



BRILL

CONTRASTIVE PRAGMATICS 2 (2021) 137–167

CONTRASTIVE  
PRAGMATICS  
A Cross-Disciplinary Journal  
brill.com/jocp

# Interpretive Constructs in Contrast: The Case of Flattery in Hebrew and in Palestinian Arabic

*Roni Danziger*

Ph.D student, Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel  
*roni.danziger@mail.huji.ac.il*

*Zohar Kampf*

Associate professor, Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem, 91905, Israel  
*zohar.kampf@mail.huji.ac.il*

## Abstract

The contrastive study of interpretive constructs, the end products of evaluative processes, enables identification of patterns of meaning-making that may result in cross-cultural misunderstandings. The study focuses on judgments of flattery in Israeli Hebrew and Palestinian Arabic. Using contrastive metapragmatic methodology, it examines how flattery is used and perceived in two neighbouring speech communities with different cultural speaking styles: Israeli *dugri* (and its related *firgun*) and Arabic *musayara*. Findings indicate more similarities than differences in the performance and evaluation of flattery, with a slight departure with regard to evaluation and stance. We hypothesize that following the asymmetrical contact between Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers in Israel, younger Arabic speakers tend to adopt the majority group's patterns of politeness.

## Keywords

flattery – Hebrew – Palestinian Arabic – metapragmatics – *dugri* – *musayara*

## 1 Introduction

Flattery is a strategic non-conventionalized social behaviour that constitutes an exploitation of politeness strategies for the benefit of the flatterer. Through a mediating effect of pleasing the hearer, the flatterer aims to achieve three goals: transactional (i.e. exchanging of goods), self-promotional (i.e. achieving likeability), and relational (i.e. establishing, improving, or restoring relationships). However, accomplishing the pleasing effect is dependent on how participants in an interaction evaluate the action and the speaker's intent (Danziger, 2020). If judged as non-face-threatening, it may serve a relational function; if judged as overpolite (Locher and Watts, 2005), it is commonly seen as manipulative (Eylon and Heyd, 2008; Kapust, 2018).

Flattery is, therefore, an interpretive construct, an evaluative product of meaning-making processes (Danziger, 2020; for a discussion of the term *interpretive construct*, see Culpeper, 2011). Judging an action as flattery involves the assessment of textual cues and contextual clues (Weizman and Dascal, 1991) filtered through culture- and society-specific meanings attributed to the action (Danziger, 2020). Through an examination of evaluations of flattery as a test case of interpretive constructs, we can learn about social and cultural sensitive processes of meaning-making (Blum-Kulka and Hamo, 2011) and how they are manifested in a specific interpretive community. Studying flattery contrastively may allow us to understand differences in strategic use and abuse of positive communication, and the ways in which interpretations are constructed by two communities with differing communicative ethos (Katriel, 1986, 1999).

In this paper we examine judgments of flattery in the Israeli-Palestinian context. Building on the premise that pragmatic misunderstandings are especially detrimental in pre-existing conflictual relations (Ellis, 2018), a contrastive pragmatic study of two politically separate yet geographically and socially interconnected communities of Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel can provide an opportune setting for understanding the ways in which cultural differences are manifested in patterns of meaning-making. Identifying the similarities and differences between their culture-specific manifestations and judgements of flattery, the two linguacultures can exemplify how interpretive constructs are a rich source of analysis for contrastive pragmatics, historical pragmatics, socio-pragmatics, linguistic politeness, ethnography of communication, and cross-cultural communication. Moreover, the methodological integration of metapragmatics and ethnography of communication offered in this study extends contrastive pragmatics research by suggesting a culturally informed analysis of similarities and differences in the performance and meaning-making patterns of relational work across languages.

In the following section we outline a theoretical framework that links between the concepts of interpretive constructs and communicative ethos. First, we conceptualize flattery as an interpretive construct and, second, survey the communicative ethos of Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel and their expected manifestations in positive communication. By so doing, we wish to demonstrate that, similar to metacommunicative terms, interpretive constructs are informed by the culture-specific ethos of linguacultures. Through focusing on a specific interpretive construct – flattery – which is only available for analysis through metapragmatic labelling, we aim to show that the evaluation of certain communicative actions as flattery is informed by values endorsed by members of a specific linguaculture. This theoretical framework sets the ground for a methodology that will advance contrastive pragmatics analysis by allowing the examination of the lines drawn by members of different yet connected linguacultures around acceptable and unacceptable positive behaviour.

## 2 Flattery as an Interpretive Construct

Relational work theory offers a fitting framework for conceptualizing flattery as an interpretive construct, owing to its approach to politeness as a “discursive concept arising out of interactants’ perceptions and judgements of their own and other’s verbal behaviour” (Locher and Watts, 2005: 10). A social behaviour is judged appropriate or inappropriate (politic/non-politic; unmarked/ marked) in a specific context by participants in an interaction. In light of this framework, any positive communication can potentially be labelled as flattery; labelling an action as such is a result of interactants’ judgement of the communicative action in question as either positively marked or overpolite. A previous metapragmatic study that analysed 661 judgements of flattery and examined its use and perception in the Israeli-Hebrew speaking community has led to the following definition:

A marked communicative action; it is intended to be face-pleasing to the recipient, an effect that mediates one of three interactional goals of the flatterer: transactional, self-promotional, or relational. The action is perceived by at least one participant in an interaction as instrumental after evaluating textual cues and contextual clues.

DANZIGER, 2020: 423

This definition qualifies flattery as an interpretive construct since its evaluation depends on the judgment of the action and the speaker's intent as instrumental. The interpretive process of judging an action as flattery involves an evaluation of textual cues and contextual clues (Weizman and Dascal, 1991) in regard to what the interpreter identifies as conventional positive communication (e.g. compliments, praise, terms of endearment). In the first stage, the addressee detects a potential mismatch between the positive words that flattery relies on and the context in which they were uttered, including asymmetrical power relations, character of the participants, potential gain for the speaker, and the appropriateness of language and behaviour used in specific settings. Following the identification of a mismatch, the addressee labels the communicative action as flattery, attributing instrumental intentions to the positive words.

Since norms of communication are constructed around culture-specific values (Katriel, 1986), analysing interpretive constructs allows outlining the ways in which members in a specific community connect between cultural values and norms of politeness. Evaluating a positive action as either appropriate (e.g. polite, conventional, acceptable) or inappropriate (e.g. overpolite, flattery, unacceptable) is informed by culture-specific perception of values such as sincerity and solidarity, and preferred modes of speaking in a certain community, such as directness or indirectness (Blum-Kulka, 1992 [2005]). As a result, differences in the communicative ethos endorsed by members of a community affect their norms of politeness; what is expected and appropriate in context for one community may not be perceived as such by another. The advantage of this link between norms of politeness and communicative ethos for contrastive pragmatic analysis is clear: similar to politeness-realization strategies comparatively studied in the past (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Ogiermann, 2009), (im)politeness evaluation strategies are also subjected to cultural, social, and other contextual variations. Such variations make interpretive constructs a valuable point of departure for a comparative analysis of meaning-making processes in different cultural communities.

### 3 Israeli and Palestinian Communicative Ethos

The Israeli-Palestinian context provides an interesting test case for contrastive pragmatics since it includes two politically separate yet socially interconnected communities. Hebrew speakers and Arabic speakers in Israel share a social space, but their points of contact are limited. Due to the enduring intractable conflict and its effect on the geo-politics of Israel, the two communities

are simultaneously geographically and politically separate and socially and economically intertwined. While native Hebrew speakers are mostly Jewish, Arabic native speakers in Israel are of three different faiths: Muslim, Christian and Druze. The Muslim Arabic speakers in Israel broadly self-identify ethnographically as Palestinian (Amara, 2017).

The power relations between the cultures are asymmetric. As the majority population (79.1% in 2018<sup>1</sup>), Jewish Hebrew speakers are largely monolingual. Arabic speakers are 20.9% of the population and have a certain level of Hebrew proficiency required for official and everyday contexts such as tertiary education, work, commerce, and state institutions such as public health and political participation (Henkin-Roitfarb, 2011; Amara, 2017). Israeli-Palestinians' Hebrew proficiency depends on place of residence and education level. Each group, having its own language and history, represents different speech communities that have traditionally been considered complete opposites in their communicative ethos: the Hebrew *dugri* and its extension, *firgun*, and the Arabic *musayara*.

