Language is important in the prosecution of conflicts, particularly in the Middle East

The Middle East and North Africa is one of the most conflict-ridden regions in the world, with 90 percent of all states participating in at least one violent conflict since the end of World War II, or since becoming independent, against a ratio of 64 percent worldwide. The causes for these conflicts are complex and varied, but language is not one of them. However, these conflicts are played out on the international stage through intermediary languages, mainly English as *lingua franca*, in ways that draw our attention to the importance of linguistic contestation.

In this respect, it does matter to the parties concerned in the 'Israeli-Palestinian conflict' whether the media refer to Jerusalem as 'occupied', 'annexed', 'united', 'contested', 'captured' or 'conquered'. According to the Palestinians, Jerusalem is 'occupied', relying, *mutatis mutandis*, on the legality of international law in staking their claim to the city, as promulgated in UN Resolution 242. Basing themselves on *fait accompli* as a deciding factor, the Israelis consider Jerusalem as 'annexed', 'united' and some in fact claim it to be 'liberated'. The international media, when they are trying to be balanced, refer to the city as 'captured', instead of 'occupied' or 'liberated', and 'contested' instead of 'annexed' or 'united', jettisoning 'international legality' for a notion of 'balance' in reporting that evinces an ethically suspect commitment to 'fair-play' and 'even-handedness'. More 'daring' media outlets may brand the 'occupation' of Jerusalem as an act of 'conquest' to signal acquisition by force in a nod towards 'occupation' that avoids highlighting its decidedly negative meanings. The BBC is a master of this kind of linguistic gymnastics, as its coverage of the latest tragic events in Gaza in May 2021 revealed. In newscast after newscast, it reported that the attacks and counterattacks led to 'hundreds of deaths,' adding 'most of whom are Palestinians'. The fact that the percentage of deaths was in the region of 25 Palestinians to 1 Israeli was occluded by the 'most of' formulation. This is an example of how the media in certain situations tend to pay lip service to the truth, using language to avoid and dissemble while relieving their professional conscience, or protecting themselves against the charge of biased reporting.

Less obvious is the expression 'the West Bank and Jerusalem' which the international media use to refer to the area under Jordanian rule which Israel

'occupied' in 1967. This expression is now used in Arabic translation by the Arabs, even by the Palestinians, without realising that it advances an Israeli political claim that considers Jerusalem not to be an integral part of the West Bank. We are talking about East Jerusalem here, with the Old City as its locus, which was part of the West Bank when the Israelis occupied it in the Six Day War of 1967. The expression 'Six Day War' itself used to be contested, being referred to initially as the June War, or the Setback (*Naksa*), by the Arabs, although the Arab media have largely abandoned these terms in favour of the Arabic equivalent of 'Six Day War' (*harb al-ayyam al-sitta*).

Terminologically, the *Naksa* was coined by the Egyptian media to rhyme with the *Nakba* (Catastrophe) of 1948 in Arabic, which ended with the dismemberment of Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel, called the 'War of Independence' by the Israelis. On the fiftieth anniversary of the *Naksa* in 2017, young Egyptians on the streets of Cairo were asked what they thought the term meant. Very few people knew the answer. Some thought it was the name of a musical group. Such is the loss of memory in modern Arab society: the name of one of the greatest Arab defeats in modern history has dissipated into the musical ether.

While language may not be a cause of conflict in the Middle East, it is important, instrumentally, in the prosecution of conflicts. It is used to advance one's own narrative at the expense of the other side. This is blatantly reflected in the choice of code names for military operations. And the Israeli military have proven themselves to be the true masters of the war of nomenclature in the Middle East, realising that the effective prosecution of war on the military front requires an equally effective war on the linguistic front.

Israeli's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which led to the Sabra and Shatila massacre of thousands of innocent Palestinian refugees on 6 September, was given the code-name 'Operation Peace for Galilee'. The 1996 invasion of Lebanon was given the code-name 'The Grapes of Wrath', the title of John Steinbeck's novel first published in 1939, evoking Revelation 14: 19-20 with its reference to divine justice and deliverance from oppression. The massive Israeli bombardment of South Lebanon in 2006 for 'harbouring' Hezbollah forces was called 'Operation Just Reward'. These names evince a narrative of peace, justice and freedom from oppression which requires meting out punishment to the enemy who deserves his just reward for attacking 'us'. Delving into history, invoking God's presence and declaring a commitment to prosecute peace through war, these code-names, as carefully

constructed speech acts, are intended to win the audience to one's side. Winning the war is not complete without winning the hearts and minds of those who stand in the middle by acting on their feelings, religious convictions or knowledge of history through the deliberate use of language.

