

Modern-Hebrew *lama-še* Interrogatives and Their Judeo-Spanish Origins

Itamar Francez

University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

ifrancez@uchicago.edu

Abstract

This article describes a Modern Hebrew interrogative construction, not found in earlier varieties of the language, in which a *wh*-word is followed by a clause headed by the complementizer *še* 'that.' When that clause contains negation, the resulting sentence has the illocutionary force of a suggestion, with the opposite polarity to that of the complementizer clause. In this case, negation fails to license negative concord and negative polarity items. The main properties of the construction are described, an analysis is sketched, and evidence is given indicating Judeo-Spanish as the probable source for the construction.

Keywords

interrogative – mood and modality – polarity – rhetorical question – presupposition – speech act – Judeo-Spanish

Introduction

Modern Hebrew (MH) shows a contrast between two kinds of interrogative structures, exemplified in (1), the title of a newspaper article, and its constructed variant (2). The two sentences form a minimal pair, differing only in the occurrence of the complementizer *še*.

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- (1) *lama ha-zahav tamid yihiye ?atraktivi?*
 why the-gold always be.3MSG.FUT attractive
 ‘Why will gold always be attractive?’
 (calcalist, <http://www.calcalist.co.il>, accessed July 24, 2008)
- (2) *lama še ha-zahav tamid yihiye ?atraktivi?*
 why that the-gold always be.3MSG.FUT attractive
 ‘Why should gold always be attractive?’

For convenience, I refer to (1) as a *lama*-interrogative and to (2) as a *lama-še* interrogative. The two constructions differ in interpretation. The sentence in (1) expresses a question asking for reasons for the truth of what is taken to be an established fact (in (1), that gold will always be attractive). The sentence in (2) expresses a (often rhetorical) question, asking for motivations for a particular way of resolving an issue that is, crucially, considered to be *unsettled* at the time of utterance (in (2), whether or not gold will always be attractive).

The focus of this article is negative *lama-še* interrogatives, such as (3) and (4), which express suggestions. I term such interrogatives *suggesterogatives*, alluding to Sadock’s (1971) coinage *queclaratives* for interrogatives that have declarative force.

- (3) *lama še lo tagiš ?et ?exad ha-sfarim*
 why that NEG submit.2MSG.FUT ACC one the-books
šelxa ke-teza?
 yours as-thesis
 ‘Why don’t you submit one of your books as a thesis?’
 (title of a blog post by journalist Raviv Druker,
<http://drucker10.net/?p=306>, accessed May 1, 2015)
- (4) *?az ?im ?anaxnu kvar kan, ?az lama še lo*
 then if we already here, then why that NEG
nexayex ve-nište ?eyze te vradim ?im nana.
 smile.1PL.FUT and-drink.1PL.FUT which tea.CS roses with mint
 ‘So if we’re here, then why don’t we smile and drink some sort of rose-tea with mint.’
 (found in Tal Linzen’s Israblog corpus, <http://tallinzen.net>, accessed May 1, 2015)

Strikingly, the suggestion made in (3) and (4) is of the *opposite* polarity to that of the sentence in the *še*-clause, i.e., despite the presence of negation, these sentences express a positive suggestion to submit a book or drink tea. Suggesterogative readings of *lama-še* interrogatives are diagnosable by the fact that *beseder* ‘ok’ is a natural response to them. This diagnostic seems to

show that neither *lama*-interrogatives nor positive *lama-še* interrogatives have suggesterogative readings. Thus, neither (1) nor (2) can be followed up with *beseeder*, whereas this is a perfectly natural response to (3) or (4).

Negative *lama-še* interrogatives on their suggesterogative interpretation have a parallel in English, in the form of *why-don't* questions.

- (5) a) Why don't you sit down a minute?
 b) Why don't the children sit over there at the smaller table?

In the next section, I list the main descriptive properties characterizing positive and negative *lama-še* interrogatives, distinguishing them from *lama* interrogatives.

While *še* can occur with other *wh*-words in Hebrew, in which case the resulting structure shares some of the basic properties of the *lama-še* construction, none of these cases give rise to suggesterogative readings.

Properties of *lama-še* Interrogatives

As mentioned, the two constructions differ in the kind of context they can be uttered in. *lama*-interrogatives call for a context in which some proposition is assumed (by both interlocutors) to be a fact. In contrast, *lama-še* interrogatives call for a context in which the truth of the relevant proposition is assumed to be unsettled. In such a context, asking for reasons why the issue of whether the proposition is true or not should be settled in one way rather than another leads to the implication that such reasons do not exist. Under certain circumstances, elaborated below, this implication gives rise to the illocutionary force of a suggestion.

