

# *Accent and Silence in Literary Multilingualism: On Postarabic Poetics*

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay I offer an analysis of accent and silence as hallmarks of “postarabic” Hebrew writing, while also arguing for a more universal theorization of accent and silence within the literary and cultural study of multilingualism. I begin by presenting postarabic as an aesthetic mode of Mizrahi writing that engages Arabic language beyond instrumental or semantic uses. After discussing theoretical approaches to accented literature and multilingualism, I turn to close readings of key literary texts. The essay places Joseph Conrad’s “Amy Foster” in dialogue with three postarabic texts (a poem, a short story, and a short film), analyzing accent and silence through the lenses of affect, temporality, and language politics. My readings demonstrate how accent and silence work together to mark the outer limits of language and identity. Through its aural commingling of past and present languages, the post-immigration accent subverts the teleological narrative of the nation.

**F**ROM THE BIBLICAL STORY OF THE *shibboleth* to Rita Dove’s 1983 poem “Parsley,” literature has reckoned with the spoken accent as a measure of social identity so powerful that it can be wielded to mete out life or death.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I offer an analysis of the accent

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I wish to thank the participants in the ACLA 2018 seminar “The Postlingual Turn” and the ACLA 2016 seminar “Lingualism in Modern Jewish Literature,” as well as the audience of the Wesleyan University conference “The Power of Language” (2018) and *Dibur*’s anonymous reviewer, for their helpful comments on earlier iterations of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> The story of the *shibboleth*, a Hebrew word referring to the head of a stalk of wheat, appears in Judges 12:1–15. Members of Ephraim, a defeated invading tribe, attempt to cross the River Jordan incognito to retreat to their

and its close companion, silence, as hallmarks of “postarabic” writing: Mizrahi Hebrew literature written in correspondence with the half-life of Arabic. Although centrally concerned with postarabic poetics, my essay will also argue for a more universal theorization of accent and silence within the literary and cultural study of multilingualism. Arguably, both accent and silence are merely affective, rather than directly semantic, aspects of communication. But if they lack the denotative capacity of words, they serve to frame and nuance semiotic meaning within social pragmatics, deeply informing interpersonal communication. Given how deeply they are also embedded in the social dynamics of interlingual encounters, I argue for addressing accent and silence in multilingual literary studies. As I will show, both accent and silence are attributes of voice, a somatic property; their literary evocations connect language, writing, and the body. The accent’s defamiliarizing property foreignizes the acquired language, turning it sharply from its dominant cultural and literary norms. Silence, in the sense of mutism or speech refusal, works hand in hand with accent to lay bare the ideological assumptions surrounding language, including notions of ownership, community membership, and cultural context.

The accent troubles the stability of the monolingual and the multilingual as oppositional categories. When the accent is an effect of immigration, it connotes a liminal temporality between the old and the new, marking a state of incomplete becoming; in this sense it is also a linguistic expression of liminality between native and foreign. Additionally, the accent in literature embodies the tension between sound and meaning, the sonic and the semantic. Silence, on the other hand, is used in post-immigration narratives variably, to mark the limits of the immigrant’s linguistic (non)assimilability into the national body or to mark a descendant’s refusal of the society’s language norms. Literature and film show us how, when language norms become too restrictive and exclusive, silence facilitates nonlinguistic forms of communication.

## MULTILINGUALISM AND POSTLANGUAGES

Historically, multilingualism was a widespread condition, not an exception; the strict correlation of ethnic or cultural identity with a single language is a conceit of modern nationalism. Despite the prevalence of nationalist language policies, a majority of the world’s population still speaks more than one language. Linguistic centralization and standardization were major features of nationalisms in much of post-Enlightenment Europe and the non-Western world well into the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Language politics in the modern world of nation-states often begins with the formation and codification of an “official” language, often when a dialect is promoted to the status of a national language or a classical language is “modernized” and reinvented. Typically, these “national” languages are designated using terms such as “standard” and “modern” to differentiate them from the dialects and premodern classical languages whence they emerged—and, implicitly, to introduce a symbolic break intended to cleave them from their multilingual pasts. In the US context, as Joshua Miller has shown, language politics produced a standard American English as part of the broader drive to consolidate racial whiteness; Miller argues that enthusiasm for linguistic pluralism during the “polyglot period of the first half of

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home territory. They are stopped by the victorious Gileadites, who ask them to pronounce *shibboleth*. Because the Ephraimites pronounced *sh* as *s*, the Gileadites unmask their identity and kill them. Rita Dove’s 1983 poem “Parsley” tells a modern-day *shibboleth* story at the Haitian-Dominican border. In 1937, the dictator Rafael Trujillo massacred some twenty thousand Haitian guest workers. Workers in the sugarcane fields were told to pronounce *perejil* (Spanish for “parsley”); Creole speakers who could not roll their *r*’s were exposed and sentenced to death. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43355/parsley> (accessed August 5, 2019).

the twentieth century created the conditions for the invention of a standardized and racialized national vernacular.”<sup>2</sup> Reading Faulkner, Joshua Logan Wall also finds that “matters of dialectal variation, although seemingly minor, take on greater importance when we think of them less as constitutive of character variance than indicative of much larger trends in the transformation of racial and ethnic identity and national transformations in the idea of ‘Americanness.’”<sup>3</sup> In the case of Israel, the main focus of this article, the national accent of modern Hebrew was a top-down invention that marked a temporal and spatial rupture with the Diaspora.<sup>4</sup> “Correct” Hebrew pronunciation, promoted through state media broadcasts and pedagogy, is a marker of in-group status. Thus, post-immigration accents from languages of origin such as Arabic, Yiddish, and Russian mark the Hebrew speaker as a less than fully national subject, while an Arabic accent in particular brands the speaker with inferior social status by evoking stereotypes of the unassimilable Arab Jewish grandparent or the stammering Palestinian laborer.

In her 2012 study of multilingualism in the German-Turkish literary constellation, Yasemin Yildiz defines what she calls the “postmonolingual” condition as a “field of tension” between the monolingual paradigm of nation-states and the persistence or resurgence of multilingual practices. Yildiz notes that the “post-” in her coinage “postmonolingual” is meant to signify a break, marking the time that follows the historical emergence of monolingualism as a dominant national paradigm. She observes that the “post-” also has a different, critical function signifying opposition to the term it prefixes—here she cites Marianne Hirsch, who explains that the “post-” in “postmemory” “reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture.”<sup>5</sup> In an earlier, 2005 study on postwar Yiddish, Jeffrey Shandler coined the idea of “postvernacular Yiddish” to connote a “constitutive mode of engagement” with Yiddish that, in the face of a dwindling number of native speakers, privileges affect over ordinary semiotic usage, such that the relationship to language becomes less instrumental and more “meta-” or self-reflexive. “Indeed,” he writes, “having an affective or ideological relationship with Yiddish without having command of the language epitomizes a larger trend in Yiddish culture in the post-Holocaust era. . . . In the postvernacular mode, familiar cultural practices—reading, performing, studying, even speaking—are profoundly altered.”<sup>6</sup> To describe Hebrew-based Mizrahi writing that strives to reengage with Arabic, I adopt the term “postarabic.”<sup>7</sup> My understanding of postarabic contains

<sup>2</sup> Joshua L. Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9. Miller’s book explores the nexus of language politics, vernacular experimentation in literature, and modernism in American literature.

<sup>3</sup> Joshua Logan Wall, “Sound and Fury: Accent and Identity in Faulkner’s Immigration Novel,” *MELUS: Multiethnic Literature of the U.S.* 42, no. 1 (2017): 94–115, quotation from 95.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the creation of the Israeli Hebrew accent, see Miryam Segal, *A New Sound in Hebrew Poetry: Poetics, Politics, Accent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>6</sup> He continues, “In semiotic terms, the language’s primary level of signification—that is, its instrumental value as a vehicle for communicating information, opinions, feelings, ideas—is narrowing in scope. At the same time its secondary, or meta-level of signification—the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it—is expanding. This privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish over its primary level constitutes a distinctive mode of engagement with the language that I term postvernacular.” Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Michal Raizen first coined this term in an unpublished conference paper for the National Association of Professors of Hebrew; I thank her for allowing me to use it and expand upon it.

resonances of both Yildiz's "postmonolingual" and Shandler's "postvernacular." It, too, reflects the "uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" that characterizes a range of linguistic afterlives occasioned by war, displacement, immigration, and exile. It also departs from both concepts in ways I will elucidate.

