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Topicalization and Focalization: A preliminary Exploration of the Hebrew Left Periphery

Ur Shlonsky

1. General properties of topics and foci in Hebrew

Alongside pronoun-resumed DPs, which are followed by a pause, restricted to root contexts (see the contrast in (1),) and can be linked to a position inside a strong island, see (2), Hebrew has left-peripheral topicalized and focused constituents which are associated with a gap. These need not be followed by a pause, can appear in both root, (3a), and subordinate clauses, (3b), and the relation between the left-peripheral constituent and its associated gap cannot cross a strong island boundary, (4).¹

(1) a. Dani, ani xošev še pitru oto.

Dani, I think that (they) fired him

‘Dani, I think they fired him.’

b. *ani xošev še Dani, pitru oto.

I think that Dani, (they) fired him

‘I think that Dani, they fired him’

(2) Dani, ani makir et ha marce še hixšil oto.

Dani, I know DOM the lecturer that flunked him

‘Dani, I know the lecturer that flunked him.’

(3) a. et Dani ani xošev še pitru ____.

DOM Dani, I think that (they) fired

‘Dani, I think they fired.’

b. ani xošev še et Dani pitru ____.

I think that DOM Dani, (they) fired

‘I think that Dani, they fired’

(4) *et Dani ani makir et ha marce še hixšil ____.

DOM Dani, I know DOM the lecturer that flunked

‘Dani, I know the lecturer that flunked him.’

Left-dislocated constituents linked to a gap can be either topics or foci. As in English, there is no formal difference between left-peripheral topicalization and focalization (whereas in Italian or Spanish, for example, the appearance of a clause-internal clitic signals topicalization.) The differences are marked prosodically, though. Intuitively, a contrastive/corrective focus (capitalized in the examples below) bears emphasis – realized by a high tone on the final syllable in (5).

(5) ani batu’ax še ET HA SEFER HA ZE lo karat.

I sure that DOM THE BOOK THE THIS not (you.fs) read

‘I’m sure that THIS book you didn’t read.’

The intonational events associated with different kinds of topics require more than an intuitive judgment, but they are clearly distinct from focus intonation, as any Hebrew-speaker would attest upon reading the examples in (6) and (7). The discourse fragment in (6) (provided in English, for the sake of simplicity), in which a speaker discusses his working habits, is followed by a conversational shift which introduces a new topic or reintroduces a previous one. The topic ‘the paper you’re presently writing’ is labeled an (A)boutness topic in Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007) and Bianchi & Frascarelli (2010).

(6) I typically work in a very disorderly fashion: I start one project and then, without finishing it, move on to something else. Its not a very good habit. By the way, I wanted to ask you,

et ha ma’amar še ata kotev axšav ata xošev še tigmor ha šavu’a?

DOM the article that you writing now you think that (you) will finish the week

‘(As for) the paper you’re presently writing, do you think you’ll finish it this week?’

In the answer to the question in (7), the speaker employs a contrastive topic, and the sentence bears a very different intonational contour from the one that characterizes the sentence with the A-topic in (6). It needs to be determined whether the intuitively-perceived pauses following the contrastive topics in (7b) are genuine pauses or mask a sharp fall in the F0 contour.

(7) Q: ata ohev yerakot?
you.ms like vegetables
‘Do you like vegetables?’

A: gezer, ani ohev, kruv, ani lo sovel
carrot I like, cabbage I not bear
‘Carrots, I like, cabbage, I can’t stand’

Left peripheral focus in Hebrew is reserved for contrast/correction; new information focus is clause-internal, as attested by the ungrammaticality of A’ in (8).

(8) Q: et mi ra’ita etmol?
DOM who (you.ms) saw yesterday
‘Who did you see yesterday?’

A: ra’iti ET DANI
(I) saw DOM DANI

A’: *ET DANI ra’iti
DOM DANI (I) saw

Hebrew topics are A-bar elements. They license parasitic gaps and reconstruct for anaphor and pronominal binding. The examples in (9) are taken from Preminger (2010:208–210, exs. (21), (23b) & (25b)).

