Voice and Object-Marking in Biblical Hebrew: A Minimalist Analysis

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1   Introduction

The general association between active, transitive verbs and accusative case has been summarized as follows by Burzio (1986).

> **Burzio's generalization:** only a verb that assigns a theta role to its subject (*agent*, *experiencer*, etc.) can assign accusative case to its object.

Biblical Hebrew features a number of apparent exceptions to this generalization, where the internal argument of a morphologically medio-passive (*niphal*) or passive (*hophal*/*pual*) verb co-occurs with the direct object marker *'et*.

(1) way-yaggēd   mōše 'et-dibre   hā-ʿām   'el-'adōnāi
     CONJ-tell.ACT.3MS Moses ACC-words.MPL the-people to-Lord
     'And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.'   (Ex 19:9)

(2) way-**yuggad**   lĕ-ribkā 'et-dibrē   'ēśāw bĕna-h hag-gādōl
     CONJ-tell.PASS.**3MS** to-Rebecca ACC-words.**MPL** Esau son-her the-eldest
     'And the words of Esau her eldest son were (lit. 'was') reported to Rebecca.'
     (Gen 27:42)

Note also the lack of number agreement between the subject and verb in (2). This lack of agreement also seems to hold for gender.

(3) 'ak bĕ-gōrāl **yēḥalēk**   'et-hā-'āreṣ
     still by-lot   divide.MEDPASS.**3MS** ACC-the-land.**3FS**   (Num 26:55)
     'Still, the land will be divided by lot.'

1.1   Previous explanations

- Albrecht (1929) sought to amend many of the examples, and the rest he considered to be underlying impersonal clauses.
- Khan (1984) sought a semantic explanation, noting that all of the subjects in these clauses are non-volitional participants.
- Hasselbach (2013) suggested that *'et* may serve a discourse-related ('demonstrative') function in these clauses.

The present proposal has the most in common with that of Khan (1984), whose observations with respect to the semantics of these clauses will be structurally implemented here.

2   Crosslinguistic parallels

A similar construction has been documented in Icelandic (the so-called 'New Passive'). In New Passive clauses, a non-thematic expletive occurs in first position (Icelandic being a strict V2 language), while the internal argument receives accusative case.

(4) það var barið   lítinn   strá
     it was beaten.NOM.SG little.ACC boy.ACC
     'A little boy was beaten.'   (Eythórsson 2008:173)

The same basic phenomenon can be seen in Ukrainian as well.

(5) stadion   bulo   zbudovano   v 1948 roc'i
     stadium.ACC.MASC be.PAST.NEUT build.PART.NEUT in 1948
     'The stadium was built in 1948.'   (Sobin 1985:649)

> This evidence suggests that *Burzio's generalization does not always hold in natural language*, and that case and thematic roles should in fact be separated.
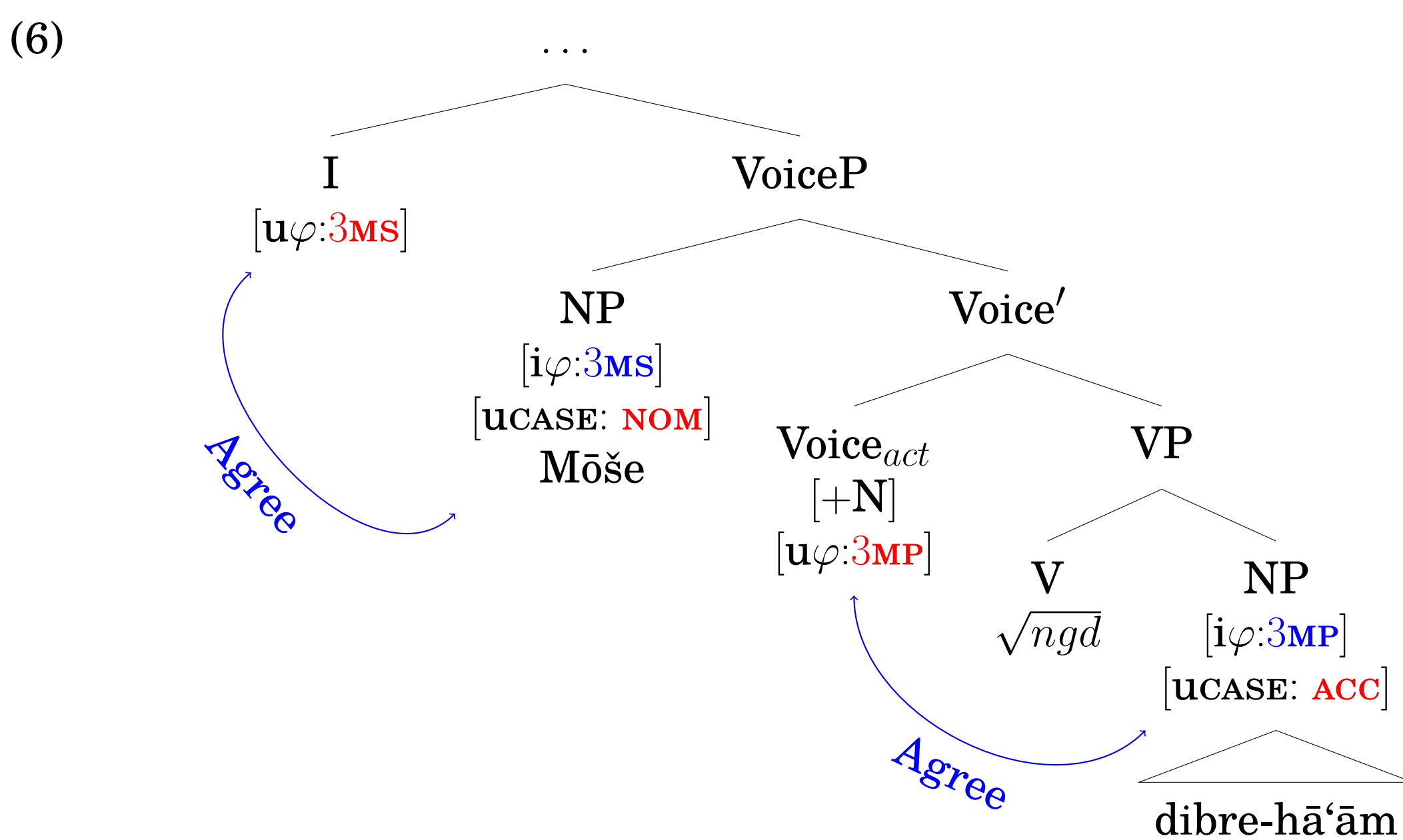
3   Case-marking and syntactic structure

