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# Language Literature Linguistics

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In Honor of Francis J. Whitfield  
on his Seventieth Birthday  
March 25, 1986

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## “What the Eye Sees”

Una Canger

As chairman of my dissertation committee many years ago Francis Whitfield taught me much about accuracy and concentration, all the while demonstrating to me his fascination with the systematic and his profound understanding of Glossematics. In reading my manuscript and in the discussions about it he would share with me some insights into the structure of the Mayan language Mam. Nonetheless, the incomprehensible complexity of human language, my own shortcomings, and the demanding glossematic framework allowed me to include in my dissertation only small parts of the fascinating aspects of Mam. It is therefore a pleasure for me to present some equally attractive and characteristic features of that language, which I was and still am incapable of doing justice to in strictly glossematic terms.

The English word *lie* is used about human beings, about a great many animals, and about certain objects; and all it implies is that the mentioned being or object does not sit, stand or hang; it simply lies in some way or other.

In the Mayan language Mam, which is spoken by some two hundred thousand people in the western part of Guatemala, it is not possible to find a similar word with as broad a meaning as the English *lie*. In comparison with English, Mam has almost as many different words for *lie* as there are objects in their world that can lie, or as there are ways of lying.

In order to express a simple sentence like “he or it is lying on the ground” it is necessary to know what in fact is lying—a human being, animal or thing—and if an animal or thing, in what manner it is lying.

The following are examples of words which indicate some of the different ways in which a human being can lie: *muts'l* ‘he is lying on his stomach’ or ‘he is lying face down’, *pak'l* ‘he is lying on his back’, *ʔsaltʂ* ‘he is lying on his side’, *qinl* ‘he is lying outstretched’, *leql* ‘he lies sprawling (maybe intoxicated)’, *kutʂl* ‘he is lying alone in a house (sick)’, *kots'l* ‘he is lying, sleeping in any position’.

Now a Mam speaker registers the exact position not only of a human being who is *lying*, but also of one who is *sitting* or *standing*. This is probably most clearly demonstrated through more examples: *k'ohl* 'he is sitting (on the ground) on his buttocks with his legs bent in front of him', *tš'ohl* 'he is squatting', *q'uql* 'he is sitting (on the ground)', *mehl* 'she is sitting on her knees that are doubled up under her' (only women sit in this way with the legs under them, but the same word is used about kneeling like the Catholic priests have taught them to do, and in this sense the word is used about both women and men); *tsakl* 'he is on all fours', *tsuk'l* 'he is bent forward (sitting or standing) doing something', *mok'l* 'he hangs his head (is sluggish)', *pitš'l* 'he is standing with his head bent down', *qahl* 'he is standing, leaning back against something', *paql* 'he is standing up, leaning forward over something, supporting himself on it on his arms', *šlekl* 'he is standing on one leg', *hatšl* 'he is standing with his legs spread', *wa'l* 'he is standing upright'.

Obviously, anyone who sees another person, no matter what his mother tongue may be, will notice the way in which that other person is lying, sitting, or standing; but his language may not *demand* that he specify the person's exact position. In many cases it will seem an irrelevant and superfluous piece of information. But he *can* express his observation in English or in whatever language he speaks, if he so chooses. That is precisely what I have tried to do in translating the cited examples.

It is characteristic of the language Mam that it emphasizes not that which is common to the many different ways of lying, sitting, or standing, but rather that which is distinctive; in other words, there are particular, simple roots for the many positions which must be expressed in English by a combination of words. In almost all of the aforementioned cases the English equivalent contains a word for some basic or neutral position, namely that of *lie*, *sit*, or *stand* plus some additional description of this neutral position: *on his stomach*, *on his side*, *outstretched*, *on one leg*, etc. From the point of view of someone speaking English, *lie*, *sit*, or *stand* is in focus, it is that which is not in focus that can be specified through additional words.

Now the use of these Mam words is not quite as narrow and peculiar as the English translations may suggest. I have used the

examples to demonstrate that in Mam there are specific words for a number of positions which human beings may assume, but every one of the words cited can also be used about nonhuman beings and objects.

