Transitive verbs with non-accusative alternation in Hebrew: Cross-language comparison with English, German and Spanish

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0. Introduction

Modern as well as ancient Hebrew have transitive verbs, mainly verbs of contact by motion, which can be construed either with a direct object marked by the definite accusative marker (henceforth OM) ‘et or with an indirect object marked by the preposition be- (a bound morpheme in Hebrew). These two grammatical structures can be thought of as occurring in complementary distribution.

In the literature of Hebrew grammar, this transitivity alternation is either ignored or traditionally understood as stylistic, that is, as an optional grammatical selection with no explicit different semantic content.

The present study is guided by the assumption that two things different in form can never be the same in meaning and in how they function in discourse environments. This principle, which has been explained at length by Bolinger (1968) and adopted by other linguists (cf. Haiman 1985; MacWhinney 1989; Goldberg 1995), is commonly known as The Principle of No Synonymy. It therefore seems necessary to examine not only the syntactic construction, but also the semantic properties of these constructions.

Studies of the nature of lexical knowledge confirm that various aspects of verbs’ syntactic behavior are tied to their meaning. Moreover, verbs that fall into classes according to shared behavior would be expected to share meaning components. Presumably, predictions about verb behavior are feasible because particular syntactic properties are associated with verbs of a certain type. Hence, I shall first introduce the verbs which are involved in the ‘et/be-alternation by classifying them into the semantic domains to which they belong (Section 1). However, following the assumption of cognitive linguistics, this study maintains that the distinction between the two constructions under discussion is a result not only of the interaction between the syntax and semantics of the verb and the participants, but also
of the meaning of the construction frame as a holistic cognitive unit (cf.
Goldberg 1995). In this view, the construction, with its specific meaning –
as will be described – exists independently of the individual verbs that may
occur in it.

The general claim is that the accusative construction is in many respects
the unmarked construction or default form, while the prepositional
construction, with an indirect object which is not part of the valency of the
verb, is the marked construction. In order to maintain this claim, the
analysis will consider the pertinent semantic properties of the central
participants, viz., the actor (A) and the object (O), (Section 2), and the
verbal action (V) (Section 3). Each of the components of the transitive
event that will be discussed involves a different facet of the effectiveness or
intensity with which the action is transferred from one participant to
another, as well as a different viewpoint on the event structure.

Triggering a more specific focus on the speaker’s or observer’s
viewpoint, the present study offers a new cognitive approach to the
phenomenon of transitivity alternation in Hebrew (Section 4). This view
corresponds to a great extent to the construction grammar approach to the
Ø/a transitivity alternation in Spanish as advocated by Delbecque (1999a,
1999b, 2002).

A close examination of the syntactic behavior of the set of verbs to be
classified below (Section 1) can probe for linguistically relevant aspects of
their meaning. In Section 5 I shall discuss the relevance of the notion of
‘contact’ to the syntactic behavior of the transitive verbs in question. It will
be argued that the notion of ‘contact’ is relevant not only to the syntactic
behavior of the transitive verbs participating in the ‘et/be-’ alternation, but is
also compatible with the viewpoint on the event.

With regard to the lexical dimension, I will suggest that the prepositional
construction plays a crucial role in creating metaphorization, and that in
languages with a formal mechanism of transitivity alternation – such as
Hebrew and Spanish – it is a device denoting verbal polysemy (Section 6).

As indicated above, a similar type of syntactic mechanism, traditionally
known as the ‘prepositional and the non-prepositional accusative
alternation’, is available in Spanish, but lacking in English. Consider the
following Spanish and Hebrew examples (1a,b), and their English
equivalent (1c):

(1) a. mataron {Ø/a} moros y judios
       killed-3PL {Ø/to} Moors and Jews

       (history books; taken from Delbecque 2002)

b. hem hargu {Ø/be-} maurim ve-yehudim
       have killed {Ø/to} Moors and Jews

       (history books; taken from Delbecque 2002)
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they killed {Ø/in-} Moors and Jews

c. They killed Moors and Jews

There are also some significant correspondences between Hebrew and German alternation patterns, e.g. (2a,b), in contrast with English (2c):

(2) a. German
   Der Mann hat {mich/mir} ins Gesicht geschlagen (taken from Draye 1996: 198)
   the man AUX {me/to-me} on-the face hit

b. Hebrew
   ha’iš hika {'oti/bi} ba-panim
   the-man hit {me/in-me} in-the-face

c. The man hit me in the face

Below, I shall present cross-language evidence from Spanish and German and compare it to Hebrew (Section 7). However, typological comparisons of languages are not the concern of this study.

The corpus data are basically of Modern Hebrew, and are taken from narrative discourse, mainly from literary and journalistic writing. For some typical cases, I shall also provide elicited examples.5

1. Classification of Hebrew transitive verbs involved in the ‘et/be-alternation

The Hebrew verbs that enter into the transitivity alternation ‘et/be- can be classified into eleven sets: eight sets of action verbs (henceforth ‘actual’ verbs), and three of non-action verbs (henceforth ‘virtual’ verbs).

A. ‘Actual’ verbs


3) POKE VERBS: e.g. xafar ‘dig’, qadax ‘drill’, xaras ‘plough’, ‘adar ‘hoe’;

4) CUT VERBS: e.g. xatax ‘cut’, qitse ‘clip’, niser ‘saw’, gilef ‘carve’;

5) PUSH/PULL VERBS: e.g. daxaq ‘push’, mašax ‘pull’;

6) CHEW AND NIBBLE VERBS: e.g. kirsem ‘nibble’ / ‘gnaw’, nagas ‘bite’;
GESTURE VERBS: e.g. *henid* ‘move head, eyes etc.’, *heni’a / ni’ane’a* ‘move body’, *gilgel* ‘roll (eyes)’, *xaxax* ‘rub hands’, *šifšef* ‘rub body parts’;

HOLD/SEIZE AND SUPPORT VERBS: e.g. *’axaz / hexziq* ‘hold’, *tafas* ‘grab’, *tamax* ‘support’.

B. ‘Virtual’ verbs

PERCEPTION AND VOLITION VERBS: e.g. *hirgiš / xaš* ‘feel’, *’sense’, ratsa ‘want’, *baxar* ‘choose’;

QUALIFYING VERBS: e.g. *qitser* ‘shorten’, *he’erix* ‘lengthen’, *heqel* ‘lighten’;

ASPECTUAL VERBS: e.g. *hexel / hitxil* ‘start’, *himšix* ‘continue’.

The ‘actual’ verbs in class 1–8 share the semantic properties of ‘motion’ and ‘contact’. It will be argued (cf. Section 5) that these properties are the meaning components related to the syntactic behavior of these verbs, particularly to the ‘et/be- diathesis alternation. The verbs at issue are dynamic verbs – most of them telic and punctual, except for the hold-support verbs (Class 8) and the pull verb *mašax* (Class 5), which have two readings: next to the typical durative and atelic meaning, they also have a telic and punctual one.

‘Virtual’ verbs, on the other hand, do not denote contact through motion. They are rather characterized by expressing the intention to go on with an action (e.g. with *hitxil* ‘begin’, Section 2.1.2.1), by indicating a mental activity with a partitive-locative effect (Section 3.2), and by contrasting factuality with virtuality (Section 3.3). Hebrew conveys these properties by using the non-accusative alternation encoded with the preposition *be-*, whose prototypical meaning is locative-tangential.

2. Characterization of the central participant roles

According to the parameters of transitivity suggested by Hopper and Thompson (1980: 252–253), the two crucial components related to participant A (here for Actor) are Agency and Volitionality (viz., A acting purposefully), and the two components which refer to participant O (Object) are Affectedness and Individuation. ACTOR is now broadly used in linguistics to denote “the participant which performs, effects, instigates, or controls the situation denoted by the thematic predicate” (Foley and Van Valin 1984: 29). It means that every Agent is an Actor, but not the other way around. Dowty (1991) suggests two general macro-role types: Proto-Agent and Proto-Patient (cf. Foley and Van Valin’s ‘Actor’ and
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‘Undergoer’). Proto-Agent properties are: (1) volitional involvement in the event; (2) sentience (and/or perception); (3) causing an event or change of state in another participant; (4) movement (relative to the position of another participant); and (5) exists independently of the event. Proto-Patient properties are: (1) undergoes change of state; (2) incremental theme; (3) causally affected by another participant; (4) stationary relative to movement of another participant; and (5) does not exist independently of the event, or not at all.

Below, I shall discuss the relevance of the Agency (Section 2.1.1) and Intentionality (Sections 2.1.2, 2.1.3) components of the A to the two alternating ways of encoding the scene. With regard to participant role O, I shall discuss the relevance of Individuation of the O (2.2.1) and its Affectedness and Involvement in the event (2.2.2) to the transitivity diathesis alternation in question.

