

The Tense-Mood-Aspect System of Ancient Hebrew: A Debate

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The following is a lightly edited transcript of an online discussion around the TMA (tense-mood-aspect) system of ancient Hebrew. Names of participants are always given in full for easy searching. It differs from the original version in one respect: a cumulative bibliography is included. The original discussion remains available [here](#) and [here](#).

The discussion throws a bright light on the underlying points of disagreement which characterize discussion of tense, mood, and aspect in ancient Hebrew. The spontaneous give-and-take of a multi-author online debate has a different feel to it than the intermittent flow of single-author monographs and essays spaced out over many years. It does not replace that flow, but it complements it in thought-provoking ways.

Introduction

Scholars love to duke it out when it comes to describing the ins and outs of the verb in ancient Hebrew. The amount of nonsense that has been said on the subject is astounding. In this post, I take as my point of departure an essay by Randall Buth entitled “The Hebrew Verb: A Short Syntax,” and defend the following thesis, to wit:

(1) *yiqtol* is the default future tense in ancient Hebrew.

I thank Randall Buth, who has been blogging a bit over at [Alef and Omega](#), for sending me his helpful discussion. Randall Buth’s discussion is a chapter, it seems, from his “Living Hebrew” textbook, which I have on order.

Any discussion of the verb in ancient Hebrew ought to open with a candid reflection on the way grammarians tend to proceed. Here is an example, taken from footnote 6 – scholars love to bury what should be the lede in a footnote – of the cited essay:

We must note a particular characteristic of TMA [tense-mood-aspect – Randall Buth] systems which, though seemingly obvious, has been ignored by virtually all work up to and including Comrie’s (1976) influential study of aspect. . . . what each marker of modality, tense, or aspect means will be largely determined by how many markers of these things there are in the system and by what each of the others mean. Facts such as these are, however, ignored by most scholars in the field, who strive to fit all phenomena into the same conceptual straitjacket.¹

Thank you, Derek. I noticed that, too.

According to Randall Buth, *yiqtol* is a tense-aspect in ancient Hebrew. On this view, sometimes the *yiqtol*’s imperfective aspect is suppressed, and sometimes it is not. I prefer to say that *yiqtol* sometimes marks future tense (and is aspect-neutral); sometimes aspect (for example, in contexts dominated by narrative past tense *wayyiqtol*s); and sometimes, in conjunction with certain function words, mood. In fact, a case might be made that *yiqtol* is aspect-neutral, and that examples Randall Buth classifies as “past habitual” and “past continual” are weak modals, equivalent more or less to ‘would’ in English. Unusually, and only in poetry, *yiqtol* with or without an initial *waw* consecutive serves as a narrative past tense (e.g., in Deut 32:10-18).

It is also a fact that *yiqtol* is the default future tense in ancient Hebrew, corresponding to *qatal* as the default past tense. This is a shorthand way of saying that if one is talking

¹ Derek Bickerton, *Roots of Language* (Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers, 1981) 90.

to someone else in ancient Hebrew, it is correct to reach for a *yiqtol* form when beginning to speak about something one expects to happen in the future, and conversely, it is correct to reach for a *qatal* form when beginning to speak about something that belongs to the past. For example:

אֲנֹכִי אֶעֱשֶׂה כְּדִבְרֶיךָ

- (1) I will do as you have spoken.
Gen 47:30

אֵצֶא וְהִיְתִי רוּחַ שָׁקֶר בְּפִי כָּל-נְבִיאָיו

- (2) I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.
1 Kgs 22:22

עַד יִגְמַל הַנֶּעֶר וְהִבְאֵתִיו

- (3) When the boy is weaned, I will bring him.
1 Sam 1:22

Qatal examples:

אָבִינוּ מָת בַּמִּדְבָּר

- (4) Our father died in the wilderness
Num 27:3

רָאִיתִי אֶת-אֲדֹנָי נֹצֵב עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ

- (5) I saw my Lord standing by the altar
Amos 9:1

נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה בְּיָמֵינוּ

- (6) The Lord swore with his right hand
Isa 62:8

(3) is interesting, because the TMA system of English does not use *its* default future tense in that kind of situation.

Randall Buth makes the argument that *yiqtol* is the default future tense when he notes “which [verb forms] are attested with a word like *מחר* *tomorrow* (52 occurrences in the Bible).” As he points out, *yiqtol*, consecutive *weqatal*, participles, and imperatives are attested with this verb, but not *qatal*. ‘Tomorrow’ *‘Tomorrow’* will do this thing’ is not ancient Hebrew; that would be *מחר יעשה* *‘the thing’* (Exod 9:5). Furthermore, ‘And when my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock,’ which a language that systematically marks aspect might realize with an imperfective – perfective sequence, is realized quite otherwise than with a *yiqtol* – *qatal* sequence in biblical Hebrew:

וְהָיָה בְּעֵבֶר כְּבֹדִי וְשִׁמְתִּיךָ בְּנִקְרַת הַצּוּר

Exod 33:22

Perfective futures in ancient Hebrew are *not* expressed by *qatal*. They are expressed by *yiqtol* or consecutive *weqatal* (as in the preceding example). Therefore, the *yiqtol*-*qatal* contrast is not aspectual in nature. I dare anyone to prove otherwise.

Here are some Russian examples of perfective and imperfective futures. Don't worry, you don't need to know Russian to get the distinction:

Буду читать (imperfective future) статью, надеюсь, что **прочитаю** (perfective future)
I shall **read/be reading** the article and hope I shall **get it finished**.

Когда я **буду проходить** (imperfective future) мимо аптеки, **куплю** (perfective future)
таблетки от кашля

When I **pass** the druggist's I **shall buy** some cough drops.²

Enough of the bluster that *yiqtol* and *qatal* are tense-neutral, and/or primarily aspectual. Rather, *yiqtol* and *qatal* have a number of specific, context-sensitive usages. In conjunction with other discourse cues, they mark tense, mood, and omnipotentiality or lack thereof (*qatal*, like the so-called gnomic aorist in Greek, is used to mark omnipotentiality). If anything, *yiqtol* and *qatal* appear to be aspect-neutral. The terms imperfect and perfect are inappropriate.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 05, 2008 | Permalink

Comments

I think this is also a simpler way to teach ancient Hebrew verbs. Perfective / Imperfective language is confusing for newbies and leads to bad habits. Might there be a designation for the prefix conjugation that describes what it does, as "imperfect" tried to do, and does not connote tense only, as in "future," and avoids the morbidity of *qatal*? Teaching students how to say and write all the forms of "kill" might not be the best first time experience. I know it's a strong verb, but it's not the only one.

Posted by: Daniel Rodriguez | February 06, 2008 at 01:41 AM

Hi Daniel Rodriguez,

I don't like the verb *qatal* either. I learned on *katav* for the *qal*, and I still prefer it for that *binyan*. I like the idea of picking different verbs to learn on for different *binyanim*, but that's just me.

Randall Buth suggests 'future' for *yiqtol* and 'past' for *qatal* in terms of labels in English. But I'm not so sure we need labels.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 06, 2008 at 02:04 AM

Actually, I prefer using *he-`atid* and *he-`avar* and sometimes "*yiqtol*" and "*qatal*" in live classes.

Basic principle: do in Hebrew and reinforce in Hebrew whenever possible, which is almost always.

On the above, without checking context, your example 3 might have used *he`avar* in the subordinate clause. See examples 31-32 in the cited article.³

Randall Buth

² Terence Wade, *A Comprehensive Russian Grammar* (2d ed.; Malden: Blackwell, 2001) 306-307.

³ *Randall Buth, full reference.*

website

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 06, 2008 at 05:47 AM

I agree. In my dissertation on tense, aspect, and modality in the Dead Sea Scrolls, I demonstrate that the *qatal-yiqtol* opposition is one not of aspect, but of tense or modality (if future and habitual actions are modal). A *waw*-prefix is “conversive.” It’s available at [hyperlink].

I teach Biblical Hebrew *yiqtol* as modal, and *qatal* as past (except for semantically stative verbs).

