

# The Postvernacular Condition



Soundscapes of Jewish Languages  
in Israeli Theatre

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## KEYWORDS

Israeli theatre, postvernacularity, Jewish languages, endangered languages

## MOTS-CLÉS

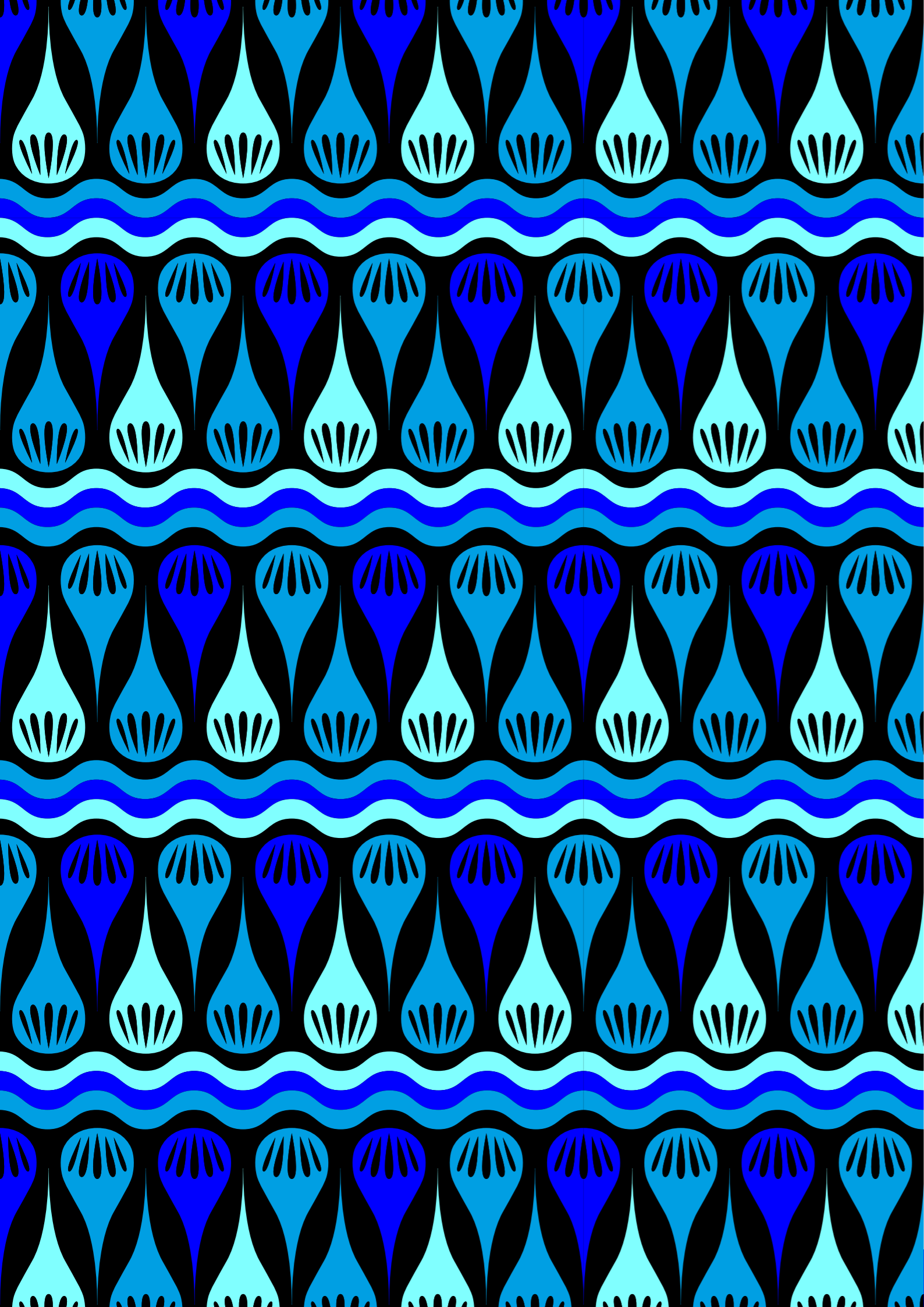
Théâtre israélien, post-vernaculaire, langues juives, langue en voie de disparition

# Summary

In the twenty-first century more and more Israelis are joining the preservation and revival of Jewish tongues and dialects onstage, looking for their diasporic roots. Across the country, one can attend shows in practically every Jewish language (Ladino, Yiddish, Maghrebi, Juhuri, Judeo-Aramaic, Bukharan, Judeo-Iraqi, and others). This trend cannot be separated from a quest for identity which includes a rejection of the essentialist attitude that the Hebrew language is a *sine qua non* for Israeli theatre (apart from Arabic). As a postvernacular cultural practice, these languages, no longer in use as a vernacular, gain in symbolic value what they have lost in communicative functions: generating vanished soundscapes, performing vocal dimensions of familiarity and estrangement. Indeed, this is a peculiarity of postvernacularity: rather than the language functioning as the vehicle of performance, its utterance is the performance itself.

# Résumé

Ces vingt dernières années de plus en plus de jeunes Israéliens, qu'ils soient créateurs ou spectateurs, participent aux efforts de conservation et de renaissance de diverses langues juives par le biais de pièces de théâtre. On peut assister dans tout le pays à des spectacles en ladino, en yiddish, en judéo-marocain, en juhuri (langue des Juifs du Caucase), en judéo-araméen, en judéo-persan, en arabe judéo-irakien, etc. Ce phénomène est lié à une recherche d'identité et au rejet de l'approche essentialiste qui considère l'hébreu comme la seule langue possible du théâtre de l'Etat d'Israël (mis à part l'arabe). Il s'agit d'une praxis post-vernaculaire; des langues qui ne sont plus employées pour la communication quotidienne prennent une valeur symbolique suite à la perte de leur fonction communicative. Les pièces dans ces langues dispensent des espaces sonores qui avaient pratiquement disparus, ainsi que des caractéristiques vocaux de représentation allant de l'identité à l'aliénation. Du fait du caractère particulier du post-vernaculaire, les langues juives ne remplissent pas seulement dans ces pièces la fonction de moyen verbal, mais le fait de les entendre sur scène constitue en lui-même la représentation théâtrale.



