1 Preface

This study is about Hebrew speakers' categorizations of linguistic variation in Modern Hebrew – the language which is spoken today by most Israelis as their first language (L1). It is an investigation into prominent conceptualizations of social groups of Hebrew speakers and the notions of 'standard' and, in contrast, 'non-standard Hebrew' in Israel.

My interest in the topic has been developing gradually since I started to learn Hebrew in a so-called *ulpan* in a *kibbuts* in Israel, about four years before I started working on this thesis. *Ulpan* designates a pedagogical framework for the instruction of Hebrew. *Kibbutsim* were founded by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the early 20th century as rural settlements, which were organized strictly adhering to communal principles.[1] Although most kibbutsim have by now diverged from the ideals of their founders, the 'kibbuts' survives as a symbolic space, which is representative of the Israeli pioneer ethos, among other concepts (Lefkowitz 2004: 87). Until recently, many kibbutsim maintained programs which combined full days of ulpan language courses altering with days of work for students who lived in the kibbuts for about half a year, usually.[2] The ulpan method is aimed primarily at Jewish immigrants, but many programs can be accessed by mere language students as well and are designed to yield fast results by the means of partial immersion. The learning materials for the ulpan typically revolve around topics which are regarded as relevant for the immigrants' acculturation, such as the history of Israel, its culture and Judaism.

I studied in the kibbuts *Ramat Yohanan* 'Yohanan heights' which is located on a hill next to the small town of *Kiryat Ata* in the metropolitan region of Haifa. From the top of the hill, one can gaze across Haifa Bay at the city's panorama against the backdrop of Mount Carmel. The ulpan facilities, including housing, class rooms and social rooms for more than fifty students, were located at the margins of the settlement, next to a gated entrance from the only road which leads to the kibbuts and ends at a round-about at its center. Besides occasional encounters with the students, the permanent residents of the kibbuts mostly kept to themselves and followed their daily routines. Although the kibbuts was not far from the next town, it was almost entirely disconnected from public transportation and without a car or a taxi, it took some forty minutes to reach the center of the town by foot. The town's

1 The suffixation of *-im* forms the plural with most masculine and some feminine nouns in Hebrew.

2 The program at the kibbuts where I studied was suspended in the meantime and the ulpan facilities have been used for the accommodation of 'lone soldiers' – immigrants without relatives in the country who serve in the Israeli army.

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center comprised a few shops, a tiny mall and from there, one could take buses to Haifa and to further directions.

In the course of the ulpan kibbuts program, I began to feel isolated from 'true Israeli society' because I was interacting mainly with other students. With slightly growing proficiency in Hebrew, I was looking for possibilities to practice my skills. Every time I left the kibbuts and tried to navigate Israeli society by myself, I came across situations I had not been prepared for in the environment of the ulpan. These experiences reinforced the perceived gap between the kibbuts and 'true Israeli society.' Deciphering meaning in certain situations was difficult for me for two reasons: Firstly, I was lacking basic linguistic knowledge of Hebrew – especially in the domain of pragmatics, and secondly, I was lacking knowledge about the social diversity in Israel. Consequently, I often failed to accommodate my speech to different communicative situations – in the terms of speech accomodation theory (Giles et al. 1987).

A lot of the vocabulary which Hebrew speakers were using outside the kibbuts in day-to-day routines was unfamiliar to me. When I asked about these expressions, the speakers usually pointed out that they belonged to a kind of "slang" and tried to explain their meaning in other words or another language. Many people would switch immediately to English or Russian when they heard my *'ivrit shel ha-'ulpan* 'ulpan Hebrew' – an expression which was used by several particpants in interviews for this study. They switched to English or Russian which are among the most spoken L1 (after Hebrew and Arabic) in Israel because of my European appearance. Only later, I could understand that 'ulpan Hebrew' is characterized by the strict adherence to certain linguistic norms which are commonly ignored by most Hebrew speakers and the use of certain lexemes which can be perceived as archaic or too formal for everyday conversation. To keep my interlocutors from switching away from Hebrew, I had to learn to use these 'slang' expressions. I realized that the variety of Hebrew I had been learning was as remote from the 'real Hebrew' as the kibbuts was from 'true Israeli society' – or that the normative correct Hebrew was a mere idealistic concept – just like the 'kibbuts of the founding fathers.'

