

# FOCUS, AGENT FOCUS AND RELATIVE CLAUSES IN YUCATEC MAYA<sup>\*</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

In this paper we address the behavior of *agent focus* in Yucatec Maya, the Mayan language spoken in the Yucatán Peninsula, Mexico. In a number of Mayan languages, the verb displays a particular morphological mark when the transitive subject is focused and displaced to a preverbal position. The resulting form of the verb is known as the *agent focus* form of the verb (henceforth AF: see Stiebels (2006) for a recent survey). This is illustrated for the Mayan language Q'eqchi in (1).

- (1) Q'EQCHI (Berinstein 1985)

*Li c'anti' x-lop-o-c r-e li cuinik*  
DET snake REC.PAST-bite-AF-TAM 3E-DAT DET man  
'It was the snake that bit the man.'

Yucatec Maya (henceforth Yucatec) does not display a specific morpheme for the agent focus form. Instead, when the transitive subject is focused in Yucatec what is observed is a defective form of the canonical transitive clause. The canonical structure of the transitive clause in

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Yucatec is schematized in (2).<sup>1</sup> We assume that the auxiliary and the Series A pronominal clitic form a single morphosyntactic unit that functions as the head of the IP.

- (2) **(Agent)                    AUX-Set A    Verb-MOD-Set B    (Object)**  
*Le máak-o'    t-u                    poch'-aj-ø            le ko'olel-o'.*  
 DM person-CL CP-A3                    insult-MOD-B3    DM woman-CL  
 'The man insulted the woman.'

When the agent is focussed, this canonical structure is altered. Although the focussed agent still occupies the preverbal position, the Series A proclitic and the auxiliary particle that typically precedes it no longer appear (Bricker (1978), Bohnemeyer (2002), Tonhauser (2003)).<sup>2</sup> This is shown in (3).

- (3) *Agent Focus in Yucatec*  
**Agent    Verb-MOD-Series.B    (Object)**  
*Juan    il-ik-ech.*  
 Juan    see-IND-B2  
 'JUAN (not somebody else) sees you.'            (Tonhauser 2003: 221)

Since Bricker (1978), it has further been observed that the AF form is not only observed when the transitive subject is focused, but also in transitive subject interrogatives and relatives. Examples are presented in (4) and (5).

- (4) *Máax il-ik-ø                    María?*  
 who    see-IND-B3    María  
 'Who sees María?'

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<sup>1</sup> Following Gutiérrez-Bravo & Monforte (2008) we assume that the unmarked word order of transitive clauses is SVO and not VOS, as previously thought. This assumption has no effect in the analysis that follows, although it will be addressed again in the next section in relation to AF.

<sup>2</sup> Only transitive agents trigger this pattern when focused. It is not observed when intransitive subjects (unaccusative, unergative or otherwise) are focused. Agent focus further brings with it a change in the mood suffixes that immediately follow the transitive stem. See Bohnemeyer (2002) for details.

- (5) *Le máax jats'-ik-ø Juan-o'*  
 DM who beats- IND-B3 Juan-CL  
 'That person who hits Juan.'  
 (Bricker 1978: 121)

Since focussing, interrogative and relative fronting all correspond to instances of *wh*-movement in the sense of Chomsky (1977) it would appear that the data in (3), (4) and (5) instantiate the same kind of structural construction, that is, a *wh*-construction or alternatively an *Operator-variable* construction. This has led a number of works (including Bohnemeyer (2002) and Tonhauser (2003)) to conclude that there is a structural unity (i.e. syntactic equivalence) between the different constructions in (3), (4) and (5).

