

# The Voice of Others: Identity, Alterity and Gender Normativity among Gay Men in Israel

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## Abstract

The use of “gay” slang varieties has often been viewed as a form of resistance to oppression, a way to subvert dominant stereotypes by recontextualizing them as positive and identity-affirming (e.g., Baker 2002; Leap 1996). Recently, however, this kind of approach has been criticized for reductively assuming that language use can be unproblematically understood as identity performance, in effect foreclosing the possibility that identities can also emerge in linguistically more subtle, and even backhanded, ways (Hastings & Manning 2004). In this paper, I evaluate this critique in relation to an Israeli gay slang variety called *oxtchit*. I argue that a close reading of how *oxtchit* is described and used by a cohort of gay men in Israel reveals the limits of the identity as explicit performance approach and forces us to consider alternative, more ethnographically nuanced interpretations.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, sociolinguists have developed increasingly sophisticated ways of modeling the relationship between language and social identity. Incorporating elements of anthropological and philosophical theory, we have moved from seeing language as a reflex of a speaker's structural position in society to seeing it as a resource with which speakers are able to construct and position desired presentations of self. This shift has been based in large part on a revalorization of identity not as something that speakers *have*, but as something they actively claim. But while this newer perspective on identity has had a profound impact on the explanatory adequacy of sociolinguistic theorizing, it has at the same time (and perhaps paradoxically) limited our interpretive purview (Hastings & Manning 2004). This is because, notwithstanding certain notable exceptions (e.g., Rampton 1995, 2006; Hill 2008), we have tended to restrict ourselves to analyses in which we see identity as necessarily resulting from an active process of "claiming" on the part of a speaker, despite the fact that social identity can emerge in a variety of ways (Cameron & Kulick 2005). Put another way, while we have become increasingly good at modeling one way in which identities are constructed, we have for the most part overlooked the alternative possibilities that exist.

In this article, I present one such possible alternative in an analysis of a slang variety called *oxtchit* as it described and used by a cohort of gay men in Israel. Contrary to the standard analyses of so-called "gay slangs," I do not claim that the men who use this variety do so as a way of expressing or affirming the kind of gay subjectivity with which this slang is affiliated. Rather, I argue that the men use *oxtchit* as a form of mockery (Goffman 1974), which enables them to indirectly index their own gender normativity through the derisive construction of an aberrantly gendered other. In making this proposal, my goal is not to imply that analyses that view language as explicit identity performance are necessarily inaccurate. Far from it. I do, however, suggest that this is a determination that needs to be made on ethnographic grounds and that the interactional function of socio-indexical language may not be as straightforward as it seems.

I begin in the next section with a brief overview of gay slang varieties as they have been treated in the sociolinguistic literature. I describe how standard analyses have viewed them as analogous to *anti-languages* (Halliday 1976), a way to resist the oppression suffered by gay men in society through the instantiation of an alternative, identity-affirming discursive space. And while on the surface *oxtchit* too resembles an anti-language, I go on to demonstrate how an examination of the use of *oxtchit* among a group of men that I observed ultimately renders this type of analysis untenable. Instead, I employ Goffman's 1974 well-known theory of participant roles in conversation to argue that *oxtchit* serves as what Hastings & Manning 2004 call a *voice of alterity* for these men- a voice whose goal is not the presentation of self but rather its opposite: the presentation of a not-self. I then turn finally to a brief discussion of the implications that this analysis may have for our understanding of identity-linked language more broadly.

## LAVENDER LEXICONS

### Gayspeak

The idea that there exist distinctive "gay lexicons" has always featured prominently in discussions of gay-identified language (see Cameron & Kulick 2003, ch. 4 for a comprehensive review). Though first considered nothing more than the linguistic manifestation of male homosexual abnormality (e.g., Legman 1941), researchers in the 1970s began to argue that these lexicons represented an important component of what came to be

called gay “subculture.” In step with the dominant strand of lesbian and gay politics at the time, these scholars claimed that the distinctiveness of gay-identified speech reflected the structural subordination of gay men in society and the consequent need for them to devise “special” ways of speaking and interacting. While there was intense disagreement in the literature as to how widespread and/or unique it actually was (e.g., Farrell 1972; Conrad & More 1976; Penelope & Wolfe 1979), a consensus did at least emerge that so-called “gay language” was not an inherent property of gayness but was instead a learned behavior that served a particular social purpose.

The most detailed articulation of what that social purpose might be was offered by Hayes 1981, for whom *Gayspeak*, as he called it, fulfills a tri-partite function:

- 1) a language of *secrecy* that allows gay men to communicate private meanings to one another even when in public;
- 2) a language of *community* and solidarity that delineates and reinforces the norms of gay subculture;
- 3) a language of *political activism* through which previously derogatory terms, such as “faggot,” are reclaimed and revalorized.

There is much to be commended in Hayes’ proposal. Sidestepping the issue of the problematic circularity of its logic (i.e., the notion that since gay men behave in a certain way, that behavior is “gay”; see Darsey 1981; Cameron & Kulick 2003), Hayes’ proposal manages to capture the fact that in contexts as diverse as Britain in the 1940s (Baker 2002) and the present-day Philippines (Manalansan 1995) gay lexicons are used as a means of secret communication. Likewise, numerous studies have demonstrated the solidarity-building function that the use of gay lexicons can serve (e.g., Leap 1996; Boellstorff 2004). And Kulick (2000: 254) comments on how Hayes’ ideas about *Gayspeak* and its connection to political activism anticipate Butler’s 1993, 1997 discussions of linguistic subversion and performative resignification by more than a decade.

It is perhaps for these reasons that Hayes’ account remains central to contemporary analyses of gay lexicons, even as the theories used to support these analyses have changed. Barrett 1997, for example, explicitly rejects Hayes’ notion of a singular or authentic “gay language,” preferring instead a more nuanced framework of indexicality (e.g., Ochs 1992). He nevertheless argues that “bar queen speech” serves to index a common gay male identity, build community solidarity and, in certain contexts, help gay men to identify one another covertly. Similarly, Baker 2002 states that his analysis of Polari in early-twentieth century Britain is not framed in terms of “universals” of homosexual language (as Hayes’ was), but rather in a more local, practice-based understanding of social meaning (e.g., Bourdieu 1991). Ultimately, though, Baker’s conclusion is that Polari primarily functioned as a means for gay men to ironically recontextualize discriminatory stereotypes of male homosexuality and, in so doing, construct positively evaluated identities within the gay subculture of the time.<sup>1</sup> In both of these examples then, as in many others in the literature, we find that the final analysis given essentially replicates what was originally proposed by Hayes: that gay lexicons serve an identity-affirming, community-building purpose. The language of these arguments has certainly changed, and Hayes’ overly simplified treatment of concepts such as “identity” and “community” has been replaced by more dynamic, socially-situated accounts. But, at the end of the day, our understanding of *why* gay lexicons are used (by the people who use them, when they use them) has gone largely unaltered for the past thirty years.

This is not a problem in and of itself. The goal of our work after all is to devise generalizable theories that can model sociolinguistic phenomena across a range of cultural and historical contexts. A problem does arise, however, when the predominance of a

particular theoretical perspective serves to conceal, or even misrecognize, alternative accounts. In terms of gay lexicons, this means that subsequent research on the topic needs to ensure that it does not take the model of such language use as only being about identity-claiming, and in so doing overlook other, potentially more accurate interpretations.

### Lexicon as Anti-Language

Though not always stated in those terms, scholars for the most part have tended to understand gay lexicons as a specific instantiation of what Halliday 1976 famously labels an *anti-language*, or the language style characteristic of a “secret” *anti-society*.<sup>2</sup> Conceived of as a way to resist the marginalization and exclusion suffered in society-at-large, anti-societies are liminal discursive spaces with their own locally-generated standards, values and systems of social organization. The goal of an anti-society is to provide an alternative frame of reference for its members, a new and different reality in which they can construct and portray alternative (i.e., non-normative) identities without fear of censure or reproach. The anti-language, in this formulation, serves two crucial and interrelated purposes. The first is the *creation* of the anti-society itself, literally giving voice to the alternative set of values by which the anti-society is defined. The anti-language’s second purpose is then the *maintenance* of the anti-society it helped to define, providing its members with a unique, and often subversive, means of distinguishing themselves from non-members.

