

## When syntax mirrors information structure: the case of Movima

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Movima, a linguistic isolate of lowland Bolivia, has predicate-initial syntax (VOS). Consider the canonical transitive clause in (1), where the verb comes first and the subject (bold; in the case of a DIRECT-marked verb, the patient) is expressed in clause-final position.

So-called verb-initial languages are often claimed to have a preverbal slot for focused or topicalized noun phrases (see e.g. Aissen 1992 on Mayan). Similarly, it seems that in Movima, the subject argument can “move” from its clause-final position to the position before the predicate. Compare the canonical construction (1) with the pragmatically marked construction (2) (where the pronoun appears in its “strong” form), which expresses argument focus.

However, when dependent clauses are taken into account, a different analysis seems to be more adequate. In dependent clauses, the predicate is nominalized, as shown in (3) for the canonical case. Interestingly, in the case of the “marked” construction, it is the pronoun that is nominalized, while the verb remains unmodified (4).

Thus, in the dependent clause, the pronoun is formally identified as the predicate. Consequently, it might be more adequate to analyze the pronoun as the predicate also in the main clause (2), rather than as occupying a slot preceding the predicate. Under this analysis, the “marked” construction would be a cleft, with the pronoun as the main predicate and the verb as a headless relative.

Indeed, there is also evidence that the verb in the marked construction is a headless relative. First, its subject cannot occur in its canonical, clause-final position: it is gapped. Second, when the focalized argument is the non-subject of a transitive clause, a valency-decreasing construction is required, shown in (5). Both these phenomena, gapping and valency decrease, only occur in a specific set of constructions, which share the property that a lexical predicate is preceded by a reference-establishing unit, such as a free pronoun (‘It was him [whom] she saw’, (2)), a determiner (‘the [one whom] she saw’), or a full NP with a relativizing particle (‘the man whom she saw’). In all these constructions, the verb has a relativizing (restrictive) function, narrowing down the class of potential referents.

Thus, Movima syntax is governed by information structure: the predicate represents the focussed constituent, and whatever is to be in focus will be encoded as the predicate; in the case of argument focus, this results in a cleft.

The paper will present the crucial properties of Movima grammar that corroborate the present analysis: the different types of relative clauses, voice alternations, and the syntactic flexibility of lexical classes. Based on an annotated corpus of spontaneous oral discourse, it will furthermore provide contextual data illustrating the pragmatic functions of the different construction types. (457 words)

### References:

Aissen, Judith. 1992. Topic and Focus in Mayan. *Language* 68(1): 43–80.

### Examples:

- (1) *vel-na=sne kus*  
watch-DR=3F.AB OBV.3M.AB  
'She watches him.'
- (2) *usko vel-na=sne*  
PRO.3M.AB watch-DR=3F.AB  
'She watches him.'
- (3) *n-as vel-na-wa=sne kus*  
OBL-ART.N watch-DR-NMLZ=3F.AB OBV.3M.AB  
'when she watches him (lit.: "in her watching him")'
- (4) *n-as usko-niwa vel-na=sne*  
OBL-ART.N PRO.M.AB-VBLZ:NMLZ watch-DR=3F.AB  
'when it's him she watches'
- (5) *isne kaw vel-na*  
PRO.F.AB VALDECR watch-DR  
'She is the one who watches (him).'

### Abbreviations:

3 = third person; AB = absential; ART = article; DR = direct; F = feminine; M = masculine; OBL = oblique; OBV = obviative; PRO = free pronoun; NMLZ = nominalizer; VALDECR = valency decreaser; VBLZ = verbalizer.