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Never say never: the case for Iraqi Judeo-Arabic

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In light of a growing body of research on language death, this paper examines the situation of Judeo-Arabic, an ethnolect of Jews from Arabic-speaking countries with various written and spoken forms. More specifically, the fate of the Iraqi variety of Judeo-Arabic is discussed, particularly in the context of Montreal, Canada. Educational initiatives are also proposed. Two parent-child Iraqi-Jewish dyads and one additional participant, all of whom either reside in Montreal or have resided in Montreal in the past, were interviewed to investigate the hypothesis that there has been a lack of transmission of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic from first- to second-generation Iraqi-Jewish Canadians, and that this can partially account for the precarious situation in which Iraqi Judeo-Arabic currently finds itself. Although in one case in particular a concerted effort was made by the parent to pass the language on to the child, all participants in the study expressed the belief that the language will likely not be transmitted to the succeeding generation, and that language death is both impending and inevitable. It seems that any hope of survival can only be the result of a concerted effort and unyielding commitment on the part of both individuals within the community, and of the community at large. Each individual in this study formed part of the rich mosaic of Iraqi Jewry in Canada in the present day and age. Each voice had its own personal story to tell in its own unique timbre with its own particular nuances.

Introduction

As Baker (2003) observed, the new millennium has brought with it publications by the likes of Crystal (2000), Nettle & Romaine (2000) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) that express a pressing concern for the many 'sickly' world languages that are threatened to extinction (Fishman, 1991). Indeed, in this our era of globalization, the putrid smell of language death fouls the air, and the Angel of Death continues to hover menacingly over the prototypical last speaker now as ever. By analogy, it seems that languages, like human lives, are both ephemeral and expungeable: they too choke out a last gasp of air and are buried deep in the bowels of human consciousness,

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forever to be silenced. Yet perhaps there is room both top-down and bottom-up to help these feeble languages to 'rage, rage against the dying of the light', as the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1951/95, p. 93) eloquently put it. Highly resonant in the applied linguistics research literature is Fishman's (1991, p. 12) impassioned plea that 'there is no language for which nothing at all can be done'. Fishman's dismissal of the attitude that it is too late to act on behalf of a dying language since there are not enough speakers and supporters left could well be empowering to those potential torch-bearers who may have given up hope, if only they could be exposed to this fishmanesque rhetoric and infused with the will not to relent. The implication is that, coupled with the requisite belief that 'finding a cure is worthwhile' (p. 39), there *is* a way to quench, or at least to temporarily offset the encroaching process of language death: to prevent the flickering light from being completely expunged. This is what Fishman refers to as Reversing Language Shift (RLS).

Judeo-Arabic, also known as Yahudic, figures among the world's many dying languages (Corré, 2005; SIL International, 2005). In fact, 'Judeo-Arabic' refers not to one specific language, but rather it is an umbrella term for an ethnolect with various regional dialects written and spoken by Jews of Arabic-speaking countries (Hary, 2003). For example, there are Moroccan, Egyptian and Iraqi varieties of Judeo-Arabic, some of which are not mutually intelligible, but most of which are easily distinguishable from the Arabic of the Muslim compatriots in their respective countries (Hary, 1992). In the first part of this paper, Judeo-Arabic will be treated as one language, and the implications of language death will be considered. Later, the focus will shift to the specifically Iraqi variety of Judeo-Arabic, and a description of the language and history of Iraqi Jewry will be delineated with reference to personal stories and attitudes that were expressed in a series of qualitative interviews. These interviews were conducted in order to examine how two generations of Iraqi Jews regard the present state of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic and its future in the Canadian context. Finally, a case will be made for bringing the linguistic and cultural realities of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic into the mainstream classroom in the West. Raising awareness of a language that is shared among communities distanced by wars, persecution, and/or international migration, it will be argued, might lead to a greater understanding of common bonds that ought to be sustained. Educators interested in developing a culturally sensitive curriculum and promoting peace initiatives would certainly have a role to play.

The plight of Judeo-Arabic

Endowed with a rich history which can be traced back to pre-Islamic times (Hary, 1992), Judeo-Arabic 'is reaching the end of the road' and in all probability *has* no future left of which to speak (Corré, 2005). Signs of near extinction are all too clear: the population of the few existing speakers of Judeo-Arabic is ageing and dying out (Hary, 2003), the language has mostly *not* been passed on to the newer generations, the bloodline, so to speak, is becoming more and more dilute due to mixed-marriages with Jews of European descent (Ashkenazim) and non-Jews. Furthermore, other languages, notably Hebrew, have prevailed at the expense of Judeo-Arabic. That

Judeo-Arabic, along with other Jewish languages of the Diaspora, has been shunned as a symbol of exile and oppression, particularly in the Israeli context (Nahir, 1988), has certainly contributed to its demise. Given that the Jews have by-and-large left the Muslim countries where they had resided for generations and integrated into other cultures, this process of language death may seem inevitable (Hary, 1992). The language no longer performs the important societal functions it once did, and has largely been relegated to the home. Simply put, Judeo-Arabic is no longer the *lingua franca* of the population, and its use is becoming more and more obsolete as grandparents die and memories fade. Of course, language and culture are inextricably linked (Fishman, 1991), and it follows that the language shift of this displaced people is accompanied by a culture shift that is irretractable.

