

The voice of others: Identity, alterity and gender normativity among gay men in Israel

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of a slang variety, called *oxtsit*, as it is described and used by a cohort of gay men in Israel. Unlike many previous analyses of gay slang, I argue that the men described do not use the variety to help construct and affirm an alternative gay identity, but rather that they use it as a form of in-group mockery through which normative and nonnormative articulations of Israeli gay male sexuality are delineated. It is suggested that this discussion has implications for sociolinguistic understandings of “groupness” more broadly, and particularly the relationship between macro-level social categories (like “gay”) and individual lived experience. (Gay slang, Israel, vari-directional voicing, identity/alterity)*

INTRODUCTION

In-group lexicons have long been of special interest to sociolinguistic theory because they bring into sharp relief the relationship between language and social structure. Research on gay slang varieties, for example, has demonstrated how certain lexicons can function as anti-languages (Halliday 1976) by providing gay men with a means to build in-group solidarity through the valorization of distinctive cultural practices and thus help them to resist their social marginalization (e.g. Hayes 1981; Manalansan 1995; Leap 1996; Wong & Zhang 2000; Baker 2002; Boellstorff 2004; see also Cameron & Kulick 2003:ch. 4). In this article, I present an analysis of an in-group lexicon, called *oxtsit*, as it is described and used by gay men in Israel. Yet unlike many of the lexicons described previously, I do not argue that *oxtsit* represents a subversive and/or self-affirming variety for the men who use it. Instead, I make use of the concept of VARI-DIRECTIONAL VOICING (Bakhtin 1984; Rampton 1995, 2006; Hill 2008) to suggest that the men use *oxtsit* as a form of mockery (Goffman 1974), which enables them to indirectly index their own gender normativity through the derisive construction of an aberrantly gendered other. In other words, I claim that the men do not use *oxtsit* in order to affirm their affiliation with the cultural formation that *oxtsit* represents,

but rather to ridicule that formation and construct identities for themselves that exist in opposition to it.

My primary goal in arguing this point is to provide an analysis of the social meaning of *oxtšit* that is situated in the contexts within which I observed the variety used. Through this discussion, I also hope to address an issue that is relevant for sociolinguistic theorizing more broadly. What I have in mind here are conceptualizations of “groupness,” and particularly the relationship between macro-social categories (like “gay”) and individuals’ lived experiences. *Oxtšit* is a gay-identified variety. With very few exceptions, it is used and understood exclusively by gay men in gay settings, and its use results in the linguistic construction of a gay persona. Yet, crucially, I argue that the gay persona constructed through *oxtšit* is distinct from the persona with which the variety is affiliated. Rather, I suggest that users of *oxtšit* deploy it as a means to disrupt an ideology of gay homogeneity, a belief in a unified gay male “group,” and to instantiate in its place a culturally salient boundary between distinct articulations of Israeli gay identity. In this respect then, my analysis parallels previous research on IN-GROUP crossing and/or mockery (Johnstone 1999; Chun 2004, 2009; Shankar 2008) and provides additional insight into the ways in which speakers use language to negotiate larger sociodemographic categories and inflect them with local meaning.

O X T Š I T

An Israeli gay lexicon

I was first exposed to *oxtšit* while conducting a larger examination of language and sexuality in Israel (Levon 2010). For that project, I spent more than 500 hours over twelve months as a participant-observer in numerous lesbian and gay activist associations ranging across the Israeli political spectrum, including everything from a centrist political lobby to a queer anarchist group. During this time, I participated as fully as possible in the regular activities of the groups I was observing, which included meetings, discussion sessions, political activities, and social gatherings. I also conducted individual sociolinguistic interviews with fifty-seven group members (twenty-one women; thirty-six men), beginning about halfway through my research period. These informants were all core members of their respective groups from whom I solicited interviews after having gotten to know them through my participant-observation. I selected these particular informants for interviews (who together represent approximately thirty percent of the total number of group members with whom I interacted) in an effort to achieve as balanced a representation as possible of the diversity of lesbian and gay experiences in Israel. In addition to differences in political affiliations, which were the primary focus of my research, informants were also varied in age (ranging from twenty to sixty), region (roughly, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa), ethnicity (*Aškenazi* and *Mizraxi*; see below), relationship/family status, and religion/level of religious observance.

From the moment I began conducting the fieldwork for this project, my informants spoke to me about a particular kind of Israeli gay man called an *oxšā* (pl. *oxšot*), a term original to Hebrew that is most likely derived from the Arabic for “my sister.”¹ As they were always described to me, *oxšot* are young, effeminate gay men of Middle Eastern or North African descent (what are called in Israel *Mizraxim*, lit. ‘Orientals’) who are physically slight, wear makeup and the latest designer clothing, and are obligatorily passive during sex.² In addition to these bodily characteristics, *oxšot* are also notably distinguished by their use of language, which is usually characterized in terms of exaggeratedly high speaking pitch, wide pitch ranges, and high levels of pitch dynamism all laid over a distinct and unique set of lexical items. These lexical items, known collectively as *oxšit*, were in fact the most salient aspect of my informants’ descriptions, mentioned every time as an essential component of the *oxšā* persona.

