

THE EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTION IN SPOKEN MODERN HEBREW: A TYPOLOGICAL AND SYNTACTICAL-PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This contribution is part of the Debate section that dialogues with the two-part paper "The Syntax of Existential Constructions" by Shlomo Izre'el from Tel-Aviv University published in Volume 11 in 2022. In this response and rejoinder to Izre'el's monumental paper on existential constructions in spoken Israeli Hebrew, I call attention to the fact that unlike European languages, Hebrew is a non-subject oriented or non-configurational language type, and highlight that existential particle yeš in Hebrew is a TAM marker. I further enhance on the multifunctionality of constructions featuring particle yeš far beyond bare assertion of existence. In addition, I refer to the high productivity of competitive configurations to the bare existential yeš construction based on a range of eventive-situative and locational verbs that are widespread in current use of Hebrew.*

Keywords: Modern Hebrew; existential construction; existential particle; subject-oriented language; configurational language; TAM marker .



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1 Introduction

Izre'el's two parts monumental study brings a fresh look to the regular analyses of the use of the EXT construction in Modern Hebrew (MH), substantially in present-day spoken language. By basing his analysis on real data, showing that prosody is not subsidiary for the analysis of the language, Izre'el demonstrates that syntax, information structure and prosody integrate in spoken language structure forming a coherent unity. Part I of his study deals with existential-presentative constructions in spoken language. Part II briefly examines other EXT constructions, including NEG.EXT constructions; constructions involving particle *yeš* as the sole constituent in the sentence; EXT constituents comprised of clitic referential markers; constructions where the EXT particle comes in the default position of the predicate domain, i.e. following a subject (defined by Izre'el as "bipartite construction"), and the use of particle *yeš* as an interjection or discourse marker.

Undoubtedly, EXT *yeš* particle is used as part of different pragmatic strategies - to answer a question, to correct information, or to confirm information, and in rhetorical questions, particularly in speech acts of challenging, protesting, complaining or criticizing. I will not be concerned here with the prosodic articulation of the construction in question.

Before starting, I would like to mention that the term 'Existential Construction' is usually employed in the literature in two senses:

- i. For *construction-functions* (e.g., Clark 1978)
- ii. For *construction-strategies* (e.g., McNally 2016; Creissels 2019)

In its first sense, the EXT construction is viewed as a clause construction in which an indefinite and discourse-new NP referring to the participant role of the Existent is said to be in some location.

In the second sense, the term is used to refer to "sentence types that are 'non-canonical' whether due to some aspect of their syntax or the presence of a distinguished lexical item (e.g. Spanish *hay*). This non-canonical structure is invariably accompanied by what appears to be a special semantic or discourse function related to introducing the presence or existence of some individual(s)... It is difficult to pin down exactly what these constructions have in common across languages." (McNally 2016: 212).

In the sense given to this term by Izre'el, as also in the present rejoinder to Izre'el, an EXT construction refers to a type of construction *defined by its formal properties* rather than by its semantic function, i.e. of assertion of existence. To quote Creissels (2014: §2.3) "‘existential predication’ should be viewed as a technical term arbitrarily used as a label for a class of constructions whose use is not regulated by the notion of existence as defined in dictionaries of English or other languages." That is, the morphosyntactic make-up of the construction under discussion is not restricted to a proposition of assertion of existence, as this notion is commonly understood; it is viewed as a construction invoking a special "perspectivizing" function, i.e. perspectivized from the ground rather than initially from the figure (Borschev and Partee 2007). Such a construction seems to be an optimal candidate for introducing new information and for centering on the event or situation as a whole; moreover, as revealed in spoken MH, being a non-subject oriented construction it suppresses any specific information regarding a putative 'notional subject', even when referring to a salient human referent, and as such invites multifunctionality.

In European languages that insert a non-referential external argument to fill the subject slot, there is to some extent a dissonance between such 'dummy subject' and a definite postpositional nominal (hereafter- pivot), to the extent that the presence of a 'dummy subject' correlates with lack of agreement. As exemplified by Izre'el, this is not the case in Hebrew.

