Colloquial Hebrew imperatives revisited

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Abstract

In revisiting Bolozky’s [Bolozky, Shmuel, 1979. On the new imperative in colloquial Hebrew. Hebrew Annual Review 3, 17–24] and Bat-El’s [Bat-El, Outi, 2002. True truncation in colloquial Hebrew imperatives. Language 78(4), 651–683] analyses of colloquial Hebrew imperatives, the article argues for restricting Imperative Truncation to the morphologically-triggered process of #tV prefix elision (or even to just #t prefixes). Elision of e and i in imperatives is claimed to be effected by the general, phonetically-motivated elision of the same vowels in casual speech. The prominence and sonority of the vowel a protects it from elision in imperatives, and short forms like kum ‘get up!’ are not derived from their takum counterparts, but rather borrowed from the normative register.

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1. Introduction

Normative Modern Hebrew maintains the Classical Hebrew distinction between the Imperfect (or Prefix) conjugation – which now functions as the Future conjugation – and the Imperative. In the colloquial register, however, the second person of the Prefix (or Future) conjugation often has an imperative function. Thus, a sequence like titragel laze1 ‘(You will) get used to it’ can refer to the future in:

(1) tox šana titragel laze ‘In a year’s time you’ll get used to it’

but it can also function in commands:

(2) titragel laze ‘get used to it!’

In addition to the register difference, the use of titragel as an imperative moderates the urgency of the command, making it sound “more polite.” In normative Hebrew, only the Imperative form hitragel would be used for commands.

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1 Stress is word-final, unless marked otherwise.
In many instances, however, the colloquial register seems to allow use of both the Prefix-conjugation-as-Imperative form and its normative Imperative counterpart. Thus, for instance, *tedaber bešêket* ‘(you will) speak quietly’ can refer to the future in:

3. *yavînu otxa yoter tov im tedaber bešêket* ‘They’ll understand you better if you (will) speak softly’ or convey a command in:

4. *tedaber bešêket* ‘speak softly!*

But at the same time, *daber bešêket* ‘speak softly!’, using what appears to be the normative Imperative form *daber*, is also commonly found in the colloquial, alongside *tedaber*.

A closer look suggests that although *daber*, the colloquial alternant of *tedaber*, is identical to the normative Imperative *daber*, it does not constitute a “revival” of the latter; rather, it is a form derived from its Prefix conjugation counterpart used imperatively, with the prefix, or part of it, “chopped off”: *tedaber > daber*. In passing, Bar-Adon (1966) notes that one way of creating formal imperatives in contemporary Hebrew is “to separate the prefix from the stem”, as in *kanes* (<*tikanes* ‘enter!’), or *stalek* (<*tistalek* ‘be gone!’). Bolozky (1979) develops a full analysis of such forms, and argues that deriving the ‘new Imperative’ from the prefix conjugation is intended to increase ‘imperative force’.

This type of truncation operates on *e* and *i*, applying either to the vowel in the *#tV* sequence of the Prefix conjugation, or to the whole *#tV* string, and depends on style and degree of casualness. In speech prevalent in the 1970s, on which Bolozky’s (1979) analysis was based, it was almost always the case that when the vowel alone was elided, the process was blocked if an initial three-consonant cluster would have been formed in the process:

--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
(a) | tftax | open! | *tftax ~ ftax | tftexi | *tftexi ~ tftexi
| tmrax | smear! | *tmrax ~ m(e)rax | tmrxexi | *tmrxexi ~ tmrxexi
(b) | tikanes | come in! | *tkanes ~ kanes | tikansi | *tkanesi ~ kansi
| tizaher | watch out! | dz(h)er ~ za(h)er | tizaheri | dz(h)eri ~ za(h)eri
(c) | texabs | launder! | txabes ~ xabes | texabsi | txabesi ~ xabei
| tesˇalem | pay! | tsˇalemičalem ~ šalem | tesˇalmi | tsˇalmičalmi ~ šalmi
(d) | ttlabesˇ | get dressed! | *ttlabesˇ ~ tblabesˇ | ttlabashi | *ttlabesi ~ tblabsi
| ttctalemi | get photographed! | *ttctalemi ~ ctalem | ttctalmi | ?ttctalmi ~ ctalmi

