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Troubled Speech, Hebrew Subjects, and the Problem of Meaning-Making: Speaking Hebrew in Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner's *Shkhol ve-kishalon* (Breakdown and Bereavement, 1920)

Among early twentieth-century Hebrew writers, perhaps no other was as enthralled with the nuance and reverberations of speech as Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner. Brenner's literary works exhibit heightened sensibility to speaking practices. His stories are filled with catalogues of sounds, accents, voices, and gestures that surround spoken language. His narrators are obsessively concerned with the musicality and disharmony that make up human speech, and his protagonists chatter, chime, murmur, buzz, or stammer their words out.[1] In particular, Brenner is attentive to the bodily dimension of speech and the unintended significations that the speaking body adds to the words that it speaks. In his works, then, what is said is always haunted by the act of saying, and the speaking body necessarily exceeds what it says.

Since migrating to Palestine in 1909, Brenner's attentiveness to speech had become entwined with the broader questions of mimesis, representation, and the possibility of authentic expression that have preoccupied him throughout his literary career (**fig. 1**). Hebraist calls to instill Hebrew in the lives of Jewish immigrants, and concrete attempts to employ it as a spoken language within the Jewish settlement in Palestine (the Yishuv), percolated into his literary works and shaped anew his poetic and philosophical reflections on language. Not only the dynamics of speech, but Hebrew speech in particular now became a dominant theme in his oeuvre.[2]

1 The trope of Hebrew stammer allowed Brenner to enact within his poetics an iterated experience of transition and deferral, both typical of the literary discourse of Hebrew revival. Roni Henig, Stammering Hebrew. Y. H. Brenner's Deferred Beginnings in the Novel "Me-Hathala," in: Comparative Literature Studies 56 (2019), no. 2, 229–259.
2 Ariel Hirschfeld and Allison Schachter have shown how in works written in and about Palestine, language, and particularly situations of Hebrew speech, become a major locus for the drama of the narratives. See Ariel Hirschfeld, Retet ẓamarot

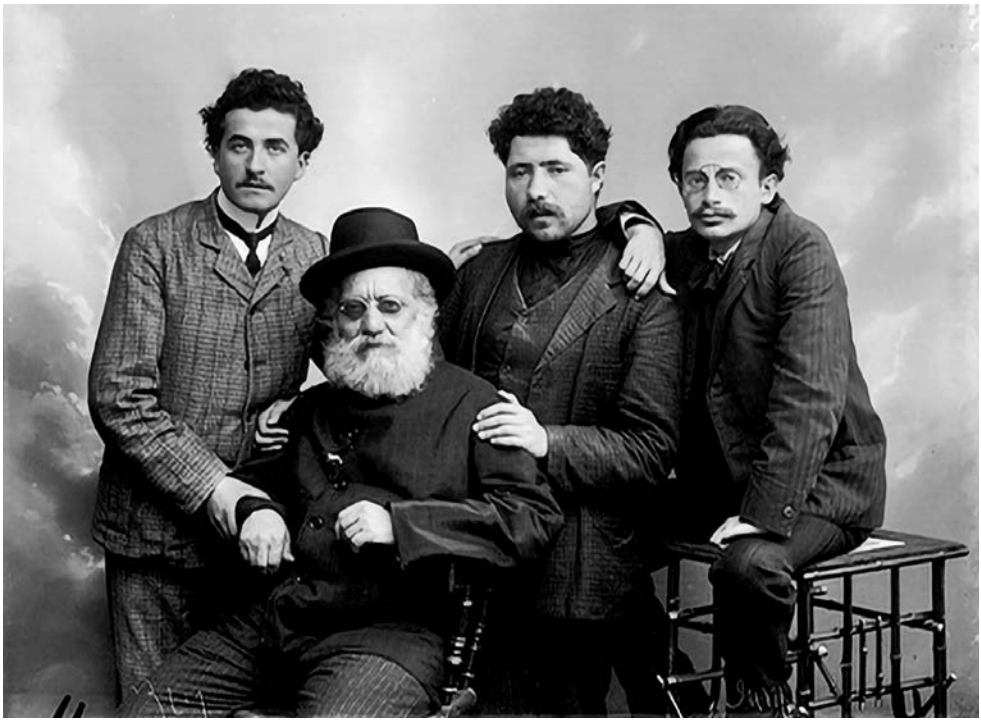

Fig. 1: From left to right: the writers Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Alexander Siskind Rabinovitz (known as Azar, sitting), Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner, and David Shimoni, 1910.

