Sociocultural Motivation for Spelling Variation in Modern Hebrew

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Abstract. Ideological tendencies and cultural preferences may at times constitute powerful factors in motivating spelling variation in variable social environments. Such tendencies and preferences may stem from religious taboo or represent modern political or seemingly-historic nuances. Since Sebba's (2007) account *Spelling and Society: The culture and politics of orthography around the world* leaves Hebrew outside of scope, the following brief account offers an overview of categories in which variable spelling conveys ideological perceptions and sociocultural stances.

1.   When Spelling Disagrees With Orthography

Orthography and *spelling* are often used interchangeably, especially by linguists, who most often overlook the subject or treat it as a means to consider phonology. The study of graphemics as a socio-semiotic discipline, however, must distinguish inherently-variable spelling from inherently-invariable *orthography*, i.e., the 'officially-sanctioned spelling' (Greek *ortho* = 'correct'), be the sanctioning authority a state-governed official language academy (as in France, Spain, Israel and Egypt), a prestigious printing house (early modern England) or an editor of dictionaries (Germany, USA). This means that spelling variation includes orthography among other variants, and descriptive linguistic methodology, which justifiably ignores prescriptive dictums, cannot avoid taking into consideration orthography as a relevant factor in the spelling continuum despite its inherent prescriptive component. Thus, for the sake of socio-semiotic analysis, it must be noted that while spelling displays variation across time, space and social premises, orthography— once an established institution in a given culture—changes only in leaps, sanctioned by the concerned authoritative decisions. In the case of Hebrew, a one-state language, such decisions are voted in the Academy of

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the Hebrew Language, an official institution, legally empowered and financially sustained by the State of Israel (Fellman, 1974). Decisions on orthography may follow prevalent spelling-tendencies across society in some cases and advocate changes in spelling in other cases, which may in turn be followed by some users and ignored by others, whether for lack of knowledge or for reluctant conservatism (Moreshet, 1968; 1969).

2.   Graphemic Euphemism Regarding Sequences <yh> and <yy>

Religious taboo in writing concerns primarily avoiding pointing the tetragrammaton יהוה <yhvh> in pointed editions of the Hebrew bible from the tenth century on. Post-Biblical works avoid writing it down altogether except in citations of entire biblical utterances (Sharvit, 1992). A cultural side effect of not writing the tetragrammaton down is the custom among observant Jews, quite pervasive in those milieus, to avoid spelling even small sequences thereof in other words. Thus, words whose spelling combines two subsequent letters of the tetragrammaton are spelled using a special apostrophe between the "holy" letters to be avoided, e.g., בעי'ה <bʕy'h> 'problem' and מאפיי'ה <mʔpyy'h> 'bakery', instead of the general spelling בעיה <bʕyh> and מאפייה <mʔpyyh>. Another religious taboo concerns the spelling of אלהים <ʔlhym> /ʔelohim/ 'God', modified into אלקים <ʔlqym> by changing the letter *bey* ה <h> into *qof* ק <q> (ibid., p. 115) by virtue of their graphetic proximity (a slightly longer stroke in the latter); this new spelling has given rise to the new euphemism /ʔelokim/ (Neuman, 2009, pp. 625–626).

3.   Intentional Respelling Expressing Disapproval

One of the discourse strategies in use for expressing slight disapproval, strong opposition or fierce contempt towards an idea or entity consists of intentionally respelling words whose messages one wants to denigrate. The guiding principle of the graphemic pun is changing the spelling while keeping pronunciation intact. Whereas graffiti were the sole scene for such variations (Sebba, 2007) until the internet revolution, nowadays this practice is widespread on social media platforms.

   To take a mild example, public transportation users who wish to express their dissatisfaction with the train services respell רכבת ישראל <rkbt yśrʔl> /rakévet israel/ *Israel Railways Ltd.* as רקבת ישראל <rqbt yśrʔl>, alluding to the root √r.q.b. 'decay'. Similarly, dissatisfaction with the Israeli Police motivates respelling משטרה <mšṭrh> /miʃtara/ 'police' into משטרע <mšṭrʕ>, whereby the last syllable /ra/ respelled רע <rʕ> means 'bad'.

