



Ideology, the Nation and the Unsaid: Sensing the Mission in Israeli Middle East Studies

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Abstract

This article examines the discursive assumptions arising from a prevalent narrative in Israeli Middle East studies, as carrying a public mission. Drawing on Foucauldian, psychosocial and cultural critical discourse analysis, it deconstructs an interview with a key individual in the field to dislodge the political unconscious layers in the pivotal power-knowledge agency, and draw conclusions about the politics of knowledge production, practices of academic elites, and the particularities of language with the specific cultural-historical conditions in which it operates. Arguably, the narration of a ‘public mission’ is a discourse fostered by political suppositions, such as inclusion and exclusion, secularised-religious morphologies, and naturalisation of interested hegemonic and academic discourse, as well as manifests a particular Zionist devotion of the individual to the nation and state.

Key words: academic culture, Middle East Studies, Israeli orientalism, Israeli militarism, Hebrew

1. Introduction

This work identifies forms and modes of formulation in a longstanding self-narrative, prevalent among key Israeli scholars in Middle Eastern studies (MES), as an expertise that bears a public ‘mission.’¹ The following analysis traces the ideological charges of this additional function of the scholarship, by interrogating a mode of subjectivity that arises from the said discourse. It deconstructs extracts from an interview with a professor who heads several leading local MES bodies and who frequently comments on Hebrew news-media about various current affairs as an expert on the Middle East. Like nearly all the professors in this field, the speaker is a member of the Jewish majority (and hegemony) in Israel (and like most researchers in this field, a man). It must be noted that, unlike in British academia, Middle East studies is probably the most popular subject in the Humanities in Israel, and this interested popularity has political and cultural charges, which are at the heart of this study (Clyne 2018). Moreover, the Israeli academic discipline overlaps and collaborates with other forms of a uniquely powerful Jewish-Israeli expertise called ‘*mizrahanut*,’ which literally means orientalism, and is a broader specialisation on Arabs and Islam prevalent and influential in sites of national security, political NGOs and the Hebrew news-media, as well as in academia, where it was once called orientalism or orient studies. However,

unlike orient studies, *mizrahanut* topicalises Islamic, Middle Eastern and Arab matters (hereinafter: ‘Arab/Muslim,’ to reflect this elision), and usually not other parts of the ‘orient’ (such as south east Asia, south and west Africa, or the Far East).²

I argue that the informal said ‘mission’ of this expertise manifests, yet simultaneously camouflages, multi-layered national, ‘sucritised’ (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998; Sheffer and Barak 2010, 2013; Abulof 2014) and interested practices, which interlock with a particular devotion to the Jewish-Israeli hegemonic ingroup, nation and state.

1.1 Materials and Conceptual Framework

The interview analysed here is part of a larger holistic study of the field (Clyne forthcoming), which included 45 original ‘ethnographic interviews’ (Fetterman 2009: 40-42; Bernard 2006: 211) that I conducted in 2013-14 with key figures in the field of Israeli MES, alongside fieldnote ethnographic observations, conversations, and analyses of Hebrew documents and publications. The semi-structured interviews were usually conducted in Hebrew and took place in the interviewees’ university offices for a duration of 1-3 hours each.

The following text-led analysis, which is also informed by, and draws on, the broader corpus of the study, interrogates the ‘political unconscious’ (Jameson 2007) that informs this account, i.e. the *desubjectified* conditions that foster a text and its formulation, such as contextual epochal ideologies, and with which it needs to be read. Exploring what is told to us through and beyond the text, this analysis draws on, and demonstrates, eclectic *qualitative* critical discourse analysis strategies, primarily Foucauldian, psychosocial and cultural critical discourse analyses (Burman and Parker 2016 [1993]; Billig 1999; Wetherell 1998, 2003; Maier and Jäger 2016; Gavriely-Nuri 2010, 2012a). ‘Discourse’ in this work refers to a set of epistemic knowledge-power structures that *interpellates* subjects, i.e. constitutes *subjectivities* (Foucault 1980 [1969]; Althusser 1972; Burke 1998). In the approach taken here, both meaning and speech are not (entirely) in the control of the (speaking) subject, and the key interest is in finding what society is saying through the individual and language. Furthermore, speech inevitably lets slip the way in which the speaker-subject is ‘troubled’ by social conventions and positions (Wetherell 2003), and so, like in psychoanalysis, these slippages do not necessarily manifest in quantity or repetition, as assumed in corpus-based studies, and therefore explicating them demands more interpretative work, as the understanding and sense-making of a text necessarily draw on existing linguistic, discursive, cultural (and, I would add, situational) building blocks (Barthes 1967; Spivak 2012: 242). Therefore, in such analyses, *speakers’ intentions matter less* (and remain inaccessible anyway!), and there is an emphasis on meaning as produced in the interpretive process of *reading* (e.g. Fish 1982; Eco 1984, 1991; Eco et al. 1992; Jameson 2007).

