Teaching meter in Bialik’s poetry to students of Hebrew as a foreign language

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Although most Modern Hebrew poets, particularly the younger Israeli ones, no longer see themselves bound by the metrical constraints which their more traditional predecessors imposed upon their poems, it is nevertheless important to devote special attention to the teaching of meter in Hebrew poetry whenever relevant. I am primarily thinking of tonic, stress-determined meter rather than of syllabic rhythm.

The opposition between stressed and unstressed syllables is a common phenomenon, and fixed repetition of this contrast in the form of rhythmic alternation is a natural phenomenon in the colloquial registers of a number of languages. In Modern Hebrew, as well as in Polish and in other languages, there exists almost automatic alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables, where the main stress constitutes the base-, and in most cases every other syllable before it receives secondary stress (/ = primary stress, \ = secondary stress; $S = shin$, $\aleph = aleph$, $\vain = ayin)$:

(1) u kam beSeva hitlabes verac laavoda > he got up at seven got dressed and ran to work

u kam beSeva hitlabes verac laavoda

Occasionally, as will be shown below, two unstressed syllables are squeezed between two stressed ones. The existence of two consecutive unstressed syllables in regular lexical items (or in grammatical words of more than two syllables) generally results from the nonrealization of secondary stress when a penultimately stressed word is followed by a bisyllabic word with final stress, as in döar avir below:

(2) u Salax et amixtav bedoar avir

he sent acc. the letter in mail air

‘He sent the letter by air (mail)’

or when the secondary stress would have 'clashed' (see Bolozky 1982) with the main stress of the previous word, as in katvu xamiSá or xamiSá mixtavim below:

(3) em katvu xamiSá mixtavim > em katvu xamiSá mixtavim

they wrote five letters

Linguistically, the consequence of stress clash can be described in two ways: (a) secondary stress is assigned to every other syllable to the left of the main stress, then a secondary stress that clashes with
a primary stress is removed, or (b) secondary stress is assigned as described above, except where it would clash with the main stress of the preceding word. The question becomes more complex when dealing with grammatical words of one or two syllables, whose accentuation (at least in informal speech) is variable or nonexistent, depending on the general rhythm. They may be argued to be lexically stressed, marked as having lower degree of stress than the main stress in full lexical items, and equal to that of regular secondary stress. Then, in case of stress clash, monosyllabic grammatical words are subject to destressing (as in az below), whereas bisyllabic ones undergo shift (as in ata and lanu below):

\[
(4) \quad \text{az ata ba laseret? em amru lanu}
\]
so you come to the movie? they told to us

\[
\text{Sekeday lirot oto} >
\]
that worthwhile to see it

'So are you coming to the movie? They told us that it is worth seeing'

\[
az ata ba laseret? em amru lanu Sekeday lirot oto
\]

Another option is to regard monosyllabic or bisyllabic grammatical words as stressless to start with, and have their lower stress, if any, assigned by the mechanical secondary stress distribution process (after the main stresses in lexical items have been determined), provided that no clash occurs. In Biblical Hebrew, stress retraction as a result of stress clash (nasóg ?ahór) occurred even in lexical items, as in Gen 1:5:

\[
(5) \quad \text{velahoSex qara layla} > \text{velahoSex qara layla}
\]
and (to) the dark he called night

But Modern Hebrew does allow adjacent main stresses across lexical items, as in vedaras kélev below:

\[
(6) \quad \text{u naag bemeirut mufrezet vedaras kélev}
\]
he drove in speed excessive and ran over a dog

In other words, in Modern Hebrew stress shift is practically restricted to bisyllabic grammatical words. Linguistically, then, it would probably make more sense to assume that monosyllabic and bisyllabic grammatical words are not stressed lexically, and that mechanical secondary stress should apply to both lexical items and grammatical words (up to two syllables) after main stress has been determined provided that no stress clash occurs. The advantage of this approach is in dispensing with the need to apply and immediately remove mechanical secondary stress in numerous occurrences, and in not requiring a special stress retraction rule for grammatical words. One simple mechanical process accounts both for secondary stress in lexical items and for the behavior of monosyllabic and bisyllabic grammatical words. Here are another two illustrations:
(7) 'istalaknu mukdam min amesiba Sel aviva. ayu
we split early from the party of Aviva there were

Sam milyone anaSim 'istalaknu mukdam min amesiba Sel
there millions people

(8) em racu iti yaxad began aacmaut
they ran with me together in garden the independence

They jogged together with me in Independence Park'

Regular rhythmic alternation is also characteristic of counting sequences or memorized numeral sequences, as well as children's rhymes, rhythmic chants of by groups of the él él israël type (see Gil 1986), etc.

