

Article

Light Against Darkness: Rhetoric and the Struggle over LGBTQ+ in Israel

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Abstract

The article examines conservative rhetoric and discourse in Israel toward the LGBTQ+ community from a sociolinguistic perspective that conceptualizes language as an arena of socio-cultural struggle over identity, power, and normativity. Drawing on queer linguistics theory and identity politics, the study explores how language constructs reality through metaphors of illness, sin, and existential threat, as well as through theological framing and appeals to family and national values. These rhetorical strategies produce a social hierarchy in which heteronormativity is positioned as a “natural truth” while queer identities are labelled as deviant or threatening. From sociological perspective, the study reveals how conservative discourse establishes social boundaries and reinforces collective identity through the exclusion of the Other, thereby reproducing power relations and hierarchies. The article calls for the development of an alternative public discourse grounded in pluralism, inclusion, and the recognition of diverse identities as a means of strengthening democracy and social justice. While existing studies have examined conservative discourse toward LGBTQ+ communities primarily in Western contexts, this study contributes to the field by centering the Israeli case as a distinctive site of analysis, where conservative voices emerge from multiple and ideologically heterogeneous traditions: national-religious, ultra-Orthodox, and Muslim-Arab. By examining how rhetorically divergent speakers converge around shared mechanisms of exclusion, the study reveals that heteronormative discourse is not the product of a single ideological source, but a cross-sectoral phenomenon embedded in the specific political and cultural tensions of Israeli society.

Keywords: conservative discourse; queer linguistics; identity politics; LGBTQ+; social exclusion; sociolinguistics



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1. Introduction

This article examines how conservative public figures in Israel use rhetoric and discourse as mechanisms of power to construct, regulate, and exclude the LGBTQ+ community. It focuses on language as an ideological tool that defines social and moral boundaries, reinforces heteronormativity, and shapes the perception of “the other” within political and public spaces.

Israeli society reflects a complex coexistence of liberal and conservative attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. On the one hand, legal and social progress has increased visibility and partial inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in urban and secular contexts (Shilo 2007, 2019). On the other hand, conservative and religious leaders continue to portray non-heteronormative identities as moral and social threats. This tension exposes

deep ideological divisions within Israeli culture, shaped by patriarchal values, militarism, and religious authority (Shilo et al. 2015).

The study situates the Israeli case within a broader global trend of resistance to postmodern pluralism and gender diversity. Similar conservative backlash appears in the rhetoric of leaders in the United States, Italy, and other parts of Europe, who use moral and nationalistic language to frame heterosexuality as “normal” and LGBTQ+ identities as deviant or dangerous (Prearo and Scopelliti 2025). Through a critical linguistic and queer lens, the article reveals how language operates as a political weapon that constructs both power and exclusion.

Yet despite this growing body of research, existing studies have tended to examine conservative discourse toward LGBTQ+ communities in Israel through a single-sector lens. Research on the religious Jewish sector has received considerably more scholarly attention, while the rhetoric of Arab-Muslim public figures within Israel remains underexplored as a discursive phenomenon. The few studies that do address LGBTQ+ experience in the Arab Palestinian community in Israel focus primarily on the social and psychological dimensions of exclusion rather than on the linguistic mechanisms through which that exclusion is produced (Da’as and Slobodin 2025; Blus-Kadosh et al. 2023). Moreover, the dominant research tradition in this field has been sociological and psychological, attending to the effects of exclusion on LGBTQ+ individuals rather than to the rhetorical strategies through which heteronormativity is constructed and legitimized in public speech. This study addresses both gaps by bringing together conservative voices from multiple sectors of Israeli society and examining them through an integrated framework of queer linguistics and critical discourse analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Queer Theory: Language, Power, and Sexual (In)security*

Since the 1990s, queer theory has become a major critical framework in the humanities and social sciences and has gained growing influence in sociolinguistics. It posits that gender and sexuality are not natural or fixed but produced through discourse, institutional regulation, and the performativity of identity (Butler 1990, 1993). In this view, language does not merely describe sexuality; it creates and legitimizes it through naming, framing, and normalizing practices that distinguish between what is accepted and what is deviant (Bucholtz and Hall 2004).

Queer linguistics investigates how heteronormativity, the assumption that heterosexuality is natural and superior, is sustained through everyday speech and communicative patterns (Cameron and Kulick 2003). Meaning is constructed indexically through linguistic cues that signal identity or belonging (Hall 2013). The same expressions may resist norms in one setting and reproduce them in another. Scholars have also shown how queer communities internalize certain normative ideals, such as monogamy or respectability, aligning with broader neoliberal orders (Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013).

Early sociolinguistic work in Israel focused on how prosody and intonation signal gay identity within Israeli norms of masculinity (Levon 2010, 2020), revealing that sexual identity is performed and negotiated through subtle phonetic cues rather than explicit declarations. Subsequent research broadened this inquiry to include intersections of ethnicity and sexuality. Gafter (2016) showed how discourse about “Mizrahi gays” exposes the layered nature of identity construction, where sexuality cannot be disentangled from ethnicity, class, and social marginalization. More recently, Milani and Levon (2024) shifted the focus from identity performance to political arena, demonstrating that Hebrew discourse on sexuality functions as a site of power and exclusion rather than merely self-expression. Taken together, these studies chart a trajectory from the micro-level analysis of individual

speech patterns toward a broader understanding of sexuality as a politically contested field. Yet they share a common limitation: their analytical gaze remains directed primarily at the discourse of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, leaving largely unexamined the conservative rhetorical structures that produce and sustain the conditions of exclusion in the first place.

