

## Performing “correct” Hebrew: Stylistic variation in reading tasks

Standard language ideologies about Hebrew are quite different from those typically observed in well-studied Anglophone contexts. Rather than conforming to prestigious speech norms of a social elite, the prescriptively correct variety of Hebrew prioritizes faithfulness to earlier attested forms of the language (Morag 1990, Mor 2016). As a result, socially prestigious and prescribed features are often at odds (Yaeger-Dror 1988, Gafter 2016), and even highly-educated Hebrew speakers typically use forms that are considered “incorrect” (Ravid 1995). Myhill (2004) argues that for Hebrew speakers, the notion of “correct Hebrew” is divorced from social prestige, as it is assumed that no one speaks “correctly”. This paper demonstrates, however, that some prescribed features that do not occur in spontaneous speech are nonetheless an important part of Hebrew speakers’ stylistic repertoires, as they are an expected community norm in reading styles.

This paper draws on a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews of 21 Hebrew speakers (ages 23-64) from the greater Tel Aviv area, contrasting a reading passage with spontaneous speech. The linguistic variables examined in this study are frequent clitics found in virtually any Hebrew passage: (ha), ‘the’, and (ve), ‘and’. In speech they are realized as [ha] and [ve] respectively, but prescriptive rules dictate a complicated set of morpho-phonological alternations (based on Biblical Hebrew): for (ha), alternation between [ha]~[he] was originally phonologically conditioned, but loss of historic vowel contrasts has rendered [he] lexically determined for Modern Hebrew speakers. (ve) has prescribed variants that are lexically determined (e.g. [va]), and others that are generalized phonologically (e.g. [u], which occurs before labials). Due to the ambiguous nature of Hebrew orthography, which lacks explicit vowels and other phonological cues, the alternations in (ha) and (ve) are not reflected in spelling. Therefore, use of the prescribed variants in reading is not prompted by orthographic cues, but rather, reflects style-shifting.

In the read speech data, all participants used the prescribed [u] variant of (ve) before labials, whereas, in spontaneous speech, all but one speaker had no [ve]~[u] alternation. Thus, prescribed features do play an important role in stylistic variation. However, speakers do not simply shift to “correct Hebrew” when reading: in contrast to phonologically-conditioned variants, lexically-determined variants showed far more variation in the reading passage (with 57% use of [va] and only 19% use of [he]). It appears, therefore, that speakers have more difficulty acquiring prescribed patterns of variation that are not governed by phonological environment, due to the limited use of these variants in everyday contexts.

While traditional accounts of stylistic variation interpret read and spontaneous speech along a unidimensional stylistic scale, such as standardness or “attention paid to speech” (Labov 1972), the findings in this study suggest that Hebrew speakers have a specialized reading register, which recruits a set of stylistic resources separate from those of spontaneous speech. This phenomenon highlights the nature of reading as a distinctive part of speakers’ stylistic repertoire, and as a form of performance that cannot be accounted for as simply a result of an increase in formality or attention.

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