

Agent marking in passive constructions in Modern Hebrew: A corpus-based diachronic study

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This paper traces the formation process of fixed means for agent marking in passive constructions in Modern Hebrew. The analysis is based on the examination of a vast morphologically-parsed textual corpus of journalistic texts from the seminal period of modernization (1870s-1930s).

The morphological means to form passive verbs existed already in ancient Hebrew, but like in other Semitic languages, passive verbs were intrinsically impersonal (Rabin 1999). Therefore, they were rarely accompanied by specified agents (Notarius 2013). Modern Hebrew, by contrast, employs the inherited verbal patterns as a productive structural mechanism for passivization. The agent may be either left unspecified or explicitly mentioned by the adverbial phrase *ʕal yede* (or less often: *bi-yede*) 'by' (literally: 'on/in the hands of'), originally an instrumental (Halevy 2020), e.g.:

- (1) *gever hutqaf* (ʕal-yede neʕar-im)
 man attack.PASS.PST.3MSG (in-hands.CS youngster-PL)
 'a man has been attacked (by youngsters)'

A wide distribution of passive constructions, with or without a specified agent, is a conspicuous feature of contemporary journalistic style (Taube 2013). Our analysis of the early journalistic texts indicated an initial vacillation between various means of expression in passive constructions, as writers searched for suitable linguistic means to explicitly specify the agent, a feature extant in their native European contact languages. These included *mi-* 'from', *meʔet* 'from', *mi-taʕam* 'on behalf', *mi-tsad* 'from side', *be-yad* 'in hand', *bi-yede* 'in hands', *ʕal yede* 'on hands' and more. Modernization in this domain of the linguistic system did not require the introduction of structural innovation, but rather a process of selection. As a result, it involved a reduction, rather than an increase, in the number of options potentially available to language users in achieving their communicative goals (for further examples of this process see various papers in Doron 2016 and Doron et al. 2019).

The transformation of *ʕal yede* from instrumental into an agent marker, which was very likely influenced by Russian journalistic style (Nath 2009), occurred despite repeated prescriptivist objections, reflecting the tendency of ordinary speakers to adopt linguistic means that were felt as suitable to fill the functional needs triggered by the contact languages. The consolidation of *ʕal yede* in this new function contributed to the formation of a formal register, essential for the transformation of Hebrew from a traditional written language into a modern means of communication (Rosén 1992).

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