“But Then Again, Too Few to Mention”: Negotiating Regret in Israeli and American News Interviews

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Abstract

This study adopts a contrastive pragmatic approach to examine the meanings and functions of public regret in two linguacultures. We located questions of regret realized by news interviewers in Israel and the United States between the years 2010 and 2020 using keyword searches in databases of diverse radio and television broadcast news media. Contrastive analysis of realizations and uptakes of questions of regret reveals similar discursive, functional and thematic patterns across the two cultures: questions of regret are predominantly used to demand accountability or to elicit emotion and narrative evaluation, and are discursively constructed as either challenging or supportive. We also found a delicate cross-cultural difference, with interviewees’ tendency to avoid regret greater in the U.S. In the Discussion we suggest possible explanations for the overall resemblance of discursive patterns in news interviews in Israel and the U.S., and their theoretical and methodological implications for contrastive pragmatics in institutional settings.

Keywords

regret – broadcast talk – news interviews – public speech acts – media discourse
1 Introduction*

In this paper we connect contrastive pragmatics, speech act theory and media and broadcast talk analysis, three of the many fields our mentor, advisor and friend Shoshana Blum-Kulka helped to consolidate and deepen. In line with her interest in cross-cultural pragmatics and media discourse, we analyse and compare “do you regret” questions asked by Israeli and American news interviewers and interviewees’ responses to such questions. Such a comparison sheds light on similarities and differences between the interpersonal dynamics, appropriateness and content of public emotional performances in the two linguacultures. It will allow us to further understand how emotions are elicited and discussed in (Western) media contexts and whether there are differences in their enunciation in Israeli and American mediated public discourses.

At the centre of the study stands one expressive speech act – regret. Defined as an expression of sorrow aroused by circumstances beyond one's control or power to repair (Merriam Webster Dictionary), regret is considered a semi-performative verb. As such, it entails psychological (cognitive and emotional loads) and performance/performative aspects. Regrets can be considered to harbour a moral emotion when their expression is “linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent” (Haidt, 2003: 276). Their performance in public, in media confessions (Bauer, 2011) or mediated interactions (Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming) may provide a model for moral behaviours and a motivational force to follow this model (Kroll and Egan, 2004). Their performative aspect lies exactly in displaying the regretting agent’s accountability for past choices and verbalizing their emotional and moral stance toward them. Through this manifestation, public speech acts of regret suggest a model for “appropriate” personal and public conduct.

In what follows we survey the scant literature on cross-cultural analysis of news interviews, point to the benefits of studying interviewers' elicitation of speech acts in contrast and discuss the meanings and functions of regret.

1.1 Why Study News Interviews in Contrast?

Recognized for their contribution to the establishment of a public sphere, the various sub-genres of news interviews have been extensively studied over the last four decades in many cultural contexts by discourse, communication and media scholars (e.g., Bilvitch, 2009; Blum-Kulka, 1983; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a, 2002b; Montgomery, 2008; Weizman, 2008). These studies identified several functional/normative and interactional aspects of news interviews. At
the functional and normative levels, they inform audiences about issues on the national agenda and further contribute to the democratic process by holding public figures accountable for their actions. To this end, the discourse of interviews constructs and adheres to ethical values and practices of the journalistic profession (such as neutrality and fairness [Clayman and Heritage, 2002a]). At the interactional level, news interview sub-genres (e.g., accountability, experiential, expert, etc. [Montgomery, 2008]) are practiced according to a tacit set of professional conventions and subjected to the rules of institutional discourse. They unfold dialogically in the form of a dispute (in accountability interviews), emotional inquiry (in experiential interviews) or factual and contextual interrogation (experts’ interviews); their topical agendas are partly predetermined and they allocate different interactional rights and obligations to the interviewer and interviewee.

The structural and normative features of news interviews make them a suitable genre for cross-cultural contrastive analysis. Across all cultures examined, the genre presents naturally occurring institutional discourse with relatively structured exchange (in the form of Q&A), thus facilitating a comparative analysis. Moreover, the allocation of normative roles to participants (e.g. the expectation for interviewers’ questions and interviewees’ answers) as well as other features of institutional discourse, allow us to contrast and compare interactional dynamics and contents across cultures. Lastly, as broadcast talk tailored for public consumption, news interviews serve as an available and familiar data resource for analysis.

1.2 Contrastive Analysis of News Interviews

Surprisingly, despite the above-mentioned benefits and the great number of studies on news interviews in different national contexts, contrastive analyses of interviewing practices, styles and content are relatively rare (see also Gnisci et al., 2013). One strand of studies analyses discursive strategies in several journalistic cultures in order to find recurrent practices in broadcast discourse (see an edited book by Ekström and Patrona, 2011; an edited special issue by Fetzer and Weizman, 2006; and an edited book by Feldman, 2022). These collections include a gamut of cultural perspectives on interviewing practices (U.S., U.K., Greece, Sweden, Hong Kong, Israel, etc.), without a direct cross-cultural comparison between the cultures or practices under scrutiny. Other predominantly linguistic studies focus on comparisons of questioning styles (see Levy et al., 2004; Weizman et al., 2007, Hebrew and Arabic; Jiang, 2006, U.S. English and Chinese; Al-Owaidi, 2018, British English and Arabic; Radulović and Jovanović, 2020, Serbian and British, U.S., Canadian and Australian English), but ignore the role of journalistic conventions and cultures in question design.
A third relevant strand of studies focuses on cross-cultural comparisons of interviewing style, taking into account factors such as news interview sub-genres and their relations to different media systems. For example, Becker compared interviewers’ communicative styles on different TV election night programs (2007, 2009). Her findings suggest there is no one clear and constant national interviewing style. Instead, questioning patterns differ across sub-genre, channel orientations and interviewer’s socio-cultural identity. In contrast to Becker’s findings, Gnisci et al. (2013) found similarities among the questioning styles of British interviewers, whose methods were “compatible with the Anglo-Saxon journalistic style” (164). British interviewers differ, however, from their Italian counterparts. While both British and Italian interviewers were found to equally display the same levels of “toughness”, the Italian method seemed “to depend more on the individual features of the interviewer and to be dependent on the political and financial components of the different channels” (164). The current study further expands Becker’s and Gnisci et al.’s findings by studying both content and interactional aspects of news interviews that potentially allow for identifying moral cultural differences. Rather than examining interviewers’ aggressiveness and question design as a whole, the present study zooms-in on one specific interviewing practice, namely, the elicitation of a particular speech act.

