

Biblical Hebrew who will understand?

Methodological reflections on identifying topic and focus in a dead language

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The notions of topic and focus are well known to a theoretical linguist by the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Much less were they so just a few decades ago, and much less are they still so outside the general linguistics community. The topic of this talk is the word order in Biblical Hebrew, and we focus on why these two concepts have posed a challenge to biblical scholars.

Topic relates to information structure, and topicalization does not affect the truth condition of a sentence. Focussing does. However, it is not easy to distinguish between truth conditions without full access to context. E.g., if Donald Trump twitters “I won”, it sounds like a focus with the intended meaning ‘it is me who won, and not you’. But when he twitted “I won big and he didn’t” about Mitt Romney (on January 2, 2019), he topicalized the subjects: ‘in 2012, you did not win for the Republicans, whereas I did in 2016’.

On a linguistic level, several devices can be deployed to mark topicalization and focussing: at least prosody, lexical items (cf. Japanese *wa*), word order (cf. Hungarian) and syntactic constructions (cf. cleft sentences in English). Biblical Hebrew does not have dedicated lexical items or obvious syntactic constructions, even though a specific syntactic structure will be shortly argued to be a focus marker. As far as prosody is concerned, it has not been preserved.¹ The only candidate still in the game is word order.

Biblical Hebrew is standardly postulated to be a VSO language. (For alternatives, cf. Holmstedt 2011 and other works of his.) Any deviation therefrom is an aspirant for topicalization or focussing.

Bandstra 1986 argues for VOS emerging when the object is known (topic-like), whereas the subject is new. Revisiting his examples, I shall argue that scrambling in the middle field is better understood as being related to weight, i.e. pronouns preceding nouns, and shorter NPs preceding longer ones. True, the two explanations converge, since pronouns refer to entities already known in the discourse. Further factors may also contribute to scrambling.

Subsequently, I shall turn to the Vorfeld, and argue for a *topic – focus – V S O* order. Consider the following examples with both the topic and focus positions filled (note the Wh-word in the focus position):

- (1) a. *wəhanniš’ārîm herāh nāsū* (Gen 14:10b)
and.the.rest to.hill fled
[...the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them,]
‘and the rest fled to the hill country.’ (NRSV)
- b. *’ēšeṭ ḥayil mî yimšā* (Prov 31:10a)
woman valour who find.IMPF.3.SING.MASC
‘A capable wife who can find?’ (...) (NRSV)

Yet, how shall we interpret sentence (2) with a single NP before the verb?

- (2) a. *bəkōr bānekā titten lî* (Exod 22:28b)
firstborn sons.your give.IMPF.2.SING.MASC to.me
‘The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.’ (NRSV)

Is here *firstborn* a topic or a focus? Can we distinguish between the two, without reference to prosody or a native speaker’s intuition? To answer this question with some certainty, we must make use of disciplines that linguistics long ago parted ways with, such as literature, religious history and philology.

In an Iron Age context, Exod 22:28 would be read with a topicalized object. Even if the dative object was not explicitly focussed, the sentence might have contained an implicit contrast between “giving”

¹ The standard text of the Hebrew Bible, the *Textus Masoreticus* contains cantillation marks. Yet, these marks, originating at the late 1st millennium CE (!), were added to the text for liturgical reasons, and in a period when Hebrew had not been in spontaneous oral usage for centuries anymore. While future research might search for a possible correlation between cantillation marks and topic or focus positions, currently they are of no help to us.

