

Guarding the tongue:

A thematic analysis of gossip control strategies among Orthodox Jewish women in London

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Short title:

Gossip control strategies among Orthodox Jewish women

Lewis Glinert, Dartmouth College, USA

Kate Miriam Loewenthal and Vivienne Goldblatt, Royal Holloway University of London, UK.

Main contact author:

Lewis Glinert, 6191 Bartlett Hall, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755, USA

Abstract

This article describes the views and experiences of Strictly-Orthodox Jewish women with respect to the [metapragmatic](#) ethos of Shmiras HaLoshon (monitoring one's talk, literally 'guarding the tongue'). Eight extended interviews were conducted with Strictly-Orthodox women and teenagers in London, and salient themes were identified, namely:

- A. Loshon Hora ('evil talk') is the prime exemplar of bad talk.
- B. Loshon Hora is the hardest (one of the hardest) things to avoid, because it is so easy to do.
- C. The perceived consequences of Loshon Hora are very serious
- D. Great caution/various strategies are employed in order to not speak Loshon Hora
- E. Perceived gender differences exist in proneness to speak Loshon Hora.
- F. One is responsible for monitoring others.

G. Young children can be(come) aware of the issues.

Subjects appeared to take this aspect of religious observance very seriously, and were taking active steps to promote observance. Social desirability bias may be an inappropriate concept for explaining our participants' behaviour. It is also suggested that the perceived importance of Shmiras HaLoshon may be important in helping to maintain community cohesion and preventing conflicts, by improving respect for privacy and reputation in a community where gossip is attractive but divisive.

Background

Strictly-Orthodox Jews (also known by the ingroup term Charedi, often spelled Haredi, and by the outgroup term Ultra-Orthodox) live in relatively self-contained communities in several dozen localities in North America, Western Europe and Israel. Numbering several hundred thousand, they are distinct in their stringent observance of the traditional Jewish codes of religious practice, together with an attachment to the traditional Eastern European Jewish life-style wiped out by two world wars (Belcove-Shalin 1988, Glinert and Shilhav 1991, Heilman 1992; on Strictly-Orthodox women, see Davidman 1991, Kaufman 1991, Morris 1998). Membership of the group entails strict observance of the Sabbath, dietary, marriage and other laws. Members educate their children in single-sex schools, emphasizing the study of Jewish religious texts. From about the age of 16, boys attend yeshivas and then Kollelim (institutions for Rabbinic study), while most girls attend seminaries for the training of Jewish educators. Men are generally self-employed within the community, often dividing their time between work and Talmudic study; most women are mothers to large families and work part-time, if at all, most often in teaching.

In the Jewish Diaspora, Strictly-Orthodox Jewish communities consist of both native speakers of a Gentile vernacular and, particularly among males, native speakers of Yiddish. A functional trilingualism prevails: for worship and reading religious texts, a form of Hebrew is predominantly used; for ingroup interaction, particularly within the religious-ethnic subgroup known as Hasidim, Yiddish is often used by males and by females to males; for other functions, a Gentile vernacular is used, but (within the group) with a rich admixture of Hebraisms and Yiddishisms that index the ethno-religious ethos or serve as contextualizing cues for shifts in activity, tone etc. (For a fuller sociolinguistic background, see Gold 1985, Glinert 1999, and Benor 2000, and with particular attention to women's language attitudes and to language socialization in these circles, Abraham-Glinert 1999 and Fader 2001 respectively.)

