Accepting while Shifting: The Discourse Marker tov (‘okay, fine’, lit. ‘good’) in Israeli Hebrew Talk-in-Interaction

Yael Maschler
University of Haifa, Israel

1. Introduction

The Hebrew word tov is listed in the dictionary as an adjective meaning ‘good’, as an adverb, a noun, a verb, and as a ‘word of agreement and affirmation’ meaning ‘yes, fine’. All of these uses, including the last one, are found already in Biblical Hebrew. The present study focuses on this last meaning of tov in Israeli Hebrew casual conversation, as well as on another meaning, not listed in any of the dictionaries. In both of these uses, tov comprises a discourse marker.

A discourse marker is defined as an utterance fulfilling two conditions: a) Semantically, the utterance must have a metalingual interpretation in the context in which it occurs. In other words, rather than referring to the extralingual world, it must refer metalingually to the realm of the text [‘textual discourse marker’], to the interaction between its participants [‘interpersonal discourse marker’], or to their cognitive processes [‘cognitive discourse marker’]. b) Structurally, the utterance must occur at intonation-unit initial position, either at a point of speaker change, or, in same-speaker talk, immediately following any intonation contour other than continuing intonation. It may occur after continuing intonation or at non intonation-unit initial position only if it follows another marker in a cluster (Maschler, 2002: 2).

A) and B) coincide for 94% of the discourse markers throughout the corpus.

Whereas tov of ‘agreement and affirmation’ functions in the interpersonal realm of the interaction, the discourse marker tov in its other use (that which is unattested in the dictionaries) functions in the realm of the text.

For an example of the interpersonal function, examine excerpt (1) from a conversation between two women in their early twenties. Yafit is attempting to begin a story about a pair of shoes she found on one of her shopping trips, while Meirav wants to know first how much they cost:
Meirav humorously tells Yafit that unless she tells her first how much the shoes cost, she won’t be able to focus on the story. Yafit promises her again that she’ll get to it (line 31), and asks her to listen to the story from its beginning with takshivi! (‘listen’, 32). Meirav agrees to this request with tov (33), and Yafit begins the story. This tov, then, refers not to the extralingual world, but rather to the realm of the interaction between participants, and it appears at intonation unit initial position at a point of speaker change.

This use of tov is equivalent to the English use of okay to affirmatively respond to a request, as described e.g., by Schegloff, 1968; Merritt, 1978; Condon, 1986; and Beach, 1993.

Whereas interpersonal tov is employed by the recipient, textual tov is used by the speaker. In excerpt (2), for example, two archeology students at the University of Haifa are discussing a paper they were assigned concerning an ancient city of their choice in the region. They are making fun of the strange names some of these cities have (Constantinople, Sarageyopolis). Ami then jokingly tells Liraz to let their professor know that he’ll be writing his paper on the ‘ancient’ city of Haifa. This should suffice, he adds, because Haifa, too, has a ‘strange’ name:

(2) ‘Archeology’:
114 Ami: . . tagidi lo, tell him,
115 . . she’ani ’ose ‘avoda.
Upon completing the topic of the archeology paper (line 122), and following laughter on both sides and a long pause, Ami switches to the new topic of Students’ Day celebrations on campus. The transition is prefaced by tov, appearing in a discourse marker cluster (Maschler 1997) along with 3 more markers: ‘so, about the second topic, uh’ (lines 125-6). Tov functions here in the textual realm, marking the move to the new topic. From the definite article in hanose hasheni (‘the second topic’, line 125), we learn that a second topic had been on the speaker’s agenda for a while, rendering the transition at line 124 an expected one for the speaker.

This, too, is reminiscent of descriptions of the English discourse marker okay, which, in addition to its interpersonal uses, also ‘marks the transition across [the] boundary as a default or expected one’ (Condon, 2001: 496). This tov, too, refers not to the extralingual world. Rather, it functions in the realm of the text to mark the beginning of a new conversational action, and it appears at intonation unit initial position in same-speaker talk, following final intonation (line 122).

Hebrew tov and English okay, then, are equivalents of each other in at least the two functions of agreement and transition to an expected course of action. To be sure, English okay has entered the Hebrew discourse marking system just as it has in many other languages. Upon initial examination, it seems to function in Hebrew in these two functions as well. However, tov
is almost 4 times more common than 'okley throughout the corpus, and further study is needed in order to characterize the difference between them. From a linguistic point of view, tov has the advantage of being easily traced back to a particular lexeme, which okley does not.

The question is, how might a particular utterance come to have both interpersonal as well as textual functions? I wish to explore here the functions of tov in Israeli Hebrew casual conversation, in order to reveal the functional itinerary followed by this discourse marker, thus contributing to cross-language studies of grammaticization of discourse markers (e.g., Fleischman & Yaguello, 1999; Traugott & Dasher, 2002).

