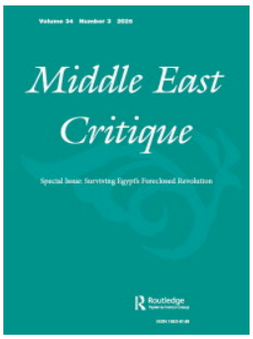

Middle East Critique

ISSN: 1943-6149 (Print) 1943-6157 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ccri20

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To cite this article: Abeer Otman & Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (07 Sep 2025): The Politics of Acquiring the Colonizer's Language in the Colonial Academy, Middle East Critique, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2025.2554020

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2025.2554020

Published online: 07 Sep 2025.

MIDDLE EAST CRITIQUE
https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2025.2554020

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

The Politics of Acquiring the Colonizer's Language in the Colonial Academy

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ABSTRACT

In the context of settler colonization, mastering the colonizer's language may carry dual, contradictory values: it affirms the subjugation of the colonized while offering them a means of liberation from oppression and colonization. This article investigates the psycho-political work of learning, acquiring, and hearing the colonizer's language by Indigenous Palestinian Jerusalemite students studying at an Israeli academic institution. It concludes that the politics of acquiring the colonizer's language produces a fundamental paradox for the colonized: using this language can assist them in challenging their oppression, but it can also play into the colonizer's racialized colonial agenda.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 March 2025
Accepted 26 August 2025

KEYWORDS
Language acquisition; settler colonialism; affective politics; defiance

> The Hebrew course upsets me, I feel that the teachers insist to teach us Hebrew that is dunked with the Israeli culture, religion, and life … although they can teach us the language using other topics, but they chose to use texts from Torah, religious songs etc. … it's good to know about the Israeli language and culture but its overstated … I believe that they use the Hebrew course to manipulate my mind.

Hasan[1] is a Palestinian Jerusalemite student studying at Sadarah, the preparatory program (Mechina) of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HU). It is a head-start program designed for East Jerusalem high school graduates who wish to become fluent in Hebrew in order to pursue undergraduate studies in higher education institutions in Israel (Hebrew University of Jerusalem n.d.a, n.d.b). Hasan, like many other Palestinian students from Occupied East Jerusalem (OEJ), understands that mastering the colonizer's Hebrew language is crucial for joining Israeli higher education institutions to obtain an accredited university degree, finding a job in the Israeli market, building a career, and securing social and economic rights in Jerusalem. However, Hasan's voice indicates that, when the economic aspirations of the colonized intersect

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[1]All student names are pseudonyms to protect their privacy and to protect them from political retribution.

with higher education and the settler-colonial state's power, the colonizer's language perpetuates the colonizer's colonial agenda, thus raising questions about the psychopolitical work of learning, acquiring, using, and hearing the colonizer's language.

In past decades and following the occupation of East Jerusalem, Palestinian students have had to acquire the language of the occupier to manage their daily life, education, economic survivability, state bureaucracy, and more. Additionally, Israeli policies in the well-funded governmental plans to address education in OEJ (Eilan 2023), challenging socioeconomic conditions for Palestinians in OEJ (MAS 2017), as well as the difficulties OEJ students face acquiring education in the West Bank Palestinian universities means more and more Palestinian students have joined HU even though they don't know Hebrew. Indeed, statistics show a substantial increase in the numbers of Palestinian Jerusalemite students enrolling in Sadarah and the HU. In 2015, only 70 students joined the preparatory program, while in recent years the number reached 450 students a year (Ilan 2023). The last five academic years show substantial increases in Palestinian undergraduate students from OEJ studying at HU: 419 students from OEJ joined the HU in 2019, 599 in 2020, 732 in 2021, 789 in 2022, and 851 in 2023. The numbers of postgraduate students from OEJ almost tripled over the same years: from 64 in 2019 to 180 students in 2023 (Hebrew University of Jerusalem n.d.a, n.d.b). As more and more Palestinian students from OEJ seek higher education in Israeli academia and thus must master Hebrew, the question arises: how do they experience speaking, writing, and hearing their oppressors' language while living under ongoing settler-colonial violence?

Throughout our research, Palestinian Jerusalemite students studying in Israeli institutions of higher education highlighted Hebrew as an affective obstacle. Their repeated insistence on discussing the psychological burdens when/in using Hebrew compelled us to delve into the complexities shared by the colonized in mastering the colonizer's language, and we turned to Franz Fanon. In the context of French-colonized Algeria, Fanon ([1952] 1986) indicated that colonized Algerians *had* to speak French, the language of their colonizer, to come closer to being considered human. He argues that the act of speaking or reading the language of the colonizer lends coherence and shape to a vision that enables communication with the colonizing state and its institutions. In Fanon's words, 'to speak is to exist absolutely for the other' (17): to speak the colonizer's language means 'being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of this or that language', and, 'above all', speaking a language means being able 'to assume a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization' (17, 17–18). However, Fanon also claims that practicing the colonizer's language is an act of (self-)subjugation, whereby the body and psyche become hostage to colonial domination. Either way, the colonized can be politically trapped and psychosocially hunted by the colonizer's language. Thus, for Fanon, the colonizer's language becomes a potent vehicle for the colonizer's domination, carrying dual and contradictory values: it both affirms the subjugation of the colonized while offering them a powerful means of liberation from oppression and colonization.

