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Language Attrition in the Verbal Complex of Ch'orti' (Mayan)
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[Overhead: Mayan Family Tree] *(Point out the Tzeltalan-Cholan branch.)*

I want to start with the Mayan family tree so that you can see that it is a large group of

languages, over 30, and that Ch'orti' is part of the Tzeltalan-Cholan branch, which is the focus of

this paper. In order to show you that certain linguistic features in Ch'orti' used to exist but no

longer do, I need to compare Ch'orti' with its most closely-related languages.

[Overhead: Tzeltalan-Cholan Branch] *(Point out Eastern Cholan, Western Cholan,*

and Tzotzil. Talk about relationship between Ch'orti' and Ch'olti.)

[Overhead: Map] *(Point out where the languages are on the map; Epigraphers and*

linguists are now claiming that Cholan languages were the basis of the Classic Mayan

hieroglyphic writing.)

Ch'orti' is a Mayan language spoken in eastern Guatemala, on the edge of the Honduran

border, near the ancient site of Copan. There are officially about 22,000 speakers, but the actual

number is more likely quite a bit higher, maybe even 45,000. Many speakers deny their ability

to speak Ch'orti', because they don't want to be identified as 'indian', but their neighbors will

tell you that they communicate in Ch'orti' all the time. Spanish speakers and Ch'orti' speakers

have long lived in a symbiotic relationship, both dependent on each other for certain essential

goods. Although the Spanish-native speakers in the area do not speak Ch'orti', most Ch'orti'-

native speakers are bilingual. Bilingualism in Ch'orti' and Spanish started with colonization in

the 1600's, as reported in handwritten documents of the time. By at least the 1930's, according to Charles Wisdom, the Ch'orti' ethnographer/linguist, almost every Ch'orti' speaker became bilingual in his lifetime. This is still true today.

This intense language contact has had a profound effect on the Ch'orti' language over the years, resulting in a high level of borrowing, code switching, and — the topic of this paper — considerable reduction in the structure. Reduction can be seen in all areas of the grammar, including features that are characteristically Mayan, such as verb-initial word order, antipassives, positionals, relational nouns, noun classifiers, glottalized consonants, and a common basic vocabulary. These typically Mayan features have become marginalized or changed in Ch'orti', such that they occur in fewer types of grammatical structures and in limited sociolinguistic situations. In this paper I will focus only on the reduction in the verbal complex, which I believe to be language attrition due primarily to long-term bilingualism.

The Ch'orti' verbal complex has undergone significant morphological and syntactic change that started prior to the Spanish Conquest and continued under the influence of Spanish colonization. We know this because of the considerable linguistic comparisons among the languages of the family and the reconstruction of all the various branches. We also have linguistic information from colonial and other historical documents, as well as from the hieroglyphs. In fact, the Mayan language family is one of the most highly studied of the languages of the Americas.

Although I believe that significant changes in the verbal complex of Ch'orti' occurred prior to, during, and after the Maya Classic Period of 500-900 AD, I will focus here on the changes that likely took place under contact with Spanish. As I mentioned, for the present study I have relied mostly on comparative data within the Tzeltalan-Cholan branch, especially the

Cholan languages. The Tzotzil examples come from Judith Aissen, Chol examples from Jessica Coon and Vazquez Álvarez, Chontal examples from Susan Knowles-Berry, and the now-extinct Ch'olti' from the 17th century document of Morán (Robertson, Law, and Haertel 2010; and Fought 1984). The Ch'orti' data come from the Wisdom texts of the 1930's, the Fought texts of the 1960's, and my own data from the 1970's and afterwards. One complication to keep in mind are the differing claims regarding the relationship of Ch'olti' to Ch'orti': either as the direct ancestor of Ch'orti' (Houston 2000, Robertson 2009) or as a close relative, meaning a dialect of or sister language to Ch'orti' (Kaufman 1984, Mora-Marín 2009).

