Biblical Hebrew who will understand?

Methodological reflections on identifying topic and focus in a dead language

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The ambiguity of written texts

Trump: Én győztem

<u>January 2, 2019</u>

Donald Trump: "I won   "

The ambiguity of written texts

Romney: Trump alkalmatlan, fajgyűlölő, szexista, migránsellenes, tisztességtelen

Trump: Én győztem

<u>January 2, 2019</u>

Mitt Romney: "I will speak out against significant statements or actions that are divisive, racist, sexist, anti-immigrant, dishonest or destructive to democratic institutions"

Donald Trump: "I won big, and he didn't"

The ambiguity of written texts

Trump hits back at Romney: 'I won big, and he didn't'

By **ELI OKUN** | 01/02/2019 08:28 AM EST | Updated 01/02/2019 01:33 PM EST

January 2, 2019

Donald Trump: I won big [in 2016], and he didn't [in 2012].

The ambiguity of written texts

WHITE HOUSE
Trump hits back at Romney: 'I won big, and he didn't'

By **ELI OKUN** | 01/02/2019 08:28 AM EST | Updated 01/02/2019 01:33 PM EST

	verb in focus	subject in focus	subject in topic
én nyertem	*én NYERtem*	*ÉN nyertem*	*én – NYERtem*
I won	I won (and didn't lose)	I won (and not you)	(as for me) I won

Topic vs. focus vs. none

- Truth conditions:
  - Focus: different truth condition
  - Topic: no change in truth condition

- Presence vs. absence of topic / focus markers
  - lexical items   (cf. Japanese *wa* topic marker, Akan *na/ne* focus marker)
  - word order   (cf. Hungarian)
  - syntactic constructions (cf. cleft sentences in English)
  - prosody
  - …

Topic and focus in a dead language

Components of the problem:

1. Lack of a recognizable topic or focus marker or construction

   - No marker in the language?

   - Maybe there is a marker that does not appear in writing, such as prosody.

   - Topic or focus marking strategy not yet discovered.

2. Topic and focus are concepts unknown to traditional philologists
   + most of them not familiar with topic/focus prominent languages.

