

The survival of Algerian Jewish Sign Language alongside Israeli Sign Language in Israel

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1. Introduction

We came across Algerian Jewish Sign Language quite accidentally. We were investigating the history of Israeli Sign Language, the dominant sign language in Israel, that emerged in the 1930s, with the formation of the Jewish Deaf community in Israel. One of the tasks we asked our interviewees to do was a simple picture-naming task; we wanted to establish the degree of uniformity in the vocabulary of first and second generation of ISL signers. When we interviewed Y.Z., a 65 year old man who immigrated to Israel from Algeria, he asked us: “Do you want me to use the signs I use with my friends, or the signs I used with my mother?” We were intrigued, and asked him what the difference was. He replied that with his friends he uses ISL, but with his mother he used “Algerian signing”. We asked him to sign both. While videotaping him, two things became obvious right away. First, the Algerian signs were very different from the ISL signs. Secondly, it was clear that Y.Z. remembered the Algerian signs very well; these signs were still very much part of his active linguistic repertoire. Every now and then he would comment: “There is no sign for that concept in Algerian signs.” Such comments gave further indication that Y.Z. was bilingual in two sign languages, that he kept the two languages apart, and used both.

We started looking for more information on the sign language that he referred to as Algerian sign. Who used it? Where did the language come from? Do people use it until today? Is it passed on to younger generations? As our investigation expanded, we discovered that the language is used among people who came from a specific region in Algeria, the M’zab region, specifically from the city of Ghardaia. These people use the language even today, though almost all of them use ISL as their dominant language. This language, which we termed Algerian Jewish Sign Language (AJSL), contributes to the linguistic mosaic of sign languages in Israel.

Israel is home to several sign languages. The dominant sign language is Israeli Sign Language (ISL), a language that emerged in the 1930s, with the formation of the Deaf community in Israel and the establishment of the first schools for the deaf. Apparently there were some small signing groups in some towns in the region before that, but little is known about them. The members of the first and second generations of the Deaf community came from different backgrounds, both in terms of their country of origin, and in terms of their language. A few were born in Israel, but the majority were immigrants who came to Israel from Europe (Germany, Austria, France, Hungary, Poland), and later on from North Africa and the Middle East. Some of these immigrants brought with them the sign language of their respective countries (e.g., German Sign Language, Austrian Sign Language, Moroccan Sign Language and others). Others had no signing, or had some kind of a homesign (gestural communication system developed and used among the members of one family, see e.g. Goldin-Meadow 2003). Deaf people started to form a social group that met regularly. In 1944 these social ties were formalised by establishing an association for the deaf in Israel, and creating deaf clubs around the country. Today the community numbers about 10,000 members. The language is quite unified across the country, though there is some regional lexical variation; i.e., some signs are typical of the Tel-Aviv area, while others may be used in Haifa, Be'er-Sheva or Jerusalem. The country of origin of the signers also may have some effect on the lexicon. Some signs are used within families of Moroccan, Algerian, Egyptian or German origin. This latter type of variation is more pervasive among older signers.

In addition to ISL, which developed in an 'urban' setting, there are also several village sign languages that developed in Arab, Bedouin and Druze villages in the country. The most studied of these is Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), a language that emerged about 75 years ago in the Al-Sayyid Bedouin community. The socio-linguistic characteristics of this community were studied and described by Kisch (this volume, 2000, 2007, 2008). Its linguistic structure is described in Sandler et. al (2005), Aronoff et. al (2008) and Padden et. al (2010) and references cited there. Another sign language developed in Kfar Qasem in central Israel. According to preliminary study (Kastner, Meir and Sandler in preparation), deaf children were born into this community in the early 1920, maybe even earlier, so that the sign language that emerged there is probably slightly older than ABSL. Other village sign languages exist in Ein Mahel and Arab El-Naim, a town and a village located in the northern part of Israel. All these sign languages are endangered. People in their 30s and younger attend schools for the deaf

or deaf classes in regular school in which the teachers use ISL signs. Moreover, recent activities of the Institute for the Advancement of Deaf People in Israel draw together deaf people from the different communities. In such gatherings, people are much more likely to use ISL. Therefore, the signing of children and young adults is heavily influenced by ISL. Yet all the people from the different communities we interviewed, even children, can make a distinction between ISL and the local sign language, and can use the local sign language if they are asked to.

In addition to the languages that emerged and developed in Israel, at least two languages were brought by immigrants and are still used in Israel today: Russian Sign Language (Yoel 2007) brought by immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, and Algerian Jewish Sign Language (AJSL), the topic of the present paper, brought by immigrants from the M'zab area in Algeria in the 1960s (see Lanesman and Meir, this volume for a socio-linguistic sketch of the language).

As pointed out above, Algerian immigrants were not the only ones to bring with them a sign language. Immigrants from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Egypt, Morocco and other countries told us that they used a different sign language in their country of origin.¹ Yet members of the Israeli Deaf community who immigrated to Israel from other countries report that they have forgotten the sign language which they had used in their country of origin. When we asked people to try and remember signs that they used in their country of origin or signs that they used within their families, people often insisted: "I don't remember. I forgot the language. Now I use only ISL." Some people could provide a few signs, but in general, they ceased to use their original sign language long ago. These people exhibit what can be regarded as *L1 attrition*, that is, the loss of first language by predominant use of the second language. This is very typical of immigrants: "The diminished role of L1 in use and function, exacerbated by separation from the L1 speaking community in the case of immigrants, is one of the significant soci-olinguistic variables in the advent and sustenance of first language attrition" (Seliger and Vago, 1991:4). There is not much literature about L1 attrition in sign languages (but see Yoel 2007 for an overview and an analysis of attrition of Russian Sign Language in Russian immigrants in Israel). Yet from our interviews and our acquaintance with the ISL community, it is evident that most members of the community² have forgotten their L1.

