

# In the Beginning There Was Conversation: Fictive Direct Speech in the Hebrew Bible

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## Abstract

As the canonical form of language use, face-to-face conversation, characterized by recurring perspective shift, also provides a central conceptual frame for structuring monologues and written texts. We hypothesize that such conversation-based structures are especially widespread in texts and languages that stand close to the oral roots of human culture. To substantiate this claim, we study an ancient and extremely influential text, the Hebrew bible, which shows a highly conversational structure throughout. We discuss such frequent structures as the presentation of non-reported speech in order to introduce intentions, hopes, motives, or states of affairs. Special emphasis is laid on the complementizer לֵאמֹר (lemor), grammaticalized from a speaking verb (Miller 2003). This complementizer introduces the reason or significance of an action, presented through direct speech. We hope to advance the view that language and discourse are inherently conversational and thus viewpointed in nature.

Keywords: direct speech, fictive interaction, conversation frame, fictive interaction, viewpoint, Biblical Hebrew

## 1. Introduction

Face-to-face communicative interaction—characterized by perspective shift—is the primary, canonical and earliest form of language use (Clark 1996)—ontogenetically, diachronically, and phylogenetically (see overview in Pascual 2014, 1–2). It is thus reasonable to expect that conversation itself would have offered one of the earliest and most widespread cognitive models for structuring more monologic spoken discourses and written texts. Indeed, the turn-taking structure of situated conversation may be “internalized” into the utterance, in the form of perspective-indexing structures, and more specifically direct speech and other kinds of interactional structures (Pascual 2002, 2006, 2014; Pascual and Sandler 2016b).

Per our hypothesis, perspective-indexing structures, should be especially widespread in texts and languages that stand close to the oral roots of human culture (Pascual 2014, 29–57,

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83–112; Vries 2003). One common feature of a large number of primary oral languages is the existence of unmarked or obligatory grammatical forms that transparently developed from direct speech to express what is often not a report of previously produced discourse (Pascual 2014, 83–112; and see Vries 2003; Voort 2016). In this paper we study the use of direct speech for non-reports in one particular ancient text—the Hebrew Bible, which originates in a predominantly oral culture.

As an illustration of the type of linguistic phenomenon we will focus on, consider the quotative *like* construction, as in (1):

(1) I caught Michelle Obama’s eye, like, “*What is going on here?*”<sup>2</sup>

The italicized words could be interpreted as a simple quotative: the enunciator (Hillary Clinton) simply quotes literally her own previous utterance of the words “What is going on here?”. This could also be viewed as an approximate quotative: Clinton didn’t say these exact words, but they give the gist of what she uttered (cf. Clark and Gerrig 1990). But in (1), Clinton explicitly demonstrates her *silent* reaction to Donald Trump’s inauguration speech, as it was being delivered. The *like* construction is thus used here to express the speaker’s state of mind rather than to reproduce a past utterance by the speaker or anybody else. The utterance is not reported, as in ordinary quotation, including the report of fictitious or imaginary speech (e.g. “In the movie *Frozen* the Snowman says: ‘*I like warm hugs!*’”). It is not a *constructed* utterance either (Tannen 1988, [1989] 2007), as in “I wish the President had said: ‘*I hereby resign*’”. Instead, the utterance following “like” in (1) is a *fictive* one, in the sense of Talmy ([1996] 2000). Its ontological nature is between reality and fiction, since it is non-actual in that it has never been factually uttered, but it does serve to express something about the world (or, better, the speaker). Face-to-face conversation is used as a frame for conceptualizing and expressing what was originally a silent feeling or opinion that may not even have been internally verbalized.

Examples such as this one are typical cases of *fictive interaction*—the use of the frame of the Conversation, which involves perspective shift, as a means of structuring thought,

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<sup>2</sup> Italics in examples indicate direct speech; underlining is used to mark quotative markers and other parts in the example we wish to direct readers’ attention to. Source: Kayla Epstein, “Now we know how Hillary Clinton felt watching Trump’s inauguration speech”, *The Washington Post*, 27 May 2017 (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/05/27/now-we-know-how-hillary-clinton-felt-watching-trumps-inauguration-speech>).

discourse, and grammar—and one of the very first studied (Pascual 2002, 192–93; 2006, 251–53, 261; 2014, 115–40). But whereas the *like* construction is associated with the colloquial speech of the youth (Blyth, Recktenwald, and Wang 1990; Streeck 2002), the phenomenon of fictive direct speech, which it instantiates, has a long and venerable history (see also Coppen and Foolen 2012). The same is true for related discourse phenomena involving perspective shift (Xiang 2016; Xiang and Pascual 2016)

It has often been noted that the Hebrew Bible—a foundational text of Western culture dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE—is to a large extent dominated by conversation. Thus, while indirect speech does exist in Biblical Hebrew, it is clearly dispreferred, in favor of direct speech forms (Miller 2003, 93–94). One study estimated that 42.5% of the words in the entire text are contained within direct speech quotes (Rendsburg 1990, 160, cited in Miller 2003, 2). Moreover, the action in biblical passages often proceeds primarily through the use of reported speech (Miller 2003, 2). Tellingly, the verb root אמר (*'mr*, “say”) appears 5,308 times in the text, making it, by a hefty margin, the most frequent verb in the Hebrew Bible (Wigram 1995).

