Asymmetries and inequalities in the teaching of Arabic and Hebrew in the Israeli educational system

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The aim of this comparative study is to detect symmetries and asymmetries in the status of two major languages taught in Israel: Hebrew in Arabic-medium schools and Arabic in Hebrew-medium schools. The teaching of these two languages offers a unique case of language education policy where categories of ideology, policy, curriculum, methods, and assessment intersect. For Arabs, Hebrew is perceived as a major tool for upward mobility, but findings show they are alienated by a curriculum embedded in the hegemonic culture and ideology, with which they can hardly identify. For Jews, Arabic is a language of low prestige, and their motivation is hindered by a curriculum which focuses mostly on formal language and security needs, and not on communicative, interactive skills. Concluding the paper, we propose an outline for the creation of alternative teaching environments that defy existing power structures and reinvent inclusive ecologies for the learning of both languages.

Keywords: symmetry, language education policy, Arabic and Hebrew in Israel, comparative education, linguistic justice and equality

Introduction

Arabic and Hebrew, two politically loaded languages, are both official in Israel. Both play important roles in Israeli society. A wide variety of languages contribute to Israel's diverse linguistic reality as a result of (1) the existence of an autochthonous Arabic-speaking population; (2) massive waves of Jewish immigration from numerous countries; (3) the standardization and proliferation of Hebrew as the national language; and (4) the recent arrival of migrant workers, asylum seekers, and refugees, mainly from Africa and East Asia. Hence, the linguistic repertoire of Israel includes Hebrew, Arabic, English, Russian, French, Spanish, Amharic,

Tigrinya, Yiddish, Tagalog, Nepali, Thai, and Mandarin, among many other languages (Spolsky, Shohamy 1999; Ben-Rafael et al 2006).

Within this diverse reality, the Jewish population generally uses Hebrew, and Jewish immigrants learn Hebrew in order to get integrated in mainstream Israeli society. Second-generation immigrants often become native speakers of Hebrew. Hebrew is also an important language for Palestinian Arabs in Israel, since it is the main language of communication, government, commerce, and higher education, and a key to social mobility. Hebrew is a compulsory subject in all Arab schools, and knowledge of Hebrew is required for higher education, the job market, and dealing with the authorities or with business organizations.

In contrast to Hebrew, Arabic is used by the Arab population, which makes up about a fifth of Israel's population. Many Arabs in Israel identify themselves as Palestinians, although they vary by religion (Muslim, Christian, and Druze) as well as by origin, local identity, and political aspirations. Interestingly, Arabic is also the heritage language of many of the Jewish immigrants from Arabic-speaking countries and their descendants, as well as the native language or lingua franca of some of the African refugees and asylum seekers. However, the fact that Arabic is shared by several groups in Israel does not add to its prestige or currency, both because all these groups are significantly marginalized and because the colloquial varieties of Arabic they use are typically regarded with low esteem even by Arabic speakers. Despite its relatively low prestige, Arabic is a language with high vitality in towns and villages where Arabs live and even in some neighborhoods of 'mixed' towns such as Jaffa.

Since in Israel there are separate educational systems (coordinated by a single ministry) for Arabs and Jews, both Arabic and Hebrew serve as media of instruction, each within its own community. Moreover, according to official policy, each of the two communities is expected to learn the language of the other (Ministry of Education 1996). Given this reality, the purpose of the present paper is to inquire about the equality between Arabic and Hebrew in the Israeli educational system. This inquiry is anchored in the socio-political context of Israel, where Arabic is perceived as marginal while Hebrew is dominant and hegemonic. Inequalities between Arabic and Hebrew may also be the product of animosity and conflict between the two groups throughout recent history (Shohamy & Abu Ghazaleh-Mahajneh 2012). One consequence of such inequalities is that after high school graduation, Arabs usually have good working knowledge of Hebrew, while Jews typically do not have similar command of Arabic.

