



## LANGUAGE PREFERENCES AMONG HEARING PARENTS OF DEAF CHILDREN IN EIN MAHIL

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### **Abstract:**

The present study focuses on the complex language situation of hearing families with deaf children in Ein Mahil, a village in northern Israel, where five distinct language varieties co-exist: Colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew, Israeli Sign Language and Ein Mahil Sign Language. In this community, hearing parents must make difficult language choices for their deaf children in terms of language use in the home and at school. Data were gathered from 10 hearing parents of deaf children who did not share a fully accessible language with their children from birth. Using questionnaires, we explore language proficiency, preference, and usage as expressed by hearing parents. Findings show that deaf children in Ein Mahil are more proficient in EMSL than the dominant sign language, ISL, despite their hearing parents' preferences for ISL. That said, parents in this study indicate that each language is used for a specific purpose: Colloquial Arabic and EMSL for ideological reasons, ISL and Hebrew for instrumental reasons, and Standard Arabic for religious purposes. This study highlights the language situation faced by the minority deaf communities in Israel, particularly the importance of family and school language policies in this process.

**Keywords:** linguistic of sign languages, language development, linguistics, bilingualism, language and identity

### **1. Introduction**

Israel is a country rich in linguistic and cultural diversity. It is not unusual to hear speakers of Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, and French, among other languages, on the streets of any large city in Israel. Despite this richness, language diversity in Israel is not reflected in language policy - Hebrew is the dominant language of the State and the only official language of Israel. As a result, minority groups (indigenous and immigrant groups) need to be proficient in Hebrew to survive and succeed (Shohamy & Donitsa-Schmid, 1998).

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The same situation of language diversity and language imbalance is reflected in the *deaf* community of Israel. Israel has a unique abundance of sign languages compared to other countries, most of which emerged naturally within the last hundred years (Meir & Sandler, 2008). Israeli Sign Language (ISL) is the dominant sign language used by approximately 10,000 people. It is the language of the National Deaf Association, the education system, and sign language interpreting throughout Israel (Meir & Sandler, 2008). As a result, deaf people across Israel rely on ISL in communications with the public sector, services and education. Other sign languages in Israel are typically used in smaller deaf communities, often with a high incidence of congenital deafness compared to the wider community (Sandler *et al.*, 2005). These include deaf signing communities in Al-Sayyid, Kufr Qassem and Ein Mahil<sup>ii</sup> to name a few. For these smaller deaf communities, there is an imbalance in language status—ISL is the dominant sign language, and any local sign language is consequently considered a minority language. This study examines the case of Ein Mahil, a village in the Northern District of Israel with a large deaf community and its own sign language variety.

Deaf children in Ein Mahil are born into a multilingual environment, both in spoken and signed languages. Arabic is the primary spoken language, and Ein Mahil Sign Language (EMSL) is the primary sign language, despite their minority status compared to Hebrew and ISL. As previously mentioned, however, all minority groups in Israel must obtain proficiency in Hebrew to survive. Similarly, smaller deaf communities also need an understanding of ISL to interact with the wider deaf community or to access services provided to the deaf community. Arabic is the spoken language of deaf children in this community, and most are exposed to this in varying degrees at home (visually or through residual hearing) or when they enter school. However, the existence of a diglossia further complicates the acquisition of Arabic – there are two distinct language varieties, one spoken and one written. Therefore, deaf children in Ein Mahil are typically exposed to at least five distinct language varieties: Colloquial Arabic (SpA), Standard Arabic (MSA), Hebrew, ISL and EMSL.

This study focuses on the linguistic landscape of deaf children who grow up in Ein Mahil, a community with a large deaf population and their own local sign language. We focus our attention on the reports of hearing parents of deaf children who do not share a fully accessible language with their children. Therefore, their language choice decisions are more deliberated. The question we address in this study is: What are the language preferences and considerations for hearing parents of deaf children in Ein Mahil? In the next section, we outline the linguistic situation in Israel and, more specifically, in Ein Mahil, and we discuss the factors that determine language choice and language attitude (Sections 2.2 and 2.3). Section 3 describes our methods for eliciting questionnaire and interview responses from ten hearing parents of deaf children. In Section 4, our results show that both Colloquial Arabic and the local sign language, Ein Mahil Sign Language (EMSL), are most frequently used by deaf children in Ein Mahil. However, ISL is valued

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<sup>ii</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of sign languages in Israel. It has been noted that there are less-researched sign languages used in Arab Al-Naim, Abu Kaf, and Al-Atrash (Meir & Sandler, 2008).

by parents because of its importance in the future of their deaf children's lives. We conclude, in Section 5, that all five distinct languages are valued by parents in order for their deaf children to communicate in different contexts and with different communities, and yet the provisions necessary for the successful acquisition of each language are not equally distributed, leading to potential adverse consequences in later life.