Our argument is that this conversational nature of the biblical text is manifested also on a deeper conceptual level when conversation is used as a conceptual frame structuring numerous aspects of the narrative. This pervasiveness of conversation manifests itself, among other things, in an abundance of fictive direct speech in the text.

## **2. *Biblical Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible: Methodological Considerations***

For an ancient language, Biblical Hebrew provides an exceptionally extensive and relatively diverse corpus of data, fully available for electronic search.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible is basically the *only* material we have in this language (there is also a small collection of inscriptions and letters), and it, of course, does not reflect the variety of actual registers any language has.

Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible underwent millennia of copying and centuries of editing, based on multiple sources. It is the record of different periods in the development of a language, with the occasional scribal error or editorial mistake. Also, while there is good evidence to support most of what we know about the semantics of Biblical Hebrew (translations into other ancient languages and a prolific tradition of biblical exegesis in later Hebrew texts), some passages and words remain cryptic and the meanings of many words

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<sup>3</sup> We used the corpus of Jewish religious writings (*ma'agar sifrut ha-kodesh*), at: <http://kodesh.snunit.k12.il>.

and expressions are unclear or contested. Consequently, conclusions from single isolated occurrences of a form should be drawn with great caution. Despite these uncertainties, our focus in this paper are phenomena that are sufficiently robust to make meaningful generalizations.

Examples analyzed in detail are from the Classical Biblical Hebrew linguistic layer of the text (Genesis through 2 Kings). All biblical verses used as examples in this paper are given in the Hebrew original (as preserved in the standard Masoretic text), followed by an English translation. English translations are based on the New Revised Standard Version, modified to render quotative constructions as literally as possible.<sup>4</sup>

We aim to explore the forms and functions of fictive direct speech in the Hebrew Bible from a qualitative perspective, though we do occasionally cite quantitative measures to support the qualitative argument that fictive direct speech is widespread in the biblical text.

### 3. *The Conversation Frame in the Hebrew Bible*

As noted above, conversation is central to the biblical narrative in general. It is also ubiquitous as a conceptual frame used to structure parts and elements of the text. One case in point is the pervasive use of non-information-seeking questions in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup> At a deeper conceptual level, the Hebrew Bible uses conversation as a major structuring metaphor in significant places. Thus, the very creation story of Genesis 1 is structured as a dialogue between God and the created world (Miller 2003, 286–89), where the world responds non-verbally to (or acts upon) God’s verbal commands, as in (2):

(2) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי-אוֹר

‘Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light’ (Genesis 1:3)

The biblical narrative thus presents the creation of the world in conversational terms.

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<sup>4</sup> In particular, the verb אמר (*mr*) is always translated as “say” and the complementizer לאמר (*lemor*) is always translated as “to say”. Quotatives added by the translators were removed, and those omitted were restored.

<sup>5</sup> On non-information-seeking questions as a form of fictive interaction, see Pascual (2014, 29–57) and Xiang and Pascual (2016). See Moshavi (2010; 2013 and further literature cited there) for information on the frequency and pragmatics of non-information-seeking questions in the Hebrew Bible. Notably, about three quarters of the questions in Moshavi’s (2013) corpus are non-information-seeking. This finding fits in well with our thesis on the prevalence of fictive interaction in the biblical text.

However, again, in this paper we focus on only one class of such phenomena—the use of fictive direct speech, as in our analysis of (1) above. Within this diverse category (see overview in Pascual 2014, 1–25; Pascual and Sandler 2016a) too, we will only turn our spotlight to a small group of subtypes: (i) fictive direct speech used to express thoughts and intentions; (ii) choral speech; (iii) the use of fictive direct speech to give reasons with the *ki amar* (“for [...] said”) construction; (iv) the use of fictive direct speech to account for characters’ names; and (v) the distinctive and ubiquitous *lemor* (“to say”) construction, to which we shall devote a longer discussion.

### 3.1. Fictive Direct Speech to Express Mental States

Fictive direct speech is frequently used to express the fictive speaker’s mental states, as documented across a wide variety of contexts, genres, and registers, in many unrelated languages (Pascual 2014; Voort 2016; Vries 2003). The *like* construction in (1) is also a case in point. The Hebrew Bible is no exception to this rule, with thoughts, and especially intentions, routinely expressed through fictive direct speech (cf. Vries 2010).

(3) וַיִּפֹּל אַבְרָהָם עַל-פָּנָיו וַיִּצְחַק וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ הֲלָבֹן מֵאָה-שָׁנָה יִגְלַד וְאִם-שָׂרָה תִּשְׁעִים שָׁנָה תֵּלֵד.

‘Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “*Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?*”’ (Genesis 17:17)

In (3), Abraham expresses disbelief through a rhetorical question in direct speech addressed to his inner self.

