

## 'GRIPING' AS A VERBAL RITUAL IN SOME ISRAELI DISCOURSE

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"The function of ritual, as I understand it, is to give form to human life, not in the way of a mere surface arrangement, but in depth."  
(Campbell 1972)

1. *Introduction*

This paper examines the speech mode known in colloquial Israeli Hebrew as *kiturim* or *kuterai*, whose closest English equivalent would be 'griping'. As many Israelis concede, and some lament, griping has become an ever-present speech activity in informal encounters among Israelis. So much so that Friday night gatherings in Israeli homes, which form the major context for middle-class Israelis to get together socially, have earned the label *mesibot kiturim*, that is, 'griping parties'.

The overall flavor of these parties is conveyed by the following lines from an article by a prominent Israeli journalist:

"About a year ago a group of us were sitting at a friend's house and, as is the habit among Israelis, we were griping about the situation. The immediate pretext for this collective bathing in our national-frustration-puddle was a rumor which circulated at the time concerning some instance of corruption in an important government agency (and which, incidentally, later proved to be largely untrue) and some half-insane political act of a marginal group that manages to conquer the newspaper headlines from time to time".  
(*Ma'ariv*, Nov. 29th, 1980; my translation)

A few months later, the same author talks about "the masochistic 'griping parties' held on Friday nights, which more than anything else reflects the attitudes of the public" (*Ma'ariv*, April 24th, 1981; my translation).

Thus, in contemporary middle-class Israeli society, the griping mode finds its primordial expression in the type of speech event known as a *Griping*

*Party*; however, it is by no means restricted to this prototypical context. In what follows, I will delineate the structure and functions of griping in Israeli discourse, arguing that it constitutes a well-bounded and readily recognizable type of communicative event, both in its more and in its less paradigmatic forms. Moreover, I will not only argue that griping has evolved as an implicitly patterned interactional routine in Israeli social life, but also that its import and functions can be best understood by regarding it as a verbal ritual.

The term 'ritual' as used here refers to patterned symbolic action whose function it is to re-affirm the relationship of members to a culturally sanctioned 'sacred object' (or 'unquestionable', in the secularized language of contemporary anthropology (Moore and Meyerhoff 1977)). According to Firth (1973: 301), symbolic actions of this kind "are communicative, but the information they convey refers to the control and regularization of a social situation rather than to some descriptive fact."

In a previous paper (Katriel & Philipsen 1981), a similar attempt has been made to apply the ritual metaphor to the description of the speech event we have dubbed the *Communication Ritual*, to which Americans refer by the locutions *sit down and talk* or *discuss our relationship*. This ritual pertains to the domain of intimate relationships and provides the major context for members of the culture to construct as well as validate personal identities and generate intimacy through the form of talk known as 'communication', which is culturally interpreted as 'supportive speech'. Comparisons will be drawn between the Communication and the Griping Rituals whenever this seems appropriate.

The observations contained in this paper are based both on my own intuitions as a 'native griper' and on discussions with over 50 informants of a predominantly middle-class background, of which I recorded spontaneously expressed attitudes towards griping, descriptions of actual griping, as well as elicited responses to various appropriate and inappropriate uses of the term *lekater* 'to gripe' and its morphologically related terms, such as *kuter* (which stands for an 'habitual griper') and *kuter mikzo'i* (which indicates a 'hopeless one'). This set of moves has provided the data base for the analytic description of griping as a distinct type of communicative event, and for the outline of the symbolic structuring involved in its ritualistic enacting.

The colloquial term *lekater* is explicated in the popular dictionary of Hebrew slang compiled by Dan Ben-Amotz and Netiva Ben-Yehuda (1972), where it is rendered as 'to complain' and illustrated with an example that can be roughly translated as 'Stop griping, nothing will come out of talk'. It

is said to be a Yiddish borrowing, but its etymology is not specified. Several informants, however, were familiar with the word's history and noted that it has sprung from the Yiddish word *kuter*, which denotes a male cat who is whining even while mounting a female, thus giving expression to basically unwarranted plaintiveness. The cat's griping disposition and its metaphorical extension to the human domain were attributed to a generally defensive orientation, nourished by the belief that one should not appear overly contented so as not to attract the devil's attention (as happened, for example, to the Biblical figure of Job). People also tended to see the griping mode as an expression of a 'national character', counting evidence as ancient as the Children of Israel complaining on encountering their first difficulties after the exodus from Egypt. Thus, in its folkloristic roots, griping is viewed as part of the national ethos, constituting both a spontaneous expression of lack of faith and a culturally sanctioned form of 'preventive treatment'.

