

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR: ON SEEING AN ELEPHANT CONCLUDING THE DEBATE (FOR NOW)

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**Abstract:** *This contribution is part of the Debate section that dialogues with the two-part paper "The Syntax of Existential Constructions" by Shlomo Izre'el from Tel-Aviv University published in Volume 11 in 2022. This letter is a reply to Rivka Halevy in the same section and published in Volume 11 in 2022 and to Pavel Ozerov in the same section and published in Volume 12 in 2023. First, I will refer to Rivka Halevy's rejoinder, where she mainly addressed typological issues, among which the syntactical status of the pivot is especially intriguing. I will then deal with Pavel Ozerov's rejoinder, who addressed the theoretical framework upon which my analysis of the existential-presentative constructions was based. Here I will deal with the complexities in defining and analyzing a syntactic predicate and its relations to the pragmatic notion of comment. In guise of a conclusion, I will touch upon some general observations on the study of language.*

**Keywords:** Existentials; Information Structure; Syntax; Prosody

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## 1 Introduction

My rather lengthy paper on the syntax of existential (henceforth: EXT) constructions (Izre'el 2022a; 2022b) has received two rejoinders, which I have, of course, carefully read and very much appreciated and for which I am very thankful indeed. In what follows, I will address the two papers in the following order: First, I will refer to Rivka Halevy's rejoinder (Halevy 2022), where she mainly addresses typological issues (§2). I will then deal with Pavel Ozerov's rejoinder (Ozerov 2023), who addresses the theoretical framework upon which my analysis of the existential-presentative (henceforth: EXT-PRES) constructions was based (§3). The final section (§4) will touch upon some general observations on the study of language.

## 2 Reply to Rivka Halevy

In her Introduction (§1), Rivka Halevy calls to mind two options for dealing with the notion of Existential Construction: from the point of view of function and from the point of view of form or sentence structure. In her rejoinder, Halevy looks at this notion from the point of view of structure. Or, as stated by Halevy:

In the sense given to this term by Izre'el, as also in the present rejoinder to Izre'el, an EXT construction refers to a type of construction *defined by its formal properties* rather than by its semantic function, i.e. of assertion of existence.

While this may hold for the discussions of affirmative EXT-PRES sentences (Izre'el 2022a), other uses of the EXT particle are not presentative and are dealt from the functional point of view. Halevy indeed adds to this part some fine uses of EXT (§3.2: Multifunctionality).

In fact, I myself do not see any problem in defining the EXT particle semantically as existential-assertive in all its occurrences.<sup>2</sup> When occurring in the dedicated presentative construction, i. e., it does not change its meaning; it is the form of the entire construction {EXT pivot} that carry the function presentative function. Indeed, Halevy cites examples with similar constructions which indicate presentativity that do not include an EXT particle (usually referred to asthetic sentences, where EXT-PRES sentences seem to be their prototype; Izre'el 2024; Izre'el, forthcoming).

At this point, the role of prosody, word order and context should be emphasized. Halevy cites one case where the EXT particle occupies the second position and carries the sentence accent (ex. 1; Halevy's ex. 8):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) *báyit kvar yeš, ve-ma axšav?*  
house already EXT, and-what now  
'You have already got a house (lit. a house there-is), and what next (lit. now)?'

Halevy states, that "in spite of the special emphasis on EXT *yeš* I contend that such constructions are *one unit*, namely '*sentence focus*' of wide informational focus." As I have claimed in Izre'el 2022b: §3, the prosodic accent on the EXT particle suggests that the particle be regarded as the predicate of the sentence, which follows the definitional features of *predicate*

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is used also by Halevy, who later remarks that she prefers that the EXT particle be referred to as a TAM marker instead of the reduced reference to modality. I wonder whether the introduction of tense and aspect to this reference is indeed significant as suggested by this preference.

<sup>2</sup> Transcription, glossing and translation by Halevy.

within the used framework (for which see also below). As for the NP *bait* ‘house’, its status in the sentence will be determined according to the context, whether it represents a background or a given referent or whether it represents a newly introduced one. This is not indicated explicitly in the example as cited, but one can assume that it represents a referent which is part of the common ground of the co-locutors. If so indeed, then its status can be set as subject, forming with the EXT particle a bipartite sentence. For some notes onthetic or sentence-focus constructions see further below, as well as Izre’el 2024; Izre’el, forthcoming).

In the section on typology (§2), Halevy eloquently describes the morphosyntactic structure of the EXT-PRES constructions along with other existential-like (for this notion see Halevy 2016) constructions in Hebrew, reflecting the non-configurational character of Modern Hebrew in comparison with Indo-European languages. Halevy is definitely right in objecting to the notion of subject-inversion, which has become a dominant feature in the definition ofthetic sentences (e.g., Abraham 2020: 1). As I have dealt elsewhere withthetic constructions in Hebrew (Izre’el 2024; Izre’el, forthcoming), I am exempt from commenting extensively on this issue here.

