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# Political grammar

## The name *Palestine* as discussed at the Academy of the Hebrew Language

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> *"To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language" (Derrida 1976[1967]: 112)*

The Academy of the Hebrew Language is considered the supreme institute for the Hebrew language in Israel, a status which is also expressed legally in Israeli law since 1953. Its members are known and distinguished linguists, poets, writers and translators. In the years 1994–1995 the Academy plenum devoted three meetings to discuss the question of how to pronounce, spell and use the name "Palestine" in Hebrew. The protocols of those discussions are the corpus studied in this article. A close examination of the discussions reveals significant, subtle, and sometimes paradoxical relationships between the political and the linguistic. In addition, the article traces the way in which the inevitable question regarding the possibility of distinguishing between these two facets permeated the debates. The article points out correlations between answers to this question, local political positions, and linguistic theories. It suggests that in addition to critical discourse analysis methodologies, in order to address this question an integration of some notions from the Derridian linguistic critique is indispensable, and by using them renegotiates the nature of the zone between the linguistic and the political. It is within the same blurred, ungraspable zone between the political and the linguistic, the zone from which the very wish to give a name arises and motivates the discussions, that this wish is also, at its peak, exhausted, interrupted, bringing the discussions to their indecisive conclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

> My friend, take care. When you recognize the concept of "Palestine", you demolish your right to live in Ein Hahoresh.[1] If this is Palestine and not the land of Israel,[2] then you are conquerors and not the tillers of the land. You are invaders. If this is Palestine, then it belongs to a people who lived here before you came. Only if it is the land of Israel do you have a right to live in Ein Hahoresh and in Deganiyah B. If it is not your country, your fatherland, the country of your ancestors and of your sons, then what are you doing here? You came to another people's homeland, as they claim, you expelled them and you have taken their land. (Begin 1969: 17)

These statements by former prime minister of Israel Menachem Begin, which were made during a lecture at a kibbutz and were quoted in the popular daily newspaper *Yediot Ahronot* in 1969, lay open the heart of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, the struggle for the right over and ownership of territory. At the same time, they also open up a way of thinking about the position of language in this conflict. The question of what the territory being fought over will be called is not only a symbolic question, according to Begin, but also part of the cultural and political conflict itself, and one must fight over the linguistic change, struggle for the word and the name, as in any other political conflict. Another issue that arises from these statements is the ability of a name to undermine the political order. How does this undermining occur? What are the relevant linguistic mechanisms for such an act, and are they also linked to the political order? This article will deal with these questions through a review of the discussions conducted by the Academy of the Hebrew Language in regards to the Hebrew name for Palestine.

## 2. Corpus and literature

The Academy of the Hebrew language is considered the supreme institute for the Hebrew Language in Israel, a status which is also expressed legally in Israeli law since 1953. Its members are known and distinguished linguists, poets, writers and translators. During 1994–1995 the Academy discussed the question of the name "Palestine", as well as the way it should be pronounced and written. The major questions which required the Academy's attention were seemingly linguistic: should the name be written with a Samekh (ס) and Tet (ט) — פלסטין, or with a Shin (ש) and Tav (ת) — פלשתין; whether to pronounce the first consonant of the name — the letter Peh (פ) as [p] (plosive-bilabial, and hence פלסטין (/palastin/) or as [f] (fricative-labiodental, hence פלסטין (/falastin/);[3] and whether to use the short form פלסטין (/falastin/) or the long form פלשתינה (/palestina/).

It should be noted that similar attempts to find linguistic solutions for the question of "Palestine" are occasionally made, as has been attempted in recent years by Shamir (2005), Tsimhoni (2007) and Almagor-Ramon (2006).[4] The common ground for all these solutions — whether they are etymological or philological solutions based on a search of a long-lost origin, and whether they are solutions seeking golden rules of linguistics which are just as lost — is that, on the one hand, they do not give up on the attempt to reach a linguistic truth, while, on the other hand, they limit the discussions with a general claim that political aspects are involved. Nevertheless, in none of these did a discussion which comprehensively examines the relationship between linguistic theories and perceptions of language, and political perceptions and power relations, take place.

