TOPIC MARKERS IN HMONG

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0. Introduction

The data that I will present in this paper arise from my investigations of Hmong syntax in light of the claims made by Li and Thompson (1976) about topic-prominence vs. subject-prominence in languages. Li and Thompson state that the sentences of some languages can be more insightfully described in terms of subject-predicate organization, and they call these subject-prominent languages. Indo-European languages, including especially languages like English and French, fall into this category. In other languages, by contrast, sentences are more insightfully described in terms of topic-comment organization, according to Li and Thompson, and they call these topic-prominent languages. Lisu, described by Hope (1974), is a prototypical topic-prominent language, and Lahu (Matisoff 1973) and Chinese (Tsao 1979) are also quite topic-prominent.

Topic-prominent languages are characterized by Li and Thompson as giving a less prominent role in sentence organization to the grammatical subject, to the extent that the subject may be omitted in many instances, and a more prominent role to the topic. One of the ways in which the sentence topic is made more prominent is that it is marked overtly, either by position or morphological marker or both. While every language presumably has ways of marking topics, in topic-prominent languages a sentence structure consisting of a topic followed by a comment (which may or may not include a subject) is the basic (or a basic) sentence pattern of the language.

I have defined the notion of "topic" pragmatically, following Gundel (1985:4), in terms of the speaker's intentions. In particular, Gundel states that "an entity, E, is the pragmatic topic of a sentence, S, iff S is intended to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E." Constituents presented as topics in this paper are evaluated by this definition. Since topic is defined pragmatically, the association of topics with syntactic or morphological characteristics such as position and special markers is an empirical question.

Since Hmong is a language with some of the characteristics associated with topic-prominent languages (see Fuller 1985a, 1985b, 1985c), it is reasonable to ask whether
Hmong marks topics overtly in the manner of topic-prominent languages. In Li and Thompson's sample, if a language uses position to mark topics, it always uses initial position. However, many languages, including Hmong, also use position to mark grammatical relations. Hmong has a fairly rigid Subject-Verb-Object order of grammatical relations, with the result that the subject frequently appears in sentence-initial position. If the subject is the topic, as often occurs, then both roles are embodied in one constituent, and no position conflict occurs. If topic and subject are distinct, these two roles are in competition for sentence-initial position. When both of these roles are overtly expressed, topic precedes subject. Topics can thus be identified by position; the question remains as to the possibility of marking topics morphologically. That question is addressed in the present paper.

Hmong makes use of a number of particles with a variety of functions. Two of these particles in particular are candidates for topic particles, mas and ces. I will first present information in Hmong dictionaries and grammars available to me about these particles. I will then provide evidence that they are not pause markers or subject markers. By looking at texts, I will show that these particles have a topic function.

1. Previous characterizations of mas and ces.

Heimbach's (1969) dictionary lists mas as a pause particle, functioning like the English comma; when it occurs at the beginning of a sentence, according to Heimbach, it functions like 'well' or 'and' in English. He lists ces as an initial particle which carries the action forward. Xiong (1983), Bertrais (1964), and Lyman (1974) translate both words as 'then' or 'so', with Lyman adding some other (conjunctive and relative pronoun) meanings. Mottin (1978:14) lists both words under conjunctions which express consequence. He gives the meaning as 'then', with the examples listed in (1-3).

(1) Nws tuaj, mas kuv zoo siab. (Mottin)
    s/he come PRT I happy
    'Il est venu, et je suis très heureux.'
    (He came, and I am happy.)

(2) Yog nws tuaj, mas koy hai s rau kuv. (Mottin)
    if s/he come PRT you speak to me
    'S'il vient, dis-le-moi.'
    (If he comes, you tell me.)

(3) Thaum nws los, mas kuv yuav tuaj. (Mottin)
    when s/he come PRT I will come
    'Quand il viendra, je viendrai.'
(When he comes back, I will come.)

(It should be noted here that according to my principal informant, the pause in Mottin's sentences comes after mas rather than before it, and that while it is sometimes possible to pause before mas, it is more typical to pause after it.) Mottin also lists a quant à 'as for...' meaning for mas, which takes the form of a left dislocation, with the noun phrase, followed by the particle, then a sentence with a coreferential pronoun as subject or object. An example from Mottin is shown in (4).

(4) Kuv, mas kuv nyob zoo thiab. (Mottin)
    I PRT I stay good and
    'Quant à moi, eh bien, je vais bien.'
    (Me, I am happy.)

Yang Dao (1980) also lists mas under quant à 'as for'. An example from Yang is (5).

(5) Ntawm nej lub tsev mas kuv mam saib xyuas. (Yang)
    LOC your CLF house PRT I PRT look visit
    'Quant à votre maison, je m'en occuperai.'
    (As for your house, I'll take care of it.)

2. Rejection of Mas as a Pause Marker

Since it has been suggested that mas is a pause particle, I would like to address the question of the relationship between the particle mas and possible pauses in the discourse. If mas is simply the Hmong 'comma', then possible pause locations should be all and only those locations where mas can occur. If this is the case then the relationship of the particle mas to the topic would be only that one can typically pause after a topic. However, the set of pause locations and the set of mas locations do not correspond exactly. I first present examples where a pause is possible but mas is not. These are sentences (6-8).²

(6) "Tub <pause/**mas> sab Luang Prabang mas av zoo tsis zoo."  
    son side land good not good
    'Son, (on the) Luang Prabang side, the land is very good.' (HT)

(7) Hmoob thiaj qw zom zaws hais tias: <pause/**mas>  
    then yell all saying if egg

    "Yog tuavqe..."
    if break egg

    'The Hmong then yelled all at once saying, "If (you)
break
the egg...’ (HT)

(8) Nws cov me nyuam mas, ib tug yog xib fwb <pause/*mas>
s/he grp child PRT 1 CLF BE teacher

ib tug yog tus kws tshuaj <pause/*mas> ib tug yog
1 CLF BE CLF doctor 1 CLF BE

tus coj zos.
CLF leader village

‘His children, one is a teacher, one is a doctor, (and)
one is a village leader.’

In (6), *Tub* is an appositive, which may be followed by
a pause, but not by *mas*. In (7), a pause but not
*mas* may follow the expression introducing a direct or
indirect quote. In (8), a pause but not *mas* may follow
each comment about the children. In none of these cases could
the material preceding the pause where *mas* is
unacceptable be interpreted as topical. The unacceptability
of *mas* in these pause contexts shows that although
*mas* is often used where there is a pause, it is not a
pause particle. The fact that the places where *mas*
cannot occur are precisely those pauses which do not follow
topics strengthens my argument that *mas* is used to mark
topics.

The opposite situation, where *mas* is possible but
a pause is not, also occurs. If *mas* marks topics,
after which pauses are possible at least in prototypical
cases, then it could be the case that wherever *mas*
occurrs, a pause is possible. This does not seem to be quite
true, but the reason for the unacceptability of a pause in
certain contexts with *mas* appears to be related to the
stylistic factor of constituent length rather than to the
syntactic/pragmatic factor of the relationship of the topic
to sentence containing it. This is shown in (9-11). In
these examples, (*pause) means a pause cannot occur either
before or after *mas*.

(9) ...ua qoob mas (*pause) zoo tsis zoo:  (HT)
do crops good not good
'...raising crops (was) very good;'

Taub dag mas (*pause) loj tsis loj...
pumpkin big not big
'Pumpkins (were) very big...'

(10) Lawv los mas (*pause) muaj thaj txoob ... (HT)

they come have CLF palm