2.1. Participant role: A

2.1.1. Agency of the A entity

In the accusative construction of the transitive verbs at issue, the A is a prototypical agent, viz., animate and usually human. Thus, when the A is not agentive, and therefore not operative, the accusative construction is regularly excluded. Consider, for example, (3) where the be- construction is preferred in Hebrew:

(3)  \textit{ba' lefeta gal 'adir šel ruax ve-hika} \textit{??'oti/bi}  
came suddenly wave strong of wind and-hit \{??OM-me/in-me\}  
\textit{be-xozqa} (Biyalik, p. 1) (class 1)  
strongly  
‘Suddenly a strong wave of wind came and hit me powerfully’

Or consider the preferred be- construction in the following examples, in which the A is an abstract entity and the predicates have a metaphorical reading:

(4)  \textit{ha-batsoret hikta kašot} \textit{??'et/be-}  \textit{ha-xaqla'ut} (class 1)  
the-drought hit severely \{??OM/in-\} the-agriculture  
‘The drought hit agriculture severely’
(5) be-‘eynav ha-‘aforot ra’a hary hištaqfuš šel ‘ota
In his eyes the grey saw Harry a-reflection of OM-that ‘eīma še-‘axaza {??’oto/bo} (Harry Potter, p. 314) (class 8)
terror that-held {??OM-him/in-him}
‘In his gray eyes Harry saw a reflection of that terrible fear that took hold of him’

(6) ha-kibuš mexarsem {??’et/be-} yexolta šel
the-occupation gnaws {??OM-in-} the-ability-her of
ha-medina lehagen ‘al ‘emdata ha-musarit klapei
the-country to-defend on position-her the-moral towards
ha-‘olam (Haaretz 15.2.02) (class 6)
the-world
‘The occupation gradually reduces the country’s ability to defend its moral position to the world’

As we shall see in some detail below (Section 6), in Hebrew it is almost predictable that the be- construction influences the verbal meaning and often triggers a metaphorical reading.

2.1.2. Intentionality

The prepositional construction is marked for intentionality. This is especially noticeable in verbs of perception and volition (Class 9). In (7), e.g., ratsa be- means ‘wanted something very much, purposefully’.

(7) tahalix 'oslo haya mivxan še-yisra’el yaxla leharšot
the-process(of) Oslo was a-test that-Israel could to-permit
le-‘atsma, še-rov ha-yisra’elim ratsu bo
to-herself, that-most of-the-Israelis wanted in-3SG.MASC.
(21.2.01)(class 9)
‘The Oslo (peace) process was a test that Israel could afford and that most Israelis desired’

In (8), the nominal form derived from baxar ‘choose’, namely bexira ‘choice’, is not construed with the accusative (baxar ‘et) but with prepositional (baxar be), to denote ‘an intentional, not random choice’, as corroborated by the context (‘this one and not another’).8
(8) *ha-bexira be-mašal ze ve-lo’ ‘axer yeš la ‘erex*
the-choice in-proverb this and-not another has to-her a-value
simboli ba-tarbut (Haaretz 5.1.00) (class 9)
symbolic in-the-culture
‘The choice of this fable and not another has symbolic value in the culture’

With verbs denoting inception (Class 11), the accusative construal conveys a merely ingressive aspect, e.g. (9a):

(9) a. *ha-menahel patax ‘et ha-diyun ba-nose’* (class 11)
the-director opened OM the-discussion on-the subject
‘The director opened the discussion on the issue’

The prepositional construal, by contrast, may be regarded as expressing what Brugmann (1917) termed as *Streckung* (‘stretching’) of ingressive into durative, that is, suggesting the A’s intention to continue with the action, e.g. (9b):

(9) b. *ha-menahel patax be-diyun ba-še’ela ha-kakalit*
the-director opened in-discussion on-the-question the-economic
‘The director started with / began a discussion on the economic question’

While (9a) is not marked for the intention to pursue the activity begun, (9b) implies that A is actually participating in the event and will continue to do so. The same is true for (10) and (11):

(10) *tamid ratsiti qaryera tsva’it, ve-xašavti še-ze*
always I-wanted a-career military, and-I-thought that-this(is)
ha-maqom lehatxil {??’ota/ba} (Haaretz 20.12.99) (class 11)
the-place to-start {??OM-her/in-her}
‘I always wanted a military career and I thought that this was the place to start’

(11) *ha-mafginim qar’u le-sar ha-‘otsar lehatxil*
the-demonstrators called to-the-minister (of) the-treasury to-begin
miyad {??’et/be-} ha-masa’ u-matan ‘im ha-studentim (Haaretz 20.11.01) (class 11)
immediately {??OM/in-} the-negotiation with the-students
‘The demonstrators called on the Minister of Treasury to immediately begin negotiations with the students’

Like many other properties of the event, the intention to realize the action is discourse-determined, it is not just a property of one of the elements of the clause. In (10), e.g., the intention is to realize the dream that the A had always had, and in (11), it is to negotiate immediately with the students. The English paraphrase of hitxil be- would then be ‘actually start with’ or ‘start with a clear intention to fulfill the mission’.

2.2. Participant role: O

2.2.1. Individuation of the O entity

According to Hopper and Thompson’s (1980: 286) definition, individuation is “the degree to which the entity referred to by the NP is discrete, bounded and separated from its environment”. The properties of individuated objects, according to their parameterized theory of transitivity are: proper, human/animate, concrete, singular, count, and referential/definite (Hopper and Thompson 1980: 253).

In the accusative construal of the scene, the distinctness of O from A and its distinctness from its background environment are unmarked, not only in terms of its individuality as a particular and discrete entity, but also in terms of assigning prominence to it as a figure in the scene. Thus, the O is susceptible of being a non-individuated entity, as expressed, e.g. by an indefinite noun, as in (12), or a generic noun, as in (13) and in (14), where it has a metaphorical reading.

(12) kulam lehaxziq {Ø/?be-} yadayim (class 8) everybody to-hold {Ø/?in-} hands ‘Everybody hold hands’

(13) ‘axbarim mexarsemim {Ø/?be-} bad (class 6) mice gnaw {Ø/?in-} cloth ‘Mice gnaw cloth’

(14) mi še-mider ‘et ha-sarim ve-qitsets lahem he-who compartmentalized OM the-ministers and-cut-off to-them {Ø/?be-} knafayim ba-šana va-xetsi ha-’axrona (Haaretz 21.2.01) (class 4)
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{Ø/??in-} wings at-the-year and-a-half the-last
‘The one who has constricted the ministers and clipped their wings over the last year and a half’

The accusative construction frame is also used when the O expresses a propositional content or denotes a process conceived as an abstract entity, i.e. a third-order entity in the sense of Lyons (1977: 443) e.g. (15):

(15) ha-xasifa la-qrina he’itsa {‘et/??be-}
the-exposure to-the-radiation accelerated{OM/??in-}
hitpatxut ha-maxala (class 10)
development of-the-disease
‘The exposure to radiation accelerated the development of the disease’

The accusative is also the only possible frame when the O nominals functions as the predicative component of a complex verbal predicate with a lexically depleted verb e.g., in (16), the compound verbal predicate is split into the secondary verb tafas (‘caught’) and the nominal complement šalva (‘tranquillity’).

(16) hu’ šaxav lo’ ‘al ha-xof ve-tafas šalva
he lay to-him on the-beach and-caught tranquility
‘He lay on the beach finding tranquility’

The same holds for ‘effected objects’ integrated in the verbal concept: in (17), e.g., the DO xor ‘hole’ is a non-discrete kind of reference established by the verbal predicate niqev ‘pierce’. Hence, it is implied by the verb, and cognitively part of its domain.

(17) hi’ niqva la xor ba-’ozen
she pierced to-her hole in-the-ear
‘She pierced her ear’

Examples (12) through (17) show that when the O is a non-individuated or non-discrete entity only the accusative construal is available.

In contrast, all Os introduced by the be-preposition in our corpus data are definite or highly individuated. The condition for the prepositional alternation to be possible seems to be that the O has to denote an individuated entity (18, 19).
Finally, it is relevant to note that the dative morpheme is in many languages a marker of definite and animate O’s, as for example the Spanish a and the Semitic dative le- which has become in Neo-Aramaic a marker of the definite accusative, e.g. qatlā le – kills 3 FEM.SG to-him ‘she kills him’. On this account Hopper and Thompson (1980: 259) suggest that the arguments known to grammar as ‘Indirect Objects’ (as opposed to ‘obliques’ such as instrumentals or locatives), whether dative marked or not, should in fact be transitive O’s rather than what might be called ‘accusative’ O’s, since they tend to be definite or highly individuated.  

2.2.2. Involvement and affectedness of the O entity

In the prepositional alternation of the transitive verbs at issue, the O is marked in terms of affectedness. The affected object represents an independent entity, whose existence is not stipulated by the action; however the action has an impact upon it. The be-preposition marks the realization of the contact between the A and the O. The action is focused intentionally and intensively on the O. In the accusative construction, on the other hand, the object is unmarked in terms of affectedness, and is susceptible of denoting an effected object, viz., a nominal entity constituting the last element of the verbal process, as shown above in (17) and in (20) below.

(20) *hi’ qar’a* {Ø/??be-} *pisa mi-nismato šel ‘avigdor* (Kerrett, p.61)
    she tore {Ø/??in-} piece of-his-soul of Avigdor
    ‘She tore off a piece of Avigdor's soul’

The DO *pisa* (‘piece’) is inseparable from the concept of the verb. It functions as an incremental theme (in the sense of Dowty 1991), i.e. it does not exist independently of the event, and, as advocated by Delbecque (1999a, 1999b, 2002), it cognitively acts as an internally bounded domain.
An even better illustration can be found in (21), since here the effected object is also lexically (viz., collocationally) restricted to the verbal domain.

