Analogism vs. Anomalism in Jewish Linguistic Thought. The 18th-Century Controversy between Zalman Hanau and Jacob Emden

Yehonatan Wormser
Efrata College, Jerusalem; The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem; Gordon Academic College, Haifa, Israel
yowormser@gmail.com

Abstract

This article presents an analysis of the controversy between two 18th-century leading figures: Rabbi Zalman Hanau and Rabbi Jacob Emden. The stances expressed in this controversy, which was held over changes in the traditional prayer versions suggested by Hanau, reveal opposing fundamental attitudes of the two rivals towards basic questions concerning the origin of Hebrew and its linguistic essence. It is being suggested that this controversy resembles the ancient linguistic dispute between the analogist school and anomalist school in Greek and Latin linguistics, even though these two 18th-century figures were not familiar with it.

Keywords
analogism – anomalism – language – linguistics – Hebrew

The controversy over linguistic analogism and anomalism was firstly initiated by Greek grammarians around the 2nd century BCE. It has been a continuous dispute between well-known scholars over generations (for example, Aristophanes of Byzantium and Dionysius Thrax were analogists, while the Stoic philosophers were usually anomalists), its main point being the question of to what extent language conforms to some rules. The Analogists believed

---

1 This research was conducted with the support of the Russian Science Foundation (project no. 17-18-01295), Saint Petersburg State University.
that language has a logic and coherent structure, which can be described by fixed paradigms and rules. The Anomalists, on the other hand, pointed out the many irregularities in language and thus asserted that it does not conform to steady rules. The debates between the two schools formed a framework for many discussions in fundamental linguistic issues, such as the origin of language (to be presented later), correspondence of form and meaning, and linguistic purism.²

The antique controversy died down around the end of the 1st century CE, and probably had no direct impact on medieval and early-modern Hebrew linguistics. Yet, a scholar who deals with grammar ought to hold, at least intuitively, any stance towards this fundamental question. The basic attitudes thus got sometimes some expression in Jewish linguistic writings, although usually not explicitly espoused. In general, the Jewish grammarians’ line of thought follows the analogist principle.³ But some reflections of anomalist approach are also found, as the contrast between analogism and anomalism stands behind some arguments in at least one medieval grammatical dispute.⁴

In what follows I would like to present the basic attitudes towards this fundamental matter and their projections in the famous early-modern controversy between Zalman Hanau⁵ (1687–1746) and Jacob Emden (‘Yaavetz’, 1697–1776).⁶ The dispute was held over changes in versions of the traditional Jewish prayers

---

³ On the concept of analogy in medieval Jewish linguistics, see J. Martínez Delgado, ‘The Philosophical Background of the Andalusian Hebrew Grammar (10th Century),’ Zutot 3 (2003) 44. Although being focused on the Andalusian linguistic school, Martínez Delgado’s analysis is essentially valid to most of later medieval Jewish grammarians, who followed the Andalusian grammatical foundations.
⁵ I follow here the common spelling of his name, which is identical with the German town where he was born. But the correct form of his name is actually ‘Hena,’ which is derived from his birthplace name.
⁶ The distinction between analogism and anomalism in context of the dispute between Hanau and Emden was mentioned by A. Schatz, Sprache in der Zerstreung: Die Säkularisierung der Hebräischen im 18. Jahrhundert (Göttingen 2009) 212–213. Schatz points out its resemblance to discussions between German linguists of the time, but Hanau and Emdens’ approaches were presented only as general ideas, without analyzing their explicit expressions in this issue, nor presenting their implications on the practice of these scholar’s grammatical deduction.
which were introduced by Hanau. Hanau, a well-known grammarian, had published a book named *Sha‘are tefilah* (Jessnitz 1725). In this book he claimed, mostly on the basis of grammatical arguments, that the version of the prayers was faulty in hundreds of cases, and presented an alternative version for each case. In the same year he published also a prayer book – *Bet tefilah* (Jessnitz 1725) where he implemented his version changes and supplemented them. Emden, a leading rabbi, rejected most of Hanau’s changes, in an attempt to preserve the customary versions. He published his criticism in a comprehensive book, dedicated to this aim – *Luah eres* (Altona 1769). In addition, he addressed these issues also in numerous passages throughout other writings he published.

One fundamental difference between Hanau and Emden, which is explicitly expressed by both sides in many cases, is about the nature of the language of the prayers. Hanau believed that the prayers texts are based on Biblical Hebrew vocabulary and grammar. Inasmuch as the Hebrew of the prayers do contain plenty of rabbinic elements, Hanau considered many of them as faulty. Emden, on the other hand, maintaining that the language of the prayers is, to a large extent, of rabbinic character (without denying, however, that they integrate also many biblical traits), rejected Hanau’s changes.

