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Verbal Predicate Fronting in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish

Isaac L. Bleaman

Dept. of Linguistics, New York University, New York, NY, USA

ibleaman@nyu.edu

Abstract

This article discusses the development of verbal predicate fronting (“predicate cleft”) in Modern Hebrew by comparing its properties with those of analogous constructions in Classical Hebrew and Yiddish, a critical contact language. The evidence, largely syntactic, lends support for contact-induced change as a plausible source of verbal predicate fronting in the contemporary spoken variety.

Keywords

predicate cleft – syntactic borrowing – substrate effects – Hebrew – Yiddish

Introduction

Modern Hebrew allows for verb phrase fronting of a topic or focus.¹ In such a construction, one copy of the verbal predicate surfaces with infinitival morphology in the left periphery, while a second, tensed copy is obligatorily

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1 Many linguists (e.g., Cozier 2006) have described similar fronting constructions for topic/focus as instances of “clefting.” Following Landau’s (2006) analysis of Hebrew, and Aboh’s (2006) analysis of Gungbe and other West African languages, I will refer to this construction as “VP-fronting” or “verbal predicate fronting” rather than as predicate cleft. Abbreviations

pronounced in its canonical position lower in the clause. This is illustrated in the following example:

- (1) לקרוא, היא לא קוראת בכלל.
li-kro hi lo koret bi-xlal
 to-read she not read at-all
 'As for reading, she does not read at all.'
 (cf. Ziv 1997, ex. 2)

Although VP-fronting (with doubling) in Modern Hebrew has historical precedents, ultimately I will argue in favor of contact as the more probable source of the construction. The following discussion will first describe the syntactic properties of VP-fronting in Modern Hebrew, and then offer a comparative analysis of parallel constructions in both Classical Hebrew and Yiddish. Finally, the syntactic evidence will be supplemented with historical data from the early decades of revitalized Hebrew.

Verbal Predicate Fronting in Modern Hebrew

As Landau (2006:37) shows, Modern Hebrew permits both “phrasal-infinitive fronting” (PI-fronting), where the verb is fronted along with its internal argument, and “bare-infinitive fronting” (BI-fronting), where the verb alone undergoes fronting. In both cases, a tensed copy of the verb is also pronounced in its canonical position lower in the sentence:

- (2) לקנות את הפרחים, היא קנתה.
li-knot ?et ha-prahim, hi kanta (PI-fronting)
 to-buy ACC the-flowers she bought
 'As for buying the flowers, she bought them.'
 (Landau 2006, ex. 8a)
- (3) לקנות, היא קנתה את הפרחים.
li-knot, hi kanta ?et ha-prahim (BI-fronting)
 to-buy she bought ACC the-flowers
 'As for buying, she bought the flowers.'
 (Landau 2006, ex. 8b)

used in this article: 1, 2, 3 = person, ABS = infinitive absolute, ACC = accusative, EXPL = expletive, INF = infinitive, PRT = particle, SG = singular.

The constituent located at the left edge of the sentence is a bare VP, allowing only for a verb and its arguments and right-adjoined adjuncts:

- (4) להוריד את המים (במהירות), גיל לא תמיד מוריד.
le-horid ʔet ha-mayim (bi-mhirut), Gil lo tamid morid
 to-flush ACC the-water (in-speed) Gil not always flushes
 'As for flushing the toilet (quickly), Gil doesn't always do it.'
 (cf. Landau 2006, ex. 10a and footnote 9)

Consequently, negation (לא *lo* 'not') and sentential adverbs (e.g., תמיד *tamid* 'always'), which normally precede the verb (as in sentence [4]), cannot be fronted:

- (5) (*לא) (*תמיד) להוריד את המים, גיל מוריד.
 (**lo*) (**tamid*) *le-horid ʔet ha-mayim, Gil morid*
 (*not) (*always) to-flush ACC the-water Gil flushes
 'As for (*not) (*always) flushing the toilet, Gil does it.'
 (Landau 2006, ex. 10b)

As the translations suggest, the construction is employed typically (but not exclusively) in contrastive contexts.

With these general characteristics of VP-fronting in mind, let us turn to the question of the origins of the construction: is VP-fronting attested in older varieties of Hebrew, and if so, how does Modern Hebrew compare with such precedents?

