Life and death expressions in Hebrew through time

Hava Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot and Einat Kuzai

Abstract

This paper deals with expressions of life and death in Hebrew and their development from biblical to contemporary usage. Based on several corpora, it is shown that death expressions are more prone to change compared to life ones and that the mechanisms involved in these processes may differ in kind.

1. Introduction

Lexical items referring to life and death regularly acquire various meanings in addition to their original ones. The consistent development of new meanings is likely due to the centrality of these concepts in human existence.

Several life and death expressions, including metaphoric ones, are found as early as Biblical Hebrew. However, many expressions referring to death have evolved into constructions in Modern Hebrew expressing intensification or disagreement, completely losing their lexical meaning, as demonstrated in (1).

(1) a. *lacum beʃavu'ot? **lama mi met**?*
   'fasting in Shavuot? **I don't think so**' (lit. 'Why who died?'; HeTenTen).

   b. *'ani **meta 'al** xacil.*
   'I'm **crazy for** eggplant' (lit. 'I'm dying on eggplant'; HeTenTen).

   c. *A: 'ani haxatan. B: **hayita met**!*
   'A: I'm the groom. B: **you wish**!' (lit. 'You were dead'; Hebrew Corpus).

Similarly, expressions referring to the concept of life have also extended beyond their meanings in present-day Hebrew, even though the main sense has remained to some degree, as illustrated in (2).

(2) a. *hasignon hamuzikaly ʃel ʃiri hu **gadol mehaxayim**.*
   'Shiri's musical style is **larger than life**' (HeTenTen).

   b. *pa'am **hayu li xayim**.*
   'Once I **had a life**' (HeTenTen).

   c. *hu **lo yode'a mehaxayim ʃelo***
   'He **doesn't know shit**' (lit. 'He doesn't know from his life'; HeTenTen)

In this corpus-based study, we seek to present the evolution of life and death expressions from biblical times to Contemporary Hebrew, including the spoken mode. We intend to explore the change paths that life and death expressions have gone through over time, aiming to uncover the processes underlying those changes as well as their origins. For these purposes, we will use Jewish corpora, including Biblical, Mishnaic, and later Judaic and Israeli literature, e.g. Responsa Project, The Historical Dictionary Project, Historical Jewish Press, CoSIH, HeTenTen, and Hebrew Corpus. It is important to note that Hebrew expressions involving life and death have been studied mainly from a cultural perspective (e.g. Medina 2010; van Uchelen 1994). Diachronic-semantic studies investigating those items have yet to be conducted to our knowledge.

The first part of the paper presents the semantic analysis and classification of life and death expressions in Contemporary Hebrew. The second part is devoted to their diachronic analysis. In the third and last part, we conclude the paper by discussing reoccurring principles of evolution.

2. Life and death expressions in Contemporary Hebrew

In this part, we analyze the above-mentioned expressions in Contemporary Hebrew. Based on the corpora consulted, we found 26 different expressions accommodating life and death nouns or verbs in present-day Hebrew. These expressions were classified into four types of constructions according to parameters of function, syntactic structure, and semantic themes. The four types are metaphoric constructions, propositional intensifiers, illocutionary intensifiers, and interpersonal constructions. Table 1 presents the distribution of life and death expressions in Contemporary Hebrew, as found in the corpora, according to construction type.

	metaphoric constructions	propositional intensifiers	illocutionary intensifiers	interpersonal constructions	Total
Life expressions	11	2	0	0	13
Death expressions	4	2	5	2	13

Table 1. The distribution of life and death expressions in Contemporary Hebrew according to construction type.

As can be seen in Table 1, death expressions display more variation relative to life expressions. The following sub-sections present several of the life and death

expressions found respectively, illustrating the four types of constructions while focusing on the extent to which the core meaning of life and death concepts are preserved in present-day Hebrew.

2.1. Life expressions

As illustrated in Table 1, most of the life expressions in the corpora are metaphoric constructions. In this type of use, the concept of life is metaphorically evoked to syntactically compact complex notions associated with life, e.g. experiences limited in time, meaningful activities, the essence of existence, cherished objects, uncontrolled processes, and the total of one's experiences. These expressions are syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically varied and stretch from clauses to vocatives, denoting both positive and negative meanings, sometimes pragmatically utilized to express speakers' stances. However, in all of these cases, the concept of life seems to be preserved. Consider, for instance, the tokens in (3).

(3) a. *xaʃavtem ʃhem yaʃvu kol haxofeʃ babayit vehitga'age'u elexem? tiʃkexu mize.* **hem 'asu xayim meʃuga'im.**
'You thought they sat at home all vacation missing you? Forget it. **They had the time of their life**' (lit. 'They did crazy life'; Hebrew Corpus).

   b. *harikud biʃvili ze hakol,* ***ze haxayim****, lo yexola bli ze.*
'Dancing is everything for me, **it's my life**, can't do without it' (lit. 'It's the life'; Hebrew Corpus).