In this paper we show that, contrary to what is assumed in these works, the distribution of the AF form in Yucatec is in fact highly irregular and is consequently an unreliable diagnostic for operator fronting. Specifically, data from both our corpus and direct elicitation shows that in many (if not most) instances of relative operator fronting, the AF form is actually not observed. As such, we propose that the AF form in Yucatec no longer seems to be a morphosyntactic cue signaling an *operator-variable* configuration. Rather, our results confirm Bricker's original observation that the AF form in relative clauses is used mostly to disambiguate subject relativization from object relativization. Our paper is structured as follows. In section 2 we make a brief description of AF in Yucatec. We then discuss the analysis in Tonhauser (2003), an analysis that defends the structural unity of AF constructions, and provide evidence from relative clauses that makes this analysis problematic. In section 3 we argue that Yucatec relative clauses provide strong evidence against any structural unity analysis of AF in Yucatec. This is because the distribution and function of AF in relatives appears to be unrelated to the behavior it displays in declarative clauses with agent focussing. In section 4 we present our overall conclusions.

## 2 Agent focus in Yucatec

### 2.1 Focus and Agent Focus in Yucatec

Since Norman (1977) it has been noted that foci in most Mayan languages are displaced to the immediate preverbal position, as in examples (1) and (3). Further work in Aissen (1992) identifies this focus position as the specifier of IP, an analysis we henceforth adopt.

In Yucatec, however, word order is not a cue for focusing of the transitive subject. This is because Yucatec differs from most Mayan languages in that SVO is the unmarked word order of its transitive clauses (see Briceño Chel (2002), and Gutiérrez-Bravo and Monforte (2008) for the relevant evidence). Hence, we take the unmarked transitive subject in (6) and the focused subject in (7) to occupy the same structural position, namely, Spec-IP. As such, besides intonational prominence, what signals the focal nature of the transitive subject in (7) is the defective clause structure just discussed.<sup>3</sup>

(6) *le ko'olel-o' t-u ts'-aj-∅ u ma'alob nook'.*  
 DM woman-CL CMP-A3 put-MOD-B3 A3 good clothes  
 '...and the woman put on her good clothes...' (Si'ipil)

(7) *leti' ts'a-ik-∅ u mas kuxtal...*  
 3rd put-IND-B3 A3 more life  
 'It is THAT that gives more life...' (Cultivo)

When a constituent other than the subject is focused, it equally moves to Spec-IP. In this case the subject remains in the postverbal field in its VP-internal position (see Briceño 2002). The resulting structure is then just like that of verb-initial Mayan languages (Aissen 1992). These cases of focussing do not trigger AF and so we do not discuss them any further here. Now, it does not seem that all foci in Yucatec move to Spec-IP. Following the distinction between *contrastive focus* and *information focus* (as in Kiss (1998)), our data show that only contrastive foci surface in Spec-IP. Specifically, we applied an elicited survey with six speakers of Yucatec. Our results indicate that information focus (understood as the constituent providing new information in a clause that is a felicitous reply to a *wh*-interrogative) is not displaced to Spec-IP when its unmarked position is in the postverbal field. This is illustrated with an instance of object focus below.

(8) *Ba'ax t-u man-aj-∅ le ko'olelo'?*  
 what CP-A3 buy-MOD-B3 DMwoman-CL  
 'What did the woman buy?'

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<sup>3</sup> Text examples are presented with the name of the text they are taken from after the free translation. The examples from the texts *Piich*, *Si'ipil*, *X-lool* and *X-otzilil* are taken from Góngora (1990).

- a. *T-u man-aj-ø bu'ul.*  
 CP-A3buy-MOD-B3 beans  
 'She bought beans.'
- b. # *Bu'ul t-u man-aj-ø.*  
 beans CP-A3 buy-MOD-B3

The conclusion we arrive at from the results of our survey and from the examples of preverbal focus in our corpus is that preverbal foci are essentially contrastive foci. Of course, it is possible to find in texts *wh-question/answer* pairs where the focus in the answer occupies the preverbal position. However, the contexts in which we have found those pairs indicate clearly that the focus in such cases is also being used contrastively.