In this proposal, I will outline a purely structural approach to the "*'et* problem, couched within Minimalist syntactic theory (Chomsky 2000, 2001).

3.1   A feature-sharing account of *'et*

In a typical transitive clause, *'et* is the phonological exponent of a syntactic Agree relation – a sharing of φ-features (person, number, gender) – between an active Voice head and a structurally lower direct object (with the presence/absence of *'et* conditioned by the definiteness/specificity of the object).

- Subject-verb agreement arises through a sharing of φ-features with the higher I(nflection) head, which values nominative case on the subject.
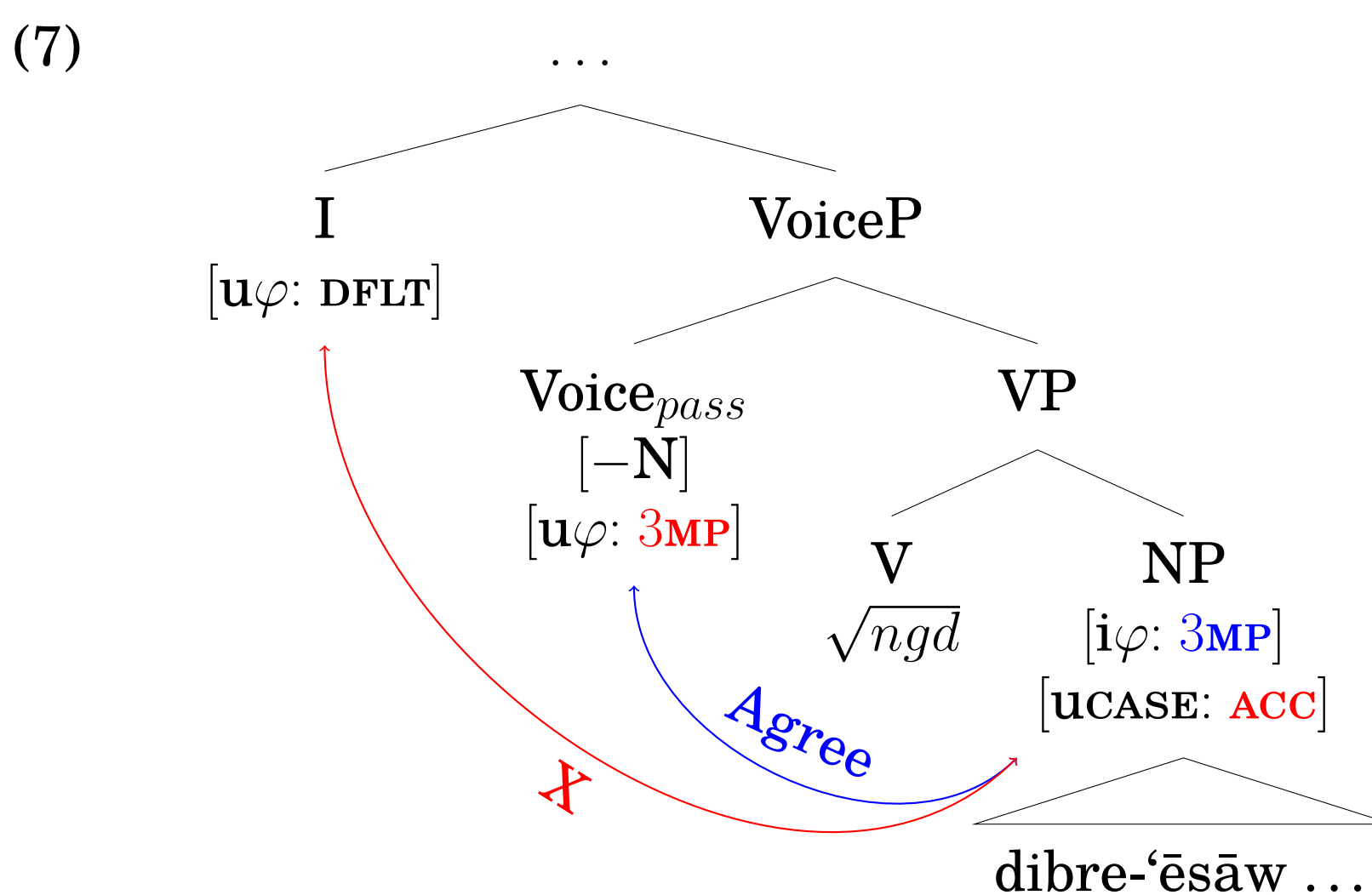
(6)

