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‘You dribble faster than Messi and jump higher than Jordan’: The art of complimenting and praising in political discourse

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Abstract: Communicating admiration and appreciation in public discourse are two important tasks for political actors who wish to secure relationships and advance models for civic behavior. Our goal in this study is to understand how political actors signal their desire to please addressees and advance political sociability by way of manifesting positive judgment towards others. On the basis of 241 utterances praising and complimenting others’ words and deeds, we identify the topics, patterns, and functions of these speech acts and the processes and struggles they evoke in Israeli public discourse. We conclude by discussing the role of positive evaluations in demarcating the boundaries of proper conduct in political communities and the ways the distinctive logic of politics is integrated with specific cultural speaking styles in influencing how members of the Israeli political community signal their appreciation and affect for other members’ skills, performances, and personalities.

Keywords: Solidarity, political discourse, complimenting, praising, political speech acts

1 Introduction

For laymen, discursive patterns of politics leave the impression that politicians live in “an esoteric world of internal squabbles, of Byzantine power struggle” (Thompson 2000: 99). This impression is based on what discourse scholars have titled the distinctive logic of the political world, which influences the ways members of the political community use and interpret their peers’ actions (Bull

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et al. 1996; Kampf 2008; Wodak 2009). Notably, discursive patterns displayed by political actors with their peers are not solely adversarial, but also characterized by communicative cooperation strategies (Chilton 2004) and utilized for gaining influence, maintaining power, and promoting self-interest (Thompson 2000; Lakoff 2005). However, whereas confrontational modes of political language use have been studied extensively, the ways in which politicians and public figures apply cooperative and solidarity-oriented modes of communication remain on the margins of political discourse studies (Kampf 2015). Reasons vary and include a normative assumption about the role of confrontational communication in advancing political decision-making and opinion formation (Schudson 1997); a descriptive bias (when the analysis is based on media materials), resulting from a journalistic preference for reporting on political disagreement (Tannen 1998); and a critical stance taken by scholars who suspect the motives behind political solidarity, framing it as manipulative (Wilson 2002). Whatever the reason, communicative acts that aim at oiling social relationships in public discourse are part and parcel of politicians' linguistic behavior (Lakoff 2005). Such acts maintain, reinforce, or reestablish political ties; and initiate, advance or transform political processes; they therefore deserve scholarly attention.

In this study, we take the examples of two expressive speech acts in the toolkit of political speakers – compliments and praise – to demonstrate the role of solidarity-oriented actions in cultivating friendly relationships and models of behavior in political discourse. Since both speech acts have been under-studied thus far in public contexts, our goal is to understand how political actors signal their desire to please addressees and advance political sociability by way of manifesting the positive judgment towards others. Taking Israeli political discourse and its distinctive Israeli cultural speaking style (Katriel 1986, 2004) as our case study, we ask what public actors compliment and praise each other about. What are the structural, rhetorical, and pragmatic features of complimentary and praise discourses? In what types of political processes and rituals are we more likely to find them? Why do public actors positively evaluate each other? And how are power relations negotiated in compliment and praise events?

In the next section, we draw on speech-act theory, linguistic politeness, and rhetoric literatures in defining compliments and praise. After explaining our methodological framework, we analyze the contents, uses, functions, processes, and struggles these speech acts evoke in Israeli public discourse. We conclude by discussing the role of compliments and praise in demarcating the boundaries of proper behavior in political communities and the ways in which political and cultural speaking-styles are conflated in the discourse of manifesting positive evaluations toward others.

2 Compliments and praise in everyday and public discourse

Compliments and praise are expressive speech acts (Searle 1969) that share a positive evaluation of another person with an overall goal of pleasing the direct addressee (Wierzbicka 1987: 201) and increasing the sense of commonality between interlocutors (Wolfson and Manes 1980; Holmes 1986; Jaworski 1995). Compliments and praise can be distinguished by the ways each of these speech acts address the hearer. Compliments directly attribute credit to a present addressee, while praise can do so indirectly (Wierzbicka 1987) by way of targeting a third party (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989). Nevertheless, in this study we treat compliments and praise as a single category as both acts share a positive affective stance of the speaker toward the positively evaluated party with an overall goal to “oil social wheels, to increase or consolidate solidarity” (Holmes 1986: 500).

Interestingly, the etymology of the Hebrew word for compliment ([maxmaʔa]; מחמאה) is directly linked to the idea of oiling interpersonal relationships by way of speaking. The word’s first appearances in the Bible refers to the greasy nature of butter (in Hebrew: [xemʔa]; חמאה), metaphorically projecting the kind of sweet talk that can appease an addressee’s heart (“The words of his mouth were smoother than butter... his words were softer than oil” [Psalms 55: 22]). A formal definition for compliments was suggested by Holmes (1986: 485): “A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some “good” (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer”. As an object of study, personal compliments (Jucker 2009) and responses to their performance were first explored during the 1980s in American English (Pomerantz 1978; Manes and Wolfson 1981) and New Zealand English (Holmes 1986). Manes and Wolfson (1981) and Holmes (1986) demonstrated that compliments are remarkably formulaic speech acts that contain recurrent uses of the same adjectives (e. g., nice, good, lovely) and verbs (e. g., like, love, enjoy) with positive semantic loads. Thematically, following Holmes (1986), studies found that everyday compliments are directed to one of the following topics: appearance, ability or performance, possessions, or some aspects of personality or friendliness (Herbert 1990; Danziger 2018).