Brenner repeatedly explored the poetic potentialities that became available as the status of Hebrew and its relationship to other languages continued to transform. If the concern with spoken language previously served Brenner in displaying the latent incongruities between words and their objects, or between spoken languages and the bodies who speak them, then speaking Hebrew not only intensified this initial mistrust, but also cast the practice of Hebrew writing within a cluster of ideological and poetic expectations and a newly articulated language politics.

This essay focuses on a seemingly marginal moment of Hebrew speaking in the novel *Shkhol ve-kishalon* (Breakdown and Bereavement). Closely reading this moment, it explores the ways in which the possibility and threat of Hebrew speech, as imagined in Brenner's literary oeuvre, stirred up a series of questions within his literary narration, including his choice to

ve-dagim meluḥim. Al "ha-milim ve-ha-devarim" be-"Aẓabim" le-Y. Ḥ. Brener [Trembling Treetops and Salty Fish. On "Words and Facts" in "Aẓabim" by Y. Ḥ. Brenner], in: Judith Bar-El / Yigal Schwartz / Tamar S. Hess (eds.), Sifrut ve-ḥevrah ba-tarbut ha-ivrit ha-ḥadashah [Literature and Society in Modern Hebrew Culture], Tel Aviv 2000, 71–81; Allison Schachter, Diasporic Modernisms. Hebrew and Yiddish Literature in the Twentieth Century, Oxford / New York 2011, 55–83.

write in Hebrew. Considering Brenner's criticism of the Jewish settlement in Palestine and its language politics, I ask, what critique is possible when critical intervention itself is challenged by the instability of the narrating authority? Through seemingly critical, ironic, or ridiculing representation of Hebrew speech, Brenner evokes a self-reflective questioning of both his narrative and the critical agency that it sets forth. At the same time, I argue, the performativity of Hebrew speech makes visible the identification of national Hebrew subjects as rooted in an artificial process of meaning-making, which leaves little room for the possibility of original, natural, or authentic expression. Such artificial identifications underscore the fictional nature of national linguistic attachment. In this respect, they carry a liberating potentiality that may fleetingly dismantle the grip of national subjectivity.

In recent years, scholars researching Brenner and his works have largely moved away from previous tendencies to ground his position in an ethical commitment to sincerity. Instead, scholarship has gravitated towards interrogating the disintegration that characterizes Brenner's narratives, the reflexivity and unreliability of his narrators, and the challenges that his prose fiction poses to the very possibility of literary mimesis.[3] In that vein, Shai Ginsburg has shown that, for Brenner, literary representation was entwined with categories of territory and space, and that his migration to Palestine rendered the European literary forms that were at his disposal inadequate for narrating the experience of uprootedness typical of that community of recent immigrants to the land.[4] I propose that the conscious awareness of the lack of such adequate form implicates the narrative of *Shkhol ve-kishalon* from its inception. Yet, this inadequacy in and of itself finds an effective model of representation in the very problematics of insufficient Hebrew speech.

The novel *Shkhol ve-kishalon*, which Brenner began writing in 1914 and published in 1920, summoned various opportunities to engage with Hebrew

3 See, for instance, Eyal Bassan, Affirmative Weakening. Y. H. Brenner and the Weak Rethinking of the Politics of Hebrew Literature, in: Rethinking History 19 (2015), no. 1, 41–60; Dina Berdichevsky, Yehudim, masa'im ve-she'ar ḥasre ha-z'aner. Ha-mikreh shel Brener ve-tekufato [Jews, Essayists, and Other Genreless People. The Case of Brenner and His Time], in: Mi-kan. Ketav et le-ḥeker ha-sifrut ve-ha-tarbut ha-yehudit ve-ha-isra'elit [From Here. A Journal for the Study of Jewish and Israeli Literature and Culture] 20 (2020), 26–46; Shai Ginsburg, Rhetoric and Nation. The Formation of Hebrew National Culture, 1880–1990, Syracuse, N. Y., 2014, 108–152; Michael Gluzman, Ha-guf ha-ẓiyoni. Le'umiyut, migdar ve-miniyut ba-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-ḥadashah [The Zionist Body. Nationalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Hebrew Literature], Tel Aviv 2007, 136–181; Hannan Hever, Ha-sipur ve-ha-le'om. Kri'ot bikortiyot be-kanon ha-siporet ha-ivrit [The Narrative and the Nation. Critical Readings in the Canon of Hebrew Fiction], Tel Aviv 2007, 47–75.