Reading, too, while not ‘objective,’ is also not ‘subjective’ (i.e. subject-led) or arbitrary, but must avoid the risk of absurd and ahistorical possibilities (Jameson 2007: 2, 7; Eco 1984, 1991; 1992; Ricœur 2006). The reader’s (and analyst’s) own *desubjectified* language, interactions and dispositions are

equally and inevitably as instrumental for the production and analysis of the text. In this way, my positional subjectivity and work – as an ethnographer (Clifford 1988), interviewer (Holstein and Gubrium 1995), reader/hearer/analyst (Fish 1982), translator (Spivak 2012: 242; Charlston 2014: 12) and author – are (in)formed by being native to the collective of Jewish Israeli Hebrew speakers, and by the habitus of having studied and taught in the humanities and social sciences in Israel. These simultaneously endow my reading with the appropriate intelligibility of producing a reasonable reading in the uttered context.

It is also significant to aver that the following fragments are inevitably mediated and processed reductions of the original, situated and preformed text. They were selected translated, and transcribed from audio-recordings, as well as reorganised for an analytical purpose. Additionally, the fragments were not chosen for their ability to ‘represent’ or epitomise the diverse field, because no quote can (although I should clarify that they were also not exceptional), but as significant for highlighting indicative structural and ideological aspects. Four specific reasons guided the choice of interview for analysis: that the interviewee held key positions in the field, which testifies to his successful operation within the field’s discourse and praxis; that its narratives touch issues that are relevant to the field as a whole; that its analysis would introduce an original outlook which was not previously discussed; and that identifying and evaluating the arguments being made requires explication, contextualisation and analysis.

2. Identity Work and Self-Importance

2.1 Opening the interview

It is essential at this point to provide some situational context to the analysed text. The interview commenced with an open probe and receptive style (Bernard 2006: 216-23; Fetterman 2009: 46-47; Brinkmann 2013: 8, 31) inviting the interviewee to narrate his way into the profession. The interviewee replied that he had studied a *mizrahanut* course [already] in secondary school, and subsequently served a number of years in several roles in the [Israeli military’s] Intelligence Corp, which he said, ‘had strengthened my familiarity with the region,’ concluding: ‘I did a course of what people will call, a natural course.’ Then, he added that curiosity led him to study Middle East [studies] in university, reiterating: ‘I think that it was truly a natural³ course.’ Once in university, the interviewee said he ‘fell in [MES]’s charms,’ adding that this⁴ -

FRAGMENT 1

...has something very individual [...] But, on the other hand, I was looking, in students who are going to specialise in this, for this bug,⁵ in inverted commas. To see if they have, after all, [*tone of first of two options:*] a mechanical approach to the subject, [i.e. whether] ‘I am doing this because I will find work here or there...,’ [*expected second option here; yet, quickly and in clarifying tone:*] This is [also] absolutely fine! That ministry, [or] in the media... We have, many of our graduates, actually, are net[work]ed⁶ in the Israeli society. I think that this is something, which is an *unsurpassable* blessing. Because I think that, in Israel, ultimately, the issue of knowing⁷ the Middle East, not through

the pages of newspapers, but in a much deeper and real way, is actually the order of the day.⁸ It is something that Israel of the twenty-first century will have to grow[-up]⁹ with. It's something that the next leaders of this state will have to come with a *background* in their *résumé*, of Middle East [studies]. This is something that we, in that sense, in my opinion, are public emissaries. And I am definitely saying this with pride.

I am pausing here for convenience of presentation and analysis, and will return to the text shortly.

In approaching this text, there is, first, an opportunity to appreciate its nature as an extemporaneous and associative narrative. The speaker takes us through a convoluted and ambivalent path, until he stabilises on a clear direction. The intricate route commences with describing a [militarised] professional development track as something *common* and *normal*, but then contradicts it as reflecting a 'very *individual*' passion, and then supposedly contradicting it again with 'But, on the other hand,' yet continuing to speak in favour of the individual 'bug' in others, thus inferring that the 'mechanical' (or 'instrumental?') approach is less preferred, then immediately contradicting the hierarchy he has just devised by stating that other motivations are also fine even if perhaps not as good. In the final direction, the speaker seems sufficiently comfortable, or eloquent, or has something more detailed, organised or urgent to say, and he increasingly comes to express that the instrumental approach is in fact very valuable, as if the more he speaks about it, the more he takes pride in his role of training the next generation of professionals. As we shall see, pride has a key role in this narrative.

2.2 Order of the Day

The speaker's mission, which is being delivered to us with a sense of importance and urgency ('the order of the day'), is one of pulling power-knowledge strings behind the scenes of the state's decision-making circles, training the future leaders of the state, where their graduates are already well 'net[work]ed.' In other words, we are being explicitly narrated an Althusserian ideological function (Althusser 1984), an influential social institution that operates not by oppression and indoctrination, but by habituating the discursive logic, worldviews and beliefs, by making subjects 'voluntarily' take certain things for granted. One conspicuous ideological apparatus that Althusser has explored was the church, and a metaphor slippage in the text also reveals a missionary possibility. I translated the phrase *shlihey tsibur* above literally as 'public emissaries,' being loyal to the way I thought his words were intended and understood in context (and I easily found ample examples of similar literal applications online). However, an 'accurate' translation of the phrase, i.e. its denotation in dictionaries, is cantors, the figures within synagogues who pray to God on behalf of the community (Chaueka 1997: 1834b), or, figuratively, act on behalf of a public (Even Shushan 1961). Whether we take the explicit sacred engagement of the denotative meaning at its social unconscious level, or the secularised and literal 'messengers of the public,' *mizrahans* are narrated as being sent by/to the public to undertake a special role. I return to the theological reading later in the text.

