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DISCOURSE OF (IL)LITERACY: RECOLLECTIONS OF ISRAELI LITERACY TEACHERS[1]

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Abstract

The concepts of literacy and illiteracy are fluid; their meanings vary according to sociocultural-political trends and language ideologies. Reflections of literacy workers about their involvement in national literacy campaigns are a source of data for such fluctuations. This paper analyzes the recollections of Israeli former soldier-teachers from the time of the campaign, and additional data collected decades later in personal interviews. Close attention to discourse strategies used in both sets of data demonstrates how changes in the structure of society, and the public discourse of identity, affect the cluster of meanings along the continuum of literacy-illiteracy.

Keywords: Narratives; Literacy; Discourse strategies; Hebrew; Israel; Language ideologies.

1. Introduction

Literacy and illiteracy are laden with cultural and ideological overtones exceeding the abilities to code and decode messages. The discourse of adult literacy – writing and speaking about instilling skills – reflects a wide range of opinions relating to potential students, their motivation, background, and status. This discourse, like literacy itself, is context-bound and may change in accordance with sociocultural factors.

This paper analyzes the ways women speak about their military service as teachers in an Israeli literacy campaign, Operation Eradicate Ignorance (1964-1976, henceforth OEI). Data from the time of the campaign and decades later indicate shifts in the connotations of illiteracy. The analysis will show that these concepts are code words reflecting social stratification as affected by changes in the Israeli public discourse of identity.

Literacy is researched from different perspectives and disciplines – anthropology, education, and linguistics – and its meanings shift from the ability to read and write simple sentences to being considered a process of interpretation, a tool for learning (Baquedano-López 2009; Collins and Blot 2003; Heath and Street 2008). Illiteracy is as difficult to define as literacy because the two are not mutually exclusive but reflect a continuum of social phenomena rather than educational concepts (Harman 1987: 11). Illiteracy connotes negative characteristics; economic exclusion and inability

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to eloquently express one's self are some of the crippling results (Limage 2008: 299). Literacy connotes modernity: Literacy rates are an index for a "capacity of self-representation and even as signs of fitness for democratic self-rule" (Cody 2009: 352). On the personal level, knowing how to read and write is "something that defines us as human beings, i.e., as normal members of our cultures" (Blommaert, Creve and Willaert 2006: 35).

National literacy campaigns intend to change modes of communication, according to language policies of the particular group. As was the case with Israel's Operation Eradicate Ignorance, the campaign required large-scale coordination among policy makers, institutions and individuals; "In the mass mobilization literacy campaigns, all elements […] work together in theory to socialize the population into a new faith" (Arnove and Graff 2008: 20).

Literacy, language education, and literacy campaigns are couched in language ideologies – a cluster of attitudes and beliefs about language and discourse explicitly and implicitly expressed (Silverstein 1998). Language ideologies are employed in national or ethnic movements, and serve as justification for language planning and policies, e.g., in promoting a particular language or register in an educational system (Shohamy 2006). Intentionally or not, ideologies guide individuals in preferring particular modes of communication as perceived appropriate in the context of use (Kroskrity 2000). Articulated and unarticulated perceptions of language can be found in official and unofficial discourse about educational linguistic endeavors, as the case of the Israeli literacy campaign will show.

This study considers the perceptions and recollections of individuals about their participation in a specific literacy campaign. When speaking about participation in public endeavors, the evaluations and self-positioning are affected by the ways society-at-large views those events; the sociocultural contexts at the time of action and at the time of narration frame the events and lead the narrators in explaining, justifying, defending, accepting, or apologizing for their activities. Recollections about participation in national literacy campaigns are a case in point, because campaigns are "a product of sociocultural development and involves a set of practices which are shaped by political, social, and economic forces" (Baquedano-López 2009: 246). While speaking about their participation in the campaign, the former teachers, perhaps non-consciously, consider changes in the relative status of languages and those who speak them. The tension between historical and interactional times is more significant when the ramifications of the activities (in this case, the Israeli Establishment's treatment of the target population) are part of contemporary social agendas. Reminiscing about military service as adult-literacy teachers thus unavoidably relates to wider social factors beyond instilling specific communicative skills.

I will argue that changes in the public discourse of Israeli identity in the course of 40 years indeed affect the connotations of literacy-illiteracy. The analysis of images, metaphors, and discourse strategies used when speaking about the students demonstrates how attitudes are framed to accommodate changing norms of ethnic relations. The data reflect social hierarchies and language policies at the time of the campaigns as well as years later; literacy and illiteracy thus remain indexes for social acceptability and normative behavior.

2. Cultural and linguistic context

2.1. *Hebrew and Israel, 1960s*

The interaction between language ideologies, national ideologies, and language change has had a significant impact on Israeli policies resulting from the reciprocal relationship between the return of the Hebrew language to everyday use ("revival of Hebrew") and the national movement, Zionism (Harshav 1993). Hebrew was declared an official language of the British Mandate in Palestine alongside English and Arabic in 1922, becoming the main official language (Arabic is the second official language) with Israel's independence in 1948.[2] As a nation-state based on Jewish migration,[3] Israel invests resources in teaching Hebrew to migrants of all ages, and has developed a unique method for teaching Hebrew in Hebrew, the *ulpan* (Spolsky and Shohamy 1999). These programs, addressing people with varied levels of education, have a socializing agenda combined with teaching linguistic skills: Textbooks tell about Israeli history and culture, field trips to cultural and historical landmarks are scheduled, and the celebration of national and religious holidays are all part of the curriculum.[4]

The social paradigm of the first decades of Israeli independence – the period of the researched literacy campaign – was that of a melting pot: All (Jewish) migrants were expected to assimilate into the burgeoning Israeli-Hebrew culture. The Eurocentric ethos of the founding fathers resulted in greater pressure on migrants arriving from non-Western cultures to assimilate. The Israeli Establishment tended to see them as a monolithic cultural entity, *Sephardim* (or *Mizrahim,* or *Edot haMizrah* - "communities of the East"), in contrast to *Ashkenazim* (Israelis of European/Western origin).[5] The non-European Jewish "other" was conditionally accepted into the collective, but needed to be resocialized as members of the Israeli nation (Shohat 2003*).*