Some respellings are fiercer than others. Indeed, one of the strategies of expressing strong disapproval of the Israeli Culture Minister, thus criticizing her policy, her general anti-cultural discourse ("I haven't read Chekov") and some of her questionable public manners, consists of changing שרת התרבות <śrt htrbvt> 'Culture Minister' into סרת התרבות <srt htrbvt> "culture-less".

Israeli political discourse offers the highly frequent respelling סמול <smvl> for שמאל <śmʔl> /smol/ 'left', a common practice by right-wing partisans to express fierce opposition to- and mockery of- left-wing ideas and partisans, although recently appropriated by left-wing partisans in the self-designated proactive Facebook page סמולנים <smvlnym> "leftists". Following similar thinking, since one of the landmarks of the Arab-Israeli Peace Process, conducted by an Israeli left-wing government in the mid '90s, was the city of Oslo (cf. the Oslo Accords), the toponym אוסלו <ʔvslv> *Oslo* has been respelled עוסלו <ʕvslv>, a kind of 'nonce spelling' (Bolinger, 1946, p. 336), whereby the letter *áyin* ע <ʕ> (corresponding to a pharyngeal consonant) connotes the feature [+Arab], i.e., *negative* in the respellers' set of values. This and other cases of 'phonemically-pointless áyin' probably represents the emergence of a new [+pejorative] thematic grapheme in colloquial writing of Israeli Hebrew.

Finally, some respellings are more personal than others. For instance, the fact that intentional spelling variations such as סמולן <smvln> 'leftist' are often accompanied by numerous ignorance-based spelling variations, one of the social media attested responses, not very frequent though, is the intentional derogatory would-be imitative respelling אנאלפבט <ʔnʔlpbṭ> "eliddiret" as an eye-dialect spelling for orthographic אנאלפבית <ʔnʔlpbyt> 'illiterate'.

4.   Anti-*Plene* Graphemic Conservatism

Either pointing or *plene* spelling may help readers complete phonological information unavailable in unpointed "defective" spelling (Weinberg, 1985). Before the *plene* accommodations were sanctioned (using additional *yod* י <y> and *vav* ו <v>), unpointed Hebrew was overloaded with the zero grapheme and reading it required intense cognitive labor. Yet, the introduction of those "helping letters" was felt by some readers to be "lowering the standard for the lazy, slow, and ignorant, instead of just teaching them how to read and write correctly". Reacting by psychological or cultural inertia (Aronoff, 1994) to the *plene* accommodations, some spellers would rather avoid adding *yod* י <y> and *vav* ו <v> in a few highly frequent lexical items.

One such word is מאוד <mʔvd> /meod/ 'very', whose highly frequent reactionary conservative variant is מאד <mʔd>. Another example is

the word אמא <ʔmʔ> /íma/ 'mom', whose recently-introduced *yod* (אימא <ʔymʔ>) breaks the visual-word habits of many language users. While unorthographic *vav*-less מאד <mʔd> is typically old school, unorthographic *yod*-less אמא <ʔmʔ> is much more widespread (Cohen-Gross and Ilani, 2006–2007). The case of the word /mila/ is more complex, since its pointed spellings vary between different meanings: מִלָּה <mlh> 'word' and מִילָה <mylh> 'circumcision'. When *plene* orthography was first sanctioned in 1968, it was accepted that מלה <mlh> /mila/ 'word' be left unchanged in order to avoid homography with 'circumcision'. A few decades later, in 1994, the Academy of the Hebrew Language decided to adopt the *plene* spelling even for 'word', which assumes this semantic context would allow distinguishing both meanings in spite of their homographic spelling, whence מילה <mylh> /mila/ for both 'word' and 'circumcision'. Conservative spellers, however, maintain the spelling מלה <mlh> for 'word'. They include the liberal *Haaretz* daily newspaper, whose editor titled Or's (2004) critical article on prescriptive rigidity "Why <mlh> should be <mylh> from now on." In the conflict between Academy orthographic decisions and spelling traditions maintained by the intellectual elite, Tzivoni represents the prescriptive standpoint: "The Academy has set forth clear rules, but the influencing instances—particularly book editors and newspapers—refuse to obey them and make their own rules" (2011, p. 22). Without taking a stand here, it is worth noticing that reluctance from reform does not equal making up one's own rules—it rather constitutes maintaining a handed down spelling tradition against what conservatives view as unnecessarily made up spelling horrors.

