

Agreement features and non-agreeing copulas in Modern Hebrew

Interactions of agreement with interpretation pose a theoretical challenge to the Minimalist view of agreement as a purely syntactic operation. This paper proposes a syntactic analysis of copular clauses in Modern Hebrew where lack of agreement between the copula and the subject has been reported to affect the subject's interpretation; I argue that it is not lack of agreement features on the copula itself which has semantic consequences, but a 'secondary' feature deficiency of the subject. Considering both the copula's deficiency and the subject's, I propose a Minimalist feature-based explanation for the subject's syntactic and semantic properties.

Two types of copulas have often been distinguished in Hebrew: one that is homophonous to nominative 3rd person pronouns (henceforth 'PronH'); and one homophonous to demonstratives/impersonal pronouns ('PronZ'):

- (1) dina hi saxkanit muxšeret.
Dina(FM.SG) PronH.FM.SG actor.FM.SG talented.FM.SG
'Dina is a talented actor.'
- (2) ugat gezer ze macxik.
cake(FM.SG) carrot PronZ.MS.SG funny.MS.SG
'A carrot cake is funny.'

Unlike PronH, which always agrees, PronZ often surfaces with default agreement (MS.SG), as in (2). While various works have attempted to characterize the semantic correlates of PronZ having default agreement, little attention has been paid to the exact underlying syntax of non-agreeing PronZ sentences or to the question why non-agreement is tied to the observed semantics (discussed below). The often implicit assumption has been that failure to agree and the associated semantics are two lexical properties of a special kind of PronZ. Below we argue that while non-agreeing PronZ indeed lacks agreement features, there is a principled reason why the subject must also lack certain features.

Cast in Minimalist terms, the typical analysis of PronZ clauses is roughly that there are 2 types of PronZ: one that enters the derivation with unvalued ϕ -features, and one that lacks agreement features (or comes specified for default values). Lack of subject agreement follows from selecting the 2nd type of PronZ, which does not function as a Probe. Additionally, non-agreeing PronZ is also associated with certain semantic properties: the denotation of its subject may be 'shifted' from its basic referent, as in (3); see Heller (1999) and Greenberg (2008).

- (3) yeladim ktanim ze avoda kaša.
children(MS.PL) small.MS.PL PronZ.MS.SG work(FM.SG) hard.FM.SG
'(Raising/dealing with) small children is hard work.'

This analysis suffers from two shortcomings: First, it offers no explanation of the relation between the syntactic and the semantic properties of PronZ, instead stipulating each of them separately; while the analysis of Greenberg (2008) does propose an explanation for this relation, it is based on the hypothesis that the post-PronZ predicate contains an abstract, featureless, noun, a hypothesis which seems not to apply to cases where the predicate is nominal, as in (3), and not adjectival as in (2). Second, it wrongly predicts that, other than its denotation, the subject of non-agreeing PronZ would behave just like subjects of other types of sentences. One difference between subjects of PronZ and other subjects is that the former may not bind anaphors:

- (4) tipšim hem / *ze ha-oyvim šel acmam.
fools(MS.PL) PronH.MS.PL / PronZ.MS.SG the-enemies.MS.PL of self.MS.PL
'Fools are their own enemies.'

One apparent explanation for this fact, as well as for the fact that PronZ subjects trigger no agreement, not only on PronZ but also on predicative AP (as in (2); see Greenberg 2008), would be to claim that the pre-copular DP is not really the subject but a left-dislocated topic. This analysis can be ruled out based on, among other things, word order when the predicate undergoes *wh*-movement; as (5) shows, this DP then follows the fronted predicate and PronZ, as expected from a subject and not from a topic:

- (5) kama avoda ze yeladim ktanim?
 how.much work PronZ children small
 ‘How much work is raising/dealing with small children?’

Alternatively, we might consider the possibility that PronZ subjects, despite their morphological marking, do not carry syntactically active/visible ϕ -features, which would account for their failure to participate in agreement and in binding. This simple analysis would fail to account, however, for the fact that subject-internal concord is obligatory when the subject of non-agreeing PronZ is modified by an attributive adjective, as in (3).

Nevertheless, we would like to argue that failure to bind indeed shows that non-agreeing PronZ subjects are deficient in terms of their features. Our hypothesis is that subjects of PronZ carry only the features needed for subject-internal concord, but not those needed for external agreement. This may be formalized by claiming that these subjects contain an abstract D which, unlike typical D, carries no ϕ -features and hence makes it impossible for the features of N and/or intermediate functional projections below DP to participate in DP-external operations (Danon, to appear); alternatively, if we distinguish between 2 sets of agreement features, as in Wechsler and Zlatić (2003) and other HPSG work, PronZ subjects could be argued to carry only the set of CONCORD features, but not the INDEX features needed for external agreement.

If indeed *both* PronZ and its subject are deficient in features, two questions must be answered: (i) Why must the subject be deficient in the presence of deficient PronZ? (ii) Why does this have the observed semantic consequences? As to the first question, we propose that this can be derived from the assumption that structural Case depends on agreement. In the absence of ϕ -features on PronZ, it cannot value Case on the subject, which is therefore Caseless. Borrowing somewhat from the GB Visibility Condition, we propose that Case is required for licensing a D’s ϕ /INDEX features, and hence subjects of non-agreeing PronZ must lack these features.

The fact that non-agreeing PronZ subjects may get a ‘shifted’ interpretation, as in (3), now seems to follow: Non-agreeing subject DPs lack features that are associated with referentiality and which are also typically linked to the noun’s features. Thus, we would expect such subjects to be non-referential (e.g., get a generic reading) or to have a reference which is not tied to N’s lexical properties. As noted by Heller (1999) and Greenberg (2008), this is indeed the case.

Finally, this analysis also explains why ‘featureless’ subjects are restricted to copular constructions with PronZ, i.e., why subject-verb agreement is not optional throughout the grammar, with lack of agreement correlating with potentially ‘shifted’ readings of the subject.

- (6) *yeladim ktanim ya‘avid oto kaše.
 children(MS.PL) small.MS.PL make.work.FUT.MS.SG him hard
 (Cannot mean: ‘Raising/dealing with small children will make him work hard.’)

If we assume that Caseless DPs are grammatical only if the D lacks ϕ /INDEX features, (6) is ungrammatical because the verb must have a thematic subject, which would be identified by exactly those features; subjects of PronZ, on the other hand, are not arguments of any verbal predicate, and as such do not require such features. Thus, the picture that emerges is that Case is not merely an uninterpretable feature that must be eliminated, but a feature that serves a function in licensing other, interpretable, features of DP arguments.

References

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