(21)  
\[
\begin{align*}
bor & \text{kara} \quad \text{va-yaxperehu} \quad \text{(Ps. 7:16)} \\
pit & \text{dug-he and-hollowed-it} \\
& \text{‘He dug a pit and hollowed it out’}
\end{align*}
\]

Modern Hebrew: \( kara + \{bor, \, \text{šuxa, qever}\} \)

\text{dig} \quad + \{\text{pit, cistern, grave}\}

The verbal head \( kara \) (‘dig a pit’) is lexically ‘pregnant’,\(^{12} \) since it encapsulates (in the sense of Lyons 1977: 618) objects from the semantic domain of ‘pit’ (e.g. \( \text{bor}, \, \text{qever}, \, \text{šuxa} \)). Hence it is more felicitously associated with the direct, non-prepositional, construction. On the other hand, a less specified verb like \( \text{xafar} \) (‘dig’) fits both the accusative (22) and the prepositional construction (23).

(22)  
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{hem} & \, \text{xafru} \quad \text{‘et} \quad \text{ha-te’ala} \\
\text{they dug} & \quad \text{OM the-tunnel} \\
& \text{‘They dug the tunnel’}
\end{align*}
\]

(23)  
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{hem} & \, \text{himšixu} \quad \text{laxpor} \quad \text{ba-te’ala} \\
\text{they continued to-dig} & \quad \text{in-the-tunnel} \\
& \text{‘They continued digging the tunnel’}
\end{align*}
\]

In (22), \( \text{te’ala} \) ‘tunnel’ is an ‘effected object’, i.e. an incremental effect of the transitive event, while in (23) it is an ‘affected object’, i.e. a discrete entity which is affected by the verbal process but which exists from the beginning, independently of the event.

The distinction between effected and affected objects does not seem to be pertinent for the non-prepositional construction frame. Verbs which can be construed with affected objects in the accusative construction can also be construed prepositionally, as in (18) above. However, the prepositional frame only takes affected entities as objects.

Up to this point, I have discussed the relevant properties of the core participant roles A and O in the two construction frames of the transitive verbs participating in the ‘\text{et}/\text{be}’ alternation. In the following section I shall discuss the semantics of the event in terms of viewpoint, type of situation, and aspect (\text{Aktionsart}) of the verb and the entire predication.
3. Characterization of the event in terms of aspect, scope, and instantiation

It is presumably no accident that inherent features of a verb’s meaning fit in with the meaning of certain tense and aspect forms, but not with others. The ‘actual’ transitive verbs of contact through motion which participate in the diathesis alternation under discussion (cf. list in Section 1) refer to dynamic situations. Most of these verbs are inherently telic and punctual; however, the component of ‘contact’, which is part of their lexical semantics, makes them susceptible of being viewed as atelic and durative.

It will be argued that turning to the prepositional frame (often in combination with other lexical and grammatical elements) corresponds to the choice to focus on the internal structure of the event, thus viewing it rather as a process than as an action. Whether the clause receives a perfective or imperfective reading crucially hinges on the construction frame used (3.1.). Since the imperfective Aktionsart (mode d’action) is, in general, associated with activity, volition/intentionality and intensity, it usually yields a more vivid and accurate image than the perfective (cf. 2.1.2.).

As a corollary of the aspectual distinction, the ‘et/be alternation also involves a scope difference: while completion uses to involve the whole O entity, internal viewing rather favors a part-centered conceptualization of the effect. The alternation therefore also deserves to be analyzed in terms of holistic vs. partitive scope (3.2.).

An imperfective, partitive view further tends to imply the instantiation of an individuated, specific event, whereas a perfective, holistic approach gives way to a type reading, i.e. an unspecified, generically portrayed predication (3.3.).

3.1. Perfective vs. imperfective aspect

The accusative construction of the ‘actual’ verbs which admit the ‘et/be-alternation expresses prototypical transitivity. In this construction frame, the speaker chooses to view the accomplishment of the activity – that is, he views it as perfective. The event is viewed externally, in terms of its completion, i.e. the effect of the action is effectively transferred from A entity to O entity, with no reference to its internal temporal structure. On the other hand, the prepositional construction frame, which exhibits reduced transitivity, permits viewing the contact by motion from within, making explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of the event – in
particular, to the real process of actualization – leaving the end in particular unspecified; for example, *hu’ qara’ et hasefer* ‘he read the book’ in contrast to *kšenixnasti hu’ qara’ ba-sefer* ‘when I entered he was reading the book’.

The combination of the accusative construction with telic verbs yields the implication of completion, while the combination of the prepositional construction with such verbs does not. This means that the O is marked with the oblique case-marker *be*- when the action of the predicate does not reach, or is not considered to reach, any determinate point or phase. It thus yields an imperfective or atelic reading. In (24) below, the action of cutting is viewed as an ongoing process, which may continue indefinitely.

(24) yišarti 'et retsu'at ha-tarmil še-xatxa be-gabi
I straightened OM the-strap(of) the-bag  that-cut in-my-back
(Kerrett, p. 101) (class 4)
‘I smoothed the strap of the bag that was cutting into my back’

Viewing a situation from within, namely as imperfective, correlates with real situations, both in terms of dynamicity and atelicity. A transitive activity is viewed as “carried over” from one participant to another, methodically and intensively. So it is no accident that in the *be*-construction we find adverbials which ‘overdetermine’ the meaning imposed by the construction, e.g. adverbials which express deliberateness and intensity, as in (25) *bexavana* (‘deliberately’) and *xazaq* (‘strongly’):

(25) hu’ ‘amar se-gabi mašax ba-guf šel ha-xatul
he said that-Gabi pulled in-the-body of the-cat
xazaq  be-xavana (Kerrett, p. 71) (class 5)
strongly deliberately
‘He said that Gabi deliberately pulled the cat hard’

Although aspect is a clausal property, it is generally expected in Indo-European languages to be marked on verbs. Hebrew, however, lacks such a systematic morpho-syntactic mechanism for expressing aspectuality. The preposition *be*-., which in its spatial-tangential meaning signifies ‘being in a place’ or ‘being in contact with’, appears to be one of the devices used in Hebrew to give aspectual information, namely of imperfectivity.

It is also worth noting that the coreferential dative construction, which marks the affectee, plays a similar role in Modern Hebrew: It triggers an imperfective interpretation, when it is combined with certain types of motion verbs, whether transitive or intransitive. With telic verbs, it yields
an atelic reading. Compare, e.g. the canonical accusative construction of the
telic verb tsavat ‘pinch’ (26a) with the imperfective and atelic interpretation
of (26b) that contains the coreferential dative clitic le-.

(26) a. ziser tsavat me’at min ha-lexem, hispig ‘oto
Zisser pinched a-little from the-bread, dipped OM-3 MASC.SG
ba-šemen ... ve-hibi’a ‘et haš’arato (elicited example)
in-the-oil ... and-expressed OM hypothesis-his
‘Zisser pinched off a bit of the bread, dipped it in the oil, and
expressed his hypothesis’

(26) b. ziser tsavat lo me’at min ha-lexem,
Zisser pinched to-him (DAT, CLIT) a-little from the-bread,
hispig ‘oto ba-šemen... ve-hibi’a ‘et
dipped OM– 3 MASC.SG in-the-oil ... and-expressed OM
haš’ arato (Beer 1987: 29)
hypothesis-his
‘Zisser pinched himself off a bite of the bread, dipped it in the oil
…and then expressed his hypothesis’

However, aspectual meaning cannot be accounted for solely by the verb
and its construal. Other clausal elements play a role, too. In (27), the
aspectual reading hinges on the secondary verbs himšix (‘continued’), and
in (28) on the presence of adjuncts in combination with an ingressive verb,
e.g. qam kedey ‘rose to/with an intention to’:

(27) ha-‘ilem himšix laxbot ba-na‘ar še-haya
the-mute continued to-beat in-the-boy who-was
‘axšav saru’a ‘al ha-‘arets (Kerrett, p. 16) (class 1)
now stretched-out on the-ground
‘The mute went on beating the boy who was now stretched out on
the ground’

(28) sinen li’or ve-qam mi-mqomo kedey lingos
muttered Lior and-rose from-place-his in-order to-bite
ba-šezȋf (Kerrett, p. 28) (class 6)
in-the-plum
‘Muttered Lior and rose to bite the plum’

Imperfect forms, such as the present participle, e.g. maxziq ‘being in a
position of holding’ in (29) below, and mexatex ‘was cutting’ in (30),
constitute yet another grammatical device in Hebrew for portraying a vivid
dynamic situation viewed as imperfective. They also pattern with the be-construction.

(29) ha-tšerqesi herim 'oto me-'axor, maxziq bo
the-Circassian lifted him from-behind, holding in-him
kedei še-lo’ yitmotet (Kerrett, p. 16) (class 8)
so that-he-not would-collapse
‘The Circassian lifted him from behind, holding him so that he wouldn't collapse’

(30) ve-haya rofe’ kofto u-mexatex be-raglo
and-was a-physician tidying-him-up and-cutting in-his-leg
(Rabbinical Hebrew: Tosefta, Sheqalim, A: 6) (class 4)
‘And a physician was tidying him up and cutting his leg’

In all these examples, the imperfective aspect is largely triggered by the prepositional construction frame. The preposition be- overtly marks the actualisation of contact between the A and the O. The accusative/prepositional alternation thus counts as a coding device for the aspectual perfective/imperfective distinction at clause level.