Palestinian scholar Al-Shaikh (2022), in 'The Morphology of the Wolf's Mouth', problematizes the use of Hebrew as a local precolonial language in Palestine before being Zionized. Building both on Fanon's argument on language and on Deleuze and

Guattari's (1987) insights on the 'war machine', Al-Shaikh suggests that we should look at the invocation of the Hebrew language in the Palestinian context, not as a spoil of war, but as a war machine Palestinians can use to confront the system and open possibilities in areas that are difficult to control. Al-Shaikh further explicates that mastering the Hebrew language is not only a 'weapon' that Palestinians use to face their colonizer but also a tool to engage and challenge the other's knowledge, to reflect and mirror the Indigenous narrative, and, thus, to reflect moral superiority of the colonized over the colonizer when and while they strive for their daily survival.

In the context of military occupation, Palestinians in Israeli academia struggle with numerous political, cultural, social, and economic obstacles (Abu-Rabia-Queder 2022; Abu-Saad 2006b; Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019). Sa'di-Ibraheem and Furani (2022) discuss the conditions of Palestinian students and lecturers in the Israeli universities, describing them as swallowed 'inside the leviathan' (13). This metaphor illustrates the complexity of being Palestinian in the Israeli academy. Creating what we argue elsewhere is a carceral expansion within higher education (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Otman forthcoming), higher education institutions have been complicit in the violation of Palestinian rights, silencing and disciplining Palestinians through academic degrees, research, and programs (Wind 2024) and have contributed to the hegemonic discourse on Palestine and Palestinians. Palestinian students, faced with this carceral expansion, attempt decolonization from within the Israeli education system, creating a condition that requires living through tense moments, limitations, and challenges while seeking to build a future under settler-colonial dispossession.

Scholars concerned with questions of survivability (Fash, Vásquez Rivera, and Sojob 2023; Pykett 2022) and 'proper viability' (Hage 2020) have reflected on the ethics of life and the importance of attending to the everydayness of life and struggles that sustain it, including the militarization of education (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2010, 2015). In the context of Palestinian citizens in Israel, Khaizran (2025) advances an 'epistemology of rational concession' (3), which conceptualizes a growing willingness to strategically instrumentalize the colonial framework of conditional citizenship in order to advance local, civil, and individual interests – without accepting the ideological and political foundations of the Jewish state. Comparable insights emerged in recent research on youth in Myanmar, where social activism and everyday lives are shaped by persistent preoccupation with securing employment, education, and safety (Oosterom, Pan Maran, and Wilson 2019). In Kenya, Mwaura (2017) describes how youth in clubs developed a hybrid political identity to improve their lives, while emphasizing the need to develop an ethics of life. In urban South Africa, Dawson (2022) explains that young people think beyond mere survival. In other words, and as Dyson and Jeffrey (2024) point out regarding rural north India, Indigenous youth are not leading a 'bare life' in contexts of struggle; instead, they are closely engaged in pursuing affective and ethical fulfillment beyond survival.

Building on the above, the current paper seeks to understand students' attitudes toward knowing and using their colonizer's language by drawing on the perspectives of 80 students to analyze and understand the political, affective, and educational role of the Hebrew language on Palestinian students. Borrowing both from Fanon's ([1952] 1986) theorization of the colonized's use of the colonizer's language and from

Al-Shaikh's morphological take, the article maps the structure of the colonial apparatus and takes as a departure point a refusal to accept an ahistorical and apolitical approach to understanding language as a grammar of power and domination.

Israel's Military Occupation of Jerusalem

Palestinians in OEJ encounter a number of challenges that affect their daily lives and mark their existence in Jerusalem as temporary and precarious. Partitioned as a result of the 1948 war, the eastern half of Jerusalem and its residents fell under Jordanian rule until 1967, when Israel illegally occupied East Jerusalem and unilaterally annexed parts into the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem – without granting Israeli citizenship to Palestinian residents in these areas (Hasson 2019).[2] Unlike Israeli Jews or Jews anywhere in the world, Palestinians living in OEJ lack a right to residency, nationality, or citizenship in their city, and they must constantly prove that their 'center of life' is in Israel or their so-called permanent residency will be revoked. Since 1967, the Israel Ministry of Interior has revoked the residency of at least 14,643 OEJ Palestinians (B'Tselem 2023b). The Israeli government also regularly demolishes Palestinian homes and structures across OEJ under the pretext that they lack proper building permits, thus furthering the precarity of Palestinians' lives in the city. Since 2004, Israeli authorities have demolished 1,150 Palestinian homes and structures in OEJ, rendering 3,725 Palestinians, including 1,983 minors, homeless (B'Tselem 2023a).