This conclusion is worth highlighting because our proposal in this paper is that AF in Yucatec is not a unitary phenomenon. Specifically, our data shows that there is no structural unity between the contexts and conditions where AF is observed. AF instead appears to be triggered by different conditions that seem to us to be unrelated. One of these conditions is when the transitive agent bears a [contrastive] feature, as in (3) and (7). In the following section we discuss, in the context of the analysis in Tonhauser (2003), why it is problematic to instead assume that AF is triggered by a specific syntactic configuration shared by agent focusing, interrogative fronting, and relativization.

## 2.2 The analysis in Tonhauser (2003)

Tonhauser (2003) proposes that the three constructions where AF is observed in Yucatec, transitive agent focussing (3), *wh*-interrogatives (4), and relative clauses (5) instantiate the same structure. The analysis in Tonhauser (2003) is similar in its essentials to Aissen (1992)'s original analysis, in that it assumes that the focus is in a sisterhood relation with an open proposition. The fundamental difference is that in Aissen's GB analysis the focus position is Spec-IP and the open proposition is the I' intermediate projection, whereas in Tonhauser (2003) the focus is taken to be a predicative phrase, as in (9).

- (9)
- FOCUS CONSTRUCTION

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graph TD
    A[FOCUS CONSTRUCTION] --- B[PREDP]
    A --- C["[verbal clause]"]
  
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It will not be contested here whether this is a plausible analysis for instances of agent focussing like (3). However, in order to maintain the hypothesis that all constructions that display AF have the same structure, Tonhauser extends the analysis in (9) to relative clauses. As such, in Tonhauser (2003) it is suggested that the relative clause in (10) shows AF because the head of the relative *máak* ‘person’ is a sister of the open proposition and hence it is internal to the relative clause.

- (10) ... [<sub>NP</sub> *jun túul* [<sub>RC</sub> *máak kanaan-t-ik-ø* *in*  
           one CNUM    person take.care-TRNS-IND-B3   A1  
           *chiib-o’ob*]].  
           goat-PLUR  
           ‘...a person who takes care of my goats.’       (Tonhauser 2003: 211)

Tonhauser’s analysis relies on the assumption that the head of the relative in Yucatec can alternatively be a relative pronoun. This can be seen in the cleft in (11), to be compared with the *wh*-interrogative in (4).

- (11) [<sub>NP</sub> *Le* [<sub>RC</sub> *máax kím-ø*]-*o’*, *Pedro*.  
           DM     who   die-B3-CL   Pedro  
           ‘The one who died was Pedro.’

It is crucial for this argument that referential nominal heads and relative operators appear to be in complementary distribution in this language. Specifically, on a first approximation it appears that a relative clause in Yucatec can have a referential nominal head, as in (10), or a relative operator, as in (11), but not both. Hence they are taken to occupy the same structural position. In this analysis, the internal head can in turn be modified by numerals, determinants, and numerous other modifiers that are external to the relative clause, like those in (10) and (11).

### 2.3 Evidence against the internal head analysis

Three facts point to the conclusion that the analysis of the nominal head as being internal to the relative clause in Yucatec cannot be correct. First, evidence against the internal head analysis can be found in extraposition. In (12), for instance, the relative clause ‘*that die*’ has been extraposed from the NP where it originated, leaving behind the head of the relative.

- (12) *Yaan* [<sub>NP</sub> *wúnik-o'ob* \_\_\_\_<sub>i</sub> ] =e'    *chen tsa'ay-ak-ø*  
 EX    man-PLUR                    =TOP    when stick+PASS-IRR-B3  
*ti'-ob=e'*                    [<sub>RC</sub> *k-u*            *kúm-l-o'ob* ]<sub>i</sub>.  
 PREP-PLUR=TOP    HAB-A3    die-IND-PLUR  
 'There are people, when it (disease) sticks to them, that die.'  
(Sonámbulo)

There is a sense in which this first argument is somewhat controversial. As is discussed in detail in the following section, relatives in Yucatec have no complementizers. Furthermore, in contrast with many other Mayan languages, the Yucatec verb shows no special morphology when relativization has taken place. Because of this, there is an alternative analysis of (12) where the clause [*k-u kúm-il-o'ob*] is not a relative clause but instead a conjunct of the matrix clause, i.e. 'There's some people and, when the disease strikes them, they die.'<sup>4</sup> We consider this alternative analysis possible but unlikely, given the example's free translation. However, there are two other arguments that provide stronger evidence that the head is not internal to the relative.