Because of these specialized functions, Halliday argues that anti-languages will normally exhibit certain distinctive structural characteristics that set them apart from other kinds of linguistic varieties. The first and most salient of these, *relexicalization*, refers to the presence in the anti-language of an abundance of terms for describing the semantic domains typical of the activities and interests of the anti-society. For example, Halliday cites the case of the anti-language of Calcutta’s criminal underworld (Mallik 1972) in which there are 21 words for “bomb” and 41 words for “police.” In addition, Halliday claims that relexicalization is normally accompanied by processes of semantic specialization, such that denotationally similar words take on individual, connotative meanings within the anti-language and do not remain direct semantic variants of one another. Thus, once again in Calcutta, two words that originally both simply meant “girl” shift in meaning so as to express distinct attitudes on the part of the speaker toward the individual referred to. The final characteristic that Halliday describes is what he calls *metaphor*, by which he means the introduction in the anti-language of innovative linguistic forms across all levels of structural organization, including phonology (exemplified by processes such as metathesis and syllabic insertion), morphology (e.g., suffixation, compounding) and semantics (e.g., synecdoche).

Halliday clearly states, however, that these formal properties are only secondary characteristics, and do not serve as sufficient evidence for the identification of an anti-language. That identification must instead result from a close examination of the *functional orientation* of the variety:

An anti-language is not something that we shall always be able to recognize by inspection of a text. It is likely to be characterized by some or all of the various features mentioned, and hence to be recognizable by its phonological or lexicogrammatical shape as a metaphoric alternant to the everyday language. But in the last resort these features are not necessary to an anti-language. ... An anti-language, while it may display variation [i.e., of phonological and lexicogrammatical forms], is to be defined as a systematic pattern of tendencies in the selection of meanings to be exchanged (Halliday 1976: 582).

The “meanings” that Halliday has in mind here are the anti-social ones. In essence, Halliday is claiming that what distinguishes anti-language from language is the fact that the former encodes the beliefs and values of the anti-society (while the latter encodes those of society). Yet, he insists that this encoding is not static; it is not an identifiable property of a text. Rather, Halliday characterizes it in terms of an “exchange,” arguing that anti-social meaning, and thus the anti-language itself, can only ever be defined in interaction. In other words, only when a variety is used to create an anti-society does that variety become an anti-language.

It is this *emergent* character of anti-languages that I would argue deserves further exploration in the literature on gay lexicons. Rather than seeing the meaning of gay lexicons as self-evidently grounded in the expression of a gay identity (as some argue much research has; Hastings & Manning 2004; Cameron & Kulick 2005), I propose that we engage in a close examination of the contexts of a gay lexicon’s use as a means of avoiding potentially premature analyses in anti-linguistic terms. What I mean is that an assumption that identity is the goal would allow researchers to move directly from an analysis of form (i.e., the sociolinguistic structure of a lexicon) to an interpretation of function (i.e., an anti-language of community, secrecy and/or advocacy). Yet this is precisely the sort of textual analysis Halliday cautions against, since it effectively substitutes a presumption of “explicit identity performance” for an empirical examination of how a lexicon is actually used. In this article, I place an examination of use at the center of my analysis, and argue that an investigation of form and use together can yield a very different understanding of a gay lexicon’s function.

## OXTCHIT

### An Israeli Gay Lexicon

My arguments are based on an analysis of an Israeli gay lexicon called *oxtchit* that I was first exposed to as part of a larger examination of language and sexuality in Israel (Levon 2010). For that project, I spent more than 500 hours over twelve months as a participant-observer in numerous lesbian and gay activist associations ranging across the Israeli political spectrum, including everything from a centrist political lobby to a queer anarchist group. I also conducted individual sociolinguistic interviews with 57 group members (21 women; 36 men). From the moment I began conducting the fieldwork for this project, my informants spoke to me about a particular kind of Israeli gay man called an *oxtcha* (*oxtchot* in the plural), a term original to Hebrew that is most likely derived from the Arabic for “my sister.”<sup>3</sup> As they were always described to me, *oxtchot* are young, effeminate gay men of Middle Eastern or North African descent (what are called in Israel *Mizrachim*, literally “Orientals”) who are physically slight, wear makeup and the latest designer clothing and are obligatorily passive during sex.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these bodily characteristics, *oxtchot* are also notably distinguished by their use of language, which is usually characterized in terms of exaggeratedly high speaking pitch, wide pitch ranges and high levels of pitch dynamism all laid over a distinct and unique set of lexical items. These lexical items, known collectively as *oxtchit*, were in fact the most salient aspect of my informants’ descriptions, mentioned every time as an essential component of the *oxtcha* persona.

Because of the frequency with which they were described to me across my informant population, I began to investigate the extent to which *oxtchot* exist as a salient persona-type in Israeli society more broadly. I quickly discovered that while all of my lesbian and gay informants were, to varying degrees, familiar with the words of *oxtchit*, people not affiliated with the Israeli gay and lesbian “scene” had never heard of *oxtchot* nor had any knowledge of their characteristic language style. In this respect then, *oxtchit* is a “secret” lexicon whose domain of relevance does not extend beyond certain institutionalized configurations of Israeli

lesbian and gay life. Yet unlike some of the other secret gay lexicons mentioned above (e.g., Polari), *oxtchit* is a very restricted code. While Baker 2002, for example, lists over 400 words that make up the Polari lexicon, the most comprehensive list of *oxtchit* words I have been able to find contains only 28 entries (see Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

The words in Table 1 are divided into three sections. These divisions are empirical ones, and reflect the extent to which the words can be reliably categorized as *oxtchit* forms. The topmost section contains words that were spontaneously offered to me as examples of *oxtchit* by my informants. These are also the words that I myself heard used most often, and can thus be identified as part of the core *oxtchit* vocabulary. The middle section, on the other hand, contains words that are listed in a published lexicon of *oxtchit* (see note 5) but were never corroborated by my informants (note too that all the words in the top section also appear in the published lexicon). The status of these words is therefore more peripheral. Finally, the bottom section of Table 1 contains words that are listed in the published lexicon and that I heard used, but that are identical in form and in use to their source forms and are thus perhaps more accurately described as borrowings (question marks in the table refer to source languages and meanings that have been suggested but that I have been unable to verify).

In examining Table 1, it is immediately clear that the majority of the words listed all refer to a restricted set of semantic domains, primarily concerned with issues of feminine gendered practice (e.g., *nashat* “feminine gay man”; *koveret* “look wonderful”; *poreax* “beauty”), the physical attributes of men (e.g., *birz* “handsome man”; *kobor* “big penis”; *menafuax* “muscular man”) and sex (e.g., *lexolel* “give oral sex”; *ledžardel* “act slutty”). This is something that *oxtchit* shares with many of the gay lexicons described in the literature (e.g., Penelope & Wolfe 1979; Leap 1996) and is also reminiscent of Halliday’s principle of relexification in anti-languages. When we consider the origins of the words listed, we find that roughly two-thirds are derived from languages other than Hebrew, nearly evenly split between Arabic (six words), English (seven words) and other European languages (five words), including Spanish, French, Italian and German. These words of foreign origin are structurally largely unaltered from their source languages, aside from a slight adaption to Hebrew phonological and morphological patterns. So, for example, the English word *apt* becomes [aft] in *oxtchit*, presumably due to a normal process of post-vocalic spirantization in Hebrew. In another case, the German noun *Strich*, literally “line” but colloquially used to mean “street” in expressions like *Strichjunge* (“male prostitute”) and *auf den Strich gehen* (“walk the streets”), is borrowed as a noun, but is then also transformed into a verb (*lehashtrex*) through a normal process of Hebrew morphological derivation.

