“I have no head for long words” —

The Linguistic Representation of the Frecha in the Israeli Media

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The word frecha [frexa, pl. frechot], which probably stems from the Arabic word for joy, was once a proper noun, mainly used for Moroccan women. Employed in Israel as a generic noun from the early 1970s, this construct came to denote a certain cultural type — usually a young, flighty, vulgar woman, characterized by unrefined speech, cheap dress, and garish behavior as well as sexual permissiveness, simplistic thinking, and distinctive body language.

In recent years, writers, poets, playwrights, comedians, sociologists, painters, and scholars have all addressed the image of the frecha. The concept has also translated into the Israeli media in a unique way. While the term frecha formerly had strong ethnic overtones and primarily referred to Sephardi-Mizrahi (mostly Moroccan) women, at present its meaning extends to women from other ethnic groups who have also adopted linguistic features attributed to the Mizrahi frecha. Irena, a Russian-Israeli woman portrayed as a frecha in the television series The Parliament, uses many Arabic words and expressions in her speech, albeit with a strong Russian accent.

Although the image of the frecha has been explored in previous scholarship, these studies do not probe the frecha’s language as a defining feature. In examining the linguistic representations of the frecha in Israeli popular media, I argue that speech alone — pronunciation, vocabulary, intonation, malapropisms, and the use of Arabic words and expressions — can mark a woman as a frecha. Alongside the standard language exists a changing, dynamic, informal, non-normative language: the frecha belongs to and functions on the seam between the two.¹

In televised humor, women tend to be marked more stereotypically than men;² thus the frecha’s language can be classified as a genderlect, that is, a sociolect characterized
by gender. There is a recognizable difference between the language of the frecha and the language of her male counterpart—the ars—in various media: the language of the ars is usually more elevated and normative, reflecting his greater exposure to classic Jewish sources in real life.

The “Frecha Song,” performed by Ofra Haza in Asi Dayan’s movie Shlager (1977), can be perceived as an attempt to reject hegemonic culture and language in order to make space for a minority one. Haza declares proudly in the movie, “I am a frecha,” there is a place for me. The song’s opening line, “I have no head for long words,” singles out a stereotypical linguistic feature: the frecha’s inability to understand, use, and pronounce elevated words. The song is used again in a new television series, Amamiyot (2014, Naor Zion), in which the three main characters are frechot trying to disguise their origins. By singing this song openly during an evening of karaoke, they aim to squelch any suspicion that they are indeed frechot. In underscoring the importance of language in forming a new identity, Zion’s series echoes Pygmalion and My Fair Lady, where Eliza Doolelittle desires to adopt a new identity by means of language.

As is often the case, satiric television programs intensify and exaggerate linguistic features. While some linguistic features derive from real speech, others are invented. Not all the linguistic features described here are exclusive to the frecha. Some are shared by young girls; some are used by Mizrahi speakers. For example, despite the penultimate intonation that changes the word kapara (literally “atonement”) to an affectionate salutation pronounced kapara, its use does not necessarily make one a frecha. Rather, it is the accretion of linguistic characteristics, some overused (like kapara), and some shared by other populations that mark a frecha’s speech.

A frecha’s speech is characterized by many linguistic features, several of which I will cite here. The most prominent televised representative of the frecha is Limor, played by the actress Orna Banai. All the linguistic features discussed here appear constantly in her speech. Although she exemplifies the stereotype, her speech also possesses subversive aspects. She is mocked and, at the same time, mocks others through her use of language. The first linguistic feature relates to names. Because ultimate-stressed modern names are linguistically unmarked in Hebrew, the penultimate pronunciation of Limor’s name—LImor rather than the normative liMOR—is a dead giveaway of her identity as a frecha. When pronounced with penultimate stress, names divulge a lower social status: ORtal, MORan, YAniv, GOlan, Ofir, Alon, among others. The penultimate pronunciation of general words is revealing as well: in another Naor Zion television show, “A frecha in disguise” is exposed by her use of penultimate stress in the word for cake, Ooga.

Typically, a frecha who wishes to adopt a new identity changes her name, usually from a French name to a “kosher,” neutral, Israeli one. Frechot are portrayed as women who are fully aware of the importance of names in Israeli society and of the link between name and social label. Sima (a typical Mizrahi name) becomes Smamit, literally “gecko.” This choice of a ridiculous name mocks not just the frecha who uses a form of an unmarked, popular [it]-suffixed name to disguise her origins, but also the overuse of these names by normative society. Other examples of name changes are Shontal/Shani, Sweesa/Swinger, Sylvie/Slavit, Knafo/Kanaf. The name Sigalit in particular, and its abbreviated form Sigi, marks the frecha in many media sources.

Violation of the noun-adjective agreement rule when the Hebrew noun has a dual
form is another identifying feature of a frecha. One recurring example that marks the speaker as possessing a distinctive provincial substandard sociolect is michnasayim katsar instead of michnasayim ktsarim. (In English this would be equivalent to saying “a short pant” for “short pants.”) Other examples of the use of the singular for the dual or plural nominal forms include: na’al for na’alayim (shoe); and tachton for tachtonim (underwear).

Many other characteristic features of the frecha’s speech appear in these shows, including voiced pronunciation of unvoiced consonants: gvar instead of kvar (already); mispronunciation of elevated words: lehitnavnev instead of lehinnaven (to decay), and especially foreign words: streo instead of stereo; the distortion of idioms: “to be in his boots” instead of “in his shoes”; morphological shifts that lead to incorrect verb usage: hisrateti instead of saratety (I scratched); and special intonation in a chain of short simple sentences: My sister?↑ Her brother?↑ His dog?↑-died↓. Distinct syntactic structures and conjunctions also mark the frecha’s speech.

Regardless of her ethnic origins, the frecha always makes wide use of Arabic words, especially fillers such as ya’ani, ya’anu, and walla that correspond to the use of “like” in English. Also, all media representations of the frecha exhibit more frequent use of exclamations than in unmarked speech.

Nonetheless, we can chart a shift in the status of the frecha in the media. When the character Limor on the television show became a political advisor, her original image as a simple-minded, submissive woman experienced empowerment. Outside the media, the peculiarities and innovations of Limor’s language have made their way into general speech, as was the case earlier regarding the iconic comedy trio “Ha-gashash Ha-chiver” (1963–2007). Whoever uses Limor’s expression “yoter adif” (more preferable), knows that it is incorrect, but chooses to use it with a smile. This movement from restricted, tagged language to general speech symbolizes a shift in the status of the frecha, from marginalization to mainstream representation regarding both language and dress. (For example, leopard-spotted clothing, typical of a frecha, is now in fashion.)

This process goes hand in hand with the current, growing interest in Mizrahi literature and music in Israeli society. The image of the ars and the frecha has also reached the gay community, as demonstrated by the song promoting the last Gay Pride parade in Tel Aviv. As one of the actors in the Parliament TV show (portraying the ars husband of a Russian frecha) said: there are no more Russians, Ashkenazis, etc.: everyone is Mizrahi.