

## Hebrew GaySpeak: Subverting a gender-based language

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Does language allow gender diversity? Most of the research regarding gender and discourse deals with the differences between women and men, disregarding sexual orientation. Yet there are some studies focusing on same-sex discourse strategies. My discourse analysis of Israeli men's interaction joins these studies and explores the discourse strategies of Jewish-Israeli gay men in contemporary Israel. I focus on inverted appellation, i.e., the use of feminine references for male persons (Bunzl, 2000).

I will begin with exploring gender in society. Then, I will provide a short introduction to Hebrew grammar and its inherent gender bias. I will introduce my research and then elaborate on a particular discourse strategy in the talk of Israeli gay men's.

The dominant culture perceives gender as a dichotomy. There are women, there are men. Women are feminine, men are masculine. Women are attracted to men and men are attracted to women. Gay men and lesbians do not obey this social order. According to the dominant perception, they are in a liminal status. Gay men and lesbians perceive gender in a versatile and consecutive way that permits endless performances: the male-female dichotomy is replaced with a continuum.

Judith Butler (1993, 1990), following Foucault, discusses the idea of the body as a social site. Her study examined the performances of Drag Queens and the parodic fashion in which they challenge the conventional dichotomous gender categories. They dissociate men from masculinity and women from femininity.

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Just as drag queens use their bodies as a vehicle for criticizing social conventions, the Israeli gay men presented in my research, use language as a social vehicle. They bend its rules in order to articulate a political-social-cultural statement. Bunzl (2000) calls it "linguistic drag".

Before elaborating, let me introduce you to some patterns of Hebrew grammar. The Hebrew language, unlike English, marks gender on every noun, pronoun, verb and adjective. Every noun is either masculine or feminine, and has to follow a suitable gendered verb or adjective. A simple sentence like "I love you" can be translated into 4 different sentences in Hebrew, depending on the gender of the object and subject:

- I love (male) you (male)
- I love (male) you (female)
- I love (female) you (female)
- I love (female) you (male)

Each of these has a different format in Hebrew, but only one in English. Each translation clearly defines the gender of the subject and the object. In order to speak properly, Hebrew speakers must obey grammatical rules and attach a masculine subject form with a masculine verb or predicate, when referring to masculine agents and the same goes for feminine agents.

Physical objects are also classified as either masculine or feminine. This rather rigid structure of the Hebrew Language forces Hebrew speakers to accept certain social conventions regarding gender and social order. A speaker, who refers to a mixed audience of men and women, will have to refer to them as if they were all men regardless of the number of men or women in that audience. On the other hand, this linguistic structure enables the speaker to play with the language and to manipulate it in a way that criticizes social order and political conventions.

West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that: "gender is not a set of traits, or a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doing of some sort... gender itself is constituted through interaction" (p. 129). This brings me back to Judith Butler and to the power of discourse and the ability of the individual to use language as a social vehicle in order to subvert the gendered structure of society.

My current research examines conversation between Israeli gay men. The research uses discourse analytic methods and examines the use of language in interaction. Yossie and Jagger, the subjects of my research, are a gay couple who have been living together for the past 13 years. Yossie is a forty-something lawyer and Jagger is a thirty-something physiotherapist. They recorded a conversation in February 2007.

I analyzed their conversation and studied their discourse strategies. In the current paper, I will present their use of what Bunzl (2000) calls "inverted appellation" – the use of feminine references for male persons. Livia (1997) refers to this phenomenon and describes the men who use it as being disloyal to masculinity. According to her, this strategy is used by gay men in regard to other gay men. Yet she notes that "this linguistic strategy is not intended to reflect a feminine persona so much as to dissociate the speaker from a heterosexual alliance. As such, it is a statement of sexual orientation rather than of sexual identity" (p. 359). Pastre (1997) also found that this strategy is used by gay men with regard to other gay men. The study she conducted in France indicated that inverted appellation is used in order to convey a friendly

message or to provoke against a social order. My research joins those researches that were conducted in Austria and France, and looks into this strategy in Hebrew.

