Relative Clauses in Hebrew Translation of Maimonides’ *Treatise on Asthma*

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The article examines the influence of Classical Arabic on the syntax of relative clauses in Shemuel Benvenishti’s Hebrew translation of Maimonides’ medical tractate. On the basis of contrastive analysis and translation theories, the article also analyzes the guiding principles of the translation in question in order to shed light on the translator’s approach and his reasons for rendering relative clauses one way or another.

# 1. Introduction

*Treatise on Asthma* (subtitled *The Book of Nourishment*) was written by Maimonides in Arabic and translated into Hebrew by the physician Shemuel Benvenishti in 1173.[[1]](#footnote-1) This translation was one of the many close encounters between Hebrew and Arabic that took place over centuries. The situation in which two linguistic systems meet and to some extent intermingle results in their categories influencing each other.[[2]](#footnote-2) According to Weinreich, vocabulary, phonetics, and syntax of the languages that are in contact tend to merge.[[3]](#footnote-3) This usually occurs when a bilingual speaker utilizes words from the lending language in the host language or equates a phoneme of the secondary system with one in the primary system, namely the mother tongue.[[4]](#footnote-4)

As a part of human culture, literature is an important vehicle for transfer­ring concepts and terms regardless of whether direct contact exists between the cultures. It is also a major channel through which languages affect each other, in particular when literary works are translated following a cultural encounter between nations and individuals. In such cases, translation often involves linguistic interpretation, mirroring the repertoire, rules, and norms of one language (in our case, Arabic) in another one (Hebrew).

Toury maintains that all translations involve interpretation, even if it is limited; in other words, texts cannot be translated from one language to another without being interpreted.[[5]](#footnote-5) He also formulated several pertinent rules:

* Avoiding interpretation requires special conditions and/or considerable effort by the translator.
* Two kinds of interpretation exist: negativetransfer,with the influence of the source language leading to deviations from the rules and patterns of the target system, and positivetransfer, where the employed linguis­tic forms and structures exist anyway in the target language but are influenced by the source language.
* Interpretation is affected by the cognitive processes that take place dur­ing the act of translation, accompanied by what Toury calls “discourse transfer” whereby the original text imposes itself on the translator.
* The greater the translator’s attention to the character of the source text the more interpretive the translation turns out, except when it is per­formed by a highly skilled individual.
* Sociocultural factors can affect tolerance for interpretation. It is more tolerable when the text is translated from a highly prestigious language or the “majority” tongue—especially when the target culture/language is “weak” or belongs to a “minority.” Tolerance for interpretation is not necessarily the same across all the textual and linguistic levels within the target system.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Shemuel Benvenishti likely considered himself not just a translator of a medical text from Arabic to Hebrew, but also a mediator between the Arab and Jewish cultures. Therefore, his strategy of using the same relative clauses as those employed in the original Arabic, rather than alternative linguistic structures, could be a voluntary and conscious choice, designed to reflect the realities and flavors of the culture of origin.[[7]](#footnote-7) The present article provides examples from classical Hebrew, namely from the Bible and rabbinic writ­ings, to show that while many of the Hebrew syntactical patterns he employed have precedent in earlier strata of the language, he chose these patterns be­cause they are identical to those in Arabic. What is more, at least one of these patterns is attested only in Arabicized Medieval Hebrew.

# 2. Arabic Influences on Syntactic Structures of Relative Clauses

According to traditional grammar, a relative clause is one that modifies a noun nucleus (a noun, a noun phrase, or a pronoun) and is dependent on this nucleus in form and/or syntax. In general, the dependent element is subordi­nate to the main element.[[8]](#footnote-8) The clause which accompanies the nucleus is known as the modifying clause. The nucleus plus the modifying phrase is called a complex noun phrase. The nucleus of the complex noun phrase is also called the antecedent and the conjunctions, such asש , אשר*,* andה, are known as relative pronouns.[[9]](#footnote-9)

There are two types of relative clause in Classical Arabic: the syndetic relative clause (*tsilah*) with a noun as the antecedent and the asyndetic relative clause (*tsifah*) where there is no definite antecedent.[[10]](#footnote-10) In a *tsilah* clause, the antecedent is linked to the relative clause by a relative pronoun while in a *tsifah* clause, the antecedent is connected to the relative clause without a relative pronoun.