Other non-*plene* spellings consist of *yod*-less /i/ in open syllables which affect particular morphological categories, two of the most salient being

- the future tense and infinitive of *nif'al* verb template like להכנס <lhkns> /le(h)ikanes/ 'enter (inf.)' instead of ordinary but more recently standardized *plene* להיכנס <lhykns>; and
- the past tense of *pi'el*, e.g., למדו <lmdv> /limdu/ 'taught (past, 3pl)' instead of ordinary but more recently standardized *plene* לימדו <lymdv>.

The first is quite pervasive among college-degree holders since even *yod*-less spelling is sufficiently transparent. The second category, on the other hand, is much more opaque since in the absence of *yod* it graphemically coalesces with another morphological category (*qal* stem); it is therefore much rarer, and generally characterizes spellers who graduated from high school by the mid-1970s, when active pointing was taken out of the baccalaureate curriculum.

A more widespread non-*plene* spelling consists of avoiding the orthographic double-*yod* יי <yy>—which many proficient spellers would consider nonce spelling—corresponding to the consonantal /y/ in ultrafrequent words whose single-*yod* spelling is not subject to opacity in

reading. One such word is הייתה <hyyth> /hayta/ '(she) was', whose general spelling is היתה <hyth>. Tzivoni comments from a prescriptive point of view: "A few respectable book publishers refuse spelling הייתה <hyyth> and use היתה <hyth>. Their resistance to הייתה <hyyth> is astonishing and incomprehensible" (2011, 105, n. 1). Another case of double-*yod* public intolerance is the final /ay/ spelling, whereby the general public keeps spelling עלי <ʕly> for orthographic עליי <ʕlyy> /alay/ 'on/about me', מתי <mty> for orthographic מתיי <mtyy> /matay/ 'when', די <dy> for דיי <dyy> /day/ 'enough'. The last anti-*plene* frequent spelling on this list is הכול <hkvl> /(h)akol/ 'everything', whose general spelling is הכל <hkl>. The lexical items presented in this paragraph are unorthographically spelled not-*plene* by the general public, including by major publishers, with the exception of ardent adherents to the Academy of the Hebrew Language.

5.   Proper Names: General Anti-*plene* Conservatism

The relatively long time-span of composition of the Hebrew biblical text is responsible for several chronological differences in applying the use of *matres lectionis* into its variable spelling in such way that later texts within the biblical canon are spelled more *plene* than earlier ones (Andersen and Forbes, 1986). While variable spelling, including *plene*, affects the general lexicon, the category of proper names is somewhat more conservative than others in that it tends to remain relatively "defective". This means that adding a *vav* ו <v> corresponding to a back vowel or a *yod* י <y> corresponding to a front vowel was much less current in some proper names.

    Modern Hebrew orthography tends to adopt these spellings by maintaining their traditional biblical spelling without adapting it to the general rules of modern *plene* orthography. Thus, a few traditional proper names, widespread among Modern Hebrew speakers, display no *vav* ו <v> corresponding to /o/: יעקב <yʕqb> /yaakov/ 'Jacob', משה <mšh> /moʃe/ 'Moses', שלמה <šlmh> /ʃlomo/ 'Solomon'; and the name דוד <dvd> /David/ 'David' displays no *yod* י <y> corresponding to a the /i/, although some Israelis who go by that name take the somewhat avant-garde liberty of spelling it using an additional *yod* י <y> as in only three occurrences in Classical Biblical Hebrew (ibid., pp. 4–5), namely דויד <dvyd>, e.g., writer David Grossman.