Still, one of Halevy’s arguments against subject inversion is worthy of noticing:

The fact that speakers do not consider this constituent as an ‘inversed subject’ is revealed by its marking by *et* particle, which is generally regarded as an accusative marker.

That the pivot in EXT sentences is a non-canonical subject has been noted by many. From the typological perspective, a title of a paper by Lambrecht is especially illustrative: “When Subjects Behave Like Objects” (Lambrecht 2000). Nevertheless, Lambrecht adheres to analyzing the pivot in sentence focus constructions as subject, albeit non-canonical:

According to the present analysis, the driving force in the expression of sentence focus is not iconicity but **non-canonicity**. The SF subject is coded via a non-canonical pattern. For example, in Subject–Verb Inversion it appears in object position, which contrasts with its position in the normal sentence order. (Lambrecht 2000: 668)

In this and other studies of sentence-focus constructions in Hebrew, Halevy argues against this view:

Consequently, it is subsumed that the object-like behavior and coding properties of the pivot constituent in the EXT construction in Hebrew do not justify its analysis as either object or detopicalized subject. Along these lines, I suggest that the occurrence of this alleged accusative marker is part of a pragmatic strategy motivated by the need to emphasize that contra to our expectations the constituent in question is not conceived a topic. In other words, particle *et* is part of a strategy of highlighting a high referential nominal as focus, disambiguating its position as non-subject, or non-topic.

One step further in this pragmatic analysis will conclude, so I deem, that the focused pivot be regarded as the syntactic predicative nucleus of the EXT sentence (Izre’el 2022a: §3.1.1; see further below).

Halevy finds of interest cases where the constituent marked by *et*, usually regarded as a DOM in Hebrew, is topicalized in a sentence (Halevy’s ex. 10). Another such example is the following (ex. 2):<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> References follow the system used in *The Corpus of Spoken Israeli Hebrew (CoSIH)*; speakers are referred to as sp1, sp2, etc.

- (2) *et=ha=si'pur ha='ze      fel=rilo'kejfen | ka'jam gam be'toχ mikso'ot      ha=bri'ut |*  
 et=DEF=story DEF=this of=relocation      exists also inside professions DEF=health

‘This issue of relocation exists also within health professions.’ (A doctor interviewed in The Weekend News program, Israeli TV channel 12, August 5, 2023)

I submit that I am puzzled by this apparent contradiction, as the topicalized constituent in ex. 2 is a given referent and should be analyzed as both subject and continuing topic, having been established previously also as the discourse topic. I believe that the meaning and function of this particle still needs further research (Izre’el 2022a: §3.4; Izre’el, forthcoming).

As I mentioned above, Halevy’s additions to the multifunctionality of the EXT particle is very welcome. To these I should note, that deontic modal constructions may occur not only in formal registers, but also in the colloquial language (Izre’el 2022a: §3.1.2, ex. 33).

### 3 Reply to Pavel Ozerov

In his contribution, Pavel Ozerov has given special attention to the representation of EXT-PRES constructions as unipartite sentences. Ozerov has thus chosen to concentrate on the theoretical basis of the analysis of EXT-PRES constructions as unipartite sentences. In his contribution, Ozerov has “tried to demonstrate how the discussed framework would additionally benefit from dispensing with other traditional models, which similarly originate in the bipartite view of sentence structure.”

Ozerov finds “challenges inherent to the operationalisation of the notion of predicate” as used in the framework upon which the study of EXT sentences in particular and in the study of sentence structure more generally. The notion of *predicate* (or *predicate domain*) has been described as follows:

The *predicate* (or the *predicate domain*) is viewed as the constituent carrying an individual piece of information within the discourse context, which by default will include a newly introduced element. As such, a predicate may be seen as the default representation of the comment. The expression of the predicate (or the predicate domain) is the *raison d’être* for the formation of a new chunk of speech which we term *clause*. In other words, it is the constituent that carries the informational load of the clause. By default, the focus of the clause will be found within the predicate domain. The predicate (or the predicate domain) carries the modality of the clause, where modality is seen as an essential component of the clause,

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Transcription is usually broad phonetic, with some attention to the phonological system. Phonological input is added mainly in the representation of /h/, usually elided in contemporary spoken Hebrew, and in the representation of some occurrences of /j/, which may also elide in certain environments. Epenthetic vowels (usually *e* [ɛ]) following prepositions are transcribed when actually heard. For typographic and reading convenience, the rhotic phoneme, which is uvular in standard IH, is represented as *r*; the mid vowels are represented as *e* and *o*, although their prototypical respective pronunciations are lower. Two successive vowels are separated by a syllabic boundary, e.g. *baal* ‘husband’ is to be read *'ba.al*.