This situation stands in a marked contrast with what we found in AJSL users. Although they use ISL daily, even within their nuclear families, they remember their original language and use it to this very day. This special attribute of AJSL users led us to formulate our research question:

Which factors have contributed to the survival of AJSL in Israel for over two generations alongside ISL? In order to understand the socio-linguistic circumstances that led to the survival of AJSL in Israel, we conducted detailed interviews with nine AJSL users who live in Israel today. In this chapter we describe some of the main results of our research. We first provide a literature review on existing sources about AJSL and the community in which it developed (sections 2 and 3). The research methodology that was used in collecting and analyzing the interviews are detailed in section 4. The questionnaires were aimed to obtain information about the emergence and use of AJSL in Ghardaia, Algeria (described in section 5) and the social and linguistic circumstances of its use when the community immigrated to Israel and was confronted with another sign language, ISL (described in section 6). We suggest that the theoretical framework suitable for addressing our research question is that of Ethnolinguistic Vitality (EV, Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977), which provides the tools for identifying the factors contributing to the survival of AJSL in Israel in the past two generations, as well as explaining why the language is endangered in the present generation.

2. Jews in the M'zab

AJSL developed in several Jewish communities in the region of M'zab in the northern Sahara Desert region of Algeria. This region is isolated from the northern, more densely settled area. The Jewish population in this region lived in several villages and towns, but the main community was in Ghardaia, the largest city of the area.

Ghardaia was founded in the 11th century by Berbers belonging to the Ibadiyya sect, a schismatic Muslim sect who is characterised by a puritanic interpretation of the Koran (Briggs and Guède 1964:9, Nagel 2004:27). The Ibadites, who formed a state around the city of Tahert (often referred to also as Tiaret) in central Algeria, were forced to retreat to the south after their city was destroyed by the Fatimids in 909 CE. After more than a century, they settled in the M'zab area, and established a flourishing community there. According to M'zabite and Jewish oral traditions, four Jewish families of craftsmen from Djerba were brought to Ghardaia around the 14th century to work as blacksmiths and jewelers (Briggs and Guède 1964:10). These four families were later joined by Jews from Tamentit, a town situated on the western tip of the north-western Sahara, where a prosperous community developed. In 1447 the community was at the peak of its prosperity, but in 1492, when the Jews were persecuted by the Muslims, they fled and found refuge in the region of M'zab, settling in Ghardaia.

The Jews living in Ghardaia had several restrictions imposed on them (ibid., p.10). They had to dwell in their own quarter (the *mellah*) surrounded by a wall, they were not allowed to farm the land, they had to wear black clothes, were not allowed to ride horses or even donkeys, and had to go barefoot outside their own quarter. On the other hand, within their own quarters they were allowed to build a synagogue and perform all the religious and social ceremonies according to their belief and tradition. Marriage was strictly within the community. These conditions gave rise to a closed community. Members of the Jewish community maintained commercial and economical relations with their Muslim neighbours, but other than that, all their social and communal needs were met within their own community. The isolation of this community, however, was not complete. Although the neighbouring towns in the M'zab region did not have Jewish communities, we learned from our interviewees that Ghardaian Jews had some social contact with Jewish people in the towns of Laghouat and Aflou, and that a few Jewish families left Ghardaia and moved to Laghouat and Aflou, probably in search of better sources for livelihood (Joseph Chetrit, p.c. 2012).

Briggs & Guède (1964) bring some demographic data concerning the Jewish community in Ghardaia, drawn from official archives in the office of the District Commissioner of the M'zab. According to these data, the Jewish community there never exceeded 2,500 people, and usually the numbers were much smaller than that. In 1954, the community numbered 1,091 members. This social isolation, which lasted for at least 500 years, gave rise to a community whose members had several distinct physical characteristics, among them elongated heads, slight tendency towards blond or red hair, and deafness. They also developed some special customs and practices (such as food taboos unrelated to Kosher restrictions. According to these taboos, blind people were prohibited from eating the eyes of a lamb, a lame person was not supposed to eat meat from the leg or foot, and deaf people could not eat tongue, ibid., pp. 33–34), though whether or not these customs are unique to this community or are at least partly shared by other Algerian and North African Jewish communities is a matter of controversy (see e.g. Jacobs 1967).

3. Deafness in the Jewish community of Ghardaia

Briggs and Guède's (1964) monograph constitutes a comprehensive description of the lives, customs and traditions of the Jewish community in Ghardaia in the 1950s–1960s, until its last days (in 1962), when the entire community left Algeria and immigrated to Israel and France. In the manuscript there

are very few mentions of deafness in the community. Yet they constitute the only written source about deafness in the Jewish Ghardaia community, and should therefore be carefully studied, as they provide an initial basis towards our understanding of the life of deaf people in this community.

Briggs and Guède write:

“Inbreeding was doubtless responsible, however, for the relatively high proportion of deaf-mutes among the Jews of Ghardaia, which ran roughly in the neighborhood of 2.5 percent. Luckily for them they were at no great disadvantage in the community, however, for they were treated just like everybody else. Nearly everyone had at least one deaf-mute among his close relatives or neighbor, and so everyone is fluent in sign language. Although these people were completely deaf, they were mute only to the extent that they could not reproduce articulate sounds, words that is. Nevertheless, they were extremely noisy. By groaning, grunting, squealing and yelling at the tops of their voices, they called attention to themselves and the ideas which they tried to express by gestures and grimaces. In this way they managed to participate in social activity which they could not enter into as we do by simple conversation. Their efforts in this respect were so successful, however, that they had about as rich a social life as anyone; they had little or no difficulty in finding normal wives or husbands and, in general, seemed very well adjusted. Social gatherings were never so gay and lively as when two or more deaf-mutes were present, for they loved to laugh and delight in acting out their jokes.” (ibid., 12).

This short description provides some important pieces of information. The first is the demographic data, namely that deaf people constituted 2.5% of the population in the community. Second, it seems that deafness ran in several families and was not confined to one family, since many people were in touch with deaf individuals. The observation that “everyone is fluent in sign language” is, of course, extremely important. It asserts that there was a sign language in use in this community, and that its use was widespread enough that even outsiders (such as Briggs and Guède) noticed it. It is not clear what is the basis for their observation that deaf people were fully integrated into the community (that is, whether these were their own impressions or whether they interviewed people concerning this issue), but their description of deaf people in social gatherings clearly show that deaf people took part in the social life of the community, and were able to convey important and intricate information (such as jokes). The fact that deaf people were married, usually to hearing people, is also an important fact indicating that they were socially active in this community.

