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Masculine Talk: On the Subconscious Use of Masculine Linguistic Forms among Hebrew- and Arabic-Speaking Women in Israel

Unmarked cultural categories have received increased attention in recent anthropological and sociological research. Particular interest has been paid to the categories of whiteness and masculinity and to the ideological constructions that underlie their neutral appearance.[1] In sociological and anthropological research of language, more specifically, this comes as a timely complement to the vast literature on linguistic aspects of gender and racial domination, which focuses on marked categories, namely, linguistic forms and language uses specific to women and members of racialized groups. This article on the daily use of masculine grammatical forms by female Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel is located in the thematic intersection of language and masculinity, on the one hand, and what is often called *women's language*, on the other.

The literature on women's distinct linguistic features is methodologically and theoretically diverse. One branch of studies, the variationist paradigm (Haeri 2000), looks at phonological and other standardized gender variations in the use of language (see, e.g., Gordon and Heath 1998) and raises questions about the role of women relative to linguistic change. These studies, which tend to be heavily quantitative, usually take women and men as objective and unproblematic demographic categories. Another branch of studies, typically ethnographic, regards gender as a cultural construction. Here fall investigations of genres, linguistic registers,

Fieldwork for this research was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Lady Davis Fellowship Trust. I would like to extend particular thanks to Tamar Katriel for her enormously helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay, to the anonymous reviewers for *Signs*, and to Murray Rosovsky for his careful editing of the manuscript.

[1] Johnson and Meinhof 1997; Cameron 1998a; Hill 1998; Bucholtz 1999; Sa'ar 2005.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2007, vol. 32, no. 2]
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forms of address, selection of topics, or time allocation in cross-gender conversations.

Over the course of thirty-odd years of feminist research of language, interpretations have evolved and become more complex. As Sally Johnson (1997, 9) observes, the agenda shifted from a dominance approach, which saw women's distinct styles as a language of powerlessness, to a difference approach that celebrated its special qualities. Other studies, however, have tended to emphasize the dual potential of women's language to empower and oppress, depending on its specific content and context (see Crawford 1995; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Cameron 1998b). Whether they concentrate on women or on men, contemporary feminist works emphasize a complex understanding of gender. Femininity and masculinity are seen as mutually informing, contextual, culturally constructed, and embedded in relationships of power. Still, empirically, much of this research continues to be classified under separate rubrics of women/femininity and men/masculinity.

The phenomenon of women who make routine use of masculine linguistic forms offers an opportunity to traverse the distinction between feminine and masculine language. Unlike the prevalent tendency to concentrate on instances of women's employment of speech styles that distinguish them within their speech community (e.g., Israeli-Hebrew or Palestinian-Arabic speakers), the case presented here is one of apparent gender similarity, where women make active, though subconscious, use of masculine language and significantly reduce their use of feminine inflections. As such, it provides an opening to study the language of masculinity within women's language.

Female speakers of Hebrew and Arabic in Israel consistently use masculine pronouns and verb inflections in their everyday language, including self-references and when talking about typically feminine and personal matters in all-women circles. These speech practices are normative and mostly outside the awareness of either speakers or listeners. They are different from instances of deliberate use of masculine manners, which are implemented in particular contexts and carry particular meanings, as in the case of female police officers in Pittsburgh who adopt masculine speech as a professional mask intended for purposes of adaptation and survival (McElhinny 1995). Conversely, Hebrew and Arabic speakers using masculine grammatical forms of the type discussed here regard them as gender neutral. Similar practices are documented in the case of Russian speakers (Doleschal and Schmid 2001) and may well exist also in other languages that share the characteristics of gender inflection in word formation and agreement. However, documentation of daily uses of mas-

culine forms among women is difficult to find. In Hebrew and Arabic, for example, it is very common to hear expressions as intimate and feminine as "when you♂ become♂ a mother" (Hebrew *Keshe'ata nihya 'ima*) or "any person♂ feels♂ the need to have sex" (Arabic *kul insane byiḥiss il-ḥaji lal-jins*; the symbols ♀ and ♂ are used to designate feminine and masculine grammatical gender, respectively) uttered in masculine form by women. This overwhelmingly widespread phenomenon among Israeli Jewish and Palestinian women cuts across age, class, and ethnic group. Similar tendencies of women to use masculine forms in their daily speech are attested abundantly in quotes and narratives in the ethnographic literature on Arabic-speaking populations in other Middle Eastern countries. In what follows, I document the phenomenon, hereafter referred to as *masculine talk*, and offer some interpretations of it.

Before I continue, two brief comments on the limits of my discussion are needed. In the case of Arabic, much of the research on gender and language has focused on women's use of classical and Modern Standard Arabic, as opposed to local vernaculars. My concentration on speaking practices by its very nature prioritizes colloquial speech. Although I have anecdotal evidence that shows that women also tend to use masculine forms when they write or make formal commentaries, these instances remain outside the scope of the present analysis. Among Hebrew speakers the norm of using masculine forms to address mixed-gender audiences has been the subject of some public debate. Occasional campaigns have been launched to introduce pairs of masculine and feminine grammatical inflections into signs, announcements, and official letters. Concomitantly, the Hebrew Language Academy has reaffirmed its position that the masculine should remain the unmarked form.[2] In this article I leave official regulations aside and focus instead on the naturally occurring colloquial inclination of female speakers to adopt masculine talk.

"Male as norm" (Bußmann and Hellinger 2001) is a highly prevalent phenomenon across languages. In Contemporary Standard Russian, for example, "masculine personal nouns denote males but may also refer to females, while feminine personal nouns can never refer to males. The same is true, mutatis mutandis, for pronouns and other word classes showing gender agreement" (Doleschal and Schmid 2001, 256). Similarly, generic masculine forms are documented in the cases of "gender languages" (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001, 5), such as Serbian, Polish, French, German, Greek, Russian, Czech, and Romanian, as well as in languages with no "gender noun class," such as English or Danish, and in languages that

[2] See http://hebrew-academy.huji.ac.il/question3.html.

show no gender distinctions in the pronominal system, such as Orya (Hellinger and Bußmann 2001). Note again that, unlike the general focus in comparative literature on grammatical gender, lexical gender, and referential gender, my focal point is the relationship between the cultural gender of the speakers and the grammatical gender that is prevalent in their speech.

