

LEXICAL WARS: HEBREW EUPHEMISMS AND DYSPHEMISMS
IN PHRASES RELATING TO THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

This survey offers some data about the frequency of several Hebrew phrases commonly appearing in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Various subjects were analysed and, for each one, different phrases that are being used to denote the same referent were taken into account, ascertaining the number of their occurrences in different sources; by calculating the frequency of each phrase in a single source, a comparison was made among the different sources in order to observe their usage. For each subject, some of the linguistic variants taken into account, even if denoting the same referent, convey extremely dissimilar connotations; in the most extreme cases, an oscillation is noticeable between euphemism and dysphemism, with a series of more neutral phrases in the middle.

Euphemism and dysphemism are two linguistic devices which operate by the same mechanism although in opposite directions: when referring to an unpleasant subject, a euphemism is a mild, oblique, indirect phrase used as a replacement for another one deemed too violent, explicit, or direct, whereas a dysphemism is a blunt, brutal and derogatory phrase deliberately chosen instead of neutral alternatives. In the event of a person's death, we can state that *he/she has passed away* (euphemism) or that *he/she kicked the bucket, popped off, or croaked* (dysphemisms), along with many other options, each one with a different connotation.¹ Euphe-

mism is thus the result of linguistic choices aimed at hiding or understating the negative aspects of a situation, to the point of producing phrases that are completely opaque to those unfamiliar with their idiomatic meaning, as seen in some cases below; dysphemism, on the other hand, stresses negative aspects, usually in order to express hostility toward the referent, which is negatively connoted. In brief, considering the point of view of the speaker, euphemism blurs or improves, whereas dysphemism reveals or worsens.

In the languages of the world, euphemism regularly occurs with some categories subject to various forms of prohibition or taboo, such as sacrality, death, sex, and bodily functions;² one should note that all those categories are ultimately instances of one subject, that is human mortality. Usage of euphemisms consists in avoiding all and every direct reference to such topics, whereas dysphemism shows itself as a means of resorting to no less than direct reference to forbidden topics, thus challenging the prohibition. The catalogue of forbidden subjects with their correlated level of prohibition changes in time and space: every single society shows its own attitude towards sensitive subjects and therefore the circumstances in which euphemism is needed may vary greatly; it will suffice to mention here, with regard to traditional sectors of Jewish society, the ban on the divine name and the euphemisms sometimes used to denote impu-

¹For a classification of the main sources of euphemism, K. BURRIDGE, *Taboo, euphemism, and political correctness*, in K. BROWN (ed.), *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics*, 2nd edition, Elsevier, Amsterdam – London – New York 2006, vol. 13, pp. 455-462.

²A thorough analysis by category is offered by K. ALLAN & K. BURRIDGE, *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*, Cambridge Univer-

sity Press, Cambridge 2006. Three dictionaries of euphemisms in English are also worth mentioning: J. AYTO, *Bloomsbury dictionary of euphemisms*, Bloomsbury, London 2000; G. HUGHES, *An encyclopedia of swearing: The social history of oaths, profanity, foul language, and ethnic slurs in the English-speaking world*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY – London 2006; R.W. HOLDER, *How not to say what you mean: A dictionary of euphemisms*, 4th edition.

re referents.³ As for the latter, a turn of phrase was matter of discussion in recent times, when a Haredi newspaper was faced with the difficulty of reporting on an accident involving wild boars: in addition to the common euphemism בשר לבן *bašar lavan*, literally “white meat”, for *pork*, Haredi Hebrew speakers have דבר אחר *davar aher*, literally “other thing”, as a replacement for חזיר *ħazir* “pig”; thus, in September 2012, the Haredi newspaper *Hamodia* described the aforementioned accident as having occurred on account of two דבר אחר בר *davar aher bar*, an awkward “wild other thing” used in order to avoid חזיר בר *ħazir bar* “wild pig”, the common Hebrew term for “wild boar”.⁴

A great amount of topics can be related to the few categories listed above: to death, for example, one can directly connect illness and its signs, ageing, and physical decay, but also external events such as natural disasters, catastrophes, and war; the last is also connected to sacrality, since armed conflicts are normally associated with struggle for personal and collective freedom, cultural and religious heritage, ethnic identity, and other categories deemed highly valuable by a significant number of individuals.

The Arab-Israeli conflict, with its long history and highly symbolic value, is connected to many subjects which are extremely sensitive for the people who experience it in person; in such a context, linguistic choices adopted to refer to

topics concerning the conflict may provide an insight into the different attitudes of the speakers. Assuming a link between political standing and choice – may it be deliberate or spontaneous – of a particular linguistic expression, newspapers of different leanings were used as sources: the four daily newspapers in Hebrew with the highest circulation in Israel.⁵ Even though none of those newspapers has a definite political affiliation comparable to that of past party newspapers, each one has a political leaning. The oldest, *Haaretz*⁶ (founded in 1919), highly regarded and widely quoted abroad yet with relatively limited circulation, is progressive in matters of diplomacy and human rights; notwithstanding its tendency towards economic liberalism, it is considered a left-wing newspaper for its stances in favour of a compromise solution of the conflict.⁷ Traditionally associated with the political centre is *Yedioth Ahronoth* (founded in 1939), which was for a long time the most widely circulated newspaper; in 2009 it stood out as a supporter of *Kadima*, the centrist party founded by Ariel Sharon which advocated Israel’s unilateral disengagement from Gaza, implemented in 2005.⁸ Its long-standing competitor is *Maariv* (founded in 1948), a centrist newspaper more oriented towards conservative and nationalist stances, whose political line has been oscillating over recent years due to frequent changes of both property and editors.⁹ The last to appear, founded in 2007, is *Israel Hayom*, owned by the Ame-

Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007.

