

Free Relative Clauses¹

Free relative clauses (FRs) are clauses which do not modify an overt head (1), unlike regular relative clauses (2). In Modern Hebrew (MH) FRs are typically introduced by the complementizer *še-* preceded by an interrogative pronoun occupying the specifier position of the complementizer.²

This paper focuses on FRs which denote inanimate object. In this position, the accusative marker *ʔet* is optional (3). There are two main complementizers in FRs found in different periods of Hebrew: *ʔašer* and *še-* (both: ‘that’) (4-5)

(1) מה שקנית יפה.

ma *še-*kanit yafe
what **that**-you.bought beautiful
What you bought is beautiful.

(2) החולצה שקנית יפה.

ha-ḥulca *še-*kanit yafa
the-shirt **that**-you.bought beautiful
The shirt that you bought is beautiful.

(3) אהבתי (את) מה שקנית.

ʔahavti (*ʔet*) **ma** *še-*kanit
I.loved (ACC) **what that**-you.bought
I loved what you bought.

(4) ...הוא מהר לתקן את אשר עות.

hu miher letaken ʔet *ʔašer* ʕivet
he hurried to.fix ACC **that** he.distorted
He was quick to fix what he had distorted. (*Ha-Zfira*, August 23, 1914)

(5) הממשלה תעשה מה שתחפוץ מבלי לשאול עוד את פי העם.

ha-memšala taʕase ma *še-*taḥpoc mibli lišʔol ʕod
the-government will.do what **that**-will.want without to.ask more
ʔet pi ha-ʕam
ACC mouth.CS the-people

The government will do what it pleases without asking the people. (*Ha-Magid*, January 18, 1882)

Two processes affected Modern Hebrew FRs constructions:

- a. *ʔašer* → *še-*: The gradual replacement of the Biblical complementizer *ʔašer* with the Mishnaic complementizer *še-*:
- b. *ma+še-* → *ʔet ma+še-*: The growing trend of using *ʔet* before *ma+še-* FRs:

¹ Based on Bar-Ziv Levy & Agranovsky (2016).

² We assume that FRs headed by *še-* have the structure argued for by Caponigro (2002), with the *wh*-phrase in the specifier position of the FR.

FRs in periods predating MH

MH has inherited various alternatives for expressing FRs from the previous stages of the language. In Biblical Hebrew (BH), FRs generally appear with the complementizer *ʔašer*, usually marked with the accusative marker *ʔet*, never with the interrogative *ma* (6-7). *ʔet+ʔašer* FRs express in BH both animate and inanimate complement (8). *še* is rare in BH in general and specifically in FRs, and occurs only in the later books.

(6) שָׁמֹר לְךָ אֶת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם
 šəmor ləḵā 'ēṭ 'āšer 'ānōḵī məšawwəḵā ha-yyōm
 keep to.you ACC **that** I command.you today
 Mark well what I command you this day (Exodus 34:11) (NJPS)

(7) וַיְהִי אָמַר מְכַסֶּה אֲנִי מֵאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה
 wa-YHWH 'āmār məḵasse 'ānī mē-'abrāhām 'āšer 'ānī 'ōše
 and-GOD said hide I from-Abraham **that** I doing
 Now the Lord had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do" (Genesis 18:17) (NJPS)

(8) כִּי לֹא יִנְקֶה יְהוָה אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא אֶת שְׁמוֹ לְשׁוֹן
 kī lō yənakke YHWH 'ēṭ 'āšer yiśšā 'ēṭ šmō laššāw
 for not will.clear GOD ACC **that** utter ACC his.name in.vain
 For the Lord will not clear one who swears falsely by his name. (Exodus 20:6) (NJPS)

In Rabbinic Hebrew *ʔašer* FRs are replaced by *ma+še-* FRs, usually without the accusative marker *ʔet* (9). *ʔet+ma+še-* appears in the Mishnah only twice both in one sentence (Nega'im 13, 10)

(9) עָשִׂינוּ מַה שֶׁגִּזַּרְתָּ עָלֵינוּ, אַף אַתָּה עָשָׂה עִימָנוּ מַה שֶׁהִבְטַחְתָּנוּ
 'āšīnū **ma** še-gāzartā 'ālēnū 'ap 'attā 'āšē **ma** še-hiḇtaḥtānū
 we.did **what that**-you.decreed on.us also you do **what that**-you.promised.us
 We have done what thou hast decreed concerning us: do thou also what thou hast promised to us. (Mishnah, Maaser Sheni 5:13) (Danby 1933)

Medieval Hebrew has direct object FRs with both complementizers. Late Rabbinic Hebrew uses both complementizers as well, though there is a preference for *še-*.

