Hebrew's *pa’al* – a perfective marker or a past tense marker?

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According to the accepted view, Hebrew’s verbal inflection *pa’al* designates past tense (Berman 1978:17; Coffin & Bolozky 2005).  

Dekel, however, argues that *pa’al* encodes perfectivity (2010: 159). To test Dekel’s proposal I examined Hebrew data and applied Aspectual Coercion. Consequently, I propose an alternative encoded meaning for *pa’al*.

A Usage-Based analysis reveals that contra Dekel, *pa’al* does not indicate perfectivity exclusively. Rather, it indicates stative (1), habitual (2) and iterative situations as well – all of which are manifestations of the imperfective (Comrie 1976: 25):

(1) `az anaxnu amadnu al hagehser anaxnu pit’om ani ro’a
then we **stand.1.PL.PST** on the.bridge we suddenly I see.F.SG.PRES
et kulam kaza mitkahalim...(Maschler, violence 4-9)
ACC everyone like.that gather.M.PL.PRES
‘We **were standing** on the bridge when I suddenly saw everyone gathering...’

(2) hi...dilga bein rishtot hashivuk laxanuyot praxim kol
she **skip.3.SG.F.PST** between DEF.supermarkets to.florists every
yom shishi...gamalti la bexol pa’am likrat haxagim
Friday ...**reward.1.SG.PST** DAT.3.SG.F in.every time toward the.Holidays
‘She [a car] **used to travel** from supermarkets to florists every Friday. I **rewarded**
her each year before the Holidays’ (shishabat, 19.6.20 15)

One might perhaps argue that these are instances of imperfective constructions that override the alleged perfective meaning of *pa’al*. To rule out this explanation, I will apply an additional test.

An inferred interpretation is always cancelable whereas an encoded one is noncancelable (Grice 1975). In (3a) *barax* indicates a perfective situation. Aspectual Coercion (Pickering et al. 2006) is a cancelability test that applies contextual enrichment in an attempt to override a verb’s lexical aspect, or Aktionsart (Vendler 1967). The Aspectual Coercion test successfully transforms the situation type in (3b) to iterative:

(3a) *pa’am barax* li naxash katan beulam a’artsaot (Dekel 2010)
.once **escape.3.SG.M.PST** DAT.1.SG snake small in.hall DEF.lectures
‘Once, a small snake **escaped** from me at the lecture hall’

(3b) *pa’am barax* li naxash katan beulam a’artsaot shuv veshuv
.once **escape.3.SG.M.PST** DAT.1.SG snake small in.hall DEF.lectures again and.again
‘Once, a small snake **escaped** from me at the lecture hall **over and over again**’

Indeed, I argue that every perfective interpretation of *pa’al* is cancelable by means of Aspectual Coercion.

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1 *pa’al* is used here as a generic term referring to all of the seven verbal templates (*binyanim*) of CH.
The counter-examples (1) and (2) and the Aspectual Coercion test (3b) indicate that the perfective interpretation of pa‘al is inferred rather than encoded. I therefore propose an alternative explanation according to which pa‘al encodes anteriority whose precise manifestation is context-dependent. By default, pa‘al indicates absolute past (1-3b). However, in (5) pa‘al conveys relative past because azav (‘he left/has left’) is anterior to yodi’a (‘he will tell’). Finally, in (6) xasaxta (lit. ‘you saved’) is a Future Perfect construction denoting a future state of an alleged saving of 300 shekels stemming from a future purchase:

(5) ha‘ax hagadol yodi’a lanu maxar mi azav et habayit
   ‘the Big Brother will tell us tomorrow who left the house’

(6) ha-mexir ecle-nu: 900. xasaxta: 300 (Mobile operator’s ad)
   ‘Our price: 900. Your saving will be: 300 (lit. you saved)’

References


2 Perfects are anterior because they denote a state ensuing from a preceding event. (De Swart 2007: 2278).