Commenting on *in-memoriam* columns

Juggling with deliberative and epidictic norms

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The discussion in this paper proposes to shed light on a hitherto under-researched area: commenting on *in-memoriam* columns. Borrowing the basic notions of deliberative and epidictic genres from classical rhetoric and accommodating them to a pragmatic study of online interaction between commenters and columnists, readers’ comments are conceived as follow-ups, which necessarily re-contextualize the initiating column. The mixed character of the initiating columns, which combine deliberative and epidictic features, encourages the commenters to choose between different readings of the columns in context, and exercise their discursive power in re-contextualizing the commenting/column interaction. The analysis suggests that in the data discussed here, commenters manifest clear preference for the epidictic. By so doing, they depart from norms of deliberation manifest in habitual political commenting. On a more general level, the analysis supports the initial claim, namely that by choosing between different readings of the initiating columns and following-up on them, commenters have the discursive power to shape and re-shape the interaction through preferred commenting strategies.

**Keywords:** online commenting, epidictic, deliberative, follow-ups, genres

1. **Introduction**

Online commenting on op-eds¹ is part of user-generated content (UGC), previously discussed both in the framework of communication studies and socio-pragmatics. The assumption underlying these studies is that the op-eds/

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¹ I am grateful to Ms. Veronica Zilberstein, a research student at Bar-Ilan University, for pointing out to me that the term op-ed, often mistakenly read as short for ‘opinion-editorial,’ signifies ‘opposite-editorial,’ meaning “a page of special features usually opposite the editorial page of a newspaper”, or, as in our case, “a feature on such a page” (Sterling 2009).
commenting arena is set-up for an open debate. Accordingly, commenters’ strategies are evaluated in terms of negotiations of meanings, roles and face wants with the columnist and with other commenters.

In this paper I propose to shed light on a hitherto under-researched area: commenting on *in-memoriam* columns. Borrowing the basic notions of deliberative and epidictic genres from classical rhetoric and accommodating them to a pragmatic study of online interaction between commenters and columnists, I will show that in my data, commenting on *in-memoriam* columns range from the deliberative to the epidictic, with general tendency to preserve the epidictic norm of after-death praising. I will further argue that through the strategies commenters adopt, they may contextualize the commenting/column interaction as deliberative, epidictic or mixed. In the data analyzed here, the interaction is contextualized as a mixed genre, with high preference for the epidictic.

In what follows, I will outline briefly previous research on commenting (Section 2), describe the methodology of the study presented here (Section 3), introduce the conceptual framework underlying it with special reference to deliberative and epidictic genres and briefly apply them to the description of the three columns which initiate the commenting strategies (Section 4), and discuss in some detail commenting strategies in the context of online columns about the death of Mr. Yossi Sarid, a prominent political figure in Israel (sections 5, 6 and 7). To conclude, I will discuss the findings (Section 8).

2. Commenting in online journalism

Studies of commenting in online journalism have mostly focused on the political arena (henceforth ‘habitual political commenting’, HPC), through which citizens talk with journalists, politicians and other citizens on political issues. As part of user-generated content (UGC), the role of online comments in the public sphere and their contribution to the democratization of the political arena is debated (e.g. Bohman 2004). Although commenting in its various forms can be viewed as the contemporary form of the classical agora or cafés in 18th-century Europe (for a discussion see Johansson et al. 2017), studies seem to indicate that UGC is far from complying with Habermas’ (1989, 1992) ethics of democratic debate. This is demonstrated, for example, in the empirical analysis of commenting in British tabloids and broadsheet newspaper websites (Richardson and Stanyer 2011), and in the view of commenting as part of slacktivism or as a way to maintain problematic democratic practices (Manosevitch 2011; Dori-Haohen and Shavit 2013), as well as Papacharissi’s (2014) view of new media as a venue for the expression of civic cynicism.
From a discursive viewpoint, commenting has been discussed in terms of (dis)agreement and (im)politeness, with emphasis on the expressions of disagreement and the interrelations between disagreement, emotions and face wants (Kleinkne 2010; Upadhay 2010; Johansson 2015). Commenting on op-eds in Israeli online journalism is described as antagonistic in terms of preference for antirhetoric, i.e. for comments challenging the columnist’s logos, ethos and pathos (Kohn and Neiger 2007), and for the use of pejorative semantics and unmitigated directness (Dori-Haohen and Shavit 2013). The fact that the commenting arena in Israel received its own term of talk, ‘tokbek’ is interpreted as demarcating a detrimental arena to democracy (Dori-Haohen and Shavit 2013).

From a different angle, Weizman (2012, 2015, 2016) studied indirectness in comments on op-eds focusing on its most typical realization, irony. Viewing the interactional column/comment thread as a conversation whereby, through the commenter’s follow-up a debate is launched (Weizman 2012, 2015), I argued that ironic commenting has a high potential for threat to the columnist’s positive and negative face. This aspect of confrontation has been recently elaborated on, based on a larger corpus, additional criteria and a comparison between commenting in the Washington Post (USA) and NRG (Israel) (Weizman and Dori-Hacohen 2017). In the debate between commenter and columnist, we considered criticisms addressed at the columnist’s personality (ethos-oriented) as relatively more threatening than those addressed at the argumentation (logos-oriented, ad-rem); within the ethos-oriented category, pure insults (ad-personam) are relatively more face threatening than comments on the professional illegitimacy of the columnist (ad-hominem).