Since the 1980s, with the growing influx of migrants from the former Soviet Union, attitudes are changing, and the pressure of uniform Israeliness is easing. Multiculturalism and multilingualism are perceived as acceptable attitudes, and Hebrew literacy is seen mainly as a necessary skill for daily life (Ben-Rafael 2001). Concurrently, the practices of the Establishment, the concept of "institutionalized sociology," are criticized as discriminatory towards *Mizrahi* Jews in Israel (Goldberg and Bram 2007; Ram 1993; Shokeid 2001; Smooha 2008). This sketch of Israeli society excludes the non-Jewish population (mainly Arab), which remains marginal to the Jewish collective (Shafir and Peled 2002).[6]

The national census of 1961 reinforced the perception of *Mizrahim* as culturally deficient: 12.1% of the Jewish population was illiterate in any language; two-thirds were *Mizrahi* and two-thirds were women.[7] These results were a wake-up call for the Establishment: "It is a shame and disgrace for the People of the Book that more than 200,000 adults in the State of Israel cannot read and write in any language, and we have to do all we can to remove the disgrace and erase this stain from us," exclaimed Zalman Aran, the minister of education in December 1963, announcing the new literacy campaign, *Ha-mivzta le-Bi'ur ha-Ba'arut*, Operation Eradicate Ignorance.[8] As clearly stated by the minister, the target was the national Jewish collective, ignoring the needs of other groups of citizens, such as the Arabs.[9]

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[2] Although Arabic is the official second language of Israel, it is a minority language (Shohamy 2006).

[3] See Shohamy and Kanza (2009) for the interaction between language skills and citizenship in Israel.

[4] As noted by Golden (2001), these programs frequently treat adult migrants as schoolchildren, teaching holiday songs and encouraging behavior that reinforces Israeli norms of closeness [*gibush*] (see Katriel 1986).

[5] The ethnic epithets, *Edot haMizrah, Mizrahim, Sephardim* and *Ashkenazim* have a long history and their reference has changed over time, according to social and historical factors. See Goldberg 2008 for an extensive analysis.

[6] The linguistic reflection of the tension between Jews and Arabs is elaborated by Lefkowitz (2004).

2.2. *Eradicating ignorance – A literacy campaign*

Operation Eradicate Ignorance (OEI) followed other programs intended for national cohesion, such as volunteers teaching Hebrew and literacy to migrants who arrived from diverse countries and linguistic traditions. What set this program apart was its national scope and the cooperation among the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), which supplied the teachers; the Ministry of Education, which trained and supervised them; and the local authorities, providing their basic needs. Furthermore, while the *ulpan*, schools for teaching Hebrew, addressed educated immigrants, OEI was specifically developed for illiterate and semi-literate people whose knowledge of Hebrew was, at best, minimal.

OEI initially targeted small, ethnically homogeneous agricultural communities known as *moshavim* (singular: *moshav*), with a high percentage of undereducated adults (40% or more). Female IDF recruits with high school diplomas were offered the chance to serve in the campaign as part of the soldier-teacher unit.[10] Following basic military training, the young recruits (aged 18-20) participated in a brief course that trained them to become adult literacy teachers. These solider-teachers were assigned to live in their students' communities for the eighteen months of their military service. Usually, two teachers were sent to each *moshav* and went from house to house, attempting to convince the residents to allocate time for learning – targeting mainly women. Classes were held in the homes of the students to enable learning as part of their busy schedules; as a result, teachers taught individual women, or two or three together at most.[11] The intrusion into the private sphere and the personal relationship with students challenged the hierarchical structure of the pedagogical setting, forcing teachers to cope with issues of authority.

The gendered nature of OEI – female teachers and mostly female students – was the result of two major factors: Educating mothers (the primary caregivers of children) was prioritized for the benefit of the younger generations (Prins, Toso and Schafft

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[7] According to the 1961 census, the illiteracy rate among the non-Jewish population was 51.7%. The current literacy rate among the entire Israeli population is over 95% (Brosh-Vaitz 2007).

[8] The Minister was quoted in the daily *Haaretz*, December 19, 1963. *Ba'arut* may be translated as illiteracy or ignorance. As will be discussed below, my translation is intentional. All Hebrew quotes are translated by the author.

[9] The adult education program that succeeded OEI in 1977 was aimed at poorly educated Jews and Arabs.

[10] The IDF has a unit of female teachers working in regular schools and other institutions; the option for teaching mainly illiterate adults was introduced in 1963.

[11] Classes were organized for men as well, usually in the evenings, teaching topics such as civics or numeracy skills. The former teachers report, however, that the majority of their work was with the women.

2009), and Hebrew literacy traditionally belonged to the religious-masculine sphere of activity. (Jewish males learned to read Hebrew for ritualistic purposes, from which women are exempt.) The secularization of Hebrew literacy, now perceived as a key for modernization, caused concern and some objection to the project (see below).

The teachers represented the hegemonic center; in Maya's[12] words: "All in all, we were mainstream youth [lit. 'cream babies'[13]] from normal homes and normal education." They were mostly veteran Israelis of European descent (*Ashkenazim)* who resided in cities, large towns, established *moshavim* or *kibbutzim*; they knew very little about the places they were sent to and were largely ignorant of the cultures of their students. For the students, military service was an expected masculine rite of passage to become Israeli, as for all Jewish-Israeli males. For women, however, there were concerns that they would be taken advantage of or corrupted. In most target communities, women opted for exemption from military service based on religious reasons; thus female soldier-teachers were an unfamiliar and strange phenomenon.[14]

The purpose of the campaign was to provide the student population with the skills necessary for life in Israel – skills befitting the image of a modern nation-state. In a pamphlet distributed to female recruits (ca 1965), the Ministry of Education and the Women's Corps stresses that the first stage of teaching includes reading and writing simple texts and numeracy skills to be followed by basic knowledge of Israeli geography, civics, history, and Bible. Additionally, the preparatory course included methods of teaching literacy skills as well as lectures on home economics and hygiene that were seen as lacking among the non-Western new citizens of the country.

