

The Mystery of the Missing Argument: Hebrew Object Drop

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The goal:

Constructing a unified analysis for
(non-generic) Hebrew object drop

The means:

- Examining previous analyses of Hebrew object drop
- Pointing to the problems they present
- Observing that (non-generic) missing objects are topics
- (Sidetracking: looking at object drop and sloppy readings)
- Considering 2 options for the content of the silent object
- Proposing an alternative account
- Conclusion

Hebrew object drop

In certain environments, Hebrew allows an object position to remain empty.

- 1) Dani katav et ha-šir ve-Miriam tirkema ø
Dani wrote ACC the-song and-Miriam translated
'Dani wrote the song and Miriam translated it.'

- 2) Dani kisa et ha-salat ve-sam ø ba-mekarer
Dani covered ACC the salad and-put in-the-fridge
'Dani covered the salad and put it in the fridge.'

More on the next slide...

Hebrew object drop

3) Q: macata et ha-maftexot?

found.2SG ACC the-keys

'Did you find the keys?'

A: ken, macati ø

yes found.1SG

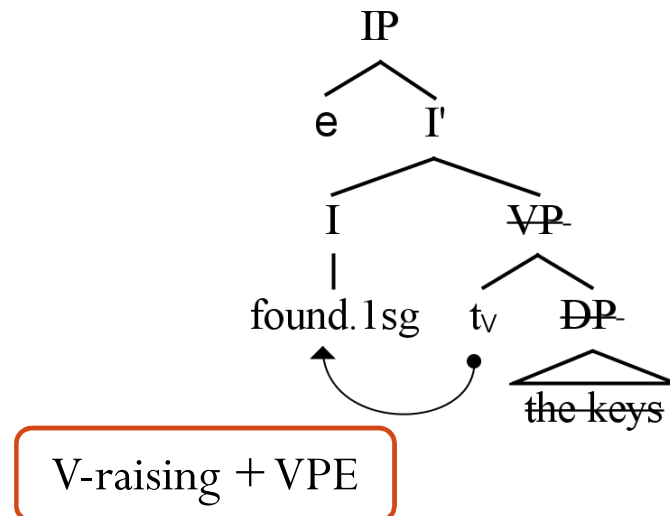
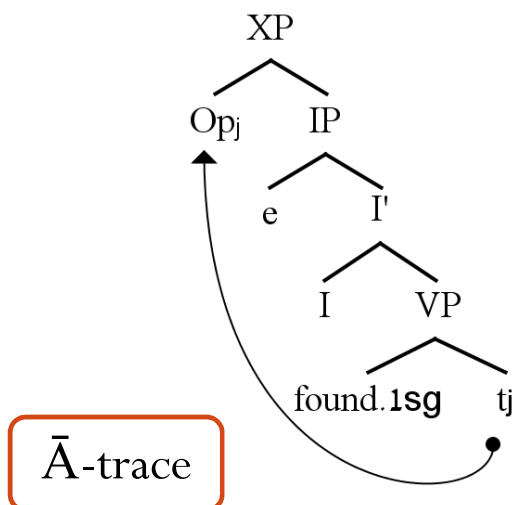
'Yes, I found them.'

Hebrew object drop

Excluded from this discussion: generic, non-referential and arbitrary objects (e.g. 'I have already eaten' ; 'Dan likes to surprise' etc.)

Previous proposals

- What is the essence of the empty category and how is it derived?
- Two analyses (Doron 1990, 1999 and Goldberg 2005):
 - a) It is a variable \bar{A} -bound by a null operator (Huang 1984).
 - b) It results from verb raising + VP Ellipsis (Otani & Whitman 1991).



Previous proposals

- Doron and Goldberg claim that both mechanisms exist in Hebrew.
- Both analyses suffer from empirical problems.

Previous proposals:

Problem with the \bar{A} -trace analysis

The \bar{A} -trace analysis predicts that Hebrew object drop is island sensitive, but actually it is not (contra Doron 1990, 1999).

NP Complement Island:

1) Her'eti et ha-tmuna le-dina,
showed.1SG ACC the-picture to-Dina

ve-mišehu hefic šmu'a [_{NP complement} še-her'eti ø gam le-Yosi]
and-someone spread rumor that-showed.1SG also to-Yosi

'I showed the picture to Dina and someone spread the rumor
[that I also showed it to Yosi.]'

Previous proposals: Problem with the \bar{A} -trace analysis

Adjunct Island:

2) fiksasnu et ha-mismaxim le-London
faxed.1PL ACC the-documents to-London

[_{Adjunct} lamrot še-kvar šalaxnu ø le-Berlin]
despite that-already sent.1PL to-Berlin

'We faxed the documents to London even though we had already sent them to Berlin.'