(4) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶסְרֶה-נָּא וְאֶרְאֶה אֶת-הַמַּרְאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה מִדּוּעַ לֹא-יִבְעַר הַסִּינָי.

‘Then Moses said, “*I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.*”’ (Exodus 3:3)

In (4), direct speech is used to inform us of Moses’ intention to wander off his path. According to the biblical narrative, Moses is at this point alone in the wilderness so the utterance clearly does not have an addressee.

It is possible to interpret such expressions of mental states as representing a genuine quotation of a character’s inner monologue. Indeed, (3) is explicitly marked as such (“said *in his heart*”). Nevertheless, the point of such quotes is to present a mental state or intention, and thus advance the action narrated. Tellingly, in (4), Moses’ words are sufficient to inform

us not only of his intention, but also of him acting as intended. Immediately after the reported speech, the narrative continues: “And the Lord saw that he had turned aside” (Exod. 3:4). Moreover, in some cases, interpreting the expression of intentions in direct speech as inner monologue would not work. Thus, in (5) direct speech is used to ascribe intentions—and action upon them—to a group of people (see also the next section).

(5) נִיאָמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ הִבֵּה נִלְבְּנָה לְבָנִים וְנִשְׂרָפָה לְשִׂרְפָה וַתְּהִי לָהֶם הַלְבָנָה לְאָבֹן וְהַחֲמֵר הָיָה לָהֶם לַחֲמֵר.  
 נִיאָמְרוּ הִבֵּה נִבְנֶה-לָנוּ עִיר וּמִגְדָּל וְרִאשׁוֹ בַשָּׁמַיִם וְנַעֲשֶׂה-לָנוּ שֵׁם פֶּן-נִפְּוֹץ עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-הָאָרֶץ. וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה לִרְאוֹת  
 אֶת-הָעִיר וְאֶת-הַמִּגְדָּל אֲשֶׁר בָּנוּ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם.

‘And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.’ (Genesis 11:3–5)

The issue to note about these examples is how unexceptional they are. Intentions and other mental states are routinely described by imputing direct speech to the character(s) in question, especially where the description requires some nuance (cf. Sandler 2012, 589).

### 3.2. Choral Speech

The device of choral speech forms another, fairly large, set of uses of fictive direct speech in the biblical narrative.<sup>6</sup> There are two different types of choral speech in the text. In one case, the conversation among a group of people is summed up by one utterance attributed to the group as a whole, as in (5) above and in (6):

(6) נִיאָמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו אָבֵל אֲשָׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל-אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְּנוּ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמְעֵנוּ עַל-  
 כֵּן בָּאָה אֵלֵינוּ הַצָּרָה הַזֹּאת: וַיַּעַן רְאוּבֵן אֲתָם לֵאמֹר הֲלוֹא אָמַרְתִּי אֲלֵיכֶם לֵאמֹר אֵל-תִּסְטָאוּ בְיָלֶד וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם  
 וְגַם-דָּמּוּ הָיָה נִדְרָשׁ.

‘They said to one another, “Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.” Then Reuben answered them to say, “Did I not

<sup>6</sup> This device is by no means unique to the Hebrew Bible, and is commonly used in present-day discourse in various languages (see Pascual 2014, 4, 132, 161; Tannen 1986, [1989] 2007, 113–16).

*tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.”* (Genesis 42:21–22)

Here, the first utterance (“Alas, we are...”) is attributed to the entire group (Jacob’s sons) conversing among themselves. By contrast, the second utterance (“Did I not tell you...”) is attributed specifically to one member of the group, Reuben. We may imagine the collective utterance to have been uttered by one of the brothers on behalf of all, or it may not reproduce anybody’s precise words. Either way, this stretch of direct speech summarizes the upshot of the brothers’ conversation rather than actually quoting anyone. Thus, in (4), “Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother ...” is a *fictive* message that summarizes and stands for the whole conversation.<sup>7</sup>

The other type of choral speech in the Hebrew Bible features collective utterances by groups addressed to an outside audience. A typical example is (7):

וַיִּתֵּם הַכֶּסֶף מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּמֵאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַיָּבֵאוּ כָּל-מִצְרַיִם אֶל-יֹסֵף לֵאמֹר הִבֵּה-לָנוּ לֶחֶם וְלָמָּה נָמוּת נְגִדָה כִּי אָפְסָה כֶּסֶף (7)

When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, to say, “Give us food! Why should we die before your eyes? For our money is gone.” (Genesis 47:15)

In this case, words are attributed to an entire nation. It would be absurd to interpret this as an actual quotation. We suggest, again, that these are fictive utterances summing up multiple conversations between different characters. These multiple conversations are compressed to human scale (Fauconnier and Turner 2001, 2002) by representing them as a single fictive utterance attributed to a large group of people, as if it were an individual speaker.

### 3.3. *Fictive Direct Speech for Reason: The ki amar Construction*

A use of fictive interaction which is quite common cross-linguistically (Pascual 2014, 102–4), and which is also abundant in the Hebrew Bible, is to indicate reason. Biblical Hebrew has a special construction dedicated to this purpose, which we will call here the *ki amar* construction, where direct speech is introduced by the sequence *כי אמר* (*ki amar*, lit. “for [...]”)