2.3. *Studying OEI*

Operation Eradicate Ignorance lasted thirteen years, from 1964 to 1976, when it was replaced by a different model for adult education. However, no study has been conducted to evaluate the pedagogical results or the effects on participants. The study of OEI therefore begins with basic data, such as reports, photographs, and minutes of meetings found in official archives. Secondary data from that period include newspaper reports and audiovisual materials. Personal data were collected from letters and the soldier-teacher bulletin, *The Gray Lanyard*,[15] which appeared sporadically between 1968 and 1977. A special issue of *Orhot* [Paths] was dedicated to basic adult education (Kodesh 1972), and includes discussions and assessments of teachers and educators about the ongoing campaign. These documents are supplemented by data collected between 2005 and 2008 through questionnaires and interviews with participants: Teachers, administrators, students, and focus group discussions. Additionally, there were visits to centers for elderly people, many of whom were students in the program.[16] Former teachers were located through a snowball method, accompanied by an Internet site, where people could find archival data, photographs, and lookup former colleagues. Questionnaires were included in the site, encouraging visitors to participate in the study, and were the basis for further individual and group interviews. For this paper I analyze "raw" texts authored by participants in various contexts. These are vignettes published in *The Gray Lanyard*, in the 1972 anthology, personal letters, and recent interviews.

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[12] Names of interviewees were changed to protect their privacy. See Appendix for details.

[13] The expression *yaldei shamenet*, "children [made] of cream," is a Hebrew idiom from the early 1950s, a period of food rationing. Children from established agricultural communities (veteran *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*) were believed to be well-fed with scarce food, such as real cream. The contemporary meaning is children from wealthy families.

[14] "Sort of aliens," as Miri the teacher put it.

[15] Soldiers serving in the teachers' unit wore a gray lanyard on the shoulder of their uniforms, hence the title of the unit's bulletin.

Various genres have differing constraints: Public texts may have been edited to conform to the style and ideologies of the publication, and group discussions with officials at the time of the campaign include specific concerns about the ongoing program, while 40 years later these have become opportunities for nostalgic reflections. Data from personal interviews require special attention because of pre-set social roles of participants. Even unscripted, open-ended interviews are framed by the interests and initial questions of the interviewer and thus are somewhat controlled. The frame and format of the interview, the predefined roles, and the preconception about each other's motives for acquiring or sharing information are a basic component of the dialogical process (Philipsen and Coutu 2005; Silverstein 1992; Wortham 2001).

Personal experiences are frequently presented in a narrative form (re)constructed from the perspective of the present. Personal narratives are complex phenomena that are concurrently discourse genre, mode of cognition, and social activity; they may include historical data or reflect personal position vis-à-vis other people or events as well as evaluations of the narrated events (Ochs 2009). Stories establish a certain coherence that connects events and allows the narrators to evaluate actions and attitudes towards issues at hand. These may be detected by shifts in alignment (footing), strategies of positioning, or varying degrees of salience of one's agency apparent in use of voice (Ribeiro 2006). Goffman's (1981) distinction between participatory roles of speaker and hearer help identify shifts in the position and evaluation of reported events. The use of different voices, reporting words of others, including and excluding events and people, and the causality and order of events, allows for analysis of explicit and implicit attitudes towards the evolving "plot" (Wortham and Gadsden 2006).

These guidelines are of particular importance given the explosive potential of the subject matter – interethnic relations between Jewish groups – in contemporary Israeli society. The researcher's identities have bearings on the interviews: As female and age cohort of the former teachers, I could easily establish rapport with them. However, as member of academe, known for its critical approach to the Establishment, and as *Mizrahi*, raised on a *moshav* targeted by OEI, my probing might have caused former teachers to be more careful in expressing their views.[17] The data collected indicate that while some caution can be detected in the interviews, other data (e.g., from questionnaires) demonstrate similar attitudes.

The cultural gap between teachers and students is a given, and teachers' attitudes are frequently implied and can be detected in analyzing discourse strategies used in reflecting on and describing their students. Is students' behavior similar to what the teachers were familiar with, are they like "us," or are they strangers? Whom did teachers choose to align with in their narratives? Are they using the first person plural pronoun

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[16] Data include questionnaires collected from 100 former teachers, interviews with 34 teachers, 29 students, 20 officials, and visits to six different activity centers.

[17] In fact, my interest in OEI stems from memories of female soldier-teachers living and teaching in my home community.

"we"? What was accepted and what was rejected from the norms they encountered? Following the frameworks suggested by Goffman (1981), Ribeiro (2006), Wagner and Wodak (2006), Wortham (2001), Wortham and Gadsden (2006), the next sections analyze data from the time of the campaign and 40 years later. The cluster of meanings associated with illiteracy and ignorance as code words for social stratification can thus be exposed.

3. Expectations and experiences – 1960s-1970s

The agenda of the campaign was social transformation. In official statements, illiteracy is equated with a lack of culture or civility; teachers' opinions, however, vary: Some accepted the official position, while others pointed at differences in values and the possibility of reciprocal learning. What is common in texts from the time of the campaign is the focus on the conduct of students, not on skills.

3.1. *Official position – illiteracy is lack of culture*

The social distance between students and teachers, the different cultural values and the need for the transformation of students were explicitly described in two symposia held in 1969 (Kodesh 1972). The deputy minister of education, the head of the Women's Corps, and the director of adult education in the Ministry of Education engaged in a dialogue with soldier-teachers, voiced their agendas and listened to the teachers' concerns. The officials had no doubts about the cultural mission as they addressed the teachers in 1969 (emphasis added):

(1) Deputy Minister of Education

> In this operation you are dealing with the *spiritual rehabilitation* of the nation. Sometimes the adult students are reborn. Reborn as citizens of the State of Israel, as free citizens. There is no need for too many words to explain the fact that acquiring the *Hebrew language and understanding basic terms about Israeli citizenship are interrelated*. We observed that in our visits and tours of this operation. These two issues are a condition for real integration, a strong *spiritual integration in the Israeli homeland* (Kodesh 1972: 202).