The speaker's pride continues to frame the next parts of his speech. (Note: Emboldened words, in subsequent fragments, are added as interpretive

emphases to indicate manifestations of ‘troubled subjectivity’ and difficulty to verbalise).

FRAGMENT 2

Now, what I am trying to say [is] that this department, or our centres, are, in the end of the day, *also*, **in my view**, working with the broad public. **Eh**, of students. And [we] see this [as] a sort of a public mission, and I certainly think that this thing, in terms of Israel, is very important. And I don’t mean only the [international] political¹⁰ issue, I mean more the social-cultural issue. The ties that would build inside Israel. The co-existence, **as we call it**, between Arabs and Jews. These are things that would need to be built with people who, **in my opinion**, will do it only after they will know much better the cultural configurations of this area which is called [the] Middle East. [E.g.] [*tone of counting*:] the mode in which people do memorisation, their past, the[ir] understanding of questions of identity and memory... A great many dimensions, which I call [*in English*:] ‘*soft dimensions*,’ which we give in our teaching, without ignoring the hard dimensions of reality, which are also very important. But, **really**, to give **some kind of** comprehensive picture, to tease the appetite of people with relation to Middle East [studies¹¹] even if they are not going to be professors in university. Rather, to create a situation, **really**, of routinisation - from the word routine - of very many terms and very many values which are in the Middle Eastern being,¹² because Israel is [maybe] a [*in English*:] *start-up nation*, that’s nice, but it is also, to the same extent, a state in the Middle East.

There is more than meets the eye in this ambiguous speech, but I must first ward off a spurious possibility which is caused by translation. ‘Israel is [maybe] a start-up nation’ does *not* infer that Israel is allegoric to a ‘start-up’ company, or is in its infancy or incubation. This option should be defenestrated as what Umberto Eco et al. (1992) called an *overinterpretation*, or what Frederic Jameson (2007: 2, 6-7) describes as ‘unacceptable’ reading, where a reading transcends a text from the context in which it was performed. It would also make no sense in this context... Rather, ‘start-up nation’ is a very common aggrandising narrative of Israel through its large proportion of advanced technology companies, (and which is strengthened by a popular nondistinction between *start-up* and *hi-tech* companies, two lexemes that are normally indicated in English).

Still, the relevance of Israel’s high-tech profile is ambiguous. While possibly serving an indirect claim about the importance of the humanities [to the nation] versus the supposed obviosity of applicable sciences’ contribution, this *particular* choice still remains significant over other alternatives. Advanced technology works simultaneously and illicitly to elicit the presupposition that Israel is ‘advanced,’ ‘successful,’ at the forefront of technology and modernity, and therefore part of the First World. As such, it is not without significance that what follows (after giving a [pseudo-]credit of ‘that’s nice’) is a (re-) validation of it through an orientalist contrast: ‘*but* it is also, to the same extent, a state in the Middle East.’ Here, the reminder of Israel’s regional location assumes an opposition with Israel’s [Western] progress.¹³ This disharmony interpellates *mizrahans* to become missionaries, because, despite being ‘in the Middle East,’ Israelis supposedly ‘need’ MES academics to connect, habituate, ‘routinise’ and harmonise their being ‘there.’ The claim to ground the ‘detached’ Israelis in the region, or in reality, is particularly

noticeable given that Israeli MES is known for overall excluding Israel and Israeli society from its study of the Middle East, and is engaged in archive-based history and philology more than in, say, ethnography.

The morphology of this narrative of redemption also poses an implicit theological option that informs the mission. Seeing ‘the wrong ways’ of their people, the experts are being sent to the people to correct their ways. In such sacerdotalist structure (where priests are essential mediators between God and humankind), the clergy are bestowed with the divinity and knowledge that the unholy do not possess, and which they gained through endless worship, practice and piety. This option is reinforced at a later stage of the interview, where the interviewee refers to [probably postgraduate] students with the phrase *pirhey kahuna*, acolytes or altar-boys (figuratively: cadets).¹⁴

