, curricula and research agendas for trans, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming representation: “Pedagogies that engage with students as whole persons inherently encourage identity-focused reflection and may facilitate more ethical teaching (23). Speaking about Hebrew’s usual default to masculine forms, Michal Shomer explained:

Women are supposed to get used to the idea that whenever we walk into a classroom, a public building—even when we read signs on public

transportation—we are supposed to see ourselves as included. The language says that if you are not male, you are not there, or are not supposed to be there (Prince-Gibson, 2021).

At Habonim Dror camps in 2016, the youth leadership council voted on a proposal to introduce gender neutral language to its chain of summer camps, and the resolution passed. With guidance from the Nonbinary Hebrew Project and mentors in Israel, the group created new terminology to express gender neutrality for common phrases at camp. Jen Braveman explained the effects of the new policy and the democratic, bottom-up processes spurring the changes:

It was pretty amazing, actually. The kids who identify as nonbinary came to life in this really incredible way. We know language is powerful and we saw that. It gave them a space in everyone's day to day conversation that didn't exist before. That was very powerful. There was a gain in some social power in a

way that was leveling the field a little. There was no language for people who identify as nonbinary and trans. It felt hurtful and disrespectful. It makes a person who is nonbinary feel very invisible. There were times when we'd be in the middle of making an announcement and realize there was a word we'd need to change in real time, and the *rosh* (director) would be standing there and someone would shout it out and say, "It's this!" and it was that, everyone would be excited that we figured out another word. It was very much a community effort with a lot of enthusiasm.

Brin solomon confronted Jewish themes of power and supremacy in traditional synagogue prayers, and in addition to changing gendered language, chose to reimagine this imagery:

The traditional version of the *aleinu* (Jewish prayer) is about how all other faiths will end and everyone will be Jewish. That's very cultural genocide-y in a way. That's what the text says. We hope for the day when

there will be no other religions and everyone will be Jewish. I actually don't hope for that! I found alternate phrasings and wrote a version of it that says we hope for a day when everyone will be committed to building a world of justice and everyone will come together and act with righteousness and love toward one another. That's something I hope for.

5. The Hebrew Classroom as a Place of Beauty and Growth

Finally, and related to the notion of the democratization of the Hebrew language classroom as a place in which the students and teachers both teach and learn together, offering dynamism, new ideas and self-expression to traditional norms of the language, participants continually emphasized the need for the classroom to be a place of safety, beauty, growth and as Jen Braveman said about the Camp Moshava language changes, a “celebration” around this progress. Dov Wiener said about the summer camps, “There are languages with more than two genders, so giving someone a third one

doesn't mean that later on they can't learn the other two. Even if that's making one kid more comfortable and easier for one kid to have a home in this community, it's a worthwhile change." Lior Gross described the collaborative process of working with Eyal Rivlin as a University of Colorado student to find language options that worked for them:

We spent a lot of time in Eyal's office discussing, trying it out in our mouths, like how would this work? Do we change the letter? How do we signal that it's different? The cool thing was, that semester we got to take it and play with it in the classroom and see how it could be applied and what worked and didn't work in practice, what felt kind of weird and what created more exceptions. Because there was such a rigid, binary system that exists where grammatical gender is applied to everything, it was actually pretty easy to create something parallel that felt organic and

intuitive and I think that's the most beautiful thing about it.

Rivlin further described their collaborative process:

You can ask how do I authentically do this within the values I believe in? It's not to throw the baby with the bathwater, but within the system, how do we create the beautiful harmony or the beautiful blend that both honors the past and welcomes the future and brings them together? We are not the authorities. We helped start the conversation or push it forward but we're not the Academy and don't want to be. To me that would be limiting the possibilities of what could be. Walking on eggshells, we can't talk about religion, we can't talk about politics. Let's welcome the differences and understand. This is beautiful, rich soil and it requires safety and the ability to hold the differences. In the classroom it's so beautiful and touching and moving. I think it invited more vulnerability and openness in the classroom.

In addition to the classroom as a space of beauty, creativity and flexibility, participants mentioned themes of collaboration, acceptance and trial and error, adding to the notion of a bottom-up democratization process of language use and change. Lior Gross said:

I would say that teachers should encourage experimentation and creativity and it would be doing a disservice to students to say that this third option is the only way to do it. It's a way of developing the skill of reasoning, what makes sense in the language itself, and then you can actually learn the language better knowing what the rules are and what breaks the rules by being creative with them. It's a meta-synthesis process in the pedagogical approach. I want it to be an invitation for people to feel like the language is in their hands a lot more than sometimes we think.

Conclusion

Revivers of Hebrew as a spoken language sought to transform a holy, religious language with biblical and rabbinic vocabulary and grammar into a means of modern communication and a bonding agent for Diasporic communities as a new Zionist state was in beginning stages of formation. Large waves of immigration and influxes of cultures and languages from all corners of the globe, mandatory military service and its accompanying slang, widespread prevalence of U.S. media and popular culture, disparate religious communities and an economic focus on science and technology heavily influence modern Hebrew, and its “Start-Up Nation” reputation is reflected in its creative and playful innovation with modern language. With this atmosphere as a backdrop, this project showcases a new frontier of Hebrew language innovation in both Israel and the U.S.