## 2. The linguistic structure in Israel

### 2.1 Spoken languages in Israel

The language situation in Israel is closely related to its history and politics. In 1948, when the State of Israel was established, there were three official languages in Israel: Arabic, Hebrew and English<sup>iii</sup>. Hebrew played a significant role in establishing a Jewish state, and as a result, it became the dominant language in government, business, and economic matters (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999). Consequently, the citizens of Israel were encouraged to become proficient in Hebrew (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999), and this was not limited to the Jewish community. Since the establishment of the state, several legislations have been passed, in 1999 and 2018, and Hebrew is now the sole official language of Israel.

Israeli Arabs constitute around 20% of the population. For children growing up in Arab-speaking communities, Colloquial Arabic is their mother tongue, acquired naturally at home and the primary language of instruction in schools within the Arab sector. It is typical, however, for most Arab children to grow up acquiring multiple languages simultaneously. First, Arabic exists as a diglossia (Ferguson, 1959); Arab children in Israel acquire two distinct variations of Arabic, the Palestinian spoken variety of Arabic (SpA) and the standard written variety of Arabic (Modern Standard Arabic, MSA), which are syntactically, semantically, morphologically and phonologically distinct from one another. For this reason, many linguists regard Standard Arabic as a second language rather than simply a formal or written variety of Colloquial Arabic (Ibrahim & Aharon-Peretz, 2005).

Hebrew is used in various aspects of daily life, such as in the workplace, accessing health services, and studying in higher education (Amara & Mar'i, 2002). The importance of Hebrew is evident in the educational system, in which Hebrew is the first additional language taught in schools in the Arab sector (Benavot & Resh, 2003). Hebrew is a compulsory subject taught from the age of seven through to the school-leaving age. In contrast, though, Arabic is taught as a compulsory subject for only two years in Jewish schools (Ben Rafael *et al.*, 2006). The imbalance between Arabic and Hebrew educational practices in Israel is likely to increase in years to come since the passing of the second and third readings of the Basic Law (Basic Law. 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2018) regarding the status of Arabic as a language of Israel. This new law has moved the status of Arabic from official to special status (Basic Law. 19<sup>th</sup> of July, 2018).

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<sup>iii</sup> In 1922, Item 82 (*siman hamelech* 82) of the Palestine Order in Council declared: "All ordinances, official notices and official forms of the government and all official notices of local authorities and municipalities in areas to be prescribed by order of the High Commissioner, shall be published in English, Arabic and Hebrew" (Saban 2003:115; Fisherman & Fishman, 1972:499).

This study examines the language choices made by parents in Ein Mahil, an Arab-speaking community located in the Northern District of Israel near the city of Nazareth. As is the case in any Arab community in Israel, most people in Ein Mahil are multilingual. Colloquial Arabic is used in the local community, with friends and family, Standard Arabic in the educational system and specific formal settings, and Hebrew when communicating with the larger Hebrew-speaking community, as a subject at school and when attending university (Amara, 2002, 2006).

As with the spoken language community in Israel, there is great diversity in the deaf communities across Israel, which adds to the complex decisions regarding language choice for parents of deaf children.

### 2.1.1 Sign languages in Israel

ISL is the main sign language used in Israel. ISL is known as a deaf community language, and it originated with the formation of the deaf community in Israel in the 1930s. Immigrants from all over the world contributed to the signing, which was used by a few deaf Jews and Arabs already living in Jerusalem. Vocabulary items have been traced to a small number of immigrants from Germany and immigrants from elsewhere in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East who also brought their sign languages or home sign systems with them. A conventionalized sign language emerged, and today, ISL is used in a wide range of settings, including social and cultural institutions, interpreting programs, the media, pre-schools, and schools across Israel (Meir & Sandler, 2008).

In addition to ISL, several distinct sign languages are used in smaller deaf communities in Israel, including the deaf community in Ein Mahil. The sign language used by this deaf community is known as Ein Mahil Sign Language (EMSL)<sup>iv</sup>, and it differs from ISL as it originated as a village sign language<sup>v</sup>. Village sign languages arise when many deaf children are born into a relatively insular community. As a result, sign language emerges as the natural means of communication (Meir *et al.*, 2010). There are two large families in Ein Mahil with a long line of congenital deafness, and as a result, the deaf community in Ein Mahil, even today, continues to thrive. The actual number of deaf EMSL users is unknown since this language has not been researched. However, presumably, they are fewer than those estimated in Al-Sayyid and Kufr Qassem, which stands at an estimated 100 deaf signers.

The linguistic situation for deaf children from Arabic-speaking families in Israel is complicated (Meir & Sandler, 2008). In Ein Mahil, deaf children are surrounded by five distinct language varieties, and it falls on their hearing parents to make essential language choices which determine their children's success in various aspects of their daily lives. Most deaf children in Ein Mahil are born to Arabic-speaking families, but

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<sup>iv</sup> As is the case with the sign languages used in Al Sayyid and Kufr Qassem, EMSL developed separately from ISL and is an independent language. Although younger signers in Ein Mahil are now in contact with both EMSL and ISL, this is only a recent phenomenon and the degree of language transference has been largely under researched.