Today, Palestinians comprise 38% of the population within the Israeli municipal boundaries of Jerusalem (Assaf-Shapira 2023). Israeli authorities have kept them isolated in ghettoized neighborhoods separated from the city's Jewish Israeli areas (Al-Jubeh 2017; Hammami 2010). About 83,000 Palestinians with Jerusalem residency live, behind the separation wall that the Israeli government built in 2008, within the densely populated neighborhoods of Kufr 'Aqab, Atarot, Shu'fat refugee camp, and New Anata (Korach and Choshen 2020). Compounding the drastically inadequate municipal and governmental services that Palestinian Jerusalemites receive, those living in neighborhoods behind the separation wall must pass through military checkpoints every day to access their places of work, healthcare, education, and other basic services.

For decades, the Israeli government, as part of its strategy of de-development in Palestinian areas (Nasrallah 2014), has neglected education services in OEJ. Nearly 55% of the Palestinian population within the Israeli municipal boundaries of Jerusalem is under the age of 24, and about 60% of the total population of OEJ and nearly 67.5% of Palestinian children in OEJ live below the poverty line (Assaf-Shapira 2023). Additionally, since 2014, Palestinian youth in OEJ have suffered from continuous political arrests. In July 2017, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) indicated that over three years (2015–2017), approximately 700 Palestinian children in East Jerusalem were detained (UN OCHA 2017). This socioeconomically limited and politically unstable reality presents various

[2]For more on this, see Ramon and Ronan (2017).

and complex challenges for Palestinians living in OEJ, and especially for Palestinian youth, who experience multiple forms of violence on a daily basis as the oppressed (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Odeh 2018).

Language and the Homesh Plan

The Israeli government's Homesh plan for economic development for the Palestinian community in Israel includes resolutions for OEJ. In its first iteration, spanning five years from 2018 to 2023, the Homesh plan introduced resolution 3790, claiming to offer a holistic approach to development, including improving the quality of education and transportation infrastructure, developing local economies and employment to reduce socioeconomic gaps, and integrating Jerusalem's Palestinian community into Israeli society and Israel's economy (Zimran 2019). But the plan's proposal to integrate Palestinians is part of strengthening Jerusalem socioeconomically as Israel's capital (Prime Minister's Office 2023). Researchers also argue that it serves Israeli authorities' political agenda of consolidating Israeli sovereignty over OEJ, thereby promoting the city's 'Israelization' (Lavie, Hadad, and Elran 2018; Qadah 2023). According to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, the plan is intended to create a 'united and strong Jerusalem' and to strengthen governance in the city (Hasson, Lis, and Heruti-Sover 2023).

In August 2023, the Israeli government approved a second five-year plan for the development of OEJ (2023–2028; resolution 3791). The plan identifies four main goals for education in OEJ, including deepening knowledge of the Hebrew language (Ministry of Education – Jerusalem District n.d.). The educational component of the Homesh plan is considered the lynchpin to achieving its overall goals. A study by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy and Research (n.d.) confirms that an essential objective of the plan is transferring the Israeli curriculum to Palestinian educational institutions, a strategy that critics argue is part of the 'Israelization' of OEJ through shaping the consciousness of younger generations of Palestinians (Qadah 2023).

Moreover, through the Homesh plan, governmental and educational institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, the Jerusalem Municipality, HU, and local Israeli organizations, have been recruiting and preparing Palestinians from OEJ for higher education at HU and other Israeli academic institutions. Indeed, Abu-Saad (2006a) shows how the Israeli government obliterates the Indigenous identity of Palestinians through identity formation policies within the formal education system, repressing their Indigenous collective history and culture. This effort includes inferiorization of their Indigenous language, Arabic, particularly in the Israeli academic sphere (Jabareen and Mendel 2024) and even physical erasure of the Arabic language from the public scene in OEJ to advance a Jewish-Israeli identity and perspective through the use of Hebrew (Dahamshe and Mendel 2021). Wolfe (2006) has argued that the settler-colonial logic of elimination contains biocultural aspects, as part of what he referred to as 'destroy to replace'. Mamdani (2015) has indicated how the Israeli settler-colonial regime's aim is to control Palestinian land. Wind (2024) has explained how Israeli universities have served Zionist claims to Palestinian land and particularly how the establishment of the HU campus served the Zionist colony in Palestine. Not