This approach was applied by Kampf (2021), who analysed a specific political speech act in contrast. On the basis of 215 variations of do you condemn questions made by Israeli and American news interviewers in accountability interviews, Kampf found differences in condemnable issues and variance in the extent to which interviewers in each culture allow interviewees to divert from the moral model they perceive as appropriate to their community. At the content level, American interviewers framed incivility as the most imminent moral threat to society, while Israeli interviewers emphasized national loyalty and security as the greatest issue. At the interactional level, the study found differences in the ethics of Israeli and U.S. interviewers, with the latter showing greater tolerance to non-mainstream views. The current study builds on Kampf’s previous research in analysing a single expressive speech act (regret) in a specific interactive context (news interviews) in two linguacultures (Israel and the U.S.).

Before elaborating on the rationale for choosing regret as our case study, we discuss the benefits of studying public elicitation of expressive speech acts in contrast.

1.3 Journalists’ Elicitation of Expressive Speech Acts

The relations between speech acts and everyday normative scripts in different cultures were first identified in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization...
Building on the premises that norms and values inform culture-specific speaking styles, and that these styles find expression in the realization patterns of speech acts, Blum-Kulka et al. studied cross-cultural and situational variations in the performance of apologies and requests. Their contrastive analysis underlined similarities and differences in realization patterns and perceptions of face, and therefore allowed for mapping normative expectations across cultures (Blum-Kulka, 1989).

The indicative power of expressive speech acts in public contexts was further highlighted by Lakoff (2001) in her discussion of apologies in American political contexts. According to Lakoff, in analysing speech acts “located in a specific cultural and societal time and place, we can come to understand a great deal about who we are, what we want, and the rules and assumptions that bind us together as a society” (212). Kampf (2013) further pointed to the indicative power of expressive speech acts by arguing that since they are grounded in normative scripts and conventions that inform individual and community conduct, their study enables us to understand actors’ emotional and moral stances towards actions, events and individuals.

Harnessing these indicative qualities, several studies have analysed public expressive speech acts in an effort to reveal the normative scripts that inform communities’ conduct. These studies consider speech acts as a performative nucleus, which is essential to identifying what the discourse “amounts to” (Beale, 1978: 233). Speech acts were found to serve as kernels of social rituals – recurrent public events that transform identities and relationships – and play a pivotal role in rituals of reconciliation (apologies), mobilization (praise) and exclusion (condemnations) (see Kampf, 2013).

Relevant to the current discussion are studies that focused on journalistic uses of expressive speech acts in designing interview questions with moral implications. Building on epideictic rhetoric literature (Beale, 1978; Hauser, 1999; Rosenfield, 1980), Kampf (2020) studied journalists’ elicitation of condemnations in Israeli political interviews as a means to understand issues related to morality and accountability. Analysing demands to condemn alleged transgressions in ethno-political interviews, the study examined the tenets suggested by Israeli-Jewish interviewers for moral behaviour, and how far they are willing to go in eliciting condemnations from Israeli-Arab politicians, representing an ethno-political minority group in Israeli society.

In a previous work, Hamo and Kampf (forthcoming) discussed news interview questions regarding regret and sorrow as a specific type of journalistic ritual aimed at eliciting emotional and moral responses from interviewees. On the basis of 627 questions that included the Hebrew speech act markers regret (mitcharet) and sorry (mitstaer), we identified three prototypes of
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such questions: as part of the ritual shaming and social exclusion of criminal offenders during the coverage of court proceedings; as a challenging demand for accountability in interviews with politicians and public figures; as eliciting emotion and evaluation in personal interviews focusing on narrating the interviewee's life events. In the current research we further analyze emotional manifestations in media discourse by applying a contrastive pragmatics approach to elicitations of regret and their uptake in news interviews in Israel and the U.S. In what follows we will discuss the discursive phenomenon that stands at the centre of this study – manifestations of regrets.

1.4 Regrets
Etymologically related to words that refer to weeping and whining (imported to English from the Old Norse word grata and to Hebrew from the Arabic takraṭa; see Landman, 1993), regret is considered a moral emotion (Gasdaglis, 2019) experienced in the face of some moral dilemma (McConnell, 2018) and linked to the interests or welfare of others (Haidt, 2003). In the psychological literature, regrets are considered a secondary emotion, that is, acquired through experience and socialization and as such under the influence of social and cultural learning of emotional management (Damasio, 1994; Turner and Stets, 2005). Although it may be experienced differently across cultures (Wierzbicka, 1994), regret is considered a negative emotion aroused by the sense of self-blame the regretting person feels following the consequences of their actions (Roese and Summerville, 2005). Namely, if the regretting person would have acted differently under specific circumstances in the past, the untoward consequences of their actions could have been avoided in the present (Connolly and Zeelenberg, 2002; Landman, 1993).

Although both dictionary and most scholarly definitions are quite clear about what it means to regret, in everyday discourse terms of regret are ambiguous and multi-functional. Depending on the context of speaking, in both English and Hebrew regretting (le-hitcharet in Hebrew) can be equivalent to (and thus can be defined in terms of) other speech acts with neighbouring functions, such as apologizing (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Kampf and Blum-Kulka, 2011) or condoling (Lakoff, 2000; Murphy, 2019).

