

Research Project: EMODHEBREW

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The superlative

Modern Hebrew has a tripartite paradigm for degree comparison consisting of the positive adjective, the comparative, and the superlative. Such a paradigm did not exist in Classical Hebrew. The paper traces the emergence of the modern paradigm in Modern Hebrew and evaluates the role of contact languages in the process.

Modern Hebrew expresses degree comparison of adjectives, illustrated in (1) and (2), through different attachments of modifiers of the adjective:

	<u>Positive</u> 'big'	<u>Comparative</u> 'bigger'	<u>Superlative</u> 'biggest'
(1)	<i>gadol</i> big	<i>gadol yoter</i> big more	<i>ha-gadol beyoter</i> the-big most
(2)	<i>gadol</i> big	<i>yoter gadol</i> more big	<i>haxi gadol</i> most big

Paradigm (1) is used more in formal style, whereas paradigm (2) is the unmarked option used in speech and casual writing (Shatil 2014; Glinert 1989, 2013). Structurally, the modifier *beyoter* is restricted to adjectives while *haxi* may be used with both adjectives and adverbs.

Classical Hebrew

In Classical Hebrew there is no variation in the expression of the adjective in the different degree comparison constructions. Instead, it is the comparison class which is expressed differently in comparative and superlative constructions. Consequently, the classical constructions require explicit reference to the comparison class, and are hence less flexible than the corresponding modern ones. This is probably the reason for their having practically fallen into disuse. The classical superlative construction is illustrated below:

(3) Biblical Hebrew

קטן בְּנָיו
qəṭōn bānāw
small(of).M.CS sons.his
'his youngest son' (2 Chr. 21:17)

(4) Rabbinic Hebrew

קטנה שבבנות

qeṭanna *šeb-b-a-banot*
 small.F.S that-in-the-girls
 ‘the smallest of the girls’ (Mishna, Shabbat 8:4)

Medieval Hebrew

The use of degree modification to express the superlative first emerged in Hebrew in the medieval period and is due to contact with Arabic and dialects of Latin. The superlative was derived by attaching the definite article to the comparative (Goshen-Gottstein 2006):

(5) *mešubaḥ* *yoter mešubaḥ* *ha-yoter mešubaḥ*
 fine more fine the-more fine
 ‘of high quality’ ‘of higher quality’ of highest quality’

This construction is attributed to medieval Hebrew translators’ attempts to render the superlative in Hebrew following the paradigm found in the contact languages. Arabic uses the definite article as one of several strategies to form the superlative. In dialects of Latin origin, this is the default option (e.g., French *grand—plus grand—le plus grand*). There are two factors explaining the contact induced emergence of adjective degree words in medieval Hebrew: (a) The contact languages raised the need for a specific, fixed construction to express the superlative, and (b) the employment of the definite article to do so contributed to writers’ preference to use construction (5) over its classical alternatives.

Modern Hebrew

The modern expression of the superlative with the modifiers *beyoter* and *haxi* is relatively new. The dominant construction of the superlative in the first phases of Modern Hebrew was inherited from the medieval (5).

(6) גירוש היהודים היותר גדול בדברי הימים, הלא הוא גירושם הנורא מארץ ספרד
geruṣ *ha-yehudim* ***ha-yoter*** ***gadol*** *be-divrey.ha.yamim*
 expulsion.CS the-Jews the-more big in-history
halo *hu* *geruṣam* *ha-nora* *me-ʔerec* *sefarad*
 surely is their.expulsion the-terrible from-land.CS Spain
 ‘**the biggest expulsion** of Jews in history, namely their tremendous expulsion from Spain’ [Sokolov 1882]

However, the medieval (5) construction was preplaced by the (1) and (2) constructions in the early decades of the 20th century. Both forms *beyoter* (originally: ‘very, a lot’) and *haxi* (originally: ‘indeed’) were inherited into Modern Hebrew from previous linguistic layers. Originally used as reinforcing elements denoting “high degree”, they were reinterpreted in Modern Hebrew as superlatives denoting “highest degree”.

beyoter

The form *beyoter* began to emerge as a superlative marker in a gradual process beginning in the late 18th century. *beyoter* originates in Rabbinic Hebrew where it was used as a degree word “a lot” – “בניך יפין ביותר” *banaix yafin beyoter* (sons.yours handsome very) (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 20:2) – used extensively in both indefinite and definite constructions (Kaddari 1991).

- (7) בעמקים האויר הוא עב ביותר ולא טוב לנשימה, ועל ההרים הרמים ביותר שם האויר דק יותר
ba-šamakim ha-ḡavir hu šav beyoter ve-lo tov li-nešima
in.the-valleys the-air is dense very and- good for-breathing
not
ve-šal he-harim ha-ramim beyoter šam ha-ḡavir dak meḡod
and-on the-mountains the-high very there the-air thin very
‘In the valleys the air is **very dense** and it is not good for breathing, and on **the very high mountains**—there the air is very thin.’
(Pinhas Eliyahu Hurvits, *The Book of the Covenant*, 1797)

The acquisition of a superlative meaning by the definite construction is quite natural (cf. Bobaljik 2012), and in fact many contexts in which it occurs are ambiguous and tolerate both an interpretation of ‘high degree’ and ‘highest degree’. Use of the definite construction acquired an unambiguous superlative function around the late 18th century.