Comparison with Classical Hebrew

Verbal predicate fronting and doubling is available in Classical Hebrew, although its form and syntactic behavior differ in important ways from VP-fronting in Modern Hebrew. Under the heading "the infinitive absolute," Gesenius's Classical Hebrew grammar (1910/1976:342) notes that when this non-finite form appears immediately before the verb, it typically "emphasize[s] . . . either the certainty (especially in the case of threats) or the forcibleness and completeness of an occurrence," as in Genesis 2:17 *mōt tāmūt* 'thou shalt surely die.'

The usage that most closely mirrors the pragmatics of VP-fronting in Modern Hebrew, however, is when the non-finite form "give[s] emphasis to an antithesis" (Gesenius 1910/1976:343), as in Genesis 2:16 *אֶל תֹּאכַל* *ʾākōl*

tō'kēl 'thou mayest freely eat, but... [see previously cited verse]'. Despite this similarity, the infinitive absolute is morphologically distinct from the canonical *l*-prefixed infinitive of both Classical and Modern Hebrew. Moreover, the fact that the non-finite verb can surface *after* the finite copy—often in narratives, *wh*-questions, imperatives, and injunctives (Harbour 2007:229–234), as in Job 37:2 *שמעו שמעו* *šim'ū šāmō'a* 'hear ye attentively'—is incompatible with the facts of Modern Hebrew and suggests that the form may in fact be a cognate object.²

Harbour (1999) presents additional facts about Classical Hebrew that contrast sharply with the properties of VP-fronting in Modern Hebrew. First, he claims that the Classical Hebrew construction involves head movement (movement of the verb alone), since there is no evidence that complements can be pied-piped along with it. This is different from Modern Hebrew, where phrasal movement is attested (as in sentence [2]). A second point of contrast concerns the possibility of mismatched verbal templates, or *binyanim*: in Classical Hebrew, the two copies of the verb must be matched for their *binyan*, unless the copy in the left periphery is in *binyan pa'al*, in which case it can co-occur with any other *binyan* later in the sentence—"without any evident difference in meaning" between the two alternants (Harbour 1999:165). The availability of mismatched *binyanim* is shown in the biblical verses below (6). Modern Hebrew, by contrast, permits no mismatched combinations of *binyanim* (Landau 2006:49).

- (6) a. *.נָסֹ֑וּ נִשְׁאֲרֵ֑ם נִשְׁאֲרֵ֑ם*
nāsō' 'eśśā' lā-hem
 carry.ABS (*pa'al*) I.will.carry (*pa'al*) to-them
 'I will utterly take them away.'
 (Hosea 1:6)

- b. *.נִשְׁאֲרֵ֑ם נִשְׁאֲרֵ֑ם*
nāsō' yīnnāsū'
 carry.ABS (*pa'al*) they.will.be.carried (*nif'al*)
 'They must be carried.'
 (Jeremiah 10:5)

2 On the infinitive absolute as the accusative of the internal object, see also Joüon (1923/1996:421–422). Harbour (1999:164–165) argues against the view that the non-finite form is a cognate noun.

Since Classical Hebrew is a VSO language, perhaps it is not surprising that arguments are not permitted to intervene between the infinitive absolute and the tensed verb. Negation (לא *lo'* 'not'), however, is permitted to intervene (Harbour 1999:163). This is a point of overlap between the two varieties of Hebrew, since in both cases negation occurs to the left of the tensed copy of the verb, but never before the fronted copy (compare sentences [7] below with [4] and [5] above), leading to the conclusion that in both cases the fronting operation targets a VP constituent not including negation.

- (7) a. והוֹרִישׁ לֹא הוֹרִישׁוּ.
wə-hōrēš' lō' hōrīš-ō
 and-drove.out.ABS not drove.out-him
 'And [Israel] did not utterly drive them out.'
 (Judges 1:28; Gesenius 1910/1976:342; Harbour 1999, ex. 8b)
- b. וְלֹא הוֹרִישׁ הוֹרִישׁוּ* (no attested examples of this type)³
 **wə-lō' hōrēš' hōrīš-ō*

While some languages (such as Gungbe; Aboh 2006:39) disallow sentential negation in instances of verbal predicate fronting and doubling, others (including Yiddish and Russian) display the very same grammaticality facts as the Classical Hebrew data in (7): that is, they permit negation before the tensed copy of the verb but not before the fronted infinitive. Consequently, this point of similarity between Classical and Modern Hebrew cannot be taken as definitive support for verbal predicate fronting as a purely language-internal development, as opposed to a contact-induced change.

