

Zahalit – how Israeli soldiers speak

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Abstract

This article is an introduction to linguistic phenomena which have their origins in the Israeli army and are subsumed under the term Zahalit. The first part illustrates what Zahalit looks like with several examples. The examples are taken from written sources as well as from interviews with Hebrew speakers conducted by the author. Characteristic traits of Zahalit include abbreviations and acronyms along with metaphoric and metonymic constructions. Some of its linguistic properties, as well as common perceptions of Hebrew speakers of Zahalit, are displayed and the argument is made for these phenomena to be viewed as part of a single variety of Modern Hebrew. In the second part, the main functions of Zahalit are reviewed. It satisfies not only the communicational and professional needs of the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) soldiers, but carries an implicit ideology and can fulfill political, as well as social and psychological functions. In fact, its functions can be understood as a continuum between professional language, secret language, and slang. Details regarding the social implications of Zahalit in Israel are given in part three. The role of the IDF in Israeli society and its impact on everyday life are discussed. Linguistic spillovers from the military to civilian society can be explained by the fuzzy boundaries of these two spheres and the influence that the IDF has on an individual's everyday life.

Keywords: *Israeli army, Zahalit, linguistic variation, sociolinguistics*

1 What does *Zahalit* look like?

In Modern Hebrew (MH) one can come across linguistic constructions which have been originally used exclusively by soldiers in the Israeli army. Many of these constructions have made their way into everyday speech and can even be found in Israeli newspapers and books. Fiction writer Ilan Heitner occasionally uses such soldierly expressions in civil contexts in his books:

(1) עוד חצי שנה למנייאק (Heitner 2018: 122)

'od ḥatsi shana la-manayek

another half year to-release

'half a year until release (from the military service)'

When used in its original context in the army, this expression means 'half a year until release (from the military service)'. It is uncertain how this expression developed. Rosenthal (2015: 124) points out that the original Arabic derogatory lexeme *manayek* 'fucker' usually refers to military police officers in the soldiers' slang. On the day of one's release from the army, one has to pass the military police at the gates of the military compound. *Manayek* possibly became conventionalized with this background in the soldiers' slang as a synonym for 'end of the military service'.

In the fictional text from which (1) was taken, the first-person narrator refers to the time remaining until the end of his family's one-year-long journey. The author's choice of this variant from soldiers' slang instead of a more common wording like 'od ḥatsi shana le-sof ha-tiyul 'half a year until the end of the journey' conveys additional information about the narrator. First of all, people who use soldier slang have likely served in the Israeli army themselves (and

so has the narrator of the story). Furthermore, the choice of words suggests that he conceptualizes this journey with his family in a way similar to his experience during the military service – consecutive challenges to master in a limited period of time. This interpretation is supported by the narrator’s repeated description of everyday tasks as military missions throughout the book.

The use of soldierly linguistic variants by the novel’s protagonist achieves several literary effects. The ironic exaggeration in the comparison of day-to-day family life with military routine adds humor, though is quite difficult to decipher for anyone unfamiliar with Israeli military culture.

1.1 What does *Zahalit* mean?

In this article, I use the Hebrew term *Zahalit* to refer to the domain of the Modern Hebrew language to which all the linguistic phenomena presented here belong. I follow Rosenthal’s (2014) use of this term according to his pioneer research on soldier slang in MH. As will be elaborated in 1.3, this designation is well-known to the wider non-expert public in Israel and therefore, is best suited for the discussed phenomena.

The term *Zahalit* itself is one of many characteristic examples of these phenomena and can only be rendered in English with further explanation. It was formed with the acronym for the Israeli army’s official name *tsva’ ha-hagana le-yisra’el* ‘Israel Defense Forces’, pronounced *Zahal*¹. Together with the derivational suffix *-it*, which forms adjectives and designations of languages like *’anglit* ‘English’, *Zahalit* can be used to refer to the special kind of Hebrew originally used within the Israeli Army (IDF).

