

Galia Hatav (University of Florida)

Converbs in Biblical Hebrew

It is traditionally claimed that Biblical Hebrew (BH) has two kinds of infinitives: Construct and Absolute. The kind labelled ‘Infinitive Construct’ behaves in the most part in a similar way the infinitive behaves in other languages, and may also have subject or object clitics attached to it. The form labelled ‘Infinitive Absolute’ (IA) is understood to be a non-finite verb form, deprived of temporal and agreement features as well as (subject or object) clitics.

Scholars list a number of uses for the IA in BH: as a directive, performing commands (Waltke & O’Connor 1990 and Doron 2018, a. o.), as an adverbial, modifying situations (Waltke & O’Connor 1990), as a focus or topic marker (Harbour 1999; Hatav 2017), etc. All of those uses seem to be performed in other languages by forms understood to be converbs. This suggests that the title ‘infinitive’ given to the IA is a misnomer. My contention is that it is actually a converb. If this is, indeed, the case, the IA in BH might shed some light on the characteristics of converbs in language.

Doron (2018) claims that on its use in commands the IA serves as the citation of the verb, Gesenius (1910, §113) considers one of its functions to represent the verbal idea, Harbour (1999) contends that it represents the bare eventuality of the verb in question, and Hatav (2017) considers it to be representing the lexical concept of the verb. Based on its semantic characteristics (and some morphological behavior), we can conclude that what the IA in BH does is to name the root of the verb in question. By extension, we may conclude that converbs in languages like Hungarian are root names.