# Revisiting impersonal constructions in Modern Hebrew

## Discourse-based perspectives*

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The study focuses on three impersonal constructions in Modern Hebrew: subjectless sentences with 3rd person plural main verbs, subjectless sentences with modal operators that take a complement clause, and sentences with generic pronoun subjects. Structural and semantic analyses elaborate on earlier studies in a discourse-embedded functional perspective based on authentic adult-child conversational interchanges and extended texts elicited from schoolchildren, adolescents, and adults in Hebrew and other languages. These serve to demonstrate the effects of such usage-based factors as genre, age-schooling development, as well as target language/typology. The study concludes by arguing for a confluence of structural devices that combine to form a cline of impersonalization in the expression of a more or less depersonalized discourse stance.

Keywords: discourse; genre; Hebrew; impersonals; language development; subjectless

## 1. Introduction

The paper elaborates on prior studies of impersonal and related constructions in Israeli Hebrew in structural, functional, and discourse-based perspectives. Structuralist analysis of two subjectless predicate-initial impersonal constructions (with 3rd person plural verbs and with modal operators taking complement clauses), led to

the characterization of Modern Hebrew as "an (S)VO language" (Berman 1980).[1] In another, functionally-oriented study, subjectless plural-verb impersonals were defined as higher in agentivity as compared with two other "agentless" constructions in Modern Hebrew – passive and middle-voice – in which verb-pattern morphology expresses alternations of transitivity and voice (Berman 1979). Developmental research on young children's use of Hebrew-specific devices in conversational and oral narrative discourse showed that they tend to adopt an agent- rather than a patient-oriented perspective on events (Berman 1993a, b; Berman & Neeman 1994). More recently, generic use of a 2nd person pronoun subject in extended texts was analyzed for Hebrew and other languages as a means for expressing a relatively depersonalized discourse stance (Berman 2005).

The present study evolves out of and expands on this earlier work in the following directions. Structurally, concern is with three types of impersonal constructions in Modern Hebrew: subjectless sentences with plural verbs or taking modal operators plus complement clauses and sentences with a generic subject. Functionally, these constructions are analyzed as expressing a depersonalized "discourse stance", defined as a pragmatic frame of reference for characterizing how people use language to position themselves with respect to a piece of discourse in a given set of circumstances (Berman, Ragnarsdóttir & Strömqvist 2002). In keeping with a usage-based view of linguistic analysis and language development (Bybee 2006; Tomasello 2003), occurrence of the target constructions is examined here in authentic, unedited language materials. The data-base is a large sample of extended written texts, both narrative and expository, elicited from schoolchildren, adolescents, and adults in Hebrew and other languages (Berman 2008; Berman & Verhoeven 2002) – hence concerned with "later language development" (Berman 2007; Tolchinsky 2004) – supplemented by longitudinal data from the naturalistic speech output of young pre-school children and their caretakers (CHILDES archive).

Following a brief outline of relevant features of Modern Hebrew (Section 2), the bulk of the study describes the structural and semantic properties and the discourse functions of the three target constructions – subjectless main clauses with plural verbs (Section 3.1), subjectless modal operators with complement clauses (3.2), and clauses with generic 2nd person subjects (3.3). Occurrence of these constructions in the data-base is then related to the variables of discourse genre (Section 4.1), developmental level (4.2), and target language (4.3), concluding with discussion of the "confluence

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1. The label "Hebrew as an (S)VO language" was subsequently extended to subject-pronoun elision in Hebrew, analyzed as a partially pro-drop language, where verbs inflected for person serve the discourse function of topic maintenance in conversational interactions and oral narratives of young children compared with adults (Berman 1990).

of devices" involved in expressing an impersonal discourse stance in Hebrew and suggestions for a "cline of depersonalization" (Section 5).

## 2. Relevant properties of Modern Hebrew

As background to the (re-)analysis of impersonal constructions considered in this chapter, this section briefly reviews relevant features of Modern Hebrew: Wo.d order, Predicate-initial constructions, Verb-pattern morphology in voice and valence-changing operations, and grammatical Tense and Mood.

The basic word order of current Hebrew is SVO, hence subject-initial, with lexical or pronominal subject NPs and with lexical or copular predicates (Givón 1979, 1994; Schwarzwald 2001). The language also has a range of Predicate-initial constructions, some of which can be assigned a referential subject, even if not necessarily realized on the surface. Thus (i) VS order may alternate with SV(O) constructions, typically with change-of-state or so-called "unaccusative" verbs (Kosta & Friedman, in press; Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995), and in presentative contexts in discourse (Berman & Neeman 1994). (ii) Existential and possessive constructions are basically predicate-initial, expressed in Hebrew as a non-habere language by a special existential operator yeš in present *tense* and the copular verb haya 'be' else*where*; in possessives, this is followed by a dative-marked possessor and a subject-like possessee argument, e.g. yeš lanu harbe *sfarim* '*be to-us many* books = we have lots of books' (Ravid 1977; Ziv 1976).[2] And (iii) verbs inflected for person typically occur with a surface subject – a property that in Hebrew, unlike more typically "pro-drop" languages, is confined to 1st and 2nd person in Past and Future tense (Berman 1990).

Directly related to the theme of this volume is the existence of (iv) predicate-initial subjectless constructions, traditionally characterized as "incomplete" or "indefinite" (Gesenius 1910). From a "subject-centered" point of view, with "impersonalization associated with the lack of a canonical subject" (Siewierska 2008), Hebrew impersonal, non-referential propositions include weather and other circumstantial or evaluative propositions, where a subject-requiring language like English or French would use an expletive or dummy subject. As in other languages, in Hebrew these are typically modified by temporal or locative expressions, e.g. *xam (po) ha-yom* 'hot (here) today = it's hot here/it's hot today', *haya na'im eclexem* 'was pleasant by-you = it was nice at your place'. And they include what Barðal (2004) terms impersonal predicates that "select for oblique subjects" in Scandinavian languages. In Hebrew, where these involve an optional oblique argument, it is invariably confined to dative marking of

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2. Unless otherwise noted, Hebrew data are presented in broad phonemic transcription, representing current pronunciation, with non-final word-stress marked by an *accent aigu*.

the experiencer role (cf. *xam li ha-yom* 'hot to-me today = I'm hot today)'. This is true, too, of (v) evaluative-type predicates, e.g. *xaval li alav* 'pity to-me for-him = I'm sorry for him', *nim'as lánu me-hitnahaguto* 'sick to-them from-behavior-his = they're fed-up with his behavior', *meša'amem la-yeladim ba-babáyit* 'boring to-the-kids at-home' (see, further, Berman 1981).

This last type of construction shares numerous structural and functional properties with predicate-initial modal operators plus complement clause analyzed in Section 3.2 below. Speakers also sometimes use the pronominal *ze* 'it, this' as a "dummy" or "exple-tive" subject.[3] This usage reflects the fact that Modern Hebrew is susceptible to rapid processes of change, partly due to the special circumstances of its relatively recent revival as a medium of everyday spoken interchange (Berman 1997; Harshav 1993; Ravid 1995).[4] Use of *ze* occurs even with the most canonic type of impersonals - (iv) above - as in the examples in (1) overheard on a bus in a conversation between two native Hebrew-speaking women.

(1) a.  *ze  meod  gašum  axšav  ba-xuc*
        it   very   rainy  now    outside
        = 'It's raining very hard now outside'

    b.  *ze  haya  nora    cafuf    šam*
        it   was   horrible crowded  there
        = 'It was horribly crowded there'

This expletive pronoun also occurs with evaluative predicates of the kind noted here, as in the examples in (2) and (3) - of a woman addressing her two-year-old daughter from the longitudinal child language sample and from the written essays of two 4th-grade 9-year-olds respectively.

(2) a.  *ze  naxon  še-ha-bad  hu         pepita*        *pepíta  (add accent aigu)*
        it   right   that        the-cloth   gingham
        = 'It's true that the cloth is gingham'

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3.  This pronoun has a special status in the language, marking it off from its 3rd person sin-gular counterparts masculine *hu*, feminine *hi* 'he/she = it'. For example, (i) *ze* is not suffixed inflectionally to prepositions in non-nominative position, compare *hu* 'he' ~*lo* 'to-him, to-it', *alav* 'on-him, on-it' but *le-ze* 'to-it', *al ze* 'on it'; and (ii) it can function as a pro-copular with sentential subjects, e.g. *le'ašen ze asur* 'to-smoke it=is forbidden', *še-tavo ze ya'azor li* 'that-you'll come will-help me = it will help me if you come'. On the other hand, *ze* does not mark neuter as against masculine or feminine gender.

