When the Construction Is Axla, Everything Is Axla: A Case of Combined Lexical and Structural Borrowing from Arabic to Hebrew

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Abstract

This article examines a borrowing from Arabic into Hebrew, which is a combination of a lexical borrowing and a structural one. The Arabic superlative aḥla ‘sweetest, most beautiful,’ pronounced by most Modern Hebrew speakers [axla], has shifted semantically to mean ‘great, awesome.’ Yet, as our corpus-based study illustrates, it was borrowed into Hebrew—for the most part—with a very particular syntactic structure that, in Arabic, denotes the superlative. In Arabic itself, aḥla may also denote a comparative adjective, though in different syntactic structures. We discuss the significance of this borrowing and the manner in which it is borrowed both to the specific contact situation between Arabic and Hebrew and to the theory of language contact in general.

Keywords

Introduction

When the history of Modern Hebrew is explored, language contact surfaces on every level. Hebrew had fallen into disuse as a vernacular language centuries ago, until a famously successful revitalization project brought it back to the status of a mother tongue for many speakers. But despite conscious attempts to reconstruct the language as it was historically spoken, the Modern Hebrew
that emerged is, of course, not the same as Biblical Hebrew, or any other historical form of Hebrew, and has been greatly influenced both by the first languages of the early revitalizers and by the surrounding languages (Zuckermann 2003). Of particular interest is the contact between Hebrew and Arabic. Before the Jewish immigration, Palestinian Arabic was the majority language of the area that was to become the State of Israel, and many Jewish immigrants from Arab countries were native speakers of other varieties of Arabic as well. Unsurprisingly, many Arabic loanwords became very common in Hebrew, and it is hard to imagine current Israeli slang without some of its Arabic staples, *yala* ‘come on’ (< Arabic *yaḥla*), *wala* ‘whatever, really?!’ (< Arabic *waḥlāh*), *basa* ‘darn, bummer’ (< Arabic *baʔs*), and a range of others.\(^1\)

In this article, we focus on a particular loanword in Modern Hebrew: *axla* (< Arabic *(ʔ)aḥla*), which means ‘sweeter/sweetest’ in Standard Arabic, but has a far more general meaning in Hebrew—more similar to ‘great, awesome.’ This word is considered somewhat non-standard, yet is extremely common in Modern Hebrew. Perhaps the most memorable example of its use is in the name of the ubiquitous hummus brand *Hummus Axla*, and in its popular slogan shown in (1):

\[
(1) \quad kše- \quad ha- \quad xumus \quad axla \quad hakol \quad axla
\]

‘When the hummus is great/*axla*, everything is great.’

**Beyond Lexical Borrowing**

There is more to *axla*, however, than simply a commonly used borrowed lexical item. In the example in (1), *axla* serves as a clausal predicate, and as such behaves like a normal Hebrew adjective. However, in cases where it modifies a noun, its behavior is more peculiar; whereas adjectival modifiers in Hebrew follow the noun they modify, *axla* can appear either before or after the noun, as shown in (2) and (3):

\[
(2) \quad davar \quad axla
\]

‘a great thing’

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\(^1\) The glosses provided are for the loanwords as they are interpreted in Modern Hebrew.