4 Ginsburg, Rhetoric and Nation, 131.

Figs. 2 and 3: Yosef Ḥayyim Brenner's *Shkhol ve-kishalon*, published in New York, Warsaw, and Moscow in 1920.

speech (figs. 2 and 3). The novel takes place in Ottoman Palestine. It tells the story of Yehezkel Hefetz, a Jewish immigrant who recently arrived in the land, hoping to become an agricultural laborer and fulfill the Zionist imperative to shed his diasporic attributes, restore his masculinity, and embody the ideal of a new Hebrew subject. Immediately, however, his wish is met with a resounding failure, and Hefetz, who throughout the course of the novel suffers a series of physical and mental breakdowns, is sent out of the agricultural group to live with relatives in Jerusalem, where he also spends time in a mental institution. The community of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Jerusalem is at the center of this novel. The protagonists, members of the Hefetz family and their acquaintances, struggle with sickness, unemployment, poverty, and loss. They are emotionally and sexually troubled, and their romantic pursues are destined to failure.

As is the case in many of Brenner's works, it is clear that, for the most part, the languages that the characters speak differ from the language of narration, Hebrew. Although all dialogues are imparted in Hebrew—albeit strewn with foreign vocabulary—Yiddish is implied to be the more commonly spoken language. Readers are told early on that in Palestine, Hefetz

"had spoken the native language of a Jew from Eastern Europe, […] and if now and then he had actually conversed in Hebrew with a teacher, or a student, or an aspiring young girl, they had all felt a bit superior."[5] Speaking Hebrew is presented ironically not only as a largely uncommon practice, but also as part of an artificial and pretentious facade associated with nationally oriented institutions.

In her reading of the novel, which focuses on Hebrew speech, the tensions between Hebrew and Yiddish, and the multilingual conditions of Hebrew writing, Allison Schachter has argued that the entire work is framed as a fictional translation from Yiddish.[6] Schachter compellingly shows how, through embedded stories of translation and linguistic failings, the novel is imprinted with the translational trace of Yiddish. She thus argues that "the Hebrew of Brenner's novel conceals its fictional Yiddish source,"[7] and in so doing, the novel voices a critique of Hebraist monolingual national culture and its claim for dominance within the Yishuv.

While I agree with Schachter that *Shkhol ve-kishalon* is riddled with linguistic failings that underscore the fraught language politics of the time, I take a different approach to Brenner's preoccupation with Hebrew speech. I argue that Brenner deploys Hebrew speech—in its brokenness, dysfluency, and foreign influences—to represent a fundamental incongruity between language and identity. In this respect, Hebrew speaking, rather than revealing a Yiddish origin that is concealed within the Hebrew text, represents the very uprooting of the assumption of a native tongue.

Eyal Bassan has shown that Brenner's literary writing, including his nihilistic critique of Zionism, often provides "a critical account of the very possibility and legitimacy of the critique itself."[8] For Bassan, Brenner's criticism is only available by means of "weakening affirmation," that is, by the weakening of strong identities through the acknowledgement that "contingency is pertinent to the question of identity."[9] My reading suggests that the accentuated Hebrew speech that is embedded in the narrative of *Shkhol ve-kishalon* exposes the problematic mechanism of meaning-

5 Yosef Ḥayim Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon o sefer ha-hitlabtut [Breakdown and Bereavement], in: Ketavim [Writings], 4 vols., here vol. 2, Tel Aviv 1977, 1443–1688, here 1456; Yosef Haim Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, transl. and with an introduction by Hillel Halkin, New Milford, Conn., 2004, 17.

6 The novel opens with a fictional foreword, in which the narrator "confesses" that he had converted Hefetz's original diaries from the first person to the third person. Schachter argues that such adaptation must have also involved a translation of the text, since Hefetz could have only written his diaries in Yiddish.

