Participant Tracking in Biblical Hebrew and Obligatory Explicitation of Anaphors in Translation

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Abstract

Bible translators are often reluctant to refer to participants explicitly in their translation when the source text "only" has a pronoun/anaphor. This is because some of these pronouns/anaphors appear "ambiguous" to them (as they would be, according to the rules and regularities of participant reference in their own language), even at points where, based on the rules and regularities of participant reference in Hebrew, the pronoun/anaphor itself already amounts to an explicit participant identification in the Hebrew and is therefore not ambiguous in the text. This article calls the notion of ambiguity into question and argues that instead of treating such references as ambiguous, they should be treated as instances of clear identification of a participant in the Hebrew, and therefore as part of the information in the source text—information that should be preserved in translation (and, for this reason, made more explicit if that is required by the target language). Thus, exegetes and translators should take rules and regularities of participant reference from clause to clause in Hebrew much more into account. This article will compare different language systems and contrast rules of referring to (major) participants in Hebrew with rules of referring to (major) participants in some European languages, and show how translators can keep the participant identifications as clear as they are in the Hebrew by means of such explicitation, so that this information from the source text is not lost.

Keywords: anaphors; participant tracking; cross-clausal syntax; discourse linguistics; contrastive linguistics; explicitation; translation

Introduction

Bible translators are often reluctant to refer to participants explicitly in their translation when the Hebrew source text "only" has an anaphor (in the form of a pronoun, suffix

pronoun or inflection). Some of these anaphors appear "ambiguous" to exegetes and translators, as indeed they would be according to the rules and regularities of participant tracking in their own target language. The problem is that such anaphors are quite often kept "ambiguous" in translation even at points where, given the rules and regularities of participant tracking in Hebrew from clause to clause, the anaphor itself already amounts to an explicit participant identification in the Hebrew and is therefore not ambiguous in the source text.

In a target language in which the rules and regularities of participant tracking—a "chain of reference" (Mundhenk 2018, 311)—are different from those in Hebrew, the translation will need to refer to participants more explicitly at certain points. Such explicitations are not additions, since the purpose of this type of explicitation is not to "add" explanations to make the translation simple, and easier to understand (even though explicitation might have this effect on the reader). Rather, their purpose is to preserve information already contained in the text that would otherwise be lost. They come under obligatory explicitations, "caused by grammatical differences between [the systems of the] source and target language" and "differences in text-building strategies … between languages" (Becher 2010, 2). In the target text this information is not redundant.

In this contribution I will look at differences in cross-clausal participant tracking between languages (Hebrew in contrast to some other languages) and consider what these differences imply for translators. We should be aware of the contrasts between Hebrew and target languages regarding participant tracking from clause to clause and take these differences into account in our exegesis and when we translate, so as not to lose information contained in the source text. I will also reflect on the nature of such explicitation in translation for this purpose.[1]

Tracking Participants: Syntactic Regularities

In another article (2019) I have explored a number of cross-clausal syntactic regularities in participant tracking, developing a protocol for determining the referent of an anaphor. In the present contribution I will briefly summarise some of these and concentrate instead on differences in cross-clausal participant tracking between languages (Hebrew

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1   Becher (2010) and De Metsenaere and Vandepitte (2017) reflect on the need to distinguish between different types of explicitation in translation. If translators are to preserve the information contained in the source text, they "must be very careful not to simply follow the pattern of their source languages … But whether they mention that character with a name, or a noun, or a pronoun, or whether they leave that character implicit, all of this should be determined completely by what is good style and makes sense in their own language" (Mundhenk 2018, 312), given the cross-clausal syntax of that language.

in contrast to some other languages) and on how a deeper understanding of such differences can and must be reflected in any good Bible translation.

Coreferentiality with a Preceding Object

In Hebrew there is the syntactic regularity that if there is an object (direct or indirect) or object complement (i.e., a prepositional direct or indirect object) in the preceding clause,[2] the anaphoric subject in the current clause is coreferential with that previous object, provided it is of the same gender and number.

Genesis 15:6b is an example (de Regt 1999, 51). After v. 6a ("and he believed in Yahweh"), the anaphoric subject in the current clause v. 6b (וַיַּחְשְׁבֶ֥הָ לּ֖וֹ צְדָקָֽה "and he [Yahweh] reckoned it to him as righteousness") is coreferential with the preceding object, Yahweh. (The current anaphoric object, then, refers to Abram.)