In this paper we introduce, apply, and discuss the concept of *symmetry* as a criterion for analyzing and comparing the language education policy of two languages that share the same space and official status. The teaching of these two 'foreign' languages (Arabic to Jews and Hebrew to Arabs) offers a case for examining

policies and practices of language teaching, assuming that categories of ideology and education policy are manifested in the curriculum, teaching methods, teaching materials, and assessment. The application of symmetry and its related categories may be instrumental in analyzing language policy, pointing to specific areas where just or unjust power relations or policies exist, and showing what can be done about them.

Language symmetry and equality

The notion of symmetry is proposed here as both an explanatory tool and a socio-linguistic ideal. In the context of comparative research, symmetry, or lack thereof, becomes evident whenever juxtaposing two different entities such as social, linguistic, or educational contexts. We consider symmetry to be first and foremost a concrete feature occurring in nature or reality, and the linguistic landscape of a particular place is perhaps the best way to visualize this. When two languages in the same space, such as Finnish and Swedish in Helsinki, are represented on a street sign using the same font and font size (Figure 1), this suggests an evident notion of symmetry (although the Finnish text may always be on top, curtailing the level of symmetry). Looking at an Israeli 50 shekel banknote (Figure 2), on the

Figure 1. A street sign in Helsinki

Figure 2. An Israeli 50-shekel note

other hand, we can see a certain level of asymmetry, resulting from the fact that one side of the note is entirely in Hebrew, whereas Arabic shares the same space with English (as well as with a Hebrew motto) on the other side of the note.

Thus, symmetry can be used first of all as a simple diagnostic tool for language equality. Findings based on this tool can be related to concepts of linguistic justice, especially aspects of unfair precedence given to some languages at the expense of others (Van Parijs 2011). Diagnoses of symmetry or asymmety may also be linked to future-related critique striving to counter linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992) on a local or global scale, as well as to protect language minority rights (May 2012). Nevertheless, since parallelisms and differences can theoretically be

found between any pair of contexts, it may be in order to ask whether symmetry is at all desirable or possible in a given setting. For example, language policy legislation in Quebec clearly shows that symmetry between French and English is not perceived by legislators as good enough for protecting the French language. Even in the Israeli context, one may rightly ask if it is fair to contrast Hebrew and Arabic in such manner, knowing that one language belongs to a hegemonic group and the other to an underprivileged minority group. While accepting the assumption that educational contexts may well be unequal, asymmetrical, incompatible or even incommensurable, and that in some cases compensatory measures would be required more than symmetry, we believe that issues of symmetry should at least be debated, in order to evaluate whether any symmetries or asymmetries can be justified.

From a theoretical point of view, we link this comparative work to the framework of comparative education research (Bereday 1964; Brock & Alexiadou 2013). Broadly linked with the intellectual traditions of comparative studies in linguistics (Beekes 2011) and literature (Melas 2007; Spivak 2003) and originally conceived as a means of comparing entire education systems in different nations, researchers have pointed out that this field of study can also benefit from intra-national comparison (Bray & Thomas 1995). The comparison of two distinct school subjects (each with its own unique population of students) in a country can be seen as such an endeavor. Since in the present study both the school subjects and populations are language-related, any findings uncovered by this diagnostic tool can be instrumental in elucidating the sociolinguistic reality (Blommaert 2010; Fishman 2006) and language policies (Shohamy 2006; Spolsky 2009) of the educational contexts studied. Findings could then be compared cross-nationally to other contexts in which languages compete or coexist.

Methodologically, the comparison may involve a broad range of approaches and techniques such as (critical) discourse analysis, visual analysis, counts, measurements, statistical analyses, and so forth. It may be easier to show that there is asymmetry than symmetry, since a single counter-example should be enough to disprove any claim or hypothesis of symmetry, whereas to show the existence of symmetry, a systematic comparison is needed to show that no such counter-example exists. Consequently, this study, although based on the systematic comparison of a finite set of materials (curricula, textbooks, and exams), relies heavily on examples, which ultimately reveal the extent of symmetry or asymmetry found in the materials we examined.

