

## The Language of the Mishnah – Between Late Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew

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### 1. Introduction

Hebrew is a Canaanite dialect belonging to the Northwest Semitic family of languages. It was spoken by the population of ancient Israel in the Palestine region until the early centuries of the Common Era. Most of the texts canonized in the Hebrew Bible were composed in this language, and as a result it acquired the status of a sacred tongue. Later in the Roman Period (74–220 C.E.), the legal corpus of the Mishnah and the Tosefta was composed, featuring rulings by rabbinic sages of this period, the Tannaim. This corpus is complemented by the legal Midrashim, which, broadly speaking, propose connections between the rabbinic law and the Biblical sources. It is believed that the Roman period literature was initially transmitted orally and only later recorded in writing.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, although the earliest manuscripts of this literature date from the Middle Ages, they mostly reflect the language of the first to third centuries.

In discussing the history of the Hebrew language, a distinction must be made between its history as a **linguistic system** and the history of its **written forms**. The former assumes an idealized periodization of the language and distinguishes between **Early Hebrew (EH)** and **Late Hebrew (LH)**.<sup>2</sup> The latter bases the division on corpora, resulting in the traditional classification into Biblical Hebrew, Qumranic Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew, with further sub-divisions such as early vs. late Biblical Hebrew, Early vs. Late Mishnaic Hebrew, Babylonian vs. Palestinian Talmudic Hebrew, etc. Although these two perspectives are fundamentally different, they are clearly interrelated: on the one hand, our knowledge about

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<sup>1</sup> Yaacov Sussmann, "Oral Torah Understood Literally: The Power of the Tittle of the [Letter] Yod", in *Mehqerei Talmud, Vol. III, Part 1 – Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach*, eds. Yaacov Sussmann and David Rosenthal, (Hebrew, Jerusalem, 2005), 209-384.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on the periodization of Hebrew, see Ze'ev Ben-Hayyim. "The Historical Unity of the Hebrew Language and its Division into Periods" (Hebrew), *Language Studies* 1 (1985): 3–25 and Moshe Bar-Asher, "The Historical Unity of Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew Research", *Language Studies* 1 (1985): 75–99. For a good presentation of the standard approach that divides the history of Hebrew into four stages, and which does not make the distinction between the two perspectives introduced here, see Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A history of the Hebrew language* (Cambridge, 1993).

the history of the structure(s) of the language is based on data gathered from the Hebrew corpora and on the historical setting of these texts; on the other hand, the analysis of the linguistic information in the corpora is a de facto description of how the different linguistic systems were used in each corpus.

This paper aims to examine the language of the Mishnah from these two perspectives and explore the conceptual distinction between the two categories with which it is associated, namely Late Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew. I will outline what it means to provide a description of Late Hebrew as a linguistic system, and what it means to examine Mishnaic Hebrew as the language of a written corpus. Accordingly, this paper has a twofold goal:

- 1) to explain the difference between the two perspectives as relevant to the language of the Mishnah.
- 2) to demonstrate the advantages of keeping them separate.

The structure of the paper is as follows: in Section 2 we will briefly review the question of whether the Hebrew of the Mishnah reflects an artificial language. In this section, I will explain why we should not deal with this question at all. Once this question will be put aside, it will be possible to return to questions that we have the tools to address them and thus Section 3 discusses linguistic heterogeneity and explains why the awareness of heterogenous states compels us to consider the language of the Mishnah from two different perspectives. Section 4 proposes a practical methodology for dealing with the "noisy" data in the corpora and classifying the linguistic forms according to their periods: EH vs. LH. This discussion also involves a diachronic analysis of the kinds of historical relations that may hold between the two linguistic systems. Following this discussion. Section 5 considers Mishnaic Hebrew (MH), i.e., the language of the Mishnah. While the default assumption in the literature is that MH is largely synonymous with LH, we will examine the various ways in which EH is present in the Mishnah corpus as well.

## 2. Was Mishnaic Hebrew an artificial language?

A major debate among the early scholars of Mishnaic Hebrew is whether this language was an "artificial" variety of Hebrew created by speakers of Aramaic, or was actually a living, spoken language. At the heart of the debate was the question whether all differences between EH and LH (to use our terms) can be explained by pointing to parallel phenomena in Aramaic (see below Section 4.2.2.1). Those who answered this question in the negative

argued that Mishnaic Hebrew exhibits various analogical changes (see below Section 4.2.2.1), and that such changes can only occur in spoken languages.<sup>3</sup>

What is common to both sides in this debate is the structure of their argument, as both rely on a *modus ponens* syllogism: (If X then Y; X is given; therefore Y). Those who argue that Hebrew at the time of the Mishnah was an artificial language assume that *if the grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew is similar to Aramaic then Mishnaic Hebrew must be artificial*, and those who argue that it was a spoken language assume that *if there were analogical changes then Hebrew must have been a live language*. However, both assumptions are intuitive, and in fact baseless. First, it is well known that languages with bi-lingual speakers can become very similar, especially when their grammars were close in the first place (as is the case with Hebrew and Aramaic). Second, it has been observed that even literary languages that lack a community of speakers can still go through analogical changes.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the assumptions at the basis of those *modus ponens* syllogisms are groundless.

Generally speaking, I would like to note that such arguments, based on intuitive assumptions unanchored in empirical data, are not a good methodology for making historical claims. As for the question whether Hebrew was a spoken language, there seems to be no evidence, even indirect, to answer this question; therefore, it is better to leave it open. Instead of trying to answer it, this paper attempts to characterize the language of the Mishnah, regardless of whether it was spoken or not. To this end, let us now describe the language of the rabbinic corpus from the two perspectives introduced in Section 1.

### 3. From heterogeneity to idealized grammars

An examination of the inventory of independent pronouns in the Mishnah, specifically in MS Kaufman,<sup>5</sup> reveals that even in Tractate Shabbat alone there are two different variants of the

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<sup>3</sup> See M. Hirsh Segal, "Mišnaic Hebrew and its Relation to Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic", *Jewish Quarterly Review* (Oxford, H.Hart, 1908), 649–651, for a review of this literature. Segal himself tries to downplay as much as possible the significance of Aramaic influence on LH.