Currently, these constraints are not always enforced; in casual speech, one may sometimes hear *tftax/tftexi, tmrax/tmrxexi* (where *m* is usually syllabic; *mrxexi* with non-syllabic *m* may also occur), as well as *ttlabesˇ = [t:labesˇ]* and *ttctalemi = [t:ctalem]*.3

In the 1970s as well as currently, the blocking of vowel elision (to prevent the formation of a three-consonant cluster) is always removed if the segment following the prefix *t* is a sibilant fricative, since the sibilant merges with that *t* into an affricate, resulting in the formation of a shorter cluster (see Bolozky, 1980):

6. Form | Gloss | Alternants
--- | --- | ---
| tsgor | close! | tsgor > cgor ~ sgor
| tištok | shut up! | tištok > čtok ~ tok
| tistakel | look! | tistakel > ctačel ~ stakel

In her extensive discussion of the same phenomenon, Bat-El (2002) names these forms “‘truncated imperatives’”. She provides a detailed Optimality Theory analysis, which accounts for full prefix truncation as well as for elision of only the prefix-vowel, and also captures the environments in which truncation is blocked.

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1 Bar-Adon (1966) introduces new jussive and imperative formations in colloquial Hebrew – where *še* + Prefix-conjugation forms function as jussives, and as imperatives when *še*- is reduced to *še*, as in *š(e)taxo maher* ‘come quickly!’, *šeyelek kvar* ‘let him go already!’, *še’amut* ‘may I die!’ (desiderative sense). The reference to forms like *kanes* and *stalek* is incidental.

2 Forms whose source is not specifically noted were found in various recordings by Shmuel Bolozky.

3
In revisiting the imperative truncation phenomenon, I will argue that of the two options of imperative truncation, the elision of the vowel-only and “chopping off” the whole #TV sequence, are different in nature. The former is essentially the same as the general, phonetically-motivated deletion of i and e in casual speech, and the latter is the “heart” of imperative truncation, whose function it is to make the command more immediate and stronger, and is (morphologically) limited to Prefix-conjugation-cum-imperative forms. It will also be claimed below that frequency of use plays a role in accounting for the distribution of imperatives in colloquial Hebrew.

2. Elision of e and i in casual speech

In casual/fast speech, speakers may weaken almost any unstressed vowel in very common, easily recoverable clitics and function words, given the right prosodic configuration:

(7) *hu kaná et aóto bezól ‘He bought the car cheap’ > u kana taóto bezól

but full deletion in lexical morphemes, as in:

(8) *nexon ‘correct’ > naxon áf exad lo... ‘nobody’ > áf saxadlo

In the most casual and/or fast registers, frequent lexical items may undergo similar weakening, as in (illustrations from Izre’el (2002)):

(9) *maá atá xošúv al zé ‘What do you think of it?’ > máta xšév al zé

is rare. This should not be understood, however, as implying that casual vowel deletion is a marginal phenomenon. Bolozky (1977, 1999) and Bolozky and Schwarzwald (1990) show that the quality of the vowel determines the likelihood of fast/casual vowel weakening taking place, and that the process applies quite frequently to e and i. Weakening (often manifest in complete deletion) is most likely to affect the vowel e. In Israeli Hebrew e constitutes a merger of three historical entities: two Classical Hebrew phonemes and the shva allophone: /e/, /æ/ and [ə]. In Classical Hebrew, the shva, which is probably the commonest source for Israeli Hebrew e, was inserted to prevent impermissible initial or medial clusters (or resulted from reduction that “did not go all the way” in order to prevent such clusters from being formed), and many occurrences of e from /æ/ originated from an epenthetic vowel whose original function was to split an impermissible final cluster.