3.2. Holistic vs. partitive scope

The choice of the accusative or non-accusative construal is also determined by the scope and effect attributed to the event. The completion of the action naturally involves the whole O. When the action is viewed as an ongoing process, it encroaches upon the O entity and affects only part of it. Hebrew reveals more clearly than English the difference in transitivity of the total, as opposed to partial transitivity, by using the ‘et/be- alternation.

The DO construction frame represents a whole centered view, it conveys a ‘holistic effect’. In the et- frame, the action is viewed as encompassing and the object is conceptualized as totally affected. The be-construction frame, on the other hand, represents a part-centered conceptualization. The action is viewed from within, marking the intentional and intensive contact between the entity of A and the entity of O. Such action is displayed as local action, specifically focused on a discrete O or a particular part of it. It thus triggers ‘reduced operativity’ or the conceptualization of a ‘partitive effect’. In (31), e.g., the accusative construction implies that O₁ tiq ‘bag’ is completely affected, while the be-construction in the second part of the sentence suggests that only part of O₂ retsu’a ‘strap’ is affected.
The lighting man pulled the bag from her hip; she tried to seize the strap.'

Compare also the difference of aspectual meaning with the verb *tavax* 'slaughter' in (32) and (33). In (32), the image conveyed by the accusative construal is one of ‘full operativity’ with a ‘holistic effect’, that is, the action is viewed as accomplished and thus involves the whole O (viz., all 7,000 men and children). In contrast, the prepositional construal in (33) triggers ‘reduced operativity’, signalling the ‘partitive effect’ of an ongoing process, where only part of the O is affected (viz., not all Christians have been slaughtered).

(32) *ba-*ayara *ha-*muslmit *tavxu* *xayalav* *ke-*7,000
in-the-village the-muslim slaughtered his-soldiers about-7,000
*gvarim* *ve-*yeladim *(Haaretz 1.3.02)* (class 1)
men and-children
‘His soldiers slaughtered some 7,000 men and children in the Muslim village’

(33) *ha-*’olam *ha-*notsri *ro’e* *keytsad* *tovxim*
the-world Christian sees how (they)-slaughter
*ba-*notsrim *be-*nigeria, *be-*sudan *u-*bi’-še’ar *megomot*
in-the-Christians in-Nigeria, in-Sudan and-in-other places
*ba-*’olam *ve-*lo’ *noqef* ‘etsba’ *(Haaretz 24.9.01)(class 1)*
in-the-world and-does-not lift a-finger
‘The Christian world sees how they slaughter Christians in Nigeria, Sudan, and other places in the world and does not lift a finger’

This viewpoint distinction also holds with ‘virtual’ verbs, such as verbs of sensation. Compare the holistic effect of the ‘*et*-construal in (34) with the partitive one in (35), where the action is not viewed as completed.

(34) *qafa*’ti *mi-*qor *ve-*lo’ *hirgašši ‘et* *ha-*yadayim
I-was-freezing of-cold and-didn’t feel OM the-hands
(class 9)
‘I was freezing and couldn’t feel my hands’
Transitive verbs with non-accusative alternation in Hebrew

(35)  naxum xaš ha-ye'uš ha-mištalet 'al gufo  
Nahum felt in-the-despair that-is-taking over his-body  
(Kerrett, p. 36) (class 9)  
‘Nahum felt despair overwhelming his body’

The same holds for ‘qualifying’ verbs: the whole centered view expressed in (36) contrasts with the part-centered view given in (37), where only part of the O (viz., ‘onša ‘her sentence’) is conceived as susceptible of being affected (i.e. only part of her sentence might be reduced).

(36)  ‘iraq tuxal leqatser 'et ha-zman ha-daruš  
Iraq will-be-able to-shorten OM the-time necessary  
levitsur uraniyum mo'ošar (Haaretz 27.2.01) (class 10)  
for-production of-uranium enriched  
‘Iraq would be able to reduce the time necessary to produce enriched uranium’

(37)  šoftey beyit ha-mišpat ha-elyon daxu 'et  
judges of-the-court the-supreme rejected OM  
ha-baqaša leqatser be-onša (class 10)  
the-appeal to-shorten in-punishment-of-her  
‘The Supreme Court judges rejected the appeal to reduce her sentence’

3.3. Factuality vs. virtuality

Next to imperfectivity (3.1.) and partitivity (3.2.), a third notion typically applies to the be-construal, viz. the epistemic modality of factuality. Factuality is used here as a cover term for epistemic modality. It refers to various judgments of factuality of a proposition and to various devices allowing the speakers to depict a projected or hypothetical action rather than an actual one. The ‘et/be- alternation counts as one of the devices to compare the real, factual world with hypothetical versions of it. While the ‘et-construal can depict a generic view, the be-construal requires the actuality of the situation to be specified and implies that at least one individual reference of the O entity is operative (3.3.1.). Put otherwise: unlike the be-construal, the ‘et-construal does not only depict something actually done, but also enables an event to be envisaged as hypothetical and even counterfactual (3.3.2.).
3.3.1. Instantiation vs. genericity

From a logico-semantic point of view, every situation is unique and unrepeatable. Therefore no sharp distinction can be drawn between the individual and the generic level. However, if we adopt a less inclusive view of the notions of individuality and actuality, we may differentiate between individually instantiated events and generically conceived ones.

Just like there can be assumed to be a correlation between individuation, i.e. specific instantiation, and imperfectivity, I shall suggest that there is also a correlation between individuation and foregrounding, understood as “high” profiling of the reference domain of the O entity.

The accusative frame is particularly suited for conveying a type-reading: in a perfectly construed event, the scope of the effect on the O easily remains unspecified. This is illustrated in (38) where the OM ‘et is normally used to depict a typical or generic action. It would be awkward to turn to be- ‘in’ to mark the contact between the A and the O, since then a discrete kind of reference would implicitly be recognized to be operative for the O entity.

(38)  
\[ \text{gam ha-yom yeš } ‘adayin horim } še-makim } \{‘et/??be-\} \\
\text{even today } \text{there-are still } \text{parents who-beat } \{\text{OM/??in-}\} \\
\text{yaldeyhem} \\
\text{the-children-of them} \\
\text{‘Even today, there are still parents who beat their children’} \]

Conversely, since the prepositional configuration invokes a view from within, as an ongoing process, it tends to denote only individual and specific events. A predicational relationship, in which the focus is on the genericity of the action, as in (38) above, is therefore semantically incompatible with the be- construction frame. In contrast, in (39) both constructions are available.

(39)  
\[ \text{ha-šotrim } še-to’adu } \text{be-video ve-zuku} \\
\text{the-policemen who-were-documented in-video and-acquitted} \\
\text{nir’u } \text{ke-še-hem makim } \{’oto/bo\} \text{makot} \\
\text{were-seen while-they were-beating } \{\text{OM-him/in-him}\} \text{blows} \\
\text{retsax (the be- version is taken from Haaretz 29.2.02)} \\
\text{murderous} \\
\text{‘The policemen documented by video and acquitted were seen beating him murderously’} \]
This observation can be stated in more general terms: the realization of the alternating be-construal is excluded when the referentiality of the situation is not specified and in particular when the contact between the A and the O is not specified.

### 3.3.2. Projection and counterfactuality

The distinction between something projected, imaginary, hypothetical or counterfactual, and something actually done concerns judgments regarding the factuality of the predication, in terms of its truth value at the moment of speech. The different modes in which the speaker encodes the propositional content of his utterance, which in many languages are grammaticalized in the category of mood, mark the different degrees of actualization of the process signified by the verb.\(^{15}\) The accusative construction, which is the unmarked construction, can depict something actually done, or the opposite, viz., something projected or hypothetical that may end up having truth value in a ‘possible world’. Hence, the OM ‘et easily combines with a modal auxiliary (40) or an imperative (41).

\[\begin{align*}
(40) & \quad 'ani \ yaxol \ lešayef \ {\text{et}\text{?}be-} \ ha-ets \ maher \\
& \text{I can to-polish \{OM\?in-\} the-wood quickly} \\
& \text{‘I can sand the wood quickly’}
\end{align*}\]

\[\begin{align*}
(41) & \quad haxzeq \ {\text{et}\text{?}be-} \ ha-kos \ yašar! \\
& \text{hold-3 MASC.SG.IMP \{OM\?in-\} the-glass straight!} \\
& \text{‘Hold the glass straight!’}
\end{align*}\]

The be-construal, on the other hand, tends to appear only in the indicative.\(^{16}\) Since the events depicted are typically not counterfactual, the central instantiations are realis. Non-factual predications, such as those in (40) and (41) therefore preclude be-insertion before the O.

### 4. Towards a global cognitive approach

So far we have concentrated on the semantics of the verb and the central participant roles and I have argued that the Hebrew ‘et/be-alternation functions as a compensating mechanism for the absence of a regular system of morpho-syntactic aspectuality markers on the verb.
Yet, it is my contention that the above discussed properties of transitivity have to be understood relative to a prior understanding of the two alternative construals as holistic units, the Gestalt of which does not simply emerge from the summation of their constituent parts.