[Handout: Language attrition] *(On your handout there is a list of the kinds of linguistics changes that are found in studies on language attrition; you can also see the kinds of features that are characteristic of creoles.)*

Language attrition is the term applied to the reduction in language that occurs in individual speakers or in communities of speakers due to bilingualism or intense language contact (Thomason 2003). This reduction is indicative of language death, whether it happens over a short period of time in the language of an individual or over several generations of speakers, as in the case of Ch'orti'. Studies of language attrition reveal that certain changes are typical in bilingual situations: loss of inflection, reliance on modal verbs for tense/aspect/mode distinctions, loss of marked structures, loss of redundancy, loss of subordination, change from synthetic to analytic structure, and juxtaposition of verbs and/or serial verbs (Thomason 2003, Dorian 1989). Although most studies of language attrition concentrate on the language spoken imperfectly by individual language learners, I believe that similar changes can be exhibited by speakers' native language over many generations of language contact. If the process is

pervasive, as I think it is for Ch'orti', the language could become significantly reduced, a kind of reverse creolization. Note the features that are often cited as typical of creoles: lack of inflection, lack of markedness, juxtaposition of verbs and/or serial verbs, and analytic structures.

[**Overhead and Handout: Historical Trends in Ch'orti'**] *(On your handout is a list of the kinds of changes evident in the verbal complex of Ch'orti'.)*

The main historical trends involving language reduction in Ch'orti' have been: 1) loss of tense/aspect markers on the verbs, with increased usage of auxiliaries and particles, 2) loss of contrastive subordinate marking on verbs, with an increase in subordinators, 3) and increased reliance on juxtaposition of verbs in subordination. In general, the changes have resulted in a leveling of structure, such that there is less contrast between subordinate and coordinate structures. In fact, many constructions can be interpreted ambiguously as involving subordination, coordination, or serial verbs.

[**Overhead: Ergativity and Split ergativity**] *(Point out the patterns on the overhead: Ch'orti' for ergative, Chontal for accusative, Ch'orti' for tripartite.)*

Mayan languages are ergative. All the languages discussed here follow an ergative pattern of person marking in the completive (perfective) aspect. This means that Pa of transitive verbs and Su of intransitive verbs are marked alike for person with the ergative, in contrast with Ag of transitive verbs which is marked by the absolutive.

[**Handout: Ergativity**] *(The ergative pattern, illustrated in the overhead and on your handout in Ch'orti' (ex.1-3), in Cholti (ex.5,6), in Chol (ex.8,9,10), and in Chontal (ex.12,13,15).*

[Overhead: Ergativity and Split Ergativity] *(Point out how split ergativity works using the overhead.)*

Cholan languages have been analyzed as having split ergativity, where there is a switch to an accusative pattern of person marking in incompletive (imperfective) and progressive constructions. This means that Ag of transitive verbs and Su of intransitive verbs are marked alike with the nominative, in contrast to Pa of transitive verbs, which are marked by the accusative, as illustrated in the overhead by Chontal and for the Cholti and Chol on the handout. Jessica Coon (2013) has claimed that this latter pattern is not really *split ergativity*, but rather a result of the normal ergative pattern of marking embedded verbal nouns with possessive person markers, which are ergative. I am inclined to agree with her analysis, which works for Chol as well as Ch'olti'; however, in Chontal the accusative pattern occurs in what are main verbs. *(Point out Cholan accusative pattern again on the overhead.)*

[Overhead: Ergativity and Split Ergativity] *(Point out tripartite split ergativity in Ch'orti'.)*

Ch'orti' has a different kind of split ergativity, with a tripartite pattern instead of an accusative one, which likely developed after the 1600's since Ch'olti' did not have it. Robertson has argued convincingly that this innovative tripartite pattern arose out of the structure of Ch'olti' (one of his main reasons for claiming Ch'orti' to be the daughter language of Ch'olti') (Robertson 1998). Uniquely, in Ch'orti', there are three sets of person markers on the verbs, instead of two sets as in other Mayan languages. The tripartite pattern arises from the usage of all three sets of person markers in the incompletive aspect, such that Ag, Pa, and Su are each distinctly marked (Quizar 1994). While the introduction of a third set of person markers would

appear to be a significant increase in structural complexity in Ch'orti', rather than a reduction, this tripartite pattern is not associated with subordination, as it apparently is with the other languages. The subordinate structures where the accusative pattern would occur have been lost in Ch'orti', as we will see below.

