

Glottothèque
Mayan languages

Topic and focus in Yucatec Maya

Rodrigo Gutiérrez-Bravo

El Colegio de México

rogutierrez@colmex.mx

February 5, 2024

Introduction

- This talk is an introductory talk to the syntactic properties of topic and focus in Yucatec Maya.
- The syntax of topic and focus has been widely studied for a good number of Mayan languages.
- There is a good reason for this: topics and foci are not necessarily categories that can be easily identified in many languages.
- In Mayan languages, however, topics and foci are associated with a good number of syntactic and morpho-syntactic properties that allow us to identify them unequivocally: they are very transparent (Aissen 1992).

Yucatec Maya

- Yucatec Maya is spoken in the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico and in some parts of Belize.
- It is the Mayan language with the second largest number of speakers (795,499 people: INPI 2020).
- Map: CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1483259>



Sentence topic: definition

- A **sentence topic** is a full syntactic phrase that, instead of appearing in its canonical position, appears in the initial position of the sentence.
- This type of topic is essentially found in an “aboutness” relation with the rest of the sentence. It is what the sentence is about, as in the following example:

(1) **This dream** I've had maybe three, four times. (Prince 1984:218)

Sentence topics in Yucatec

- Yucatec Maya has a topic enclitic =e', which adheres to the right edge of a sentence topic.
- When the base position of the topicalized element is after the verb, it is possible in principle to observe *two different properties* that indicate the topicalization of this element:
 - A. Its displacement to the left edge of the sentence and,
 - B. The presence of the topic clitic.

When the topic is an intransitive subject

- Here the topicalized element is an intransitive subject, which occupies a postverbal position in the unmarked case:

(2) *In w-atan=e' ts'o'ok u bin*
A.1SG EP-wife=TOP TERM A.3 go
'My wife (she had) left already.'



- In other words, the phrase that corresponds to the topic is not found in its original position and additionally it shows the clitic =e'.

When the topic is the direct object

- When the topic is the direct object, the two relevant properties are also observed:
- We see the presence of the topic clitic =e'.
- We see displacement of the direct object from its base position to the left edge of the sentence.

(3) [*Tuláakal ba'ax k'a'abéet-∅ teen*]=e' k=in
all what necessary-B.3SG 1.SG=TOP HAB-A.1SG
taa-s-ik-∅ _____.
come-CAUS-IND-B.3SG
'Everything that was necessary to me, I would bring.'

Multiple sentence topics

- In many different languages it is possible to have multiple sentence topics in the same sentence, and this is also observed in Yucatec.
- Notice that the presence of these topics is once again very transparent because each one has its own topic clitic =e'.

(4) *To'on=e'*, *jach u jaajil=e'*, *mina'an-∅ to'on*
1PL=TOP very A.3 truth=TOP NEX-B.3SG 1PL
mix jun p'éel quincena.
not.even one CLF salary
'Because **us, truly**, we don't even have a salary.'
(Lit. 'Because us, truly, not even a salary exists for us.')

Contrastive focus

- There are two different kinds of focus (represented in SMALL CAPS) but here we will only talk about **contrastive focus**.
- Contrastive focus identifies and highlights a specific entity among a set of possible alternatives (Rooth 1985).

(5) Mary said that only **JOHN** stole a cookie. (Krifka 2007)

- Here the focus is not only expressed as one of the elements of a set of alternatives, but it is **explicitly contrasted** with some other element or elements of that set (*Mary, Tom, etc.*).

Focus fronting

- There are languages where the focus, especially contrastive foci, is displaced to the left edge of the sentence, like topics.
- This process is known as **focus fronting**.
- Yucatec has fully productive focus fronting (most Mayan languages do). In the following example the focus is an intransitive subject.

(6) [FOC *LETI'*] *k=u* *y-awat*.
3.SG HAB=A3 EP=scream
'HE is the one who screams.'

Topic and focus

- When a sentence has both a topic and a focus, in Yucatec (as in many other Mayan languages) it is very easy to distinguish them.
- The topic always appears to the left of the focus. Additionally, the topic shows the clitic characteristic of it, but the focus has no special mark.

(7) *Tumen to'on=e'* [_{FOC} *MAAYA*] *k t'an-ik-∅.*
because 1.PL=TOP Maya HAB.A1.PL speak-IND-B3.SG
'Because we, we speak MAYA.'

Focus and negation

- As noted in Aissen (1992), in many Mayan languages the sentential negation occupies a position immediately to the left of the focus position, which means that the focus appears **to the right of the negation**. This is also the case in Yucatec:

(8) *Pero ma' TI' TULÁAKAL k=u ts'a'ab-al=i'.*
but NEG PREP all HAB=A3 give.PASS-IND=CL
'But they are not given to ALL (PEOPLE).'

- In contrast, topics always appear **to the left of the negation**. This is an additional property that allows us to differentiate them.

The fronted focus cannot be a definite NP

- Focus in Yucatec Maya is subject to a restriction that disallows a fronted focus to be nominal expression (noun phrase, DP) introduced by a definite determiner or a demonstrative.

(9) **Le aj koonol=o' jannt-∅ oon.*
DET M seller=CL eat-B.3SG avocado
'The SELLER ate the avocado.'

Verhoeven & Skopeteas (2015: 16)

- Once again, topics are different, and they are not subject to this restriction.

Agent focus

- When the **transitive subject** is focused, many Mayan languages show a verb form that is different from the canonical verb form.
- This form is known as the **agent focus** form of the verb and Yucatec is one of the languages that show this property:

(10) *LETI' kiiin-s-ik-ech=o'.*
3.SG die.AF-CAUS-IND-B.2SG=CL
'THAT is what kills you.'

(11) *LETI' kiiin-s-ej-ø.*
3.SG die.AF-CAUS-PRV-B.3SG
'HE killed him.'

Agent focus

- Agent focus constructions are different from most of the other transitive constructions in Yucatec in that they do not show any kind of auxiliary.
- The **A-series** clitic that is co-referential with the subject/agent is also absent, and so the subject/agent instead has to be realized as an **independent pronoun** or a full **noun phrase**.
- The aspect/mood morphology of the agent focus construction is also different from that observed in canonical transitive clauses. Perfective constructions do not show the expected suffix **-aj**, but instead show an allomorph **-ej**, like (11).

For further reading

- Gutiérrez-Bravo, R. & J. Monforte. 2010. 'On the nature of word order in Yucatec Maya.' in J. Camacho, R. Gutiérrez Bravo & L. Sánchez (eds.), *Information Structure in Languages of the Americas*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 139-170.
- Gutiérrez-Bravo, R. 'External and internal topics in Yucatec Maya', in R. Gutiérrez-Bravo, L. Mikkelsen & E. Potsdam (eds.), *Representing Language: Essays in honor of Judith Aissen*. Lexington: Linguistics Research Center, pp. 105-119.
- Verhoeven, E., & Skopeteas, S. 2015. Licensing Focus Constructions In Yucatec Maya. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 81:1-40.

Thank you!
iDyoos bo'otik!
iGracias!
Danke!

Topic and focus in Yucatec Maya

is part of the series *Glottothèque: Mayan languages*. Berlin, Göttingen, Mexico City: online resource.

visit glottothèque at:
<https://spw.uni-goettingen.de/projects/maya/>



glottothèque
MAYAN LANGUAGES
ONLINE RESOURCE

El Colegio de México
Humboldt University of Berlin
University of Göttingen

funded by the DAAD

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
German Academic Exchange Service