ON THE SYNTAX AND SEMANTICS OF THE BIBLICAL HEBREW INFINITE ABSOLUTE
Vincent DeCaen, University of Toronto
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(Slide 1) My agenda today is threefold. First, I will state the problem of the syntax and semantics of the so-called infinitive absolute as it has been framed to date. Second, I will introduce only the bare bones of the syntactic theory that I adopted in my 1995 doctoral dissertation. (In twenty years, I have seen no reason to modify that analysis, except to bring the notation into line with the theory of Distributed Morphology under the umbrella of the so-called Minimalist Programme.) Third and finally, I will put forth my proposal, detail the essential predictions made, and how they are confirmed.

§1. Biblical Hebrew (BH) possesses two infinitives, in the sense of a verbal form lacking inflection for person, tense, mood and aspect: the straightforward infinitive or “infinitive construct” *qutul, and the so-called “infinitive absolute” *qatāl—in the words of Bergsträsser, “a peculiarly Hebrew hybrid of verbal noun and verbal interjection of imperative character”. Though the proto-Semitic infinitive *qatāl is found in several daughter branches—Ethiopian, Akkadian, Aramaic and the family of Canaanite dialects, of which Hebrew is of course a member—what “makes [ancient] Hebrew distinct is its frequent use” of this infinitive absolute, as Kim emphasizes. This Biblical Hebrew “hybrid” verbal form may apparently play the role of any major part of speech save the preposition and conjunction.

Typically this infinitive occurs paronomastically with a verbal form (finite verb, participle, and so on), and in this role is “always intensifying”—an “intensifying infinitive”, as Waltke & O’Connor call it—that can often be rendered by the adverbs certainly, surely, indeed, definitely, and so on, or by the English modals must, shall.
Typically this paronomastic or “tautological” infinitive appears immediately before the finite verb (though the negative lo may intervene); yet it may also appear postpositively at an indefinite distance from the finite verb in a variety of constructions.

This description is inadequate, however, because the infinitive absolute, in addition to its intensifying function, often functions as what Waltke and O’Connor call an “adverbial infinitive”, and indeed some forms have become lexicalized as adverbs: for example, hēṭēb “well, thoroughly”, harbēh “much”, harḥēq “at a distance”, haškēm “early”, mahēr “quickly”.

In previous treatments, especially the 1999 paper by Harbour, this adverbial infinitive is set to one side as only complicating matters. At the extreme, it is treated as a distinct verbal form: two infinitives absolute: one intensifying, one adverbial. I would argue that this is a huge mistake. First of all, the null hypothesis is that there is only one infinitive absolute with only one function. Second, the simplifying and unifying assumption, is that all such infinitives are essentially predicate modifiers—or adverbs if you will, a notion to which I will return frequently.

Harbour’s 1999 paper proposes a generative analysis of the intensifying infinitive, adopting an inverted V, “Λ” (not a lambda!), to represent this infinitive absolute, a convention that I will adopt. With Perel’tsvaig 2002, he assumes the incorrect verb-initial or VSO analysis, in which the infinitive, as an incompletely deleted copy of the verb, moves to a higher, unspecified functional head F, hence the prepositive infinitive with its tautologous finite verb. In these respects he is followed by Kim 2009. Harbour (1999) treats the infinitive plus finite verb as a so-called predicate-cleft construction, but Kim is correct in disputing this analysis. In any case, all reject out of hand the alternative
analysis of the infinitive as a full syntactic phrase adjoined to the verb phrase, and subsequently fronting to the higher landing site. Further, Harbour argues that the postpositive order, that is, the finite verb followed by the infinitive, obtains when the usual preverbal landing site of the infinitive is occupied, which I will show is the correct intuition, and so the copy is left stranded—though without any explanation of landing sites or the term “occupied”. Again, in all cases, the adverbial infinitive is set to one side—though probably a true phrasal constituent, that is, a true adverb.

I claim that previous treatments are inadequate, because lacking in unification and full explanation. Thus, the syntax and semantics of this infinitive remains a vexed question, despite the 2009 doctoral study by Kim as well as the generative treatments by Harbour (1999) and Pereltsvaig (2002). I maintain that the difficulties and inadequacies arise for two reasons: (1) the morpho-syntactic misanalysis of the infinitive as a functional head, like its counterpart finite verbal form, and not the full syntactic phrase that it actually is; and (2) the application of the conventional misanalysis of Biblical Hebrew syntax: the so-called VSO hypothesis.

I pursue the idea here that a unified analysis of the various uses and several syntactic configurations of the infinitive absolute can be obtained by adopting my particular verb-second or V2 analysis, set forth in my 1995 doctoral dissertation and pursued subsequently. In this model, there is crucially a double movement. First, some constituent is necessarily raised by a clausal operator, call it “TOPIC” (and the raised element may be the phonologically-null subject pronoun); and second, the finite verb may raise to realize phonologically-null features of the complementizer. Crucially, these
movements do not affect the semantics of the infinitive, with possible exceptions that I will mention in my conclusion.