Because of the frequency with which they were described to me across my informant population, I began to investigate the extent to which *oxšot* exist as a salient persona-type in Israeli society more broadly. I quickly discovered that while all of my lesbian and gay informants were, to varying degrees, familiar with the words of *oxšit*, people not affiliated with the Israeli gay and lesbian “scene” had never heard of *oxšot* nor had any knowledge of their characteristic language style. In this respect then, *oxšit* is a “secret” lexicon whose domain of relevance does not extend beyond certain institutionalized configurations of Israeli lesbian and gay life. Yet unlike some of the other secret gay lexicons described in the literature, *oxšit* is a very restricted code. While Baker (2002), for example, lists over 400 words that make up the Polari lexicon, the most comprehensive list of *oxšit* words I have been able to find contains only twenty-eight entries (see Table 1).³

The words in Table 1 are divided into three sections. These divisions are empirical ones, and reflect the extent to which the words can be reliably categorized as *oxšit* forms. The topmost section contains words that were spontaneously offered to me as examples of *oxšit* by my informants. These are also the words that I myself heard used most often, and can thus be identified as part of the core *oxšit* vocabulary. The middle section, by contrast, contains words that are listed in a published lexicon of *oxšit* (see n. 3) but were never corroborated by my informants (note too that all of the words in the top section also appear in the published lexicon). The status of these words is therefore more peripheral. Finally, the bottom section of Table 1 contains words that are listed in the published lexicon and that I heard used, but that are identical in form and in use to their source forms and are thus perhaps more accurately described as borrowings (question marks in the table refer to source languages and meanings that have been suggested but that I have been unable to verify).

In examining Table 1, it is immediately clear that the majority of the words listed all refer to a restricted set of semantic domains, primarily concerned with issues of feminine gendered practice (e.g. *našat* ‘feminine gay man,’ *koveret* ‘look

TABLE 1. An *oxšit* lexicon.

Term (Origin)	Meaning	Source Meaning
oxša (Arabic)	young, feminine gay man	from <i>my sister</i>
uft (unknown)	ass	unknown
birz (Arabic?)	handsome man	<i>endearment</i> (?)
džondž/žož	penis	<i>penis</i> (?)
harmot/leharim (Hebrew)	talk “oxšit”	<i>elevations, to raise</i>
wedž (Arabic)	face	from <i>face</i>
žarmiž (Turkish?)	amazing	unknown
lexolel (Hebrew)	give oral sex	from <i>play the flute</i>
kobor (Arabic)	big penis	from <i>big</i>
lord (English)	handsome man	<i>lord</i>
našat (Hebrew)	feminine-acting gay men	from <i>feminine</i>
poreax (Hebrew)	beauty (person)	from <i>blossom</i>
koveret (Hebrew)	look wonderful	<i>bury</i>
kukitsa (English)	young “oxša”	<i>cookie</i> (?)
aft (English)	large penis	<i>apt</i> (?)
dakak (Hebrew)	small penis	from <i>very thin</i>
vijedža (Spanish)	old gay man	from <i>old (fem.)</i>
vizon (French)	vagina	<i>mink</i>
ledžardel (French)	act slutty	from <i>whorehouse</i>
lehafil (Hebrew)	have sex with straight man	<i>to impose upon, defeat</i>
menafuax (Hebrew)	muscular man	from <i>swollen</i>
štrix/ lehaštrex (German)	sex, have sex	from <i>street</i> (colloquial)
bod (English)	body	from <i>body</i>
butch (English)	butch (woman)	<i>butch/masculine</i>
ber (English)	large, hairy man	<i>hairy gay man</i>
gaydar (English)	gaydar	<i>gaydar</i> (i.e. <i>gay radar</i>)
diva (Italian)	diva (superstar)	<i>goddess</i>
ma'ayna (Arabic)	stupid (<i>fem.</i>)	<i>stupid (fem.)</i>

wonderful,’ *poreax* ‘beauty’), the physical attributes of men (e.g. *birz* ‘handsome man,’ *kobor* ‘big penis,’ *menafuax* ‘muscular man’) and sex (e.g. *lexolel* ‘give oral sex,’ *ledžardel* ‘act slutty’). This is something that *oxšit* shares with many of the gay lexicons described in the literature (e.g. Penelope & Wolfe 1979; Leap 1996). When we consider the origins of the words listed, we find that roughly two-thirds are derived from languages other than Hebrew, nearly evenly split between Arabic (six words), English (seven words) and other European languages (five words), including Spanish, French, Italian, and German. These words of foreign origin are structurally largely unaltered from their source languages, aside from a slight adaption to Hebrew phonological and morphological patterns. So, for example, the English word *apt* becomes [aft] in *oxšit*, presumably due to a normal process of postvocalic spirantization in Hebrew. In another case, the

German noun *Strich*, literally 'line' but colloquially used to mean 'street' in expressions like *Strichjunge* 'male prostitute' and *auf den Strich gehen* 'walk the streets,' is borrowed as a noun, but is then also transformed into a verb (*lehaštrex*) through a normal process of Hebrew morphological derivation.

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

Based on this overview, it would seem that *oxšit* is a prime example of what Halliday (1976) famously describes as an ANTI-LANGUAGE, a secret language variety used by a socially marginalized population as a means of creating and maintaining an alternative (and, at times, subversive) identity without fear of censure or reproach. In formal terms, Halliday argues that anti-languages will normally exhibit certain distinctive structural characteristics that set them apart from other kinds of language varieties. These include: RELEXIFICATION, or an abundance of terms in the anti-language for describing the semantic domains typical of the activities and interests of the group; SEMANTIC SPECIALIZATION, wherein denotationally similar words take on individual, connotative meanings within the anti-language and do not remain direct semantic variants of one another; and METAPHOR, by which Halliday means the introduction in the anti-language of innovative linguistic forms across all levels of structural organization, including phonology (exemplified by processes such as metathesis and syllabic insertion), morphology (e.g. suffixation and compounding) and semantics (e.g., synecdoche).