This article describes the views and experiences of Strictly-Orthodox Jewish women with respect to just one aspect of the large array of religious legislation they observe - the laws of Shmiras HaLoshon (monitoring one's talk, literally 'guarding the tongue'),ⁱ [arguably the most salient of a range of metapragmatic and metalinguistic laws and customs that govern Strictly-Orthodox discourse](#)

The brief Code of Jewish Law, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (Ganzfried, 1850), has long been a standard book in Orthodox Jewish homes (Glinert 1987). Of the approximately 200 chapters, just one - chapter 30 - is devoted to "Laws concerning talebearing, slander, vengeance and bearing a grudge". This chapter describes the prohibition against talebearing, even though "the thing told may be true", and the graver crime of slander - speaking badly of another. This includes "shades of slander", and words intended to "vex or frighten" another. The chapter goes on to quote Rabbi Jeremiah of the Talmud, who said that "scorners, hypocrites, liars and slanderers are not worthy to receive the divine presence".

These laws constitute a small proportion of the mass of Jewish law, but in recent years they have received considerable attention in Strictly-Orthodox circles, with the emergence of a highly concerted and influential Shmiras HaLoshon movement. This article will outline some features of the Shmiras HaLoshon ethos, in terms of the experiences of Strictly-Orthodox Jewish women and girls with respect to these issues. We will be using qualitative methodology, attempting to convey an understanding of these experiences to the reader, following the guidelines of Elliott, Fischer & Rennie (1999).

ⁱ For Hebrew terms, we have generally followed the transcriptional practices of the community, reflecting the Ashkenazic Hebrew pronunciation prevalent in Diaspora Strictly-Orthodox circles. (The Israeli pronunciation of shmiras haloshon would be shmirat halashon.) Hebrew terms generally have penult stress. ch denotes the velar fricative [x].

In the title of this study, we refer to Shmiras HaLoshon as 'gossip control strategies', but this is perforce only a broad approximation. What counts as gossip is of course a matter of individual cultures and their metapragmatics. Of the many scholarly definitions of 'gossip' (see, e.g., Nevo et al. 1994), that of Emler (2001, p. 318) seems to come particularly close to the Shmiras HaLoshon perspective:

...informally exchanging information or opinion among two or more persons about named third parties... [the definition] has no stipulations about the kinds of people likely to be involved in such exchanges or their motives, about the truth, validity or value of what is exchanged, or about the consequences of these kinds of exchanges.

The central figure in the Shmiras HaLoshon movement was and still is Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (1838-1933), a spiritual leader of Eastern European Jewry, whose wide-ranging ethical studies and manuals have achieved **broad** popularity among Strictly-Orthodox Jews. Kagan became known as The Chofetz Chaim (or **Chafetz Chaim**, lit. "desires life") because his **best-known** work, Chofetz Chaim, dealing with verbal ethics, is based on the verse (Psalm 34, vv13-14) "Which person desires life....? Guard your tongue from speaking evil...". (See Pliskin 1975 for a popular summary in English.) Today, Jewish publishers offer an increasing array of study guides enabling people to spend a few minutes in regular daily study of the laws and principles of 'harnessing the awesome power of the tongue', covering laws governing derogatory speech, ranging from verbal abuse to flattery. Groups of people meet regularly to study the original work of The Chofetz Chaim, and there are tutorials available via telephone and the internet, and teaching materials suitable for young children. Studying and observing the laws of Shmiras HaLoshon are said to promote peace and unity, and a range of other benefits.

In the following example, in an English-language novel aimed at the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish reader (Katz, 1996), an infant is about to undergo surgery. A well-known Rebbetzin is approached. (Rebbetzin= 'Rabbi's wife', the title is used to denote religious authority and leadership in the semi-autonomous world of Strictly-Orthodox women.) The Rebbetzin is asked to dedicate her Shmiras HaLoshon class that night to the merit of the child, for a complete

recovery. "It meant more than I can say to know that such a special Shmiras HaLoshon class was taking place at the exact time of the scheduled surgery...as women...carried (the Rebbetzin's) message of judging one another favourably, doing all we can to think well of one another, and above all, speaking positively of one another. What more potent tool was there to inspire Hashem (G-d) to deal kindly with us...?"