### 3.1 Jewish-Israeli *dugri* and *firgun*

*Dugri* (דוגרי) is a metacommunicative term for the Jewish-Israeli cultural speaking ethos (Katriel, 1986). Borrowed from Arabic (meaning to be honest, to speak the truth), the cultural keyword manifests in a straightforward and unembellished speech that in linguistic politeness terms is connected with directness, sincerity, and solidarity at the expense of face maintenance (Blum-Kulka, 1992 [2005]; Ellis and Maoz, 2002). Since the 1980s, an erosion of the *dugri* style has been documented, parallel with the emergence of two related speaking styles: *kasah*, and *firgun*. *Kasah* (כסאה) refers to a hostile, bashing talk that maintains the assertive directness of *dugri* without its infrastructure of solidarity. *Firgun*, (פריגון), in contrast, is an interpersonal speaking style that maintains sincerity and solidarity in a competitive, individualistic environment (Katriel, 1993; Maschler, 2001; Dori-Hacohen, 2016; Danziger, 2018). The Hebrew verb *lefargen* roughly translates as “to support, not to envy or begrudge another's success” (Katriel, 1993: 31), and denotes a selfless, sincere supportive verbal activity towards another.

As an indirect communicative strategy, flattery may be seen as directly related to *firgun* when the latter is perceived as exceeding the norms of appropriate supportiveness. In cases where words of support are evaluated as instrumental or insincere, they are often labelled flattery (*hanfanut*, Katriel, 1993). Since

1 The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics' official report for 2018; [https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/publications/DocLib/2019/Shnat070\\_mun.pdf](https://www.cbs.gov.il/he/publications/DocLib/2019/Shnat070_mun.pdf) (accessed July 2020).

*firgun* has been shown to be a communicative pivot for Jewish-Israeli solidarity-oriented social behaviour (Danziger, 2018; Kampf and Danziger, 2019), this metacommunicative term needs to be taken into account when studying the evaluation of strategic language use by Hebrew speakers.

### 3.2 *Palestinian-Arabic musayara*

Despite wide variations among Arabic communities, it is commonly accepted that Arabic linguacultures share beliefs, values, practices, and a sustained communal identity (Zaharna, 1995; Feghali, 1997; Abuarrah et al., 2013).<sup>2</sup> Common discursive features documented in pan-Arabic are affective argumentation, repetition, frequent use of formulas, ornate and elaborate language use, and emphasis on context over code in meaning-making (Johnstone, 1991; Zaharna, 1995; Feghali, 1997). Pragmatic and ethnographic scholars have commonly referred to this set of features that comprise the Arabic speaking ethos as *musayara* (Griefat and Katriel, 1989; Feghali, 1997; Nelson et al., 2002; Henkin-Roitfarb, 2011). *Musayara* is a folk-linguistic term in Arabic linguaculture (مُسَايَرَة; literally “to accommodate” and “go along with”), commonly used to describe a cultural orientation towards maintaining harmony in social relations. The *musayara* interactional code is face-maintaining, other-oriented, socio-linguistic behaviour. It refers to behaviours “designed to enhance commonalities rather than differences, cooperation rather than conflict, and mutuality rather than self-assertion” (Griefat and Katriel, 1989: 123).

Verbal acts of *musayara* can be marked by both conversational effusiveness and conversational restraint. *Conversational effusiveness* is manifested through repetition, elaboration, and affective communication, i.e. “interactional tactics that function to dramatize and to intensify interpersonal bonds, [e.g.] layered greetings, the use of multiple, accentuated deferential or affectionate forms of address, accented display of attentiveness, and the open sharing of personal resources, in both time and effort” (Griefat and Katriel, 1989: 124; also, Feghali, 1997; Ellis and Maoz, 2002). Studies in Arabic linguistic politeness found empirical indications for such effusiveness. For example, Egyptian and Syrian compliments were found to be longer and more verbose than American English, as well as heavily relying on formulaic expressions of compliment responses (Nelson et al., 1993, 1996). Eshreteh (2014) found prevalent use of exaggeration as a positive politeness strategy when performing invitations in Palestinian Arabic. *Conversational restraint* is manifested through indirectness, deference, and an effort to avoid discord or confrontation, even if it entails a momentary concession of oneself. Importantly, the two characteristics of *musayara* are

2 Following Feghali (1997), “Arab” is anyone who speaks Arabic and feels as an Arab.

complementary; in order to maintain social harmony, speakers are said to use both indirect and effusive language aimed at avoiding confrontation.

*Musayara* can be read as positively marked communication when it does not entail “subordination of one’s self-interests to those of one’s interlocuter” (Griefat and Katriel, 1989: 128). Nevertheless, its main characteristics – indirectness and effusive language – may trigger an interpretation of over-politeness, and thus flattery, when judged as instrumental (Danziger, 2020). The literature connects *musayara* and flattery in a specific context entitled “political *musayara*” (Griefat and Katriel, 1989: 125), by which one pursues self-interest while maintaining politeness norms, namely attempting to address the other’s face needs with a particular goal in mind without transgressing acceptability. Nevertheless, “political *musayara*” is vulnerable to crossing from positively marked (*musayara*) to overpoliteness (flattery or *masah juh*<sup>3</sup>), namely, when a behaviour “is perceived as overly self-ingratiating” (p. 128). Interestingly, the crossing from *musayara* to flattery parallels the crossing from *firgun* to flattery (*hanfanut* or *hanupa*) in the Hebrew-speaking community. In both cases, evaluation of others as failing to realize cultural communicative ethos represents the peril of overpoliteness or crossing from appropriate to inappropriate positive social behaviour.

Similar to the erosion of the Jewish-Israeli communicative ethos in the late 1980s, scholars have documented an erosion of *musayara* ethos among younger speakers of Arabic (Griefat and Katriel, 1989; Zupnik, 2000) and a general pragmatic change towards directness in expressive speech acts performance among younger speakers of Arabic (Syrian God wishes: Ferguson, 1983; Omani greetings: Emery, 2000). Nelson and colleagues (2002) reported a preference for direct communication in expressing refusals in Egyptian Arabic. Against the backdrop of mixed findings, they concluded that while Arabic speakers may present similar communication pattern at times, over-generalization should be avoided and “cross-cultural examinations of communication style and patterns should be based on data, systematically collected and analyzed” (p. 42).

As previous cross-cultural studies have shown (Griefat and Katriel, 1989; Ellis and Maoz, 2002), the opposite communicative ethos of *dugri* (and *firgun* by extension) and *musayara* can bring about cultural misunderstanding and hinder problem-solving discourse (Katriel, 1999; Ellis, 2018). While Israeli Hebrew speakers’ directness can be experienced as aggressive by Arabic speakers, the indirect and effusive style of Arabic speakers can be perceived as

3 According to Griefat and Katriel (1989), going overboard in humouring others is sometimes referred to as *masah juh* / مسح الجوخ (lit. wiping the dust [off the elegant, silken clothes of the ruler]).



insincere and manipulative.<sup>4</sup> Against this backdrop, understanding differences and similarities in evaluating flattery in both linguacultures is of special value. Studying the culture-specific properties of the use and perception of flattery in a contrastive manner underscores differences between the linguacultures' perception of acceptable and unacceptable positive verbal behaviour and may aid in preventing cultural misunderstandings in an already tense socio-political environment.

#### 4 Methodology and Data

The present study compares evaluations of flattery made by Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel. Since metadiscursive labelling of interpretive constructs plays an essential role in constituting an interpretive community (Danziger, 2020; Caffi, 1998), a contrastive metapragmatic analysis was applied for discovering differences and similarities in the utilization and evaluation of flattery. Two separate yet complementary metapragmatic datasets were collected through a diary method of interpersonal interaction (see also Culpeper, 2011) and a "metacommunicative" online corpus method for public interaction (see Jucker and Taavitsainen, 2014). Each dataset was analysed separately and then comparatively, with special emphasis on power relations, social distance, and interactional functions. Lastly, findings were triangulated by conducting a focus group with native speakers of Hebrew and Arabic in order to give a more detailed picture of the social behaviour under investigation. Table 1 summarizes the data collection process and levels of analysis.

TABLE 1 Data collection and levels of analysis

Data	Diary method	Online corpus	Focus groups
Level of analysis	Interpersonal	Social	Interpersonal and social
Hebrew data	79 reports	561 items of <i>hanupa</i>	15 native speakers
Arabic data	37 reports	43 items of <i>tamalluq</i>	9 native speakers

4 A similar claim has been made repeatedly when comparing variations of Arabic and English (e.g. Cohen, 1987; Zaharna, 1995).