4.  For example, while more typically verb-framed than verb-satellite (Slobin 2004; Talmy 1985, 2000). Hebrew manifests some features of what have been termed "equipollent" lan-guages. For example, it allows the equivalents of "he ran into the house", but not "he swam across the lake", or "the bottle floated along the river" but not "the bottle floated down the river".

b. *ze lo tov lehaxnis stam kol davar la-pe*
   it  not  good  to-insert  just  all  thing  to-the-mouth
   = 'It's not good to put just anything into your mouth'

(3)  a. *ani ro'e lif'amim yeladim še-megalim sodot leyad*
      I  see  sometimes  children  that-reveal  secrets  next-to

      *ha-xaverim šelahem*
      the-friends  of-them
      = '*I sometimes see kids that* tell secrets when (they are) near their friends'

      *ve-ze me'od lo yafe legalot sodot ba-xevra*
      and-it  very  not  nice  to tell  secrets  in company
      = 'and it is very rude to tell secrets in front of other people'

  b. *ze lo tov la'asot dvarim ka'eyle*
     it  not  good  to-do  things  like those
     = 'It is not good to-do things like that'

Two other facets of the structure of Modern Hebrew that impinge on the topic of "impersonalization" concern the domains of valency, voice, and tense. First, the *binyan* system of verb-morphology functions in valence-changing relations such as ~~with~~ intransitive reflexive or change-of-state predicates or transitive causative constructions, also serving to express a more or less agent-oriented perspective on events. Compare, for example, *ha-xalon nišbar ~ha-yéled šavar et ha-xalon* 'the-window broke ~ the-boy ACC broke the-window' with the shared verb-root *š-br* in two different patterns; *hu gilgel et ha-agala ba-midron ~ ha-agala hitgalgela ba-midron* 'he rolled the-cart down-the-slope ~ the cart rolled down-the-slope' from the shared root *g-l-g-l; ha-acic nafal ~ ha-xatul hipil et ha-acic* 'the vase fell ~ the-cat caused-fall the-vase' from the shared root *n-p-l* (Berman 1993a). The same system of seven morphological patterns also serves for alternations of voice between active, middle, and passive: Compare *ha-mehandesim pitxu šita xadaša* 'the-engineers developed (a) new method' ~ *šita xadaša hitpatxa be-méšex ha-šanim* (a) new method developed over the years' ~ *šita xadaša putxa (al ydey ha-mehandesim)* '(a) new method was-developed (by the-engineers)' – with all three constructions based on verbs with the shared root *p-t-x* in three different *binyan* patterns (Berman 1979).

    Another relevant factor is that a relatively more or less impersonal point of view also interacts with predicates in use of different TAM (Tense-Aspect-Mood) categories (Bybee & Fleischman 1995; Hopper 1982; Timberlake 2005). In her analysis of discourse-based temporality in English, Hebrew, and Spanish, Kupersmitt (2006) points out that different degrees of generality/specificity of nominal reference interact with the predicate-oriented domain of TAM and Voice, such that past perfective tense/aspect is associated with more specific, hence immediately involved episodic information, whereas timeless or habitual present and/or use of hypothetical irrealis

*š – b – r*

*add hyphen before r*

mood typically reflects a generalized, detached impersonal stance. Relevant features of Modern Hebrew structure in this respect are, first, that it lacks grammaticized marking of Aspect, so that the *benoni* 'intermediate' form of verbs refers to both generic or extended present and to immediate or ongoing events; second, it lacks grammatical marking of subjunctive and conditional moods, so that future tense marking is extended to a range of irrealis categories, supplemented by the modal operators analyzed in Section 3.2 below; and, third, use of *binyan* verb morphology, as noted, makes it possible to express a less personally involved, non-agentive point of view by means of middle voice constructions as well as by syntactic passives.

## 3.   Hebrew impersonal constructions

This section details three types of impersonal constructions, illustrated from adult-child conversational interchanges and extended texts written by schoolchildren, adolescents, and adults: Subjectless main clauses with 3rd person plural predications, subjectless clauses with modal operators and complement clauses, and clauses with generic 2nd person pronominals. Each section first outlines structural, morpho-syntactic features of the relevant construction, followed by semantic analyses of type or degree of referentiality and discourse-based functional considerations of agency-defocusing and expressing a more or less depersonalized "discourse stance".

### 3.1   Subjectless clauses with plural predicates

The first construction analyzed here is termed *mišpat stami* '(an) indefinite' sentence' in traditional school grammars listed in Schwarzwald (1978), who characterizes such sentences as "syntactically incomplete and semantically impersonal". In the invented examples in (4), the verb (in bold type) is invariably in masculine plural form, as shown by the underlined suffixes, present tense *-im*, past tense *-u*.

(4)   3rd Masculine Plural Impersonals

   a.   ***šotim***      *harbe   mic   be-Yisrael   ba-káyic*
         drink+PLUR    much  juice  in-Israel   in-the-summer
         = 'People drink lots ~ Lots of juice is/gets drunk in Israel ...'

   b.   ***šatu***       *lanu   et   kol   ha-konyak   ba-msiba*
         drank+PLUR   to-us  ACC  all   the-cognac   at-the-party
         = 'They drank all our cognac ~ All the cognac got drunk at the party'

These sentences, as roughly translated into English by a generic subject like 'they', 'people' or by passive voice, were defined in my earlier study as "strictly subjectless" and non-referring, inter alia because they cannot have a pronominal referent as antecedent

(Berman 1980). For example, (5a) below is ungrammatical, unless *hem* 'they' can be interpreted as referring to some specific people mentioned earlier, a sub-set of the universe implied by the impersonal predicate *šatu* 'drank++PLUR'. In contrast, in (5b), the (implicit) subject of the verb *axlu* 'ate' is necessarily co-referential with the overt pronominal subject *hem* 'they' of the verb *šatu* by equi-NP ellipsis.

(5) a. *šatu̲*      *lanu et kol ha-konyak ve hem ka'asu*
drank+PLUR    to-us ACC all the-cognac and they were-angry
= 'All the cognac got drunk, and they were angry'

    b. *hem šatu̲*      *lanu et kol ha-konyak aval axlu*
they drank+PLUR   to-us ACC all the-cognac but ate+PLUR

        *rak me'at*
        only little

        = 'They drank all the cognac but ate very little'

Third-person plural impersonals are common at different levels of Israeli Hebrew style, including journalese and prose fiction (Taube 2007). Their usage in colloquial Hebrew is attested to by caregiver input to young children in the examples in (6), from different Hebrew-speaking adults addressing their two-year-old children (from the Berman corpus on the CHILDES archive). Labels in brackets indicate the name and age of the child.

(6) a. Aunt: *eyx kor'im̲*     *la-báyit šel ha-kélev?*      [Leor 1;9]
How call+PLUR   the-house of the-dog
= what's it called?

    b. Fath: *ma omrim̲?*                         [Leor 1;9]
What say+PLUR
= What does one say? Child: Please

      Child: *(be)vakaša*
'Please'.

      Fath: *lo, omrim̲ toda.*
No, say+PLUR thanks
= No, you/we/people say thank you

    c. Moth: *naxon, nitraxec*       *ha-yom. roxacim̲*
right, we-wash+FUT today, wash+PLUR

             *gam rosh*                         [Hagar 2;1]
             also hair
             = 'Yes, we'll wash today. Washing hair, too'

    d. Fat: *axšav lo ro'im̲*     *televizya, axšav*
now not see+PLUR television, now

             *holxim̲ lišon*                     [Hagar 2;1]
             go+PLUR to-sleep

             Now we ~ you're not watching TV, now we ~ you're going to sleep

e.   Mot:   *klavim   niš'arim   ba-bayit   kše-holxim   la-xanut*
             dogs     stay+PLUR  at-home    when-go+PLUR   to-the-store.

             *hem    mafri'im    be-xanut.*                    [Sivan 2;4]
             they    bother+PLUR  in-a-store

= 'Dogs stay at home when people ~ you go to the store, they're in
  the way in stores'

Exchanges like these occurred in nearly every transcript of our extensive data-base
of conversational interactions between adults and young children, together with
predicates that involve personal reference – with an incorporated pronoun subject
in (6c) *nitraxec* 'we-will-wash', and with the pronominal subject *hem* 'they' pro-
nominalizing 'dogs' in (6e). They were also common in children's speech, as in the
examples in (7).