When we compare *oxšit* to Halliday's description, we find that *oxšit* is a domain-specific relexicalized alternative to Hebrew. The relexicalization that characterizes it, moreover, is realized via processes of structural metaphor that apply on phonological, morphological, and semantic levels. Functionally, *oxšit* would also be well suited to serving as the means through which an alternative *oxšit* identity is constructed and maintained. The fact that the lexicon is made up of either foreign words or Hebrew terms that have been fundamentally altered in

some way means that *oxšit* can serve both as a language of secrecy and as a way to establish a communal *oxša* identity that excludes those not familiar with the variety (Irvine 2001). *Oxšit*'s domains of reference are, furthermore, specific to those aspects most stereotypical of *oxša* life, and which stand in explicit contrast to normative ideologies of gender and sexuality in Israel. As I have argued elsewhere (Levon 2009, 2010), men in Israel are subject to a particular conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (what has been called the "men as soldiers model") that prizes taciturn virility and links it to standard definitions of Israeli national identity. *Oxšit*, by virtue of its portrayal of a stereotypically histrionic hyper-femininity, valorizes and linguistically encodes a contravention of this norm, rendering it a potentially very potent form of political resistance and a basis for in-group cohesion. Halliday, however, is careful to state that these formal properties are only secondary characteristics, and do not serve as sufficient evidence for the identification of an anti-language:

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

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

When it comes to *oxšit*, however, there is little evidence to suggest that gay men in Israel are using it as a means to express an alternative, *oxša* identity. On the most superficial level, in the twelve months I spent conducting fieldwork in Israel (in addition to another two dozen months spent in the country over the years for both personal and professional reasons) I never met an *oxša*. This is not to say that I never heard *oxšit* words in conversation or that I did not meet young, effeminate gay men. But I never met anyone who either self-identified as an *oxša* or who exhibited the various characteristics—both physical and linguistic—that I had been hearing about. If *oxšit* were indeed being used in the ways envisaged by Halliday's theory, my lack of firsthand knowledge of *oxša* as an embodied identity would be surprising. That said, it is also entirely possible that I was just not in

the right place at the right time or in some other way did not gain access to *oxšot*. My discussion is necessarily restricted to the people and practices I was able to observe, and no matter how representative I endeavored to be it is certain that my methodological choices meant that there were certain things that I failed to see. Yet, that methodological caveat notwithstanding, I believe that it is nevertheless telling that none of the gay men that I observed, interviewed, or interacted with while in Israel identified as *oxšot*, even if they occasionally used elements of *oxšit* in their speech.

In making this claim, I also do not mean to imply that in order for *oxšit* to function as an anti-language, *oxšot* must in some essentialized sense exist. Like any other distinctive variety, *oxšit* is a linguistic abstraction—an enregistered voice (Agha 2003)—that is ideologically linked to the reified category *oxša*. My point, however, is that in order for a voice to function as an anti-language, we must have evidence that speakers are using it in what Bakhtin (1984) would call a UNIDIRECTIONAL fashion—that is, as a means to performatively align themselves with the persona that the voice indexes (see also Rampton 1998). This is what is lacking in my observations in the Israeli context, where, as I outline below, *oxšit* was not used as a way to claim affiliation with *oxšot*.

Speaking Oxtšit

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

- (1) ani lo xošev še ze naxon, lema'et oxtšit meduberet. [tsoxek] ani tsoxek ki kaxa, lefaxot kaxa korim le ze etsleinu. še mištamšim be'eize šehu slang ... ze be'emet be'ikar ma še anaxnu korim oxtšot. limrot še gam ani lefamim jaxol lehaxnis milim ka'ele bišvil hatsxok. mešaše'a besax hakol.

'I don't think it [determining someone's sexuality over the telephone] is possible, except for *oxšit*. [laughs] I'm laughing because, at least that's what we call it. It's using a kind of slang ... I mean it's really mostly what we call *oxšot* [who use it]. Even though sometimes I'll throw in some of those words just for fun—it's entertaining.'

The extract in (1) comes from my interview with Gilad, a thirty-one-year-old man from Tel Aviv.⁴ In his comments, Gilad claims that the only salient linguistic clue to (male) sexuality in Israel is *oxšit*. And while he primarily associates this “slang” with others (“what we call *oxšot*”), Gilad also admits to using it himself sometimes, though only for comic effect (“even though sometimes I'll throw in some words just for fun”).

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

- (2) ješ kama, bo nagid, milim bodedot še ešar- še mišehu omer otan hu o homo o še haxevre šelo homo'im. lehagid oxtša, lemašal, ze- ata tsarix lehijot mi hamilje hazot keday lehavin mima medubar.

‘There are certain, let’s say, distinct words that it’s possible- when someone says them he’s either gay or his friends are gay. So saying *oxtša*, for example, it’s- you need to be from this milieu in order to know what it’s about.’

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

- (3) ze sfat ha oxtšot. sfat gevev naši, im mexevat guf še hen našijot, adinot. ktsat rofes kaze ulay. ješ leze gam hevtim joter raxavim. bxinat ta'am belavuš, bemuzika.

‘It’s the language of *oxtšot*. The language of a feminine man, with feminine mannerisms, delicate mannerisms. Maybe even kind of limp-wristed. There are also other aspects to it [being an *oxtša*]. In terms of taste in clothing, in music.’

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

- (4) ani lo. ani lo oxtša, ve ani lo mi ele še mištamšim basteriotip. kelumar, ješ hamon homophobia- afilu mi homo'im še hem joter gavri'im klapey homo'im še hem joter naši'im, klapey ha oxtšot. veješ hamon sina klapey ha oxtšot. kelumar hen arbe pe'amim ktsat muktsot. az ani lo ose et ze.

