The Reflection of Middle Arabic in the Syntax of Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah

**Abstract**

This article compares two phenomena in Judeo-Arabic with the Hebrew of the Mishneh Torah: (A) The use of the first person plural future *nqtl/nqṭl* instead of the first person singular *ʔqtl/ʔqṭl*; (B) Agreement of the existential verbs *kâna/haya* with the object rather than the subject. The article shows the importance of such comparison for study of both Hebrew and Arabic.

**Introduction**

In his article on the influence of Middle Arabic on Medieval Hebrew, Blau (1985) noted the need to compare the Hebrew of Medieval Jews not only to Classical Arabic, but also to the Middle Arabic they spoke and wrote. In this article I will present two syntactical phenomena in the Hebrew of Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah that reflect phenomena from Judeo-Arabic and are not characteristic of Classical Arabic. I will seek to show that this comparison contributes not only to our understanding of Arabicized Hebrew, but also to a more profound description of Judeo-Arabic.

**The Use of the Forms *nqtl/nqṭl* for the First Person Singular**

Scholars of Arabic have noted the replacement of the singular and plural forms *nqtl/ʔqtl* with the forms *nqtlû/nqtl* in Judeo-Arabic in North Africa and Spain. This phenomenon is well attested in many dialects of Arabic. Joshua Blau has claimed that the earliest documentation of this phenomenon in any Arabic dialect can be found in the responsa of Rabbi Isaac Alfasi from the eleventh century.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This phenomenon is well documented in Maimonides’ Arabic writings. Hopkins 1993: 243-244 noted that in the autograph of Maimonides’ commentary on the Mishna the author sometimes corrected his own language, replacing the colloquial form *nqtl* with the classical form *ʔqtl*, as in the following examples: **נחרת'** (“I shall sow”) > **אחרת'**; **לם נבעהא** (“I did not sell it”) > **לם אבעהא**.

According to Joshua Blau, the form *nqtl* evolved in two stages. Firstly the synthetic structure *ʔqtl* was replaced by the analytic structure *anâ ʔaqtl*, and subsequently the pronunciation of the consonant /*ʔ/* between the two /a/ vowels was eroded and the first syllable was omitted: *anâ ʔaqtl* > *nqtl*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This phenomenon is also familiar from the Western Aramaic dialects – Galilean Aramaic and Neo-Aramaic in Malula.[[3]](#footnote-3) The contact between Galilean Aramaic and Galilean Hebrew led to an interesting phenomenon. Michael Sokoloff showed that the use of the first person plural form *nqṭl* in Galilean Aramaic led to its use in Galilean Hebrew.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, the Hebrew of Genesis Rabbah (Noah portion) uses the forms **נחתך**, **נעכב** (“we will cut,” “we will refuse”) rather than \*אחתך, \*אעכב (“I will cut,” “I will refuse”):

ויאמר לי **שנחתך** אבר מאבריי ולא **נעכב**.

“And he will bid me to cut off one of his limbs, then I will not refuse”

Sokoloff emphasizes that the use of the form *nqṭl* for the first person singular is not found in the language of the Tannaim, from the period in which Hebrew thrived in the Land of Israel. It emerges only during the Ammoraitic period, when the living language became one confined to prayer and study. Accordingly, the Hebrew first person singular form *nqṭl* does not have its origins in a phonetic process leading to the emergence of a new form in the verb system, but rather in the reanalysis of the Aramaic *nqṭl* as a plural form. In other words: in Galilean Aramaic this is a morphological phenomenon, whereas in Galilean Hebrew it is a syntactical one.

The use of *nqṭl* forms for the first person singular is documented in the best manuscripts of the Mishneh Torah, as well as in Shailat’s excellent edition, which is based on these manuscripts. We will present here four examples – three from Sefer Mishpatim (Book of Civil Laws) and then one from Sefer Qinyan (Book of Acquisition):

A. Borrowing and Depositing 2:7: ואם אמר השותף לחבירו: השאיליני היום **ונשאילך** למחר, אינה שאלה בבעלין (“If a man said to another, ‘Make a loan to me today and I will make you a loan tomorrow, it is not a borrowing with the owner.”)

