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Lefargen: A Study in Israeli Semantics of Social Relations

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term *lefargen* and its derivatives—roughly translatable as 'to support, not to envy or begrudge another's success'—is routinely employed in everyday discourse among Israelis. As Netser (1988) pointed out, and as many adult speakers of colloquial Hebrew confirm in sociolinguistic interviews, this has not always been the case. Although the spread of the term cannot be determined precisely, the sense of lexical novelty attending its use can still be glimpsed now and then as when people readily respond to questions of linguistic usage by recalling "the first time I have heard the word." Or, more pointedly, when a person who has been away from the country for a number of years explicitly wonders about the semantics of *lefargen,* as did a re-patriated colleague of mine who, upon hearing about my interest in this term, said: "I was really wondering about this word. I just learned it coming back now, and am not quite sure how to use it." Indeed, I, too, found myself tenuously trying to pin down the semantics of *lefargen,* which I clearly remember to have first encountered upon my return from an extended stay in the United States in early 1988 in the often-heard

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expression *"etslenu lo mefargenim"* 'Here, by us, people don't support each other, are envious of each other's well-being'. Notably, however, younger informants, students in their early 20s, consider *lefargen* and its derivatives as part of their taken-for-granted everyday vocabularies. In fact, they are somewhat surprised to learn that the term has not been part of the active, standard repertoire of speakers of colloquial Hebrew until relatively recently.

Thus, whereas the lexemes morphologically derived from the root stem *f-r-g-n* have found their place in dictionaries of Hebrew slang for quite a number of years now (Sappan, 1965; Ben-Amotz & Ben-Yehuda, 1972), they seem to have been incorporated into colloquial Hebrew speech in a gradual manner over the past decade or so. These items have also gained increasing sociolinguistic legitimacy as their usage proliferated. For example, they can be heard in relatively formal speech events such as lectures or formal TV interviews with high-profile artists or politicians, and they no longer tend to appear in the press in single quotation marks, which are typographical devices used to mark the nonstandard status of linguistic items. As one person put it, smilingly: "When I heard Shimon Peres [former prime minister and leader of the Labor bloc who is considered an intellectual] use the word *lefargen,* I knew it was ok to use it."

Like other metacommunicative terms that verbally chart culturally focal "ways of speaking" (Hymes, 1974), *lefargen* is considered both routine and symbolically potent. In Ortner's terms (1973), it is a verbal "key symbol," affirmed as much in positive injunctions about the value of supportive conduct falling under the heading of *firgun* and in ongoing complaints about a prevailing attitude of nonsupportiveness, or lack of *firgun.* Thus, the culturally focal status I claim for the verbal symbol *lefargen* is predicated not only on its proliferation in everyday speech, a matter of frequencies, but more importantly on the emotional and moral overtones attending its discussion among cultural members. As I show, the wider circulation and broader legitimacy related to the use of the family of terms morphologically associated with *lefargen* (verb) and *firgun* (noun) have been accompanied by a broadening of its semantic scope. For example, *lefargen* and its derivatives have assumed a central "summarizing" role in descriptions of a social milieu as a whole (Ortner, 1973), as exemplified in the generalized expression *avira mefargenet* 'a supportive atmosphere.'

The extent to which the term *firgun* has become "naturalized" in Israeli speech can be gleaned from a somewhat facetious newspaper article by Amnon Rubinstein (1990), professor of law, member of parliament, and student of Israeli society (Rubinstein, 1977). This article explicitly supports my selection of *lefargen* as a culturally focal key (verbal) symbol in contemporary Israeli society. The article is entitled *"Fargen Li I-firgun Katan,"* roughly, 'Don't begrudge me a bit of begrudging', and carries a subtitle (given in parentheses), which reads: 'If you understand this title it is a sign that you are an Israeli.' Further commenting on the title, Rubinstein wrote: "Every true Israeli will understand it with a little effort. If I don't begrudge you, [do] begrudge my failure to begrudge you. But who will understand this title except for us? And how the hell do you translate this title into English or French – or into any other language" (p. 8)? He continued by writing that the word has spread so much that "it is difficult to imagine a newspaper article without it being employed in both expected and unexpected places" (p. 8).

Whereas parsing out the semantic features of *lefargen* would in itself be an interesting analytic task (which was partially accomplished by Netser, 1988), my main interest lies in reflecting upon the larger contextual issues associated with the adoption (through lexical borrowing) and spread of the term as part of Israeli social semantics. I submit that in commending a person as someone who 'knows how to express support' (*ehad shejodea lefargen*) or in presenting oneself as 'someone who likes to express support' (*ohev lefargen*) or in complaining of 'lack of support' (*hoser firgun*), speakers give voice to an ethnosociological model in which social relations and interpersonal patterns of a particular kind are verbally reified and valorized.

As I demonstrate, the particular conception and scope of the notion of "interpersonal support" embedded within this model, and the behavioral expectations associated with it, are indeed a matter of empirical exploration.[1] To what extent this verbally encoded cognitive model in fact shapes actual behaviors is another question. The constant complaints about people's failure to stand up to expected standards of *firgun* suggest that social expectations are, in fact, often thwarted by the actual realities of everyday interpersonal conduct. These expectations, however, whether followed or not, are central components in Israeli "behavioral ideology." Behavioral ideology, according to Volosinov,

1973, p. 91, is "that atmosphere of unsystematized and unfixed inner and outer speech which endows our every instance of behavior and action and our every 'conscious' state with meaning."

