

Chutzpah in Israeli Hebrew and American English

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ヘブライ語とアメリカ英語におけるフツパ

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イスラエルでは、chutzpah フツパという表現をあちこちで耳にする。これは、一般に英語には utter nerve, effrontery, cheek, 日本語には、‘あつかましき、極端なずうずうしさ’、などと訳されるヘブライ語源の口語表現である。Chutzpah は英語や他のヨーロッパ言語にも借用語として入ってきていて、たとえばアメリカではほとんどすべての人たちが、だれかが chutzpah と言っているのを一度は聞いたことがあると言う。ここでは、この chutzpah が何を意味するか、どのような状況で使われるのかを論じ、また、アメリカ英語では何を意味するのかを論じ、cultural metaphor の意味を問い直す¹。

Introduction

Discourse surrounding the concept of *chutzpah* (spelling variations: khutspe(transliteration of the Yiddish spelling), chutzpa, chutzpah (the most often used spelling), hutzpa, Chúzpe) generally translated into English as “utter nerve, effrontery“ is quite often featured in Israel. *Chutzpah*, (of which the root - of Hebrew origin-is *ch-z-f*) is heard everywhere. Even some Israelis say that *chutzpah* is the key metaphor for Israel. “Eize *chutzpah!*”, ‘What *chutzpah*’ is heard in public places such as on streets, in post offices, at bus stops, in cultural halls, etc.

People are often criticized for being *chutzpan/it* (*chutzpah* person), when they cut in line, behave in a

rude way, show no consideration for others, etc. Newspaper articles also often use the term *chutzpah* to characterize certain political acts. Overall, *chutzpah* is evaluated negatively.

On the other hand, the term *chutzpah* is often heard not only in Jewish communities but also in non-Jewish communities. The majority of American college students can identify the term. However, the perception of *chutzpah* is not so negative as in Israel, and often becomes an object of jokes as well as heroic acts (e.g. Dershowitz).

Israeli key terms such as *dugri* [straight] (Katriel 1986) and *freier/freierit* [free-er] (Bloch 2005) have been well reported and discussed. On the other hand, probably because it has been so widely used outside of Israel, and beyond Jewish communities in the US, *chutzpah* has not been well-enough discussed as a linguistic and cultural key term. This paper attempts to explore the origin and sociocultural use of the term *chutzpah*, and characterize behaviours that merit its use, and provide a historical background for the term.

In discussing *chutzpah* three approaches seem possible, i.e. discourse analysis, (contextual analysis), a sociological approach, and approaches to it as a cultural key term or root metaphor. Under the first of these, discourse analysis I will describe the social contexts in which the term *chutzpah* is used. Under the rubric of cultural key terms, I will question whether *chutzpah* is specifically Jewish and whether *chutzpah*

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can be interpreted as an Israeli key metaphor. Finally, citing parts of a few essays which include *chutzpah* expressions found in certain texts, I will compare the situational and semantic differences between Israeli forms (and uses) of *chutzpah* and those found in America and in American English, focusing especially on the question of whether or not the term *chutzpah*, and corresponding behaviour has only a negative connotation.

2. Defining *chutzpah*

The root of *chutzpah* is ch-z-f/p. The noun *chutzpah* is most often used. The adjective *chazuffa*, and the nomen agentis form *chuzpan/it* are also sometimes used. In other European languages, too, the noun form *chuzpah/chutzpah* prevails. Many Israelis and Jewish Americans think that the term originates from Yiddish. A German colleague of mine said that he knows the word as a term borrowed from Hungarian. It is also reported that Americans use the term, although they are not sure where it comes from (Hook, p.c.).

According to dictionaries and interviews with Israelis, the following English words describe what is meant by *chutzpah*.

- gall
- astonishing guts
- cheekiness
- cheap things worthless things (vulgar or semi-vulgar)
- *verstunkene tusch*-head
- stinking thing (See after “cheap”)
- nerviness?

According to a French dictionary, *chutzpah* is: mot d'origine yiddish - état d'impudence ou d'arrogance de soi - aussi traduit par effronterie, audace, insolence, culot.