2. Data

The study is based on the Haifa Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew (Maschler, 2004) which I have been collecting over the past decade. At the time of this study, it comprised audio-recordings of 50 conversations transcribed following Chafe 1994, between friends and family relatives, constituting approximately 157 minutes of talk among 124 different speakers. Altogether, 60 tokens of the discourse marker tov are employed in this corpus, and they are distributed among the functions given in the following table:

(3) Functions of tov throughout the database

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal tov</th>
<th>Textual tov - Transition into following action</th>
<th>Textual tov - Closing current action</th>
<th>Ambiguous between interpersonal/textual tov</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28 (46.7%)</td>
<td>21 (35%)</td>
<td>2 (3.3%)</td>
<td>9 (15%)</td>
<td>60 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We see that almost half the tokens (46.7%) function interpersonally, whereas a little over a third function textually (most of them, 35% to begin the following action, and only 3.3% to close the current one). Another 15% of the tokens are ambiguous and function both in the interpersonal and the textual realms. It is these ambiguous cases that are particularly helpful in tracing the connection between the interpersonal and textual functions of tov.

Let us examine the functions of tov in more detail.

3. Interpersonal tov

Interpersonal tov is employed in this corpus by the recipient, and it is used to express:
1) agreement to action
2) acceptance of some state of things
3) third-turn receipt
4) concession, often preceding a ‘but’ response
5) ironic agreement, i.e., disagreement.

The first category, ‘agreement to action’ was illustrated in excerpt 1. Let us examine some of the other categories.

3.1. Acceptance of Some State of Things

Just as a recipient can agree to some course of action, they can also agree to, or accept a description of some state of things. In excerpt (4), for instance, Yonat tastes some Pomelos, which Gila, her hostess, offered her:
(4) ‘Sofas’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Yonat:</th>
<th>Gila:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>‘oy.</td>
<td>(laughs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>(slight laughter)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 58   | ‘tipa mar.  
|      | a bit bitter. | |
| 59   | ‘hayiti /mexana ‘et ze/.  
|      | I would /call it/ I’d say. | |
| 60   | Yonat:  | (laughs) |
| 61   | ‘az bo‘i,  
|      | so come so let’s, | |
| 62   | ‘ani ‘eten lahem ‘od ‘eize,  
|      | I’ll give them another, | |
| 63   | Gila:  | (laughs) |
| 64   | Yonat:  | ‘om vomayim. 
|      | day two days day or two, | |
| 65   | Gila:  | ‘le... ‘esof ktsat pazam mashehu. 
|      | to to gather some time something to become more ripe. | |

After tasting the fruit, Yonat announces that it’s kind of bitter. To this Gila responds with some laughter and a *tov* (line 61), accepting Yonat’s description of the state of the fruit. Indeed, following another discourse marker, ‘az (‘so’, line 62), she proceeds to suggest that they allow the fruit a few more days to ripen.

3.2. Concession

*Tov* can be employed by a recipient to pay lip service towards accepting some state of things. In these instances, it is often immediately followed by a ‘but’ response. The result is a fleeting concession of the state of things as described by the interlocutor. In excerpt (5), for instance, an interaction between Orit and her parents, the mother is in the middle of a story, when the father suddenly interrupts with a question concerning the tape recorder:

(5) ‘Family Gossip’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Mother:</th>
<th>Father:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 192  | ‘od hu ‘amar,  
|      | what else he said | tagidi, 
|      | what else did he say, | tell (fem. sg.) me, |
| 193  | Father:  | ‘at hekla ha’irat ha?  
|      | you changed here battery | did you change batteries here? |
| 194  | Orit:    | ‘o.  
|      | no, | |
| 195  | Father:  | ‘at yodu’at shehadavar haze ‘oved  
|      | you know that the thing the this works | you know that this thing works |
| 196  | Orit:    | ‘ani ganavti ‘et ze,  
|      | I stole this, | |
| 197  | ‘ani be’emtsa mishpat.  
|      | If ‘m in [the] middle of [a] sentence. | ‘ima be’emtsa |
When the father continues the tape recorder topic (lines 196-197), both mother and daughter overlap, objecting that the mother was in the middle of a sentence. The mother then adds an expression of her annoyance at the situation ‘you’re driving me crazy’ (line 201), which the father overlaps with ‘tov but it’s terribly important, to know this’, at 202. With this tov, the father accepts the state of things as described by mother and daughter, and pays lip service towards acknowledging the inadequacy of his interruption. His acceptance is quite momentary though -- it is immediately followed by ‘aval (‘but’), a humorous justification of his behavior (‘it’s terribly important to know this’), and a continuation of the topic of the tape recorder.

