

The Hebrew Object Marker and Semantic Type

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Abstract

It is well-known that the object marker in Hebrew, *et*, is used only in front of definite objects. In this paper I show that even though the distribution of *et* is governed by a formal notion of definiteness which is determined by syntactic factors, *et* itself is not semantically vacuous. I discuss the phenomenon of "definiteness spreading" in construct state nominals and show that this is not spreading of semantic definiteness. Use of *et* in front of a CSN, however, blocks an indefinite reading which would have been available otherwise. Other semantic effects of *et* involve distributive readings of conjunctions and the interpretation of *wh*- words and pseudoclefts. I propose that all these semantic effects can be derived from the assumption that *et* acts as a type shifting operator.

1 Introduction

The object marker in Hebrew, *et*, is used only with definite objects ¹:

- (1) a. Dan kara et ha- sefer.
Dan read et the- book
'Dan read the book.'
- b. Dan kara sefer.
Dan read book
'Dan read a book.'

As shown in detail in Danon (2001), the relevant notion of 'definiteness' in this respect is not the usual semantic notion. This can be seen very clearly with demonstratives. The demonstrative 'article' in Hebrew, *ze*, is syntactically an

¹I use the term 'object marker' rather than 'accusative marker', leaving open the question whether *et* is really related to accusative Case. See Danon (2001) for a discussion of the Case-related properties of *et*.

adjective, and it optionally cooccurs with the definite article *ha-*. Whether or not *ha-* appears has no effect on interpretation in this case; still, when a demonstrative serves as an object, it is *ha-* that determines whether or not *et* will be used. Thus, in the following examples, (2a) and (2b) are synonymous, yet they differ with respect to the use of *et*:

- (2) a. Dan kara et ha- sefer ha- ze.
 Dan read et the- book the- this
 'Dan read this book.'
- b. Dan kara sefer ze.
 Dan read book this
 'Dan read this book.'

A demonstrative DP can thus appear without *et* even though it is semantically definite. Partitive construction with the numeral *exad* ('one') illustrate the opposite pattern and provide further evidence that it is not semantics that determines the distribution of *et*. In the following examples, the object is a partitive noun phrase. There is no difference in interpretation between the object in (3a) and the one in (3b); yet only the former allows *et*:²

- (3) a. Dan kara et axad ha- sfarim.
 Dan read et one the- books
 'Dan read one of the books.'
- b. Dan kara exad me- ha- sfarim.
 Dan read one of- the- books
 'Dan read one of the books.'

It is clear that the difference between the two partitives above is in their syntactic structure. The partitive in (3a) is syntactically a construct state nominal (CSN; *smixut*. See for instance Ritter 1991, Siloni 1997, Borer 1998) headed by the numeral *axad* (Danon 1996), as opposed to the partitive in (3b) which is not a CSN. It is well known that CSNs display a phenomenon of "definiteness spreading",

²In colloquial speech, the two forms are often confused, and as a result the use of *et* does not always follow this pattern.

where the definiteness value of the embedded nominal (in this case, *ha-sfarim* 'the-books') is shared by the entire construct. As this example illustrates, this spreading of definiteness is spreading of the *formal* (syntactic) definiteness which is relevant to the distribution of *et*, and not necessarily spreading of semantic definiteness, as the partitive object in (3a) is not semantically definite. A partitive can thus be interpreted as an indefinite, yet be preceded by *et*.

I assume the definition of formal (syntactic) definiteness from Danon (2001):

- proper names and pronouns are formally definite
- simple DPs with the definite article *ha-* are formally definite
- a CSN is formally definite iff its embedded DP (the associate, *somex*) is formally definite

Using this definition, the following rule describes the distribution of *et*:

- (4) *et* precedes an object iff the object is formally definite ([+def]).

