ON THE NEW IMPERATIVE IN
COLLOQUIAL HEBREW*

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1.

IT IS OFTEN observed that in Modern Hebrew colloquial usage, future forms normally substitute for the corresponding more normative imperative forms, as exemplified in (1).

(1)

NORMATIVE, MASC. SING.	COLLOQUIAL
ktov ("write!")	*tixtov*[1] ("you will write; write!")
hizaher ("watch out!")	*tizaher* ("you will watch out; watch out!")
baker ("visit!")	*tevaker* ("you will visit; visit!")
hitlabeš ("get dressed!")	*titlabeš* ("you will get dressed; get dressed!")
hasber ("explain!")	*tasbir* ("you will explain; explain!")

This is hardly surprising. First, the future and imperative stems are identical, except for a slight difference in the *hip'il* conjugation; secondly, since the imperative *aims* at the future, many languages allow imperative use of their future forms—see, for instance, the hierarchically arranged list in Ultan (1978,

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1. Stress is word-final, unless marked otherwise.

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p. 103). In Modern Hebrew, this tendency is often attributed to avoidance of direct commands, which "sound too aggressive." If this is indeed the reason (and it may very well be, since similar explanations of the same phenomenon are given for other languages), then the use of the future for commands may fulfill a double function, the obvious semantic one and—for the commonest two conjugations—a phonological one as well: the addition of a syllable lengthens the command and renders it milder sounding, particularly when curt, one syllable *pa'al* imperatives are replaced by corresponding bi-syllabic forms, and the main stress of the imperative is moved away from the very beginning of the utterance. It is interesting to note that normativists agree that the "bare imperative" sounds harsh and impolite, and to counter it have proposed the revival and wider use of the imperative immediately followed by *na* ("please, pray"), as in *ktov na* ("please write, would you write") (see, for instance, Gesenius, 1910, pp. 308, 324). The suggestion, however, was never adopted by the average speaker.

2.

At closer look, the phenomenon of replacement of the normative imperative by corresponding future forms does not seem to be that sweeping, at least not in the most commonly used conjugations, *pa'al* and *pi'el*. Thus, even in purely colloquial contexts, one often finds *either* the future *or* imperative form of these two conjugations used for commands with apparently the same likelihood of occurrence, as in (2).

(2)   *tisgor* ~ *sgor* ("close!")
     tištok ~ *štok* ("shut up!")
     tešev ~ *šev* ("sit down!")
     takum ~ *kum* ("get up!")
     tesaper ~ *saper* ("tell!")
     tedaber ~ *daber* ("speak!")
     texapes ~ *xapes* ("look [for]!")

The normative imperative form seems to reemerge only when the speaker expects immediate result.[2] Thus, *ktov* ("write!") would be used when the speaker expects the addressee to start writing something right away, but not in "write a book!" The future form is used in either case; the normative imperative seems to be restricted to direct, rather forceful commands, which assume immediate response. Since, as pointed out above, *pa'al* and *pi'el* imperatives are one syllable shorter than the corresponding future forms, and thus move the main stress of the verb closer to the very beginning of the utterance, the "direct,

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2. I owe this observation to Michael Peleg.

forceful command'' quality attributed to the normative imperative appears to be supported phonologically as well. This is particularly true of *pa'al,* where the imperative is monosyllabic —and indeed most ''new imperatives'' are in *pa'al.* The claim that shorter forms are associated with more ''immediate'' commands can also explain the total absence in colloquial Hebrew of normative *nip'al, hip'il* and *hitpa'el* imperatives, which contain the same number of syllables as their corresponding future forms. Since *hizaher* (''watch out!''), *hitlabeš* (''get dressed!'') and *hasber* (''explain!'') are not shorter than *tizaher, titlabeš* and *tasbir,* respectively, speakers would not tend to use them for direct commands.

3.