- (8) הפשטן ביותר מכל תופשי התורה הוא רש"י ז"ל
ha-paštan beyoter mi-kol tofsey ha-tora hu raši z.l.
the literalist most from-all keepers.CS the-Torah is Rashi
‘The **most inclined toward pešaṭ** among the interpreters of the Torah is Rashi, blessed be his memory’.
(Pinhas Eliyahu Hurvits, *The Book of the Covenant*, 1797)

At the onset of the revival period the use of *beyoter* as a superlative marker within construction (1) is attested fairly regularly, alongside the medieval construction, an example is shown in (9):

- (9) הלא זהו שירו היותר חריף של הינה, שחוקו המר והנמהר ביותר
halo zehu širo ha-yoter harif šel haine,
indeed this.is his.poem the-most sharp of Heine
šhoko ha-mar ve-ha-nimhar beyoter
his.song the-bitter and-the-hasty most
‘This is indeed Heine’s **sharpest poem**, his **most bitter song**.’
(Haim Nahman Bialik, *The Hebrew Book*, 1913)

Yet, the distribution of construction (1) with *beyoter* was restricted until the 1930s with the medieval construction (5) remaining statistically more frequent until the rise of construction (2) with *haxi*.

haxi

The form *haxi* originates in Biblical Hebrew, primarily as an interrogative element in one context and, in another context, it is traditionally interpreted as a reinforcing element. מן השלשה הכי נכבד *min ha-šloša haxi nixbad* (2 Sam. 23:19), literally, *of the three indeed important*. The reinforcing function was used in both medieval and early modern texts (Berggün 1981).

The employment of *haxi* as a superlative, first attested in the work of Mendele Mokher Sefarim (1836–1917), was initially exclusive to the quotation of the Biblical expressions. The widespread use of *haxi* with a variety of adjectives is recorded only from the first decade of the 20th century on, alongside the other superlative constructions, e.g.:

- (10) על פי החוק של ההתנגדות הכי-פחותה
ʕal.pi *ha-ħok* *šel* *ha-hitnagdut* *haxi* *peħuta*
according.to the-law of the-resistance most meager
‘According to the law of the least strong resistance’
(Yosef Haim Brenner, *Beyond the Borders*, 1907)

Construction (2) with *haxi* was immediately accepted in general use as the main means of expression of the superlative. By the 1920s, it had turned into the most common construction in written Hebrew, rendering the medieval construction (3) obsolete. However, its domination was short-lived. Due to its dubious Biblical origin, normative objection to its use as a superlative was repeatedly stated from the early 1920s on (Ben-Asher 1969; Peretz 1965). As a result, it started to be viewed as unsuitable for formal usage, and construction (1) expanded at its expense in language-conscious usage.

Conclusion

An examination of the languages present during the initial phases of the revival of Hebrew (Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, Yiddish, German, Russian) indicates none of them presents a close morphosyntactic equivalent to the Modern Hebrew superlative constructions. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to consider a functional impact (Heine & Kuteva 2005), as all of the contact languages share the existence of the category of the superlative. The forms, rather than adopted through language contact, reflect the exhaustion of the latent potential of the inherited Hebrew inventory through grammaticalization processes that imbued existing elements with new functions. Only meaning and functionality can be attributed to language contact in the formation of the Modern Hebrew superlative constructions, together with the manipulation of the classical Hebrew lexical items, the Rabbinic *beyoter* and the Biblical *haxi*, which eventually grammaticalized as superlative markers in constructions (1) and (2). The preference for these constructions over the formerly dominant medieval construction (5) may be attributed to the latter’s deviation from the formal inventory of classical word order: the modifier *more* in (5) precedes the head Adj, while Hebrew

requires the opposite word order. By contrast, constructions (1) and (2) provided an apparent external continuity with the classical models.

Editors comment:

Reshef shows that Early Modern Hebrew gradually lost the medieval periphrastic superlative *the+more+Adj* and replaced it with the original Hebrew periphrastic elative construction *Adj+to-a-high-degree*. Reshef attributes the loss of the previous construction to its problematic word order, since *ha-* ‘the’ is obligatorily affixed to *Adj* rather than to *Adj*’s modifier *more*. As such, Reshef’s explanation does not sufficiently explain the change whereby the ungrammatically ordered comparative was replaced with the elative construction. Reshef concludes that the value-transfer from the contact languages was merely functional rather than structural. However, it is possible to entertain a different hypothesis. In Slavic, the elative *to a high extent/degree* is used for the superlative. Therefore, it is plausible that the adoption of the elative structure took place under the influence of the Slavic construction. Since Slavic is an attested contact language in the 1920s, the period when the change took place, the change might after all have been structural rather than functional.

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