    The noun pattern *QóTeL* underlies common nouns whose pointed vs. *plene* orthographies diverge on an additional ו <v>, e.g., בֹּקֶר <bqr> /bóker/ 'morning' vs. בוקר <bvqr>. Some of these nouns are also used as proper names, whence room for variation concerning the *vav* ו <v> in unpointed yet willingly defective spelling (see § 3.2 supra). Thus, while the noun זֹהַר <zhr> /zó(h)ar/ 'glamour' is spelled *plene* זוהר <zvhr>, peo-

ple who go by that name (mostly first, seldom last) either spell it *plene* or insist on זהר <zhr>. Other proper names displaying this feature: נגה <ngh> /nóga/, נעם <nʕm> /nóam/, רתם <rtm> /rótem/, ארן <ʔrn> /óren/, נעה <nʕh> /nóa/, שהם <šhm> /ʃó(h)am/, with divergent tendencies in biblical names preferring the *vav*-less spelling vs. modern names showing preference for the *plene* spelling. Those who use the *vav*-less variant sometimes comment meta-graphemically "this is the *correct* spelling" and would often correct correspondents who would dare add the conventional *vav*. Parents often take the warrior's stand, as the mother of a 12-year old boy called אבינעם <abynʕm> /avinóam/, who commented in an interview (October 2017): "How can anyone with minimal self-respect spell it with a *vav*?" Others opt for the *vav* variant: "It's just easier to read. And those who insist on the *vav*-less spelling are a bit stuffy" (Landman, 2014, p. 140).

Similar variation with respect to *vav* in proper names may be found in proper names of the noun patterns *QoTla* and *QoTLat*, whose *plene* spelling adds a *vav* which is absent in the pointed spelling, e.g., שמרת <šmrt> /ʃomrat/, דברת <dbrt> /dovrat/, עפרה <ʕfrh> /ʕofra/. The case of אסנת <ʔsnt> vs. אוסנת <ʔvsnt> for /osnat/ is more complex since one of the phonemic variants is /asnat/. Here too, biblical origins may encourage preference for the *vav*-less variants, and the same meta-graphemic discourse applies for these morphological categories as well.

6.   Eye-Dialect Respellings

The term 'eye-dialect' refers to pronunciation-oriented non-orthographic respelling, whether the pronunciation at hand is socially-unmarked, <wimmin> for <women>, or, in an extended sense of the term, socially-marked, e.g., <bo'l> for <bottle>. Eye-dialect in Hebrew is used in direct speech represented in fiction or on social media and texting. In fiction it may either characterize pronunciation as ethnic or foreign, i.e., socially-marked pronunciation, or it may indicate fast / colloquial speech, which is then unmarked (Ben-Shahar, 1995). While eye-dialect in fiction is generally anecdotal, although some formation patterns are discernable, on social media and in texting it usually conveys socially-unmarked colloquial speech, thus representing *anti-spelling* (analogous to *anti-language* in general sociolinguistics). Among the highly-frequent eye-dialect items is the term בית ספר <byt spr> /bet séfer/ 'school' commonly respelled בצפר <btspr> "skool". Taken a step farther, this alternative teasing respelling, originally conceived in teenagers' blogs and short text messages, later served for branding as [+young] a new (2002) establishment:

> "Habetzefer" was established by the Israeli Advertising Association which unites 50 advertising agencies in Israel. "Habetzefer"'s shares holders, are 40

leading advertising agencies of the country. Above all, this ensures that the "Habetzefer" curriculum is on par with the strict requirements of the advertising industry in order for our graduates to fit in the industry successfully. (`www.habetzefer.co.il/english`)

It remains to be seen whether the adoption of SMSpellings for branding products as [+young] is merely anecdotal or liable to become more productive.