My ethnographic exploration, which included observing the practices and collecting women's interpretations of their own speech style, revealed that female Hebrew and Arabic speakers in Israel not only use masculine talk as a general rule but in fact actively avoid feminine grammatical forms (hereafter *feminine talk*). This is the case especially in reference to a generic person or a mixed-gender audience, but it is also common in self-references. Within this normative context, when feminine grammatical forms are used as generic or as gender inclusive, they are experienced by speakers and listeners alike as offensive. As I show later on in detail, feminine talk sparks resistance, which ranges from irritation, through ridicule, to explicit objection. Put simply, to most members of either speech community, feminine talk sounds wrong and masculine talk sounds right, regardless of any objective discrepancies.

Jane Hill (1998) has used the concept of linguistic order in the context of race relations in the United States to argue that the popular mocking of Puerto Ricans' spoken English—their alleged inability to meet the standards of "correct" language—serves as an important mechanism of their racialization. Following her lead, I will use the understanding that the collective ear for correct speech can serve as a mechanism of exclusion/inclusion in the public cultural sphere to interpret masculine and feminine talk as practices of obeying and disobeying the linguistic order. I will argue that what makes feminine talk disorderly (I refer specifically here to feminine talk that is used in a generic sense) is that it implies an attempt to declassify the feminine grammatical gender from its marked position and consequently to challenge the hegemonic position of the male gender. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1989) and treating language as a quintessential arena of symbolic power, I regard the normative classification of masculine as unmarked and feminine as marked as an objectification of male hegemony. In view of Bourdieu's argument that "symbolic relations of power tend to reproduce and to reinforce the power relations that constitute the structure of social space" (1989, 21), I contend that attempts to use feminine talk as generic comprise instances of "symbolic struggle for the production of common sense or, more precisely, for the monopoly over legitimate naming" (21). Yet notwithstanding its conservative effect, women's masculine talk bears complex and possibly

contradictory symbolic implications. While it may be interpreted as active participation in women's own subordination or even silencing, it also can be seen as a form of appropriating the language of domination, hence facilitating participation rather than producing exclusion.

Importantly, the diminution of the feminine (grammatical) gender does not imply any automatic elimination of women from the community of speakers. In fact, as I show shortly, women are active participants in both speech communities. Moreover, their use of masculine talk does not seem to unsettle their sense of femininity. Instead, masculine talk may be described as a lack of syntactic agreement, to borrow a linguistic concept, between the speakers' cultural gender and the grammatical gender most prevalent in their speech. Here some clarification of terminology is called for, since the uses of gender in cultural analysis are usually broader than in linguistic analysis. The constructionist approach, which I adopt, rejects a dichotomous vision of gender and power. It understands femininity and masculinity as mutually informing rather than mutually exclusive and acknowledges multiple articulations among women, men, masculinity, femininity, power, and disempowerment. According to this framework, it is possible to distinguish between women, as actors and as a conceptual category, and the female gender. Women, as a political category, are created and recreated within particular regimes of gender power, and language plays an important role in this ongoing process. The female gender is analytically distinguishable from women even though it is embodied by women actors and invested in women as a conceptual category. A vivid indication of this distinction, again, is found in the very phenomenon of female speakers using masculine grammatical forms without feeling that this in any way impairs their feminine identity.

Women and the female gender (or men and the male gender), then, are distinct constructs. However, they are also mutually informing. For one thing, the degree to which gender is at all noticeable is negatively correlated with power; the gender of the powerful generally tends to be less obvious than that of the marginalized. As with other forms of cultural hegemony (notably, whiteness or ethnicity), the male gender is all too often invisible to the participants or at least regarded as irrelevant. At the same time, the female gender's tendency to protrude, to be marked, reflects women's subordinate or marginalized position. Women therefore can be said to be gendered in a manner structurally similar to the racialization of ethnic minorities: they tend to be construed through their difference. Finally, despite the firm positioning of male and female within long-standing structures of power, gender is not static or monolithic. Therefore, women are gendered not inherently but as a result of historical

context. In the case of masculine talk, the distinction between women and the female gender opens an analytical space that is necessary in order to assess the dual potential of the phenomenon. On the basis of this distinction, I will argue that masculine talk represents the exclusion of the female gender from the public linguistic space, even while women actors are allowed in. The conditioning of the inclusion of women as actors on the subordination of their gender reflects the limits of their participation in cultural production.

This article begins with a description of masculine talk, accompanied by the relevant features of the linguistic habitus in Hebrew and Arabic and by the women's interpretations of their own speech style. The main finding that emerges in the description is the existence of implied but very strong prohibition against generic female talk. The discussion then addresses the respective symbolic meanings of masculine and feminine talk, and the article ends with a note on the complex potential of gendered speech activities to oppress and empower women.

Masculine talk: Description of the phenomenon

Gender is inherent in the structure of Arabic and Hebrew. Nouns are either feminine or masculine, and adjectives, verbs, pronouns, and inflected prepositions show agreement with the gender of the noun. Masculine morphology is generally considered unmarked, and feminine morphology marked (Hachimi 2001; Tobin 2001). This section describes the phenomenon of masculine talk in each respective linguistic community and outlines the broader linguistic habitus in which it occurs. *Habitus*, according to Bourdieu, refers to "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception" (1977, 86). I treat the accepted classification of the masculine gender as unmarked as one such scheme of perception and conception, and the spontaneous enactment of masculine talk in the daily speech of women as an action within this subjective, but not individual, system of internalized structures. The cumulative effect of masculine talk, on the one hand, and women's persistent refraining from using feminine talk, on the other, is a form of objectification and apperception of male hegemony.

