

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 (1978:141) 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 koj hais 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 housePRT 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).<sup>2</sup>

- (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 tuav qe..."  
 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 occurs, 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

'(When) they came there was one grove of palms'

- (11) Ntim su mas, poj niam mas (\*pause) noj loj nawb. (HT)  
 fix lunch woman eat big EMPH  
 '(If you) carry a lunch, the women (want to) eat a lot.'

If the two sentences in (9) occur together, a pause (and mas) may occur between them, but no pauses occur in the individual sentences. In (10), no pause occurs until the end of the sentence. In (11), no pause can occur at the second mas (presumably since a pause occurs after the first mas), but if the sentences begins with poj niam, a pause can occur with mas. These facts suggest that while pauses occur only at constituent breaks, an additional constraint is maintenance of a space between pauses, and that with two constituent breaks where pauses are possible, the pause will occur at the larger break. Although further examination of this point is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear from the examples above that the relationship between mas and the pause is an indirect one. The places where mas occurs are typically places where pauses also occur, but since a pause can occur where mas cannot, and (less clearly) mas can occur where a pause cannot, mas is not a true pause marker.

### 3. Rejection of mas as a Subject Marker

Since subjects and topics frequently coincide in a sentence, the occurrence of mas after the subject/topic NP might be interpreted as a subject marker. However, mas does not consistently mark subjects, as I show here. First are examples where the subject cannot be followed by mas, as shown in (12-14).

- (12) Nplias (mas) kuv (\*mas) twb muab paj tshab rau nws lawm.  
 Blia PRT I PRT already give present to her COMPL  
 'Blia, I already gave a present to her.'

- (13) Phau ntawv no thiab phau ntawv ntawd (mas) kuv (\*mas)  
 CLF book this and CLF book that PRT I

yuav yuav tib si.  
 will buy both

'This book and that book, I will buy both.'

- (14) Nag hmo (mas) Xia (\*mas) tuaj xyuas kuv.  
 yesterday PRT come visit me  
 'Yesterday Xia came to visit me.'

In these sentences there is a sentence-initial topic followed by an optional particle and then the subject.

It is also the case that constituents other than subjects may be marked with mas. This is true in (12) and (13), where the constituent marked with mas is co-referential with an object, and in (14), where the constituent marked with mas is an adverbial.

Since subjects cannot always be marked with mas, and constituents other than subjects can be marked with mas, it is clear that mas is not a subject marker.

#### 4. Mas and Ces in Two Texts

In order to examine how these particles functioned in connected discourse, I examined all of the occurrences of mas and ces in two of my collected texts, HT1 and HT2, both eight page narratives. I tabulated each occurrence of mas and ces according to the constituent category of its preceding context. The categories where mas and ces occurred in these texts were noun phrases, prepositional phrases (of place), time clauses, 'if'-clauses, and sentences with a 'then' relationship, a 'so' relationship, or an unspecified relationship to the sentence following the particle. In HT1, the contexts in which mas and ces appeared were, except for one instance, in completely complementary distribution: ces appeared in the 'then' and 'so' contexts, and mas in the others. The one exception was an instance of mas in a 'so' context. In HT2 the results were not quite so clear-cut; there were five instances of ces in NP contexts, and five instances of ces in 'if'-clauses. The trends in HT2, however, were the same as in HT1. Charts showing these tabulations are given in (15) and (16).

(15) Tabulation of instances of Mas and Ces in HT1.

<u>Preceding Context</u>	<u>Mas</u>	<u>Ces</u>
Noun Phrase	30	0
Place Phrase	3	0
Time Clause	4	0
If-Clause	7	0
Sentence (unspecified)	13	0
Sentence ('then')	0	15
Sentence ('so')	1	14

(16) Tabulation of instances of Mas and Ces in HT2

<u>Preceding Context</u>	<u>Mas</u>	<u>Ces</u>
Noun Phrase	22	5
Place Phrase	0	0
Time Clause	11	0
If-Clause	7	5
Sentence (unspecified)	3	1
Sentence ('then')	0	16
Sentence ('so')	0	3

Of these contexts, I will discuss in this paper only the use of the particles in noun phrases.

