

Psych-verbs and Subjecthood in Modern Hebrew

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Keenan's (1976) decompositional approach to the category of subject opened up the way to a more nuanced conceptualization of syntactic relations. Subjecthood is viewed as a gradient category, where subjects of some clauses can be more subject-like than subjects of other clauses. Moreover, the entire *basket-of-properties*, to use Givón's (2001) term, does not need to be associated with only one argument.

One domain which often challenges the division between subject and object is the domain of psychological verbs. Psych-verbs are known to exhibit inconsistent syntax–semantics mapping, both within and across languages. Some verbs map the experiencer onto the subject and the stimulus onto the object, while others follow the reverse pattern. Regardless of the mapping, experiencers are necessarily human (or, at least, sentient) and typically more prominent than the stimuli. Consequently the experiencer–object mapping often produces a marked syntax–semantics–pragmatics correspondence, where the semantically and pragmatically prominent argument is not realized as subject.

Languages provide different mechanisms for dealing with such misalignments. One solution involves lexical pairs such as the English pair *fear/frighten*, which can be used to describe the same event, each from a different perspective (but not necessarily with identical semantics). Passivization is another solution. When a passive form of an experiencer-object predicate is available it can be used to promote the experiencer to subject (see Engelberg (to appear) for a corpus study of German psych-verbs). Nevertheless, for psych-verbs the passive option is notably limited Landau (2010). A different solution is found in Icelandic, where one class of predicates alternate between two argument structures – Dat-Nom and Nom-Dat – depending on whether the dative experiencer or nominative stimulus is foregrounded. Crucially, when dative experiencers are foregrounded the nominative arguments behave like objects in all respects except case and agreement (Barðdal et al., 2014).

From a diachronic perspective dative experiencers are one construction which is especially susceptible to language change in many of the world's languages (Seržant & Kulikov, 2013). Cole et al. (1980) propose a 3-stage process whereby arguments which begin as non-subjects (Stage A) subsequently acquire subject behavior properties (Stage B) and ultimately acquire all subject properties, including nominative case (Stage C). Dative subjects in Icelandic reflects Stage B as they exhibit the entire range of subject properties, with the exception of the morphosyntactic coding properties of case and agreement.

In this paper I focus on psych-verbs in Modern Hebrew, and more specifically, on dative–experiencer verbs which do not have near-synonymous subject–experiencer counterparts, and which do not passivize. In light of the different mechanisms described above and the proposed diachronic process, I examine the usage patterns of such verbs in Modern Hebrew and their syntactic relations. For this purpose I use corpus data retrieved from *heTenTen 2014*, a 1.1-billion-token Hebrew corpus (Baroni et al., 2009). To this data I apply a relevant subset of Keenan's subject behavior tests.

The data reveal variation with regards to the subject coding properties of the subject–stimulus. While the unmarked word order in Modern Hebrew is SVO, there is a clear preference for psych-verbs to appear in an inverted VOS order, with the nominative stimulus argument losing its subject position property. For some verbs, such as *hitxašeq* ('feel like'), only marked VOS clauses were found. Furthermore, in colloquial speech agreement marking on the verb in VOS clauses was found to be inconsistent, with attestations of both agreeing and impersonal verbs. Finally, with some verbs, the stimulus argument was found to be marked with accusative case.

The study shows that the mechanism that Modern Hebrew speakers employ in order to reconcile the marked syntax–semantics–pragmatics alignment in the case of object–experiencer verbs targets the stimulus argument. Instead of promoting the experiencer argument to a canonical subject by way of passivization or to a non-canonical subject, as is the case in Icelandic, Hebrew demotes the stimulus by stripping it of its coding properties, namely position, case, and agreement, thus resulting in a subjectless construction.

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