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PhD thesis summary

**Family language policy and heritage
language maintenance: a study of
Romanian-origin immigrants in Israel**

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THESIS SUMMARY

The study of family language policy is a significant area within sociolinguistics and language policy research, focusing on detailed examinations of how families handle multilingualism. In the present thesis, I examine the language practices, beliefs, and management methods of Romanian-origin immigrants in Israel, a community managing heritage language preservation alongside the dominance of Hebrew. By examining these dynamics, I explore how language, identity, and migration interact within the more general environment of sociolinguistic and cultural integration.

The number of Israelis of Romanian descent has been falling gradually over the last several years, in spite of their historical significance. In 2022, there were 124,300 Romanian-born Israelis, or roughly 2% of the nation's total population, compared to 198,898 in 2017 (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics). This significant demographic shift begs the question of how this community adapts to its linguistic heritage in a society where Hebrew holds such a hegemonic role in everyday interactions.

Regarding the relevance of my research, it derives from its contribution to a less-explored area of family language policy, specifically concerning Romanian-origin immigrants in Israel, addressing a gap in the available literature. Existing studies on family language policy have generally concentrated on larger or more widely documented immigrant communities, such as Spanish, Arabic or Russian speakers in Israel. Thus, since no family language policy-specific studies have been published on this overlooked community to the present date, my research will attempt to enhance academic understanding of how smaller immigrant groups handle linguistic and cultural adaptation while more or less consciously attempting to maintain their heritage languages.

To explore this, I will focus on the following research questions:

1. How do Israelis of Romanian origin manage the preservation of their heritage language in the context of Hebrew dominance?
2. What are their attitudes and beliefs regarding the use of Romanian and Hebrew in familial and societal settings?
3. How do intergenerational dynamics influence family language practices and policies?

To answer these questions, I will build on Spolsky's (2004) foundational framework, which identifies three components of language policy: practices, beliefs, and management. Practices pertain to habitual patterns of language use in everyday life, beliefs encompass the

values and attitudes associated with specific languages, and management refers to deliberate efforts to influence linguistic behaviours within families. Further, the psychosociological dimensions of language policy, including identity formation, social networks, and attitudes, supplement the analytical depth of my study. I will also look into patterns of intergenerational transmission by combining Fishman's (1991) theory of language shift and Giles et. al's (1977) notion of ethnolinguistic vitality with Spolsky's framework.

My results indicate that Romanian is experiencing a decrease in transmission between generations in Israel, but this decline is more consistent with linguistic attrition and domain loss than with the paradigm of "language death" (Crystal 2001; Mufwene 2004; Sallabank 2018). Fishman's theory provides a useful perspective on how sociocultural and generational factors influence the preservation of minority languages, rather than causing Romanian to completely disappear in Israel. This heritage language loss is neither uniform nor inevitable, being determined by intergenerational agency, educational structures, migration histories, and idiosyncrasies.

The primary aim of my research is to discover how Romanian-origin Israelis manage the maintenance of their heritage language while addressing the linguistic demands of integration into Israeli society, and to contribute to broader discussions on multilingualism, language maintenance, and the role of family in sustaining minority languages. It is my hope that this research will offer practical recommendations for language policy in Israel, especially with regard to strategies to support Romanian immigrants and their descendants in preserving their linguistic heritage.

Regarding the structure of my thesis, besides the first chapter, where I introduce the research topic, its importance, and the objectives of my study, outlining its theoretical and methodological frameworks and summarising the structure of my thesis, I have organised it in six other chapters, with the final one serving as the conclusion.

In my second chapter, which acts as the literature review for the thesis, I examine the theoretical, psychosociological, and methodological foundations of my research, considering concepts such as language policy, identity, and attitudes, and situating my study within the broader field of sociolinguistics, drawing on foundational theories and models to frame the analysis. Spolsky's (2004) conceptualisation of language policy as comprising practices, beliefs, and management has provided an essential framework for examining how families make linguistic decisions. This tripartite model is particularly relevant in studying immigrant families who manage both the preservation of their heritage language and the adoption of a dominant societal language. Moreover, psychosociological perspectives contribute to

understanding how families manage language policies, considering the influence of identity, social networks, and attitudes in the development of language behaviours. For example, identity is closely tied to language use, as individuals often see their linguistic heritage as a core aspect of who they are. Social networks affect language maintenance, with connections to heritage language communities providing support for language use. Attitudes towards heritage and societal languages can either encourage or hinder efforts to maintain bilingualism.

Further, in the third chapter, I explore the historical and sociolinguistic contexts relevant to my research, focusing on Romanian migration to Israel and Israeli language policies, in order to position the experiences of Romanian-origin families within the wider socio-political and linguistic landscape of Israel and to provide a suitable context for understanding my findings. Over several decades, Romanian-origin immigrants have contributed to the culture of Israeli society, bringing with them unique linguistic and cultural traditions. However, the dominance of Hebrew as the national language poses risks for heritage language preservation, as Israel's language policies, which have long prioritised Hebrew as a unifying force, leave minority languages at risk of decline.

