

# When the Construction Is *Axla*, Everything Is *Axla*: A Case of Combined Lexical and Structural Borrowing from Arabic to Hebrew

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## Abstract

This article examines a borrowing from Arabic into Hebrew, which is a combination of a lexical borrowing and a structural one. The Arabic superlative *ahla* ‘sweetest, most beautiful,’ pronounced by most Modern Hebrew speakers [*axla*], has shifted semantically to mean ‘great, awesome.’ Yet, as our corpus-based study illustrates, it was borrowed into Hebrew—for the most part—with a very particular syntactic structure that, in Arabic, denotes the superlative. In Arabic itself, *ahla* may also denote a comparative adjective, though in different syntactic structures. We discuss the significance of this borrowing and the manner in which it is borrowed both to the specific contact situation between Arabic and Hebrew and to the theory of language contact in general.

## Keywords

Arabic – Hebrew – language contact – structural borrowing – lexical borrowing – construct state – superlatives – elative

## Introduction

When the history of Modern Hebrew is explored, language contact surfaces on every level. Hebrew had fallen into disuse as a vernacular language centuries

ago, until a famously successful revitalization project brought it back to the status of a mother tongue for many speakers. But despite conscious attempts to reconstruct the language as it was historically spoken, the Modern Hebrew that emerged is, of course, not the same as Biblical Hebrew, or any other historical form of Hebrew, and has been greatly influenced both by the first languages of the early revitalizers and by the surrounding languages (Zuckermann 2003). Of particular interest is the contact between Hebrew and Arabic. Before the Jewish immigration, Palestinian Arabic was the majority language of the area that was to become the State of Israel, and many Jewish immigrants from Arab countries were native speakers of other varieties of Arabic as well. Unsurprisingly, many Arabic loanwords became very common in Hebrew, and it is hard to imagine current Israeli slang without some of its Arabic staples, *yala* ‘come on’ (< Arabic *yatta*), *wala* ‘whatever, really?!’ (< Arabic *watta:h*), *basa* ‘damn, bummer’ (< Arabic *baʕs*), and a range of others.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we focus on a particular loanword in Modern Hebrew: *axla* (< Arabic (?)*aḥla*), which means ‘sweeter/sweetest’ in Standard Arabic, but has a far more general meaning in Hebrew—more similar to ‘great, awesome.’ This word is considered somewhat non-standard, yet is extremely common in Modern Hebrew. Perhaps the most memorable example of its use is in the name of the ubiquitous hummus brand *Hummus Axla*, and in its popular slogan shown in (1):

- (1) *kše- ha- xumus axla hakol axla*  
 when the hummus great everything great  
 ‘When the hummus is great/*axla*, everything is great.’

### Beyond Lexical Borrowing

There is more to *axla*, however, than simply a commonly used borrowed lexical item. In the example in (1), *axla* serves as a clausal predicate, and as such behaves like a normal Hebrew adjective. However, in cases where it modifies a noun, its behavior is more peculiar; whereas adjectival modifiers in Hebrew follow the noun they modify, *axla* can appear either before or after the noun, as shown in (2) and (3):

- (2) *davar axla*  
 thing great  
 ‘a great thing’

1 The glosses provided are for the loanwords as they are interpreted in Modern Hebrew.

- (3) *axla davar*  
 great thing  
 'a great thing'

The word order shown in (2) is the normal order for modifiers in Hebrew. But as corpus analysis will show, the order in (3) is actually the preferred one for this word. The unusual word order in (3) is the one in Arabic, suggesting that *axla* was not simply borrowed as a lexical item, but as a construction, that is, along with its particular structure. Before going into the distribution of *axla* in Modern Hebrew, however, let us explore the Arabic origins of the word and the construction it takes part in.

