My research and teaching

David Mora-Marín
Linguistics

davidmm@unc.edu

Background

- BA in Anthropology and Linguistics, University of Kansas-Lawrence, 1996
- PhD in Anthropology, SUNY-Albany, 2001
- At UNC since Fall 2004

Office hours

- Set hours for Fall 2025:
  - M 8–9 AM
  - Th 9–10 AM
- Zoom link: https://unc.zoom.us/j/9130064440
- By appointment: in person (outdoors or Campus Y) or Zoom (email me at davidmm@unc.edu)
- Set hours will very likely change each semester
- Very Covid Cautious due to moderate persistent asthma, and also due to my wife having severe persistent asthma and being immuno-compromised

Research topics

- Mayan historical linguistics
    - Sound change
    - Morphological and morphosyntactic change
    - Lexico-semantic change
    - Subgrouping
    - Remote genealogical relationships
- Mayan epigraphy
    - Grammar of Mayan texts
    - Orthographic principles of Mayan writing
    - Paleography
    - Graphic, graphemic, orthographic, linguistic variables
    - Lexical determinatives (aka semantic determinatives)
- Mayan historical sociolinguistics
    - Variationist, quantitative analysis
    - Social factors
- Decipherment of writing systems (several Mesoamerican scripts are undeciphered)
- Linguistic fieldwork and documentation
- Historical lexical semantics

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RESEARCH REPORT

HISTORICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS OF THE CLASSIC MAYA LOWLANDS: THE **GENERIC PREPOSITION VARIABLE**

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ABSTRACT

This paper applies a historical sociolinguistic framework to the study of Epigraphic Mayan (ISO 639-3 code emy), a logosyllabic writing system from southeastern Mexico and northeastern Central America. The subject is the Generic Preposition variable (conservative *tä*, innovative *ti*) and the focus of the paper is the linguistic and social factors that may have influenced its temporal and geographic distribution, as well as the reconciliation between the epigraphic data and the historical linguistic reconstructions. Two datasets for quantitative analysis were compiled by means of the Maya Hieroglyphic Database (Looper; Macri, 1991–2025). The study takes advantage not only of the absolute dates

nature
COMMUNICATIONS

ARTICLE

https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29158-y OPEN

Check for updates

South-to-north migration preceded the advent of intensive farming in the Maya region

Douglas J. Kennett[1✉], Mark Lipson[2,3✉], Keith M. Prufer[4,5✉], David Mora-Marín[6], Richard J. George[1], Nadin Rohland[2], Mark Robinson[7], Willa R. Trask[8], Heather H. J. Edgar[4], Ethan C. Hill[4], Erin E. Ray[4], Paige Lynch[4], Emily Moes[4], Lexi O'Donnell[9], Thomas K. Harper[10], Emily J. Kate[11], Josue Ramos[12], John Morris[12], Said M. Gutierrez[13], Timothy M. Ryan[10], Brendan J. Culleton[14], Jaime J. Awe[12,15] & David Reich[2,3,16,17✉]

The genetic prehistory of human populations in Central America is largely unexplored leaving an important gap in our knowledge of the global expansion of humans. We report genome-wide ancient DNA data for a transect of twenty individuals from two Belize rock-shelters dating between 9,600-3,700 calibrated radiocarbon years before present (cal. BP). The oldest individuals (9,600-7,300 cal. BP) descend from an Early Holocene Native American lineage with only distant relatedness to present-day Mesoamericans, including Mayan-speaking populations. After ~5,600 cal. BP a previously unknown human dispersal from the south made a major demographic impact on the region, contributing more than 50% of the ancestry of all later individuals. This new ancestry derived from a source related to present-day Chibchan speakers living from Costa Rica to Colombia. Its arrival corresponds to the first clear evidence for forest clearing and maize horticulture in what later became the Maya region.

Mora-Marín, David F. 2019. Problems and Patterns in the Study of Olmec Hieroglyphic Writing. In The Chinese Writing System and Its Dialogue with Sumerian, Egyptian, and Mesoamerican Writing Systems, edited by Kuang Yu Chen and Dietrich Tschanz, pp. 239-269. Rutgers University Press.