(7)  a.   *kaxa   olim     al   ha-géšer*                       [Bel 2;8]
           so     go+PLUR  on   the-bridge
           'That's how we climb onto the bridge'

     b.   *ze   lo   taim   ha-xol   ...   bol'im       et   ze,*
           it   not  tasty  the-sand  ...  swallow+PLUR  ACC  it,

           *ve-moridim          et   ha-xol   me-ha-roš*       [Lior 2;9]
           and take-down+PLUR  ACC  the-sand  from-the-head

           'The sand doesn't taste good, (you ~ we) swallow it and take it off your
           head' [said when having her hair washed]

     c.   *im   marbicim   li      ani   marbic   xazara*      [Shachar 3;11]
           if   hit+PLUR   to-me   I     hit      back
           = 'If someone hits me, I hit back'

Semantically, these Hebrew constructions, while "strictly subjectless", share many
properties with 3rd plural constructions that take a third person plural pronominal
like English 'they'. That is, "from the semantic perspective [they] are constructions
with a non-referential human subject which excludes the speaker and the addressee"
(Siewierska & Papastathi 2008) and, as such, they are functionally akin to the class of
what Malchukov and Ogawa (2008) define as "R-impersonals" that are triggered by
lack of referentiality. However, such constructions, whether lacking a surface subject
as in Hebrew (and also Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, and Spanish in the sample
analyzed by Siewierska and Papastathi) or requiring a pronominal subject (English,
Dutch, French, German), do not, strictly speaking, lack any implication of agentivity.
Rather, they invariably imply agency, to the class not merely of animates, but of human
beings. For example, in the dialogic excerpt in (6e), the mother is telling her daughter

that she cannot take her dog along because they, kids and their parents, people in general, do not take a dog with them when they go to the store.[5]

The scope of reference in 3rd person subjectless constructions is further restricted to people within the specific domain of discourse, either implied or explicit. Thus, in the invented examples in (4), drinking juice or cognac is constrained by location as attributable to any but only people residing in Israel in (4a) and by the event – to people present at the party hosted by the speaker in (4b). The same is true of the example from a little boy in (7d), whose comment on what they were told that day at nursery-school implies that he heard this from his teachers or other people associated with that context. Similarly restricted scope of reference of subjectless impersonals is illustrated by the excerpts in (8) and (9) from texts produced by schoolchildren and adolescents (in the framework of a cross-linguistic project on developing text construction abilities, as detailed in Berman 2008; Berman & Verhoeven 2002.[6] Thus, the sphere of activity referred to in (8), from an essay on violence written by a 9-year-old girl, is clearly what takes place in school and reference is to her fellow-students – and while the subjectless impersonals in bold alternate with the overt subject pronoun *anáxnu* 'we'.

(8)  *lefi da'ati alimut ze ha-davar haxi nora še-yeš, še-ravim kol ha-zman,*
     *ve-še-marbicim ve-co'akim ve-xuli. kol yom ro'im be-beyt ha-séfer be'ayot še-*
     *marbicim ve-mekalelim ve-kol miney dvarim še-lefi da'ati xayavim lehipasek.*
     *im anaxnu rocim xayim tovim yoter, anaxnu xayavim lehafsik et ha-alimut*
     *hazot bimhera ...*                                                         [G13]

     'In my opinion violence is the worst thing there is, that 0 fight+PLUR all the
     time, and 0 hit+PLUR and 0 yell+PLUR and so on. Every day 0 see+PLUR at
     school problems that 0 hit+PLUR and 0 curse+PLUR and all kinds of things that
     in my opinion must stop+PLUR+PASS. If we want a better life, we have to stop
     this violence right away ...'

These constructions also occur, less commonly, in the narrative texts elicited in the same project, where the same participants recounted an incident where they had experienced interpersonal conflict, as the excerpts in (9).

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5.  Thus, a sentence like *yešenim harbe ba-xóref* 'sleep+PLUR much in-winter' could not refer to bears or other such creatures, but means something like *people sleep a lot in the winter*; and the statement *xayavim lehagiš et ha-bexinot bi-zman* 'must+MASC-PLUR submit ACC the-tests in-time' is acceptable in the context of an all-girls' school, in the sense of 'You = all girls must hand in their tests in time ~ tests must be submitted on schedule'.

6.  Participants are identified by age-group and serial number out of 20 per age in square brackets: G stands for grade school children aged 9 to 10 years, J for junior high students aged 12 to 13 years, H for high school students aged 16 to 17 years, A for adult graduate university students in their 20s and 30s. Impersonal predicates are bolded, with the plural suffixes underlined present tense -*im* and past tense -*u*.

(9) a. *haya yéled exad še-haya matara lefanay, kor'im*
   was  boy  one  that-was aim  before-me, call+PLUR

   *lo   Dima*                                                    [J-15]
   him  Dima

   'There was a boy that was a mark for me, he's called Dima'

b. *kše-sixákti            kadurégel az  asu    alay  faul*      [G19]
   when played+1st SING football  then did+PLUR on-me foul
   'When I was playing soccer, so did on-me a foul = I got fouled'

c. *kše-rak    higáti      la-mosad        ke-yéled xuc,   lo*
   when-only arrived+1st to-the-institute as-boy  outside, not

   *kiblu          oti*                                         [H-05]
   accept+ PLUR  me

   'When I first got to the kibbutz school as an outside kid,
   I wasn't accepted = welcomed'

The excerpts in (9), from stories written by three boys at different levels of age-schooling, occur in the typically episodic and specific rather than generalized style of discourse of a personal-experience narrative. Like those from the more obviously impersonal and more distanced context of expository discourse in (8), they bear all the hallmarks of the impersonal constructions at issue here: lacking an overt grammatical subject, taking 3rd person masculine plural predicates, and non-personal in reference. Yet their scope of reference is restricted, even if implicitly: in (9b) to the other kids playing soccer with the narrator, specifically those on the other team, and in (9c), the ill-treatment the narrator suffered at the hands of others in his new school, specifically his classmates.

The same also holds for the examples in (10) from children's naturalistic speech output: (10a) a little boy telling his aunt what happened at his nursery school that day, (10b) a little girl telling her parents why she and her friends got yelled at; and (10c) from peer-interaction of a girl at kindergarten.

(10) a. *ba-gan    sipru      še-ha-tamnun     yeš lo*
   at-school  told+PLUR  that-the-octopus be  to-him

   *harbe  ragláyim*                                   [Shachar 3;11]
   many  legs

   'At (nursery) school, they told us that the octopus has many legs'

b. *ca'aku         aleynu še-lakaxnu*
   shouted+PLUR  at-us   that-took+1st,PLUR

   *mamtakim  ba-piknik*                              [Shelli 3;3]
   candies    at-the-picnic

   'They (the people in charge at the picnic) yelled at us when
   we took candies'

c.   *hu*   *ša'al*   *li*    *me-efo*    *lanu*   *ve-amarti*   *lo še-hayom*
    he   asked  to-me  from-where  to-us  and-told+1st  that-today

    *samu*    *lanu*                            [Dafna 6;1][7]
    put=PLUR  to-us

'He asked me where we got it from and I told him that they put it
there for us today'

Thus, while in Hebrew, as in many typologically unrelated languages, 3rd plural sub-jectless impersonal constructions do not explicitly specify an agent, the *range* of their agentive reference is often defined by the specific locative and/or temporal context under discussion – here, at nursery school that same day or at a picnic whose where-abouts and participants are (assumed) known to the addressees.

From the point of view of discourse function, we take as a point of departure Sierwierska's (2008) introductory comment to the effect that "The notion of impersonality is a broad and disparate one" to argue that an impersonal "discourse stances" serves the two related purposes of agency downgrading and of generalizing about a habitual state of affairs. Sierwierska further points out that "From the structural point of view, impersonalization is associated with the lack of a canonical subject, from the functional perspective with agent defocusing ... in the sense of diminishing the prominence or salience from what is assumed to be the norm or, in the terminology of Langacker (1991), archetype". This view is consistent with what Givón (1994) refers to as "suppression of agency" in discussing voice and inversion, and it relates to general processes of agency alternation, defined as "patterns in the use of grammatical constructions that express differing amounts of involvement of the agents (or causes) of the states, activities, or events referred to ... in the course of ongoing text production" (Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005).

In her comparison of 3rd plural impersonals and passives in Modern Hebrew, Taube (2007) characterizes the former as "actional in nature": It "expresses agentivity and marks the actualization of the event", in contrast to passive voice, which she describes as being "unmarked as concerns actionality and thus allows for focusing on the state of the undergoer" (2007: 282). My earlier analysis of Hebrew described suppression of agency as ranging on a descending cline from (3rd person plural) active to passive and middle voice respectively (Berman 1979). These contrasts are elaborated on below (Section 3.3) in comparing means used by speaker-writers of different languages for expressing a more or less depersonalized discourse stance.

The scope of reference of 3rd plural impersonal constructions also interacts with the domain of Tense/Aspect. Thus, use of an imperfective or extended present form of the verb – as in examples (6) through (8), with the present-tense plural

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7.  This example is from the Blum-Kulka (2009) corpus of conversational peer-interaction.

suffix *-im* – lends the proposition as a whole a more habitually generic reading. In contrast, use of a perfective or past tense verb – as in the invented sentences in (4b) and the narrative excerpts in (9b), (9c), and (10) – constrains the scope of the proposition to a more episodic time-frame, hence to a more specific, less generalized frame of reference. The preference for present-tense predicates with these constructions is also noted by Taube (2007) who points out that "Many of the 3rd masculine impersonals in our corpus [of newspaper and prose fiction – RAB] are in the present participle form, and they usually describe a rule, a custom, a routine" (2007: 289). I propose that these represent the "default" or least marked instance of the construction in question. For example, when speakers are asked to provide a so-called *mišpat stami* 'indefinite sentence', they invariably use the (timeless or generic) present tense, although past/perfective and future/irrealis constructions would be grammatically well-formed and semantically plausible. This indicates that a key function of subjectless plural-verb constructions is to express generalized propositions about a regular or habitual state of affairs, combining subjectlessness for non-specified agency and extended present tense for non-specified temporality.