Since we found no other written sources about deaf people and their language in the Jewish community of Ghardaia, it became clear that in

order to get more information about the language we would have to use oral histories, that is, to rely on interviews with members of the community. In the following section, we describe our methodology.

4. Methodology

We interviewed nine adults, between the ages of 50 and 85. Seven out of nine participants are deaf, and two are hearing adults who were born to deaf parents. Six of the subjects are women (5 deaf and one hearing) and three men (two deaf and one hearing). Eight were born in Algeria and one was born in Israel. The details of the subjects can be seen in Table 1.

The most important factor in choosing the interviewees was that they are fluent in AJSL and still use it extensively. This is not trivial, since most Algerians in Israel today are bilingual, using ISL to communicate with deaf people not of Algerian origin, and using AJSL only among family members and people from the AJSL community. Therefore it was important to choose interviewees that use the language today with at least several close acquaintances or family members.

We decided to include hearing people in the study, because hearing people are an integral part of the community that uses AJSL, as is evident from the description in Briggs and Guède above, and as we learned from our interviews. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the details and social intricacies of the community and the relationship between deaf and hearing, it is important to interview the hearing members alongside the deaf members of the community.

Three types of data were collected: personal details, life histories and lexical items from the AJSL lexicon. Only the first two are relevant for the present chapter, so we do not expand here on vocabulary elicitation. Personal details were collected by using questionnaires (see Appendix), which included questions about the Jewish community in Ghardaia, the conditions of the deaf in the Jewish community, and the ways of communication between hearing and deaf people in the community. Other questions focused on the immigration to Israel, life in Israel and the use of AJSL in Israel. The questions were presented to the subjects in ISL (by the first author, a fluent ISL signer), and they replied in the same language, as all interviewees are fluent in ISL.

Participants were also asked to share and discuss their life stories with another AJSL signer. These narrations were conducted in AJSL, and their purpose was to enrich our understanding of the socio-linguistic history

of the community, as well as to videotape AJSL conversations. Both the questionnaires and the conversations were video-taped (with the consent of the participants), and transferred to a digital format. The conversations were then edited using a split screen format. This format enables the viewer to see both subjects in full view and to simultaneously follow both sides of the conversation.

The data was then coded and analysed as follows. Each interviewee's responses to the questionnaire were summarised in writing, creating personal profiles containing personal details with relevance to the research. The life stories were transcribed and translated to Hebrew. They were then divided into short segments, each related to a specific topic. These topics were assembled to a few general themes that directly bear on the research question, namely the survival of AJSL in Israel alongside ISL. The following sections present our findings concerning the language and its community in both locales – Ghardaia and Israel.

Table 1. Personal details of the interviewees

No. and Initials of subject	Gender	Deaf/hearing	Country of birth	Year of birth	Other deaf family members
1. Y.Z.	Male	Deaf	Ghardaia, Algeria	1940	Two sons, wife, father, four brothers, more deaf relatives
2. M.G.	Female	Deaf	Ghardaia, Algeria	1946	Brother, father, more relatives (sister of 9.Y.S.)
3. M.S.	Female	Deaf	Aflou, Algeria	1936	Two sisters, brother, husband, three children
4. L.P.	Female	Deaf	Ghardaia, Algeria	1955	Three sisters, one brother, father, more relatives (sister of 5.E.S.)
5. E.S.	Female	Deaf	Ghardaia, Algeria	1953	Three sisters, one brother, father, more relatives (sister of 4.L.P.)

6. Z.M.	Female	Deaf	Israel	1957	Grandmother, more relatives (daughter of 7.M.A.)
7. M.A.	Male	Hearing	Ghardaia, Algeria	1923	Mother, daughter, two uncles, more relatives (father of 6.Z.M.)
8. S.S.	Female	Hearing	Ghardaia, Algeria	1924	Husband, sister, brother, four children, more relatives (mother of 5.E.S. and 4.L.P.)
9. Y.S.	Male	Deaf	Ghardaia, Algeria	1943	Father, sister, more relatives (brother of 2.M.G.)

5. Deafness and sign language in Ghardaia

5.1. The status of deaf people in the community

Deafness in this community ran in certain families. All our interviewees had other deaf members in their families: E.S. and L.P. (females, age 55 and 53 respectively) have a deaf father and a hearing mother. They also have two other deaf sisters, one deaf brother, and one hearing sister. Y.Z. (male, 65) had a deaf father and a hearing mother. He has three deaf brothers and one hearing sister. M.S. (female, 70) has three deaf siblings and three deaf children, two daughters and one son. M.G. (female, 60) has a deaf father and hearing mother, as well as one deaf brother. Z.M. (female, 50) says: “My paternal grandmother was deaf. Part of my family on both sides is deaf. Part of my family is deaf... In the second and third generations there are many deaf people.”

As can be seen, deaf people, both women and men, were married. In Algeria, they were always married to hearing spouses. It is not clear whether there was a restriction on deaf-deaf marriage or that it just never happened. This marriage pattern might indicate that deaf people were considered in need of assistance of a hearing spouse in everyday life. Alternatively, it could also indicate that ‘hearing/deafness’ status was not an important factor in spouse choice. Our participants did not give a specific reason for this marriage pattern. One participant, M.G., mentioned that what was important

was getting married; whether the spouse was hearing or deaf was less important. This marriage pattern is different from that of ‘urban’ signing communities, where deaf-deaf marriage is the norm. In other village communities, the pattern varies. On Martha’s vineyard, Groce (1985) reports that deaf people married both deaf and hearing spouses. In Desa Kolok, Marsaja (2008:60) mentions that of the 407 families in the village, there are 13 deaf couples, and two deaf-hearing couples. In the Al-Sayyid community, deaf people used to marry hearing spouses, as in the Ghardaia community, though recently there have been a few deaf-deaf marriages. In Adamarobe, deaf people mostly marry other deaf people, while hearing marry hearing. The Ghana government outlawed marriage between two deaf people, in an attempt to decrease the incidence of deafness. Ironically, most deaf children are born into families with two hearing parents. Deaf women seem to have no trouble getting married, especially in cases of polygamy, but deaf men often do not marry (Nyst, 2007:28).