(9) a. Dan amar še et ha sefer ha ze₁ hu kara t₁ (mi-)bli li-knot e

Dan said that DOM the book the this he read from-without to-buy pg

'Dan said that this book, he read without buying.'

b. Dan amar še et acma; Rina ohevet t_i

Dan said that DOM herself Rina likes

'Dan said that herself, Rina likes.'

c. Dan yode'a še [et ima šelo]_i kol yeled_i ohev t₁]

Dan knows that DOM mother his every boy loves

'Dan knows that his mother, every boy loves.'

The picture of Hebrew topics that emerges very much resembles the description of English topics in the literature. A further property shared by the two languages is the very weak sensitivity to weak cross over, illustrated in (10).

(10) ?et Dani_i hor-av_i ohavim (lamrot še nixšal) Borer (1995: 577, ex. (110a))

DOM Dani parents-his love despite that (he) failed

'Dani, his parents love (although he failed).'

2. The distribution of Hebrew topics

Yet, the resemblance between Hebrew and English topicalization is only superficial. Further scrutiny reveals substantial distributional differences between the two languages.

English topicalization is basically restricted to declarative contexts and is degraded in imperatives and interrogatives. English topics are also degraded in complement clauses to factive verbs, in subject clauses, relative clauses, in complex nominals and in central adjunct clauses. Although there is some (and in some cases, substantial) variability in judgments, the following examples from the literature (cited and discussed in Haegeman (2012b),) illustrate these descriptive generalizations.

- (11) a. *This book, put in my pigeon hole.
b. *That book about shrimp, did you actually read?
c. *Bill asked if such books John only reads at home.
d. %*John regrets that this book Mary read.
e. *That Mary, your antics will upset is obvious.

- f. *The student to whom your book I will give tomorrow.
- g. *I resent the fact that each part he had to examine carefully.
- h. *When this song I heard, I remembered my first love.

The examples in (12) are almost literal translations of the preceding English examples. They are all grammatical, given the appropriate context.²

- (12) a. et ha sefer ha ze sim ba teva šeli
 DOM the book the this put in.the box mine
 'This book, put in my mailbox.'
- b. et ha sefer 'al xasionim be'emet karata?
 DOM the book about shrimps really read.2ms
 'Did you really read the book about shrimps?'
- c. Bill ša'al im sfarim ka'ele John kore rak ba bayt
 Bill asked if books like these John reads only at home
 'Bill asked if John reads books like this only at home.'
- d. John micta'er še et ha sefer ha ze Mary kar'a
 John regrets that DOM the book the this Mary read
 'John regrets that Mary read this book.'
- e. še et Mary ha hištolelut šelxa te'acben ze barur
 that DOM Mary the antics yours will upset is clear
 'It is clear that your antics will upset Mary.'
- f. ha student še et ha sefer šelxa ani eten l-o maxar...
 the student that DOM the book yours I will give to-him tomorrow
 'The student to whom I will give your book tomorrow.'
- g. ani ko'es 'al ha uvda še kol xelek hu ne'elac livdok bi zhirut

I angry about the fact that each part he needs to check with care

'I am angry about the fact that he needs to carefully check each part.'

h. kše et ha šir ha ze šamati b-a pa'am ha rišona, nizkarti

when DOM the song the this (I) heard at-the time the first (I) remembered

be ahavat ne'ura-y

of love youth-my

'When I heard this song for the first time, I recalled the love of my youth.'

While the order Top > Foc is acceptable for some English speakers, the order Foc > Top is excluded, (Haegeman 2012b:92: Table 2.3). Both orders are possible in Hebrew. (13b) as well as (13c) can serve as a continuation of (13a), with focal stress on 'the book'.

(13) a. (ani yode'a še) šalaxta le Rina et ha ama'amar. Ve le Ruti?