The word ‘praise’ is etymologically related to the notion of value in both English and Hebrew ([jevax]; שבח).¹ As aforementioned, scholars of pragmatics

1 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/praise> (accessed 10/08/16); Sapir Dictionary, 1997.

identified the high resemblance between complimenting and praising, with the exception of the latter being more general in according a positive evaluation to a hearer. For Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 215), praise is mere expression of approbation, while compliments express approval of a specific hearer (Wierzbicka 1987; Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989). Although the speech act of praising did not receive as much scholarly attention in the linguistic-pragmatics literature as compliments, it generated extensive attention in the literature of epideictic rhetoric (Hauser 1999)². Following Aristotle's discussion in *Rhetoric* of the language of praise and blame and its contribution to the consolidation of shared civic values, praise is considered a formal genre of speech, realized in ceremonial occasions, as part (and the definer) of epideictic discourse (Beale 1978; Hauser 1999).

At the functional level, several roles of compliments and praise have been identified in past research as recurrent in everyday interactions: Both actions were found to be utilized as socialization and positive reinforcement tools (Manes 1983), which “encourage desired behavior” (Wolfson 1984: 240). This function is more prevalent in the context of asymmetrical, top-down interactions in which, for example, the performance of children is positively evaluated and reinforced by parents and teachers. In asymmetrical, bottom-up relationships, the difference in status plays a prominent role in the interpretation of the speech acts. Compliments and praise can serve as a means to please the hearer, and thus endear oneself to a person higher in the hierarchy, but can also be negatively evaluated by the addressee, who may suspect the complimenter is manipulating her/him through flattery (Holmes 1986). In symmetrical relationships, compliments and praise are treated as a verbal gift, one through which the speaker is applying a positive politeness tool so as to enhance the positive face needs of the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987). Performing positive evaluations of another person for being or doing ‘good’ thus led scholars to identify the main function of compliments and praise as verbal tools for creating solidarity (Holmes 1986) and maintaining rapport by means of “social lubricants” (Wolfson 1983: 86).

In spite of the vast literature that points to the benefits of praise and compliments in smoothing human interaction, both speech acts may have other functions that derive from the specific context of their realization. Thus, Brown and Levinson (1987) acknowledged that the compliment can aggravate relationships in cases in which, for example, a compliment is considered too intimate. Scholars

² Epideictic rhetoric is defined as the rhetoric of praise and blame. As recognized by scholars of rhetoric, in assigning nobility or baseness to public actors and their actions, epideictic rhetoric constructs models for proper behavior and thus reinforces shared values (Hauser 1999; Kampf and Katriel, 2016).

of the second wave of politeness research (Culpeper 2011) go further in arguing that compliments will have a positive effect only when they are realized as part of politic behavior. When speakers judge compliments as non-politic, they may cause a negative effect and become an object of controversy (Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005).

The functions of praise and compliments at the societal level are in large part informed by the uses and functions of these speech acts in private, interpersonal discourse (Wolfson 1984). Indeed, as part of epideictic rhetoric, both praise and compliments set models for civic conduct and thereby validate and reinforce shared cultural values and traditions (Hauser 1999). In assigning nobility to people and actions, public speakers provide normative scripts for modeling behavior to be emulated by others. Like in other cases of expressive speech acts, in performing praise and compliments in public settings, audiences take part in ‘teachable moments’ in which they are meant to bear witness to what is right or permissible in public affairs (Kampf and Katriel 2016).

Taking into account the power of praise and compliments to set models for behavior and to signal solidarity, these speech acts serve as important performative means in the toolkit of political speakers. But while praise for the public can be seen as a kind of ‘safe’ political language that has no observable negative side effects on the speaker’s self-image, complimenting other politicians, even if ostensibly, seems to be a more risky endeavor. The uniqueness of political evaluative language is an outcome of the distinctive logic that influences the ways in which members of the political community perceive ‘face’, and thereby use language and interpret the communicative actions of their peers (Thompson 2000; Kampf 2008; Wodak 2009). The need to climb up the hierarchical ladder within the political peer community, coupled with the need to secure political affiliations, pose a unique challenge when an actor must decide how to evaluate the performance of her/his peers. On the one hand, complimenting and praising others may enhance the complimented political face and as such could come at the expense of the complimenter’s symbolic power. In positively evaluating other’s political or professional skills, the political complimenter implies that the performance of her/his peer is higher or better than her/his own. On the other hand, the need to secure political affiliations with other actors turns the speech acts into solidarity-enhancing devices, utilized as strategic tools for maintaining and fostering political relationships, and as a means for realizing the speaker’s political goals and interests.

In sum, combining confrontational with cooperative modes of language use (Chilton 2004) seems to be a necessity in acquiring symbolic power in politics. The discursive challenge political actors confront is thus related to questions such as when, how, what, and whom to positively evaluate. This discursive challenge

also makes praise and compliments an interesting case study for understanding the discursive norms of the political peer community, the calculated language used for consolidating solidarity, and their specific functions in political affairs.