(2) **LET US BEGIN**, then, with the conventional statement of the problem, which I summarize in the projected table. Notice that I’m following the convention of inverting the verbal V to represent this particular infinitive. With reference to this table: a theory must explain (a) the conspicuously empty cell, that is, the scenario where an infinitive absolute is indefinitely separated from its finite verb in initial position; and (b) the exact position of the stranded infinitive relative to other constituents, and why. Further, the theory must explain (c) how and why the negative lo is intercalated between infinitive and finite verb, but (d) not between verbal elements when the order is reversed, though na may be intercalated in that case. Finally and crucially, a theory must explain (e) the difference between these three constructions at some level of grammar: syntax, semantics, etc. I reject any suggestion that there is free variation. **Thus**, I am setting the bar high here for any competing theory of the syntax and semantics of the infinitive absolute.

§2. **NOW, ON TO THE SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS.** You must grant three syntactic phenomena for the sake of argument: 1. verb movement, 2. mandatory fronting, aka topicalization, and 3. and so-called pro-drop. Let me explain.

2.1. **FIRST, VERB MOVEMENT.** (3) “Hebrew word order does make a difference”: a truism, I assume. The syntactic structure in English as in Hebrew is right-recursive, and so we can represent this structure in tree notation as indicated. (4) “Does Hebrew word order make a difference?” Yes, it does. I assume here that there is a phonologically-null,
sentential operator “QUESTION”, unlike in Biblical Hebrew which has the overt particle 
*ha*, (5) and this operator forces the finite verb to move to realize that feature: hence we’ve 
gone from the verb-second order to verb-first order in creating the English question. 
(6) “Boy, does Hebrew word order make a difference!” Again a phonologically-null, sentential operator, (7) again verb movement. Grant me, then, that Biblical Hebrew has 
the same verb-movement to realize higher syntactic features.

2.2. **VERB-SECOND SYNTAX.** English is an atypical Germanic language in lacking a 
robust verb-second or V2 word order, by which I mean that the verb is tucked behind 
some element that must obligatorily be fronted, as in diverse languages such as Kashmiri, 
Anglo-Saxon, Old French, and so endlessly on. (8) I assume we start with the structure 
projected, which is obviously ill-formed as an indicative statement. There is a 
phonologically-null, clausal operator “**TOPIC**” that forces some element to move and 
leave behind a gap or trace.

(9) *Die Kinder spielten vor der Schule im Park Fußball*

(10) *Vor der Schule spielten die Kinder im Park Fußball*

(11) *Im Park spielten die Kinder vor der Schule Fußball*

(12) *Fußball spielten die Kinder vor der Schule im Park*

What we must conclude is that this Topic function is relevant to information structure 
only, that is, apparently nothing semantic is involved: there is no fundamental semantic 
difference, yet something still has to move because of the Topic operator.

2.3. **FINALLY, THE DROPPING OF THE SUBJECT PRONOUN, AKA PRO-DROP.**

(13) As a rule, English cannot drop the subject pronoun, except in very special registers 
and contexts where the pronoun can be recovered from context: e.g., conversationally
relating what you did, or entering the same in a diary. Notice now that V2 word order is no longer surface true, by which I mean the finite verb is not overtly in second position; and it is this sort of mismatch that gives Biblical Hebrew its special dynamic and also makes for misdiagnosis. I believe that the study of well-understood, V2 pro-dropping systems such as Old French will yield many insights into Biblical Hebrew syntax: an interesting thesis topic if anyone is looking for one.

2.4. **In summary:** 1. Verb movement, 2. Verb second, 3. Pro-drop.

2.5. **In this light, let us now consider the Hebrew structure in Second Kings 18:4:**

(14) kî ʿad-hayyāmîm hāhēmmā hāyû bənē-yišrāʾēl məqaṭṭərīm lô “for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it”.

It is so hard to find examples with all the bells and whistles, but this is one. All the sentential markers are overt and separate: an overt subordinating conjunction kî (15) delimitating the clause boundary; tense and aspect split apart, (16) with the progressive participle məqaṭṭərīm encoding aspect, (17) and supported by the dummy auxiliary hāyû bearing past tense; (18) and crucially an overt subject bənē-yišrāʾēl that is not the topic instead of the usual phonologically null pronoun. (19) Let me now light up the complete syntactic structure which I’ve colour-coded: red for the functional projections, and blue for the core predication. This is my theoretical analysis of Biblical Hebrew syntax in a nutshell, which I argued for in my 1995 dissertation.

3. **Claim and Predictions.** Now we can reframe the problem as follows: what and where is the infinitive absolute in this syntactic tree? The functional projections are all accounted for: it is not a functional head. The arguments of the verb are always accounted
for. If the infinitive is neither a functional head nor an argument of the verb, then we are forced into predicate modification, (20) and thus it is also a full phrasal constituent: it is technically a “verb-phrase left-adjunct”, or an adverb if you will. As I have already suggested, we have independent motivation for this analysis, since basic infinitives function, and are even lexicalized, as adverbs. If this claim be correct, many predictions follow. Let’s take the major predictions one at a time, and see that they are in fact correct, at least in my trial cut.

