

Topic prominence in Yucatec Maya

Seminar: Information structure in Yucatec Maya

M. Ling. 311: Sprachtypologie und Feldforschung: Grundlage

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1. Typology of the subject and topic-prominence

Li and Thompson (1976) claim that all languages can be typologized according to whether they are topic-prominent, subject-prominent, neither, or both. A language is typologized as topic-prominent if it structures sentences according to the topic-comment principle, i.e. placing what the sentence is about at the beginning of the clause (topic) and the information about it behind the topic (comment). In contrast, a language is typologized as subject-prominent if the way it organizes sentences after a subject-predicate model. Its sentences are normally composed of a subject, a verb and frequently an object.

According to this typological classification, East-Asian languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Korean belong to the group of topic-prominent languages, whereas Indo-European languages such as English, German and Spanish belong to subject-prominent languages. However, it should be noted that this typological disparity only conveys the general tendency of each language; it does not exclude topic structures in subject-prominent languages and rule out subjects in topic-prominent languages.

2. Features of topic-prominent languages

Li and Thompson (1976) provide a list of criteria to determine the degree of topic-prominence of a given language.

Table 1: Characteristics of topic-prominent languages (based on Li and Thompson 1976).

Characteristic	Description
(a) Surface coding	Coding of the topic by position and/or morphological marking in topic-prominent languages
(b) The passive construction	No or marginal passivization in topic-prominent languages
(c) "Dummy" subjects	Absence of dummy subjects in topic-prominent languages
(d) "Double subject"	Pervasive double-subject constructions in topic-prominent languages
(e) Controlling co-reference	Topic controls co-referential constituent deletion in topic-prominent languages
(f) V-final languages	Topic-prominent languages tend to be verb-final languages
(g) Constraints on topic constituent	No constraints on what the topic may be in topic-prominent languages
(h) Basicness of topic-comment sentences	Topic-comment structures are the basic structure in topic-prominent languages

However, cross-linguistic evidence shows that some of the above-alleged features including (b) (c) (e) and (f) cannot necessarily define topic-prominence (for more details, see Sze 2015). We are now left with four features which are more central to the notion of topic-prominence.

- There will be always a surface coding of topic in topic-prominent languages. The coding can be either morphological or syntactic, or both. For example, the topic can be coded by morphological markers and/or syntactically, the topic is always in the sentence-initial position. For subject-prominent languages, however, the topic is often indicated through prosodic mechanisms such as intonation, stress or similar suprasegmental cues.
- All topic-prominent languages allow 'double subject' constructions, whereas no pure subject-prominent languages have this type of construction. Such construction refers to sentences that contain a topic and a subject, but they do not overlap. In this case, the topic is required to be semantically, but not syntactically, related to an element in the comment or to the comment as a whole. However, a mere presence of such construction is not enough, and a topic-prominent language should use this construction frequently.
- There are no or few constraints on what can become topics in topic-prominent languages. For instance, basically all syntactic categories can be topicalized in Mandarin. Additionally, it also allows more complex topicalization such as multiple sentence topics, embedded topic or topic in interrogative sentences, which are obviously not allowed in certain subject-prominent languages (e.g. English).
- Topic-comment structures are basic in topic-prominent languages. It means that they are not derived from any other sentence type via a process of topicalization, but can be considered part of the repertoire of basic sentence types.

References:

- Gregory, Michelle & Laura Michaelis. (2001). Topicalization and left dislocation: A functional opposition revisited.
- Lehmann, Christian. (2023). Textos mayas. Online resource.
- Li, Charles & Sandra Thompson. (1976). Subject and topic: a new typology of language.
- Sze, Felix. (2015). Is Hong Kong sign language a topic-prominent language?

3. Empirical observations in Yucatec Maya

The current study tries answering the question of whether Yucatec Maya is topic-prominent according to its typological features. The key criteria of topic-prominence discussed above will be applied to Yucatec. The data collected in this study come from five narrative texts including a total of 708 sentences.

- The topicalized constituent in Yucatec always occurs sentence-initially. In addition, it is marked morphologically with the topic clitic 'e' on its right edge.

(1) taak'in-e' ma' k'abéet teen behe'la'-e',
money-TOP NEG necessary me today-R3
"Money, I do not need today,"
(hala'ch_014.1)

- 'Double-subject' constructions can be also found. However, robust and productive use of such construction is not observed in the data set.

(2) teech-e' kaach-al a t'óon uts a mot'-tal.
you-TOP break-INCMP L POSS.2 calf.muscle good SBJ.2 squat-FIENT. INCMP L
"As for you, your knees are broken so you can squat well."
(hnaz_161.2)

- Yucatec exhibits few restrictions on what serve as a topic. Different kinds of phrasal constituents can be topics and more complex topicalization is also allowed, as illustrated in the following.

(3) Multiple sentence topics:
ka'likil-e' teech-e' k-a bis-ik-en ti' u yaanal kaah.
meanwhile-TOP you-TOP IMPF-SBJ.2 carry-INCMP L-ABS.1.SG LOC POSS.3 other village
"Meanwhile you bring me to another village."
(hala'ch_083.3)

(4) Embedded topic:
Le ka'h tu y-a'l-ah chúumuk áak'ab-e' le ku k'uhs-'al le k'éek'e'no'b-o'
when PRFV-SBJ.3 0-say-CMPL center night-TOP DEM IMPF-SBJ.3 bring-PASS. INCMP L DEM pig-PL-R2
"He said at midnight the pigs were brought".
(HA'N_0023.02)

(5) S' topic:
[Le máax paakat-ik]-e' k-u túucht-ik kim-s-bil.
DEM who look-INCMP L-TOP IMPF-SBJ.3 send-INCMP L die-CAUS-GER
"Whoever would look at it, the king would have him killed".
(hala'ch_003)

(6) S topic:
[le ken u chu]-e' kin taal in ch'a'-ech.
DEM SR-FUT SBJ.3 catch-TOP SR.FUT come SBJ.1.SG take-ABS.2.SG
"When this time is over, I will come to fetch you."
(koochuuk_13.3)

(7) Topic in the interrogative sentence:
Le k'éek'en-o'b-e' ts'o'k wáah a ts'a'-ik ha' ti'-o'b?
DEM pig-PL-TOP TERM INT SBJ.2 put-INCMP L water LOC-PL
"As for the pigs, have you already given them water?"
(hnaz_191)

- The topicalization in Yucatec always involves some kind of syntactic operation which somehow modifies the unmarked word order (V-initial) of the sentence. Therefore, the topic-comment construction is not basic but movement-derived in Yucatec.

4. Summary and future research

There are 201 sentences out of 708 sentences in the data set containing a topic, which means nearly 28.4% topicalization is observed. Compared to only 0.1% topicalization of English observed in a conversation corpus (Gregory and Michaelis 2001), this is a quite high frequency of topicalization.

Based on our observations, it can be proposed that Yucatec is topic-prominent. It manifests its topic-prominence in light of its frequent topicalization, obligatory and consistent use of topic marking as well as the lack of constraints of topicalization. In the future, analyzing topicalization on a larger scale and with more recent data would be needed in order to substantiate or reject the ideas put forward in this research.