Careless Juxtapositions: Hebrew and Thai in the Central Arava Region of Southern Israel

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The Central Arava is a sparsely populated, mostly agricultural region in southern Israel. It is twice the area of Singapore, but is home only to approximately 2,800 Hebrew-speaking Israelis and a slightly higher number (ca. 2,900) of Thai migrant workers. The presence of Thai workers in the region dates back to an Israeli government decision from 1989, which aimed at reducing the country’s dependence on Palestinian workers and paved the way for the arrival of foreign workers from various parts of the world. Although Thai workers are contracted for agricultural work in all parts of the country, their presence in the Central Arava creates a unique configuration in which Thais numerically form at least as significant a group as Hebrew-speaking Jews.

Most of the Thai workers are young men who come to Israel without their families and leave after a couple of years. They do not have any viable option of becoming permanent residents, let alone citizens of Israel. Unlike Israeli Arabs or Jewish immigrants, they are not even typically recognized as a minority group in Israeli discourse, rendering them virtually invisible in Israeli society.

This study, focusing on the Central Arava region, can therefore be seen as an example of localities and temporalities in which a disempowered ethnic group outnumbers the hegemonic one. Using a linguistic landscape approach (Jaworski & Thurlow 2010; Shohamy & Gorter 2009; Shohamy 2012), the study will seek to explore the visibility and vitality of the Thai language as well as its interactions with the Hebrew language. It will be shown that while the presence of Thai is barely recognized by official authorities, the Thai population is directly addressed in several types of signage, and some intriguing interplay exists between Hebrew and Thai and their respective speakers.

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