You dared someone to prove the *yiqtol-qatal* contrast is aspectual in nature. I would like to hear your review of two works, one by John Cook ([here](#)), and one by Rolf Furuli ([here](#)).

Ken Penner

Posted by: Ken Penner | February 06, 2008 at 06:33 AM

John Hobbins,

I could not disagree more. I think John Cook’s aspectual model is the best explanation given so far (note the reference that Ken Penner gave). He not only explains the BH data but he, in my opinion, is the only one who has adequately dealt with the various linguistic models and cross-linguistic patterns.

I teach the model we promote in our textbook⁴ and my students rarely have a problem with it. And students that have already studied a language other than English *never* have a problem with it.

You ask for proof -- you’ll not get it (and you haven’t given any “proof” for your model, either). But, if you do want to a model that is scientific,⁵ you’ll need more than a deep knowledge of the biblical texts and a comparison one one other language, you’ll need just as deep a knowledge of TAM systems -- and how they develop diachronically -- in Semitic and in non-Semitic languages. And again, you’ll spend an American PhD worth of time trying to better John Cook’s theory -- and I doubt it’s possible to produce an alternate theory that explains the data from all angles as elegantly as John Cook’s.

Robert Holmstedt

Posted by: Robert Holmstedt | February 06, 2008 at 08:56 AM

John Hobbins,

Notwithstanding Robert Holmstedt’s valiant defense, I will add the following comments regarding your challenge to “prove” otherwise:

1) Your 6 examples are all direct speech. While the verb forms appear to contrast with each other in terms of tense in direct speech (i.e., *qatal* = past, *qotel* = present, *yiqtol* = future), this model does not work for non-speech.

⁴ Robert Holmstedt and John Cook, [here](#)

⁵ If you bristle at my use of "scientific," then I recommend this good article: Pedro Beade, "Falsification and Falsifiability in Historical Linguistics," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 19 (1989) 173-81.

2) Randall Buth's examples with **מחר** do not prove that *qatal* is not past tense; they only prove that it is not non-past tense. Both conclusions assume tense a priori: either *qatal* is past tense or it is non-past tense.

3) Most of your discussion is based on simple intuition, and all by people (you, Randall Buth, Ken Penner) whose native language is tense-based. No wonder the language appears to “work” as tense—that is the character of the metalanguage.

4) As a result, I find statistical studies such as Ken Penner's and Furuli's (despite the great differences between their conclusions and the generally much more sound linguistic foundation to Ken Penner's) provide me with no more than a statistical tallying of their particular intuitive interpretation of the verb in its various contexts. Statistics give a false sense of objective proof in semantic study.

5) So why the differences of opinion on tense versus aspect with regard to *qatal*? I believe it is due to the semantically close relationship between past tense and perfective aspect as noted by Dahl 1985: 79 (available in pdf online: <http://tiny.cc/xGqhl>). Dahl states that cross-linguistically ‘past time reference’ characterizes the typical use of perfective verbs.

(The case is similar to the English “will”: Is it future or modal? Linguists disagree, but I side with [James D. McCawley](#) that since certain statements about the future are judged by people to be “true” or “false,” there must be a non-modal future to be referred to by tensed “will.” Another way to argue the case is that future-time reference always accompanies the use of “will” whereas a modal sense is not always apparent. Similarly, perfective aspect always accompanies the use of *qatal*, whereas past temporal reference is typical but not exclusive of the form, on which see below.)

6) So how then can a case be made for perfective aspect at all? It would appear from Dahl's observation that all perfective forms could easily enough be treated as past tense and then we would eliminate another one of those pesky TAM categories. My response is that there are two types of evidence germane to BH, and which are derived from cross-linguistic analysis and not intuitive interpretation:

a) The first is that the *qatal* form is regularly used for present-time reference performative statements, such as Gen 15:18: **לְזַרְעֶךָ נָתַתִּי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת**. This is directly contradictory to the notion that the *qatal* is past tense, whereas it makes sense with a theory that recognizes that *qatal* is perfective aspect that typically has past-time reference but in cases such as this can have a present-time reference.

b) Cross-linguistically past tense verbs and perfective verbs interact differently with stative predicates, thus providing an objective basis for distinguishing the two. The pattern is a privative marked one: past tense verbs with stative predicates always express states or inchoative events with past time reference, whereas perfective verbs with stative predicates express either past or present time reference, depending on the context. That is why we find in the Bible examples of **יָדַע** in *qatal* expressing present states “I know” (e.g., Gen 12:11: **הִנֵּה־נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אִשָּׁה יִפְתַּמְרָאָה אֵת**). By contrast, *wayyiqtol* always has a past temporal reference (e.g., Gen 3:7: **וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי עִירְמָם הֵם**).

So, just to reply to your “dare,” good-naturedly of course, I “dare” you to explain away this important typological data with your intuitively-based tense interpretation.

For discussion of this typological data, see:

Bybee, Joan. 1998. "Irrealis" as a Grammatical Category. *Anthropological Linguistics* 40: 257–71.

Bybee, Joan L., and Östen Dahl. 1989. The Creation of Tense and Aspect Systems in the Languages of the World. *Studies in Language* 13: 51–103.

Bybee, Joan L., Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca. 1994. *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Dahl, Östen. 1985. *Tense and Aspect Systems*. Oxford: Blackwell.

On *yiqtol* in particular, see my exchange with Jan Joosten in *JANES*:

Cook, John A. 2006. The Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Do Express Aspect. *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 30: 21–35.

Joosten, Jan. 2002. Do the Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Express Aspect? *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29: 49–70.

Posted by: John Cook | February 06, 2008 at 09:45 AM

Now that you've weighed in, John Cook, I should just head for the locker room and call it a day. Whenever you talk about these things, I feel like I'm watching Eli Manning throw the football.

But I'll come back to the topic after I lick my wounds. The game is too much fun, especially among friends.

Thanks to Randall Buth, Daniel Rodriguez, Ken Penner, Robert Holmstedt, and John Cook for joining the discussion. I will take up some of John Cook's points in future posts.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 06, 2008 at 10:05 AM

I'll deal with some of this later on another blog. Let me just clarify an obfuscation by John Cook:

Randall Buth's examples with **נִחַר** do not prove that *qatal* is not past tense; they only prove that it is not non-past tense. Both conclusions assume tense a priori: either *qatal* is past tense or it is non-past tense.

This quoted sentence is a nonsense built around a 'sense' unit that is trying to be hidden (the definition of 'obfuscation').

Let's start at the point of agreement:

they [Randall Buth's examples - Randall Buth] only prove that it [*qatal* - Randall Buth] is not "non-past."

Folksies, that admits that there is a time-component in there somewhere, that there is a time-feature in the verb. There is a positive interactive with 'non-pastness.' It is exactly the smoking gun that 'aspect-only' theorists pretend doesn't exist. 'Aspect-only' would say that the context marks the time, like the word 'tomorrow' in the examples, and the verb would mark the aspects. But 52 to zero the Hebrew verb refuses to use a particular "aspect" with that TIME word. A-priori-ness has nothing to do with this conclusion. It is

simply a false/bad prediction of “aspect-only” theory. That is why the Hebrew verb MUST be defined as a Tense-Aspect-Mood, not a pure aspect, not a pure mood, and not a pure tense. To wrangle about which of the three was first, is a wrangling about etymology, not meaning, to wrangle about which of the three is ‘more prominent’ is a subtle repetition of the same etymological philosophizing and is irrelevant to a language user and to the synchronic system. Once the whole TAM is in the simple verb system, the whole TAM is in the system.

People just don’t seem to understand the impact of closed systems in the language world, illustrated in Bickerton’s research into Creole and TAM. Creole’s tend to start to morphogrammatize ‘perfective’ (so don’t be surprised to see ‘aspect’ at the base of Indo-European or Greek, or child development), but if the morpho-structure stops there, the verb system will use those “aspects” for time as well as mood. The meaning of a system is determined to a large extent by how many pieces the cake is divided, and the cake includes aspect, mood and TIME. Cross-linguistic tendencies are nice, but not water-tight and sometimes done by people who are ignoring “Bickerton’s cake.” [Rajesh Bhat](#) warned people not to use his classification system as a water-tight predictor of semantics. Another example, if sequential tense systems typically have only one person-inflected verb structure, and we find two in biblical Hebrew, would that negate what Hebrew is?