TABLE 1. *An oxtchit lexicon*

Term (Origin)	Meaning	Source Meaning
<b>oxtcha</b> (Arabic)	young, feminine gay man	from <i>my sister</i>
<b>uft</b> (unknown)	ass	unknown
<b>birz</b> (Arabic?)	handsome man	<i>endearment</i> (?)
<b>džondž/žož</b>	penis	<i>penis</i> (?)
<b>harmot/leharim</b> (Hebrew)	talk “oxtchit”	<i>elevations, to raise</i>
<b>wedž</b> (Arabic)	face	from <i>face</i>
<b>žarmiž</b> (Turkish?)	amazing	unknown
<b>lexolel</b> (Hebrew)	give oral sex	from <i>play the flute</i>
<b>kobor</b> (Arabic)	big penis	from <i>big</i>
<b>lord</b> (English)	handsome man	<i>lord</i>

<b>nashat</b> (Hebrew)	feminine-acting gay men	from <i>feminine</i>
<b>poreax</b> (Hebrew)	beauty (person)	from <i>blossom</i>
<b>koveret</b> (Hebrew)	look wonderful	<i>bury</i>
<b>kukitza</b> (English)	young “oxtcha”	<i>cookie</i> (?)
<b>aft</b> (English)	large penis	<i>apt</i> (?)
<b>dakak</b> (Hebrew)	small penis	from <i>very thin</i>
<b>vijedža</b> (Spanish)	old gay man	from <i>old</i> ( <i>fem</i> )
<b>vizon</b> (French)	vagina	<i>mink</i>
<b>ledžardel</b> (French)	act slutty	from <i>whorehouse</i>
<b>lehafil</b> (Hebrew)	have sex with straight man	<i>to impose upon, defeat</i>
<b>menafuax</b> (Hebrew)	muscular man	from <i>swollen</i>
<b>shtrix/ lehashtrex</b> (German)	sex, have sex	from <i>street</i> (colloquial)
<b>bod</b> (English)	body	from <i>body</i>
<b>butch</b> (English)	butch (woman)	<i>butch/masculine</i>
<b>ber</b> (English)	large, hairy man	<i>hairy gay man</i>
<b>gaydar</b> (English)	gaydar	<i>gaydar</i> (i.e., <i>gay radar</i> )
<b>diva</b> (Italian)	diva (superstar)	<i>goddess</i>
<b>ma’ayna</b> (Arabic)	stupid ( <i>fem</i> )	<i>stupid</i> ( <i>fem</i> )

For the remaining eight words of Hebrew origin, a combination of morphological, phonological and semantic innovation has taken place. Phonologically, two of the words are derived by simply altering one vowel of their standard Hebrew counterparts. The initial root vowel of the Hebrew verb *lexalel* “play the flute” is changed to derive *lexolel* “give oral sex.” Similarly, changing the second vowel in Hebrew *dakik* “very thin” results in the innovative form *dakak* “small penis” (perhaps in phonetic reference to the English *cock*). In terms of morphology, three *oxtchit* words are distinct from their corresponding standard Hebrew source forms. The word *nashat* “feminine gay man” is a (non-standard) combining form of the Hebrew adjective *nashi* “feminine”; the noun *poreax* “beauty” is derived from the verb of the same form (meaning “to blossom”) rather than the expected nominal form *prixa*; and the adjective *menafuax* “muscular man” is derived via the addition of a pleonastic stative prefix to the standard Hebrew adjective *nafuax* “swollen.” Finally, all eight Hebrew-origin words take on specialized semantic meanings in *oxtchit*, either through metaphorical extension (e.g., *koveret* “look beautiful” and hence “bury” the competition), ludic iconization (e.g., *lexolel*) or synecdoche (e.g., *ledžardel* “act slutty” as one acts in a “whorehouse”).

The similarities between *oxtchit* and Halliday’s description of anti-languages are striking. In formal terms, *oxtchit* is a domain-specific relexicalized alternative to Hebrew. The relexicalization that characterizes it, moreover, is realized via processes of structural metaphor that apply on phonological, morphological and semantic levels. Functionally, *oxtchit* is also well suited to serving as the means through which an *oxtcha* anti-society is constructed and maintained. The fact that the lexicon is made up of either foreign words or Hebrew terms that have been fundamentally altered in some way means that *oxtchit* can serve both as a language of secrecy and as a way to establish a communal *oxtcha* identity that excludes those not familiar with the variety (Bourdieu 1979; Irvine 2001). *Oxtchit*’s domains of reference are, furthermore, specific to those aspects most stereotypical of *oxtcha* life, and which stand in explicit contrast to normative ideologies of gender and sexuality in Israel. As I have argued elsewhere (Levon 2009, 2010), men in Israel are subject to a particular conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (what has been called the “men as soldiers model”) that prizes taciturn virility and links it to standard definitions of Israeli national identity. *Oxtchit*, by virtue of its portrayal of a stereotypically histrionic hyper-femininity,

valorizes and linguistically encodes a contravention of this norm, rendering it a potentially very potent form of political resistance and a basis for anti-social cohesion. Yet, as I claim above, in order to do any of these things, *oxtchit* must be used by those who speak it as a means to express an alternative, *oxtchit* identity (or identification).<sup>6</sup> There is, however, little evidence to suggest that gay men in Israel are in fact using it in this way. On the most superficial level, in the twelve months I spent conducting fieldwork in Israel I never met an *oxtcha*. This is not to say that I never heard *oxtchit* words in conversation or that I did not meet young, effeminate gay men. But I never met anyone who either self-identified as an *oxtcha* or who exhibited the various characteristics, both physical and linguistic, I had been hearing about. If *oxtchit* were indeed being used in the ways envisaged by Halliday's theory, my lack of firsthand knowledge of *oxtcha* as an embodied identity would be surprising.

In saying this, I do not mean to imply that in order for *oxtchit* to function as an anti-language, *oxtchot* must in some essentialized sense exist. Like any other distinctive variety, *oxtchit* is a linguistic abstraction – an *enregistered voice* (Agha 2007) – that is ideologically linked to the reified category *oxtcha*. My point, however, is that in order for a voice to function as an anti-language, we must have evidence that speakers are using it in what Bakhtin 1984 would call a *uni-directional* fashion- that is, as a means to performatively align themselves with the persona that the voice indexes (see also Rampton 1998). This is what is lacking in my observations in the Israeli context, where, as I outline below, *oxtchit* is not used as a way to claim affiliation with *oxtchot*.

### Speaking *Oxtchit*

In the interviews I conducted with my informants in Israel, I would ask whether it is possible to determine if someone is gay or lesbian simply by speaking with them on the telephone. While the women were relatively nuanced in their responses, the men all answered that it was possible (at least when speaking with other men), and when pressed for more details invariably made reference to *oxtchit*.<sup>7</sup>

- (1) אני לא חושב שזה נכון, למעט אוחצ'ית מדוברת. [צוחק] אני צוחק כי ככה, לפחות ככה קוראים לזה אצלינו. שמשתמשים באיזה שהוא סלנג ... זה באמת בעקף מה שאנחנו קוראים אוחצ'ות. למרות שגם אני לפעמים יכול להכניס מילים כאלה בשביל הצחוק – משעשע בסך הכול.  
 (“I don't think it [determining someone's sexuality over the telephone] is possible, except for *oxtchit*. [laughs] I'm laughing because, at least that's what we call it. It's using a kind of slang ... I mean it's really mostly what we call *oxtchot* [who use it]. Even though sometimes I'll throw in some of those words just for fun - it's entertaining.”)

The extract in (1) comes from my interview with Gilad, a 31-year-old man from Tel Aviv. In his comments, Gilad claims that the only salient linguistic clue to (male) sexuality in Israel is *oxtchit*. And while he primarily associates this “slang” with others (“what we call *oxtchot*”), Gilad also admits to using it himself sometimes, though only for comic effect (“even though sometimes I'll throw in some words just for fun”).

Oren, a 34-year-old man from Jerusalem, similarly identifies the use of “certain words” as the only way to linguistically determine if an Israeli man is gay:

- (2) יש כמה, באו נגיד, מילים בודדות שאפשר- שה משיהו אומר אותן הוא או הומו או שהחברה שלו הומואים. להגיד אוחצ'ה, למשל, זה- אתא צריך להיות מהמיליה הזות כדי להבין ממה מדובר.  
 (“There are certain, let's say, distinct words that it's possible- when



someone says them he's either gay or his friends are gay. So saying *oxtcha*, for example, it's- you need to be from this milieu in order to know what it's about.”)

For Oren, knowing a word like *oxtcha* requires an intimate familiarity with Israeli gay life (“when someone says them he's either gay or his friends are gay”). When I asked him where these distinctive words come from, Oren replied that they come from *oxtchit*, and went on to describe the people who normally use them:

- (3) זה שפת האוחצ'ות. שפת גבר נשי, עם מחוות גוף שהן נשיות, אדינות. קצת רופס כזה אולי. יש לזה גם הבטים יותר רחבים. בחינת טעם בלבוש, במוזיקה.

(“It's the language of *oxtchot*. The language of a feminine man, with feminine mannerisms, delicate mannerisms. Maybe even kind of limp-wristed. There are also other aspects to it [being an *oxtcha*]. In terms of taste in clothing, in music.”)