(2) The Women's Corps commander

> You were sent not only to teach, but also *to introduce a new life* […]. I was asked if our female soldiers are fighting, and I said yes. They are fighting! […] We are fighting with a non-lethal weapon; we are fighting with the *most expensive weapon*, the weapon of education. That is what I mean by *fighting ignorance* (Kodesh 1972: 205-6).

The transformational agenda of the campaign was brought up at a second and smaller symposium, held at the home of the Director of the Division of Adult Education, Dr.

Shlomo Kodesh, in July 1969.[18] Discussing teachers' concerns, the host-facilitator asked: "Do you worry about that [too], are you successful in somewhat changing things that *we do not even consider as culture*?" – referring, *inter alia*, to modes of behavior such as playing the radio even when no one is listening, different food habits, and unruly children. Vered, a soldier-teacher on active duty, challenged Kodesh's assumption, commenting that "Noise is part of the culture in these homes, and it is not uncultured." Furthermore, she objected to the practice of telling the students how they should behave. Meira, a veteran soldier-teacher and university student, responded:

(3)

> According to your approach, Vered, I think OEI is somewhat unnecessary. If you cannot hurt people's feelings, then you are not allowed *to change them*, so why are we teaching them? They were quite happy even without learning and would have found ways to manage without the campaign. […] the question is, are we able to get them out of their situation *into a different state* or are we only trying to give them minor tools? If this is the case, I think the campaign was superfluous. If not – then *we need to work on all directions of change* (Kodesh 1972: 249-50).

Directly appealing to Vered serves a double function: On the one hand, it reinforces solidarity, and is a common practice in Israeli modes of speaking (Katriel 1986). On the other, the personal address intimates that the position presented by Vered is individual and probably not shared by other soldier-teachers. The personal address, therefore, can be interpreted as underscoring hierarchical order based on experience: Veteran Meira is equipped to guide the naïve young teacher.

Accepting the transformative mission is even clearer in the following passage from *The Gray Lanyard*, an anecdote Nurit shares with other soldier-teachers.

(4) "Engraved in Memory" (original title)

> What really bothered me in my students' homes were the children who constantly disrupted, the earsplitting radio volume, and the artificial flowers in vases. I decided somehow *to remove these bothersome elements*. I promised the children a story and a game after a lesson, during which they will go outside. The oldest daughter sat with the baby. I lowered the radio immediately upon entering the house and had a bunch of wildflowers in my hand. After a while, mothers began to send the kids outside, promising candy and a story by the teacher. The radio was turned off upon my arrival, and wildflowers appeared in vases, sometimes picked by the little girl. *My satisfaction was immense*. "My next project will be *better attention to house cleanliness and personal hygiene* of my students" (ca 1969).

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[18] The information about the meeting does not include the specific number of participants but mentions by name five officials, and eight teachers, two of them already discharged from service but involved in adult education.

For Nurit, the teacher, instilling social manners is more pressing than print literacy. She is satisfied that her students "learned the lesson," since they began removing the disturbing elements (radio, children, plastic flowers) on their own initiative, following the teacher's example.

3.2. *Negotiating authority*

As noted earlier, most teaching was done in the homes of the students, a setting that may weaken authority. The soldier-teachers could retain formal hierarchy, or develop egalitarian relationships with the students. Compare the following reports by Liat and Dana:

(5)

> I presented my students with the choice of learning or not learning. "If you want to learn, you have to come to classes together." I did not tell them, "You cannot come," but I said, "*I am very busy* and cannot schedule individual classes for individual students" (Kodesh 1972: 215).

(6)

> The greatest achievements [of the campaign] were in the interpersonal sphere. *We were with them*, we lived *with them*, we stayed for holidays. […] I still visit them about once a year. I feel I have 40 houses that were mine. Every house I enter I feel as if it is mine […] I myself learned a bit about agriculture, *asked them to teach me*. (Kodesh 1972: 210-11).

The different attitude towards the mission is evident not only in the content of the texts but also in the ways of speaking. For Liat (excerpt 5), the mission is transmitting knowledge, and her authority is reinforced by the unidirectional instructions, "*You have to come to classes together*." For Dana, in excerpt 6, rapport is an important aspect of the campaign; her attitude is amplified by using the plural "*we*" and repeating reciprocal learning: *"asked them to teach me."*

3.3. *Developing relationships*

Reciprocal learning and appreciation of students' culture is evident in another item published in *The Gray Lanyard* #3. Responding to a request by the editor of the bulletin, Vered shares with other soldier-teachers the positive experiences that allayed her initial fears.

(7) "A Thought in a Free Moment" (original title)

> … I was so afraid of the boredom in this place. The mere word *"moshav"* produced a long yawn. … And how many tears I shed on my pillow in the hotel [during the training course] when I heard where I will be sent, all alone, with no other soldier from the training course. Who knows where this community is? Who are these people? What will I do there for

> such a long time to fight the boredom, day and night, day and night? I thought there is nothing more horrible than going there to teach. Now *I laugh at my previous fears* […] In brief, the day is not long enough, so many things to do, and *so much joy*! (letter dated June 30, 1969).

Growing familiarity with the students and gradual personal transformation can be observed in letters written during military service. Personal letters are subject to fewer constraints than texts intended for publication because they are addressed to specific and familiar individuals. When other modes of communication are scarce (as in Israel in the 1960s) letters are a crucial medium for maintaining and developing relationships, transmitting information, expressing concerns, and sharing experiences with others (Ahearn 2004; Violi 1985). Dina wrote many letters to family and friends during her military service that document, in a sensitive way, a wide range of feelings about her older Moroccan and Persian students.

(8)

> The picture of houses there is atrocious. It seems that the Establishment [lit. "high windows"] skipped over this place, it is totally neglected. […] poverty is terrible: A large room, *dirty concrete floors*, and every family sits huddled near a small burner and shivering from the cold. This is the situation with most families and, when there is a home with a picture and a *kitschy jar decorated with disgusting gold* – this is the most respectable, richest family in the place (December 1965).

Reporting on her first visit, Dina observed lack of hygienic and aesthetic values, but even at this initial stage she points at the "High Windows" as responsible for ignoring the community. The people themselves are only props in the background, but they become animated, and are given names, faces and feelings in subsequent letters.