In (3a), the writer remarks that the addressees' children did not miss them, and they in fact had a crazy time without them. The word *xayim* ('life') here is embedded in the semi-schematic construction *X la'asot xayim Y* ('X do life Y'), with X referring to the agent and Y serving as an optional adjective denoting the nature of an experience. In the token above, life indicates a dynamic occurrence limited in time. In other tokens found, life may refer to difficult or easy experiences, yet in all of these cases, the expression refers to an activity limited in time, similar to one of life's central characteristics - an ongoing process with a beginning and an end. In (3b), the writer stresses that dancing is everything for her, she can't be without it, and that it is her life. The existential clause *ze haxayim* ('it is the life') describes the essence of existence, as subjectively viewed by the speaker.

3

Existential expressions also appear in the negative form, indicating a lack of significant activities within a certain timeframe. These expressions appear with dative pronouns, marking the logical subject as an experiencer, as illustrated in (4).

(4) a. *lo halaxti lemixlala, lo xaverim, lo klum, **mamaʃ lo hayu li xayim**.*
'I didn't go to college, no friends, no nothing, **I really didn't have a life**' (Hebrew Corpus).

   b. *'eyn lo ma la'asot, 'eyn lo sipuk miklum, uvekicur **'eyn lo xayim**.*
'He doesn't have anything to do, he doesn't feel satisfaction from anything, and to make a long story short, **he doesn't have a life**' (HeTenTen)

In (4a), the writer is reflecting on the past, at a time in which he did not go to college and he didn't have any friends. He then uses the existential expression 'I really didn't have a life', characterizing this period as one lacking any meaningful experiences. In (4b), the same idea is expressed differently – the writer refers to a third person, complaining about his inactivity and lack of satisfaction. He then concludes that 'he has no life', i.e. he is not currently doing anything significant that can bring a person a sense of purpose and accomplishment.

Another expression that metaphorically evokes life is the vocative *xayim ʃeli* ('my life'), which may be also phonologically reduced to *xayim* ('life'). In (5), for example, the speaker is addressing her friend as *xayim ʃeli* while telling him she loves him and thanking him for everything he has done for her. Thus, in this type of vocative the concept of life is evoked to express the notion of a precious object to be cherished. It is worth noting, however, that this expression seems to become a general way to address somebody in informal speech, even someone that the speaker hardly knows.

(5) *'oʃer 'ohevet male **xayim ʃeli** toda 'al hakol.*
'Osher, I love you so much, **my dear**, thanks for everything' (lit. 'My life'; HeTenTen).

A different life expression refers to certain experiences as uncontrolled processes. In this type of use, life metaphorically describes a complex notion of lack of power over feelings or occurrences, as demonstrated in (6).

(6) a. *haxarada hazo nexona legabey kulam. **ze haxayim** vezehu.*
'This anxiety exists within everyone. **That's life** and that's it' (HeTenTen).

b. *'ima xalta besartan vehayu harbe rivim baayit. ma la'asot?* ***'ele haxayim****.*
'Mom had cancer and there were a lot of fights at home. What can you do? **That's life**' (HeTenTen)

Both in (6a) and (6b), this notion is accentuated by the use of either the particle *zehu* ('that's it') indicating completion (Shor & Inbar, 2019) or a reversed-polarity question expressing the claim that there is nothing to do (Koshik 2002).

In the last metaphoric expression that we present here, the word *xayim* is part of a prepositional phrase (PP) and refers to the totality of one's experience and occurrences which contribute to the degree of knowledge and education. As exemplified in (7), by saying someone 'doesn't know from his/her life', writers are looking down on addressees' or third parties, completely denying their judgmental capacity.

(7) a. *'eyn lexa ma lehit'acben 'alav!* ***hu lo yode'a mehaxayim ʃelo****.*
'You shouldn't get mad at him! **He doesn't know shit**' (lit. 'He doesn't know from his life'; HeTenTen).

b. *kula bat 12* ***lo yoda'at mehaxayim ʃela****.*
'She's all but 12, doesn't know shit' (lit. 'Doesn't know from her life'; HeTenTen)

As mentioned above, the second semantic category of life expressions, propositional intensifiers, consists of only two constructions according to our data. Even though the constructions are clearly based on a metaphor, they also express propositional intensification, i.e. they modify propositional content (Bazzanella, Caffi & Sbisà, 1991). In both constructions, the word *xayim* appears as PP with the preposition *me-* ('from', 'than'), indicating a high degree. The first expression is a fixed construction *gadol/gdola mehaxayim* ('larger than life'), in which life, as a totality of occurrences and experiences, is evoked to express the notion of 'to a high degree'. This expression is mainly used in positive connotations as in (8) in which a character (8a) or love (8b) are propositionally intensified.

(8) a. *habicu'a ʃelo hicig* ***dmut gdola mehaxayim****.*
'his performance presented **a character   larger than life**' (Hebrew Corpus).

b. *zehu sipur 'al* ***'ahava gdola mehaxayim****.*
'This is a story about **a love larger than life**' (HeTenTen)

In the second expression, exemplified in 9 below, the prepositional phrase *mehaxyim sheli* ('from my life') is equivalent to the PP *mimeni* ('from me'). The speaker in this example states that he does not understand what a third party wants from him. The phrase *mehaxyim sheli* then seems to evoke the concept of life, as the total of one's experiences, to indicate a strong degree of bother.