Oren's description contains many of the familiar tropes regarding *oxtchot*, including an emphasis on femininity (“a feminine man, with feminine mannerisms”) and the identification of a distinctive set of tastes and habits (“taste in clothing, in music”). When asked, however, whether he uses *oxtchit* words himself, Oren's reply contrasts sharply with that of Gilad above:

- (4) אני לא. אני לא אוחצ'ה, ואני לא מי אלה שמשתמשים בסטראוטיפ. כלומר, יש המון הומופוביה- אפילו מי הומואים שהם יותר גבריים כלפי הומואים שהם יותר נשיים, כלפי האוחצ'ות. ויש המון שינאה כלפי האוחצ'ות. כלומר הן הרבה פעמים קצת מוקצות. אז אני לא עשה את זה.

(“Me, no. I'm not an *oxtcha*, and I'm not one of those people who uses the stereotype. I mean, there's a lot of homophobia- even from gays that are more masculine toward gays that are more feminine, toward *oxtchot*. And there is a lot of hatred of *oxtchot*. I mean, they are even outcast a lot of the time. So I don't do that.”)

While Gilad admits to sometimes using it “for fun,” Oren sees *oxtchit* as a language style uniquely affiliated with *oxtchot* (“I'm not an *oxtcha*”). He nevertheless recognizes the fact that people who are not *oxtchot* can also make use of the variety (“people who use the stereotype”). Oren, however, views this practice unfavorably as a manifestation of what he calls “homophobia” among gay men, and explicitly rejects the idea of doing it himself (“so I don't do that”).

Gilad's and Oren's comments together are representative of the responses I received on the topic from the men in my sample. The men all commented on the salience of *oxtchit* as a variety, even as they maintained that it is spoken primarily, or even “authentically,” by others (i.e., *oxtchot*). Even so, some of the men (like Gilad) acknowledged using certain *oxtchit* words, at least on occasion. These uses, however, were consistently described as light-hearted and entertaining, never serious or “identity-claiming.” On the other hand, other men in my sample echoed Oren's response and flatly denied using *oxtchit* whatsoever, stating either that it was simply irrelevant to them or that they did not approve of the intolerance that they felt its use implied.

The men's own descriptions of their uses/non-uses of *oxtchit* parallel what I observed of *oxtchit* in practice.<sup>8</sup> While very frequently a topic of conversation and meta-commentary,

the actual use of *oxtchit* terms was relatively rare. When this use did occur, it was in my experience exclusively at bars or other social gatherings where it was used between friends as a means of commenting on someone else. So, for example, the *oxtchit* word for “face” (*wedž*) would be used in a sentence like “What a lovely face,” or the *oxtchit* word for “ass” (*uft*) in a statement like “I want a piece of that ass.” As these examples demonstrate, *oxtchit* was not normally used in directly addressing the individual concerned; I never heard anyone say to someone else “You have a lovely *wedž*” (though the analogous sentence without the *oxtchit* term was common). Rather, *oxtchit* only ever seemed to be employed in indirect commentary, and normally when that commentary was of a sexual nature.

This already rather specialized use of *oxtchit* was even further restricted by speaker, such that only a specific subset of the men in my sample employed *oxtchit* words with any frequency (as alluded to in Gilad’s and Oren’s comments). Interestingly, this division among the men into those who use *oxtchit* and those who do not falls along salient ethnographic lines. In previous work (e.g., Levon 2010), I have argued that the men in my sample can be divided roughly into two camps based on the extent to which their own beliefs and practices correspond to dominant Israeli conceptualizations of gender and national belonging. The men in the first of these camps (what I call the “Mainstream” group) believe in the importance of reconciling what they call their gay “lifestyle” with Israeli models of normative masculinity. The men in the second camp (the “Radical” group), on the other hand, reject this integrative inclination and argue instead for a total reconfiguration of the Israeli gendered order. These two positions are articulated through a number of symbolic practices that serve to distinguish the men of the two groups from one another, not the least of which includes a tendency for the Mainstream men’s speech to conform to Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms while the Radical men’s speech subverts them (Levon 2009).

Contrary to what we might expect given this broader ethnographic context, it is the Mainstream men (including Gilad) who are the predominant users of *oxtchit*. The Radical men (like Oren) hardly use it at all. This finding poses a serious problem for an analysis of *oxtchit* as anti-language since those who use the variety are the same people whose stated beliefs contradict everything that *oxtchit* represents. In other words, *oxtchit* – an explicitly feminine speech style that controverts Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms – is used almost exclusively by the men most invested in maintaining those norms. If, as I argue above, we take uni-directional voicing as a necessary condition of anti-languages, then an anti-linguistic account of *oxtchit* appears to be ethnographically unjustified.

Instead, I would argue that the Mainstream men’s use of *oxtchit* is an example of *vari-directional* voicing (Bakhtin 1984). Unlike its uni-directional counterpart, *vari-directional* voicing does not involve a performative alignment between the speaker and the persona indexed through the act of speaking. Rather, *vari-directional* voicing is a form of distancing via comparison, a way for a speaker to layer a socially salient voice over her own in order to demonstrate the *opposition* between the two. That this is indeed what the Mainstream men are doing when they use *oxtchit* is supported by the characteristics of their use that have already been described. First of all, there is the apparent incongruence between the beliefs the Mainstream men maintain and the social stances *oxtchit* can be said to index. Rather than confounding an analysis of the social meaning of *oxtchit*, this incongruence is central to a *vari-directional* account. Second, there is the fact that *oxtchit* seems to be used only for indirect commentary among friends, not directly or to “outsiders.” This is a common feature of *vari-directionality* (see, e.g., Rampton 1995 on *avoidance*) that helps to ensure that this kind of voicing is in fact interpreted as such, and not, for example, uni-directionally. Finally, and related to this, is the fact that the Mainstream men consistently describe their use of *oxtchit* as “fun” or “entertaining.” *Vari-directional* voicing is, after all, a form of parody (Bakhtin 1984: 199), one that is often employed in a seemingly comic and light-hearted way.

In summary, my observations and experiences of *oxtchit* in Israel lead me to reject an understanding of it as a voice speakers use uni-directionally, and hence as a potential anti-language. Instead, I propose that the men who use it do so vari-directionally, an assertion that is supported by both their own descriptions of their use and the situations in which that use occurs. In the next section, I broaden the scope of my inquiry to include an examination of how *oxtchot* and their associated language style are represented in Israeli gay cinema. I do so in order to develop a clearer understanding of the role played by *oxtchit* in the Israeli gay imaginary and so gain further insight into what I argue is the Mainstream men's vari-directional practice.

### Representing *Oxtchit*

Two recent Israeli films have made at least indirect reference to *oxtchot* and the language style with which they are stereotypically affiliated. *The Bubble*, directed by Eytan Fox and released in 2006, includes a brief scene in which a character is identified as an *oxtcha* and in which the positionality of *oxtchot* in Israeli society is explicitly discussed. In *Antarctica*, directed by Yair Hochner and released in 2008, *oxtchot* are not overtly identified or discussed, though indirect reference is made to the language style *oxtchitit*. In this section, I consider both of these representations of *oxtchot/oxtchit* in turn as a means to metapragmatically situate the uses of *oxtchit* among the Mainstream men described above.

*The Bubble* tells the story of three young Israeli friends – two gay men (Noam and Yali) and one straight woman (Lulu) – who are forced to look beyond their sheltered Tel Aviv lives (i.e., their “bubble”) and confront the socio-political realities of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This confrontation is brought about, in the first instance, by a chance-encounter-cum-love-affair between Noam and a young Palestinian man (named Ashraf). Male homosexuality thus plays a pivotal role in *The Bubble*. Structurally, it provides the primary narrative impetus of the film, motivating the development of the storyline throughout. On a symbolic level, the institutionalized expression of gay male identity (as in the bars, parties and other venues that Noam and Ashraf frequent) provides the film with a means to contrast a “liberated” Israeli society with a “repressive” Palestinian one (see Friedman 2008).

