Aissen, J. 1992. Topic and Focus in Mayan (Summary by G. Legendre)

1. Main Claim:
- Two types of Topics need to be differentiated in terms of their syntax: Internal Topics (I-Topics) are in Spec,CP while External Topics (E-Topics) are external to CP, under a root E(xpression) node (at least in Mayan).
- (Contrastive) Foci occupy a third position, Spec,IP.

2. Differentiating E-Topics from Foci:
External Topics in Mayan (Tzotzil, Jakaltec, Tojolobal?) have morphosyntactic properties that differentiate them from Foci. E-Topics (section 3.2)
- appear with a preceding Topic marker a, with a ‘closing’ enclitic -e, and with a definite determiner.
- always precede Foci.
- precede sentential negation (adjoined to IP) and the interrogative marker mi (in C) which, in turn, precede Foci.
- constitute separate Intonational Phrases; Foci don’t.

3. Evidence for the syntax of E-Topics from the prosodically-based distribution of enclitics
Tzotzil has an optional enclitic -un which occurs (section 3.3.1)
- at the end of independent sentences
- after an adverbial clause preceding and modifying a main clause
- sentence-internally immediately before an adverbial clause
- sentence-internally before complement (CP) clauses to verbs of saying and knowing
- immediately after E-topics

This distribution is prosodic. -Un coincides with an Intonational Phrase boundary: significant pause and phrase-final contour marked by stress on the final syllable of the phrase and a noticeable rise or fall in pitch.

> -un attaches to the right-edge of IntPs.

The best alternative, a syntactic constituent candidate for attachment would be CP (see 25) but A argues against both left- and right-attachment to CP: (pp. 54-57)
- un productively attaches sentence-finally > left-edge attachment to CP un-[CP,...] (22, *27, *28) but
- un cannot attach to the left edge of Relative Clauses that follow the head (31,32) and
- un cannot attach sentence-initially (-un = enclitic) > right attachment to CP?
No, this would not account for the productive sentence-final position of -un

Given an algorithm mapping S-structure onto IntPs (a la Selkirk, 1984) even a prosodically-based distribution of -un can tell us something about the syntax of E-Topics.

Syntax-Prosody Mapping: The right edges of Tzotzil IntPs correspond to the right edges of ungoverned XPs.

In a simple sentence all XPs are governed except the root CP > right-edge attachment to CP/IntP
Clausal complements of V and RCs are governed by head (under a particular analysis of RCs and an m-command definition of government)
Complements of verbs of saying are obligatorily extraposed and adjoined to the XP from which they move. That XP is assumed not to be governed and constitutes an IntP at the right edge of which -un attaches.
Foci are governed by I hence incorporated to an existing IntP > no -un.
In contrast, E-Topics -- if generated under root E -- are not governed, their right edge defines the right edge of an IntP > -un is OK

There is another enclitic -e, also an IntP enclitic > it immediately follows the E-Topic (but not the focus) because only the right edge of the E-Topic corresponds to the right edge of an IntP boundary.

Further evidence against a syntactic characterization of enclitic attachment is provided by Jakaltek -an. Its distribution is similar to Tzotzil -un and is optional but it is subject to a further condition: -an needs a first person licensor (see examples below).
The first-person licensing condition on an can be easily formulated under the prosodic account: it must be satisfied within the IntP to which an attaches.
an is licensed in the main clause
(1) X-w-al tet naj an [chub’il ch’ahtoj naj swi’=te’=nhah].
asp-E1-say to him 1st that climb.up he roof
‘I told him to climb on the roof’

an is licensed in the complement clause
(2) Xal naj [chub’il x’apni hin mam] an.
said he that arrived my father 1st
‘He said that my father had arrived’

A syntactic account that refers directly to ungoverned XPs -- an attaches to the right edge of an ungoverned maximal projection containing a first-person pronoun -- makes the wrong prediction re (1). It predicts two possible positions, at the right edge of the main clause (ungoverned VP2: correct) and at the right edge of the root CP (incorrect) (see 58, 60). To make the syntactic account work, one could stipulate the domain of attachment as the smallest ungoverned XP containing a first-person pronoun.

Note that this added complication is devised to solve a problem which cannot arise in the prosodic account. This is because IntPs are nonoverlapping and nonnesting (cf. Selkirk’s 1984 Strict Layer Hypothesis).