The case of postarabic is specific to Jewish descendants of Arabic speakers who do not themselves have a functional command of written Arabic and who may or may not speak the language to varying degrees. Postarabic is an inherently multilingual aesthetic mode in which Mizrahi writers reclaim and perform Arabic *primarily through Hebrew*. In large part, then, it is a literary phenomenon that revitalizes Hebrew's rich multilingual history. The term "postarabic" is forged from a temporal prefix and the substantival term "Arabic"; this construct makes sense within a specific and limited context in which Arabic once was, but no longer is, the dominant language of the community in question. As a historical marker, the "post-" in "postarabic" denotes the period following the mass emigrations of Arabic-speaking Jews from their countries of origin to Israel and the West beginning in the early 1950s. This meaning of "post-" reached a definitive point of no return with the deaths of the last generation of Jews who spoke Arabic as a mother tongue. The term thus does not apply to the still predominantly Arabic-speaking Palestinian communities within Israel.

If the "post-" of postarabic signifies a temporal disjuncture, the substantival term "Arabic" evokes language, accent, and speech style. Because of its dialectical multiplicity and the literary/colloquial (*fusha/amiyya*) divide, Arabic presents an especially complicated case for the theorization of accent and the relationship between oral and written cultures. Furthermore, among Arab Jews and their descendants, "Arabic" does not denote a single, unified language or linguistic identity. Rather, it is a placeholder for a multiplicity of dialects specific to different communities (e.g., Yemeni, Iraqi, Tunisian, and Moroccan Jews) as well as for the literary register of Arabic that is common to the entire Arab world regardless of the speaker's religion, ethnicity, or location. In many locales, the Arabic dialects Jews used with each other differed from the dialects of their non-Jewish neighbors; the scholarship generally refers to them as Jewish dialects of Arabic or as "Judeo-Arabic" (Ella Shohat argues, however, that "Judeo-Arabic" may reflect institutional imperatives, especially of Jewish Studies, more than actual sociolinguistic conditions).<sup>8</sup> In Arab Jewish linguistic memory, it is often the specific dialect ("Yemeni," "Baghdadi," etc.) rather than a collective notion of Arabic that serves as the site of affective attachment. However, in invoking this linguistic memory today, privileging the particularity of the community's dialect over "Arabic" can be a political choice, insofar as a claim to "Arabic" implies identification with the (overwhelmingly Muslim) collectivity of Arabic speakers. Finally, colloquial Israeli Hebrew absorbed numerous words from Palestinian Arabic. In contemporary Israeli society and culture, Palestinian Arabic intermingles with Hebrew and with the various Diasporic Arabics of Mizrahi provenance; much recent Mizrahi cultural production (cinema, spoken word, music, and literature) showcases this heteroglot reality. My use of "Arabic" in this essay denotes the full spectrum from literary invocations of single words in colloquial Arabic to extensive uses of the classical heritage.

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<sup>8</sup> On this question, see Ella Shohat, "The Question of Judeo-Arabic," *Arab Studies Journal* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 14–76. Shohat uncovers the ideological assumptions that influence the ethnic classification of dialects as "Jewish"; she argues against classifying Judeo-Arabic exclusively as a "Jewish language" or an "Arabic dialect" of Jews, stressing the pluralities of Arabic and the prevalence of code-switching among all Arabic speakers, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

In their edifying study of Arabic linguistic usage in Mizrahi music, Oded Erez and Nadeem Karkabi apply Shandler's concept to the sphere of popular music in Israel, while noting structural and circumstantial differences between the cases of Yiddish in North America and Arabic in Israel.<sup>9</sup> Given that music is the most popular sphere of Mizrahi cultural expression in Israel, Erez and Karkabi's insights offer a valuable counterpart to literary studies.<sup>10</sup> Their analysis focuses on how the performance of language in Mizrahi music "realizes . . . the tension between using language as a semantic vehicle and mobilising it as a complex sonic symbol."<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, they "find many of the characteristics of postvernacular uses in recent musical performances of Arabic by Israeli Jews, in contexts where Arabic is performed as part of Jewish heritage or as an object for aesthetic investment"; in other words, they find that the affect and sonic qualities of Arabic are privileged over semantics.<sup>12</sup> In many ways, Shandler's "postvernacular" mode is also germane to contemporary Mizrahi literary engagement with Arabic in which "reading, performing, studying, even speaking" the language "are profoundly altered." Musing on the relationship of "post-" to "Yiddish," Shandler explains that "A 'post-X' is a response or reaction to 'X' and exists in a dialogic, interdependent relationship with 'X'."<sup>13</sup> "Postarabic" is not Arabic, nor is it the lack of Arabic; it is a dialogical mode of engagement with Arabic as a language and as a heritage, as cultural memory. Creating an Arabophonic Hebrew, or defamiliarizing Israeli Hebrew, is part and parcel of the postvernacular relationship to Arabic. In postarabic poetics, accent and silence thus become ways to fill in the gaps of the "missing" language by communicating affectively rather than semiotically.

In their literary work, many second- and third-generation postarabic Mizrahi writers seem haunted by a trauma or a rupture they did not directly experience.<sup>14</sup> The affect of postarabic in recent Mizrahi literature exudes melancholia and a sense of loss responding to this rupture with the past, yet postarabic is also intensely creative and transformative: it reclaims and re-creates Arabic within a challenging, even hostile environment. As I have discussed in my book *Poetic Trespass*, within much contemporary Mizrahi writing, Arabic is fodder for cultural negotiations with Israeli Hebrew. As a multivalent site of cultural memory and signifier of contemporary identity, Arabic is at once instrumental language and symbol. In Mizrahi writing, therefore, Arabic is not so much deployed as it is *performed*. Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism in Mizrahi writing occupies a wide spectrum ranging from extensive interpolation of colloquial Arabic into a standard Hebrew narrative fabric to the thematization of Arabic as a site of loss, to the writing of Hebrew in an Arabic accent as a method of both recovery and protest. All these represent bypaths through which literary multilingualisms and accented literatures can exercise their disruptive political potential.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, the temporal dimension of "post-" languages should not be downplayed. In the aftermath of immigration and the movement between a "home" language and a public, national

<sup>9</sup> Oded Erez and Nadeem Karkabi, "Sounding Arabic: Postvernacular Modes of Performing the Arabic Language in Popular Music by Israeli Jews," *Popular Music* 38, no. 2 (2019): 298–316; see esp. 302–3.

<sup>10</sup> On attitudes toward Mizrahi music as expressed in Hebrew literature, see Yochai Oppenheimer, "'Od hozer ha-nigun be-'orqeykhem: Muzika ve-zehut yehudit-'aravit" [The melody still returns in your veins: Music and Judeo Arabic identity], *Pe'amim* 115–27 (2010): 377–407.

<sup>11</sup> Erez and Karkabi, "Sounding Arabic," 301.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>13</sup> Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 22.

<sup>14</sup> On the idea of rupture vis-à-vis Arab Jewish experience more broadly, see Ella Shohat, "Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews," *Social Text* 21, no. 2 (2003): 49–74.

<sup>15</sup> See Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), chaps. 5–6.

language, the family's home language becomes bound up not only with another place but with another time, the time implied by "the old country." In general, the concept of "standard language" entails an association not only between language and political geography—in other words, the idea that this is the language we are supposed to speak *here*, in this place—but also between language and temporality, since this is also the language we are supposed to be speaking *now*. Thus, in addition to writing in a spectral post-immigration language, authors can also destabilize their "standard" writing language by utilizing a nonstandard stratum or idiom; when an author writes in an archaic, prenatal form of her language, she is enacting a temporal break within the naturalized configuration of place, language, and identity that is at the core of the nation-state.

In framing this body of work through the temporal signifier "post-," I also depart from models of multilingual writing that utilize "graph" and "phone." "Postcolonial literature" is itself a temporal construct, yet within postcolonial literary studies, multilingualism is usually analyzed in reference to the "X-ophone" (e.g., Francophone, Anglophone, Lusophone) model. X-ophone literature is characterized by the grossly uneven power relations between the European language of the colonizer and the indigenous language of the colonized, by linguistic hybridity, and by what Homi Bhabha has famously termed colonial "mimicry."<sup>16</sup> Fundamentally, this model assumes a vast cultural difference between the European and the local languages in question. As I argued in my book, the case of Arabic and Hebrew bilingualism calls for a different model, one based not on distance but on proximity and on the long cultural memory operative between the two languages. To fully grasp the historical dimensions of this relationship, we must remember that linguistic and literary contact between Arabic and Hebrew dates back to at least the ninth century and did not originate with a modern colonial encounter, although their relations were transformed by Zionism; as such, the contemporary Hebrew-Arabic nexus is more analogous to the relationship of Japanese and Korean than to that of French and Arabic.<sup>17</sup> Transmission between Hebrew and Arabic has always encompassed both religious and secular literary genres and is deeply informed by philosophies and theologies of language that fail to accord with the secularized epistemologies embedded within the postcolonial model.