*While we are drowning in the noise of our own  
voices, uttered within dominant cultures  
and languages, we are surrounded by an ocean filled  
with the silence of others and barely  
hear an echo of the vanishing chorus.*

*(‘Last Whispers’.  
The Endangered Languages  
Documentation Programme)*

# Introduction

The Hebrew language intimately identifies Israeli culture, yet a new theatrical phenomenon can be found today outside mainstream theatre in Israel: across the country one can attend theatrical productions in practically every other Jewish language<sup>1</sup> such as Ladino, Yiddish, Maghrebi, Juhuri, Judeo-Aramaic, Bukharan, Judeo-Iraqi, and others.<sup>2</sup> These new initiatives in Israeli theatre reflect a major shift taking place, which sociologists and historians have discussed extensively (Shapira 2004, Kimmerling 2001). This shift rejects the essentialist linguistic ideology of Hebrew as the *sine qua non* for Israeli theatre (apart from Arabic).<sup>3</sup> Above and beyond the historical and sociological transitions, this phenomenon opens up a new category of performances, which I would like to examine and conceptualise: theatre productions in Jewish languages that are on the verge of extinction. Basing my current essay on case-studies that are in my view key phenomena, I will analyse performances and interviews with audiences and founders of various theatres and explore how these languages operate onstage, what is their reception, who is the audience, and what is their aesthetic rationale.

1. 'Jewish languages' refers to languages spoken by the Jewish people besides Hebrew.

2. Ladino is spoken by Jews from Turkey and the Balkans, Yiddish by Eastern European Jews, Maghrebi by Moroccan Jews, Juhuri is the language of Jews of the Caucasus, Judeo-Aramaic that of the Jews of Kurdistan. Bukharan is spoken by Jews of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and Judeo-Iraqi by Jews from Iraq.

3. Arabic used to be (and is not any longer) an official language in Israel. It is now a language with 'a special status' – after a new law of 'nationality' was passed a few years ago. Still, Arabic speaking theatres are financially supported by the Ministry of Culture.

At the heart of my analysis will be the concept of postvernacularity, a term coined by Jeffrey Shandler in *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (2006). In his study Shandler defined postvernacularity as a cultural practice where languages that are no longer in use as the vernacular gain in symbolic value what they have lost in their communicative functions, by generating vanished soundscapes, and performing vocal dimensions of familiarity and estrangement. Indeed, what is peculiar about postvernacularity is that rather than the language functioning as a vehicle of performance, its utterance is the performance itself. I will further explore the theatrical attributes of endangered languages and their attractiveness for audiences who understand them, as well as those who barely understand them. My main question is how postvernacular languages in theatre acquire an aesthetic dimension of their own and how they function as a gesture of performance rather than as a semantic means of communication. Consequently, I will analyse how one can mobilise such languages to evoke a lost, multilingual background. I will propose three socio-political metaphors (the zombie, the genie, and the dybbuk) that will enable me to illuminate the specific situation of diasporic languages in Israel as 'undead' and to illustrate their haunting dimension as well as their unconscious after-life for third and fourth generations.

# Soundscapes on the Verge of Extinction<sup>4</sup>

Jewish culture in the diaspora was essentially multilingual: Jewish vernacular speech was a communal dialect, while literary and religious texts were written in a language patterned altogether differently, mostly in Hebrew, sometimes Aramaic. Jewish speech communities in the diaspora were inherently diglossic (or even triglossic). This wasn't diglossia in the classic sense, where the same language is used in a low register for the everyday and in a high and more prestigious register for writing. The languages of Jewish heritage belong to various families (Germanic, Turkish, Iranian, Semitic and more). In fact, in their diasporic lands of origin, Jewish languages were essentially not much different from the dialects of other communities within the same environment. Only when the community relocated did its language become markedly different from the surrounding language (as with Ladino speakers in Turkey or Yiddish speakers in Russia). Several Jewish dialects developed regionally, consisting of Hebrew grafted onto a framework of local languages. In addition to the most prominent examples — Yiddish (Judeo-German), Ladino (medieval Castilian) and Judeo-Arabic (Maghrebi Jewish Moroccan, Jewish Iraqi, and more) — there are lesser-known languages, including: Judeo-Provençal (the medieval Occitan dialect), Judeo-Persian (spoken by Jews in Iran, Uzbekistan and central Asia), and Judeo-Tat (the Turkish-Iranian language of Jews from the Caucasus), to name but a few of the most prominent. Many of these languages were customarily written in Hebrew letters but are really separate, if related, languages.

4. This essay does not discuss additional languages in theatre in Israel, such as Arabic, Russian, or English, since these are not postvernacular languages.

When the State of Israel was formed in 1948, the government took Hebrew to be the *de facto* official language, discouraging the use of any other Jewish tongue. This coincided with a politics of 'cultural homogenisation' (Appadurai 1996): language and culture had to contribute to the formation of a unified and univocal people. The government adopted this ideology with the aim of Hebraisation of the population, in order to create homogeneity in place of heterogeneity from its origins in the Jewish diaspora.