Not only has Judeo-Arabic suffered from relative neglect in the Judaic research literature, but also it has been implacably and consistently dismissed and ignored by apparently well-intentioned researchers. For instance, in her remark that ‘no attention has been given to the maintenance or revival of the Jewish-heritage languages that were the *lingua franca* of the Diaspora’, Shohamy (1994, p. 137) simply neglects to list Judeo-Arabic alongside its Diaspora-language counterparts of Yiddish and Ladino as a ‘Jewish heritage-language’. Indeed, it does not figure into her discussion of Jewish languages at all, and is condemned, by default, to the position of marginalized, unmentioned ‘other’. In other words, Shohamy relegates Judeo-Arabic to an inferior position by virtual exclusion. Her discussion of ‘the neglect of the teaching of Arabic’, on the other hand, is only in reference to the use of Arabic among non-Jews, both by Muslim minority groups within Israel, and within the Muslim world at large. This reflects the underlying attitude that Judeo-Arabic is not a legitimate Jewish language because of its close ties with Muslim Arabic. It would clearly be irrational to deny any status to Yiddish as a Jewish language, for instance, because of its relationship with German, but this is precisely what is being done in the case of Judeo-Arabic. In fact, Judeo-Arabic was the mother tongue of about 8% of the Jews in Israel in 1996 (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1996), although this percentage has likely gone down in the past few years due to the death of many of the native speakers, most of whom are over 50 (SIL International, 2005), and to the continued influx of immigrants into Israel.

The romanticization of Yiddish, a Jewish language that has been threatened in its own right (Fishman, 1991), and is now, comparatively speaking, alive and well (Goldman, 2003), has also been at the expense of Judeo-Arabic. As Spolsky (1995, p. 189) states, ‘Yiddish is the prototypical Jewish language, but there are many others’. Yet he offers no justification for his claim, assuming it to be a given. On what basis is Yiddish more prototypically Jewish than Ladino or Judeo-Arabic? Because it *sounds* that way? Because it is currently thriving in the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) and Hassidic Jewish communities (Fishman, 1991), and *they* are the ‘prototypical’ Jews? These justifications are certainly contentious. On the surface, however, there are many apparent similarities between the two languages. Both Yiddish and Judeo-Arabic are hybrid languages incorporating elements of the vernacular, are easily distinguishable from the non-Jewish languages, have a long and rich history, and are

written with Hebrew characters (Corré, 2005). Eastern European Jewish traditions neither typify Jewish traditions, nor are they the origin of Jewish traditions. They are simply one of the many rich traditions from the Jewish Diaspora that makes modern day Judaism so eclectic. Spolsky's attitude reflects a certain distorted perception of importance that is present among some Ashkenazim (Jews of Eastern or Central European origin), and this is reinforced by an imbalance in power relations. Since the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, for example, not one of the Israeli Prime Ministers has been Sephardi (non-Ashkenazi) nor, in turn, a speaker of Judeo-Arabic. If language is, indeed, power (Fairclough, 2001) then the case has been made.

Although in its broader definition, the term 'Sephardi' (the '-im' ending is plural) has been taken to mean Jews from Spanish, Middle-Eastern or North African countries, in this paper, 'Sephardi' will refer exclusively to Jews from Arabic-speaking countries. The more precise term of 'Mizrachim', which has more recently come into use, will not be used in this paper since it does not emphasize the traditional Ashkenazi–Sephardi dichotomy that has been pervasive for so many years (US Library of Congress, 2003).

Iraqi Judeo-Arabic: the countdown has started

Iraqi Judeo-Arabic, also known as Judeo-Iraqi, is the language of the Jews of Iraq. This paper will use the term 'Iraqi Judeo-Arabic' to emphasize that it is, indeed, a subset of Judeo-Arabic, and will overlook any finer linguistic distinctions based on region (i.e. Baghdadi versus Basrawi Judeo-Arabic) or on when the particular individual or group in question left the country (i.e. an Iraqi Jew who left Iraq in the 1940s might use a slightly different vocabulary than an Iraqi Jew who left in the 1960s). Hard statistics and demographics on the number of speakers of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic are certainly difficult to come by. It may be that there are no official international statistics available, especially since the various varieties of Judeo-Arabic are often generalized as one language (for statistics on speakers in Israel, see Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). The general consensus from on-line sources, however, is that in 1992, there were somewhere between 125 000 and 160 000 speakers of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic internationally, most of whom are now over the age of 50 (Ager, 2005; SIL International, 2005). The sources all seem to indicate, however, that the population is ageing quickly, and that the language is (both literally and figuratively) dying along with its speakers.

As it happens, my interest in Iraqi Judeo-Arabic and impetus for researching it is largely autobiographical. My grandmother is a native speaker of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic. She is 92 years old, has been living in Tel Aviv for over 25 years, and speaks very little English or Hebrew. To my distress, I find that I am utterly unable to communicate with her due to my lack of knowledge of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic. Although my father, who left Iraq when he was 3 years of age, maintained oral proficiency in the language for himself, he did not manage to pass it on to either myself or my sister. This is a textbook case of what Nettle & Romaine (2000, p. 136) describe as 'the classic three-generational pattern of language shift that imperceptibly makes

children strangers to their own grandparents'. As I wrote in my research journal on 2 March 2004:

if I can offset language death for myself personally, then I have a better chance of learning more about my heritage, actually communicating with my Grandmother in Israel on the telephone before she dies, feeling like I'm part of a community, and maybe even being able to pass a little bit more of my Iraqi Jewish heritage onto my (future) kids. I think that learning Judeo-Arabic would make me feel more complete.

From this account, it is clear that there is much more that is at stake than just language. In addition to being a vehicle for communication, language embodies tradition, culture and identity for me.

