COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ‘ISRAELI HEBREW’*

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ABSTRACT

‘Hebrew’ is one of the official languages – with Arabic and English – of the State of Israel, established in 1948 on 20,770 km² in the ‘Middle’ East. Israeli emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Its symbolic first native speaker, Itamar Ben-Yehuda, began speaking in 1886. Israeli is a fusional synthetic language, with non-concatenative discontinuous morphemes realised by vowel infixation. This typological paper demonstrates that the typical Israeli comparative construction involves a copula or verbless clause construction, with the ‘Parameter’ as copula complement (CC) or as a verbless clause complement (VCC). However, there is another mono-clausal comparative construction, in which the ‘Index’ of comparison is the main verb in an extended intransitive clause. Future research would demonstrate that Israeli comparatives correspond with Yiddish and ‘Standard Average European’, although the forms used are Hebrew.

Keywords: Hebrew, Israel, Basic Linguistic Theory, linguistics, Jewish language and culture, typology, superlative, comparative, extended intransitive, grammar, forms versus patterns, Israeli, Yiddish, Standard Average European, fusional, synthetic, discontinuous morphemes, infixation, complementation, clauses, analyticization, allative case, construct-state, ambiguity

1. INTRODUCTION

‘Hebrew’ is legally one of the official languages of the State of Israel. Arabic and English also are official languages, and this reflects, for Arabic, demographic realities, and for English, the State of Israel being the successor state of British-ruled Palestine, itself one out of several successor polities of the Ottoman empire. Yet, the statement that ‘Hebrew’ is the official language, as well as the main spoken language, in Israel, is misleading, in that the language spoken and written is ‘Israeli Hebrew’. In fact, I usually refer to it as ‘Israeli’ (tout court) (Zuckermann 1999, 2003), because it has very distinctive features with respect to earlier historical strata of Hebrew.

Israeli (henceforth ‘Israeli’ or ‘Israeli Hebrew’) emerged prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Its symbolic first native speaker, Itamar Ben-Yehuda, the revivalist Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s son, began speaking in approx. 1886.

This Basic Linguistic Theory typological paper demonstrates that the typical Israeli comparative construction involves a copula or verbless clause construction, with the ‘Parameter’ (see below) as copula complement (CC) or as a verbless clause complement (VCC). All of these terms will be explained below. However, there is another mono-clausal comparative construction, in which the ‘Index’ (see below) of comparison is the main verb in an extended intransitive clause.

* Bernard Comrie and Ephraim Nissan read a draft of this paper and provided invaluable suggestions for improvement. A note on the transcription: whereas ́ is primary stress, ̀ is secondary stress. If a stress is not mentioned in a bisyllabic word, it means that there are two possible stresses

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2. GRAMMATICAL PROFILE

Israeli (a.k.a. ‘Israeli Hebrew’) – just like Hebrew (e.g. Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew) – is a fusional synthetic language. It is a fusional language since it has morphemes which simultaneously encode several meanings – cf. Latin *dominus* (‘lord’), whose suffix -*us* ‘fuses’ the meanings of masculine, singular and nominative. It is a synthetic language as it has a high morpheme-per-word ratio and it uses non-concatenative discontinuous morphemes realised by vowel infixation. Consider *yoháv* ‘love:3msg fut’, i.e. ‘(he) will love’; *mitahévet* ‘fall.in.love:fsg pres’, i.e. ‘(she) is falling in love’. (A list of abbreviations used in this paper can be found after the bibliography.)

However, Israeli is much more analytic than (Biblical/Mishnaic) Hebrew. Whereas the Hebrew phrase for ‘my grandfather’ was *sav-í* ‘grandfather-1poss’, in Israeli it is *sába shel-ì* ‘grandfather-1sg’. Still, Israeli sometimes uses the Semitic feature known as ‘construct-state’ (Israeli *smikhút*), in which two nouns are combined, the first being modified or possessed by the second. For example, *repúblíka-t banánot*, lit. ‘Republic bananas’, refers to ‘banana Republic’. However, unlike in Hebrew, the construct-state is not highly productive in Israeli. Compare the Hebrew construct-state *em ha-yéled* ‘mother def-child’ with the more analytic Israeli phrase *ha-íma shel ha-yéled* ‘def-mother gen def-child’, both meaning ‘the mother of the child’, i.e. ‘the child’s mother’.