Today, like many other languages around the world, most Jewish languages are considered endangered (a linguistic concept to describe the process of a diminishing command of the language among members of the community, to the point of disappearance). However, the process undergone by Jewish languages has been different from other languages. If Jewish communities in the diaspora would have remained in place, perhaps their languages would have died out like other minority tongues, rather than being brought to the State of Israel through massive flows of immigration from around the world, where they are still in use in domestic and communal spaces. These languages have been uprooted from their places of origin, along with their speakers, and replanted in the State of Israel with its ideology of Hebrew, where they have become grandparents' languages, now facing extinction:

Today, with few exceptions, the remaining longstanding Jewish languages are severely endangered, whether destroyed by the Holocaust, persecuted in the Soviet Union, or lost in the thinning of the diaspora and the push towards assimilation. [...] Individuals and communities seeking to record and maintain their languages, in whatever form, have often had to do so alone (Endangered Language Alliances 2021).

In the absence of an Israeli policy for language preservation, every initiative and body does its best in its own way. Paradoxically enough, research into languages is blossoming. Books, articles, research and conferences worldwide as well as in Israel show the importance of this subject in academic terms (Miller & Norich 2016, Myhill 2004, Kahn 2018, Kahn & Rubin 2014, Spolsky 2014). Against this background, theatres play a prominent role: performances are unique in their active engagement with languages. Spectators are willing to spend money on tickets and go to the trouble of getting to the theatre hall with the expectation of an enjoyable performance. While ‘preservation’ might imply a passive form of documentation, theatre adopts an active stance. In fact, theatre is one of the only public arenas in the country where Jewish languages are used naturally, as a primary form of communication between characters on stage and between stage and audience (Shem-Tov 2021). These theatres reengage with the various languages in an everyday manner, not in academic or artificial circumstances and they are rare examples of theatre in endangered languages even on a global scale. One of the most intriguing examples is theatre in the Sami language, which can be found at the Ruska Ensemble in Finland and the Giron Sámi Teáhter in Sweden. Another case in point would be the shows acted in Romagnolo dialect, in Rimini, Italy, where every year a theatre company plays a theatrical comedy in Romagnolo (ELP), an endangered language of the Emilia-Romagna region (Grementieri). In Israel the quantity and diversity of shows in endangered languages is well beyond these examples and requires a serious study.

## Jewish Languages Soundscapes On Stage: Sonic Genies and Macaronic Performances

Most Israeli theatres working with various Jewish languages operate as private initiatives with amateur actors, apart from Yiddishpiel (which puts on performances in Yiddish) and Hullegeb (playing in a combination of Hebrew and Amharic<sup>5</sup>), which are two professional theatres that receive recognition and funding from the Ministry of Culture. Multiple private and independent troupes have achieved significant success. For example, Asher Cohen’s *Maghrebi Al Maghreb Theatre*, Hay Davidov’s Bukharan *Handa Handa*, and Sigal Shaul’s *Iraqi Theatre* have all become successful businesses. These entrepreneurs have figured out the nature of the market in which they operate and made their theatres into profitable concerns. They know how to identify the right places and times, the right subjects, and the right ticket prices. Cohen, Davidov and Shaul partner with local councils and municipalities who invite them to perform at suitable events. Davidov also receives support from the World Congress of Bukharan Jews. In contrast, the Aramaic theatre of Gila Hakimi and the Juhuri theatre from the Eastern Caucasus established by Roman Isaev, are volunteer amateur companies that make no profits and cover their costs with difficulty.

5. Spoken by Jews from Ethiopia.

Within the framework of this essay, I would like to focus on two case studies that are adaptations of European canonic plays into Jewish languages (one in Maghrebi and one in Yiddish) and their postvernacular practice. My first case study concerns a performance of Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* (2004, see figure I) directed by Ronit Ivgi with her amateur Maghrebi language company *Tami* (Moroccan Israeli Theatre), as I have already described elsewhere:

Mounted on a proscenium stage, the scenography, costumes, and adaptation of *The Servant of Two Masters* in 2004 evoked the Casablanca of French Morocco in the 1950s and 1960s. The set represented the patio of a well-off family's residence. The walls were painted in warm yellow to reddish shades; the doors and window frames were turquoise. Décor included painted murals of arches with crown moldings; long, red velvet drapery; a red tapestry; Moroccan-style benches in vibrant red and gold tones; soft pillows; and blue tiles. A large blue hamsa (hand-shaped good luck charm) was prominent. The costumes conformed to the fashions in Morocco during the same period. Men and women of the upper class wore European attire and red tarbushes, while the male servants wore Moroccan caftans and sharwals (loose-fitting trousers), and servant women wore colourful dresses with white aprons and headscarves. The performance was accompanied by Moroccan music, which the spectators happily supported with rhythmic clapping (Cofman-Simhon, 2013: 52).

Naphtaly Shem-Tov notes that this particular production catered to the nostalgia of the spectators who grew up in Morocco, thus 'challenging and expanding Israeli identity' (2019: 62). Shem-Tov differentiates between those audiences who know the language and emigrated from Morocco on the one hand and spectators from the third and fourth generations on the other:

[W]e can see how nostalgia is for Israeli-born spectators of Moroccan descent, this is an imagined nostalgia, recognizable from family stories, visually, linguistically, and bodily recreated on stage. This performance does not deal only with the past, but also relates indirectly to the Israeli present (*ibid.*: 62).

Indeed, for those who know the language, for whom Jewish Maghrebi is not a postvernacular, the happy reunion with their language in a public space constitutes an affirmative action. However, for the Israeli-born spectators of Moroccan descent, this very same language triggers imagined nostalgia which is intimately intertwined with the history of migration in Israel. The process through which Jewish languages have become endangered is to a certain degree similar to what happens to the languages of migrants all over the world, removed from their countries of origin. The bond to heritage languages in the third and fourth generations functions as a kind of 'sound box', explains Haviva Pedaya, similar to a box of hidden treasures, from which sounds of collective memory reverberate (in Nizri 2004, 13; my translation). This is true of those who experience intergenerational transmission who might hear heritage languages but do not speak them. The audience who is not at all of Moroccan descent and does not know the language of the performance also participates to some extent in this sound box, since in a small country, such as Israel, diverse sonic spaces are easily reachable. Many people in the State of Israel encounter, on a daily basis, Jewish languages outside their home. That the country is small means that one recognises, and even utters words in the languages of a number of communities. Their sound is theatrical material even for those who have no direct connection to it. This reverberation functions as a link in the chain of generations, says Yigal Nizri, who sees the connection to a diaspora language as a longing for continuity between the diaspora and the Israeli state. There is in this 'a need to go back to something that was lost in the effort of Hebraisation [...], a kind of gap asking to be filled with these links' (2004, 13; my translation).