(21) If adverbial, there can be no overt subject—a true infinitive; yet there still must be a covert syntactic subject to satisfy the argument structure of the verb: the so-called “big PRO”, a null pronoun that must be semantically bound by the subject of the higher clause. The prediction is that this null subject must always be bound by the clausal subject: if not, the theory falls down.

And if phrasal, we expect to be able to find (a) a full infinitive phrase, (b) operating independently of the main finite verb; and (c) displaying internal complexity: taking overt arguments and modifiers. A needle in a haystack, but haškêb ṭ̱ôtām ḍārṣā satisfies all these conditions.

Read (22) If some other constituent is topicalized, the infinitive must stay home. Where is home? Home is necessarily stranded immediately following the progressive participle when present. Thus, if hēmmā is raised into the topic position, necessarily blocking any other fronting, the infinitive absolute hālōk must follow the overt expression of progressive aspect: in this case, the participle hōlōkīm. If this fixed ordering does not obtain, the theory falls down.
READ (23) However, if the infinitive is fronted into topic position, then movement of any other constituent is blocked. The word order following the fronted infinitive absolute ʰâlök is therefore also firmly fixed: if not fixed, the theory fails. And here of course, the two verb forms are necessarily contiguous, crucially assuming as I do that the finite verb ˤelēk must also raise to realize the phonologically null TOPIC feature.

READ (24) If the finite verb must raise higher to realize phonologically null features, say in the so-called “consecutive construction”—or as I much prefer, “modal coordination”—the infinitive absolute bārök and finite verb yəbārek are still necessarily contiguous, only now in reverse order.

READ (25) Now we get to the interesting scenario. It is predicted within this framework, that a fronted verb may be separately indefinitely from its infinitive. If the finite verb yišṭəḥû raises higher, but the infinitive absolute šāṭôah is not in topic position, rather some other constituent is in the topic position, here the prepositional phrase lāhem, then the infinitive absolute is left stranded back within the VP as expected. Furthermore, it is predicted that the infinitive absolute will always precede any remaining constituents within the VP. If not, again the theory fails.

(26) This of course is the missing cell in the table introduced at the beginning of the talk: a situation in which the finite verb is fronted, that is, crucially now verb-initial word order, but the infinitive absolute has not moved out of the lower VP, stranded indefinitely below.

§4. IN CONCLUSION, I have laid out the problem of the syntax and semantics of the infinitive absolute as it has hitherto been framed, and suggested that previous
treatments are inadequate in many ways: inadequate primarily because of the misdiagnosis of the nature of the infinitive absolute, which I claim is a phrasal predicate-modifier that is left-adjoined to the verb-phrase; and also because of the inadequate verb-initial or VSO analysis.

Instead, I put forward the verb-second analysis as superior in all respects. On this view, there is a double movement: some constituent must be raised into the mandatory topic position—mandatory because of the nature of the topic feature, and the need to check that feature; and the verb may also be raised to realize phonologically null sentential operators, as we saw with questions and exclamations in English. The double movement combined with pronoun-dropping or pro-drop gives Biblical Hebrew its peculiar dynamic that, as I said, ought to be explored in light of well-known and well-studied V2 pro-dropping systems.

The next step in this research programme is an exhaustive analysis of all the biblical infinitives absolute in light of this analysis, to see how well the theory in fact does. If it fails, I expect it to fail systematically, and consequently we will learn something valuable about Biblical Hebrew syntax. Perhaps we may even identify dialects on this basis.

In that study I will be looking for indications of subtle semantic and information-structuring effects. I already mentioned the semantic binding of the null subject pronoun or big PRO of the infinitive absolute. There are other possible binding effects, though. Because the infinitive may be raised, it now has wide scope and not narrow scope, and this should have some effect if quantification is also involved, where by quantification I mean quantifiers such as all, some, every, none, on so on.
Another aspect that may come into play is the subtle difference between a lower predicate modifier and a raised infinitive that is now a higher, sentential modifier. For instance, it is well known that the English adverb may appear in several positions. When a lower predicate modifier, it typically describes manner, as we saw with the lower *haškēb ūtām ūarṣā*; but when higher in the syntactic structure, it typically refers to degree and certainty: famously in Gen 3:4 *lō̲ môt tǝmūtūn* “ye shall not surely die”.

Furthermore, if in fact there is a binary difference between structures with or without a fronted infinitive absolute, this must be related directly to the information structure, and accordingly there ought to be a strictly binary and complementary distribution of these two constructions in the larger discourse. What then is that contrast?

Finally, there is the absolutely fascinating question of the infinitive absolute appearing by itself. Clearly, it is predicted that it can, since we know the infinitive may operate independently of a finite verb, and it may have a full complement of arguments and modifiers. When, and where exactly, and under what conditions? The distribution and function ought to be very restricted. Within my framework, the default position is somewhat counter-intuitively that the clause is verbless, that is, there are no tense, mood, or aspect features that need morphological realization, nor any verbal predicate at all. The less appealing possibility is that the finite verb has been suppressed or deleted, but this is an empirical question.

Thank you for your attention. Notes and slides are available upon request.