Linguistic and Stylistic Changes in the Poetry of
Ronny Somek: A Diachronic View

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Abstract

The poetry of Ronny Somek—with its unique literary and linguistic nature—has earned respected literary status as well as popular appeal. In this study, I examine linguistic changes in Somek's poetry with particular emphasis on syntax. For this purpose, two books of poetry were chosen to serve as research corpus: Golé [Exile], his first book, published in 1976, and Kol kakh harbé elohim [So Much God], his most recent book, published in 2020. This study demonstrates that Ronny Somek's language in the later period has undergone syntactic changes. The changes involve a new diversity in conjunctions whose usage has increased, especially time conjunctions, and special usages that diverge from standard Hebrew, such as biglal shé- and sha'a shé-, and real conditional im, used mostly as the conditional word for hypothetical conditionals instead of lu or ilu. Other syntactic changes in his late work are also apparent in using asyndetic structure. Further, there are other special language usages, such as syntactic agreement. However, the usage of complex tense denoting ongoing action happening over time was dropped in his late work.

1. Introduction

The poetry of Ronny Somek - with its unique literary and linguistic nature - has earned respected literary status as well as popular appeal. It constitutes an impressive body of masterly work in which linguistic vibrancy and precise formulations are clearly discernable. It may be viewed as "easy poetry" – accessible - reflecting society "not because it declaims its messages or because it does not challenge the reader, but rather because if there is a wound in it,

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society is that wound" (Shakargy, 2018, p. 9).[2] Avraham-Eitan (2017, pp. 69–75) feels that Somek erupts into public consciousness in an unusual way, incorporating important messages indirectly while ostensibly being preoccupied with humble, everyday matters. His poetry is notable for its figurative density; the profusion of images in his brief poems brings the reader close, so that the reader senses the special metaphors. Thus, Somek lends his poetry a popular, unpretentious character and connects it with contemporary language.

Language is dynamic, a fact readily apparent if one takes a diachronic view. It is only logical to suppose that, over time, language changes for a host of reasons. Such changes are evident in both spoken and written language, including in the language of poetry.[3] In this essay, I will examine linguistic changes in Somek's

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[2] Somek started writing poetry at the age of 16; his first poem was published six months later under the name "Somek" instead of "Somekh" because of a printing error. His poetry has been translated into 42 languages and published in many different countries (Shakargy, 2018, 10, 12). Somek (2018, 278–289) describes his sources of poetic inspiration. For more on the nature of Somek's poetry, see Meiri (2015, 351–388) discussing the poetry of two Mizrahi poets (Erez Biton and Ronny Somek) who have shaped unique, ground-breaking models of Mizrahi poetics. He claims that both have generated widespread and profound revolutions and have played a role in fashioning Israeli identity in general. In another essay (2018, 48–86), Meiri discusses central forms and motifs of popular culture in Somek's poetry that may be either overt or hidden.

[3] Poetic language has been discussed in the literature and many have noted its character and uniqueness. Sobran (2002, 395–419) discusses the overlaps between speech and poetic language and demonstrated characteristics of poetic language that formed in Hebrew under the influence of spoken Hebrew undergoing revival. See, too, Valden (2012, 21–34) who demonstrates that language is dynamic and constantly changing and that poetic language is especially flexible and creative. She describes the attitude of six poets to language as evidenced in their poetry, one of whom is Ronny Somek.

poetry with particular emphasis on syntax. For this purpose, I have chosen two books of poetry to serve as my research corpus: *Golé* [*Exile*], his first book, published in 1976, and *Kol kakh harbé elohim* [*So Much God*], his most recent book, published in 2020. A close reading of the poetic language of these two books shows that in the later period, Somek's poetry underwent a number of significant linguistic and stylistic changes, as discussed and illustrated below.

2. Syntactic Changes

A close reading of these two books of Somek, written 44 years apart, reveals his language to be dynamic and full of changes in syntax. The syntactic elements examined are the use of conjunctions, the asyndetic structure, the use of the complex tense, and special language usages (such as syntactic agreement).