Prosodic notation: | minor boundary; || major boundary; / major boundary with “appeal” tone (for this term see Du Bois *et al.* 1993: §3.3); – truncated module; ..1.2”.. pause with length in seconds; accented words are indicated by boldface characters.

( ) indicate uncertain transcription (identification).

Glossing follows, *mutatis mutandis*, the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Additional glossing: EXT existential, PRES presentative.

the one that transforms a proposition to a sentence, thus including assertion, polarity, sentence types like declarative and interrogative, and beyond (Izre'el 2018b: §5). (Izre'el 2022a: end of §2)

Ozerov has chosen to deal with the first part of this description, which he considered to be a definition of the notion of predicate, thus concentrating on the necessity of the pragmatic (or informational) notion of *comment* when defining the syntactic notion of *predicate*. In what follows, I intend not to discuss Ozerov's arguments, which come from a different point of view. I should merely add some words on the background to the use of the notion of *comment* in relation to *predicate* and reflect on some of Ozerov's particular observations.

Let me first clarify my own use of terminology as reflected in the discussed study. I have given a lot of thought before deciding to keep the term *predicate*. My view of the concept suggests that predicate is the necessary and sufficient element to constitute a sentence and thus it is the first in hierarchy also in a bipartite sentence. Admittedly, by adhering to this term, I also had in mind the originating meaning of this lexeme in Latin, viz., *praedicāre* 'to proclaim, make known, declare, to state, say, to praise' (OED). I also thought of the Arabic term for this sentence constituent, viz., *ḡabar*, which originally means 'information, a piece of information, a notification, an announcement, news, a piece of news', or the like (Lane 1865: 696). The same can be said of the term *rheme* (<Greek *ῥῆμα* 'that which is said or spoken, a word, saying'; Liddell & Scott 1996: 1596),<sup>4</sup> or, the term which later took over, *comment*, the original interpretation of which is widely understood today. The two latter terms, although serving diverse schools of thought, have — *mutatis mutandis* and with only a few exceptions — carried similar dichotomies in the analysis of linguistic units from the point of view of IS (Swart & Hoop 2000). As suggested by Swart & Hoop,

we can simplify the situation a bit by collapsing the theme-rheme and the topic-comment distinction into one: the theme or topic gives us what we are talking about, and the rheme or comment tells us what we are saying about the theme. (Swart & Hoop 2000: 116).

Of course, in the framework where predicate (or comment) is sufficient to form an information unit, one need not rely on the dichotomy between topic and comment for this equivalence, and leave the above statement with the congruence between rheme and comment. A comment may be thus redefined, but I will leave that to scholars dealing with IS.

A widespread alternative to the term *comment* is the term *focus*, thus replacing the dyad topic-comment by topic-focus (Ozerov 2018; among many others). Other arrangements have similar dyads, albeit different in the pragmatic or informational perception of their components or bearing related notions of their respective components (cf., *inter alia*, Östman & Virtanen 1999; Swart & Hoop 2000; Andrews 2007: §1.3; Foley 2007; Mereu 2009; Lombardi Vallauri & Masia 2015; LaPolla 2020). I myself have chosen to keep the term *comment*, preserving the term *focus* to indicate that part of the comment which is especially marked for focus, usually by prosodic accent. The following two examples demonstrate this in bipartite sentences (ex. 3), and in unipartite sentences (ex. 4).

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<sup>4</sup> While Latin *praedicātum* was interpreted after Greek *κατηγόρημα*, the technical meaning of *ῥῆμα* was tightly related to the notion of predicate (Atherton & Blank 2013: §13.6.7).

(3)	<b>topic</b>	<b>comment</b>
		<b>focus</b>
	<i>'rina</i>	<i>tsiltse'la</i>
	Rina	called.3SGF
		<i>fil'jom</i>
		the.day.before.yesterday
	'Rina called the day before yesterday.' (CoSIH, OCh_sp1_879)	

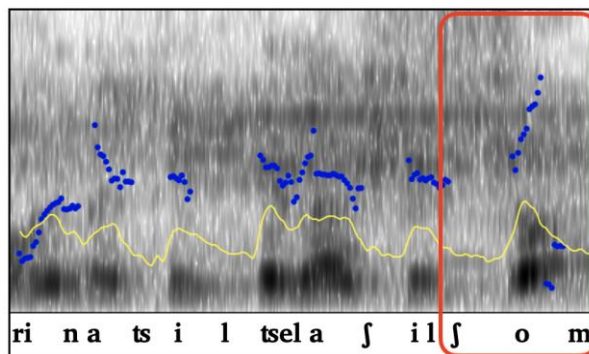


Figure 1: Comment and focus in a bipartite sentence

(4)	<b>comment</b>	
	<b>focus</b>	
	<i>a'val</i>	
	but	
	<i>ha'ja</i>	
	was.3SGM	
	<i>χava'ja</i>	
	experience	
	'But it was an experience.' (CoSIH, OCh_sp1_879)	

