

# Flirting with the Israeli prime minister, humorously

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## Abstract

*This article examines a specific type of supportive, make-believe, playful humour called here flirting humour, which serves to create a positioning of symmetry and intimacy, while posing a mitigated threat to the face of the addresser and addressee. We focus on two sub-categories of this humour prevalent in online readers' comments to Facebook posts published by the Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the March 2020 electoral campaign: (1) humorous confessions of lust and love by women, even marriage proposals; (2) humorous gestures of camaraderie, mostly by men, including informal social invitations and friendly requests for favours – all directed to Netanyahu. We suggest that this humour reflects characteristics identified with the Israeli Sabra individuals (e.g., directness, openness, easy-goingness, mischievousness) and the Israeli society (camaraderie, informality). Furthermore, we argue that flirting humour, which is particularly dominant among Netanyahu's supporters, is associated with his dual self-positioning: while the symmetrical and intimate scenarios his supporters humorously create reflect Netanyahu's positioning as "one of the guys", the humorous framing reflects awareness of his hierarchical superiority, and acceptance of his self-positioning as a great leader. Thus, flirting humour contributes both to the solidification of Netanyahu's supporters, and the reinforcing of his position among them.*

*Keywords: humour, flirting, Facebook, readers' comments, script opposition.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two unique types of *flirting humour* that supporters of Benjamin Netanyahu –the head of the moderate rightist Likud party and leader of the Israeli right– typically employ in comments to his Facebook posts, creating an imaginary scenario in which the said commenters and Netanyahu share an intimate relationship. The present study is based on an analysis of all comments to the posts uploaded by Netanyahu during the campaign preceding the general elections held in Israel on March 2, 2020 (January 16 to March 2, 2020).

Netanyahu has held several senior positions throughout his long political career, most importantly prime minister from 1996 to 1999 and again from 2009 to 2021, and from December, 2022. He has been known to evoke extreme emotions, both among his supporters and opponents (section 3); and he has a particularly active presence in social media, specifically on Facebook, where each of his posts receives a massive number of comments, both from his supporters as well as from supporters of rival parties. Thus, Netanyahu's Facebook page is a conflictive turbulent dialogic arena where supporters of the two rival political wings clash, while, at the same time, sentiments of rapport and solidarity within the same political wing are intensified (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020b).

Previous studies have indicated a close connection between Netanyahu's ethos and his supporters' positive face, both in their eyes and in that of his political rivals; this way, the positioning of Netanyahu by his partisans contributes to their own self-positioning (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020a; 2020b; 2022). Accordingly, it is suggested here that the *flirting humour* used by Netanyahu's advocates bears some intrinsically related functions: (1) feigning the existence of symmetrical and intimate relations between the commenters and leader, thus positioning the latter as an "ordinary" (Sacks, 1984), approachable person; (2) positioning Netanyahu and his supporters as quintessential (or at least typical) Israelis, for showing *chutzpah* (extreme self-confidence or audacity) by replacing the formality – conventionally used in situations of power differentials – with informal, genial responses – normally representative of symmetrical relations; (3) contributing to the solidarity of their own political wing, as the supporters share their affectation and unique social permission to engage in a "customary joking relationship" (Norrick, 1993) with their leader.

In what follows, we will address the main components associated with the identity of the Israeli *Sabra* as reflected in the *flirting humour* of Netanyahu's supporters (section 2) and the nature of their comments on his Facebook page (section 3); present the phenomenon of *flirting humour*, outlining its features as reflected in our corpus (section 4); and then analyse representative examples (section 5), concluding with some final remarks (section 6).

## 2. Israeli identity and humour

The term *Sabra*, in use since the 1930s to refer to a Jew born in Israel (or in the pre-state Jewish community, i.e., before 1948), depicts the essence of the Jewish Israeli identity, as often observed both by outsiders and themselves: tough and prickly on the outside, but sweet and soft on the inside, just like the *sabra* species of cactus. *Sabras* are considered sincere, unpretentious, courageous, direct, open, easy-going, spontaneous, amicable, extroverted and mischievous; and Israeli society as a whole is considered to be founded on solidarity, camaraderie, mutual assistance and the absence of hierarchies (Katriel, 1986; Almog, 1997; Katriel, 1999).

A unique style of speaking has been attributed to the *Sabra* identity, known as *dugri* speech, a straight-to-the-point, simple, direct and efficient form of speech – unconcerned with grammar or style and devoid of any flowery, metaphoric or sophisticated language. Israelis imagine it to be the epitome of an open, frank and amicable form of communication, befitting the ideals of equality and familiarity seemingly typical of this society (Almog, 1997; Katriel, 1999). Since the 1950s, and even more so towards the late 1980s, the ethos of the *Sabra* was gradually abandoned in favour of sentiments of individualism, on the one hand, and universalism, on the other, resulting in the *Sabra* identity increasingly being replaced by the "Israeli" one (Almog, 2004).

The shift from the *Sabra* identity to the Israeli identity is characterised by two opposing tendencies: 1) mitigation of *dugri* speech with an emphasis on the importance of interpersonal relationships, emotional openness, a harmonious environment and mutual support; 2) escalation

of *dugri* speech, to the point of verbal or even physical violence (Katriel, 1999). These two facets are observable in public discourse in general, and specifically in the digital sphere.