I know that (you) sent to Rina DOM the article. And to Ruti

'I know you sent the article to Rina. And to Ruti?'

b. le Ruti, ET HA SEFER šalaxti, lo et ha ma'amar

to Ruti, DOM THE BOOK (I) sent, not DOM the article

'To Ruti, I sent THE BOOK, not the article.'

c. ET HA SEFER le Ruti, šalaxti, lo et ha ma'amar

DOM THE BOOK to Ruti (I) sent, not DOM the article

'I sent Ruti THE BOOK, not the article.'

3. Hebrew topics and intervention effects

The consensus in the literature since Chomsky (1977) has been that English gap-linked topics are derived by null operator movement to the left periphery. Haegeman (2012b) (which summarizes and develops Haegeman (2007; 2010a; 2010b; 2012a)), Rizzi (to appear), and others, have brought recent developments in the theory of relativized minimality, (Endo (2007), Rizzi (2004), Starke (2001)), to bear on this formal property of English topics. Haegeman (2012b), in particular, explicitly defends the idea that topics are endowed with an Op feature that intervenes for or is intervened by other elements with this feature, where intervention is computed in terms

of selective or feature-based relativized minimality. The distributional restrictions on English topics are considered, in this light, to be intervention effects.

Hebrew topicalization does not naturally yield to such an analysis, since Hebrew topics are available in precisely the environments where they are arguably crossed-over by operators in English, yielding ungrammaticality. Indeed, it doesn't appear to be the case that the possession of any feature is of relevance to the distribution of topics, given the availability of both Top>Foc and Foc>Top orders as in (13b,c) – a clear indication that the two fronted elements do not interact with respect to relativized minimality.

An option which comes to mind is to relate Hebrew topics to Romance clitic left-dislocated (CLLD) topics. In fact, the distributional properties of Hebrew topics summarized in the preceding paragraphs are largely the same ones that hold of CLLD topics, as discussed in Haegeman's and Rizzi's work.

CLLD incorporates a clitic which, Cinque (1990) argues, acts as a local binder for the topic gap. The topic itself is neither an inherent operator, nor – in the terms of Haegeman (2012b) – a bearer of an operator feature. If English topics are associated with an operator, or an operator feature, while Romance topics are simply preposed referential expressions, the interaction of the former with other left-peripheral operators is explained with the same theoretical vocabulary as the insensitivity of the latter.

Hebrew topics are, however, not resumed by a clitic. In fact, Hebrew altogether lacks clitics on verbs. From Cinque's perspective, it follows that in the absence of a clitic or an English-like null operator, the topic itself must be the gap's binder and a fortiori, an intrinsic operator. But then, the insensitivity of Hebrew topics to the presence of other operators in the left periphery cannot be explained along the lines of Haegeman's treatment of CLLD.

Haegeman writes of an operator *feature*, shared by (English) topics, foci, wh and relatives, among others, but absent in CLLD topics, which have a clitic-bound trace. Hebrew topics might be taken to lack an operator *feature* but to retain the capacity to bind a variable. In English, presumably, the property of being an operator is coded-for morpho-syntactically (as an instruction to interpret a given constituent as a λ). CLLD languages may or may not have this feature, but it cannot appear on topics because local binding by the clitic would violate the syntactic locality condition on operator-binding, as Cinque argued. Suppose Hebrew lacks an operator *feature* in its feature vocabulary. Operator-variable relations are established when the appropriate syntactic configuration is established (e.g., through internal merge). Thus, for example, wh elements are operators *not* in virtue of bearing an operator feature in addition their wh feature but simply because they move (their wh feature is criterially probed) and c-command their trace.

On the assumption that preposed wh elements and preposed contrastive/corrective foci do not share any

features (in particular, no operator feature), it is predicted that they should be able to co occur in either order. (14b,c) are both appropriate continuations of the utterance in (14a): (14b) displays the order wh > contrastive/corrective foc and (14c), the opposite order.

(14) a. et ha orez ani mitkaven lehaxin be ševa.

