Fronting and exhaustive exclusion in Biblical Hebrew

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Abstract

Biblical Hebrew scholars struggle to account for about one third of instances of fronting in the Hebrew Bible in terms of a coherent semantic-pragmatic model. I hypothesize that considering fronting as a construction (i.e. a form-meaning pair) that could encode various semantic-pragmatic functions, including "exhaustive exclusion", could be one of the solutions to this challenge.

Keywords: Focus, fronting, exhaustive exclusion, information structure, exhaustive inclusion, negation, topic

In the Hebrew Bible the majority of the finite verbal clauses commence with a verb. When a non-verbal clause constituent precedes the verb, such construction is called an instance of fronting (Van der Merwe 2013: 931-935) and is considered as a marked construction (Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze 2017: 491-493). Two out of three of these marked constructions in Biblical Hebrew can typically be explained from an information structure point of view.[1] A fronted constituent typically represents the selection of one or other alternative from a set. It may involve the activation or reactivation of the topic of a clause in a context where entities are part of a POSET (partially ordered set), and the clauses then display one or other logical relationship, e.g. comparison (1) or contrast (2).[2]

(1)   (1 Sam 15:34)

וַיֵּלֶךְ שְׁמוּאֵל הָרָמָתָה וְשָׁאוּל עָלָה אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ גִּבְעַת שָׁאוּל׃

"Then Samuel went to Ramah; and *Saul* went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul."

(2)   (1 Sam 18:12)

כִּי־הָיָה יְהוָה עִמּוֹ וּמֵעִם שָׁאוּל סָר

"For the Lord was with him, but *from Saul* he had departed."

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[1] For the basic notions of information structure, see Krifka (2008) and Song, S (2017: 1-104). For a more detailed discussion of the notion information structure, see Lambrecht (1994), Erteschik-Shir (2007). For some of the major theoretical frames of reference to explain word order in general, see Song, J J (2012). For the statistics, see e.g. Lunn (2006: 291) and Moshavi (2010: 167).

[2] See Moshavi (2010: 144-166). See also Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze (2017: 501-502).

A fronted constituent may also select the focus of an utterance (3).

(3)   (1 Sam 26:6)

מִֽי־יֵרֵד אִתִּי אֶל־שָׁאוּל אֶל־הַֽמַּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִישַׁי אֲנִי אֵרֵד עִמָּֽךְ׃

"Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?" Abishai said, "*I* will go down with you."

About 65% of all instances can typically be classified as belonging to one of the above-mentioned categories. In the corpus that I investigated for the purposes of this study, viz. 1 Samuel, the overwhelming majority (i.e. 87%) of the remaing 35%, have fronted subjects.[3]

First are those instances that are used to establish (or recap)[4] the common ground between a narrator and his/her audience. This may happen at the outset of episodes (4). In the course of a narration, narrators may also broaden the common ground between them and their audience by means of some background information (5).[5]

(4)   (1 Sam 1:5).

וּלְחַנָּה יִתֵּן מָנָה אַחַת אַפָּיִם כִּי אֶת־חַנָּה אָהֵב וַֽיהוָה סָגַר רַחְמָֽהּ׃

"But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, and *the Lord* had closed her womb."

(5)   (1 Sam 18:25)

וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁאוּל כֹּֽה־תֹאמְרוּ לְדָוִד אֵין־חֵפֶץ לַמֶּלֶךְ בְּמֹהַר כִּי בְּמֵאָה עָרְלוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים לְהִנָּקֵם בְּאֹיְבֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְשָׁאוּל חָשַׁב לְהַפִּיל אֶת־דָּוִד בְּיַד־פְּלִשְׁתִּֽים׃

"Then Saul said, "Thus shall you say to David, 'The king desires no marriage present except a hundred foreskins of the Philistines, that he may be avenged on the king's enemies.'" Now *Saul* planned to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines."

Secondly, an "out of the blue" event may be reported (6).[6]

(6)   (1 Sam 23:27)

וּמַלְאָךְ בָּא אֶל־שָׁאוּל לֵאמֹר מַהֲרָה וְלֵכָה כִּֽי־פָשְׁטוּ פְלִשְׁתִּים עַל־הָאָֽרֶץ׃

 "But *a messenger* came to Saul, saying, 'Hurry and come, for the Philistines have made a raid against the land'."

Thirdly, there are a few instances where the events referred to by verbal clauses with fronted subjects display a relationship of simultaneity (7).

(7)   (1 Sam 9:5)

הֵמָּה בָּאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ צוּף וְשָׁאוּל אָמַר לְנַעֲרוֹ אֲשֶׁר־עִמּוֹ...

"When *they* came to the territory of Zuph, *Saul* said to the boy who was with him…"

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[3] The 13% instances (10/75) that do not have a fronted subject are: 1 Sam 1:15; 9:16; 10:5; 11:13; 14:35; 17:46; 23:13; 25:35; 27:11; 28:2.

[4] Reference is typically to one or other anterior event. See 1 Sam 5:1; 14:46, 16:1, 14; 19:18.

[5] BH narrators may even confirm aspects of the common ground between them and their audience by means of a summary statement at the end of a scene (1 Sam 1:18; 4:18; 19:1) or episode (1 Sam 15:35).

[6] Van der Merwe, Naudé and Kroeze (2017: 505-508) lump examples (4-6) together under the heading "sentence focus", since they tend to present disjunctive chunks of all-new information.

Biblical Hebrew scholars are not certain if and/or how the categories of use as exemplified in (4-7) should be related to those in (1-3).[7] Among the 337 cases of fronting in 1 Samuel, I identified a number of instances that apparently cannot be categorized as belonging to any of the above-mentioned categories. Nevertheless, they do display a family relationship, viz. an indefinite subject + a negated predicate (8).

(8)   (1 Sam 1:11)

וּנְתַתִּיו לַיהוָהֹ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּיו וּמוֹרָה לֹא־יַעֲלֶה עַל־רֹאשֽׁוֹ׃

"And I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and *no razor* shall touch his head [lit. a razor, it shall not go over his head]."[8]

I want to argue that in these cases a selection has also been made. The selection was not from a list of possible alternatives as in (1-3). The selected 'topic' is an indefinite entity that by definition refers to each and every possible member of a set. What is asserted about this all-inclusive 'topic' is the negation of its involvement in the event or state of affairs that is referred to. This type of exhaustive *exclusion* can be contrasted with exhaustive *inclusion*, when each and every member of a set is selected overtly, and a strong assertion is made that every member of the overtly specified all-inclusive set is included in the event or state of affairs that is referred to (9).

(9)   (1 Sam 9:6)

כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יְדַבֵּר בְּוֹא יָבֽוֹא

"*Everything he says* certainly comes out."

I hypothesize that exhaustive exclusion of an entity in Biblical Hebrew is expressed by the construction in (8). While the quantifier כֹּל can be used to specify that each and every member of a set is included in an event or state affairs, no lexical equivalent is available to express exhaustive exclusion.

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[7] See Moshavi (2010: 167-169).
[8] Also 1 Sam 13:19; 21:3; 25:28; 27:11 and 28:20.

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