Regarding the fourth chapter, this is where I discuss my research methodology, including the design, data collection methods, and ethical considerations. I have carefully designed my study's methodological framework to align with my research objectives, drawing on prior studies in family language policy. Qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured interviews, have been widely recognised for their ability to uncover detailed accounts of linguistic practices and beliefs.

In the fifth chapter, I explain the primary findings of my study, discussing themes such as family language practices, identity formation, and language maintenance, scrutinising the difficulties and strategies involved in maintaining bilingualism and the heritage language across generations. In this sense, my participants described a variety of practices, from speaking Romanian at home to encouraging younger generations to learn the language. However, I also observed challenges, such as intergenerational language shifts and systemic social pressures to prioritise Hebrew.

As we continue with the sixth chapter, I critically and comparatively interpret my findings, linking them to Spolsky, Giles et. al and Fishman's theoretical concepts, and situating them within existing literature by comparing them to a 2019 study by Tannenbaum and Peleg on the Iranian community in Israel.

Chapter two situates family language policy within broader sociolinguistic and theoretical notions, drawing on Spolsky's (2004, 2018) tripartite model of language policy,

comprising practices, beliefs, and management, as a foundational framework. Additionally, Fishman's (1991) work on reversing language shift provides insight into the conditions that facilitate or hinder minority language survival. Ethnolinguistic vitality theory (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977) offers a complementary perspective, highlighting the role of status, demographic strength, and institutional support in determining language maintenance. Finally, qualitative methodologies, particularly those informed by Patton's (1987) general interview guide approach, have been instrumental in capturing the nuanced experiences of multilingual families.

Language policy as a discipline emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War in response to sociopolitical transformations, including decolonisation and migration. Initial efforts at language planning often failed due to unpredictable demographic changes and the deep-seated ideological and emotional connections individuals held to their languages (Spolsky, 2018).

Spolsky's model of language policy, composed of practices (actual language use), beliefs (ideological attitudes toward language), and management (deliberate efforts to regulate language use), is particularly relevant to family language policy. Families negotiate these three elements in response to societal pressures, attempting to manage language maintenance at the same time as their integration. Fishman (1991) expands on this by conceptualising language shift as a gradual process influenced by intergenerational transmission. His Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (1991) categorises language endangerment, with heritage languages often occupying mid-range stages where transmission is inconsistent, but not yet entirely lost.

Giles et al. (1977) introduce ethnolinguistic vitality theory, which assesses the likelihood of minority language maintenance based on status (economic and historical factors), demographic strength (speaker population size and distribution), and institutional support (representation in education, media, and government). When minority languages lack institutional support, their survival often depends on community-level efforts and intrafamilial reinforcement. This concept, which integrates social psychology with sociolinguistics, provides a structured way to evaluate the challenges faced by migrant families in sustaining their heritage languages. Minority languages with low ethnolinguistic vitality face pressures from dominant languages, leading to attrition and possible language death (Mufwene, 2004). However, some scholars contest deterministic views of language decline, arguing that language shift is determined by socio-political and ideological factors rather than being an inevitable process (Ricento, 2007).

Attitudes toward language significantly influence linguistic behaviours and policies. Research in this area, particularly Gardner's (2002) studies on language attitudes, demonstrates how perceptions influence both policy effectiveness and individual language choices.

Family language policy research engages with a variety of methodologies, from large-scale quantitative surveys to in-depth qualitative ethnographies. Recent studies have concentrated on the interaction between macro-level policies (e.g., government language policies, educational curricula) and micro-level family decisions (Curdts-Christiansen, 2014, 2015, 2016).

Surveys and census data can provide broad indicators of language health, but they rarely manage to record the complexities of language use within families. For instance, language use surveys can reveal intergenerational shifts, but they do not necessarily reflect the more subtle ideological and emotional factors that can impact linguistic choices. Further, census questions on language often conflate proficiency with actual use, leading to potential misrepresentations of minority language vitality (Baker, 2001).

Patton's (1987) general interview guide approach offers a valuable methodological alternative by prioritising in-depth, flexible conversations over rigid questionnaires. This qualitative approach allows researchers to explore explicit language policies within families, as well as implicit attitudes and shifting practices. By encouraging open-ended responses and adapting question phrasing based on participant narratives, Patton's method allows for an improved understanding of how families view and handle language use across generations.

Lane (2010) examined the long-term effects of Norway's Norwegianisation policy on Kven speakers, revealing how state policies can stimulate rapid intergenerational language loss. Similarly, Curdts-Christiansen's (2014) research on bilingual Chinese families in Singapore shows how government focus on English influences parental expectations and heritage language support. Therefore, it is reasonable to posit that family language policy is not solely a private family matter, due to it being directly influenced by broader socio-political and ideological forces.

A significant aspect of family language policy research is language ideology, or how families perceive and evaluate their linguistic choices in relation to the forces of societal expectations. Language hierarchies, as observed in multilingual societies like Malaysia (Wang, 2017) and the United Kingdom (Kirsch, 2012), impact family decisions on which languages to prioritise. Quite often, families adjust their linguistic strategies in relation to perceived economic or social advantages, frequently at the expense of heritage language transmission.

