# Topic, Focus, and Wh-Phrases in Cham and Moken

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It has been taken as axiomatic that *wh*-phrases are (A) categorically not topics (e.g. Kiss 1998) and (B) always carry focus (see references in Cable 2008). In this paper, I will explore data that challenge both of these ideas from three related Austronesian languages: Eastern Cham, Western Cham, and Moken, where information structure acts orthogonally to *wh*-fronting. Along the way, I illustrate how multiple genres of text collection, from narratives to semi-spontaneous discourse and elicitation are all needed to account for these phenomena (cf. Mithun 2014). Additionally, I show the benefit of incorporating data from multiple closely related languages and dialects (cf. Kaisse 2014).

Eastern Cham, Western Cham, and Moken are all isolating, SVO, *wh*-in-situ languages spoken in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand, respectively.[1] In Eastern Cham, information structure is marked by two fronting constructions: a topic-like construction ("topic" in the Cham literature, cf. Brunelle & Văn Hẳn 2015) and an identificational focus cleft (Kiss 1998, Aissen 2015). *Wh*-phrases may appear in both constructions (1a) or in-situ (1b).

(1a)  *kẽ̌t*   *//*      *thay*   *hu*    *plày*[2]      (1b)   *thay*   *plày*   *kẽ̌t*
      what           who     FOC    buy                    who     buy      what
      `Who is it that bought what?'                        `Who bought what?'      [Eastern Cham]

To address claim (A), I turn to narrative and semi-spontaneous discourse data, which shows that the topic-like construction marks discourse anaphora (as per López 2009's account of clitic dislocation in Romance), in the absence of any other topic construction. As for claim (B), nearly identical data from Western Cham confirms that the topic-like construction occupies a functional projection (overtly marked by *kɨŋ*). This proves that *wh*-phrases may mark both topic and focus (2). Lastly, data from Moken shows what occurs when there is an active *wh*-feature (marked by *=laː*). Superiority effects obtain (cf. Stepanov, Fanselow & Vogel 2004) (3a), but *wh*-phrases may still occupy both the topic and focus slots (3b).

(2)   *hagɛt*   *kɨŋ*   *say*   *hu*    *blay*
      what      TOP     who     FOC    buy
      `Who is it that bought what?'                                        [Western Cham]

(3a)  *\*acaː=la*      *anoː=laː nə*    *maneʔ*      (3b)   *anoː=laː*      *olan*   *nəʔ*    *mətok*
      who=Q           what=Q FOC  ask                     what=Q         snake   FOC     bite
      Intended: `What is it that who asked?'                    `It is the snake that bit what?'   [Moken]

Taken together, this data encourages the study of information structural phenomena as unitary before incorporating similar, but potentially orthogonal phenomena like *wh*-fronting (Cable 2008). Eastern Cham, Western Cham, and Moken all demonstrate dramatic decoupling of the two.

1. Data for this paper come from the author's fieldwork with four native speakers of Eastern Cham, one native speaker of Western Cham, and a corpus of Moken data from Peter Jenks' fieldwork (see, Jenks 2008), compiled by the author.

2. Note the pause that separates Eastern Cham dislocated constituents, but not foci; writing system is IPA, with grave accents marking low, breathy tone.

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