Agents, Paths, and States in the Hebrew Middle Templates

This essay will investigate the phenomenon of agentive readings in the Hebrew middle templates, both simple niCCaC and intensive hitCaCeC. Such readings present a problem to our understanding of the syntax-morphology interface in Hebrew, in that middle morphology is often understood to correspond to a Voice head that cannot introduce an external argument (Doron, 2003; Alexiadou & Doron, 2012). Clauses featuring these agentive middles are all of the same basic form, each featuring a PP.

(1) ha-iš nidxaf le-gidmat ha-tor
    the-man pushed.MID.SIMPL to-front the-line
    ‘The man pushed his way to the front of the line.’

The analysis to be presented will build upon the proposal of Kastner (2016) who labels these verbs figure reflexives. These constructions can be labelled ‘reflexive’ because the same DP appears to saturate two θ-roles – that of the Figure introduced by the functional head p (Svenonius, 2007) and that of the Agent introduced by Voice. I will argue that these should be understood by analogy to naturally reflexive verbs that take middle morphology in Hebrew and Greek (Alexiadou & Schäfer, 2014): in both phenomena, the middle Voice head cannot introduce a DP but can assign an Agent θ-role to a DP already in the derivation.

The present account will also make finer distinctions between the classes of verbs found in the middle templates.

(2) ha-yeled hištoqeq le-glida
    the-child craved.MID.INT to-ice cream
    ‘The child craved ice cream.’

Although (1) and (2) appear similar in their syntax, they actually contrast in that the former features an activity verb implicating a Path, while the latter features a stative verb taking a PP complement, where the preposition simply plays some (debated) role in licensing the DP (Neeleman, 1997). Only (1) involves a true Figure argument.

With respect to clauses like (2), this essay will argue that stative clauses feature a unique structural configuration, with the subject merging below SpecVoiceP. This structural distinction can account for the conspicuous presence of psych and speech-act verbs in the middle templates in all periods of Hebrew (as well as other Semitic languages).

In regard to activity predicates like (1), only those which implicate a Path can take middle morphology. It will be shown that once the notion of Path-implication is appreciated, explanations for several other sets of problematic middle verbs fall out naturally: agentive middles which can take infinitive complements (3), inchoative posture verbs (4), and perambulatives (5).

(3) Dani hitganev laqaxat oxel me-ha-mitbax
    Dani snuck in.MID.INT take-INF food from-the-kitchen
    ‘Dani snuck in to take food from the kitchen.’

(4) Rina ne’emda me-ha-kise
    Rina stood up.MID.SIMPL from-the-chair
(5) Gil hitroce\textsuperscript{c} ba-xacer
Gil ran around.MID.INT in the-yard

References