

Tickets to the Opera: A Negotiation of Western Knowledge—Beyond Resistance or Reproduction

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What are the prices of “must knowledges?” Does the study of English impose Anglocentric control on its learners or can English as an icon for “must knowledge” enable disempowered populations to empower themselves? This article examines these questions through an ethnographic study of middle-/lower-class Orthodox and Sephardic Jewish women in an adult education course. The women did not resist “Western knowledge,” yet its potential for empowerment was not realized. This study offers anthropologists of education an opportunity to reexamine the relations between local cultural systems and external knowledges beyond the binary prism of resistance versus reproduction. [necessary knowledge, epistemic knowledge, Jewish orthodoxy, gendered education, ethnicity]

Photographs in the popular press of young women in Muslim attire studying computer sciences in Malaysia and women in traditional apparel peering into microscopes in medical school in Egypt are not a rarity nowadays. Such images alternately deconstruct or reproduce stereotypes of the so-called Third World, traditional societies, and traditional Third World attitudes toward women’s education. In modernist thinking, education corresponds with correctness; the degree to which a society is entitled to fair treatment from other nations correlates with the education it provides its citizens. In the epoch of globalism (exacerbated by the events of September 11, 2001), Third World nations, especially, require an international stamp of approval. The female student often serves as a symbol of that entitlement.

The criteria of “modernism” are applied whenever the Third World is being reviewed, explored, or reported, and in every case involving gender. Thus, it is not surprising that in Abu-Lughod’s (1998) collection of essays on women in the Middle East, she proposes “modernization” as a key to deciphering the remaking of women in the Middle East. This anthology joins other critical works that deconstruct the binary opposites of East–West, modern–primitive, authentic–fabricated. Kandiyoti (1998) assesses the power of local societies to negotiate the modernist

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enterprise, while highlighting external pressures of the sovereign's values on the local. Is it possible, she wonders, that the traditional/modern dichotomy is dictated in part by internal forces, and that not everything is a response to external pressures? As she states: "To what extent were contested images and attributions of tradition and modernity also mediated through the internally heterogeneous nature of Middle East societies. . . ?" (Kandiyoti 1998:272).

Could it be that "modernism" as a cultural and political movement does not create social segmentation within societies, but rather exposes and reinforces it? After all, the West is not monolithic, and the local is neither generic nor essential. Thus, social researchers must heed the mediation, translation, and negotiation transpiring within the societies they study. They must dissociate themselves from a preconception of domination and ideological conquest in order to learn the local meanings of oppression and resistance.

The site of education—the most sought after modernist commodity—was chosen here as a platform for exploring these questions. Whereas many studies address the state of education in the Third World on the assumption that it conceals issues of nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, gender, and so on (Berkowitz and Bradley 1999), the present article enlarges this topic by analyzing the learning experience of middle- to lower-class Orthodox and traditionalist Sephardi Jewish women in Israel (Motzafi-Haller 2000).¹ These women enrolled in adult education courses in hopes of acquiring a profession; in this case, the year-long course would certify them as senior secretaries. The curriculum included secretarial skills, administration, bookkeeping, English, and computers. This article focuses on the study of English.

It is incontestable that learning English can increase one's job opportunities. This is not the issue here, nor is the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Rather, English is presented as a corpus of cultural knowledge, an icon of "necessary knowledge" that attests to correctness. The issue to be interrogated concerns the power relations exposed in a specific social context as prestigious foreign knowledge is being negotiated. Does English as an icon for essential global knowledge necessitate acts of cultural oppression? Does it necessarily subject local learners to a foreign agenda? Does English erase or blur internal cultural differences? Are women of a particular ethnic origin and religion who are learning English forced to relate to a "Western" cultural model that inevitably diminishes their cultural power? Following Kandiyoti's (1998) recommendation, these questions do not focus solely on internal-external relationships, but also turn the gaze inward. By critically examining these questions, we can learn whether the process of learning English indeed exposes and reproduces, or whether it generates transformative power relations.

My previous studies (El Or 1994, 2002) focused on whether it is possible to teach a certain body of knowledge while controlling the manner in which the learner uses the learned material. A similar issue is tested

in the present study, where I examine the inherent obstacles (or lack thereof) in English studies, while exposing the value-oriented worlds they involve. This study discloses the instances in which learning crosses boundaries of difference without erasing them, and shows that learning English in the periphery is more than a form of simple resistance or reproduction.

I begin by placing this article within the context of the larger project from which it derives. I then describe the status of English in the ultra-Orthodox educational system, present the ethnographic data, and discuss how the study of English can offer a certain empowerment that, ironically, may not be realized. To move the discussion beyond the case discussed here, I then examine studies from Mexico and from higher education in the Arab world that deal with similar concerns.

The Gan Na'eh Project

Observing a course for senior secretaries was part of my exploration of the intellectual world of Orthodox Sephardi women. Having already studied the intellectual worlds of Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox women in Israel (El-Or 1994) and modern Orthodox women (El-Or 2002), the present work adds the third component of the triangle of the Israeli Orthodox community—the Sephardi sector. As a secular academic Ashkenazi female, conducting qualitative research with Orthodox Sephardi women is no trivial matter. Postcolonial academic discourse, the reflexive nature of this type of social research, and the obvious power asymmetries create challenges for conducting research with those perceived as the “weaker” other (El-Or and Schechet n.d). Add to this the fact that my observations centered on women with little means or formal education, and the issue becomes doubly complicated, for the heart of the research interrogates the stereotype of this population as being poor, religious, and primitive (Dahan-Kalev 2000; Motzafi-Haller 1997).

