

Adjectivally headed construct states and the semantics of metonymic predication



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Abstract

Adjectivally-headed construct states such as (i) pose a problem for thematic role assignment, and for accounts of compositional semantic interpretation.

- (i) ha-yeled šxor eynayim
DEF-boy.m.sg black.m.sg eyes.f.pl
“the boy has black eyes”

Apparently, the external thematic role of the adjective *šxor*, is assigned to its complement, while it is not clear what thematic role is assigned to external argument of the whole phrase. Siloni (2002) and Hazout (2000) suggest that these constructions are inalienable possession constructions: the complement noun is a noun of inalienable possession and thus relational, and its external argument becomes the argument of the whole phrase. I argue that these are indeed inalienable possession constructions, but that the crucial relation is expressed by the adjectival head and not by the nominal complement: the adjectival construct state in (i) predicates of its subject the property “being black with respect to his eyes”. These constructions illustrate what I shall call “metonymic predication”, in which a property is predicated of an entity *x* in virtue of a relation that holds between *x* and a proper part of *x*. This allows us to give a simple syntactic analysis of these expressions and a straightforward compositional semantic analysis.

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1. The problem

This paper examines the semantics of the adjectivally headed construct states (AHCSs) in Modern Hebrew illustrated in (1a–d). These AHCSs, which we call ‘characterising AHCSs’ for reasons which will become clear, are particularly interesting because of an apparent mismatch between thematic role assignment and semantic interpretation. (1a–d) contrast with the thematically ‘well-behaved’ AHCS in (1e), since in (1a–d) the external thematic role of the adjective seems to be assigned to complement of the adjective.

- (1) a. ha- yalda hayta *kxulat* eynayim.
DEF- girl.f.sg was blue.f.sg eyes.f.pl
‘The girl was blue-eyed/had blue eyes’

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- b. yeladim arukey raglayim
children.m.pl long.m.pl legs.f.pl
'long-legged children'
- c. yeled švur yad
boy.m.sg broken.m.sg hand.f.sg
'(a) boy with a broken hand'
- d. anašim kšey lev
people.m.pl hard.m.pl heart.m.sg
'cruel people'
- e. sakit mléat sukariot
bag.f.sg full.f.sg sweets.f.pl
'(a) bag full of sweets'

AHCS constructions in general are interesting and important. They raise the issue of how to extend an account of nominal construct states in Hebrew to adjectivally headed construct states. With few exceptions, almost all discussion of construct states in Hebrew has focused on nominal constructions, and on the relation between the nominal and determiner heads. But while nominal construct states are the most widespread and familiar construct states, they are by no means the only kind. Construct states can be headed by adjectives (Siloni, 2002; Hazout, 2000), numerical expressions and quantifiers (Danon, 2012; Rothstein, 2012a,b), participles (Siloni, 2002), and arguably prepositions (Siloni, 2000, 2001). As Siloni (2002) points out, any analysis of the licensing of construct states which relies on properties of N heads and null determiners will not be able to account for these constructions, and any attempt to give a general account of the licensing of construct states will have to take the non-nominal constructs seriously. One goal of this piece of work, then, is to contribute to a more general account of construct states by giving an in-depth analysis of the properties of those headed by adjectives, such as those in (1).

However, accounting for (1a–d) is a challenge beyond this general issue. Theories of thematic roles assume that when an adjective is syntactically predicated of a DP, its external thematic role is assigned to its subject or external argument as in (2a,b). As a semantic correlate, the entity denoted by the external argument is the bearer of the property expressed by the adjective. If the adjective assigns two thematic roles, then its internal thematic role is assigned to the complement, and its external thematic role is assigned to its subject as in (2c) and (2d).

- (2) a. Mary's eyes are blue.
- b. ha- eynayim šelo kxulot.
DEF- eye.f.pl of-him blue.f.pl
'His eyes are blue.'
- c. Mary is proud
- c'. Mary is [proud_A of her cat]_{AP}
- d. ha-sakit mléa
DEF-bag.f.sg full.f.sg
- d'. hi hevia sakit [mléat sukariot]_{AP}
she brought bag.f.sg full.f.sg sweets.f.pl
'She brought a bag full of sweets'

In (2a,b), the predicate adjective is *blue/kxulot*, and the property of being blue is said to hold of the denotation of the subject. If the adjective is attributive rather than predicative, as in *blue eyes/eynayim kxulot*, the external argument of the AP is identified with the external argument of the NP it modifies. *Blue eyes* denotes a set of entities which have both the property of being eyes and of being blue. In (2c–d), we see that a one-place adjective can have a related relational interpretation. (2c) shows that the simple adjective *proud* can also have a relational interpretation as illustrated in (2c'). (2d) illustrates the same point for the Hebrew adjective *mléa*. Crucially, the mapping between thematic roles and external argument is not affected. In (2c/2c') Mary is the subject of the AP, and is assigned the property of being proud or proud of her cat. In both (2d/2d') it is the bag which is full although in (2d') we get the extra information given by the internal argument that the bag is full of sweets.

This pattern does not hold in the examples in (1a–d). In (1a) the head of the AP is the adjective *kxulat* 'blue', which agrees in number and gender with the external argument *yalda* 'girl'. However, thematically, the external theta role is assigned to the complement of the adjective: it is the eyes which are blue and not the girl. (1b–d) work in the same way. These examples thus raise questions not only about the syntax and semantics of construct states, but also about thematic role assignment and the mapping between syntax and semantics. In particular, we must ask:

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