Since rhythm is a natural, common phenomenon, it would make sense to dwell on it whenever relevant in the teaching of poetry at the more advanced levels of foreign language instruction. The naturalness of the meter should be utilized as an attractive, interesting component of the target culture, as well as a mnemonic device.

Bialik attributed great importance to meter, so that in addition to the didactic advantage of introducing his various rhythms, meter is also inherently central to the understanding of his poetry even for native speakers of the language. According to Benshalom (1974), Bialik's tonic meters are, from the commonest to the least frequent:

(9)
- amphibrach: v --v
- iamb: v --
- anapest: v v--
- trochee: --v
- dactyl: --v v
Without going into the question of how accurate the classification is — particularly since regarding
the first syllable as extrametrical, for instance, could change amphibrachic meter into dactylic and iambic
meter into trochaic, and consequently upset the above hierarchy — one thing is clear: in his mizmorim
ufizmonot ('folk and popular songs'), Bialik's preference is for trochaic alternation, due to its simple
rhythm, and perhaps also owing to its being the unmarked meter. According to Gil (1986), there is
a universal preference for iambic rhythm in poetry, whereas in songs the preferred rhythm is trochaic.
Bialik's mizmorim ufcizmonot are closer to songs than to formal poetry, which accounts for their
predominantly trochaic meter. In this respect they are closer, for instance, to children's popular songs
such as:

\[ (10) \] mimromim pcaca yoredet...
from the sky bomb comes down

Trochaic rhythm is also found in other popular structures. As shown in Bolozky and Haydar (1986),
preference for the unsuffixed numeral set in colloquial Hebrew and for the suffixed one in the dialects
of Arabic (e.g. Lebanese Arabic below) originates, at least in part, from numeral paradigms in trochaic
rhythm as chanted and acquired for the first time by children:

\[ (11) \] (a)xat_staym SaloS arba xameS_SeS_SeS Smone teSa eser

\[ (12) \] wahed tneytn_tlete ?arb’a xamse sitte sab’a tmeni tis’a ‘aSra

Had the situation been reversed, the chanted sequences would not have flowed as naturally (a partial
anapest (?) in Hebrew and staccato in Lebanese Arabic):

\[ (13) \] exad Snaim SloSa arbaa xamiSa SiSa Siva Smona tiSa asara

\[ (14) \] ...tlêt ?arb’ xams sitt sab’ tmên tis’ ‘aSr

Trochaic meter is also common in Israeli children’s rhythmic counting for 'random selection' purposes:

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1 Benjamin Harshav agrees (personal communication) that the trochaic meter may very well be the unmarked
one in folk songs, but explains that this was not the direct historical reason for its being chosen for Bialik's
poems in this genre. Bialik simply followed a long tradition of trochaic rhythms in Russian folk poetry, and so
did other Israeli poets of Russian descent when they wrote children's poems in Hebrew. It can not be
attributed to the influence of Yiddish; trochaic rhythms are not characteristic of Yiddish folk songs.
The same applies to the English equivalent of the latter:

\( \text{ini mini mayni mo...} \)

as well as to the rhythmic chants referred to above\(^2\), like:

\( \text{aSofet abayta 'referee go home!'} \)

\( \text{the referee home} \)

I would argue, then, that when teaching Bialik's meters, one should start with his *mizmorim ujizmonot* not only because of their structural simplicity, but primarily because in being typically trochaic, their meter conforms to the expected, the natural and the unmarked in Hebrew popular rhythm. Metrical analysis of the *mizmorim ujizmonot* will also help the instructor overcome the special problem associated with the teaching of Bialik's meters. As is well known, Bialik adhered to the Ashkenazi stress in almost all of his poems, as well as in his own speech, and was very worried about the consequences of the inconsistency between the rapidly expanding Sephardi stress (which even he considered to be the "correct" one...), primarily in child speech. The simple trochaic rhythm of the folk poems will facilitate introduction to the Ashkenazi stress intended by the poet, and alert students to the general need for production of Ashkenazi stress for appropriate representation of some other Hebrew poets' meters.