Israeli is a head-marking language. It is nominative-accusative at the syntactic level and partially also at the morphological level. As opposed to Biblical Hebrew – whose constituent order is VAO / VS(E) – but like Standard European and English, the usual constituent order of Israeli is AVO / SV(E). Thus, if there is no case marking, one can resort to the constituent order. Israeli is characterized by an asymmetry between definite Os and indefinite Os. There is an accusative marker, *et*, only before a definite O (mostly a definite noun or personal name). *Et-ha* is currently undergoing fusion and reduction to become *ta*. Consider *taví li* et *ha-séfer* ‘give:2msg imp (puristically fut) dat-1sg acc def-book’ (i.e. ‘Give me the book!’), where *et*, albeit syntactically a case-marker, is a preposition, and *ha* is a definite article. This sentence is realised phonetically as *taví li ta-séfer*.

2.1 Nouns

Israeli nouns show number, normally only singular and plural. Each noun is either m(asculine) or f(eminine), the latter often being created by adding a suffix to the unmarked masculine. For instance, whereas *mazkír* is ‘male secretary’, *mazkirá* is ‘female secretary’ (note the addition of -*a*). Similarly, whilst *profésor* is ‘male professor’, *profésorit* is ‘female professor’. Pronouns have ‘case forms’ consisting of a preposition plus a suffix: nominative (e.g. *aní* ‘I’), accusative (*otí* ‘me’), dative (*li* ‘to me’) and genitive (*shelí* ‘my’). However, NPs which are not pronouns do not bear case marking. The only exceptions are the above-mentioned accusative marker *et* (or *ta*), and the lexicalized allative (‘to/towards’) case (which, serendipitously, is based on the historical accusative case, see Weingreen 1959), e.g. *báit* ‘house’ > *ha-báyt-a* ‘to the house’; *yerushaláim* ‘Jerusalem’ > *yerushaláym-a* ‘to Jerusalem’; *tsafón* ‘north’ > *tsafón-a* ‘to the north’. New allative phrases, e.g. *tel avív-a* ‘to Tel Aviv’, are not used unless one is trying to sound flowery or jocular.

Adjectives agree in number, gender and definiteness with the nouns they modify, e.g. *ha-yéled ha-gadól*, lit. ‘def-boy def-big’, i.e. ‘the big boy’; *yelad-ím gdol-ím*, lit. ‘boy-mpl big-mpl’, i.e. ‘big boys’.

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1 The term ‘Standard Average European’, a.k.a. SAE, was first introduced by Whorff (1941: 25) and recently received more attention by Haspelmath (1998, 2001) and Bernini and Ramat (1996) – cf. ‘European Sprachbund’ in Kuteva (1998).
2.2 Verbs

As opposed to Biblical Hebrew, which had only a perfect-imperfect distinction, Israeli has three tenses: past, present and future. In the past and future, verbal forms differ according to gender, number and 1st, 2nd and 3rd person. However, in the present tense, verbs are only conjugated according to gender and number and there is no person distinction. The historical reason is that the forms of the Israeli present can be traced back to the Hebrew participle, which is less complex than the historical perfect and imperfect forms.

Verbs are transitive, intransitive or ambitransitive (labile). Ambitransitivity is usually of the S=A type. Whereas S is an intransitive subject, i.e. the subject of an intransitive verb, A is a transitive subject. For example, in the Israeli sentence dzhúlyo shatá etmòl ‘Giulio drank yesterday’ (cf. dzhúlyo shatá etmòl bíra ‘Giulio drank yesterday beer’), the object of ‘drinking’ is not mentioned. However, owing to Americanization, there are more and more ambitransitive verbs of the S=O type (O being the object of a transitive verb), e.g. ha-séfer mokhér tov ‘The-book sells well’ (cf. grísham mókher et ha-séfer tov ‘Grisham sells ACC the-book o well’); yésh po máshehu she-meríakh ra ‘There is here something that-smells bad’ (cf. aní meríakh po máshehu ra ‘I smell here something o bad’).