Similarly, the anaphoric subject in 2 Chr 32:21b is coreferential with the object, מַלְאָ֗ךְ, in the preceding clause: ...וַיִּשְׁלַ֣ח יְהוָ֣ה מַלְאָ֗ךְ וַיַּכְחֵ֣ד "and Yahweh sent an angel, and he [the angel] annihilated every mighty warrior … in the army of the king of Assyria" (2 Chr 32:21ab). This analysis of the syntactic regularity can be confirmed by the content of, but does not depend on, the parallels in 2 Kgs 19:35 and Isa 37:36 concerning the angel's action.

By the same token, the anaphoric subject in Num 20:16d is coreferential with the object, מַלְאָ֔ךְ, in the preceding clause: וַיִּשְׁלַ֣ח מַלְאָ֔ךְ וַיֹּצִאֵ֖נוּ מִמִּצְרָ֑יִם "and Yahweh sent an angel, and he [the angel] brought us out of Egypt" (Num 20:16cd). Again, this syntactic regularity is confirmed by, but does not depend on, the contextual information in Exod 14:19 and particularly 23:20–23, 34 and 33:2: it is an angel who will lead and protect Israel on its journey to the promised land (Levine 1993, 491; Gnuse 2017, 17).

In contrast to the Hebrew, these anaphoric subjects would be ambiguous in languages like English and Dutch and information would be lost if they are not made more explicit in translation. It seems surprising and inconsistent when a number of translations (the English RSV, NRSV, NIV, REB, the Dutch NBG, NBV, BGT, and *Die Bybel* in Afrikaans) make the angel the subject only in 2 Chr 32:21b ("… an angel, who …" or as in BGT "… een engel. Die … [… an angel. That one …]") but not in Num 20:16d:

> And the LORD sent an angel who cut off all the mighty warriors … in the camp of the king of Assyria
> (2 Chr 32:21 NRSV)

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2   This object/object complement in the preceding clause would, in terms of semantic roles, refer to the Patient or Recipient of the action (i.e., the entity directly or indirectly affected by the action) in that clause. See Givón (2001, 106–108) for an overview of semantic roles.

and when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice, and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt
(Num 20:16 NRSV)

Verb Combinations

It should be remembered, however, that in some instances the subject and object remain the same in the current clause as in the preceding clause. This applies when the two verbs involved are part of the same movement, action, utterance, cognition/perception, or decision:

and they [Moses and Aaron] *brought* (וַיּוֹצִיאוּ) your fathers out of Egypt and they [Moses and Aaron] *settled* them (וַיֹּשִׁבוּם) [your fathers] in this place
(1 Sam 12:8de)

and Abner … took (לָקַח) Ishbosheth … and brought him over (וַיַּעֲבִרֵהוּ) to Mahanaim
(2 Sam 2:8)

and he [Isaac] called (וַיִּקְרָא) Esau, his elder son,
and he [Isaac, not Esau] said (וַיֹּאמֶר) to him
(Gen 27:1de)

and David feared (וַיִּרָא) Yahweh and he [David, not Yahweh] said/thought (וַיֹּאמֶר)
(2 Sam 6:9)

and Yahweh loved him (אֲהֵבוֹ) [Solomon]
and he [Yahweh, not Solomon] sent (וַיִּשְׁלַח) through Nathan the prophet
(2 Sam 12:24f–25a)

Coreferentiality with a Preceding Discourse Active Subject

If, on the other hand, there is no animate direct or indirect object or object complement in the preceding clause, the anaphoric subject (or, if the subject is already specified, an anaphoric object) in the current clause refers to a previously-mentioned subject that is still active across clauses in the discourse, making such anaphoric subjects a high continuity reference device in Hebrew.[3]

This is what we see at work in 1 Sam 15:27b (וַיַּחֲזֵק בִּכְנַף־מְעִילוֹ "and he seized the corner of his robe"). In the preceding clause v. 27a (וַיִּסֹב שְׁמוּאֵל לָלֶכֶת) there is no object, so that the anaphoric subject of וַיַּחֲזֵק in the current clause v. 27b will have to be coreferential with another antecedent. The anaphoric subject of וַיַּחֲזֵק "he seized" is Saul, the discourse active subject (and not Samuel, the local, immediately preceding subject).

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3   As Givón observes, "referential continuity in natural discourse is, overwhelmingly, a matter of subject continuity" (Givón 2017, 339).

