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*Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics
Society* (1986), pp. 186-194

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Polyadicity of Three Verbs Associated with Bloodletting Rituals in Western Glyphic Maya

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Polyadicity refers to the number and kinds of arguments a predicate may take. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the polyadicity of three verbs found in the Maya inscriptions of the Classic Period (c. 250-900 A.D.), all having to do with blood-letting. Before discussing the verbs themselves, I would like to begin by presenting a few relevant facts about Mayan languages, and then briefly describing the Maya script.

Whatever languages may have played significant roles in the development of Maya hieroglyphic writing, there is consensus that the language, or languages, recorded in the script on the monuments of the Classic Period is most closely related to Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and various modern Cholan languages, with greater or lesser amounts of influence from Yucatec. All Mayan languages exhibit ergativity, expressed morphologically by person marking on the verb. In addition, modern Yucatec and Cholan have nominative/accusative marking in the incompletive aspect. The ergative person markers also function as possessive pronouns. Therefore, a third person ergative marker on a verb stem allows for three possibilities:

1. a transitive construction
2. a possessed verbal noun
3. an intransitive construction in incompletive aspect
in a language exhibiting partial ergativity.

The third possibility is relevant to the Classic Period texts only if it is the case that partial ergativity existed in the language(s) recorded at that period and if the texts are in incompletive aspect (see Macri, in preparation).

As nearly as can be determined, there are no examples of first or second person occurring in the inscriptions. Another relevant fact about Mayan languages is that the third person absolutive is zero, that is, it has no phonological realization. Its presence can, however, be inferred whenever the ergative person marker is present in any verb in purely ergative languages or in verbs in the completive aspect in the type of partial ergative systems found in Yucatecan and modern Cholan languages. Since the verbs are marked for person, independent NPs for subjects and objects are optional. Consequently, a third person ergative marker and a verb stem (with the appropriate morphological marking for tense/aspect, voice, etc.) can qualify as a transitive sentence, and a verb with no person marker can stand alone as an intransitive sentence with the subject being third person singular absolutive (\emptyset). This has important implications for our understanding of the verbs found in the Classic inscriptions.

In the three or four surviving hieroglyphic codices—bark paper books from the Postclassic Period (c. 900-1500 A.D.)—there are examples of sentences with independent subject and object NPs. In the Classic inscriptions, however, such constructions are virtually non-existent (Lintel 8 from Yaxchilan which records in VOS word order 'captured B, A' being a notable exception).

A typical sentence in the inscriptions begins with a calendrical statement followed by a verb followed by the subject NP which may consist of one or more names and titles, and embedded clauses giving various epithets and parentage statements. The lack of object NPs has prompted epigraphers to remark: ". . . verbs that can be identified grammatically as transitive constructions are rare in the inscriptions. . . (Schele 1985 10)," and, "(split ergativity) explains major anomalies in which clearly intransitive verbs appear consistently with a third-person ergative pronoun (Schele 1982:10)." The only

criterion Schele gives for labelling verbs as clearly intransitive is that they occur only with one NP, or with one NP and a complement clause.

In discussing possible meanings of the affix T181 read as *-ah* MacLeod states that "In considering any transitive morpheme as a candidate for T181, one must demonstrate a potentially transitive relation between two protagonists (or one actor and one nominal object)(1984: 236)." This ignores the fact that in Mayan languages relevant to glyphic studies independent subject and object NPs are optional, and a transitive sentence may consist minimally of a verb root with an ergative person marker to indicate subject, and the \emptyset absolutive person marker to indicate the direct object. The fact that overt object NPs do not occur is consistent with findings in discourse studies that for Mayan languages the percentage of two full NPs in a single sentence is extremely low. See, for example, Du Bois's data on Sacapultec, an Eastern Mayan language closely related to Quiche (1981).

Maya hieroglyphic writing is a mixed logo-syllabic system. Some of the signs are logographic and represent a word and all of its homophones. Other signs are syllabic, representing CV and VC combinations, and are used orthographically without reference to meaning. Typically the signs occur in glyph blocks. A glyph block may consist of a single sign or a combination of one or two main signs each of which may be accompanied by one or more smaller signs called affixes. Any affix or main sign may be used phonetically, logographically, or as a semantic determinative. Graphic affixes are not necessarily morphemic affixes.

