

# FRONTING IN SAN JERONIMO MAZATEC

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the phenomena of fronting of noun phrases in San Jeronimo Mazatec, an Otomanguan language of Oaxaca.<sup>1</sup> I look at different constructions in which noun phrases are fronted and what functions they are fulfilling in their fronted position. Included is a discussion of topic and focus in Mazatec, although I only touch on this as it relates to fronting. What I attempt to show is that there are two distinct conditions involved, one which establishes a topic and another which marks narrow focus.

## 2. Frequency and Use of Fronting

Fronting is used to (a) introduce new participants in texts, (b) mark narrow focus, and (c) establish the topic of clauses. It is a frequent phenomenon; 33% of the noun phrases in the corpus were fronted.

## 3. Word Order

The basic word order in SJM is VSO. It is rare however, for there to be a sentence in the VSO pattern with full noun phrases filling the subject and object slots. Unlike other Otomangian languages such as Mixtec, the word order is rather free and many examples can be found of other word orders, namely SVO, SOV, VOS, V, VS, VO, SV, or OV, as illustrated in examples (1) through (8).<sup>2</sup>

(1) SVO

Ch<sub>Q</sub> tájaà k<sub>Q</sub> nbúrró tsohokjón ch'á.  
animal hard and donkey DP.carry load  
'Mules and donkeys carried loads.'

(2) SOV

Jè natsé jngo x<sub>Q</sub> kisokó -l<sub>a</sub>.  
SG\_DEF\_ART rabbit one peso DP.is\_found to.3  
'The rabbit found a peso.'

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<sup>1</sup>The Mazatec language described in this paper is spoken in the town of San Jerónimo Tecóatl, District of Teotitlán in the extreme northern part of the State of Oaxaca, Mexico. This town has a population of approximately 2000 speakers. In this paper I refer to San Jerónimo Mazatec with the initials SJM.

<sup>2</sup>Abbreviations used in morpheme glosses are listed at the end of the paper.

## (3) VOS

Ta nda k<sub>o</sub>ó -ne jè tajchá xi  
 but good with ? SG\_DEF\_ART old\_lady REL\_PRO

takoá komà -la kiko yije nojmé -la  
 just\_like\_that DP.happen to.3 DP.go.with all corn to.3

cho jè.  
 animal SG\_DEF\_ART

'It was good that the old lady was shocked; that animal  
 took all her corn.'

## (4) V

Tisíkjane, tisíkjane.  
 CONT.play\_instrument CONT.play\_instrument  
 'He was playing and playing.'

## (5) VS

Ki ni'ya ní cho koi.  
 DP.go house little animal PL\_DEM  
 'These little animals went to their house.'

## (6) VO

Ikjoàn ochrje xó inima -la  
 and\_then take\_out QUOT heart to.3  
 'And then, it is reported that they take out their hearts.'

## (7) SV

K'e jngo tsini tso -la: «Guitarra tindí. ¿A  
 time\_when one uncle says to.3 guitar IMP.buy.2 Y/N\_QUE

mà -le nikjani?»  
 be\_able to.2 play\_instrument.2

'When an uncle says to him: «Buy a guitar. Do you know  
 how to play?»'

## (8) OV

Joòn xó siind<sub>o</sub> jmi metro cuadrado tjín -la  
 six QUOT hundred thousand meter square exist to.3

kóhokji.  
 all\_which\_is

'It is reported to be six hundred thousand square meters, all of it.'

#### 4. Focus and Topic

Lambrech (1986) defines *focus* as "a device used to indicate the scope of the assertion in a sentence" and *topic* as "that entity which the sentence or proposition is about." I find these definitions more helpful than the notion of topic used by Givón (1983) and others that can refer to any "participant". Also I do not use topic in the sense of whatever comes first (the Prague school's *theme*), although I will be looking at fronted topics. In the unmarked case, topic follows the verb in SJM as a pronominal clitic--zero if third person.

Also included in my idea of topic and focus is that the topic referent is always identifiable and thus is part of the pragmatic presupposition that is shared by the speaker and addressee. Focus on the other hand, conveys information that is added by the speaker to the pragmatic presupposition in uttering a sentence (Lambrech 1986:159).