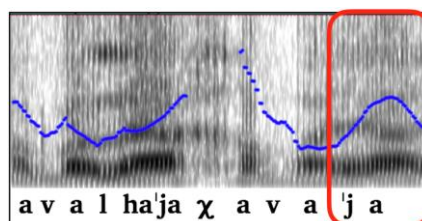


Figure 2: Comment and focus in a unipartite sentence

For this exposition, cf., inter alia, the following statement by Foley:

The topic prototypically denotes a presupposed established entity, while the focus supplies part of the comment, newly provided information, on that entity. (Foley 2007: 405)

As is obvious from the discussion above, the traditional wisdom submits that any sentence consists of two parts, the second of which depends on the first one, be it a syntactic predicate on a subject for syntax or a comment on a topic for Pragmatics or Information Structure (henceforth: IS). With regard to the notion of *comment*, one should keep in mind that — although it does suggest a bipartite structure showing a dichotomy between comment and topic — it has been noted in the literature, that an utterance can consist of only a comment:

The topic expressions then are the linguistic materials referring to the entities that the sentence is about; the comment is the remainder – that is, what the sentence actually says

about them. **If there is no topic expression, but there is a topic entity**, then the entire sentence will constitute the comment expression. (Andrews 2007: 149; my emphasis)

Remarkably, in the pragmatic Language into Act theory (L-AcT) (Cresti 2000),

the core of the information pattern is formed by a Comment information unit which accomplishes the illocutionary force of the utterance allowing its pragmatic interpretation.

The information pattern depends on the occurrence of the Comment, which is necessary and sufficient for performing the utterance. (Cresti 2021: 47)

Although a comment in L-AcT can consist of bipartite sentences (or utterances, in accordance with the pragmatic L-AcT terminology), unipartite sentences are abundant; e.g.:<sup>5</sup>

- (5) \*KAT: [1] o quê // =COM= [what//]  
%ill: [1] wh-question
- \*SIL: [2] copos // =COM= [glasses //]  
%ill: [2] answer
- \*SIL: [3] copos de Urano / =COM= que tem aí // =APC=  
[glasses from Urano / that are there //]  
%ill [3] assertion (evaluative attitude – focus on the right)
- \*KAT: [4] copos de quê // =COM= [glasses of what //]  
%ill: [4] focal question (negative att., with preparation, focus on the right)
- \*SIL: [5] Urano // =COM= [Urano //]  
%ill: [5] confirmation (expressive att.)
- \*KAT: [6] Urano // =COM= [Urano //]  
%ill: [6] expression of disbelief (two syllable nucleus, right focus)
- \*SIL: [7] é // =COM= [yes //]  
%ill: [7] assertion of evidence
- \*SIL: [8] Urano // =COM= [Urano //]  
%ill: [8] confirmation
- \*SIL: [9] Urano // =COM= [Urano //]  
%ill: [9] conclusion
- (Mello 2014: 40-41; ex. 3)

This example can be compared to the example of a discourse chunk consisting of only unipartite sentences as cited by Ozerov (Ozerov 2023: ex. 3 = Izre’el 2018a: ex. 2; 2018b: ex. 9). I cite it here again (ex. 6) with additional markings to illustrate the intra-discursive relations between unipartite sentences.

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<sup>5</sup> Abbreviations and symbols: COM Comment; APC: Appendix (Cresti 2021); %ill: illocutionary type (Moneglia & Raso 2014 with a summary in Table 1, pp. 477-478); // major prosodic boundary; / minor prosodic boundary.

- (6) [1] sp2:  $\uparrow$  'moruʃ ||  
Morush 'Morush,
- [2] sp1: ma 'motek |  
what sweetie 'What, sweetie?'
- [3] sp2: arba'a ja'mim |  
four days '(For) four days –'
- [4]  $\uparrow$  'fva=meot 'fekel le='zug ||  
seven=hundreds shekel to=couple '(the cost is) seven hundred shekels for a couple.'
- [5] sp1:  $\uparrow$  bli 'kesef ||  
without money '(This is) very cheap.'
- [6] sp2: na'xon /  
right 'Isn't that so?'
- [7] sp1:  $\uparrow$  'ejfo /  
where 'Where?'
- [8] sp2:  $\uparrow$  be='holidej in ha='xadaf ||  
in=Holiday Inn DEF=new 'At the new Holiday Inn.'
- [9] sp1: daj ||  
enough 'Wow!'
- (CoSIH, OCD\_2\_sp2\_059-063; sp1\_027-030)

