

Roots and Words in Chol (Mayan):  
A Distributed Morphology Approach

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# Abstract

Two main goals are considered in this thesis. First, I aim to provide a basic sketch of the phonology and morpho-syntax of the Mayan language Chol, which previously has received relatively little linguistic attention. Second, through an examination of the nature of Chol roots and stem formation, I hope to place Chol within the context of contemporary linguistic theory.

Current classifications of Mayan roots encounter a number of problems by assuming that roots must be stored fully specified in the Lexicon. I propose instead, following the framework of Distributed Morphology, that roots are under-specified with respect to morpho-syntactic and semantic features. In order to fix their meanings, these under-specified roots must merge with a category head. In Chol, I argue, this category head takes the form of one of a set of previously unexplained post-root suffixes. These suffixes, which before were classed under three separate labels: “thematic vowels”, “status suffixes” and “valence-changing morphology”, all serve to fix the meaning and specify the argument structure of a root. This proposal allows us to account for the semantic multiplicity of Mayan roots without forcing them into a restrictive model of lexical classification.



*Wokolix iyäyäyob jiñi ta'bä ipäsbeyoñob:  
ajVirginia, ajMatilde, ajDora, yik'oty ajHermelinda.*



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In this thesis I hope both to contribute to the description of Chol grammar, as well as to bring Chol into the discussion of current theoretical issues in linguistics. In describing the nature of roots and processes of word formation, I argue that among other current morphological theories, the framework of Distributed Morphology (cf. Halle and Marantz 1993) is best equipped to account for Chol facts. I claim that roots in Chol are under-specified feature bundles rather than fully formed grammatical units. Part of the support for this argument will come from the observation that non-perfective verb stems in Chol are formally nominal. The nominality of non-perfectives has been previously argued for nearby members of the Yucatecan family (cf. Bricker 1983) and subsequently dismissed, based partially on faulty information about Chol, which this thesis intends to remedy.

The majority of data for this thesis was collected in a small village called Campanario in the *municipio* (township) of Tila, Chiapas. In this chapter, I briefly describe my fieldwork situation and data-collection methods. In §1.1 I narrate my arrival/abandonment in Campanario. Next, in §1.2 I describe the family who shared so much of their lives, their culture, and their language with me, focusing on my primary formal and informal consultants. Finally, in §1.3 I discuss the methods used to conduct this research, as well as problems I encountered along the way.

Chapter 2 is largely descriptive, and covers Chol phonology, morphology, and syntax. The description of Chol and other under-documented languages should serve

as a resource to expand our knowledge of the ways languages may (and may not) vary cross-linguistically. Because many current linguistic theories have been developed with English and other related languages in mind, the examination and analysis of unfamiliar languages will provide an important testing ground for many theoretical claims. In Chapter 3 I discuss Mayan roots and re-evaluate a proposed classification of roots in Chol. In this chapter I argue that the best account of roots in Chol is to claim that they are under-specified. Next, in Chapter 4 I analyze stem-formation and argue that non-perfective constructions in Chol are formally nominal. After a description of the framework of Distributed Morphology, I claim that roots in Chol acquire part of their semantic and grammatical information through the addition of what I term “specificational” morphology. Finally, in Chapter 5 I conclude with some overall thoughts and ideas for future research.

## 1.1 Campanario

I first arrived in Mexico in June of 2003. Reed linguistics professor John Haviland met me at the bus stop in San Cristóbal de las Casas, an old colonial city nestled high in the mountains of Chiapas and the final stop of my twenty hour bus trip from Mexico City. As he drove me on a whirlwind tour of the city, he asked whether I would be ready to go the next morning. “Go where?” I asked. Although I had hoped to spend a significant part of my summer living in a Chol speaking community, I had imagined at least a week in the city during which I might improve my Spanish, become acquainted with Mexican culture, and perhaps meet with some local Chol speakers. This is not what my professor had in mind.

The next morning we woke up before dawn, picked up our guide Matilde, and set off on a six hour trip down winding mountain roads into the hot jungle lowlands of northern Chiapas. Matilde had grown up in Campanario but lived in the city where she was working on her thesis with Professor Haviland. Our destination turned out to be a small village, composed of a series of small wooden houses with palm-thatched roofs situated along a narrow gravel road. Chickens and turkeys cleared the

way as we pulled in, and a group of small children crowded around the truck. John quickly negotiated my stay with Matilde's surprised family while I sat nervously and tried unsuccessfully to follow the conversation. An agreement was apparently reached and John hastily bid me farewell. Having had only vague notions of what "linguistic fieldwork" entailed, I asked him desperately what exactly I was supposed to do. "Make some friends. Learn some Chol," he replied with a quick shrug. He and Matilde said good-bye, hopped back in his pickup truck, and drove back up the dusty gravel road which serves as the only entrance to Campanario. Later that day, Virginia asked me when he was coming back to pick me up. "He's not," I replied. "Well, then how are you getting home?" I was about to ask her the same thing.