<sup>4</sup> Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, "Medieval Jewish Literary Languages: the case of the Aramaic of the Zohar" in *Hebrew and Aramaic in the Middle Ages - Language Studies and Grammatical Thought*, eds. Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal and Ya'akov Doron (editors), (In Hebrew, Jerusalem, 2020), 19–63.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars such as Epstein, Lieberman, Yalon and Kutscher emphasized that the research of Mishnaic Hebrew must rely on high-quality manuscripts, which differ significantly from the printed editions of the Mishnah. E.Y. Kutscher "Mishnaic Hebrew" in, *Henoch Yalon Jubilees Volume on the Occasion of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, Eds. S. Lieberman et al. (Hebrew, Jerusalem Qiryat Sefer) 246–280, insisted that the grammatical description must be based on "reliable manuscripts" (אבות תקסטים), i.e., manuscripts which faithfully reflect the original version of the text, and identified MS Kaufmann as the best source of this kind. In fact, Kutscher seems to ascribe all deviations from MS Kaufmann to copyists influenced by the Tiberian tradition of Biblical Hebrew or by the language of the Babylonian Talmud. This approach was modulated in Moshe Bar-Asher, "The Mishnah in Ms.

third-person masculine plural pronoun: הם (6,4) and הן (12,4). Heterogeneity of this sort can be found at all levels of Mishnaic grammar. Some words have different spellings representing different phonology. For example, guttural consonants alternate with their non-guttural counterparts,<sup>6</sup> e.g., כאור and כעור "ugly".<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, some verbal and nominal patterns alternate between their so-called "contextual" and "pausal" forms (נִכְתְּבָה/נִכְתְּבָהּ, (הוֹלֵבֶשׁ/הוֹלֵבֶשׁוּ),<sup>8</sup> exhibiting another instance of heterogeneity. In some cases, the heterogeneity is evident within the very same text (i.e., the same part of a given manuscript), and in other cases it is evident in different parts of the same manuscript (e.g., in a specific tractate)<sup>9</sup> or between different manuscripts.<sup>10</sup>

The term "heterogeneity" is used here in the sense of Labov's observation that "it is common for a language to have many alternate ways of saying 'the same' thing".<sup>11</sup> Indeed, all tongues exhibit variation at all levels of the linguistic system: certain words have alternate pronunciations, and it is not so rare for a language to have different forms of the same grammatical category. A study that shined the spotlight on heterogeneity was Weinreich et al.,<sup>12</sup> which contended that linguistic analysis should seek to identify structure in multiple versions.<sup>13</sup> From a methodological point of view, the task of detecting such multiple structures has two components: first, identifying the separate idealized grammars, and second, determining their functional distribution by identifying the circumstances in which each of them is used. These two stages correspond to the two perspectives mentioned in the introduction with respect to the language of the Mishnah.

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Parma B of Seder Teharot – Introduction" (Hebrew), in Bar-Asher 1971:166–185. Nevertheless, unless stated otherwise, all examples in this paper are indeed taken from MS Kaufmann.

<sup>6</sup> Shimon Sharvit, "Gutturals in Rabbinic Hebrew", *Studies in the Hebrew language and the talmudic literature: Dedicated to the memory of Dr. Menahem Moreshet*; (Ramat-Gan, 1989), 225–243.

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Bar Asher, *A Morphology of Mishnaic Hebrew: Introductions and Noun Morphology*, (Bialik, The Academy of the Hebrew Language, Jerusalem, 2015), 887–888. While in MS Kaufmann the spelling is always with *aleph*, in MS Parma A both spellings are found.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Bar Asher, *Contextual Forms and Pausal Forms in Mishnaic Hebrew According to MS Parma B* (Hebrew), *Language Studies* 4 (1990): 51–100.

<sup>9</sup> An example is Tractate Abot, which is unique in its content and style, as it contains ethical teachings. See Shimon Sharvit, *Leshonah ve-Signonah shel Massekhet Avot le-Doroteha* (Hebrew; Beer-Sheba, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> See Moshe Bar-Asher, *Studies in Classical Hebrew* (Studia Judaica, Berlin and Boston, 2014), Chapter 19, for systematic differences between groups and types of manuscripts.

<sup>11</sup> William Labov, *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (Philadelphia 1972).

<sup>12</sup> U. Weinreich, W. Labov and M.I. Herzog, *Empirical foundations for a theory of language change*, W.P. Lehmann and Y. Malkiel (eds.), *Directions for historical linguistics: a symposium*, (Austin, 1968), 95–188.

<sup>13</sup> On the significance of this paper, see Brian D. Joseph, *New Direction for Historical Linguistics: Historical Linguistics in the 50 Years since Weinrich, Labov, and Herzog (1968)* (Leiden, 2019), 153–173.

The idea that it is possible, or necessary, to distinguish between idealized grammars relies on the assumption, well-established in both the structuralist and generative theoretical frameworks, that languages exist as independent (cognitive) systems with identifiable structure. This common theoretical approach considers languages as systems operating on various levels – phonological, morphological and syntactic – whereby all the elements, taken together, convey a message, i.e., combine in a compositional manner to produce a meaningful expression. Each level involves an inventory of elements that relate to one another in specific ways. For example, at the morphological level, there are systematic paradigms, such as the paradigm of independent pronouns, and this is the context in which forms like  $\text{הוּ}$  and  $\text{הִיא}$ , mentioned above, are examined. The paradigms of EH and LH differ in terms of whether or not the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person masculine plural pronouns are identical to their feminine counterparts (a case of syncretism). Having recognized certain collections of elements as forming a paradigm, we can compare alternate paradigms and characterize the synchronic relations between their respective elements, or else examine them diachronically and identify historical processes that result from the fact that various elements belong to the same inventory (as in cases of leveling).

Thus, the standard methodology employed by linguists assumes “an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community”.<sup>14</sup> Given this methodological assumption, intra-speaker variations must be regarded as cases of optional rules.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. (Cambridge, 1965), 3.