The word *pałl*, which I translated by 'he is standing up, leaning forward over something, supporting himself on it on his arms', is also used about a hen sitting on a rock or brooding, about a man who is sitting alone on a hill, or about a blanket hanging on a clothesline.

This is not a case where one word has several unrelated meanings, like the homonymous English *count* 'enumerate' and *count* 'nobleman'. There is only one simple meaning behind the word *paql*, and we get an idea of it through the various uses I have cited; however, in English we cannot find one word that will cover all these different uses.

Likewise, the word *tsakl*, which I translated 'he is on all fours', is used also about a mousetrap that is set, about a house that is finished, about a loom that is prepared for weaving, about a horse, a cow, a table, or a newborn lamb that is standing up, but not about standing dogs or cats; *tsališ* 'he is lying on his side' is used about the position of the sun between 1:00 and 2:00 p.m. The word *šlekl* 'he is standing on one leg' is used for birds that stand on one leg, but also for dogs with one bad leg that therefore run around on three legs. In other words, the meaning of *šlekl* is not 'stand on one leg', but rather 'stand with one leg pulled up'. The word *wakl* is applied to human beings in the 'crouched (possibly, ready to jump) position', but also to a rope full of tangled knots, and to water or other liquids that are foaming.

One might imagine that such strongly diversified words were originally reserved for the description of humans, and then only later metaphorically extended to describe the position of certain objects, like *wakl* about rope and *tsakl* about a mousetrap, metaphorically saying 'the rope is crouching' and 'the trap is on all fours'. In fact, this is not the case; man is neither dominant nor central in the very elaborate Mam vocabulary. The precise, descriptive words are not restricted to rendering positions that human beings assume.

It is thus misleading to provide only one translation of the various examples above, particularly when the translation chosen

involves human beings. I have done this to have at least some starting point in common with English.

In Mam one finds equally specialized words that are not used about human beings, but which express how a given *object* is standing, sitting, or lying; since no position is neutral, no object just lies “neutrally.” There is no word like English *lie* which is used about objects that from our point of view simply “lie,” for instance a ball, a wheel, a jacket, a piece of string, etc. And it is precisely only from an English point of view that such objects *simply* lie.

For a speaker of Mam almost all objects lie in their own way. Thus *sul* ‘it lies (about a wheel or such)’ or ‘it lies like a wheel’, *tultš* ‘it lies (about a spherical object)’, *bunl* ‘it (dog, lion, and the like) is lying with his paws stretched out in front of him’, *kitšl* ‘it (rope, hair, and similar object) is lying, not softly, but bristly’, *kojl* ‘it (rope, clothes, and the like) is lying softly and loosely, but not placed in any orderly way’, *q’iltš* ‘it (snake, worm, etc.) is lying’, *ts’akl* ‘it (a handful of mud) is lying’, *ts’ojl* ‘it is lying empty and flabby (about a ball without air or a dry and wizened grain of corn)’.

Words with meanings as diverse as ‘lie on one’s back’ and ‘hang (about a blanket) over a clothesline’, can be juxtaposed in the same discussion only because they all seem to share some notion of *lie* or of *being positioned*.

However, that is not the only feature which the words under discussion share. If we take an entirely different point of view and look at the *form* of the words, we see that they all end in *l*, all except three, namely *tsaltš* ‘he is lying on his side’, *tultš* ‘it is lying like a ball’, and *q’iltš* ‘it is lying like a snake’, and these all end in *l-tš*.

It is no coincidence that the words look so much alike; *l* and *tš* are in fact endings; they indicate position as opposed to movement in relation to some position. One might possibly say that in the endings *l* and *tš* we have an expression for the neutral position that I was seeking above, represented in English by *be* or in many cases, *lie*.

These endings can be replaced by other endings which indicate movement, for example, that a given being or object *take* or *moves into* the position which is expressed by the root. Compare English *lay* and *set*, which mean movement into a *lying* and *sitting* position.