Hebrew does not constrain hearer-old pivot nominals (i.e. definite, including proper names) that may nevertheless be part of the new information provided by the sentence as a whole.

In my response, I opt (i) to briefly re-examine in a comparative typological perspective the form-meaning-function of EXT *yeš* construction, supplemented in 3rd form by 'be' verb $\sqrt{h.y.y.}$, which in spoken language appears frequently in invariable 3rd person masculine singular, and its negative existential (NEG.EXT) *en* counterpart; (ii) to discuss the motivation for the atypical use of the particle *et*, best known in the literature as DOM, that is encoded in front of the nominal standing for the Existent which functions as the pivot nominal of the predicate domain along with lack of agreement when the 'be' verb *haya* is employed; or alternatively, using a strategy of co-varying agreement. By doing that I wish to present the ability to appropriately exploit optional structures of the language to achieve a desired meaning at the interface with pragmatics; (iii) To briefly throw light on the high multifunctionality of the EXT construction (including its negative form) in current use of MH far beyond its prototypical existential-presentative form-meaning-function. In addition, I would like to call attention to the fact that as presumably a neutral, lexically unspecified construction, the EXT construction calls for utilization of competitive phrases consisting of locative and situative (situating a figure in a ground) verbs that supposedly fill the lexico-semantic gap produced by the unspecified EXT construction.

2 A comparative typological perspective

Dealing with the special properties of what is defined as an EXT construction strategy taken in living usage of MH, it is essential to analyze these properties in accordance with the special linguistic typology of Hebrew. In general, it is assumed that MH exhibits in many respects properties of a '*non-configurational*' (Hale 1989)² or '*non-reference-dominated*' language (in Foley and Van Valin 1984: 123), or '*non-subject-oriented*' language-type (Thompson 1976), in the sense that subjects are not necessarily related to arguments high in the Thematic Hierarchy, or do not function as aboutness topics, unlike their counterparts in the majority of European languages. Furthermore, MH is not a language of fixed word-order (cf. e.g., Goldenberg 2013, Halevy 2013).

This morpho-syntactic characterization of Hebrew is revealed typically in impersonal constructions, in meteo-environmental predications where no agent is responsible for the event, and in modal-evaluative predications where no statement about an entity is made (Halevy 2020a, 2020b). Consider the following clauses in which the subject position is empty (hereby marked by [P₀]).

(1) *huxlat lo laxtom al ha-heskem*
[P₀]decide.PASS.PST.3M.SG not to-sign on DEF-agreement
'It was decided not to sign the agreement.'

(2) *kar hayom*
[P₀]cold.M.SG today
'It's cold today.'

² According to Hale (1983:5) the following properties, among others, are typical of non-configurational languages: (i) 'free' word order; (ii) lack of pleonastic NPs (expletives); (iii) extensive null anaphora (pro-drop); (iv) syntactically discontinuous expressions.

(3) *meuxar. carix laxzor habáyta*

[P₀]late. PRS.PTCP.M.SG necessary.M.SG to-return home

'It's late, we need to go back home'

(4) *efšar lišon po?*

[P₀]possible to-sleep here

'Is it possible to sleep here?'

The same holds for the dative-experiencer construction in Hebrew (Halevy 2022). For example,

(5) *kar li*

[P₀] cold DAT-me

'I am cold.'

It means that Hebrew does not require the encoding of a 'dummy subject' (expletive) as a semantically vacuous element functioning as a place holder for the absent or demoted subject. By contrast, in many European languages a 'dummy subject' is employed in such cases, playing the role of a null place holder of the subject slot, or pragmatically pointing towards the relation between the hearer-new (focus/comment) and the hearer-old (topic/theme) information. English uses a locative expletive *there* (*there is*), other European languages use a 'dummy subject' pronoun combined with a dummy locative like *y* in French (*il y a*); or a demonstrative expletive such as German *Es* (*Es ist, Es gibt*), Dutch *Er* (*Er is/bestaat*), Swedish and Norwegian *det* (*det är*), Danish *der* (*der er*); Italian use a proclitic form of the pronoun and adverb *c'è/ci* (*c'è, ci sono*). Spanish, do not require an expletive/'dummy-subject' but employ the verb *hay* in initial order with an impersonal existential predicate. In these languages, the alignment of the EXT construction might superficially appear like a kind of 'subject inversion', although there is a consensus in the literature that the constituent standing for the Existent does not really qualify as subject, though it may still control verb agreement. On the other hand, in contra-distinction to many European languages, analyzing the EXT in Hebrew as arising through a process of subject or locative inversion is, in my view, not viable. Put it differently, it does not necessarily pattern with a locative inversion construction.