## 3.2 Subjectless constructions with modal operators

A second group of subjectless impersonal constructions take the form of a modal operator followed by an infinitival or tensed 'that' clause as complement, as illustrated in (11) from the longitudinal child-language sample and Blum-Kulka (11d), and in (12) from the written texts of schoolchildren and adolescents.

(11)   a.   *oy,   ze   meluxlax   nora.   carix   lizrok   et*
           Oh,   it   dirty   terrible,   must   to-throw   ACC

           *ze   la-kvisa*                                    [Mother to Sivan, 2;5]
           it   to-the-laundry

           'It's terribly dirty, it has to go into/we have to throw it into the wash'

       b.   *at          yodd'at     im     sear   kacar   i     efšar*
           You+FEM   know+FEM   with   hair   short   not   possible

           *la'asot     camot*                               [Mother to Sivan, 5;3]
           to-make   braids

           'You know you can't make braids with short hair'

       c.   *rak     ba-madregot   efšar     laredet*            [Assaf, 5;4]
           only   in-the-stairs   possible   to-descend
           'It's only possible/you can only go down by the stairway'

       d.   *kodem   tikre'u            la-xaverim.     carix*
           first   call+IMP, PLUR   to-the-friends,   must
           *likro     la-xaverim*                        [Boy 5 to 6 years]
           to-call   to the friends

           'First call the other kids, we/you have to call the other kids'

The examples in (11) illustrate the two modal operators that were commonest in our data-base, *carix* 'must, have to' and *(iy)efšar* '(im)possible = can('t)', followed by a verb in the infinitive. Those in (12) are rather more sophisticated and less everyday, taken from expository essays written on the topic of interpersonal conflict by students from grade- to high-school age, and they include a finite tensed 'that' clause in (12d).

(12) a. *ma carix la'asot kdey lo lehagia le-makot ve-le-klalot?* [G-12]
what must to-do for not to-reach to-blows and-to-curses
'What must we do/what must be done so as not to get to blows and curses?'

    b. *ze kmo maxala še-nidbeket la-or ve-i-efšar*
it like disease that sticks to-the-skin and not possible

      *lehištaxrer mimena* [G-07]
      to-get free from it

      'It's like a disease that sticks to the skin and that you can't get rid of'

    c. *et ha-be'ayot efšar/iftor be-štey draxim* [J-07]
ACC the-problems possible to-solve in two ways
'It is possible to solve problems in two ways, problems can be solved in two ways'

    d. *yaxol liheyot še-meuxar miday lexanex yeladim* [H-01]
can to-be that late too to educate children
'It could/might be too late for educating kids'

In morphological form, these modal operators in subjectless impersonal constructions are invariant (3rd person masculine singular), often in the shape of homonymous verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Thus *carix* 'must, have to' in (11a) is a verbal form – that also has (suppletive) past and future tense forms. Unlike most of these modal operators, *carix* can also occur with what Heine (1995) describes as "agent-oriented subjects with specific reference" – in which case it agrees with a surface subject in number and gender, and takes an infinitival complement. For example, Assaf, aged 3;3 says *ani carix liknot li sus* 'I must to-buy to-me horse = I must buy myself a horse; his sister; Sivan [4;4] says *ha-géšem carix lehaškot et ha-ecim* 'The rain must to-water ACC the-trees', and [age 4;7] *bney -adam lo crixim kol ha-zman la'avod* 'people not must+PLUR all the-time to-work = people shouldn't have to work all the time'). In contrast, *(i) efšar* '(im)possible' is an adverbial that alternates with the adjective *efšari* – which inflects for number and gender. Two other terms commonly used where English might have an agent-oriented modal auxiliary are also suppletive, adverb-like elements: *yitaxen* 'likely' (e.g. *yitaxen še-hu codek* 'likely that-he right = he may be right') and *kday* 'be worthwhile' (e.g. *kday še-nemaher ~ lanu lemaher* 'worthwhile that-we-'ll-hurry ~ to-us to-hurry = we should hurry').

In syntactic structure, these invariant subjectless modal constructions, as noted, can take infinitival and tensed 'that' clause complements, with the two sometimes in competition (for example, *kday* '(be) worthwhile' in the sense of 'should'). This

alternation is lexically restricted: Some modal operators take only infinitival complements (e.g. high register use of the existential marker *yeš* 'be' in the sense of '(it is) necessary' or the preposition *al* + N 'on + N' in the sense of '(it is) incumbent upon') while others take only tensed *še-* 'that' clauses (including *yaxol liheyot* 'can to-be, maybe, is possible' in (12c) or *yitaxen* '(it is) likely'). The infinitival complement appears more basic, binding the modal operator to the following proposition more tightly than its tensed counterpart, in a construction traditionally termed *nasu murxav* 'extended predicate', rather than constituting a separate clause. Sharvit's (1997) analysis of modal expressions in Mishnaic Hebrew is confined to infinitival constructions, but further analysis is required based on contemporary discourse usage.

As subjectless predicate-initial operators with clausal complements, modals share the syntactic structure of evaluative predicates like *boring, annoying* noted in Section 1 above. This also applies to impersonal passives – for example, *besofo šel davar huskam še-tov laxtof anašim kmo X* 'eventually (it was) agreed that (it is) good to-kidnap people like X' (from an article in *Ha-arets*, 3.10.2009) – where the complement of passive *huskam* 'was agreed' is a subjectless evaluative clause with *tov* 'good'. Taube (2007) characterizes the Hebrew impersonal passive as "an invariable verbal form ... [that] is, however, rather infrequent, occurring in fixed formulas" (p. 278). The fact that they are common, as Taube notes, in newspaper writing and legalese yet failed to occur in the data-base of the present study, suggests that (non-formulaic) passive impersonals represent high-register, more formal alternatives to their active-voice plural-verb counterparts. That is, in everyday colloquial usage, Taube's example of *huxlat lidxot et ha-mišpat* '(It) was-decided to-postpone the-trial' could be replaced by *hixlitu lidxot et ha-mišpat* 'decided+PLUR to-postpone the-trial = They decided ...'

In case-marking assignment of role-properties (Malchukov & Ogawa 2008), Hebrew modal operators lie somewhere between evaluative and impersonal passive constructions. Unlike evaluatives (and like impersonal passives), modal operators typically fail to assign an oblique case role in the form of a dative experiencer. The adverbial *kday* 'worth(while), pays, beneficial' is an exception, since it can occur both with and without a dative argument (e.g. *kday lexa ~ lanu laasot zot* '(it is) worthwhile for-you ~ for-us to-do that' in the sense of 'You ~ We should do it') – suggesting that it is semantically closer to an evaluative than to a modal operator, hence less strictly impersonal. That is, lack of even oblique argument assignment underscores the impersonal nature of modal operators.

Not only do the basic modal operators – *carix* 'must, have to' and *efšar* 'possible' – not allow a dative experiencer, they rarely if ever take a non-normative expletive *ze* 'it', illustrated with evaluative predicates in (1) to (3) above. These two operators, which occur relatively early in child speech, reflect the basic semantics of irrealis modality: deontic necessity and epistemic possibility respectively (Bybee & Fleishman 1995; Reilly et al. 2002). On the other hand, these semantic dimensions also reflect

the "mixed" nature of contemporary Hebrew, as follows: Compared to their Spanish counterparts *deber, poder* (Silva-Corvalán 1995), only *carix* 'must, have to' occurs in both subjectless and "agent-oriented" constructions. Basic ability as well as possibility are expressed either by the sentence-initial operator *efšar* 'be possible' or by the verb *yaxol* 'can, be-able': In subjectless constructions, *yaxol* is invariant and requires a copular complement *liheyot* 'to-be' as in (12d) above. More typically, it occurs in agentive constructions, agreeing morphologically with the surface subject (e.g. *hu yaxol la'azor* 'he can to-help', *ani yaxólti la'azor* 'I could+1st to-help = I was able to help', *hem yaxlu la'axor* 'they were-able to-belp'). And it can also occur in plural-verb subjectless impersonals; for example, Shachar, aged 3;9, says of somebody on the telephone *hu haya medaber, yexolim lišmoa oto* 'he was talking = used to talk, can+PLUR to-hear him = we are able to hear him'.

Modal operators in Hebrew are thus a mixed group of items, syntactically, morphologically, and lexically. As such, they differ markedly from the grammatically distinct set of "agent-oriented" modal auxiliaries *can, must, should* etc. or their semi-modal alternatives *be able to, have to, ought to* respectively of English. In terms of discourse function, constructions with modal operators were earlier analyzed as encoding irrealis "propositional attitudes" (Reilly et al. 2002), that range from subjectively personal affective, via more generalized deontic to quite distanced and detached epistemic attitudes. This interacts with target language morphology, such that sentence-initial operators may express a relatively depersonalized, less involved or self-committing discourse stance compared with their agent-oriented alternatives in Hebrew or the modal auxiliaries of English. This is sbown by comparing the same kind of judgmentally prescriptive attitudes as expressed in different languages by 9-year-old children asked to discuss the issue of "problems between people": English - *When you fight, you can hurt the person's feelings ... so you should always be nice and respectful ...*; French - *Quand on se fait racketer, c'est une exception. Il faut s'éloigner le plus possible de la personne;* Spanish - *Hay muchos niños que se fijan en los demás y tienen que mejorar su actitud;* Hebrew - *asur la-morim leharbic la-talmidim, carix la'asot hakol kdey lo lehagia le-makot* 'forbidden to-teachers to-hit to-students, must to-do everything in-order not to-reach to-blows = teachers mustn't ~ aren't allowed to hit students, people ~ we must do everything not to get to the point of blows'.