During the 1998–99 school year I was granted access as a participant-observer in the Gan Na'eh Community Center senior secretaries course sponsored by the Urban Renewal project, the Israeli Ministry of Labor and Welfare, and the participants themselves. Gan Na'eh is a neighborhood in an Orthodox city in the center of Israel. The majority of the 15,000 inhabitants are middle- to lower-class Sephardi Jews. Some 3,000 are recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

Research Participants and Scope

Twenty women were enrolled in the course and 18 completed it. The non-Orthodox Sephardi women included Odelya (all names are pseudonyms), Suzy, and Sigalit, all single and approximately 30 years old; Rivka, 35; Liat, 27 and divorced; Etty, 40 years old and married; and Miriam, 40 years old and divorced. The ultra-Orthodox Sephardi women were Ayelet, 22, single, and working; Evelyn, 35; and Rina and

Einat, married; Mazel, married; and Hanny, all of whom were about 20 years old. The Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox women were Sarah, 35, and Shlomit, 28, both married; Nicole, 55, was a Religious Zionist; and Olga, 35, and Ina, 45, were new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. When I first encountered them half appeared to be Orthodox as judged by their dress, and several of the others were subsequently discovered to be Orthodox observers who consciously chose not to dress the part. All 20 participants were granted certificates by the course organizers, including those who failed the tests or dropped out toward the end.

At the end of the school year, and throughout 1999–2000, I conducted and audio-recorded in-depth interviews with most of the course participants in their homes or at the center. The participants received 150 shekels for their cooperation. One course participant agreed to serve as my research assistant, arranged the interviews and participated in some, and was paid for every interview she arranged as well as a salary.

In the interviews, the women were asked to recount their educational or literacy biography (El-Or 2002). A chronological narrative was built around the women's self-description as learners, a description of the schools and educational institutions to which they had been exposed, their families' attitudes to their studies, and the significance of the present course in which they were enrolled.

Opening Windows: The Ethos of English and Its Status in the Orthodox Community

English and computers rate high on the third millennium scale of educational correctness in the Third World. These are necessary prerequisites for "opening windows" and assimilating into the outside world. English and computers represent icons of the prospects of entry into the enterprises of knowledge, work, and tourism, and the ability to move within and beyond local contexts.

Ultra-Orthodox education in Israel functions as a separate, independent branch alongside the modern Orthodox and state systems. It is dependent on government funds and therefore highly sensitive to pressure to expand the curriculum to better prepare students to enter the job market. Among the ultra-Orthodox, the male who focuses exclusively on religious studies is at the top of the pyramid, followed by men (usually 26–30 years of age) who discontinue their studies and join the work force, and women who go to work after high school. This structure has resulted in fundamental economic rifts, addressed by the gradual broadening of ultra-Orthodox curricular content and the movement into professions such as computer programming, tourism, and graphic design. Women have always engaged more than men in secular studies. Jewish law does not oblige them to take up religious studies, and the community expects them to financially support the males in their studies. Many changes have taken place in women's curricula since the

early 20th century (Weisman 1976), and they now contain more religious studies as well as more general knowledge and professional courses.

English and computers are considered “tools” rather than epistemic bodies of knowledge that contain insights about the world. As such, these subjects are considered value-free and easily introduced into conservative curricula. They demonstrate to the public and education authorities that the system is not as conservative as it is said to be, and at the same time give members of the community skills that may get them better jobs, all at minimal ideological risk. This is not a cynical maneuver between internal and external pressures; it is a controlled internalization of the message of enlightenment in its current form. Very few today dismiss the power of technology and the achievements of science and medicine, and the desire to be current and “correct” does not elude those who identify as highly Orthodox or fundamentalist.

It is important to stress that the course observed here was not part of the ultra-Orthodox educational system. It took place in a community center that was part of a nationwide network that aspired to be a vehicle for positive civic involvement. The course relied on a curriculum designed by a commercial education company. That ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox women were not reluctant to join this program (and study with non-Orthodox women) reflects the atmosphere in the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities and their changing views of the boundaries of knowledge for men as well as women.

The following ethnographic excerpts document key incidents in the women’s English study, including literacy encounters with a Brighton Beach summer resort and pseudo-purchases of tickets to the Liverpool Opera. I continue to the course’s end, offering a description of its nature and reception by the women.

Between Gan Na’eh Israel and Brighton Beach England: The Pains of English

“My Name is Jerry”

Just before 6:30 in the evening a tall, thin man wearing khaki pants, a blue shirt, and a checkered jacket approached the group of women sitting in the lobby of the community center. He looked so foreign. He bent slightly and asked (no one in particular) whether this was the group that was supposed to learn English. He smiled and spoke in a British accent. The women answered in the affirmative, and, heading for the door, promised to return in a few minutes.

The women all smiled, slightly embarrassed but excited. A male teacher. This had never happened before. A cute, young, male teacher. “Wow,” Suzy laughed, “what a hunk.”

We climbed the stairs to the classroom and arranged the chairs, trying to figure out if the newly installed air conditioner was also a heater. It wasn’t. The class was not full, and during the lesson a few more women

wandered in. I sat next to Sarah, after making sure she didn't want to save a seat for Evelyn.

The teacher placed a large cardboard box on his desk and began pulling out folders. He handed them out to the women who leafed through them. They seemed very impressed with the handouts. At the top corner of the blackboard he scribbled "Jerry."

The whisper "Jerry" passed through the class. Some of the women read the name aloud. Others asked "What? What? What does it say? What is it? What did he write? What does it mean?"

"His name, his name," said Rivka, "that's his name, Jerry."

Jerry went to the back of the class, making everyone turn around. He looked at his name and began speaking Hebrew. "Yes, that's my name. I come from England. I would like each of you to write your name in English in large letters on a blank piece of paper and put it on your desk."

The women started writing, murmuring, and consulting with each other. Some wrote their name in Hebrew or let one of their friends write it for them; others wrote in tiny letters Jerry couldn't read.

"This is how you start? I have to begin with ABC," said Odelya. They all laughed.

