

Hebrew

The Hebrew language belongs to the West-South-Central Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic languages. Modern Hebrew is spoken in Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Germany, the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, and Panama by more than 5 million people. Classified as a Canaanite language, its closest relative is Phoenician, although Arabic is also a South-Central Semitic language and shares many similarities with the Canaanite languages. Other Semitic languages include Aramaic, Akkadian (Assyrian and Babylonian), and Amharic.

The Semitic languages originated east of the Mediterranean Sea and spread to North Africa and the Middle East. The Hebrew culture survived in Mesopotamia through its monotheistic religion, Judaism, and gave its language to the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament of Christianity. However, Biblical Hebrew is not the same language as Modern Hebrew that is spoken in Israel today. Yet it is possible to understand one with sufficient knowledge of the other. The Jewish people have kept Hebrew in constant use, and although it remained mostly written for many years, it was never actually a dead language. Even so, the revival of the language is quite impressive.

Today Hebrew is the official language of Israel and taught in several universities worldwide. The two major dialects are spoken by Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern and Central Europe and Sephardic Jews of Israel and the Mediterranean area. Hebrew has also given its alphabet to other languages. Yiddish, which is grammatically similar to German, is spoken by Ashkenazi Jews. Sadly, the number of speakers of Yiddish fell from 11 million to 2 million after the Holocaust. Another language that uses the Hebrew alphabet

is Ladino, also called Judeo-Spanish. It was once the main language of Sephardic Jews, but the number of speakers has dwindled to about 150,000 people, who live mostly in Israel and Turkey.

Writing System

The writing system of Hebrew is derived from the Phoenician, and later Aramaic, alphabets and is written from right to left. There are 22 basic consonants, as well as vowel symbols (called nikkud) and diacritic marks (called dagesh) to indicate voicing, spirantisation and gemination. In the majority of printed Hebrew, the vowels are omitted, except in books written for children or for students who are learning Hebrew as a foreign language. Five consonants (kaf, mem, nun, pey, and tsadie) have a final version only when used at the end of a word.

The standard print is the most common print and evolved from Aramaic, which had previously replaced the old Hebrew script that was almost identical to Phoenician. From the second century CE, cursive scripts developed, of which two survive today: modern cursive and Rashi. Transliterating Hebrew to the Roman alphabet presents problems with orthographic representations. For example, there are many accepted spellings for the Festival of Lights: Chanukah, Chanukkah, Hanukkah, et al. But regardless of the transliteration, the pronunciation remains the same.

An interesting aspect of the Hebrew alphabet is the presence of numerical values assigned to each letter. Letters can be combined and the value of a word is determined by adding up the value of each individual letter. Gematria is a discipline of Jewish mysticism that tries to find meanings in these numerical values. For example, the most important word in the Hebrew language is chai (life), which is composed of the letters

yud (10) and chet (8). Because of this, eighteen is a very significant number and often present in Judaica.

Phonetics and Phonology

There are only a few sounds that occur in Hebrew that do not exist in English. All three are fricatives: voiceless uvular /χ/, voiceless pharyngeal /ħ/, and voiced pharyngeal /ʕ/. In addition, /r/ exists as an alveolar trill instead of an approximant /ɹ/ as in English. Hebrew only has five vowels: /i/, /e/, /a/, /u/ and /o/, which correspond to their English equivalents, with the exception of /a/ which is a front vowel instead of a back vowel. There are also three pairs of consonants that are allophonic: /b/ and /v/, /k/ and /χ/, /p/ and /f/. Several phonemes are represented by two letters because Biblical Hebrew used to differentiate between the sounds, but Modern Hebrew no longer does. Examples of this include /v/ written as *vet* and *vav*, /k/ written as *kaf* and *kuf*, /t/ written as *tet* and *tav*, and /χ/ written as *chet* and *khaf*.

Hebrew phonetics includes two types of schwa: resting and moving. The resting schwa is a brief stop of speech, whereas the moving schwa is similar to the English schwa. Hebrew also has two kinds of stress: on the last syllable and on the penultimate syllable. Rules that differentiate the vowel length for verbs and nouns are different so that two words can be written exactly the same, but pronounced differently. Therefore, stress is phonemic at the word level. For example, *okhel* means the noun "food" when the stress is on the first syllable, but the verb "eats" when the stress is on the last syllable.

Morphology and Syntax

Sentences in Hebrew are composed of a subject and predicate, which agree in gender and person, although the subject can be lacking. Basic word order is subject - verb - object, although verb - subject - object occurs sometimes because it was dominant in Classical Hebrew. Only the definite article "ha-" exists and it is attached to parts of the subject (including the adjectives that describe the nouns). Direct objects, complements to the noun, and indirect objects also make up Hebrew sentences. However, complements agree in gender and person with the subject and follow the noun rather than precede it. There are several distinctions among various kinds of indirect objects, such as objects for time, objects for place, and objects for reason, et al. Compound sentences are connected with the preposition "she-" (that) and use the same word order as English.

Verbs are inflected for gender, person, number, mood and tense. There are three persons, both singular and plural. The suffix of the verb changes to show these agreements. There are also three tenses in the indicative mood: present, past and future and the imperative mood. Perfect tenses can be derived from the context and the auxiliary "to be" can be used to show progression, but this is only for emphasis or distinction. Hebrew verbs are classified into seven groups, called binyans, and each conjugate in a certain way. There are three active binyans and four passive binyans. This system is relatively easy to learn, but there are many exceptions due to phonological changes.

Like verbs, nouns are derived from a three letter root that signifies a certain concept. Vowels and prefixes are added to distinguish related meanings of the words. Therefore, nouns are generally correlated to verbs by shared roots. Nouns can also be formed by adding two existing stems together. Nouns are inflected by gender (masculine

and feminine) and number (singular, dual and plural), but not by case. The dual number is not very common anymore except for certain words such as week. Possession can be shown by a possessive pronoun, but inflections still exist from Ancient Hebrew.

Negation is expressed by using the word *lo* after the verb. It does not normally occur at the end of a sentence. *Yesh* and *ayn* are the common phrases corresponding to there is/are and there is/are not. The formation of questions does not require a change in word order. Intonation can be raised just as in English, the tag question *nachon* (correct) can be added to the end of the sentence, or *haim* can be added to the beginning of the sentence. However, this last option is rather formal so it is mostly used in writing and not speech.

Hebrew is an interesting language to me mostly because of its history and relationship to Judaism, but also because of its writing system. Although I don't necessarily believe in the mysticism, I do like to find numerical values of words. Plus the writing system is so different from other alphabets that I use and study. And the root system of deriving nouns and verbs seem like a logical and practical use of grammar and of the language overall.

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