As I learned more about Hebrew 'slang' and tried to apply it appropriately, I also learned more about different groups of Hebrew speakers who allegedly differ in their use of 'slang' expressions and different kind of 'slangs' – Kristiansen (2008: 61) refers to these pre-scientific notions as "linguistic stereotypes." For example, I could relate more and more to the way that characters in Israeli TV series were portrayed, with differing linguistic features like special vocabulary and accents. The learning process which I underwent is subsumed by Kristiansen:

> [S]peakers gradually acquire receptive (and to a minor extent also active) competence of a wide range of different speech styles. This knowledge, which is experientially grounded [...]

> goes hand in hand with the ability to relate speech styles to the corresponding social groups. Accents, in short, are socially diagnostic. (Kristiansen 2008: 58)

At a later point, already during my MA studies in linguistics, my interest was sparked by something which was described to me by Hebrew speakers as "armyslang." I started investigating this phenomenon from a linguistic perspective, which eventually led to my first publication about Hebrew with the title *Zahalit – how Israeli soldiers speak* (Striedl 2019). When I was looking for further research about linguistic variation in Hebrew, I was surprised that the available material was very scarce. These observations marked the onset of my own research project.

As a language learner, I would have liked to have had access to more information about pragmatics, especially different contexts of use and linguistic variation in Hebrew. This information needs to be contextualized with a poignant introduction to Israeli society and its different social groups, which is needed to understand day-to-day encounters as well as broader contexts like political developments. I hope that this study will be helpful for language learners and readers who are interested in the interplay of linguistic and social categorization in Israel. Besides offering an introduction to linguistic variation in Hebrew, this study grew to extend its scope over domains which are not particular to Israel and Hebrew. These domains include cognitive linguistics, the sociology of knowledge and research methodology for the investigation of linguistic variation and speakers' declarative knowledge about language.

1.1 Hypotheses and research questions

Here, I present my hypotheses at the beginning of the study which yielded the main research questions (RQs) and the methods I chose to answer them. Detailed accounts of the the existing research on the topic and the adopted methodology for this study will be given in Chapters 2, 3.2.2 and 4. In accordance with Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), I developed my RQs in the course of subsequent stages of fieldwork, data collection and analysis.

My main hypothesis at the beginning of the study was that there is considerable linguistic variation in spoken Hebrew (SH) which can partly be explained by the diversity of Israeli society. At the same time, I was aware that the traditional terminology of variationist linguistics, with a focus on the regional dimension, is not fit for the linguistic space of Hebrew speakers (HSs) in Israel because of Israel's recent history and today's make-up of Israeli society, which will be reviewed in Chapter 3. Since the beginning of this study, the overarching RQ was:

RQ0 How can linguistic variation in MH be ordered?

The hypothesis about the existence of variation in MH is based on my own experiences as Hebrew student in Israel and on scholarly opinions, such as the one expressed by Myhill:

> Like any language, Modern Hebrew shows variation in usage, between different styles and between different usages. Because the language has not been spoken as a living language for very long, the dialectal situation is not typical. For one thing, clearly differentiated regional dialects of Hebrew have not been identified, and no one, including trained linguists, can identify where people come from on the basis of their language usages, although it seems reasonable to suppose that such differences may be developing. (Myhill 2004: 196)

The above wording is somewhat contradictory: On the one hand, the existence of "regional dialects" and the possibility to determine "where people come from" are categorically ruled out. On the other hand, Myhill (2004: 196–197) concedes that "such differences may be developing" before he goes on to name "social class distinctions," which have traditionally been described as the cause for a binary division of Hebrew into an "Oriental dialect" and a "General dialect."[3] One has to take into account that socioeconomic differences often play out regionally – in a way that the regional and the social dimensions are rather interdependent than clearly separable. Regarding Israel's demography, the interplay between regional and social factors is considerable: there are settlements with a high concentration of certain social groups as well as more heterogeneous settlements (see 3.1.5). So, if it is possible to recognize "class distinctions", as Myhill (2004: 197) suggests, why should it be impossible to infer information about HSs' places of residence?