As an interim summary, the examples in (13) - from the expository essays written by schoolchildren and high-school students on the topic of interpersonal conflict - illustrate both types of subjectless impersonal constructions, with 3rd plural verbs and with modal operators followed by a complement clause occurring in the same segment of discourse.

(13) a. *im ro'im xaver bi-šeat cara carix la'azor lo*     [G-18]
      if see+PLUR friend in-time trouble must to-help him
      'If you see a friend in trouble, (you) should help him'

b.  *mi-*      *beayot*    *lomdim*      *hamon gam bizman ha-beayot,*
    from    problems  learn+**PLUR**  both at-time+**GEN**   the-problems,

    *ve   gam   eyx   še-potrim*      *otam. efšar    lilmod*
    and   also   how   that solve+**PLUR**   them. Possible  to-learn

    *la-xayim   ve-la-pa'am ha-ba'a*
    for-life   and for-next time                              [J-07]

'You learn a lot from problems, both at the time and also how
people solve them. You can learn for life and for next time'

c.  *ani  xoševet  še-lifney   še-doršim*      *šivyon   bi-zxuyot,*     [H-07]
    I   think    that-before  demand+**PLUR**  equality  in-rights,

    *carix  še-yiheye    kodem  kol  shivyon    xovot*
    must   that-will-be  first-of  all   equality-of  duties

'I think that before demanding ~ we demand ~ one demands equal rights,
(it is) necessary that ~ there must be ~ we need to have equal obligations'

d.  *yaxol  liheyot  še-lo       meyaxasim   le-xax  maspik  xašivut*  [H-01]
    can    to-be    that-not   relate+**PLUR**  to-it    enough  importance

    = 'It could be that not enough importance is attributed to it ~ People
       might not relate enough importance to it'

It is no chance that these excerpts, combining the two structurally and semantically
distinct subjectless constructions, are from non-narrative, expository-type texts. As
discussed below (Section 3.1), this discourse genre is particularly suited to the general-
ized, non-specific, non-agentive, less involved discourse stance embodied by subject-
less impersonals.

## 3.3   (Pro)nominal expression of generic reference

Hebrew speakers can also express a depersonalized discourse stance by using
generic categorial terms such as *people, a person*, like those mentioned by Shemesh
(2009) as functioning as impersonal subjects in Mishnaic Hebrew: *adam* 'per-
son', *iš* 'man, *iš exad* 'man one = a man', *iš plóni* 'some man'. As an example from
our data-base, the excerpt in (14) is from a talk given by a woman [A-01] on
the topic of interpersonal violence, using the category label *ben-adam* 'son+GEN
Adam = (a) person', pronominalized by nominative *hu* 'he' or by suffixal *-o* in sub-
sequent mentions.

(14)   *ha-ben-adam carix laxšov ba-roš šelo ma ha-plúsim ve-ma ha-minúsim,*
       *hu carix liheyhot meyuman ba-maxšava ma haxi tov bišvilo, im ma*
       *hu yiheye haxi šalem*
       'The man [ = a person] must think in his mind what are the pluses
       and minuses, he must be skilled in thinking what is best for-him,
       what he can feel most at one with'

Such usages occurred mainly in more formal essay-type contexts (see Section 3.1), mainly by older speaker-writers in our study. Far commoner was reliance on the 2nd person masculine singular pronoun – nominative *ata* or suffixal *-xa* – analagously to use of Dutch *je*, English *you*, or Spanish *tú* in comparable samples – as analyzed for these languages in parallel data bases by van Hell, Verhoeven, Tak & Oosterhout (2005); Reilly, Zamora, & McGivern (2005); and Tolchinsky & Rosado (2005), respectively. In Hebrew, generic *ata* is invariable, whereas when used as a personal pronoun it contrasts with feminine singular *at* and with plural *atem*. Generic use of 2nd person pronoun in Hebrew is illustrated by the bolded forms in excerpts from oral expository texts of a 9-year-old girl in (15a) and a 12-year-old boy in (15b): The 2nd person pronoun takes the free nominative form *ata* 'you' in subject position, alternating elsewhere with the oblique form *-xa* suffixed to a preposition.

(15)  a.  *nagid mišehu ba laševet leyad-xa, ve-hu mag'il ot-xa, az lehagid lo,*
          *še-ata lo roce liyot xaver šelo*                                          [G-18]
          '(let's) say somebody comes to-sit next-to-you, and he disgusts ACC+you,
          so tell him that you do not want to-be friends with-him'

      b.  *lamrot še-ani xošev še-ze lo mašehu še-carix laásot,*
          *im ata lo yodea šeéla axat ...*                                          [J-09]
          'Even though I think it [=cribbing] is not something that should to-do
          [=that should be done, that people should do], if you don't know
          one question ....'

      c.  *ze taluy be-eyx še-ata mityaxes la-inyan, ani lo yodea, tni*
          *li beaya še-ani agdir lax*
          'It depends how you relate to-the-matter, I don't know, give +IMPER,
          2ND FEM me (a) problem that I'll-define for-you+2ND FEM'

These examples underscore the generic sense of 2nd person *ata*, since in (15a), it co-occurs with the indefinite pronoun *mišehu* 'someone, somebody' (literally 'who-that-hi', elided to *míšu* in current speech), pronominalized by *hu* 'he' in the same sentence, as a colloquial variant of the more formal generic noun *ben-adam* '(a) person' in the adult's text in (14). In (15b) the 2nd person pronoun occurs in the same context as the indefinite pronoun *mašehu* 'something' and, moreover, contrasts overtly when used generically versus the same pronoun used in a deictic, personal sense in the feminine forms of the imperative verb *tni* 'give' and suffixal *-ax* 'for you' (cf. masculine *lexa*), when the boy addresses his teacher, requesting her guidance on how to discuss the topic of "problems between people".

While clearly used in a generic sense, contrasting with specific personal reference in these examples, Hebrew *ata* is typical of more colloquial, everyday use in contrast to higher-register 3rd person generic subjects as in (14). 2nd person pronouns evidently express a relatively interactive orientation, even when used generically. And, indeed,

across the Hebrew-language sample, these forms occurred almost exclusively in the spoken texts (see Section 3.1), reflecting a relatively informal, personalized type of discourse stance compared with the more distanced and detached written language (Berman & Ravid 2009).

## 4.   Comparative trends

A usage-based perspective implies that how different constructions are deployed for expressing an impersonal stance on events will be affected by factors such as communicative context, level of literacy, and target language typology. Below, observations emerging from the Hebrew-language data-base used for this study are reviewed and integrated with findings from studies on comparable samples in other languages – to compare occurrence of the three constructions described above in relation to the variables of genre (4.1), development (4.2), and language (4.3).

### 4.1   Type of discourse

Research shows children to be genre-sensitive from an early age. For example, young preschoolers can distinguish between scripts and personal-experience narratives (Hudson & Shapiro 1991) or between fictional narrative and description (Sandbank 2002), while 9-year-old speaker-writers distinguish clearly between the linguistic means they use in their expository essays compared with personal-experience narratives (Berman & Nir-Sagiv 2007).

Discourse-based comparisons indicate that use of the three target constructions described above for making non-agentive, impersonal, or generic reference depends critically on communicative context. Subjectless Impersonals, as illustrated earlier, are common in adult-child interactive input and output from a very early age, typically to refer to generic states of affairs in extended present. Subsequently, they are extended to reporting on past events in restricted contexts such as school or the playground. Moreover, in a large sample of written texts produced by grade-school, middle-school, and high-school students (N=36 in each group), they were used significantly more, and by more respondents, in the expository essays compared with the personal experience narratives elicited from the same participants on the shared topics of violence in schools or interpersonal conflicts (Berman 2003; Berman & Nir-Sagiv 2004). Analogous findings emerged for use of Subjectless Modal constructions: These are documented in Hebrew adult-child conversational interactions from pre-school age, they are typical of expository essays rather than personal-experience written narratives in different languages (Reilly et al. 2002), and they occur at least once in half the expository essays of school-age students, but in fewer than 10% of the stories that they wrote (Berman 2003). Use of a 2nd Person Generic Pronoun interacts with the factor of modality and register as well as with discourse genre: Across the data-base

of 320 Hebrew extended texts, *ata* as a generic subject was used at least once, often several times, by one-fifth [16 out of 80] of the respondents in the four age-groups – but exclusively in spoken and not written texts, typically in the expository genre, although it can be found occasionally in oral peer interactions from late pre-school age (in the data-base of Blum-Kulka, 2009). Further, while Hebrew speakers can make use of lexical nouns for generic reference – among older speaker-writers in the form of a high-register term like *ben-adam* '(a) person' (as in (14) above) and among children, by more colloquial, plural generics like *anašim* 'people', *yeladim* 'children', these are less widely used than subjectless constructions (Ravid et al. 2002). The latter emerge as a favored means for expressing an impersonal, non-agentive stance in Hebrew from early on in development.

