On Topics in Itzaj

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Abstract

The 1992 paper "Topic and Focus in Mayan" by Aissen categorized Mayan topics into external topics and internal topics. This paper attempts to determine if Itzaj topics are external or internal, or if it contains both types of topics. It also investigates if clause final topics could exist as external or internal topics in the language. By drawing data from Itzaj and other Mayan languages, the paper concludes that internal topics exists in Itzaj. The presence of external topics is not proven due to lack of relevant data. It can be inferred that Itzaj may contain external topics as Yucatec, a language closely related to Itzaj, has both external and internal topics. Clause-initial and clause-final topics are both allowed in internal topics in Itzaj. However, that of external topics are again unable to be proven.

1 Introduction:

The goal of this paper is to determine the presence of external topics or internal topics in Itzaj, and if clause final topics could exist as external or internal topics in the language. The analyzations of external and internal topics will be based on the classifications by Aissen (1992). The discussion on clause-final topics will be based on the hypothesis suggested in Clemens and Coon 2018. Itzaj is a Mayan language spoken in Guatemala. It has 410 native speakers and 1000 total users as of 2019. It is marked as a 'dying' languages as native speakers of Itzaj are of the age of grandparents, and that the language can no longer be acquired naturally at home (Eberhard et al., 2022).

Itzaj is rich in its variations of word order and allows the use of topics and foci to highlight important noun phrases in a sentence (Hofling, 2000).

Section 2 talks about the background of the puzzle. It includes information on word order, topics, and foci in Mayan languages, and introductions to the ideas of external and internal topics and clause-final topic. Section 3 analyzes how only internal topics are found in Itzaj and discusses clause-final topics in the language. Finally, Section 4 gives a conclusion of the essay and ideas for future projects. Examples listed in this essay are adapted for consistency

2 Background

2.1 Word order in Mayan languages and Itzaj

Mayan languages are typically verb-initial (Clemens & Polinsky, 2017). According to England 1991, the basic word order of Mayan languages can be divided into two categories. They are either rigidly VOS or an alternation between VOS and VSO. Rigid VOS languages are often stricter and block some combinations of word orders. In contrast, the rest of the Mayan languages usually allow all possible word orders to exist in their languages (England, 1991).

Based on the classification by England (1991), Itzaj belongs to the category of having both VOS and VSO as basic word orders, since it allows all six possible combinations of verb, object, and subject to exist. However, Hofling (2000) claimed that Itzaj has the basic word order of VOS, with SVO also being a common word order. (1) is an example of the word order VOS and (2) is an example of the word order SVO.

(1)	k-u-kin-s-ik	b'alum	a'winik-ej.
	INC-3A-die-CAUS-ITS	jaguar	DET-man-TOP
	'The man kills jaguar(s).'		

(Hofling 2000; p. 190)

(2) i   la'ayti'-oo'   ma'   patal   u-b'et-ik-oo'   ... mix=b'a'al
     and   3IPR-PL   NEG   ABIL   3A-do-ITS-PL   NEG=thing
     'and they couldn't do anything'   (Hofling 2000; p.193)

2.2 Topics and Focus in Mayan languages and in Itzaj

While sentences in Mayan languages are usually presented as verb-initial, highlighted noun phrases are sometimes fronted to the position before the verb. Topics and foci are both markers to highlight noun phrases and both of them are seen across most Mayan languages. When they exist in the same clause and are both being fronted, the topic usually resides in the place before the focus (Aissen, 1992). Aissen (2017) differentiates the two information structures by the example seen in (3).

(3)   a. Where is Mary driving tomorrow?

         b. Mary is driving to Prague tomorrow.

               i. Focus-Background: Mary is driving to [FOC Prague] tomorrow.

               ii. Topic-Comment: [TOP Mary] is driving to Prague tomorrow (Aissen 2017;p.309)

In this case, 'Mary' would be the topic and 'Prague' would be the focus. Aissen (2017) explained that the two functions work in different dimensions. 'Mary' would be topicalized as it is the entity that is being talked about. 'Prague' would be focused as it is the greatest point of informativity. The background of 'Mary is driving somewhere tomorrow' is already known. Topics are part of the background while being contrasted with the comment. On the other hand, foci contrast with the background while being part of the comment.