(9)

> It is so demeaning to beg the woman to learn while she presents a stiff-necked attitude and continues with the laundry or caring for the chickens. If I wasn't convinced about the importance of the issue, were I not aware of the fact that this is the *epitome of ignorance*, of *mind deterioration*, I would have given up a long time ago. [...] After such arguments it is so good to come to a family yearning for knowledge and awaiting every word from me. But there are all kinds of people, and we always say, "and these are people who could have been *my mother and father*" (February 1966).

Dina shares the hegemonic ideology that literacy is more than skills, lamenting those who refused to be helped. Despite cultural differences, she acknowledges familiarity with the students who "could have been *my mother and father*."

(10)

> I also noticed how my relationships with the students have changed. At one time they were students I wanted to teach; I was only *interested in their progress*, books, and notes. Now it is more complex. Now *learning*

> *is a means, some kind of connection we have*, and through letters and words one discovers troubles, and difficulties, and joys, and sorrows, *and we learn, and mutually open our eyes*. Wonderful! I never believed I could learn and be informed by our friends here. It is difficult to explain *what exactly I am learning at every moment I spend with them*, but most of all appreciation and love for every woman who has many children, has huge, frightened eyes, and wears a kerchief[19] (June 1966).

Dina's many letters include a wealth of information about the day-to-day life of a soldier-teacher in OEI, but also eloquently demonstrate her sensitivity to others. Although she rejects the official position that required cultural change, she nevertheless was aware of the drawbacks of illiteracy, accepting the logocentric ideology. The great number of letters reveals her growing sympathy and deeper understanding – a process that is lacking from other segmented data found in written sources. Dina continues to reflect on her experience, and in the 2007 interview she expressed similar opinions: Appreciation of students' culture and criticism of attempted forced modernization, but also a belief in the necessity of acquiring literacy skills. Her evaluation of the campaign is mixed with self-criticism for being too lenient and not sufficiently insistent with reluctant students, "unlike today, when I stand with my foot stuck in the door no matter what."

The above texts, dating from 1965 to 1972, reflect actual concerns of performing duties according to social paradigms of the time – *spiritually rehabilitating* the students. The next section presents reflections of former teachers on their actions 40 years earlier. Rather than being concerned with performing their military-educational duties, the interviewees may have other concerns, such as how the mission is perceived in the contemporary multicultural era, and the dialogical nature of interviews.

4. Reflecting on the experience – 2005-2008

The recent data is based on face-to-face interviews conducted with former teachers. I met them at the locations of their choice, and began by explaining that the paucity of documentation necessitates the use of personal recollections in order to better understand the dynamics of the campaign. Former teachers continue to equate literacy with modernity without challenging the logocentric modernist notion and the cultural difference between teachers and students. The interviews focused on what illiteracy entails; however, rather than dwelling on (un)cultural behavior, they emphasize teaching and learning. Relationships with the students, negotiating their authority as teachers, and their feelings, take precedence over the transformative mission.

4.1. *Ethnocentrism*

Ruthie began by apologizing for the possible inaccuracy and idiosyncratic point of view that she can offer. She then added:

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[19] Married observant women cover their heads; the kerchief is typical of North African and other Middle Eastern traditions.

(11)

> Leaving the closed, protected, and protective – perhaps even inhibiting – *kibbutz*, to meet the Israeli reality, and the encounter with *Edot haMizrah* or the new immigrants, was the strangest and most different experience. It was like coming from another planet and landing in a reality I was not aware of. The positive thing I personally felt was, or perhaps because *I really did not have any prior feelings, or any prejudice*. I *did not have a bad opinion* about *Edot haMizrah*, perhaps because we were children and were so protected.

Later on, still in the initial stages of the interview, Ruthie continued:

(12)

> There were people who lived, really, today *you would call that primitive*. They did not use toilet bowls properly, they pickled olives in them.[20] […] The entire cooking was done sitting on the floor. I remember some dish they made, a kind of dough; *we* would actually sit for a half hour or so, *doing exercises from booklets*, when the required first step was actually to *teach them to hold the pencil*.

For Ruthie, and many other teachers, *Edot haMizrah* came from a different world; some equated the experience of living among their students as an ethnographic venture. Perhaps sensitive to interethnic relations and to my presence, Ruthie rejects the possibility of her ethnocentrism. The derogatory qualifier "primitive" is attributed to a generic second person that includes me, the interviewer. Animating the interlocutor, "you would call that," infers sharing the opinions voiced, and thus reduces potential controversy, a strategy found in media interviews (Liebes, Kampf and Blum-Kulka 2008).

Sensitivity to ethnic relations is not common to all teachers. A former soldier-teacher who was interviewed by a friend expressed her opinion about the students differently: "I accepted them as they were, although I came from, yes, the top of civilization to a place that is so godforsaken, you can't even imagine!" The speaker is aware of her prejudicial attitude as can be deduced from her emphatic "yes."[21]

Lack of "cultured" norms is indicated by behavior – sitting and cooking on the floor – but also by the lack of specific skills: They needed to be taught "*to hold a pencil*." Yet the social and cultural distance is reduced by including herself in the routine, "*we* would sit…" Acceptance of local norms and emphasizing common behavior appears in most interviews. Thus Meira, who in 1970 articulated the need to change behavior (excerpt 3 above), spoke of accepting local customs in the 2007 interview: When invited to eat with her students, she sat *with them* on the floor, even when they offered her a chair.

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[20] The role played by toilet bowls in the discourse of ignorance will be discussed later.

[21] One of my students gave me the text of the interview she had conducted some years ago.

4.2. *Teacher's authority*

In retrospect, the interviewees seem to be aware of their marginal position in the communities where they taught: They were aliens, fulfilling a mission that raised objection from certain segments of the community – mainly men – fearing the consequences of women's learning. Furthermore, the teachers presented a potentially dangerous role model for local women: Single, living alone, serving in the military. Teachers' marginality required asserting – or negotiating – authority in order to perform their duties. The following narrative, related by Galya in response to my question about the training course, represents one type of authority.