3 Data and method

The corpus for this study consisted of 102 compliments and 139 instances of praise that were retrieved from news reports published between 2010 and 2015 dealing with public figures' linguistic behavior. The 241 instances of compliments and praise were studied as a unified functional category of positive evaluation through metacommunicative expression analysis (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014). We conducted systematic keyword searches of variations on the roots of two metacommunicative expressions in Hebrew³ that mean 'to compliment' (א.מ.ח) and 'to praise' (ת.ב.ש) in the archive of a highly reputed Israeli newspaper (*Haaretz*), as well as additional non-systematic keyword searches of the online version of *Haaretz* and other digital popular news platforms (*Ynet*, *Mako*, *NRG*, and *Israel Hayom*). Included in the corpus were cases in which compliments and praise markers were utilized to represent the realizations of the speech acts by at least one public figure who took part in the communicative process of positively evaluating another figure's traits, actions, or words. The compliments and praise were applied in the journalistic reports in either a performative manner (by citing the politician's speech act in direct quotes), or a descriptive manner (in cases of reporting on politicians' speech acts; see Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014). Excluded from the corpus were any self-praise or self-compliments (as framed by the reporters), following Holmes' (1986) definition according to which a compliment attributes credit to someone other than the speaker.

The decision to base our corpus on journalistic meta-representations of public figures' linguistic behavior was made for two main reasons: First, responses to compliments are crucial to identifying the speakers' intentions (Lorenzo-Dus 2001; Golato 2002) and serve as a metacommunicative indicator for the researcher that a compliment was indeed paid (Maíz-Arévalo 2012; Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014). Therefore, in cases of reporting on complimenting events in which the complimented party was not present, the journalistic framing of the speech act was

³ The use of 'to praise' in Hebrew is equivalent to its use in English. The speech act verb 'to compliment' is similar to what Jucker and Taavitsainen (2014: 261) call 'personal compliments', and is in line with Holmes' definition of a compliment (1986). The Hebrew language does not include what Jucker and Taavitsainen define as 'ceremonial compliments.'

a central indicator for identifying the speaker's intentions. Second, as members of a specific professional community (Zelizer 1993), journalists are engaged in the practice of identifying the communicative intentions of politicians (Kampf 2013). When reporting on others' words, journalists apply their linguistic-pragmatic competencies in identifying the illocutionary force of political speech acts (even if made indirectly). They inform the public about public figures' intentions in the form of simple metacommunicative expressions (Hübler 2011) utilized for naming "a communicative entity, such as speech acts" (Jucker and Taavitsainen 2014: 260). In so doing, they fulfill their double role as mediators among political actors themselves and between political actors and the general public (Bennett and Entman 2001).

Overall, we found 241 utterances of reported instances of praise and compliments in 198 news items, of which 139 were reported in the form of direct speech and 102 in indirect speech.⁴ The analysis took into account the lexical choices made by the speaker, the object of her/his compliments and praise, and the timing of their performance. Moreover, we considered the context in which the metacommunicative expressions were presented in the news story in order to point to the socio-pragmatic features of the speech acts, as well as their political functions, namely how the positive evaluation of others' conduct was utilized as a solidarity-enhancing device.

Our focus on the Israeli public discourse needs to be prefaced by a description of the roots of solidarity-oriented behavior that relates and informs the Israeli cultural speaking-style. The collective values dominating Israeli culture during the first decades of its existence were manifested in the term *dugri*, defined as assertive, direct, and sincere "straight talk" (Katriel 1986). Accordingly, members of the Israeli speech community favored values such as clarity and authenticity over elaborate facework. These values were shown to be upheld especially in close relationships, with styles of politeness still varying greatly according to social situations within Israeli society (Blum-Kulka et al. 1985; Blum-Kulka 1992). Later studies drew attention to the process of erosion in this distinctive speaking-style, paralleling the decline in collective values in Israeli society and the growing importance of the management of interpersonal relationships (Maschler 2001; Katriel 2004). This process brought about both the emergence of a hostile style of talk, termed *kasah* (כסאח) and, in contrast, mitigated and elaborated scripted

⁴ An inter-coder reliability test was conducted on 15 % of the coding units (N=36). The test resulted in Krippendorff's alpha reliability scores ranging between 0.73 and 0.94 for the categories of the complimenter's identity, the complimented party's identity, the topic of the compliment, and the type of quote.

types of speech encapsulated in the Israeli cultural keyword *firgun* (פִּרְגּוֹן). Borrowed from Yiddish (פֿאַרײַניקן) into colloquial Hebrew, the verb *lefargen* means “to treat favorably, to treat with equanimity, to bear no grudge or jealousy against”,⁵ and sometimes serves as a synonym for meta-linguistically describing the act of complimenting.⁶

In what follows, we point to the topics, forms, functions, rituals, and power relations of praise and compliments made in public settings. Since most cases in our corpus were realized within the political community boundaries (from politician to politician; 109, 45 %), or from politicians to other actors in the public arena (62, 26 %) we focus our discussion mainly on the uses and functions of the speech acts in politics.

4 The topics of political praise and compliments

Identifying the objects of praise and compliments enabled us to pinpoint the matters that are positively valued by members of the political community and to demarcate the boundaries of ‘proper’ public conduct as understood by the participants in the process of praising and complimenting. It also allowed us to compare the topics of positive evaluation in public discourse with what is expected from addressees in interpersonal communication.