I will expand on my blog next week.

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 07, 2008 at 03:35 PM

Hi John Hobbins,

Thanks for calling this discussion to my attention. I’m sympathetic to your proposal. I teach my students that the basic meaning of *yiqtol* is to express the future. But to my mind that is simplification. In a discussion among grammarians I would rather define the basic meaning of *yiqtol* as the expression of irrealis: *yiqtol* means the process expressed by the verb is not (yet) begun at the moment of speaking (or at reference time); it is contemplated.

In reaction to some of John Cook’s points (hi John Cook) I would say, firstly, that, yes future *yiqtol* forms occur in direct speech: where else would you expect them? Since narrative is situated at a point in the past, it does not allow the use of the simple future. Where the “future in the past” is to be expressed, in narrative, *yiqtol* is used (2 Kgs 13:14 Now Elisha had fallen sick of his sickness whereof he was to die [יָמוּת]).

Secondly, I’m not an English speaker, but I don’t think it’s true “will” statement always refer to the future. John Cook will say that, of course; but English “will” like BH *yiqtol* is also used in the expression of general truths and habitual processes.

I agree that *qatal* is not a past tense (although, again, I do teach my students that *qatal* expresses roughly the past). In my view, *qatal* is a perfect: it depicts the process as anterior to the moment of speaking (or to the reference time where this does not coincide with the moment of speaking). But a grammatical perfect is not the same as a perfective. Performatives, in my understanding, should not be used to argue grammatical meaning because the function is wholly dependent on the pragmatic context. נָתַתִּי can mean “I have given,” and does so very often; only the speech situation (the felicity conditions) may lend it a meaning that we render in English with a present tense.

Finally, and just for fun: *wayyiqtol* does not always have past temporal reference. Ps 45:8 אהבת צדק וְחַשְׁנָא רָשָׁע, “Thou lovest righteousness, and hatest wickedness”. This usage occurs with the verbs בטה, גיל, ירא, ידע, נבהל and לאה.

Jan Joosten

Posted by: Jan Joosten | February 08, 2008 at 02:40 AM

Shalom Jan Joosten,

I, too, am sympathetic to your “future,” a.k.a., “irrealis.”

I think that I see you doing what Joüon did almost a century ago, using terms that are incongruent, in order to implicitly expose the complexity/simplicity of the system. Joüon juxtaposed perfect/future (an aspectual term and a time term) while you are juxtaposing perfect / irrealis (an aspect and a mood).

In a chapter that helped trigger this discussion in [*reference*], I used a term ‘indefinite,’ meaningless by itself and too לועזית for a classroom, in order to include both time and aspect, and implicitly mood, in the label of the Hebrew *yiqtol*. I think that it is helpful for all concerned to follow Bickerton’s advice not to try to ‘straightjacket’ something into one dimension of a multi-dimensional usage and reality. The problem or power of the biblical Hebrew TMA is that it “under-differentiates,” but still covers all the bases, including TIME. In one sense it is using a binary switch in a three+ parameter world.

Actually, Biblical Hebrew uses an emerging three-position switch, since I agree with you that the participle, contrary to Arabic, had already become a real present tense in First Temple Hebrew. (Though a couple of modal lexemes יכול, חפץ, lagged behind and only expanded into the three-layered TMA at the end of the First Temple e.g. 1 Kgs 21:6 אם חפץ אתה ... also LBH. (And בינוני יכל only in Biblical Aramaic).

For the record, we use אני חפץ, אני אינני חפץ in our [*reference*] along with a binary אני לא אוכל, אוכל. We have debated going ‘First Temple only’ which would result in something like a present situation: חפצתי אך לא אוכל “I want to but I can’t.” (Maybe we’ll adopt it this summer, I’ll talk with teachers again. We let in words like כבר.) But the point isn’t time-machine purity, but rapid language acquisition for biblical Hebrew, especially for those not starting from modern Hebrew.

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 08, 2008 at 05:02 AM

Shalom Randall Buth,

The participle of יכל may be attested in Arad (Aharoni) 40:14:

איננו יכלם לשלח

we can't send

This would be First Temple (colloquial?). But the reading is admittedly doubtful.

Posted by: Jan Joosten | February 08, 2008 at 08:43 AM

Thank you for that, Jan Joosten.

I knew I was forgetting something out there. The reading is actually solid for יכלם, it is only the ננו[אי] that is partial. It just reinforces how the participle had taken over for the present tense, because הפצים HAFETSIM and יכלים YEXOLIM were among the last holdouts.

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 08, 2008 at 09:22 AM

Randall Buth and Jan Joosten,

I can't resist responding to your previous post.

1) Randall Buth, your argument is a non sequitur. Although I claim that *qatal-yiqtol* form an aspectual opposition, it does not follow that I deny the BH verb the ability to express TIME. Indeed, I am in full agreement with your reasonable claim that the BH verbal system is Tense-Aspect-Mood; to wit, *wayyiqtol* is past (narrative) tense, *qatal-yiqtol* opposition is aspectual (perfective-imperfective), and VS ordered *qatal* and *yiqtol*, as well as the imperative, are irreal mood. You've chosen to ignore a most important datum in Dahl's observation, that prototypically perfective verbs have past TIME reference.

2) Your dismissive comments regarding "wrangling about etymology" is misplaced, as is your trivializing of cross-linguistic tendencies. In the first case, typologists are now recognizing that, to quote Moravcsik, "Indeed, the only possible causal explanation for a language system is by reference to history: how a given system evolved from something else" (2007: 38). Thus, historical explanation cannot be dismissed from the discussion of the Hebrew verb. The results from those who claim a "synchronic only" approach over the past century have proven as much. In the second case, in the absence of native speakers I would posit that cross-linguistic tendencies are the closest we come to an objective basis for analyzing ancient verbal systems. Thus, we should have to come up with better dismissals of the validity of these tendencies than intuitive or traditional interpretations or pragmatic arguments regarding the easiest approaches to teaching and learning. While pragmatic decisions are bound to play a part in language teaching, they should not be confused with accurate descriptions of the language (this goes to Jan Joosten's points as well; e.g., even though Robert Holmstedt and I teach *qatal* and *yiqtol* as aspectual / modal (based on word order) in our grammar, we do give our students—mostly native speakers of tense-prominent English—rudimentary clues to begin translating these forms that are based in the grammar of their native language, such as use

past tense or a form of the English Perfect to render *qatal*, and use present or future to render *yiqtol*.

3) In response to your comments Jan Joosten (thanks for joining in with us), your example from 2 Kgs 13:14 (Now Elisha had fallen sick of his sickness whereof he was to die [יָמוּת]) demonstrates that point. I can't think of any sample languages that allow a future-tense marked verb form to function with past reference — even if it is future-in-the-past (I would appreciate if anyone does know of an example). I think that examples such as these support instead taking *yiqtol* as aspectual (imperfective) or as modal, as you have; other factors lead me to argue the former rather than your latter option.

4) Point taken that perfect and perfective are not the same thing. However, perfect forms do develop into perfective forms, and in the process they may not lose their earlier perfect meaning. Thus, I explain to my students that *qatal* is perfective (prototypically with past time reference, hence translatable by Past Tense in English and other tensed languages), but that it has held on to its earlier perfect meaning, so that it expresses both depending on the discourse context, verb sequence, etc.

5) I cannot agree though with your dismissal of the importance of *qatal* in performative statements. Perhaps though I could have been more clear. The issue is not simply one of temporal reference, but also aspect: performatives cross-linguistically use punctiliar type verb conjugations (such as perfectives) rather than durative or progressive. Thus, in English the person presiding over a wedding will say “I (hereby/now) pronounce you . . .” but not “I (hereby/now) *am pronouncing you . . .” Thus, the evidence goes towards arguing that *qatal* expresses perfective aspect (even if one still claims that it is past tense); but further, the fact that the performative statement has present time reference remains a valid argument against a past time interpretation of the form. (Unless you persuade me otherwise; I'm not entirely clear on why you object to the argument).