Problems and Patterns in the Study of Olmec(oid) Hieroglyphic Writing

DAVID F. MORA-MARÍN

University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

The study of Olmec writing is undergoing a veritable revolution, due to recent findings that have prompted scholars to revisit the question of the Olmec phenomenon and the history of Mesoamerican writing. Initially, such findings led some of the former holdouts and skeptics to concur that the Olmecs had (some form of) writing, potentially ushering in a new era in the study of Mesoamerican history, as well as the comparative study of writing systems. Nevertheless, in Olmec studies, claims of this nature are nothing new. Based on the discovery of Tres Zapotes Stela C, later shown to postdate the Olmec horizon by several centuries (and to constitute an example of Epi-Olmec writing), Matthew Stirling had concluded, in 1965, that the Olmecs had invented writing, an idea that fit nicely with the Olmec as a mother culture paradigm that was gaining

Ancient Mesoamerica (2023), 1–22
doi:10.1017/S0956536122000335

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Research Article

Evidence for lexical and phonetic determinatives in Mayan writing: The case of T713

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Abstract

This article utilizes the Maya Hieroglyphic Database (Looper and Macri 1991–2022) to study the spellings of three glyphic values based on T713 (Thompson 1962), namely, the logogram **K′AB′** 'hand, arm' (*n* = 88), the logogram **K′AL** 'to close, wrap, adorn' (*n* = 484), and the syllabogram **mi** (*n* = 68), cataloged as MZ1, MR1, and MR2, respectively, by Looper et al. (2022). The main goal is to study the functions of certain graphemes typically placed atop T713 (T713's "holding site") when it has the value **K′AL**, and to determine to what extent such signs can be described as *lexical determinatives*. The article concludes that MZ1 **K′AB′** constitutes the unmarked value of T713, while MZ1 **K′AL** requires contextual or graphemic disambiguation, the latter facilitated by means of phonetic complements (e.g., **k′a** or **la**) or lexical determinatives (e.g., T617/1M3). Syntagmatic contextual associations resulting from frequent proximity to other signs was a common factor in the establishment of certain signs as lexical determinatives. The question of MR2 **mi**, which can be analyzed as either a digraph or a case of a "phonetic determinative" (distinct from "phonetic complement") in the holding site of T713, is left open to future research.

Transactions of the Philological Society

PhilSoc
The Philological Society

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Transactions of the Philological Society Volume 00 (2021) 1–59 doi: 10.1111/1467-968X.12212

THE HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF GREATER TZELTALAN (MAYAN) VOWEL ASSIMILATION AND VOWEL RAISING PATTERNS

By DAVID F. MORA-MARÍN AND MELISSA FRAZIER
University of North Carolina

(Submitted: 8 September, 2018; Accepted: 9 March, 2021)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of vowel assimilation at a distance in di- and trisyllabic roots and stems in the Greater Tzeltalan languages of the Mayan language family. The study focuses on changes undergone in disyllabic and trisyllabic roots and stems, characterized by either anticipatory or perseverative vowel assimilation, and discusses the historical scenarios relevant to their reconstruction to the various relevant stages (Proto-Greater Tzeltalan, Proto-Ch'olan, Proto-Tzeltalan), as well as likely cases of diffusion between Ch'olan into Tzeltalan. In addition, the paper also considers the question of vowel raising in Ch'olan, i.e. the so-called *oo > u and *ee > i shifts, identified by Kaufman and Norman and reexamined by Brown and Wichmann. We posit a series of phonetic blocking conditions, and we argue that most cases can be accounted for as examples of suffix-controlled vowel assimilation. It is also shown that the presence of certain typical suffixes with low or mid vowels can account for the etyma that did not experience the shifts.

Lexico-semantic stability in the anatomical domain in the Mayan language family

David F. Mora-Marín, Megan Fletcher and Elizabeth Gorman
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill | University of Georgia | Montgomery County Public Schools

This paper deals with lexico-semantic stability, specifically in the anatomical domain. The main goal is to develop a method for measuring semantic polysemy and shift, in order to address: (1) the validity of standardized vocabulary lists (e.g., Swadesh 1950, 1952, 1955; Holman et al. 2008; Haspelmath & Tadmor 2009a, 2009b) for investigating cross-linguistic stability; and (2) the difference between basic and stable vocabulary (Ratliff 2006; Matisoff 2009), and its implications for studying remote relationships between language families, on the one hand, and subgroup differentiation within language families, on the other. To study these problems, a total of 50 etyma from the anatomical domain were selected from the Preliminary Etymological Mayan Database (Kaufman with Justeson 2003), and these were then classified employing the novel metric, and further analyzed by means of statistical methods. The results point to: (1) no specific correlation with the stability rankings of the Swadesh and Leipzig-Jakarta lists; (2) support for the "basicness" of etyma from the anatomical domain; (3) several significant relationships between stability and polysemy scores and independent variables relevant to the anatomical domain; (4) evidence of lexico-semantic stability score affinities between Mayan subgroups; and (5) evidence supporting the utility of polysemies to investigate subgrouping and language contact. The paper also offers conclusions and areas for further research.