Homonationalism (Puar 2007) describes how states selectively adopt LGBTQ+ symbols to project modernity while conditionally excluding those who challenge national or moral boundaries. Pinkwashing extends this critique by naming the strategic deployment of LGBTQ+ visibility to improve political image while concealing deeper inequalities. Together, both concepts illuminate a central tension in the Israeli case: a state that projects tolerance internationally while conservative voices within it actively contest the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ identities in public life.

The related notion of pinkwashing refers to the use of LGBTQ+ visibility to improve national or political image while concealing inequality or occupation. Both mechanisms demonstrate how sexual discourse is used to define who belongs to the nation and who remains outside its moral order.

Recent research combining queer linguistics and security studies introduces the concept of sexual and intimate (in)security. It explores how bodily and emotional spaces are framed as zones of risk and surveillance (Milani and Levon 2024). Even “safe spaces” like LGBTQ+ centers can reproduce hierarchies of belonging, determining who feels secure and whose visibility is seen as a threat. Thus, the sense of safety enjoyed by the heteronormative—and sometimes homonormative—majority is maintained through the continuous insecurity of those whose intimacy crosses national, gendered, or cultural boundaries.

2.2. Queer Linguistics

Queer theory views language as a performative act that shapes social reality rather than merely describing it (Butler 1990). Rhetorical analyses of conservative discourse reveal recurring metaphors of disease, sin, impurity, and existential threat used to frame LGBTQ+ identities as deviant and dangerous to family and social order (Charteris-Black 2018). Through religious and moral intertextuality, sexuality becomes securitized and regulated, limiting imagination and defining who is granted recognition and voice in the public sphere.

Borba (2022) shows how “gender ideology” functions as a transnational rhetorical register that unites nationalist and religious movements through a shared vocabulary of moral danger directed at feminism and gender diversity. Gal (2018, 2021) complements this by revealing the semiotic infrastructure beneath such discourse: the systematic reproduction of a binary between “normal” and “deviant” through metaphors that make heteronormative hierarchy appear natural and inevitable. Both dimensions are operative in the Israeli speeches examined here, where moral danger language is embedded within a broader metaphorical architecture of threat, purity, and collective survival.

Although queer theory has been criticized for being overly abstract and Western-centered (Ziv 2020), contemporary queer linguistics takes a pragmatic turn. It traces how words and discursive forms are reframed and integrated into institutional and legal practices, showing that linguistic change itself becomes a site of resistance and social transformation.

2.3. Identity Politics

Identity politics is a theoretical and practical approach that emerged from broader discussions of multiculturalism and the impact of social and economic structures on power relations and inequality. This approach centers on the struggles of marginalized groups

for equality, representation, and recognition of their rights, emphasizing their unique experiences and collective identity (Fraser 2003).

Identity politics underscores the need for cultural and identity recognition alongside demands for the equitable distribution of social and economic resources. However, some scholars warn of the risks inherent in one-dimensional identity politics, which may deepen social divisions and lead to “political fragmentation” rather than cooperation across groups (Cohen 2000).

In recent decades, identity politics has become a central focus in research concerning gender, ethnic, and religious minority communities, analysing processes of marginalization, visibility, and social change (Yuval-Davis 2011). In the context of the LGBTQ+ community, this politics is expressed in the aspiration to reshape public space to include diverse gender and sexual identities. It highlights the importance of visibility and cultural recognition, based on the understanding that equality is measured not only in the legal sphere but also through the social internalization of values such as tolerance, diversity, and equal opportunity (Butler 2020; Fraser 2003).

The relationship between identity politics and nationalism acquires complexity when gender and sexuality are instrumentalized for political ends. Building on Puar’s (2007) concept of homonationalism discussed above, Farris (2017) introduces the related concept of femonationalism: the mobilization of women’s rights discourse by nationalist and right-wing actors not in the service of genuine equality, but as a rhetorical weapon against groups constructed as culturally inferior or threatening. In the Israeli context, both mechanisms are operative. Conservative speakers invoke traditional gender and family norms as markers of authentic national identity, while casting LGBTQ+ inclusion as a foreign agenda that erodes the collective. This logic merge’s identity politics with nationalism in ways that simultaneously produce belonging for some and exclusion for others, revealing how claims about identity are never merely cultural but always entangled with questions of power, citizenship, and the borders of the political community (Yuval-Davis 2011; Fraser 2003).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the linguistic and rhetorical mechanisms employed by public figures in their speech to influence audiences regarding the LGBTQ+ community. This study contributes to the field of political and social discourse analysis in Israel by focusing on a rhetorical-linguistic examination of conservative discourse toward the LGBTQ+ community.

2.4. The Israeli Context: Legal Protections and Social Contradictions

Israel occupies a paradoxical position in comparative LGBTQ+ research. On the formal legal level, it is considered the most progressive country in the Middle East: same-sex sexual activity has been legal since 1988, employment discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation has been prohibited since 1992, LGBTQ+ individuals serve openly in the military, and same-sex marriages conducted abroad are recognized by the state (Blus-Kadosh et al. 2023). These achievements are real, and they have shaped Israel’s self-image as a liberal democracy committed to equality.

Yet this legal framework coexists with persistent and documented social hostility. Research consistently shows that LGBTQ+ individuals in Israel, particularly youth, face family rejection, institutional discrimination, and elevated rates of psychological distress tied to stigma and minority stress (Shilo 2007, 2019). Religious institutions, which hold significant authority over marriage, education, and public norms, remain powerful sites of opposition to LGBTQ+ inclusion. The gap between formal protection and everyday experience is especially pronounced for LGBTQ+ individuals in religious communities, both Jewish and Arab, where community belonging is conditioned on adherence to rigid gender and sexual norms (Avishai 2020).