The scene of interest to us here is part of a secondary plotline in the film that revolves around Yali (the other gay male protagonist) and his romantic involvement with a man named Golan. The scene itself narrates Yali and Golan's first date in a trendy Tel Aviv bar. At the start of the scene, Yali is approached and greeted by Miki Buganim, an acquaintance who is a renowned hairstylist and makeup artist in Tel Aviv. Miki's brief appearance incites a subsequent conversation between Yali and Golan in which views about appropriate ways to embody gay male sexuality in Israel are discussed. The scene is transcribed in its entirety in (5).<sup>9</sup>

#### (5) Imagining gay male sexuality in *The Bubble*.

- 1 Miki: היי  
 (“Hi”)
- 2 Yali: היי  
 (“He::y”)
- 3 Miki: וואו- איזה חולצה מהממת  
 (“Wow- what a fabulous shirt”)
- 4 Yali: נכון?  
 (“Right?”)
- 5 A: מיקי- בוא כבר

- 6 (“Miki- let’s go already”)  
 ((Miki and A leave))
- 7 Golan: [נגעל] יא אללה- כל האוחצות האלה  
 (“[disgustedly] Oh God- all those *oxtchot*”)
- 8 Yali: ?מה לא בסדר?  
 (“Is there a problem?”)
- 9 Golan: לא אוהב (. שאני הומו לא אומר שאני צריך להיות נשי  
 (“Don’t like it (. That I’m gay doesn’t mean that I need to be feminine”)
- 10 Yali: =אתא לא צריך (. יכול (. עושים מה שהם רוצים והם רוצים להיות נשיים=  
 (“Not need (. Can (. They can do what they like and they want to be feminine=”)
- 11 Golan: ?אתא משחק עלי? אח שלי- למה שמישהו יעשה להיות כזה מנשנש=  
 (“=Are you kidding me? Bro- why would someone want to be such a biter?”)
- 12 Yali: ?>מנשנש<  
 (“>A biter<?”)
- 13 Golan: כריות? מה אתא לא מכיר את הביטוי? מנשנש כריות? (. מה אתא כזה  
 14 בוחש בשוקו? (1.5) סתם, לא להתבאס- צוחקים אתך (. איזה תמים אתא  
 (“Pillows? What you don’t know the expression? A pillow biter? What are you like a fudge packer? (1.5) C’mon, don’t get all worked up- just playing with you (. You’re so naive”)
- 15 Yali: ((looks at Golan in silence and drinks))

The scene in (5) opens with a somewhat campy exchange between Yali and Miki. Yali’s response to Miki’s simple greeting (“Hi”) is a lengthened “He::y,” featuring a high pitch accent immediately followed by a steep drop in contour to the end of the word. Because of its indexical associations in Israel (Levon 2010), this sort of pitch dynamism serves to mark Yali’s speech as affected and/or effeminate. Miki responds in kind, complimenting Yali on his shirt using the Hebrew word *mehamemet* (literally “amazing”), a word stereotypically associated with women and gay men (much like “fabulous” in English). This brief interchange is brought to a close when Miki’s friend (called “A” in the transcript) pulls Miki away to a table elsewhere in the bar.

As soon as Miki and A leave, Golan expresses exasperation (*ya allah* “Oh God”) at “all of those *oxtchot*,” a category of person that he clearly affiliates with Miki. When Yali asks if anything is the matter, Golan continues in line 9 to state quite frankly that he does not like *oxtchot*, equating them with abnormal femininity in a man (“that I’m gay doesn’t mean I need to be feminine”). Golan’s statement to this effect is a straightforward articulation of a so-called *assimilationist* view of gay identity- that is, the belief that gay men should be as normatively masculine as their heterosexual counterparts (Vaid 1995; Levon 2010). In line 10, Yali counters by arguing instead for a more *liberal* understanding of gender as a form of individual choice (“they want to be feminine”). Interestingly, though, Yali is careful to avoid associating himself with people who may choose to adopt non-normative gender practices, making exclusive use of the third person plural (masculine) pronoun *hem* in his comments.

Golan immediately rejects Yali’s proposal, latching a disdainful “are you kidding me?” to the end of Yali’s turn before going on to ask (rhetorically) why anyone would choose to be an *oxtcha*. Golan frames his question by juxtaposing the stereotypically masculine vocative *ax sheli* (literally “my brother”) with the labeling of *oxtchot* as “biters” (or men who adopt the passive position in penetrative sex). In doing so, Golan establishes an opposition between “real” men (i.e, Golan and “his brother” Yali) and the emasculated *oxtcha*. When Yali, however, in line 12 appears not to understand the reference, Golan begins

to tease him and, in so doing, insinuate that Yali is himself a “biter.” The teasing is initiated by a demonstration of apparent incredulosity at Yali’s ignorance of the term, linguistically materialized through Golan’s repetitive questioning at the start of line 13. Golan then goes on to ironically suggest that the reason that Yali does not know the word “biter” is because Yali is actually a “fudge packer” (a man who adopts the active position in anal sex). When this tactic also elicits no response, and following a 1.5 second pause, Golan finally reassures Yali that he is only joking about Yali’s being a “biter” and laments what he sees as Yali’s naïveté. The scene ends with Yali unable or unwilling to respond, signaling a tacit acceptance of Golan’s point of view.

Taken as a whole, I believe that this scene in *The Bubble* works to delineate what are considered to be “acceptable” articulations of gay male identity in Israel, and that it does so in such a way as to categorically exclude *oxtchot*. From the outset, *oxtchot* are described as abhorrent (“Don’t like it”), impotent (“biters”) and ontologically distinct from gay men (“that I’m gay doesn’t mean that I need to be feminine”). And while there is some evidence of a diversity of opinion between Golan’s more assimilationist view and Yali’s more liberal one (“they can do what they like”), both of these perspectives result in a portrayal of *oxtchot* as sexually *pathological* (Warner 2000)- deviant individuals whose existence needs to be explained and/or justified and who stand in obvious contrast to the sexually “normal.” This deviance, moreover, is interactionally instantiated later in the scene when, toward the end, Golan uses the image of *oxtchot* as a source of banter or antagonistic play (Coupland 1999; Jaworski & Coupland 2005). That he then goes on to explicitly mark his insinuation that Yali is a “biter” as nothing more than a joke underscores the perceived danger such a label could pose if applied seriously. In short, I would argue that by the end of the scene *oxtchot* are positioned as both discursively and interactionally *liminal*; they are an aberrant person-type that neither Yali nor Golan seems willing to recognize as a viable embodiment of gay male sexuality in Israel.

A similar rejection of *oxtchot* can also be found in the second film I consider, Yair Hochner’s *Antarctica*. Like *The Bubble*, *Antarctica* recounts the story of a small circle of lesbians and gay men in Tel Aviv. It is, however, a self-avowedly less political film and focuses exclusively on the more mundane social and sexual encounters of its characters. As I state above, *oxtchot* are never explicitly identified or discussed in the film as such. Nevertheless, in one scene an *oxtchit* language feature is used and is immediately the subject of dispute and meta-linguistic commentary. The feature, one that I have not yet described, involves using feminine gender morphology when referring to men. Similar in form to calling a man “she” in English, this is a highly salient stereotype of *oxtcha* speech in Israel that was frequently offered to me as an example of the kind of thing that *oxtchot* do (though I, interestingly, never heard anybody actually use this feature in practice).<sup>10</sup> Symbolically, the association of *oxtchot* with feminine gender morphology is one of direct indexicality, where grammatical form is understood as straightforwardly encoding the inherent femininity by which *oxtchot* are characterized.

The scene in question narrates an encounter between two secondary characters: a woman, Michal, who is the ex-lover of the film’s female protagonist, and her friend, Eytan, a man who is infatuated with one of the film’s male protagonists. At the start of the scene, Eytan is pictured sitting drinking a cup of coffee alone in the bar that Michal owns. Michal enters, spots Eytan sitting alone and goes to sit next to him. The ensuing dialogue is transcribed in (6).

(6) Rejecting *oxtcha* language in *Antarctica*.