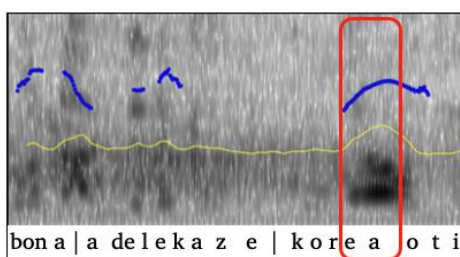
In this chunk, six out of the eight sentences have anchors in previous utterances, either adjacent or remote. Ex. 5 evidently can be paralleled with ex. 4, showing the similarity, if not identity, of the contents of units between the notion of syntactic predicate and pragmatic comment. As seen in this cited discourse, anchors do not equal topics. Predicates can further be anchored extra-linguistically (for discourse anchoring see Izre'el 2018a: §4; 2018b: §6; see further below, §4 for ex. 14). I believe that Ozerov will find ex. 5 a perfect candidate for his dynamic analysis, but one can definitely see that the intra-discursive relations between utterances are different than a simplistic relations between topic and comments. Still, ex. 5, very much like ex. 4, shows the possibility of unipartite sentences (or utterances) consisting of only comments.

Ozerov, dealing with the notions of *comment* within the framework of IS (which he, in any case, questions its theoretical bases; Ozerov 2018), remarks on some instances where he questions the operationalization of the mentioned relation between comment and predicate, notably where an utterance includes a NP newly introduced into the discourse. Such cases, Ozerov would rather perceive as topic or somewhere on the topic-comment cline (§2). Ozerov gives the following illustration for this puzzling caTEGORIZATION (Ozerov's ex. 5):<sup>6</sup>

- (7) *bona*, *ha-DElek ha-ze*, *ko'vEa o'ti*, *'omev*,  
hey DEF-fuel DEF-this tears.apart me PN  
'Hey, this gas, makes me go bankrupt, Omer,' (CoSIH, OCD\_1\_sp3\_013–016)

<sup>6</sup> Ozerov's transcription, glossing and translation.





**Figure 3:** 'bona = a='delek=a=ze | kor'ea=oti |  
come.on DEF=gas=DEF=this tearing=me<sup>7</sup>

There are, however, some issues involved with this example: The NP *delek* 'gas' has already been mentioned before in the discourse by the same speaker 9" before uttering this replica (mostly consisting of gaps in speech). Its cost has already been mentioned as well in a rhetorical question responding to another speaker, who had just expressed concern for the longer route the driver (sp3) was taking:

- (8) 'lama | at mfa'lemet 'delek /  
why 2sgf.pred paying gas  
'Why? Are you paying for the gas?' (CoSIH, OCD\_1\_sp3\_008-009)

Therefore, the NP *delek* should be regarded as topic and subject in the discussed sentence. far as pitch is concerned, its high seems to be similar on both constituents, which may have been the basis for Ozerov's interpretation. However, it should also be noted that there is prosodic boundary between the two, and therefore each pitch contour should be interpreted on its own, belonging to a separate prosodic module,<sup>8</sup> which may also indicate the topical status of (*ha*)*delek* (*haze*) '(this) gas' (Ozerov 2013: 333). The apparently high pitch on the syllable /*de*/ is probably due to its initial-position in the module, which is rather standard in this position (cf. Izre'el 2022a: §2.2 re ex. 12; Izre'el 2022a: §3.1.1 with previous references and ex. 51 in §3.2.3). Note further, that while the pitch is indeed as high on *delek* 'gas' as on the form *korea* 'tearing', the intensity line is flat up until the form *korea* 'tearing' and becomes much stronger on the predicate *korea oti* 'tearing me apart' (Figure 3). Therefore, my interpretation of the (split) prosodic contour of this sentence suggests the dyadic status of topic vs. comment and subject vs. predicate, marked as focal on the stressed syllable /*ko*/ of *korea* 'tearing'.

Still, let us assume that the NP *delek* 'gas' is introduced here for the first time in the conversation. In this case, we might perhaps interpret this as athetic construction, being, as it were, an "all news" or "out of the blue" statement (García Macías 2016: §2). As I will show in a forthcoming paper (Izre'el, forthcoming: §6.4), Hebrew does not seem to favor sentence accent on the first constituent. Still, some examples of "all new" statements do exhibit irregular prosodic patterns (exx. 9-11):

- (9) *ha=balag'an* *xo'geg* *po* |  
DEF=mess celebrating here  
'It is messy here,' (CoSIH, Y111\_sp1\_129)  
(10) '*aba* *feli* *mis'ken* ||

<sup>7</sup>The personal name has been omitted here, as it had been changed for anonymity.

