

Explaining the Preference for **הָאִישׁ** as a Label

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(Numbers in square brackets refer to the handout.)

The hypothesis that undergirds today's presentation is the subject of an article that is about to be published in an open-access journal [#1]. Its topic is how the noun **אִישׁ** functions in Ancient Hebrew. Briefly, the idea is that **אִישׁ** is a key part of this language's special vocabulary for the depiction of *situations*, and that speakers prototypically employ this noun when outlining a situation in a schematic way, to profile its referent as an *essential participant* in that situation. And this is why I call **אִישׁ** a *situating noun*.

The challenge that I lay out before you is exemplified by [#2–#4]—which I will briefly discuss in turn, in order to derive an overall problem statement. (But first let me note that today's paper employs the word **אִישׁ** as a cover term that includes **אִשָּׁה** and their respective plural forms.)

[#2] In 2 Samuel 12, the prophet Nathan has appeared before King David and begun to tell a story that he recounts in a schematic way, featuring a rich man and a poor man. Then in verse 4, he introduces a third character:

וַיָּבֵא הַלֵּוֹי לְאִישׁ הָעֶשְׂרִי

He proceeds to call that visitor **הָאִישׁ הַבְּאֵלִי**; yet in his concluding clause, Nathan labels him **הָאִישׁ**:

וַיַּעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ הַבָּא אֵלָיו:

Now, why of all possible noun phrases is **הָאִישׁ** the one chosen as the label here? It does not even set this visitor apart from the other two figures, who have both been labeled as **אִישׁ**. We could already infer that the visitor was an adult male, and here those two traits are not directly at issue. Given the conventional view that **אִישׁ** is a sortal noun that profiles its referent in terms of gender and age, this noun phrase **הָאִישׁ** does not suit its context well.

[#3] In 1 Samuel 4, the aged priest Eli is sitting and waiting to hear the outcome of a battle with the Philistines. A runner arrives and breathlessly relates bad news. In verse 18, Eli reacts by falling off his chair and meets his tragic end:

וַיִּפֹּל מֵעַל־הַכִּסֵּא ... וַיָּמָת.

and then the narrator explains how merely falling off a chair could be fatal:

כִּי־זָקֵן הָאִישׁ וְכָבֵד

Now, why would the narrator suddenly refer to Eli as **הָאִישׁ**? Don't we long since know that he was an adult male?

[#4] Exodus 22:6 is the start of a casuistic law from the Covenant Code. Its protasis is stated in two parts. The first clause introduces the parties, prompting us to activate two participants in our mental representation of the discourse:

כִּי־יָתַן אִישׁ אֶל־רֵעֵהוּ כֶּסֶף אֶזְכָּלִים לְשֹׁמֵר

the first participant, the giver of the goods, is labeled as אִישׁ; and the second one, the recipient of the goods, is labeled as רֵעֵהוּ.

וְגָנַב מִבֵּית הָאִישׁ

Somehow in this next clause, it is now that second party who is called הָאִישׁ. What is gained by switching to a label that was applied to the first party—a label that thus fails to differentiate them? (And let’s recall that in non-specific references like these, אִישׁ cannot constrain the gender of its referent; it functions as a *gender-inclusive* term. Furthermore, gender is not at issue in this scenario.)

“Changed Label” as a heuristic category

What these three cases have in common is that הָאִישׁ is employed as a label after another way of referring to the same discourse participant has already been placed on the table, so to speak. As a heuristic, I will classify them under the rubric of *Changed Label*, which I define as follows [#5]:

הָאִישׁ is a Changed Label when it is used to refer to a participant who has been labeled differently in a third-person reference, or whose name has been mentioned (even if not yet used in reference).

I include the cases of naming because, after all, a person’s name is attractive as the most precise way to refer to them.

Today, I am considering הָאִישׁ only when used as a Changed Label, because such cases throw into stark relief my underlying question:

Why does אִישׁ appear where it does in the biblical text?

Against the backdrop of another label that has already been in play, the choice to use אִישׁ must be intentional—and somehow advantageous.

Yet outside of my own work, there is almost nothing in the scholarly literature that addresses this question. I have searched in the works of a dozen experts in participant reference and in discourse analysis.¹ Steve Runge and Josh Westbury (2012a,b) have held that in general, a shift in the referring expression functions either “to recharacterize the participant or [to] highlight some thematically important information”—that is, the label is

¹ Givón, Longacre, De Regt, Polak, Van Wolde, Levinsohn, and Runge—as well as scholars who have engaged with Runge’s work, namely Grebe, Van Peursen, Lipscomb, and Che.

selected so as to support the speaker's message. Yet as they recognized—and as we have seen—those functions do not seem to apply to **שיא**—at least not as this noun is normally understood. Gender is usually not germane!