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

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

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

The men's own descriptions of their uses/non-uses of *oxtšit* parallel what I was able to observe of *oxtšit* in practice, which was admittedly not very much.⁵ While very frequently a topic of conversation and meta-commentary, the actual use of *oxtšit* terms was relatively rare. When this use did occur, it was in my experience predominantly at bars or other social gatherings where it was used between friends as a means of commenting on someone else. So, for example, the *oxtšit* word for 'face' (*wedž*) would be used in a sentence like "What a lovely face," or the *oxtšit* word for 'ass' (*uft*) in a statement like "I want a piece of that ass." Contrary to what we might anticipate, these expressions of sexual desire were usually serious in that they referred to people that the speaker found sexually attractive. In other words, it was not the case that *oxtšit* was used to ironically comment upon men that speakers perceived to be effeminate or otherwise "*oxtša*-like." Rather, *oxtšit* was used as a means to honestly express sexual desire. This desire, however, was not conveyed to the individual concerned using *oxtšit*; I never heard anyone say to someone else "You have a lovely *wedž*" (though the corresponding sentence without the *oxtšit* term was common). Instead, *oxtšit* only ever seemed to be employed in indirect commentary.

I also occasionally heard *oxtšit* being used to recount past sexual exploits. In one example, an informant told me and a group of his (male) friends about a man he had met in a club the night before. My informant described how a *lord* (*oxtšit* for 'handsome man') had approached him on the dance floor, emphasizing that the man was *xatix kaze ve šririri* 'attractive and well-built.' My informant went on to recount his sexual relations with the man later that night, ending his story with the statement *ve haja lo žož anak* 'and he had a huge penis,' using the *oxtšit* word *žož* for 'penis.' Here, as above, *oxtšit* was used as a way to express (or, in this case, recount) male homosexual desire, once again in a situation in which the object of that desire was not directly addressed.

Though brief, these examples provide a representative snapshot of my observations of *oxtšit* being used as a way to indirectly address the subject of homosexual desire in social situations. This already rather specialized function of the variety was, moreover, even further restricted by speaker such that only a specific subset of the men I interacted with employed *oxtšit* words with any frequency (as alluded to in Gilad's and Oren's comments). Interestingly, this division among the men into those who use *oxtšit* and those who do not falls along salient

ethnographic lines. In previous work (e.g. Levon 2010), I have argued that my male informants can be divided roughly into two camps based on the extent to which their own beliefs and practices correspond to dominant Israeli conceptualizations of gender and national belonging. The men in the first of these camps (what I call the “Mainstream” group) believe in the importance of reconciling what they call their gay “lifestyle” with Israeli models of normative masculinity. The men in the second camp (the “Radical” group), by contrast, reject this integrative inclination and argue instead for a total reconfiguration of the Israeli gendered order. These two positions are articulated through a number of symbolic practices that serve to distinguish the men of the two groups from one another, not the least of which includes a tendency for the Mainstream men’s speech to conform to Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms while the Radical men’s speech subverts them (Levon 2009).

In contrast to what we might expect given this broader ethnographic context, it is the Mainstream men (including Gilad) who are the predominant users of *oxšit*. The Radical men (like Oren) hardly use it at all. What this means is that the men who use *oxšit* are the same men whose stated beliefs contradict everything that *oxšit* represents. In other words, *oxšit*—an explicitly feminine speech style that controverts Israeli sociolinguistic gender norms—is used almost exclusively by the men most invested in maintaining those norms. If, as I argue above, we take unidirectional voicing as a necessary condition of anti-languages, then an anti-linguistic account of *oxšit* appears to be ethnographically unjustified.

Instead, I would argue that the Mainstream men’s use of *oxšit* is an example of vari-directional voicing (Bakhtin 1984). Unlike its unidirectional counterpart, vari-directional voicing does not involve a performative alignment between the speaker and the persona indexed through the act of speaking. Rather, vari-directional voicing is a form of distancing via comparison, a way for a speaker to layer a socially salient voice over her own in order to demonstrate the OPPOSITION between the two. That this is indeed what the Mainstream men are doing when they use *oxšit* is supported by the characteristics of their use that have already been described.

First of all, there is the apparent incongruence between the beliefs the Mainstream men maintain and the social stances *oxšit* can be said to index. Rather than confounding an analysis of the social meaning of *oxšit*, this incongruence is central to a vari-directional account. Second, there is the fact that *oxšit* seems to be used only for indirect commentary among friends, not directly or to “outsiders.” This is a common feature of vari-directionality (see e.g. Rampton 1995 on AVOIDANCE) that helps to ensure that this kind of voicing is in fact interpreted as such, and not, for example, unidirectionally. Third, and related to this, is the fact that the Mainstream men consistently describe their use of *oxšit* as “fun” or “entertaining.” Vari-directional voicing is, after all, a form of parody (Bakhtin 1984:199), one that is often employed in a seemingly comic and light-hearted way. Finally, there is the fact that all instances of *oxšit* that I observed occurred in conversations

that specifically addressed male homosexual desire. This is, I think, meaningful because, as Yosef (2005) argues, explicit discussions of gay male sex threaten the dominant discourse of heteronormativity upon which Israeli conceptualizations of gender and the nation rest. For the Mainstream men—men for whom accommodating to Israeli gender norms is important—discussing gay male sex could therefore be a delicate matter, one in which sexual and national identity are brought into overt discursive conflict. Previous research (Rampton 1995:152–53; Baker 2002:81–84) has argued that vari-directional voicing is common in situations of “inner conflict” like this because it provides speakers with a means to symbolically distance themselves from the content of their speech and hence mitigate a perceived infraction of prevailing in-group norms.

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

Representing Oxtšit

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

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

venues that Noam and Ashraf frequent) provides the film with a means to contrast a “liberated” Israeli society with a “repressive” Palestinian one.