The diary corpus comprised reported evaluations of flattery events. Respondents' evaluation of what counts as flattery in their own eyes allowed us to ask the following questions: What verbal acts count as flattery? What are the common contexts in which flattery is performed? Why did the participants judge them as such? Respondents were instructed to report on events in which they flattered someone, they themselves were flattered, or they witnessed flattery. They were asked to detail what had happened, what was said, and who took part in the event. Following the descriptive part of the process, we solicited "retrospective comments" (Culpeper, 2011: 11) by asking the respondents what led them to judge a specific behaviour flattery. The responses allowed us to identify the textual cues and contextual clues (Weizman and Dascal, 1991) Hebrew and Arabic speakers resorted to when making their evaluation. Finally, in order to identify evaluations of flattery, respondents were asked what they thought of the flatterers and what they felt following the flattery event. Consequently, comparable diaries that include information on the content of the utterance, the socio-pragmatic context of the interaction, and the informant's reflections on the event were produced.

The evaluations were collected by the Israeli research firm iPanel.co.il, which specializes in online surveys. The Hebrew corpus comprised 100 reports by a representative sample of the Jewish population in Israel in terms of gender, age, religiousness, and place of residence. The Arabic corpus included only "1948" Palestinians (John and Agbarya, 2020), who reside within the borders of Israel. Unlike Palestinians who reside in the Occupied Territories, the former have frequent contact with Hebrew speakers in a variety of professional, commercial, and educational contexts. The 165 respondents represent the Arab population in Israel in terms of religion, gender, age, and area of residence.

Only 18 Arabic-speaking respondents provided relevant and coherent answers; while some confused the literary Arabic words for flattery /tamalluq/ (تملق), with bullying /tasalluṭ/ (التسلط), others indicated their disdain to answer the questions, probably because of an ideological refusal or a political reluctance to participate in a Jewish-Israeli-led study.<sup>5</sup> In order to increase the number of respondents, we enlisted a research assistant from East Jerusalem, a native Arabic speaker, who contacted potential Israeli-Palestinian participants. Through this process we added 19 reports to the corpus, all of

5 John and Agbarya (2020) encountered a similar challenge when collecting data from "48" Palestinians. Although the questions were formulated by an Arabic native speaker, it was evident from the names of the two P1s that they were part of the Jewish-Israeli community. A few participants replied in Hebrew, demonstrating their awareness that the study was conducted by Hebrew speakers.

which were completed by 20- to 22-year-old Arabic-speaking respondents. In order to balance the demographics (age and gender) of the Hebrew and Arabic datasets, we created new, comparable datasets. (The final Arabic-speaker dataset was comprised of 37 respondents, 40% men and 60% women, of the age ranges 18–35; 51%; 36–50; 18.9%, 51–59; 8.1%. The final Hebrew speaking dataset was comprised of 79 respondents, 45% men and 55% women, of the age range 18–35; 59.5%, 36–50; 31.6%, 51–54, 8.9%).

The online public dataset was compiled through keyword searches for the literary Arabic root for flattery /tamalluq/ (تملق) and the Hebrew root /ḥanupa/ (חנופה) in *SketchEngine*, an online tool that allows access to large linguistic databases. Hebrew script was used in .il domains and therefore provided text produced by Jewish-Israeli Hebrew speakers (561 items). The Palestinian Arabic search was limited to .il and .ps domains, which are used in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, respectively (43 items). The Arabic SketchEngine database contains all webpages published until 2012 and the Hebrew one all webpages published until 2014. The items were collected during these time-frames and translated into English by professional translators.

The challenges we faced in collecting the Palestinian Arabic materials led us to adopt a complementary strategy for increasing the validity of our findings. In addition to meticulously cross-checking our contrastive analysis with a native Arabic-speaker research assistant, we discussed our findings with a focus group comprised of ten native speakers of Arabic, BA students in the Department of Communication and Journalism at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A similar discussion was conducted with 15 native speakers of Hebrew, also BA students in the same department.

## 5 Findings and Discussion

Our findings indicate similarities in the use of flattery in the two linguacultures in terms of context, performance, and evaluative process. The slight points of departure between the Hebrew and the Arabic speakers were found in their perceptions of and stance towards flattery and will be discussed in Section 6.

### 5.1 *Contexts – When Do Hebrew and Arabic Speakers in Israel Expect to Encounter Flattery?*

Flattery was found to be prevalent and expected by both Hebrew and Arabic speakers in similar social (settings and relationship types; e.g. social distance and status) and local (interactional) contexts. The three recurring social settings of flattery in both datasets were workplace, commerce, and politics, all of

which serve as main meeting points for Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel (Amara, 2017).<sup>6</sup>

Examples E1 and E2 demonstrate the common occurrences of flattery in sales. The salient similarities of discourse patterns in a commercial context is to be expected due to what Fairclough (1995) calls “the technologization of marketing discourse”, which is largely engineered and scripted towards pleasing customers. The first example was reported by an Arabic speaker in a shop.

E1) When I was buying clothes, the saleswoman started flattering me using a gentle tone of voice that is filled with hospitality and respect [saying] “Welcome”. (42-year-old woman)

hīna 'aradtu 'an 'aštārī malābisan, bada'at-i l-bā'i'atu tatamallaqu-nī binabrati ṣawti laṭīfati wa-ḥtirāmi wa-stiḍāfati ... 'ahlan wa-sahlan

حين اردت ان اشترى ملابس بدأت تلبأعة تتملقني بنبرة صوت لطيفة واحترام واستضافة. اهلا وسهلا ...

The second example was reported by a Hebrew speaker in a telemarketing context. The respondent told how she was flattered by an insurance company salesperson who wanted her to purchase a retirement plan:

E2) A representative will come to your house, we will schedule at the most convenient time for you. [...] we can offer you a better plan than the one you have. (32-year-old woman)

yavo lakh natzig 'ad habayt nikba' sha'ot shenoaḥ lakh [...] ytnu lakh hatza'a yoter tova mima sheyesh lakh

יבוא לך נציג עד הבית נקבע שעות שנוח לך [...] יתנו לך הצעה יותר טובה מממה שיש לך ...

In both examples, the salespersons used flattery to encourage a transaction of goods by attempting to please their potential customers (Danziger, 2020; Chan and Sengupta, 2013). In E1, the addressee identified the “gentle” tone of voice used by the salesperson when welcoming her as flattery, while in E2 the

6 The following analysis focuses on the two first settings since the last adheres to the internal logic of public discourse (Kampf, 2013) and thus requires a separate study.

addressee judges the representative's accommodating utterance "the most convenient time for you" as aiming to please.

The second recurring setting in both datasets was the workplace, which includes asymmetrical power relations and thus is more open to evaluation of communicative actions as flattery (for example, "*my employee flatters and justifies me all the time*" [41-year-old Hebrew-speaking man] עובד (שלי מתחנף ומצדיק אותי כל הזמן). Cases of flattery between equal colleagues were also reported, as demonstrated in the following words of a 30-year-old Arabic speaker: The respondent was flattered by a colleague, who reportedly said "*You are the best person ever, thank you for all the help that you provided*" (انت افضل شخص على الاطلاق شكرا لكل المساعدة الي قدمتها). While both datasets had examples of bottom-up and equal power relations in the workplace, only the Hebrew respondents reported top-down examples of employers flattering employees (6%), as in "*to get free hours out of me, I was told I was hard-working, professional, and essential to the business*" (40-year-old man; בניסיון להוציא ממני שעות עבודה נוספות בחינם, נאמר לי שאני מקצועי וחרוז ונצרך (לעסק). In discussing the latter example, participants in the Arabic focus group suggested that even though it may be for strategic purposes, instances of top-down positive behaviour in the workplace are not commonly considered flattery by Israeli Arabic speakers. It may be possible, however, that the corpus size was too small to account for flattery events in an infrequent context.