Keywords: semantic change, anatomical domain, Mayan languages, polysemy

Online appendices available from https://doi.org/10.1075/jhl.21031.mor.additional
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RECONSTRUCTING POSSESSION MORPHOLOGY IN MAYAN LANGUAGES[1]

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1. Introduction. This paper studies the attributive possession strategies of the Mayan language family (ISO-639-3 myn) from both a typological and comparative-historical perspective. Attributive possession refers to a special relationship between two nouns—a possessee and a possessor—or between a possessive modifier and a head noun within a noun phrase (e.g., *the girl's dog*; *her dog*) and is contrasted here with predicative possession (e.g., *the girl has a dog*; *she has a dog*).[2] In the Mayan language family, attributive possession exhibits a variety of morphological and semantic traits, some of which combine to produce an alienable-inalienable possession split. These traits have been employed by Mayanist linguists, especially since the mid-1970s, to classify nouns

[1] I would like to thank Aaron Broadwell for the seminar on Mayan linguistics in the spring of 2000, which set off my interest in the comparison of possession constructions in Mayan languages. I am indebted to Terrence Kaufman for sharing with me, in 1999, his then-unpublished manuscript from 1989, "Mayan Comparative Studies," which has proven to be a source of ongoing inspiration and insight. Thanks to John Justeson for his comments on my review of possession morphology in my dissertation draft (Mora-Marín 2001), which served as the pilot for the conference papers that eventually led to this paper (Mora-Marín 2013, 2015). Thanks to Johanna Nichols for detailed comments on an early draft of this paper; to Carol-Rose Little for commentary on the Ch'ol data; to Kerry Hull for his help with Ch'orti' materials; to Victoria Bricker for sharing additional materials on Yucatec Maya that proved invaluable in my research; and to Ana Kondic for sharing her work on Huastec as well as her insights with me. I want to especially acknowledge the efforts of the peer reviewers, who alerted me to a plurality of small issues and also brought recent work on Huastec (Kondic 2012) and Ch'olan (Becquey 2014) to my attention. Finally, I am also indebted to David Beck, as well as the *IJAL* editorial staff, who have been extremely helpful throughout the process and who had to work through such a long and complicated manuscript. No one is to blame but me for any lingering errors or problems.

This article includes additional unedited content accessible in its online version.

[2] Attributive possession is also known in the literature as nominal, adnominal, or phrasal possession. It is not typically based on "possession" in the strict sense of "ownership" but instead on a variety of relationships between nouns (e.g.. kinship, anatomical, part-whole, ownership, attributes, locative, case relationships); possession involving a possessive modifier (e.g., my, your, his/her/its, etc.) is typically included in this type of possession. Predicative possession is also known as verbal or clausal possession. Heine (1997) surveys different types of attributive and predicative constructions and elaborates a model for their diachronic origins in a limited set of cognitive schemas.

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0020-7071/2021/8703-0003$10.00 DOI 10.1086/714250

TESTING THE PROTO-MAYAN-MIJE-SOKEAN HYPOTHESIS[1]

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

This paper tests the hypothesis of a common ancestor for the Mayan and Mije-Sokean languages. It applies the Comparative Method to a data set of Proto-Mayan and Proto-Mije-Sokean comparanda compiled following strict criteria for the selection of comparanda, including wide distribution of the forms within each of the language families, semantic isomorphism, and biconsonantal correspondences. Loanwords have been reviewed and compiled, and their sound correspondences isolated, to serve as a control in the process of identification of sound correspondences among the potential cognates. Due to the limited data set, the focus of the comparative analysis lies with consonantal correspondences. It is shown that many consonantal correspondences exhibit sufficient recurrence and sufficient phonetic distance from the consonantal correspondences attested in the loanword data set to support a Proto-Mayan-Mijesokean hypothesis. Also, a few etyma can be traced as probable cognates and also as later loanwords, also supporting the hypothesis. It is concluded that the hypothesis is plausible, although not yet verified. The most difficult task at hand remains to distinguish between a situation of common descent and one of extensive archaic diffusion. A discussion of the problems inherent to long-range comparison is offered, as well as potential cultural historical implications. The paper concludes with a summary and an outline of desiderata for further testing of this hypothesis.