2.1 Changes in the Use of Conjunctions[4]

In his poetry in the volume *Kol kakh harbé elohim* (henceforth: the late poetry), there are striking changes in the use of conjunctions compared to the poems in *Golé* (henceforth: the early poetry) in which there are no more than eight conjunctions, some of which are quite rare: *asher* [that] appears once as a Biblical interpolation; the conjunctive *vav* [and] is commonly used to add something; the subordinating *shin* [that] is found mainly in the role of introducing a subordinate clause; to denote contrast, the word *aval* [but] is used

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Yemini (2021) in her book discusses features of six modern poets, focusing on the features each of which "serves the poet to mediate between the earthly and the heavenly, between matter and spirit, and between the impermanent and the eternal" (ibid., 18).

[4] For more on conjunctions, see Kautzsch (1909, 305), Joüon & Muraoka (2006, 319), Brosh (1985, 29–32), Williams (2007, 152), Rosmarin (2008, 147–167), and Abbas (2016, 19–42).

several times; there are a few instances of *k'shé-* [when] to refer to time; and in rare cases, *heykhan shé-* [where] refers to place, *ad shé-* [until] introduces a modal clause, and *afilu* [even] connects with a conditional phrase.

In contrast, the late poetry uses nearly double the number of conjunctions, and many words not used in the early poetry make an appearance in the later work, such as *im* [if], *lu* [if only], *oh* [or], *ki* [because], *kedey shé-* [so that], *gam* [too], *lamrot zot* [nonetheless], *mitsad ehad/mitsad sheni* [on the one hand/on the other hand], and *biglal shé-* [because of]. Their use is evidence of the poet's intention to explicitly clarify the logical connection between statements. In the late poetry, there is notable variety of time-related conjunctions, expressed in the conjunctive phrases *bizman shé-* [at a time when], *lifney shé-* [before], *aharey shé-* [after], and *sha'a shé-* [a time when]. These help emphasize the sequence of time and stress the importance of time in the poems.

This analysis reveals another characteristic of the late poetry, namely an intentional lowering of the register noted in the use of special conjunctions not found in the early poems. In those, Somek was careful to use correct grammatical Hebrew, avoiding any deviations. Of particular note are three conjunctions found in the later poetry: in most places where it appears, the real conditional *im* [if] begins a hypothetical conditional instead of *lu* or *ilu* [if only];[5] the questionable causal conjunction *biglal shé-*[6] [because of] is notable too; and the unusual time

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[5] For more on the varied uses of the conditional *im*, see Abbas (2012, 68–89). The way its reflection in Rasag's translation of the Torah shows that this word is considered in most cases as a conditional word, but sometimes it fulfills the functions of emphasis, question, negation, and presentation. For the use of the word *im* as a hypothetical conditional word in the press language, see Abbas (2022, 95).

[6] For more on this phrase, see the Hebrew Language Academy website ("About the Phrase *biglal shé-*," October 14, 2010). Its validity is a matter of debate; it is not found

conjunction *sha'a shé-* [a time when] appears instead of *besha'a shé-*[7] [at a time when]. Some examples can be seen here:

1. *Im* [If] he had a soul

    he wouldn't have stopped

    standing tall. ("News from the Underworld")

2. It's *biglal shé-* [because of] the next day

    and the day after the next

    in the course of navigation

    I was the only one whose heart's compass

    went elsewhere. ("Blues for the Young Woman Hitchhiker from the Navy")

3. And flakes of whitewash fell on Miri B.S.,

    Havatselet H., Shelley B., Shimon T.

    and on me *sha'a shé-* [a time when] I was quoting my Rosh Hashanah prayer book. ("Moon")

In the three examples above, the use of simple syntactic structures is evident, indicating logical relations of condition, cause, and time. The gap between syntactic simplicity and the depth of the content expressed in the lines enhances the emotional intensity. Although the language is simple and characterized by

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in authoritative sources. Its sole documented use is in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. According to the Hebrew Language Academy, it is preferable to use other phrases than this one to introduce a causal clause: *ki, mipney shé-, keyvan shé-, mishum shé-, me'ahar shé-, ho'il shé-*, etc. For a discussion of *biglal shé-*, also see Dubnov and Mor (2012, 99-121) and Amihai (2017, 93–94).