2 Interpretation of formally definite CSNs

The examples so far show two mismatches between formal definiteness and semantic definiteness. One might wonder how productive these mismatches are. Formal definiteness is based on definiteness spreading (DS) in constructs, which has often been assumed to be relevant to interpretation and not only to syntax. In most prototypical examples, a CSN whose associate is definite is also interpreted as a definite. Consider for instance the following example:

- (5) beyt ha- mora me'od mexo'ar.
 house the- teacher very ugly
 '*The teacher's house (=the house of the teacher) is very ugly.*'

The subject, a formally definite CSN, has the interpretation of a definite. Examples like this, however, should be contrasted with the examples in (6) below, where a formally definite CSN can also be interpreted as an indefinite.

- (6) a. **tošav ha- štaxim** ne'ecar la- xakira.
resident the- territories arrested to- interrogation
'A/the resident of the territories was arrested for interrogation.'
- b. **xayal cva ha- darom** neherag etmol.
soldier army the- south killed yesterday
'A/?the soldier of the army of the south was killed yesterday.'
- c. **gufata šel ovedet šagrirut kenya** nimce'a be- dirata.
body.3sg of worker embassy Kenya found in- apartment.3sg
'The body of a worker of the Kenyan embassy was found in her apartment.'
- d. **bxirat ha- va'ada be- ezrax medinat yisra'el** asura.
choice the- committee in- citizen state Israel forbidden
'Choice of an Israeli citizen by the committee is forbidden.'
- e. **Dan boger ha- xug le- safrut.**
Dan graduate the- department to- literature
'Dan is a graduate of the literature department.'

In (6a-b), the subject is a formally-definite CSN, which can easily be interpreted as an indefinite in the lack of a previous context. In (6c-d), a [+def] CSN which follows a preposition is also interpreted as an indefinite. And in (6e), a [+def] CSN is used as a predicate, where no uniqueness is implied. One semantic property shared by the heads of all these CSNs is that they are membership nouns. Thus, a resident is part of the group of people living in a certain place, a soldier is part of an army, and so forth. We can conclude that when a CSN is headed by a membership noun, "definiteness spreading" does not involve the interpretation of the CSN. Dobrovie-Sorin (2000, 2001) has proposed that the presence of a definite associate (which, in her analysis, is located in [spec, Nmax]) triggers an interpretation of the head of a CSN as a function from individuals to individuals, giving rise to semantic definiteness spread. In light of the facts shown above, this generalization seems to be subject to conditioned by properties of the head noun, which in the case of membership nouns seems to be interpreted as a function from individuals to *sets*. Apparently, membership nouns are not the only class of nouns that don't always trigger semantic definiteness spreading; Engel-

hardt (2000) shows that derived nominals like *ktivav ha-sefer* ('writing the-book') can also have an indefinite reading. It is now clear that "definiteness spreading" is not a matter of interpretation.

A surprising property of the indefinite readings of [+def] CSNs is that they are not available when the CSN follows *et*. When the same CSNs headed by membership nouns that were shown in (6) are used as objects, the syntactic rule governing the distribution of *et* forces *et* to be present. In this context, the CSN can only be interpreted as a definite:

- (7) a. ha- mištara acra et **tošav ha- štaxim**.
 the- police arrested et resident the- territories
'The police arrested the resident of the territories.'
- b. ha- hafgaza harga et **xayal cva ha- darom**.
 the- bombing killed et soldier army the- south
'The bombing killed the soldier of the army of the south.'
- c. pagašti et **ovedet šagrirut kenya**.
 met.1sg et worker embassy Kenya
'I met the worker of the Kenyan embassy.'
- d. minuy ha- va'ada et **ezrax medinat yisra'el** asura.
 appointment the- committe et citizen state Israel forbidden
'Appointment of the Israeli citizen by the committee is forbidden.'
- e. ha- va'ada baxara et **boger ha- xug le- safrut**.
 the- committee chose et graduate the- department to- literature
'The committee chose the graduate of the literature department.'

Thus, in (7a) the object can only refer to a unique and contextually-familiar resident of the territories; the object in (7b) must refer to a familiar soldier; and so on. Note that this goes against the general tendency in discourse, which favors a definite subject and an indefinite object; if discourse considerations were involved, we would expect the subject position to block the indefinite reading, not the object position.

