



A Quick Win:

How to Fix the Language Barrier in Israel's Digital Financial System

Abstract:

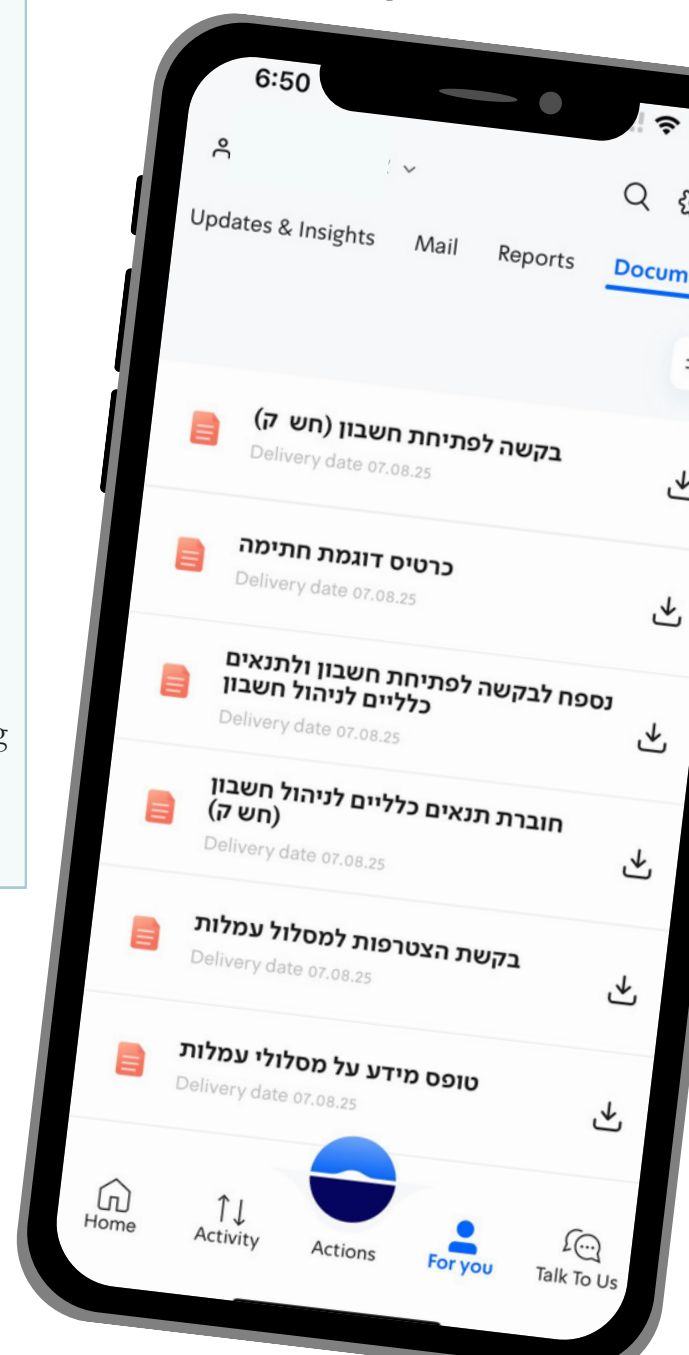
Israel's online financial system excludes **hundreds of thousands** of citizens, residents, and foreign partners due to Hebrew-only digital banking interfaces, from websites to mobile applications.

Unlike peer economies such as Singapore, Ireland, or the UAE, Israel provides **no comprehensive multilingual access to financial services**. This puts immigrants, foreign residents and investors, and Arab citizens at a disadvantage, while deterring foreign investors and entrepreneurs.

Our analysis shows that banks' **modest investments** in translation and localization could deliver **significant returns**: new customers, improved trust, higher revenue, and better economic transparency.

This paper applies product management best practices from Israel's high-tech sector, proposing a concrete roadmap for banks and new financial competitors to adopt within 12 months.

A screenshot of the Bank Leumi English app version taken on August 20th, 2025



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Israel has 4.5 million speakers of languages other than Hebrew. Yet digital financial services remain almost exclusively Hebrew-only.

Israeli banks overwhelmingly offer Hebrew-only interfaces. Our 2025 review of 10 banks and 5 credit card companies found that **no institution provides complete, robust, and fully usable English or Arabic digital services**. Language access increases economic efficiency, is a lever for reducing economic informality, expanding the taxable, banked economy, and strengthening the inclusiveness and competitiveness of its financial system.

