

glottothèque  
Mayan languages



# The acquisition of ideophones and split ergativity in Chuj

Pedro Mateo Pedro

Linguistics, University of Toronto

Toronto, January 21, 2024

visit glottothèque at: <https://spw.uni-goettingen.de/projects/maya/>

# Ideophones

---

- In linguistic typology, ideophones are considered as an open lexical class that depict sensory imaginary' (Dingemanse, 2019)
- They are considered as universal or near-universal feature of human language (Dingemanse, 2012), although they have been associated to primitive languages (Barret 2014)
- Hierarchy of ideophones (Dingemanse, 2012):  
SOUND < MOVEMENT < VISUAL PATTERNS < OTHER SENSORY PERCEPTIONS < INNER FEELINGS AND COGNITIVE STATES

# Ideophones in Mayan languages

---

- In Mayan languages, two distinct lexical classes shared properties with ideophones: positional and affect roots (Barret, 2014)
  - Positional roots refer to shapes and movements, while affect roots are onomatopoeic
  - Although Barret (2014) says that Mayanists have not considered ideophones as a lexical class in Mayan languages, England (2009, 2017) refers to affect words as ideophones
-

# Ideophones in Mayan languages

---

- In Mayan languages, ideophones are very common and frequently used when making jokes and teasing (Barret, 2017) and found in narratives, e.g., Mam (England, 2009)
- Ideophones in K'iche' (1) and Q'anjob'al (2) (Barret, 2017: 453-454)

1. Kaqab'an puq' puq' puq' puq' puq'.      We go puq' puq' puq' puq' puq'
2. Yet chi wab'on yay t'ujlab'oq ha' a'ej:      When I hear the water dripping:  
t'uj, t'uj, t'uj, t'uj...      t'uj, t'uj, t'uj, t'uj...

- puq': sound of a rock dropped into water
  - t'uj: sound of water dripping
-



# Argument

---

- Studies on ideophones in Mayan languages show that the morphology of the verb after an ideophone varies, e.g., ergative & split ergative alignment, e.g., Pérez González (2012) for tseltal and England (2009) for Mam
  - While there is discussion about the status of ideophones in Mayan languages, e.g., Barret (2014), it is important to evaluate how children acquire this word category in relation to split ergativity
  - Children acquire ideophones following the split ergative alignment
  - From my knowledge, no studies exist on the acquisition of ideophones in Mayan languages
-

# Agenda

---

1. Language background
  2. Methodology
  3. Chuj child Ideophones
    - a. Ideophones
    - b. Ideophones and verb types
    - c. Productivity
    - d. Ideophones and split ergativity
  4. Conclusion
-

# Language background

---

- Chuj is a Mayan language spoken in the department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, and the southern part of Mexico
  - It belongs to the Mayan language family, although there is debate about its linguistic classification (Hopkins 1967)
  - It is an ergative language with marking in the nucleus and a verb initial language
  - Two main dialects: San Mateo Ixtatán and San Sebastián Coatán (Hopkins, 1967; Domingo Pascual, 2007; and Buenrostro, 2013)
  - The Chuj of San Mateo Ixtatán uses the word order verb-object-subject (VOS) (England 1991)
-





# Split ergative alignment

---

6. a. \*Lan hach=b'ey-i. Coon & Carolan (2017: 2-3)

PROG ABS2=walk-IV

intended: 'You're walking.'

b. Lan ha-b'ey-i. ABS > ERG

PROG ERG2-walk-IV

'You're walking.'

7. a. \*Lan hach=ko-chel-a'.

PROG ABS2=ERG1p-hug-TV

intended: 'We're hugging you.'

b. Lan hach=ko-chel-an-i. Suffix -AN

PROG ABS2=ERG1p-hug-SUB-IV

'We're hugging you.'

---



## 2. Methodology

---

- In this study, I analyzed data from a child acquiring Chuj from San Mateo Ixtatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/3VSDSK> (Mateo Pedro 2012, 2023))
- The data was collected longitudinally for a period of 8 months; video and audio recordings made every two weeks
- The child was recorded from the age of 2;2 to 2;10
- The recordings took place at the child's home and based on his spontaneous interaction with relatives and sometimes with the Chuj Research Assistants
- Extraction of ideophones—going through each of the child's files