2.3 Clauses

The main clause in Israeli consists of (a) clause-initial peripheral markers, e.g. discourse markers, e.g. ‘In my opinion […]’; (b) NP(s) (i.e. noun-phrases such as ‘the king of Spain’) or complement clause(s); (c) a predicate – either verbal, copular or verbless; (d) clause-final peripheral elements, e.g. discourse markers. The only obligatory element is the predicate, e.g. higáti ‘arrive:1sgPAST’, i.e. ‘I arrived’. Sentences (1), (2) and (3) are examples of a verbal, copular and verbless clause, respectively. The notation [ester]A means that Esther is the subject of a transitive verb, [akhlá]V means that akhlá ‘[she] ate’ is a verb, and so forth. (A list of abbreviations can be found after the bibliography.)

(1) אסתר אテル תפקת.
‘Esther ate an apple.’

(2) אסתר והד אשת שלי.
‘Esther is my sister.’

(3) אסתר חכמה.
[ester]VCS [[khakham-á]VCC]
[Esther]VCS [[clever-f]VCC]
‘Esther is clever.’

There are many types of subordinate clause, e.g. adverbial (denoting comparison, time, place, condition, concession, reason, result, goal, state), adjectival/relative, nominal/complement. For a detailed discussion of complementation clauses in Israeli, see Zuckermann (2006b). On reported speech in Israeli, see Zuckermann (2006c).
3. COMPARATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

3.1 Type A1

This type of comparative construction involves a copula or verbless clause construction, with the Parameter as copula complement (CC) or as a verbless clause complement (VCC) – see Dixon (2004: 4-8).

3.1.1 ‘More’

The following is the unmarked, most common comparative construction:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
[dáni]_{VCS} & [yotér \text{ gadól}]_{VCC} & [mi-\text{yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[Danny]_{VCS} & [more \text{ big}]_{VCC} & [from-\text{Yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[\text{COMPAREE}]_{VCS} & [\text{INDEX PARAMETER}]_{VCC} & [\text{MARK-STANDARD}]_{PERI}
\end{array}
\]

‘Danny is older/bigger than Yossi.’

The Comparee (dáni ‘Danny’) is a Verbless Clause Subject (VCS). The Parameter (gadól ‘big’) and the Index (yotér ‘more’), which modifies the Parameter, constitute the Verbless Clause Complement (VCC). The Standard (yósi ‘Yossi’) is a Peripheral Argument (PERI), the grammatical function of which is marked by the Mark mi- ‘from’.

It is possible to have zero in the Index slot, as follows, but this is literary and sounds high register:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
[dáni]_{VCS} & [gadól]_{VCC} & [mi-\text{yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[Danny]_{VCS} & [big]_{VCC} & [from-\text{Yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[\text{COMPAREE}]_{VCS} & [\text{INDEX PARAMETER}]_{VCC} & [\text{MARK-STANDARD}]_{PERI}
\end{array}
\]

‘Danny is older/bigger than Yossi.’

The Mark can also be me-ashér, lit. ‘from that’ (ashér is usually a relativizer), as follows:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
[dáni]_{VCS} & [yotér \text{ gadól}]_{VCC} & [me-\text{ashér} \text{ yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[Danny]_{VCS} & [more \text{ big}]_{VCC} & [from-\text{REL.} \text{Yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[\text{COMPAREE}]_{VCS} & [\text{INDEX PARAMETER}]_{VCC} & [\text{MARK STANDARDS}]_{PERI}
\end{array}
\]

‘Danny is older/bigger than Yossi.’

It is, in fact, possible to have a copular clause, as follows, but this is not common:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
[dáni]_{CS} & [hu]_{COP} & [yotér \text{ gadól}]_{CC} & [me-\text{ashér} \text{ yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[Danny]_{CS} & [\text{COP:MSG}]_{COP} & [more \text{ big}]_{CC} & [from-\text{REL.} \text{Yósi}]_{PERI} \\
[\text{COMPAREE}]_{CS} & [\text{INDEX PARAMETER}]_{CC} & [\text{MARK STANDARDS}]_{PERI}
\end{array}
\]

‘Danny is older/bigger than Yossi.’

