

Language and Cultural Contacts Among Yukatekan Mayans

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ABSTRACT

The Yukatekan branch of the Maya language family, spread across the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico, northern Guatemala, and Belize, began to diversify approximately 1,000 years ago. Today it has four branches: Mopan Maya, Itzaj Maya, Lakantun Maya and Yukatek Maya proper, which have widely varying language statuses. Lakantun and Itzaj Maya are seriously threatened, while Mopan appears to have a stable or growing population of approximately 10,000 speakers and Yukatek has a very large number of speakers, perhaps 750,000. However, even many Yukateks believe that their language is threatened and that shift to Spanish is underway. During the past millennia there has been a series of contacts involving migration, trade, warfare, and flight among the different branches, as well as with other Mayan languages and with the Spanish. This paper examines a variety of different kinds of contact, and how the different language varieties were involved and affected. One goal of the paper is to better understand how the dynamics of inter-cultural contacts affects language practices resulting in very different language statuses and ideologies.

Key words: *Maya, Yukatek, Mopan, Lakantun, Itzaj, Spanish*

Introduction

The Mayan lowlands have been occupied by speakers of Yukatekan and Ch'olan languages for over two millennia. These two branches of the Mayan language family are quite distinct and have no common ancestor other than Proto-Mayan, which began to diversify at about 2000 B.C.¹ At the beginning of the Classic Period

(A.D. 250) neither Yukatekan nor Ch'olan had begun to diversify (Figure 1).

We know that there have been prolonged contacts between Yukatekan- and Ch'olan-speaking groups and that Proto-Yukatekans borrowed large numbers of words as a result of these contacts². These contacts were so pervasive that Lowland

Mayan is a well established linguistic area as well as a culture area³. In this paper I briefly explore the nature of these contacts and how they relate to shifting identities of the groups involved. Written records of the lowland Maya span the last two thousand years, proving information on language contact and change that is unsurpassed in the new world.



Fig. 1. *Maya Lowland Languages 250 A.D.*

Bilingualism appears to have been prominent among scribes and there is even evidence of code-switching between Yukatekan and Ch'olan in the Mayan hieroglyphic codices⁴. The direction of lexical diffusion appears to be mainly from Ch'olan to Yukatekan, and, early on at least, was especially prominent in the priestly domains of ritual and religion. As

Vail⁵ has recently shown, large numbers of deity names of Ch'olan origin are recorded in colonial Yukateko sources from the northern part of the peninsula, where the contact would presumably have been least intense.

By 800 A.D. Ch'olan had diversified into Eastern Ch'olan Ch'olti/Ch'orti' and the Western Ch'olan languages Ch'ol and Chontal, and by 950 Yukatekan began to diversify. It appears from the archaeological and epigraphic records that the Itzaj were present in the Petén Lakes region during the Classic and Postclassic, as well as the historic periods⁶. According to Grube, the title *Itzaj Ajaw* or 'Itzaj Lord' is recorded hieroglyphically at Motul de San José, a Classic site north of Lake Petén Itzá, as well as at Chichen Itza⁷. The name of their king, *Kan Ek'*, who is well known from colonial sources⁸, also appears hieroglyphically both in the Petén and at the site of Chichen Itzá⁷ during the Late Classic Period. Similarly, the toponym *Mopan*, was recorded in the Classic period in the region of Naj Tunich⁹, which we know was occupied by Mopan Maya in colonial times⁸.

Cyclicality in Mayan Culture

Cyclicality is a primary theme in Mayan language and culture. In addition to being a pervasive feature of their calendars, it is a prominent in many discourse genres¹⁰ and has spatial analogs reflected in ritual circuits, pilgrimages, ceremonial architecture and, apparently, cyclic migration. The indigenous Yukatekan books of Chilam Balam appear to describe repeated migrations of the *Itza* from the south to the northern Yucatán and back to the Petén again^{7,11,12}. The *Itza* are described as having come by both eastern and western routes and to have spoken Maya »brokenly.« I interpret this to mean that they spoke a dialect of Yukatek that was noticeably different than that spoken

