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# Playing with Meaning

**Figure 1.** When students recently protested the falling apart of higher education, their slogans, although demanding, benefited from their optimal innovativeness. (The large sign reads "The semester is running out;" but the two highlighted letters, an abbreviation for "Of Blessed Memory," implies it's as good as dead!)



Speakers love to play with language. Recent research by Miral Ariel and Rachel Giora at the TAU Linguistics Department shows that the way people play with language can be quite revealing about the nature of language and communication – and about playfulness' costs and effects.

Consider this humorous exchange:

A: When you come home, I'll have the food ready on the table.

B: I'd rather have plates.

A: What?

B: I'd rather have plates (not spaghetti, sitting directly on the table. Laughter).

Wasn't A planning on serving the food on plates? Of course, she was. Why didn't she say so? Because she didn't have to. When communicating, speakers rely on a rich body of contextual assumptions that they needn't specify. Note that had B said:

B: I'd rather have food.

the discourse would not be acceptable. Why can B get away with his first "wise-guy" interpretation, but not the second? It all depends on the purely linguistic meaning of "have the food on the table." These two examples teach us that, while contextual assumptions ('food is served on plates') are an integral part of the speaker's message, they are not part of its linguistic meaning, and so, can be ignored. Linguistic meaning itself cannot.

If so, argues Mira Ariel ([www.tau.ac.il/~mariel](http://www.tau.ac.il/~mariel)), wise-guy interpretations can provide a useful tool for teasing linguistic meanings from contextual inferences in difficult cases. For example, linguists assume that the number 50

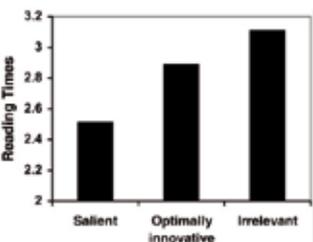
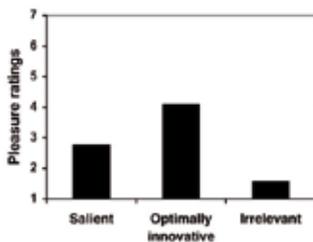
linguistically means 'at least 50.' But consider the following story from Hair (3.9.1990):

[A] couple went into the Allegro record store ... to sell two CDs. The store manager offered ... 40 shekels. The guy ... said that ... he could get 50 shekels. The manager ... said that not on his life would he get such a sum. They took a bet ... The guy ... got 55 shekels ... "Sorry", said the manager, "you lost. I said you wouldn't get 50 shekels, and indeed, you did not get such a sum".

Just like B, the wise-guy manager sticks to the linguistic meaning. We then see that 50 linguistically means 'exactly 50,' although in context, it could certainly convey to the average listener 'at least 50.'

Why do speakers play with language? After all, such plays can be costly for the addressees, as can be seen above. Speakers take the risk of introducing novel interpretations to a discourse, because such novelty results in pleasing and witty effects. These plays rely on the listener's automatic activation of salient (coded) meanings, even when not invited to do so by contextual information. Indeed, words and phrases usually have more than one meaning, some of which – whether linguistic or inferred, literal or figurative – are more accessible than others, on account of their frequency, experiential familiarity, conventionality, prototypicality, and the like. These more salient meanings get activated even when unintended; and they affect both processing and its effects.

In a recent study, Rachel Giora ([www.tau.ac.il/~giorar](http://www.tau.ac.il/~giorar)), Ofer Fein (The Academic College of Tel Aviv Yaffo), Ann Kronrod, Idit Elnatan, Noa Shuval,



**Figure 2.** (a) Optimally innovative stimuli, which carefully balance novelty and familiarity, provide the most pleasure, but (b) they also demand more effort from the reader.

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and Adi Zur of the TAU Faculty of Humanities quantitatively investigated the costs and aesthetic effects produced by such innovations. They found that, to be highly aesthetic, a stimulus should be “optimally innovative,” in that it should incur a novel (less salient or nonsalient) response (a piece of paper) while allowing for the automatic recoverability of a salient one (a piece of paper), so that both responses make sense despite being different from each other. Such innovations, although less familiar, are more pleasing than pure innovations (a piece of pepper), highly familiar versions (a piece of paper), and slightly less familiar versions (a single piece of paper).

This leads to a highly interesting result. It is the *familiarity* in the unfamiliar that is responsible for the aesthetic effect (Figure 1). This is clearly seen in their data from a typical study of this effect (Figure 2a).

This pleasure, however, has to be earned. While optimally innovative stimuli were rated most aesthetic, they took longer to comprehend than more familiar stimuli (Figure 2b). Such intriguing studies probe the frontier between linguistics and the social, emotional and aesthetic contexts of communications.



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## The “Wonder-Phone” in the Land of Miracles

*Pelephone*, the name of Israel’s first mobile-phone provider, literally means Wonder-Phone; and it has become a fitting generic label for all mobile-phones in the country. The ubiquity and prominent place of these devices in Israeli culture – usage rates are among the world’s highest – calls out for explanation. Several characteristics of Israeli society may contribute. First, Israeli society maintains close familial ties and cohesive social networks conducive to interpersonal contact and communication. Second, Israel’s complex and trying relationships with its neighbors, and its fragile internal security situation, have created special needs, including those involving terror and military activity (e.g., compulsory active and reserve duty). Third, Israelis have a history of infatuation with and intensive diffusion of technological innovations, particularly those involving communication.

The rapid adoption and use of the mobile phone in Israel raises questions regarding a long list of behavioral and perceptual dichotomies: public and private, work and leisure, freedom and control, male and female, young and old, technology and nature. In addition, questions involving etiquette and values bring to the forefront changes in accepted normative behaviors, as well as the reconstruction of substantive issues such as the nature of “truth” and the social expectation to reveal it (e.g., the whereabouts of the caller and person being called). Finally, it tackles self-perceptions, as people discuss the mobile-phone behavior of “other” Israelis as rude, inconsiderate, pushy and *chutzpahdik* (cheeky).

Using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, Profs. Akiba A. Cohen and Dafna Lemish of the TAU Department of Communication – in conjunction with Prof. Amit Schejter of Pennsylvania State University – have examined the place that the “Wonder Phone” occupies in many facets of Israeli life. Their framework includes historical research on policy and regulation; telephone surveys and face-to-face interviews; real-time measurements of mobile phone use (using sophisticated interactive voice-response technology), semiotic analysis of advertising for mobile phones; and secondary analyses of archival data provided by Cellcom, Israel’s largest mobile-phone provider (that graciously funded these studies).

It was concluded that the mobile-phone is “not only talk,” as an advertising slogan of one Israeli mobile-phone provider suggests. Rather it is a medium through which Israelis define their gender and national identities. It offers an experience of “being there,” and a security net to hold family members and loved ones together, especially in times of war and terror. It also provides a lifeline during existential crises, such as those involving rituals of mourning.

In analyzing the mobile-phone as it is contextualized in Israeli society, the researchers found clear evidence of two opposing social forces: on one hand, the mobile phone is an expression of modernity and globalization: but, on the other hand, it has been recruited as both a tool and a symbol for the expression of locality and patriotism.