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<sup>7</sup> This is reminiscent of the sentence “Three times a student asked a stupid question”, one of the classical examples of fictivity (Langacker 1999, 98). Here, “a student” is a fictive entity, actually standing for three different students, “a stupid question” similarly standing for three different questions.

said”).<sup>8</sup> This construction offers an explanation grounded in some person’s or people’s thoughts, for some action or state of affairs. It is quite clear that all such ‘quotations’ aim to provide a retrospective account of people’s reasoning, rather than reproduce their actual words. We found about 30 occurrences of the *ki amar* construction in the text.

(8) וְלֹא-דָבַר שְׂאוּל מְאוּמָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּי אָמַר מִקְרָה הוּא בְלַתִּי טְהוֹר הוּא כִּי-לֹא טְהוֹר.

Saul did not say anything that day; for he said, “*Something has befallen him; he is not clean, surely he is not clean.*” (1 Samuel 20:26)

In (8), the direct speech attributed to Saul explains the fact that Saul did *not* speak. Interpreting the direct speech as an actual quotation would imply Saul simultaneously spoke and was silent, which is naturally an impossibility.

(9) וְכָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתֵיהֶם נָסוּ לְקִלְמֵם כִּי אָמְרוּ פֶן-תִּבְלַעַנּוּ הָאָרֶץ.

‘All Israel around them fled at their outcry, for they said, “*Lest the earth will swallow us too!*” (Numbers 16:34)

In (9), the ‘quoted’ words explain what motivated the ‘speakers’ to flee in panic. It would be strange to assume they first stopped to deliberate and produce the quoted utterance before running away.

(10) וַיִּרְאוּ הַפְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי אָמְרוּ בָּא אֱלֹהִים אֶל-הַמַּחֲנֶה

‘The Philistines were afraid; for they said, “*Gods have come into the camp.*” (1 Samuel 4:7)

The verse in (10) is one of several cases where the *ki amar* construction serves to account for the fictive speakers’ mental states. Here, members of the Philistine army are struck by fear, which is explained not directly by the divine presence, but by their *saying* that gods came there. The biblical narrative here—we believe—is not concerned with nuanced observations about the effects of verbalization on the psyche. Rather, the use of direct speech

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<sup>8</sup> Since Biblical Hebrew is a VSO language, the two words כִּי (“for” or “because”) and אָמַר (“said”, inflected for gender and number) follow in sequence, where in the English translation the speaker has to be identified in between the two words.

*ki amar* construction is meant to provide the Philistines' subjective perspective: they are afraid because they *realize* a deity is present in the enemy camp.

(11) וְהָרֵשׁ לֹא יִמָּצֵא בְּכֹל אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-אִמַּר פְּלִשְׁתִּים מִן יַעֲשׂוּ הַעֲבָרִים חֶרֶב אוֹ חֲנִית.

‘Now there was no smith to be found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Philistines said, “Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears for themselves” (1 Samuel 13:19)

Finally, in (11), direct speech is used to express, very succinctly, the rationale for a state of affairs affecting an entire population. In a striking reversal of modern political realities, the Israelites are at that point living under occupation by the Philistines. The verse here reports that there are no blacksmiths in the entire country because the occupying army took measures to prevent the occupied population from revolting. However, this state of affairs is presented as explained by what the Philistines (as a group) *said*, and what they said gives not the order some commander or other gave, but only the rationale behind it: “Lest the Hebrews make swords or spears for themselves”.

#### 3.4. ‘Etymological’ naming of characters

One very distinctive use of fictive direct speech in the Hebrew Bible is as part of a formulaic sequence that appears when characters are named at birth, as in (12):

(12) וַיִּדַע אָדָם עוֹד אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַתִּקְרָא אֶת-שְׁמוֹ שֵׁת כִּי שֵׁת-לִי אֱלֹהִים יָרַע אָחִיר פִּתְחַת הַבַּיִת כִּי הָרַגוּ קַיִן.

‘Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth [*shet*], “for God has appointed [*shat*] for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.”’ (Genesis 4:25)

The point here gets somewhat lost in translation: the quote contains a word (or sometimes two), which shares a root with the name being given to the child (or parts of it), thus providing a folk etymology that ‘explains’ the name. Such etymological accounts for names are a distinctive feature of the biblical narrative, specifically in the book of Genesis.<sup>9</sup> In the great majority of cases, the account is given in direct speech by the person naming the child

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<sup>9</sup> We were able to locate only one example (of a total of 28) of an etymological naming for a child outside of Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus (1 Sam 1: 20). We should also note similar ‘etymological’ sequences used for naming places (e.g. Gen 32: 3) and, more rarely (e.g. Gen. 16: 13), for renaming distinguished persons or deities.