A disbeliever converted: the genesis of the study

When I first broached the idea of doing a term project on Iraqi Judeo-Arabic in a graduate course, I upheld, at least in part, what Fishman (1991, p. 14) considers to be the 'most defeatist claim' towards RLS. Having failed at several attempts at learning Iraqi Judeo-Arabic through various means, including trying to teach myself Muslim Arabic (which, in the case of non-North African dialects, has considerable overlap), I appeased myself with the notion that I had tried my best, in vain, and was resigned to the idea of never being able to learn the language given my present lack of exposure to it. As for what could be done at a community level, it seemed irrelevant to me personally since I felt alienated from the Jewish community in general and viewed myself as an outsider. I remember reading with anger, disbelief and scepticism Fishman's words that 'societally based RLS cannot be accomplished at all if it is not accomplished at the intimate family and local community levels' (p. 4). Conversely, I was quieted and saddened by the concept that 'weakened and endangered languages pertain to cultures that no longer significantly regulate the daily lives of their members' (p. 8). I dismissed the former quotation, shunning the concept of any personal involvement with the community. The latter quotation, however, immediately rang true to me. I had always acknowledged that Judeo-Arabic was important to me, that it was part of some missing existential and intergenerational link. Overwhelmed with conflicting emotions, which were accompanied by the practical necessity of selecting a compelling term-paper topic, I remember reading the first Fishman quotation over and over again one evening until I abrasively managed to convince myself that there was, indeed, something to be done at the local level, and, further, that *I*, as an individual within the community, could do something. Thus, this project, in its very foundations, borrows Fishman's assumption that, no matter how dismal the prognosis, there is *something* that can be done for a threatened language, in this case Iraqi Judeo-Arabic. It represents an attempt for me, a half-Sephardi half-Ashkenazi hybrid, to get in touch with my Iraqi-Jewish side, to reach out to the Jewish community, specifically to the community in Montreal that I had felt so isolated from, and to delve into the history that is the backdrop for the rich traditions that my father taught me and that I love and cherish so much.

Research questions

This study sets out to investigate what can be done to offset the process of language death, or to incite the reversal of language shift, in the case of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic in the Iraqi Jewish community of Montreal, Canada. Montreal is my adoptive city, my present city of residence, and the city which is, therefore, the most immediately accessible to me in terms of hands-on research. According to one source, there are an estimated 3500 Jews of Iraqi descent in Montreal (Pomerance, 2003). In order to examine, first, whether and to what extent the Iraqi Judeo-Arabic language and traditions have been passed on from my father's generation of Iraqi Jews to their children in my generation, I interviewed two parent-child dyads who are first and second generation Canadians, respectively. I also interviewed my father in order to hear his stories in a more formalized setting, to understand his background a little bit better, and, to gain insight on some of my personal 'missing links' by comparing his perceptions with my own. Driven by the reality of my own situation, I also set out to test the hypothesis that there has been a gap in the transmission of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic from first- to second-generation Iraqi Jews, and that this lack of linguistic competence, in turn, precludes the possibility for my generation to pass the language on to the next generation. Therefore, if the language is to be passed on to our children, or if we want to communicate more effectively with our grandparents before it's too late, then my generation needs to acquire the language really quickly. As I conceptualize it, this would likely involve people who are willing to impart their knowledge of the language on people like me who do not speak it, in a way that would be mutually beneficial. In sum, in this paper, I set out to explore, firstly, how Iraqi Jews from both generations perceive the present and future state of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic. If the participants indicate that they feel that its future is limited, then the question becomes whether and to what extent they are concerned by this impending loss of the language. Finally, in my quest for a solution, I was interested in finding out whether the participants have any solutions to propose for promoting language maintenance and RLS.

Participants and methodology

All participants in this study are personal acquaintances or relatives of mine that were selected on the basis that they constitute my 'link' to the community. Participants either currently reside in Montreal, or they now reside in another Canadian city but have lived in Montreal in the past, visit Montreal frequently, and are connected to the Montreal Jewish community. The participants from the older generation are in their mid-to-late 50s and their children are in their early-to-mid-20s.

The interviews took place from 11 to 29 April 2004. One parent-child dyad was interviewed in person and the other three participants, two of whom live out of town, were given telephone interviews which were not taped. Unfortunately, in spite of my fast dictation skills, some of the nuances of the language in the untaped interviews were inevitably lost, and parenthetics and hesitations were overwhelmingly omitted, although I feel that the gist of what was said was almost always captured on paper.

The taped interviews, on the other hand, were subjected to two hearings but were not transcribed in full. Thus, in most cases, I will be paraphrasing the utterances rather than quoting verbatim. The parent–child dyad who were not taped will hitherto be referred to as parent A and child A, the taped dyad will be called parent B and child B, and parent C and child C refer to my father and myself, respectively. Parent C was also interviewed by telephone.

Due to my lack of knowledge of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic, no interview was actually conducted in Iraqi Judeo-Arabic. Rather, the interviews were conducted in English, with the occasional reference to Hebrew or Arabic words where appropriate. The interviews lasted 45–60 minutes for the parents and 15–20 minutes for the children. This difference can be accounted for by the fact that the parents were asked direct questions about their family history (lineage, etc.) and often recounted first-hand anecdotes, whereas these features tended to be absent from the children's interviews. The interview guidelines that were used can be found in Appendix I.

In addition to these participants, I also spoke of my research project over the telephone with one Montreal Iraqi Jew from my parent's generation (parent D) and one from my generation (child E). Because of scheduling difficulties with the former and the latter's trip to China, I was unable to arrange a time to interview them formally. Nonetheless, their comments and stories exposed me to two different 'voices' and coloured my global perception of the attitudes towards Judeo-Arabic. Perhaps because my discussion with them was spontaneous and unscheduled, I felt that their comments tended to be slightly more unsolicited than those of the other participants, although this may simply have been a feature of the individual personalities rather than the fact that they did not undergo formal interview. These conversations alerted me to the reality that, in spite of my careful efforts to follow techniques that reportedly minimize the likelihood of what I like to call the 'interviewee-responding-in-a-certain-way-to-please-the-researcher' scenario (Seidman, 1991; Weiss, 1994), there can be no doubt that the interviewees' responses were influenced by my research agenda, which almost certainly came through. Because I am so emotionally implicated in this project and all of the participants know me personally, coming across as a neutral interviewer was near impossible. Certainly, this feature should be taken into account in the interpretation of this study.

