

Innovative Language Practices and the Sociolinguistic Dimension of Israeli Feminist Social Change Work

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In her article titled “Demythologizing sociolinguistics: Why language does not reflect society,” Cameron (1990) argues that many of the theories used to explain the social meaning of language variation serve as further description of the phenomena rather than explanation. Instead of looking at corollary demographic factors that co-occur with the use of particular language practices or styles, Cameron advocates that we view language use and variable linguistic behavior as social acts in and of themselves. The explanation of language variation, thus, has more to do with understanding what speakers are doing as social actors in a given social interaction. Cameron’s argument is supported by Ochs’ (1992) concept of indexicality and language use as a system of social semiotics. According to Ochs, speakers enact gender and other aspects of social identity through the behavioral choices they make in interactional contexts. Speakers make use of elements from a shared sociolinguistic repertoire to convey both linguistic and socio-cultural meaning. Language use practices index particular identities or stances through the conceptual links between behaviors and the members of a community who typically enact specific social roles. Linguistic innovation, therefore, can be understood as an act that signals some sort of break with the accepted socio-cultural practices. The “break” is indexed by making use of language in ways that do not conform to the norms of speakers’ shared sociolinguistic repertoire. In this paper, I present two examples of the way that speakers and their interlocutors make sense of the social meanings of innovative Israeli feminist practices of language use.¹ Using Cameron and Ochs’ theoretical positions as a starting point, I explore the role of ideologically motivated linguistic innovation in the context of the Israeli feminist social change work.

Because the indexical value and meaning of specific language use practices shift depending on the context of use, an inquiry into the role of linguistic innovation in social change work must begin with a description of the larger socio-cultural context within which Israeli feminists engage in social change work. Israeli society can be conceived of as multiple, intersecting, and overlapping communities, some of which constitute communities of practice (CofP), as defined by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) and

¹ Data used in this paper were collected during three years of fieldwork in the Israeli feminist community from 1996-1999.

reiterated by Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999). Since this paper focuses on the innovative use of Modern Israeli Hebrew (MIH), I have focused on the communities within Israel that are made up of Hebrew speakers and particularly those Israelis who are native speakers of MIH. Within the larger speech community of MIH speakers are communities of practice organized around particular socio-cultural endeavors. These communities of practice overlap, intersect, and are often themselves made up of a number of smaller communities of practice. Israeli society can be thought of as a large bounded circle that intersects with other communities and also wholly or partially contains several intersecting, overlapping, and nested circles of varying sizes that represent multiple communities of practice.²

The mainstream Jewish Israeli community of practice may be the largest community of practice within the MIH speech community. It is organized around continually creating and defining Israeli society as the homeland of the Jewish nation. The Hebrew language plays a central role in this task as it supports the ideological and conceptual link between the ancient Israelite civilization and the modern Israeli nation-state, a key part of Zionist and Israeli national ideology (Kuzar, 2001). As such, there is considerable cultural investment in maintaining a clear link between the assumed language of these Israelite ancestors and the language of contemporary Israelis.³ The Modern Israeli Hebrew language--symbolized for most MIH speakers by the prescribed standards for language use--is a central pillar of Israeliness. Relevant to this discussion is the conventional practice of using the *masculine* grammatical category as the unmarked or inclusive category in both generic and definite referential statements.⁴ In many contexts, the *masculine* plural forms are used for reference to any group of individuals regardless of their collective gender (Jacobs, 2004).

As stated above, mainstream Jewish Israeli society is comprised of several smaller communities of practice, each organized around a particular socio-cultural task. Each community of practice has its own set of norms that define and are defined by the task around which it is organized. Individual MIH speakers may be members of multiple smaller CofP's, but they are all members of the mainstream Jewish Israeli community of practice.⁵ They have access to the shared set of norms associated with the macro-level CofP that is mainstream Israeli society as well as the specific set or sets of practices associated with all of the other CofP's to which they belong. Although they may develop specialized vocabularies or codes, language use practices and language ideologies in most of these smaller communities adheres more or less to the language ideologies and conventional practices and standards for language use as described above.