In this article, as may already be apparent, I will avoid dealing with the question of the name Palestine as a matter for which a linguistic solution must be found. I do not seek to find an answer for the question of Palestine, but rather to examine the conditions in which the question comes up and is put forward, to study the discourse surrounding it as discussed by the Academy (discursive in Foucauldian sense, and as developed in critical discourse analysis; cf. Foucault 1971, Fairclough 1989, Poynton 2000). Not having to provide a linguistic solution and a discursive study of the discussions will reveal significant, profound and complex connections between linguistic and political positions. In addition, the article will trace the way in which the inevitable question regarding the possibility of distinguishing between the political and linguistic permeated the debates, and will point out correlations between answers to this question, local political positions, and linguistic theories. I will suggest that in order to address this question some notions from the Derridian linguistic critique are indispensable, and by using them rethink the nature of the zone between the linguistic and the political.

Nevertheless, in order to understand the complexity of the matter at hand, I will introduce some linguistic issues in the following section.

## 3.   Forward to the Discussion

The Grammar Committee of the Academy of the Hebrew Language submitted a proposal for discussion of the name "Palestine" to the Academy's plenum. The proposal was to spell "Palestine" with Samekh and Tet, and to pronounce the Peh as [p], as is customary for Beged Kefet[5] letters at the beginning of a word (פלסטין). This proposal was the grounds for the discussion at the plenum. The linguistic questions raised in the discussions were divided into three aspects of the name, as mentioned above: the pronunciation, the spelling and the morphology. In terms of pronunciation, a question was raised about whether it should be pronounced

as [p] or [f] at the beginning of the word. The rules of transcription from foreign languages and "internal" Hebrew rules — mainly of the above mentioned "Beged Kefet" rule are relevant here. In terms of spelling, the question of whether the word should be spelled with Samekh (ס) and Tet (ט) or with Shin (שׁ) and Tav (ת) was discussed. The rules of transcription are also relevant to this, as well as different spelling traditions of the word in the Hebrew culture. As for morphology, the discussion revolved around the question of whether to use short form פלסטין (/falastin/) or the long form פלשתינה (/palestina/). The various forms of nouns (country names), the rules of derivation and earlier traditions are relevant to this. These are joined by the semantic aspect, i.e., what is the meaning of the name. The semantic aspect is closely linked to the abovementioned grammatical issues, and all these problems together are related to the political questions.

As for customary Hebrew traditions — the Bible contains the form פלשת (Philistia) — for instance "behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia; this man was born there" (Psalms 87, 4), and the name refers to a specific area in the southern coastal strip in the land of Israel. The Midrash, on the other hand, mentions the form פלסטיני (/palastini/). This spelling, with Samekh and Tet, is a transcription of the Greek and Roman word Palestine — the name given by the Romans to the region which was usually called Judea (for example: "and there was famine in all lands: in three countries, vis. In Phoenicia, Arabia, and Palestine" — Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, chap. XC; 6). The name פלשתינה (/palestina/) comes from a much later tradition — it was given by the British during the period of the British Mandate. The British rejected the name ארץ ישראל (/erets yisrael/ 'Land of Israel') and wrote it down only in brackets (and in initials) after the name "Palestina", (א״י) פלשתינה.

Thus there are various traditions for pronunciation and spelling of the name "Palestine". Moreover, the many relevant issues and grammatical rules for examining the topic allow for more forms of pronunciation and spelling, which were not customary in the past. Such is, for instance, the proposal by the Grammar Committee to pronounce "Palastin". These proposals are often understood in the discussions as the invention of a new Hebrew word. These also point out the problems of analogy of grammatical rules for the purpose of providing an answer to this issue. Indeed, it is possible to discern in the discussions explanations and opinions which differ from the complicated outline provided here. The following chart presents the theoretical possibilities for spelling the word, in accordance with the major considerations raised in the discussions (the longer or shorter form, Peh as [p] or as [f] and the spelling).