This tension is not merely a private matter; it structures the very terrain on which public discourse about LGBTQ+ issues in Israel takes place. As [Blus-Kadosh et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrate, LGBTQ+ politics in Israel are inherently contradictory: at times progressive, and at other times reflecting a reserved liberal policy that confines non-normative sexualities to the private sphere, denying them full legitimacy in public life. The formal legal architecture of protection thus coexists with persistent social exclusion and institutional discrimination, particularly within religious communities ([Shilo 2007, 2019](#); [Avishai 2020](#)). Understanding conservative rhetoric in Israel therefore requires holding both dimensions simultaneously: a state that formally protects LGBTQ+ rights, and a public sphere in which those rights are continuously contested through language, religious authority, and political mobilization.

3. Methodology

This study addresses the following research question: What rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms do conservative public figures in Israel employ to construct, regulate, and exclude LGBTQ+ identities, and how do these mechanisms operate across Jewish-religious and Muslim-Arab political contexts?

The study is qualitative in nature and combines thematic content analysis ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)) with principles of critical discourse analysis ([Wodak 2015](#)). Its aim is to uncover how conservative political language in Israel serves as a tool for constructing collective identities, reinforcing cultural boundaries, and legitimizing the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. This approach assumes that discourse does not merely reflect social reality but actively shapes it and produces power relations through linguistic patterns, ideological framing, and the invocation of discursive authority. At the core of critical discourse analysis lies the understanding that the politics of discourse are not only present in what is explicitly stated, but also in forms of expression, syntactic structures, lexical choices, metaphors, and what remains unsaid through omission or concealment ([Van Dijk 2006](#); [Reisigl and Wodak 2005](#)).

The analytical framework specifically to four dimensions of discourse. The first is metaphorical framing: the identification of conceptual metaphors drawn from semantic fields of illness, sin, threat, and natural order, following [Lakoff and Johnson \(1980\)](#). The second is lexical choice: the analysis of terms and semantic fields that construct LGBTQ+ identities as deviant, dangerous, or incompatible with collective belonging. The third is syntactic and rhetorical structure: the examination of conditional clauses, repetition, and rhetorical escalation that convey threat, urgency, or moral authority. The fourth is religious intertextuality: the analysis of how sacred texts are mobilized as sources of discursive legitimacy and moral boundary-making.

The research corpus consists of eight public discourse events involving politicians and public figures. All speeches were originally delivered in Hebrew or Arabic and were translated into English by the authors for the purposes of analysis and presentation.

1. Rabbi Yigal Levinstein—"Even Israel" Conference: To Normalize the Abnormal (September 2023) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcuLEk8vmF0> (accessed on 16 September 2025)
2. Waleed Taha—"No law concerning perverts will pass with our party's votes." Israel Hayom, 3 June 2021 <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/politics/article/1770784> (accessed on 8 December 2025)
3. Waleed Taha—"We will not accept a man marrying a man." Ynet, 3 February 2022 <https://www.ynet.co.il/news/article/hjvk7yfat> (accessed on 10 December 2025)

4. Yaakov Litzman—"They know they are sinning." Mako, 25 February 2016 <https://www.mako.co.il/pride-news/local/Article-1bcd0ba63971351006.htm> (accessed on 16 September 2025)
5. Avi Maoz—"I protested against presenting Ohana's partner at ceremonies—I was filled with shame and pain." Walla, 28 February 2023 <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3575049> (accessed on 7 September 2025)
6. Bezalel Smotrich—"The natural family is a father, a mother, and children." Srugim, 27 May 2018 <https://www.srugim.co.il/257135-%D7%94%D7%9E%D7%A9%D7%A4%D7%97%D7%94-%D7%94%D7%98%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%99%D7%90-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%90-%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%90-%D7%95%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%93%D7%99%D7%9D> (accessed on 4 September 2025)
7. Avi Maoz—"Don't call me backward." Makor Rishon, 13 March 2021 <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/magazine/dyukan/324269/> (accessed on 16 September 2025)
8. Eli Yishai—"Every Jew needs a father and a mother." YouTube, 13 February 2019 <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5462755,00.html#autoplay> (accessed on 7 September 2025)

In the first stage, the selected speeches were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read to identify rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms, power structures, and cultural ideologies. The utterances were then coded and classified according to the four analytical dimensions outlined above and subsequently grouped into two overarching categories: religious-theological framing and conservative-social framing. The two overarching categories emerged inductively from the data through an iterative coding process, in which initial open codes were progressively grouped into thematic clusters and subsequently validated against the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis.

Ethical principles were strictly observed: since the speakers are public figures, their statements were analysed in accordance with transparency and fair use, ensuring accuracy in transcription, quotation, and contextual representation while maintaining academic integrity and responsibility.

The selection of speeches was based on theoretical sampling, aimed at identifying typical rhetorical mechanisms in Israeli conservative discourse rather than producing statistical representation. The chosen speeches were highly salient public events that generated substantial media attention and controversy and therefore serve as clear illustrations of recurring discursive patterns in debates about LGBTQ+ issues.

Each speaker represents a major ideological stream that consistently influences public discourse: Rabbi Yigal Levinstein represents the national religious movement, Yaakov Litzman the ultra-Orthodox leadership, Avi Maoz and Bezalel Smotrich the religious nationalist right, and Waleed Taha the conservative Muslim leadership within Arab society. For international readers unfamiliar with the Israeli context, it is important to note that these groups hold significant cultural and political power in shaping national identity, education, and public norms concerning family, gender, and sexuality. The speeches are therefore not representative in a quantitative sense, but they typify the dominant and influential sites of conservative discourse in Israel and reveal how authoritative speakers use language to construct boundaries of belonging, identity, and social stability.