Topic and focus in a dead language

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text

meaning

context

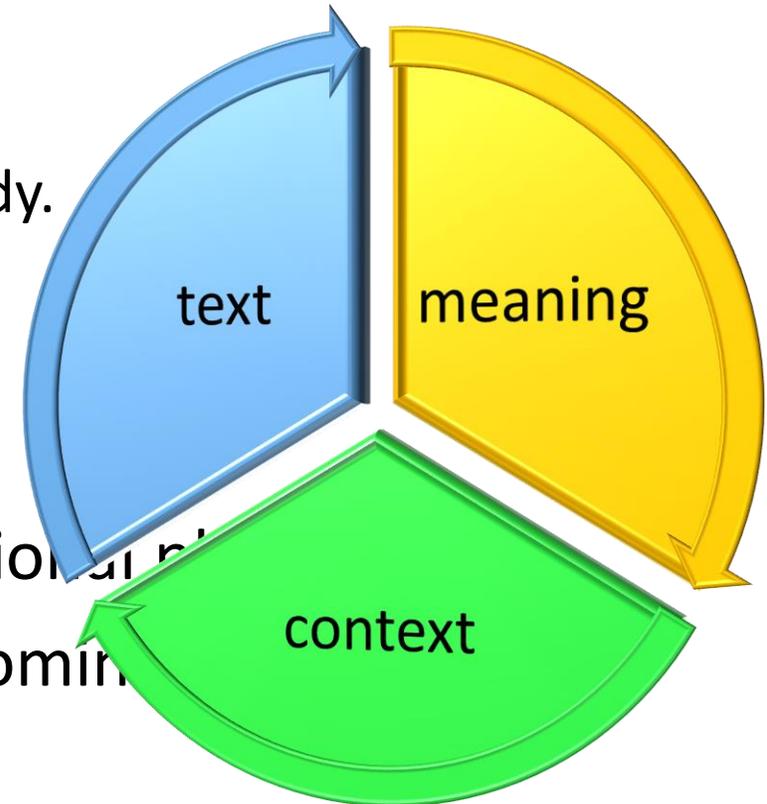# Topic and focus in a dead language

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   describe grammar

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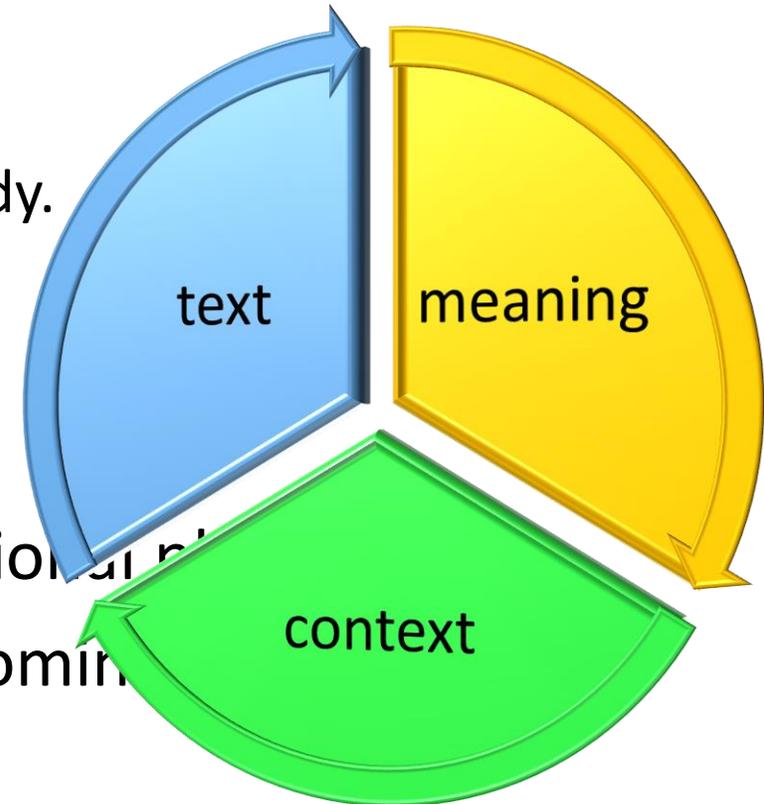
Biblical Hebrew

- No lexical topic or focus marker

- No construction known (thus far)

- Prosody not preserved

- Word order: VSO

  Any deviation therefrom is an aspirant for topicalization or focussing:

  - VOS

  - SVO, OVS

The ambiguity of written texts

(1)   a.   *YHWH*   *hū*   *hā'ĕlō hîm*   (1Kings 18:39)

               Lord   he   the.God

              'the Lord indeed is God'   (NRSV)

Neutral and topic interpretation: 'The Lord is God
                                         (and possibly other deities as well)'

Focus interpretation: 'The Lord is God, and no else'

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Neut

Focus

Context: the prophet Elijah competing with 450 prophets (priests) of the Canaanite deity Baal and 450 prophets (priests) of the Canaanite goddess Asherah, in front of all the Israelites. Elijah asked them: "*How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.*"

Then Elijah performed various miracles. 'When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God."'

'the Lord indeed is God'   (NRSV)

Neutral and topic interpretation: 'The Lord is God
                                                      (and possibly other deities as well)'

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(1) c. *ʾim   YHWH   hāʾĕlōhîm   ləḵū   ʾaḥărāw*
    if   Lord   the.God   go.IMPERAT.2.MASC.PL   after.him

    wəʾim   habbaʿal   ləḵū   ʾaḥărāw (1Kgs 18:21)
    and.if   the.Baal   go.IMPERAT.2.MASC.PL   after.him

    'If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him'   (NRSV)

no copula!
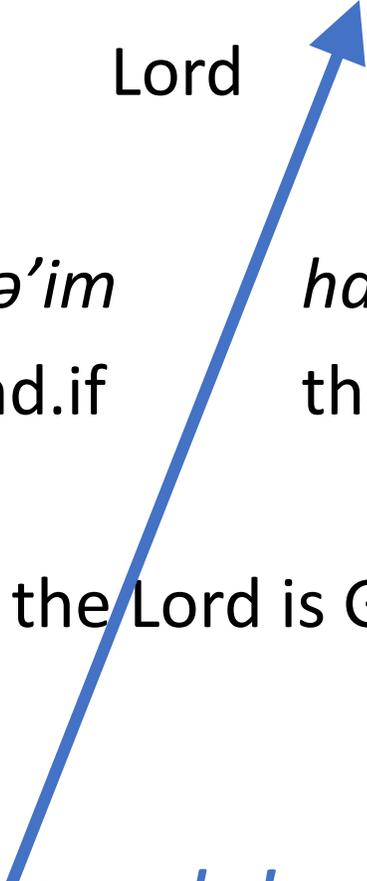
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Neutral an

*I am going to argue that this construction
with a resumptive pronoun is a focus construction!*

Focus interpretation: 'The Lord is God, and no else'