Contemporary opinions on variation in MH, like the above quotation by Myhill (2004: 196), often lack a sound foundation in linguistic theory and therefore fail to go beyond the surface. Scholarly voices that attest MH "a remarkably wide range of spoken and written language varieties" have been scarce and gradually multiplied after I began working on the topic (Henkin 2020: 61). On these grounds, I wanted to question the possibility of categorizing HSs on the basis of their language use, systematically: it is my aim to review the HSs' linguistic space from the standpoint of a cultural outsider and to strive for an adequate theoretical basis for its description. It will be argued in 2.1.3 that a theoretical grounding in perceptive variationist linguistics (PVL) is best suited for this endeavour. Instead of imposing scientific

3 In this term, "Oriental" does not refer to a somehow geographically determined Eastern region, but the the speakers' (family's) origin in an imaginary Oriental space which lies typically somewhere East of Europe (see 3.2.2). In the last decades, 'Oriental dialect,' has been replaced by the notion 'Mizrahi Hebrew' in the scholarly literature (cf. Henshke 2015, Henshke 2017 and Henkin 2020).

categories on linguistic data from corpora – hence referred to as 'production data' (PD), this approach aims to contextualize PD with the speaker's own 'declarative knowledge' (DK) about linguistic variation to enable a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of linguistic variation. Therefore, the central questions for this study focus on the HSs' DK about linguistic variation in MH:

> **RQ1** Which main categories are applied by HSs to classify linguistic variation in MH and how are they defined?
> **RQ2** Which social groups are distinguishable on basis of their language use, according to HSs and how are these groups characterized?
> **RQ3** Which linguistic phenomena do HSs link to the categories (of RQ1 and RQ2) and why?

The aim of this study is to investigate categories which have been used so far for the description of linguistic variation in MH: therefore it is a terminological work. RQ1 departs from concepts, which have been introduced above, like 'slang,' 'ulpan Hebrew,' 'standard Hebrew' and leads to the more specific question RQ2 which asks about group-specific variation in MH. Commonly used categories tackled by RQ1 and RQ2 will be compared with the existing research on linguistic variation in Israel, which will be reviewed in 3.2.2. Thereby, notions like 'Oriental dialect' (see above) can be reassessed critically in the tradition of post-structuralist theories as exemplified by Said (1978) in his monograph *Orientalism*, which originated in the very context of this study. Said, who was born in Jerusalem and spent most of his academic career in the United States, questions hierarchic relations between 'East' and 'West.' By its nature, this study will be concerned with hierarchic relations between Europe (the researcher's physical and mental home), Israel (the geographic focus of this study) and the Middle East (the cultural and geographic environment of Israel). RQ3 asks about specific linguistic variants in MH and how they are commonly categorized by HSs – in contrast to RQ1 and RQ2, this question also asks about PD.

Some barely controllable variables have to be handled for the investigation of linguistic variation and its meaning because the interplay of various notions like 'social identity' and 'language attitude' (LA) are at the heart of this complex topic. From a general perspective, Barron & Schneider (2009: 426) highlight five social factors which can have an impact on language use: "region, social class, ethnicity, gender, and age (less stable – and less studied – factors such as education and religion may be considered in addition)." In respect to 'social class,' they add that this concept may be handled more adequately by "[d]istinguishing between education on the one hand and present job, profession or position on the other hand" (Schneider & Barron 2008: 17).