The divide and tensions in Israeli society can be seen to be reflected in the aggressiveness of online readers' comments, both on media platforms and politicians' Facebook pages, specifically directed at assumed political rivals (Kohn & Neiger, 2007; Dori-Hacohen & Shavit, 2013; Weizman & Dori-Hacohen, 2017; Hirsch, 2020; Shukrun-Nagar, 2020a; 2021). However, it can also be seen that many comments in online journals adhere to socially acceptable principles of politeness, and serve mainly to form alignment and support (Marmorstein & Sclafani, 2019), reinforce feelings of solidarity (Goldschmidt, 2006) and mutual values (Blais, 2001, p. 88), and even offer tips and advice (Almog, 2015, pp. 376-396). Similarly, research has shown that comments on politicians' posts often convey positive feelings towards the politicians or other commenters from the same political party or wing (Shukrun-Nagar, 2022).

Certain qualities have been attributed to Israeli humour, which are related to the formulation of Zionist identity and the history of the Jewish people. Israeli humour has developed from the tradition of Jewish humour, but presents new characteristics, more reflective of the Israelis' self-perception (Ziv, 1988). Some useful observations about the humour of the Jewish Israeli population have been made over the years, such as that it lacks understatement and self-disparagement (Asscher, 2010); focuses on political and current affairs (Kotler-Fux, 2018); references the Holocaust (Steir-Livny, 2016);<sup>1</sup> and is preoccupied with gender and ethnic divides (Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman, 2015; Friedman, 2016; Hirsch, 2017; Gal, 2019).

As will be detailed below, the phenomenon of *flirting humour* (section 4) may be conceived as an expression of the Sabra identity or the Jewish-Israeli identity, specifically of the former's key traits: openness, casualness, spontaneity, mischievousness, informality and the absence of hierarchies. Nonetheless, an explanation for the employment of this type of humour directed at Netanyahu, when he was not only their favoured leader but also the prime minister, can mostly be found in the unique relationship between Netanyahu and his supporters, as evinced from his Facebook page.

### **3. Netanyahu's Facebook page**

In many democratic countries, politicians make use of social media to position themselves as approachable, original and authentic; in order to show an attitude of equality and informality, in what seems to be a response to their supporters' expectations, especially the younger ones (Manning et al., 2017). This is especially true for Israel, where in accordance with the expectations of the general public, most politicians maintain an active Facebook page, on which they share their stances, plans and achievements, as well as criticism of their rivals – often more than once a day.

Notwithstanding the advantage that lies in being able to address the public directly at any time, this medium undermines the distinction between the public and private, the formal and informal, forcing politicians not only to constantly account for their actions, but to reveal their private lives (at least to some degree), and demonstrate wit, nonchalance, authenticity, and humour (Trammell et al., 2006; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Lehti, 2011; Nilsson, 2012; Kopytowska, 2013; Kruikemeier, 2014). Compared to other Israeli politicians, Netanyahu is reputed to be remarkably successful in employing social media to address his needs (see for example Anonymous, 2019, April 8; Zamir, 2020, June 13).

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<sup>1</sup> The reference to the Holocaust in the context of popular entertainment and especially humour is a very complex matter, especially in the Israeli context. The humorous treatment of the Holocaust was considered taboo for many years in Israel; but since the 1990s, this has undergone a process of change (Zandberg, 2015).

Posts by Israeli politicians (especially party leaders) often elicit multiple readers' comments, consisting mainly of praise or criticism, as well as questions, requests, and suggestions, directed at both the politicians and other commenters. Whereas the comments are seldom responded to by politicians themselves, commenters maintain active interactions – either supportive (among commenters of the same wing) or hostile (among commenters from rival wings) (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020b).

The comments we analysed were uploaded by Netanyahu's supporters in response to posts published on his Facebook page during the electoral campaign leading up to the Knesset elections held in Israel in March 2020 (January 16, to March 2, 2020).<sup>2</sup> At the time, Netanyahu's posts elicited hundreds of comments, mainly from his own supporters and those of Benny Gantz – then the leader of the largest opposition party and the main contender for the office of prime minister. These comments, where supporters of the two rival wings clash, attest to the intensity of the sentiments Netanyahu evokes among both his supporters and those of his rivals.

A study of comments posted by Netanyahu's advocates reveals a unique relationship between the two sides: on the one hand, the advocates relate to Netanyahu as an accomplished leader, demonstrating blind admiration and often using exaggerated superlatives such as “king” and “one of a kind” (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020b). On the other hand, many consider him young at heart, someone with a healthy sense of humour, much like a close acquaintance, a person with whom one can joke, give compliments, offer advice and ask for favours (Shukrun-Nagar, 2022).<sup>3</sup> This duality is manifested not only in the content of the comments, but also in the linguistic patterns employed: formal language and terms of address accompanied by expressions of adulation and, on the other hand, informal everyday register and personal declarations of love and support. These contradictions dovetail with Netanyahu's dual self-positionings: an extremely accomplished prime minister with an impressive record, as portrayed by his serious posts and videos; and, at the same time, an ordinary person, “one of the guys,” as depicted in the more light-hearted ones (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020a; 2020b). It will be thus demonstrated how the special relationship between Netanyahu and his supporters has led to the playful exchanges called here *flirting humour*, a phenomenon unique to this politician's Facebook page in terms of numbers and consistency.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Flirting and humour