Looking beyond the specific case of Arabic-Hebrew multilingualism, I contend that to frame literary multilingualisms exclusively through the tropes of "phone" and "graph" is to theorize from the center. These tropes usually assume the spread of a metropolitan or dominant language from its geographic center of power to its peripheries. If we were to rethink literary multilingualism from the perspective of East-East—intraregional cases such as Hebrew and Arabic (or Persian and Arabic, Turkish and Arabic), Japanese and Korean, and Persian and Urdu (or other South Asian languages) or cases that involve the meeting of geographically diffuse vernaculars or of a "classical" language and vernaculars (what Annette Lienau has termed "vernacular comparisons beyond the Europhone")—we would fashion alternatives to the Euro-centered X-ophone paradigm.<sup>18</sup> As such, I encourage recalibrating the X-ophone model to include multilingualisms derived from historical configurations beyond that of an originally European language imported into a former colony.

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<sup>16</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Levy, *Poetic Trespass*, 109–10.

<sup>18</sup> See Annette Lienau, "Vernacular Comparisons beyond the Europhone: An ACLA Forum," *Comparative Literature* 70, no. 2 (2018): 105–13.

## WHAT IS ACCENT? ACCENT, DIALECT, AND ACCENTED LITERATURE

This study joins recent efforts to reorient the study of literary multilingualism toward vernaculars, speech styles, and accents in literature. Dialects and vernaculars have received considerable critical attention, including in a previous issue of this journal.<sup>19</sup> As the case of postarabic instructs us, however, accent and dialect are not always interchangeable; accent may stand independently of dialect as a site of anxiety and projection. Discussions of accent in literature focus either on the accented voices of immigrants and exiles or on ethnic/racial sociolects, which may coincide with dialect. (A related question, albeit one outside the purview of this essay, concerns best practices in literary translation when attempting to transpose a nonstandard dialect or accent from a source language into a target language.)

“Accented literature” can denote literature that attempts to re-create accent, dialect, and sociolect through orthographic variation (dubbed “eye dialect” by the literary critic George Philip Krapp)<sup>20</sup> or that attempts to defamiliarize the language in order to produce a reading experience that is “accented,” as one might associate with the work of Junot Diaz. The concept of “accented literature,” including its latent political capacity, overlaps in part with the theory of “minor literature” as originally formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari’s model theorizes the defamiliarization (or, in their parlance, the “deterritorialization”) a majority language undergoes at the hand of a minority writer, resulting in the category of “minor” literature, which they privilege as politically “revolutionary.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Deleuze and Guattari restrict the purview of minor literature exclusively to works written in the standard, “majority” language of a given national context. Further, their model overlooks the dimension of alinear temporality that, as I will show, plays a critical role in postarabic literature and that Hamid Naficy also identifies as a defining characteristic of “accented cinema.”<sup>22</sup> As a hermeneutic framework, I find “minor literature” to be of partial relevance, but limited and incomplete.

How, then, can we move beyond the analyses of dialect in literature or minor literatures to more accurately theorize “accented literature”? Here, sociolinguistics can offer a useful point of departure. What differentiates accent from dialect? John Edwards delimits the technical understanding of dialect to “a variety of language that differs from others along three dimensions: vocabulary, language, and pronunciation (accent).”<sup>23</sup> Rosina Lippi-Green notes that for linguists, “accent can only be a fuzzy term” but proposes a “rough distinction,” as follows: accent accounts for differences that are “restricted primarily to phonology (prosodic and segmental

<sup>19</sup> See Amir Eshel, Vered K. Shemtov, and Anat Weisman, eds., “Spoken Word, Written Word: Rethinking the Representation of Speech in Literature,” special issue, *Dibur* 1 (Fall 2015), [https://arcade.stanford.edu/dibur\\_issue/spoken-word-written-word-rethinking-representation-speech-literature-0](https://arcade.stanford.edu/dibur_issue/spoken-word-written-word-rethinking-representation-speech-literature-0). See esp. Jahan Ramazani, “Code-Switching, Code-Stitching: A Macaronic Poetics?,” *Dibur* 1 (Fall 2015): 130–41.

<sup>20</sup> George Philip Krapp, *The English Language in America* (New York: Century Company for the Modern Language Association of America, 1925); Tom McArthur, “Eye Dialect,” in *The Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; online version 2003). For more on Krapp’s work, see Miller, *Accented America*, 110–16.

<sup>21</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?,” in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16–27.

<sup>22</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exile and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> John Edwards, *Language and Identity: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63.

features)—in other words, pronunciation.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, although regional variations are commonly referred to as “accents,” linguists consider variations within a home language (the “L1”) to be, not “accents,” but rather, structured variation in language, whereas “L2 accent” is the “breakthrough of native language phonology into the target language.”<sup>25</sup> Roberto Rey Agudo’s more expansive definition includes social and regional distinctions within the L1: “An accent is simply a way of speaking shaped by a combination of geography, social class, education, ethnicity and first language.”<sup>26</sup> In everyday usage, of course, “accent” refers not only to interference from a second language but also to regional, ethnic, and class-based variations within the home language. Technically, everyone speaks with an accent, but the speech style that is neutral or standard is not marked as one. “When we say that someone speaks with an accent,” says Agudo, “we generally mean one of two things: a nonnative accent or a so-called nonstandard accent.” Phenomenologically, then, to experience another’s accent is to experience the speaker’s difference, despite the fact that the language and meaning are shared. Listeners react intuitively to unfamiliar phonology by drawing lines of belonging and nonbelonging. Understood in this sense, accents are not only markers of foreignness and nativity; they also are markers of the in-group and the out-group, and of privilege and power. In short, accents work to bridge gaps or create differences. Whether the source of the perceived accent is based on regional, ethnic, class, or national difference, for the interlocutor, perceiving an accent becomes an encounter with alterity.

Building on the sociolinguistic understanding of accent, I propose three general observations about accent in literature, applicable to “accented literature” as an expansive and inclusive category:

1. Because it is embodied and depends on orality, the accent occupies a liminal place in literary texts, in between language as signification and language as sound.
2. The accent is performative *both* in spoken language and in graphic representation.
3. Referring to or directly representing the accent situates the speaking subject in relation to a presumed non-accent and introduces a power disparity that is diegetic (between characters), extradiegetic (between character and reader), or both.

Of course, each specific case of accented literature will have its unique characteristics. Postarabic writing draws both on the “L1” Mizrahi-accented Hebrew of native speakers and on “L2,” interference of a native Arabic-language accent in second-language Israeli Hebrew, but these are linked insofar as the Mizrahi “accent” in Hebrew is strongly influenced by the phonology of Arabic, much like Chicano English and the phonology of Spanish. However, the postarabic deployment of accent in Mizrahi writing diverges from typical literary uses of accent in ethnic American literatures. In the context of nationalist language politics, we are conditioned to understand accent as a liability, such that losing an accent means gaining social acceptance.

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<sup>24</sup> By contrast, “[i]f two varieties of a single language also differ in morphological structures, syntax, lexicon, and semantics, then they are different varieties, or dialects, of the same language.” Finally, “[i]f two varieties of a common mother language differ in all these ways, and in addition have distinct literary histories, distinct orthographies, and/or geopolitical boundaries, then they are generally called different languages.” See Rosina Lippi-Green, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States* (London: Routledge, 1997), 42–43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Roberto Rey Agudo, “Everyone Has an Accent,” *New York Times*, July 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/14/opinion/sunday/everyone-has-an-accent.html>.

Alternatively, the intentional maintenance of an accent can be a statement of ethnic pride or an act of resistance. The borderlands bilingualism of Spanish and English becomes amalgamated with the question of code-switching among one's languages in different social contexts. But the case of Mizrahi postarabic is somewhat different. As opposed to the García girls losing their accents and learning standard English in order to become Americans,<sup>27</sup> or Gloria Anzaldúa refusing to tame her wild tongue,<sup>28</sup> recent Mizrahi literature features second- and third-generation Israelis raised as native or proficient speakers of the acrolect who are refuting the teleology of assimilation into the nation and reclaiming the rejected Arabic accent. Erez and Karkabi reveal that Mizrahi musicians who did not grow up speaking Arabic have even performed covers of English pop songs with "an adopted Arabic accent," which, they note, essentially reduces Arabic to its sound.<sup>29</sup>

In what follows, my readings investigate how three contemporary Mizrahi cultural producers (writers or filmmakers) utilize accent in tandem with silence to foster a postarabic poetics in the cultural spaces between Hebrew and Arabic. I preface my discussion of postarabic poetics with a reading of Joseph Conrad's classic story "Amy Foster," through which I establish the central connections between language, accent, sound, silence, and death. In this selection of writing, I read silence as a structuring presence that works in tandem with representations of speech, often when speech is also reduced to the properties of sound. In literature, silences—for example, the atmospheric silence of a quiet place—can be described but not experienced aurally, whereas film can create a sonic experience of silence. The literary silences that accompany accent are in effect the absence of speech, akin to selective muteness.