The multiple pragmatic meanings of regret share the semantic component of verbally pointing out a negative emotion aroused by an undesired and uncontrolled past event, from the speaker's point of view. On the basis of this core meaning, regret can function as an apology for controlled or uncontrolled actions that harmed the hearer (I regret hurting you), as an expression of sorrow for controlled or uncontrolled actions that harmed the speaker (I regret working too hard), as an expression of disappointment (I regret you treat me
so badly) or as an expression of sympathy and condolence for an uncontrolled action or event (*I regret to inform you*). The plethora of meanings associated with regret allows for utilizing this performative marker for various interactional ends.

Since the gamut of functions of regret involves the manifestation of a moral emotion – an expression of remorse, distress or sadness – the performative markers used to elicit it and their uptake serve as discursive means for constructing mediated rituals of morality (Beale, 1978; Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming; Kádár, 2017; Kampf, 2020). The moral script that informs the realization of regret sets up models for emotional and moral behaviour that other members within a community should adopt and follow. The function of regret in displaying emotions that engage audiences with moral issues makes their elicitation an efficient questioning strategy in news interviews and thus calls for a contrastive analysis of the ways interviewers across journalistic linguacultures design questions of regret, and of interviewees’ uptake of such questions.

2 Method

2.1 Materials

The present study examined questions of regret in news interviews. Following Montgomery’s (2008) typology, we adopted a comprehensive approach to the news interview, defined here as any interaction involving a representative of the broadcasting institution asking interviewees questions, and encompassing a variety of programs, formats and sub-genres. Accordingly, the study examined interviews with a variety of public personae holding a range of roles and positions – politicians and civil servants in accountability interviews, celebrities and ordinary people in experiential interviews and experts and journalists in expert interviews.

We used the *Ifat Digger* Hebrew media database and *Lexis/Nexis* English language media database to locate questions of regret in news interviews on Israeli and American radio and television broadcast news media between the years 2010 and 2020. To accommodate for differences in the affordances and limitations of the two research tools employed, in the Israeli and American media landscapes and in Hebrew and English language-specific patterns of use (for details, see below), different procedures were used to compose the Israeli and American corpora.

In the Israeli case, we used *Ifat Digger*, an integrated archive of a range of Israeli media. We restricted the search to radio and television and included all channels, formats and broadcasting hours – representing both public service
and commercial broadcasting media, with diverse orientations ranging from neutrality to partisanship. Thus, the resulting corpus represents the entire Israeli broadcast news media landscape. As Israeli Hebrew speakers regularly omit the interrogative syntactical marker *ha'im* (equivalent to “do” in English), and distinguish between indicative and interrogative sentences based solely on intonation, we conducted a keyword search of the string *you regret* in all its inflections (singular/plural * masculine/feminine). Results were then manually sorted by sentence type, identified based on intonation (indicated in the transcripts by question marks) and linguistic and interactional context. This resulted in 199 instances of questions of regret that formed the Hebrew corpus for analysis.

In the American case, as *Lexis/Nexis* only allows for searches within specific predetermined media outlets, we focused our search on *NPR, NBC News, MSNBC News, ABC News, CBS News, CNN and FOX News*. In equivalence to the Israeli corpus, these include television and radio, both public and commercial broadcasting, with different political orientations, thus composing a diversified database of American news media. The much larger scope of the American database did not allow for manually filtering instances of the single keyword *regret*. Accordingly, we conducted initial pilot searches in order to identify recurrent structures of questions of regret, and consequently focused our search on six such typical phrases (do you regret, what do you regret, do you have regret(s), what are your regrets, is there anything you regret). Then, 20% of the resulting instances of each phrase in each media outlet were randomly selected, yielding a representative sample of 356 instances as the American corpus for analysis.

### 2.2 Analytic Frameworks

To compare and contrast the two corpora, we employed predominantly qualitative discourse analysis, combined with some rudimentary quantitative analysis. In the qualitative analysis, each corpus was first analysed independently; the discursive patterns identified in these separate analyses were then compared.

Three main analytic frameworks were employed to examine the discursive, functional and thematic characteristics of elicitations of regret and their uptake in news interviews. First, as the present study builds on our previous research on questions of sorrow and regret in Israeli news interviews (Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming), one of its aims was to examine the cross-cultural validity of findings in the Israeli context. To this end, we used Hamo and Kampf’s (forthcoming) typology of questions of regret as the starting point for examining interactional and pragmatic functions in the present corpora.
We distinguished between questions of regret employed to shame and exclude criminal offenders, to demand accountability from politicians and public figures and to elicit emotion and evaluation in personal narratives.

Second, the present study extends previous research by taking a closer look at the interactional and interpersonal implications of the diversified linguistic realization of questions of regret. To this end, we drew on the extensive empirical and theoretical work on the discourse of news interviews, particularly political interviews. Such work focused on the linguistic construction of political interviews as typically adversarial (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a, 2002b) and documented a wide range of discursive resources employed by interviewers to challenge interviewees (Weizman, 2008) and threaten their public image (i.e. their political face, [Bull et al., 1996]). This is a particularly relevant framework for the present study: As questions of regret inherently presuppose potentially inadequate or undesirable prior conduct by the interviewee, it may seem theoretically warranted to presume that they are immanently challenging (Labov and Fashnel, 1977; Weizman, 2008). Accordingly, drawing on this research tradition, we examined the discursive resources used to intensify or mitigate the challenging and face-threatening potential of questions of regret in the present corpora.

Third, while our previous study focused only on questions of regret and sorrow, it yielded some intriguing initial observations regarding their uptake by interviewees. Accordingly, the present study includes a systematic examination of interviewees’ responses to questions of regret,1 using both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

To quantitatively analyse the uptake of questions of regret, we coded the entire American corpus (with the exclusion of cases where the interviewee did not produce any verbal response, n = 325) and a systematically-randomly selected sample of half of the Israeli corpus (with the exclusion of 17 cases where no verbal response was produced or available for analysis, n = 84), distinguishing between three types of responses:2

(1) Responses that manifest regret, either by producing an affirmative answer to the interviewer’s question (“Do you regret that night?” – “Yes, I do”), and/or explicitly performing the speech act of regret (“I regret not having

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1 Note that this examination is somewhat limited by our research tools: While Lexis/Nexis provides access to the original full transcripts of interviews, Ifat Digger provides only the immediate interactional context of a few sentences before and after the target keyword, precluding full analysis of the dynamics of entire interview segments. Nonetheless, as available Hebrew materials usually contain the interviewee’s initial response, they do allow for cautious exploration of the uptake of regret in both cultures.

