



**CONTRIBUTIONS
IN NEW WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY**
Volume 11



CONTRIBUTIONS

IN NEW WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY



Contributions in New World Archaeology (ISSN 2080-8216) is a semi-annual journal dealing with various aspects of North and South American archaeology, anthropology and ethnohistory. Its main aim is to publish results of archaeological excavations and surveys conducted in various parts of the New World as well as to present papers devoted to the studies of collections of archaeological artefacts discovered in either American continent. Moreover, the journal addresses such subjects as theory, methodology and practice in New World archaeology.

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**CONTRIBUTIONS
IN NEW WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY**

Volume 11

**Weaving Histories:
Women in Mesoamerican Culture,
Society and Politics**




Special Issue

*Proceedings of the 5th Cracow Maya Conference
'Weaving Histories: Women in Mesoamerican Culture, Society and Politics'
February 25-28, 2016, Cracow*

Edited by
Monika Banach
Christophe Helmke
and Jarosław Żrałka

Kraków 2017





Cover image:

Front cover: Stela 34 from El Peru, drawing by John Montgomery.

Back cover: the glyph of *k'uhul ixik* from Naranjo Stela 24, drawing by Christophe Helmke


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Kraków 2017

ISSN 2080-8216


The print version of Contributions in New World Archaeology
is the primary, reference version of this journal.

Indexed on  **BazHum**





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WHY 'HE/SHE' IS NOT A RELEVANT DISTINCTION IN CLASSIC MAYAN: HOW GRAMMAR REVEALS PATTERNS OF THOUGHT

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Abstract

Since the grammatical structure of a language embodies and expresses the conceptual organization of the minds that create and use the language (Langacker 2008: 405), the way people speak reveals how they perceive and comprehend the world around them. If Classic Mayan makes no distinction between 3rd person pronouns (ERG: u/y- 'he/she/it/they/his/her/its/their', ABS: -ø 'he/she/it/him/her/it'), it tells us that the gender of the agent/subject of the action was not significant for the users of the language. In fact, statistical analysis of Maya hieroglyphic texts shows a heavy bias towards intransitive and intransitivized verb forms (Mora-Marín 2004: 346), which together with the ergative-absolutive case marking reveals that the language is theme-, not agent-oriented. Theme-oriented languages focus on the realm of settings, locations and stable situations that can be apprehended without invoking explicitly the agent as the source of energy (Langacker 2008: 370). As such, the default clause organization is agent-less, though, of course, the language provides means to mention the agent if need be. Consequently, if agents are generally not the focus of discourse, their gender even less so. This paper analyses how grammar of Classic Mayan reveals certain aspects of the worldview of the ancient Maya people, namely its theme orientation and voice system.

Keywords: Classic Mayan, cognitive grammar, theme-orientation, gender of agent

Resumen

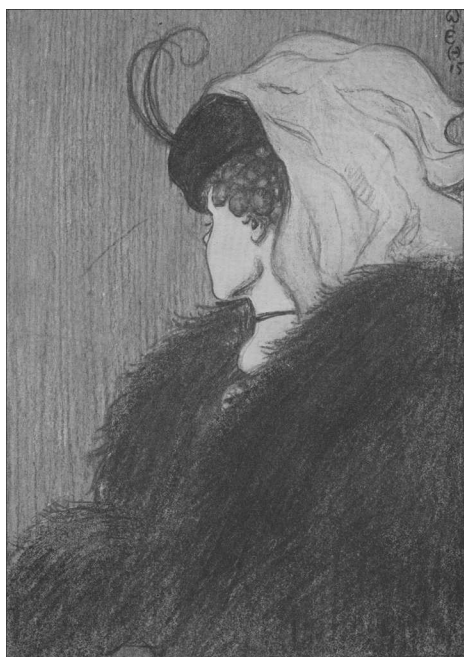
Dado que la estructura gramatical de un lenguaje encarna y expresa la organización conceptual de las mentes que crean y usan el lenguaje (Langacker 2008: 405), esto revela cómo las personas perciben y comprenden el mundo que les rodea. Si el maya jeroglífico no hace ninguna distinción entre los pronombres de 3 personas (ERG: u / y- 'él / ella / ellos / ellas / su / sus' ABS: -ø 'él / ella / él / ella'), nos dice que el género del agente / sujeto de la acción no fue significativo para los usuarios del lenguaje. De hecho, el análisis estadístico de los textos jeroglíficos mayas muestra un fuerte sesgo hacia las formas verbales intransitivas e intransitivadas (Mora-Marín 2004: 346), que junto con el marcaje ergativo-absolutivo revelan que el lenguaje es orientado a temas y no a agentes. Los lenguajes orientados al tema se centran en el ámbito de los entornos, ubicaciones y situaciones estables que pueden aprehenderse sin invocar explícitamente al agente como fuente de energía (Langacker 2008: 370), por lo que la organización de la cláusula por defecto es sin agente, por supuesto el idioma proporciona medios para mencionar el agente si es necesario. En consecuencia, si los agentes no son generalmente el foco del discurso, su género aún menos. Este artículo analiza cómo la gramática del maya jeroglífico revela ciertos aspectos de la cosmovisión de los antiguos mayas, a saber, su orientación temática y su sistema de voz.