6) Finally, comments on English ‘will’ not having future time reference and *wayyiqtol* sometimes not having past time reference both deal with gnomic or generic type statements. I have argued elsewhere (see [reference]) that gnomic statements (cross-linguistically—sorry Randall Buth) allow for a wide range of verb tenses (see esp. Carlson and Pelletier 1995). Thus, Gross some years ago already noted the use of *wayyiqtol* in gnomic expressions. That said, I would argue that ‘will’ in gnomic expressions portrays the event in a particular light: as a future prediction of what will happen based on the way the world ‘works’ (there are several different models for explaining gnomics, but the point is valid in any case). As for the Ps 45:8 example, I don't think that *wayyiqtol* is non-past there. I render it in English, “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore, God your God has anointed you . . .” The perfect interpretation of the *qatal* holds for the *wayyiqtol* as well, just as in the case of flashback story-lines in BH narrative, where the initial *qatal* expresses past perfect and the following *wayyiqtol* past narrative forms continue the storyline (e.g., Gen 39:14: וַיְהִי כִּי־רָאוּתָהּ בְּיַעֲקֹב בְּגָדוֹ בִּידָהּ וַיִּנָּס הַחוּצָה: or 2 Kgs 13:13–20). On this phenomenon, see both Randall Buth's 1994 article and my 2004 article:

Buth, Randall. 1994. Methodological Collision Between Source Criticism and Discourse Analysis: The Problem of "Unmarked Temporal Overlay" and the

Pluperfect/Nonsequential wayyiqtol. Pp. 138–54 in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, ed. Robert D. Bergen. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Cook, John A. 2004. The Semantics of Verbal Pragmatics: Clarifying the Roles of Wayyiqtol and Weqatal in Biblical Hebrew Prose. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 49/2: 247–73

Moravcsik, Edith A. 2007. What is Universal about Typology? *Linguistic Typology* 11: 27–41.

Posted by: John Cook | February 08, 2008 at 09:59 AM

Randall Buth and Jan Joosten,

This idea that the participle by itself marks the present tense bothers me. If that is what you two are saying, I have problems with that. The topic is certainly worth returning to.

I want to draw everyone’s attention back to some statements by John Cook:

The case is similar to the English “will”: Is it future or modal? Linguists disagree, but I side with [James D. McCawley](#) that since certain statements about the future are judged by people to be “true” or “false,” there must be a non-modal future to be referred to by tensed “will.” Another way to argue the case is that future-time reference always accompanies the use of “will” whereas a modal sense is not always apparent. Similarly, perfective aspect always accompanies the use of *qatal*, whereas past temporal reference is typical but not exclusive of the form, on which see below.

John Cook put all of that within parentheses, which is what scholars tend to do with their best thoughts. But I still don’t see why it’s wrong to suggest that *yiqtol* in ancient Hebrew and “will” constructions in English are alike in many ways. Conversely, I do not find it helpful to explain the verbal system of ancient Hebrew by analogy with verbal systems in which aspect is regularly marked, such as those of Russian and ancient Greek.

For the rest, I’m not convinced that *qatal* נָתַן in John Cook’s Gen 15 example is best analyzed as a present tense performative. I understand there to be past reference: “To your offspring I have assigned this land.” It’s a very interesting case, because the semantics of what is being talked about allows for “staging” along opposite lines. It would have been possible to relate the very same action in future terms; indeed, that is what is done in Gen 12:7 (*yiqtol!*). The promise could just as well have been related in present performative terms, but that, in ancient Hebrew, would have been with הִנֵּה + the participle (cf. Jer 32:3).

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 10:14 AM

John Cook,

Sorry our posts crossed in the mail. I agree with you about the importance of cross-linguistic comparisons and I love historical explanations, but not all, to say the least, are especially convincing.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 10:21 AM

OK, John Cook,

Here is another example of *wayyiqtol* not referring to the past:

אָנְכִי אָנֹכִי הוּא מְנַחֵמְכֶם מִ־אֶת וְתִירָאִי מֵאָנוּשׁ יְמוֹת

I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die?

Isa 51:12

This is not gnomic (nor is Ps 45:8, in my understanding).

Posted by: Jan Joosten | February 08, 2008 at 10:40 AM

Hi Jan Joosten,

Without doing some research on it, my initial reaction to the example is that I agree with you that it is not gnomic. But you will agree that it is one of the very few examples one could dig up of *wayyiqtol* + stative with non-past temporal reference, and I would be inclined to argue further that you have a distinct possibility of confusion between *wayyiqtol* and *yiqtol*: “Who are you that you are afraid” is exactly the context that we would find what Joüon calls an “indirect volitive” *yiqtol*, is it not? Alternatively, perhaps it is best to follow the LXX, which renders it as having a past temporal reference (aorist indicative): “you were afraid . . .”

Posted by: John Cook | February 08, 2008 at 11:08 AM

Dear John Cook,

It’s a pleasure discussing with you. I agree with all three of the points you make.

Posted by: Jan Joosten | February 08, 2008 at 11:35 AM

Jan Joosten,

Couldn’t find some good examples to demonstrate the “inappropriateness” of *wayyiqtol* in the usual rendering “that you are afraid . . .,” but leave it to Delitzsch to pull out the relevant examples: Ex 3:11 אֶל־פְּרַעֲהַ אֵלֶיךָ כִּי אָנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶל־פְּרַעֲהַ and Judg 9:28 מִ־אֲבִימֶלֶךְ וּמִ־שָׁכֶם כִּי נִעְבְּדָנוּ. In light of these examples, I would argue even more strongly that in Isa 51:12 וְתִירָאִי should be amended to a *weyiqtol* or else interpreted as past with the LXX evidence.

Posted by: John Cook | February 08, 2008 at 11:36 AM

I wouldn’t say *wayyiqtol* is inappropriate in Isa 51:12. Several verbal forms may fit one and the same syntactic slot. A question may be followed by a modal clause:

מָה־אָנוּשׁ כִּי־תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ Ps 8:5

What is the human being that you should remember him?

Or it may be followed by *wayyiqtol*:

מָה־אָדָם וְתִדְעֶהוּ Ps 144:3

What is the human being that you do know him?

Here of course the past meaning is feasible: “you have taken cognizance of him” (if this is English).

With verbs like ירא and ידע, the “immediate past” and the present are very close to one another.

Posted by: Jan Joosten | February 08, 2008 at 11:57 AM

Thank you, John Cook,

For trying to deal with the data and explaining yourself. For the record, I too love cross-linguistic explanations. They just need to be done correctly, and they cannot override a specific language’s system. So to substance. You stated:

Randy, your argument is a non sequitur. Although I claim that *qatal-yiqtol* form an aspectual opposition, it does not follow that I deny the BH verb the ability to express TIME. Indeed, I am in full agreement with your reasonable claim that the BH verbal system is Tense-Aspect-Mood; to wit, *vayyiqtol* is past (narrative) tense, *qatal-yiqtol* opposition is aspectual (perfective-imperfective), and VS ordered *qatal* and *yiqtol*, as well as the imperative, are irreal mood. You’ve chosen to ignore a most important datum in Dahl’s observation that prototypically perfective verbs have past TIME reference.

This evades the point that I made about *qatal*. You have just included time with *vayyiqtol*, for that I congratulate you, (though you seem to deny that a *vayyiqtol* / *veqatalti* opposition exists. more below.) But I was talking about *qatal* in the previous note, and it is *qatal* that needs an answer from you first. The מחר evidence suggests that both *vayyiqtol* and *qatal* have time features inside them, not just *vayyiqtol*. (this is only the tip of the iceberg, of course, because most of those ‘conversational’ *yiqtol* referring to future events appear to default as perfective, more on perfective futures below.)

