

From Negative Polarity to Negative Concord— Slavic Footprints in the Diachronic Change of Hebrew *meʔuma*, *klum*, and *šum davar*

Einat-Haya Keren

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

keren.einat@mail.huji.ac.il

Abstract

The article is concerned with a special kind of negative items that changed their distribution when Hebrew became a spoken language again, as an impact of the native languages of its first users. The main claim is that the items *meʔuma*, *klum*, and *šum davar*, which function as Negative Polarity Items (NPIS) in Biblical and Rabbinic texts, and are therefore translated as ‘anything,’ have changed their function into Negative Concord Items (NCIS) in the course of Hebrew’s so-called revival, and are now better translated as ‘nothing.’ Though both classes are often used with negation, there are contexts in which only NCIS or NPIS are allowed. Showing the difference in distribution between Modern and Classical Hebrew, the article compares *meʔuma*, *klum*, and *šum davar* to parallel NCIS in Polish, Russian, and Yiddish. It concludes that the shift in distribution and meaning of these items is mostly due to influence of Slavic languages.

Keywords

Negative Concord Items (NCIS) – Negative Polarity Items (NPIS) – Modern Hebrew – Slavic – Yiddish – Diachronic Change

Introduction

NCIS

Negative Concord Items (NCIS)¹ are elements with a certain puzzling nature. On the one hand, they must be used in structures containing sentential

1 Such items are usually referred to as N-words, after Laka (1990:106). Negative quantifiers not necessitating further negation are viewed as N-words by some authors, but not by others

negation; but on the other hand, the reading resulting from the combination of these two negations yields just one logical negation. One can see that Modern Hebrew *meʔuma*, *klum*, and *šum-davar* qualify as NCIs by the following example:

- (1) *lo raʔiti meʔuma/klum/šum davar*²
 NEG see.PAST.IS nothing
 ‘I didn’t see anything.’/ ‘I saw nothing.’

In (1), although the quantifiers *meʔuma*, *klum*, and *šum davar* are combined with the sentential negation *lo*, the interpretation of the sentence is ‘I saw nothing,’ with single negation. The sentence is **not** interpreted with double negation: ‘I didn’t see nothing’ (= ‘I saw something’). Moreover, this negation is necessarily present, and without it the sentence is ungrammatical.

Strict versus Non-strict Use of NCIs

There are different ways in which languages use NCIs. In some languages, the verb has to be negated, regardless of the function of the NCI (subject, object, or adjunct) or its position (before the verb or after the verb). Modern Hebrew is such a language:

- (2) *ki b-a-tmuna lo raʔiti meʔuma.*
 because in-the-picture NEG saw.IS nothing
 ‘Because I didn’t see anything in the picture.’
 (“Tapuz Anashim,” <http://www.tapuz.co.il/forums2008/viewmsg.aspx?forumid=485&messageid=172190518#172190518>, accessed December 4, 2014)

- (3) *meʔuma lo yešane ʔet daʕatam*
 nothing NEG change.SM ACC opinion.GEN
ʕal ha-ḥisun
 about the- vaccination
 ‘... Nothing can change their opinion about the vaccination.’
 (y-net, health+(Briut), <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4457560,00.html>, accessed December 4, 2014)

(Willis, Lucas, & Breitbarth, 2013:32). For simplicity reasons, this article will only use the term “Negative Concord Items.”

2 Unless mentioned otherwise, all examples of Modern Hebrew were provided by myself as a native speaker.