In formal speech, the Index and the Parameter can switch places in Sentences (4), (6) and (7), for example:
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Negation appears before the Index or the Parameter, whichever comes first:

(8) [dání]_{VCS} [gadol]_{VCC} [mi-yósi]_{PERI}

‘Danny is older/bigger than Yossi.’

(9) [dání]_{VCS} [lo]_{VCC} [mi-yósi]_{PERI}

‘Danny is not older/bigger than Yossi.’

The following matrix summarizes the possibilities:

(11) COMPAREE (COP) (NEG) INDEX PARAMETER INDEX MARK STANDARD
dání (hu) (lo) yotér gadól mi-/meashér yósi
dání (hu) (lo) yotér gadól yotér mi- yósi
dání (hu) (lo) yotér gadól mi- yósi

‘Danny is (not) older/bigger than Yossi.’

The Compare and Standard are usually expressed by NPs, mostly a definite noun or personal name, and sometimes a pronoun or without an explicit mention, as follows:

(12) [tafsík]_{S} [yotér tsadík]_{CC} [me-ha-apifyór]_{PERI}

‘Stop being more righteous than the pope!’

But they can also be an abstract noun, as in the following verbal clause, where the Parameter is an extended intransitive verb (rather than an adjective):

(13) [inteligéntsya rigshi-tʃ]_{S} [ozér-et habré yotér]_{VP} [me-áy kyú]_{PERI}

‘Emotional intelligence is much more helpful than I.Q.’

In the above sentence the Index (modified by habré ‘much’) follows the Parameter. In such a case, negation will precede the Parameter. Consider the following sentence, with the Parameter being an adverb (‘fast’) of an intransitive verb (‘run’):
That said, in colloquial speech the negator can come just before the Index, i.e. between *yarúts* ‘will run’ and *yotér* ‘more’. In the following sentence – where there is no flexibility with regards to the location of the Index – the transitive verb *ohév* ‘like’ can be analysed either as part of the Comparee or as the Parameter:

\[(15)\]

\[
\text{aní ohév} \quad \text{shawármá} \quad \text{yotér} \quad \text{mi- falafel}
\]

\[
\text{I love:msg}\text{PRES} \quad \text{shawarma} \quad \text{more} \quad \text{from-falafel}
\]

\[
\text{COMPAREE} \quad \text{INDEX} \quad \text{MARK-STANDARD}
\]

‘I like shawarma [Middle-eastern döner kebab] more than falafel [ground spiced chickpeas shaped into balls and fried].’

Occasionally, the Parameter can be a noun:

\[(16)\]

\[
\text{dání} \quad \text{hu} \quad \text{yotér} \quad \text{ben-adám} \quad \text{mi-móti}
\]

\[
\text{Danny} \quad \text{COP:msg} \quad \text{more} \quad \text{person} \quad \text{from-Motti}
\]

\[
\text{COMPAREE} \quad \text{INDEX} \quad \text{PARAMETER} \quad \text{MARK-STANDARD}
\]

‘Danny is more of a ‘mentsh’ [humane, gentlemanly, honest…] than Motti.’

In speech, the Index and Parameter often precede the Comparee:

\[(17)\]

\[
\text{yotér} \quad \text{tov} \quad \text{shipúts-nik} \quad \text{atsbaní} \quad \text{mi-khantarísh}
\]

\[
\text{more} \quad \text{good} \quad \text{repair-nik} \quad \text{crusty} \quad \text{from-crummy}
\]

\[
\text{INDEX} \quad \text{PARAMETER} \quad \text{-------COMPAREE-------} \quad \text{MARK-STANDARD}
\]

‘Better a ‘crusty’/nervous builder than a ‘crummy’/mediocre one.’

Note the ellipsis: *shipúts-nik* ‘builder’ does not appear in the Standard.