The same pattern is at work in Exod 34:5c and 6b, where it is Yahweh, the discourse active subject throughout vv. 5–7, who does the proclaiming, not Moses. The anaphoric pronouns in עִמּוֹ and עַל־פָּנָיו in the preceding clauses (vv. 5b and 6a) are not an object, so that the current subject that follows in vv. 5c and 6b is not coreferential with those anaphoric pronouns. Instead, the subject (Yahweh) remains the same. In English the subject continuity is shown by omitting the pronoun:

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וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בֶּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שָׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְשֵׁם יְהוָה

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and Yahweh descended in the cloud
and *He* [Yahweh] stood with *him* there
and [Ø] proclaimed the name of Yahweh
(Exod 34:5abc)

<div dir="rtl">

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה ׀ עַל־פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא

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and Yahweh passed before *him*
and [Ø] proclaimed
(Exod 34:6ab)

In Exod 7–9, the clause וְלֹא שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם "he [Pharaoh] would not listen *to them*" occurs several times: in 7:13b, 22c; 8:11, 15d; and 9:12. To whom, then, did Pharaoh not listen? Logically, the answer to this seems straightforward: Pharaoh did not listen to those who spoke to him, i.e., Moses and Aaron (as predicted in 7:4 where it says: "but Pharaoh will not listen to you"). However, it can already be explained in syntactic terms across clauses as follows: the anaphoric (plural) object complement *to them* is coreferential with a previous (plural) subject that is still active across clauses in the discourse.

On the face of it, the subject at the end of 1 Sam 1:28 (וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ שָׁם לַיהוָה "and he worshipped Yahweh there") would be Eli, since he has just been the addressee (although it has to be said that he does not respond). However, it is more plausible that this anaphoric subject (masculine singular in MT) is coreferential with Samuel as the still most discourse-active masculine subject. Not only is it Samuel who has just been discussed in vv. 27–28, but, more importantly, Samuel has been the subject at the end of v. 24, where the place to which שָׁם "there" is referring is also specified: וַתְּבִאֵהוּ בֵית־ יְהוָה שִׁלוֹ וְהַנַּעַר נָעַר "and she brought him to the house of Yahweh in Shiloh, while the boy was still young."[4]

It appears (but this, like the tracking of participants in other types of subordinate clauses, is a topic for further research) that object clauses are excluded from the syntactic regularities concerning coreferentiality with the preceding object or with a preceding discourse active subject. In 1 Sam 27:4c the current subject, Saul, is indeed coreferential

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4   Reinoud Oosting, personal communication. FC, NFC and Dutch GrNB make Samuel explicit here.

with the preceding prepositional object in 4a (and not with the subject, David, in 4b, the object clause).

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וַיֻּגַּ֣ד לְשָׁא֔וּל כִּֽי־בָרַ֥ח דָּוִ֖ד גַּ֑ת וְלֹֽא־יָסַ֥ף ע֖וֹד לְבַקְשֽׁוֹ
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> and it was told to Saul
> that David had fled to Gath
> and he [Saul] did not pursue him anymore (1 Sam 27:4)

And in 1 Sam 31:7 the anaphoric subject of וַיַּֽעַזְב֣וּ, referring to the men of Israel, is indeed coreferential with the preceding subject, i.e., the same men of Israel in v. 7a (and not with the other group also called the men of Israel in the object clause).

> and the men of Israel [X] … saw
> that the men of Israel [Y] had fled …
> and they [X] abandoned (וַיַּֽעַזְב֣וּ)
> (1 Sam 31:7)

Instructions Carried Out

Another syntactic regularity in Hebrew is that the current subject is coreferential with the participant to whom the imperatives or requests in a previous utterance were addressed. An example occurs in Exod 34:4a:

> Yahweh said to Moses: "Carve two tablets of stone …"
> And he [Moses] carved (וַיִּפְסֹ֛ל) two tablets of stone
> (Exod 34:1, 4a)

Yahweh gives an instruction to Moses, who carries it out. In 1 Sam 21:1 David, not Jonathan,[5] is the one who "got up and left" (וַיָּ֖קׇם וַיֵּלַ֑ךְ), doing what Jonathan told him to do in 20:42b (לֵ֣ךְ). In 2 Sam 14:29 Absalom gives an instruction to Joab (twice), after which Joab is the one who does not carry it out (v. 29c and f):