While *instrumentality* is the primary function of language in ordinary life and in times of conflict, attention must also be paid to its *symbolic* role in society as the subject of extra-linguistic meanings. And, here again, we may turn to historical Palestine for data. Right from its early beginnings in Europe in the late nineteenth century, the Zionist movement faced the question of language in its full symbolic force. Instrumentally, it would have been easier, for pragmatic reasons, to choose Yiddish, the language of Central European Jewry, as the medium of communication in the much hoped for 'national home' for Jews in Palestine. But this was rejected because of its negative symbolic meanings as a sign of the Diaspora, which the Zionist movement was seeking to annul. Instead, the Zionist leadership opted for Hebrew, practically a dead language among European Jewry in daily interaction, because of its symbolic resonance in laying the claim for Palestine and enacting a narrative of continuity with the ancient past. So important was language in pressing the Zionist claim, it in fact formed part of a Zionist triad that incorporated land and labour to underpin the call for return to Palestine, whereby the Jews would reclaim the land through exclusively Jewish manual labour with Hebrew as the medium of communication. The revival of Hebrew which followed in Palestine was therefore a nationalist project in which symbolism was, initially, more important than instrumentality. And it was a project doomed to enter into conflict with Arabic, the language of the Palestinian Arabs who formed the absolute majority at the time.

To this day, the linguistic landscape of the streets of Jerusalem provides a palimpsest of this conflict. During the British Mandate period (1920 – 1948), the streets of the city appeared in a trilingual form, with English as the language of the ruling power appearing at the top, followed by Arabic as the language of the majority population (including, incidentally, the indigenous Palestinian Jewry), and Hebrew as the language of the minority (Figure 1).

Figure 1: road sign from British Mandate period with English, Arabic and Hebrew arranged in that order, with gunshot marks from wars in the city in 1948 or 1967. Copyright: Yasir Suleiman.

This trilingual arrangement was contested by the leaders of the Zionist movement in Palestine and London, who unsuccessfully petitioned the British authorities, demanding parity among the three languages by displaying them horizontally on all street signs.

During Jordanian rule of the Old City, which extended from 1948 to 1967, street signs appeared in Arabic and English, in that order (Figure 2). Hebrew was erased, but some of the old mandate signs were preserved, providing a flashback to a prior linguistic order.

Following the Israeli occupation of the Old City in 1967 and, more so since its formal annexation by Israel in 1980, the linguistic landscape of the city has shifted to reflect Hebrew ascendency. The street signs regained the trilingual nature of the British Mandate period, but with Hebrew at the top, followed by Arabic and English (Figure 2).

Figure 2: original road sign in Arabic and English in a single frieze from the Jordanian rule period, with Hebrew imposed on top after Israeli occupation of Jerusalem in 1967. Copyright: Yasir Suleiman.

Acts of erasure of Arabic and Hebrew from street signs are found in this landscape to deny the claims of ownership of the other side (Figure 3). The picture is in fact more complex, but this will suffice to show that, in addition to being used as an *instrument* for circulating politically inflected terminologies and ways of talking, language provides an *echo chamber* for political conflict through its role as a *symbol* that conveys extra-linguistic meanings. Here language acts as a *proxy* for concerns that pertain to the world of politics in its broadest sense. The conflict, in this case, is not over language *per se*, but about what language stands for, symbolically, in the world of politics and international law.

Figure 3: road sign with superimposed Hebrew at the top, after 1967, removed. Copyright: Yasir Suleiman.

Language erasure, for symbolic reasons, was also a primary factor in the loss of Arabic among the hundreds of thousands of Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab lands during the early years of the state. For these Jews, called Mizrahim, the active renunciation of Arabic, leading to its loss, was considered a necessary stance in becoming a fully-fledged Israeli, the implication being it is not possible to achieve full national status and integration in society without severing one's links to the language of the Diaspora (although this drive for linguistic monism applied unevenly). But Arabic is not just any language of the Diaspora for Israelis: it is the language of the enemy outside who threatens the existence of the state, as well as that of a politically suspect and socially under-privileged and stigmatised fifth column of Palestinians who remained in their land, who would refer to it euphemistically as *Liblaad* (the homeland), after the establishment of the state. In fact, the Ashkenazi leadership of the Zionist movement, being at the helm of the new state, was at pains to distance it from its Arab-dominated environment, fearing that the influx of Mizrahi immigrants from this environment carried with it the danger of 'Levantinising' Israeli society.

Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion (born in Plonsk, Poland in 1886 and died in Ramat Gan, Israel in 1973), feared these immigrants' 'primitive Arab mentality' Abba Eban (born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1915 and died in Tel Aviv, Israel in 2002), who served as Ben-Gurion's Minister of Education and Culture from 1960 to 1963, reiterated the same stance when he said that these immigrants 'could drag Israel into 'unnatural Orientalism'', which explains the use of *opprobrium controls (a societal mechanism of disapproval, ridicule or ostracism) … against any display of Arab background by [these] immigrants and especially by their offspring'*. In his book *Outsider in the Promised Land* (2006), Nissim Rejwan, who calls himself 'an Iraqi Jew in Israel' in the subtitle of his book, dubs this stance the 'Levantinism scare'.

The erasure of Arabic among Mizrahi Jews from Arab lands, called Arab Jews by Israeli sociologist Yehouda Shenhav, was a desired goal for the new state for symbolic, identity-linked reasons, although the need of the state for Arabic instrumentally, for critical security reasons, was supremely paramount. This is a clear case of symbolism, a secondary role of language, triumphing over instrumentality, its primary function, in society. This threat of erasure through *opprobrium* controls, including 'mockery and parody' extended to the Mizrahi pronunciation of Hebrew, which is stigmatised in Israel because of its closeness to Arabic, leading Jews from this background to switch to the Ashkenazi privileged pronunciation that distances itself from Arabic (despite the fact that 'Standard Hebrew' is modelled on Mizrahi forms of the language for reasons of authenticity and closeness to Arabic, Hebrew's sister Semitic language).

The idea of language as a symbolic boundary-setter in Israel is embedded in the existential conflict over historical Palestine between Zionism and the Palestinian national movement. As a majority identity marker on the Jewish Israeli side, Hebrew excludes the Palestinian citizens of Israel despite their instrumental control over the language. 'Native' competence in the majority language of one's citizenship does not necessarily imply membership in the national community of the language concerned in Israel.

To illustrate this fact I shall, briefly, refer to the controversy that surrounded the publication of Anton Shammas' highly acclaimed Hebrew novel, *Arabesques* (1986, translated to English in 1988). Shammas' novel created a challenging and destabilising paradox for its Hebrew reading public on three fronts. First, its exquisite mastery of Hebrew was felt to be incompatible with the fact that its author

was Palestinian, betraying a belief that Palestinians could not attain mastery of the language. Second, the novel was deeply steeped in classical Jewish culture and religious traditions, which were thought to be beyond the knowledge repertoire of most Palestinians. Third, and this is the most important front in the paradox, the novel deployed these two elements to narrate the story of the Palestinian *Nakba*, which is at odds with the Israeli founding accounts of the establishment of Israel. Israelis were shocked to read the competing narrative of the 'Palestinian Other' in a language which they regarded, symbolically, as a sign of their exclusive national identity. It is one thing to narrate the *Nakba* in Arabic, but a vastly different matter to do so in a refined and impeccable Hebrew that is deeply steeped in its own history, culture and traditions. Provocatively, Shammas (born in Fassouta, northern Israel in 1950 to a Christian family) called this supreme act of deliberate subversion on his part the 'unJewing' of the Hebrew language, by which he meant making Hebrew the language of all Israeli citizens, who are equi-distant from the centre of authority in a fully democratic state, regardless of their ethnicity or religious background. Shammas considered this to be a prerequisite for making Israel the state of all its citizens, equally.

Shammas' 'unJewing of Hebrew' thesis drew the ire of one of Israel's foremost novelists, A. B. Yehoshua (born in Jerusalem, Palestine in 1936), who criticised Shammas publicly for seeking to undermine one of the most fundamental symbols of Israel's identity as a Jewish state. Yehoshua considered *Arabesques* as an act of 'linguistic trespass,' which challenged the symbolic integrity of Hebrew as a marker of Jewish identity, calling on Shammas to write in Arabic, his language, and, preferably, to do so from outside Israel. I interviewed Yehoshua on 17 June 2012 on the topic of what is sometimes called 'hybrid literature', writing by a writer in a language that is considered not to be his or hers in identity terms. He was adamant that, in the case of Israel and Palestine, each side must stick to their own language, leaving the task of transfer from one literature to another to translation. Based on Israeli author David Grossman, Yehoshua must have taken this stance because hybrid texts reflect a 'foggy identity' which, in the case of Israel, undermines the unitary nature of its exclusive Jewish identity, which he calls 'Israeliness'.

