

Comments on Duolingo Hebrew Course

First of all, many thanks to the developers of this course. It has been a fun ride, and I look forward to continuing learning Hebrew from DL as the course, and my abilities, develop. I particularly enjoy the humor in many of the sentences. The genius of Duolingo is that it makes language learning fun, with both humor and gamification helping the cause. תודה רבה

These notes reflect my own experience with the course, which may or may not match the experience of others. Hopefully they can help you understand what does and doesn't work, and continue to improve the course.

Difficulty:

The Duolingo Hebrew course is much more difficult than any of the European language courses I have completed (namely Italian, Spanish, French and German).

There are several reasons for this. First, Hebrew is intrinsically harder than European languages to a native speaker of a European language. After all, (Indo-)European languages all share a lot of vocabulary and grammar, and so build on one another. Hebrew is another thing entirely, and has to be learned from scratch.

Second, the “strength” meters on the individual Hebrew modules decay **much** faster than those of the other languages I’ve encountered. In Italian/Spanish/French/German, I would learn a module, be given a strengthening exercise a few days later, then maybe a second one a week after that, and perhaps a third within the first month. In Hebrew I’d typically be asked to do a strengthening three times in the first week, and another half dozen times in the rest of the first month. In one case, I was asked to do a strengthening **immediately** after finishing a module, and it took two passes to make the leaf gold! Perhaps this accelerated pace is necessary to learn Hebrew (see intrinsic difficulty, above), but it’s still a lot to ask.

As a result, it took me roughly twice as many XP’s to finish the Hebrew tree as to finish any of the European trees. In the European languages, most of my XP’s at the time that I finished the tree came from learning the modules themselves. In Hebrew, the majority came from “strengthening”.

Third, there are no pronunciation drills. I understand that this is a technically difficult feature to implement, but its absence makes the strengthening exercises **much** more difficult, both because we don’t get to practice with the sound of the language, and because pronunciation drills are easy. Even if the other kinds of Hebrew exercises were of equal difficulty with the analogous exercises in Italian/Spanish/French/German (and they’re not), a Hebrew module with no “gimme” pronunciation questions would still be harder than the others. (I don’t understand the inner workings of Duolingo, but these harder questions, and the resulting lower success rate, might also contribute to the rapid decay of the strength gauges.)

I’m not saying that these difficulties are all bad, and that the course should be watered down! It does take work to learn Hebrew, and you are making us work. However, you should understand just how **much** you are asking when you calibrate your settings. I suspect it’s a lot more than you think it is.

First checkpoint: Learning the basics

The beginning of the course is very well designed. It works well, and seems to be fairly well debugged. Learning to type in Hebrew wasn't easy, and made the first few modules take a **very** long time, but after a while I got the hang of it.

My biggest problems have been with spelling. You never give a clear explanation of when to insert vavs and yuds to represent vowels! Often the long E sound is represented by a yud, but sometimes the yud is skipped (especially on verbs and gerunds), and sometimes it is doubled (also on verbs). Sometimes a long O is represented by a vav (as in כֹּתֵב) and sometimes it isn't (as in אִמְנוּת). Sometimes a long A sound is two yuds, and sometimes it's just one.

To make matters worse, many of the multiple-choice problems (mostly later in the course) build on this exact point. The exercise might have a correct spelling of a sentence, at least according to what we've been taught so far, together with a different spelling of the same words. After I click on the one we've been taught, I'm told "Wrong! Both are accepted spellings."

Of course, you can't change the irregular and sometimes inconsistent spellings of Hebrew, any more than an English or French teacher can change the (even more bizarre!) spellings that appear in those languages. שֵׁ זֶה מֵה' ! However, you could provide more guidance in dealing with this confusion.

Binyanim:

The lessons that introduce the seven binyanim pose two challenges. One, which is relatively easy, is to learn the grammar. (Essentially, learning the conjugation table, with modifications for short roots and final-heh verbs). The other, which is harder, is to learn a lot of new verbs. These goals get in each other's way. I recommend splitting each of these modules in half, to be learned at different stages of the course. In the first, you could introduce a modest number of verbs and drill the grammar in question. In the second, you could expand the vocabulary. Or the additional verbs could be postponed to the existing modules where we learn additional grammar, such as the past and future tenses for those binyanim.

The German course is a good model for this strategy. It has a huge number of modules (over 120), but each module is fairly short, and the hardest topics are spread out over the course.

Prepositions:

One of the hardest things about learning Hebrew (or any other language) is the use of prepositions. Hebrew often uses b' or l' or m' where English uses a direct object or a totally different preposition. This is an area that desperately needs more explanation. For instance, you could provide tables of verbs that take different prepositions and explain some of the more common contrasts with English.

For reference, the German course contains a long explanation saying which verbs take the accusative or dative (or, less frequently, genitive) case, and which can take either depending on meaning. The exact same explanation gets repeated whenever we learn or review each of these cases, because it's still relevant. A similar description of which Hebrew verbs take b' versus l' versus m' versus al versus a

direct object, perhaps specialized to each binyan and repeated when we learn the past/future of that binyan, would be extremely helpful.

