

LANGUAGE AND NEGOTIATION: A MIDDLE EAST LEXICON¹

Raymond Cohen

Looking back on the abortive Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations of 1995-96, chief Israeli negotiator and distinguished Arabist Itamar Rabinovich pondered the language gap between the two sides that prevented their reaching agreement despite a clear convergence of interests: “The Israeli-Syrian dialogue”, he remarked, “was a striking example of the ability of the two old foes, who were trying to reach agreement, to speak in the same terms—but in a different language.”² Why did Syria vigorously object to Israeli insistence on “normalization”, only eventually to agree on “normal peaceful relations”? What did Syrian spokesmen mean when they bitterly criticized Israel for “bargaining” about peace? By definition, negotiation is an exercise in language and communication, an attempt to create shared understanding where previously there have been contested understandings. When negotiation takes place across languages and cultures the scope for misunderstanding increases. So much of negotiation involves arguments about words and concepts that it cannot be assumed that language is secondary and all that “really” counts is the “objective” issues at stake. Can one ever speak of purely objective issues? When those issues include emotive, intangible concepts such as “honor”, “standing”, “national identity”, “security”, and “justice” can we really take it for granted that the parties understand each other perfectly? And if not, what can be done to overcome language barriers?

The Middle East Negotiating Lexicon is an interpretive dictionary of key negotiating words in Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, and Turkish. It is intended as a reference facility for English-speaking observers and practitioners of negotiation interested in clarifying language and resolving linguistic discrepancies. For those wondering just what Syrians understand by “normalization” and “bargaining” the lexicon provides an analysis of the equivalent Arabic terms. Alongside difficult, contested concepts such as “rights”, “disagreement”, and “peace”, ordinary day-to-day negotiating words like “argument”, “instructions”, and “document” are also interpreted. It emerges that ostensibly simple ideas may be as prone to cross-cultural variation as obviously complex notions. Nevertheless, it should

be emphasized that the lexicon is a guide to meaning rather than behavior. How we negotiate is influenced by our understanding of what “concession”, “compromise” and other key terms imply; yet there is no linear cause-and-effect relationship between conception and action. Our actions depend on a range of other factors including circumstances, issues, personalities, power, and, crucially, the feedback received from our opponent. What the lexicon does is to suggest what Middle Easterners mean when they refer to notions such as “principle”, “commitment”, and “interest.” It does not purport to be a simplistic do-it-yourself manual of negotiating or a crystal ball, but a guide through a linguistic maze.

Besides the usual dictionary-type definition, each entry seeks to give the range of possible meanings of words, drawing attention to special features of use, describing possible religious and historical connotations, and analyzing the social and cultural associations evoked by the word for the native speaker. Examples of use are taken from the daily press and accounts of negotiators. In effect, each entry consists of a brief interpretive and illustrated discussion. Entries for each language were prepared by two mother-tongue researchers working separately to permit cross-checking and to control for blatantly subjective interpretations. Draft versions were verified by a third senior academic who was also a native speaker. Overall guidance and supervision was exercised by the author, who also edited the final product.

Behind the preparation of the lexicon lay the conviction that differences between languages matter deeply. Living and working in two languages, English and Hebrew, I was struck by how each language seemed to manifest a different outlook on the world. Things that could be said easily and elegantly in one tongue lent themselves to laborious expression in the other. Where one called for understatement, the other required hyperbole. Ostensibly slight nuances of tone and nice distinctions evoked quite far-reaching differences of association and meaning. Similar observations have been made by many authors, nomads across cultures and languages.³ Indeed, “the impossibility of translation” lies at the heart of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness (which does not mean that one should not try to bridge the gap). Personally, I had always been particularly impressed by the dramatically different sensibilities, ways of thinking, feeling, and perceiving, reflected in the English Bible and the Hebrew Bible or Tanach, for instance, in the Book of Psalms.