[KEYWORDS: Mayan, Mixe-Zoquean, Comparative Method, loanwords, remote language relationship]

1. Introduction. This paper examines new evidence testing the remote relationship between the Mayan and Mije-Sokean languages.[2] The primary

[1] I owe a debt of gratitude to Terrence Kaufman and John Justeson, who have read and commented on two previous versions of this manuscript in extensive detail. Thanks are also due to several scholars who offered detailed comments and suggestions: Cecil Brown, Brian Stross, Søren Wichmann, Lyle Campbell, Nicholas Hopkins, and David Beck. Two anonymous referees offered their insights and pointed to errors that required fixing. The present version of the paper has benefited enormously from all of these scholars, as well as Keren Rice. Any remaining errors are entirely my own.

[2] In general, this paper utilizes the spelling system for the names of indigenous languages of Mesoamerica employed by the Project for the Documentation of the Languages of Meso-America (PDLMA), which is in turn based in large part on that used by the Proyecto Lingüístico "Francisco Marroquín" (PLFM) in Guatemala (Kaufman and Justeson 2007:193, n. 1). Thus, Mije, Mijean, Soke, Sokean, and Mije-Sokean are used instead of Mixe, Mixean, Zoque, Zoquean, and Mixe-Zoquean, the traditional spellings. For some sounds, the Americanist and Mesoamericanist traditions for phonetic symbols are used, deviating from IPA as follows: <š> for /ʃ/, <č> for /ʧ/,

[*IJAL*, vol. 82, no. 2, April 2016, pp. 125–80]

0020–7071/2016/8202–0001$10.00

Teaching

- Ling 89 **Decipherment of Writing Systems**
- Ling 138 **Introduction to linguistic anthropology**
- Ling 202 **Language variation and change**
- Ling 302 Language and power
- Ling 458 Writing Systems: Past, Present, Future, Fictional
- Ling 525 Comparative and Historical Linguistics
- Ling 558 **Ancient Mayan Hieroglyphs** (Spring 2026)
- Ling 560 Mesoamerican Languages and Linguistics
- Ling 561 Native Languages of the Americas
- Ling 490 Historical Sociolinguistics (will turn this into a regular course)

Advising

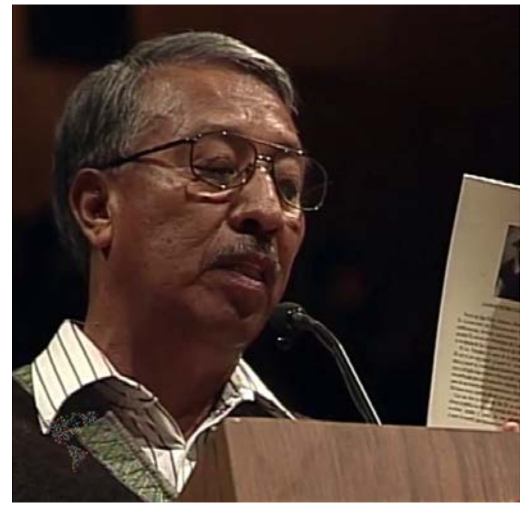
Thesis Advisor

Ana Kiskley	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	Spring 2026
Patrick Barrett	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	Summer 2024
Leah Dudley	M.A. Research Paper	Linguistics	Summer 2024
Andrew Knudsen	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	Summer 2023
Trey Anthony	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	Summer 2023
Rebecca Winters	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	Fall 2023
Alexander Austin-Trongo	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	Summer 2023
Carson Gartner	Honors Thesis	Linguistics	Spring 2023
Emily Martha Thomas	M.A. Research Paper	Linguistics	Spring 2022
Mónica López-Vázquez	M.A. Research Paper	Linguistics	Spring 2022
Amy Reynolds	Ph.D. Thesis	Linguistics	Spring 2021
Minlu Zhang	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	August 2020
Tristan Bavol	M.A. Thesis	Linguistics	May 2020

Mayan peoples

Rigoberta Menchú Tum
K'iche'