In the context of Hebrew and Arabic teaching and learning in Israel, symmetry may be of prime importance for social and linguistic justice, delivering an important message of equal participation and rights to students and citizens. Symmetry is an expected outcome of the de jure, declarative level of language policy according

to which both languages are official, and every student is required to learn his or her own native language as well as the other official language. It is important to note that the position paper accompanying the official educational language policy in Israel mentions, alongside political, cultural, and pragmatic reasons for making Arabic a compulsory subject for Jews, the "point of view of equality", according to which "the fact that Arab citizens in Israel are required to learn Hebrew should be balanced out" (Spolsky & Shohamy 1996, 13; Ministry of Education 1996). Thus, the authors of the policy document acknowledge that the creation of symmetry in the compulsory status of both languages would make the language education policy more egalitarian.

In this paper we strive to detect and apply multiple criteria that can be used to compare the educational policy of languages and evaluate the extent to which symmetry or equality is achieved. Such a comparative endeavor may reveal whether the status of Arabic and its teaching is different from or the same as that of Hebrew, and whether differences stem from fundamental inequalities between the two groups. Following this avenue, we question whether the need for each group to learn the language of the other, as stated in policy documents, is a sufficient condition for symmetry or just a necessary one, and examine whether policy can transform to become more egalitarian.

Background: Symmetry between Arabic and Hebrew in Israel

While within Israel (including East Jerusalem), Arabs make up only 20.7% of the population (Central Bureau of Statistics 2013), in historical Palestine, including Israel and the Palestinian Territories, the number of Arabs (Palestinians) and Jews is almost equal (5.8 million Palestinians vs. 6 million Jews at the end of 2012; Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics 2013). This means that, moving beyond the borders of official Israel, Arabic can no longer be seen as a minority language. Furthermore, in a globalized context, Arabic is a major world language, one of the six official languages of the UN, and *the* major language in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the context of Israel can show how 'global' and 'local' may function as relative terms (Shohamy 2007). In Israel, Arabic is seen as a 'local' language of low prestige, and even its official status is continuously questioned by right-wing politicians and NGOs, who wish to make Hebrew the only official language (e.g. Bakshi 2011).

Modern Hebrew, a reincarnation of an ancient language which was revived and standardized by Zionist activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, is immersed in Zionist ideology, of which it is both a product and a symbol. It has become the power, hegemonic language in government, media,

academia and commerce. It is the language of instruction at all universities, as no Arabic-medium university has been established in Israel thus far. This privileged status of Hebrew makes it a major tool for upward mobility, and consequently, the instrumental motivation for acquiring it among Arabs is generally high (Amara & Mar'i 2002; Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmidt 1998)

Two major language shifts in the Arab and Jewish populations of Israel since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 deserve mentioning. First, broadly speaking, the linguistic repertoire of the Jewish population has become more uniform, with Hebrew replacing the many languages Jews had spoken in the Diaspora. Second, conversely, the linguistic repertoire of the Arab population has become more complex, as Arabic could no longer be used in all social contexts after the foundation of the State of Israel. This discrepancy between the two groups is associated with the asymmetrical bilingualism and biculturalism of Israel (Amara & Mar'i 2002). In terms of attitudes, a large comparative study conducted in the late 1990s showed that Arabs generally ascribed more importance than Jews to multilingualism and the teaching of Arabic in Jewish schools (Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmidt 1998).

Research into the teaching of Hebrew to Arabs in Israel (Abu-Rabia 1998, 1999; Amara 2007) has shown that language learning is adversely affected by the inclusion of Jewish and Zionist culture in the curriculum, and the overall 'melting-pot' policy that forces Arab students to become 'Israelis', leaving little room for them to express their 'other' identity. Since their motivation is more instrumental than integrative, Arab students perform better if they learn contents set in their own culture, so that any clash with the majority culture of the state is avoided. With the preparation of a new curriculum some improvements were made, placing more emphasis on the four language skills rather than on 'Jewish' materials.