So language symbolism may in situations of conflict assume greater importance than language instrumentality. Following the establishment of Israel in 1948, the government kept the official status of Arabic, which it inherited from the British Mandate period. Palestinians who remained in the new state could therefore expect to receive their school education, and other government services, through the

language as a medium of instruction and social and legal service provision. However, the *de facto* situation in the new state meant that Palestinians resorted to Hebrew for inter-communal communication, in the labour market and in higher education. In fact, as the language of high prestige, Hebrew acted as a source of linguistic modernisation for Arabic through borrowing, and as a source of power/status display through code-switching in intra-communal settings. However, despite the differences in status between the two languages socially, politically and institutionally in favour of Hebrew, Arabic acts as a symbol of communal and national solidarity for the Palestinians vis-à-vis the Jewish majority. It is therefore not surprising that the official status of Arabic in Israel has been contested, from time to time, over a long period.

On 19 July 2018, the Israeli Knesset passed a Basic Law, having constitutional status, declaring the State of Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People who, alone, have the right to exercise national self-determination (article 1). Most of the act deals with the symbols of the state, including its name, flag, emblem, national anthem (article 2), capital (article 3), official calendar (article 8), Independence Day and memorial days (article 9). Article 4 declares Hebrew to be the 'state's language', allocating to Arabic a 'special status' to be regulated by law which, effectively, erases its 'official status.' From the instrumental perspective, the erasure of the 'official status' of Arabic makes little sense: it does not alter the currency of Arabic in Israel much, and it saves the state little money. But instrumentality as a linguistic fact and its financial cost as an economic consideration are not the issue here; symbolism is. As a symbol of communal solidarity for Palestinians inside and outside Israel, Arabic is read by the Israeli authorities as a threat to the claim of unique national ownership of what the Basic Law calls the 'Land of Israel' (article 1), a land whose borders have not been defined to this day.

The fight over the land of historical Palestine between Zionism and the Palestinian national movement extends beyond the military battlefield. As an aspect of 'banal nationalism', language enters this fight from a symbolic perspective that includes other items of material culture as proxies to express political meanings that maximise the interests of the in-group. One such item is food. The humble Levantine *hummus* and *falafel*, part of Arab fare long before Israel came into existence in 1948, have been the subject of appropriation and rebuttal in the last half century. The issue at stake here is cultural authenticity as it pertains to food as a signifier of nationhood.

Considering their ability to circulate widely across political boundaries, it is not surprising that postcards have been used in the battle of national selves between Israelis and Palestinians. Figure 4 is a copy of a postcard that claims the *falafel* sandwich as 'Israel's national snack', accompanied by another emblem of banal nationalism, the Israeli flag.

Figure 4: postcard claiming the traditional Arab falafel sandwich as an Israeli national snack. Copyright: Yasir Suleiman.

Figure 5 rebuts this claim by crossing out the word Israel and replacing the Israeli flag by an emblem of Palestinian banal nationalism, the Palestinian flag. The absence of the word 'Palestine' in Figure 5 is loaded with meaning; it is intended to say: 'Since it is widely known and accepted that the humble *falafel* is Palestinian, there is no need to state the obvious'.
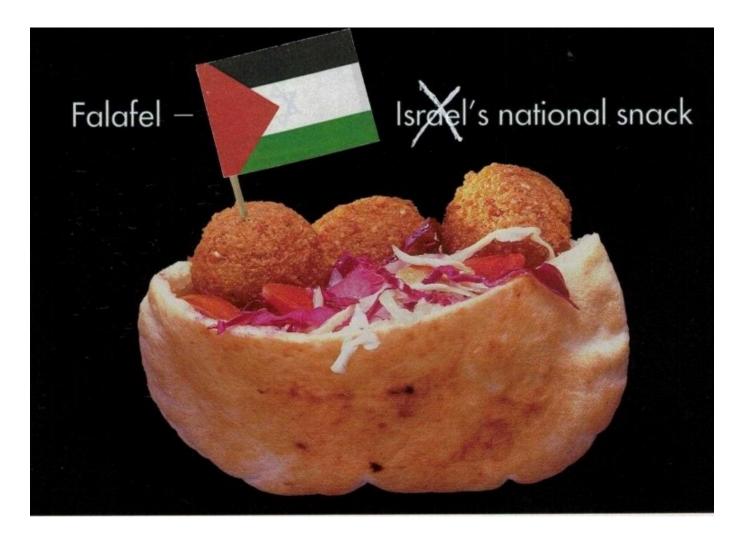
Figure 5: postcard denying the traditional Arab falafel sandwich as an Israeli national snack.

The fight these two cards present is a semiological fight over national symbols, with erasure and counter-erasure, or appropriation and rebuttal, as the primary cultural stances. Language, being the most important of all cultural symbols, is at the heart of this semiological fight.

Image: Jerusalem. Credit: Joachim Tüns/Flickr.