In local, interactional contexts, both Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking respondents reported encountering flattery in pre-requests as a means for encouragement to comply. Although overpolite pre-requests were identified in various social settings, a striking resemblance was noted in higher education where students coax each other for help. In the following examples, both participants are women in their twenties. The Arabic speaker reported:

E3) In university, my friends/colleagues flattered me and said that I was hardworking, all in order to copy my homework in a course. I responded with thank you, but I cannot give you [the homework].

fi l-ğāmi'ati, šāhibāt-ī/zamilāt-ī fi l-ta'limi tamallaqū 'alay-ya 'inna-nī muğtahidatun li-'ahđi l-wāğibi l-dirāsiyyi fi mītāqin (sic). qultu la-hunna šukran lakin lā yumkinu-nī 'i'tā'u-kunna

في الجامعة، صاحباتي / زميلاتي في التعليم تملقوا علي اني مجتهدة لاخذ الواجب الدراسي في ميثاق. قلت لهن شكرا لكن لا يمكنني اعطائكن

The following Hebrew speaker was similarly approached by schoolmates, who reportedly said:

E4) They wanted me to do the assignment alone [...] they said I would do it best.

hem [rotzim] she'avatse'a 'et ha'avoda levad [...] 'amro she'ani mevatza'at 'et ze hakhi tov

הם [רוצים] שאבצע את העבודה לבד [...] אמרו שאני מבצעת את זה הכי טוב

As demonstrated in both examples, pre-requests were formulated as “sweeteners”, positive evaluations given to the addressee regarding their ability to fulfil a certain request (“*You will do this best*”; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984). In other cases, flattery was identified in pre-starters for a request, as demonstrated by a 20-year-old Arabic speaker who reported her friend told her she looked “*beautiful today*” before asking for help in a school assignment.

### 5.2 *Pragmatic Strategies: How Do Hebrew and Arabic Speakers Flatter?*

Similar patterns of resemblance were also found in how flattery is performed in both linguacultures. Hebrew and Arabic speakers reported on using positive politeness strategies, either linguistic strategies such as terms of endearment (“*In the dorms, she treated me in such a good way [saying *habibtī*<sup>7</sup>] and nice words*”; 21-year-old Arabic speaking woman *في السكن تعامل بطريقة (جيدة, حبيبي) وكلمان لطيفة* and/or paralinguistic markers such as tone of voice and facial expression. Respondents from both communities identified flattery when speakers used positive evaluations; redressive actions; gifts and bribes; and various expressive speech acts, such as boasting, thanking, and blessings. As Figure 1 shows, the difference in performance strategy distribution between the linguacultures was insignificant ( $p > 0.5$ ).

The distribution of strategies for performing flattery is quite similar, with positive evaluation and positive politeness taking up the majority of reports (83% of the Arabic and 81% of the Hebrew reports). The following examples (E5, E6) for positive evaluation pre-starters demonstrate the resemblance:

7 *habibt-ī حبيبي* is a common term of endearment in Arabic, literally meaning “my loved one” (here in feminine form).

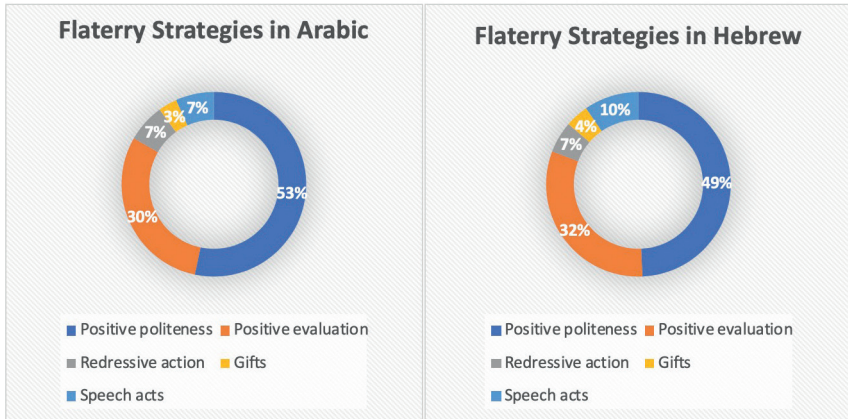


FIGURE 1 Comparison of the strategies reported as flattery in Arabic ( $N_1=30$ ) and Hebrew ( $N_2=73$ )

E5) A: Hi, why do you look very beautiful today?

B: Hi, thanks, thanks, you too.

A: I wanted to ask if you can help me in my assignment later.

B: Yes. Off course. (A 20-year-old Arabic-speaking woman)

A: marḥaban, limādā tabdīna ḡamīlatan ḡiddan l-yawma?

B: ahlan, šukran šukran, 'anti 'ayḡan

A: 'aradtu 'an 'as'ala-ki 'idā kāna yumkinu-ki musā'adat-ī fī waḡīfat-ī lāḡikan

B: 'aḡal, bi-l-ṡab'i

A: مرحبا، لماذا تبدين جميلة جداً اليوم؟

B: أهلاً، شكراً شكراً، أنت أيضاً.

A: أردت أن أسألك إذا كان يمكنك مساعدتي في وظيفتي لاحقاً.

B: أجل بالطبع

E6) I am a nurse in a clinic, a mother came in without an appointment and told me sweetly, with a huge smile: "Oh, there, I was looking for you, you are the nicest nurse, could you vaccinate my son even though I don't have an appointment?" (48-year-old Hebrew-speaking woman)

'ani 'aḡot bemirpa'a, nikhnesa 'ima lelo' tor ve'amra li bemetikut 'im ḡiyukh 'anak ... 'ah hine 'otakh ḡipasti 'at ha'aḡot hakhi neḡmada sheyesh tokhli leḡhasen 'et bni lamrot she'en li tor?

אני אחות במרפאה, נכנסה אמא ללא תור ואמרה לי במתיקות עם חיוך ענק ... אה  
הנה אותך חיפשתי את האחות הכי נחמדה שיש תוכלי לחסן את בני למרות שאין  
לי תור?

Both respondents identified compliments (“Hi, why do you look very beautiful today?”; “the nicest nurse”) as flattery in a pre-request context (“I wanted to ask if you can help in my assignment”; “Could you vaccinate my son?”). The juxtaposition between positive evaluation and request served as clues for the strategic use of these solidarity-oriented verbal actions, which in both cases benefited the requesting speakers.

### 5.3 *Evaluative Categories: How Do Hebrew and Arabic Speakers Identify Flattery?*

A previous study on how Hebrew speakers judge an action as flattery listed six common textual cues and contextual clues: (a) perceived potential gain for the addresser, (b) perceived undeserving addressee, (c) unequal power relations that affect contextual expectations, (d) evaluation of an action as exaggerated or hyperbolic, (e) recurrence or change in the addresser’s behavioural patterns, and (f) the public performance of the actions (Danziger, 2020).

The analysis of the Arabic data indicates that both Hebrew and Arabic speakers apply the same evaluative categories in identifying flattery. The following example demonstrates three of the six contextual clues (a, b, c) that a respondent noted in the evaluation of flattery:

E7) I witnessed a conversation between a [female] employee and our [male] employer in the office. The employee wanted to flatter her employer in order to get special attention from him, and praised him by saying things that are not true at all (48-year-old Arab man, who replied in Hebrew).

hayiti ‘ed lesiḥa ben ‘ovedet lema‘asik shelano bamisrad, ha‘ovedet ratzta lehithanef ‘al menat lekabel tsumet lev meyuḥedet mehama‘asik vedibra beshivḥo dvarim she‘eynam nekhonim bikhlal

הייתי עד לשיחה בין עובדת למעסיק שלנו במשרד, העובדת רצתה להתחנף על מנת לקבל תשומת לב מיוחדת מהמעסיק ודיברה בשבחיו דברים שאינם נכונים בכלל.

In this example, the participant interpreted insincere praise as flattery. The potential gain is surmised from the workplace power relations between employers and employees. The ‘undeservedness’ of the addressee is described



in noting the participants' judgement that the positive evaluation is untrue ("She praised him by saying things that are not true at all").

A slight difference between the respondents from the two communities was found in the textual cue of *verbal exaggeration and hyperbole*. While this cue of flattery was absent in the Arabic corpus, Hebrew speakers tended to judge textual exaggeration or hyperbole as overpolite. The following example from the Hebrew corpus demonstrates a speech event in which a recipient judged strategic behaviour intended to achieve the interactional goal of (heterosexual) relational success as flattery due to textual exaggeration.

E8) Don't be ashamed to please her. The biggest problem men have today is that they're embarrassed to admit they want someone, and if they do so they do it moderately. They skimp on compliments [...] on expressing their feelings [and] passion. [...] Now, I'm not saying be a creep and fill her door with heart-shaped Post-its. That happened to me once. And to teach you a lesson on the power of flattery: a door full of Post-its is very exaggerated and I thought it was creepy as hell, but do you think I didn't sleep with him? Of course I did!

Xnet.com, 2014

'Al titbayesh leratzot. Haba'aya hakhi retzinit shel gvarim beyameynu hi shehem mitbayshim lehodot shehem rotzim mishehi, ve'im hem modim 'az hem osim 'et ze bimsura, ya'ani, mitkamtzenim. Mitkamtzenim al mahma'ot, mitkamtsenim al haba'at regashot, al bituey tshuka [...] akhshav ani lo omeret tihiye hōle nefesh vetemale la 'et kol hadelet beptakim nidbakim 'im levavot. Ze kara li pa'am. Vekedey lelamed etkhem shi'ur me'anyen 'al koḥa shel ḥanupa: delet mele'a beptakim ze mugzam me'od veze haya nira'a li si' hakripyut. 'Az ma 'atem ḥoshvim, shelo shakhavti 'ito? betaḥ sheken!

