Predicate clefts in Yiddish

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1 Introduction

This paper deals with so-called ‘predicate cleft’ constructions in Korean and Yiddish. In Predicate Clefts a verb or a VP is located in the left periphery of a sentence and a copy of this verbal expression is in the base position. (1) provides examples with a verb fronted:

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. Essen est Maks fish. \\
\hspace{2em} eat eats Maks fish \\
\hspace{2em} ‘As for eating, Maks eats fish.’

\item b. Mek-ki-nun Mimi-ka sakwa-lul mek-ess-ta \\
\hspace{2em} eat-nmlz-top Mimi-nom apple-acc eat-pst-decl \\
\hspace{2em} ‘As for eating, Mimi ate an apple.’
\end{enumerate}

As observed in these examples, the left peripherial expression, bearing either a bare verb form or nominal morphology, has a copied expression in the main clause. Such constructions, occurring in a wide variety of typologically unrelated languages,\footnote{\text{Vata (Koopman 1984), Yoruba (Baker 1989), Haitian Creole (Larson & Lefebvre 1991), Russian (Abels 2001), Hebrew (Landau 2006), Spanish (Vicente 2005, 2007), Brazilian Portuguese (Cable 2004), Japanese (Nishiyma and Cho 1998), Korean (Lee 1995), etc.}} are herein referred as predicate topicalization because of its discourse function, which will be clear in due course.

Note that in these languages the left periphery or fronted expression can be more than just a verb:

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. Essen est Maks fish. \\
\hspace{2em} eat fish eats Maks \\
\hspace{2em} ‘As for eating fish, Max eats them.’

\item b. Sakwa-lul mek-ki-nun Mimi-ka (sakwa-lul) mek-ess-ta \\
\hspace{2em} apple-acc eat-nmlz-top Mimi-nom apple-acc eat-pst-decl \\
\hspace{2em} ‘As for eating apples, Mimi ate apples.’
\end{enumerate}

In languages like Korean, the fronted predicate has to be affixed by a nominalizer and a topic marker, but does not have any tense marking. However, in languages like Yiddish, the fronted predicate can bear past-participial morphology when the copied predicated has the same morphology, as in (3b) (Cable 2004: (2a)):

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. talli-(*ess)-ki-nun Mimi-ka talli-ess-ta \\
\hspace{2em} run-pst-nmlz-top Mimi-nom run-pst-decl \\
\hspace{2em} ‘As for running, Mimi ran.’

\item b. Gegessen hot Maks gegessen fish. \\
\hspace{2em} eaten has Max eaten fish \\
\hspace{2em} ‘As for having eaten, Max has eaten fish.’
\end{enumerate}

In addition to the doubling of the past participle, an infinitive in fronted position is possible as well:
Essen eat has Maks eaten a fish.

‘As for eating, Max has eaten a fish.’

Different from such doubling examples, as noted in Cable (2004), Yiddish allows examples like (5a) where the fronted predicate (V(P)) and the linked main predicate are in a genus-species relation. Korean allows such examples too, as (5b) shows.

(5) a. Essen est Maks hekht.
    eat fish eats Max pike
    ‘As for eating fish, Max eats pike.’

b. Forn keyn amerike bin ikh gefloygn keyn nyu-york.
   travel to America am I flown to New York
   ‘As for traveling to America, I have flown to New York.’

c. kwail-ul mek-ki-nun Mimi-ka sakwa-lul mek-ess-ta
   fruit-ACC eat-NMLZ-TOP Mimi-NOM apple-ACC eat-PST-DECL
   ‘As for eating fruit, Mimi ate an apple.’

Another distinguishing property of the construction is that the relationship between the fronted predicate and the one linked in the lower clause can be unbounded. Observe the following examples:

(6) a. Veysn hostu mir gezog az er veyst a sakh.
    know have.you me told that he knows a lot
    ‘As for knowing, you told me that he knows a lot.’

b. nol-ki-nun, wuli-nun Mimi-ka nol-ass-ta-ko sayngkakha-n-ta
   play-NMLZ-TOP we-TOP Mimi-NOM play-PST-DECL-COMP think-PRES-DECL
   ‘As for playing, we think Mimi played.’

The linked predicates know in Yiddish and play in Korean are in the finite embedded clause here. However, the dependency between the two is island sensitive:

(7) a. * Veysn hob ikh gezent dem yidn vos veyst a sakh. (Davis & Prince 1986)
    know have I seen the man who knows a lot
    Intended: ‘As for knowing, I saw the man who knows a lot.’

   eat-NMLZ-TOP Mimi-NOM eat-PST-MOD apple-ACC buy-PST-DECL
   Intended: ‘As for eating, Momo bought the apple that Mimi ate.’