(typically the mother). A smaller subgroup of cases gives the etymological account without employing direct speech in the same manner. Sometimes the child's birth is foretold in advance, with the account and the name both contained in the divine utterance announcing the upcoming birth (e.g. Gen. 16: 11). On one occasion (Gen. 3: 20), the etymological account appears directly in the main narrative. With these few exceptions, direct speech seems to be the norm. Indeed, the use of direct speech in this context was sufficiently formulaic so that in several instances the text dispenses entirely of quotative markers for introducing the direct speech (which is very unusual in other contexts). Thus, in (12), Eve is referred to in the third person (“and she bore a son...”), immediately followed by direct speech, in which she refers to herself in the first person (“God has appointed for me another child”), without anything in the text to mark the perspective switch.<sup>10</sup> The same abrupt switch also appears in Exod. 18: 4, 1 Sam 1: 20, and, twice in a row, in Gen. 41: 51–52.

At other times, the direct speech is introduced with a speaking verb, typically ותאמר (wattomer— “and she said”), as in (13), or sometimes using the *ki amar* construction:

(13) ותהר עוד ותלד בן ותאמר כי-שמע יהוה כי-שנואה אנכי ויתן-לי גם-את-זה ותקרא שמו שמעון.

‘She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the Lord has heard [*shama*] that I am hated, he has given me this son also”; and she named him Simeon [*shim`on*].’  
(Genesis 29:33)

Whether or not the biblical narrative is committed to the claim that the naming person actually uttered the words presented as her direct speech is an open question. The grammatical forms used are usually compatible with the assumption that these are bona fide quotations. Also, explicit markers (כי, “for”/“because” and על כן, “therefore”) occur on several occasions to mark the name given as a *consequence* of the utterance act. On the other hand,

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<sup>10</sup> The particle כי (*ki*, translated here as “for”) should, in our analysis, be regarded as part of Eve’s ‘quoted’ words. Etymological naming sequences often have the same particle at the beginning of the quoted utterance, regardless of whether a quotative marker is present. *ki* is also used in Biblical Hebrew as a complementizer introducing *indirect* speech, but it is unlikely to interpret it here in this manner, both because of the preceding context and because *direct*, not indirect, speech follows it. A third option is to view *ki* as part of the quoting context, not the quote itself, in which case we would have to assume the verb אמרה (*amra*— “she said”) was omitted after it.

only rarely is there any information on the time or place of enunciation,<sup>11</sup> and the use of direct speech is, again, entirely formulaic. It seems *beside the point* whether or not the words were uttered. Functionally speaking, the role of direct speech in these examples is to provide an account for the name being given, the reason behind it, rather than to report an utterance token. The direct speech, in other words, is given a non-token interpretation (Pascual and Sandler 2016a, 10–11), and should thus be regarded as fictive.

#### 4. *The lemor Construction*

Our final set of examples comes in the form of a characteristic grammatical construction in Biblical Hebrew, the *lemor* construction. This construction appears extremely frequently in the text, with over 900 occurrences, it is literally on every page of the Hebrew bible.<sup>12</sup>

The word *lemor* (לֵאמֹר) itself is the infinitive of the verb אָמַר (“say”). But, as Miller (2003, 181–85), the authority on this subject, convincingly argues, with only a handful of exceptions, this word does not figure as a true infinitive. Rather, it has grammaticalized into a complementizer (Miller 2003, 199–212), introducing direct speech (as opposed to complementizers in languages spoken most often in the West today, which only introduce indirect speech).<sup>13</sup> This is quite accurate in terms of the syntactic role of *lemor*. There has been a bit of debate about the semantics of the word *lemor* itself, essentially around whether it is entirely bleached, and so carries no meaning of its own (see overview in Miller 2003, 418–22). We believe that a more fruitful approach would be to use the tools of Construction Grammar (Croft 2001; Goldberg 1995, 2003, 2006) and examine the semantics of the whole construction in which *lemor* figures, not just the word itself.

Syntactically speaking, the *lemor* construction has the following general form:

(14) <matrix clause> *lemor* <direct speech>

For example in (15), “And the supervisors [...] were beaten” is the matrix clause, then comes the word *lemor* itself (translated as “to say”), and “Why did you not finish [...]?” is

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<sup>11</sup> The two only exceptions, Gen. 35: 17–18 and Gen 38: 29, involve utterances by a midwife made at the time of birth.

<sup>12</sup> The word *lemor* appears 936 times in the text (Wigram 1995). There is a small number of cases where it is not used as part of the *lemor* construction (but as an infinitive, as we explain in a moment).

<sup>13</sup> For similar cases of complementizers emerging from verbs of communication in other, unrelated languages, see Güldemann and von Roncador (2002).

the direct speech component. Note the second person plural form, clearly indicating this is indeed direct speech.

(15) וַיִּכּוּ, שְׂטָרֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲשֶׁר-שָׂמוּ עֲלֵהֶם, נִגְשֵׁי פַרְעֹה לְאֹמֵר: מַדּוּעַ לֹא כִלִּיתֶם חֲקֻכֶם לְלִבְּנִי, כַּתְּמוּל שֶׁלְשֶׁם-גַּם-תְּמוּל, גַּם-הַיּוֹם

‘And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten to say, “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?”’ (Exodus 5:14)

As for the semantics of this construction, we propose the following ‘formula’ as a way to express its *prototypical* meaning:

(16) The action/event/state described in <matrix clause> conveys the message (or otherwise has the import) that would be expressed by a speaker uttering <direct speech>.

