

Glottothèque
Mayan languages

Topic and focus in Yucatec Maya

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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-∅.*
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!

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