Runge did offer one answer in his dissertation in 2007. It was inspired by the narratological analysis of Adele Berlin, and it drew upon cinematography as a metaphor. He suggested that when the general term **שיא** replaces a more specific label, it shifts the narration to a more distant point of view. When **שיא** is used, the camera has zoomed out, as it were (pp. 70–72, 165–67).

However, no change in point of view is discernible in many cases of **שיא**, including the three that we have already seen. Happily, I will now offer a more comprehensive solution.

[#6] An answer begins to emerge by considering the nature of communication between a speaker and an audience. It's crucial to bear in mind that normally, a speaker is trying to communicate something; therefore their utterance—including its references to persons—will be both informative in some way, and coherent in the service of its message.

The problem statement for this paper thus boils down to:

[#7] When (the determined noun phrase) **שיא** is used as a Changed Label (which occurs dozens of times), how can we construe its meaning so as to yield a truly *informative* and *coherent* text?

Answering the question: some linguistic considerations

Upon considering the nature of communication, three linguistic factors seem salient [#8]:

1. Speakers tend to avoid the effort to articulate any more than is necessary to make their point about a given referent. And this tendency favors the label **שיא** over almost any other substantive except a pronoun. Typically, **שיא** is even easier for a speaker to say than the referent's own name.

2. It is easier to mentally process short and semantically “light” words. This, too, favors **שיא** as a referring expression, because **שיא** is not only just one syllable but also nearly devoid of semantic content.

3. Speakers tend to minimize the amount of “coding material” that they use to refer to a participant who is already active in the discourse. Because **שיא** is relatively simple, it is a good candidate for referring to a discourse-active participant.

Answering the question: applying the hypothesis

However, those three factors still do not address the audience's natural expectation that a given usage of **שֵׂאִי** will, in context, seem both informative and coherent. For that, let's plug in my hypothesis and look again at our three initial examples....

[#2] Looking at the last clause in 2 Sam 12:4:

וַיַּעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ הַבָּא אֵלָיו:

Taken as I have proposed, **שֵׂאִי** regards its referent in terms of the situation that has been previously depicted. Because **אִישׁ** is a situating noun, the use of the label **שֵׂאִי** puts attention here on the situation as it exists at the end of the parable. It lays out that situation as such before us, so that its outrageousness is in full view.

Furthermore, this usage has a special cognitive function. Grammatically speaking, here **שֵׂאִי** is part of the clausal predicate. As a rule, when **שֵׂאִי** is in a predicate, its referent is cast as a *conceptual reference point*. It quietly instructs us to regard that situated participant as fixed, while the situation revolves and evolves around it, as it were. In this case, for example, the predication is not about the visitor, but rather about how badly the rich man behaves, given the visitor's presence. That function explains why Natan employs this expression at this juncture, even though the other parties were already labeled as **אִישׁ**.

By this reading, the Changed Label **שֵׂאִי** yields a text that is informative and coherent.

[#3] In 1 Sam 4:18, when the narrator adds:

כִּי־זָקַן הָאִישׁ וְכָבֵד

the label **שֵׂאִי** puts attention on the situation as such; and it regards Eli as a participant in the established situation. This noun phrase meanwhile creates an opening, in the audience's mental representation of the discourse, for background information to be supplied that is germane to our grasping the depicted situation and to how Eli participates in it. For that purpose, **שֵׂאִי** is a simple yet effective device that yields an informative and coherent text.

[#4] As for Exod 22:6, generally speaking, in a casuistic law, the point of its protasis is to establish the situation of interest—to state the dilemma clearly before prescribing its resolution. Here, in the clause

וְגָנַב מִבֵּית הָאִישׁ

when the lawgiver now refers to the second party as **הָאִישׁ**, it tells us that attention is still on fully defining the situation to which the law applies. It also provides cognitive continuity by regarding that party in terms of the established situation. As in the first example, **שֵׂאִי** casts this participant as a point of reference for describing a development in the case. That situating function explains why the lawgiver employs this expression at this juncture, even though the other party was already labeled as **אִישׁ**. Once again, on this view, the text is both informative and coherent.

Changed Labels and the Situating Noun in English

Before treating one more example from the Bible, let us look at the same phenomenon in English, in order to help us see it as linguistic in nature. I claim that in the English language, the noun *man* is a situating noun; that is, it functions much like $\psi\text{א}י$ in Ancient Hebrew.

A set of made-up utterances [#9] plays off of an example in the linguistics literature—which was based upon some widely reported events more than 30 years ago, involving a famous Hollywood actor who was known for his hostility toward the paparazzi.² Each utterance is meant to sound natural, to illustrate how one’s choice of label serves the overall message. It’s best if you hear them aloud...

[a] Sean Penn attacked a photographer. The photojournalist was quite badly hurt.
He won’t be able to work again for months.

[b] Sean Penn attacked a photographer. The paparazzo was quite badly hurt. He got what he deserved.

[c] Sean Penn attacked a photographer. The man was quite badly hurt. He fell hard after he got slugged.

[d] Sean Penn attacked a photographer. The man must be deranged. He just pops off for no reason.