[Overhead: Mayan Verb Structures] *(These are the typical structures for main clause verbs in all the Mayan languages.)*

Verb structures in Mayan languages are generally synthetic, with inflectional marking for person, tense, aspect, and/or mode. Note that both prefixes and suffixes are used to indicate tense/aspect/mode. Within the Mayan family there exist two different structures for main clause transitive verbs and two for intransitive, depending on whether the absolutive person marker comes before the verb stem or after.

[Handout: Main Verb Clause Structures] *(On your handout, I have given you main clause verbs patterns for each of the languages under discussion here.)*

Tzotzil uses all four patterns; the Western Ch'olan languages use only three patterns (excluding the first one). The Eastern Cholan languages, Ch'orti' and Ch'olti', follow the same three patterns, but with reduced tense/aspect marking.

[Handout: Main Verb Clause Structures] *(Let's look first at Ch'olti', ex. 20-23, and then at Ch'orti', ex.16-19)*

The now-extinct Ch'olti' language had lost most tense/aspect inflection by the 17th century, having only the following: prefix **x-** 'future', suffix **-n** 'future', and suffix **-ik** , which

Robertson and Law call 'future' but which I think is more likely a 'subjunctive' or 'irrealis' marker. Ch'orti' has been stripped of all inflectional affixes specifically marking tense or aspect. As part of their argument that Ch'orti' is a direct descendant of Ch'olti', Robertson and Law have claimed that **x-** and **-ik** are used in present-day Ch'orti' to indicate negative future, as **mix….-ik**. Closer analysis, however, shows that the form **mix** should be analyzed as **ma-ix** lit., 'not-already', and is translated by both Wisdom and Fought as 'no longer' or 'not yet' (which might be interpreted also as 'not at this moment'), which is clearly not a 'negative future' and in any case is not inflection, but adverbial in nature. While the suffix **–ik** in Ch'orti' does occur, only in the negative, it is clearly a subjunctive or irrealis marker, not a future marker, since neither Wisdom nor Fought ever translate this morpheme as future. Thus, I am claiming that Ch'orti' no longer has any tense/aspect affixes, in contrast to its closest relatives.

[**Handout: Main Verb Clause Structures**] *(I don't have time to go through all the examples of main clause verbs from the other languages, but on page 3 I have provided verbs from all the Cholan languages, as well as Tzotzil. All the languages except Ch'orti' have morphemes on both transitive and intransitive verbs that are designed to indicate tense/aspect -- these morphemes are indicated in bold.)*

In Ch'orti' there are no inflectional affixes specifically meaning tense or aspect on its verbs. However, while transitive verbs in Ch'orti' are unmarked and ambiguous as to aspect, completive and incompletive aspects are indicated clearly on intransitive verbs by the choice of person markers. A suffixed absolutive person marker indicates completive, while a prefixed Su marker indicates incompletive. Thus, these person markers in Ch'orti' are *portmanteau* morphemes, each indicating aspect as well as person on intransitive verbs (this is obviously a

case of increased linguistic complexity in the morphological system of Ch'orti' developed to compensate for the loss of tense/aspect inflection).

[Handout: Subordination in Ch'orti'] *(Now we will look at subordination in the various languages; we'll start with Ch'orti' on page 4.)*

Language reduction in Ch'orti' is most apparent in the area of embedded clauses. The only way of **overtly** indicating subordinate clauses (complements and relatives) in modern Ch'orti' is by subordinators; there are no special verb forms, such as infinitives, nominalized verbs, or optative/subjunctive verbs, or contrastive inflectional marking, each of which occurs in at least one language closely related to Ch'orti'. All embedded verbs in Ch'orti' are finite and fully marked for person.

(Ex. 30-35 on page 4 illustrates the usage of subordinators in Wisdom; ex.36-37 show the usage in Fought.)

The most common subordinating conjunction that occurred in the texts of Wisdom from the 1930's is **twa'**, which introduces purposive, desiderative, and epistemic clauses. Other subordinators in Wisdom include **tya'** 'where, when', **kocha** 'because; like, as', and **tin** 'who', all of which are native to Ch'orti'. *(Again, see examples 30-35 on the handout.)* The texts of Fought, collected 30 years later in the 1960's, still had subordinators to indicate embedded clauses, but Spanish borrowings had been introduced into the mix. *(See examples 36-37.)* The subordinator **tya'**, translated as 'when, where' in Wisdom, had become **konda** for 'when' and remained **tya'** for 'where' in Fought. The Spanish subordinator **ke'** for *que* 'that, so that, in order that', which had occurred only three times in all the texts of Wisdom, appears commonly in Fought, both alone and as part of other borrowings. The earlier subordinator **kocha** 'because,

since; as, like' was replaced by Spanish **porke'** 'because, since' but still was used to express 'like'.