Whether this mission is a mission of peace is obscured by the words ‘co-existence, as we call it, between Arabs and Jews.’ As the ultimate purpose of an important mission, *co-existence* is not a term that tells us a great deal about the relations that are being wished for. The term describes peaceful, tolerant co-living, but this avoids the question of *what* is being peacefully tolerated (e.g. exploitation? Oppression? Victimhood? Terror? etc.). In fact, it may seem counterintuitive, but in Israel-Palestine *there is* co-existence of Jews and Arabs, since, de facto, both Jews and Arabs simultaneously and jointly exist. There is no need to strive for it, rather to recognise it and explore its character. The role ‘co-existence’ plays in this text, then, is one of approximation (‘as we call it’), evasion, equivocation and/or putting ‘under erasure’ (*sous rature*) of the power relations at play, and so of ‘peace.’ My reading draws on the broader Hebrew Israeli cultural-political context where ‘peace’ has ‘gone out of fashion’ after the collapse of the Oslo Accords, around the turn of the millennium (cf. Gavriely-Nuri 2012b; Friedman and Gavriely-Nuri 2017). Being passé, unrealistic, and/or naïve, ‘peace’ was replaced by less explicit and ambitious words like ‘co-existence,’ in the same way that ‘conflict resolution’ was replaced with the less ambitious, if not opposite, ‘conflict management.’ Arguably, coexistence synonymises and conceals the way politics is ‘the continuation of war by other means’ (Foucault 2003).

Additionally, co-existence enforces Arabs’ and Jews’ independent existences, and infers their mutual exclusivity, rendering their hybridity irrelevant. Of course, I do not suggest that the speaker or the agents in the field necessarily and rationally reject, for example, ‘Arab-Jews’ or ‘Palestinian-Israeli’ as a theoretical, rhetorical or concrete description. Rather, what we learn from *co-existence*’s presence in this speech, over other alternatives, is the discursive foreclosure of hybridity as an epistemic option.

Another ambiguity about this ‘sort of a public mission’ pertains to the identity of the public. It surfaces at the beginning of the segment, where ‘the broad public’ is amended shortly after, by supplementing ‘of students.’ Put simply, is this mission addressing the broad public, or to the broad public of students? If it is the general public, then what are the reasons and functions of the subsequent corrective addition? Alternatively, ‘the broad[/er] public of students’ is an address to all *students*, perhaps as a response to an assumed narrower address to outstanding students aiming at an academic career, where other students, who ‘are not going to be professors in the university.’ In this reading, academic expertise is said to have something to offer *also* to

those who do not (intend to) become professors. However, then, the status of being a '*public mission*' is questionable, and the relation to Arab-Jewish co-existence, or anything that 'in terms of Israel, is very important,' becomes intangible.

In my reading, the students *are* (part of) the general public. The broader public outside academia is represented in the students, whom are the prospective leaders within the broader national context. And so, there is a realisation that students are more than 'just' students, but are a window onto the broader public, where most people are not professors. A substantial subtextual key to this reading lies in the fact that the interviewee did not say '*also - ,*' but '*even if* they are not going to be professors in university,' which distinctly changes the meaning from a marketing narrative that appeals to more crowds, into joining the criticism of the 'purity' of inapplicable research which is lifeless outside university, and its supposed disregard to life outside the 'ivory tower.' Thus, where university regularly is presumed to ignore the non-academic masses, academic *mizrahanut* is said to have a calling to fulfil an inclusive social duty. Hence the corrective addition 'of students' lays out another line of mitigation, accepting, yet simultaneously negotiating, academia's jurisdiction. Importantly, this reading further disambiguates the public's identity, because it goes without saying that that 'public' does not refer to all Israelis, but to the hegemony of Jewish Israelis, because only they, and not the large minority of Palestinian-Arabs, may lack appreciation of the surrounding cultural wealth, and only they can effectively lead the country and its key ministries.¹⁵

In fact, uncertainty and political prevarication are also hosted via the 'Arabs' being referred to in the mission of fostering co-existence, particularly following the statement:

I don't mean only the [international] political issue, I mean more the social-cultural issue. The ties that would build inside Israel. (Underlines added)

On the one hand, this statement establishes a distinction between 'inside' and 'outside', and prioritises intra-Israeli ties over 'the [international] political issue.' Such reading must attend to the politics of nominalisation and note the genealogy of Zionist terminology of the referred group, where 'Arabs' and 'Israeli-Arabs' deny, overlook, depreciate or 'unmention' the group's Palestinian identity and history, and ahistorically frames the referenced group as a sector within Israeli society, forcing a liberal story of civic minority integration (Rabinowitz 1993, 2002).¹⁶ Therefore, saying that promoting co-existence *with Arabs* 'in terms of Israel, is very important' is a reference to constructing an Israeli collective, by perpetuating the removal of the group's threatening Palestinianhood. However, on the other hand, *Arabs* could be a reference to Arabs outside Israel, as suggested in the concerns raised about Israel's or Israelis' unfamiliarity with the 'Middle Eastern being' (or character, or way of life),¹⁷ and about its/their disharmony with being 'a state in the Middle East.' But then, why say 'inside Israel'?

