The Dative in Modern Hebrew

The basic function of the dative case, in Hebrew and in many other languages, is to mark an indirect object bearing the relation of recipient (datum) to the event. It therefore typically occurs with verbs of transfer (prototypically verbs of ‘giving’). In Hebrew the accusative is unmarked while the dative is marked and represented by the ex-allative preposition ל- ‘to’, which also appears in the inflected form, e.g., לו ‘to-him’. The dative marker is also used to encode the infinitive, e.g., ל֖ו תָּפָּא ‘to-go’.

The dative-marked argument can be governed by verbs as well as by nouns and adjectives.

In Modern Hebrew the dative case is well-established, in contrast to Biblical and especially Early Biblical Hebrew, where the obligatory dative, as a case required by the verbal predicate, is not yet well-governed, and still alternates with expanded forms such as ל- ‘el ‘towards’ and the archaic form ל- ‘with’, e.g. ל֖ו יָוֵרָה YHWH el-bá’-adám way-yömer ló ‘and God called Adam and said to him’ (Gen. 3.9); אֶל־הָֽאָדָ֑ם aber nattå ’immadá bi’nataná li ‘the woman that you gave me, she gave (it) to me’ (Gen. 3.12).

It is noteworthy that in Modern Hebrew only the ‘recipient’ relation is obligatorily marked by ל- whereas other functions are marked by various expanded particles that have come to be conventionalized for these meanings, e.g. ל-מִבְּיָיו צִבְיָה ‘for (lit. in the path of)’; לָפֶס לֶשֶם ‘for the purpose of (lit. to-name-of)’; לָו מִבְּיָיו לַמְּרוֹד ‘for (lit. to-honor-of)’; לָהו מִבְּיָיו ‘by himself’; לָו מִבְּיָיו לָא מִבְּיָיו ‘by himself’, etc. However, indirect objects with non-recipient semantic content are occasionally marked with ל- as well. Furthermore, in Modern Hebrew many types of adverbials are associated with the dative marker, e.g. locative: לָו מִבְּיָיו נַעֲמִית אל-לא ‘I bought flowers for Sabbath’; temporal: לָו מִבְּיָיו מַחְשֶׁבֶת דַּגּוֹט לְ-סֶטֶד ‘five minutes to seven’; manner: לָו מִבְּיָיו אוֹמֵר לָא לֶאֲתָלוּ שְׁתוּ ‘slowly (lit. to-me)’.

Datives are prototypically animate and thus have the potential of being affected by the event. Consequently, employing the dative with inanimate entities has the force of ascribing an animacy of sorts, and therefore agency, to them, e.g., לָו מִבְּיָיו קָרָא ‘I have a headache (lit. hurts to-me the-head)’.

In Modern Hebrew, as in many European languages, the dative element is adjacent to the verb in the unmarked word order, and precedes the direct object, e.g., לָו מִבְּיָיו מָצָא תָּפָּא ‘he took my (lit. to-me) place’, whereas in Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew, the direct object generally precedes the indirect object. This change from the classical word order, like some of the other manifestations of the increasingly dative orientation of Modern Hebrew, is first attested in the 1920s–1940s, in the language of the first generation native speakers of Modern Hebrew (Mishor 1994), probably owing to Russian, Polish and Yiddish influence on the Hebrew spoken by their non-native parents.

This dative-first ordering is the unmarked option in Modern Hebrew when the dative argument is a definite N(oun) P(hrase) or pronoun (i.e. a referential or presupposed element). Similarly, with intransitive verbs the unmarked order is verb + datival element (unstressed) + postposed subject, e.g., לָו מִבְּיָיו קָוֵי יֵל אוֹר ‘I have a headache (lit. hurts to-me the-head)’; לָו מִבְּיָיו קָוֵי יֵל אוֹר ‘I can’t remember his name (lit. not remembered to-me his-name)’.

However, when the direct object or the subject are focused or emphasized, the dative appears at the end of the clause, e.g., לָו מִבְּיָיו קָוֵי יֵל ‘I have a headache (lit. hurts to-me the-head)’.