In English-Japanese dictionary, *chutzpah* is translated as: ずうずうしさ, あつかましさ (岩波) (口語) ひどい厚かましさ, 鉄面皮 (研究社)

Israelis say that *chutzpah* is an Israeli key term, meaning that *chutzpah* represents Israeli culture. In fact, almost all the time when I go out, walk along streets, go to concerts, go shoppings, ride on bus or

train, I hear the expression *Eize chuzpah!* ‘What *chutzpah!*’ The situations in which I have observed the expression being used are:

1. A man refuses to give up an empty seat next to him, after a senior lady asks him to do so. The senior lady yells at him, “Eize *chuzpah!*”
2. A large pick-up truck blocks a narrow street so that other cars cannot enter. Seeing the situation, a senior lady yells at the truck driver, “Eize *chuzpah!*”
3. There is only one entrance or only one line for a ticket office in front of a long line of people, who exclaim, “Eize *chuzpah!*”
4. There is only a single security check and the agent tells people to open their bags but does not help them close the bags. Several of them say, “Eize *chuzpah!*”

According to many Israelis the prototypical behaviour meriting use of *chutzpah* is jumping a queue or cutting a line. However, behaviours inviting use of the term can be categorized as verbal actions and non-verbal actions:

- (1) Verbal actions: talking loud, interrupting conversations, speaking back to authorities
- (2) Non-verbal actions: cutting lines, not sharing food/drink with friends, ignoring obligations.

It is said that the first text in which the word *chutzpah* was used was in a collection of records of the Sanhedrin (a Jewish juridical body) compiled in A.D. 40.

1. A man, having killed his parents, asks for mercy from the court, on the grounds that he has now become an orphan.
2. An abusive husband, asks his wife for help, while beating her.

Another typical story of *chutzpah*:

A beggar begs for food, and the housewife there says there is black bread and challa bread. The beggar takes the challa.

Housewife: We also have black bread.

Beggar: I like the challa better.

Housewife: But the challa is much more expensive!

Beggar: But I like it better, good wife! (“wife”? Is the beggar her husband?)

He devours the challa this behavior is Labelled *chutzpah*.

Taking into account the verbal as well as non-verbal behaviours described above, and using Wierzbicka’s semantic primitives, *chutzpah* can be described as follows:

Israeli *chutzpah*:

1. X feels something like this:
2. something bad is happening
3. Y is doing something bad
4. Nobody wants this to happen
5. because of this, X feels something bad

In the Israeli context, *chutzpah* is a negative act, which everybody needs to avoid doing. However, at the same time, *chutzpah* is a behaviour which every Israeli might engage in. According to Israelis, one should not say or behave in a *chutzpah* way in front of his/her family or friends. In other words, *chutzpah* should not be indulged in among insiders. It is more typical of (and appropriate for) words and acts in the public sphere. As a result, the expression “Eize *chutzpah*!” frequently heard in public, has led to the impression that “*chutzpah*” is a key cultural metaphor for Israel, like other expressions proposed as Israeli key terms, expressions such as *dugri*, ‘bluntness’ or ‘straight talk’ as discussed by Katriel, or *Yehie beseder*. ‘It will be OK.’, or *En bchera* ‘No choice’, often cited as such in newspapers like the Jerusalem Post or Haaretz.

However, is *chutzpah* really an Israeli key word? Ortner describes cultural key metaphors as follows:

One type of key symbol in the elaborating mode, i.e. a symbol which operates to sort out experience, to place it in cultural categories, and to help us think how it all hangs together. Key symbols are symbols which are ‘good to think’...in that one can conceptualize the relationships among phenomena by analogy to the interrelations among the parts of the root metaphor” (Ortner 1973:1341)

Following Ortner, Katriel 1980 also describes a key metaphor as something helpful to understand the culture in general:

A key metaphor/root metaphor has an integrative function within a cultural system, that is, it formulates the unity, or coherence, of a cultural orientation by virtue of the fact that central aspects of experience can be likened to it. (Katriel 1987:11)

Given its salience in members’ discourse, tracing the uses of the term *chutzpah* in its various contexts of deployment can provide some important insights into central domains of Israeli cultural organization (ibid.).

Adopting the idea that “the use of objectifying, reifying analytic techniques - the identification of “key symbols” and process of ritualization, the elucidation of native terms, the formulation of communicative rules - has been helpful in accomplishing this gesture of self-estrangement” (Katriel 1987:2)

Although key metaphors are considered something significant and helpful to understand the culture, one should consider the problems inherent in labeling culture or society with a single term or phrase. Where a certain descriptive term is often referred to, or when it becomes a main topic of routine dialogues in a certain culture or society, that term or expression may be treated as one of its cultural key metaphors. (Geertz 1973). However, this labeling often ignores the dynamic aspect of the culture. The transcultural situation and globalization have been triggering the dynamic change of the culture. Katriel called *dugri*, Israeli way of communication of talking straight, a key metaphor for understanding Israeli communication, but her discussions is already considered out of date — according to Israelis, nobody says, “Talking *dugri*” any more — this behaviour is already forgotten. Moreover, each culture is not something which can be labelled or characterized just by using one or a few terms or expressions. Each culture has its unique features, which are not possible to describe in only a few words, and even were it possible to do so, those definitional or key features may change.