It is certainly not a ‘non-sequitur’ to say that you deny a time component to *qatal*. You just did so again in the quote. You did not explain why there is no *qatal* with מחר but instead accused me of a non-sequitur. Now what do logicians call that? Respectfully, this might be called “evading the question.” But you still haven’t given an answer. (PS: there are some answers, not good ones in my eye, but there are always ‘options.’)

And Dahl’s comments are not relevant to this. Why? Because true perfectives can be also used in future contexts. Far from being confused by ‘past’ and ‘perfective’, some of us are keeping them clearly in view. Note κα γράψω ‘I will write’ modern Greek perfective future. (unambiguously not imperfective future ‘I will be writing,’ which would be κα γράφω). There is no problem with the close correlation of past and perfective in languages around the world. I only have problems with claiming that there is no time in the *qatal* / *yiqtol* contrast. That is what the מחר evidence was showing. So, for Dahl’s comments one can only say מה לי ולו.

Finally, far from being ‘intuition’ or ‘pragmatics,’ this is what the language teaches about itself, through actual attestation and usage, which is how everyone learns their own language. Even ancient Hebrew speakers. (Wow, what a novel idea, the language teaches itself.) If *qatal* / *yiqtol* were pure aspect markers, then ancient Hebrew would accept

*מחר באתי. I just don't like following a system that mispredicts onesidedly in a 52 to zero fashion, especially when future systems themselves have a leaning to perfectivity. Note again modern Greek where this perfectivity is morphologized, something not very common cross-linguistically in comparison to marking within past systems. But not having perfectivity commonly marked cross-linguistically in future morphology does not rule it out of Greek. Incidentally, ancient Greek grammarians grouped the aorist (simple past and perfective) with the future, aspectually. Makes sense, since both developed σ morphology.

So back to the issue, it is *qatal* that never occurs with מחר, showing that time is a feature included within *qatal*, causing it to react with מחר.

And it is *veqatalti* that is the opposite of *vayyiqtol*, and that is frequently in complementary distribution with *X-yiqtol* and both with (*vayyiqtol* vis-à-vis *X-qatal* [including with לָא]). (Exodus 25-40 is a classic.) Bickerton's cake would suggest that if *vayyiqtol* contained a time feature, then *veqatalti* would likely have a time feature.

If your system were to freely predict *מחר באתי, then I am afraid that we would be using two different languages. One of us would be building a 'leaning tower of Pisa' (warning, here comes some intuition: I still believe that never using a system is a sure way to build a system that doesn't work. I've seen that a lot in Africa, where outside linguists would often try to fit a language to a theory. There are even quite a few 'aspect' languages cited in cross-linguistic studies, that on closer inspection were not 'aspect-only', just under-differentiated "Bickertonian cakes" that outsiders needed to label as non-Indo-European).

And for something really fun for you to shoot at, in most contexts where *yiqtol* has future reference the situation covers the 'whole event' and would receive perfective marking in an aspectually sensitive language like Greek. Greek is very sensitive to aspect marking, Hebrew is much less sensitive to aspect. Now I will admit that these last observations are interpretations, mappings of situation to form, but they are an iceberg in size.

And because of the iceberg size of this, I would agree with John Hobbins, enough of 'aspect-only' explanations of *qatal-yiqtol*. In old-fashioned metalanguage: they were wrong.

When we understand how biblical Hebrew works we can turn to its typology cross-linguistically and explain where it fits, where it doesn't fit, and pose reasons why. That is really a lot of fun. You will remember that even Bhat recognizes mixed-scales within typologies.

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 08, 2008 at 02:33 PM

Randall Buth,

I think your point about complementary distributions is very important.

Like you, I try to understand a system from the inside out. I have my doubts about cross-linguistic explanations most of the time, but I find cross-linguistic analogies - and dis-analogies - very helpful. The contrast between ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek

when it comes to aspectual differentiation, for example, is instructive. But you know and could explain that much better than I.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 03:51 PM

Randall Buth,

I will make this brief since your argument is mainly aimed at my take on *qatal* (I'm not going to get into *weqatal* now). I think we must be talking past each other (most innocent interpretation). First, I have never in print nor elsewhere claimed that BH was an aspect-only language, and yet that is what you seem to be attacking me on. *Wayyiqtol* is past TENSE, VS *qatal* and *yiqtol* express IRREAL MOOD. But, as long as it is still recognized that *qatal-yiqtol* is the core opposition of the system, that core opposition is aspectual.

Second, I haven't heard from you a good reason to dismiss Dahl's observation that past temporal reference is a "secondary feature" of perfective verb forms. This explains perfectly why *qatal* does not combine with *מחר*, because past temporal reference is implied by perfective verbs in many languages, including, I would say, Hebrew.

Third, if you are going to continue to simply throw out the *מחר* case, then I should just continue to throw at you all those instances of *ידעתי* 'I know' and the like. Why are they not all past tense if *qatal* is marking past tense?

Thanks again for a great exchange. Always stimulating!

Posted by: John Cook | February 08, 2008 at 05:43 PM

John Cook,

You should run for office. Seriously.

You didn't answer the *מחר* data, for the umpteenth time. Why don't you just admit that the Hebrew *qatal-yiqtol* is a mixed tense-aspect?

Once you accept a mixed tense aspect then *ידעתי* is not a problem. When focusing on time one says *יודעת / יודע*, when focusing on decisiveness one says *ידעתי*; if you want it Englished, 'I have realized,' 'I fully know,' respectively. Yes this is a classic 'perfect' something-completed-in-the-past with present results. In a binary system that is frequently encoded in the "past." (Note quotation marks, I do not claim that *qatal* is a pure past. It's only the straightjacket people, to paraphrase Bickerton, that would do that. Yet sometime I hear you trying to misread me that way!).

And for Dahl, I do recognise that perfectives generally line up with pasts in binary verb systems. there is no point of argument here. But if, in John Hobbins's examples, the perfective is chosen because the context is PAST and the imperfective is chosen because the context is future, not because of marking the aspectual view of the wholeness or completeness of the event, then that is temporal, then there is a time feature within the "tense / aspect". Östen Dahl might be one of those that Derek Bickerton would classify with those who have retreated from the real data to pastel overlays.

All of this stems from the lack of a good linguistic term for a basic binary opposition in a TAM system. A lot of linguists use ‘aspect’ for that, but sloppily, and forgetting what they are talking about, so that they proceed to misapply to real data and real languages. theoretically, one could propose ‘aspect’ for this “tense + aspect” term, as long as it was remembered that a time feature may be included in such an “aspect.” But that would ruin the term ‘aspect’ as a pure parameter term for TAM, and another term would need to be developed for true ‘aspect.’

So will you come out and admit that the מַהֲרָה data, as well as confirming contextual data, shows that the Hebrew *qatal-yiqtol* is a tense-aspect (or aspect-tense, it really doesn’t make any difference)?

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 09, 2008 at 07:49 AM

Randall Buth,

Now, when it comes to discussion the verb with you Randall Buth, I find us falling again and again into arguments over nomenclature. But beneath this I think there lies a fundamental difference of approach—one of discourse-functional versus semantic.

For the record (and in keeping with all that I have previously said and written), the BH verbal system is a tense-aspect-mood (TAM) system in two regards:

- (1) It can indicate a full range of notional meanings traditionally categorized under TAM, such as temporal location of a situation (tense), temporal constituency of a situation (aspect), and the role a speaker wants a situation to play in the discourse (mood / modality—just to use Bybee’s definition; others are possible);
- (2) The verbal forms in the system are morphologically marked for tense (e.g., *wayyiqtol* is past tense), aspect (e.g., *qatal* is perfective aspect and *yiqtol* is imperfective), and mood/modality (imperative and jussive are deontic mood, VS *qatal* and *yiqtol* are more generally unreal mood).

And sure, I admit that the מַהֲרָה data show that the BH verbal system can indicate tense. I never denied that. But this is where you want to end the inquiry, with the notion that the BH verbal system can functionally express tense or aspect, depending on context and speaker strategy. But this leaves unanswered how we know which is being indicated—tense or aspect? If we answer “context” then it threatens to become a viciously circular argument, as are Weinrich’s discourse approach (background to Schneider, Talstra, and Niccacci) and Longacre’s model (Hatav has criticized him of being circular).