The *lama-še* interrogatives, unlike *lama*-interrogatives, are restricted to the future tense, as shown by the contrast between (6a)¹ and (6b). This is unsurprising given that *lama-še* interrogatives ask about an unsettled issue. The past and present are by nature already settled.

- (6) a) **lama še hu lo yašan / yašen ba-salon.*
 why that he NEG slept.3MS sleeps in.the-living room
- b) *lama hu lo yašan / yašen ba-salon?*
 why he NEG slept.3MS sleeps in.the-living room
 'Why didn't he sleep / isn't he sleeping in the living room?'

1 The * symbol in front of (6a) is the convention used in contemporary theoretical linguistics to indicate ungrammaticality. See examples (3) and (4) above for exemplification of *lama-še* interrogatives with the future tense.

Negation in *lama-še* interrogatives on a suggesterogative reading cannot license negative concord elements such as *klum* ‘nothing’ or negative polarity items such as *bixlal* ‘at all.’ For the difference between negative concord and negative polarity, see Keren (2015). Thus, the sentences in (7) cannot be interpreted as suggestions, but only as rhetorical questions, in response to an assertion denying the complement of the complementizer.²

- (7) a) *lama še lo toxal klum?*
 why that NEG eat.FUT.2MSG nothing
 ‘Why should you not eat anything?’
 NOT: ‘Why don’t you eat?’
- b) *lama še lo toxal bixlal?*
 Why that NEG eat.FUT.2MSG at.all
 ‘Why should you not eat anything at all?’
 NOT: ‘Why don’t you eat?’

This property of *lama-še* suggesterogatives is shared with their English counterparts. English suggesterogatives also cannot feature negative polarity items, as shown in (8), where (8b) is not interpretable as a suggestion.³

- (8) a) Why don’t you eat something?
 b) #Why don’t you eat anything?

Whether a negated *lama-še* interrogative receives a suggesterogative interpretation depends on properties of the context. In particular, in a context in which an assertion has been made about how a metaphysically unsettled issue will be resolved, a *lama-še* interrogative can be used to take issue with that assertion. This is exemplified in the dialogue in (9):

² An example of a natural context for, e.g., (7a) is as a response to (i):

- (i) *hi ?amra še ?ani lo ?oxal klum.*
 she said.3FS that I NEG eat.FUT.1SG nothing
 ‘She said that I will not eat anything?’

³ This pattern has been known in the literature, going back at least to example (ii), attributed to Barbara Partee by Laurence Horn (Partee 2005).

- (ii)
 a) Why don’t you love me some more? (invitation)
 b) Why don’t you love me anymore? (question)

- (9) A: *lo nirʔa li še ha-kelev yišan*
 NEG seems to.me that the-dog sleep.FUT.3MSG
ba-salon.
 in.the-living room
 'I don't think the dog is going to sleep in the living room.'

B: *lama še hu lo yišan ba-salon?*
 why that he NEG sleep.FUT.3MSG in.the-living room
 'Why shouldn't he sleep in the living room?'

B's response in (9) is not interpreted as a suggestion that the dog sleep in the living room (such a suggestion would be an odd one to make to someone who has just asserted the opposite), but instead as a rhetorical question, implying that the dog might well sleep in the living room.

In a context in which A has not made her assertion and in which the issue at hand (or Question under Discussion, see, e.g., Ginzburg 1994; Roberts 1996) is where the dog should sleep, B's assertion is interpreted as a suggesterogative, suggesting that the dog sleep in the living room. These two interpretations are distinguished by intonation. In both cases, the context of utterance is one in which it is unsettled where the dog will sleep.

The suggesterogative reading of *lama-še* interrogatives arises only for negative sentences. Thus, (10), the title of an article in an online journal, cannot be interpreted as a suggestion, and, if it were uttered, could not be followed up by *beseder*, even though it does give rise to the implication that we should not care whether or not Obama is reading our emails.

- (10) *lama še yihye lanu ʔixpat ʔim ʔobama*
 why that be.3MSG to.us care if Obama
kore ʔet ha-meylim šelanu?
 reads ACC the-mails of.1PL
 'Why should we care if Obama is reading our mails?'
 (alaxson, <http://alaxon.co.il>, accessed June 13, 2013)

Similarly, (11), which was written as a response to a question about the compatibility of a device with a certain package, has only declarative force and cannot be followed up with *beseder*. The suggestion that the addressee not buy the package is a perlocutionary, rather than illocutionary, effect.

- (11) *ʔaval lama la-ʕazʔazel še tikne ʔet*
 but why to.the-hell that buy.2MS. FUT ACC
ha-maʔaraz haze? hu ʕole faking ʔelef šekel!
 the-package this? it costs fucking thousand NIS
 ‘But why the hell would you buy this package? It costs a fucking thousand dollars!’
 (<http://hwzone.co.il/community/threads/389697>, accessed May 1, 2015)

The declarative force of positive *lama-še* interrogatives is further exemplified by the sentence in (12), a classic Sadock queclarative. The particle *naxon* ‘right’ generally embeds declarative sentences to form, roughly, a yes-no question.