**Table 1.** A split name

| פלסטין /*falastin*/ | פלשתין /*falastin*/ | פלשתין /*falashtin*/ |
|---|---|---|
| פלפלסטין /*palastin*/ | פלשתין /*palastin*/ | פלשתין /*palashtin*/ |
| פלסטינה /*falestina*/ | פלשתינה /*falestina*/ | פלשתינה /*faleshtina*/ |
| פלסטינה /*palastina*/ | פלשתינה /*palastina*/ | הניתשלפ /*paleshtina*/ |

## 4. Identical forms, conflicting considerations

Not all theoretical forms were raised in the discussion, of course. Some of them create a mix of traditions, offering forms which are not at all relevant for discussion. In fact, the names raised in the discussion were the following: פלסטין (/falastin/ — [f], Samekh and Tet), פלסטין (/palastin/ — [p], Samekh and Tet), פלסטינה (/palestina/ — [p], Samekh and Tet), פלשתינה (/palestina/ — [p], Shin and Tav), פלשתינה (/falestina/ — [f], Shin and Tav), Palestine Arabs and Land of Israel Arabs. Nevertheless, an in-depth examination of the discussions shows that the following forms received the most attention: פלסטין (/falastin/ — [f], Samekh and Tet), פלשתינה (/palestina/ — [p], Shin and Tav) and פלסטינה (/palestina/ — [p], Samekh and Tet). This means that the proposal by the Grammar Committee was hardly under discussion, interestingly enough, and it was in fact rejected by the plenum (only Yaacov Mansour supported it explicitly). Nevertheless, the discussion of these two forms raised all the grammatical questions mentioned above, i.e., pronunciation, spelling, form, semantics, and political meanings.

### 4.1  פלסטין (/falastin/ — Peh as [f], Samekh and Tet)

The following people were explicitly supportive of this form in the discussions: Avraham Tal, Yehuda Ratzhabi, Avner Treinin, Shraga Irmay, Amatzia Porat, Shlomo Morag and Yizhar Smilansky.[6] This form is the closest to the manner in which the name is pronounced in Arabic, and the spelling with Samekh and Tet is also based on the transcription of the name from Arabic, as well as the Midrash form "Palastini".

Ratzhabi based his opinion on the Midrash form "Palastini". As for the pronunciation of the Peh as [f], he relies on a Jewish Yemenite tradition in which it is not customary to pronounce plosives at the beginning of a word:

(1)  השיקולים האלה מובילים גם למסקנה שיש להגות פ''א רפה, כפי הגיית הערבית. אני יודע
מתוך המסורת של יהודי תימן, שהם מבטאים פ''א רפה בראש מילה בלשון חז''ל. הם לא
יאמרו פרוש, אלא פרוש, לא פינחס אלא פינחס. (Proceedings: 185)[7]

This also leads to the conclusion that it should be pronounced as lax Peh, as in Arabic. I know from the Jewish Yemenite tradition that they pronounce lax Peh at the beginnings of words in Mishnaic Hebrew. They would not say "Perush" [explanation], but "Ferush", Not "Pinxas" [a proper name], but "Finxas".

To these linguistic considerations Ratzhabi adds the following explanation:

(2)    במדרש, בתקופת יוון ורומית, השם בא בטי׳׳ת, ושמע מינה שהשם נהגה בדיוק כמו
שהערבים הוגים אותו היום. אם נבוא לשנות, נהיה חריגים במזרח התיכון כולו. כל המזרח
הוגה פלסטין בטי׳׳ת, ופתאום באה ישראל, הנתפסת כארץ קולוניאלית, ומכניסה שם משלה
להכעיס. (ibid. 185)

In the Midrash, in the Greek and Roman periods, the name was with Tet, and thus it was pronounced exactly as the Arabs pronounce it today. If we come forth to change, we will be the exception in the entire Middle East. The whole East pronounces Palestine with a Tet, and here comes Israel, which is perceived to be a colonial country, and introduces a name of its own to spite.