Weinrich, for instance, argues that the verb forms in European languages served to indicate discourse type, but how do we know which discourse type they indicate unless we have already determined the discourse type independently of the verb forms, in which case, what possible reason could there be for signaling the discourse type with the verb forms? Thus, the verb form is stripped of all semantic significance, and we devolve into arguments like [Baayen](#)’s, that *qatal* has NO semantics, but signals a disconnect between discourse entities.

Similarly, note your statements above:

the perfective is chosen because the context is PAST and the imperfective is chosen because the context is future, not because of marking the aspectual view of the wholeness or completeness of the event,

Here you actually admit my position by labeling the forms PERFECTIVE and IMPERFECTIVE. But I can agree with your statement only halfway, because you don't see any meaningful connection between the choice of the perfective verb for past temporal reference (and similarly the imperfective for future). If there is no connection, then why have different verb forms? They must contribute something to the expression; they are not just arbitrarily chosen!

Such discourse-functional arguments violate Frege's principle of [compositionality](#), whereby we are required to ask what the individual verb forms contribute to the utterance. I wholeheartedly agree with Fleischmann:

The pragmatic functions of tense-aspect categories in narrative are not arbitrary; rather, I see them as motivated extensions of the meanings of those categories, extensions that, according to the view of grammar as 'emergent' may ultimately contribute to a reshaping of the basic meanings." (1990: 23)

Thus, the way I see it (and no doubt you will correct my perception; but for the sake of those "listening" to this exchange . . .), you are content to say that the verb forms express a range of TAM meanings depending on context, discourse type, speaker strategy, etc. (call it what you like), whereas I am interested in getting beyond this "arbitrary" assignment of discourse function to the verb forms by explaining how the contribution of the semantics of the verb conjugations themselves to the variety of TAM expressions they appear in.

Thus, I argue that the *qatal* conjugation is marked for perfective aspect, because that identification is the most coherent and comprehensive explanation of the data: Why does *qatal* indicate past temporal reference regularly? Because it is perfective aspect, which denotes an event as undifferentiated entity, typical of narrating past events. Thus it has an implied meaning of past. But, given that *qatal* also expresses present temporal reference, such as with stative lexemes, performative expressions, etc., it is less problematic to explain its contribution to each utterance as being perfective aspect than to say it contributes past tense in one instance and perfective aspect in another. This latter judgement just seems sloppy and incomplete to me. We can understand the language better!

Fleischman, Suzanne. 1990. *Tense and Narrativity*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Posted by: John Cook | February 09, 2008 at 11:13 AM

PS: I may have read your response too quickly.

John Cook said:

This explains perfectly why *qatal* does not combined with מחר, because past temporal reference is implied by perfective verbs in many languages, including, I would say, Hebrew.

I can read this as meaning that Hebrew “perfective” is in fact a TENSE-ASPECT, or ASPECT-TENSE if you wish. But if you say that, then it would miscommunicate to claim that Hebrew *qatal-yiqtol* has no time component within it. Your Dahlian definition of “aspect” is already including time within the aspect. (I am not sure if Dahl says or demands that, one of the problems of quoting outside ‘authorities’). But in any case, your definition now includes time with “aspect.”

If you would simply highlight that, would make it transparent, there would not be a problem. Since the discussion proceeds as though there is a difference, I end up assuming that you don’t really use or include the time component when you yourself say ‘aspect.’ And as mentioned, if “aspect” includes time, then there are two terms out there, creating confusion. I would rather keep aspect for what it is, and then be precise, so that we don’t have perfective futures marked as “imperfective.” That really is a non-sequitur, or an inversion of the ‘aspect’ term through a hidden re-definition that uses ‘future’ inside itself in order for the “imperfective [sic]” to be used for a perfective without implying imperfectiveness. Weird. Linguistics is supposed to take us beyond such double-speak.

And then why in the world would anyone object to a “tense-aspect” or an “aspect-tense”? That keeps things transparent in the term and helps prevent nonsense like students who might say “it’s an aspect, so there is NO time involved.”

Posted by: [Randall Buth](#) | February 09, 2008 at 11:57 AM

PS: (this is a second PS, the first appears to have been swallowed somewhere) I may have read John Cook’s response too quickly. (Depends how to read the word ‘implied’. Is time there, or isn’t it.)

Randall Buth and John Cook,

Perhaps this is what it boils down to:

For you, John Cook, the *qatal / yiqtol* contrast is, fundamentally, one of aspect, but past temporal reference is implied by the use of a perfective form, the *qatal*, in specific cases;

For you, Randall Buth, the *qatal / yiqtol* contrast marks, fundamentally, both time and aspect; in specific instances, the aspectual dimension is suppressed.

I think you two agree on quite a bit.

Meanwhile, though the three of us pooped out in this discussion long before the two of you, Ken Penner, Jan Joosten, and John Hobbins continue to think that *yiqtol* is future / modal, and aspect-neutral.

Posted by: [John Hobbins](#) | February 09, 2008 at 01:14 PM

John Hobbins,

Nice summary.

I am very happy with *Authors C, E, and B*’s aspect-neutral future modal, that is exactly what I see for *yiqtol* and *ve-qatal* outside of past contexts. Within past contexts I see both habitual and incomplete examples (even supported by etymological predictions based on comparison with Arabic), so I use the ‘aspect’ word rather than ‘modal’. As I

mentioned in my [reference], my tense-aspect is short for ‘tense-aspect-mood,’ and I discuss mood separately under specifically modal morphology. And a lot of that chapter is taken up with explaining how *qatal-yiqtol* can be used for mood. However, the summary glosses over the original incongruity, the Dahl-John Cookian “perfective” that implies itself into a past context but is NOT used in independent future sentences to mark perfectivity.

John Cook, I am grateful for the stimulation to engage and clarify positions. Hopefully, things clarified will not retreat. You said:

Thus, I argue that the *qatal* conjugation is marked for perfective aspect, because that identification is the most coherent and comprehensive explanation of the data: Why does *qatal* indicate past temporal reference regularly, because it is perfective aspect, which denotes an event as undifferentiated entity, typical of narrating past events. Thus it has a implied meaning of past. But, given that *qatal* also expresses present temporal reference, such as with stative lexemes, performative expressions, etc.

It still appears that you are using ‘implied’ in order to deny actual existence, and once again have left out the fact that such a view would allow (‘would predict’ in some linguistic circles) a *qatal* to mark perfective futures. The מחר data is only the tip of this iceberg. When we have a false prediction, we have a less-satisfactory theory. You would counter that Dahl would allow you to use ‘imperfectives’ for future perfectives, so the ‘perfective’ is not necessary. But if you did that, then you would have a time-based, AD-HOC footnote, and you surely don’t want to press me to use the ‘A’-word. [For Semitists: AD-HOC is very strong language within generative linguistics :-)]

As for “sloppy”, we can take it up with the ancient speakers, or most any binary tense-aspect-mood system in the world. All languages have points of weakness and ambiguity, which is why they continually change. Theory must allow for what’s there and then generate neither too little nor too much.

“Incomplete” would belong to a “perfective” theory with false predictions and to one that would seem to deny a synchronic *vayyiqtol-veqatal* dichotomy, too. (I am aware that etymologically and comparatively the dichotomy is a neo-structure. But etymology is NOT semantics. And if one allows some time in *vayyiqtol*, and if *veqatal* functions in a dichotomous relationship with *vayyiqtol*, then one has just added time to *veqatal*, too.)

“Better” should require a comprehensive semantics (yes, semantics, not pragmatics, I agree with ‘compositionality’) in regard to the data. “Better” would then be able to eat cake (Bickertonian), and have it, too.

So I see our disagreement as based on internal dynamics of attested data and structural oppositions (with both *qatal-yiqtol* and *vayyiqtol-veqatal* having a binary TAM with tense a feature) versus a particular application of external theory. External theories are not monolithic and can be applied differently, but one cannot change the language.

