Biblical Hebrew Consonantal Co-occurrence Restrictions (CCRs) have been described in several works (Koskinen 1964, Weitzman 1987, Bachra 2001), yet some issues remain unanswered. The data on Biblical Hebrew CCRs presents a challenge for Hebrew Linguists, since CCRs are such that some CCRs are stronger than others; some are absolute restrictions, while others are only relative. I argue that the relative strengths of the CCRs is best explained as symptomatic of the underlying phonology, which I will argue for by using the Modified Contrastive Specification (MCS) (Dresher, 2009).

Biblical Hebrew is typical of Semitic languages in forming words from tri-consonantal roots. It has been long known that not all possible combinations of three consonants are exhausted in Biblical Hebrew. Consonants that never co-occur in Biblical Hebrew (i.e. an absolute CCR) include the labial obstruents: /b/ and /p/. Consonants that very rarely occur together (i.e. a relative CCR) include the coronal stops, /d/, /t/, and /tˁ/. The ideas of homorganic consonants and the obligatory contour principle has been utilized to explain why certain combinations of consonants are avoided (Bachra 2001). Although this explains why certain groups of obstruents articulated in the same place resist co-occurrence, it does not explain why some restrictions would be stronger than others.

I propose that the CCRs are best analyzed in terms of phonological similarity. I use MCS, but I also adopt three theories concerning the application of MCS: 1) I follow Mackenzie in seeing CCRs as a reflection of underlying phonology (Mackenzie 2013). 2) I follow Purnell & Raimey in adopting Avery & Idsardi’s feature geometry as a list of possible features (Purnell & Raimey 2015, Avery & Idsardi 2001). 3) I use marked features, rather than equipollent features. I show that the feature hierarchy in Biblical Hebrew should be:

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\text{[Cons.]} > \text{[Labial]} > \text{[Tongue Thrust]} > \text{[Fricative]}
\]

On this view, absolute co-occurrence restrictions, like the labials, are a result of the specification of features high up in the hierarchy. On the other hand, relative co-occurrence restrictions occur among phonemes lower down the hierarchy; therefore, groups of phonemes with weaker co-occurrence restrictions, like the coronal stops, are less fully specified.

This analysis accounts for the variation in the strengths of Biblical Hebrew CCRs: Whereas Bachra’s use of feature geometry gives equal weight to all features, my analysis gives varying prominence to features, and thereby claims that some groups of phonemes are less similar amongst themselves (such as the coronals), than are others that are very similar amongst themselves (such as the labials).


