

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

Roey J. Gafter  
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

3/9/2019

UKLVC12, Queen Mary University of London

# Overview of the talk



- Reading styles and the sociolinguistic interview
- Hebrew standard language ideologies and what this means for read speech
- Challenges posed by the Hebrew writing system
- Results from a Hebrew reading passage
- Discussion

# Reading tasks in the sociolinguistic interview

- The classic sociolinguistic interview identified two conversational styles (casual and formal) and three reading styles (reading passage, word list, minimal pairs).
- Labov's attention paid to speech model interprets them on a single continuum from most casual to most careful speech.

# Some issues with reading tasks



- But can spoken styles and read speech be interpreted along a single stylistic dimension?

# Some issues with reading tasks

- A broader issue: reading is a distinct social and cognitive activity, which may have its own specialized register and features (Milroy 1987).
- Stuart-Smith et al. (2013) report that in their examination of th-fronting among young Glaswegians, they found more of the non-standard [f] variant in read speech. “[T]heir readings had an air of performance, with some laughing and commenting on the words... A particular stance was being taken (Stuart-Smith et al 2013:513)

# Some issues with reading tasks



- The often reproduced pattern of a decrease in non-standard variants in reading tasks relies on culturally-specific constructions of the relationship between standardness, formality and reading.

# Some issues with reading tasks

- So should we avoid reading tasks?
- No, but we need to consider how to *interpret* them.
- Taking into account the self-conscious aspects of read speech, it can be a valuable source of data on specific specialized registers—but not necessarily as a proxy for formality.

# Case study: a Hebrew reading passage

- Using and interpreting a reading passage in Hebrew raises several issues:
  - ▣ The Israeli notion of “standard language”
  - ▣ Specific features of Hebrew writing
- The results are a clear demonstration of a specialized register.
- Which is worthy of investigation in its own right.





# Hebrew standard language ideologies

# Hebrew standard language ideologies

- In English-speaking communities, the notions of linguistic “correctness” and prestige are generally aligned (Myhill 2004).
- Modern Hebrew has an unusual history, as it was revived by speakers of other languages.
- Israeli prescriptive norms were not modeled to reflect the language of the cultural elite, but rather to imitate a reified biblical Hebrew (Yaeger-Dror 1988, Morag 1990).

# Hebrew standard language ideologies

- Myhill (2004) proposes to distinguish between different types of linguistic “correctness”:
  - Prestige correctness
  - Textual norm/prescriptive correctness
- The notion of correctness in Hebrew is based on the latter: even highly educated speakers are often not confident about what constitutes the correct form of common, everyday Hebrew words (Ravid 1995).

# Hebrew standard language ideologies

- Hebrew speakers generally assume that no one naturally speaks completely “correct” Hebrew – though they are exposed to it in some specialized registers, e.g. newscaster speech, liturgical reading etc.
- Thus Hebrew can be thought of as having a “diglossia” of sorts – “correct” Hebrew is not anyone’s native variety, nor is it expected in formal spoken settings.

# Hebrew standard language ideologies



- Hebrew certainly has linguistic features whose social evaluation is determined by the social prestige of their speakers (Gaftner 2016).
- However, those are often orthogonal to the perception of a variant as “correct” or not.

# Hebrew standard language ideologies

- For example, the verb *nisiti* ('I tried') has a variant form *niseti*, which is stigmatized and associated with low socio-economic class, but both forms are, in fact, prescriptively correct according to the Academy of Hebrew Language.
- Conversely, a form like *ve-matos* ('and a plane'), is not prescriptively correct – the prescribed form would be *u-matos* – but as speakers of all social strata regularly use it, it suffers no negative social evaluation.

# Prescriptive norms and stylistic variation

- Myhill's (2004) description of how "correctness" is understood by Hebrew speakers may give the impression that the prescriptive norm is entirely divorced from social evaluation, and does not play a role in stylistic variation.
- And that may be generally true for spontaneous speech, but when we consider read speech as a part of speakers' stylistic repertoire, the relationship to prescriptive norms becomes more complicated

# Example: the Hebrew pharyngeals

- The Hebrew pharyngeals /ʕ/ and /ħ/ have a complex social meaning:
  - They are mainly used by *Mizrahi* Jews (Jews of Middle Eastern descent), who tend to have lower SES, and as such are highly stigmatized.
  - They are considered “correct” due to their status as the historically conservative form.
- In Gafter (2016) I show that Mizrahi speakers use more pharyngeals in the word list task than in the spoken parts of the interview, in spite of their being stigmatized.