#### 5. Unmarked Focus

I discuss marked focus constructions in the next section. However, first I want to discuss unmarked focus. I assume that "predicate focus is the unmarked type of focus in general, both in English and cross-linguistically" (Van Valin 1993:7). This is true in SJM. Following are examples of unmarked focus. The topic is the null third person subject, as in (9) and (10).

(9) Jye komà -re nga tsatse guitarra, jngo yá  
 already DP.happen ? CTZR DP.buy guitar one tree

kikanangui ko guitarra -la.  
 went\_under and guitar to.3

'After it had already happened that he had bought a guitar,  
 he sat down under a tree with his guitar.'

(10) Síkjane, síkjane.  
 play\_instrument play\_instrument  
 'He plays and he plays.'

#### 6. Marked Focus

Focus in SJM can be marked in at least two different ways. One type of focus marking, which I do not discuss here, is by the use of enclitics (D. Agee, this volume). Another type of focus marking focus in SJM is by fronting. Subject noun phrases and object noun phrases can be fronted in order to bring them into focus. When the verb is first in a clause, which is the unmarked order, it is within the scope of the focus (section 5). In the texts studied, noun phrases were always fronted when a new participant was being introduced into a story. This is

true whether the NP is "brand new", in the sense of Prince 1981, or has an inferrable referent. In (11), for example, the referent of the fronted NP could be called inferrable because the shadow of the sun is a known object and therefore, although it has not been referred to before in this text, it is not a brand new referent. However in the second example *jngo tsini* 'the uncle' is a brand new, non-inferrable referent, so it is fronted when introduced. Subject NPs can also be fronted, as in (12).

## (11) Object Fronting

Tà jè xó 'nguién -l<sub>a</sub> ts'eí kisíkjeén koni s'in  
just SG\_DEF\_ART QUOT shadow to.3 sun DP.use like does

fì ndobá,  
go sun

'It just uses, it is reported, the shadow of the sun as it goes.'

## (12) Subject Fronting -- New Referent

K'e jngo tsini tso -l<sub>a</sub>...  
time\_when one uncle says to.3  
'When an uncle says to him...'

These fronted focus noun phrases are characterized by immediate pre-verbal positioning. Nothing--neither adverbial phrase nor noun phrase--can come between the fronted focus noun phrase and the verb, as seen in (13).

(13) Ch<sub>o</sub> tájaà k<sub>o</sub> nbúrró tsohokjón ch'á.  
animal hard and donkey DP.carry load  
'Mules and donkeys carried loads.'

These fronted NPs, unlike topics, are often characterized by use of the indefinite article. When a fronted noun phrase is in focus, it may or may not have an identifiable referent. Often the identifiability of a referent is not marked; both identifiable and non-identifiable NPs may occur with no article, as in (14) and (15).

(14) K'e jngo tsini tso -l<sub>a</sub>: «Guitarra tindí. ¿A  
time\_when one uncle says to.3 guitar IMP.buy.2 Y/N\_QUES  
mà -le nìkjani?»  
be\_able to.2 play\_instrument.2  
'When an uncle says to him, «Buy a guitar. Do you know how to play?»'

- (15) Ta ní tajchá nitsé tsokonchrovà.  
 but little old\_lady not\_a\_little ?.DP.return  
 'But the little old lady almost didn't go.'

Another characterization of the focus fronted noun phrase is that phonologically there is no pause between the fronted NP and the following verb. Thus in (14), there is no pause between *jngo tsini* 'the uncle' and *tso-la* 'he says to him'. It is a continuous flow of rapid speech.

## 7. Unmarked Topic

Once the topic is established, further references to that topic are typically characterized by null anaphora until a new topic is established. Furthermore, in the standard case, the topic is referenced by the subject of the clause. As a result, most clauses in a narrative have null subjects, as in (16) and (17).

- (16) Nda síkjane.  
 good play\_instrument  
 'He plays well.'
- (17) Tsatse dulce.  
 DP.buy candy  
 'He bought candy.'

## 8. Marked Topic

As noted above, once the topic referent has been established it is usually referred to by the minimal form (null for 3 person). However, there is a special fronting construction that serves to establish a new topic. That is, when a topic NP is fronted, it is used to reintroduce an already known referent when it has not been referred to for several clauses. In Givon's (1983) sense it occurs where there is *high topic discontinuity*. A topic NP typically has the definite article. However, a topic NP can also occur with no article although it is always identifiable. Thus, for example, (18) is from a text in which the topic *natsé* 'rabbit' has not been referred to by a full noun phrase for several clauses and, in order to reestablish the topic, the full noun phrase is used.