> and Absalom sent for Joab in order to send him (לִשְׁלֹ֤חַ אֹתוֹ֙) to the king
> and he [Joab] was not willing (וְלֹ֥א אָבָ֖ה) to come to him [Absalom] (v. 29c)
> and he [Absalom] sent for him [Joab] a second time
> and he [Joab] was not willing to come (v. 29f)
> (2 Sam 14:29)

Given this syntactic regularity, the Hebrew is not ambiguous here. However, in languages in which this regularity does not apply, v. 29c and f will be ambiguous or will at the very least require much more processing effort on the part of the reader/listener if these anaphoric subjects are not made more explicit. In v. 29c this has been done, for example, in the Italian CEI: "ma egli non volle andare da lui [but that one did not want to come to him]," similarly in the Russian Synodal Version: "но тот не захотел прийти

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5   Alter (1999 as well as 2019) has "And Jonathan arose" here.

к нему [but that one did not want to come to him],” and in NRSV, *Die Bybel* (and many others): “but Joab would not come to him”; “maar Joab wou nie kom nie.” Again, these translations have not been adding anything, but have made information more explicit that would otherwise have been lost in the target languages concerned.

Rules in Order of Priority

The last-mentioned rule, as to who carries out an instruction, comes before the rule regarding coreferentiality with a preceding discourse active subject. We see this in Ruth 4:1b–2a and 1 Sam 9:23–24.

In 1 Sam 9:23–24 the same syntactic regularity and order of priority can be observed as in Ruth 4:1–2. In Ruth 4:2a, Boaz (“and he [Boaz] took ten men”) is discourse active and therefore—once the kinsman has complied with Boaz’s request to come over and sit down in v. 1 (“and he came over and sat down”)—Boaz becomes the (global) subject again. In the same way, once the cook has complied with Samuel’s instruction, Samuel becomes the (global) subject again in 1 Sam 9:24. We will now compare these two passages in some more detail.

Ambiguity?

In Ruth 4:1, the text refers to the kinsman, a minor participant, in only a few clauses. The kinsman complies with Boaz’s instruction to come over and sit down (“and he came over and sat down” in v. 1) What happens next is that the Hebrew reverts back to Boaz, major participant and discourse active subject, without having to refer to him explicitly by name at that point. In other words, the subject change is not marked in any way. And yet, nobody is suggesting that the text might be ambiguous and that the subject in 4:2a might still be the kinsman, not Boaz. The subject change back to a major participant and discourse active subject does not have to be made explicit in Hebrew (even though such an explicitation would be required in certain other languages).

וּבֹ֨עַז עָלָ֣ה הַשַּׁ֩עַר֩ וַיֵּ֨שֶׁב שָׁם֙

Meanwhile Boaz had gone to the gate and he sat down there

וְהִנֵּ֨ה הַגֹּאֵ֤ל עֹבֵר֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר דִּבֶּר־בֹּ֔עַז

and look, the next-of-kin passed by, of whom Boaz had talked

וַיֹּ֛אמֶר

and he [Boaz] said

ס֥וּרָה שְׁבָה־פֹּ֖ה פְּלֹנִ֣י אַלְמֹנִ֑י

Come over and sit down here, friend

וַיָּ֖סַר וַיֵּשֵֽׁב:

and he [the next-of-kin] came over and sat down

וַיִּקַּ֞ח עֲשָׂרָ֧ה אֲנָשִׁ֛ים מִזִּקְנֵ֥י הָעִ֖יר

and he [Boaz] took ten men of the elders of the city (v. 2a)
(Ruth 4:1–2a)

1 Samuel 9:24c is an exact parallel to Ruth 4:2a. In 1 Sam 9:24ab, after the cook carries out Samuel's instructions to him, it is the instructor, Samuel, again (not the cook) who is the subject of "and he said" in v. 24c. The subject change is not marked in any way. It does not have to be; the Hebrew is reverting back to Samuel, major participant and discourse active subject, without having to refer to him explicitly at that point.

> And Samuel said to the cook, "Bring the portion …" (v. 23)
> and the cook took up (וַיָּרֶם הַטַּבָּח) the thigh and what was on it (v. 24a)
> and he [the cook] set [Ø: it] (וַיָּשֶׂם) before Saul. (v. 24b)
> And he [Samuel] said (וַיֹּאמֶר) (v. 24c):
> "See, what was kept is set before you. Eat … saying: I invited the people (לֵאמֹר הָעָם קָרָאתִי)"
> (1 Sam 9:23–24)

There is no suggestion in the Hebrew that the subject in v. 24c might be ambiguous and that translators should therefore respect this ambiguity.