The form **ונשאילך** for“and I will make you a loan” appears in the Sutro manuscript 132 and in El-Escorial 133. Oxford Hunt 545 and Rome 1480 both have the form **ואשאילך**.

It is worth mentioning that this religious law has its origins in the Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 81a. The ruling in the Mishneh Torah summarizes the Talmudic discussion there: "תנו רבנן: שמור לי ואשמור לך, **השאילני ואשאילך**, שמור לי ואשאילך, השאילני ואשמור לך – כולן נעשין שומרי שכר זה לזה. ואמאי? שמירה בבעלים היא! אמ' רב פפא: דאמ' ליה, שמור לי **היום** ואני אשמור לך **למחר**".

Maimonides’ remarks are based on the Talmudic phrase **השאילני ואשאילך** (“make me a loan and I will make you a loan,”) and accordingly it is clear that the form **ונשאילך** in his comments denotes the first person singular, and not the first person plural. It is also apparent from the comparison to the Talmud that this form is an innovation by Maimonides himself.[[5]](#footnote-5)

B. Creditor and Debtor 6:3: הורו רבותי שהמלוה את חבירו ולאחר זמן תבע חובו, ואמר לו הלווה דור בחצירי עד **שנחזיר** לך חובך, הרי זה אבק רבית. (“My teachers have taught that if a man lent money to his fellow and thereafter, when he demanded repayment, the borrower said to him, ‘Live in my house until I repay the loan,’ it is quasi-usury.”)

All the four above-mentioned manuscripts have **שנחזיר** here; Rome has **שאחזיר**.

C. Pleading 15:3: בא שמעון ונמלך בלוי, ואמ' לו: הרי אני קונה שדה פלונית מראובן בעצתך **שנקנה** אותה. ואמ' לוי: לך וקנה, טובה היא. (“Simeon came to take counsel with Levi saying to him, ‘I am about to buy such a field from Reuben, and it is upon your advice that I will buy it,’ and Levi said to him, ‘It is a good field, go and buy it.”)

El-Escorial is defective here, and the law is presented according to Oxford Hunt. 545. Sutro 132 and 133 also have **שנקנה**. In the Rome printed edition, the text reads ובעצתך אקנה אותה (“and it is upon your advice that I will buy it.”)

Shailat 2011 does not offer any explanation for the form that appears in the Laws of Borrowing and Depositing. In the laws of Creditor and Debtor (p. 91), he explains that “our Rabbi is sometimes uses the first person in plural form [when the intended meaning is singular] (under the influence of the Spanish dialect of Arabic.”)

We now turn to an example from Sefer Qinyan (Book of Acquisition):

D. Agents and Partners 10:2 (Oxford, Hunt. 612): או שאמ' התובע חלקנו על מנת שנשביע אותך שבועת השותפין בכל עת שנרצה ועדיין לא נשבעת לי, ואתה מדחה אותי מיום ליום. (“… or if the plaintiff says, ‘We divided on the condition that I impose upon you an oath of partnership whenever I desire, and you have not yet sworn and are putting me off from day to day.”)

Shailat 2013: 181 notes that the printed editions use the singular form, commenting on the form in the manuscripts that “it is the influence of Spanish Arabic.”

All four laws presented above clearly show the influence of the form *nqtl* for the first person singular in Middle Arabic. The presence of the plural form instead of the singular in Maimonides’ Hebrew probably also suggests that Maimonides, too, did not associate this form with the meaning *anâ ʔaqtl* but regarded it as a plural. Following the reanalysis of *nqtl* as a plural form, Maimonides sometimes employed the Hebrew plural form *nqṭl* in accordance with the (ostensible) use of the plural in his Arabic.

The assumption that Maimonides reanalyzed the form *nqtl* supports Blau’s position concerning the distribution of the first person plural form *nqtlû* in Judeo-Arabic. Blau argues that this plural form did not become widespread, since it is evidently an innovation, whereas the singular form *nqtl*, despite its character as an innovated form resulting from phonetic change, was reanalyzed as the majestic plural (*pluralis maiestatis*), and accordingly came into widespread use.[[6]](#footnote-6) The use of the form *nqṭl* in Hebrew under Arabic influence shows that speakers indeed analyzed the form in this manner.

