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Language Corrections as a Tool for "Civilized"
Bashing

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August 2, 2023

“Hebrew level: Bibist.”: Online Hebrew language corrections as a tool for “civilized” bashing

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Abstract

Despite the potential for democratic engagement offered by online commenting, research suggests that political discourse within the Israeli online commenting sphere falls short of realizing its democratic potential. A notable example is the presence of language policing practices. Hebrew online comments often display non-standard language forms, occasionally prompting corrections from individuals who adhere to a standard language ideology. It is these instances of correction that serve as the focal point for the present study. Examining interactions containing language corrections drawn from four prominent Israeli Facebook news pages, we compare between interactions that follow posts related to political issues (the judicial reform/coup in Israel) and those that follow posts related to (mostly) non-political matters (celebrities in Israel and abroad). Findings indicate that language corrections are more prevalent in the political context compared to the non-political context. Qualitative analysis suggests that language corrections manifest as a form of supposedly “civilized” and sanctioned bashing. These language corrections are not driven by a genuine concern for the Hebrew language, but rather stem from the desire of (typically) left-wing correctors to establish their intellectual superiority over the (typically) right-wing individuals being corrected, thus contributing to the perpetuation of existing stereotypes prevalent in Israeli society.

Keywords: online commenting, language corrections, standard language ideology, political discourse

1. Introduction

Since its inception, the Internet has been regarded as a public sphere that encourages democratic participation, potentially eliminating social barriers and amplifying non-hegemonic voices (Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013). This potential extends to linguistic diversity, encompassing not only various languages but also non-standard language varieties (Švelch & Sherman, 2018). However, research indicates that although the Internet is ostensibly democratic, many online platforms perpetuate the same hierarchical structures and social practices found in society (e.g., Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013; Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, 2017). A notable example is the presence of language policing practices. Language policing exists not only in offline communities, such as educational institutions and academia, but is also prevalent in digital communities, such as Facebook (Švelch & Sherman, 2018) and Jodel (Heuman, 2020; Heuman, 2022). These practices often stem from a “standard language ideology” that advocates a prescriptive notion of “correct” language usage (Lippi-Green, 1997). In the realm of digital communication, this ideology has been termed “cyber-prescriptivism” (Schaffer, 2010).

2. Language Corrections

Individuals who adhere to a standard language ideology often engage in language corrections, aiming to rectify non-standard forms of language. In everyday conversations, language repair primarily serves the purpose of addressing interactional issues, such as improving intelligibility (Macbeth, 2004). Additionally, early studies in Conversation Analysis (Schegloff et al., 1977) highlight that in everyday conversations, speakers predominantly choose to self-correct, refraining from correcting others. In other contexts, such as educational institutions, the endorsement of a standard language ideology is commonly observed, not only among teachers who correct their

students’ language (e.g., Godley, 2007; Razfar, 2005) but also among students correcting their own language (Netz et al., 2018).

Finally, despite its potential for breaking down social barriers, the Internet has become a space where standard language ideologies can actually flourish. For instance, Švelch and Sherman (2018) conducted a study examining two Facebook pages, one in English and the other in Czech, both dedicated to the concept of “Grammar Nazi”. Originally a derogatory term referring to individuals who excessively police language, these “Grammar Nazi” Facebook communities have appropriated the term to signify language policing as a positive social practice. They collect and share instances of non-standard language use online, primarily for entertainment purposes. In another study investigating standard language ideology in digital communication, Heuman (2020) explored language corrections performed by users of the social network Jodel in Swedish. Heuman (2020) reveals that, in contrast to corrections in everyday conversations, non-standard language forms in Swedish digital communication on Jodel are primarily corrected by others rather than self-corrected. Like Švelch and Sherman (2018), Heuman (2020) also highlights the humorous tone associated with language corrections. However, the primary focus of Heuman’s (2020) study was on the various forms of these corrections, while her exploration of their pragmatic function in context was limited.

