

## **The content of non-argument positions in the left periphery: Evidence from Yucatec Maya**

Non-argument positions in the left periphery have been assumed to host information structural functions in several languages (see i.a. Rizzi 1997, Kiss 1998, Drubig 2003). A number of recent accounts, however, challenge the generalizations about the association between syntactic positions and information structure either in presenting counterexamples that show that the assumed associations do not categorically hold or in decomposing the observed associations in properties of the linearization or the prosodic structure (see Fanselow 2006, Wedgwood 2003 and subsequent work).

Yucatec Maya qualifies as a particularly interesting language in order to test hypotheses concerning the information structural properties of left peripheral positions. First, it is a V-initial language (canonical order VOS) and displays two structurally different left peripheral positions that are arguably non-argument positions. Second, it is a tonal language and recent prosodic analyses show that information structure does not have any tonal effects on the realization of the utterance, i.e. there is no focus-to-accent association that may interact with syntax (see Kügler and Skopeteas 2006, Gussenhoven 2007). Hence, information structural concepts like ‘topic’ and ‘focus’ may be only reflected in syntactic properties.

Following a long tradition in Mayan linguistics, the sentence initial position is labeled ‘topic position’ and the immediately preverbal position is labeled ‘focus position’. There is overt evidence for the distinction between these positions: occurrence of clitics at the right edge of the ‘topic position’, special inflectional properties of the V when the ‘focus position’ is occupied. Moreover, we show that the two positions differ syntactically: only the former position may co-occur with co-referent pronouns in situ, while only the latter may occur in subordinated clauses.

Aissen (1992) presents a syntactic account on the basis of data from several Mayan languages that may be applied in Yucatec Maya too: the higher syntactic position is inherently associated with the topic function while the lower syntactic position is inherently associated with ‘uniqueness’ of the asserted information. Previous accounts on Yucatec Maya confirm this assumption by providing single examples from critical contexts (e.g., question/answer pairs). Aim of our talk is to account for the pragmatic properties of these two positions in discussing rich evidence from spontaneous corpora and experimental field work. We argue that the assumption of information structural functions that are inherent to these syntactic positions is (a) not adequate for the empirical facts and (b) conceptually superfluous.

The first type of evidence is based on counterexamples: placement in the sentence initial position is not always contextually licensed. In particular, we observe an asymmetry triggered by structural properties: whenever a transitive verb with two lexically realized arguments occurs, the subject constituent is placed in the sentence-initial position. This is a very robust effect found in spontaneous corpora and production experiments based on picture descriptions, and is in line with processing difficulties that we encountered in the comprehension of sentences with two postverbal arguments. We assume that this is an effect of the distinctness condition (Richards 2006), since it does not apply for subjects of intransitive verbs, passives, or clauses with a local subject/object argument. This kind of evidence suggests that a sentence initial position is structurally available in the constituent structure of the language and may be used for manifold

reasons depending on structural preferences for the linearization of the utterance or pragmatic preferences for utterance-initial placement of links to the common ground.

Similarly, not all occurrences of the pre-predicate position can be accounted for through the assumption of inherent pragmatic properties. Distributional properties of focus-sensitive particles show that there are no restrictions with respect to the placement of *only*-, *also*- and *even*- phrases (either in the focus position or in situ), which suggests that focus is not a sufficient condition for movement to this position. In the text corpus, we encounter occurrences of this construction in which the predicate is not presupposed, which suggests that a narrow focus domain on the pre-predicate position is not a necessary condition.

The most robust difference between the two positions is that constituents in the sentence initial position may not be focused, which is *prima facie* evidence for the assumption of an inherent form-to-function association. We argue that this difference is decomposable, if we take a closer look at the prosodic properties of the constructions at issue, and in particular at prosodic phrasing. Pre-predicate constituents form a unique phrasal unit with the predicate, while the alleged ‘topic’ constituents form separate prosodic phrases that are right-bounded by a clitic with salient tonal properties (lexically projected H tone). Hence, the latter constituents are extrametrical and may not bear the prosodic prominence that is licensed by the highest intonational category at the sentence level (vgl. Truckenbrodt 1999, Szendrői 2003).

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