(13)

> The instructor taught us to associate letters with their phonetic representations. Thus, the consonant "gimel" [/g/ as in /good/] should be associated with the sound of a duck quacking, /ga/. One of the soldier-trainees asked what to do if a student says that ducks make a different sound. The instructor replied, "*You are the teacher, if you say the duck's call is /ga/, then the duck says /ga/.*"

The narrative did not disclose Galya's opinion, so I inquired how she felt about the incident. Galya assured me that the instructor's reply was best for that stage because it reinforced the authority of the teacher.

Miri represented the community's point of view. Responding to my question about obstacles she encountered in attempting to teach Yemeni women to read and write, she said, "At first there was shame, and there was apprehension, and there were husbands who did not allow it;" elaborating further, animating others – a generic man, her younger self – to explain the behavior of community members [square brackets are added for clarification]:

(14)

> […] all kinds of things [were said]. That perhaps one [generic, male] needs to be a bit careful and open one's eyes. Look [female, addressing me, the interviewer], *the moment the woman learns,* then you [generic, male] feel that in time *she may threaten* [you]. As they say [generic], like in the story of the Garden of Eden, "and their eyes opened up." Because the more I [as a teacher] open the woman's eyes, meaning I [Miri, in the interaction] am trying to follow and think what might have been the motivation [of men objecting to women's learning], *she* [the woman-student] *will want and want and want, and who knows what the end will be*. […] And there is some wariness, and it is very legitimate, and I [Miri, as a soldier-teacher] accepted it and really understood it.

These excerpts posit two systems of knowledge: Communal-religious, and official-secular. In excerpt #13 Galya prioritized the teacher's authority by quoting the instructor, "If you say the duck's call is "ga," then the duck says "ga." Miri favored local concerns and repeated the voices of male authority, adding her own evaluation for reinforcement, "it is very legitimate, and I accepted it and really understood it." The students in Galya's narrative are passive receptors of outside knowledge originating from scientific observation of nature. Miri silenced the outside authority and chose to quote a generic male, reinforcing his authority by alluding to an authoritative principal in a Jewish religious community, the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden (Schely-Newman 2009). Interestingly, Miri, one of the few *Mizrahi* soldier-teachers, is the only one who voiced and justified male concerns about activities she herself took part in. Other teachers spoke of men's objections and interference as indicating patriarchal norms.[22]

These contradicting positions reflect similar attitudes voiced years earlier – by those who saw their mission as changing their students (excerpts 3, 4, and 5) and those appreciating the local norms while teaching (excerpts 6 and 7). Other teachers were not as sure about their positions as were Galya or Miri. They presented a more complex view of the campaign, justifying the need for teaching while criticizing the authoritative demands. Being younger than their students and teaching in the domestic sphere caused some to feel like intruders, as Leah explained:

(15)

> There was a problem of finding time for learning when the student said, "I cannot" and I [as teacher] need to bring her to learn regardless of her complaints. And who am I? All in all I am a girl. *She looked like my mother*. I mean, it was very difficult. I remember sometimes *I felt uneasy,* a feeling of, "what do I want from her?"

Similar to what Dina wrote in her letters many years earlier (excerpt 9), Leah finds in her students a resemblance to her parents. Rather than assert her authority (as did Liat in excerpt 5, or Galya in excerpt 13), Leah expresses solidarity with the students, and uses women's traditional activities as opportunities for reciprocal learning.

(16)

> I suggested to my friend to offer to teach them Hebrew and *they will teach us* to cook, so they will not be offended, because we were much younger and they had lots of experience. […] *we wrote and read recipes*. […] One time we helped someone whose house was in a terrible mess and she was not able to throw anything away. We helped her tidy up and clean the house, then *we made a list of things* to throw away, taking advantage of the opportunity.

In this example illiteracy is equated (as years earlier) with inability of proper domestic maintenance; once more the remedy is literacy – listing and following instructions. However, unlike in Nurit's narrative (excerpt 4), literacy skills are an integral part of the process of "rehabilitation," not a separate issue. As in prior examples, the use of the pronoun "we" reinforces solidarity and mutual development.

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[22] The correlation between ethnicity and gender and their impact on the campaign is beyond the scope of this paper.

4.3. *Goals of the campaign*

The existing cultural gap was repeatedly presented by the former teachers as an obstacle to be overcome, stressing social cohesion as a central goal of the literacy campaign. Following my request to evaluate the campaign, Shoshi mused about the campaign's goals:

(17)

> It was more about *creating contacts*, building *mutual trust*, and this is a tremendous advantage. That is why I told you I think that all this Eradicate Ignorance business was more sort of *an attempt to connect* than just *sitting to read and write*. This is why I think the achievements were so low.

Shoshi, like other teachers in recent interviews, mentioned cultural aspects of their students' lives while referring to the acquisition of skills. When social cohesion replaces literacy skills as the main purpose of the campaign, unidirectional influence is replaced by familial settings (mother-daughter) and reciprocal learning.

Although differences between individual teachers at the two points in time may seem idiosyncratic, changes in Israeli public discourse of ethnicity need to be considered as influencing how and what can be said about other ethnic groups. The effects of multiculturalism and multilingualism, which replaced the melting pot social paradigm, become apparent in the discourse strategies used when speaking about the literacy campaign, indicating a shift in the cluster of meanings associated with illiteracy.

5. Discussion: Discourse of (il)literacy

OEI was a top-down program based on the Zionist national ideologies of transforming Jewish migrants into Hebrew-speaking (and -writing) Israelis. All texts, from the time of the campaign and from recent interviews, do not challenge the boundaries of the Israeli-Jewish collective or the supremacy of Hebrew logocentrism over native languages or other modes of communication. All texts refer only to the Jewish population, mainly to *Edot haMizrah* who migrated from non-Western societies. Their *spiritual rehabilitation* required abandoning the old, eradicating traditional social norms, and replacing them with appropriate skills for a *new life*. The title of the campaign, with its catchy alliteration, *bi'ur ha-ba'arut*, reinforced this interpretation by the connotations of the root *b.'.r.* that appears in Biblical texts in the context of elimination of negative characteristics.[23] Thus from the outset, as the former teachers suggest in recent interviews, the title itself devaluated the students' cultures.

