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Who's Afraid of Being a *Freier*? The Analysis of Communication Through a Key Cultural Frame

This work presents an analytical approach to assessing the negotiation of interaction through a key cultural symbol. Six distinct dimensions are proposed to explain how the term freier (roughly glossed as “sucker”) functions in Israeli society and what impact it has on communication: the freier concept as a frame for interaction; its centrality as a key cultural concept within cultural discourse; its prevalence in several social realms; the terms of negotiation delimited by the frame; the dynamics of the freier frame as a scale; and the duality of its function in interaction as both means and end. Critical analysis based on these dimensions shows that the freier frame is detrimental to communication and social interaction and has the potential to threaten the cohesion of an entire society.

Discourse surrounding the concept of being or not being a *freier*, usually translated into English as “sucker,” features prominently in daily interaction in Israel. The word is heard frequently in speech, and in the media, it appears in advertising campaigns and is employed in political rhetoric. It is even used to justify national policy, as when former Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly explained his negotiation tactics with the Palestinians, claiming, “We are not freiers. We won’t agree to give without receiving anything” (Ben-Horin, 1998). The *freier* concept is so pervasive in Israeli discourse that it has reached the status of a core value, manifest through a key cultural frame.

This article presents an analytical approach that assesses the negotiation of interaction through a key cultural concept. The analysis developed here uses six distinct dimensions to explain how the concept of the *freier* functions in society and what impact it has on communication. Using the *freier* discourse as an example, this work begins by discussing the usefulness of the frame metaphor to help visualize the process by which this construct overpowers its subject. The study then assesses the centrality of the concept in daily interaction, examines several realms of social action in which the *freier* phenomenon is particularly apparent, and shows how use of the frame exposes some of the parameters endemic to the society. These parameters, in turn, delimit and thus dictate

the terms for the negotiation of meaning because the rigidity of the frame makes certain choices of action almost irreversible by impelling interactants to perceive things in some ways and not in others. Next, I propose an analytical construct—referred to here as the “freier scale”—to classify the courses of action open to interactants using this frame, taking into account situation, background, and personality. Finally, this article describes how the frame, rather than merely classifying the way interactions are perceived, can come to direct them. When this happens, it disrupts the communicative process itself, as one party ignores the other’s rights, needs, and perspective, in order to focus exclusively on himself or herself.

By analyzing how interaction based on the freier frame works, I show how a pervasive feature of cultural discourse can evolve from classifying interaction to actually determining social action. The negotiation of interaction, in terms of the freier frame, is not an attempt to reach an understanding nor to resolve interpersonal conflict. This discourse, which frames interaction as a zero-sum game and drives participants to win at the cost of achieving a consensus, can be considered “dysfunctional” in communicative terms because it engenders change through threats to social cohesion (Giddens, 1989, p. 697).

The intellectual inspiration for this research can be partially traced to symbolic interactionism and the contention that meaning is both created and maintained through social interaction. Of particular relevance here are Goffman’s discussions of impression management (1959) and face (1967). Closely related to these ideas are those of social constructionism, emphasizing the centrality of language in the construction of meaning (Gergen, 1985). Within this school of thought, Shotter’s work on social accountability (e.g., 1984, 1989) focuses attention on the relations between the people as manifest in their communication. Shotter (1984, p. 140) maintains that communication and the experience of reality form a cycle; ways of speaking and making accounts determine how reality is experienced, which then influence communication. As Gergen and Semin (1990) put it, “Everyday understandings . . . exist in the language of the culture” (p. 14).

The specific approach to studying language in society is rooted in the ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1972). Carbaugh (1989) has pointed out that interactional concepts construct and constrain their users’ models of personhood, sociality, and understandings of communication. This is a notion whose parallel can be found in Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration: “Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interac-

tion” (p. 25). In this work, it is shown how use of a particular concept does just this. Perhaps an unintended consequence is that each time it is employed, it reaffirms its own existence, entrenching it still deeper in society and perpetuating the values that it entails.

It should be noted that Giddens (1984) stressed that the structures are “both constraining and enabling” (p. 25), although either function may come to dominate. It is interesting that Hall (1995), crediting Carbaugh (1989), used the identical terminology as Giddens (1984) in discussing “a cultural resource that is created and recreated in everyday talk, *enabling and constraining* human relations” (p. 394; emphasis added). Giddens (1984), however, further pursued the matter to explain that constraints may fade away or, on the contrary, become reified or “naturalized” (p. 25) by human actors within a particular social system. This is indeed the case here, where the terms dictated through the use of the freier frame appear to be so rigid as to take on a concrete form.¹

This analysis of freier discourse provides a situated model for being a person, a mode of sociation, and a means of communication. It demonstrates how key cultural categories are linked to personhood, social interaction, and folk forms of communication practice.

Beyond the essential descriptive function, this analysis fulfills the two additional requirements vital to critical theory (Bohman, 1996): It provides a normative evaluation in which it is claimed that the use of this frame hinders communication and is destructive to social cohesion, and it offers a pragmatic conclusion advocating change by employing an alternative discourse strategy.² The work here is concerned with pointing out culture-specific communication problems and promoting critical reflection in the hope of resolution. It seeks to provide vital information both for those managing interaction within the same culture and for those who wish to attempt intercultural interaction.³

Analyzing a Key Cultural Concept

Several analyses of key cultural concepts and their implications for communication have led their authors to propose various models (Carbaugh, 1989, 1990b, 1993; Philipsen & Carbaugh, 1986; Wierzbicka, 1997). Hall (1995), in his investigation of brown-nosing as a cultural category, made three working assumptions leading to different levels of analysis. First, he maintained that it is up to researchers to investigate how folk concepts are used and understood by natives in everyday life, which he calls the discursive context. Next, he assumed that these concepts both construct and constrain interaction within the culture, referred to as the social context, and finally, that these concepts construct and constrain who we are or can be in society. This last assumption, inspired by

Carbaugh's (1989) discussion of terms of talk in different cultures, was further divided into three levels of analysis: models of personhood, sociality, and understandings of communication.

In this study of the freier, I undertake analysis at all five levels proposed by Hall (1995) together with Carbaugh (1989): I illustrate the discursive context through interviews and newspaper articles; address the social context in the discussion of some of the social realms in which prominent use is made of the freier "form" (Carbaugh, 1988); examine models of personhood via a scale; discuss sociality through the terms of negotiation that become prominent when meaning is negotiated in terms of being or not being a freier; and investigate understandings of communication through the explication of the dual functioning of the term. In addition, in this work I use the metaphor of the frame as an explicative device to facilitate an understanding of how this communicative act functions within this particular cultural system.

Agar's (1994, 1999) notion of a "rich point" describes a verbal or nonverbal expression of the group under study that requires translation for outsiders (see also Ortner's, 1972, concept of a key cultural symbol). He noted that as researchers, we engage in translation between the perspectives of the source (the group being studied) and the target (the scholars). The aim of this work is no less to afford insiders—members of the source culture themselves—with a deeper understanding of their own culture, by providing what Carbaugh (1991) has called "interpretive insight" achieved by examining the role of the native communication practices within the larger system of symbols, forms, and meanings.

Agar (1994, 1999) described four levels of analysis of the rich points: (a) the identification of the expression, (b) the use of abductive inferences, or the conditions arising in conjunction with the rich point, (c) testing of the inferences using diverse sources, and (d) an explanation that employs a nonlinear dynamic system of complexity. These levels of analysis are comparable to the research in the present study, albeit in a different order, whereby the expression is identified in terms of its centrality, abductive inferences are made in the form of parameters that emerge through its use, and testing of the inferences occurs in the examination of newspaper articles and interviews categorized according to social realms, while the explanation employing a nonlinear dynamic system of complexity is proffered here in the form of the three constructs described: the frame, the scale, and the duality of functions.

The combination of these constructs coupled with an understanding of the social relations involved develops a conceptual approach that can serve as a heuristic guide to understanding communicative behavior. This approach should provide a useful framework by which to analyze other core cultural values featured in other national discourses.

Data Collection

The data for this paper are based on over 500 newspaper articles in which the word *freier* appears, supplemented by a collection of advertisements and recordings or notations of instances in which the word *freier* was used in television and radio programs. The bulk of the newspaper articles were collected from mid-1998 until the present, primarily from the three main daily Hebrew-language newspapers. Fifty-one interviews conducted between November 1999 and February 2000⁴ were another important source of data. Respondents represented a convenience sample obtained through chance encounters and snowballing. Interviewees included 17 females and 34 males, and ages ranged from 13 to 65, though most were between 20 and 50. Two respondents were Arab Israeli; the rest were Jewish Israelis. All of those over 18 had completed high school or its equivalent, and more than half had some form of higher education. Occupations spanned a broad range of professional and nonprofessional activities. All interviewees were fluent or native Hebrew speakers. About two thirds had been born and raised in the country; the rest had lived in Israel for at least 10 years except for two more recent immigrants (3 and 6 years).