In spite of the numerous subordinators that exist in the language, Ch'orti' relies heavily on verb-verb structures. *(See examples 38-42 from the texts of Wisdom from the 1930's; see examples 43-47 from the texts of Fought 30 years later.)* Many of these verb-verb structures can be interpreted as subordination, but they are often ambiguously translated as involving coordination or serial verbs. *(For instance, example 38 involves subordination under most analyses, while example 42 has a much more ambiguous structure. #40 could be translated as: 'he goes out to frighten us' [subordination], 'he goes out frightens us' [verb-verb], 'he goes out and he frightens us' [coordination].)* Verb-verb constructions are not an innovative structure, unique to Ch'orti'. The other Ch'olan languages, as well as Tzotzil, also have verb-verb constructions which can carry purposive, desiderative, causative, and other meanings.

Another pattern of subordination, common to the other languages, is nominalized verbs. In Ch'orti', they would be best called "verbal nouns," in that they are more noun-like than verb-like. These verbal nouns are rare and occur in religious texts; both Fought and Wisdom translate them as nouns rather than subordinate verbs. *(See examples 48 and 49 on the handout, both from Fought.)* In the texts where these constructions are found, the Ch'orti' storyteller Isidro González is quoting a religious leader in a spiritual event.

You will note that I have included a progressive construction in this section on Subordination in Ch'orti'. *(See examples 50 and 51 on your handout.)* This is because, in contrast to the other Cholan languages, Ch'orti' *does not have* a progressive construction that involves subordination. Progressive constructions in Ch'orti' are expressed by using the auxiliary **war**, plus a fully marked main clause verb. **War** 'progressive' undoubtedly comes

from the positional **wa'r** 'standing'. In other Ch'olan languages, however, progressive constructions involve subordinate verbs, while Ch'orti' has lost this type of subordinate structure altogether.

[Overhead: Marking of Subordination] (*This is a chart showing the relevant types of markers indicating subordination for each of the languages. Point out the Ch'orti' column.*)

Ch'orti' has only two methods for indicating subordinate clauses: subordinators and verb-verb constructions, neither of which utilize any special inflection on the subordinate verbs (i.e., all verbs in Ch'orti' are fully marked and finite). In contrast to the other languages in this study, Chorti' has become reduced in its marking of embedded verbs.

[Handout: Subordination in Ch'olti'] (*Now we will look at the examples illustrating subordination in Ch'olti'.*)

First of all, however, Ch'olti' has the same two methods I have illustrated for Ch'orti': subordinating conjunctions and verb-verb structures. Ch'olti' has the subordinator **ti** (which also serves as the preposition meaning 'in, on, at') to introduce complement structures, (*see ex.52 on the handout*), and it also has verb-verb structures, (*see ex.53-54*). In addition to these methods which it shares with Ch'orti', Ch'olti' commonly uses nominalization to indicate subordination. (*See examples 55-57.*) These come in the form of nominalized verbs, a very common construction in the 17th century religious texts of Ch'olti', as written in the Morán documents. (Recall that Ch'orti' uses verbal nouns, which are more noun-like by comparison; such verbal nouns also appear mostly in the religious language of Ch'orti', which is rapidly disappearing in today's world). Notice that progressive constructions in Ch'olti' are expressed with subordinate

nominalized verbs and also can take the subordinator **ti**; *(see example 58).* To go back to the issue of raised by Jessica Coon's research, that imperfective and progressive aspects are indicated by nominalized verbs rather than by accusative patterns of inflection, the same argument could easily be applied to Ch'olti'. Interestingly, Robertson has claimed that split ergativity occurs in Ch'olti' only in progressive constructions, which means that he views other nominalized verbs differently (although it is not clear why).