This study set out as an investigation of the relevance of these and additional factors and their impact on linguistic variation in MH in Israel. It is often assumed that class consciousness is weak in Israel, in comparison to other countries. Instead,

ethnic divisions have received much scholarly attention (Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991: 136). This has to be taken into account if one wants to investigate social categories in Israel, in general and from a linguistic perspective. I expected that 'ethnicity' might have less of a measurable impact on production data as is commonly expected. Instead, I wanted to explore additional factors like LA and social identity which are formed on the basis of notions like political opinions, religious and ethnic concepts. I expected that identification with and participation in religious groups would weigh heavily in Israel – to an extent that it can outweigh ethnic or socioeconomic factors. I also expected that military service and involvement with the Israeli army can have an impact on linguistic variation – this factor is also considered by Izre'el et al. (2001) in their layout for the design of a corpus of spoken Hebrew.

Measuring such diverse notions is methodologically challenging. Therefore, the chosen methodological approach and its evaluation will take a prominent place in this study. From the onset, it was clear that qualitative interviews with HSs, questionnaires and fieldwork in Israel will form the empirical basis for the study. Therefore, I started investigating with exploratory interviews by asking HSs questions like: "Can you know from where people come, judging only from their language?"[4] The following is a typical non-scholarly answer taken from one of my earliest recorded interviews, dating from August 2018:

4 Hebrew original: אפשר לדעת לפי דעתך מאיפה באים אנשים רק לפי השפה?

(1) i53f2l1 (26:48)

זה כן ולא כי זה תלוי, למשל אני אסביר לך. נניח אנשים, אפשר לראות אנשים שהם משכילים שהם אנשים חכמים יותר שהם למדו יותר [...] ויש אנשים שנניח פחות, הם גרו בשכונות שהם יותר, פחות הלימודים פחות חשובים וזה. אז הם אולי השפה קצת יותר רדודה יותר נמוכה, יותר, הרבה סלנג, הרבה. לא סלנג רגיל כמו סבבה וזה. יכול להיות אתה, למשל אנחנו אומרים אהה זה ערס. ערס זה מישהו שלא כל כך [...] כמו שרואים את זה על הלבוש ועל הזה, גם בשפה קצת יותר, לפעמים יותר קצת קללות או יותר משהו. הרבה פעמים יש מטבריה למשל, אבל לא רק. אני פשוט לא מכירה הרבה אנשים מכל מיני מקומות. אבל אני מאמינה שגם בלוד, לוד יש גם כן מקום שהוא קשה.

Yes and no, because it depends, for example – I will explain this to you. Let's say people, you can see people who are educated, who are smarter, who studied more [...] and there are people, let's say, less... they lived in neighborhoods which are more, the studies are less important, so maybe the language is a bit more superficial, lower, a lot more slang, a lot. Not regular slang like sababa *and that, maybe, for example we say: ahh, that's an* 'ars. 'Ars, *that's someone who isn't that kind of. [...] Like you see it on the clothes and that also in the language, sometimes a little more swearwords or something more, often they are from Ṭveria, for example, which place is like that, but not only. I just don't know a lot of people from all sorts of places – but, I believe that in Lod, Lod, too, is a place which is difficult.*

The unclear structure of the answer, which is due to i53f2l1's constant attempts to reword, suggests that it was not an easy question for her. This is underlined by her relativizing introductory statement, "yes and no, because it depends." Before tackling the question about regional variation, she elaborates on the concept of 'education' as a factor for linguistic variation: less estimation of studies and consequentially less exposure to formal education can lead to lower and more superficial language use, accompanied by the frequent use of slang and swearwords. For her explanation of 'education' as a factor for variation, she introduces the concept of "slang", "regular slang" and the stereotype of the *'ars*, which can be analyzed in the light of RQ1 and RQ2. Only after mentioning these linguistic and social stereotypes, she locates them in the Israeli geography by mentioning the city *Ṭveria*, which is located on the shores of lake *Kinneret*, and *Lod*, which lies in the outskirts of Tel Aviv and has gained some international attention due to violent riots in early 2021. She characterizes both places as *ḳashe* 'difficult.'