One day a friend interested in the Jewish roots of Christianity asked me if the Christological term “the lamb of God” (agnus dei) might not be an allusion to the Passover sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem. Assuming that the first Christians would be fully conversant with the Hebrew

therefore a shorthand symbol capable of evoking a unique range of specialized references, uses, and associations. Words are polysemic

governor, chairman of the board, and so on. These role words are largely devoid of extra-functional associations. In fact, the word “president” is used in the United States to mean the head of any business corporation, however minor, and sometimes self-appointed. Unlike English, Turkish

2. Historical Associations

Languages are not only vehicles of current meaning but also serve as the living archives of a civilization, the repository of past customs and attitudes. Words carry evocations of historical usage down through the generations. Where a central theme of social and national life is concerned, such as negotiation or conflict resolution, historical reverberations are inevitable. "Appeasement", once a word with favorable resonances of peace and reconciliation in English, can no longer be used without evoking Neville Chamberlain's discredited policy of buying time at Czech expense. "War" evokes the numbing horror of the great world wars.

The same principle can apply to technical negotiating terms. "Delegation" is a neutral word in English denoting a group of people authorized to represent their country in a diplomatic or cultural capacity. In contrast, its Arabic equivalent, *w fd*, is bound up with the Arab tradition of communal visiting. A *w fd* can be a delegation of reparation and conciliation following a domestic feud, or a group bringing condolences or congratulations on some family occasion. The historic associations of the term become clearer if we note that the ninth year of the Islamic calendar was known as the year of *wuf d* (plural of *w fd*). It was at this time that Islam began to spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, with delegations coming to the Prophet Mohammed, swearing allegiance, and accepting Islam. *W fd*, in other words, goes back to the very origins of Islam and the building of bridges between Moslem co-religionists. One can still observe this phenomenon today, delegations from all over the Arab world traveling from one place to another to express allegiance or request support. Delegations from the poorer Arab countries visit the wealthy countries of the Persian Gulf to pledge loyalty and ask for assistance. President Sadat of Egypt traveled on a *w fd* to Saudi Arabia for help in the peace process with Israel and for financial aid. The custom is even maintained by delegations of Israeli Arabs who visit Arab countries such as Syria in order to show their affiliation to the Arab world, and to maintain their Arab character. *W fd* is a term redolent of Arab solidarity. In Egyptian history the *W fd* Party emerged in the Egyptian Parliament after the first world war and is associated with the struggle to free Egypt of the British protectorate that had existed since 1882. "The appellation *W fd* originated in a demand by Sa'd Zaghlul [its leader]... to be allowed

to proceed in a delegation to Great Britain to discuss Egypt's relations with the Protecting Power and her constitutional future".⁴

From all these references it can be seen that *wafd* combines the sense

characterization of the prevailing, “normal” state of relations between nations that Israel, for long isolated in the Middle East, aimed for. Since Israel had never had normal relations the term acquired self-evident, positive associations. Equally, its absence, a continuation of abnormality, possessed strongly negative associations, being connected with a term—*lo normali*—suggesting irregularity and in some contexts mental deficiency.

The Arabic term for normalization has exactly the reverse valency. *Tatbi'* is connected with the word for “nature”, *tabi'a*. *Tatbi'* has its origins in the ancient, nomadic Arab way of life, when animals—donkeys, horses, camels, buffalo—played a central role, and were raised and broken in, especially for riding. This dimension of *tatbi'* still exists in pastoral and rural communities, such as those of the Bedouin or fellahin (peasant farmers), where animals continue to be domesticated and trained for service as beasts of burden, whether as pack animals or for plowing. *Tatbi'*, originally applied to the domestication of animals, now refers to the normalization or naturalization of relations between individuals or countries. Although the metaphor is a strange one for the English speaker, the logic is clear: As an undomesticated animal can only be of service and enter the household when it has been broken in, “pressed into service”, so can states only live together side by side after they have been “trained” and “domesticated.” In the context of Israeli-Syrian negotiations these connotations of the word are highly unfortunate: With its perennial fear of Israeli hegemony and acute sensitivity to hierarchical relationships, the last thing the Syrian government wanted was to be “broken in” and “tamed” by Israel as *tatbi'* intimates. However, if *tatbi'* was considered offensive, *tabi'i*, meaning “normal, ordinary, regular, usual, natural” was acceptable as not implying subjugation and submission. Thus after difficult negotiations at Shepherdstown in January 2000 the Israeli and Syrian delegations were finally able to agree on the establishment of a committee on Normal Peaceful Relations.⁵ Here was one semantic dispute, rooted in dissonant linguistic-cultural associations, that had contributed to years of delay and ill will in a process that had started way back in Madrid in 1991.