Flirting is a linguistic and interactional phenomenon (Køhler Mortensen, 2017: 594), which can be defined as “an off record negotiation and recognition of interpersonal desire” (Kiesling, 2013, p. 106) and is “identified by a combination of linguistic, paralinguistic and non-verbal features” (Cameron & Kulick, 2006, p. 5). Implicitness plays an important role in flirting, both as a way to communicate and negotiate romantic interests (a flirtatious move is not as face-threatening as a direct proposition; Kiesling, 2013, p. 118), as well as an attempt to share the excitement of the

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<sup>2</sup> While politicians do not necessarily write their own Facebook posts, readers' comments demonstrate that they are nonetheless perceived as being responsible for any content published on that platform. In Goffman's terms (1981), this means that, even if politicians are not considered to fulfil the role of *authors*, the commenters still view them as *principals*.

<sup>3</sup> On this unique phenomenon, see for instance Kirma's (2020, August 9) description of how a video using soccer imagery to promote voting, uploaded by Netanyahu on August 9<sup>th</sup> to his Instagram account, got more than 17,000 likes and hundreds of comments, most of them by females, complimenting the former prime minister's looks with expressions of familiarity, such as “hunk” and “rock-star”.

<sup>4</sup> A systematic study of the most common Hebrew graphic laughter marker *hhh* in two parallel corpuses of online readers' comments to Facebook posts by Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, revealed multiple examples of *flirting humour* employed towards Netanyahu and not even one occurrence for Gantz (Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch, accepted). This seems to be the case with other Israeli politicians' pages, pending a more methodical investigation in the future.

possibility (Køhler Mortensen, 2017). Even though interpreting flirtatious acts is considered challenging, they are often not as ambiguous as suggested, and can be tracked in analysis, relying on contextual factors and linguistic forms (Køhler Mortensen, 2017; Speer, 2017).

The relationship between flirting and humour is complex. Humour can be regarded as a tool in the arsenal of romantic approaches, based on studies describing playful banter and teasing as practices of flirting (Speer 2017, p. 4). It might also be compared to flirting, and its serious or playful intentions, as an interaction that is based on ambiguity, negotiation, and deniability (Kuipers, 2011; Tsakona & Popa, 2011; Speer, 2017, pp. 4, 35). Addressers of humour may keep a purposeful ambiguity regarding their communicative intentions, so as not to be held accountable for the meaning they have indeed intended to convey (Dyrel, 2018, p. 402).

Superiority Theory –the oldest classical approach to humour studies– argues that humour is always based on power and aggression (see La Fave et al., 1976; Vandaele, 2002). Such approaches have been found to be faulty (Morreall, 2009, p. 9), although some notions are still useful to its understanding in today’s contexts, especially when treating humour as setting social boundaries (Gal 2018). While both facets of humour –supportive and aggressive– contribute to the creation and expression of the participants’ social identity (Vine et al., 2009),<sup>5</sup> more relevant to this study is the function of humour as a foundational ingredient of friendship, trust and intimacy (Friedman & Kuipers 2013, p. 193), along with its role in enhancing rapport between in-group members, while at the same time positioning them in relation to the out-groups (Norrick, 1993; Tsakona, 2013).

Our research focuses on what will be termed here *flirting humour* – a supportive type of humour, which employs strategies of flirting, although in this framework not necessarily sexual or romantic in nature. Flirting humour is considered here to meet the following characteristics:

1. Speaker’s meaning – indirect.<sup>6</sup>
2. Logical mechanism of humour – two opposed and overlapping scripts (Raskin, 1985) (i.e., Netanyahu as a politician vs. friend/lover); local logic (Ziv, 1984); breaches of social or hierarchal expectations.
3. Emotional stance – teasing but positive.
4. Content – personal (rather than public or political).
5. Semantic – sexual, romantic or other semantic field of intimacy.
6. Phrasing: informal, emotive.
7. Common speech acts (Searle, 1976) – directives: suggestions, requests, questions; expressives: expressions of love, hope and admiration, as well as compliments.
8. Positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) – the addresser is self-positioned as intimate with and equal to their addressee (i.e., the commenter is seemingly intimate with and on an equal level with Netanyahu).
9. Politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) – the use of teasing threatens the face of both the addressee and the addresser, but the threat is mitigated by humour (i.e., the commenter uses humour as a way to avoid the risk that their flirting with Netanyahu could entail).

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<sup>5</sup> According to Tsakona’s (2013) expansion of Raskin & Attardo’s theory (1994; Attardo, 2008, p. 108), the two faces of humour may be perceived as two contrasting contextual interpretations, based on sociocultural presuppositions and metapragmatic stereotypes on humour.

<sup>6</sup> Viewing humour as a case of speaker’s indirect meaning, much like irony (Dascal, 1983; Dascal & Weizman, 1987; Weizman & Dascal, 1991; Weizman, 2001), means that humorous intentions are deciphered with the help of co-textual and contextual cues and clues. For a broad overview on *indirectness* see Livnat, Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch, 2020.

Note that indirectness and humour stand at the core of the flirting discussed here, as we do not address other forms of flattery or praise, such as those Netanyahu's supporters have been observed to employ (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020b).