I would like to show, however, that it is not the normative imperative that speakers often use for direct commands, but rather shortened future forms used imperatively. It is true that the imperative and future stems are often the same, and once the future prefix is removed, it is hard to tell a derived shortened future form used imperatively from an original imperative. Still, suffixed colloquial imperatives in *pa'al* are different from normative suffixed imperatives:

(3)	MASC. SING.	FEM. SING.	PLURAL	GLOSS
Normative	sgor	sigri	sigru	close!
Colloquial	sgor	sgeri	sgeru	
Normative	štok	šitki	šitku	shut up!
Colloquial	štok	šteki	šteku	

While it is indeed impossible to tell whether *sgor* is the original imperative or is derived from *tisgor,* it is quite clear that colloquial *sgeri* and *sgeru,* or *šteki* and *šteku,* are related to the corresponding future forms *tisgeri-tisgeru* and *tišteki-tišteku,* respectively.[3]

Further indication that the new imperatives are derived from corresponding future forms can be found in *hitpa'el:* in very colloquial Hebrew, one some- times finds *tlabeš* (''get dressed!'') in variation with *titlabeš,* but never the normative *hitlabeš; stalek* (''go away!'') in variation with *tistalek,* but never

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3. Diachronically, alternants like *sgeri* may be attributed to a kind of rule loss or reversal, if one assumes development like $s V\hat{g}\hat{o}r + \hat{i} \rightarrow s \partial g \partial r + \hat{i} \rightarrow sigr\hat{i},$ but not if the other alternative is assumed, i.e. $s V\hat{g}\hat{o}r + \hat{i} \rightarrow s Vgr + \hat{i} \rightarrow sigr\hat{i}.$ Synchronically, however, *sgeri* is clearly related to its future counterpart *tisgeri,* and whether it constitutes actual derivation or analogical formation does not affect the claim for the relationship itself.

It is not claimed here, incidentally, that the normative imperative is never used. Speakers who generally tend to be formal regard the colloquial form as substandard and would opt for the normative variants, i.e. *sgor, sigri* etc. The general tendency, however, is to use the future-related forms. My prediction is that the colloquial variants will soon achieve overall standardization.

histalek. There is also at least one similar case in *nip'al: zaher* ("watch out!") from *tizaher,* but never *hizaher* in colloquial Hebrew.

4.

   Shortening of future or imperfect forms to emphasize commands is not new to Hebrew. As in Arabic, a shortened form of the imperfect (the jussive) was used for negative commands in biblical times, as in *'al tešeb* ("do not sit!", full form *tešeb*); Deut 9:26 *'al tašḥēt* ("destroy not!", full form *tašḥît*); Prov 3:7 *'al təhî* ("be not!", full form *tihye*); Judg 13:14 *'al tēšt* ("do not drink!", full form *tište*), etc. The jussive was also used to express a command or request in affirmative sentences, but that applied primarily in the third person, e.g. Gen 1:3 *yəhî 'ōr* ("let there be light!") (vs. *yihye*); Gen 44:33 *vəhanná'ar yá'al* ("and let the lad go up!") (vs. *ya'ăle*), etc. As described in Gesenius (1910), the general characteristic of the jussive was rapidity of pronunciation, often combined with a tendency for shortening of the vowel of the second syllable in order to express the urgency of the command in the very beginning of the word. It is true that the cohortative, which denotes self-encouragement, a resolution or a wish, and in a way complements the jussive in the *first* person, constitutes an *extended* imperfect, e.g. *'ešmərā* ("I will observe, let me observe"; imperfect form *'ešmôr*), but the cohortative does not have the urgency of the command expressed by the jussive, not even as a "command to oneself."