The next section will highlight some of the similarities between Modern Hebrew and Yiddish in terms of the movement operations involved, lending support to one such alternative contact-based account.

Comparison with Yiddish

Both syntactically and pragmatically, verbal predicate fronting in Yiddish—a Germanic verb-second language—displays many of the same properties that have been outlined for Modern Hebrew. Consider the following alternation:

3 This prediction is assumed from Harbour's (1999) discussion. However, Gesenius (1910/1976:344) lists three apparent exceptions with negation preceding both copies of the verb.

- (8) מאַקס עסט פֿיש.
Maks es-t fish
 Max eat-3.SG⁴ fish
 'Max eats fish.'
- (9) עסן עסט מאַקס פֿיש.
es-n es-t Maks fish
 eat-INF eat-3.SG Max fish
 'As for eating, Max eats fish.'
 (Cable 2004, ex. 1a)
- (10) עסן פֿיש עסט מאַקס.
es-n fish es-t Maks
 eat-INF fish eat-3.SG Max
 'As for eating fish, Max eats them.'
 (Cable 2004, ex. 1b)

Like Modern Hebrew, but unlike Classical Hebrew, Yiddish allows for both BI-fronting (sentence [9]) and PI-fronting (sentence [10]). Yiddish, like Modern and Classical Hebrew, also bars the fronting of negation:

- (11) אָבער (*נישט) אָפּלאַכן פֿון זיך אַליין לאַכט זי נישט אָפּ.
*ober (*nisht) op-lakh-n fun zikh aleyn lakh-t*
 but (*not) off.PRT-laugh-INF from self alone laugh-3.SG
zi nisht op
 she not off.PRT
 'But as for laughing at herself—she *won't*.'
 (translation of Landau 2006, ex. 16b)

As in Modern Hebrew, the Yiddish construction is typically employed in contrastive contexts, though a simple topic reading is also possible, as in the following exchange:

4 The glosses for Yiddish will be more explicitly morpheme-by-morpheme than was the case for Hebrew. This is because agreement and other features of Yiddish verbs are marked by affixes, whereas Hebrew displays the Semitic pattern of changes within the stem, and because person and number features will be shown to undergo fronting (see example [17]).

- (12) Q: ווען פֿאַרסטו אָהיים?
ven for-st-u aheym?
 when travel-2.SG-you homeward
 ‘When are you going home?’

A: פֿאַרן פֿאַר איך ניין אַ זייגער.
for-n for ikh nayn a zeyger
 travel-INF travel.1.SG I nine o'clock
 ‘I’m leaving at nine o’clock.’

Finally, the analogous constructions in Yiddish and Modern Hebrew suggest a movement analysis rather than base-generation in the left periphery. The earliest such analysis of the Yiddish pattern comes from Davis & Prince (1986:92–93), who show that “Yiddish verb-topicalization,” as they call it, is constrained by subadjacency:

- (13) a. Extraction from complement clause (crosses single bounding node, S):

.וויסן האָסטו מיר געזאָגט אַז ער ווייסט אַ סך.
veys-n ho-st-u mir gezogt [s az er veys-t a sakh]
 know-n have-2.SG-you to.me said that he know-3.SG a lot
 ‘As for knowing, you told me that he knows a lot.’

- b. Extraction from relative clause (crosses two bounding nodes):

.ווייסן האָב איך געזען דעם יידן וואָס ווייסט אַ סך.
 **veys-n hob ikh gezen [NP dem yid-n [s vos veys-t a sakh]]*
 know-n have I seen the Jew-ACC that know-3.SG a lot
 ‘As for knowing, I saw the man that knows a lot.’

- c. Extraction from indirect question (crosses two bounding nodes):

.ווייסן האָסטו מיר געזאָגט ווער עס ווייסט אַ סך.
 **veys-n hostu mir gezogt [s ver [s es*
 know-n have-2SG-you to.me said who EXPL
veys-t a sakh]]
 know-3SG a lot
 ‘As for knowing, you told me who knows a lot.’