DOM the rice I intend to prepare at seven

'The rice, I intend to prepare at seven.'

b. ma še ani roce lada't ze matai ET HA SALAT ata mitkaven lehaxin,

what that I want to know is when DOM THE SALAD you intend to prepare

lo et ha orez.

not DOM the rice

'What I want to know is when you intend to prepare THE SALAD, not the rice.'

c. ma še ani roce lada't ze ET HA SALAT matai ata mitkaven lehaxin,

what that I want to know is DOM THE SALAD when you intend to prepare

lo et ha orez.

not DOM the rice

Same as (14b)

Many unrelated languages (Italian, Gungbe, Hungarian) do not tolerate focus and wh in any order in the same left periphery. This might be due to the intervention effects by an operator feature or by a shared class feature such as [quantificational], (Rizzi 2004), [operator] (Rizzi to appear) or [modifier] (Abels 2012).³ Hebrew, then, might be taken to lack this class feature and thus, wh and focus are featurally disjoint and do not intervene for one another in chain formation, see (15).

(15) a. Italian/English, etc.

Hebrew

Quantifier/Operator/Modifier

[wh], [foc], [rel], ...



[wh] [foc] [rel] ...

But is the Romance and, by extension, the Hebrew topic truly a mere referential expression? Its occurrence in the left periphery (most likely through movement, at least in Hebrew gap-linked topicalization) must be syntactically triggered and the likely candidates for triggering movement to the left periphery are scope/discourse-related features. One possibility is that the feature vocabulary provided by UG contains the primitive feature [topic], (Rizzi 2004). This would suffice to explain the co-occurrence of topics and foci in the Hebrew left periphery in any order, as in (13).

Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007) and Bianchi & Frascarelli (2010) argue that the left peripheral topic space in Italian is selectively sensitive to properties such as 'aboutness' and 'contrast'. The results of this work suggest that the feature [topic] is a class feature. The putative recursiveness of topics described in Rizzi (1997) is, thus, not an indication that topics are unaffected by relativized minimality computation (as Rizzi 2004 tentatively suggests), but that multiple topics involve topics with different sub-features. If similar conclusions were shown to be valid for Hebrew (research into this area is yet to be carried out), then we should conclude that while Hebrew lacks an operator class feature it has a topic class feature.

4. Positional Restrictions on Hebrew Topics Unexplained by Featural Intervention

Hebrew topics are not completely unrestricted in their distribution, however. For example, in both root and embedded *wh* questions, they can only appear above the *wh* expression.⁴

(16) a. (ani lo yode'a) na'alaim ka-elu efo efšar limco
 (I not know) shoes like-these where (one) can to find
 'I don't know where one can find shoes like these.'

b. ??(ani lo yode'a) efo na'alaim ka-elu efšar limco
 (I not know) where shoes like-these (one) can to find
 'I don't know where one can find shoes like these.'

(17) a. et ha ma'amar ha ze eize student hiclaxta lešaxne'a likro?
 DOM the article the this which student (you) managed to convince to read
 'This article, which student did you manage to convince to read?'

b. ??eize student et ha ma'amar ha ze hiclaxta lešaxne'a likro?

which student DOM the article the this (you) managed to convince to read

‘Which student did you manage to convince to read this article?’

The contrast in (16) and (17) is, in a way, even more surprising than the co occurrence of focus and wh in (14b,c). If Hebrew topicalization is akin to Romance CLLD in that the topic is not associated with a null operator (Cinque 1990), or fails to bears an operator feature, (Haegeman 2012b), or simply lies beyond the purview of feature computation for relativized minimality (Rizzi 2004), then it should be expected to be freely ordered with respect to wh, as it is in the Italian described in Rizzi (1997).

Although a wh cannot precede a topic in the *same* left periphery, (16b) and (17b), wh can cross over a topic and land in the left periphery of a higher clause, as in (18).

(18) efo ata xošev še na'alaim ka-elu ešar limco?

where you.m think that shoes like-these (one) can to find

'Where do you think that one can find shoes like this?'