The second argument against a head-internal analysis comes from relativization of obliques. As mentioned previously, an observation that apparently supports the internal head analysis is that the NP with the relative can show a referential nominal head, as in (10) or a relative pronoun, as in (11), but not both. This apparent complementary distribution makes it reasonable to conclude that both elements occupy the same structural position inside the relative. However, this is the pattern observed when the subject, the object or a possessor is relativized. When an oblique XP is relativized, it is possible for both the referential head of the NP and the relative pronoun to co-occur, as shown in (13) and (14). In these cases it is clear that the head is external to the relative.

- (13) *Jach raro persona* [<sub>RC</sub> [ *máax ti'* ] *k-u*  
 very rare person            who PREP HAB-A3  
*si'ib-il* ].  
 grant+PASS-IND  
 'He's unusual, a person that (this power) is granted to.'    (Marcelino)

<sup>4</sup> Yucatec typically conjoins clauses simply by juxtaposition.

- (14) *jun p'éel kool* [<sub>RC</sub> *tu'ux pak'-a'an-ø*  
 one NUMC cornfield where plant-PART-B3s  
*leek-e'* ]]...  
 round.gourd-TOP  
 '... a cornfield where round gourds were planted.' (Piich)

Thirdly, the relative position of negation with respect to the head of the relative clearly shows that the head of the relative does not occupy the same position as the focus in (3) and (7). As noted in Aissen (1992), in many Mayan languages the sentential negation occupies a position immediately to the left of the focus position. This is also the case in Yucatec, as shown in (15). When the relative clause is negated, however, the negation instead appears to the right of the head of the relative, as in (16).<sup>5</sup>

- (15) *Ma' leti' páak-t-ik-ø* *u kool.*  
 NEG 3SG weed-TRNS-IND-B3 A3 cornfield  
 'It is not HIM that weeds his cornfield.'
- (16) *Le máak* [<sub>RC</sub> *ma' t-u* *tuukul-t-ik-ø* *wa*  
 DM person NEG DUR-A3 think-TRNS-IND-B3 if  
*jaaj ba'ax le k-u* *y-a'al-a'l* *ti']-o'*  
 true what DM HAB-A3 EP-say-PASS-IND PREP-CL  
*t-u* *y-a'al-aj-ø...*  
 CP-A3 EP-say-MOD-B3  
 'The man [that did not believe that what was told to him was true]  
 said...' (Piich)

This pattern is explained in a straightforward way in a standard analysis where the head is external to the relative and it is in turn coreferential with a null operator inside the relative. As illustrated in (17), in this analysis the null operator can be taken to occupy the canonical focus position. In contrast, the proposal that the head of the relative actually occupies the same position as the focus is hard to reconcile with this fact about the distribution of negation.

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<sup>5</sup> Further observe that the transitive subject relative in (15) shows no AF. We return to this point later in the paper.



- (17) *Le máak<sub>i</sub> [RC [ ma' Op<sub>i</sub> t-u tuukul-t-ik-ø... ]].*  
 DM person NEG DUR-A3 think-TRNS-IND-B3  
 'The man that did not believe...'

It is worth pointing out that negated *wh*-interrogatives show this same pattern. Specifically, in negated interrogatives the fronted *wh*-operator does not appear to the right of the negation, but instead to its left, and no AF is observed. This is illustrated in (18). We take this to be further evidence that it is not the case that all *Operator-variable* constructions involving a transitive agent make use of AF in Yucatec.

- (18) *Máax ma' t-u beet-aj-ø u meyaj-i'?*  
 who NEG CP-A3 do-MOD-B3 A3 work-CL  
 'Who didn't do his job/chores?'