4. Findings

The analysis reveals that at the core of public discourse opposing postmodernist ideas regarding the LGBTQ+ community lies a religious-conservative ideological framing, which includes two main categories:

1. Religious-Theological Framing—the use of sacred texts to justify exclusion.
2. Conservative-Social Framing—the defence of institutions, values, and national identity.

While both categories share a common ideological foundation, positioning the LGBTQ+ community as a threatening “other” and constructing heterosexuality as the natural, moral, and social basis of the existing order, the distinction between them lies in their source of authority. Speakers in the first category derive their legitimacy from the Bible, Jewish law, or the Qur’an, whereas those in the second category rely on cultural, national, and nostalgic values.

4.1. Religious-Theological Framing—The Use of Sacred Sources to Justify Exclusion

Rabbi Yigal Levinstein, head of the Bnei David institutions, voiced his opposition at the “Even Israel” conference to same-sex parenting, pride parades, and educational changes that encourage LGBTQ+ families:

Male and female He created them, and He named them Man. This is the healthy and complete order of life. Two males is the opposite of this order, unnatural, immoral, and without values. We want to confront the goal of the LGBTQ+ movement: to normalize what is not normal. This is a movement that has set for itself the mission of changing the face of society. It is a revolution. And we do not agree with it, and we believe it is part of the process of dismantling society. The LGBTQ+ movement wants to transform society and uses every technique to achieve its goal. Above all, it exploits the hardship and suffering of people who struggle with this inclination, riding on their backs to carry out its social revolution—not for their good, but out of the desire to reshape society. (Rabbi Yigal Levinstein, “Even Israel” Conference—“To Normalize the Abnormal”)

Levinstein positions himself as a representative of the religious establishment with authority over the moral boundaries of the permitted and the forbidden. His language does more than express a normative stance, it actively produces heteronormativity as natural and beyond dispute. From a queer linguistic perspective, this is precisely how normative identities are constructed: through repeated discursive acts that present one form of sexuality as the unmarked default and all others as deviations requiring explanation, correction, or containment (Motschenbacher 2011; Milani 2015). By quoting Genesis 5:2, “Male and female He created them,” Levinstein anchors heterosexuality not merely in cultural tradition but in divine ontology, transforming a religious claim into a universal and unchallengeable truth. The rhetorical strategy does more than express disapproval, it produces a discursive boundary that delineates belonging and exclusion, illustrating how language operates as a site of ideological control.

Rhetorically, Levinstein consistently draws on semantic fields of struggle, revolution, illness, and suffering to frame LGBTQ+ identity as a pathological condition requiring treatment or isolation. From a conceptual metaphor perspective (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), these metaphors do not merely describe differences, they actively construct it as a social threat. By placing non-normative sexuality within the semantic field of disease and contagion, the discourse reframes LGBTQ+ identities as an invading force that endangers the collective body, thereby legitimizing exclusion, correction, or suppression. The metaphors function as mechanisms of symbolic power that shape public perception and reinforce ideological boundaries between acceptable and deviant identities, embedding discriminatory attitudes within seemingly natural and familiar linguistic structures (Charteris-Black 2011). Using the slippery slope effect, Levinstein further predicts that any social change in this domain will lead to the collapse of the entire social order, a rhetoric typical of conservative discourse resistant to change (Lakoff 2004).

Using the slippery slope effect, Levinstein predicts that any social change in this domain will lead to the collapse of the entire social order, a rhetoric typical of conservative discourse resistant to change (Lakoff 2004). From a social perspective, his words reflect the

exclusionary mechanisms targeting marginalized groups perceived as threats to traditional moral structures (Yonai and Spivak 1999).

From a queer-linguistic perspective, Lowenstein's discourse does more than reproduce heteronormativity. It performs what Milani and Levon (2024) describe as a checkpoint of desire, in which religious language serves as a mechanism that regulates the flow of non-normative identities in the public sphere. His reliance on biblical intertextuality functions not only as an appeal to authority, but also as a meta-pragmatic moral index that signals which identities are and are not categorically permissible.

The metaphors of illness, deviance, and social rupture that he repeatedly invokes embody what Cameron and Kulick (2003) describe as ideological cleansing, framing queer identities as infections to be linguistically contained. This discursive strategy also aligns with Butler's (1993) claim that the performability of identity is limited by norms that determine which subject positions can be intelligibly articulated. Lowenstein mobilizes a broader politics of sexual security, presenting LGBTQ+ presence as a risk to both moral and national order. Such rhetoric, as Motschenbacher (2022) notes, actively shapes the sociolinguistic conditions under which desire can be expressed.

Moreover, following Ibtisam Mara'ana's initiative to establish a support centre for Arab LGBTQ+ youth, Taha publicly attacked her, quoting a verse from the Qur'an and declaring: No shelter will ever be established to encourage and embrace those who marry members of their own sex within our Arab society:

People, I remind you that We created them male and female. You are nations and tribes so that you may know that God Honors you. Ibtisam Mara'ana, don't even dream of it while you're still awake! No shelter will ever be established to encourage and embrace those who marry members of their own sex within our Arab society! Period. People in Arab society, Ibtisam, preserve their religion and their moral system and will not accept a man marrying a man or a woman marrying a woman! (Waleed Taha—"We will not accept a man marrying a man")

By paraphrasing a Qur'anic verse (Surat al-Hujurat, verse 13), "We created them male and female" Taha mobilizes religious authority as the foundation for a moral and national argument. He constructs a hierarchy of values in which heterosexuality is portrayed as the fulfillment of divine purpose, while homosexuality is depicted as a grave violation of the divine command and of the social order.