The social and economical status of the deaf in the community varied as with the hearing people within the community. Some were prosperous and of high status, while others were poor. E.S. and L.P. told us that their father was rich, had a big house, and married 5 wives. His financial situation was such that he donated food to poor families. Y.Z. (male, 65), on the other hand, reports that his family was poor and had a hard life.

An important difference between deaf and hearing boys concerned education and literacy. Deaf boys did not attend school, as there were no special educational settings for deaf students. Consequently, all deaf men were monolinguals in AJSL and illiterate (as is not unusual situation in other village communities; see e.g., Marsaja 2008:77 for a similar situation in Desa Kolok), which was a constant source for anguish and frustration. The older deaf boys usually worked and helped with the family’s livelihood, while younger boys just stayed at home: “In Algeria I played with a rope and a football and that was all. It bored me terribly. There was no deaf school. It was boring and I sat outside and wandered around all the time, playing marbles” (Y.Z.). Most girls, both deaf and hearing, did not attend school, but rather stayed at home and helped their mothers with the housekeeping. In that respect, then, hearing and deaf girls were alike.

5.2. The sign language that developed in the community, AJSL

As we can learn from the description in Briggs and Guède, in the 1950s there was a sign language in the community, used by both deaf and hearing

members. We do not know when this language emerged and whether it was influenced by other sign languages. One of our interviewees, M.A., a man 84 years of age, told us that his grandmother was deaf. E.S. and L.P. had a deaf father, who died in 1995, at the age of 96. We can deduce, then, that deafness in the community runs at least for five generations, some 110 years ago. Although it is impossible to give an exact estimation of the age of the language, it is clear that it was passed down for at least three generations, as six of our interviewees had deaf parents and one had a deaf grandmother. Importantly, both deaf and hearing members were involved in the process of acquiring and transmitting the language. As for possible contacts with other sign languages and signing systems, since deaf children did not go to school, the educational system could not have been the source for the sign language. It is possible that there were deaf in the Muslim population of Ghardaia, but we have found no information whatsoever about that. To the best of our knowledge, there are no dictionaries or any other documentation of Algerian Sign Language, so it is impossible to establish any relationship (or the lack of it) between the two languages.³ The only relevant piece of information regarding possible influence from a sign language used by Algerian Muslims was provided by U.B, a deaf man, 55 years old, who immigrated to Israel from Morocco. U.B. has a Muslim friend from Algeria, and he also has friends who use AJSL. He says the signs used by his Muslim friend are different from those of his friends who are AJSL signers.

Whatever the source of the language might be, it is clear that it served as a main means of communication in families with deaf members, as evidenced in the following vivid description: E.S. (female, deaf, 55):

“My mother signs AJSL to this day...Every time my aunt and my mother would talk about different issues and gossip, I would cry. After they would eat and my aunt would go home, my mother would call me over and say: ‘Let me tell you about all the different things that your aunt told me - about her quarrel with her husband, and about how her husband refused to give her money’. It was good for me to hear these things from my mother, because we are very close and she tells me everything. This connection with my mother is very important to me. My mother shares with me everything from her heart.”

L.P. (female, 60) points out that “The whole family from Ghardaia knows AJSL excellently and the hearing have full command over AJSL, exactly like the deaf.”

The language was not confined to the family unit. L. P. reports that “In my neighbourhood in Ghardaia we had Arab neighbours and we always spoke in AJSL.⁴ They knew our language. But outside the village the situation was absolutely different, not the same. Only the neighbours know and recognise

that this is local AJSL... my uncle knows AJSL very well.” While this description raises the possibility of influence from the signing of deaf Muslims, we don’t have any positive evidence for that. As pointed out above, we haven’t been able to find any information about Algerian Sign Language, apart from the fact the language used by the Algerian Deaf community today is related to French Sign Language. It is not clear, though, whether the language in use today is related to any signing systems that were used by deaf people in the M’zab area during the first half of the 20th century.

We do know, however, that there were deaf individuals in two other towns in the area: Laghouat and Aflou. Laghouat is 280 km. north of Ghardaia, and Aflou is 80 km. north-east of Laghouat. We interviewed two people from Aflou and one from Laghouat. All three people have other deaf members in their families, and all three are AJSL users. Apparently, people from the three towns visited each other, and as mentioned above, we learnt that some families from Ghardaia moved to these towns, probably in search of better livelihood. It may well be that some of these families had deaf members, but we do not have any information about that as yet.

Deaf-born children acquired AJSL from their deaf family members. When deaf children were born to hearing families, they acquired the language from deaf adults in the vicinity - extended family members, neighbours or friends, or hearing family members who knew how to communicate in sign language. Hearing people who married deaf people acquired the language from their spouses if they did not know it previous to marriage.

S.S., a hearing woman (age 80) who married a deaf man, describes how she learned to sign: “I can hear and I speak and understand the language well. Once I did not know how to use AJSL and now I know...my husband was deaf. He taught me AJSL and I began to learn and grasp the signs slowly. I did not work outside the home. I was only at home...”