The particular flavor of *lefargen* as an interpersonal support term can be gleaned from the explications found in slang dictionaries. Thus, Ben-Amotz and Ben-Yehuda (1972) noted that *lefargen* is a borrowing from Yiddish, and they exemplified its use with the negative *Hu lo mefargen leaf ehad shum davar,* which is explicated as 'He cannot stand it when someone has an advantage over him. . . . He is envious.' Sappan (1965) similarly explicated *lefargen* as "relating to another without envy." This explication goes back to the German-derived Yiddish term *ferginen,* which denotes an interpersonal attitude anchored in the ability and willingness to overcome one's envy in another's good fortune, and not to begrudge his or her success.[2] This account indeed captures a core component in the semantics of this family of terms but does not cover the whole array of meanings and uses currently associated with it.

Interviewees' renderings of *lefargen* similarly mark it as a social support term, pointing to various dimensions of its meanings. Thus, a 39-year-old male informant explained: "*Lefargen* is to give advance credit, to want somebody else's advantage. To give them a chance, to want them to succeed, and to be pleased with their success. For example, when someone succeeds in business, I show him I am pleased for him (*ani mefargen lo*)." A 37-year-old woman said that "*lefargen* is to give someone a chance to do things, not to judge them harshly." And a 22-year-old woman said that "*lefargen* is generally speaking a positive expression, a positive form of expression that is externally expressed in words, bodily behavior, or smiles. The classical example: a teacher–student encounter. When the student gives a correct answer, the teacher supports him (*mefargen lo*) by repeating the student's words and making use of what he said." And, finally, a 40-year-old man said: "*Lefargen* is supporting someone you like, i.e., if your colleague received a promotion and you didn't, then *lefargen* is when you are as happy for him as if it was you who received the promotion. It is not just giving compliments, it's when you identify with, encourage, and feel proud of the other person."

As is further discussed in the next section, the notion of support is not invoked here in its more usual sense of extending goodwill in times of stress, but rather in the sense of partaking in another's success or good fortune, for example, by being willing and able to express delight

in another's accomplishment with no trace of envy. Notably, this kind of "facework" (Goffman, 1967) involves expressive behavior that in Brown and Levinson's (1987) extension of Goffman's facework model would fall under the category of "positive politeness." But it actually refers to conduct that goes beyond matters of politeness as culturally interpreted in Israeli ethnosemantics. Thus, one can be quite polite (*menumas*) and yet not act in the mode of *firgun,* whereas acting in the mode of *firgun* actually precludes the interpretation of conduct as involving politeness (in the native rendition as *nimus*).

That *nimus* and *firgun* semantically exclude each other was brought home to me one day when, standing at a bus stop on campus, I overheard two young students who were discussing a third person. One of them said: *"Ani davka ohevet ota, ki hi mefargenet kazot"* 'I actually like her because she is a supportive type'. The other replied: *"Hi lo kol kah joda'at lefargen, hi stam kazot nimusit"* 'She doesn't really know how to show support, she's just sort of polite'. From an emic standpoint, politeness is associated with the social conventions governing "dutiful" behavior rather than with individually motivated, voluntary, spontaneous conduct expressive of sincere feeling (see Katriel, 1986). So that although conduct culturally perceived as "polite," together with conduct that would earn the label of *firgun* in cultural members' talk, similarly fall into Brown and Levinson's (1987) category of "positive politeness" as far as their universal model of politeness strategies goes, the interpersonal scenarios these two metacommunicative terms invoke are clearly differentiated within the ethnosemantics of colloquial Hebrew.

We are now in a better position to delineate the semantics of *lefargen* more closely. It denotes 'support', like the more standard expression for support (*tmiha*), but is semantically differentiated from *tmiha* in its scope of application within the ethnosemantics of social support in Israeli everyday speech (referring to supportiveness and appreciation in good rather than in bad moments). *Lefargen* also denotes attentiveness to one's interlocutor's "positive face wants," but in such a way as to assure him or her that one's expressive conduct is not a matter of "mere politeness."

My interest in tracing the semantic journey of *lefargen* and its derivatives was triggered on one level by the aforementioned experiential sense of lexical novelty and widespread linguistic presence, and on another level by an ongoing attention to the lexical coding of social

relations in colloquial Hebrew and their communicative manifestations as ways of speaking and acting. Given the proliferation of *lefargen,* and the considerable animation attending its discussion in preliminary explorations, I decided to trace its "language game" (Wittgenstein, 1968) in a way similar to earlier studies of Israeli metacommunicative terms, hoping it would similarly offer new inroads into the study of central aspects of the semantics of social relations in Israel (Griefat & Katriel, 1989; Katriel, 1986, 1991).

Identifying my enterprise as a study in the "semantics of social relations" implies a particular research focus on the *language of social relations* as culturally coded in the form of the lexicalization of metacommunicative dimensions of speech conduct. In line with one of the standard foci of ethnography of communication research (see, e.g., Hymes, 1974; Stross, 1974), I am interested in studying the discursive uses of lexically codified "talk about talk" as a way of exploring the "behavioral ideology" (Volosinov, 1973) of a speech community. On given occasions, cultural members may hold divergent opinions as to whether a particular communicative act counts as *firgun,* yet they share a cultural logic in terms of which their interpretations of particular acts are constructed and, at times, debated. It is this underlying cultural logic that I seek to uncover—not so much through attention to instances of interactional behavior that I or my informants might interpret as involving *firgun,* but rather through a focus on the metacommunicative acts that invoke the cultural construct of *firgun* as actional attributions.

