

Saving a language: Exercises on language revitalisation and revival.

(Author: Michael Hornsby)

1. Read the two newspaper articles about reviving and saving languages.

Attempts to revive language spoken in Jesus' time by Diaa Hadid, Associated Press (MONDAY, MAY 28, 2012 08:45 AM CEDT).

SALON. JISH, Israel (AP) — Two villages in the Holy Land's tiny Christian community are teaching Aramaic in an ambitious effort to revive the language that Jesus spoke, centuries after it all but disappeared from the Middle East.

The new focus on the region's dominant language 2,000 years ago comes with a little help from modern technology: an Aramaic-speaking television channel from Sweden, of all places, where a vibrant immigrant community has kept the ancient tongue alive.

In the Palestinian village of Beit Jala, an older generation of Aramaic speakers is trying to share the language with their grandchildren. Beit Jala lies next to Bethlehem, where the New Testament says Jesus was born. And in the Arab-Israeli village of Jish, nestled in the Galilean hills where Jesus lived and preached, elementary school children are now being instructed in Aramaic. The children belong mostly to the Maronite Christian community. Maronites still chant their liturgy in Aramaic but few understand the prayers. "We want to speak the language that Jesus spoke," said Carla Hadad, a 10-year-old Jish girl who frequently waved her arms to answer questions in Aramaic from school teacher Mona Issa during a recent lesson. "We used to speak it a long time ago," she added, referring to her ancestors.

During the lesson, a dozen children lisped out a Christian prayer in Aramaic. They learned the words for "elephant," "how are you?" and "mountain." Some children carefully drew sharp-angled Aramaic letters. Others fiddled with their pencil cases, which sported images of popular soccer teams.

The dialect taught in Jish and Beit Jala is "Syriac," which was spoken by their Christian forefathers and resembles the Galilean dialect that Jesus would have used, according to Steven Fassberg, an Aramaic expert at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"They probably would have understood each other," Fassberg said.

In Jish, about 80 children in grades one through five study Aramaic as a voluntary subject for two hours a week. Israel's education ministry provided funds to add classes until the eighth grade, said principal Reem Khatieb-Zuabi. Several Jish residents lobbied for Aramaic studies several years ago, said Khatieb-Zuabi, but the idea faced resistance: Jish's Muslims worried it was a covert attempt to entice their children to Christianity. Some Christians objected, saying the emphasis on their ancestral language was being used to strip them of their Arab identity. The issue is sensitive to many Arab Muslims and Christians in Israel, who prefer to be identified by their ethnicity, not their faith.

Ultimately, Khatieb-Zuabi, a secular Muslim from an outside village, overruled them.

"This is our collective heritage and culture. We should celebrate and study it," the principal said. And so the Jish Elementary School became the only Israeli public school teaching Aramaic, according to the education ministry.

Their efforts are mirrored in Beit Jala's Mar Afram school run by the Syrian Orthodox church and located just a few miles (kilometers) from Bethlehem's Manger Square.

There, priests have taught the language to their 320 students for the past five years.

Some 360 families in the area descend from Aramaic-speaking refugees who in the 1920s fled the Tur Abdin region of what is now Turkey.

Priest Butros Nimeh said elders still speak the language but that it vanished among younger generations. Nimeh said they hoped teaching the language would help the children appreciate their roots.

Although both the Syrian Orthodox and Maronite church worship in Aramaic, they are distinctly different sects. The Maronites are the dominant Christian church in neighboring Lebanon but make up only a few thousand of the Holy Land's 210,000 Christians. Likewise, Syrian Orthodox Christians number no more than 2,000 in the Holy Land, said Nimeh.

Overall, some 150,000 Christians live in Israel and another 60,000 live in the West Bank.

Both schools found inspiration and assistance in an unlikely place: Sweden. There, Aramaic-speaking communities who descended from the Middle East have sought to keep their language alive.

They publish a newspaper, "Bahro Suryoyo," pamphlets and children's books, including "The Little Prince," and maintain a satellite television station, "Soryoyosat," said Arzu Alan, chairwoman of the Syriac Aramaic Federation of Sweden. There's also an Aramaic soccer team, "Syrianska FC" in the Swedish top division from the town of Sodertalje. Officials estimate the Aramaic-speaking population at anywhere from 30,000 to 80,000 people.

For many Maronites and Syrian Orthodox Christians in the Holy Land, the television station, in particular, was the first time they heard the language outside church in decades. Hearing it in a modern context inspired them to try revive the language among their communities.

"When you hear (the language), you can speak it," said Issa, the teacher.

Aramaic dialects were the region's vernacular from 2,500 years ago until the sixth century, when Arabic, the language of conquering Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula, became dominant, according to Fassberg.

Linguistic islands survived: Maronites clung to Aramaic liturgy and so did the Syrian Orthodox church. Kurdish Jews on the river island of Zakho spoke an Aramaic dialect called "Targum" until fleeing to Israel in the 1950s. Three Christian villages in Syria still speak an Aramaic dialect, Fassberg said. With few opportunities to practice the ancient tongue, teachers in Jish have tempered expectations. They hope they can at least revive an understanding of the language. The steep challenges are seen in the Jish school, where the fourth-grade Aramaic class has just a dozen students. The number used to be twice that until they introduced an art class during the same time slot — and lost half their students.