Landau (2006:42–44) uses a number of diagnostics to show that A'-movement gives rise to the syntactic relation between the two copies of the predicate in Modern Hebrew, as well. First, the left copy can cross a finite clause boundary

(assuming successive cyclic movement; sentence [14]), but is also sensitive to the number of bounding nodes (e.g., a complex NP island; sentence [15]).⁵

- (14) (לה) לעזור לרינה, גיל זכר שהוא הציע שהוא יעזור (לה)
 %*la-fazor le-Rina, Gil zaxar* [S *še-hu hicifa*
 to-help to-Rina Gil remembered that-he offered
še-hu yařazor (la)
 that-he will.help (to.her)
 ‘As for helping Rina, Gil remembered that he’d offered to help her.’
 (Itamar Kastner, p.c.; based on Landau 2006, ex. 21)

- (15) לעזור לרינה, גיל זכר את ההצעה שלו שהוא יעזור.
 ??*la-fazor le-Rina, Gil zaxar* [NP *?et ha-hacařa šelo*
 to-help to-Rina Gil remembered ACC the-offer his
 [S *še-hu yařazor*]
 that-he will.help
 ‘As for helping Rina, Gil remembered his offer to help her.’
 (Kastner, p.c.)

Space constraints prevent me from explicating other overlapping syntactic, prosodic, and discourse-pragmatic properties, including the possibility of fronted copular verbs but not fronted auxiliary verbs (Davis & Prince 1986:95; Landau 2006:41) and the marginal acceptability of certain pairs of non-identical lexical verbs across the sentence (Cable 2004:9; Landau 2006:47–48).

However, a discussion of VP-fronting in Yiddish would be incomplete without mentioning a noteworthy difference from the Hebrew. The fronted copy of the predicate, imprecisely glossed as ‘INF’ in most of these examples, was instead glossed as ‘stem-*n*’ in (13). In most cases, the fronted copy coincides with the canonical citation form of the infinitive (as in עסן *esn* ‘to eat’ in sentence [9]); however, when an irregular tensed verb is fronted, what appears is neither the true infinitive nor an exact copy of the clause-internal verb, but rather a copy of the stem with the infinitival *-n* suffix. For this reason, earlier analyses have referred to the fronted constituent as a “pseudoinfinitive” (term from Mark 1978; later in Waletzky 1980):

5 The percent symbol indicates that informants differ on their acceptability judgments. The double question marks indicate that informants uniformly consider the example to be degraded.

- (16) ווייסן/וויסן*/ווייסט ווייסט ער גארנישט.
*veys-n/*visn/*veys-t veys-t er gornisht*
 know-n/*know.INF/*know-3.SG know-3.SG he nothing
 ‘As for knowing, he knows nothing.’
 (Davis & Prince 1986, ex. 3b)

Indeed, some of the fronted “pseudoinfinitives” are lexical items found nowhere else in Yiddish, e.g., *binen* and *izn* in the following examples, whose stems bear the person and number features of the tensed verb:

- (17) a. בינען/זײַן בײַן אײך אין אַמעריקע.
*bin-en/*zayn bin ikh in Amerike*
 am-n/*be.INF am.1.SG I in America
 ‘As for being, I am in America.’
 (cf. Davis & Prince 1986, ex. 17b)

- b. אײזן/זײַן אײז ער אַ טשודאַק.
*iz-n/*zayn iz er a tshudak*
 is-n/*be.INF is.3.SG he a oddball
 ‘As for being, he is an oddball.’

The Yiddish “pseudoinfinitive,” which is a morphological puzzle in its own right,⁶ can be contrasted with the simple infinitive-fronting strategy employed in Modern Hebrew. The difference between the two languages may derive from how they instantiate the spell-out of default (non-finite) tense features (one as stem+*n*, the other as infinitive). In any case, given the other overlapping properties, this point does not diminish the possibility that Yiddish provided a critical model upon which VP-fronting in Modern Hebrew was based.

Attestation in Early Modern Hebrew

The discussion presented thus far has highlighted the syntactic parallels between VP-fronting in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as the differences between Modern and Classical Hebrew. However, given that the “revernacularization” of Modern Hebrew was initiated by a learned Jewish elite (Spolsky

6 Why the Yiddish predicate is fronted along with the phi-features of the lower copy (as in example [17]) is beyond the scope of this survey article; see Cable 2003 for one proposal.