"Please," Jerry said quietly. "In order to know whether I have to speak Hebrew, which I'm not very good at, or whether I can speak English, I would like each of you to write one sentence, anything, a short sentence. I won't read it. You will say it out loud so I can tell how good your English is."

This triggered more commotion. The women leaned toward each other, turned back, glancing with amazement and admiration at those who managed to quietly write a sentence. The drama of performing a difficult and somewhat embarrassing task began.

Limor volunteered to go first: "My name is Limor, I am 23 years old, I work for a very well known company."

"Well done," said Efrat.

"Very nice." Jerry wanted to know what company she worked for. "Mor," Limor replied.

"And is it well known?" he continued.

"Yes, it's famous here," she answered.

It went like this from one to the other. Some, with shy smiles, asked to be skipped. Others said things like:

"My name is Sarah, I have three children." "My name is Nicole, I have six children."

"My name is Lea, I have a daughter." "My name is Evelyn, I have five children, my husband lives in Haifa."

"Wow, five children! But you look so young," said Jerry.

Evelyn blushed.

There was quite a lot of embarrassment in the classroom, as well as respect for those who managed to speak fluently. At least one-third of the participants asked not to speak. Jerry had sized up the situation

and from then on spoke Hebrew. He told them that the course was not for spoken English, but for English correspondence, so their oral skills were nothing to worry about. The important thing was that they would eventually know how to compose a letter in English. He asked them to open the folder to the first page, which contained an outline entitled "letter layout" in English. He went over it with them, trying to explain what it was, until one of the women realized it was an outline. Once she said the word out loud in Hebrew, everyone was relieved, because they were familiar with the term. From this point on they compared and translated the terms to ones familiar to them from their secretarial studies in Hebrew.

The lesson proceeded at a very slow pace. Most of the students managed to understand what "address" and other letter elements were, but other basic words remained a mystery. Rivka was losing patience and turned to me. She smiled and said, "Well, I can already tell this is going to take forever. It will be hours before something happens here."

Sigalit, who was usually very diligent, was fidgety. "I hate English, I really hate it. They have to teach us the basics before they teach us all this."

"That's enough, Sigalit," said Rivka from the back of the class, "it's not nice, stop it. Take in what you can, eventually you'll catch on. Don't do this. Have some fun while you learn!"

The Russian woman, Olga, arrived late. She had a fair command of English, but couldn't correctly pronounce the words she knew. When discussing opening salutations, for instance, Jerry mentioned "Dear Sir," and Olga asked if it was possible to write "Dear Colleague," but she mispronounced the word and he didn't understand. I repeated the word and he said it is possible, but the class panicked because the handout only said Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss. The women wanted to know what it meant, and I had to provide a Hebrew translation.

Jerry explained how the designation Ms. was coined, mentioning the term "politically correct." The women ignored his explanation and stuck to the rule: whether the addressee's familial status is known or not. His pedantic pronunciation of Ms. (Miz) as opposed to Miss made the class laugh.

"Biz," Etty said, "it sounds like biz." Rivka, who was sitting next to her, laughed and tapped her on the shoulder, "He doesn't know what *biz* [Arabic for barbecued cow's udders] is."

The lesson progressed slowly. At some point Jerry said, "Here we have a space after the date. What does it mean?"

Suzy: "Date is a romantic meeting, isn't it?"

Jerry laughed: "Not in this case. Here it is the day, month, and year."

They all laughed and ultra-Orthodox Sarah said, "Oh Suzy (secular and single), all she ever thinks about is dating."

Evelyn, who sat behind us, leaned forward and said, "It's fun to study with a male teacher. We never had a male teacher. You must have them, it's great, isn't it?"

"What, you never had male teachers?" I asked.

"No."

"There were no rabbis?"

"Well, of course there were rabbis, but not teachers like this."

I managed to slip in a comment about different academic achievements in coed and single-gender classes. The women were surprised and smiled. "So there is something positive about an all-girl class after all." When Jerry turned to one of them, she was embarrassed. When he turned in our direction, Sarah and Evelyn urged each other to respond. Sarah told Evelyn: "Go on, you answer. He came on to you, not me." (Later I remembered that when Evelyn said she had five children, he told her, "But you look so young.")

"You Think I Don't Read People?"

Two weeks passed. When I returned to the class, I was afraid I had gotten mixed up and the lesson had been canceled. It was already twenty past six and there was no one in the lobby. Haya came in first, and she was also surprised to find no one there. She sat next to me and told me about Jerry and how things had been going since the first class.

"Around the third lesson the girls were giving him a hard time, and he's a thinking type of person, so instead of getting angry, he simply left the classroom and told us he didn't care because he gets paid no matter what, and he's not willing to work like this. So the next lesson he arranged the chairs in a semicircle, which gave us a feeling of togetherness, and it was an excellent lesson. We asked him to translate every single word, because many of the women don't understand what it says there, and he did, and there was a sense of accomplishment. He even said he felt there was cooperation and all that."

Jerry arrived. He took a key and went up to the classroom. Some women remained downstairs, letting him take care of the preliminaries. Sarah and Nicole admitted they skipped a class or two "because it was hard and frustrating." The classroom gradually filled up. The women arrived later than usual. I took a seat next to recently married Einat and Rivka. Ayalet joined our row. For the first time I was directly amongst my target population—religious Sephardi women. Jerry asked for volunteers to write out the letters from the handout on the blackboard. These were letters cut up into scrambled paragraphs, which the women were to rearrange. The goal was to teach English correspondence, and the method was to teach a pattern of phrases, like assembling a jigsaw puzzle. It seemed a clever idea.

Nicole and Einat rose and went to the board. One got a red marker, the other a green one, and they copied their homework onto the board. The others were astonished they had volunteered. Jerry moved between the students, checking their homework. They talked among themselves until Nicole and Einat finished their work.

Rivka: "What are you worried about? In any case, if they need a lot of English correspondence, they'll hire a native English speaker."