Three stories

In order to understand the context of the personal accounts, it is necessary to have some understanding of the history of the Jews in Iraq. The Jewish community of Babylon, which is essentially modern-day Iraq, is the oldest Jewish community in the Diaspora, long predating both Christianity and Islam. In other words, the existence of this community, which goes back to the destruction of the First Temple in the sixth century BC (Haddad, 1984), marks the beginning of the long and ever-continuing history of Jews who live in exile from their homeland (present-day Israel). Parent B believes that his ancestors have probably been in Iraq since the time of the exile. Parent C can trace back his roots at least seven generations to the 1830s or 1840s,

when his grandmother's grandmother's grandfather's grandfather reportedly came to Iraq from Jerusalem to provide religious instruction. Apparently, such trips across borders were commonplace at the time. After a presence that spanned over 25 centuries, however, it seems that reference to a Jewish community in Iraq will soon have to be made in the past tense. Indeed, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that upon the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, an estimated 40 Jews were living in Iraq. By October 2003, when the article came out, that number had apparently dwindled to about 24 (Hedges, 2003) and has likely continued to diminish since then. Yet for many years, the Iraqi Jewish community was among the largest and most affluent of the Jewish communities in the Arab world. Parent A describes that, as she remembers it, most of the Jews were middle- and upper-middle class and lived comfortably. There was also a sizeable body of very wealthy, highly educated and highly established Jews, among them, some of her relatives, as well as some very poor Jews. During the British Mandate (1917–32), Jews were elevated to positions of power and were generally more prosperous than their Muslim counterparts (Levin, 2001). Parent C emphasizes, however, that while the Jews had economic power, they lacked political power.

After Iraqi independence (1932) in the midst of economic difficulties, the climate became increasingly hostile towards the Jews, who were a convenient scapegoat, and a number of economic measures were implemented against them, including attempts to limit their access to higher education and the firing of civil servants (Levin, 2001). Iraqi Jewish leaders, who had maintained that harmonious Jewish co-existence with Muslims in Iraqi society was possible, woke up to reality after Baghdad's Farhoud, or pro-Nazi pogrom, in June 1941, in which 180 Jews were killed (Shohet, 1999). In the post-war Era, hostilities continued to increase as Jews were (sometimes falsely) accused of Zionism and jailed, fined or executed (Haddad, 1984). At the dawn of the establishment of the State of Israel, somewhere between 130 000 and 150 000 Jews lived in Iraq (Haddad, 1984; Levin, 2001). Jews were prohibited from leaving the country from 1948 to 1950, until a Bill in parliament granted them permission to leave on condition that they relinquish their Iraqi citizenship and leave their property in the country. As parent C recounts, hostilities were such that many Jews felt that they had to leave, even though they would be stateless. In a mass exodus between 1948 and 1952, more than 124 000 Jews, among them, the very wealthy, left the country, leaving behind their properties and businesses (Shohet, 1999). Recently, there has been a movement for Iraqi Jews to receive compensation for property that they forcibly left behind, which has some ardent advocates (e.g. Levin, 2001). Parent C reported that his mother's wedding band was taken by one of the guards, who had apparently decided to take the law into his own hands. Only 6000 Jews remained in Iraq by the end of 1951 (Haddad, 1984).

Contrary to parent B's family, who left Iraq for Iran in the 1930s, and then headed to Israel, where parent B was born, and parent C's family, who had fled with the masses to the newly declared State of Israel when parent C was a toddler, parent A's family was among the few that decided to stay in Iraq. (For a summary of participants' migratory histories, see Appendix I.) Since parent A's parents had heard reports that things were really tough in Israel, they figured that they'd stay in Iraq until things got

better. Parent A speaks about the constant fear that she experienced growing up in a society which was openly hostile and persecutory towards the Jews, explaining that she was 'psychologically embedded' with the idea that the Jews are hated and in danger from the time she was born. She says that she would not speak Judeo-Arabic on the street, switching instead to a more standard variety of Arabic so as not to make her Jewish identity too obvious. In 1969 during the Ba'ath regime, when Hussein was already masterminding his rise to power (Levin, 2001), the family was smuggled out of the country through Iran, where they were granted a *laissez-passer* from a Jewish agency, since they had no passports. (The Iraqi government denied the Jews this right.) Shortly thereafter, they arrived in Israel.

All three parents' stays in Israel were only temporary before they moved to Canada permanently. Yet, their experiences in Israel were very different. After the birth of the Jewish State in 1948, there was a huge influx of Jewish immigrants which the new country simply did not have the infrastructure to support (Michael, 2004). Reality was that life was tough for everybody, even for the well-to-do Jews. Parent B, who was born 4 years before Israeli Independence, lived a privileged life, relatively speaking, since his father, who had brought in money from Iran, was wealthy, and could procure things from the black market. Yet, parent B described that no one at the time had any extra flesh on their bones. Because of clever thinking on the part of parent B's father coupled with the benefit of his wealth, parent B's family actually managed to leave Israel before any of the other Jews were able to leave. They were among the first Iraqi-Jewish families to arrive in Montreal in 1952. Parent B explains jokingly how his house in Montreal was like a 'drop-in-centre' for Iraqi Jews 'off the boat', and that every second week they would have the new Iraqi Jew in town over for dinner. Parent B mentioned repeatedly how much he admires his father's courage to take his family to a country where he did not know anyone. In a sense, the members of parent B's family are pioneers, and they form an important part of the history of Iraqi Jewry in Montreal.