**Agreement with the Object instead of the Subject**

Joshua Blau presented other examples from Judeo-Arabic in general, and Maimonides’ Arabic in particular, showing agreement of the pronoun with the object rather than the subject. For example:

ומאלך הד'ה אלאנצאף כלהא הן בנאת אלאך'   
(And the owner of these halves **are** all the brother’s daughters).[[7]](#footnote-7)

This phenomenon appears once in Sefer Mishpatim:

Borrowing and Depositing 2:11: כל **אלו** ספק שמירה בבעלים **היא[[8]](#footnote-8)** (In all **these** cases it is doubtful whether **it is** a keeping with the owner)

In Maimonides’ Hebrew we find a similar phenomenon in the verbal sentence: in three instances in Sefer Mishpatim, the verb **היה** (“to be”) agrees with the object rather than the subject:

Hiring 1:2: שומר חנם שנגנב **הפקדון** ממנו או אבד, ואין צריך לומר אם נאנס **הפקדון** אונס גדול, כגון **שהיתה בהמה** ומתה או נשבית – הרי זה נשבע ששמר כדרך השומרין ונפטר.   
(“A gratuitous bailee from whose possession **the object bailed** [masc.] was stolen or lost – and needless to say if it was lost through *force majeure*, for example **it was** [fem.] an animal [fem.] that died or was captured – must swear that he kept the object bailed after the manner of bailees, and he is quit.”)

Ibid., ibid.: נושא שכר או השוכר, שניהן דין אחד יש להן: אם נגנב או אבד **הדבר השכור** או שנטל שכר על שמירתו – הרי אלו משלמין, ואם אירעו אונס גדול מזה, כגון **שהיתה** בהמה ומתה או נשברה או נשבית או נטרפה – הרי אלו נשבעין שנאנסה ופטורין.

(“The bailee for hire and the hirer both are subject to one rule: If the **object hired** [masc.] or for the keeping of which one received hire, was lost – then they pay for these. But if the loss occurred through a force greater than these, for example **it was** [fem.] an animal that died, or was crippled or captured or torn – then they swear to the force and are quit.”)

Ibid., 2:4: המוסר לחבירו **דבר** המחובר לקרקע לשמור, אפילו **היו** ענבים העומדות להבצר, הרי הן כקרקע בדין השומרין.   
(“If a person gives **something** [masc. sing.] connected to the ground to his fellow for keeping, even if **they were** [masc. pl.] grapes about to be harvested, then they are considered tantamount to land for the laws of keeping.”)

In all three instances there is an equation: 'הפיקדון הייתה בהמה', 'הדבר השכור הייתה בהמה', 'הדבר המחובר היו ענבים' (“the object [masc.] bailed was [fem.] an animal [fem.],” “the hired object [masc.] was [fem.] an animal [fem.],” “the fixed thing [masc. sing.] were [pl.] grapes [masc. pl.]”) – in other words, the agreement is with the object, rather than the subject.

Two questions arise here. Firstly, should we analyze the syntactical structure in these two laws as verbal agreement with an object? The first two instances might, under some duress, be interpreted as independent sentences: “once there was an animal, and it died or was broken.” Secondly, is this syntactical structure influenced by Arabic? The answer to both questions is in the positive, as emerges from a comparison between Maimonides’ language in the Mishne Torah as cited above with his commentary on the Mishna on the subject of keeping lost items:

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| בבא מציעא ב:ז (קאפח 1965:55): עושה ואוכל, ליס יבקי כד'לך לאלאבד, ואנמא לה חד מחדוד בחסב **אלשי אלמוג'וד**, | Baba Metzia 2: 7: Does and eats – it will not remain so in perpetuity, but rather it has some limit according to **the thing that exists**, |
| **אן כאנת בהמה גסה** פיתכלף אלאשתגאל בהא שנים עשר חדש... | **If it was a crude animal** he must occupy himself with it for twelve months…. |
| **ואן כאנת בהמה דקה** אעני גנם וג'די ועג'ול ראעיה... יתכלף אן יכ'דמהא ויטעמהא שלשה חדשים. | **And if it was a delicate animal**, such as sheep and goats and grazing lambs… he must attend to them and feed them for three months. |
| **ואן כאן אלשי אלמוג'וד אוזין ותרנגלין כאמלה** מטפל בהן שלשים יום. | **And if the thing that exists was geese and large chickens**, he attends to them for thirty days. |