In Arabic, as in Hebrew, adjectives generally follow the noun they modify. The word order associated with *axla* is thus not the default order in Arabic either, but rather, the result of a general and productive process. Palestinian Arabic, like many other varieties of Arabic, has a morphological template (?aC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>aC<sub>3</sub>), which denotes either a comparative or superlative nominal.<sup>2</sup> This is usually an adjective, but since Arabic—like many other Semitic languages—lacks a morphological distinction between adjectives and substantive nouns, the latter interpretation is quite often implied, especially when a definite article is present. This comparative/superlative form in Arabic is also known jointly as the “elative” form (see e.g., Girod 2007; Shahin 2008:532; Cowell 1964:310–315).

The derivation of the elative form is as follows. Palestinian Arabic adjectives come in various templates, yet their elative (i.e., comparative/superlative) will always take the form aC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>aC<sub>3</sub>, as follows:

- |     |   |                         |   |                                    |
|-----|---|-------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| (4) | C <sub>1</sub> C <sub>2</sub> i:C <sub>3</sub>  | <i>kbir</i> ‘big’       | → | <i>akbar</i> ‘bigger, biggest’     |
| (5) | C <sub>1</sub> iC <sub>2</sub> C <sub>3</sub>   | <i>šifb</i> ‘difficult’ | → | <i>ašfab</i> ‘more/most difficult’ |
| (6) | C <sub>1</sub> a:C <sub>2</sub> iC <sub>3</sub> | <i>barid</i> ‘cold’     | → | <i>abrad</i> ‘colder, coldest’     |

Like other Arabic adjectives, the word *hilw/hilu* ‘sweet, beautiful’ derives its elative form in the aC<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>aC<sub>3</sub> template, resulting in *ahla* ‘sweeter, sweetest, beautiful, more beautiful.’ This item was borrowed into Hebrew, but due to the fact that most Hebrew speakers merge /ħ/ and /x/ (Blanc 1968; Yaeger-Dror 1988; Gafter 2014, among others), in Hebrew this elative is usually pronounced *axla*. The meaning has changed as well—whereas in Arabic the original meaning denotes sweetness,<sup>3</sup> and the more general meaning of ‘good’ is an extension, in Hebrew *axla* has lost its original meaning of sweetness and only maintains

<sup>2</sup> The glottal stop is presented here in parentheses, as it is often deleted in Palestinian Arabic as part of a consonantal chain shift.

<sup>3</sup> In some Arabic dialects, *hilw/hilu* also carries a secondary meaning of beauty.

a meaning of good quality. Furthermore, although it was the relative that was borrowed, Hebrew *axla* does not denote a comparative or superlative, but rather, its meaning is closer to that of a simple adjective—‘great.’

Of particular interest in this discussion is the syntax of superlatives in Arabic.<sup>4</sup> Ryding (2005) provides a detailed breakdown of the syntactic constructions in use for superlatives in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Many of these constructions are shared with Levantine Arabic, the group of dialects to which Palestinian Arabic belongs. What follows is a summary of the available constructions in MSA that are shared by Syrian and/or Palestinian Arabic, based on the authors’ knowledge of these dialects, and cross-referenced with Cowell (1964) for Syrian Arabic, and Seeger (2013) for Palestinian Arabic. The examples have been changed to include the superlative adjective *aḥla*. In the examples below, this term is translated in its original MSA meaning, ‘the sweetest.’

As the examples show, Arabic *aḥla* can follow the noun, like most Arabic adjectives, and as such it agrees in gender (as shown in (7) and (8)). However, there is another construction, traditionally understood to coincide with the construct state,<sup>5</sup> in which *aḥla* precedes the noun and is invariant (shown in (9)–(10)).

(7) *al- ṣasal al- aḥla*  
 the honey (MASC) the sweetest-MASC  
 ‘the sweetest honey’

(8) *al- baqla:wa al- ḥulwa*  
 the baklava (FEM) the sweetest-FEM  
 ‘the sweetest baklava’

(9) *aḥla ṣasal*  
 sweetest-MASC honey (MASC)  
 ‘the sweetest honey’

4 The syntax of comparatives is not discussed here, as it is not relevant to the use of *axla* in Modern Hebrew.

5 Wright’s (1964:218, 226) analysis of superlatives is couched within his chapter on “the *status constructus* and the genitive,” and he is unequivocal about superlatives such as those in the  $aC_1C_2aC_3$  template being substantive nouns, not adjectives, as they “govern” the genitive nouns that follow them.