Hofling (2000) offered a different kind of classification for topics and foci in Itzaj. He claimed that topics highlight given or accessible information, while foci highlight new, contrastive information. This explanation could also be applied to the example in (3), where 'Mary' is the topic and 'Prague' is the focus. 'Mary' was already given in the question, and 'Prague' was newly introduced in the reply. Hofling (2000) also suggested that noun phrases that are topicalized and focused should be fronted, i.e., they should be moved in front of the verb. However, this is not always the case in the examples provided in Hofling 2000, which may provide evidence for clause-final topics. Topics are marked with the suffix -e or -ej in Itzaj, while foci do not require any markers. (4) is an example where the third person plural subject is topicalized, and the object 'shaman' is focused in (5).

(4)   la'ayti'-oo'-ej   k'och-oo'   et-el ak'ä'.
         3IPR-PL-TOP   arrive-PL   with-POS night
         'They arrived at night.'   (Hofling 2000; p.333)
(5)   i aj-waay   je'-loj   ... t-u-b'et-aj   .. tz'ak   wal   ti a' b'a'alche'-ej
         and MASC-sorcery OST -DIST   COM-3A-do-cTS spell   perhaps   to DET animal-TOP
         'and it was that shaman who made a spell on the animal, perhaps'   (Hofling 2000; p.195)
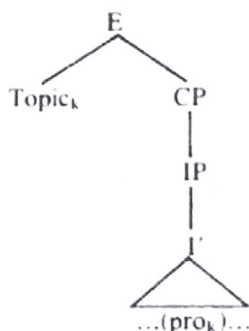
2.3 External and Internal Topics

The notion of internal and external topics was developed by Aissen (1992). Aissen (1992) claimed that topics in Mayan languages can be divided into two categories, external and internal. Tsotsil and Jalkatek have external topics, while Tz'utujil has internal ones. It was hypothesized that the two kinds of topics are inherently different, as external topics are base generated outside of the CP, while internal topics are generated inside the CP, where it is then moved up in the tree. Aissen (1992) raised several evidence to how the topics are different. External topics often require enclitics after the noun phrase. They also tend to have an intonational pause between the noun phrase and the rest of the sentence. Since external topics are generated outside of the CP, these topics are not allowed inside an embedded phrase. It was also pointed out that external topics can be doubled by a pronominal element. (6) is an example of an external topic in Tsotsil. The subject *vinik* 'man' in (6)b and the subject *antz* 'woman' in (6)c are being topicalized. The topics are opened by the topic marker a and closed by the enclitic -*e*.

(6)   a.   There was a man and a woman, newlyweds.
         b.   a   ti   vinik-e   ta=xlok' ech'el, ta=xbat ta=xxanav.

TOP	DET	man-ENC	exists	away	goes	travels

'The husband leaves, he goes, he travels.'

c.   a   ti   antz-e   jun=yo'on   ta=xkom...

    TOP   DET   woman-ENC   happily   stays

'The wife stays at home happily...'   (Aissen 1992; p.49)

As for internal topics, it was theorized that they are allowed inside embedded clauses and do not have intonational pauses. Third person pronouns are also permitted to be topicalized. Tz'utujil is an example for a language with internal topics. It does not require any enclitics and has no intonational pauses. However, Aissen (1992) also claimed that Tz'utujil contains both external and internal topics. (7) is an example of a topic inside an embedded clause in Tz'utujil. The subject *Ta Mari'y* 'Miss María' is being topicalized.

(7)   Aa   Xwaan n-0-b'ij   chi   Ta Mari'y   ma   t-r-aajo'.

    youth Juan ASP-3A-say that Miss María NEG ASP-3A-want

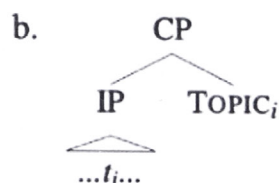   'Juan says that María doesn't want it.'   (Aissen 1992; p.74)

The syntax trees developed by Aissen (1992) are shown below. (8) demonstrates that the external topics are generated outside of the clause, while (9) shows the internal topics which are generated inside the CP

(8) External Topics   (9) Internal Topics

2.4 Clause final topics

Clemens and Coon (2018) suggested that topics in Mayan languages are peripheral. That is, they are either clause-initial or clause-final. While clause-initial topics are often discussed in the literature, clause-final topics are much less researched. Clemens and Coon (2018) argued that clause-final clauses occur more commonly than what is usually considered. Clause-final topics are found in many Mayan languages, including Tojolab'al, Oxchux Tseltal, K'iche', and Classic Yucatec. Syntax trees for clause-final external and internal topics are shown in (10) and (11), which are developed by Clemens and Coon (2018) and adapted from Aissen (1992). However, Clemens and Coon concluded that whether clause-final topics can be categorized as external or internal is still unknown.