2 Double-blind coding of 10% of the American and Israeli samples revealed a sufficient 92.5% inter-coder agreement rate.
more children”), and/or using other expressions of remorse (“There are so many moments I wish I could take back”).

(2) Responses that manifest no regret, either by producing a negative answer to the interviewer’s question (“Do you have any regrets?” – “No, I don’t”), and/or justifying the potential regrettable act mentioned in the question (“It was the right thing to do”), and/or expressing continued commitment to it (“I would do it again”).

(3) Ambiguous responses: Answers that present a complex stance, combining grounds for both regretting and not regretting (e.g. “I tried to fix a problem. Today we are worse off” – i.e. the original act was justified and well meant, but the consequences were undesirable); answers that express regret while shifting its object and deflecting the speaker’s responsibility (“I regret that the press treats me so badly”, example 7 below); or answers that are highly evasive or indirect (“I don’t think that’s the issue”).

In the qualitative analysis, we explored the various discursive strategies used by interviewees to cope with the potentially challenging nature of regret, and examined their attitudes and beliefs towards regret and its moral and (inter)-personal implications, as manifest by meta-pragmatic discussions of the concept.

3 Findings

Overall, rituals of regret in American and Israeli news interviews are largely similar and exhibit shared discursive, functional and thematic patterns. Accordingly, we first present cross-cultural shared patterns, starting with the diversity of interactional function and linguistic form of questions of regret. We then move to discuss the discursive and thematic aspects of their uptake, first presenting cross-culturally shared typical patterns, and then exploring more nuanced culture-specific preferences. In the Discussion we return to discuss possible explanations for the overall resemblance of rituals of regret in news interviews in Israel and the U.S., and their theoretical and methodological implications for contrastive pragmatics in institutional settings, such as media discourse.

3.1 The Functional and Discursive Range of Questions of Regret

As the starting point for mapping the interactional contexts and socio-pragmatic functions of questions of regret, we relied on our previous work, which categorized questions of sorrow and regret in Israeli news interviews into three prototypes. Israeli interviewers were previously found to use questions of sorrow and regret to shame and exclude criminal offenders, to challenge...
public figures and hold them accountable in political interviews and to elicit emotion and evaluation in personal narrative interviews (Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming).

We used this typology to examine the present corpora, and found that in both Israel and the U.S., questions of regret may be identified as belonging to one of these three prototypes. While a systematic contrastive analysis of salience goes beyond the scope of the present study, it seems that the general distribution of the three prototypes is rather similar in Israel and the U.S.: questions of regret as shaming rituals accounted for only relatively few instances, while the two other rituals, of accountability and evaluation, dominated. Thus, the present study provides further support and cross-cultural validation for previous findings (Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming).

We now move to a closer examination of the linguistic realization of questions of regret, and the role it plays in the dynamics of challenge and support – a key dimension for the analysis of interaction, specifically of news interviews (Blum-Kulka, 1983; Weizman, 2008). As discussed above, questions of regret presuppose potentially inadequate or undesirable prior conduct by the interviewee, and accordingly may be perceived as immanently challenging (Labov and Fashnel, 1977; Weizman, 2008). However, detailed discourse analysis of the actual use of questions of regret in news interviews reveals that the three prototypes mentioned above, and their contextualized linguistic realizations, form a wide functional range. As we demonstrate below, questions of regret may be placed on a continuum, from extremely challenging face-threatening to highly supportive face-enhancing.

3.1.1 Challenging Questions of Regret
The challenging pole of this continuum includes shaming and accountability questions, which typically employ several discursive resources for constructing and intensifying challenge, as demonstrated by examples 1 through 3.

(1) Christiane Amanpour interviews the president of Zimbabwe, Emmerson Mnangagwa (“CNN’s Amanpour”, CNN, August 28, 2018):

You are part of the old regime. You were President Mugabe’s intelligence chief. You did take part in the suppression of the tainted elections in

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3 A contrastive analysis of relative salience may require composing a more carefully and narrowly defined corpora that would allow for cross-cultural comparison of relative salience within and across program types (see Gnisci et al., 2013). Moreover, such systemic quantitative analysis requires further refinement and development of the current typology.
2008 when Morgan Tsvangirai and his movement actually won the parliamentary vote and actually they believe [they] won the first round of the presidential elections. Again, do you regret that?

(2) Lucy Aharish Interviews Knesset Member Moti Yogev (“Today’s Talk” [Shichat Ha-yom], Channel 2 Television, July 30, 2015):

Moti, I just, let’s just a moment go back, I sure don’t need to repeat the sentence that you said yesterday and it’s not an easy sentence, it’s not a simple sentence, certainly not in a country that heralds to be a democratic country with checks and balances, when one of the balances is, what can you do, the Supreme Court. Do you regret what you said?

Moti, ani rak, bo rega nachzor, ani betah lo tsricha la-chazor al ha-mishpat she-amarta oto etmol ve-ze mishpat lo kal, ze mishpat lo pashut, betach lo be-medina she-charta al digla, lihyot medina demokratit she-yesh ba blamim ve-izunim, kshe-echad me-ha-blamim, eyn ma la-asot, ze beit ha-mishpat ha-elyon. Ata mitcharet al ma-she-amarta?

(3) Brian Stelter interviews journalist April Ryan (“Reliable Sources”, CNN, August 25, 2019):

Do you regret that the bodyguard put his hands on this reporter? To me, that’s completely inappropriate.