A third possibility is that the mission is to foster co-living with Arabs regardless of where, both in and out of Israel (giving particular weight to the order of clauses and underlined words). However, this third option would make redundant the very distinction and tension that the speaker constitutes

between ‘ties inside Israel’ and ‘[international] politics,’ unless it discloses an assumption that co-existence in Israel has more legitimacy or is less controversial, and so mentioning it is a mitigating addition for the legitimacy of the mission. Remaining inconclusive about intra-Israeli or intra-Middle Eastern relations, we not only gain a sense of the discomfort and confusions in discussing these matters with a clear and forward approach, but also learn about the discursive liquidity of ‘Arabs’ and ‘Arabness.’ Regardless of where, what or who these Arabs are, the one constant that remains is that this is a Jewish-Israeli discourse, as Jewish-Israelis are presupposed in the ‘us’, where what is ‘important for Israel’ becomes important for (his) *mizraḥanut*.

Forging such identity of ‘importances’ between experts and ‘everybody’ is at the same time the familiar hegemonic means by which the ruling classes position their interested ideology as the common good. In this case, it is the interested authority of the class ruling knowledge, which is maintained by two means in the above: ‘teasing the appetite’ and ‘routinisation.’ The former positions the speaker at a higher authority, and as in the case of a tasting stand in a supermarket, it is not a public service but an interested marketing tactic of audience-building. Then, *routinisation* explicitly describes the routine way in which an academic tradition and field accustom subjects to the rules by which they become a discourse. Saying that the mission is oriented towards the ‘routinisation [...] of very many terms and very many values which are in the Middle Eastern being’ – and notwithstanding the vagueness of the ‘terms,’ ‘values’ and ‘being’ – what is being described here is an outspoken ambition to habituate, to make something a second-nature, automatic, obvious and therefore less or not discernible. It is only in this unusual moment that the covert political unconscious is being made more overt.

In the next extracts, the place of the nation also becomes overt and essential.

3. The Politicality of the Non-Political

3.1 Pride and Presumption

As the interview progressed, *pride* emerged as a fundamental theme. The text below almost directly followed the last segment:

FRAGMENT 3

INTERVIEWEE. [*Interrupting a probe about something else:*] **I... I again...** [*Rearticulating:*] **I want to say again**, you know, from what I said now, [it] can be said, what many say about us... And... [*Dismissive tone:*] Okay... That we are serving Israel. We are not serving Israel in that, that we are forging¹⁸ now people who will do the ‘know the enemy’ better. That’s not our role.¹⁹ [For] that, there’s an intelligence corp. I think that for Israel itself - **for Is-ra-el itself**, for the sake of the society, for the sake of its future, for the sake of the more correct understanding of how [to] integrate in an area **s-o** complex, Middle East studies is a *very* very positive grocery [item].²⁰ Without offending [the] start-up [industry], without offending hi-tech, without... [*Interrupted -*].

This segment opens with a need to clarify, to declare that academic *mizraḥans* are not another form of information gathering about the enemy. A very similar point was made at the end of the interview:

FRAGMENT 4

Whoever thinks that this is a wing²¹ of the... I don't know what, of the Israeli Mossad or something like that, and *there are* such people - will continue to think that. It can't be helped, you know.

Although both comments give the sense of helplessness, that 'others will always think that,'²² the speaker does not truly despair because his very statement offers resistance. Thus, what is being narrated here is a story of an underdog waging a lost battle against critics, possibly rooted in the repeated biblical narrative morphology of the few and just against the many.

Less straightforward is the boundary being patrolled between the *mizrahanut* (the Israeli expertise on Arabs/Islam) of/in the spying and intelligence agencies and 'ours,' i.e. academic *mizrahanut*. The high-stakes practice of constituting and reinforcing demarcations between fields of knowledge has been recognised by sociologists of knowledge as boundary work (Gieryn 1983). But, the above does not assert that academic *mizrahans* are not creating images of the enemy, but that they (1) are not 'serving Israel' as an intelligence agency; and (2) [because] for these things 'there's an intelligence corps'. So, (1) the speaker leaves room for *mizrahanut* to still be serving Israel; and (2) the first difference that came to mind between the roles of academic *mizrahanut* and the *mizrahanut* in intelligence agencies was that 'know the enemy' is covered by the latter, thus, arguably, relieving them of that duty. The statement 'That's not our role; [for] that, there's an intelligence corp,' is worthy of a simple test of change of variables, using other groups of Otherness, for example: We are not providing a 'know the danger of women' service, *for this there are others*; or, We are not improving the 'know the black threat,' *there are designated state units for that*.²³ Notwithstanding the differences in the first parts of these sentences, the second parts tell an important story, and academic *mizrahanut* is narrated by them as a function made possible through the privilege of having other 'walks of mizrahanist life' in the establishment. Acknowledging the separation and allocation of responsibilities, academic *mizrahanut* co-habits with the intelligence. The former is complementary to the latter, not by providing operational information on troops or war scenarios, nor by vying or countering them; but by providing a more holistic background. In addition, academic *mizrahanut* is somewhat dependent on, and has an avowed rich history of, transitions and co-operations with, security bodies, for organisational, cultural and financial reasons. The security (and diplomatic) apparatus(es) were also sometimes a two-way door for faculty, an important trainer and maintainer of Arabic and Persian languages among prospective (Jewish Israeli) students, and the two realms share interests and networks (Eyal 2006; Matza 2013; Mendel 2016; Clyne 2018; Clyne forthcoming).