7 Schachter, Diasporic Modernisms, 57.

8 Bassan, Affirmative Weakening, 43.

9 Bassan, Affirmative Weakening, 52.

making particular to the symbolic space of "the Holy Land" that the novel portrays, a mechanism that is extended to the act of Hebrew narration. At the same time, in the constraints and limitations that Hebrew speaking imposes on its speakers, Brenner also identifies a productive possibility to narrate the theatricality of national and ethnic identities. While that possibility may not amount to a shattering critique of the national project, it provides the narrative with fleeting moments of sobriety, in which failing identifications gesture towards the fragile, paradoxical logic that comprises nationalist systems of signification.

This paper will address in detail one anecdote in the narrative in which Shneirson (an acquaintance of the Hefetz family and a former private tutor to Yehezkel's beloved cousin, Miriam) engages in a Hebrew conversation with his new Sephardic girlfriend, who remains nameless throughout the story. Shneirson is described earlier in the novel as an average "young Hebrew nationalist," who stems "from a well-to-do home." The narrator further mentions that he was "certainly no worse than any of his Russian friends and contemporaries."[10] Shneirson is thus introduced as (yet another) Zionist pioneer, a recent immigrant to the Yishuv, whose nationalist sentiments blend in with those of a banal collectivity. Like others who have "debarked at one time or another off the coast of Palestine's Jaffa," Shneirson, too, is presumed to have "admired the splendid scenery from the deck of the ship, went into town feeling dreadfully moved, [and] lost [his] temper at the Arabs who approached [him] on the way."[11] Those pseudo-impassionate responses of admiration and hostility are depicted as almost mechanical.

A similarly mechanical behavior seems to characterize Shneirson's love life. After having given up on previous romantic pursues, Shneirson becomes involved with a young Sephardic woman. Hebrew speech becomes a central focus of their relationship:

> "שניאורסון, כידוע, הלך בעת האחרונה — לאחר שנכזבה תוחלתו גם מבת בעל־המלון, אך זה אינו מן הענין — ובכן הלך שניאורסון בעת האחרונה שבי אחרי ספרדיה אחת. 'טיפוס אֶכּזוֹטי' — הוא אומר, אך סליחה, זה אינו מן הענין, ולא בזה היא הסתירה; הסתירה היא באחרת, בזאת: הספרדיה, ככל חברותיה הבאות בדברים עם הישוב האשכנזי, הישן או החדש, יודעת, כמובן, את הז'ארגון האשכנזי למדי — לא פחות משניאורסון (השוטים בחוץ־לארץ מדמים, שעברית היא השלטת ... גם זוהי אניקדוטה!). ואולם למרות שהיא יודעת ושניאורסון יודע שהיא יודעת, והיא יודעת ששניאורסון יודע שהיא יודעת, ושניאורסון יודע שהיא יודעת כי הוא יודע שהיא יודעת, אף על פי כן, גם הוא, שניאורסון, גם היא, אבן־המושכת, הטיפוס האֶכּזוֹטי, שניהם

10 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1497 f.; Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 59.
11 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1497 f.; Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 59.

מתחפשים, כי חס ושלום ... מי? הם? הם יודעים ז'ארגון? שניהם מתחפשים, כי רק השפה העברית היא המקרבת אותם, את שני האֶלמנטים של הישוב ..."[12]

> "Recently, as everyone knew, after he had been stood up by the hotel owner's daughter (but this was another story), Shneirson had begun to chase after a certain Sephardic girl, an 'exotic type,' as he put it—though begging everyone's pardon, this too was another story, for the irony did not lie here. No, the irony lay elsewhere: this Sephardic girl, like all the Jews from the Levant who had dealings with the Ashkenazim of Eastern Europe, knew Yiddish perfectly well—as well as Shneirson, in fact. (Abroad every imbecile thought that the Jews in Palestine spoke Hebrew—this too was a story!) Yet despite the fact that she knew, and that Shneirson knew that she knew, and that she knew that Shneirson knew that she knew, and that Shneirson knew that she knew that he knew that she knew—nevertheless, he, Shneirson, and she, the exotic type of his dreams, pretended that … *What? They speak that jargon called Yiddish? The idea!* That is, they made believe that as representatives of the two halves of the Jewish people in the Holy Land they could communicate only in Hebrew."[13]

The irony that motivates the scene seems to grow and multiply as the anecdote unfolds. Shneirson's Orientalist fascination with the "Sephardic girl," what he conceives of as her "exotic" allure, is presented as the first in a series of ironies. His attraction to her echoes the flat admiration of the "splendid scenery" viewed from the deck of the ship upon his arrival in the land. It is an attraction that strips the "Sephardic girl" of any nuance and reduces her to no more than a substitutional "exotic type." Yet, the narrator soon stresses that this artificial love story is not where the main contradiction of the anecdote lies.