³ For an overview of the subject: S.M. PAUL, *Euphemism and dysphemism*, in F. SKOLNIK & M. BERENBAUM (eds.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edition, Keter – Macmillan, Jerusalem – Farmington Hills, MI 2007, vol. 6, pp. 549-550; L.F. HARTMAN et al., *Names of God*, *ibid.*, vol. 7, pp. 672-678.

⁴ Y. ETTINGER, המודיע מדיווח: שניים נהרגו בתאונה עם “דבר אחר בר”, *Haaretz* 23 September 2012 (<http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.1829420>); G. HALPERN, *Word of the day / Davar akher*, *Haaretz* 3 October 2012 (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/word-of-the-day/word-of-the-day-davar-akher-1.468068>).

⁵ According to a TGI survey from 2010. See: O. BAR-ZOHAR, “ישראל היום” עקף את “ידיעות אחרונות”, *Haaretz* 28 July 2010 (<http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/1.1214257>).

⁶ A non-standard transliteration is used here for the names of the newspapers according to the spelling adopted by their English versions.

⁷ O. LIVIO, “הארץ” מתיישר לשמאל, «Ha-‘ayin ha-ševi‘it» 1 July 2005 (<http://www.the7eye.org.il/28306>); *Ha-‘ayin ha-ševi‘it* is a periodical specializing in Israeli journalism and media, published by the independent research group *Ha-maḡon ha-yisra‘eli la-demoqraṭiyah*, Israeli Institute for Democracy. N. SHEIZAF, *The political line of Israeli papers (a reader’s guide)*, «+972 Magazine» 26 October 2010 (<http://972mag.com/the-political-line-of-israeli-papers-a-readers-guide/4072>).

⁸ O. PERSICO, אצל אביגדור בחצר, «Ha-‘ayin ha-ševi‘it» 10 February 2009 (<http://www.the7eye.org.il/27356>).

⁹ SHEIZAF, *The political line of Israeli papers*, cit.

rican tycoon Sheldon Adelson, who is an overt supporter of the Republican Party in the United States and of Netanyahu in Israel;¹⁰ it is estimated that Adelson invests 20 million dollars a year in this right-wing freely-distributed newspaper, which quickly attained the highest circulation in the country.¹¹ For each newspaper, the online Hebrew edition was consulted for this survey.¹²

Territories

Many issues are raised by the definition of the territories beyond the Green Line,¹³ where permanent settlements of Israeli civilians were established and some forms of military control are exercised by Israel. Such a definition is currently valid exclusively for the West Bank, i.e. the region west of the Jordan river which was annexed by the Kingdom of Jordan in 1948, conquered by Israel in 1967 and today partially administered by the Palestinian National Authority; in the past, the same condition was shared by the Gaza Strip, annexed by Egypt in 1948 and under Israeli administration from 1967 to 2005, when Israel implemented the unilateral disengagement plan. The Palestinian Authority claims sovereignty over both areas, which – along with

the territory of the State of Israel – formed the British Mandate for Palestine (1920-1948); the name *Palestinian Territories*, generally adopted in the West when referring to the West Bank and Gaza, mirrors both the current Palestinian-Arab claims to sovereignty and the situation prior to 1948, when *Palestine* was a mere toponym free of ethnic or nationalist connotations, without distinctions between Jews and Arabs.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 (22 November 1967) required the “[w]ithdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict”;¹⁴ even the Israel military authorities, immediately after the Six-Day War, referred to the aforementioned areas as השטחים הכבושים *ha-šetaḥim ha-kevušim* “the occupied territories”, a phrase soon replaced by השטחים המוחזקים *ha-šetaḥim ha-muḥzaqim* “the administered territories” and later by יהודה ושומרון *Yehudah we-Šomron* “Judea and Samaria”. Officially adopted in 1968, but successfully entered into common use only after Likud’s victory in the 1977 elections,¹⁵ the first ones won by a right-wing party, יהודה ושומרון “Judea and Samaria” shows itself as a neutral designation solely based on geographical criteria; nevertheless, the choice of a biblical name, even though

¹⁰ Defined as “a rich conservative American Jew” whose daily newspaper “serves as a de facto mouthpiece for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu”: O. NIR, *Supporting Israel’s media strengthens its democracy*, «Jewish Telegraphic Agency» 15 October 2012 (<http://www.jta.org/2012/10/15/news-opinion/opinion/op-ed-supporting-israels-media-strengthens-its-democracy>).