Concessive tov is not always followed by an explicit ‘but’. In excerpt (6), Orna describes some old fashioned medicine in the form of mustard powder mixed with water, which her mother recommended she spread over pieces of paper and apply on her back over the lung area:

(6) ‘Old Fashioned Medicine’:
42 Orna: . . . velasim ’et ze, and to put it,
43 ’al ha--, on the--,
44 re’ot, lungs.
45 . . . me’axora? from the back?
46 Xava: nu’, yeah,
47 vem ’ose? and what it does and what does it do?
48 Orna: . . . hi ’omeret, she says,
49 z i
50 ze.

For a study of the Hebrew discourse marker nu (‘yeah, go on’), see Maschler, 2003.
Following the mother’s constructed dialogue (Tannen, 1989) concerning the benefits of this medication (lines 49-54), Orna reports, again in constructed dialogue, her response to her mother in a smiling tone: ‘I said to my mother’, tov, ‘I won’t do it’, lines 55-57. tov here does not accept the mother’s advice even momentarily, as it is accompanied by a smile and a declaration of its unacceptability. It functions concessively, as in despite what you say, or even contrary to what you say, I won’t do it.

3.3. Ironic Agreement: Disagreement

For some readers, tov of the previous excerpt will be interpreted with a certain degree of irony -- the irony of a daughter ridiculing her mother’s unacceptable suggestions. The irony expressed by tov of excerpt 7 is unquestionable. This is a 1994 political argument at a family meal between right-leaning (Likud party supporter) father and left-leaning (Labor (Ma'arax) party supporter) son, concerning the peace agreement with Jordan just signed by the labor government:

(7) ‘Political Argument’;

4 Gabi: bentayim,
    meanwhile,
    mi shedafak ‘et tahalix hashalom,
    he who screwed up the process peace
    those who screwed up the peace process,
5 xamesh ‘esre shana,
    [for] fifteen years,
6 . . . ze halikud,
    are the Likud,
7 lo ha--
    not the--
8 Shani: ta'avir li t’apire?
    pass me the puree?
9 Gabi: . . lo hama’arax.
    not the Ma’arax.
10 Father: ze naxon,
    it’s true,
11 . . halikud.
    the Likud,
At lines 18-22, Gabi claims, in a rather agonistic tone, that so far the Labor has been carrying on the negotiations quite skillfully. To this, the father responds with a sarcastic *tov* (line 23) followed by a long silence and a sarcastic *‘okey* (‘okay’, 24). With these two tokens, the father clearly does not agree with his son that the Labor is carrying on the negotiations with Jordan skillfully. Gabi’s continuing talk ‘you don’t agree with me...’ (lines 25-28) is evidence that this was Gabi’s interpretation at the time of the argument. The father’s response ‘if I don’t agree with you ...’ (lines 29-32) is evidence that this was the father’s interpretation at the time.
as well. Thus, this tov (as well as the 'okey of line 24) is a token of ironic agreement, or rather disagreement.

As mentioned earlier, all tokens of interpersonal tov are employed by the recipient. Let us now examine textual tov.

4. Textual tov: Marking Expected Transition

Textual tov is employed by the speaker to mark transitions:
1) at beginnings of major topics, whether narrational or elicitational
2) between the episodes and sub-episodes of a narrative
3) to return to an action which has been interrupted
4) at the end of a topic/action.
We have seen an example of textual tov beginning an elicitational topic (excerpt 2). Because of space limitations, I will not illustrate any of the other categories here.

5. Ambiguous Cases: Between Interpersonal and Textual tov

In 15% of the cases throughout the database, tov functions both interpersonally and textually. These tokens are generally employed by the recipient, who responds to the speaker and at the same time also initiates a move on to the next episode/action.

5.1. Acceptance of Some State of Things + Transition into Following Episode/Action

For example, in excerpt (8), an interaction between two women in their early forties, Nurit tells Sara about the dealings her husband had with various medical doctors while they were on vacation. In this section of the story, they are on the phone with their family practitioner, who is wondering why the husband’s lab test results are not in yet:

(8) ‘Doctors’

129 Nurit: . . hu ’omer, he says,
130 ma ___ ze, what[s] this,
131 ‘eyn totsa’ot! no results!
132 . . ma, masartem beyom xamishi, you handed [the culture] in on Thursday,
133 . . ze tsarix lihiyot, it has to be [in],
134 hatosta’ot! the results!
135 . . yom shishi, Friday,
136 yom Shabat, Saturday,
137 yom rishon, Sunday,
138 . . ts’xot lihiyot kvar hatosta’ot, the results should be in already.
139 Sara: naxon, right.
In lines 130-138, comprising the constructed dialogue of the family practitioner, the doctor calculates the days that have elapsed since the culture was taken and concludes that the results should have been in already. At 139 Sara, the recipient of this story, agrees with the doctor’s conclusion, and Nurit continues the story at 140 with the doctor’s constructed dialogue: ‘tov, give me your phone number, I’ll find out’. This tov comprises the doctor’s acceptance of the situation (i.e., that there still are no results although they should have been in already). At the same time, it begins a new episode in the story, the episode describing a new action of the doctor’s -- requesting their phone number.