Miriam: "I'm Moroccan. Moroccan Arabic is my mother tongue." Miriam laughed and leaned toward Shlomit who was sitting next to her, and all three giggled.

Miriam: "I showed the homework to my daughter so she could help me. What can I tell you, I felt so stupid, and my daughter just looked at the exercises and said it's like first grade homework."

Evelyn and Sarah sat across from me. Sarah was wearing a see-through black blouse over a white shirt—rare attire for an ultra-Orthodox woman. I later learned she recently divorced, moved to a less Orthodox neighborhood, and transferred her children from the ultra-Orthodox to the modern-Orthodox school system. Evelyn leaned toward Olga and said, "What happened to you today? You've abandoned us, huh? Hiding from us."

Olga helped the women around her, moving between them. She had previously sat with her sister or by herself. When she spoke in class, the women would often giggle at her heavy accent, or show impatience with her learned comments.

Before class began, Haya told me: "You know that Russian woman, she knows; maybe she is the only one who knows. She has a degree in biochemistry or something, and she's still studying, because she once got fired and wants to have another profession in hand." While Haya was speaking, Olga came in and headed straight for the library to exchange the Naomi Ragen book she finished reading. (Naomi Ragen is a modern Orthodox novelist of American origin who writes about the Orthodox society in Israel and the United States.)

Einat and Nicole went back to their seats and Jerry turned to check their letters. One was a request for a fashion catalogue, the other was a subscription form for the Liverpool Opera. The letter mentioned that the writer especially likes Mozart and Haydn. But the women skimmed over the content without really paying attention to it. They now had to assemble the puzzle. Despite the apparent simplicity of the method, it seemed quite difficult to get it right without understanding what the phrases meant. Nicole mixed up the pieces and Jerry pointed out the mistake. Einat got it right and Jerry's only comment was that she should have used a capital letter. Next he divided the class into groups of fours and gave them a task. He asked for a volunteer to read aloud an ad from the newspaper that the groups were to refer to in a letter. Haya raised her hand and said, "Worst comes to worst, if I make a mistake you'll correct me."

She barely managed to read one word correctly. The other students tried to correct a word here and there, but for the most part they didn't know the right word. They couldn't give the exact meanings of the words, although they managed to figure out more or less what the ad was about, and they worked around it without making a huge mess of it.

No one laughed when Haya read. Etty couldn't find the page and said, "I don't have page 28." Someone told her, "It's next to 29," and everyone giggled.

Jerry translated some of the words, such as "sun," "south," and "beach." He teased them gently, but not without patronizing. They didn't know directions. Some of them could say "south," "east," and so on, but they couldn't assign the word to the right direction and ended up guessing. The letter was about reserving a summer house in Brighton Beach, England. Evelyn recognized the word "beach" and immediately said, "Aha! Miami Beach."

When the women began the next part of the exercise (replying to the ad), Einat, Rivka, and Ayelet with whom I was teamed, wanted me to help them. They were my primary research participants, and I finally had a chance to work with them, but I decided to leave them on their own, knowing they would manage, and went to help Odelya.

Odelya was one of the younger non-Orthodox participants. She always sat next to Suzy. Both were hard workers and very serious about their studies. They didn't like it when the others chitchatted. In short, they had come to learn. They had been nervous ever since the English course began. Jerry interpreted their behavior as "disruptive" rather than resistant, and was very sarcastic to them. He failed to see where this behavior was coming from. I asked him if it was okay if I moved next to Odelya. He hesitated a little and then shrugged. I took my chair and moved toward her. Her eyes were filled with tears and she asked me to wait a minute. She went out, came back, and tried to explain why she felt so pressured. I told her: "Enough of that, Odelya, let's get to work. I understand you are having difficulty here. Don't take it so hard, we'll talk later." Odelya simply could not read English, and therefore couldn't do the puzzle work. I used the fact that she did understand some of the words when I read them to her, and tried to show her how to assemble the puzzle. We managed to complete the letter within the allotted 15 minutes. She copied the fragmented sentences from the pages in the folder into a complete letter. She took pains to write them nicely in pencil, obsessively erasing every word if even one letter was wrong. During the break she came up to me and suggested I join her for a drink in the smokers' room. Suzy and Odelya, as well as the older Miriam and Etty, were already there. None of them knew English. All four were secular. They used break time to calm each other down. Odelya said:

I'm really mad. The woman in charge of the course told us, "OK, if you'd like, you can take another English course later. In the meantime, just show up for the lessons and I'll pass all of you." But I didn't come here to get a passing grade. I want to learn. What will I do on the exam? Turn in a blank page? See what I mean? I'm serious. These studies are important to me. I didn't come here to fool around. If I wanted to do that, there'd be no problem, but that isn't the case.

Etty and Miriam, who were older, tried unsuccessfully to calm her down. I decided to try: "Odelya, . . . I've seen how serious you are in Adina's administration lessons, and I realize it's frustrating. In the meantime, sit and listen, I'm sure you'll get something out of it. And on the exam don't write anything, turn in a blank page, and then enroll for the English course you were promised. Don't worry about it. In most offices you won't need to write in English. And don't be offended by Jerry. Go see him after class and tell him you don't ask in order to disturb him, but because you don't understand. Reassure him."

Odelya: "You think I don't read people? That I didn't read him? I see exactly what he feels. But he's really missing the target here, he should be more sensitive. When the girls disturbed him, I got them to be quiet. Can't he see that?"

Two Weeks Later

I entered the lobby at a quarter past six. Suzy, Odelya and Haya sat in one of the corners. They smiled at me from afar and I sat down with them.

Odelya: Where have you been? You've been absent for quite a while.

Me: Actually, I was here last week, but you weren't.