## 2.1. Syndetic Relative Clauses Following a Definite Antecedent

There are two types of syndetic relative clauses in the Hebrew Bible, those with a definite antecedent and those without it; there is consequently no uniform rule:[[11]](#footnote-11)

(1) Exod 3:5

וַיֹּאמֶר אַל תִּקְרַב הֲלֹם שַׁל נְעָלֶיךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אַדְמַת קֹדֶשׁ הוּא

And he said, Do not draw near; take your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you are standing is holy ground.

(2) Exod 1:8

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ חָדָשׁ עַל מִצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע אֶת יוֹסֵף

Now there rose up a new king over Egypt who knew not Joseph.

Shemuel Benvenishti’s translation of the *Treatise on Asthma* follows the pattern of the *tsilah* clause in Classical Arabic, with the definite antecedent having syndetic subordination, as in the examples that follow.

### 2.1.1. Relative Clauses Introduced by ש

(3)

וידע השיעור, שאם אכלו בימי ניסן, יקל עליו משאו

And knowing the amount, which if he consumes it in the springtime, can be easily tolerated (p. 10).

*wa-yaʻlamu l-miqdāra l-laḏī ʼiḏā tanāwalahu fī zamani r-rabīʻi sahula ʻalayhe ḥtimāluhu* (p 24).[[12]](#footnote-12)

(4)

על כן יטעו בעלי הניסיון, שאין עמהם היקש

And hence the empiricists, who do not employ analogical reasoning, commit errors (p. 25).

*yaġlaṭu ʼahlu t-taǧribati l-laḏīna lā qiyāsa maʻahum* (p. 61).

### 2.1.2. Relative Clauses Introduced by ה

(5)

ועל כן אייעץ לכל בני האדם שירחיקו כל המסעדים המולידים הליחות הרעות

Therefore, I advise everyone to abstain from all the foodstuffs that produce bad humors (p. 4).

*wa-liḏālika ʼušīru ʻalā ġamīʻi n-nāsī ʼan yaġtanibū ġamīʻa l-lʼadwiyati l-lmawġūdati li-l-ʼaxlāṭi r-radiʼati* (p. 9).

(6)

הדם, הנמצא בכבד יקרא הרוח הטבעי

The blood found in the liver is called “natural pneuma” (p. 33).

*fa-buxāru d-dami l-mawǧūdi fī l-kabidi yusammā r-rūḥa ṭ-ṭabīʻiyyata* (p. 80).

### 2.1.3. Relative Clauses Introduced by אשר

(7)

וכבר זכרו האחרונים מן הרופאים חפיפת החזה בעילה הזאת, אשר אתה קובל ממנה

[Physicians] in our time have mentioned [the importance of massage] of the chest for this disease about which you complain (p. 23).

*wa-qad ḏakara l-mutaʼaxirūna dalka ṣ-ṣadri fī hāḏihi l-ʻillati l-latī taškūhā* (p. 54).

(8)

אף המשקים, אשר הכוונה בהם לבשל ולהקל הרקיקה

Decoctions with which one wishes to coct [the superfluities] and to ease expectoration (p. 27).

*faʼammā l-muġliyātu l-latī l-murādu bihā l-ʼinḍāǧu wa-tashīlu n-nafṯi* (p. 65).

## 2.2. Asyndetic Relative Clauses Following a Definite Antecedent

In the Bible, an asyndetic relative clause may accompany either an indefinite antecedent:

Gen 24:22

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר כִּלּוּ הַגְּמַלִּים לִשְׁתּוֹת וַיִּקַּח הָאִישׁ נֶזֶם זָהָב בֶּקַע מִשְׁקָלוֹ וּשְׁנֵי צְמִידִים עַל יָדֶיהָ עֲשָׂרָה זָבָב מִשְׁקָלָם

And it came to pass, when the camels were through drinking, the man took golden earrings weighing a shekel and two bracelets for her wrists weighing ten shekels of gold,

or a definite antecedent.[[13]](#footnote-13) There are hardly any asyndetic relative clauses in the Mishnah, apparently due to the influence of Aramaic, although some exceptions to this do exist.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the Arabicized Hebrew of the medieval period, asyndetic relative clauses after indefinite antecedents were increasingly used in translated texts, following the pattern of the *tsifah* clauses in Arabic.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Hebrew translation of the *Treatise on Asthma* is representative of this trend. Because there are asyndetic relative clauses after indefinite antecedents in the Hebrew sources, in our case, we can call the Arabic influence indirect since the translator chose to use the syntactic structure attested in the target language because this structure was compatible with that of the source language and consequently preferable to the alternatives. Its use can consequently be seen as a part of a deliberate strategy on the translator’s part. For example:

(9)

ואלה כולם טעויות מביאות לכל במה שהזהרנו

All these are errors which cause those eventualities against which we have warned (p. 40).

