The Role of Contact in the crystallization of Agent marking in passive constructions in Modern Hebrew

This paper traces the formation process of fixed means to specify the agent of passive verbs in Modern Hebrew, focusing on the role of the contact languages in the process. The analysis is based on the examination of a vast morphologically-parsed textual corpus of journalistic texts from the seminal period of modernization (1870s-1930s).

The morphological means to form passive verbs existed already in ancient Hebrew, but like in other Semitic languages, the function of the passive was intrinsically impersonal (Rabin 1999). Therefore, passive verbs were rarely accompanied by specified agents (Notarius 2013). Modern Hebrew, by contrast, employs the inherited verbal patterns as a productive structural mechanism for passive formation. The agent may be either left unspecified or explicitly mentioned by the adverbial phrase *ʕal yede* (or less often: *bi-yede*) 'by' (literally: 'on/in the hands of'), originally an instrumental (Halevy 2020).

The wide distribution of passive constructions is a marker of contemporary journalistic style (Taube 2013). Our analysis of early journalistic texts indicated an initial vacillation between various means of expression, as writers searched for suitable linguistic means to explicitly specify the agent, a feature extant in their native European contact languages. In particular, agent-marking strategies that were compatible with those used in Yiddish and Russian competed with each other. However, by 1930, the field had become almost totally uniform, as one of these elements (ʕal yede) gained dominancy.

From the historical viewpoint, the change in the status of ʕal yede immediately followed the spread of Hebrew speech. In the absence of internal factors that may have led to the preference of ʕal yede over its alternatives, sociolinguistic factors seem to have played a major role. In the emerging speech community, language ideology strongly objected to Yiddish, and at the same time Russian influence on journalistic activity in Hebrew increased. Consequently, the employment of the same strategy both for instrument and agent marking – similarly to Russian – prevailed (compare Nath 2009). The contact with English following the end of World War I further consolidated this initial selection, as English as well uses the same element both for instrument and agent.

The study traces the course of typological change that accompanied the emergence of Modern Hebrew, and highlights the relative share of the various factors involved in this significant structural change.

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