parent C's family, having come to Israel straight from Iraq with no assets, was not quite as fortunate as parent B's family. They lived in the 'Ma'abarot', or in tents in the immigrant camps under deplorable conditions (Michael, 2004). Both parents B and C describe the negative profiles of Jews who spoke either Judeo-Arabic or Hebrew with an Arabic accent, and allude to the enormous societal pressure to speak only Hebrew (Nahir, 1988). Parent C mentioned that he never said a word to an Iraqi Jewish girl who was in his class in grades 1–3, although he knew that she spoke Iraqi Judeo-Arabic. He also expresses that he felt ashamed to respond to his parents in Arabic when they spoke it to him on the street. This is reminiscent of parent A's reluctance to speak Iraqi Judeo-Arabic in the 'souk' (market) in Iraq (see above). Though the precise reasons behind not wanting to speak the language and circumstances behind them were markedly different, parents A and C seem to have shared the joint goal of wanting to hide different aspects of their identity. In parent C's case, the goal was to hide the Arabic connection; in parent A's case, it was to hide the Jewish connection. Ironically, Iraqi Jews and the language that they spoke seemed to have been shunned in both the Jewish and Arab worlds.

Sephardi Jews, parent C says, were viewed by many Ashkenazim to be uneducated, inferior, and worthy of only menial labour (Wurmser, 2005). It seems that on a few occasions, parent C encountered the negative Ashkenazi attitude toward Sephardim firsthand. Firstly, upon his arrival in Israel, his family was sprayed with DDT. This was apparently a common practice at the time, in light of the view that people from Arab countries were thought to be dirty and diseased. Child C remembers seeing a picture showing this at an Iraqi Jewish exhibit in Israel several years ago, and this upset and disgusted her, especially when she learned that her father's family was subjected to the same humiliating procedure. Parent C also explains how, on account of his fair complexion, he was not only accepted by the Ashkenazim as one of them, but was also often taken to be 'a better Ashkenazi than the Ashkenazim themselves'. He recounts an incident when he was 4 or 5 years old and an Ashkenazi neighbour proclaimed to his mother something on the lines of, 'he's not one of you, he's one of us'. Although in parent C's analysis, this had been intended as a compliment to the effect of, 'your son is so light and beautiful', or by implication, 'your son is not dark like the rest of you Sephardim', this had a scarring effect on him. Coupled with the benefit of his facility for languages, he reports that he *could* fit in so easily and, in part, *wanted* to fit in so easily with the Ashkenazim. It turns out that this was a double-edged sword. Guilt accompanied his desire to be part of the 'Master race', and this made him resent the Ashkenazim even more.

Parent C left Israel for Iran with his family at the age of eight, was sent off by himself to boarding school in England at the age of 14, and finally moved to Montreal to live with his aunt, parent B's mother, where he completed high school and his Bachelor's Degree. As it happens, parents B and C are first cousins. Parent C then settled in Edmonton, Canada.

By the time parent A arrived in Israel in 1970, she was already in her early 20s, and living conditions were considerably better than they had been when parents B and C had been there some two decades earlier. Parent A indicates that she loved living in Israel and would have liked to have stayed. Her family decided, however, to move to Montreal so that they could be reunited with her older brother, who had left Iraq earlier than the rest of the family to go to boarding school in London. It was in vogue at the time for Iraqi-Jewish families to send their sons to Britain for education. Parent A had not seen her brother in fifteen years. While parent A's family stayed in Montreal, parent A married and moved to Edmonton.

Iraqi Judeo-Arabic: the prognosis

Parents A–C all report that they are able to speak Iraqi Judeo-Arabic fluently, although, perhaps, with varying degrees of proficiency. Because parent A is the only one who actually grew up in Iraq, it follows that parent A is the only one that is able to both read and write Judeo-Arabic. Although she went to a Jewish school, because of the diglossic situation in Arab countries, Classical Arabic was taught at school and the dialect was reserved for the home.

Whereas parent B raised his children in Montreal, both parents A and C brought up their children in Edmonton, where there is no Iraqi Jewish community or even Sephardic community to speak of: they literally constitute the community. Children A and B both moved to Montreal as young adults, however. Of the three parents, parent A is the only one that has an Iraqi Judeo-Arabic speaking spouse. Both parents B and C married Ashkenazi Jewish Anglophones.

With regards to language proficiency and to what extent the language was passed on, I found that in each dyad, the parent's and child's testimonies were strikingly congruent. Both parent and child A reported that a concerted effort was made by parent A to pass on the language. Child A never felt that the language had been imposed on her, however, and seemed to appreciate her mother's effort. Both participants report that Iraqi Judeo-Arabic was child A's older sibling's first language, and, as parent A claims, was spoken exclusively in the household in the early years. She indicates that she made a deliberate effort to speak only Iraqi Judeo-Arabic to her oldest child with consistency, although the child socialized with friends, like child C, in English. (parent A adds jokingly that her daughter would have been an ideal subject for the avid bilingual researcher. Apparently, she knew who she was talking to). By the time child A was born two years later, the oldest child was already starting to become English dominant, and English was spoken more and more at home. If parent A were to speak to either child in Arabic, they would likely respond in English. This is apparently still the case. By the time child A's youngest sibling was born, the two older children were already in school and English had taken over. Parent A reports that her youngest child barely understands Iraqi Judeo-Arabic and, unlike her older children, never really paid much attention to it. Child A points out that the language was more diffuse by the time her younger brother was born, implying that position in the family may have something to do with it.