The separation being constituted is clear, yet intangible, because it overlooks what was said earlier about a 'natural' or 'normal course' of Israeli MES scholars who come from the intelligence. A satirical paraphrasing equivalent would be: 'we are not the Intelligence, we only come from there, return for reserve service, and have friends and colleagues there.' It is analogous to soldiers speaking calmly, perhaps about their pragmatic beliefs, as though their words can be dissociated from the guns they carry, or from the organisation of violence and oppression of which they are part. The presence

of those means of violence, or even their absent-presence, i.e. knowing that these are available for them elsewhere, or through agents and agencies, becomes useful when their words are not accepted, or in 'encouraging' pre-emptive affirmative listening.

Furthermore, elsewhere in the interview, the interviewee referred to the respect and platform national security authorities enjoy in the research centre he leads, saying that he (and his centre) see/s it an honour to host them:

FRAGMENT 5

So, listen, we, as I told you, are asked [by non-academic bodies] to voice our opinion. We are not a body that gives professional services and consultancy to the Israeli Government. But, if the Minister of Security was hosted in the [/slap/²³] [unit name omitted] a month ago, it is our honour²⁴ [/slap/]. And if the Minister of Security gives some kind of lecture that, eh, has a large public interest, it is our honour.

The relationship being described now is more than 'simply' cohabiting, or of mutual respect, or of the responsibilities of respecting esteemed guests. Nor is it as reactive to external circumstances as the passive utterance 'we are asked to...' conveys. The use of passive voice is a device which does not require specification of the agent, employed again in 'the Minister of Security was hosted in the Centre.' Grammatically, 'the Minister' is the *subject*, the acting party, and his action is to be hosted (we now imagine the minister *doing* that), whereas the 'we' becomes an indirect *object* (i.e. 'by us'), the element that is being acted upon, which then may, and indeed was, removed. So, although in the referenced world, the academics of the said centre were the ones who *actively* hosted, perhaps even invited, the minister (who then actively gave a lecture), the use of passive allows for the removal and concealment of such action, or at least downplays it.

After this ideological boundary work with the security apparatus, which has now developed into what may be called 'border-crossing work,' appears a second comparison of the vocation. This time it is juxtaposed against the national contribution of the hi-tech industry, which returns for an encore. The text reads: 'for the sake of Israel [...] MES is a *very* very positive grocery[-item]. Without offending start-up[s], without offending hi-tech, without...'. The gist here is that MES is most vital for Israel, like *groceries* (the Hebrew root of which is 'need'), as opposed to the luxury of hi tech.²⁵ So much so that *mizrahanut* might (allegedly) shame the acclaimed technology industry, and thus the speaker feels compelled to state that this is not his intention. Yet, in an indirect way, the statement does exactly the opposite. It unexpectedly associates *mizrahanut* with the national recognition that hi-tech receives. The mentioning of 'hi-tech' serves as a wish to challenge the uniqueness of this industry's national reputation. Consequently, hi-tech emerges not as inferior - as wishing to avoid offence would imply - but as an object of envy. This comment makes claims for similar national recognition, where *mizrahanut* would be upheld as highly contributing to the nation's pride, prosperity and perhaps modernity. The national remains unsaid and partially anaphoric, as well as is conveyed in the speaker's pride to 'report' and host in attention whenever national security functions 'call' him.

The unrecognised contribution of *mizrahanut* is described as understanding what the speaker calls ‘an area *s-o* complex.’ Stressing ‘complexity’ is itself complex, for all areas and societies are complicated, unless this is a claim for exceptionalism or essentialism. Either way, aggrandising the region is simultaneously self-praise of those who can (or have the power to) cope with such recondite matter.

3.2 Humble Servants

The public aspect of the profession resurfaced at the end of that interview, and so did the plea for recognition.

FRAGMENT 6

[...] If I want to do, in my close surrounding,²⁶ with my humble power,²⁷ to contribute something to the society in which I live, I believe that this is what I need to do. And... I really hope that it would be accepted with empathy.²⁸ Look, it is clear to me that there are people who won't accept that. I, however, as I always do,²⁹ believe that many people *will* accept it. Always..., **You understand?** We don't need to be caught to this extreme³⁰ or the other. [*His unit omitted*] is situated in the mainstream.³¹ We are trying more or less here to think what is mainstream here, but **the meaning is** more to social mission, and, of course, an academic research mission, which is what we are [/slap/]. [END: The interviewee hastily gets up to leave the room for another commitment].