Posted by: [Randall Buth](#) | February 10, 2008 at 04:09 AM

The *yiqtol* / *qatal* contrast in ancient Hebrew

In a [previous exchange](#), I touched on a controversial topic: how best to describe the tense-aspect-mood system of the verb in ancient Hebrew. For example, does *yiqtol* mark tense, aspect, or both, and in what contexts? I argued, if only as it were on the back of a napkin, that it marks *tense*, and is aspect-neutral; John Cook, who has researched the question in great detail, argues that it marks *aspect*, and is tense-neutral; Randall Buth, who has engaged the topic at length, argues that it marks *tense and aspect* in some instances, and *tense only* in others. Ken Penner commented that his [] on Qumran Hebrew supports the view that *yiqtol*, at least in that corpus, marks the *future* – whether to call the future a tense or a mood being a separate question. Robert Holmstedt indicated his agreement with John Cook, and notes that the textbook he and John Cook have put together, which I very much like, describes the verb in terms of aspect. In this post, I explore the *yiqtol* / *qatal* contrast in more detail.

An observation about nomenclature. Some grammar books and Hebrew teachers use terms like *perfect* and *imperfect* for the sake of convenience, not because they want to take sides in a debate. I remember being taught to refer to *yiqtol* and *qatal* as imperfect and perfect early on, but at the time, the terminology did not speak to me one way or another. It was only after I began to read in the field of linguistics that I started to ask questions and formulate hypotheses. This post, and others which follow, is not meant to cut off discussion, but to stir it up. In my previous post, I came out swinging. In this post, the boxing metaphor does not apply. I just want to take a closer look at the evidence.

The first thing to note about *yiqtol* is how seldom, relatively speaking, “free-standing” *yiqtol*s occur. By free-standing, I mean *yiqtol*s not introduced by **כִּי** or **וְהָיָה כִּי** or **פֶּן** or **כִּאֲשֶׁר** and so on. *Yiqtol*s of all kinds, furthermore, are not nearly as frequently occurring as are the workhorses of biblical narrative, to wit: consecutive *wayyiqtol*s and *weqatals*.

With respect to **כִּי**-introduced *yiqtol*s and such, there is general agreement, I think, that they are modal. They deserve very careful study, but I leave them to one side here.

Like Randall Buth, I have trouble wrapping my mind around John Cook’s assertion that “Randall Buth’s examples with **מָחָר** do not prove that *qatal* is not past tense; they only prove that it is not non-past tense.” But I want to be teachable, so keep at me, John Cook! That **מָחָר** does not occur with *qatal* remains telling in my book.

Here is another example: what happens with **וַאֲחֵר** / **בֵּן** / **וַאֲחֵר־בֵּן**? These examples are typical:

וַאֲחֵר בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן

Afterward Moses and Aaron entered.
Exod 5:1

וַאֲחֵר בֵּן יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאוֹת אֶת־הַבַּיִת

After that the priest will enter to examine the house.
Lev 14:36

Is the difference between Exod 5:1 and Lev 14:36 one of aspect? I don't see how that could be the case. The *yiqtol* / *qatal* difference marks a difference in tense.

Again:

וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יֵצְאוּ בְרֵכְשׁ גָּדוֹל

After that, they will go out with great wealth.
Gen 15:14

וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן קָבַר אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ

After that, Avraham buried Sara his wife.
Gen 23:19

Is the difference between 15:14 and 23:19 one of aspect? How is it possible to claim this?

Once more:

וְאַחַר נָפְצוּ מְשִׁפְחוֹת הַכְּנַעֲנִי

Afterward, the Canaanite clans spread out.
Gen 10:18

וְאַחַר יִשְׁקָה אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֶת־הַמַּיִם

Afterward, he will make the woman drink the water.
Num 5:26

I'm leaving *qotel* out of the picture because I'm not convinced that Randall Buth is right that *qotel* marks present tense in ancient Hebrew. But once again, I want to be teachable, so don't give up on me yet, Randall Buth!

My intuitive sense of how the verbal system works in ancient Hebrew is bound to be wrong in certain sectors. The question is: where? It's all well and good to be directed to the secondary literature, but there is no agreement on these matters there. Linguistically trained Hebraists agree among themselves no more than do philologically trained Hebraists. With respect to the issue at hand, I still think I'm right: free standing *yiqtol* / *qatal* marks a difference in tense.

February 08, 2008 | Permalink

Comments

John Hobbins,

I agree for the most part with where you're going, but should make a couple of cautionary comments.

First, it is probably possible to find a couple of examples or counterexamples to any of the major hypotheses regarding the semantics of the *qatal-yiqtol* opposition. This is how the tense model was "disproven": by providing a few examples of *yiqtol* for past reference and *qatal* for future reference. What is needed is an examination of a large sample that is not hand-picked to prove a point. I am inclined to guess that such an examination would lead to the rejection of the aspect hypothesis for Biblical Hebrew, but I make that guess based on my work with the Dead Sea Scrolls, not on any systematic examination of biblical texts.

Second, what you describe as a tense distinction could at least as easily be considered a distinction of modality. Of the three *yiqtol* statements you used as examples above, only one is a prediction; the other two are prescriptions.

I should also note that John Cook makes the best case I've seen for aspect, but I still find it unconvincing. I take issue with every one of the points in his comment to the earlier post. I am puzzled by a grammar that describes the *qatal-yiqtol* in terms of aspect (whole vs. in-progress), then says the perfect is used predominantly for past-time events, and the imperfect for non-past time events. It glosses the imperfect into English as a perfective (!) future: "he will attend". I don't see what is "in-progress" about this translation of the ostensibly "imperfective" *yipqod*. Would not "he is attending" or even "he will be attending" convey the imperfectivity better? Is this not how we would express non-past and in-progress actions in English?

Ken Penner

Posted by: Ken Penner | February 08, 2008 at 08:23 AM

Ken Penner,

I agree that one must be careful not to cherry pick the data. I should have been clearer that this post was based on systematic research covering all occurrences of *yiqtol* and *qatal* with אָהַר כֵּן, אָהַר, etc. There are further cases of predictive *yiqtol* with אָהַר.

It is also true that future tense and modality are interrelated with one grammatical form used to indicate both. That seems to happen in a lot of languages.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 09:40 AM

Hi John Hobbins,

Well you have managed to create and keep astir an interesting discussion. You note your interest over nomenclature. I would encourage you to call for care in distinguishing between "marking" and "expressing." All of us here in the discussion and most listening in (to retain the aural metaphor) would agree that the BHVS can express a full range of Tense-Aspect-Mood meanings. But this is different from the issue of the marking of individual verb forms. There are some who may argue that the latter (i.e., what meaning is expressed by the verbal conjugations) to be pointless, but this is to open up the door to discourse-pragmatic theories that run roughshod over syntax, semantics, and even sometimes morphology. I side with those who remain committed to the idea that words do mean "something" in isolation, otherwise we would be violating the most basic linguistic principle of compositionality (namely, that the meaning of an expression is based on the contribution of the constituent parts). Thus, it is important to ask what the contribution of the individual verbal conjugations are to the TAM meanings they express.

Thus, in your examples I wholeheartedly agree that there is an opposition of time going on, though I would prefer to label it "temporal reference" rather than "tense," because the latter implies verbal morphological marking. The perfective *qatal* expresses past temporal reference a majority of the time; *yiqtol* expresses future temporal reference a majority of the time. These facts do not mean that these conjugations are marked for

past tense and future tense respectively, just as the fact that modal verbs have future time reference does not automatically mean they are marked for future tense.

Making this important distinction goes a long way toward showing the common ground amongst us all regarding which verbs can express which meanings in BH. It is with regard to the explanation of what each conjugation contributes to these TAM expressions that we differ with one another.

Posted by: John Cook | February 08, 2008 at 10:12 AM

John Cook,

Thanks for pointing out the common ground amongst us all.