The scene of interest to us here is part of a secondary plotline in the film that revolves around Yali (the other gay male protagonist) and his romantic involvement with a man named Golan. The scene itself narrates Yali and Golan’s first date in a trendy Tel Aviv bar. At the start of the scene, Yali is approached and greeted by Miki Buganim, an acquaintance who is a renowned hairstylist and makeup artist in Tel Aviv. Miki’s brief appearance incites a subsequent conversation between Yali and Golan in which views about appropriate ways to embody gay male sexuality in Israel are discussed. The scene is transcribed in its entirety in (5).⁶

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

- 1 Miki: hay
'Hi'
- 2 Yali: he::y
'He::y'
- 3 Miki: wow- eize xultsa mehamemet
'Wow- what a fabulous shirt'
- 4 Yali: naxon?
'Right?'
- 5 A: miki- bo kvar
'Miki- let's go already'
- 6 ((Miki and A leave))
- 7 Golan: [nigal] ja ala- kol ha oxtšot ha ele
[disgustedly] 'Oh God- all those *oxtšot*'
- 8 Yali: ma lo beseder?
'Is there a problem?'
- 9 Golan: lo ohev (.)še ani homo lo omer še ani tsarix lehijot naši
'Don't like it (.) That I'm gay doesn't mean that I need to be feminine'
- 10 Yali: ata lo tsarix (.) jaxol (.) osim ma še hem rotsim ve hem rotsim lehijot naši'im=
'Not need (.) Can (.) They can do what they like and they want to be feminine='
- 11 Golan: =ata mesaxek iti? ax šeli- lama še mišehu ja'ase lehijot kaze menašneš?
'=Are you kidding me? Bro- why would someone want to be such a biter?'
- 12 Yali: >menašneš < ?
'>A biter<?'
- 13 Golan: karijot? ma ata lo makir et ha bitui? menašneš karijot? (.) ma ata kaze boxeš ba
šoko? (1.5) stam, lo lehitba'es- tsoxkim itxa (.) eize tamim ata
'Pillows? What you don't know the expression? A pillow biter? What are you like a
fudge packer? (1.5) C'mon, don't get all worked up- just playing with you (.)
You're so naive'
- 14 Yali: ((looks at Golan in silence and drinks))

The scene in (5) opens with a somewhat campy exchange between Yali and Miki. Yali's response to Miki's simple greeting (“Hi”) is a lengthened “He::y,” featuring a high pitch accent immediately followed by a steep drop in contour to the end of the word. Because of its indexical associations in Israel (Levon 2010), this sort of pitch dynamism serves to mark Yali's speech as affected and/or

effeminate. Miki responds in kind, complimenting Yali on his shirt using the Hebrew word *mehamemet* (lit. ‘amazing’), a word stereotypically associated with women and gay men (much like ‘fabulous’ in English). This brief interchange is brought to a close when Miki’s friend (called “A” in the transcript) pulls Miki away to a table elsewhere in the bar.

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

Golan immediately rejects Yali’s proposal, latching a disdainful “are you kidding me?” to the end of Yali’s turn before going on to ask (rhetorically) why anyone would choose to be an *oxša*. Golan frames his question by juxtaposing the stereotypically masculine vocative *ax šeli* (lit. ‘my brother’) with the labeling of *oxšot* as “biters” (or men who adopt the passive position in penetrative sex). In doing so, Golan establishes an opposition between “real” men (i.e. Golan and “his brother” Yali) and the emasculated *oxša*. When Yali, however, in line 12 appears not to understand the reference, Golan begins to tease him and, in so doing, insinuate that Yali is himself a “biter.” The teasing is initiated by a demonstration of apparent incredulosity at Yali’s ignorance of the term, linguistically materialized through Golan’s repetitive questioning at the start of line 13. Golan then goes on to ironically suggest that the reason that Yali does not know the word “biter” is because Yali is actually a “fudge packer” (a man who adopts the active position in anal sex). When this tactic also elicits no response, and following a 1.5 second pause, Golan finally reassures Yali that he is only joking about Yali’s being a “biter” and laments what he sees as Yali’s naïveté. The scene ends with Yali unable or unwilling to respond, signaling a tacit acceptance of Golan’s point of view.

Taken as a whole, I believe that this scene in *The Bubble* works to delineate what are considered to be “acceptable” articulations of gay male identity in Israel, and that it does so in such a way as to categorically exclude *oxšot*. From the outset, *oxšot* are described as abhorrent (“Don’t like it”), impotent (“biters”) and ontologically distinct from gay men (“that I’m gay doesn’t mean that I need to be feminine”). And while there is some evidence of a diversity of opinion between Golan’s more assimilationist view and Yali’s more liberal one (“they can do

what they like”), both of these perspectives result in a portrayal of *oxšot* as sexually PATHOLOGICAL (Warner 2000)—deviant individuals whose existence needs to be explained and/or justified and who stand in obvious contrast to the sexually “normal.” This deviance, moreover, is interactionally instantiated later in the scene when, toward the end, Golan uses the image of *oxšot* as a source of banter or antagonistic play (Jaworski & Coupland 2005). That he then goes on to explicitly mark his insinuation that Yali is a “biter” as nothing more than a joke underscores the perceived danger such a label could pose if applied seriously. In short, I would argue that by the end of the scene *oxšot* are positioned as both discursively and interactionally LIMINAL; they are an aberrant person-type that neither Yali nor Golan seems willing to recognize as a viable embodiment of gay male sexuality in Israel.

A similar rejection of *oxšot* can also be found in the second film I consider, Yair Hochner’s *Antarctica*. Like *The Bubble*, *Antarctica* recounts the story of a small circle of lesbians and gay men in Tel Aviv. It is, however, a self-avowedly less political film and focuses exclusively on the more mundane social and sexual encounters of its characters. As I state above, *oxšot* are never explicitly identified or discussed in the film as such. Nevertheless, in one scene an *oxšit* language feature is used and is immediately the subject of dispute and meta-linguistic commentary. The feature, one that I have not yet described, involves using feminine gender morphology when referring to men. Similar in form to calling a man “she” in English, this is a highly salient stereotype of *oxša* speech in Israel that was frequently offered to me as an example of the kind of thing that *oxšot* do (though I, interestingly, never heard anybody actually use this feature in practice).⁷ Symbolically, the association of *oxšot* with feminine gender morphology is one of direct indexicality, where grammatical form is understood as straightforwardly encoding the inherent femininity by which *oxšot* are characterized.

