

Topics in V-initial languages: structural and discourse motivations for left dislocation

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Subjects in some V-initial languages, e.g., Arabic or Greek, are very frequently realized at a left periphery, even in neutral contexts. This observation gives rise to a debate about the basic word order of these languages: is the preverbal position a canonical position for subjects or a topic position, which is just typically filled in by subjects due to discourse reasons?

This talk deals with Yucatec Maya, which is a VOS split-intransitive language with head-marking morphology (cross-reference markers on the verb; no case affixes). Similarly to many V-initial languages, Yucatec Maya has a discourse-configurational left periphery involving (a) a pre-predicate position that hosts elements in narrow focus as well as (b) a sentence-initial domain hosting the topic(s) and/or frame-setting adverbials. Preverbal arguments (including subjects) come with additional morphological marking (topics are enclosed by an enclitic; foci trigger a particular verbal inflection). These facts lead to the conclusion that the basic position of the subjects is postverbal (in which case no additional marking appears) (Norman and Campbell 1978; Lehmann 1990; Bohnemeyer 1998).

However, subjects can be preverbal in neutral contexts and they most frequently do so. Corpus studies show that the SVO order is by far the most frequent order in discourse. These facts motivate the observation that there is a preverbal subject position in this language (Gutiérrez Bravo and Monforte y Madera 2008).

This talk presents evidence that the preverbal position of subjects is restricted to particular structural conditions (i.e., it is not a neutral option), but these conditions do not relate to information structure (i.e., they may apply in neutral contexts). Precisely, it applies with transitive verbs in exactly the case in which both arguments are realized through lexical NPs. It does not apply with intransitive verbs or with transitive verbs with pronominal arguments.

Based on the strict head-marking properties of the language at issue and considering previous findings from speech comprehension, I account for the observed facts in terms of a dissimilatory principle applying in configurations with two potentially adjacent lexical noun phrases.

References

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