Palabras clave: maya clásico, gramática cognitiva, theme-orientation, género de agente

INTRODUCTION

Gestalt pictures of the kind shown in Figure 1, depicting two distinct images interpenetrating each other, show that human mind is capable of perceiving the very same piece of reality in very diverse ways. This human ability is based on the figure / ground phenomenon which Langacker claims also concerns language and manifests itself even in grammar. Examples in (1) illustrate how various languages compartmentalize the world differently. Spanish possessive adjectives require specifying the singularity or plurality of the number of the possessed thing but not the gender of the possessor (1a), whereas English possessive adjectives ignore properties of the possessee, focusing on the gender and singularity/plurality of the possessor (1b). English past tense does not make a distinction between a single or habitual past action (1c-d), while Polish requires not only a different verb form to specify the frequency of the action but also different gender endings (1e-f). Finally, in Classic Mayan ergative pronouns ignore gender and in third person plurality of the agent/possessor (1g), while absolutive pronouns (1h) do not specify the gender of the object (of transitives) / subject (of intransitives). Thus, different grammatical patterns highlight different aspects of the situation depending on which language is used for its description.

- (1)
- (a) *su libro / sus libros*
 - (b) *his/her/their book / books*
 - (c) *You went to school yesterday* (single past action)
 - (d) *You went to school when you were young* (habitual)
 - (e) *Poszedlem (m) / poszlam (f) do szkoły* (single)
 - (f) *Chodzilem (m) / chodzilam (f) do szkoły* (habitual)
 - (g) *u- 'he/she/it/they, his/her/its/their'*
 - (h) *-ø 'he/she/it, him/her/it'*



DEFAULT CODING STRATEGIES

The prevalent clause structure in a language shows how the language directs people's attention at the most significant participants of an event; and each language has the default coding strategy along with a range of alternatives to cater for communicative needs of its users (Langacker 2008: 366-367). Langacker enumerates two main strategies: agent orientation, where the **agent** is understood as the source of energy that causes the event to happen, and theme orientation, where the **theme** is understood as another, non-active participant of an occurrence. The different voices – active, passive, mediopassive, antipassive – are morphological means to direct

Figure 1. William Ely Hill "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" first published in *Puck*, v. 78, no. 2018 (1915 Nov. 6), p. 11.

our attention at different elements of the situation, that is to change the trajector/landmark alignment, the **trajector** being the main focus of a clause and the **landmark** the secondary focus of a clause (Langacker 2008: 401, 70-71). A typical trajector / landmark alignment is illustrated in Figure 2 where the spatial organization of elements of the situation can be described in two equally appropriate ways depending on what we want to highlight – the position of the lamp or of the table, in other words whether we ask the question “Where is the lamp?” or “Where is the table?”.

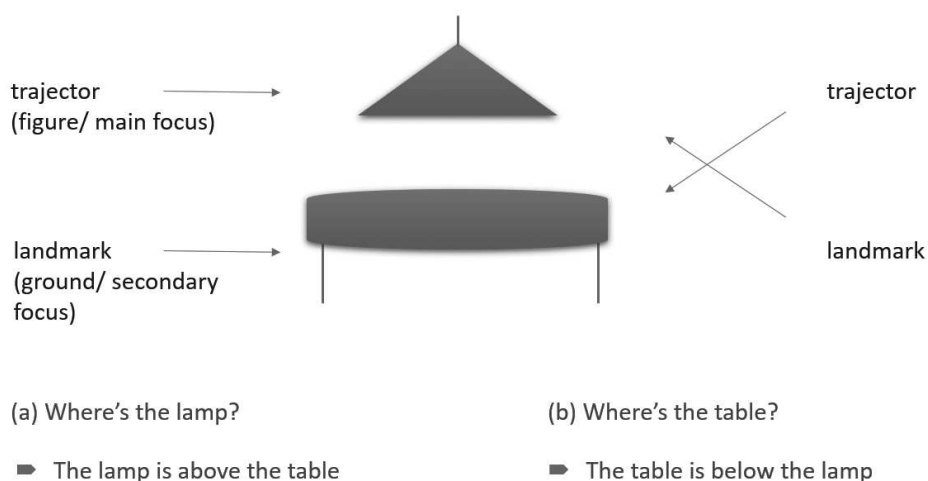


Figure 2. Trajector / landmark alignment.