(9)　　*'ani lo hevanti **ma hi roca mehaxayim ʃeli.***
　　　'I didn't understand **what she wanted from me**' (lit. 'What she wanted from my life'; HeTenTen).

2.2. Death expressions

Like life expressions, death phrases are also in use as metaphoric constructions and propositional intensifiers in Contemporary Hebrew. However, contrary to life expressions, death phrases are members of two other categories - illocutionary intensifiers, i.e. expressions upgrading speakers' inner states of hopes and desires (Bazzanella, Caffi & Sbisà, 1991) and interpersonal constructions marking disagreement and rejection of an interlocutor's stance or claim. In this subsection, we discuss several cases found in the corpora to exemplify the varied and productive use of death expressions in present-day Hebrew.

Similar to life expressions, the concept of death may be metaphorically used to refer to physical and abstract notions associated with death, e.g. the end of a process (10a), lack of vitality (10b), and the absence of meaningful experiences (10c). Hence, these expressions often denote negative meanings, preserving the dreary connotation of death. Syntactically, the component referring to death is embedded in the clause as a predicate or an adjunct.

(10)　　a.　*lelo migvan de'ot **hademokratya tiye meta.***
　　　　　'Without a variety of opinion **democracy will be dead**' (HeTenTen).

　　　　b.　*'aba **met mibifnim.***
　　　　　'Dad is **dead from inside**' (Hebrew Corpus).

　　　　c.　*haderex ha'ultimativit lahafox **zman met** lizman 'exut.*
　　　　　'The ultimate way to turn **dead time** into quality time' (HeTenTen).

Nevertheless, other metaphoric expressions referring to the concept of death may mark unpleasant experiences, not necessarily leading to severe and dramatic outcomes, as in (10a) or (10b). In the tokens in (11), for instance, the direct object

6

mavet ('death') is a complement of the semi-auxiliary verb *la'asot* ('doing'), with the dative pronoun marking the experiencer. These tokens may refer to a person being nagged (11a) or more seriously suffering from harassment (11b). In both cases though the concept of death marks an unfavorable experience.

(11) a. ***miki 'asa li et hamavet*** *'al xoser hahitxaʃut becimxonim.*
          'Miki gave me a hard time for not being considerate toward vegetarians'
          (lit. 'Miki did me the death'; HeTenTen).

      b. *mi ʃeya'ez lehafer et hakod hanokʃe haze,* ***ya'asu lo et hamavet*** *bebeyt hasefer.*
          'A student who dares break this strict code **will be given a hard time** at school' (lit. 'Will do to him the death'; Hebrew Corpus)

The second type of use of death expressions is as a propositional intensifier. In these kinds of expressions, the component referring to death is embedded in the clause as a predicate complemented by the PP [*me*('from')+NP] or as an objective genitive. In both kinds, the concept of death intensifies a particular mental or physical state explicitly expressed to the highest degree, e.g. boredom (12a), quietness (12b), or laughter (12c). Similar to metaphoric death expressions, most of the propositional intensifiers which we found mark a negative experience or situation. The only expression referring to a positive experience is the phrase *met/a micxok* ('dying from laughter'), as in (12c).

(12) a. *'axʃav 'ani yoʃev bebeyt xolim,* ***met miʃi'amum***.
          'Now I'm sitting in the hospital, **dying from boredom**' (HeTenTen).

      b. *hakol sviva haya ʃaruy* ***bidmamat mavet***, *keʃeket lifney hase'ara.*
          'Everything around her was quiet as death, like calmness before the storm' (lit. 'In quietness of death'; HeTenTen).

      c. *ʃom'im oti bareka* ***meta micxok***.
          'You can hear me in the background **dying from laughter**' (HeTenTen).

The third category of death expressions consists of illocutionary intensifiers. This type of use is particular to death expressions. In this category, the idea of death, which is syntactically represented as the predicate, intensifies a desire, urge, or need for something to a high degree. Interestingly, unlike the examples in (12) above, the inner state intensified in these expressions is not explicitly expressed. Rather, the lexical noun denoting sensation is absent , resulting in a construal of the concept of death as either a negative or positive experience, depending on the complement of the death

7

predicate. The meaning of death then seems to be more bleached in this type of use, mostly marking a heightened emotion. Consider, for instance, the following tokens.

(13)　a.　*'ani haxi 'ohevet et hasxiya ki **'ani meta 'al hamayim**.*
　　　　'I love swimming most because **I really love being in the water**' (lit. 'I'm dying on water'; Hebrew Corpus).

　　　b.　*hu be'acmo benadam xamud me'od, **'ani met alav**.*
　　　　'He's a very nice person, **I really like him**' (lit. 'I'm dying on him'; HeTenTen).

　　　c.　*'ani **meta lesigarya**.*
　　　　'I'm **dying for a cigarette**' (HeTenTen).

　　　d.　*'ani crixa et haʃixrur **ve'ani meta livkot**.*
　　　　'I need the release **and I really need to cry**' (lit. 'I'm dying to cry'; HeTenTen).