[7] The conjunctive phrase *sha'a shé-* as a shortened form is not found in the sources, nor is it documented in dictionaries. It is common mostly in speech; a preference for it would seem to indicate a lowering of register.

the use of conjunction from spoken Hebrew, the content in these contexts is profound and thought-provoking. The choice of conjunctions from colloquial Hebrew creates a sense of an inner and authentic voice, spontaneously emerging from the heart, and a tone that speaks at eye level—originating from emotional turmoil and drawing the reader's attention.

This tendency indicates a unique stylistic choice even if it is not precisely in keeping with purist grammatical rules. The incorporation of these words adds something new to the formation of Somek's unique style, which has a propensity to reflect a folk character and unpretentiousness, preferring elements of contemporary, everyday Hebrew.[8] These changes that occurred over time in his poems show the dynamic nature of his language and his stylistic shifts.[9]

2.2 A Propensity for the Asyndetic Structure

In Somek's early poetry, there is no sign of the use of an asyndetic structure. In contrast, in his later poetry, there are many instances of a clear preference for this structure, reflected in the elimination of the subordinating *shin* [that], which is meant to be attached to an inflected conjunction when it introduces an attributive clause.[10] This change is evidence of stylistic variation in his late

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[8] The tendency to lower the register may also be found in short stories. See, e.g., Ben-Shahar (2019, 199–231) who noted the stylistic and linguistic characteristics in S. Yizhar's later story collections in which he incorporated elements of spoken Hebrew.

[9] For more style and stylistic choice, see Fruchtman (1990, 30 on).

[10] In an asyndetic structure, a certain conjunction is dropped. Evidence for such a structure may be found in Biblical Hebrew, such as "let the nations know they are but men" (Psalms 9:21), i.e., "let the nations know *that* they are but men." See, too, Blau (1982, 277–285). See Abbas (2015, 22–34) who discussed conjunctions as an addition by R. Saadia Gaon in his translations to Arabic as evidence for asyndetic structures in the Hebrew Bible, and Abbas (2016, 35–36) who gave examples of such sentences and

poems. Below are examples from three poems where the subordinating *shin* is left out before the attributive clause:

1. Also the handle of an axe that chopped the tree *mimenu* [from which]
   the paper was baked
   alav [on which] I forfeit the ink
   of the entire poem. (stanza 33 from the "Minister of Loneliness")

2. Imagine me standing where
   once smothered by sacks of flour, a heap of butter and
   chimney-bedecked ovens, *aleyhen* [on which] you could hang
   the whiteness of your brow for all to see. ("Petit Beurri")

3. I sell them poems
   as if I were a cashier at the door to a striptease club
   bo [in which] the soul again and again abandons
   the body's acrobatics. ("Reading Poetry to the IDF's Mental Health
   Officers")

The use of asyndetic structure may convey implicit messages. Preferring this structure over a syndetic one contributes to the prominence of emotional

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makes it clear that R. Saadia Gaon in his translations of the Torah identifies asyndetic sentences in the Biblical text that, for the sake of interpretation, he translates as syndetic sentences, such as in the following example: "Ye are a stiff-necked people; if I go up into the midst of thee for one moment, I shall consume thee" (Exodus 33:5), which he translated as: "Antom Qom Sa'ab al-Rikab **Falaw** Anni Asa'adtu Nuri Fima Baynakom Tarfa Wahida Laa'fnaytukum". In contemporary Hebrew, there is a certain tendency to the asyndetic structure. It is important to note the Hebrew Language Academy's determination that it is proper to use a connected structure and that the common manner to begin a relative clause is by using the relative *shin* or *asher* (Hebrew Language Academy decision of January 12, 2004).

intensity. As seen above, this asyndeton creates a compressed and authentic rhythm. The fragmented sentence structure grants the text greater force. One can sense a storm of emotions and a breathless quality, as if the poet is unable to adopt a complete syntactic structure, and thus gravitates toward the asyndetic form.