<sup>15</sup> See, among others, William Labov, *The Study of Nonstandard English*. (Washington, 1969); Antony Kroch, Reflexes of grammar in patterns of language change. *Lang. Var. Change* 1 (1989): 199–244; D. Lightfoot, *The Development of Language: Acquisition, Change and Evolution*. (Oxford 1999). It should be noted, however, that many linguists, especially proponents of usage-based approaches, think that the idea of a systematic homogenous linguistic system is illusory (e.g., Geeraeters 2010). For them, attempts to portray homogeneous varieties are merely a "game" fraught with methodological problems (Makoni S., & Pennycook A. “Disinventing and reconstituting languages” in *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*, eds S. Makoni and A. Pennycook (Cleveland, OH; Buffalo, NY; Toronto, ON: Multilingual Matters Ltd) (2007); J. E. Schmidt, “Versuch zum varietätenbegriff,” in *Varietäten - Theorie und Empirie, Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang*, (2005): 61–74. For a review of the literature on this topic see Anne-Sophie Ghyselen & Gunther De Vogelaer, “Seeking Systematicity in Variation: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations on the “Variety” Concept”. (2018)).

Returning to the history of the Hebrew Language, tables 1 and 2 present the standard verbal stems (*binyanim*) of EH and LH, respectively, and outlines, in broad strokes, their semantic-syntactic distribution in each period: in EH, each active stem had a passive counterpart, whereas LH demonstrates a *systematic* syncretism of the passive and middle categories.<sup>16</sup>

Active	Passive	Middle
פָּעַל	פִּעֵל	נִפְעַל
פָּעַל	פִּעֵל	הִתְפַּעֵל
הִפְעִיל	הִפְעֵל	

Table 1: BH standard verbal stems

Active	Middle-Passive
פָּעַל	נִפְעַל
פָּעַל	נִתְפַּעֵל
הִפְעִיל	הִפְעֵל

Table 2: LH standard verbal stems

The difference between EH and LH in this context can be described in terms of the loss of certain stems (the two פָּעַל stems), and a formal shift of הִתְפַּעֵל => נִתְפַּעֵל. From a wider perspective, these changes add up to a formal syncretism between the middle and passive grammatical categories.

As noted, observations of this kind involve a theoretical abstraction and idealization of the data itself. In reality, when comparing forms from various corpora, one encounters heterogeneity everywhere. Forms characterized as belonging to EH appear next to forms associated with LH. For example, the Mishnah contains instances of the form הִתְפַּלֵּל “you prayed” (Ta’anit 3, 8), prefixed with -ה rather than -נ.<sup>17</sup> But as explained above, such heterogeneity is not unique to the language of the Mishnah. All languages, spoken and written, exhibit variations of form and structure. Speakers and writers always employ more than one linguistic system. Often, the variants belong to different registers and are used in different social settings. This phenomenon is difficult to detect in ancient texts, but it is occasionally discernable even there. In our context, Nathan argued that the distinction between two forms of the root קב”ל depends on genre: in Tannaitic texts, the EH form הִתְקַבֵּל is used in legal formulae, while the expected LH form נִתְקַבֵּל is found elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For a review of all the verbal patterns in the language of the Mishnah, see Bar-Asher, *Classical Hebrew*, Chapter 20.

<sup>17</sup> Gideon Haneman, *Morphology of Mishnaic Hebrew, Based on the Tradition of MS Parma (De Rossi 138)* (Hebrew, Tel-Aviv 1980), 208-211.

<sup>18</sup> Hayya Nathan, “The Linguistic Tradition of MS Erfurt of the Tosefta” (Hebrew), Ph. D. diss., (Hebrew University, 1981), 148-149. Cf. Yochanan Breuer *The Hebrew in the Babylonian Talmud according to the Manuscripts of Tractate Pesahim* (Hebrew, Jerusalem 2002), 176-178.

Heterogeneity cannot and should not always be explained in sociolinguistic terms, as it can stem from other factors as well. Variation in written texts may be due to multiple authors using different grammars (from different areas or periods), or to the instability of authors' linguistic knowledge. Variation can also arise in the process of transmission, i.e., when the original texts were copied by hand or rendered in print.<sup>19</sup> This can be either accidental or deliberate (based on some norm or ideal), or due to the influence of foreign languages.

Before describing the language of the Mishnah and its place in the history of Hebrew from the two perspectives introduced here, let me note another significant difference between these two approaches that indirectly affects the linguistic discussion. It must be kept in mind that a diachronic investigation of the linguistic system is rarely based on one specific text. In periodizing a language, scholars seek to reconstruct a grammar of each era. Therefore, they utilize as many texts as possible in order to distill a consistent grammar that eliminates the "noise" in the texts and untangles the mixture of grammars. In contrast, when focusing on the history of the written forms, it is important to consider the nature of each individual text and keep in mind the historical context of its composition. For our purposes, when comparing the language of the Bible with the language of the Mishnah, it is not enough to think in diachronic terms. It is also crucial to keep in mind, for example, that the Mishnah is very different from the Bible in terms of its genre. Generally speaking, the Mishnah is a legal text, a collection of brief rulings on specific issues. Unlike the Bible, it contains few narrative passages, and those that do appear are very short. Poetic texts are likewise almost absent from the Mishnah, and indeed, the tractate of Abot, which does have poetic features, is linguistically very different from the other tractates of the Mishnah.<sup>20</sup>

Such stylistic differences must be kept in mind when comparing the language of the two corpora. For example, differences of genre are crucial to the analysis of the tense system. Narrative text presents events taking place in a certain temporal sequence, while legal texts are largely modal, setting out laws and rules regarding possible states-of-affairs.<sup>21</sup> Many languages use different modes of expression to convey factual statements and modal ones. Therefore a comparison between these aspects of EH and LH grammar is not straightforward, and must take into account this gap in genre.

To conclude, in studying the language of a certain corpus – in our case the language of the Mishnah – one must first inventory all the grammatical elements found in this corpus, and then try to account for its grammatical heterogeneity. In broad strokes, the goals are: 1) to

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Ryzhik. "From Manuscript to Print Edition: The Development of Vocalization Patterns in the Late-Fifteenth and Mid-Sixteenth-Century Printed Editions of the Italian Prayer Book" *Lěšonénu* (2012), 333–357.