Based on many examples of the uses of the family of terms related to the root stem *f-r-g-n* recorded over the past 5 years (1988 to 1992) during casual conversations and from media sources, as well as in sociolinguistic interviews with 58 native speakers of colloquial Hebrew, I attempt to delineate the type of conduct that would be encompassed within this metacommunicative category by cultural members as well as the attitudes it invokes. However, there is always some measure of slipperiness to such behavioral attributions both in actual everyday usage and in retrospective analysis. When, for example, is an act of recognition of a friend's success considered a well-meaning, spontaneous act of *firgun* and when is it considered a self-serving act of calculated flattery? Attributions of this kind are clearly contingent on assessments of intentions and degrees of sincerity. Notably, these kinds of judgments are always external to the act—one can name as *firgun* the act of another or one's own past acts, for example, but one cannot

preface one's utterance with a prefix explicitly identifying and framing it as an act of *firgun* in the way that *dugri* utterances can be prefaced with "I'll tell you *dugri* . . ." (Katriel, 1986, chapter 3).

In fact, the characterization of an act as constituting *firgun* is not only a matter of intentions but also of uptake. An utterance cannot be considered as having involved *firgun* if its supportive function is not acknowledged by the party to whom the *firgun* was directed. One cannot say: *Firganti lo aval hu hitragez alai bitguva* 'I acted toward him with *firgun* but he was angry with me in response'. One would say: "Nisiti *lefargen* lo . . ." 'I tried to act toward him in the mode of *firgun* but . . .'

My data, therefore, consist of reports of linguistic usage (involving *lefargen/firgun* and their derivatives) encountered either in natural settings of casual interaction when conversational partners used them spontaneously, in press reports of verbal conduct identified as involving *firgun,* or in the more formal setting of interviews in which informants were asked to discuss the semantics and scope of the terms and give examples. Such examples involved reports of relevant past interpersonal conduct or speculations about possible usage.

In the next section, I draw cumulatively on the data I have collected in further exploring the social semantics of the family of terms derived from the root stem *f-r-g-n* as linguistic articulations of a culturally focal idiom. I also inquire into the sociocultural implications of the prevalence and salience of this and related lexemes in spoken Hebrew in recent years. In so doing, I consider the language game of *firgun* in relation to the aforementioned studies of Israeli *dugri* 'straight' talk and the *gibush* 'crystallization' metaphor that, I believe, denote ways of speaking and feeling that point to different cultural models of social relations than the one encapsulated in the notion of *firgun* in the Israeli context.

2. *FIRGUN* AS A CULTURAL IDIOM

The most common derivations of *f-r-g-n* are the verb *lefargen,* as in the often-heard, self-critical comment, *Etslenu lo yod'im lefargen,* roughly, 'Here people don't know how to display support', or in an inflected form, such as past tense, third person singular, male *Hu firgen li mikol halev,* roughly, 'He supported me with all his heart'. The noun

firgun is also routinely employed, as in *Hajta avira tova, harbe firgunim hadadi'im,* roughly, 'There was a good atmosphere, lots of displays of mutual support'. A commonly used nominal expression relates to the state of a lack of support, natively referred to as *hoser firgun,* which is quasi-ritually lamented in many casual discussions of social life. Finally, the root stem is used adjectivally, as in an example that appeared in Rubinstein (1990), *Nai'm li lihtov katava mefargenet,* roughly, 'It is pleasant for me to write a supportive, complimentary article'. Netser (1988, p. 50) did not include this adjectival form in his list, but he included the form *mefurgan,* which denotes the recipient of positive, supportive feelings, rather than their giver, citing the one example he found: *"Ha'ish hahi mefurgan bakongress. . . ,"* roughly, 'The person who received the most compliments, recognition in the congress . . .' I have not encountered this inflection elsewhere, whereas the adjectival form *mefargen* (appropriately inflected for number and gender) is quite common.

The rather impressive morphological productiveness of the root stem *f-r-g-n,* including such creative, immediately intelligible, non-standard forms as *mefurgan* and its widely varying contexts of occurrence, points to the semantic richness of the term. As Netser (1988, p. 50) pointed out, and as the definition of the term found in the Ben-Amotz and Ben-Yehuda (1972) slang dictionary suggests, *lefargen* is often defined negatively in terms of its implied emotional content – as involving *lack* of envy, as *not* begrudging another's good fortune. Informants' folk interpretations, however, even though they did not contradict these definitions, referred more specifically to the communicative displays associated with acts of *firgun,* delineating a sense of the term that captures its behavioral dimensions as well. Acts of *firgun* are thus said to involve gestures of goodwill, expressions of positive feelings and sympathy, compliments, verbal encouragement, and displays of appreciation. These may be either generalized as part of an overall supportive attitude (*jahas mefargen*) designed to affirm and reinforce the positive self-image of the recipient of the *firgun,* or, as is more often the case, they may indicate a more localized response of appreciation ("positive feedback," in some informants' words) for specific accomplishments by individual actors for which they should "get credit."