אל תתבייש לרצות. הבעיה הכי רצינית של גברים בימינו היא שהם מתביישים להודות שהם רוצים מישהי, ואם הם מודים אז הם עושים את זה במשורה, יעני, מתקמצנים. מתקמצנים על מחמאות, מתקמצנים על הבעת רגשות, על ביטויי תשוקה [...] עכשיו אני לא אומרת תהיה חולה נפש ותמלא לה את כל הדלת בפתקים נדבקים עם לבבות. זה קרה לי פעם. וכדי ללמד אתכם שיעור מעניין על כוחה של חנופה: דלת מלאה בפתקים זה מוגזם מאד וזה היה נראה לי שיא הקריפיות. אז מה אתם חושבים, שלא שכבתי איתו? בטח שכן!

The Hebrew speaker in E8 perceived the actions of her suiter (“*a door full of Post-its*”) as overpolite sexual behaviour because it was “*very exaggerated*” and “*creepy as hell*”.

In contrast, Arabic speakers based their judgments of overpolite behaviour on contextual clues, such as potential gain for the flatterer (a) and a gap between current and previous behaviour (e), leading to labelling the verbal action flattery. In a similar context of overpolite sexual behaviour, an Arabic speaker judged his friend’s action as flattery by noting contextual clues rather than textual ones; he detected insincerity due to conflicting previous patterns of expression (“*He expressed his hatred for this other [female] colleague*”; “أحد زملائي عبر لي عن كرهه لزميلة أخرى”) and a benefit to the speaker (“*He tries to court and flirt with her to receive ‘special treatment’*”; “حاول ملاطفتها بالكلام للحصول (على) ‘معاملة خاصة

The difference between the communities in evaluating the textual cue of *verbal exaggeration and hyperbole* as flattery was discussed with the Arabic-speaking focus group. Participants confirmed that although exaggeration can serve as a textual cue for flattery, “*over-complimenting does not necessarily mean flattery*”. One participant stated, “*sometimes I over-compliment but I don’t want something, I don’t have an interest*”. This observation may suggest that textual exaggeration and hyperbole are not the most obvious flattery cue for Arabic speakers, leading them to turn to other contextual clues in their evaluations. The finding aligns with previous pragmatic studies arguing that Palestinian Arabic is a high-context linguaculture (Abuarrah et al., 2013), where “*meaning is embedded more in the context rather than the code*” (Zaharna, 1995: 242). Studies have recognized verbal exaggeration as a common characteristic of Arabic (Pan-Arabic: Zaharna, 1995; Jordanian Arabic: Bataineh and Bataineh, 2008) and specifically of Palestinian Arabic (Eshreteh, 2014). The finding also corresponds with studies on speech acts of compliment in Egyptian Arabic and Syrian Arabic that have found them long and verbose, displaying repetition and common formulas (Nelson et al., 1993, 1996).

#### 5.4 Stance – How Do Hebrew and Arabic Speakers Perceive Flattery?

The most notable point of departure between the two communities regards their stances towards flattery. Although no differences were found in the web datasets (79% of the Arabic texts and 76.1% of the Hebrew texts included negative lexical choices when discussing the phenomenon), major differences were found in the solicited datasets. Arabic speakers demonstrated almost an entirely negative stance, with 92% of the respondents representing flattery with negative terms (e.g., “*sad and sorry for myself; used and exploited; disgusted*

and pain; uncomfortable; disappointed; distress and anger”, “بالإساءة والحزن على”, “(بالاستغلال: بالاشمئزاز: بالوجع: بعدم راحة: بالخيبة: الضيق والغضب), compared to 57% Hebrew speakers who treated this discursive phenomenon negatively.

The vast majority of the Arabic speakers explicitly mentioned that they were offended by flattery and the negative consequences it had on their relationship with the flatterer. Several respondents even reported confronting their flatterers and exposing their malign intentions. For example, a 20-year-old woman reported she was praised by a fellow Muslim woman for wearing a headscarf. Rejecting the implicit re-enforcement of a desired behaviour of praise (Wolfson, 1984) she responded: “*Is this what makes you love me, my outer appearance or my relationship with god? Is that what makes me a good girl?*” (هل ما يجعلك تحبيني هو مظهري الخارجي أم علاقتي مع الله؟ هل هذا يجعل مني فتاة؟). (“صالحة؟”).

The negative stance of Arabic speakers towards flattery can be further demonstrated by the two respondents who admitted they flattered someone (5.4%; compared to 15.2% of the Hebrew speakers). In both cases the speakers justified the use by shifting the blame to an external person. A 28-year-old woman reported she flattered her boss by smiling at him because she was late, although she “cannot stand her [boss]” (“لا أتحمّلها”). The respondent added that she “felt annoyed” (“احسست بالازعاج”) because she is not a flatterer but “was forced to act that way in order to keep [her] job” (“مجبورة على التصرف هكذا للحفاظ”) (“على العمل”). The other respondent reported that she flattered her daughter’s teacher because she felt she had no other choice if she wanted to make her daughter the teacher’s favourite.

Additionally, a recurring metacommunicative perception of flatterers as having low communicative competence was found in the Arabic data. Participants perceived “the flatterer” as “a person who lacks communication skills with others and resorts to un-useful ways that might hurt others”, (“شخص يفتقد لمهارة”), “very ignorant and uneducated person who needs awareness” (“انسان جاهل بحاجة لوعي أكثر”) and “socially stupid. (...) a person who does anything to reach what he wants” (“غبي”). (اجتماعي وشخص يفعل اي شي ليصل لمبتغاع). Discussing with the Arabic focus group the perception of flatterers as having low communicative skills revealed a more nuanced perception: People with good communicative skills are undetected in their flattery, and therefore are not labelled flatterers.

Although Hebrew speakers expressed negative stances towards flattery and reported the negative consequences its use may have on relationships, they

also admitted the potential of flattery to achieve interactional goals. For example, a 34-year-old man reported,

Eg) I was talking on the phone with a [female] friend, who was crying and telling me how she is having a hard time because she and her boyfriend don't see each other enough during their military service. In order to calm her down and to make her feel good about herself, I told her that I happened to see her sitting in a café with her boyfriend by the beach the other day. She asked how she looked, and I said, in an impressed tone, that she looked gorgeous. I was flattering her to make her feel better.

dibarti 'im yedida batelefon, 'asher supra li bebekhi shehi' ḥova tkufa kasha 'ekev kakh she'en la maspik zman lir'ot 'et ben zuga me'aḥar vehu' batzava' vehi' beshrut le'umi+'ovedet. 'al menat lehargi'a 'oti (sic) veb-khdey shehi' targish tov im 'atsma, siparti la shebemikre ra'iti 'ota lo mizman 'im haben zug shela yoshvim bebet kafe leyad hayam. Hi' sha'ala 'oti ekh hi' nir'ata be'enay ve'aniti la bekol mitrashem shehi' "nir'ata mehamemet". hithanafti 'eleia kdey le'oded 'ota lehargish yoter tov.

דיברתי עם ידידה בטלפון, אשר סיפרה לי בבכי שהיא חווה תקופה קשה עקב כך שאין לה מספיק זמן לראות את בן זוגה מאחר והוא בצבא והיא בשירות לאומי+עובדת. על מנת להרגיע אותי ובכדי שהיא תרגיש טוב עם עצמה, סיפרתי לה שבמקרה ראיתי אותה לא מזמן עם הבן זוג שלה יושבים בבית קפה ליד הים. היא שאלה אותי איך היא נראתה בעיניי ועניתי לה בקול מתרשם שהיא "נראתה מהממת". התחנפתי אליה כדי לעודד אותה להרגיש יותר טוב.

In this example, the respondent strategically performed a positive evaluation ("I said [...] she looked gorgeous"), with the intention of pleasing his friend so she would "feel good about herself". His compliment ("looked gorgeous"), namely the attribution of credit for some "good [...] which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer" (Holmes, 1986: 485), is evaluated by the respondent as serving a relational function. The framing of the compliment as flattery is explicitly described in his words; "I was flattering her to make her feel better". Notice that the compliment in this case is not necessarily insincere; the speaker may indeed think that his friend "looks gorgeous". It is strategically deploying a positive evaluation with awareness of the pleasing effect it may have on the friend.

