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. 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) kêt // thay hu plày
what who FOC buy
`Who is it that bought what?'

(1b) thay plày kêt
who buy 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) haget kɨŋ say hu blay
what TOP who FOC buy
`Who is it that bought what?' [Western Cham]

(3a) *acaː=laː anoː=laː nə manəʔ
who=Q what=Q FOC ask
Intended: `What is it that who asked?’

(3b) anoː=laː olan nəʔ mətok
what=Q snake FOC bite
`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.

References


Cable, Seth. 2010. The Grammar of Q. Oxford University Press.