[Handout: Subordination in Chontal, Chol, and Tzotzil] *(We will now look at subordination techniques in Chontal, Chol, and Tzotzil.)*

Other languages of the Tzeltal-Cholan branch, more distant from Ch'orti', have even more methods for indicating subordination. Like Ch'orti', they can have finite verbs in subordinate structures, both with subordinating conjunctions and without (the latter being verb-verb constructions). *(See examples 59-61 for Chontal, 67-68 for Chol, and 75-77 for Tzotzil.)* Unlike Ch'orti' but like Ch'olti', they all use nominalized verbs for embedded clauses. *(See examples 62-63 for Chontal, 69-71 for Chol, and 78-80 for Tzotzil.)* Note that these nominalized verbs in Chol, Ch'olti', and Tzotzil commonly take an **-el** nominalizing suffix; I believe the imperfective suffix **-e7** of Chontal to be historically related. Progressive constructions in Chontal and Chol also use a nominalized verb as complement; *(see examples 64-65 for Chontal and 72-73 for Chol.)* Again, note that Chontal doesn't have an **–el** nominalizing suffix. Tzotzil does not have any special progressive construction, *(see example 81)*; imperfective verbs are used to carry progressive meanings.

Additionally, these three languages have other structures that indicate subordinate complements. Chontal has a subjunctive **–ik** suffix in many subordinate verbs, *(see example 66)*;

the language also uses imperfective verbs in many subordinate clauses, even when the main clause verb (plus the overall meaning) is perfective. Chol uses aspectless verbs, which are nevertheless marked normally with person, to indicate subordination, *(see example 74.)* Tzotzil uses a combination of the above strategies: aspectless verbs that are normally marked for person can take the subjunctive suffix **–ik** to indicate subordination, *(see example 82.)*

[Overhead: Marking of Subordination] *(Point out the chart on the overhead.)*

In sum, Ch'orti' has only two methods for indicating subordination, and neither of these has overt subordinate marking on the verb. By comparison, all the other Tzeltalan-Cholan languages including its closest relative Ch'olti' have these same two structures, plus at least two other subordinate structure types that are overtly marked on the embedded verb.

Conclusion

[Handout: Historical Trends in Ch'orti'] *(Return to page 1 of your handout, right-hand column, to review the historical changes in the verbal complex of Ch'orti'.)*

The main historical trends in Ch'orti' have been: 1) loss of tense/aspect markers on the verbs and 2) loss of subordinate marking on embedded verbs. This has led to 3) increased reliance on juxtaposition of verbs in subordination, 4) increased usage of auxiliaries and particles to mark tense/aspect *(I apologize for not including examples of these for you)* , 5) increase in subordinators, including borrowings, Overall, the changes have resulted in a leveling of structure, such that there are fewer possibilities for embedded clauses and many constructions can be interpreted ambiguously as involving subordination, coordination, or serial verbs.

Ch'orti' has thus been stripped of many inflectional methods previously used to specify grammatical meaning. It has become a language with little subordination, little inflection on the verb, and having an analytic structure. In many ways the language looks like a creole, but instead of developing from a pidgin, it has been formed by reducing its grammatical contrasts.

[Handout: Language Attrition] *(Look again at the results of studies on language attrition; see the left-hand column of page 1 at the top.)*

Research on **language attrition**, where the language of bilingual speakers or communities of speakers is observed, shows similar changes to those in Ch'orti'. The following types of linguistic change due to language contact or bilingualism are recorded in various studies:

a) Loss of inflection
b) Reliance on modal verbs for tense/aspect/mode
c) Loss of marked structures
d) Loss of redundancy
e) Loss of subordination
f) Loss of synthetic structure (gain of analytic structure)
g) Stylistic shrinkage.

[Handout: Features Typical of Creoles] *(Look at the features typical of creoles; bottom of page 1, left-hand column.)*

Similar features are typical of **creoles**, according to numerous studies. The verbal complex of Ch'orti' is working its way toward a similar anaytic structure.

a) Lack of inflection
b) Lack of markedness
c) Juxtaposition of verbs; serial verbs
d) Analytic structures

Some of these characteristics can be directly attributed to the influence of Spanish structure on Ch'orti', particularly the borrowing of subordinate conjunctions. The other changes are less

obviously related to contact with Spanish, but because of their similarity to the changes that happen in language attrition due to bilingualism or other language contact, I am claiming here that the changes are due in large part to the external pressures of language contact, rather than to internal structural pressures.

Thank you very much!