In the EXT construction widespread in MH, any specific information concerning the nominal standing for the Existent is suppressed (e.g., gender and number). Furthermore, even when it refers to a salient human referent, it is not conceptualized as actively involved in the event, but as merely appearing on the scene as it were. For example, in the following.

(6) *al tidag, yeš/yihye šam gam et*

dina

(do-)not worry.FUT.2M.SG EXT/be.FUT.3.M.SG there also DOM

Dina

'Don't worry, Dina will be there too.'

Ostensibly, the sentence above does not present information about a specific human being. It is not the speaker's intent to refer to the entity in question and present it as topic, but rather to treat it as an integral part of the information conveyed by the sentence as a whole. In other words,

although this entity is a 'given' referent, part of background information, it functions as part of a focal strategy.

As indicated by Izre'el, the constituent standing for the Existent is conceived as being within the scope of the predicate in a "unipartite construction". The fact that speakers do not consider this constituent as an 'inversed subject' is revealed by its marking by *et* particle, which is generally regarded as an accusative marker.

In addition, I would like to add that there is no '*equi NP deletion*'. That is, contrary to a subject in a coordinated clause, when the nominal of the Existent is co-referred in the immediate context it has to be fully encoded. As, for example, in the following.

- (7) *yeš adayin kama kartisim, aval hem yekarim yoter*
EXT still few ticket.M.PL, but they expensive.M.PL more
'There are some tickets, but they are more expensive.'

In fact, as marked by Izre'el, contrary to EXT constructions in European languages, the EXT construction in Hebrew is *deficient of a copula*, or alternatively particle *yeš* does not function as a copula, and *its supplement form in the 'be' verb-form performs in a lexical function* (i.e. significantly assertion of existence) rather than in the syntactic function of a copula.³ Moreover, particle *yeš* differs from a copula in that in extraposition or in a construction of contrastive focus it is aligned in final position, as in the following.

- (8) *báyit kvar yeš, ve-ma axšav?*
house already EXT, and-what now
'You have already got a house (lit. a house there-is), and what next (lit. now)?'

Izre'el defines such constructions as "bipartite", consisting of a subject and a predicate, where the focus, indicated by prosodic prominence, is on EXT *yeš*. However, in spite of the special emphasis on EXT *yeš* I contend that such constructions are *one unit*, namely '*sentence focus*' of wide informational focus.

Izre'el (2022 part I: §3.1.2) defines particle *yeš* as a modal assertive marker that serves as an operator of an assertive force. I prefer to define it as a *TAM marker*.

2.1 Atypical use of direct object marker

Contrary to many European languages, due to the wide range of meanings and functions implied by EXT *yeš*-construction, the so-called "Definiteness Effect" (Keenan 2003, *inter alia*) is not applicable for the construction in Hebrew. While accusative pivots are rarely encountered in European languages, or overt case-marking is visible in certain languages (e.g., English) almost exclusively on personal pronouns, this is not the case in MH. As indicated, the peculiarity of the EXT construction in MH lies in the structural contradiction between the basic assertion (and denial) of existence and the incompatible object-like form and behavior of the pivot constituent.

³ See Benveniste (1966:188) regarding the distinction between the grammatical vs. lexical notion of the verb *être* (= to be).

The direct object marking, and lack of agreement (when using the supplement 'be' verb), or lack of coreferentiality, produce a hybrid construction, as seen in the following.

- (9) *lo haya et mi lišol. haya šam rak*
et ha-asistentit
not be.PST.3M.SG DOM who to-ask be.PST.3M.SG there only
DOM DEF-assistant.F.SG

'There was nobody to ask. There was only the assistant.'

