

Linguistic Adjustment among Israeli Immigrants in Germany

1. Introduction

At a time when Europe is facing a large influx of refugees, most of whom originating in Africa and the Middle East, free migration continues at much slower pace among countries within continental Europe, from Europe to other destinations (mainly North America), and from industrial and democratic countries to Europe. These free migrants may comfortably consider the advantages and disadvantages of alternative areas, plan their migration diligently, and know that they can always return to their origin country. Several factors facilitate this unprecedentedly easy movement of people: convenient and cheap transportation, allowing migrants to visit their families frequently and vice versa; advanced technology that lets migrants and relatives who stayed behind communicate routinely in written, oral and visual ways; and recognition by many host countries of immigrants' wish to establish ethnic organizations and hold events that sustain their contacts and identity with their homeland.

One of these streams of free migration originates in Israel. Official Israeli figures and the public have long viewed emigrants negatively ("descenders") as representing the opposite of the national Jewish ideology of immigration ("ascendence") to Israel. More recently, however, the attitude toward emigrant Israelis has eased amid broader social and cultural changes. It is estimated today that some half a million Israeli Jews live permanently in a different country. Approximately half of the emigres dwell in the United States; other major destinations include Canada, Australia, South Africa, France, and the UK. A relatively new country of settlement for Israelis is Germany. In view of the historical circumstances of the Holocaust and the extermination of six million Jews during World War II, those who leave Israel and choose Germany as their destination may be seen as having committed a "double offense".

A comprehensive study on the immigration of Israelis to Germany views this move as a four stage process: *background* i.e. ethnic extraction, satisfaction with life in Israel, reasons for emigration, and the reaction of family and friends to the decision to emigrate in general and to Germany in particular; *settlement*, including the number of immigrants, time of migration, city or area of settlement in Germany, and socio-demographic characteristics; *integration*, namely homeownership, German-language proficiency, and employment; and *identity* (German, Jewish, and Israeli). The presentation proposed here focuses on one of these aspects, a major one: proficiency in the German language. Following insights into the methodology of the survey, I begin by discussing the way the number of Israelis in Germany is estimated and continue by providing a descriptive analysis of the levels of proficiency in German and how it varies commensurate with duration of stay in the country. The core of the study assesses the determinants of German-language proficiency including immigration factors, reasons for immigration, and socio-demographic characteristics.

2. Methodology

This study is based on an Internet survey carried out between September 1, 2014 and August 30, 2015. The questionnaire comprised some seventy items. Respondents were recruited in various ways such as Facebook, Israeli media in Germany, and Israeli organizations in Germany. The survey yielded 603 native-born Israelis aged eighteen and above.

The dependent variable is the respondent's ability to speak German. Respondents were asked whether their fluency in German is "very good", "good", "mediocre", "weak", or "nil". The control variables were clustered into three major blocs. The first

bloc, composed of immigration factors, includes age at immigration, duration of stay in the country, German citizenship, and homeownership. The second bloc, reasons for migration, is comprised of professional and economic reasons associated with the origin country and the destination country. The third block is made up of demographic and human-capital characteristics including gender, education, marital status, employment status, and place of residence in Germany. Given the nature of the dependent variable which is composed of five possible values that are inconsistently spaced, I applied an ordinal logistic regression.

3. The Number of Israelis in Germany

To approximate the number of Israelis in Germany, several statistics need to be manipulated. Data on the Israeli side are scanty because Israelis typically do not register with their embassy and may not deregister in Israel to avoid bureaucratic hurdles if they ever return. They may also wish to remain anchored in Israel for psychological or for practical reasons such as being able to vote.

On the German side, the statistics are more reliable. Even so, a number of national and communal statistics need to be accumulated in order to determine the number of Israelis who are registered as Israeli or dual German Israeli citizens. Since Germany requires all residents to register these data are available for the country at large and for individual communities. When people register for the first time, German registry officers ask them about their citizenship and require them to provide proof of citizenship. They do so to ascertain the correct resident status and eligibility to vote because EU citizens can vote in specific elections. German citizens are asked this question when they apply for a first or a new passport. The purpose of this inquiry is to determine whether they remain eligible for German citizenship, given that German citizenship law allows dual citizenship only under specific circumstances. Be this as it may, by accumulating these data from German offices the number of Israeli citizens and Israeli/German dual citizens can be approximated. Not all German citizens who hold Israeli citizenship will admit to it, of course, and not all Israelis or German/Israelis who no longer reside in Germany will deregister. The German registration offices estimate that between 5 percent and 10 percent of all Israelis and German/Israelis are no longer residents.

Once the German data have been manipulated, international data from the embassies of EU countries in Israel concerning the number of renaturalizations of Israelis – or naturalizations in cases of past citizenships - need to be collected. The phenomenon of third-generation Israelis renaturalizing as citizens of East European EU countries increased in the late 1990s and was widely reported in the Israeli media. Once these data sets are collected, information on the total number of citizen residents of these countries in Germany and their emigration from and immigration to Germany must be collected, along with statistical data from these countries concerning the approximate number of Jews who hold or are eligible for citizenship.

By combining the various quantitative international, national, and local data sets, the number of Israelis whose permanent country of residence is Germany may be estimated at about 16,000 of whom around 11,000 live in Berlin.

4. Descriptive Overview

Approximately one-fifth of Israeli immigrants speak German very good, another one-quarter speak it good, and another one-quarter characterize their German as mediocre. The remaining respondents assessed their fluency in German as weak and 5 percent indicate that they do not speak the language at all. Immigrants' German-language

proficiency increases commensurate with their presence in the country. Thus, among those who have been in Germany for less than three years only one-fifth speak German very good or good; the proportion increases to 45 percent among those who have lived in the country for 4-5 years and to about two-thirds among those who have been there for 6-10 years. Among those who have lived in Germany for 11-20 years, up to 80 percent indicated that they speak the local language very good or good, and almost all of those who have been in Germany for twenty-one years or more report good or very good proficiency in the vernacular.

5. Multivariate Analysis

All three immigration variables have a statistically significant effect on German-language proficiency, suggesting that the ability to speak German improves as time in the country passes. Judging by the size of the coefficients, the improvement is gradual. Likewise, younger age at immigration increases the likelihood of speaking German well. The effect is especially significant for those who moved when they were less than twenty-five years old; immigration at ages 25-34 was significant only at $p < .10$. Israelis who hold German citizenship are 60 percent more likely to move from one level of German-language to the next level than counterparts who do not have German citizenship.

Israelis who emigrated due to the push factors of inability to progress professionally in Israel were likely to learn German more rapidly than those for whom the professional consideration was not important. Economic push and pull factors did not have a significant effect on German-language proficiency.

Among the socio-demographic characteristics only marital status had a statistically significant effect. This demonstrates the role of having a German spouse, or being single, in speedy acquisition of the host country's language. None of the other variables in this bloc - gender, education, employment status, and homeownership - figured importantly in learning German.

The independent variables were efficient in explaining variation in German-language proficiency. The explanatory power of the model, as indicated by the Nagelkerke measure, is 53 percent.

6. Final Remark

The data file of our survey on Israelis in Germany became ready for analyses only several weeks ago. Additional work, including the introduction of interaction terms, is needed and will be done in time for EPC2016. The findings will be discussed in reference to three major mechanisms of immigrant acquisition of destination-language proficiency: "exposure", "efficiency", and "economic incentives".