Whereas the interview protocol included some closed-ended questions, most questions were open-ended and allowed interviewees to respond based on their own understanding of the concept. All responses were transcribed.

Most of the interviews were carried out by students within the framework of a seminar course on the topic of the *freier* in Israeli culture. The remainder were conducted by the author. The instructor individually and collectively trained the students for the express purpose of carrying out these interviews; all had previously taken courses in qualitative research methods. The interviewers learned to encourage interviewees to relate stories or anecdotes and to provide as many examples as possible to illustrate use of the *freier* concept. Interviewees also learned to observe the interviewing process itself and to allow interviewers to describe their reactions to it. Comments from both interviewees and interviewers were generally positive, and most interviewers encountered no difficulties eliciting information of the type described. Part of the ease with which these interviews were conducted can be explained by the fact that all interviewers were native Israelis for whom the term was familiar from the outset. Transcriptions indicate that at times the interviews proceeded almost as if they were part of a “naturally occurring” conversation.

The Frame

A frame “refers to an expectation about the world, based on prior experience, against which new experiences are measured and interpreted”

(Tannen, 1993a, p. 17; cf. Goffman, 1974; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Tannen conceives it as a relational concept, and not as a sequence of events. The frame used here designates a means of negotiating meaning and interpreting experience within discourse.

The metaphor of the frame is particularly useful to describe the freier situation. A frame is usually stiff; rules entailed by use of the freier frame are self-imposed and, for some people, more rigid than those externally determined by so-called authorities (as described in the section, “disregard for rules”). By definition, a frame is a means of limiting something, marking it, and setting it apart from other stimuli. The frame thereby privileges one view and discourages others. Moreover, it functions as a means of categorizing human interaction that repeats itself. Tannen (1993b) said:

At the same time that expectations make it possible to perceive and interpret objects and events in the world, they shape those perceptions to the model of the world provided by them. . . . Structures of expectation make interpretation possible, but in the process they also reflect back on perceptions of the world to justify that interpretation. (p. 21)

In other words, the frame creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, compounded by the fact that it is used across different realms of social interaction. As a result of both the pervasiveness and the self-perpetuation, it generally becomes difficult to see beyond this one frame to consider any other perspective. Consequently, the components that can be said to make up the freier frame also become more predominant, bringing into play a set of interconnected facets or parameters reflecting integral elements of the society.

Typically, however, a frame is not intended to be the essential feature; rather, this is the role of the text that it encloses. In the case of the freier concept, by contrast, frequently the frame has such a strong impact on the dynamics of the discourse that it dominates the picture.

The Centrality of the Freier Concept

The centrality of the freier frame is established here with reference to Ortner’s (1972) criteria for identifying cultural symbols, as well as through the prevalence of the term in society, its historical evolution, and the academic interest it has aroused (Bloch, 1998; Bloch & Guttman, 2003; Roniger & Feige, 1992, 1993). Ortner (1972) discussed two approaches to determining the centrality of a symbol in a cultural system: The first is a more deductive means, whereby the system is analyzed in an attempt to identify representative symbols; the second, more commonly used method is based on inductive interpretation, in which something from

within the culture stands out and thereby attracts interest. It is this latter approach that is taken here: A phenomenon was observed and its existence was considered to be indicative of something significant in the cultural system. Ortner (1972) mentioned five indicators of cultural interest: (a) The natives say it is important, (b) they are positively or negatively aroused by it, (c) it comes up in a variety of different contexts, (d) there is a high amount of elaboration concerning its nature, and (e) there are strong cultural sanctions surrounding its use or misuse (see also Agar, 1994, 1999; Wierzbicka, 1997). Ortner stressed that the list is not exhaustive, and that, whereas most symbols will meet more than one of the criteria, any one on its own should be sufficient to draw the attention of the cultural scholar. As will be seen, the *freier* concept meets most if not all of the criteria listed. Members of the society are typically quite “conscious” (Giddens, 1984, p. 44) of the *freier* concept, willing and able to articulate this awareness at a metacommunicative level. The *freier* phenomenon functions in this society as a frame and, indeed, is an illustration of how important frames are in regulating interaction.

The term permeates daily speech and pervades the mass media. According to one journalist, “The fear of being a *freier* is a national preoccupation that plays into every aspect of life, from the most mundane task to the peace process with Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat.” The article quotes another reporter who claims: “The topic ‘is something we talk about all the time’” (Miller, 1997). It should be noted that the term has been heard in interactions at all levels of society, from the market to the Knesset (Parliament) and from construction sites to university faculty lounges.

Origin of the Term *Freier*

The word *freier* is originally German, derived from *frei* (free) and *herr* (man). Its dominant meaning in that language was of a man of high social standing, free from certain constraints (Roniger & Feige, 1992). Other meanings exist as well, such as that of a man courting a woman; in modern German, it is used to denote the client of a prostitute (Roniger & Feige, 1993). The term spread into Yiddish and other Eastern European languages, including Russian, Polish, and Romanian. As it passed into Hebrew, the term “underwent a major syntactical change and inversion of meaning. The connotation of freedom moved to the backstage, crowded out by a cluster of connotations focused on naiveté” (Roniger & Feige, 1992, p. 295).

Nowadays, the desire to avoid being a *freier* basically consists of refraining from voluntarily undertaking any activity that would entail an effort not resulting in the actor’s own immediate interests or not taking advantage of a situation that presented itself. *Freier*-like behavior includes abiding by the written law (e.g., willingly paying television licens-

ing fees; Bramson, 1991) or by unwritten rules of behavior ranging from basic decency or honesty (e.g., leaving a note on a car one has hit in a parking lot rather than driving off, or returning money to someone who dropped it or miscalculated) to common courtesy (e.g., apologizing if one bumps into someone on the street or not trying to cut ahead in a queue). As it is used today in modern Hebrew, a *freier* is a person who has lost out or been made a fool of, knowingly or unknowingly, either by not taking advantage of whatever might be possible or by giving or doing more than absolutely necessary. The insult that accompanies its use comes from the implication that the individual should or could have known better.

Interestingly enough, despite its use across several generations and its prevalence in Hebrew since at least the late 1950s (Roniger & Feige, 1992), *freier* has retained the status of a slang word (Ben Yehuda & Ben Amotz, 1972, 1982), is frequently spelled in different ways, and is featured in quotation marks to designate its status. The word has never attained full legitimacy in the language. Moreover, although being a *freier* is usually considered negative and “not to be a *freier*” is normally positive, the preferred state (not being a *freier*) has no particular term and can only be expressed in the negative form by describing what one does not want to be.

The fact that the word has never attained full legitimacy in the language, and that the preferred state is attained through its negation, hints at a tension between the values that it represents and those that actually prevail in society. The *freier* concept entails devaluing the good of society in favor of the pursuit of individual gain. Yet to invoke the concept at all is to acknowledge the existence of a prior value system: of selflessness, of respect for others, and, indeed, of a different set of rules. The reason for this seemingly paradoxical situation can be found in the uneasy move from the collective ethos upon which early Zionism was based and the new reality in which modern Israelis find themselves with the luxury of focusing more on financial and interpersonal concerns than on existential ones (Roniger & Feige, 1992, 1993). Katriel (1993) points out that “given the strong traces of an egalitarian ideology in Israel, competition and personal achievement are still often felt to be socially too problematic to be openly celebrated” (p. 43). Thus, expressing the lack of willingness to be a *freier* sounds at times like an excuse or even a defiant apology, thereby reflecting ambivalence in the shift from collective to individual goals.

Previous Work on the Freier

In an insightful sociological study, Roniger and Feige (1992) traced the evolution of the *freier* phenomenon in terms of generalized exchange,

illustrating how it delineates the shift in the relations between the community and the individual. In their second study, Roniger and Feige (1993) explored the socio-historical significance of the term and its place in Israeli culture. The person refusing to be a freier, they conclude, is not merely the opposite of the pioneer, but also the by-product of it and joined in a dialectic. The two together represent a central statement about Israeli identity. The prominence of the freier concept in Israeli culture has been studied in conjunction with American immigrants' perceptions of interpersonal communication with members of the host culture (Bloch, 1998). These immigrants consider that Israelis perceive them to be freiers merely by virtue of their being in Israel, as well as through their communication with them. The dominant perception of the freier within the larger society is shown to be so much at odds with the values of this immigrant group that they repeatedly attempt to effect cultural changes among their hosts through their daily interactions. Bloch and Guttman (2003) demonstrate that the freier concept is so central a part of daily life, so deeply rooted, and so taken for granted as a premise for interaction, that it is used as a motivational appeal in various types and at different levels of persuasion: political, public communication, and commercial and social mobilization.