Not only did Hebrew speakers explicitly mention the relational benefit of flattery, but they also used neutral or positive terms when they reported on

flattery events (31% of the respondents in the solicited corpus reported feeling “flattered” as “wonderful, excellent, better, powerful, respected”; מוחמאת, נפלא, כבוד (מצוין, עוזר להמשך, במעמד עליון, כבוד מוערכת) when her female boss flattered her, and a mother reported laughing and enjoying her daughter’s strategic expression of love before being asked for a present.

The latter example illustrates the transactional function of flattery, when a speaker intends to please the addressee in exchange for goods. While both communities reported flattery events they perceived as serving the transactional function, our finding suggests that Hebrew speakers perform a semantic transfer from the economic to the social domain, frequently using economic terms and metaphors to describe the act of flattery. Speakers used verbs like to buy (“[She] didn’t buy [his] flattery”; לא קנתה חנופה), gain (“he gained his capital by flattering”; מהחנופה [...] את כל הונו עשה) and sell (“I felt like I was selling myself [by flattering him]”; הרגשתי שמכרתי את עצמי”), nouns like an investment (“flattering egos is an investment”; בחנופה לאגו), a debt (“I was mad. I don’t like to be in debt [to someone]”; לא אוהבת להיות חייבת), money (“flattery is addictive as money”; [כמו כסף] חנופה היא) חומר ממכר), price (“the price of flattery”; מחירה של חנופה), and adjectives like cheap (“this is a cheap act of flattery”; זול אקט חנופה זה).

Perceiving flattery as transaction echoes Goffman’s social contract approach. In the strategic “game” (Goffman, 1970: 85) of flattery, one provides face enhancement in exchange for something valuable. Similar to the case of compliments (Yu, 2003), flattery presents an inherent risk of being negative face-threatening through the unsuccessful execution of addressing one’s need to be liked. Positive politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987) is thus perceived as a strategy to impose on the hearer to “give” something in return to the “verbal gift” of flattery. This explanation aids in understanding the possible negative consequences of flattery. When the addressee judges sweet talk as an imposition, a challenge is posed to friendly interpersonal relations expected to be established on sincerity, trust, and positiveness (Kong, 2003; Rawlins, 1991).<sup>8</sup>

To conclude, while both linguacultures display a mostly negative stance towards flattery, the Arabic speakers display significantly more disdain toward the discursive phenomenon. While Hebrew speakers admit the relational potential of flattery, like in example E9 (in which a respondent strategically used a positive evaluation to make his friend feel better), the Arabic speakers in the focus group strongly argued that the label ‘flattery’ (*tamalluq*) cannot

8 It will be interesting to examine whether additional cultures use this economic metaphor for flattery. The English collocation of “paying compliments” may indicate it is not an Israeli-specific understanding.

be applied in instances where the speaker has the other's needs in mind. For them, addressing the other's face needs for the speaker's benefit is an inappropriate relational practice in this specific context. In the next section, we discuss how the practice and perception of flattery is informed by the cultural communicative ethos of Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel.

## 6 The Metapragmatics of Flattery in Hebrew and Israeli-Palestinian Arabic

In Section 3 we hypothesized that both *firgun* and *musayara* are expected to inform the use and perception of flattery since they entail a communicative ethos that comes into play in the strategic use of solidarity-oriented communication. While *firgun* is anchored in the values of sincerity and solidarity, "political *musayara*" provides guidelines on how to strategically and politely deploy communicative actions in order to achieve an interactional goal. Both are positively marked social behaviour, but are in constant peril of crossing a normative line into overpoliteness. When a positive act of communication is judged as strategic, what can be seen at first glance as a compliment, praise, or an authentic sign of endearment, turns into instrumental flattery. In this section we discuss how each communicative ethos is both reflected and constructed in the use and perception of flattery in each linguaculture, where they overlap, and where they depart.

### 6.1 *Firgun and Flattery*

Although Hebrew speakers commonly see flattery as insincere, some considered even the sincere action of *firgun* as flattery when it was realized in a public context. Publicly expressing approval or approbation led respondents to evaluate it as intending to intensify the enhancing of positive face. For example:

E10) Yesterday, my daughter's kindergarten teacher helped me wean my daughter of her pacifier; in response I supported her (lit. /*firganti*/) by flattering her on the kindergarten's Facebook group. (35-year-old Hebrew-speaking woman)

'etmol haganenet shel habat sheli 'azra li begmila shel habat sheli mimotzet betguva firganti la bedivrey hanupa bafeisbuk ba'amud shel hagan

אתמול הגננת של הבת שלי עזרה לי בגמילה של הבת שלי ממוצץ בתגובה פרגנתי לה בדברי חנופה בפייסבוק בעמוד של הגן

In this example, the mother amplified the intended pleasing effect by expressing public appreciation for the kindergarten teacher. Posting a supportive Facebook post enlarged the circle of in-group community members aware of the teacher's professional achievement.

*Firgun* was mentioned explicitly eight times in the Hebrew corpora. While some mentions contrasted flattery with *firgun*, others used it as a synonym or in a sequence. Example E11, written by a personal career coach, was found in a business website "for women who know". Characterizing the workplace environment of an organization led by a woman, the actor contrasts negative flattery with positive *firgun*.

E11) The way [they] work looks fun [...] like friends hanging out, being serious and deep. There is no chumminess (Hebrew lit. /*saḥbakiyut*<sup>9</sup>), not a drop of *flattery*. And yet, there is an intense feeling of *firgun*, of re-evaluating strengths, and that there is someone in charge of the process.

from Women.Biz, undated

derekh ha'avoda nir'et kmo biluy [...] kmo yeshivat ḥaverim, retzinit ve'amuka. 'en saḥbakiyut, 'en tipa shel ḥanupa. vebekhol zot yesh tḥusha 'aza shel firgun, shel ha'arakha meḥudeshet shel ḥozakim vesheyesh kan ba'al habayt 'al hatahalikh

דרך העבודה נראית כמו בלוי [...] כמו ישיבת חברים, רצינית ועמוקה. אין סחבקות, אין טיפה חנופה. ובכל זאת יש תחושה עזה של פרגון, של הערכה מחוץ דשת של חוזקים ושיש כאן בעל הבית על התהליך

The writer describes a healthy working environment as truly supportive. For him, flattery is destructive to the creation of such an environment since it promotes workplace relations that are built on exaggeration and insincerity.

In contrast, example E12 was found in the "Official Website of Freedom", an organization supporting separation of religion and state. Criticizing supportive interviews with celebrities who have become religious, the writer treats

9 *Saḥbak* (סחבק) is a slang Hebrew word that means "a close friend who does not require formalities in interaction". It originates from an Arabic word meaning "a friend" and became common in the 1970s. *Saḥbakiyut* is term that describes a familiar friendly encounter between people who are long-time friends, an extremely informal encounter and a light-hearted atmosphere. <https://blog.ravmilim.co.il/tag/סחבק/> (Retrieved July 2020).



flattery and *firgun* as partial synonyms, placing both terms in the same list of positive nouns.

E12) The media's job is of course to review, report and even criticize, but I can't recall even one interview with a celebrity who had become religious that wasn't reported lengthily in the weekend papers in the spirit of *firgun and empathy, flattery and understanding*.

hofesh.org,<sup>10</sup> 2009

tafkida shel hatikshoret hi' kamuvan lesaker, ledaveah ve'af levaker, 'akh 'eyni zokher velu re'ayon e'had 'im yedu'an shenafal letshuva she'eyno sukar beharhava bemusafey hashabat beruah shel firgun vehavana, hanupa ve'empatya.

תפקידה של התקשורת היא כמובן לסקר, לדווח ואף לבקר, אך איני זוכר ולו ראיין אחד עם ידוען שנפל לתשובה שאינו סוקר בהרחבה במוספי השבת ברוח של פירגון והבנה, חנופה ואמפטיה.

In this example, *firgun* and flattery are interchangeable nouns for (unjustifiable) positive treatment of newly religious Israeli celebrities. These examples demonstrate that positive evaluation and supportiveness, i.e. compliments, praise, and *firgun*, can be labelled flattery when they exceed appropriateness (Danziger, 2020; Katriel, 1993).