Non-bona-fide exchanges (Raskin & Attardo, 1994) –briefly touched upon in previous research (Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch, accepted) – seem representative of Netanyahu's supporters' flirting humour. In these exchanges, the commenters position themselves as Netanyahu's equal, either as a close friend or a romantic counterpart; often through praise and/or insincere directive or expressive speech acts. This sort of humour is based on the script opposition (Raskin & Attardo, 1994) between the real situation (great distance and hierarchical differentials between the two parties) and the imagined one (of friends or lovers). The potential threat to Netanyahu's positive and negative face, which could be posed by the insinuation of such a close relationship, is mitigated by the indirect nature of the exchange, leaving room for denial (see Brown & Levinson).

This playful push of the boundaries of intimacy has been observed in instances of flirting where exchanges included sexualised compliments, self-praise and teasing (Speer, 2017, p. 36). These practices are found in many instances in our corpus. The type of flirting humour studied here alludes to an "imagined togetherness," achieved by linguistically constructing an imagery of a shared future (Køhler Mortensen, 2017, p. 594). Køhler Mortensen (2017, p. 594) stresses the usefulness of this imagined togetherness: "to probe interests and thus protect oneself from potential rejection, it also draws on fundamental dynamics of fantasy in nourishing the excitement of romantic possibility".

The gap between the imagined togetherness and its fulfilment creates excitement (Køhler Mortensen 2017, p. 594). The pleasure derived from these fantasies, which still allow for the preservation of implicitness, might serve as an explanation for the presumptuous nature of the flirting humour present in comments made by Netanyahu's supporters, which have been observed and analysed in this framework. In other words, although commenters in general do not seriously believe that their propositions will receive a response, they enjoy engaging in make believe and perhaps entertain a hidden hope that their wishes will somehow miraculously come true. This shared humour corresponds to what Glenn (2003) defines as a stance of *laughing with*, as opposed to *laughing at*.

## 5. Analysis of examples

As mentioned above, the corpus is composed of all comments to the posts uploaded by Netanyahu during the electoral campaign (January 16, 2020 to March 2, 2020). Examples of flirting humour were first identified without prior specific intentions during a previous study of the use of the graphic laughter marker *hhh* in the present corpus.<sup>7</sup> After identifying the phenomenon of flirting humour in few comments, words that indicate this phenomenon and were found to be common in these comments, as well as similar words (*hunk*, *charming*, *smile*, *wish*, etc.), were employed to actively search for more examples of flirting humour. In addition, since it was found that flirting humour mostly followed posts in which Netanyahu positioned himself as an ordinary, regular guy,<sup>8</sup> all the comments after this type of posts were carefully examined.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch (accepted) for more descriptions and previous research on this corpus.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between a politician's self-positioning as an ordinary person and the nature of the supporters' comments, see (Shukrun-Nagar, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Thousands of comments were examined, although a more precise estimate of their number (and of the supporters in general) is not available due to the technical difficulties involved in collecting data from Facebook (comments disappear, downloading challenges, etc.). Nonetheless, the dozens of examples extracted from Netanyahu's page allow for the qualitative research proposed here.

As noted earlier (Section 4), the type of humour discerned here, termed “flirting humour”, does not necessarily involve romantic or sexual innuendo, but can refer to any case in which commenters create humour by defying the reality of Netanyahu as a political figure and expressing what may be perceived as their fantasy of being on much more intimate and equal terms with him.

Our corpus of comments shows two main scripts (Raskin & Attardo, 1994) standing in opposition to the one of the public figure: lover and friend. Through humour, commenters self-position themselves as close to and on an equal level with Netanyahu either by pretending to be his friend or by alluding to the possibility of a romantic involvement with him, as will be demonstrated through representative examples in the next sub-section.<sup>10</sup> The comments featuring flirting humour were interpreted based on the immediate and broader co-text, as well as on para-textual means, attached media and relevant extra-linguistic knowledge.

### 5.1. Pseudo romantic

This sub-section will provide a few of the many examples of flirting humour based on the script opposition between political leader and lover. These humorous occurrences, found only in women’s comments or used on their behalf, include themes such as love and marriage, which are generally common in all types of flirting (whether humorous or not).

The first example presented here is a reaction to a short post (January 28, 2020), uploaded by Netanyahu during a diplomatic visit to the White House. Attached to the post is a video of the speech he gave at a press conference in the presence of US President Donald Trump proclaiming a new plan for peace with the Palestinians. Compared to other examples described below, the flirting is relatively mild and could be conceived as transference of the commenter’s feelings towards Netanyahu onto the former president of the US.

(1) Af<sup>11</sup>: The strongest ever, who could fit in his shoes??!! By the way, Trump seems to be in love 😍😍

The female commenter reacts to Netanyahu’s post with different expressive complimentary speech acts. First, she hyperbolically compliments him on his strength as a leader –*the strongest ever*– using the word *hazak* (strong, powerful), which commonly describes physical strength associated with masculinity. She then emphasises his seeming singularity by posing the rhetorical question *who could fit in his shoes*, highlighted by an excess of question and exclamation marks.