The loss in Israeli Hebrew of many constraints on initial, medial and final clusters, and additionally, since there; the shva allophone: /e/, /æ/ and [ə]. In Classical Hebrew, the shva, which is probably the commonest source for Israeli Hebrew e, was inserted to prevent impermissible initial or medial clusters (or resulted from reduction that “did not go all the way” in order to prevent such clusters from being formed), and many occurrences of e from /æ/ originated from an epenthetic vowel whose original function was to split an impermissible final cluster.
(10) hu ló medáber ivrit ‘He does not speak Hebrew’ > ul omdáber ivrit
hi téláméd oto anglít ‘She’ll teach him English’ > i tlamédoto anglít ~ i tlamértó anglít
matáy hu yéxábes kvar et aimixnásim ‘When will he finally launder his pants?’ > matáy uy yxábes kvar tamixnásim
hi séméret aláv ‘She’s protecting him’ > i sémért aláv
raita kvar et haséret hazé ‘Have you already seen this movie?’ > raita kvar tasért azé
štéléx kvar ‘(I wish) she left already!’ > štélék kvar
lédáber hu yodéa ‘In talking he is very good’ > ldáber uy(ʊ)déa tóv mód

At first glance, i does not seem to be as vulnerable to such elision in affixes, but a closer look reveals that its apparent resistance to elision may be due to potential formation of impermissible sequences that would have resulted from i-deletion. When the right configuration arises, it may be deleted as well:

(11) ze ló mištálém li láasót et zé > ‘It does not pay for me to do it’ ~ ze lómštalémli lasót edže
matáy hi tštalék mipó ‘When will she get out of here?’ > matá i tštalék mipó ~ matái cta lék mipó
hi ló tkanés habáyta bli resút ‘she won’t enter the house without permission’ > i ló tkanés abáyta bli resút
hi ló tšaér itó yotér mísáná > ‘She won’t stay with him longer than a year’ > iló tsjaeritot yotér mísáná
mszá ‘iló čaérítot yotér mísáná
kédáy shaht tšzaér míménu ‘she’d better watch out for him’ > kédáy šeht tzaér míménu ~ kédáy šeidzaér míménu

The question is whether the V-only option in imperative truncation is a manifestation of the same process as general eli elision, or is independent of it. Bolozky (1979) shows that there are some minor differences, but on the whole, it is the same process of eli elision, in the same colloquial register. It is true that in the majority of cases, casual eli elision tends to apply when the phonetic need for it is removed through resyllabification, whereas imperative truncation is morphologically-triggered. However, while #tV truncation applies only to imperatives, eli casual elision operates everywhere, including e or i in an utterance-initial syllable (of imperatives as well as non-imperatives) in frequent, easily recoverable morphemes, i.e., even when potential resyllabification is irrelevant. This can be seen in illustrations such as štéléx kvar ‘(I wish) she left already!’ > štélék kvar above. In other words, since elision of i or e is not categorically limited to imperatives, V-only truncation is already “covered” by casual eli elision, and there is no need for a separate V-only truncation process.

One could argue for imperative truncation being a two-step process – vowel elision followed by t-deletion – and thus cover all truncated vowels by one process. However, an independent #tV truncation rule will be required anyway, to yield forms like ftax without going through a *fttax stage in cases like tftax ‘open!’