Studies on personal compliments in everyday discourse reduced the potentially infinite number of topics that are positively evaluated to four broad categories – physical appearance, abilities and performance, possessions, and aspects of personality or friendliness (Wolfson 1983; Holmes 1986; Herbert 1990; Danziger 2018). Public praisers and complimenters, on the other hand, exclude positive evaluations of appearance and possessions, drawing the boundaries of appropriate conduct in public discourse around the following topics:

⁵ <http://www.morfix.co.il/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%92%D7%9F> (accessed 10/08/16) <http://hebrew-academy.org.il/2012/01/17/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%92%D7%95%D7%9F/> (accessed 10/08/16)

⁶ This interchangeable use of the verbs can be found in a television item broadcasted on 11 March 2015 on Channel 2, in which the interviewer asked Israeli politicians the same question: ‘To what other politician would you like to lefargen.’ He was answered with the lavishing of compliments on their peers. See: <https://www.mako.co.il/tv-people/articles/Article-83bae08dba50c41006.htm>

- (1) Impressive actions and performance (50 compliments; 102 praise utterances), i. e., regarding the successful application of a policy, achievements, decisions and stances they admired, or the advancement of the greater good of the country and its people. This is demonstrated in the following praise bestowed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on an efficient government minister before members of the coalition government: “[Moshe] Kahlon did amazing things; be like Kahlon and find solutions” (*Ynet* 19 June 2011);
- (2) Various aspects of personality (31; 31), i. e., the personal and social traits of a public figure such as friendliness, modesty, and honesty, as demonstrated by the following compliment by Netanyahu to the Israeli Chief of Staff: “[Moshe Ya’alon is] a moral officer who does not cut corners and tells things like they are” (*Haaretz* 24 August 2005);
- (3) Ability, talent, or skills (27; 14), i. e., the competencies and leadership traits owned by a public actor that make her/him competent for her/his position. This is seen in the compliment on professional skills paid by the Minister of Environmental Protection (Avi Gabay) to the Minister of Transport (Yisrael Katz) during the first ever test drive in Israel of a bus powered by natural gas: “We have a Minister of Transport who knows how to get things done and I am sure the environment will benefit from his skills” (*Haaretz*, 7 July 2015). Focusing on the “skill-specific reputation” (Thompson 2000: 246) of his colleague, Gabay demonstrated that political actors are not only involved in defending the interests of “significant others” in political discourse (Bull et al. 1996), but also take the initiative and enhance their face needs by complimenting their professional competencies. As both politicians were involved in promoting the environmental project, this compliment may also be seen as a way to enhance the speaker’s self-face needs without being accused of the “aberrant behavior” attributed to self-praising (Holmes 1986). Focusing on his coalition partner’s qualities thus allows Gabay to enhance both his own and his addressee’s positive public-face needs, as well as to strengthen their cooperative relationship.

As our findings suggest, praise discourse exhibited a narrow topical focus and was lavished mainly on public actors for their impressive performance (such as achieving extraordinary accomplishment in the political or public arenas; [102/139]). As such, they fulfilled their public functions as identified by scholars of epideictics (Hauser 1999), that is, setting models for civic and professional conduct. The somewhat limited topical variation of praise discourse is best demonstrated in the large number of cases in which political actors positively

evaluated the professional performance of Israeli security forces (military, intelligence, police, etc.). Out of 139 instances of praise, 36 were heaped on security actors following a successful response to a threat. Thus, for example, after a Border Police officer killed a Palestinian who committed a vehicular assault in Jerusalem, the Minister of Public Security, Yitzhak Aharonovich, arrived at the scene and praised the officer's 'professional' performance to journalists: "The action of the Border Police officer who chased the terrorist and killed him immediately is a proper and professional action and I would like all such events to result in the same outcome" (*Haaretz*, 5 November 2014). It is worth noting the socializing function that appeared in the final clause of the announcement ("I would like all such events to result in the same outcome"). After describing the proper reaction to a terrorist action, Aharonovich manifested his expectation from all Borders Police officers, thus making the individual officer a role model for professional performance.

The large number of security performance cases remediated by reporters using the marker 'praise' indicates that journalists apply a stylistic lexical routine when reporting on the endorsement of successful actions by the security services. The frequent use of the marker 'praise' in Israeli discourse can be explained by the prevalence of the military abbreviation צל"ש (*tzalash*) in Modern Hebrew (literally 'mark of praise'; in English, military citation). Traveling from professional military discourse into colloquial Hebrew (Rosenthal 2015), the verb 'to praise' is frequently used by public and media actors (signaling their membership in the national community) to mark distinction in security-related contexts.

5 The language of political praise and compliments

Focusing on the main features of the evaluative language of praise and compliments allows us to understand how members of the political community discursively manifest their positive affection (Holmes 1986) toward their political and public addressees. We distinguished between two strategies of positive evaluations in utterances of praise and compliments.⁷ The first strategy includes either a description of the complimented worthy deeds (as in "he succeeded in bridging

⁷ In order to identify the prominent evaluative features of the discourse of praise and compliments, we took into account only items that included a representation of positive evaluations reported in direct speech (n=139).

all disputes” [*Haaretz* 18 March 2013]) or an explicit statement about the complimenter’s stance or feelings vis-à-vis the object of evaluation, including what s/he foresees as the outcome of the praiseworthy action (as in “Netanyahu gave a fluent speech moving to every Jewish soul” [*Haaretz* 1 January 2015]). The second strategy of evaluations consists of linguistic strategies for intensifying the sense of admiration for the complimented party, including adjectives that express positive affect and lexical choices with positive valence for signaling approbation (such as metaphors and other poetic devices: “The veterans are the skeleton on which the IDF was built” [*Haaretz* 19 September 2014]).