*wa-hāḏihi kulluhā ʼaġālīṭun tadʻū li-lwuqūʻi fī mā ḥaḏḏarnā minhu* (p. 96).

(10)

מה שיקראהו הרופאים רוחות, הם אווירים קלים, נמצאים בגוף החי

This is so because what the physicians call “pneumas” are fine vapors found in the bodies of living creatures (p. 33).

*wa-ḏālika ʼanna hāḏihi l-latī yusammīhā l-ʼaṭibbāʼu ʼarwāḥan hiya ʼabxiratun mawǧūdatun fī ǧismi l-ʼinsāni* (p. 80).

## 2.3. Nominalized Relative Clauses with מה, מי, and ממה as Relative Particles

In Arabic, the relative pronouns *mā*, *mān*, and *mimā* are found in nomi­nalized relative clauses. Nominalized relative clauses containing the nominal pronouns *ma* and *man* can function as *tsilah* or *tsifah* clauses. When these pronouns are part of an indefinite antecedent, the relative clause is known as a nominalized *tsifah* clause. For example:

*ʼakaltu mā ʼuḥibuhu*

I ate what I like.

Original:

*ʼakaltu ṭaʻāman ʼuḥibuhu*

I ate food that I like.

When the pronouns belong to a definite antecedent, the relative clause is known as a nominalized *tsilah* clause, for example:

*ʼakaltu mā ʼuḥibuhu*

I ate what I like.

Original:

*ʼakaltu ṭ-ṭaʻāma l-laḏī ʼuḥibuhu*

I ate the food that I like.

The word מי functions only rarely as a relative particle in the Bible:

2 Sam 20:11

וְאִישׁ עָמַד עָלָיו מִנַּעֲרֵי יוֹאָב וַיֹּאמֶר מִי אֲשֶׁר חָפֵץ בְּיוֹאָב וּמִי אֲשֶׁר לְדָוִד אַחֲרֵי יוֹאָב

And one of Joab’s men went and stood by Amasa, and said to those who passed by, “To whom do you belong? Are you of the men of David who are after Joab?”

In the Mishnah, the words מה, מי, and ממה are used as relative pronouns, for example, כָּל מַה שֶיִּרְצוּ‘for anything they would decide’ (*Git.* 4:3); מִי שֶהָיוּ שְתֵּי כִּיתֵּי עֵדִים מְעִידוֹת אוֹתוֹ ‘If two groups of witnesses were testifying against a person’ (*Naz.* 3:7); קְצָרוּהָ לִסְטִים חֶצְיָהּ וְקָצַר הוּא חֶצְיָהּ – נוֹתֵן פֵּאָה מִמַּה שֶׁקָּצַר ‘If robbers reaped half of it and he reaped half of it – he gives *peah* from what he reaped’ (*Pe’ah* 2:8).

The translator of the *Treatise on Asthma* clearly tends to employ nominalized relative clauses with מה, מי, and ממה as relative particles, in the same way nominalized relative clauses function in the source where *mā, man,* and *mimmā* appear as relative particles. The interpretation, which seems to have been involved in the act of translating the *Treatise on Asthma,* is apparently a positive transfer, because the translator consciously selected Hebrew syntactic patterns under the influence of the source language—Arabic. His frequent selection of these patterns is indicative of the preference for syntax that is similar to that of the Arabic original. The influence was indirect, however, because there is precedent in the Hebrew sources for the syntactic patterns that the translator chooses.

### 2.3.1. Relative Clauses with מי as a Relative Particle

(11)

ומהם, מי שאצטומכתו קטנה ועיכולו חלש

while those with a small stomach and weak digestion (p. 10).

*wa-minhum man maʻidatahu ṣaġīratun wa-haḍmuhu ḍaʻīfun* (p. 24).

(12)

רצוני לומר, שאבחרה להודיע הנהגת החלי הזה, הן שיקרה למי שיקרה

namely, [to impart] knowledge about the treatment of this disease for every individual case (p. 1).

