

An Optimality-Theoretic Analysis of Verb Focus in Yucatec Maya

In this talk, I provide a description and an OT analysis of the construction used for verb focus in Yucatec Maya (Yucatán, Mexico). Yucatec displays a verb focus construction where a focused transitive verb occurs in a defective subordinate form. The verb focus construction resembles other focus constructions in Yucatec and other Mayan languages in that the focused element surfaces in the position immediately to the left of the verb. However, verb focus is otherwise peculiar because; (a) the insertion of a light/dummy verb is unattested elsewhere in this language; (b) focalization of a transitive root or stem requires an intransitive, non-finite verb form, and; (c) Yucatec transitive verbs regularly agree with their direct object, but I provide data that show that in the verb focus construction the object of the focused verb is morphologically realized in the light verb. I present an OT analysis where this pattern is the result of a strategy by which Yucatec avoids a mismatch between the semantic and the morpho-syntactic representations of the clause. Specifically, assuming a semantic representation where the verb and only the verb is the focus, then having a finite verb in the focus position would result in a mismatch, because the focus would be extended to the arguments that are ordinarily cross-referenced by the finite verb. To avoid this mismatch, the optimal construction is one where the arguments of the focused verb are instead realized morphologically in the light verb. I conclude by addressing the question of whether focus constructions in Yucatec are biclausal or monoclausal (a current debate in the literature on this language), arguing that the data from verb focus provide evidence for the latter analysis.