But even here Mam is exceedingly diversified. If in English I say, “he sat down,” then it is not clear from that sentence whether he intended to sit down or whether he was taking a few steps backwards and unintentionally walked into a chair and sat down. A speaker of Mam, however, cannot leave it up to the listener to decide; there is one ending indicating that something or someone intentionally and by his own efforts moves into a given position, and there is an entirely different ending which indicates that something or someone moves into a position suddenly and unintentionally.

The ending *ée* occurs with all the words that have to do with position, meaning ‘move into (position) by one’s own efforts’. Corresponding to *muts-l* ‘he is lying on his stomach’, they will thus say *ma kub muts-ée* which means ‘he lay down on his stomach’. The word *ma* signifies that the action already has taken place, and *kub* has to do with the direction in which it happened, i.e., not that he lay down with his stomach upon a closet or a crevice, but precisely *down*. Corresponding to *pak’-l* ‘he is lying on his back’ speakers of Mam will say *ma kub pak’-ée* which means ‘he lay down on his back’; corresponding to *tsal-tš* ‘he is lying on his side’ is *ma kub tsal-ée* ‘he lay down on his side’; and to *ts’oj-l* ‘it is lying empty and flabby’, *ma kub ts’oj-ée* ‘it shrivelled up’.

I have mentioned that one may also get into a position suddenly and involuntarily; this is expressed by the ending *pah*: *ma kub muts-pah* thus means ‘he suddenly fell down, landing on his stomach’, *ma kub q’uq-pah* means something like ‘he accidentally sat down’ and *ma kub ts’oj-pah* ‘it suddenly shrivelled up (the ball deflated)’.

The ending *naha* is used when one wants to express that movement into a given position takes place repeatedly: *tš’oh-naha* means ‘he repeatedly gets into a squatting position’; *hatš-naha*, ‘he walks with his legs spread out’ (lit. ‘he repeatedly moves into a position with his legs spread’); and *tul-naha*, ‘it (a spherical object) repeatedly lies down’ (for example, an avocado pit, which is slightly smaller than the cavity in the avocado, and which is felt and heard to move around inside when the avocado is shaken).

Finally, someone else may move someone or something into a given position; this is indicated with the ending *ba’n*. It corresponds to English *put* and *make*. *Ma kub tmuts-ba’n* ‘he lay him down on

his stomach', *ma kub tq'uq-ba'n* 'he sat him down' or 'he made him sit down', *ma kub thatš-ba'n* 'he put him down with legs spread', *ma kub ttul-ba'n* 'he put it down (a spherical object)', etc.

The words I have cited here represent only a few examples of the diversification of positions rendered by individual roots in Mam, and the list is far from being exhausted; it is astonishing how many different positions are expressed by simple roots.

It may seem difficult to determine what can reasonably be characterized in formal terms as *position* or *movement into position*. Such features do exist. These words alone share the property of collocation with the endings noted above: *l* and *tš* for 'position' or 'state (of being)', *ée* for 'movement to', *pah* for 'sudden or involuntary movement to', *naha* for 'repeated movement to', and *ba'n* for 'put' or 'make'. It is thus not some vague notion of position or state of being that justifies the classification of these words—and many more—into one group of roots. On the contrary, the characteristic endings are criterial for determining whether a given root belongs to this class. Using these endings as criteria one can gather at least two hundred roots which indisputably belong to one and the same class.

Among the roots of this class there are many more of the type already exemplified which indicate a specific way of sitting or lying, a specification which makes it possible to limit their use to only a few beings or objects. Referring to a standing being that is stout and fat one uses *bitl*; if that same being is also short, one must rather say *bohl*. If he is sitting one uses *tšotl*; but if it is a fat pig, one must use the word *q'upl*, which applies only to pigs; in order to refer to a being which is fat like a duck, i.e., fat in only one place, not all over, the word *q'atsl* applies; if the ending *naha* 'repeated movement to' is added on to it, we get the word *q'ats-naha*, a word which for once has an appropriate English translation: 'he waddles like a duck'.