First, challenging questions of regret clearly identify a specific regrettable act and demand that the interviewee account for it. This can be variously accomplished by explicitly mentioning that regrettable act in the question (example 3, see analysis below) or in a preface (example 1, see further analysis below), or by more implicitly mentioning the regrettable act using extra-textual reference, thus somewhat mitigating the challenge (“Do you regret what you did?” [“ata mitcharet al ma-she-asita?”], Furat Nassar interviews an indicted murderer in the courthouse, Channel 2 News, Channel 2 Television, December 12, 2013; example 2, see analysis below).

The regrettable nature of the specific act is often highlighted and intensified using various discursive resources. In example 1, an extended preface presents the specific regrettable – the interviewee’s involvement in subverting democracy. The interviewee’s personal responsibility is highlighted through triple repetition of the second-person reference “you”, used to gradually zero-in on a specific regrettable – beginning with general involvement in “the old regime”
and ending with the concrete events of the 2008 elections. The deplorable nature of these events is further intensified through heavily loaded lexical choices ("suppression", “tainted”). This carefully constructed preface, which employs several typical resources for intensifying challenge through linguistic form (such as redundancy, Clayman and Heritage, 2002b), leads to a succinct question of regret that is framed as a repeated question (“again”), thus underscoring the expectation of, and insistence on, regret.4

Example 2, which also employs a highly redundant and repetitive preface, is part of an on-going talk scandal (Ekström and Johansson, 2008): the day before, right-wing Knesset Member Moti Yogev criticized a decision of the Israeli Supreme Court and called for demolishing the Court using a D9 bulldozer. While Yogev’s statement is mentioned rather opaquely using the extra-textual reference “the sentence” (and later, in the question, “what you said”), it is explicitly evaluated as “not easy”, “not simple”, not worthy of repeating, and in contrast to the supposedly consensual framework of democracy and its “checks and balances”. Thus, through its thematic focus and explicit content, this elaborated preface creates a clear negative stance towards Yogev’s statement, intensifying the challenge.

Example 3 demonstrates a similar overtly negative moral stance by an American interviewer. While it is more succinct, it is highly challenging and critical, as it mentions a specific regrettable act (“the bodyguard put his hand on this reporter”) and supplements the question of regret with an explicit evaluation of this act as “completely inappropriate”. Note that in both cases, the critical stance towards the regrettable is somewhat personally owned by the interviewer: In example 2, the interviewer’s highlighted use of the first-person singular (“I sure don’t need”, emphasis added) seems to subtly evoke her well-known public persona as a left-wing liberal Arab-Israeli journalist who naturally opposes Yogev and his views; in example 3, the negative evaluation of the regrettable act is explicitly prefaced as personal and subjective (“to me”).

In other cases, the explicit content of questions serves to intensify their challenging nature more subtly and from a more neutral stance by mentioning the negative consequences of the regrettable act. For instance, when Alisyn

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4 This may refer to an earlier segment of the interview, where Amanpour inquires, “Was it regrettable that President Mugabe didn’t leave legitimately and under election a long, long time ago?”. While this question uses the term regrettable, it is not constructed as eliciting the interviewee’s regret for his own actions, but rather his general evaluation of events. Accordingly, example 1 may be understood as part of a larger sequence gradually focusing and intensifying the question of regret – a sequence which continues when, following the interviewee’s response to example 1, Amanpour repeats the question “Do you regret it?” once again.
Camerota asks Congressman Mark Sanford “Do you regret, given what’s happened to you and your political career, do you regret speaking out about the President?” (“New Day”, CNN, June 22, 2018, emphasis added).

Such cases not only intensify the regrettable, but also underscore the expectation of regret. While any question of regret assumes that expressing regret is a possible and potentially warranted response from the interviewee, in example 2 and other similar cases this expectation is accentuated, creating a biased question with a preference for regret as its uptake. A similar function may also be fulfilled by the interviewer’s insistence on eliciting regret through repeated questions (example 1, footnote 4 above; and see also Kampf [2021] on interviewers’ insistence on eliciting condemnations).

3.1.2 Supportive Questions of Regret
At the other end of the continuum of challenge and support, questions of regret may be non-challenging, and even supportive. As demonstrated by examples 4 through 6, this is typical of narrative evaluation questions, but may also occur in accountability questions.

(4) Dana Weiss interviews the retiring state comptroller of Israel, Micha Lindenstrauss (“Meet the Press” [Pgosh et ha-itchon], Channel 2 Television, July 7, 2012):

The first question of the summation questionnaire I prepared for you, you already answered me because I wanted to ask you what your great accomplishment is, I presume it’s the battle against corruption. Is there anything you regret?

Et ha-she’ela ha-rishona ba-she’elon sikum she-hechanti lecha kvar anita li ki ratsiti lish’ol otcha ma ha-heiseg ha-gadol shelcha, any manicha she-ze ha-milchama ba-sh’chitut. Yesh mashehu she-ata mitcharet alav?

(5) George Stephanopoulos interviews entrepreneur Mark Cuban (“Good Morning America”, ABC, October 27, 2017):

Looking back at the whole, at all the seasons, which investment do you regret the most?

(6) Yoav Limor interviews Knesset Member Moshe Feiglin (“Butting Heads” [Rosh be-rosh] current affairs talk show, Channel 2 Television, March 26, 2014):
Twenty years ago you were one of the leaders of the protest against the Oslo [peace] agreements, hand on your heart, is there anything you did then and you regret?

*Lifney esrim shana hayita mi-moviley ha-mecha’a neged heskemey Oslo, im yad al ha-lev, yesh mashehu she-asita at ve-ata mitcharet alav?*

Unlike challenging questions that typically pinpoint a specific regrettable act, supportive and non-challenging questions of regret maintain relatively low degrees of specificity, lending interviewees great leeway and control over the topical agenda. This can be accomplished by posing a fully open-ended question which leaves the identification of the regrettable act, if any, to the discretion of the interviewee (“Is there anything you regret?”, example 4). Alternatively, the question may somewhat limit the topical scope by asking the interviewee to select a regrettable from a category, time frame or type of possible event (“Which *investment* do you regret the most?”, example 5; “Is there anything you did *then* and you regret?”, example 6, emphases added).

