Mayan Agent Focus and the Ergative Extraction Constraint

Overview. Many Mayan languages restrict the extraction of transitive (ergative) subjects; we follow Aissen 2017 in labelling this restriction the **ergative extraction constraint** (EEC). We offer unified account of the EEC within the Mayan language family, as well as an analysis of the special construction known as **Agent Focus** (AF) used to circumvent it. Specifically, we propose the generalization regarding the EEC in (1).

(1) MAYAN ERGATIVE EXTRACTION CONSTRAINT: When the object moves above the subject (and remains), the subject is restricted from undergoing A'-extraction.

We argue that the restriction in (1) has a similar source across the subset of Mayan languages which exhibit it: **locality**. We argue that the problem with Ā-extracting the ergative subject across the object connects to the requirements of the Ā-probe on C. Adapting the proposal of Coon and Keine (2018), we argue that in such a configuration, conflicting requirements on movement lead to derivational crash. While we propose that the EEC has a uniform source across the family, we develop a proposal in Henderson, Coon, and Travis 2013 that AF constructions vary Mayan-internally in *how* they circumvent the EEC. This paper both contributes to our understanding of parametric variation internal to the Mayan family, as well discussion of variation in Ā-extraction asymmetries cross-linguistically.

Agent Focus. The AF construction is illustrated for Chuj (Q'anjob'alan) in (2-b). It is contrasted with the plain transitive in (2-a).

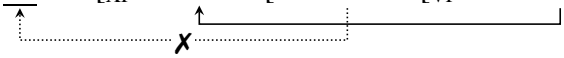
(2) a. Ix-in-y-il ix ix.
PFV-B1S-A3S-see CLF woman
'The woman saw me.'

b. Ha ix ix ix-in-il-an-i.
FOC CLF woman PFV-B1S-see-AF-SS
'*The woman* saw me.'

We take the core explananda for a successful analysis of AF to be: (i) AF is used when the transitive subject is A'-extracted; (ii) AF constructions involve dyadic predicates in which neither subject nor object DP is oblique; (iii) Set A (ergative) ϕ-marking is absent; and (iv) a special Agent Focus suffix appears on the stem.

Exceptional ergative extraction. AF is used to circumvent a restriction of Ā-movement of the subject over the object. The locality problem arises when objects raise (and remain) above the subject and is schematized in (3).

(3) $[_{CP}$ __ ... $[_{XP}$ OBJECT [SUBJECT $[_{VP}$ V ~~OBJECT~~]]]]



Previous accounts have linked the illicitness of Mayan ergative subject extraction in (3) to Case licensing (e.g. Coon et al. 2014; Assmann et al. 2015), anti-locality (Erlewine 2016), or intrinsic properties of ergatives (Polinsky 2016). We argue instead that this restriction arises due to a locality problem preventing movement of the ergative. Specifically, we propose that the object serves as a closer goal to the Ā-probe on C in (3) because of the nature of Ā-probes in Mayan:

(4) RELATIVIZED PROBING IN MAYAN Ā-MOVEMENT
Ā-probes are relativized to the feature [D].

Evidence for the locality-based proposal comes constructions in which AF is not required for ergative extraction, such as when the object is a bare/non-referential nominal. In this context,

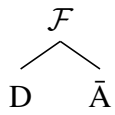
AF is not required for ergative extraction, as in (5).

(5) Jachiin x-∅-u-loq' **(*rii) uuq**?
WH COM-A3SG-E3SG-buy **(*DET) cloth**
'Who bought (*the) cloth?'

We argue that the noun *uuq* is an NP, and not a DP, as indicated by the obligatory absence of the determiner. Thus, it should not serve as an intervenor for the Ā-probe on C, which is relatived to [D]. We show further that other contexts not requiring AF for extraction (including cases of multiple extraction, as cases in which the subject binds into the object) receive a unified account in terms of lack of intervention under our proposal.

Relativized probing. Our derivation of the behavior of Ā-probes in Mayan involves two key pieces. **First**, we propose that Ā-probes on C in Mayan search for both Ā-features ([Ā]) and the feature ([D]). Specifically, we argue that these are both part of a larger feature geometry we label $\mathcal{F}$ (see Baier 2018), shown in (6). Following much work on the behavior of φ-probes (Béjar and Rezac 2009; Preminger 2014, a.o.), we propose that (6) itself is the probe on the C merged in Mayan Ā-constructions. **Second**, we adopt the syntax of Agree proposed by Coon and Keine (2018). Specifically, developing B&R's *Cyclic Agree*, an articulated probe will Agree with multiple goals if it is not fully satisfied after Agree with the highest goal in its search space.

(6) FEATURE GEOMETRY



This situation arises in Mayan transitive clause where the object has moved across the subject, as shown in (7). The Ā-probe on C first agrees with [D] on the object, ❷; subsequently, it agrees with [Ā] on the subject, ❸. We argue that it is the configuration in (7) that blocks extraction of the subject, because conflicting requirements on movement result in a derivational crash. While the subject is a better match for the probe on C (Best Match), the object is closer (Attract Closest).

(7) $[_{CP}\ C\ [\ u\mathcal{F}\ [\ uD\ \ uĀ\ ]\ ]\ \ldots\ [_{vP}\ OBJ\ [\ \mathcal{F}\ [\ D\ ]\ ]\ ]\ [\ SUBJ\ [\ \mathcal{F}\ [\ D\ \ Ā\ ]\ ]\ ]\ v^0\ [_{VP}\ V^0\ \ldots\ ]]]]$

❶ ❷

Following Coon and Keine (2018), we take these two constraints to be unranked and inviolable. In a nutshell, because the articulated probe has successfully agreed with two DPs, and moving either results in a violation, the derivation crashes.

The role of AF. We argue that the role of the AF construction is to prevent the configuration in (7) from arising in the first place. In AF derivations, the object does not move across the subject. However, Mayan languages vary as to the position that the object occupies. In Q'anjob'alan, the object does not shift, (8). In K'ichean, the object shifts to a position below the subject, (9).

(8) $[_{CP}\ \_\_\ \ldots\ [_{XP}\ SUBJECT\ [_{VP}\ V\ OBJECT\ ]]]$ ✓ *Q'anjob'alan*

(9) $[_{CP}\ \_\_\ \ldots\ [_{XP}\ SUBJECT\ [\ OBJECT\ [_{VP}\ V\ \sout{OBJECT}\ ]]]]$ ✓ *K'ichean*

While the position of the object varies, the repair is the same in both subfamilies: in AF derivations, the object never intervenes between the subject and the probe on C. Thus, the subject may move to Spec-CP in such contexts. The variation proposed in AF constructions accounts for family-internal parameteric variation including variation in the presence of hierarchy effects, as well as the use of AF in nonfinite embedded contexts.