Transliterations versus translations:

Some of the later modules, especially Festivals and Israel, don't so much define words as just transliterate them. You define מטקות as "matkot", and "משלוח מנות" as "mishloach manot". That information doesn't help if you aren't already familiar with Purim customs and Israeli beach games, and is unnecessary if you are. Sometimes you do need to use a transliteration when there isn't an equivalent English word, but you use transliterations even when there are good English equivalents. For instance, you define "סביבון" and סופגניות as "sivivon" and "sufganiyot" rather than as "top" (or "dreidel") and "jelly donuts". (Also, how can you talk about Hanukah without even mentioning potato pancakes, aka latkes?!)

Some Hebrew or Hebrew/Arabic words, like falafel and pita and matzah (also spelled matza or matzo), have been incorporated into English, so of course the preferred translation of מצה is matzah, not "unleavened bread". These words have perfectly good English plurals that should also be used: falafels and pitas and matzahs (not matzot). Many of these words also have multiple generally accepted spellings in English: Hanukah has over a dozen! By the way, many of the spellings of holidays that you insist on in the course are different from the ones most commonly used in the English speaking Diaspora.

Major glitches:

One glitch, which is likely to improve over time, is the relatively small number of sentences. You make us "strengthen" the skills so often that we wind up doing the same sentences over and over and over again. This teaches memorization of that particular sentence, and the possibly quirky usages in it (see below), but not how to actually compose and understand and modify Hebrew sentences.

A second glitch is the quality of the recordings. The male voice is generally good, with clear enunciation, but the female voice isn't. She frequently slurs words together, blurs (or even omits) consonants, or pauses in the middle of a word. She also sometimes speaks very, very fast. At the end of the course, having a few rapid-fire sentences is probably a good exercise, especially since real speakers of Hebrew (or English, or any other language) frequently do blur their speech. But in the middle or at the beginning of the course, with no "turtle" feature available, listening to the female voice is often an exercise in frustration.

A third problem is the large number of **very** complicated sentences. Again, having a few of these is probably good training, but repeatedly wrestling with a sentence of many parts, where there are a dozen opportunities for making a mistake, can be frustrating.

The fourth big glitch is the course's failure to be flexible in recognizing correct usages in Hebrew. I'm obviously not an expert in Hebrew, but the comments from natives confirm that many perfectly good Hebrew sentences get rejected. Examples include using על יד instead of ליד, or יש ל(משהו) rather than יש ל(משהו), or צריך rather than חייב. (On that last one, you translate צריך as "have to" and חייב as "must", but those are pretty much interchangeable in English. If they're not interchangeable in Hebrew, then you have to (need to? must?) explain their different usages at some point.)

But the biggest glitch, by far, is the course's failure to be flexible in recognizing correct usages in English. To make things worse, the pattern of what is or isn't accepted is inconsistent. Sometimes you are looking for an English construction that parallels the Hebrew (e.g. using a plural word where in English we would normally use the singular) and sometimes you insist that the English be natural and **not** be parallel to the Hebrew.

English is a very flexible language, with many ways to say a given thing. You might say that somebody is standing in the entrance to the court, or at the entrance of the court, or in/at the entrance of the courthouse, and those descriptions all match the same situation. A person can be hurt, be injured, get hurt, or get injured, and it all describes the same fall from his bicycle. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the same thing as the Foreign Ministry (or, in the USA, the State Department). I could go on.

The point is that there are often many more correct ways to translate a Hebrew sentence into English than DL Hebrew is currently prepared to accept. Instead of concentrating on making sense of the Hebrew, I often found myself trying to remember the last time I did that sentence, and guessing which particular English construction you might be demanding. Sometimes I would make the same English "mistake" (actually a correct usage) several times in the same session! These "mistakes" would then register in how well DL thought I understood the Hebrew, and how many times I would be asked to re-strengthen the skill.

This may sound like a petty complaint, and in truth the total amount of time I've lost to these errors probably **is** a small fraction of the time I've spent on DL Hebrew. However, the frustration is gigantic. Learning a language requires motivation, as you grope for a word that you only half-remember, or struggle to make sense of a half-understood grammatical rule. Getting called wrong when you actually get something right feels like being cheated, and turns (productive) enthusiasm into (highly counterproductive) frustration and anger.

The genius of Duolingo is that it makes language learning **fun**. "It's not a chore; it's a game!" However, every time that I have to parse an unintelligible spoken sentence, every time I make a mistake translating an unreasonably long sentence into Hebrew, and every time I have a correct (Hebrew or English) answer rejected, it stops feeling like a game. At those times it becomes a chore all over again.

I don't want to end on a negative note. I have learned a **lot** from doing your course, and I'm very grateful for your having put it together. I certainly don't want to undercut your own enthusiasm and replace it with anger! If you think that these criticisms are inaccurate or unfair (and some of them probably are), then please ignore them. But to the extent that my comments hit the mark, I hope that you can use them to improve the DL Hebrew experience for the next generation of learners.

Lorenzo Sadun
Professor of Mathematics
University of Texas