- (10) *aḥla*                      *baqla:wa*  
 sweetest-MASC      baklava' (FEM)  
 'the sweetest baklava'

Note that in examples (9) and (10), there is no overt definite article (*al-* in Arabic), but the phrases in both examples are definite by virtue of their inclusion in a construction known in Arabic as *ʔiḍāfa* (literally, 'addition'), which is a synthetic possessive phrase similar to the Hebrew construct state (*smixut*). The idiomatic translation, therefore, encapsulates this definiteness with the English article *the*.

As illustrated in example (1), *aḥla/axla* in both languages can serve as a clausal predicate. In Arabic we find such examples as (11)–(12):

- (11) *al- sukkar aḥla min al- milh*  
 the sugar sweeter from the salt  
 'Sugar is sweeter than salt.'

- (12) *al- ḥasal aḥla šī bi- l- dunya*  
 the honey sweetest thing in the world  
 'Honey is the sweetest thing on earth.'

We shall return to this issue and its significance when we discuss parallel Hebrew data.

### Corpus Analysis

We argue that it is the construction in (9)–(10), with an invariant *aḥla* preceding the noun, which was borrowed into Hebrew, resulting in forms that feature a borrowing not only of a word but also of the word order of a particular construction—such as *axla davar* in (3). However, while forms like the one in (3) are clearly attested, the extent of their current use is not empirically validated. In order to assess the distribution of *axla*, we searched the Israblog Corpus (Linzen 2010), which was extracted in September 2008 from the Israeli blog-hosting site [www.israblog.co.il](http://www.israblog.co.il) (accessed September 15, 2014). The corpus comprises blogs written between 2005 and 2008. This corpus is particularly suitable for our purposes, since its source materials are blogs, and therefore it features a variety of registers but, importantly, has ample representation of a less formal writing style, which is where we expect to find *axla*.

We searched for the first 500 tokens of the word *axla*<sup>6</sup> to determine that speakers indeed use the *axla* NOUN order, and not just the NOUN *axla* order (which, again, would be the unmarked order for a noun and adjective in Hebrew). The results show that they undoubtedly do. Out of these tokens, 63 percent (313 tokens) are in the *axla* NOUN order (exemplified in (13)–(14)), and only 2 percent (8 tokens) of the hits are in the NOUN *axla* order (exemplified in (15)–(16)).

(13) *nekave še- tihye axla mesiba*  
 we'll.hope that will.be great party  
 'We'll hope that it'll be a great party'

(14) *ve- gam ha- nof yafe šam, axla nof*  
 and also the view pretty there great view  
 'and the view there is pretty too, a great view'

(15) *kodem kol, nose axla*  
 first all topic great  
 'first of all, great topic'

(16) *xaxa hu benadam maze axla*  
 haha he person so great  
 'Haha, he's such a great person'<sup>7</sup>

The data show that for these writers, *axla* NOUN is not only common, but the preferred order: *axla* is not reanalyzed as a Hebrew adjective, but rather, is used as part of the entire borrowed construction. Thus, the Hebrew *axla* maintains an interesting combination—the lexical item was borrowed through the *aħla* NOUN construction, and tends to maintain that order, although it is not the basic one for adjectival modification in Hebrew, nor is it a generalized construction. It is important to point out, however, that while the word order is superficially similar to that of Arabic, the resulting construction in Hebrew is different from the Arabic one. In the Arabic construction *aħla* NOUN (which again, in Arabic, is general to adjectives of this template, not restricted to a

6 In Hebrew orthography, the word *axla* (אֲחֵלָה) can be ambiguous with various verbal forms such as *exle* ('I will get sick') and *ex(a)la/ix(a)la* ('she wished'). We did not consider such tokens.