In Modern Hebrew, as in many European languages, the dative element is adjacent to the verb in the unmarked word order, and precedes the direct object, e.g., לָו מִבְּיָיו מָצָא תָּפָּא ‘he took my (lit. to-me) place’, whereas in Biblical and post-Biblical Hebrew, the direct object generally precedes the indirect object. This change from the classical word order, like some of the other manifestations of the increasingly dative orientation of Modern Hebrew, is first attested in the 1920s–1940s, in the language of the first generation native speakers of Modern Hebrew (Mishor 1994), probably owing to Russian, Polish and Yiddish influence on the Hebrew spoken by their non-native parents.

This dative-first ordering is the unmarked option in Modern Hebrew when the dative argument is a definite N(oun) P(hrase) or pronoun (i.e. a referential or presupposed element). Similarly, with intransitive verbs the unmarked order is verb + datival element (unstressed) + postposed subject, e.g., לָו מִבְּיָיו קָוֵי יֵל אוֹר ‘I have a headache (lit. hurts to-me the-head)’; לָו מִבְּיָיו קָוֵי יֵל ‘I can’t remember his name (lit. not remembered to-me his-name)’.
what else do you want to wreck?! (lit. the computer-ACC you already ruined to-her, what else do you want to ruin?!)'.

Depending on whether the dative is governed by the verb (or a deverbal form) or not, one can distinguish between obligatory and ‘free’ (nonvalence or non-lexical) datives. Nonvalence datives in Modern Hebrew can be divided into five categories, as detailed below. The distinction between them depends, in general terms, on the affectedness of the referent and on the extent of his/her involvement in the event, as perceived by the speaker. Hence, some of these datives are interpreted at the suprasentential level, i.e. at the level of the utterance (pragmatics, illocution).

1. The possessive dative

In Semitic languages the preposition -ל l- is often used as a genitive marker, e.g. in Biblical Hebrew: מִזְמ֥וֹר ל-דָּוִד `a psalm of (by) David’ [Ps. 22.11]; and also in the relative construction ל-אשר l-`asher ‘the Song of songs, of Solomon’ (Song 1.1). In post-Biblical Hebrew the dative alternates with the unmarked genitive לSel. Some restricted biblical uses of the possessive dative have been retained in Modern Hebrew, e.g. in referring to authorship, המפר `the book My Michael by (lit. oltro) Amos Oz’, and in names of institutions, הקרן `the Jewish National Fund (lit. the permanent fund to/of Israel)’.

Furthermore, as in many non-habere languages, the dative marker also functions as a possessive marker when co-occurring with the verb ית-ל haya ‘be’ in the past and future tenses, or with the present-tense existential verbal form ית-ל be’ in the past and future tenses, e.g., ית-ל הבשמה `he had/will have/has (lit. to-him there-is) money’. In Biblical Hebrew equivalent sentences in the present tense generally appear without an overt existential predicate. Modern Hebrew likewise allows the possessive לl- to occur without the overt existential לl in some marked environments, e.g., have ית-ל `$he had/will have/has (lit. to-him there-is) money’. In Biblical Hebrew equivalent sentences in the present tense generally appear without an overt existential predicate. Modern Hebrew likewise allows the possessive לl- to occur without the overt existential לl in some marked environments, e.g., have ית-ל `$he had/will have/has (lit. to-him there-is) money’. In Biblical Hebrew equivalent sentences in the present tense generally appear without an overt existential predicate.

The dative of interest, traditionally known as dativus commodi/incommodi marks the affected argument as ‘benefactee’ or ‘deprivee’, e.g., לע-ל רוני `he parked Ruti’s car for her (lit. he parked the car to-Ruti)’ versus ל-ל רוני `I have a request of you (lit. a-request to-me DAT to-you)’.
the dative in modern hebrew.indd   3

The nature of the affectedness is sometimes only pragmatically determined, e.g., מ㎝וי le-Ruti 'he wrecked Ruti's car'.

The increasing preference for the experiencer dative in contemporary Hebrew is best witnessed to it.

The ethical dative must be adjacent to the verb. Unlike the datives discussed previously, it cannot be focused or questioned, and it is nearly always a pronoun. It can also appear as a full NP, but these cases are rare and are more properly analyzed as borderline cases of the possessive dative, e.g., לא תקול המל עלי 'I don’t know me' versus יש לי 'I have something to my self'. The ethical dative also differs from those discussed above in that it is a non-propositional element in the sentence which is interpreted at the suprasentential level, i.e. at the pragmatic or illocutionary level. By using this dative personal pronoun, the speaker invites the hearer to share his feelings about the event or to be a witness to it.