- 1 Michal: [בקול מיילל] אית::ן  
[whining] Eyta::n
- 2 Eytan: מה קרה?  
What's wrong?
- 3 Michal: או- קשה לי  
Oh- it's hard for me
- 4 Eytan: דיי (.) את אדיין מאוהבת בה?  
Enough (.) You're still in love with her?
- 5 Michal: >למה- היא דיברה אתך?<  
>Why- did she talk to you?<
- 6 Eytan: ראיתי אותה אבל היא לא ממש דיברה (.) היא קרה כמו קרח זוטי (.) מה הסיפור שלה?  
I saw her but she didn't really talk (.) She's cold as ice that one. (.) What's her story?
- 7 Michal: לא יודעת (.) אין לי כוח לדבר על זה=  
I don't know (.) I can't handle talking about it=
- 8 Eytan: =אוד פעם אין לך כוח לדבר על זה? אל תדברי=  
=You still can't handle talking about it? Don't talk
- 9 Michal: תרגעי  
Calm down [feminine form]
- 10 Eytan: [בקול יותר עמוק] על תדברי אלי בלשון נקבה- בסדר?  
[in a deeper voice] Don't address me in the feminine form- okay?
- 11 ((drinks his coffee))
- 12 Eytan: מה זה קפה חדש?  
What is this new coffee?
- 13 Michal: ג'מייקה משהו (1) טעים לך [נקבה]?  
Jamaica something (1) Do you like it [feminine form]?
- 14 ((both laugh))

The scene begins with Michal plaintively calling out to Eytan, elongating her creaky-voiced vowel to create a recognizably “whiney” voice. While at first concerned that something may be the matter (“what’s wrong”), Eytan soon becomes visibly annoyed by what we can infer is Michal’s regular complaining about her ex-lover (“Enough (.) You’re still in love with her?”). Michal seemingly misinterprets Eytan’s reply, thinking that it may indicate that he has new information about the situation. Eytan’s response, though, is dismissive and critical, and ends with his trying to understand why the ex-lover is so “cold” (“What’s her story?”). Michal, however, does not want to begin a long conversation on the topic, and replies she cannot handle talking about her ex-lover anymore (*eyn li koax ledaber al ze*, literally “I don’t have the strength to talk about it”). At this, Eytan’s mounting irritation erupts and he responds with an emphatic rhetorical question (“You still can’t handle talking about it?”) before attempting to silence Michal with the forceful imperative “Don’t talk.”

Rather than being silenced, however, Michal issues her own imperative (“Calm down”) in an even louder voice. Interestingly, she does so using the feminine form of the verb (*teragi*) rather than the masculine form that we would normally expect. This is immediately and negatively commented upon by Eytan, who, in a deeper voice than he was using previously, tells Michal not to address him using feminine forms. This negative sanctioning effectively ends this part of the conversation, and after having had a sip of his

coffee, Eytan attempts to change the subject (“What is this new coffee?”). Michal seems at first to have agreed to the topic shift, responding cooperatively that it is a new Jamaican blend. A moment later, however, Michal references what transpired just before by jokingly flaunting Eytan’s prohibition on referring to him using feminine forms. Instead of taking offense once again, this time Eytan joins Michal in laughter as the scene ends.

What is of primary interest to us here is the use (line 9), rejection (line 10) and subsequent re-use (line 13) of a feminine grammatical form to refer to a man— a practice stereotypically associated in Israel with *oxtchot*. Michal’s initial use of this feature is open to a number of interpretations. First, the feminine verb form could serve as a means of indexing Eytan’s prior behavior as in some way “feminine.” In the turn immediately preceding Michal’s, Eytan was increasingly agitated: his voice rose higher and he began to visibly lose his temper. A great deal of research on gender in Israel (e.g., Katriel 1986; Almog 2000) has argued that this sort of emotional display in a man runs counter to normative ideologies of Israeli masculinity, which instead require men to be laconic and reserved. Michal’s choice of grammatical form could therefore be interpreted as a way of highlighting Eytan’s deviation from this standard (i.e., his abnormal femininity).

A second, and in certain ways similar, interpretation of Michal’s practice is that it has to do with an assertion of power in the conversation. By the time she speaks in line 9, Michal has already been the recipient of two commands from Eytan (“Enough” in line 4 and “Don’t talk” in line 8). Using the feminine form in line 9 could therefore represent an attempt on Michal’s part to emasculate Eytan interactionally and unseat him from a position of conversational dominance. This interpretation once again relies upon a deployment of Israeli ideologies of masculinity, such that Michal’s “feminizing” of Eytan is interpreted as a threat and hence an effective means of establishing conversational control. The final interpretation that I suggest is related to both of the previous two, though it is less concerned with an assertion of power or an imputation of deviance as it is with the maintenance of an interpersonal status quo. What I have in mind here is Rampton’s 2008 discussion of stylization as embedded within *interaction ritual*, whereby Michal’s shift to a marked form in line 9 could be seen as a demand for remediation, an insistence that she and Eytan’s prior “friendly” relations be restored. From this perspective, the fact that Michal issues this demand by temporarily identifying Eytan as feminine (and hence in some way non-normative) would serve to heighten the demand’s intensity and perhaps increase its chance of success (Rampton 2008: 162).

All three of these interpretations crucially rely upon a belief that the identification of men with overt femininity is abnormal or undesirable. Whether the feminine verb form indexes Eytan’s gender deviance, weakens his conversational power or enacts a request that he soften his combative tone, the interactional force of Michal’s utterance rests on a prior association between feminine men and social liminality. Eytan’s response in line 10 is then direct metapragmatic evidence that he too shares this opinion. He firmly refuses any implication that he would be the type of man willing to be referred to with the feminine form, thus implicitly demonstrating his categorical distinction from men who do engage in this practice (i.e., *oxtchot*).<sup>11</sup> Michal does not dispute Eytan’s position, and goes on to cement their common bond by jokingly repeating a feminine form in line 13. Eytan here accepts the joke for what it is, and the “abnormal” femininity that is indexed by the feminine verb form is definitively marginalized in the interaction. Thus while certainly less overtly than in *The Bubble*, I argue that this scene in *Antarctica* is also a depiction of what is to be considered “normal” for gay men in Israel. Crucially, this normality is characterized as in opposition to the perceived gender deviance of *oxtchot*.

The portrayal of *oxtchot* as socially abject in *The Bubble* and *Antarctica* reflects and reproduces dominant Israeli ideologies of gender and sexuality. Even before the start of

Jewish settlement in Palestine in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Zionist theoreticians bemoaned what they viewed as the chronic passivity and weakness of Jews in Europe (Biale 1997). For them, the establishment of a Jewish national homeland was an opportunity not only to escape persecution, but also to create a so-called “new Jew” (Almog 2000; Kimmerling 2001) who would be strong and virile and able to overcome any attempts to subjugate him. Thus from the earliest possible moment, Israeli national identity has been intimately bound up with an insistence on hegemonic masculinity among men.<sup>12</sup> When, in the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian and gay activism began to emerge in Israel, calls for the inclusion of gays and lesbians in society were consistently couched in an assurance that non-normative sexuality does not imply non-normative gender (Walzer 2000; Gross 2002). In other words, the prevailing strand of lesbian and gay politics did not challenge the centrality of Israeli normative gender roles and instead argued that gays and lesbians are equally able to accommodate them.

This belief in the necessity of “normalcy” continues to animate dominant configurations of Israeli lesbian and gay life, both on-screen and off (see also Yosef 2005). Like the characters in *Antarctica* and *The Bubble*, the men and women in my sample are keenly aware of the expectation that they will adhere to traditional gender roles or risk being marginalized and labeled as aberrant. What is interesting about the films discussed here is that they depict in sharp relief what adhering to traditional masculine gender roles means in practice- which behaviors are to be considered acceptable and which, crucially, are not. Thus while the reality of gay life in Israel is certainly more complex and nuanced, its cinematic representation provides informative insight into how *oxtchot* are positioned as a sort of exemplary “other,” an embodiment of the passivity and effeminacy that stands in symbolic counterpoint to everything that “normal” Israeli gay men are supposed to be. This information is critical to building an account of the Mainstream men’s use of *oxtchit* since it helps us to understand the field of indexical meanings with which the language style is affiliated. In the next section, I combine this understanding of the meanings of *oxtchit* with my earlier assertion that the Mainstream men use it vari-directionally to propose an analysis of the purpose that such a use serves.

## VOICING ALTERITY

It has been a commonplace of research since Goffman 1974 that voices, speakers and selves need not always be aligned. In his well-known theory of production formats, Goffman outlines four participant roles in conversation with which to categorize the relationship between a speaker and an utterance: *author* (the person responsible for the utterance); *animator* (the person voicing the utterance); *principal* (the person whose views are expressed by the utterance); and *figure* (the social persona or “character type” indexed by the uttering). When canonically aligned, these four roles are embodied by a single individual- a speaker who performs an utterance (animator) of her own making (author) that expresses her own views (principal) and through which she is able to engender a desired presentation of self (figure). But this sort of alignment is only one of the typological possibilities that exist. In so-called “natural talk,” Goffman (1981: 128) argues that speakers often strategically misalign these various roles as a means of managing interaction and of positioning themselves in the larger social world within which that interaction takes place.

Of Goffman’s four roles, it is the *figure* that is of primary interest to us here. While author, animator and principal are for the most part concerned with the mechanics of language production, the concept of figure is a way to model *reception*, a way to establish a link between talk-in-interaction and its socially meaningful interpretation. In other words,



figures represent the interactional next-step of linguistic indexicality. They model the different ways in which speakers deploy meaningful voices, and help us to understand that deployment as a form of social action (see Keane 2000; Irvine 2001). Figures are thus a crucial component of our analysis of the function of the Mainstream men's use of *oxtchit*.