It is our impression that the study of the laws of verbal monitoring has achieved enormous popularity in the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community, particularly among women and adolescent girls. This may be because religious study, particularly Talmudic study, is a constant duty and preoccupation for men, and the movement among women to study the laws of verbal monitoring stems from a wish to develop their own forms of religious expression, religious study and self-improvement. In this article, we examine the reported impact of these laws and their dissemination, among women in the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community in London. We will offer a thematic analysis enabling the reader to understand the experiential perspective of the research participants, and consider what implications this perspective might have for ethnolinguistic theories of gossip as 'intelligent action.'

Method and Participants

Following grounded theory principles (Corbin & Strauss, 1998), we conducted a thematic analysis. This method aims to illustrate underlying themes in each respondent's discourse by examining the transcripts and looking for common themes in the language used. This facilitates the investigation of underlying structures behind attitude and belief systems. In order to achieve this, the transcripts and comments were read and re-read, key themes that tended to re-occur were noted and credibility checks carried out as described below. Smith (1995) offers further information about thematic analysis. Its aim is to arrive at an interpretive phenomenological perspective on the accounts of the research participants. In common with other qualitative methods, a primary

aim is to enrich the reader's understanding of the experiential perspective of research informants (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999).

Interviewing took place in London, in the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community. All participants in the study were [primary speakers of English](#) from member households of the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations. Of a U.K. Jewish population of approximately 250,000, 10.5 percent are affiliated to Strictly-Orthodox congregations (JPR, 2000), a number that is rapidly increasing in both absolute and relative terms. It was planned to interview 6-10 participants in order to reach conceptual saturation. We targetted four women and four adolescent girls from the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community in North-West London. [No survey data are available on this community, but a demographic survey of the neighbouring \(economically less secure\) Stamford Hill community suggests that just 15% of wives were in full-time work, generally for family reasons \(Holman & Holman 2002, ch. 9\).](#) The women in our study were aged 20-49, all married, mean age 36.8 years. The adolescent girls were aged 15-18, all in orthodox Jewish schools and seminaries. Their mean age was 16.5 years. Participants were interviewed [in English](#) by an orthodox Jewish woman, in their homes, at a time to suit their convenience. All participants were unpaid, assured of anonymity, and told that they need not answer any question and could withdraw at any time without stating a reason. The project received ethics approval from the research ethics committee of Royal Holloway, London University. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The interview schedule explored the definitions of [Loshon Hora](#) ('evil talk'), participants' understandings of the (religious) laws pertaining to [Shmiras HaLoshon](#) (verbal monitoring), their experiences of learning and observing these laws, and their views on their importance. A copy of the interview schedule is appended.

Results: Themes

We have identified seven emerging themes from the very rich material. These enable the reader to understand some of the experiential aspects of orthodox Jewish women and girls dealing with the laws of verbal monitoring. Credibility checking involved checking the themes with two other

members of the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community, and also asking them to sort a sample of illustrative material under the heading of each theme. The first check resulted in a suggested increase of the number of themes from five originally suggested, to seven. The two additional themes added were, first, the notion of Loshon Hora and, second, the idea of responsibility for others. In the second check, the illustrative material was matched in every case with the theme it was selected to illustrate. It was also noted that some of the material was illustrative of more than one theme.

The themes are now described and illustrated.

Loshon Hora as the prime example of bad talk.

For those interviewed, Loshon Hora was by far the most salient of the forms of bad talk, and dealing with it was referred to over and over again in the interviews. It was the first and most salient example when participants were asked what terms are used for good and bad talk.

(1) "Loshon Hora, rechilus ('talebearing'), motzi shem ra ('giving someone a bad name'), don lechaf zechus ('[not] judging others in the most favourable way')" (W)

(2) "Loshon Hora" (G and W)

(3) "Loshon Hora, rechilus" (G and W)

And the following catalogue, offered by a 15-year-old:

(4) "Onaas devorim which is when you say something which isn't Loshon Hora, but it's hurtful to someone else, regarding their cooking, or whatever it is. And rechilus, which I think is basically the same as Loshon Hora, spreading bad about a particular person. And Motzi shem ra, to shame someone else's name, to say bad Loshon Hora about them" (G).