The ungrammaticality of such examples indicates that the copied expression cannot be within an island.

Finally, there is a morphological quirk for Yiddish predicate clefts: the fronted form looks like an infinitive when the in situ verb is finite but in fact, it is not. It is the stem of the finite verb + n or en (Davis & Prince 1986: Section 3). So rather than (8a) the fronting is (8b):

(8) a. * visn veys-t er gornit.
    know-INF knows-3SG he nothing
    ‘As for knowing, he knows nothing.’

b. veys-n veys-t er gornit.
    know-PS know-3SG he nothing
    ‘As for knowing, he knows nothing.’

c. * veys-t veys-t er gornit.
    know-3SG knows-3SG he nothing
    ‘As for knowing, he knows nothing.’
Cable (2004: 14) calls the form pseudo-infinitive and we gloss it as ps here. The most extreme case is the verb zayn ‘be’, which has five different stem forms. As Table 1 shows, the pseudo infinitives are formed from the stem by appending \(e\)n. Davis & Prince (1986) argue that this data is evidence for an analysis in which the verb stem moves and hence against the assumption of Lexical Integrity. As we show in the following section a simple stem movement approach is not sufficient and in Section 3, we develop an approach that maintains Lexical Integrity.

## 2 Previous approaches

As we have seen, one key property of predicate topicalization is to have predicate doubling, one verb is left-peripheral and the other one is in the lower main clause. One way to account for this is to link the two by movement operations, an approach gaining support from the examples in (6) that show that there can be unbounded dependencies involved. For instance, one could assume that the fronted predicate (V(P)) undergoes movement to the topic position and the remaining part is pronounced or copied in the lower clause at PF (see Koopman 1997, Cable 2004, Landau 2007, Hein 2017). The question is then how the predicate in the lower clause is pronounced. As suggested by Koopman (1984), it could be a resumptive pronoun or it is pronounced as to support the otherwise stranded T/Agr. However, as the examples in (5) show, the repeated part can be more than just a verb.

In addition, a follow-up question is how movement operations can license examples like (5) with a genus-species relation. There is no identical morpho-phonemic forms in such examples. An ensuing question would be why the doubling is possible only when a verbal predicate is fronted. Nominal fronting or topicalization in these languages does not allow any copying:

(9) Ku sayngsen-un Mimi-ka *(ku sayngsen-ul) ecey mek-ess-ta (Korean) that fish-TOP Mimi-NOM the fish-ACC yesterday eat-PST-DECL

‘As for that fish, Mimi ate it yesterday.’

## 3 The analysis

For the analysis we assume a hierarchy of clause types (not given here due to space limitations). One clause type is the filler-head-cat combining a fully saturated projection of a finite verb containing a gap with a matching filler. Another is the constraint on topic clauses given in (10):

(10) topic-cl \(\Rightarrow\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{C-CONT[RELS}} & \left[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{about-rel} \\
\text{ARG1}_i \\
\text{ARG2}_s
\end{array} \right] \\
\text{NON-HEAD-DTR}s & \left[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{IND}_i \\
\text{TOPIC}_+ \\
\text{IND}_s
\end{array} \right]
\end{align*}
\]

The non-head daughter is marked as topic and its referential index \(i\) functions as the ARG1 of the about-rel, which is introduced constructionally via C-CONT at the mother node. The other argument of the about-rel is the index of the head-daughter (a finite clause) that is combined with the topic.

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Table 1: Paradigms of finite forms of zayn ‘be’ and Fronted Verb-Topicalization forms according to Davis & Prince (1986: 5).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>person</th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>bin</td>
<td>zaynen/zenen</td>
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<td>bist</td>
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<td>3</td>
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Lexical rule for the introduction of the predicate-cleft dependency:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{HEAD} \quad \text{verb} \\
\text{SPR} \quad \text{⟩} \\
\text{SLASH} \quad ⟨⟩ \\
\text{ARG-ST} \quad \text{⟩} \\
\text{RELS} \quad \text{⟩}
\end{array} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{SLASH} \left[ \begin{array}{c}
\text{HEAD} \quad \text{verb} \\
\text{SPR} \quad \text{⟩} \\
\text{ARG-ST} \quad \text{⟩} \\
\text{RELS} \quad \text{⟩}
\end{array} \right] \quad \land \quad \text{check}_{\text{sem}}(\text{⟩}, \text{⟩), \text{⟩})
\]