Most informants, it should be noted, were not aware that *kuter* was a borrowing from Yiddish and related the word either to the Hebrew word *katar* 'steam engine' or to the word *ktoret* 'incense'.<sup>1</sup> Both words conjure up the image of smoke and of the blowing out of surplus, waste material, which is quite in line with the way the griping mode is generally conceptualized. In sum, the family of words related morphologically and semantically to *lekater* is felt by many Israelis to be a colloquial form with native roots rather than a foreign-sounding borrowing. This is indicated both by the morphological productiveness of the root-stem and by the semantic motivation it is felt to have.

The slang dictionary rendering of *lekater* as 'to complain' is not upheld by native speakers of Hebrew, who draw a clear distinction between the two words, indicating that, although both verbs denote plaintive speech acts, they cannot be used interchangeably. Some of the semantic differences between the Hebrew equivalents of 'to gripe' and 'to complain' will be brought out by the forthcoming analysis.

Despite the general recognition of the long-standing cultural roots of the griping mode, many informants pointed out that the family of terms related to *lekater* has gained currency in colloquial Hebrew mainly during the past decade or so (some confidently dated its emergence in the days following the 1967 war; two clearly remembered learning it as a new word on returning to Israel after a few years' absence at that time). Informants also noted that griping has become increasingly salient in recent years; some even referred to it as 'the trademark of Israeli society'.

This is corroborated by a passage from a recently published book by Ben-Yehuda (1981) which depicts the ethos of the *Palmach*, a major division of the pre-Independence mainstream army. The passage describes the wholehearted commitment and sense of unquestionable rightfulness that filled the lives of the youngsters who had volunteered to assume the role of the 'realizers', through whose deeds the Zionist dream for national revival would come true:

"We sang with great enthusiasm, danced energetically, went out to camps, climbed mountains, prepared whole-heartedly to 'realize' ... and we were happy, content with what we had, pleased with our goals, at peace with everything ... Nobody complained or criticized, nobody slandered, or noticed anything negative. We didn't speak ill of ourselves. We did not speak ill of our leaders, and this was no mistake. We didn't comment on anything. The very notion of 'criticism' was a negative concept. Absolutely negative. Like throwing mud. Making filthy. Slander and griping (*kiturim*) — these concepts didn't even exist. In the state-to-become, among us, the ardent pioneers, there was not the slightest trace of these concepts". (Ben-Yehuda 1981: 131; my translation)

This description of 'then' is written against the background of the present. It is the prevalence of the griping mode in present-day Israel that hovers at the edges of this picture of enthusiastic, committed 'realizers' who are actively engaged in the pursuit of communal goals. Conversely, it is the memory of this wholehearted, 'gripeless' commitment and active participation in communal life that nourishes some of the frustration that give rise to griping. The above passage, then, suggests that the rise of the griping mode, indeed the very coinage of the term, has to do with an ideological crisis, some dimensions of which are due to the fact that, as Rubinstein (1977) puts it, social cohesiveness in Israel nowadays is predicated on a common *fate* rather than a common *faith*. It is this common fate and the problems surrounding it as a source of communal identification that — as we will argue — the Griping Ritual dramatizes.

The Griping Ritual and the Communication Ritual are, thus, functionally comparable in that they each provide a major context for members of their respective cultures to give expression to, and form an experience of, a central problem area in their culture. The topic of each is, accordingly, a problem; but while the Communication Ritual addresses a problem whose locus is the 'self' in an attempt to reaffirm its status as the culture's 'unquestionable', the Griping Ritual locates the problem in public life and in its members' participation in it, reaffirming the status of the 'public interest' or

'community' (*haklal*) as the culture's 'unquestionable'.