O: That's true, I wasn't here on Monday, but I did come to the exam in the course in English. What can I tell you, all my fears were for nothing. It was a really good test. Open books, very fair. I don't feel I just passed, I actually did really well. Still, if they give that English course as promised, I'll definitely enroll. I've got to learn English from scratch. In fact, I'd like to complete my matriculation exams, but the course we had in order to complete 12 school years only gives me two study units in math, and for me math is "my daily bread," a piece of cake. I find it really easy. I want a matriculation certificate. Nowadays you need it for any profession you want to pursue."

M: Perhaps you should take the preparation course for the psychometric (SAT) exam they give here. There's one that started two weeks ago.

O: Yeah, but I don't know if they accept you without a matriculation certificate. The truth is I wanted to be a lawyer, but it seems really long to study four years and then work for someone for a few more years before you can start your own practice—it's too long.

Meanwhile the other students arrived. Full attendance. Rivka sat next to Miriam and Etty and me. The atmosphere had improved considerably. If at the beginning of the course they had complained to the woman in charge about the heterogeneity of the group, today she wouldn't have noticed any problem. The women smiled at each other, they were happy to meet, the younger blended with the older, religious with secular. Odelya chastised Miriam for not showing up for the exam in English. She told her it was easy and it was a shame she had been too afraid to

come. Miriam, in turn, said she couldn't make it for some other reason altogether.

In the meantime, Miriam went to the center office and began making phone calls to find out why the computer teacher hadn't arrived. The women complained about the management of the course, saying that that's what you get when you go cheap.

Suzu: I won't recommend this course to anyone. They really don't care about you.

O: In the administration part I must say there were new and interesting things that really opened my eyes, but in general it doesn't give you much. The most important thing is experience, that's the determining factor.

Miriam came out of the office and the women gathered around her. The Computer class would start only after the elections.

A Closer Reading

English [in Israel] is the language everybody wants his [*sic*] children to acquire before any other, besides, of course, the legitimate language. The higher the social-economic status, the greater the probability of knowing English. . . . The language most valued by all classes is the one that best differentiates the privileged from the underprivileged. [Ben Rafael 1994:183]

Gender and Illusion

After five months of administration, office procedures, and bookkeeping courses with female teachers, the women in this study went on to study English and computers in courses taught by young, secular, attractive male teachers. The first encounter with Jerry, the English teacher, was powerful and embarrassing. He was a man among women, a British immigrant among Israelis, and a secular man among primarily Orthodox and traditional women. His attire and the fact that he handed out organized materials on the first day marked him as a "professional." These qualities established his position relative to the women's and built yet another wall of foreignness around him.

The power relationship between the teacher and the students was further charged with sexual tension among the learners, who were not used to a young male teacher. The fact that he was entrusted with the teaching of English and from the outset had spoken and written in English positioned the event in a faraway, fantastic realm where English is spoken. In Israel and elsewhere, such places are associated with "America" (despite the fact that Jerry was British), the land of movies and television—a place of money, drama, and wild gender relations. Thus, the "date" became a romantic date, and the reservations for a summer cottage in Brighton Beach conjured up a television series about Miami Beach.

The dialogue with a man in a small crowded classroom elicited giggles and embarrassment. When asked to introduce themselves, the married women chose to say their name and number of children. The single ones tried to tell him where they worked. In spite of or perhaps because of this, when Jerry said, "You look so young" to Evelyn, her friend interpreted it as "He came on to you." Such a comment would not have been made in a religious classroom. To my ears Jerry's remark sounded like a standard comment by secular people who often are amazed to learn that young, attractive ultra-Orthodox women are mothers of quite a few children.

It was Evelyn who whispered in my ear that it must be fun to study with a male teacher. She never perceived the rabbis who had taught her as "men." When I tried to seriously discuss with her the different academic accomplishments of women who studied in separate and co-educational schools, she was surprised to learn that there was something positive about all-female classes. For a moment she was proud of it, but she did not want to spoil the fun of the new situation in which she found herself; the teacher's assumption surfaced as a form of flirting. As in the discussion of "Ms.," this episode did not form a basis for a discussion of women's contemporary roles and statuses. The event was located outside any context pertinent to their lives.

Thus, the learners were afforded a simulation or illusion that linked America, Miami Beach, dates, "hunks," and unsupervised gender relationships. The content of the letters themselves—the overt focus of the lesson—was foreign. Jerry was like a "short trip abroad." The secular women in the class were familiar with foreign places from the movies. The ultra-Orthodox got their information from the little cinema and television they managed to see, and from their occasional encounters with family and friends who lived in ultra-Orthodox communities abroad.

Pains of Landing or Odelya's Tears: Stratification in the Mastery of English

Many of the women came late for the lessons, some missed a few lessons, and three stopped coming midway in the course and never showed up for the final exam. Liat dropped out of the course entirely. In an interview she told me, "The truth is I had difficulties with the entire course, but English was the last straw for me."

Restlessness characterized many of the students, specifically the non-Orthodox Sephardi women — Odelya, Suzy, Sigalit, Liat, Etty and Miriam. These six women frequented the smoking room during breaks and became the conspicuous nonreligious group. Four ultra-Orthodox Sephardi women—Rina, Einat, Mazal and Hanny—carried out the classroom tasks in relative silence. In interviews they reported having difficulty remembering the material they had learned in high school. "But," as Mazal told me, "overall, except for a word here and there, I understood what was going on." The most relaxed among them were Ayelet (single, Sephardi, ultra-Orthodox who worked in the Shas [a Sephardi orthodox party] education system but was herself educated in a

state-religious school), Sarah and Shlomit (Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox women who studied at the Beit Yaacov Orthodox school), Nicole (Religious Zionist who studied in Morocco at Alliance Francais, a Jewish-French international educational network), Evelyn (ultra-Orthodox who was educated in Morocco and in Sephardi ultra-Orthodox institutions in Israel), Rivka (ultra-Orthodox who studied in Sephardi ultra-Orthodox educational institutions), and Olga (an immigrant from the former Soviet Union). Olga exhibited the broadest knowledge of all of the women.

