A Different Type of Cleft.

Cleft constructions in many of the world’s languages are made of four elements: a pronoun, a verbal copula, a focused constituent and a CP as in (1). This study compares the cleft construction in (1) with the Hebrew cleft in (2) and defends the claim that the introducing pronominal (henceforth: IP) of the construction in (2) is a pronominal copula rather than a pronoun in subject position as in (1).

(1) It was John who ran away.
[It] + [was] + [John] + [who ran away]
[pronoun] + [copula] + [focused constituent] + [CP]

(2) ze (haya) dani Se barax.
ze was dani that ran-away
‘It was Dani who ran away.’
[ze] + [haya] + [dani] + [Se barax]
[pronominal copula] + [(verbal copula)] + [focused constituent] + [CP]

One challenge for such an analysis is accounting for the verbal element that may optionally follow the IP: haya, ‘was’ in (2). This verbal element plays the role of a copula in other Hebrew constructions and so assuming that the IP is a subject pronoun follows naturally. However, I argue that the IP does not show the typical behavior of neither pronouns nor subjects. Rather, it shows some resemblance to the Hebrew pronominal copula PronZ, while the verbal element that optionally follows it, diverges from the typical behavior of Hebrew copulas.

Several competing analyses of clefts are found in the literature. According to one approach (e.g. É. Kiss 1998) the pronoun is located in subject position and both the pronoun and the copula are expletives. The focused constituent moves from the CP to a designated focus phrase which heads the CP. An alternative approach to clefts assumes that the copula holds the relation between a pronoun in subject position and the focused constituent. This subject pronoun is either a pronominal antecedent of an extraposed relative clause, (e.g. Percus 1997) or a referential pronoun while the CP is a modifier of the focused constituent (e.g. Reeve 2010) or a sentential adjunct (e.g. Spector 2012). The roles and labels each analysis assigns to the different elements vary, but all consider the introducing element a pronoun in subject position: an expletive, a referential or a relative clause (RC) antecedent.

However, the IP in (2) fails to show the prototypical behavior of Hebrew pronouns, whether expletives, referentials or RC antecedents. Unlike expletive pronouns, it can inflect for gender and number (Spector 2012): zot dana Se-baraxa, ‘thisFM danaFM that ran away’. Unlike referentials, it cannot be modified: *ze, Se axSav ani lo sovel oto, et dana Se hu ra’a, lo et mixal, ‘this that now I NEG tolerate him OM dana that he saw NEG OM mixal’ and unlike an antecedent of a RC, it does not form an agreement relation with the verb in the CP. Instead, the verb in the CP agrees with the focused constituent: ze atem Se-baraxtem/*barax ‘this3rd.sg you2nd.pl that ran2nd/pl/3rd.sg away’. Further, it cannot interchange with other RC antecedents: *ha-exad dani Se-barax ‘the one dani that ran away’ and if it heads the extraposed CP, the entire construction is a zero copula sentence with two referring expressions. This contradicts Doron’s (1983) observation that a copula is obligatory in identity sentences. I conclude that the IP in (2) is not a pronoun of any kind.

In addition, the IP in (2) does not show the typical behavior of subjects. The verbal element that follows the IP does not agree with it, but rather with the focused constituent. This is an unexpected agreement relation if the IP is the subject: ze hayita/??haya ata Se baraxta, ‘this3rd was2nd/3rd you2nd that ran away’. Further, the IP in (2) does not control PRO: ze ata, Se baraxta kedey Se PRO, lo tictarex/*tictarex lehasbir et acmexa/*acmo, ‘this3rd you2nd that ran away so that NEG will-need2nd/3rd to-explain yourself2nd/3rd’. It also
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does not show the typical Hebrew word order with relation to the negation particle eyn. Inflected eyn cannot

co-occur with the pronominal copula: *dani hu/ze eyno mar yosef, ‘dani he/this NEG mar yosef” (Rothstein 2001) and can follow pronominal subjects: ze eyno dani, ‘this NEG dani’. In clefts inflected eyn is banned suggesting that the IP in (2) is not a subject and at the same time that it may be a copula: *ze eyno dani Se babarx, ‘this NEG dani that ran away’. I conclude that the IP in (2) is neither a pronoun nor a subject.

Several pieces of evidence provide support to the claim that the IP in (2) is the pronominal copula known as PrONZ. For example, PrONZ can either agree with the element to its right or show up in its default form (Sichel 1997, Heller 2002) and only the default form is licensed with the object marker et (Heller 2002).

The IP in (2) shows the same agreement pattern: ze/zot dana Se ixara, ‘thisSG/PL dana that was-late”; ze/*zot et dana Se ra’iti, ‘thisSG/PL OM dana that I saw’. Further, PrONZ does not usually agree for number. When the element to its right is a plural noun, the neuter form is generally preferred: ma Se ani ohev ze?ele ug ot,

‘what that I likeSGSGPL cakesPL’. The same is true for the IP in (2): ze/?ele uguot Se ani ohev (not ugiyot), ‘thisSGSGPL cakesPL that I like (not cookies)’. I conclude that the IP is not a subject pronoun but rather the pronominal copula PrONZ.

If the IP is a pronominal copula, the verbal element that follows it remains unexplained. First, the verbal copula in (1) is not optional and so the optionality of the verbal element in (2) could suggest that its role is not copular. Spector (2012) suggests that this is an instantiation of Hebrew zero copula construction. However, in (2) the copula is optional in all three tenses while other Hebrew constructions allow zero copulas only in the present tense: dani (hu)/*(haya) moreh, ‘dani is/ was a teacher’. Second, such verbal elements follow pronominal copulas in other past tense Hebrew constructions with CP subjects with which a verbal copula cannot agree: pa’am linso’a le-amerika ?haya/?hayta/[zot hayta] harpatka’a, ‘once going to America was an adventure’ (cf. the present tense ‘linsoa le-amerika zot harpatka’a from Hazout 1994). It is also found in other languages such as Polish: Jan to jest moj najlepszy, ‘Jan this is my friend’ (Citko 2008). Third, languages like Haitian Creole and Saramaccan have only pronominal copulas in their inventory. When a copular sentence is uttered in a non-present tense an unbound tense morpheme follows the pronominal copula: Jan se te zanmi mwen ‘John is [past] my friend’ (Déprez 2012). This fact could suggest that in Hebrew haya is added when tense must be conveyed in an otherwise pronominal copula construction. The pronominal copula is required since a verbal copula is unable to agree with a CP subject. Since pronominal copulas cannot mark tense the verbal element is added to carry tense.

This construction is not Hebrew-specific. In Cape Verdean Creole a pronominal copula e which was derived from the 3rd person singular pronoun el ‘he’ is used: Joao e mao, ‘Jao is evil’ (Baptista, 1999). In clefts e, ‘is’ is used rather than el, ‘he’: e mi k’el odja, ‘It is me that-he saw’ (Baptista 1999). Shi of Mandarin Chinese (MC) was derived from a demonstrative pronoun in Old Chinese (Li & Thomspson 1977). In MC the demonstrative function of shi is lost and a new pronoun, zhe, is used (van-Gelder 2009). The IP of MC clefts is shi rather than zhe, suggesting that languages with pronominal copulas introduce clefts with the pronominal copula rather than a subject pronoun.

Selected References:


