

## The Predicate Phrase Structure in Spoken Israeli Hebrew

### Aims

In the linguistic literature the sentence<sup>1</sup> is usually defined as one of the following: a unit that consists of both subject and predicate phrases (Matthews 2007: 15-16), or a unit that consists of a (verbal) predicate with its core arguments, optionally accompanied by additional adjuncts (van Valin & Lapolla 1997: 25, Helasvuo 2001: 21). What these definitions have in common is the following assumption: the sentence should exhibit a bipartite structure (both a subject and a predicate phrase) with overt expression of core arguments required by the predicate. However, many functionally complete units in spoken language seem to defy this assumption, as they do not exhibit a bipartite structure and consist of only a rhematic phrase, with no overt subject (Izre'el 2005, cf. Cresti 2014: § 2.1).

One way to approach these findings is to hypothesize an underlying “full clause”, from which the “semi-clause” is derived through the process of ellipsis. However, several scholars have argued against reconstructing missing arguments through contextual information. Moneglia & Cresti (2006: 101-102), for example, have claimed that reconstruction of missing elements is highly speculative and is not supported by empirical evidence. Similarly, Hopper (2011: 36) and Lee et al. (2009: 106) claim that full clauses with overt arguments are perhaps better seen as secondary and expanded forms, rather than primary and basic.

Another approach is to reassess existing notions of the sentence in order to be able to account for the natural data from spontaneous language. This approach has been adopted by Izre'el (2012: 220), who proposed the sentence be redefined as a unit consisting minimally of a predicate, being the rhematic element, usually carrying the focus, and the one which carries the modality of the sentence. Thus, the sentence is defined internally using discursive and pragmatic cues. Furthermore, the utterance is the default domain of the sentence, and thus a major prosodic boundary, which delimits the utterance, also indicates the end of a sentence and the beginning of a new sentence in the following utterance (Izre'el forthcoming). Accordingly, two main classes of sentences can be

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<sup>1</sup> The term "sentence" is used here as the reference unit of syntax, and therefore is equivalent to the term "clause", as it may be used in other approaches.

discerned: (1) unipartite, consisting of a predicate phrase only, (2) bipartite, consisting of a predicate phrase and a subject.

In this framework, I will try to characterize the predicate phrase in Spoken Israeli Hebrew, in terms of its interface with prosodic groups (henceforth: PG, aka "intonation units"). In other words, I will examine the distribution of the predicate phrase over PGs, focusing on cases where the predicate phrase is distributed over more than one PG, i.e. within the domain of a single utterance. In addition, as the predicate phrase consists of a head that may or may not be accompanied by additional elements, I will ask the following questions: (1) What word types occupy the head position? (2) Which element in the predicate phrase is prosodically prominent, and can it be functionally motivated?

## Methodology

This presentation is based on a pilot study of two conversations taken from The Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew (*CoSIH*). The conversations were first segmented into utterances and PGs, and then into sentences. Each predicate phrase was then marked for the following features: (1) the word type of the head; (2) the position of prosodic prominence; (3) the number of PGs over which the predicate phrase is distributed; (4) the syntactic pattern of distribution over more than one PG.

## Results

First, it has been found that most of the predicate phrases are distributed over a single PG (92%), while the remaining 8% are distributed over: 2 PGs (5%), 3 PGs (2%) and 6 PGs (1%). In these cases, the minor prosodic boundary divides the predicate phrase into the following patterns: head/complement(s) and initial adjunct/predicate phrase. These findings suggest that there is a strong tendency for the predicate phrase to be realized in a single PG. Further research will attempt to characterize the contexts that exhibit deviation from this tendency and establish whether certain types of complements tend to be separated from the predicate head by a minor prosodic boundary.

Secondly, the position of the head can be occupied by all word types, with varying frequencies: suffix-conjugated verbs<sup>2</sup> (35%), substantives (13%), participles (13%), formulaic expressions (6%), prepositional phrases (5%), adjectives (5%), polarity words (5%), prefix-

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that the predicate component is only a part of the Hebrew verb, which is a morphological complex that consists of two components, a subject and a predicate, and holds the nexus between them.

conjugated verbs (4%), and adverbials (4%).<sup>3</sup> These findings emphasize the need for probabilistic description of the “predicate head” category.

Thirdly, most of the predicate phrases (61/77) include elements that are focused by prosodic prominence: head (56%), final adjunct (11%), head plus complement (10%), direct object (7%), initial adjunct (7%) and modifier (7%).<sup>4</sup> Prosodic prominence of elements other than the head has been found in cases where that element has high informational value (conveys the focal information, usually new), whereas the head has low informational value (given, low-content or underspecified without a complement). The position of the prominence tends to be final, with the exception of initial thematic elements, such as adjuncts, whose thematic status may be indicated by prominence.

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<sup>3</sup> The remaining 10% include infinitives, numerals, interrogatives and imperatives.

<sup>4</sup> The remaining 2% include procedural elements.

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