### 3.1.2 ‘Less’

Israeli ‘less’ constructions are very similar to ‘more’ ones. Just as in the case of *yotér* ‘more’, it is possible for the Mark to be *me-ashér*. The Index *pakhót* ‘less’ can occur after the Parameter but it is not common.

\[(18)\]

\[
\text{[dání]} \text{VCS} \quad \text{[pakhót]} \text{VCC} \quad \text{[mukhshár]} \text{VCC} \quad \text{[mi- / me-ashér]} \text{PERI} \quad \text{[yósi]} \text{PERI}
\]

\[
\text{[Danny]} \text{VCS} \quad \text{[less]} \text{VCC} \quad \text{[talented]} \text{VCC} \quad \text{[from / from-REL]} \text{PERI} \quad \text{[Yossi]} \text{PERI}
\]

\[
\text{[COMPAREE]} \text{VCS} \quad \text{[INDEX]} \text{VCC} \quad \text{[PARAMETER]} \text{VCC} \quad \text{[-------MARK-------]} \text{PERI} \quad \text{[STANDARD]} \text{PERI}
\]

‘Danny is less talented than Yossi.’

The Parameter can be a noun, as in the following existential copular clause (Note the ellipsis: the Parameter and part of the Standard do not reappear after the Mark):
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[be-[pigúa ha-hitabdút]CONSTR etmól be-moskvá]PERI
[in-[terror.attack DEF-suicide]CONSTR yesterday in-Moscow]PERI

[-----------------------------------------------COMPAREE-----------------------------------------------]PERI

[hayú]COP [pakhót harug-ím]CS [me-ashér be-ber shéva]PERI
[INDEX PARAMETER]CS [MARK STANDARD]PERI

‘In yesterday’s suicide terror attack in Moscow there were fewer killed than in Beer Sheva.’

The Parameter can consist of a transitive verb:

(20) ha-mélekh abdála medabér aravít pakhót tov me-anglít
def-king Abdullah speak:msg Arabic less good from-English
PARAMETER→ COMPAREE INDEX ←PARAM. MARK-STAND.
‘King Abdullah speaks Arabic less well than English.’

Obviously, the Comparee here is ‘Arabic’ rather than ‘King Abdullah’. Note the ellipsis: medabér ‘speaks’ does not reappear after the Mark.

3.1.3 ‘The same as’

Israeli ‘the same as’ constructions are structurally different from ‘more’ or ‘less’ constructions. They lack an Index, the sameness being expressed by the Mark kmo, lit. ‘as, like’.

(21) [dáni]VCS [mukhshár]VCC [kmo yoší]PERI
[Danny]VCS [talented]VCC [as Yossi]PERI
‘Danny is as talented as Yossi.’

The Mark can be followed by a modifier such as be-érekh ‘approximately’ (lit. ‘in-value’), kimá ‘almost’ or pakhót o yatér ‘more or less’ (lit. ‘less or more’); or by augmentative adverbs such as bi-dyúk (puristically be-diyúk) ‘exactly’ (lit. ‘in exactness’) and mamáš ‘exactly’ (‘substantially’):

(22) [dáni]VCS [mukhshár]VCC [mamáš/bidyúk kmo yoší]PERI
[Danny]VCS [talented]VCC [exactly as Yossi]PERI
‘Danny is exactly as talented as Yossi.’

Instead of using the Mark kmo ‘as’, an Israeli formal writer could use the rare ke- ‘as’:

(23) [dáni]VCS [mukhshár]VCC [ke-yoší]PERI
‘Danny is as talented as Yossi.’
When the Parameter is a noun, the inflectable Index *ot-ô*, lit. ‘ACC-msg’, meaning ‘the same’, can be used:

(24)

le-barák obáma yesh *ot-ô* sikúy le-natséakh
to-Barack Obama EXIS.COP ACC-msg chance:msg INF-win

kmo le-híle r klínto
as to-Hillary Clinton

‘Barack Obama has the same chance of winning as Hillary Clinton.’

The expression *be-ot-á midá*, lit. ‘in-ACC-fsg measure:fsg’, i.e. ‘in the same measure’, is often used the ‘the same as’ constructions.

3.2 Type A1-si

In an appropriate discourse context the Standard can be omitted in ‘more’ and ‘less’ constructions (but obviously not in ‘the same as’ constructions). Dixon (2004: 8-9) calls this ‘Type-A1-si’ since the Standard is implicit. Consider the following sentence:

(25)

ze yotér yafe
DEM more beautiful

‘This is more beautiful.’

The Standard is implicit but understood from context.