If feature intervention lies at the the root of the ungrammaticality of (16b) and (17b), then it should presumably also effect long wh movement in (18).⁵ Since it doesn't, the grammaticality of (18) leads us to look elsewhere for an explanation of the status of (16b) and (17b).

Two sorts of explanations have been proposed for ordering constraints in the left periphery. The first, elaborated in Rizzi (1997), proposed a *cartography* of positions. The second, developed in Rizzi 2004, tried to pin ordering constraints on feature intervention for relativized-minimality based locality.

Many aspects of the cartographic picture are surely amenable to an explanation based on feature intervention, as Abels (2012), Endo (2007), Haegeman (2012b) and Rizzi (to appear) have recently pointed out, and some may be due to factors such as scope or perhaps to some third factor (in the sense of Chomsky (2005),) that we do not yet understand.

The restriction of topics to a position above wh in Hebrew does not seem to be straightforwardly reducible to a semantic constraint such as scope. In indirect yes/no questions, topics must follow and may not precede the interrogative particle *im* 'if', compare (16) above with (19). If Hebrew topics must take scope above wh operators, it is semantically mysterious why they must take scope below interrogative 'if'.

(19) a. *ani lo yode'a na'alaim ka-elu im ešar limco b-a xanut ha zot

I not know shoes like-these if (one) can to find in-the store the this

'I don't know if one can find shoes like these in the store.'

b. ani lo yode'a im na'alaim ka-elu ešar limco b-a xanut ha zot

I not know if shoes like-these (one) can to find in-the store the this

'I don't know if one can find shoes like these in the store.'

The Hebrew/English difference in the grammaticality of topics in infinitives constitutes another case of cross-linguistic variability in cartographic ordering which does not receive an explanation under feature-based relativized minimality. Topics are quite degraded in English infinitives, but perfectly acceptable in Hebrew, as the contrast below makes patently clear.

(20) a. tagid li, ata xošev et ha tered lehagiš im o axarey ha orez?

tell me you intend DOM the spinach to serve with or after the rice

'Tell me, do you intend to serve the spinach before or after the rice?'

b. ??Tell me, do you intend the spinach to serve before or after the rice?

Shlonsky & Soare (2011) argue that English infinitival clauses are truncated, in that the left peripheral projections above the one housing *wh* are simply unavailable. Hebrew, in this perspective, is less constrained than English and has a larger, perhaps complete left-periphery in infinitivals. The truncation hypothesis for English infinitives can perhaps explain the fact that whereas both *if* and *whether* are possible in finite indirect questions, only *whether* is possible in infinitives.

(21) a. John didn't know *if/whether to leave.

b. John didn't know if/whether he should leave.

Assume that *whether* can lexicalize either the same head that houses *wh* elements in its specifier or a higher head (perhaps Rizzi's (2001) Int⁰), while *if* is restricted to Int⁰. If interrogative are truncated above the *wh* projection, then it follows that topics, *if* and, as Shlonsky & Soare (2011) point out, other Int⁰-dependent material such as *why* are barred in infinitives.

(22) *I wonder why to leave

Hebrew does not have truncated infinitives so that the gamut of material that can appear in the left periphery of finite clauses can also licitly occur in nonfinite ones. Not only *im* 'if' and topics are possible, but also focused

constituents and 'why'.

(23) a. ani roce ET UGAT HA PEREG lenasot (lo et ugat ha tapuxim)

I want DOM CAKE THE POPPYSEED to try (not DOM cake the apples)

'I want to try THE POPPYSEED CAKE (not the apple cake).'

b. ani lo mevin lama la'avor dira

I not understand why to move apartment

'I don't understand why to move apartments.'

An explanation in terms of truncation must be construed as tentative. One would like to know why infinitival clauses are truncated and why languages may vary with respect to this property.

5. Concluding Remarks

Putting together the map of the Hebrew left-periphery that emerges from this preliminary investigation, we arrive at the following cartographic picture.