By the numbers

- **Foreign-born Israelis:** 1.8 million people (20.1% of Israel's residents);¹
- **Dual nationals:** Over 300,000 Israelis hold passports from the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, or South Africa;²
- **Foreign residents:** 248,000 (incl. 195,000 legal foreign workers, 26,000 asylum-seekers, and 11,000 foreign students);³
- **Arab citizens:** 2.1 million, of which 13% are unbanked. 17% do not read Hebrew, and 12% do not speak it.⁴

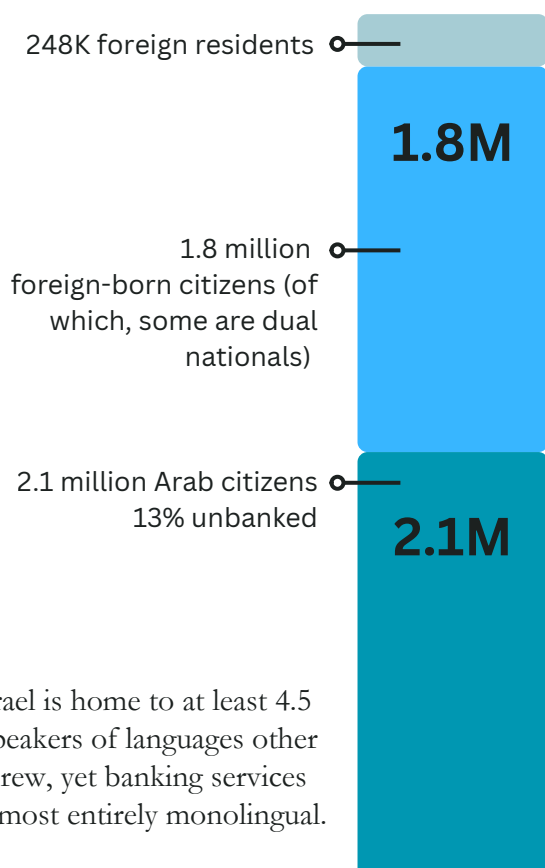


Fig. 1: Israel is home to at least 4.5 million speakers of languages other than Hebrew, yet banking services remain almost entirely monolingual.

While the problem of language accessibility is highlighted in the digital sphere, it extends to lack of language accessibility in bank branches and in other communication channels like customer support.

In a 2024 [report](#) published by The Economic Integration Org, 40% of Olim from the 2022 Aliya wave reported serious language barriers in the banking system.

Meanwhile, in other sectors, Israeli companies have already successfully localized apps and websites, providing language accessibility to millions of people. (*i.e. IEC, Pango, El Al, Bit by Hapoalim, Israel Railways, Gett, Wolt, RavKav Online, Aliya Ministry App, etc.*)

¹ [International Migration Outlook 2024 \(OECD data\)](#) / CBS Israel

² [Times of Israel](#) 2023;

³ CBS - Foreign Residents in Israel

⁴ European University Institute / [OutRush](#)

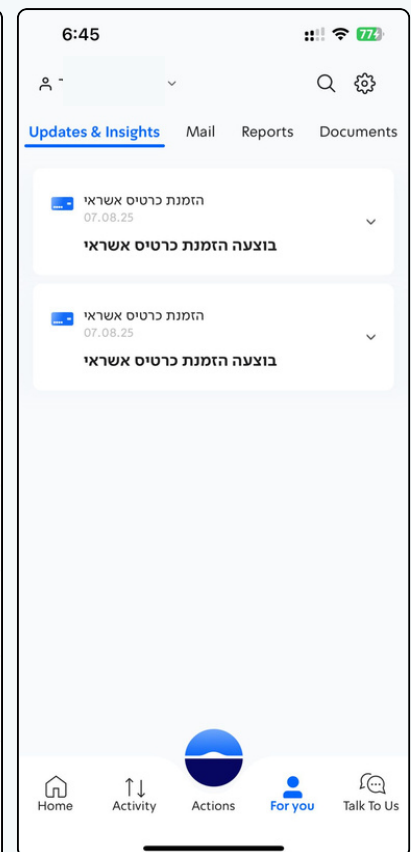
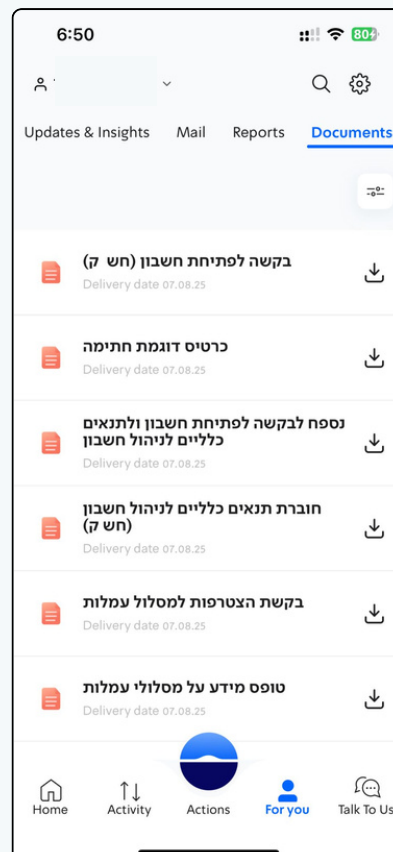


