



KHOTI KHOTI (Neta Elkayam & Amit Hai Cohen) Neta Elkayam, 2017

SONGS OF LONGING AND CONTESTATION

TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI POP CULTURE

Alexa Altmann



HABIB GALBI (Idan Shtainer & Tomer Yosef) A-WA, 2015

Closing ones' eyes and listening in on Allenby, one of Tel Aviv's busiest streets, one is engulfed by a polyglossal wave of sound and language emanating from conversations and shop loudspeakers. The stereos blasting competing popular Hebrew pop tunes, Russian rave tracks, North-American Rap, Greek and Turkish folk songs as well as Arabic lyrics over thumping dance-beats. Particularly the increasing presence of Arabic on mainstream Israeli airwaves and concert halls is striking, considering the tension fraught history of Israeli language ideologies and policies, which culminate in the Nation-State Bill's degradation of Arabic from an official to an auxiliary language in July 2018.

The young musicians, A-WA, Neta Elkayam, Yemen Blues or SHIRAN, just to name a few, whose all-Arabic songs have been topping Israeli charts in the past years, are Jews of Middle Eastern and North African ('mizrahi') descent. As second generation Israeli-born, they have 'lost' their families' ancestral Arabic as a spoken language due to the dominant decree for national monolingualism dating back to the pre-state era, which was to effectively overcome the feared linguistic, and hence cultural, stigmatisation of Jewish Diaspora. As the heteroglossal and translanguing lifeworlds of diverse Jewish communities between local and colonial languages, varieties such as Yiddish, Ladino, or a multitude of Judeo-Arabic traditions, and heterodox Hebrew(s) had been a source of contempt for European anti-Semitic linguists of the 19th to the mid-20th century, citing the alleged 'multi-tonguedness' ('Mehrzügigkeit') of Jews as proof of universal Jewish duplicity and

un-belonging, language became a central bone of contention in the Israeli national project.¹ The ensuing debasement of diasporic multilingualism in favour of standardised Modern Hebrew resulted in a sharp separation between immigrants and their Israeli-born 'sabrah' descendants. However, whereas European identified languages, accents and varieties were reminiscent of an alleged submissive and homeless Jewishness, Arabic speakers were associated with the 'enemy' in light of increasing Jewish-Arab hostilities. Hence, Arabic and Hebrew – in spite of their close proximity and many translanguing entanglements – were

gradually established as exclusive signifiers in the production of the Israeli Jew versus the Arab 'Other' within and beyond uneasy national borders. For Arab Jews, caught between the cogs of concurrent Jewish and Arab national aspirations, Arabic-Hebrew heteroglossia became a perceived existential contradiction, which Lital Levy (2014) poignantly describes as 'a minefield [...], at once intimate, forbidden, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten'.² Consequently, Arabic vocabulary has primarily prevailed in colloquial Hebrew speech as a stylistic element or affective device in the invocation of such intimate matters as love, anger or the divine.

Since the 1950's, Popular Mizrahi music (*muzika mizrahit*) has developed into a further powerful outlet for the persistent prevalence of Eastern Mediterranean languages, Levantine phonemes and tonalities. However, the recent surge and success of all-Arabic songs by Jewish Israeli musicians, which attract listeners throughout and beyond the MENA region and across embattled geopolitical borders, raises further pressing questions and challenges the conceptualisation of language and belonging, of language acquisition and ownership, as well as of loss.

The ongoing power of Arabic varieties on the imagination and creative expression of these young artists challenges the bitter dialectical binary of 'Jew' and 'Arab', in which the erasure of Judeo-Arabic varieties across territorialised space obscures

and suppresses the diverse and ancient histories of Jewish communities in the region, just as the undeniable prevalence of Arabic in everyday Israeli-Palestinian soundworlds. Moreover, it also defies common concepts of 'native'-, 'first'- or 'mother'-tongues, wherein language is gendered and ethnicised as an allegedly coherent system of designation to be passed down and 'inherited', or otherwise, to be irretrievably lost. Such acts of linguistic re-appropriation define musicians as active and influential languagers³, who are able to obtain, disseminate and bend linguistic repertoires beyond dominant language ideologies and discourses. Music as an ever evolving and highly mobile fabric of human aural and oral expression therefore sustains and generates diverse and intertwined communicative soundworlds in performances of contested narratives of pivotal (be)longings.

3 THE TERM WAS COINED BY JØRGENSEN (2004) AS A DELIBERATE ACTOR-CENTRIC SHIFT IN DEBATES ON LANGUAGE AND MIGRATION.



ZEHERE (Shiran Avraham, Ron Bakal & Vadim Mechona) SHIRAN, 2017

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1 COMPARE FOR EXAMPLE: ALMOG, O. (2000). *THE SABRA: THE CREATION OF THE NEW JEW*. BERKELEY: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS; LEVY, L. (2014). *POETIC TRESPASS*. PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS; SHOHAT, E. (1989). *ISRAELI CINEMA: EAST/WEST AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION*. AUSTIN: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS; SHOHAT, E. & STAM, R. (1994). *UNTHINKING EUROCENTRISM. MULTICULTURALISM AND THE MEDIA*. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE; ET AL.

2 LEVY, L. (2014), 190.