The "camel humps" intonation contour in spoken Hebrew

An analysis of a conventional prosodic pattern as an interactional and rhetorical resource

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This talk provides a bottom-up description of the form and function of a specific prosodic pattern of spoken Hebrew. The pattern will be analyzed as for its acoustic characteristics, its environments of occurrence and its interactional and rhetorical functions. The analysis is based on an exhaustive study of about 200 every-day conversations, each 2-5 minutes, about 11 hours of recorded speech altogether, of “The Haifa Corpus of Spoken Hebrew” (Maschler 2015).

The pattern consists of several repetitions of a lengthened rise-and-fall pitch movement (usually two or three repetitions), and the representation of its acoustics creates what can be called the “camel humps” intonation contour. Each such rise-and-fall unit functions as the main accent of an intonation unit (IU) (Chafe 1994), while the fall of pitch is lengthened, and continues to the end of the IU, thus “covering” all following syllables in cases where the accented syllable is not the last one in the IU.

The pattern is used by speakers to create “open lists” (Selting 2007), i.e. lists which do not end with a final intonation, and are inexhaustive. It appears mainly in two environments: a. when a speaker lists items or arguments which support a claim she makes, a position she holds, or a stance she takes; b. when a speaker lists sayings in the frame of a constructed dialogue (Tannen, 1986). In the first environment, which accounts for about 65% of all examples, the speaker uses the pattern to strengthen a support she gives for her claim, position, or stance by a. listing arguments in an open list, which suggests that many more arguments could be adduced, and b. assigning a marked prosody (high dynamicity of pitch plus lengthening) to each item of the list, which is iconic to the significance their content has in the speaker’s mind. In the second environment, which accounts for about 35% of all examples, the speaker uses the pattern to list utterances, usually attributed to a third person (or persons), to which she wishes to add an evaluation (Gunther 1999). Here, as well, the open list intonation indicates that many more arguments could be adduced, and the prosodic prominence signals the importance of these “citations” as support for the point made by the current speaker.

In both of these environments, the use of the pattern is a responsive move (Goffman 1976), i.e. it is always counter to something, either to some earlier explicit or implicit content of the conversation, or to a belief or knowledge that the speaker expects the other participants hold (many times this is just the normal or trivial state of affairs). Finally, as all conventionalized list patterns do, this pattern enables the speaker to hold the floor until the listing ends up (Jefferson, 1991).
Examples:

1. *discovery*, “The Haifa Corpus of Spoken Hebrew”

Example 1 shows a use of the pattern in the first environment. JA is responding to her mom’s claim about the crumbling of American Jewry due to assimilation by pointing out that some Jewish Americans still hold an affinity to Judaism and to the state of Israel.

48. JA: je- davka _tacxej taglit  _hixlitu  _laalo:t_1 who actually after _TAGLIT_ decided to-do-ALIYAH

49. ve: and...

50. ve: laasot _tsava_; and... to-do army (to go to the army)

51. velehijaew baarets, and-to-stay in-the-country (Israel)

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**Figure 1 - Acoustic analysis of example 1**

2. *traveling in bus from Jerusalem to Tel-Aviv*, “The Haifa Corpus of Spoken Hebrew”

Example 2 shows a use of the pattern in the second environment. NA is constructing a very aggressive dialogue she overheard between a passenger and a bus driver (here, quoting the passenger), as part of her efforts to describe that bus drive as a very weird one.

87. NA: ata _od_ tifma _mimeni:_ you more(will) hear from-me

88. jef _li_ et hapxsatim _felxa:_ have to-me the-details yours

89. veze and...

90. ze lo _jihije hasof_ it not will-be the-end

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1 The parts of the text which carry the humps are underlined.
References


![Figure 2 - Acoustic analysis of example 2](image)