HAL
open science

Review of *The Story of Zero* by Talmy Givon (John Benjamins, 2017)

Francis Cornish

To cite this version:

Francis Cornish. Review of *The Story of Zero* by Talmy Givon (John Benjamins, 2017). 2019. hal-01940675

HAL Id: hal-01940675

https://hal.science/hal-01940675v1

Submitted on 30 Nov 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

To appear in *Glosema. Revista Asturiana de Llingüística* 1, March 2019

The Story of Zero by T. Givón, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company. ISBN: 978 90 272 1239 9, v-xv and 414 pp.

This is a massive work, dealing with a variety of constructions systematically comparing English, Spanish, (Biblical) Hebrew, German, Ute and Japanese, with data also presented from certain other languages from the Indian sub-continent, Africa and the Americas. But curiously, there is no presentation or discussion of examples from Arabic. It is largely based around already published work by the author, and focuses on the structural contexts in which zeros occur. There is very little on the wider discourse contexts in which zero forms function (but see below for a qualification of this point). Furthermore, there is an unusually high number (and variety!) of typographical errors and even of spellings, suggesting that the proof-reading stage of the production process was not carried out optimally. Moreover, given that the majority of chapters are adapted from existing publications by the author, there is no cross-referencing between the chapters, and also some degree of redundancy.

There are 13 chapters, arranged in two overall parts. Part I comprises chapters dealing with Givón's theoretical framework, which is essentially functional and cognitive in orientation. Chapter 1 deals with the communicative framework in which zero and overt anaphoric markers are used, while chapter 2 details Givón's broader conception of "referential coherence" in terms of a "grammar" of markers viewed as "mental processing instructions". Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the close relationship between zero forms and "pronominal agreement" (both tightly bound up with the expression of continuity in a discourse). Chapter 5 asks whether zero anaphora is a "typological exotica", answering the question in the negative, while chapter 6 is devoted to a discussion of zero forms in "verbless clauses", drawing evidence from spoken Ute narratives, spoken English, early child language, second language pidgins and Broca's aphasic speech. Chapter 7 deals with so-called "cataphoric zero", and adduces in this respect examples of the passive and antipassive voices (see below for more on this issue).

Part II then discusses coreference in relative clauses, with data from Japanese, Bambara, Hittite, Hebrew, Ute and German (chapter 8), in clausal verb complements (chapter 9), in adverbial clauses (chapter 10), and how zero forms and 3rd person pronouns function in the context of clause chaining (chapter 11). Chapters 12 and 13 then set the focus more broadly, asking whether there are "promiscuous ill-governed zeros" (chapter 12) and showing that there are only relatively few such instances. Finally, chapter 13 demonstrates that the phenomenon of "stranded adpositions" is not some quirk of language, but is in fact functionally and communicatively motivated.

The book is completed by an extensive 18-page bibliography, a general and a language index. However, there is no overall conclusion to the work, drawing together the various strands of the argument and descriptions and pinpointing avenues for future research on zero forms; but only a short section 7 ("Closure") to the final chapter (chap. 13, pp. 387-8) on the communicative function of stranded case-marking adpositions and their correlation with ellipsed nominal arguments in the languages that permit it.

As a whole, this work is impressive: in its coverage of languages, from a variety of types, taking account also of certain forms of language use (early child language, second-language pidgins, Broca's aphasic speech), its wide-ranging and effective references to the literature on the topics covered (already very extensive), and its handling of the structural features of the phenomena under discussion. However, apart from the preliminary chapters devoted to the communicative functions of indexical markers, viewed as "processing instructions" (chapters 1 and 2), the bulk of the work focuses on what we might call the "micro-linguistic" aspects of zero forms. These are approached indirectly, via their roles in the setting up of various structural relations within constructions (the passive and antipassive, left-

dislocation, so-called "Y-movement", complement, adverbial and nominal clauses and so on). The broad focus of the work is on these, rather than on zero forms *per se* in fact, thus belying the emphasis of the title to an extent.

Yet Givón does recognize (chap. 1) what we might call "meso-textual" structures, in the shape of "clause-chaining". Here, structured groupings of clauses in a text constitute a unit of discourse (see below),[1] introduced by a "reorientation device", separating off the unit in question from the clauses upstream, then a "chain-initial" clause, followed by one or more "chain-medial" ones, a "chain-boundary" clause and finally a "chain boundary". The discourse to which these clause-chainings may give rise would then be internally coherent semantico-pragmatically. Above this "intermediate" level, Givón also recognizes the dimensions of "paragraph", "episode" and "story" (in the case of narrative discourse): see in this respect the Hierarchy represented in (5) in Chapter 1 (p. 5). But apart from a very few allusions to the status of a zero-containing clause within this meso-textual structure, it is to all intents and purposes abandoned as a framing device for the study of these forms.