Political actors often combine the two strategies in their praise and compliments discourse. For example, after being nominated for the position of deputy speaker of the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament) and membership in five parliamentary committees, Likud Party member, MK Oren Hazan showered the following compliments on the head of the prime minister: “[Netanyahu acted in a] surprising, amazing, calm, and gentle way and proved true leadership. I stand at his side and behind him” (*Ynet* 2 June 2015). By enumerating a list of positive adjectives to describe Netanyahu’s actions (surprising, amazing, calm, gentle), Hazan signaled his satisfaction with the prime minister’s decision and enhanced the positive political face of Netanyahu by publicly evaluating his decision as a sign of ‘true leadership’. He concluded with the first evaluation strategy by pointing out the consequences of his addressee’s action on the two politicians’ cooperative relationship (“I am standing at his side and behind him”).

Interestingly, in praising and complimenting ideologically or professionally marked audiences, political actors tend to rhetorically adjust their evaluative words to their addressees by using lexical choices and idioms borrowed from their distinct world of discourse. Such rhetorical adjustment was found when religious figures, military professionals, and businessmen were addressed, as in the following instance of praise by the Minister of Economy, Naftali Bennett, for the founders of *Waze* (a commercial GPS software company) following the announcement of their acquisition by Google: “This is what being Israeli is all about: being modest, attuned to their customers, hard workers, and knowing how to recalculate the route when necessary”. Complimenting the company’s performance, Bennett included in his words lexical choices from business-world discourse (customers, workers) and phrases from GPS-applications technological discourse (recalculating route). Such a strategy could prove his acquaintance with the hi-tech sector, signal his own suitability to fill the position of Minister of Economy, and allow Bennett to redirect some of the light of *Waze*’s glory on his own political image.

On the pragmatic functional level, we identified the functions of praising and complimenting in the broad discourse of positive evaluations. Both speech

acts were found to be utilized in several discursive contexts: First, they were applied as tools for leveling criticism on a third party, as in “Bennett praised the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its officers but said that the assumption that Israel has “the best army in the world” doesn’t make the strategy of the security policy-makers right” (*Haaretz* 19 January 2016). Second, praise and compliments were realized as indirect speech acts, that is, as substitutes for justifications, thanks, or congratulations, as in the congratulatory message to a new party member by Avigdor Lieberman, the chair of the Yisrael Beytenu Party: “We have been joined by a talented person and a real patriot, [Sharon] Gal, who will contribute a lot to our public and parliamentary efforts” (*Haaretz*, 05 January 2015). This praise can be seen as a strategy aimed at justifying Lieberman’s decision to assign Gal a ‘safe’ position on the party’s list for upcoming Knesset elections. And third, praise and compliments can be performed side by side with other solidarity-oriented speech acts (apologies, congratulations, and thanks), as in the following case: “I love you Dalia. You are an excellent minister. I apologize for what I said that hurt you at the party convention” (*Haaretz*, 04 October 2002). The chair of the Labor Party (Benjamin Ben Eliezer) in this case prefaced his apology with a compliment as a positive politeness strategy, hopefully increasing the chances his gesture would appease Dalia Itzik, the offended party member.

6 Rituals of praise and compliments and their political functions

Public speech acts such as apologies, greetings, and condemnations serve as pivotal actions around which political rituals of reconciliation, solidarity, and exclusion are constructed (Kampf 2013). Studying the role of compliments and praise in political processes and rituals is important for identifying the contexts in which solidarity-oriented actions are more likely to be realized in political discourse, for classifying the types of ritual games (Goffman 1967) of sociability recurrent in political communities, and for understanding the political functions they fulfill.

Although we did not find cases in which praise and compliments were the defining speech act of a specific political ritual (such as ceremonial greetings or reconciliation rituals constructed around historical apologies; see Duranti 1997; Kampf and Löwenheim 2012), we could identify six types of rituals in which the positive evaluation of others was a recurrent communicative act: rituals of consent, inauguration, nomination, farewell, compensation, and tri-

umph.⁸ This is not to say that praise and compliments cannot appear in other local contexts and in unexpected timings; in fact, the following broad categories represent the moments they are more likely to be found, moments in which politic behavior (Watts 2003) in the form of positive evaluations of others' skills, performances, and personalities is expected from political speakers.

Rituals of consent occur following political negotiations over the distribution of governmental or party posts – a type of political process that often entails controversies and disagreements – usually when a political deal or a pact between at least two politicians or parties is signed. When a political actor takes the initiative and realizes speech acts such as praise, compliments, and thanks during a pact-signing ceremony, solidarity with colleagues is consolidated by way of signaling appreciation for their cooperation and flexibility. The burst of appreciation for others' skills, performances, and personalities thus serves to calm previous tensions and potential emotional residues, very much like in *sholem* rituals between Israeli children, after which exaggerated cooperation between past rivals is expected (Katriel 1985). Thus, for example, following the signing of a coalition agreement between the *Likud* and *Yesh Atid* parties, the chair of the latter, Yair Lapid, complimented Prime Minister Netanyahu for making concessions:

The negotiations were long. The success is manifested not according to ministerial positions, but the issues we agreed on, from 'military service for all' to increased benefits for Holocaust survivors. I wish to thank the Prime Minister. He succeeded in bridging all disputes. (*Haaretz* 18 March 2013)

After pointing out the difficulties in the negotiation process, Lapid utilized a triad of self-praise (his success in securing ministerial positions, equality in military service, etc.), other-praise (to the PM "bridging all disputes"), and mutual-praise (the inclusive "we" in "we agreed on") in his message. Reminding the public what he, his partner, and both together achieved, thus allowed Lapid to enhance both his partner and his own public-face needs and reinforce solidarity, which was important for securing future cooperation and the smooth functioning of the future government.