(10) Clause-initial and clause-final internal topics

(11) Clause-initial and clause-final external topics

a.
```
        XP
       /  \
   TOPICᵢ   CP
           /\
         ...proᵢ...
```

b.
```
        XP
       /  \
     CP   TOPICᵢ
    /\
  ...proᵢ...
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3 Analysis

3.1 Internal topics in Itzaj

In order to prove the presence of external or internal topics in Itzaj, this paper would search for several distinct features of the two categories. To prove that there are external topics in Itzaj, the examined sentence should either contain an intonational pause, i.e., a comma after the topicalized noun, or contain a doubled pronominal element. To prove the existence of internal topics, the examined sentence should either have a topic inside an embedded clause, or have a third person pronoun topicalized. The paper Hofling 2000 is utilized in this essay as the database for Itzaj sentences.

It is discovered that Itzaj allows internal topics. In the example (12), the subject in the clause *b'alum* 'jaguar' is being topicalized while residing in an embedded clause. It is also being fronted before the verb. The subject *mak-oo'* 'the people' is being topicalized in (13). It is also inside an embedded clause but was not fronted. There were no instances of a third person pronoun topic found. Since Itzaj is a pro-drop language, it could be hypothesized that these instances could be legal but rarely exist.

(12) [_TOP_ Aj-Jwan-ej]   t-uy-il-aj   [_CP_ ke [_TOP_a' b'alum-ej]   t-u-kin-s-aj   aj-Juulyoj.]
     MASC-PN-TOP COM-3A-see-CTS SUB DET jaguar-TOP   COM-3A-die-CAUS-CTS MASC-PN
     'Juan saw that the jaguar killed Julio.'   (Hofling 2000; p.497)

(13) La'ayt   a'-lo'   [_CP_u-k'a't-ij   a'   mak-oo'-ej] ...
     3IPR   DET-DIST   3A-want-TS   DET   person-PL-TOP
     'It is that, that the people want,'   (Hofling 2000; p.483)

Itzaj topics also bears resemblance to the internal topics in Tz'utujil than to Tzotsil or Jakaltek. It has no enclitics nor intonational pauses. Additionally, being inside embedded clauses suggests that the topicalized noun phrase is 'closer' to the rest of the sentence, which supports the idea that topics are generated inside the CP.

However, there is no evidence to the presence of external topics in Itzaj. No instances were found to contain an intonational pause or a doubled prenominal element. Nevertheless, the possibility of external topics in Itzaj cannot be ruled out. Yucatec, another language in the Yucatecan family, was found to contain both external and internal topics, which would be discussed in the next section (Eberhard et al., 2022).

3.2 Topics in Yucatec

Gutiérrez-Bravo (2011) claimed that Yucatec contains both external and internal topics. The rules concluded by Aissen (1992) were utilized to determine the types of topics that exists in Yucatec. The example shown in (14) suggests that the topic, *áak=e'* 'turtle', has an intonational pause after it, which is represented by a comma. (15) demonstrates the phenomenon of a second prenominal element, with the subject *le ah koonol-o'* 'the master seller' repeating before the third person subject *leti'*. Both examples are representative of external topics in Yucatec.

(14) Le   áak=e',   t-u   jaan-t-aj-ø   su'uk.
     DET   turtle=TOP   CP-3A   eat-TRNS-PRF-3SG.B   grass
     'The turtle ate grass.'   (Gutiérrez Bravo 2011; p.111)

(15) Le   ah   koonol-o',   leti'   tun   y-áalkab.

	DET	master	seller-CL		3SG	DUR.3A EP-run

'The vendor, he's running.'   (Gutiérrez Bravo 2011; p.112)

Internal topics are also apparent in Yucatec. (16) demonstrates the topicalization of the third person pronoun *leti'*. (17) shows that Yucatecan topics can exist inside embedded clauses.

(16) | Pero | leti'=e' | | k-u | | p'áat-al | te' | jool-o'. |
      |------|----------|---|-----|---|----------|-----|---------|
      | but | 3SG=TOP | | HAB-3A | | stay-IND | LOC | door-CL |

'But she would stay at the door (of the corral).'   (Gutiérrex Bravo 2011; p.113)

(17) U   ts'o'ok ka   in   w-a'al-ø   teech-e' [CP [TOP le   tiempo táan