Since Bialik wrote only three poems in Sephardi accent, two of which are *pizmonim*\(^3\), it would be advisable to start with those. One can begin with "Sir ha'avoda veham(e)laxa" 'The Song of Work and Toil,' whose meter is iambic, and continue with "Hamexonit" 'The Car,' whose meter is trochaic. The students should be instructed to mark (a) the syllable carrying the main stress in each lexical item, and (b) secondary stress that does not cause stress clash, in lexical items as well as in monosyllabic and bisyllabic grammatical words -- while bearing in mind that a *xataf* vowel after *aleph* or *'ayin* or some other consonant of low sonority may be "skipped over."\(^4\) This way they can begin to construct an initial

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2 In fact, Gil (1986) talks of two types of such chants, iambic and trochaic, but his discussion deals with more global aspects, beyond the simple mechanical alterations discussed here. He shows, for instance, that the relationship between the two hemistiches in *él, él Israël* and *lô, lô nîtên et hapoel lézayén* is a 'weak-strong' relationship (in a few respects -- number of syllables, etc.), and therefore will be defined as iambic, whereas *mi ziyen et apoel -- oded velavi* the first hemistich is stronger and, consequently, the structure is regarded as trochaic. In any case, at the level of sequential mechanical alternations, all three chants above may be regarded as trochaic.

3 The third is a poem for a special occasion (the 25th anniversary of Tel Aviv), "al SileSim." It is not included in the official collection of Bialik's poems.

4 because of the absence of sufficient contrast with the adjacent consonant. An open syllable with insufficient sonority contrast between consonant and vowel is relatively unstable.
hypothesis about the meter. Thus, for instance, in the first line of "Sir ha’avoda vehamelaxa" one should first mark the main stresses of lexical items (as noted above, not in grammatical words -- unless they contain more than two syllables):

(19) mi yacilenu mera’av 'Who can save us hunger’s dread?'
who will save us from hunger

and then the secondary ones:

(20) mi yacilenu mera’av
who will save us from hunger

At this point one may have already hypothesized that the meter is iambic. This is confirmed by the second line, if the aleph with xataf is glossed over:

(21) mi yaxilenu lexem rav (lexically ya?axilenu)
who will feed (to) us bread much
'Who always gives us ample bread?'

The students should then be shown that after the meter has been established, some deviations from expected pronunciation might be required, in any lexical as well as grammatical word, when a stress clash could occur. In such cases the poet uses the Biblical Hebrew device of stress retraction, as in:

(22) mi hexin lanu pinat gag 'Who made our house
who prepared for us corner of roof
a cozy nest?'

In this case, the retraction from pinát with final lexical stress is unavoidable, owing to clash with gág. lanu, a grammatical word, is assigned penultimate stress on the first syllable so as to avoid clash with pinat, where stress has been retracted, and lexical final stress in hexín is retracted because of clash with lanu... Note that this is one case where meter does not conform to what happens in Modern Hebrew speech, where a lexical item like hexín does not undergo stress retraction under any circumstance. Such deviations, at any rate, are not that numerous. A similar procedure should apply to "Hamexonit". After the trochaic meter has been established:

(23) kol me’emek kol mehar
sound from valley sound from mountain

and it was explained that either the line may end with a "mute" syllable to complete the pattern -- or, alternatively, that the final existing syllable is extrametrical -- one can concentrate on the unavoidable deviations, all of whom can be attributed to stress retraction:
Stress retraction has immediate methodological implication to the question raised above: Should we (a) assign stress regularly anywhere, including secondary stress, and then destress or retract in case of stress clash, or (b) not stress monosyllabic or bisyllabic grammatical words lexically, and assign automatic secondary stress anywhere, except where a stress clash would be formed. It was argued above that in Modern Hebrew, where no stress retraction ever takes place in lexical items, there is some advantage to the second approach, but for the purpose of describing meter in poetry such as Bialik’s a stress retraction process is unavoidable. A possible middle way is to combine elements from both approaches here: each word, including grammatical words, will have main lexical stress (lower for grammatical words, though), and stress clash will be prevented by stress retraction. In the resulting setup, secondary stress will be added as required (and allowed) by the rhythm. In this combination, stress will be moved, but not removed (sequences like lemi ?even tova below indeed require removal of the main stress, but it seems to be a marginal phenomenon).

As an aside, one could draw students’ attention to the common use in these two poems of penultimate stress that is legitimate in Sephardi pronunciation as well — perhaps because even at this late stage, the poet still could not free himself from the basic penultimate accent of his writing. Thus, we find penultimate stress in yacilénu 'will save us,' yitén (with a seghol) 'will give,' yá'al 'come up,' etc. in "Sir ha'avoda vehamelaxa," 'émek 'valley,' yaria' 'blare,' poléax 'pierce,' rodéfet 'chase (fem.),' galgiléah 'her wheels,' náxal 'river,' túsa 'fly!,’ yéga' 'toil, exertion,' hizahéru 'watch!,' graméah 'its bones,' etc. in "Hamexonit."