Both parent and child A report that, while child A is reluctant to speak Iraqi Judeo-Arabic, she understands it extremely well and, as parent A claims, was even able to extrapolate her knowledge to get the gist of a conversation in Lebanese (Muslim) Arabic in one instance. Child A recounts that when she is at her grandmother's house or among Judeo-Arabic-speaking aunts in Montreal, she cannot remember which language a story had been told in two seconds after the fact. Nor does she notice when they switch back and forth between Iraqi Judeo-Arabic and English. It seems, then, that child A's receptive knowledge of Judeo-Arabic is excellent, although she does not push herself to speak it.

Child A predicts that, had she grown up in Montreal rather than Edmonton, she probably would have been more involved in the Iraqi-Jewish community. Parent A expresses that she did not feel isolated as an Iraqi-Jew in Edmonton, since there is an active Jewish community. However, there was no Sephardi synagogue, and the Iraqi connection was lacking. Parent C also seems to have experienced some feeling of isolation as an Iraqi Jew in Edmonton, but he also admits that he never really focused on it. It seems that, for both parents A and C, being part of the Jewish community is most important, while their Iraqiness is only secondary. Thus, in my interpretation, 'Jewish-Iraqi' might be more a fitting designation for these participants than

'Iraqi-Jewish'. Both parents and children B and C feel that the transmission of Judeo-Arabic was unsuccessful. Children B and C both allude to gaps in their knowledge, say that they regret not being able to speak more than a few words, and mention that they have, on occasion, asked their parents why they did not pass the language on. Parent C asserts that his children would have had a much better chance of learning Iraqi Judeo-Arabic had their grandparents been around. His parents and sisters in Israel, he says, are really the only people to whom he speaks Judeo-Arabic. In conjunction with this, child C claims that, during a 4-day visit with her grandparents four years ago, her comprehension and production of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic improved markedly, and she started to be able to produce some broken two and three word phrases in addition to her small repertoire of pre-packaged multi-word items. Her grandmother recently expressed disappointment to parent C on the telephone that child C's linguistic knowledge, which she had likely perceived to be higher than it probably ever really was in her optimism about being able to 'speak' to her grandchild, was not maintained. Needless to say that this comment has had an impact on child C (myself).

Child B *did* have the benefit of growing up with her grandparents, but said that they almost always spoke English to their grandchildren. Both parent and child B report that, of parent B's parents' 11 grandchildren, only one really has any knowledge of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic of which to speak. Parent B, in fact, indicates that when his family was in Israel, they all spoke pretty much only Hebrew, including his parents, as it was the lingua franca. When they moved to Canada, however, his parents began to speak more Judeo-Arabic at home. But it was only really when his cousin, parent C, moved in with the family after his boarding school experience that parent B actually started to speak. In fact, parent B largely credits parent C for encouraging him to learn the language.

None of the children in this study reported that they had any close Iraqi Jewish friends. Child C appreciates the fact that in Montreal, she has the choice of being able to go to a Sephardi or an Ashkenazi synagogue during High Holidays. Inevitably, she goes to a Sephardi one, where she feels more comfortable. Both children B and C report that, in their mixed Ashkenazi–Sephardi homes, their fathers' Iraqi traditions prevailed over their mothers' Ashkenazi ones. Child B notes that this may be because her father's parents were so involved in their lives. Child C feels that her father really emphasized his tradition, sometimes forcefully, in order to compensate for the lack of exposure that his children received to Sephardi traditions in the Edmonton Jewish community. This may also, perhaps, be a by-product of his negative views towards Ashkenazim.

Interestingly enough, child A, the only child who is 100% Judeo-Iraqi, feels that the community does not intermarry a lot. I believe that 'intermarry', as child A intended it, is expanded from its traditional definition of marrying outside of faith to marrying a non-Sephardi Jew. Child A also states, however, that how much of her Iraqi-Jewish language and heritage she is able to pass on to her children largely depends on who she ends up marrying. In contrast, children B and C, both of whom are half Judeo-Iraqi and half Ashkenazi, cite the fact that the bloodline is

becoming increasingly dilute as a major reason for language death and loss of tradition. It seems, then, that the parent's marriage patterns are perceived by the child to be the norm. Unfortunately, I lack any statistics to show what 'intermarriage' rates actually are.

All parents and children in the study report that they feel that Judeo-Arabic is dying and express regret at this loss. Parent A, who seems to be the most optimistic of the three parents, expresses that the language will only be maintained if there is a clear initiative to keep the language up, to speak it, and to learn and teach it. She indicates that this may be more likely in Israel than in the Diaspora. Parent B, who is, arguably, the most pessimistic of the three, remarks that the only impetus that he sees for preserving the language and culture comes from the synagogues, but that the emphasis there is really more on Hebrew-Arabic (i.e. Hebrew pronounced with an Arabic accent) than on Judeo-Arabic. He predicts the language will be gone by the next generation, but that there is not really much that can be done about it. He makes the point that even if his children learned Judeo-Arabic by tomorrow, they would have no one with which to interact. His words, 'who are they going to talk to, the wall?' still resonate in my mind. Parent C also feels that the loss of the language within a generation or two is inevitable. He states that without living in the land of origin and relying on the language as the *lingua franca*, the *raison d'être* of the language is gone. As to the likelihood of it being passed on, he cites the fact that a whole generation grew up without speaking it in Israel, so it is not likely. As for communities outside of Israel, he maintains that it is unrealistic to be able to preserve the language when the population is so thinly spread. In a more optimistic moment, he cites an initiative in Great Neck, New York, in which there is a sizeable Iraqi-Jewish population, and suggests that there, perhaps, Iraqi Judeo-Arabic might have a chance.