- (12) *ʔamarti lexa lo likro ʔaval lama*
 told.1SG to.you NEG read.INF but why
še takšiv li naxon?
 that listen.3MS.FUT to.me right
 ‘I told you not to read, but why listen to me, right?’
 (Tal Linzen’s Israblog corpus, <http://tallinzen.net>, accessed May 1, 2015)

The *lama-še* interrogatives on their rhetorical, non-suggesterogative reading license free choice items that *lama* interrogatives do not, as shown in (13):

- (13) a. *lama še ʔey-paʕam tišan ba-salon?*
 why that ever sleep.FUT.3MSG in.the-living room
 ‘Why should you ever sleep in the living room?’
 b. **lama ʔey-paʕam tišan ba-salon?*
 why ever sleep.FUT.3MSG in.the-living room
 ‘*Why will you ever sleep in the living room?’

This is unsurprising, given the unsettledness of the truth of the propositions asked about in a *lama-še* interrogative in contrast with the settledness of the proposition asked about in a *lama* interrogative.

When the subject of the sentential complement of *lama-še* is first or second person, the complementizer can be dropped. This is not possible with third-person subjects.

- (14) *lama (še) lo nišan / tišan ba-salon?*
 why that NEG sleep.FUT.1PL sleep.FUT.2MSG in.the-living room
 ‘Why don’t you / we sleep in the living room?’

The Origins of *lama-še* Interrogatives

lama-še interrogatives are just *lama* interrogatives that embed a *še*-clause. This *še*-clause is precisely the structure that Schwarzwald & Shlomo (2015) discuss as the [še+FUT] construction. As they show, the [še+FUT] clause can appear as a matrix clause and has a range of irrealis readings involving the notions of hortative and optative modality. Schwarzwald & Shlomo demonstrate that [še+FUT] entered Modern Hebrew through Judeo-Spanish. The Judeo-Spanish correspondent of [še+FUT] is [ke+PRES.SUBJ], and it too can stand alone as a matrix clause with the relevant set of meanings. In fact, similar constructions are to be found in a whole range of Balkan and southern European languages (see Ammann & Van der Auwera 2004).

Since [ke+PRES.SUBJ] can function as a matrix clause, it is expected that the language should be able to embed such a clause under a *wh*-word meaning ‘why’ and achieve the structure of a *lama-še* interrogative. This expectation is fulfilled. The following Judeo-Spanish example is from Luria (1930), reported by Kahane & Soporla (1951):⁴

- (15) *Pur ke k'afirmi?*
 why that that-sign.IS.FUT
 ‘Why should I sign?’

Here, the *wh*-word is clearly followed by a clause headed by the complementizer *ke*, and the structure is both syntactically and semantically identical to the *lama-še* interrogative.

Furthermore, Judeo-Spanish also features the suggesterogative interpretation for negative [ke+PRES.SUBJ] interrogatives. Example (16) was reported to me by Aldina Quintana.

- (16) *de ké no te asentas?*
 why that NEG CL.2S sit.2S.FUT
 ‘Why don’t you sit?’

4 The datum in (15) comes from oral materials collected by Luria in Monastir (present-day Bitola). Aldina Quintana (p.c.) points out that the use of *pur ke* (and *por ke*) instead of the more common *de ke* is probably a feature of the Monastir dialect. The Jews of Monastir were, together with the rest of Macedonia’s Jews, transported to Treblinka and murdered there. Consequently, very little is known about this dialect.

Finally, Judeo-Spanish allows other *wh*-words to embed *ke*-clauses, as shown in (17), also from Kahane & Soporta.

- (17) *ande ké la meta?*
 where that 3F put.IS.FUT
 ‘Where should I put it?’

Exactly the same structure is found in Modern Hebrew, as mentioned briefly in the last sentence of the introduction.

- (18) *ʔefo še ʔani ʔasim ʔet ze?*
 where that I put.FUT.ISG ACC it
 ‘Where should I put it?’

While more research is required to draw definitive conclusions, it seems highly probable that *lama-še* interrogatives entered Hebrew through Judeo-Spanish, together with the matrix [ke+PRES.SUBJ] construction.

The Suggesterogative Reading

In this section, I sketch an analysis of the interpretation of *lama-še* interrogatives, and the suggesterogative reading associated with negative ones. A key component of any satisfactory analysis is an explanation for the failure of negative *lama-še* interrogatives to license negative concord and negative polarity items.

