

## From possibility to necessity in the history of Hebrew

Aynat Rubinstein, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The meaning of the modal construction *yeš le-x l-* 'is to-x INF(INITIVE)' (and its negated counterpart) in Hebrew and its historical development poses a challenge for a number of long standing generalizations. In many languages, expressions of possession give rise to modal meanings in which they express obligation, i.e., a normative type of *necessity* (e.g., English *have* as in *I have a bottle of wine* vs. *have to* as in *I have to save it for a special occasion*; see Bybee et al. 1994; Bhatt 1998; Bjorkman and Cowper 2015). Hebrew *yeš le-x* 'is to', in contrast, is a possession expression that is attested from biblical through medieval times and up to pre-modern Hebrew with modal meanings of *possibility*, *ability*, and *permission* (Ben-Hayyim 1953/1992; Shehadeh 1991; Ariel 2015). This peculiarity ended abruptly with the consolidation of Modern Hebrew: the dative phrase *le-x* 'to-x' was lost in the modal construction, and with it came a surprisingly rapid semantic change from possibility to necessity. In the present day, *yeš l-* 'is INF' is an expression of obligation, in line with the crosslinguistic tendency (Boneh 2013).

This paper sets out to describe the path of historical change in existential/possessive *yeš*, focusing on what looks like a change in modal force and morphosyntactic loss of the possessor phrase. Taking into account the growing literature on so-called *variable force modality* (Rullmann et al. 2008; Deal 2011; Yanovich 2013), I present two explanations for the change and evaluate the evidence for internal as well as external (contact-induced) pressures in the development of the construction.

1. **More than just 'possible'**. Examples of biblical and rabbinic *yeš le-x l-* 'is to-x INF' that are discussed in the literature have a peculiar flavor: they seem to convey at once possibility and necessity. The recurring phrase in the Mishnah *yeš le-x ledaber zxut 'al* 'be to-x to.speak.well.of', for example (e.g., Sanhedrin 5:4), means not just that a person is able or can speak well of a defendant, but that they will do so given the chance to speak. In (1), the speaker is asking if he should speak to the king on his benefactor's behalf, not just if he can/may do so.

(1) הָאֵלֶּיךָ לְעֵשׂוֹת לְךָ הַגִּישׁ לְדַבְרֵי-לֵךְ אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ אִי אֶל-עַר הַצֶּבֶא  
... whether-is to.speak to-you to-the-king ... (2 Kings 4: 13)

JPS (1917) Hebrew Bible in English: "... what is to be done for thee? **wouldest** thou be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host?"

Notably, the same examples are explained and translated with both possibility and necessity paraphrases (e.g., *possible/able, would/have to/shall* in (1)). Readers find it difficult to settle on a translation, and observe that the contexts in which the expression occurs are such that if one can act, they should. See Schwartz (1992) on the use of Aramaic 'הוה ליה למימר 'was to-him to.say' in the Talmud to mean at once 'could have said' and 'should have said'. In Medieval Hebrew, 'is to-x INF' has clear possibility uses (Ariel 2015) and clear necessity uses (Shehadeh 1991), alongside examples that can receive at once possibility and necessity paraphrases (2).

(2) וַיֵּשׁ לָנוּ בְּכֹאן לְדַרוֹשׁ עַל יוֹנָה ... אִם קָרָא וְאִם לֹא  
and-is to-us in-here to.ask on Jonah ... whether he.called or not ... (Bar Hiyya, 11-12<sup>th</sup> c.)  
'Next we have to/may ask whether Jonah called [on God] or not'

The variability in interpretation observed in pre-modern Hebrew (in primary sources and in the linguistic literature) is characteristic of variable force modals (Rullmann 2008). I argue next that it reflects a particular type of modality, which I term ‘can-and-will ability’.

**2. Analysis of the apparent variation in modal force.** I propose that *yeš le-x p* carries the conditional presupposition that if *p* is possible, then *p* is contextually deemed to be most beneficial, morally most perfect, or otherwise “best” (3b). Together with an assertion that *p* is possible (3a), the construction gets the ‘can and will’ interpretation observed above.

- (3) a. Assertion: among the accessible worlds *AccW* compatible with the circumstances of *x* in an evaluation situation *e*, there is a world in which *p* is true.  
b. Presupposition: if *p* is possible, then *p* is true in all worlds in  $BEST_{e,x}(AccW)$ .

(3b) is a type of homogeneity presupposition (cf. Gajewski 2007). Such a presupposition has been proposed for variable force modality in Old English (Yanovich t.a.) My analysis for Hebrew and the one for English differ in type of modality: the English examples have been argued to involve metaphysical modality, conveying that *p* is not just possible but metaphysically necessary. In Hebrew, the necessity conveyed is priority oriented (e.g., it is not a metaphysical necessity that I defend myself in trial, but it’s the best thing I can do). Another mechanism to derive homogeneity effects has been offered for variable quantificational force in Hebrew regarding individuals (Bar-Lev and Margulis 2014 on *kol* ‘every’). This analysis assumes that the quantifier has simple possibility semantics and, crucially, that it lacks a scale-mate necessity quantifier. Deal (2011) has proposed such an analysis for variable modal force in Nez Perce.

**3. Morphosyntactic and semantic change.** Did modal *yeš* start expressing obligation under the influence of Yiddish/German (Ben-Hayyim 1992)? Since (i) a necessity interpretation was already available in the language, and (ii) modern *yeš l-* ‘is INF’ lacks an overt possessor and is not clearly a possession construction (cf. German (4)), this conclusion should be reconsidered.

- (4) Der Hans hat {ein Buch, rechtzeitig in Wien anzukommen}.  
the Hans has a book, in-time in Vienna to-arrive  
‘Hans has {a book, to arrive in Vienna in time}. (German; Bhatt 1998)

I suggest that the opaque morphological form of *yeš* led to the copula losing its status as a verbal predicate in modern Hebrew, preventing it from getting the ‘can and will’ interpretation. Such morphological change would explain why *yeš* no longer associates with a possessor argument and why there is no past tense version of its modal construction (Boneh 2013: \**be.PAST INF*, e.g., \**haya le’exol be-fe sagur* to mean ‘One had to eat with one’s mouth closed’). Modals that retained their dative arguments are morphologically transparent (e.g., *asur/mutar* ‘prohibited/permitted’). Those that lost it are opaque (*yeš*, ‘*efšar* ‘possible’, *carix* ‘need’).

In sum, the paper sheds light on the necessity-like interpretation of ability modals (e.g., Hackl 1998) and contributes to our understanding of variable force modality across languages.

**Selected References.** Ben-Hayyim. 1992. The struggle for a language. Boneh. 2013. Mood and Modality. Deal. 2011. Modals without scales. Yanovich. To appear. Old English \**motan*, variable force modality, and the presupposition of inevitable actualization.