I will end this review by highlighting certain key issues raised by this work. First, in Givón's (largely successful) attempt to undermine the claimed distinction within Generative Grammar between "configurational" and "non-configurational" languages in chapter 5, he attempts to show that zero gaps in both subject and non-subject positions are widespread in spoken English (contrary to what is claimed by this conception, English being said to be a prototypical "configurational" language). To test this claim, he had pairs of subjects watch a short (presumably silent) video, having been told in advance that the one each saw was slightly different. Each member then had to try to establish via discussion the similarities and differences between the two viewings. But in analyzing the data this experiment yielded, no account seems to have taken to distinguish between the genuine occurrence of zero forms, and simply hesitations followed by repairs. An example comes from section 3.4.1.5.4 in chap. 5, on "zero-anaphora objects":

(1) "The guy in my story picked [Ø]…got [Ø]…and picked up **all those tools** [CAT]" (Ex. (34a), p. 150)

But this isn't a finished, "final" clause structure at all (as the analysis provided suggests): we are dealing here surely with a series of hesitations on the speaker's part in terms of the optimal verb to choose, where he or she plumps eventually for the same verb as used initially, but followed by a particle (i.e. a "phrasal" verb). There is no instance of "cataphora" here (a highly marked referential device, as Givón in fact notes elsewhere in the book, e.g. on p. 183), as indicated by the abbreviation "(CAT)". The speaker keeps in short-term memory for the duration of the utterance the full object NP *all those tools* and simply spends processing time searching for the optimal verb to use in governing it. Note that "reinstating" an unstressed overt pronoun for the "gaps" as indicated here would result in clear ungrammaticality:

(1) a. *The guy in my story picked them…got them…and picked up all those tools.

This is a case therefore of over-analysis, the analyst reading into a user's textual productions more than can reasonably be supposed to be present. There are a number of other examples like this in this chapter. This problem also has implications for the many relative textual frequency tables throughout chapters 5 and 6 (such as Table VI "Distribution of zero-object categories",

[1] Though the author does not explicitly recognize any clear distinction between the dimensions of *text* and *discourse* (cf. Cornish, 2009).

on p. 153) that are based on these supposed "data", thereby largely affecting the overall conclusions drawn on their basis.

A second major issue has to do with Givón's conception of *text*. As in a great many works on anaphora and indexical reference generally, the textual dimension of language use is made to do duty for aspects of the latter for which it is not strictly relevant. For Givón, a given indexical-anaphoric marker (he recognizes in this category zero forms, unaccented 3rd person pronouns, accented pronouns and definite NPs) has to be justified by an appropriate textual antecedent, co-occurring in its vicinity in a given text for it to be considered as anaphoric (Givón frequently uses the term "text-based antecedent" in this respect, e.g. on p. 61).

However, the author does recognize (p. 43) the limitations of purely text-based accounts of indexical reference, which tend not to take into consideration "the **mind** that produces and interprets the text" (p. 43: Givón's own emphasis). Hence the author's insistence that the search for referents of given indexical forms takes place "in mentally-stored text" (pp. 27, 37), and not in text itself *per se*. Yet this cannot literally be the case, since working memory is finite and limited. Indeed, the textual trace of a communicative event is short-lived, disappearing from short-term memory once that discourse is constructed — or very soon thereafter (see, e.g., Jarvella, 1979, and indeed Givón himself, on p. 66). What is stored in memory is *discourse*, not *text* as such, that is, a mental representation of the speaker and addressee's interpretation of the ongoing communicative event, subject to continuous revision as a function of the ever-changing context of that event. It is discourse which is hierarchically structured, while text is essentially linear (notwithstanding Givón's characterization of text as **both** hierarchical and linear). *Text*, then, would be the connected sequence of perceptible cues (i.e. the physical product of an act of utterance) provided by the speaker/writer for their addressee/reader to infer the *discourse* (the negotiated meaning) that may be associated with a given stretch of text in conjunction with a relevant *context*. However, Givón does not make this distinction explicit (though it appears often to be implicit to varying extents, notably in chapter 2) in his analyses and presentations.