The discussion of particles with noun phrases is largely limited to mas, since ces appears so infrequently with noun phrases in the texts I have examined. (Because of this distribution of mas and ces, and because of the dictionary definitions I have cited, and my examination of other texts, I have come to believe that mas is more closely associated with topics than ces. Ces often has a ready translation into English as 'then' or 'so', as the tabulations of the texts would indicate, whereas the translation of mas is problematical. However, native speaker judgments about these two particles, which I will not present in this paper, do not fully agree with these intuitions.)

All the noun phrase contexts preceding mas could be identified as topics according to the definition of topic which I have presented. I sub-divided the noun phrases into four categories by type of topic according to Keenan and Schieffelin's (1976) categorization of discourse topics. Their categorization makes a primary division of continuous topics, which occurred in the previous sentence, and discontinuous topics, which do not. They divide continuous topics into COLLABORATING TOPICS, in which the topic is the same as the topic of the previous sentence, and INCORPORATING

TOPICS, in which the topic is part of the comment of the previous sentence. They divide discontinuous topics into RE-INTRODUCING TOPICS, in which the topic has appeared in the previous discourse, and INTRODUCING TOPICS, in which the topic is new in the discourse. The resulting categorization gives an indication of the functions that topics serve in discourse. In this case, since I have only tabulated noun phrase topics marked by mas and ces, the result does not give a total picture of the discourse pattern of topic function. In particular, it does not account for topic chains, which would produce a larger proportion of collaborating topics. What it does show is how noun phrases marked by particles function as discourse topics. This information for HT1 and HT2 is charted in (17) and (18).

## (17) Categorization of NP Topics in HT1

	Mas	Ces
Collaborating	3	0
Incorporating	18	0
Re-Introducing	4	0
Introducing	2	0

## (18) Categorization of NP Topics in HT2

	Mas	Ces
Collaborating	2	0
Incorporating	7	2
Re-Introducing	2	0
Introducing	6	0

From these charts it can be seen that the most frequent use of mas with noun phrases is to encode entities which have been introduced in the previous sentence and have been incorporated into the present sentence as a topic. Examples of these INCORPORATING TOPICS from the two texts are given in (19-22), where preceding sentences are given to show the context. In these examples, mas can appear only where it is indicated (that is, following the topic) and in no other place in the sentence.

(19) Ua tau teb pob kws thiab teb yeeb nkaus xwb.  
make able field corn and field opium single only  
'(We) could grow corn and opium only.'

Yeeb thiab pob kws mas zoo tas nrho.  
opium and corn FRT good completely  
'Opium and corn both grew well.' (HT1)

(20) ...Fab kis thiaj npaj tub rog tes.  
French then prepare soldier meet  
'The French then got the soldiers ready.'

Cov tub rog mas yog Nyab Laj coob xwb.  
grp soldier FRT BE VN many only



'The soldiers were mostly Vietnamese.' (HT2)

- (21) kuv txiv hnuv nyoog muaj 5 xyoos los nyob Houei Kasao  
 mv father age have year come live  
 'My father was 5 years old (when he) came to live  
 at H. K.'

mus txog hnuv nyoog tiav hluas lawm,  
 go arrive age mature young ASP  
 'and became a young man'

...twb yeej ua kam lawm.  
 already do business ASP  
 '... already run a business.'

Thaum ntawd mas lawv ua kam rau Suav xwb nawb.  
 time that PRT they do business to Chinese only EMPH  
 '(At) that time, they did business with the Chinese  
 only.' (HT1)

- (22) ...ua qoob mas zoo tsis zoo.  
 do crops PRT good not good  
 '...raising crops (was) very good.'

Taub dag mas loj tsis loj...  
 pumpkin PRT big not big  
 'Pumpkins (were) very big...' (HT1)

In (19), veeb 'opium' and pob kws 'corn' were mentioned in the first sentence and became the topic in the second sentence. In (20), the same is true, with tub rog 'soldiers' mentioned in the first sentence and topic in the second. In (21), where the time is the topic, this time period is mentioned in the previous sentences and becomes the topic in the last sentence. In (22), the topic of the second sentence taub dag 'pumpkins' is a sub-set of qoob 'crops', which is the topic of the previous sentence.

COLLABORATING TOPICS marked by mas or ces are few, because a collaborating topic is not always overtly mentioned. When the topic does stay the same from one sentence to the next and is expressed by a full noun phrase, a particle may mark the topic, as in the examples (23) and (24).

