

Is irrealis a modal category? Evidence from the biblical Hebrew imperfect

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The nature of the realis/irrealis distinction is debated: some, like Palmer (1986), have proposed that it is a modal distinction, indicating the dichotomy between factual and non-factual events; but later, Palmer (2001) proposed that the relevant distinction is not, in fact, modal, but lies at the speech-act level: the dichotomy between asserted and unasserted propositions.

Evidence from Biblical Hebrew can help decide between these two views. Based on comparisons with irrealis forms in several unrelated languages, Grasso (2017) demonstrates that the imperfect in Biblical Hebrew is irrealis (cf. Hatav 1997; Joosten 2012). But is it modal? Indeed, it is often used in modal contexts, and also in future contexts, which are arguably modal. However, sometimes the imperfect is used in clearly factual contexts:

(1) **'āz yakkeh mənahēm 'et tipsah wə'et kol 'ăšer bāh wə'et**
then hit-IMP Menahem ECM Tiphsah and-ECM all who-is in-it and-ECM
gəbūlēhā mittirshāh kī lō' pātah (2 Kings 15:16)
its-borders from-Tirzah because not opened

'Then Menahem **sacked-IMP** Tiphsah and everyone in the city and its vicinity all the way from Tirzah because they didn't open (their gates)'

Menahem's destruction of Tiphsah is clearly described as factual, and does not seem to have any modal flavor.

But note that the imperfect is preceded by **'āz**. In Biblical Hebrew, "p 'āz q", usually translated "p, then q", can also mean "p, so q". Strawson (1952) explains: "If one statement is a ground for another and we believe the first statement to be true, we are justified in saying something of the form 'p, so q'."

Indeed, the ground for Menahem's action against Tiphsah is explicitly given: the refusal of its residents to open the city gates to him. Thus, (1) is actually saying that Tiphsah's refusal to open its gates is a ground for Menahem's sacking the city. A trivial bit of inference allows us to conclude that Menahem did sack Tiphsah; but, crucially, although factual, this statement is not asserted.

Hence, the Biblical Hebrew imperfect provides evidence for the view that the realis vs. irrealis distinction does not involve modality, but rather assertion vs. non-assertion.

References

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