

Identity Avoidance without Phonology: Possession and Relativization in Semitic

Many grammatical processes seem to be motivated by “avoidance of identity” (Yip 1998). Nearly all such phenomena documented so far, even so-called syntactic ones, make reference to *phonological* identity, even if phonological identity is not sufficient in itself to trigger some identity-avoiding grammatical repair processes (though see Kornfilt 1986, Neeleman and van de Koot 2005). This study provides evidence for the relevance of purely non-phonological identity (presence of definiteness and case inflection) within a particular syntactic domain (the strong phase) at a particular point in a derivation (linearization at Spell-Out; Kayne 1994, Richards). Data comes from the Semitic languages Hebrew, Arabic, Ge’ez, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Amharic, Modern South Arabian, and Sabaic. I argue that alternative constructions for possession and relativization in these languages involve the identity-avoidance mechanisms of deletion and distancing.

Argument

Semitic periphrastic and “construct” genitives, and parallel relativizing constructions, arise from an identity-avoiding requirement on syntactic linearization.

Identity Avoidance and Possession

Various Semitic languages mark nouns for definiteness, case, or both. In periphrastic/prepositional possessive phrases such as (1a,2a,3a), all of this inflection is expressed freely (with Noun 2 always in genitive case). For possessive phrases without such a preposition – “construct state,” as in (1b,2b,3c) – the first noun lacks all such inflection.

	<u>Periphrastic</u>	<u>Construct</u>
1) Akkadian case	a. kasp-um ša šarr-im silver-nom of king-gen ‘king’s silver’	b. kasp šarr-im silver king-gen (Ge’ez patterns similarly.)
2) Hebrew definiteness	a. ha bayit šel ha mora the house of the teacher ‘the teacher’s house’	b. beyt ha mora house the teacher (Sabaic patterns similarly)
3) Classical Arabic case AND definiteness	a. al-kitaab-u ‘and al-walad-i the-book-nom ~of the-boy-gen ‘the boy’s book’	b. kitaab-u-l-walad-i book-nom-the-boy-gen

I argue that these constructions are instances of identity-avoiding distancing and deletion phenomena, respectively. Unless a preposition is present to introduce a new syntactic phrase in between the two nouns, identity-avoidance is satisfied by deletion of inflectional material from the first noun.

Identity Avoidance and Relativization

Semitic relative clauses can be introduced by a relativizer, which for many of the languages is homophonous with the prepositional possessive. For relative clauses without this, the first noun is restricted in the inflection it can express, just as in possessive “construct state” Noun 1’s.

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| 4) Akkadian | a. kasp-um ša itbal-u(šu)
silver-nom that he took-sub-(it)
‘silver that he took’
(Ugaritic, Hebrew, Old South Arabian, and Ge’ez pattern similarly.) | b. kasap itbal-u(šu)
silver he took-sub.-(it) |
| 5) Arabic | a. al-kitaab-u allađi qaray-tu-hu
the-book-nom that read-I-it
‘the book that I read’ | b. kitaab-u-n qaray-tu-hu
book-nom-indef read-I-it
‘a book I read’ |

On the assumption that relative clauses are introduced into the syntactic structure by a phonologically null DP relative operator, these clauses and their head noun DPs face the same problem with identity as Semitic possessives. That is, two DP heads within a strong phase lack an asymmetrical c-command relationship, and therefore cannot be linearized at Spell-Out.

Conclusions

Richards (2010) formulates a Distinctness Principle with respect to Kayneian linearization (1994), holding that linearization cannot proceed when identically-labelled syntactic nodes occur structurally adjacently. I show that such an identity-avoiding principle accounts for an array of syntactic properties in languages of the Semitic family, corresponding to well-known phonological processes. An analysis along these lines provides support for the notion of morphomic representations and an account of construct state in which N raises to D (Ritter 1988, 1991, Borer 1999, Siloni 2000, contra Cinque 2003, Shlonsky 2004). Most importantly, the Semitic data constitute a class of identity-avoidance phenomena based only purely morphosyntactic properties, with no reference to phonetic form.

Selected References

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