Favoring of impersonal constructions in expository prose compared with personal-experience narratives can quite obviously be explained as a general feature of this type of discourse. And it confirms findings for use of diverse linguistic forms – including personal versus generic and expletive pronouns, middle and passive voice, modal expressions – in a comparable sample of texts in different languages revealing clear and consistent differences between the direct, immediate, subjectively personalized perspective of personal-experience narratives and the more detached, distanced, abstract, and impersonal style of expository discourse (Berman 2005) Expository discourse is a natural site for the expression of a depersonalized discourse stance, hence for use of impersonal construction, since it is typically topic-oriented, with a focus on concepts and ideas, whereas narrative discourse is concerned mainly with people, their actions and motivations, hence more personalized and subjective (Britton 1994; Longacre 1996). Comparisons of expository discussions with personal-experience narratives in both speech and writing in our data-base revealed an intersection of genre and modality ranging along a clear language-independent hierarchy – with oral narratives at one end and expository essays at the other – in domains of linguistic register, agent downgrading, and overasll discourse stance (Nir-Sagiv, Bar-Ilan & Berman 2008 – for English; Ravid & Berman 2009 – for Hebrew; Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005 – for Spanish). These convergent findings point to a broad, genre-related continuum of **impersonalization**, extending out to interactive conversation at one end, via personal experience and fictive narratives to informative texts, expository discussions, and research papers, at the other.

## 4.2 Age-schooling related factors

Age-related developments in the acquisition and use of the three target constructions indicate that all three appear before school-age. As noted, Subjectless Impersonals are common in adult input even to 2-year-olds, and in child speech from as young as age 3 years; Modals occur early in Child Directed Speech, but children use them with clausal complements only from age 4 to 5 years – as part of the development of

complex syntax; while generic *ata* as a depersonalized mode of reference appears at late pre-school age. The extended texts in our data-base show two major developments in expression of a detached, depersonalized stance, as in other areas of language acquisition and use (Berman & Slobin 1994): (1) a broadening of the range of expressive options and (2) a change in the content of these different devices.

With respect to the broader range of devices deployed with age and schooling, in a recent study comparing development of a "depersonalized stance" in French and Spanish, Jisa and Tolchinsky (2009) point to an "increase in the diversity [emphasis mine, RAB] of linguistic means" appropriate to expository discourse. In general, with age and increased literacy, related research on different languages (in the Berman 2005 special issue) reveals a general shift to more formal, often more typically written styles of expression. These include greater reliance on passive voice and a move from *get* to *be* passives in English; use of *se* middles and passive voice rather than generic subjects like *on, nous, tout le monde* in French; infrequent use of generic *maður* in Icelandic by mature participants compared with their younger counterparts; decrease in reliance on 2nd person pronouns used generically in favor of other, more formal devices such as the pronoun *men* in Dutch; and greater reliance on *se* impersonals, middles, and passives in Spanish. A key development in this respect in Hebrew not previously noted is increased use of intransitive middle-voice *binyan* verb-pattern morphology to express a non-agentive perspective on events. The **bolded** verbs in the examples in (16) are in the *hitpaèl* verb-pattern typical of change-of-state achievement predicates, those in (17) are in the *nifàl* pattern, commonly used for adjectival passives or so-called unaccusative predicates (Berman 1993a; Berman & Neeman 1994).

(16)  a.  *alimut    ze  davar   še-mitgaber    im    ha-zman*    [J-03 expos]
violence   it  thing   that **gets-bigger**  with  the-time
= 'Violence is something that increases with time'

b.  *ve-az     hitpateax̱mi-ze    riv*    [H-03 narr]
and then  **developed** from-it  quarrel
= 'And then there developed a quarrel out of that'

c.  *ze  taluy      bi-yexolto       šel  ha-oved*
it  depends   in-ability-his  of   the-worker

*le-hištalev     ba-cévet*    [A-19 expos]
**to-integrate**  in-the-team

= 'It depends on the worker's ability to become part of the group'

(17)  a.  *beayot     ben       anašim  ze  kmo  maxala*
problems   between    people  it  like  disease
*še-**nidbéket**  laòr*    [G-07 expos]
**that-sticks**   to-the-skin
= 'Problems between people are like a disease that infects the skin'

b.  *ve-kan     nocar      sixsux    beneyhem*                         [J-01 narr]
    and-here   was-created   conflict   between-them
    = 'And here there arose a conflict between them'

c   *nórmot   eyle    no'adu  lehagdir   et     txumey     ha-mutar* [A-12 expos]
    norms    those   meant  to-define  ACC   limits-GEN  the-allowed
    = 'Those norms were intended to delimit the bounds of what is permissible'

Use of the two typically intransitive verb-patterns *hitpa'el* and *nif'al* out of the 7 *binyan* forms in the Hebrew sample of 320 written and spoken expository and narrative texts increased consistently with age, as follows: from 6.8% of all (lexical) verbs used by 4th-grade 9-to-10-year-olds to 14% in 7th grade, to nearly 20% in high school; among adults, 17% intransitive pattern usage was supplemented by nearly 5% use of the two passive voice patterns – rare until high school age, when they account for only 2.0% of all verbs. This age-related increase in intransitive verb-forms reflects developing ability to adopt a patient- rather than an agent-oriented perspective on events, as shown earlier for children's oral picture-book narratives in Hebrew and other languages (Berman 1993b; Berman & Slobin 1994).

Increased age-related diversity in expression of an impersonal discourse stance is reflected not only between alternating systems (say active versus middle or passive voice), but also by expansion within a given linguistic system. This was noted above in the extension of generic present tense use of subjectless plural-verb impersonals to more temporally specified past (and also future) tense, and it is observed in a shift from use of colloquial-style generic lexical subjects like *yeladim* 'children', *anašim* 'people' to higher-register terms like *ben-adam* '(a) person' (Berman & Ravid 2009). A particularly dramatic development in this respect, documented for English and French as well as Hebrew, was a significant age-related shift in the type of propositional attitudes expressed by modal terms (Reilly et al. 2002). Nine- to 12-year-olds use modal terms mainly to express prescriptively normative, socially dictated attitudes to the topic of "problems between people" – in Hebrew, by means of operators such as *carix* 'must, have to', *lo carix* 'shouldn't, ought not', often by (early acquired) modals of prohibition or allowance – *asur ~ mutar* 'forbidden = you can't, mustn't' ~ 'allowed 'you can, may' respectively. In contrast, older speaker-writers resort to epistemic, cognitively motivated modal expressions, referring to as possible or probable contingencies as eventualities that can, may, or will arise out of interpersonal conflict – in terms such as *yaxol liheyot* 'can to-be = it's possible', *yitaxen* 'likely'. This development in use of subjectless modals as an impersonal construction is consistent with other studies that show age-related changes not only in linguistic structure but also in the thematic content and pragmatic perspectives expressed by older, more literate, even if non-expert speaker-writers in discussing their ideas and relating their experiences (see, for example, for Hebrew, Ravid 2006; Ravid & Cahana-Amitay 2005).

Research into developing discourse abilities from preschool age to adolescence and beyond suggests two related explanations for these developments. The first is the universal progression where, starting out as "child speakers", language learners early on move to becoming "native speakers", but only much later, with increased social-cognitive and literacy-related development, advance to the level of "proficient speaker/writers" of a given native language (Slobin 1997, 2001). The second, related factor is that of "later language development": It takes until adolescence or beyond for speaker-writers to evolve the cognitive skills and communicative sophistication necessary for deploying a fully developed repertoire of linguistic forms flexibly and appropriately in varied discursive contexts (Berman 2007; in press; Ravid & Tolchinsky 2002; Tolchinsky 2004). This kind of alternation is illustrated by the bolded impersonal, passive, and modal forms in the short excerpt in (18), from the of a high-school boy [H-10].

(18)  aval  ba-zman    ha-axaron  **menasim**+PLUR  lehaxdir    la-yeladim
      but   in-the-time last       try+PLUR         to-introduce to-the-kids

      (gila'ey  arba~esre  šloš-esye  et  ha-nose  šel  sovlanut
      (ages+GEN thirteen   fourteen)  ACC the topic of   tolerance

      ha- nose  **muxdar**         be-emcaut        ha- tikšóret ...
      the-topic introduced+PASS    in-medium+GEN    the-media

      aval  be-gila'im  yoter  gvohim      crixim      ladun       be-ze
      but   in-ages     more   high+PLUR   must+PLUR   to-discuss  in-it

      be-kvucot lefi bxirat ha-ne'arim
      in-groups by choice+GEN the lads

      = 'But lately (they've been) **trying** to introduce the topic of tolerance to kids
        aged 13 or 14. The topic **is-introduced** through the media, but in older
        age-groups, (people) **should discuss** it (it should be discussed) in groups
        of the young people's choosing'

As I have argued elsewhere for other facets of Hebrew-language development, children are from early on familiar with most of the forms available in their language – in the case in point, plural impersonals, modals plus complements generic pronouns, passive voice, etc.(Berman 2004). But it takes many years, often to high school age, before speaker-writers can extend and integrate use of diverse forms to meet the function of expressing an impersonal stance in a stylistically felicitous and communicatively appropriate fashion.