Such an alignment suppresses any specific information relating to the presuppositions about the expected presence of the participants involved. It emerges that in this kind of configuration, the constituent of the Existent, even if highly referential, is not conceptualized as actively involved in the event, but instead conceived as merely appearing 'on the scene'.

A crucial insight of typological research is that atypical associations between referential properties and grammatical roles tend to receive more grammatical marking across languages, presupposing that DOM serves an *ambiguity avoidance function*, namely to distinguish subjects from objects (Bossong 1991; Comrie 1977, *inter alia*). Lambrecht suggests (2000: 623–625) that diachronically, the postverbal nominal in existential (in European languages), is a 'detopicalized subject', divested of (some or all) subject properties, and hence assigns it a status somewhere "between subjecthood and objecthood". This constituent's non-nominative marking, he contends, stems from the need to minimally distinguish what he terms as "sentence focus" from the corresponding categorical statement. He argues that the 'detopicalization' or 'objectivization' of this argument is pragmatically driven. Besides prosody, Lambrecht mentions other cross-linguistic strategies to express 'sentence focus', two of which appear applicable to Hebrew: "co-occurrence of S[entence] F[ocus] subjects with 'object' particles", and "suspended subject-verb agreement". Since a 'sentence focus' alleged subject does not have a topic role, there is no functional motivation for the presence of an anaphoric element marked on the verb (Lambrecht 2000: 644).

Regarding the prevalence of particle *et* in Hebrew existentials, Izre'el (2022 part I: §4) writes that "the precise meaning of the particle *et* (usually referred to as an accusative marker) still awaits further in-depth research. A semantic direction may perhaps lead to a satisfactory conclusion".

I would like first to point out that Hebrew particle *et* is unique typologically. It is important to remark that it is not consistently used as a DOM marker, and it recurs not only with objects determined by means of the definite article. It should therefore be distinguished from formal prepositions. In MH and occasionally in Biblical Hebrew, it marks or rather emphasizes that the constituent of the 'notional subject' (actually, the core component of the predicate) is not a topic. Substantially, in addition to featuring in the EXT construction, in current usage of the language particle *et* recurs in constructions of zero subject [P₀] displaying invariable (3rd person) masculine singular predicate, substantially in passive constructions of light-informational verbs (frequently belonging to the category of *verbum dicendi*), along with unaccusative verbs, in constructions with verbs of occurrence and disappearance, commencement and accomplishment, and with modal-evaluative predicates (Halevy 2016).

Consequently, it is subsumed that the object-like behavior and coding properties of the pivot constituent in the EXT construction in Hebrew do not justify its analysis as either object or

detopicalized subject⁴. Along these lines, I suggest that the occurrence of this alleged accusative marker is part of a pragmatic strategy motivated by the need to emphasize that contra to our expectations the constituent in question is not conceived a topic. In other words, particle *et* is part of a strategy of highlighting a high referential nominal as focus, disambiguating its position as non-subject, or non-topic. Of interest is also the fact that particle *et* is employed even in constructions in which the constituent of the Existent is fronted, as in the following.

- (10) (*šamati še-*) *et ha-sipur ha-ze yeš gam be- germanit*
 (hear.PST.1SG that)-DOM DEF-story DEF-this EXT also in-German
 '(I heard that) this story exists also in German.'

3 Variability, inconsistency and multifunctionality

3.1 Variable and inconsistent patterning

As demonstrated by Izre'el, the analysis of the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic factors triggering the appropriate interpretation of sentences consisting of particle *yeš* reveals that the form-meaning-function of such sentences is underspecified, going beyond mere assertion or denial of existence. The fact that variability and inconsistency are frequently detected in MH in patterning the EXT construction suggests that its alignment is basically anchored in discourse, depending on information structure and speakers' perspectival choice vis-à-vis the event presented. Hence, based on intuition, speakers may once overtly mark agreement, while in other time disregard it, along with inserting particle *et* in front of the sole obligatory participant, all in one and the same sentence. Moreover, discrepancy and inconsistency in agreement alignment is often encountered even in one and the same sentence, as in the following.