Hebrew speakers use the word *hanchayot* not for lack of an alternative. The everyday language does in fact possess a word that captures the essence of “instructions”. The term *hora’ot* means “orders, commands, directives, and instructions”. It has its origin in a root related to instruction in the sense of teaching. In some contexts teacher, *moreh*, is synonymous with *rabbi*. The implication is that *hora’ot* are more authoritative and obligatory than *hanchayot*. *Hora’ot* are the instructions that a superior gives to a subordinate and that are not open to discussion or debate. The term appears in such usages as “safety *hora’ot*” and “*hora’ot* for use”, where the procedure or appliance will not work unless the instructions are strictly adhered to. In military terminology yet another word, *p’kudot*, orders, is used.

The fact that the word adopted for negotiating instructions, *hanchayot*, has looser connotations than the readily available term *hora’ot*, implies that in an Israeli cultural context members of a negotiating team are given some leeway to exercise their own judgment. They do, indeed, receive *hanchayot* from the political echelon, but to a lesser or greater extent they would be expected to display some initiative and possibly even independence of mind. This reflects greater individualism, a looser hierarchical set-up, a more open decision making process, and a less structured approach to negotiation than is found either in other ME societies or even Britain and the United States.

The semantic picture suggested by the preference for the flexible word *hanchayot* to the inflexible word *hora’ot* is faithfully reproduced in the practical Israeli conduct of negotiations. Veteran negotiator and international lawyer Joel Singer, one of the architects of the two Oslo agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, noted that Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin did not provide him with “exact *hanchayot* where to go.” How then did he know what to negotiate? By piecing together the contents of remarks, speeches, and answers to questions made by the prime minister and foreign minister. “From the combination of all these words we built up a map of *hanchayot*.”⁶ The pattern repeated itself in the June 1999 domestic negotiations to set up a governing coalition under Ehud Barak. David Liba’i, who headed the negotiating team on behalf of the Labor party, describes a process in which instructions were not handed down from on high, but in which *hanchayot* emerged from a “joint analysis of changing situations.”⁷ His colleague Gilead Sherr described “a

dynamic and fluid process of receiving hanchayot

Having noted this, one hastens to add that the adoption by Farsi and Turkish of English loan words and the deliberate replacement, particularly in Turkey, of traditional Arabic and Persian terms by new Turkish words, may change this picture in the future.¹⁰ Three features of ME discourse set it apart from English: 1. A very clear distinction between pragmatic commercial and principled political negotiation; 2. The absence of concepts that are pivotal to English negotiating discourse, especially “compromise” and “concession”; 3. The prominence of central Islamic and Arabic concepts embodying a very characteristic ethical outlook.

1. Meanings of Negotiation

“Negotiation” derives from the Latin *negotiare* meaning “to do business, trade, deal” and this original commercial sense is retained in modern Latin languages so that, for instance, *negozio* in Italian is a shop. “Negotiate”, meaning “to traffic in goods”, is found in seventeenth and eighteenth century texts. In contemporary English “negotiate” evokes a can-do, commercial world in which pragmatic individuals exchange views in order to arrive at a mutually satisfactory arrangement. The ideas of discussion, business, and adroit management are present in equal proportions: Thus the Oxford English Dictionary gives the following definitions of the word: 1. “To hold communication or conference (with another) for the purpose of arranging some matter by mutual agreement; to discuss a matter with a view to some settlement or compromise.” 2. “To deal with, manage, or conduct (a matter or affair, etc., requiring some skill or consideration).” 3. “To convert into cash or notes.” 4. “To deal with, carry out, as a business or monetary transaction.” 5. “To succeed in crossing, getting over, round, or through (an obstacle etc.) by skill or dexterity.”