3.3 Extended Intransitive ‘Type C’

As opposed to Type A, where the Index is a modifier to the Parameter, Israeli uses – albeit significantly less frequently – a comparative construction in which the Index is the main extended intransitive verb in a clause, with Comparee and Standard being its subject and indirect object arguments. This can be categorized under Dixon’s ‘Type C’ (2004: 15-17) with one modification: in Israeli the Comparee and Standard are not A and O arguments but rather S and E arguments. The Parameter is usually expressed immediately after the verb, as following:

(26)

[Liári fránklin] olé be-rashlanut-ô al [dzhónatan pólard]
Larry Franklin exceed:msgpres in-negligence-3msg on Jonathan Pollard

‘Larry Franklin [U.S. Air Force Reserve colonel who has pleaded guilty to passing information about U.S. policy towards Iran to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)] exceeds Jonathan Pollard [convicted Israeli spy and former U. S. Naval civilian intelligence analyst] in his negligence.’

Besides the preposition requirement (*al* ‘on’), the indirect object in such comparative construction cannot be the target of passivization.
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Punningly comparing the Yarkon River (south of Ramat Aviv, lit. ‘plateau of spring’, a suburb of Tel Aviv) and Benny Begin, the son of Menachem Begin, former Israeli Prime Minister, an Israeli could say the following:

(27)

af ekhád me-hèm lo megíya le-[ramá́t avív]CONSTR
NEG one from-they NEG arrive:msgPRES to-[Ramat/level Aviv/his.father]CONSTR
‘None of them arrives at Ramat Aviv / at the level of his father.’

Note that the Israeli words for ‘spring’ (avív as in Ramat Aviv, modelled upon Tel Aviv, the latter being Nahum Sokolov’s witty translation of Herzl’s Altneuland (the ancient tel ‘hill’ with the new avív ‘spring’) – see Yadin and Zuckermann forthcoming, as well as Ezekiel 3:15) and ‘his father’ are homophonous.

4. SUPERLATIVE

Although the Parameters used in both are similar, Israeli comparative and superlative constructions behave in a different way syntactically. As seen above, a comparative adjective typically makes up the whole of a verbless clause complement argument, and relates two participants of equal status. A superlative adjective, on the other hand, modifies a head noun within an NP which includes a definite article. It effectively identifies a unique individual, as in the following sentence:

(28)

hayíti ha-yéled hakhí gavóá b-a-kitá
be:1mPAST DEF-boy most tall in-DEF-class
COMPAREE INDEX PARAMETER MARK STANDARD
‘I was the tallest child in the class.’

The Mark and the Standard are optional, see the following sentence which lacks them:

(29)

pinkhas hu ha-kanár hakhí tov
Pinchas COP:msg DEF-violinist most good
COMPAREE PARAMETER INDEX ←PARAMETER
‘Pinchas is the best violinist.’

Whilst hakhí ‘(the) most’ (historically, ‘DEF-REL’, i.e. ‘the that’) is the most common Index, in high register one can use be-yotér, lit. ‘in more’, as well. Note that yotér is the common Index in the ‘more’ constructions (see above). However, whereas hakhí has to come before the Parameter (which has to have an indefinite adjective), be-yotér has to follow the Parameter (which has to have a definite adjective), as follows:

(30)

pinkhas hu ha-kanár ha-tóv be-yotér (b-a-olám)
Pinchas COP:msg DEF-violinist DEF-good in-more (in-DEF-world)
COMPAREE ------------PARAMETER INDEX MARK STANDARD
‘Pinchas is the best violinist (in the world).’

Elsewhere, i.e. not when modifying the adjective of a definite Parameter in a superlative construction, be-yotér functions as an augmentative adverb and means simply ‘very’ – see the following non-superlative/comparative sentence:

Melilah 2006/2, p.9
As opposed to the most common augmentative adverb *meód* ‘very’ which can either precede or follow the adjective, *be-yotér* can only occur after the adjective it modifies. Coming back to the superlative, it is, in fact, possible to omit the Index *be-yotér*. However, in such a case the Mark and the Standard must appear (and obviously the adjective of the Parameter must be definite):

(32)

Pennahas hu ha-kanár ha-tov b-olam
Pinchas cop:msg def-violinist def-good in-def-world

‘Pinchas is the best violinist in the world.’