3. Short CVC imperative stems

Short CVC imperative stems related to irregular “defective” verbs in the Prefix conjugation are very commonly used, and they figure quite prominently in both normative and colloquial Hebrew, as in:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M. Sing.</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
<th>Alternants</th>
<th>F. Sing.</th>
<th>Alternants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) takum</td>
<td>get up!</td>
<td>*tkum ~ kum</td>
<td>takúmi</td>
<td>*tkúmi ~ kúmi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taruc</td>
<td>run!</td>
<td>*truc ~ ruc</td>
<td>tarúci</td>
<td>*trúci ~ rúci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tasim</td>
<td>put down!</td>
<td>*tšim ~ šim</td>
<td>tasími</td>
<td>*tsími ~ šími</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tavo</td>
<td>come!</td>
<td>*two ~ bo</td>
<td>bói</td>
<td>*tvói ~ bóí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>titen</td>
<td>give!</td>
<td>*tšen ~ šen</td>
<td>šími</td>
<td>*šími ~ ší</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tigaš</td>
<td>approach!</td>
<td>*tgaš ~ gaš</td>
<td>ši</td>
<td>*tgóš ~ gší</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tikax</td>
<td>take!</td>
<td>*tkax ~ kax</td>
<td>šíxi</td>
<td>*tkxi ~ kší</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) tešev ~ tišev</td>
<td>sit down!</td>
<td>*tševčev ~ šev</td>
<td>tešvi ~ tišvi</td>
<td>*tšvčíš ~ šší</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>telex</td>
<td>go!</td>
<td>*tlex ~ lex</td>
<td>telxi</td>
<td>*tlxi ~ léxi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To account for the inadmissibility of most of sequences resulting from V-only truncation in such verbs (*tkum, etc.), Bat-El (2002) invokes Steriade’s (1999) Correspondence Condition, which requires that corresponding stressed syllables be segmentally identical. Thus, *tkum is not segmentally identical with the kum in ta-kum, *tku is not identical with ku in ta-ku-mi, etc. The acceptability of ĉev (the only one that can also undergo vowel-only truncation) may be due to the single-unit affricate allowing rough equivalence of *sˇev = ĉev, and possible syllabic division of the feminine prefix-conjugation form as te-sˇvi. The e in re´di and equivalent forms is the original e of normative re´di, possibly maintained so as to prevent violation of the sonority scale; the penultimate stress of re´di appears to result from analogy with the large class of verbs of the kumi type (the “hollow” verbs). tifta´x ‘open!’ > ftáx is allowed even though the most likely syllable division in the former is ti-ftáx, not ti-ftáx, i.e., an exception to the Correspondence Condition; an anonymous reviewer suggests that it may be accounted for by ranking the constraint requiring truncation above the Correspondence Condition.

3.1. Accounting for #tV truncation in verbs with CVC imperative stems

At this point, the question is how to account for #tV truncation in verbs with CVC imperative stems. We have two options:

(a) Delete all #tV strings, which is the approach taken in Bolozky (1979) and also adopted in Bat-El (2002).
(b) Delete only e and i (not a) in instances of #te and #ti, as allowed by the general casual e/i elision rule, and assume that forms like kum are not derived, but borrowed, or inherited, from normative Hebrew – borrowing that resulted from their frequency and familiarity.

The first approach is the simplest and most straightforward. Since #tV is morphologically restricted, i.e., is not a phonological process with “pure” phonetic motivation, any vowel can be subject to it, a included.

The second approach is based on the observation that the natural, general process of casual vowel elision rarely allows deletion of the vowel a, and that if that is also what applies to the vowel in these #tV strings, the vowel a should not be deleted by imperative truncation. The exclusion of a from this process is supported by the following arguments:

First, Bolozky (1999) shows that while e is the “minimal” vowel in Hebrew phonology, and is thus the most likely vowel to be elided or used to break impermissible clusters, the sonority and prominence of a make it the most stable vowel in the language and the least likely to be deleted. There are indeed many alternations that involve the loss of a, like katuw ‘he wrote’ ~ katua ‘she wrote’, gadol ‘big m.s’ ~ gdolim ‘big m.pl’, all cases of construct-state reduction like sˇanat ‘year’ ~ sˇnat- ‘the year of’, etc. But although such alternations originally captured well-motivated processes at certain historical phases of the language, today they are imposed by morpho-phonological templates, and no longer reflect phonetically-motivated elision. And in spite of the fact that a can be reduced or centralized by phonetically-motivated reduction processes (as in naxon ‘correct’ > nexon, etc. above), full elision of a rarely applies (except in very common, easily recoverable clitics, and very rarely in some frequent lexical items in the most casual or fastest register). On the other hand, since e/i casual elision is a phonetically-motivated process, one could also consider the possibility of allowing it to operate on #tV sequences as well. If #ta sequences are not affected (given the assumption that forms like kum are borrowed from the normative register, not derived), and e and i in #te and #ti, respectively, can also be covered by casual e/i elision, then it may be argued that #tV truncation is actually just #t-truncation.