The fact that it is the presence of *et*, and not the object position itself, which is responsible for the loss of the indefinite reading can be seen in minimal pairs like the following:

- (8) a. ha- va'ada baxara be- boger ha- xug le- safrut.
 the- committee chose in- graduate the- department to- literature
'The committee chose a/the graduate of the literature department.'
- b. ha- va'ada baxara et boger ha- xug le- safrut.
 the- committee chose et graduate the- department to- literature
'The committee chose the graduate of the literature department.'

In (8a), which uses the preposition *be-* 'in', an indefinite interpretation of the CSN is easily available. (8b), on the other hand, which uses *et*, does not have this interpretation; it is only acceptable if the context supplies a unique referent for the CSN *boger ha-xug le-safrut*, i.e. when there is exactly one graduate of the literature department in the context.

The following illustrates more or less the same point:

- (9) a. Dan me'ohav be- ovedet ha- bank.
 Dan in-love in- worker the- bank
'Dan is in love with a/the worker of the bank.'
- b. Dan ohev et ovedet ha- bank.
 Dan loves et worker the- bank
'Dan is in love with the worker of the bank.'

While (9a), in which the verb selects for a PP headed by *be-*, allows an indefinite reading of the object (and is therefore acceptable if no worker of the bank is known from the previous context or if there is more than one familiar worker), (9b) does not allow this interpretation. The verb *ohev* 'love', unlike *me'ohav* 'be-in-love', appears with *et*, and consequently it does not allow an indefinite interpretation of the object CSN.

3 Optional *et*

The examples so far suggest that *et* is not semantically vacuous, as it seems to affect the interpretation of the DP that it precedes. Further evidence can be found in environments where the use of *et* is optional. There are restricted cases where the syntax seems to allow *et* optionally. In these cases, there is a clear semantic effect associated with the use of *et*.

The question word *ma* 'what' is one example. Although *ma*, when it stands for an object, is usually not preceded by *et*, use of *et* does not lead to ungrammaticality and is optionally allowed:

- (10) a. *ma kanita?*
 what bought.2sg
 'What did you buy?'
- b. *et ma kanita?*

The question in (10a) is the unmarked form; if the context supplies no previous information on what might be the answer, most speakers would prefer the question in (10a) over the one in (10b). A suitable answer to (10a) could be a definite (such as *et ha-xulca ha-aduma*, 'the red shirt'), and indefinite (*kama dvarim*, 'some things'), or a quantificational DP (like *šum davar*, 'nothing'). However, if the context makes it clear that the answer should be an item out of a set of known entities, (10b) becomes appropriate; a suitable answer must be a definite, and not an indefinite or quantificational DP.

Winter (1999) discusses the semantic effect associated with the use of *et* with a conjunction of definite DPs. If an object is a conjunction of this sort, *et* can either precede the entire conjunction or precede each conjunct individually; the syntax allows both options, even though prescriptive grammars tend to view the repetition of *et* as obligatory. Citing an unpublished paper by Dorit Ben-Shalom and Ziva Wijler, Winter notes that the choice whether to repeat *et* in front of each conjunct affects the distributivity of the object. Consider the following example:

- (11) a. *hizmanti et Ruti ve Sara.*
 invited.1sg et Ruti and Sara
 'I invited Ruti and Sara.'
- b. *hizmanti et Ruti ve et Sara.*
 invited.1sg et Ruti and et Sara
 'I invited (both) Ruti and Sara.'

In (11a), the object is interpreted collectively: the speaker invited Ruti and Sara together, and there was one event of inviting. The object in (11b), on the other

hand, has only a distributive reading: the speaker invited Ruti and also invited Sara, possibly on two different occasions.

Winter provides the following example, which makes it clear that there is a truth conditional difference that stems from the choice whether or not to repeat *et*:

- (12) a. Dilan avar be- mispar ha- širim še- katav et Simon ve
 Dylan exceeded in- number the- songs that- wrote et Simon and
 Garfunkel.
 Garfunkel
'Dylan wrote more songs than Simon and Garfunkel.'
- b. Dilan avar be- mispar ha- širim še- katav et Simon ve
 Dylan exceeded in- number the- songs that- wrote et Simon and
 et Garfunkel.
 et Garfunkel
'Dylan wrote more songs than both Simon and Garfunkel.'

