Double object fronting in Bangla

1. Background

Bangla is a SOV Nom-Acc Indo-Aryan language. A nominative subject in Bangla obligatorily triggers agreement on the finite verb. Furthermore, in finite clauses, the inflectional morphemes appear as suffixes on the verb root. As far as word order is concerned, Bangla allows considerable freedom in the positioning of verbal arguments. As with other scrambling languages, any departure from the canonical word order bears information structural import.

2. The problem

Bangla allows both objects in a Double Object Construction (DOC) to be optionally fronted, which marks the subject as the constituent bearing contrastive focus. The discourse neutral word order is given in (1a), and sentence in (1b) exemplifies double object fronting. The aim of this paper is to provide a syntactic derivation for the string in (1b), along with an account of its information structural significance.

(1)
　　[SUB IO DO V]　　　　　　　　　　　　[IO DO SUB V]
　　a. Apu Raja-ke　ek-ta　boi　diyeche　　b. Na, Raja-ke　ek-ta　boi　AMI diyechi
　　　 Apu Raja-DAT one-CL book gave　　　　 No, Raja-DAT one-CL book I　gave
　　　 'Apu gave Raja a book'　　　　　　　　 'No, I gave Raja a book'

3. The syntax

There are two possible derivations for the string in (1b). Firstly, it could have resulted via movement of individual arguments to a position hierarchically superior to the derived position of the subject, as schematically illustrated in (2a). Alternatively, (1b) may be the output of beheaded VP movement. In this scenario, the verb would vacate the VP first, landing in a position below the subject. Next, the remnant VP moves to a position higher than the subject, as shown in (2b).

(2)
　　a. IO　DO　S　[$_{VP}$ t_{IO}　t_{DO}　V]
　　b. [$_{VP}$ IO　DO　t_V]　S　V　t_{VP}

The interpretation of indefinites provides a piece of evidence in support of the beheaded VP movement analysis. Consider the sentence in (3a), which may be naturally continued with the sentence provided in the brackets. This shows that an indefinite DO in its base position may be interpreted as a non-specific indefinite. However, a fronted indefinite DO, as in (3b), is necessarily interpreted as specific. This is because the bracketed sentence is utterly impossible as a continuation for the sentence given in (3b).

(3) a. Ami to-ke　　ek-ta　boi　dite　　chai…
　　　 I　you-DAT　one-CL book　give.INF　want
　　　 (kintu kon　boi-ta　　debo　　ekhono　thik kori　ni)
　　　 but　which book-CL　　will.give yet　　　decide　　NEG
　　　 'I want to give a book, but I haven't yet decided which one'
　　b. Ek-ta　boi　ami to-ke　　dite　　chai…
　　　 one-CL　book I　you-DAT　give.INF　want
　　　 (#kintu kon　boi-ta　debo　　ekhono　thik kori　ni)
　　　 but　which book-CL will.give yet　　　decide　　NEG
　　　 'There is a book that I want to give you, but I haven't decided which one'

We know that a weak determiner may remain in the domain of existential closure (vP) and lend itself to a cardinal/non-specific interpretation, as in (3a). Alternatively, it may be outside of the domain of existential closure, in which case it receives a specific interpretation (Diesing 1992). If double object fronting were derived via the movement of individual arguments, we would expect an indefinite to be necessarily interpreted as specific. However, the example in (4) shows, this is not the case. In (4), the DO is not in its base position, yet it retains the non-specific interpretation. This suggests that the indefinite DO, though moved, it still within the domain of existential closure.

(4) Raja-ke   ek-ta   boi Anu diyeche, kintu kon   boi-ta   je   diyeche ami jani na
    Raja-DAT one-CL book A   gave   but   which book-CL REL gave   I   know not
    'It's Anu who gave Raja a book, but I don't know which book she gave him'

As mentioned earlier, in the Bangla finite clause, the verb is adorned with inflectional *suffixes*. One could assume that a fully inflected verb is created in the syntax, as the verb undergoes head movement through the inflectional layer of the clause.[1] This, then, provides a motivation for the first step of the beheaded VP movement analysis, namely V movement. Furthermore, verbal idioms provide a strong empirical evidence for the existence beheaded VP movement in Bangla. An example of a verbal idiom is provided in (5).

(5) shaak   diye mach dhaka
    spinach with fish cover
    Lit: 'To cover the fish with spinach' Idiomatic interpretation: 'To hide something'

When the verbal constituents undergo fronting, as shown in (6a), the idiomatic interpretation is not only preserved, but it is also the more salient reading of the sentence. However, when only one of the verbal constituents is fronted, as in (6b), the idiomatic reading is no longer available. The fact that idiomaticity is preserved in (6b) suggests that the fronted category is a VP, which contains a copy of the verb.

(6) a. Shaak   diye mach ami   kokkhono dhaki na
       spinach with fish I   ever   cover NEG
       'I have never hid anything'
    b. Shak   diye ami mach dhaki ni,   (mangsho dekhechi)
        spinach with I   fish cover NEG   meat   covered
        'I did not cover the fish with the spinach, I covered the meat'   *Idiomatic reading

4. Information structural consequence

When both objects are fronted, as in (1b), the subject naturally becomes the locus of contrastive focus. It should be noted here that double object fronting is felicitous only when both objects are discourse anaphoric. I assume an architecture of the grammar that allows for an interface between syntax and information structure (cf. Eilam 2011). At the end of the syntactic derivation, the IS component marks the discourse anaphoric items as such; subsequently, when the string is shipped off to the PF wing, main stress is assigned to discourse new material only. In other words, in my analysis, contrastive focus is result of syntactic movement of discourse anaphoric items. This position differs from the one defended in Jayaseelan 2004, for instance, where he argues that a focused constituent obligatorily undergoes focus-driven movement into the Spec position of a dedicated functional projection that immediately dominates *v*P. However, if the nominative subject is assumed to raise to [Spec, TP] due to the EPP feature of T, it is not clear how the EPP feature can be checked if the subject were to remain in a low FocP in sentences such as (1b).

5. Conclusion

A study of the alternation illustrated in (1) shows that beheaded VP movement is permissible in Bangla. Furthermore, the information structural fact discussed here could be accounted for without appealing to focus-driven movement.

Reference: Eilam, Aviad. 2011. Explorations in Informational Component. Doctoral dissertation, UPenn.
Jayaseelan, K.A. 2008. Topic, focus and adverb position in clause structure. *Nanzan Linguistics* 4: 43 – 68.

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[1] Following standard practice in the study of South Asian languages, I assume Bangla is head final. Thus, trees are right branching, with both complements and specifiers appearing on the left of the head.