

Parallel yet unrelated evolution of neo-Semitic: Maltese and spoken Hebrew typology of pronominal suffixes

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Pronominal suffixes display many-fold functions in general Semitic, among which possessive pronouns for nouns, declensions for prepositions, and object pronouns adduced to verbs. This is the state of the art in classical Semitic such as Biblical Hebrew and Koranic Arabic. Neo-Semitic speech varieties may maintain, drop or make changes in each of these functions. One particular mutation involves their possessive function, which is restricted to a closed set of nouns reserved for the expression of inalienable possession, while others take an analytic possessive particle. Maltese and spoken Hebrew use pronominal suffixes to convey the possession of nouns, which go under various semantic subcategories of inalienable, be they body parts in Maltese or kinship and personal autonomy related terms in spoken Hebrew. Maltese has officially departed from Standard Arabic. As an independent speech form of Arabic, it is depicted as a special case regarding its genealogical affiliation and its geography: “the Maltese inalienable distinction [is] a typologically frequent, utterly non-European and fairly non-Semitic pattern” (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 1996: 271). Borg (2009: *34–*36) mentions three inalienable noun categories in Maltese: body parts, immovable property and material objects closely associated with the possessor, which take the pronominal suffixes, unlike other semantic categories of nouns. He then adds a typological parallel with Israeli Hebrew, but in which style is said to blur the distinction of this feature in nouns. What Borg calls style is the occasional usage of literary Hebrew in speech on a continuum of ‘educated spoken Hebrew’, in which any noun can take pronominal suffixes to convey possession.

The inalienable function of the pronominal suffixes in spoken Hebrew is nevertheless sound and clear. While written Hebrew may adduce pronominal suffixes to all nouns, spontaneous spoken Hebrew, when free of written language stylization, limits their usage to a specific set of nouns, e.g.:

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Kinship terms: axoti ‘my sister’, axíha ‘her brother’, baalex ‘your husband’, išto ‘his wife’, gisato ‘his sister in law’

Terms related to authority and personal autonomy: tori ‘my turn’, lo inyanxa ‘none of your (ms) business’, ma daatex (fs)? ‘what is your opinion?’ (i.e. ‘what do you think’), zxutxem (mp) ‘(it is) your right’.

What this means is that while both written Hebrew and spoken Hebrew dispose of pronominal suffixes adduced to nouns, only the latter restricts their function to conveying inalienable possession, like Maltese, however in different semantic categories.

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