in the north. The Itza claim to have founded Chichen Itzá In k'atun 8 Ajaw a period of approximately twenty years from A.D. 672–92. In the next k'atun 8 Ajaw (A.D. 928–48) the Itza are said to have abandoned Chichen Itzá and established Chak'an Putun (Champton?) as their capital; in the next k'atun 8 Ajaw (A.D. 1185–1204) a group of Itza returned to Chichen Itzá, but were forced to retreat to Petén. It appears most likely that they encountered Mopans there, probably absorbing some and pushing others south. In the north in K'atun 13 Ajaw (A.D. 1263–83) the Itza formed an alliance with the Xiu to seat the *may* or k'atun cycle at Mayapan; in the next k'atun 8 Ajaw (A.D. 1441–1461) Mayapan was abandoned and some Kowoj, a group associated with the Xiu at Mayapan, went south to Petén¹³. In the books of Chilam B'alam the Itza are especially associated with the eastern half of the peninsula, while the Xiu are based in the west¹¹. There appear to have been repeated migrations of Yukatekan groups over the last millennium, and speakers of different varieties of Yukatekan Maya came into contact with one another, at times prolonged and intense contact. The political geography of the 16th Century, as reconstructed by Ralph Roys (1957), is a complex mosaic of distinct provinces within both the Xiu and the Itza spheres of influence.

While the northern Yucatan was conquered in the middle of the sixteenth century, The Itzajs and Mopans were independent until 1697. In the seventeenth century the linguistic picture is fairly complex. Quite a number of groups are identified and relations among them were largely hostile. Contact was maintained between the northern Yukatekans and the Itzajs in the Petén, with periodic travel by Itzaj nobles sent by their king Kan Ek', and by Spanish missionaries and soldiers interested in the conversion and conquest of the Itzaj⁸. The account of

Avedaño y Loyola¹⁴ of trips made in 1696 is especially interesting for the information it contains about groups in the region. He explicitly notes that there were linguistic differences between Itzaj and the Maya spoken to the north. The Itzaj version was considered archaic, and indeed is more conservative in a number of ways morphosyntactically, including dependent status marking on verbs and retention of the masculine noun classifier *aj-* and the feminine classifier *ix-*, which were reduced or lost to the north¹⁵. His examples of Itzaj words and phrases, including *chämach*, 'old man', with a high central vowel, and *Chaltuná*, the Itzaj name for lake Petén Itzá, clearly identify the dialect as Itzaj with distinctive differences from northern Yukatekan dialects. Language contacts were also quite different among dialects. Northern Yukateko borrowed lexicon from Spanish from the sixteenth century on, while Itzaj and Mopan borrowed more from Ch'olan languages.

If the ethnohistoric accounts are correct, we should expect more intense contacts between the Itzaj and Mopan and Ch'olan groups to the west and South. Cano¹⁶, another missionary, made a trip to the Petén coming from the south in 1695–96. He spoke Ch'ol and passes through Ch'ol territory before arriving to the Mopan lands. He was unable to communicate with them until he found some Mopans who were bilingual, speaking both Ch'ol and Mopan. The Mopans at this time were subordinate to the Itzaj king Kan Ek' according to Cano.

From Spanish accounts it is clear that Kan Ek's control was faltering and that the Kowoj were traditional adversaries of the Itzaj, just as they were in the north where the Kowoj (Xiu) controlled the western half of the peninsula while the Itzá controlled the east. During the sixteenth century, the Spanish removed the Ch'ols from the Lakantun forest and re-

settled them in the highlands, leaving the Lakantun forest region depopulated. After the conquest of the Itzaj in 1697, all indigenous peoples of the region were settled in mission towns around the lake. Kowoj, Itzaj and perhaps some Mopanes were forcibly settled in San José¹⁷, the home of virtually all surviving Itzaj speakers. A distinct Kowoj identity largely disappeared, merging into the Itzaj, although the surname survives. The Lakantun forest became a refuge area for a number of Yukatekan groups, including the Kowoj and likely some Itzaj, whose descendants speak Northern Lakantun^{13,18}. The descendants of other Yuka-

tekans more closely related to the north now speak Southern Lakantun¹⁸ (Figure 2).

In Hofling¹⁸ I outlined the linguistic evidence for the genetic model of the family (Figure 3). The most controversial aspect of the diagram is the suggestion that Mopan is the first branch, rather than grouping Mopan and Itzaj together. My model is based on shared innovations. The reason why many have grouped Itzaj and Mopan together is that they share many features as a result of contact with one another and with Ch'olan languages.