AGENT-ORIENTED LANGUAGES

In agent-oriented languages, such as English or Luiseño (a Uto-Aztecan language spoken in California), the default alignment is to focus on the agent or most agent-like participant of an occurrence as the source of energy that causes the occurrence to happen (Langacker 2008: 367, 369). The agent is the prototypical subject of a clause and by default becomes the trajector with other subject roles permitted by extension (Langacker 2008: 367). Compare examples in (2) (based on Langacker 2008: 369):

- (2)
- (a) *Floyd broke the glass with a hammer.*
 - (b) *The hammer broke the glass.*
 - (c) *The glass broke.*
 - (d) *The glass was broken (by Floyd).*

Sentence (2a) shows the alignment which is canonical for English with the agent as subject and trajector, the patient as object and the instrument expressed by a prepositional phrase. In (2b) the instrument – as the most agent-like participant – becomes the trajector, and the object remains the theme (and landmark). Sentence (2c) is a one-participant clause where the non-agentive theme becomes the subject (and trajector), while the agent and instrument are not profiled (or mentioned) at all. Sentence (2d) presents the alternative alignment, which in English is the passive voice, where the object becomes the primary focus of attention, while the agent is not in profile or is oblique.

Langacker (2008: 366) argues that: “Agent orientation reflects our role as sentient, willful creatures forcefully acting on the world, expending energy to achieve and maintain control of our surroundings”, which is consistent with what has been described for the Euro-American culture, and this is how, for example, social psychologist Nisbett (2004: 47–48) describes a typical Westerner: an individualist who thinks they are in control of their life, oriented toward achieving personal goals and climbing the social ladder. Thus, the grammatical structure – the agent-orientation and active voice with agentive subject as default alignment – mirrors the worldview characteristic of this culture (see Figure 3).

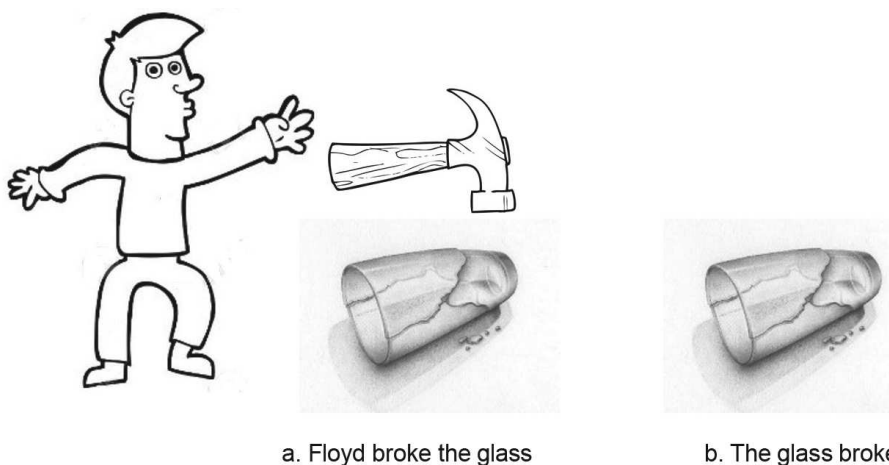


Figure 3. Trajector alignment strategies typical for agent- and theme-oriented languages.

THEME-ORIENTED LANGUAGES

On the other hand, theme-oriented languages (e.g. South Pacific Samoan, Australian Dyirbal, Austronesian Tagalog) focus primarily on non-agent participants of an occurrence, with the basic thematic roles being zero, mover, patient, and experiencer, which are exemplified in (3) (Langacker 2008: 370-371):

- | | | | | |
|-----|-----|--------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| (3) | (a) | ZERO: | <i>The pole is long.</i> | <i>She is over there.</i> |
| | (b) | MVR: | <i>The boat sank.</i> | <i>The door opened.</i> |
| | (c) | PAT: | <i>The ice melted.</i> | <i>The glass broke.</i> |
| | (d) | EXPER: | <i>I itch all over.</i> | <i>He was sad.</i> |

The zero in (3a) exhibits a property or occupies a location, the mover in (3b) undergoes a change of location, the patient in (3c) undergoes a change in a property it exhibits, the experiencer in (3d) experiences something (Langacker 2008: 370). They are the sole participant in a **thematic process** which Langacker (2008: 370) defines as “a minimal, single-participant process in which the theme’s role is passive (i.e. it is not construed as a source of energy)”. No agent or other energy source, such as heat or gravity, is explicitly mentioned, as “a thematic process can be conceptualized autonomously, without reference to an agent or agentive causation” (Langacker 2008: 371). The opposite of this

absolute construal of a thematic process would be a situation where the agent simply causes or induces without mentioning the process that is caused or induced, which – Langacker further argues – would be conceptually incoherent, as sentences such as **He caused* or **He brought about* are not felicitous.

Figure 4 summarizes Langacker's description of the different configurations. A thematic process focuses on a single-participant process where the theme undergoes a certain change of state, without mentioning the agent or other source of energy explicitly. A typical agentive process focuses on the agent (as its trajector) with the thematic process being in the background (as the landmark), there is a transfer of energy from the agent to the theme and the theme undergoes a change. An agentive and theme-less process, where the agent exerts energy but there is no theme to receive it, is anomalous in English.

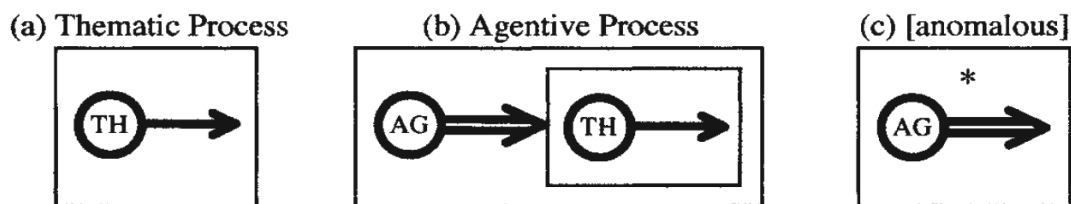


Figure 4. Thematic process vs. agentive process (Langacker 2008: 372, Fig. 11.3). The double arrow denotes energy transfer, the single arrow denotes a change of state.

SINGLE PARTICIPANT PROCESS IN MAYA TEXTS

The statistical analysis of Maya hieroglyphic texts shows that they mostly focus on one-participant processes. Mora-Marín (2004: 346) analyses the preferred clause structure of the language on the basis of Palenque Cross Group, Palace Table and Tablet of the Slaves texts, a corpus of 162 clauses comprising a more or less continuous and well-deciphered narrative. Of the 162 clauses, only 14 (8.6%) are transitive, while 130 (80.3%) are intransitive and 18 (11.1%) are equational. As for the number of arguments, only 6 (3.7%) have 2 lexical arguments, while as many as 102 (63%) have 1, and 54 (33.3%) have 0 lexical arguments. This brings Mora-Marín (2004: 360) to the conclusion that “CLM [Classic Lowland Maya] texts exhibit a PAS [preferred argument structure] favoring at most one lexical argument per clause in S role”, subject being understood as the intransitive subject, as opposed to A – transitive subject and O – transitive object (Mora-Marín 2004: 339).

To pursue this argument further, in the Temple of the Cross panel, 40 predicates could be identified (excluding parts of text which are obscure and difficult to interpret), including:

- 16 stative clauses (no verbal endings, e.g. *i k'al sak huun* ‘then it [is] white paper tying)
- 18 intransitive verbs, among them:
 - 15 derived intransitives (*siyaj-ø* ‘s/he is born’, *siyaj-ø-iiy* ‘after s/he was born’)
 - 3 root intransitives (*huli-ø* ‘s/he arrives’, *uhti-ø* ‘it happens’, *uhti-ø-iy* ‘after it happened’)
- 6 transitive verbs, among them:
 - 4 intransitivized forms:
 - 3 mediopassives (*tzutzuyu-ø* ‘it finishes’, *t'abaay-ø* ‘it gets dedicated’, *puluuy-ø* ‘it burns’)
 - 1 passive (*k'ahlaj-ø* ‘it is presented’)
 - and only 2 active, agent-focused forms (*utzakaw-ø* ‘s/he grasps it’, *utzutzuw?-ø* ‘s/he finishes it’).

Similarly, the analysis of occurrences of a selected verb *tzutz* ‘finish, complete’, which is relative common in Maya texts, shows a significant focus on the thematic process. Among 19 analysed occurrences of the verb, 11 are passives (example 4a), 7 are mediopassives with one case mentioning the agent periphrastically (example 4b), while only 1 (example 4c, Palenque Temple of Cross J1-J2) may potentially be a transitive sentence in active voice: the glyphs are significantly eroded but the general shape and contextual analysis point to active voice. If it is active voice indeed, then it reads ‘Toktan finishes 9 bak’tun’, where bak’tun is the name of a period of nearly 400 years and 9 bak’tun a period ending that was celebrated, whereas *Toktan* is a placename connected with early Palenque (Stuart and Houston 1994: 31), which renders a PLACE FOR INSTITUTION/PERSON conceptual metonymy (compare *White House Celebrates Big Block Cheese Day*).