Ben Rafael's epigraph at the beginning of this section is confirmed in this nonrepresentative group. In this case, the secular Ashkenazi woman (and here, with stereotypical exaggeration, the Russian immigrant) is positioned at the top of the literacy hierarchy, followed by ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi women, ultra-Orthodox Sephardi women, and, at the bottom of the scale, non-Orthodox Sephardi women.

The stratification mirrored the women's social positions. Financially, Ety's and Miriam's statuses were relatively good, better than that of their ultra-Orthodox (both Ashkenazi and Sephardi) classmates, or of Olga (an unemployed immigrant at the time of the study). Likewise, Suzy and Odelya were no worse off than Rinah, Einat, Mazal or Hanny. Thus, the emphasis shifts to their "cultural capital," the assets they had accumulated in the educational institutions they attended, their ongoing exposure to learning opportunities, and, perhaps, to the self-images they developed in these contexts.

Odelya's tears (El-Or 2002; Roth 1989,) expressed her deep despair. She came to the senior secretaries class after having taken courses to complete her high school education. She dropped out of vocational school at the age of sixteen and a half, and since then had worked as a supermarket cashier or saleswoman. Like many of her friends, she carried with her the failure of the state system. In previous courses she was considered a serious student. The encounter with English returned her to the past. Suddenly, she was the one who "didn't know," who "couldn't make the grade." The letters were a jumble of black marks with no meaning. It was precisely her seriousness, her refusal to do a sloppy job or to be reassured she would be "given a passing grade" that evoked her anger with the English lessons. She wanted to "be taught from scratch," to be corrected, to go from A to Z. The teacher himself was growing increasingly frustrated and saw her requests as a breach of order. (When I told him I was going to work with her, he shrugged as if to say: "Well, alright, but she doesn't really deserve it.") The course organizers, themselves victims of a system that thrust its failures at them, offered Odelya a solution that would appease her—a guaranteed passing grade—when all she really wanted was to learn. Odelya and the other students were thus faced with the perennial dichotomy: the European Ashkenazi who knows (Olga) versus the Sephardi saleswoman/cashier who doesn't.

Until the English class, Olga and her sister were foreigners no one befriended. When they answered the questions the Administration

teacher asked, their knowledgeable remarks triggered derisive comments, sometimes a giggle because of their heavy accents and Russian-influenced Hebrew. That class divided into veteran Israelis and new immigrants, and it was clear who had the upper hand. The knowledge exhibited by Olga was seen by her classmates as a nuisance. This was not the case in the English course. Suddenly she was sought after, and when she moved her seat, Evelyn accused her of abandoning her. Haya told me that Olga “is the only one who knows,” and praised her degree in biochemistry. Adding to the Russian-scholar stereotype, Olga chose that moment to go to the library to take out a (Hebrew) book.

The post-exam classroom conversation illustrates well how these stereotypes and a parallel distribution of knowledge are socially reproduced. This should have been a happy conversation of those who passed, but in fact the distribution of knowledge—those who knew English and those who did not—was unchanged. The fact that the test was easy, with open books, and that the teacher passed all of the women only reinscribed existing inequities while stimulating unrealistic dreams. Rather than setting realistic goals, such as those Odelya emphasized prior to the exam, new images of Hollywood and Miami Beach mixed with dreams of law school. The material reality was that Olga retained a good command of English, the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox women retained a basic English they would not be able to use in office work, and the English of Odelya and her friends from the smoking room remained nonexistent. I turn now to an examination of the pedagogy that contributed to these outcomes.

Pedagogy

There was logic to the teaching method in this course, which was supposed to provide a basic knowledge of English and quick access to preparing a standard clerical letter. However, since at least two-thirds of the students in the group lacked the basics of English, the lessons became a game of “pin the tail on the donkey”—a game played blindfolded. The students’ determination and intelligence enabled them after awhile to learn the game and pass the tests, but at the same time the process generated confusion. It was clear to most of them that they could not identify many words, that they just “sort of” understood. Most could not relate to the content of the letters that spoke of worlds irrelevant and unconnected to their own. The encounter with these worlds was not meant to enrich them or open the door to other places. The Liverpool Opera House, for instance, found itself only at the beginning, middle, or end of a letter. A reservation for a summer house in Brighton Beach was accompanied by the teacher’s attempts to discuss the English yearning for the sun. But the women, who knew the most important thing was to put the text in the right order, viewed Olga’s attempt to add the title “colleague” to the opening addresses or Jerry’s cultural elucidation of the term “Ms.” as irrelevant.

Jerry's course began after the women had already been studying together for four months and gotten to know each other. When he asked them to introduce themselves to the class in the first lesson, after a moment of awkward embarrassment, some seized the opportunity to show off their English and were not ashamed of a heavy accent or serious mistakes, while others preferred to remain silent. When someone wrote on the board or read aloud, no criticism or mockery was heard. Some even applauded those who sounded fluent or wrote quickly on the board. There was nervousness, frustration, and resistance in the class, but there was never shame. When Miriam, whose mother tongue was Moroccan Arabic, voiced concern about her future ability to work in English, Rivka reassured her, saying that in any event employees would be looking for a native English speaker for such jobs. The laughter of Miriam's friends was not meant to embarrass her but was instead a way to let off steam.

The women were obviously relieved after the final exam. It was clear to all of them that the teacher had passed them regardless of their performance. In the interviews held some six months later, some told me: "It wasn't serious," "Obviously I haven't a clue about English." Their passing grade—even for those who never showed up for the exam—compounded their criticism of the course. Not only were they not given what they needed, they were "certified" regardless of their real achievements. The possibility they would have to compose a letter in English in their prospective work place was small, and the chance they would manage to do so even smaller. But the encounter was painful. They came face to face with the failure of their past education and its replication in the present. With the goal of walking through the doors of knowledge, the women found on the threshold a young, foreign, male teacher armed with folders and good intentions, who, like other teachers, helped them walk around that door but never gave them the key.