It is interesting that in this signing community, some deaf members acquired AJSL not from older deaf language models, but from fluent hearing signers, a situation very different from urban signing communities in which deaf children often acquire the language from deaf peers. Although Y.Z.’s mother was hearing, she learned AJSL to communicate with her deaf children, so they acquired it naturally from her as well as from other community members. Z.M., who is deaf, was not exposed to AJSL at home. She acquired the language from interactions with Y.Z.’s (hearing) mother: “In the beginning I looked at Y.Z. and his brothers but I did not understand one word of AJSL. Y.Z.’s mother loved me very much. I looked at how she signed and I learnt the sign language from her. Now our communication is good.” These instances illustrate that hearing people played an important role along with deaf members of the Ghar-

daia Jewish community in the acquisition and transmission of this language. Signing hearing people in Ghardaia, then, were multilinguals; they used AJSL with the deaf members of the community, and they used at least one spoken language, the local Arabic dialect. Men also studied Hebrew as the language of prayer and religious rites, and French as the language of commerce. The deaf people in the community were monolingual in AJSL.

In summary, the picture that emerges is that there was no ‘deaf community’ per se in Ghardaia; rather, the deaf were part of the entire community. This is characteristic of many villages where a sign language developed (see Meir et al 2010 and references there). The deaf people living in Ghardaia were integrated in the community in many ways. Communication was accessible, they held ordinary jobs, were married to hearing spouses, and enjoyed an economical situation that was similar to their hearing counterparts. Their life was very similar to the lives of the hearing members of the community. However, there are two respects in which deaf people differed from hearing people, as pointed out above. The first is education: deaf boys did not attend schools while hearing boys did. Thus, the critical skills of reading and writing were denied them, damaging their ability to participate in Torah reading and later to accommodate to life in Israel. Second, deaf people always married hearing spouses, whereas hearing people were not restricted in their choice of spouse. These socio-linguistic characteristics changed drastically when the community emigrated from Algeria.

6. The use of AJSL in Israel

Between the years 1943 and 1962 the entire Jewish community left Ghardaia and immigrated, mainly to Israel and to France. The first wave of immigration was between 1943–1950. Due to growing tension between Berbers, Muslims and Jews in the M’zab area and in Algeria in general, 500–600 Jews immigrated to Israel and France (Briggs and Guède, 1964). In 1950–1951 the tensions in Algeria diminished to some extent and the Jews stopped leaving Algeria. Some immigrants who were unsatisfied with life in Israel returned to the M’zab region at that time (from the archives of Beit HaTfutsot #73772).

In the 1950s, a second wave immigration began, motivated both by the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and by the Algerian War of Independence with France. The Jews of the region were regarded as French allies, and as such they felt increasingly unsafe in their homes and began to leave, again. The last wave of immigration from Algeria to Israel was in 1962. No Jews remained in Algeria today.

The emigration from Algeria changed the life of the community members in every aspect of life. First and foremost, the community itself disintegrated. Part of the community immigrated to France while the other part moved to Israel. According to Nagel (2004), the majority of the wealthier Jews moved to France, while less affluent members of the community moved to Israel. Those who moved to Israel settled in different places in the country. Thus, members of the Ghardaia community no longer shared a physical location, and consequently the close-knit relationships between the community members collapsed.

Second, the immigrants had to adjust to many changes, among them the fact that the Jewish society in Israel was, by and large, secular, while the Ghardaian immigrants were observant Jews. They had to learn a new language, Hebrew, to find housing and to find jobs. Many families had had to sell all their property in order to raise the money for the trip to Israel, and came to Israel penniless. All of our interviewees describe their first years in Israel as years of poverty and hardships.

For the deaf members of the community, the immigration entailed further changes, the two most significant were the educational system for deaf children and the encounter with the emerging Deaf community in Israel, and its language, Israeli Sign Language (ISL). The educational system for the deaf in the 1950s and early 1960s consisted of several schools, nursery schools and special classes for the deaf (in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beer Sheva and Nazareth Illit, Plaut 2007). The schools in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were boarding schools with dormitories. There was also a vocational rehabilitation center in Tel-Aviv. The Ghardaian deaf immigrants met, for the first time in their lives, deaf people who went to school and could read and write. Though the immigrants joined the deaf schools in Israel, those who were already in their teens found the studies in school very frustrating; they were not accustomed to the discipline and learning habits required in school. Moreover, they had to learn a new spoken language, Hebrew. As a result many of them left school after a few years and did not attain an adequate level of literacy. A vivid description of the experience was narrated by Y.Z.:

“My friends and I attended Niv, the school for the deaf. I began to learn how to go to school. I slowly understood how to find my way into school. I sat quietly with a group of new immigrants. I am from Algeria, one immigrant was from Egypt and two were from Romania. All of us came here. The class consisted of a mixed audience. I stayed in the class and studied. My mother made an effort for me to study at the school for the deaf. I studied with four other friends in my class. I was a new immigrant and studied but I did not fully understand how to write on the blackboard A-B-C-D...”

Upon entering the educational system, the new immigrants encountered another sign language, ISL. Though the schools for the deaf adhered to an oral approach, the children used sign language among themselves (Meir and Sandler 2008). ISL, although a very young language at the time (about 20–30 years old), served as the common sign language for deaf people who came from different countries and different backgrounds.

The second major factor influencing and changing the lives of deaf immigrants from Ghardaia was the Deaf community in Israel. As mentioned in the introduction, the Deaf community in Israel developed in the late 1930s. Its members came from different backgrounds, both in terms of their country of origin, and in terms of their language. A few were born in Israel, and some of them went to the school for the deaf in Jerusalem that was founded in 1932, but the majority were immigrants who came to Israel from Europe (Germany, Austria, France, Hungary, Poland), and later on from North Africa and the Middle East. Some of these immigrants brought with them the sign language of their respective communities. Others had no signing, or used some kind of home sign.⁵ These deaf individuals started looking for other deaf, and formed small social groups that began to meet on a regular basis, creating the founding group of the Deaf community in the country. This burgeoning group attracted more deaf people. In 1943 the temporary committee of the association was set up and the following year the Association of the Deaf was officially founded. The association building that was built by 1958 was used as place for social gatherings of the deaf, and as a place where group activities and trade courses were provided.

