



Discourse or grammar? VS patterns in spoken Hebrew and spoken German narratives

Peter Auer^{a,*}, Yael Maschler^{b,1}

^aFreiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), University of Freiburg, Albertstraße 19, D-79104 Freiburg, Germany

^bDepartment of Hebrew Language, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31905, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The realm of this study is the tension between syntax and pragmatics. We explore two structurally very different languages, unrelated genetically – Hebrew and German – which both employ the same marked syntactic pattern of VS word order for similar pragmatic functions in spoken narrative discourse. The question is whether there is some universal functional motivation which can be held responsible for this convergence. The results provide some evidence that, once analyzed in their ‘natural habitat’ of interactional exchanges, languages are more similar than they are in their written, highly monitored form, and that the reason for this may be found in universal discourse motivations. However, the study supports a cautious view: what seems to look like an obvious, functionally-motivated parallel between the syntax of two languages turns out to be much harder to evaluate once the whole spectrum of usages is taken into consideration. We show that there are at least three different discourse motivations for the VS word order, and that the ways these motivations interact among each other differ between Hebrew and German, resulting in different overall patterns in each of the two languages.

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1. Introduction

Examine the following two excerpts told in the midst of casual conversation, the first from a Hebrew narrative, the second from a German one²:

(1) ‘Sex, Lies, and a Thief’

78 Mili: ..'az hi 'omeret li,
so she says to me,
→79 ..**ba** 'elay **texna**'i,
came to-me [a] **technician**,
a technician came to my house
80 ..ve-bidyuk yatsati me-hamiklaxat,
and I had just come out of the shower,
81 ve-- ,
a--nd,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: peter.auer@germanistik.uni-freiburg.de (P. Auer), machler@research.haifa.ac.il (Y. Maschler).

¹ The authors contributed equally to this research.

² The German transcriptions follow GAT (cf. [Selting et al., 1998](#)), the Hebrew transcriptions follow [Chafe \(1994\)](#), as modified for Hebrew by [Maschler \(1997\)](#). See Appendix for transcription conventions.

- 82 ..haya keta beyneynu.
 was 'paragraph' between us
 there was a sexual encounter³ between us.
- (2) Couple Buying Car
- 01 J: <<all>des is ja> unheimlich;
 this is scary;
- 02 (.) kOmmt (.)n (.) PAAR (.) PÄRschen an,
 comes a couple couple-DIM in
 comes a couple
- 04 was n Wagen kaufen wollte;
 who a car buy wanted
 who wanted to buy a car
- 05 das(-) die FRAU geht auf den Wagen zu;
 the the woman goes to the car up
 the the woman goes up to the car
- 06 das Erste was sie SAGT;
 the first what she says
 the first thing she says
- 07 <<all>was is n da mit der BEUle.>
 what is PART therewith the dent
 what's this with the dent

In each of these two short narratives, the first complicating action (Labov, 1972) is begun and the main protagonist is introduced by an utterance in which the finite verb precedes the subject: *ba* 'elay texna'i ('came to me a technician', excerpt (1), line 79) and (.) *kommt* (.) n (.) *paar* ('comes a couple', excerpt (2), line 2).⁴ This word order pattern is marked in the two languages, although for different reasons. In Hebrew, VS word order is a marked pattern because the language is generally an SV language (Givón, 1976; Ziv, 1976; Ravid, 1977; cf., for instance, line 78 of excerpt (1)). Against this unmarked SV order, any 'inversion' of the subject will count as an instance of a VS pattern.⁵ In German, the finite verb occupies the second position in the clause in the unmarked case as well. However, the slot preceding it can (and must) be filled by exactly one constituent the syntactic status of which is not fixed, although the most frequent filler of this slot is the subject constituent. VS is therefore only marked if no constituent precedes the verb (while this is irrelevant in Hebrew). Given this difference in basic word order in the two languages, AdvVS is for instance unmarked in German, but marked in Hebrew, while e.g. AdvSV is marked (and indeed ungrammatical) in German, but unmarked in Hebrew. Nonetheless, on the surface of the facts, the structure of (1) and (2) is the same.

In this study, we would like to consider the question of how it is that two structurally very different languages, unrelated genetically, with only marginal language contact between them throughout history which is unlikely to have had any influence here,⁶ have each chosen to use a marked syntactic pattern which leads to the same surface syntactic structure for similar pragmatic functions. The question we want to raise is whether there is some universal functional motivation which can be held responsible for this convergence.

³ The Hebrew word *keta* literally means 'a segment' and in the context of a text it has been metaphorically extended to mean 'a paragraph'. Colloquially, however, a *keta* is something funny or weird, something that makes a good story. In the present context, the collocation *haya keta beyneynu* ('there was a *keta* between us'), the noun carries a clear sexual meaning. For more on the use of *keta* in Hebrew discourse and on grammaticization processes it may participate in, see Maschler (1998, 2011).

⁴ In these particular two excerpts, also two 'equivalent' verbs are employed – both translated as the English motion verb 'came'.

⁵ In this study, we relate only to the relative position of Subject and Verb. We thus ignore all non-subject arguments of the verb (such as the object in the VOS clause of excerpt 1, line 79).

⁶ Direct language contact between German and Hebrew is marginal, but Yiddish may have played a mediating role. As is well known, Yiddish is one of the Germanic languages which has made extensive use of V-first verb order all through its history, presumably in conservation of the older Germanic pattern which became more and more restricted in most Germanic languages, including German. Since, however, Biblical Hebrew, a basically VS (O) language (Gesenius, 1910, p. 456; Waltke and O'Connor, 1990, p. 129), also makes use of V-first extensively, tracing back VS in modern Hebrew to Yiddish language contact in the 20th century seems unwarranted.

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