7. Spelling Subsystem: Graphemic Marking of Lexical Foreignisms

One of the most salient features of Yiddish orthography is the graphemic dichotomy between European and Semitic lexical components, somewhat comparable to the "Native and foreign" graphemic distinction within Carney's (1994, 96ff) *Spelling Subsystems*. While the spelling of the Hebrew-Aramaic (hence 'patrimonial') lexical component of Yiddish follows classical Jewish sources, thus expressing loyalty to Jewish cultural heritage, as in the spelling systems of other Jewish languages, the spelling of the European component, mostly Germanic and Slavic, is much more phonemic, i.e., ideologically-neutral. Thus, on the verge of linguistic conversion to Modern Hebrew, after a few minor hesitations between contradictory tendencies, this graphemic dichotomy ended up remaining in Modern Hebrew with minor modifications, thus maintaining the traditional opposition between cultural continuity with classical sources vs. practical spelling of words bearing no cultural attachment (Neuman, 2013). Modern Hebrew phoneme-to-grapheme correspondences thus vary according to the feature [+foreign], and this dichotomy has led to two parallel graphemic sub-systems:

Phoneme	Hebrew autochthonous	Foreign
/a/	Final position: א <ʔ>, or ה <h>, or ע <ʕ>	ה <h>
	Medial position: zero <ø>	א <ʔ> <ø>
/i/	Closed unstressed syllable: zero <ø>. Elsewhere: י <y>	י <y>
/ay/	י <y> יי <yy>	יי <yy>
/v/	rarely ו <v>, frequently ב <b>	וו <vv>
/s/	rarely שׂ <š>, frequently ס <s>	ס <s>
/χ/	ח <ḥ> כ <k>	כ <k>
/k/	כ <k> ק <q>	ק <q>
/t/	rarely ט <ṭ> frequently ת <t>	<t> → ט <ṭ> <th> → ת <t>

All in all, the spelling of foreign words is less complex, and learners of Hebrew may figure them out more easily than the orthography of patri-

monial vocabulary. To illustrate the major categories of the dichotomy, here are a few examples, one for each. Concerning the notation of /i/, whereas the /i/ in מפקדה <mpqdh> /mifkada/ 'headquarters' takes no *yod* י <y> since its syllable is closed and unstressed, the /i/ of היפנוזה <hypnvzh> /hipnóza/ 'hypnosis' takes the *yod* י <y> since in spelling foreign words, the type of syllable is irrelevant; unsanctioned yet common spelling exceptions display *yod* י <y> in closed unstressed syllables only where homography is liable to cause ambiguity, e.g., מנהל <mnhl> /mena(h)el/ 'director' vs. מינהל <mynhl> /min(h)al/ 'office'. With respect to the sequence /ay/, in autochthonous לילה <lylh> /láyla/ 'night' it takes a single *yod* י <y>, which could technically be interpreted as the vowel /i/ or /e/, while the same diphthong in the foreign term סיידר <syydr> /sáyder/ 'cider' takes a double-*yod* יי <yy>, which is less ambiguous; less proficient spellers tend to apply the foreign graphemic rule also to Hebrew words, e.g., ליילה <lyylh> instead of לילה <lylh>. Similarly, while the /v/ in autochthonous הבנה <hvnh> /havana/ 'understanding, comprehension' corresponds to *bet* ב <b>, but could technically be spelled with a double-*vav* וו <vv>, the Cuban capital city Havana does take a double-*vav* וו <vv>: הוואנה <hvvʔnh>, leaving no room for hesitation in reading. Finally, the alveolar stop /t/ in the word /tik/ is either spelled as autochthonous תיק <tyq> 'bag' or as foreign טיק <tyq> 'tick', and this spelling distinction joins a morphophonemic distinction in the plural *tikím* 'bags' vs. *tíkim* 'ticks'. Spelling autochthonous words is more complex than spelling foreignisms, and being able to coherently apply this dichotomy is part of spelling proficiency.