FRs in MH

a. The Gradual Replacement of *ʔašer* with *še-*

At the beginning of the Revival Period, a clear preference for *ʔašer* over *še-* is observed (Figure 1).

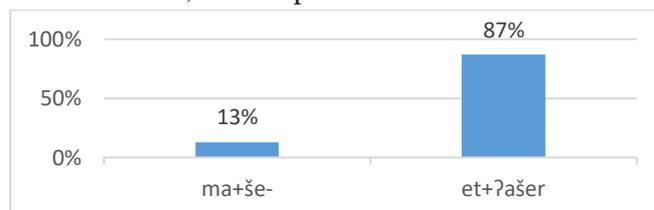


FIGURE 1: *ʔet+ʔašer* vs. *ma+še-* in FRs in object position (inanimate) in 1882 newspapers.³

³ Here and in the other figures according to Historical Jewish Press.

In early MH, as in BH, *ʔašer* usually appears with *ʔet* (10). *še-* is preceded by *ma*, as in the classical texts (11).

(10) תתקנו את אשר קלקלתם.
 tetaknu **ʔet ʔašer** kilkaltem
 you.will.fix ACC **that** you.muffed
 Fix what you've done wrong. (*Maḥzikey ha-dat*, 26.09.1882)

(11) הממשלה תעשה מה שתחפוץ מבלי לשאול עוד את פי העם.
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 the-government will.do what **that-will.want** without to.ask more
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Throughout the development of MH, there has been a significant trend of replacing *ʔašer* with *še-*. In contemporary Hebrew, *ʔašer* is largely confined to higher-register texts (Figure 2).

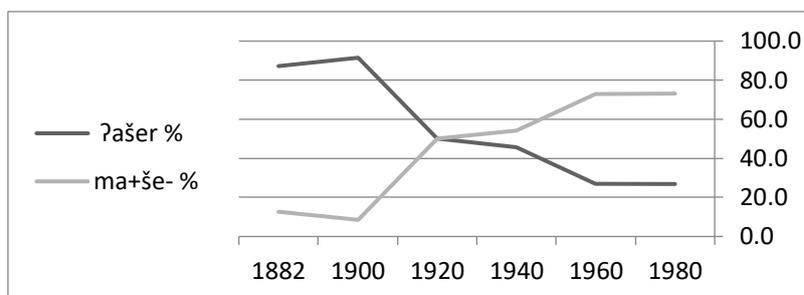


FIGURE 2: *ʔašer* vs. *ma+še-* in FRs from 1882 to 1980 newspapers

The preference for the Biblical complementizer in the Revival Period is probably due to the particular reverence felt toward BH during this period.

Possible explanations for the tendency to later minimize the use of *ʔašer* and expand the use of *še-* in FRs are:

- The general tendency to replace *ʔašer* with *še-* throughout the development of MH.
- The influence of the main languages MH was in contact with. The period in which the transition occurred was characterized by the relatively strong influence of Yiddish and Russian. These two languages employ the interrogative pronoun ‘*what*’ in FRs.
- *še-* allows a distinction between animate and inanimate complement by usage of interrogative pronoun (*mi* ‘who’ vs. *ma* ‘what’), whereas *ʔašer* refers to both. This could also be an indirect influence of Yiddish and Russian, which has this distinction in FRs.

b. The Growing Trend of Using *ʔet* before *ma+še-* FRs

In the Revival Period, as in previous stages, *ma+še-* FRs in object position were rarely preceded by the accusative marker *ʔet*, consistently with the general tendency to downplay *ʔet* in that period. Over the years, *ʔet* became increasingly common in these clauses as part of a general tendency of Modern Hebrew to become more consistent in marking definite direct objects with *ʔet* (Reshef 2004:180) (Figure 3).