As mentioned, female speakers are largely unaware of their own speech style, which poses a methodological challenge when one investigates the diverse meanings of the phenomenon. To overcome that, I pay particular

attention to speech incidents that mark the boundaries of normative practice, namely, the relatively few instances in which speakers veer away from masculine talk. In Hebrew, most shifts from masculine to feminine forms tended to occur when speakers were talking in the first person. These shifts represented a move from generic to concrete language in the sense that the speaker seemed suddenly to notice the specific person she was referring to, which made masculine language sound off key. In Arabic, occasional interspersing of feminine forms in sequences of masculine talk usually occurred in the second person, and the contexts in which they occurred were less systematic. Nevertheless, the analysis of particular examples will show that in both languages spontaneous shifts from masculine to feminine comprise moments of unexpected, though fleeting, awareness that masculine talk somehow discords with the gender of the speakers or referents. Finally, some women used feminine talk deliberately. Such cases are quite rare but very pertinent to the phenomenon at hand. These examples are discussed in the next section.

Data for this article were collected during a total of sixty hours of targeted observations, which were conducted by two research assistants—one native Hebrew speaker and one native Arabic speaker. They documented the casual discourse of women in a variety of settings and demographic subgroups inside Israel. Examples of all-women settings were group sessions in a psychodynamic training program, pregnancy ultrasound checks, all-women teachers' meetings, informal political discussions, and social gatherings. The mixed-gender settings in which masculine talk was documented were also very diverse, from university classes to workplace conversations to shopping malls and social gatherings.[3] This supplemented my own continuous observations over several years of anthropological research among Israeli Palestinians (I did fieldwork with Palestinians in two communities inside Israel in 1993–94 and again in 1997–99) as well as through my routine participation in my native Israeli-Jewish culture. It is noteworthy that my own awareness of Hebrew masculine talk emerged only after I reached adulthood, and it developed together with my growing involvement in feminist activism in my twenties. With respect to Arabic, while I was vividly aware of masculine talk during fieldwork, the full range of the phenomenon, as detailed below, became clear to me only through subsequent observations that were devised especially for this project.

[3] For more reports on masculine talk among Hebrew-speaking women who relate their experiences during gynecological examinations, see Weinberg (2000).

Hebrew speech practices and the linguistic habitus

Hebrew speakers characteristically use the masculine pronoun *you♂* (*ata*) to make personal and general statements.[4] Miri Horvitz (1999) calls this the "pseudo second person," noting its hybrid character. Although morphologically it is the second person, semantically it designates the first person or the indefinite. According to Horvitz, when used as a pseudo second person, the Hebrew *ata,* similar to the English *you*, may assume three meanings depending on the context. It may express solidarity in that conveying a personal experience or opinion in the second person implies that the addressee could potentially share such an experience or opinion. In communicating a highly personal content, the second person may be used to avoid excessive emotionality and therefore connotes emotional restraint. Finally, it may be used as an indefinite pronoun. In this article I offer different interpretations that take power relations into account. For now, suffice it to note, following Horvitz's characterization of the disjunction between the morphological and semantic components of *ata,* that such pronoun use represents a norm of distancing self-expressions and a strong preference to relate personal opinions, emotions, and experiences to a generalized ego.

To Horvitz, like most women I encountered in my research, when *ata* (you♂) is used as pseudo second person, it applies to males and females alike, even though it is always in masculine inflection, because the male gender is unmarked. The feminine *at* (you♀), however, is marked and therefore cannot be used among males and in fact, as shown below, is usually avoided among women as well. Contrary to this understanding, my treatment of language as a major symbolic instrument in the production and reproduction of power structures demands problematization of the alleged neutrality of the unmarked masculine form. I therefore suggest that female speakers who use the second person *ata* (you♂) as a generalized ego perform a *double distancing*, or replacement of the person and of the gender. The gender replacement, moreover, occurs much more frequently than that of the person because it applies to pronouns and verbs as well. Therefore, while male speakers would use the same (masculine) verb form whether they said "I" or "you," female speakers exercise a gender distancing, in addition to pronoun use, when they use masculine verb forms.

[4] Masculine talk also occurs as part of linguistic gender reversals (male to female and female to male) that communicate intimacy, indulgent playfulness, or sensuality (Tobin 2001). In Hebrew, such forms of gender reversals differ from the practices that I discuss here in that they tend to be deliberate and theatrical.

For the speakers themselves it is important to emphasize that masculine talk is spontaneous and largely unproblematic. It concerns a wide variety of interpersonal situations and conversational topics. Here are two characteristic examples. An Israeli college lecturer who had obtained a doctorate in modern British history from Oxford explained that she started writing on Israeli society because she could not keep up her professional British connections. She said (example 1), “Now, with the home and the family, you♂ get invited to present at conferences but you♂ can’t♂ travel that easily anymore, so you♂ change♂ the topic . . . you♂ give up♂, you have♂ to give up the career” (ata muzman lehatsig beknasim aval ata kvar lo yakhol liso’a bekalut, az ata meshane et hanose . . . ata mevater, ata mukhrah levater ʾal ha-kariera).[5] The other example is a thirty-four-year-old fashion designer who explained why she had become self-employed. She said (2), “One day you♂ suddenly realize♂ that you♂ are♂ a mother and all you♂ wish♂ to do is stay home with the children” (Yom eḥad ata pitʿom tofes sheʿata ima ve-kol ma sheʿata rotse ze lehishaʿer babayit ʾim hayladim).[6]

Such an automatic, routine way of using masculine form occurs across a wide range of ages, ethnicities, and educational groups. Women use masculine language whether they converse on general topics or talk about utterly personal and feminine subjects, such as their birthing, nursing, and mothering experiences. It is the default option of the majority of female speakers, so much so that any use of the feminine becomes conspicuous and provokes resistance, as I show below.

