

THURSDAY INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLOQUIUM

Thursday 9.12.2021

16:15-17:45

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From synchrony to diachrony and back - the case of pronominal possessives in Hebrew

Usage-based theories account for language structure by tying together synchrony and diachrony: synchronic language use motivates diachronic change, which in turn shapes synchronic grammar (Bybee 1985, 2003; Ariel 2008; Haspelmath 2019). I apply such an analysis to Hebrew pronominal possessives. Hebrew offers two pronominal possessive phrasal constructions: a suffixed construction (*xaver-i*, 'my friend') and a prepositional construction (*xaver fel-i*, 'friend of mine'). Different accounts have been proposed for their distribution (Rosen 1977; Shatil 1997; Dubnov 2000). While these accounts describe different properties of their distribution, they lack explanatory power, failing to motivate the association of each construction with its specific distribution on the one hand, and for the fact that their distributions are not complementary on the other hand.

I describe the synchronic distribution of the two constructions based on a spoken language corpus (Maschler et al. 2020; 'The Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew'). The synchronic patterns are compared with respect to frequency, morpho-lexical and semantic properties of the possessed nouns, and definiteness. Puzzling findings are clarified by elicited speaker judgments. The data is analyzed in light of cross-linguistic patterns of possessive constructions (Chappell & McGregor 1996; Haspelmath 1999, 2014; Aikhenvald 2013), and the synchronic distribution points to a diachronic language change in progress.

Extending proposals in Bybee's (1985, 2003) and Haspelmath (2014), I offer a diachronic trajectory for processes of morphological regularization, motivated by principles of language use. I analyze the synchronic distribution as testifying to a specific stage in the trajectory, providing an explanation for the synchronic distribution: language use drives language change, giving rise to an asymmetric, yet non-complementary distribution.

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