### **"AMY FOSTER": THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN ACCENTED SUBJECT**

A foundational text of modernist exile literature, Joseph Conrad's "Amy Foster" follows the story of Yanko Goorall, a young fellow from the mountains of central Europe who, following a shipwreck, literally washes up one day on the beach in a tiny English town.<sup>30</sup> (Not coincidentally, Conrad, like his creation Yanko, had also settled in a coastal town in England.) The provincial townsfolk see Yanko as animal-like, if not actually as an animal. Throughout the story he is compared to an animal, most prominently through the recurring image of a bird in a snare. Even after Yanko cleans up and begins to integrate into the life of the town, the locals fear him primarily because of his incomprehensible speech, which they process as the nonlinguistic vocalizations of an animal. Indeed, Yanko is never described in the story as "speaking," but only as "jabbering." Kennedy, the doctor who narrates Yanko's story to an unidentified companion years after the fact, recalls how Yanko had painstakingly acquired both spoken English and, in tandem, partial acceptance in the community, through a long, slow, and difficult process. But even after he learns to speak English, Yanko remains an outsider, viewed with mistrust.

Kennedy says that Yanko had related his story over the course of a few years, and he describes Yanko's manner of speech by recalling that Yanko told his story "at first in a sort of

<sup>27</sup> Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," in *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 75–86.

<sup>29</sup> Erez and Karkabi, "Sounding Arabic," 299, 313.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Conrad, "Amy Foster," in *The Complete Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad: The Stories*, vol. 1, ed. with introduction by Samuel Hynes (New York: Ecco Press, 1991), 181–209. Hereafter, page numbers for quotations from "Amy Foster" will be given in the text.

anxious baby-talk, then, as he acquired the language, with great fluency, but always with that singing, soft, and at the same time vibrating intonation that instilled a strangely penetrating power into the sound of the most familiar English words, as if they had been the words of an unearthly language” (190). For his interlocutors, Yanko’s native phonology defamiliarizes the familiar English words, such that throughout the story, both Yanko and his language are apprehended not just as foreign but as *unearthly*. He is compared to a “man transplanted from a different planet” (201) (think of the contemporary idiom “illegal alien”), and his language is described as “incomprehensible” (196, 199, 201) and even “beyond the comprehension of the living” (199), foreshadowing the story’s bleak ending.

The plot centrally concerns Yanko’s failed marriage to a local woman, Amy Foster, whom Dr. Kennedy describes as ordinary, simple, and even dull. Their marriage briefly flourishes, until the birth of their son rekindles Yanko’s love for his home country. Yanko decides he wants to raise his son in his native language and teach him its folklore, which terrifies Amy and alienates her from her husband. She complains to Kennedy that she can’t understand what Yanko says to the boy; when he sings to the child in his language, she snatches the baby from his arms. After Yanko falls ill, Amy watches him with “the terror, the unreasonable terror, of that man she could not understand creeping over her” when, burning from fever, he pleads for a drink of water. Critically, she fails to understand the word “water” (207); thus, instead of nursing him through the illness, she runs off with the baby, abandoning him to his fate.

On his deathbed, Yanko laments to the doctor that he had only asked for water. We are told that Yanko dies of “heart failure,” code perhaps for a broken heart. Amy’s inability or unwillingness to understand Yanko’s intention because of his accent has literally killed him. Yanko has perished in a society that refused to accept him, primarily on the basis of his incomplete language acquisition and his indelible accent, with his fatal sin being the desire to transmit his own language to his English-born son. The story, then, is an illustration of a monolingual mind-set taken to an extreme: the townspeople cannot imagine any language other than their own as a *human* language.

Earlier in the story, in what Nico Israel calls a “remarkable prolepsis,” the narrator recounts how Amy, while working as a maid for a local family, had been spooked by the voice of the pet parrot: “when that outlandish bird, attacked by the cat, shrieked for help in human accents, she ran out into the yard, stopping her ears, and did not prevent the crime” (184).<sup>31</sup> This strange scene foreshadows the fate of Yanko, the exotic, outlandish “bird” whose own plea for help will go unanswered. But what exactly does Conrad mean by his odd turn of phrase “in human accents” (in the plural)? Conrad completed the writing of “Amy Foster” in June 1901, two years after the publication of *Heart of Darkness*. The story is often read as a kind of spiritual autobiography reflecting the alienation he shared with his protagonist. Conrad retained a particularly strong Polish accent in his English, a fact mentioned in all his biographies.<sup>32</sup> Conrad is like Yanko in other ways as well, an exile beset by feelings of guilt and remorse for leaving his native land, caught between an ostracizing accent and the silence that is spiritual death. Furthermore, Conrad is notorious for his occasional English-language infelicities and oddities. The unidiomatic turn of phrase “in human accents” tellingly reveals that for Amy Foster and her fellow townsfolk, what makes language sound “human” is neither the humanity of the speaker nor the suggestion of a grammar or syntax

<sup>31</sup> Nico Israel, *Outlandish: Writing between Exile and Diaspora* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 37.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 28–29.

but simply *phonology*. The parrot mimicking the accent of a human recalls, in inverse, Abdelfattah Kilito's aphorism in his remarkable essay "Dog Words": "Speak like me or you are an animal."<sup>33</sup>

Both the word "outlandish" and the image of the bird recur in the text, always in connection with Yanko's appearance or speech.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, Kennedy recalls: "Many times have I heard his high-pitched voice from behind the ridge of some sloping sheep-walk, a voice light and soaring, like a lark's, but with a melancholy human note, over our fields that hear only the song of birds" (201). Here, too, Yanko's voice is registered by the Englishman as a bird's voice, speaking in a human "note" or accent. When speaking, Yanko will never be accepted by a different speech community as fully "human." Kennedy recalls Yanko's death throes: "He was muddy. I covered him up and stood waiting in silence, catching a painfully gasped word now and then. They were no longer in his own language. The fever had left him, taking with it the heat of life. And with his panting breast and lustrous eyes he reminded me again of a wild creature under the net; of a bird caught in a snare" (208). Oddly, the story ends with a description of Yanko and Amy's son, the little boy, himself "with his fluttered air of a bird in a snare" (209), hinting at an intergenerational transmission of Yanko's exile and language-induced trauma.

This extraordinary exposition of language and society in nineteenth-century England may seem worlds removed from twenty-first-century Mizrahi culture in Israel. Why I find "Amy Foster" so universally instructive is, first, Conrad's preoccupation, in the context of a story about immigration and acceptance, with the sonic properties of language: his attention to the significance of language as *sound*. Conrad understands, and is explaining to us, that what seems to matter most deeply in any confrontation with linguistic difference is not the knowledge that the Other is speaking a different language so much as our affective, phenomenological response to its phonology. It is the *sound* of a foreign language or accent that triggers a social response of acceptance, rejection, or qualified acceptance. The sonic quality of language is also at the core of the Mizrahi renegotiation of Arabic within Hebrew-based music, text, and film. Second, Conrad exposes the association between the *accent* (as the marker of linguistic difference or out-group status) and *death* that has haunted our collective psyche ever since we have understood language variation as the marker of social identity, as attested in the *shibboleth* story. In short, on a symbolic level, he shows us that the accent is so profoundly estranging from the social body as to be linked with death. Let us now see how these same precepts inform three postarabic works: Adi Keissar's poem "Black on Black," Almog Behar's story "Ana min al-yahud," and the short film adaptation of his story, directed by Niv Hachlili and Aharon Shem Tov. The three texts I read employ a combination of accented strategies: affective interaction with accent (as a trope); writing in "accented" Hebrew; and literal depiction of accented speech, represented cinematically. All three texts also deal thematically with accent and silence in an otherworldly manner that links both Arabic language and Arabic accents to the memory of deceased grandparents and that attempts to reestablish an intergenerational connection, one both linguistic and emotional, beyond the grave.

### ARS POETIKA AND "BLACK ON BLACK": IN A HEAVY ACCENT

One of the most significant developments in Israeli culture of the past decade, *Ars Poetika* is a grassroots artist collective that, beginning in 2013, organized monthly poetry slams and dance parties

<sup>33</sup> Abdelfattah Kilito, "Dog Words," in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer, trans. Ziad Elmarsafy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xxi–xxxii, quotation from xxvii.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Conrad, "Amy Foster," 184, 198, 200.