Data: Language accessibility investments by entities with Israeli banking licenses

Fig. 2: Nearly no Israeli banks or credit card companies have invested in language accessibility

Bank / Credit Company	App in English	Website in English	App in Arabic	Website in Arabic
Bank Leumi Le-Israel	Limited	Limited	No	Limited
Bank Hapoalim	No	Limited	No	No
Israel Discount Bank Ltd.	No	Limited	No	No
Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank Ltd.	No	Limited	No	No
First International Bank of Israel	No	Limited	No	No
Bank of Jerusalem	No	Limited	No	No
Bank Yahav	No	No	No	No
Bank Massad Ltd.	No	No	No	No
One Zero Digital Bank	No	Limited	No	No
Bank Esh Israel Ltd.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Isracard	No	No	No	No
CAL.	No	No	No	No
MAX	No	No	No	No
Premium Express (AmEx)	No	No	No	No
Diners Club Israel	No	No	No	No

Fig. 3: Bank Leumi's English version app using mixed Hebrew language interfaces on critical flows, in a screenshot captured on August 20th, 2025 by an American customer who immigrated to Israel in the same month under the Right of Return. The customer's name was obscured, otherwise these images are not modified.





Human impact

Should people “Just learn Hebrew?” As our interviews showed, for many new immigrants (Olim Hadashim), a Hebrew-only banking app doesn’t accelerate language learning. It only creates stress, frustration, and exclusion at a moment when integration is critical.

- Example: The difference between פיקדון (pikadon, savings deposit) and הפקדה (hafkada, the act of depositing money)
- Example: משכנתה (mashkanta, mortgage) vs. משכון (mashkon, collateral)

For Arab citizens, the impact is more severe. Digital exclusion translates into lower usage rates: only 21% use banking apps, compared with 31% among Haredi Jews and 44% among non-Haredi Jews. The Bank of Israel itself has acknowledged that lack of Arabic-language services is a key barrier to inclusion.



*“During my first year as an ola hadasha, I had to make **at least two in-person bank visits for transactions that could have been completed online.** It was costly for me and inefficient for the bank.”*

[Bella Leyn](#), new immigrant from Haifa



*“Frankly, I find it embarrassing, unprofessional, and above all inefficient that banking apps in Israel are available only in Hebrew. My, faculty and I are often forced to assist Olim with basic actions such as bank transfers or account-ownership requests. **The terminology used in these apps is typically high-level, highly specialized banking language, which has no use beyond this context and therefore is not taught in Hebrew-as-a-second-language programs.**”*

[Aviv Bertele](#), Hebrew teacher for new immigrants, founder of [UAB](#), a Hebrew-as-a-second-language school for adults.



*“Undertaking a full language adaptation project for a banking application would require **only three to six months**, even under conservative estimates. Globally, localization is a well-established and standardized process that leading financial institutions adopted years ago. The fact that major Israeli banks have not yet implemented such multilingual versions highlights a critical gap in ensuring equal access to essential financial services for all citizens.”*

[Joseph Kovalov](#), Global Markets Expansion Expert and [UI localization professional](#)



Data re: language accessibility

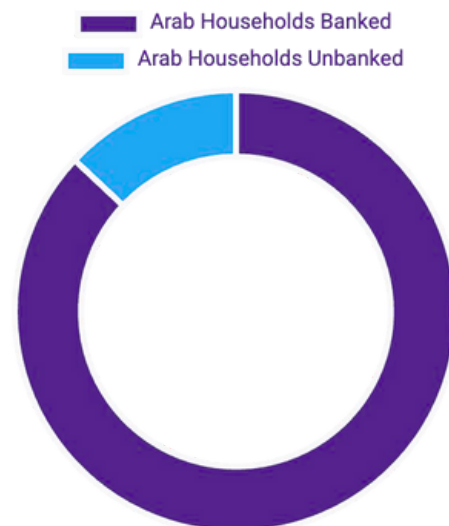
A One possible explanation for the low adoption of digital banking in Arab society may be linguistic barriers.