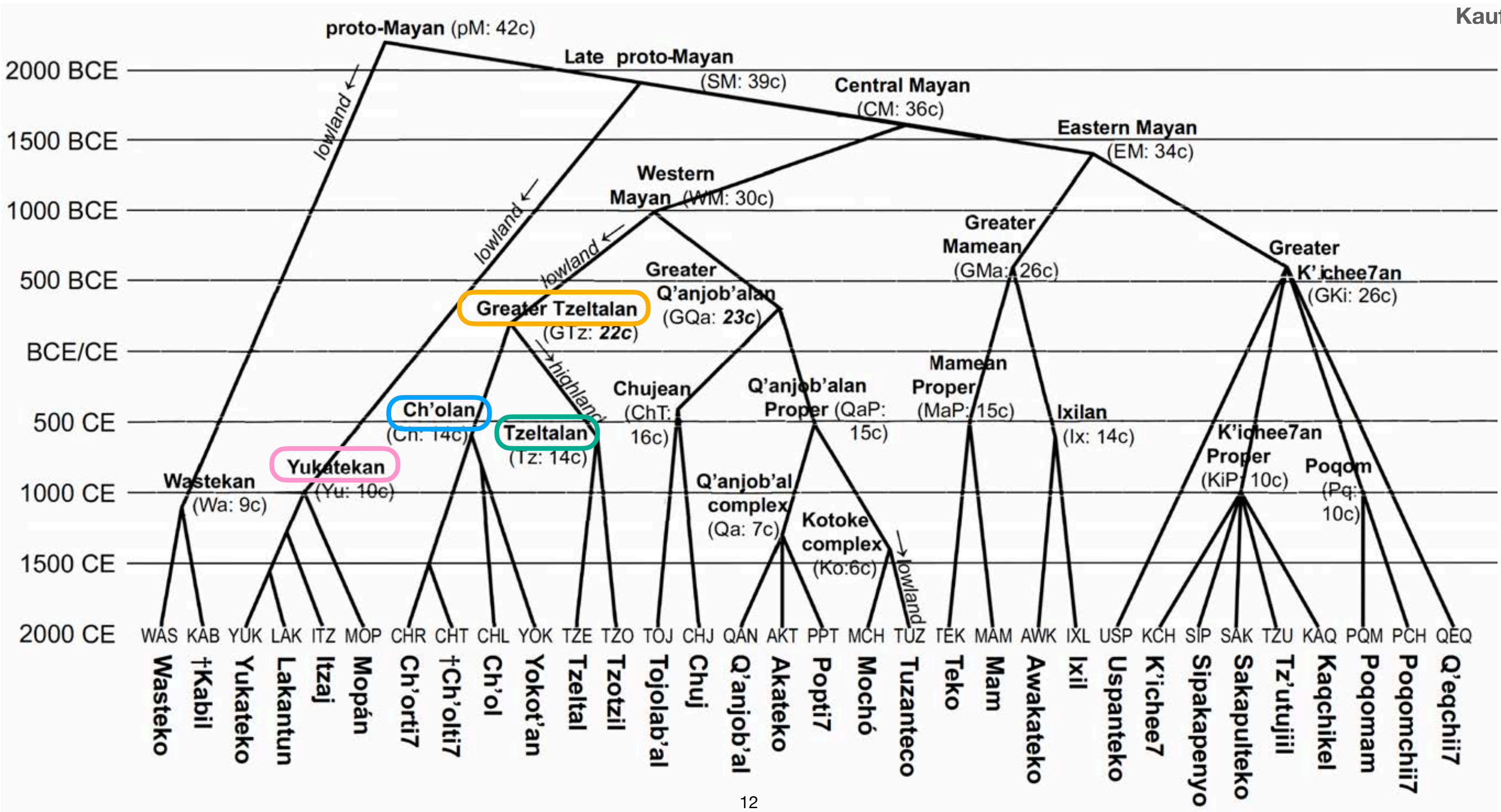
Briceida Cuevas Cob
Maaya t'aan (Yucatec)