(Winter 1999)

(12a) is true if and only if Dylan wrote more songs than Simon and Garfunkel wrote together, as a pair; (12b) is true iff Dylan wrote more songs than Simon and more songs than Garfunkel. The sentences are thus truth-conditionally distinct.

Similarly, when a verb selects for a group-denoting object, repetition of *et* when the object is a conjunction of singular DPs is only marginally acceptable:

- (13) a. hifradeti et Ruti ve Sara.
 separated.1sg et Ruti and Sara
'I separated Ruti and Sara.'
- b. ?? hifradeti et Ruti ve et Sara.

Since the verb *hifrid* ('separate') requires its object to denote a plurality, when *et* is repeated as in (13b) the sentence is odd. This results from the fact that repeated *et* leads to a distributive interpretation, and thus the sentence means 'I separated Ruti and separated Sara', which has only a marginal interpretation with an additional implicit argument (from whom Ruti and Sara were separated), or with an odd 'mass' interpretation in which each person was separated into her constituent parts.

Finally, we should note that semantic contrasts related to the presence of *et* have also been noted in the case of pseudoclefts, as discussed in Heller (1999). In the following example, use of *et* in front of the postcopular DP is optional ³:

- (14) a. ma še- Dan ra'a ze et ha- šaxen.
 what that- Dan saw is et the- neighbor
 '*What Dan saw is the neighbor.*'
- b. ? ma še- Dan ra'a ze ha- šaxen.

(14a) could be used, for instance, in a contrastive context, to distinguish what Dan saw from what he didn't see. (14b), on the other hand, does not have this contrastive reading; rather, it can only be paraphrased roughly as "That thing which Dan saw was the neighbor", thus using *ha-šaxen* ('the neighbor') as a predicate that applies to the free relative *ma še-dan ra'a* ('What Dan saw').

To conclude, it is clear that *et* triggers a variety of semantic effects, some of which have not been discussed before. These semantic effects cannot be reduced to definiteness, since they are sometimes found when the relevant DP is definite with or without *et* (for instance, with conjunctions of definites and with pseudoclefts). The semantic content of *et* is subtle enough to make it go unnoticed in the vast majority of instances where *et* is used. In the rest of this paper, I will propose an approach for explaining these facts.

4 DP denotations and semantic type

Following Partee (1987), I assume that noun phrases may have denotations at more than one semantic type. Common nouns denote sets (or properties), to which a determiner applies to give a denotation at one of the three types e , $\langle e, t \rangle$, and $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$. I will assume that different determiners produce different semantic types; the basic classification of determiners that I assume is the following:

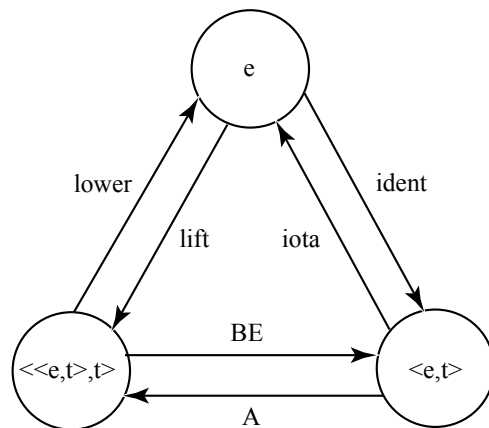
- Definite determiners like *the* and *this* map a set into an individual out of that set (hence, they denote choice functions; see Reinhart 1997 and Winter

³Some speakers find the sentence where *et* is omitted to be only marginally acceptable

1997); consequently, a definite has type e . Proper names like *Dan* also denote individuals of type e .

- Indefinite determiners and simple numerals like *a* or *three* map sets into sets; indefinites thus denote sets of type $\langle e, t \rangle$.
- Quantifiers like *every*, *no* or *many* map sets into generalized quantifiers (GQs), of type $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$ (see Barwise and Cooper 1981).