The next step is to present the Ashkenazi accent to the student as (essentially) penultimate, and explain that a clitic such as ha 'the,' ba 'in the,' la 'to the' does not attract stress to itself before a monosyllabic word, as seen in bayom below:
To get the students used to the Ashkenazi accent, I would introduce simple trochaic poems as illustrations: "Ló bayó m veló baláylá"5 'Neither by Day Nor by Night,' "Beyn n(e)har prát un(e)hár xidékel"6 'Twixt Tigris and Euphrates,' "Mí yó d'é 'ír liStína" 'Say, Who Knows the Town of LiStin.' All three have had melodies composed for them that are quite simple to learn, and can be quite useful in facilitating the learning process. It is interesting, incidentally, that although in the first two, the melody (in the Israeli version) generally preserves the Ashkenazi accent, in "Beyn nhar prát unhár xidékel" some final stress beats occur -- especially at the end of the line, where the penultimate vowel is reduplicated in singing, resulting in both the penultimate and the ultima being stressed: xidéekél 'Euphrates,' 'áfá?ááv 'it branches' in the first stanza, etc. The Israeli melody also causes deviation from the expected realization of lamelaxá in la'ávodá velám(e)laxá 'to work and toil' in "Sir ha'avoda vehamelexa": The vowel e is maintained, although metrical reading requires that it be deleted. So one should not rely too heavily on Israeli attempts to be "true to the original" insofar as stress is concerned. The only poem of the three whose melody has not passes through the Israeli sieve is "Mí yó d'é 'ír liStína." LiStin, the alterant of liStína, is realized with final stress in 'ír liStín ani yó d'éa' 'I know the town of Lishtin' to avoid clash with the stress of 'ír; in the refrain it is caused to end up with a sort of penultimate stress: the final vowel, i, is reduplicated, and stress falls on the first occurrence: liStín...7

Bright students will notice that the realization of schwas and xatafim within the meter is more complex than it initially appears to be. We saw that ya?áxilénu above is realized as váxilénu for metrical purposes; on the other hand, the same xataf is considered a separate syllable in la'ávódá 'to (the) labor' in "Sir ha'avoda vehamelexa." In fact, the xataf in la'ávódá is even assigned (secondary) stress. The only safe generalization concerning schwa and xataf is that they will never be assigned primary stress. Beyond that, everything depends on position within the metrical sequence. To conform to the trochaic meter, the lexical schwa of lemuddt (owing to sonority considerations) is deleted in lmUdat pegá' in "Hamexonit," and the same happens to the schwa in temaléït 'will cause to escape' in hi tivlóm vehi tmaléït 'she will brake and cause to escape.' The xataf a in xatór is not realized in xtór vaSút 'break forth and cruise,' so that the trochaic alternation can be maintained; the schwa in rexáv in trútútú -- rexáv ucláx 'TootTootToot -- ride and good luck!' is preserved for the same reason. To maintain the trochaic rhythm, the xataf of xarúzeï is glossed over in xrúzeï pñínim ?im?algúnim 'pearl beads or corals?' in "Ló bayó m veló baláylá;" a similar consideration dictates the reading of ve'tód in v'tód tagídi ló mitáí 'and also tell him: my bed' without a schwa, perhaps even without 'ayin, in "Beyn nhar prát unhár xidékel."

5 From this point in the presentation, no distinction will be made between primary and secondary stress. While the difference is essential for spoken language, and useful for instructional purposes in poetry (facilitating unaided discovery of the meter by the student), it is of lesser importance once the general metrical pattern has been established.
6 Only Ashkenazi stress will be observed. Other Ashkenazi features, like kamac=[o] and postvocalic t=[s], will be ignored.
7 I learned this melody from my late father, Eliyahu Bolozky, to whom I am grateful for other useful comments on the interpretation of Bialik's meters. I have not heard any Israeli musical rendition of this poem.
Additional *mizmorim ujizmonot* with trochaic meter that could be taught: "YeS li gán" 'My Garden,' "Tírza yáfa" 'The Beautiful Acacia,' "Mínhag xádaS" 'A New Fashion,' "Plóni yeS lo" 'One Has,' "áxat, Stáyim" 'One, Two,' "Távás z(e)hávi" 'My Golden Peacock,' "Tómar ?ehye ráv" 'Should I Be a Rabbi.'