# A more general phenomenon

- Today I focus on two completely different variables, (ha) and (ve), which feature a set of prescribed morpho-phonological alternations that have received little attention in sociolinguistic scholarship on Modern Hebrew
- And show that some prescribed features that do not typically occur in spontaneous speech surface as an expected community norm in reading styles.



# The Hebrew writing system

# A very brief introduction to writing Hebrew

- Hebrew is written in a consonantal script – that is, typically the vowels are not marked.
- For example, the word *sefer* ‘book’ is written as s-f-r: ספר. The word *safar* ‘count’ is spelled exactly the same way.
- Which creates considerable ambiguity.

**Note:** Ambiguity is not as pervasive as it may seem, since four consonantal letters are also used to mark vowels in some words. For example, the letter ך, which marks the consonant /v/, can also be used for the vowel /u/. Thus, *tut* ‘strawberry’ is spelled t-v-t תות

# A very brief introduction to writing Hebrew

- Hebrew has a system of vowel diacritics that can be used to fully specify vowels:
- סְפֹרֹת

# A very brief introduction to writing Hebrew

- The vowel marking system was not constructed for Modern Hebrew, and does not match its phonology.
- Modern Hebrew has only five vowels (a e i o u), but the system makes far more distinctions (notice the two different diacritics for *e* in *sefer* סֵפֶר).
- Whereas some of the diacritics map to two different Modern Hebrew vowels.
- Used only in specialized domains (e.g. children's books, religious texts, language learning materials). General publications for adults never use the vowel diacritics.

# How this affects reading tasks

- The ambiguity in Hebrew script creates many potential locations for variation.
- In many cases in which the prescriptive norm differs from what most speakers do, the only difference is in the vowels, and therefore not written.
- Any Hebrew reading passage is likely to contain words in which the prescribed form is different from what speakers naturally say, with the spelling providing no clue as to what the prescribed form is.



# A Hebrew reading passage

# The participants



- 21 native Hebrew speakers (12 women and 9 men), from the greater Tel Aviv area.
- Ages: 23-64.
- All participants finished high school, 13 of them also have a college degree.



# The reading passage

- A short text, adapted from the novel *Momo* by Michael Ende (A young adult novel with a “fairytale” setting).
- Speakers were asked to read the passage from a printed sheet of paper, written without the vowel diacritics (as would be normal for adults).

# The reading passage

- I focus on two very common Hebrew clitics:
  - ▣ *ve* ‘and’
  - ▣ *ha* ‘the’
- Both are written with a single Hebrew consonant.
- Both of them have a set of alternate forms used in prescribed Hebrew in specific environments, which are not generally used in spontaneous speech (Rosen 1963).
- In all cases, the alternate forms do not affect the spelling.

# The reading passage

be-yamim kdumim kdumim, bi-zman še-bney **(ha)**-adam od  
dibru be-safot axerot legmarey, kvar hayu ba-aratsot  
**(ha)**-xamot arim gdolot **(ve)**-mefoarot. hayu šam armonot šel  
melaxim **(ve)**-keysarim im rexovot rexavim **(ve)**-mikdašim  
mehudarim. alfey šanim xalfu me-az **(ve)**-**(ha)**-arim **(ha)**-gdolot  
me-**(ha)**-zman hahu nehersu **(ve)**-hitporeru. aval po **(ve)**-šam  
adain ešar limtso kama amudim atikim o srid xoma  
me-**(ha)**-yamim hahem.

*Green – prescribed form matches the common form*

*Orange – prescribed form differs from common form*

# The variable (ve) – ‘and’

- The clitic (ve) – ‘and’
- Written with the Hebrew letter ו with no space between it and the adjacent word.
- Prescriptive rules:
  - ▣ [ve] Generally (*ve-Roey* ‘and Roey’)
  - ▣ [u] Before labials or consonant clusters: (*u-Mira* ‘and Mira’)
  - ▣ [va] Before **specific** words with initial stress, in certain set phrases: *va (basar va-dam*, ‘flesh and blood’)
  - ▣ [vi] Before ye where the e is an epenthetic vowel (*yeladim* ‘children’, *vi-ladim*)

# The variable (ve) – ‘and’

- All these forms are spelled the same way.
- In spontaneous spoken Hebrew, [ve] is the common form used in all environments.
- What happens in the reading passage?