As noted, although a few informants rendered *lefargen* as involving social support in the sense of providing encouragement and comfort, overwhelmingly the interpretation of the term pointed to support and

encouragement extended to a person who finds himself or herself in a position of advantage, cultivating a sense of achievement and self-worth. The ability to respond to another's success in the mode of *firgun* both presupposes and implies a sense of connectedness, a selfless identification with another's accomplishment. Many informants commented that one does not speak of *firgun* between strangers, that it assumes some measure of solidarity. When someone is accused of lack of *firgun* vis-à-vis the accomplishments of another, it does not imply that the accomplishment goes unacknowledged but that it is denied *public* recognition. Mostly, such recognition is accorded verbally, so that *firgun* tends to be heard as a discursive act. In a few rare cases, I have heard it used to refer to nonverbal acts, as when a teenager described a gossip session in which a friend of hers was maligned. She said that she kept silent, later describing (and accounting for) her reticence as a matter of *firgun* toward her friend. Some informants referred to attentive listening on the part of an addressee as displays of *firgun* as well.

The overwhelmingly discursive contexts of *firgun* point to an important semantic dimension of the term: *Lefargen* involves acts that are both interpersonally oriented in the sense that they are predicated on the positive feelings of one individual toward another *and* they are publicly oriented in the sense of being performed as much for a wider audience as for the individual in question. As a supportive act, in other words, use of the term is designed not only to help cultivate another's self-image in a direct way but also to do so indirectly through the social repercussions attending public announcement. Acts of *firgun* serve to enhance the favorable reputation of the person whose performance or character is the object of the expressed positive evaluations referred to as *firgun*. Given their public resonance, acts of *firgun* can be performed in the absence of the person they are "about," the expectation being that news will travel and he or she will eventually learn of them.

The enhancement of reputation associated with acts of *firgun* applies no less to the person who "knows *lefargen*" than to the person whose praises are sung. A person who acts with *firgun* not only exudes goodwill but is also seen as secure enough in his or her personal standing to publicly express recognition and delight in another's accomplishments. This becomes particularly meaningful in contexts of actual or potential competition, professional or otherwise, when another's recognized success may have direct consequences for one's own position.

Thus, frequent examples given to me of *firgun*-related conduct involve superordinate–subordinate relations (e.g., commander in the army and his or her soldiers, supervisor at the workplace and his or her staff, schoolteacher and his or her students) or collegial relations among equals who are willing to give each other credit for their contributions to a cooperative project or to acknowledge each other's professional merits. Thus, many examples I have collected involve assessments of the degree to which a person can be described as *mefargen/et* or not vis-à-vis a rival. The ability to give public recognition to the merits of one's competitor(s) is sometimes even described as nobility (*atsilut*) and has been an often-discussed feature of the lore surrounding local celebrities (e.g., pop stars, actors, and politicians) as it appears in gossip columns in the popular press.

In the context of hierarchical relations, it is the person higher in the hierarchy who can be said to display appreciation toward his or her subordinates in the mode of *firgun*. The reverse situation, when appreciation is displayed by the person lower in the hierarchy to the person higher in it, may be spoken of in an idiom of respect (*ha'araha*) but not of *firgun*. This structural constraint on participation in supportive exchanges falling under the rubric of *firgunim* throws further light on the semantics of the term. Displaying appreciation toward one's superior is mandated by a code of respect. Failure to do so indicates either that one does not know one's proper social place, or that one refuses to acknowledge it, and may imply direct or indirect sanctions. Displaying appreciation toward one's social equals or inferiors, on the other hand, is recommended by a code of sincerity and generosity. Failure to do so may reflect on one's attitude or character but is not a directly sanctionable act.

Lack of *firgun* is therefore an index of lack of positive identification, not of ill will. It is to be distinguished from the opposite of *firgun,* which is said to involve verbal acts designed to discourage rather than encourage, to hurt rather than to enhance reputations, to act in the aggressive interactional mode of *kasah* (Katriel, 1986, pp. 52–54). Someone who is said to be *ehad kaze shelo ohev lefargen,* a person who does not like to support others in the way of *firgun,* is thought of as a kind of "social miser," who inwardly acknowledges another's success or merit but refuses to express this knowledge through a public display of appreciation. Thus, for example, critical comments about the competitiveness of career women are routinely phrased as a semiformulaic

complaint that *nashim lo mefargenot ahat lashni'ja* 'women do not support each other'.

That acts of *firgun* are considered as tokens of both forthrightness and generosity was succinctly expressed in a student paper I received, which dealt with autograph books and which contained the following statement: "The youth of today are much more direct, *mefargen,* do not hesitate to express feelings and write praises."

The association of *firgun* with directness is interesting, particularly in view of the fact that some informants contrasted *firgun*-related conduct with the "thorniness" of the Sabra, which is associated with the straightforwardness of the *dugri* idiom (Katriel, 1986). Both *firgun* and *dugri* imply an openly and sincerely expressed evaluative stance. The former involves a positive and the latter a negative evaluation of another's situation or conduct, which is, however, articulated as a corrective act, with the addressee's interest in mind. In both cases, it is the speaker's personal, active choice that propels the act. Opting to invoke the *dugri* code, a speaker implies or explicitly signals that he or she has chosen to suspend the politeness requirements standardly holding in everyday interaction. A person's choice to act in such a way as to convey *firgun* is similarly predicated on the self-regulated enactment of individual intentions rather than on conforming to a closely prescribed set of social rules. Both *dugri* speech and acts of *firgun* can thus be said to articulate and mediate basic cultural codes of forthrightness and goodwill with individuals' needs for personal support in the one case and for social information in the other. Both these cultural communication codes, however, have their limits. One's straightforwardness can exceed the parameters encapsulated in the *dugri* code, sliding into bluntness (*gasut ru'ah*); and one's appreciative displays can exceed the parameters set out in the code of *firgun,* sliding into flattery (*hanfanut*).