The meetings with other deaf people eventually drew the immigrants from Algeria to the Deaf clubs. This was a very big change in their life style. In Ghardaia (as in other towns of North Africa at the time) there were no Deaf clubs. The seminal social unit was the family. Going to a social gathering in a club was something very new, and at times threatening, to people coming from a very conservative community. This was especially true of young girls. Both M.S. and E.S. recount that it was very difficult to persuade their fathers to let them go to the club. In the case of E.S., it was only after a respectable deaf man from the Israeli community made a promise to look after her that her father granted her the permission to go to the club.

At the Deaf club, the young Algerian immigrants met educated deaf people. The difference between the educated and non-educated members of the community was widely felt those days:

“One member, who had arrived at the time of the establishment of the state and had learned Hebrew well, tells how occasionally, while recounting a story, he would find himself stumped over the lack of a sign and would

have to use speech. In such cases, only the educated could understand. To get the meaning across to the others who could not lipread, it was necessary to compose whole stories, and create a situation in which the meaning would be brought home.” (J. Shunari 1969;4, in Meir and Sandler 2008;195)

The ISL community members came from many different countries in Europe, Africa, and Asia, but the AJSL users nevertheless stood out as a distinct group. The AJSL signers shared their place of origin, a sign language, the North African Jewish tradition and ways of life, and they were illiterate. These characteristics singled them out, and, according to their own recollections and feelings, not favourably. Z.M. says:

“It is said that people of Algerian origin are dangerous. It is said that we are vengeful and stubborn, but this is not true. I prefer to use AJSL in private conversations on the side and not in front of everybody, so that the other deaf people don’t get offended or say that we are dangerous. I would like to explain to them about Algeria very much, although people have classified the Algerians in a negative way. Now I speak the sign language naturally. I am not ashamed of my sign language. Everyone has their own natural language.”

Within the Deaf community, it seems that the most salient characteristic of this group was their language, AJSL. Since they felt stigmatised, and they felt that their language was “responsible” for singling them out, they tried to avoid using it when ISL signers were around, as is evidenced in Z.M.’s quote above. E.S. also notes that “When speaking in AJSL, we speak in secret. The other deaf people looked and asked what it is: ‘Is the AJSL secretive?’ I told them that this is just the way it is. This is the Algerian Sign Language.”⁶ Thus, AJSL users who associated with other deaf people became bilingual in sign: they used ISL to communicate with members of the Deaf community, and kept AJSL for private, family settings. Crucially, AJSL remained the only means of communication with their hearing family members: E.S.: “I communicate only in ISL with friends at all times, but when I talk to my mother, I immediately switch to AJSL. I talk with my deaf sister in ISL but with my mother mainly in AJSL and sometimes in ISL. Every Saturday the whole family comes to visit my mother. There are two hearing brothers, one hearing sister, and five deaf brothers and sisters, and we all communicate in AJSL with a few word signs in ISL – a mixture of ISL and AJSL.” The choice between using AJSL or ISL became an ‘*act of identity*’ in the sense of Le Page & Tabouret-Keller (1985). By choosing to use ISL in the public sphere, AJSL users signalled their identity as members of the Israeli Deaf community. Their Ghardaian identity, displayed by the use of AJSL, was confined to the family setting.

In spite of the strong sense of inferiority and stigmatization, deaf Algerian individuals became integrated into the Deaf community, and most of them married deaf spouses of non-Algerian origin. Of our 7 deaf interviewees, only two married a deaf Algerian spouse.⁷ This marriage pattern resulted in a shift towards ISL within the nuclear family, as the non-Algerian spouses usually did not learn AJSL. The children born to these families grew up with ISL, and indeed their competence in AJSL is very weak: L.P.: “My eldest son knows quite enough AJSL but my other sons can’t communicate in the language.” E.S.: “I used to speak with my sisters in AJSL at all times, but today it is different because of my children (who only know ISL). Sometimes, depending when, we still speak in AJSL.” Both Y.Z. and M.S. have deaf children, but they cannot sign or understand AJSL.

It seems, then, that the immigration to Israel entailed drastic changes in the social structure of the community and consequently in their patterns of language use. The community disintegrated, and deaf people found themselves drawn to social networks that were based on deafness rather than on family ties. This shift also brought about a change in language use. Deaf Ghardaïans were exposed to ISL, and became bi-lingual in sign. Because of the stigma associated with AJSL, it disappeared from the public sphere and was restricted to communicating with family members, especially hearing family members, who remained monolingual in sign as they were not exposed to ISL.

The integration with the Israeli Deaf community brought about changes in marriage patterns: AJSL users married members of the Deaf community, usually of non-Algerian origin. Therefore, AJSL is not used in the new families that were established in Israel, and the language is not passed on to the younger generation. According to various scales of language endangerment, a language that is not passed down to a younger generation is moribund (Krauss 2001) or dying (Hudson and McConvell 1984, Fishman 1991). It seems then, that if nothing drastic happens, AJSL will disappear with the current generation of users. However, importantly, in the past few years AJSL users feel that they would like to use the language more often. This might be the result of two processes: first, the feeling of stigmatization has waned over the years as AJSL users became part of the Deaf community, and many of them who grew up in Israel from an early age went to school, acquired literacy, and hold jobs. Second, they may also feel that the language is endangered, and that measures should be taken to preserve it and the heritage that it represents. As Z.M. points out: “The history and geography of Algeria is very interesting. In the future our heritage will disappear, AJSL will disappear and it is a shame. Very few people speak in AJSL.”

7. The survival of AJSL in Israel alongside ISL: what makes AJSL different?

As we mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, most of the deaf immigrants who came to Israel and brought with them another sign language or signing system did not maintain their original sign language, and switched to use ISL. As the people themselves testify in our interviews with them, they do not remember the lexicon of their original language. This could be regarded as a case of *L1 attrition*, the decline in native language proficiency among immigrants (see inter alia Köpke et al 2007 and references there). In case of the Israeli Deaf community, the decline was rather final, as the immigrants stopped using their L1, and eventually forgot it. Among these immigrants, AJSL users stand apart; they did not forget their L1. Though most of them use ISL as their main language of communication in everyday life, they still remember AJSL and can hold a conversation in it. AJSL seems to be much more durable, as it continued to exist in Israel alongside ISL for about 50 years (however, its vitality is diminishing now, as we point out at the end of this section). What may explain it?