I will now turn to a description of the structure and functions of griping in Israeli discourse, in keeping with Geertz's (1973: 364) general formulation of the goal of anthropological inquiry as that of "describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience ... as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time — in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture." As was done in the case of the Communication Ritual, I will employ a subset of Hymes' (1972) components of speech events to describe the 'structure of experience' a communicative event must manifest for middle-class Israelis to identify it as having involved griping rather than, say, complaining or chatting, for example.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. *The Griping Ritual*

The speech components to be used in organizing the description of the Griping Ritual are the following: topic, purpose, channel, participants, setting, key, act sequence.

### 2.1. *Topic*

One never gripes about something one feels good about: the topic of griping must always be a problem. As noted, the problem griped about has its locus in some aspect of that external reality Israelis refer to with the sweeping term *hamatzav* — the Situation writ large. The topic may be a more general one, such as the nation's economy or the public morale, or a more 'localized' one, such as teachers' low salaries and the quality of one's neighborhood school. Personal problems can become the topic of griping only insofar as they are incorporated into the discussion of some aspect of the current Situation (e.g. as 'an example of', or 'evidence for'), in which case these personal problems are dressed in a public language and presented, so to speak, in disguise.

Some informants consequently claimed that habitual gripers tend to project (and blame) their personal problems onto external factors rather than taking responsibility for their own lives. This is generally said in the anti-griping mode, which will be discussed later. Whether this accusation is warranted or not, we might at least argue that the Griping Ritual channels the expression of discontent, providing an established pattern for the structuring of plaintive talk in informal encounters among middle-class Israelis, so that feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction that might lead Americans to examine their personal lives through enactments of the Communication

Ritual would tend to be cast in the form of the Griping Ritual in informal encounters among Israelis.

Notably, not all aspects of the general Situation are proper candidates as the topic of griping: we are unlikely to say that the inhabitants of a border settlement are griping about the frequent shelling they are subjected to, although this is part of their Situation *par excellence*. Similarly, as one informant put it, when people who are reasonably well-off complain about inflation, we call it griping, but when a jobless father of twelve does so, we do not. On the other hand, the foreign policy of the U.S.A. might be subject to objections or criticism, but it is not likely to serve as the topic of griping. If it does, it will most likely be interpreted as an indirect comment on the inadequacy of Israeli foreign policy since griping, unlike complaining, is essentially interpreted as self-addressed. Grippers are basically consumers of their own talk.

The problem Israelis tend to gripe about, then, is a problem related to the domain of public life, and one which they feel they should have been able to deal with through some form of collective social effort. Israelis' disposition towards griping seems to be nourished by a deep sense of frustration related to their perceived inability to partake in social action and communal life in a way that would satisfy the high level of commitment and involvement which characterized the small community of 'realizers' as described in the excerpt from Ben-Yehuda's book. The prevalence of griping suggests an overwhelming, culturally sanctioned concern with the public domain, on the one hand, coupled with a marked absence of widely satisfying participation channels, on the other.

In sum, the topic of griping is constrained in a number of ways: it must be a problem related to the Situation, i.e. that shared fate around which Israeli communal life revolves and on which Israelis' sense of solidarity is most clearly predicated. However, not all aspects of the Situation can be properly griped about; griping is generally restricted to problems with the fabric of Israeli social life that 'somebody around here' should be able to do something about, not problems felt to be overwhelming thrusts of fate.

## 2.2. Purpose

Most informants noted that the function of griping is to relieve pent-up tensions and frustrations. This therapeutic orientation is similar to that of many Americans towards the Communication Ritual. In both cases, downplaying the sense of difficulty experienced by a fellow member of the culture — as expressed by an attempt to initiate either the Griping or the

Communication Ritual — would be interpreted as a rejection. Thus, responses of the form "I don't see what you mean; I'm quite pleased with the way the relationship is going" in the one case, or "People gripe about inflation but the standard of living is so much higher than it used to be" in the other, are not experienced as encouragements, but rather as refusals to validate the problem bearer, despite the face value encouraging content of the message.