² My doctoral thesis (Jacobs, 2004) contains a thorough discussion of how Israeli Jewish society and the Israeli feminist community can be understood as intersecting communities of practice.

³ In an earlier article (Jacobs, 1998), I present an analysis of the Hebrew Language Academy's role within Israeli society and its relationship to mainstream Israeli language ideologies.

⁴ Throughout this paper, I use bold italics to refer to the grammatical categories of '*masculine*' and '*feminine*' and lower case letters to refer to the socio-cultural categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine'. The words 'man' and 'woman' refer to either individual social actors or the idealized conceptualization of these social roles. The differentiation between the latter two is made explicit in the text.

⁵ Note that in Israel "Jewish" is considered a national category rather than a religious or ethnic category. In addition, while Israeli society includes a large percentage of non-Jewish and Jewish non-native speakers of MIH, in this paper I am only concerned with native MIH speakers who identify as Jewish within the national context.

The Israeli feminist community is one of the smaller communities of practice that exists within mainstream Israeli society.⁶ It can be considered a meso-level CofP that consists of multiple local and national feminist organizations and individual feminist activists. The Israeli feminist movement can also be situated within the larger world-wide feminist movement. As we might expect, it is influenced by the agendas and ideologies of other feminist communities, particularly the North American and Western European feminist movements. The Israeli feminist community of practice is organized around the task of challenging the entrenched sexist ideologies that lead to discriminatory socio-cultural practices. It is also organized around supporting women's rights to self-determination and creating communal space within which the concept of gender does not necessitate the privileging of one over the other and where the feminine can linguistically and socially serve as the unmarked category.

Given its social change agenda, it is not surprising to find that the practices of the Israeli feminist community sometimes conflict with those practices that are considered normative or conventional within the larger mainstream Israeli CofP. The women who are members of the Israeli feminist community of practice are also members of other communities of practice, including the macro-level CofP that is mainstream Jewish Israeli society. Thus, their shared cultural and linguistic repertoires (Ochs, 1992) include the norms of all the various CofP's to which they belong. The women who identify as feminists live their lives shuttling between these multiple communities as they go about their daily routines. In particular, they must negotiate their identities and stances between a feminist conception of social reality and the mainstream Israeli conception of social reality, such as it exists. It is in the negotiation between the practices developed within the feminist CofP and those developed in other CofP's that what is considered normative can be seen as one of many possible norms, and what was hidden has the potential for becoming visible.

In addition to understanding the complex and multi-level nature of Israeli society, it is also important to understand the language ideologies prevalent among Israeli feminists. These ideologies shape the language use practices that are associated with the feminist movement and the linguistic behaviors of those enacting a feminist stance. Israeli feminist linguistic innovation can be understood as both a natural outcome of feminist consciousness and an integrated aspect of feminist culture and social change within Israeli society. The patriarchal aspects of Israeli culture are reproduced and legitimized through conventional practices of language use in mainstream Jewish Israeli society. These practices naturalize an iconic relationship between the culturally defined social behaviors or roles associated with the conceptual categories of 'man' and 'woman' and the linguistic forms (including the gender categories themselves) used to talk about men and women as social actors. The use of the *masculine* grammatical category as the unmarked or inclusive also naturalizes the privilege afforded to men in a male-dominated society by associating the normative man with the normative self. Conventional practices of language use are thus social acts that contribute to (re)creating gender inequality within Israeli society.

⁶ I should note that for the purposes of my research, which was limited to examining how native Israeli Hebrew speakers used language to negotiate a feminist identity, I have located the Israeli feminist community totally within the mainstream Jewish Israeli community, but in fact there are many non-native Hebrew speakers and non-Jews who are active members of the larger feminist movement within Israel.

Many of the women I interviewed commented on the way that conventional Israeli language practices located the concept of the Israeli self within the *masculine* category, to which they were socialized to orient themselves.