In (15), the beating in the matrix clause conveys the message that would have been conveyed by the accusation (in the form of a rhetorical question) expressed in the direct speech component. There is no implication that these words were necessarily uttered by anyone to justify the beating.

Thus stated, the semantics of the *lemor* construction has two features, which we would like to discuss in greater depth. First, the direct speech component is prototypically *fictive*. Secondly, the *lemor* construction is a means of expressing the *meaning* of actions and events.

#### 4.1. The *lemor* Construction and Fictive Direct Speech

Genuine quotations reproduce the particular words of a particular person, made at a particular time and place, for the purpose of informing one’s audience of what that person said. Fictive quotations have a different purpose than to inform the audience of a particular utterance token, and often do not reproduce anything that anybody said. This is very clearly the case in (17):

(17) כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לֹא-נִפְלְאֶת הִיא מִמָּוֶה וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הִיא: לֹא בְשָׁמַיִם הִיא לְאֹמֵר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ הַשְּׂמִימָה וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנִשְׁעָנָה: וְלֹא-מֵעֵבֶר לָיִם הִיא לְאֹמֵר מִי יַעֲבֹר-לָנוּ אֶל-עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחֶהָ לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמְעֵנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנִשְׁעָנָה.

‘Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, to say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” Neither is it beyond the sea, to say,

“Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” (Deuteronomy 30:11–13)

The questions “Who will go up...” and “Who will cross...” appear in a counterfactual scenario: that’s what a character might have said if the commandment were in heaven or beyond the sea, which is—we are told—not the case. So, by design, we do *not* have here a quote of what somebody purportedly uttered. Nevertheless, the biblical text uses the *lemor* construction, unequivocally featuring direct speech (note the shift to first person), as well as choral speech and non-information-seeking questions, to characterize the counterfactual scenario.<sup>14</sup>

But such clear-cut cases are relatively rare. More often, the *lemor* construction, much like the English quotative *like* construction exemplified in (1), occupies a continuum between genuine quotation and fictive direct speech. Our argument, however, is that the fictive end of this continuum should be seen as *prototypical* (Rosch 1973; in the Cognitive Linguistics sense, see, e.g. Langacker 1987) for this construction.

A very common use of the *lemor* construction is to introduce loose quotation, or what Hatav (2000) calls “free direct discourse”.<sup>15</sup> This is a likely interpretation for such examples as (18):

(18) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה נִגְדַל לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר הִנֵּה יִלְדָה מִלְכָּה גַם-הוּא בָנִים לְנַחֹר אַחִיד.

‘Now after these things it was told Abraham to say, “*Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor [...]*” (Genesis 22:20)

In such examples, the matrix clause of the *lemor* construction refers to a communicative act (Abraham being *told* of something), and the direct speech component reproduces the gist of the message. In accordance with our formula in (16), we are in effect told that the direct speech component, if uttered by a discourse character, conveys the same message as the communicative act(s) referred to in the matrix clause did in fact convey. This, however, does not imply somebody came to Abraham and used these precise words. The direct speech

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<sup>14</sup> This is a clear illustration of negation analyzed as involving intersubjectivity, specifically fictive argumentation, in Verhagen (2005, 184–90). For a discussion of direct speech dialogue representing what wasn’t said, see Tannen ([1989] 2007, 111; 1995, 202).

<sup>15</sup> Hatav’s thesis is that *lemor* is *always* used for free direct discourse. However, Miller (2003, 412–18) provides multiple counterexamples, including our example (19).

merely reproduces the information Abraham received, on one or more occasions, collecting this into one utterance. The same point holds for the multiple uses of the *lemor* construction to introduce “quotations that are semi-direct, retold, iterative, hypothetical, or fabricated” (Miller 2003, 394).

Farthest removed from the semantic prototype of the *lemor* construction, as expressed in (16), are cases in which it is used as a *bona-fide* quotative, as in:

(19) וַיְבָרֶכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בָּרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר יְשׁוּעָה אֱלֹהִים בְּאַפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-אַפְרַיִם לְפָנֵי מְנַשֶּׁה.

‘So he blessed them that day, to say, “By you Israel will invoke blessings, to say, ‘God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.’” So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.’ (Genesis 48:20)

Here, despite the use of the *lemor* construction, the precise wording of the direct speech component is indeed attributed to the speaking character. Indeed, the narrator draws our attention to a particular fact about that wording (the order in which the names appear).<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the prototype expressed in (16) also throws some light on such uses of the construction. We should bear in mind that the *lemor* construction is one of several different quotative constructions in Biblical Hebrew, and is not the most common one. Most typically, quotations in the biblical text are given using a regular VSO clause with a speaking verb (overwhelmingly אָמַר, *’mr* with the singular masculine form *wayyomer*, וַיֹּאמֶר being the most frequent).<sup>17</sup> Where the *lemor* construction is used to provide faithful quotations (as far as we can tell), it is reserved for reproducing salient utterances, and is, more generally, a marked form of quoting (Miller 2003, 299–398).

