

Advantages of Vocabulary of European Origin for Learning Modern Hebrew

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Abstract

Latin and Greek are important donor languages to Hebrew, which does not belong to the Indo-European but Semitic language family. The present study conducted a vocabulary survey to examine the advantage of frequently used Modern Hebrew vocabulary of European origin and their English equivalents for learning Modern Hebrew as a foreign language. The Oxford 3000 list was used as the primary reference of high-frequency English words and their Hebrew equivalents. As a result, 186 loanwords of Latin or Greek origin are included in the most frequently used 3,000 Hebrew words and approximately 150 loanwords can be used with a similar pronunciation in English and Italian. Therefore, the present study concluded that knowledge of high-frequency Hebrew vocabulary of Greek or Latin origin could assist speakers of English and Italian in learning Modern Hebrew.

Keywords: Hebrew; English; Italian; Loanword; Latin.



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1. Introduction

1.1. The Creation of Modern Vocabulary in Hebrew

Hebrew belongs to the Semitic language family (Crystal, 2010). Because of frequent invasions by the Roman Empire, Jewish people lost their initial home state and could not have their own country for almost 1,900 years. During this period, Hebrew was mainly used for liturgical purposes such as collective and individual prayers and practice of religious customs. However, in the 19th century, linguists such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda started revitalizing Hebrew by enriching vocabulary and standardizing its grammar as a living modern language.

Majority of Modern Hebrew neologisms were created based on original Hebrew vocabulary elements (Sáenz-Badillos, 1996): *machshev* (computer) from the verb *lachshov* (to think) and *matos* (plane) from the verb *latus* (to fly). Other words related to modern life are compounds of two vocabulary items. For instance, the Hebrew noun *nemal-te'ufa* (airport) consists of *namal* (port) and *te'ufa* (aviation) (Sivan and Levenston, 2009), and the noun *beit-cholim* (hospital) consisting of *beit* (house) and *cholim* (patients) includes a structure similar to its German equivalents *Krankenhaus* (hospital) that comprises *Kranken* (patients) and *Haus* (house) (Clark and Thyen, 2013).

1.2. Loanwords of European Origin

However, Modern Hebrew also contains many loanwords of European origin, such as *ambulans* (ambulance), *bank* (bank), *mapa* (map), *sport* (sport), and *supermarket* (supermarket). The Hebrew *kontsert* (concert), *Yanuar* (January), and *Februar* (February) retain German or Yiddish pronunciations, e.g., the German *Konzert* (concert) (Clark and Thyen, 2013). The English suffix *-tion* corresponds to *-tsya* in Hebrew which was mainly borrowed through Russian because a large Jewish diaspora existed in the Slavic countries. For example, the Hebrew *reputatsya* (reputation) mostly retains the pronunciation of the Russian noun *ryeputatsya* (Thompson, 2013). Moreover, loanwords of French origin are, for instance, *roman* (novel) and *biskvit* (biscuit), whose ultimate origin is Latin (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Therefore, those with basic vocabulary knowledge in English or another European language may learn these Hebrew words with ease. Additionally, many academic terms in Hebrew are loanwords of Latin or Greek origin because they convey precise concepts.

1.3. Loan Translation in Finnish and Hungarian

Finnish and Estonian are two European languages that do not belong to the Indo-European language family but rather to the Finnic branch of the Uralic language family. The Finnish noun *lentoasema* (airport) consists of *lento* (flight) and *asema* (station). Its form is completely different from Latin-based words, such as *airport* in English and its Italian equivalent *aeroporto*. However, the Finnish word may have been created through loan translation from other European languages (Sanders, 2017). An example with a similar composition is the Swedish *flygplats* (airport) consisting of *flyg* (flight) and *plats* (place, square) (Hille, 2011). The Swedish *sjukhus* (hospital) includes *sjuk* (sick, ill) and *hus* (house) (Hille, 2011).

Hungarian is another Uralic language that created thousands of modern vocabulary items using loan translation. For instance, the Hungarian noun *kórház* (hospital) consists of *kór* (disease) and *ház* (house) (Szabó, 2005). The structure is similar to that of its German equivalent because Hungary was part of the Austrian Empire for centuries (Molnár, 2001). Other Hungarian compounds are *könyvtár* (library) comprising *könyv* (book) and *tár* (storehouse) and *szótár* (dictionary) that includes *szó* (word) and *tár* (storehouse). In addition, *repülőtér* (airport) consists of the radical *repül-* (to fly) and *tér* (square). These Hungarian words demonstrate a linguistic independence from influential European languages such as English and German. The use of original vocabulary elements for loan

translation enabled Hungarians to strengthen their ethnic identity. However, those purified words frequently impede Hungarian learning by foreigners and even ethnically Hungarian people outside Hungary, who are studying Hungarian as a heritage language.

This study will not discuss the importance of linguistic identity but will rather focus on the benefits of shared loanwords among several languages for language learners.