In contrast, the teaching of Arabic in Hebrew-medium schools is often criticized for the low level of proficiency it achieves. Among the many problems that characterize this language teaching context, teachers and students often mention the unclear, ambiguous status of Arabic as a compulsory subject, the low number of instructional hours, the focus on Literary Arabic rather than on spoken, colloquial Arabic, and the deficient training and competence of teachers (Amara et al. 2008; Donitsa-Schmidt, Inbar, & Shohamy 2004; Spolsky, Shohamy, & Donitsa-Schmidt 1995; Spolsky & Shohamy 1999). While a new curriculum has been recently adopted, stressing communicative skills and methodologies (The Division of Curriculum Planning and Development 2009), it is yet to be seen how it will be implemented and whether it will change the way Arabic is taught in Hebrew-medium schools.

In the following sections, we will present a set of criteria for the comparison of the educational contexts of Arabic and Hebrew in Israel, and then apply them to

various excerpts from mainstream textbooks and exams in an attempt to check the level of symmetry between the two contexts.[1] We will then examine the possible implications of symmetry or asymmetry to issues of inequality and social justice.

Domains and sources for comparison

A number of domains were selected to assess similarities and differences between the teaching of Arabic in Hebrew-medium schools and the teaching of Hebrew in Arabic-medium schools. We consider these domains, all crucial to language education, to be different axes of comparison, which may tend to be more symmetrical or more asymmetrical. The domains cover six main aspects of language education: (1) learner motivations and needs; (2) the way learner needs are addressed or ignored; (3) learner achievements; (4) explicit and implicit language learning agenda; (5) extent and focus of language teaching; and (6) the teaching of culture. We analyzed each case according to these domains, and used them as points of comparison with similar materials in the other language educational context.

In conjunction with these domains, we selected three key types of sources, which represent three major components of language educational policy. These are: (a) curriculum; (b) learning materials; and (c) assessment. The interaction of these types of sources with the different domains stated above would yield a good indication of the language educational policies in any context. To produce a finite subset of materials for systematic comparison, we included in our sample the curricula for both school subjects, a selection of four Arabic and five Hebrew textbooks for the compulsory years of study, and the matriculation exams of 2011. While the analysis of the official curriculum will serve as an indication of the agendas, goals, and intentions of the top-level de jure policy, the examination of learning materials will enable us to inspect the way agendas, goals, and intentions are implemented. The analysis of language assessment will serve as an indication of the actual skills and forms of knowledge learners are expected to have. The analysis of data related to these sources would ultimately allow us to evaluate the degree of symmetry between both contexts.

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1. It is important to note that there are several experimental programs in the teaching of both languages, including the creation of bilingual schools and the introduction of colloquial Arabic at early age (see for example Dubiner 2008; The Abraham Fund Initiatives). Nevertheless, our paper focuses solely on the mainstream forms of language teaching in public schools, being an indication of the main trends affecting the greatest number of learners.

Findings: Asymmetries in the teaching of Arabic and Hebrew in Israel

a. Curriculum

While the teaching of Arabic in Hebrew-medium schools has been compulsory since 1996, one basic asymmetry resides in the fact that while Arabs are required to learn Hebrew from second or third until twelfth grade and take a final exam, native Hebrew speakers are only required to learn Arabic in seventh to ninth grade, and are not required to take a final exam in the subject. Even this limited requirement is not followed by all Hebrew-medium schools, for various reasons (Amara et al. 2008; Hayam-Yonas & Malka 2006; Spolsky & Shohamy 1999; Zemer 2009). Schools that do teach Arabic in the compulsory period of three years do not always offer or encourage students to take Arabic further until graduation; indeed, only 6% of students choose to take a final graduation exam in Arabic (Amara 2005; Yitzhaki 2011).