*ʼaʻnī ʼan ʼaḍaʻahā l-maʻrifati tadbīri hāḏa l-maraḍi ʻarḍun li-kulli man ʻaraḍ* (p. 1).

### 2.3.2. Relative Clauses with מה as a Relative Particle

(13)

וכמו כן מה שיסעד מסעד רב מאד, ואפילו היה טוב

and similarly everything that is very nutritious, even if it is good (p. 4).

*wa-kaḏālika kullu mā yaġdū ġiḏaʼan kaṯiran wa-law kāna ğadīdan* (p. 8).

(14)

וכבר ידעתי בעדות ובמה שספרת לנו

I know from what I have witnessed with my own eyes and from what my Master has described to me (p. 1).

*wa-qad ʻalimtu bi-l-mušāhadati wa-bi-mā waṣafathu l-ḥaḍratu lī* (p. 2).

### 2.3.3. Relative Clauses with ממה as a Relative Particle

(15)

ובזמן בריאותם יאות לעשותו יותר ממה שיעשהו בשיעור, ואין צריך לומר המשוש היבש

But when they are healthy, it may be necessary to apply massage to them more frequently than in the case of the other limbs, and especially [to apply] dry massage (p. 23).

*wa-fī waqti ṣiḥḥatihā qad yanbaġī ʼan tastaʻmila fīhā bi-ʼakṯari mimmā yustaʻmalu minhu fī sāʼiri l-ʼaʻḍāʼi wa-lā siyyamā mina d-dalki* (p. 54).

(16)

וללחך מאחת מן הלחיכות, שאוכיר ממה שיעזור ברקיקה

and licking one of the linctuses which I will describe and which assists in expectoration (p. 26).

*wa-laʻqu ʼaḥadi l-laʻūqāti l-latī sa-ʼaṣifuhā mimmā yuʻīnu ʻalā n-nafṯi* (p. 63).

## 2.4. Clarifying and Descriptiveמִן in the Expression of Relative Clauses

In Arabic, *min* is used to clarify a general issue, elaborate on it, or analyze it. It appears in Arabic to express a relative clause with the structure *mā…min* of inanimate objects and *man…min* of humans and other living beings. For example:

*ʼaʻṭā li-ğārihi l-māla l-laḏī yamlikahu = ʼaʻṭā ğārahu mā yamliku min māl*

He gave his neighbor the money that he has = He gave his neighbor what money he has.

*raʼaytu r-riğāla l-laḏīna qadimū = raʼaytu man qadima mina r-riğāli*

I saw the men who came = I saw the men who came.

In Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew, there is no similar structure for expressing a relative clause. However, such a structure does exist in Medieval Hebrew, as a direct consequence of intermingling with Arabic at that time.[[16]](#footnote-16) The translator’s decision to use the clarifying and descriptiveמִן in the Hebrew version of the *Treatise on Asthma* thus definitely points to the direct influence of Arabic. For example:

(17)

וכל מה שדרכו מן המטעמים שיושם בו

And every dish to which one is accustomed to adding (p. 10).

*wa-kullu mā šaʼnuhu mina l-ʼalwāni ʼan yalqā fīhi* (p. 22).

(18)

ואין זה כוונת המאמר אחרי שחברו הרופאים בכל חולי מה שצריך אליו מזה

But this is not the purpose of this treatise, since the physicians have already laid down for every disease all that is necessary in this respect (p. 1).

*wa-laysa hāḏā ġaraḍu hāḏihi l-maqālati ʼiḏ qad waḍaʻati l-ʼaṭibbaʼu fī kulli maraḍin mā yaḥtāğu ʼilayhi min hāḏā* (p. 2).

# 3. Summary

There is a direct link between syndetic subordination and the definite antecedent. Generally speaking, in Shemuel Benvenishti’s translation of the *Treatise on Asthma*, a definite antecedent has to have syndetic subordination, exactly like the *tsilah* clause in Classical Arabic where a definite antecedent always has syndetic subordination. There is often a direct link between an indefinite antecedent and the kind of subordination: asyndetic relative clauses frequently appear after an indefinite antecedent, similar to Classical Arabic.

