A tale of two languages: a microvariation study across language families

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Bezanozano, a Western Malayo-Polynesian (WMP) language and dialect of Official Malagasy, and Kaqchikel, a Mayan language, share enough characteristics to suggest that they are produced by similar grammars. In fact, in certain constructions, they behave more closely to each other than to their close relatives. In this paper, I explore a particular fronting construction in both languages and suggest that by studying both in parallel, one can learn more about each, drawing not only from what each data set contributes to the question, but also the traditional viewpoints that have developed within the literature attached to the language family. In particular, Mayan languages are most often treated as ergative while ergative accounts are less prevalent in the WMP literature. On the other hand, fronting of arguments is treated as predicate fronting in the WMP literature and not in accounts of Mayan languages such as Kaqchikel. The list of characteristics that these two languages share suggests that a common ground should be explored.

Bezanozano is a dialect of Malagasy and syntactically very similar to the better documented dialect of Official Malagasy (OM). OM has been described as a VOS language that can, nevertheless, front the subject.

(1) Manasa ny lambanay Rakoto
    PRES.AT.wash DET clothes.1PL.EXCL Rakoto

‘Rakoto is washing our clothes.’ OM

(2) Rakoto no manasa ny lambanay
    Rakoto NO PRES.AT.wash DET clothes.1PL.EXCL

‘It is Rakoto who is washing our clothes.’ OM

The analysis for this has been that the fronted material isn’t a DP but rather a fronted predicate with an unrealized copula, suggesting a more accurate translation for ?? as ‘The one who is washing clothes is Rakoto’.

Kaqchikel, described as a VSO language, also has fronting (in this case the absolutive object has been fronted).

(3) X-e-ki-tz’et ri tijoxel-a’ ri tijonel-a’
    CMP-A3P-E3P-see DET student-PL DET teacher-PL

‘The teachers saw the students.’ Kaqchikel

(4) Ja ri tijoxel-a’ (ri) x-e-ki-tz’et ri tijonel-a’
    FOC DET student-PL (DET) CMP-A3P-E3P-see DET teacher-PL

‘It’s the students who the teachers saw.’ Kaqchikel

I will argue that the appropriate analysis for fronting in Kaqchikel is similar to the one
proposed for OM. One of the arguments that the fronted material in OM is a predicate is that it can be negated independently of the rest of the clause.

(5) Tsy Rakoto no manasa ny lambanay
    neg Rakoto no pres.at.wash det clothes.1pl.excl
    ‘The one who is washing our clothes isn’t Rakoto.’ OM

As we can see in ?? below, the same is true of Kaqchikel.

(6) Man ja ta ri tijoxel-a’ (ri) x-e-ki-tz’et ri tijonel-a’
    neg foc irr det student-pl (det) cmp-a3p-e3p-see det teacher-pl
    ‘The ones who the teachers saw are not the students.’ Kaqchikel

Further, the material to the right of the fronted material on its own can function as a nominal (perhaps a headless relative) in both languages.

(7) a. Antitra ny manasa ny lambanay
    old det pres.at.wash det clothes.1pl.excl
    ‘The ones who are washing our clothes are old’ OM

    b. E’ nîm ri x-e-ki-tz’et ri tijonel-a’
    A3p big det cmp-a3p-e3p-see det teacher-pl
    ‘The ones who the teachers saw are big.’ Kaqchikel

Bezanozano (Bz), a dialect closely related to OM, differs from OM in a way that makes it more similar to Kaqchikel than either one is to OM. In the fronted structures we have seen above, Kaqchikel follows the fronted material with the determiner ri (optionally), while OM follows it with a particle no. In Bz, instead of the particle no, the determiner i is used as we can see in the example below.

(8) a. manasa i lambanay Rakoto
    pres.at.wash det clothes.1pl.excl Rakoto
    ‘It is Rakoto who is washing our clothes.’ Bz

    b. Rakoto i manasa i lambanay
    Rakoto det pres.at.wash det clothes.1pl.excl
    ‘It is Rakoto who is washing our clothes.’ Bz

It is useful, therefore, to make a closer comparison between Kaqchikel and Bezanozano. I explore an interesting distinction that arises that involves the use of the determiner when it comes to fronting adjuncts. I argue that this distinction points to steps in the development of the construction that appears to be instantiated in both language families.

The main point of the exercise is to show how comparing across language families brings fresh viewpoints to each, how microcomparisons do not necessarily involve closely related dialects, and how cross-pollinating the language family specific literature can lead to fresh views of old issues.