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► To cite this version:

| Pablo Kirtchuk. Hebrew and General linguistics. 2011. hal-00603766

HAL Id: hal-00603766

<https://hal.science/hal-00603766>

Preprint submitted on 27 Jun 2011

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HEBREW AND GENERAL LINGUISTICS

Pablo Kirtchuk

It is important, before going to the heart of the matter, to distinguish linguistics from philology, and within the former between a particular language [family] linguistics and General Linguistics (henceforth GL). Philology studies, compares and completes texts, mostly ancient, in order to grasp cultural, literary or other realities, whilst for a linguist a text is one of the means to explore language itself. In other words, for a philologist language is but a means, albeit an indispensable one, while for the linguist it is an aim. Moreover, a linguist is interested in many aspects of language, especially dynamic ones, which do not necessarily reflect in texts: phylogeny; ontogeny; psychology; anatomy and physiology of the organs involved in language production and comprehension; grammaticalization and incipient languages (Creoles, pidgins), among other aspects. A linguist is – or should be – especially interested in oral language, which only indirectly concerns the philologist. Secondly, in the framework of linguistics itself, a specialist of a particular language or language family most often does not explore language [families] other than the one he specializes in, while the GL approach consists in using the data from individual languages of different families and structures to learn more about language in general. In this context, concentrating on one language [family] won't do.

It is generally admitted that GL as such blossoms with the posthumous publication of de Saussure's (1857-1913) *Cours de Linguistique Générale* in 1916. De Saussure had had precursors and correspondents such as Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), Hugo Steinthal (1823-1899), William Dwight Whitney (1827-1894), Georg von der Gabelentz (1840-1893), Jan Baudouin de Courtenay (1845-1929), Michel Bréal (1832-1915); among others, as he had disciples and colleagues, either direct such as Charles Bally (1865-1947), Albert Séchehaye (1870-1946) and Antoine Meillet (1866-1936), or indirect such as, among others, the American Jews Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949), considered as the founder of distributionalism or American structuralism. Most of them make some reference to Hebrew in order to illustrate a linguistic statement, but it is usually made *en passant*. In Sapir's 'Language' (1920) examples in Hebrew are quoted to make a morphological point. Lucien Tesnière's (1893-1958) 'Eléments de Syntaxe Structurale', prepared during the first half of the XX century even if it only appeared in 1959, also has references to Hebrew¹, in order to show that actantial variations in the verb can be expressed by morphological means, while other languages may express them by syntactic or lexical means. As for research on Hebrew as such, until the 1950s it was mostly led on philological bases, with true but scarce general linguistic insights made especially by Paul Joüon (1871-1940), Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai (previously Torczyner, 1886-1973), Edward Yehzekel Kutscher (1909-1971), Haiim Rabin (1915-1996), Haim Blanc (1926-1984), Joshua Blau (1919-) and Zellig Sabbetai Harris (1909-1992), as well as Irene Garbell and Shlomo Morag (previously Mirkin) among others. A special mention must be made of Meir Max Bravmann whose deep and far-reaching GL insights on many a question are relevant, original and all the more compelling as, while

¹ In 1984, I had the honor of counting Yveline Tesnière, the linguist's daughter, among my students of Hebrew at the *Institut National de Langues et Civilisations Orientales* in Paris. It is her father that inspired her interest for the language, she said. In 1993, Dr Tesnière assisted to the public defense of my Doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne. This was as close as possible to having her admired father in the audience.

exploring syntax, *i.e.* structure, he gives primacy to the communicational and pragmatic factors; his detractors, on the other hand (*e.g.* Blau) only proceed from syntactic considerations, which is a wrong methodology inasmuch as grammar, including syntax, is an output, not an input of linguistic reality, originated at all levels, including synchrony, in biological, communicative and pragmatic factors (Kirtchuk 2007 and forthcoming)