The increased pervasiveness of the term in recent years is all the more obvious by its extensive use in persuasive campaigns, particularly in commercial advertising in the mass media. Earlier investigations have paved the way for the current analysis, exposing how the freier concept functions in communicative terms, which has, in turn, allowed for the development of the means by which to examine other core features of cultural discourse. In the process of this analysis, shifts in Israeli communication practices will become evident, through the data presented and the discussion of how they came about. These shifts are not merely sociological or historical concerns but the consequence of communication practices themselves.

It should be stressed, however, that the purpose of this endeavor is not to provide a sociological analysis of Israeli society; Roniger and Feige (1992, 1993) have done this brilliantly in conjunction with the freier phenomenon specifically. Rather, like Katriel's (1986, 1991b, 1993; Greifat & Katriel, 1989) studies of central aspects of the semantics of social relations in Israel, the aim here is to examine from a communication perspective how an interactional frame can shed light on social relations and relationships within a culture. The approach taken here leads to a critical analysis that points out the dysfunctional communication aspects of the frame and ultimately facilitates the regeneration of an ailing process.

Freier Discourse in Different Realms of Social Life

Although discourse concerning the freier is present in all domains of social life, its use stands out in particular in some of the following realms: financial transactions, politics, the military, and driving. The list of realms was derived in several ways: by sorting newspaper articles according to the social situations they described; by asking interviewees to name social situations in which they had either heard or used the word freier; by having interviewees rank a list of different social situations in which they considered use of the word freier to be prevalent; and by categorizing the examples provided by interviewees according to the contexts in which they occurred. In each of these realms, it will be shown how the freier frame actually regulates interaction in this society. Success or failure of the outcome, both in specific situational terms and in overall communicative terms, is determined by the criterion of whether or not a person emerges from the encounter as a freier.

The Freier in Financial Transactions

Use of the term freier is particularly prevalent in reference to financial transactions, for example, cheating or being cheated, not getting what one paid for, noncompetitive pricing. Almost two thirds of interviewees ranked financial transactions as being the field in which the concept is most prevalently used.

Advertisements in the mass media (Bloch & Guttman, 2003) all emphasize the financial gain or loss to be made from investing or not in certain goods or services. An ad for a wedding hall shrieks, "Freier if you get married in September" (prices being lower in July and August)⁵; another for an insurance company shows testimonials of various people holding signs proclaiming, "Not freiers"⁶; a time-sharing project cries out, "Only freiers pay more!"⁷; a cellular phone company explains gleefully, "The freiers will continue to pay almost four times the price."⁸

Newspaper articles frequently link the freier to financial transactions from the perspective of how members of the public are expected to overpay for various services and consumer goods. In financial terms, to be a freier entails coming out of a transaction at a disadvantage, in other words, as a loser. A 29-year-old male student explains: "It's the Israeli mentality that whatever you've done; [if] you could have done [it] for less money, that you've been had." Rosenblum (1994) illustrated how the imperative not to appear to be a freier is so strong that at times, it becomes more important than actually conducting business effectively: "It's better for a person to pay 20–30 additional shekels as long as he does not appear to have been cheated of a shekel or two."

The Freier and Politics

Involvement in politics is very high in Israel (Arian & Shamir, 1995, 1999); indeed, it pervades many aspects of life (Cohen & Wolfsfeld,

1995). The population displays great eagerness to engage in political discussions in public and in private (e.g., Bloch, 2000c). The link between politics and the concept of the freier can be seen at various levels. At the level of international affairs, in negotiations with Israel's neighbors, the issue of not coming out a freier has played a very important role. Use of this frame can have historical consequences. One article begins: "Netanyahu is a smart man. He is nobody's freier, certainly not Arafat's" (Sivan, 1998). Internally, people with political clout and politicians in general are among the "types" who tend not to come out freiers. Because politicians are extremely concerned with their image, they are particularly anxious not to appear to be freiers. One of the common issues in dealings between politicians themselves seems to be the fear of being a freier. Shortly after they had made considerable gains in the 1999 national elections, a spokesperson for the Shas Party (representing Orthodox, Sephardic Jewry) described the progress in their negotiations as potential coalition partners saying, "We are not freiers."⁹ Ironically, one informant, a 27-year-old male working in the media industry, said that what would best benefit constituents is a politician who would be willing to be the public's freier rather than serving his or her own interests.

Finally, the public is often portrayed as the losing member in the freier competition. This is a tactic frequently used to stir up the electorate, to change the status quo, or to prevent a recurrence of a situation. For example, a political candidate in the 1999 national elections, Tommy Lapid, began a speech with the assertion, "You're all freiers!" (Gilbert, 1999), referring to the fact that his audience had all served in the military and paid taxes, as opposed to certain religious Jewish (ultra-Orthodox) members of the population, who are exempt.¹⁰

When used in connection with politics, the language employed is sometimes that of bartering, for example, a flyer bearing the message, "*Shalom ken freier lo!*" (Peace Yes Freier No!), referring to proposed negotiations with Syria concerning the Golan Heights.¹¹ The slogan has since been made into a bumper sticker, a medium of particular significance in Israel (Bloch, 2000a). Indeed other political messages affixed to cars have made use of the term as well, such as, "Only a freier would believe Netanyahu a second time!"—phraseology reminiscent of commercial advertisements, where the fear of being a freier is considered to be so strong that it constitutes a motivational appeal in its own right. In politics, in fact, the image often seems to be more important than anything else, and not being seen to be a freier supersedes all else: One journalist reported how Prime Minister Barak's American media advisor, Stanley Greenberg, found that above all else, the most important issue for Israeli citizens was "that their prime minister doesn't come out as a freier to Arafat" (Eldar, 2000).

The Freier and the Military

The military plays a significant role in the lives of most Israelis. With the exception of large segments of the Israeli-Arab population, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and people with disabilities, most Israeli men serve for approximately 3 years or more in the regular army. Most nonorthodox Jewish Israeli women serve in the military, too, but for approximately 2 years. In theory, men continue to serve in the reserves for approximately 1 month yearly until sometime in their 40s. During this time, life is disrupted at home and at work. Interviewees agreed that the term *freier* is widely used in the army, both within the framework of the regular army and within that of the civilian army—the reserves. In the military, perhaps more than elsewhere, other words connoting the individual who does an undesirable job, or volunteers for certain tasks, are also employed (e.g., *sanjar*). Since more and more men began obtaining exemptions from reserve duty at increasingly younger ages, the word is frequently used by civilians to portray those who are serving, as if they are choosing to be overzealous in fulfilling their civic duties.

A group of men interviewed while doing their reserve duty all recognized that by current standards they are *freiers*. A work colleague, whose husband is 42 and still serves out his full month in reserve duty, said of her mate, “He’s one of the last of a dying breed. He’s still doing the dirty work, a real *freier* who hasn’t gotten out of it somehow, like all the rest, and yet at his age! His friends all laugh at him.” An entire broadcast of a popular investigative television program was devoted to soldiers who go AWOL, labeling those who do serve without trying to get exemptions as the ultimate *freiers*.¹² The subheading of a newspaper article similarly noted, “These days doing military reserves is the ultimate contender for the title of *freier*” (Limor, 2000, p. 66), a sentiment that is repeatedly echoed both in interviews and in the print media.

The situation has come to a head even with regard to doing regular military service after new laws exempting ultra-Orthodox Jews from service. One Haifa University study found that some 40% of Israelis feel like *freiers* because they are required to serve in the army while others manage not to (Rahat, 2000). The reality of these sentiments is reflected in the fact that a social movement named *Hitorerut* [Awakening], whose members believe that service in the Israeli Defense Force is “the last remnant of the crumbling Israeli collective, the last element in an Israeli identity that is rapidly becoming meaningless” (Dayan, 2000), recently distributed t-shirts to newly enlisted soldiers bearing the message, “We want to serve, not to be *freiers*” (Rapaport, 2000).

The Freier and the Road

Daily, the mass media report the death toll on the roads, giving it prominent play. Zaidel (1992) has discussed the significance of the social envi-

ronment and the strong influence of other road users on individual drivers. More specifically, Bloch (2000a) has made the link between the freier concept and driving, as indeed have a number of journalists. One states that fear of being a freier “turns driving into a bumper-car competition that leaves hundreds of dead each year” (Miller, 1997). A prominent professor of ethics, Asa Kasher, wrote an article about the merit of being a freier, concluding that at most this means giving up the right-of-way on the road and conceding a few seconds of one’s time (Kasher, 2000).

