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**The rhetorical uses of the formula « delegitimization of  
Israel » in political speeches**

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE "DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY" BY

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## **Summary**

The complex lexical unit "delegitimization of Israel" has literally invaded the public discourse arena in Israel and in the Jewish Diaspora in the last few years. However, no single satisfying definition of the phenomenon has been agreed upon by the community of users of what we shall later define as a "formula". What is the "delegitimization of Israel"? The meaning of the formula we analyze in the present work is so blurred, that it is impossible to give it a precise definition. The discursive usages of such an ambiguous terminology therefore raise numerous questions. One context in particular – political discourse – deserves special attention. The "delegitimization of Israel" has in fact become a central theme in the political speeches of not only Israeli leaders, but also foreign ones. When a politician decides to use such a controversial expression, his or her choice implies taking a stance in the rhetorical battlefield revolving around Israel, where the battle is fought through the simple mention (or the absence) of the expression "delegitimization of Israel", and the interpretation that is given to it.

## Part I – Theoretical background

The analysis of the formula "delegitimization of Israel" and of its argumentative uses in discourse is done following the perspective that is typical of "argumentation in discourse", as developed in the French tradition of discourse analysis (Amossy 2012 [2000]). The analysis of argumentation presents itself as a branch of discourse analysis insomuch as it wishes to clarify the discursive functioning of arguments, by exploring a situated and at least partially constrained discourse.

The study of argumentation and its insertion in the discipline of discourse analysis allow us to analyze political speeches in all of their facets (the context of such speeches being a fundamental key to their understanding) and reveal not only the speakers' goals, but also their views on the world, their image of themselves as well as of their audience, the intended reception of their ideas and the strategies behind their words. In fact, a political speech is by nature a persuasion enterprise supported by a conscious intention and an *ad-hoc* strategy to fulfill this purpose.

In this thesis, we analyze the discursive and argumentative mechanisms involved in the use of the *formula* "delegitimization of Israel" as part of the persuasion enterprise of political speeches, which we understand as *oral verbal productions, with an institutional character, pronounced by actors having an institutional legitimacy in front of an audience that is present at the time of the speech, inserted in the field (as Bourdieu defines it) of politics.*

We have chosen to concentrate our research on the speeches of some contemporary political world leaders whose influence in the international political arena is complex and widespread. Specifically, we have chosen the following categories of political leaders: Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Prime Ministers, Opposition Leaders, and electoral candidates.

The historical framework chosen for our research spans a period from late 2008 through early 2013; while the formula was coined before the year 2008, this is the year when the "delegitimization of Israel" violently enters the Israeli public discourse in all of its dimensions – including the political one – thus marking a turning point as a

social referent. Between Operation Cast Lead in Gaza (2008) and the Israeli elections of 2013 our formula goes through a first "lifecycle", which is marked by key events such as the Gaza Flotilla raid by the Israeli army in 2010, the subsequent Goldstone Report and, in 2011, the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations. It is the year when the formula breaks out of the Israeli political discourse boundaries, and is used by foreign leaders as well. Following the elections of 2013, the ways in which the formula is used change, thus putting an end to its first lifecycle (a second one will start in 2015).

Our analysis concentrates on the only two countries in which the formula "delegitimization of Israel" is used in political speeches: Israel and the United States. While the formula is largely known and employed in the Jewish Diaspora all over the world, only politicians from Israel and the United States make use of it in their official speeches. This is not a coincidence: these two countries host the biggest Jewish communities in the world, with approximately 6,000,000 Jews in both.

The corpus of this work consists of forty-one speeches, retrieved from the official archives of all the political leaders who were analyzed.

## **Part II – the "Formula"**

It is French scholar Alice Krieg-Planque who theorized and conceptualized at the start of this century the notion of "formula": a peculiar use of a certain word (or combination of words) which slowly crystallizes in the spoken language (Krieg-Planque 2009) and responds to the following criteria: (1) The lexical unit (simple or complex) is fixed (2) It is inscribed in a discursive dimension (3) It works as a social referent (4) It bears a polemical aspect.