- (18) Natsé kisikiña -lde.  
 rabbit DP.loan ?  
 'The rabbit loaned it to him.'

A topic NP is also characterized by the ability to be separated from the postposed verb by an adverbial phrase or a focus NP. In examples (19), the topic NP is a full noun phrase with a relative clause. It is separated from the verb by the locative phrase *skanda Ijnchi* 'to Teotitlan'. In example (20), the noun phrase is separated from the verb by the

temporal phrase *k'e nga koma iskan* 'later', and in example (21) the object noun phrase is separated from the verb by the temporal phrase *isa xó kjotseè* 'even longer ago'.

- (19) Ngats'iì *xità* xi kis'e -l<sub>a</sub> ch<sub>o</sub> ch'á skanda  
 all people REL\_PRO had to.3 animal load to
- Ijnchi* kiikjá nítamé ch'á -ne koni tsa najmé, ndojo  
 Teotitlán DP.go.get whatever load ? like if corn soap
- xi ts'iìn -ne nikje, ndátsja, ndá ixii, azucar,  
 REL\_PRO wash ? clothes beer water sweet sugar
- ndátí k<sub>o</sub> tsojmì xi kj'eíí isaà.  
 kerosene and things REL\_PRO different more
- 'All of the people who had pack animals went to Teotitlán to go get whatever load, like maybe corn, soap to wash clothes with, beer, soda pop, sugar, kerosene and other things.'
- (20) Ngats'iì *xità* koi k'e nga koma iskan  
 all people PL\_DEM time\_when CTZR DP.happen later
- tsibitsakjó nga tsibíndaà jngoò beneficio ts'e  
 DP.come\_to\_agreement CTZR DP.make one cooperative of
- kofé xi ki'mì «Café mazateco».  
 coffee REL\_PRO DP.be\_called coffee Mazatec
- 'All of those people later got together to form a cooperative of coffee which was called Mazatec Coffee.'
- (21) Tsò jñà *xità* koi, ìjngoò chrjó xi  
 says PL\_DEF\_ART people PL\_DEM another wall REL\_PRO
- tíjnajiìn'nde isa xó kjotseè kisindaà.  
 is\_buried more QUOT long\_time\_ago DP.make
- 'Those people say that another wall which is buried was made even longer ago.'

A topic NP is also characterized phonologically by a pause following the topic NP and then more rapid speech on the verb. This seems to show that the topic NP is set apart from the verb and is not an integral part of the clause. In (22) and (23), the pause is indicated to the tenth of a second between the topic noun phrase and the following verb. This contrasts with the fronted focus noun phrases where there is no measurable pause.

- (22) Ní tajchá..(.5)..ijin -la ñánda nchit'e xita.  
 little old lady.....DP.get excited to.3 where dance people.

'The dear old lady, she got excited where the people were dancing.'

- (23) Jè cho jè.....(.5)..tikotsengui -ko -la  
 SG\_DEF\_ART animal SG\_DEF\_ART.....look under with to.3

ñánda tíjna jè ní tajchá.  
 where exist SG\_DEF\_ART little old lady

'The animal, he was spying on her where the little old lady was.'

The position of these fronted topic NPs has been referred to as a left-dislocated position or left-detached position. Lambrecht (1986:132) sees this as a way to promote a referent on the topic scale from accessible to active status.<sup>3</sup>

## 9. Topic and Focus Fronted NPs Occurring Simultaneously

When two NPs are fronted in SJM, one of them is acting as topic and the other as focus. The first noun phrase is the topic; it is old information in that it has an identifiable referent. The second noun phrase is the focus fronted NP; it is the new information. That is, it is telling us something about the topic that we did not already know. Thus the preverbal NPs occur in the following order in SJM: topic + focus.

In (24), for example, the people--who don't have money to carry a flashlight--is the topic, and the lantern--or lamp or even pitch--is the focus; it is showing what they carry. In (25), the 'lantern and lamp' is the topic; it has already been discussed and now they will say something more about it. Ndátí 'kerosene' is in marked focus position. They state that kerosene is what they burn in it; this is new information.