only that, scholars have shown how Israeli higher education is directly complicit in oppressing Palestinians through its academic disciplines and research laboratories, as well as by dominating critical scholarship and silencing Palestinian student dissent (Abu-Rabia-Queder and Hager 2024; Golan-Agnon 2020; Wind 2024). Historically, Israeli academia has provided an intellectual foundation for Zionist ideology and myths that demanded the creation of the state of Israel, and later it created the intellectual and professional elite that served as the gatekeepers, together with Israeli military, to the Zionist project in Palestine (Alexander 2005). For example, Dolev (2016) has argued the centrality of the Hebrew University, founded to revive national Jewish and Hebrew identity in Jerusalem, to Zionist goals long before the establishment of the state of Israel. More recently, Golan and Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019) argue the direct contribution of the HU to the Israeli political apparatus through the use and abuse of higher education as a racialized regime of colonial dispossession, surveillance, and control over the Palestinian narrative, creating an atmosphere of fear, silencing, and self-censorship on campus.

Methodology

This study is a part of four years of research investigating the experiences of Palestinian students from OEJ studying at HU within the context of the Homesh plan. The purpose of this current research is to attain a bottom-up understanding of the psychosocial dynamics of learning, speaking, and mastering the Hebrew language among Palestinian students from OEJ seeking academic degrees at HU. It focuses on the challenges they face and how they cope with or confront these challenges while living in the context of economic, social, and political precarity. In doing so, we employ a critical and feminist methodology (Hammersley 1992; hooks 2009; Lafrance and Wigginton 2019; Luke and Gore 2017; Million 2009; Taylor, Ulmer, and Hughes 2020) that recognizes the importance of the lived experience of everyday life, with the goal of unearthing subjected knowledge (Hesse-Biber 2007). Feminist thinking and practice require thinking from the margins to the center (Harding 2004; Smith 1990), and Palestinian feminist methodology stresses the importance of looking at the intimate, at the everydayness of suffering, and at the epistemology of details (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015). We also rely on context-informed methodology, which 'recognizes the complexity of both the socio-political context and the workings of power that produce knowledge and affects in a specific situation' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Roer-Strier 2016, 553).

Deploying a bottom-up, feminist framework that centers the subordinate group's perspectives (Schram 2017), we examine the narratives of 80 Palestinian students studying at HU. Following approval from the ethics committee of the Institute of Criminology at the Faculty of Law at the HU (IRB), researchers shared an informed consent, guarantee of anonymity, and the option to withdraw from the research with all the participants before the interview. We collected testimonies between September 2022 and August 2023 through various research methods, including 60 semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions comprised of 20 students total. We randomly selected students from various faculties and academic programs at HU.

The research utilizes grounded theory methodology as an explanatory framework to understand the phenomenon of colonized Palestinian students learning their colonizer's language, thereby allowing for new, contextualized theories to emerge organically from the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that grounded theories are fluid because they embrace and account for the interactions of multiple actors and emphasize temporality and process. In this regard, implementing grounded theory allows complicated narratives to shape new understandings of how the colonized face their conditions. In other words, this research analyzes student narratives of acquiring their colonizer's language through an implicit critique of the very settler-colonial social conditions that render the colonized dependent on colonial language and structures for survival. As Palestinians living under Israeli settler colonization ourselves, we, the researchers who study and work at the HU, struggle with the same colonial challenges, including using the Hebrew language to navigate the institution. We also note that the Principal Investigator, post-doctoral, doctoral student, and research assistants for this project live in OEJ.

Mastering the Language of the Colonizer

Students described how mastering Hebrew is embedded in the political context of OEJ. Rula, an undergraduate student in her second year at HU, relayed:

> When I hear their language, my stomach hurts … It is because of the political situation that silences us. We don't speak what we think. It's like there is an elephant in the room, and the elephant is the Palestinian. Everyone sees the elephant, but everyone ignores it, precisely when the political situation is intense.

Rula indicates that being at HU and speaking and hearing the Hebrew language is not merely a matter of being a minority struggling with a foreign language within a racial hierarchy (Nuseibeh, Cohen, and Bekerman 2024). Rula's struggle *to be*, to speak, and to be heard and seen is influenced by the ongoing violence against her and her people as colonized subjects. Hearing and using the language of the occupier, as Rula suggests, operates affectively, politically, and psychosomatically. It disrupts the intimate and her very senses (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2016).

Rula emphasizes that her psychological and physiological stress and anxiety result not only from acquiring and using the colonizer's language but also from being in the same room as her oppressors, sitting side-by-side, studying, and conversing with them. In this context, the pain, stress, and anxiety come from knowing that she *must* master this language to be able to socialize and achieve a future in her city, a realization that reminds her of her condition as a colonized subject. Her voice reflects how being a Palestinian in an Israeli university is dissonant, anomalous, stressful, and painful to the degree of feeling physically sick. Hearing and conversing with the colonizers, in their language, carries dual meanings: not only does it contradict Rula's everyday ordeals of living under oppression, but it also frames her as the unwanted other studying alongside her colonizers in their academic institution, where even in the ostensibly equal classroom the reality of colonization persists.