Previous proposals:

Problem with the \bar{A} -trace analysis

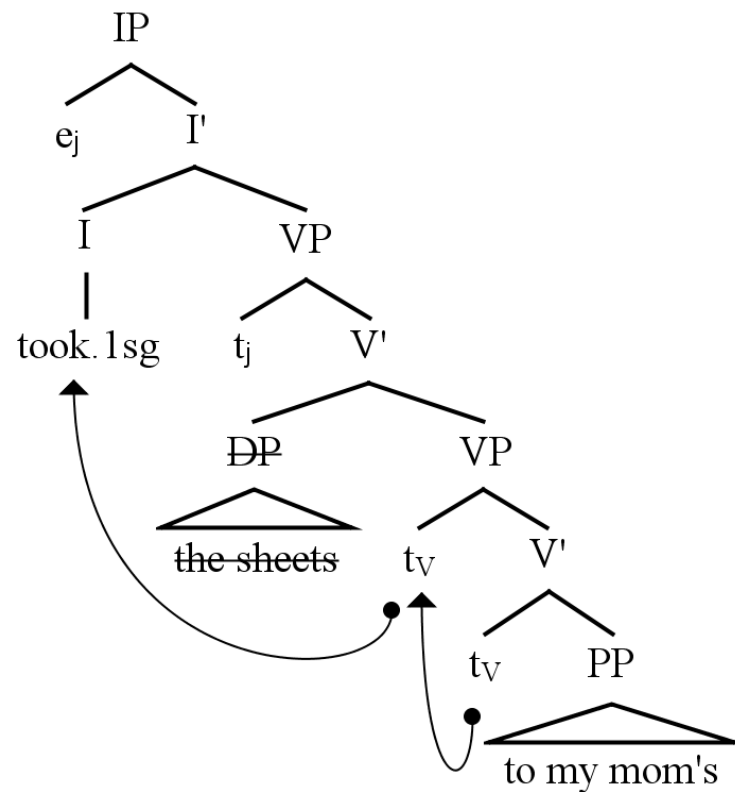
- Object drop is not island bound. \bar{A} -movement is island sensitive.
- ➔ Object drop does not involve \bar{A} -movement.

Previous proposals: Problems with the VPE analysis

A missing direct object can be followed by an overt indirect object, indicating that the VP is intact:

- 1) Q: lakaxta et ha-sdinim la-maxbesa?
took.2SG ACC the-sheets to-the-cleaners
'Did you take the sheets to the cleaners? '
A: lo, ba-sof lakaxti ø le-ima šeli.
no in-the-end took.1SG to-mother my
'no, I ended up taking them to my mom's.'

Previous proposals: Problems with the VPE analysis



Previous proposals:

Problems with the VPE analysis

- Counterargument: Maybe the 2nd internal argument (the indirect object) raised outside the VP thus remained overt post VPE?

Previous proposals:

Problems with the VPE analysis

- Rejection of counterargument:
 - a) Theoretical disadvantage—requires stipulating 2 movements.
 - b) Empirical problem—incorrectly predicts that the direct (empty) object will not be able to bind an anaphor in the indirect object (Binding Condition A). (Şener and Takahashi 2010):
 - 1) Q: ma asita im ha-kufsa'ot?
What did.2SG with the-boxes
What did you do with the boxes?
A: samti ø [axat al ha-šniya]
put.1SG [one on the-second]
'I put them [on each other].'

Previous proposals

- Both proposals— \bar{A} -trace and VPE—leave some data unexplained.
- The goal: having a unified analysis for null objects in Hebrew.
- ➔ The empty object is neither an \bar{A} -trace nor a part of a deleted VP.

New approach

- An observation: null objects of the type discussed here are systematically interpreted as **topics**.
- Topic—what the sentence is 'about'; something that is in the hearer's attention (See Strawson 1964, Reinhart 1981, Erteschik-Shir 1997, 2007.)
- The environments where null objects appear establish the object as a topic by providing a discourse antecedent.

New approach: The dropped object is a topic

Back to our first examples of Hebrew object drop:

- 1) Dani katav et ha-šir ve-Miriam tirkema ø
Dani wrote ACC the-song and-Miriam translated
- 2) Dani kisa et ha-salat ve-sam ø ba-mekarer
Dani covered ACC the salad and-put in-the-fridge
- 3) Q: macata et ha-maftexot?
found.2SG ACC the-keys
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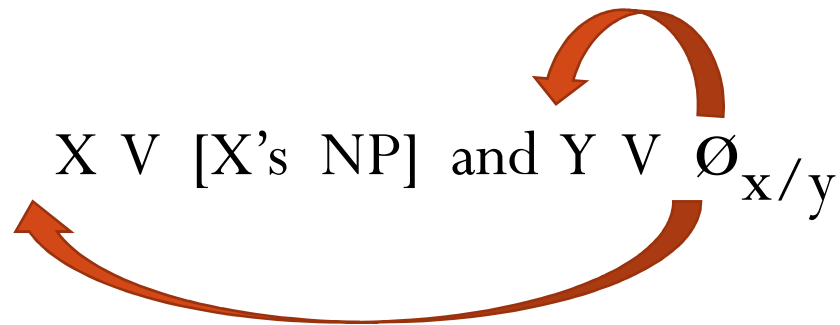
New approach: The dropped object is a topic

- Across languages, topics can be fronted (or otherwise moved), pronominalized, cliticised, and/or de-stressed.
- Hebrew allows topics to remain silent.
- ➔ The missing Hebrew object is a constituent which is identified as a topic and thus is optionally unpronounced at PF.