It is only in the second half of the XX century that a thorough investigation of Hebrew from its oldest stages to its contemporary forms in the light of modern linguistic theories was engaged, by the dominating figure of Haiim Rosén, whose first training was that of a classical philologist. At the end of the 1940s, after completing a dissertation on Herodotus under Hans-Jakob Polotsky (1905-1992) he went to Paris to study under the great Jewish French linguist Emile Benveniste (1902-1976), Meillet's most gifted disciple. Rosén can be considered therefore as a member of the fourth generation of Saussure's linguistic offspring, and indeed the study of Hebrew in a GL perspective has been marked by the seal of structuralism for the second half of the XX century. While accomplishing considerable work as an Indo-Europeanist (he formulated the hypothesis of the laryngeal origin of the IE suffix for the participle in *-to*) and as a classical philologist (he edited at Teubner's famous collection the writings of the man who first used the term *ᾠκυκλοπαια* to denote a World Chronicle and to whom he had dedicated his Ph.D. dissertation) Rosén did an earth-breaking job in Hebrew Linguistics. It is significant and highly symptomatic that his own linguistic offspring as far as Hebrew is concerned is rather thin. Indeed, his conception of Hebrew as a language like any other, which is the basis of the GL approach, collides with conceptions which privilege it on whatever grounds (national and/or religious and/or cultural); in addition, the very demanding nature of the GL approach, which Rosén heralded without complex, requires the mastery of a considerable number of languages and alphabets, both modern and ancient, spoken and written, as well as an acquaintance with neighboring disciplines, all requirements which won the GL approach and its paladin in Hebrew linguistics to be stigmatized as elitist, the stigma which ignorance stamps on its foes. Not only do the high aptitudes necessary in order to study Hebrew - or any other language, for that matter - in a GL framework clash with the rather reduced requirements implied by its conception as a vector of whatever particular values that should supposedly be studied on a purely synchronic or philological basis, but they challenge the main vocation of many Hebrew Language academic departments, which is (or was, until the emergence of Colleges in Israel in the 1990s) to educate future teachers, namely to transmit knowledge, and a rather restrained one, for that matter, rather than create it. This last point is common to many academic departments across the world which are devoted to the country's national language: by definition, they educate teachers for the *hoi polloi*; a noble mission as it undoubtedly is, such departments do not and cannot require from their students that they study languages or disciplines not directly related to what they will end up teaching. And since they are devoted to the national language, such departments often monopolize it as an object of research and oppose that the GL department, if there is such in the same institution, include the national language among the ones it investigates. This intricate and paradoxical situation is evoked because for a linguist, Hebrew and indeed any other language, be it official or not, should be investigated with the most efficient tools and by the most qualified researchers, notwithstanding a normative stance that may prove necessary in other contexts, and for a reborn language like Hebrew, moreover adopted by

a huge number of people having the most diverse mother tongues, such a stance is certainly indispensable. The GL approach and the normative one are not contradictory, since they apply in different contexts: a psychologist who is also a father probably uses different criteria when exerting each of those two distinct responsibilities. Again, symptomatically and significantly, Rosén's first paper on Hebrew and indeed his first scientific paper as such (1948), written in French, was devoted to Biblical Hebrew, and it displays a fair Semitic and linguistic philological-cum-linguistic craftsmanship. A colleague and friend whom Rosén held as a master, the Polish GL, Indo-Europeanist and Semitist Jerzy Kurylowicz (1895-1978) also devoted luminous pages to Hebrew and Semitics. One can investigate Hebrew in a GL framework while being attached to its most ancient, culturally and religious unequivocal manifestations; on the other hand, an acquaintance with Contemporary Hebrew (CH) alone, to the exclusion of any previous stage or any other non-Semitic tongue can hardly produce valuable results even as far as CH itself is concerned, since CH is but a projection of former stages and not a linear development thereof. To put in the President of the Hebrew Language Academy Moshé Bar Asher (1939-) words, 'If one takes the pain of studying Ancient Hebrew (AH), he can explore CH as well; but if he only knows CH, he won't have an insight even of CH itself'. This should be a matter of thought for those who establish the utterly wrong equation: AH = philology, CH = Linguistics. It is possible and indeed necessary to investigate AH within a linguistic framework and with linguistic tools and aims, as it is possibly and indeed necessary that a scholar of CH have a thorough mastery of texts representative of the language he specializes in. The present author acknowledges his debt towards H. Rosén (first winner of the Israel Prize for Linguistics as such, in 1978) who must be accredited with the very creation of Hebrew modern Linguistics and its inclusion within the framework of GL, even though my own research led me to the conviction that structuralism has attained its limits and must be abandoned for deeper waters, which reveal the nature of language and its speakers to be essentially biological and not purely formal, iconic and not symbolic, pragmatically and not grammatically driven (Kirtchuk 2007 and forthcoming). In adopting and seriously deepening this approach I have been influenced by the promoter of this most relevant orientation in linguistic research, native speaker of Hebrew who devoted some studies to the language including AH, and who quotes in all of his work vast examples from it, including in what he terms 'Street Hebrew'. Indeed, functional-typological linguistics has a debt towards Talmy (*aka* Tom) Givón (1936-). Born in the Izre'el Valley, his initial training in Israel was in agriculture, both practical and theoretical; he then specialized in horticulture and plant-biochemistry at UCLA. Eventually, this botanically and ultimately biologically oriented education deeply influenced his vision of language. Before writing his first paper in Linguistics, he published a short story in Hebrew (*Mas'ot Binyamin Adam*, Maxbarot leSifrut 1966). Givón (2002) is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Greenberg (1915-2001), the great Jewish-American linguist who as a child went to a Hebrew school: Hebrew was indeed the first second-language he learned, along with English, his mother tongue being Yiddish, just like his intellectual father's Edward Sapir, whose lectures he was unable to follow due to Sapir's declining health which made him stop teaching as Greenberg was heading to Yale to follow his courses. In his work Greenberg referred to Hebrew though his most influential paper devoted to a single major Semitic language investigates definiteness in Aramaic (1978) in a GL perspective. Aron Dolgopolsky