Examples 4 through 6 illustrate additional typical discursive resources employed to mitigate challenge or construct support in questions of regret: questions may be keyed as intimate and familiar, evoking the interpretative frame of supportive and sincere “soul talk” among friends (“hand on your heart”, example 6). They are often prefaced by face-enhancing compliments to the interviewee, for instance by acknowledging their “great accomplishment” before turning to explore regrets (example 4), or by highlighting the longevity and breadth of their career (example 5; for further discussion of face enhancement in questions of regret in personal narrative interviews, see Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming).

The mention of longevity serves another function. Non-challenging questions of regret frequently include explicit reference to their retrospective stance, highlighting the often-significant time gap between the potentially regretted past and the present (“looking back at the whole”, example 5; “twenty years ago”, “anything you did *then*”, example 6, emphases added). This serves to mitigate the potential face-threat of expressing regret by implying that as present-day regret is the result of hindsight, and as circumstances and normative expectations change and develop over time, regretting past acts does not necessarily imply admitting responsibility for any wrongdoing.

To summarize, in both Israel and the U.S., questions of regret in news interviews may serve to challenge or support the interviewee to varying degrees, according to the context-sensitive combination of their interactional function, degree of specificity and use of diverse structural, lexical and thematic resources.
3.2 “Everything Happens for a Reason”: the Ethos of “No Regrets” in Interviewees’ Uptake

We now turn to examine the ways Israeli and American interviewees respond to questions of regret. We start by presenting the shared patterns and move on to discuss some nuanced differences between the two cultures. In general, both Israeli and American interviewees tended to refrain from expressing regret, perhaps because of its inherent challenge potential (Labov and Fanshel, 1977; see Section 2.2 above). Interviewees expressed regret in only 18.3% of cases, and chose the opposite negative response, of clearly not regretting, in 39.4% of the cases analysed (for further detail, see discussion of cross-cultural differences below).

The overall tendency of interviewees to avoid regretting is also evident in the exploitation of the inherent semantic and pragmatic ambiguity of regret in their answers. In personal narrative interviews, this often involves the meta-pragmatic re-negotiation of the meanings, implications and significance of regrets and their avoidance (see analysis of example 10 below). In accountability interviews, this may aid interviewees in avoiding and deflecting challenging questions. Examples 7 through 9 each demonstrate a specific avoidance strategy.

(7) Lesley Stahl interviews U.S. President Donald Trump (“60 Minutes”, CBS, October 14, 2018):

1. Stahl: So you’ve been President for almost two years. Is there anything that you wish you hadn’t said, anything you wish you hadn’t done? Do you have any regrets?
2. Trump: So, when I won the presidency, I thought- I I- the press treats me terribly. I thought very strongly that, you know, the one great thing will happen is the press will start treating me great. Lesley, they treat me worse. They got worse instead of better. Very dishonest.
3. Stahl: Okay, this- you’re- what you regret?
4. Trump: I regret that the press treats me so badly-
5. Stahl: I’m I’m really asking if you-
6. Trump: And despite that, my poll numbers are very good, so.
7. Stahl: Have you made any mistakes? That’s my question.
8. Trump: Everybody makes mistakes.
9. Stahl: And what have been yours?
10. Trump: I could have been earlier with terminating the NAFTA deal [answer continues].
In example 7, U.S. President Donald Trump is asked to look back on his two years in office and identify something he regrets. While the question opens up a relatively large topical scope for a relevant reply – namely, anything the President has done or said over the past two years – Trump chooses to sidestep it entirely. He draws on the potential semantic meaning of regret as sorrow for events beyond the speaker’s control to express condemnation rather than remorse, and adheres to this line following a repeated question (“I regret that the press treat me so badly”, turn 4). In turn 7, the interviewer reformulates the original question to explicate the intended semantic meaning of regret as remorse for one’s own actions (“Have you made any mistakes? That’s my question”). Trump first responds with a non-committal general statement (8), and only after yet another, more personally focused reformulation (9), finally specifies a tentative possible regret. While Trump’s highly evasive and defiant conduct in example 7 may be understood as part of his unique interactional style and relationship with the news media (e.g., Boczkowski and Papacharissi, 2018), we regard his persistent avoidance of regret as – an albeit extreme – evidence of the highly face-threatening potential of performing regret for political leaders (Corcoran, 1994; see also discussion of cross-cultural differences below).

In example 8, the interviewee utilizes another facet of the meaning potential of regret to avoid a more challenging question.

(8) Yoaz Hendel interviews Israeli Minister of Education, Naftali Bennett (“Today on GLZ” [Ha-yom be-Galatz], IDF Radio [Galei Zahal], October 26, 2015):

Hendel: Say, do you regret the election campaign where you [plural] talked about the non-Zionist left, the Zionist Union that’s not really Zionist, all this kind, Hamas etc.?

Bennet: Look I go through myself, I know well what is incitement and I was at the Ha’aretz [left-wing newspaper] convention and I too get it from left to right also verbal violence and also like was there physical violence, and I think that all of us need to do some soul searching, me too [remainder of answer unavailable for analysis]

Hendel: Tagid ata mitcharet al kampeyn ha-bchirot she-bo dibartem al ha-smol ha-lo tsiyon i, ha-machane ha-tsiyoni she-lo be’emet tshiyoni, kol minei ka’ele, chamas ve-shut?