My working hypothesis – in line with a basic assumption of cognitive linguistics, and of construction grammar in particular – is that the availability of the alternating ways of envisaging the scene does not depend on the referential category of the NP, nor on the semantic class of the verb, but hinges upon the abstract, schematic meaning of the construction frame, very much as is the case for the Ø/a transitivity alternation in Spanish (Delbecque 1999a, 1999b, 2002). In other words, the Hebrew ‘et/be-alternation also corresponds to two different construction frames, each one representing a different grounding of the O in a cognitive domain.

The accusative, ‘et-construal depicts a unidirectional relationship. In this prototypically transitive configuration, the A plays the role of a typical agent, while the O plays the converse role, namely that of a typical patient or causee. The event is viewed as an effective transfer of energy from the A (Source) to the O (Goal), in terms of reaching a goal, viz., of causing a change of state in the O by transferring energy to it. While the focus of the scene is on the A, the O, being semantically and syntactically bounded to the domain of the verb, is conceptualized as part of the background. In Langackerian terms, it thus maintains a low profile.

On the other hand, along the lines suggested by Delbecque (2002), the prepositional configuration marks the causal relationship between the A entity and the O entity as “bilateral”: viz., the two participants play a salient and non-arbitrary role in the scene, there is more to them than just the overt prototypical roles of Source and Goal. The preposition signals the relevance of the reference domain of the O entity, which represents an independent argument not bounded by the verbal predication. In other words, be-insertion highlights the conceptual autonomy of the O entity with respect to the predicate; in terms of setting up the participants of the scene, it gives the O a high profile and turns the spotlight on it. To quote Delbecque (2002: 87) on the ‘prepositional accusative a alternation’ in Spanish: “a functions as a compensating mechanism for a form-meaning contradiction, viz., it restores the equilibrium between the S entity and the DO entity by re-enhancing the DO’s actantial value.”

The prepositional frame yields the conceptualization of an oriented and progressive event, in which both the A entity and the O entity are “actively” and simultaneously involved. There is no implication of an accidental event here. The presence of be- suggests concern on the part of the O entity. Unlike what happens in “blind” action, the O role is not reduced to that of a
passive and arbitrary patient. The contrast can be illustrated by means of a
minimal pair: with *hikir be-* ‘acknowledge’ (42a), the O role is that of an
interestee vs. (42b) *hikir ‘et* ‘know smb.’, it is just that of a typical patient
or causee:

(42)  a. hem hikiru be-dan ki-netsigam
    they acknowledged in-Dan as-representative-of-them
    ‘They acknowledged Dan as their representative’
  b. hem hikiru ‘et dan
    they knew OM Dan
    ‘They knew Dan’

With certain types of verbs, the O entity can be even thought of as
responsible for the action. For instance, massacres and pogroms are not
usually accidental killings but voluntarily initiated acts fueled by deep
religious or national motives. Thus, in a historiographer’s view, not only
the killers but the victims as well may be considered “responsible”.17 With
*harag ‘kill’, e.g.,* be- marks the relevance of the O entity and thus prevents
it from being seen as an occasional or accidental patient. The speaker who
utters (43) depicts a non-accidental and methodical killing on national
grounds (in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). In contrast, to
evoke a scene with victims involved by accident, i.e., not because of their
nationality, or the like, but just because they happen to be there, one would
turn to the accusatively construed *harag ‘et ‘kill’.

(43)  ‘ilu hayinu yots ‘im ... hayu mašmidim
    if we-would-have gone-out ... they-would-have destroyed
    ve-horgim banu ‘ad ha-‘iš ha-‘axaron (Haaretz 18.9.98)
    and-killed in-us until the-man the-last
    ‘If we had gone out ... they would have destroyed us and killed us
    all (to the last man)’

Similarly, the image conveyed by the biblical expression *’asa šefatim*
‘execute severe punishments’, e.g. (44), is that of an oriented and motivated
action. It therefore comes in the *be-* construal.

(44)  u-be-kol ‘elohey mitsrayim ‘e’ese šefatim (Ex. 11: 8)
    and-in-all gods(of) Egypt I-shall-make judgements
    ‘And against all gods of Egypt I shall execute judgements (= severe
    punishments)’
With *tavax* 'slaughter', another 'actual' verb, the same meaning-pattern distinction is illustrated in (32) and (33) above. With 'virtual' verbs (Classes 9–11), the bilateral view of the virtual predicational relationship, triggered by the *be*- construal, is not only associated with the high profiling of the O, but also with the A’s high motivation to be involved in the event. In such cases, the O is perceived as the stimulator, e.g. (7) above with *ratsa* 'want', (8) with *baxar* 'choose', and (10) and (11) with *hitxil* 'begin'. In (11) high profiling of the third order O entity is associated with the intention to go on with an action that just begun.

By “restoring” the asymmetrical causal relationship between the core participants of the transitive event, the prepositional construal evokes a more complex and vivid scene than the one depicted in the plain accusative construction. The difference in event structuring manifested by the *et/be*- alternation can be expected to be backed up by other paradigmatic correlates.

5. The relevance of the notion of ‘contact’ for the transitivity alternation

As argued above, the *et/be*- alternation corresponds to the distinction between a unilaterally conceived causal relationship (*et*) vs. a bilaterally oriented and motivated one (*be-*). The repercussion of the construal choice on the interpretation of the verbal predicate is particularly visible in central meaning components such as ‘motion’, ‘causation’, ‘change of state’ and, especially, ‘contact’ (5.1).

Moreover, my hypothesis is that the difference in conceptualization has a paradigmatic value that reaches beyond the transitivity alternation. To verify whether the behavior of individual verbs in other diathesis alternations follows the same rationale, I shall therefore dwell on particular (in)compatibilities of contact-by-motion verbs with body-part possessor ascension, causative/inchoative alternation, middle-passive alternation and passivization (5.2).

5.1. General principles

There is nothing new in the acknowledgment that various aspects of the syntactic behavior of verbs are tied to their meaning. Common syntactic behavior is revealing for shared semantics. Pinker (1989) observes that syntactically relevant aspects of verb meaning resemble the meanings of
closed-class elements: the semantic features that are used to predict overt syntactic structure (via linking rules) are of the same types as those associated with closed-class items, for instance motion, causation, contact, and change of state.\textsuperscript{17} According to Goldberg (1995: Ch. 1), however, what Pinker takes to be “syntactically relevant” aspects of verbal meaning are aspects of constructional meaning. I agree with Goldberg that constructions are closed-class elements and therefore are predicted to have the semantics of closed-class elements. This point can be clearly demonstrated with the subclasses of transitive verbs at issue that share the semantic features ‘motion’ and ‘contact’ and participate in the ‘et/be- alternation.’

Verbs of contact through motion denote a dynamic action initiated by one entity for the purpose of coming into contact by impact with another entity. Construing a scene in the prepositional frame reflects the conceptualization of an interdependent contact between the A entity and the O entity – or, to put it otherwise, a focus on the process which anticipates the desired outcome. Any event structure that does not fit in with such a view is incompatible with the be- construal. Thus, transitive verbs denoting motion (in Langacker’s term “transfer of energy”) without the implication of effective contact between the A and the O are confined to the accusative construal, e.g. heziz ‘move’ and zaraq ‘throw.’ Furthermore, pure change-of-state verbs which have no “criterial trait” (in the sense of Cruse 1986: 16–17) of direct contact between the A and the O also preclude the prepositional construal. Take, for example, verbs that denote changing the O’s state or shape, such as matax ‘stretch’, kivets ‘squeeze’, saraf ‘burn’, šavar ‘break’, and haras ‘destroy’, only enter the accusative construal. Conversely, class 4 verbs, e.g. xatax ‘cut’, which denote bringing an object into contact with an instrument that causes breakage of its unity and cohesiveness, admit the prepositional frame. However, a pure change of state verb like šavar ‘break’ does not necessarily entail contact between the A and the O, since one can break a window from afar, for instance with a rock, without coming into contact with the Target (the O). On the other hand, pure verbs of contact, such as naga ‘touch’ and nitqal ‘bumped into’, which do not denote motion, preclude the accusative construal and are encoded only in the be- construal, at the exclusion of the accusative construal. The same holds for contact verbs denoting physical assault such as paga ‘hit + cause harm’, xibel ‘sabotage’ or mental assault such as ga’ar ‘scold’, hitel ‘tease’, šita ‘fool’ and zilzel ‘scorn’/ ‘underestimate’, which are construed only in the be- configuration.

With ‘aspectual’ verbs expressing the notions of beginning or continuing (Class 11), e.g. hitxil ‘begin’ and himšix ‘continue’, the alternate coding with be- represents the abstract contact between the A and the third-order
Finally, the focus on the contact (viz., giving the O a high profile) may also become lexicalized. For instance, besides hika ‘hit’, which can alternatively be construed in the accusative and in the prepositional, Hebrew also has lexicalized verbs that incorporate the notion of contact between the core participants in their lexical structure and are, therefore, confined to the be- construction, e.g. paga’ ‘hit + cause harm’ and halam ‘strike with an heavy instrument’. In (45), hika be- can be replaced by the nearly synonymous paga’ be- and halam be-, since all reflect the same event structure and the same meaning-pattern, viz., imperfectivity, part-centered view, intentionality, and so on.