In (13a), the structure *'ani meta 'al* (lit. 'I'm dying on') followed by a non-animated noun *mayim* ('water') is used to describe the speaker's affection for being in the water, upgraded by the use of the verb *meta* ('dying'), thus explaining her passion for swimming. In (13b), a similar structure followed by an animate pronoun denotes the speaker's fondness for a person, intensified by the predicate *met* ('dying'). In (13c), the structure *'ani meta le* ('I'm dying for') marks a momentarily strong urge for a cigarette. In (13d), the predicate *meta* complemented by the infinitive *livkot* ('to cry') also expresses a strong urge. In this example, this urge is directed toward a negative experience, namely to cry. Note that while the concept of dying in (13a)-(13b) represents a lasting state, the expressions in (13c)-(13d) represent a momentary situation. This difference may stem from the expressions' distinct use of prepositions. According to Vardi (2015: 38), both constructions using the preposition *'al* and constructions using the preposition *le-* have a directional meaning. However, it seems to us that the preposition *le-* ('to') is more associated with notions of dislocation, e.g. transfer and movement, while the preposition *'al* ('on') may refer to stable situations, as demonstrated in the constructed examples in (14). This may explain the difference of meaning between (13a)-(13b) and (13c)-(13d) though more extensive research on this topic is needed.

(14)　a.　*natati **leraxel** et hasefer.*
　　　　'I gave the book **to Rachel**.'

b. *hu ʃoxev '**al** haricpa.*
'He is lying **on** the floor.'

A related expression to the tokens in (13) is the phrase *ba le-X lamut* ('X feels like dying'). This phrase is a part of the more schematic construction *ba le-X Y* ('X feels like Y') which refers to momentarily urges and needs. Accordingly, the phrase *ba le-X lamut* describes a speaker's urge to die often metaphorically evoking the concept of death to indicate the strong, involuntary effect of a stimulus over the speaker (Kuzai & Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot, forthcoming), as in (15).

(15) *kʃe'ani koret et yomaney ne'uray **ba li lamut**.*
'When I read through the diaries from my youth **I feel like dying**' (lit. 'Come to me die'; HeTenTen).

The fourth and last category of death expressions, according to our data, is interpersonal constructions. Two kinds of expressions were found in the corpora under this category, both mostly frequent in informal daily speech. The first one is a rhetorical question emphasizing surprise or objection to a claim introduced in a previous proposition. Thus, similar to the previous category introduced, the concept of death in this type of expression is bleached, as demonstrated in (16).

(16) a. *'ani lo mevina lama 'adam normativi boxer 'al da'at 'acmo laruc 42.2 kilometer […] **lama mi met?***
'I don't understand why a normative person chooses to run 42.2 km […] **Who died?**' (lit. 'Why who died?'; HeTenTen).

b. *higi'a macav ʃebo morim mexalkim et mispar hatelefon ʃelahem lxol 'exad. lama? ma kara? **lama mi met?***
'Teachers nowadays tend to hand out their telephone number to anyone. Why? What happened? **Who died?**' (lit. 'Why who died?'; HeTenTen).

c. *hanevelot ha'ele yikxu 5 dolar 'al kol zug taxtonim ʃeniʃlax lixvisa? **lama mi met?***
'Those bastards are going to charge 5 dollars for underwear sent to to the laundry? **Who died?**' (lit. 'Why who died?'; HeTenTen).

In (16a), the speaker questions the motivation of marathon runners nowadays to make such an effort and emphasizes her lack of understanding using the phrase *lama mi met* ('who died?'). In (16b), the speaker is surprised that teachers hand out their phone numbers to students. The expression is combined with two other rhetorical questions, *lama* ('why') and *ma kara* ('what happened') to accentuate the speaker's astonishment at the situation. In (16c), the speaker is commenting on the price of laundry services.

9

The following phrase *lama mi met* expresses the speaker's objection to such a price and indicates his refusal to send an item for laundering.

The second kind of interpersonal expression found is the phrase *hayit/a met/a* ('you wish'). This expression signals speakers' rejection of interlocutors' claims, arguments, or speech acts, framing the plausibility of their occurrence as improbable. This is also emphasized by the use of the past tense. In (17a), for example, the first speaker demands that the addressee come along with her. She, in turn, replies 'you wish, I'm not coming', completely rejecting her demand and explicitly expressing her refusal to do so. In (17b), a discussion by two players takes place. One of the players asks what the score is and suggests that he is winning. Once again, the answer is 'you wish', declaring that this is wrong and wishful thinking on his behalf while the truth is completely different. In (17c), the speaker is insinuating that she is as valuable as the addressee by using a rhetorical question. She uses the death expression *hayit meta* ('you wish') to emphasize the rejection of the addressee's implication.

(17) a. *A: 'at ba'a. zo lo ʃe'ela zot 'uvda.*
          *B: **hayit meta**, 'ani lo ba'a.*
          'A: You're coming. That's not a question; it's a fact.
          B: **You wish**, I'm not coming' (lit. 'You were dead'; HeTenTen).

      b. *A: kama 'anaxnu? 10? 12 letovati?*
          *B: **hayita met**.*
          'A: What's the score? 10? 12 in my favor?
          B: **You wish**' (lit. 'You were dead'; Hebrew Corpus).

      c. *ma 'ani paxot tova mimex? **hayit meta!** 'ani bidyuk kamox.*
          'What, am I not as good as you? **You wish!** I'm just like you' (lit. 'You were dead'; HeTenTen).