Alongside the masculine *you♂*, which is the most common element of masculine talk, female Hebrew speakers also occasionally express themselves in the masculine through the first person, singular and plural. Since first-person Hebrew pronouns themselves are gender neutral, the grammatical gender is expressed through the inflection of verbs, nouns, and gerunds. For example, in a meeting of the Knesset (Israeli parliament) Committee for the Promotion of the Status of Woman in March 2004, which was dedicated to the appropriate forms of address of mixed-gender audiences, the representative of the Hebrew Language Academy strenuously opposed attempts to introduce female forms of address on the grounds that it would go against the internal structure of the language. She gave an example (3): “When I talk about giving birth, I say ‘when giving birth♂’ (*ksheyoldim*) [masc. pl.]. I can’t say ‘when giving birth♀’ (*ksheyoldot*) [fem. pl.]. You will agree with me that these forms are not

[5] Quote from an informal conversation in Tel Aviv, 1998.

[6] Quote from an informal conversation in Keisaria, 1998.

masculine, they are unmarked. It is true that historically these were masculine forms, but essentially they are forms that include the female. When I say 'writing♀' (*kotvot*) [fem. pl.] I exclude you [the addressee was a man], but when I say 'writing♂' (*kotvim*) [masc. pl.] I don't exclude myself. I'm in there. I'm telling you as a woman that it doesn't disturb me."[7] Finally, female speakers use also the first person singular in masculine inflection, but this seems to be less prevalent than other masculine forms. When they find themselves using the first person singular in masculine inflection, women usually adjust it to feminine inflection after one or two occurrences. Throughout my observations, women who used the first person masculine tended to adjust the verb or noun forms to feminine after a few occurrences. For example, in a commentary on the split ballot system in Israeli elections, a female student said (4), "I as a voter♂ am not forced♂ to make a connection between the prime minister♂ whom I vote♀ for and the platform of his party" (Ani ke-matsbi'a lo ḥayav likshor bein rosh ha-memshala sheʿani matsbi'āh 'avuro, ve-hamatsa' shel hamiflaga shelo).[8] Similar shifts from masculine to feminine in verbs were consistent throughout the observations. In a sense, the masculine first person singular thereby marks the boundaries of the phenomenon of masculine talk in that, when they use it, female speakers are more likely to notice the lack of syntactic agreement between their cultural gender and the grammatical gender with which they refer to themselves. Different from the second person, which is hybridized across genders (men too use the second person *you*♂ [*ata*] to communicate personal statements), the morphology and semantics of the first person are consistent, except in the case of female speakers. It is in those cases that the distancing effect sometimes ceases to be transparent, and women consequently adjust by switching to feminine grammatical forms.

Arabic speech practices and the linguistic habitus

In Palestinian Arabic, too, the communication of personal opinions and emotions habitually involves grammatical distancing. Arabic speakers consistently use the third person singular. People commonly say *one* (*al-waḥad*), instead of *I*, when relating their thoughts, opinions, or feelings. Used in this way, the third person or the term *one* is nearly invariably masculine, which again implies a double distancing practice in the case of

[7] Protocol #8142 of the Knesset Committee for the Promotion of the Status of Woman, January 14, 2004.

[8] Quote from a class taught by the author in Tel Aviv, 1998.

female speakers. Another tendency, somewhat less prevalent, of both male and female speakers is to use the first person plural to express personal feelings or opinions. Contrary to the third person singular, however, the plural form of past- and future-tense verbs is gender-inclusive. For example, when asked in a private interview to assess the benefits she derived from a business training course for low-income women, a Christian Israeli Palestinian participant in her late forties answered in the plural: "We benefited greatly" (*istafadna kthīr*). The popular tendency to talk in either the third person singular or the first person plural accords with descriptions from other Arabic-speaking populations. For example, Saba Mahmood (2001), who studied the women's mosque movement in Cairo, cites a woman explaining how she had taught herself to feel shy as part of her acquisition of Islamic virtues. She said, "It means making oneself♂ shy, even if it means creating it" (ya'ni ya Saba, ya'mil nafsuhu yitkisif ḥatta lau ṣan'ati; 213). In spoken Moroccan Arabic, likewise, the masculine third person commonly replaces the first person. According to Fatima Sadiqi (2003, 66), this is a corollary of local constructions of the self as collective or embedded in social relations, constructions that are accompanied, moreover, by deliberate avoidance of the first person pronoun.

Along with the habit of using the third person singular, which is the most common practice, women over a very wide age range also tend to use the first person masculine singular form. For example, an eighty-year-old Muslim woman from Nazareth answered her neighbor's greeting, "How have you been?" with (5) "Very poorly♂ lately; I don't know♂ what it is—my health is not good" (Wallah ta'bān, mush 'aref shu ṣāybni, ṣaḥti mish 'am bitsā'idni).[9] The next example (6) is from a conversation between two Bedouin women from Galilee who were looking through clothes in a store:

a) Maha: 'Abir, come♀ look♀ at this pair of trousers, isn't it nice? ('Abīr t'āli shufi ma-ḥla il-banaṭlīn hōn).

b) 'Abir: It is nice alright but too tight (mazbūt ḥilwāt bas kthīr tṣamood [last word said in Hebrew]).

c) Maha: You♂ always dwell♂ on insignificant details (Dāiman inte bit'alleq 'ala ashyā' tāfha).

d) 'Abir: It is better that I dwell [on such details] than afterwards at home they send you♂ back to change♂ after you've bought♂ the trousers (A'alleq ana, aḥsan min yiraj'ūk fi-lbeit itbaddel ba'ed ma-shtareit ilbanṭalōn).