Taha employs a strategy of public shaming and delegitimization toward political representation grounded in pluralistic values. He portrays the very act of inclusion as a subversive deed that threatens the collective, "people in Arab society." This is a familiar tactic of backlash discourse, as described by Ziv (2020) and Gross and Ziv (2003), in which political homophobia is presented as an act of defending tradition against the "infiltration" of foreign ideas. His words expose the internal tension within Arab society in Israel between tendencies of social change and conservative forces striving to preserve traditional conceptions of family, gender, and identity.

While Lowenstein and Taha operate within distinct ideological and theological frameworks, one rooted in Jewish religious nationalism, the other in Islamic conservatism within a minority community, their rhetorical strategies reveal a striking convergence. Both speakers construct LGBTQ+ identities as incompatible with normative social and moral orders, both invoke sacred texts as sources of absolute authority, and both frame inclusion as a collective threat rather than an individual right. This convergence is analytically significant: it suggests that exclusionary discourse is not the product of any single tradition but functions across divergent ideological contexts through shared mechanisms. What unites them is not theology but a common investment in maintaining normative boundaries around gender, sexuality, and collective belonging. As such, the analysis points to a cross-sectoral pattern

of heteronormative reproduction in Israeli conservative public speech, one that transcends the Jewish-Arab divide and reveals the structural logic underlying both discourses (Van Dijk 2006; Wodak 2015).

The statement “No shelter will be established to encourage or include those who marry members of their own sex” is not merely a denial of rights or services, but a rejection of the very legitimacy of LGBTQ+ identity in the Arab public sphere. This rhetoric exerts the power of exclusion not only from political discourse but also from collective identity itself, based on the assumption that belonging to the group requires adherence to rigid gender and religious norms.

In his words, three forms of power can be identified: authoritative religious power, which draws on sacred texts as the basis for prohibition; regulatory linguistic power, which establishes boundaries through speech; and cultural-gendered power, which defines what is permissible within the realm of intimacy. At this intersection, sexual and intimate (in)security emerges as a product of linguistic power. Religious language generates a constant sense of threat toward those who deviate from the norm. Same-sex intimacy is perceived as a rupture in the social fabric and is thus subject to surveillance, condemnation, and silencing. From the perspective of queer linguistics, the Qur’anic verse functions as a benchmark for a “pure” identity, and these threatening statements fortify heteronormativity as a mechanism of communal defense.

Here is another example of framing perceptions in terms of religious values. Health Minister Yaakov Litzman (United Torah Judaism) responded to Michal Rozin’s (Meretz) demand that medical training include treatment of LGBTQ+ patients during medical studies:

In this week’s Torah portion, they made the Golden Calf. Moses our teacher came down from the heavens, after he gave the Torah, and he saw the calf, he saw the dancing. He broke the tablets; he went back up to the heavens and wanted to be an advocate for the Jews. What did he say? And Moses said to the Lord: ‘Please, this people has committed a great sin.’ That’s the lawyer, that’s the advocate. He sees the destruction; he sees the thing.” (Yaakov Litzman—“They know they are sinning”)

When questioned by Member of Knesset Michal Rozin about his comparison between LGBTQ+ patients and sin, former Minister of Health Yaakov Litzman replied: “It is written in the scriptures, Moses and God themselves know that they have sinned.” This statement reflects a moral and religious rhetoric that serves to impose ethical authority on a professional discourse and to construct sexual and intimate (in)security. In response to the demand for training physicians to provide sensitive and inclusive care for LGBTQ+ patients, Litzman invokes a biblical parable, the sin of the Golden Calf.

From a critical perspective, one could argue that as Minister of Health, Litzman would be expected to respond with professional and rational arguments grounded in medical reasoning. Instead, he amplifies the moral and religious dimension, basing his remarks on an axiomatic premise: “This people have committed a great sin” (Exodus 32:31). The outcome is a rhetoric of “sin and punishment” which frames LGBTQ+ identity as a “dangerous other” and expels it from the legitimate collective. In other words, the discourse stems not from medical logic but from a conservative ideological framework in which religious authority functions as a source of justification for political action (Hall and Jones 1996; Wodak 2015). Religious and political discourse constructs a linguistic order in which heteronormativity is presented as a precondition for belonging, while queer sexuality is defined as a deviation to be excluded.

4.2. Conservative-Social Framing—Defense of Institutions, Values, and National Character

Knesset Member Waleed Taha, chair of the Ra'am parliamentary group, who draws a clear boundary between Arab society and LGBTQ+ norms. In his interview with Mikan Radio, he firmly opposed any legislation related to the LGBTQ+ community:

Any law that concerns perverts will not pass with Ra'am's votes. The party will have no part in such a law regarding this issue, and all the parties in the Israeli political arena know that our stance is serious. Under no circumstances will we support any law that imposes a value system on the community. We will not interfere in anyone's life at home, and we will refuse any interference in people's lives. If they have a majority to impose such a law without our votes that is their business, but under no circumstances will we take part. (Waleed Taha, "No law concerning perverts will pass with our party's votes")

Taha constructs a position of rejection toward the LGBTQ+ community through a collective framing that draws a sharp boundary between "us", a moral community that preserves tradition and identity, and "them" the others, perceived as threatening, immoral, and non-belonging. He employs a mechanism of negative definition of the other, through which a traditional and self-protective group identity is consolidated against change (Yonai and Spivak 1999; Avishai 2020).