¹¹ *Wapping in the Holy Land*, «The Economist» 3 November 2012 (<http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21565679-israeli-newspapers-famously-feisty-and-irreverent-are-fighting-their>).

¹² The websites are: haaretz.co.il (*Haaretz*), ynet.co.il (*Yedioth Ahronoth*), nrg.co.il (*Maariv*), and israelhayom.co.il (*Israel Hayom*). Online English editions of these newspapers are available as well, but they were not taken into account, being the current research focused on Hebrew phrases.

¹³ The Green Line is the demarcation line set out between Israel and its neighbouring countries in the 1949 Armistice Agreements in Rhodes, after the first Arab-Israeli war.

¹⁴ Official documents are accessible through the UN website: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/242\(1967\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/242(1967)).

¹⁵ R. HACOEN, *Influence of the Middle East peace process on the Hebrew language*, in M.G. CLYNE (ed.), *Undoing and redoing corpus planning*, Mouton De Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1997 (Contributions to the Sociology of Language 78), pp. 385-414: “During a short period immediately after the 1967 war, the official term employed was ‘the Occupied Territories’ (ha-shetahim ha-kevushim). It was soon replaced by ‘the Administered Territories’ (ha-shetahim ha-muḥzakim) and then by the (Biblical) Hebrew geographical terms ‘Judea and Samaria’. The latter were officially adopted and successfully promoted by the governments (since 1977) and are still the official terms in use” (p. 397). The role of censorship after the first victory of the Right must not be overlooked; see I.S. LUSTICK, *Unsettled states, disputed lands: Britain and Ireland, France and Algeria, Israel and the West Bank-Gaza*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1993: “Early in his second term, Prime Minister Begin condemned

referring to entities which were politically separated in biblical times, is a means aimed at underlining the ancient connection of the Jewish people with the Land of Israel.¹⁶

At present, the region is called אזור יהודה ושומרון *Ezor Yehudah we-Šomron* “Area of Judea and Samaria”, abbreviated in יו”ש *Yoš*;¹⁷ the name מחוז יהודה ושומרון *mehoz Yehudah we-Šomron* “District of Judea and Samaria” only refers to the “Israeli localities in the Judea and Samaria Area”.¹⁸ Such a distinction between the generic אזור *ezor* “area, region” and the official מחוז *maḥoz* “district”, which is used for the six administrative Districts of Israel (North, Centre, South, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa), is due to the fact that the West Bank was not annexed by Israel, which defines it “disputed territories whose status can only be determined through negotiations”.¹⁹ On the other hand, the sectors of Jerusalem situated beyond the Green Line, also known as East Jerusalem, are not included in the Area of Judea and Samaria but rather in the District of Jerusalem, and therefore in the State of Israel.

Israel state radio as ‘anti-Zionist’ and likened its director to an official of the British mandatory regime. Thereafter use of the terms ‘occupied territory’ and ‘West Bank’ was forbidden in news reports” (p. 359).

¹⁶ S. GAZIT, *Trapped fools: Thirty years of Israeli policy in the Territories*, Routledge, London 2003 (translated by S.L. SAPPİR: *Peta'im be-malkodet. 30 šanot mediniut Yišra'el ba-šetaḥim*, Zmora-Bitan, Tel Aviv 1999): “[T]he Likud Government was not satisfied with the name ‘Administered Territories’. Even though the name ‘Judea and Samaria’ had been officially adopted as early as the beginning of 1968 instead of the ‘West Bank’, it has hardly been used until 1977” (p. 162).

¹⁷ Including Gaza, from which Israel disengaged in 2005, the official name is יהודה ושומרון וחבל עזה “Judea, Samaria and region of Gaza”, abbreviated in יו”ש.

¹⁸ The phrase, which refers to the localities commonly known abroad as the “Jewish settlements in the West Bank”, is used in the *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, yearly published by the Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013 edition, p. (32) (http://www.cbs.gov.il/shnaton64/shnaton64_all_e.pdf). Such localities that constitute the מחוז יהודה ושומרון “District of Judea and Samaria” – as listed by the Israeli Government Portal in the section רשויות מקומיות

Two definitions are quite neutral: the elliptical השטחים *ha-šetaḥim* “the Territories”, commonly heard in everyday language, and הגדה המערבית *ha-gadah ha-ma‘aravit*, a literal equivalent of *West Bank*, commonly heard from media abroad. Unquestionably non neutral is the definition השטחים הכבושים “the occupied territories”, which stresses the disputed status of the region and immediately identifies the speaker as an opponent of the Israeli presence therein; a similar connotation is conveyed by הפלסטיניים *ha-šetaḥim ha-palešiniyim* “the Palestinian territories”, which implicitly endorses Palestinian Arab sovereignty over the region.

The frequency of use of different phrases is shown below; as for the first table, which displays the total count of occurrences for each phrase in the four newspapers taken into account, it is useful to point out that absolute values are not meaningful by reason of the great disparity among the different newspapers in the number of articles.²⁰

(“Local Authorities”) – are 4 cities (Ariel, Betar Illit, Ma‘ale Adumim, Modi‘in Illit), 13 local councils, and 6 regional councils (<http://www.gov.il/FirstGov/TopNav/OfficesAndAuthorities/OALocalAuthorities/OAALShomron>). It is noteworthy that the *Map of Districts, Sub-Districts and Natural Regions* included in the *Statistical Abstract* does not include the Area of Judea and Samaria in the Districts of Israel (http://www.cbs.gov.il/shnaton64/map/01_01e.pdf).