<sup>20</sup> See above, n. 8.

<sup>21</sup> See Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, "Towards a Reconsideration of the Tense-Aspect-Mood System of Tannaitic Hebrew", in *Studies in Mishnaic Hebrew and Related Fields: Proceeding of the Yale Symposium on Mishnaic Hebrew*, May 2014, eds. Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal and Aaron J. Koller (Jerusalem-New-Haven 2017): 59-66.

distinguish between separate grammars; 2) to examine the historical relationship between these grammars, and 3) to identify regularities in the distribution of the competing grammars.

#### 4. The history of Hebrew from the perspective of linguistic systems

##### 4.1 Principles for distinguishing between EH and LH

Given that all texts exhibit some level of linguistic heterogeneity, it seems reasonable to begin the discussion with a few notes on how to determine which grammatical category belongs to which linguistic system. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address this complicated theoretical question. Moreover, it is not even clear that linguists have a consistently reliable method of resolving it. Hence, I will only demonstrate that, in practice, there are several principles that can guide us in assessing which elements belong to EH and which belong to LH:

- 1) Prevalent in early vs. late texts: given any attested variation, an option that appears mostly in early texts can be assumed to belong to EH, while one that appears mostly in later texts can be assumed to be part of LH.
- 2) Derivation: When it is evident that one variant is derived from the other, it is reasonable to assume that the latter is older.
- 3) Internal structure: when systematic connections between two forms can be identified, a proposal that treats them as part of the same linguistic system is preferable.

These principles are only rules of thumb for drawing a tentative distinction between grammars; furthermore, as we shall see, they occasionally yield conflicting results. In such cases, the first principle can usually be given primacy. Let us therefore start by surveying some of the linguistic differences between the two corpora – the Mishnah and the Bible – and then proceed to characterize these differences in historical linguistic terms.

A convenient place to begin the discussion is the lexicon, because it has been recognized for centuries that the Mishnah and the Bible differ in this respect, using different words for the same concept. For example, in the Bible the standard word for “tree” is עץ, whereas in the Mishnah it is אילן. The Biblical word for “fasting” is צום, while the Mishnaic word is תענייה. Further pairs of this sort are איש-אדם “man” and רע-חבר “friend”.<sup>22</sup> Similar relations hold between grammatical morphemes: the standard relative pronoun in the Bible is אשר while in the Mishnah it is -ש (although both forms appear in both corpora). Sometimes the variants

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<sup>22</sup> For a substantial survey of this kind of differences see Abba Bendavid, *Leshon Miqra u-Lshon Hakhamim* 2 vols. 2nd ed. (Hebrew; Tel-Aviv, Devir, 1971).

exhibit only minor morphological differences, as is the case of the Biblical demonstratives *הזוה/הזואת* and their Mishnaic counterparts *זה/זו*. Conversely, there are elements that have a different meaning in each corpus. In the Bible the root *בע"ל* refers to ownership whereas in the Mishnah it refers to sexual intercourse;<sup>23</sup> in the Bible the word *מזוזה* denotes a doorpost while in the Mishnah it denotes the ritual object affixed to the doorpost.<sup>24</sup>

So far we have only stated which variants are common in which corpus. In some instances, the distribution can be accounted for in terms of historical development, as in the case of *מזוזה*, which seems to be an example of metonymy – a semantic change based on proximity in space or time. In other cases, it is possible to rely on principle 3 and demonstrate that semantic changes in the meaning of specific words correspond to other changes in the same semantic field.<sup>25</sup>

Taking the approach of comparing linguistic systems, and following principle 1, it is possible to map many grammatical differences between EH and LH with a high level of certainty. For example, in terms of the inventory of phonemes, it is reasonable to assume that while EH had the consonant /ʃ/, represented by the letter *ש*, in LH this consonant merged with the consonant /s/. This assumption is supported by the alternate spellings of words like *שאור* (*Menahhot* 5, 1) *סאור* (*Ṭebul Yom* 3, 4). Another example from phonology is the widespread assumption that LH had no distinction between /m/ and /n/ in word-final position, as both were either pronounced as /n/ or turned into nasalized vowel in final position, as evident from spellings like *ארן* "man" (*Berakot* 1, 3) instead of the standard *ארם*, or *כרן* "vineyard" (*Baba Batra* 4, 9) instead of the standard *כרם*.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, it is widely accepted that EH and LH had different versions of many morphological forms. For example, the infinitive construct in LH always begins with *l-*, and with weak verbs its form mirrors the form of the prefix-conjugation (compare EH *לאמר* with LH *לומר*). In EH the masculine singular form of the independent pronoun "you" was *אַתָּה*, but there are reasons to believe that in LH it was *אַתְּ*, identical to the feminine form.<sup>27</sup> Yet another example is the form of the presentative particle, which is *הנה* in EH and *הרי* in LH. This difference is also accompanied by a syntactic one: While in EH nominal clauses the presentative particle is followed by a cliticized pronoun denoting the subject of the clause (*הנני, הנך, הני*), in LH the

<sup>23</sup> Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal and Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *The Hebrew-based traditions in Galatians : Ancient Christianity* 9 4:21-31 (2018): 404-431.

<sup>24</sup> Bar-Asher, *Classical Hebrew*, 238.

<sup>25</sup> Sarfatti, G. 8.8.

<sup>26</sup> See Bar-Asher, *Morphology*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> In MS Kaufmann the form *את* of the masculine pronoun appears 19 times while the EH form *אתה* appears 140 times. Some manuscripts exhibit only the EH form.

presentative can also be accompanied by an independent subject pronoun (הרי אני/ הרי את/ הרי) (הוא).<sup>28</sup>

Following this method, it is possible to construct two independent grammars for each grammatical category. Next, we turn to principle 2 and consider the diachronic relationship between the two grammars by asking the following question with regard to each difference: Did the LH variant develop from the EH one? What motivated the change from one grammar to the other? I will now outline several types of changes that occurred between the early and late periods.