<sup>v</sup> Village sign languages are also known as 'indigenous sign languages' (Woodward, 2003), 'rural sign languages' (DeVos, 2011) and 'speech/sign communities' (Nonaka, 2007).

because of their deafness, they face challenges acquiring the surrounding spoken language naturally. Many deaf children, as a result, are delayed in their acquisition of Colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic and Hebrew compared to their hearing counterparts (Kawar *et al.*, 2019; Stamp, Shaban & Novogrodsky, in prep.). Because of this, invention strategies, including speech and language training, cochlear implantation or sign language training, might be suggested to hearing parents to bridge the language acquisition gap. If parents of deaf children choose sign language training, then another choice is essential, whether to acquire the local sign language, EMSL, or the primary sign language, ISL, or both.

The decision of language choice and preference can be overwhelming, and a number of factors must be considered; these are discussed in the following sections.

## **2.2 Factors that determine language choice for parents of hearing children**

In multilingual communities, the initial milestone of language socialization among children typically occurs within the family; however, as children grow, their exposure to the community and school environment influences their language choices (De Houwer, 2009; Lanza, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011). In this study, we examine the language choices of parents of deaf children from two perspectives: family language policy (Caldas, 2012; King *et al.*, 2008; Schwartz, 2010) and school language policy.

Decision-making can be complex for any parent, regardless of language background. Parents living in multilingual communities whose native language is different from the societal majority usually face a dilemma of whether to speak to their children using their mother tongue or to opt for the official language of the State (Schwartz, 2010). Studies show that parents' decisions are influenced by a number of factors, including professional advice, advice from family members (King *et al.*, 2008 p. 913), and expectations about their children's language and literacy development (Curdt-Christiansen, 2013). On the one hand, using the family language at home can increase family cohesion, intimacy, and preservation of cultural norms (Toppelberg & Collin, 2010). For example, in a qualitative study of Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, and Spanish-speaking parents in an English-majority environment in Iowa, the reasons parents gave for maintaining their native language included preservation of religion, strengthening family and moral values, continued connection with their native culture, and economic advancement (Yan, 2003). On the other hand, some speakers prefer using the country's official language at home for practical, political, social, and economic reasons (Degefa, 2004; Ferrer & Sankoff, 2004). Often, the official language is known by a more comprehensive number of speakers, and therefore, it eases communication in everyday life and is associated with greater prestige and social status (Ferrer & Sankoff, 2004). Parents of deaf children must also consider the language modality when making these critical decisions, as discussed below.

### 2.3 Factors that determine language choice for parents of deaf children

In minority language communities, children acquire their family language through early exposure at home, and only later are they exposed to the dominant language at school and in interactions with the broader society (Hamers & Blanc, 2000). For a deaf child (from a hearing family), the situation is more complex. The minority language spoken in the home is not easily accessible to them (Meir *et al.*, 2010). With limitations on speech perception, a deaf child cannot easily acquire spoken language in the same way as their hearing peers.

In the case of hearing parents with deaf children, there is another choice: communication mode or spoken language versus sign language (Marschark *et al.*, 2007). Studies examining parents' decisions regarding communication modes have often used questionnaire-based surveys, similar to the methods of the current study. Questionnaire-based surveys reveal that a range of factors influences parental decisions regarding communication mode, including expectations for their children (Crowe, Fordham, *et al.*, 2014; Crowe, McLeod, *et al.*, 2014; Li *et al.*, 2003), child's degree of hearing loss (Li *et al.*, 2003), professional advice and services provided by schools (Steinberg *et al.*, 2003; Guiberson, 2013), practical communication needs (Crowe, Fordham, *et al.*, 2014), and availability of services in schools and their proximity to home (Guiberson, 2013; Steinberg *et al.*, 2003). Borum (2012) used semi-structured interviews to explore Afrocentric cultural influences on the communication choices of 14 parents with deaf or hard-of-hearing children aged 2 to 17 years. Culturally wise, the parents expressed that accessing the oral language tradition was important. At the same time, they also wanted their children to be able to be part of both hearing and deaf worlds. Parents claimed that access to the written language was essential to be able to share their racial, ethnic and cultural heritage. While Borum's study (2012) highlights the influence of values, including cultural and socialization aspects, on parents' decisions, Steinberg and colleagues' study (2003) highlights schools' services' contribution to overall decision-making. In their study, they reported on the results of semi-structured interviews with 29 Hispanic families with deaf or hard-of-hearing children aged 4 to 14 years. Ninety-six per cent were influenced by professional advice, and eighty-six per cent by the services available at the schools attended by their children.