Bennet: Tir’e ani over be-atsmi, yode’a hetev ma zot hasata ve-hayitti be-ve’idad ha-arets ve-ani gam chotef al yamin ve-al smol gam alimit milulit
In example 8, the interviewer mentions a specific regrettable – the negative election campaign of the interviewee’s party – and implies that it may have included inciting and inflammatory comments. While the interviewee (at least in the segment available for analysis) does not explicitly use the term regret, and hence does not provide a direct answer to the question, he does respond to the indirect challenge it poses (Blum-Kulka, 1983). Bennet begins by employing “whataboutism” to counter the challenge, describing in detail how he himself is the victim of incitement and violent discourse, and then moves on to reformulate the issue of regret in terms of a generally required “soul searching”. Thus, Bennet re-negotiates regret not as an individual speech act of accountability and apology, but rather as a communal act of reflection and conciliation.

Finally, much in the same way public figures and institutions have been shown to exploit the pragmatic ambiguity of “sorry” and other discursive strategies to produce “non-apologies” (Kampf, 2009), interviewees may exploit the semantic and pragmatic ambiguity of regret to produce “non-regrets”. This is the case in example 9, which is part of a larger sequence from an interview with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence questioning the motives, justification and wisdom of recently employing federal armed forces in response to civic protest.

(9) Martha MacCallum interviews U.S. Vice President Mike Pence (“The Story with Martha MacCallum”, Fox News, July 28, 2020):

MacCallum: So the other images that are shown are this wall of moms, wiping tear gas out of their eyes, and we have all seen the image of the navy member who was – they came at him pretty hard and broke his hand. Do you have any regrets about those incidents?

Pence: Well, I regret any time anybody is hurt. But let’s be clear, before federal officials moved in a significant way in early July to the federal courthouse in Portland, the Mayor of Portland had said that he had seen a “month of violence in Portland”. I mean there is nothing to the suggestion that having federal law enforcement officials, marshals, DHS personnel on the ground has had a causative effect here. The reality is that the Mayor of Portland in the local community has simply allowed violent protesters to overrun that community. That community was looking the other way on groups like Antifa a long time ago and now they are paying a price. But what President Trump has made clear, what we’ve
made clear with federal officials as we are saying this far and no farther, we are not only going to protect the federal courthouse and do what it takes to bring our security there. But we’re going to make sure that work with the State of Oregon and we reestablish peace on the streets of Portland. The people of that community deserve nothing less. And with this President of this administration, we’re going to stand strong with law enforcement and for law and order.

Having been asked if he has any regrets about federal violence directed at protesting American citizens, Pence opens his answer with the seemingly immediate direct affirmative answer “I regret any time anybody is hurt”. This affirmation, however, functions as a non-regret. First, as it states the obvious, it may be interpreted as blatantly flouting Grice’s maxim of quantity, and accordingly, as evasive (see Weizman [2008] for similar cases of flouting in news interviews). Second, while the question specifies very concrete and particular incidents as potentially regrettable (following a gradual move, beginning with more general questions not presented here), Pence names a highly generalized and vague regrettable in response. This generalization inherently limits Pence’s responsibility for the regrettable, rendering his speech act ambiguous – expressing general sorrow (or even condemnation) alongside with, or instead of, remorse. Pence then moves to deflect the responsibility of federal forces (as not having a “causative effect”), re-assign blame (to the mayor and community of Portland), and finally restate his commitment to harsh maintaining of law and order. Thus, while his answer includes an ostensible expression of regret, it fails to realize its core felicity conditions, and functions as a “non-regret” (Kampf, 2009).

Examples 7 through 9 demonstrate various strategies for exploiting the semantic and pragmatic ambiguity of regret as means for topic shifting or reframing in accountability interviews. Interestingly, they all demonstrate yet another recurrent pattern in our corpora, as interviewees open their replies to questions of regret with a discourse marker (“so”, example 7; “look”, example 8; “well”, example 9). Such discourse markers may variously serve to mitigate or intensify statements, and preface both affirmative answers of regret and negative answers of no regret; but overall, they may be interpreted as evidence that regret warrants contemplation and prefacing, as it is significant and potentially challenging to the facework of public figures.

In personal narrative interviews, the re-negotiation of the meaning and function of regret is often topicalized, as interviewees offer their meta-pragmatic reflections on the matter. Such reflections explicitly present and rationalize an ethos of “no regrets”, as demonstrated by example 10.
Savannah Guthrie interviews singer Lady Gaga, (“Today Show”, NBC, March 21, 2014):

Lady Gaga: Do I have any regrets? Well, no, because I feel like everything happens for a reason. And I think you learn every time there’s a challenge in your life. And I wouldn’t want my fans to have any regrets in their own life. So I would say no. But, of course, you know, I’m a, I’m a musician and an artist. So, I’m always editing and changing things, but that’s the beauty of life, right? Your, your life is your own art piece. You can make it whatever you want.

According to this ethos, regrets are unwarranted because everything, including past mistakes and tribulations, “happens for a reason” (example 10), is part of one’s “destiny” (actress Clare Danes, “CBS Sunday Morning”, CBS, April 26, 2020), or is the expression of being “true to yourself” (Congressman Mark Sanford, “New Day”, CNN, June 22, 2018) or what “you needed to be” (comedian Trevor Noah, “CNN’s Amanpour”, CNN, December 1, 2016). Furthermore, past mistakes and challenges are something “you learn from it and you try to move on” (Senator John McCain, “The View”, ABC, October 23, 2017) in the ongoing process of “changing things” while working on life as “your own art piece” (example 10). Accordingly, potentially regrettable acts should be positively (re-)evaluated by adopting an “optimistic, forward facing” outlook that focuses on the “positive side” of things (“I’m an optimistic person by nature, and one that always tries to look forward to the future, I look on the positive side of things” [“Ani adam optimi mi-tiv'i ve-echad she-mishtadel tamid litspot pney atid, ani mistakel al ha-pan ha-chiyuvi”], Retired IDF General Erez Weiner, “Outlook” [Mabat] News Edition, Channel 1, February 5, 2014).