From the evidence presented above, we thus conclude that the head is external to the relative clause in Yucatec. In the following section we develop an analysis of the structure of relatives in this language that makes this conclusion compatible with the apparent complementary distribution between relative pronouns and the head of the relative.

### 3 Agent focus and Relative Clauses

#### 3.1 The structure of relative clauses in Yucatec Maya

We now develop an analysis of relative clauses in Yucatec that accounts for the apparent complementary distribution between nominal heads and relative pronouns previously discussed. The analysis we propose is compatible with the evidence that in Yucatec heads are external to the relative clause.

Observe first that Yucatec has free relatives, as illustrated in (19). Since, by definition, free relatives are relative clauses that are not associated with a nominal head, these data provide evidence that relative operators are indeed internal to the relative clause. As such, it seems equally undesirable to develop an analysis of relative clauses in Yucatec where the apparent complementary distribution results because the relative pronouns is external to the relative, and thus ends up occupying the same position as the nominal head.

- (19) [<sub>RC</sub> *máax u y-ojl* ]=*e*'                    *k-u*                    *ts'ak-ik-ø*                    *xan*.  
           who A3 EP-know=TOP    HAB-A3 cure-IND-B3s also  
           'Whoever knows, can cure it (sleepwalking).'                    (Sonámbulo)

Our claim is that the apparent complementary distribution is instead the result of the fact that, (a) Yucatec uses two different strategies for relativization, (b) Yucatec allows for the head of NP to be null, and (c) relatives in Yucatec have no complementizers. In order to consider how these three properties interact, we first consider the basic typology of relativization strategies in Comrie (1989). Languages display different strategies for relativization, the two most common ones being the *gap strategy* (where the relative shows a gap but no filler for this gap internal to the relative) and the *relative pronoun strategy*<sup>6</sup> (where an overt pronominal element inside the relative functions as the filler). As is well known, some languages show more than one relativization strategy (Comrie (1989), Kroeger (2005), Andrews (2007)). English, for instance, makes use of both the *gap strategy* and the *relative pronoun strategy*.

- (20) We listened to [<sub>NP</sub> the employee [<sub>CP</sub> that the boss fired \_\_\_\_ ]].  
 (21) We listened to [<sub>NP</sub> the employee [<sub>CP</sub> whom the boss fired]].

Technically both relatives involve filler-gap dependencies. However, in accordance with our purely typological discussion at this point, we use the underscore in (20) to illustrate the presence of a gap for which there is no overt filler, in contrast with what is observed in (21). Now, there are languages which have the *gap strategy* and which further allow the head of the relative to be null (Lehmann (1984), Kroeger (2005)). As suggested in Rojas (2006), the head of the relative in such languages tends to be null when its referent is discourse-old. Spanish is in fact a language that combines null relative heads and the *gap strategy*, as illustrated in (22) and (23), where  $\emptyset$  represents the null  $N^0$ .

- (22) *Escuchamos* [<sub>NP</sub> *al*                    *empleado* [<sub>RC</sub> *que el patrón*  
           we.listened ACC-the employee                    that the boss  
           *despidió* \_\_\_\_ ]].  
           fired  
           'We listened to the employee that the boss fired.'

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<sup>6</sup> We use these terms in italics to indicate their typological, theory-neutral definitions.

- (23) *De los empleados, escuchamos* [<sub>NP</sub> *al*  $\emptyset$  [<sub>RC</sub> *que el patrón despidió* \_\_\_ ]].  
 of the employees we.listened ACC-the that the  
 boss fired  
 ‘Of the employees, we listened to the (one) that the boss fired.’

Even though there is no overt head and no overt relative operator in (23), the left edge of the relative in Spanish is none the less signaled by the presence of the complementizer *que* ‘that’. Yucatec, in contrast, has no complementizer for declarative subordinate clauses in realis mood, as shown in (24).<sup>7</sup> It can be observed in this example that the subordinate complement clause is just like the matrix clause schematized in (2).