Figure 1  
*The Servant of Two Masters* (2004), Moroccan Israeli Theatre (*Tami*), directed by Ronit Ivgy  
© Yakov Saada



Jana Braziel explains that throughout the world there is a consciousness of uprooting among the children and grandchildren of migrants, the generations that did not themselves experience migration. She explains that in immigrant cultures the third generation feels a lack of roots and looks for a 'distant beginning' (2003) which they may turn into a mythical ground for their current experience. The longing for unknown roots can take the form of a search for a founding story, of an eternal return to a distant origin. Braziel explains how the migrant condition is consistently present in the third generation taking mythical proportions, due to an absence of its actual experience. In the case of the Jews, a people who have known many wanderings and many exiles, and for whom migration is almost a continual experience, the founding narrative is all the more indispensable. Arjun Appadurai emphasises how the search for belonging and cultural identity defines many of the descendants of migrants. He calls this phenomenon 'nationalist genie' (1996: 160), to describe how these groups try to hold on to a kind of supernatural, imaginary creature. The migrant subject, says Appadurai, is in an unstable condition, often also into the third generation: the descendants of migrants see themselves as belonging to two places, if not physically, then at least in their consciousness. The image of a genie illustrates repressed longing, like the genie in the bottle or the genie in Aladdin's magic lantern who will liberate the desires of whoever sets them free. In this image the categories of reality and fantasy are mixed up and assimilated with one another: present and past are linked in a return to a mythic or fantastic beginning, by means of language.

In contemporary circumstances, migrants can continue to be nourished by the language and culture of the mother country, even for several generations. By contrast, the State of Israel is purported to draw its culture and build its national identity from the Jewish diasporas, while erasing them. This politics of building while simultaneously erasing does not allow the younger generations the option of drawing, in the future, on those diasporic cultures. For the descendants of migrants,

the search for belonging and cultural identity amounts to freeing a kind of cultural genie which had been caged and repressed since the immigrant generation. It is a paradoxical state: just as the social and cultural structures of Jewish communities are broken up in the move to Israel or to other countries, new paradigms are created alongside a collective longing for what has been lost.

My second case study is Yiddishpiel's theatre production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (2015) directed by Yehoshua Sobol. Sobol chose to alter the ending, transforming it into a play about Jewish refugees in 1943 who are waiting for help to escape the Nazis but eventually decide to flee by themselves (see figure II). He got the idea for this staging through a text published in 2009 by Pierre Temkine, *Warten auf Godot: Das Absurde und die Geschichte*. In this book Vladimir and Estragon become French Jews hoping to be smuggled over the Spanish border. Sobol was not the first to use Temkine's book to reinterpret Beckett's well-known play. Indeed, in the last decade a number of productions of *Waiting for Godot* have been based on this same book,<sup>6</sup> yet not using Yiddish (spoken by the majority of European Jews in the interwar period) as the language of the protagonists. In Sobol's production Vladimir and Estragon carry suitcases and wait for that someone named Godot to help them cross the French-Spanish border clandestinely, yet Godot never arrives. The two characters are doomed to wait for salvation until their death (alluding to Walter Benjamin's suicide on the French-Spanish border in 1940).

Yiddishpiel's *Waiting for Godot* was a multilingual production: the two main protagonists spoke Yiddish and Podzo French, while his servant

6. Among others, the 2010 production by Le Théâtre de l'Eskabo de Saint-Étienne, presented at Avignon Festival and directed by Patrick Reynard, and the 2012 production in Hamburg at Deutsches Schauspielhaus, directed by Henrike Zöllner, as well as the 2016 Laurent Fréchuret's staging at Théâtre de la Croix-Rousse in Lyon. In 2014 Ivan Panteleev's production at Deutsches Theatre Berlin was awarded the Theatertreffen prize.

Lucky used a mixture of languages gradually turning into gibberish, and the boy from the other side of the border spoke Spanish. These languages, which are integrated in the main language of the performance, constitute a ‘macaronic text’. According to the *Oxford Reference*, the concept of macaronism was born in the seventeenth century, when Latin words were mixed into verses written in the vernacular: ‘Macaronic: Refers to speech or writing that mixes languages’ (Oxford References). Marvin Carlson expands:

Nearly every period of theatre history offers examples of plays that utilize more than one language, and our own era is particularly rich in the number and variety of multilanguage performances. [...] Every macaronic performance may be seen as a cross-cultural activity, a staging of difference (2000: 16).

Indeed, the staging of *Waiting for Godot* in Yiddish relegates the two eternal tramps to be linguistic outsiders: they speak Yiddish, as did many Jews in interwar France, while Podzo, the master, speaks French. Marking difference through language also contributes to the idea of verisimilitude: ‘Surely nothing so immediately marks an outsider as representing another culture than the fact that he speaks an alien language, and the alien voice of the outsider has always been a major contributor to heteroglossia in the theatre’ (Carlson, 2006, 21). Thus, Sobol’s play reverberates soundscapes of interwar Jewish European anguish as unwanted outsiders, by postvernacular means: he makes use of a language which has almost been erased from the European continent in tragic circumstances. Given the profile of Yiddishpiel’s theatre audience (mostly senior spectators who came from Europe, including Holocaust survivors), the soundscape of Yiddish was imbued with terrifying significance. For these reasons, as he attests in an interview, Sobol could not leave Vladimir and Estragon on the border, but had to have them flee (Sobol, 2016). Vladimir and Estragon decide to leave, take their suitcases and step off the stage, pass through the audience and exit.