What has been proposed by Fokkelman (1993, 405) is that the cook, as the last-mentioned explicit subject (v. 24a), remains the subject in 24c as well as 24b, on the grounds that there is no explicit subject in 24c (וַיֹּאמֶר) that could indicate a change of subject. But as we have seen in Ruth 4:2, no explicit subject is needed to mark the change of subject in Hebrew. In Fokkelman's analysis, the subject is unchanged and, as a result, the words spoken in the rest of the verse become the cook's direct speech, which seems quite unlikely.

1 Samuel 9:24c and Ruth 4:2a are syntactically in the same environment, yet some translators tend to treat them differently. NBV and CEI make the cook the (implied) subject of 1 Sam 9:24c. Instead, it should be recognised that 1 Sam 9:23–24 and Ruth 4:1–2 are constructed in the same way: after the minor participant has complied with the major participant's instructions, the latter, who was active as a subject before, becomes the subject again. An explicit reference to the new subject is not needed in Hebrew.

Thus, there is no syntactic basis for treating anaphoric references such as those discussed above as ambiguous, let alone intentionally ambiguous. The anaphoric references appear to be ambiguous only when one considers them in isolation and from the point of view of target languages that lack the specific set of cross-clausal syntactic regularities of Hebrew. As the syntactic regularities show, the clauses in which these anaphors occur are obviously not isolated from the syntactic structure of the text to which they belong. Given the cross-clausal syntactic regularities, these anaphors should actually be treated as instances of clear identification of a participant in the Hebrew. These identifications are part of the information in the text—information that should not be lost in translation. Making the identity of such participants explicit in translation—as RSV, NRSV, NIV, REB, Alter (1999; 2019) and *Die Bybel* have done in 1 Sam 9:24c: "Samuel said"; "Samuel het vir hom gesê"—does not amount to adding information that

is not part of the source text. Rather, it ensures that the translation in the target language does not lose information that is there in the Hebrew source text.

Preserving Information in Translation

Many translations make Boaz explicit in Ruth 4:2a. The Septuagint and Vulgate already made Samuel explicit as the subject in 1 Sam 9:24c. Equally, both made Boaz explicit as the subject in Ruth 4:2a. These are good, parallel examples for translators to follow in languages in which, unlike Hebrew, such a shift to a discourse active subject in a narrative would (have to) be marked explicitly by means of mentioning the changed subject in full.

Conclusion: Explicitation in Target Languages

The Hebrew system is clear—given its specific set of cross-clausal syntactic regularities—so it can afford to leave the participant unspecified when the narrative returns to a major participant, a (more) discourse active subject. By contrast, this would be underspecific and amount to loss of information or even misinformation in many target languages in which a change of subject, even in the case of a major participant, could only be realised by referring to the new subject explicitly (i.e., by name or description, not just by a pronoun) at that point.[6]

In such target languages, at such points in the text, the translation should make participant references more explicit at clause level, in order to match the cross-clausal implicit information (as to who does something to whom) in the source text and not lose information. In such instances, then, the translation should be more explicit than the text is in the source language. Such explicitation is dictated by differences in language systems and is not triggered pragmatically by other differences between the source text and the target audience such as cultural gaps (De Metsenaere and Vandepitte 2017, 390) or other gaps in world knowledge (Becher 2010, 2). Thus, so-called ambiguities which, given the cross-clausal reference patterns of the source language, are actually not ambiguous in the source text should not be treated as such in exegesis and translation. Instead, such "ambiguities" should be resolved in the translation—not just for stylistic reasons, but in order to maintain the cohesiveness of the text in accordance with the rules of the target language.

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6   Note, for example, the following cross-clausal syntactic regularity in Korean: "Whenever there is a role switch among participants, the one who becomes the agent or initiator (realized as the surface subject) is *overtly* referred to" (Hwang 1987, 111; italics mine).

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FC La Bible en français courant, 1997.
NFC La Nouvelle Français courant, 2019.
GrNB Dutch Groot Nieuws Bijbel, revision 1996.
NBG Dutch Nieuwe Vertaling, 1951.
NBV Dutch Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling, 2004.
NIV New International Version, 1978.
NRSV New Revised Standard Version, 1989.
REB Revised English Bible, 1989.
RSV Revised Standard Version, 1952.

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