¹⁹ *Disputed territories: Forgotten facts about the West Bank and Gaza Strip*, «Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs» 1 February 2003 (<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFA-Archive/2003/Pages/DISPUTED%20TERRITORIES-%20Forgotten%20Facts%20About%20the%20We.aspx>).

²⁰ The numbers are the results of Google searches for exact phrases limited to single websites performed in September 2013. It must be taken into account that the total count of results for any search query is an estimate of the actual number of results, as explained by Google’s documentation (https://developers.google.com/search-appliance/documentation/64/xml_reference#appendix_num_results); the method is nonetheless useful to determine the distribution of different phrases in a single newspaper and to compare the results across different newspapers.

Lexical wars in Hebrew euphemisms and dysphemisms related to the Arab-Israeli conflict

	Haaretz	Yedioth Ahronoth	Maariv	Israel Hayom
יהודה ושומרון / יר"ש	19,500	18,500	9,970	566
השטחים ²¹	16,900	13,800	5,680	305
הגדה המערבית	5,400	14,000	5,280	166
השטחים הכבושים	2,630	8,660	2,370	16 ²²
השטחים הפלסטיניים ²³	143	644	164	0
	44,573	55,604	23,464	1,053

Since the purpose of the current research is to observe the frequency of different phrases, it is necessary to compare the relative distribution of different phrases for each source rather than to determine the absolute number

of occurrences for each phrase; percentage of use of each phrase in a single source allows for comparison across sources. The following table displays relative values.

	Haaretz	Yedioth Ahronoth	Maariv	Israel Hayom
יהודה ושומרון / יר"ש	43.75%	33.27%	42.49%	53.75%
השטחים	37.92%	24.82%	24.21%	28.96%
הגדה המערבית	12.11%	25.18%	22.50%	15.76%
השטחים הכבושים	5.90%	15.57%	10.10%	1.52% ²⁴
השטחים הפלסטיניים	0.32%	1.16%	0.70%	0.00%

It is immediately noticeable that the official naming יהודה ושומרון "Judea and Samaria" is by far the most common in all newspapers; while its frequency on *Israel Hayom*, which uses it in more than half cases, is far from being unexpected, it is noteworthy that the same phrase is preferred over others also by *Haaretz*, with a percentage of occurrences comparable to that observed for *Maariv*. The newspaper that uses it with the least frequency is *Yedioth Ahronoth*, consistently the same one that offers the highest percentage of השטחים הכבושים "the occupied

territories", a phrase carrying diametrically opposed implications; the latter appears with negligible frequency in *Israel Hayom* and in low percentage in *Haaretz*, whose English edition liberally uses the phrase *occupied territories*. The frequency of השטחים הפלסטיניים "the Palestinian territories", which only in *Yedioth Ahronoth* exceeds 1%, is negligible; *Haaretz* displays a more frequent use of the neutral השטחים "the territories", which *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Maariv* alternate with a comparable frequency to the Hebrew equivalent of *West Bank*.

²¹ The term השטחים "the territories" was searched by a query that explicitly required from the search engine to exclude results containing the modifiers הכבושים "occupied" e הפלסטיניים "Palestinian"; therefore the results comprehend the occurrences of השטחים alone.

²² Mainly quotations, except for articles by

Y. SOBOL (29.8.2010, 11.7.2012) and M. SHLOMOT (1.7.2011, 2.3.2012, 8.6.2012, 26.10.2012).

²³ The variant spelling השטחים הפלסטיניים was also considered.

²⁴ As said in a note to the previous table, these 16 occurrences are contained in quotations or sporadic critical articles.

Barrier

The Hebrew term used to denote the separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank is גדר *gader* “fence, boundary, border”. The barrier is “a multi-layered composite obstacle”²⁵ made up of ditches, barbed wire, patrol roads, and detection devices; about 5% of its total length, typically in densely inhabited urban areas, consists of a solid wall made up of concrete slabs. A merely descriptive phrase is גדר ההפרדה *geder ha-hafradah* “separation fence”, whereas some variants used by its supporters are גדר הביטחון *geder ha-bittahon* “security fence” and גדר אנטי-טרוריסטית *gader anti-terroristit* “anti-terrorist fence”.²⁶ The latter underlines the role that the barrier – built since 2002 – actually had in preventing suicide terror attacks:²⁷ the number of victims dropped from 220 in 2002 to 142 in 2003 and to only 3 in 2007.²⁸ Even some representatives of terror organizations admitted the role of the separation barrier in preventing their attacks: Islamic Jihad leader Ramadan Abdallah Shalah, speaking on Hezbollah’s *Al-Manar TV* (11 November 2006), defined the separation fence “an obstacle to the resistance”; later, interviewed by the Qatari newspaper *Al-sharq* (23 March 2008), he told: “We do not deny that it

limits the ability of the resistance to arrive deep within [Israeli territory] to carry out suicide bombing attacks, but the resistance has not surrendered or become helpless, and is looking for other ways to cope with the requirements of every stage”. A similar response had been given less than a year before by Mousa Abu Marzouq, deputy chairman of Hamas’s political bureau in Damascus, to some representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood who asked him, on *Ikhwan online* (2 June 2007), why suicide attacks had diminished in number: “[carrying out] such attacks is made difficult by the security fence and the gates surrounding West Bank residents”.²⁹