A preliminary comment is required here: I must restrict and remind you that not all gay men engage in a similar linguistics practices. I would also like to remind Jacob's (1996) assertion, that "perhaps no other minority is so diverse" (p. 65) . I also agree with Penelope and Wolfe (1979) that: "any discussion involving the use of such phrases as 'gay community' ... or 'gayspeak' is bound to be misleading, because two of its implications are false: first, that there is a homogeneous community, composed of Lesbians and gay males, that share a common culture or system of values, goals perceptions and experience; and second, that this gay community shares a common language" (p. 1).

After being precautious, I would like to present some examples of Hebrew Gayspeak and the use of inverted appellation. The first example Yossie and Jager talk about their mutual friend named Ilan. The example demonstrates the inflection of names and pronouns.

#### Example (1)

433	Yossie:	Ilanit surely can,	]
434	Jagger:	It can in fact,	
435		it can solve problems,	
436		that Atraf. [gay dating website]	
437	Yossie	For me it /doesn't need/ to solve any problems.	
438		Ilanit for example,	
439		she is obsessed about the computer,	
440		in my point he is a member in,	
441		like,	
442		Gaydar.UK,	
443		and in Gay-Romeo.	

433	Yossie:	<i>Ilanit haray yaxol le,</i>	]
434	Jagger:	<i>ze yaxol davka,</i>	
435		<i>ze yaxol liftor baáyot,</i>	
436		<i>ha-'Atraf ha-ze.</i>	
437	Yossie:	<i>li ze lo /tzarix/ liftor beáyot,</i>	
438		<i>Ilanit lemashal,</i>	
439		<i>hi obsessivit al maxshev.</i>	
440		<i>lefí daáti hu xaver be,</i>	
441		<i>kaxa,</i>	
442		<i>be Gaydar U K,</i>	
443		<i>ve be Gay-Romeo.</i>	

Ilan is a masculine name for a man (unlike unisex Hebrew names such as my own – Tal). In Hebrew, one way of changing proper nouns and other nouns from masculine to feminine is by adding the suffix "it" to the name or noun. For example, a male CEO is a *mankal*. The feminine equivalent is a *mankalit*. Another example is librarian. A male librarian is a *safran*, a female librarian is a *safranit*. By adding the suffix "it" to the proper noun *Ilan*, Yossie changes Ilan's name into a feminine one - *Ilanit*.

We can see it happens in line 433, when Yossie changes Ilan's name into a feminine one, and yet he uses the masculine verb form. In line 438, Yossie keeps referring to Ilan in a feminine form, and this time Yossie matches a feminine pronoun and predicate. In line 439, Yossie uses the pronoun *hi* (meaning she in Hebrew) while referring to Ilan, and attaches a feminine inflection of the word obsessed to it (*obssevivit* instead of *obssevisi*).

The inflection of Ilan's name into a feminine one demonstrates the basic use of inverted appellation. Usually used when referring to another gay man, the speaker would refer to the subject in a feminine form. Yossie does so inconsistently and in an unpredictable manner. Sometimes he inflects both name and verb in the feminine form, other times he inflects only the name and leaves the verb in masculine form.

Another example is taken from another segment of the interaction. This time, Yossie talks about Ilan again, but this time he refers also to Ilan's sister, Nurit:

**Example (2)**

573	Yossie:	Nurit and Ilan are (masculine) much more,
574		They (masculine) are gifted (feminine),
575		They (masculine) are gifted (masculine),
576		Gifted (feminine),
577		Both of them (feminine),
578		Ilan and Nurit,
579		Are unbelievably gifted (masculine).
573	Yossie:	<i>Nurit ve'Ilan hem harbe yoter,</i>
574		<i>hem muxsharot,</i>
575		<i>hem muxsharim,</i>
576		<i>muxsharot,</i>
577		<i>shteyhen</i>
578		<i>Ilan veNurit,</i>
579		<i>nuxsharim betzura shelo te'amen.</i>

In this example Yossie gets lost by the inherent masculine bias of the Hebrew language. In Hebrew, while referring to a mixed gendered group, one must refer to the group as if it was composed only of men, i.e., using the masculine form. A single man eliminates a women-based group and grammatically turns that group into a men-based group. Therefore, by talking of Ilan and his sister Nurit, Yossie should have used the masculine form. Yet he gets confused and combines a masculine pronoun with a feminine adjective (line 574). He then tries to "go straight" by putting the sentence correctly (line 575), but right away returns to the incorrect form and uses a feminine inflection. Finally he settles and put the sentence once again in the correct form and uses the masculine adjective.