Interactional studies can further reveal how language practices evolve within families. Gafaranga (2010) examined Rwandan children in Belgium, showing how they initiated language shifts by requesting French over Kinyarwanda. Meyer Pitton's (2013) study of Russian-French bilingual families in Switzerland discovered how daily interactions, such as conversations at the dinner table, affect long-term linguistic outcomes. Translanguaging, as defined by García and Li Wei (2014), shows how multilingual families fluidly switch between languages, reinforcing or altering their linguistic environments in response to social cues.

Chapter three considers the historical and sociolinguistic aspects that have had an impact on the Romanian-origin community in Israel. It explores issues such as migration, cultural adaptation, and language policies in relation to identity and heritage preservation.

Migration has been a defining feature of Israel's development, yet unlike conventional immigration patterns, Jewish migration to Israel was ideologically driven, based on the concept of *aliyah*, literally meaning "ascent", which denotes a return to the ancestral homeland (Halperin, 2015). The earliest cases of Romanian Jewish migration date back to the late eighteenth century, when the Chief Rabbi of Bukovina settled in Tzfat (Ioanid, 2005). By the late nineteenth century, Romanian Jews were instrumental in early Zionist movements. The Focșani Conference of 1881 marked the beginning of organised Zionist activities in Romania, leading to the establishment of agricultural colonies in Palestine, such as Rosh Pina and Zikhron Yaakov (Ioanid, 2005).

During the Second World War, Romania's position on Jewish emigration varied due to geopolitical pressures. While Romanian authorities initially viewed emigration as a means to resolve the "Jewish question", the process was complicated by Nazi opposition and logistical obstacles (Ioanid, 2021). The events of the Holocaust decimated Romania's Jewish population, prompting many survivors to seek refuge in Palestine. By 1948, Romanian Jews already constituted a significant portion of the Jewish population in Palestine, due to earlier waves of *aliyah* driven by Zionist movements. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, mass immigration was further emphasised, accelerating the migration of Romanian Jews (Meyer, 1953).

Post-war migration policies were shaped by Romania's communist leadership, which alternated between restricting and permitting Jewish emigration. In the early years of communist rule, the government allowed large-scale *aliyah*, but later imposed stringent control. Emigration policies became a transactional tool, with the Romanian regime reportedly negotiating Jewish departures in exchange for economic or diplomatic advantages (Bines,

1998). By the late 1980s, the Jewish population in Romania had significantly declined due to successive waves of immigration (Rotman, 2004).

The Romanian-origin community in Israel represents one of the largest Jewish immigrant groups. By 2017, an estimated 198,898 individuals of Romanian origin lived in Israel, though numbers declined to 124,300 by 2022 due to demographic ageing (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Romanian Jews initially maintained strong cultural ties, with Romanian widely spoken in households and community spaces. However, over time, assimilation pressures and the dominance of Hebrew led to a significant language shift, with younger generations increasingly favouring Hebrew (Herşcovici, 2018).

The revival of Hebrew as a spoken language was essential to the Zionist project (Fishman, 1991). Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's efforts to modernise Hebrew laid the groundwork for its widespread adoption, reinforced by state policies following the establishment of Israel (Spolsky, 2014). The *Ulpan* system, introduced in 1949, was fundamental in the process of integrating immigrants through its provision of immersive Hebrew instruction (Shapiro, 1989). However, this linguistic unification came at the expense of minority languages, including Yiddish, Ladino, and Arabic, which were systematically marginalised (Saban & Amara, 2002). These languages, once widely spoken among Jewish immigrants, were actively discouraged in favour of Hebrew (Fishman, 1991). Arabic, although historically an official language, has been largely symbolic in practice, with legal and educational policies reinforcing its secondary status (Yitzhaki, 2011). The 2018 Nation-State Law officially declared Hebrew as Israel's sole national language, even further diminishing the status of Arabic (Jabareen & Bishara, 2019).

Romanian historically occupied a prominent place among Israel's immigrant languages, particularly between the 1940s and 1970s. Publications, theatre, and community events in Romanian were common, with newspapers such as "Viața Noastră" contributing to linguistic continuity (Herşcovici, 2018). However, as with other heritage languages, Romanian gradually declined due to pressures of assimilation and generational shifts. More recent efforts such as the "Școala de limba română din Israel" (The Romanian Language School in Israel), supported by the Association of Romanian-Language Writers in Israel and the Romanian Cultural Institute, attempt to preserve Romanian, but these initiatives face funding and logistical constraints (Airinei, 2023).

Hebrew's dominance in schools and public life has led to a generational shift in language use among Romanian-origin families. Research on Russian-speaking families in Israel indicates similar patterns, where children adopt Hebrew as their primary language despite parental efforts to maintain the heritage language (Altman et al., 2013). Among Iranian

families, older generations continue using Persian in domestic settings, but second- and third-generation speakers exhibit declining proficiency (Tannenbaum & Peleg, 2019).