## 4.2 Types of change from EH to LH

### 4.2.1 Lexical changes

Some grammatical changes are merely the result of lexical changes. For example, the replacement of the early reciprocal construction featuring the components איש-אחיו/רעהו with the late construction featuring the components אדם-חבירו is at least partly a reflection of the lexical change mentioned above:<sup>29</sup>

(1)

(a) וְכִי יִזְדּוּ אִישׁ עַל רֵעֵהוּ לְהַרְגוֹ בְּעָרְמָה

“If a man willfully attacks his neighbor to kill him cunningly” (Exod 21:14)

(a) הַתְּקִינוּ שִׁיהִי(ו) אִם אָדָם שׂוֹאֵל אֶת שְׁלוֹם חֲבִירוֹ בְּשֵׁם

“It was decreed that every man should greet his friend by the name of the Lord”

(Berakot 9, 5)

Similarly, genitive constructions consisting of relative-pronoun+ל+Noun Phrase were used in both periods, but EH uses the relative pronoun אשר (“אשר לשלמה”),<sup>30</sup> whereas LH uses the relative element -ש (שלשלמה). In such cases, the difference between the two grammars involves nothing more than a difference in the inventory of forms or components used in the various grammatical constructions.

In other differences, chronological order is a crucial factor. This is very clear at the phonological level. For example, as mentioned above, in EH the contrast between /m/ and /n/ was consistently maintained, whereas in LH it was neutralized in word-final position.

<sup>28</sup> Stern Ruth, “The importance of Medieval Hebrew innovations to the study of Modern Hebrew: The case of the presentatives *hinneni* and *hareni*” (forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> It is more accurate to describe the function of the expressions as indefinite pronouns, used also to express reciprocity. On this topic, and with a discussion on these forms see Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, *The NP-strategy for expressing reciprocity: Typology, history, syntax and semantics. Typological Studies in Language 127* (Amsterdam, 2020), especially Chapter 4.

<sup>30</sup> It should be noted, however, that this construction is quite rare in BH and appears mostly in the later books.

Clear cases of chronological development also exist at the morphological level. For example, the Bible has two forms, *לולי* and *אילו*,<sup>31</sup> which introduce negative and positive counterfactual conditionals, respectively. The Mishnah, on the other hand, has the form *אילולי*, which seems to be a combination of both and marks negative counterfactual conditionals. It seems reasonable to assume that the combined form is a later development.<sup>32</sup> In other cases, LH features grammatical elements that cannot be related any specific phenomenon in EH. An example is the construction consisting of *כל* "all"+relative pronoun+3<sup>rd</sup>-person independent pronoun (*כל שהוא/שהיא/שהן*), which either appears as a free relative, quantifying universally over kinds (2a), or is embedded within a clause (2b) to universally quantify over quantity (and later as an indefinite pronoun/determiner (2c)):<sup>33</sup>

(2)

(a) *כל שהוא מין קללה – אין מברכין עליו*

“No blessing should be pronounced **over things which had their origin in a curse**” (*Berakot* 6,3)

(b) *קרקע כל שהוא חייב בפיהא ובכורים*

“**Whatever the size of the ground** it is subject to *Pea* and to ‘first fruits’

*Pe’ah* 3, 6)

(c) *הבונה כמה יבנה ויהא חייב. הבונה כל שהוא המסתת והמכה בפטיש ו[ב]מעצד הקודיה כל שהוא חייב*

“He who builds, how much must he build to become guilty? Whoever builds at all [be it ever so little], whoever chops a stone, strikes with a hammer, or uses a plane, or bores a hole; [whosoever] at all [does either of these] is guilty.” (*Šabbat* 12, 1)

This is a new development within LH, whose emergence can be explained internally as a grammaticalization of expressions that arose in a compositional manner. From a broader perspective, the emergence of these forms in LH should be considered in light of the emergence of other indefinite expressions consisting of relative pronoun+3<sup>rd</sup> independent pronoun, such as *משהו*.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Typical diachronic changes

<sup>31</sup> It must be noted that *אילו* appears only in later books of the Bible (specifically *Ecclesiastes* and the *Book of Esther*).

<sup>32</sup> See Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, *The history of the forms אילולי and אלמלי - Part I: linguistic diachrony*, *Leshonenu* 81 (2019): 95-115.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of this construction see Bar-Asher Siegal (forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> Segal M. Hirsh, *A Grammar of the Language of the Mishnah* (Hebrew, Tel-Aviv, Devir, 1936), 64, proposes that *כל שהוא* is related to the pronominal use of *כל* “all” in the Bible. However, this association does not explain the presence of the relative pronoun and independent pronoun in this construction.

Alongside these considerations, it is often possible to apply standard methodologies of historical linguistics to account for the data collected from all the relevant corpora. This essentially involves applying principle 2 and tracing diachronic developments in the history of Hebrew. These developments are of various kinds:

#### 4.2.2.1 Contact-induced changes

Many of the forms that appear in the later texts but not in the earlier ones have parallels in Aramaic, and consequently are often regarded as the result of Aramaic influence. For example, the standard NP-strategy for expressing reciprocity ("each other") in the Bible employs the construction איש-רעהו/אהיו "a man-his companion/brother" (3a). The equivalent construction in LH features a repetition of the proximal demonstrative, such as זה-זה "this-this" (3b), which mirrors the Aramaic construction and therefore seems to be borrowed from that language (3c).

(3)

(a) וַיִּזְקוּ אִישׁ בְּרֵאשׁ גְּרֵעֵהוּ

“Then each man grabbed his opponent by the head” (2 Sam 2:16)

(b) הַשׁוֹכֵר אֶת הָאוֹמְנִים וְהִיטְעוּ זֶה אֶת זֶה, וְאִין לּוֹ זֶה עַל זֶה אֵלָא תְרַעוּמַת

“If one engaged craftsmen and they deceived one another, they have only resentment against each other” (*m. B. Meṣi’a* 6:1)

(c) וְאֶרְכָּבְתָּהּ דָּא לְדָא נִקְשָׁן

“and his knees were knocking against one another” (Dan 5:6)

Similarly, the LH reflexive pronoun consists of the noun עצם “bone” suffixed with a dependent pronoun that agrees with the antecedent. This is a calque of an Aramaic construction in which the noun גרם “bone” is used in a similar way.<sup>35</sup>

It must be noted, however, that it is often hard to determine whether parallels between LH and Aramaic reflect contact-induced change or should be considered as an isogloss, in which Hebrew and Aramaic share the same linguistic feature. This is the case, for example, with the 2<sup>nd</sup>-person masculine singular independent pronoun אַת, shared by LH and the Aramaic of this period. It is almost impossible to determine whether the shift from אַתָּה to אַת in Hebrew is a reflection of Aramaic influence or a shared feature involving the apocopation of the final vowel.