There are some striking parallels in the data between what the parents and children actually say within the individual dyads. This, of course, may well be the product of the analysis of an over-zealous researcher, but I will mention my thoughts anyway. To my surprise, my father, parent C, whose background is in chemistry, indicated that he was interested in the etymology of Judeo-Arabic, in knowing which words came from Turkish, etc. At the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim dialect of Arabic had apparently expunged words that the Jewish dialect retained. He also stated that he was interested in the etymology of Yiddish and other Jewish hybrid languages, inasmuch as Hebrew words are used in these languages. This is something that I, a self-declared language buff, would be interested in finding more about myself. When child B reported that she only knows a few words in Judeo-Arabic that her father tended to use frequently, she mentioned by example that she knows a lot of words for foods. Parent B reported that, while he felt that the language will die within the next generation, he is confident that the food will be passed on. Iraqi-Jewish food seems to have been important in this household.

All participants indicated that there was a considerable degree of success in passing on Iraqi-Jewish traditions. In terms of actual language transmission, however, the real

success lies in dyad A. Both parent and child in dyad A, perhaps given their own success in language transmission (they were the only ones who did not report any gap in knowledge) have a more positive attitude about the future of Judeo-Arabic than their B and C counterparts. As for proposing a possible solution, both parent and child A indicate that the language *can* be preserved if significant efforts are made by the Iraqi-Jewish community. Parent A suggests that, in conjunction with the requisite support from the community, there must also be involvement from some sort of a 'network' that has power and connections. She also indicates that educators and historians have a part to play, and that offering university courses in Judeo-Arabic language and culture, should there be sufficient interest, would likely increase the language's chances of success.

None of the participants indicated that they were aware of any government policy or program in either Israel or the Diaspora that has been put into place to help revive or maintain the Judeo-Arabic language(s) or culture. Nor did they think it likely that such a measure would be put into place in the future. This lends credence to the idea that any impetus to revive Iraqi Judeo-Arabic will need to be bottom-up rather than top-down, but that does not preclude educators and policy-makers from playing an important role in the effort.

Future trails, future trials

My hope is to establish an intergenerational Iraqi Judeo-Arabic dialogue group in Montreal for those who are seeking an opportunity to learn, teach, and converse in the language. As I envision it, the group would consist of eight to 12 people, including, where possible, parent-child dyads, grandparent-child dyads or grandparent-parent-child triads. (It sounds like that could make for some rich harmony.) The group would meet once a week at a different group member's house on a rotating basis, and one of the dyads or triads would be responsible for providing an activity centred around a theme. Iraqi Judeo-Arabic would be used as the language of communication as much as possible, and cultural events such as singing Iraqi Jewish songs for Passover or making traditional foods like sambusak (small pastries usually stuffed with cheese or chick peas) would also figure into the group's regular activities. The biggest challenge, I think, will be accommodating busy schedules, as the participants in my study seemed (hypothetically) enthusiastic about the idea.

There is also a dire need to record the oldest generation of Judeo-Arabic speakers, whatever their variety of Judeo-Arabic, so that technology can at least preserve what nature cannot. Written and spoken archives of the language will facilitate 'archaeological digs' in the future, add to our existing knowledge, and hopefully capture not only the dynamism and linguistic features of the language, but also the vividness of the narratives as they are lived by the speakers (Crystal, 2000).

While preparing this paper for publication, my parents visited Israel for a few weeks, and with my insistence, undertook the endeavour of recording stories in Judeo-Arabic told by family members, including my grandmother, now aged 93.

Dying languages and inclusive education: what is the link?

While the aftermath of the war on Iraq and the on-going political situation between Israelis and Palestinians have little to do with the vitality of the Iraqi Judeo-Arabic language, languages are necessarily pitted against the backdrop of global realities and Iraqi Judeo-Arabic is no exception. Bringing the language and cultural realities of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic into classrooms in the West, it will be argued, can be useful for raising awareness and sensitizing students to some of the issues that surround this unique language.

Any talk of 'Judeo-Arabic' necessarily brings to light that Arabic is not only the language of Muslims, but also that of Jews, Christians, and other groups around the world. As Behar (1997) points out, the mere existence of Jews who are Arab challenges the 'Arab' versus 'Jew' dichotomy' that has been invoked by several Arab and Jewish nationalists. In fact, Arab Jews and Arab Muslims lived together harmoniously for centuries and share many of the same cultural references (Wurmser, 2005). These points of common ground do not often come up in the media, however, which has brought to the fore images of conflict during times of crisis. It is likely that most students in classrooms in the West have had little or no exposure to this side of the story that brings out common bonds that ought to be sustained. Highlighting to them that there are many 'Jewish fusion languages' like Judeo-Arabic that are spoken around the world (such as Yiddish, Judeo-Persian and Ladino, to name a few), as well as numerous varieties of Arabic (the most recent on-line edition of *Ethnologue* cites forty, including five listings for Judeo-Arabic) might lead to an understanding that this linguistic diversity brings with it considerable cultural diversity and richness (Abley, 2003, p. 206; SIL International, 2005).