In recent decades, English has gained prominence in Israeli society, particularly in academia and business. English is increasingly perceived as the language of socioeconomic mobility, further challenging the position of heritage languages (Reshef, 2008). The proliferation of English-language media, alongside the globalisation of education and technology, has contributed to shifting linguistic priorities among younger Israelis (Tannenbaum & Shohamy, 2023).

Given these sociolinguistic dynamics, my study adopts a qualitative approach to record and examine the lived experiences of Israelis of Romanian origin, and in chapter four I explain my preference for such an approach in the form of semi-structured interviews. The qualitative approach is well suited to my research, as it prioritises an in-depth exploration of the participants' lived experiences and enables an understanding of the interaction between language practices, beliefs, and management within Romanian-origin family settings in Israel.

In addition to reviewing prior literature, my selection of deductive themes was informed by personal correspondence and discussions with Bernard Spolsky, whose extensive work in language policy has shaped the study of heritage language maintenance. While Spolsky's theoretical framework underpins my data analysis, his practical guidance also influenced the structure of my interviews. Specifically, he advised an open-ended approach focusing on the tension between language maintenance and social integration, rather than restricting participants' responses to predefined categories. As he suggested:

“Get their idea of the importance of maintaining language and culture as compared to the importance of integrating. Ask them about any differences of attitude and practice among members of the family. What language do they use at work? As much as possible, let them speak freely rather than answering questions.”

Regarding participant recruitment, I achieved this by using the snowball sampling method, first described by Goodman (1961) as a referral-based approach for accessing specific or hard-to-reach populations. Snowball sampling involves starting with an initial set of contacts who, after agreeing to participate, provide referrals to others within their networks who meet the study's criteria.

I initiated recruitment through professional and academic contacts, including individuals I met during my tenure as a Holocaust museum curator and certain former lecturers. These initial participants then referred others, resulting in a diverse sample representing various

migration timelines and backgrounds. The referral process also fostered trust, as recommendations were facilitated by known and respected individuals within the community.

Despite its advantages, snowball sampling has inherent limitations. Its non-random nature can lead to selection biases, as referrals may favour individuals who are more socially connected and exclude those less engaged within the Romanian-Israeli community. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent the entire population. Furthermore, the use of personal networks may result in a sample composition that reflects particular characteristics or viewpoints.

Participants emigrated at different periods, from the 1960s to the 1990s, providing a broad historical and generational perspective on Romanian immigration to Israel. They resided in various locations, including Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem, adding regional diversity. Demographic details of the participants, including gender, year of birth, year of emigration, and current residence, are summarised in the table below (see figure 1). Participant 3 and his daughter share the same numerical identifier for easier analysis and presentation of data, as they belong to the same family and household.

Participant no.	Gender	Year of birth	Year of emigration	Place of residence
1	F	1951	1970	Tel Aviv
2	M	1947	1972	Jerusalem
3	M	1946	1988	Haifa
3's daughter	F	1979	1988	Haifa
4	M	1967	1999	Tel Aviv
5	F	1940	1967	Tel Aviv
6	F	1948	1972	Haifa
7	M	1947	1986	Haifa
8	F	1950	1976	Tel Aviv
9	F	1935	1960	Tel Aviv

Figure 1. Demographic data of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to capture participants' linguistic choices and family language use in a flexible yet structured manner. This approach allowed for the emergence of unanticipated themes and provided deeper insight into the challenges of maintaining Romanian while integrating into Israeli society. Inspired by Patton's (1987)

general interview guide approach, I structured the interviews around key themes while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences.

The interview questions focused on the participants' linguistic biographies, language attitudes, and integration experiences. Initial demographic questions eased participants into the conversation, while subsequent sections explored their Romanian and Hebrew proficiency, use of these languages in different contexts, and the emotional and cultural significance of language within the family. Additionally, participants reflected on the transmission of Romanian to younger generations and the pressures associated with adopting Hebrew as the primary language.

Interviews were conducted in familiar settings, such as participants' homes or quiet cafés, to create a relaxed environment conducive to open discussion. Sessions lasted between one and three hours, depending on participants' willingness to elaborate. Interviews took place between July and August 2019 in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv, primarily in Romanian, though participants occasionally switched to Hebrew when discussing aspects of their lives in Israel. All interviews were audio-recorded with verbal consent for accurate transcription and analysis.

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the interview data, drawing on Spolsky's (2004) framework of language policy, which comprises three core components: language practices, beliefs, and management. Practices refer to routine language use, beliefs encompass the values and attitudes attached to particular languages, and management involves efforts to influence linguistic choices.

For coding, I used the qualitative software Delve, which facilitated systematic organisation and identification of thematic patterns. The coding process began with an initial reading of the transcripts to ensure familiarity with the data. Preliminary codes were then assigned to recurring themes, which were iteratively refined to align with the research objectives and accommodate emergent patterns.

Inductive coding was particularly useful in identifying themes beyond the deductive categories, such as generational shifts in language use, emotional connections to Romanian heritage, and societal perceptions of language choices. This ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical constructs.