\*

Although I didn't realize it at the time, I recognize now that throwing me off the proverbial deep-end was not John's idea of a cruel joke, but in fact his tried and true method for initiating students into unfamiliar fieldwork environments. I have come to understand that no amount of preparation or hand-holding could have prepared me for the cultural shock I was in for. And while data-collection tips would have been immensely appreciated at the time, I am grateful for having had the opportunity to really discover on my own what works and what doesn't.

## 1.2 Teachers and informants

I spent large portions of that and the following summer living with Matilde's elder brother, Irineo Vásquez Vásquez, his wife Virginia, and their four children: Elmar, María de Jesús (Nena), Morelia (More), and Orlando (see Figure 1.1). Virginia has been my patient and generous teacher of all things Chol, from my first day when she taught me how to grind corn to make tortillas, to the subtle grammaticality judgements she provided through the end of my second summer. I spent most of my time in the village with Virginia, helping her with daily chores, and pestering her with an endless stream of questions about how to say things in Chol. Virginia is the source of the majority of the data in this thesis.



Figure 1.1: Nena, Morelia, Virginia, Orlando, and Elmar

Irineo's parents, Jesús and Fabiana, live just across the stream. Jesús's parents were the original settlers of Campanario, which was named after a nearby formation of rocks which ring like bells (*campanas* in Spanish) when hit. Jesús and Fabiana are the parents of eleven grown children. These eight women and three men, scattered with their own families throughout the region, provided me with endless help and hospitality throughout my stay. During the time I spent in Campanario, Irineo's sister Hermelinda was living next-door with her three children: Linda del Rosario, Manuel, and Meyamatza. When I wasn't shadowing Virginia, I could often be found next door chatting with Hermelinda on the porch as she fed her infant daughter and worked around the house.

During visits to San Cristóbal in the summer of 2002 I met often with Matilde, a veteran linguistic informant, to transcribe texts and talk about life in Campanario. The following summer, when Matilde was less available, Dora Angélica, the youngest

of the Vásquez Vásquez siblings, spent countless hours working with me, both in San Cristóbal and during her frequent visits to Campanario. These two young women were the only paid consultants with whom I met in a regularly scheduled fashion to elicit data and transcribe texts. Though not formally trained in linguistics, Dora proved to have an excellent sense for language. Her skill as an informant has been invaluable to the completion of this thesis.



Figure 1.2: Dora, me, Matilde

### 1.3 Data and methods

The data in this thesis comes from a combination of casual conversation, formal elicitation sessions, and recorded texts. In the beginning stages of my fieldwork, I was confined to conversations with bilingual adults in my semi-competent Spanish. In my early stages of Chol acquisition, I found the many young children by whom I was constantly surrounded to be an excellent help. It is not terribly frequent that an adult asks a five-year-old to teach her something; kids were eager to point out new words to me and, unlike many of the adults, were never shy in calling

attention to my mistakes. By the second summer I found myself slowly beginning to understand and even participate in the conversations around me. Some of my most interesting data comes from scribbled bits of live conversation, double-checked later during elicitation sessions.

Transcriptions of four texts, three recorded with Virginia's father Abram in the summer of 2002, and one with Irineo recorded in 2003, are given in Appendices B–E. In *Ipapa Abram* and *Ye'tyel Abram*, Virginia's father recounts stories of his family and lessons learned throughout his life. *Xñek*, in Appendix D, is a non-traditional narration of a traditional Chol demon, a black man who lives in caves and comes out to eat people's tongues. In *Me'* in Appendix E, Irineo tells the story of the deer that he had recently shot while working out in the field with his friends.

Lines from these stories will provide much of the material for this thesis. It should be noted, however, that these texts, though all perhaps more “natural” than purely elicited data, do not represent completely natural conversation. Rather, they are better described as monologue narratives, told to me, a (mostly) non-Chol speaker. As Attinasi (1973, 5) notes, a typical Chol dialogue requires, like many other Native American languages, “partial or total repetition of the sentence by the hearer to signal comprehension and to encourage the speaker to continue.” In spite of these drawbacks, all constructions present in this thesis have been double-checked with speakers and should be considered reliable, if not exemplary.



Figure 1.3: The road into Campanario