Direct object resumption in Hebrew: How modality of presentation and relative clause position affect acceptability

Aya Meltzer-Asscher [a,b,*], Julie Fadlon [a], Kayla Goldstein [a], Ariel Holan [b]

[a] Linguistics Department, Tel Aviv University, Israel
[b] Sagol School of Neuroscience, Tel Aviv University, Israel

Abstract

Hebrew is generally considered a language with grammaticized resumption, in which resumptive pronouns (RPs) and gaps alternate freely in direct object position. The current study investigates whether and how speakers' acceptability judgments of direct object RPs in Hebrew are affected by the position of the relative clause in the main clause and the modality in which the sentences are presented. A hundred and eight Hebrew speakers completed an acceptability rating survey which included sentences with relative clauses modifying the main clause subject, direct, or indirect object, with either a gap or a resumptive pronoun. Modality of presentation was visual for half of the participants, and auditory for the other half. Results show that Hebrew speakers consistently judge direct object resumptives as less natural than gaps, particularly when sentences are presented in written form. The position of the relative clause does not interact with the acceptability of the RP. We discuss how different processing considerations may have contributed to the pattern of results observed.
© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Resumption; Resumptive pronouns; Relative clauses; Hebrew; Auditory modality; Acceptability ratings

1. Introduction

Hebrew is generally considered a language with grammaticized resumptive pronouns (RPs), namely, a language in which resumption is a productive strategy of forming A'-dependencies, obligatory in some syntactic environments and unquestionably acceptable in others. In particular, an observation often repeated in the literature is that in Hebrew relative clauses, RPs are obligatory in indirect object position, and may alternate freely with gaps in the direct object position (Beltrama, 2013; Borer, 1984; Sells, 1984; Shlonsky, 1992), as exemplified in (1a and b):

(1) a. *ze   ha-iš še-šamati   alav*   (Adjusted from Shlonsky, 1992)
         this the-man that-heard.1st.sg about-him
         'This is the man that I heard about.'
     b. *ze   ha-iš   še-ra'iti   (oto)*
         this the-man that-saw.1st.sg him
         'This is the man that I saw.'

---

* Corresponding author at: Webb Building, Room 413, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel. Tel.: +972 3 6405024.
E-mail address: ameltzer@post.tau.ac.il (A. Meltzer-Asscher).

This contrasts with the situation in so-called 'intrusive resumptive' languages (Sells, 1984). In these languages, RPs are generally judged as ungrammatical. However, their status may be improved in certain environments. For example, it has been claimed that in English, RPs in relative clauses become more acceptable as the relativized position is more deeply embedded (Alexopoulou and Keller, 2007; Ariel, 1999; Dickey, 1996; Erteschik-Shir, 1992) and that RPs are preferred over gaps in island configurations (Beltrama, 2013; Ross, 1967; Sells, 1984). The reason for this, however, is still debated. Whereas traditionally, resumption was viewed as a means, built into the grammar, to bypass movement when the latter is impossible (i.e. in islands, see, for example Ross, 1967; Sells, 1984), more recently there have been suggestions that RPs facilitate processing – comprehension or production – of challenging constructions, and it is this function which renders them more acceptable in certain structures. In production, RPs can rescue a sentence which was, so to speak, not planned properly, e.g. where the required gap would need to appear inside an island. As noted by Polinsky et al. (2014), resumption is a way for speakers to maintain coreference without breaking the production chain. In comprehension, the occurrence of an RP was argued to facilitate the formation of dependencies as it aids in the retrieval or reactivation of the filler (Asudeh, 2004; Dickey, 1996; Erteschik-Shir, 1992; Hawkins, 1999) or enables an anaphoric processing strategy which circumvents the standard, cyclic syntactic processing associated with filler-gap dependencies (Alexopoulou and Keller, 2007; Hawkins, 2005). In principle, it is not easy to decide between a representation-based account and a processing-based one because improved grammaticality (e.g. of English RPs in islands) may be attributed not only to a well-formed representation, but also to less demanding processing (e.g. Sprouse, 2008).

As mentioned above, in Hebrew, RPs in object relative clauses have generally been considered grammatical. Several accounts have been proposed for this difference between Hebrew and English. Shlonsky (1992) suggests that Hebrew (but not English) possesses two (phonologically identical) relative complementizers, one which allows object movement to its specifier and another which does not. If a complementizer of the latter type is selected, movement is barred, and the sentence must contain an RP. In contrast to this grammatically oriented account, Ariel (1999) maintains that resumptives have a processing function cross-linguistically. Ariel conducted a corpus study on conversational Hebrew, and found that the vast majority of direct object relatives in the corpus (90%) included gaps. To account for her findings, Ariel proposed the Accessibility Theory, stating that a relatively high degree of mental accessibility of the head when the relativized position is reached favors gaps, whereas a relatively low degree of mental accessibility encourages the use of an RP. Accessibility is determined by a combination of factors, among them the distance between the head and the relativized position (see also Ariel, 1990), the length of the relative head, and the restrictive/nonrestrictive nature of the relative clause. Since most direct object relatives in Ariel's corpus showed a high degree of accessibility, they included gaps, rather than resumptives. Ariel proposes to capture the difference between grammaticized and intrusive resumptive languages by assuming that languages form a continuum, such that in certain languages, e.g. Hebrew, a gap covers a smaller portion of the higher accessibility range than in other languages, e.g. English.

Farby et al. (2010) examined the status of Hebrew direct object RPs in two grammaticality judgment experiments, manipulating the depth of embedding and the existence of an island. Their stimuli included Hebrew sentences with object relative clauses modifying the object of the main clause, where the gap/RP appeared either in a non-embedded position (2a), a single-embedded clause (2b), or a complex noun phrase constituting an island (2c).

(2) a. *dina   maskima   lifgoš   et   ha-calemet   še-dan   pagaš t / ota be-xeyfa*
        Dina   agrees   to+meet   ACC   the-photographer   that-Dan   met   her in-Haifa
        be-mikre.
        by-chance
        'Dina agrees to meet the photographer that Dan met in Haifa by chance.'
     b. *dina   maskima   lifgoš   et   ha-calemet   še-tal   siper   še-dan   pagaš t / ota*
        Dina   agreed   to+meet   ACC   the-photographer   that-Tal   said   that-Dan   met   her
        be-xeyfa   be-mikre.
        in-Haifa   by-chance
        'Dina agrees to meet the photographer that Tal said that Dan met in Haifa by chance.'
     c. *dina   maskima   lifgoš   et   ha-calemet   še-ha-xaver   še-pagaš t / ota*
        Dina   agrees   to+meet   ACC   the-photographer   that-the-friend   that-met   her
        be-xeyfa   nasa   le-šam   be-mikre.
        in-Haifa   went   there   by-chance
        'Dina agrees to meet the photographer that the friend who met her in Haifa went there by chance.'

Results showed that while RPs were judged as better than gaps inside the island, they received significantly lower ratings than gaps in the other two conditions. Specifically, the mean rating given to the sentences with RPs was about 0.5 point (on a 7-point scale) below that given to their gapped versions, both in the non-embedded and in the embedded version.