This scale, as well as other discussions on HPC, presuppose that the genre of comments is underlined by expectations for a certain degree of reasonableness. In this framework, since the commenting arena is a form of public debate, the arena is supposed to be geared towards open content-oriented (ad-rem) comments. Other types of comments are interpreted based on these premises.

These assumptions hold because the commenting arena is part of participatory discourse which inherently encourages deliberation. In what follows I argue that comments on in-memoriam columns act within the constraints of a different paradigm, and present a different discursive behavior.

Comments are viewed here as follow-ups, i.e. as “communicative acts (or dialogue acts), in and through which a prior communicative act is accepted, challenged, or otherwise negotiated by ratified participants in the exchange or by third parties” (Fetzer and Weizman 2015: XI). Thus, follow-ups necessarily “involve recontextualization of an object of discourse (or parts of it) from another context, stance-taking, and the negotiation of new meaning” (Linell 1998:154; for an overview and discussions see contributions to Fetzer, Weizman and Berlin 2015;
Readers’ comments follow-up on the initiating column, and at the same time initiate threads of second-order readers’ comments as well as other readers’ (non) endorsement clicks (likes and dislikes). Adopting an interactional approach, it is posited here that commenters have the discursive power to re-contextualize the interaction between them and the columnist through the selection of commenting strategies. Specifically, I argue that in the context of after-death columns, commenters have the discursive power to negotiate deliberative and epidictic norms.

3. Methodology

3.1 Background

Yossi Sarid served as member of the Knesset (Israel parliament) for the left-wing Hamá’arach faction, Ratz and Meretz parties between 1974 and 2006. A former Minister of Education and Minister of the Environment, he led Meretz between 1996 and 2003 and served as Leader of the Opposition from 2001 to 2003. Highly involved and outspoken, his weekly column in the daily Ha’aretz after retiring from political life renders him especially apt for the analysis proposed here since his death had a direct impact on Ha’aretz readers, in addition to its indirect impact on Israeli citizens in general. His weekly column, published on weekends, attracted heated debates involving a relatively high number of readers: a study of commenting in Ha’aretz in the year 2012 found out that the average number of comments on Sarid’s articles is 73.1, as compared with an average number of 56.6 comments on other columnists’ ironic articles (Atkin 2016). This active commenting arena encouraged highly confrontational style, including repeated themes of ad-personam insults and ad-hominem criticisms, and an exceptional use of belittling invented nicknames (Atkin, personal communication).

Against this background, the question of how commenters managed Sarid’s death acquires a more intriguing dimension.

The elitist daily Ha’aretz is published in print and online. Since March 2013 the online edition is available for subscribers only. Commenting has a fixed form: comments appear below the column, it may have up to three parts – title, message and signature – and comments may be responded to by sub-comments with the

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2. Ms. Hila Atkin, a research student at Bar-Ilan University and an expert on commenting on Sarid’s column, notes (personal communication) the exceptional affluence of denigrating nicknames such as ‘yosinyu’ and ‘yosale’, and the unusual abundance of favoring and challenging comments on Sarid’s style.
same structure. For each comment, the exact uploading time is given, as well as the number of likes and dislikes (Atkin, personal communication).

The three articles studied here were published on December 5, 2014 on <https://www.haaretz.co.il>, a day after Sarid’s death, had the same format as any other op-ed, and were accompanied by readers’ comments. The articles will be presented in section (3.3). Comments will be analyzed in reference to them, taking into accounts readers’ likes and dislikes as manifestations of readers’ (non) endorsement. Texts were written in Hebrew, and are translated here into partly literal English.

3.2 Data

As stated above, the research studies the strategies used in commenting on in-memoriam articles following Said’s death. The data includes commenting on three op-eds: an unsigned editorial (henceforth called Editorial, 32 comments), a signed editorial by two journalists (henceforth Aderet and Lior, 332 comments) and an op-ed written by a highly controversial Ha'aretz columnist, Gideon Levy, whose writing regularly triggers aggressive and hateful commenting (henceforth Levy, 91 comments). The total number of comments (450) lends itself to an analysis of commenting strategies.

4. Deliberative and epidictic genres

In his Rhetoric, Aristotle (Rhetoric, Book 1, Chapter 3, 1359) distinguishes between three genres of speeches – the deliberative, the forensic and the epidictic. The deliberative speech urges to either do to or refrain from doing some action; the forensic either attacks or defends somebody, and is addressed at those engaged in judging; and the epidictic is essentially ceremonial, displays either praise or blame, and addresses those engaged in the pleasure and beauty of the speech and its ceremonial aspects. Beauty was identified with good, praise and blame were associated with virtues. A typical example of the latter would be the eulogy, whereby the orator shows that the dead is worthy and honorable, without practical consequences (Rhetoric, Book 1, Chapter 3). Unlike the deliberative speech, the epidictic raises no objection, and is sometimes even devoid of interest, except for its virtuosity and dramatic value.

This distinction, elaborated on since classical rhetoric (see discussion in Quintillian Book III, iv) is challenged by Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca (1969). In their account, the ancients’ view focused on the epidictic speech's virtuosity and aesthetic value and did not attribute it any rhetorical importance, which led to its
Later inclusion in literary prose rather than in philosophy, dialectics and argumentation:

[...] in the absence of the concept of value-judgement, and of that of intensity of adherence, the theoreticians of speech, from Aristotle on, readily confused the concept of the beautiful, as the object of speech (which was, besides, equivalent to the object of ‘good’) with the aesthetic value of the speech itself.  

(Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca 1969: 48)

Hence, Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca propose an alternative account, whereby “epidictic oratory forms a central part of the art of persuasion, and the lack of understanding shown toward it results from a false conception of the effects of argumentation” (Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca 1969: 49). Accordingly, in their view, “the epidictic oratory has significance and importance for argumentation, because it strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca 1969: 51).

The analysis which follows takes these two diverging views into account.

Relevant to in-memoriam discourse is the norm of grieving on the dead, which considers defamation of the deceased as socially inappropriate. This norm has already been documented in ancient Greek by Diogenes Laërtius, (3rd Century AD. tr. 1959) who attributes the Greek aphorism τὸν τεθνηκότα μὴ κακολογεῖν (tòn tethnekóta mè kakologeîn, “Don’t badmouth a dead man”) to Chilon of Sparta (in the Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, Book 1, 70).

It is later mirrored in the Latin aphorisms De Mortius nil nisi bonum (literally: “about the dead—nothing unless good”) and De mortuis nil nisi bene [dicendum] (literally: about the dead—only good or nothing”), as well as in its Hebrew equivalent ahaery mot kdoshim emor (Speak not ill of the sainted dead).

The Jewish tradition offers us an attenuated, more reserved version of this social norm. The shulxan arux (literally: “Set Table”), a widely accepted compilation of practical Jewish law, authored in Hebrew by Yosef Karo in 1563 and published in Venice two years later, devotes a section to the appropriate behavior following a death, and rules:

It is a major good deed [Hebrew: mitsva] to mourn the dead adequately. And it is a good deed to raise his voice and say good things which touch our heart and cry a lot and praise [the dead]. And it is forbidden to praise him exceedingly unless one mentions [only] his good characteristics and elaborates a little, just don’t exaggerate […]  

(shulxan arux, yore dea, 344, 1)

The Israeli journalist Uzzi Benziman (2011) notes that Israeli journalism avoids mentioning politicians’ weaknesses after their death with “zealous, nearly religious” conservatism. Exceptions are scarce. One well known exception is an arti-
cle by the founder and editor of the daily Haaretz, Gershom Shoken, following the death of Israel 4th PM Golda Me’ir in 1978 (Benziman 2011). Another exception is the eulogy of the late politician Ben Eliezer by his fellow-politician Yossi Beilin, which opens with the words “I would not consent to ‘speak no ill of the sainted dead’. For me he was the most belligerent, aggressive politician. He should not have been candidate of Ha’avoda party [=the Israeli labour] for presidency.” (Yossi Beilin, Channel 1, Israel TV, 28.8.2016). As will be shown below, three commenters in my data join Benziman and Beilin in explicitly contesting this specific norm (Example (16)) and its universality (Example (17)), and more generally challenging unconditional praising (Example (28)). But to no avail.

The three articles which initiate the comments to be analyzed below, represent a mixed form of deliberative and epidictic, with a tendency towards the epidictic. The preservation of after-death praising is one aspect of this mixture, but not the only one. On the one hand, their typological form and organization vis-à-vis neighboring articles and comments on the same page conforms with that of other political articles, and comments are similarly encouraged by the journal, which is typical of deliberation. In addition, the three articles introduce facts and stances which, being related to a prominent political figure and hence – to central events in the political arena, could, under different circumstances, encourage debate. These features converge with Aristotle’s notion of the deliberative. On the other hand, these facts are introduced to illustrate the deceased’s greatness, and as such they conform with Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca’s view of the epidictic as a way to enhance adhesion to the values it lauds. The articles are further epidictic mostly in the way they celebrate the deceased’s activities as a public figure, with varying degrees of explicitness, and varying emphases on his political, ideological, journalistic and personal merits. Let us then examine them briefly:

(a) Editorial. The article comes under the section “opinions, editorial”, and its title is typical of a journalistic eulogy: “Yossi Sarid, 1940–2015”, without subtitle. Each of its 5 paragraphs starts with a praise, followed by selected information about Sarid’s activities. For example: “Yossi Sarid was a man of principles, determined and modest in his manners, although he was aware of his own worth. He supported a just society […]” or: “Sarid played a major role in the relative success of Rabin’s government to put Israel on the road toward peace with the Palestinians”. The style is mildly literary. Thus the article opens with the words “Yossi Sarid was young and then old, yet he has never lost his cleverness, lucidity and wit”. This statement is coined, lexically and syntactically, after the biblical verse “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread” (Psaulms 37, 25). At the same time, the opening statement alludes to the fre-
quent use Sarid made of this quotation in his weekly column (e.g. Ha'aretz 21.2.2008, 29.9. 2010, 24.1.2010 and more), and thus resonates his idiolect. The article received the smallest number of comments, 33.

(b) Aderet and Lior. The article comes under the section “News. Political”. Its title, “Yossi Sarid died at the age of 75”, is informative, and so is its sub-title, which further includes a citation of Sarid’s words in his typical, somewhat poetic style. The journalists provide information about Sarid’s public activities as politician, educator, journalist and author, as well as about his stances on controversial issues, in a factual manner, without taking a stance. Unlike the editorial, they also tell about his personal life, about his parents, mention a tragedy in the family, and quote Sarid on these issues. On the whole, the large number of Sarid’s quotations introduces the dimension of stylistic virtuosity, although the rest is stylistically unmarked. Praises are intertwined with the informative details, as in: “[...] acting as Member of Parliament for 9 terms, he stood out in his struggles for peace and against religious coercion”, or “at the beginning he fought against corruption and organized crime”. The article received the largest number of comments, 346.

