

Paradigm uniformity and the locus of derivation: The case of vowel epenthesis in Hebrew verbs



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Abstract

This study examines vowel epenthesis in Hebrew verbs with stem-medial glottals. The stem-internal epenthetic vowels of these verbs colloquially display variation in 3rd person feminine forms in some verb templates. While the normative epenthetic vowel in these cases is *a*, there are cases where it is colloquially *e*. We provide empirical evidence for the variation (or lack thereof), accounting for the differences 2 among verb templates and the variation by appealing to paradigmatic faithfulness constraints, and grammatical components deriving verbs. We argue that vowel selection is motivated by competing faithfulness to three different paradigms: other feminine 3rd person forms, base forms, and the general inflectional paradigm. The component of the grammar deriving verbs, lexicon vs. syntax, as well as the way verbs are stored in the lexicon, determine which paradigmatic relation is relevant in different cases. The results of this study show the importance of paradigm accessibility in morpho-phonological processes. In addition, they point to a high correlation between the degree of variation in such processes and the locus of application and storage.

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1. Introduction

This study examines vowel epenthesis in Hebrew verbs with stem-medial glottals. The stem-internal vowels of these verbs colloquially display variation in 3rd person feminine forms in some verbal templates, as demonstrated in (1).

(1) Variation in vowel epenthesis

Masc. form	Fem. form	
miheʔ	mihaʔa/miheʔa	'rush'
nivhal	nivhala/nivhela	'get scared'
huvhal	huvhala/huvhela	'be rushed (into hospital)'

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The second vowel of the stem of most Hebrew past verbs is deleted when a vowel-initial suffix is added (e.g. *siḇeḇ-siḇva* ‘tell’). In the case of a medial glottal consonant, a vowel is inserted as glottals cannot appear in codas in Hebrew (Rose, 1994). The second vowel in all feminine forms in (1) is therefore assumed to be epenthetic, although in some cases it is identical to the vowel in the masculine form. The normative epenthetic vowel in all forms in (1) is *a*, but we also encounter cases where it is colloquially *e*. This study provides empirical evidence for this variation. We account for the differences among verb templates and the variation by appealing to (i) paradigmatic faithfulness constraints, and (ii) the different grammatical components deriving verbs. We argue that vowel selection in the feminine forms, as in (1), is motivated by paradigmatic faithfulness constraints, but to three different paradigms: (i) feminine 3rd person forms in other paradigms, (ii) the corresponding base forms, and (iii) the general inflectional paradigm (McCarthy, 2005). The selection of the relevant paradigm is based on the component of the grammar that derives the particular verb, either the lexicon or the syntax.

As indicated above, the type of epenthesis discussed here appears after glottal consonants, whose status in Modern Hebrew is different from their status in earlier periods, such as Biblical Hebrew. The glottals trigger various phonological processes, like vowel deletion and lowering. However, the glottals’ effect has weakened and become less stable and systematic in Modern Hebrew. Hebrew originally had two glottal consonants, *ʔ* and *h*, and two pharyngeal consonants *ʕ* and *ħ*. The phonetic distinction among *ʔ*, *ʕ* and *h* hardly exists and they are either produced as glottal stops or not produced at all (Cohen, 2013).² The pharyngeal fricative consonant *ħ* has merged with the velar fricative for most speakers. In orthography, the distinction among these four consonants remains.

In this paper, we only examine verbs with a glottal stop which is transcribed phonetically as *ʔ*, *ʕ* or *h*. We assume that they are all produced in the same way, and in any event, their production is not crucial to the arguments that we make in this paper.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a background on the verb system of Hebrew with respect to derivation and inflection. We examine the different morpho-phonological alternations with a focus on vowel epenthesis. We address vowel epenthesis in stem medial glottals, aiming to identify and quantify patterns of selecting *a* or *e* in three verbal patterns.³ Section 3 provides details about the experiment we conducted in which we examined speakers’ vowel selection. 24 native speakers of Hebrew, aged 22–29, read a text aloud. The text contained 14 verbs with medial glottals in the three verbal templates. In section 4, we propose a morpho-phonological explanation, examining different cases of paradigm leveling that could play a role in selecting *e* or *a*. These factors account for the differences between two verbal patterns, *CiCeC* and *huCCaC*, but not for the variation within verbs in the *niCCaC* pattern. In section 5, we turn to a different type of explanation that takes into consideration the component of the grammar where verbs are derived, the lexicon or the syntax, and the way verbs are stored in the lexicon. Such an explanation accounts for the variation in *niCCaC* and it is also intertwined with the morpho-phonological differences between *CiCeC* and *huCCaC*. We conclude in section 6, highlighting the importance of paradigm accessibility in morpho-phonological processes and the correlation between the degree of variation in such processes and the locus of application and storage.

2. Verb formation in Hebrew

All Hebrew verbs are derived within one of seven templatic configurations called *binyanim* (singular *binyan*) (Ornan, 1971, 2003; Schwarzwald, 1973, 1981a, 2001; Berman, 1978, 2003; Bolozky, 1978a, 1986; Bat-El, 1989; Ravid, 1990; Nir, 1993; Aronoff, 1994). The *binyan* determines the prosodic structure of verbs, their vocalic patterns and their derivational affixes, if any (Bat-El, 1989, 2011). The phonological shape of a verb (unlike that of a noun) is essential when determining the shape of other forms in the inflectional paradigm. The seven *binyanim* are listed in (2), illustrated by verbs in the morphologically simple form of past tense, 3rd person masculine singular (no inflectional affixes).⁴

² For the discussion of glottals in Hebrew, see for example, Morag (1977), Bolozky (1978a, 1991, 1995, 1997), Schwarzwald (1979), Blau (1981, 1986), Ravid and Shlesinger (2001), Bar-Asher (2002), Shatil (2006), Bolozky and Kreitman (2007), Gonen (2008, 2009), Faust (2011), Pariente (2012), and references therein.

³ The root vs. stem debate in Semitic morphology (and in general) is beyond the scope of this paper. For consistency’s sake, we use the terms ‘stem/stem consonants’ throughout the paper.

⁴ The *binyanim* *CuCaC* and *huCCaC* are used for the formation of the passive counterparts of *CiCeC* and *hiCCiC* respectively. These *binyanim* have no independent status, in contrast to other *binyanim*, because there are no passive verbs without an active counterpart (in Hebrew, as well as some other languages). For example, there could be an active verb in *CiCeC* without a passive counterpart in *CuCaC* (e.g. *himem* ‘shock X’, **humam* ‘be shocked’), but not the other way around. The only difference between these two passive *binyanim* and their active counterparts is in their vocalic patterns. Therefore the verbal system of Hebrew is often regarded as consisting of five *binyanim* only (see Bat-El, 2011). We will discuss the semantic features of the *binyanim* in section 4.

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