Similarly, other studies show the importance placed on fulfilling a happy and complete life when parents consider language choices for their deaf children. In a large-scale study which analyzed responses from 175 parents in Australia, the authors examined parents' decisions regarding the use of speech or signs (Ching *et al.*, 2013). While the use of speech was determined by the parents' own speech skills (96.9%) and the desire for their child to speak to family (91.2%) and friends (91.2%), the use of the sign was determined by the desire for the child to participate in the hearing world (63.5%), the child's ability to form friendships in future (62.2%), and the child's future literacy and academic success (55.4%). The ability to access employment in future was also an essential factor in deciding between the use of speech or sign.

In summary, parents' decisions are influenced by a range of factors. In bilingual communities, in which the societal language and the family language are different, we

see that there are competing factors: the maintenance of the family language and the participation in the wider community. When hearing parents of deaf children make language decisions often, they need to consider both their desire to communicate with their child and the availability of language provisions in schools.

### 3. Materials and Methods

This study focuses on the linguistic landscape of deaf children in Ein Mahil. We ask: What are the language preferences and uses of parents of deaf children in Ein Mahil? To this end, we address five specific research questions. First, we examine *language proficiency and usage* by deaf children and their families, as reported by hearing parents:

- 1) To what extent are deaf children proficient in the following languages: Colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew, ISL and EMSL?
- 2) What is the frequency of use of each language among deaf children in Ein Mahil? and
- 3) What are the preferred contexts for each language? Secondly, we examined the *language preferences* of hearing parents toward these languages in terms of their contribution towards the lives of their deaf children (e.g., ideological vs. instrumental)
- 4) Which languages do hearing parents prefer for their deaf child/children?
- 5) What factors contribute towards language preference? Additionally, the study highlights the conflicts between family and school language policies.

In this section, we introduce the participants, the materials and procedure, and the methods used for data coding.

#### 3.1 Participants

We interviewed five families, each with at least one deaf child (see Table 1). All hearing mothers and fathers were born in Ein Mahil, except for one mother, who was born in a nearby village. All parents are native speakers of Arabic, the dominant language of the local community. The parents' ages ranged from 42-61 years old, and all parents had a similar number of years of formal education (Mean = 12.15 years of education). Six deaf children (one family had two deaf children) were the subject of discussion. All children are profoundly deaf (on a severity scale from mild/moderate/profound). Two received cochlear implantation surgery at a young age; however, in one case, the surgery was unsuccessful, and in the other case, the child refused to wear the cochlear implant device. The children's current ages ranged from 17-27 years old, and therefore, in most cases, the children under discussion are now fully grown. This was taken as an advantage as we also discussed, as part of the interview, how the language choices affected their lives as young deaf adults.

**Table 1:** Parent and child characteristics

Family#	Parent			Child			
	Age	Gender	Age of education completed	#	Age	Gender	Age of education completed
1	54	Male	10	1	25	Male	12
1	47	Female	11				
1	54	Male	10	2	23	Male	12
1	47	Female	11				
2	55	Male	12	3	27	Female	20
2	50	Female	11				
3	61	Male	14	4	27	Male	11
3	53	Female	12				
4	42	Male	9	5	17	Female	10
4	45	Female	12				
5	47	Male	15	6	22	Male	13
5	43	Female	16				

### 3.2 Materials and Procedure

Data were collected via two different methods: a questionnaire and a short interview. Each parent was asked individually (without the presence of his/her spouse) to fill out the questionnaire in Arabic. The questionnaire included four sections:

- a) Personal information about the parent and child (place of residence, age, years of education), see Table 1 above.
- b) Parents' reports regarding **language proficiency** in five languages for themselves and their deaf and hearing children on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = low proficiency, 7 = high proficiency).
- c) Parents' reports regarding **language usage** in different settings (with family, with the Ein Mahil hearing community, at school, with the Israeli deaf community and with the wider Israeli hearing Hebrew-speaking community). For each setting, parents could choose from multiple languages (Colloquial Arabic, Written Arabic (SpA or MSA), Spoken Hebrew, Written Hebrew, EMSL or ISL; this was binary and analyzed as 1 if used, or 0 if not used).
- d) Parents' reports regarding **language preference** for their deaf child. Parents were asked to rate the following five languages in terms of preference: colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew, EMSL, and ISL. The scale ranged from 1 to 5 (1 = highest priority, 5 = lowest priority).
- e) Following this, they were asked to detail the **factors affecting their choices**. This included a list of 10 aspirations for their deaf child (e.g., obtaining a job, maintaining his/her identity, communicating with the wider hearing communities, etc.). Parents were asked to specify which of the five languages was necessary to obtain each goal (this was analyzed as one if used or 0 if not used).

Following the questionnaire, each parent was interviewed for a short time. Specifically, parents were asked to report the educational and language policies



experienced by their deaf children in Ein Mahil (or elsewhere) and present the consequences of these educational policies.