<sup>8</sup> Or intonation unit. For the term *prosodic module* see Izre'el 2020: §2.

father mine poor

‘My father is in pain.’ (CoSIH, Y33\_sp2\_139)

(11) *ha=’baal fel axo’to nif’tar* |

DEF=husband of his.sister died

‘The husband of his sister died.’ (CoSIH, Y33\_sp2\_146)

Now, had the pitch accent been informationally meaningful, as interpreted by Ozerov, we would still regard the entire sentences as athetic one, and add this example of the three examples cited above. In the framework allowing for unipartite sentences, thetic ones would be regarded as such, i.e., as consisting of only a predicative domain. Had this been the case, taking *delek* ‘gas’ in ex. 7 as part of the predicate domain would not take it ad absurdum (as suspected by Ozerov for this case). It must be admitted, at this point, that a decisive analysis of exx. 9-10 is still wanting. However, given the overall contextual status of this sentence, I believe a more appropriate analysis would be to take it as a bipartite, categorical one.

Ozerov further looks at another example (Ozerov’s ex. 9), where “the speaker provides an additional reason for organizing transportation for their guest.” Ozerov seems puzzled by the apparently perceivable two accents, one on what might apparently be analyzed as subject/topic and the other within what might apparently be analyzed as predicate/comment.<sup>9</sup>

(12) *ve=ha-ho’v-IM fel-a j-ih’j-u ve-gu-’IM jo’tex.*

and=DEF-parent-PL of-3SG.F 3-FUT.be-PL calm-PL more

‘And her PARENTS will be less WORRIED.’ (CoSIH, C712\_1: 222”-223.08”)

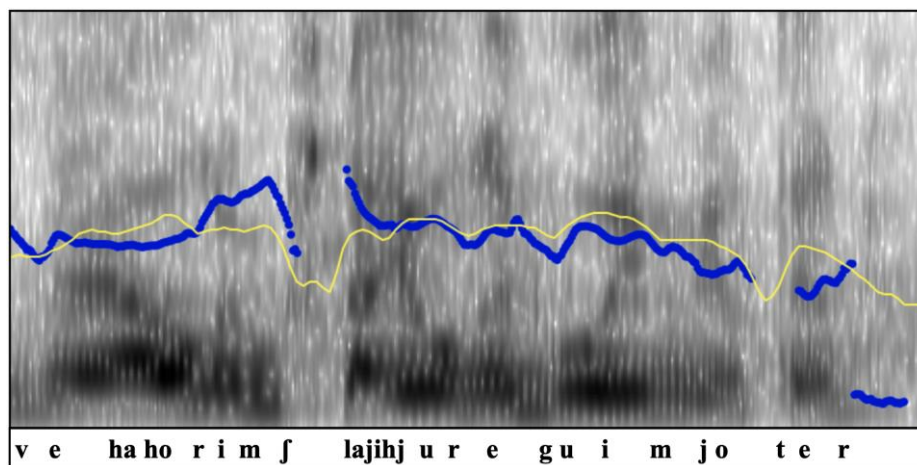


Figure 4: Sentence accent or late peak?

As seen in Figure 4, one should cast doubt on the existence of a prosodic accent on the stressed syllable /im/, and accordingly on the focal status of *reguim* ‘calm’. Furthermore, the high pitch on the stressed syllable /rim/ is ambiguous as regards its assignment as a focus marker on *hahorim* ‘the parents’, as it can also be interpreted as the starting point of standard declination. If one can still regard this (late) declination pick as a focus marker, I believe it should not be taken (pace Ozerov’s claim) as a sign of thetic sentence for two reasons: (1) the subject of this sentence is definitely topical; (2) in my view, theticity is not only a formal feature, but also a functional

<sup>9</sup> Ozerov’s transcription, glossing and translation. The transcription beneath the spectrogram follows the one I usually use, described in note 3 above.

one, viz., presentative, which in this case is not feasible, as the topic (=subject) includes an anaphoric pronoun representing a topic already discussed in the discourse, while the NP itself is common knowledge, as well as an associative part of the common background by the virtue of a necessary relationship to the topic's referent ('she'; viz., 'her parents'). Forthetic sentences in spoken Hebrew see Izre'el 2024; Izre'el, forthcoming. Therefore, in spite of the non-standard prosodic structure of this sentence, I cannot see the objection expressed by Ozerov as valid in this case.

In general, the analyzing linguist is not in the position where he can tell the speaker's intentions. Linguists can only follow the side of the hearer, and even when doing so, there is no way they can totally identify themselves with the hearer, who may have some shared knowledge and background with the speaker. Ozerov, indeed, shows examples of items that can be interpreted as either comments, i.e., when first introduced into the discourse, or as topics, if they are also used as "further-oriented introduction", i.e., items that will function as topics for the successive discourse. In my view, an analysis of a referent which serves as a start for a newly established discourse chunk does not obstruct its analysis as comment. In a similar vein, Ozerov claims, that

[o]ccasionally the move performed by the NP accomplishes merely a local attention shift to a referent which is expected to be relevant for the upcoming discourse. It cannot be regarded as a "comment" under the current definitions of this concept. However, this information is also not a "topic", as the subsequent clause is not structured yet, let alone as about it. (§2)

Ex. 13 (Ozerov's ex. 8) is a case in point.