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

(6) Rejecting *oxša* language in *Antarctica*

- | | | |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Michal: | [be kol mejalel] eita::n
[whining] ‘Eyta::n’ |
| 2 | Eytan: | ma kara?
‘What’s wrong?’ |
| 3 | Michal: | o- kaše li
‘Oh- it’s hard for me’ |
| 4 | Eytan: | dai (.) at adain me’uhevet ba?
‘ <u>Enough</u> (.) You’re still in love with her?’ |
| 5 | Michal: | >lama- hi dibra itxa?<
‘>Why- did she talk to you?<’ |

- 6 Eytan: ra'iti ota aval hi lo mamaš dibra (.) hi kara kmo kerax zoti (.) ma ha sipur šela?
'I saw her but she didn't really talk (.) She's cold as ice that one. (.) What's her story?'
- 7 Michal: lo joda'at (.) en li ko'ax ledaber al ze=
'I don't know (.) I can't handle talking about it='
- 8 Eytan: =od pa'am en lax ko'ax ledaber al ze? al tidabri
'=You still can't handle talking about it? Don't talk'
- 9 Michal: teragi
'Calm down' [feminine form]
- 10 Eytan: [be kol amok joter] al tidabri elai be lašon nekeva- beseder?
[in a deeper voice] 'Don't address me in the feminine form- okay?'
- 11 ((drinks his coffee))
- 12 Eytan: ma ze kafe xadaš?
'What is this new coffee?'
- 13 Michal: džamaika mašehu (1) ta'im lax?
'Jamaica something (1) Do you like it [feminine form]?'
- 14 ((both laugh))

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

Rather than being silenced, however, Michal issues her own imperative (“Calm down”) in an even louder voice. Interestingly, she does so using the feminine form of the verb (*teragi*) rather than the masculine form that we would normally expect. This is immediately and negatively commented upon by Eytan, who, in a deeper voice than he was using previously, tells Michal not to address him using feminine forms. This negative sanctioning effectively ends this part of the conversation, and after having had a sip of his coffee, Eytan attempts to change the subject (“What is this new coffee?”). Michal seems at first to have agreed to the topic shift, responding cooperatively that it is a new Jamaican blend. A moment later, however, Michal references what transpired just before by jokingly flaunting Eytan’s prohibition on referring to him using feminine forms. Instead of taking offense once again, this time Eytan joins Michal in laughter as the scene ends.

What is of primary interest to us here is the use (line 9), rejection (line 10), and subsequent re-use (line 13) of a feminine grammatical form to refer to a man—a

practice stereotypically associated in Israel with *oxšot*. Michal's initial use of this feature is open to a number of interpretations. First, the feminine verb form could serve as a means of indexing Eytan's prior behavior as in some way "feminine." In the turn immediately preceding Michal's, Eytan was increasingly agitated: his voice rose higher and he began to visibly lose his temper. A great deal of research on gender in Israel (e.g. Katriel 1986) has argued that this sort of emotional display in a man runs counter to normative ideologies of Israeli masculinity, which instead require men to be laconic and reserved. Michal's choice of grammatical form could therefore be interpreted as a way of highlighting Eytan's deviation from this standard (i.e. his abnormal femininity).

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

All three of these interpretations crucially rely upon a belief that the identification of men with overt femininity is abnormal or undesirable. Whether the feminine verb form indexes Eytan's gender deviance, weakens his conversational power, or enacts a request that he soften his combative tone, the interactional force of Michal's utterance rests on a prior association between feminine men and social liminality. Eytan's response in line 10 is then direct metapragmatic evidence that he too shares this opinion. He firmly refuses any implication that he would be the type of man willing to be referred to with the feminine form, thus implicitly demonstrating his categorical distinction from men who do engage in this practice (i.e. *oxšot*).⁸ Michal does not dispute Eytan's position, and goes on to cement their common bond by jokingly repeating a feminine form in line 13. Eytan here accepts the joke for what it is, and the "abnormal" femininity that is indexed by the feminine verb form is definitively marginalized in the interaction. Thus while certainly less overtly than in *The Bubble*, I argue that this scene in

Antarctica is also a depiction of what is to be considered “normal” for gay men in Israel. Crucially, this normality is characterized as in opposition to the perceived gender deviance of *oxšot*.

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

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

VOICING ALTERITY

It has been a commonplace of research since Goffman (1974) that voices, speakers, and selves need not always be aligned. In his well-known theory of production formats, Goffman outlines four participant roles in conversation with which to

categorize the relationship between a speaker and an utterance: *AUTHOR*, the person responsible for the utterance; *ANIMATOR*, the person voicing the utterance; *PRINCIPAL*, the person whose views are expressed by the utterance; and *FIGURE*, the social persona or “character type” indexed by the uttering. When canonically aligned, these four roles are embodied by a single individual a speaker who performs an utterance (animator) of her own making (author) that expresses her own views (principal) and through which she is able to engender a desired presentation of self (figure). But this sort of alignment is only one of the typological possibilities that exist. In so-called “natural talk,” Goffman (1981: 128) argues that speakers often strategically misalign these various roles as a means of managing interaction and of positioning themselves in the larger social world within which that interaction takes place.

Of Goffman’s four roles, it is the *FIGURE* that is of primary interest to us here. While author, animator, and principal are for the most part concerned with the mechanics of language production, the concept of figure is a way to model *RECEPTION*, a way to establish a link between talk-in-interaction and its socially meaningful interpretation. In other words, figures represent the interactional next-step of linguistic indexicality. They model the different ways in which speakers deploy meaningful voices, and help us to understand that deployment as a form of social action (Keane 2000).