2.3 Use of Complex Tense

In the Schwartzwald and Sokoloff (1992, p. 43) *Milon lemunahey balshanut vedikduk* [Hebrew] [*Dictionary of Linguistic and Grammatical Terminology*], the complex tense is defined as a form created with the help of an auxiliary verb or other word, such as *haya bokhé* [would cry] rather than *bakha* [cried]. Such a usage combining verbs in two separate tenses, past and present, instead of a verb in the past tense, is typical of Rabbinic Hebrew to indicate an action that occurs with regularity [e.g., *hu haya omer*, "he would say"]. One may find contexts in which the complex tense may reflect a stylistic choice without effecting a change in the content, as is common in spoken Hebrew, mostly as a result of the influence of Arabic.[11] However, sometimes the usage is chosen intentionally to convey the sense that the action is ongoing, regular, as is the case in some of Somek's poems. Generally, the complex tense is uncommon in his early poetry. Some examples of early poems with such usage include:

1. And in the window, *haya* [was] the sea of Herzliya
   maru'ah [smeared] with velouté. ("Arak Solo")

2. Sea sand was flicked in her eyes.
   And soft spume *haya nimrah* [was spread] white on her lips. ("Lady Sings the Blues")

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[11] For more on the use of complex tenses in the language of Middle Ages translators under the influence of Arabic, see Tsarfaty (2003, p. 87).

3. Their hair *haya asuf* [was gathered] in smoke

and rust spread in their eyes. ("Painting")

The use of the complex tense instead of the simple past [*nimrah, ne'esaf*] in the above examples is not merely the result of stylistic variety. It serves to stress the ongoing atmosphere and the routine persistence of the situation: the sea at Herzliya was spread with "velouté," the soft spume was spread, their hair was gathered. The special use of the complex tense is found in the poem "A Poem of Longing," which opens the volume *Golé*. The multiple use of the tense in it [eight times] is striking:

1. Grandfather *haya kofets* [would jump] to pass;
2. Grandfather *haya medaber veholem* [would speak and dream];
3. The words *hayu mistovevot* [would revolve] on his lips;
4. Grandfather *haya morid* [would cut off] the head to cut the spirit;
5. And his lips *hayu mavrikot* [would shine] from the drops of the celebratory cognac;
6. Where *shehayinu medabrim* [we would speak] each of us in a different language about the same childhood;
7. Where their demons *hayu nilhatsim* [would be pressed] by our rigid fingers;
8. Where *shehayinu mekhabim* [we would extinguish] the last cigarettes in the same ashtray.

Somek expresses his longing for his grandfather—his action and speech as well as his lifestyle—that lasted into Somek's adolescence. One can see the complex tense as a dominant feature of the poem that also contributes to emphasizing the habitual nature of the continuing actions depicted as a part of routine life in those days. His grandfather was prone to speaking, jumping, dreaming, and more. Furthermore, each one would speak in a different language, engaging in the actions typical of routine life in those days.

While the use of the compound tense describes actions from the distant past, it also evokes a sense of an idealized past and nostalgia for those days, in contrast to the present. As demonstrated in the examples above, the emotional charge originates in the past, yet it is portrayed as if still alive within the speaker, thanks to small, meaningful actions that reflect an intimate bond between the poet and his grandfather. The past perfect tense connects the described images emotionally, as remembered by the heart.

In contrast, the use of the complex tense is reduced in Somek's late poetry and can be found only in two poems:

1. "I am Picasso without the canvas,"
    the Armenian tattoo artist George
    from the Old City *haya omer* [would say].
    Whoever wanted a cat got a tiger,
    ravens turned into hawks,
    and young women who just wanted a heart, he *haya mosif* [would add]
    [in Cupid's name] the tip of the arrow. ("George")

2. Don't forget that the umbilical cord *yakhol haya* [could have] been
    the hangman's rope. ("A Sketch for the Inquisition")

In the first example, the complex tense indicates the actions of George, the tattoo artist, who has become accustomed to doing them regularly: he would utter the statement in which he compares himself to Picasso, and for young women who wanted only a heart, he would add the tip of an arrow. In the second example, too, the complex tense indicates a regular action and a timeless situation rather than a one-time action that occurred in the past: the umbilical cord could have been the hangman's rope.