- (24) *T-u y-a'al-aj-ø* [ *je'el u bin t-in*  
 CP-A3 EP-say-MOD-B3s ASV A3 go PREP-A1s  
*w-éetel-e'*].  
 EP-company-CL  
 ‘She said she would definitely go with me.’ (X-otzilil)

In the absence of a complementizer, it is not immediately obvious where the left edge of the relative is, as illustrated in (25). This example is almost identical to matrix clauses as schematized in (2). What indicates that it is a relative clause embedded in an NP is the presence of the deictic clitic *-o'*, which is a member of a set of distal enclitics that systematically attach to the right edge of the NP.

- (25) ...[<sub>NP</sub> *le x-ch'úupal* [<sub>RC</sub> *k-u wen-el-i'*]]-*o'*...  
 DM FEM-girl HAB-A3 sleep-IND-LOC-CL  
 ‘The girl that was sleeping there.’ (X-lool)

As such, our proposal is that Yucatec is just like Spanish and English in that it has both the *gap strategy* and the *relative pronoun strategy* for relativization, and it is like Spanish in that it allows for the head of the NP to be null. However, when the head of the relative is a null N, the absence of a complementizer to signal the left edge of the relative makes it appear as Yucatec has only one strategy for relativization and that the heads of relatives (10) and relative pronouns (11) occupy the same structural position.

<sup>7</sup> Yucatec does have interrogative, irrealis, and adverbial complementizers, but this fact is not relevant for the analysis of relative clauses here.

All of this relates to a crucial difference between Yucatec and Spanish. In Spanish, when the head of the relative is overt the relative that follows can be either a *gap relative* or a *relative pronoun* relative.

- (26) *Escuchamos* [<sub>NP</sub> *al empleado* [<sub>RC</sub> *que el patrón*  
we.listened ACC-the employee that the boss  
*despidió* \_\_\_ ]].  
fired  
'We listened to the employee that the boss fired.'
- (27) *Escuchamos* [<sub>NP</sub> *al empleado* [<sub>RC</sub> *a quien el patrón*  
we.listened ACC-the employee ACC whom the boss  
*despidió*]].  
fired  
'We listened to the employee that the boss fired.'

In Yucatec, a sharp difference is observed. When the head of a subject, object or possessor relative is overt, the only relativization strategy that is allowed is the *gap strategy*, as illustrated in (28). Note that this is also what is observed in (10), (12), (16), and (25). In more technical terms, what this means is that when the head of the relative is overt, in Yucatec it is obligatory to make use of a null relative operator, as in (17).

- (28) [<sub>NP</sub> *Le máak* [<sub>RC</sub> \_\_\_ *áant-ik-ø Carlos*]]-o'.  
DM person help-IND-B3 Carlos-CL  
'The person that is helping Carlos.'

Alternatively, an overt relative operator can be used. However, in this case it is required that the head of the NP be null. This is shown in (29) and (30).

- (29) ... *ti'* [<sub>NP</sub> *le Ø* [<sub>RC</sub> *máax ts'a-ik-ø le kuxtal*  
PREP DM who give-IND-B3 DM life  
*ti'*]]-o'.  
PREP-CL  
'... to (the one) who had given life to him.' (Gigante)

- (30) *ka a'al-a'ab-ø teen* [<sub>NP</sub> *tuláakal* Ø [<sub>RC</sub> *ba'ax*  
 and say-PASS.CP-B3 1SG every what  
*úuch-ij* ]].  
 happen-B3.CP  
 'And everything that had happened was told to me.' (Si'ipil)

Null Ns in our analysis, of course, are not expected to be specific to relative clauses, and indeed they are widespread in Yucatec (see Gutiérrez-Bravo 2002). In (31) we present an example in which the null N is just modified by an AP. Observe that this is analogous to the way in which the demonstrative and the quantifier modify the null N in (29) and (30), respectively.

- (31) [<sub>NP</sub> *Le boox* Ø ]-a'  
 DM black -CL  
 'The/this black one.'