(c) Levy, column. This article is published in the framework of a weekly column, in the section “opinions”. The title consists of a pun, and has no sub-title. The author adopts a personal perspective, writes in the first person singular, and combines praises of Sarid’s personality and values with emotional remarks which convey a sense of affinity with the deceased. For example: “He knew how to love and how to hate. As one should. One day we were walking in the parking lot […]” or: “Life, not death, provided endless proofs for Yossi’s greatness; Yossi’s, because that’s how everyone called him, and that’s how I will call him now, for the last time”. In this case, the pathos of intimacy is somewhat artificial, since Yossi, a highly conventionalized nickname coined after Yossef, is not only the sole name used by Sarid as well as by people addressing him and referring to him in the public arena, it is also the most frequent form used for other public figures in the secular milieu having the first name Yossef. Still, the strategy confers an emotional, intimate tone on the column, and is particularly interesting in as much as the journalist, whose column is highly controversial and attracts extreme responses, carefully avoids here any reference to political issues. The article received 91 comments.

Faced with these interesting manifestations of mixed genres, commenters have the discursive power to contextualize the interaction between them and the columnist in accordance with the components on which they chose to follow-up. In the
following sections (5–7) I will discuss the main commenting strategies in terms of their orientation to the deliberative or the epidictic.

5. Enhancing deliberation: Ad-rem and ad-hominem commenting

Just as in HPC, commenting on *in-memoriam* articles includes *ad-rem* and *ad-hominem* comments. *Ad-rem* comments (literally: addressed at the thing itself), either support or criticize the content of the column and the columnist’s stance, and thus elaborate on its deliberative components. *Ad-hominem* comments (literally: addressed at the man), refer to the personality, background or circumstances of the person who makes the argument, in our case – the journalist. In rhetorics they are considered fallacious inasmuch as they do not contribute to the argumentation (Toulmin et al. 1984: 144). However, some researchers consider them to be non-fallacious if they draw on facts that undermine the speaker’s reliability and authority in presenting his arguments (Amossy 2000: 129–32; Amossy and Koren 2010). The criterion of contribution to the argumentation allows for a third type, *ad-presonam* comments, which are personal remarks, mostly pure insults, with no relevance to the argumentation. *Ad-personam* comments are scarce in my data, and will not be discussed here.

In HPC, the distinction between *ad-rem* and *ad-hominem* is relatively more transparent than it is in *in-memoriam* articles, despite some ambiguities. Compare the following comments on an article by Richard Krauthammer, a columnist in the Washington Post (26.2.2013):

(1) Dr. Krauthammer is, of course, correct in his diagnosis […] The capitulation in all of the areas noted by Dr. Krauthammer is an indication that there will be many foreign policy messes to be cleaned up by the new POTUS […]

(Krauthammer, 32)

(2) Mr. Krauthammer’s bias is showing

(Krauthammer, 42)

The comment in (1) expresses explicit agreement with the content of the column and the columnist’s stance, and thus represents an *ad-rem* argumentation. The comment in (2) challenges the columnist’s integrity and reliability, and therefore represents an *ad-hominem* argument.

This distinction, illustrated and elaborated on in the context of political commenting (Weizman and Dori-Hacohen 2017), is less clear-cut in our data. For one thing, in *in-memoriam* articles the columnist argues for the merits of the deceased, and thus identifies with her or with him in full or in part. Accordingly, *ad-hominem* comments on Sarid may also be read as *ad-rem* comments on the columnist’s argumentation. Another specificity of our data is that while in HPC, as
in classic rhetoric, *ad-rem* and *ad-hominem* are typically directed at the author of the columnist, in my data Sarid is the target of nearly all *ad-hominem* commenting, although in most cases he is not addressed at the 2nd person but rather mentioned in the 3rd person. Accordingly, the definitions of *ad-rem* and *ad-hominem* commenting are extended here to include comments on the deceased. Together, both types constitute 8% (*n* = 36/450) of the data.

Consider the following example. The columnist praises Sarid, among other things, for his self-determination (Hebrew: *nexishut*), i.e. the courage to swim against the current at the expense of his own interests. To do so, the sub-title quotes Sarid praising himself: “I earned my reputation for my self-determination […] to swim against the current when it is polluted, and readiness to pay the price for it” (Aderet and Lior).

This way, the columnists conform with Aristotle’s affirmation that in the ceremonial genre, “those who praise or censure a man do not consider whether his acts have been expedient or not, but often make it a ground of actual praise that he has neglected his own interest to do what was honorable” (Rhetoric, Book 1, Chapter 3, 1359). Indeed, most commenters accept the attribution of self-determination to Sarid and elaborate on its merits. The commenter in Example (3), on the other hand, does not relate to Sarid directly. Rather, he chooses to question the merit of self-determinacy, by casting doubt on its legitimacy in the political context:

(3) *Is ideological determination an advantage or disadvantage?* As we know, advocates of the extreme right can claim determination as well. And so do Heads of States such as the murderer Pol Pot, or, without comparing, Israeli politicians such as Begin [=Israel 6th PM] and Shamir [=Israel 7th PM]

(Shay, 5.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C. 250, Like 5, Dislike 22)

By rejecting the presupposition that self-determinacy is necessarily a virtue, the commenter challenges the columnist’s moral perception, and it frames the personal praise of the deceased as the grounds for a general debate about values. In this sense, his comment is *ad rem*, and frames the comment/column interaction as deliberative. The number of dislikes (22 vs. 5 likes) indicates the readers’ dissatisfaction with this strategy. This may be interpreted as a rejection of the propositional content of the commenter’s criticism or, more plausibly, as a rejection of the deliberative framing. As will be shown below (Sections 6.2, 6.3), epidictic orientation gets many more likes.