The characterization of the LGBTQ+ community as "perverts" and the framing of their presence as a "social virus" extend beyond metaphorical expression and function as a powerful discursive strategy of pathologization. In invoking biomedical language, the discourse reframes non-heteronormative identities as threats requiring containment or eradication, thereby legitimizing exclusionary attitudes not as acts of discrimination but as acts of collective hygiene. This framing dehumanizes individuals and simultaneously constructs a moral imperative for social regulation, positioning heteronormativity as both natural and necessary for societal health. From a critical discourse perspective (Wodak 2015; Van Dijk 2006), such language operates to normalize fear-based narratives, reinforcing ideological boundaries and justifying the marginalization of LGBTQ+ communities under the guise of protecting the collective. The power of this strategy lies precisely in its apparent neutrality: medical language disguises ideological violence as rational concern, making the exclusion seem not only justified but necessary.

The discourse on "preserving tradition" and "non-intervention" presents heteronormativity as a security boundary that must be defended, like what Milani and Levon (2024) describe as "linguistic crossings of risk". When same-sex intimacy is framed as an invasion or threat, it shifts from being an expression of emotion and human connection to a politically charged communal issue. In this way, a linguistic practice of social (in)security is produced, constructing clear boundaries of belonging, who is "inside" and who is "outside" and maintaining the heteronormative order ostensibly as a mechanism of collective protection, but in reality, as an act of exclusion, surveillance, and subjugation of the gendered other.

Avi Maoz stood on the Knesset plenum podium in December 2022, near Hanukkah, during a debate about the appointment of temporary deputy speakers for the Speaker of the Knesset, Amir Ohana, and said:

Maoz: When I was a child in the education system, before the influence of foreign countries, foreign funds and organizations, and foreign agendas entered, we were taught the well-known children's song, written by Sarah Levy-Tanai and composed by Emanuel Amiran. It is fitting for our days: "We came to banish the darkness, in our hands light and fire, each of us is a small light, and together we are a mighty light, Darkness, go away, black, retreat before the light".

Knesset audience: You are the darkness! What is your light?

Maoz: Whoever tries to harm Jewish identity is the darkness. Whoever falsifies Judaism with a cynical attempt to create a new, supposedly enlightened and liberal religion, completely alien to everything that still carries the scent of authentic Judaism, is the darkness”.

Member of Knesset: “You are creating a new religion that doesn’t exist, you are creating-it’s all ruined”! (Avi Maoz—protesting the presentation of Ohana’s partner at official ceremonies “I was filled with shame and pain”)

Avi Maoz’s rhetoric exemplifies the ways in which conservative speakers mobilize religiously enregistered discourse to police the limits of acceptable identity. The invocation of the children’s song about “light” triumphing over “darkness” is not merely symbolic; following Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor, it constructs a moral universe in which heteronormativity is aligned with purity, truth and divine legitimacy, while queer identities are relegated to the domain of corruption and danger. Such framing performs what Gal (2018) identifies as moral meta pragmatics, assigning ethical value to linguistic forms and positioning certain identities as inherently unworthy of public articulation. Maoz’s claim that liberal actors “falsify Judaism” reflects Butler’s (1993) insight that normative power stabilizes itself by discrediting competing identity performances and presenting its own version of authenticity as natural and unquestionable.

The audience’s counterclaim, “You are the darkness”, briefly exposes the constructed nature of this moral order and reveals that the binary Maoz relies on is fragile and contestable. Yet, as Milani and Levon (2024) note, such confrontations often reinforce the underlying logic of sexual and cultural securitization, in which queer presence is framed as a threat that requires containment. Maoz’s speech participates in this dynamic by recasting queer visibility as an assault on national and religious stability, transforming intimate identity into an object of surveillance and control. Through these processes, discourse functions as a technology of exclusion that narrows the horizon of intelligible identities and naturalizes heteronormativity as the only authentic expression of Jewish collectivity.

In this excerpt, Smotrich delivers a speech at a preparatory academy conference addressing the character of the army and the Israeli fighter, expressing concern for the fate of the “regular” family unit of mother and father:

Postmodernism wants to raise weak people, who will not fight at all; therefore, it educates them that there is no absolute truth. But we want to grow up in a world with absolute values [. . .]. This struggle is by those who want to raise the opposite of what is sitting here. This struggle within the family has entered the IDF, which we love with all our heart [. . .]. Time and again, for many years, the people of Israel have been moving to the right. To the right means more healthy national feeling, to the right means more tradition, to the right means more connection to the Land of Israel, to the right also means more health in many areas. Since the creation of the world, we have lived with father, mother, and children. That is the natural thing, and in the end, this natural order will prevail. The IDF is cutting off the branch it is sitting on if it allows these perceptions to enter through the door or the window. An army that educates its soldiers in postmodern values is an army that shoots itself in the head. And an army that wants to remain faithful to its mission must base its existence on Jewish, national, and Zionist values. (Bezalel Smotrich, “The natural family is father, mother, and children”)

In his speech, Smotrich displays self-confidence and a combative credo, warning against the attempts of liberal organizations to blur the concept of the family unit and undermine the value system of the military. He chooses to employ an explicit conditional clause beginning with the word “if” followed immediately by two subordinate clauses that

explain and elaborate on the nature of the desired army, carrying connotations of threat and warning (Gvura and Levi 2016).

An army that educates its soldiers in postmodern values is an army that shoots itself in the head → If the army educates its soldiers in postmodern values, then it shoots itself in the head.

Likewise:

An army that wants to remain faithful to its role and mission must base its existence on Jewish, national, and Zionist values → If the army wants to remain faithful to its role and mission, then it must base its existence on Jewish, national, and Zionist values.

These syntactic structures convey meanings of threat and warning (Gvura and Levi 2016) and reinforce the perception that postmodernism constitutes an existential danger to state institutions. The choice of sharp expressions such as “shoots himself in the head” “cuts off the branch he is sitting on” and “through the door or through the window” illustrates an unwanted penetration of foreign ideas and intensifies the sense of personal and national danger.