Biblical Hebrew basic word order is VSO

(2) a. *wayyiqqaḥ*   *'aḇrāhām*   *'eṯ*   *'ăṣê*   *hā'ōlāh*   (Gen 22:6)

      and.take.IMPERF.3.SG.MASC   Abraham   ACC   wood the.burnt.offering

      'Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering (...)'   (NRSV)

    b. *wayyaškêm*   *'aḇrāhām*   *babbōqer*

      and.rise.IMPERF.3.SG.MASC   Abraham   in.the.morning

      wayyaḥăḇōš   *'eṯ*   *ḥămōrōw*   (Gen 22:3)

      and.saddle.IMPERF.3.SG.MASC   (PRO)   ACC   donkey.his

      'So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey (...)'   (NRSV)

Scrambling in the middle field

(3) a. *'ăšer* *'āmar* *lōw* *hā'ĕlōhîm* (Gen 22:3)
which say.PERF.3.SG.MASC to.him the.God
(and set out and went to the place in the distance)
'that God had shown him' (NRSV)

VSO → VOS

- Bandstra 1986: when O is known, and S is unknown

- Rather related to weight? Pronouns and lighter NPs before heavier NPs.

Vorfeld: *topic – focus – V S O*

(4)   a.   *wǝhanniš'ārîm*   *herāh nāsū*   (Gen 14:10)

        and.the.rest   to.hill fled

        [...the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them,]

        'and the rest fled to the hill country.'   (NRSV)

    b.   *'êšet*   *ḥayil* *mî*   *yimṣā*   (Prov 31:10a)

        woman   valour who   find.IMPF.3.SING.MASC

        'A capable wife who can find?' (...)   (NRSV)

        (note the Wh-word in the focus position)

Topicalization

(5) a. *wəhā'ĕlōhîm,* *nissāh* *'eṯ* *'aḇrāhām* (Gen 22:1a)

 and.the.GOD test.IMPERF.3.SG.MASC ACC Abraham

 '(...) God tested Abraham (...)' (NRSV)

 b. *šəḇū* *lāḵem* *pōh* *'im* *haḥămōwr*

 return.IMPERAT.2.PL.MASC to.you here with the.donkey

 wa'ănî *wəhanna'ar* *nêləḵāh* *'aḏ* *kōh* (Gen 22:5)

 and.I and.the.boy go.IMPERF.1.SG until there

 (Then Abraham said to his young men,) 'Stay here with the donkey;
 the boy and I will go over there (...)' (NRSV)

Ambiguity

(6) a. *baḵōr*   *bāneḵā*   *titten*   *lî*   (Exod 22:28)

firstborn   sons.your   give.IMPF.2.SING.MASC   to.me

'The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.'   (NRSV)

Topic or focus?   Refer to history of religion and source criticism!

• Iron age reader: "to me [and not to Moloch]"   → *firstborn* is   topic

• Persian age P reader: "the first son is to be redeemed, not the rest"   → focus

Full NP – pronoun – V : a focus construction?

(7) a.   *ʾiššāh*   *yirʾaṯ*   *YHWH*   *hî*   *ṯiṯhallāl*   (Prov 31:30b)

        woman   fearing.FEM   LORD   she   is.praised.IMPF.3.SING.FEM

       [Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,]

       'but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised'   (NRSV)

Full NP – pronoun – V : a focus construction?

(7) b. *hā'iššāh*   *'ăšer*   *nāṯattāh*   *'immāḏî*

the.woman who   give.PERF.2.SING.MASC with.SING.1

hî *nāṯənāh*   *lî*   *min*   *hā'ēṣ*   *wā'ōḵêl*   (Gen 3:12b)

she give.PERF.3.SING.FEM   to.me   from   the.tree and.eat.IMPF.1.SING

'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' (NRSV)

Full NP – pronoun – V : a focus construction?

(7) c. *'êṯ*   *kol*   *haddāḇār*   *'ăšer*   *'ānōḵî*   *maṣawweh 'eṯkem*

     ACC   all   the.thing   which   I   commend   you.PLUR.MASC.ACC

     'ōṯō   *ṯišmərū*   *la'ăśōṯ*   (Deut 13:1a)

     he/it.ACC   keep.IMPF.2.PLUR.MASC   do.INFINITIVE

'You must diligently observe everything that I command you'

[do not add to it or take anything from it.]   (NRSV)

Summary

(1)   a.   *YHWH*   **_hū_**   *hā'ĕlōhîm*   (1Kings 18:39)

        Lord   **he**   the.God

        'the Lord indeed is God'   (NRSV)

I have argued that this construction with a resumptive pronoun is a focus construction!

Focus interpretation: 'The Lord is God, and no else'

Thank you for your attention!