In this section, the structure בחסב **אלשי אלמוג'וד**, **אן כאנת בהמה גסה** appears alongside the structure "**ואן כאן אלשי אלמוג'וד אוזין ותרנגלין כאמלה**". A comparison of the two structures reveals that the former is an abridged form of the latter, and that in both the subject is **אלשי אלמוג'וד** (“the thing that exists.”) Accordingly, the verb **כאנת בהמה** is to be analyzed as a verb agreeing with the object, and the unusual phenomenon of verbal agreement with the object should be seen as the result of the influence of Arabic on Maimonides. In this example from the Commentary on Mishna Bava Metzia, the context is similar to that of the rule in the Laws of Hiring, and this provides a solid foundation for its syntactical analysis.

Thus the phenomenon of the agreement of the verb **היה** (“to be”) with the object rather than the subject in the Hebrew of the Mishneh Torah is also documented in the Judeo-Arabic of Maimonides’ Commentary on the Mishna, and it emerges that this reflects a linguistic feature in Judeo-Arabic. The importance and frequency of this linguistic feature in Judeo-Arabic are clarified by its distribution in Arabic-influenced Hebrew.

**Conclusions**

The two phenomena discussed above – the use of the forms *nqtl/nqṭl* for the first person singular in Hebrew and Arabic, and agreement of the existential verbs kâna/היה(“to be”) with the object rather than the subject – illustrate the importance of a systematic comparison of Medieval Hebrew to Judeo-Arabic. On the one hand, this comparison provides a firm foundation for understanding the background to the phenomena in Hebrew; on the other, it deepens our knowledge about Judeo-Arabic. In the case of the first person plural, this comparison highlights the reanalysis of *nqtl* as the first person plural form; in the case of agreement with the subject, it emphasizes the frequency and importance of this phenomenon.

1. For a history of the scholarship, including many examples, see Blau 1999: 58-60, 119-120; Hopkins 1993: 244, note 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nöldeke 1984: 251 considered and rejected this explanation, since he did not find evidence of the first stage with addition of the detached personal pronoun before the verb (however, Blau 1999: 120 presented early evidence of the addition of personal pronouns before the verb). Fischer 1898: 216 suggested that this form is the product of two analogies: Firstly a first person plural form *nqtlû* was formed by analogy to the second person plural form *nqtlû* [**shouldn’t this be *tqtlû*? – trans.**] and the third person plural *yqtlû*, and later the first person singular form *nqtl* was formed by analogy to the second person masculine singular *tqtl* and the third person masculine singular *yqtl*. Blau 1999: 119-120 noted that the weakness of this explanation is that while the singular form *nqtl* is common in many Arabic dialects, the first person plural form *nqtlû* (which Fischer suggests forms the origin of the first person singular *nqtl*) is restricted solely to Maghrebian Arabic; even in those Aramaic dialects for which the singular form *nqtl* is testified, there is no evidence of a final vowel in the first person plural. Accordingly, it is more probable that the first person plural form *nqtlû* developed in order to distinguish this form from the common first person singular form *nqtl*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Blau, ibid. A similar phenomenon is even found in spoken Hebrew: Following the addition of personal pronouns before the first person singular, the form אקטול was replaced by the form אני יקטול. See Bar-Adon 1959: 150-161. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Sokoloff 1969: 144-148. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Maimonides was evidently quoting the Gemara from memory, and accordingly changed its phrasing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Blau 1957: 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Blau 1980: 136; Blau 2014: 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. If the copula were in agreement with the subject, the sentence would read \*'כל אלו – ספק שמירה בבעלים **הן**'. In this law, the pronoun **היא** agrees with the governed **שמירה** rather than with the governing **ספק**. Again, this phenomenon is familiar from Judeo-Arabic. Blau 2014: 85 offered fiver examples of agreement with the complement, though these all appear in the language of those asking the questions rather than in Maimonides’ own language. See also Blau 1980: 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)