*Mizmorim ujizmonot* in amphibrachic rhythm: "Lam(e)naceax 'al ham(e)xólot" 'The Dance Master' (lo básar lo dágá lo xála lo láxem... The refrain, múpim vexúpim, is dactylic), "Hi yóSva laxálon" 'She is Sitting at the Window,' "Me?axorey haSá'ar" 'Behind the Gate' (bat yónim homóya bat yónim behára...), "Lo yáda' ?iS mi hi" 'No One Knew Who She Was,' "Cil cíl" 'Ding Dong' (cil cíl hi ?enéna cil cíl hi yacá?a...), "Lemí ?even Tóva" 'One Has a Gem' (lemí ?even tóva ulmi hamargálit...). The latter, incidentally, indicates that it may occasionally not be possible to totally avoid destressing: ?éven is stressed penultimately in the lexicon, but the amphibrachic rhythm requires destressing -- not retraction, but complete removal.

An amphibrachic/dactylic *mizmor* is "Sábat hamálka" 'Queen Sabbath' (haxáma meróS ha?ilánot nístálka...).

If the students show interest in additional work on meter in more "serious" poems, one may discuss prominent illustrations from the rest of Bialik’s poetry, as in:

**Amphibrachic:** "Zariti larúax ?anxáti" 'I Scattered my Sighs,' "Koxávim mecécim vexávim" 'The Stars are Lit,' "Zóhar" 'Glow' (be'écem yaldáti yexádi hucágti), "Siráti" 'My Song' (hatéda' me?áyin naxálti ?et Síri...), "Lo tímáx" 'Will Not be Wiped' (lo tímáx bimhéra dim’áti hakvéda...), "Cafrírim" 'Imps of the Sun' or 'Morning Spirits' (hanSikat pi ?imi ?im cífçuf hádéro...), "Lamitnadvim ba’ám' 'to the Valiant ones' (lívSu na... bim’árot hacúrim xoróSim mecélim...)'al levávxem SeSámem' 'On Your Desolate Heart' (bexúrvat levávxem hamzúza nifsála...).

**Trochaic:** "Háxnisini táxat knáfax" 'Take me Under your Wing,' "Míxtav kátan lí katáva' 'Just a Little Note she Wrote me,' "miStrey haxóref' 'From Winter Songs' (cínat bóker críxat órev...), "'eynéah' 'her eyes' (báríSóna Sím baxóreS xéreS ré?ittah...), "bitSuváti" (Sáv lefánay záken bálé...).

**Iambic:** "Xóze lex brax" 'Go Flee, Oh Prophet' (lex brax – lo yívrx ?IS kamóni...), "BeSél tápxáx" 'The Apple's Fault' (hatóvu dá'at b(e)Sélma (?)ahávit ?ání ?ahávit b(e)Sél tápxáx...), "Ba’áróv hayóm' 'Twilight' (beyn ‘ávey ?éS ve’ávey dám...).

**Anapest:** "'im dimdúmyey haxáma" 'Sunset' ('im dimdúmyey haxáma (?)í haxálon na góSi...), "Lo zaxiti ba?ór min hahéfker,' 'MiSórmrim labóker' 'Observing the Dawn' (haSamártá labóker vatére bidróx...).

**Dactylic:** "Cánax lo zálzal" 'A Long Bough' (cánax lo zálzal 'al gáder vayánom ko yáSen ?anóxi), "Besora-II' 'Tidings' (hókxim vezákim he’ávim).

REFERENCES

An Investigation of Biblical Language Study from 1986 - 1991 at Ashland Theological Seminary

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Introduction

Educational sensitivity positively affects a Biblical language classroom. One information gathering resource to help in the improvement of educational sensitivity are the institution's alumni. Graduates are able to provide unique insight into the areas of curriculum, instruction, and overall contributions of a program. The information generated from alumni can contribute to improving the educational environment.

The Biblical studies department at Ashland Theological Seminary recognized the importance of information generated by its alumni. In the fall of 1991 the faculty developed a questionnaire geared specifically to glean information from graduates who had completed Biblical language study. The purpose of the study was two fold. First, the faculty hoped to provide a preliminary evaluation of its Biblical language program in order to prepare for an upcoming review by the Association of Theological Schools. Secondly, (although not presented in this study) they hoped to gain information to reinforce the need for a summer Hebrew intensive.

The research methodology for this study consisted of a cross-sectional survey design involving the collection of data at one point in time, from a random sampling representing a given population. The population was Ashland Theological Seminary graduates who had completed the study of Greek and/or Hebrew during the academic years 1986 to 1990. A sampling of 47 graduates was selected randomly from academic records. A one page survey was mailed to the sample with a stamped return envelope enclosed. The response was 29, or 61%. This number is adequate considering the population and the type of research.

The survey was designed to investigate six variables within the study of Greek and Hebrew: (1) languages (Greek and Hebrew), (2) academic year of study (1986-1991), (3) tutorial usage (yes or no),