I like your suggestion that we use the terminology of temporal reference rather than tense so as not to decide the question before the race is run.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 10:27 AM

Hi Ken Penner,

I hadn't seen your post before I posted my comments. I appreciate your insightful remarks on my work. I appreciate your being unconvinced by *yiqtol* as imperfective expressing future, but it is indeed supported by cross-linguistic evidence, namely, that imperfectives can express general (not just imperfective) future (see Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994: 275–76). We should bear in mind that the major difference between progressives and imperfectives is the generalization of meaning in the latter case. Hence, it is not entirely suitable to render the imperfective *yiqtol* with future time reference with English Future Progressive “he will be attending.” Note similarly the ability of English present and present progressive to express future when in a future context: “I travel / am traveling to Kentucky next week.”

Thus, to take one of John Hobbins's examples, Gen 15:14: אֲנִי אֶעְרָא has future temporal reference because of the context of future prediction that began, in this case, with הִנֵּה in the previous verse. (I am of the opinion that הִנֵּה is a tensed verb form: *yiqtol* for future and *qatal* for past. Longacre (2003: 64) rightly notes that the verb ‘to be’ is a special case in many languages.

Additionally, in light the alternative branching model of Bybee and Dahl versus Kurylowicz (see my discussion in [reference], and the following paragraph), the expression of progressiveness versus a more general imperfective meaning is more apparent in past time reference in which the imperfective contrasts with the typically past-time referencing perfective. Hence, in non-past time an imperfective can express either general present/future temporal reference or more specifically a progressive sense. The fact that there are nearly no (I can't pull an example of the top of my head, can anyone else?) future progressive *yiqtol*s is in large part due to the marginality of future progressives in all language communication. When was the last time any of you English speakers used a Future Progressive expression?

Just to make the argument explicit, the contrast between Kurylowicz's models of Semitic and Bybee and Dahl's model of verbal systems in their cross-linguistic data comes down to a dispute over which is more basic to verbal systems, tense or aspect.

Kurylowicz argues that former, stating that languages must distinguish tense before aspect (logically and etymologically) in their verbal systems. By contrast, Bybee and Dahl make several arguments that aspect is more basic in the world's verbal systems, and propose a branching model as representative of over half the languages in their data set. The model consists of a primary perfective / imperfective contrast and a secondary tense distinction for the imperfective. As I've stated in earlier comments, they find no reason to have an explicit tense distinction for perfective verbs, because they prototypically have past time reference, where they contrast with past imperfective verbs. By contrast, the imperfective can have general non-past tense/aspect reference because it does not contrast with an explicit perfective form in most cases. Dahl cites Classical Arabic as a prime example, in which *qatala* is perfective and limited mostly to past temporal reference, and *yaqtulu* is the general imperfective, which can have a general non-past sense, and *kana yaqtulu* (i.e., the periphrastic imperfective construction) that is marked for past imperfective in contrast to perfective (past) *qatala*.

Cook, John A. 2006. The Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Do Express Aspect. *JANES* 30: 21–35.

Bybee, Joan, Revere Perkins, and William Pagliuca. 1994. *The Evolution of Grammar: Tense, Aspect, and Modality in the Languages of the World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Longacre, Robert E. 2003. *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence. A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39-48*. 2nd ed. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Posted by: John Cook | February 08, 2008 at 10:48 AM

John Cook,

- a. Still no explanation as to why there is no *qatal* with מָחַר data.
- b. Now no explanation as to why the different verbs בָּא and יָבוֹא were chosen. Why did the Ken Pennero what he did? John Hobbins appears correct that these are not being chosen to mark aspect.
- c. I am quite unsatisfied with “imperfective” perfective futures. It's been many a year since I've read the studies cited, what do they say about modern Greek, a truly aspect-sensitive language? How do we know that Bickerton is not right about these studies, too, perhaps they are citing others who are ignoring the “Bickerton cake”?

John Hobbins, you said:

I'm leaving *qotel* out of the picture because I'm not convinced that Randall is right that *qotel* marks present tense in ancient Hebrew. But once again, I want to be teachable, so don't give up on me yet, Randall!

אינני מרפה ולא ארפה

Here is something that might help:

Try to list five examples of actual, present tense *yiqtol*, that are not questions or poetry (often reinterpretable as generic / habitual.) As mentioned, I don't accept אוֹכֵל, since that is a specific modal lexeme, mixing with the modal-friendly side of *yiqtol*.

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 08, 2008 at 03:25 PM

Randall Buth,

Does Dahl represent a consensus point of view when he interprets the classical Arabic verbal system as at root aspectual? Or is there a continuing debate in that field that mirrors the one in ours?

I have an Arabist friend I could ask, but you might know the answer off the top of your head.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 03:58 PM

NOTE: Randall Buth blogged a reply on this point [here](#).

Joosten vs. Cook on Tense-Mood-Aspect in Ancient Hebrew: The Skinny

For helpful summaries of the contenders' positions, check out this post and its follow-up over at *[blog]* (a very interesting blog). *[Blog]* begins the series with a great John Cook quote:

Teaching is, after all, a form of show business.

A humorous reminder from a master pedagogue.

But why be satisfied with the skinny when Jan Joosten and John Cook's relevant essays are available online in pdf form, a click or two away? Here are the links:

[Jan Joosten](#), "Do the Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Express Aspect?" *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29 (2002) 49-70

[John Cook](#), "The Finite Verbal Forms in Biblical Hebrew Do Express Aspect," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 30 (2006) 21-36

תודה רבה to [] for making [] available online. ALL academic journals should be available online free of charge, with subscriptions continuing to be paid for paper copies by research institutions and individuals in exchange for a set of additional perks.

February 08, 2008 | Permalink

Comments

John Hobbins,

Thanks for the mention, I think you meant to say that the quote is from Steve Martin, not John Cook :). I had already read the Jan Joosten and John Cook articles last week, your interesting post/follow-up discussion gave me the impetus to get my summaries up. And by all means, please read the actual articles before/instead of my summaries.

Posted by: Pete Bekins | February 08, 2008 at 01:57 PM

Pete Bekins,

Nice to have you comment here. Keep up the great work!

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 08, 2008 at 03:44 PM

John Hobbins,

One of my grad school linguistics profs, T(almy) Givon, a sabra from Israel, has written on Biblical Hebrew tense-aspect:

Givón, T. 1977. The drift from VSO to SVO in Biblical Hebrew: The Pragmatics of Tense-Aspect. Pp. 181-254 in *Mechanisms for Syntactic Change*, ed. C. Li. Austin: U. Texas Press.

Givón, T. 1991. Serial verbs and the mental reality of 'event': Grammatical vs. cognitive packaging. Pp. 81-127 in *Approaches to Grammaticalization. Volume 1: Theoretical and Methodological Issues*, ed. E. C. Traugott and B. Heine. Typological Studies in Language 19/1. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

He told me I could pass on these citations to you.

Posted by: Wayne Leman | February 10, 2008 at 06:03 PM

Wayne Leman,

Thanks. Now if Givon would come on over and share his wisdom with us, we would all be most thankful.

Posted by: John Hobbins | February 10, 2008 at 06:24 PM

Wayne Leman,

Thank you, I haven't seen the '91 article. However, the '77 article doesn't really help or apply. Talmy ignored the **וּן הַהִפּוּךְ** *vav conversive* in his analyses, merging *vayyiqtol* and *yiqtol* together as one tense-aspect if I remember correctly, and he mixed genres/selections in his word order statistics so that they illustrate his point of VSO-to-SVO, but don't really prove it, especially if Mishnaic Hebrew is VSO. (He would have the language switch from VSO to SVO to VSO? I'm getting dizzy.) He asks good questions, though.

Posted by: Randall Buth | February 11, 2008 at 04:23 AM

Now if Givon would come on over and share his wisdom with us, we would all be most thankful.

I'm hoping for that, John Hobbins. I have forwarded yours and Randall Buth's responses to him, so maybe that will be enough to motivate him to come here.

Posted by: Wayne Leman | February 11, 2008 at 01:30 PM

NOTE: Givon wrote to say that he stands by his earlier articles.

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For a brief introduction to aspect, go [here](#); to grammatical tense, go [here](#); to grammatical mood, go [here](#).