   More problematic is the existence in Biblical Hebrew of lengthened imperatives. Although some shortened imperatives could be found, like *gal* ("discover!") from the full imperative *gallē*, lengthened imperatives were commoner.[4] Thus, we had *qûmā* ("get up!") vs. *qûm, tənā* ("give!") vs. *tēn;* Gen 25:31 *mikrā* ("sell!") vs. *məkōr;* Dan 9:19 *šim'ā* ("hear!") vs. *šəma',* etc. According to Gesenius (1910), the longer imperative is frequently emphatic. Another way of emphasizing commands in Biblical Hebrew was by using the infinitive absolute, e.g. Deut 5:12 *šāmôr* ("thou shalt observe!") (vs. *šəmôr*); Exod 13:3 *zākôr* ("thou shalt remember!") (vs. *zəkôr*). As the imperative is identical to the infinitive construct, use of the infinitive absolute as replacement for the imperative is equivalent to lengthening of the first syllable of the imperative. In other words, Biblical Hebrew had at least two kinds of imperative lengthening (rather than shortening) for the purpose of emphasis.

   I do not believe, however, that the lengthening of the imperative for the purpose of emphasis should be taken as counter-evidence to the shortening of

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4. Diachronically, the cohortative can be related to the Arabic subjunctive, realized in Hebrew only in the first person of the imperfect, whereas the jussive is limited to the second and third person. In the imperative, however, realizations of both the subjunctive and the jussive seem to be found.

the imperfect or future to express urgency of command. First, the emphatic imperative does not necessarily mean an urgent command — imperatives with final -*ā* added often imply a request, as the cohortative does. This is not surprising, particularly since the cohortative and the lengthened imperative share the same suffix *ā*. Secondly, the infinitive absolute is used for *long-range* commands rather than for urgent ones. But even if emphatic imperatives could not be convincingly separated from urgent commands, the lengthening of the imperatives for the purpose of emphasis does not necessarily have direct bearing on the shortening of imperfect or future forms for increased urgency of commands. The imperative is very short to start with, and the best way of further emphasizing it is to modify its phonological composition in some noticeable fashion — in this case by lengthening it. There is really no other way of effecting a small but noticeable change in the form of the imperative.

5.

Coming back to the new imperatives of colloquial Hebrew, which were shown above to be derived from corresponding future forms used imperatively, one should point out the existence of forms intermediate between the latter and the former. Thus, in *pi'el*, any colloquial imperative is derived in two stages, each of which can be an independent output, as in (4).

(4) *tekabel* ("accept! masc. sing.") → *tkabel* → *kabel*
   telamdi ("teach! fem. sing.") → *tlamdi* → *lamdi*
   tesapru ("tell! pl.") → *tsapru* → *sapru*

Only *te*- and *ti*- prefixes are affected, not the *ta*- of *hip'il*. In the case of *nipa'l*, shortening is rare — the very colloquial *zaher* ("watch out!") from *tizaher* above will also have intermediate *tzaher*, phonetically *dzaher*. In *pa'al* and *hitpa'el*, deletion of *i* creates a three consonant cluster. If the first two elements are *ts* or *tš*, the stop-fricative sequence is interpreted as a single affricate (*c* or *č*, respectively); in other cases, unpronounceable clustering does not allow an intermediate stage.

(5) *tisgor* ("close! masc. sing.") → *tsgor* → *sgor*
   tišberi ("break! fem. sing.") → *tšberi* → *šberi*
   tiftax ("open! masc. sing.") → **tftax* → *ftax* ~ *ptax*
   titlabeš ("get dressed! masc. sing.") → **ttlabeš* → *tlabeš*
   tistalku ("go away! pl.") → *tstalku* → *stalku*

All the forms on the left are, of course, future forms used imperatively. It is interesting to note that although each of these forms is essentially a future form, reduction of the *i* in *ti*- is normally allowed only when the form concerned is

used imperatively. In other words, one seldom gets derivations as in (6) if future rather than imperative meaning is intended.