The challenge in the next comment is addressed more specifically at a political issue. The unsigned editorial praises Sarid for his unwillingness to negotiate with the Palestinians and some Arab countries on any territorial arrangements which may compromise Israel’s security:
Sarid had an important role in the relative success of Rabin’s government – to put Israel on the journey towards peace with the Palestinians, the Jordanians and the Syrians – without giving up on security assets. (Editorial)

The commenter, on his part, challenges the definition of “security assets” shared by the columnist and by Sarid, by ironically alluding to the fact that Sarid was ready to give up on the northern part of Israel, Ramat-Hagolan, despite its crucial role in defending Israel in case of war. The dialogic relations between the comment and the columnist’s view are explicitly marked by the commenter’s echoic mention (Sperber and Wilson 1981; Wilson and Sperber 1992) of the columnist’s phrasing, this time – in ironic quotation marks (Weizman 2011):

(4) “Without giving up on security assets?” For example: Ramat Hagolan.

(Alexandre 6.12.15. Editorial, C 29. Like 5, Dislike 3)

This argument, as well as the ironic keying, is echoed in a sub-comment (4a). Here too the criticism is formulated in the ironic keying:

(4a) For example, giving up on Judea and Samaria which provide missile launchers with access to the Ben-Gurion airport”.

(Guy, 6.12.15. Editorial. Like 2, Dislike 6)

Here the commenter ironically criticizes Sarid’s willingness to give up on parts of the area of Judea and Samaria, which he considers as assets for Israel security, due to their location close to the international Ben Gurion Airport and Israel’s metropolitan, Tel-Aviv.

The comment in (5) responds to Gideon Levy’s article, and tackles a similar issue: it criticizes Sarid’s political stance on one of the major debates in Israeli politics – the influence of Jewish settlements in the West Bank of Israel on the Israel/Palestine conflict:

(5) As someone who wants to see an independent Palestinian state, and who sees the settlements as the root of evil, I posit that Sarid caused more harm than benefit to this wish of mine.

(Me’ir Shilo, 12.2.15. Gideon Levy, C. 32. Like 19, Dislike 64)

This comment is particularly interesting, since the commenter represents a view which is central to Levy’s agenda, but which Levy himself refrains from mentioning, probably purporting to enhance affiliation with the deceased and his supporters. The commenter’s attempt to initiate deliberation is not embraced with enthusiasm by his fellow-readers: although he introduces a leftist ideology presumably shared by a large number of Haaretz readers, his bold criticism is mostly rejected (64 dislikes vs. 19 likes), as is the case with Example (3). This seems to indicate readers’ preference for agreement in the context of in-memoriam. More-
over, it might allude to readers’ rejection of the deliberative framing initiated by \textit{ad-rem} commenting. We will get back to this point later.

Comments which challenge Sarid’s ideology may also be read as challenging the columnist’s praising stance, mostly when they speak about Sarid in the third person. As noted above, in some cases, it is hard to determine whether they are \textit{ad-rem} or \textit{ad-hominem}. Example (6) is a case in point:

(6) I quote the column: “Sarid was a Zionist patriot”. For this we need a new Hebrew dictionary.

Definition 1: A patriot is a person who bluntly refuses the decision of the Israel Defense Forces to recruit him to a combat unit.

Definition 2: A Zionist is a Jew who views the establishment of a 22nd Arab state as the major role of Zionism.

With these minor modifications I too agree that Sarid really was a Zionist patriot. (The mouse that roared, 6.12.15. Editorial, C 12. Like 18, Dislike 36.).

Here, the commenter explicitly quotes the columnist’s statement “Sarid was a dedicated Zionist patriot” and elaborates on it, ironically implicating that Sarid is being unduly qualified as one, since he had not served in a combat unit and had supported the establishment of a palestinian state (“22nd arab state”, in his words). Irony here draws on a blatant flouting of Grice’s maxim of quality (Grice 1975, 1978) and the violation of the sincerity condition for the performance of a suggestion (Haverkate 1990): the commenter pretends to suggest a change in the Hebrew lexicon, by so doing implicates that the columnist’s view of Zionist patriotism is at odds with the accepted definition and is therefore blatantly untruthful (Grice 1975, 1978). The alternative definition he insincerely pretends to suggest (Haverkate 1990) obviously contradicts his own view of Zionist patriotism, which reflects a right-wing stance. Thus, the comment may be read both as blaming Sarid for advocating patriotism without fully practicing it (=\textit{ad hominem}), as well as refuting the columnist’s praises (= \textit{ad rem}) and questioning the definition of Zionist patriotism (= \textit{ad rem}).

The examples discussed so far indicate that \textit{ad-rem} comments orient toward a deliberative reading of the dialogue columnist/commenter since in terms of Aristotelian rhetoric, unlike the epidictic, they engage in a debate by raising objections and questioning assumptions, and are consequently non-ceremonial in any way.