- (13) A: *Dan.* 'Dan'  
 B: *m* 'mhm'  
 A: *jef l-i fee'LA.* 'Can I ask a question?'  
 EXT to-1SG question  
 B: *ken.* 'Yes.'  
 ...1.7...  
 A: *miL'χEmet-leva'NON ||* 'The (2006) Lebanon war.'  
**war.of-Lebanon**  
 B: *nu ?* 'OK?'  
 ...1.8...

Continuation:

A: What do you think, what percentage of the population, somewhere deep inside, ...1.7..., thinks tha::t, that it's cool. .. That there is a war. (The Haifa corpus; Winds of War 21.5"–37.1")

If the definition of *comment* must include its dependency on topic, Ozerov's point of view is justified. However, if taking into consideration the alternative discussed above, I can't see why the presentative unipartite sentence *milχemet levanon* 'the Lebanon war' cannot be regarded as comment (and predicate, for that matter). Its status as regards the continuing discourse is not a

matter of syntactic analysis, which is in my interest, but of discourse analysis, informational structure, and interactional analysis.

Another interesting case is brought forward by Ozerov (ex. 6; cited below in a larger context as ex. 14 with Figure 5; you can listen to the audio file of Figure 5 [here](#)). The speaker is looking at an atlas, discovering locations he had visited in a trip to China and Mongolia. Following a short comment on Mongolia, he continues to point at such locations:

(14) ..2.25”.. 'hine seʃu'an | ju'nan | 'ejfo ju'nan | 'hine /  
 PRES Sichuan Yunan where Yunan PRES

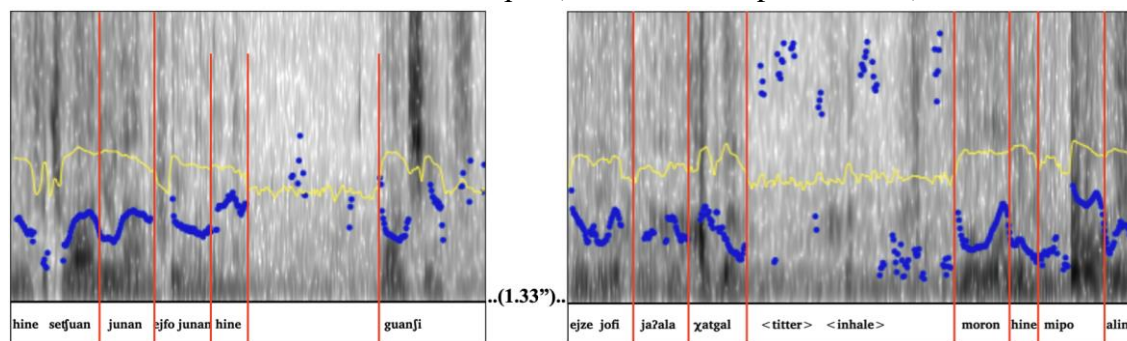
“Here is Sichuan; Yunan; where is Yunan? Here (it is);”

..1.33”..guan'ʃi | ..3.66”.. 'ejze 'jofi || jaʔala || 'χatgal ||  
 Guanxi which beauty wow Hatgal

“Guanxi; ... Great! Wow! Hatgal!”

..0.8”.. <titter> ..0.5”.. <inhale> ..0.28”.. 'moron | 'hine || mi='po | a'linu –  
 Mörön PRES from=here we.went.up

‘Mörön; ... Look: From here, we went up – (CoSIH; OCh\_sp1\_027-039)



**Figure 5:** Spectrogram, F0 and intensity curves of ex. 14

You can listen to the audio file of Figure 5 [here](#)

As noted correctly by Ozerov, finding Mörön on the map is an opportunity for the speaker to use it as an anchor for indicating a trip he and his friends took from there. Yet, while analyzing the information module<sup>10</sup> *moron* ‘Mörön’ as comment, thus continuing the speaker’s route of discovering known locations on the map, I am reluctant to define it also as a topic for the following comment (although *moron* may be regarded as *discourse* topic), but as an anchor for what follows, or more specifically for the adverbial phrase *mi=po* ‘from here’ (for discourse anchoring see Izre’el 2018a: §4; 2018b: §6; see also above, re ex. 6). As already stated above, its status as regards the continuing discourse is not a matter of syntactic analysis, which is in my interest, but of discourse analysis, informational structure, and interactional analysis. It will further be noted, that the PRES particle *hine*, which follows a minor (“continuing”) prosodic boundary, is always located at sentence initial position or consisting of a complete sentence on its own as is the case here (Izre’el 2023). This fact further indicates that the preceding locality name *moron* ‘Mörön’ consists a sentence in itself. The prosodic contour of this sentential NP, perceived as one in a list of locations rather than as a topic for the following string, the module *moron* thus continues the string of the isotonic modules *yunan* | ... *hine* | ... *guanʃi* |, interrupted by the module *ejfo yunan* | which carries a slightly different, although very similar contour, and the insert ‘*ejze* ‘*jofi* ||

<sup>10</sup> For this term, see Izre’el 2020: §2.1.1.