(6) *tisgor* ("you masc. sing. will close") → *? tsgor*
    tišberi ("you fem. sing. will break") → *? tšberi*
    tistalku ("you pl. will go away") → *? tstalku*

5.1

It is not altogether clear whether reduction of future forms is indeed morphologically conditioned, i.e. whether it is essentially restricted to imperatively used future forms. For one thing, reduction of non-imperative future in *pi'el,* though by no means common, is still acceptable, i.e. we may find

(7) *tekabel* ("you masc. sing. will accept") → *tkabel*
    telamdi ("you fem. sing. will teach") → *tlamdi*
    tesapru ("you pl. will tell") → *tsapru*

and reduction of non-imperative future in *hitpa'el,* though worse than in *pi'el,* is still not as bad as in *pa'al: tistalek* ("you will go away") → *tstalek.*

I believe that the explanation lies in a sort of rhythm condition colloquial Hebrew has, which like the English rhythm rule and the Biblical Hebrew *nasog 'ahor* favors alternating stress in surface strings. Thus, as is shown in Bolozky (1977), casual vowel reduction applies to *e* in *'atá mevín 'otí* ("you understand me") only if either *ta mvín otì* or *atà mvín otì* results — since **atá mvín otì* would result in two adjacent stresses. Since imperatives are always utterance-initial, two stresses will not occur adjacent to each other as a result of *i* or *e* deletion in imperatively used future forms. Typical sequences are *telaméd 'otì* ("teach me!") → *tlaméd otì, tisgór 'et haxalón* ("close the window!") → *tsgór ta xalón.* So deletion works for all imperative uses. On the other hand, the second person of the future is normally not utterance-initial, and within utterances, the likelihood of two adjacent stresses resulting from non-imperative future shortening in *pa'al* is considerable, as in *matáy tisgór 'et haxalón* ("when will you close the window?") → *? matáy tsgór taxalón,* or *matáy tišláx 'otó* ("when will you send him?") → *? matáy tšláx otò.* To avoid bringing two stresses together, future shortening in *pa'al* is blocked — except, perhaps, in extremely fast speech.

5.1.1

That this might be the reason for the difference between command shortening and future shortening is further supported by the following facts.

First, *tkabel, tlamdi,* etc. are reasonably acceptable as shortened future

forms, as in *matáy tekabél 'otí* ("when will you receive me?") → *matáy tkabél otì*. If we accept avoidance of adjacent stresses as a criterion, then the fact that deletion of the prefixal *e* would never bring two stresses together in *pi'el* explains why deletion is not blocked.

Secondly, in *pa'al, matáy tsgeri taxalón* ("when will you [fem. sing.] close the window?") is more acceptable than *?matáy tsgór taxalón*, and *matáy tšlexú otò* ("when will you [pl.] send him?") better than *?matáy tšláx otò*. The presence of an extra syllable, which still allows alternating rhythm after the deletion of the vowel, explains this difference in acceptability.

Clearly, we are not dealing with absolute rules here, but rather with *tendencies*. In other words, there might be exceptions to the generalizations stated above, just as there are exceptions to the biblical *nasog 'ahor*. It does nevertheless seem to show that colloquial shortening of commands is more acceptable when it does not violate the general alternating stress rhythm of the language.

The importance for this paper of the above discussion of the restrictions on shortening of future forms is in further emphasizing the role of utterance initial position of imperatives and future forms used imperatively. It shows that it not only serves to stress the urgency of the command by having the main stress moved closer to the very beginning of the utterance, but also makes it easier, at least in the case of bi-syllabic future forms, not to violate the preferred rhythm of Hebrew.

6.

To conclude, the imperative seems to come back into colloquial Hebrew; it is not the normative imperative, however, but rather the shortened form of imperatively-used future forms. Shortening and moving the main stress closer to the beginning of the utterance seems to emphasize the urgency of the command, and suggests expectation of immediate result. There also exist forms intermediate between future-used-imperatively and the new imperatives; formation of such forms does not disturb the rhythmic stress pattern of the language, as reduction of actual future forms does.

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