To sum up this section, the examples discussed above clearly show that life and death expressions do not behave the same way. While the concept of life is preserved, at least partially, in all the expressions found, the sense of death is bleached in some of the constructions (*met 'al*, *lama mi met*) and becomes an intensifier or an interpersonal marker. Interestingly, those tendencies already partially existed in earlier stages of Hebrew. As will be illustrated in the third part, these tendencies have been accentuated over time up to Modern Hebrew.

3. Diachronic paths

In this section, we present how life and death expressions were used in earlier Hebrew strata and what change mechanisms were involved in their evolution through time. Due to limitations of space, we do not address the specific evolution path of each expression. Rather, we aim at portraying a general picture according to the four types of categories discussed in the previous section. Subsection 3.1 outlines the use of life and death expressions in earlier Hebrew strata. The following subsection discusses the change mechanisms involved in the evolution of these expressions through time.

3.1. The use of life and death expressions in earlier Hebrew strata

Similar to their use in Contemporary Hebrew, life and death expressions appear as metaphoric phrases since Biblical Hebrew. While the concept of life is often associated with favorable attributes such as wisdom, prosperity, and vitality, the concept of death is associated with negative notions, e.g. sin and terror. Table 2 presents several of the metaphoric life and death expressions found in the corpora according to timeframe – Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Medieval Hebrew (1000-1500), Haskalah (1700-1900), and Hebrew revival (1901-1930).

	Metaphoric life expressions	Metaphoric death expressions
Biblical Hebrew	*pri cadik **'ec xayim*** 'The fruit of the righteous is **a tree of life**' (Proverbs 11:30 KJV).	*'afafuni **xevley mavet**.* '**The sorrows of death** compassed me' (Psalms 116:3 KJV).
Mishnaic Hebrew	*bedavar ʃeyeʃ bo **ruax xayim*** 'In a thing that has **the spirit of life**' (Jerusalem Talmud).	*vesartem miderex xayim **lederex mavet**.* 'And you deviated from a way of life to **a way of death**' (Sifre to Deuteronomy).
Medieval Hebrew (1000-1500)	**begiʃmey xayim** *tixye* 'adama '**In rains of life** the land will be fertile' (1050).	*'atem **miʃoreʃ mavet**.* 'You are **from the root of death**' (1056).
Haskalah (1700-1900)	*uleha'iram **be'or haxayim*** 'And to lighten them **in the light of life**' (1765).	**veze'at mavet** *'al 'pi nigra*. '**And the sweat of death** dripped down my nose' (1809).
Hebrew revival (1901-1930)	*ve'ani me'orero, mosif lo **sam xayim ze**.* 'And I arouse interest in him, adding to him **this drug of life**' (1901).	**velibi met** *bekirbi*. '**And my heart died** within me' (1902).

Table 2. An illustration of metaphoric life and death expressions found in earlier Hebrew strata.

As opposed to the category of metaphoric constructions, life and death expressions are distinct regarding their use as propositional intensifiers. While life expressions modifying propositional content such as the phrase *gadol mehaxayim* ('larger than life') are found only after Hebrew revival, death expressions functioning as propositional intensifiers are found as early as Biblical Hebrew, though to a lesser degree. The content modified by these expressions relates only to negative experiences. The expression *met micxok* ('dying from laughter') found in contemporary Hebrew and discussed above is attested only since Hebrew revival, according to the available data. The tokens in (18) demonstrate the use of death expressions as propositional intensifiers through time.

(18) a. *vayomer heytev xara li **'ad mavet**.*
'And he said, I do well to be angry, even **unto death**' (Jonah 4:9 KJV).

b. *ʃeyefaxadu **'eymat mavet**.*
'That they will be scared **to death**' (lit. 'Terror of death'; 1100).

c. ***vetardemet mavet*** *nafla 'alay.*
'**And sleep deep as death** came upon me' (lit. 'Sleep of death'; 1853).

d. ***mar mimavet*** *haya li be'odesa.*
'I had an experience more **bitter than death** in Odessa' (1909).

The other two categories unique to death expressions, i.e. illocutionary intensifiers and interpersonal constructions are found only in Modern Hebrew. Illocutionary intensifiers are attested in the corpora beginning the mid 20th century (19a) while interpersonal death expressions are attested only toward the end of the previous century (19b).

(19) a. ***'ani met 'al tupim***, *'ani muxrax tupim.*
'**I really love playing drums**, I must have drums' (lit. 'I'm dying on drums'; 1965).

b. *lama carix lekabel 'iʃur 'al yecu yeda cva'i velo yeda xakla'i,* ***lama mi met?***
'Why do you need a permit to export military knowledge but not agricultural knowledge, **who died?** (lit. 'Why who died?'; 1991).

In what follows, we discuss the change mechanisms involved in the evolution of life and death expressions through time according to construction type. We argue three processes have taken place in the emergence of these expressions: metaphoric mapping, pragmatic strengthening, and constructional extension. We particularly address the varied use of death expressions relative to life ones by reviewing the motivation for the change of emotive intensifiers suggested by Jing-Schmidt (2007) - the negativity bias.