I would now like to focus on linguistic evidence of contact among Yukatekan and Ch'olan languages. The lexical domains of flora and fauna are especially interesting with reference to contact and lexical borrowings. It is generally the case that in-migrating peoples borrow vocabulary from the older inhabitants. However, in the case of Itzaj and Mopan, the overwhelming majority of terms for flora and fauna are not borrowed, they are Yukatekan words, confirming the long history of occupation in the Petén by Yukatekans. In most regards the lexicon of flora and fauna in Yukatekan and Ch'olan languages are quite distinct. There are, however, some borrowings as shown in Table 1.*

The comparisons of the word for jaguar reveal that the southern Yukatekan Mopan, Itzaj and Lakantun words for jaguar can be traced to a Chontal source, with its innovation of *b'ahlum*, with *u*. Similarly their word for spider can be traced to Chontal. The Mopan, Itzaj, and Northern Lakantun words for snail also has a Ch'olan source, perhaps reflecting

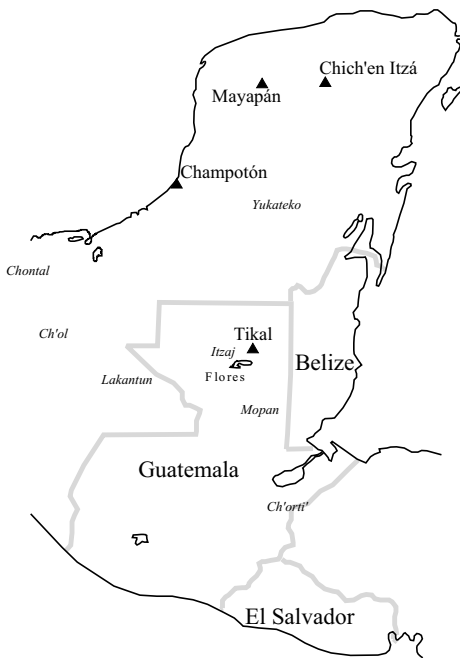


Fig. 2. Lowland Mayan Languages 2000 A.D.

* Proto-Yukateko reconstructions are based on Kaufman¹⁹. Canger²⁰ is the primary source on San Quintín (Southern) Lakantun data; Bruce^{21,22} is the source for Northern Lakantun; Bricker et al.²³ is the source on Yukateko; Itzaj data are from Hofling²⁴; Mopan data are from Ulrich and Ulrich²⁵; Ch'ol data are from Aulie and Aulie²⁶; Chontal data are from Keller²⁷ and Ch'orti' data are from Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín²⁸. All Mayan forms appear in the practical orthography approved by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala: tz = ts, ch = tʃ, x = ʃ, j = h, and ä = ç.

trade for conch shells with Chontal merchants. In these cases it is impossible to tell if the Itzajs borrowed directly from a Ch'olan group, or which I consider more likely, the borrowing entered via Mopan in most instances. The case of the word for cricket is unique in that the Mopan word is a borrowing from Ch'ol, as one would expect, while the Itzaj word indicates contact with the Chontal. The Itzaj word for the female Great currasow, *ajb'olon-chan* is clearly a Ch'olan borrowing meaning 'nine sky', (the Itzaj form would be *b'olon-ka'an*, not *b'olon-chan*) a religious reference attested hieroglyphi-

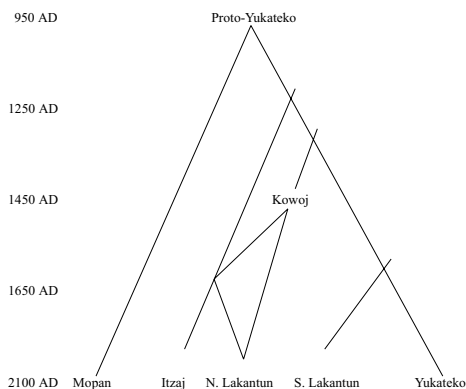


Fig. 3. The Yukatekan Language Family.

TABLE 1
SELECTED FAUNA TERMS

	jaguar	spider	snail	cricket	great currasow
Proto-Maya	*b'ahlam	*am	*t'oot'	*chiil	
Proto-Ch'olan	*b'ahlām	*am	*t'ot'	*chil	
Ch'ol	b'alām	am	t'ot'	ajch'inay	chāk-mut
Chontal	b'ahlum	ajtoy	t'ot'	chil	
Chorti	b'ahram	am	t'ot'		
Proto-Yukatekan	b'ahlam	*am	'uhl	*ajmahs	
Mopan	b'aalum	ajtoy	t'ot'	chil	
Itzaj	b'alum	ajtoy	t'ot'	ajch'ānay	ajb'olon-chan k'ām-b'ul
N. Lakantun	b'alum	äjtoy	t'at'	ajmaas	
S. Lakantun	b'áarum	tóoy	túunu'n	máas	k'áam-b'ur
Yukateko	b'áalam	'am	'úul	hmáas	k'áam-b'uul

cally, but which does not appear in the modern Ch'olan dictionaries consulted.

