

Blorít - Pagans' Mohawk or Sabras' Forelock?: Ideologically Manipulative Secularization of Hebrew Terms in Socialist Zionist Israeli

Dr Ghil'ad Zuckermann
<http://www.zuckermann.org/>
gz208@cam.ac.uk

Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (RCLT), La Trobe University

The main problem facing those attempting to revive Hebrew as the national language of Israel has been that of Hebrew lexical voids, which were not semantic voids but cases in which purists tried to supplant unwelcome guestwords, foreignisms and loanwords. The 'revivalists' attempted to use mainly internal sources of lexical enrichment but were faced with a paucity of roots. They changed the meanings of obsolete Hebrew terms to fit the modern world. This infusion often entailed the secularization of religious terms.

This paper explores the widespread phenomenon of semantic secularization, as in the ideologically-neutral process visible in English cell 'monk's living place' > 'autonomous self-replicating unit from which tissues of the body are formed'. The main focus, however, is on secularizations involving ideologically-manipulative 'lexical engineering', as exemplified by deliberate, subversive processes of extreme semantic shifting, pejoration, amelioration, trivialization and allusion.

An example of such transvaluation is BLORIT. Mishnaic Hebrew [belo'rit] is 'Mohawk, an upright strip of hair that runs across the crown of the head from the forehead to the nape of the neck', characteristic of the abominable pagan and not to be touched by the Jewish barber. But defying religious values, secular Socialist Zionists use blorít with the meaning 'forelock, hair above the forehead', which becomes one of the defining characteristics of the Sabra (native Israeli). Thus, the 'new Jew' is ultimately a pagan!

In line with the prediction made by Gershom Scholem in his letter to Franz Rosenzweig (*Bekenntnis über unsere Sprache*, 1926), some ultra-orthodox Jews have tried to launch a 'lexical vendetta': using secularized terms as dormant agents, as a shortcut to religious concepts, thus trying to convince secular Jews to go back to their religious roots.

The study of Israeli cultural linguistics and socio-philology may cast light on the dynamics between language, religion and identity in a land where fierce military battles with external enemies are accompanied by internal Kulturkämpfe.

About the speaker:

Dr Ghil'ad ZUCKERMANN, D.Phil. (Oxford), Ph.D. (Cambridge) (titular), M.A. (Tel Aviv) (summa cum laude), is a fellow at the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (RCLT), La Trobe University. He has been Gulbenkian Research Fellow at Churchill College, University of Cambridge, has taught in Israel, Singapore, UK and USA; and has held research posts in USA, Italy and Japan. His publications - in English, Israeli, Italian, Yiddish, Spanish, German and Russian - include the books *Language Contact and Lexical Enrichment in Israeli Hebrew* (Palgrave Macmillan 2003) and *Hebrew as a Myth* (Am Oved 2006). He is currently working on two further books: (1) *Language Genesis and Multiple Causation*, and (2) *Language Academies*. His website: <http://www.zuckermann.org/> and email: gz208@cam.ac.uk