(45) ha-de’a ha-kelalit hi’ še-hateroristem hiku bahem mipney še-hem amerika’im (Haaretz, 13.9.01)
the-opinion the-general is that-the-terrorists struck in-them because that-they-are Americans
‘The general opinion is that the terrorists struck them because they were Americans’

5.2. Further syntactic properties of verbs of contact by motion

Further examination of the relation between the notions of ‘motion’ and ‘contact’ and the syntactic behavior of the transitive verbs at issue reveals that, apart from the ‘et/be-’ alternation that is sensitive both to motion and contact, other transitivity alternations are sensitive either to the notion of ‘contact’ or to the notions of ‘motion’ and ‘change of state’.

In what follows, I shall examine four types of transitivity alternations: (1) body-part possessor ascension; (2) inchoative alternation; (3) middle-passive alternation; and (4) passivization.

5.2.1. Body-part possessor ascension

The construction of body-part possessor ascension is realized by ascension of the body-part possessor to the position of a direct or indirect object (usually encoded in the possessive dative le-) while moving the possessed body-part to a tertiary position (in the sense of O. Jespersen), namely an adverbial position. From the cognitive viewpoint it represents a whole-
centered perspective, namely, a strategic choice of the speaker or observer to assign prominence to the possessor, which is evidently the coreferential affectee, while “low” profiling the possessed body-part. This alternation is sensitive to the notion of ‘contact’ and is therefore basically found with pure contact verbs, such as naga ‘touch’ (cf. Section 5.1), e.g. (46), where the ascendant possessor is introduced by the dative marker le- ‘to’ or alternately by be- ‘in’, while the body-part regel ‘leg’ is moved to the right (in Hebrew to the left), viz., to the adverbial position.

\(46\) hu’ naga’ {lo/bo} ba-regel
   he touched {to-him/in-him} on-the-leg
   ‘He touched his leg’

The body-part possessor ascension alternation is also found with transitive verbs of contact by motion, prototypically hit and cut verbs and their paradigmatic associates (cf. Section 5.1). In, for example, (47) and (48), this is illustrated with hika ‘hit’ and daqar ‘stab’, where the possessor is introduced as the DO, in the accusative (viz., OM ‘et-3 MASC.SG = ‘oto), and the body-part is introduced indirectly, namely by the prepositional phrase headed by be-.

\(47\) ha-mit'agref hika ‘oto ba-xaze
   the-wrestler hit OM-him on-the-chest
   ‘The wrestler hit him in the chest’

\(48\) ha-ro'tseax daqar ‘oto ba-tsavar
   the-murderer stabbed OM -him on-the-neck
   ‘The murderer stabbed him in the neck’

This kind of alternation is prevalent also in pull and seize verbs (Class 5 and 8), e.g. (49) and (50):

\(49\) hi’ ‘axaza ‘oto ba-yad
   she held OM -him on-the-hand
   ‘She held him by the hand’

\(50\) hu’ mašax la ba-se’ar
   he pulled to-her on-the-hair
   ‘He pulled her by the hair’

On the other hand, this alternation seems to be precluded with change of state verbs, which do not incorporate a “criterial” feature of direct contact.
between the A and the O, e.g. šavar ‘break’ in (51), haras ‘ruin’ in (52) and 'iqem ‘distort’ in (53):

(51) ??hu’ šavar ‘ota ba-'etsba’
    he broke OM-her on-the-finger

(52) ??hu’ haras ‘ota ba-gav
    he ruined OM-her on-the-back

(53) ??hu’ 'iqem 'oti ba-'etsba’
    he bent OM-me on-the-finger

5.2.2. Causative/inchoative alternation

The transitivity causative/inchoative alternation is available for pure change of state verbs but not for transitive verbs that incorporate a feature of ‘contact’. Compare, for instance, the causative interpretation triggered by (54a) and the passive sense rendered by (54b), which are realized in the verb-form of NIF’AL\(^2\) (e.g. nextax ‘cut/was cut’) as opposed to the minimal pair (55a) and (55b), where the alternation with the passive verb-form can trigger both a passive and an inchoative interpretation, depending on the contextual environment.

(54) a. rut xatxa 'et ha-basar
    Ruth cut OM the-meat
    ‘Ruth cut the meat’

b. ha-basar nextax
    the-meat was-cut
    ‘The meat was cut’

(55) a. dani šavar ’et ha-kos
    Dani broke OM the-glass
    ‘Dani broke the glass’

b. ha-kos nišbera
    the-glass {was-broken/broke}
    ‘The glass {has been broken/broke}’

In (55), the verb šavar ‘break’ is a pure change of state verb; therefore it can basically be realized with a one-place predicate construction, i.e. with a single argument denoting the entity undergoing a change of state, as shown
by the inchoative construction. The transitive construal, which includes two core participants, is merely meant to add the notion of ‘cause’ to the action. On the other hand, xatax ‘cut’ (54) is a contact by motion verb; it requires an A that uses an instrument to cause a change of state in the O. Hence it can only be realized in a two-place predicate construction, and cannot be found in the inchoative construction.

5.2.3. Middle-passive alternation

The feature of ‘change of state’ inherent in šavar ‘break’ and xatax ‘cut’ enables them both to be construed in the NIF’AL form, which is one of the morphological devices Hebrew uses to express a middle-passive meaning – as illustrated in (56) and (57) with the verb-forms nišbar ‘break’ and nextax ‘cut’ (cf. note 18).

(56) 'adašot zexuxit nišbarot be-qalut
    lenses(of) glass break easily
    ‘Glass lenses are {easily broken/easy to break}’

(57) 'uga kazo’t 'eina nextexet be-qalut
    cake such is-not cut easily
    ‘A cake like this is not {easily cut/easy to cut}’

On the other hand, this kind of middle-passive alternation cannot occur with verbs of contact by motion that need not entail a change of state, e.g. hika ‘hit’, and pure contact verbs, e.g. naga’ ‘touch’.

5.2.4. Passivization

The passive alternation is commonly excluded with hit verbs whose meaning does not imply direct contact between the A and the O, e.g. (58) – (60): hilqa ‘hit with an instrument (usually with a lash)’, halam ‘hit on the head with a heavy instrument’, and hitslif ‘whip’ are hit verbs; they involve three basic semantic roles: Actor - Manipulator (or Instrument) - Target (viz., the Undergoer). That is, they refer to a Manipulator being swung through the air to impact on the Target. Hence, passivisation is awkward.

(58) ??be-yalduto hu’ hulqa biydey ‘aviv
    in-his-childhood he was-flogged by-hands-(of) his-father
In contrast, passivization characterizes verbs that do not imply a Manipulator. The verb *hika* ‘hit’ does not imply a Manipulator because one can hit somebody by direct “transfer of energy” from A to O; it can therefore be passivized, as shown in (61):

(61) *hu*’ *amar še-huka* kašot bi-zman ha-xaqira

he said that-he-was-beaten severely during the-interrogation

‘He said that he was severely beaten during the interrogation’

The fact that passivization is excluded with *hit* verbs that do not exhibit a high degree of transitivity suggests that passivization obeys a constraint on the aspect of the entire expression rather than directly on the Aktionsart of the verb alone.

5.3. Summary

The notions at stake in the *et/be-* alternation, viz. ‘motion’, ‘contact’, ‘causation’ and ‘change of state’, are also involved in the above discussed diathesis alternations. The body-part possessor ascension alternation is sensitive to the notion of contact: it is available for contact by motion verbs, e.g. *hika* ‘hit’, and pure contact verbs, e.g. *naga* ‘touch’. The causative/inchoative alternation is found only with pure change of state verbs, such as *šavar* ‘break’, but is excluded with transitive verbs that specify how the change of state occurs, i.e. verbs that refer to the realization of contact or to the actual process from within. The middle-passive alternation is found with verbs whose meaning involves causing a change of state, such as *šavar* ‘break’ and *xatax* ‘cut’, but is excluded with verbs of contact by motion which does not include the change-of-state feature, such as *hika* ‘hit’. Passivization is excluded with *hit* verbs which do not entail direct transfer of energy from the A to the O but which involve three semantic roles, two core participants and a Manipulator.

The *et/be-* alternation, for its part, is sensitive to both contact and motion, hence it is typically found with *hit* and *cut* verbs and their paradigmatic associates (Classes 1–6). The existence of links between verb
behavior and verb meaning is not language specific. Analogues of several of these alternations can be found across languages using verbs with the same semantics, as mentioned by Levin (1993) and others with regard to English, for instance. However, according to the construction grammar approach, it has to be recognized that what are taken to be the syntactically relevant aspects of verbal meaning are in fact aspects of constructional meaning. By entering a construction, the verbs inherits its schematic structure.

6. Lexical correlates of the ‘et/be- alternation

Given the impact of the construal choice on the reading of the verbal predicate, there is a relation between the transitivity alternation and verbal polysemy. The latter can be traced by means of various heuristics: one is translation, another is the possibility of obtaining a metaphorical interpretation.

The value of translation as heuristic device is, of course, limited to languages without an equally grammaticalized counterpart for the ‘et/be-alternation. Since English, e.g., lacks such a formal mechanism, it turns to different lexemes to express the conceptual difference. This is especially clear with the ‘virtual’ verbs (class B, cf. section 1): e.g. baxar ‘et ‘choose’ vs. baxar be- ‘select’, ‘elect’ and he’its ‘et ‘accelerate’, ‘speed up’ vs. he’its be- ‘urge’.