Acronyms and abbreviations are abundant in military vocabulary around the world (cf. Möller 2018 and Thorne 2006: 22), but they are also frequently used in Hebrew in general. Due to its main word formation strategies which are based on three root consonants, Hebrew is prone to the use of abbreviations just as if they were natural lexemes. *Zahal* fits perfectly in the noun pattern CaCaC (C stands for consonant) and possesses the phonological quality of a natural Hebrew word like *nahal* ‘river’. Abbreviations can also be found in huge quantities in the Rabbinical literature and other contexts. The frequent use of abbreviations in both written and spoken language, in addition to the derivation of nouns, adjectives and verbs from abbreviations is typical for *Zahalit*.

1.2 Linguistic spillover from the military into the civil domain

Example (2) is taken from Leshem’s bestselling novel *’im yesh gan ’eden* ‘if there is a paradise’ which tells the fictional story of a unit of young Israeli soldiers during the end of the South Lebanon conflict in the year 2000. This story is told in a realistic fashion from the unit commander’s perspective and is filled with military terminology and slang.

¹ Instead of the standard transliteration *tsahal*, [z] is used here because the term *Zahal* is already established.

- (2) כשמישהו היה מזכיר בטעות את אחותי ויקי, הייתי יוצא מאיפוס (Leshem 2005:22)
kshe-mishehu haya mazkir be-ta'ut 'et 'ahot-i yiki
 when-somebody be.PST.3MS mention.PRE.MS by-mistake ACC sister-my Viki
hayiti yotse' me-'ipus²
 be.PST-1S exit.PRE.MS of-calibration
 'when somebody mentioned my sister Viki by mistake I lost my mental balance'

In (2), the construction *yotse' me-'ipus*, which literally means 'leave the calibration', is particularly notable. *'ipus* is a technical term which means 'calibration' and is typically used in the context of handling weapons and watches. This example shows how this technical military term metaphorically extended to refer to one's mental constitution in general. The broader meaning of *'ipus* is so widespread that the *Free Online Hebrew Dictionary* (www.milog.co.il, accessed 21.01.2019) lists *'izun nafshi* 'mental balance' as a definition in the entry for *'ipus*.

A similar spillover of a term from the technical to the human semantic domain is described by Klemperer (1947:235) for the German lexeme *Einstellung* 'configuration (originally of a machine)', which became conventionalized with the additional meanings 'mental state' or 'worldview' at the beginning of the twentieth century and can be used nowadays to refer to one's political opinions, for example, as in *politische Einstellung*.

Rosenthal (2018) cites many examples for the use of *Zahalit* in civilian contexts and argues that spillovers take place in the semantic domains of *politics, management, sport, relationships, ways of behavior* and *words of empowerment*.

- (3) כוננות ספיגה: ההגנה תתרסק להפועל גם מול מכבי תל אביב? (Rosenthal 2018)
konenut sfiga: ha-hagana ti-trasek le-hapo'el gam mul
 state.of.alert absorption: DEF-defense 3FS-be.crushed.FUT to-Hapoel also in.front.of
makabi tel 'aviv?
 Makabi Tel Aviv³
 'State of alert: Will Hapoel's defense also be crushed in front of Makabi Tel Aviv?'

Example (3) is a newspaper headline about a football match between the teams *Hapoel* and *Makabi Tel Aviv*. Rosenthal (2018) explains how the meaning of *konenut sfiga* broadened as it was used often in an ironic manner in non-military contexts to indicate readiness to react to one's opponent. It was originally the IDF's designation for a defensive state of alert when attacks from the enemy were anticipated.

The above examples show that *Zahalit* is used in Israeli popular culture in contexts which have nothing to do with the army per se. The examples are instances of linguistic spillovers from *Zahalit* into MH. According to Rosenthal (2018), the influence of *Zahalit* on MH is considerable.

² PST.3MS = past tense, third person, masculine, singular; PRE = present tense; ACC = accusative

³ DEF = definite; 3FS = third person, feminine, singular; FUT = future tense

1.3 How do Hebrew Speakers perceive Zahalit?

When I asked Israelis questions about Zahalit and its usage in everyday life, they all knew the linguistic phenomena to which I was referring. Most had already heard the term before and some even mentioned *Zahalit* before I had introduced the term into our conversation.

