

Definiteness in standard and colloquial Hebrew

Edit Doron & Irit Meir

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem & The University of Haifa

edit@vms.huji.ac.il & imeir@univ.haifa.ac.il

The main claim of the paper is that the Hebrew definite determiner *ha-* is undergoing a morphological change, from a word level affix to a phrase level clitic. We attribute this change to a conceptual shift in the interpretation of nouns, from a relational interpretation to a sortal interpretation.

Standard Hebrew:

ha- is a prefix to lexical nouns (also adjectives etc). Prefixation by *ha-* yields a noun in the so called *emphatic state*. This is part of the Central Semitic nominal inflection system as described by traditional semiticists (e.g. Buxtorf 1651), whereby each basic noun is inflected for three separate states: construct state (CS), e.g. *simlat*; absolute state (AS): *simla*; emphatic state (ES): *ha-simla*. Since CS and ES are in contrast, it is obvious why *ha-* is never prefixed to CS, a question that has often been raised in the literature.

We argue that CS is the unmarked state, and we adopt Heller's 2002 interpretation of CS as an $\langle e, e \rangle$ function. In other words, the basic meaning of nouns is *relational* rather than *sortal*, in the terminology of e.g. Löbner 1985. We derive the sortal meaning of AS and the definite meaning of ES from the meaning of CS. Abstracting away from kinds, and focusing on ordinary objects, we propose:

1. *simlat* $\sim \lambda x[x\text{'s gown}]$
2. *simla* $\sim \lambda y \exists x[y \text{ is } x\text{'s gown}]$
3. *ha-simla* $\sim \lambda y \exists x[y \text{ is } x\text{'s gown}]$

Colloquial Hebrew:

ha- has become a phrasal clitic which attaches to maximal projections (X^{\max} clitic, in Condoravdi & Kiparsky's 2002 terms), not to basic lexical items. In the following attested examples, *ha-*[_{NP} *me'at N*] replaces the standard *meat ha-N*, *ha-*[_{AP} *yoter/me'od A*] replaces the standard *ha-A yoter/me'od*, *ha-*[_N *he'arat šulayim*] replaces the standard *he'arat ha-šulayim*:

- 4.a im anaxnu rocim lehaxzir le viki knafo et ha-me'at kavod še od notar la
if we want to-return to V. K. ACC the-little dignity that still left her
'If we want to give Vicky Knafo back the little dignity that was still left to her...' (radio interview, Reshet bet, 10.7.2003)
- b ze exad ha-sratim ha-yoter mera'anenim šel ha-tqufa ha-axrona
this one the-movies the-more refreshing of the period the-last
'This is one of the more refreshing movies of the last period.' (same)
- c simu lev l-a-he'arat šulayim ha-me'od me'anyenet
put heart to-the-note margins the-very interesting
'Notice the very interesting footnote.' (lecture, Oranim College, 2.2.2002)

We view this change as part of the loss in colloquial Hebrew of the inflectional state system. We suspect that the trigger for the change is the reinterpretation of most nouns as being sortal rather than relational. The possessive relation is no longer encoded in the basic meaning of nouns, as can be detected by the unacceptability of CS where the relation is possessive:

5. ?? kelev ha-šaxen ?? mexonit ha-more
 dog:CS the-neighbour car:CS the-teacher
 ‘the neighbour’s dog’ ‘the teacher’s car’

The CS is used only for nouns which are basically relational:

6. hatxalat ha-ši’ur malkat anglia
 beginning:CS the-class queen:CS England
 ‘the beginning of the class’ ‘the queen of England’

For the possessive relation, a *šel*-phrase is preferred:

7. ha-kelev šel ha-šaxen ha-mexonit šel ha-more
 the-dog of the-neighbour the-car of the-teacher
 ‘the neighbour’s dog’ ‘the teacher’s car’

As a result, in the case of definite phrases such as in (7), it is easy to reanalyse the *ha-* which is prefixed to the noun as a clitic prefixed to the entire phrase. This causes the reanalysis of the emphatic state as an absolute state preceded by a determiner. The outcome is the collapse of the whole inflectional state system, since the emphatic state disappears together with the construct state, and only the absolute state of the noun remains (a similar process occurred about fifteen hundred years ago in the transition from Aramaic to Syriac).

In compounds, on the other hand, CS is preserved (as was the case in Syriac as well). This holds both for transparent compounds, e.g. *ugat tapuxim* ‘apple pie’, and for opaque compounds of the type discussed by Borer 1989, e.g. *gan xayot* ‘zoo’. CS is also preserved with numerals and other noun-like determiners, which, following Danon’s 1998 analysis for standard Hebrew, are either heads of DP (in definite phrases) or specifiers (in indefinite phrases). In colloquial Hebrew, the standard definite DPs are preserved, as in (8a), but in addition, another definite form is now available: the *ha-* prefixed indefinite NP, as in (8b), (cf. (4a)):

- 8.a [DP_D šlošet] ha-[NP_{yeladim}] b ha- [NP [QPšloša] yeladim]
 three:CS the-children the three children
 both: ‘the three children’

We argue that these forms coexist in colloquial Hebrew since they differ in meaning in some environments. One of the cases we discuss is:

- 9.a patarti yoter mi- šlošet ha-targilim še- at patart
 I-solved more than three:CS the-exercises that you solved
- b patarti yoter mi- ha-šloša targilim še at patart
 I-solved more than the-three exercises that you solved

While (9a) means that you solved three exercises and I solved the same ones and more, (9b) means that you solved three exercises and I solved at least four. We show why (9b) but not (9a) contains an amount relative (Carlson 1977, Grosu and Landman 1998).