In his original formulation, Goffman (1974) identifies five figure types along a descending cline of correspondence between the embodied reality of a speaker (i.e. the “self”) and the persona portrayed through the act of speaking: (i) *NATURAL* figures, (ii) *STAGED* figures, (iii) *PRINTED* figures, (iv) *CITED* figures, and (v) *MOCKERIES* or *SAY-FORS*. Natural figures are those that are the closest to what a person is (or desires to be); they are, in essence, acts of identity through which speakers animate a claim to a particular identity category. The other four figure types, by contrast, all involve a discernable break between the speaker who animates an utterance and the figure the utterance portrays. For staged and printed figures, this break is grounded in the genres of theatrical performance and fiction-writing respectively. Cited figures refer to the use of reported speech, where not only are the animator and the figure unaligned but the distinction between the two is emphasized. The final figure type, mockeries, is like cited figures in that it entails the quotation of speech explicitly attributed to another. Yet unlike straightforward citation, mockeries involve a focus on the form of an utterance, not its content, as a way of ridiculing the category of people with which that form is ideologically linked.

Building on Goffman’s work, Hastings & Manning (2004) elaborate a theory of indexical language use that rests on a contrast between what they call *FIGURES OF IDENTITY*, natural figures that correspond to a speaker’s image of self, and *FIGURES OF ALTERITY*, mockeries that serve to interactionally construct an alternate “other.” Crucially, however, they argue that the end-result of using either figural type is the same: the emergence of a speaker’s desired presentation of self. In other

words, both figures of identity and figures of alterity allow speakers to portray “identity” in interaction. The difference is one of method, whereby figures of identity involve explicit ascription to a particular category while figures of alterity involve the creation of a “monstrous or deviant [other], with respect to which the (normal) identity of the speaker emerges as the unmarked ground to the figure of abnormal alterity” (Hastings & Manning 2004:304).

I bring in Hastings & Manning’s redevelopment of Goffman because I believe that it provides a useful way for describing the interactional function of *oxšit* among the men I observed. In essence, I suggest that *oxšit* represents a figural voice of alterity for the Mainstream men—that they use it in order to portray an aberrantly gendered “other” in conversation and that in doing so they are able to indirectly index their own gender normativity. To use Goffman’s terminology, I propose that *oxšit* is the presentation of a “not-self” and that the purpose of the Mainstream men’s using it is to construct a normative (gay) self in interaction. I would argue, moreover, that the structural, pragmatic, and metapragmatic features of *oxšit* outlined above support this interpretation.

In terms of pragmatics, Hastings & Manning claim that figural voices of alterity are “for the most part words of another that are never found in the mouth of another ... they are never forms found indexing speaker identity” (2004:306). This is, I argue, the situation of *oxšit* in Israel, at least among the men that I observed. As the comments by Gilad and Oren attest, *oxšit* is seen as being the words of an identifiable other, the *oxša*. Yet, as I say before, I never encountered anyone who self-identified as an *oxša* or who used elements of *oxšit* to index an *oxša*-affiliated identity. For my informants, then, *oxšit* appears to be an exceptional (as opposed to unmarked) language variety, one that is never used to represent an embodied expression of identity. Rather, I suggest that my informants only ever employ *oxšit* vari-directionally.⁹

From a meta-pragmatic perspective, the Mainstream men rationalize their use of *oxšit* as “fun” or “entertaining.” But the fact that it is only the Mainstream men who use the variety, and that even they only use it when discussing particular topics in social situations, seems to indicate that this use serves a more serious interactional purpose. In the words of Hastings & Manning, *oxšit* appears to be a form of PERSONATION, an act of performative mimicry that makes use of parody to contrast the putative “normality” of the speaker with the abnormality of the voice (see, e.g., Chun 2004; Hill 2008). We saw examples of this in both of the film scenes discussed above, where the image of *oxšot* (if not necessarily *oxšit*) was instrumentalized in antagonistic play as a way to build solidarity between characters through the exclusion of an out-group other. Thus while I do not dispute that the Mainstream men do indeed find their use of *oxšit* amusing, I would argue that this amusement is grounded in a mockery of the iconic abnormality of *oxšit*.

Up to this point, I have focused on the ways in which *oxšit* seems to serve as an index of “difference” in interaction (i.e. as the language style associated with a salient “other”). My final point, in contrast, involves the structural characteristics

of *oxšit*, which I argue are themselves a concrete manifestation of Israeli ideologies of alterity. In their discussion of how certain speech styles come to denote the “monstrous deviant” of alterity, Hastings & Manning claim that “‘abnormal speech types’ ... are ‘imitative’ in speech, not of SPEECH, but rather of other forms of alterity” (2004:305, emphasis in the original). In other words, the language used to denote an “other” is formally derived from the linguistic iconization (Irvine & Gal 2000) of the social characteristics that serve to identify that other as different. As an example, Hastings & Manning cite cases in which speech abnormalities are incorporated into figural voices of alterity as a means of representing some other physical, social, or emotional “abnormality” of the people in question (the stereotype of the “gay men’s lisp” seems to be a case in point). In addition to physical abnormalities, Hastings & Manning also consider the possibility of alterity being linguistically encoded via changes in the morphology, phonology, and local versus foreign origins of words (see also Hill 1998, 2008).

