Predicate Nominal Sentences with the Hebrew *ze* and Its Russian Counterpart *eto*

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Abstract

The article is devoted to Hebrew predicate nominal sentences in which the lexical item *ze* fulfills a copula-like function. A hypothesis is put forward according to which the demonstrative *ze* has acquired its new function under the influence of Slavic contact languages.

Keywords

predicate nominal sentences – Hebrew – Slavic – copula

Introduction

In this article, I discuss the lexical item *ze* ‘this’ in Modern Hebrew, especially its occurrence in predicate nominal sentences. I argue that the use of *ze* as a copula-like element in predicate nominals, as well as, plausibly, its occurrence in pseudoclefts and clefts, is a result of contact with Slavic languages.

Demonstrative and Copular *ze* in Hebrew

The distribution of the lexical item *ze* is extremely varied in Modern Hebrew. First, under what plausibly constitutes its most basic use, *ze* functions as a demonstrative (1a), which also has an attributive use illustrated in (1b) and (1c):

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(1) a. طني את זה.
    ten li ?et ze
    give me ACC this
    ‘Give this to me.’

b. הזאиш הזה.
    ha-ʔiš ha-ze
    the-man the-this.m sg
    ‘this man’

c. האישה הזאת.
    ha-ʔiša ha-zot
    the-woman the-this.f sg
    ‘this woman’

Under the attributive use, the demonstrative agrees with the modified noun in gender and number. Ze represents the masculine singular form.

An additional, strongly related, use is one whereby ze appears as a “pointer” subject (Geach 1968):

(2) זה דני.
    ze dani
    this Dani
    ‘This is Dani.’

The fact that the same item is used as both a demonstrative and a pointer is not surprising; in fact, in many languages, including English, both constructions contain the same word (e.g., this). Both the demonstrative and the pointer uses of ze can be traced back to Biblical Hebrew.

However, ze is characterized by additional uses, which have entered the language in its Revival period. One of these is the copula-like function that this item receives in predicate nominal sentences such as (3):

(3) דני זה חבר טוב שלتي.
    dani ze ħaver tov šeli.
    Dani this friend good my
    ‘Dani is my good friend.’

This construction has received considerable attention in the literature on the syntax and semantics of Hebrew copular sentences (e.g. Sichel 1997; Heller