There is a whole group of roots that describe how various objects lie when they are in a pile, stack, or heap. But here the choice of root depends not only on the kind of objects that are lying (corn-cobs, clothes, books, ashes, grains of corn, firewood, etc.) but also on the way they are lying (in an orderly fashion or carelessly).

In the class of roots that can be isolated by means of the mentioned criterial endings, there is a whole series whose meanings imply very little

about position. It requires a good deal of imagination to read position into the examples like *tšutl* 'it (clothes) fits too tightly', *t'abl* 'he is toothless', *luk'l* 'it has (stands with) a long neck (like a crane)', *toq'l* 'he is naked', *ts'ahl* 'he is bald, bare', *štupl* 'it has a short tail', *sbukl* 'he is white-haired', *muts'l* 'he has his eyes closed', *sbakl* 'it is mouldy', *shotl* 'it is all white', and *škitsl* 'it is rough, ragged'. Many more in this group could be mentioned.

It is appropriate to ask whether it actually makes sense to maintain that the roots in this peculiar class really share the notion of *position* or *state of being*. One might choose to say that *some* of the roots in the class express position, while the rest describe objects in a number of different ways which do not appear to have any one feature in common, and which do not have anything to do with position.

It is possible, however, to identify something that the two types share. At least it is characteristic of all the examples I have cited so far and also of all the other examples that I know—both those which involve something with position and those which in some other way describe an object, namely, that the description, the features that the words single out in the beings or objects in focus are features that we *see*. It is the eye that allows us to observe that a human being is lying on his stomach, that a ball is deflated, that a piece of clothing is too tight, that a certain object is white, that a being is naked or has a long neck like a crane.

The example with the avocado pit rattling in the avocado, *tul-naha* may seem to go against this idea. We cannot see it before we have opened the avocado, and then it no longer rattles. But it would be natural to interpret the word in this example as describing a situation which we imagine visually, we picture how the loose pit is lying now to one side of the cavity inside the avocado and now to the other.

Admittedly, to say that a description appeals to the sense of seeing is a very general characterization; there are a host of possible descriptions that all appeal to the sense of seeing. And it is questionable whether such a general characterization can really be used to define our class of roots.

In this connection it is crucial that in Mam we find another and much less extensive class of roots, most of which appeal to senses

other than that of seeing. Formally this class of roots is characterized by endings other than those mentioned here. This other set of endings provides evidence to support the claim that the roots to which they are suffixed actually form another class.

To this new class belong for example *k'ook'h* 'it smells good', *saash* 'it is light (about weight)', *qaqh* 'it tastes like lime', *muumh* 'it provides shelter', *tshintsh* 'it is dangerous', *q'unq'h* 'it stinks', *tshintsh* 'it smells like horse urine or burnt egg', *tsubtsh* 'it is good', *meeq'-mah* 'it is warm', *g'ahg'ah* 'it can be heard', *g'ulg'ah* 'it is lukewarm', and *k'isk'ah* 'it hurts'.

The content of these formally related roots seems to show that the appeal to the sense of seeing is not a trivial shared feature that links the roots in the first class together.

On the basis of such formal evidence, I would claim the existence of two different classes of roots, each characterized by its own particular endings, one class reserved for the description of visual perception, the other for the description of nonvisual perception, that is, through the senses other than sight. But we note in passing that Mam also has a third class of roots, formally not quite as well defined as the first two, which typically refers to the sense of hearing.

It is not so difficult to understand why the Eskimos have and need a rich vocabulary for the various forms of snow, wet snow, dry snow, newly fallen snow, etc., or that the Tuaregs talk about camels with words that require long paraphrasings and explanations if translated into English. It is no more surprising than the diversity of technical terms that each trade in our world has for its tools and techniques, terms which outsiders normally do not know.

But why the speakers of Mam have an insatiable need for an ever finer elaboration of various visual impressions remains to me fascinating, but unexplained.

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