

Introduction to Hebrew linguistics

Assignment for week 13

The last topic we cover in this semester is syntax. (In Hebrew, *syntax* is תהביר, coming from the root הבר ‘to connect’. That is, syntax is about “connecting words”.) Syntax is concerned about different levels of the structure of a sentence: about the word order within the phrase (e.g., noun + adjective), or within the entire sentence. The syntax of a phrase is a topic amply covered by your Biblical Hebrew and Modern Hebrew courses.

Yet, the word order within an entire sentence is much trickier an issue in Hebrew. Unlike in the case of the languages you are most familiar with (Dutch, English, French or German), the word order in Hebrew seems to be free. There are no strict rules, and the verb may take the first, second, third, etc. positions in the sentence. Yet, many modern linguists (syntacticians) say that Israeli Hebrew is a so-called *V2 (verb-second) language*: similarly to Dutch and German, the verb always takes the second position in a declarative sentence. Usually the verb order is subject-verb-object (SVO).¹ But sometimes the object (or the indirect object or the place or the time or some other components of the sentence) is put to the beginning of the sentence. This is done, for instance, in order to *focus* this element. Or because this element is the *topic* of the sentence.² In such a case, the subject is moved to the third position, in order to keep the verb in the second position, creating, e.g., an object-verb-subject (OVS) word order.³

Your assignment is to test this V2 hypothesis for Israeli Hebrew. Choose a relatively longer text (a few paragraphs, between half a page and a full page in length) in Israeli Hebrew (or Biblical Hebrew, if you prefer it), which you understand relatively well. I would be happy if you could supply a copy of the text as an attachment. Then, collect the word order of the declarative sentences. Ignore sentences that are not declarative: questions, commands, etc. You can also ignore dependent/subordinate clauses (bijzinnen).

Then, arrange the remaining sentences into groups:

1. The verb has no subject and no object (or any other arguments).
2. The verb has a subject, but no object (or any other arguments).
3. The verb has an object (or another argument), but no subject.
4. The verb has both a subject and an object (or some other argument).

¹ *Subject* = onderwerp. *Direct object* = lijdend voorwerp. *Indirect object* = meewerkend voorwerp.

² ‘Topic’ and ‘focus’ are important notions in syntax. Here, we do not enter the details, and just rely on your intuitions.

³ Note that the “first position” may be longer than a single word. The first position is filled by three words in the sentence that you are just reading (“the + first + position” = three words). In deze zin komt het onderwerp in de derde positie, omdat de eerste positie (weer drie woorden) door de locatie wordt gevuld.

There can be several reasons for not having a subject/object:

- a. Intransitive verbs do not need an object, transitive verbs do.
- b. The subject and/or the object are expressed as an affix on the verb.
- c. The subject and/or object are left out, because they are obvious from context.

A sentence in some languages (English, Dutch, French...) must have a subject, either as a noun or as a pronoun. Other languages (Italian, Hungarian, etc.) may drop the pronoun, if it is obvious from the sentence or from the context. Based on your text, what can you say: Is it allowed to have a sentence in Hebrew without its subject explicitly expressed in the sentence? In other words: do you have subject-less sentences in Hebrew whose Dutch translation would include the subject (as a noun or as a pronoun)? Is it different if the sentence is in the past or future tense from the case of a sentence in the present tense?

In your email, explain your opinion based on examples taken from the text.

Finally we can return to our original problem. Focus on the sentences that have both their subjects *and* objects (or some other sentence components: place, time, manner...) explicitly marked in the sentence. What is the word order of these components? Is it true that Hebrew is an SVO language? Is it true that Hebrew is a V2 language, such as Dutch? Is the first position always occupied by the subject? If not, what is the reason of having something else in the first position? You will probably not be able to give a simple yes/no answer to these questions (I wouldn't).

What I am asking you, then, is to describe your impressions, your observations based on the sample text.