
Creative Lexical Strategies among Hebrew Heritage Speakers Dominant in English

Clara Fridman¹, Natalia Meir¹

¹Bar-Ilan University

clarafridman@gmail.com, natalia.meir@gmail.com

Recent trends in heritage language (HL) research highlight linguistic creativity among heritage speakers (HSs), who diverge from baseline speakers for whom this language is the dominant societal one^{1,2}. To contribute to this new direction of enquiry, we present a lexical profile of a previously unstudied group of HSs: adult Hebrew HSs dominant in English. To assess lexical abilities, we collected MINT³ tests in both English and Hebrew, along with Hebrew narratives based on Mercer Mayer's "Frog, Where Are You?"⁴, from 40 US-based participants (aged 18-44). We aimed to characterize the strategies HSs use to fill lexical gaps by assessing non-standard lexical responses and expressions at both the noun-naming and narrative levels, considering cross-linguistic influence, calques and borrowings, and non-target response patterns.

On average, participants reached 92% accuracy on the English MINT (Range: 80%-100%) and 56% accuracy on the Hebrew MINT (Range: 15%-82%), reflecting classic trends in HS lexical production^{5,6}. Investigating non-target responses, we found that most participants using hypernyms produced the same responses, while participants using explanations produced completely unique ones. We additionally noted the use of child-like and antiquated terms, which diverge from the monolingual baseline.

Within narratives, various forms of code-switching, including lexical insertion, inner speech, and commentary, among others, suggest that English remains the framing language in the mental lexicon, even when performing a task fully in Hebrew. Calquing patterns show that, while certain phrases would not be produced by Hebrew-speaking monolinguals, they are logical and not entirely incomprehensible. We conclude that Hebrew HSs are clear, proficient, effective communicators who rely on their dominant language to bridge lexical gaps.

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