4 While sibilant fricatives may either precede or follow plosives, segments like /t/ are generally more sonorant than /k/, and languages tend to prefer syllables starting with a consonant that is lower in sonority than the one closing the former one (Vennemann’s, 1988 Contact Law).
Second, the resistance of a to reduction offers an additional explanation why imperative truncation is blocked in hif`il (the verb pattern, or template, hiCCiC), which in the Prefix conjugation starts with #ta. Bat-El (2002) argues that the initial a of the participle and Prefix-conjugation of hif`il (as well as the i counterpart of its past tense paradigm) belongs to the stem, and stem vowels are not subject to truncation. Her claim is also reinforced by the fact that with the exception of tasim ‘put!’ > sim, taCiC forms in #tal (the verb pattern/template CaCaC), such as tasir ‘sing!,’ are not subject to either V-only or #IV truncation owing to their surface similarity to hif`il forms such as tapil ‘drop (tr.)!’ or tavim ‘understand!’, which as hiCCiC forms are not subject to truncation. However, the fact that two possible explanations work here – avoidance of stem vowel truncation and the resistance of a to deletion – does not necessarily imply a contradiction; in the case of hif`il, the two accounts simply reinforce each other. The stability of a and its durability in face of reduction pressures is independently needed for this binyan, to explain the resistance of a to hif`il centralization (hiCCiC > heCCiC). As is well known, there is a strong tendency in colloquial Hebrew today for hif`il forms in the past tense to be realized as hef`il: hisbir ‘he explained’ > hesbir, higdir ‘he defined’ > hegdir, etc. Bolozy (2007) shows that unlike the hipil ‘he dropped’ > hepil phenomenon, which is triggered by analogy to the more frequent “hollow” verbs like hekim ‘he raised, set up,’ the hif`il > hef`il phenomenon is a phonetically-motivated centralization process. Centralization, however, never applies to the Participle or Prefix-conjugation paradigm of hif`il, which are realized with a: one never finds masbir ‘explain’ > mesbir or tasbir ‘(you will) explain’ > tesbir, owing to the resistance of a to reduction (and centralization is a type of reduction).

Perhaps the strongest argument against deriving kum-type imperatives from forms like takum comes from a single case, but a crucial one nevertheless. The original claim in Bolozy (1979) for deriving the colloquial “new” imperatives from Prefix-conjugation forms used imperatively was supported by alternations like

\begin{equation}
\text{tiftax} \sim \text{tiftax} \sim \text{ftax} \sim \text{tiftexi}
\end{equation}

above, which showed not only direct derivation from the Prefix-conjugation paradigm (the normative imperatives in this case, for instance, are ptax, pttxi), but also by the fact that the initial stem consonant remains a fricative, as in the Prefix-conjugation paradigm, and does not revert back to the stop expected in initial position, as in the normative realizations. Similarly, in short imperatives, we get (repeated from above):

\begin{equation}
\text{tavo} \sim \text{bo} \sim \text{boi} \sim \text{boi}
\end{equation}

Had the “new” imperative been derived by truncation, one would have expected *vo, *voi.

As noted above, this second analysis would require that frequent imperative CVC stems be borrowed from the normative register, rather than be derived from Prefix-conjugation forms used imperatively. This would also explain why a significant number of imperative forms are used in both registers, the normative as well as the colloquial. From a very young age, children hear short CVC imperatives such as kum ‘get up!, sv ‘sit down!, lex ‘go!, bo ‘come!, ruc ‘run!, ce ‘go out!, ten ‘give!, kax ‘take!’ – probably more frequently than their Prefix-conjugation-as-imperative counterparts. There is no need for derivations like takum ‘get up!’ > kum, since forms like kum are readily available, and more frequently encountered than their takum counterparts. On the other hand, considerable exposure to forms like tiftax ‘open!’ do make derivations like tiftax > ftax quite feasible, and the same applies to texaber ‘laundry!’ > xaber, tizaher ‘watch out!’ > za(h)er, tissaket ‘look!’ > stakel, etc. Where do we have complete overlap of imperative forms in both registers? The normative imperative forms of nif`al (niCCaC), hif`il (hiCCiC) and hitpa`el (hitCaCeC), all of which contain an initial h, are restricted to the normative register. In the colloquial, and only in the colloquial, the Prefix-conjugation form, with its initial t in the second person, functions as an imperative in these binyanim, as it normally does, and in nif`al and in hitpa`el it also tends to undergo truncation, as shown above. Only in pi`el

