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: χaʃavti   ʃe-amal   lo   ohevet   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   gəmajn-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-

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[1] We thank Edit Doron and Bar Avineri for their comments and suggestions.

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-ʃalom lo? ʃalom.* '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'.[2]

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 *si* 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-of   ha-*ken*/lo   metubal
     DEM   DEF-chicken   DEF-AFF /NEG   spicy
     'This is the (NOT) SPICY chicken'

(5) le-histabeχ   im   ha-gever   ha-lo   naxon ve-kax   gam
     to-get.tangled.INF   with   DEF-man   DEF-NEG   right CONJ-so   also

     le-hitraχek   me-ha-gever   ha-*ken*   naχon?
     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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[2] https://hebrew-academy.org.il/2018/03/15/ממתי-עונים-כן-בעברית/

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   niʃt/??jo   gəlungənə   firmə
         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. tsipiti   ʃe-*ken*/lo   te-ʃalem   lo   (Hebrew)
         hope.PST.1S   COMP- AFF /NEG   pay.2MS   DAT.3MS

     b. iχ=ob   gəmajn-t   ve-st=im   *jo*/niʃt   batsul-n   (Yiddish)
         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. gart   be-katamon?   (Hebrew)
         live.PST.2FS   in-Katamon

     b. ho-st   gəvojn-t   in katamon?   (Yiddish)
         have-2S   live-PST.PRTC   in Katamon
         'Did you live in Katamon?'

(10) a. lo   gart   be-katamon?   (Hebrew)
         NEG   live.PST.2FS   in-Katamon

     b. ho-st   niʃt   gəvojn-t   in katamon?   (Yiddish)
         have-2S   NEG   live-PST.PRTC   in Katamon
         'Did you not live in Katamon?'

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

      b. ho-st   *jo*   gəvojn-t   in katamon?   (Yiddish)
         have-2S   AFF   live-PST.PRTC   in Katamon
         'You DID 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.

(12) a. mi   ba?   (Hebrew)
          who come.PST.3MS

      b. ver   iz   gəkimən?   (Yiddish)
         who   be-3MS   come.PST.PRTC
         'Who came?'

(13) a. mi   lo   ba?   (Hebrew)
          who NEG   come.PST.3MS

      b. ver   iz   niʃt   gəkimən?   (Yiddish)
         who   be-3MS   NEG   come.PST.PRTC
         'Who didn't come'

(14) a. mi   *ken*   ba?   (Hebrew)
          who AFF   come.PST.3MS

      b. ver   iz   *jo*   gəkimən?   (Yiddish)
         who   be-3MS   AFF   come.PST.PRTC
         'Who DID come?'

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   (Hebrew)
          NEG/AFF call.FUT.2MS   DAT.1S   heretic

      b. hajs   mir   niʃt/*jo*   an   apikojrəs!   (Yiddish)
         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	χaχam	aval	ken	armumi
he	neg	smart	but	aff	cunning

'He is not smart, but he IS cunning'

(17)

lo	bikʃu	mimeni	teuda	aval	ken	ʃaalu	oti
neg	ask.PST.3PL	of.1S	document	but	aff	question.PST.3PL	ACC.1S

ʃeelot	iʃijot
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

maχar	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	jaχzor	l-a-misʔada.	ani	esmaχ	im	ken	t-avo-i.
I	return.FUT.1S	DAT-DEF-restaurant	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	ʃe-ani	ken	mevakeʃ
DAT-1S	preferable	LOC-DEF-shelter	what	COMP-I	AFF	ask.PRTC.MS

be-χol	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.'

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