Hemmingby (2011: 3) claims that foreigners may have the impression of it as a “language within the language” and Israeli native speakers of Hebrew even use this concept when referring to Zahalit. Fania, aged 57, who served in the army, put it as follows:

“In the IDF in Israel, there are a lot of words which belong to the army. Outsiders don’t understand, but a part of the army words got transferred to the civil language [...] and a lot of abbreviated words – acronyms – came from the army to the civil society, too. But the army invents new words all the time – I already don’t know a part of the army words anymore.”⁴

She argued further that Israelis who haven’t been in the army, like Israeli Arabs or Ultraorthodox Jews, have difficulties understanding Zahalit.

Iris, a 53-year-old mother who never served in the IDF herself, told me that her son, who was doing his military service at the time of the interview, used many abbreviations and she had to ask him frequently about his special language usage because she sometimes has difficulties understanding him. She described Zahalit as follows:

“They have abbreviations. They have an army language, slangs or... slang. Like kind of a special army language. I have to ask him [her son] all the time what does it mean?”

When I asked her about the use of Zahalit in everyday life, she declared:

“I think that many things [expressions in Zahalit] – when they come back to the civilian sphere – then they already don’t say them because it is only when you are in the army. There are things that stay but in general, they lose them.”

In contrast, Yaniv, aged 28, who completed his military service some years ago, told me that he still uses Zahalit, but mainly when talking to his army friends.

When I asked what is characteristic of Zahalit in their opinion, all of the informants mentioned the great number of abbreviations. Yaniv added that there is a lot of imagery (*dimuyim*) in Zahalit and that a lot is based on the special speech conventions used for two-way radio communication in the IDF.

I found that people feel confident judging whether or not a word or construction is likely to have originated in the army. In many cases, I asked Hebrew speakers specifically if they would classify certain phenomena as belonging to Zahalit. For example, at least five informants judged *’ipus* as belonging to Zahalit originally, although it is used in civilian contexts as well (see example (2)).

⁴ All interviews were conducted in Hebrew. The citations in English are my own translations.

The aforementioned utterances are evidence that at least the Israelis I asked are aware of the peculiarities of Zahalit and its special status within MH, as well as the difficulties that outsiders are likely to have understanding it. As all of my informants were neither linguists nor experts on the subject, it can be expected that many more Hebrew speakers are aware of the shared origins of the linguistic phenomena subsumed here under the term *Zahalit*. According to Krefeld (2015: 23), one can speak of a linguistic non-standard variety if co-occurring variants are perceived as belonging together or as one complex. If this is also the case with Zahalit, one can reasonably argue that it is a linguistic variety of MH.

1.4 What are the linguistic properties of Zahalit?

Zahalit is Modern Hebrew; its phonology, morphology, syntax, and orthography are nearly identical with that of Modern Hebrew. One of its most notable characteristics is its productivity and therefore, its changeability. Many new lexemes can be formed from one single lemma due to the variety of derivational strategies available in MH. For example, the blend *ḥapash*, ‘simple soldier’, is composed of the two words *ḥayal* ‘soldier’ and *pashuṭ* ‘simple’. Further forms like *ḥapsh-an* ‘passive, lazy person with lack of initiative’ or the abstract noun *ḥapsh-an-ut* ‘laziness, passivity’ (Rosenthal 2015: 65) were derived and successfully conventionalized; even a verbal form *mithapshen* is used. The morphological structure of the new verb was adapted to the verbal pattern called *hitpa’el* which often carries a reflexive meaning or is used to indicate “initiate one’s own activity upon oneself” (Bolzky 1982: 77). Therefore, *mithapshen* could be translated as ‘laze about’.

When used in contexts outside the IDF, Zahalit occurs mainly as lexical variation, just like the above examples illustrate. It is hard to find utterances outside the IDF which are purely Zahalit, though they are possible nonetheless. Rosenthal at times uses catchy headlines composed entirely in Zahalit when he writes about the topic on his blog (www.ruvik.co.il). These examples are only understandable with some background knowledge and show how far Zahalit can deviate from MH. These examples are, however, highly artificial and would not plausibly be used in this manner.