The battlefield metaphor naturally resonates with the military sphere, and the army that Smotrich describes as the ideal one is heterosexual, normative, combative, and strong. He presents the army as a closed framework, similar to the family, and both represent in his view absolute, natural, and immutable values. Creating a shared foundation with the audience by appealing to family values and traditional beliefs allows him to strengthen a sense of identification and affirm his moral stance. To reach the audience’s hearts, he uses reasoned rather than aggressive rhetoric, relying on lexical and syntactic repetitions intended to build trust and reinforce his message:

More national emotion on the right

More tradition

More connection to the Land of Israel

More health in many areas

The traditional family, composed of a father, a mother, and children, is portrayed as natural and healthy, while other family structures are dismissed as impossible. The use of terms such as natural, health, and absolute truth, together with rhythmic repetition, generates not only agreement but also a sense of reality, serving the desire for certainty, stability, and masculine strength while opposing cultural pluralism.

Avi Maoz, chairman of the Noam association, likewise reveals an explicit and incendiary ideological rhetoric that combines feelings of national belonging with a conservative worldview regarding the institution of the family:

Until a decade ago, if you asked any child—what is a family? He would have told you: father, mother, children. Our starting point is the love for the people of Israel, for every single individual. Precisely from this love we act against what we see as threatening the people of Israel and Israeli society, and one of the areas we identify as a threat is the issue of the family. Therefore, I will fight this agenda of different families. (Avi Maoz—“Don’t Call Me Backward”).

His words “Our starting point is the love for the people of Israel. . . therefore I will fight this agenda of different families” create a dichotomous logic: love for the nation = opposition to postmodernist concepts of family pluralism. He forges a direct link between love for the people of Israel and the need to fight against non-traditional families. This is rhetoric that seeks to anchor the conservative social order (family = father, mother, children) within national identity: whoever loves the nation must oppose changes to the family structure.

His choice of the phrase “we act against what we see as threatening the people of Israel” indicates the construction of a clear enemy anyone who does not represent the heteronormative model of family. His use of the word “threatening” grants legitimacy to aggressive, even militant, action.

The common thread between Smotrich and Maoz is their opposition to postmodernist concepts through combative rhetoric, in which diverse families are portrayed as aggressive forces acting against society, the army, and the nation, with the aim of constructing a new social order and undermining the foundations of the traditional family structure. In this context, Ben Shaaya (2019) argues that postmodernism, as a philosophy, is preoccupied with deconstruction, separating the object (external reality) from the subjective experience of it. In other words, the tendency to deconstruct things means looking at them critically, breaking conventions, and asking questions. By contrast, in religious faith there is no such separation: the believer and his faith are one and the same—that is, there is complete identity between what he feels and what he believes truly exists.

Nahum (2024) notes that the attribution of postmodern ideas to secular elites, along with a sense of suspicion toward major changes, has become very common among the national-religious public. Influential rabbis and policymakers have taught and continue to teach their students that abandoning Jewish values leads only to postmodernism, which relinquishes any value whatsoever and seeks to blur gender, national, and religious distinctions. According to him, religious Zionism plays an important role to reveal the inner desire to be conservative and to struggle so that Israel will be governed according to traditional frameworks the family unit and national distinctions and to lead the people toward their biblical destiny.

The words of Eli Yishai, former Knesset member from religious party, further illustrate the conservative-social ideology and the fear and anxiety over changes to the traditional family structure:

I go with my truth. I have a problem both with the Pride Parade and with ‘father and father.’ Why do they need the Pride Parade? Why do they need all the propaganda? Something here is not right. I don’t want to focus on ‘father and father, but I will say that the best and most correct thing is father and mother—a proper family unit to raise children in a healthy way. This is our path. Look at what is happening in the Ministry of Education—they are changing the concept of ‘Shabbat father and Shabbat mother’ and replacing it with ‘parents.’ They are changing the entire culture and the proper, healthy, normative way of life. (Eli Yishai—“Every Jew needs a father and a mother.”)

The words of former Knesset member Eli Yishai are a clear example of conservative rhetoric grounded in a heteronormative ideology, which emphasizes the superiority of the traditional family structure consisting of father and mother, and opposes any deviation from it. In his view, father and mother are the legitimate parents, and they alone are perceived as capable of providing children with a healthy upbringing. His reference to changes in the education system such as the shift from using “Shabbat father and Shabbat mother” to “parents” illustrates his fear of the disintegration of normative cultural symbols that, in his eyes, safeguard the social order. In this way, he expresses anxiety over changing perceptions of identity, gender, and family, portraying these changes as a threat to the “healthy culture”.

5. Discussion

This article has examined how conservative political figures in Israel use language as a mechanism of control, identity construction, and exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. From the perspective of queer linguistics (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Motschenbacher 2011;

Queen 2014), language is not merely a tool for representing sexual identity but an arena in which gender and sexuality are constantly produced, negotiated, and redefined. Categories such as “normal” and “deviant” are shown to be discursive products that reflect power relations and context rather than natural distinctions.

Politicians from religious and Arab sectors employ a religious-conservative framing that constructs LGBTQ+ identities as a moral and social threat. Statements such as “Since the creation of the world we have lived with a father, a mother, and children” or “to normalize the abnormal” and “no shelter will ever be established to encourage and embrace those who marry members of their own sex” demonstrate how public speech delegitimizes non-heteronormative identities while attempting to “re-socialize” LGBTQ+ individuals in line with hegemonic order (Berger and Luckmann 2016; Connell 2020). This extends Milani and Levon’s (2024) concept of sexual (in)security in an important direction. Where their framework was developed primarily in relation to LGBTQ+ communities navigating spaces of risk, the Israeli case examined here reveals that the same logic of securitization operates as an offensive rhetorical strategy in the hands of conservative public figures: sexuality is framed as a matter of national threat not to regulate space but to deny legitimacy altogether. The contribution of this study lies in showing that sexual (in)security is not only experienced by marginalized communities but is actively produced through political speech as a mechanism of collective boundary-making.