There is, however, a difference between the kind of 'therapy' provided by 'communicating' among Americans and by 'griping' among Israelis. While 'communicating' is actually perceived as talk which constitutes the *solution* to the problem forming the topic of the ritual, 'griping' is perceived as an activity that constitutes an *anti-solution* to the problem griped about. Rather than being the preferred action strategy for dealing with the problem invoked, *talk* in the case of the Griping Ritual is seen as the dispreferred strategy: it is because grippers perceive the problem as beyond their power to solve, but cannot rid themselves of their overall concern with problems of this type, that they opt for the dispreferred channel of talk in dealing with it.

This cultural valuation of talk as counterproductive, as a dispreferred alternative to social action, is epitomized in the often heard injunction 'Stop talking, do something'. This injunction apparently lies behind recent institutionalized efforts to provide participation channels for the solution of communal problems, which have taken the form of highly dramatized fund-raising drives conducted through the mass media. The money was raised for causes which enjoy a high degree of consensus (the children of Cambodia, a special defense fund, disabled children). The economic need was recognized by all, but the impact and drama attending the drive was felt by many to go far beyond the monetary side of it. The donation was presented in terms of a rhetoric of participation. As a major 'character' in the drama — a TV personality — put it in countless previews of the event: "Let nobody find himself in the unpleasant position when he gets to work the morning after the fund-raising drive that he has to admit he is the only one who has not donated." Being in such a position would amount to being a non-participant in Israeli communal life. Donating was interpreted as partaking in the life of the community: attesting to one's commitment to the public interest through the form of social action provided by the occasion.

That one major such event was carried out on TV was particularly significant: this positively-oriented anti-griping ritual was brought right into the main setting of the griping ritual, the living room of the man-in-the-street,

where he had spent many a Friday night 'sitting and griping', i.e. being socially useless. Also, the media, and TV in particular, are generally accused of being the enemies of the public morale — they are said to be digging up all the Negative, painting a picture of a world one can really do nothing about but gripe. In fact, news items are often employed as starters in a griping chain. Here, they have blessedly reversed their role.

In addition to its overt, ventilating function, the Griping Ritual has a less recognized integrative function on its hidden agenda. In probing their experience of griping as a communicative event, people mentioned the sense of *zavta* 'togetherness' that it engendered. The proposition that griping produces solidarity was never contradicted. Some informants maintained that this sense of *zavta* made griping 'a lot of fun' for them. This stands out particularly if we remember that griping is usually referred to in derogatory terms. Notably, griping was never relegated metaphorically to the domain of 'work'; in this, it is unlike 'communicating', which is conceptualized metaphorically as work-related (along with other concepts in the interpersonal domain; thus, you *work* on your *communication*, you *work* on yourself, and you *work* on your *relationship*).

In fact, griping and joke telling are two major interactional resources for Israelis to reaffirm their common fate. In joke telling, Israelis often poke fun at themselves and their Situation. In times of crisis, such as war, both griping and joke telling disappear from the social scene, as cohesion is spontaneously achieved by virtue of the criticalness of the moment. Moreover, those topics which are too serious, or sacred, or delicate to be joked about will not be appropriate topics for the Griping Ritual either.

Griping and joke telling are the two major types of speech activities that give form and predictability to the domain of informal relationships among Israelis — they are the cornerstones of the everyday interpersonal task of socializing. Someone I can gripe with or joke with shares with me at least one dimension of social experience, this shared dimension being both reflected in and produced by the possibility of griping or exchanging a joke.

### 2.3. Channel

The Griping Ritual typically involves face-to-face oral engagements, although phone conversations and perhaps personal letters might qualify as well.

### 2.4. Participants

The Griping Ritual typically takes place among friends, casual acquaintances

or even strangers, unlike the Communication Ritual which is typically enacted among potential intimates. The less familiar the participants are with each other, the more general the theme that functions as the topic of the ritual. A general griping comment about the Situation is a ready-to-hand opener for a conversation between unacquainted Israelis who thereby legitimate their entrance into a state of talk by invoking and affirming their shared communal bond.