The notion of *Ethnolinguistic Vitality* (EV) seems relevant here; AJSL exhibits much more EV than other L1 sign languages. This notion was first introduced by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977), when trying to characterise ethnolinguistic groups in terms of their ability to maintain distinctive collective identity in intergroup settings. They define EV as “that which makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations” (p.306). They propose that there is a correlation between social and psychological factors and linguistic behaviour when ethnic groups come into contact. Dimensions such as institutional support, control over resources, social status, demographic strength (related to sheer numbers of ethnolinguistic group members as well as to their distribution throughout a particular territory) all contribute to the likelihood of an ethnolinguistic group to survive as a distinct group in intergroup settings.

The notion of EV has received a considerable amount of attention over the years (see e.g. the recent volume of *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 2011, volume 32;2 that was devoted to EV). However, it has hardly been applied to sign languages. The only analysis of the vitality of a signed community based on the notion of EV is Judith Yoel’s (2007) analysis of L1 attrition in Russian deaf immigrants in Israel. Based on a model of EV developed by Allard and Landry (1986, 1992), Yoel suggests that the attrition of Russian Sign Language in Russian deaf immigrants in Israel (evidenced by their difficulties in two naming tasks) is related to

various sociological, sociopsychological and psychological factors. For example, in the Former Soviet Union (FSU), residential schools served as central locations for groups of deaf people, providing them with social clubs, sports clubs and job opportunities. Such locations played an important role in creating group identity and ample opportunities for daily communication. In Israel, deaf immigrants from FSU were dispersed across the country, sometimes in peripheral areas with very few other deaf people. This resulted in a drastic weakening of their demographic and economic status, lack of opportunities to interact with other Russian deaf immigrants and a decrease in the status of their language and identity as a group. All these contribute to the fact that their L1, RSL, is losing grounds to the dominant sign language in the country, ISL.

We would like to apply the notion of EV to analyse the socio-linguistic situation of AJSL users in Israel in order to explain its relative vitality to other L1 sign languages. We adopt a model developed by Landweer (2000) for analyzing potential viability of languages of Papua New Guinea. She suggests eight factors which are indicative of the direction a speech community takes with respect to the maintenance of or shift from its traditional language. We present these factors and explore whether and how they can be implemented with respect to AJSL.

The first factor is related to the *relative position on the urban-rural continuum*: the more rural the community is, the less it is likely to be in contact with other languages, and therefore the vitality of its language is stronger. Regarding AJSL, the language arose in an urban setting, within the city of Ghardaia. Yet within this urban setting, the community was isolated from the surrounding Muslim community. According to our interviews, Jewish deaf individuals did not have regular contact with other deaf people, and their language developed and thrived as it was not threatened by contact with another sign language. This might suggest that the relevant factor is the degree of social isolation rather than the geographic isolation or remoteness, although more information about other sign languages in the area is needed to support this claim.

In Israel, the situation has changed drastically. The Ghardaian community disintegrated, and most of the deaf members came into contact with deaf people using another sign language, ISL, and became sign-bilingual. It could be expected that AJSL would lose ground to ISL. However, this process is much slower than could have been expected, as many AJSL signers still use the language today.

A second factor has to do with *population and group dynamics*: there should be a critical mass of fluent users of a language for it to survive,

though the exact numbers may vary in different situations. Regarding AJSL, it is difficult to assess the number of people who use it. As documented by Briggs and Guède, in 1960 there were 25 deaf people in the community. Yet the number of AJSL users was higher than that, since many hearing family members used the language as well. We do not know how many of the deaf immigrated to Israel. Furthermore, we have no demographic statistics regarding the number of deaf people of Algerian origin in Israel, nor do we know how many hearing people use the language. But the role of the hearing people in expanding the number of AJSL users is critical. Deaf immigrants from other countries did not have a substantial number of hearing people as part of their linguistic community.

The hearing members of the AJSL community played additional roles in other factors as well. Landweer (2000) refers to *frequency and type of code-switching*: frequent individual unbounded code-switching is regarded as the most threatening form of bilingualism to the vitality of a language, whereas a community with a majority of members with monolingual allegiance is the least threatened. The hearing AJSL signers remained monolingual in sign even in Israel.⁸ The deaf AJSL users met other deaf people and another sign language when they immigrated, and therefore many of them became bilingual, and some of them use ISL in many more communication domains than their use of AJSL. But the hearing family members did not go to Deaf clubs and were not exposed to ISL. They remained (sign) monolingual in AJSL. Therefore, deaf AJSL users *had* to continue to use AJSL with the hearing family members. There was no other way for them to continue the rich and natural inter-family communication they were used to in Ghardaia.

Another important factor in determining the ethnovitality of a language has to do with *domains in which the language is used*: languages that are used for communication in more domains in life (cultural events, social events, home, education) are stronger than languages used in fewer domains. AJSL is used in one domain that other sign languages brought by immigrants were not used in: the nuclear and extended family. Deaf people from other countries often remark that they did not use sign language with the hearing members of their families – parents, siblings, aunts and uncles etc. They used sign language to communicate with other deaf people, mainly in social gatherings in the Deaf club. These social circumstances offered intensive language contact between the languages brought by immigrants of different countries. The immigrants did not have a domain where they could or should have used their L1. For AJSL signers, the nuclear and extended family provided such a domain, thus increasing the vitality of the language. In addition, it also enriched the social networking of AJSL users, since the

members of this language community were related to each other not only by social acquaintance but also by family ties, and many of them knew each other, maintaining closed-knit social networks (cf. Milroy 1980).

AJSL does not fare so well on the following two indicators: (a) *language prestige*: a language that has prestige among other languages in the region or country has greater potential for use in the foreseeable future; and (b) *access to a stable and acceptable economic base*: a language that benefits its users economically has greater potential for survival.