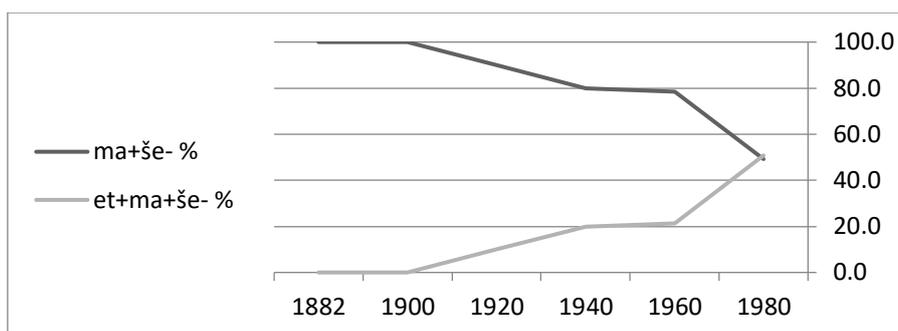


FIGURE 3: *ma+še-* vs. *ʔet+ma+še-* in FRs in object position from 1882 to 1980 newspapers.

In contemporary Hebrew, *ma+še-* FRs in object position appear with or without *ʔet*. One possible explanation is that the process whereby *ʔet* is becoming an obligatory marker of *ma+še-* FRs is not yet complete. However, there seems to be a subtle distinction between *ma+še-* clauses with and without *ʔet*. It appears that the clauses without *ʔet* can be interpreted in two ways: as definite or universal, whereas clauses with *ʔet* are interpreted as definite. For example, the sentence without *ʔet* allows two readings: a. I did whatever he said (universal) (12); b. I did a particular thing he said (definite). In the sentence with *ʔet*, the definite reading is the only one (13).⁴

(12) עשיתי מה שהוא אמר.
 ʕasiti **ma** ʃe-hu ʔamar
 I.did **what that**-he said
 I did **what/whatever** he said.

(13) עשיתי את מה שהוא אמר.
 ʕasiti **ʔet ma** ʃe-hu ʔamar
 I.did ACC **what that**-he said
 I did **what** he said.

The distinction between FRs with and without *ʔet* may be due to the influence of Yiddish and perhaps also other contact languages, such as Polish (Citko 2004).

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with two processes that FRs underwent in MH. The first is the gradual replacement of the biblical complementizer *ʔašer*, which was dominant in the Revival Period, with the Mishnaic complementizer *še-*, which ultimately became the more prevalent form. The second is a process whereby *ma+še-* FRs in direct object position increasingly appear with the accusative marker *ʔet*. We pointed out that the initial preference for the Biblical complementizer *ʔašer* over the Mishnaic complementizer *še-* during the Revival Period may be due to the great influence of Biblical Hebrew in that period, in contrast to the lesser influence of Rabbinic Hebrew. As for the gradual replacement of *ʔašer* with *še-*, we suggested two possible causes. First, it may be seen as a part of the general process of expanding the use of *še-* at the expense of *ʔašer* in MH. Since in the Classical Hebrew sources the complementizer *še-* is preceded by *ma* in FRs, the same happens in MH as well. Another possible factor is the influence of Russian and Yiddish, in which FRs appear with an interrogative pronoun

⁴ We can compare *ma+še-* FRs to questions introduced by *ma* ‘what,’ which display a similar distinction (Danon 2008:262)

meaning ‘what.’ Since Hebrew *ma* comes only with *še-* and not with *ʔašer*, this may have contributed to the replacement of the latter with the former. In present-day Hebrew, both *ʔašer* and *še-* are in use, with *še-* as the dominant complementizer and *ʔašer* as a more marginal variant characteristic of high-register texts.

The absence of *ʔet* before *ma+še-* FRs in the Revival Period may be due to the tendency to emulate the language of the Classical Hebrew sources which typically did not insert the accusative marker *ʔet* before FRs in object position. The later insertion of *ʔet* in these clauses may be part of a general tendency of MH to consistently mark definite direct objects with *ʔet*. In present-day Hebrew, *ma+še-* FRs in direct object position can appear either with or without *ʔet*. We assume that there is a semantic-pragmatic distinction between the two alternatives. The distinction is subtle, but it seems that the clause without *ʔet* allows two readings—definite and universal—whereas the clause with *ʔet* has only the definite reading. The distinction may have emerged under the influence of Yiddish and Polish, which exhibit a similar phenomenon.

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