- (4) a. **TZUTZ-ja 15-WINIKHAB**
tzuh tzaj ho’lajuun winikhaab
 tzu<h>tz-<-aj>-ø 15 20.year
 finish-PAS-3SA 15 K’atun
 15 K’atun is finished
- b. **TZUTZ-yi u-11-WINIKHAB (u-KAB-ya +person)**
tzutzuy u buluch winikhaab (ukabiyy +person)
 tzutz-uuy-ø u-11 winikhaab (ukabiyy +person)
 finish-MPAS-3SA 3E₁-11 20.year (RELAT +agent)
 11th K’atun finishes (under the auspices of + agent)
- c. **u-tzu?-wa? 9-pi-hi to-ko-TAN-na**
utzu[tz]uw balun pih toktan
 u-tzutz-uw-ø 9 pih toktan
 3E-finish-ACT-3SA 9 Pih Toktan
 Toktan finishes 9 Bak’tun

Thus, this confirms that Maya hieroglyphic texts show a marked tendency to focus on single-participant processes and not on agent-patient interaction typical of transitive clauses.

PROMINENCE

Various languages adopt different coding strategies illustrated in Figure 5, with one of them usually being prevalent (Langacker 2008: 373-375). In a transitive clause the agent and theme are distinct (*e.g. He broke it*), in an agentive intransitive both roles are filled by the same participant (*e.g. He walked*), in a non-agentive intransitive clause the theme is the only participant (*e.g. It broke*). Figure 5 shows how these roles are realized grammatically depending on the default coding strategy.

In agent-oriented languages the agent is typically the trajector and the clause focuses on the agent or most-agent like participant. In theme-oriented languages the theme is the trajector, so the focus is on the object of a transitive clause or the only participant of an intransitive clause, and the agent – if s/he is mentioned at all – is secondary. In languages, where the two strategies are more in balance, both the agent and theme of a two-participant clause may grammatically behave like the only participant of an intransitive clause (Langacker 2008: 375).

Table 1 below summarizes basic differences in terms of grammatical behaviour between the two strategies, and the discussion of the characteristics of Classic Maya follows.

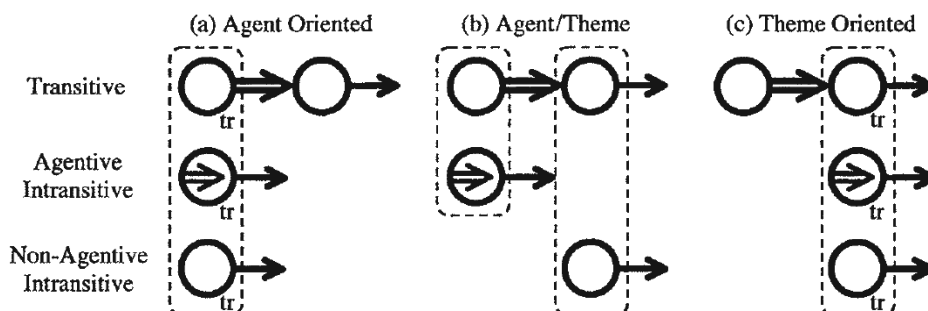


Figure 5. Alternate coding strategies (Langacker 2008: 374, Fig. 11.4). The double arrow denotes energy transfer, the single arrow denotes a change of state.

Table 1. Comparison of main grammatical characteristics of agent- and theme-oriented languages

Agent-oriented languages	Theme-oriented languages
Transitive agent and intransitive subject marked alike with object standing out	Object and intransitive subject marked alike with agent standing out
Two basic cases traditionally referred to as nominative and accusative	Two basic cases traditionally referred to as ergative and absolutive
Nominative typically zero, accusative marked explicitly	Absolutive typically zero, ergative marked overtly

ERGATIVE-ABSOLUTIVE CASE MARKING

Classic Maya has two sets of personal pronouns with different grammatical functions (see Table 2) and examples in (5) illustrate how Maya pronouns function in clauses. The ergative ones are prefixed and used with transitive verbs to refer to the agent (5a) and with nouns to refer to the possessor of the noun (5b), while the absolutive ones are suffixed and used with transitive verbs to refer to the patient/object (5c), with intransitives to refer to the subject (5d) and with nouns to refer to the subject of an equational clause (5e).