I propose that *lama-še* interrogatives are just *lama* interrogatives, i.e., ‘why’ questions, which ask for a reason for the truth of the complement of the *wh*-element. In this case, that complement is a [še+FUT] structure, which expresses, roughly, weak bouletic necessity.⁵ To exemplify the analysis, I use the simple examples in (19), based on (14) above.

5 Bouletic modality has to do with what is possible or necessary given the desires, preferences, or wishes of a discourse participant. Weak bouletic necessity (Kratzer 1991) is truth in the worlds that best fit the relevant wishes, desires, or preferences. As noted above and discussed by Schwarzwald & Shlomo, the Hebrew [še+FUT] construction on its own can express more specific notions of hortative and optative mood (e.g., wishes and curses). A semantic account of the modality of the [še+FUT] construction is far beyond the scope of a short paper. See Boneh (2013) for a recent discussion of the expression of various types of mood and modality in Modern Hebrew.

- (19) a. *lama še lo tišan ba-salon.*
 why that NEG sleep.2MS in.the-living room
 ‘Why don’t you sleep in the living room.’
- b. *lama še tišan ba-salon?*
 why that sleep.2MS. in.the-living room
 ‘Why should you sleep in the living room?’

First consider (19a). My proposal is that the suggesterogative interpretation of this sentence arises when the negation *lo* scopes outside the [ŠE+FUT] clause, as part of a *why not?* question asking for reasons against the truth of the [ŠE+FUT] clause, paraphrasable roughly as “you should sleep in the living room.”⁶ The proposed logical form for (19a) is (20).

- (20) Why-not [SHOULD (you sleep in the living room)]

Given this logical form, the failure to license negative concord and negative polarity items is unremarkable. Negative concord items require the presence of negation in the same clause, and negative polarity items, on standard accounts following Ladusaw (1979), require a downward entailing environment.⁷ Neither of these is provided by the [ŠE+FUT] clause in (20).

The suggesterogative reading arises as an indirect speech act through a pragmatic convention. When the issue at hand is where, among several salient possibilities, the addressee should sleep, a speaker uttering the question schematized in (20) indicates that she does not know, and cannot think of, any reasons against the truth of “*you should sleep in the living room,*” and therefore that she believes “*you should sleep in the living room.*” In situations in which it would be unreasonable for the hearer to assume that the speaker is genuinely asking her a question (for example, if it is up to the speaker to decide where the hearer should or shouldn’t sleep), the speaker is therefore interpreted as asserting what she believes, namely “*you should sleep in the living room,*” and thus, through a meta-linguistic convention of usage, indirectly making a suggestion.⁸

6 Recall that *should* here is to be read as weak necessity, i.e., as equivalent to “it is recommended / preferred that.”

7 A downward entailing environment is, very roughly, one which licenses inferences from general cases to stronger, more specific ones. For example, *Eve didn’t eat a fruit* entails *Eve didn’t eat an apple*.

8 A full explication of this account requires a theory of indirect speech acts. See Gordon & Lakoff (1971), Sadock (1974), Searle (1975), and, for the view of indirect speech acts as metalinguistic conventions of language use, Morgan (1977).

Recall that, as shown in (14), the suggesterogative reading is not obligatory and not conventionally encoded by (19a), which can also be uttered to ask a question. This happens in contexts in which it has already been suggested that the addressee should not sleep in the living room. The speaker can then genuinely ask the addressee for the motivations behind that suggestion, implicating conversationally that there are no good motivations. In this case, I propose, negation is interpreted within the [še+FUT] clause, yielding the logical form in (21).

(21) Why [SHOULD (you not sleep in the living room)]

As discussed above for (7) and (8), in genuine *why* questions, polarity and concord items are licensed, as expected if negation is interpreted inside the [še+FUT] clause. The implication that arises from an utterance of (19a) with the meaning in (21) is that the speaker does not endorse the truth of “*you should not sleep in the living room,*” and therefore, that as far as she is concerned, you are free to sleep there. This implication does not amount to a suggestion to sleep there, only to a relief from an obligation not to. This is why, on this reading, (19a), like (19b), cannot be followed by *beseder*, a response that indicates the endorsement of a suggestion.

Conclusion

This article has laid out the properties of the *lama-še* interrogative in Modern Hebrew. Such interrogatives differ from regular *lama* interrogatives mainly in that (a) they ask about motivations for a particular resolution of a yet-unsettled issue, rather than reasons for the truth of an established fact, and (b) they express suggestions rather than questions in their negative form. It was argued that the interpretation of *lama-še* interrogatives, including their suggesterogative reading, follows from the meaning of the *še*-clause they embed. Finally, strongly suggestive, if inconclusive, evidence was presented that *lama-še* interrogatives entered Hebrew through Judeo-Spanish.

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