\begin{footnote}
Analogical formation in the opposite direction is also possible, i.e., chopping off a #ta prefix in a hif`il form because of it similarity to pa`al. Shlomo Izre’el pointed out to me that p. 104 of Ro’i Politi’s 2001 novel ‘Arevovoney Goget’ has some good colloquial representation, including an utterance like: rim, rim, tarim tapayadi‘! ‘Raise, raise, raise your hands!,’ where a soldier is ordering an elderly Palestinian at a road block. This is an instance of a hif`il form that may be erroneously identified as belonging to pa`al owing to similarity with tasim ‘put down!,’ and consequently tarim > rim is parallel to tasim > sim.
\end{footnote}
and in pa`al may normative and colloquial variants of the imperative coexist (in part) in the spoken register, e.g.,

(15) Normative Colloquial
pi`el saper, sapri... ‘tell!’ same, and tsaper/caper, tsapril/capri...
kabes, kabsi... ‘laundry!’ xabes, xabsi.../kabes, kabsi... (the former commoner), and txabes, txabsi...

pa`al sgor, sigri... ‘close!’ sgor, sgeri... and tsgor/cgor, tsgeri/cgeri...
ptax, pitxi... ‘open!’ ftax, ftxi.../ptax, ptexi... (ftax, etc. probably more common)

So in regular verb forms, even when there is partial coexistence of normative and colloquial variants of the imperative in the spoken register, there is no complete identity, since there exist at least two “deviations” from the norm: CCeCi variants in pa`al, and stop/fricative non-normative realizations in both pi`el and pa`al. The only instances in which there exists complete identity of realizations in both registers are the irregular CVC verb imperatives of pa`al; in other words, kum, ki`umi... ‘get up!’ and all other CVC imperative stems are fully identical in both registers, and even stop/fricative realization is the same, as seen in bo, boi. So the argument that they are borrowed from the normative register rather than by derivation from Prefix-conjugation counterparts makes sense. Also note that although Bar-Adon (1966) did not propose an analysis of contemporary imperatives (his article only dealt with se-jussives and si-imperatives), he already suggested then that there existed both old and new imperatives.

4. #t-only truncation in hif`il?

It was suggested above that if truncation actually operates only on e and i (assuming that kum-type verbs are borrowed from the normative register, not derived from takum, etc.), then #tV truncation may in fact be redefined as #t truncation. Shlomo Izre’el reports two instances he noted: in one, about 20 years ago, he heard a father rebuking his son: afsik ‘stop!’ instead of the expected tafsik (note: not the normative hafsek), and in May 2004 he heard orid tagag ‘remove the awning’ (note: not the normative horid), followed by a subsequent response from another speaker: al torid ‘don’t remove!’ In both instances, a hif`il (hiCCiC) form is affected by truncation – only #t, of course, not a stem vowel, which is always immune to truncation. Could these constitute support for the possibility that Imperative #tV Truncation is in fact #t-truncation? As these are isolated cases, possibly resulting from interference of the normative forms (hafsek and horid, respectively), they do not constitute sufficient independent evidence in favor of this claim. But they do suggest that Imperative Truncation may be in flux.

5. Conclusions

We may come up with the following suggestions:

First, where only the vowel is removed from Prefix-conjugation forms used imperatively, accounting for the resulting forms does not require that they constitute part of imperative truncation, since the general phonetically-motivated rule of eli casual deletion would independently generate such forms.

Second, Imperative Truncation only applies to the whole #tV string. It is morphologically restricted to pre-
fix-conjugation forms used imperatively, and is blocked from applying to stem-initial vowels, and/or to #ta
prefixes because of the resistance of the vowel a to reduction. If casual eli elision is assumed to operate on
#tV sequences as well, we may redefine #tV truncation as #t truncation.

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