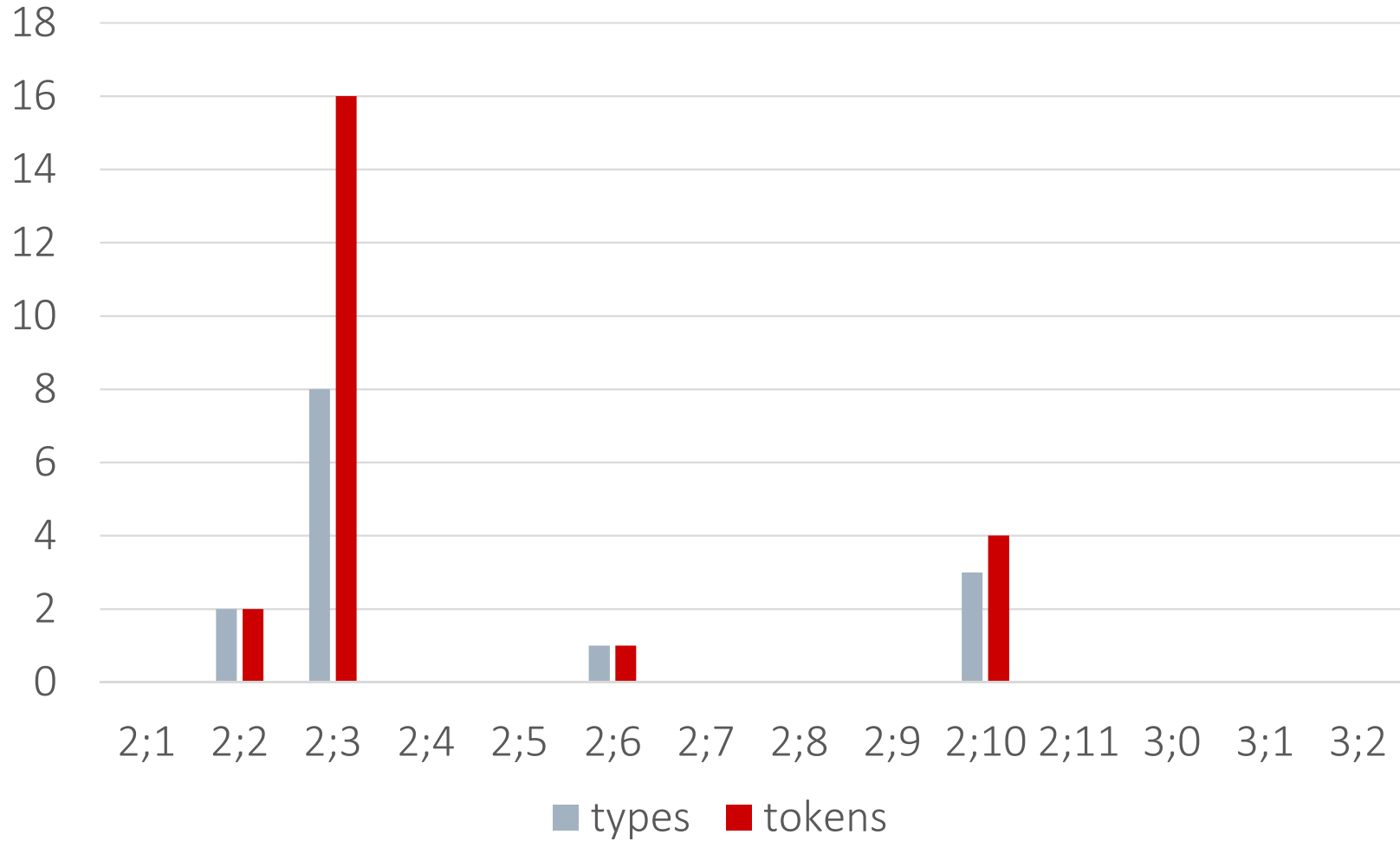
# Questions

---

- Do children acquire ideophones in Chuj?
- If so, do they follow the ergative and split ergative alignment?
- In Chuj, as we have seen in (8), an ideophone conditions the morphology of the verb
  - o A child would not just produce an ideophone and produce a verb
  - o The child must evaluate the verb type that appears after the ideophone

### 3. Chuj child ideophones

---



# What are those ideophones?

---

ages	child	adult	translation
2;2	kukala	?	'kukuruku'
	pum	punh	'sound of something falling, exploding'
2;3	ixti	ichatik	'like this'
	pum	punh	'sound of something falling, exploding'
	chopita	chopita	?
	kampana	kampana	'bell'
	te'	tek'	'kick'
	tinh	t'inh	'sound of something exploding'
	putul	putul	'sound of something falling, exploding'
2;6	punh	punh	'sound of something falling, exploding'
2;10	kisan	kixan	'bottom up'
	k'otnaj	k'otnaj	'sound of something falling'
	kixkon	kixkon	'going backwards'

---

# Ideophones and verb types

ages	ideophones	intransitive	transitive	
2;2	kukala		ak'	'to give'
	pum		ak'	'to give'
	ixti		ak'	'to give'
2;3	pum		ak'	'to give'
	chopita		ak'	'to give'
	kampana		ak'	'to give'
	te'		ak'	'to give'
	tinɦ		ak'	'to give'
	putul		ak'	'to give'
2;6	punɦ		ak'	'to give'
2;10	kisan	aj	---	'to go up'
	k'otnaj	em	---	'to fall'
	kixkon	el	---	'to exit'



# Ideophones with transitive verbs

---

9. a. pum ani. Mat (2;0)

= punh y-ak'-an-i

punh ERG3-give-SUB-SUF

'Punh it does (it exploded).'

b. tinh hani. Mat (2;3)

t'inh y-ak'-an-i

t'inh ERG3-give-SUB-SUF

'It exploded.'

