

Conversion through composition: The transformation of Bialik's prosody from Ashkenazi to the Sephardi stress patterns in nursery rhymes set to music

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Abstract

As is well known, Bialik's tonic-syllabic poems followed the Ashkenazi pronunciation system, which is characterized by penultimate stress patterns. As Sephardic stress patterns in spoken Hebrew by, Bialik's nursery rhymes needed to be adapted to the new pronunciation. This gave rise to a remarkable phenomenon: the conversion of texts' stress patterns from one pronunciation system to another through composition. As a rule, composers need to follow the stress pattern inherent in the texts they set to music, but in this particular case, the task was to rearrange the texts into a new prosodic pattern. The transformation from one pronunciation system to another involves radical rhythmic changes: texts' stress patterns are thoroughly modified, and the original prosody chosen by the poet completely changes. Composers therefore faced the challenge of finding a way to deal with the texts' new rhythmic organization, which did not necessarily result in a systematic, recognizable prosodic pattern.

This study analyzes the process of conversion through composition, based on the corpus of Bialik's nursery rhymes which were set to music. Nursery rhymes provide a convenient case study because of their inherent prosodic simplicity. Composers cannot bypass the difficulties of conversion by an "artistic", irregular composition, but have to rearrange the text in its Sephardic reading into a simple and highly regular prosodic pattern. This constraint enables us to analyze in detail, both theoretically and empirically, the phases involved in the conversion of an "Ashkenazi" text into a "Sephardi" song. The first methodological part of the article sets up the tools of analysis required to examine the process of conversion. The remainder of the article compares between different melodies written for the same text. This enables us to illustrate the possible relationships between the hypothetical regulated prosody based on the text's Sephardi reading on the one hand, and its various realizations by different composers on the other hand. Alongside versions that fully convert the texts into the Sephardi pronunciation we examine hybrid versions that manifest partial conversion, as well as versions that preserve the texts' original Ashkenazi stress patterns.