Data collection took place in the participants' homes. For three of the five families, the deaf child was present. Some parents asked their deaf child to help answer questions related to school, communicating with the larger Hebrew and Israeli deaf communities, and future careers. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, recorded on an Olympus VN-1100 PC Digital Voice Recorder, and transcribed into Arabic orthography for analysis.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

We analyzed the results as average ratings for all ten parents' responses. T-tests (two-tailed) were performed to test whether the differences across languages were statistically significant. Logistic regression was also used to test the significance of binary responses. While the dataset is small, this is the only known study examining the minority deaf community in Ein Mahil. Therefore, we hope that these results can point towards areas for future work.

## 4. Results

The results are organized into the following subsections: language proficiency, language usage, language preference and the factors affecting these decisions.

### 4.1 Language Proficiency

Parents were asked to rate their own proficiency in the five languages under investigation and to rate the proficiency of their deaf and hearing children in these languages. Table 2 shows that fathers reported their highest proficiency in Colloquial Arabic, followed by Hebrew, with a significant difference ( $t(5) = 1.353$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). They rated their proficiency in EMSL as better than ISL with a significant difference ( $t(5) = 2.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Mothers, on the other hand, reported higher proficiency in Colloquial Arabic compared to EMSL ( $t(5) = 1.93$ ,  $p = 0.041$ ) and Standard Arabic ( $t(5) = 2.8$ ,  $p = 0.009$ ). However, mothers showed lower proficiency in both Hebrew and ISL. Mothers reported a significant difference in their proficiency between EMSL and ISL ( $t(5) = 1.91$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ), and Colloquial Arabic and Hebrew ( $t(5) = -5.08$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). No significant differences were found between the reported proficiency ratings for EMSL and Standard Arabic ( $t(5) = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.3$ ).

Parents reported that their deaf children were more competent in EMSL, Hebrew and ISL, respectively than in Colloquial Arabic and Standard Arabic. Significant differences were found between reported proficiency in Hebrew and EMSL ( $t(10) = 1.98$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ), and EMSL and ISL ( $t(10) = -2.28$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ). Nevertheless, no significant differences were found between reported proficiency in Hebrew and ISL ( $t(10) = -0.4$ ,  $p = 0.34$ ) and Colloquial Arabic and Standard Arabic ( $t(10) = -1.14$ ,  $p = 0.13$ ).

**Table 2:** Language proficiency ratings in each language for mothers, fathers, and deaf and hearing children

	Colloquial Arabic		Standard Arabic		Hebrew		EMSL		ISL	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Hearing children	6.8	0.52	6	1.17	5.9	1.21	4.65	2.23	3.05	1.98
Deaf children	4.67	1.92	3.92	1.24	5.58	1.44	6.58	0.99	5.33	1.61
Hearing mothers	6.8	0.45	5.2	1.65	4.6	1.14	5.2	1.64	3.2	2.04
Hearing fathers	7	0	3.8	1.64	6.2	1.30	3.2	1.48	1.8	1.09

Regarding hearing children, parents reported that their children were more competent in Colloquial Arabic than in Standard Arabic and Hebrew in both sign languages, with significant differences. Hearing children were reported as more competent in Colloquial Arabic, and this was found to be significant compared to Standard Arabic ( $t(10) = -2.79$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), and Hebrew ( $t(12) = -3.05$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). However, they reported that they were more competent in EMSL than in ISL; this difference was significant ( $t(12) = 2$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ).

#### 4.2 Language usage and context

There was a clear relationship between language and context. Although our dataset is limited in size, we conducted a logistic regression for each language to determine the preferred context for each language (see Table 3). The contexts provided in the questionnaire were as follows: with family, with the Ein Mahil hearing community, at school, with the Israeli deaf community, and with the more comprehensive Israeli hearing Hebrew-speaking community.

**Table 3:** Significant results for language context

Language	Context	Logodds	Tokens	%	Factor weight
Colloquial Arabic	Family	9.114	12	83.3	> 0.999
	Ein Mahil hearing	8.586	12	75	> 0.999
	School	8.586	12	75	> 0.999
Spoken Hebrew	Israeli hearing	2.582	12	58.3	0.93
	Israeli deaf	0.461	12	33.3	0.613
Written Hebrew	Israeli hearing	11.862	12	100	> 0.999
	Israeli deaf	11.835	12	100	> 0.999
ISL	Israeli deaf	9.098	12	75	> 0.999
	Israeli hearing	8.584	12	66.7	> 0.999
	School	5.632	12	16.7	0.996
EMSL	Family	817.17	12	100	> 0.999
	Ein Mahil hearing	131.81	12	100	> 0.999
	School	89.54	12	75	> 0.999
	Israeli deaf	65.98	12	8.3	> 0.999

Parents reported that their deaf children used Colloquial Arabic with their families, with Ein Mahil speaking community, and at school more than in other contexts. Standard Arabic was not found to be statistically significant for the context of use because it was rarely selected. However, when it was, it was mainly used with the Ein Mahil hearing community (16.7%), with family (16.7%) and at school (16.7%). In contrast, spoken and

written Hebrew were reportedly used only in the context of the Israeli deaf and hearing communities. ISL is used with Israeli deaf and hearing communities and at school. Finally, EMSL is used with family, with the Ein Mahil hearing community, at school, and with the Israeli deaf community.