Saving a language by Melanie Lidman (02/22/2012 02:34). *THE JERUSALEM POST*.

Sami minority studies ulpan model in effort to keep its ethnic dialects alive.

The approximately 100,000-strong ethnic Sami minority, living in a sparse, frozen region flung across northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and parts of Russia, have a gargantuan task ahead of them: Preserving the dozens of dialects of their traditional language before assimilation erases them forever.

To add to the challenge, some dialects of Sami have as few as 30 speakers left, and most are not mutually understandable.

A mission of Sami leaders arrived in Israel this week to study how the country invented and implemented modern Hebrew into a successful, vibrant language in 100 years, and how to utilize the ulpan language study program to teach new learners.

No one ever believed that a university could teach in Hebrew, Hebrew University President Menachem Ben-Sasson told Kevin Johansen, Lars Joar Halonen and Nils Ante Eira on Monday, after the three observed Hebrew-language instruction at the university's Rothberg International School. The university's name came from the founders' determination, back in 1925, to have Hebrew become a spoken language for everyday use, Ben-Sasson explained.

"They said it would be a dream, but it's like your dream," said Ben Sasson. People thought the university was crazy to insist on teaching the sciences in Hebrew, a language that students barely spoke, he added. "You can get students to be a light to revive language and positive nationalism vis-à-vis language."

Johansen, Halonen and Eira are on a five-day visit to understand how Israel teaches new immigrants the language in the various ulpan (language immersion) programs. The Norwegian government has sponsored a number of initiatives to preserve and promote Sami culture, including creating a Sami-language kindergarten, which opened in August.

"Parents want to learn with their children," said Johansen, who estimated that his was one of only three households in a municipality of 300 Sami that speak Sami as a day-to-day language. Johansen, an adviser for Sami issues at the University of Nordland in Norway and for the county governor of Nordland, said they hoped to expand their contacts with Israel.

"Even though we have been here a short time, we learned a lot and we have started planning for the next trip, to bring Sami teachers for a longer stay so they can learn ulpan teaching methods," Johansen said after meeting Ben-Sasson. "We want to focus on the spoken language so that our people are able to communicate with each other. We think that will help motivate people and lead to better results."

Sami delegations have also traveled to Scotland and Wales to learn more about successful initiatives to revive European languages.

Sami leaders organized the Israel trip through contacts with the Israeli Embassy in Norway.

The Sami's language initiatives are still in their infancy. The Sami Language School was founded in Nordland in 2008, and there are hopes to create after-school programs and an adult learning center there as well.

Some local artists are choosing to perform only in Sami, even though they cannot speak it fluently. The Sami are also stressing language instruction for nurses who work with the elderly and need the language to communicate with some of their patients.

An additional challenge for the Sami is the wide range of dialects. Due to geographic isolation, a number of different Sami languages sprouted across northern Europe that are not mutually understandable. The largest language group, North Sami, has about 15,000 speakers. But some dialects have already been lost, and others have only 30 people who know how to speak them.

The Sami's visit to Israel coincided with International Mother Language Day, a UNESCO holiday celebrated every February 21 and created "to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world," according to the UN's website.

“Linguistic diversity is our common heritage,” UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said in statement honouring International Mother Language Day.

“It is a fragile heritage. Nearly half of the more than 6,000 languages spoken in the world could die out by the end of the century,” she said. “Languages are who we are; by protecting them, we protect ourselves.”

2. Fill in the grid with appropriate facts about each language situation:

<i>Details</i>	<i>Aramaic</i>	<i>Sami</i>
How many speakers?		
Where currently spoken?		
What are the different dialects mentioned?		
Why revive/save the language?		
What problems are there?		
What is the aim of each revival project?		
How is each language being revived?		
Are revivalists learning about other revival projects? Where?		
What interest is there among ordinary people in reviving these languages?		

3. Watch the short clip about reviving Sami. Why have the revivalists travelled to Israel? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB7wstlOqp4>

4. Discuss: Why do you think people want to revive languages such as these? What are your opinions about such attempts?

For teachers: Suggested answers to Task 2:

<i>Details</i>	<i>Aramaic</i>	<i>Sami</i>
How many speakers?	80,000 world-wide.	30-15,000 speakers, depending on the dialect.
Where currently spoken?	Israel, Palestine, Sweden	Norway, Finland, Sweden, Russia.
What are the different dialects mentioned?	Syriac Aramaic, Kurdish Aramaic, Galilean Aramaic.	Dozens and some are not mutually comprehensible.
Why revive/save the language?	Historical value.	To prevent assimilation.
What problems are there?	Some see the revival as an attempt to convert Muslims to Christianity; more 'interesting' lessons timetabled at the same time.	Small number of speakers; not all revivalists other speak the language fluently.
What is the aim of each revival project?	To speak the language Jesus spoke.	Preserve and promote Sami culture.
How is each language being revived?	Optional lessons in one primary school; elders teach it to younger generation. Support from Sweden.	Kindergarten, after schools programme, (planned), adult learning centre (planned).
Are revivalists learning about other revival projects? Where?		
What interest is there among ordinary people in reviving these languages?	Jish residents wanted their children to be taught Aramaic in the local school.	Local artists perform in Sami, nurses are being trained to talk to old people.