- (1) ze gam muvan me'elav. at, eh nira lax barur sheponim tamid legevarim. at lo xoshevet al ze afilu. ki megil me'od tsa'ir hem melamdin otax, eh lehistakel al ha'olam derex einayim shel ge'ver. ke'ilu at kevar ro'a hahizdahut shelax hi im ge'ver.⁷

this is also built into it, you, um it is clear to you, that always (they) address(M,P) men. You don't think about this, even, because from a very young age (they) teach(M,P) you to look at the world through male eyes. Seemingly, you already see your identification, it is with man.⁸

The statement in example (1) above, typifies the language ideology that I encountered among women in the Israeli feminist community. It illustrates an awareness of the way language use contributes to the "othering" of women in Israeli society. Several women articulated a very sophisticated understanding of the relationship between conventional practices of language use and the persistence of rigid patriarchal concepts of gender and gender roles. For example, consider Einat's comment in response to my question about why she felt changing practices of language use was so important:

- (2) ze me'od xashuv, mikeivan sheze meshakef et hadominantiyut hagavrit, hagavrit vehatfisa hashaletet.

this is very important because it reflects the dominance of the male, the masculine and the mainstream concept.

As the statements above illustrate, for the women in my study feminist consciousness included an awareness of the way that language use in mainstream society contributes to the reproduction of gender differentiation and discrimination in Jewish Israeli society. This awareness shaped my informants' use of language and their ideological stances vis-à-vis both feminist and conventional practices of language use. Given that conventional practices of language use contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal concepts of gender and the unmarked Israeli self, it is not surprising to find that feminists, who are engaged in challenging and dismantling patriarchal elements of culture, would use language to enact oppositional stances. Within the context of the Israeli feminist CofP, the use of language to enact a feminist stance can be understood as creating and supporting the culture of the feminist community. The question remains however, what if anything does the use of feminist practices in contexts that are not overtly feminist accomplish? How do interlocutors understand and respond to the use of feminist practices in these non-feminist socio-cultural contexts? For the remainder of this paper, I will discuss the metalinguistic discourse of two Israeli feminist activists, Na'ama and Osnat, and their strategic use of language to create feminist social change. My analysis will focus on how their

⁷ In the transliterated representations of the Hebrew, the single quotation mark represents the Modern Israeli Hebrew (MIH) letters *ayin* and *aleph*, which are realized by most MIH speakers as a glottal stop.

⁸ The abbreviations in the glosses of the Hebrew translate as follows: M—masculine, F—feminine, P—plural, S—singular. I only mark the gender and number of nouns and predicates that have animate referents or agents.

metalinguistic discourse and linguistic behaviors reveal the relationship between language use and feminist social change work.

Na'ama was well known as an elected official whose tenure on the governing council of a major Israeli city was marked by struggles against institutional practices that limited women's access to political and economic power. In the context of our conversation about the relationship between language use and women's status in Israel, Na'ama told me several stories about linguistic feminist battles, all of which occurred within the setting of municipal institutions. She prefaced the telling of the stories with the statement, *axshav ani rotsa lesaper lax al kama ma'avakim she'ani ne'evakti. ani xoshevet al shelosha*. 'And now, I want to tell you about some battles that I fought. I am thinking of three.' Na'ama's word choice overtly constructs her stories about language use in the municipal context as social actions in which she engaged. Her choice of words also characterizes her "telling" as testimony about these acts. Na'ama's first "battle" story was about her attempt to get city council stationery that would use the *feminine* title for "member of city council." She began her testimony by contrasting her "struggle" for gender appropriate stationery with the passive acceptance of the *masculine* stationery by previous female city council representatives:

- (3) tamid hayu xavrot mo'etsa,
There have always been female members of council⁹
- aval hen tamid hitstapku beniyar mixtavim shekatuv xaver mo'etsa.
but they(F) always made do with stationery that was written member(M)
council.
- ani amarti meihahatxala
I said from the beginning
- she'ani rotsa niyar shel xavrat mo'etsa
that I want stationery of member(F) council.