(*haflot*) in Tel Aviv clubs. The name *Ars Poetika* is itself an instantiation of multilingual wordplay in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew: while the allusion to *ars poetica* is self-evident, the Arabic term '*ars*' (pimp) was absorbed into Hebrew slang as a derogatory term for a loud, flashy, low-class male, a stereotype largely associated with Mizrahi men. Thus, *Ars Poetika*'s double meaning cleverly signifies both the classical poetic tradition and its antithesis, the quintessence of street culture: a conjuncture that is highly representative of the mix of highbrow and lowbrow culture in the poems produced by the group. This linguistic and cultural admixture from Hebrew, Arabic, and American English, from local and foreign sources, distinguishes their collective body of work.

*Ars Poetika* was inaugurated by Adi Keissar (b. 1980), an Israeli poet and activist of Yemeni Jewish descent.<sup>35</sup> The group attracted a sizable following and a lively social media presence. Both individual poems and entire gatherings were recorded and posted to YouTube, producing the impression of a carefully documented and curated cultural enterprise. *Ars Poetika* was lauded by the Israeli media for reinvigorating Hebrew culture as a youthful, relevant, authentic, and non-elitist phenomenon: a "poetry for the people" read onstage, spoken-word style, from phones. On the whole, their collective body of work is richly heteroglossic, code-switching with abandon between Hebrew and Arabic street slang, studded with intertexts from other contemporary Mizrahi poets and singers as well as literary and scholarly references that reach further afield into American and European traditions. Despite their showcasing of their working-class backgrounds, the poets are hardly naïfs; they are sophisticated artists seeking to transform Israeli poetry by taking *lashon mizrahit* (Mizrahi Hebrew) to the next level.<sup>36</sup> *Ars Poetika* as a group put out two poetry collections published by Gerila Tarbut (Cultural Guerilla), which also published Keissar's debut collection *Black on Black (Shahor al-gabey shahor)* in 2014. The collection's signature poem, originally performed as spoken word, recounts a childhood experience with the speaker's grandmother. In this case, the accent is not mimetically performed; rather, it is the structuring trope for this poem about the complex interaction of emotional intimacy and linguistic estrangement. Keissar uses the accent in the poem's opening line to introduce the tension between the presence of love and the absence of a shared language in which to acknowledge that love.

"Black on Black"

My grandmother loved me with a thick accent [*ba-mivta kaved*]  
 spoke to me Yemeni words  
 I never understood,  
 and as a child  
 I remember  
 how I was scared to stay alone with her  
 out of fear that I wouldn't understand the tongue [*lashon*] in her mouth  
 which she kept singing to me with a smile.  
 I didn't understand  
 a single word she said  
 the sounds far, far away  
 even when she spoke closely.  
 Once

<sup>35</sup> Other founding members included Roy Hassan, Tehlia Hakimi, Shlomi Hatuka, Mati Shmuelof, and Israel Dadon.

<sup>36</sup> On *lashon mizrahit*, see Levy, *Poetic Trespass*, 259–60, 267, 283.

I remember,  
 she bought me a pineapple yogurt  
 and after I punched a hole with my thumb  
 in the thin aluminum lid  
 and drank it all,  
 I wanted to say thank you  
 but didn't know  
 which language to use,  
 so I went to the big garden  
 plucked a flower  
 and handed it to her,  
 sheepishly.  
 I remember  
 how much awkwardness stood between us  
 of one blood  
 and two muted tongues.  
 She washed the yogurt cup  
 silently  
 filled it with water  
 and placed the flower in it.  
 I never understood  
 a word she said,  
 my grandmother,  
 but I understood her hands  
 I understood her flesh  
 even though she never  
 really understood  
 the words I said  
 and simply loved my little body  
 the daughter of her daughter.  
 And sometimes the heart asks  
 strange things for itself  
 like to learn Yemeni [Arabic]  
 and return to her grave  
 lay lips to the earth  
 and cry into it  
 all that that little girl had to say  
 and mainly to warn her  
 that the flower I'd given her  
 was full of ants.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Adi Keissar, "Shahor al-gabey shahor" [Black on black], in *Shahor al-gabey shahor* (Tel Aviv: Cultural Guerilla, 2014), 51–53 (translation by Ayelet Tsabari).

This poem, originally composed and performed in Hebrew for a live audience, uses a simple colloquial register of spoken Hebrew that shrinks the gap between speech and writing. At times, its simplicity also bespeaks the child's perspective. Although Keissar eschews melancholy in favor of tender characterization and wry observation, her poem exemplifies postarabic writing in its wistful invocation of the absent language and the persistent sense of loss that follows the speaker from her reconstructed childhood self to the present moment of recollection. The poem is at once culturally specific in its invocation of the relations between Arabic and Hebrew and universal in its depiction of the language rupture between the first and third generations in post-immigration scenarios. Voiced from the split, retrospective focal point of the adult reconstructing her childhood thoughts and sentiments, all aspects of communication between the granddaughter and grandmother—the language barrier, the grandmother's Arabic accent, the child's fear of Arabic, the body language and exchange of objects that work to fill the gap—become the site of an ambivalent intergenerational relationship. That ambivalence is now a source of regret, sparking the speaker's desire to reverse the past through a belated acquisition of Yemeni Arabic, the lost familial mother tongue. Significantly, it also takes place after the grandmother's death and ends with the desire to speak to her “beyond the grave” but literally at her gravesite.

In this poem about love and language, the objects silently exchanged between the girl and her grandmother—the yogurt, the flower—stand in for their missing words. There is a mutual give-and-take that mimics the rhythm of a conversation. With the lack of materialization in language, emotions become concrete and legible within the bodies of the speaker and grandmother: the tongue (*lashon*, which in Hebrew also means “language”), the grandmother's hand and flesh, the speaker's “little body.” The objects have a positive function until we arrive at the surprise ending. The speaker wishes to learn Yemeni Arabic not to tell her grandmother that she loves her or misses her but to return to the moment encapsulated in memory and warn her about the flower. Here the flower becomes the figure of ambiguity and ambivalence that subtends the poem as a whole: the flower, like the child's love for her grandmother, seems innocent, yet hides ants.

From the child's perspective, accent and silence form a continuum. Beginning with the opening line, the speaker establishes love and disfluent language as the poem's double helix. The grandmother loves her, the child, *ba-mivta kaved*: literally, in a heavy accent. What does it mean to love in an accent? The grandmother's love itself is incomprehensible when articulated in language, but her intent is completely legible to the child as affect. Yet the child's discomfiture with the lack of mutual comprehension actually induces fear of being left with her grandmother. When the grandmother speaks to her even from up close, the incomprehensible words, apprehended purely as *sounds*, seem distant (*ve-ha-tselilim nishme'u rehoqim rehoqim*); the grandmother washes the yogurt cup in silence (*be-shtiqa*); their tongues are “muted”—in Hebrew, *shtey leshonot ilmot*, which means both “two mute tongues” or “two mute languages,” a double meaning that is intentional and significant. In this wording, their languages/tongues mirror one another, finding equivalence in their shared silence. The silence between them is a source of embarrassment to the speaker, yet from the grandmother, the speaker senses no discomfort but rather only unqualified affection and love. The poem does not end with a reclamation of Arabic, or with the desired cry into the grave; it ends with unfulfilled desire and with the finality of death, perhaps tempered by the small irony that the innocent symbol of intergenerational love is one that can bite.

In his 2005 short story “Ana min al-yahud,” Arabic for “I am of the Jews,” Almog Behar composes a prose meditation on silence and accent that, like Keissar's poem, addresses the language

barrier between the first and third generations in the immigrant schema (grandparents and grandchildren) and deals with the accent as a site of subverted temporality. But where Keissar used a direct, colloquial idiom to communicate affect and a sense of lack, Behar opts for linguistic excess, writing in an accented Hebrew to connote the experience of absence at the psychological center of the narrative. Behar's story engages accent both linguistically and thematically: he forges an accented prose idiom—a textured, allusive, and slightly archaic Hebrew—and creates an elaborately wrought thematization of Arabic accent. The story, which I analyzed previously, has since inspired a provocative short film (2017). In this revised and expanded reading of the story, I address additional aspects and compare the story to the cinematic adaptation.<sup>38</sup>

### **“ANA MIN AL-YAHUD”: BETWEEN ACCENT AND SILENCE**

A contemporary Jewish Israeli writer (b. 1978) of partial Iraqi-Jewish descent, Behar is the author of three poetry collections as well as a novel and a short-story collection; he also edited a bilingual Hebrew-Arabic poetry anthology. Behar's work deals extensively with questions of Arabic language and heritage. Although his early literary work focuses on the absence of Arabic, he later acquired the language through formal study, a shift reflected in his more recent activities in translation and bilingual editorial work involving Hebrew and Arabic. “Ana min al-yahud” launched Behar's literary career in 2005 when it was chosen as the winner of *Haaretz's* annual short-story contest. It was reprinted in 2008 in his short-story collection, where it appeared bilingually in Hebrew and in Arabic translation. Written in Hebrew but titled in Arabic, the story is narrated by the first victim of a mysterious “language plague” that has literally gone viral, causing young, native Israelis to revert to the Diasporic accents of their immigrant grandparents—in the narrator's case, the Iraqi Arabic accent of his deceased grandfather. Whereas in Keissar's poem, the granddaughter expresses the desire to learn her grandmother's language (Arabic) and shout into the grave, Behar imagines an opposite scenario in which the grandfather literally speaks to his grandson from beyond the grave.

