

Milon Even-Shoshan, Revisited

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The lexicographer Avraham Even-Shoshan entitled his dictionary, published in 1948, *Milon Hedash* [*New Dictionary*]. This title was changed, in a later edition, to *ha-Milon ha-Hadash* [*The New Dictionary*]. Now that Even-Shoshan is no longer alive, the title was changed to *Milon Even-Shoshan* [*Even-Shoshan Dictionary*, (ESD)]. This name was deemed proper, on one hand, to express the esteem and admiration felt toward the founder and first editor, and, on the other hand, to formally endorse the name by which the first *New Dictionary* has become known. Now, with this publication, Avraham Even-Shoshan joins Noah Webster, Paul Robert, Pierre Larousse, and other compilers of monolingual dictionaries that bear the name of their author. Even-Shoshan not only gained the privilege of having his name become synonymous with Israeli Hebrew lexicography, but he is also seen by many Israelis as the symbol of standard Hebrew.

The sub-heading of ESD is “A General and Comprehensive Lexicon of Contemporary Hebrew Combined as Derived from all Hebrew Periods”. This was indeed the description of the dictionary from its inception. The dictionary attempts to be, as far as possible, a complete compendium of everyday spoken and written Hebrew, and, being a general dictionary, it intentionally does not include a lot of scientific and technological terminology, sufficing with words and expressions that educated people may encounter in non-professional reading and conversation.

Another characteristic of the dictionary is that it is constructed in a manner that describes the vocabulary of contemporary Hebrew in combination with all its historical periods. This method is based on the assumption that present-day Hebrew cannot be properly understood without considering it as yet another stage in the long history of the language. No language exists on its own without reference to its history, certainly not Hebrew, especially regarding the most common words inherited from the Biblical and Talmudic periods. Thus, the vocabulary of the Hebrew language has increased without deleting old words and senses. Moreover, disconnecting Modern Hebrew words from their past would mean disconnecting them from the heart of the religious, cultural and literary legacy

stored in the Hebrew language throughout the generations. Even-Shoshan correctly decided to preserve the uniformity of the Hebrew language by indicating the period (Biblical, Talmudic, Medieval, Modern and Modern Foreign) in which the word and meaning became part of the lexicon for Hebrew speakers.

ESD, then, is characterized by documenting and interpreting Israeli contemporary Hebrew (Modern Hebrew), including many foreign and non-standard words and idioms, as well as all the words that appear in the Old Testament with their accepted meanings, and a large selection of Talmudic and medieval words and meanings. The reason for this is, as Even-Shoshan wrote in the Preface to the first edition: “There is almost no word, as uncommon as it might be, which the Hebrew reader might not encounter by chance, through reading or conversing, and it is his right that his dictionary explain it to him. It is, then, better for the dictionary to ‘err’ here and there by including more words, than by leaving out words which in contemporary Hebrew may be considered as ‘dead’. Yet, it is not impossible that, one of these days, our language will revive these words in their original form or with some minor change.” Even-Shoshan well expressed the dominant passive role of any general monolingual dictionary. A dictionary of this kind is intended first of all for understanding unfamiliar and unclear words, which a reader may encounter, and also for enriching the linguistic knowledge about these words, including linguistic history.

Even-Shoshan’s mixture of old and new is not very different from that of the great European monolingual dictionaries. These dictionaries, especially those dedicated to national languages, are distinguished by associating a contemporary language with its historical sources and roots. A national language is not a mere vehicle for communication; it also preserves culture. Therefore, listing words and describing their present usage without associating them to their past, strips them of nuances that can be grasped only by knowing their historical background.

The language that is inscribed, described and interpreted in ESD is standard, normative and correct Hebrew, provided that the words defined are not marked as colloquial or slang. Evidence of how Even-Shoshan’s various editions have

been considered as the authoritative dictionary of normative language can be found in written verdicts of Israeli courts, which based their decisions concerning the interpretation of disputed words on Even-Shoshan's definitions. Sometimes the court accords the dictionary the explicit title *normative*. For example, a verdict given by the Jerusalem District Court sitting as an appellate court in 1996 (criminal appeal 96/19; see also *Leshonenu La'am* 47.65, 1997) says: "...we have brought above the definition of Even-Shoshan dictionary, the normative dictionary of the last decades".

ESD is in fact the only new Hebrew dictionary constructed in an integrated manner, which is characteristic of dictionaries known by the designation 'academic'. As with other academic dictionaries, it is general and comprehensive, and, at the same time, standard. Like them, it describes the contemporary linguistic facts with a strong inclination to historical and etymological facts. Like them, technical and scientific terms are only partially represented, and encyclopedic items and information is restricted. And, as in any regular academic dictionary, the most important element is the standard language. Standard language entries are treated with the utmost attention and are described in full detail. They are usually accompanied by quotations with exact references. The grammar, morphology (roots and stems), and syntax appendices provide indispensable tools for the comprehensive description of standard language.

The decision to retain the policy of the former editions regarding vocalized spelling, and fully punctuate all words according to the rules of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, is also congruent with viewing the dictionary as intended for all Hebrew speakers and students. Native speakers of Hebrew are also included in its student population, not because Hebrew is unique in being still in a state of transformation from a language preserved in books into a modern living one, but because every language that serves as a cultural and literary medium is always in the process of being learned. There can be no doubt about the importance of vocalized spelling for all Hebrew speakers, and especially for students of Hebrew, whether native or non-native speakers. If a dictionary attempts to be user-friendly, it cannot do without sufficient spelling,

not only with respect to words which users look up, but also for definitions and quotations. As Even-Shoshan wrote in the preface to the first edition: "The full and exact spelling illuminates the eyes of the reader, it eliminates doubts and mistakes when reading a quotation, and thereby facilitates comprehension of the subject matter. Also, vocalized spelling opens the dictionary before larger and more popular circles – students, new immigrants and others".

The new and updated ESD undertook the task of including all the lexical, grammatical, vowel indications, and syntactical innovations that were created after the last edition of the dictionary was published, as well as those created before the last edition but which, for whatever reason, were not included in it.

The lexical innovations may be in the form of new Hebrew words (neologisms), standard or non-standard, or foreign. They may also appear as new meanings added to old words or as idiomatic phrases. Thousands of new lexical items found a place in the new edition, from every corner of life and all types of writing and speech, whether created spontaneously by speakers or writers, or coined by the Academy. Among the sources from which they were drawn, it is worth mentioning the vast corpus of fiction written since the early 1970s, which was not cited in previous editions.

Finally, although ESD assembles colloquial words and meanings, and to some extent even words that may be considered gross and vulgar, spelling always follows the standard grammatical rules. The dictionary also takes no consideration of the fact that many users of the language, including interviewees on radio and television, pronounce certain words in a non-standard way. An academic general language dictionary is not meant to reflect everything that happens in the language. Ungrammatical forms and pronunciations may become part of language (or of a subset of it) some day, but they may also disappear. ESD, as any general monolingual dictionary, is pre-eminently designed to serve as a practical, academic, standard dictionary, and as such, does not include information about inconsistency or instability concerning pronunciation.



Milon Even-Shoshan

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