Within the IDF, a higher frequency of Zahalit lexemes is likely to be used – especially in professional contexts which require specialized vocabulary. Zahalit is highly differentiated between the different units in the army (Rosenthal 2016). Another domain where Zahalit deviates considerably from MH is in two-way radio communication inside the IDF. In order to conceal transmission content from outsiders, a large amount of conventionalized lexical variants is used.

Zahalit deviates from the common morphosyntactic strategies of MH in some ways. One example is the use of the MH past tense – the historic perfective form – to convey an imperative meaning in commands.

- (4) חמישים שניות הייתם כאן בהזרה. זוז
ḥamishim shniyot hayi-tem kan beḥazara. zuz
 fifty seconds be.PST-2PL here back move
 ‘In fifty seconds, you are going to be back here – move!’

In (4), the speaker commands someone to run to a designated place and to be back within 50 seconds. The command phrase is kept as succinct as possible. In this specific context, it is clear to the recipients that *ḥamishim shniyot* ‘fifty seconds’ indicates the available time for the task.

Usually, a temporal designation of this sort would include the temporal adverbial *'aḥarey* ‘after’ in MH, which is omitted here. The most significant variant in (4) is the past form *hayitem* which is used instead of a future form like *ti-hiy-u* (2-be.FUT-P⁵). This is widespread in commands in Zahalit. The past form here more resembles the verbal systems of Classical Arabic or earlier stages of Hebrew, which mark the imperfective and perfective aspects instead of marking tenses.

Without the availability of proper corpora of Zahalit, it is hard to describe its grammatical properties on the level of syntax and morphology in detail. The main obstacle for data collection of Zahalit inside the IDF is the seclusion of military institutions from the public due to matters of security. For more examples with their translation and further remarks about the conventionalization and the use of metaphors in Zahalit see Striedl (2018).

In conclusion, Zahalit does not necessarily stand out in terms of its linguistic properties, but rather its semantic and etymological peculiarities, the effects it can have on its recipients and its diverse functions for the speakers.

2 Zahalit’s functions

Every language variety adapts to the communicational needs of its speakers and fulfills important functions (cf. Labov 1972). In the following, the main functions of Zahalit will be reviewed. It should be kept in mind that the borders between the functional domains are fluid and that one and the same phenomenon in Zahalit can fulfill several functions at the same time.

Figure 1 was designed to illustrate the functional continuum of Zahalit and its understandability for non-expert speakers of MH. There is one axis at the top which represents the understandability of the italicized Zahalit phenomena in accordance with their contexts of usage (in bold letters). The bottom axis divides the contexts from less to more specific, ranging from situations in everyday life to situations in specific units within the IDF. The degree of variation from MH increases in more specific contexts. One elliptic form, Zahalit slang, is adjacent and/or overlaps with almost all entries to illustrate its huge scope, comprising of phenomena from diverse categories which can be used in nearly any context.