The lexical unit "delegitimization of Israel" fully corresponds to Krieg-Planque's definition, as we demonstrate in this section of the thesis. In regards to the first criterion, we show how the expression "delegitimization of Israel" is fixed and known by all in its fixed form; if minor variations to the lexical unit are possible in languages other than Hebrew (in English, for example, it is possible to decline the verb "to

delegitimize"; this cannot be done in Hebrew where the "delegitimization" only exists as a noun), such variations only attest to the existence of a fixed formula which is known, recognized, understood and used by all. Such widespread use also attests to the discursive dimension in which the formula is inscribed (second criterion): through a presentation of hundreds of foreign and local newspaper articles, academic works and other elements of the Israeli public discourse, we demonstrate to what extent the "delegitimization of Israel" is a subject that recurs in all kinds of public, professional and specialized discourses, and to what extent it works as an "unavoidable subject" of discussion (third criterion). The "delegitimization of Israel", in fact, brings specialists, politicians, academics, militaries and the general public to engage in an on-going debate around the phenomenon, its interpretation, its causes, its solutions and, sometimes, its very definition. It is the fourth and last criterion: the formula bears a polemical aspect, which is – specifically in the case of our formula – double. On the one hand, the formula is used as part of polemical exchanges to mark the disagreement between opposite sides; on the other, speakers frequently disagree on what the "delegitimization of Israel" actually is.

Our formula is in fact characterized by the vagueness of its lexemes: "delegitimization" is a process that implies at its heart the notion of "legitimacy", but this can apply to both the "legal" legitimacy of a person or an entity (a "legitimate" child is a child born in a legal framework) or their "moral" legitimacy (a "legitimate" question is a question that deserves to be asked). Which legitimacy is taken away when the "delegitimization" takes place?

Toponyms are also, by their very nature, vague notions whose meaning can be influenced by several factors; it is easy to imagine how "Israel" means something very different for a diasporic Jew, a Palestinian from Ramallah or an Israeli born and raised in Tel Aviv. "Israel" can also refer to a State, or to its government, its people, its army and even its football team. Which part of the semantic field of "Israel" is delegitimized?

This *vagueness* is precisely what makes our formula a powerful argumentative tool. An expert speaker knows how to include it in all sorts of argumentations, exploiting

the fact that the "delegitimization of Israel" can assume several different meanings without the audience even taking notice.

To illustrate this last point, we present in the final part of this section three speeches which were given by the same speaker, in front of the same audience, in the same institutional context – at three different chronological moments. The first speech is given by Prime Minister Netanyahu on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010 at the Knesset; Netanyahu's speech is to be followed by the speech of the Opposition Leader, which means that the use of the formula is tainted by several polemical aspects. The same can be said for the second speech, pronounced by Netanyahu on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011. Finally, the third speech is given only a few days later (July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011), but this time it is not followed by a response of the Opposition Leader. Our formula appears in these speeches without any explanation about its meaning, which could lead a casual reader to think that there is some form of consensus around such meaning. It is not so: by analyzing the use of the formula in these three cases, we show how the meaning of "delegitimization of Israel" is different in each one of the speeches – and yet, nobody in the audience seems to take notice.

### **Part III – Uses of the formula in political speeches – exploiting vagueness as an argumentation strategy.**

In this section of the thesis we analyze the actual speeches that include the formula "delegitimization of Israel" in their text. Through the analysis of forty-one chosen speeches, we show how our formula can help a speaker build several different argumentations, all of them exploiting the vagueness of the formula at their heart. We can summarize the different argumentation strategies that involve the use of our formula:

1. Positioning the speaker on the global (or national) political map
2. Creating a polemic, or exploiting an existent one
3. Creating or reinforcing a collective *ethos*

4. Appealing to the *pathos* of the audience
5. Several strategies at once

Through the analysis of all the different argumentation strategies, we show how the vagueness of the formula allows a speaker to include it in his or her persuasion enterprises. Often, the same occurrence of the formula can serve several argumentations at once, which is what we show at the end of this section.

#### *1. Positioning the speaker on the global (or national) political map*

Speaking of "delegitimization of Israel" cannot be considered a simple linguistic act: adopting or rejecting this formula, whose meaning is highly controversial, constitutes a form of agreement (or disagreement) with the worldview of those who launched it in the first place – in this case, Israelis.

In the two examples shown in this chapter, we demonstrate how our formula has been used by politicians on the very far ends of the political spectrum. In the first example, we analyze the speeches of U.S. President Barack Obama, the President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; these three speeches all revolve around the same historical event (the Palestinian bid for statehood at the United Nations in 2011), and they all involve the use of the formula at their very heart. However, the effects obtained by the use of "delegitimization of Israel" are radically different in each one of the speeches.