# Results for (ve): [u] environments

- The passage included two instances of (ve) preceding a labial, in which the prescriptive pronunciation is [u], that is – a mismatch between the common form and the prescribed one:

	<b>Prescriptively correct</b>	<b>Common form</b>
(ve)-mefoarot ‘and fancy’	<b>u</b> -mefoarot	<b>ve</b> -mefoarot
(ve)-mikdašim ‘and temples’	<b>u</b> -mikdašim	<b>ve</b> -mikdašim

# Results for (ve): [u] environments

	<b>Prescriptively correct</b>	<b>Common form</b>
(ve)-mefoarot ‘and fancy’	<b>u</b> -mefoarot	<b>ve</b> -mefoarot
(ve)-mikdašim ‘and temples’	<b>u</b> -mikdašim	<b>ve</b> -mikdašim

- In the first word, *all* speakers realized (ve) as [u].
- In the second word, all but four speakers realized (ve) as [u], and four realized it as [ve].

# Results for (ve): [u] environments

- Perhaps there is more [ve]~[u] variation than we assumed, and this alternation is productive in spontaneous speech?
- No! Throughout the spoken component of the interview, 20 out of 21 speakers have **no** variation in (ve) before labials, and do not use [u].
- Only one speaker (the second oldest one) features [u] in her spontaneous speech (and has other uncommon features as well).



# Results for (ve): [u] environments

- Speakers all use the prescribed form even though virtually all of them do not use in spontaneous speech.
- Since [ve] and [u] are spelled the same way, this cannot be attributed directly to the orthography and is genuinely a style shift.

# A dedicated reading style



- This does not pattern like moving along a continuum of formality: there is virtually no variation in spontaneous speech, nor between speakers.
- Rather, it patterns like a dichotomy: not just a rise in formality but a switch to a dedicated register.

# Results for (ve): [ve] environments

- How do we know speakers are not just assuming that [u] is the “reading form”?
- The passage included three instances of (ve) in which the prescriptive pronunciation is [ve], that is – the common form happens to match the prescribed one:

	<b>Prescriptively correct</b>	<b>Common form</b>
(ve)-keysarim ‘and emperors’	ve-keysarim	ve-keysarim
(ve)-hitporeru ‘and (they) collapsed’	ve-hitporeru	ve-hitporeru
(ve)-(ha)-arim ‘and the cities’	ve-he-arim	ve-ha-arim

# Results for (ve): [ve] environments

- In all but two cases, speakers used the expected *ve* in these words.
- Speakers not simply using [u] in reading but are following the prescribed alternation.
- Two speakers used [u] in *ve-keysarim* (that is, in one of the three [ve] environments).
- These two speakers are not following the prescriptive rule, and have a “hyper-correction” – interpreting [u] as appropriate for reading (though they still use mostly [ve] in [ve] environments).

# Results for (ve): [va] environments

- The passage one instances of (ve), in which the prescriptive pronunciation is [va] (lexically determined), that is – a mismatch between the common form and the “correct” one:

	<b>Prescriptively correct</b>	<b>Common form</b>
po (ve)-šam ‘here and there’	po <b>va</b> -šam	po <b>ve</b> -šam

- 12 speakers (57%) used the prescribed [va]. The remaining 9 used the common [ve].

# Why more [u] than [va]?

- I propose that all speakers are attempting the “correct” reading style, as evinced by their use of [u].
- The conditioning of [u] is a simple phonological generalization (before labials) that is easy to acquire, even if it is not one’s native variety.
- The conditioning of [va] is lexically determined, and therefore, its application is more idiosyncratic among speakers.

# The variable (ha) – ‘the’

- The clitic (ha) – ‘the’
- Written with the letter ה with no space between it and the adjacent word.