The final fragment in this analysis opens by positing modesty, and limiting the mission three times: to one's ‘*close surrounding*,’ to one's ‘*humble power*,’ and by the circumscribed influence conveyed in ‘to *contribute something*,’ which is furthered with the emotive and moral mitigation ‘to the society in which I live,’ and a proclaimed lack of confidence as to whether people would accept it. The uncertainty and humility, as well as a depiction of small-scale effects, stand in tension with the pride, leadership, urgency and import, as well as with the wide and ambitious influence of national scale, which were narrated earlier, in statements like: ‘[graduates in leading social positions] is something which is an *unsurpassable* blessing;’ ‘the order of the day;’ ‘something that Israel of the 21st century will have to grow with;’ ‘the next leaders of this state will have to come with;’ ‘I am definitely saying this with pride;’ ‘[We] see this [as] a sort of a public mission, and I certainly think that this thing, in terms of Israel, is very important.’ The shift from pride to humility is accompanied by a move from social role to individual influence. This modesty can be read as a bowing of the individual in face of the national, *and* a performance of fake modesty, where the interviewee is in fact conveying that he is proud of his influence, and uses modesty to shelter from potential criticism, also thereby laying a pleading second line of legitimacy defence for the public mission.

This pretence is particularly incongruous with the pathos at work in two tropes: ‘in my close surrounding’ (*b'dalet amotay*) and ‘with my humble power’ (*b'koḥi ha-dal*), that evoke affective images to convey and limit meaning. The first is a high-register phrase, which literally means ‘in my [approx.] 4 ft² [room],’ importantly: using *biblical* measurements and language. The phrase denotes ‘in the privacy of my home,’ but the rhetorical force is figurative (as my translation indicates). The second is also of high-register, and translates as ‘in my meagre power,’ although it also has a less

literal sense. Despite the images that these tropes force, the said mission is not exactly carried out by an individual, in a small or private space, with humility, or in one's last powers. Rather it is practiced by speaker who holds senior roles, and by the powerful bodies that he represents, with pride and missionary sentiments, in public, as part of a powerful and high status academic elite. Yet, it seems that the more the speaker fears that his ideology might not go unquestioned, the more he is laying claim to a place where authority is clear, which is why the interviewee concluded with the academic authority claim: 'an academic research mission, which is what we are [/slap/].'

In addition, the humility of a messenger is an empathic image with theological roots. A common plot of Biblical prophet stories, like of Moses, Jonah and Jeremiah, is of a messenger so pious and meek that he at first refuses his prophecy, and is then forced into his appointments by God. However, when 'humble' *mizrahanut* academics doubt whether people will accept their mission, they dissociate themselves from the authority they have to make others listen or accept it. This power is evident in the immediate addition 'we don't need to be caught to this extreme or the other,' which shows the choice of audience, as well as implies an association between 'extremism' and not accepting the mission. This affiliation with the mainstream fortifies the defences and legitimises the mission by distancing (a specific site of) academic *mizrahanut* from 'radicalism' of any kind. '[Our centre] is situated in the mainstream' means that 'we' are not doing anything controversial, as per the 'mainstream.' What remains presupposed is whose mainstream this discourse 'brands' itself as, and addresses. If the mission is non-controversial for that 'mainstream,' then mainstream must refer to those who would not challenge the networks with, and the respect for, the security apparatus and figures, or whom are allowed in the state leadership, and who benefit from both the military and the expertise on Arabs/Islam. In other words, these are the Jewish hegemony in Israel, and more specifically, the Zionists among them. The ideological outlook in which the speaker is grounded is that of Israeli-Zionist discourse, made uncontroversial and apolitical, even 'natural,' so that challenging it is rendered 'extreme.' As Israeli philosopher Adi Ophir (2014) has aptly observed, the view that whatever is not Zionist (or Zionist enough) is extreme, perhaps even dangerous, reveals something about Israeli academia at large:

[In Israel] you are political when you dare not to be a Zionist. Then you are accused of threatening to shatter the glass of the academic ivory tower. Because what hides in the ivory tower and is unwilling to be exposed for critical discussion is not the academic, but the Zionist.

4. Conclusion

This article analysed various spoken and unspoken strata that foster a key self-narrative of a *mission* of a powerful knowledge-power agency, through one (key) subjectivity mode it allows. Desubjectifying the speaker, speech and performance, the analysis deconstructed the symbolic density and political overdetermination of this discourse, as manifested in the oral account. The analysis makes multimodal arguments about the interests of experts and

subjectified Zionist ideology, which are narrated with urgency, pride and missionary charges.

First, the narrated mission expresses a cognizance, assumption or hope that MES students will shape the future of the (Zionist) society and state, and explicates an ambition for an ambiguous national intervention behind the scenes through habituation and authority-building. The ‘mission’ is then to ‘know’ and educate about the ‘Arab/Muslim,’ and thus contribute to ‘coexistence;’ yet, while simultaneously being articulated with exclusivist Zionist assumptions that perform the Zionist ownership of Israeli academia.

Second, the very concept of a ‘mission’ is interested. It holds evident returns in various forms of capital, and assumes and reinforces the expert’s and the expertise’s authority and status, which are also fostered by the uniqueness of local ‘*mizrahanut*.’ The narrated ‘mission’ further envelopes a desire for recognition by making claims for a patriotic (and western?) contribution of paramount timely import, which is simultaneously a plea for power, reinforced by various hegemonic and authority-building strategies. And, whilst using an academic foothold as a clear authority ground, the speech renders the academic ambiguous by performing boundary work *and* ‘border-crossing work’ with the security apparatus.

