

# THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTING AND GROWING UP AS IMMIGRANTS: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CHILD-REARING PRACTICES IN RUSSIAN-ISRAELI FAMILIES. *Summary*

**Claudia Zbenovich**

As people move from one location to another, cultural understandings of childhood and parenthood are modified. Emigration inevitably affects parenting values and practices, changing them in the process of negotiating cultures whereby immigrants construct new identities, community structures, and cultural sensibilities. At the same time, immigrant families maintain in practice and attitude their inherited cultural capital, which defines a sense of belonging to family traditions on the one hand and, on the other hand, underlies their aspiration to pass this legacy on to their children.

Values and norms of child rearing are to a significant extent transmitted through culture-specific meanings embodied in language. The linguistic aspects of communication have therefore guided my research. Parents bring their beliefs with them into everyday communication with children, and their expectations influence the form of interaction. For immigrants, discourse about these beliefs and expectations organizes the new transnational family dynamics, and this is strongly reflected in particular verbal practices that are employed by parents to mediate their cultural perspectives.

My evidence for this claim comes from conversation analysis of everyday communication in Russian-Israeli immigrant families. The parents are members of an urban, educated middle class (the *intelligentsia* milieu) who immigrated to Israel from Russia in the early 1990s and raise their Israeli-born children in the bilingual context of a large immigrant community. As a rule, the parents employ two languages, Hebrew and Russian, going hand in hand with their maintenance of a bicultural social reality. However, in their guidance of, and transmission of cultural capital to their children, the parents apply culturally specific Russian patterns of linguistic behavior.

In the framework of the immigrant community, the practices of raising children by Russian-Israeli parents are virtually viewed as 'going against' the mainstream Israeli culture. Therefore, the concepts of parenthood and childhood are best examined through the prism of a clash of dialogues between parents and children,

where the latter are carriers of conventional Israeli styles of verbal behavior. The gap between two different experiences of childhood with respect to generation (late Soviet and post-Zionist), language (Russian and Hebrew), and culture (Russian/Soviet and Israeli) underlies the two sets of assumptions of the parties within the discourse, and explains the use of two different modes of communication.

The majority of the Soviet-born parents I studied are professionals who graduated from Israeli universities. Their social integration, acculturation, and command of linguistic resources go hand in hand with a wish to retain their former culture and identity and pass their cultural capital on to their children. Their children are Israeli-born junior schoolchildren between the ages of six and ten.

The main body of data for the study comes from natural conversations, mostly at mealtimes, that I recorded and transcribed. Additional sources of data are interviews with the families on child-rearing in Israel, the host culture, and Russian cultural values. The interviews capture the broader context that explains the data collected through observation of parent-child interaction. Although some parents I interviewed voice a positive view of Israeli childhood, the dominant opinion suggests that there is a gap between the parental perception of familiar and normative child-raising practices on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a reality that is judged to be exceedingly liberal, weird, and unreliable.

Both levels of data are used to reconstruct Russian-Israelis' cultural assumptions in raising their children, as reflected in the patterns of Russian linguistic performance. In examining the rich source of family conversational patterns, I draw on Austin's analysis of speech acts, Grice's pragmatic analysis, Goffman's frame analysis, and Bakhtin's studies of dialogue.

In the section entitled "Language Choice: The Pragmatics of Hebrew and Russian," I consider the communicative outcome of code-shifting. Different levels of familiarity with the two languages, Russian and Hebrew, that are used in everyday discourse, create the underlying gap in parent-children interaction that I observed. The parents are the main promoters of Russian: judging by the interviews, Russian-Israeli parents would like their children to preserve full mastery of the Russian language. Parents therefore continue to speak their native language at home in order to guide their children's verbal comprehension and to supervise the accuracy of their speech. The parent's desire to instill their native language in their children is evidenced in immigrant parents' exclusive use of Russian when speaking with their children, even if the latter switch to Hebrew in the response.

The patterns of the children's language choice vary according to context. In examining bilingualism, scholars of broader social context such as Auer and Gumperz have noted that code switching performs discursive as well as social functions. The essential question regarding language use then concerns the pragmatic outcome of communicating in Hebrew, the children's dominant language, and in Russian, which is dominant for the adults. More specifically, how do parents and children establish their positions in the discourse through language?

No less important is the subject of the children and parents' meta-pragmatic comments around the encounter. In Blum-Kulka's terms, these comments relate to all

aspects of verbal (and non-verbal) behavior considered worthy of attention. The explicit ways in which participants discuss verbal appropriateness are important in the bilingual discourse, since they act as an index for the communicants with regard to linguistic and conversational performance.