The Emancipatory Power of a Colonizing Language

Relating to English far from the Western world borders almost automatically calls for a postcolonial analysis. Yet the cultural situation is far more complex, and the assumption of suppression needs to be problematized. [Canagarajah 1999:33]

Braj Kachru was among the first to address the power relations inherent in discussions of World Englishes (Kachru 1985, 1987). Building on Foucault's (1980) analysis of power, Kachru offers four parameters for the power of English: the demographic and numerical spread of speakers, positive and negative values attributed to the language, its functional role, and the accessibility it provides to other forms of communication. Jordanian scholar Zughoul (2001) uses these parameters to trace a split between the functional and cultural or status/prestige powers of English in higher education in the Arab world. Zughoul claims that the status of English is rooted in the region's colonial history and

the language's present position: During the colonial era, English was a sign of "proper education" among the middle and upper classes, and of "good breeding" among the lower classes. Relationships to English and the (Western) cultures it represents were charged with local, national, religious, class, and gender struggles.

The tendency in most Middle Eastern universities, says Zughoul, is to stress the functional value of English. This blurs cultural negotiations with English, veiling local power relations. Looking at both utility and cultural prestige may help determine whether it is possible to use an external language as a tool for handling internal relations. English in this case might be a site of both prestige and resistance—not bowing toward the symbolic master of the language (the "West"), but toward local dominant parties.

This brings us back to Kandiyoti's (1998) suggestion that modernization processes revoke and reshape existing tensions and grant them new forms and syntax. Such an approach was proposed by Francis and Ryan (1998), who studied English as the international language of prestige in Mexico and how it ranked among students in the National University in Mexico City and in a rural setting. The attitude toward English in Mexico, Francis and Ryan maintain, ranges between love and hate, and is affected by politically and economically charged relations with the United States. Students seek some mastery of the language because it is required for certain jobs or by certain educational programs. In the Third World, Francis and Ryan argue, English is perceived as a tool, a vehicle to generate profit; its acquisition does not necessarily indicate Anglicizing intentions.

Francis and Ryan's study is interesting for its dual target population. The urban students differentiated between the language and its associated American culture. When American culture did come up, students referred to it negatively: "Those Americans," "the gringos." The situation was completely different in the rural area where Native people were trying to resuscitate the local language, Nahuatl, after hundred of years of linguistic oppression by Spanish. Francis and Ryan report that students were glad to circumvent the foreign domestic language (Spanish) and link to a remote language (English). Like students in the city, they perceived the language in cultural-political terms. But, while English in the city stood for the cultural conqueror, in rural areas that position was taken by Spanish. Rural students were not embarrassed to speak imperfect English, but their imperfect Spanish embarrassed them. Learning English in the rural area was accompanied by the hope that it would help students acquire higher education. The connection to English, the researchers argue, was tantamount to a link to the affluent, the faraway, the multicultural, eliding local tensions between the official state language and their native Nahuatl. As an interviewee from rural Malintzi said: "We speak Nahuatl amongst ourselves, Spanish with 'others,' English with the world, and Latin with God" (Francis and Ryan 1998:38).

Similarly, Mennonites living in northern Mexico also strive to learn English and reject the acquisition of Spanish (Hedges 1994). Their language is a traditional Germanic dialect; English is viewed as a way of transcending the local, which is foreign to them, and linking with other Mennonites in the United States and Canada. The role of English as a cultural marker is clear, but the significance of that culture is ascribed according to the sociopolitical status of the local group.

The Sociolinguistic Structure of Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel and the Status of English

A similar situation exists among Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel. Many speak Yiddish amongst themselves, Hebrew with "others" (nonreligious Jews), English with the world, and *Loshen Koidesh* (a form of pronunciation of Hebrew used by Ashkenazi Jews when reading the Holy Scriptures) with God. They too perceive Hebrew as a local language charged with cultural meanings. Hebrew, the language of the Holy Scriptures, was secularized by the Zionist enterprise and is considered a street language, "their" language, that of the secular Zionists. The canonical manifestations of Hebrew in literature, poetry, and research are unfamiliar to the ultra-Orthodox, who do not expose themselves to it. *Heder* (religious elementary school for boys) and *Yeshiva* (religious high school or advanced school of Jewish studies for boys) pupils learn Hebrew on the street; only at an older age do they study it somewhat systematically. The most modern Hebrew they read is in the newspapers. Ultra-Orthodox women, whose literacy status is lower, are exposed to Hebrew earlier and in a more systematic manner (Bogoch 1999; El-Or 1994; Isaacs 1999; Parush 2001).

The prestige of languages in this case is not dependent on the speakers' cultural background, but rather on their gender. Ultra-Orthodox Ashkenazi men often master four languages—Yiddish, Aramaic, Hebrew and *Loshen Koidesh*—while women know Hebrew and a little English. The men dictate the linguistic hierarchy, with Yiddish at the top. English is in many respects external to the system. An Israeli Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox man who has taken a prestigious course of study is not expected to know English; any knowledge of it is gained on his own. The status of English in the ultra-Orthodox world relies on its being the language of "our brothers in the Diaspora," those who dwell in Jewish communities scattered throughout the English-speaking world. English also is associated with images of affluent relatives visiting from abroad, of celebrations such as weddings, and of shopping in the United States. English is sometimes viewed as "the other Yiddish," another language that helps Jews communicate with Jews in other places. It is not imbued with the local and current.

The situation is more complex for ultra-Orthodox Sephardi Jews, for whom Hebrew remains the sole language. Ladino, the language of the Jews in the Balkans and Spain, is not used. Arabic was eliminated by the

Zionist educational enterprise and was not mastered by the generation that grew up in Israel. French, which was used by some of the North African Jews, was not passed down to the generation born in Israel.