In each case, in its second sentence, the referring expression is a Changed Label. How does each choice of label fit the particular point that the speaker is making?

In the first two cases, the relatively hefty nouns *photojournalist* and *paparazzo* direct attention to their own semantic preoccupations—and away from the opening situation. That altercation becomes no more than an initial condition for what follows.

In the next case, notice how the label *the man* makes the utterance feel more compact. That’s because it profiles its referent in terms of the established situation. It prompts the audience to continue to regard him situationally.

In the fourth case, note that the noun phrase *the man* does not itself distinguish between the two participants. Apparently the situating functions of *man* can be more salient than its informing us about gender or age. Here those implications are largely incidental and beside the point.

Finally, note how *the man* can be used in at least two ways: as in *c*, to elaborate on the situation of interest; and as in *d*, to comment on a participant of interest.

² Deirdre Wilson, “Reference and Relevance,” UCL Working Papers in Linguistics 4 (Proceedings of the International Semiotics Conference), 167–91. University College London, 1992.

All of these observations apply equally well to **איש** in the Hebrew Bible. Let us now look at one more instructive example there.

A telling example in the Hebrew Bible

[#10] Gen 30:42–43 relate that near the end of Jacob’s long sojourn in Aram, his tenuous situation changes. As flocks of the best quality are allocated to him rather than to his father-in-law, Jacob prospers:

וְהָיָה הָעֵטְפִים לְלֶבֶן וְהַקְּשָׁרִים לְיַעֲקֹב:
וַיִּפְרֹץ הָאִישׁ מְאֹד מְאֹד

For various reasons, the noun phrase **הָאִישׁ** must refer to Jacob. But how does this label set him apart from Laban, who is likewise an adult male? And since this label is semantically underspecified, why was it chosen over something more precise or explicit? Presumably it was questions like these that prompted a puzzled Klaus Westermann to comment: “there is no reason for the designation **הָאִישׁ**.”

Yet an underspecified label is optimal for communication if the intended referent can be readily inferred—as here. Meanwhile, the narrator is summing up the situation as it has taken shape during this episode. The situating nature of **איש** leads the audience to still regard Jacob in the context of his long rivalry with Laban. By referring to Jacob in terms of that situation, the label **הָאִישׁ** depicts his newfound wealth as the resolution of that previously established situation.

Discussion

Before bringing this paper to a close, let me offer three observations.

1. *Communicative purposes.* I have observed that **הָאִישׁ** as a Changed Label serves many common and recurring communicative purposes. In [#11], I offer a sample list. (The first four entries in this list are the purposes that we have already seen in our examples.) When **איש** is viewed in this light, it is no longer an exception to Runge and Westbury’s general rule about what a change in the referring expression accomplishes, for in its situating role, **איש** does function to highlight “thematically important information.”

2. *Comparison with a pronoun.* There is a need to amend a claim made by the late Luis Alonso Schökel, in his linguistically oriented biblical dictionary, published in 1993. Schökel stated that whenever **איש** is used with the article to refer to an aforementioned party, it is equivalent to a pronoun [#12].

That claim is correct up to a point. I have now demonstrated that **הָאִישׁ** evokes significant meanings that a pronoun cannot evoke. While pronouns flag their referent as an

already active discourse participant, **שִׂאָה** also flags its referent as an active situational participant—which evokes additional information.

3. *Dataset.* How many Changed-Label instances of **שִׂאָה** are there? The answer: at least 109. [#13] directs you to my online tabulation.

A key finding from that tabulation is that the use of **שִׂאָה** as a Changed Label is widespread: it is employed by the narrators in 16 of the 39 biblical books as well as in the quoted speech of 18 different characters. This large number of distinct voices confirms that the claimed functions of **שִׂאָ** are indeed linguistic—a feature of the language. Furthermore, they are *conventional*—which means that even if a given Changed Label could be read as having gender implications, it is the situating functions that I have described today that should be given priority in our exegesis.

Summary and Conclusions

[#14] As a Changed Label, the noun phrase **שִׂאָה** can have several functions.

Being part of the vocabulary for sketching situations schematically, it regards its referent as a participant in an established situation—cognitively anchoring them to that situation.

Sometimes **שִׂאָה** flags situationally essential information about its referent.

Quite often, it renders a participant as a cognitive point of reference, enabling the speaker to focus attention on some other aspect of the situation.

Usually **שִׂאָה** says nothing new or relevant about the age or gender of its referent.

Given those situationally oriented functions, and because **שִׂאָה** is (not coincidentally) short, easy to pronounce, and semantically lightweight, it is a device for efficient communication. This explanation accounts handily for all of the Changed Label instances, unlike the conventional view that **שִׂאָ** is a sortal noun that profiles its referent in terms of gender and age.

That finding, in turn, adds to the already strong evidence that in Ancient Hebrew, there was such a thing as a situating noun, and that noun was none other than **שִׂאָ**.

References

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