⁸ The six rituals were identified on the basis of their social, institutional, or political functions. In order to pinpoint the overall goal of an utterance, we tried to garner as much contextual information as possible from the news reports in regard to the settings, the genres, and the participants' roles within the speech events. No quantitative analyses were carried out in this section because many reports did not contain enough contextual information. It is potentially possible, therefore, to expect that there are other ritualistic functions of praise and compliments discourse that were not identified in our corpus.

Rituals of inauguration include high-profile introductory or launching events (of a policy, a system, etc.) in which politicians are more likely to deliver a congratulatory message that includes the performance of praise and compliments. These types of rituals have been identified in the scholarly literature as consisting of epideictic discourse (Campbell and Jamieson 1985) and were demonstrated above when the Minister of Environmental Protection (Avi Gabay) praised the Minister of Transport (Yisrael Katz) during the test drive of a natural-gas-powered bus (“We have a Minister of Transport who knows how to get things done” [*Haaretz*, 07 July 2015]). Inaugurations thus allow a politician to combine self- and other-praising utterances so as to create an appearance of an actor who knows how to give credit when due, i. e., who shares the light of glory with others. The message also permits the speaker to demarcate the public performance expected from political actors, thus setting a model for other politicians’ conduct while reinforcing the public positive face (Gruber 1993) of both the complimenter and the complimented parties.

Nomination and farewell rituals, discussed in the past in relation to the speech acts of congratulations (Kampf 2016), include delivering messages of praise to newly appointed or retiring public figures in professional (e. g., the Supreme Court, military, or governmental commissions) or political (ministry, parliament, party) positions. Lavishing compliments on the new office holder signals the acceptance of the nomination, thus setting up conditions for proper working relations crucial to the future functioning of the political or professional organization. This can be demonstrated in the complimentary words spoken by Ehud Barak, the retiring Minister of Defense, to his successor in office, Moshe (Bogie) Ya’alon: “Bogie is a person who in or out of uniform knows where he stands; he’s stable, doesn’t vacillate, says what he thinks, and does what he says” (*Haaretz* 19 March 2013).

By using Ya’alon’s nickname to address the newly appointed minister, Barak applied a positive politeness strategy for signaling friendliness toward him. He then continued with praise for Ya’alon’s sincerity (“says what he thinks and does what he says”), thus pointing to what should be an exemplary trait of personality for political actors. Focusing on Ya’alon’s sincerity, Barak aimed at enhancing his addressee’s public-face needs by echoing a significant discursive norm in the Israeli cultural speech community – *dugri*, i. e., an assertive, authentic, and sincere speaking style (Katriel 1986).

Praising and complimenting a retiring person in *farewell rituals* can be understood as an act of courtesy that aims to conclude a period of public service full of controversies in friendly relationships. This ritual can be demonstrated in an item that covered the farewell speech of the right-wing Prime Minister Netanyahu to the left-wing Meretz Party member, Chaim Oron, who retired from his

position after twenty years of service: “You always wear a shirt, without a jacket or a tie. This is an indication of your humbleness” (*Haaretz* 24 March 2011). Farewell rituals that follow a public figure’s retirement from the community of professional politics thus display a rare moment in politics in which friendly and rival politicians exchange praise and compliments. The fact that the subject of the compliments no longer poses a political threat allows opponent members of the political community to suspend the everyday rules of confrontational politics and replace internal squabbles with words of admiration for the retiring figure and her/his public contribution. It allows political complimenters to present the private face of an empathic person, and thereby possibly leave behind former hostilities with the complimented party.

Rituals of compensation occur when political actors utilize image restoration discourse (Benoit 1995) following some sort of tension between the complimented party and the speaker. The speech acts are typically realized on the side of apologies, and pragmatically function as ‘verbal gifts’ in exchange for the addressee’s appeasement or forgiveness. As such, praise and compliments in compensation rituals allow the reduction of the addressee’s dissatisfaction and serve as a tool for conflict resolution and calming tense relationships. For example, after the Likud Party failed to secure political support for the nomination of one of its members, Nava Boker, to a desired political position, she threatened to vote against her party’s bills. In order to appease Boker, members of the Likud Party lavished compliments on her during a party meeting the day following the failed vote. The participants used their floor time to praise the insulted colleague in what *Haaretz* reporter Yossi Verter titled “A journey of convulsion and flattery”. MK Yuval Steinitz rose above others in signaling his affect by saying “Nava, we all like you”, and Prime Minister Netanyahu was reported to have interrupted his words by adding: “Stop with the political correctness, we all love you!”. According to Verter, the compensation ritual ended in success: “At this stage Boker was smiling. The prey was hunted. Mission accomplished. There are people who achieve their fame in one defeat” (*Haaretz* 01 August 2015).

Lastly, *triumph rituals* occur following a significant personal, commercial, or military success and include in their structure of participation a high-ranking figure praising the champion. We illustrated this type of positive evaluation earlier in the case of the Minister of Economy, Naftali Bennett, praising the founders of the commercial software company Waze following its acquisition by Google in 2013 (“This is what being Israeli is all about: being modest, attuned to the customers, hard workers, and knowing how to recalculate the route”) and in the case of politicians and high-ranking officers praising the security performance of soldiers, policemen, and security guards (as in “The fighters and the guards showed high professionalism, just as expected, and their rapid and determined response

prevented the exacerbation of the event” [*Haaretz* 25 April 2015]). As these cases demonstrate, praising and complimenting others who have succeeded in their missions provides a model for civic, commercial, or military performances, encouraging others to perform in the same manner. It also allows the complimenter to create an appearance of control (praising ‘security performance’) or to bathe for a moment in the champions’ glory (commercial success).