The ability of the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox to master English is dependent on its inclusion in the curriculum. In this case, too, the women are exposed to English more systematically than the men, who study in Yeshivot. As opposed to Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox who can shift between Hebrew and Yiddish, the majority of Sephardi ultra-Orthodox are confined to Hebrew (save a small number of those who study in Ashkenazi Yeshivot where they master Yiddish). When Sephardi ultra-Orthodox turn to English, they discover that even though they have no cultural "problem" with it, the education they received in the state schools makes it difficult for them to master it. Once again, the advantage of the middle and upper-middle classes, of the secular and Ashkenazi, and of the Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox is conspicuous. English provides a pathway to achieve prestige, but for the Sephardi, the road toward it is laden with obstacles. The very fact that it is a difficult-to-acquire, valued resource strengthens the differentiation drawn by Ben Rafael (1994).

Summary and Conclusions: "Moroccan Arabic is my Mother Tongue; Who Will Need that in the Office?"

The senior secretaries course in English was the most difficult literacy encounter of the five course subjects studied by the women profiled here. The course brought them face to face with a pedagogical-literacy failure from their school days that manifested itself in great difficulty to speak and read, and a profound lack of confidence in their ability to rectify that failure.

The curriculum, a ready-made commercial product, assumed two things: that the students could read and write basic English, and that they would not leave the program with a better command of English. Instead, the major goal of the program was to furnish them with formal correspondence skills. It did not address current methods of correspondence such as fax and e-mail, covering only orthodox formulas and formulations. The women were expected to identify and perform exercises involving "openings," "closings," "forms of address," and "signatures;" they were required to read silently and aloud, write and copy, translate, and decipher. The act of deciphering, involving understanding, imagination and projection, was the only linguistic task open to them. In this task, the women's intelligence was expressed, and they managed to understand in general terms the text before them. Reading and word-for-word translation were the most difficult tasks; either the women knew or they did not—usually the latter. The two major functions of English for learners in the periphery—prestige and utility—emerged as contradictory, making the study of English a bitter and disillusioning experience.

In terms of prestige, the study of English did provide the students with a sense of international atmosphere. Rolling foreign sounds on straining tongues, the women encountered a foreign teacher, visited faraway places, and performed pleasant tasks: ordering clothes from a catalogue, learning about a sun-bathed house in Brighton Beach, England, purchasing tickets to the opera, and pronouncing their names in English as if they were television stars. At the same time, the places themselves were perceived as inaccessible. Acts described in the letters were far removed from their lives, the spoken words felt like singing off-key, and interactions with a foreign teacher were understood as a predetermined power game.

In terms of utility, the experience was even more bitter. Throughout the lessons the question of whether ultra-Orthodox women (half the class) should learn English was never raised. There was no discussion of the fact that they were reading remote texts that dealt with a non-Jewish, non-Israeli culture. The language and its content (the texts) were taken for granted. The women internalized the "inability inherent in not knowing English in our times" as an absolute truth, and were prepared to improve their situation vis-à-vis this truth. As professionals-to-be, they wished the very best for themselves, but when they tried to imagine themselves working in an office and having to deal with English, they panicked. Rivka tried to reassure her classmates by saying that an office that uses English extensively would hire a native English-speaking secretary, to which Miriam replied, "My mother tongue is Moroccan Arabic"—a simple yet profound sociological commentary. Miriam was well aware that her linguistic and cultural heritage had no market value in an office. The laughter her comment evoked signalled a recognition that Sephardi women had very little to bring to an academic encounter with English; it was the students' way of saying, "Forget it, given where we come from, we will never be able to handle it."

Yet those feelings did not foster alienation from English in general or from "Western values," nor a desire to live the life described in their textbooks. Most of the students at Gan Na'eh seemed to move easily between the cultural realms. After class, for example, they might listen to the local rabbi's weekly talk where he preached against computers, movies, and the values of the "Free West." The women appreciated his talks, but this did not stop them from wanting to learn English.

Nor was English marked by the students as a cultural threat to Judaism, gender, Middle Easternness, or Israeliness. The women viewed English as a necessity, a "rescuing" language that could link them to faraway, neutral, and less oppressive places. At the same time, their previous educational experiences as women of the middle and lower classes of Sephardi origin, combined with the nature of the course curriculum, failed to "rescue" them in fact. The prestige of the English language momentarily intoxicated them, but left them culturally powerless. The reproduction of this powerlessness was ensured as they interpreted their

failure to learn English as a personal failure, or as the destiny of their cultural origin.

Thus, for these women, the teaching of secretarial skills in English did not produce resistance. While it reproduced earlier experiences, it also exposed and reaffirmed the power struggle between ethnic groups and social classes in Israel: Sephardic and Ashkenazi women; ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox women; secular and religious women; recent Russian immigrants and veteran Israelis.

In order to realize the empowering potential of acquiring “must knowledges” such as English, illusion and failure for low-status economic and cultural groups must be eliminated. Individuals from these groups, like the women described here, are interested in English as a “rescuing” language. Using relevant texts can lead to their successful learning and serve as a bridge to an external source of power that will improve their local status. Teaching and learning English does not have to entail the oppression of the local by the universal. It need not erase cultural difference; it can even enhance it by enabling middle- and lower-class ultra-Orthodox Sephardi women to better negotiate their place in the local society. Such successes may help deconstruct the East–West split that cross-cuts gender, religion, and ethnicity—a segmentation that positions ultra-Orthodox Sephardi women as inferior to Western secular men and women.

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Notes

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1. Although critical academic discourse uses the term *Mizrahi* (Oriental) for Jews from Muslim and Mediterranean countries, I use the term *Sephardi*, which is preferred by the people themselves as it distinguishes them from Ashkenazi Jews of European origin.

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