### 4.3 Language preference

Parents were asked to rank the five languages under examination, from the most important to the least important, regarding their deaf child (1= most important; 5= least important). Parents clearly preferred ISL and Colloquial Arabic, followed by Hebrew and EMSL. The differences between Colloquial Arabic and EMSL ( $t(9) = 1.9, p = 0.034$ ), Hebrew ( $t(9) = 2.17, p = 0.019$ ), and Standard Arabic ( $t(9) = -4.06, p < 0.001$ ) were found to be significant. Likewise, the differences between ISL and EMSL ( $t(9) = 1.87, p = 0.036$ ), Hebrew ( $t(9) = 2.13, p = 0.02$ ) and MSA ( $t(9) = -4, p < 0.0001$ ) were found to be significant. Standard Arabic was preferred the least (see Table 4).

**Table 4:** Language preference of hearing parents (N=12)

	Mean	SD
Colloquial Arabic	1.83	0.835
ISL	1.83	0.937
Hebrew	3.25	0.866
EMSL	3.25	1.28
Standard Arabic	4.83	0.389

### 4.4 Factors motivating language preference

To explain the motives behind parents' language rankings, parents were asked to consider ten aspirations and select which languages were necessary for their deaf child to achieve them (e.g., to get a job). The ten aspirations were to better their education, to get a job in Israel, to improve their economic status, to be socially respected, to maintain their Arabic identity, to maintain their Arab culture, to maintain their religion, to receive satisfactory medical treatments, and to ease their communication with the larger deaf community in Israel, and the larger hearing community in Israel. Any combination of the five languages could be selected (Colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew, ISL and EMSL), and therefore, each language received a binary response (e.g., important versus not important).

Because of this binary distinction, we conducted a logistic regression for each language to see which factor was considered to be the strongest predictor for language choice (see Table 4). The significant results are reported below in Table 5. Colloquial Arabic was reported as necessary for social reasons and to maintain an Arab identity. For Standard Arabic, the significant reasons were religion, Arab culture and identity. There were multiple reasons reported for Hebrew: communication with hearing people, getting a job, better education, satisfactory medical treatment, improved economic status, communication with the deaf and social reasons. ISL was reported as necessary for getting a job, communicating with the deaf community, getting a better education, and receiving satisfactory medical treatment. Finally, the use of EMSL was reported as

important for social respect, maintaining an Arab identity, culture, and religion, satisfactory medical treatment and getting a job.

**Table 5:** Significant predictors for language choice

Language	Factor	Logodds	Tokens	%	Factor weight
Colloquial Arabic	Social	16.917	12	100	> 0.999
	Arab identity	14.394	12	100	> 0.999
Standard Arabic	Religion	924.583	12	100	> 0.999
	Arab culture	13.368	12	58.3	> 0.999
	Arab identity	11.933	12	25	> 0.999
Hebrew	Communication with hearing	2590.130	12	100	> 0.999
	Job	858.711	12	100	> 0.999
	Education	780.602	12	100	> 0.999
	Medical	406.604	12	100	> 0.999
	Economic	286.017	12	100	> 0.999
	Communication with deaf	234.829	12	83.3	> 0.999
	Social	210.261	12	8.3	> 0.999
ISL	Job	125.939	12	100	> 0.999
	Communication with deaf	50.973	12	100	> 0.999
	Education	37.447	12	100	> 0.999
	Medical	30.908	12	100	> 0.999
EMSL	Social	10.426	12	91.7	> 0.999
	Arab identity	9.099	12	75	> 0.999
	Arab culture	8.304	12	58.3	> 0.999
	Medical	7.207	12	33.3	0.999
	Religion	6.209	12	16.7	0.998
	Job	5.348	12	8.3	0.995

These results represent differences in terms of ideological and instrumental motivations for language choice. In order to investigate this further, the aspirations were divided into those which represent ideological motivations (i.e., to be socially respected, to maintain their Arabic identity, to maintain their Arab culture, to maintain their religion, and to ease their communication with the larger deaf community in Israel, and the larger hearing community in Israel) and those which represent instrumental motivations (i.e., to better their education, to get a job in Israel, to improve their economic status, to receive satisfactory medical treatments. Colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic and EMSL were significantly predicted by ideological reasons and Hebrew and ISL by instrumental reasons (see Table 6 below).