In respect to RQ3, the statement includes one lexical variant – *sababa* 'wonderful,' which was categorized by i53f2l1 as "regular slang." Thus, the early interviews did not just yield evidence that my participants claimed to be able to categorize HSs somehow on based on their language use, but the interviews included multiple notions which can be analyzed systematically and gave rise to further hypothesis

and RQs. Because the early interviews contained many evaluative statements, the subsequent RQs focus on LA and normative aspects:

RQ4 How are categories from RQ1 and RQ2 applied by the speakers rated in terms of 'prestige' and 'correctness of Hebrew?'
RQ5 Which kind of a linguistic standard do HSs have in mind and how were these ideas shaped?
RQ6 Which kind of different LAs do HSs express?
RQ7 How are these LAs reflected in their reported language practice?

These RQs were the basis for a questionnaire which was used in guided interviews to complement the data of the open interviews. On the basis of RQ1, RQ2 and RQ4, I devised a method for the systematic elicitation of groups of Hebrew speakers and their rating. This method will be referred to as 'group elicitation and rating task' (GERT).

There are two more interrelated RQs which can only be touched upon in this study:

RQ8 To what extent are representations of social categories influenced by linguistic variation?
RQ9 To what extent is linguistic variation influenced by representations of social categories?

This field of research is connected to far reaching topics which cannot be treated in this study. It is assumed that knowledge about speakers' attitudes towards certain groups of speakers and their evaluation of variants can help to understand processes of standardization and language change (Anders et al. 2010: XIV and Krefeld 2010: 155). In this study, I will not attempt to predict trends of linguistic change in MH, but, I hope that my analysis will be helpful for future research with this aim. To determine, for example, which variants are commonly perceived as an 'error' and which normative 'erroneous' variants are not perceived as such, perception experiments have to be carried out. The same applies for the determination of HSs' ability to identify HSs in respect to their sociodemographic characteristics based on actual PD. The categories which are used in these experiments need to fit the particpants' own categories to yield valuable results. Therefore, an analysis of the particpants' categories is required for the design of such experiments (Krefeld & Pustka 2010: 16). For this purpose, the results from the present study are valuable.

The theoretical aim of this study is twofold: to enhance variationist linguistic theory and sociological theory. The following analysis includes a discussion of the cognitive and social mechanisms for categorization in general, and for linguistic variation in particular, as well as a methodological discussion about the study of linguistic variation and speakers' DK. As an investigation of the HSs' notions of sociolinguistic variation, this study is necessarily concerned with the dynamics of Israeli society: it is an investigation into the subjective meaning of linguistic and

social concepts that particpants expressed in the interviews, which were carried out for this study. This approach will hopefully help to get a better grasp of HSs' commonly used social and linguistic categories and how they are used for their construction of reality – in Berger & Luckmann's (1967) words – at the specific point and time of this study. It is therefore a synchronic, empirical approach.

1.2 Structure of the book

This book contains five major parts. In the following chapter, I build the theoretical basis borrowing from different research traditions and revisit the most relevant literature for the research objectives. Chapter 3 is a brief guide to Israeli society and its history. I introduce social groups that are assumed to constitute Israeli society. In Chapter 3.2.2, I reassess how their use of Hebrew is described in the existing literature. In Chapter 4, I describe in detail how I subsequently designed and applied the methods for collecting data.

In Chapter 5, I start by displaying the analyzed data in its most condensed form in Table 5.4.3: the categories that participants used most frequently to describe distinguishable groups of HSs in an elicitation task (GERT). I treat these as core categories which are contextualized with participants' utterances from the interview corpus. Using illustrative data, I discuss theoretical implications and propose a typology of the participants' representations for each core category (see Chapter 6). In Chapter 7, I reassess the applied methodology and summarize the main findings of the study.

For the sake of transparency, I appended a short biographical account about myself in Appendix A which helps to contextualize my perspective as researcher.