Examples provided by interviewees of how the desire not to be a freier influences drivers included the following: not letting another car into one’s lane and speeding up to prevent this; overtaking from whichever lane is easiest; not ceding the right-of-way to other drivers (whatever the rules); not warning other drivers when intending to turn or switch lanes; not allowing a pedestrian to cross the road if this would mean losing time; speeding up when a green light turns to amber. Not only did many of the descriptions illustrate how the person determined not to be a freier obeys only those traffic signals that are not perceived to clash with his or her own self-interests, but also how it is considered a personal slight if anyone else comes out ahead.

According to a survey undertaken by the National Authority for Road Safety (Hershkowitz, 2000), 13.5% of respondents claimed that a driver who allowed them to go ahead would be a freier (p. 4). The same report later states that patterns of thought on the road include “Those who take others into consideration are freiers, weak, not a man” (p. 10). A 65-year-old male born in Austria echoed this sentiment: “Freierish driving means obeying rules and laws.” One reporter actually went so far as to say that “the main goal of Israeli driving, like so many other Israeli activities, is to avoid being a freier” (Chafets, 1995).

As can be seen from the above, the freier concept plays a central role in major realms of social life and at various levels of communication. Within and across these domains, use of this concept produces an insidious effect on the communication process, for it precludes any attempt at mutuality and, at best, reduces interaction to competitive bargaining.

Terms of Negotiation of the Freier Frame

Communication may be described as a process of negotiation, where two or more parties interact with the aim of achieving some level of mutual understanding. Wilson and Putnam (1990) identified three primary goals for negotiators: instrumental, relational, and identity centered. Instrumental goals focus on the distribution of resources; relational goals revolve around power and trust; and identity goals concern the issue of face or image. In terms of the freier concept, the overt instru-

mental goals of the interaction frequently become obscured. In the same context, relational goals are not issues to be resolved, as use of the frame comes about when there is a perceived power struggle and there is no trust between participants. Goals concerning the face and identity of one side at the expense of the other, and sometimes to the detriment of all else, represent the principal aims. Thus, at no time is cooperative action a consideration in this type of interaction, ultimately leading toward a breakdown in the process of communication. Within the Israeli cultural context in which the freier concept is used, interaction can be treated as negotiations in which the parties perceive that they each have incompatible goals from the outset.

In this section, I describe the actual terms of negotiation, or cultural parameters, that become most salient when employing this particular frame. They were derived by classifying the primary issues leading to use of the freier frame in both the newspaper articles collected and the interviews. These parameters, delineated by the borders of the freier frame, represent what Agar (1994, 1999) calls “abductive inferences” or antecedent conditions arising in conjunction with the concept. They represent structural properties of the system (Giddens, 1984) that both emerge from use of the concept and exist independently of its use within the society. To put it differently, although these parameters are to be found within the society, use of the freier frame makes them even more obvious. The parameters that make up the outer limits of the frame itself set the terms by which meaning is negotiated within the freier frame. They consist, primarily, of the following elements: concern for face, disregard for rules, individualism, competition, and machismo. The significance in communicative terms of each of these parameters and of the freier frame itself is to restrict interaction rather than to facilitate it. Once viewed within a certain frame, it is hard to see things any other way; once invoked, the freier frame and its contents are difficult to revoke. The freier frame functions to bolster the personal ego, isolating the individual from social values. Beyond the move from a community ethos to an interpersonal one, there is a more radical shift toward intrapersonal needs in which the most salient concern seems to be a person’s perception in his or her own eyes. Use of this frame does not represent an endeavor to function as a responsible member within a society; it is an individual struggle for the survival of the fittest.

Concern for Face

Issues relating to what may variously be labeled as honor, image, self-perception, or ego, are among the most salient concerns of actors invoking the freier frame. All of these terms may be subsumed under the heading of “face.” Brown and Levinson (1978) have elaborated on Goffman’s

(1967) concept of face to describe a model based on the concepts of positive face and negative face, or the desires for approval and autonomy. Katriel (1986) extended this model to include acts that threaten the positive face of the speaker, not only of the hearer. Bloch (1998) proposed that the model further account for conflicts in evaluation between what the actor, as opposed to the audience, considers praiseworthy. In the case of the freier frame, it is the actor's opinion of himself or herself, rather than that of the hearer, which may contradict it, that assumes dominance. In other words, for the person choosing to be or not to be a freier, the important thing is what the actor thinks of his or her own behavior. Whether or not this threatens others' negative face is of little or no consequence. This is not to say, however, that how one appears to others is irrelevant. In the case of the person seeking not to be a freier, the appreciation of the peer group is all-important. One of the "rules" in not being a freier is that "what the '*chevreh*' [slang for a close group of friends, frequently from school or army days] think is important, even when there are no '*chevreh*' around" (Rosenblum, 1994).

Concern for the face of others, displaying respect toward them by abiding by unwritten rules of polite or decent behavior rather than preoccupation with the self alone, is part of what it means to be a freier. One interviewee, a 47-year-old woman working in the tourism industry, who had lived in Italy until the age of 18, said that a freier is "someone who stands in line when others don't; someone who obeys the law and is polite and cultured when others do the exact opposite and don't keep to the accepted norms of behavior [*muskamot*]." Bloch (1998) discussed American immigrants' distress at their hosts' lack of accountability and unwillingness to apologize for violations of certain rules of behavior.

Other studies on politeness in Israeli discourse have found that native Hebrew speakers, in fact, apologize less often and less profusely than do certain other cultures, specifically, native English speakers (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Olshtain, 1983; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). What for one group of individuals might constitute politeness might represent hypocrisy for another.¹³ Katriel (1986) describes how Zionist ideology discouraged all forms of speech indicating respect and encouraged more natural and truthful means of expression. By Israeli standards, to show respect or deference may be considered indicative of the perception that the other is more important than the self, thereby entailing humiliation and loss of face. Moreover, if the rules are not considered relevant to begin with, or the rights of others are not a priority (Herzog, 1992), the so-called violations may not even have been noticed.

What is at issue in the use of the freier frame is not overall concern with face, but specific concern for a person's own face. Just as Katriel

(1986) explains with regard to *dugrijout*, which “challenges the common assumption (e.g., Goffman 1967) that all interaction is grounded in a rule of considerateness” (p. 9), typical use of the freier frame means that considerateness for others is nonexistent. When using the freier frame, situations are evaluated according to the potential threat they might pose to a person’s face (cf. Roniger & Feige, 1992). Depending on the extent to which the face is considered to be threatened, it is possible to calculate the perceived power and the rights of the adversary and the lengths to which it is necessary to go in order to redress the situation. At this stage, individuals either resign themselves to losing or choose to fight. In other words, the person determines how to use the frame, or where to position himself or herself along what will be described as the “freier scale.” The perceived adversary may be another individual or may be the so-called “system” (*ba’Ma’arechet*)—“the way things are” at the bureaucratic, political, or social level. Exceptionally, when it is the system that is the adversary, it is possible to excuse or justify the choice not to fight and to come out a freier without having done too much injury to face because this may be seen as an entity that is too big to take on. Frequently heard reactions to such situations are “*Ein ma la’asot, kacha zeh ba’aretz*” [“There’s nothing to be done, that’s how it is in this country”]. As Danet (1989) pointed out, Israelis are rather “cynical” regarding their ability to exert influence on the system and have a low concept of “civic efficacy” (p. 125). Naturally, however, if one does beat the system, it is a particularly great victory to be savored, much like David slaying Goliath.

Disregard for Rules

Obedying the law is one of the ways in which many respondents have described what it means to be a freier: “People who are pedantic and who observe the law to the letter” (32-year-old male MBA student); “Someone who allows others to dump on him and who obeys laws like an idiot and doesn’t get anywhere in society” (23-year-old Swedish woman, living in the country for less than 3 years).

To some extent, it appears to be a vicious cycle. In Israeli political culture, concern is with the collective, and individual needs are typically thrust aside (Herzog, 1992). This results in mutual distrust between authorities and citizens that often seems well deserved, according to press reports (e.g., Rosenblum, 1994). One respondent, a 65-year-old male born in Austria, said, “When there is no enforcement of limiting laws, then people ignore them and there is an internal struggle whether to obey the law or to disregard it and then when one sees that everyone laughs [at you] and profits [from disobeying the law] and you are the only one to obey the law then one feels like a freier. And in the end one joins in to profit from not abiding by the rules.”

