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STUDIES IN SEMITIC LINGUISTICS

SELECTED WRITINGS

by

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IMPERFECTLY-TRANSFORMED CLEFT SENTENCES

A primary distinction in the basic structure of the most common sentence-types is that between the two parts that have mostly been called 'logical' subject and predicate,¹ and are nowadays also commonly known as 'theme' and 'rheme' or as 'topic' and 'comment'.² This distinction is involved (as one scholar put it some twenty years ago) in any "interpretation in depth" intended to reveal the 'real' structure of the sentence "hidden under the surface of formulation" so as to bring to light the "ultimate meaning" of the utterance, which is different from what he calls "the traditional surface-meaning".³

The 'logical' subject and predicate are more easily recognizable in the structure of the nominal (or copular) sentence, which leaves no key position to be occupied by a finite verb, whose inherent coalescence of lexical substance and grammatical accident may require some effort in order to break through the "surface of formulation".

An important aspect of the dynamic of syntax is its power (a) to turn any extracted part of the sentence into a "logical subject" (the so-called "topicalization"),⁴ and (b) to mark any part of the sentence as "logical predicate". The latter process (which might be called "commentization" or the like), when carried out formally, results mostly in some variety of the construction generally known as "cleft sentence",⁵ in which [128] the "logical predicate" is formed into a predicate (خَبْر) of a nominal (or copular) sentence (for which the French term "vedette" has also been suggested), and the rest of the utterance ("glose") is nominalized so as to become a subject-clause (مُبْتَدَأ) of that nominal (or copular) sentence.

¹ In practically the same meaning subject and predicate have otherwise been defined as "psychological" (H. Paul, G. von der Gabelentz), "real", "natural", or "cognitional" (v. M. Sandmann and others). There are also other terms proposed for the same dichotomy, like "exposition"—"predicate" (Wegener), "Ausgang"—"Ziel" (Blümel) etc. Cf. *IOS I* (1971), p. 37, n. 3. Arabists are familiar with the "natürliches Subject/Prädikat" used by Reckendorf, in presenting extraposition, though this author failed to recognize the equivalence of his "natural subject" to the "so-called psychological subject" (v. H. Reckendorf, *Die syntaktischen Verhältnisse des Arabischen*, p. 782 n.).

² "Theme"—"rheme", besides others, are terms of the Prague school; "topic"—"comment" were introduced by Hockett, cf. *IOS I* (1971), p. 37, n. 3.

³ See M. Sandmann, *Subject and Predicate* (Edinburgh 1954), pp. 235–237.

⁴ Cf. *IOS I* (1971), pp. 37 & seqq.

⁵ This term in its English form was introduced (from Danish) by Jespersen, later revived by Polotsky, and has become common in modern linguistic parlance; cf. *IOS I* (1971), p. 50, n. 29 & n. 30.

Imperfectly-Transformed Cleft Sentence

The subject-clause may be extraposed, and represented pronominally in the body of the sentence, like in English *It is he | that/who has done it*; French *C'est lui | qui l'a fait*, (*Qui fut étonné..., ce fut le pasteur*); Aramaic דקטעי | רבנן הוא "it is the rabbis that are mistaken", but the extraposition of the "glose" (which involves the use of the cataphoric *it, ce* and the like) is not an essential part of the complex called cleft sentence. Cf., e.g., Italian *È lui che l'ha fatto*; Arabic ²inna- || -mā qataltum | fatan = ²innakum || fatan | mā qataltum "it is a (real) man that you have killed" (cf. *IOS I*, 78–79). Which order is "favourite" or required in any given language, vedette–glose or glose–vedette, is again not an essential feature of the construction in question. What really counts here is the forming of the "logical subject" into a substantival clause which is made the *mubtada*⁷ of a nominal or copular sentence, so that the "logical predicate" will form its *xabar*.

There exist, however, cases that raise difficulties. Such are those cleft sentences where a pronoun as subject and the logical predicate form a nuclear nominal sentence, but the rest of the utterance is not marked formally as nominalized, like *זה אני שהלכתי* besides *זה אני הלכתי* (both existing in colloquial Hebrew). The construction *זה אני שהלכתי* is that of the common cleft sentence, *זה אני* "it is I" forming a favourite sentence-type in which *אני* is the predicate, *שהלכתי* being a substantivized concrete relative in apposition with *זה*.⁶ But in *זה אני שהלכתי* it is not clear where the *אני* belongs, unless we recognize the construction as an imperfectly-transformed cleft sentence, in which the verb just fails to be marked as included form.