Extrapolating on the case of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic, I will now argue for the value of bringing stories of other 'dying languages' used by peoples with similar conflict-related histories into the classroom, in order to generate dialogue, raise awareness, and promote tolerance. Stories of languages shared among communities distanced by war, persecution, and/or international migration may help students to make some sense of complex issues that are pertinent in our world today without needing to centre around 'conflict'. Educators interested in promoting peace initiatives or developing a culturally sensitive curriculum could weave stories of some of the world's many 'dying languages' into curricular materials, and, if possible, work in conjunction with its community members to draw in issues that are relevant to that community. For example, once the Judeo-Arabic dialogue group is up and running, some members of the group could certainly go into local classrooms. Ideally, this dialogue group would help to generate classroom 'dialogue' too. Furthermore, any talk of 'language death' necessarily brings to light issues surrounding globalization, including global disparity, as well as the notions of language life span, language mortality, and linguistic ecology. These considerations may lead students and educators alike to reflect on and minimize our perceived differences, since we are all humans who, like other species and languages, must one day succumb to the forces of nature (for more on the coming and going of languages, see Crystal, 2000). At the same time, acknowledging the need

to take vigorous means to preserve languages for their value and place in time would hopefully lead us to celebrate our differences as we look ahead to the future.

Teaming up educators interested in developing a culturally sensitive curriculum with stories of dying languages that are just waiting to be told (so that they can live on) could prove to be a powerful means of promoting values of inclusion in the classroom and, ultimately, of helping to develop a more inclusive society.

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Appendix I

Interview guidelines: parents

Section 1: Background:

- (1) Where were you born? In what year?
- (2) How far can you trace back your family roots in Iraq?
- (3) When did your family leave Iraq? Why did they (you) decide to leave?
- (4) What were the living conditions like in Iraq? In other countries you migrated to?
- (5) How much can you remember? Are there any anecdotes that you can think of that are especially vivid in your mind?
- (6) How did you end up in Montreal? In what year?

Section 2. Iraqi Judeo-Arabic: present and future:

- (1) How proficient would you say that you are in Iraqi Judeo-Arabic? How did you learn what you know?
- (2) Who do you speak Iraqi Judeo-Arabic to?
- (3) Did you pass on the language to your children?
- (4) Do you have any special Iraqi Jewish traditions? Did you pass those traditions on to your children?
- (5) How positive do you feel about the future of the Iraqi Judeo-Arabic language?
- (6) (if applicable) Why do you think that the language is dying out?
- (7) What do you feel is the state of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic in the Diaspora versus in Israel?
- (8) To what extent are you involved in the Iraqi-Jewish community?
- (9) Do you think it likely that your children will pass on the Iraqi Judeo-Arabic language to their children? Is this a priority for them?
- (10) In your family, is there a 'language transmission gap' between your generation and your children's generation of Iraqi Jews? Does such a gap exist among Iraqi Jews in North America? If so, how prevalent do you think it is?
- (11) Are there any linguistic/cultural maintenance programs that have been put into place on behalf of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic that you are aware of?
- (12) What do you think can be done to promote the use of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic? Do you think it is worthwhile to try to preserve the language?
- (13) Do you think that an intergenerational language course in Montreal is feasible/useful for maintaining the language? Would you hypothetically participate?

Interview guidelines: children

Section 1. Background:

- (1) Where were you born? In what year?
- (2) (if applicable) How did you end up in Montreal? In what year?

Section 2. Iraqi Judeo-Arabic: Present and future:

- (1) How proficient would you say you are in Iraqi Judeo-Arabic? How did you learn what you know?
- (2) Who do you speak Iraqi Judeo-Arabic to?
- (3) To what extent do you feel that your parents were able to pass on their Iraqi-Jewish traditions and culture to you?
- (4) Did they tell you their stories about how they left Iraq and what their living conditions were like?
- (5) How positive do you feel about the future of the Iraqi Judeo-Arabic language?
- (6) (if applicable) Why do you think that the language is dying out?
- (7) What do you feel is the state of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic in the Diaspora versus in Israel?
- (8) To what extent are you involved in the Iraqi-Jewish community?
- (9) Do you think it likely that you will pass the Iraqi Judeo-Arabic language on to your children? Is this a priority for you?
- (10) In your family, is there a 'language transmission gap' between your generation and your parent's/parents' generation of Iraqi Jews? Does such a gap exist among Iraqi Jews in North America? If so, how prevalent do you think it is?
- (11) Are there any linguistic/cultural maintenance programs that have been put into place on behalf of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic that you are aware of?
- (12) What do you think can be done to promote the use of Iraqi Judeo-Arabic? Do you think it is worthwhile to try to preserve the language?
- (13) Do you think that an intergenerational language course in Montreal is feasible/useful for maintaining the language? Would you hypothetically participate?

Appendix II: Migratory history

Interviewed participants:

Parent A (b. 1949, Baghdad)

- During the mass exodus of Jews out of Iraq (1948–52), family decided to stay in Iraq until the situation got better in Israel
- 1969–70 — smuggled out of Iraq via Iran; moved to Israel with family
- 1975 — moved to Montreal with family to be reunited with older brother
- 1977 — got married and moved to Edmonton

Parent B (b. 1944, Tel Aviv)

- before birth, family moved from Iraq to Iran then to Israel
- 1952 — moved to Montreal with family

Parent C (b. 1947, Basra)

- 1950 — moved to Israel with family during the mass exodus
- 1956 — moved to Teheran with family
- 1961 — sent to Jewish boarding school in England
- 1963 — moved to Montreal to live with aunt, parent B's mother
- 1969 — moved to Edmonton to study at University of Alberta

Child A (b. 1981, Edmonton)

- 2000 — moved to Montreal to study at McGill University

Child B (b. 1983, Montreal)

Child C (b. 1978, Edmonton)

- 1997 — moved to Montreal to study at McGill University

Additional participants (no formal interview):

- Parent D (b. 1945, Teheran)
- before birth, family moved from Iraq to Iran
- 1946 — moved to Montreal with family

Child E (b. 1976, Montreal)