**Table 6:** Significant predictors for language choice (ideological vs. instrumental)

Language	Factor	Logodds	Tokens	%	Factor weight
Colloquial Arabic	Ideological	2.122	48	95.8	0.893
	Instrumental	-2.122	72	27.8	0.107
Standard Arabic	Ideological	17.591	48	45.8	> 0.999
	Instrumental	-17.591	72	0	< 0.001
Hebrew	Instrumental	3.703	72	97.2	0.976
	Ideological	-3.703	48	2.1	0.024
ISL	Instrumental	3.703	72	97.2	0.976
	Ideological	-3.703	48	2.1	0.024
EMSL	Ideological	1.509	48	60.4	0.819
	Instrumental	-1.509	72	6.9	0.181

## 5. Discussion

This study examined language proficiency, usage, preferences, and factors affecting language preference in five languages from the perspectives of ten parents of deaf children in Ein Mahil. The question raised was: What are the language preferences and uses of parents of deaf children in Ein Mahil? The findings indicate that deaf children in Ein Mahil, as reported by their parents, have a unique language situation. They employ different languages with different degrees of proficiency in various settings. We examine the findings and parents' responses as part of an interview, concerning family language planning and school policy. Additionally, we consider how the family and school environments contribute towards the deaf children's experience, in terms of job opportunities and psychological well-being. We conclude that parents place an equal importance on Colloquial Arabic and ISL.

### 5.1 Family language planning

The combined findings reveal that Colloquial Arabic is the preferred language of use in the home for hearing family members in Ein Mahil, both in terms of proficiency, usage and preference. This is not surprising since all of the families live in an Arabic-speaking community. That said, the results indicate that all family members are multilingual with varying degrees of proficiency in the five languages available daily. Regarding usage, Colloquial Arabic and EMSL are mostly associated with the family environment. On the contrary, though, for deaf children, their proficiency in Colloquial Arabic was rated as one of the lowest. Rather, parents reported that deaf children show the highest proficiency in EMSL, Hebrew and ISL. This highlights the contrast in language proficiency across different family members within the home – deaf children are most proficient in EMSL, and the rest of the family in Colloquial Arabic.

### 5.2 School language policy

Typically, Arab children in Israel are exposed to Colloquial Arabic at home and in the local community and Standard Arabic at school by around the age of six (Saiegh-Haddad,

2018). Our data reinforce this separation in terms of the domain of use; colloquial Arabic is reportedly used with family, while Standard Arabic is used at school.

On average, parents reported that their deaf children were least proficient in Standard Arabic. In the interviews, parents emphasized the difficulties faced by their deaf children when acquiring Standard Arabic in school. One parent explained that Standard Arabic is a "complicated" subject for deaf children compared to other languages:

*"We had six years of catastrophe with her [daughter], for the Bagrut (high school exams, administered prior to graduation), she tried several times with Math, English and Arabic (Standard Arabic), yes, Arabic. Hebrew, she got it from the beginning; she did not have any trouble with it. Arabic, she tried it several times, but it didn't work out. For her, Hebrew is easier than Arabic, to study Hebrew was easier than Arabic. In Arabic, there is poetry, literature, a complicated grammar, and the real trouble she had with it is that each word has multiple unconnected meanings; therefore, it was difficult for her to understand the instructions and the sentences. She always got the wrong meaning...that was her problem."*

Interviews with the parents highlighted the importance of the school policy experienced by each deaf child in Ein Mahil. They explained that the educational routes available in Ein Mahil for deaf children are limited. Until 1996, deaf children were sent to the small Franciscan school connected to the Saint Vincent De Paul-French Hospital in Nazareth. Then, a class for deaf children was opened in the local elementary school in Ein Mahil. Children in this class were taught through a combination of Colloquial Arabic and EMSL. However, neither Hebrew nor ISL was introduced. One parent described their children's experience in this class:

*"What made him most upset was the transition to junior high; they all moved to the junior high school while my kid stayed in the same class in elementary school, since there was no place to move him to."*

When this elementary class closed, a new school called *Karim El-Sahib* in Nazareth was opened in 2013. Today, parents explained that there are two local options for deaf children in Ein Mahil: to study at *Karim El-Sahib* in Nazareth or at *Girnada* in Kafr Kanna. Parents' central concern when making language choices is the importance of Hebrew and ISL in continuing their children's studies. Deaf children must know ISL and Hebrew to be accepted into academic institutions or to earn a vocational diploma. As shown in the questionnaire responses, parents agreed that ISL and Hebrew are important for educational opportunities and finding a job. This also explains that parents prefer schools that offer ISL over those that offer EMSL. One parent stated:

*"The schools know that ISL and Hebrew are important for this kid, to know what to do with his life in Israel. They do nothing about it. They have this contract with the rehabilitation center and the National Insurance Institution (referring to deaf children's acceptance to the vocational institute in Kfar Sava), but under the condition that they have some proficiency in ISL and Hebrew, but nothing is done."*

In sum, parents' decisions are based on important considerations about communication needs, which prove to be most helpful for their children in the future, as shown in previous studies (Hyde & Punch, 2011).