Verbal consent was obtained from participants at the beginning of each interview, ensuring their understanding of the study's objectives, scope, and their right to withdraw at any time. Given that many participants were elderly, this verbal approach was considered more

accessible than written consent forms. Participants were assigned numerical identifiers to protect their identities, and all personally identifiable information was omitted or generalised in the transcripts and analysis.

Interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected device accessible only to me. I took additional precautions to ensure that direct quotes used in this study did not include identifiable details, balancing ethical considerations with the need for rigorous academic analysis. It is also for these reasons that I have not included the interview transcripts in the appendix of the thesis, so as to avoid the possibility of the participants being identified from details disclosed in the interviews.

As a Romanian-born researcher with cultural ties to Romania and experience as a former Holocaust museum curator, my background provided certain advantages, such as a deep understanding of the historical and socio-political factors involved in the participants' experiences. The fact that I shared a linguistic and cultural background with the participants promoted trust and rapport, particularly among older individuals.

However, my positionality also introduced potential biases. I remained aware of the risk of projecting my assumptions onto participants' narratives or inadvertently guiding discussions towards particular themes. Reflexivity was integral to mitigating these risks, and I prioritised an open-ended interview approach to centre participants' voices rather than my own preconceptions.

Although I initially considered surveys, I ultimately determined that they would not be suitable for capturing the depth of personal experiences related to family language policy. Surveys impose structured response options, limiting participants' ability to articulate their individual perspectives.

Ethnographic observation was another approach I considered but decided against due to ethical and logistical constraints. Observing participants in their private, familial settings could have altered their natural behaviours and posed ethical concerns. Given the geographical dispersion of participants, ethnographic observation was also impractical within the study's timeframe. By employing semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, I ensured that this study remained centred on the lived experiences of first-generation Romanian immigrants in Israel, capturing the nuances of their linguistic and cultural adaptations.

Moving on to chapter five and six, this is where I present and discuss key themes I derived through a combined deductive and inductive approach, analysing the participants' strategies for handling bilingualism and cultural identity. I translated the participants' responses

into English while presenting the Romanian originals as footnotes, to maintain linguistic authenticity.

The deductive themes, informed by established theoretical frameworks as mentioned earlier in this summary, include language maintenance and cultural preservation, adaptation and integration, family language practices, Romanian and Hebrew proficiency, attitudes toward language, and generational and societal influences. Inductive themes emerged directly from participant narratives, such as historical context and assimilation, social issues and marginalisation, nostalgia and language loss, and integration versus resistance.

To visually represent these themes in a granular manner, I developed a heat map, presented below in figure 2, scoring each theme based on its prevalence, emotional intensity, and relevance across interviews. Themes scoring higher (e.g., 2.75-3.00) denote frequent and deeply felt or discussed subjects, whereas lower scores indicate less central but still significant issues. This approach ensures a nuanced representation of linguistic and cultural experiences within the Romanian-origin community in Israel.

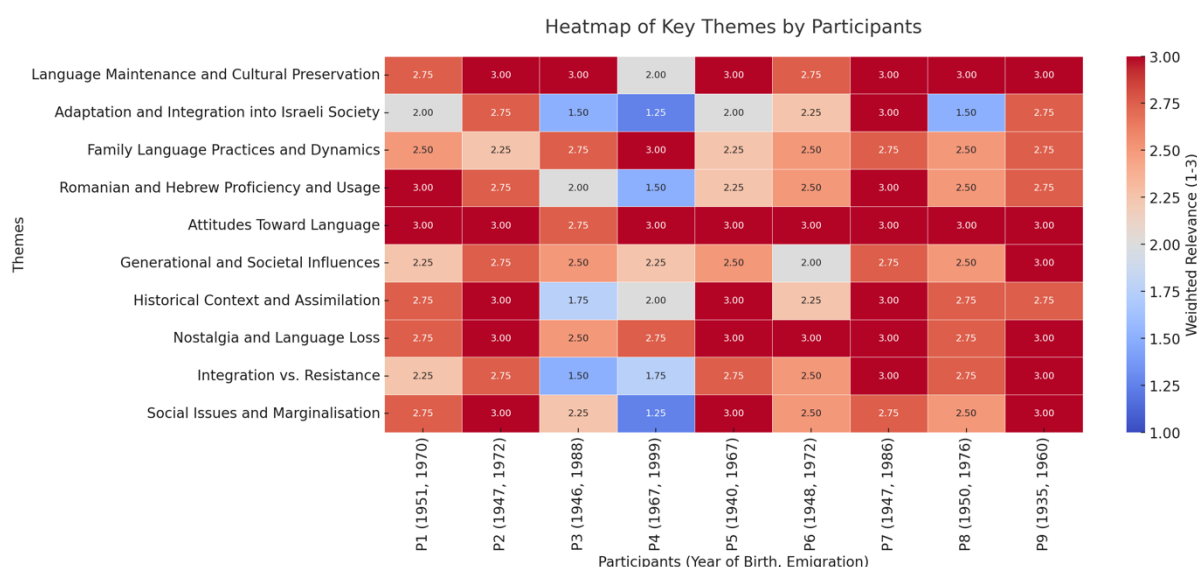


Figure 2. Heatmap of key themes by participants.