### 4.3   Cross-linguistic factors in selecting means for depersonalization

The free translations into English of the Hebrew examples provided in this chapter, including for the excerpt in (18), where the English version supplies surface subjects and extends use of passive voice, are indicative of critical cross-linguistic differences

in expression of an impersonal stance. This is highlighted by the different options selected for expressing the same content in English, French, and Hebrew in (19), with subject (pro)nouns in italics and verbs underlined.

(19) Passive Patient Subject: *English* <u>spoken</u> here

Generic Pronoun Subject: Ici *on* <u>parle</u> français

Subjectless 3rd Plural: *0* kan <u>medabrim</u> ivrit

These alternative formulations show how, if a language does not have readily available subjectless constructions for meeting the function of "impersonalization" then, quite obviously, other options will be sought.

The cross-linguistic comparisons proposed below are based on a large and uniquely comparable sample of the same text types derived by the same elicitation methods from the same age-groups of native speaker-writers in different languages. A clear divide emerged between the means favored for expressing depersonalization and agency downgrading in languages tolerant of subjectless constructions like Hebrew and Spanish compared with languages that require a surface subject like English and French. Hebrew relies on the three options detailed in Section 2, supplemented by morphological options for agent downgrading by means of intransitive middle-voice verb-morphology (Section 3.2), the latter system also used, but far less frequently, for passive voice. Spanish likewise has a rich range of options for expressing a depersonalized discourse stance: These include, along with a generic 2nd person pronoun subject, common reliance on *se* marked subjectless impersonals and, less commonly, *se* marked middle and passive voice constructions as well as periphrastic or syntactic passives with a non-agentive subject (Jisa & Tolchinsky 2009; Tolchinsky & Rosado 2005). In contrast, Reilly et al. (2005) describe English as using passive voice constructions – where younger children favor *get* passives compared with more mature reliance on *be* passives (Berman & Slobin 1994) – or else expletive pronouns *it, there* and generic subjects such as *people* alternating with generic pronouns like *you, they, one* – with these alternating in what appear to be rather haphazard ways. For example, in the course of a single short essay, a Californian high-school student [eH02] alternates generic reference as follows: "Problems are only as big as <u>one</u> makes them out to be. If <u>you</u> ignore a problem, or try not to make it into a big deal, <u>the other person</u> is forced to do the same thing. As <u>one</u> grows up, <u>they</u> learn to get along with people ..."

Other subject-requiring languages in the sample differ from English in having what we term a "dedicated" generic pronoun. This is the case with French *on*, which gives way with increased age and literacy to greater reliance on passive constructions for expressing a depersonalized stance (Jisa 2004; Jisa & Viguié 2005), while in Swedish, the analogous item *man* remains favored across the board as against its counterpart *maður* in the typologically closely related Icelandic, which prefers use of passive

constructions (Ragnarsdóttir & Strömqvist 2005).[8] And in fact, reliance on passive voice, where "downgrading the topicality of agents raises the topicality a non-agent participant" (Givón 1994) in the form of a surface subject nominal, reveals clear cross-linguistic distinctions. Thus, comparison of passive voice usage in the written texts in five different languages differed markedly in this respect, with Dutch and English making the greatest use compared with Hebrew and Spanish, and French somewhere in the middle (Jisa et al. 2002).

These language-particular differences in use of passive voice for agency down-grading are of interest since, as noted, the discourse data-base was closely parallel in all seven languages (elicited on the same topic, by the same procedures, and at similar levels of age and schooling). Besides, all these languages have structurally productive passive voice constructions. The relatively low reliance on passives for agency down-grading in Hebrew, then, as in Spanish, is due not to structural productivity per se, but rather to the availability of alternative rhetorical options for expressing this same discourse function in the form of subjectless impersonals along with middle-voice constructions in which intransitive morphology combines with typically inanimate, non-agentive subjects. Basic expressive options for expressing a depersonalized discourse stance are accessible to even quite young children, in the form of a dedicated generic pronoun in subject-requiring languages (French on, Swedish man), and subjectless impersonals in Spanish (with se) and Hebrew (with 3rd person plural verbs). These constructions are typical of relatively informal, everyday discourse rather than the more mature, high-register style where passive constructions tend to occur in Hebrew (Ravid & Berman 2009; Taube 2007).

Analogous findings emerged in analysis of complex syntactic constructions in the same data-base. Although English, Hebrew, and Spanish share much the same repertoire of structural devices for linking clauses in extended discourse (by coordinate, complement, adverbial, and relative clauses), speaker-writers differed in their use of such constructions in parallel corpora: English relied relatively more on nonfinite subordination, Hebrew was largely paratactic, while Spanish texts favored complex embedding and interdependency of clauses (Berman & Nir-Sagiv 2009; Berman, Nir & 2009). Taken together, these patterns suggest that target language typology interacts with "rhetorical style" in determining the means favored by speaker-writers for meeting discourse functions such as event-construal (Berman & Slobin 1994: 622–639),

8.   Assoulin (2009) describes an interesting case of change in the Yiddish spoken by members of the ultra-Orthodox speakers of the Jerusalem dialect, who use the 1st person plural *mir* as a "dedicated" generic pronoun, alternating with the impersonal pronoun *me(n)* and contrasting with occasional use of the pronoun *undz* to refer to a specific social group, generally expressing the opposition between "us" versus "them".

clause-combining connectivity or, in the domain at issue here, expression of a depersonalized discourse stance by means of passive voice, generic pronouns, or subjectless impersonal constructions.

Another theme, one that echoes Slobin's (1982, 2001) cross-linguistic insights into child language development, is the effect of *grammaticization* of a given set of options in a particular language. Reilly et al.'s (2002) comparison of modal expressions occurring in written texts elicited on the same topic in different languages shows that the younger English-speaking children use modal expressions significantly more than their French-, Hebrew-, and Spanish-speaking peers – a finding we attributed to the relative salience and accessibility of modals as a closed class of grammaticized terms in English.[9] Moreover, across the texts of children, adolescents, and adults, modal expressions were typically subject/agent-oriented in English, less so in French, and even less so in Hebrew and Spanish, two languages that do not require a surface subject in such constructions. English can use expletive subjects to express impersonal, hence non-referential, non agent-oriented modality (e.g. *it is possible, necessary, likely*), but these were far more restricted in the texts we examined than their subjectless counterparts in corresponding samples in Hebrew and Spanish. On the other hand, even advanced level *second language* speakers of English use such rather heavy and stiff-sounding constructions extensively to express an impersonal stance, where a subject/agent-oriented construction might sound more natural.

## 5.   Concluding discussion

Two general conclusions emerge from a discourse-anchored consideration of Hebrew impersonal constructions: First, that speaker-writers typically rely on a "confluence of devices" from the structural options available to them in a given language for expressing a discourse function such as a depersonalized stance; and, second, that the available devices can be ranged along a continuum of differing degrees from most to least impersonal.

The two texts reproduced in (20) and (21) illustrate the weaving together of numerous alternative means for expressing an impersonal stance in Hebrew. Consider, first, the oral text of 12-year-old girl [J-11] asked to give a talk discussing the topic of "problems between people". Numbered brackets indicate clause boundaries, with depersonalizing forms in bold.

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9.   Degree of grammaticization might also explain relatively wider distributions of the generic 3rd-person pronoun subjects *on* and *man* in French and Swedish compared with the partial occurrence of 2nd person *ata* in the texts of Hebrew 9-year-olds (4 out of 20 children).