Hanau’s aspiration to correct existing prayer versions is a clear expression of his basic analogical approach. Hanau believed that the Hebrew language is an organized system, which adheres to strict, definite rules. In principle, the rules govern the whole vocabulary and usage of Hebrew. He made great efforts to minimize exceptions in Biblical Hebrew and to show how, in fact, seemingly exceptional words and phrases adhere to the rules. When he could not provide such an explanation, he admitted that there was an exception, but

---

7 For details and references, see Y. Wormser, ‘The Grammatical Theory of Rabbi Zalman Hena (Hanau)’ (PhD diss., University of Haifa 2016) 12–15 [Hebrew].
8 The main motive for Emden’s activity in this field was probably his desire to maintain the Jewish tradition and to prevent changes in the Jewish ancient heritage (see Emden, *Luah eres*, 2a–3b).
regarded it as an intentional variation aimed to hint at an additional, midrashic interpretation.\(^{12}\)

The basis of Hanau’s linguistic view is the traditional assumption of the divine origin of the Hebrew language.\(^{13}\) The rules of the Hebrew grammar were set, according to Hanau, by God, and its words and utterances were all created by him in line with these rules. He supported his approach by asserting that language lacking consistency in its linguistic structures is typical to ‘foolish’ men with ‘garbled’ language, but impossible to be assumed while regarding the language of the holy Pentateuch.\(^{14}\)

According to Hanau’s assumption of their biblical nature, the words of the prayers are also subject to the same principle. Therefore, when there is any deviation from the expected grammatical form, it is definitely a result of some fault in the text which occurred in some late period of time. Thus, all the prayers’ corrections suggested by Hanau are based on one underlying assumption, according to which the Hebrew linguistic forms and structures permanently adhere to fixed, definite rules.

Emden shared with Hanau the same basic view on the divine origins of Hebrew, but the basic approach towards Hebrew grammar, which he derived from this very view, was completely the opposite. Emden postulates that the real grounds of the Hebrew grammatical behavior are divine, thus lay beyond the scope of the human comprehension.\(^{15}\) Thus, any human attempt to discover the real fundamental nature of any Hebrew grammatical phenomenon is bound to failure. Accordingly, he asserts that any grammatical rule of Hebrew which might be formulated by a human grammarian is necessarily and


\(^{14}\) In his words: כי איך תהיה תורתנו הקדושה כשיחה בטילה בלי בחינה,沙特ור תורה? (introduction to Zalman Hanau, *Tsohar ha-teva* (Berlin 1933); I have added the punctuation here and in the next quotations.

\(^{15}\) הוא באמר דבר ממולא מכלי אש zaw, יא, יא ישעור לשון הקודש בטימות על שפות התהמותיホーム ב בלוגי ל יא אל לו שנות התהמותי הילו של אולו (Jacob Emden, *Birat migdal ‘oz* [Zhytomyr 1874] 84a; this book was initially published in Altona, 1748 as the third volume of the Emden Siddur).
inevitably restricted and partial, which in any case would leave exceptions. The Hebrew grammar, therefore, might be subject to an analogical system from its divine perspective, but when it comes to the scope of human perception, the anomaly plays a central role. This fundamental attitude formed one of the grounds of his objection to Hanau’s changes in versions of prayers: since there are no grammar rules without exceptions, one cannot argue that a textual deviation from the rules necessarily indicates a faulty version.

In comparison of these fundamental attitudes to the ancient dispute, a clear distinction is manifested. The analogism-anomalism controversy was also strongly connected to the wide discussion on the origin of language – whether it is natural, or rather conventional. The analogists believed that any language was created by human convention, and therefore it is logical to assume that the founders of the language set consistent logical rules to which the language adheres. The anomalist, on the other hand, maintained that language is a product of nature, therefore being only partly liable to be described with strict rules, as nature is.

In the medieval Jewish version, the argument on the origin of language focused on the origin of Hebrew. Some well-known scholars (as, for example, Maimonides) maintained it was conventional, while in place of the natural approach, the aforementioned belief that the Hebrew language was created by God (as, for example, Judah Halevi believed) prevailed. Thus, point of departure of the Hanau-Emden argument, in which both sides shared the same perception on the origin of Hebrew, was different than the ancient controversy, which stemmed from two opposing approaches to this subject. It is only in the Jewish version of this controversy (or, to be more precise, the medieval Judeo-Islamic views, from which the fundamental assumptions of the Hanau-Emden dispute were originated), in which the divine origin of language was postulated, that the two opposing attitudes – analogism vs.

16.or is there a rule for all rules? We are not referring to this [Hanau’s] rule!
anomalism – could have stemmed from the same assumption of the origin of language, each side presenting its own interpretation to this very assumption.

