The connection between null subjects and topicalization

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Both Standard and dialectal Arabic have clitics (or agreement affixes – Shlonsky (1997)) on nouns, prepositions and verbs. Mishnaic Hebrew was more or less like Arabic (although certain forms of the inflected verb eschewed clitics). Modern (spoken) Hebrew, does not allow clitics on verbs and employs free-standing weak pronouns in their stead.

My first point is to relate this observation to another, namely, the absence of Clitic Left-Dislocation (CLLD) in Hebrew as opposed to its presence in the various Arabics. CLLD is not simply left-dislocation with a clitic; it is a form of topicalization which can be iterated, it is subject to constraints on reconstruction and it can appear in so-called embedded root contexts, like adverbial clauses.

Hebrew Topicalization is "English"-like, in that topic iteration is very marginal and reconstruction ubiquitous. Furthermore, Topicalization is barred from adverbial clauses, conditional clauses and infinitives.

Two recent views on the difference between CLLD and (English-like) Topicalization are contrasted. Under one view (going back to Chomsky (1977)), Topicalization involves a base-generated topic which provides content to a moved null operator. CLLD (according to e.g., Cinque (1990)), crucially lacks the operator structure. Rather, the topic is directly connected to the clitic via an A' chain. Under a different view (recently articulated in papers by Haegeman, e.g., (2006)), the position of the CLLD topic is lower in the left-periphery than that of the (English-like) topic. My second point consists of comparing these two approaches on the basis of the evidence from Semitic.

My third point is based on the claim – to be defended - that if a language has clitics on verbs, then it has phonetically-null topics. In other words, verbal clitics are invariably connected to a topic, whether it is pronounced or not, (Frascarelli 2007). When, in addition, a language has sufficiently rich subject-verb agreement, then null subjects are predicted to be available. Such a language is Arabic (Levantine Arabic is used in the examples, but the generalization can be illustrated in many other varieties). My fourth point, therefore, is that in Arabic, subject agreement is a clitic, in the precise sense that it is associated with a null topic.

In the absence of verbal clitics, Hebrew lacks the kind of null topics that Arabic (and other clitic languages) possess in virtue of having clitics. Null topics can, of course, be manifested independently of clitics (e.g., Chinese -Huang (1989), or German Topic-Drop), but this is a lg.-specific option. My fifth point is that Hebrew lacks this kind of null topic and hence, despite its "rich" agreement (as rich as that of Levantine Arabic), it does not tolerate null subjects.

Null subjects are, however, available in Hebrew but only in several well-defined configurations, namely, with first and second person inflection and with third person inflection, only in the presence of a linguistic antecedent. First and second person inflections are incorporated pronouns, (Doron 1988, Shlonsky 2009) so these are not cases of genuine pro-drop. Characterization of the contexts in which "anteceded" third person null subjects are admitted in Hebrew constitutes the final point of the presentation, expanding on Landau (2004) and Gutman (2004).

Due to my ignorance of the matter at the time of writing, I will not discuss the diachronic aspects of the loss of verbal clitics in Hebrew. The essence of my contribution is the claim that the absence of verbal clitics clusters with the absence of CLLD, the presence of Topicalization and a restricted pattern of pro-drop, suggesting that relatively minor morphosyntactic differences between languages (Hebrew and Arabic, in this context), engender important differences in their syntax, as the parametric approach leads us to expect.

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