A newspaper article explains:

The Israeli temperament does not accept rules of behavior and rejects natural obedience to the law. The average Israeli is afraid to feel like a sucker [N.B. freier is used in the Hebrew language edition], so scorns the rules and regulations and regards the law as an area of ever-expandable space in which to maneuver, outwit, bypass and bribe, if necessary, in order to achieve more, and to make the competition green with envy. (Benziman, 2001, p. 5)¹⁴

Both Sprinzak (1986) and Danet (1989) have analyzed the socio-historical elements contributing to illegalism in Israel. Danet (1989) has explained how in the early days of nation building, a certain disregard for the letter of the law was almost a survival tactic, and that tactic has persevered far beyond that time. She has further noted that emigrants from North Africa and the Middle East as well as those from socialist nations, are accustomed to what, by Western standards, appear to be unconventional methods for dealing with authorities, for example, bribes, barter, and networks of patronage (locally known as *protektzia*). This too can explain the scorn for a freier who adheres to rules and regulations when doing so appears to be to his or her disadvantage.

Respect for the law can also be interpreted as fear of it and hence may be perceived as weakness. Indeed, the opposite of fear, bravery or daring, is one of the typical traits of a person who is not a freier. This lack of respect for boundaries set by written or unwritten rules is manifest in the attempt to stretch them and in refusal to conform to positions within the confines of certain limits. In other words, tenacity, holding one's own, or never taking "no" for an answer are all part of what it means not to be a freier.

Orr (1994), a political activist, writing about his perception of the politics and ideology of modern Israel, after an absence of several years, has said: "Most Israelis grasp the state of Israel as the core of their ethnic identity rather than as an instrument for regulating the life of the citizens" (p. 50). If the state represents who they are, not what they should be, then the citizens themselves make their own laws, and there is nothing to prevent them from bending them. In a most radical interpretation, it might be said that for some Israelis, Louis XIV's words ring true: "L'état c'est moi" [I am the state].

Individualism

The use of the freier frame shows how the main dialectic of communal versus individual concerns within Israeli society has now shifted to encompass full-fledged egocentrism (cf. Katriel, 1991b, 1993). This communication practice is a reflection of social and historical change; at the same time, it has social and historical consequences. Although the con-

cept of *gibush* (crystallization) described by Katriel (1991a) may be said to illustrate the essence of collectivism, the antifreier represents the other end of the continuum, both of them part of the repertoire of Israeli cultural interaction. A woman in her '20s defining what it means to be a freier said:

Today a freier is someone who isn't only concerned about himself, who doesn't put himself first . . . today it's someone who doesn't take what he deserves, or takes what he deserves by force. A person who doesn't fight for what he deserves. It's more radical now [than before].

Herzog (1992) explains that, contrary to its American counterpart, the Israeli version of individualism lacks the dimension of liberalism and borders on egotism. Although Israelis expect to have their rights respected by authorities, they feel no obligations about respecting those of others. Moreover, the Israeli rendition of the American dream consists of the pursuit of wealth, prosperity, and personal advancement. An advertising executive noted that more than ever, the Israeli customer "has an increasing need for self-realization, for individualism as a value" (Palti, 2000).

The first generation of native-born Israelis (*Sabras*) placed a high value on equality and unity, a desire not to stand out, an antimaterialistic attitude, and even anti-intellectualism (Almog, 1997). Those who strive not to be freiers have a different set of priorities. They are not especially concerned with fitting in, nor do they have a desire to prove their worthiness through such contributions to society as volunteering. Indeed, some equate being a freier with generosity (Barak, 2000). "Voluntarism, self-help, conservationism," another article declares, are all the work of "the national freiers" (Orbaum, 1998). Roniger and Feige (1992) have said that "a freier has come to denote a naive person who is willing to contribute efforts to cooperative endeavours while others may choose free riding" (p. 297). Contrary to the ideals of the Sabras, those who are so anxious not to be freiers are motivated to show that they are superior to others through their ability to take care of themselves, whether or not this is at the expense of others. One female student summed it up this way: "If you're a freier you're the only one who suffers for it, and not society. If you're not a freier you can be the only one who enjoys it and the rest of society will suffer."

Hardin's (1968) notion of the "tragedy of the commons" is relevant here. He explains how in the villages of medieval England, common grazing grounds could only be preserved if each family restricted itself to grazing a limited number of cattle. If they did not, overgrazing would result in tragedy for them as well as for all the rest of the townspeople. By analogy, when people serve their own immediate self-interests with-

out regard for others, ultimately they hurt themselves as well as the rest of society; in the long run, everybody becomes a freier. As one reporter predicted: “In the last millennium the most important thing was not to be a freier. In the next millennium, anyone who is not a freier will come out a freier” (Lapid, 1999).

Competition

To enact the freier frame is to call up a set of rules in which interaction is viewed in terms of competition. Miller (1997) specifically refers to the freier in terms of a zero-sum game, in which there are winners and losers. Part of using the freier frame consists in pointing out who has won, by designating the loser. One newspaper article cites the head of inter-city traffic police as saying

the only time Israelis applaud the police is when they stop someone who has tried to avoid a traffic jam by passing on the shoulder. . . . Israelis hate to feel like suckers.¹⁵ . . . There’s a feeling that if we’re in a jam, why should someone else get around it? (Arnold, 1999, p. 15)

The author of another article goes still further to claim that “the ‘freierish condition’ is an existential condition of continuous tension, of perpetual readiness: Will I be able to ‘fix’¹⁶ someone? Will they succeed in ‘fixing’ me?” (Rosenblum, 1994, p. 12). Not to enter into the competition at all implies passivity and, hence, being a freier. “If you don’t cut someone off on the road you come out a freier. You let someone overtake you—you come out a freier,” said one female in her early 30s working in sales.

A counterpart to this type of reaction does, however, exist in Israeli society in the form of *firgun*, “roughly translatable as ‘to support, not to envy or begrudge another’s success’” (Katriel, 1993, p. 31). Katriel states, “The cultivation of a climate of *firgun* is associated with the de-emphasis of competition and conflict and the overall enhancement of good feeling” (p. 42). It could be argued that the mere fact that a term exists to mark the expression of lack of envy, might signal the prevalence of competitive situations in which another’s success is begrudged. Katriel (1993) further notes:

One hears at least as much about lack of *firgun* in Israeli society as about its deployment. . . . The very preoccupation with this issue suggests that it has a problematic standing and the constant complaints concerning lack of *firgun* reinforce this sense.” (p. 44)

The motif of competition often leads to one-upmanship. One of the tenets of the freierish condition is that “Not only are there free meals, but one must complain about the size of the portions” (Rosenblum,

1994). As competition escalates and tension mounts, it seems inevitable that there should be a certain amount of aggression and even violence in the society. Respondents speak of both verbal and nonverbal aggressiveness in connection with the freier.

It was long said that the heated talk about politics in Israeli society could never amount to true aggression, but it has—the most famous case being the tragedy of Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination (Bloch, 2000b). At a very basic level, the freier/nonfreier mode is manifest in the competition between speaking turns where it influences the form of the interaction itself and can even have historical consequences, such as in the case of a political debate. Several scholars have already noted an adversarial style of speech and manner prevalent among Jews (Schiffrin, 1984; Tannen, 1981, 1984) and particularly among Israelis (Tannen, 1998). Moreover, Katriel’s (1986) description of the Israeli style of direct or “straight talk” can also be interpreted as being confrontational, particularly in the roughened mode known as *kasach*. Aggressiveness at the level of turn taking is repeatedly illustrated on television talk shows, where frequently a group of participants come together with everyone speaking simultaneously. The impression is that no one in the studio is listening to anyone else, including the moderator. One reporter described such a program, saying that the winner was the person who spoke louder than anyone else and consequently did not end up as a freier (Starr, 1995).¹⁷

In the end, the situation is one of “lose-lose,” as described by a 50-year-old accountant:

In the final analysis everyone here comes out freiers because they’re always thinking that they’re being screwed and how not to come out freiers. You devote so much needless energy to not being a freier, that in the end you come out a freier. Once you screw someone, and once they screw you, and in the end it balances out.”

In an article on the troubles of immigrant youth, in which one young man talks of his experience in jail, he says there are only “suckers and survivors” (Ushpiz, 2000).

The freier can also represent the ultimate loss: death. The conflictual status of the Middle East has further dramatized the situation. With a compulsory military service and men all too frequently finding themselves in combat situations, the country raises its young, particularly its male population, to value and to adopt the survival tactics of war. Under fire, to be a freier is to die. It seems natural that this attitude should carry over into other contexts of life in Israel. However, the very same approach that pays off in war, competition to the death, can be lethal in peace. On the road, for example, unless drivers cooperate they end up killing one another.

Machismo

Israeli society is largely male dominated. This is due partly to the traditional leadership position and the paternalistic role of the male in Jewish religion and partly to the vital function of the military in the country. In general, men and women are not expected to perform the same functions in civilian or in military life, particularly not in times of war (Herzog, 1992).

Roniger and Feige (1993) note that the values espoused by those aspiring not to be freiers are more commensurate with masculine than feminine culture. In their survey, they found men used the term more than women, although women rated themselves as more prone to behave in a freier-like way.