#### 4.2.2.2 Internal developments

**Analogies:** Some changes of form between EH and LH can be explained as cases of analogy. For example, as mentioned earlier, while in EH the middle form of הִתְפַּעֵל is פִּעַל, in LH the form of the middle-passive is נִתְפַּעֵל. The change of the prefix (from *hi-* to *ni-*) can be explained as

<sup>35</sup> Segal, “Mišnaic Hebrew”, 679.

an analogy to the middle-passive form of the *qal*-stem, נִפְעַל. Given that Aramaic has no stem with the prefix *n-*, this development cannot be the result of Aramaic influence.

**Reanalysis:** The word שׁוּב, imperative of the verb "returned", was reanalyzed as an adverb meaning "again":<sup>36</sup>

(4) שׁוּב מַעֲשֵׂה בְּאַסְיָא

"Once again it happened in Asya" Yebamot 16, 4)

This reanalysis very likely occurred via a bridging context like the one in (5):

(5) לֵךְ שׁוּב

"go-return"(I Kings 19, 15 and 20, among other places)

In contexts such as this, "go return" can be understood as meaning "go again," which possibly induced the reanalysis.<sup>37</sup>

**Structural changes:** Turning now to principle 3, the Tense-Aspect-Mood (TAM) system is a good example of a context in which it is crucial to consider the morphological inventory as a system. In such a system, the function of each verbal form depends to some extent on which TAM categories the language has, and on the contrast between the meanings of the various forms. Table 3 compares the inventories of the verbal TAM form of the two linguistic systems:

	Early Hebrew		Late Hebrew
Suffix-conjugation	פָּעַל		פָּעַל
Prefix-conjugation	יִפְעַל	יָקוּם	יִפְעַל
Prefix-conjugation-jussive		יָקֻם	---
Prefix-conjugation-cohortative		אֶקְוֶמָה	---

<sup>36</sup> In this case there is an Aramaic equivalent, with the form תּוּב, so this development may be the result of Aramaic influence.

<sup>37</sup> Consider the following context:

שׁוּב קח-לךְ, מִגִּלְתָּה אַחֲרַת; וּכְתֹב עָלֶיהָ, אֵת כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים, אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ עַל-הַמִּגְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹנָה, אֲשֶׁר שָׂרַף יְהוֹיָקִים מֶלֶךְ-יְהוּדָה

"Return and take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah has burned up" (Jer 36: 28).

This is a context in which the reanalysis is expected to take place. I wish to thank Noa Feldman for this great example.

Waw-consecutive (narrative tense)	וַיַּעַל/וַיַּעֲלֶה	---/---
Imperative	עֲלֵה/עֲלֶה	עֲלֵה
Infinitive construct:	עֲלֵה	---
Infinitive construct:	בְּעֲלֵה	---
Infinitive construct:	בְּעֲלֵה	---
Infinitive construct:	לְעֲלֵה	לְעֲלֵה
Infinitive construct:	מְעֲלֵה	---
Infinitive absolute	עֹלֵה	---
Active Participle	עֹלֵה	עֹלֵה
Active Participle	עֹלֵה	עֹלֵה

Table 3: The inventory of verbal forms in EH and in LH

On the one hand, the shift from EH to LH can be described as a case of simplification,<sup>38</sup> in which a complex morphological system with a large variety of forms became a simpler system with a smaller number of forms. However, this is only part of the story, since the TAM system not only became smaller, but was also reorganized. The grammar of LH encodes the following TAM distinctions:<sup>39</sup>

	Past	Present	Future
Imperfective	Participle + היה	Participle	Participle + יהיה
Perfective	Suffix-conjugation		Prefix-conjugation

Table 4: The LH TAM system.

According to the structure depicted in Table 4, the verb forms marked for person (i.e., prefix- and suffix-conjugation verbs) are always marked for tense as well – the former for past-tense and the latter for future-tense – while the participle always indicates the imperfective aspect. Hence, when a suffix/prefix-conjugation verb appears on its own, it usually indicates the perfective aspect. However, it is more accurate to say that the conjugating verbs are

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Shomon Sharvit, *The Tense System of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Hebrew, Sarfatti, 1980).

<sup>39</sup> This description follows Bar-Asher Siegal “Towards a Reconsideration”. See, Mishor, M. “The Tense System in Tannaitic Hebrew” (Hebrew), *Ph. D. diss., Hebrew University* (1983), for a different view.

unmarked for aspect, since they are compatible with both aspectual values, perfective and imperfective. When a participle is preceded by a verb in the suffix/prefix-conjugation form (specifically the auxiliary of the root *הי"י*), the verb phrase as a whole indicates the imperfective aspect and the conjugated form denotes the tense. The EH system indicates other distinctions as well, mostly aspectual ones. This is an example of a context where the linguistic systems of EH and LH differ significantly. Furthermore, the changes that produced the LH TAM system are similar to changes that took place in the Aramaic dialects of the period, and which are in fact observed cross-linguistically.<sup>40</sup> For our purposes, the important observation is that there is a reorganization of the entire system according to some core semantics.

#### 4.3 Conflicts between principles 1 and 2

As noted at the beginning of this section, ideally it would be possible to demonstrate that all differences between LH and EH grammar can be explained diachronically, i.e., that LH forms are younger, and are derived from older EH forms. But in practice this is not always the case, for there are instances where principles 1 and 2 yield contradictory conclusions.