Dalia, a graduate student at HU, also described the influence of political connotations on Palestinian students' experiences learning and using Hebrew at the university:

> I don't feel happy when coming to the university. I feel like I am coming to the unknown – maybe someone would ask me something in Hebrew and I wouldn't understand. I hated going to the Hebrew courses, while I was relaxed when going to the English courses. Although I wasn't very good in English, I felt strong compared to the Hebrew, where I felt weak. Maybe because it's the language that I hear at the checkpoint.

Busch and McNamara (2020) argue that language can become interconnected with traumatic experiences in complex and multilayered ways. Dalia's testimony confirms this claim, showing that language carries and stores memories, fears, traumas, wounds, connections, and disconnections. She identifies Hebrew as the language of the oppressor and its power as a language that reflects the brutalities of a military checkpoint. Relatedly, Busch and McNamara (2020) argue that traumatic experiences can severely impact a person's linguistic practices, including speaking or learning a certain language or self-imposing or taking refuge in silence. Accordingly, using the Hebrew language at the university reminds Palestinian students of their own as well as their people's daily experience, regenerating the fear and anxiety that comes with years of traumatic experiences.

Dalia's fear arises from the unknown: she fears not understanding what is going on, what to say, or how to react at the university if and when those in power remember that she is the same person they can stop, search, shoot, and oppress at military checkpoints. The apprehension and sense of alarm she carries with her from past and ongoing traumatic events as a Palestinian who passes through dehumanizing military checkpoints stay with her and are ignited at the university, especially in Hebrew class. Salameh (2024) illustrates how the power and control exercised at Israeli checkpoints become inscribed on the Palestinian body, to the extent that the body – its sensory perceptions and modes of operation – functions as an extension of the checkpoint's technologies of domination. This inscription is not merely external but deeply somatic, shaping bodily responses and affective states.

Dalia's experience of precarity exemplifies this embodiment, wherein the Hebrew language operates as a trigger that reanimates the embodied effect of settler-colonial control. For her, Hebrew is a constant reminder of her ongoing vulnerability – the persistent possibility of being threatened, targeted, or rendered defenseless – even within the space of the Hebrew University. As Salameh (2024) argues, this condition not only marks her bodily experience but also fundamentally transforms her sense of space and being-in-the-world. Together, Rula's pain and Dalia's feeling of weakness expose how using the colonizer's language is violence that invades the body of the colonized. Feminist scholars argue that unearthing the embodiment of structured violence illuminates the intersections of the intimate/private and the systemic/public, thus revealing unseen and affective everyday aggressions that the state not only ignores but utilizes and manipulates (Fischer and Dolezal 2018; Fluri and Piedalue 2017).

Language and the Erasure/Reformulation of Palestinian Consciousness

While some Palestinian students described learning the Hebrew language as embedded in the political context of OEJ, others revealed how the colonizer's

language is another tool of subjugation in the master's hands. Widad, an undergraduate student at HU, said:

> I don't like to talk politics. I have good relationships with my Israeli and international classmates and we talk a lot. Once, we were talking and I repeated the word *Israel* instead of *Palestine* when relating to occupied locality because my Jewish Israeli classmates use it. I felt weird and I thought to myself, 'Why did I repeat their wordings?' I was upset because it's like I acknowledged the occupation.

Widad's example indicates that the use of Hebrew – the language of the colonizer with its specific political framings – contributes to the denial of the existence of military occupation and, by extension, the erasure of her people's right to exist on the land. It therefore functions not merely as an invasion of one tongue by the other but as an invasion and manipulation of the colonized's very mode of speaking, thinking, and knowing.

Valdez (2020) argues that the colonizer's language reflects and maintains settler culture and values and that the colonizer uses it to 'civilize' the colonized into hegemonic ways of thinking and being. Speaking Hebrew carried debilitating psychopolitical ramifications for Widad. It led her to use the word *Israel* instead of *Palestine*, in effect penetrating and reshaping her consciousness, erasing her identity, narration, and reality in the process. Indeed, as Abu-Saad (2006a) argues, the state of Israel obliterates the Indigenous identity of Palestinians in Israel through identity formation policies within the formal education system that serve to repress their collective history and culture. To that end, the Homesh plan funds curricular changes in Palestinian educational institutions (Alayan 2018). The initiative would also train teachers and school staff in Israeli pedagogical techniques, including through the creation of a special program to encourage selected students from OEJ to study in Israeli universities (Lavie, Hadad, and Elran 2018).

Another undergraduate student, Laila, commented:

> The concepts and theories Israeli lecturers use debilitate me. All subjects are about terrorism, terror, and terrorists. Until when? Enough applying theories of terror to Palestinians! To write that the state incarcerates Palestinian children aged ten to twelve to maintain public peace burns my heart.