The orientation of the \textit{ad-hominem} comments we examined is more complex. On the one hand, expressions of disagreement, be they \textit{ad-rem} or \textit{ad-hominem} are characteristic of the preference for debate, and in this respect \textit{ad-hominem} criticisms are not different from habitual political commenting (Weizman and Dori-Hacohen 2017), which are inherently deliberative.
On the other hand, if we adopt Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca’s (1969) view, their role is somewhat equivocal. As we saw earlier, for them, “the epidictic oratory has significance and importance for argumentation, because it strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds” (Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca 1969: 51). The ad-hominem challenges we saw do not necessarily increase the disposition toward action, but they do support adherence to the general values celebrated by the columnist: when the commenter argues with the columnist on whether Sarid was Zionist, he indirectly accepts the value of Zionism; and when the raises arguments against praising Sarid for his modesty, he indirectly lauds the value of modesty.

6. Enhancing the epidictic

Absence of ad-rem components in HPC has been considered as damaging to the public arena and breaking expectations for free debate (Weizman and Dori-Haco-hen 2017). In this section we examine three commenting sub-strategies which comply with epidictic norms in various ways: eulogistic formulae, emotional expressions and praising comments.

6.1 Eulogistic formulae

Eulogistic formulae are respectful, mostly impersonal expressions, which draw on religious traditions. In the Jewish tradition they are usually pronounced when a deceased is mentioned, for example in obituaries, and are engraved on gravestones and memorials.

The commenting examined here includes the use of a large variety of Hebrew formulae, either independent, i.e. with no addition, or incorporated in other strategies. The following represent typical eulogistic formulae, featuring independently in 33/450 comments (7% of the data) and, combined with other strategies, in 127/450 comments (28%):
(7) “yehi zixro barux” (Blessed be his memory)

(8) “nuax al mishkavxa besahlom” (May your soul rest in peace)

(9) the aramaic “xaval al deavdin ve’einan mishtakxin” (literally: Alas for those who are gone and no more to be found!, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, Folio 111a)

(10) “Barux dayan emet” (Literally: blessed be the true judge)

(11) “Tehi nishmato tsrura bitsror ha’xaim” (Literally: May his soul be bound in the bond of life).

Less formulaic though still ceremonial expressions include, for example:

(12) condolences to his family.

6.2 Emotional expressions

Emotional expressions, like eulogistic formulae, are devoid of propositional content. Unlike eulogistic formulae, however, they vary in form, usually include superlatives or other polar items, are mostly formulated in the first-person singular or plural, sometimes coincide with eulogistic formulae and often addressed directly at the deceased in the second person. They constitute the most frequent strategy in the data (35%, \( n = 158/450 \)), and are usually endorsed by the readers. The comments in (13) (with 19 likes), (14) (with 50 likes) and (15) (with 18 likes) typically represent this preferred category:

(13) I am really sad. Rest in peace, Mr. Sarid.  
    (Galit, 5.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C. 181. Like 19, Dislike 1)

(14) I am crying bitterly. It is a very very sad day.  

(15) Shoc and amazement  
    (Bar, 5.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C. 188. Like 18, Dislike 1)

Against this remarkable variety of formulae, two commenters contest the preference for the eulogistic norm. In (16), the commenter questions its very legitimacy, and is responded to mostly by readers’ disaffiliation (44 dislikes vs.11 likes):

(16) Title: Speak no evil of the sainted dead [Hebrew: [aharey mot kdoshim emor]  
    I heard with great excitement the eulogies of his friends from the left-wing,  
    telling about his love and devotion to the state of Israel, and I can’t but say that  
    the white page tolerates everything […]  
    (Rephael, 5.2.15. Aderet and Lior, C. 207. Like 11, Dislike 44)
In (17), on the other hand, the commenter’s meta-comment implies that he acknowledges the legitimacy of the norm in principle, but does not support its universality: in this specific case he feels obliged to suspend it through an ad-rem criticism of Sarid. Readers’ responses (34 likes vs. 46 dislikes) seem to indicate that specific criticism is not rejected as long as the norm is accepted:

(17) True, “do not speak ill of the dead”, but Sarid misled the public at the time of the Oslo accord. (Historian, 5.12.15. Levy, C. 62. Like 34, Dislike 46)

Eulogistic formulae and emotional expressions correspond to a large extent, though not fully, with the Aristotelian notion of the epidictic. Both types are ceremonial, dramatic and lack any practical consequences. Additionally, emotional expressions imply support and affinity with the deceased, and thus correspond also with Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca’s (1969) notion of the epidictic. On the other hand, eulogistic formulae as well as expressions of emotions do not provide explicit praises or propositional grounds for their feelings, and therefore do not relate to values, except indirectly through their affinity with the deceased. In this respect, they differ fundamentally from praising comments, to be discussed in the next section.

6.3 Praising comments

Praising comments are explicitly laudatory. Through them, the commenter joins the columnist in celebrating the deceased’s qualities. Unlike supportive comments in HPC, which address the columnist’s argumentation or ethos (Weizman and Dori-Hacohen 2017), praising comments in my data address the ethos of a third party, i.e. the deceased, and by praising him indirectly support the journalist’s laudatory stance. Like emotional expressions (6.2), they may include emotional, somewhat dramatic components. Unlike emotional expressions, they are not devoid of ad-rem components, but rather provide the grounds for praises in varying degree of specificity. They are the second most preferred strategy (28%, \( n = 128/450 \)), and usually attract readers’ alignment through their Likes.