Figure II

Dori Engel as Vladimir and Yuval Rappaport as Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett. Directed by Yehoshua Sobol, July 2015. Yiddishpiel Theatre, Tel-Aviv © Gérard Alon

This concrete example of a macaronic practice suggests that theatre productions can use postvernacular language as a tool to resituate canonic plays and reflexively comment upon them.

# Reception

One can divide the audiences for various performances in Jewish languages into a number of groups: older people who understand and even speak the language; members of the second generation, who grew up in Israel and have some command of the language; the third and fourth generation who don't know the language but hear it at home; and those who are not members of the community and don't know the language. Testimonies of spectators give us a more precise understanding of the appeal of these shows for the different groups of spectators. Hay Davidov, for example, who established a theatre in the Bukharan language, was born in Israel and relates that he learned Bukharan mainly from his grandmother. He reconstructs what he told her, and she told him:

Safta [grandma], look, these are people who in Uzbekistan [ex Soviet Union], I know, all went to the theatre. They all played a musical instrument: it was part of the curriculum. They were all continuously involved in culture, the theatre, the stage. How is it that these beautiful people, from the day they arrived in Israel, stopped going to the theatre, to the cinema, didn't even know where it was, weren't involved at all? She told me: 'They went then, but where will they go now when they don't know the language?' So I promised my grandmother, I told her: 'Look. If these beautiful people aren't coming to the theatre, one day I will bring theatre to the Bukharans'. (Davidov 2017; my translation)

Davidov is a graduate of the Nissan Nativ acting studio in Tel Aviv. Although he dreamed of becoming an actor, he had no intention of acting in Bukharan:

I wanted to be Tel Aviv. I grew up in Tel Kabir, and Tel Kabir is exactly five minutes walk from Herzl Street in Tel Aviv, where the studio of my beloved teacher Nissan Nativ was. But although the distance is next to nothing physically, intellectually and spiritually it is very great. I crossed this distance to be a little bit Israeli, to be part of Israeliness. With us, we live together all the time, the Bukharan family, the Bukharan community, all the Bukharans marrying within the community, eating Bukharan food. I so wanted to get out. And the further away I got, in the end it brought me closer (*ibid.*).

What Davidov means by this is that the more successful he became as an actor, director and scriptwriter in Hebrew, and the more doors opened for him in Israeli theatre, the more he realised that his unique creativity was connected to the Bukharan identity he had left behind. He saw the case for establishing a theatre in the Bukharan language:

On the day I finished my studies I established the 'Nonsense' group and we performed [in Hebrew] as a team, doing some very funny things, and one day they invited us to appear at this event of the Bukharan Jewish Congress, in front of Bukharan students who had received grants from the congress. An hour-long performance, entirely in Hebrew, and very funny. I added a skit about a Moroccan who came to ask a Bukharan for a grant. In the Bukharan passages, they laughed more than ever. I saw that the audience laughed throughout the performance, but the laughter in that sketch was a different laughter, a soul laughter; and the players stopped for each minute of laughter and each second of applause, so that a five-minute skit turned into one of twenty five minutes, just because of the laughter, just because of the applause. I understood that something was going on here. I understood that the community wanted something of me, they expected things of us, it was the community that was making demands. From that day on, it wasn't me that decided

to establish a theatre, the community decided that I would do it for them. The community had decided on this, on this sketch in Bukharan, and it wanted more, more than just this show (*ibid.*).

From there it was a short journey to opening a Bukharan theatre; a theatre in which Davidov writes, acts, and directs a new production every year.

In 2001 Ronit Ivgy founded *Tami*, the first Moroccan Israeli Theatre. Her Maghrebi productions of Molière's *The Miser* and Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* triggered enthusiastic responses: 'I left Morocco when I was twenty-four,' says one spectator, 'the show is wonderful, brings back words, memories, proverbs and sayings. I am very moved, it is a return to my roots' (*Moroccan Theatre* file; my translation).<sup>7</sup> On internet websites, as well, people reacted enthusiastically and someone wrote: 'The sayings, tricks and pranks onstage undoubtedly brought back memories for many spectators' (*ibid.*). Another fan added: 'The show carried me back to childhood, to the melodies and songs of my parents' house' (in Cofman-Simhon 2013: 54). Another says:

When I was a little boy, I forbade my parents to speak Moroccan, as did many other children, first because I wanted to 'help' them assimilate, and second because I was concerned about my status among my friends. Even at my *bar-mitzvah*, I didn't let them speak anything but French and Hebrew (in Rotem 2004; my translation).

And perhaps the best summary of this productions' impact: 'The show in Moroccan took me back forty years to the language at its best. Lucky us to have managed to restore the Moroccan language, which people

were afraid to speak, and now can be heard all over the lobby of the theatre in our town' (*Moroccan Theatre* file; my translation).

Some of my students, young actors of Moroccan origin of the third and fourth generation, shared their experience with me after their parents had attended theatre in the Maghrebi language. As one of them described it:

My father Raphael told me: 'I laughed and cried with excitement. I recalled my childhood and also understood to what extent the Maghrebi language is beautiful and funny. I was moved to see the connection between theatre and Maghrebi; I am used to elevated language in theatre, with which I don't feel good. Besides, I haven't seen your mother laughing like that for a long time' (in Cofman-Simhon 2013, 56; my translation).

Another young student cited her mother: 'It's a pity that you don't know Maghrebi,' she said. 'You have no idea what you're missing' (*ibid.*). Here we can see the difference between the first generation who embraces nostalgic soundscape of Maghrebi, and the young generations who feel connected to the language through the 'sound box'.