3. Online Political Discourse

The present study examines Hebrew language corrections within the context of Israeli political digital discourse. Previous research on Hebrew online political discourse has primarily focused on the Israeli online commenting sphere (e.g., Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013; Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, 2017). These studies indicate that despite the democratic potential of online commenting, political

discourse in the Israeli arena is predominantly characterized by what Katriel (2004) termed as a “bashing style”. This type of discourse aims to establish boundaries between opposing right-wing and left-wing factions, thereby conveying a “radical pessimism about the possibility of political debate” (Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013, p. 361).

For instance, Weizman and Dori-Hacohen's (2017) findings demonstrate that comments in response to political opinion editorials on the Israeli website NRG are typically “ethos-oriented,” employing highly emotional language such as aggressive or derogatory slurs targeting the columnist's personality or their political group affiliation, rather than engaging in “logos-oriented” challenges related to the argumentation itself. Moreover, the comments predominantly consist of “ad-personam” attacks, which directly target the columnist, rather than “ad-hominem” challenges questioning their credibility and professional authority (Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, 2017). Within this realm of bashing, leftists often depict rightists as uneducated, occasionally violent, or even fascist individuals, while rightists often portray leftists as elitist, naive, and bordering on delusional (Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013, p. 370).

However, these studies have primarily focused on analyzing online comments that were written in direct response to opinion editorials, often overlooking the broader interactions that take place among the commenters themselves. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating interactions among Facebook commenters, comparing between interactions that follow posts related to political issues (the judicial reform/coup in Israel) and those that follow posts related to (mostly) non-political matters (celebrities in Israel and abroad). Since online comments are composed by the general public and are typically unedited, they frequently contain non-standard language forms. Occasionally, individuals adhering to a standard language ideology take it upon themselves to correct these non-standard forms. It is precisely these instances of correction that serve as the central focus of the current study.

4. The Current Study

4.1 Research Questions, Data, and Method

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) What types of language forms are corrected by commenters on prominent Israeli Facebook news pages?
- (2) Does the context of the interaction (political vs. non-political) influence the frequency of language corrections on these Facebook pages?
- (3) What is the political affiliation of the correctors in political interactions?
- (4) Which identity categories are constructed through the language corrections?
- (5) How are the language corrections received (i.e., are they accepted by the person being corrected or do they generate antagonism)?

To address these questions, we conducted an analysis of two distinct sub-corpora of Facebook data: (1) a political sub-corpus consisting of comments following posts related to the judicial reform/coup in Israel, and (2) a (mostly) non-political sub-corpus of comments following posts related to celebrities in Israel and abroad. Each sub-corpus comprised a random sample of 150 threads, which encompassed both original posts and subsequent comments. These data were collected over a four-month period from March to June 2023, sourced from four major Israeli Facebook news pages: (1) *Ynet*, (2) *News 12*, (3) *News 13*, and (4) *Now 14*. After collecting a total of 300 threads (150 in each sub-corpus), we conducted a manual examination of the data to identify all comments that included language corrections. Altogether, we identified a total of 82 language corrections. For each correction found, we documented the initial comment that contained the use of non-standard language, the comment containing the correction, and any subsequent comments following the correction. Subsequently, we compared the frequency of language corrections in the two sub-corpora. We then carried out a qualitative discourse analysis of the data to gain deeper insights into the nature and dynamics of the language corrections and their implications in both political and non-political contexts.

4.2 Findings

As noted above, we identified a total of 82 language corrections. Most corrections were related to non-standard spelling. Less frequently, corrections were made regarding non-standard grammar and punctuation.