(1930-), emeritus at the Hebrew Language department at the University of Haifa, a key figure in the research on macro-phyla such as Nostratic (Greenberg's *Eurasian*), has devoted specific and enormously valuable research to Hebrew in that context. Dolgopolsky has made a major contribution to Hebrew in a GL framework as well as to GL as such in an approach which connects to that of Humboldt, Sapir, Bally, Greenberg, Givón and this writer, and which is coherent and enhances the theory of evolution as sketched by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1801-1806 *sqq.*), corrected by Charles Darwin (1859, 1872), much deepened (1978 *sqq.*) by Humberto Maturana (1928-) and his disciple Francisco Varela (1946-2001) and re-formulated by Henri Atlan (1931-).

An influential albeit erroneous path in linguistics, opposed in all points to the one just mentioned was initiated through Hebrew research, or rather through the desertion thereof: Noam Chomsky (1928-) was writing a description of Contemporary Hebrew as a Ph.D. dissertation under Zellig Sabettai Harris when he decided that he had enough with describing a language on which his father William (1896-1977) had already published several works. Chomsky Jr. then turned to another father, that of French Rationalism, René Descartes, and to the no less French authors of *La Grammaire générale et raisonnée de Port Royal*, Arnauld et Lancelot, who inspired his enterprise of formalizing grammar and promoted his vision of language as a synchronic, mathematical and ideal reality ideally used by ideal speakers, having at a so-called deep level an universal grammar strangely akin to the grammar of English whose actual realizations by real people speaking in real languages are but pale and imperfect versions of the ideal, Platonic idea. Generative grammar, which is nothing but Structuralism's apotheosis, is opposed to everything we know about *Homo sapiens sapiens* as a biological species, and to everything we know about biology in the framework of evolution. (Kirtchuk 2009).

R. Longacre, a key figure in cognitive linguistics, has also devoted some specific studies to Hebrew. Claude Hagège (1936-), a leading Jewish French linguist of Tunisian descent, also refers to Hebrew incidentally, and especially (2002) inasmuch as it is the only case in which the reactivation of an ancient language has been crowned by success. His *landsmann* David Cohen (1922-), one of the greatest Semitists of our time has worked on AH (1984) and CH (1986) in a GL oriented approach; so does his disciple M. Masson. Israeli linguists of our day who have made valuable contributions to Hebrew in a Semitic-cum-GL framework include among others Prize Israel winner Gideon Goldenberg (1930-), another summit of Semitic Linguistics, of the Israel Academy of Science and Humanities. Of the same generation, O. (Rodrigue) Schwarzwald works mainly on Hebrew morphology and lexicon, and R. (Aronson-) Berman's work spans different aspects of Hebrew, especially grammar, bilingualism and acquisition. The following generation of confirmed Hebraists who work in a GL context includes, among others, Sh. Izre'el, T. Zewi, R. Henkin, I. Yatziv (a student of the late Jewish-French linguist Claire Blanche-Benveniste, 1935-2010), Y. Reshef, I. Meir, and this writer, who works in a functional-typological-cognitive and biological-evolutive orientation

The bibliographical list gives a sample of works by authors mentioned in the paper. It is meant as an illustration, by no means as an exhaustive list of their work. The writer of this entry succumbed to the temptation of devoting a larger place to his own work, which does not mean that his production is more important, either by quantity or quality, than that of anyone of his colleagues.

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