Another initiative is the Amharic<sup>8</sup> Ethiopian theatre *Tizita* (Memories, or Nostalgia), established by Fruit Farada in 2016. Farada came to Israel when she was eight. The *Tizita* Theatre began as a community project and the initiative was received with pride by Ethiopian emigrants: 'the theatre gives proud and nourishing expression to community members and gives us a basis for preserving the beautiful language and culture we grew up with' (Farada 2019; my translation). She adds that her

<sup>7</sup> *Moroccan Theatre* file. Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum (IGTAM), Jerusalem. IGTAM maintains articles from the Israeli press. Yet many of the articles were selected from newspapers lacking the author's name and/or the date of publication. In such cases the file itself serves as reference.

<sup>8</sup> Amharic is not a Jewish language, but the main language of Ethiopia. It has been included in this essay because the Ethiopian community is rather new in Israel and is struggling with preserving its identity.

theatre answers the need of youngsters in the community to identify with Amharic, and is aimed, then, not only at adults, but also at young people who came to the country as children speaking Amharic, but even more so for those born in Israel and who barely know the language. Farada declares that ‘to children it is saying: be proud of your heritage’ (*ibid.*). The group seeks to correct the absence of theatre in Amharic:

Our vision is to connect the generations and theatre groups particularly those working in Amharic, which can bring together the whole community – Sabras,<sup>9</sup> adults and adolescents. When we first launched the theatre and saw the whole spectrum of ages in the audience, we realized the sheer pleasure of experiencing Ethiopian culture in Amharic together (*The First*; my translation).

To conclude, what we hear, again and again, is that various audiences of productions in Jewish languages want and need to hear the soundscapes of their communities’ tongues onstage. However, at the same time, they are perfectly aware of the fact that the utterance of these languages in the theatre is not an ordinary event: it is something to celebrate and to be proud of. The sudden transition experienced by Jewish languages as they passed from being spoken vernaculars throughout the diaspora to being postvernacular in the State of Israel, turned them into a sort of distinct sociolinguistic category. The achievement of the Hebrew ‘revival’ made it a more common language, and there are those who argue that it is no longer Hebrew rather than ‘Israeli’.<sup>10</sup> The holy tongue shared by Jews from diverse communities was called on to become a kind of *lingua franca*, so that people who spoke different mother tongues could communicate. Thus, the holy tongue

9. Sabras are people born in Israel.

10. Such as Ghil’ad Zuckermann, whose book *Israeli—A Beautiful Language* (2008) maintains that contemporary Hebrew vernacular is radically different from ancient Hebrew.

metamorphosed into a vernacular, while Jewish languages that had been vernacular became conspicuous, of no practical use, and a source of longing, thereby acquiring a special status.

## Postvernacular Jewish Tongues and Zombie Linguistics

According to Jeffrey Shandler, language no longer used as a vernacular can gain in symbolic value what it has lost in communicative functions. Members of a postvernacular speech community may not be able to speak the language fluently or fully understand it, but they can still engage in a number of activities which Shandler calls ‘postvernacular cultural practices’ (2006: 94). They can do so, for example, by attempting to learn the language, performing in the language, engaging in discourse about the language, using or doing translations, surrounding themselves with objects related to the language and using certain borrowed words and phrases from the language.

Shandler writes about the fate of Yiddish culture in the U.S.A. and points out how parallel to the demise of Yiddish as a spoken language, there are signs of its development and renewal. So the practice of Yiddish is developing in opposite directions: on the one hand Yiddish as a vernacular is shrinking, but on the other it is prospering in new forms. This Yiddish, diminished though certainly not dead, says Shandler, has become something else, something altogether different from what it once was: it has become a museum artefact, or even a theatrical and artistic object, serving the needs of researchers, translators, directors and performers. Yiddish language and literature are taught and

studied today in universities under the umbrella of Jewish studies, but also in classes for German language and culture. In its postvernacular era, Yiddish has returned to its origin as a dialect of German, and can for the first time reclaim what was once dismissed in Germany as an inferior jargon.<sup>11</sup> In the twenty-first century, Yiddish is rarely thought of as a language of the everyday, and is sometimes met with a smile. Shandler gives the example of ticket vending machines for the New York subway. In 2004 the authorities programmed the machines to give instructions for use in a number of languages, including Yiddish (at certain stations in areas of Brooklyn, populated by Yiddish speakers). This decision did not go unnoticed: local media outlets reported on the development in piquant headlines, such as ‘Subway learns joys of Yiddish’ (in Shandler 2006: 4). Other languages introduced to ticket vending machines in various neighbourhoods across the city (Greek, Korean, Polish) did not attract special attention. The reason for this, says Shandler, is Yiddish’s postvernacular standing: the other languages employed in the New York subway vending machines have vernacular status in their countries of origin (Poland, Korea, Greece), and in New York they exist as extensions of languages which have a homeland and an independent concrete existence. Yiddish, though, is not seen as a part of the everyday, where one buys subway tickets, but as a vague and intangible remnant from another time. It has a special aura, from a distant time and space, which is nearly extravagant. It has become a kind of curiosity. In Shandler’s view, this response to the attempt at public signage in an outdated language (as far as the wider public is concerned) clarifies the unique status of Jewish languages in our time. In public consciousness these languages have achieved an unreal status, even if there are still (much diminished) communities who speak them. The distinctive status of Yiddish in the United States gives

11. For centuries it was widely assumed that Yiddish was just broken German, more of a linguistic mishmash than a true language (Johnson, 1996).

a nostalgic hue to the renewed interest in academic circles and beyond. The reputation of the language precedes her: people who have never spoken Yiddish claim to have a deep and true, emotional or ideological connection to it. In semiotic terms, Shandler indicates, the primary aspect of the language, its communicative value, is diminishing. At the same time, its secondary dimension, its symbolic value as a language of the past, beyond its semantic value, is increasing. When the secondary dimension becomes more predominant than the primary, the language acquires a *sui generis* function. At this stage, the everyday speech of those who still communicate in Yiddish is seen as almost exotic, a leftover from the past.

