

Course: LIN 631 Linguistic description of American languages:
Typological properties of Mesoamerican languages
Term: Fall 2007
Text: Readings on reserve
Meetings: Tu/Th 15:30 -16:50 in 118 Baldy
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Office hours Tu 11:00-11:30 and Th 10:00-11:00

Overview: The seminar covers Mesoamerican (MA) and adjacent languages.¹ The MA linguistic and cultural area stretches from the Valley of Mexico in the North to the northern Honduran border on the Caribbean coast and well into Costa Rica on the Pacific Coast. The MA languages comprise five unrelated families: Otomanguean; Aztecan (a branch of the larger Uto-Aztecan language family); Totonacan; Mixe-Zoquean; and Mayan. A number of MA languages are isolates or of uncertain genealogical grouping; these include Purépecha (or Tarascan), Huave, Oaxaca Chontal (or Tequistlatec), and Xinca. The MA languages have long been recognized as forming a *sprachbund* or linguistic area. Several millennia of intensive contact have changed the members of the various unrelated language families so as to enhance their compatibility in formal and semantic categories. Phenomena that are pervasive in the MA area include head-marking; ergative and split-intransitive traits in both morphology and syntax; alignment-hierarchy (or “obviation”) effects in argument linking; verb-initial and verb-final constituent orders; morpho-syntactic alienable-inalienable distinctions in adnominal possession; (numeral, nominal, and possessive) classificatory systems; and lack of deictic tense coupled with rich systems of aspectual and modal marking. Polysynthesis, in the sense that syntactic relations and processes tend to have morphological reflexes at the word level and in the sense that content words, in combination with the necessary inflections and function words, can constitute clauses by themselves (independently of their lexical category), is widespread in most MA language families, the most important exception being Otomanguean.

Aims of the course: Our goal in this seminar is to familiarize ourselves with key typological properties of the languages of the MA linguistic area. We will seek to broaden our knowledge and understanding of language universals and crosslinguistic variation with findings from the study of the morpho-phonology, morphosyntax, lexicon, and semantics of MA indigenous languages. The participants will be given the opportunity to learn from the description of MA languages about topics and phenomena they are independently interested in. At the same time, the seminar is designed to get students interested in future work on MA languages – be it as part of their own research projects or as part of joint ventures – and to provide them with some of the expertise required for such work.

¹ Coverage of languages and topics depends on the interests of the participants. In the following, assume a maximally inclusive definition of “Mesoamerican”. *For example*, if a participant happened to be working on a certain mysterious isolate spoken hundreds of miles north of the MA area, we can accommodate that ☺

Organization and course work: I currently envision two parallel independent organizing principles: by language and by topic or domain of interest. At the beginning of the seminar, every participant picks a language, branch, or family of which they will serve as the expert and compiles, with the help of the instructor, a bibliography of work on this language/branch/family that is related to the topics to be discussed over the course of the seminar. Each week will be dedicated to a particular topic. The participants compile 1-to-3-page thumbnail sketches of the week's topic for their language (etc.) of expertise. At the same time, one participant will be in charge of each week's topic, providing a more detailed summary of the relevant phenomena in their language (etc.) of expertise, compiling a survey of the other participants' sketches (a "typologist's digest" – or *typogest* ☺), and leading the discussion of both.

The selection of topics we will tackle and the amount of time we spend on each topic will depend on the interests of the participants. The instructor's interests lie chiefly in the expression of temporal and spatial relations and in the interface between syntax and lexical semantics, including argument structure, argument marking and realization, linking, voice, and grammatical relations ☺

Assessment: Weekly thumbnail sketches – 40%; "typogest" presentation of a selected topic – 20%; short (10 pages, give or take 5) term paper presenting the student's original research, based either on a survey of available descriptions or on primary data from one or more MA languages (the instructor will be happy to provide Yucatec data ☺) – 40%.