Consider the comments in the next two examples:

(18) So sad, a precious, clever and eloquent person. (Yaniv, 4.12.15. Lior and Aderet C 1., Like 4, Dislike 1)

(19) Yossi, you were a good person. Human and a great Zionist. We will miss you. (Elodie 6.12.15. Editorial, C 18. Like 23, Dislike 4)

Here, each comment contains a triad of evaluations\(^3\) in the form of a crescendo, starting with a relatively impressionistic appreciation at the personal level (“precious[…] person”, 18; “good person”, 19), and escalating to the public sphere, as
journalist (“eloquent”, 18) and ideologist (“great Zionist”, 19). The emotional effect of (19) is further construed by addressing the deceased in the 2nd person (“you were”, “we will miss you”).

The comments in (20), (21) are more specific, highlighting Sarid’s well-known, exceptional command of the Hebrew language:

(20) A sad day to Israeli democracy, to the Hebrew language. It’s a shame he did not give us a few more years.

    (Oron, 5.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C 150. Like 28, Dislike 2)

(21) His magnificent Hebrew will be greatly missed.,

    (Yig’al, 4.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C. 85. Like 3, Dislike 0)

In (22), an emotional keying is added through the use of the present tense:

(22) Yossi Sarid uses normative, flawless and witty Hebrew. He is decent and has never taken a bribe.

    (Decency, 6.12.15. Editorial, C 20. Like 11, Dislike 3)

Here, Sarid’s rhetorical merits are specified in greater detail than in Example (21) (“normative, flawless and witty”, and compare with the use of triads in Example (18), (19) , and are accompanied by a moral judgement (“decent”). The statement “has never taken a bribe” possibly alludes to his moral stature vis-à-vis his fellow politicians. The signature (“decency”) probably aims to add an additional moral touch to the argumentation.

Sarid’s linguistic artistry attracted the attention of commenters on his weekly column also during his lifetime. However, alongside with enthusiastic comments, his style earned him harsh criticisms, mostly for his preference for figures of speech and high register at the account of readability (23), communicative value (24) and seriousness (25):

(23) What did you say? Even academic education wouldn’t help understand what you mean.

     (4.11.11)

(24) The title of this column should be: the complete guide for the graphomaniac – how to write a lot without saying anything.

     (4.5.12)

(25) Covering up for unsound argumentation by word-plays? An unworthy trick.

     (Revital Goldfish. 3.6.12)

No such challenges were found in the comments on the three in-memoriam articles studied here.

3. Roeh (1982) points to the use of triads, among other means, to construct subjectivity through poetic effect within the news bulletin.

4. My thanks go to Hila Atkin for these examples.
The commenter in Example (26) praises Sarid's civil engagement, specifically referring to his decision to spend 3 years in the peripheral town of Kiryat Shmona, where he acted as a high-school teacher while being also Member of Parliament:

(26) A volunteer in the educational system when he taught in Kiryat Shmona. Who else did anything like it? (teacher, 5.12. Gideon Levy C5. Like 60, Dislike 6)

As in Example (22), here too the comparison enhances Sarid's uniqueness, but this time it is introduced explicitly (“who else did anything like it?”). This comment is endorsed by a rather exceptional number of readers (60 likes vs. 6 dislikes):

The comment in (27) below is explicitly framed as a eulogy:

(27) In memory of Sarid
For me Sarid represented most of my views in remarkable Hebrew and expressed it in a way I never would have; but I agreed with every word. I will miss you a lot. These last days I listened to your program in Galeya Tsahal [on the radio] and I never skipped it in order to listen to a sane voice.

(Ra'aya Leiton, 6.12.15. Editorial, C. 23. Like 22, Dislike 4)

Here, the commenter expresses her ideological affinity with Sarid (“I agreed with every word”) and praises him specifically for his style (“remarkable Hebrew”) and moral merit (“a sane voice”). She further frames her comment as a eulogy through the title (“in memory of Sarid”), the emotional keying embedded in the use of a second-person address (“your program”) and an emotional farewell (“I will miss you a lot”). By so doing, she joins the journalist on his eulogistic orientation.

This preference for unconditional praising is contested once, through ironic criticism indirectly addressed at its practitioners:

(28) If you must be a leader, you had better be in the left-wing, the cult of personality there is more valuable.

(Idolator. l, 5.2.15. Aderet and Lior, C.345. Like Ø, Dislike 2)

As we saw, the praising effect of the comments accounted for in this section is enhanced through various combinations of discourse patterns, including emotional lexicon, addressing the deceased in the 2nd person, generalizing the praise through the use of the present tense, poetic triads of adjectives, and others.

Unlike emotional expressions (6.2), fully praising comments do provide some support for their enthusiasm, which may expose them to some deliberation, and at the same time enhances their laudatory effect, As a result, they mostly comply with the norm of “do not speak ill of the dead”, and enhance the epidictic effects of the article.
7. Between deliberation and epidictic: The mixed type

Whereas commenting types have so far been analyzed as representing either alignment or dis-alignment with the deceased, the data exhibits also mixed comments: the commenter expresses her appreciation for Sarid’s personality while dissociating herself in general terms from his ideological stance and political beliefs. Mixed comments are the least frequent strategy (6%, \( n = 29/450 \)), and they often include also eulogistic formulae.

Let us examine the comment in (29):

(29) An honest man, true to himself. Far removed from my own way of thinking, but this has never affected my appreciation for him as a person and statesman. Blessed be his memory. (Shira, 4.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C7. Like 2, Dislike 1).