In the second example, we concentrate on a speech given by Netanyahu to the Israeli parliament. Here, our formula allows him to create a divide within Israeli society (and consequently, within its elected officials in the Knesset) and to position himself as the head of the "good" side of such divide.

In all of these examples, it is through the analysis of the arguments built by each one of the speakers around the notion of "delegitimization of Israel" that we are able to infer their political positions about the State of Israel. If the formula is the same in all cases, its interpretation and its argumentative use are radically different; this is what allows speakers to position themselves on the political map, without having to explicitly state such a positioning in words.

## 2. *Creating a polemic, or exploiting an existent one*

Because of the polythetic nature of the lexemes composing formulas, polemics often develop concerning their very meaning. At the same time, formulas can be used as part of an argumentation involved in a polemical exchange, as an argumentative tool intended to persuade the interlocutor.

In this chapter we investigate the relationship between the intrinsically polemical aspect of a formula (concerning its meaning), and its use at the heart of a verbal confrontation where its meaning is not the core of the debate, but rather an argumentative tool at the service of other goals. How is our formula's inherent polemical aspect exploited in the construction of polemical argumentations in general, and political argumentations in particular?

As we have seen already, a formula is characterized by the vagueness surrounding its different meanings, and this trait is particularly meaningful when it comes to analyzing the polemical aspect of a formula. In this chapter we bring three examples to show the different argumentations that can be built *around* the formula, or *about* the formula. In the first example, we bring a polemical exchange concerning the meaning of the formula, and as a result, concerning the very existence of the phenomenon our formula is meant to describe. In the other two examples, the interpretative fluidity of the lexemes composing the formula is exploited so that the "delegitimization of Israel" can be used as an argumentative tool in a polemical exchange whose goal is not to debate around the phenomenon itself, but rather to disqualify the interlocutor and his/her discursive positions.



### 3. *Creating or reinforcing a collective ethos*

By "collective *ethos*" one can refer to the image that is attributed, from the outside, to a certain group; in other words, the social representation of a certain group that prevails in society at a certain time in history. At the same time, "collective *ethos*" can also mean the "image of self" that a spokesperson (or a plural speaker – a "we") builds in discourse, through the shared representations of a society.

In the case of the speech analyzed in this chapter, the collective *ethos* that the speaker builds is attached to an image of group that belongs to the audience's *doxa*; the speech's argumentation is built with the very purpose of constructing such collective *ethos*, rather than exploiting a pre-existing one. In other words, rather than a pre-existing *ethos*, we are dealing here with a "post-hoc" *ethos*: the speaker's task is to build a collective image of self whose goal is to unite and to persuade the audience through the creation of a group representation that is likely to seduce such group. At the heart of this chapter is therefore not the collective *ethos* of a "we" that is collectively speaking; rather, it is the construction of a group *ethos* by a single orator who exploits this argumentative tool to persuade his audience.

The speech we analyze in this chapter is given by then-President of Israel Shimon Peres, at the World Zionist Congress of 2010. It is a speech in which only the subject "we" is used by the speaker - and it is not a coincidence: Peres is addressing a traditionally right-wing audience, and he is aware that his own pre-existing *ethos* of leftist leader is not likely to enjoy the approval of large parts of the audience. In this case, the "we" is pronounced by a speaker who enjoys the audience's approval about his institutional role, but not about his political positions. Thus he needs to erase, as much as he can, that part of his pre-existing *ethos* that is more likely to damage the reception of his speech. At the same time, Peres has to build a group image that can include a controversial "I" and a presumably ill-disposed "you" inside a non-controversial "we" that can help him move forward with his persuasion enterprise. In this speech, Peres builds an argumentation that is strongly based on recurrent appeals to the audience's *pathos*, whose climax is reached when our formula is mentioned. It

is then the way in which the "delegitimization of Israel" participates to the construction of the discursive collective *ethos* that is here at the heart of our analysis.