Since topics must precede wh - (16b), (17b) - but can co-occur both to the left and to the right of focus, (14b,c), we have

(24) a. Top Wh

b. Top Foc Top

Together, (24a,b) yield (24c),

c. Top Foc Top Wh

However, wh and focus can both precede and follow each other, (14b,c), but a topic can only precede wh, (16b), (17b). This should be taken to mean that Hebrew disposes of a focus position below wh and below the lowest topic position:

d. Top Foc Top Wh Foc

(24d) entails the prediction that a topic could precede wh which, in turn, precedes a focus but that when a focus precedes wh, a topic cannot follow it. This appears to be true:

- (25) a. et Dani eix et ha SALAT ata mitkaven lešaxn'ea le'exol?
 DOM Dani how DOM THE SALAD you intend to convince to eat
 'Dani, how do you intend to convince him to eat THE SALAD?'
- b. *et ha SALAT eix et Dani ata mitkaven lešaxn'ea le'exol?
 DOM THE SALAD how DOM Dani you intend to convince to eat
 'THE SALAD, how do you intend to convince Dani to eat?'

We have seen that topics cannot precede *im* 'if', (19). In fact, no preposed constituent can precede it, including foci and "scene-setting" adjuncts; compare (26a) and (26b).

- (26) a. ani lo yode'a im maxar hu yavo le bikur
 I not know if tomorrow he will come for visit
 'I don't know if tomorrow he'll come for a visit.'
- b. *ani lo yode'a maxar im hu yavo le bikur
 I not know tomorrow if he will come for visit

Perhaps *im* 'if' is positioned in Force or moved there?

The picture we have arrived at is tentative, not only because the database is limited and has not been sufficiently explored but also because it presents two options which other, better-studied languages have not been shown to manifest, namely, a low focus position, below *wh*, and an indirect yes/no question particle in Force. Future research will hopefully refute this picture or explain it.

Notes

- 1 The topic in (3a) is preceded by *et*, glossed as DOM (direct object marker), which obligatorily precedes definite direct objects. For discussion, see Danon (2001). *et* is absent in (1a), probably because the pronoun-resumed topic is externally merged in a dislocated position and is never probed for Case.
- 2 Haegeman cites examples from Shlonsky (2010) to illustrate that fronted arguments are not possible in Hebrew temporal clauses. Under scrutiny, however, it appears that topicalization is not excluded in this environment, provided the topic is construed as a continuing topic (termed familiarity topic in Frascarelli & Hinterhölzl (2007) and given topic in Bianchi & Frascarelli (2010)). For example, suppose we are listening to

the radio together and you make some remark about the song being played. In that context, I can felicitously utter (12h). In that example, the topic 'this song' neither signifies a change in aboutness, nor implies a contrast with some other song; it simply picks up, as it were, the given topic and adds a comment to it. The addition of the modifier 'for the first time' renders more natural the familiarity or givenness of the topic. Haegeman's cited Hebrew examples (as well as a literal translation of (11h), without the modifier in question), are naturally interpreted as aboutness topics which, as Bianchi & Frascarelli (2010) illustrate, are generally, perhaps universally, unavailable in non-reported speech acts.

- 3 The co-occurrence of *why* and its equivalents with focus, in Italian, Hungarian and other languages suggests that there is no semantic clash between focus and *wh*. Rizzi (2001) argues that *why* is externally-merged in Spec/Int so that it never actually intervenes in the formation of a chain between a fronted focus and its associated gap (see also Abels 2012). Shlonsky & Soare (2011), however, argue that *why* is moved to Spec/Int from a position below Focus.
- 4 Care must be taken to interpret the preposed constituent in (16b) and (17b) as a topic and not as a focus. Adding a focus-sensitive particle like *rak* 'only' to the preposed constituent which follows the *wh* in these examples, or stressing it, remove the ungrammaticality and reclassifies these examples as *wh* > *foc* strings, as in (14b).
- 5 Abels (2012) uses this sort of argument to show that the cartography of the Italian left periphery can, to a large degree, be explained by relativized minimality.

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