The point of the story, the reason for imparting it, lies in the couple's Hebrew speech. By speaking Hebrew to each other, Shneirson and "the Sephardic girl" act out a Zionist fantasy, in which Hebrew operates as a unifying force that could bridge the gaps between Jews of different origins within the charged territory of the "Holy Land." Speaking Hebrew, then, grants the couple entrance into a Hebraist narrative, according to which they can communicate with each other only in Hebrew. That fantasy aligns perfectly with the "imbecile" expectation from "abroad"; the false assumption that "Jews in Palestine spoke Hebrew." An implied audience is thus inserted into the scene, and the two lovers' display of language and identity is framed as a spectacle to behold.

12 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1636.
13 Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 208.

While the narrator's perspective is ironic, it is nevertheless speaking Hebrew that, in effect, grants the Sephardic woman her momentary appearance in the narrative. Although the narrator ridicules her choice to speak Hebrew (when she could have been communicating perfectly well in Yiddish), it may be noted that it is this choice in the first place that inserts her in the story. The girl speaks both Yiddish and Hebrew. Neither of these languages are "native" to her. Yet, the other languages that she speaks—perhaps Ladino, or Arabic—are absent from this scene. The anecdote therefore marks an underlying linguistic hierarchy, in which Yiddish, which is second to Hebrew, participates in the repression of other languages spoken within the Yishuv. It further demonstrates that Hebrew speech, ironic as it may be, often functions as a condition of visibility (or audibility) in the fictional space that the novel portrays.

In their Hebrew conversation, Shneirson and the Sephardic woman are introduced as actors in a (comedic) play. Practicing Hebrew speech, they comply with a role that is designated for them in the preconceived, imagined drama of ethnicity and nation-building. While they are both clearly aware that they could communicate and understand one another in Yiddish, nevertheless, they are choosing to act as if their relationship depends upon Hebrew as a sole language of communication. The phrase "nevertheless," or "*af-al-pi-khen*," is a particularly charged choice of words in the context of Brenner's literary oeuvre. A recurring gesture that is echoed throughout his work, "the Brennerian *af-al-pi-khen*" has been read traditionally as a persistent expression of resilience in the face of failure and despair. It is not entirely clear whether by framing the couple's Hebrew conversation as yet another moment of "nevertheless," Brenner lends a layer of ideological legitimacy to their linguistic pretense; or alternatively, whether this framing parodies the Brennerian trope itself, presenting it as an empty gesture. Either way, a direct link is established between the questionable practice of Hebrew speech and the practice of Hebrew writing in Palestine.

The couple is said to "pretend" that the language they speak springs naturally from them. The narrator uses the Hebrew verb *mitḥapsim* (literally, to disguise oneself) to name the purported lie in their behavior, thus alluding to the masquerading function of language. By speaking Hebrew, they are performing a linguistic identity that clearly responds to the demands of the ideological space that they inhabit. Playing that prescribed role turns the speakers into flat representations, but, as shall be seen, it also speaks to the performative dimension that is inherent in the constitution of national subjectivity.

The narrator's ridicule of the couple's speech is further demonstrated in the cited dialogue that follows, of their garbled Hebrew love discourse:

"— תאכל שוקולאדה, תאכל.
— למה שזה בריא בשביל הלב? אני לא חופצ!
— אז היא הולכת לדודה שלה?
— אני לא יושנת שמה; אני באה להנה.
— אז לא תשכח, אני בא אחריה בחצי התשיעית, תמיד איפה שהיא הולכת, אז גם אני הולך.
— הוא עושה לי כואב ואני נותנת לו נשיקה.
לשון־קודש נחמדה זו אפשר לשמוע מפיהם בכל ערב ..."[14]

"—Have a piece chocolate, have.
—Why 'cause it's good for me? I don't want none!
—So, when was you going to your aunt already?
—I wasn't sleeping there. I was coming to here.
—You should only don't forget, I'll pick you up a quarter to nine, wherever you go, me too.
—You make me a little hurt and I give you a little kiss.
This lovely Holy Tongue could be heard in their conversation every evening ..."[15]