# Ideophones with intransitive verbs

---

10.a. yo kisan yaj chan ni. Mat (2;10)

=yo kixan y-aj ch'a'anh ni'i  
oh kixan ERG3-go up ? see

'Oh, it's upside down, see.'

b. kixkon yeli.

Mat (2;10)

= kixkon y-el-i

kixkon ERG3-exit-IV

'Kixkon goes backwards.'

# Productivity

---

11.a. em bomba. Mat (2;3) Indicative

= ix-∅-em bomba

COM-ABS3-fall bomb

'A bomb exploded.'

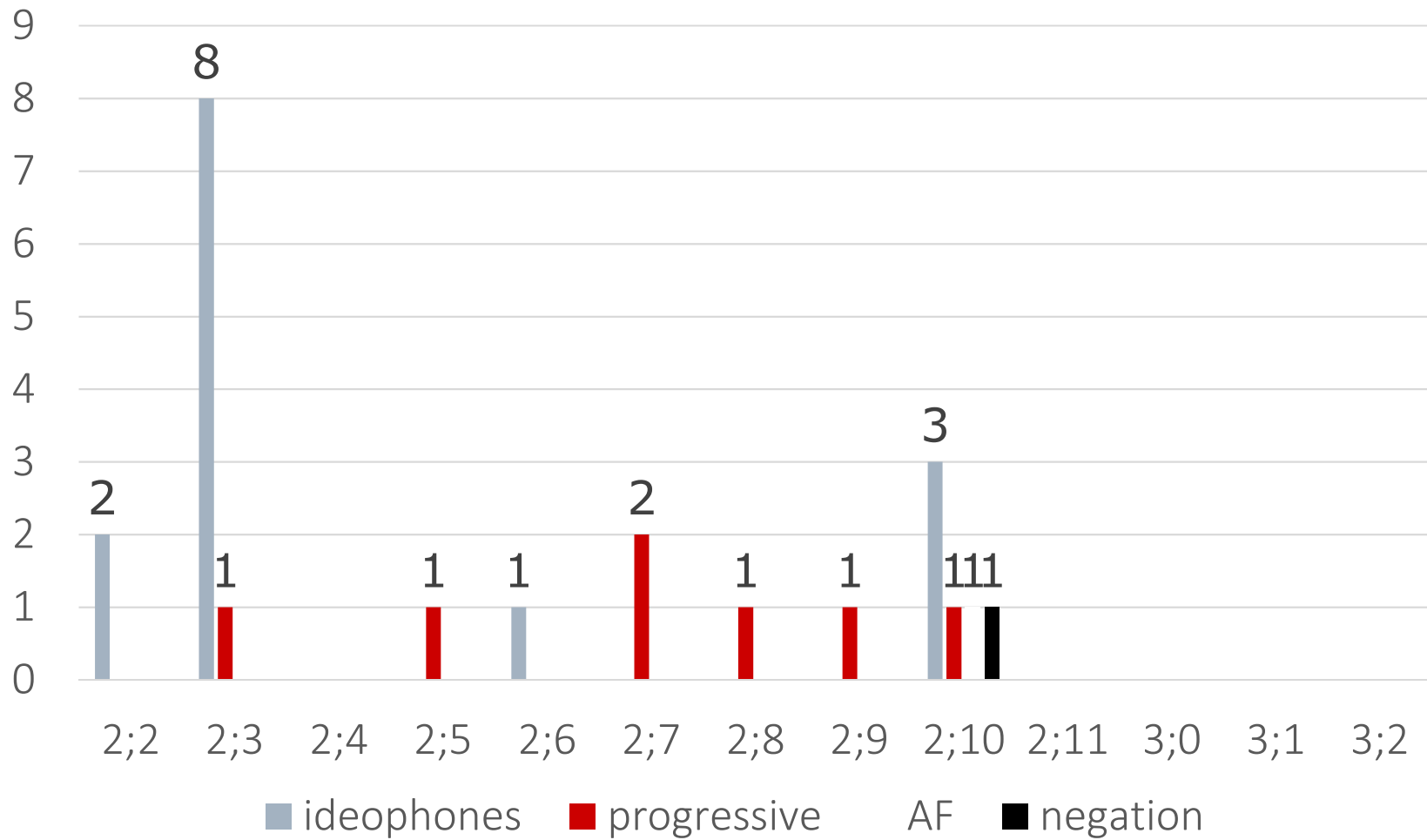
c. pom pahani. Mat (2;3) Ideophone

= ponh y-ak'-an-i

ponh ERG3-give-DM-SUF

'Boom, it does.'

