

Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics

Inchoative Verb

(774 words)

Inchoative verbs denote a change of state, beginning, or becoming, and they are also considered achievements according to Vendler's (1967) aspectual classes.

Hebrew inchoative verbs are usually morphologically marked (see Berman 1978; Schwarzwald 2001; 2008 among others). Most Hebrew inchoative verbs are formed in templates such as *hitpa'el* (e.g., התכווץ *hitkaveš* 'shrink'), *nif'al* (e.g., נרדם *nirdam* 'fall asleep'), but some of them are also formed in *qal* (*pa'al*) (e.g., נפל *nafal* 'fall') or *hif'il* (e.g., הלבין *hilbin* 'become white'). The term 'inchoative verb' overlaps to some extent with the term 'unaccusative verb' (Unaccusative), which relates to intransitive verbs whose sole argument is internal (Perlmutter 1978; Burzio 1986), in contrast to unergative verbs, whose subject is external. While the term 'unaccusative' is a syntactic one, the term 'inchoative' is semantic and relates to aspectual properties of the verb in question. The verb נפל *nafal* 'fall', for example, is both inchoative and unaccusative, while the verb נבהל *nivhal* 'become frightened' is only inchoative, as it does not satisfy unaccusativity diagnostic tests such as the simple inversion construction (Shlonsky 1997), e.g.,

(1) נפלו שלושה ספרים
naflu šloša sfarim

fell three books

'Three books fell.'

(2) נבהלו שלושה ילדים*
**nivhalu šloša yeladim*

became frightened three children

'Three children became frightened.'

Many Hebrew inchoative verbs are derived from transitive verbs that denote the bringing about of a change of state. Such derivation is performed via reduction of the syntactic valence of the transitive verb, that is, the number of arguments it takes. The transitive verb קלקל *qilqel* 'spoil', for instance, takes two arguments, a cause and a patient, while the intransitive inchoative verb התקלקל *hitqalqel* 'become spoiled' takes only one argument, a patient. It can be seen that *hitqalqel* is derived from *qilqel*, as the former is morphologically marked with the prefix *hit-*.

(3) דן קלקל את המרק
dan qilqel 'et ha-maraq

dan spoiled the-soup

'Dan spoiled the soup'.

(4) המרק התקלקל
ha-maraq hitqalqel

the-soup spoiled

'The soup spoiled'.

Sentence (3), which contains a transitive verb, describes Dan's bringing about the spoiling of the soup, while sentence (4), which contains an inchoative verb, describes the change of state according to which the soup spoils.

Other inchoative verbs are morphologically derived from intransitive verbs that denote both a state and a change of state, for example, ישב *yašav* 'sit' and התיישב *hityašev* 'sit down'. While the former denotes both being in a state of sitting and the action of sitting down, the latter is morphologically marked and denotes only a change of state, that is, the transition to the state of sitting (see also Blanc 1965).

There is also a group of homophonous verbs that are formed in *hif'il* and are both transitive and inchoative. The verb האדים *he'edim*, for example, derived from the adjective אדום *'adom* 'red', denotes both 'make something/someone red' and 'become red' (see Borer 1991). *Hif'il* is used for the formation of inchoative verbs mainly for verbs that are derived from adjectives (Rosén 1956). Interestingly, such homophonous verbs tend to change their form into *hitpa'el*, e.g., התאדם *hit'adem*, but retain only the inchoative meaning. This is because *hitpa'el* is more typical for the formation of inchoative verbs than *hif'il*. This is also attested in the formation of denominative inchoative verbs that have no transitive alternate and are derived directly in *hitpa'el*. The verb השתבץ *hištaveš* 'suffer a stroke', for example, is derived directly from the noun שבץ *šavaš* 'a stroke'.

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