## 6.2 *Musayara and Flattery*

*Musayara* is considered a cultural code that informs the successful navigation of a layered social hierarchy through indirectness and effusiveness (Griefat and Katriel, 1989). While previous studies have documented indirectness as a cultural feature in Arabic-speaking communities, others have found a preference for directness in performance of speech acts (e.g. Nelson et al., 2002; Abuarrah et al., 2013). Our findings join the latter studies in indicating directness and sincerity as valued by Arabic speakers. Several evaluations of flattery made by young respondents (ages 20–22), included a negative stance towards indirectness:

E13) A bad feeling generally and it is a type of *exploitation* since you can ask what you want from me without flattery ... There were a lot of "preparations" that were unnecessary. (man)

10 [http://hofesh.org.il/articles/maavak/a\\_lost\\_war.html](http://hofesh.org.il/articles/maavak/a_lost_war.html) (Retrieved October, 2019).

šu'urun say'un bi-šaklin 'āmin, wa-huwa naw'un min-a l-stiġlāli, tastaṭī'u ṭalba mā turīdu min-nī dūna tamalluqin [...] li-'anna-hu kāna hunālika tamhīdātun kaṭīratun lā ḥāġata la-hā.

شعور سيء بشكل عام وهو نوع من الاستغلال تستطيع طلب ما تريد مني دون تملق.... لأنه كان هنالك تمهيدات كثيرة لا حاجة لها.

E14) A selfish thing and *I don't think indirect ways to gain personal things should be used.* (man)

šay'un 'anāniyyun wa-'a'taqīdu lā yaġibu sti'mālu ṭuruqin ġayri mubāširatin l-l-ḥuṣūli 'alā 'umūrin šaḥṣiyyatin

شيء أناني واعتقد لا يجب استعمال طرق غير مباشرة للحصول على امور شخصية

E15) Disgusting. Shame on the world, what for, *just say what you have to say straight into his face.* (woman)

buḥzī, llāhu yuḥzī l-'ālam (sic), li-šū, 'ādī 'aḥkī li-lli qbāl-ak miš ṭarīqa (Colloquial Palestinian Arabic)

بخزي، الله يخزي العالم لشوعادي احكي لي قبالك مش طريقة.

When discussing this finding with the Arabic speakers focus group, participants evoked the sentiment of communicative competence in navigating social hierarchy in the Arab culture, stating that they are obligated to be indirect and follow *musayara* with people who are higher in the social hierarchy, like an in-law or a grandfather. However, when communicating with close friends, they reported on an expectation for sincerity and directness, as in "*if my friend has gained weight, I will tell her because I care for her, but I would flatter someone I don't care about, tell that person she looks good*". Interestingly, the same expectation for sincerity among close friends was documented in Blum-Kulka's (1992 [2005]) study on the metapragmatics of politeness among Hebrew speakers in Israeli society. The Hebrew speakers in her study expressed the sentiment of affect in friendship, that is, "people who are emotionally close [and] deserve to be treated '*dugri*'" (p. 265).

The finding that directness is expected by Arabic speakers is in line with studies that document the erosion of the communicative ethos of *musayara*

among young Palestinians (Griefat and Katriel, 1989; Zupnik, 2000; Ellis and Maoz, 2002) and may be further explained by language contact theory. According to Jakobson (1938 [1962]: 241), “a language accepts foreign structural elements only when they correspond to its own tendencies of development”. We hypothesize that the long-term, asymmetrical social contact between Arabic and Hebrew speakers in Israel (Henkin-Roitfarb, 2011; Amara, 2017) affected verbal routines demonstrated by Arabic speakers. The Jewish Israeli direct communicative style, conflated with the already ongoing erosion of *musayara*, has led to a convergence in flattery perception among all speakers in Israel. In addition to extensive lexical borrowing from Hebrew to Palestinian Arabic (Henkin-Roitfarb, 2011; Amara, 2017) and a phonological “near merger” (Horesh, 2015: 228), our study suggests indications for a pragmatic overlap in a specific pattern of linguistic politeness realization and evaluation. A possible reason for this can be found in Amara (2017), who suggests that Hebrew acquisition by Palestinians originates from an instrumental motivation, that is, a means of acquiring similar economic, social, and educational levels to those of Hebrew speakers in Israel, especially in contact contexts of work, commerce, and political participation. Moreover, Amara describes the obligatory teaching of Hebrew as a means for inculcating it as a second language in Arabic schools in Israel. Analysing the Hebrew curriculum in schools, he argues that language teaching is shaped by the Jewish-Zionistic ideal.

When Hebrew enters the Palestinian education field, the implication was that it would become an integral part of the Palestinian Arab linguistic repertoire. Its impact exceeds the communicative functions. It also affected matters of culture and identity. (p. 76)

Since schools play a major role in social contacts and socialization processes, it may be that acquiring Hebrew from early childhood has introduced the Hebrew cultural ethos devised by the Zionist pioneers into Palestinian Arabic in Israel.

## 7 Conclusion

Analysing an interpretive construct like flattery benefits contrastive pragmatics in that it encapsulates cultural and social norms regarding use of language, specifically the pragmatic meaning-making process wherein interactants make sense of language use. Contrastively analysing interpretive constructs across different linguacultures can provide a comparable point of reference

with regards to a specific discursive norm, like the strategic use of positive language in interaction.

Against this backdrop, we set out to conduct this study in order to discover differences in uses and perceptions of flattery between Arabic and Hebrew speakers in Israel. Surprisingly, we found more similarities than differences in the contexts in which flattery is performed or expected, in its verbal performance, and in the evaluative categories utilized when judging an action flattery. Differences were identified in the evaluation of textual cues of verbal exaggeration and hyperbole as flattery and in the stance towards the use of flattery. The Arabic-speaking respondents tended to ignore the verbal cue of verbosity as a sign of flattery and demonstrated a more negative stance toward flattery than the Hebrew-speaking respondents. We hypothesized that just like other linguistic fields susceptible to language contact (e.g. phonology, morphology, and semantics), growing similarities can be found in specific routines of linguistic politeness such as flattery. Nevertheless, residues of traditional communicative ethos may be still identified, as indicated in the greater tolerance towards exaggeration and verbosity among Arabic speakers. Future research within the purview of historical pragmatics could further study the meeting points of linguacultures as a means for tracing residues and transformations in traditional communicative ethos.

In terms of realization, this study has found that the pragmatic strategies used to perform flattery by both Arabic and Hebrew speakers in Israel are exclusively solidarity-oriented politeness strategies. This may be an indication that although flattery can potentially exploit any communicative actions, Arabic and Hebrew speakers tend to use a limited repertoire that includes positive politeness strategies, positive evaluations, expressive speech acts, gifts, and redressive actions.

Finding a greater negative stance towards the social use of flattery among Arabic speakers in Israel may suggest that the social norms that govern the strategic use of language are culture-specific, and that the line between positively marked communication and overpoliteness, i.e. acceptable and unacceptable positive behaviour, is susceptible to cultural values. The range in perception between acceptable and unacceptable flattery is dependent on its perceived harm to the face. According to Danziger (2020: 424), “what is harmful is defined both individually and on a societal level, according to personal values and social norms, respectively”. While for Israeli Hebrew speakers, strategic use of positive language becomes unacceptable when it is perceived as face-harming, for Palestinian Arabic speakers, a detection of self-interest in deploying positive communication is more likely to be deemed socially

unacceptable (i.e. flattery). Future research would benefit from contrastively analysing interpretive constructs across linguacultures. Specifically, behaviours that would be positively marked in a certain linguaculture in specific contexts, for example a positive evaluation of a boss considered as “polite” in Chinese linguaculture (Ran, Zhao and Kádár, 2020: 55), could be evaluated as flattery by a Hebrew or Arabic speaker.

In the Israeli-Palestinian context, it would be productive to compare other metacommunicative terms in Hebrew and Palestinian Arabic in order to discover the extent of the language contact between the cultures. The Palestinian Arabic linguaculture represents a complex case of an identity repertoire (Amara, 2017: 39), nevertheless it is grossly under-studied. We suggest to further study the socio-pragmatics of Palestinian Arabic, especially the interplay between identity and politeness. Lastly, we believe that utilizing the findings of this research could aid the field of cross-cultural communication and conflict-resolution studies. Drawing awareness to the peril of deploying flattery unskillfully, or wrongly assuming familiar interpersonal relations, can facilitate a better understanding of how Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel communicate, and as a consequence, advance an informed and respectful inter-cultural interaction.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Camelia Suleiman, Michal Marmorstein, Dania Alamy, Raida Aiashe-Khatib, Lina Obeid and all students who participated in our focus groups.

### Funding Information

This study was supported by the Israel Science foundation Grant number grant No. 789/16.