Unlike Widad, Laila is aware of the epistemic violence embedded in the colonizer's conceptualizations, imposed through its language (Pinto 2017; Sa'di-Ibraheem 2024). Widad's experience shows how such violence is not just inscribed on her mind but also on her body. However, she refuses this invocation. Imposed political framings and concepts, such as terrorism, loaded with the colonizer's criminalization and dehumanization of Palestinians, upset Laila and burden her psychologically. Laila's experience of embodied violence in higher education, wounding her mind and heart, confirms Woodson's ([1933] 1990) argument that higher education of the racialized other 'does not bring their minds into harmony with their life as they must face it' (38); rather, it installs the oppressor's knowledge in their minds 'under the pretext of education' (44). Laila's embodied burning shows us how using the colonizer's language reproduces epistemic violence, colonization, and its psychosocial and bodily wounding.

This situation similarly causes suffering for another undergraduate student, Hadi:

> I feel I am lost. I start talking to myself in their language, using their words and sentences, but I am Palestinian. It makes me feel alienated. I feel like I'm not the same when using their language. I started to feel that I'm not a real Palestinian, that this is not my identity nor my cause that I was raised to protect. Like, when Shireen Abu Akleh was killed, I couldn't speak about how sad and angry I was. At the university, business was as usual. I felt like a hypocrite.

Hadi's remarks demonstrate what Fanon ([1952] 1986) described about adopting the language of the oppressor. As Fanon emphasized, the colonized moves away from themself, their own language, culture, community, and worldview. Hadi's voice indicates that practicing the colonizer's language, in effect, penetrates intrapsychic spaces of talking to the self. The words and sentences of the colonizer erase the reality of the colonized, torture Hadi, split his identity, penetrate his psyche, and dismember his sense of belonging.

Hadi also indicates that the context of settler-colonial violence, including the killing of Palestinians, intensifies the sense of dismemberment of Palestinian students, particularly when using the colonizer's language. The assassination of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh in May 2022 was a major event for Palestinians. She was shot in the head by an Israeli sniper while covering an Israeli raid in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank (Gillen 2023). Her murder generated widespread outrage in the Palestinian community, leading to protests and a general strike.[3] This included a protest held by Palestinian students at HU. Despite this shocking extrajudicial killing of a prominent and beloved journalist and despite the protests held by Palestinian university students, Palestinian students had to attend their courses as if business was as usual, intensifying their feelings of alienation, otherization, and oppression within HU. Hadi explained that the feeling of silence on campus following Abu Akleh's assassination was similar to the feeling of alienation he experiences speaking Hebrew.

Hadi, Laila, and Widad's voices demonstrate how practicing the colonizer's language plays into the colonizer's hands, epistemologically and affectively supporting the domination of the colonized. Hadi, Laila, and Widad's testimonies bring us back to Fanon's (1963) explanation that colonization of the mind is a violent colonial process of destroying the language, culture, and history of colonized peoples.

The Painful Paradox of Acquiring the Colonizer's Language

Discussions about language trouble students. As Salam, an undergraduate student, narrated:

> When I hear the Hebrew language, when I use it, I feel violence. I feel like I am being raped. Why rape? Because everything is permitted; everything is penetrable – my home, my family, my mind, my body, my way of conversing and using a language. See, words such as *hawiyyeh* [identity card], *makhsom* [military checkpoint], *mehabel* [terrorist] are all we hear in Hebrew. Then, we come here to the university and there's no other way

[3]For more on this, see Hashmonai and Khoury (2022) and Hendrix and Taha (2022).

> but to use the checkpoint language. See, this is why I feel like I'm being raped. I need to use the language and protect myself.[4]

Another undergraduate student, 'Alia, narrated:

> I never forget that I live under occupation. Currently, I need to think about how I can be useful to my people and to support my community. For example, I teach Hebrew. I had two scholarships: one for teaching Palestinians Hebrew and the other for teaching Israelis Arabic. But when I started to teach the Israelis Arabic, I thought to myself, 'What am I doing?! I am teaching them our language!' They can understand what we say and maybe they can hurt us. So, I quit teaching Arabic and now I only teach Hebrew to my people.

Students like Salam and 'Alia laid out a tapestry of meanings involved in the politics of utilizing the language of the colonizer. In some instances, acquiring it made students feel as if they accept the colonial reality in which they live, while others explained how knowing the colonizer's language allowed them to be in control of their racialized condition and find ways to defy it. Salam described the intimate penetration of rape when using the colonizer language, while 'Alia suggested that knowing the Hebrew language is not merely a mode of self-protection amidst ongoing inequality but also a mode of *sumud*, or steadfastness (Meari 2014; Schiocchet 2011), because it allows her to confront settler colonialism in its own language, confirming Al-Shaikh's (2022) argument that Hebrew can become the Palestinian's tool to defy their colonizer.