Summing up, the crucial difference between Yucatec and a language like Spanish is the following. When the head of the relative is phonetically overt in Yucatec, the only relativization strategy available is the gap strategy, as in (25) and (28). In contrast, the relative pronoun strategy in subject and object relatives is only available when the head of the relative is null, as in (29) and (30). Crucially, the presence of a null N in this case can be identified because these constructions still allow for a wide range of nominal modifiers. The exception to this generalization is observed when obliques are relativized. In this case, as previously observed in (13) and (14), the relative pronoun can (but need not) co-occur with an overt nominal head.

### 3.2 Back to agent focus

Now that the basic structure of relative clauses in Yucatec has been determined, we can turn to our original problem of the behavior of AF in relatives. In Section 2 we showed that the structural unity analysis in Tonhauser (2003) is problematic once we consider further details about the structure of Yucatec relative clauses. From this, however, it cannot yet be concluded that *any* unified analysis of AF constructions in Yucatec would be undesirable. We now present further evidence from Yucatec relatives that points to the conclusion that the distribution and function of AF in relatives is different from that observed in clauses that do display focusing

of the transitive agent. From this we conclude that AF is not linked to a single and unique syntactic operation or configuration. In other words, AF in Yucatec is not a unitary phenomenon and so it cannot be used as a diagnostic for *wh*-movement or *operator-variable* configurations.

The standard observation in the literature is that relativization of the object (or relativization of an intransitive subject) does not bring with it any modification of the canonical structure of the transitive clause, as shown in (32). In contrast, relativization of the transitive subject triggers the obligatory presence of AF, as in (33).

- (32) *In k'ajóol* [<sub>NP</sub> *le máak<sub>j</sub>* [<sub>RC</sub> *k-u<sub>i</sub> y-áant-ik-ø<sub>j</sub> \_\_\_\_\_<sub>j</sub>*  
 A1 know DM person HAB-A3 EP-help-IND-B3  
*Carlos<sub>i</sub>]]-o'*.  
 Carlos-CL  
 'I know the person that Carlos is helping.'

- (33) *In k'ajóol* [<sub>NP</sub> *le máak<sub>i</sub>* [<sub>RC</sub> *\_\_\_<sub>i</sub> áant-ik-ø<sub>j</sub> Carlos<sub>j</sub>]]-o'*.  
 A1 know DM person help-IND-B3 Carlos-CL  
 'I know the person that is helping Carlos.'

However, contrary to this claim, relativization of the transitive subject does not necessarily bring with it the presence of AF.<sup>8</sup> So, in contrast with what is observed in (33), in the transitive subject relatives in (34) and (35) there is no agent focus form, and the canonical form of transitive clauses (2) is observed instead.

- (34) ... *u pak'-m-aj-ø* [<sub>NP</sub> *jun túul wayúum* [<sub>RC</sub> *k-u*  
 A3 plant-PP-MOD-B3s one NUMC huaya HAB-A3  
*ts'a-ik-ø u y-ich láaj ja'ab*]].  
 give-IND-B3 A3 EP-fruit all year  
 'She had planted a huaya tree [that bore fruit all year long].' (Xotzilil)

- (35) [<sub>NP</sub> *Le máak* [<sub>RC</sub> *ma' t-u tuukul-t-ik-ø wa*  
 DM person NEG DUR-A3 think-TRNS-IND-B3 if  
*jaaj ba'ax le k-u y-a'al-a'l ti'']] -o'*  
 true what DM HAB-A3 EP-say-PASS-IND PREP-CL

<sup>8</sup> As previously mentioned, this in fact was Bricker's (1978) original observation.

*t-u*      *y-a'al-aj-ø...*

CP-A3 EP-say-MOD-B3

'The man [that did not believe that what was told to him was true] said...'

(Piich)

In these relatives presumably a null operator corresponding to the transitive agent has undergone *wh*-movement, as in (17), but AF is still not observed. From this data, in conjunction with (16), we conclude that AF in Yucatec is not a valid diagnostic for *wh*-movement or *operator-variable* configurations. However, if this is not what triggers the presence of AF in (33), we still need to address the issue of why AF *can* appear in this context even though no contrastive focusing of the agent is involved.