Griping can proceed undisturbed as long as there are no outsiders, i.e. non-Israelis such as tourists or newcomers, around. The very same talk that would be considered incidental griping among Israelis turns into malicious slander, *hashmatza*, when uttered in the presence of an outsider. The reason for this is that Israelis know very well that griping should not be taken at face value, that it commands a special interpretive norm according to which the referential function of the talk is, as it were, suspended. Griping is not really an information-oriented speech activity. Although purporting to be a response to the Situation 'as it is', it is by no means a reflection of reality. Outsiders are unlikely to be familiar with this interpretive convention, and are likely to take the talk too literally, constructing for themselves a skewed picture of life in Israel.

A number of informants related anecdotes describing cases in which a group of loosely acquainted Israelis discovered that one of its members was a tourist or a prospective newcomer after griping had been underway for a while. This discovery generated a great deal of embarrassment as the 'outsider' took the talk to be informative, while the 'insiders' were aware of its non-informative, ritual functions.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, griping is not considered a verbal activity to be encouraged in the presence of children who, like tourists and newcomers, have not been fully socialized into the adult griping mode, and may be vulnerable to the content of the talk. Some informants noted the cumulative effect of exposure to griping on children and youth: the picture of the Situation they are presented with is so exaggeratedly bleak, the borderline between informative and non-informative talk so fuzzy that they 'don't know what to think' — so goes the claim.

We might rephrase this by saying that many Israelis find themselves gearing their talk to the topical format that the structure of the Griping Ritual 'suggests'. Consequently, the Situation, as constructed through the talk about it, is perceived as more and more lamentable, i.e. more and more amenable to griping. This state of affairs generates a sense of discrepancy between

reality and the talk about it, and griping thus becomes a problem in the collective perception of reality, to whose aggravation all Israelis unwittingly contribute as they 'sit and gripe'. In fact, the most immediate 'solution' to the problem of griping that is proposed by anti-grippers involves a change in perceptual emphasis rather than direct social action. It takes the form of a call to point out and talk about the 'great and beautiful things that have been accomplished in this country' and avoid a one-sided emphasis on the Negative.

A different type of constraint on participation in the Griping Ritual concerns more 'localized' problems: if, say, a group of office employees are sitting and griping about their working conditions, the approach of their boss is most likely to silence them. In the presence of the person(s) who may hold the solution to the problem griped about, the talk turns into complaining. This awareness of the potential change in the status of the talk lies behind many embarrassed shifts in such contexts.

#### 2.5. *Setting*

As indicated, the typical settings for the enacting of the Griping Ritual are Friday night gatherings in private homes, but they are certainly not restricted to the latter. They must, however, be settings in which participants can make their talk a focal activity and in which people who are not potential participants are excluded.

#### 2.6. *Key*

The key or tone that prevails in the Griping Ritual is that of plaintiveness and frustration, accompanied by a sense of entrapment and enmeshment in the event itself. Thus, informants said they felt themselves unwillingly 'sliding' into the griping mode, expressing bewilderment at their own participation in it, since they held a very low opinion of this speech mode.

One important aspect of griping as far as its 'key' is concerned is that participants in the ritual should achieve a synchronization of their emotive display in terms of the degree of frustration they express, so that the enacting of the ritual is felt to be reasonably well 'orchestrated'. An extreme example of lack of synchronization is observed when a member of a gathering engaged in griping does not take part in the ritual, consistently keeping his or her silence. His or her behavior is construed as a critical comment on the verbal conduct of the grippers in attendance and tends to give rise to discomfort, if not resentment (much like the case of the non-drinker in a drinking party).

Loss of such synchronization is often accompanied by a disruption of

the Griping Party. As some of the informants said, there is that feeling that griping had 'gone too far': either the topics touched upon were considered too delicate or 'touchy' to be griped about, or the cumulative effect of the griping that had been going on became too oppressive for the participants in the ritual who felt they needed a change of 'key'.