Table 2. The pronominal system of Classic Maya

Ergative pronouns (Agents, possessives)		Absolutive (Objects, Subjects, statives)	
Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
<i>ni(w)</i> - 'I, my'	<i>ka(w)</i> - 'we, our'	<i>-e'n</i> 'me, I'	<i>-o'n</i> 'us, we'
<i>a(w)</i> - 'you, your'	<i>i(w)</i> - 'you, your'	<i>-et</i> 'you, you'	<i>-ox</i> 'you, you'
		<i>-ø</i> 'her/ him/ it, she/ he/it'	<i>-o'b</i> 'them, they'
<i>u-/yV-</i> 'she/he/it/they, her/his/its/their'			

- | | | | |
|-----|----|--|---|
| (5) | a. | ni -pakaw- \emptyset 'I plant it/him/her'
1SE-TV-3SA | u -pakaw- \emptyset 's/he/it/they plant/s it/him/her'
3E-TV-3SA |
| | b. | ni -lak 'my plate'
1SE-N | u -lak 'her/his/its/their plate'
3E-N |
| | c. | u-jatz'aw- e'n 's/he/they wound(s) me'
3E-TV-1SA | u-jatz'aw- \emptyset 's/he/they wounds her/him/it'
3E-TV-3SA |
| | d. | hul- e'n 'I arrive'
IV-1SA | hul-i- \emptyset 'she/he/it arrives'
IV-THEM-3SA |
| | e. | ajaw- e'n 'I [am] a ruler'
N-1SA | ajaw- \emptyset 'she/he/it [is] a ruler'
N-3SA |

Interesting phenomena appear in 3rd person and particularly in 3rd person singular. Firstly, the 3rd person singular absolutive pronoun is a zero morpheme and, as Langacker (2008: 376) points out, zero marking is "iconic, since zero indicates a starting point: the origin of the natural path based on conceptual autonomy". This is the base form on which other forms are build up to refer to cases other than the default one. Thus, the default in Classic Mayan seems to be to talk about themes, while agents are of secondary importance. Secondly, 3rd person ergative pronoun has the same form not only for all genders but also for singular and plural, so not only the gender but also the grammatical number of agent is disregarded. This is a further indicator of the insignificance of the agent role in Classic Mayan.

DEFAULT ALIGNMENT (VOICE SYSTEM)

Different voices in a language provide means to direct interlocutors' attention to different aspects of the situation (Langacker 2008: 401). In agent-oriented languages, active voice, focusing on the source of energy which causes the occurrence to happen, is the default alignment, and passive, de-focusing the agent and focusing on the theme, is the alternative. In theme-oriented languages, the default alignment has no standard name (because it encompasses many different cases) and antipassive is the alternative alignment which de-focuses the theme and focuses on the agent (Langacker 2008: 383).

The Maya voice system is traditionally presented as a 4-voice system (see Figure 6) with a separate discussion of intransitive verbs: root and derived intransitives, positionals, inchoatives, affectives, statives, causatives (see e.g. Kettunen and Helmke 2014: 69-71; Johnson 2014: 175-183; Lacadena 2004; Wichmann 2004) and the list has been growing. The sheer number of intransitive forms and statistics regarding their occurrences in discourse cited above suggest that the Maya verbal system has a considerably different focus than the languages we are using now to describe it. Thus, attempts to

Voice:	Transliteration:	Transcription:	Translation:
active	u -TZUTZ-wa	utzutzuw	he/she finished it
passive	TZUTZ-tza-ja	tzu[h]tzej	it was finished
mediopassive	TZUTZ-yi	tzutz[u]y	it got finished
antipassive	TZUTZ-wi	tzutz[u]w	he/she finished
participial	TZUTZ-li	tzutz[u]l	finished

Figure 6. Traditional Classic Mayan voice system for CVC verbs (Kettunen and Helmke 2014: 66).

force a language so fundamentally different into grammatical paradigms developed to describe ancient Indo-European languages (see Figure 6) are bound to be unsuccessful. We immediately face problems, for example, the diagnostic features for active voice in Maya include the ergative pronoun (in glyphic texts of the Classic Period usually 3rd person *u/y-*) and *wa* syllabogram which spells the *Vw* ending like in example (a) in Figure 7. However, there are also examples of active voice spelled with the *wi* syllabogram which should mark the antipassive (Figure 7, example b). On the other hand, antipassive which should be spelled with *wi* (example d) occasionally is spelled with *wa* (example c). This, of course, can be attributed to a scribal error, which is always possible, but it can also show that the boundaries of the grammatical categories of active and antipassive are rather fuzzy in Classic Mayan and possibly scribes enjoyed quite significant freedom as to the choice of *wa* or *wi* syllabogram in the agent-oriented voices, especially that both syllabograms spell out a suffix whose vowel is synharmonic with the root vowel, so regardless of the syllable chosen to spell out the ending *k'al+wa/wi* renders the same pronunciation *k'alaw* 's/he binds', *tzutz+wa/wi* renders *tzutzuw* 's/he finishes', and it is the presence or absence of an ergative pronoun and object which indicate whether it is active or antipassive. Possibly, with more research, we will also find certain regional variation, just like in case of positionals *laj* and *waan* which mark vernacular influences on the grapholect (Hruby and Child 2004).