[9] Quote from a casual conversation during participant observation in Nazareth, 2002.

e) Maha: We buy what we want, it's none of their business (iḥna mnishtri shu bidna, shu khaṣṣhom henni).[10]

This exchange actually starts with two successive feminine forms (in direct address). The following masculine forms, however, are used first in a direct address, referring in the masculine to an actual woman (sentence *c*, pronoun and verb), and later in a generalized sense, referring to the speaker herself (sentence *d*, pronominal suffix). Here the displacement of grammatical gender is intensified by the gendered content of the conversation, namely, assessing the moral propriety of women's fashionable clothing. Another example (7) is taken from a domestic conversation between women in a large community in the Triangle region (center of Israel), featuring a Muslim mother, Naram, her three-year-old daughter Layān, her sister-in-law Ahlām, and their (female) guest Samāher, who as my research assistant documented the conversation:

a) Naram: Come♂, Layān darling, eat♂, the food is very tasty, look♂ how nicely Samāher is eating♀ (ta'āl, mama Layān, kol, ilʿakel kthīr zāki, shuf khalto Samāher 'am btakol kthīr).

b) Layān: I'm very hungry♂, I'm coming in a minute (ana ju'ān kthīr, ukhra shway bāji ākol).

c) Naram (talking to Samāher): What do you♂ think, ya Samāher, is the food good? (shu raʿyak, ya Samāher, ilʿakel zāki?). [Next Ahlām criticizes Naram for using kosher meat, which she considers less tasty.]

d) Ahlam: "Look♂ at your♂ daughter, she doesn't want♂ to eat, and poor♂ Samāher only eats♀ because she is shy around you♂" (Shūf bintak, mush qābel yākol, wa-Samāher maskīn btakol hyyan minnak).[11] [Samāher, the guest and research assistant, evaluated the atmosphere between the two sisters-in-law during that visit as tense.]

In this example we encounter a variety of masculine forms used in reference to actual women and girls. The first person masculine is used in sentence *b* ("I'm hungry"). The second person masculine is used in sentences *a* ("come," "eat," "look"), *c* ("you think"), and *d* ("look," "your daughter"). Finally, the third person masculine is used in sentence *d* ("he doesn't want to eat," "poor"). This narrative was somewhat exceptional among the thirty-odd hours of documented talk of Arabic-speaking women. It featured persistent use of the masculine form, both in direct address and with reference to actual individuals. In the sequence cited here, this pattern changed into feminine address twice (sentences *a*

[10] Quote from a casual conversation during participant observation in Tiv'on, 2002.

[11] Quote from a casual conversation during participant observation in the Triangle area, 2002.

and *d*), both times in reference to an actual third person ("Samāher is eating♀"). The second time (sentence *d*, "poor♂ Samāher is eating♀"), the shift from masculine to feminine was particularly abrupt, as the feminine verb *eating*♀ followed the masculine adjective *poor*♂ directly. Interestingly, the generic third person masculine, which is the most popular form of male talk in vernacular Palestinian Arabic inside Israel, does not feature in this sequence.

For the most part, the third person masculine, like the plural, tends to be used for generalized statements. The first and second person masculine may be used in either generalized statements or direct address, and in the latter case they tend to communicate varying degrees of intimacy. Unlike the Hebrew case, the observations of Arabic speakers revealed no consistent pattern in the occasional shifts to feminine forms. Yet some of the cases do seem to support my argument that occasional feminine exceptions within sequences of masculine talk represent momentary awareness of the otherwise transparent unmarked masculine. In the example above, the shift from masculine to feminine referred to the one person who was not a member of that domestic group. In this situation, masculine talk connoted (tense) intimacy, and Samāher was let in only partly. Similarly, we will see breaches in the flow of masculine talk in examples 9 and 10 below, which occurred when women were asked to reflect on their speech style.

A few general comments are in place to round off this outline of the linguistic habitus. Since the phenomenon examined here belongs specifically to speech practices, it is important to mention that both Hebrew and Arabic have strong oral traditions. In Arabic in particular, scholars have noted the immense importance related to the spoken word (Messick 1993; Sa'ar 2000, chap. 5; Sadiqi 2003, 43). Second, Arabic is a language of multiple dialects. Although in the Palestinian context all dialects are perfectly intelligible to everyone, local discourse regards them as important markers of social distinction. As is exemplified in the next section, on more than one occasion women related their masculine talk to their dialect and rejected my own emphasis on gender reversal. Finally, it is relevant to mention that, in addition to the daily speech practices in various colloquial dialects, instances of a seeming lack of gender agreement exist in Modern Standard Arabic (Hachimi 2001). Of particular interest are active participles such as *ḥāmel* (pregnant woman), *ʿāqer* (barren woman), or *ʿānes* (old maid), which are lexically female and yet grammatically masculine.[12]

In sum, in Arabic and Hebrew alike, female speakers are heavily inclined

[12] For elaborate explanations of such cases in Modern Standard Arabic, see Sadiqi (2003), 109–10.

to use masculine forms when they talk. The semantic space is considerably gendered, and language, in all its aspects, is decisively androcentric (see Sadiqi 2003). Paraphrasing Ingrid Gogolin’s *monolingual habitus*, a term she proposes for mechanisms of exclusion in multiethnic classrooms, it is possible to say that Arabic and Hebrew speakers in Israel live in a *masculingual habitus*. Masculine speech represents what Gogolin calls “the basic and deep-seated obsession” that the male form “is the one and only, overall, forever and always valid normality” (1997, 4). The concept of *habitus*, in Bourdieu’s (1977) sense of a precondition for people to act routinely, brings forth the possibility that masculine self-reference by female speakers is a form of acting out the hegemonic mental structures of their cultures. At the same time, Bourdieu’s emphasis on practical knowledge implies that people are not passive executors of hegemonic norms but instead are strategizing actors who negotiate knowledge and meaning within pregiven and limiting structures. Within this dialectical framework, I turn to the semiotics of masculine talk, first presenting the women’s own explanations of their talking style and then reviewing these within the larger context of symbolic power.

The semiotics of masculine talk

Having dwelt on the unprompted uses of feminine forms by speakers whose normative speech is masculine, I now turn to examine some explicit explanations that women offer for the practice of masculine talk. Most of the examples below were responses to my own broaching of the subject to speakers. Reactions ranged from angry incomprehension to irritation and defensiveness to elaborate rational explanations. As is vividly expressed in some of these accounts, such emotional overtones suggest that certain usages of feminine forms violate a serious, albeit unspoken prohibition. Also presented below are some cases of deliberate feminine talk by women who are themselves preoccupied by what they regard as linguistic sexism.