### **5.3 Beyond the home & school environments**

The educational policy offered to deaf children in Ein Mahil leaves parents with concern over the future of their children. After graduation from high school, parents explained that many of their children experienced difficulties finding a job. A father described the situation for his 27-year-old deaf son who has never had a job:

*"He can't adapt, working is difficult...why is that? He does not talk and does not hear, so it is difficult to find him any appropriate type of job. It is difficult for him to stay this way, because no one accepts him. Can he work in construction? He does not hear. There are cranes! No way! No one will accept him even if he wants it."*

Another father described the case of his two unemployed deaf sons (25 & 23 years old):

*"This affects Haskell the most, he is more psychologically affected by the fact that he has nothing to do in life; no one accepts him. He tried and tried, but they all say you do not fit the job, do not fit the job. This leaves him feeling very bad."*

Some deaf children, after graduating from high school, attend an educational institution offered to them under the sponsorship of the Israeli National Insurance Institution. Parents explained that this option is problematic for several reasons. The institute is located in Kfar Sava, a city 103 kilometres away from Ein Mahil, and students must reside there. Because it is a vocational institution, the subjects offered are limited; students can study to become chefs, hairdressers, or embroiderers; however, not all deaf students are interested in these professions. As highlighted in previous studies, parents in this study emphasize the availability of school services and their closeness to home (Guiberson, 2013; Steinberg *et al.*, 2003).

### **5.4 Best of both worlds**

When parents were asked to rate the five languages in terms of preference, Colloquial Arabic and ISL were ranked as the highest. Similar to other studies (Steinberg *et al.*, 2003), parents do not decide between communication modes (e.g., signed vs. spoken). Moreover, it seems that the combination of these two languages complements one

another by addressing both ideological as well as instrumental motivations. In this study, parents associated Colloquial Arabic with ideological motivations such as social reasons and maintaining Arab identity. Importantly, Colloquial Arabic is the home language, the parents' mother tongue. Interestingly, Hebrew was not ranked as one of the most important languages by parents of deaf children despite its wider societal status. This finding signals the importance of the local situation and of deafness in this study. For parents in Ein Mahil, learning ISL was more important than Hebrew as ISL is crucial for finding a job, communicating with deaf people, finding better educational opportunities and accessing medical treatment.

Regardless of the preference for colloquial Arabic and ISL, these were not chosen to the detriment of Hebrew, EMSL, and standard Arabic. In this study, parents indicated that the choice of language is largely dependent on different motivations and contexts. Hebrew, for example, while rarely used with family or at school, is used in particular settings with the wider deaf and hearing community outside of Ein Mahil. Therefore, Hebrew is crucial for later stages of life or in specific situations, such as accessing health services. The role of EMSL might seem overshadowed by the importance of ISL. However, parents expressed negative attitudes towards the loss of EMSL. Furthermore, parents reported that the use of EMSL is essential for social reasons, for maintaining Arab identity, culture and religion, for medical treatment, religion, and for job opportunities. EMSL is the mother tongue of the deaf community in Ein Mahil, reflecting their identity and solidarity with the Arab deaf community.

Parents ranked Standard Arabic as the least important language. Despite this, Standard Arabic was reported as important for maintaining religion (similar to Borum, 2012), and parents agreed that Arabic is an important part of Arab identity for deaf people, regardless of proficiency.

## 6. Conclusion

Importantly, this study highlights the balance parents consider when making language decisions for their deaf children. Parents combine the importance of family language – Colloquial Arabic - and the importance of school policy - ISL. As shown in other studies (Ching *et al.*, 2013), the ability to access employment in future was an important factor in determining language choice in this study. The findings from this study demonstrate the unique role each language plays in the linguistic landscape of this deaf community. Similar to Shohamy and Donitsa-Schmidt's findings (1998), which found that the Arab-speaking minority (Muslims *et al.*) perceive Hebrew to be the language of survival in Israel, the parents in this study also consider ISL and Hebrew as the main languages that contribute towards the success of their deaf children in Israel. However, parents expressed their dissatisfaction that this was not reflected in school policy.

Future research should replicate the study in other Arab deaf minorities across Israel, such as in Al-Sayyid or Kufr Qassem, to test whether these preferences and attitudes are replicated. The educational policy and opportunities available to deaf children in the northern district, in general, and in Ein Mahil, in particular, should be



examined. These findings can inform the linguistic practice of ISL across Israel to ensure that linguistic services are made accessible to all communities in Israel.

Israel, although a multilingual state, has one official language, Hebrew. It is clear from this study that while ISL is not the only sign language used across Israel, it is most important in deaf education, significantly higher education. For this reason, ISL should also be recognized as an official language to ensure that the significant role of ISL in the educational policy of deaf children in the Arab sector is also made fully accessible. This should not, however, be at the expense of losing any of Israel's local sign languages, such as EMSL. This study has certainly highlighted that all languages under investigation - Colloquial Arabic, Standard Arabic, Hebrew, ISL and EMSL - are valued.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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