

Afterword

We conclude this book by briefly highlighting its most important contributions to the creation of new typological knowledge on the syntax of the indigenous languages of Mesoamerica from the light shed by their RC structure. This exercise leads us to further propose some lines for future research that we believe are essential to cover if we want our knowledge of this area to be more complete.

As we have pointed out in Chapter 1, RC structure represents a unique object of study for linguists, because it provides us with the opportunity of gaining knowledge about a great deal of the syntactic structure of a given language. This is because in RC syntax many aspects converge, as they involve not only aspects of extraction syntax that relate them to focus constructions, such as interrogatives or clefts, but also aspects of nominal phrase syntax, constituent order syntax, alignment configurations, nominalization and subordination. A good understanding of RCs in a language requires at least some basic understanding of all these areas, with the result that a good description of RC structure will shed invaluable light on different aspects of the syntax of the languages in question. The studies in this book serve precisely this purpose on languages or language families about which we have hitherto known little or nothing about this area of grammar, and they do so on the basis of natural textual data.

1 Canonical RC Structure in Mesoamerica

In Chapter 1 we have presented a number of features that represent the canonical profile of RCs in a Mesoamerican language. We list some of them here:

- Morphosyntactically, the RCs in Mesoamerican languages are morphologically and syntactically finite. This is in clear contrast to the nominalization syntax found in the languages in the North of Mesoamerica, such as the northern Uto-Aztecan languages, as well as in the languages at the southern border, such as Pesh, a Chibchan language of Honduras.
- As far as relativization strategies are concerned, we find that the gap strategy is predominant in headed RCs. The strategy has two subtypes, which can be (and usually are) found in the same language, but with idiosyncratic differences in distribution. First there is the syndetic RC subtype. This RC can in turn be introduced by one of three different types of linking words: (i) a subordinator that is specific to RC structure, which we call “relativizer”, and

which in the OV languages of Mesoamerica is the only subordinating connective occurring in clause-final position; (ii) a general subordinator that also introduces other types of subordinated clauses, such as complement or adverbial clauses; or (iii) a determiner which agrees in deixis with the determiner of the DP including the nominal head, when the reference is construed as definite. This last type is specific to Mesoamerica. The other type of RC with a gap is an asyndetic RC; that is, a clause which is not introduced by an explicit linking word, and which in many cases (except when the RC exhibits a stranded adposition or when the predicate is inflected in a special subordinating mood) looks like a matrix clause superficially, only to be interpreted as an instance of a RC because of prosodic cues that commonly involve a RC that forms a unified intonational unit together with the head.

- While all languages in the area exhibit a relative pronoun strategy in headed RCs, in many of them this strategy is *ONLY* used to relativize a locative. This restriction is not uniquely Mesoamerican though, because it is also found in non-Mesoamerican languages like Pesh. In headless RCs, on the other hand, the relative pronoun strategy is common for other roles (see the various works in Caponigro et al. 2020).

There are other less widespread strategies, such as the resumptive pronoun strategy observed in some Mixtec languages and the internal head strategy, which in Mesoamerica is found in the Mixe-Zoquean languages from Chiapas and Oaxaca, and which can be explained as a by-product of verb-final syntax, just as it is also found in other verb-final languages outside the area, such as Pesh. While such strategies are not specific to Mesoamerica, finding them in Mesoamerica presents a more typologically diverse picture of relativization in the area. To this, we need to add the extraposed RCs of the Mixe-Zoquean languages of Oaxaca and Chiapas, and the puzzling internally-headed RCs with co-occurring relative pronouns that are exhibited by Nahuatl variants and some Totonac languages, but which could be alternatively explained as a by-product of non-configurational syntax, as shown by Flores Nájera in Chapter 5 for Tlaxcala Nahuatl.

2 Revisiting the Areal Features of Mesoamerica in the Light of RC Structure

Mesoamerica is a linguistic melting pot. This melting pot emerged after centuries of intense linguistic and cultural contact between speakers of neighboring languages, as well as between speakers of local languages and speakers of non-local languages with social and religious prestige. As the political–military

hegemony of different ethnic groups rose and fell, these non-local languages were displaced one after the other. Campbell et al. (1986) proposed to understand this linguistic melting pot in terms of the linguistic area model. In this connection, in order to define the area they advanced five distinctive features: (a) non-verb-final basic word order; (b) a nominal possession construction of the type “his-dog the man” for “the man’s dog”; (c) the expression of oblique and adverbial relations by means of possessed relational nouns; (d) vigesimal numeral systems; and (e) several widespread semantic calques.

Of these five features, the first three are the only ones which are genuinely linguistic in nature. We now know that *NONE* of them hold. Against (a), we know now that the basic word order of Proto-Mixe-Zoquean, which is one of the fundamental pillars of the area, was verb-final and that this order is preserved in many of the modern languages. Similarly, against (b) and (c), we know now that there are languages with genitive case (some Zoquean languages) and the use of relational nouns is a common widespread feature outside the Mesoamerican borders.

