

# From Habituality to Modality: Grammaticalization in Hebrew

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This study discusses the grammaticalisation paths involved in the polysemous construction 'was + participle' (e.g. *hayiti mesaxek tenis* 'I used to/would play tennis') in Modern Hebrew. Out of context, this construction conveys the **past habitual** (...*be-ceirut-i* 'in my youth') or the **subjunctive** (...*im haya li kadur* 'if I had a ball') in simple sentences. In conditionals, it conveys the **counterfactual conditional** (*im hayiti mesaxek tenis, hayiti be-kofer* 'if I played tennis, I would be in shape').

I argue that the three senses of the construction, which were previously treated as distinct constructions, are in fact attributable to the three main historical stages of Hebrew. The habitual use developed in Biblical Hebrew, which evolved into the counterfactual conditional in Rabbinical Hebrew, which in turn emerged as the subjunctive in Modern Hebrew.

## 2 PATHS OF GRAMMATICALIZATION

### Stage 1: The Emergence of the Habitual

I claim that the habitual emerged in Biblical Hebrew as the copula *haya* 'be.PAST' began to link between a subject and a participle. This process was gradual and caused by conceptual and morphological **analogy**; the copula first linked subjects to nouns, later to adjectives and finally to participles (e.g. *haya ger* 'was a sojourner' (Exod. 2.22) > *haya arum* 'was wily' (Gen. 3.1) > *haya ro'e* 'used to herd' (Gen. 37.2)). This host-class expansion (Himmelman 2004) is attested cross-linguistically (Pustet 2003). Although this form emerged in Biblical Hebrew, it seems to have conventionalized only in Rabbinical Hebrew (due to its higher frequency).

Stage	Category	Function	Example
1	adjective/noun	feature or entity	<i>ger</i> ('sojourner')
		↓ conceptual analogy	
2	participial adjective denominative noun	feature of an agent agent	<i>'arum</i> ('wily') <i>ro'e</i> ('shepherd')
			↓ morphological analogy
3	participle	state of action	<i>ro'e</i> ('shepherding')

### Stage 2: The Emergence of the Counterfactual Conditional

The religious texts written in Rabbinical Hebrew very often include fables with an explicit moral. Since the purpose of the fable is to justify the moral decision, the factuality of the content of the fable is of minor importance. Therefore, a new discourse pattern emerged. Its first part told the fable using habitual morphology in a few sentences at most, and the second part expressed a moral with deontic obligation (e.g., *haya raxuv 'al ha-hamor, yered* 'if he was riding on an ass, he should dismount' [Mishna Berakhot 4.5]). With its conventionalization, the first part of this discourse profile was shortened to a single sentence which in turn was

reanalysed as a counterfactual clause. Consequently, an ‘if’ particle was added to reinforce the counterfactual meaning by disambiguating it (e.g., *im haya meSamər-an, tehor-im* ‘if he was guarding them, they are pure’ [Mishna Makkot 1.10]).

Thus, the claim is that the fully grammaticalized counterfactual conditional is a result of the conventionalization of a salient discourse pattern (see Ariel 2008 for the cross-linguistic attestation of this process), which was made possible through reanalysis carried out by (synchronic) pragmatic inferences.

### Stage 3: The Emergence of the Subjunctive

The subjunctive was derived from the counterfactual conditional through *syntactic liberation* (Givón 1994). The main clause of the conditional was used as an independent sentence conveying an indirect speech act, thus leaving the conditions required for its fulfilment to inference. Example (1) is a counterfactual conditional which serves as a bridging context for the grammaticalized low-epistemic-certainty subjunctive in (2).

(1) *im lo hayiti makir otax*  
 if no was.1S know.PART.M ACC.2S.F  
 ‘if I didn’t know you’

*hayiti xofev se-at doxefet oti la-yadaim fel tami meser*  
 was.1S think.PART.M that-you.F push.PART.F ACC.1S to.DEF-HANDS of Tami Meser  
 ‘I would have thought you’re pushing me to the hands of Tami Meser’<sup>1</sup>

(2) *hayiti xofevet se-ze mexuvan kodem kol neged ha-xaver jela*  
 was.1s think.PART.F that-it aim.PART.PASS.M first-of-all against DEF-boyfriend her  
 ‘I would think that it is aimed first of all against her boyfriend’<sup>2</sup>

This process of grammaticalization is characterized by **subjectification** and **intersubjectification** (Traugott & Trousdale 2010), namely the diachronic process in which a grammaticalized form expresses the personal attitudes and stance of the speaker towards the addressee. This process began with the emergence of the counterfactual conditional which is often used to modulate emotional experience and support moral judgments (Byrne 2006). Finally, the subjunctive expresses both subjective attitudes (epistemic and deontic) and intersubjective ones (hedging).

### Selected References

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the Israeli series *Betipul* ‘in treatment’ [S02E30].

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* [S01E16].