The salience of Loshon Hora emerges throughout the interviews, and our themes centre on this.

Loshon Hora is the hardest (one of the hardest) things to avoid, because it is so easy to do.

Loshon Hora is seen as ever-tempting, an enjoyable part of everyday social behaviour - hence (one of) the most difficult things to guard against.

(5) "I think it's very important because it's something you come upon every day. You don't have to learn not to eat traifus (forbidden, non-kosher food) because you don't think about it, but Loshon Hora is something you want to do all the time" (G)..

(6) "I do remember when I was in school, we used to read the dinim ('laws') and I do remember thinking: Oh my goodness, I do that every day! Just to make a comment about someone else that they could take badly, even if you don't mean it badly" (G).

The consequences of speaking Loshon Hora are perceived to be very serious.

The participants reminded us and themselves of the traditional Rabbinic warnings about the serious consequences of speaking badly of others.

(7) " Loshon Hora is so bad because it kills three people: the person speaking it, the person hearing it, and the person who's spoken about" (G).

(8) " It's so far-reaching. The fact that you think it's just you and your friend sitting in the room together, but actually the ramifications are that it can spread throughout the world - one doesn't even know how many people one might have affected, monetarily, or by reputation, and it can spiral out of hand. When it comes to wanting to rectify, one wouldn't even find a way to do it" (W).

Participants use a range of strategies to avoid speaking Loshon Hora

Because Loshon Hora is easy and pleasant, but has such terrible consequences, participants described a range of strategies for dealing with it.

(9) "Be very careful that you choose your friends, and stay away from those who know how to enjoy sitting down and having a chatter about everybody....Also, not believing is a

very important thing...don't register any compliance with what has been said...grimace and show them that you disapprove of what's going on, if one can't actually get up and leave" (W).

(10) "I think it's a very good practice if one can actually be forthright and not be shy about saying 'I actually don't want to listen to this. I have a principle not to listen to Loshon Hora.'" (W)

(11) "Keep away from it" (W).

(12) "I try to learn two halochos ('laws') a day. It's very hard for me not to speak Loshon Hora, it's just something enjoyable. I often try to be melamed zchus ('judge favourably') and try and see where that person's coming from." (W)

"When I've been to Rabbi X's shiur ('class') on the laws of Shmiras HaLoshon, I don't open my mouth for at least half an hour. When anyone is mentioned, or you're thinking of mentioning anyone, I do what I ought to do - I think first before opening my mouth" (W).

(13) "It's very difficult. If you mix with people who are aware of Loshon Hora it's easier, because if you say "Loshon Hora" they'll just stop - or they'll remind you. With other people it's much more difficult because you have to explain." (G).

(14) "My family have always been very conscious of Loshon Hora. At my Bas Mitzvah ('coming of age', 12 for a girl) I took upon myself that I'd be extra careful about Loshon Hora, and it really helped. Many times you're about to say something, and you really think. Especially at a turning point in life, to make a commitment (like that) means a bit more" (G).

(15) "I was once talking to a friend and she stopped me and said, 'That would probably be 'Loshon Hora'. That stopped me and it's good - if friends can tell one another nicely, not in a catty way.'" (G)

(16) "Once you are older and you begin to realize the seriousness of Loshon Hora, you try to moderate it" (G).

This range of illustrative material suggests that the women and girls interviewed made a **variety** of (by general contemporary standards) rather extraordinary efforts to keep alert to the possibility that they might be speaking or listening to Loshon Hora. They described a range of manoeuvres

to minimize the extent to which they might fall into this tempting trap. Both women and girls said that they and their friends and acquaintances would explicitly signal if a conversation was turning to Loshon Hora. This practice might seem bizarre or sanctimonious in normal society, but all the authors have observed it as quite normative and matter-of-course in Orthodox Jewish social circles.