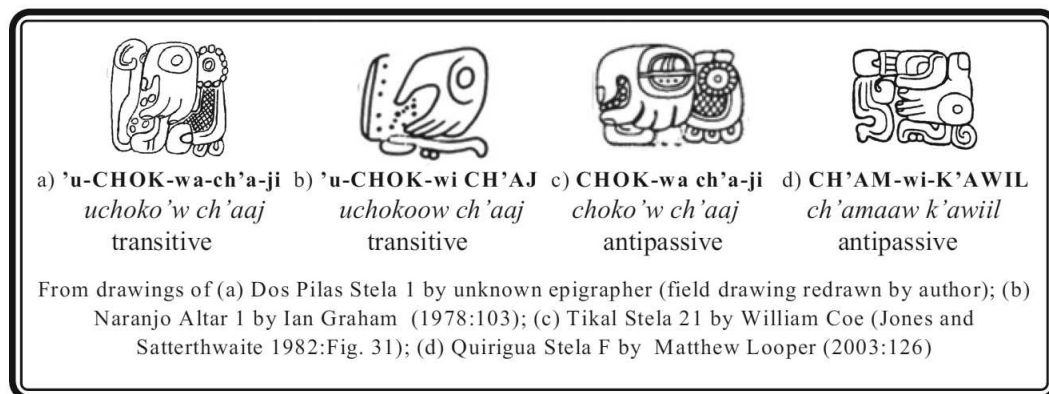


Figure 7. Fuzzy category boundaries between active and antipassive (Wald 2007: Fig. 81).

Intransitive and intransitivized forms as well as statives (that is theme-focused forms) clearly are the default alignment in Classic Mayan with the theme in focus and the agent absent or expressed periphrastically by means of one of relational expressions, such as *ukabjiiy* 'under the auspices of' or *yehte* 'it is the work of'. The so called active and antipassive forms are statistically significantly less frequent and they are the alternative that the language provides if its users wish to mention the agent.

The theme-focused forms include statives (example 6a) and root intransitives (6b) which are morphologically unmarked, so they constitute the base form, as well as several derived intransitive and intransitivized forms (examples 6c-i) in writing marked by syllabograms **ja**, **la-ja**, **na-ja**, **yi**, **wa-ni** and **ni**. They never take ergative pronouns, only absolutive ones, which in 3rd person singular (prevailing in the available corpus) is a zero morpheme and does not show in the surface structure. Among agent-focused forms, the antipassive (6j) behaves somewhat like intransitives because when the object is deleted (oblique or incorporated), the agent receives an absolutive pronoun. The active and causative (6k-l) employ an ergative pronoun to mark the agent and absolutive to mark the object.

- (6) a. stat. *awinake'n*
a-winak-e'n
2SE-man-1SA
I [am] your man
- b. root int. *huli tan ? aj bolon haabtal*
hul-i-ø tan ? Aj Bolon Haabtal
arrive-THEM-3SA PREP-PLACE S
- c. der. int. *siyaj K'uk' Bahlam*
siy-aj-ø K'uk' Bahlam
gift-DER-3SA S
K'uk' Bahlam is born (lit. s/he is a gift)
- d. posit. *chumlaj ta ajawlel K'inich K'uk' Bahlam*
chum-laj-ø ta ajaw-lel K'inich K'uk' Bahlam
seat-POS-3SA PREP ruler-ABSTR S
- e. inch. *ch'okoj*
ch'ok-øj-ø
heir-INCH-3SA
s/he becomes the/an heir
- f. affect. *balaj*
bal-aj-ø
hammer-AFF-3SA
hammering
- g. change *k'a'aay u sak ? ik'il Ix Pakal*
k'a'-aay-ø u sak ? ik'-il Ix Pakal
diminish-CHAN-3SA 3E-white-?-breath-POSS S
the white ? breath of Lady Pakal diminishes
- h. pass. *tzuhztaj u jo' haab ti ajawlel*
tzu<h->tz-<-aj> u-5-haab ti-ajaw-lel
finish-PAS 3E-5-year PREP-ruler-ABS
his/her 5th year in rulership is finished
- i. mediop. *tzutzuy u chanlajuun winikhaab*
tzutz-uy-ø u-14 20.year
finish-MED-3SA 3E-14 K'atun
14th K'atun finishes
- j. antip. *k'alaw*
k'al-aw-ø
bind-APAS-3SA
s/he binds
- k. act. *utzutzuw balun pih Toktan*
u-tzutz-uw-ø 9 Pih Toktan
3E-finish-ACT-3SA 9 Pih S
Toktan finishes 9 K'atun
- l. causat. *upatbu*
u-pat-bu-ø
3E-form-CAUS-3SA
s/he makes it form