Quite surprisingly, compliments that might be perceived as expressions of admiration for a phenomenal and unreachable leader are then switched to a non-bona-fide mode (Raskin & Attardo, 1994), breaking expectations and evoking a personal, romantic theme. The humorous utterance builds on the gap between political diplomacy and meetings of world leaders and the romantic theme of falling in love. The analogy created is humorous in nature, but it serves both to indirectly suggest that nobody is immune to Netanyahu’s charms, and to position the commenter as equal to Netanyahu – someone who is intimate enough to refer to his romantic appeal and kid about it.

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<sup>10</sup> The examples were translated by the authors (Hebrew available upon request) to best reflect their pragmatic implications, without representing typos, grammatical errors or other mistakes present in the original text. Punctuation was occasionally added to facilitate reading. Explanatory details have been added by the authors in square brackets.

<sup>11</sup> We use capitalised letters of the alphabet to denote the order of commenters and a lower-case *m* or *f* to indicate the gender of the commenter, deciphered on the basis of their use of personal pronouns, names, and/or Facebook identity.

The two laughter emojis at the end of the utterance, marking its humorous intention, may serve to mitigate both the threat to Netanyahu's face –which could result from the commenter's reference to his love life and her positioning as his equal– and to her own face –which may be threatened by the comment's disclosure of her feelings of admiration towards Netanyahu, not (only) as a multi-talented leader, but also, and more importantly, as an attractive man whose charms are irresistible. Thus, the ambiguity and deniability of humour can be used as an excuse.

The following example is a representative case of the mechanisms of this type of flirting humour and of its co-construction by the group of interactants – three supportive commenters. It follows a short post from February 17, 2020, in which Netanyahu cheers a widely popular Israeli soccer team (*Beitar*), and a photo (see Appendix A), in which he, his wife and his son, are wearing the team's scarves, just like all regular fans. The post and photo serve Netanyahu's positioning as an ordinary fellow (just a regular guy who loves soccer) and emphasise his belonging to the Israeli collective.

(2) Af: Enough, Bibi [Netanyahu's nickname], enough of melting me with this photo  
Not only a fan of Beitar [Jerusalem Football Club], but also Bibi Netanyahu  
That is too much for me. Marry me  
Bf: A and make me a baby  
Cm: A hh We've gone crazy with Bibi 🤔 😊

The first commenter jokingly declares that Netanyahu is just too perfect: not only is he himself –which implies that that fact alone is more than enough– but he is also a fan of a favourite football club, just like many other Israelis (and apparently commenter A herself). She ends with an insincere directive speech act: *Marry me*. This request combines realistic and non-realistic features forming the special logic inherent to humour, which Ziv (1984) calls *local logic*. The non-realistic script of wedding the married leader Netanyahu is made more plausible as he and the commenter supposedly share fandom.

Commenter B demonstrates her appreciation of A's humour by joining the game of make-believe and self-positioning as a romantic candidate for Netanyahu with the request *make me a baby*, which can be understood as asked in the name of both A or B herself. As suggested by Hay (2001), by contributing more humour and maintaining the humorous frame, Commenter B acknowledges A's humour and supports it.

Commenter C, a man, uses other strategies to acknowledge the non-bona-fide framing. First, he uses *hh*, which here fulfils the function of an interpretation marker –indicating the deciphering of the pragmatic strategy in the previous comment, namely its humour (Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch, accepted).<sup>12</sup> He then shows metapragmatic awareness of the humorous game by saying *We've gone crazy with Bibi*, meaning that although he does not share the romantic aspirations of the two female commenters, he is aware of Netanyahu's magnetising influence and feels it himself. His admission of the absurdity of the highly emotional reactions to Netanyahu's post is reinforced with two laughing emojis.

In the next example, the female commenter employs flirting humour using similar lines. It follows a post (from February 28, 2020) in which Netanyahu states that Gantz is unworthy of being prime minister, and where he asks for votes.

(3) Af: Bibi marry me  
Bm: As someone who went to school with her I can assure you that her partner would be the happiest man alive

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<sup>12</sup> For more functions of the marker, see *ibid*.



Similarly to example 2, the analysis of the humour here relies on the incongruity between the reality of the politician being unavailable and the fantasy of A maintaining a close, intimate relationship with him. Interestingly, the local logic in the pretence that a romantic engagement could actually happen is sustained by Commenter B. B positions himself as someone who went to school with A, and playfully assumes the role of a matchmaker, as typical in dating situations, by providing justification and reinforcement for the request: *her partner would be the happiest man alive*. By replying with the same flirting humour, Commenter B attains both a show of support of the humour in the previous turn and a positioning of himself as equal and close to Netanyahu, and as even belonging to the same social circle. By this, B demonstrates the type of flirting humour that characterises male commenters – self-positioning as friends of Netanyahu, in contrast to the women who hint at romantic involvement with him.

The following example is an interesting case where both scripts, lover and friend, are present, as opposed to the realistic script of a political figure. It follows a live video stream of an election rally, in which, while giving his speech, Netanyahu is seen joking with his supporters in the audience (February 10, 2020).

(4) Am: Bibi listen chum, my wife's in love with you 🧡💪

Bf: A hhhh

Cf: A Who isn't? HaaHaa [in English]

The male commenter A addresses Netanyahu with the informal, friendly term *chum* (*habibi*), a self-positioning which is later supported by the pseudo-sincere revelation that his wife is in love with him. Both the disclosure and the term of address are breaches of social hierarchal expectations, thus creating humour but posing a threat to the political leader's negative face. The negative threat seems to be mitigated by the use of emojis, which reinforce the humorous framing and correspond to the main theme: the heart emoji symbolises love and the muscle often means a compliment in the lines of “way to go.”

