Research Project: EMODHEBREW

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Authors: Noa Bassel and Noam Faust

The Modern Hebrew affirmative focus
and its possible Yiddish origin

1. Introduction

This note concerns a non-canonical use of the Modern Hebrew affirmative (AFF) particle *ken* ‘yes’, akin to the phenomenon known as VERUM FOCUS (Höhle 1992), in which verbs, auxiliaries or particles take sentence stress and high tone in order to strengthen the speaker’s believe in the truth value of a proposition *p*. This use of *ken* appears to be limited to contexts in which the negation of *p* has been presented, as in (1). Otherwise, verum meanings can only be conveyed by adverbs such as *behexlet* ‘indeed’ and *legamre* ‘totally’. This is the case, for example, with unbiased yes/no questions (2). When licensed, the affirmative focus *ken* appears in the exact positions occupied by the negation marker *lo* ‘no’ in *not p*. Interestingly, a similar pattern is exhibited by the Yiddish affirmative *jo* (3).

(1) A: χαφαντι ʃe-amal ʃo høvet marak. (Hebrew)
think.PST.1S COMP-Amal NEG like.PRTC.FS soup
‘I thought Amal didn’t like soup’

B: amal *ken* ohevet marak!
Amal AFF like.PRTC.FS soup
‘Amal DOES like soup!’

(2) A: amal ohevet marak? (Hebrew)
Amal like.PRTC.FS soup
‘Does Amal like soup?’

B: amal *ken/behexlet/legamre ohevet marak!
Amal AFF indeed totally like.PRTC.FS soup
‘Amal *DOES/certainly/totally like soup!’

(3) A: iχ ob gəmän-t az amal ot niʃt liib jojχ. (Yiddish)
I have.1S think-PASS.PRTC COMP Amal have.3S NEG love soup.
‘I thought Amal didn’t like soup’

B: amal ot jo liib jojχ!
Amal have.1S AFF love soup.
‘Amal DOES like soup’

In what follows we present some of the patterns of use of these constructions in both languages and show that the use of focus-*ken* appears to extend beyond typical verum focus positions, in that it interacts with the domain of individuals rather than with that of truth values (section 3). We further show that focus-
ken is not licensed only by implicit negation, but also by the presence of the negative alternative in pragmatic inferences, or in the common ground.

2. Origin

Uses of the word ken with the meaning ‘yes’ are unattested in Biblical Hebrew, where the lexeme ken has the meaning ‘so, in that manner’. In the Biblical text, simple affirmation is achieved through repetition, e.g. ha-šalom lo-šalom. ‘Is he in/with peace? Peace’. The modern meaning ‘yes’ emerged in the middle ages, based on the rare occasions in the Biblical text where ken meant ‘indeed’.

Biblical Hebrew exhibits several focus patterns (Muraoka 1985, Shimasaki 2002), none of which can plausibly be claimed to underlie the modern use.

Yiddish itself can probably be seen as a contact language adapted from Germanic dialects by the Jews of Eastern Europe. One may therefore raise the question of the origin of the use of affirmative focus jo in Yiddish. No analogue was found in the neighboring languages German, Russian or Polish. Such a use of the affirmative particle jo is attested in Spanish, hence we suggest that the origin of focus jo can be attributed to an early contact between Yiddish and Romance varieties. Alternatively, this use of jo may have emerged spontaneously in Yiddish.

3. Affirmative focus in attributive positions

Focus ken varies from verum focus constructions in Germanic languages in its availability within adjectival phrases modifying nouns. In this case, the meaning contributed by ken does not interact with the truth value of the proposition, but rather creates an opposition on the domain of individuals in the extension of the head noun. (4)-(5) illustrate:

(4) ze ha-šof ha-ken/lo metubal
DEM DEF-chicken DEF-AFF /NEG spicy
‘This is the (NOT) SPICY chicken’

(5) le-hitraχek me-ha-gever ha-ken nayon?
to-distance.oneself.INF from-DEF-man DEF-AFF-right
‘Becoming tangled up with the wrong man, thereby getting further away from the RIGHT man?’

The meaning of ken in (4)-(5) is not that the chicken is indeed spicy or the man indeed right, but rather that within the context of the conversation there exist a chicken which is not spicy and a man who is not right. The availability of these meanings for focus-ken can be taken as indication that it does not belong among the verum phenomena after all, but two points should be taken into consideration in this respect:

First, the adjectival phrases in (4) and (5) are accompanied by the definite article ha, which also heads tenseless reduced relative clauses. Since Hebrew predication (in the present) may appear without an overt tense marker, what seems like APs here could also be analyzed as a clause, in which case focus-ken has its usual clausal scope.

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The second relevant fact is that in other languages as well, when verum focus particles are licensed in relative clauses – which have the semantic type of APs – the accepted meaning is also not related to the truth-value. This is illustrated by the English focused auxiliary in (6), which implies that there are students that did not read the paper.

(6) The students which DID read the paper may skip the next class.

The crucial difference has to do with the Hebrew affirmative focus being tenseless, compared with the auxiliaries and verbal morphemes used in German and English. The latter can only modify TPs, whereas the Hebrew ken may modify tenseless clauses.