Ratzhabi is concerned that introducing a name which differs from the Arabic name will reinforce Israel's colonial image. This reservation reflects an important critique on central colonial practices. As Edward Said (1978) showed, colonial practices, such as renaming, reorganizing, mapping and classifying places, languages, plants etc., were at the heart of Orientalism both as the creation of a scientific field of study and as the creation of imagined orient-occident relations. In the Israeli context Benvenisti (2000) pointed out the intensive work of the "Committee for the Designation of Place-Names in the Negev Region" in renaming and Hebraizing the names of Arab villages in the years following the foundation of Israel, as part of the attempt to delete the history and culture of its former inhabitants.[8]

One can thus identify crucial similarities in Ratzhabi's statements: the giving of a name is similar, at least to some extent, to the colonial act of occupation. Ratzhabi prefers accepting the name from Arabic without any alteration. Another matter which is raised is the thought of "interfering" with the name — is it necessary to interfere with determining the name, and what is the meaning of such an intervention. The act of intervention itself, rather than the question of which specific name will be chosen, is what parallels the attempt of colonial domination, in his opinion.

Yizhar Smilansky also refers to the matter of intervention. He agrees that the name should not be changed or pronounced otherwise than it is pronounced by its people:

(3)    דעתי שאין להתחמק מלהביע דעה. השאלה קיימת, פונים אלינו מצדדים שונים, ואי אפשר
להתחמק. שמות כמו ספרד, צרפת ויוון הם שמות עתיקים והם עובדה לשונית. אין טעם
לשנות אותם, עד כמה שהדבר משונה ומוזר. אבל כאן עומד לפנינו דבר חדש, מדינה

מתהווה. אנחנו לא נשנה את שמם, ולא נקבע אם הם קיימים או לא קיימים, ואם הם כאלה
או אחרים. (Proceedings. 219)

> I think we cannot evade the question. The question exists, we are
> approached by different parties, and we cannot avoid it. Names like "Sfarad"
> (spain) "Tsarfat" (France) and "Yavan" (Greece) are old manes and they are
> linguistic facts. There is no point in changing them, as strange peculiar as it
> may be. But here we face a new thing, a state in creation. We shall not change
> their name, and we shall not determine whether they exist or not, and
> whether they are one thing or another.

I find the following statement by Smilansky to be the most interesting:

(4)  הם קיימים, הם קוראים לעצמם בשם, ואנחנו צריכים להביע את השם הזה במיטב
האפשרויות של התעתיק העברי בלי להתחמק. (ibid.)

> They exist, they call themselves by a name, and we need to express this name
> with the best-possible options in Hebrew transcription without evasion.

On the one hand, Smilansky strongly insists that "we", meaning Israeli-Jews, shall
not determine whether Palestinians exist or not. On the other hand, in the sen-
tence that follows, he himself determines that they do exist. Smilansky in fact does
not object to the idea of "intervention", to talking about "whether they exist or not".
He simply opposes the claim that they do not exist. Hence, he perceives his inter-
vention, or his claim that they do exist, as a transparent statement, a proclamation
which does not express any intervention (cf. Fairclough 1989: 33). It seems that, in
his perception, the mere fact of determining that they exist, meaning, the position
of identifying with them, is not an intervention simply because it is seemingly an
intervention "to their benefit."

It seems that Ratzhabi and Smilansky's assertions, backed up by linguistic ar-
guments, reflect political positions perceived in Israel as "left wing," in other words
— recognition of a people and their state. Nevertheless, arguments in favor of the
use of פלסטין came from other directions as well.

For instance, Avraham Tal claims:

(5)  אני אקרא לזה לעולם פלסטין כדי להודיע למי שקורא את המאמר שלי שאני לא מודה בשם
הזה, והשם שלי הוא ארץ ישראל. (Proceedings 186)

> I will forever call it פלסטין (/falastin/] to announce to anyone reading my
> article that I do not admit to this name, and that my name is ארץ ישראל
> (/erets yisrael/, 'Land of Israel').

In other words, Tal too does not want to interfere with the name, and he sup-
ports its pronunciation as is customary in Arabic. However, his considerations do
not express a wish to recognize the name, meaning a people or a state, but rather
the opposite — they express a wish not to acknowledge them. In his opinion, the

pronunciation of the name, as is customary in Arabic, creates distinction and division much desired by him politically. There is the Hebrew name of the Land of Israel, and there is the Arab name פלסטין (/falastin/). The pronunciation of פלסטין (/falastin/), to his mind, is pronunciation of an Arabic name rather than a Hebrew form. As far as he is concerned, any process of "Hebraizing" the name could create some sort of recognition of an entity or a people. Moreover, this kind of process could lead to the creation of a new name, or another name, for the Land of Israel, such as פלסטין (/palastin/ as proposed by the Grammar Committee). Two crucial questions derive from these issues. The first is the question of the multiplicity of names and the giving of a new name. Another important question is if and how much can "Arabic" and "Hebrew" be separated in the case of the name Palestine, as well as in other cases.

