

On the interaction of variation and exceptionality in Modern Hebrew spirantization

Michael Temkin Martinez (*Boise State University*)

Modern Hebrew (MH) spirantization is a variable phenomenon with many exceptions. Adam (2002) claims that the variation is driven by the exceptions and concludes that spirantization is changing, yielding what is currently a variable grammar, with expected and variant forms in free variation, and moving toward one with no alternation. This paper reports the results of an acceptability rating task showing that, in alternating segments, the expected form is still rated as more acceptable than that variant forms, and that which variant surfaces (stop or fricative) depend on its underlying root position. Additionally, participants indicate that some variation is acceptable in exceptional segments. This suggests that, far from moving towards non-alternation, variation and exceptionality affect each other, reducing alternation in alternating segments and alternations in exceptional segments. MH has three stop/fricative pairs that participate in spirantization- [p]/[f], [b]/[v], and [k]/[χ]- with the fricatives surfacing in post-vocalic position and stops occurring elsewhere. MH spirantization is complicated by the presence of both exceptions and variation. Exceptions are cases in which [p], [b], and [k] do not alternate with their fricative counterparts and vice versa, such that stops may surface in post-vocalic and fricatives in non-post-vocalic position. There is also variation in MH spirantization (Adam 2002, Temkin Martínez 2008), with segments surfacing as stops where fricatives are expected and as fricatives where stops are predicted.

In the experiment described in this paper, 74 participants rated the naturalness of words pronounced with either the expected or the variant forms of alternating and exceptional segments. Each participant was presented with four tokens for each of 20 roots: the expected and variant forms of each of two conjugations. The tokens were randomized and therefore rated independently of others stemming from the same root.

Results show that variation is acceptable in alternating segments with preference given to the expected form ($F(1,73)=890.892$, $p<.001$). In exceptional segments, some variation is also acceptable ($F(1,73)=767.518$, $p<.001$), although variation in exceptional segments was rated less natural than variation in alternating segments ($F(1,73)=80.073$, $p<.001$). Thus, current patterns of variation in MH alternation and exceptionality demonstrate a possible two-way interaction between exceptionality and variation.