In the prototypical case, the direct speech component expresses, in the voice of a discourse character, the import of the action referred to in the matrix clause, the meaning it has, the effect it takes. When, however, it is understood that the direct speech component reproduces the very speech act announced in the matrix clause, the result is focusing the reader on the import of that speech act, on the very fact it takes effect.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> The verse in (19) is also a relatively rare case of one *lemor* construction embedded within another.

<sup>17</sup> Such a quotative clause can also serve as the matrix clause within the *lemor* construction, thus combining the two constructions in question. Reuben’s words in the second verse brought in (6) above are a case in point.

<sup>18</sup> There certainly is room for further bleaching. The *lemor* construction can serve to mark a quoted utterance as merely pragmatically important or unusual, for instance to introduce a dispreferred response within

In (19), the quoted utterance is a *blessing* given by Jacob to his two grandchildren (understood, according to the narrative, to foreshadow events in the distant future). In our reading, it is the fact that this is a blessing that makes the use of the *lemor* construction pertinent. Jacob’s words are marked as particularly effectual. Another telling case in point is the use of the *lemor* construction in what is in effect the Biblical Hebrew equivalent of legalese, as in:

(20) וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-עֶפְרוֹן בְּאָזְנֵי עַם-הָאֲרֶץ לֵאמֹר אִם-אַתָּה לֹא שָׁמַעְנִי נְתַתִּי כֶסֶף הַשְּׂדֵה קַח מִמֶּנִּי וְאָקַבְרָה אֶת-מִתִּי שָׁמָּה: וַיַּעַן עֶפְרוֹן אֶת-אַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר לֹא: אֲדַנִּי שָׁמַעְנִי אֲרֶץ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת שֶׁקֶל-כֶּסֶף בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ מֵה-הוּא וְאֶת-מִתְּךָ קִבֵּר.

He spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land to say, “If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there.” Ephron answered Abraham to say to him, “My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” (Genesis 23:13–15)

The verses in (20) are part of a sales deed. Abraham purchases a burial cave from Ephron. The quoted utterances in (20), as well as in the entire sequence (20) comes from, are part of a *binding* agreement, and indeed, the agreement is recorded using the *lemor* construction throughout. Similarly, the *lemor* construction is also frequently used as the preamble to batches of religious laws and commandments (Miller 2003, 285–86).

Thus, in our analysis, the *lemor* construction is prototypically a fictive interaction construction. As the formula in (16) makes evident, it attributes a fictive utterance (the direct speech component) to a discourse character, thereby characterizing the action in the matrix clause. Even when used as an actual quotative, introducing factual reported speech, we find in its semantics traces of its fictive-interaction core. The discourse character utters the direct speech component for the reported speaker, or in unison with that speaker, as it were, resulting in a loose paraphrase in some cases, or added stress and weight in others.

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an adjacency pair (Miller 2003, 328), or it can serve as simply an alternative means for introducing quotations, to be selected over other variants for syntactic (see Miller 2003, 313–14) or perhaps even stylistic reasons. All such uses (and any quotative use more generally) fit our ‘formula’ in (16), but they are of less interest to us, as it is precisely the fictive-interaction aspect of the construction that gets progressively effaced in them.

#### 4.2. *The lemor Construction and Meaning*

In our view, as expressed in (16), the function of the fictive direct speech contained within the *lemor* construction is to express (or reinforce) the *meaning* (or at least the meaningfulness) of what the matrix clause tells about. This is easy to see in cases where the construction is used for loose quotation, as in (18) above. The direct speech component here restates the gist of the message delivered in the communicative act(s) referred to in the matrix clause. Of particular interest are cases in which the verb of the matrix clause is not itself communicative, as in (15) above or in (21).

(21) ותקח המילדת ותקשר על-ידו שני לאמר זה יצא ראשונה

‘[A]nd the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, to say, “*This one came out first.*”’ (Genesis 38:28)

Here, twins are born, and the midwife marks the firstborn among them by tying a thread around his hand: “to say, “This one came out first””. Critically, the Hebrew text does *not* attribute these words to the midwife, who is said to perform an action: binding a thread. It is the import of this action that is expressed in the text by the words “this one came out first”. The direct speech component is ‘uttered’ by an implied, fictive, discourse character, with the aim of characterizing or explaining the action referred to in the matrix clause.

In (22), we again have a non-verbal action (blowing a horn) to which direct speech is being attributed.<sup>19</sup>

(22) ושאול תקע בשופר בכל-הארץ לאמר, ישמעו העברים: וכל-ישראל שמעו לאמר הכה שאול את-נציב פלשתים וגם-נבאש ישראל בפלשתים.

‘And Saul blew the horn throughout all the land, to say, “*Let the Hebrews hear!*” And all Israel heard to say, *Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become odious to the Philistines*’ (1 Samuel 13:3–4)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A possible alternative interpretation of (22) would be that Saul did not blow the horn himself, but ordered it to be blown, with the rationale for the action given verbally as part of such an order.