In the current study, women clearly demonstrated greater tolerance for the freier label, saying, for example, that it is not an insult when said about oneself or that it is not all bad to be a freier.

Some interviewees explicitly draw the connection between the desire not to be a freier and machismo, a link also made by a number of journalists. Several informants have noted that those who work systematically at not being freiers are invariably men. A 29-year-old man working in computers said that to call a person a freier indicated that he was perceived as “lacking masculinity.” Roniger and Feige state that the term is tied to “gender-related connotations of bravery and virile will” (1992, p. 206) and describe how a group of schoolboys “used the word primarily to provide legitimacy to their actions in terms of norms of masculinity” (1993, p. 126; my translation). At the level of international politics, an article about the image of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in his discussions with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat maintained that Barak was not a freier and that he had “faced Arafat, Clinton and all the leftists like a real man” (Eldar, 2000).

The freier is almost invariably described by interviewees as someone who is taken advantage of, very frequently using the colloquial Hebrew verb *lidfok*, which can be translated as “to bang” in both common uses of the word: the act of hitting something and that of copulating. The full implication of the sense of *lidfok* as taking advantage of someone is better captured in English through the verb *to screw* and more specifically, *to screw someone*. Typically, a freier is considered someone who’s been had, or less politely, who’s been screwed. One male respondent, specifically claimed that *lidfok* is actually part of the expression itself: “What a freier, how you’ve been screwed!” [*Ayzeh freier, aich dafku otcha!*]. The sexuality of the metaphor (to screw = *lidfok*) and the passive role attributed to the recipient of the act is further reinforced through the common use of passive grammatical constructions (e.g., *nidfak* —a person who has been screwed, or *yotzeh dafuk*—one who comes out

screwed). Together, these reveal a view of the person in the position of the freier that fits in well with that of the stereotypical female. This is seen, too, through descriptions of the freier as being weak, soft, innocent, passive, not knowing much about the world, and a multitude of other labels associated with feminine stereotypes. Here, then, the freier concept reinforces the gender bias in this society, and use of this communication practice has obvious social consequences.

Even if being a freier may be conceived of as possessing certain positive connotations for some members of society, such as self-reliance, it is claimed here that the freier frame itself brings into prominence too many antisocial elements to serve as a constructive agent of change in this culture. Concern for one's own face, disregard for rules, individualism, competition, and machismo, whether considered separately or together, are parameters that lead away from mutual respect, the rights of others, common interests, cooperation, or equality. The only way to overcome this and to promote effective communication is by eschewing the frame itself.

The Freier Scale

I have argued here that to discuss merely being or not being a freier does not fully reflect the way the concept exists in Israeli society. Instead, both with regard to behavior labeled as freier-like or its opposite, it is necessary to distinguish between levels of activity to permit further analysis of how the concept actually operates in regulating interaction. For this reason, it was necessary to devise an analytic construct to rank behavior according to the degree that a person is or is not being a freier and to demonstrate how shifts among the different points affect interaction. This construct should certainly be applicable to the analysis of the dynamics of other cultural frames in which intensity or rigidity, by definition, affects interaction. Thus, where a person is located within the construct, and under what circumstances, show how rigidly he or she perceives the frame or the terms within which she or he is prepared to negotiate in a given interaction. If a person is violently opposed to being a freier, this may serve as the rationale for action in and of itself. By contrast, if being a freier is less important than other considerations, there will be different constraints influencing the individual's behavior. To the extent that recognizing the implications of being or not being a freier can be said to be a measure of whether or not a person is a full-fledged participant in mainstream Israeli culture, a person's rank within the construct demonstrates his or her level of understanding or acceptance of the mechanism by which identity is negotiated within this society. Indeed, Roniger and Feige (1992) have stated: "To be a freier means

to have the wrong definition of the situation” (p. 297). Alternatively, this may be interpreted as a means of contesting the use of the frame itself. Location within the construct indicates how a person uses the frame to define the situation; changes in location on the scale entail changes in the definition of the situation and consequent changes in the communicative behavior.

Two levels of intensity are proposed with regard to being or not being a freier. However, the distinctions are best viewed as clusters on a continuum, beginning with the most freierish to the least. Because the clusters of behaviors described have a graduated nature, the construct has been dubbed a “scale.”

An Ultimate Freier, Just a Freier, Not a Freier, and an Anti-Freier

An Ultimate Freier (*Freier Ultimativi*). A person may specifically decide to undertake something that will knowingly label him or her a freier. If individuals actually become conscious that their behavior could label them as freiers, and they nonetheless decide to pursue the strategy, they are ultimate freiers. As Roniger and Feige (1992, p. 206) point out, whereas it is normally employed in the negative form, “Its unusual force is clearest when used as a positive depiction of conscious self-determination” whereby a person is prepared to declare himself or herself a freier in order to stand by his or her actions. Bloch (1998) found that choosing to behave like freiers, and even being proud of this, are typical of a specific immigrant group, Americans in Israel, most of whom come to the country for ideological reasons. A person in this category, it might be argued, is not a freier at all for they are electing to act in a certain way that happens to suit their moral conscience. In this sense, then, they can be seen to be contesting the very essence of the meaning of what it is to be a freier for they are redefining it as a term of which to be proud.

The word *ultimate* is employed here because its Hebrew equivalent (*ultimativi*) has been used both in interviews and in the mass media to describe behavior consistent with the extreme positive end of the freier continuum. A typical example of an ultimate freier is someone who performs his reserve duty in the military instead of obtaining an exemption as has become extremely common.

Just a Freier (*Stam Freier*). A person can be a freier as a result of lack of vigilance or even due to circumstances beyond his or her control. At this level, the image is of someone who has lost out, perhaps through bad luck, gullibility, falling victim to deceit, or unquestioningly believing in the law. It is possible to apply to people who might be said to fit into this category the popular Israeli expression *freierim lo metim, hem rak mitchalfim* (Freiers don’t die, they’re just exchanged)—a close approximation of the American “There’s a sucker born every minute.” In

fact, this expression is frequently used by the press to illustrate a point. As one reporter says: “How many more times will we repeat the well-known phrase about the freiers” saying that if consumers were organized “there would be fewer freiers . . . to exchange” (Paz-Melamed, 1999).¹⁸

Not a Freier (*Lo Freier*). This refers to someone who seeks to come out ahead, but not at any price. This range would include people who are not easy prey and who would tend to take advantage of a situation that presented itself, but not if this entailed too much risk or too much effort. In other words, they would not tend to actively pursue just any avenue in order to prove that they are not freiers. This might be described as the “default” attitude, or the one that is most prevalent in society. Beyond those who take advantage of others, or of situations, it is possible to come out “not a freier” in a fairly passive manner: Interviewees and newspaper articles frequently describe an apparent need to point out that other people had been taken advantage of (i.e., they are freiers) as opposed to themselves (the speaker), thereby making the speaker feel superior, and, naturally, not a freier.

An Anti-Freier. This term describes the active effort entailed in fighting the freier label. People falling into this category overtake the previous one in the extent to which they are willing to go to great lengths to prove to themselves or to others that they are not freiers. This category would embrace those who are so intent on proving that they are not freiers, that they have little regard for what it costs them and none for what it costs others. Such would be the case for those who, according to Rosenblum’s (1994) description of “the freierish condition,” believe that “life is a Darwinian battle in which the survivors are those who avoid being used, and the winners are those who first use others” (p. 12). A 45-year-old male working in the computer industry described the kind of person who would fit into this category as “the one who is constantly trying to outmaneuver everyone else, looks out for his own ass at any price, and just screws everyone else.”

The difference between the two types of nonfreiers is in the lengths to which a person is willing to go in order to prove that she or he is not a freier.

Dynamics of the Freier Scale

The ranges of each of the four clusters along the freier scale are not always absolute. In fact, they represent the four smallest common denominators within a dynamic situation. These four clusters were selected because, when confronted with them, informants had no difficulty recognizing the differences between the positions or identifying behaviors associated with each of them.

Situational factors (including the relationship between the interactants—close friend or family member, complete stranger or supe-

rior) or personal and cultural traits are frequently held accountable for the dynamics of these communication behaviors. In other words, a person may behave as a freier on one occasion or with one person, but not another (e.g., with one person, but not with another; on one occasion, but not a second or third). A person's character and background may partially influence the behavior.