The section "Communication Modes: Logical versus Analogical" explores the styles of communication employed by parents and children. Both parties are in contact with two incongruent communicative-pragmatic systems, each embodied by a culturally-specific style of language, typical of either the Russian or the Israeli community. The analysis of a family conversation allows me to examine the difference in modes of communication established by a mother and her daughter within the interaction. It shows that the modern Israeli concept of communication pertains to negotiation discourse, where children are allowed (and even socially encouraged) to argue and discuss. Argumentation, in turn, can be used on the part of the child in order to undermine the parents' authority and change their opinion. While the study showed this type of communication to be prevalent among the Israeli-born children, rational modes of talk were rarely encountered among their parents. The parents' modes of communication often echo the common rhetoric of the authoritarian, compliance-oriented Soviet parents-children discourse, exhibiting sets of assumptions that are continuously upheld by generations of Soviet parents. The style of "you should do as you are told" conversation is typified in more explicit and verbally less complex language patterns of control, rarely accompanied by rational explanation. The characteristic pattern of acts of control manifests a preference for a high level of directness, and this directness reflects a positional attitude toward obedience. In addition, the smaller amount of parental talk renders adult power more noticeable. In short, the Russian-Israeli parents have preserved a directly positional, authoritarian attitude toward communication style as their intrinsic human capital. I believe that the position of being outside the mainstream in the context of immigration contributed to the encapsulation of such practices stereotyped as "Russian."

The section entitled "Cultural Formulas and Clichés of Education" examines how cultural values such as norms of etiquette and gender principles are being consciously taught by parents at mealtime. The analysis of the conversation quoted in the study illustrates several features of parents' educational style. First, codes of behavior are taught within a more complicated "common knowledge" discourse. It is noteworthy that in eliciting adherence to acceptable polite conduct from their Israeli-born children, the parents address the specific normative corpus of Russian cultural knowledge. Their implied criticism is maintained by the underlying assumption that their son or daughter possesses the non-local cultural equipment to an adequate level.

Furthermore, the parent-child hierarchy is constructed through an affirmative impersonal syntax that frames the father's speech acts, and his command tone is intensified by imperatives that directly instruct the son in factual patterns of behavior. The style used by both parents serves to emphasize the hierarchy and to accentuate the discursive distance between the members of the family. It also reveals that though the father doesn't overtly take a critical stance on Israeli table manners,

his disapproval is implied in what he says. In this sense, the practice of teaching children etiquette in Israel might have the same appearance as in Russia, yet it acquires an additional implied meaning: dissatisfaction with the host culture's codes of behavior and a striving to be "culturally superior."

At the same time, my analysis illustrates that both children tend to minimize the discursive gap and assume equality as if they were approved partners in the conversation. In explaining themselves, the boy circumvents the underlying inconvenience of adhering to table manners, while the girl switches to Hebrew in order to signal her disagreement. The Russian cultural code presumes competence in a number of outward behaviors, the ability to act "well mannered" in order to produce the appropriate impression. The Israeli perspective, by contrast, emphasizes a preference for the non-pretentious, simple, and sincere style of *dugriyut*, or directness, of social performance.

In the conclusion, I emphasize that the interplay of change and continuity in the communicative performance of parents and children creates a particular type of family dynamics where the perception of the older generation clashes with the discursive reality of the world of Russian-Israeli childhood.

The Russian language is one of the most imperative ways the parents use to mould their culture, construct social identity, and create community. Moreover, the use of Russian is an attempt on the part of parents to survive in their children: it symbolizes the human cultural capital that they strive to pass on to them. Equally important, the conversational fabric of everyday family communication provides linguistic testimony of how the parents hold on to a position of authority. In the context of immigration, an enforced appearance of Russianness, where all the traditional cultural attitudes are preserved and to some extent exaggerated, is used as a resource against the mainstream Israeli host culture.

The paper suggests that this phenomenon contextually reveals itself in language choice (parents' main concern), modes of communication (use of authoritarian control patterns), and cultural stance (pertaining to the clichés of a "visible pedagogy"). Such parental practices, however, are incongruent with the socially encouraged central position of children in Israeli culture. Russian-Israeli children are bilingual and argumentative, they control the dynamics of the conversation and gain more power in their interactions. However, in this way they violate their parents' Russian-Soviet perception of what childhood is and what verbal manner should be adhered to.