For example, the Mishnaic form of the feminine singular proximal demonstrative is *זו* *zô*, while the Biblical form is *זאת* *zôt*. From a diachronic point of view, and based on data from other Semitic languages, it seems easier to derive the Biblical form from the Mishnaic one, rather than the other way around.

Similarly, it was noted above that the Biblical construction *איש את רעהו/אחיו* was replaced by the Mishnaic *אדם אח חבירו*. However, from the perspective of grammaticalization, the Biblical construction seems more "advanced," since the meaning of the word *אח* "sibling" is bleached and can be applied to inanimate referents, such as curtains,

חמש הַיְרִיעוֹת, תִּהְיֶינָה חִבְרֹת, אִשָּׁה, אֶל-אֶחָתָּה; (6)

"The five curtains should be joined to one another." (Exod. 26: 3)

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<sup>40</sup> Kevin Grasso, "The Stative to Perfective to Perfect to Past Path in Semitic" (forthcoming).

whereas the equivalent element in the LH construction, namely חבר “friend”, cannot be applied to inanimate referents, which require a different construction involving a repetition of nouns.<sup>41</sup>

(7) טבילים מגב לגב ומחבורה לחבורה ביום טוב (7).

"One may immerse from one purpose to another, and from one company to another" (*m.*

*Beṣah* 2: 3)

Finally, we saw earlier that in EH the presentative הנה is followed by a clitic pronoun (הני, הנך), while in LH the presentative הרי is followed by an independent pronoun (הרי אני, הרי אתה). This syntactic change is interesting, since in most cases cliticization represents a later stage in process of grammaticalization.

These examples illustrate a conflict between the principles proposed above for distinguishing between EH and LH elements. Such conflicts are usually resolved by giving precedence to principle 1, and also by assuming that Hebrew, like any other language, had dialects throughout its periods of existence as a spoken tongue (an assumption that is supported by independent evidence). Accordingly, when early and late forms differ, we need not automatically assume that the latter developed from the former. Some late forms may be derived from unattested forms in a different dialect of the earlier language. In the case of the demonstratives, for example, it may be assumed that the two forms, *zōt* and *zô*, existed in different dialects of EH. The Bible has one of these variants (*zōt*), whereas the Mishnah inherited the other.<sup>42</sup>

## 5. The history of the written corpora

Biblical Hebrew (BH) and Mishnaic Hebrew (MH) are the languages of the Bible and the Mishnah, respectively. While the Bible is mostly written in EH and the Mishnah mostly in LH, elements associated with LH are occasionally found in the Bible, and vice versa.<sup>43</sup> Some scholars appear to assume that the Mishnah was originally written in "pure LH" and that any deviation from this is the result of later interference during the transmission of the texts. However, the evidence suggests that a more nuanced approach to the relationship between EH and LH is needed. While it is true that EH *per se* does not appear in the rabbinic

<sup>41</sup> Bar-Asher Siegal *The NP-Strategy*, 132-134.

<sup>42</sup> See Bar-Asher, *Classical Hebrew*, 234-236, for a similar discussion and more examples.

<sup>43</sup> See Bar-Asher, *Classical Hebrew*, Chapters 6 and 23, for an overview of the relevant phenomena.

corpus, its authors often inserted EH elements into the text. The next section presents some examples of MH texts containing EH forms, as well as examples of LH elements in the Bible. This will be followed by a reflection concerning the difference between the two approaches: the one that describes the language of the Mishnah as LH and the one that describes it as MH.

It is often the case that, where BH exhibits heterogeneity, MH does not. Sometimes the BH variants are similar in their prevalence – as in the case of the two variants of the independent pronoun "I", *אני* and *אנכי* – and sometimes one of the variants is noticeably more common than the other, as in the case of the two variants of the independent pronoun "we", *אנחנו* and *אנו*, the first of which is the standards form in BH.<sup>44</sup> In both these cases, LH uses only one of the variants – specifically *אני* and *אנו* – while the other is rare. The forms *אני* and *אנו* are paradigmatically related, as they follow the iconicity principle of a single difference in form (*i* vs. *u*) signaling a single difference in meaning (singular vs. plural). The pronoun *אנו* is thus an example of an element that is generally regarded as part of LH but which appears once in BH as well. Another example is the word *אדם* used as an indefinite pronoun. As mentioned above, this element is typical of LH, whereas BH usually used the word *איש* instead. However, the Bible does have some instances of *אדם* in this context.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, it also displays a few examples of reciprocal constructions featuring a repetition of the demonstrative, the typical LH construction:

(8)

(a) שְׁרָפִים עֹמְדִים מִמַּעַל לוֹ... וְקָרָא זֶה אֶל-זֶה וְאָמַר

“Seraphim stood above Him... and they called one to the other and said...” (Isa 6:2-3)

(b) וַיִּחַנוּ אִלֶּה נֹכַח אִלֶּה שִׁבְעַת יָמִים

“For seven days they camped opposite each other” (1 Kgs 20:29)

These are all instances of a well-known phenomenon whereby early heterogeneity is the first sign of historical change, and whereby rare forms, restricted to a particular dialect or register, become standard at a later stage.<sup>46</sup>

From the opposite perspective, features of EH morphology and phonology are often attested in MH as well, and in some categories they are even the default. Given the differences between written and spoken languages, and the tendency of the former to preserve archaic

<sup>44</sup>In fact, *אנו* appears only once in the Bible in the *Ktiv* (Jer 42, 6).

<sup>45</sup>Segal, *Grammar*, 65.

<sup>46</sup>As claimed by Weinreich et al. “Empirical Foundations”.

features, it is not surprising that the rabbinic corpus often contains BH elements, despite clear evidence that the spoken language (and for our purposes, LH in general) did not adopt them. For example, as noted earlier, in LH word-final /m/ became /n/ or became a nasalized vowel. Nevertheless, in the rabbinic corpora, most words that historically ended with /m/ are still written with the letter *mem*. This is an example of the phenomenon, widely attested cross-linguistically, whereby the spelling reflects an older pronunciation of the word. The same can also happen with morphological categories, and may apply to the independent pronouns mentioned above. Moreover, even when the later texts are written in LH, it's still possible that they were originally written in a more archaic style and later amended to fit new norms.