- (23) Lawv los mas muaj ib thaj txoob, cov txoob uas rog rog  
 they comePRT have 1 CLF palm grp palm REL fat fat  
 uas noj tau tam mov, thaum tsis muaj dab tsi noj.  
 REL eat can rice when not have what eat  
 Cov txoob ntawd mas cuag hav tsawb nyob hauv tib  
 grp palm those PRT reach valley banana LOC in 1

lub vox hav Cov txoob mas tej niag tug rog rog ...  
 CLF valley grp palm PRT grp large CLF fat fat...  
 (HT1)

'(When) they came, there was one grove of palms; those palms which were so big that (they could be) eaten as rice, when (the people) didn't have anything to eat. Those palms, (they were as many as ) banana trees located in a broad level valley. Those palms, the group was large (and) each one was fat...'

In (23), txoob 'palms' is repeated three times after its introduction, the first time modified by a relative clause, and the second and third times with the particle mas. In all these instances it is clear that the speaker is saying something specifically about the palm trees, and marking this topic overtly by using both full noun phrases and particles. In the final sentence of this discourse, mas can only appear where it is shown.

In (24) the topic is initially expressed by a full noun phrase, then repeated with the particle mas.

(24) Xyoo twg, sau qoob tas thiab hlais yeeb ces Nplog  
 year WH harvest crops finish and cut opium PRT Lao

tuaj sau se ntawm Hmoob txhia leej txhia tus.  
 come collect tax LOC each person each one

Ib xyoos twg mas cov nom tswv Nplog tuaj mus  
 1 year WH PRT grp leaders Lao come go

"sarave"...  
 inspection (HT2)

'Each year, after the crops are harvested and the opium cut, the Laotians come to collect taxes from every Hmong person. Each year, the Laotian leaders come (for) inspection...'

In this case it is also clear that it is the regularity of these events, expressed by a time phrase, that is the topic of both sentences. In these collaborating topics, the particle is used not for the introduction of a topic but for its maintenance.

The particle mas is also used for both the introduction and re-introduction of noun-phrase topics. Examples of INTRODUCING TOPICS are shown in (25-26).

(25) Cov Phu Phaib lub caij ntawd mas muaj tsawg tsawg...  
 grp CLF time that PRT have few few

Lub Moos Xaj mas nyob 7 yim Phu Phaib.  
 CLF PRT live family (HT1)

'The Phu Phaib (at) that time were very few. (In)  
 Moos Xaj lived seven families of Phu Phaib.'

- (26) Thaum ub, Tiao In thiab Chaomuong laus lawv mas xuas  
 long ago and leader old they PRT take

nees mus thauj Hmoob cov nqaij npuas los dai tau  
 horses go carry grp meat pig come hang

tsheej niag nqai nthab.  
 (area full) beam storage

'Long ago, Tiao In and the old leader took horses to  
 go and carry the Hmong's seasoned meat back and hang  
 it up in the ceiling storage area until the area is  
 full.' (HT2)

Examples of RE-INTRODUCING TOPICS are shown in (27-28),  
 where I present only the relevant sentence, omitting the  
 discontinuous context.

- (27) ...peb lub zos mas yog peb tib pawg kwv tij xwb.  
 our CLF village PRT BE our one grp. brothers only  
 'Our village was only our group of cousins.' (HT1)

- (28) Cov Suav mas muaj nyiaj heev.  
 grp Chinese PRT have money very  
 'The Chinese had a lot of money.' (HT1)

Summarizing the uses of mas and ces which I  
 have discussed in the two texts, I find that mas in  
 particular marks noun phrase topics. Among topic types,  
mas is used most frequently to mark incorporating  
 topics, that is, those noun phrases that are introduced as  
 part of a comment and become the topic of the following  
 sentence. Although time does not permit discussion of other  
 constituents marked by mas, analysis of the  
 relationship of these constituents to their following  
 sentences reveals that the constituent preceding mas  
 can be considered a topic of the following sentence. Thus  
 the primary function of the particle mas appears to be  
 that of marking the preceding constituent as the topic of the  
 following sentence.

##### 5. The Relationship between Mas and Ne

Additional support for the view that mas is a  
 topic particle comes from the relationship between mas  
 and ne. Ne is described by Heimbach (1969:136)

as a "final interrogative and exclamatory particle", with (29-30) as examples.

- (29) Koj tsis paub ne? (Heimbach)  
 you not know  
 'Don't you know?'
- (30) Kuv twb hais rau nej <li> no ne! (Heimbach)  
 I already say to you this  
 'I did tell you!'