The problem of flattery and lack of sincerity arises with particular force in contexts of *firgun* between status equals, when the issue of manipulativeness may become salient, as relationships are not as closely regulated in terms of structural arrangements. A specialized context of this kind involves courtship relations in which *firgun* is both highly functional and most vulnerable to accusations of insincereity and manipulativeness. Hence, there is a frequency of such expressions as *lefargen mikol halev,* which underscores the sincerity of an act of *firgun,* indicating the speaker's perception that it might be put into question. It

may be the double burden of providing support and communicating the sincerity of one's intentions that has given rise to the sense that *firgun* is not only a matter of willingness to display appreciation but also a matter of doing so in such a way as to inspire credibility, so that, as mentioned earlier, one can speak of "knowing how to *lefargen.*"

As discussed so far, *firgun* marks a specific response to a specific occasion in which it is felt to be deserved. A more diffuse usage, however, refers to *avira mefargenet,* a social climate in which *firgun* is said to take place routinely. The cultivation of a climate of *firgun* is associated with the de-emphasis of competition and conflict and the overall enhancement of good feeling. It is interesting to compare the generalized notion of *avira mefargenet* 'supportive climate' to another, older, Israeli cultural idiom of social relations centered on group solidarity, which is natively referred to as *gibush* 'crystallization' (see Katriel, 1991, chapter 2). Whereas both *gibush* and *firgun* (as applied to groups) refer to a diffuse notion of social climate, they denote subtly different social emphases. The ethnosociological notion of *gibush* 'crystallization' subsumes individuals within a group formation, metaphorically envisioning them as the equalized, equidistant "atoms" that have come to form a crystal (Katriel, 1991), whereas the idiom of *firgun* can be said to encapsulate a group-centered yet *interpersonally grounded* social pattern.

As both *gibush* and *firgun* are similarly used in describing the social feeling prevailing in such contexts as the work teams of status equals, the introduction of the idiom of *firgun* in such discursive contexts is indicative of a newly emerging cultural emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relations as reflected in and cultivated by acts of *firgun,* rather than processes of group formation under the heading of *gibush.* In particular, a 'supportive atmosphere', labeled *avira mefargenet,* is considered to serve the function of diffusing tensions associated with a (potentially) competitive situation between status equals. Tension is diffused by turning the success of individual members of the group into an affiliative resource through the cumulative effect of spontaneously engendered interpersonal acts of *firgun.* In this way, the social support idiom of *firgun,* although grounded in interpersonal gesture, has, in turn, become semantically extended in such a way as to recapture the communal focus that is such a salient feature of Israeli cultural ethos (see Katriel, 1991). The semantics of *firgun* thus suggests the contours of a newly emergent Israeli pattern of social relations: an interpersonally

grounded communal ethos in which individual experience and accomplishment are both acknowledged and transported, becoming a source of shared social feeling.

We are now in a position to address the question that has given the first impetus to this study. Given, as Netser (1988) argued, that the frequency of use and range of uses of *firgun* and its derivatives have proliferated in recent years, serving to fill a semantic void in colloquial Hebrew, the sociocultural question still arises of how we can account for the emergence of this "void" in the first place, which has triggered the lexical borrowing of the term and its subsequent elaborations. Assuming that the naming of social relations and sentiments through a process of lexicalization is a significant if subtle step in the cultural coding of both experienced and danced social attitudes, one wonders what this particular change can teach us about the dynamics of the cultural construction of social relations in contemporary Israel.

Considering the newly emergent cultural focus on *firgun* as an expression of the softening of the *dugri* mode (Katriel, 1986, pp. 48–52), it is notable that these two interactional styles both partake in a common idiom of forthrightness and goodwill, although this underlying idiom is differently articulated and interpreted in each. In both cases, also, the enactment of the style is a matter of individual intention and expressive choice that have become a measure of relationships and even of the whole social climate of the group. The essential difference between them is, I believe, that the employment of *dugri* speech is predicated on the invocation of a cultural code that allows for the transcendence (or suspension) of interpersonal relations in the name of some higher, impersonal cultural values shared by participants whose membership in the Sabra speech community is both assumed and *ascribed.* Acts of *firgun,* on the other hand, capitalize on the need to attend to the contours of interpersonal relations, harmonizing and leveling situational differences in *achieved* status by acknowledging them in a mutually supportive and participatory vein rather than by diffusing them within a more broadly shared cultural frame.

The *firgun* matrix has become central in a sociocultural context in which competition and achieved status are acknowledged rather than systematically repressed as they were in the heyday of the nation-building effort. Yet, 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 so that, as many

informants pointed out, one hears at least as much about lack of *firgun* in Israeli society as about its deployment. That is, although there is a keen sense of the need and value of supportive conduct that will give full social legitimacy to personal success and worth, the very preoccupation with this issue suggests that it has a problematic standing, and the constant complaints concerning lack of *firgun* reinforce this sense.

