Subject to Change: Agreement Patterns with Unaccusatives

In various languages that allow both S(subject)V(erb) and VS word-orders, it has been observed that lack of \( \Phi \)-agreement occurred in VS structures but not in SV. This phenomenon has been referred to in the literature as SV-VS asymmetry (Kinjo, 2015; Kobayashi, 2013; Soltan, 2006). One of these languages is Hebrew, whose default word-order is SV(O), yet it allows a VS order in several cases. One of these cases is VS order with verbs whose subject is an internal argument, i.e., passives and unaccusatives (Reinhart & Siloni, 2005; Shlonsky, 1997). In colloquial Hebrew, such VS examples may fail to exhibit \( \Phi \)-agreement between the verb and its internal argument:

\begin{align*}
1) \text{nafal} & \text{ le-dina ha-maftexot} \\
& \text{fell-3M.SG DAT-Dina the-key-M.PL} \\
& \text{‘Dina’s keys fell’} \\
2) *\text{ha-maftexot nafal (le-dina)} \\
& \text{the-key-M.PL fell-3M.SG (DAT-Dina)}
\end{align*}

Preminger (2009) argues that it is the intervention of a possessive dative (\textit{le-dina} in (1-2)) between the verb and its subject which licenses lack of \( \Phi \)-agreement, or in his terms, failure to agree.

In this talk, I will discuss corpus examples as well as experiments showing that lack of agreement is improved by – but does not require – intervention, as illustrated by the attested example (3) where an intervener is absent.

\begin{align*}
3) \text{nigmar ha-tutim} \\
& \text{ended-3M.SG the-strawberry-M.PL} \\
& \text{‘There are no more strawberries’}
\end{align*}

Further, I will suggest that such lack of agreement is a colloquial variation representing a step in the same developmental process that Hebrew existential and possessive constructions have undergone. In Modern Hebrew they are ‘accusative constructions’ lacking agreement that have developed from ‘nominative constructions’ exhibiting agreement (in previous stages of the language) (4). The first step in the process is loss of nominative case on internal argument subjects in the complement position. This enables lack of \( \Phi \)-agreement on the verb, which in turn leads to the emergence of accusative marking. Indeed, unaccusative verb-subject order in contemporary Hebrew fails to license nominative pronouns (5), and exhibits lack of \( \Phi \)-agreement (1). Moreover, certain unaccusatives even allow for the insertion of the accusative marker (6), which has already been claimed to morphologically mark caseless arguments (Siloni, 1997).

\begin{align*}
4) \text{haya (li) et ha-sfar-im ha-ele al ha-madaf} \\
& \text{was-3M.SG (DAT-me) ACC the-book-M.PL the-these on the-shelf} \\
& \text{‘These books were on the shelf’/ Dative: ‘I had these books on the shelf’} \\
5) *\text{nafal hu} \\
& \text{fell-3M.SG him} \\
& \text{‘He fell’} \\
6) \text{hofi’a li et ha-mila ha-zot ba-milon} \\
& \text{appeared-3M.SG DAT-me ACC the-word-F.SG the-this-F.SG in-the-dictionary} \\
& \text{‘This word appeared in the dictionary’}
\end{align*}

\textit{Click here} to see the colloquium program.