7 This example also shows the adjectival behavior of *axla*, in that it is able to get an adverbial modifier.

particular lexical item), the noun phrase is definite as well, and the meaning is technically ‘the sweetest thing,’ not ‘a sweet thing’ (as shown in (9)–(10)). In Hebrew this meaning is lost; it has neither a comparative nor a superlative meaning, nor is it definite.

In addition to its use as a modifier, *axla* is also frequently used as a predicate. In our corpus, 25 percent of the hits were predicative uses, in which *axla* does not modify a noun at all, as exemplified in (17)–(18).<sup>8</sup> As mentioned before, the Arabic *aḥla* can be a predicate as well, but it is used differently. In Arabic, it is a comparative in its indefinite form and a superlative in its definite form, but once again, this meaning is lost in Hebrew.

- (17) *gam ha-xaverim šela me-ha-becefer ha-kodem*  
 also the friends hers from the school the previous  
*hegiu ve-hem mamaš axla*  
 arrived and they really great  
 ‘her friends from her previous school also came and they were really *axla*’

- (18) *haya nexmad, ha-hofaot hayu axla*  
 was nice the shows were great  
 ‘it was nice, the shows were *axla*’

Examples (17)–(18) show another important way in which *axla* shows that it does not behave like a normal Hebrew adjective. Whereas Hebrew adjectives agree in gender and number, *axla* does not (the subject in both cases is plural, requiring the agreement suffix *-im/-ot*). This is not an exception, but the rule: in our corpus, *axla* never showed agreement, regardless of syntactic position. It is invariant as a predicate, in the *axla* NOUN order, and in the NOUN *axla* order. This is different from the pattern in Arabic shown in (7)–(8), in which *aḥla* agrees when used as an adjectival modifier. This supports our proposal that *axla* was borrowed into Hebrew along with the *axla* NOUN construction, and suggests that it was nativized as a single, invariable, lexical item, such that even when the more typical Hebrew word order is used (NOUN *axla*), it does not behave like a regular Hebrew adjective.

We have argued that the greater use of *axla* NOUN compared to NOUN *axla* suggests that for most speakers, *axla* was not reanalyzed as an adjective, and

8 The use of *axla* as a predicate is also very common in short answers to questions. In fact, the first definition given to *axla* in the popular online Hebrew dictionary *Milog* is: “A positive answer when someone is asked how they are doing.” <http://milog.co.il/%D7%90%D7%97%D7%9C%D7%94> (accessed February 5, 2015).

rather, the construction was borrowed wholesale from Arabic. It is interesting to note that *axla*, which was borrowed along with the Arabic word order, is not showing signs of losing its special distribution. The Israblog corpus represents a variety of speaker/writer ages, but due to the nature of its source material, it is highly skewed towards younger speakers—almost all are younger than 40, and many are in their teens—reflecting the demographics of speakers likely to be writing blogs. Thus, the sample over-represents younger speakers, most of whom are likely to have little to no knowledge of Arabic, let alone the complexities of its syntax. If this sample shows such a preference for *axla* NOUN, it is safe to assume that it is not the case that early borrowers from Arabic borrowed the construction and younger generations are just using the lexical item based on Hebrew syntax. Rather, the borrowed structure appears to be here to stay.

#### A Note on *šel* Constructions

Finally, of the 500 tokens from the Israblog corpus, 10 percent (51 instances) are neither *axla* NOUN nor NOUN *axla*. Rather, they use the general possession/genitive marker *šel* between *axla* and the noun, as exemplified in (19)–(20):

(19) *naxal tsafit, axla šel maslul la- yom ha- rišon*  
 river tsafit **great of route** for.the day the first  
 ‘Tsafit river, an *axla* route for the first day’

(20) *pašut axla šel xofeš*  
 simply great of vacation  
 ‘simply a great vacation’

This use of *šel* is a Hebrew innovation and does not come from the Arabic. Recall that in Arabic the *aħla* NOUN construction is a construct state; Arabic also has an analytic possession which can be used instead of the construct state forms, such as *tabaħi/še:t* in Palestinian Arabic,<sup>9</sup> but constructions such as *aħla tabaħi/še:t* NOUN (parallel to Hebrew *axla šel* NOUN) have not, to our knowledge, been documented. Rather, *axla* here seems to be following a

9 These forms are increasing in their distribution in speech communities that are in close contact with Hebrew, such as Jaffa (Horesh 2014).