In addition to the basic type associated with each DP, which results from the application of the determiner to the CN denotation, type-shifting operations allow DPs to have a denotation at other semantic types. In Partee (1987), it is assumed that type shifting from any type to any other type is always allowed where the operation is defined. The following diagram, known as the 'Partee triangle', shows the different type shifting operations:

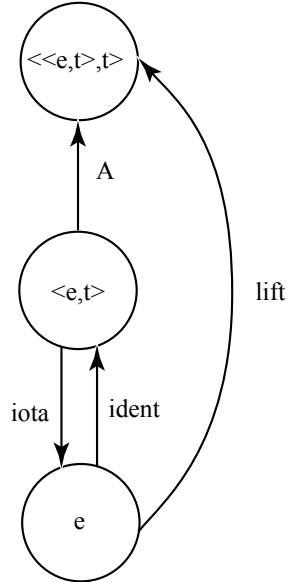


Here, however, I will assume a more restricted theory in which only the following type shifting operations are freely available:

- **Lifting**: from any type to any higher type
- ι (**iota**): from $\langle e, t \rangle$ to e ; this is partial function, which maps a singleton set into its unique element, and is undefined if the set does not contain exactly

one element.⁴

This is summarized in the following diagram:



As a consequence, except for indefinites that denote a singleton set, free lowering is not allowed. Using this framework, I propose that *et* acts as a restriction on the semantic type of the DP that it precedes. The following is my central hypothesis:

- (15) *et* must precede a DP that has a type *e* denotation.

What this means is that DPs that do not have a denotation at type *e* will not be able to follow *et*. Furthermore, it means that certain ambiguous DPs will be disambiguated as a result of the restriction imposed by *et*.

This hypothesis can be implemented in a variety of ways. I will pursue the following implementation:

- (16) *et* denotes the lifting operator from type *e* to $\langle\langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$:

$$\llbracket et \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda P.P(x)$$

⁴Within a semantics of plurality we should instead assume the supremum operator of Link (1983), which is a generalization of the ι operator to the plural and mass domains.

In what follows, I show how this proposal can be used to derive the different semantic effects that were described in the first part of this paper.

5 Deriving the semantic effects of *et*

First, we should note that in the case of simple definites, *et* is correctly predicted to have no semantic effect. When combined with a definite like *ha-sefer* ('the-book'), whose basic denotation is at type e , *et* lifts it to a GQ. This lifting has no truth-conditional effect, giving the impression that *et* is vacuous.

Consider now CSNs with a definite associate. As shown in (6) above, these are ambiguous between a definite and an indefinite reading. One possible explanation for this is that a CSN like *ovedet ha-bank* (lit. 'worker the-bank', *a/the worker of the bank*) lacks an overt determiner, and thus has a basic denotation of type $\langle e, t \rangle$, like common nouns and indefinites. This accounts for the indefinite interpretation. Since a definite article is impossible on heads of CSNs, a CSN has some of the properties of noun phrases in languages that lack articles. As is well-known, in such languages a noun phrase is systematically ambiguous between a definite and an indefinite reading, and can optionally be interpreted as if there was a definite article attached to it (see for instance Chierchia 1998). Thus, we may assume that the *iota* operator, which is the denotation of a definite article, can apply to the denotation of a CSN to give the definite reading. Adopting Chierchia's proposal, we may assume that the option of using this operation is limited to environments where the definite article is not allowed by the grammar:

Blocking Principle ('Type Shifting as Last Resort')

For any type shifting operator τ and any X :

$*\tau(X)$

if there is a determiner D such that for any set X in its domain,

$D(X) = \tau(X)$

(Chierchia 1998: 360)

While Chierchia's blocking principle is concerned only with whether or not a language has a suitable determiner, the behavior of CSNs in Hebrew suggests that

if a determiner exists but is syntactically impossible in a given environment, it does not block type shifting. We conclude that the possibility of applying the *iota* type-shifting operator in Hebrew is limited to CSNs, which are morphologically incompatible with the overt definite article.

We thus have two different denotations for a CSN with a definite associate: an indefinite denotation, at type $\langle e, t \rangle$, and a definite one, at type e . When a CSN does not follow *et*, both options are allowed. But when a CSN follows *et*, which combines with a type e denotation, the indefinite interpretation is blocked and we get only the definite reading.