Further investigation is required to understand whether these constructions are possible in Yiddish. In our inquiry, only 1 out of 4 speakers accepted (7). Of the four, that speaker is the one who most frequently uses Modern Hebrew in daily life, so that their acceptance of jo here might be an influence of Hebrew.

(7) a

\[\text{a niʃt/??jo ɡəlungənə firmə} \]

\[\text{INDEF NEG/AFF successful firm} \]

‘an unsuccessful/??definitely successful firm’

4. Further environments of affirmative focus

4.1 Affirmative focus in embedded clauses

Subordinate clauses generally behave like matrix clauses with respect to the affirmative focus, in both Hebrew and Yiddish.

(8) a. \[\text{ʦi̱piti ʃe-ken/lo te-falem lo} \]

\[\text{hope.PST.1S COMP-AFF/NEG pay.2MS DAT.3MS} \]

(Hebrew)

b. \[\text{ix=ob ɡəmajn-t ve-st=im jo/niʃt batsul-n} \]

\[\text{I=have.1S think-PST.PRTC FUT-2S=DAT.3MS AFF/NEG pay-INF} \]

‘I expected you WOULD/ wouldn’t pay him’

4.2 Affirmative focus in questions

Affirmative focus may also appear in questions, again in the position of the negation lo/niʃt. The following data present yes/no questions, in which both a negative (10) and an affirmative particle (11) create an implicature that the speaker believes the contrary of her utterance to be true.

(9) a. \[\text{gart be-katamon?} \]

\[\text{live.PST.2FS in-Katamon} \]

(Hebrew)

b. \[\text{ho-st ɡəvojn-t in katamon?} \]

\[\text{have-2S live-PST.PRTC in Katamon} \]

(Yiddish)

‘Did you live in Katamon?’

(10) a. \[\text{lo gart be-katamon?} \]

\[\text{NEG live.PST.2FS in-Katamon} \]

(Hebrew)

b. \[\text{ho-st niʃt ɡəvojn-t in katamon?} \]

\[\text{have-2S NEG live-PST.PRTC in Katamon} \]

(Yiddish)

‘Did you not live in Katamon?’
With WH questions, as in (14), the effect of both negative and affirmative presupposes the existence of two complementary groups of individuals, in the case of the examples below – those who came and those who didn’t.

(11) a. ken gart be-katamon?
   AFF live.PST.2FS in-Katamon

b. ho-st jo govojn-t in katamon?
   ‘You DID live in Katamon?’

4.3 Affirmative focus with imperatives

Modern Hebrew exhibits a special allomorph al for negation in the imperative. This particle can also be replaced by ken to create an affirmative focus effect.

(15) a. al/ken tikra li kofer
    NEG/AFF call.FUT.2MS DAT.1S heretic

b. hajs mir nifṭ/jo an apikojrə!
   call DAT.1S NEG/AFF INDEF heretic
   ‘don’t call me heretic / DO call me heretic’

5. Affirmative focus does not require previous explicit negation

Importantly, the affirmative focus is not licensed by the actual presence of the negative counterpart in the preceding context, but can rather relate to any type of pragmatic inference. For example, in (16)-(18), an affirmative focus construction in the second conjunct relates to an implicature conveyed from the first conjunct. In (19), the affirmative proposition ken tavoi ‘do come’ relates to the real-world situation in which the addressee is admitted in a rehabilitation center and cannot attend the mentioned event.
(16) hu lo χαχαμ aval ken armumi
he neg smart but aff cunning
‘He is not smart, but he IS cunning’

(17) lo bikʃu mimeni teuda aval ken faalu oti
neg ask.PST.3PL of.1S document but aff question.PST.3PL ACC.1S
feelot ifjot
question.PL personal.PL
‘They didn’t ask me for a document, but they DID ask me personal questions.

(18) Context ‘The articles you gave me are interesting, but they are about Ancient Egyptian.
I think widening the scope like this would be too much of a deviation right now…

aval ani ken mekava le-hatSliaχ li-kro otam
but I AFF hope.PRTC.FS to-manage-INF to-read-INF ACC.3PL

mayar b-a-otobus
tomorrow LOC-DEF-bus
‘but I DO hope I can manage to read them tomorrow on the bus.’

(19) Context: A head chef is talking to a worker who has been absent due to a stay at the rehabilitation center.

ani jαξor l-a-misʔada. ani esmaχ im ken t-avo-i.
I return.FUT.1S DAT-DEF-rentaurant I be.glad.FUT.1S if AFF 2-come.FUT-F

‘I’m going back to the restaurant. I’ll be glad if you DO come.’

When the negative proposition is not evident in the context, affirmative focus introduces it to the common ground. This is illustrated in (20): using ken alongside the request to meet in privacy tells the addressee that the speaker – her husband – believes she plans to bring someone to their meeting.

(20) Context: A man who recently left the orthodox community is talking to his estranged wife, trying to set up a meeting.

li adif b-a-miklat. ma sε-ani ken mevakeʃ
DAT-1S preferable LOC-DEF-shelter what COMP-I AFF ask.PRTC.MS

be-ɣol ofen be-arba ejn-ajim.
LOC-any way LOC-four eye.PL

‘I prefer the shelter. What I DO ask is that it will only be the two of us.’

References