Yet all the many tables of data presented all through the book are in terms of relative textual frequencies of occurrence of the forms at issue, so the textual dimension looms large at every turn. This is especially apparent in Givón's heuristic of "anaphoric distance"[2] in terms of degree of anaphoricity, and of "referential persistence" in terms of "cataphoricity". Here, an essentially *discourse* phenomenon is being characterized in purely *textual* terms. For it is quite possible, for example, that a macro-topical discourse entity may not be mentioned textually for a large stretch of text, yet remain topical and activated, and will be treated as such in terms of the use of highly continuous markers at a later stage (I have found several instances of this in my French- and English-language collected corpora of utterances). This phenomenon surely invalidates to some degree, at least, the "anaphoric distance" criterion.

Finally, Givón's conception of the "anaphoric"/ "cataphoric" distinction, which looms large in the work as a whole, is somewhat problematic. He uses the concept of anaphora in the accepted sense of the "referential dependency" of a highly attenuated indexical form upon the existence of a given topical referent in memory, depending on the level of attention or saliency which it enjoys at the point of retrieval. However, his use of the term in general tends to be rather broader than this (cf. the issue of "zero anaphora" in unplanned spoken language discussed in chapter 5), and so is not always appropriate. As far as his conception of "cataphora" is concerned, however, his usage is so broad that it loses all specificity, in opposition to "anaphora" (in the strict sense of the term). To all intents and purposes, "cataphora" is tantamount in the author's usage to "referent locatable textually downstream", while "anaphora" is "referent textually locatable upstream". In addition, "cataphora" (or textual

[2] This is defined (p. 39) as "The number of clauses (or elapsed time) from the last occurrence of the referent in the preceding discourse." However, "referents" do not "occur" as such: it is rather the textual expression targeting that referent which occurs in a given text (i.e. here, certainly, the "antecedent" in traditional accounts).

"downstreamness") is associated by Givón with the relative "importance" of the referent at issue in the discourse —though the notion of "importance" is not defined. But of course this leads to an inevitable contradiction: "cataphora" signals both unimportant information to come, and important information to come. As far as zero forms are concerned, the author characterizes as "the communicative logic of zero" the notion that "Unimportant information need not be mentioned" (item (1b), p. 3). He illustrates this on p. 4 with examples of the English short passive and "antipassive" constructions:

(2) a. Passive: Two months later, she was fired [by Ø]. (Givón's ex. (2a), ch. 1, p. 4)
b. Antipassive (sic): He eats [Ø] regularly. (Givón's ex. (2b), ch. 1, p. 4)

But these zero forms are simply interpretable as generic or indeterminate references (if indeed they count as "references" at all, which is doubtful): see the three-way distinction amongst *non-referential (generic* or *indeterminate*), *referential- (in)definite* (discourse-new) and *anaphoric* (contextually definite) internal implicit arguments which the reviewer draws in Cornish (2007:193). The passive voice in (2a) has intransitivized the basic accomplishment predicate 'fire', to create a state one (*fired* in the short passive in (2a) being a quasi-adjective). The zero realization of the second semantic argument corresponds to a variable, whose value is determined via the lexical-semantics of the predicate (i.e. a potential 'firer'). And in (2b), the zero realization of the second argument has similarly converted 'eat' from an accomplishment to an activity predicate, the variable determined again via the lexical semantics of 'eat' ('something edible'). So neither "anaphora" nor "cataphora" in the strict sense is involved in examples (2a) and (2b) at all.

Finally, let us look briefly at Givón's characterization of zero forms, the purported major topic of the book as a whole. Close examination of his examples suggests there are three subtypes. First, a "discourse" use, initially illustrated in comparison to that of unstressed pronouns by the English examples in (8) (p. 7: an invented dialogue), (11) (p. 38: an invented narrative), (14) (p. 78: an identical dialogue example to that given earlier in (8) on p. 7), and (6) (p. 284: the very same invented dialogue as in (8) and (14) listed above). Second, the one mainly illustrated in the chapters dealing with various types of clause, mainly non-finite ones, but also finite relative clauses. Apart from the relative clause zeros (which may be subject or non-subject in status), all these involve subject zeros. We may call these "micro-textual" instances, since their occurrence and interpretation are more or less completely determined by the grammatical contexts in which they appear. And third, the variable, non-anaphoric occurrences of zero as illustrated in (2a) and (2b) above, which Givón (wrongly) classifies under the general heading of "Cataphora", as we have seen.

