Topic-focus word order in Biblical Hebrew and its translations into Hungarian

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A translation, from an Optimality Theory-style perspective (cf., e.g., Mansell, 2007), optimizes three constraints: faithfulness to the source meaning (FSM), markedness of the target form (MTF), and faithfulness to the source form (FSF). While precise formulations and implementations of these constraints, or constraint families, await future work, studying Bible translations might still contribute valuable materials to an understanding of their interactions. Namely, the culturally enhanced importance of the source's presumed meaning predicts a promotion of FSM. The broad usage of biblical texts in various (liturgical, study and secular) contexts should favour MTF. Whereas the high prestige of the source text has occasionally resulted in a highly ranked FSF, such as in the case of the *Ferrara Bible*, a 1553 word-by-word translation of the Tanakh from Hebrew to Ladino (Judeo-Spanish).

Information structure (topic and focus, or a lack thereof, in a sentences) can serve as a fascinating test case, because language users have always "had a feeling" for them, but it was not conceptualized until recently. Consequently, translators did not follow explicit prescriptive rules. Different word orders in the source and target languages result in a conflict between FSF and MTF, whereas FSM could only be implemented with "gut feeling".

Like Hungarian, Biblical Hebrew (Tiberian Hebrew) is also a topic-focus language (cf., e.g., Heimerdinger 1999). Observe the following examples:

(1)   Num 18:14

כָּל־חֵרֶם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ יִהְיֶה׃

kol	*ḥērem*	*bə=yiśrāʾēl*	*lə-kā*	*yihyeh*
all	devoted	in=Israel	to-SG.2.M	be.IPFV.SG.3.M

'Everything devoted in Israel shall be thine.' (KJV)

Minden	*örök szentség*	*Izraélben*	*a*	*tied*	*legyen.* (IMIT)
all	eternal holiness	in=Israel	ART.DEF	yours	be.IMP.SG.3

'Everything that has been proscribed in Israel shall be yours.' (JPS 2006)

(2)   Isaiah 8:13a

אֶת־יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת אֹתוֹ תַקְדִּישׁוּ

ʾet̠-ʾăd̠ōnāi	*ṣəb̠āʾôt̠* ʾ	*ōt̠ô*	*t̠aqdîšû*
ACC-LORD	host.PL	PRO.ACC.SG.3.M	account=holly.IPVF.PL.2.M

'None but GOD of Hosts shall you account holy' (Revised JPS)

Az	*Örökkévalót,*	*a*	*seregek*	*urát,*	*őt*
mondjátok	*szentnek.* (IMIT)				
ART.DEF	Eternal.ACC	ART.DEF	host.PL	Lord.POSS.ACC	PRO.SG.3.ACC
say.IMP.PL.2	holly.DAT				

'But the Lord of hosts, him you shall regard as holy' (NRSVUE)

Sentence (1) contains both a topic ('regarding everything proscribed in Israel,…') and a focus ('yours, *i.e.* not anyone else's'). The cited English translations do not reflect the information structure of the original text in writing. Their readers are expected to derive it from context and read the sentence with an emphasis on *yours/thine*. The Hungarian translations, however, have no problems reproducing the topic-focus structure, and most do so by mirroring the Hebrew word order:

KG-1908:	*Minden, a mi teljesen Istennek szenteltetik Izráelben, tiéd legyen.*
KNV-1997:	*Mindaz, amit fogadalomból adnak Izrael fiai, a tiéd legyen*.
IMIT:	*Minden örök szentség Izraélben a tied legyen.*
Bernstein Béla:	*Minden átok alá vetett Izraelben a tied legyen.*

(Source of the translations: https://ebo.kre.hu/.) While the Hebrew word *ḥērem* poses a challenge to the translators, and the stylistic *tiéd ~ tied* alternation is also observable, the word order of these translations is uniformly topic – focus – VP. The more recent ones, however, either make use of right-dislocation (ÚRK-2011: *Minden a tied legyen, amit fogadalomból teljesen Istennek szentelnek Izráelben*"), or omit topicalization altogether (SZIT-1973: "*A tiéd minden, amit Izraelben felajánlanak átok alatt*"; ÚF-1990 and RÚF-2014: "*Tied legyen mindaz, amit esküvel szenteltek oda Izráelben*"). MTF disprefers longer NPs on the left-periphery, and this constraint might have been promoted by recent generations of translators at the expense of FSF. Focus is uniformly maintained, nevertheless.

Example (2) also contains a focus: 'the Lord of the Hosts must, and no one else can be considered holy'. As the focus is a heavy NP, in Biblical Hebrew it is further moved to the sentence initial (topic) position, and a resumptive pronoun appears at its trace. Due to the theological importance of this declaration, English translations employ periphrasis to make the information structure clear. One of the translations mirrors the Hebrew structure, but seemingly this is not the preferred solution among the translations. Yet, the Hungarian translations are again rather similar – if we ignore the differences in the divine names, and the precise translations of *taqdîšû* ('to sanctify, to declare holy, to consider holy') – as they can easily copy the Hebrew syntax. Indeed, most of the translations maintain the original word order with the inclusion of an accusative pronoun. However, ÚF-1990, KNV-1997 and RÚF-2014 omit it: another example of recent translators promoting MTF, they do so probably because the same pronoun also appears in the topic position of the second half of the same Biblical verse.

In my talk, I shall analyse further examples, making use of the *Egységes Bibliaolvasó* developed at KRE, a very handy tool to compare Hungarian Bible translations. I concentrate on narratives, because other genres – such as archaic, poetic, prophetic and legal materials – have their own styles, possibly also affecting their syntax. The small sample is insufficient to draw significant conclusions on the syntax of Hungarian Bible translations. Yet, these preliminary results might prepare a future project, which in turn can help us better understand the roles of FSM, MTF and FSF in translations.

References:

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