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Flavors of existential/possessive modals

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In many unrelated languages, expressions of possession give rise to modal meanings in which they express obligation (e.g., English *have* as in *I have a bottle of wine* vs. *have* to as in *I have to save it for a special occasion*; Bybee et al. 1994; Bhatt 1998; Bjorkman and Cowper 2016). Modern Hebrew seems to conform to this crosslinguistic tendency with the existential copula *yeš* ‘there is’ (Boneh 2013; also *eyn* ‘there is not’), although there are two wrinkles: the construction is not fully possessive, and adding a possessor phrase gives rise to a specific type of goal-oriented modality, not obligation. Moreover, earlier varieties of Hebrew constitute a counterexample to the crosslinguistic possession-obligation generalization. While modal uses of the copula are documented throughout the history of Hebrew, these uses differ from the modern ones in terms of both force and flavor. In terms of force, historical *yeš* can express possibility and not necessity. In terms of flavor, it can refer to non-normative possibilities like abilities (Ben-Ḥayyim 1953/1992, Shehadeh 1991).

This talk aims to provide a semantic analysis of the modern modal existential/possessive constructions in Hebrew that is informed by their trajectory of historical change, focusing on what looks like a change in modal force and morphosyntactic loss of the possessor phrase. The profile of modal flavor in the different constructions sheds light on the grammatical underpinnings of possessive modality crosslinguistically.

References: • Ben-Ḥayyim, Z. (1992): *The struggle for a language*. The Academy of the Hebrew Language. In Hebrew. • Bhatt, R. (1998): Obligation and possession. In *Papers from the UPenn/MIT roundtable on argument structure and aspect*, ed. Heidi Harley, volume 32 of *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics*, 21–40. MITWPL. • Bjorkman, B. and E. Cowper (2016): Possession and necessity: from individuals to worlds. *Lingua* 182(2016), 30–48. • Boneh, N. (2013): Mood and modality: Modern Hebrew. In *Encyclopedia of Hebrew language and linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan, volume 2, 693–703. Brill.