A similar explanation can be given for the more restricted interpretation of *ma* ('what') when it is preceded by *et*. Assuming that *wh*- words denote variables, *ma* may denote a variable of any of the semantic types that a noun phrase may have. An answer is appropriate as long as it matches the semantic type of the question, and therefore *ma* can be answered by a definite, an indefinite, or a quantificational DP. But when *et* precedes *ma*, as in (10b), the denotation is restricted to a variable of type e . Thus, an appropriate answer must be a DP that has type e , and hence a definite.

The distributive reading that is observed in conjunctions where *et* precedes each conjunct, as in (11b), can also be derived from the assumption that *et* is the lift operator. Suppose that each conjunct is a definite DP; as such, its denotation is of type e . Following Link (1983), I assume that a conjunction of two individual-denoting DPs denotes the plural individual which is the sum of the two conjuncts. Crucially, this is still an individual of type e , and hence it is the suitable type for combining with *et*. A conjunction where *et* appears only once is thus interpreted at type e ; the formation of the plural individual is the source of the collective reading. For example, the object in (11a) is interpreted as following:

- (17) a. et Ruti ve Sara
 et Ruti and Sara
- b. $\llbracket et \rrbracket(\llbracket ruti\ ve\ sara \rrbracket)$
 $= \lambda x \lambda P.P(x)(r \oplus s)$
 $= \lambda P.P(r \oplus s)$

If, on the other hand, *et* applies to each conjunct individually as in (11b), the conjunction is at the type of generalized quantifiers. The plural individual $r \oplus s$, the sum of the denotations of the two conjuncts, is never formed in the derivation of the coordinated object in this case:

- (18) a. *et* Ruti *ve* *et* Sara
et Ruti and *et* Sara
- b. $\llbracket et \rrbracket(\llbracket ruti \rrbracket) \wedge \llbracket et \rrbracket(\llbracket sara \rrbracket)$
 $= \lambda x \lambda P.P(x)(r) \wedge \lambda x \lambda P.P(x)(s)$
 $= \lambda P.P(r) \wedge \lambda P.P(s)$
 $= \lambda P.P(r) \wedge P(s)$

If collective interpretations stem from having the plural individual as part of the derivation, then we have an explanation for the lack of this reading when *et* precedes each conjunct.

An apparent problem for this analysis is that the same collective/distributive alternation is found not only with *et*, but with all prepositions, even in languages that have no equivalent to *et*. This is illustrated in the following English example:

- (19) a. John dreamt about Mary and Bill.
b. John dreamt about Mary and about Bill.

Suppose that John dreamt about Mary alone and about Bill alone, but never about Mary and Bill as a couple; then (19a) is false, while (19b), which has the distributive reading, is true. Since there is no *et* here, it might seem as though my analysis of *et* misses an important generalization.

This, however, is only an apparent problem. The crucial point about my analysis of conjunctions with *et* is that *et* is not semantically vacuous; coordination after applying *et* to each DP denotation is not identical to coordination before application of *et*, because *et* contributes to the compositional semantics. The fact that all prepositions give rise to similar distributivity effects shows that no preposition is entirely vacuous.⁵ Thus, after applying the denotation of *about* to each conjunct

⁵As a minimum, we might assume that 'functional' prepositions such as English *to* (when not used with its directional meaning) are also type shifters of some sort.

in (19b), we can no longer get back to the type e denotation of the proper name alone. I conclude that the similarity between et and other prepositions is expected under the current approach and does not pose a real problem.

Finally, consider the different interpretations of pseudoclefts with and without et , in examples like (14). Recall that without et , we get a reading in which the postcopular DP is predicated of the free relative in subject position. This reading is missing when et is present, and in that case we get an equation: the free relative is equated with the postcopular DP.

