

Contextualising the Teaching of Biblical Hebrew¹

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1. Introduction

Last autumn, I was in the Philippines for a ‘discourse for translation’ workshop on Exodus 1-12. All the Filipino MTTs in the workshop had previously studied Hebrew at seminary in Manila and I was already aware, from previous workshops in the country, of two important features that N.W. Austro-nesian languages of that country share with Biblical Hebrew:

- they are VS/VO languages (see §2);
- they are aspect-prominent languages (see §3).

In addition,

- they are pro-drop languages (see §4).

My starting point in the workshop was therefore the above points of similarity between Hebrew as the source language (SL) and the participants’ mother tongues as receptor languages (RLs). They analysed the RL texts they had brought to the workshop and found that variations in the order of constituents were indeed consistent with the way constituents are ordered in VS/VO languages. They also learnt that the same variations are found in Biblical Hebrew. In similar fashion, they observed that verbs in their texts were marked for aspect, rather than tense, and that the same is true of Hebrew.

Although the participants observed these parallels between the SL and their mother tongues, they also brought to the workshop certain contradictory assumptions that they had internalised about Hebrew—assumptions that I had to keep on countering. It eventually transpired that their seminary professors had made little or no reference to the similarities between Biblical Hebrew and Philippine languages. Instead, they had taught Hebrew from the same textbook (Weingreen 1959) that I had studied in the 1960’s and, consequently, had employed traditional terms developed for tense-prominent SVO languages of Northern Europe that are not pro-drop and do not relate readily to languages of the Philippines.

At the end of the workshop, one mother tongue translator (MTT) remarked that, had he known of the parallels between Philippine languages and Biblical Hebrew, he would have found the learning of the latter much easier. His remark led me to raise the matter with a couple of seminary professors who teach Hebrew in Manila. It also promoted me to offer this paper to BT2010, since it may well be the case that others who are responsible for teaching Hebrew to aspiring translators of the Old Testament have not thought of exploiting similarities with the RLs, either. I am thinking particularly of countries in Africa and the Indian sub-continent where languages are spoken that are aspect-prominent, as well as Mexico, with its many minority languages of the VS/VO type.

I start, then, with a brief discussion of constituent order in VS/VO languages. I then turn to Bhat’s (1999) distinction between tense-prominent, aspect-prominent and mood-prominent languages, before making some brief remarks about pro-drop languages. Each section includes some observations about how a valuable course book such as John Dobson’s (2005) *Learn Biblical Hebrew* could be adapted to different language situations around the world.

¹ This paper was presented at the 2010 Bible Translation (BT2010) conference held at Horsleys Green, UK in July 2010 under the auspices of the European Training Programme (ETP) of SIL International.

2. Variations in Constituent Order in VS/VO languages

One productive way of classifying languages is according to the way they commonly order the subject (S), verb (V) and object (O) in **narrative** texts. Nearly every language in the world falls into one of three types:²

S V O (e.g. English, Chinese)

S O V (e.g. Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Korean, Japanese)

VS/VO (e.g. N.W. Austronesian languages of the Philippines, Biblical Hebrew, Koiné Greek, Oto-Manguean languages of Mexico).³

To establish whether a language is of the VS type, I concentrate on narrative propositions that make a comment about a topic when the topical subject is a noun or noun phrase (NP). ‘Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law’ (Ex 18:24a) is such a proposition. The subject noun ‘Moses’ is the propositional topic and the rest of the proposition (‘listened to the voice of his father-in-law’) makes a comment about him.⁴

I consider a language to be of the VS type if it is common in narratives for NP subject-topics to follow the verb.⁵ This is illustrated below for Ex 18:24a in Hebrew and Balangao (a N.W. Austronesian language spoken in Luzon and east Bontoc province in the north of the Philippines):⁶

24a	וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל הָתָנּוּ	&.listened (V) Moses (S) to.the.voice of.his.father.in.law ‘Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law’
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		V	S	O						
24a	Yachi	yag	enafurot	Moses	hen	anchi	tugun	atogangana	an	hiya.
	that	and	obeyed	Moses	DT	that	advice	parent-in-law	NM	3s
	‘Then Moses obeyed the advice of his father-in-law to him.’									