With ‘actual’ verbs (class A), both construals can convey a literal meaning, e.g. (63a), (64a), (65a). However, when the notion of contact gets metaphorized, the prepositional construal is largely preferred over the accusative one. In (62), e.g., kasas (lit. ‘bite nails’) receives a metaphorical reading:

(62) ‘axar kax siper ‘al ... metsuqat ha-bdidut ha-koseset
after that he-told about ... agony of-the-loneliness which-gnaws
{??’oto/bo} me’az hit’almen (Beer 1998: 150)
{??OM-him/in-him} since he-was-widowed
‘Then he told about... the agony of loneliness gnawing at him since he was widowed’

Metaphorization of the contact typically arises in the following configurations: a [+HUMAN] A with a [-CONCRETE] O, as in (63b) and (64b), or a [-CONCRETE] A with a [+CONCRETE] O, as in (62) and (65b). The presence of a [-CONCRETE] participant excludes the literal
interpretation, and renders the use of ‘et anomalous. The logico-semantic paradox (contact normally occurs between two concrete entities) can only be overcome by appealing to semantic glides that allow a richer background frame to come in, including elements of encyclopaedic knowledge. The required extensions naturally follow from the basic meaning structure of the be-construal, since it is inherently endowed with a broader scope and motivation than the ‘et-construal.

(63) a. *Dan xaxax ‘et/be-} yadav be-hana’a*  
Dan rubbed {OM/in-} his-hands in-pleasure  
‘Dan rubbed his hands with pleasure’

b. *Dan’ xaxax ‘et/be-} da’ato ‘im legabel ‘et ha-hatsa’a*  
Dan rubbed {OM/in-} his-mind if to-accept OM the-offer  
‘Dan hesitated regarding whether he should accept the offer’

(64) a. *David tamax ‘et/be-} ro’so šel ha-patsua*  
David supported {OM/in-} his-head of the-wounded  
‘David supported the wounded man’s head’

b. *hu’ tamax ‘et/be-} da’ato*  
he supported {OM/in-} his-opinion  
‘He supported his opinion’

(65) a. *ha’-orvim niqru ‘et/be-} ‘eyinav*  
the-ravens pecked/gouged {OM/in-} his-eyes  
‘The ravens gouged out his eyes’

b. *niqer ‘et/be-} moxo ra’ayon*  
pecked {OM/in-} his-mind idea  
‘An idea recurred in his brain’

Noteworthy is the fact that a similar complementary distribution can be found in Hebrew with regard to the possessive dative/genitive alternation; that is, often the possessive dative triggers a metaphorical reading (66a), while the genitive construal triggers only the literal meaning (66b):

(66) a. *hotseti li ‘et ha’-eynaim*  
I-took-out to-me OM the-eyes  
‘I strained my eyes’

b. *hotseti ‘et ha’-eynayim šeli*  
I-took-out OM the-eyes of-mine  
‘I took out my eyes’ (for instance, I took out the eyes I got to make a doll)
Indeed, constructions are typically associated with a family of closely related senses rather than a single, fixed sense. We have seen here that the meaning conveyed by the preposition be-, as part of the construction frame as a whole, yields a conceptualization that differs from the one conveyed by the prototypical accusative construction. This formal transitivity alternation, which is pervasive in Hebrew, enables the speaker to handle verbal polysemy and metaphorization. Languages lacking a parallel alternation normally have recourse to lexical devices. However, given the fact than no strict division between syntax and lexicon can be assumed, constructional polysemy is expected to be found in other languages as well, even when alternations are specific to only some languages.

7. Cross-language comparisons

In the following I shall point out a number of similarities between the transitivity alternation in Hebrew and some transitive diathesis alternations in German and, particularly, Spanish, as opposed to English.

7.1. A comparison with English and German

German is similar to Hebrew in the way it assigns participants to basic grammatical relations (i.e. subject, direct object, indirect object). With regard to the semantics of transitivity, German and Hebrew have remained fairly close to prototypical transitivity. This is in contrast with the considerable extension transitivity has undergone in English.21

A transitive clause in German requires for its nominative case subject an NP with fairly typical agent properties. Similarly, the accusative-case DO must be a fairly typical patient, while the verb must denote a fairly typical action (high transitivity requires a telic, dynamic, and punctual predicate).22 Hebrew is much closer to German than to English. Thus, while in English pure contact verbs fit the transitive construction, in Hebrew they are always encoded in the prepositional be- construction, e.g. hu’ naga’ bo ‘he touched him’.

In general, Hebrew and German, unlike English, do not permit instruments to function as subjects within a transitive construction, e.g. (67):
(67) a. English
   My guitar broke a string mid-song
b. German
   Mitten im Lied (zer)riss meine Gitarre eine Saite
   middle in-song toren my guitar a string
c. Hebrew
   be-’emtsa ha-šir ha-gitara seli qar’a meitar
   in-middle of-the-song the guitar mine tore string

Or, in Hebrew, the instrument may be expressed as subject in combination with another verbal lexeme which rejects the accusative construal: in (68), e.g., paga’ be- (a pure contact verb) is used instead of hika ’et/be- ‘hit’ (a contact through motion verb) which is confined in its most literal meaning to proto-agents (viz., human ones):

(68) a. The stick hit the vase
b. ha-maqel paga’ ba-’agartal (??hika ’et/be-)
   the-sick hit/touched in-the-vase

In both Hebrew and German, transitivity alternation, i.e. ’et/be- in Hebrew and ACC/DAT in German, is available only with proto-agents, as was illustrated at the outset of this paper by reference to example (2). Otherwise, unlike in English, the oblique case is used (i.e. the DAT construction in German and the be- construction in Hebrew), e.g. (69):

(69) a. Der Regen hat {??mich/mir} ins Gesicht geschlagen
   (from Draye 1996: 198)
   The rain AUX {??me/to-me} on-the face hit
   ‘The rain hit me in the face’
b. ha-gešem hika {??’oti/bi} ba-panim
   the-rain hit {??OM-me/ in-me} in-the-face
   ‘The rain hit me in the face’

Metaphorized readings also appear to require the presence of the preposition or the oblique case, e.g. (70):

(70) a. Die Fragen schnieten ins Herz
   The questions cut in-the heart
   ‘The acute questions engage the attention’
b. ha-še’elot menasrot be-xalal ha-’avir
   the-questions cut in-space(of) the-air
The historical expansion of the transitive category in English provides fertile ground for a conative alternation (by using the preposition *at*). This alternation is an intransitive variant of the accusative construction, which describes an attempted action without specifying whether the action was carried out, e.g. *Ruth struck at Adam*. The semantics of this construction can be represented roughly as ‘*X DIRECTS ACTION AT Y*’ – that is, *X* does not necessarily strike *Y*, but striking him is the intended result of the directed action. In Hebrew, German, and also in Spanish (see below), the prepositional or non-accusative alternation does not have a conative meaning. Rather, it serves to specify the carrying out of a transitive action, viz., by viewing the internal structure of the event and the realization of an effective contact between the core participants, e.g. (71a–c):

(71) a. *Der Bauer schniet das Holz* vs. *Der Bauer schniet ins Holz*
b. *ha’ikar xotex ‘et ha’ets* vs. *ha’ikar xotex ba-’ets*
c. *The farmer cut the wood* vs. *the farmer cut at the wood*
(conative alternation)

7.2. A comparison with Spanish

Modern Hebrew and Modern Spanish display an increasingly ‘dative orientation’ – or preference for the oblique case in general, as with the preposition *be-* in Hebrew – to signify affected participants.23 The diathesis alternation of ‘*et/be-* in Hebrew transitive verbs parallels, in many cases, the transitivity alternation of the bare accusative and what is called in Spanish grammar “the prepositional accusative”,24 e.g. (1a, b) above the Ø/a alternation in Spanish with the verbal predicate *matar* ‘kill’ and the corresponding alternation of ‘*et/be-* with *harag* ‘kill’ in Hebrew. Consider also the following (72a, b) – (75a, b):

(72) a. *El pueblo eligen {Ø/a} sus representantes*
   the people choose Ø/to} of-their representatives
   ‘The people choose/elect their representatives’
b. *ha’am boxer {‘et/be-} ha-neitsigim šelo*
   the-people choose {OM/in-} the-representatives of-his
   ‘The people choose/ elect their representatives’
(73) a. *El toro furioso corneó {Ø/a} toreros*  
the bull furious gored {Ø/to} bull-fighters  
‘the furious bull gored bull-fighters’  
b. *ha-šor ha-zo'em nagax {'et/be-} loxamey ha-švarim*  
the-bull the-furious gored {OM/in-} fighters (of) the-bulls  
‘the furious bull gored the bull-fighters’

(74) a. *Cyrano perforaba con su estoque {Ø/a} los nobles y plebeyos que burlaban su figura*  
Cyrano stabbed with his sword {Ø/to} the nobles and plebeians which laughed-at his shape  
‘Cyrano stabbed with his sword the nobles and plebeians which laughed at his shape’  
b. *Cyrano daqar be-xarbo {'et/be-} ha-'atsilim ve-ha-flebeyim še-la'agu le-mar'e panav*  
Cyrano stabbed with-his-sword {OM/in-} the-nobles and-the-plebeians which-laughed-at view of his shape  
‘Cyrano stabbed with his sword the nobles and the plebeians which laughed at his shape’