The copula is usually required unless it follows a pronoun. However, superlative constructions appear in verbal sentences too, in which case the Index has to be *hakhí* ‘(the) most’. Consider the following sentence, with an intransitive verb:

(33)

Pennahas menagen hakhí tov b-olam
Pinchas play:msgprespion most good in-def-world

‘Pinchas plays the best in the world.’

5. INHERENTLY COMPARATIVE LEXEMES

There are several Israeli adjectives, verbs and nouns which are inherently, *ipso facto*, comparative. In structural terms, they involve a fusion of Parameter and Index.

5.1 ‘More’

The adjective *adíf* ‘preferable, better’ is very often used in comparison (more than *muadáf* ‘preferred, favoured’):

(34)

adíf meukhar me-ashér from-rel NEG time (cf. German *niemal* ‘never’)

‘Better late than never.’

In colloquial speech, one can often hear ‘tautological’, double comparatives:

(35)

ze yotér adíf
de:msg more better

‘This is more better.’

i.e. ‘This is better.’
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An inherently comparative verb is le-haadif ‘to prefer’:

(36) khí-r-nik-im amiti-ím maadif-ím milkhamá al shálom
    unit-infantry-nik-mpl real-mpl prefer:PRES-mpl war on peace

INDEX+PARAMETER COMPAREE MARK STAND.

‘Real infantry soldiers prefer war to peace.’

An inherently comparative noun is adifút ‘preference’:

(37) hi notén-et adifút le-mi she-mégía kódem
    she give:PRES-fsg preference to-who REL-arrive:msgPRES previously/first

‘She gives preference to those who arrive earlier.’

5.2 ‘Less’

Consider the adjective nakhút ‘inferior’:

(38) ha-robot nakhút me-ha-adám
    DEF-robot inferior from-DEF-man

COMPAREE INDEX+PARAMETER MARK-STANDARD

‘The robot is inferior to man.’

Often, the ‘less’ meaning results from negating the verb le-hishtavót ‘to be equal (to), to compare (with) [intransitive]’:

(39) rúsa lo mishtavá le-sín be-[kádúr Áf]CONSTR
    Russia NEG be.equal:fsgPRES to-China in-[ball:m fly:msgPARTIC]CONSTR

‘Russia is not as good as China in volleyball.’

With the right intonation (stressing mishtavá), this sentence can actually mean that ‘Russia is far below China in volleyball’.

The root of this verb, הושע, is sh.v.h. ‘equal, compare’, yields many inherently comparative lexical items such as the verb le-hashvót ‘to compare’. Consider the expression be-hashvaá le- ‘in comparison with’:

(40) be-hashvaá le-shikágó, ha-[mézeg avír] CONSTR
    in-comparison to-Chicago, DEF-[temperament air]CONSTR (i.e. ‘weather’)

be-mélborno hu ‘khalóm’
in-Melbourne COP dream

‘Compared with Chicago, the weather in Melbourne is a dream.’
5.3 ‘The same as’

The adjective *shavé* means ‘equal’, but when accompanied by *yotér* ‘more’, it means ‘worth more’. Consider the following sentence from George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945):

(41) kol ha-khay-ót shav-ót, akh yesh-nán kaéle she-shav-ót yotér all DEF-animal-fpl equal-fpl, but EXIS.COP-fpl DEM:fpl REL-equal-fpl more ‘All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.’

Consider also the adjective *zehé* ‘identical’, as opposed to *shoné* ‘different’:

(42) ha-mehirút shel feráí lo zehá le-zót shel lamborgíni DEF:speed GEN Ferrari NEG identical to-DEM GEN Lamborghini ‘The speed of a Ferrari is not equal to that of a Lamborghini.’

5.4 Superlative

Consider the adjective *ultimáti vi*, ‘ultimate’, as well as *muadáf* ‘preferred’, as in the following sentences in which the Mark and the Standard are not mentioned explicitly:

(43) zot ha-khayá ha-ultimáti vi-t DEM:fsg DEF-experience:fsg DEF-ultimate-fsg INDEX+PARAMETER ‘This is the ultimate experience!’

(44) hi ha-bát ha-muadéfet she DEF-daughter DEF-preferred:fsg INDEX+PARAMETER ‘She is the favourite daughter.’