One characteristic of many VS/VO languages is that, although it is most common in narratives for the verb to be initial in propositions and sentences, some topical subjects and focal constituents precede it. Such variations are readily explainable by reference to a template proposed by Dik (1989:363).

The template is: **P1 P2 V X**, where:

position P1 can be occupied by one or more ‘TOPIC constituents’;⁷

position P2 can be occupied by a FOCUS constituent (to give it contrastive or emphatic prominence).

X is the starting position for all the non-verbal constituents of the proposition.⁸

² See Dryer 1997.

³ The Timugon Murut language of Sabah is similar; see Brewis and Levinsohn 1991.

⁴ This section is based on §0.3 of Levinsohn 2010. See *ibid.* §2.1 for a definition of propositional topic.

⁵ See also Longacre 1995:332.

⁶ The draft translations of Exodus into Balango that I cite were produced by MTT Robyn Lucasi.

Abbreviations are as follows: DT: determiner; IMPF imperfective; LK linker; NM: noun marker; SP spacer; TH theme; 1s/3s 1st/3rd singular; 2p 2nd plural.

⁷ Levinsohn (2010 §3.1) calls Dik’s ‘topic constituents’ ‘points of departure’.

⁸ Inter-propositional connectives do not feature in the template, which also explains why topical subjects in many Bantu languages precede the verb, whereas non-topical subjects follow it.

See *ibid.* §4.1 for discussion of focus, propositional topic and point of departure.

ii) with C before S, to ‘emphasise’ (give prominence to) C, as in Ex 18:18c:

18c	כִּי־ כָבֵד מְאֹדָּה הָיָה לְךָ	for heavy for.you (C) the.thing (S) ‘(For) the work is too heavy for you.’
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	C		S		
18c	Ammag	chakar	ha	way	tarafaho
	Utterly	big	that	LK	work
	‘That work is extremely big.’				

The above examples illustrate that, very often, the order of constituents in a Hebrew sentence may well be the order that a Filipino would naturally use in the equivalent sentence in his or her language.¹¹ If constituent order is taught with reference to English, in contrast, Filipinos MTTs may well not realise that there are similarities in the way that the SL and RLs arrange information.

When John Dobson (ibid.) writes in §2.12 about constituent order, he has to point out that, in English, ‘subject-before-the-verb is normal in sentences that give information’, whereas narrative sentences in Hebrew usually place the verb before the subject. For Filipinos, no such mismatch is found. Instead, they can be taught that the order of constituents in Hebrew follows similar principles to those applicable to their mother tongue. The same is true for speakers of Oto-Manguean languages of Mexico and native speakers of other VS/VO languages.

3. Tense-prominent versus Aspect-prominent languages

In 1999, Indian linguist D.N.S. Bhat published a book called *The Prominence of Tense, Aspect and Mood* to explain differences in the way that the main language families of India handle tense, aspect and mood. He concluded that there are three types of languages, as far as these features are concerned:

- tense-prominent (e.g. Dravidian, English, German, Finnish)
- aspect-prominent (e.g. Indo-Aryan, N.W. Austronesian languages of the Philippines, Biblical Hebrew, Koiné Greek, Cross-River & Kwa languages of Nigeria, Chadic)
- mood-prominent (e.g. Burmese).

Bhat claimed (p. 120) that a language that is X*-prominent grammaticalizes X to a greater degree than Y or Z, and also makes X more obligatory, more systematic, and more pervasive than Y or Z. (*X may be tense, aspect or mood; Y and Z will be the other two categories.)

He continued (p. 161), ‘the most prominent category would be represented by inflectional markers, which are closest to the verbal base, whereas other categories would be represented by particles or clitics, or by auxiliary verbs, which are less close to the verbal base than inflectional markers’. In English, for example, present versus past tense is associated with the verbal base (e.g. *talk-talked, is-was*), whereas aspect (*be...-ing, have...-ed*) and mood (*must, should*) are represented by auxiliary verbs, so English is tense-prominent.

Because English is a tense-prominent language, grammars of Hebrew for English speakers have to address the issue of the tense that should be used when a particular Hebrew verb is translated into English: should it be in the past or the present or the future? (See Dobson pp. 253-61 for examples.)