A further problem arises with the syntactic account when the licensor is contained in the focus (spec, IP) which is governed and does not define its own IntP. An still occurs immediately before the complement clause.

(3) Ha’ hin mam xal naj an chub’il x’apni --.
Cleft my father he.said he 1st that arrived
‘It’s my father that he said had arrived’

The smallest ungoverned XP containing a first-person pronoun being the root clause, the syntactic account wrongly predicts that an should appear at the end of the entire sentence.

4. Why a node E?
The node E is an attempt at accounting for several syntactic properties:
-E-topics do not occur in embedded CP clauses.
-There is evidence against a movement analysis: Overall, the relation between the topic and what follows is far looser that a movement chain or a binding relation. That is, E-topics can be linked to a position in the following CP via a pronoun, never a trace. Jakaltek pronouns are overt and they never occur in focus structures (presumably because a focus moves). In Tzotzil the null element behaves like a pronoun, not a trace. E-topics need not be linked to any element in the following CP (67,68).
-E-topics can be properly included in the reference of some nominal in the CP without a binding relation: ‘as for you ... we’ll go together’ (69)
-E-topics, contrary to foci, can be linked to an element in an island (coreference is not subject to island conditions). Foci, if they moved leaving a trace behind, are subject to island conditions and their ungrammaticality is explained (63,64 vs. 65, 66).

Conclusion: E-Topics are base-generated outside of CP, under E.

There is further evidence that E-Topics are not base-generated in Spec,CP (where they would be governed by C): Spec,CP is occupied by a different sort of topic in Tz’utujil
not signaled by a significant pause
absence of focus semantics, of focus verb forms
can occur in an embedded clause (81,82) after think, know, say, tell that, be true that...

> Tz’utujil (I)-Topics are internal to CP -- in spec, CP -- rather than adjoined to IP because sentential adverbs (plausibly adjoined to IP) follow rather than precede the topic (83) (they precede the focus).
E-topics and I-topics are different pragmatically. E-topics signal that some identifiable participant is the new topic. I-topics can be continuing topics (their referent can already be established as a topic, see 85) Tz’utujil makes frequent use of third-person pronouns (good continuing topics, bad new topics) in the relevant position. In Jakaltek, third-person pronouns rarely function as topics (subject to a strong locality restriction on the antecedent). Tzotzil lacks overt pronouns.

5. Comments on the analysis:
1. Two Predictions:
   - I-topics should always be bound to a syntactic position in the following clause in Tz’utujil (See fn. 39).
   - You could have two topics, an E-one and an I-one in Tz’utujil given that the language appears to also have E-topics (fn 30).

2. Position of I-topic [spec,CP] is incompatible with complementizer evidence. Chi ‘that’ precedes rather than follows I-Topics! (See 82 and fn. 33). Adjunction to IP appears to work better.

3. A discourse function cannot be uniquely tied to a syntactic position. E-topics under E in Tzotzil and Jakaltek are new topics. I-topics in spec,CP can be new or continuing. In K’iché, new topics are in spec,CP.

4. The analysis crucially relies on government defined in terms of m-command (see 36) and an interpretation of adjunction as constituting an independent projection (contra Barriers for example).

5. Minor point: Evidence for [spec,IP] position of focus? Only indirect: S is assumed to be VP-internal (VOS, VSO)? why not adjoined to IP?

6. E-topics do not occur in embedded clauses, hence the need for E. Well, one example was found in Tzotzil (fn.26).
A assimilates E-topics to Left-dislocation which is in fact possible in the complement of say in English, of verbs of propositional attitude (Cinque, 1990).

French left-dislocation: new or continuing topic, +/- contrastive; left-adjoined to IP (Déprez, 1989).
Left-dislocation is productive in complement clauses, regardless of main verb:

(4) a. Ils ont dit.....
   they have said ....
   Je pense/ai lu/entendu dire que Pierre, il devra repasser son examen
   I think/have read/heard that P he should retake his exam
b. Je pense/ai lu/entendu dire que Pierre, il faudrait qu’il repasse son examen
   I think/read/heard that P it is necessary that he retake his exam

Emerging general picture of Topic positions:
Under E (new Topics in Tzotzil, JakalteC)
In spec,CP (new/old Topics in Tz’utujil?, new Topics in K’iché )
Adjoined to IP (new/old Topics in French; new/old Topics in Tz’utujil? )

Note: There is no evidence against left-adjoining E-topics to CP in Mayan. Why complicate X’-theory with E?