6. OTHER SCHEMES OF COMPARISON

6.1 Comparing two distinct properties/clauses

(45) b-a-kvísh yotér khashúv li-yót khakhám me-ashér tsodék in-DEF-road more important INF-be clever from-REL right INDEX PARAMETER COMPAREE MARK STANDARD ‘On the road, it is more important to be clever than right.’

(46) mi she-mitábéd hu yotér tipésh me-amíts who REL-commit.suicide:msgPRES COP more stupid from-courageous INDEX COMPAREE MARK-STANDARD ‘The one who commits suicide is more stupid than courageous.’
Comparative Constructions in ‘Israeli Hebrew’

The compared properties can also be shown by verbs:

(47) ha-núdnik ha-zé medabér yotér me-ashér osé
DEF-pest DEF-DEM speak:msgPRES more from-REL do:msgPRES

‘This pest speaks more than he acts.’

Rather than comparing two participants (as in the prototypical comparative construction), or two properties (as here), in Israeli – like English – one can compare whole clauses, resulting in a complex sentence:

(48) netanyáhu ra l-a-yehudí-m pakhót me-ashér
Netnayahu bad to-DEF-jew-mpl less from-REL

‘Netanyahu is less bad for the Jews than Clinton is good for the Jewesses.’

(49) hu koré yotér leát me-ashér hi maklíd-á
he read:msgPRES more slowly from-REL she type:PRES-fsg

‘He reads more slowly than she types.’

6.2 Ellipsis (and ambiguity)

Comparative constructions often include ellipsis, which could result in ambiguity:

(50) hermafrodít-im ohavím gvarím yotér mi-nashím
hermaphrodite-pl love:mplPRES men more from-women

‘Hermaphrodites love men more than they like women.’

However, such an ambiguity is blocked when the object is definite, the reason being that in Israeli, as previously mentioned, there is an accusative marker, et, (only) before a definite O. Consider the following minimal pair:
The fact that ‘her sister’ is the one who loves in (51) but the one who is loved in (52) results from the existence of the accusative marker et.

6.3 Correlative comparatives

Unlike most world languages, but just like Indo-European languages, Israeli has ‘correlative comparatives’, in which two comparative clauses are juxtaposed:

(53)

nell Shelomo, (ככ) rotzō voh ŋad voh, (kakh) rotzō-ūm

‘as-all’ REL-study:PRES-mpl more languages (thus) want:PRES-mpl

eyotér li-lmōd balshanūt

more INF-study linguistics

‘The more languages one studies, the more one wants to study linguistics.’

Whereas ke-khōl she-, lit. ‘as all that-’, usually means ‘as long as’ or ‘as much as’, the optional kakh is an adverb meaning ‘thus, so’.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The prototypical Israeli comparative construction is Type A1 (e.g. dáni yotér gadōl mi-yósi ‘Danny is older/bigger than Yossi’). However, there is another mono-clausal comparative construction: extended intransitive ‘Type C’, in which the Index of comparison is the main verb in an extended intransitive clause (e.g. lári frānklīn olé be-rashlanut-ō al dzhōnatān pōlard ‘Larry Franklin exceeds Jonathan Pollard in his negligence’).

Further research should compare comparatives in Israeli to those of Yiddish, ‘Standard Average European’², Polish and Russian, as well as to those of Judeo-Spanish and other non-Ashkenazic Jewish languages. My hypothesis is that Israeli, a ‘semi-engineered’ multi-layered language, resurrects Hebrew comparative lexical items but adapts them to European patterns. In other words, Israeli comparatives correspond with Yiddish and Standard Average European, although the forms used are Hebrew. Such findings would strengthen my hybidric model of the genesis of fascinating and multifaceted Israeli (e.g. Zuckermann 2006a, forthcoming).
Comparative Constructions in ‘Israeli Hebrew’

REFERENCES


ABBREVIATIONS

1  1st person
2  2nd person
3  3rd person
A  transitive subject
ACC  accusative
CC  copula complement
COMP  complement(izer)
CONSTR  construct state
COP  copula
CS  copula subject
DAT  dative
DEF  definite
DEM  demonstrative

Melilah 2006/2, p.15
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