The dialogue is intentionally awkward and filled with grammatical errors. Redundant prepositions are added (*le-henah* instead of *henah*, "to here" instead of "here"); verbs are conjugated incorrectly (*yoshenet* instead of *yeshenah*, *oseh li ko'ev* instead of *makh'iv li*); and the speakers misuse words and employ the pseudo-formal, Yiddish-inflected third person and future tense to address one another. It is not surprising that much of the dialogue revolves around the speakers' bodies (the mentioning of eating and sleeping, hurting and kissing). Brenner's representation of Hebrew speech is often interwoven with excessive or inappropriate sexual desire.[16] A free and overly self-confident use of Hebrew, as demonstrated by the two lovers, signals sexual promiscuity. Indeed, in the following page, a comment is made on the "corrupted and disoriented [...] soul" of the promiscuous younger generation *("Ha-periẓut shel ha-dor ha-zeh! Ha-periẓut ha-mekhalah et ha-nefesh ve-goremet le-pizur ha-nefesh")*.[17] Coded in this way, the scene is read as a sensational linguistic and bodily spectacle.

What is most striking about this dialogue, however, is the narrator's attempt to mimic and accurately convey the artificiality of "non-native" speech. He does so in a language that is only just beginning to develop

14 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1636.
15 Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 208 f. The translation of the last sentence is by the author.
16 Roni Henig, Stammering Hebrew.
17 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1637; Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 209.

its colloquial standards, a language that in reality lacks stable colloquial models that might be emulated in literature, and is therefore non-native by definition. Hence the awkwardness of the conversation can only be measured against a literary standard of a Hebrew dialogue, in relation to which the "realistic" colloquial dialogue falls short. This inverted mimesis, as it were, unsettles the very possibility of literary representation.

That attempt to mimic non-native spoken language is all the more striking considering that the scene is narrated through free indirect discourse, combining the narrator's voice with that of Kahanowitz, Shneirson's friend and roommate. Kahanowitz is described earlier in the novel as a former yeshiva of Telz student, who has failed to be admitted to the secular seminar for teachers in Ḥolon and therefore suffers from "intellectual insecurity."[18] He is further said to be particularly interested in "the irony in human thought and behavior."[19] With an air of bitterness for his own failures, he then shares his reflections on his friend's latest romance willingly and with a "tongue [that] had become more and more biting."[20] Although the anecdote is narrated in the third person, the conversational manner in which it is told is evident. Kahanowitz's voice could be heard through breaks in the narrative and brief bracketed comments ("pardon, this too was another story!"), and his colloquial interventions interrupt the narrator's proper speech. Kahanowitz seems to take pleasure in revealing the irony in his friend's behavior. Yet, as the narrator makes clear, Kahanowitz himself is riddled with contradictions. Immediately after citing the dialogue between Shneirson and the Sephardic girl, the narrator comments:

> "כאן, אמנם, היה אפשר להקשות על מספר־האמת בעצמו: למה הוא משנה תוכן־סיפורו על פי סיבה חיצונית, במעמדו של שניאורסון או היעדרו בשעת מעשה? [...] גם אצלו אצל כהנוביץ אין מחסור בסתירות."[21]

> "Of course one could hoist Kahanowitz [in the Hebrew text: the truth-teller] by his own petard: wasn't it just as ironic of him to vary his story depending on whether Shneirson was present or not? [...] Kahanowitz himself was the first to admit that he was full of contradictions."[22]

The "truth-teller," who aspires to expose the couple's lie, is now presented as an unreliable narrator, whose story shifts and is fundamentally unstable.

18 Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 60.
19 Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 207.
20 Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 207.
21 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1637.
22 Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 209.

In other words, through this seemingly marginal anecdote of Hebrew speaking, the third-person narrator of *Shkhol ve-kishalon* points at another third-person narrator's unreliability. An obsessive concern with contradictory behavior and insincere expression, it turns out, is not a guarantee for genuine narration or truth-telling. Instead, the story ends with questioning the storyteller himself, moving away from the narrative to the problem of its narration.