On the other hand, the feature in (d) is cultural and not linguistic, so it does not count for defining a linguistic area. The feature in (e) is more interesting. It is actually based on previous work by Thomas C. Smith-Stark which was only published at a later stage in a revised version as Smith-Stark (1994). The author observed that in the languages of the Mesoamerican cultural area, many words in the lexicon reflect similar concepts (e.g. the “wrist” is called “neck (of the hand)”; a “boa” is called “deer snake”; a “score” is called “man” or “person”; the verb for “kiss” is polysemous and it also means “suck”, etc.). This semantic evidence led Smith-Stark (1994) to propose that in ancient times there was intense lexical borrowing in the languages of the area but that the borrowing was primarily achieved through semantic-syntactic calques. Lexical borrowings, as part of the conceptual imagery of a language community, can be understood at the border between culture and language, in the same way as the number systems. So strictly speaking, neither (d) nor (e) should be really thought of as linguistic features.

We can think of the Mesoamerican melting pot through the lens of prototype theory in such a way that membership of the area is not ascribed by sharing a set of sufficient features, but by prototype resemblance. Our understanding of this linguistic melting pot is enriched as we add more features to it that speak of high degrees of convergence, but not all of them have to be exhibited by a given language to be treated as Mesoamerican. However, in order to achieve a proper characterization of Mesoamerica as a linguistic area, what we need are linguistic features that are uniquely area-specific from a typological point of view. This is precisely what we have proposed in Chapter 1.

In this respect, we first established that RC structure can be borrowed as a consequence of intense linguistic contact. We know this from the fact that linking words used in RCs can be borrowed, as evidenced for example by the fact that Sierra Popoluca, a Zoquean language from the Gulf Zoque subgroup, acquired the subordinator used in RCs from a neighboring Nahuatl variety. In the same way, Proto-Cholan borrowed its relativizer from Proto-Zoquean, a fact that further triggered a reshuffling of the syntax of relativization in these Mayan languages with the simultaneous acquisition of prenominal RCs, which were adjusted to express property concepts.

On the basis of evidence of RC structure borrowings such as these, we have proposed the existence of three constructions involved in RCs that we consider to be specific linguistic features of Mesoamerica. As expected, these three constructions do not occur at the same time in all languages of this cultural area, but it is enough that one of them is observed in a given system for that system to be considered without any doubt as emerged within the sphere of linguistic convergence of Mesoamerica.

Firstly, only in Mesoamerica do we find RCs introduced by determiners which agree in deixis with the determiner of the DP in which the nominal domain of the relative clause is embedded. Secondly, only in Mesoamerica do we find the so-called ‘pied-piping with inversion’ introduced by Smith-Stark (1988) for interrogatives, which we treat as having percolated into RC structure for the relativization of non-argumental roles marked with adpositions. For example, for the relativization of a comitative, in addition to a possible construction with a stranded adposition (“the man I went with”), we may find a puzzling pied-piped configuration in verb-initial languages of the type “the man **whom with** I went” instead of the expected “the man **with whom** I went”. This structure is foreign to the syntax of verb-initial languages, and it escapes an account in terms of syntactic derivation, since it could only be explained by a totally ad hoc rule of “inversion” that would explain nothing. We propose that the structure in effect results from the borrowing as a syntactic calque of the equivalent native structure of Mixe-Zoquean languages, whereby the REL.PRO/INTER.PRO+POST.P configuration (“whom with”) in the pied-piped adpositional phrase represents the natural syntactic configuration of a verb-final language. The third and last feature involves the existence of headless RCs with a gap; that is, headless RCs where there is little morphosyntactic indication as to the role of the relativized element.

3 A Wish-List for Future Research on RCs

Given that RCs represent an optimal descriptive tool for the study of the syntax of a given language, and given that in the specific case of Mesoamerica, the study of RC structure sheds light of great importance for the understanding of Mesoamerica as a linguistic area, we envision several areas of research to develop if possible in a not-so-distant future, especially due to the endangered or threatened situation in which most of the indigenous languages of Mexico and Central America find themselves in our times:

- We are in need of RC studies in the language isolates of the area: Huave, Chontal de Oaxaca and Purepecha.
- We are in need of word-order studies in the Totonac-Tepehua languages, as well as in other Nahuatl variants of the Puebla highlands, carried out under the hypothesis that there may be features of non-configurational syntax in the RC structure of these languages.
- We need more in-depth studies of more core and non-core Mesoamerican languages. In particular on languages at the northern border, such as Northern and Central Pame and Chichimec, but also on the Uto-Aztecan languages of Northern Mexico. The same applies to the languages at the southern border of Mesoamerica, such as the Tol languages and Belizean Garifuna (which shows traces of contact with languages of the Mayan family, cf. Munro 2017).
- We need corpus-based studies to examine the distribution of different strategies for the same role and for different ones, and we need to deepen our understanding of the distribution of headless RCs with a gap as opposed to other types of headless RCs.
- At a qualitative level, we are in want of understanding the factors that trigger the use of one construction over another, perhaps by revisiting the relationship between RC syntax and information structure more precisely in each language in natural texts, as it is for example explored by Campbell in Chapter 6.
- In particular, for the languages whose RC structure is already more familiar, we need to further explore cleft constructions and their structural relation between clefts and other monoclausal focus constructions.

In times of hope and renewal, in the Spring of 2021 ...

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