3.2. Change mechanisms

As illustrated in Section 2, the core meaning of concepts of life and death is preserved to varying degrees according to construction type. In metaphoric expressions, for example, these concepts convey notions associated with them. In the case of life, the notions relate to favorable attributes whereas in the case of death, they relate to negative ones. Metaphors and the processes responsible for their emergence have received considerable attention in relevant literature. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a thorough review. Instead, we focus here on the conceptual account of metaphors as discussed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). According to the authors, abstract ideas are often presented in everyday speech in terms of physical notions.

13

Thus, when talking about love, one may conceptualize romantic relationships as journeys, as evidenced by expressions such as 'we're at a crossroads' and 'this relationship isn't going anywhere'. Thus, in our understanding of abstract notions there is a metaphoric mapping of features from the physical world, the source domain, onto the abstract world, i.e. the target domain (ibid.). When a new expression, coined via metaphoric mapping, is used frequently in the speech community, it may become a conventionalized phrase in a given timeframe in the history of the language (Langacker, 1987). Accordingly, we find various metaphoric life and death expressions in different strata of Hebrew, some of which are still in use in Contemporary Hebrew, though mostly restricted to a specific genre and register, e.g. *'ec haxayim* ('the tree of life'), *libi met bekirbi* ('my heart died within me'). However, the mechanism involved in the emergence of all of these types of expressions is metaphoric mapping. Consider, for instance, the following tokens in (20).

(20) a. *bney ha'adam yafixu **ruax xayim** bexol davar 'aʃer 'eyneno ʃam.*
         'Humans will instill **a spirit of life** in every object in which it does not exist' (1913).

      b. *hu yode'a harbe yoter tov mimeni 'eyx **'osim xayim** bayam.*
         'He knows how **to have fun** at sea much better than me' (lit. 'To do life'; HeTenTen).

Although these examples are structurally different and are attested in different timeframes, the same conceptualization underlies both, namely 'living is doing'. Life is therefore conceived as the opposite of stillness, identified with constant motion. In this conceptualization, a senso-motoric feature from the source domain 'motion' is mapped to the abstract idea of life. Since life is the essence of human existence, it is no wonder it is associated with positive attributes compared to the concept of death. This concept, in turn, is often conceptualized as an end of a process, explaining the appearance of metaphoric death expressions in negative contexts, as illustrated in (21).

(21) a. *kol hfsaka be'avodat hakolonizacya **tavi mavet** lexol ha'inyan.*
         'Any break in the work of the colonization **will bring death** to the whole matter' (1903).

      b. ***biʃvili** hu **met**.*
         'He's **dead to me**' (Hebrew Corpus).

As suggested by Vardi (2015) based on a synchronic analysis, a metaphoric mapping may have also been involved in the emergence of the illocutionary intensifier *X met 'al Y* (lit. 'X is dying on Y'). According to the author, the concept of death evolved into expressing inner states of adoration, desires, and urges due to the projection of features such as totality and passiveness from the source domain, death, to the target domain, love/desire. In fact, as discussed by Vardi (2015: 45-46), evidence for the conceptualization of both domains as intense experiences may be found in the biblical verse presented here in (22).

(22)   *ki 'aza kamavet 'ahava.*
       'For love is strong as death' (Song of Solomon 8:6 KJV).

It is worth noting that the emergence of death expressions functioning as illocutionary intensifiers may have been motivated by analogical thinking (Traugott 2011). Since death adverbials modifying negative propositional content are already attested in Biblical Hebrew, as illustrated in the previous subsection, the concept of death has been associated with the notion of intensification throughout the history of the Hebrew language. Therefore, it is conceivable that speakers may have exploited this association to express positive intensification, especially since similar expressions to *X met 'al Y* are also present in languages spoken during Hebrew revival, i.e. Yiddish (Rosenthal, 2018: 755).

Other than metaphoric mapping, the mechanism of pragmatic strengthening may have also played a part in the changes described in subsection 4.1, particularly in the evolution of death expressions into propositional intensifiers. According to the Invited Inferencing Theory of Semantic Change (IITSC; Traugott & Dasher, 2002; Traugott & König, 1991), speakers may innovatively use an expression, inviting hearers to infer the implicature conveyed beyond the literal meaning of the phrase. At this stage, the implicature is particularized, but as the expression is used more frequently at various usage-events to convey this inference, the implicature may become generalized through pragmatic strengthening, leading to the emergence of a new coded meaning. Concerning death expressions or adverbs modifying propositional content, previous studies have found that these items tend to evolve through a similar path. First, the item modifies meanings characteristic of death or ones which may lead to death such as 'pale' or 'sick'. Interpreters may infer that death in these contexts

15

indicates 'to a high degree' due to it being the ultimate limit in human existence. As this implicature pragmatically strengthens with ongoing usage, it may become a coded meaning, leading to the expansion of the expression with other kinds of propositional contents, ones not necessarily associated with death (Blanco-Suárez, 2014; Gyselinck & Colleman, 2016; Margerie, 2011). In the case of Hebrew, as mentioned in the previous subsection, death expressions functioning as propositional intensifiers are attested as early as Biblical Hebrew. However, these examples are very rare, with only three tokens found. In Medieval Hebrew and Haskalah, however, death adverbials increasingly modify features related to death ('terror') or physically similar to death ('silence'), as demonstrated in (23). These instances may be interpreted as indicating or causing death, but at the same time they may imply scalarity by the implicatures – (a) 'if something may cause death, then it is potent to a high degree' (b) 'if something seems to be dead, it displays characteristic X to the highest degree'.