**4.2** פלסטינה (/palestina/ — [p], Samekh and Tet) or פלשתינה (/palestina/ — [p], Shin and Tav)

The form פלסטינה (/palestina/ — [p], Samekh and Tet) was explicitly supported by the following people: Ari Avner, Moshe Azar and Uzi Ornan. Avner, similarly to Tal, suggested distinguishing between the Hebrew and the Arabic. In his opinion, the name in Hebrew should be the name taken from the Midrash — פלסטיני (/palastini/), or the name as transcribed from Latin — "פלסטינה". Avner in fact is willing to introduce a new name into the Hebrew language, which is not taken from the Jewish traditional sources, and he believes that Hebraizing the name will maintain the distinction between Hebrew and Arabic. The name is new since, although it is morphologically similar to the British Mandate form "פלשתינה", it differs from it in terms of spelling. Avner explains the issue of spelling in his following question:

(6)          למה לתת להם הילה מקראית ולשייך אותם לפלשתים? (ibid. 186)
             Why give them [the Palestinians] a biblical aura by associating them with
             the Philistines?

In other words, the form פלסטינה fulfils both his grammatical and political ambitions.

    The major problem with the form 'פלסטינה' was strongly put by Shlomo Morag:

(7)          אי אפשר להתעלם מהעובדה שאנחנו עומדים בפני הכרעה פוליטית. השם פלסטינה שימש
             בתקופת המנדט במשמעות זהה לארץ ישראל בגבולותיה המנדטוריים. אסור לשכוח זאת.
             אם אנחנו קובעים עכשיו את השם פלסטינה, אנחנו נותנים גושפנקא לשטחים שמיועדים
             להיות שטחי האוטונומיה. (ibid. 216).
             One cannot ignore the fact that we are facing a political decision. The name
             "Palestina" was used during the British Mandate in a meaning identical to

the name "Erets Yisrael" in its mandatory borders. We shall not forget this. If we choose "Palestina" now, then we are giving a seal of approval to the territories intended to be lands of the [Palestinian] autonomy.

According to Morag, the fact that the name "Palestina" is morphologically identical to the British Mandate name for the Land of Israel might imply that there is a geographical overlap between the referents of the two names. Therefore he objects the present use of this form, which is in contrast to his political preferences:

(8)  ולכן אני מציע שנבחר באחת משתי דרכים: או שכלל לא נקבל החלטה, או שנדחה מכול וכול
את השם פלסטינה, שהיא ארץ ישראל בגבולותיה המנדטוריים, ובשום פנים ואופן איננה זהה
לאותה יחידה שתקום, תהא מהותה אשר תהא. (.ibid)

Thus I suggest that we take one of two roads. We shall either decline to make a decision at all, or we utterly reject the name "Palestina", which is the land of Israel in its mandatory borders, and by no means identical to the future unit which will be established, whatever its form.

Uzi Ornan also expressed support of the form "פלשתינה" (though he rejected its connection to the question of borders). Ornan pointed to Hebrew sources in the past two hundred years which utilized this form.

(9)  מקובל בידנו: כאשר יש גם שם עברי וגם לועזי — העברי עדיף. המילה פלסטינה מצויה
בעברית של מאות השנים האחרונות, בדיוק במובן הזה, כשמו של חבל הארץ הזה. שאלת
מקומו המדויק של הגבול איננה חשובה. (ibid. 215)

It is accepted that when there is both a Hebrew and a foreign name — the Hebrew is preferred. The word פלסטינה [Palestina] is found in the Hebrew of the last few hundred years, exactly in this sense, as the name of this land. The question of the exact location of the border is not important.