Women’s interpretations of their own speaking practices

’Anat, a Hebrew-speaking hairdresser who was asked why she talked in the masculine in her casual conversations with clients, said that this was her way to signal that she did not wish to get too personal. Ronit, a social worker, went into a lengthy psychological explanation of her relationship with her father. Interestingly, this woman, like many others, continued talking in the masculine throughout her explanation. Several women, when asked about their speech pattern, did not understand what was to be explained, either because they remained unaware of it even after their

speech style was brought up or because they could not see it as an issue that required explanation. Still others said that they were in fact very sensitive to gender discrimination but that either they were not aware of their own talking style or they did not feel that they could change it. More than one woman said, "I can't fight on all fronts."

ʾIdit, a twenty-eight-year-old Hebrew-speaking woman, was a project coordinator in a marketing research institute where I worked as a group facilitator. One of her assignments was to prepare guidelines for facilitators of focus groups. In one instance, as we went over some guidelines she had prepared for a focus group of women designed to test a cosmetic product, I pointed out to her that it was written in the masculine throughout. She accepted the correction and said that it was "eating her up" that she could not bring herself to write an entire document in the feminine. She usually made a point of going over the guidelines, she said, despite the heavy workload, to make sure that the text was not all in the masculine, and still she did not always succeed. When asked why she found it so difficult she said (8):

> It makes me feel uncomfortable. I get reactions. Yoram (a male coworker), for example, teases me with nasty little comments. It is also a matter of how it sounds in your ear♂ [*eikh sheze nishmaʾ lekha baʿozen*—here she was already using the masculine possessive adjective *your*♂]. Sometimes I insist. There are things that I really insist on, but it is disturbing to people. I'm actually quite a strict feminist in certain matters. . . . Sometimes, the fierce resistance that talking in the feminine arouses makes me wonder whether this is the right war to fight [*haʿim zo ha-milḥama hanekhona*]. There are so many important things that need fighting for, and language is so central in shaping the conception of self [here she mentioned having read Ludwig Wittgenstein] that this war is just too difficult. . . . It is an internal struggle. It's pretty horrible.[13]

Finally, Ruti, an art teacher in an elementary school, told of an all-women teachers' meeting in which the participants regularly spoke in the masculine. Her suggestion that they switch to the feminine was irritably dismissed with comments such as "Here comes the feminist."

Responses from Arabic speakers were similar. Many women who were asked why they spoke in the masculine responded with incomprehension, with denial, or by skirting the question about gender and treating it as if it were about their dialect. When Samāher asked the two Bedouin women

[13] Quote from a casual conversation in Tel Aviv, 1999.

who were discussing women's clothes why they spoke in the masculine, they at first did not understand what she meant. When she repeated the sentences she had heard them say, they explained to her that this was part of the Bedouin dialect, which was totally different from Samāher's Nazareth dialect. Similarly, a Christian woman in her twenties who was using male talk to complain about her work pressures as she came to pick up her child from day care was vexed by Samāher's queries. The first sentence in the following example (9) is her original masculine utterance, and the second and third sentences are her responses to the query:

a) I don't know♂, one♂ rushes♂ and rushes♂ and doesn't manage♂ (wallah il-wāḥad mush 'āref, burkuḍ, burkuḍ, wi-ma byilḥaq).

b) [In response to the query] What is it with you♀? It's not true, I don't know♂ where you get♂ this talk from (shu ma-lek inti? Mush mazbūṭ mush 'āref min wein jāyeb ha-lḥaki).

c) All right, so I'm not from here, but I speak pretty much the same dialect as you people (mazbūṭ ʿana mush min yāfa, bas baḥki nafsi-l-lahje ta'it il-balad).

This woman took the comment as criticism of her being an outsider with a dialect treated by locals as less refined than their own. Like the first two women, she in fact ignored or denied the specific gender aspect. A slightly different response by a thirty-two-year-old Muslim woman again related the phenomenon to the multiplicity of Arabic dialects. Surprised, she said (10), "What do I know♂? This is what we've been used to. The truth is that I don't always pay attention to myself" (ʿana 'āref? Heiki t'awwadna. Ilmaḍbūt mush dāyman bantbeh 'ala nafsi). . . . I don't know♂ what to say exactly. It's as if you♀ learn a language, and you♀ learn it with all its dialects (Mush 'āref shu aqūl-lek bi-ḍḍabt. Betit'allami il-luga, betit'allamīha bikul lahjātha).[14] Note that in both examples 9 and 10 the sequence of masculine forms was interrupted, although in different orders. While in example 9 the speaker opened in the feminine but then went back to masculine, in example 10 the speaker shifted from masculine to feminine as her explanation evolved. Indeed, that speaker was less defensive about her masculine talk.

In the few cases where Arab women did not deny or sidestep the subject, their responses were actually very straightforward. Two teenage Christian girls who were lamenting their miserable lives compared with what they watched in their favorite soap opera burst into laughter when asked why they talked in the masculine (11): "Here one♂ is always afraid♂, and feels besieged♂ and incapable♂ of relaxing♂" (il-wāḥad hōn dāyman khāyef

[14] Quote from a casual conversation during participant observation in Haifa, 2002.

wi-zayi-l-muḥaṣar, mush ʾāref yukhed rāḥto bi-shi).[15] Then they said, "Because the man is the ruler of this society, that's why we talk in his language." Similarly, three Muslim university students explained their masculine speech style, saying that they simply were used to this style, that it was very common, and that it indicated that they lived in a patriarchal society (*mujtamaʾ dhukūry*). Alternatively, several younger Arab girls explained their masculine talk as a form of indulgence (*batdallaʾ, zanākha*).