Firstly, in terms of deductive themes, regarding language maintenance and cultural preservation, the participants exhibited diverse approaches to preserving Romanian, with intergenerational transmission emerging as a critical factor. Some, such as participant 3, prioritised maintaining Romanian within the home, ensuring children and grandchildren were exposed to the language through daily conversation and cultural traditions: “We spoke

Romanian at home here in Israel. You can't forget your own language".¹ Others, such as participant 4, expressed resignation about language loss: "Romanian will remain just a vague nostalgia that you can cultivate individually, if you choose".² This contrast underscores the variability in language retention efforts. The absence of institutional support further complicates language maintenance. While some participants engaged with Romanian through cultural and literary activities, most acknowledged that Romanian's presence in Israeli public life was limited. The findings align with Fishman's (1991) Reversing Language Shift theory, which highlights that minority languages cannot survive solely through family transmission but require broader community and institutional reinforcement.

As regards the second deductive theme, adaptation and integration into Israeli society, experiences varied significantly, shaped by socioeconomic status, personal resilience, and linguistic competence. Participant 1 recalled the early post-immigration stigma surrounding diasporic languages: "Back then, any language [other than Hebrew] was looked down upon."³ Participant 2 similarly noted professional barriers due to insufficient Hebrew proficiency and a limited understanding of the Israeli mentality: "When I attempted to get work as a school teacher, I couldn't. It was in the early stages, I didn't know Hebrew that well, and they told me, 'You've learned Hebrew, but you don't understand our psychology and mentality'".⁴ Some participants framed their integration pragmatically. Participant 3 noted that while he learned Hebrew for work, he continued speaking Romanian at home. Others, like participant 8, struggled with Hebrew acquisition, leading to feelings of alienation: "Even now I can't speak Hebrew well. I feel guilty and, to some extent, illiterate".⁵

Concerning the third deductive theme, family language practices and intergenerational transmission, the tension between heritage language maintenance and generational language shift was evident. Participant 6 observed that her eldest daughter initially spoke only Romanian but, upon entering school, switched entirely to Hebrew: "Until the age of 3, my eldest daughter spoke only Romanian. Then one day she started speaking Hebrew. Since then, she hasn't spoken a word of Romanian, but she can understand it very well".⁶ Participant 9, however, succeeded in preserving Romanian within her family, noting that her children "grew up with

¹ "Am vorbit românește în familie aici, în Israel. Nu poți să-ți uiți limba."

² "Româna va rămâne doar o nostalgie vagă pe care, la nivel individual, vei putea să o cultivi, dacă vei dori."

³ "Nu numai româna, dar orice altă limbă era privită cu dispreț."

⁴ "Când am încercat să fiu profesor la o școală, n-am putut. Era la început, nu știam încă suficientă ebraică și mi s-a spus, 'ai învățat ebraică, dar nu ne cunoști psihologia și mentalitatea'".

⁵ "Eu nici astăzi nu știu să vorbesc bine ebraica. Simt o senzație de culpă și, oarecum, de analfabetism."

⁶ "Până la vârsta de 3 ani, fiica cea mare n-a vorbit decât românește. Atunci, într-o bună zi, a început să vorbească ebraică. Și de atunci n-a mai vorbit un cuvânt în românește, însă înțelege foarte bine."

Romanian and were never ashamed of it”.⁷ Parental strategies influenced these outcomes. Participant 8 enforced strict language rules, refusing to respond to her daughter unless she answered in Romanian, leading to resistance: “If I spoke Romanian and she replied in Hebrew, I wouldn’t respond until she repeated in Romanian”.⁸ Her daughter confessed to her mother that she felt forced to learn Romanian. On the other hand, participant 7 allowed linguistic flexibility, with one son maintaining Romanian fluency while the other gradually transitioned to Hebrew.

Regarding the fourth deductive theme, Romanian and Hebrew proficiency and usage, several participants described maintaining Romanian as a cultural and intellectual pursuit. Participant 2, an academic, engaged with it for professional purposes, such as archival research, which renewed his interest in the language: “While working on my PhD, I discovered significant archival material in Romanian, including Cyrillic script. I refreshed my knowledge from my university studies and conducted research at the National Archives of Romania and at other relevant archives”.⁹ Meanwhile, others, like participant 5, passively retained Romanian through reading, but relied on her husband and his secretary for Hebrew literacy tasks, such as filling out forms and other legal documents. Linguistic hierarchies in Israeli society influenced participants’ experiences. Participant 4 noted that Romanian’s lower social prestige, as perceived at intracommunity-level, might have discouraged active usage: “Romanians everywhere in the world, not just in Israel, have an inferiority complex”.¹⁰ This aligns with Spolsky’s (2004) observations on how societal attitudes influence language retention.