As opposed to Morag's claim, Ornan argued that the name is not linked to the geographical issue, and thus he indirectly supports the opinion that this is a linguistic issue rather than a political one — an essential debate that I will discuss in the following sections. It may be important to mention Ornan's political standpoints, which he has expressed many times: Ornan used to be part of the Canaanite movement led by his brother, the poet Yonatan Ratosh (Ornan 1993). It seems that Ornan's Canaanite points of view reverberate in his opinion in the matter of פלשתינה. (cf. Kuzar 2001: 197–279). Ornan, unlike others, would like to draw on native British Mandate culture (he even mentions the song "Titine, oh Titine, we will go to Palestine"). His attitude to the classical Hebrew sources is also different from that of others. It is difficult to think of another person in the discussion who would have held what is said in Midrash Bereshit Rabbah in such contempt as Ornan did when he said:

(10)   ואל תשימו לב שבאיזה מדרש כתוב בסמ״ך וטי״ת [...] זה לא צריך להיות מורה דרך שלנו
בהחלטות שאנחנו מקבלים היום. (ibid. 216)

> And do not pay attention to [the fact] that some Midrash spells with Samekh
> and Tet [...] this should not be our guide for the decisions that we make
> today.

## 5.   Linguistic or political question?

In the heat of linguistic and political discussions and arguments about how the
name Palestine should be pronounced and spelled, one can observe another ques-
tion penetrating the discussion, which is whether the mere act of discussing, and
the question involved in it, are linguistic or political issues. The answer to this
question is crucial for understanding the attitude of the speakers, both to the lan-
guage phenomenon and to the political issue.

The position claiming that this is a political question was expressed by various
speakers:

(11)   (1) זאת לא שאלה לשונית, זאת שאלה פוליטית, כמו שאמר הא׳ מגד, ואפילו לאומית.
(Avraham Tal, ibid. 186)
(2) זוהי בלי ספק שאלה פוליטית. (Avner Treinin, ibid. 186)
(3) אי אפשר להתעלם מן העובדה שאנו עומדים בפני הכרעה פוליטית.
(Shlomo Morag, ibid. 216)
(4) הדבר הזה הוא עניין פוליטי ויש בו ריח פוליטי מכל צד. (Efraim Hazan, ibid. 217)

  a.   This is not a linguistic question, this is a political question, as Mr.
       Megged has said, and even a national one.
  b.   This is without a doubt a political question.
  c.   One cannot ignore the fact that we are facing a political decision.
  d.   This is a political matter which smells of politics throughout.

Nevertheless, the participants in the discussion were not in agreement over this

(12)   (1) זוהי שאלה לשונית ולא פוליטית. (Ari Avner, ibid. 186)
(2) לדעתי אין כאן שום עניין פוליטי. (Yaakov Mansour, ibid. 220)
(3) אנחנו צריכים לדון בבעיה לשונית טהורה. (Shraga Irmay, ibid. 220)
(4) השאלה היא שאלה לשונית ולא שאלה פוליטית. (Uzi Ornan, ibid. 318)

  a.   This is a linguistic question rather than a political one.
  b.   In my opinion, there is no political issue here.
  c.   We need to discuss a pure linguistic problem.
  d.   This question is linguistic, and not political.

Gavriel Birenbaum also referred to this issue:

(13) אני חושב שדווקא כל הדיבורים האלה 'לא להפוך את זה לדבר פוליטי' הופכים את השאלה
לשאלה פוליטית. השאלה היא פשוטה מאוד. קריין הרדיו שואל: 'איך אני צריך להגיד
בחדשות? פלסטינים או פלסטינים?' (ibid. 186),

> I think that actually all this talk about "not making it into a political issue"
> is turning the question into a political one. The question is very simple. The
> radio announcer is asking: how should I say on the news? "Palestinim" or
> "Falestinim" ('Palestinians')?

It seems that Birenbaum also believes one can avoid referring to the question as a
political one. But his claim, that the mere discussion of the question turns it into
a political one, hints at the direction in which the discussions of the academy are
headed throughout three plenary meetings.

## 5.1  "This is a political question"

It seems that the longer the discussions take, the more the academy hesitates and
is unable to reach a decision. The declared reason for this is that "This is a political
question". This approach was expressed by Ari Avner in the third meeting:

(14) הגעתי לכלל מסקנה שמי שתמך בדעתי ומי שהתנגד לה עשה זאת לא מטעמים לשוניים, אלא
מטעמים פוליטיים. אם כן אני מציע שהאקדמיה לא תתערב בוויכוח הזה. (ibid. 315)

> I have come to the conclusion that anyone who supported my opinion, and
> anyone who opposed it, did so not out of linguistic considerations but rather
> out of political ones. Thus I suggest that the academy shall not get involved
> in this issue.