This particle also occurs in expressions like (31).

- (31) Koj ne?  
 you  
 'And you?'

The particle ne does not always occur sentence-finally, as shown in (32-33), from one of my interview texts.

- (32) Cov Nais Khus ne lawv ua lawv zaub mov noj los? (HT4)  
 grp teacher they do their food eat  
 'What about the teachers? Did they cook their own food?'
- (33) Nyob li cov hluas ne, tsis yog cov me nyuam kawm ntawv.  
 be like grp young not BE grp child study book  
 lawv nrog cov Nais Khus tham ne lawv hais lub Hmoob  
 they with grp teacher talk they speak CLF Hmong  
 xwb los lawv hais lus nplog? (HT4)  
 only or they speak word Lao  
 'What about the younger persons, not the student, do they talk to the teachers in Hmong or in Lao?'

The left-dislocated phrases preceding ne in (32-33), as well as the translation (which was provided by a Hmong translator independently of the topic-particle hypothesis), strongly suggest a topic function for ne. This relationship is made explicit in sentences (34-35).

- (34a) \*Chicken mas, lus Hmoob hu li cas?  
 (34b) Chicken ne, lus Hmoob hu li cas?  
 'How do you say 'chicken' in Hmong?'
- (35a) \*Chicken ne, lus Hmoob hu ua qaib.  
 (35b) Chicken mas, lus Hmoob hu ua qaib.  
 'The Hmong word for chicken is 'qaib'.'

Mas and ne are in complementary distribution, mas being used in statements and ne in questions.

The (a) sentences are ungrammatical because mas has been used in a question and ne in a statement. Additional examples are shown in (36-37).

- (36a) Koj lub tsev ne (\*mas) koj puas muaj kiv cua?  
 your CLF house you Q have spin wind  
 'Your house, do you have a fan?'
- (36b) Kuv lub tsev mas (\*ne), muaj ntau ntau lub qhov rai.  
 my CLF house have many CLF window  
 'My house has lots of windows.'
- (37a) Koj lub kev sib tham ne (\*mas), puas mauj tej yam  
 your CLF way RECIP talk Q have GRP kind  
 txaus siab?  
 (interest)  
 'Your meeting, did anything interesting happen?'
- (37b) Lub kev sib tham mas (\*ne) tsis muaj dab tsi  
 not have anything  
 (txaus siab).  
 'The meeting, nothing much happened.'

In these sentences, topics of statements are marked with mas, and topics of questions are marked with ne. The function of ne as an interrogative topic particle parallel to the function of mas in statements strengthens the argument that mas is a topic marker.

#### 6. Gradations of Acceptability of Mas

If mas is a topic marker, the acceptability of mas following a given NP should indicate whether or not that NP can be interpreted as a topic. In (38), the NPs are marked for the acceptability of mas.

- (38) (Hais txog) Maiv (mas), kuv (?mas) nco hais tias Xia  
 speak about Mai I remember that Xia  
 (mas) twb tau sau ib tsab ntawv (\*mas) rau (nws) lawm.  
 PRT already write 1 CLF letter to her ASP  
 'Speaking of Mai, I remember that Xia already wrote a letter to her.'

Mas is only acceptable with the left-dislocated NP Maiv and the subordinate subject Xia. Mas with the main clause subject kuv is questionable, and mas with the indefinite direct object is unacceptable.

These acceptability judgments for mas correspond at least roughly to intuitive judgments about what NPs in this sentence are candidates for topic-hood.

## 7. Conclusion

Evidence has been presented in this paper that the particles mas and ces in Hmong mark sentence topics. In particular, noun phrase topics marked with mas are shown to both introduce new topics and maintain old topics in discourse. The use of mas as a topic marker in statements is paralleled by the use of ne as a topic marker in questions. Degrees of acceptability of mas appear to correspond to degrees of acceptability of the preceding NP as a topic. These facts indicate that Hmong is characteristic of topic-prominent languages in marking topics overtly both by position and by a morphological marker.

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank my informant, Kee Thao, for his significant contribution to this work, and Bruce Downing for his helpful suggestions on earlier versions. This work was partially supported by a grant from the University of Minnesota Graduate School.

2. The sentences marked (HT) are taken from spoken Hmong texts which were tape recorded and transcribed. Unmarked sentences were elicited from a native speaker.

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