While many Arab citizens are proficient in Hebrew, complex financial matters require the clarity and confidence afforded by one's native language. Moreover, a significant portion of the community (17%) do not read Hebrew at all and 12% do not speak it. These citizens are effectively locked out of a Hebrew-only digital banking system.

The Bank of Israel itself, which has identified Arab citizens as a group whose use of financial services is "below par" and has cited the lack of Arabic information as a key barrier.

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Of 2.1 million arab population only 87% of households are banked



⁶ [ynet.com / CBS](https://www.ynet.com/CBS)

⁷ [The Inter-ministerial Team to Formulate a National Program to Increase Financial Inclusion Report](#)



Consequences and economic inefficiency

Israel's non-observed (grey) economy was estimated at ₪134 billion in 2018 by the Taub Center.⁵ For perspective, this is larger than the country's annual defense budget.

This figure represents nearly 10% of GDP hidden from taxation and formal financial channels.

If banking multilingualism addressed just a fraction of this by drawing excluded populations (immigrants, Arab citizens, foreign workers) into the formal system, the gains would be meaningful.

Even a **0.1% shift** into the formal system through greater accessibility would generate a **net present value of ₪59.3M** over 10 years.

For banks, translation and localization cost an estimated ₪0.3 million, but could generate NPV of ₪145M, with IRR of 729% and a payback period of just over 1.2 years.

In other words: language access is a lever for reducing informality and expanding Israel's taxable, banked economy.

A modest investment in language access can generate disproportionate efficiency gains for both the state and the banks themselves.

Fig. 4: This initiative creates economic upside both for the Israeli banks and credit companies as well as for the Israeli government

Economic Efficiency for the State

Even bringing 0.1% of the ₪134B non-observed economy to the open economy:

NPV (10y)	₪59.3M
NPV + TV	₪192.7M
IRR	227%
Payback Period	1.6 years

Economic Efficiency for Banks

Estimation of additional 25K consumers (5K annually over 5 years) with the initial cost ₪8.0M

NPV (10y)	₪53.3M
NPV + TV	₪145.1M
IRR	729%
Payback Period	1.2 years

⁵ [The Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel](#)



Report goals and policy objective

The report aims to remove language barriers in Israel's banking sector, benefiting both consumers and the financial system.

Core Goals

- **Expand digital banking access by requiring all Israeli banks to provide full, functional English and Arabic versions of websites and mobile apps, covering both core and advanced features.**
- Increase financial inclusion for key populations:
 - Over 500,000 consumers who would prefer English interfaces, including more than 300,000 Israeli dual citizens from English-speaking countries.
 - 2.1 million Arab citizens, of whom 17% cannot read Hebrew and 12% cannot speak it, leaving them effectively excluded from Hebrew-only systems.
- Address documented discrimination in banking against immigrants and non-Hebrew speakers, as identified by sociological research and government reports.

Economic and Strategic Benefits

- Boost the formal economy: Bringing just 0.1% of Israel's ₪134B non-observed economy into the formal system would yield an NPV of ₪59.3M over 10 years.
- Drive customer acquisition: Estimated 25,000 new customers over 5 years, generating NPV of ₪53.3M for banks.
- Deliver high ROI for minimal cost: Translation and localization costs (~₪0.3M) are negligible relative to bank profits, with IRRs exceeding 700% and payback periods of less than 2 years.

Policy Objective

To implement a clear 12-month mandate requiring linguistic accessibility in banking:

- **Phase 1 (Months 1–6):** Tier-1 banks localize public websites and core app functions (balances, transfers, bill pay) in English and Arabic.
- **Phase 2 (Months 6–12):** All banks achieve full functional parity across digital services, including loans, investments, and customer support.



Product roadmap for implementation

Israel's banks can adopt multilingual digital services using proven methods from the software and product-development sector. The process is neither costly nor complex, requiring structured translation, integration into development pipelines, and continuous quality assurance.