This accumulated meta-pragmatic discussion of regret focuses on its mental and emotional aspects as the inner reflection of individuals, rather than on its public manifestations as a speech act of accountability and penance (see also analysis of example 8 above). Furthermore, it legitimizes the ethos of “no regrets” by grounding it in contemporary Western culture. These conceptualizations of (no) regret echo the individually and therapeutically oriented view of the self as a sacred object, worthy of reflection and development (for further discussion, see Hamo and Kampf, forthcoming), and more specifically, the rising salience of positive psychology, which emphasizes affirmative and resilient reactions to misfortune as morally and emotionally favourable (Binkley, 2011; Cabanas, 2016).

While the ethos of no regrets is largely shared by the two cultures under study, some more delicate cross-cultural differences do emerge. In both linguacultures, the most frequent response to questions of regret is ambiguity.
(i.e. combining both regret and no regret in the same answer, or producing highly indirect or irrelevant answers), followed by the expression of no regret and finally, regret. However, the avoidance of regret is more pronounced in the U.S., where interviewees expressed regret in only 16.7% of examined cases, in comparison to 25% in Israel. This is mirrored by greater rates of “no regrets” responses (40.3% in the U.S. compared to 35.7% in Israel) and of ambiguity (42.6% versus 39.2%). These nuances may reflect the American culture-specific ethos of success, as the face-threatening potential of regretting may be greater in “a culture devoted to being Number 1”, where “dwelling upon defeat contradicts a basic American commitment to success” (Corcoran, 1994: 109). Additionally, these slight nuances echo more noticeable differences between Israeli and American news interviews, documented in the analysis of “do you condemn” questions: while Israeli interviewers insisted more on – and Israeli interviewees produced more – explicit condemnations, ambiguity was more frequent and more tolerable in the U.S. (Kampf, 2021). Such differences in the salience and tolerance of ambiguity may stem from the culture-specific traditional Israeli Dugri communicative style of directness, sincerity and unambiguity (Katriel, 1986).

4 Discussion

Linking contrastive pragmatics and broadcast talk analysis, this paper follows the heels of Shoshana Blum-Kulka’s intellectual heritage in clarifying the meanings and functions of speech acts in news interviews in two linguacultures: Israel and the U.S. Our analysis of questions of regret on Israeli and American broadcast news media contributes to the literature on news interviews discourse (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1983; Bull et al., 1996; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a; Fetzer and Weizman, 2006; Weizman, 2008) by demonstrating how expressive speech acts are employed by journalists to pursue their professional tasks and by politicians and celebrities to manage their public image. Interviewers carefully design their questions of regret, utilizing a variety of discursive and linguistic resources in order to realize their institutional roles: to control and manage the interaction, to push their interviewees to publicly reflect on their choices and actions, and to elicit newsworthy quotable answers (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a). Interviewees draw on the pragmatic and semantic ambiguity of regret either to evade challenging questions (Blum-Kulka, 1983) or to construct a sincere and authentic persona in line with their respective cultural expectations (Ekström and Patrona, 2011).
Our findings suggest that in both linguacultures, questions of regret in news interviews exhibit similar discursive, functional and thematic patterns. How can we explain this overall resemblance? We suggest that the discursive patterns of broadcast news interviews are the product of at least two “cultural” contexts: culture in the broad sense of the word, namely the values, ethos and communicative styles of a specific social or national community, and the professional culture of Western journalism – namely, the set of normative expectations, ethical guidelines and discursive practices developed over the years in the United States and Europe and discussed in detail in journalism theory (e.g. Christians et al., 2010). The degree and manner in which the Western model is employed vary significantly across different economic and political systems, and furthermore, professional practices are context-sensitive and applied differently according to participants’ identities, specific sub-genre and subject matter (Gnisci et al., 2013). Nevertheless, these values and routines serve as a shared constitutive ethos for the journalistic community of practice (Deuze, 2005).

Media discourse – and probably other types of institutional discourse – is the meeting point of these two cultural contexts, and their conjunction may have different consequences for the discursive patterns displayed by interlocutors. Previous studies in the Israeli context found that when the specific cultural communicative style and professional and institutional norms and practices overlap, their conjunction results in the intensification of discursive patterns. This is the case with Israeli political talk shows: given that both the traditional Jewish-Israeli communicative style and media genres of political discourse exhibit a preference for disagreement and confrontation, they are extremely adversarial (Blum-Kulka et al., 2002). By contrast, when the values and norms of the two cultures clash, their conjunction involves the mitigation of discursive patterns. For example, the case of Jewish Israeli women’s Havruta study sessions: while the Havruta genre exhibits a preference for disagreement, gendered norms regarding same-sex interactions among women favour support and harmony. As a result, participants in such study sessions tend to produce mitigated disagreements (Teomim Ben-Menachem and Livnat, 2018).

On the basis of this theoretical discussion of the interplay between various cultural contexts, we assume that Western journalistic culture, which is shared by all interviewers in our corpora, may have served to mitigate possible cultural differences between Israel and the U.S., and to yield high resemblance in discursive, functional and thematic patterns in Israeli and American news interviews. To better understand the role of journalistic culture in shaping...
discursive patterns, further research contrasting Western and non-Western linguacultures, as well as democratic and non-democratic media systems, is called for.

Furthermore, the possibly equalizing role of the shared journalistic culture points to the methodological obstacles and limitations of cross-cultural comparisons of institutional, specifically media, discourse. Contrastive studies of media discourse by nature involve the collection and comparison of naturally occurring materials, which are shaped by a multiplicity of contextual factors, including different legal, technical, generic and political settings. Often, such factors cannot be fully controlled for, and it is difficult to assess their relative weight in shaping discursive patterns (see the Method section and footnote 3 above, and further discussion in Gnisci et al., 2013).

In the case of the present study, the discursive realization, interactional functions and uptake of questions of regret are embedded in cultural communicative styles, journalistic practices, accepted lay understandings and definitions of the meaning of regret and underlying moral assumptions regarding self and society. All these are somewhat interrelated and may be culture-specific or cross-culturally shared. Disentangling such factors in the contrastive analysis of institutional discourse poses a significant methodological and theoretical challenge that merits further attention in future research.

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