Thus, those people who fall into the category labeled above as "not a freier" can also sometimes be freiers because they are not willing to go to absolutely any lengths not to be one. Indeed, many respondents have said that overall to be a freier is a negative thing, but on the road, for example, it is acceptable in the interests of safety. Equally, doing a favor for a friend was one thing, but to do something for your boss without reward was to be a freier. Several respondents mentioned that their willingness to be interviewed meant being a freier because they had devoted time to something that would give them nothing in return—even though they had undertaken the behavior of their own volition. By so doing, they may even be said to have been ultimate freiers, by their own reckoning, because they were fully conscious of what the interview entailed. American immigrants, who typically perceived themselves as ultimate freiers, on occasion went out of their way to further their interests by speaking English rather than Hebrew (Bloch, 1998), and in this, they may be said to be engaging in anti-freier behavior. Yet most respondents had no trouble describing character traits typically associated with freiers (e.g., naiveté, honesty) or with those who are usually nonfreiers (e.g., aggressiveness, egotism). Moreover, the responses of interviewees and the findings of past research (Bloch, 1990) indicate that immigrants from certain cultural backgrounds, such as so-called Anglo-Saxons, are, as a group, considered to be more prone to behaving as freiers. Thus, no single factor can account for a person's position on the freier scale.

An Illustration of the Freier Scale on the Road

Because driving is a metaphor that has been frequently employed to illustrate behavior in relation to the freier, it will be used here to show how people falling into the four categories might act on the road, based on responses provided by interviewees. For this purpose, consider the case of a person driving in a lane in which there is heavy traffic. Under such circumstances:

1. An ultimate freier, having noted the large amount of traffic in her or his lane, would stay there on principle if it were not legal or even incautious to change lanes at that point;
2. Just a freier could be someone who realized she or he was driving in a lane that moved slowest of all, as a result of bad judgment, inattention, or even bad luck;

3. Someone who is not a freier would try to get into a faster lane as quickly as possible;

4. An anti-freier would make certain to be in the fastest lane at all times and to be ahead of others no matter what the cost, including driving down the shoulder of the road, cutting across several lanes or turning off from a nonturning lane, crossing a white or double white line, making an illegal U-turn to take a different route, and even driving over the median, reversing down a road, and the like.

The freier scale is an analytical tool that maps a situation within the freier frame and is applied in order to understand to what degree this type of discourse is regulating interaction. This occurs at two successive levels: (a) in determining whether interactants are or are not behaving like freiers and (b) in allowing for a classification of how much effort a person is prepared to invest in either direction. The two constructs developed so far, the frame and the scale, are thus used to demonstrate how the freier concept actually works to define the situation and to illustrate how identity and meaning are subsequently negotiated through the dynamics of the frame.

The Duality of Functions of the Freier Frame

The freier frame fulfills a dual function in the Israeli communication culture, helping interpret meaning while justifying its own existence. Once again, Ortner's (1972) work helps illustrate this through her distinction between two types of key symbols: elaborating and summarizing. As Katriel (1991a) claims of the *gibush*, or crystallization metaphor in Israeli society, it is argued here too that the freier frame serves as both an elaborating and a summarizing symbol.

Elaborating symbols, according to Ortner (1972), provide a means of "sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable into orderly action" (p. 1340). These may have elaborating power in two modes: conceptual or action based.

Symbols that have primarily conceptual elaborating power are "valued as a source of categories for conceptualizing the order of the world" (p. 1340). They provide a way of ordering experience, categorizing it, and assisting us in understanding the relationships between various elements. Similarly, when evaluating certain experiences, the freier symbol is frequently invoked to determine whether a person has come out ahead (i.e., as a nonfreier) or lost out (i.e., as a freier). One respondent, a student, said this type of measurement is particularly common in reference to "buying things, because people compare what I did, what you did;

how I came out, how you came out.” Such comparison may be considered precursory to determining further action.

Indeed, the second type of elaborating symbol Ortner (1972) describes, known as “key scenarios” (p. 1341), are those that suggest the ways and means of attaining appropriate or successful social goals. This applies to the freier symbol in two manners. First, the mere utterance of a phrase such as “What a freier!” or “I’m not a freier!” constitutes not only an accusation or a justification, but a performative speech act (Austin, 1962). Once the freier frame has been invoked, the situation is irrevocably marked and defined according to certain rules. A high school student who was interviewed claimed, “The fact that they tell it to other people—that they came out freiers—makes them come out not freiers themselves.”

Secondly, the freier frame provides a means of determining strategy for social action and even international policy. A newspaper article explained: “The sides (Israelis, Syrians and Palestinians alike) seem willing to sanction concessions; but neither wants to come across as a freier who gave something in return for nothing” (Margalit, 2000). Strategy is called for whenever a situation arises that is perceived to compromise the actor’s relative position in a competition, ability to function in a male-dominated environment, perception of face, competence in manipulating boundaries set by rules, or sense of individualism. Evaluation of the extent of the threat and the appropriate steps to be taken depend on the situation, as well as a person’s cultural background and personality. As one newspaper article put it: “Fear of being a freier is, at base, a deep-seated personal insecurity—not only about your ability to negotiate an advantageous deal in the various interfaces of society, but about whether others will learn of your failure, leading to social disgrace” (Arnold, 1999).

To capitalize on the predominant sanctions against being a freier, the theme is overtly used as a motivational appeal in a multitude of different persuasive messages ranging from public health campaigns, political campaigns, enlisting support for a variety of causes, and most abundantly, advertising. “The contemporary equivalent of excommunication in Israel is to be branded a freier . . . a social outcast, and someone to laugh at: a fear continuously and quite nauseatingly exploited in the local advertising industry” (Abelman, 2000). The assumption is that it behooves the person to do or not to do a certain thing because clearly the last thing any sane person would wish to be is a freier. This is apparently learned at an early age, according to one advertisement for low-cost baby diapers in which a diaper-clad infant is shown whacking a television set until the program changes from a cartoon to a football game as the voice-over asserts, “Israeli babies are not freiers!” Another

journalist has pointed out that if people were to engage in a certain behavior for the sole reason that to do so would mark them as not being freiers, their actions would in fact, ironically, make them freiers (Rosenblum, 1994). In other words, being or not being a freier can be seen to be not merely the by-product of a certain behavior, but the aim of the behavior itself. It is here, then, that the issue of being or not being a freier may best be seen to also fulfill the second general type of key symbol Ortner (1972) describes.

Ortner's (1972) second main category, summarizing symbols:

are seen as summing up, expressing, representing for the participant in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way, what the system means to them . . . they operate to compound and synthesize a complex system of ideas, to "summarize" them under a unitary form. (pp. 1339–1340)

As a reporter stated, "It has been said that Israelis fear being a freier (patsy) more than dying" (Lerner, 1997). The negative perception of being a freier is so strong, that its antithesis—the imperative not to be a freier—has become a value in and of itself, engendering acts that demonstrate how one is not a freier, and these frequently overshadow what is, at least theoretically, the principal goal of the interaction. One journalist has written, "The biggest insult in Israeli slang is not 'stupid' or 'dumb' but freier" (Rosenthal, 1998).¹⁹ This sentiment is captured succinctly by Miller (1997): "It's a sin to be a sucker in Israel."²⁰ When the principal reason for doing something is no longer to serve any other purpose than to live up to one's values within the freier framework, the concept can be said to have acquired the power of a summarizing symbol (Ortner, 1972). This goes beyond merely having an impact on the dynamics of discourse within Israeli culture, but actually serves as the motivation for people's actions within this society, or even, as their *raison d'être*.

Dysfunctional Communication

It is useful here to look at Habermas's (1981) model of communication to comprehend what is at stake in the use of the freier frame. Specifically, Habermas differentiates between communicative action and instrumental or strategic action. The former is oriented toward mutual understanding, whereas the latter are oriented toward individual, ego-centric calculations of personal success. Use of the freier frame conforms more to action-oriented success, where "it is such things as the employment of sanctions which coordinate interaction, not the attainment of a consensual agreement" (White, 1988, p. 45). Furthermore, Habermas's "instrumental action" attains a certain state by "following technical rules of action and assess[ing] the efficiency of an intervention into a complex

of circumstances and events” (p. 285). Another type of action oriented toward success is when the actor is intent on influencing another’s actions by what Habermas calls “strategic action,” defined as “following rules of rational choice and assess[ing] the efficacy of influencing the decisions of a rational opponent” (p. 285). A parallel may be drawn here between the types of evaluation used in such success-oriented actions and the choices made in determining an actor’s place along the freier scale.

Habermas (1981) labels instrumental action nonsocial, while he maintains that strategic action is social by definition. The distinctions between instrumental and strategic actions can contribute to the present analysis because they can be likened to summarizing and elaborating symbols, respectively. At times, use of the freier frame entails instrumental action, when actors appear to be primarily concerned with reinforcing their own self-image, thereby representing a breakdown of the entire communication process as the individual loses sight of all but the self, at most engaging in intrapersonal interaction. At other times, strategic action is employed with the purpose of creating an impact on the other side by negotiating with them primarily in order to affect their perception of the first actor’s image. At best, use of the freier frame is adversarial in the case of strategic action; at worst, it is antisocial when action is instrumental. In neither case does it lend itself to cooperative social action or further the case of successful communication; worse, it defies them.