That the story itself, which revolves around the lie of speaking Hebrew, is imparted to the readers in Hebrew, duplicates the irony once again. Ridiculing the couple's attempt to "pass" as effortless Hebrew speakers and mimicking their awkward conversation, the narrator of *Shkhol ve-kishalon* is engaging in a similar lie, what Schachter has named the "linguistic fiction in the novel,"[23] that is, its Hebrew narration. The multiple ironies that this story reveals therefore become referential of the novel's mode of narration, as if the narrator inserts this comedic scene to question the validity of his own narrative and signals that he himself should not be trusted. But what happens when a critical narrative, driven by impassionate commitment to the revelation of contradictions and to sincere expression, produces a mirror image which doubles the lie it initially exposed? Rather than contesting the practice of Hebrew writing, Brenner reveals the lie and by the same token participates in its reproduction and dissemination.

We are left with nothing but a glance into the workings of an ideological linguistic fantasy and its inherently fictional nature, which fits in with the novel's broader apparatus of meaning-making. *Shkhol ve-kishalon* repeatedly demonstrates how the meaning of things, always subjected to a Zionist grand narrative, is uncontrollably diverted to the realms of sentimentality and cliché. That signification mode, which is associated with the territory of Palestine and its ideologically motivated Jewish inhabitants, operates on different levels of the text. The Yishuv emerges as an ideological space that abstracts singularities and turns them into representational signs; particularities translate inadvertently into generic symbols. Members of the agricultural group, for instance, are ironically depicted in the novel as idealistic men and women, "who bore the world's burdens on their shoulders and judged everything in terms of the group." Infected with what the narrator calls "the ailment of collectivity"[24] (*"negu'ey maḥalot-ha-kelal"*), they interpret every detail of their daily existence as standing for a broader ideological cause: "If one of them traveled abroad, for example, he had not simply gone someplace else, but had 'given up' and 'betrayed the

23 Schachter, Diasporic Modernisms, 73.
24 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1453 (translation by the author).

ideal'; if someone stood guard in a vineyard he was not just a lookout, but a 'watchman in the fatherland.'"[25]

This pompous inflating of trivial or arbitrary practices and their conversion into components of an ideological myth is indicative of the reductive processes of meaning-making that are fundamental to the story. Such processes are ubiquitous in the novel. They are particularly evident when it comes to names and naming. Shneirson, for instance, who is also introduced as a snarky name-giving individual, "felt obliged to transfix [every new person that he met] with a piercing glance, staring intently and at length as though to probe him to the bone until he had divined his true nature and could define it with a single word."[26] The somewhat violent practice of reducing a person to a single-word definition is typical of the mechanism of signification described above. Similarly, the protagonist, Yehezkel Hefetz, is said to have had an "entirely different" name when he was spending time in Western Europe, a name that was "not in the least prophetic or oriental or Palestinian."[27] Hefetz's Hebrew name is given to him (we do not know exactly by whom, or under which circumstances) upon his arrival in Palestine. His first name invokes the mysterious biblical prophet, while his last name (literally an object, but also a want, a desire) alludes to the objectifying act of naming.[28]

The imperative to speak Hebrew, which the narrative not only represents but also performs, thus becomes entwined with the regime of signification that governs the novel. Hebrew speaking in the national territory diverts meaning in the service of a nationalist narrative. Yet, in its awkwardness and exaggerated theatricality, Hebrew speaking also points at the absurd of this logic of signification. It thereby opens a gap in a seemingly natural process of linguistic and nationalist identification. Rather than affirming the identities of its speakers, it unsettles them, highlighting their inherent instability. It is not a coincidence that mental breakdown and psychosis are central themes in the novel. The contours of subjectivity are rendered particularly mutable throughout *Shkhol ve-kishalon*, and a stable recognition of the self, let alone via the practice of genuine linguistic expression, becomes impossible.

This mutability of subjectivity, however, is experienced in the novel in its duality, at once traumatic and potentially liberating. For Brenner not only

25 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1453; Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 15.
26 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1499; Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 61.
27 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1456; Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 17.
28 Gluzman has shown that the name Hefetz (*ḥefeẓ* means "object") is emblematic of the protagonist's drama of identity, which is manifested in his subjection to Zionist ideology and the gaze of the group. Gluzman, Ha-guf ha-ẓiyoni, 163.

mourns the loss of the sense of self that follows from the Zionist demand to transform Jewish subjectivity. Hebrew speech does not emerge in the novel as mere lament for the no-longer-retrievable integrity of the self, or for the loss of Yiddish as a language of trust and intimacy. Rather, the artificiality of Hebrew uproots the very assumption of nativity in language. Through Hebrew speaking, both language and identity are revealed in their performativity as theatrical gestures, random sounds and voices fundamentally disconnected from their speakers. In this respect, the novel disrupts any possibility of a native tongue.