Masculine talk and the active avoidance of feminine talk

It is fairly clear that women's tendency to talk about themselves in the masculine is largely subconscious. Even the few who said that masculine talk echoed male domination or who came up with instant and elaborate psychological explanations continued to use it, unaware of their own actions. Additionally, most of those who are made aware of the phenomenon do not necessarily find it significant or problematic. However, what many do find disturbing is the reverse. Like ʾIdit and Ruti, who testified that when they spoke in the feminine they got angry reactions, I too encounter strong, even aggressive reactions from men and women to my generalized use of feminine linguistic forms. The following comment by a (male) media critic on the insistence of feminist radio broadcaster Meirav Mikhaʿeli to talk in the feminine expresses the intensity of this sense of disruption: "The first time it sounds like an irritating mistake. The second time you understand♂ (that is, understand♀) that it is systematic, and then it simply sounds ridiculous. The third time it starts sounding like a feminist nag. The tenth time you♀ start♀ internalizing the satirical provocative message. True, it is ridiculous to address men in the feminine, but it is no less ridiculous to address women in the masculine. . . . We must♀ admit that it is more graceful than burning bras" (Oshri 2005, 16a; translation mine). Certainly, feminine forms are acceptable when used in direct address and in reference to specific individuals (the speaker herself through first person feminine forms or to a particular addressee). It is their use as a generalized address that is considered provocative. Feminine talk provokes resistance when it is used to address a mixed-gender audience or even a crowd of women only, unless they are addressed as women; it likewise sounds wrong when used in reference to an anonymous crowd or a generalized person (the *patient*, the *child*, the *old person*, and the like).

The resistance to deliberate feminine talk and the speakers' own feelings that they are waging a war suggest that such talk is a form of symbolic struggle. The struggle, more specifically, is to remove the feminine form

[15] Quote from a casual conversation during participant observation in Nazareth, 2002.

from its marked position and to establish it as parallel to the unmarked masculine form. As such, feminine talk seems to pose a threat to the linguistic order. This possibility is indirectly supported by studies in cognitive linguistics (Dominguez and Segui 1999; Sicuro Corrêa, Almeida, and Sobrino Porto 2004) that show how the classification of inflected forms as marked or unmarked affects the ways they are stored in the mental lexicon of members of a speech community. The irritable responses of speakers to the reclassifications of feminine forms as unmarked may reflect a sense that a deep-seated mental order has been disrupted. The avoidance of generalized feminine language therefore reflects internalized monitoring of women's speech, which helps preserve the masculine domination of public linguistic space and, by extension, cultural space. The prohibition, notably, is on the inclusion in the public linguistic domain of the female gender rather than of women. As mentioned in the introduction, it is analytically possible to distinguish women as actors and as a cultural category from the female gender as a symbolic category, despite the centrality of the bodies and sexualities of the former in the construction of the latter.

The norm that allows female forms as marked but rejects them as unmarked implies that women are accepted in the public cultural domain as long as their classification remains a subcategory. Intriguingly, the actors themselves do not necessarily feel that they are being subordinated or discriminated against. The representative of the Hebrew Language Academy, who was quoted above explaining that she could not use the feminine gerund to say "when giving birth♀," said the following during the same discussion: "When I drive with my daughter and tell her, 'Today we♂ are going♂ to visit someone♂' (*hayom anaḥnu holkhim levaker mishehu*), there's no problem with this. You can't say that I have discriminated against myself and my daughter in this sentence." In her manner, in the content of her argument, and in her official position as gatekeeper, this speaker conveyed self-assured authority. In her own words, she felt wholly comfortable with the construction of the male form as unmarked, and she rejected the possibility that it might have political implications. Yet the linguistic norm does not go entirely unchallenged. In that particular discussion by a legislative committee on proper address to a mixed-gender audience, the assertion that the male form is neutral was supported by another female participant but strongly opposed by four others, including one male member of the Knesset who initiated and cochaired the discussion. These people voiced the position that the status of masculine forms as unmarked generates sexist effects. In the case of Arabic, documented struggles against sexist language date back to the seventh century.

Atiqa Hachimi (2001, 47) mentions a case of Arab women who protested to the prophet Muhammad against the use of masculine gender verses in the Koran when the referents were men and women.

To reiterate, the focus of this article is the spontaneous use of masculine language by female Hebrew and Arabic speakers rather than the issue of formally regulated speech. However, as shown in the last example, since the latter aspect of gendered language is more readily debated in local settings and concomitantly less invisible to members of the respective speech communities, it can offer a good vantage point from which to consider the complex implications of the phenomenon under discussion. On the one hand, masculine self-references by female speakers continuously reinforce the exclusion of the female gender from positions of generic linguistic representation. On the other hand, women who practice such seemingly exclusionary practices emerge as active, strong-minded, and influential participants in the speech community.

The complex potential of speech practices

According to the constructionist approach, "gender is not an attribute of individuals but a way of making sense of transactions" (Crawford 1995, 12). This was the initial theoretical position that facilitated my distinction, throughout this article, between women and the female gender. If gender is something people do rather than have, then the question is, What gender are women doing who speak in the masculine? One possibility is that they are doing masculinity. In that case, considering that they obviously do not leave their femininity outside their linguistic interactions (as we have seen, masculine talk is often applied to distinctly female content), they may actually be transforming the practical meaning of masculinity and making it more inclusive. This interpretation sees masculine talk as a form of subtle but meaningful change in the gender division of symbolic power. Conversely, if by adopting masculine forms female speakers are doing femininity, they then continuously enact the construction of femininity as subordinate and derivative. According to this interpretation, masculine self-references are a form of self-deprecation that inevitably perpetuates women's oppression.

I now turn to the first interpretation. It was not surprising that some local women to whom I presented my thesis did not accept that their masculine talk reflected internalized oppression. One plausible reason for this is that they themselves did not experience direct silencing. On the contrary, many of them were outspoken, self-assured, and linguistically eloquent. Some even interpreted their use of masculine language as en-

abling rather than encumbering. Since they saw the generalized masculine ego as neutral, despite its male form, they regarded it as a cultural category broader than the gendered one and therefore one that allowed them fuller cultural participation. Such local interpretations find an echo in feminist literature on gender and language. Feminist anthropologists and sociolinguists, stressing the complex and dynamic aspect of power relations, have paid close attention to informal power, including women's contesting, resisting, and subverting official forms of cultural domination (see, e.g., Gal 1991, 1995; Sa'ar 2006). Since the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) categorically tend to be subtle and ambiguous, they may be subversive even when seeming to reinforce the hegemonic facade. For example, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986), who studied Bedouin women in the Sinai desert, read dissenting content in their poetry, which was made possible precisely because the genre itself was marginal. Conversely, Kira Hall's (1995) study of women telephone sex workers in California documents a case in which, while the content is reproductive, the genre is infused with meanings of empowerment. Although the workers of "fantasy phone lines" (Hall 1995) used the most stereotypical forms of submissive women's speech, they regarded their enterprise as liberating, since it gave them control of their work and of their lives. Following this line of thinking, a case could be made for reading subversive meanings into the masculine talk of female Arabic and Hebrew speakers. As one of my colleagues insisted, "Feminine talk reminds me of the girls-only games I played as a child; it's a ghetto I don't wish to go back to."