This dichotomy clearly carries ideological values. Patrimonial lexicon in Yiddish constitutes a minority within the entire vocabulary, so spelling it as in classical texts carries the value of respect towards Jewish cultural heritage. Conversely to Yiddish, Modern Hebrew vocabulary is more than 90% autochthonous (Schwarzwald (Rodrigue), 1998), so spelling foreign words differently puts them in a visible *graphemic quarantine* (not without calling to attention the special [Pharaonic] Egyptian graphemics for non-Egyptian words, more phonetic than for autochthonous words). When added to the already existing morphophonemic quarantine, and given the ideological anti-foreign inclination of the linguistic pillar in Zionism, as in several other national movements in 19th and 20th centuries, namely the language-shift to Hebrew, it becomes clear that their identification as external to the autochthonous system makes it easier to gradually replace them (Masson, 1986). For example, both morphophonemic foreignness of /táksi/ 'taxi' and the graphemic relative foreignness of its spelling טקסי <ṭqsy>, the *tet* ט <ṭ> in particular, have allowed its maintenance in a stable structural segregation until the time came for its gradual yet successful replacement by the Hebrew term מונית <mvnyt> /monit/ (Neuman, 2013).

8. Arabic Loanwords: Between Foreignisms and Semitisms

Judeo-Arabic established a special tradition of transcribing Arabic using the Hebrew alphabet, which, though unstable with respect to the notation of several sounds, contributed its own share to Modern Hebrew graphemics. What is relevant for the present synopsis of Modern Hebrew spelling variation is the distinction, using Hebrew letters, between Arabic emphatic phonemes /ṭ/ and /q/ and non-emphatic counterparts /t/ and /k/. Based on this distinction, the Hebrew notation of Judeo-Arabic phonemes follows this rule (Hary, 1996):

		Phoneme	Arabic script	Hebrew script
Alveolar	[–emphatic]	/t/	ت	*tav* ת <t>
	[+emphatic]	/ṭ/	ط	*tet* ט <ṭ>
Velar	[–emphatic]	/k/	ك	*kaf* כ <k>
	[+emphatic]	/q/	ق	*qof* ק <q>

Comparing the Judeo-Arabic graphemic treatment of /t/ and /k/ according to this chart with their treatment in the last two lines in the previous chart (lexical foreignisms) suggests a possible graphemic conflict if, while being foreign in Hebrew, Arabic loanwords in Hebrew follow the Judeo-Arabic spelling tradition. Indeed, whereas Judeo-Arabic [–emphatic] /t/ and /k/ take *tav* ת <t> and *kaf* כ <k>, as foreign words in Modern Hebrew they would take *tet* ט <ṭ> and *qof* ק <q>. The choice of their spelling in Modern Hebrew is partly conditioned by the feature [+learned] of the borrowing process (Neuman, 2015): words introduced into Hebrew via or accompanied by literacy, mostly by scholars or journalists, usually follow the customary Judeo-Arabic tradition, e.g., אינתיפאדה *Intifada* (an Arabic word meaning 'tremor', usually rendered by 'uprising') with a *tav* ת <t>, whereas popular loans initially display more fluctuation in spelling, though they quite often become normalized though scholarly intervention and end up acquiring an orthography that follows the Judeo-Arabic tradition. Thus, Arabic loanwords in Hebrew whose spelling was arranged by learned language users are spelled in Hebrew according to the Judeo-Arabic tradition. For example, the 19th century Palestinian Yiddish lexical Arabism /sábre/ 'cactus fig' (Kosover, 1966, p. 157) was respelled into Modern Hebrew צבר <ʦbr>, whence subsequent graphophonemic rephonemization into /ʦabar/ (Neuman, 2009, pp. 690–692).

In turn, the fact that European loanwords obey relatively strict graphemic rules while Arabic loanwords are much less subject to such restrictions may indicate that, on the ideological level, given that Zionism exhibits a combination of rejecting old Europe and yearning for a somewhat imagined "new East," Arabic loanwords might appear less foreign in Hebrew than the European loanwords. The unequal graphemic

treatment of European vs. Arabic loanwords is thus carrying a compo-
nent of identitary ideological discourse.

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