Another fundamental point differentiating between these two contrasting attitudes is reflected in one local discussion on the accurate spelling of one word – ערומים (naked), which appears as part of the ritual morning blessings (Birkhot ha-shahar) in the phrase מלביש ערומים ([God] dresses the naked people). This word occurs twice in the Bible (Gen. 2:25, Job 22:6), both in plene spelling – with vav – and a following dagesh: עֲרוּמִּים. Such kind of phonemic sequence of a vowel letter (vav or yod) followed by a dagesh is customarily considered as deviation from the regular biblical spelling rules. Accordingly, Hanau states that the two occurrences of ערומים in the Bible both appear in an exceptional spelling. Nevertheless, he argues that this very word, when used in prayers, is spelled according to the regular rules, in deficient spelling – עֲרֻמִּים.²⁰ According to Hanau, the prayers versions were set in full accordance to the standard grammatical rules, so any word used in the prayers is spelled and formed in adherence to the rules, even if its biblical occurrences deviate from them.²¹

Emden, in a typical response, maintains the plene spelling ערומים and rejects Hanau’s correction by claiming that the biblical form could not be considered exceptional in such cases.²² According to Emden, the basic or ‘right’ form of a given word should not be determined by any theoretical consideration but its actual form, as it appears in the Bible. Exceptionality of a certain form might be considered only with regard to its biblical occurrences, rather than its accordance to grammar rules. Therefore, one cannot consider ערומים as an exceptional form, since this is the only form of this word which occurs in the Bible.

This discussion reflects a fundamental distinction in the perception of the notion of זרים (literally ‘strangers’) – exceptional forms (that is a key notion in traditional Hebrew grammars in general and in Hanau’s writings in particular), which is derived from the underlying difference between Hanau’s analogical and Emden’s anomalist approaches. While Hanau determines regularity or

²⁰ Hanau, Sha’are tefilah, 13b.
²¹ He expresses this stance again in another passage (see idem, Sha’are tefilah, 35b). His distinction between biblical occurrences and use in prayers might be explained on the basis of his above-mentioned attitude towards exceptions in biblical Hebrew, which are aimed to hint at some midrashic interpretation of the text. This function seems to be relevant only for biblical texts, not for prayers. Exceptional forms in biblical Hebrew thus are well explained, but there is no justification for their existence in prayers.
²² Emden, Luah eres, 11b.
exceptionality of a certain form only by assessment of its conformity to the
grammar rules, Emden bases his determination on the concrete linguistic
inventory. Emden thus believes that a certain word might have its own ways of
formation, which might differ from the standard grammatical forms; however,
this non-grammatical form should be regarded as the regular, standard form of
this specific word.

There are more expressions of these basic attitudes, which lie behind some
specific discussions on details of prayer versions. For our purpose here, one
example would suffice: the dispute over adding *vav consecutive* at the begin-
nning of the *על הניסים* passage. This passage is added to the textual sequence
in certain prayers on Hanukkah and Purim. Hanau\textsuperscript{23} asserts that in order to
connect this passage to the context in which it is embedded, the regular con-
junctive element – *vav consecutive* – should be added – *ועל הניסים*. Emden,\textsuperscript{24}
on the other hand, opposes this change in version, mainly basing his stance on
the following case:

\begin{quote}
ואין להקפיד על חסרון וי״ו העטף, כי כן דרך לשון הקודש פעמים הרבה, בין לחסרה
בין להוסיפה שלאを得.
\end{quote}

one should not be bothered by the absence of *vav consecutive*, since it is
very common in the Holy Tongue to omit [even when it is expected] or to
add it when it is not needed [by context].

While Hanau thus assumes that the use of *vav consecutive* is entailed by cer-
tain syntactic contexts in which it ought to be added, Emden maintains that
there is an intrinsic inconsistency in its use. Hanau's analogical assumption
served as ground for a change in the version, while Emden's anomalist argu-
ment facilitated preserving the version unchanged.

To summarize, our short essay demonstrates how fundamental antique ideas
reappear in a later period and take a unique shape according to the specific
context in which they show up. The Jewish version's perception of the origin
of language, which postulated a divine source of Hebrew, yielded here two
opposing opinions: Hanau, on the one hand, believed that God created a well-
organized language which adheres to strict analogical rule; Emden, on the
other hand, asserted that a divine product could not be fully comprehended

\begin{flushleft}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{23} Hanau, *Sha’are tefilah*, 26a.
\end{flushleft}
by human thought, thus perceived only as an anomalist system. Another point is the indicator for determining an exceptional form, whether it should be examined only according to the grammar rules, as assumed by Hanau, or by its actual occurrences in the language, as maintained by Emden.

Despite the short, incidental transparent expressions that those basic ideas got in this controversy, no doubt that they lie behind considerable parts of this heated discussion.