(23) a. *ve'eymot mavet naflu 'alav mize.*
          '**And terrors of death** befell on him from that' (1500).

      b. *dumiya misaviv! dumiyat mavet!*
          'Silence all around! **Deathly silence!** (lit. 'Silence of death'; 1853).

Similar to the change path described in other languages, we find death expressions modifying features not necessarily associated with death in later strata such as 'boredom' (24a) and 'laughter' (24b), suggesting that death adverbials evolved into intensifiers via pragmatic strengthening of the implicature 'to a high degree'.

(24) a. *xavrehem yac'u laevalot vehem nifʼaru badira. ʃiʼamum mavet.*
          'Their friends went to have fun and they stayed in the apartment. **Bored to death**' (lit. 'Boredom of death'; 1987).

      b. *macxik 'ad mavet, halo ken?*
          'He is **dead funny**, isn't he?' (lit. 'Funny till death'; 1990).

 The last change mechanism we discuss here, constructional extension, relates to the emergence of the death expression functioning as an interpersonal construction indicating disagreement and rejection – *lama mi met* ('why who died?'). Since the work of Goldberg (1995), numerous studies have shown how semi-schematic argument structure constructions restricted to a limited number of predicates may evolve into more productive structures, appearing with a variety of lexical items from

16

different semantic fields (e.g. Barðdal, 2007; Perek, 2016). Israel (1996), for example, studied the development of the way-construction in English and found that the construction evolved from a structure restricted to verbs describing physical actions which enable the creation of a path ('They hacked their way through the jungle') to a construction appearing with a wide range of verbs generally indicating a way of achieving an agent's goal ('She typed her way to a promotion'). Another illuminating study in this respect is the work of Borochovsky and Sovran (2003). In their research on the idiom *X 'ibed 'acmo lada'at* ('X committed suicide'), the authors found that this fixed expression is expanding in present-day Hebrew, appearing with a variety of verbs to convey the meaning of intense activities, e.g. *hu pitpet 'acmo lada'at* ('He talked to death'). Based on these studies and the data at hand, we suggest that the interpersonal expression *lama mi met* ('who died?') evolved by the process of constructional extension. Consider the following examples:

(25) a. *lama 'ani crixa lehargiʃ kmo hameʃaretet ʃelxa?* **lama mi met*?*
          'Why do I need to feel like your servant? **Who died**?' (lit. 'Why who died?'; HeTenTen).

      b. *'anaxnu nos'im [...] befaxad.* **lama ma kara***? milxama? 'im 'ani lo yaxol lehistovev xofʃi, gam hem lo yistovevo xofʃi.*
          'we drive [...] in fear. **Why what happened**? War? If I can't move freely, neither will they.' (1984).

The rhetorical questions in (25), *lama mi met* and *lama ma kara*, are structurally similar and they both signal an objection to an accessible proposition or implicature in the discourse. Since *lama ma kara* appears in the corpora earlier than its counterpart, we suggest that the interpersonal death expression emerged by constructional extension, i.e. the embedment of the lexical items *mi* ('who') and *met* ('died') in the now generalized semi-schematic construction *lama [question word] [verb]* signaling objection and disagreement. The emergence of an interpersonal death expression on the basis of an existing construction may have been motivated by speakers' need for expressivity (Meillet, 1912), i.e. intensifying strong emotions of disagreement. A verb referring to death is suitable for this purpose since it indicates an extreme occurrence. Thus, when speakers ask rhetorically *lama mi met* ('who died?') when it is apparent no such drastic event took place, they express the claim that there is absolutely no justification of interlocutors' stances and arguments.

17

Throughout this paper, we have demonstrated how the concept of death has evolved into expressing a wide range of meanings, some of which are not necessarily associated with death. These developments seem to be intrinsically linked to signaling extreme situations and intensified inner states and emotions, among them positively connotated concepts of love, adoration, and desire. The concept of life, though also evolving into several types of expressions, seems to be preserved in its various uses in Contemporary Hebrew. This seeming anomaly, whereby a negative concept changes into expressing positive intensification over a more positive related concept, may be explained by the negativity bias, as discussed in Jing-Schmidt (2007). Based on a cross-linguistic study on emotive intensifiers, the author argues that emotive intensifiers tend to evolve from negative concepts in different languages since negative experiences have more influence on human behavior and cognition compared to positive ones. According to this argument, the greater impact of death on human cognition may underlie speakers' linguistic choices in describing extreme situations and heightened emotions (see also Shefer and Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot, 2020: 46-47; Vardi, 2015: 47).