2. *Chutzpah* in English essays

The dictionary definitions for *chutzpah* quoted above clearly have negative connotations. Sometimes English writers use the term *chutzpah* in order to criticize certain policies such as in ‘it is *chutzpah* of North Korea to demand 5 abductees back from Japan’. However, actually, in American English, *chutzpah* can mean something positive, something which can be translated as ‘courage, guts’ as seen in Dershowitz’s *Chutzpah*, and parts of essays shown in (1) through (5), taken from websites.

- (1) In my bio I said I was “a second generation welfare mother struggling to get out of poverty with grace - and a little **chutzpah**. . . . In less than a year I am free, by God’s grace, and maybe more than a little **chutzpah**, from any government assistance.”
- (2) **Chutzpah** is necessary in life, go on, I need *chutzpah* with girls, Aurelio . . . Adam and Eve. Now, we finally are experiencing what seems to be like a throwback to guts, gusto and **chutzpah** on the part of sane, rational individuals who are actually using their God-given reason.
- (3) It takes a lot of **chutzpah** to brazenly admit to such an abuse of power, even if it is done just before midnight.
- (4) I hope America wakes up and the majority of its citizens voting will see that Mr. Obama has the integrity, compassion, knowledge, smarts and **chutzpah** that is needed to lead this country back onto the right road.
- (5) (My father) called me over and asked, “Who are you?” and I replied, I’m Santa Claus.’ I had lot s of **chutzpah** even then. When father asked me, what do you want to do? ‘ I said, I want to sing.

Chutzpah in English is used for encouraging oneself or even others. Even though the speaker or writer may feel that *chutzpah* is associated with rudeness or arrogance, s/he thinks that its use is necessary in order

to reach his/her goal. Therefore, *chutzpah* in English (American English, at least), can be described as:

chutzpah (sometimes spelled ‘chuzpah’) in English:

1. X feels something like this:
2. something is happening
3. X thinks Y is doing something
4. X thinks like this:
5. I do not want to do this because
6. somebody will feel bad because of this
7. X has to do something
8. X thinks it is not easy,
9. X thinks like this
10. In order to do this
11. *chutzpah* is necessary

Conclusion

Analyzing *chutzpah* as a communicative form in Israel is appropriate, but *chutzpahee* is not a key metaphor. It is a term often used in order to evaluate the second person or the third person’s verbal or non-verbal behavior. In Israeli routine speech, *chutzpah* is perceived as negative, and engaging in it is something which people should avoid. In this sense, it is a term of controlling and sanctioning. *Chutzpah* denotes a rude, inconsiderate, and selfish act. *Chutzpah* can be related to the issue of politeness (Miyake 2005), but it is not the opposite of politeness.

Probably temporary visitors to Israel may be bewildered by Israeli behaviour in public such as talking loud in trains and busses (both with fellow passengers and on mobile phones), cutting in line, eating food before paying the cashier, even by opening a bag of food, and among visitors, those who have heard the term *chutzpah* immediately may associate these behaviours with the term *chutzpah*. However, except for cutting in line, these behaviours are not really examples of *chutzpah*, because these behaviours do not offend Israelis. In this sense, only culturally defined offending acts are labeled as acts of ‘*chutzpah*.’

Secondly it should be pointed out that women utter the expression “Eize *chutzpah*!” more often than men. This fact suggests that *chutzpah* is a term of complaint, which does not have much significant

effect. In this sense, *chutzpah* is not a term of authority or power. If ever it is, *chutzpah* is an expression used by journalists to criticize politicians in newspapers as shown above. Or to criticize somebody who in a high position and who abuses his position or manipulates others by using it unfairly. That is *chutzpah*.

The fact Israelis feel free to say out loud, “Eize *chutzpah!*” toward others can be interpreted as showing Israeli straightforwardness, their attitude to be open to others, or even their egalitarianism. Non-Israelis often feel offended by Israelis’ inconsiderate acts (Miyake 2005), and they tend to keep silent or complain about them only with other non-Israelis, while Israelis freely complain and speak back, overusing the phrase “Eize *chutzpah!*”, to the point that it just means, “That’s terrible.”

On the other hand, in American English, although frequency of the use is much less, *chutzpah* has the somewhat positive connotation of courage, bravery, lack of fear, etc. It is a *liberating* expression. It is also a self-encouraging mechanism used to help the user to reach goal.

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