Opponents of the barrier refuse the term גדר “fence” and speak rather of חומה *homah* “wall”, adding some modifiers that are more or less dysphemistic according to the more or less radical stances: options vary from חומת ההפרדה *homat ha-hafradah* “separation wall” to חומת האפרטהייד *homat ha-apartheid* “apartheid wall”, a phrase used since the beginning by some activist groups campaigning against the building of the barrier.³⁰ It is self-evident that the label חומה “wall” attached to the barrier in its entirety is a dysphemism, owing to the fact that over 90% of the barrier is not a wall;³¹ on the other hand, in גדר “fence” one could see a

²⁵ A description of the barrier’s design is available on the website of the Ministry of Defence (<http://www.securityfence.mod.gov.il/Pages/ENG/operational.htm>).

²⁶ See the definitions in Hebrew and English on the websites of the Ministry of Defence (<http://www.securityfence.mod.gov.il>) and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (<http://securityfence.mfa.gov.il>).

²⁷ A decisive argument may have been the mainly successful experience with the Gaza fence: a first 60-kilometre fence around Gaza on the Green Line had already been built in 1994 and it had “provided an answer to the suicide bombers” (I. KERSHNER, *Barrier. The seam of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005, p. 161). A new multi-component barrier system built in 2001 “helped the military achieve the previously unreachable goal of 100 percent prevention of terrorist infiltration”, according to Major General Doron Almog, then the head of the IDF’s Southern Command (*ivi*, p. 167); nonetheless, in March 2004 two 18-year-old suicide bombers were able to make their way out of Gaza killing ten in Ashdod (*ibidem*).

²⁸ *Victims of Palestinian Violence and Terrorism since September 2000*, «Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs» (<http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/terrorism/palestinian/pages/victims%20of%20palestinian%20violence%20and%20terrorism%20since>).

²⁹ *The leader of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad again admits that the Israeli security fence built by Israel in Judea and Samaria prevents the terrorist organizations from reaching the heart of Israel to carry out suicide bombing attacks*, «The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center» 26 March 2008 (http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/data/pdf/PDF_08_089_2.pdf).

³⁰ Y. FEINSTEIN, *Activists Squeezed between the ‘Apartheid Wall’ and the ‘Separation Fence’. The Radicalism versus Pragmatism Dilemma of Social Movements: The Case of the Israeli Separation Barrier*, in E. MARTEU (ed.), *Civil organizations and protest movements in Israel*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2009, pp. 107-125, p. 107.

³¹ The question is remarked by a recent article in the Official French-language Blog of the Israel

euphemism aimed at obfuscating the real nature of the barrier in some areas, where it consists of a wall up to 8 m in height. Such contrasting choices are clearly expression of an ideological clash, as expected for a hotly debated issue as the barrier is; but a sort of dilemma between radicalism and pragmatism is also observable inside group of opponents.³² Another term in use is מכשול *mikšol* “barrier”, which recalls the definition

adopted by the foreign media more inclined to keep a neutral approach; in Hebrew it occurs in the phrase מכשול ההפרדה *mikšol ha-hafradah*, “separation barrier”.³³

The following table displays the frequency of the main phrases used to denote the barrier.

The entirety of the newspapers taken into account prefer גדר ההפרדה “separation fence”; the highest percentage is found in *Haaretz* and

	Haaretz	Yedioth Ahronoth	Maariv	Israel Hayom
גדר הביטחון	490	2,280	713	40
	10.59%	30.54%	21.12%	22.35%
גדר ההפרדה	3,530	4,230	2,110	135
	76.29%	56.66%	62.50%	75.42%
חומת ההפרדה	563	853	540	4 ³⁴
	12.17%	11.43%	15.99%	2.23%
מכשול ההפרדה	44	102	13	0 ³⁵
	0.95%	1.37%	0.39%	0.00%
	4,627	7,465	3,376	179

Israel Hayom, which use it three times out of four, whereas the lowest is found in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, which chooses this option over half of the times, slightly less frequently than *Maariv*. The phrase that can be reasonably seen as the most favourable to the existence of the barrier, גדר הביטחון “security fence”, is used in almost a third of the cases only by *Yedioth Ahronoth*, slightly more

than 20% by *Maariv* and *Israel Hayom*, and remarkably less by *Haaretz*. The option חומת ההפרדה “separation wall” is seldom used by the three older newspapers and practically never by *Israel Hayom*; everywhere negligible is the frequency of מכשול ההפרדה “separation barrier”.