1.4. Objective

The objective of this study is to propose an effective method of learning Modern Hebrew vocabulary of Greek or Latin origin. The method is primarily oriented to English and Italian speakers who are interested in learning basic Hebrew. However, the findings of this study will also benefit speakers of Spanish and Portuguese because these languages also include many words of Latin and Greek origins. The primary reference for Latin vocabulary is *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Morwood, 2005).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Benefits of Cognates for Language Learning

Nation and Webb (2011) suggest the benefits of using English words that share the same origin in teaching English vocabulary. They exemplify *revise*, *visual*, and *vision*. These words originate from *videre* (to see) in Latin (Stevenson and Waite, 2011). Through focusing on words of the same origin, learners will become more aware of semantic associations among them. Ringbom (2007) also advocates the utility of cognates, defined as “historically related, morphologically similar words, whose meanings may be identical, similar, or partly different,” when teaching and learning foreign languages.

2.2. Studies Focused on Hebrew and Other Languages

Everson (2011) conducted a comprehensive review of recent studies focused on the teaching of Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese, and Mandarin, all of which have non-Latin writing systems. His study emphasizes the importance of developing the ability to exploit the semantic elements of the characters from an early learning stage as this skill enables learners to efficiently recognize and infer the meanings of unknown words (p. 263). It was also stressed that by improving their recognition of each character’s semantic components, learners can more easily remember the characters than through rote memorization (p. 264). (Laufer and Shmueli, 1997) compared the benefits of several different ways to demonstrate the meanings of selected English vocabulary. The participants were Israeli university students learning English as a foreign language. The researchers provided the experimental group with vocabulary lists and single sentences with first-language translations while the texts distributed to the control group comprised only definitions or synonyms in English. Their research concluded that providing first-language translations enabled the participants to retain the selected vocabulary better, and that giving definitions or synonyms in a second language contributed less to their vocabulary learning. The learners’ first language could convey far higher quality information or knowledge for vocabulary learning than the target language could.

3. Materials and Methods

In this study, the primary reference for high-frequency English words was the Oxford 3000TM, a list of approximately 3,000 basic words used to define entry words in the Oxford Dictionary. The author of this study counted Hebrew words of Latin or Greek origin in the scope of the Hebrew equivalents of the English list. The selected Hebrew words were then sorted according to their origins. The first category was vocabulary of Latin origin. The second was that of Greek origin.

4. Results

In total, 186 words of Latin or Greek origin were included in this study’s list of basic Hebrew vocabulary equivalents to the most frequently used 3,000 English words. This number of loanwords was equal to 6.2% of the total number of words in basic Hebrew vocabulary. The total number of Latin loanwords was 122 (e.g., *virus* “virus” and *ambitsya* “ambition”), and that of Greek loanwords was 64 (e.g., *energya* “energy” and *kategorya* “category”).

5. Discussion

5.1. Hebrew Words Ending in -a

The Hebrew words in Table 1 end with the vowel *a*, and they derive from Classical Greek or Latin. The English and Italian equivalents retain similarity and most frequently end with *-y* and *-ia*, respectively, originating from the *-ia* ending in Classical Latin. For example, the final vowel of the Latin *categoria* (category) changes to *-y* in English. The listed Hebrew words ending with *-ika* correspond to the English and Italian words with similar endings. In addition, *alergya* (allergy), *galerya* (gallery), *fantazyia* (fantasy), and *harmonyia* (harmony) are other Hebrew examples that include the *-ya* ending, although they are not included in the Oxford word list.

The listed Italian words all end with an *a* that has remained since the period of Classical Latin. Many of these words are frequently used in basic communication in English and Italian. For example, the Latin *theoria* (theory) becomes *teorya* (theory) in Hebrew and *teoria* (theory) in Italian. This regular correspondence between Hebrew and Italian would help Hebrew-speaking learners of Latin-based languages, who have the fundamental English vocabulary knowledge.

Similar pairs of Hebrew, English, and Italian words also exist among items ending in *-ma*: *aroma* (aroma), *diploma* (diploma), and *drama* (drama). Their Italian equivalents are *aroma* (aroma), *diploma* (diploma), and *dramma* (drama) (Bulhosen *et al.*, 2013).

Table-1. Examples of Similar Words in Hebrew, Italian, and English (1)

H.: Hebrew It.: Italian			
H. <i>byologya</i> It. <i>biologia</i> (biology)	H. <i>energya</i> It. <i>energia</i> (energy)	H. <i>filosofya</i> It. <i>filosofia</i> (philosophy)	H. <i>fizika</i> It. <i>fisica</i> (physics)
H. <i>geografya</i> It. <i>geografia</i> (geography)	H. <i>kategorya</i> It. <i>categoria</i> (category)	H. <i>komyeda</i> It. <i>commedia</i> (comedy)	H. <i>logika</i> It. <i>logica</i> (logic)
H. <i>matematika</i> It. <i>matematica</i> (mathematics)	H. <i>politika</i> It. <i>politica</i> (politics)	H. <i>tehnologya</i> It. <i>tecnologia</i> (technology)	H. <i>teorya</i> It. <i>teoria</i> (theory)

5.2. Hebrew Words Ending in -i

Table 2 presents the Hebrew and English words. The Hebrew words end with an *-i* (e.g., *klasi* “classical”), which indicates the singular masculine form. The adjectival suffix *-i* is one of the most common endings in Hebrew. The singular feminine form is *-it* (e.g., *muzika klasit* “classical music”). These vocabulary items are used in Spanish and Portuguese with similar spellings.