The lexical rule takes as input a verb and licenses a verb as output that has the same head values and the same valence specification and semantic contribution as the input verb (values of features that are not mentioned in lexical rules are taken over by convention). The only difference is the SLASH value of the output. It contains a verb that has a head feature PREDICATE-CLEFT (TOPIC) with the value +. This is needed since the filler in the predicate cleft construction is a topic and must not be interpreted as a focus. Fronted elements can be either topic or focus in Yiddish but it has to be made sure that elements licensed by the lexical rule above must be topics. Surprisingly perhaps, nothing else is specified. This differs from other nonlocal dependencies that are introduced by lexical rules. When complement extraction is modeled via lexical rules the SLASH element is identical with one of the arguments (or more generally with one of the dependents). As we have seen above the filler is not necessarily identifiable with material in the rest of the clause but what we need is the information about the semantic contribution of the filler. Let us assume the analysis in Figure 1. The relations for essen and fish are collected in the VP node that is the filler. Because of the SLASH passing mechanism this information is also available down at est (⟩ in the lexical rule). We also can access the semantic contribution of the in situ verb (est = ⟨⟩ and we have access to the ARG-ST list. The ARG-ST list is a list of all arguments and the descriptions of the arguments contain the RELS values, that is, the semantics of the arguments is accessible. Therefore it is possible to check at the place of introduction of the nonlocal dependency whether the fronted material is more general than or equivalent to the material in situ.

Figure 1: Simplified analysis of Essen fish est Maks hekht. ‘As for eating fish, Maks eats pike.’

This leaves us with the forms of the fronted verbs. When the in situ verb is a participle, the fronted verb can be an infinitive (4) or a participle (3b). This contrasts with verbs selected by a governing verb as in (12):

\begin{enumerate}
\item \text{a.} Gegessen fish hot Maks.
\text{eaten fish has Maks}
\text{‘As for having eaten fish, Maks has eaten them.’}
\item \text{b.} * Essen fish hot Maks.
\text{eat fish has Maks}
\end{enumerate}

The reason is that gegessen is a filler of a gap that is identified with a selectional requirement by the auxiliary hot ‘has’. This auxiliary requires a participle perfect and hence (12b) is ruled out.

\footnote{This is specific to Yiddish. For Korean we assume that a category is put into SLASH that corresponds to the nominal marking of the fronted element.}
The predicate cleft lexical rule does not constrain the form of the fronted element and hence both the participle (3b) and the infinitive (4) are possible in predicate cleft constructions. This follows from the fact that the infinitive does not have tense information and hence is more general than the participle perfect in situ. The reverse fronting with bare infinitive in situ and participle perfect in fronted position is not possible:

(13) *Gegessen fish vel Maks essen fish.
     eaten fish wants.to Maks eat fish
  ‘As for having eaten fish, Maks wants to eat fish.’

For the pseudo infinitives we assume that they are finite verbs, which is evidenced by their person and number features (see Table 1). Since no auxiliary verb governs a finite verb these forms could not enter an analysis involving genuine extraction as in (12a). But these pseudo-infinitive forms are compatible with the requirements by the lexical rule in (11).

The SLASH-based treatment of predicate cleft constructions makes correct predictions as far as the subsumption tests is concerned. Note that if we did not use the SLASH mechanism and tried to establish the subsumption test at the level of the top-most clause, we would run into problems with sentences like (14):

(14) *Eat fish thinks the man who eats pike that Maks knows pike.

This sentence is unacceptable since the verb in the embedded clause is not equal to or subsumed by the fronted verb. However, the set of relations contributed by thinks the man who eats pike that Maks knows pike contains an eats pike. From looking at the list of relations it is unclear from where they are coming. In the case of (14) the relevant relations are coming from a relative clause and hence are irrelevant for the tests to be carried out. The SLASH-based treatment makes the correct predictions as far as the locality of the origin of the relevant relations is concerned.

4 Conclusion

We have shown that movement-based approaches in particular those assuming the copy theory of movement with the option to spell out both copies do not work for the phenomenon at hand. We also showed that the data does not force one to give up Lexical Integrity and assume the movement of stems as suggested by Davis & Prince (1986). We showed that semantic/pragmatic constraints play a role and found a way to check these using the fact that a long distance dependency between filler and verb can be established. This made interesting predictions as far as the setup of the feature geometry is concerned: we assumed that the RELS list is part of CONT and hence accessible in SLASH and ARG-ST (Copestake et al. 2005) rather than assuming that RELS is at sign level and hence not locally accessible (Müller 2015).

References

Cable, Seth. 2004. Predicate clefts and base-generation: Evidence from Yiddish and Brazilian Portuguese. Manuscript, MIT.