Inconsistent attitudes apparently emerge if these data are compared to the ones seen abo-

Defence Forces: *Ceci n'est pas un mur. Appelez les choses par leur nom*, «Armée de Défense d'Israël» 3 March 2014 (<http://tsahal.fr/2014/03/03/ceci-nest-pas-mur>).

³² FEINSTEIN, cit., pp. 108-9. See the website of the organization *B'tselem*, which is strongly critical of the barrier but uses neutral phrases such as גדר ההפרדה and מכשול ההפרדה (http://www.btselem.org/hebrew/topic/separation_barrier).

³³ Awareness of verbal strategies and media responsibility is demonstrated by a document containing the guidelines of BBC on *Israel and the Palestinians: Key terms*; under the entry “Barrier” we read: “BBC journalists should try to avoid using terminology favoured by one side or another in any dispute. The

BBC uses the terms ‘barrier’, ‘separation barrier’ or ‘West Bank barrier’ as acceptable generic descriptions to avoid the political connotations of ‘security fence’ (preferred by the Israeli government) or ‘apartheid wall’ (preferred by the Palestinians). The United Nations also uses the term ‘barrier’. Of course, a reporter standing in front of a concrete section of the barrier might choose to say ‘this wall’ or use a more exact description in the light of what he or she is looking at” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/newswatch/ukfs/hi/newsid_8370000/newsid_8374000/8374013.stm).

³⁴ Two of which refer to other topics.

³⁵ An article where the phrase refers to the plan of a barrier on the Egyptian border was not taken into account.

ve: *Yedioth Ahronoth*, which is the most reluctant to call the West Bank יהודה ושומרון “Judea and Samaria” and liberally defines the territories “occupied”, is also the most inclined to refer to the barrier as גדר הביטחון “security fence”, the official denomination that implies a favourable attitude. There is arguably no homogeneity in the stances taken on different issues concerning the conflict: an attitude favourable to, for example, the existence of the barrier seen as a necessary means of self-defence does not necessarily imply an approval of the Israeli presence in the territories, or vice versa; the apparent contradiction in the data provide evidence for this assumption. Similarly, the unwillingness to use a definition that immediately express support to the existence of the barrier does not imply the use of phrases provided with a strongly critical connotation, also because they are customarily used by groups of opponents; *Haaretz*, for example, moderately uses both גדר הביטחון “security fence” and חומת ההפרדה “separation wall” (and nearly never מכשול ההפרדה “separation barrier”), opting for the less problematic and virtually unbiased גדר ההפרדה “separation fence”. In the use of the last phrase, the oldest Israeli newspaper is similar to the young *Israel Hayom*, yet their affinities do not go beyond this point: *Israel Hayom* uses גדר הביטחון “security fence” twice as much as *Haaretz* does, while regularly abstaining from both חומת “wall” e מכשול “barrier”, thus showing a strict consistency in the choice of phrases more clearly associated with conservative stances.

Violent actions

A type of military operation customarily carried out by Israel Defence Forces is the killing of individuals accused of organizing or having organized terror attacks against Israeli targets. In 2006, in reply to a petition challenging the legality of such policy, the Supreme Court of Israel declared it legitimate, provided that the conditions for its enforcement are proven case by case and that the operations are carried out within precise limits;³⁶ the legitimacy of extrajudicial killings in general is a complex matter and lays far beyond the scope of the current study.³⁷

The references to this policy in the Israeli press seem not to include Hebrew equivalents of the phrases commonly used by foreign media: occurrences of הריגה ממוקדת “targeted killing” and התנקשות ממוקדת “targeted homicide” are too sporadic to be taken into account;³⁸ the term מניעה “prevention”, occurring in phrases such as פעולת מניעה “prevention action” and מניעה ממוקדת “targeted prevention”, is also infrequent. Much more common are the phrases סיכול ממוקד “targeted elimination” and סיכול ממוקד “targeted foiling”, which can be preceded by מבצע “operation” or פעולת “action”; the following table displays their distribution.

Euphemistic value of both phrases is self-evident, especially for סיכול “foiling, thwarting”, which denotes the act of preventing someone from accomplishing an attack while avoiding all and every reference to the means actually used; the choice is consistent with a universal tendency

	Haaretz	Yedioth Ahronoth	Maariv	Israel Hayom
סיכול ממוקד	1,100	6,770	2,950	46
	70.33%	61.71%	62.77%	68.66%
סיכול ממוקד	464	4,200	1,750	21
	29.67%	38.29%	37.23%	31.34%
	1,564	10,970	4,700	67

³⁶ The text of the ruling (14 December 2006) is available on the website of the Supreme Court (http://elyon1.court.gov.il/Files_ENG/02/690/007/a34/02007690.a34.htm).