2.4 Special Use of Agreement in the Interrogative Word *eyzé* and the Usage of the Phrase *shakhah me-*

Somek's late poetry contain special linguistic features indicative of renewal and changes in his language. The interrogative words *eyzé*, *eyzo*, and *eylu* [all meaning "what" or "which"] are meant to agree in gender and number with the following noun. This is not always the case in Somek's late poetry, a fact that lends his style a natural, spoken flavor, such as in "Blues for the Young Woman Hitchhiker from the Navy" [*Kol kakh harbé elohim*]. The first word of the poem is *eyzé* ["what," masc., sing.] instead of the more correct word *eylu* ["what," masc./fem., pl.], which would agree in number with the following noun *be'itot* ["kicks," fem., pl.]. This usage is common in contemporary Hebrew and is indicative of the fact that native speakers treat the word *eyzé* as a fossilized, consistent word that is in agreement with any syntactic environment.[12] See, for example, the first stanza of the poem in which *eyzé* begins two questions. The lack of agreement is evident in the first question *eyzé be'itot*.

> *Eyzé be'itot* [What kicks] can one kick in military shoes
>
> suffocated by tangled laces?
>
> *Le'eyzé gova* [To what height] can grass grow in a field
>
> that was never a field?
>
> Just a crossroad
>
> in the middle of the desert.

The grammatical inconsistency in the use of the word 'eyze' ('which') highlights emotional intensity, as the breach of grammatical norms reflects an overflow of emotion that overrides linguistic conventions. This usage emphasizes authenticity, mirroring patterns found in spoken language.

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[12] For this issue which is also found in the press language, see Abbas (2022, p. 97).

Another example of special usage in Somek's late poetry may be found in the title of the poem "Daf externi ve-nish'khah me'yemey Tikhon 'Mishlav'" [*External and forgotten page from Mishlav High School Days*]. The phrase *shakh'ah me-* [forgotten] is a spoken form in contemporary Hebrew, common to most speakers[13] instead of the standard usage of the conjunction *et* [for which there is no English equivalent; it precedes a definite noun being used as a direct object]. The poem presents a scene from the lives of adolescents attending high school and describes a moment from their routine. Their way of life is also reflected in their speaking style, expressed in Somek's tendency to an intentional lowering of register. This tendency infuses his style with the nature typical of young people's language, which is also easy and serves society in general in everyday life. This aspect underscores the disruption of linguistic order for the sake of emotional expression.

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[13] For more on spoken Hebrew, see, e.g., Borochovsky (2010, Paragraph 2, pp. 219–251) discussing the features and changes made to a spoken text once it is written up.

3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Ronny Somek's language has undergone syntactic changes. His late poetry in the volume *Kol kakh harbé elohim* contains linguistic features not seen in his early poetry in the volume *Golé*. The changes involve a new diversity in conjunctions whose usage has increased, especially time conjunctions, and special usages that diverge from standard Hebrew, such as *biglal shé-* and *sha'a shé-*, and real conditional *im*, used mostly as the conditional word for hypothetical conditionals instead of *lu* or *ilu*.

A propensity for other syntactic changes is apparent also in the asyndetic structure common in his late poetry compared to his early work, where Somek made a point of using the syndetic structure. As for the complex tense, it emerges that its usage was dropped in the late work and in all contexts denoting ongoing action happening over time. There are other changes in his late poetry, such as the use of the interrogative *eyzé* as a fossilized constant word also with reference to the plural instead of *eylu*. There is also the special usage of the verb *shakhah* by means of the conjunction *me-* instead of *et*.

The changes we see by taking a diachronic view are indicative of the dynamism of Somek's language. He incorporates elements of modern and even spoken Hebrew. Many such cases may be seen as an intentional lowering of register and a means for bridging the distance between poetic language and the language of society at large. These changes point to the amplification of emotional intensity, manifested through spontaneity, authenticity, and an emphasis on the emotional turbulence present in the poetry. Relating to these changes contributes towards understanding Somek's unique style in both periods discussed.

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