In sum, the six political rituals in which the positive evaluation of others is recurrent allow political actors to take advantage of the functions of praise and compliments. Broadly speaking, they serve political actors as means for maintaining, reinforcing, or reestablishing solidarity in political affairs; providing role models for admirable skills, performance, and personality; and enhancing the political face needs of the complimenter and her/his significant other.

7 Power relations in praise and compliment events, and the struggles they evoke

Mastering the socio-pragmatic script of praise and compliments discourse, i. e., who should be complimented, when, and for what, allows public actors to take advantage of the socializing and solidarity-oriented functions of uttering pleasant words. Diverging from this script, however, may transform the speech acts into a subject of controversy, thus threatening the face of the complimenter and thwarting his/her political goals. Our final section is devoted to cases in which public actors deviate from the expected scripts of “politic behavior” (actions that are “appropriate to the ongoing social interaction” [Watts 2003: 20]), and focuses on questions of power relations: what are the consequences of political status (in terms of institutional positions within the political hierarchy) on praise and compliments discourse and when are they contested discursively by their recipients?

Our corpus suggests that positive evaluations of others are trouble free in cases of symmetrical relationships between public figures with the same political status (members of parliament, party chairs, etc.; 94/241, 39 %) and in top-down, asymmetrical relationships, between high-ranking figures (prime ministers, party chairs, high-ranking military officers, etc.) and figures lower on the organizational hierarchy (108/241, 44.8 %). As discussed earlier, these modes of political relationships best utilize the functions of praise and compliments as solidarity-oriented devices in symmetrical relationships (Holmes 1986) and as socialization and positive reinforcement tools in top-down relationships (Manes 1983; Wolfson 1984). More risky are cases of bottom-up compliments (33/241, 13.7 %), which the addressee may suspect are manipulative (Holmes 1986). The precar-

ious nature of bottom-up compliments can be demonstrated in a report about praise of the Israeli Chief of Staff made by his deputy, Yair Golan, in a speech before Special Forces veterans for his “talent and determination” in leading the Israeli Defense Forces. The reporter’s awareness of the risk of these words being interpreted negatively by the readers of *Haaretz* can be seen in his decision to explicitly negate the discursive implicature according to which Golan’s praise was instrumental and thus manipulative: “This is not flattery. Golan has in the past praised those who impress him, both his commanders and occasionally his subordinates” (*Haaretz* 19 December 2015).

Bottom-up compliments can be even more dangerous in cases when the complimenter is suspected of overstepping his or her authority. Thus, for example, when the Israeli Chief of Staff was invited to a government cabinet meeting and concluded his briefing with words of praise to the ministers for their “moderate and sound decisions” (in response to a Hamas rocket attack from Gaza), he was rebuked by the Minister of Home Front Defense, Gilad Erdan, for acting *ultra vires*: “This is not an appropriate statement. Your duty is not to grade us or to imply that other suggestions made here were not sound” (*Haaretz* 1 July 2014). As compliments and praise necessarily presuppose that the speaker is positively evaluating something as ‘good’ related to the addressee (Holmes 1986), a third party with higher authority – in this case Minister Erdan – who may not evaluate the same performance as ‘good’, can take advantage of her/his higher institutional position and verbally sanction the person who holds limited discursive rights – in this case the Chief of Staff – for daring to express a contradictory stance (Erdan, a hawkish Likud Party member, was reported to support an aggressive response to the Hamas assault during the meeting).

As this and other cases demonstrate, praise and compliments may arouse controversy when they are not welcomed by their recipients, when the compliment sets a model for untoward behavior or is not in line with the public consensus, or when there is disagreement on whether the subject of the evaluation should be praised or condemned for her/his actions. In each of these cases, the positive evaluation ceases to function as socialization or a solidarity-enhancement tool and instead becomes an object of controversy over worldviews, values, ideology, etc. A case in point, which demonstrates the latter scenario, took place in 2011, one year after the Mount Carmel forest fire claimed the lives of 44 Israelis and aroused harsh criticism in public discourse for the unpreparedness and flawed reaction of the government to the crisis. Prime Minister Netanyahu attended the commemoration ceremony, and when his turn to speak arrived, the moderator prefaced his invitation to the stage with the following words:

I am honored to invite the first person to understand the magnitude of the event, who mobilized concerned parties in Israel and around the world to help extinguish the fire, and since then has tirelessly taken care of the families who lost their loved ones, the Honorable Prime Minister of Israel, Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu. (*Ynet* 19 December 2011)

Public debate erupted immediately following the ceremony over the exaggerated praise for Netanyahu's response to the calamity. Public, political, and media rage focused on three main questions: First, did Netanyahu deserve praise for a disaster that ended with such grave results? Criticism over the PM's flawed reaction can be seen in an item that quoted an institutional judicial source who claimed: "The State Comptroller will not have compliments for Netanyahu" (*Yediot Aharonot* 21 December 2011). One member of the opposition Labor Party, Eitan Cabel, went further in mocking Netanyahu's praise. Speaking in the Knesset, he cynically said, "It is important to add that you are great, you're a hero, you're amazing... you dribble faster than Messi, jump higher than Jordan, a more brilliant coach than Guardiola, you're the one who prophesized our State, the one who established it, you are the sun of all nations" (*Yediot Aharonot* 21 December 2011). In another report, a bereaved mother was quoted as saying, "From the moderator's words you would think that Netanyahu took a hose and extinguished the fire himself" (*Ynet* 19 December 2011).

