From multi-clausality to discourse markerhood: The Hebrew *ma she*- (‘what that’) construction in so-called ‘pseudo-clefts’

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This paper investigates Hebrew clauses opening with *ma she*- (‘what that’) in what traditionally has been considered to be part of pseudo-clefts in everyday spoken interaction. We argue that, rather than being viewed as the first part of a bi-clausal structure, the *ma she*- clause is better perceived as a projecting construction (Auer 2005, Hopper and Thompson 2008, Günthner 2011, Pekarek Doehler 2011, Maschler 2012) which has become sedimented for specific interactional purposes. In its most crystallized form, it has become a full-fledged discourse marker (Maschler 2009).

According to traditional Hebrew grammar (e.g. Azar 1992), the canonical pseudo-cleft structure constitutes a nominal sentence whose two parts are separated by the copula *ze* (lit. ‘this’ MASC SG DEMONST PRO, ‘is’) or *hu* (lit. ‘he’ MASC SG PERS PRO, ‘is’). Part A is a finite clause opening with *ma she*, and Part B consists of either an NP or a finite/nonfinite clause. In the case of a finite clause, the subordinator *she*- (‘that’) must precede, as, e.g., in:

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mashe kara, zeshe--, nir 'e--h kibel telefon.
what that happened, this thaa--t, Nir u--h got phone.
'what happened, is thaa--t, Nir u--h got a phone call.'
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However, upon examination of these *ma she*- clauses in everyday spoken Hebrew, rarely do we find all components of the canonical pseudo-cleft structure. For instance, in the following excerpt, an older male student is giving rather patronizing advice to a young female fellow student, who has just confessed feeling embarrassed:

56 Avi: .. 'ani makir 'et ze.
       I know DEF OBJ this
       ‘I’m familiar with this [type of thing].’

57 ...*ma she* at 'osa ze,
      what that you dois
      ‘what you’re doing is,’

58 ..'at mekisha mimatsavex hapnim--i,
      you draw analogy from situation-your the internal,
      ‘you’re drawing an analogy from your internal situation,’

59 ...lematsavex haxi .. la .. lamatsav haxitsoni.
      to situation-yours the ext to the . . to the situation the external
      ‘to your ext situation... to the . . to the external situation.’

We find here *ma she*- opening part A and a copula (line 57), but no subordinator at the beginning of the finite clause constituting part B (lines 58-59). We will argue that the *ma she*- construction is employed mainly in order to gain cognitive time, and in order to frame the following discourse as an action/event/rephrasal (cf. Hopper and Thompson 2008) or for framing the speaker’s stance (Du Bois 2007) towards his/her upcoming talk.
Our 11-hour corpus manifests 45 tokens of the pseudo-cleft-like variety. They all open with *ma she*-*, but most of them are ‘missing’ one or more parts of the canonical structure: copula, subordinator of part B, and/or part B altogether. Most often, part B occupies a syntactically independent stretch of discourse much longer than a clause. Part A, on the other hand, tends to be lexically fixed, with 44% of the cases exhibiting a *do/happen/say* verb (cf. Hopper 2001) and another 31% manifesting an adjectival predicate conveying speaker stance (e.g., *mashe me'atsben/hifxid/hitsxik*… ‘what is/was annoying/scary/funny…’).

In the most sedimented cases, there is no predicate at all. Part A then consists of *ma she-* followed by the word *ken* (‘yes’) alone (lit. ‘what that yes’, roughly meaning ‘what is true / what I will say’), which arguably constitutes a discourse marker employed to project a speaker’s stance that contrasts with a stance previously taken by him/her.

The degree of fixedness of the *ma she-* construction in pseudo-cleft-like structures thus increases in inverse proportion to its degree of syntactic projection. Syntax and lexicon are therefore shown to be intimately interrelated in the sedimentation of the *ma she-* projecting construction.

References