Third, the analysis identifies the employment of conceptual metaphors like cantors and acolytes, that position the experts as the clergy or messengers. This corresponds with religious idioms and theological morphologies identified in the narrative, such as ‘good but few versus the many’ and the ‘humble servant’ messenger, where there is a tension between collective authority and pride and individual humility. However, like coexistence and the academic foothold, humility, is arguably a device employed to shelter from, or to preempt criticism.

Fourth, the fusion of proud devotion to a collective with individual humility is a key feature of nationalist ideology, where individuals ‘voluntary’ bow to the national, with a sense of duty to serve, respect and make sacrifices to the state and nation. I suggest that a deep sense of debt to the political entity is particularly strong in Israeli Zionism, and reproduces Jewish Israeli hegemonic ownership over it.

Notes

- 1 For more on the nature and history of this ‘mission,’ see: Clyne forthcoming. Cf. the mission pronounced in Israel Studies in Aked 2018.
- 2 Unlike its English literal parallel ‘orientalism,’ *mizrahanut* saw a semantic differentiation from the loanword *oryentalizem*, which in the studied field usually denotes an accusation and a curtailed version of the theory of Edward Said (1978; see Clyne forthcoming).
- 3 I read ‘natural’ here idiomatically as ‘normal,’ because other interviewees also referred to a similar life-trajectory as ‘the regular/usual course,’ or, as another interviewee has put it, there were ‘many familiar faces’ from his past in the Military Intelligence (MI), when he arrived at his MES unit.
- 4 The nature and complexity of translation and the changes to syntax that it impelled have made the use and conventions of ‘conversation analysis’ and its symbols of vocal/performative transliteration somewhat complex, misleading and unhelpful. I opted for some comments in italics in square brackets instead.
- 5 Literally: virus (slang); similar to ‘craze’ in its positive signification.
- 6 Originally: *merushatim*.

- 7 Originally: *lehakir* (from familiarity and consciousness, not knowledge).
- 8 Literally: order of the hour, or time (idiom).
- 9 Originally: *ligdol ito*. Literally: to become bigger with it. To remove doubt, this verb does not normally infer economic growth.
- 10 Originally: *medini-politi*.
- 11 The non-definitive 'Middle East' (*mizrah-tikhon*) is often an objectification used to denote MES (*limudey mizrah-tikhon*) rather than the area (*ha-mizrah ha-tikhon*), disclosing the fostering of desire for MES, rather than for the Middle East itself.
- 12 Being (originally: *havaya*). Despite its denotation, the word connotes 'nature' or 'character,' as it is intuitively fused or confused with, and is phonetically close to, 'experience' or 'way of life,' (*havaya* and *havay* respectively).
- 13 Depicting a society through an emblem of its economic industry makes it also a form of academic cultural capitalism. I elaborate on the dimensions of neoliberal academic discourse in Israeli MEIS in Clyne 2018, Clyne forthcoming.
- 14 Literally: priesthood flowers. In Judaism, the Temple priests whom are still under bar-mitzvah age, and serve as aides.
- 15 Assumptions of Jewish Israeli ownership of *mizrahanut* (as students, society, etc.), and of Israeli university generally, were evident in other interviews as well.
- 16 This is the discursive extension of the political annihilation Kimmerling (2006) terms 'politicide.' However, the common alternatives 'Palestinian citizens of Israel' or 'Palestinians in Israel' antithetically reduce the Israeli praxis elements of the hybrid group(s) to merely presence, legalism and formal citizenship, conceding at the same time the impossibility of being simultaneously both (cf. Ghanim 2009).
- 17 See n. 12.
- 18 Originally: *yotsrim*. Reads: creating, but not normally in the godly sense (*bor'im*), rather more as production, or of artwork.
- 19 Also: function (noun).
- 20 Originally: *mitsrakh*. Product, but not from the root of 'production,' but of 'consumption,' 'need,' and 'grocery [shop].'
- 21 Originally: *Zro'a*. Literally: arm. The term is normally denotes state authorities or wings of militant groups, (i.e. not wings of hospitals). This choice is not insignificant.
- 22 The statement 'what others say about us' deserves its own analysis.
- 23 I marked with '/slap/' the two points where the speaker was gently hitting the tabletop with an open palm, mostly with his fingers, making a clap-like sound that gave accent to certain speaking points (Givens 2013)
- 24 Originally: *lekhavod lanu*.
- 25 As in n. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**, this economic trope is part of a larger neoliberal discourse in academia and in market society.
- 26 Originally: *b'dalet amotay* (high register).
- 27 Originally: *b'kokhi ha-dal* (high register).
- 28 Originally: *b'havana*. Literally: understanding.
- 29 Originally: *k'darki bakodesh*. (High register). Literally: As is my way in [issues of] the holy. Meaning: As I have always piously done.
- 30 Also: end.
- 31 Originally: *meynstrim*.

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