

A Prominence Based Account of the Hebrew Possessive Dative Construction

The Hebrew Possessive Dative Construction (PDC) is a form of external possession, in which a dative marked NP is interpreted as the possessor of another NP (Berman 1982). Borer & Grodzinsky (B&G, 1986) claim that the possessed element must be c-commanded by the possessor. Hence, in the case of transitives and unergative intransitives it cannot be the subject. However, in the case of unaccusatives, since the subject is assumed to be generated as an internal argument, it may be the possessed element, as shown in (1)-(3).

- (1) ha- yalda kilkela [le- dan]_{possessor} et [ha- radyo]_{possessee}
 the girl spoiled to Dan ACC the radio
 ‘The girl broke Dan’s radio’ – *transitive* (B&G 1986:181, 12a)
- (2) [ha- maftexot]_{possessee} naflu [li]_{possessor}
 the keys fell to.me
 ‘my keys fell’ – *unaccusative* (B&G 1986: 184, 21a)
- (3) * [ha- poalim]_{possessee} avdu [li]_{possessor}
 the workers worked to.me
 (intended meaning: ‘my workers worked’) – *unergative* (B&G 1986:182, 14c)

B&G’s analysis is widely accepted and the PDC is now a standard unaccusativity diagnostic for Hebrew (Landau 1999, Reinhart & Siloni 2004, among others). However, there are clear cases of sentences with unaccusative verbs in which the subject cannot be the possessed element, as shown in (4). Furthermore, grammatical examples involving an unergative verb and a PDC can be found as well, as shown in (5).

- (4) * [ha- ganan]_{possessee} nafal [le- dan]_{possessor} ve- šavar et ha- regel
 the gardener fell to Dan and broke ACC the leg
 (intended meaning: ‘Dan’s gardener fell and broke his leg’) – *unaccusative*
- (5) ba- pgiša ha- reviit [ha- telefon]_{possessee} cilcel [le- xaim]_{possessor}
 in.the date the fourth the cell.phone rang to Chayim
 ‘On the fourth date, Chayim’s cell phone rang’ – *unergative*

In light of this data and further empirical exploration, I present a novel account for the availability of the PDC, which relies not on syntactic configuration, but on the relation between the possessor and the possessee. I propose that the PDC is more acceptable, the more prominent the possessor is with respect to the possessee. Following Aissen (1999, 2003), I define *prominence* not as a unidimensional notion, but as emerging from several distinct scales, each making independent contributions to prominence and hence to the overall acceptability. In this work, I focus on three dimensions of prominence and show their effect on the acceptability of the PDC: animacy, definiteness, and grammatical relations.

The first two scales considered are animacy and definiteness, the contributions of which are as follows:

- (6) The PDC is more acceptable when:
- (i) The possessor is higher on the animacy scale than the possessee (e.g. animate possessor and inanimate possessee)
 - (ii) The possessor is higher on the definiteness scale than the possessee (e.g. definite possessor and indefinite possessee)

(6i) makes essentially the same predictions as B&G’s unaccusativity account for the data which motivated their generalization, since in all of B&G’s ungrammatical unergative sentences, the subject (the possessee) is animate, whereas in all their grammatical unaccusative sentences, it is inanimate. In fact, these two accounts often make similar predictions, since unergatives, unlike unaccusatives, typically require animate subjects. However, further data allows teasing the predictions apart, and supports the prominence account. As (4) shows, an unaccusative with an animate subject is bad in the PDC.

Furthermore, those unergatives that do allow inanimate subjects, such as sound emission verbs (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995), can appear in the PDC, as shown in (5).

The multi-dimensional notion of prominence relies not on categorical requirements, but rather on an interaction of violable tendencies. Therefore, my account predicts a wide range of gradience in the acceptability of the PDC, since the possessor and possessee might not be equally prominent on all scales. Consider the acceptable sentence in (7), which due to the human possessee (which is as animate as the possessor) may have been expected to be unacceptable. However, since the possessee is indefinite, it is still less prominent than the possessor on the definiteness scale, which can explain its acceptability.

- (7) [šney banim]_{possessee} metu [le- šula]_{possessor} ba- milxama
 two sons died DAT Shula in.the war
 ‘Two of Shula’s sons died in the war’
unaccusative, animate definite possessor, animate indefinite possessee

Sensitivity to the third prominence scale, the grammatical relations scale (Subject > Non-Subject), motivates an asymmetry between transitives and intransitives. In transitive cases, non-subject NPs are available as both possessor and possessee, whereas in the intransitive case, in the absence another NP that can serve as the possessee, the possessee is invariably the subject – the most prominent element. Therefore, transitive verbs can allow the PDC more freely than intransitive verbs (which is consistent with B&G’s account); in the intransitive case the possessor is less prominent than the possessee in terms of grammatical relations, and must thus be more prominent in other dimensions, such as those stated in (6i)-(6ii), for the sentence to be acceptable.

To substantiate the prominence account, I conducted an acceptability judgment experiment with over 40 native Hebrew speakers. The target sentences involved 22 predicates (transitives, unergatives, unaccusatives) with the possessor and possessee showing varying combinations of animacy and definiteness. The judgments showed considerable gradience, as expected. However, statistical analysis using a mixed-effects linear regression shows the predicted effect of prominence. First, PDC sentences with an animate possessor and an inanimate possessee received significantly higher ratings than sentences with other combinations of animacy ($P < 0.001$). Second, sentences with an indefinite possessee and a definite possessor received significantly better ratings than sentences in which both are definite ($P < 0.01$). Finally, transitive sentences (in which the possessee is a non-subject) received significantly better ratings than either unaccusatives ($P < 0.005$) or unergatives ($P < 0.01$), motivating the relevance of a subject vs. non-subject distinction. Therefore, the more prominent the possessor is with respect to the possessee on various scales of prominence, the more acceptable the PDC. In addition, in sentences with intransitive verbs, the unaccusativity of the verb did not have a statistically significant effect on the ratings, suggesting that the apparent difference between unaccusatives and unergatives with respect to the PDC can be explained by the different types of NPs typically preferred as the arguments of such verbs.

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