Such a pronominal post-verbal dative is coreferential with the subject, e.g., זכרתי את המ FORCE qašal 'we were just hanging around (lit. to-us) on Qašal Boulevard' (Israeli song by A. Hillel); כה הולך le-‘im nasm 'he is successful with women (lit. it.is-going to-him with women').
under discussion must be coreferential with the subject, while the ethical dative (in Modern Hebrew and in Indo-European languages) typically refers to someone other than the subject. Other researchers call this construction the ‘reflexive dative’ (Borer & Grodzinsky 1986: 183 ff.; Berman 1982b: 71 ff., among others). However, as a name for the Modern Hebrew construction this term, too, is misleading, since the pronoun in question is not interchangeable with the conventionalized reflexive pronoun 'esem- (unlike in Biblical Hebrew, where the subject-coreferential -ל is ambiguous and the reflexive is one of its ordinary meanings). Furthermore, the subject-coreferential dative, unlike the regular reflexive pronoun, can occur with intransitive verbs and with verbs in the middle-reflexive form (typically in the nif’al and hitpa’el templates).

Subject-coreferential datives are also found in Biblical Hebrew, but only on a limited scale and apparently with a different function than their Modern Hebrew counterparts, e.g., in God’s command to Abraham לֶךְ-לְךָ לֶךְ-לוֹ מֵאַרְצְךָ מֵאַרְצֵי הָעָם לֶךְ-לֶךְ מֵאַרְצְךָ מֵאַרְצֵי הָעָם (walk to your land and from your-land and and from -your-land) (Gen. 12.1). Evidence suggests that the contemporary construction is not patterned on the Biblical Hebrew dative at all, but was reinvented by the first generation of Modern Hebrew speakers under the influence of similar constructions in Russian and Yiddish (Even-Zohar 1986:311; Halevy 2007: 318, forthcoming: ...).

The subject-coreferential dative can be characterized as ‘subject-oriented’, for it signals that the situation in which the subject is immersed is perceived by the speaker as somehow autonomous, or free from outside intervention. Depending on the context, this sense of autonomy can take on overtones of isolation or loneliness, or of egoistic, frivolous or leisurely action. Since autonomy is prototypically ascribed to animate entities, this dative, when appearing with non-animate subjects, ascribes to them a sense of animacy (See above "בְּלֵב הָעָרֶץ פִּאַפְאֵה לַא מיזְרָאָה גָּרִישׁ "in the middle of the pool, a fountain was bubbling quietly to itself").

While in Biblical Hebrew this dative is almost exclusively confined to imperative-hortative-jussive constructions, in Modern Hebrew it also appears in narrative contexts, most typically in informal speech. The subject-coreferential dative can occur with verbs of various classes, most commonly intransitive verbs of motion, stationary and engrossed activity, but also (unlike its Biblical Hebrew counterpart) with transitive verbs, e.g., היא כתבה لها מיילים והילדים написали письма לә-әләм "she wrote (lit. to-her) e-mails while the kids jumped alone into the water’. In this example, the pronominal -ל implies that the activity was conducted for the subject’s own pleasure, while marking it as a contrastive focus.

Like the Modern Hebrew ethical dative discussed above, and unlike other nonvalence datives, the subject-coreferential dative can only appear as a clitic, and cannot be focused or questioned. This stems from the fact that, like the modern ethical dative, it is a non-propositional element that functions on the pragmatic level: it signals a re-evaluative attitude on the part of the speaker towards the subject and the situation in which he/she/it is immersed. It can be said that both these datives have the effect of enlisting the solidarity or complicity of the hearer, or simply of creating a greater affective closeness between hearer, speaker and message.

It is important to note that this construction differs in essential ways from a formally identical construction attested in Mishnaic Hebrew, which serves as an aspectual marker indicating ingressive as opposed to stative meaning: הֲלֹּךְ לֹ - halax lo, for example, in Mishnaic Hebrew means ‘(he) went off, departed’, in contrast to the bare הֲלֹּךְ - halax ‘(he) went’. In Modern Hebrew, the same datival construction yields an inference of ‘fancy! he just went off’ or ‘he was walking at his leisure’ (depending on the particular flavor with which the speaker wishes to imbue the utterance).

In contrast to earlier stages of the language, Modern Hebrew may thus be characterized typologically as a dative-oriented language.

Primary Sources
References

Rivka Halevy (Hebrew University, Jerusalem)