Perceived gender differences in proneness

Women and girls were described - by the women and girls interviewed - as more prone to engage in Loshon Hora than men and boys. This was not seen as the result of temperamental differences, but as the effects of life-style.

(17) "Women are known to be chatty much more than men...men if they're sitting in the kollel (advanced Rabbinic college) are less likely to start chatting than if women see one another in the street" (G).

(18) " Women are gossiping. Boys are more preoccupied - or should be - with other things, with learning (studying religious texts), in their spare time. Girls in their spare time should also be learning. But a girl's spare time is sometimes babysitting, things like that. So I think she has to be very aware of the halochos ('laws') of Loshon Hora" (G)

Responsibility for monitoring others.

As we saw in considering the range of methods used for coping with Loshon Hora, social control figures prominently. There is a double motivation here - all are seen as responsible for each other. Additionally, in the case of Loshon Hora, helping others to be aware of and to avoid Loshon Hora lessens one's own wrongdoing by reducing the chances that one will be exposed to Loshon Hora.

(19) "Yes, like all mitzvos ('religious duties'), you're responsible for your fellow-Jews. First of all, you're not allowed to listen to Loshon Hora, so if they start to speak, you have to remind them. Generally, if you care for someone you don't want them to go wrong, so you don't want them to speak Loshon Hora" (G).

(20) "Yes, I know when it comes to friends, when we talk about someone, something bad, there's always one person who'll say "Stop, it's Loshon Hora!". When we were younger, there was always one of us who'd put a stop to it..." (G)

Young children can be(come) aware of the issues.

Responsibility for monitoring others extends to the care and training of children, and several participants noted that young children could both be sensitized to Loshon Hora and show awareness of Loshon Hora and the wish to avoid it.

(21) "Children are aware that there is such a concept (as Loshon Hora). ..My mother asked my 5-year-old something, and he said to her: "You don't expect me to answer that - that would be Loshon Hora" (W).

(22) "When my sister comes home and she says her friend was sent out of the classroom, I say "That's Loshon Hora and you mustn't talk (like that) about other people...she's five" (G).

Conclusion

The material we have discussed shows an extraordinary degree of conscientiousness - sometimes bordering on sanctimony - among the women and girls interviewed. They saw Loshon Hora as an ever-present, pleasurable temptation, but with serious and often irreversible consequences. Participants reported deploying a range of strategies for controlling Loshon Hora, in themselves, in friends and acquaintances, and in dealing with children. Two popular strategies were regular study and tactful reproach (consciousness-raising).

The material prompts a number of questions, of which two seem particularly important. The first is: Did social desirability effects operate here, both in the reports that the women and girls gave in the interviews and in their lives? Social desirability is a tendency to "fake-good" in responding to interviews and questionnaires, as well as in everyday conversation. The effect results in self-enhancing descriptions of own behaviour and thoughts, e.g. Crowne & Marlowe, 1960; Manstead & Semin, 1996. Regarding gossip, Bergmann (1993, p. 21ff) speaks of copious evidence for 'the discrepancy between the collective public denunciation and the collective private practicing of gossip' as a discrepancy that 'always and everywhere is part of the phenomenon of gossip' -- but whose significance 'so far has not even begin to be clarified.' We did wonder to what extent the women and girls were really doing everything they said they did. Might they, at the very least, be given to non-malicious gossip even if they eschewed the malicious variety? Be this as it may, we also regard the kind of discourse that was recorded as part of the social fabric of the society to which the women and girls belong. Talking about doing good, and learning about doing good, and teaching others to do good (and avoiding evil), are part of social being. Moral and religious exhortation are everyday practices. If there is a discrepancy between what one says and what one does, it is not necessarily helpful to type this as the result of social desirability effects, of "faking-good" biases. It is better seen as an expression of the cultural value placed on religious learning and exhortation, in which shortcomings may exist but which can be reduced by more learning, more exhortation and more encouragement.