Gaspar Pedro Gonzalez
Q'anjob'al

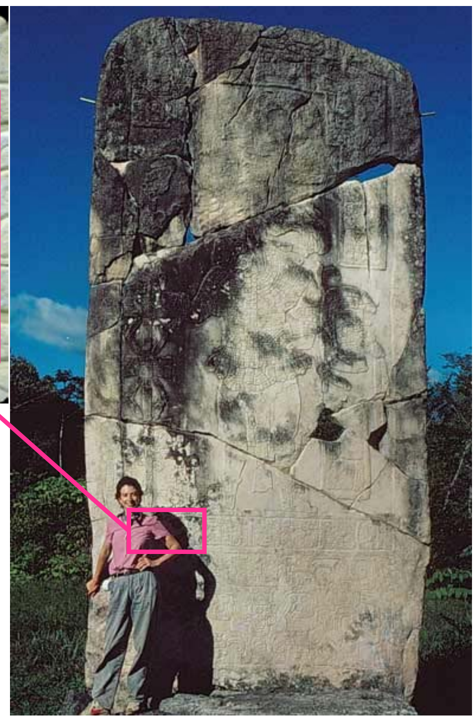
Mayan linguistic diversity

Kaufman (2017)



Ancient city of *Mutul* (Tikal, Peten, Guatemala)

Epigraphic Mayan



Bonampak Stela 1

Mayan orthography

- "Logosyllabic" script
- **Logograms** (uppercase) represent words
- **Syllabograms** (lowercase) represent CV sequences
- Both could be used separately or in various combinations
- Variable spellings of the same word were common

K'AYOM

a

K'AYOM

ma

b

k'a yo

ma

c

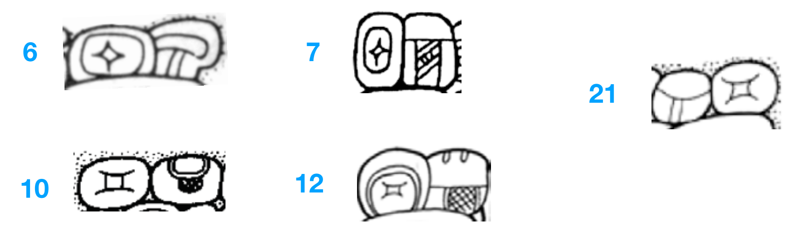
Transliteration:	**K'AYOM** (a) ~ **K'AYOM(-ma)** (b) ~ **k'a-yo-ma** (c)
Transcription:	k'ay-om
Morpheme Glossing:	sing-AGENTIVIZER
Translation:	'singer'

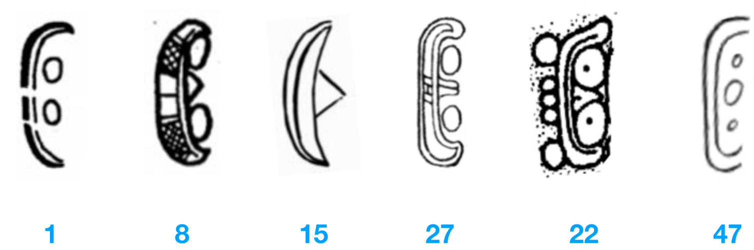
https://www.mayadatabase.org/

- Martha Macri
- Matthew Looper
- Yuriy Polyukhovych
- Gabrielle Vail
- 80k records (glyph blocks)
- ~ 4,850 texts
- Publication: http://glyphdwellers.com/

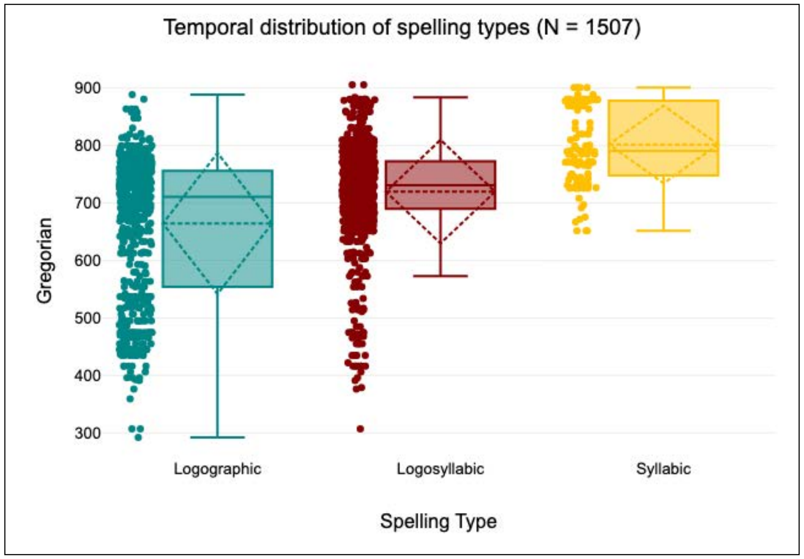
Paleography (graphic variables)