One of the major issues concerning the curriculum of Arabic for Hebrew-medium schools is that it focuses almost entirely on the standard, literary form of the language, known as MSA (Modern Standard Arabic), and uses a predominantly grammatical approach (Fragman 1999; Spolsky, Shohamy, & Donitsa-Schmidt 1995). While some changes have been made in recent years, the core of language teaching remains with little communicative focus (Amara et al. 2008; Donitsa-Schmidt, et al. 2004; Or 2011). Typical language tasks include the translation of isolated sentences, the identification of syntactic structures, and traditional reading comprehension tasks. Culture is often taught uncritically, objectifying Arabs and their culture and presenting them in a stereotypical manner.

Much of the vocabulary mandated by the official curriculum seems tailored for security purposes. Mendel (2011, 2014) has shown how the teaching of Arabic has been influenced by direct military intervention for decades. Arabic is seen as an asset for security and military intelligence, and the students, especially in eleventh and twelfth grades, are seen as prospective soldiers who are likely to be in the Intelligence Force. This colors the entire course of studies so that instead of focusing on communication in daily life it is based on the language of the media, with particular focus on political issues, security, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. The fact that the teaching of Arabic could be used to promote peace and better communication with the Arab population and neighboring countries is always marginalized (Elazar-Halevi 2009; Lustigman 2008). This phenomenon of teaching a language for security purposes bears resemblance to other language education contexts, such as that of the US after 9/11 (Kubota 2006; Scollon 2004).

As a result, the language is reduced to instrumental security needs, which contribute to the stereotypical presentation of Arabs as the enemy. The vocabulary

items from the 2009 official curriculum in Arabic for eleventh grade can serve as an example. The stated purpose of the vocabulary list is to create a "shared base" of vocabulary for all schools. The curriculum list contains, among others, the Arabic words for 'terrorist', 'soldier', 'army', 'checkpoint', 'Chief of Staff', 'weapon', 'military (adj.)', 'armed', and 'ceasefire'. It should be noted that more frequent words such as those for 'always', 'real', 'perhaps', or 'human being' are absent (The Division of Curriculum Planning and Development 2009).

Like the Arabic curriculum, the official curriculum of Hebrew in Arabic-medium schools (The Division of Curriculum Planning and Development 2010) is grammar-based, focusing on literary, standard Hebrew, rather than on collo-quial language and communicative skills. It emphasizes Jewish cultural heritage and values, and contains materials heavily based on the Bible, Mishna, and modern Hebrew literature. Nevertheless, while the level of Arabic taught in Hebrew-medium schools is relatively low in terms of both requirements and achievements, the level of Hebrew required in Arabic-medium schools seems very high, often surpassing the knowledge of native speakers and exceeding the current requirements of Hebrew as an L1 in the Israeli educational system. Tasks involve difficult, high-order analytical thinking, and some of the texts contain obsolete words and expressions that many native speakers are not familiar with. There is limited coverage of frequent communicative expressions.

b.   Teaching and learning materials

Teaching and learning materials can be used to evaluate the way in which culture is presented. Using a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2010; Wodak 2011) of the text included in textbooks, it is possible to trace the discursive construction of learners' own culture and the culture of the target language. An examination of Arabic textbooks for Hebrew-medium schools shows that Arab culture is often chracterized in an Orientalistic manner (Said 1979), objectifying the Arabs and presenting their culture as backward, homogeneous, and static. The monolithic presentation of Arab culture ignores the complex social reality and modern trends in Arab society. Arabic textbooks also fail to include any references to Palestinians or the Palestinian national identity of Israeli Arabs, and the maps of the Middle East included in them show the territories of the Palestinian Authority as part of Israel. No genuine effort seems to be made to bridge between Jewish learners and the Arab population and generate a true encounter with the Arab 'other'.

In contrast, Hebrew teaching materials for Arab-medium schools have undergone major shifts in recent years, and now contain less Jewish cultural content than previously, although most of the materials are still predominantly Jewish, containing almost exclusively passages by Jewish authors. Problematic issues

related to politics or religion are avoided, but even this attempt at presenting 'neutral' or 'universal' topics seems to be tainted by the mainstream culture imposing its values on the minority group (for a fuller discussion, see Or & Shohamy 2015).