### Notes on Contributors

#### *Roni Danziger*

Roni Danziger is a PhD candidate at the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Her PhD dissertation

focuses on the strategic use of positive language in interaction within the field of socio-pragmatics. Her most recent publications have appeared in *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Journal of Politeness Research* and *Intercultural Pragmatics*.

### *Zohar Kampf*

Zohar Kampf is Associate Professor of language and communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research focuses on how media and language can transform social and political processes. He is the author of 2 books and of more than 60 chapters and articles in leading language and communication journals. He is currently associate editor of *Journal of Pragmatics*.

### References

- Abuarrah, Sufyan, Katja Lochtman, and Madeline Lutjerhams. 2013. Cross cultural pragmatics requests' use of strategy and level of directness in Palestinian Arabic and British English. *An-Najah University Journal for Research (Humanities)* 27(5): 1109–1144.
- Amara, Muhammad. 2017. *Arabic in Israel: Language, Identity and Conflict*. London/ New York: Routledge.
- Bataineh, Rula Fahmi, and Ruba Fahmi Bataineh. 2008. A cross-cultural comparison of apologies by native speakers of American English and Jordanian Arabic. *Journal of Pragmatics* 40(4): 792–821.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana. 1992[2005]. The meta-pragmatics of politeness in Israeli society. In: Richard Watts, Sachiko Ide, and Konard Ehlich (eds.), *Politeness in Language*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 255–280.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, and Michal Hamo. 2011. Discourse pragmatics. In: Teun A. Van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* 2nd edition. London: Sage, 143–164.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, Juliane House, and Gabriele Kasper (eds.). 1989. *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Blum-Kulka, Shoshana, and Elite Olshtain. 1984. Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns (CCSARP). *Applied Linguistics* 5(3): 196–213.
- Brown, Penelope, and Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Caffi, Claudia. 1998. Metapragmatics. In: Jacob Mey (ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 581–586.
- Chan, Elaine, and Jaideep Sengupta. 2013. Observing flattery: A social comparison perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research* 40(1): 740–758.

- Cohen, Raymond. 1987. Problems of intercultural communication in Egyptian-American diplomatic relations. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 11(1): 29–47.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. 2011. *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Danziger, Roni. 2018. Compliments and compliment responses in Israeli Hebrew: Hebrew university in Jerusalem students in interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics* 124, 73–87.
- Danziger, Roni. 2020. The pragmatics of flattery: The strategic use of solidarity-oriented actions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 170: 413–425.
- Dori-Hacohen, Gonen. 2016. Tokbek [Talk-back], Israeli speech economy, and other non-deliberative terms for political talk. In: Donal Carbaugh (ed.), *The Handbook of Communication in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New York/London: Routledge, 299–311.
- Ellis, Donald G. 2018. Building a theory of communication and ethno-political conflict. *Communication Monographs* 86(1): 68–87.
- Ellis, Donald G., and Ifat Maoz. 2002. Cross-cultural argument interactions between Israeli-Jews and Palestinians. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 30(3): 181–194.
- Emery, Peter G. 2000. Greeting, congratulating and commiserating in Omani Arabic. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 13(2): 196–216.
- Eshreteh, Mahmood K. M. 2014. A cross-cultural socio-pragmatic study of invitations in Palestinian Arabic and American English. (Unpublished PhD dissertation). Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
- Eylon, Yuval, and David Heyd. 2008. Flattery. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 77(3): 685–704.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. London: Longman.
- Feghali, Ellen. 1997. Arab cultural communication patterns. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 21: 345–378.
- Ferguson, Charles A. 1983. God-wishes in Syrian Arabic. *Mediterranean Language Review* 1: 65–83.
- Goffman, Erving. 1970. *Strategic Interaction*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Griefat, Yousuf, and Tamar Katriel. 1989. Life demands *musayara*: Communication and culture among Arabs in Israel. In: Stella Ting-Toomey, and Felipe Korzenny (eds.), *Language, Communication and Culture*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 121–138.
- Henkin-Roitfarb, Roni. 2011. Hebrew and Arabic in asymmetric contact in Israel. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics* 7(1): 61–100.
- Holmes, Janet. 1986. Compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English. *Anthropological Linguistics* 28(4): 485–508.



- Horesh, Uri. 2015. Structural change in Urban Palestinian Arabic induced by contact with Modern Hebrew. In: Aaron Butts (ed.), *Semitic Languages in Contact*. Leiden: Brill, 198–233.
- Jakobson, Roman. 1938 [1962]. On the theory of phonological affinities between languages. In: Selected Writings Vol 1, The Hague: Mouton, 234–246. Reprinted from Acts du Quatrieme Congres: International de Linguistic, Copenhagen: Munsgaard, 1938: 48–59.
- John, Nicholas, and Aysha Agbarya. 2020. Punching up or turning away? Palestinians unfriending Jewish Israelis on Facebook. *New Media & Society*: 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820908256>.
- Johnstone, Barbara. 1991. *Repetition in Arabic Discourse: Paradigms, Syntagms, and the Ecology of Language*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Jucker, Andreas H., and Irma Taavitsainen. 2014. Complimenting in the history of American English: A metacommunicative expression analysis. In: Irma Taavitsainen, Andreas H. Jucker, and Jukka Tuominen (eds.), *Diachronic Corpus Pragmatics*. (Pragmatics and Beyond New Series 243). Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 257–276.
- Kampf, Zohar. 2013. Mediated performatives. In Jan-Ola Östman and Jef Verschueren (Eds.), *Handbook of Pragmatics*. 1–24. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kampf, Zohar, and Roni Danziger. 2019. ‘You dribble faster than Messi and jump higher than Jordan’: The art of complimenting and praising in political discourse. *Journal of Politeness Research* 15(1): 1–23. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2016-0044>.
- Kapust, Daniel J. 2018. *Flattery and the History of Political Thought: That Glib and Oily Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katriel, Tamar. 1986. *Talking Straight: Dugri Speech in Israeli Sabra Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Katriel, Tamar. 1993. *Lefargen*: A study in Israeli semantics of social relations. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 26(1): 31–53.
- Katriel, Tamar. 1999. *Keyword: Patterns of Culture and Communication in Israel*. Haifa, IL: Zmora-Bitan [In Hebrew].
- Kong, Kenneth C. C. 2003. “Are you my friend?”: Negotiating friendship in conversations between network marketers and their prospects. *Language in Society* 32: 487–522.
- Locher, Miriam A., and Richard J. Watts. 2005. Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research* 1(1): 9–33.
- Maschler, Yael. 2001. Veke’ilu Haragláyim Sh’xa Nitka’ot Bifním Kaze (and Like Your Feet Get Stuck Inside Like): Hebrew Kaze (Like), Ke’ilu (Like), and the decline of Israeli *Dugri* (Direct) Speech. *Discourse Studies* 3(3): 295–326.
- Nelson, Gaylel, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Erin Echols. 1996. Arabic and English compliment responses: Potential for pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics* 17(4): 411–432.
- Nelson, Gaylel, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Waguida El Bakary. 2002. Directness vs. indirectness: Egyptian Arabic and US English communication style. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 26(1): 39–57.

- Nelson, Gaylel, Waguida El Bakary, and Mahmoud Al Batal. 1993. Egyptian and American compliments: A cross-cultural study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 17(3): 293–313.
- Ogiermann, Eva. 2009. Politeness and in-directness across cultures: A comparison of English, German, Polish and Russian requests. *Journal of Politeness Research* 5(2): 189–216.
- Ran, Yongping, Linsen Zhao, and Dániel Z. Kádár. 2020. The rite of reintegrative shaming in Chinese public dispute mediation. *Pragmatics* 30(1): 40–63.
- Rawlins, William K. 1991. On enacting friendship and interrogating discourse. In: Karen Tracy (ed.), *Understanding Face to Face Interaction: Issues Linking Goals and Discourse*. New York/London: Psychology Press, 101–115.
- Weizman, Elda, and Marcelo Dascal. 1991. On clues and cues: Strategies of text-understanding. *Journal of Literary Semantics* 20(1): 18–30.
- Wolfson, Nessa. 1984. Pretty is as pretty does: A speech act view of sex roles. *Applied Linguistics* 5(3): 236–244.
- Yu, Ming-Chung. 2003. On the universality of face: Evidence from Chinese compliment response behavior. *Journal of Pragmatics* 35(10–11): 1679–1710.
- Zaharna, Rhonda S. 1995. Understanding cultural preferences of Arab communication patterns. *Public Relations Review* 21(3): 241–255.
- Zupnik, Yael-Janette. 2000. Conversational interruptions in Israeli-Palestinian “dialogue” events. *Discourse Studies* 2: 85–110.