5.2. Concession + Transition into Following Episode/Action

In a study of agreement adverbs such as German natürlichen or Bavarian fei in the position preceding the front-field of the finite German verb (‘the pre-front field’), which is a preferred locus of grammaticization (Hopper, 1987), Auer writes:

Semantically, these pre-front field agreement adverbials and tokens often preface a possible counter-argument, which the speaker presumes to be relevant in some kind of imagined dialogue with a partner who is not necessarily identical with the one co-present. This counter-argument, although it has not been made by the other party, at least not explicitly and not in the prior turn, is taken up and ‘agreed with’ in a yes-but strategy (1996: 316-317).

In excerpt (6), ‘Old Fashioned Medicine’, lines 56-57, we saw that a real, not an imagined dialogue was reported, and the counter-argument was made via tov: tov, ‘I won’t do it’, or ‘contrary to what you may assume, I won’t do it’.

Auer’s analysis is relevant to the final excerpt, (9), in which a mother tells her husband and daughter about moving her old mother to a new apartment:

(9) ‘Grandma Can’t Remember’:
10 Mother: . . . xamishim shana,
      fifty years,
11 hi xaya sham be
      she lived there on
12 . . behamelex iori
      on King George [street].
13 . . ze lo kal,
      it’s not easy.
14 le'isha mevugeret.
      for an older woman,
15 pi'om la'avor dira.
      to suddenly move apartments.
16 Father: naxon.
      right.
17 Mother: . . tov 'anaxnu 'azaru.
      tov we helped,
18 veze ve
      and so on and
This \textit{tov} can be interpreted as part of an imaginary dialogue, in which the speaker assumes that some interlocutor says that \textit{it's not easy for an older woman to suddenly move apartments} (lines 13-15), particularly with no help. The imaginary argument, that the grandmother had no help 'is taken up and countered by the speaker with a yes-but strategy': \textit{\textquote{tov we helped}}, line 17, in other words, 'yes, you may assume we did not help, but we did', or \textit{\textquote{contrary to what you may assume, we helped}}. This \textit{tov}, then, presents a counter-argument to a possible imaginary argument, that the speaker assumes is relevant in an imaginary dialogue with some interlocutor.

With this example of imaginary dialogue, we begin to see how a metaphorical extension of the primary interactional usage of the agreement token \textit{tov} ‘opens the way to grammaticization] into a connective with quasi-conjunctural function’ (ibid.: 317).

However, \textit{tov} of excerpt 8 also has a textual function, because it constitutes the beginning of a new sub-episode in the orientation to the narrative: Whereas earlier the narrator described the Grandmother’s general living situation over the past 50 years, at line 17 she moves to a more specific orientation describing the day before the move. This \textit{tov}, then, functions both as a concessive conjunction as well as a transition into the following sub-episode of the narrative.

6. \textbf{Grammaticization of tov}

How does a word meaning ‘good’ develop first into an interpersonal discourse marker and then into a textual one?

I would like to suggest that the interpersonal function developed from the basic adjectival meaning of \textit{tov} (‘good’) (see figure below). It emerged through usage in metalingual utterances such as \textit{\textquote{this is good, and therefore I agree to it / for you to continue}}. In other words, before moving on with the rest of the discourse, an agreement must be reached among its participants that they find the state of things satisfactory. This agreement can be
expressed via the nominal sentence ze tov (‘this [is] good’), which later becomes just tov (‘good’).

We saw Auer’s suggestion (1996) concerning the imaginary dialogue with some recipient, to which the speaker responds beginning with a concessive. I would like to extend this idea of an imaginary dialogue to an imaginary metalingual dialogue speakers may hold with themselves prior to continuing with their discourse. A speaker may carry on a metalingual dialogue with her/himself and examine the state of her/his discourse thus far. If everything is satisfactory, she or he may indicate that this is so via tov and move on to the next, expected action. With time, of course, this inner metalingual dialogue is not carried out at every single shift, and tov comes to be used unambiguously to mark expected transitions. In this way, a word meaning ‘good’ that had originally served interpersonal purposes comes also to serve textual functions in the discourse.

Of course, without a spoken corpus from an earlier period of the language, this can only be hypothesized. However, ‘equivalents’ of tov in other languages, also originating in adjectives meaning ‘good’, such as Spanish bien (de Fina, 1997), Bavarian German fei (Auer, 1996), Chinese hao (Miracle, 1989), as well as the Brazilian thumbs-up gesture (Sherzer, 1991) all support this grammaticization path.

References