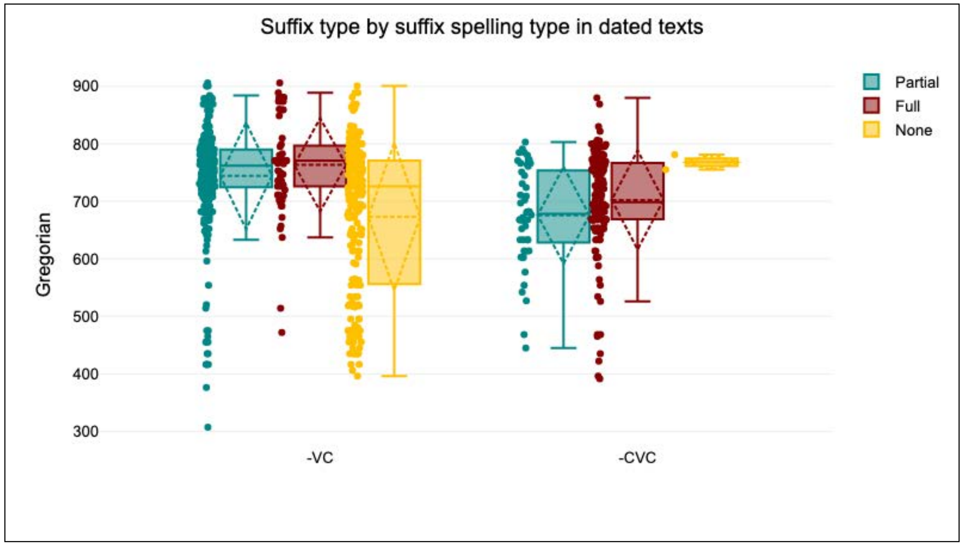
- Mora-Marín (2021a):
  - Graphic variable, T168/ZB1 **ʔAJAW** 'lord, ruler', paleography, graphic designs of same grapheme, innovative designs replacing older designs, geographic differentiation according to designs
- Mora-Marín (2021b):
  - Graphic variable, T1/HE6 **ʔu**, paleography, innovative designs replace older designs, geographic restrictions, significant distinctions according to media (portable vs. monumental)

