

The role of the Ulpan in constructing Israeli national identity in new immigrants.

Israel has a unique system of state-sponsored intensive language courses for new immigrants, comprising at least five months of free instruction to every new citizen of the country. Officially, these language courses, or Ulpanim (plural), have a dual goal: to teach the Modern Hebrew language, and assimilate the newcomer into Israeli culture and society (Perlmutter 1994). Maybaum (2007, unpublished material) argues that the Ulpan also has an important unofficial function, which is to bridge the gap between the new Israeli immigrant's pre-existing Jewish identity and the new Israeli national identity they will construct as they enter Israeli society.

Myhill (2004) and Spolsky (1996) agree that ancestry and religion, and not everyday spoken language, have traditionally been the features by which Jews define themselves as a people. At the same time, the modern western society views language as an essential element of the definition of any nation (Myhill 2004). Because of this discrepancy, the Jewish state (Ben-Gurion, et. al. 1948) had to find a way combine the two differing concepts of people/nation into one, in order to construct a convincing national identity (Anderson 2004; Handelman 1994). The Ulpan serves as a crucial component of the this fusion process by placing language at the center of the immigrant's absorption experience, and by embedding traditional Jewish values within the modern language-centric nation framework (Maybaum 2007, unpublished material).

Previous studies dealing with the issue of national identity in the Ulpan context have focused on the construction of Israeli national identity from the perspective of the teacher, the institution, and classroom materials (Golden 2001; 2002), but the student's Ulpan experience has not been thoroughly analyzed in the same way. It is difficult, therefore, to know whether the Ulpan's stated goals of integrating culture, language, and identity as envisioned by the Israeli government are in fact being achieved.

In the current study, I analyze new immigrants' constructions of Israeli national identity while enrolled in an Ulpan. Questionnaires in English, French, and Spanish were administered to forty new immigrants to Israel who are enrolled in either a rural, Kibbutz Ulpan program in the north of Israel, or an urban Ulpan setting in Jerusalem. The questionnaire was designed to elicit participants' attitudes and beliefs about the Jewish and Israeli identities respectively, as well as the perceived role of the Hebrew language in the construction of those identities. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to analyze the data. In particular, an experimental magnitude estimation methodology will be used to enable a full statistical analysis of attitude questions beyond what would be possible using traditional ranking systems. The results from the questionnaires will provide an in-depth profile of newly immigrated Ulpan participants' conceptualization of Israeli national identity. This can then be contrasted with studies focusing on the Israeli government's official representation of the nation's identity, as well as results from studies examining native-born Israelis' constructions of national identity.

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