Within the realm of Aramaic we find extremely common in Babylonian Talmudic rounded-off cleft sentences with *הוא ד* like *אנא הוא דאמיקית* "it is I that brought out"; *משום כסיפותא הוא דאמר הכי* "it is for shame that he has said so"; *מהו דתימא* "what is it that you would say". The presence of *ד* in such sentences is practically general in this language,⁷ [129] but that is not the case in Mandaic, where the same construction is used mostly in the interrogative, with or without the *ל*: *מאהו לביית* "quid est, quod quaeris?", *מאהו להוית* "what is it that you have seen?" besides *מאהו אבארד* "what is it [that] you have done?", *מאהו הוית* "what is it you have seen".⁸

⁶ The congruence (in person) of *שהלכתי* with *אני* falls within a wider rule of attraction which is valid in Hebrew and has numeral parallels elsewhere. [Such attraction, however, does not necessarily occur; cf., e.g., *אני הוא שהכין אותך לבחינות בגרמנית ובלטינית* (Amos Oz, *קופסה* (Tel Aviv 1987), pp. 180₂₋₃.)]

⁷ Cf. M. Schlesinger, *Satzlehre der aramäischen Sprache des Babylonischen Talmuds* (1928) p. 222, n. 1.

⁸ Cf. Nöldeke, *Mandäische Grammatik*, pp. 435–438 (§ 289); Drower & Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, pp. 237–238.

to a question with *مَا* is no reliable guide for determining the function of *مَا* as relative. Thus far Sibawayhi. Later authors accept mostly the case-form of the noun in the answer as criterion. Their whole treatment of the problem is unsatisfactory, because they keep ascribing a relative function to *مَا* while it can easily be proved that *مَا* &c. is incapable of being relative. H. L. Fleischer (Beiträge zur arabischen Sprachkunde V, 1874, pp. 143–145 = *Kleinere Schriften* I, Leipzig 1885, pp. 355–356) has already shown (a) that in questions with *مَا* &c. a *مَا* which would be expected to refer to the *مَا* if it were relative, is normally impossible,¹⁸ so that for *مَا* to be the head of a normal concrete relative clause is actually out of the question. He has also pointed out (b) that *مَاذَا*, *مَاذَا* &c. admit of no interpretation of *مَا* as being *بِمَعْنَى الَّذِي* (because a conjunctive relative, *حَرْفُ مَصْدَرِيّ*, is here expected). To Fleischer's two arguments I am taking the liberty of adding two others: (1) The inverted form of *مَاذَا صَنَعْتَ؟* is *صَنَعْتَ مَاذَا؟*¹⁹ [132] the form of which shows clearly that there is no way to regard *صَنَعْتَ* as a *صَلَة* of *مَاذَا*; (2) There exist questions with *مَاذَا الَّذِي*, *مَاذَا الَّذِي* in which *مَاذَا* is present and the *مَاذَا* is still there, certainly not as a relative pronoun (while *مَاذَا هَذَا* * does not seem to exist).

All Arab grammarians who discussed the problem had a strong feeling that the verb in the type *مَاذَا صَنَعْتَ؟* must often be recognized as somehow "relativized", which is true. Their mistake was that they clung to the false assumption that it is the *مَاذَا* that marks this status, and ascribed to the *مَاذَا* the function of governing the relative verb, while in fact the relation between the two is apposition, and *مَاذَا* is demonstrative, the construction of *مَاذَا صَنَعْتَ؟* being no other than the imperfectly-transformed cleft sentence. It corresponds to the Hebrew *מָה עָשָׂה / מָה עָשָׂה*. A non-Semitic parallel is the Russian question-form of the type *что это случилось с ним?* "what is it (that) happened to him?"; *что это он не идёт?* "what (= why) is it (that) he does not come?".