Indeed, Salam and 'Alia's lived experiences pose critical questions: how does mastering the colonizer's language help the colonized defy the colonizer's abuses? How does it reinscribe pain in the colonized mind and body? 'Alia's testimony demonstrates how, although she is studying in an Israeli institution of higher education, she can master the Hebrew language without assimilating. To the contrary, she uses her studies and scholarship to oppose the penetrative power of the colonizer's language by refusing to cooperate. For her, mastering the Hebrew language means gaining the ability to better comprehend colonial strategies as well as the racial tactics and epistemic violence embedded in colonizing curricula. She chooses to teach more Palestinians Hebrew so that they can also know how to study their colonizer and its apparatuses, thereby enabling them to prepare and protect themselves and their communities from the daily violence of Israeli settler colonialism. This inversion, in turn, disrupts and challenges the colonizer's systems of oppression.

But for Salam, using the colonizer's language carries embodied racialized violence that creates a feeling of psychological and physical violation. This dilemma between using and not using the language emerged in another graduate student's narration. Rima shared the way she survived the trap that the Hebrew language creates:

> Once, I was driving home and a military patrol stopped me and asked why I was there on that road and asked for my *hawiyyeh*. My Hebrew helped me to talk back in a way where I was not inferior, in a way that challenged him. The soldier didn't expect my

[4]The researchers recognize that *hawiyyeh* is Arabic, but Salam's larger point remains true: most Palestinian students hear Hebrew from soldiers in the militarized context of checkpoints and elsewhere as the language of an occupying force.

> answer in Hebrew. I was confident, fearless. The language helped me to control my action and challenge him. I didn't succumb.

Rima's anecdote indicates that language acquisition goes beyond ensuring survival amidst violence. In Rima's experience, Hebrew allowed her to challenge critically the colonizer by surprising a military patrolman with her mastery of his language. She transformed the Hebrew language from a tool of brutalization, violent subjugation, and corporeal violation to one of challenge and refusal – from a weapon of penetration and death to a weapon of life. Resonating with Al-Shaikh's (2022) insight that mastering the Hebrew language can dismantle the Israeli colonizer's superiority, Rima also practices a critical disruption of settler-colonial legacies in her appropriation of Hebrew in this encounter.

Similar insights were apparent in another undergraduate student, Salah's, testimony:

> I want to learn Hebrew because learning the language of your enemy will protect you from their hostility. You feel like you know more about them and you can understand what they say and what they do. One needs to know about one's rights, so they won't be afraid.

Salah, like Rima, illustrates how his use of the Hebrew language shields him from the colonizer's aggression. He explains that mastering the colonizer's language is crucial to understanding how the colonizer plans its atrocities against the colonized – how the colonizers think and act. It is a tool that goes beyond survival to disrupt the machinery of fear and defy technologies of hostility and control, fortifying the colonized against the colonizer's hostilities (Al-Shaikh 2022). It is a mode of *sumud*.

Practicing the Hebrew language presents a trap of life and death. As graduate student Lama shared:

> Once, I was in an Israeli store and I couldn't understand what the cashier was saying in Hebrew, so she was talking to me rudely and meanly. I felt humiliated. Now, I avoid going to Israeli stores. Another time, I was crossing a checkpoint and I couldn't understand what the soldiers were saying, so they were screaming at me, pointing their guns towards me. I could have been killed because of it. Now, I avoid crossing checkpoints. Studying at HU where we use Hebrew is loaded with a heavy psychological burden. It takes from one's health. It takes years off one's life – an awful psychological *nakseh* [deterioration].

Lama's everyday experiences demonstrate how not knowing a language incarcerates, creates invisible borders, and limits access for the colonized. She tells us that not speaking the Hebrew language dispossesses Palestinians of their humanity and dignity and makes them targets of the occupying power.

Mastering Hebrew for undergraduate student Hanan also carried contradictory meanings:

> Why do I have to speak their language? They are the ones who came to our land. They should speak the Indigenous language … It was hard to learn the language because of a psychological burden. I rejected the language because of my belief that they should learn our language and not the opposite, and now I try to accept the reality and learn Hebrew to be able to survive and to be strong.

The multiplicity of meanings that Hanan draws out reflects the effects of militarized and violent colonial carcerality, which carries with it deep psychological challenges and rejection for the colonized. Nevertheless, Hanan emphasizes that she was able to overcome such violence by learning the colonizer's language while refusing assimilation, domination, and submission. These voices revealed that learning Hebrew does not necessarily mean accepting the violence embedded in its Zionization. Learning Hebrew, the colonizer's language of oppression, doesn't mean accepting oppression. By walking the walk, talking the talk, and being aware of the language as the 'wolf's' language (Al-Shaikh 2022), these students reproduced Hebrew as a language that has failed to existentially erase the Palestinians, in spite of all the military victories. Mignolo (2012) tells us that language can be complicit with colonial violence and used as an instrument of colonial domination; however, the colonized can transform it into an instrument of resistance. Similarly, these testimonies uncloak the contradictory reality of mastering the colonizer's language – a paradox in which the colonized practice the language of their colonizer to feel stronger. Hanan's voice reflects Fanon's ([1952] 1986) theorization that the colonizer's language carries dual and contradictory values, at once confirming the colonized's subjugation while serving as an effective tool of resistance to oppression.

