A Note on Feminine Plural Inflection in Spoken Israeli Hebrew

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This is a report of results obtained in testing native Israeli students in the production and comprehension of inflected forms of adjectives that were not couched in sentences. The subjects performed according to normative rules in their production of adjective forms. In comprehension, however, they performed according to an acceptability scale of deviations from the norms. It is suggested that a change in the linguistic system first affects the speakers' processing of received language. Only later will their own production be affected as well.

INTRODUCTION

Israeli Hebrew is a language in great flux. The spoken language was artificially revived some 100 years ago in accordance with its written and spoken traditions such as the Bible, the Mishna, Medieval Hebrew, and Modern Hebrew (dating from the 19th century).

Since Israeli society was essentially formed by the immigration of Jews from all over the world, all sorts of linguistic influences have been brought to bear upon the newly born colloquial Hebrew that has since been gaining more and more native speakers as the generations multiply.²

In this paper I shall present results from one study that suggest the existence of variability within speakers in their processing of inflected forms and their actual production of similar forms.

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¹ The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel.
² For details concerning the revival of Hebrew as a modern spoken language, see studies such as Rabin (1969), Bar-Adon (1975), and many more.
HEBREW INFLECTIONAL SYSTEM

Hebrew is a highly inflected language. Being a Semitic language, it has the typical triconsonantal root and verb pattern via which one can derive most of the lexicon. Nouns in Hebrew are either masculine or feminine. They are likewise marked for plurality. All other parts of speech (accept adverbs and some prepositions) agree in gender and number with the noun that they relate to in a given utterance.

The data to be reported here concern adjective inflection. The following are a few examples of the regular inflectional paradigm for adjectives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine sing.</th>
<th>Feminine sing.</th>
<th>Masculine plur.</th>
<th>Feminine plur.</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. sagūr</td>
<td>sgur-ā</td>
<td>sgur-ím</td>
<td>sgur-ôt</td>
<td>'closed'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. naki</td>
<td>neki-y-ā</td>
<td>neki-ím</td>
<td>neki-y-ôt</td>
<td>'clean'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. leumī</td>
<td>leumī-t</td>
<td>leumi-ím</td>
<td>leumi-y-ôt</td>
<td>'national'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. mexubād</td>
<td>mexubēd-et</td>
<td>mexubād-ím</td>
<td>mexubād-ôt</td>
<td>'respectable'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not unexpectedly, present tense verbs share some morphological and semantic properties with the adjectives.

The masculine singular is the unmarked category. In accordance with Jakobson's (1939) notion of syncretization in marked categories, it can have an impersonal meaning as well as a person-specific one. Thus, mi³ (‘who’) tov (‘good’) po (‘here’) uttered by a newly arrived student can be answered by any of the following:

1. **hunt**
   ‘Hunt’
   (name—masculine singular)
   tov
   ‘good’
   (masculine singular)

2. **ein**
   ‘there (is) no’
   af mor-ā
   ‘woman teacher’
   tov-ā
   ‘good’
   (feminine singular)

3. **kol**
   ‘all’
   ha-mor-ím
   ‘the teachers’
   tov-ím
   ‘good’
   (masculine plural)
   (masculine plural)

4. **rak**
   ‘only’
   ha-morót
   ‘the women teachers’
   tov-ót
   ‘good’
   po
   ‘here’
   (feminine plural)
   (feminine plural)

³Mi (‘who’) being the unmarked member of the category; milma (‘who’/‘what’) usually refers to animates but may also refer to inanimates. (see below for procedure for testing comprehension).