The graphic laughter markers used by the two female commenters B and C –*hhh* and its English equivalent *HaaHaa* – can be read as interpretation markers of A's humorous utterance, conveying both recognition and appreciation of the humour (Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch, accepted). This attests to the special logic of humour, as it is hardly plausible the commenter would happily admit that his wife is in love with another man. In addition, the humorous framing of A's claim (*my wife's in love with you*) is successfully supported (see Hay, 2001) by C's rhetorical question *Who isn't?*, thus building solidarity and rapport with the previous commenters.

## 5.2. Pseudo camaraderie

This sub-section presents representative supportive humorous comments appealing to Netanyahu's self-positioning as an ordinary guy by creating an imaginary scenario in which the male commenter and Netanyahu are close friends.

In the following example, this is achieved by complimenting Netanyahu on his hard work. It follows a post in which Netanyahu reports on an important work meeting with Russian President Putin, praises the importance of the relationship between Russia and Israel, and thanks the latter (January 30, 2020).

(5) Am: Believe me Bibi, you've seen Putin this week more than you've seen Sara and Yair [Netanyahu's wife and son]!!! Hhhh 🤔🤔🤔 Bravo!!! 😊

Here the commenter addresses Netanyahu in a highly informal manner, not just by using his nickname Bibi –which has become standard in Israel, an expression of the Israeli familiarity (Section 2)– but with the vernacular expression *believe me*, commonly employed in an informal conversation between equals. He then praises Netanyahu twice: first indirectly, *you've seen Putin this week more than you've seen Sara and Yair!!!* –which could be attesting to his senior political position and/or his dedication to the fulfilment of his duties– and then directly, *Bravo!!!*. The mentions of Netanyahu's family members by first name, as though by someone who is close to the family, and the multiple exclamation marks (twice in the comment) along with the compliments, could all pose a threat to the politician's negative face, as they cross the line between strangers, especially those who are not on equal terms. Perhaps to minimise this embedded face threat, the commenter clearly frames his utterance as humorous: first, by using *hhh* as an intention marker (see Shukrun-Nagar & Hirsch, accepted), and second by a series of laughter emojis.

Another form of creating this pseudo-intimacy with Netanyahu is by insincerely employing directive speech acts which are not likely to be fulfilled aside of the humorous framing. Such is example 6, which follows a short post from election day (March 2, 2020), in which Netanyahu exhorts his supporters to vote for him, using a very colloquial metaphor *step on it* (literally – give a gas; *tnu gaz*), which is brought to life with a photo of Netanyahu filling his car up with gas (see Appendix B):

(6) Am: Binyamin grab a six-pack of Carlsberg and come watch the exit polls at my place on the balcony, in any case you'll ace it 😊

In example 6, the commenter employs an insincere speech act of invitation, in a manner typical of male camaraderie, as though inviting a close friend to come over to watch a soccer match. Interestingly, the fake intimacy is further reinforced by the use of the leader's full first name –as jokingly common between male friends– instead of his popularly used nickname Bibi, or his last name, Netanyahu, which is the customary manner of addressing a politician. The familiarity in the commenter's approach is evident from the content of the comment, as well as its spontaneous everyday language, which echoes Netanyahu's own language in his post.<sup>13</sup>

The content and the linguistic playful push of the boundaries help create the shared fantasy of Netanyahu as one of the guys: this time he is asked to bring beer, while in the next comment he is asked for help in moving, which is also commonly asked of Israeli male friends (February 29, 2020):

(7) Am: Mr. Prime Minister, I'm moving on election day and I have to move some equipment to another house, coming to help me, man?

In the next example, the commenter himself offers help with an insincere directive speech act of suggestion, which can be perceived as extremely rude, or alternatively as extremely naughty. The comment follows a short post in which Netanyahu directs his supporters to watch a video where a journalist named Yossi Davidov praises Netanyahu and condemns his political opponents (February 5, 2020).

(8) Am: Bibi take a break for a few hours and come over and smoke a joint 😊

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<sup>13</sup> For the imitation of everyday-language patterns used in politicians' posts in comments to these posts, see Shukrun-Nagar, 2019.

The commenter advises Netanyahu to take a break, thereby indirectly implying that the latter is working or “trying” too hard. This advice may be seen as an indirect speech act of praise, as in the first example of this subsection, and/or as an expression of concern and empathy, which are connected to the values of encouragement or generosity of spirit (*firgun*) and mutual responsibility (*arvut hadadit*), inherent to the Israeli society (Katriel, 1999).

The advice is extended in the special logic inherent to humour with an offer which is mostly unlikely to be accepted: *come over and smoke a joint* where the commenter uses the slang word for cannabis (*zingaleh*). The commenter seems aware of the absurdity of the suggestion, perhaps also of its rudeness, and marks his humorous intention with a laughter emoji, which mitigates the face threat embedded in it. Be that as it may, by showing concern for the politician’s personal well-being and suggesting a relaxing activity frequently enjoyed among friends, the commenter positions himself as equal to Netanyahu, and feeds the fantasy of being close to him.