      3A   end   COMP 1A   EP-say-3SG.B   2SG-CL.   DM   time   DUR
      u   meen-t-ik-ø]=o',   [TOP   kan   taa-k-ø]=e',
      3A   do-TRNS-IND-3SG.B=CL   when   come-IRR-3SG.B=TOP
      táan   u   jats'-ik-en].
      DUR   3A   beat-IND-1SG.B

'Lastly, I'll tell you that at that time when he used to do it (get intoxicated), when he came (back home), he would beat me.'   (Gutiérrez Bravo 2011; p.114)

As Yucatec and Itzaj both belong to the Yucatecan family, it is possible that the two languages may share some similar characteristics. Since Yucatec was found to contain both external and internal topics, it is likely for Itzaj to be identical in this aspect. Some of the sentences found in Hofling (2000) that are not in embedded clauses may well be external topics, but this essay is unable to prove it.

3.3 Clause final topics in Itzaj

To prove that clause-final topics can be internal, an Itzaj topic should be inside an embedded clause while being positioned at the end of the clause. Itzaj has ample evidence on this matter. The examples below show that clause-final topics do appear in embedded clauses, suggesting that clause-final internal topics exist in Itzaj. The subject *b'alum* 'jaguar' is being topicalized in (18). The word order is VOS, suggesting that the topic has not been fronted and is therefore a clause-final topics. (18) proves that clause-final topics exist in Itzaj. The subject *che'* 'tree' is being topicalized in (19). It is inside an embedded clause, and the word order of the clause is VO, with the subject pro dropped. As the topic is inside an embedded clause, it could be inferred that it is generated inside the CP and therefore qualify as an internal topic. It proves that Itzaj contains clause-final internal topics. It was established in the last section that there is no evidence of external topics in Itzaj. As a result, there is no way of knowing whether they could be clause-final.

(18) K-uy-il-ik   a'   winik   a'   b'alum-ej.
      INC-3A-see-ITS DET   man   DET   jaguar-TOP
      'The jaguar sees the man.'   (Hofling 2000; p.191)

(19) T-u-täk'a'-t-aj-en   [CP   ka'   nak'-äk-en   t-a' [TOP che'-ej.]]
      COM-3A-order-TRN-CTS-lSG.B   SUB   ascend-DIS-lSG.B   to-DET   tree-TOP
      'He ordered me that I climb the tree.'   (Hofling 2000; p.490)

Clause-initial and clause-final topics are found both inside and outside of embedded clauses. It can be theorized that the topicalized noun phrases move to Spec, CP in both cases, only to different sides of the syntax tree. No pattern was discovered to determine whether the topic would be clause-initial or clause-final. Interestingly, of the Itzaj data presented in Hofling (2000), it seems that clause-final topics occur slightly more often in embedded clauses than those outside of the clauses. As Itzaj prioritizes its noun phrases according to animacy and definiteness, it could be theorized that the topicalized noun phrases may be 'fronted' or 'backed' according to these two features. However, more data is needed to investigate this matter.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is discovered that Itzaj allows both clause-initial and clause-final internal topics. Due to the lack of relevant data, the presence of external topics in Itzaj is unable to be proven. Since Yucatec, a Mayan language that is in the same language family as Itzaj, contain external topics, it is possible to speculate that there may be external topics in Itzaj. Itzaj allows both clause-initial and clause-final topics. However, the method of categorization is not found. In terms of further research, more data is needed to determine whether there are external topics in Itzaj. If an Itzaj sentence is found to adhere to any of Aissen's (1992) rule for external topics, the hypothesis could then be proven. To determine the differentiation of clause-initial and clause-final topics, interviews could be conducted with native speakers. Native speakers could determine if the sentence is still grammatical if the clause-initial topic is switched to a clause-final position, or vice versa.

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