The sense of 'togetherness' or solidarity forms a secondary strand in the 'key' of the Griping Ritual. Griping, unlike communicating in its role as supportive speech in interpersonal relations among Americans, is a speech activity deeply entrenched in the domain of casualness and triviality. This difference in the status of griping and communicating as speech activities is also detectable in bodily postures which accompany these two rituals, and their tolerance for side involvements à la Goffman (1967): one can slouch and gripe, but one can hardly slouch and 'communicate'; one can gripe while doing dishes, but one cannot accomplish the purposeful, concerted activity of 'communicating' under these circumstances. A similar difference is observed between 'complaining' and 'griping': plaintive speech produced while slouching is more likely to be interpreted as 'griping' than as 'complaining'. The same goes for plaintive speech produced while doing the dishes. For plaintive talk to be heard as a complaint it must be addressed to an agent who can act towards the solution of the problem referred to, and the talk must be interpreted as a concerted, purposeful speech activity commanding the speaker's full commitment.

#### 2.7. *Act sequence*

While the unfolding of the Communication Ritual has been shown to follow a linear pattern, proceeding from one phase of the talk to the next, the sequential organization of the Griping Ritual can be said to follow a 'spiral' pattern, proceeding from one 'round' of talk to another. This may prove to be a more general distinction between communicative encounters oriented towards problem solving and those oriented towards the production of solidarity: the internal structure of the Griping Ritual is reminiscent of the case of joking or anecdotal exchanges which are similarly structured around a common theme, e.g. jokes about national characters, with each contribution linked to the others through the relation of 'more of the same'. Among strangers, the Griping Ritual tends to proceed in a centripetal pattern, from the more general to the more local theme; among well-acquainted people, the opposite pattern is possible, and often more natural: the talk proceeds in a centrifugal pattern, from a more local to a more general topic.

The overall structural differences between the sequential organization of the Gripping and the Communication Ritual are brought out when we consider what it would take for a participant to join either type of ritual in mid-session: for this to be properly accomplished in the case of the Communication Ritual, the talk has to come to a halt and current participants will have to retrace and fill the newcomer in on what came before. In the case of the Gripping Ritual, all a new arrival has to know is the general theme currently engaged in. Even if he or she repeats some of what came before, it would not be a great disaster, just another expression of shared ground.

The Gripping Ritual, like the Communication Ritual, is usually initiated by a particular participant who voices a complaint of greater or lesser generality. This is the *initiation phase*. A typical 'opener' is a report or a comment on some news item which illustrates some unfavorable aspect of the Situation. A comment that elaborates on the 'opener', or suggests some comparable item, functions as an *acknowledgment phase*, indicating the participants' willingness to enact the ritual (or else the attempt to enact it would be aborted). This phase triggers a 'chain-effect' of individual contributions which are, by and large, 'more of the same'. The ritual often proceeds by progression from one sub-theme to the next, each sub-theme dominating a 'round' of talk; the rounds combine to form the aforementioned 'spiral structure'.

Typical forms for terminating the ritual<sup>4</sup> involve standardized ways of dramatizing the participants' 'shared fate' with such expressions as *That's life* or *It's no joke, things are getting worse all the time* or *The Situation is real lousy* (these are translated examples given by informants to illustrate terminations of the Gripping Ritual). This would be the case of 'smooth' terminations. At other times the ritual is disrupted with the loss of emotive synchronization as described in the discussion of its 'key' (cf. section 2.6.).

2.8. Finally, let us briefly note that the Gripping Ritual has given rise to two subsidiary verbal modes which have become increasingly salient on the Israeli social scene: I have dubbed one of them *kitur-al* 'meta-gripping' and the other *al-kitur* 'anti-gripping' (the rather fortunate rhyming effect is possible because /al/ is a homophone in Hebrew meaning 'about' and a form of negation, respectively. They are spelled differently and would, in fact, be also pronounced differently in some dialects of modern Hebrew).

Meta-gripping is itself an instance of gripping, often taking the form of gripping about the low morale among Israelis, as manifested, of course, in their disposition to 'sit and gripe'. The increasing salience of meta-gripping in public discourse seems to indicate a growing awareness of the gripping

mode's underlying ideological erosion that marks our time and age. The purpose of meta-gripping is to help grippers extricate themselves from the gripping mode by drawing attention to questions of morale and their social-communicative manifestations. Since it is itself still located within the gripping province, this form of talk is not likely to be effective in achieving the persuasive goals it set for itself.

