The zero-derived causative alternation in Hebrew is rare, but systematic
This talk resurrects a puzzle in the Modern Hebrew (MH) verbal template hiXYiZ, where verbs are mostly causative but can also be inchoative. The paper’s theoretical contribution is twofold, arguing for a specific role of roots in the derivation and claiming that feature valuation (“Agree”) can proceed in two different directions (upwards, then downwards).

Alternations in hiXYiZ. It is well-known that verbs in MH hiXYiZ—X, Y and Z are the root consonants—are predominantly causative or active (the template is often called “causative”):


With the notable exclusion of Borer (1991) and brief mention in Doron (2003), it has been otherwise overlooked that a number of inchoative verbs are possible alongside a transitive use (compare English widen or whiten, which are available both as causatives and inchoatives):


This is particularly striking since Hebrew does not employ zero-derivation for argument structure alternations, using distinct templates instead (Doron 2003; Arad 2005; Borer 2013). From a corpus (Ehrenfeld 2012) of 600 verbs in hiXYiZ, most of which are solely causative or unergative as in (1), 37 were identified as undergoing this alternation as in (2). The issue is why specifically this template and why these roots, questions not addressed in Borer (1991).

Syntax: Causatives. If hiXYiZ normally has an external argument, (1), the presence of this argument should be encoded in the syntax. This goal is achieved using the functional head Voice{(D)} (Schäfer 2008; Wood 2015), a strongly active counterpart of Voice (Kratzer 1996; Pylkkänen 2008): it requires that a DP be merged in its specifier, guaranteeing that an external argument appear. In the active case (3a) the external argument (EA) and potential internal argument (IA) are merged in the structure. The EA satisfies [D] on Voice{(D)} and the derivation converges. At PF, Voice{(D)} is spelled out as the prefix hi- and the appropriate stem vowels.

Syntax: Inchoatives. Following Borer (1991), I claim that hiXYiZ inchoatives are derived from an underlying adjective or noun. At least some inchoatives are unaccusative as in (3b). To account for them, assume that the [D] feature on Voice{(D)} requires valuation of φ-features. This valuation proceeds straightforwardly under Spec-Head Agreement but something else needs to be said if the only DP in the local domain is the IA. In this case, I propose that Voice{(D)} probes into its specifier upwards, finds no target, and then probes downwards and is valued by the IA. The syntactic requirements of Voice{(D)} are then satisfied.

The structure in (3b) is supported as follows. I adopt the so-called Arad/Marantz hypothesis: the first categorizing head selects the allophone of the root (cf. Anagnostopoulou and Samioti 2014). We predict that a causative might have a meaning that an inchoative does not share,
since causative Voice_{D} is local enough to the root to select a special meaning, whereas in inchoatives little a or n will have already chosen an alloseme. A number of idioms confirm this prediction, e.g. hilbin ‘whitened’ as ‘laundered’ for causatives in (4a–b).

(4) a. ha-sid hilbin et ha-kir [Causative, literal meaning]
   the-lime.plaster whitened ACC the-wall
   ‘The lime plaster made the wall white.’

b. sar ha-xuts hilbin ksafim [Causative, non-transparent meaning]
   minister the-exterior whitened moneys
   ‘The Minister of Foreign Affairs took part in money laundering.’

c. ha-ftarot hilbin-u [Inchoative, literal meaning only]
   the-bills whitened-3PL
   ‘The bills became white.’ (*‘The bills were laundered’)

Forms like (5) are not possible since there is no underlying adjective ‘inserted’ to be verbalized:

(5) *ha-xatul hixnis
   the-cat inserted
   (int. ‘The cat got inserted’)

Alternative 1: Contextual allomorphy. It could be proposed that a special Middle Voice or Change Of State head derives inchoatives, except that a rule of contextual allomorphy spells out this head as hiXYiZ rather than, say, the “middle” template niXYaZ. While this solution would work technically, it fails to explain why hiXYiZ is the precise template chosen.

Alternative 2: pro. It is not possible to assume a silent Cause (Doron 2003:62), pro or Weak Implied Argument (Landau 2010) in Spec,VoiceP for inchoatives: the resulting structure would be transitive, meaning that the IA would be assigned Accusative case. We would then expect the object marker et to appear before inchoative subjects, contrary to fact.

Roots. This analysis captures the general intuition that hiXYiZ is a “causative” template with limited yet productive use (Laks 2014). What remains to be examined is whether the roots that participate in the alternation can be predicted according to any (lexical semantic) characteristics. I show that some generalizations can be made: total change on a scale leads to alternating unaccusatives (e.g. change of color, ‘whiten’, 6 roots). Verbs of emission are only alternating unergatives (‘stank’, 6 roots). But partial change on a scale is compatible either with alternating unaccusatives (‘fattened’, 7 roots) or alternating unergatives (‘narrowed’, 4 roots). I will discuss what kind of framework would be necessary to account for these facts.

Consequences. I reviewed a phenomenon in MH where the causative–inchoative alternation holds in a single strongly causative template. The analysis had two components: first, an understanding of how different structures generate similar forms. Second, a contribution to the debate on the direction in which feature valuation progresses (Béjar and Rezac 2009; Preminger 2011, 2013; Zeijlstra 2012). This work paves the path for additional investigation into how distinct syntactic heads are interpreted at the interfaces and how lexical idiosyncracy can be imposed by the root while being regulated by the grammar, in Semitic and beyond.