I believe the poignancy of the term *firgun* and its associated problematics derive from a sociocultural situation that is transitional between the strongly group-oriented, communal orientation of the ethos of *gibush* (Katriel, 1991), which is associated with ascribed positions of group affiliation, and a more individualistic orientation in which personal aspirations and achieved status are both legitimate and valued in their own right. The extension of the notion of *firgun* from an interpersonal act to a social climate pulls it back in the direction of group phenomena and an affiliative orientation. In a work team, family, or friendship network where there is a climate of *firgun,* specific gestures of support are subsumed under a general expectation for interpersonally supportive conduct, diffusing the import of such acts as specifically and uniquely addressed.

In sum, the emergence of *firgun* as a culturally focal term in Israeli discourse in recent years attests to a much more far-reaching cultural tale: the uneasy and partial shift from a communal to an individualistic orientation in Israeli society. Although the contours of this shift can be gleaned in a variety of cultural contexts and forms, it is perhaps their evasive yet persistent traces in the fleeting practices of everyday speech that carry the most persuasive testimony of this shift.

The cultural embeddedness of such terms is evidenced not only in the meaning shifts traced historically within the ethnosemantics of one particular culture but also in the subtly differentiated social semantics of terms for supportive conduct that can be gleaned from a comparative consideration of in some sense comparable terms in a number of speech communities. I therefore conclude with a brief comparative account of the ethnolinguistics of social support by drawing on a number of studies. I begin with a relatively detailed discussion based on unpublished findings regarding the Arabic metacommunicative notion of doing *mujamala* that I and my students have collected in recent years (the term is mentioned in passing in Griefat & Katriel, 1989). Then I offer brief discussions of Duranti and Ochs's (1988) study of the cultural construct of the *taapua'i* 'supporter' in a Samoan speech community,

and of the American category of *communication* as studied by Katriel and Philipsen (1981) with an eye to cross-cultural comparison.

3. SOCIAL SUPPORT TERMS: A COMPARATIVE LOOK

Given the centrality of interpersonal support in the social construction of human relations, it is not surprising that social support terms can be found in the social lexicon of many speech communities. I believe the cultural semantics of such terms and their fluctuations offer important clues for understanding the ethnosociologies of particular speech communities as enacted within localized patterns of interactional practices. The following comparative look is hoped to demonstrate the fruitfulness of such an approach.

Arabic *Mujamala* as a Cultural Idiom

Arab informants who become familiarized with the notion of *firgun* tend to translate it as *mujamala.* A closer semantic exploration, however, reveals that the language games of these two terms bring out subtle differences in the ethnosociologies presupposed by them. The term *mujamala,* which like *musayara* (Griefat & Katriel, 1989) belongs to the semantic field of politeness terms in Arabic, is derived from the word *jamil* 'beautiful'. Its etymology thus points to the aesthetisizing gesture inherent in this interactional code as well as to the fact that the word has long-standing roots in the cultural lexicon rather than being a newly adopted lexical borrowing, as is the case with *firgun.* "Doing *mujamala"* refers to the performance of communicative acts designed to enhance good feelings and social harmony, to "beautify" social relations and thereby maintain a pleasant atmosphere and, by implication, the stability of the social order.

Adherence to the idiom of *mujamala* is a generalized cultural expectation but is claimed to be followed more closely by older than by younger people, by villagers more than by city folk. The injunction to do *mujamala* is experienced as mandatory. It is not internally motivated,

spontaneous conduct but acts whose origin is in the social sphere, in the stylized patterning of social relations. Typical examples of doing *mujamala* involve "foregrounding the positive aspect of everything," in the words of one informant. This includes showing deference both verbally and nonverbally by giving compliments and displaying appreciation, by participating in others' life-cycle rituals such as wedding celebrations or funerals, and by following the code of hospitality. One of the informants, a 22-year-old woman, exemplified the notion of *mujamala* as follows: "During the lesson the teacher asked a difficult question and there was only one student who was able to answer it. After class I told that student that I liked his response, I gave him respect, noticed him, that was *mujamala.*"

As many informants pointed out, it is not always clear whether a particular social enactment should be viewed as an instance of *mujamala* or as an instance of the concessive idiom of *musayara,* which involves "going along" with the other in such a way as to "give up" something of oneself (Griefat & Katriel, 1989). There seems to be an area of semantic overlap between the terms, and their "operationalizations" are not always clear-cut.

Therefore, rather than attempting a conclusive definition of what counts as *musayara* or *mujamala* in the culture's social semantics, I propose to reverse the definitional question that seemed to beleaguer many of the informants and turn it into an attributional issue, asking instead, "What is communicated to cultural members about a social act when it is said to be an instance of either *mujamala* or *musayara,* respectively?" The sense of personal sacrifice associated with doing *musayara* makes it a more weighty affair than the more casual performance of acts of *mujamala* as social lubricants. Thus, extending an insincere compliment to another, framing it as an act of *mujamala,* makes it part of the obligatory dance of social politeness, whereas framing it as an act of *musayara* foregrounds the sense of personal compromise involved in the performance of a humoring act. The need to do *musayara* is grounded in either structural or situational differentials in power relations, so that the idiom of *musayara* both responds to and re-creates deeply rooted hierarchical social arrangements.