In his original formulation, Goffman 1974 identifies five figure types: 1) *natural* figures, 2) *staged* figures, 3) *printed* figures, 4) *cited* figures and 5) *mockeries* or *say-fors*. As described by Hastings & Manning 2004, these figure types represent a descending cline of correspondence between the embodied reality of a speaker (i.e., the "self") and the persona portrayed through the act of speaking. *Natural* figures are those that are the closest to what a person *is* (or desires to be); they are, in essence, acts of identity through which speakers animate a claim to a particular identity category. The other four figure types, on the other hand, all involve a discernable break between the speaker who animates an utterance and the figure the utterance portrays. For *staged* and *printed* figures, this break is grounded in the genres of theatrical performance and fiction-writing respectively (though certain instances of language as "artful performance" might also fit into the former category; see Bauman 1975; Coupland 2007; Rampton 2008). *Cited* figures refer to the use of reported speech, where not only are the animator and the figure unaligned but the distinction between the two is highlighted or emphasized. The final figure type, *mockeries*, is like cited figures in that it entails the quotation of speech explicitly attributed to another. Yet unlike straightforward citation, *mockeries* involve a focus on the form of an utterance, not its content, as a way of ridiculing the category of people of which that form is ideologically characteristic.

Building on Goffman's work, Hastings & Manning 2004 elaborate a theory of indexical language use that rests on a contrast between what they call *figures of identity*, natural figures that correspond to a speaker's image of self, and *figures of alterity*, mockeries that serve to interactionally construct an alternate "other." Crucially, however, they argue that the end-result of using either figural type is the same: the emergence of a speaker's desired presentation of self. In other words, both figures of identity and figures of alterity allow speakers to portray "identity" in interaction. The difference is one of method, whereby figures of identity involve explicit ascription to a particular category while figures of alterity involve the creation of a "monstrous or deviant [other], with respect to which the (normal) identity of the speaker emerges as the unmarked ground to the figure of abnormal alterity" (Hastings & Manning 2004: 304). By arguing that the performance of alterity is linked to the emergence of identity, Hastings & Manning broaden our understanding of indexical language use significantly, and open up a potentially very promising new field of empirical investigation.

I go through Hastings & Manning's framework in some detail because I believe that it is key to understanding the Mainstream men's use of *oxtchit*. In essence, I argue that *oxtchit* represents a figural voice of alterity for the Mainstream men- that they use it in order to portray an aberrantly gendered "other" in conversation and that in doing so they are able to indirectly index their own gender normativity. To use Goffman's terminology, I propose that *oxtchit* is the presentation of a "not-self" and that the purpose of the Mainstream men's using it is to construct a normative (gay) self in interaction. I would argue, moreover, that the structural, pragmatic and metapragmatic features of *oxtchit* outlined above support this interpretation.

In terms of pragmatics, Hastings & Manning claim that figural voices of alterity are "for the most part words of another that are never found in the mouth of another ... they are never forms found indexing speaker identity" (2004: 306). This is precisely the situation of *oxtchit* in Israel where, as the comments by Gilad and Oren attest, *oxtchit* is seen as being the words of an identifiable other, the *oxtcha*. Yet I have argued that *oxtchit* themselves do not necessarily exist. As I say before, I never encountered anyone who self-identified as an

*oxtcha* or who used elements of *oxtchit* to index an *oxtcha*-affiliated identity. *Oxtchit* therefore appears to be a language style that is lacking in “native speakers,” an exceptional variety that is never used to represent an embodied expression of identity.

Rather, I maintain that *oxtchit* is only ever employed vari-directionally. This vari-directional use is metapragmatically rationalized by the Mainstream men as “fun” or “entertaining.” But the fact that it is only the Mainstream men who use *oxtchit* and that even they only use it for indirect commentary in social situations indicates that its use serves a more serious interactional purpose. In the words of Hastings & Manning, *oxtchit* appears to be a form of *personation* (see also Coleman 2004), an act of performative mimicry that makes use of parody to contrast the putative “normality” of the speaker with the abnormality of the voice. We saw examples of this in both of the film scenes discussed previously, where the image of *oxtchot* (if not necessarily *oxtchit*) was instrumentalized in antagonistic play as a way to build solidarity between characters through the exclusion of an out-group other. Thus while I do not dispute that the Mainstream men do indeed find their use of *oxtchit* amusing, I would argue that this amusement is grounded in a mockery of the abnormality of which *oxtchit* is iconic.

Up to this point, I have focused on the ways in which *oxtchit* serves as an index of “difference” in interaction (i.e., as the language style associated with a salient “other”). My final point, on the other hand, involves the structural characteristics of *oxtchit*, which I argue are themselves a concrete manifestation of Israeli ideologies of alterity. In their discussion of how certain speech styles come to denote the “monstrous deviant” of alterity, Hastings & Manning claim that “‘abnormal speech types’ ... are ‘imitative’ in speech, not of *speech*, but rather of other forms of alterity” (2004: 305, emphasis in the original). In other words, the language used to denote an “other” is formally derived from the linguistic iconization (Irvine & Gal 2000) of the social characteristics that serve to identify that other as different. As an example, Hastings & Manning cite cases in which speech abnormalities are incorporated into figural voices of alterity as a means of representing some other physical, social or emotional “abnormality” of the people in question (the stereotype of the “gay men’s lisp” seems to be a case in point). In addition to physical abnormalities, Hastings & Manning also consider the possibility of alterity being linguistically encoded via changes in the morphology, phonology and local versus foreign origins of words (see also Hill 2008).

We find many of these iconic representations of alterity in *oxtchit*. First, I describe above how the majority of *oxtchit* words are drawn from non-Hebrew sources, including Arabic, English and a variety of European languages. While perhaps seemingly anodyne on the surface, this diversity of origins is laden with ideological baggage in the Israeli context. A key component of the formation of Israeli national identity was the revitalization and adoption of Hebrew as a symbol of Jewish national rebirth (Spolsky & Shohamy 1999; Kuzar 2001). The promotion of Hebrew was accomplished via a range of language planning efforts, not the least of which included the association of competing languages (e.g., Arabic, German, Yiddish) with the perceived weakness and passivity of Diaspora Jewish life. It is therefore telling that *oxtchit* makes such extensive use of non-Hebrew source words, as the “foreignness” of the variety is in direct opposition to gendered ideologies of the nation in Israel. Second, for those *oxtchit* words that are of Hebrew origin, the majority have undergone either morphological or phonological change (or both) and all have been semantically repositioned so as to refer to stereotypically feminine characteristics and concerns. Finally, the exaggerated pitch ranges and high levels of pitch dynamism that are said to accompany *oxtcha* speech can be interpreted as a marked departure from a normatively masculine Israeli prosodic style (Katriel 1986; Levon 2010).

In short then, I would argue that *oxtchit* involves the kind of structural iconization of difference that Hastings & Manning associate with figural voices of alterity. The use of

words of non-Hebrew origin, the changes in the morphology and phonology of Hebrew words, the semantic realignment of meanings and the divergence from normatively prescribed prosody all serve to encode a profoundly “abnormal” other. This “other” (the *oxtcha*) is the polar opposite of standard Israeli conceptualizations of masculinity and identity: he is foreign, effeminate and passive. By deploying this figure of alterity in conversation, I argue that Mainstream men affirm the “normality” of their own gay identities (they are not foreign; they are not effeminate; they are not passive). Cast in theoretical terms, the Mainstream men’s natural figures emerge as the presupposed ground to the *mockery* that is *oxtchit* (Goffman 1974; Hastings & Manning 2004).

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding analysis, I argue that unlike many of the other gay lexicons that have been described in the literature *oxtchit* is not an anti-language for the men who use it. While anti-languages require speakers to use them uni-directionally as a means to construct an “anti-identity” (Halliday 1976), I claim that the Mainstream men make vari-directional use of the variety so as to symbolically distance themselves from all that *oxtchit* represents. I develop this argument further by subsequently examining representations of *oxtchit/oxtchot* in Israeli cinema. There, I demonstrate how *oxtchot* are depicted as existing on the periphery of Israeli gay male life; they are aberrant figures whose deviance stands in marked contrast to normative articulations of gay sexuality in Israel. Finally, I bring these two strands of the analysis together to propose that the purpose of the Mainstream men’s use of *oxtchit* is the presentation of a figural voice of alterity in interaction (Hastings & Manning 2004). Based on a close reading of the structural, pragmatic and metapragmatic features of the variety, I argue that *oxtchit* is best characterized as a linguistic materialization of “difference” that the Mainstream men employ in conversation as a way of indirectly portraying their own normatively gendered selves.

