

Pharyngeal beauty and depharyngealized geek: Performing ethnicity and class on Israeli reality TV

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A salient linguistic stereotype in Israel is that Mizrahis (Jews of Middle Eastern descent), but not Ashkenazis (Jews of European descent), use the pharyngeal segments ayin ([ʕ], a voiced pharyngeal approximant) and het ([ħ], a voiceless pharyngeal fricative). These two sounds existed in Biblical Hebrew, but Ashkenazi Israelis merge them with a glottal stop (which is usually deleted) and a uvular fricative respectively (Zuckerman 2005). Despite the stereotypical link to ethnicity, the pharyngeals are currently quite uncommon in the speech of Mizrahi speakers as well (Laufer 2009, Pariente 2010). Using Israeli reality TV shows, I demonstrate that speakers who do not consistently produce pharyngeals can nonetheless use them as a resource to index a Mizrahi persona. I also show that contrary to the stereotype, het and ayin exhibit different distributions.

The distinction between Mizrahis and Ashkenazis is socially meaningful in Israel, with Mizrahis tending to have lower income and education (Svirski 1990, Dvir et al. 2002). This social stratification is coupled with persistent stereotypes of Mizrahis as innocent, kind and warm, but also irrational, vulgar and uneducated (Shohat 1989). This plays out in the Israeli version of the reality TV show *Beauty and the Geek*. The show places “11 nerdy men and 11 beautiful women” in a villa, requiring them to perform tasks which portray the men as highly intelligent but socially awkward, and the women as their polar opposites. The “geeks” and “beauties” are also differentiated ethnically – all but one of the geeks are Ashkenazi, whereas 7 of the 11 beauties are Mizrahi.

None of the men use pharyngeal segments, but two women do (including the show’s winner); these women single themselves out as more authentically Mizrahi than the other women (e.g. constant references to their predominantly Mizrahi hometowns, use of stereotypically Mizrahi-specific vocabulary). Two native speakers of Hebrew coded the speech of these women in six hours of the show for potential and actual pharyngeal productions. These women produced ayin about 6% of its possible occurrences (25 / 348 tokens), as opposed to a single production of het (1 / 320 tokens). A parallel pattern can be observed in the speech of the host of a second show, the Israeli version of *American Idol*. In four hours of the show, he uses ayin 2.5% of the time (9 / 370 tokens), but never *uses het*.

For these speakers, ayin, even when used infrequently, is a valuable resource in performing “Mizrahi-ness”. The “beauties” use it to construct a “down to earth” Mizrahi persona, and ayin occurs when they are distancing themselves from their (Ashkenazi) Greek counterpart. Similarly, the *American Idol* host produces ayin when departing from his serious host persona to engage in warm, friendly banter with the contestants. *A possible reason why ayin is privileged is that the alternative to producing an ayin is producing nothing at all, making its performative uses very salient.* Het, on the other hand, alternates with a uvular fricative (itself a salient segment) which may render it a less useful resource.