The anti-gripping mode, which was briefly illustrated in relation to the fund-raising dramas staged through the local media, is similarly geared towards the containment of the gripping activity and its counterproductive implications. Unlike 'meta-gripping', it is optimistic in tone, and is epitomized in the already mentioned injunction to 'Stop gripping and do something'; it may be said to represent a non-gripping variant of meta-gripping. This communicative mode is amply represented in public discourse as is exemplified by a huge advertisement or announcement issued by an independent group of citizens calling for "Renewal and Change" which appeared in the evening paper *Ma'ariv* (Feb. 1st, 1981). Its large-lettered title WE ARE TO BLAME is an attention-getter precisely because of its implied reference to the customary gripping mode, and its proper interpretation is predicated on our familiarity with the Gripping Ritual. It is interesting to note that the announcement sketches three alternatives faced by members of Israeli society:

- (a) to become stagnant;
- (b) to run away;
- (c) to act.

Obviously, readers are called upon to choose the third alternative, *viz.* social action, which is the generally acknowledged alternative to gripping. Let me just mention that 'stagnation' and 'escapism' were the very terms used by my American informants to refer to the state of 'lack of communication'; here, the very same metaphors refer to the state of lack of social action, typically filled in by gripping in Israeli society. Thus, from the point of view of anti-grippers, gripping occupies a place comparable in import to the state of 'lack of communication' in some corners of American society.

### 3. Concluding remarks

This paper has provided a detailed examination of gripping as a pervasive speech mode in contemporary middle-class Israeli society. It was argued that gripping has evolved as a standardized communicative event and that, as such, it constitutes a readily available pattern for the structuring of plaintive talk

in a considerable section of the community. It was pointed out that in the contexts around which griping resolves, talk is viewed as a dispreferred social strategy, as the antithesis to social action. One result of this is that any attempt by a rather dissatisfied group of people to clarify issues through discussions of problems pertaining to the social domain may be labeled as 'griping' and dismissed as such. A well-known manipulation of the format implicit in the Griping Ritual occurs in the military where commanders will often assemble their soldiers for what is known as *erev kuterai* 'griping evening': in such contexts any justified complaint addressed to the commanders themselves is pre-defined as a 'gripe', i.e. as unwarranted and self-addressed. The function of the event is strictly that of ventilation.

Throughout the paper, I have drawn comparisons between the Griping Ritual as studied here, and the Communication Ritual, which in a previous paper has been argued to be a central communicative event for many Americans nowadays. Both rituals share the task of dramatizing major cultural problems and providing a preferred social context for the crystallization of feelings of frustration, on the one hand, and a sense of (personal or communal) identity, on the other. The analysis has emphasized contextual constraints which govern the enacting of the rituals, while paying particular attention to the ritualistic, non-referential dimensions of the talk and the specialized interpretive norms they give rise to.

An important implication of the analysis presented here is that informal verbal rituals of this kind are both shaped by, and formative of the social experience of the individuals participating in them. For the researcher, they provide clues to the construction of the social reality of the participants, as well as intriguing illustrations of the many ways in which such verbal rituals can shape our communicative lives through their dynamics of form.

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#### NOTES

1. The word *lekater* is, in fact, used in Biblical language to refer to the ritual act of using incense, but it is not part of the active vocabulary of colloquial Hebrew.

2. The social status of 'griping' as a verbal activity is somewhat reminiscent of that of 'self-talk' (Goffman 1978): neither of them is considered a proper engagement so that, like self-talk, griping tends to be disavowed. Thus, it would be highly incongruous for someone to say: "I'm sorry, I can't come now. We are sitting and griping."

3. The link between the role of the outsider and that of the non-griper is indicated in a journalist's (T. Avidar) humorous summing up of her homecoming experience after a prolonged stay abroad (in the States); one of the sources of alienation from one's surroundings, she says, is the fact that "one is not yet an active participant in Griping Parties. One still listens and finds it hard to believe the stories. One cannot yet grasp how come — if the country has it so bad — its citizens, who are griping all around us, seem to have it so good" (*Ma'ariv*, Aug. 5th, 1981).

4. I am grateful to Marcelo Dascal for suggesting that I consider postural differences, as well as terminating techniques associated with the enacting of the Griping Ritual. I am also grateful to Joseph Shimron and Perla Neshet for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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