With respect to the fifth deductive theme, attitudes toward language, several participants reflected on linguistic stigmas. Participant 1 criticised past Israeli policies suppressing diasporic languages: “Ben Gurion banned Yiddish theatre. History will not forgive him that”.¹¹ Similarly, Participant 2 lamented the prioritisation of Hebrew at the expense of Romanian: “Those who forget the past have no future”.¹² Generational attitudes also diverged. Participant 3 identified strongly with Romanian heritage, whereas his daughter balanced dual

⁷ “Copiii mei au crescut cu limba română și nu au avut niciodată rușine în privința ei.”

⁸ “Dacă îi vorbeam în românește și ea îmi răspundea în ebraică, eu nu-i răspundeam. Îi spuneam să repete în românește.”

⁹ “Lucrând la doctorat, am descoperit o bază documentară semnificativă în română, inclusiv în alfabet chirilic. Mi-am reînprospătat cunoștințele din facultate și am cercetat la Arhivele Naționale din România și alte arhive relevante.”

¹⁰ “Românii au peste tot în lume, nu doar în Israel, un complex de inferioritate.”

¹¹ “Ben Gurion a interzis teatrul în limba idiș. Istoria n-o să-i ierte chestia asta .”

¹² “Cine uită trecutul nu va avea viitor.”

identities: “I am Israeli, but I also identify with Romania quite a bit”,¹³ reflecting a more subtle negotiation between her upbringing and the forces of integration.

As far as the sixth deductive theme was concerned, namely generational and societal influences, older participants viewed Romanian as integral to identity, while younger generations often prioritised Hebrew for social mobility. Participant 6 noted: “The youth has no time or desire to connect with the past here. We live a very hard life in Israel, we are surrounded by enemies”.¹⁴ Participant 9 described the status of Romanian in Israel as a “‘language of cemeteries’, and the enrichment of cemeteries signifies the gradual disappearance of the language. Steps could have been taken to prevent this decline, but the reality is different”¹⁵, also acknowledging its decline among younger speakers.

Secondly, concerning inductive themes, the first of which is historical context and assimilation, my data showed that historical events influenced participants’ migration experiences. Participant 1 recalled ideological shifts from communism to Zionism, which influenced her subsequent emigration decision. Similarly, participant 7 connected his family’s Holocaust trauma to a strong cultural identity: “My parents blamed themselves for not managing to fetch my aunt from Oradea, to save her from being deported... This affected me deeply”.¹⁶ For both participants, their experiences led to the development of an intense connection to their heritage, though expressed through separate historical perspectives.

In terms of the second inductive theme, social issues and marginalisation, participants noted social prejudices against Romanians, including stereotypes of dishonesty. Participant 3’s daughter recalled hearing: “When they came to Israel, Romanians were stigmatised. *G’navim romanim*, meaning ‘Romanian thieves’. There’s a saying in Israel: ‘Romanians are a happy people who steal everything. If they haven’t stolen something, [it’s because] they forgot about it’. This is what they say about Romanians here”.¹⁷ These biases shaped integration experiences and, for some, discouraged Romanian language use in public. However, participant 2 noted that such labels were not unique to Romanians, citing examples such as “partner Poles” for

¹³ “Eu sunt israeliană, dar mă identific și cu România destul de mult.”

¹⁴ “Aici tinerii n-au timp și nici dorința să se conecteze cu trecutul. Ducem o viață foarte grea în Israel, suntem înconjurați de dușmani.”

¹⁵ “Cred că limba română se va stinge treptat aici. Este o ‘limbă a cimitirelor’, iar îmbogățirea cimitirelor semnifică dispariția treptată a limbii. S-ar fi putut face ceva să se evite acest declin, dar realitatea este alta.”

¹⁶ “Ai mei se auto-îvinovăteau că n-au reușit să o aducă pe mătușa mea din Oradea, s-o salveze de la deportare... Chestiunea asta m-a afectat foarte mult.”

¹⁷ “Românii, când au venit în Israel, au fost stigmatizați. *G’navim romanim* – înseamnă ‘hoți români’. Există un proverb în Israel care zice că ‘românii sunt un popor fericit și fură tot. Dacă ceva n-au furat, înseamnă că au uitat’. Asta se spune despre români aici.”

Polish immigrants, the Romanians' alleged collaborators in crime, "Iraqi pyjamas" for Iraqis due to the robes they wear, or "Moroccan knife-wielders" for Moroccans.¹⁸

Nostalgia and language loss emerged as the third inductive theme, with many participants expressing nostalgia for Romanian culture. Participant 6 reflected on Bucharest's significance: "I really love Bucharest. It feels good to return there; it reminds me of my youth".¹⁹ However, the fading role of Romanian in Israeli society was a source of regret, particularly for older generations.