*jaʔala* || *ʕatgal* || (on isotony, or intonational parallelism, see Izre’el 2020: §3.7.1.1; on inserts see *op. cit.*, §3.7.2.1).

As suggested by Ozerov in his contribution, combining the syntactic framework which allows unipartite sentences with interactional dynamic approach will be an interesting domain for future research.

#### 4 Final thoughts

Every theoretical persuasion has its own approach to the analysis of language, along with a set of axioms, a set of working customs and a more or less appropriate terminology.

Terminology has two contrasting facets. On the one hand, it tends to preserve traditional meanings and may prevent users from seeing beyond tradition. On the other hand, it tends to absorb different meanings and interpretations depending on new methods and influential trends, among other things. More significantly, terminology for linguistic categories is almost by definition obsolete, as language is not a concrete substance but is a fluid mass molded by infinite variation characterized by never-ending modification. As beautifully described by John Fowles in his book “The Tree”:

As we watch, it [nature; SI] is so to speak rewriting, reformulating, repainting, rephotographing itself. It refuses to stay fixed and fossilized in the past, as both the scientist and the artist feel it somehow ought to; and both will generally try to impose this fossilization on it. (Fowles 1979: 19)

Thus, any term, notion or concept of a category is never determined as representing a unique referent but as an array of different, yet closely related elements by some virtues that they share, and such that have vague boundaries and can share features with elements that are categorized differently (Aarts *et al.* 2004). It should be further be noted at this point, that my view of the predicate, while suggesting indeed that it may be seen as the representation of the comment, is still explicitly hedged by noting that it is the *default* representation of it.

Broadening this understanding, we should be aware that every set of linguistic features is only a model, an abstract representation of any analyzed linguistic domain.

Good philosophers prune the chaos of reality and train it into fixed shapes, thereby forcing it to yield valuable and delicious fruit *or at least in theory*. (Fowles 1979: 7; my emphasis)

Science has little time for minor exceptions. But all nature, like all humanity, is made of minor exceptions, of entities that in some way, however scientifically disregardable, do not conform to the general rule. ... I see little hope of any recognition of it until we accept ... that ... the heart of thus art lies in our own personal nature and its relationship to other nature; never in nature as a collection of ‘things’ outside us. (Fowles 1979: 28-29)

Ozerov rightly claims, that

interlocutors do not structure their contributions or interpret others’ speech by identifying topics, comments, foci, or predicates. Instead, they navigate through the interactive discourse relying on local communicative instructions which indicate attention requirements, relevance, local discourse moves, interactionally structured discourse relations, epistemic management, emotive stance and more. (§2)



is seen as static syntax and makes a sharp distinction between syntax per se and other fields of linguistic inquiry, which — in contrast to Generative syntax — takes cognizance of language use like IS (Wedgwood 2005: §2.4.1). While Dynamic Syntax is aimed at replacing “static” syntax, Ozerov suggests that the functional framework proffered in Izre’el 2022a (and previously in Izre’el 2018a; 2018b) be combined with interactional dynamic syntax, and I am looking very much forward to the implementation of this combined framework on natural language data and see whether a corpus driven approach is compatible with such a combined framework.

The issue brought up by Ozerov’s discussion is far greater than this claim, however, and raises the question what is the aim and meaning of linguistic analysis. This issue is too broad and profound to be dealt here. Aside from the obvious power that drives linguists to do what their do (i.e., enjoying themselves), I believe that most of active linguists would tend to answer that question by saying that we strive to learn how language works, or, simply, how do we understand each other. Now, as shown in both Halevy’s and Ozerov’s rejoinders, each linguist — and each theoretical persuasion — has its own approach to study this matter. I myself hold two strong beliefs: (1) that this question will not find its answer until the enigma of the brain activity will be solved, if ever; (2) that there is no definite truth. At this juncture, I beg your indulgence and cite John Godfrey Saxe’s version for the old Hindustani elephant story about the strive for ultimate knowledge:

#### **The Blind Men and The Elephant**

It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,  
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),  
that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,  
against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:  
"God bless me! but the elephant, is nothing but a wall!"

The second feeling of the tusk, cried: "Ho! what have we here,  
so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,  
this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,  
the squirming trunk within his hands, "I see," quoth he,  
the elephant is very like a snake!"

The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:  
"What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain," quoth he;  
"Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree."

The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; "E'en the blindest man  
can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,  
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,  
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,  
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,  
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,

and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!

And in the same spirit:

So, oft in linguistic wars, the disputants, I ween,  
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,  
and prate about the elephant, not one of them has seen!

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