<sup>20</sup> The verb *šm`* (שמע) in Biblical Hebrew, used in this excerpt, is polysemous. The basic meaning is “hear”. More relevant in this case is the related sense of “understand” (an utterance, a situation, or a language). In addition, the verb is also used in the sense of “obey a command”.

But perhaps the most important point is that (22) features two distinct direct speech utterances ascribed to the same (communicative) act, one reflecting the intentions of the addresser and the other reflecting the (different) understanding of this act by its audience. King Saul has just defeated a garrison of the Philistine army and he is now blowing the horn to announce it. Saul probably simply wanted the Israelites to know of the victory. This is what blowing the horn meant *from his perspective* but what the Israelites actually understood is that following this military success the Philistines are now angry with them and they should expect retaliation. This is what blowing the horn meant *to them*.<sup>21</sup>

There is, of course, some anachronism in our use of the word “meaning” in this context. The notion(s) of meaning as applied by linguists, philosophers, and lay people today would be alien to people living in Palestine more than 2,500 years ago. Tellingly, Biblical Hebrew had no word (at least not in any surviving documents) for the noun “meaning” or the verb “to mean”. But by the same token, the perspective on the import of people’s words and actions, which we see embodied in the *lemor* construction in Biblical Hebrew can be used to expand or revise our modern notions of meaning.

For speakers of Biblical Hebrew, stating what some action, utterance, or state of affairs means did not involve reducing it to logical propositions or any other abstract entities. Instead, such statements used (fictive) direct speech, indeed, often quite ‘pragmatics-heavy’ direct speech, as, for example, in (15) or (17), where it contains non-information-seeking questions and choral speech. Moreover, while modern philosophical models seek to analyze the meaning of words and utterances into some sort of (abstract) non-linguistic entity, Biblical Hebrew went in the opposite direction, as we saw for instance in (15), (17), (21), and (22): non-linguistic actions and situations were explicated using (fictive) linguistic utterances in direct speech.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

In this paper, we discussed several widespread and typical uses of fictive direct speech in the Hebrew Bible. We showed that fictive direct speech is a frequent occurrence in the biblical text, and takes a variety of different forms in the grammar of Classical Biblical Hebrew. These observations are valuable in their own right, especially given the unique status of the

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<sup>21</sup> Alter (1999, 70–71) suggests blowing the horn was rather a call to arms, and was perceived as such by the Israelites. In this case, the two meanings of blowing the horn are congruent, but are nevertheless reported as distinct by the biblical narrator.

Hebrew Bible in the history of Western Culture, but they are also significant as supporting evidence for broader theoretical claims.

The Hebrew Bible is an ancient text. While it was clearly the product of a highly literate culture for its day, it stands much closer to the oral and conversational origins of language and communication of all human culture (Ong [1982] 2002), certainly more so than texts produced in modern literate societies. One could therefore expect (as hypothesized by Pascual 2014, 83–112) various forms of fictive interaction to be widespread in such a text, including in the form of common grammaticalized constructions originating in fictive speech, since the use of conversation as a cognitive frame seems more strongly entrenched in oral societies and cultures. We have seen that this is indeed the case. Fictive direct speech takes multiple forms in the biblical text, and is abundantly present.<sup>22</sup> Several common grammatical constructions are prototypically used to introduce fictive direct speech. This is further evidence to support the claim that face-to-face conversation was one of the earliest and most productive templates for linguistically conceptualizing and expressing human experience, especially of mental and cultural phenomena.

One particular construction we examined, the *lemor* construction, suggests even broader theoretical implications. As we saw, this construction is prototypically used to gloss the meaning of an action or state of affairs. Indeed, it is the only way Biblical Hebrew had to speak about what something means. Crucially, the meaning itself is expressed in (fictive) direct speech. Biblical Hebrew thus seems to exemplify a cultural model of meaning that has been neglected in most philosophical and linguistic semantic theories, a model that connects meaning with making an utterance, a model that does not seek to reduce linguistic meaning to allegedly ‘simpler’ notions, but instead considers a communicative linguistic act as the basic paradigm and model for meaningfulness in general (Bakhtin [1975] 1981; Bakhtin [1979] 1986; Gasparov 2010; Voloshinov [1929] 1986).

This paper thus fits within the growing tendency to combine cognitive and interactional approaches to language and language use (e.g. Verhagen 2005; Zima and Brône 2015; Zlatev et al. 2008), challenging long-standing assumptions among linguists, by viewing both meaning and grammar as arising from talk-in-interaction, and ultimately, perspective shifting (Sandler 2016). More broadly, this paper, while focused on a single text, nevertheless instantiates the central role of intersubjectivity in language and discourse in general. This was

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<sup>22</sup> The same is true for non-information-seeking questions—another fictive interaction construction; see Moshavi (2013) and footnote 5 above.

the case not only on the immediate level, at which language use and discourse partake in intersubjective communication, but also on a structural and conceptual level, at which conversation provides us with a cognitive model to access and make sense of complex situations and ideas.

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