Additionally, integration vs. resistance arose as the fourth inductive theme, as some participants actively resisted linguistic assimilation. Participant 7 is involved in literary translation, "I've started translating literature, especially poetry, from Hebrew to Romanian and from Romanian to Hebrew".²⁰ Participant 2 was encouraged to speak Romanian in Israel despite feeling ashamed at first, recounting being labelled "Good guy, but Romanian" in Israel, a phrase that exposes societal biases. Such remarks led him to initially avoid disclosing his Romanian roots. However, his discovery of a book by a Romanian rabbi living in the United States restored his pride: "Let them be ashamed, not us! Others aren't more learned. They think they know the Torah better than us. We are better than them. Never give up!".²¹

Finally, one of the key findings of this study is the variation in language maintenance strategies within Romanian-origin families. While some participants engaged in deliberate efforts to sustain Romanian as an active language of communication, others regarded it as a symbolic marker of identity rather than a functional means of daily interaction. This differentiation highlights the importance of conceptualising family language policy as a spectrum rather than a binary process of retention versus loss. Additionally, the study has revealed the extent to which generational shifts, migration history, and socio-economic factors shape family language practices. Older participants frequently expressed a strong attachment

¹⁸ "Era și o glumă, *g'navim romanim*, adică 'românii hoți'. Bine, atunci erau însă porecle pentru toate comunitățile, iar pentru polonezi era *polanim shutfim*, adică românii sunt hoți și polonezii sunt colaboratorii, complicitii lor la hoție. Mai exista despre irakieni, li se spunea *iraki pijama*, fiindcă umblau în haine lungi. Despre marocani se spunea că sunt *marokayi sakim* – cuțitari."

¹⁹ "Mi-e foarte drag Bucureștiul. Mă simt bine când mă întorc înapoi acolo, îmi aduc aminte de anii tinereții."

²⁰ "În ultimii 10 ani am început să traduc literatură, în special poezie, din ebraică în limba română și din română în ebraică, cu un prieten scriitor israelian."

²¹ "Cândva, cineva a spus despre mine: 'Băiat bun, dar român' (*Bachur tov, aval romani*). Auzind astfel de remarci, mă gândeam să evit să spun că vin din România. Apoi, la un curs, am descoperit o carte scrisă de un rabin român devenit profesor în SUA la o instituție prestigioasă, iar asta m-a făcut să fiu mândru de originile mele. Ani mai târziu, când îi traduceam eu o parte din acea carte, autorul însuși m-a încurajat: 'Să le fie lor rușine, nu nouă! Nu sunt alții mai învățați. Ei cred că sunt mai învățați în Torah decât noi. Noi suntem mai mult decât ei. Să le fie lor rușine! Niciodată să nu renunți!'".

to Romanian, whereas younger generations often exhibited a preference for Hebrew due to the pressures of social integration and educational environments.

Moreover, my findings indicate that although Romanian is undergoing intergenerational attrition in Israel, this process does not equate to total language death as defined by Mufwene (2004). Instead, it aligns with Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale at Stages 6 and 7, where Romanian remains in use among older generations and within cultural networks but lacks institutional reinforcement. While Hebrew's dominance in public life exerts significant pressure towards language shift, community-led initiatives, cultural associations, and familial efforts continue to support Romanian's presence within specific domains. Participants 7 and 9 who involve themselves in literary translation or Romanian cultural activities exemplify how language maintenance extends beyond the home and into creative and intellectual spheres.

These findings reinforce the notion that language retention is not solely an individual or family decision but rather a dynamic process shaped by broader socio-political and economic contexts. As Ricento (2007) argues, language shift should not be inherently framed as a negative phenomenon but rather understood as an adaptive response to integration challenges. However, my participants' concerns about language loss highlight the emotional and cultural significance of heritage languages, suggesting that policy interventions could play a role in mitigating complete linguistic displacement.

Given the gradual decline in Romanian language transmission, several measures could be considered to support heritage language maintenance. While complete linguistic revitalisation may not be feasible, targeted interventions could help sustain Romanian as a community and cultural language. The following recommendations outline possible avenues for governmental and community-led efforts:

Firstly, educational programmes, such as incorporating Romanian language courses into school curricula, particularly in areas with substantial Romanian-origin populations, could encourage younger generations to develop literacy in their heritage language. Similar initiatives have been implemented for other minority languages in Israel, so their potential viability has been evidenced.

Furthermore, community-based language activities, such as establishing Romanian-language reading clubs, cultural workshops, and intergenerational storytelling programmes could strengthen linguistic ties within families while promoting a sense of communal belonging. Public libraries and cultural centres could support such initiatives by providing Romanian-language books and multimedia resources.

In addition, institutional recognition and media representation, specifically increasing the presence of Romanian-language content in local media, including radio, television, and online platforms, could enhance linguistic visibility. Government-sponsored media channels could allocate segments to minority languages, ensuring that Romanian maintains a presence within public discourse.

Finally, parental support and family language policy awareness in the form of providing workshops and resources for parents on effective language maintenance strategies could help families tackle the challenges of bilingualism. Encouraging consistent use of Romanian within households, while acknowledging the realities of Hebrew's dominance, could offer a balanced approach to linguistic socialisation.

While these initiatives would require coordination between the Israeli government, the Romanian community, and educational institutions, they represent feasible pathways for fostering linguistic diversity. Moreover, the Romanian government could play a role in supporting heritage language maintenance by developing existing bilateral cultural agreements and providing funding for community language initiatives.

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