A matter of time: tense, mood and aspect in spontaneous Spoken Israeli Hebrew
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Summary

The purpose of this research study is the investigation of tense, mood and aspect (TMA) categories in the verb system of Spoken Israeli Hebrew (SIH), also referred to as Modern Hebrew (MH). The Modern Hebrew verb system is generally perceived as a tense-based system, and is so presented in most of the traditional literature, as well as in a majority of textbooks. This analysis has been commonly accepted and was seldom criticized.

The research underlying this thesis was motivated by the fact that the traditional analysis of the verb system of Hebrew has to specify a large number of exceptions, and that many of the analyzed forms are inexplicable to Israeli Hebrew native speakers. It was therefore suspected that the verb system of SIH is not tense-based, but rather aspect-based and/or mood-based. Indeed, apart from containing several grammaticalized modal structures, this research shows that the SIH verb system is aspectual – rather than tense-oriented.

The research is based on a corpus of ongoing spontaneous conversations in Spoken Israeli Hebrew that were recorded in real-time. It contains authentic Israeli Hebrew speech as used by native speakers in everyday conversations. Twenty-two informants distributed across relevant demographic groups were investigated. In addition, at least an equivalent number of non-informants were used as a control group. The non-informants also actively participated in the conversations.

In this way, a spoken corpus of more than 44,000 words was established. Approximately 1000 words per informant were used, as well as a similar number of words per non-informant. The resulting 44,000 words in the corpus can be broken down to informants’ speech (~22,000 words) and the speech of the non-informants (~22,000 words). The corpus is divided into speech units which are determined according to prosodic criteria in the discourse, following accepted theories of discourse
analysis. The corpus is fully transcribed using a conventional transcription method for Hebrew.

According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS), there are approximately 3.8 million native speakers of Israeli Hebrew in Israel in the year 2009. The informants in this study constitute a research group and the non-informants constitute a control group. This division into groups was done according to the demographic distribution of the participants in the conversations. Participants, whose demographic characteristics were known, are included in the research group; participants, whose demographic characteristics were not known, are included in the control group. Both groups include Israeli citizens and residents. The demographic distribution of population of the research groups in this study is based upon the official reports of the ICBS. They include Israeli Hebrew native speakers, males and females, ages 16 and older, from different origins and education levels. Non-native speakers are not included in this research, in order to try and sketch the basic, native verb system of the language.

The conversations are spontaneous in nature, representing everyday speech in various registers. All verbal forms appearing in the conversations were listed for this study and are taken into consideration in the final analyses. The total number of verbal forms analyzed is over 6,000. All the verbal forms are presented in the same form in which they appeared in the conversations. It was not put to question whether these verbal forms are normatively adequate or not. Also, the forms are not converted to normative forms in their listing or analysis. It is assumed that native speakers of a language have their own set of rules in mind and know best what their language is like and how to best express themselves in their language.

The results of this research raise some serious questions regarding the analysis of verbs in SIH according to the normative verb system. In traditional Hebrew grammar there is no explanation for many verbal forms if the tense-based approach is applied. These forms would probably be conceived under normative views as ‘ungrammatical’ or ‘exceptional’. The
alternative analysis of the SIH verb system as aspect-based as proposed in this study covers all these ‘ungrammatical’ cases, as opposed to the tense-based analysis, which leaves these cases unexplained.

Further, several additional points are observed in this research. The first one is the absence of passive forms from the verb system. Israeli Hebrew speakers use other strategies to express passive notions in their language rather than using passive patterns. Traditional grammars define two passive patterns in the Hebrew verb system (Pual and Hufal), which are believed to exist in Modern Hebrew too. Also, they state that sometimes the Nifal pattern expresses passive notions. This research suggests that the two passive patterns do not exist in the verb system and are used only for the formation of nominals, nouns and adjectives. Also, in most of the cases the Nifal pattern does not express passive notions. The percentage of all passive forms in this research is lower than 0.5%, a fact that cannot be ignored and should be further explored.

The second point is the derivation of imperative forms. For each verbal pattern, traditional grammars define a unique imperative morphological structure that expresses the imperative mood. Again, the imperative structures are believed to be a part of the verbal system of traditional Hebrew, and are also believed to be present in Modern Hebrew. However, the traditional imperative forms were not found at all in this research. Instead, prefixed forms (which are analyzed by traditional grammars as expressing future tense) are used, as well as some imperative forms that are phonologically derived from their parallel prefixed counterparts. It is therefore suggested that imperative forms in SIH are phonologically motivated and are not derived according to any morphological pattern.

The distribution of the verbal patterns is also surprising. New verbs in Israeli Hebrew (as well as in traditional Hebrew) are derived mainly in the Piel pattern. Therefore, it is common to think that the Piel pattern is the most widespread pattern in the Hebrew verb system. This study suggests that the Piel pattern has fewer repetitions in ordinary conversations than both the Qal and the Hifil patterns. Although widely used for verb formation, its distribution is much lower than other patterns.
There are verb phrases in SIH which are not referred to in the traditional verb system. Several types of verb concatenations were found in this research, which express unique TMA meanings, and are not covered by traditional grammars. About 10% of the verbal forms in the verb system consist of concatenated verbs. Although a minority, this number is meaningful and these forms may hint at a trend towards a more analytical formation in the SIH verb system.

The verb system of SIH, as observed in this study, is different from the traditional Hebrew one. It contains five and not seven patterns, it does not contain passive patterns or any passive forms whatsoever, its’ imperative forms are phonologically motivated and not morphologically derived, the distribution of patterns is different than expected; and the existence of concatenated verbal phrases raises questions about the synthetic character of the verb system. In spite of the wide use of derivational morphology and synthetic forms, which is typical to Semitic languages, the SIH verb system is also characterized by more analytical structures in the verb system.