In regard to culture, a seventh grade textbook (CET 2011) can serve to exemplify the way culture is treated in Hebrew textbooks and the subtle way in which cultural sensitivities are not taken into account. One of the oft-repeated topics in textbooks for Arabs is nature preservation. Thus, one of the units in the book is titled "Blooming Cyclamens" (in Hebrew 'rakafot porhot'), and is dedicated entirely to cyclamen flowers. The opening spread of pages shows a group of Arab students sitting in a field, each with a speech bubble, saying statements such as: "I've never seen a cyclamen! What a beautiful color it has…", or "In our village there are a lot of cyclamens in spring. Like a carpet of cyclamens!", or "I've heard that many years ago shepherds used to use cyclamen tubers as laundry soap" (CET 2011, 118–119). On the next page (ibid, 120), an expository text on cyclamens is given, where it is mentioned that "in Israel, the cyclamen is a protected plant, and picking it is prohibited". Promoting the agenda of nature preservation, a seemingly innocuous topic, is problematic because Arabs in Israel are often blamed by Jews for not preserving nature, causing bushfires, and picking flowers (Paz 2008). Therefore, while the choice of this topic seems innocent, the textbook may in fact be perceived to be 'educating the natives' for the values of the majority group, and offensive to some of the learners.

c.   Assessment

A comparison of the written matriculation exams in Arabic for Hebrew-medium schools and Hebrew for Arabic-medium schools can provide useful information about the levels of knowledge students are required to have. For example, the Arabic exams for Hebrew-medium schools at the highest level obtainable (5-point 'Bagrut') focuses mainly on reading and grammar, and the most extensive writing task is only 35 words long, making up 4% of the total grade. In the equivalent Hebrew exams for Arab schools, however, writing tasks consist of 20–30 lines of summary and composition, comprising 16% of the grade. Overall, the level of the language tasks in the Arabic exams is basic to intermediate, whereas in the Hebrew exams it is extremely high (Or, in preparation).

In the assessment of Hebrew in Arabic-medium schools, the presentation of the Hebrew-based, dominant culture to Arab students also poses various cultural problems. One example can be found in the list of topics provided by the Ministry of Education for the oral final school exam ('Bagrut') in Hebrew for Arab schools. The 2011 list of topics (Ministry of Education 2010) contained the following two items (out of a 10-item list):

(1) Cleanliness is a supreme, basic value of a healthy life, especially given the spread of diseases and epidemics.
     Discuss this phenomenon and describe how you can contribute to the internalization of this value.

(2) Feasts and holidays bring people together and contribute to family and social cohesion. But celebrations sometimes exceed the boundaries of good taste. Discuss holiday customs and address their positive and negative facets.

As in the example of Hebrew textbooks, one can only hypothesize that the compilers of the topic list wished to avoid contentious topics related to nationalism, politics, religion, or the Arab-Israeli conflict by including topics that are universal. However, given that the teaching of the dominant language and culture to a minority group is inherently sensitive, the authors seemingly failed to go the extra mile needed so that the exam does not leave the impression of trying to 'educate the natives' into having good, civilized manners. Thus, Arab learners, who are stereotypically described as having poor standards of hygiene and using guns and explosives as part of their festivities, are required, in the context of their acquisition of the dominant language, to discuss how to avoid the spreading of diseases or celebrate in a way that does not "exceed the boundaries of good taste".

Another type of asymmetry can be found in the language in which instructions are given in the national school-leaving 'Bagrut' exams. When placing the Hebrew and Arabic exams side by side (**Figure 3**), there is an immediate illusion

Figure 3. Israeli matriculation exams in Arabic for Hebrew schools (on the left) and in Hebrew for Arab schools (on the right)

of symmetry, since the format of both exams looks identical. Nevertheless, the instructions in both exams are given in Hebrew, despite the fact that one of them is a Hebrew and the other is an Arabic exam. Thus, Hebrew speakers tested in Arabic are getting instructions in their native language, Hebrew, while Arabic speakers are required to deal with instructions given in their target language, Hebrew again.