spoke of his government's aspirations to become a full member of the Common Market: "We have said that very clearly; but we also added that: 'We don't want to humiliate ourselves by being reduced to a nation determined to join no matter what, because we want to pazarlık... If you say 'No, we still want to enter it at any cost', like people used to say, then you don't have the chance to bargain... I know this for sure: European countries love pazarlık and they really appreciate those who make serious pazarlık".¹³

2. The Absence of Key English Concepts

Compromise and concession are inseparable from negotiating in the English-speaking world. As we have seen, one of the very definitions of "negotiate" is "to discuss a matter with a view to some settlement or compromise", where "compromise" is synonymous with agreement. Other closely connected notions are give and take and reciprocity. All of these ideas are thought of as natural features of negotiation, without which a successful result is considered unlikely. According to the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of negotiation it is the very process of give and take, of mutual concession, that legitimizes the outcome. One often hears it said that "if neither side is entirely satisfied then clearly the agreement must be a fair one". Obviously, individual instances of concession and compromise might be ill-advised and one-sided but there is no doubt that they are generally assumed to be indispensable as principles of conduct. That they are viewed with favor is demonstrated by the tendency in English to elevate "compromise", "give and take", and "reciprocity" into reified virtues in their own right. "What is needed," we hear from Western mediators active in some Middle Eastern dispute, "is a spirit of Compromise and Give and Take."

None of these fundamental assumptions are present in the ME paradigm of negotiation. Neither Arabic, Farsi, nor Turkish possesses a special term for "compromise". It is true that the functional equivalent of this is implicit in the words for arrangement, agreement, settlement, reconciliation, and others. Middle Easterners are aware that a dispute can only be settled when both sides are willing to make sacrifices, and that agreements come about only when neither side can claim total victory

over the other. The point is that mutual sacrifice is not seen as something desirable in and of itself. Quite the reverse: who is enthusiastic about making a sacrifice? Thus an appeal to the Spirit of Compromise, as one might appeal to truth and justice, is literally meaningless in ME languages. Another way to grasp the difference between the paradigms is through the word “concession”. In the English-speaking world negotiators are thought of as making progress by moderating their initial demands on converging paths to agreement. Both sides give something up in an alternating and incremental choreography of concession until they finally meet “somewhere in the middle”. However, the functional equivalents of concession in ME languages are synonymous, not with moderation or equity, but with surrender and relinquishment.

The Arabic term *tan zul*, and the Turkish terms *taviz* and *ödün*, have one dominant meaning in current usage: giving up something one possesses as of right. This might be the result of persuasion or force but the implication of unfortunate loss is the same. *Tan zul* is actually derived from a root meaning “coming down” or “dismounting from a horse”. There is no denying the potential for a humiliating climb-down implicit in the term. In some circumstances there are some things that can be surrendered on a basis of mutual exchange, *tab dul*, in order to obtain

determine their fate, thereby to establish a Palestinian state".¹⁶ In Farsi, alongside haqq as a supreme value, the term is also used to refer to the sacred national rights and resources of the Iranian people expropriated by the imperialist powers. Past wrongs manifestly remain a source of great resentment. In Modern Turkish hak similarly refers to patriotic rights, particularly in the context of the historical dispute with Greece. As part of Turkey's modernizing and secularizing trend the word has also acquired important connotations of individual rights. Hence *ınsan hakları* is human rights; *temel haklar* is basic rights; *yaşam hakkı* is the right to life.