Hebrew pattern of using a noun as a modifier.<sup>10</sup> This is shown in (21)–(22) with the nouns *kesem* ('charm') and *motek* ('sweetness'):

(21) *kesem šel yalda*  
charm of girl  
'a charming girl'

(22) *motek šel xatul*  
sweetness of cat  
'a sweet cat'

(23) *xara šel seret*  
shit of movie  
'a shitty movie'

The common use of *axla šel* NOUN gives further evidence that *axla* was not reanalyzed as a Hebrew adjective, as this strategy is used for nouns, not adjectives. This raises the question: since *axla* does not show agreement, and can participate in this clearly nominal construction, was it simply reanalyzed as a noun? That may very well be the case, but it is important to point out that *axla* does not exhibit the patterns of a typical Hebrew noun either. First, in our corpus data, the two Hebrew modification strategies, NOUN *axla* and *axla šel* NOUN, are far less common than the borrowed construction, *axla* NOUN. Furthermore, in examples such as (19)–(20), the *šel* can be freely dropped, resulting in the very common *axla* NOUN form, whereas in examples (21)–(22) the *šel* cannot be dropped (*\*motek yalda*, *\*kesem xatul*),<sup>11</sup> and these nouns cannot have structure equivalent to *axla* NOUN. Interestingly, in (23), the *šel* can be dropped, resulting in the perfectly grammatical *xara seret*, but it is our impression that examples of nouns such as *xara*, which can allow for such a construction, are quite rare, whereas (21)–(22) appears to be the general pattern.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while *axla* does arguably appear more nominal than adjectival in its syntactic properties, it also appears not to have the typical distribution of any major lexical category of Hebrew.

10 For more on the origins of this use of *šel* in Hebrew, see Shatil 2015.

11 For a more complex and somewhat modified analysis of Hebrew *šel* constructions based on prosody, see Botwinik & Albert 2012.

12 It is interesting to point out that *xara* is also a borrowing from Arabic, whereas the other two examples are native Hebrew words.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the data presented here clearly show that *axla* is not a simple lexical borrowing, as it was borrowed from Arabic to Hebrew with a good deal of syntactic structure intact. This makes *axla* an interesting data point in light of the broader theoretical discussion regarding different types of borrowings and language contact (Thomason 2001). With respect to Arabic, Thomason (2007) makes a distinction between the contact Arabic may have with other languages and its interference with these languages' phonologies, as opposed to "hints of more extensive structural interference," which she argues only occur in Arabophone areas and areas that border on Arabophone areas. Modern Hebrew falls squarely into the latter case.<sup>13</sup> It clearly fits the geographical classification, and, as shown here, *axla* exhibits structural interference, since the borrowing includes a rather complex syntactic structure in Arabic, which it does not share with Hebrew: a genitive construct, which does not denote a semantic genitive, but rather a superlative. Of course, *axla* is just one example, but its syntactic behavior is indicative of the extent of contact between Hebrew and Arabic, with structural influence that goes well beyond the occasional borrowing of a lexical item.<sup>14</sup>

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13 In fact, unlike some of the cases Thomason describes in which Arabic phonology interferes with that of the languages with which it comes in contact (e.g., Wolof, Hausa, Turkish), in the case of Modern Hebrew, there is statistical evidence (Horesh 2014) of Hebrew interference in Arabic phonology.

14 For a detailed account of the contact between these two languages, see Henkin-Roitfarb 2011.

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