Such a question seldom needs to arise when Hebrew is related to languages of the Philippines, however, because, like Hebrew, they are aspect-prominent. In Ex 9:1d (below), for instance, what is relevant to a Filipino translator is not whether אָמַר should be translated ‘says’, ‘has said’ or ‘said’ (ibid.

¹¹ SIL member Rudy Barlaan (p.c.) told me that, when translating the Old Testament into Isnâg (a N.W. Austronesian language spoken in Luzon and north Apayo in the north of the Philippines), his first option was always to preserve the order of constituents in Hebrew, as the resulting structure was often the natural one.

p. 28), but that it is ‘perfective’ in Hebrew (a *qtl* from—see below).

1d	כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִים	Thus said (<i>qtl</i>) YHWH the.God of.the.Hebrews ‘This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says/has said/said:’
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1d Yato hen imfagan¹² APUDYUS way Apudyus anchichay Hebrew;
this DT TH.say.TH GOD LK God those Hebrew
‘This is what GOD the God of the Hebrews told.’¹³

Modern Hebrew grammars do recognise that the language is not tense-prominent. Dobson, for example, writes about the verb נָתַן ‘give’: ‘the time to which the statement refers can only be discovered from the context’ (p. 27). Nevertheless, the traditional terms that the participants in the workshop in the Philippines had learnt in seminary were, to put it politely, unhelpful. For example, Ex 12:12 (below) begins with two *wqtl* forms that they had learnt to call ‘perfect’ because of their morphological similarity to *qtl* forms. How much easier would it have been for them to have learnt that such forms correspond to imperfectives in languages of the Philippines.

12a	וְעָבַרְתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ-מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה	‘& I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night’
12b	וְהָבִיתִי כָל-בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאָדָם	‘& I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt—from men...’

12a Te hen hiyachi way lafi, gégga-ayê hen enteroy Egypt
for DT that LK night, roam.around.IMPF.1s DT entire Egypt

12b yag pédtê aminay pango way larae way a-anà hen iyEgypt
and kill.IMPF.1s all first-born LK male LK children DT Egyptians

‘For in that night, I will roam around all Egypt & I will kill all the first born male children of the Egyptians...’

In this connection, even Dobson associates the aspectual term ‘perfective’ with the ‘Suffix Conjugation’ and ‘imperfective’ with the ‘Prefix Conjugation’ (p. 252).¹⁴ It is entirely appropriate to employ the terms ‘prefix’ and ‘suffix’ to describe the way that Hebrew verbs are conjugated. However, it would be far more insightful to reserve the terms ‘perfective’ and ‘imperfective’ for descriptions of the **actual** aspect of each verb. For example, I would teach students that:

- Suffix Conjugation (*qtl*) forms have perfective aspect, whereas
- *waw* + Suffix Conjugation (*wqtl*) forms almost always have imperfective aspect.¹⁵

To generalise the above observations, I recommend that, when Hebrew verb forms are taught to MTTs who speak aspect-prominent languages, they should be related to comparable perfective and imperfective forms in their languages. Discussion of the tense to use when translating them into a tense-prominent language such as English should be avoided unless the students also speak a tense-prominent language. And, regardless of the language type, let’s stop describing the aspect of Hebrew verb forms by reference to purported base forms that have the opposite aspect!

¹² The aspect of *infagan* is perfective.

¹³ I find that, if native speakers regularly translate imperfective verbs into English, French or Spanish with a present tense, then the language is usually aspect-prominent.

¹⁴ On p. 38, Dobson describes the perfective *qtl* form as ‘completed, single, or definite action’. It would be better to say that, ‘When the perfective describes an event, the event is portrayed **as a whole**’ (Levinsohn 2010 §5.3.2).

As far as I am aware, Dobson never states that it is the speaker or writer’s **choice** to portray an event as perfective or imperfective.

¹⁵ For one way of presenting Hebrew verbs from an aspectual point of view, see the first part of Levinsohn 2001.

4. Pro-drop languages¹⁶

The last example (Ex 12:12) shows that both Hebrew and Balangao are pro-drop languages. In other words, the subject of the propositions is indicated not by an independent pronoun such as English ‘I’, but by an affix attached to the verb.

