The Mystery of the Missing Argument: Hebrew Object Drop

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Hebrew allows an object to be null in certain contexts, as in (1). My work examines previous analyses of Hebrew object drop and offers a new approach to this phenomenon. First I evaluate existing proposals with respect to Hebrew data, and show that they are incapable of accounting for the range of facts. Then I propose an alternative account of the empty object as an unpronounced topic.

Two underlying derivations have been proposed for Hebrew object drop. According to one analysis, the empty object position contains an Ā-trace of a moved null operator, a derivation modeled on Huang's 1984 proposal for Chinese. A competing analysis is Verb Phrase Ellipsis (VPE), whereby the verb raises out of the VP prior to VP deletion and thus remains overt while the object appears null. Doron 1990, 1999 and Goldberg 2005 maintain that both mechanisms exist in Hebrew, each accounting for a subset of the data. My goal is to propose a unified analysis that encompasses all occurrences of (non-generic) Hebrew object drop.

I start by pointing to the problems of both the Ā-trace and the VPE accounts. First I show, contra Doron 1990, that Hebrew allows null objects in islands, as demonstrated in example (2) with the Complex NP Constraint. This means that the empty object position cannot be construed as an Ā-trace.

Then I show that a missing direct object can be followed by an overt indirect object (example 3). This casts doubt on the VPE analysis, since deletion of the VP would eliminate the indirect object alongside the direct object, so both internal arguments would be null, contrary to fact. A possible objection to this argument is that prior to VPE, the indirect object raises out of the VP, similarly to the verb, and thus remains overt. This option is rejected on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

Having shown that the previous accounts of Hebrew object drop are both insufficient, I take a shift and look into the environments that allow object drop, observing that in each environment, the empty object is interpreted as a **topic** which refers back to a discourse antecedent. I propose that non-pronunciation of a constituent is a way of marking it as a topic.

A closer look is offered into the nature of the silent topic constituent. The current cross-linguistic literature on null arguments makes available two options: that the silent constituent is a pronoun (see e.g. Neeleman and Szendöri 2005), and that it is a full DP (see e.g. Kim 1999).

I explore both of these options and conclude that while they each have substantial advantages, they both leave some of the data unexplained. I thus propose that the topic constituent to undergo PF deletion is neither a pronoun nor a full DP. In the spirit of Distributed Morphology, the content of this constituent is not entirely specified; rather the constituent carries a set of features, among them is topichood, which allows PF to leave it unpronounced, and referential indices, which determine its exact reference with respect to the context. This account enables the content of the topic constituent to remain flexible and to be determined with respect to the discourse.

(1) Q: macata   et   ha-maftexot?
            found.2SG ACC   the-keys
            'Did you find the keys?'

     A: ken, macati   ø / otam
            yes found.1SG   them
            'Yes, I found them.'

(2) Her'eti   et   ha-tmuna le-Dina, ve-mišehu   hefic   šmu'a
     showed.1SG ACC   the-picture to-Dina and-someone spread rumor
     [NP complement še-her'eti   ø gam le-Yosi]
                    that-showed.1SG   also to-Yosi
     'I showed the picture to Dina and someone spread the rumor that I also showed it
     to Yosi.'

(3) 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.'

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