While the collective private praxis was not the subject of this study, our findings would acquire further significance if gossip control praxis could indeed be studied, presumably via participant observation. Emler (2001, p. 323) has noted that there has been little systematic hypothesis-testing for gossip, neither direct observation nor self-reporting being of much value here. Of particular interest for the micro-ethnography of speech would be the use of topic-shifts (Drew 1995), alluded to in our interviews, to avoid Loshon Hora.

The second question is why this particular aspect of religious observance has achieved the prominence that it has in the minds, the discourse and the practices of the women and girls who spoke to us. By their own accounts, evil talk is damaging to others and to the self, as well as to the person discussed. But there are other harmful and damaging activities which do not receive the attention and vigilance that was said to be given to Loshon Hora - for example, to the extent of widespread regular study of what it constitutes and how to control it. One factor may be the small, enclave-type communities which characterize the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish life-style (Glinert & Shilhav, 1991). On the one hand, an important factor in community cohesiveness, and indeed in individual well-being, is social support - care and concern for others. Care and concern have been reported at a high level in the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community (Holman & Holman, 2002). This may reinforce the propensity to gossip typical of close-knit communities and particularly in such bonding activities as folk rituals of lament, troubles talk and workplace gossip. Indeed, since Max Gluckman's (1963) seminal claim that gossip maintains 'the unity, morals and values of social groups', gossip has regularly been portrayed as fulfilling a profound need, be it -- following Nevo et al (1994) -- in sociological-anthropological terms, enforcing group norms and strengthening cohesion; social-psychologically, affording social alerts, enhanced status and power, and no end of entertainment; or in terms of the individual, offering a fantasy life, giving voice to taboos and working out anxieties. Gossip among women has in particular been affirmed as fostering solidarity (Tannen 1990, ch.4) or offering empowerment (Schein 1994). On the other hand, some of our other work in the Strictly-Orthodox Jewish community (Loewenthal & Brooke-Rogers, 2003) has shown that individuals prefer their difficulties and misfortunes to be kept out of the arena of public knowledge and common gossip, in order to avoid damage to individual and family reputation. Where others are known to be talking about private concerns, there can be real anger and potential conflict. Heightened vigilance at the border between concern and Schadenfreude could be an important device to prevent fragmentation and disintegration of the community. Tannen (ibid, p. 109) has highlighted the dilemma of women and girls, so often 'keenly aware of the danger of malicious gossip resulting from exchanging secrets', and who 'needed friends to talk to, but [...] knew that talking to friends is risky.' The Shmiras HaLoshon

movement is - we suggest - an important factor in preventing divisive conflicts in a closed community where gossip is an attractive pastime.

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Appendix: the interview schedule

What terms are there for good/bad talk?

What does it (these terms) cover?

Is Loshon Hora the same as gossip?

Does it include lying, rude language?

On a scale of badness, what order would you put Loshon Hora, lying, rude language?

Is there a sharp divide between Loshon Hora and pointless chitchat?

What do you think are the chief do's and don't's of Loshon Hora?

Are there different degrees of seriousness of Loshon Hora?

What about the different degrees of chumra (stringency)?

Talking to a rav (rabbi) or your friend or your boss, would you judge Loshon Hora differently?

Is it worse Loshon Hora to say very bad things?

How can you make up for it?

Does it help to say Tehillim ('Psalms')?

Is Shmiras HaLoshon something that marks Jews off from other people?

Is Shmiras HaLoshon an easy set of laws for people to keep?

How well do you think it's observed?

Are there any major lessons from Jewish history about Shmiras HaLoshon?

Is Shmiras HaLoshon associated with any great Jewish people?

Are there social benefits or just hidden spiritual value?

Is it a mishpat ('humanistic law') for any sensible society?

Who studies Shmiras HaLoshon?

How important is it, compared to other areas of study?

Do you know the history of the Shmiras HaLoshon Movement?

Anything else?