Furthermore, the verb affix is not the equivalent of an independent pronoun. This is because the option exists for a pronoun to be used **in addition to** the affix. See, for example, Ex 14:14b (repeated below). In both Hebrew and Balangao, the fact that the subject is second person plural is indicated both by the verb affix (obligatory) and by the independent pronoun (which is in P1 to mark the switch of attention from Joshua):

14b	וְאַתֶּם תִּחְרְשׁוּן : פ	&.you you.will.keep.quiet '(and) you need only to be still.'
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14b Yag **chàyu** wat an-**ayu** yanggay ammag gumiginnang.
and 2p SP will-2p only utterly silent
'And you will just keep quiet.'

On two occasions I have come across translators who were using English versions as their source text and were inserting independent subject pronouns in their RL draft whenever one was used in English, even though the RL was pro-drop.

- In one instance in India, testing of such drafts revealed that the hearers could not work out the referent of the pronoun, so the pronoun was replaced by a NP to indicate the subject of every independent clause! What really surprised me was that the mother tongue of the Indian missionaries who were responsible for the translation was also a pro-drop language. It was apparent that they had been misled by the presence of independent pronouns in the English versions they had consulted.
- In the other instance, translators into a VS/VO language of the Philippines had placed an independent subject pronoun before the verb whenever the Good News Bible used one, again with disastrous results.

As far as I can tell, Dobson does not state explicitly that Hebrew is a pro-drop language. Instead, one is left to deduce from the glosses given to Hebrew verb forms that they indicate the subject (see §4.8, where the subject pronouns are introduced). Dobson also has a couple of useful sections in which he discusses circumstances in which a subject noun or pronoun precedes the verb (pp. 91, 245-49).

As I have already mentioned, the presence of independent pronouns in English versions has been observed to lead to unfortunate results in a couple of pro-drop languages. It therefore seems advisable at an early stage in a Hebrew course to point out to speakers of pro-drop languages that the presence or absence of subject pronouns in Hebrew tends to correspond to the way they are used in their mother tongue.

¹⁶ In the discussion that followed the presentation of this paper, John Roberts pointed out that the term ‘pro-drop’ (Whaley 1997:48) is misleading, as it implies that it is the norm for an independent pronoun to be present, whereas the reverse is in fact true for the languages that I here describe as ‘pro-drop’.

5. Conclusion

Whether or not English is the means of instruction for a course on Biblical Hebrew, it is important to take into account the type of language spoken by the target audience.

When teaching a group of **Korean** students, we should bear in mind that they speak a SOV language that is tense-prominent and is not pro-drop.

When teaching a group of **Indian** students, we should also bear in mind that they all speak SOV languages. If their mother tongue is a pro-drop Dravidian language such as Tamil, we will need to discuss tense when teaching about Hebrew verb forms. If their mother tongue is an Indo-Aryan language such as Hindi, however, we will want to major on the aspectual similarities between their language and Hebrew, but we will need to highlight the fact that Hebrew is a pro-drop language, whereas many Indo-Aryan languages are not.

When teaching a group of **Bantu** speakers, we should bear in mind that they speak a tense-prominent language that is SVO (provided the subject is also the topic of the sentence), and that they almost never prepose focal constituents to give them prominence. (Bantu languages are typically pro-drop.)¹⁷

When, in contrast, we teach a group of **Nigerians** who speak a pro-drop Cross-River language or a Chadic language such as Hausa, we will want to major on the aspectual similarities between their language and Hebrew.

Finally, when teaching a group of **Filipino** or **Mexican** MTTs, we will want to exploit the similarities between their languages and Hebrew in the areas of constituent order, aspect and pro-drop. If we do so, they will grasp these aspects of the language of the Old Testament much more quickly and accurately than if they continue to be taught in a traditional way that relates these features to English or some other tense-prominent SVO language.

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¹⁷ In the discussion that followed the presentation of this paper, David Bell mentioned that he had found it useful, when teaching Biblical Hebrew in Spain, to point out that the distribution of the object marker **אֵת** is similar to that of the Spanish object marker **a**.