Kinship terminology is also intriguing. Nuclear kin terms follow linguistic boundaries, with all Yukatekan dialects using the same set (Table 2).

Terms for affinal kin, however, indicate borrowing (Table 3). Mopan and Itzaj have borrowed words for brother-in-law, sister-in-law, and daughter-in-law from

Ch'olan sources, suggesting Ch'ol-Mopan intermarriage and perhaps Mopan-Itzaj intermarriage as well.

Conclusion

To summarize, a number of Ch'olan words have entered southern Yukatekan languages after diversification of the Yukatekan family began. It seems most likely that the borrowings which have en-

TABLE 2
NUCLEAR FAMILY TERMS

	mother	father	older brother	older sister	younger sibling	son	daughter
Proto-Ch'olan	*na'	*tat		*chich	*ihtz'in		
Ch'ol	ña'	tat	äskun	chich	xut, ijtz'in	peñel, ajt'al	ixikpeñel, ixik'al
Chontal	na'	pap	säkun	chich	jitz'in	yajlo'	jixik-ch'ok
Proto-Yukateko	*na'	*tat	*suku'un	*kiik	*ihtz'in	*aal	*aal
Mopan	na'	tat	suku'un	kik	itz'in	mejen, al	al
Itzaj	na'	tat, yum	suku'un	kik	itz'in	paal, al	paal, al
N. Lakantun	na'	tet	sukun	kik	itz'in	paal, ti'al	paal, ti'-al
S. Lakantun	na'	teet	suku'n	kiik	iitz'in	páar, aar	páar, aar, ti'-ar
Yukateko	na', maam	papaj, yuum, taajtaj	suku'un	kiik	iitz'in	paal, meejen, aal	(paal,) aal

TABLE 3
AFFINAL KIN TERMS

	brother-in-law	sister-in-law	son-in-law	daughter-in-law
Proto-Ch'olan	*ja'an, *mu'	*jawän	*ni'al	*al(')ib'
Ch'ol	ja'an	mu', jawän	nij'al	älib'
Chontal	ja'an, mu'	mu', jawän	ni'ä	älib'
Proto-Yukateko				
Mopan	mu', b'al	mu', jab'an	ja'an	äli' (m.-in-law)
Itzaj	b'al (?), jab'an	mu' (?), jab'an	ja'an,	äli'
N. Lakantun	(mam)	(mam)		
S. Lakantun	chan-maam		ja'an	äkan
Yukateko	jb'aal, suku'un	xb'aal, kiik	ja'an	ilib'

tered Itzaj did so via contact with Mopans. Since the conquest, there has been eradication of ethnic groups, such as the Kowoj of Petén, as well as the transformation and genesis of ethnic groups, such as the Yukatekan Lakantun. The strategy of isolation from the Spanish, adopted by

both the Itzajs and the Lakantuns, combined with small numbers has not succeeded. The remnants of the indigenous populations in the Petén Lakes region and the Lakantun forest have been diminishing in numbers continuously and their survival is very much in doubt.

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JEZIČNI I KULTURNI KONTAKTI JUKATANSKIH MAJA

S A Ž E T A K

Jukatanska grana majanske jezične porodice, rasprostranjena na Jukatanskom poluotoku koji obuhvaća dio Meksika, sjeverne Gvatemale i Belizea, počela se granati prije otprilike 1000 godina. Danas je čine četiri grane jezika: mopanski, itzajski, lakantunski i jukateški majanski koji se međusobno uvelike razlikuju s obzirom na status. Dok su lakantunški i itzajski majanski ozbiljno ugroženi, mopanski majanski ima stabilnu pa čak i rastuću populaciju od oko 10 000 govornika, a jukateški vrlo veliku, oko 750 000 govornika. Ipak, i puno jukateških govornika smatra da je njihov jezik ugrožen španjolskim. Tijekom prošlog tisućljeća ovo je područje bilo poprište različitih migracijskih, trgovačkih i ratnih dodira između govornika ovih jezika, drugih majanskih plemena i Španjolaca. U ovom se radu analizira raznolikost tih dodira te načina na koji su različiti jezici u njima sudjelovali i bili njima oblikovani. Jedan od ciljeva rada je i bolje razumijevanje načina na koji dinamika međukulturnih kontakata djeluje na jezičnu praksu rezultirajući vrlo različitim jezičnim statusom i ideologijama.