The discussion Kodesh led with the soldier-teachers about "changing things that *we do not consider as culture*," supports my translation of the title as eradicating *ignorance*, not just illiteracy. The negative semantic field of *ba'arut* includes not knowing how to hold a pencil, unfamiliar foodways, aesthetic values, and numerous and unruly children. A documentary about OEI (Yeshurun 1966) focuses on the lack of modern amenities in the lives of the target population, showing women performing domestic chores in "primitive" conditions. Scenes of doing laundry by hand, milling grain while sitting on the ground, washing dishes using an outdoor faucet, etc., are complemented by showing adults sitting around a kitchen table and painstakingly attempting to read simple sentences or learning how to hold a pencil and write their names for the first time in their lives. The interrelationship between literacy skills, civic behavior, and citizenship is reiterated further in a 1972 primer used in the campaign, with phrases such as, "We want to learn to read and write because we want to be good parents to our children and happy citizens of our country." Elsewhere in that primer, a young man repeats the same message to a soldier-teacher in an effort to encourage her not to give up on her students: "If you leave, no other soldier-teachers will come. People here *will remain as they are*: They won't read, won't write, won't listen to Israeli radio and *will not be civilized citizens of Israel*" (Schely-Newman 2010).

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[23] The expression "*ubi'arta ha-ra mikirbecha*" [and thou shalt eliminate/exterminate evil from amongst you] appears several times, referring to negative behavior and practices that should be abandoned in order for the People of Israel to remain holy (e.g., Deuteronomy 13: 6, 17:12). The religious practice of symbolically destroying all leavened substances prior to the Passover holiday is called *bi'ur hametz*, eliminating the leavened by fire.

Unlike the official position, teachers' remarks – at both points in time – reveal tension between the top-down official attitude of transforming the students and the reality of the field: Meeting multitasking mothers who embraced the single teacher as part of the community. Asserting their authority or accepting the local patriarchal norms was another aspect of the same conflict between modernity and tradition. The written data from the time of the campaign focused on cultural changes, in line with the social melting pot paradigm. In the later corpus, appreciation of students' culture is the norm; attempts to impose modernization are implicit, framed apologetically and rationalized, or presented as the official point of view, not that of the teachers. Discourse strategies used reflect the variety of attitudes at both points of time. Transformative attitudes are framed in pride of personal actions, in silencing the students (excerpt 4) and quoting authoritative voices (excerpt 13). Appreciating the local culture and emphasis on reciprocal learning are expressed in using familial images ("*like my mother*"), and frequent use of the pronoun "we."

Many teachers repeatedly explained that their students were not ignorant, "they just did not know how to read and write." Some former teachers attributed the inability of students to acquire literacy skills to learning disabilities, rather than to a cultural trait of the population-at-large or their own inexperience in teaching. Ethnocentric views are reframed and related to others: "today *you* would call that primitive" (excerpt 12), or explained as an individual trait, "smells, *for me*, are a sensitive issue."

The modified meaning of *ba'arut* in the 2000s, now denoting a lack of particular skills, is apparent when speaking about the achievements of the OEI. The relatively unimpressive results of the campaign are justified by a lack of planning, such as "we built the boat while sailing," as Riva opined, or by emphasizing their own inexperience as young, naïve teacher-soldiers (Schely-Newman 2009). When I asked former teachers about success stories, they referred to literacy practices of students, not ways of behavior. They pointed to the fact that most people can at least write their names and therefore "you don't see any more inkpads in post offices." Others introduced me to former students – a poet, an author of a cookbook. The beneficiaries of the campaign seem to be the former teachers rather than the students, "*bi'arnu et ha-ba'arut shelanu*" [we eradicated our own ignorance]. This rephrasing of the title endowed the term *ba'arut* with its earlier cultural connotations, but rather than indexing a lack of [hegemonic] culture, it is interpreted as a lack of knowledge about [the others'] culture.

The cluster of meanings of illiteracy continues to include lack of civility, otherness, and backwardness, but in a modified way that lessens the value – and need – of transforming the students. This shift in meaning also diminishes the role of the teachers in the process and their contribution is now implicit. "I decided somehow to remove these bothersome elements. […] My satisfaction was immense," Nurit reported in her contribution to *The Gray Lanyard* (excerpt 4). Meira, who in 1970 viewed the need to change students' lives as the mission of the literacy campaign (excerpt 3), commented (in 2007) on changes in a less active way: "When I left the *moshav*, people no longer used toilet bowls for storing vegetables." Note the different voice used: From attributing changes to personal actions to a less direct correlation between teaching and changes in sanitary habits concerning food.

The unusual use of toilet bowls, as "a place for laundry and soaking vegetables, for storing all sorts of things that have no other place; the bowl is almost anything but a toilet bowl,"[24] has a significant history in Israeli folk culture. In the 1950s there were discussions about the need to install indoor plumbing in houses built for non-European immigrants because of their traditional use of outhouses. Stories about people storing vegetables or pickling olives in the (unused) bowls were told about Moroccans in 1950-1960, and repeated in the data collected about OEI. Furthermore, when I interviewed elderly women, some jokingly referred to themselves as living in *moshavim* "where people used to pickle vegetables in the toilet bowls." The same stories resurfaced in the 1980s-1990s about other migrants, this time from Ethiopia, a group that continues to be associated with the illiteracy, ignorance and primitiveness that correlate with low social status.

