What I learned about Hebrew null subjects by talking to Adriana Belletti in Siena in the summer of 2009

UR SHLONSKY
Université de Genève
ur.shlonsky@unige.ch

As is fairly well known, referential null subjects in Hebrew root clauses can only be first or second person. Landau (2004) shows that this *person restriction* does not hold in complement clauses so that third person null subjects are possible, but only if the complement verb is future tense and the matrix verb a member of the class which cross-linguistically selects for subjunctive mood. In this environment, a null subject is possible but it is not referentially free - it must have an antecedent in the matrix clause. Less well known in the narrow in the syntactic literature is the fact that referentially-dependent null subjects are also grammatical in non-complement clauses (Ariel 1990; Gutman 2004; Melnik 2007). As the examples below illustrate, they are licensed in relative clauses, (1a), clausal complements to nouns, (1b) temporal and conditional adjunct clauses, (1c,d) and comparative clauses, (1e), a.o.

(1) a. Dani pirsem   et ha sefer še   ___ katav be šana še 'avra.
        Dani published acc the book that ___ wrote on year that passed
        'Dani published the book that he wrote last year.'

     b. Dani maxa   'al   ha ciyun še   ___ qibel.
        Dani protested about the note that ___ got
        'Dani protested about the note that he got.'

     c. Dani yaca   mi ha bayt axarey še   ___ gamar le 'exol.
        Dani went out from the house after   that ___ finished to eat
        'Dani left the house after he finished eating.'

d. Lod hayta   zoxa ba   turnir 'im / 'ilu ___ hayta menacaxat
   Lod would have won in-the series if   ___   had   beaten

   et   Haifa.

   acc Haifa

   'Lod would have won the series if it had beaten Haifa.'

e. Gil yoter gavoha mi   ma   še   ___ xašav.
   Gil more tall   than what that ___ thought
   'Gil is taller than he thought.'

The descriptive generalization here is **that null subjects** (of the non-*Landau* variety,) **are possible in clauses which otherwise disallow long subject extraction.** The distribution of referential (third person) null subjects in Hebrew is inversely correlated with the extractability of subjects. This generalization renders unlikely an explanation of the distribution of these null subjects in terms of (*sideward* or otherwise non-canonical) movement – proposed for partial pro drop in Brazilian Portuguese by Ferreira (2009) and Rodrigues (2004). Another explanation should be sought for.

The explanation I suggest proceeds in several steps. First, I argue that Hebrew null subjects lack a [person] feature (which is why they cannot be employed referentially but only as expletives or quasi-referential pronouns, see Shlonsky (2009)).

Second, the null subjects are moved to the left periphery of the clause in which they are externally merged. In a left-peripheral, phase-edge position, they are accessible to binding by an antecedent in the matrix. Binding by a matrix argument supplies pro with the missing [person] feature but imposes co-indexing and hence obligatory co-reference with the antecedent.

Movement to the left periphery must be triggered. I argue that the null subjects are attracted to the left periphery *qua* topics. Null topics, familiar from other languages, are only interpretable at the root. But since the Hebrew null topics are bereft of [person], and the identification of the topic from the discourse is not a syntactic process by means of which a missing feature can be assigned, root null topics in Hebrew are ungrammatical.

The Hebrew null topics may remain in a subordinate left periphery and never reach the root only when they are syntactically barred from doing so. Thus, null topics are only possible in environments which bar subject extraction to a higher clause, (1). In languages with fully featured null topics, null topics trapped inside such islands would fail to be discoursally identified but, in Hebrew, precisely because they have a missing feature that is supplied by a matrix argument, they can be properly identified without (root) access to the discourse.

References

Ariel, M. (1990) *Accessing Noun-Phrase Antecedents*. London: Routledge.

Ferreira, M. (2009) Null subjects and finite control in Brazilian Portuguese. In J. Nunes (Ed.), *Minimalist essays on Brazilian Portuguese syntax*, 17–50. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Gutman, E. (2004) Third person null subjects in Hebrew, Finnish and Romanian: an accessibility-theoretic account. *Journal of Linguistics* 40(3), 463–490.

Landau, I. (2004) The scale of finiteness and the calculus of control. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 22(4), 811–877.

Melnik, N. (2007) Extending partial pro-drop in Modern Hebrew: A comprehensive analysis. In Stefan Müller (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 14th International Conference on Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar*, (pp 173–193). Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.

Rodrigues, C. (2004) Impoverished morphology and A-movement out of Case domains. College Park: University of Maryland Ph.D dissertation.

Shlonsky, U. (2009) Hebrew as a partial null-subject language. *Studia Linguistica* 63(1), 133–157.