Analyzing the use of the freier frame represents what Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles (1991) have referred to as the deepest level at which “miscommunication” may be conceptualized. It entails an ideological analysis in which “interaction is seen as reinforcing or even constituting a societal value system,” although for the participants themselves “the ideological foundations of communication are typically invisible” (p. 15). The authors note, however, that it is only through critical analysis by researchers that social change might result: “There are no obvious avenues along which repair can take place, other than in and through the critique offered in the analysis itself (Billig et al., 1990) and whatever political or socio-structural reorientation it may trigger” (pp. 15–16). These sentiments are very similar to those expressed by Giddens (1984) in his discussion of discursive knowledge and the role of the social scientist.

Conclusion

My purpose has been to provide the tools to analyze communicative forms, using the example of a single cultural mode of interaction that is dysfunctional by communication standards and detrimental to society as a whole, in the hope that it will eventually help engineer change and

facilitate other similar endeavors. The theoretical stance of this research is that the study of language in society illustrates how the members of a culture use verbal expression to define themselves and others in relation to one another, to situate their perceptions of the world around them, and consequently, to determine future courses of action. The approach taken in this analysis is to show what impact the use of a certain key cultural concept has on a society and what effect it has on communication in general.

This work presents an analytical approach based on six dimensions by which a key cultural concept, being or not being a *freier*, can be used to analyze central features of the communication process within a given setting. It uses a core feature of discourse in Israel, to successively describe its functioning as a frame, show its centrality, describe its usage in different social realms, expose the structural parameters it sets forth as terms by which to negotiate interaction, demonstrate and classify the nature of its dynamics, and finally, assess its implications in communicative terms. The analysis demonstrates the usefulness of the frame metaphor in describing how a key cultural symbol can function in discourse. The research demonstrates how, during the interaction and as a result of it, the concept of the *freier* can actually shift from being a frame used to interpret situations and to decide upon the actions to being the motivation for the interaction itself. Rather than being a means to an end, then, the *freier* frame itself steals the show, becoming the principal aim: The *freier* frame has taken over the entire picture. The hermeneutic dialogue no longer takes place between two parties, but between one side and, to borrow from Shotter (1989), this culturally developed text. The constructs of the frame, the scale, and the duality of symbolism served by this frame should be used to test a variety of key cultural concepts in order to eventually determine a normative standard in analyzing communicative interaction in society.

This work analyzes the case of a society inflicting serious harm upon itself through its own culturally developed communication patterns. In its most symbolic form (Ortner, 1972), the *freier* frame represents a dissolution of the very notion of communication itself. Its use brings about a situation in which actors are no longer motivated toward social interaction, but toward satisfying intrapersonal needs, as individuals coddle their own egos with no thought for the other and worse, to the their detriment. So long as members of the culture continue to use this particular frame, a type of implosion seems inevitable in which the tragedy of the commons afflicts all social interaction. Due to the rigidity of the *freier* frame in the Israeli communication setting, any change must come about through a collective renegotiation of the terms of interaction, and by extension, must entail a shift away from the *freier* concept.

According to the constructionist perspective, the function of the social scientist is to “sensitize or render self-reflexive the culture more generally” (Gergen & Semin, 1990, p. 16). By exposing the mechanics of the freier frame, I hope to have done just that, pointing out the urgency for the use of an alternative discourse strategy.

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Notes

¹ This notion is also reflected in the usage of the word *freier* in the language, where it is employed exclusively as a noun as if it were an existing prototype for a person, and not as an adverb or as an adjective denoting a quality or a trait.

² It is tempting to advocate a concrete alternative to the freier concept, perhaps something along the lines of Arnett’s (2001) proposal of “dialogic civility,” with its emphasis on mutual trust, respect, and face saving. To do so, however, is beyond the scope of this paper and seems somewhat premature and unrealistic. At this stage, what is most needed is recognition of the negative impact of this mode of interaction. My hope is that, aided by an analysis that makes the ideological foundations of communication more visible (Coupland, Wiemann, & Giles, 1991) and highlights what is at stake, it will be possible in the future to discern an alternative that evolves from within the culture itself.

³ As Billig (1987, 1991; Billig et al., 1990) and Shotter (1993) have pointed out, culture and ideology represent conflicting themes. Yet, as Carbaugh (1991) has argued, “Common meanings . . . are coherent within a larger cultural system” (p. 339). Certainly the desire not to be a freier is not always completely bad. Some might even argue that it is part of what has allowed Israel to survive against many odds, perhaps especially in the early days of the state. Nowadays, however, it would seem the time has come to move on and to draw strength from positive aspirations, rather than from negative motivations. By and large the freier frame is having so negative an impact on today’s Israel (as it affects aggressiveness and violence, for example, within the family, on the road, and in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict) that it far outweighs any positive aspect that it may have served in the past or continue to serve in the future.

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⁵ Gan Oranim. Print ads appearing during the first months of 2000. Ad agency: Barkai Shani.

⁶ AIG. Periodically featured during 1999 and 2000, in various media including newspaper print ads, on the backs and sides of buses, and on television—Ad agency: Shalmor Avnon Amichai.

⁷ See Miller, 1997.

⁸ Teltiv Inc., October 22, 1999, Ha’Ir, p. 11. Ad agency: Ish Gordon.

⁹ Nine o’clock news, Israel Television, Channel One, May 24, 1999.

¹⁰ This particular politician, currently the head of one of the three largest political parties, has shown a continued predilection for the term, employing it throughout the 2003 national election campaign, after which he became justice minister.

¹¹ Lest this be too subtle, the reverse side of the paper portrays a bank check made out to the “State of Israel” by the late Syrian leader, Hafez Al-Assad, in return for “Peace,” with a red stamp across it declaring “no coverage.”

¹² Uvda: Arikim, Israel Television, Channel 2 (Tel-Ad), January 18, 2000.

¹³ Katriel (1986) notes that miscommunication between Americans and Israelis abounds: “Americans tend to interpret the paucity of politeness formulas in Israeli speech as rudeness, and Israelis tend to experience the standard American use of these conventions as a mark of insincerity” (p. 2).

¹⁴ The negative association of being a freier and its connection to the lack of respect for rules may further be explained in historical terms. Israelis have traditionally had a desire to distance them-

selves from the image of the Diaspora Jew (e.g., Almog, 1997), often pictured as a deferential member of a minority at the mercy of others and frequently a victim (Bloch, 1998). In a newspaper article about kidnapped Israelis who escaped from their captors and released other hostages, one person explained: “The reason we did what we did has something to do with our history, with the Holocaust. It has something to do with the hutzpa of the Israeli who does not want to be a freier (a sucker, in rough translation), the hutzpa of Israelis who won’t yield.” (parentheses in original; Rabinovich, 1991).

¹⁵ The article previously explained that the word *sucker* is the closest English translation of the word *freier*.

¹⁶ The Hebrew word employed here is the infinitive *lesader*, whose root, *seder* means order. The word can mean to put in order or to repair, but also, as used here, to “fix” a person by arranging that they be put at a disadvantage. Order, in fact, is precisely the contrary of what a nonfreier is pursuing (Bloch, 1998). Indeed, a person who knows how not to be a freier is considered a *mistadernik* [a dated term for someone who knows how to manage things], from the same root as *seder* [order], (Danet, 1989).

¹⁷ This is diametrically opposed to American talk shows where regardless of whether or not participants are in agreement with one another, it is necessary to display respect for the other’s opinion (Carbaugh, 1990a).

¹⁸ Both categories of nonfreiers (someone who is not a freier as well as someone who is an anti-freier) could also be described by a popular expression: *Lo ha’freier shel af ehad* [Nobody’s freier]. This is derived from the expression *Lo ha’freier shel Golda* [Not Golda’s freier (referring to Golda Meir, prime minister of Israel from 1969–1974), Ben Yehuda & Ben Amotz, 1982]. This occurred, as Roniger and Feige (1992) have noted, at a time when there was great disillusionment with the current government, largely in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. Subsequently, the expression came to denote “a form of behavior that mistakenly follows the official, institutionalized predicament of generalized exchange” (p. 208).

¹⁹ In a later article, the same reporter said that freier “epitomizes the opposite of Israeli values” (Rosenthal, 1999). Numerous similar claims can be found in the popular press. Starr (1995) maintains that one of the worst things one can be is a freier. Kandell (1997) says, “For most Israelis, to be a freier . . . is a cardinal sin.” Negbi (1999) claims, “If there is something that the average Israeli really hates, it is to feel or to be seen as a freier.”

²⁰ Despite being a foreign newspaper, the author takes care to explain that by “sucker” she means, specifically, freier, and uses the latter throughout the article.

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