³⁷ For a thorough exposition of the subject, see:

R. OTTO, *Targeted killings and international law*, Springer, New York 2012.

³⁸ Respectively 4 (2 in *Haaretz*, 2 in *Yedioth Ahronoth*) and 3 (2 in *Haaretz*, 1 in *Yedioth Ahronoth*).

towards a sterilization of the violence inherent to military actions.³⁹ The more descriptive חיסול “elimination” is second choice, yet its frequency is relevant in all newspapers, up to nearly four times out of ten in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, and it is abundantly used (over 30%) also by *Israel Hayom*; being the latter decidedly favourable to the policy at issue,⁴⁰ the fact that it uses the blunter of the two options suggests the hypothesis that “elimination” in this context is not perceived as a reference to something objectionable or unacceptable, that has to be hidden or at least sterilized through language. This hypothesis appears even more plausible considering some data showing a general approval of the policy: according to different polls, 70 to 90% of Israelis approve of targeted killings, which thus enjoy a near-universal support like no other policy does.⁴¹

It is noteworthy that extrajudicial preventive killing is justified by the Hakakha, namely by the דין רודף *din rodef*, the norms concerning the *rodef* (“pursuer”): according to the Babylonian Talmud, a *rodef*, i.e. an individual who makes an attempt on his/her neighbour’s life, must be killed if no lesser means would save the innocent’s life.⁴² Killing the *rodef*, which is not a punishment but rather a form of prevention,⁴³ is not only legitimate but also a moral obligation, an action required in order to protect the life of an innocent and the community as a whole.⁴⁴

³⁹ Cfr. R. KEYES, *Euphemania: Our love affair with euphemisms*, Little, Brown and Company, New York 2010, pp. 170-185.

⁴⁰ Consider, for example, two editorials appeared in its English version: D. GOLD, *Legalizing targeted killings*, «Israel Hayom» 30 March 2012 (http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_opinion.php?id=1658); C.D. MAY, *The ‘targeted-killing’ memos*, «Israel Hayom» 14 February 2013 (http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_opinion.php?id=3438). Both describe the current situation as an armed conflict where it is impossible to bring terrorists to justice; they also claim that a new kind of enemy cannot be fought with traditional methods.

⁴¹ S.R. DAVID, *Fatal choices: Israel’s policy of targeted killing*, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan 2002 (Middle East Security and Policy Studies, 51), pp. 7-8, 18. A similarly high percentage was observable also in the United States soon after 9/11: *Poll: Most Americans*

The large approval of this policy and the possibility to justify it through religious law are two conditions which make the use of opaque phrases less necessary; this is why the straightforward חיסול “elimination” is not censored despite its dysphemistic connotation. A general observation can also be drawn: the choice of a dysphemism over other options does not necessarily imply aversion to the subject; it can even express praise for the subject, when the subject is a practice or an event which is harmful to someone or something deemed hostile by the speaker.

Violent actions carried out against Israelis are also subject of discussion: the term מחבל “terrorist” is widely used, not limited to those who perform a פיגוע “terror attack”, whereas the opposing side abstains from using the Arabic equivalents of “terrorist” (such as *irhabi*) and “terrorism” in relation to the same events; on the contrary, a tendency is observable among them to attach those labels to the State of Israel and its operations. Palestinian authorities are accused of keeping an ambiguous attitude towards terrorism, avoiding both clear condemnation and overt support; such an attitude could be motivated by the necessity of keeping internal support without renouncing to the sympathy of the international community. Undoubtedly euphemistic is the use, in this context, of the Arabic terms *shāhid* and *istišhād*, respectively “martyr” and

back assassinating terrorists, «CNN» 16 December 2001 (<http://asia.cnn.com/2001/US/12/15/ret.assassination.poll/index.html>). In both Israel and the US, the policy is approved even by many who consider it ineffective in decreasing terrorism; therefore, targeted killings seem to be supported more as a form of retaliation than as an actual means of enhancing security (DAVID, *Fatal choices*, cit., pp. 18-19).

⁴² In Sandhedrin 72b, in the discussion about רודף שהיה רודף אחר חבירו להורגו “one who is in pursuit of his fellow to kill him”, we are told that שופך דם האדם באדם דמו ישפך אמרה תורה הצל דמו של זה בדמו של זה “whoever sheds the blood of man, his own blood shall be shed”, says the Torah [Gen 9:6]. You shall save the blood of this at the cost of the blood of that”.

⁴³ Sanhedrin 73a: ואלו הן שמצילין אותן בנפשן “These are saved [from committing sin] even at the cost of their life”.

⁴⁴ DAVID, *Fatal choices*, cit., p. 14.

“martyrdom”, to denote a terrorist and a terror attack.⁴⁵

It may be significant that, according to an opinion poll carried out in 2011 by the Pew Research Center, 68% of Muslim Palestinians “say that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets can often or sometimes be justified”;⁴⁶ the Palestinian case is a clear exception in the Islamic world, where only a minority of people endorses suicide terrorism.⁴⁷

Terminology relating to suicide terrorism also raises discussion: the use of phrases such as *suicide attack* and *suicide bomber* was recently disputed “claiming that those who kill themselves while murdering others have few similarities to actual suicide victims”.⁴⁸ Already in 2002 an alternative phrasing was used in reference to

a suicide attack against Israeli civilians: on 12 April, after the massacre at the Mahane Yehuda Market in Jerusalem, the White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer repeatedly referred to the event as an *homicide bombing/attack*.⁴⁹

Hebrew equivalents of “suicide terrorist” and “homicide terrorist” are respectively מחבל מתאבד and מחבל רוצח; the distribution of the two alternatives is shown in the following table.