4. Conclusions

This paper explored the usage of life and death expressions in Hebrew, both synchronically and diachronically. Unexpectedly, it was found that the concept of death is much more productive than the concept of life, even in earlier strata of Hebrew. Other than the obvious metaphor of death as an ending point, which is found only in some expressions, death appears in three other kinds of constructions: propositional intensifiers (*met mi-X*), illocutionary intensifiers (*met 'al X*), and interpersonal constructions (*lama mi met*). Through time, the meaning of death has become less transparent in specific kinds of constructions (e.g. *lama mi met*) and has completely bleached in others (e.g. *met 'al*). In contrast, life expressions appear only in metaphoric constructions and propositional intensifiers. However, the range of metaphors used in these expressions is much more diversified. Life may indicate positive attributes (e.g. wisdom and beauty), experiences limited in time, meaningful activities, the essence of existence, cherished objects, uncontrolled processes, and the total of one's experiences. Nevertheless, life expressions are less productive in Contemporary Hebrew and, unlike death constructions, their lexical meaning seems to be retained both diachronically and synchronically. This difference is suggested as

18

resulting from the negativity bias, i.e. the wide-spread influence of negative experiences on human behavior and cognition compared to positive ones. This negativity bias may also explain the extensive range of change mechanisms involved in the emergence of death expressions contrary to life ones. As mentioned by Ravid (1995: 171), some changes are more successful than others. In this study, we have shown that the development of death expressions is by far more extensive, than life ones; a finding which indicates the more successful evolution of death constructions.

References

Barðdal, Jóhanna. 2007. The Semantic and lexical range of the ditransitive construction in the history of (North) Germanic. *Functions of Language* 14(1): 9-30.

Bazzanella, Carla, Claudia Caffi, and Marina Sbisà. 1991. Scalar dimensions of illocutionary force. In I. Zagar (ed.), *Speech Acts: Fiction or Reality?*, 63–76. Ljubljana: Institute for Social Sciences.

Blanco-Suárez, Zeltia. 2014. Oh he is olde dogge at expounding deade sure at a Catechisme: Some considerations on the history of the intensifying adverb dead in English. *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* 46(1): 117-136.

Borochovsky, Ester, and Tamar Sovran. 2003. Outlines of Modern Hebrew Construction Grammar. In R. Ben-Shahar, and G. Toury (eds.), *Hebrew a Living Language*, 31-49. Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad [in Hebrew].

Goldberg, Adele E. 1995. *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gyselinck, Emmeline, and Timothy Colleman. 2016. Tracking shifts in the literal versus the intensifying fake reflexive resultative construction: The development of intensifying dood 'dead'in 19th–20th Century Dutch. *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 30(1): 55-90.

Israel, Michael. 1996. The *way* constructions grow. In A. E. Goldberg (ed.), *Conceptual Structure, Discourse and Language*, 217–230. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Jing-Schmidt, Zhuo. 2007. Negativity bias in language: A cognitive-affective model of emotive intensifiers. *Cognitive Linguistics* 18(3): 417–423.

Koshik, Irene. 2002. A conversation analytic study of yes/no questions which convey reversed polarity assertions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34(12): 1851-1877.

Kuzai, Einat, and Hava Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot. Forthcoming. Analogical interference in constructionalization: The emergence of the Hebrew desiderative *ba le-X Y*.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

Langacker, Ronald W. 1987. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar: Volume 1. Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Margerie, Hélène. 2011. Grammaticalising constructions: *to death* as a peripheral degree modifier. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 32: 115-147.

Medina, Richard W. 2010. Life and death viewed as physical and lived spaces: Some preliminary thoughts from proverbs. *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 122(2): 199-211.

Meillet, Antoine. 1912. L'évolution des forms grammaticales. *Revista di scienza*, XII 6 [reprinted in 1958: *Linguistique historique et linguistique générale*, Paris: Champion: 130-148].

Perek, Florent. 2016. Using distributional semantics to study syntactic productivity in diachrony: A case study. *Linguistics* 54(1): 149–188.

Ravid, Dorit. 1995. *Language Change in Child and Adult Hebrew: A Psycholinguistic Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rosenthal, Ruvik. 2018. *Dictionary of Israeli Slang*, 2nd ed. Ivrit & keter-modan [in Hebrew].

Shefer, Hagit, and Hava Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot. 2020. From negative to positive in spoken Hebrew. *Helkat Lashon* 53: 32-53 [in Hebrew].

Shor, Leon, and Anna Inbar. 2019. The meaning of zehu in spoken Israeli Hebrew. *Scandinavian Studies in Language* 10(1): 131-151.

Traugott, Elizabeth C. 2011. Grammaticalization and mechanisms of change. In B. Heine, and H. Narrog (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Grammaticalization,* 19–30. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Traugott, Elizabeth C., and Richard B. Dasher. 2002. *Regularity in Semantic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Traugott, Elizabeth C., and Ekkehard König. 1991. The semantics-pragmatics of grammaticalization revisited. In E. C. Traugott, and B. Heine (eds.), *Approaches to Grammaticalization,* volume I, 189-218. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

van Uchelen, Nico. 1994. Death and the after-life in the Hebrew Bible of ancient Israel. In J. M. Bremer, T. van den Hout, and R. Peters (eds.), *Hidden Futures: Death and Immortality in Ancient Egypt, Anatolia, the Classical, Biblical and Arabic-Islamic World*, 77-90. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Vardi, Ruti. 2015. 'I'm dying on you': Constructions of intensification in Hebrew expression of love/desire/adoration. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 13(1): 28-58.