Interviews with former teachers in recent years evoke similarities between the two disadvantaged groups, in direct references, "just like the Ethiopian today," or implicitly, by suggesting that perhaps programs like OEI, designed according to the needs of the community, may help Ethiopian migrants to better adjust. This homology allows former teachers to avoid referring to their students as ignorant and uncultured, while indirectly devaluating their culture by way of analogy. Ethiopians migrating to Israel arrive as citizens, and are embraced into the collective (e.g., they are provided with preliminary housing and Hebrew classes like other Jewish migrants), but remain marginal, and still suffer from discrimination.[25] Other groups, such as foreign workers – documented as well as undocumented – and the Arab population – both citizens of Israel and those residing beyond the 1967 Green Line – are further marginalized and outside the main Israeli collective; no toilet bowl stories are told about them.[26]

What has changed between the two points in time that created this turnabout in the interpretation of the term *ba'arut* from a code word for uncivilized behavior to a more restricted meaning of lack of literacy skills? Nostalgia and the appreciation of past activities and experiences are a partial explanation for the shift in opinion; however, other Israeli social factors suggest additional insights. The influx of migrants from the former USSR, and greater acceptance of multiculturalism, as well as criticism of the melting pot social paradigm, has had an effect. Comparison between the two major groups of migrants, *Mizrahi* in the 1950s-1960s, and the Russian migration in the 1990s-2000s, points to the failure of the former and the success of the latter (Smooha 2008). Complaints about discriminatory practices in the early years, and the increased participation of *Mizrahi* parties in the Israeli Knesset (Parliament), sustain the subject of paternalistic attitudes and interethnic relations as an ongoing issue in the national social agenda. Notwithstanding the influence of my identity in the interviews, these changes in public discourse may account for the shifts in tone and in discourse strategies used by former soldier-teachers. As active soldier-teachers, and as representatives of the Establishment, they tended to reflect hegemonic views towards their disadvantaged students, accepting their classification as culturally deficient, and supporting the need for cultural transformation; dissenting voices are reserved for private channels. As adult citizens, they may be attuned to other voices and present their own version of what was done or should have been done for social cohesion.

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[24] A quote from the life story interview, note 21 above. This description immediately follows an extended explanation of how she avoided eating food offered by her students, even though it was a cultural affront. Was this a defensive way of justifying her *faux pas*?

[25] The situation of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel is not similar to that of the *Mizrahi* immigrants of the 1950-60s, and is beyond the scope of this paper.

[26] According to Peled and Shafir (2002), the contradictory trends in Israeli political and social thought (colonialism, national ethnicity, and democracy) led to a multiple system of citizenship creating social stratification that blurs ethnic differences while allowing non-egalitarian distribution of rights and privileges. See also Shohamy and Kanza's (2009) discussion of types of Israeli citizenship.

6. Concluding remarks

Literacy is not merely a neutral skill, and teaching is not a unidirectional conduit for knowledge. Student attitudes, teacher training, program planning, cultural understanding, and other factors influence the process and outcome, reinforcing the argument that underlying ideologies – language ideologies included – are fundamental in studying language policies and planning (Tollefson 2006). As recent studies point out, critical pedagogy, adult education, language planning, and literacy practices necessitate a broader perspective that challenges self-evident interpretations of what literacy and illiteracy are (Baquedano-López 2009; Bartlett 2008; Collins and Blot 2003; Heath and Street 2008).

The formal discourse of literacy in Israel and elsewhere is a discourse of modernity and change (Arnove and Graff 2008); Hebrew literacy was, and continues to be, a transformational tool for nation-building (Spolsky and Shohamy 1999). The social paradigm of the melting pot, of transforming all migrants into a collective with modern Eurocentric traits, caused oral cultures to be stigmatized and devalued. The data presented provide ample evidence that shifts in meanings notwithstanding, illiteracy continues to be a marker for constructing social stratification.

Oral discourse and personal experience narratives are flexible and subject to changes and thus sensitive to shifting meanings of social concepts. Contextual factors are essential elements in the construction of personal narratives, evinced in narrative practices, choice of voice, and positioning (Ochs 2009; Ribiero 2006; Wortham 2001; Wortham and Gadsden 2006). In this paper I suggest that public discourse plays a crucial part in the process, particularly when speaking of activities and attitudes that are challenged by segments of the society. Personal recollections are filtered through intricacies of interethnic relations and reflect perspectives that better fit the public discourse of interactional – rather than historical – time (Bauman 1986). Attitudes that were acceptable at one time are no longer "politically correct" and are therefore expressed in subtle ways – hedging, reported speech, evoked images, choice of events to be reported, order and causality, positioning – discourse strategies that invite a comprehensive and critical analysis. Accordingly, the consequences of (il)literacy are found in discourse, not only in skills.

Appendix – Interview data

1. Dina, from Jerusalem, a developer of pedagogical materials for teaching Hebrew as a second language. Taught in 1965-66 at a *moshav* of Kurdish and Moroccan Jews in northern Israel. Interviewed April 16, 2007.
2. Galya, a teacher, from a town in the north. Taught students of mixed ethnic origins in 1966-1967 in a small town in northern Israel. Interviewed January 4, 2007.
3. Leah, a teacher, lived on a *kibbutz* in northern Israel. Taught in 1969-1970 in a *moshav* of Tunisian and Libyan Jews in the north. Interviewed on July 18, 2007.
4. Maya, a college teacher from Jerusalem. Taught in 1967-1968 in a development town in southern Israel, mostly Moroccans. Interviewed twice over the telephone in April and May 2007 and participated in a focus group session on May 15, 2007.
5. Meira, an adult literacy program developer, from a suburb of Tel Aviv. Taught in 1964-1966 in a *moshav* of Libyan Jews in the north. Participated in the group discussion organized by Kodesh. She was my first contact with former teachers and was interviewed in person and over the telephone several times in 2005 and 2007.
6. Miri, a kindergarten teacher, emigrated from Iraq at the age of 3 and was raised in a Tel Aviv suburb. Taught in 1966-1968 at a *moshav* of Yemenite Jews in central Israel. Interviewed on May 3, 2007. I also accompanied her to visit a former student on July 23, 07.
7. Riva, an official at the Ministry of Education, in charge of adult education programs. Taught in 1967-1969 in a Tel Aviv suburb. Interviewed in her office on July 8, 2007.
8. Ruthie, a graphic designer, lived on a *kibbutz*. Taught in 1966-1968 at a *moshav* of Libyan Jews in the south. Interviewed on December 7, 2006.
9. Shoshi, a college teacher, from a suburb of Tel Aviv. Taught students of mixed ethnic origins in 1968-1969 in a small town in northern Israel, Interviewed on May 3, 2007.
10. Vered, a Hebrew teacher for adult immigrants, taught in 1971-1972 at a *moshav* of Tunisian immigrants in the south. She participated in Kodesh's group discussion. I interviewed her at her home on July 18, 2007, and escorted her when she visited her former students on July 25, 2007.

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