Even though sometimes disputed as terrorist-focused, the phrase מחבל מתאבד “suicide terrorist” is by far the most commonly used in Israeli press, where מחבל רוצח “homicide terrorist” seldom appears. As a matter of fact, also foreign media prefer the former, whereas the latter is only used as an alternative aimed

	Haaretz	Yedioth Ahronoth	Maariv	Israel Hayom
מחבל מתאבד / המחבל המתאבד	2,070	3,840	3,610	90
	96.50%	78.85%	90.43%	100.00%
מחבל רוצח / המחבל הרוצח	75	1,030	382	0
	3.50%	21.15%	9.57%	0.00%
	2,145	4,870	3,992	90

at underlining the murderous nature of such actions; nevertheless, some argue that *homicide bombing/attack* is a less useful description as it

fails to convey the key attribute of suicide terrorism.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ The media have long been aware of the role played by verbal choices in the conflict; see: G. MYRE, *In Mideast Conflict, a War of Euphemisms*, «Los Angeles Times» 25 August 2002 (<http://articles.latimes.com/2002/aug/25/news/adfg-midspeak25>).

⁴⁶ *Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image*, «Pew Research Global Attitudes Project» 17 May 2011 (<http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image>); quoted from p. 30 of the complete report (<http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2011/05/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Arab-Spring-FINAL-May-17-2011.pdf>).

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ “So says Dr. Robert Goldney, a psychiatry professor at the University of Adelaide in Australia, who is, incidentally, an internationally regarded suicide expert and author”. J. HARPER, *Psychiatrist to the press: it’s ‘homicide bomber’ – not ‘suicide bomber’*, «The Washington Times» 5 September 2013 (<http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/2013/>

[sep/5/psychiatrist-press-its-homicide-bomber-not-suicide](http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/2013/sep/5/psychiatrist-press-its-homicide-bomber-not-suicide)).

⁴⁹ After having declared that “the president was informed about this morning’s homicide bombing in Jerusalem” and “condemns in the strongest terms possible this morning’s homicide attack”, Fleischer explained that “the reason I started to have used that term is because it’s a more accurate description. These are not suicide bombings. These are not people who just kill themselves. These are people who deliberately go to murder others, with no regard to the values of their own life. These are murderers. The president has said that in the Rose Garden, and I think that it’s just a more accurate description of what these people are doing. It’s not suicide; it’s murder”. A transcript of the conversation between Fleischer and CNN’s anchorman Bill Hemmer is available online (<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0204/12/bn.14.html>).

⁵⁰ “CNN spokeswoman Christa Robinson says

Conclusions

In a world where an overwhelming majority of people have immediate access to information, wars are undoubtedly fought through words; since different names assign different weight and value to events, euphemism and dysphemism can be co-opted to serve a political agenda, as George Orwell put it soon after World War II.⁵¹ This is particularly true for the Arab-Israeli conflict, characterized by decades of a continuous hostility which makes the search for internal and external consensus a primary goal.

New terms proposed – or, rather, newer meanings for old terms – rapidly catch on with speakers of a language and thus euphemisms may take root with ease: in the same way as the English *graphic* has come to mean “explicit”

and ultimately “representing sexual activity or violence”, terms like *prevention* and *martyrdom* may be immediately understood as, respectively, “killing” and “massacre”. Therefore, rather than reflect shared meaning, their usage by the media can create it. As regards the Israeli public, a big impact in this sense is feared by some for the case of *Israel Hayom*, which “is handed out free on every other street corner and threatens to dominate the public discourse”;⁵² such a possibility cannot be excluded, yet a diachronic analysis of the sources is necessary in order to ascertain whether the other media and the public opinion were actually conditioned by a new player since its appearance.

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SUMMARY

Euphemisms are widely used in public discourse in order to obfuscate potentially unwelcome or unacceptable measures and policies, whereas dysphemisms (i.e. their unpleasant counterparts) offer a means of expressing strong feelings on disputed issues. Alternative phrasings denoting the same referent were observed for several topics in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict: depending on the choice between euphemism and dysphemism, they convey profoundly different connotations. This research was conducted through a content analysis of the four most widely circulated Israeli daily newspapers in Hebrew; three subjects – the territories, the separation barrier, and violent actions such as targeted killings and terror attacks – were taken into account in order to highlight the connection between linguistic choices and political stances.

KEYWORDS: Euphemism; Arab-Israeli conflict; Hebrew language and the media.

that the term ‘homicide bomber’ reflects only that ‘you have killed other people – like putting a bomb in a trash can which kills people – but it doesn’t reflect that you also killed yourself. We feel that ‘suicide bomber’ is much more descriptive and accurate”’. P. JOHNSON, *Homicide bomber vs. suicide bomber*, «USA Today» 15 April 2002 (<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/USAToday/doc/408885769.html>).

⁵¹ “Political language – and with variations this

is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind”. G. ORWELL, *Politics and the English Language*, «Horizon» 13/76 (1946), pp. 252-265.

⁵² NIR, *Supporting Israel’s media strengthens its democracy*, cit.