So far, I have surveyed appearances of EH features in MH, and of LH features in BH, which do not seem to be motivated by the context in any way. However, in some cases such appearances do seem to be motivated. There are strong reasons to believe that EH and LH coexisted for a long period of time, and that the differences between them were used to encode socio-linguistic distinctions. Broadly speaking, the distribution of BH and LH elements can be described as a case of diglossia, i.e., a state in which two (or more) languages, or varieties of the same language, coexist within a speech community. In such situations, the functional domains of the languages tend to be in complementary distribution, with one language used in "higher" contexts – such as religious, educational, literary, and other prestigious spheres – and the other used in "lower" contexts and serving as the everyday spoken tongue.

Our case can be described as a form of “literary diglossia”,<sup>47</sup> in which literary texts utilize two linguistic varieties to produce certain effects within the text. The elements of LH occasionally encountered in BH texts were presumably meant to add a colloquial flavor; conversely, EH elements in MH texts served to elevate the style.

Thus, in the Bible, LH-like features appear in direct speech,<sup>48</sup> e.g.,: the meaning of “hold” in the direct speech the verb is אָחַז (the LH one) while in the narrative it is חִזַּק (the EH one):<sup>49</sup>

(9) 'שֶׁלַח יָדְךָ וְאָחַז בְּזַנְבֹּוֹ'

וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיִּחְזַק בּוֹ

“ ‘Reach out your hand and take it by the tail.’ So (Moses) reached out and took hold of... (Exod 4, 4)

<sup>47</sup> See Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal, *Linguistics and philological studies in Hebrew and in Aramaic*, (Jerusalem, 2020), 17.

<sup>48</sup> See R.S. Kawshima, *Biblical Narrative and the Death of Rhapsode* (Bloomington Indianapolis, 2004), 35–69, for a characterization of the language of the biblical narratives.

<sup>49</sup> Bendavid *Leshon Miqra u-Lshon Hakhamim*, 14–15.

Similarly, it has been demonstrated that features of LH phonology (loss of distinction between word-final /m/ and /n/) are used to mark direct speech in the book of Ruth,<sup>50</sup> and that direct speech even exhibits a TAM system close to that of LH.<sup>51</sup>

Conversely, as mentioned earlier, MH employs BH elements in passages associated with the Temple (e.g., התפעל instead of נתפעל, as in the verb השתחווה), as well as in poetic expressions (and in Tractate Abot in general), which feature prefix-conjugation jussive forms (10a), as well as the EH איש-רעהו reciprocal construction (10b):

(10)

(a) "אל תעש תפילתך קבע אלא תחנונים"

When you pray, do not make your prayers routine, but [an entreaty of] mercy and a supplication (2, 13);

(b) "אילולי מוראה איש את רעהו חיים בלענו".

"for were it not for the fear of its authority, we would swallow each other alive." (3, 2)

This leads to the conclusion that the main innovation of MH, when compared to earlier Hebrew texts, is the employment of LH as its default language. Unlike in Qumran, where most of the authors attempted to write in some variety of EH (to the extent of producing grammatical innovations resulting from hyper-correction),<sup>52</sup> MH generally uses the LH grammar and lexicon.<sup>53</sup>

According to this picture, there was a gradual shift from EH to LH in literature. Based on the textual evidence at our disposal, one can conclude that after the First Revolt, LH gained

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<sup>50</sup> Elitzur Bar-Asher, *Linguistic Markers in the Book of Ruth, Shnaton – An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 18 (2008): 25-42.

<sup>51</sup> See *inter alia* M.S. Smith, "Grammatically Speaking: The Participle as a Main Verb of Clauses (Predicative Participle) in Direct Discourse and Narrative in pre-Mishnaic Hebrew". *Sirach, Scrolls and Sages: Proceedings of a Second International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sira, and the Mishnah, held Leiden University, 15-17 December 1997* (STDJ 33), T. Muraoka and J. F. Elwolde (eds.) (1999), 278-332, who examines the use of the participle in direct discourse and direct narratives.

<sup>52</sup> Steven Fassberg, "The Preference for Lengthened Forms in Qumran Hebrew," *Meghillot: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls* 1 (2003) 227-240 (in Hebrew).

<sup>53</sup> Perhaps there was a gradual historical shift, for some scholars argue that certain chapters or even entire tractates of the Mishnah, among them Tractates Tamid and Midot and certain chapters of Yoma, should be dated to the time of the Second Temple, or to the years immediately following its destruction. These chapters refer to the Temple in the present tense, and interestingly preserve some older features of the Hebrew language. It is possible, however, that these too are cases of literary diglossia.

dominance in a growing number of texts, and a register that had been largely colloquial began to be used in literature. There are various theories regarding this shift; some scholars associate it with the nationalist movement of the time or with socio-economic changes among the ruling class, for example. The observations made in this paper suggest that two additional considerations must be taken into account. Firstly, the nature of the texts: orally-transmitted rabbinic texts should not be treated the same way as texts transmitted in writing. It is reasonable that written text and oral text will be transformed in a different register. In addition, this paper sought to demonstrate that, in examining the evolution of language as a system – such as the shift from EH to LH – we find certain shifts in perspective that are natural and expected in any language. Among them are shifts in the standards and traits associated with literary corpora. For example, it is known that, over time, spoken registers and styles make their way into literary writing. Conversely, archaisms serve to elevate the language. As we saw, in the time of the Mishnah, the language of the earlier period remained available for marking certain linguistic environments as culturally elevated, and in those contexts EH, the language associated with the Bible, served as part of MH.

## 6. Conclusions

A discussion on the language of the Mishnah must consider all the linguistic data that the Mishnaic corpus includes. In other words, all this data – however heterogeneous – is part of MH. Addressing it requires making a theoretical distinction between the history of the linguistic systems (EH and LH) and the history of the language of the Hebrew corpora (BH and MH). This distinction allowed us to characterize the various linguistics layers of MH, and to provide an accurate terminology for dealing with the heterogeneity. Thus, it is possible to present the many studies of MH in a more systematic way and consider them in light of the literature about linguistic heterogeneity in general.