- (24) Koá xí majèn, linterna -né, ko ndí farol, skanda  
 and REL\_PRO no lantern FOC and little lamp even

nicha 'ba.  
 pitch\_pine carry

'And if not, a lantern or a little lamp or even pitch pine they would carry.'

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<sup>3</sup>It might be more conclusive if we could correlate the referent of the left-dislocated position NP with a subsequent unstressed pronoun, but I find no examples of that because in Mazatec the third person pronoun is a zero clitic. For examples in English when there is a left-dislocated noun phrase, there follows in the sentence a pronoun referring to that noun phrase, e.g. John, he went to the store. In SJM this may also be the case, but since the third person pronoun is a zero clitic, we cannot see the repetition of the referent.

- (25) Jñà            linterna k<sub>o</sub> farol ndátí        sinchá        -l<sub>a</sub> nga  
 PL\_DEF\_ART lantern and lamp kerosene make.store to.3 CTZR

tì.  
 burn

'They put kerosene in the lantern and lamp to make them burn.'

In these examples we see the topic NP in the left-dislocated position and the focus NP immediately before the verb.

## 10. Equative Clauses

SJM has equative clauses without a verb. These consist of two NPs following one another. Here, too, we can see the sequence topic plus focus. The first noun phrase is the topic. It is the old information, and "the entity which the sentence or proposition is about" (Lambrecht 1986:85). The second noun phrase is the focus in that it is the new information and is within the scope of the assertion. In (26), for example, we see a left-detached topic NP filled by a full noun phrase with a relative clause, followed by a focus NP filled by another noun phrase with a relative clause, where *jñà* 'they' is the head of the relative clause and the equative clause has a null subject 'they'.

- (28) Tiko<sub>a</sub> jñà            x<sub>i</sub>t<sub>a</sub>    koi    xi            gachupín 'mì,  
 also    PL\_DEF\_ART people PL\_DEM REL\_PRO gachupín be\_called

jñà            xi            tsatse kofé.  
 PL\_DEF\_ART REL\_PRO DP.buy coffee

'Also, those people who were called gachupines, they were the ones who bought coffee.'

In (27) we see a left-detached topic NP filled by a full noun phrase with a relative clause. The equative clause has a null subject and a focus NP filled by a full noun phrase.

- (27) Jñà            x<sub>i</sub>t<sub>a</sub>    xi            isa    ndaà    kis'e    -l<sub>a</sub>    ch<sub>o</sub>    tájaà  
 PL\_DEF\_ART people REL\_PRO most good had    to.3 animal hard

k<sub>o</sub>    nbúrró, jñà            x<sub>i</sub>t<sub>a</sub>    Itsjián            k<sub>o</sub>    x<sub>i</sub>t<sub>a</sub>  
 and donkey PL\_DEF\_ART people San\_Bernardino and people

Capultitla k<sub>o</sub>    x<sub>i</sub>t<sub>a</sub>            Zaragoza.  
 Capultitla and people Zaragoza

'The people who had the most mules and burros, they were the San Bernardino people and the Capultitla people and the Zaragoza people.'

## 11. Conclusion

As has been shown elsewhere (D. Agee, this volume), fronting is a very productive phenomena in SJM. What I have attempted to show here, however, is that there are two distinct constructions involved, one which establishes a topic and another which marks narrow focus. The word order in SJM is relatively free; that is, although the unmarked form is VSO, both subjects and objects can be fronted. Marked topic is characterized by the ability to be separated from the verb, the use of the definite article with the NP, and by a pause between the fronted topic NP and the following verb. Marked focus is characterized by immediate pre-verbal positioning of the fronted NP, often by the use of the indefinite article and by no pause between the fronted NP and the verb. Topic and focus NPs can occur fronted simultaneously, sometimes followed by a predicate and sometimes in an equative clause without a verbal predicate.

## References

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## Abbreviations

CONT	continuative
CTZR	complementizer
DP	distant past
FOC	focus
IMP	imperative
PL_DEF_ART	plural definite article
PL_DEM	plural demonstrative
QUOT	quotative
REL_PRO	relative pronoun
SG_DEF_ART	singular definite article
Y/N_QUES	yes/no question
2	second person
3	third person