Step 1: Static Content Translation / Localization (Months 1–3)

- Translate all static content (public websites, informational pages, legal disclosures, FAQs) into English and Arabic.
- Ensure legal terminology is reviewed by bilingual legal and compliance experts.
- Publish translated versions alongside Hebrew pages.

Step 2: Core App and Web Functionality (Months 3–6)

- Localize key user flows: account balances, money transfers, bill payments, and customer service channels.
- Use string externalization (industry-standard practice) to separate text from code, allowing easy translation updates without new development cycles.
- Incorporate translations into continuous integration / continuous deployment (CI/CD) pipelines to ensure new features are always released in all supported languages.

Step 3: Full Feature Parity (Months 6–12)

- Implement localization testing within QA workflows, using automated UI tests in English, Arabic, and Hebrew.
- Establish an internal language accessibility team responsible for ongoing updates, translations, and user feedback.

Longer-term Vision:

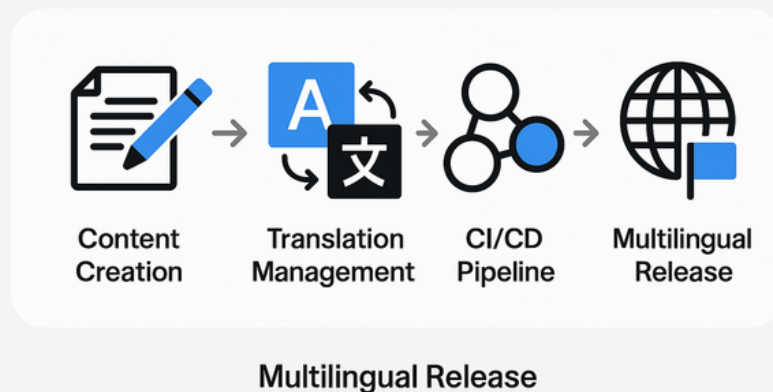
Establish **multilingual customer support** to all products.

Process integration: how banks can easily become accessible

Banks already manage frequent app and website updates. Adding multilingual capacity simply requires integrating translation into existing workflows:

- Content Management System (CMS): Store Hebrew, English, and Arabic text as structured resources.
- Translation Management System (TMS): Plug into CMS for real-time updates.
- CI/CD Pipeline: Each release automatically bundles new translations.
- QA Testing: Automated checks confirm that all three languages render correctly before release.

Fig. 3 Multilingual Software Release Process: shows how text is authored once, translated automatically, and published across apps and sites with minimal effort





Conclusion

Language accessibility in banking is an economic necessity. Israel is home to more than 4.5 million citizens, residents, and investors whose daily financial lives are constrained by Hebrew-only digital services. The costs of exclusion include lost trust, inefficiency, informality, and missed growth, while the investments required to correct it are modest.

Multilingual digital banking can be delivered through the same structured processes already used in the technology sector. Translation and localization can be integrated into existing product development cycles without disrupting operations.

The return on investment is clear. Within two years, banks can provide inclusive digital services that expand the customer base, reduce informality, and strengthen the taxable, banked economy. For policymakers, requiring multilingual interfaces is a practical reform with low cost, rapid implementation, and long-term benefits for financial inclusion, economic growth, and Israel's competitiveness.

Israel has the talent, the tools, and the technology. What is required now is the will to act. Removing the language barrier in digital banking is a quick win that strengthens the economy, signals openness, and ensures that every resident can fully participate in the financial system.



About the author:



Anton Babich is an Israeli social activist and a senior data analysis professional, working with multi-lingual technology products. He holds a Master's in Mathematics and System Analysis from MPhI, The Moscow Engineering Physics Institute. Anton has spent his career in business and financial analysis roles, including resource modeling and optimization. Anton and his family reside in Haifa, Israel.

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About The Economic Zionism Forum:

As Israel rises as the emergent regional superpower, and at a time of rising antisemitism, Israel's economy is under unprecedented pressure to create a better business climate for people staking their fortunes within our borders. The Economic Zionism Forum is dedicated to making Israel a better business environment for change-makers, accelerating the economic impact of immigrants and global professionals in Israel. Together, we can make Israel a competitive place to build, invest, and scale businesses and shareholder value.

Our mission is to publish reliable, first-party data and research from the field and to drive practical solutions through policy reform and private sector engagement.

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