The second question in public discourse focused on the communicative issue of whether or not it is appropriate to lavish compliments for successful performance during a commemoration ceremony before bereaved families. The chair of the Labor Party, Shelly Yachimovich, defined the initiative as a "cynical exploitation of a highly sensitive ceremony" (*Haaretz* 19 December 2011). *Yediot Aharonot*, the most popular broadsheet in Israel, the following day devoted its first five pages to this question under headlines such as "Embarrassment and Memory" and "The Flattery and the Anger". In addition, a mother of one of the deceased was quoted as saying, "This event was meant to honor our children and not praise and commend the public figure who came to the ceremony. It was exaggerated and strange" (21 December 2011).

Third, media and political discontent focused on the political question of whether or not it is appropriate in a democratic system to praise political actors in such a manner. *Yediot Aharonot*'s senior political commentator, Sima Kadmon, excelled herself in comparing Netanyahu to infamous dictators: "For one moment it seemed like we were watching another item about "dear leader" Kim Jong-il from North Korea, who passed away recently" (*Yediot Aharonot* 21 December 2011). The same comparison was made by Yoel Hasson, a member of the opposition Kadima Party, who said "North Korea is here. The words of praise and glory lavished on Netanyahu are the height of blatant insensitivity" (*Ynet* 19 December 2011).

As we can see from the three pivots of criticism, the flawed performance of praise and compliments allows public actors to challenge the narrative of events, the appropriateness of utilizing epideictic oratory at specific moments, and their function in a democracy. Criticizing positive evaluations for other's disputable achievements can thus be seen as a contest over a preferred public model for civic and political conduct and over communicative scripts of civility in public discourse. The struggle thwarts the solidarity-oriented function of praise and compliments but, at the same time, allows a society to debate identity-related matters and to negotiate the boundaries of appropriate behavior.

8 Concluding remarks

In this paper we analyzed political praise and compliments as public speech acts that are constructed in terms of normative scripts and enacted in political rituals that involve stance-taking and positive evaluation of others' skills, performance, and personalities. Both acts manifest a political actor's positive assessment of actions and traits of other public actors, thus demarcating the boundaries of appropriate competencies and conduct that the complimenting actor envisions as a model for others in public discourse. Our corpus of praise and compliments suggests that members of the Israeli political community tend to positively evaluate personality traits associated with friendship and the *dugri* ethos (honesty, directness, preference for actions over words, and humbleness); talents and skills associated with leadership and professional competencies; and performance associated with success, achievements, hard work, operating under pressure, and advancing the greater good of the country and its people. These topical grounds demonstrate shared values as reflected by Israeli public actors. Positively valuating them in public serves to encourage public figures and ordinary people to cultivate these shared values and actively 'celebrate' the 'Israeli identity' as a joint public performance.

At the interactional level, praise and compliments serve as a construction material for friendly relationships between the complimenting party and her/his valued addressee. Thus, they can be regarded as solidarity-oriented devices available in the toolbox of public speakers, ready to be used at specific occasions. Our findings suggest that Israeli political discourse of praise and compliments are most likely to be realized in rituals of consent, inauguration, nominations, farewell, compensation, and triumph. Their relational performativity can be located in the ways they maintain and establish solidarity in political discourse and their enhancement of the positive-face needs and self-interests of both the compli-

menter and the complimented party. Nevertheless, praise and compliments can also aggravate relationships when they are perceived as flouting the maxim of quality by being flattering, undeserved by the addressee, inappropriate to specific occasions, or diverting the democratic process from its route. In such cases, a discursive struggle erupts around the rules of proper speech in public settings and the appropriateness of the civic model the positive evaluation of others proposes: who should be praised and for what?

When comparing our findings with previous studies on everyday praise and compliments, one can identify differences in almost all aspects of performing positive evaluations of others. The gamut of topics for which public actors compliment each other is limited in comparison to everyday discourse. It includes skills, performances, and personalities, and excludes physical appearance and possession, rendering the latter irrelevant or inappropriate in political discourse. The distinct nature of the participation structure in political praise and compliment discourse finds expression in a major preference for positive evaluation of absent addressees and in the absence of responses to the evaluations. In contrast to everyday discourse in which every compliment is expected to be responded to, the political compliment is a monologic act. This finding may be a result of the mediated nature of our corpus, but it may also indicate a greater emphasis on enhancing the positive self-face needs of public actors in their ongoing pursuit of symbolic power in political discourse, and demonstrate once again the ritualistic settings in which compliments and praise are recurrent.

Our analysis also suggests that specific cultural discursive patterns and styles resonate in the modes of political evaluation. The two cultural resources – the distinctive logic of the political community and the distinctive style of Israeli speech – are conflated in creating a distinguished type of complimenting and praising discourse. The uniqueness of Israeli political socio-pragmatic behavior finds expression in manifesting admiration for cultural-specific values (sincerity and honesty, derived from the Israeli *dugri* ethos); in patterns of the distinct *sholem* process apparent in political rituals of consent; and in the heavy reliance on militaristic discourse of praise to security actors in the form of realizing verbal citations (*tzalash*, צל"ש). We suggest that future studies further examine this finding by studying how cultural speaking styles are manifested in the way in which distinctive professional communities, such as the political one, perform solidarity-oriented actions in the form of thanking, congratulating, and complimenting. These studies can expand our understanding of the ways public speech acts construct models of behavior, maintain political relationships, and transform public processes.

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