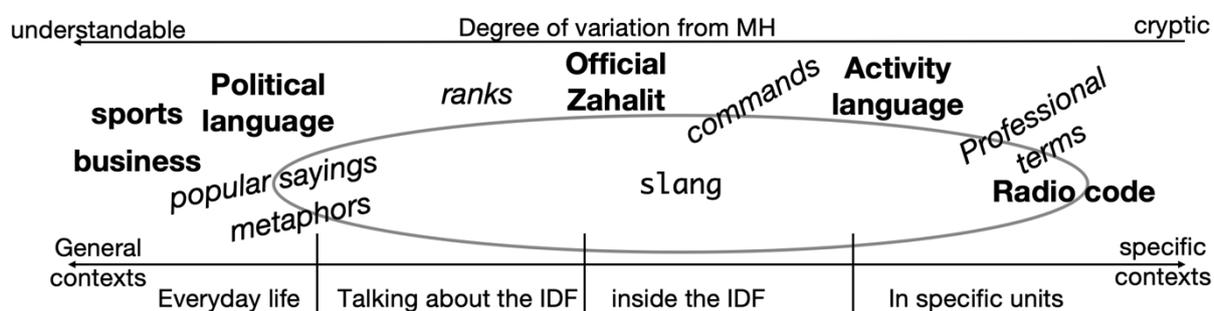


Figure 1: The functional continuum of Zahalit

⁵ P= plural

2.1 As a professional language

MH itself was first established at the beginning of the twentieth century as the language of the Jewish population in the British mandate of Palestine (Shapira 2012:144). At almost the same time, the military institutions of the Jewish settlement became more and more organized, and the first Hebrew speaking soldiers developed special vocabulary and language conventions for their communicative needs (Rosenthal 2014: 37). A professional Hebrew language for the army was created in the same way as for other domains of modern life. Shortly after the IDF was officially instituted as Israel's army with the foundation of the Israeli state in 1948, the first dictionary of Hebrew military terms, which reflects Zahalit's function as a professional language, was published (see Akavia 1951).

2.2 As a secret language

Parts of Zahalit were originally developed as a secret language to restrict access to official military communication and render it difficult for outsiders to decipher. For this purpose, the IDF have been using a special code for their two-way radio communication in which the strategy of *Neosemantisierung* (Siewert 2018: 19) is, therefore, characteristic. *Neosemantisierung* occurs when one lexeme from the standard variety is used with a different meaning. For example, *gafrur* 'match' is used as a metaphor to mean 'soldier'. This strategy is common in military contexts and a similar system was used by German pilots during the Second World War (cf. Siewert 2018: 20). Over time, a lot of the coded vocabulary lost its secrecy and lists of coded words with their meanings can be found online. Some of these words were used outside of radio communication and have made their way into soldiers' slang and even civilian spheres (cf. Rosenthal 2014: 46 and section 1.3).

This special kind of slang is also depicted in TV programs like the popular series *Ramzor*. The main character, Hefer, says *tamtini kṭana* 'wait a minute' in one scene when he is confronted with a problem and goes into an army-like mindset (Ramzor season one, part 9, minute 16). This utterance is part of the radio code. *Tamtini* 'wait.2F.IMP', which originally belongs to a higher register of Hebrew was conventionalized as 'wait' whereby *kṭan-a* 'small-F' means 'minute'.

Even if the way soldiers speak is not completely secret, it can still function as an authentication strategy. This is underlined by a report about attempts to infiltrate the IDF via smartphone applications. The report detailed how IDF soldiers were approached by false actors using nearly authentic slang (Föderl-Schmidt 2018).

2.3 From the sociological point of view

Rosenthal (2014) shows how Zahalit mirrors the hierarchy inside the IDF in both directions top-down and bottom-up. With the official language, which comprises the commands and the ranks, the formal structure of the IDF is expressed from above. On the other hand, in the soldiers' slang, there are many pejorative and ridiculing lexemes which express a negative attitude towards the authorities within the institution.

Hierarchical differences between the soldiers are expressed, for example, according to one's *pazam*, which is an acronym of *perak zman miz'ari*, which is literally for 'minimal period of time' but is used as 'the remaining period of time until the end of the service'. My informant Yaniv explained that you can't ask '*ad matai* 'until when' unless you "are the most *pazam*", which means 'the most senior soldier in the speech situation' (cf. Rosenthal 2015: 124, see Möller 2018: 152-154 for the description of a similar system in the army of the GDR). Other

hierarchical structures inside the IDF based on gender, ethnicity, religiosity and the contrast between combat soldiers and non-combat soldiers are expressed with *Zahalit* (Rosenthal 2014).

Like every slang, *Zahalit* creates a sense of belonging which can be invoked again in the civilian sphere in its use with army friends or even when politicians utilize it to address a particular audience (see Stenström 2009: 2 for a general description of slang).

2.4 From the psychological point of view

It is most obvious with regard to slang that *Zahalit* has psychological functions due to its use to express a soldier's identity as both a living being, not a machine, and as a young person. In *Zahalit*, there are taboos surrounding death and injured comrades. In the radio code, a dead soldier is called *harduf* 'Oleander' and an injured soldier *perah* 'flower', whereas enemies are called *melukhlakhim* 'dirty ones'. These terms disguise the drastic events in a combat situation using linguistic means.