To these, we may add an additional "discourse" use of zero forms in English, namely a referential hearer-old, but discourse-new type, which is responsible for actually introducing a new entity into a discourse (cf. Cornish, 2007). So its status cannot therefore be characterized in terms of that of a very high continuity marker, as in the case of the anaphoric subtype. One example is the deictic use, as in imperative constructions (cf. ex. (8) in Cornish, 2007: 198: *Eat ø!/ Watch ø!/Mind ø!/Smell!/Taste ø!*, or *Break ø in an emergency*, as in the familiar instruction placed on a glass panel behind which is an alarm). And the variable use as illustrated in (2a,b) above needs to be subdivided into an "indeterminate" subtype (as illustrated in (2a)), and a "generic" one (as in (2b)). Both have in common the fact that their interpretations are bound up with the predicating ability of the verb, adjective or proposition which governs them.

Moreover, regarding the two referential subtypes identified above, the distinction with respect to the use of unstressed 3rd person pronouns is not only a matter of degree of attention focus or continuity, as Givón claims, but is a function also of the inherent referring properties of the two indexical marker types. Zero markers have a more diffuse, global referential value

in context, whereas overt 3rd person pronouns tend to refer more specifically and concretely (cf. Cornish, 2007: 213). Examples are (3a,b)):

(3) a. [Context: article about a 1.3 kg meteorite which crashed into a New Zealand couple's living room shortly before breakfast (*The Guardian*, 14.06.04, p. 2)] "...and the Archers' one-year-old grandson had been playing in the room moments before it hit ø." (extract from ex. (1c´´) in Cornish, 2007, p. 191)

b. [At the theatre: A is seated next to B, who is placed right behind a tall spectator in the seat in front]
A to B: Can you see ø? (ex. (22d) in Cornish, 2007, p. 211)

In (3a), replacing the zero by the pronoun *it* would have induced a more local interpretation, whereby it was the 'NZ couple's living room' which was hit by the meteorite. In contrast, the zero form as used here refers more diffusely to the house as a whole. And in (3b), the same overt pronoun *it* would tend to refer specifically to the stage *qua* stage, while the zero form targets the ambient scene more globally as a whole (including the décor, the actors and so on).

There are several avenues for future research on zeros deriving from this exceptional piece of scholarly linguistic work. The most basic one would be to answer the question as to how actually to recognize a zero marker, given that by definition these are inaudible in the stream of spoken text, and invisible in that of written. The question is not moot, as we saw earlier in this review in discussing Givón's notion of supposed "zero anaphoric" or "cataphoric" constituents in unplanned spoken English. Next is the issue of the different subtypes of zero, over and above the purely referential, anaphoric subtype, which is the one the author is principally concerned with in this book. Another important issue is the comparison between the functioning of zeros and 3rd person pronouns, which as we have seen is not exhausted by the criterion of the degree of saliency of their respective intended referents at the point of use. Finally, there is the question of the strategic use of zeros (where these are permitted in distributional terms) by speakers or writers instead of that of 3rd person pronouns: see Oh (2006) for some very interesting data and analyses based on a spoken English corpus.

References

Cornish, F. (2007). Implicit internal arguments, event structure, predication and anaphoric reference. Ch. 9 in N. Hedberg & R. Zacharski (eds.), *The Grammar-Pragmatics Interface. Essays in honor of Jeanette K. Gundel*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins (*Pragmatics and Beyond* series), pp. 189-216.

Cornish, F. (2009). *Text* and *discourse* as *context*: Discourse anaphora and the FDG Contextual component. In Keizer, E. & Wanders, G., (eds.), special issue of *Working Papers in Functional Discourse Grammar (WP-FDG-82): The London Papers I,* 2009, pp. 97–115. Available at the website http://home.hum.uva.nl/fdg/working_papers/WP-FDG-82_Cornish.pdf.

Jarvella, R.J. (1979). Immediate memory and discourse processing. In: Bower, G.B. (ed.), *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation* Vol. 13. Academic Press, New York, pp. 379-421.

Oh, S-Y. (2006). English zero anaphora as an interactional resource II. *Discourse Studies* 8(6): 817-46.

Francis Cornish
Université de Toulouse Jean-Jaurès

5, Allées Antonio-Machado
F-31058 Toulouse Cedex 09
cornish@univ-tlse2.fr