- (11) Q. *kulam hiskimu?*
 all (= everybody) agree.PST.3PL
 'Did everybody agree?'
- A. *haya et ha-assistentim, aval hayu gam kama še-hitnagdu*
 be.PST.3SG.M DOM DEF-assistant.M.PL, but
 be.PST.3PL some that-disagree.PST.3PL
 'There was the assistants (who agreed), but there were also some who did not agree.'

In order to fully understand the instability and shifts which characterize the encoding of such sentences, various sociolinguistic aspects of the relationship between 'educated' and colloquial language should probably be also taken into account. In this case, recognizing the role played by the language policy of the 'planners' of MH, who directed its development, seems relevant.

3.2 Multifunctionality

As elucidated by Izre'el, in comparison to EXT constructions widespread in western European languages that feature a locative or demonstrative empty subject, affirmative *yeš*, and negative

⁴ Cf. Ziv (1976) regarding the use of DOM in Hebrew in the existential-possessive construction. She suggests that it is to be regarded as a reanalyzed object.

en respectively, lend themselves to a wide range of meanings and functions, above and beyond pure assertion of existence. Izre'el brings forward authentic and live examples from CoSIH (corpus of spoken Israeli Hebrew) featuring *yeš* particle as sole constituent in a sentence; EXT particles with clitic referential markers; and EXT particles as interjections or discourse markers.

Indeed, the range of existential variants in MH is extensive by any standard, having formed, both diachronically and synchronically, through a number of lexicalization and grammaticalization processes.

In addition to the examples brought forward by Izre'el, I would like to mention few pertinent grammaticalized constructions consisting of particle *yeš* (and *en* respectively) widespread in standard usage of MH. First and foremost, it is essential to mention the pattern [yeš+ INF] that is all-pervasive in formal-written register in a modal deontic function, conveying ought, necessary, or need. For example,

- (12) *be-mikre xerum yeš lehitkašer la-mištara*
in-case (of) emergency EXT to-call to.DEF-police
'In case of emergency, call the police (~you should call...).'

- (13) *en lišxot ba-brexa lelo macil*
NEG.EXT to-swim in.DEF-pool without lifeguard
'It is forbidden to swim in the pool without a lifeguard.'

Of interest here is also the double conjoined phrase of *yeš va-yeš* [EXT and-EXT], which carries the pragmatic inference 'sure there's'. For example,

- (14) *yeš va-yeš be-ma lehibayeš!*
EXT and-EXT in-what to-be.ashamed
'Sure there's what to be ashamed of (lit. there's and there's...)

In a similar function, this kind of doubled *yeš* expression is already attested in Biblical Hebrew (2 Kgs 10:15)

Finally, as a matter of fact, in a sense parallel to meteo-environmentals, the non-subject oriented EXT construction in Hebrew calls for alternative configurations based on situative and locational verbs, usually semantically bleached⁵. The following are representative examples from MH of collocations standing in complementary distribution to the EXT construction, whereby the subject is moved to post-position:

- (15) *kayam isur lehadlik kan medura*
exist.PRS.M.SG prohibition.M.SG to-light here fire

'There is a prohibition to light here a fire.'

- (16) *xal šinuy ba-toxnit*
occur.M.SG change.M.SG in.DEF-program

'There's/was a change in the program.'

⁵ Meteo-environmental clauses often have in Hebrew a 'rationalized' counterpart displaying verbs such as 'arrive', 'appear', 'descend', 'become' that assert the occurrence or emergence of the event.

- (17) *sorer hayom xom kaved*
 prevail/govern.PRS.M.SG today heat.M.SG heavy.M.SG
 'There's an extreme heat today.'
- (18) *niškefet sakana le-nehagim be-kviš ratov*
 reflect.PASS.PRS.F.SG danger.F.SG to-drivers in-road wet
 'There's danger to drivers in a wet road'
- (19) *afsu ha-sikuyim limco et ha-naar*
 zero.PST.3PL DEF-chance.M.PL to-find DOM DEF-boy
 'There are no chances to find the boy.'

In conclusion, as thoroughly indicated by Izre'el, the use of the EXT construction, and the use of particle *yeš* alone, is highly productive in MH, variegated both syntactically and pragmatically.

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