Looking at these short puzzled lines, one cannot escape the feeling that Yossie feels uncomfortable with the rigid chauvinist rules of Hebrew grammar. Hebrew speakers encounter language mistakes that are based on wrong gender inflection, most of the time. In that segment, Yossie is unintentionally mistaken, but deliberately rephrases himself in the wrong way. By doing this he does two things – he protests against the inherently exclusion of women in Hebrew language and blurs the man-

woman dichotomy. According to Yossie, one can refer to a group composed of men and women in a feminine form.

My last example will demonstrate the way Yossie refers to himself as if he was a woman. Yossie and Jagger talk about the differences between men and women in regard to having sex on the first date:

**Example (3)**

- |     |         |  |
|-----|---------|--|
| 230 | Yossie: | Oy,  |
| 231 |         | come on,   |
| 232 |         | How not spontaneous (literally "heavy") they are,                    |
| 233 |         | what is the problem with having sex on the first date and that's it? |
| 234 | Jagger: | They are built (feminine) differently.                               |
| 235 | Yossie: | Yeah.  |
| 236 |         | I'm also built (feminine) differently.                               |
| 230 | Yossie: | <i>Oy,</i>   |
| 231 |         | <i>nu beemet,</i>  |
| 232 |         | <i>eize kvedot hen,</i>  |
| 233 |         | <i>ma habe'aya lehizdayen al ha-erev harishon ve zehu?</i>           |
| 234 | Jagger: | <i>hen bnuyot axeret.</i>  |
| 235 | Yossie: | <i>ken.</i>  |
| 236 |         | <i>gum ani bnuya axeret.</i>   |

In this segment of the interaction, Yossie and Jagger talk about their mutual female friend and her consistent refusal to have sex with a guy on the first date. Yossie does not understand the big deal of not having sex on the first date. Jagger, in return, argues that women have a problem with sex on the first date, because they are built differently from men.

Yossie revokes Jagger's argument by saying that he himself is also built differently, but he does so by referring to himself in a feminine form. In so doing, Yossie tries to eliminate physical differences between men and women as a reason for different sexual behavior. One can say that Yossie cites Judith Butler's argument, that gender is not a matter of biology or physiology but rather a social matter.

Butler (1990) protests against the naturalization of heterosexual gender, and thinks of it as a "fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (p. 136). Drag Queens, hence, reveal the performative nature of gender. Shifting this strategy to the realm of language subverts heterosexuality as an exclusive natural gender. Bunzle (2000) puts it this way: "inverted appellation challenges and subverts a violently gendered grammar by reversing the heterosexist logic that assigns masculine form to 'male' bodies and feminine to 'female' bodies" (p.220).

The use of inverted appellation demonstrates gay critique on prevalent heterosexual perceptions of gender in society. The heterosexist social order is dichotomized and excludes gay men and lesbians. Using inverted appellation is a critical means that enables the speaker to resist this perception. The speakers take

advantage of the gendered grammar and cleverly convert it to serve their cause. The inverted appellation strategy enables gay men to reexamine and challenge existing gender categories and question their naturalness.

In conclusion, I believe that if we think of gender as social production and recognize language as a social means, then the use of inverted appellation is a sophisticated strategy that undermines the ideology of normative gender by challenging gendered grammar. Though this strategy is done mostly amongst gay men, I consider it to be a very powerful strategy. A Hebrew speaker cannot remain indifferent once encountering this strategy. By "gayspeaking", Hebrew-speaking gays make a statement. They do not only speak – they act!

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