Towards the end of the novel, another Hebrew-speaking couple—a nameless young man and woman from the so-called National School—happens to pass the narrative by. Their "conversation," in which the man speaks and the woman remains silent, revolves around beauty and art. In his attempt to convey the beauty of the land, the man resorts to the words of his literature teacher, who has proclaimed that poets and artists find beauty everywhere. But his mimicking speech fails, and his words fall flat:

> "העלם אומר דברים בשם אומרם ובשם עצמו ועובד עבודה קשה בפיו. הוא אינו מדבר — הוא מקשקש וצועק ונתקל באיזו ביטויים זרים, אי־טבעיים, על איזו אמנים, משוררים, סופרים, על איזו נופים יפים נחמדים בירושלים הישנה ... היש̇נה ... — צלצול־דברים ויסוד בנפש להם אין. רק המלה 'נחמד' יוצאת בהנאה אמיתית וכתיקונה. אכן תתברך אותה מלה, הנותנת את האפשרות להשתמש בצלצולה המיוחד."[29]

> "The young man struggles with his mouth to express his own and his teacher's thoughts. He is not speaking, rather he babbles and shouts at the top of his voice, stumbling upon foreign, unnatural phrases, about artists, poets, authors, about some beautiful, lovely landscapes in Old … Old Jerusalem … Chimes of words that do not spring from the soul. Only the word 'lovely' comes out genuinely, with sincere joy. Bless this word that allows one to utter its unique sound."[30]

Contrary to the previous scene of Hebrew speaking, in which Shneirson and the Sephardic girl are said to be carried away in the blissful ignorance of their boisterous love discourse, the Hebrew conversation of the anonymous couple from the National School demonstrates an anxious hyperawareness to the factitious nature of Hebrew speech. It is a type of speaking that either dissolves into silence (as in the case of the woman), or lays bare everything that proper speech is meant to keep hidden: the physical labor in uttering hard syllables, the struggle to link words to their referents, their disinte-

29 Brener, Shkhol ve-kishalon, 1667.
30 The translation of this fragment is by the author. For Halkin's version see Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 242f.

gration into meaningless sounds, the artificial dimension of speech, the foreignness that is always inherent in language, and the noticeable effort to make speech appear fluent and natural nevertheless. For the narrator, the young man's discourse amounts to "not speaking."[31] His Hebrew speech collapses into eccentric bodily gestures. He is incapable of capturing in words the beauty of the landscapes of Jaffa and Old Jerusalem. His speech therefore fails him precisely in his attempt to sing the praise of the land.

And yet, unexpected sincerity emerges in the midst of that mechanical exhibition of Hebrew speaking. The word *neḥmad*—which can be translated as an adjective (lovely, pleasant, nice), but also as a verb (coveted, desired)[32]—stands out in its peculiar resonance. This word captures not only linguistic beauty, but a sincere sensuous and desiring relation to language, perhaps a wish, albeit unfulfilled, to inhabit it, to dwell in it. That very same word is employed by the narrator earlier, as he cites the dialogue between Shneirson and the Sephardic girl, commenting ironically that "this lovely [*neḥmadah*] Holy Tongue could be heard in their conversation every evening."[33] With this word, the two scenes of failed attempts at Hebrew speaking become linked and mirror one another. Whereas the first depiction is comic, the second is somber. In the first, the lovers give in to the drama, playing their role despite being seemingly aware of the linguistic spectacle. In the second, hyper self-awareness leads to hesitation, self-doubt, and silence. Yet, it is in this second rendering of a failed Hebrew dialogue that the narrator instructs us to consider another reading of the scene, one in which the word *neḥmad* is deployed not ironically but genuinely, uttering at once a desiring relation to language and "sincere joy" at the playfulness of its artificiality. For in the pretense and disguise of a dysfluent language, replete with foreign idioms, also lies a sincerity that could only be captured momentarily by the non-native brokenness of Hebrew speech.

31 Translation by the author. For Halkin's version see Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 242 f.

32 The root *ḥ—m—d* appears in this meaning in Exodus, 20:17, and Psalms, 11:19, for instance.

33 Translation by the author. For Halkin's version, see Brenner, Breakdown and Bereavement, 209.

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