The plague originates among Mizrahim and eventually spreads to Ashkenazi Israelis, causing the latter to speak as though their native language is Yiddish. Yet the plague does not actually bring back the Diasporic languages; it brings back only Diasporic *accents*. The accent works in the story to reverse the multigenerational process of linguistic acculturation, symbolically transforming native speakers back into immigrants. When a young Jewish Israeli student suddenly begins speaking in a thick Arabic accent, he becomes at once ridiculous and suspect, leading to his repeated arrest and detainment; the police are bewildered by his indeterminate identity between Arab and Jew. The story hinges on the return of the repressed in the form of the narrator's dead Iraqi Jewish grandfather Anwar, who speaks to the narrator through the latter's own voice while paradoxically urging him not to speak at all but to find refuge in silence. The story continuously subverts linear temporality and clear lines of history, looping past and present and resisting a beginning or end. Accent, language, silence, death, history, and story writing are melded into a rich confusion of the speculative, counterfactual imagination.

<sup>38</sup> See Levy, *Poetic Trespass*, 268–79. To limit redundancy, I have excised most of my earlier analysis from the present essay. This should not be taken as a disavowal of my previous reading of the story; rather, my earlier interpretation can be read as complementary to the new analysis presented here.

The story begins with the unwanted appearance of the Arabic accent, like a bone in the narrator's throat:

At that time, my tongue twisted around and with the arrival of the month of Tammuz the Arabic accent got stuck in my mouth, deep down in my throat. Just like that, as I was walking down the street, the Arabic accent of Grandfather Anwar of blessed memory came back to me and no matter how hard I tried to extricate it from myself and throw it away in one of the public trash cans I could not do it.<sup>39</sup>

Accent thus opens this story objectified as literal trash that the narrator inexplicably cannot discard. Both accent and muteness in the story are transmitted intergenerationally from grandfather to grandson, skipping over the transitional generation of the narrator's parents, who represent the generation that strove to assimilate and "purify" their own Hebrew speech, divesting it of any traces of their parents' Arabic accent. As the story unfolds, accent and silence become the dual through lines of the narrative. In the course of his wanderings through the streets of Jerusalem, the police mistake the narrator for a suicide bomber, in part because he sports a beard (in the film version, a policewoman advises him to shave it off). Identity is symbolized most tangibly through his ID card, "a document that would tell them about my past and my future," which mysteriously vanishes every time he requires it. In the absence of the identity card that would confirm his ethnonational status, the narrator tries to explain to the police that he is Jewish, but the words come to him only in Arabic, and he is unable to voice them aloud. Furthermore, his internal response is not "Ana yahudi" (I'm Jewish) but rather "Ana min al-yahud"—"I am of the Jews" or "I am one of the Jews" or even "I am from the Jews"—a more ambiguous, less direct, and less idiomatic response. This unvoiced statement is the story's only full sentence in Arabic and also its only explicit statement of identity, but the narrator's inability to articulate it locks him in silence.

Behar then further thickens the story's morass of language, identity, and temporality by briefly sending the narrator into a counterfactual present in which history reverses itself such that the formerly affluent and sedate Palestinian residents of West Jerusalem actually remained in their homes after 1948. The narrator continues his wanderings among them, hoping to find an alternative language community:

And I would walk through the wealthy Palestinians' streets, and I thought that perhaps they would speak to me respectfully, not like the policemen. . . . I do not succeed in commingling with them because all I have at my disposal is Hebrew with an Arabic accent, and my Arabic, which doesn't come from my home but from the army, is suddenly mute, choked in my throat, cursing itself without uttering a word, hanging in the suffocating air of the refuges of my soul, hiding from family members behind the shutters of Hebrew. And all the time, when I tried to speak to them in the small, halting vocabulary of the Arabic I knew, what came out was Hebrew with an Arabic accent, until they thought that I was ridiculing them, and had my accent not been so Iraqi, had it not been for that, they would have been certain that I was making fun of them.

But like that, with the accent, they were confused, they thought I was making fun of the Iraqis, the Saddam Husseins, or maybe some old Iraqi who had kept his accent but forgotten his language.

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<sup>39</sup> This and all following citations from the story are from Vivian Eden's translation. See Almog Behar, "Ana min al-yahud—I'm One of the Jews," trans. Vivian Eden, *Haaretz*, April 28, 2005, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4852446> (accessed June 25, 2019). For the Hebrew, see Almog Behar, "Ana min al-yahud" [I am one of the Jews], in *Ana min al-yahud* (Tel Aviv: Hotsa'at bavel, 2008), 65–76.

And I didn't make friends there even though I wanted to . . . I had lost their language and they didn't know my language and between us remained the distance of the police forces and the generations.

Even here, the narrator remains outside both the Hebrew and the Arabic speech communities: he can mimic the accent of his Iraqi grandfather, but he cannot speak in Iraqi Arabic. As the story unfolds, the narrator thus finds that he has become a linguistic pariah who can speak in an acceptable way neither to Israelis nor to Palestinians: his Hebrew is too Arabic; his Arabic is too mute.

In fact, Behar worked the language of this section into a poem called "My Arabic Is Mute" (Ha-'aravit sheli ilemet) that appeared in his first volume of poetry, published just months before the short-story collection. Like the story, this single poem was also printed side by side with its Arabic translation:

My Arabic is mute  
 choked from the throat  
 cursing itself  
 without getting out a word  
 sleeping in the stifling air  
 of the shelters of my soul  
 hiding  
 from the rest of the family  
 behind Hebrew shutters.  
 And my Hebrew storms  
 dashing from room to room and the neighbors' porches  
 making her voice heard to many  
 prophesying the coming of God and  
 bulldozers  
 then she takes her place in the living room  
 putting on airs  
 openly on the lip of her skin  
 concealed between the pages of her flesh  
 naked one moment and clothed the next  
 she shrinks into the armchair  
 asking the forgiveness of her heart.

My Arabic is frightened  
 quietly poses as Hebrew  
 with every knock at her gates  
 whispers to friends:  
 "Ahlan ahlan" [Welcome].  
 And for every policeman she passes  
 in the street  
 she pulls out her papers  
 pointing out the protective clause:  
 "Ana min al-yahud, ana min al-yahud."  
 And my Hebrew is deaf  
 sometimes so very deaf.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Almog Behar, "Ha-'aravit sheli ilemet" [My Arabic is mute], in *Tsim'on be'erot* [The thirst of wells] (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 2007), 15–16 (my translation).

Clearly, the poem encapsulates the story; both the poem and the story express the struggle of Arabic to make itself heard. (Notably, in a recording of Behar performing the poem bilingually onstage with *Ars Poetika*, he reads it in Hebrew with an exaggerated pronunciation of the guttural letter ‘ayin that mimics an Arabic accent, vocally performing the essence of his story.)<sup>41</sup> In the story, the Arabic voice belongs to the dead Iraqi grandfather; there is no one-to-one encounter between Arabic and Hebrew. In the poem, Behar imagines the linguistic encounter as a direct confrontation between the two languages and adopts metaphors of personhood to express linguistic empowerment and disempowerment. Moreover, Hebrew and Arabic (both grammatically feminine nouns—‘*ivrit* and ‘*aravit*) are personified as women: Hebrew is frenetic, uncontainable, and mercurial, alternately putting on airs (*hoshevet et ‘atma*) and begging forgiveness, while Arabic is a frightened woman who is not only mute but also (sometimes) deaf. By contrast, the story adopts the same metaphor of disability but projects it onto the male narrator, rather than the language; near the end, the narrator says, “I am not here not there, not East not West, not my voice now and not the voices of my past, and what will happen in the end. I walk through the streets mute and also somewhat deaf.”