The commenter dissociates herself from Sarid’s ideology without specifying the nature of this disagreement (“Far removed from my own way of thinking”), praises his integrity (“an honest man, true to himself”) and concludes with an expression of affinity with him on both personal and public aspects (“my appreciation for him as a person and statesman”). Unlike \textit{ad-rem} and \textit{ad-hominem} arguments (Section 5), the commenter does not justify her appreciation or her reservations, and there is no reference to specific actions or views of the deceased. This might account for readers’ minimal interest in the comment, as indicated by the remarkably small number of clicks (2 likes, 1 dislike).

Unlike the above, in the next two examples praises are somewhat more specific, while the criticism remains vague:

(30) The last great left-wing Zionists, except for Peres [Israel 9th president]. Excellent Hebrew, witty and sharp. I did not agree with him in any way, but I have never doubted his loyalty to the Zionist idea and his good intentions. (Alex from the Carmel, 4.12.15. Aderet and Lior, C 32. Like 2, Dislike 0)

(31) Witty and painful articles, which were fascinating although they annoyed me since I am well aware of the fucked-up political and social policy here. Blessed be his memory. (Ecco, 4.12.15, Aderet and Lior, C 30. Like 5, Dislike 1)

As can be seen, mixed comments express some general, unspecified reservations (“I did not agree with him in any way”, 30, “[his] articles […] annoyed me”, 31), whereas the deceased’s merits are stated in varying degrees of specificity, ranging from the general (e.g. “The last great left-wing Zionists, except for Peres”, 30), through the intermediate (“An honest man, true to himself”, 29), to the specific (“Excellent Hebrew, witty and sharp”, 30). They often include also a eulogistic formula (“Blessed be his memory”, Hebrew: yehi zixro barux, 29, 31), and attract lit-
tle interest by other readers, as manifest in the small number of likes and dislikes (total 3 for 27, 2 for 31, 6 for 32).

Through the mixed type, commenters attend both to the deliberative and the epidictic aspects of the situation. However, orientation toward the epidictic is more pronounced, since the vagueness of criticism blurs the deliberative, and the attendance to merits and values somewhat enhances the epidictic, as do the euoligistic formulae, when added.

8. Concluding remarks

Starting with the notion of online commenting as follow-ups which re-contextualize the initiating columns they respond to, I chose to examine the role of commenting in the context of in-memoriam discourse. The study borrows the basic notions of deliberative and epidictic genres from classical rhetoric and accommodates them to a pragmatic study of online interaction between commenters and columnists. In the view presented here, the mixed character of the initiating columns, which combine deliberative and epidictic features, encourages the commenters to choose between different readings of the columns in context, and exercise their discursive power in re-contextualizing the commenting/column interaction. The in-memoriam arena is specifically suitable for this examination, since it allows commenters to juggle with deliberative and epidictic norms. The study of commenting related to the death of Yossi Sarid was particularly stimulating for two main reasons: (1) In addition to being a leading public figure, Sarid had been a columnist in a daily published in print and online, which made it possible to study commenting in his home journal; and (2) his columns used to trigger heated confrontational debates in his life-time, which made commenters’ discursive preferences after his death even more intriguing.

The analysis of 450 comments on three articles published immediately following Sarid’s death suggests that through strategy selection commenters mostly orient towards an epidictic reading of the columns, without neglecting the deliberative altogether.

1. The most frequent strategy (35%) is that of emotional expressions. Highly dramatic and devoid of ad-rem references to the column or to the context, emotional expressions completely lack any deliberative components, or, in Aristotelian terms, they bear no consequences. Although they do not relate to values, as Aristotelian epidictic oratory would, they imply affinity with the deceased, and thus correspond with Perelman and Olbrecht-Tyteca's (1969)
notion of the epidictic. Emotional comments thus orient towards the epidictic and have no bearings on the deliberative features of the column.

2. The second frequent strategy (28%) is the use of unreserved praising. Praising comments fully comply with the norm of “do not speak ill of the dead”. In them, the praising effect is enhanced through various combinations of discourse patterns, including emotional lexicon, triads of adjectives, addressing the deceased in the 2nd person, generalizing the praise through the use of the present tense, and others. They usually carry deliberative components to support their enthusiasm, but these components further enhance their laudatory effect and their adherence to values and merits. Praising comments thus fully comply with the epidictic.

3. Ad-rem and ad-hominem responses represent 8% of the data. Unlike the strategies mentioned so far, they orient mostly to the deliberative aspects of the initiating articles. Ad-rem comments typically do so by raising objections and questioning assumptions, and are consequently non-ceremonial in any way, Ad-hominem comments do so through the expression of disagreement, but at the same time may orient to the epidictic through affiliation with the values lauded in the column.

4. Eulogistic formulae resonate traditional after-death norms. In a way, they re-contextualize the interaction as hors-media. They are devoid of any deliberative elements and are fully epidictic. Comments are formulated as eulogistic formulae in 7% of the overall commenting, but they are further combined with other strategies in additional 21% of the comments.

5. Mixed responses attend both to the deliberative and the epidictic aspects of the situation through the expression of unspecified reservations and more specific laudations. In them, the vagueness of criticism blurs the deliberative, and the praising of values enhances the epidictic.

The analysis suggests that in the data discussed here, commenters manifest mostly preference for the epidictic. By so doing, they depart from norms of deliberation manifest in habitual political commenting. On a more general level, the analysis supports the initial claim, namely that by choosing between different readings of the initiating columns and following-up on them, commenters have the discursive power to shape and re-shape the interaction through preferred commenting strategies.
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