In their conception of conflict and its resolution ME languages share other significant common features. These include: the crucial lubricative role of the mediator/middle man (Arabic *wasit*, Farsi *vesâtat*); the treaty as a covental exchange of oaths (Arabic *mu'ahada*, Turkish *muahede*, Farsi *'ahd-nâme*); and good faith as purity of heart, "good intention", as in a state of mind conducive to sincere prayer (Arabic *niyya ḥ sâna*, Farsi *hosne niyyat*, Turkish *ıyiniyet*). Particularly noteworthy is the distinction found in both Arabic and Farsi (but not Modern Turkish), between peace as non-aggression (*salâm*, *mosâlemat âmiz*) and peace as reconciliation (*sulh*, *solh*). Completely absent from Western conceptions of peace as a seamless web of good will and amity, grasp of the *salâm*-*sulh* distinction is vital to an understanding of international affairs in the Middle East.

The dictionaries translate both *salâm* and *sulh* as "peace". *Salâm* has numerous meanings and covers the semantic field of "peace", "safety", "security", "health", and "wellbeing". It is in constant everyday use as a common term of greeting. Like

C. C. I.

A close reading of the Middle East Negotiating Lexicon makes it clear that English and ME languages agree on how negotiation writ large is to be depicted. There is concurrence that in a negotiation there are contacts, delegations, envoys, meetings, conferences, talks, proposals, conditions, initiatives, arguments, demands, persuasion, deadlocks, solutions, commitments, guarantees, understandings, documents, agreements, treaties, signings, and ratifications. This demonstrates the existence of a universal model of the basic procedures, the nuts and bolts, of negotiation. It is no less than what one would expect from a global diplomatic system based on the United Nations and other international agencies, the Vienna Con-

Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish from English (and Hebrew). The sense that dispute, debate, polemic, and so on are thoroughly good things is displayed by a rich and varied Hebrew vocabulary of argumentation. Even *machloket*, the term for disagreement, has positive connotations. *Pilpul* refers to a very specific and untranslatable style of legal discussion. Thus vocabulary can reflect the desirability or undesirability of features of negotiating, while identifying and drawing attention to concepts not demarcated in other languages.

Without determining behavior, semantic differences are bound to affect the range of negotiating choices and order of preferences among given options. One cannot engage in *pilpul* without knowing what *pilpul* is. When "argument" is a word with bad connotations for you, then you are inclined to shy away from arguing things out. Similarly, the attraction of "risk", "pressure", and "threat" is influenced by the positive or negative valency of the concept in the context of negotiating. Lacking indigenous words for risk (as opposed to danger) Farsi and Persian adopted a foreign loan word for the probability of losses in gambling or trading, hence *reesk* and *risk risk* (irigspnd , gieüGd omarcated marcadip()Gf L9)2j)yBPGD4:)2jB)D)2(G

“international” English with his “thick”, nuanced, mother tongue Italian of hearth and home, with its wealth of literary and cultural resonances. As long as the lingua franca is used in a mechanical (and culturally impoverished) way, with a limited vocabulary, narrowly defined according to clearly understood conventions, then international business—commercial, scientific, technical—can be efficiently conducted. Air traffic controllers and airline pilots, importers and exporters, scientists and engineers, need little more than a bare-bones technical language. But as international cooperation thrives, as relationships and communities flourish, as cultures intertwine, the limitations of a thin international language are bound to become increasingly apparent. Multilateral negotiation may have reached a high water mark.

For rich and intimate communication on complex, important issues something more is needed. Obviously, English has an essential role as a common denominator in negotiation. At the same time, the reality of linguistic diversity with its potential for confusion and asynchrony should be fully recognized. The solution to it is not just the imposition of a single language necessarily possessing a monocultural view of the world. It is the acquisition of several foreign languages, indeed the celebration of multilingualism. In addition, the comparative study of language and the elucidation of lexical differences can help overcome misunderstanding grounded in the illusion of semantic uniformity. The Middle East Negotiating Lexicon is meant as a step in that direction.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The project reported on here was generously funded by the Washington-based United States Institute of Peace as part of its long-standing commitment to investigating national negotiating styles.
- 2 Itamar Rabinovich, “Damascus’s Version,” *Ma’ariv*, 28 February 1997.
- 3 For instance, George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (London: Minerva, 1991).