Midway through the story, the narrator fleetingly finds himself speaking in his dead grandfather’s voice: “And thus my voice was replaced by my grandfather’s voice, and suddenly those streets that had become so accustomed to his death and his disappearance and his absence from them began to hear his voice again.” But not for long: the “streets of Jerusalem that had grown accustomed to my silence, to our silence, had a very hard time with the speech, and would silence the voice, gradually telling it careful, telling me careful, telling me I am alien, telling me my silences are enough.” His parents also “stood staunchly against me and against the plague, remembering the years of effort they had invested to acquire their clean accent”; they warn him that speaking in the accent will spell the ruin of his studies and his future. But the narrator persists: “And despite my fear, and even though this voice was foreign from the distance of two generations of forgetting, I spoke all my words in that accent, because there was speech in me that wanted to come out and the words would change on me as they came out of the depths of my throat.” He infects his partner, who begins speaking in Arabic and Ladino accents and who reports to him that the plague is spreading at her workplace; a small item in the newspaper notes that “the security authorities are keeping track of who has been infected by whom with the forbidden accents, and there is already concern that the country will be filled with Arabs, many, many Arabs, and therefore they have decided to reinforce the radio with announcers whose Hebrew is so pure that we will feel alien in our speech.”

The narrator then attempts to experiment with accent in other, metareferential ways, shifting his focus from speech to writing and alluding to his own writing and to “the story” or “stories.” First, he tells his partner, also a student, that he has begun writing his stories in Arabic letters. “And some days later she came home to tell me that the department heads had laughed and said, let him write like that. Let him write stories that only he can read, his parents or his children will not read them . . . and, if he applies, we will give him all the government prizes for Arabic literature without having read a word in his books.” These sham prizes, it seems, allude to the fate of real-life Arab Jewish writers in Israel such as Ishaq Bar Moshe and Samir Naqqash, whose Arabic-language work received limited institutional recognition but lacked financial support and readership.

<sup>41</sup> See “*Ars Poetika* 14—Almog Behar,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJE1ef4hCus> (accessed June 12, 2019).

The transition from accent to silence occurs near the end of the story following a lengthy interlude by the grandfather, who says he had met his own death in a “great desert of silence.” The narrator relates, “Build extensions in your heart, my grandson, he would say to me, make many departments, and lodge me in one of the hidden departments, and live in the rest of them. Or move into the silence department, because the change that you thought occurring is too simple, and what is going to change if a different accent is spoken? Will I live again, will you live my new life?” The accent, it seems, is not enough: not enough to sway the parents, not enough to bring the grandfather back from the dead, not enough to change the course of history. What, then, is the next step? The grandfather offers a solution:

Perhaps silence will put the present’s fear of the past and the future into their [the parents’] hearts. And why don’t you show them your story, perhaps that way they will wake up, said my grandfather from the dead, almost making me swear an oath.

And I started to measure my silences, this is a day’s silence, this is a week’s silence, this is a month’s silence, well-framed inside the walls of my house, and no mouth opens and no window opens. . . . And everything is the voice of my silences. . . . and there is no end to the story and there is no before there was the story, there is no beginning.

With this, the narrator’s parents, who had so staunchly resisted the accent, now beg him to speak “in any accent because the fear of silence has descended upon us.” At the story’s end, the narrator is taken back to jail, where his distraught parents are summoned. He stays silent in front of them but begins to give them the written stories he had previously concealed, hinting that he has also written about them:

And this really is the same story, recurring over and over again, how many stories do I have, Mother, Father, how many stories does a person have? Each time he tries to tell the story in different words, each time he tries to resolve the unsolved story a bit different . . . nevertheless your silence has told me a little. Look, now I’ve tried to write the story in the Arabic accent, but what has come of it. Look where we are meeting. Take them, read my story, Mother, Father, read all my stories that I have hidden from you for many years [and] . . . perhaps you will know how the plot will be resolved.

What does the narrator mean by “the voice of my silences”? What does he mean by writing “in the Arabic accent,” when he is writing in Hebrew? What does he mean by “my story”: the story of his family? The collective story of Arab Jews, or even of the Jewish migration to Israel/Palestine more generally? And what of the atemporality, whereby there is “no end to the story” and “no beginning,” and the same story recurs “over and over” in a metaphorical loop? Perhaps because of the very contradictions implied in every possibility he has explored, by the end of the story the narrator has given up on spoken language, which can elicit only a sense of “alienation . . . between thought and speech.” Silence, on the other hand, can contain past and present, Arabic and Hebrew, and all the contradictions therein; but it does not offer a promise of continuity through transmission. Initially, the narrator’s silence results from linguistic failure, as when he is unable to communicate with the police; by the end, it has become a statement in itself.

In “Ana min al-yahud,” then, spoken language fails as a means of intersubjective connection or as an instrument of identity, offering only a pretext for discrimination and rejection. Like Yanko Goorall, the narrator of “Ana min al-yahud” finds himself at the outer limits of language

and identity, caught between accent and silence. Far more than the absence or failure of speech, silence becomes the narrator's chosen means of resistance: like a hunger strike, it is a principled refusal of a basic human need. Through silence, the narrator is able to assert his agency and uncover his identity. *The* story remains unresolved, but at the same time, the narrator's revelation of the stories he had previously concealed from his parents offers some hope that they could serve as a voice and, perhaps, could begin the process of repair that would help answer the question of where the story's end lies.

### FROM STORY TO FILM: “ANA MIN AL-YAHUD” REINTERPRETED

In 2017, Behar's “Ana min al-yahud” was adapted as a short film with the same title.<sup>42</sup> Moving from prose narrative to film facilitated the literal representation of spoken Arabic, an opportunity the directors creatively seized upon. For an Israeli viewer, actually seeing and hearing a young Jewish Israeli speaking fluent Arabic in a native-sounding accent is a powerful experience. While the filmmakers' use of spoken Arabic was highly innovative, it was not the first time that Baghdadi Jewish Arabic was represented on-screen; three years earlier, in spring 2014, the film *Mafriah ha-yonim / Mutayyir al-hamam* (The dove flyer) was released in Israel. The film, whose screenplay was written by director Nissim Dayan, was based on Iraqi-Israeli novelist Eli Amir's 1992 novel by the same name, the second in his trilogy. Following the story of a Jewish family in Baghdad during its final months before emigration to Israel in 1950–51, *The Dove Flyer* is the first film ever made entirely in the Jewish Baghdadi dialect, as well as the first Israeli movie in which Jewish characters speak Arabic exclusively; it was made for a primarily Jewish Israeli audience who cannot understand the Arabic without Hebrew subtitles.<sup>43</sup>

*The Dove Flyer* fits Shandler's concept of the postvernacular; in many ways, it would be analogous to a contemporary film set in interwar Europe in which all the Jewish characters speak Yiddish. Doubtless, the filmmakers' choice to use Arabic rather than Hebrew for the film's dialogue constituted a bold move. However, because the story is set in Iraq, Arabic does not form the subject of the film in the overt manner of *Ana min al-Yahud*. *The Dove Flyer* does not seek to destabilize Israeli Hebrew but to nostalgically recuperate a Jewish dialect of Arabic as a Diasporic Jewish language, subscribing to a view of language consistent with the Zionist ideology that separates the Diasporic past from the Israeli present. In this sense, in the extradiegetic world of the viewer, the temporal barrier between Hebrew as the language of the national present and Arabic as the language of the Diasporic past remains intact. Whereas the *The Dove Flyer* represents Baghdadi Jewish Arabic naturalistically and mimetically, as the ordinary linguistic fabric of Jews in their native Iraq, *Ana min al-yahud*, set in present-day Israel, depicts a world in which the Arabic language—in any of its variants—has become anything but ordinary for Jews. Like the story, the short film adaptation deliberately sets out to blur the lines between past and present, Arabic and Hebrew, accent and silence, illustrating a postarabic poetics.