Many expressions from the soldiers' slang are filled with humor and serve to soften the often-harsh reality in the army. Small acts of rebellion with linguistic means are possible, for example, when one refers to a senior officer as *falafel* because of the symbol made of round leaves resembling the food on his/her epaulettes. As displayed in Striedl (2018: 180-182), metaphors in *Zahalit* are often taken from the source domains *flora*, *food*, *childhood*, and *Jewish culture*. Using familiar terms like *mamtaḳim* 'sweets' for 'cartridges' or '*aba*' 'father' for a 'commander' functions to trivialize the military environment.

3 Why is *Zahalit* special?

The IDF is omnipresent in Israeli society. The *ramaṭkal* (abbreviation for) 'Chief of staff of the IDF' is as prominent as the most important politicians and can even challenge their power.

One can follow the IDF's past and present activities on a daily basis in nearly every Israeli newspaper and on every Israeli news channel. The IDF itself has been broadcasting its own radio program on the stations *Galatz* and *Galgalatz* for many years and these programs are very popular. The IDF also has its own YouTube channel⁶, as well as accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where they address a young target group.

The structure of the military service in Israel is legislated primarily according to the 1986 Defence Service Law. With only a few exceptions (for Arabic Israelis and Ultra-Orthodox Jews), the military service is mandatory for men for a period of 32 months and for unmarried women for two years. New immigrants under 22 years old have to serve, too. After completing the military service, many Israelis are assigned to reserve duty, which includes military training and participation in military operations on a regular (monthly or yearly) basis. The possibility of frequently returning home during obligatory military service aids considerably in blurring the boundaries between the civilian and military sphere.

The military institutions in Israel have been crucial throughout the consolidation of the state and the shaping of its ideology. From the beginning of the 19th century, the use of Hebrew among the Jewish population in mandatory Palestine carried ideological weight and functioned as a symbol for the Zionist-nationalist ambitions of the political leaders, as well as for the emerging Israeli culture (Shapira 2012: 143-144). This is also true for *Zahalit*, which became the means with which to express the ideology of the new state and the values of the IDF. The Israeli army grew to be a nearly mythological symbol and a powerful institution at the same

⁶ On its channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/idfnadesk>) one can find introductory clips which explain aspects of the army life and even terms in *Zahalit*.

time. For generations of native Israelis from the 1930s onwards, the *mitos ha-tsabar ha-lohem* ‘the myth of the fighting cactus pear’ (Almog 1997: 187) has been a cultural ideal. *Tsabar* is a common metaphor for ‘native Israeli’. In his portrait of the cultural prototype *tsabar*, which has an illustration of a soldier on its cover, Almog (1997) shows how influential the pioneer-fighter ideal was for Israeli culture in the 20th century. He frequently cites the *tsabar*’s special use of Hebrew, which is closely related to *Zahalit*.

Whether Israel is a militaristic society or not has been a recurring question in many political and sociological analyses over the past sixty years. The different scholarly approaches to this question are reviewed in Sheffer and Barak (2016). Notwithstanding, it is unquestionable that the IDF exerts a huge impact on individuals’ lives and their worldview for a considerable amount of time. Thus, my informant Yaniv recapitulated his experience in the army as follows: “It’s as if the entire army is brought into your life after that, too.”⁷

The symbolic weight of the IDF in the ideological framework of the state, its presence in the media and the blurring of the civilian and the military sphere in everyday life cannot be found easily in other societies today, which contributes to *Zahalit*’s uniqueness.

4 Outlook

Zahalit is far from well-researched and a thorough analysis of its linguistic properties is needed. To do so requires more linguistic data in the context of its usage and ultimately, a compiled corpus of *Zahalit*.

From a historical linguistic perspective, it would be interesting to investigate how and to what extent the military institutions in Israel participated in the shaping of MH and its propagation. Another extensive research question is: which role does the IDF play today with regard to the dynamics of MH and particularly MH slang?

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⁷ The original in Hebrew: “כאילו, כאילו כל הצבא מושלך גם לחיים אחר כך”

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