Furthermore, in this humorous proposal, the commenter not only eliminates the hierarchical differences between the parties, but also positions Netanyahu as a regular guy whose stamina is limited and is in need of some rest – a complete antithesis to Netanyahu’s common self-positioning, and external positioning by his supporters, as a leader far above other people, a kind of a superhero (Shukrun-Nagar, 2020b).

As shown above, the type of supportive humour named here “flirting humour” is often constructed by means of a series of non-bona-fide exchanges (Raskin & Attardo, 1994), in which Netanyahu’s supporters jokingly position themselves or fellow commenters as Netanyahu’s equals, either as a pal or a romantic counterpart.

In the next two examples, the shared humorous fantasy, a stance of *laughing with* (Glenn, 2003), creates a sense of solidarity and rapport among the group. Like example 6 (above), example 9 also follows the post from election day (March 2, 2020) that was accompanied by a photo of Netanyahu filling up his car with gas (see Appendix A). As will be shown, the commenters interpret the photo humorously, as if Netanyahu is employed as a gas pump attendant. The humour is based on extra-linguistic knowledge unique to Israeli society, where young people who are released from military service<sup>14</sup> and engage in types of labour beneficial to the market, known as “preferential work” (*avoda muadefet*), receive a special financial grant.

- (9) Am: Bibi, hold off with the preferential job... You haven’t been discharged from serving the country yet, you have another term waiting!  
Bf: Gooood one hhhh  
Am: 😊 Until he’s at least 120  
Cf: A hystericalll  
Df: You’re right! hysterical  
Bm: A 🤡🤡🤡🤡

A’s comment is yet another example of insincere advice, simulating young friends in their 20s discussing career opportunities. Although in this case, the content of the utterance is less personal, as it indirectly alludes to Netanyahu’s functioning as a leader, the pretence of intimacy persists as part of the humorous nature of the interaction, which is based on the script opposition (Raskin & Attardo, 1994) between a young man, who chooses a job for which he will receive a grant, and an experienced and wealthy politician, who is trying to get elected again for another term. The analogy created implies that Netanyahu does not need to consider his future steps yet, because his (political) service for the country is not yet over, in contrast to that of soldiers at the end of their military service.

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<sup>14</sup> Israel has three-year mandatory service for Jewish men, usually aged 18-21, and around two years for Jewish women, usually aged 18-20.

The indirect wish for Netanyahu's success, which also expresses the commenter's hope, is met with a series of exchanges all demonstrating support of the humour employed (see Hay, 2001). The participants acknowledge both recognition of the non-bona-fide nature of the first utterance, and appreciation of the positive humour towards Netanyahu, either semantically *Goooooood, hystericalll* – intensifying their intention through letter repetition; or with the graphic laughter markers *hhhh* and laughing emojis. The discourse constructed thus serves to reinforce the group's social identity.

The last example is unique for two reasons. First, it illustrates a friendly self-positioning of a female commenter towards Netanyahu; second, it explicitly states the rationale behind the flirting humour discussed here. The comment follows a post and a video from the day before the elections, in which Netanyahu promises to personally visit some of his supporters – either to make sure they have already voted for him, or to join “election parties” organised by at least ten supporters (March 1, 2020). Many supporters responded by inviting him to visit their houses, one of whom is the commenter in example 10.<sup>15</sup>

(10) Af: You're welcome to visit our place, the house is under repairs but we have really good pastries... What am I babbling about? It's pretty obvious you won't come over here, but it's nice to dream ☺

The commenter adds to a series of invitations extended to Netanyahu by his supporters, all alluding to an exciting imagined togetherness with insincere requests: *You're welcome to visit our place*. The invitation simulates a conversation between friends, both in the apology that *the house is under repairs* and the “temptation” of *really good pastries*. The commenter then departs from the humorous non-bona-fide mode by returning to the usual everyday logic with a rhetorical question *What am I babbling about?* providing a coherent explanation for the reason to engage in such fantasies (*it's nice to dream*) and mitigating her message with an emoji. Note how she relates dreaming to humorous exchanges, just as in Ziv's concept of *local logic* (1984, pp. 79-90) which combines realistic and non-realistic features. This confirms our assumption that the commenters who engage in this sort of humour do not seriously believe that their fantasies about Netanyahu will come true.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The goal of this article is to describe a phenomenon we called *flirting humour* due to its resemblance to and use of flirtatious exchanges. This supportive humour has the following traits, among others: a script opposition between politician vs. friend or lover; a teasing but positive emotional stance; personal rather than public themes; informal use of language; positioning of symmetry and intimacy; and a mitigated threat to the faces of both the addressee and the addresser.

We focused on two categories of this humour, which we found in dozens comments on Netanyahu's Facebook posts: *pseudo-romantic* humour – humorous occurrences portraying Netanyahu as an object of attraction, where women confess their feelings and even propose matrimony; and *pseudo-camaraderie* humour – humorous treatment of Netanyahu as a close friend, asking him to take care of beers, or offering advice or a joint. Both types present a notable

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<sup>15</sup> Note that although Netanyahu himself asked his supporters to leave their details on Facebook, so that he might join their election-night parties, clearly the schedule on the election day would be very demanding and carefully planned, not allowing for a spontaneous response to a personal invitation to visit a private home.