CONCLUSIONS

Classic Mayan is a theme-oriented language. The diagnostic features for a theme-oriented language include:

1. ergative-absolutive case marking,
2. prevalence of one-argument clauses,
3. prevalence of theme-focused forms (intransitive, passive, mediopassive, stative),
4. agent absent or expressed periphrastically,

and Classic Mayan meets all the requirements: it is an ergative-absolutive language, most clauses are one-argument and theme-focused, while agent is typically absent or expressed periphrastically with 2-argument transitive clauses comprising a fraction of the investigated corpus.

Figure 8 presents a preliminary diagram of the suggested verbal ecosystem of Classic Mayan with the division into the default, theme-focused and alternative, agent-focused forms. Stative clauses and clauses with root intransitives are morphologically unmarked, so they are the base form. Then there is a group of verbal forms derived from other parts of speech: nouns, adjectives and other verbs, including transitives, in writing indicated by a family of spellings comprising syllabograms **ja**, **la-ja**, **na-ja**, **yi**, **wa-ni** and **ni**. The above mentioned forms never take ergative pronouns, only absolutive ones. On the fringes of this ecosystem there are agent-focused forms, two of which (active and causative) employ both the ergative pronouns (for the agent) and absolutive ones (for the object), while the antipassive omits ergative ones. In writing, active and antipassive are marked by syllabograms **wa** and **wi**, with certain inconsistencies in spelling discussed above, while causative is marked with **bu**. Statistically, the theme-focused forms are prevalent in Classic Maya text, while agent-focused forms are significantly rare.

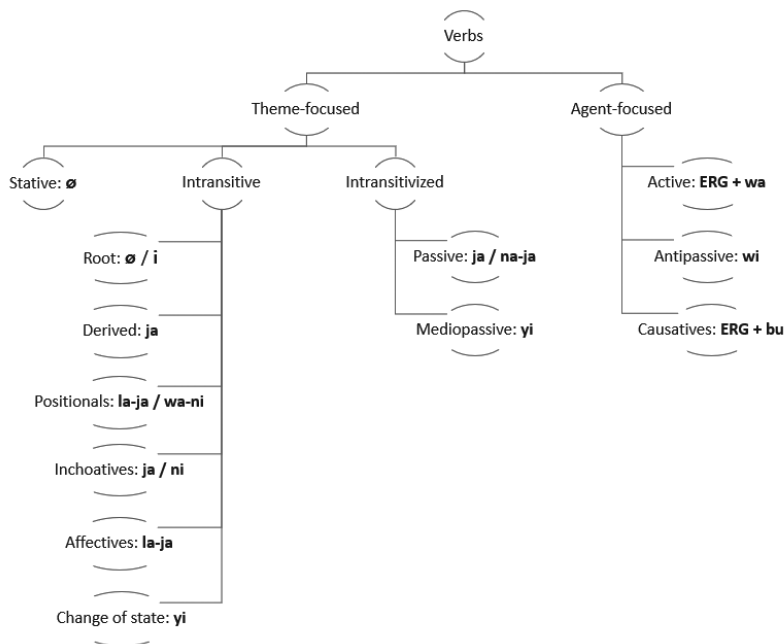


Figure 8. Suggested verbal ecosystem of Classic Maya.

Langacker (2008: 379) argues that “this structural prominence of themes can be taken as symptomatic of their conceptual prominence”. Thus, the very basic structure of verbal grammar of Classic Maya reflects the worldview in which people are only part of nature, as significant or insignificant as any other of its parts, and not its masters who constantly change the world and force it to subjugate to their will. On the other hand, if agents are not important, their gender even less so. This may be the reason why the language did not develop the ‘he/she’ distinction to differentiate between different nuances of agentivity. This worldview so different from our own is just another challenge we encounter when trying to understand and translate Maya hieroglyphic texts.

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