There are precedents in Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew for the translation’s syntactic patterns of relative clauses; they are not found solely in Arabicized Hebrew. However, the frequency with which they are used to render the same structures in the book’s original indicates an indirect influence of Arabic. In other words, what we deal with here is an oblique way of reflecting the linguistic flavor of the culture of origin. The same is true of the translator’s frequent choice of nominalized relative clauses introduced by מה, מי, and ממה as equivalents of nominalized relative clauses introduced by *mā*, *mān*, and *mimā* in the source text. By contrast, a direct Arabic influence can be seen where the clarifying and descriptive מִן is concerned since this structure does not exist in the preceding strata of Hebrew.

Most of the time, the interpretation involved in the translation of the relative clauses in the *Treatise on Asthma* is of the positive type. The translator chose to use relative clause structures that already existed in the target language but the frequency of their occurrence was affected, without doubt, by the source language.

The present article can open the door to further research on the topic of relative clauses in Arabicized Hebrew. To wit: is Arabicization of relative clauses in translated writings more common than in texts that were originally written in Hebrew? Is the influence of Arabic in general and relative clauses in particular less extensive in the work of authors who had no knowledge of Arabic, such as Levi ben Gershon and Gershon ben Solomon, than in the texts produced by those who did know it? Was the Arabicized style the norm for all writers of the period, including those who did not know Arabic? Is the literary genre likely to influence how the relative clause behaves? In other words, are some structures more common in texts with some sort of literary bent?

1. All references to this translation below follow its first print edition: Moshe ben Maimon, ספר הקצרת (The book on asthma; trans. S. Benvenishti; ed. S. Muntner; Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1940). The book is not examined in M. Goshen-Gottstein, “Syntax and Vocabulary of Mediaeval Hebrew as Influenced by Arabic” (Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 1951). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I. Basal, “יסודות עבריים וארמיים בערבית הדבורה בפי הנוצרים בא"י ובערבית הכתובה בקהילות הנוצריות בא"י, סוריה והלבנון” (Hebrew and Aramaic elements in the vernacular Christian Arabic in Israel and in the written Christian Arabic in the Holy Land, Syria and Lebanon; Ph.D. thesis, University of Haifa, 2004), p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For the influence of Arabic on Hebrew in the Middle Ages with regard to vocabulary and syntax, see G. B. Sarfatti, “לשון המתרגמים” (The language of the translators from Arabic), in פרקים בתולדות הלשון העברית (History of the Hebrew language; ed. M. Kadari; Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 2003), pp. 49–96; A. Maman, “העברית המושפעת מן הערבית” (Hebrew influenced by Arabic), *Mahanaim* 1 (1991): 106–115. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. U. Weinreich, *Languages**in**Contact* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. G. Toury, *In* *Search* *of* *a* *Theory* *of* *Translation* (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, 1980), pp. 71–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. G. Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995), pp. 274–279. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On this phenomenon in Hebrew and Yiddish, see I. Even-Zohar, לשון אותנטית, מסירת דיבור אותנטית: עברית ויידיש (Authentic language and authentic reported speech: Hebrew versus Yiddish), *Hasifrut* 30/31 (1981): 82–87. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. G. Sarfatti, “The Language of the Translators,” p. 81; S. Shaer, “משפטי זיקה בשיח העברי היומיומי הדבור” (Relative clauses in Israeli Hebrew talk-in-interaction; M.A. thesis, University of Haifa, 2007), p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. R. Quirk, S. Leech, and S. Geoffery, *Comprehensive* *Grammar* *of* *the* *English* *Language* (London: Longman, 1985), p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 317; B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An* *Introduction* *to* *Biblical* *Hebrew* *Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 331–340. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Y. Peretz,משפט הזיקה בעברית לכל תקופותיה (The relative clause; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1967), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Here and throughout, the original Arabic text of Maimonides’ treatise is quoted from Moshe ben Maimon, *On Asthma* (ed. and trans. G. Bos; Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Y. Blau, זוטות מתחום משפטי הזיקה בעברית המקראית (Notes on relative clause in Biblical Hebrew), in עיונים בבלשנות עברית (Studies in Hebrew linguistics; ed. Y. Blau; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. M. Azar,תחביר לשון המשנה (The syntax of Mishnaic Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Academy of Hebrew Language, 1995), p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. M. Goshen-Gottstein,תחבירה ומילונה של הלשון העברית שבתחום השפעתה של הערבית (Syntax and vocabu­lary of Mediaeval Hebrew; revised by S. Assif and U. Melammed; Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2006), p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. M. Goshen-Gottstein, *Syntax and Vocabulary*, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)