2014), a natural question that arises is why the so-called “infinitive absolute” was not successfully revived. In fact, early fictional texts demonstrate that the older non-finite form was dominant in written narratives (sentence [18]), as well as in the contrastive contexts where VP-fronting might be used today (sentence [19]):⁷

- (18) הלוך הלכתי לפנות ערב בין הבכאים, וארא שם אשה מכוסה בצעיף.
halox halaxti li-fnot ferev beyn ha-bxaim,
 walk.ABS I.walked at-turn evening between the-mulberries
ve-?ere šam ?iša mexusa be-ca?if
 and-saw there woman covered in-shawl
 ‘I walked in the late evening among the mulberry trees, and there I saw a woman covered in a shawl.’
 (Mapu 1853, ch. 16)

- (19) ואין איש יודע דבר על-אודותיו, ורק שמוע נשמע, כי הפולנים כבדו אותו מאד.
ve-?eyn ?ish yode?a davar ?al-?odotav, ve-rak šamo?a
 and-there.isn't man knows thing about-him and-only hear.ABS
nišma?, ki ha-polanim kibdu ?oto me?od
 was.heard that the-Poles respected him very
 ‘And there isn’t anybody who knows anything about him. It was only heard that the Poles respected him greatly.’
 (Frishman 1881)

The precise moment when the fronting of VPs (headed by infinitives) began to supplant the Classical v-fronting paradigm is difficult to reconstruct. Considering the dearth of examples in any early written prose, it is likely that VP-fronting entered the language through speech, and was thus less susceptible to conscious correction. It is clear that by 1929, when Avigdor Hameiri penned *בין שיני האדם* *beyn shiney haadam* [*Between the Teeth of Man*], the modern pattern of infinitive-fronting had already entered Hebrew prose and varied alongside the Classical pattern:

- (20) נתתי לו לשתות עוד ועוד, אך לאכול לא אכל כלום, ועד היום הזה אינו אוכל כלום.
nata?i lo li-štot ?od va-?od, ?ax le-?exol lo ?axal
 I.gave to.him to-drink more and-more yet to-eat not he.ate

7 See Ziv (1997) for a more in-depth treatment of the discourse functions of the Modern Hebrew construction.

klum, ve-šad ha-yom ha-ze ʔeyno ʔoxel klum
 nothing and-until the-day the-this he.not eats nothing
 ‘I gave him more and more to drink, but as for eating, he didn’t eat any-
 thing, and even to this day he still eats nothing.’
 (Hameiri 1929, ch. 26)

The fact that the infinitive absolute forms are morphologically distinct and used in limited, often highly stylized or liturgical contexts (Krohn 2011:229) may have accelerated their decline.

Today, the change has proceeded to completion, such that it is relatively easy to find examples of VP-fronting in colloquial Hebrew (sentence [21]; note the number of arguments) but difficult to find any idiomatic use of the infinitive absolute.

- (21) הריכל בר דעת מבין שלחבב את היהדות האורתודוקסית על הציבור הרחב, זה לא יחבב.
harey kol bar-dašat mevin še-le-ħabev ʔet
 indeed every one.with-sense understands that-to-make.fond ACC
ha-yahadut ha-ʔortodoksit šal ha-cibur ha-raħav, ze
 the-Judaism the-Orthodox on the-public the-wide, it
lo yeħabev
 no will.make.fond
 ‘Why, anyone with any sense understands that the last thing this would
 do is make the general public fond of Orthodox Judaism.’
 (Persico 2011)

Conclusion

It would be premature to identify syntactic borrowing from Yiddish as the lone source of verbal predicate fronting in contemporary vernacular Hebrew. First, it is important to mention that a number of other contact languages (including Russian) also allow for the fronting of infinitives and the spell-out of multiple copies; I chose Yiddish as the focus of this article because of its singular status as the mother tongue of most Hebrew revitalizers and Jewish immigrants from a variety of Eastern European locales (Spolsky 2014). Contact with other VP-fronting languages could plausibly have reinforced the use of the construction in Modern Hebrew. Second, because VP-fronting is attested in a number of languages that clearly played no role in the development of Modern Hebrew (e.g., Brazilian Portuguese and Gungbe), it is impossible to rule out an explanation rooted in linguistic universals: e.g., that the first generation of

native Hebrew speakers needed some way of topicalizing or focalizing verbal predicates, and this cross-linguistically common strategy emerged organically. Again, this could have reinforced the reliance on models from critical contact languages such as Yiddish. Ultimately, the syntactic evidence presented above, combined with the socio-historical reality of Yiddish-Hebrew contact, substantiates an account that invokes syntactic borrowing.

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Isaac L. Bleaman

is a doctoral student in the Department of Linguistics at New York University. His current research focuses on sociolinguistic variation in contemporary spoken Yiddish.