One of the leading theatre directors at the end of the twentieth century, the Polish director Tadeusz Kantor, coined the term ‘poor object’ (in Kobialka 2008: 113) to explain the exalted position afforded to discarded objects after they have served their purpose, objects acquiring indistinct status. Kantor would collect such items from rubbish dumps and use them as stage props in a most concrete way, explaining that at the end of their functional lives the objects become ‘poor’ and active in another, poetic dimension. This too has happened to Jewish languages. In their ‘poor,’ postvernacular age, they have become theatrical characters. The postvernacular is, then, a key concept for understanding the nature of Jewish languages onstage in contemporary Israel: languages that were until recently used in prosaic contexts, now walk a tightrope between extinction and a postvernacular alternative existence.

The significant contribution of these languages to theatre can be explained via the concept of zombie linguistics. This concept was coined in 2012 by Bernard Perley to describe research into ‘undead’ languages. A zombie, says Perley, is neither the opposite of what is alive nor of that which is dead (in Nash 2013), and this in-between state ties in perfectly with the ambivalent status of Jewish languages. In many

cultural traditions a zombie is an unnaturally created character who has returned to the world in his own deceased body. Dudu Rotman defines such creations as ‘anomalous, foreign to familiar reality’, and adds: ‘the view according to which the end of an individual’s life is not the end of their existence accompanies humanity from the dawn of history’ (2016, 392; my translation). The metaphor of the zombie language is meant to describe an abnormal presence, where a language has been conjured after it has passed away. It does not, then, become a living language, but at the same time it is not actually dead. ‘Zombie’ stands for an undefined position, says Perley, who seeks to harness the communicative power of zombie language: the parameters of the discussion change from ‘meaningful language as communication’ to ‘language as meaningful communication’ (Nash 2013). That is to say, even where the semantic value of a language is lost because no one speaks it, it can still have other features such as sound, intonation and even a certain charm to be discovered in the attempt to guess its meanings. This amounts to an expressive, non-verbal contribution to human communication and emphasises the performative dimension of language. As Rotman puts it, ‘the end of life doesn’t mean the end of existence’ (2016: 392; my translation). The extinction of a vernacular doesn’t mean its disappearance from the world. It is liable to return as a zombie.

Jewish languages are still not zombie languages, because they have speakers. They are not yet extinct. Nevertheless, the distinctions made by Perley correspond with those made by Jeffrey Shandler: the languages of Jewish heritage loom in a twilight zone. The image of the zombie presents the languages in a fantastic light: between enchantment and fear. This duality may be seen to inform approaches to Jewish languages in the State of Israel: on the one hand the consolation of nostalgia and wonder about these languages’ vitality, and on the other the fear that diaspora culture may poke its hand out of the grave and draw everyone to it. However, whilst diaspora ghosts might flutter around

Israeli heads, the triumphant Hebrew language, along with Hebrew culture that sits on firm social and economic infrastructures, doesn’t need to worry about linguistic ghosts.

## The Aesthetics of Macaronic Sound

Most Jewish language performances feature, to one degree or another, embedded Hebrew sentences, whose aim is to enable the audience who don’t understand the language to follow the plot. There are a number of ways of bringing different languages in the same performance into proximity: as translated subtitles or surtitles; as a translation built into the production, a structured part of the speech on stage; and as a feature of the characters who speak different languages or dialects, or even as a choice of a character to speak a number of languages or to utter parts of sentences in one language with some words in another language.

Artists using Jewish languages make use of macaronic texts, well beyond dropping in a few isolated words of Hebrew, with the clear intention to broaden the audience, and to make performances more accessible to spectators who don’t understand the original language but still want to hear it. A kind of polyphony is created on stage, a collocation of voices, a kind of reflection of the multilingual reality within which these theatres are operating. The decision to interpose Hebrew sentences often seems arbitrary, when the single aim is to communicate with the audience. The logic is generally pragmatic, without justification in terms of the plot. The macaronic text spices up the main language, but the isolated Hebrew sentences have special honour and weight since they are meant to clarify the main text.

Some performances have surtitles translating what is said on stage. Such examples are found in the aforementioned productions of *The Servant of Two Masters* and *Waiting for Godot*. Marvin Carlson calls this a 'side text'. The surtitles take away stage time for the reader. This is to say that although the spectators gain verbal understanding, their hold on what unfolds visually on stage is weakened. For the most part, shows in diaspora languages do not have surtitles, but instead use a kind of simultaneous translation, a built-in part of the macaronic text. Carlson considers macaronism to be an important element in present-day hybrid and eclectic postmodern theatre: 'Various elements are assembled without either the totalizing aesthetic vision that was used to justify previous formal and abstract experimentation in the theatre and other arts, or the appeal to verisimilitude that grounded traditional realistic theatre' (2006:16). In other words, contemporary theatre, which has abandoned realism, does not need to justify the macaronic beyond purely aesthetic considerations. Christopher Balme, though, emphasises the postcolonial aspect of the macaronic text: a part of the phenomenon is not the result of choice, but of the cultural hybridity forced on artists who want to write and speak in an ancestral language, rather than in a culturally hegemonic language. Other researchers who have discussed the macaronic stage in different world contexts emphasise the oral/aural aspect of languages that are not written. Most Jewish languages are like this, based on oral transmission over generations. Currently facing extinction, some have already lost part of their lexicon or have undergone 'Israelisation' (the replacement of certain terms with Hebrew words). Consequently, on the stage they are forced to make use of Hebrew, not only for translation purposes, but for the sake of precise expression.

The director Alexander Hausvater, who worked at the Yiddishpiel theatre, argues that there is no need for translation of any sort. Here spectators are seen to understand what characters are thinking, beyond their words and actions, as in opera:

There's no need for a translation, no need for the spectators to look for info on smartphones. Art gets under the skin to change a person. The fact is that if you don't understand a language, it doesn't mean you don't understand the character; the actor has to create beyond language (Hausvater 2018; my translation).

