Syntax and Information Structure: The case for Unipartite clauses
A View from Spoken Israeli Hebrew

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The canonical view of clause (or sentence) requires that it include predication (e.g., Biber et al. 1999: §3.2). Utterances that do not fit into this view because they lack a subject, when not excluded from the syntactic analysis altogether (cf., e.g., Carter and McCarthy 2006: 490), are usually regarded as if a virtual subject is represented in the clause as a zero component or as if an allegedly missing subject has gone through a process of ellipsis. This perception goes back at least to Apollonius Dyscolus (Lallot 1997: 373; see, among many others, Benayoun 2003; Spenader and Hendriks 2005; Winkler 2006). However, this type of structure is so frequent among the world’s languages (Givón 1983) that one wonders whether clauses without subjects are indeed to be viewed as elliptical. The study of spoken languages intensifies this perplexity to a point where some basic notions of grammar may be questioned.

Adopting a framework of an integrative approach to the structure of spoken language that includes prosody, information structure and syntax, I try to look at clause structure rather differently. Whereas the originally-Aristotelian concept that a subject is a necessary component in language, and specifically in a clause, a conception that arose from ontological and logical needs, I do not see predication as a necessary structural element in a clause, suggesting that the only necessary and sufficient component comprising a clause is a predicate. The clause will thus be defined as a unit consisting minimally of a predicate. A predicate can be either nuclear or extended; in other words, it can consist of either a single element (phrase, word or part of a word) or be seen as a domain. The predicate (or the predicate domain) will be viewed as the component that carries the informational load of the clause within the discourse context, which by default will be a newly introduced element. Also, and no less significantly, the predicate (or the predicate domain) is the component that carries the modality of the clause (cf. Lefevre 1999: ch.1), where modality is viewed in a broad perspective.

Two main classes of clauses have been identified: (1) Unipartite, consisting of only a (nuclear or extended) predicate; (2) Bipartite, where a clause consists – in its minimal manifestation – of a predicate and a subject (Izre’el 2012).

In my presentation, I will look at unipartite clauses, being the minimal disposition of a clause, i.e., one that consists of only a predicate domain, where a subject does not form part of the clause. A broad classification of unipartite clauses in spoken Israeli Hebrew will also be presented, based on anchoring points within a discourse context (intra- or extra-linguistic) and types of anchors.

The research has been based on data taken from The Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew (CoSIH), a corpus of spontaneous Hebrew conversations, segmented into prosodic modules (aka intonation units), transcribed in its bulk in Hebrew orthography and annotated for (functionally perceived) final boundary tones. See the attached textual samples.

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Textual samples

In the following two samples, quite typical for Hebrew casual talk, none of the units conforms to the common view of clause (or sentence) as a unit consisting of both subject and predicate.

Transcription is broad phonetic with some morphophonological input. Segmentation is into information modules (IMs; aka intonation units). Transcription notation: each IM is transcribed in a separate line; final tones: || major, | minor, / appeal (cf. Izre’el 2002, following in essence Du Bois et al. 1992).

(1) Planning a weekend in a hotel (OCD2_sp2_057-061; sp1_026-030)

sp2: mɔʁʃ1 ||
Morush

sp1: mɔʁtek ||
what sweetie

sp2: aɔbaa jəmɪm |
four days

ʃva mət jɛkel le=zʌg ||
seven hundreds shekel to=couple

sp1: bli kɛʃɛf ||
without money

sp2: nəxɔn /
right

sp1: eʃɔ /
where

sp2: bɛ=holideɪn ha = ɛdəf ||
in=Holiday_Inn the=new

sp1: daj ||
enough

(2) Speaking of Mongolian horses (OCh_sp2_091; sp1_086-088)

sp2: sus mamaf /
horse real

sp1: sus sus |
horse horse

wak jɔtɔɛ namuʃ ||
only more short

raglam mɛktʃɔr kælɛ ||
legs shortened sort_of

sp2: saʁɛm kɛʃɛf ||
but shorter.

sp1: daj ||
enough

References:


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1 Personal names (in this case, a nickname) have been changed or eliminated in CoSIH for privacy.
2 The basic monitory unit of Israel.