Note that in the first line of her statement she uses the *feminine* title *xavrot mo'etsa* 'female members of council' to refer to these women rather than something like *tamid hayu nashim bam'»etsa* 'there have always been women on the council.' By referring to these women with the *feminine* title, she positions herself as part of a long history of women politicians while at the same time highlighting the difference between her presentation of a political identity and that of her predecessors. The statement in example (3) sets Na'ama apart from these other female representatives because they made do with something that she would not abide, namely, the obscuring of their female identity by allowing the municipal institution to officially identify them as member(M) of city council.

Her use of the *feminine* title in (3) also highlights the contrast between the institution's use of language to refer to all members of council and the way she wanted to use language to identify herself, and presumably other elected women, as *female* council member(s). Her *feminization* of the official title used to refer to members of this political

⁹ Glosses of *xavrat mo'etsa* as 'female members' convey an emphasis on the gender of the referent rather than the grammatical form of the title 'member of council'. In glosses written as 'member(F)' the focus is on the grammatical form of the word itself rather than the gender of its referent.

body incorporated femaleness into the social identity of 'politician'. Her highlighting that these other women were also members of city council in the context of the statement that they had always made do with the existing stationery may also be a way of implicating their behavior as a contributing factor to the resistance she met from the institution itself. The institutional resistance is first represented by her report of the mayor's negative response to her request, in example (4).

- (4) verosh ha'ir amar shepashut lo mevin lama.
 and the mayor said(M) that he simply did not understand why.
- ze bizbuz shel niyar hadfus yitstarex la'asot od print.
 this is a waste of paper, the printer will have to do another template
- ze hit'im lekol hanashim lefanayix ma haba'aya.
 this was suitable for all the women before you what's the problem?
- amarti tov, hakol nehedar aval ani lo xaver mo'etsa
 I said good, everything is great, but I am not a member(M) of council
- ani xavrat mo'etsa ve'ani rotsa shekaxa tixtevu elai.
 I am a female member of council and I want for you to write to me as such.

I would like to call the reader's attention to the contrast between Na'ama's consistent use of the phrase *xavrot mo'etsa* 'member(F) of council' in her own characterization of the other women on the city council in example (3), and the use of the phrase *lekol hanashim lefanayix* 'for all the women before you', in her report of the mayor's speech in example (4). In the report of the mayor's speech, the linguistic choice highlights the gender of these other members of council. Those other women accepted the existing **masculine** stationery. Na'ama was not acting like those other women, and the mayor did not (or claimed not) to understand why. The statement *ze hit'im lekol hanashim lefanayix* 'it was suitable for all the women before you' can be understood to index Na'ama's perception of the institution's or the mayor's lack of understanding regarding the importance of gender in the political realm. It is not necessarily important whether this is an exact quote, i.e. the actual wording used by the mayor, or Na'ama's representation of his speech with her own linguistic choices. In either case, the contrast of the use of terms to refer to the same group of people, the female members of the city council, indexes the fact that Na'ama's behavior vis-a-vis the use of the title was exceptional. She was the other both with respect to all the other women who served as elected officials and with respect to the institution itself.

In the context of Israeli society, the concept **politician**, here represented by the specific social role of member of city council, is located within the category of male social roles. Na'ama's awareness of this fact was evident in our conversation, and she pointed to this association as partial explanation for why she wanted stationery that would identify her as *xavrat mo'etsa*. She reported that in her role as a city council representative a significant portion of the correspondence she received was addressed *lixvodo mar na'ama yisra'eli* 'To his honor, Mr Na'ama Yisraeli.' Despite her obviously feminine name, she was still addressed in the **masculine**. Even if we understand, as I believe Na'ama did, that the use of **masculine** title was simply a linguistic convention to refer to all members of the city council, its use in the context of a male-dominated political system erases or obscures a part of her social identity. Na'ama's desire for stationery that would officially represent her as a 'female member of council' might be seen as an attempt to disrupt the normative

categorization of politician as a male social role. Her request may also be seen as an attempt to force the mayor, and by extension the political institution and the public, to recognize the relevance of gender in the Israeli political realm. Certainly one of the central aspects of feminist social change work is the task of raising communal consciousness regarding how cultural gender ideologies shape social behaviors in all forms of social interaction.