As hypothesized, a significant difference was found in the frequency of language corrections between the political and non-political sub-corpora. Specifically, out of the 82 language corrections, the political sub-corpus contained a total of 71 (87%) corrections, whereas the non-political sub-corpus only had 11 (13%) corrections. It is worth noting that certain threads had no instances of language corrections, while others exhibited multiple corrections within a single thread. Out of the 150 threads analyzed in the political sub-corpus, 48 threads included language corrections, whereas in the non-political sub-corpus, 6 out of the 150 threads included language corrections. This difference in the occurrence of language corrections was statistically significant: $\chi^2(1, N=300) = 39.8374, p < .005$. These findings support the notion that language corrections are more prevalent in the political context compared to the non-political context.

Interestingly, the few language corrections that were found in the non-political sub-corpus were, in essence, political in nature, as they were related to prominent disputes in Israeli society, including the political division between rightists and leftists and the religious-secular division. For instance, out of the 11 language corrections found in this sub-corpus, 3 were observed in an interaction related to the actress Alona Sa'ar, who, according to the original post, had suffered from depression. Notably, Alona Sa'ar is not only recognized for her acting career; she is also the daughter of Gideon Sa'ar, a politician who formerly served as a minister on behalf of the Likud party and later established

a new party called New Hope after an unsuccessful leadership bid against longtime leader Benjamin Netanyahu. In other words, despite the sub-corpus being intended as non-political and centered around celebrities, Israeli politics seeped in, and it was mainly within this context that language corrections were performed.

As for the political affiliation of the correctors, out of the 71 language corrections performed in the political sub-corpus, 63 (89%) corrections were performed by opponents of the judicial coup, whereas only 8 (11%) corrections were made by supporters who view it as a judicial reform. In other words, in the majority of cases, opponents (generally associated with leftist political views) were the ones correcting the language of proponents (typically associated with rightist views).

Moreover, qualitative discourse analysis revealed that language corrections were commonly accompanied by insults and mockery towards the person being corrected. Specifically, through the language corrections, those who were corrected (typically proponents of the judicial reform, and rightist in their political view) were often portrayed as unintelligent individuals lacking formal education and producing incoherent or even nonsensical written content. Given the derogatory tone, it is unsurprising that language corrections generated antagonism and heightened feelings of animosity between the two opposing camps. For instance, those who were corrected frequently responded with additional insults in return. Moreover, the reactions to language corrections often indicated that the corrections were perceived as condescending, with retorts like "You are not my language teacher."

In fact, there were very few language corrections that did not lead to antagonism. One such occurrence took place in the non-political sub-corpus, during an interaction about the singer Avi Aburomi. A mother commented on a post about Aburomi's success among youngsters, mentioning that she attended his show with her 12-year-old daughter and was amazed by his phenomenal voice. Her comment contained a word written in non-standard spelling, which prompted a language correction. However, the correction itself was an "exposed correction" (Heuman, 2020); i.e., the correct form was framed by an asterisk without any further comments. In response, the mother thanked the corrector and expressed that she had a feeling something was wrong with the spelling of that word. This example illustrates that when corrections are not part of a heated political debate, they do not necessarily evoke antagonism. In the rare instances where corrections are made without any apparent political context, they are more likely to be accepted without generating animosity or hostility.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, our findings shed light on the nature of Hebrew online language corrections, which appear to manifest as a form of supposedly "civilized" and sanctioned bashing. It is evident that these corrections are primarily "ethos-oriented," characterized by emotionally charged and condescending comments, rather than "logos-oriented" challenges related to the argumentation itself. Notably, language corrections are prominently employed within the context of heated political debates. In such instances, corrections do not seem to arise from a genuine concern for the Hebrew language but rather stem from the correctors' desire to assert their intellectual superiority over those

being corrected.

In other words, language corrections are not about language but rather about attempts to demean and belittle others. By employing such language corrections in emotionally charged debates, individuals may further exacerbate tensions and create an atmosphere of hostility rather than promoting constructive discussions. Understanding these dynamics can be valuable in addressing the underlying issues and encouraging more respectful and constructive communication in various online forums and social media platforms.

6. References

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