A comparative analysis reveals that in spite of the initial impression of symmetry, the format and expectations in the Arabic and Hebrew exams are drastically different. While in Arabic exams for Hebrew-medium schools most of the tasks are basic and somewhat typical of an old-fashioned foreign language exam (with ample grammar, translations, etc.), the tasks in the Hebrew for Arabs exams are extremely difficult, at times resorting to arcane knowledge of the language. Although Arabs need to know Hebrew for everyday interactions, the exams do not contain frequently-used communicative expressions (Or, in preparation). Given the power of these school-leaving exams in determining the students' future (Shohamy 2001), the differences between the exams seem to have tremendous implications. Some of the differences may well be due to the different language learning needs and expectations of the two groups, but it is also significantly the cause as well as the result of inequalities in teaching hours, compulsory status, curricula, and agendas. The fact that none of the exams is geared toward communicative use seems to disempower both groups and block communication between them.

Interpretation and call for change

Table 1 summarizes the main findings in terms of symmetry and asymmetry. Based on the analysis above, it seems that Arabic and Hebrew teaching in Israel is fraught with asymmetries and inequalities. While some symmetries could also be detected, these often point to problematic aspects shared by both contexts: While Israeli Arabs are assumed to need Hebrew for social mobility and everyday use, the Hebrew they are taught is far from being practical. In a similar fashion, Israeli Jews, who need Arabic in order to develop better attitudes toward Arabs and life in the Middle East, are not taught the spoken language, and the contents they are required to learn are replete with security topics and cultural stereotypes. Thus, the symmetries that seem to exist between Arabic and Hebrew are mainly symptomatic of problems in the way these languages are taught.

The above comparison led us to conclude that in order to achieve equality and social justice, symmetry should be posited, if not as a goal that can really be obtained, then at least as an ideal that should be asymptotically approached. The fact that both languages are often defined as 'foreign' in the Israeli context seems to be at the heart of the existing inequalities, since 'foreign' actually means different

Table 1. A comparison of Arabic for Hebrew-medium schools and Hebrew for Arabic-medium schools

Domain	Arabic for Hebrew-medium schools	Hebrew for Arabic-medium schools	Symmetry?
Learner motivations and needs	Low (Arabic seen as a marginal language)	High (Hebrew as a tool for social mobility)	No
Are learners' needs properly addressed?	No	No	Yes
Learner achievements	Low	High	No
Explicit language learning agenda	The importance of Arabic in the world and in Israel	The importance of Hebrew in Israel for social mobility and open communication	Partial
Implicit language learning agenda	Arabic for security purposes	Hebrew for integration and assimilation	No
Extent of language teaching	Limited	Great	No
Focus of language teaching	Grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary for military purposes	Grammar, reading and writing, Jewish texts	Partial
The teaching of culture	Arab culture is monolithic; Orientalistic stereotypes	Mainstream Jewish culture is presented as universal	No

things to each of the two groups. For Arabs, 'foreign' represents the need to learn the power language of the state, whereas for Jews, the 'foreign' language is a marginal, minority, low-prestige language, leading to low motivation and achievements.

The numerous asymmetries that were pointed out here may be deeply rooted in pre-existing social injustices and inequalities. In pointing to asymmetries that exist in language teaching we may have merely detected symptoms, and not the root of the problems. Nevertheless, the existence of the symptoms is in itself not only indicative of problems that must be addressed, but the source of additional problems fed by the symptoms. We believe that if educators, language learning materials developers, and curriculum planners are to change this reality, they should have more utopian a horizon that they could aspire to or use as a gauge to evaluate their progress. The concept of symmetry is one such utopian horizon.

The current state of affairs may have various consequences. To begin with, the lack of focus on communication limits the social mobility of Arabs and their prospects for success in Israeli society. Moreover, the extremely high level of Hebrew

required by the curriculum may come at the expense of their native Arabic, leading to eventual attrition of their L1 (Abu Ghazaleh-Mahajneh 2009). At the same time, since Jews attain a very low level of proficiency and only in formal Arabic, they are alienated from the geopolitical region they live in (or in some cases their heritage language) and are discouraged from harmonizing their lives with the lives of the people(s) surrounding them. Overall, the teaching of Arabic and Hebrew is driven by national, patriotic goals and is embedded in the local conflict, depriving learners from having wider global perspectives.