Na'ama's linguistic choice can be understood as an act of feminist resistance to the status quo that privileges males. Her strategy indexed her feminist identity but it also clearly pointed to the way that conventional practices contribute to the reproduction of practices and ideologies that support a male-dominated political system in Israel. What set Na'ama apart from the other members of city council was not her gender per se, but rather her insistence on incorporating her feminine gender identity into her identity as an elected city official. Na'ama's linguistic behavior indexed a feminist identity because the insistence on using *feminine* titles, or grammatical forms, to refer to women is a behavior associated with the feminist movement in Israel.

The consequence of the association between Na'ama's linguistic behavior regarding the stationery and a feminist identity or ideology can be seen in the outcome of this *ma'avak al haniyar* 'struggle over stationery.' After two years, the municipality finally printed official council stationery with the *feminine* title. As might be expected, the municipal administration did not act to naturalize Na'ama's linguistic choice. Na'ama was the only female member of council to use it. She reported that the stationery became known among the municipality's administrative staff as *niyar shel na'ama yisra'eli* 'the stationery of Na'ama Israeli'. Without institutional support by way of a policy to distribute "gender appropriate" stationery to all members of city council (i.e. *xaver mo'etsa* for men and *xavrat mo'etsa* for women), the *feminine* titled stationery simply became associated with Na'ama.

When I asked why the other women on the city council did not use the new stationery she reported, "*ha'axerot lo rotsot oto*" 'the others(F) do not want it'. I did not have the opportunity to speak to the other female council members about their decision regarding the *feminine* titled stationery, but I believe there are several reasonable explanations for their choice. One possible explanation is that these other women objected to the differentiation of members of the city council along gender lines. Since the conventional practice for MIH speakers is to use *masculine* forms as unmarked and inclusive, they may have felt that the *masculine* form of the title was sufficient for identifying them in that particular social role. It may also be reasonable to interpret their actions as a hesitation to linguistically highlight their female identities in relationship to their roles as elected officials. Their rejection of the *feminine* stationery might index their awareness that linguistically highlighting their femininity in the context of Israeli political culture might hamper their ability to do the political work they were elected to do. If the norm is to use the *masculine* title, then the use of a *feminine* title might be interpreted as non-normative in both the linguistic and socio-cultural sense. It is also possible that these women wished to distance themselves from Na'ama within the context of the city council and the municipal institutions generally. As I stated earlier, Na'ama's identity within the Israeli political community was characterized by a number of "aggressive" campaigns associated with a feminist agenda. Since Na'ama initiated the process that led to the printing of this alternative stationery, the stationery itself came to index Na'ama and her style of political activism.

What is clear from Na'ama's narrative is that she understood her use of language as a feminist act. Feminist social change work is not simply *reflected* in innovative feminist language practices, it is *accomplished* through alternative ways of seeing and referring to the world. Na'ama refused to allow conventional practices to separate two aspects of her identity--politician and feminist--that she understood as inter-connected. Despite the failure to create a new institutional practice or to unite all the female council members in her stationery campaign, Na'ama's behavior regarding the stationery is an excellent example of her attempts to incorporate the practices and principles of a feminist social reality into the social reality of the city council. Her telling of this incident in the context of our discussion about the relationship between language use and gender discrimination has at least two meanings. First, her story is a cautionary tale about the ways that ideologically motivated linguistic practices can "backfire" and further isolate their users from the mainstream. I believe Na'ama's inclusion of this story in her narrative about linguistic struggles with the municipality also serves as a plea for more women to adopt feminist practices of resistance, including the unconventional use of language. Had the other women or the institution followed Na'ama's lead, the change in language use might have made a social statement that Na'ama's individual effort failed to accomplish.