Within Minimalist theory, Burzio's generalization is accounted for by postulating that only active Voice heads come with a full set of unvalued φ-features, meaning only such heads can value accusative case on an internal argument.

3.2   *'et* in passive clauses

But exceptions to Burzio's generalization can also be accomodated within a feature-checking model of case.

- In Biblical Hebrew – like Icelandic and Ukrainian – non-active Voice heads can come with a full set of unvalued φ-features and thus check the case feature of the internal argument.

(7)

The lack of subject-verb agreement in (2)-(3) may be accounted for in one of two ways:

1. The same NP cannot enter into an Agree relation with two heads. OR
2. I(nflection) is not in a sufficiently local configuration with the NP internal to VP.

> Syntactic operations are often subject to locality considerations, i.e., certain operations can only occur within a particular domain. In Minimalist theory, locality is explained via *phases*, independent domains for interpretation by the semantic & phonological components (see e.g., Gallego 2010)

4   Unaccusatives

There exists a set of related constructions which support this structural account, in that they can be accounted for within the same analytical framework.

- These sentences feature an (active) unaccusative verb, yet the subject is marked with *'et*.

(8) we-'et-hab-barzel   nāpāl   'el-ham-māym
     CONJ-ACC-the-axe.head.3MS fell.3MS to-the-water
     'And the axe head fell into the water.'   (2 Ki 6:5)

> These can be considered fundamentally similar to passive clauses, because the subject of an unaccusative verb is also an underlying *internal* argument (Perlmutter 1978).

4.1   Crosslinguistic parallel

This kind of construction is attested in another East Slavic language – Russian – where the subject of an unaccusative verb can also receive accusative case.

(9) Sestru   korčilo   ot boli
     sister.ACC convulsed from pain
     'My sister convulsed from pain.'   (Harves 2002:31)

4.2   Subject-verb agreement

While the passive clauses tend *not* to show subject-verb agreement, for unaccusatives the opposite is true.

(10) 'et-kol hā-rāʿā   hazzōt bāʾā   ʿālē-nū
      ACC-all the-evil.3FS this.3FS came.3FS upon-us
      'All this evil came upon us.'   (Dan 9:13)

(11) 'et-kol mibrāḥā-w   be-kol 'agappā-w ba-ḥereb   yippōlū
      ACC-all best.men.MPL-his in-all armies-his by.the-sword fall.3MPL
      'All the best men in his armies will fall by the sword.'   (Ezek 17:21)

This may be accounted for by adopting explanation 2 for the lack of subject-verb agreement in passive clauses (see section 3.2 above), and further, by postulating that only Voice$_{pass}$ acts as a phase boundary for agreement.

- Voice$_{pass}$ must have a different denotation from Voice in unaccusative structures, as only in the former is an agent implied.
- Voice$_{unacc}$, in contrast, contributes nothing to the semantic denotation.

(12)   a. $[\![\text{Voice}_{unacc}\text{P}]\!] = \lambda \text{e. V(e) \& Theme(e, x)}$

       b. $[\![\text{Voice}_{pass}\text{P}]\!] = \lambda \text{e.} \exists \text{y [Agent(e, y) \& V(e) \& Theme(e, x)]}$

The existential quantification of the agent may qualify Voice$_{pass}$P as a syntactic phase, preventing I^0 from agreeing with the internal argument (see further Sigurðsson 2011).

5   Conclusion

While perhaps surprising, the presence of *'et* in clauses without an external argument is not without precedent cross-linguistically, and can be accounted for via a structural, feature-sharing model of case, where the thematic properties of the predicate are disconnected from case-marking.

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