AJSL was not prestigious, and it did not have any economical advantages. As indicated by the quotes in section 6, deaf Algerian immigrants were uneducated, and felt inferior to other members of the Deaf community in Israel. We can infer from their reports that they felt that other deaf people looked down on them, so much so that they were hesitant to use their language in the presence of other deaf people. As for economic benefits, sign languages in general do not provide strong economic basis for their users, as most professions require the knowledge of the ambient spoken language. But when compared to other sign languages in Israel, any resources available in sign, such as vocational courses and use in the educational system, are provided solely in ISL.

Internal and/or external recognition of the language community as a separate entity within the larger community also contributes to the strength of the language. AJSL offers an interesting perspective on this issue. It is clear that AJSL users were marked as a distinct group within the Deaf community in Israel, characterised both by their ethnic origin and by their language. However, this group identity was not perceived as a positive feature. The group and its language were looked down upon. Nevertheless, despite its negative connotation, the language seems to have served as a marker of group identity, possibly supporting the group's sense of identity and promoting the continuous use of the language. The lesson to be learnt from AJSL is that a language need not be perceived as a positive characteristic of a community in order to function as a supporting factor in reinforcing ethnolinguistic vitality.

By examining AJSL within the framework of EV, we gain unique insights into the factors involved in the endangerment and maintenance of sign languages. It seems that there are two main factors that contributed to the vitality of AJSL as L1 relative to other L1 sign languages among deaf immigrants to Israel. The first is that the language served as the main means for communication within the family unit. This had several implications. For one, the AJSL community was larger than the number of deaf people in the community. Hearing signers significantly increased the number of people using the language. Second, AJSL continued to be a useful and central

means of communication even after the Ghardaia community disintegrated, since the family continued to serve as a vital social unit in the new country. Third, the hearing AJSL users remained sign-monolingual. Those community members who became bilingual (the deaf signers who became part of the Deaf community in Israel) *had* to use their L1 with their hearing family members. Therefore, the linguistic community had enough monolinguals in its new surroundings for the language to survive the contact with the dominant sign language, ISL. This analysis, then, highlights the crucial role that the hearing signers played in preserving the language's vitality.

Immigrants from other countries were in a different socio-linguistic situation. In Europe, deaf children were often sent to boarding schools (for example, there was a famous school for the deaf in WIssensee, Berlin; see Biesold 1993). From interviews with people who grew up in Europe (see endnote 1), we learn that they used sign language with their deaf peers, not with their hearing family members. In Israel they met with deaf people from different countries, and hence their L1 could no longer serve as a means for communication, and therefore they stopped using it. People who immigrated to Israel from North African countries such as Morocco and Egypt often had deaf siblings, with whom they presumably communicated in sign. It might also be the case that some of the hearing family members used signing to some degree to communicate with their deaf family members. But from what little we know about these signing systems, they seemed to be more like extended homesign systems, that is, a communication system that emerges within a family with deaf members, and is restricted to that family. We know of no community who used a sign language except for the Ghardaia-M'zab community. Therefore people from these other countries had very few individuals to communicate with in sign, and once they became part of the Deaf community in Israel, they acquired and switched to ISL.

The second factor that contributed to the relative vitality of AJSL is that it served as a characteristic of a group, and therefore strengthened the feelings of group identity among its members. As pointed out above, interestingly, this characteristic was not perceived as positive or prestigious, yet it helped in strengthening bonds within community members. AJSL was something they "did" when they were on their own, something they did not wish to share with others.

AJSL managed to survive in Israel for over 50 years in close co-existence with ISL, despite not being prestigious or of economic benefit. Our study provides unique insights into the endangerment of sign languages. It indicates that the family and the community play an important role in contributing to the vitality of the language. Moreover, it shows that hearing signers

can be a major factor in the vitality of a sign language. It also shows that in-group cohesion can be maintained even when the language they use is not prestigious.

With these understandings in mind, we can turn from the past and present to the future: What is awaiting for AJSL in the near future? Unfortunately, the future does not seem to hold great promise to AJSL, because the factors that contributed to its survival are diminishing. There are less and less hearing family members who still use AJSL. The majority of hearing family members who were born and grew up in Israel adapted to the general attitude of hearing people towards signing in the country, namely that it is something that belongs to deaf people. So AJSL is less and less used in families. As mentioned in section 6, most deaf AJSL users marry people of non-Algerian origin, so they do not use the language with their spouses, and consequently it is not used with the younger deaf generation. The language, then, is not passed down to a new generation. Finally, Algerian signers are much less stigmatised nowadays, and they feel less inferior and marginalised. The consequences of this positive development are that they are more fully integrated into the Israeli Deaf community, and hence are more likely to use ISL rather than AJSL.

Yet there are two points of hope. First, there are also AJSL users in France. It might be that the circumstances there are somewhat different, and that the language is still passed on to children. The AJSL community in France should be the focus of future studies, as it will provide a more complete picture about the language and its vitality. Second, it is our hope that the study and the documentation of the language, which is currently in its initial stages, will help to raise more awareness of the language, and this in turn might have some positive effect on its vitality.

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Notes

1. This information is based on interviews with 33 ISL signers of different background, which were conducted during 2004–2008, as part of a research project titled "The birth and development of a language: The sign language of the Deaf community in Israel".
2. The first author is a member of the ISL community.
3. For details, see the sociolinguistic sketch of AJSL, this volume.
4. When referring to "Arab neighbours", L.P. means those Arab people living close to the Jewish quarter. No Muslims lived inside the Jewish quarters.
5. For a description of the history of the Deaf community in Israel and the development of ISL, see Meir & Sandler (2008).
6. The term "Algerian Sign Language" is used by E.S., though it refers to AJSL. The term AJSL was coined by the authors. As mentioned above (section 5.2), we do not know whether AJSL is related to Algerian Sign Language.
7. Notice that this marriage pattern was different from that of Algeria. In Algeria, deaf people married hearing people. In Israel, deaf-deaf marriages are the norm.
8. A similar situation is described in Dikyuva, Panda, Escobedo, & Zeshan (this volume) with regard to Mardin Sign Language.

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