Unlike coercive practices of silencing women's voices, masculine talk is a quintessential product of discursive power. It is a path for women's active participation in the community of speakers, at the same time as it maneuvers them to leave part of their subjectivity unarticulated, thereby entrenching them in self-alienation. Power relations, Mahmood (2001, 210) tells us, dominate the subject but also form the conditions of its possibility. The very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she takes on a self-conscious identity and becomes an agent. Judith Butler (1993) has called this the paradox of subjectivation. Speech performances in particular bear an important agentive capacity. Masculine form aside, women speak, communicate, express, and therefore assert themselves as subjects. To stretch this point one step further, it could be argued that it is precisely the distanced nature of masculine talk that facilitates a nonconfrontational form of women's participation. ʾAnat, the Hebrew-speaking hairdresser, said, "Talking in the masculine frames the conversation as more general and less personal." In a similar vein, Amira, a forty-five-year-old Arabic

speaker, said when asked to reflect on her masculine talk, “It is easier to express♂ oneself♂ in the masculine” (lama byihki ilwāhad ʾala hālo bilugat il-mudhakkar biyʾabber ʾan hālo akthar). Women speaking in the masculine, then, may have more leeway to assert themselves without coming across as being dangerous. In a male-dominated environment that is potentially hostile to women’s claims for presence and participation, masculine talk may well be interpreted as an effective mitigating mechanism.

Still, even if masculine talk facilitates the cultural representation of women, through blending them into the generalized male ego, it can hardly be seen as subversive. At best it represents a limited agentive capacity. It is likely that the duality whereby women feel confident in language and discourse but persistently eschew talking in the feminine is connected to their deeply ambivalent position in both cultures. Notwithstanding the subtle gains enumerated above, the scope and determination of women’s avoidance of feminine talk lend strong support to the interpretation that masculine self-references produce silencing and subconscious alienation. For one, despite the insistence of some local interlocutors, the generalized male ego is not neutral (e.g., Korsmeyer 1978; Irigaray 1993). In fact, its very construction as neutral is a corollary of male hegemony, which deems the male gender transparent. Another factor that adds to the confusion is the salience of women as social and cultural participants. To be sure, the disapproval of feminine talk does not mean a direct silencing of women. It represents, rather, the exclusion of the female gender from the public linguistic space. To a degree, the ostensibly confident and articulate presence of women in public discourse camouflages the exclusion of their gender. By the same token, the male gender remains prominent even when men are marginal or absent, as in the case of women who communicate among themselves in the masculine. To put it metaphorically, the admission of women’s physical bodies into the symbolic landscape seems to be conditional on their leaving their grammatical bodies behind.

Speech is never neuter (Irigaray 2002). Women’s masculine talk represents a consciousness formed under male hegemony that subordinates women, among other things, through assigning them a marginal position in the linguistic marketplace (see also Irigaray 1993; Lazreg 1994). As Mary Crawford (1995) insists, gendered talk invariably has a political agenda, whether or not this is deliberate or acknowledged explicitly (see also Cameron 1998b, 950). The routine speech performances described in this article are one aspect of larger processes of what Nadira Shalhoub-Kevorkian has called the female’s “voxicide” (2003, 602). True, masculine talk is seemingly less dramatic than other forms of muting women’s and girls’ voices, such

as paralyzing them with fear under imminent threats of femicide, denying them access to literacy and education, or dismissing what they have to say as stupid. Yet it is precisely the subtle and ordinary nature of women's masculine talk that makes it significant. As mentioned, the stronger the hegemony of men, the more transparent their gender, and vice versa—the weaker the status of women, the more protruding their gender. The female gender tends to be noticed more as the position of women in culture and society gets more marginal. This aspect of gender-power dynamics is crucial for understanding women's active use of masculine language.

In *Borderlands-La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) describes her amazement when she first realized the possibility of the Spanish first person feminine plural pronoun *nosotras* (we♀). Similarly, the powerful sense of embarrassment and the paralysis that accompany women's initial encounters with generalized feminine talk can potentially become an equally powerful experience of liberation. Women who have undergone a process of noticing that the unmarked form is actually gender specific tell of their excitement as they started daring to intersperse feminine forms in their speaking and writing. Michal, a fifty-year-old Hebrew speaker and a self-defined newcomer to feminism, describes her initial uses of generalized feminine language as exciting and tells about her growing confidence in using feminine forms, as she says, "until they have come to pass as natural" in her own eyes. It is therefore plausible that in the male-dominated cultural sphere generalized sayings that use the pronouns *you*♀ or *one*♀ in the feminine, instead of the customary masculine (saying *at* instead of *ata* and *il-wāḥdi* instead of *il-wāḥad*), can assume a performative value, thereby stretching gender reality "outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (Butler 1990, 141). As several authors have asserted, performative acts have constitutive effects on the social environment, effects that are beyond the level of individuals (see, e.g., Austin 1962; Bourdieu 1989; Herzfield 1997). Such utterances defy the cultural diktat that females should either stand out as a subcategory or blend into the background and challenge the taken-for-granted masculine identity of the generalized ego. They indeed justify the resistance that they instigate because they contest the symbolic articulation of the social order at a very elementary level. Generalized feminine talk brings the female gender to the forefront, instead of denying it. It therefore claims cultural public space for women as whole, unalienated subjects.

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