Thus it seems that the process of naming, which began with hope and high spirits
at the first meeting, is heading towards collapse. But how does this collapse take
place? In order to trace this process I will try to explore the meaning of the phrase
"this is a political question". To do this, in addition to the discursive analysis that
has been heretofore suggested, I will address some notions from the Derridian
post-structural critique. I hope this act will enrich the theoretical debate on the
question of how critical discourse analysis and post-structural thinking can be
integrated (Threadgold 2000, Barker and Galasinski 2001, Threadgold 2003).

In his article "difference" Derrida offered an examination of the two mean-
ings of the verb différer (Derrida 1982:7), and on their basis he developed his
philosophic and linguistic critique. These two meanings will serve as the basis for
the analysis of the phrase "this is a political question". On the one hand, the mean-
ing of the verb différer is to be distinct, to be other, discernible. This meaning of
distinction, as Saussure showed, represents the very possibility to give a name and
to create a linguistic "value", by means of distinction between names. The very

possibility of the academy's will to conduct the meeting and to give a name to Palestine is rooted in the possibility of distinctions. Moreover, the possibility of distinction represents in my view the declared attitude of the academy towards the question of whether it is a political or a linguistic question. According to this attitude the linguistic question is a distinct issue in and of itself and the political issue is another matter, and the two fields must not be mixed. This view of distinction applies both to those who believe this is a political question and to those who think it is a linguistic question — they all assume a distinction and even a basic contradiction between the two areas. A clear expression of this can be found in the following statement by Gad Ben-Ami Zarfati:

(15)    מדבריהם של קודמיי עולה שיש פה שתי שאלות: האחת לשונית והאחת פוליטית.
(Proceedings. 217)

> According to the statements by those preceding me, it seems there are two questions here: one is linguistic and the other is political.

The other meaning of the verb différer which Derrida pointed out is "to post-pone". Différance is thus the spectral and simultaneous existence of the meaning of distinction and the meaning of postponement. In other words, it is the meaning of "here and now" in tandem with the meaning of "not yet". The meaning of postponement is the undeclared and more interesting stance which devolves from the academy's discussions. Together with the will to determine the Palestinians' and Palestine's name, arises time and again the idea of postponing the decision of the name, making it conditional on future political developments, or alternatively, postponing the discussion. Already in the first meeting Yaacov Mantsour suggests:

(16)    גם אני רוצה לצדד בהצעה לדבר על פלסטין בפ''א דגושה, וזה לא מגוחך כמו ההגייה
פינלנד. בכל זאת המילה היא בעלת מסורת של שימוש בעברית. כשתהיה מדינה, נדבר על
כך; בינתיים אנחנו יכולים להגות בפ''א דגושה. (ibid. 188)

> I also want to advocate the suggestion to speak of Palestine with an accentuated Peh [p], and it is not as ridiculous as pronouncing Pinland [Finland]. It is still a word which carries a tradition of use in Hebrew. When [Palestinian] a state is established, we will talk about it; meanwhile we can pronounce it with an accentuated Peh.

Mantsour suggests postponing the pronunciation of the name as in Arabic to the time when a Palestinian state exists. Another suggestion to postpone the issue was raised by Shulamit Hareven:

(17)    אני מצטרפת לדעתו של הא' חזן להסיר את העניין מסדר היום. בעוד חמש שנים ניפגש שוב
ונחליט. (ibid. 218)

> I join Mr. Hazan's opinion to remove the subject from the agenda. In five years we will meet again and decide.

In the end of the second meeting the academy decided that a decision will be made only in regards to an adjective, and not for the noun, in the sense of recognizing the people but not a collective or a political entity (it was decided that the form will be with an accentuated Peh, and with Samekh and Tet). This decision was appealed and brought up again at the third meeting, where again it was suggested to postpone giving the name.