We now predict that et +definite will differ in its semantic type from a definite without et : the former is lifted by et to a GQ, while the latter remains at type e . Since lifting from type e to $\langle e, t \rangle$ is allowed to occur freely, the prediction is that without et , the definite will have the option of being interpreted not only at type e but also at type $\langle e, t \rangle$, the type of predicates. This derives the predicative reading when et is missing, as in (14b). When et is present, on the other hand, the only option for interpreting the sentence is as an equation at the type of generalized quantifiers; the DP with et cannot be lowered to type $\langle e, t \rangle$, and therefore the predicative reading cannot be derived when et is present in (14a). The presence or absence of et thus correlates with the availability of the predication versus equation readings.

In conclusion, if et acts as a type shifter then its semantic contribution is a very subtle one, often with no truth conditional effect at all, and it sometimes results only in slight changes that cannot be reduced to a more familiar notion such as 'definiteness', 'specificity' or the like. The almost 'transparent' nature of type shifting can thus explain why until now the semantic content of et has gone almost unnoticed.

6 Testing for semantic definiteness of CSNs

I would like to end this paper with a short methodological note. Most previous analyses of Semitic CSNs have assumed that definiteness spreading is not just a syntactic phenomenon but also a semantic one. With the exception of Engel-

hardt (2000), most authors have not noticed the empirical fact that CSNs with a definite associate are not always interpreted as definites. One reason is that indefinite readings of [+def] CSNs emerge mainly when the head of the CSN is a membership noun (but see Engelhardt 2000 for examples involving event nouns); with most other classes of nouns, formal and semantic definiteness seem to match more consistently. But now we see another reason for not noticing the existence of indefinite readings: in object position, these readings 'disappear'. This is an interesting interaction between syntactic and semantic principles: a definite associate causes a CSN to be formally definite, and as a result the syntax requires the use of *et* when the CSN is an object (Danon 2001); at the same time, because of its semantic content, *et* blocks indefinite readings. Thus, we conclude that testing for definiteness of a CSN in a position that involves *et* is misleading.

This conclusion is particularly important because *et* appears not only in front of objects. A standard test for definiteness of a noun phrase is to use it in an existential sentence, which allows only indefinites. This is illustrated in the following example:

- (20) a. There is a man in the garden.
 b. * There is the man in the garden.

The Hebrew equivalent of these sentences, however, uses the element *yeš*, also found in possessive sentences. It is important to note that in possessives in spoken Hebrew, *yeš* is always followed by *et* when the DP is definite (as opposed to the rules of normative grammar, according to which *et* should not be used with *yeš*):

- (21) a. *yeš li et ha- sefer ha- ze.*
 be to-me et the- book the- this
'I have (a copy of) this book.'
 b. * *yeš li ha- sefer ha- ze.*

Applying the existential sentence test to simple Hebrew definites gives the same pattern as in English:

- (22) a. *yeš iš ba- gina.*
 be man in-the- garden
'There is a man in the garden.'

- b. *yeš et ha- iš ba- gina.
 be et the- man in-the- garden

However, if we wanted to test for the definiteness of a CSN like *boger ha-oniversita* (lit. 'graduate the-university') by putting it in this kind of sentence, the test would be complicated by the presence of *et*. Since the CSN is formally definite, it requires *et*; and since *et* blocks indefinite readings, we end up with an ungrammatical sentence:

- (23) *yeš et boger ha- oniversita ba- gina.
 be et graduate the- university in-the- garden

One might then mistakenly conclude that CSNs with a definite associate are always semantically definite. The surprising fact is that in this case, violating the syntactic requirement for *et* in front of a formally definite DP actually improves the sentence:

- (24) ??yeš boger ha- oniversita ba- gina.
 be graduate the- university in-the- garden

In summary, testing for semantic definiteness in *yeš* sentences turns out to be a misleading test. In this case, the syntactic environment which serves as the test 'discriminates' against one of the possible outcomes.

7 Conclusion

I have shown that as opposed to what has often been assumed, construct state nominals do not inherit the semantic definiteness value of their embedded genitive. I have also shown that *et* is not semantically vacuous, and that it contributes to the semantics of the sentence by restricting the type of the DP which follows it to be individual-denoting. This triggers a variety of semantic effects that can all be reduced to the semantics of *et* as type-shifting operator.

8 References

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