For Hausvater, theatregoers and artists both need to change their viewpoint: postvernacular languages today are like characters with their own personalities. This is Hausvater's private opinion, but it is analogous to Shandler's scholarly definition of the postvernacular condition. Moreover, even when the audience is not Jewish, claims Moni Ovadia, a well-known Italian performer of Yiddish cabarets, 'it doesn't matter that the audience doesn't understand the words. What's important is that they hear the sound and cadences of Yiddish' (in Gruber 2002:65).

Oded Erez and Nadeem Karkabi take a similar position, when they recount an event that occurred after a performance by the Israeli band AWA, whose songs are in the Jewish Yemeni language:

One member of the audience suggested projecting translations of the song lyrics, an element that she believed would enhance the experience of the audience. Tair Haim [...] replied: '[...] it's not done in pop music concerts'..... there's something we love about saying little and simply letting the audience *feel*; this is music with a lot of emotion, and it also makes your body move, it has a lot of groove'. In Haim's reluctance to explain what the lyrics actually mean we can identify the postvernacular tendency of separating the semantic value of language from its other semiotic registers, and relishing it as a signifier of affect or as an aesthetic experience of sound play. Teasing out 'the musicality of language' (Erez and Karkabi 2019: 311).



These interviews teach us that artists are very much aware of the postvernacular soundscapes of their performances and wish to retain this quality as a main feature of their works. Their observations stress the aesthetic quality of macaronic sound and the musicality of language and therefore the non-necessity of translation for the sake of semantic understanding.

## Sonic Dybbuks

An additional miraculous being that portrays the dynamics between Jewish languages and Israeli audiences is the dybbuk (evil spirit). Here someone whose their existence in this world was thought to have ended comes back, not in their own body as a zombie, but by means of the body of a living person, which they take control of. This is a particularly charged image, because unlike the genie and the zombie, the dybbuk is not an independent entity, but it enters ('possesses' or 'cleaves to'<sup>12</sup>) the actual bodies of humans and acts from within. In this way the past returns and is present, refuses to let go, seeks to be involved and demands acknowledgement. There is an active, stubborn and domineering side to this return. It doesn't loosen its grip; its yearning has to be assuaged.

Indeed, Jewish languages won't let go. As we have heard from the spectators quoted in the essay, these languages operate as the dybbuk of the diaspora's past, which refuses to negate itself in the Israeli present. Diego Rotman, writing of Yiddish theatre in Israel, observes that the socio-political metaphor of diasporic language as a dybbuk who demands after-life amounts to the idea that 'language is a strategy of struggle for freedom' (Rotman, 2017: 197, my translation). In Rotman's view, the liminal position of Yiddish, between life and death, has become a tool for cultural independence within Israeliness:

Liminality allows [...] to represent the tension between the dead spirit and the living body, between the new immigrant and the leader of the nation, between the Yiddish language and its speakers, the citizens of Israel.[...] Yiddish, as a language, takes over the country and expresses its subconscious, its suppressed impulses. The Yiddish speakers claiming their place in the world, attempt a cultural coup (*ibid.*).

Rotman thus equates the existence of the Yiddish language in Israel with a subversive dybbuk within the Hebrew collective subconscious, meaning nothing less than a cultural coup. I would add that other Jewish languages, in their postvernacular state, have also become a kind of dybbuk that demands its place within the Israeli entity. As we have heard from the artists and the spectators quoted above, theatre in diasporic languages cannot be separated from a quest for identity which includes a rejection of the essentialist attitude that the Hebrew language is a *sine qua non* for Israeli theatre (apart from Arabic).

The metaphor of the past that encamps in the present like a dybbuk challenges the relationship between Jewish languages and contemporary Hebrew. This is the dybbuk that Israeli culture fears. Jewish languages are returning as a dybbuk that actually grabs and dictates the Israeli experience, at the same time enriching it. This is the sound box: the need for many Israelis to hear the languages of the diaspora on stage, a need that perhaps stems from that imprisoned genie, a memory that reaches back hundreds of years: a sonic dybbuk.

12. The word 'dybbuk' stems from the Hebrew verb *davek* [to cleave to].

# Conclusion: The Appeal of Postvernacular Soundscapes On Stage

The key concept for this essay is postvernacularity, that is, languages that are no longer used as a vernacular and that may be seen in a theatrical context to function as the performance itself. Such languages, which are not fully understood or not understood at all by audiences, may be used to evoke the lost, multilingual background of a predominantly Hebrew speaking public sphere.

I have mobilised three socio-political metaphors (the zombie, the genie, and the dybbuk) to lend explanatory power to the discussion. These metaphors illuminate the specific situation of diasporic languages in Israel as ‘undead’, and illustrate their haunting dimension as well as their unconscious after-life in the third and fourth generations.

I have also sought to demonstrate how the soundscape of postvernacular languages is theatrical material beyond semantic value. For example, with regards to my two primary case studies, I have shown how in the 2004 production of *The Servant of Two Masters* directed by Ronit Ivgy with the Moroccan Israeli theatre company *Tami*, the Maghrebi language served to create nostalgia, whilst in the 2015 production of *Waiting for Godot* directed by Yehoshua Sobol at Yiddishpiel theatre, the Yiddish language defined the two protagonists as endangered outsiders.

The third and fourth generations of Israeli spectators involved in performances in different Jewish languages exemplify the ‘sound box’ syndrome, where words, intonations, and the aural repository of memories of previous generations echo. Simultaneously, the socio-political metaphor of diaspora languages as a dybbuk points to ‘language [as] a strategy in a struggle for freedom’ (Rotman 2017: 197; my translation). The soundscapes of different Jewish tongues onstage thus bring silenced voices to the fore and aurally connect the past to the present.



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