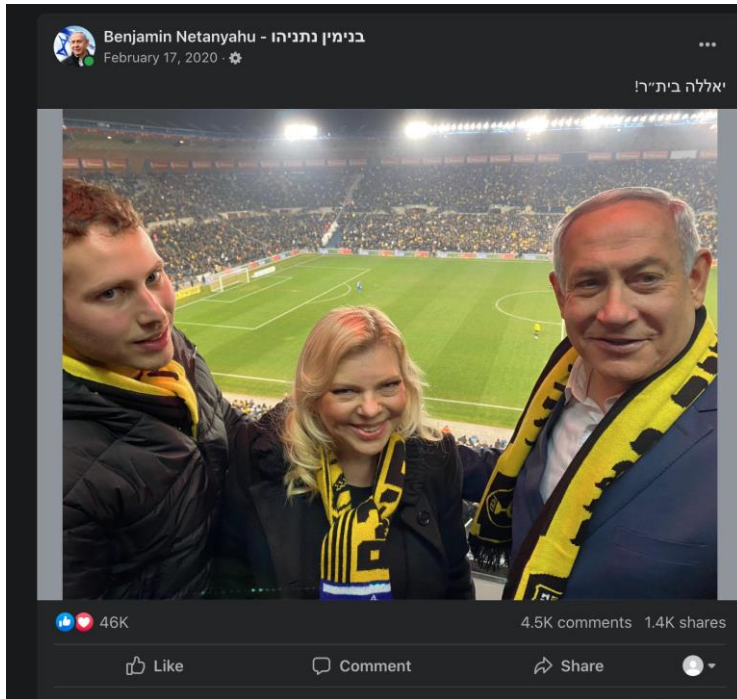
incongruity between the content, speech acts and colloquial register employed, on one hand, and the reality of ordinary citizens commenting on the page of a public figure, who is their leader and, most importantly, the prime minister of Israel, on the other. The breaking of expectations at the discourse level is, therefore, symbolic: it represents and constructs the shift to an alternative imagined reality where Netanyahu is in fact just an ordinary guy like his supporters, one of them, their equal and even a friend.

As demonstrated, these humorous comments manifest dominant attributes of the Sabra and Israeli identity, mainly forthrightness, openness, casualness, spontaneity, friendliness, mischief, and informality, as well as camaraderie and reservation from hierarchies that characterise the Israeli society. As shown in previous research (Shukrun-Nagar, 2022), all these qualities contribute to consolidate Netanyahu's supporters as an authentic Israeli community.

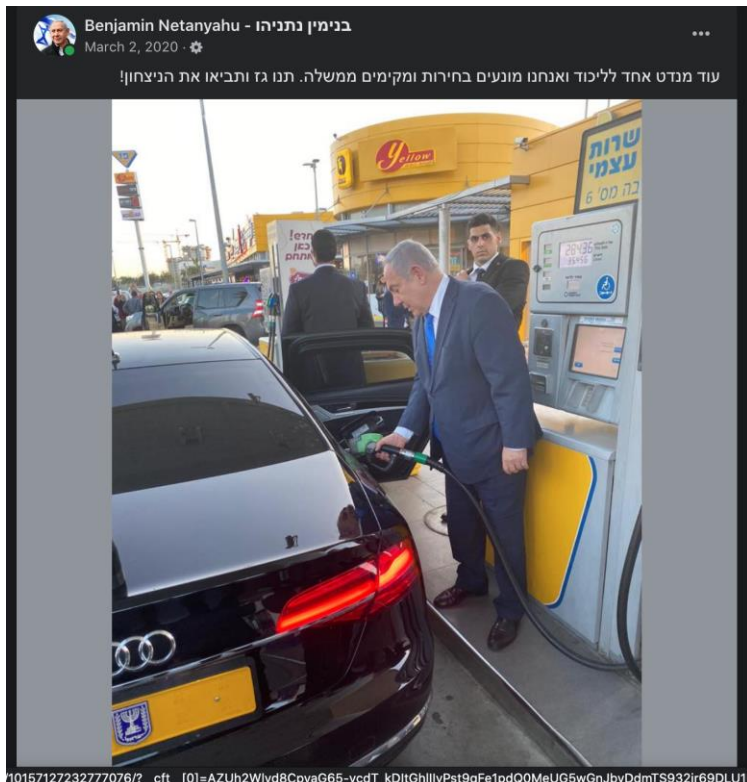
Since flirtatious humour was found to be a prominent feature of the comments by Netanyahu's supporters (both addressed to or discussing him), and particular to his Facebook page in terms of numbers and consistency, we believe this phenomenon is related to his unique dual positioning, both as a great leader and one of the guys. This duality was discovered in Netanyahu's own self-positioning in his posts, as well as in his external positioning in comments written by his supporters (see section 3). In view of the above, we see the humorous flirting of Netanyahu's supporters with him as an expression of the special relationship between the two parties. While the playful (and even brazen) voicing of secret wishes for romance and friendship with Netanyahu coincides with his positioning as an ordinary guy; the humorous framing shows that commenters are still aware of his distance and superiority, and accept his role as a leader whose face should not really be threatened.

Consequently, flirting humour not only fulfils a playful, humorous function, but seems to further establish the hierarchal disparity between this leader and his supporters, thus defining their special relationship – which is (at least partially) strongly connected to their Israeli identity.

## **Appendix A**



## Appendix B



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