All the listed Italian words end with an *-ico*, which stems from Latin. These vocabulary items are also used in Spanish and Portuguese with similar spellings. Other pairs of Hebrew and Italian words are *eleganti* (elegant) and *elegante* and *digitali* (digital) and *digitale*, respectively.

Table-2. Examples of Similar Words in Hebrew, Italian, and English (2)

H.: Hebrew It.: Italian			
H. <i>akademi</i> It. <i>accademico</i> (academic)	H. <i>byologi</i> It. <i>biologico</i> (biological)	H. <i>dramati</i> It. <i>drammatico</i> (dramatic)	H. <i>filosofi</i> It. <i>filosofico</i> (philosophical)
H. <i>geografi</i> It. <i>geografico</i> (geographical)	H. <i>klasi</i> It. <i>classico</i> (classical)	H. <i>logi</i> It. <i>logico</i> (logical)	H. <i>organi</i> It. <i>organico</i> (organic)
H. <i>plasti</i> It. <i>plastico</i> (plastic)	H. <i>politi</i> It. <i>politico</i> (political)	H. <i>romanti</i> It. <i>romantico</i> (romantic)	H. <i>techni</i> It. <i>tecnico</i> (technical)

5.3. Hebrew Words Ending in -ya

Table 3 presents Hebrew words that end with *-ya*, along with their Italian and English equivalents. The Hebrew suffix *-ya* partially retains its original Latin form *-io*. Similarly, the Latin *emotio* (emotion) becomes *emotsya* in Hebrew, which mostly retains the original pronunciation and meaning.

The listed Italian and English words include the suffixes *-zione* and *-tion*, respectively. The spellings of these Italian words remain similar to their English equivalents, as limited phonetic change has occurred since their adoption from Latin. This similarity would benefit Hebrew-speaking learners of Romance languages.

Table-3. Examples of Similar Words in Hebrew, Italian, and English (3)

H.: Hebrew It.: Italian			
H. <i>ambitsya</i> It. <i>ambizione</i> (ambition)	H. <i>emotsya</i> It. <i>emozione</i> (emotion)	H. <i>funktsya</i> It. <i>funzione</i> (function)	H. <i>motivatsya</i> It. <i>motivazione</i> (motivation)
H. <i>proporotsya</i> It. <i>proporzione</i> (proportion)	H. <i>reaktsya</i> It. <i>reazione</i> (reaction)	H. <i>reputatsya</i> It. <i>reputazione</i> (reputation)	H. <i>transformatsya</i> It. <i>trasformazione</i> (transformation)

5.4. Hebrew Words Ending in -a

Table 4 exemplifies several Italian, Hebrew, and English words that retain phonetic and semantic similarity. The listed Italian and Hebrew words end with *-a*. English and Italian speakers learning Hebrew will possibly recognize the listed words as cognates. Building the habit of focusing on words of the same origin might enable efficient vocabulary learning regardless of proximity at the level of language families.

Table-4. Examples of Similar Words in Hebrew, Italian, and English (4)

H.: Hebrew	It.: Italian		
H. <i>atmosfera</i>	H. <i>diagrama</i>	H. <i>temperatura</i>	H. <i>tema</i>
It. <i>atmosfera</i> (atmosphere)	It. <i>diagramma</i> (diagram)	It. <i>temperatura</i> (temperature)	It. <i>tema</i> (theme)

Other Italian and Hebrew words including the *-a* ending are *carriera* (career) and *karyera, media* (media) and *medya*, and *università* (university) and *universita*. The letter *à* of the Italian *università* indicates a phonetic accent in the final syllable inherited from the Latin *universitas*.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the advantage of basic Hebrew words of Latin and Greek origins, constructing a Modern Hebrew equivalent of the Oxford 3000TM list. As a result, 186 Hebrew words originating from Latin or Greek were observed in the approximately 3,000 high-frequency Hebrew words. The majority of these words remain linguistically similar to their English and Italian equivalents. This is one of the primary advantages of the shared loanwords. These findings indicate that the selected Hebrew loanwords could encourage English and Italian speakers to learn high-frequency Hebrew words. Similarly, Hebrew-speaking learners of English and Romance languages could use the identical strategy.

Future studies should develop a practical teaching method of Hebrew vocabulary for learners to increase their awareness of the advantages of their first-language knowledge of loanwords originating from Latin or Greek.

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