Aharon Amir stated at the end of the third meeting:

(18)      בינתיים אין לנו חובה למצוא שם למדינה כי עוד אין מדינה, יש רשות פלסטינית, אפילו
מבחינתם של הפלשתינאים. אין אנו צריכים להקדים את העגלה לסוסים. (ibid. 318)
Meanwhile we do not have a duty to find a name for the state, for there is no state yet. There is a Palestinian authority, even from the point of view of the Palestinians. We shall not put the carriage before the horses.

The third meeting ends with the dismissal of all previous decisions, and recognizing all forms as legitimate.

## 6.   Conclusion

Derrida's aim was to think beyond binary oppositions, beyond the thought that the distinctive meaning and the postponement meaning are mutually exclusive. Both meanings, of distinction, presence and existence on the one hand, and of postponed, "not yet in existence" on the other hand must be preceded according to Derrida by an "in between" existence, a non-existing existence, or a "polluted" existence (not a purely existence and not a purely non-existence). It is evident that a similar situation of the coexistence of these two meaning is found at the academy's discussions. It has been shown that the condition which enabled both the occurrence of the will to name and its interruption was the very question of the possibility and impossibility of relationships between language and politics, which undermined the entire academy's enterprise of naming. Or in other words, it is within the same blurred, ungraspable zone between the political and the linguistic, the zone from which the very wish to give a name arises and motivates the discussions, that this wish is also, at its peak, exhausted, interrupted, bringing the discussions to their indecisive conclusion. It is this kind of a spectral zone, I suggest, that is to be considered with the relation between language and politics.

The abovementioned discussion suggests not only seeing the politic and the linguistic as elements that are inseparably linked and integrated, elements that stain and pollute each other, but also criticizing the function of the problematic declared distinctive approach expressed by academy, within the framework of the local political power relations. An analysis of the Academy's discussions reveals

the limits of linguistic research, and moreover, of its power, role and ability to produce and shape the current political-linguistic academic discourse.

## Notes

*  I wish to thank Prof. Hannan Hever for his valuable comments.

**1.**  A name of a Kibbutz (a Zionist-socialist form of settling) in the north of the Israel. Also see below the name Deganiyah B. The English translation is taken from Bober (1972: 77). Cited also in Chomsky (1975: 21)

**2.**  In Hebrew: /erets yisrael/.

**3.**  Instead of "plosive-bilabial" and "fricative-labiodental" see henceforth Peh as [p] / Peh as [f]; Referred to also as "accentuated Peh" and "lax Peh," respectively.

**4.**  And see also Rabinowits 1993. Rabinowits does not deal directly with the question of the name Palestine, and his article focuses on the name of the Palestinians who live in Israel, sometimes named "Israeli Arabs". Also see Adiel 2009.

**5.**  An acronym used in Hebrew grammar for the letters Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, Kaf, Peh and Tav, which are pronounced according to traditional grammar as plosives when no vowel precedes them (e.g. at the beginning of words).

**6.**  Smilansky is better known as S. Yizhar — a prominent Hebrew writer who was awarded the Israel prize and was also a member of the Israeli parliament.

**7.**  All references in the article to Academy discussions are to page numbers as quoted in the *Proceedings of the Academy of the Hebrew Language 41–43*, and see henceforth *Proceedings*.

**8.**  The committee was appointed and guided closely by the first prime minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion, who wrote to the committee: "we are obliged to remove the Arabic names for reasons of state. Just as we do not recognize the Arab's Political proprietorship of the land, so also do we not recognize their spiritual proprietorship and their manes" (Benvenisti 2000: 14). Unfortunately this tendency is still common in Israel. Recently transportation minister Yisrael Katz (Likud Party) took these colonial practices a step further, advancing an initiative to write Hebraised Arab names on road signs not only in Hebrew, but also in Arabic, and to transcribe them according to Hebrew pronunciation, for example لود ([Lod] in Hebrew, a city near Tel-aviv) instead of the Arab name اللد — Al-lid; عكو ([Akko, city in north of Israel) instead of عكا [Akka]; يافو [Yafo], instead of يافا — Yafa (Jaffa, the port city), and so forth. See also Pratt 1991, Boyarin 1997, Ziv 2009.

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