There are, I think, two important generalizations to be drawn from this analysis. The first is that a purely “expressivist” conceptualization of identity is too narrow an analytical perspective to capture the myriad ways in which social subjectivities emerge (Cameron & Kulick 2003, 2005). In the case of *oxtchit*, for example, a focus on identity as grounded in explicit performance would lead us to conclude that the Mainstream men use the variety in order to construct a subversive *oxtcha* persona. This conclusion, however, would require that we overlook a bulk of pragmatic evidence to the contrary, not the least of which is the fact that engaging in “subversive” behavior is inconsistent with the Mainstream men’s beliefs and practices elsewhere. I describe above how the Mainstream men espouse an integrationist approach to gay sexuality, a belief that it is necessary to reconcile living a gay life with dominant Israeli narratives of gender and the nation (see also Levon 2010). Insisting that a performance of identity, as opposed to alterity, is what is behind the Mainstream men’s use of *oxtchit* would thus force us to draw conclusions about the men’s practice that are ethnographically unjustified. It would also mean that we would fail to appreciate the more subtle, and even backhanded, ways in which normative constructions of sexuality can emerge.

This leads to the second relevant generalization I would like to note, and that is the way in which the current analysis serves as a reiteration of Abu-Lughod’s (1990) famous caution against “romanticizing resistance” by disregarding the various forms resistance may take and ignoring their productive relationship to power. In the discussion above, I argue against an understanding of *oxtchit* as straightforwardly “subversive” practice. Rather, I propose that by using *oxtchit* as a figural voice of alterity the Mainstream men reproduce hegemonic

discourses of gender in Israel and perpetuate the requirement that gay men live according to these standards. This is not to say, however, that the Mainstream men's behavior is in no way an act of resistance. In contravention of normative ideas about sexuality in Israel, the Mainstream men affirm their belief that gay men can be just as "normative" as straight men. In other words, I argue that the Mainstream men's vari-directional use of *oxtchit* allows them to inhabit dominant social norms. But in doing so, they simultaneously transgress those norms by locating (at least certain articulations of) gay male sexuality within the realm of the ideologically tolerated (Mahmood 2005). Thus while in a certain sense freeing themselves from one structure of subjugation (i.e., the exclusion of gay male sexuality as a viable embodiment of Israeli national identity), the Mainstream men enmesh themselves in another (i.e., the requirement that Israeli men embody hegemonic masculinity). My point here, though, is that teasing out the ways in which language is related to larger structures of power requires us to consider the manifold ways in which speakers deploy linguistic resources as a form of social action. Only in moving beyond an understanding of language as a straightforward performance of identity can we hope to account for the multiple and overlapping fields of subjection and resistance in which our informants are located (Abu-Lughod 1990).

#### NOTES

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- 1 Baker (2002: 81-4) also briefly mentions different, non-identity-affirming uses of Polari, including "verbal aggression," "playing the game of one-upmanship," and as a way for speakers to "distance" themselves from an opinion they are expressing. He describes these other functions of Polari in terms of Bakhtin's (1984) concept of *vari-directional voicing*, which is precisely the framework I employ below.
- 2 Boellstorff (2004) explicitly rejects Halliday's formulation of anti-languages as irrelevant to the Indonesian *bahasa gay* lexicon he describes. His rejection is based on Halliday's insistence that the motivating principle of anti-languages is the formation of an *alternative* reality, whereas Boellstorff argues that the *gay* men he studies use *bahasa gay* as a way to represent a "queer take on the dominant reality," not to construct an alternative. I agree with Boellstorff that the situation he describes is qualitatively different from the one originally imagined by Halliday, though I feel that Boellstorff's dismissal of Halliday's perspective is a bit abrupt. After all, Halliday argues that societies and anti-societies belong to the same social structure and share the same semiotic; they are, in his words, metaphors of one another. As Boellstorff tells it, *gay* men in Indonesia use *bahasa gay* to construct an alternative world of sorts, one in which desire for "sameness" (as opposed to difference) is valorized. That this notion of sameness is "dubbed" from dominant discourses of national unity in Indonesia does not, to my mind, fully counteract the alternative character of what *gay* Indonesians are doing. I return to this question of the relationship between alterity and dominant national discourse in the final section.

- 3 I am unaware of any formal etymological study of the origins of the term *oxtcha* in terms of either its social or linguistic history. Discussions of *oxtchot* have been widespread among Israeli lesbians and gays since at least the early 1990s.
- 4 Note that the category of *Mizrachim* is a very particular, and culturally salient, one in Israel. Jewish citizens of Israel are normally divided into two groups: *Ashkenazim* (Jews of Eastern European origin) and *Mizrachim* (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin). This so-called “ethnic” difference among Jews in Israeli society is in addition to what is conceived of as a “racial” difference between Jews and Arabs. See, for example, Giladi 1990; Shafir & Peled 1998, 2002.
- 5 The lexicon, which can be found at [www.igy.org.il](http://www.igy.org.il) (accessed on 25 June 2009), is an online posting of a word list that originally appeared in the Israeli gay newspaper *HaZman HaVarod* (“The Pink Times”) in 1995. Both the print and electronic versions in fact contain 78 entries. Many of these, however, are proper names that refer to well known figures in lesbian and gay communities in Israel and elsewhere, as well as various gay-identified places in Israel (e.g., nightclubs, parks). When these proper names are removed, 28 entries remain. Transliterations in the table (and throughout) use a simplified Romanization of Hebrew script, where “x” refers to the voiceless velar fricative; “sh” and “ž” to the voiceless and voiced alveolar fricatives respectively; and “tch” and “dž” to the voiceless and voiced palato-alveolar affricates.
- 6 I am abstracting away from the distinction between *identities* and *identifications* as it is somewhat peripheral to my analysis here. While theoretically there is a difference between the expression of an *oxtcha identity* versus the expression of an *oxtcha identification*, what interests me for the moment is the more basic concept of *expression*.
- 7 All informants’ names are pseudonyms.
- 8 Due to various practical and ethical considerations, I was unable to make recordings of spoken interactions outside of the interview setting. I therefore do not provide transcripts of men using *oxtchit* in conversation, only their discussion of the topic in interviews.
- 9 English translations are my own. Transcription conventions are as follows:
- :: vowel lengthening
  - prosodic emphasis
  - ? question (rising intonation)
  - (.) pause
  - short pause
  - (n) length (in seconds) of longer pause
  - = latching (no audible break between turns)
  - >< more rapid speech
  - [ ] transcriber comment
  - (( )) non-linguistic action
  - (“ ”) English translation
- 10 It is important to note that the use of feminine forms for male referents is a rare phenomenon in Hebrew (despite the many opportunities that Hebrew’s highly inflected morphology provides) and one that is stereotypically restricted to gay men. So-called “gender reversal” is much more common in the other direction (i.e., the use of masculine morphology for female referents), predominantly as a way to make generic statement (e.g., “when you-MASC give-birth-MASC”; Sa’ar 2007) and, less frequently, to mark intimacy (Tobin 2001).

- 11 Devyani Sharma (pc) points out that Eytan's initial rejection of Michal's use of the feminine verb form may be grounded in a perception on Eytan's part of pragmatic infelicity (see, for example, Hall & O'Donovan's 1996 discussion of the pragmatics of pronominal variation among hijras in India). In other words, Eytan's reaction may very well have been different had his interlocutor been another gay man or the exchange between Michal and Eytan been less antagonistic. Related to this is the issue of the status of Michal as a woman in the interaction. Both in my observations and in my informants' descriptions, women rarely use *oxtchit*. Given this distributional tendency and the details of my analysis in subsequent sections, I would argue that Michal's use of an *oxtchit* feature here is exceptional, and that its meaning is wholly directed at Eytan (as in the possible interpretations I suggest) rather than in Michal's own construction or presentation of a subjectivity in the interaction.
- 12 My use of the exclusively masculine pronouns in the description of Zionism's "new Jew" is intentional since this category was imagined as an essentially male one. Historically, there is an analogous ideology for women in which standard definitions of Israeli femininity are equated with child-rearing and maternity (e.g., Berkovitch 1997; Sered 2000). Together, the "men as soldiers/women as mothers" matrix represents the normative conceptualization of gender roles in Israel to this day.

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