Acts of *mujamala,* on the other hand, are taken to be essentially egalitarian and reciprocal—one does *mujamala* with the expectation that a similar courtesy will be extended in return. Many informants thus interpreted *mujamala* as manifested in the self-initiated though highly

expected, ongoing exchange of pleasantries in the everyday run of events. It is used to refer to positively oriented social conduct designed to overcome embarrassing moments, as well as to the showering of compliments in the more specialized contexts of courting among modernized youngsters. Notably, many informants pointed out that doing *mujamala* is restricted to familiars who are nonintimates, as one expects close family relations not to require such gestures.

Another salient context for the articulation of *mujamala* that was mentioned by many informants involves participation as guests in significant life-cycle celebrations such as weddings or funerals. On such occasions, participants enhance social relations and reaffirm the communal order through a sheer "rhetoric of presence" and the attendant expectation that it will be reciprocated in the future. When attending someone's wedding is referred to as an act of *musayara,* there is an implication that one's presence is more than a taken-for-granted gesture of politeness or respect, that one has needed to overcome some inner resistance (a grudge, perhaps) or outer circumstances (e.g., a competing engagement) that might have prevented one from partaking in the festivities.

A person who routinely orients to others in the mode of *mujamala* is approved of socially as being *mujamel,* and one who does not reciprocate such an act is interpreted as unwilling to uphold social norms of pleasant interaction, signaling social withdrawal and an uncaring attitude (e.g., youngsters who have moved away from village life). Refraining from doing *mujamala* may be subject to explicit social sanctioning, most obviously the reciprocation of social indifference. The opposite of doing *mujamala,* however, involves more than that—it involves directly insulting another to his or her face. In the same way that one can act inappropriately by not being *mujamel* enough, one can also err by overdoing *mujamala* displays so that they are perceived as flattery and self-interested manipulation rather than well-intentioned social courtesy, a desire to exploit social relations rather than to beautify them. In other words, the problem of sincerity becomes an issue in a way similar to the case of *firgun* as discussed earlier.

Finally, juxtaposing *mujamala* and *firgun* as semantically comparable lexical possibilities in the cultural repertoires of their respective speech communities, we are now in a position to further refine our understanding of the cultural logics underlying their use. Both terms refer to social orientations grounded in a desire to maintain and

harmonize social relations in contexts in which conflict or threat to face are *not* an issue, that is, when redressive action is *not* called for although some of the verbal actions that can be referred to as displays of either *mujamala* or *firgun* may – in another context – be interpreted as constituting redressive action concerned with either positive or negative face. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), because acts of politeness essentially involve *redressive* gestures, both acting in the mode of *firgun* and doing *mujamala* would not be considered within the domain of politeness theory as etically conceived within their framework. From an emic standpoint, which is grounded in speakers' own cultural constructions, speakers of Arabic do view *mujamala* as falling within the domain of politeness, whereas speakers of colloquial Hebrew do not conceive of *firgun* as part of the politeness domain.

Furthermore, although it makes sense to speak, in English, of these terms as relating to the display of social support, this labeling covers only some cases for Arabic usage – when *mujamala* involves paying condolences in a formal visit to mourners' home, for example. In other cases, as discussed earlier, *mujamala* involves culturally coded, stylized displays of goodwill and reciprocity in informal and casual encounters, whereas *firgun* denotes the display of appreciation for someone's accomplishment when there is a potential for envy and competition rather than in times of stress.

In sum, whereas *mujamala* denotes a generalized code of reciprocity and mutuality, articulated in what are often expansive interpersonal acts designed to beautify social relations among communal members, *firgun* is much more restricted in scope, articulating a localized sense of potential social tension and competition in a particular class of interpersonal contexts, as well as a culturally preferred way of dealing with it. In doing *mujamala,* one enacts a code of stylized, easy-going sociability and taken-for-granted mutuality, with some consequences in terms of one's presentation of self. In acting with *firgun,* on the other hand – even in the case of the reciprocally extended appreciation and support alluded to in the phrase *firgun hadadi* 'reciprocal *firgun*' – reference is made to spontaneously performed personalized acts of appreciation and goodwill, which signal sincerity and generosity of character.

Clearly, these two cultural idioms of social support represent different degrees of sociolinguistic institutionalization of interpersonal relations in the two speech communities as they are embedded within

significantly different vocabularies of motives. In these vocabularies, social acts are variously constructed as springing from individual motivation (in the case of *firgun*) or from socially coded expectations (in the case of *mujamala*).

Samoan *Maaloo* Exchange as Verbal Ritual

The *maaloo* exchange is associated with the important concept of the *taapua'i* 'supporter' or 'sympathizer' in Samoan culture. It exemplifies an even greater degree of sociolinguistic institutionalization of the social support function, as the analysis offered by Duranti and Ochs (1988) brought out.

According to Duranti and Ochs (1988, p. 199), a Samoan rarely does something "without someone next to him to provide recognition of his actions, attempts or accomplishments. . . . The relationship between the actor and the supporter is truly reciprocal rather than unidirectional. When an actor's work or accomplishment is valued and recognized by a supporter, the supporter's work at recognizing the accomplishment is also recognized by the actor. This relationship is symbolically and routinely instantiated by the use of what we call 'a *maaloo* exchange'." The following example exemplifies this kind of routinized exchange:

((Driver does something that shows skill, presence of mind.))