From a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault 1991), such discourse functions as a disciplinary apparatus that defines and polices the limits of normality. Butler (2020) argues that gender and sexual identities emerge through repetitive performances of norms that appear natural only because they are constantly reenacted. Thus, speech becomes a mechanism for reproducing heteronormativity while excluding other forms of existence.

Speakers such as Smotrich, Maoz, Levinstein, and Taha use metaphors of disease, sin, and contagion to describe LGBTQ+ identity. In line with the conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), these metaphors are not decorative but cognitive tools that shape social perception. When homosexuality is labelled as a “virus” “deviation” or “spiritual illness” it is constructed as an invading force that threatens the collective body, thereby legitimizing exclusion, “correction” or repression. Such metaphors, as Sovran (2006) and Charteris-Black (2011) emphasize, evoke emotional responses, create moral hierarchies, and justify inequality.

Foucault (1991) and Butler (2020) both note that power is most effective when it presents itself as neutral or natural. Expressions such as “perverts” “danger to family values” or “disease” disguise ideological violence under moral or medical language, establishing heteronormativity as unquestionable truth. Through these linguistic acts, discourse becomes a political weapon that preserves dominance, erases pluralism, and maintains social conformity.

Smotrich’s phrase “If the army adopts postmodern values, it will be shooting itself in the head” exemplifies how syntax conveys threat. Conditional and causal structures link social change to danger, producing anxiety around liberal values. As Butler (2020) and Wodak (2001) notes, linguistic repetition and patterned syntax sustain ideological authority. Smotrich’s repetitive phrasing “Rightward means more national feeling, more tradition, more health”, transforms political ideology into moral truth (Landau 2001; Gvura and Levi 2016; Yatziv and Livnat 2007). Repetition, as Fairclough (2023) explains, draws symbolic boundaries between “us” and “them” reinforcing a vision of conservatism as natural and universal.

Religious authority serves as a major rhetorical resource in this discourse. Jewish and Muslim politicians alike justify opposition to LGBTQ+ inclusion through sacred texts, invoking divine legitimacy for exclusionary politics. Religious discourse does not merely

reflect beliefs but actively creates social reality by defining what is “right” “natural” and “permissible.” Van Dijk (2006) describes such processes as ideological reproduction, where binary oppositions like “light” versus “darkness” or “healthy” versus “sick” sustain hierarchical worldviews. Religion thus functions as both moral authority and political capital for maintaining traditional power structures.

This theological framing transforms gender and sexuality into symbols of cultural defense. By casting the LGBTQ+ community as a danger to family, faith, and nation, religiously inflected discourse merges spiritual and national identities into one moral order. As Puar (2007) argues, this dynamic reflects homonationalism: the selective inclusion of “acceptable” LGBTQ+ subjects who conform to patriotic and moral expectations, while rejecting those deemed disruptive. In the Israeli context, heteronormativity is not only moral but patriotic, aligning with religious-nationalist ideals of family, reproduction, and security.

A related dynamic is at work in the mobilization of family and women’s values as nationalist markers. As Farris (2017) argues through the concept of femonationalism, the invocation of women’s rights and traditional gender roles by nationalist actors serves not genuine equality but the construction of cultural boundaries against those deemed threatening or foreign. The speeches analysed here follow precisely this logic: family, motherhood, and tradition are deployed not to protect women but to police the borders of the national collective.

From a critical discourse perspective (Wodak 2015; Wodak and Forchtner 2018; Fairclough 2023), the repeated use of sacred, medical, and militaristic metaphors constructs a hierarchy of belonging. It defines who counts as a legitimate citizen and who must be excluded to preserve “social purity.” The convergence between religious and nationalist discourse consolidates a collective identity grounded in fear and moral superiority. This mechanism of exclusion is not unique to Israel; it mirrors transnational patterns of anti-gender politics (Borba 2022; Gal 2018, 2021).

The findings confirm that political language in the conservative Israeli context operates as an ideological apparatus that redefines the boundaries of belonging and normalcy. It sustains the dominance of heteronormative institutions and excludes alternative identities through moralized and theological reasoning. This discursive power operates simultaneously at macro and micro levels through policy, media statements, and daily speech patterns producing a climate of linguistic and social surveillance.

From the perspective of identity politics (Fraser 2003; Yuval-Davis 2011), the discourse examined here reveals that the struggle over LGBTQ+ recognition is never purely cultural: it is simultaneously a struggle over the redistribution of legitimacy, visibility, and belonging within the political community.

Considering these findings, scholars, educators, and policymakers must engage critically with such language to dismantle exclusionary narratives. Challenging metaphors, syntax, and rhetorical patterns that normalize oppression is essential for fostering inclusive discourse. As Fairclough (2023) and Wodak (2015) emphasize, critical discourse analysis is not only descriptive but transformative: it exposes how language sustains inequality and opens pathways for social change.

Ultimately, the study warns that sustained exposure to exclusionary discourse may lead to tangible harm. When public language frames minorities as diseases, threats, or sins, it legitimizes discrimination and violence. Historical experience shows that persistent dehumanizing speech can transform words into acts. Recognizing and challenging these mechanisms is therefore a moral and political necessity to protect the democratic and pluralistic fabric of society.

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