For turning any part of the sentence into a logical predicate, a formal transformation is not always called for. In fact, intonation (or "meaningful stress") alone may prove as powerful as "sentence cleaving" (Ph. Wegener, H. Paul, G. von der Gabelentz, Gardiner, Bally). Halfway between intonational (or stress-pattern) modulation and full formal transformation into a cleft

¹⁸ The resumptive pronoun is here not just "dropped" *مَحذُوف* (see references in footnote 16), but rather out of place. An exceptional example of *mā dā* with a *عَائِدَة* (*مَاذَا جِئْتَ فِيهِ؟*) has been quoted by Reckendorf, *Die syntaktischen Verhältnisse des Arabischen*, p. 599.

¹⁹ Nöldeke, *Zur Grammatik des classischen Arabisch*, pp. 91–92 (§ 72), with the notes added to the 1963 reprint, *ibid.*, p. 159 (ad 92/1). Cf. M. J. de Goeje ap. Caspari-Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* II, p. 312 n.

sentence, there is available the construction of the imperfectly-transformed cleft sentence. In some languages, especially in Syriac, this process is fully operative, in some others it is restricted. In each case it involves the basic topic-comment relation. The imperfectly-transformed cleft sentence is a genuine syntactical construction, which invites typological comparison, and should not be described as a survival of some linguistic accident. The absence of a relative marker with the verb does not really affect its syntactically nominal status.

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CONGRUENCE AND COMITATIVE
 AND A PROBLEM OF LINGUISTIC TYPOLOGY

1. Where in connexion with one verb there are two actors participating in the action, the congruence rules of the verb are often problematic, especially if forms in first or second person are involved. Very common in many languages all over the world are constructions of the type "we went with you" etc.⁽¹⁾ referring to two actors only, thus meaning approximately "I went with you" or "we went, namely I and/with you". Similar illogicality is also apparent when two different persons are referred to as conjoined in phrase-types like "we with you" (Russian *my s toboj*) = "I + you" etc. [or "we ... with our father" = "I + my father", see below, foot-note 7].

Commentating upon such constructions, discussing their origin and adducing evidence of their world-wide distribution, had been much in vogue for over four decades (until the 1930's)⁽²⁾.

2. In connecting (a) Pronoun + X, besides the last-mentioned type (i) "we with X"⁽³⁾, there are two other types, namely (ii) "we and X" and (iii) "we X"⁽⁴⁾. [The first pronoun is dual or plural 1st or 2nd or 3rd person; the X position is sometimes open to pronouns as well as to nouns, sometimes to pronouns only or nouns only.] The parallel phenomenon of such "illogical" constructions with a verb is recorded with the other person introduced by (i) "with" or by (ii) "and"⁽⁵⁾; it does not seem to occur with the other person immediately

(1) Dual forms, if available, will be found in such constructions.

(2) For literature see O. Jespersen, *The Philosophy of Grammar* 192; W. Havers, *Handbuch der erklärenden Syntax* 221 ad § 50. See also K. Bergsland, *Omkring my s toboj "vi med deg" (du og jeg), Osv.*, "Festskrift til Prof. Olaf Broch" (Oslo 1947) 1-12; L. Tesnière, *Le duel sylleptique en français et en slave*, *BSL* 47 (1951), 1, pp. 57-63; J. Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* 279-280 (§ 7.2.4); R. Hetzron, *Conjoining and Comitativization in Hungarian*, *FL* 10 (1973), pp. 493-507. For African languages see also H. Nckes, *Lehrbuch der Jaunde-Sprache* 133; D. Westermann, *Grammatik der Ewe-Sprache* 56. For Turkish see A. N. Kononov, *Grammatika sovremennogo tureckogo literaturnogo jazyka* 395 (§ 787), cf. *ibid.* 385 (§ 770); G. L. Lewis, *Turkish Grammar* 247 (XVI, 3d).

(3) "With" can also be expressed through a comitative-instrumental case.

(4) (i) Russian *my s toboj*; (ii) Duala *biso na wa*; Ewe *mí kple wò*; (iii) French *nous deux Jean*; Yaunde *bí qa*; first recorded in Old English and Old Norse.

(5) (i) Russ. *my pošli s nim vmeste*; Germ. *Wir gingen mit meiner Frau spazieren*; French *nous chantions avec lui*; Ital. *appena furono soli colla ragazza*; Turk. *sizinle başbaşa konuş-*