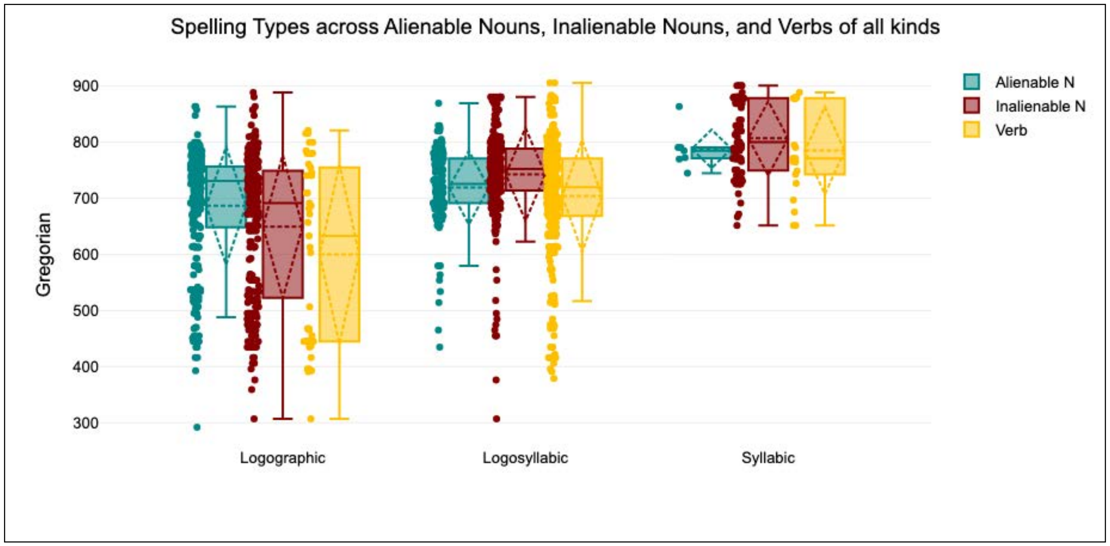




Spelling conventions

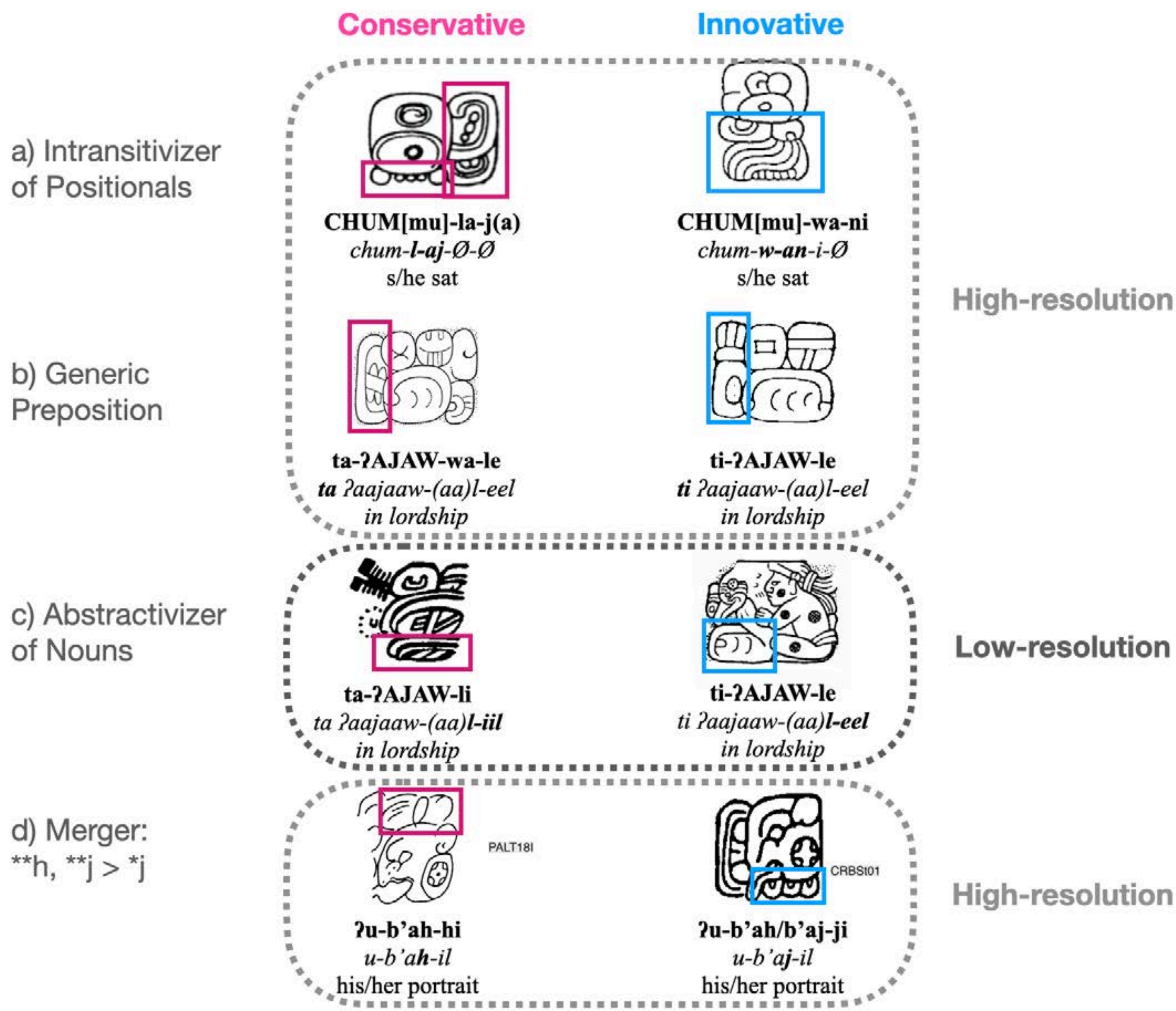






Linguistic variables

- Four linguistic variables
  - Three morphological
  - One phonological
    - Proto-Mayan *h and *j (i.e. *x) > Common Ch'olan /j/ in initial and final positions
- Differences in **orthographic resolution**
  - High- vs. low-resolution variables



Other info

https://davidmm.web.unc.edu/

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