# Prescriptive rules for (ha)

- From the website of The Academy of the Hebrew language

ה' הידיעה

ברגיל ה' הידיעה מנוקדת בפתח ואחריה בא דגש, כגון הבית, הילדה, הפרדס, המלך.  
לפני אהחע"ר יש לה' הידיעה ניקוד מיוחד כמפורט בטבלה:

דוגמאות	לפני	הניקוד
האור, הרעם העב, העבדים, הערמה	א, ר ע (בדרך כלל)	ה
ההד, ההסבר החלום, החכמה	ה (בדרך כלל) ח (בדרך כלל)	ה
ההרים, הענן החתן, החרפים	ה, ע (קמץ גדול) בהברה לא מוטעמת ח (קמץ גדול), ח	ה

*Even without knowing Hebrew you can tell it's complicated...*



# The variable (ha) – ‘the’

- Prescriptive rules:
  - ▣ [ha] Generally (*ha-yeled* ‘the boy’)
  - ▣ [he] the form *he* appears before *some* words that start with a small set of consonants (glottals and pharyngeals). Its appearance is conditioned by a complex set of rules that are based on the vowel length distinction that does not exist in Modern Hebrew → for Modern Hebrew speakers, it is entirely lexically determined

# Results for (ha): [he] environments

- The passage included one instance of (ha) in which the prescribed pronunciation is [he], that is a mismatch between the common form and the prescribed one:

	<b>Prescriptively correct</b>	<b>Common form</b>
(ha)-arim ‘the cities’	<b>he</b> -arim	<b>ha</b> -arim

- Only four speakers produced [he], the rest produced the common form [ha].

# Results for (ha): [ha] environments

- The passage included five instances of (ha), in which the prescribed pronunciation is [ha], and therefore matches the common form.
- All speakers produced these as [ha], as expected.

# Results for (ha)



- We see some use of the prescribed forms.
- Though far fewer than in the case of (ve).

# Differences between (ve) and (ha)

- Once again, for (ve), the [u] variant is determined by a simple phonological generalization.
- Even speakers who do not use [u] in their spontaneous speech (i.e., virtually all speakers), can easily acquire the perspective pattern and use it for certain styles.
- For (ha) the alternation is lexical. Due to limited exposure to the prescriptive patterns, speakers probably do not know the lexical set. Therefore it is harder to incorporate into the reading style.



# Discussion

# What we see in the reading passage

- Prescribed features do play a role in stylistic variation.
- The results suggest that speakers were using a particular reading style, that makes use of features that are virtually non-existent in their spontaneous speech.
- The reading style is clearly formal, but is hard to arrange along a single stylistic continuum of formality as the spoken interview.

# What we see in the reading passage

- The sharp divide cannot be attributed to the orthography (as the variants are spelled the same way), but it does have everything to do with reading.
- What speakers do in the reading passage is a linguistic performance specific to reading:
- A specialized register that is part of speakers' stylistic repertoire



# The Hebrew “reading style”

- The reading style incorporates features of “correct” Hebrew but is not identical to it:
  - ▣ Both (he) and (ve) have “correct” variants that are not used in common speech, but only the [u] realization of (ve) is a consistent feature of the reading style.
  - ▣ The “correct” patterns of (he) and (ve) differ in how easy they are to acquire.

# The Hebrew “reading style”

---

- Further questions arise:
  - ▣ Which other features of “correct” Hebrew often surface in read speech and which do not?

# The Hebrew “reading style”

- Further questions arise:
  - ▣ How common is this reading style?
  - ▣ The entire sample was using [u], and therefore the norm is clearly widespread.
  - ▣ Is that true of Hebrew speakers in general? Would we expect more variation in a sample with a more diverse set of education levels?

# The Hebrew “reading style”

- Different reading styles for different types of reading?
  - Were the results affected by the choice of text? (the “fairytale” opening)? Is this a specific “storybook” style?
  - What happens in other genres of text?



Questions?

# References

- Gafter, RJ. 2016. What's a stigmatized variant doing in the word list? Authenticity in reading styles and the Hebrew pharyngeals. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3: 337-348.
- Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Milroy, L. 1987. *Observing and analysing natural language*. Malden, Massachusetts/ Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Morag, S. 1990. Modern Hebrew: Some sociolinguistic aspects. *Cathedra* 56: 70–92. [in Hebrew]
- Myhill, J. 2004. A parameterized view of the concept of ‘correctness’. *Multilingua* 23: 389-416.
- Ravid, D. 1995. *Language Change in Child and Adult Hebrew: A Psycholinguistic Perspective*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.
- Stuart-Smith, D., Pryce, G., Timmins, C. & Gunter, B. 2013. Television can also be a factor in language change: Evidence from an urban dialect. *Language* 89: 501-536.
- Yaeger-Dror, M. 1988. The influence of changing group vitality on convergence toward a dominant norm. *Language and Communication* 8: 235–305.