Although this topic can be viewed through a variety of disciplinary lenses, the examination through pedagogy, and

in particular, in formal and informal Hebrew educational learning settings, adeptly illustrates historical, societal, political and educational influences at play. In many ways, teachers and other educators are on the frontlines as gatekeepers to the new language, oftentimes the first target language speaker whom the student meets and engages with about their identity definitions in a personal way. Tadmor-Shimony and Raichel (2013) credit Hebrew teachers as the significant creators of Israeli society from the very beginnings of *First Aliya* Zionist settlement because of their important contributions to the integration of immigrants through the teaching and spreading of Modern Hebrew, newly-revived from its ancient, biblical, holy (*lashon kodesh* or “holy language”) and non-spoken form. Similarly, Hebrew instructors today are constantly making hundreds of tiny choices during their class time in terms of how to present and balance normative or Standard Hebrew with language actually heard on the streets of Israel. They must sort through the way Hebrew is communicated among various segments of target

language populations (in Israel and elsewhere) in order to demonstrate and impart the authentic language with the widest variety of registers and genres in order to prepare students for communication. At the same time, they must also act sensitively toward their students and think of their needs, personalities, learning styles and comfort level in the class.

As teachers making these decisions, we are imparting to a generation of young people what Hebrew and Israel is and how to view it, based on our position of privilege as knowledge-keepers of the language and those who decide which, or *whose* language to use and teach. When I began this project, I felt that there was an urgent need to standardize nonbinary grammar so that a common set of rules could be shared and used widely in U.S. Hebrew classes. However, in interviews, participants focus less on the urgency of shared rules and standards and more on the sensitivity, flexibility and understanding of personal self-expression in the individual classroom. Language, particularly related to self-expression

and identification, comes from the individual person and not from on high. I was surprised about these innovators' goals not to educate every Hebrew speaker in a correct way of conversing with a person who is gender nonconforming and ensure that the language community adopts these linguistic practices, but rather to change the culture of rigidity and judgment so that authentic communication in a variety of forms can take place. They expressed hope about the beauty and possibility for an individual to have this sense of agency and community support. Whereas in Israel, Hebrew language focused on intergroup communication and the negotiation of meaning, participants in this project emphasized Hebrew as an intrapersonal means to move closer to their Judaism and authentic identities. Future research would take the next, necessary step in exploring the experience of gender nonconforming learners for whom these new grammar forms are directed. Although some participants in this project were and are language learners themselves who are affected by these language forms, more study is needed regarding the

reception and use of gender-inclusive language in the classroom.

Communicative competence, a fundamental goal in our teaching, is based on imparting a shared, agreed-upon set of rules and norms that will allow us to understand and be understood in the widest variety of communicative registers and contexts. Normally, as teachers, we do not give our students agency or a space to create and try things out – this would be chaotic, and no one would understand each other. However, in creating a safe and inviting space to allow speakers to create, experiment and explore, we create a more egalitarian learning environment in which the power structure changes. Instead of the teacher as ultimate authority, the classroom becomes a collaborative and creative space to workshop and grow and explore. A healthier balance between the two goals of language, to be used as a shared means of communication with others in the speech community versus a personal and individual way of self-expression can be achieved.

In interviews with Hebrew language innovators, several themes arose, and all led back to the central idea of the target language (TL) group. Language teachers' core task is to impart the linguistic forms and culture of a particular, target group of speakers whom we want our students to ultimately emulate. We choose our accent, texts, video clips and materials based on conveying these characteristics to our class and encouraging learning and imitation of these elements (Feuer, 2007). However, when it comes to gender-inclusion, a generalized assumption that our TL group is Hebrew speakers in Israel ignores the fact that gendered elements of language are approached differently in the U.S. and Jewish Diaspora than in Israel, where Hebrew is used for prayer and communal in-groupness rather than communication.

Relatedly, a foundational tenet of communicative language teaching is authentic texts and communication. Teachers select linguistic examples that “real,” “authentic” Israelis (the TL group) would see and interact with on a daily

basis. But what about authenticity of self? Can authentic communication expand to include the embracing of the authentic expression of self-identity of the language learner? Is the Hebrew of Russian or Ethiopian immigrants to Israel equal in worth and legitimacy to that of the Israeli literary giants? And if a teacher's goal is to show examples and teach language samples from the widest variety of linguistic registers in order to prepare students for the widest variety of possible linguistic interactions, is it acceptable to exclude a segment of the population who falls outside masculine grammar defaults?

This sets the stage for a shift in power dynamics in which students have a seat at the linguistic table and have an opportunity to create and change forms, like the native speaker. Creating a classroom space as a place of safety, collaboration, and acceptance fosters a comfort in authentic self-expression, trial and error and growth as participants juggle learning the norms and maintaining the essence of Hebrew with playing with options to make the language more

inclusive. Perhaps, if students do not intend to move to Israel and use Hebrew as a primary means of communication, our conception of the TL group must evolve to understand the classroom, summer camp, or synagogue *itself* as the TL group, the microcosm of the language in question.

Finally, in embracing these philosophies and opening up the learning setting to embrace difference, we can shift the way classrooms broach topics of race, social injustice and political and military situations in Israel to give students agency and an equal participatory role to contribute safely and authentically as valued stakeholders. There is a critical need to understand and support the experiences and recommendations of trans and nonbinary learners and educators, share and disseminate grammar reconstructions and standards and create social and professional networks that connect people and resources.

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[1] <https://slc.umd.edu/fields/hebrew/gender-inclusive-hebrew>

[2] <https://multigenderhebrew.com>

[3] Lower-case letters are intentional and preferred by this participant

[4] *aliyah* is Jewish immigration to Israel

[5] Israeli politician and feminist

[6] Creator of the first modern Hebrew dictionary and known as the “Father of Modern Hebrew.”