Sidetracking: Sloppy reading

Sloppy/strict ambiguity:

when the antecedent object contains a possessive pronoun, the gap can yield either a sloppy or a strict reading.



- 1) dina_i sama et ha-simla šela_i al ha-kise ve-tali_k talta $\emptyset_{i/k}$ ba-arón

Dina put ACC the-dress her on the-chair and-Tali hung in-the closet

Sidetracking: Sloppy reading

'Dina put her dress on the chair and...'

'...Tali hung Dina's dress in the closet.'

Strict reading: one dress
the topic = Dina's dress

'...Tali hung Tali's dress in the closet.'

Sloppy reading: two dresses
the topic set = {Dina's dress, Tali's dress}

Sidetracking: Sloppy reading

- In both cases the dropped object is a topic. In the sloppy reading case, the second dress is an item selected out of a **topic set** (on restrictive topics see Erteschik-Shir 1997, 2007).
- It is pragmatics that chooses between the two readings; in a wider context the ambiguity is eliminated. This is because the interpretation depends on which topic is defined by the discourse.

Back on track: What is the content of the silent object/topic?

- We have established that the empty category is a constituent identified as a topic.

- What is the nature of that constituent?

The current cross-linguistic literature on null arguments makes available two options:

- a) The silent constituent is a **pronoun** (see e.g. Neeleman and Szendrői 2005).
- b) The silent constituent is a **full DP** (see e.g. Kim 1999, Şener and Takahashi 2010).

What is the content of the silent object/topic?

Option 1: the missing object/topic is a **pronoun**.

Advantage: the gap can normally alternate with a pronoun. See (1)-(3).

Disadvantage: sloppy readings are unaccounted for: an overt pronoun in the second conjunct yields only a strict reading.

1) Dina_i put her_i dress on the chair...

...ve-tali_k talta $\emptyset_{i/k}$ / ota_{i/*k} ba-arón

...and-Tali hung it in-the-closet

‘Dina put her dress on the chair and Tali hung it in the closet.’

What is the content of the silent object/topic?

Option 2: the silent object/topic is a **full DP**.

Advantage: explains sloppy readings while not eliminating strict readings.

1) Dina_i put her_i dress on the chair...

...ve-tali _k	talta	∅ _{i/k}	/ [et ha-simla šela] _{i/k}	ba-arón
...and-Tali hung			[the dress her]	in-the-closet

‘Dina put her dress on the chair and Tali hung her dress in the closet.’

Disadvantages: next slides...

What is the content of the silent object/topic?

Disadvantage 1: doesn't capture the topichood of the understood object; doesn't reflect natural discourse.

What is the content of the silent object/topic?

Disadvantage 2: doesn't work with quantified DPs. A quantified DP yields a different interpretation than a gap.

- 1) dani katav [šloša sfarim]...
Dani wrote [three books]...

...ve-miriam tirkema Ø
...and-Miriam translated

same 3 books

...ve-miriam tirkema [šloša sfarim]
...and-Miriam translated [three books]

3 different books

What is the content of the silent object/topic?

- Each of these possibilities (pronoun/full DP) only covers some of the data.
- Reminder: we're looking for a unified treatment.

Solution: The content of the silent object/topic

- The proposal: the constituent is not inherently specified. It is merged in syntax as a feature complex.
- The feature complex minimally contains the following three features:
 - a) topichood
 - b) the relevant theta role
 - c) a referential index
- It is only at PF that phonetic content is introduced (in the spirit of Distributed Morphology.) The feature complex will be realized at PF either as a pronoun, a gap, or a full DP.

Solution: The content of the silent object/topic

- The desired flexibility is maintained: the phonetic realization may include all the previously mentioned options; yet the choice is partially dictated by the referential indices. For example, if the index indicates that the constituent refers back to an item out of a topic set, a pronoun will not be a possible phonetic realization.
- This proposal avoids the problem of deciding what lexical items underlie the gap. Rather than thinking in terms of lexical items, this solution incorporates the more abstract notion of a feature bundle.
- All the object drop occurrences discussed above are accounted for.

Summing up

- Hebrew object drop is analyzed as topic drop, where a constituent identified as a topic is PF deleted.
- The content of that constituent is not inherently specified.
- This account encompasses a wide range of Hebrew object drop occurrences.

- Parts of this work are included in the manuscript "Object Ellipsis as Topic Drop", by Nomi Erteschik-Shir, Elena Ibn-Bari and Sharon Taube, available on Lingbuzz at <http://ling.auf.net/lingBuzz>.

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