#### 4. *Appealing to the pathos of the audience*

The argumentative construction of emotions is usually made through the discursive representation of a situation that the audience typically associates to a specific emotion (Micheli 2010). In this chapter, we identify and describe the discursive constructions of such emotional *topoi*. At the core of our interest is the understanding and the description of those situations that are most likely to trigger a desired emotion in the audience, and the ways in which such situations are expressed in discourse. More specifically, we analyze in this chapter the ways in which our formula participates to such argumentative constructions, and contributes to a persuasion enterprise that exploits *pathos*. To this end, we bring here examples of texts whose argumentation revolves around one of the most sensitive subjects for a Jewish audience (in Israel and in the Diaspora alike): the Holocaust.

In this chapter we analyze the ways in which the official communication channels of the State of Israel build a relationship between the "delegitimization of Israel" and the Holocaust in their official texts. More specifically, we concentrate on how Holocaust denial is described and used as an argument by the Prime Minister and by the official government "Hasbara" in order to denounce all sorts of attacks launched against Israel and its right to self-defense. If we were to summarize the argument in one sentence, it would be: *denying the Holocaust is delegitimizing the State of Israel*. But what exactly is the relationship between the "delegitimization of Israel" and the Holocaust – or its denial?

The texts we analyze involve deep argumentative tensions that often reach the level of real contradictions; such contradictions, however, are hardly noticeable by a non-expert eye. This is mainly due to the ways in which *pathos* is used in such argumentations, appealing to the emotions of the audience rather than to its logical understanding of the (hardly provable) cause-effect relationship between the two phenomena.

## 5. *Several strategies at once*

It is important to underline that despite the schematic interpretation we have traced in the previous chapters, the persuasion enterprise of most speeches is not based on one single argumentation strategy alone. Rather, it is very common for a speech to include more than one argumentation strategy at once, and the formula "delegitimization of Israel" can be used, in one same speech, as the pivot for several different arguments and several different argumentation strategies at once.

In this chapter, we analyze several examples of such speeches.

### **Part IV – rhetorical variations around the "delegitimization of Israel"**

In this section we investigate the argumentation schemes of each of the chosen leaders, in order to identify the logic that underlies their speeches. Through the juxtaposition of all the speeches pronounced by each leader, their argumentative schemes come to light in a very clear manner: all the chosen leaders adapt their speeches to their audiences (or to the image they have of their audiences), thus changing the way in which they make use of the formula "delegitimization of Israel" according to the context in which they pronounce their speech. For example, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu uses the formula only when speaking to an Israeli or a Jewish audience; when facing a non-Jewish audience whose views may not entirely be in favor of Israel, he never mentions the "delegitimization of Israel". All the speakers we have analyzed show very precise argumentation schemes such as this one; we analyze here the ways in which each of them chooses to adapt their strategies to his or her audience when mentioning the "delegitimization of Israel".

## Conclusions

Through the analysis of all forty-one speeches gathered for this thesis, we show not only the ways in which the formula "delegitimization of Israel" is used as a powerful argumentative tool, but we also shed light on the relationship that exists between the intrinsic characteristics of a formula and its argumentative uses in political speeches.

Going back to Krieg-Planque's criteria for defining a formula, in fact, we realize how each of them is at the heart of the argumentative possibilities of the "delegitimization of Israel". This formula is in fact a social referent only in Israel and in the Jewish diaspora; in other words, those whom the political leaders try to persuade about the "delegitimization of Israel" are also those who are supposed to be the victims of the same "delegitimization of Israel". Hence the discursive spreading of the formula in the Israeli and Diasporic contexts only: the political stakes that are inherent to each formula are, in this case, relevant only for the very same population that hears, speaks and debates the "delegitimization of Israel". The fixed dimension of the lexemes composing our formula is therefore important as well: were it not for the fact that it is "Israel" that is delegitimized, and that it is "Israel" that needs to be persuaded about such delegitimization, the sequence may have never gotten to the stage of actually turning into a formula. And finally, because of the vagueness of its lexemes, polemics often revolve around the "delegitimization of Israel" – something which, in turn, helps the spreading of the formula in public discourse.

In other words, all the factors that are inherent in a formula (the fixed dimension, the discursive dimension, the social referent dimension, the polemical dimension and the vagueness of its lexemes) are, in the case of "delegitimization of Israel", the very factors that lie at the base of all its argumentative uses. The argumentative richness of this formula in political speeches is thus intrinsically related to its very characteristics, which is something unique to the "delegitimization of Israel" as far as we can tell.

It is our hope that other researchers will continue along this research path and study the second lifecycle of this formula, verifying whether its uses remain related to its inherent characteristics or whether, in different times and different contexts, they change.