The potential for feminist language practices to raise speakers' consciousness of the covert associations between linguistic and socio-cultural forms of gender differentiation and discrimination is the primary theme of the second example of feminist sociolinguistic activism. Osnat was a well known and outspoken feminist legal scholar who taught law at a major Israeli institution. I had contacted her specifically because I had interviewed one of her former students for my project. This woman had described Osnat's practice of using *feminine* forms as the unmarked during her university lectures and the impact it had on her. In the context of our conversation, Osnat focused on her ideological stance regarding the relationship between language use and the status of women in Israeli society and recounted for me her students' reactions to her innovative use of grammatical gender in the classroom. In the analysis of Osnat's strategies, I focus on how her negotiation between the roles as feminist and as educator shaped her linguistic practices.

Osnat understood her use of *feminine* generics and inclusive plurals in the university classroom as a counter-hegemonic act that revealed the underlying associations between the socio-cultural categories of "normative Israeli" and "masculine social actors." By using the *feminine* forms as the inclusive and unmarked, she temporarily broke the link between *masculine* = the unmarked collective linguistic, and by ideological extension, social identity. Her male students' experienced having to read themselves into the collective and her female students were symbolically placed in the position of the unmarked. Osnat reported that her students reacted differently to her practices depending on the number of males in the class but there was always an initial confusion that led to breaks in the normative practices of a university law class. In example (5) below, Osnat describes the general reaction to her innovative language practices by new students.

- (5) [keshe ani] matxila befa'am rishona ledaber benekeiva beshi'ur ...kulam
otrim et haneshima, vekulam bemetax lir'ot kodem kol ha'im hitbalalti.
vesheinit ma hoxex likrot axshav. ki lekulam barur sheyesh kan eize hirhur al
yisodot haxevra. veyesh mamash metax. vetamid mishehu lo matsli'ax
lehitatek yoter veme'ir li. ani lo yoda'at im hem be'emet xoshvim sheta'iti o

shehem mesevim et tsumet libi kedei she'ani axzor lamaslul. ki ze mafria et harikuz.

when I begin the first time to speak in the feminine in the class all(M) stop(M) their breath and all(M) (are) under pressure to see first of all if I was confused. And second what will happen now. Because to all(M) it is clear that there is a comment on the basic principles of the community and there is really pressure. And always someone(M) does not succeed(M,S) in remaining quiet and calls(M) it to my attention. I don't know if they(M) really think(M,P) that I made a mistake or if they(M) call(M,P) it to my attention so that I will return to the habitual practice because it is disturbing to the sense of comfort.

I want to call the reader's attention to Osnat's report that in every class, someone felt the need to point to her "grammatical mistake." Osnat's students may or may not have believed she made a mistake, but her clear break with the expected practices of language use licensed a question about her competency as a speaker of Modern Israeli Hebrew (MIH). The fact that there was always one student bold enough to interrupt her lecture and point out her "mistake" signals a clash of authority and ideology. Within mainstream Israeli society, the better one speaks Hebrew, i.e. the more mastery one displays of the prescribed rules of the grammatical system, the more cultural capital one has. Thus, Osnat's use of unconventional grammar, in this otherwise mainstream sociolinguistic context, might have signaled to her students a deficiency in her cultural capital. Her assumed linguistic deficiency might equalize her status with that of her students—competent speakers of MIH—and allow for their breaking the taboo of interrupting a professor in the midst of a lecture.

When we consider that Osnat is a native speaker of the language and that her students were likely aware of this fact, another explanation arises for their own break with the normative practices in a university classroom. Namely, her students might have interpreted Osnat's unconventional use of language as an indication that the regular rules that abide in other law school classrooms were not relevant in her classroom. Whatever the interpretation, Osnat used this break in the routine of the relationship between professor and students as an opportunity to connect her unconventional use of MIH grammar to feminist ideology. As a university professor, she expressed to me that she believes it is important that her students understand the power of language to obscure or reveal underlying ideological assumptions about the nature of social reality.

- (6) ani omeret lahem yoshev kahal shel nashim vegever exad betoxo, vetsarix ledaber eleihen bezaxar. ma ze omer? ma ze omer? ze omer shelo meshane im yesh elef o aseret alafim nashim, mi shekove'a et hamin shel hakolektiv ze hazaxar hayaxid shenimtsa sham. ze omer shekvodo shel hazaxar ha'exad haze shakul keneged kvodat shel ein sof nashim shetehiyena sham. ein dover ivrit shelo yavin et ze miyad. klomar she'i efshar lehavin et ze axeret, ze pashut kaxa.