The students' insights suggest that acquiring the language of the oppressor in higher education is not a means of normalizing or negating settler-colonial interests, ambitions, and ideologies. Learning the colonizer's language and enrolling in higher education institutions is not a celebration of multiculturalism and equal opportunity. Rather, acquiring the Hebrew language, consciously and critically, empowers Palestinian students. While they struggle with the use of the occupier's language, students also discuss the ways their use of it can produce 'conditions of possibility' to challenge the social, political, and economic workings of settler-colonial racism. But how do students reconcile speaking Hebrew (under duress) with their hopes for an economically and personally secure life in a society dedicated to their dispossession? How do such conditions of possibility coexist with the racialized regime?

Conclusion: Between the 'Wolf's Mouth' and 'inside the Leviathan'

Learning the language of the occupier, as the lived experiences of the students revealed, goes beyond acquiring a language and extends to intimate details that require thinking the politics of language. Looking at the politics of acquiring the colonizer's language reveals a fundamental paradox for the colonized: using this language can assist them in challenging their oppression, but it can also play into the colonizer's racialized colonial agenda. Applying the feminist theoretical framework reveals the complexity of speaking the colonizer's language, and this research exposed the ways in which using the language of the colonizer troubled students psychologically, at times raised their awareness of the embodied violences it carries, and at other times empowered them while confronting their occupier. It demonstrated how the power of knowing the language of the colonizer can make life 'just bearable' (Hage 2020): allowing the colonized to find ways to live beyond mere survival (Butler 2006), they bargain colonial structures (Khaizran 2025) while pursuing

affective and ethical objectives in the face of uprooting and dismemberment (Dawson 2022). Still, acquisition of the colonizer's language places a heavy toll on such young minds and hearts.

Focusing on the Palestinian students' mundane experiences of affective and embodied violence in using the colonizer's language revealed unseen settler-colonial manipulations, militarized precarities, and students' need to challenge it. Aware of the intimate and daily wounding and invasions of speaking Hebrew in the settler-colonial academy, the students pointed out that using Hebrew allows them to harness their precarious existence to break their carcerality, to open opportunities for a better future, and to mobilize for action. They were fully aware of the language's devastating psychosocial impact in a context of chronic political violence, suppression, and upheaval (Giacaman et al. 2004, 2011; Summerfield 1999). They also stressed that acquiring the language of the occupier is about spatiality (including the body and the checkpoint), temporalities (including the ongoing Nakba), and *sumud – steadfastness* and defiance against territorial, bodily, and psychosocial military occupation. Invoking the colonizer's language reminded students that although the 'master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (Lorde 1983), language can, at times, facilitate livability amidst biopolitical and necropolitical dispossession. In other words, the students' voices advanced an argument that rendered them creators – but not prisoners – of their choice to acquire the colonizer's language. As Fanon ([1952] 1986) theorized in French-occupied Algeria, Palestinian students in our study explained that acquiring the language of the Israeli occupier results in intrapsychic and sociopolitical struggles emanating from the complexities and multiplicities of pain and power they experienced while using the language. In this way, the students agreed with Fanon's analyses, but they also used the Hebrew language to bargain for better opportunities of living (Khaizran 2025) or, as Al-Shaikh (2022) explained, to defy their carceral colonization.

Finally, student testimonies asserted the politicization of language. As Orwell (1946, 265) put it, 'Political language … is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'. The fundamentally political reality of language acquisition, framed within the context of state-funded so-called 'economic development initiatives', contributes to concealing the truth of the violence of requiring knowledge of the colonizer's language for basic livability. In other words, acquiring the colonizer's language without a clear awareness of it as the 'wolf's' language, with its psycho-political warfare, as respondents voiced, clothes settler colonialism as justice, atrocities as progress, genocide as self-defense, and maiming as modes of living.

To speak a language is to possess the world expressed and implied by that language, thereby taking on that world and its cultural politics. To speak the colonizer's language might afford the power of resistance and *sumud*, but it can carry elimination, wounding, and cognitive dissonance. Thinking politically and critically about language necessitates that we first detect the 'wolf's mouth' and always ask: what is the psycho-political work of the colonizer's language? What does this language promote and what does it hinder or silence? Or is it an additional carceral space inside the Leviathan?

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Israeli Science Fund under Grant 1767/22.

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