The film *Ana min al-yahud* carries some of the story's plotlines a step further, interjecting the figure of the dead grandfather not just as a disembodied voice in the mind of the narrator but as

<sup>42</sup> *Ana min al-yahud*, directed by Niv Hachlili and Aharon Shem Tov (Israel, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> The film's dialogue is entirely in Arabic, mainly in the Jewish Baghdadi dialect; the dialogue mimetically changes to the Muslim dialect whenever the Jewish characters speak with Muslim Iraqis. Ahuva Keren, a leading Israeli of Iraqi-Jewish descent, was the driving force behind the film; she translated the screenplay into Arabic and helped the actors with accent training. Keren played leading roles in both this film and the short film *Ana min al-yahud* discussed below.

a fully embodied ghost who seems to drive the plot; furthermore, as noted, the film brings back spoken Arabic itself, not just the Arabic accent in Hebrew. The film version superimposes the language story onto the backdrop of an unspecified war that intermittently sends the characters fleeing for cover as sirens go off, alluding of course to the vexed relations of Hebrew and Arabic as a proxy for the political conflict. In this retelling, the protagonist is now a young married schoolteacher in Jerusalem named Amit (a proper Israeli name), who is expecting his first son with his heavily pregnant wife, Deborah. Amit's language troubles begin early one morning when he dreams that Grandfather Anwar has appeared (fully attired in a dark suit and Iraqi *siddara* hat) in his conjugal bed to insist that the young couple name the baby after him. When Amit refuses on the grounds that he cannot give the child an Arab name (based on the implicit understanding that this would seriously contravene Israeli Jewish social norms), he becomes possessed or cursed by Grandfather Anwar, leading to his language troubles. However, we learn soon thereafter that the plague has actually infected all male Jewish descendants of Arabic speakers. Initially, Amit finds himself speaking in Iraqi-accented Hebrew, but as the story progresses, the accent gives way to full-blown Iraqi Jewish Arabic. In the film, the accent marks Amit as either ridiculous or suspect; the Arabic language he uses toward the film's end is incomprehensible to his wife. (One irony is that there is another accent in the film: Deborah has a palpable French accent, but this accent is deemed unremarkable and socially acceptable.) Thus, accent and language are presented as being on a continuum.

After his initial, dream-state encounter with the ghost of Grandfather Anwar, Amit finds himself coughing and speaking with difficulty as the Arabic accent begins to pervade his Hebrew speech. The moment when the virus definitively takes possession of his voice occurs as Amit is teaching an iconic poem by Chaim Nachman Bialik, the Hebrew "national" poet and paragon of modern Hebrew letters, to a roomful of teenagers. As Amit dramatically intones the words of the poem, Grandfather Anwar suddenly materializes in the classroom, seated among the pupils in his dark suit and *siddara* and smiling knowingly as he fingers his worry beads. Amit sees him, coughs, and from that moment, his recitation of Bialik's poem takes on a thick, unmistakably Iraqi Arabic accent, provoking the schoolchildren's mirth. The subtext of this scene invokes the well-known Sephardi ambivalence toward Bialik, another trope of Mizrahi literature.<sup>44</sup> This addition to the story subtly accentuates another focus of postarabic writing, as attested in poems recorded from the Ars Poetika events, wherein the revenge of the accent doubles as metacommentary on what constitutes Hebrew literature and what has been systematically excised from that category in its constitution as monolingual and Ashkenazi.

Following this episode, Amit leaves school early, is briefly stopped by police, and returns home, where both his wife, Deborah, and his mother, Tikvah, confront him about his newfound accent; Tikvah insists, "We don't speak like that." As the three characters take cover in a stairwell from the latest missile strike, the police return, declaring over Tikvah's and Deborah's vocal remonstrations that they are taking Amit, "the guy who talked like an Arab," in for questioning. Amit is thrown into a police van with a young man who appears to be a Palestinian detainee, cursing the state and the occupation in fluent Palestinian Arabic (the same man then resurfaces in the station as an interrogator, implying that he was placed in the van as a stooge to collect intelligence). In the van, Grandfather Anwar appears again (albeit only to Amit), reiterating his demand that Amit name the grandchild after him and prompting Amit to explain to the other, incredulous young man, in Arabic, "Ana yahudi—Ana min al-yahud" (I'm Jewish—I'm one of the Jews).

<sup>44</sup> See Levy, *Poetic Trespass*, chap. 2, "Bialik and the Sephardim: The Ethnic Encoding of Modern Hebrew Literature."

The police station's waiting room is occupied by distraught mothers of other young Mizrahi men who have been detained for suddenly speaking in Arabic. Amit, who by now has lost the ability to speak Hebrew altogether, is brought into a room for private questioning by the man from the van. The film leaves this character's ethnicity entirely fluid and ambiguous: in the station, he speaks both perfect Israeli Hebrew and perfect Palestinian Arabic, declares in Arabic, "Ana kaman 'arabi" (I am also an Arab), and wears a necklace with a Star of David. In any case, he clearly works for the state. "People don't just suddenly start speaking Arabic," he says (*in Arabic*) to Amit, demanding that Amit reveal the identity of the accent's mysterious "source." Alone with his wife and mother in the room, Amit divulges in the Iraqi Jewish Arabic of his grandfather that he has decided to name the baby Anwar; the women seem to accept his decision, and Amit smiles in evident relief. His announcement is followed by an exchange of smiles with Grandfather Anwar, who is then shown confidently walking away, implying that the curse will be lifted.

If we compare the two versions and their respective endings, the transition from a written to a visual-aural medium seems to have allowed the filmmakers to construct a more optimistic conclusion, one that suggests the possibility of intergenerational reconciliation and acceptance of Arabic as a language for Jewish Israelis. On the level of temporality, the baby introduces the idea of a fourth generation, orienting the film toward the future rather than the past; indeed, the entire plot revolves around the choice of a name for the baby, who, in the end, will carry the memory of the grandfather into the future. On the level of accent, the film represents the accent literally and mimetically by having Amit speak Hebrew in a distinctive Iraqi Jewish accent; on the level of dialect, it also performs both Palestinian Arabic and Iraqi Jewish Arabic (although the distinction, which manifests both through accent and through morphology, will be lost on viewers who are not themselves Arabic speakers). On the level of language, *hearing* the Jewish characters speak Arabic is the aural equivalent of *seeing* Grandfather Anwar: no longer abstractions, both the language and its representative are materialized and embodied, given a tangible form. On an ontological level, the move from abstraction to realization through sight and sound creates an opening of sorts toward the possibility of closure or redemption, whereas the short story, which could only describe the narrator's linguistic paralysis, ends without resolution. Notably, however, in the screenplay's embrace of spoken language, silence disappears from the film as a locus of affect or emotional investment. While the directors could have used silence to profound effect, the attraction of mimetic representation of Iraqi Jewish Arabic is understandably strong, and perhaps was more compelling in their view.

The film's aural realization of Arabic accents and vernacular Arabic recalls Hamid Naficy's remarks about exilic film by third-world filmmakers, which he terms "accented cinema": "Stressing musical and oral accents redirects our attention from the hegemony of the visual and of modernity toward the *acousticity* of exile and the commingling of premodernity and postmodernity in the films."<sup>45</sup> In *Ana min al-yahud* specifically, the commingling of temporality is less directly a question of pre- and postmodernity than it is a visitation of the family's suppressed

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<sup>45</sup> He continues: "Polyphony and heteroglossia both localize and locate the films as texts of cultural and temporal difference. Interestingly, accented films are using the film's frame as a writing tablet on which appear multiple texts in original languages and in translation in the form of titles, subtitles, intertitles, or blocks of text. . . . Because they are multilingual, accented films require extensive titling just to translate the dialogues. Many of them go beyond that, however, by experimenting with on-screen typography as a supplementary mode of narration and expression." The role of subtitles in Arabic-based Israeli films such as *The Dove Flyer*, *Ajami*, *The Band's Visit*, and *Ana min al-yahud* is worthy of further consideration. See Naficy, *Accented Cinema*, 25 (my emphasis).

pre-Israeli, Arabic heritage into the time of the Israeli nation-state. Nonetheless, this is a temporal intrusion or wrinkle that is effected, as Naficy suggests, through the “acousticity” of exile.



In this essay, rather than asking what it means to write in the language of the Other, the language of the colonizer, or the language of the enemy, I have asked: What does it mean to write in a forbidden accent, or for a native speaker to “acquire” such an accent? How does silence complement the literary transgressions of accent? For postarabic Hebrew writers, writing in Arabic-accented or Arabophonic Hebrew serves as a means of contesting the cultural identity of Hebrew and of rewriting its modern history, and even its temporality. Their Arabophonic Hebrew realigns Israel culturally and politically with Arabic and reverses the teleological process of “absorption” of immigrants into the nation, merging formally sequestered pasts with the cultural politics of the present. In this sense, the temporality of postarabic Hebrew is one of calculated anachronism, rejecting the dominant time-space of the Israeli nation-state and reimagining the past, present, and future. The case of postarabic Hebrew thus indicates one possibility for how accented literature destabilizes or denaturalizes the correspondence between a national language and identity. At the same time, we have seen how literature uses silence to convey the limitations of speech, especially when speakers are confronted with an otherness that is unassimilable within the logic of the nation-state. Accents and silence may coexist within the same literary spaces, reinforcing each other as markers of the outer limits of language and identity. Thus, I theorize the post-immigration accent not only as a linguistic “queering” of the nation—a linguistic antinormativism—but also as a temporal indeterminacy in linguistically encoded cultural-historical scripts: as a hiccup or wrinkle in the language-nation homology. A