It is important to note that both groups of learners are disadvantaged, and their languages are made 'foreign' to one another. This is first and foremost because neither of the two languages is taught using the same state-of-the-art methods used in the teaching of languages which are more 'global', most prominently English. Furthermore, in the case of Arabic and Hebrew as second languages, both school subjects are kept completely apart since no single student in Israel takes both of them. No shared programs exist between Arab learners of Hebrew and Jewish learners of Arabic. Thus, the languages do not form a shared base for communication. One wonders whether behind the policies of Arabic and Hebrew teaching lie political interests in limiting the participation of Arabs in Israeli society, preventing Jews from creating meaningful communication with Arabs, and perpetuating the tensions between Arabs and Jews and the marginalization of the Arabic language and Arab population. The asymmetries in Arabic and Hebrew teaching seem to result from fundamental inequalities between the two groups as well as inegalitarian agendas. The requirement that each group learn the language of the other does not create a symmetrical, egalitarian reality.

While it may be difficult to disentangle the vicious circle of deep social inequalities affecting and affected by asymmetries in the educational system, we believe that it is possible to create teaching environments that defy existing power structures and reinvent an inclusive language ecology for both Arabs and Jews. Such teaching environments would dynamically reflect the evolving cultural reality, language varieties and modalities, moving away from standards, nationalism and propaganda. If curriculum and materials developers, policy makers and teachers are all committed to the creation of such ecology, students will begin to sense that interaction and communication between both groups is possible and even desirable, so that they can be welcome guests, or residents, in the linguistic and cultural space of the 'other'. While redressing the social inequalities and healing the wounds cannot be expected to be easy or effortless, language teaching can prove to be a leader of such a process.

We believe that one of the measures that need to be taken in order to promote inclusion and equality is to redefine the term 'foreign', so that learners feel they are invited to learn the other language and that by doing so they do not necessarily

trespass or transgress into an uncanny or illegitimate territory. One of the options to contemplate is viewing Arabic and Hebrew as 'participating' languages (Shohamy & Abu Ghazaleh-Mahajneh 2012), which stresses the cohabitation of both languages in one shared space or social context. Another option would be to view them as 'complementary' languages, stressing the fact that neither of them captures the linguistic reality of Israel or the Middle East without the help of the other. Other designations may recourse to the fact that Hebrew and Arabic, being both Semitic languages, are genetically related and share common linguistic and cultural ground. The category of 'Semites', originally conceived by European scholars as a way of defining both Arabs and Jews as the enemies of Christianity (Anidjar 2008) can be reused or re-conceptualized as a category binding Arabs and Jews together in a positive, synergistic manner. Thus, Arabic and Hebrew may be thought of as 'sister' or 'cousin' languages. Although this reference to family kinship, based on the Biblical and Quranic stories of Ishmael and Isaac, is occasionally evoked derogatorily in Israeli Jewish usage, we see no reason why this kind of kinship could not set the ground for shared endeavors and better understanding.

In conclusion, in this paper we have proposed the notion of symmetry as a diagnostic tool. We do not claim that total symmetry is the ideal (or sole) formula, but we do believe that a concept of symmetry may be useful for detecting issues and problems in language policy and language education. Some important questions need to be raised: How can such a concept promote equality and justice and suggest which corrective measures are needed? Can an accepted index of language education symmetry be used to examine the status of languages in a given educational context and interact? Can this serve as a useful concept for comparative policy research, contrasting the language situations in different places? Can this be a useful concept for promoting minority languages? How can the concept of symmetry be validated in and expanded to superdiverse societies, where multiple languages coexist and interact? And lastly, could symmetry analysis bring about change in language policies that can have a long-lasting effect on society?

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