



The Mayan Language

Sound of the Souls of Their Ancestors

Miguel A. Güemez*

Yucatecan Mayan—or just Mayan, as its speakers call it—is one of the most important linguistic groups in the Americas. In Mexico, it is spoken in a vast geographical area covering the states in the Yucatán peninsula (Campeche, Yucatán and Quintana Roo), as well as on the northern border of Belize. This makes it a living, homogeneous language with minimal dialect differences. When the Spaniards arrived in the sixteenth century, the Mayan language did not disappear or weaken; instead, it survived and coexisted vigorously persisting alongside the Spanish language. The Spaniards themselves had to learn it to be able to communicate with the native peoples and to give names to many of the things they found in nature in the peninsula.

In contrast with other indigenous languages spoken by different ethnic groups throughout Mexico (Tzeltals, Choles, Mazahuas and Purépechas, among others), the Mayan language is used today by more than 500,000 inhabitants from different strata of Yucatan's rural population, not just by indigenous groups. Among its speakers are rich “mestizos” and even *ts'ules*, or rich whites (merchants and landowners). There are also the “mestizos” who work as laborers, craftsmen, businessmen or public employees in the cities; the mestizos from the towns and villages who might be members of *ejido* col-

lective farms, day laborers, owners of small plots of land, teachers, doctors, priests and pastors. Then there are the *mayeros*, or *masehuales*, predominantly mono-lingual peasants living in the southern and eastern corn-producing parts of the state, far from urban centers. In these areas, Mayan functions practically as the official language and is considered of positive value in some sectors of the ruling class. In these towns, there is no stigma attached to the language; it is not looked down upon. The authorities use it both in official functions and at home with their families.

Nevertheless, in most of Yucatán's municipalities, the use of Mayan is increasingly restricted to the family, informal talks with friends in ceremonies, and when agricultural and crafts work is being done.

The Mayan language is expressive, with a rich vocabulary and beautiful syntax. From the morphological point of view, it is agglutinative, polysynthetic and very flexible. When its roots, almost always monosyllabic, are joined together, they make it possible to express entire thoughts in a single word. It abounds with silent consonants; its phonemes are classified as occlusive, fricative, affricate and nasal. Outstanding among them because they are explosive consonants are /ch/, /k/, /p/, /t/ and /ts/. The vowels are the same as in Spanish, but with five different accents: neutral /a/; glottal /a'/; high /áa/; low /aa/, and rearticulated /a'a/. When spontaneously and naturally spoken, Yucatecan Mayan acquires a special glottal, musical quality that has had a great deal of influence in the phonetics of Yucatecan Spanish. **MM**

* Professor and researcher at the Dr. Hideyo Noguchi Center for Regional Studies Social Sciences Unit at the Autonomous University of Yucatán.