(20)   *ani xošévet še-beʾayot beyn anašim ve- beʾayot beyn yeladim* ]1 *efšar lifior lo*
       *be-koax ela be-moax.*]2 *efšar ledaber,* ]3 *yeš sixot,* ]4 *lo la-riv.*]5 *im ata ose*
       *mašuʤo beseder*]6 *yeš lehitnacel* ]7 *ve-lilmod me- ha-taut.*]8 *yešalimut milulit*  ←
       *ve-alimut fizit* ]9 *ve kol ha-pitronot ha-eyle hem lo movilim le-šum davar*
       *ve- le-šum haskama*]10 *ve-hem movilim rak le-brógez*]11 *ve- anaxnu lo*
       *crixim lixyot kaxa.*]12 *anaxnu crixim lixyot be-šalom im kulam* ]13 *lexabed*
       *et kulam* ]14 *lehityaxes yafe exad la-šeni.* ]15

(20')  Freely Translated Version of (20)

       'I think that problems between people and problems between kids ]1 (it is)
       **possible** to-solve [= can be solved] not by brawn but by brain.]2 (It is)
       **possible** to-talk. ]3 (There) is talking. ]4 **Not** to-fight [= People shouldn't
       fight.] 5 If you do something wrong,] 6 **be** [=it is behoven] to-apologize ]7
       and-learn from the mistake.]8 (There) is verbal violence and physical
       violence ]9 and **all those** solutions they don't lead to anything and to any
       agreement ]10 and **they** lead only to quarreling. ]11 And **we** should+PLUR
       not live like-that, ]12 **We** should live in-peace with everyone, ]13 (have-to)
       respect everyone, ]14 to-behave nicely to one another. ]15

Nearly every one of the 15 clauses in the original Hebrew version of this oral exposi-
tory text produced by a young teenager is bolded, indicating that it is entirely imper-
sonal and generic in overall stance – the only exception being the formulaic *ani xošévet*
'I think+FEM' [cf. also Fr. *je trouve*, Sp. *creo*] in the opening line, a genre-typical marker
of generalized discussion of an abstract topic. Even the translated version in (20')
illustrates a removed, distant, and totally generalized impersonal discourse stance. It
demonstrates that by early adolescence, Hebrew speakers have recourse to numer-
ous *alternative* constructions to express a depersonalized perspective on situations: by
means of subjectless 3rd personal plural and modal constructions as well as by use of
generic 2nd person pronoun (in Clause #6) – coupled with generic *we* (in Clauses #12
and #13) and lexical reference to generic entities, typically in the plural (e.g. *people,
problems, solutions*), The text contains no personal pronouns or specific reference,
while its impersonal, generalized, non-specific, and non-episodic tenor is underscored
predicatively by use of timeless present tense plus irrealis mood and infinitival and
other non-finite predicates.

Rather different, although no less varied linguistic devices for expressing an
impersonal stance are illustrated by the expository essay written by a woman [A06] on
the same topic in (21).

(21)   *le-caʾari ba-xevra šelánu bixlal u-ve-Yisrael bifrat, yeš beʾayot rabot meod beyn*
       *anašim u-ve-txumim šonim.* ]1 *ikar ha-beʾayot novʾot mi-kšaʾey tikšóret milulit*
       *ve-lo milulit* ] 2 *kaʾašer peʾamim rabot ani mocet* ]3 *še-šney anašim metakšerim*
       *be-galim šonim legamrey, davar* ]4 *ha-gorem le-kécer.* ]5 *xašuv meʾod le-daʾati* ]6
       *lefatéax et ha tikšóret ke-kišur xayim kax* ] 7 *še-kol adam yiheye kašuv*
       *ve-meʾunyan lezahot et ha-téder* ] 8 *še-alav mešader xavero,*] 9 *ve-kax*
       *timanana beʾayot rabot.* ]10

(21')    Translation of Woman's Essay into English

To my regret in our society in general and in Israel in particular (there) are
very many problems between people and in different domains.]1 The crux of
the problems derives from difficulties in communication, both verbal and
non-verbal ]2 and frequently I find ]3 that two people communicate on
completely different wave-lengths]4 leading to a breakdown. ]5 (It is) very im-
portant in my opinion ] 6 to promote interpersonal communication as a
life skill ]7 so that every person will be attentive and ready to identify the
frequency ]8 on which his-fellow communicates ]9 and in that way many
problems may be avoided. ]10

Quite typically, and unlike schoolchildren, adults alternate perspectives between a dis-
tanced, objectively impersonal perspective and their own personal point of view. The
adult essay in (21) (quite typically) reveals a variegated rather than homogeneous dis-
course stance, ranging from less to more personalized and back again – for example, in
the discourse-marking comments "to my regret", "I find", "in my opinion" – reflecting a
skillful alternation in perspective and point of view beyond the abilities of even young
teenagers (Berman & Nir-Sagiv 2007). Like the girl's talk in (20), here, too, the exposi-
tory mode of discourse elicits atemporal predications rather than reference to specific
times, through use of the extended habitual present and irrealis modality. But the adult's
text is in a consistently higher register, including use of 3rd person singular generic
nominals like *kol adam* 'each person', *xavero* 'his fellow(man)' and passive-voice verbs.

In contrast, the example in (22), culled from an e-mail message sent by a highly
literate, native Hebrew-speaking colleague, demonstrates how impersonal reference
can function in a less formal style of discourse.

(22)    *od me'at   holxim      la-kalfi]*1,       *ve-kcat      mad'ig   oti]* 2 *še-yeš*
        soon       go+PLUR    to-the-polls, ]1    and rather    worries  me] 2 that be

        *od    anašim]* 3   *še-lo      hištaxne'u    bixlal]* 4   *še-ze*
        still  people ]3    that-not    convinced     at-all]4     that it

        *xašuv ]* 5        *le-hacbia ]* 6
        important]5        to-vote ] 6

        'We will soon be going to the polls, and it worries me a bit that there are still
        people that haven't been altogether convinced that it's important to vote.'

This short excerpt illustrates different depersonalizing constructions discussed in
this chapter – 3rd person plural subjectless impersonals in [1], a subjectless evalua-
tive predicate in [2], an intransitive middle-voice construction in [3], combined with
non-normative use of an expletive *ze* 'it' as subject in [4]. The casually unbuttoned
medium of e-mail communication elicits from the educated speaker-writer of contem-
porary Hebrew a rich variety of discourse-stance encodings within a single proposi-
tion. Packaged together here are (1) a totally impersonal non-agentive going to the
polls (here confined to the universe of Israelis with the right to vote), followed by (2)

a subjectless evaluative clause personalized by use of accusative case in the causative construction *mad'ig oti še* ... '(it) worries me that' (cf. the equally well-formed passive *ani mud'ag* 'I (am) worried'); then follows (3) a complement clause with middle-voice morphology used with the verb for 'convince' (again, cf. the passive alternant *šuxne'u* 'were convinced (by X)'); ending (4) with a complement clause taking an overt expletive pronominal *ze* where the subjectless equivalent *še 0 xašuv lehacbia* 'that (is) important to vote' would be normatively more acceptable (cf. examples (1) to (3) in Section 1 above). Insertion of an overt expletive pronoun here is still confined to more colloquial spoken (and written on electronic mail) usage of educated native-speakers of Hebrew. But these are precisely the contexts in which language change will first be realized, as has been shown for other aspects of Modern Hebrew, too (Ravid 1995).

The excerpt in (22) thus demonstrates how a confluence of devices for nominal reference in expressing a depersonalized discourse stance interacts with different degrees of generality and specificity in types of predicating elements as well. This anecdotal instance is confirmed by Kupersmitt's (2006) indepth analysis of the same data-base of extended texts as considered here, demonstrating that in English, Spanish, and Hebrew – three languages that differ markedly in grammatical TAM – the predicate-oriented domains of tense, aspect, mood, and voice interact clearly with overall discourse context, with past perfective tense/aspect and active voice preferred for conveying more specific, hence immediately involved episodic information as against reliance on timeless or habitual present, use of irrealis mood, and middle or passive voice predicates for expression of a generalized, detached impersonal stance.

In sum, a functionally discourse-based analysis of Hebrew impersonals combines with the idea of a confluence of structural devices – subjectless constructions, pronominals, case-marking, and tense/mood/voice – as conspiring together to express varying degrees of "impersonalization" (Siewierska 2008). Cross-linguistic comparisons of how these different devices are deployed in contrasting discourse genres suggest a *continuum* of depersonalization combined with agency downgrading, ranging from totally impersonal, non-referential via generic to specific reference: At one end are strictly subjectless constructions like Hebrew 3rd person plurals or Spanish *se*-constructions or their counterparts with plural pronouns like impersonal *they* in English; these align with other totally *impersonal* subjectless constructions such as weather expressions and modal or evaluative propositions where subject-requiring languages resort to expletive subjects like English *it* and where in Hebrew, an experiencer role may be expressed by dative-marked (pro)nominals. Less impersonal, expressing a more inclusive rather than a fully detached discourse stance, although also non-specific in reference, are *generic* pronominals, either dedicated terms like French *on*, Swedish *man*, or else 2nd person singular pronouns used non-personally, alternating with 3rd person generic nouns like *people, a person* or a variety of pronouns used generically such as *we, one,* etc. At the *personalized* end of the continuum are means

for making specific reference to individuals or classes of individuals and entities, by fully specific, personal forms of reference, both deictic 1st and 2nd person pronouns, as well as lexical noun phrases and anaphoric pronouns. These different means of nominal reference for conveying varying degrees of generality/specificity converge in a usage-based perspective with the predicate-oriented domains of tense, mood, and voice in the expression of a more or less impersonal discourse stance.

## Abbreviations

ACC — Accusative Direct Object marking prepositions
GEN — Genitive Suffix on Initial Head Noun in Bound Compounds
IMP — Imperative, marked for 2nd person number and gender
PASS — Passive voice forms of verbs
PLUR — Plural ending on verbs, nouns, adjectives
TAM — Tense, Aspect, Mood

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