(75) a. *El campesino aserró {el/al} madero con facilidad*  
The farmer cut to the-wood with easiness  
‘The farmer cut the wood easily’  
b. *ha-'ikar niser {'et/be-} ha-'ets be-qalut*  
the-farmer cut {OM/in-} the-wood easily  
‘The farmer cut the wood easily’

Furthermore, Hebrew and Spanish are also similar in that the alternating construals often yield a similar kind of verbal polysemy (cf. Section 6), e.g. (76a, b):

(76) a. ‘kill’ – *matar* {Ø}: *harag 'et*  
‘slaughter’, ‘execute massive killing’ – *matar* a: *harag be-*

In Hebrew, this kind of verbal polysemy may also sometimes be related to the usage of different verb-forms of the same lexeme, e.g. (77a, b) and (78a, b):

(77) a. ‘remember’ – *recordar* {Ø}: *zaxar 'et*  
b. ‘recall, remind of’ – *recordar* a: *nizkar be-*

(78) a. ‘examine’, ‘study’ – *examinar* {Ø}: *baxan 'et*
b. ‘take a close look at’ – *examinar a hivxin be-

Yet, it should be noted that while in Spanish the transitivity alternation is part and parcel of grammar – for certain verbs, Spanish has indeed developed a double paradigm of transitivity – in Hebrew it is in many cases a matter of stylistic choice prevalent in formal language. We should therefore take care not to draw any definite and general conclusion from such a typological comparison, and avoid a trap many linguists fell into especially at the beginning of the 20th century.

The above adduced evidence, however, points to the existence of similar – if not the same – cognitive mechanisms underlying the choice between competing constructions in different kinds of languages. The semantic conditioning operates at clause level, thus yielding distinct clausal meanings, irrespective of the specific meaning structure of the verb.

8. Conclusion

The primary aim of this study has been to shed light on the phenomenon of transitivity alternation in Hebrew, which did not receive much attention in Hebrew linguistics. The novelty of the present study lies in treating this alternation as motivated. On the micro level, the alternation has been analyzed in association with semantic properties of the verb and of the event participants. Approaching the constructions as closed-class elements has proven particularly enlightening for the *hit* and *cut* verbs: the conceptualization of central meaning components, such as motion, causation, contact and change of state, have been shown to crucially hinge on the construal chosen (*’et vs. be-*).

On the macro level, as assumed in Construction Grammar, the construal alternation affects the abstract, schematic clausal meaning. On the one hand, the *be-* marked alternative is semasiologically motivated, since the conceptualization of the predication in terms of actual contact and bilateral relationship between the core participants is rooted in the locative-tangential meaning of the preposition. On this account, several metaphorical uses were exemplified and shown to license further extension of the *be-* construal. On the other hand, however, the two alternating construals do not generalize broadly. As shown above, they remain, instead, conventionally associated with particular, narrowly defined classes of verbs.

The following table summarizes the relevant properties of the core participants and the predicate, the kind of predicational relationship
expressed by each of the alternating construals, the corresponding situation types, and the different viewpoints on the transitive event, including the factuality dimension.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>’et Construction</th>
<th>be- Construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Categoriality of A</td>
<td>A agentive</td>
<td>A may be non-agentive, e.g. in metaphorical reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Individuation of O</td>
<td>Unmarked</td>
<td>Marked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O may refer to a generic or non-discrete entity</td>
<td>O is highly individuated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Involvement of O in the event</td>
<td>O occasional and passive patient</td>
<td>O non-arbitrary participant actively involved in the event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unilateral relationship between A and O</td>
<td>Bilateral relationship between A and O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Contact between A and O</td>
<td>Unmarked</td>
<td>Marked: intentional and intensive contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Affectedness of O</td>
<td>Unmarked (‘holistic effect’)</td>
<td>Marked (‘partitive effect’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O is part of the verbal predication, tends to indicate an ‘effected object’</td>
<td>O is an independent argument, existing from the beginning, i.e. an ‘affected object’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Character of V and the global predication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a. Situation type:</td>
<td>Indicating typical, accidental or generic situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Aktionsart and Viewpoint</td>
<td>Indicates individual and specific situation, non-accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prototypically telic, dynamic event; Action viewed externally, with no reference to its internal temporal structure (i.e. perfectly) ‘Holistic view’</td>
<td>Atelic, progressive process viewed imperfectively ‘Partitive-local view’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table continued

| c. Factuality | May depict something projected or hypothetical | Tends to be restricted to actual and individual events, i.e. activities of truth value at moment t of speech. |

Obviously, not all languages, even closely related languages, have the same inventory of verbs nor the same transitivity alternations. Yet, the similarity between unrelated languages such as Hebrew and Spanish, and to a certain extent German, may provide evidence of common conventional conceptualizations of language and common cognitive processes that are not language specific.

Notes

1. I am greatly indebted to Nicole Delbecque for her comments on earlier versions of this paper and for her willingness to read the manuscript and point out some stylistic problems.

2. The canonic dative or ‘indirect object’ (IO) in Hebrew bears a Recipient relation to the event, and occurs with verbs meaning ‘give’, ‘show’, ‘tell’, and so on, where some entity is volitionally transferred by an agent to a recipient. The Recipient argument must take the case-marker le- meaning ‘to’ or ‘for’, while other IO’s, with non-Recipient semantic content, may be marked either by le- or by other prepositions such as be- (‘in’/’at’/’with’).

3. It was M. Bréal in his Essai de sémantique (1924: 26) who first introduced this principle, which he called ‘loi de distribution’.


5. Hebrew verbs throughout this essay are given in 3rd-masc-sg. past-tense form, as is traditional in discussions of Semitic grammars. The transliteration used throughout is intended as surface reflection of spoken Modern Hebrew. No phonological claim is intended.

6. By ‘qualifying’ verbs we mean verbs which can pass into adjectives to form the alternative construction with an inner object of the verb-form as a predicational complex (which may be defined, according to the theory developed by Goldenberg 1998, as Person + Nexus + Attribute/Inner Object), e.g. qitser bi-dvarav (lit. ‘shortened his words’): diber dvarim qtsarim (lit. ‘spoke in short words’). This fits the general distinction which some make in Russian grammar between ‘qualitative’ adverbs and ‘circumstantial’, e.g. Akhmanova-Mikael’ian (mentioned by Goldenberg 1998: 186).
7. The ‘aspectual’ verbs to be discussed function as indicators of the Aktsionsart of the ‘main’ verb. Although they usually modify a predicative nominal complement in an infinitival or gerundive form, they are not true auxiliaries.

8. Contextual clues often contribute to enhance the meaning imposed by the prepositional construction frame, e.g., bexavana (‘deliberately’) in (25) below.

9. Cf. Havers (1931: 168): “Die nomina ingressiven Sinnes können zu Durativa ‘gestreckt’ werden. Der Vorgang besteht nach Brugmann darin, ‘daß der eigentliche Wortsinn nur auf einen Beginn, ein erstes Stadium geht, während in mehr oder minder bestimmter Weise das mit vorgestellt und gemeint ist, was auf den Anfang folgt’ (S. 28)”. For more bibliographical references on this phenomenon in Indo-European languages, see Havers (1931: 259 n. 148).

10. This is similar to Spanish, as demonstrated, amongst others, by Delbecque (1999a, 1999b, 2002).

11. See also Roegiest (this volume).


13. In Modern Hebrew, the coreferential dative does not necessarily yield a reflexive interpretation. Here it reflects the typical expanded use of the expressive dative (viz., which is not part of the verb valency) added in colloquial speech to verbs of movement viewed imperfectively as being performed in a casual manner (cf. Halevy in print).

14. For a discussion of the ‘holistic effect’ vs. ‘partitive effect’ associated with certain verb classes, see Levin (1993).


18. Cf. Levin 1993:9 and 42) for the relevance of the notions of both ‘contact’ and ‘motion’ to conative alternation in English.

19. For syntactic properties of verbs of contact by motion in English see Levin (1993: 6–7).

20. Passive meaning is realized in Hebrew in the morphological system of the verb, e.g. in the verb-form of NIF’AL. Yet, passive forms, such as NIF’AL, may as well be employed to express other meanings besides passive, such as inchoative and middle-passive as demonstrated in (56)–(57) (cf. 5.2.3).


22. For ample documentation of transitivity in German vs. English, see for example Hawkins (1986: Ch. 4).

23. For a discussion of the expansion of the dative le-marking the affectee role in Modern Hebrew see Berman (1982).

24. For an extensive study of the dative and its roles in Spanish vs. English and some other European languages, see Delbecque and Lamiroy (1996), and Lamiroy and Delbecque (1998).
25. The phoneme [K] is performed in Hebrew by the allophones /k/, /x/, e.g. zaxar/ nizkar; [B] is performed by the allophones /b/, /v/, respectively, e.g. baxan/ hivxin.

26. Cf. Polotsky, a distinguished scholar of Hamito-Semitic languages, in his article (1960: 121) on the similarity between syntactic mechanisms found in Amharic and Turkish: “Dans la mesure où une comparaison typologique de l’amharique avec le turc offre un intérêt réel, elle ne le fait que par rapport à des questions de détail, où elle peut servir à mettre en relief les caractères propres de chacune des deux langues. Si l’on me demande, dans une formule qui était chère à Meillet, si la comparaison donne des résultats généraux concrets et précis, je dois répondre que non.”

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