Passenger(s): *Maaloo le fa'auli!*
Well done the steering!

Driver: *Maaloo le taapua'i!*
Well done the support!

In the Samoan world view, an accomplishment is seen as a joint product of actor and supporter. Accomplishment is a collective and cooperative enterprise "in which the individual's competence is defined by his audience appreciation, and his merit is framed within the merit of the group" (Duranti & Ochs, 1988, p. 200). This sociocentric cultural view of task accomplishment finds its discursive expression in the organizational structure of the *maaloo* exchange, which is characterized by two features that differentiate it from exchanges identified as involving *firgun* and *mujamala* alike: (a) A *maaloo* exchange is lexically signaled by the use of the *maaloo* term itself; (b) it takes the form of

what conversation analysts refer to as an "adjacency pair" (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). As in the case of greetings, given this interactional structure, once a support statement for an act is articulated, there is a strong expectation that it be met with a statement of "support for the support, as indicated in the aforementioned example of accomplished driving."

These structural features enable speakers (and analysts) to identify *maaloo* exchanges unambiguously, whereas the identification of social acts as involving *firgun* and *mujamala* remains potentially a matter of ambiguous attribution. For example, there are no surface structural features that attach to an utterance considered as *firgun* rather than as flattery or mere politeness, or as *mujamala* rather than *musayara.*

Thus, whereas *firgun* is conceptualized as an individually motivated act reflecting personal character, and *mujamala* is grounded in a loosely defined pattern of reciprocal expectations regulating the stylized performance of individually anchored social acts, the *maaloo* exchange reflects a sociocentric view. Ochs (1988) demonstrated this view to be typical of Samoan culture, in which individual action is considered but part of a reciprocal exchange so that "to be skillful (*poto*) at something does not mean to stand out with respect to everyone else as much as to be able to create the conditions for a successful collective endeavor" (p. 200). Each of these terms is central to the semantics of social support in the verbal repertoire of the speech community in which it is employed. Their shared human resonance must not obliterate but rather bring forth the distinctive tonalities they carry as culturally embedded focal terms.

American *Communication* as a Cultural Idiom

Katriel and Philipsen (1981) discussed the metacommunicative term *communication* as it is employed in American discourse as denoting a culturally coded form of flexible, supportive speech. It is associated with the domain of intimate interpersonal relations and finds its quintessential place in the context of what the authors have dubbed "communication rituals"—communicative occasions constructed around relational discourse in which cultural members "sit down and talk" in a way that affirms both "self" and "relationship." The topics elaborated on those ritualized occasions have to do with problems in the life of the person who has initiated the verbal ritual, and the interlocutor is by and large expected to lend an attentive and sympathetic ear, thereby affirming the

main speaker's sense of problematicity and self-worth, as well as the viability of the relationship between them.

Communication refers to social support in the sense of Hebrew *tmiha,* that is, support extended to a person in need or in distress rather than the appreciation and encouragement associated with *firgun,* as a form of conduct that signals one's ability to overcome envy in a context of potential competition. However, as a form of supportive speech, *communication* shares with *lefargen,* a focus on the individual experience of the person whose problem (in the one case) and success (in the other case) are foregrounded a focus not shared by the aforementioned, collectively oriented construct of *gibush* 'crystallization'. The social scope of the terms differs in that *communication* is relationally restricted to persons considered close, whereas one can *lefargen* to a broad range of people, even, at times, to someone one does not know, such as throwing a passing compliment (e.g., about appearance) in a fleeting encounter. A further difference relates to the fact that the support offered by *firgun* is a gesture one does *for* someone, the originator of the act being the person who offers support. In fact, such an act can be accomplished even in the absence of the focal person (usually with the expectation that the behind-the-back compliment will be reported to him or her), whereas the support offered in the context of the American communication ritual is something one does *with* someone, the originator of the act being the person who receives the support. It is, moreover, essentially a face-to-face dyadic affair in which attentive co-presence is an important precondition.

Both American *communication* and *firgun* differ from both *mujamala* and the *maaloo* exchange in their degree of linguistic institutionalization. Both involve spontaneously generated interpersonal acts as these are perceived by cultural members rather than highly stylized, even formulaic ones that are experienced as a matter of etiquette. However, *communication* remains an interpersonally oriented category, whereas *firgun* can become a more diffuse matter of group climate, transcending the interpersonal sphere in which it is originally grounded.

4. CONCLUSION

This comparative sketch brings out the many dimensions of meaning and value associated with cultural vocabularies of what we can

dub "supportive talk." Cultural variability in this domain is a matter of deeply rooted yet historically situated assumptions about persons, relationships, and social groupings. A consideration of these various culturally focal vocabularies can, therefore, offer insights into that which is specific to the interpersonal ideologies of various speech communities as well as help to chart points of divergence that are significant in terms of our understanding of the larger cultural configurations in which these metacommunicative terms are embedded. As I have demonstrated in this article (once again), a focus on the meaning dynamics of such terms can be highly rewarding in studying the language/culture interface.

NOTES

1 For studies concerned with "social support" as a scientific construct in communication-oriented research, see Albrecht and Adelman (1987). The American category of "communication" as studied by Katriel and Philipsen (1981) is an "emic" American concept for "supportive speech" that seems to inform some of the analytic discussions of social support that appear in the research literature.

2 I am grateful to David Gold for a discussion of the Yiddish and German etymology of the term.

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