We consider that a possible answer can be found in earlier work on AF in Yucatec. Bricker (1978) had already observed that the alternation between object and subject relatives illustrated in (32) and (33) is not the only possible alternation observed in this language. A widely observed alternative consists of making use of the canonical transitive structure for transitive subject relativization, as in (36), and using passivization instead for object/patient relativization, as in (37).

(36) *In k'ajóol* [<sub>NP</sub> *le máak<sub>i</sub>* [<sub>RC</sub> *k-u<sub>i</sub> y-áant-ik-ø<sub>j</sub>*  
A1 know DM person HAB-A3 EP-help-IND-B3  
*Carlos<sub>j</sub>]]-o'*.

Carlos-CL

'I know the person that helps/is helping Carlos.'

(37) *In k'ajóol* [<sub>NP</sub> *le máak<sub>i</sub>* [<sub>RC</sub> *k-u<sub>i</sub> y-áant-a'a-l*  
A1 know DM person HAB-A3 EP-help-PASS-IND  
*tumen Carlos]]-o'*.

by Carlos-CL

'I know the person that is being helped by Carlos.'

Bricker notes that this alternation keeps subject and object relativization unambiguous. We now spell out this intuition in more detail. Yucatec is a strictly head-marking language. When both the subject and the object of any clause are 3<sup>rd</sup> person, it is not possible to tell which argument NP is the subject and which one the object on the basis of the pronominal series alone. If there is no contrast in animacy or definiteness to resolve the ambiguity, the interpretation of the subject and object functions is determined by word order alone, an observation originally made in Durbin and Ojeda (1978). Specifically, clauses displaying an

*argument-verb-argument* order are interpreted as SVO and clauses having a *verb-argument-argument* order are interpreted as VOS. Now, in relative clauses this last cue for interpretation is lost when either of the core arguments is relativized. This is because inversion is obligatory in Yucatec relatives. Consequently the order that results after relativization is the same (i.e. *verb-argument*) both when the subject is relativized, as in (36), and when the object is relativized, as in (32).

Our proposal is that AF in relatives is simply one of two possible mechanisms to avoid this ambiguity, the other one being passivization. The crucial point of our proposal is consequently that AF in Yucatec has no relation to *Wh*-movement or *operator-variable* configurations. In our view, AF appears to be simply a morphosyntactic quirk, which is obligatorily triggered when the transitive subject in Spec-IP bears the feature [+contrastive], but which carries out a completely different function (disambiguation) in relative clauses. As such, the data presented here leads us to reject a structural-unity account of AF in Yucatec. An altogether different question, of course, is whether AF was a systematic cue for *Wh*-movement of the transitive subject in an earlier stage of the language, in the way that it appears to be in other Mayan languages. This is an important question, but one that needs to be addressed in future research.

## 4 Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed Agent Focus in Yucatec Maya and have concluded that it is not a unitary phenomenon. Specifically, whereas focusing of the transitive agent does seem to always trigger the AF form of the verb in this language, the same cannot be said about relativization. Since relativization of the transitive agent does not necessarily trigger the presence of the AF form of the verb, we conclude that AF cannot be a diagnostic for operator-variable constructions in this language and that it is not a morphological instantiation for the semantics of these constructions. Rather, it appears that the function of AF in Yucatec relatives is to prevent ambiguity between subject and object relativization, since relative clauses are a context where the usual cues for distinguishing the subject and object grammatical relations in Yucatec are neutralized.



## Abbreviations

A	Set A	IND	indicative
ACC	accusative	IRR	irrealis
ASV	assurative	LOC	locative
B	Set B	MOD	mood
CL	clitic	NUMC	classifier
CP	completive	PART	participle
DET	determinant	PASS	passive
DM	demonstrative	PLUR	plural
DUR	durative	PP	present perfect
EP	epenthesis	PREP	preposition
EX	existential	TOP	topic
FEM	female	TRNS	transitive
HAB	habitual		

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