I say to them (her students), there is a group of women sitting with a single male among them and one must speak to them(F,P) in the *masculine*. What does this say? What does this say? It says that it does not matter if there are a thousand or ten thousand women, the one who controls the gender of the

collective is the single male that is there. It says that respect for him, that one male, carries more weight than the respect of an infinity of women that would be there. There is no Hebrew speaker(M,S) that would not understand this immediately. That is to say, that it is impossible to understand this another way, it is simply so

According to Osnat after their initial shock, her students came to understand her innovative language use practices as a marker of her feminist identity. Once they adopt the perspective that her discourse was simply a reflection of her feminist identity, the normative hierarchical relationship between student and professor was reestablished. The innovative language use became part of the practices associated with the culture of Osnat's courses at the university. Indeed, these alternative practices became normalized enough in the communal context of her classes that the students began to adopt them when writing and speaking. Osnat acknowledged that the change in her students' use of grammatical gender was most likely an attempt to please her. She argued, however, that regardless of their personal use of language, her linguistic practices transformed the manner in which her students understood the relationship between language use and cultural ideologies about what is "normative." In addition, I believe it is possible to view her use of innovative linguistic practices as successfully creating a feminist space in the context of the law school's community of practice.¹⁰

Osnat's use of innovative language practices contributed to the creation of an alternative space and created the opportunity for changes in the way her students used language. More importantly, her unconventional use of grammatical gender challenged them to examine more carefully the relationship between practices of language use and the reproduction of bias in Israeli social and legal institutions. I had the opportunity to interview a few of her former students. I found that all of them remembered their experiences in her courses and felt it had influenced their thinking about language, whether or not they agreed with her ideological stance. At least one of her students credited those experiences with changing her own linguistic practices and leading her to use her legal degree in the service of a feminist advocacy organization. Outside the context of the university setting, Osnat's use of feminist language practices created a link between legal scholarship and feminist ideology which has contributed to the strengthening of the Israeli feminist community and the rewriting of many Israeli laws related to women's status.

At the outset of this paper, I stated that linguistic innovation can be understood as a social act that signals some sort of break with the accepted socio-cultural practices. I also asked, "what if anything does the use of feminist practices in contexts that are not overtly feminist accomplish?" In the case of Osnat, the use of feminist practices in the context of law school classes facilitated an opportunity to relate conventional practices of language use explicitly to the reproduction of discriminatory practices. Both her male and female students experienced a role reversal of sorts that disrupted their habitual understanding of inclusive and generic grammatical forms. Their experiences raised to the level of consciousness underlying associations between social roles, concepts of the normative

¹⁰ It is telling to note that Osnat was denied tenure at her institution despite a solid record of teaching, publishing, and significant contributions to legal scholarship. Most of her colleagues attribute the university's actions as an indication of discomfort with her feminist convictions and practices.

Israeli self, and issues of gender discrimination. In the case of Na'ama, we might argue that her use of feminist language practices did not “accomplish” anything except reinforcing her reputation as an aggressive feminist political actor. However, I would argue that Na'ama's strategy can be understood as a success in so far as she gave voice to feminist perspectives in a context where women's voices generally have not been recognized. Indeed outside the context of the municipal council, Na'ama's experience with stationery fueled a campaign by several women's organizations to encourage more women to run for political office. Na'ama's practice became a useful tool in the context of the feminist community of practice by pointing to the need for more women's voices in Israeli political institutions. In both cases, their linguistic choices can be seen as a form of feminist activism. The variation from defined standards for the use of MIH is a social practice (Eckert, 1999) developed within the Israeli feminist community and used by its members to enact a particular ideological stance. The conflict between the feminist and conventional norms of language use allowed Osnat and Na'ama to literally call attention to the underlying associations between gender and specific social roles that conventional practices of language use naturalize or erase. Raising awareness of practices that contribute to the reproduction of sexism is an inherent part of feminist social change work.

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