# The suffix -an in other contexts



## The suffix -an in other contexts

---

- 12.a. wan kak'a gol. Mat (2;5) Progressive  
= wan k-ak'-an gol  
PROG ERG1p-give-SUB ball  
'We are playing ball.'
- b. Ha winh papa' ix ak'ani. Mat (2;10) Agent Focus  
= Ha winh papa' ix-∅-ak'-an-i  
ENF CLF father COM-ABS3-give-AF-IV  
'It was my father, who gave it to me.'
- c. Malaj mach hinsayani. Mat (2;10) Negation  
= Malaj mach hin-say-an-i  
NEG who ERG1-look for-SUB-IV  
'Nobody looks for me.'
-

## 4. Conclusion

---

- Although ideophones are sporadic, the child used them following the split ergative alignment
- Following (Dingemanse, 2012), the child acquires ideophones of the categories: sound and movement
- Contribution of the study to ideophones in Mayan languages, typology of ideophones (Dingemanse, 2012; Barret, 2014; Karani & Andrason, 2022), and acquisition of ideophones and split ergativity
- Children would not miss the acquisition of ideophones if “These words are the most graphic in the language, they are the ‘colouring’ words, the stories and common speech of the people are full of them” (Whitehead 1899:18, cited by Dingemanse, 2012:664)

# Acknowledgement

---

- Parents and children of the project ‘Acquisition of an Endangered Mayan Language: A Corpus of Child Chuj’
- Comunidad Lingüística Chuj—Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala
- Research Assistants: Nicolás Alonzo Gómez, Gaspar Pérez Jorge, Nicolás Gaspar Gaspar
- Funding: Documenting Endangered Languages (FN-50094-11 y FN-50114-13); David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University
- Mentors and colleagues: Maria Polinsky (University of Maryland), Clifton Pye (University of Kansas), Jessica Coon (McGill University)



Thank you!





# References

---

Barrett, R. (2014). Ideophones and (non-)arbitrariness in the K'iche' poetry of Humberto Ak'abal. *Pragmatics and Society*, 5/3: 406-418.

Barret, R. (2017). Poetics. In J. Aissen, N. C. England & R. Zavala Maldonado (Eds.), *The Mayan Languages* (pp. 433-457). London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Coon, J. & Carolan, E. (2017). Nominalizations and the structure of progressives in Chuj Mayan, *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics* 2(1): 22. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5334/gjgl.51>.

Dingemanse, M. 2012. Advances in the Cross-Linguistic Study of Ideophones. *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 6/10, 654-672.

Dingemanse, M. (2019). "Ideophone" as a comparative concept. In Kimi Akita & Prashant Pardeshi (eds.), *Ideophones, mimetics, and expressives*, 13–33. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

---

England, N. C. 2009. To tell a tale: the structure of narrated stories in Mam, a Mayan language. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 75, 2: 207-33.

England, N. (2017, March 29). Mayan Languages. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. Retrieved 4 Jan. 2024, from <https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-60>.

Karani, M. and Andrason, M. (2022). Ideophones in Arusa Maasi: Syntax, morphology, and phonetics. *Open Linguistics*, 8: 440-458.

Mateo Pedro, Pedro, 2012, "Chuj Child Language Acquisition", <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/3VSDSK>, Harvard Dataverse, V5.

Mateo Pedro, P. (2023). Adquisición del complejo verbal en Chuj. In Cristina Buenrostro (ed.), *Estudios de Lengua y Cultura Chuj*, pp. 109-142. México: Universidad Autónoma de México.

Pérez Gonazález, J. (2012). Predicados expresivos e ideófonos en tseltal. Master's thesis, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.

---

# This lecture

---

is part of the series *Glottothèque: Mayan languages*. Berlin, Göttingen, Mexico City: online resource.

visit glottothèque at:  
<https://spw.uni-goettingen.de/projects/maya/>



glottothèque  
**MAYAN LANGUAGES**  
ONLINE RESOURCE

El Colegio de México  
Humboldt University of Berlin  
University of Göttingen

funded by the DAAD

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry  
of Education  
and Research



Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst  
German Academic Exchange Service