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

In short, I would argue that *oxšit* involves the kind of structural iconization of difference that Hastings & Manning associate with figural voices of alterity. The use of words of non-Hebrew origin, the changes in the morphology and phonology of Hebrew words, the semantic realignment of meanings and the divergence from normatively prescribed prosody all serve to encode a profoundly “abnormal” other. This “other” (the *oxšit*) is the polar opposite of standard Israeli conceptualizations of masculinity and identity: he is foreign, effeminate, and passive. By deploying this figure of alterity in conversation, I argue that Mainstream men affirm the “normality” of their own gay identities (they are not foreign; they are not effeminate; they are not passive). Cast in theoretical terms, the Mainstream men’s natural

figures emerge as the presupposed ground to the MOCKERY that is *oxšit* (Goffman 1974; Hastings & Manning 2004).

CONCLUSION

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

That the Mainstream men use *oxšit* in this way is interesting because it underscores the idea that social identities do not exist in isolation; they are instead refracted through a host of other beliefs, values, and affiliations (Cameron & Kulick 2003; Bucholtz & Hall 2005, *inter alia*). In essence, I believe that the Mainstream men use *oxšit* as a way to resist classification as straightforwardly, or simply, "gay." I do not, however, mean to imply that the men reject identification as "gay" entirely, but rather that they make use of in-group mockery in order to subdivide that category and inflect it with local meaning (see Johnstone 1999; Chun 2004). In concrete terms, I propose that the strategic deployment of *oxšit* allows the Mainstream men to symbolically instantiate two kinds of Israeli gay male identity: a gender-normative one that they themselves embody and a gender-aberrant one that they reject. To my mind, their reason for doing so is grounded in the men's own conceptualization of the intersection of "gay" and "Israeli" identities, and their firm belief in the necessity of reconciling the expression of gay male sexuality with dominant ideologies of gender and the nation. In other words, I argue that vari-directionally voicing *oxšit* provides the Mainstream men with a means to negotiate the competing demands of overlapping fields of social subjectification and present an identity that is at once both "gay" and "Israeli." In doing so, the men demonstrate not only how larger ideological imperatives can be incorporated and, to a certain extent, refashioned within groups to suit more local, in-group needs (Abu-Lughod 1990; Mahmood 2005), but also how language plays a central role in this process.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

::	vowel lengthening
—	prosodic emphasis
?	question (rising intonation)
(.)	pause
-	short pause
(n)	length (in seconds) of longer pause
=	latching (no audible break between turns)
><	more rapid speech
[]	transcriber comment
(())	nonlinguistic action

NOTES

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¹I am unaware of any formal etymological study of the origins of the term *oxšā* in terms of either its social or linguistic history. Discussions of *oxšot* have been widespread among Israeli lesbians and gays since at least the early 1990s.

²Note that the category of *Mizraxim* is a very particular, and culturally salient, one in Israel. Jewish citizens of Israel are normally divided into two groups: *Aškenazim* (Jews of Eastern European origin) and *Mizraxim* (Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin). This so-called “ethnic” difference among Jews in Israeli society exists in addition to what is conceived of as a “racial” difference between Jews and Arabs (see, for example, Shafir & Peled 2002).

³The lexicon, which can be found at www.igy.org.il (accessed on 25 June 2009), is an online posting of a word list that originally appeared in the Israeli gay newspaper *HaZman HaVarod* (‘The Pink Times’) in 1995. Both the print and electronic versions contain seventy-eight entries. Many of these, however, are proper names that refer to well-known figures in lesbian and gay communities in Israel and elsewhere, as well as various gay-identified places in Israel (e.g. nightclubs, parks). When these proper names are removed, twenty-eight entries remain. Transliterations in the table (and throughout) use a simplified Romanization of Hebrew script, where *x* refers to the voiceless velar fricative; *š* and *ž* to the voiceless/voiced alveolar fricatives; *tš* and *dž* to the voiceless/voiced palato-alveolar affricates; and *j* to the palatal glide.

⁴All names are pseudonyms.

⁵Due to various practical and ethical considerations, I was unable to make recordings of spoken interactions outside of the interview setting. I therefore do not provide transcripts of *oxšit* in conversation, only discussions of the topic in interviews.

⁶English translations are my own. Transcription conventions are given in the appendix.

⁷It is important to note that the use of feminine forms for male referents is a rare phenomenon in Hebrew (despite the many opportunities that Hebrew’s highly inflected morphology provides) and one that is stereotypically restricted to gay men. So-called “gender reversal” is much more common in the other direction (i.e., the use of masculine morphology for female referents), predominantly as a way to make generic statement (e.g. “when you-MASC give-birth-MASC”; Sa’ar 2007) and, less frequently, to mark intimacy (Tobin 2001).

⁸D. Sharma (p.c.) points out that Eytan's initial rejection of Michal's use of the feminine verb form may be grounded in a perception on Eytan's part of pragmatic infelicity (see, for example, Hall & O'Donovan's (1996) discussion of the pragmatics of pronominal variation among hijras in India). In other words, Eytan's reaction may very well have been different had his interlocutor been another gay man or the exchange between Michal and Eytan been less antagonistic. Related to this is the issue of the status of Michal as a woman in the interaction. Both in my observations and in my informants' descriptions, women rarely use *oxšit*. Given this distributional tendency and the details of my analysis in subsequent sections, I would argue that Michal's use of an *oxšit* feature here is exceptional, and that its meaning is wholly directed at Eytan (as in the possible interpretations I suggest) rather than in Michal's own construction or presentation of a subjectivity in the interaction.

⁹It is interesting to note that if *oxšit* were indeed part of no speaker's unmarked repertoire that could have ramifications for our understanding of the origins of indexical language, since we normally assume that the indexical value of a particular feature is grounded in the prior existence of a distributional correlation between that feature and some identifiable group of speakers who use it "natively" (e.g. Agha 2003; Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson 2006). While in the interest of space I do not discuss this issue here, I refer the reader to recent research (Johnstone 2009; Squires 2010) that has argued that features can also become enregistered even when no prior distributional correlation exists.

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