By the turn of the century most of the calendrical glyphs were deciphered, however, the most significant progress in reading the non-calendrical passages has come within the last 25 years. A current estimate given by Peter Mathews of Harvard is that although secure phonetic readings can be given for only a small portion of the hieroglyphic texts, we can understand the meaning of about 80%

of the texts. For example, we may know that a certain glyph is a man's name, and know when he was born, etc., without being able to know how his name was pronounced. In other cases we may know that particular glyph is a verb and that it never is preceded by an ergative person marker, and that it always occurs with the earliest date given a particular ruler. From this we can infer that it is the intransitive verb 'to be born' even though there is no consensus on the phonological form of the word. It is also possible that some glyphs were read differently by speakers of different languages or dialects; 1500 years is certainly enough time to accumulate archaic spellings.

The purpose of the Classic monuments was to glorify and legitimize the local political ruler. The monuments were erected on important calendrical dates or in commemoration of a ruler's accession to power, death, etc. All of these ceremoniously auspicious occasions were commemorated by bloodletting rituals. These were acts of auto-sacrifice which involved tongue, ear lobe, and penis perforation. The three verbs that I will discuss here are all found in association with bloodletting rites. Figure 1 shows lexical entries for these verbs written according to an LFG framework. It gives the argument structure for each of the verbs, and the person, number, and case for each of the arguments, as indicated by the verb glyph itself.

The first is the scattering glyph, read *mal* 'to scatter' referring to a liquid. It may be spelled purely phonetically with syllabic signs [ma + la], or represented logographically by a hand which sometimes has droplets coming from it. In some cases the hand has the syllabic sign [ma] at the wrist and [la] written beneath it. Of 75 entries in Schele's Verb Catalog 59% are preceded by the ergative third person marker.

The second verb is the jog glyph read by this author as *u ak' u b'a*, 'to offer oneself'. It has been called an "auxiliary verb" (Josserand et al. 1985) because it is frequently followed by *ti*-constructions, that is complement clauses

introduced by the particle *ti*. Of 164 occurrences, it is preceded by the ergative person marker 86% of the time.

The last verb is called the fish-in-hand glyph. Although it is preceded by the ergative marker only 48% of the time (12 out of 25 times), Proskouriakoff (1973: 165) notes that when it follows a date—that is, when it is the main verb in a sentence—it takes the ergative prefix. This fact is also true of the other verbs as well. Generally when they are the main verb in a sentence they take ergative marking. When they occur without the *u-* prefix it is usually in embedded constructions.

Although it is important to remember that overt object NPs are not necessary in transitive sentences, I would like to suggest that for at least two of these three verbs there is evidence for a direct object within the event glyph itself, a kind of graphic object incorporation. In the first verb, *mal*, 'sprinkle', the direct object can be seen as the droplets, supposedly of blood, issuing from the hand. Additionally, the crosshatched element with a circle of dots (T93) that frequently appears affixed to the scattering hand may indicate more information about the direct object. It does occur with a number of other glyphs, but it patterns as if it were being used as a phonetic complement rather than a verbal affix.

In Macri (1984) I have given evidence for reading the second verb as 'to offer oneself'. As illustrated in Figure 2, the glyph segments into four parts: the first element is *u*, the ergative third person marker, the second is the animal's tongue *ak'*, the next element, present only in a few examples, is a smaller *u* positioned over the animal's eye, and a finally, *b'ah*, the established phonetic value for the animal's head which translates as 'gopher' (Proskouriakoff 1968). In Greater Tzeltalan languages *ak'* also means 'to give'. In Tzotzil, when it is paired with the reflexive pronoun *b'a* (which must be inflected with the appropriate ergative person marker) we have the verb *ak' ba*

'present oneself /before authorities/, offer self /sexually/' (Laughlin 1975:40). It is also part of the formulaic expressions *ak' ba ta k'ob rioš* and *ak' ba ta k'ob kahvaltik*, both of which mean 'to partake of the sacraments' literally, 'to offer oneself into (by, with, for, because of) the hand of god'. Just as this verb in modern Tzotzil is associated with religious rituals, it appears that its glyphic counterpart had similar associations during the Classic Period. The direct object in this transitive verb is the reflexive pronoun.

At the present time there is no consensus on the reading of the hand/fish event glyph. Again, it clearly occurs in contexts which are associated with blood-letting. Of the three verbs discussed in this paper it is the one least likely to occur as the main verb of a sentence. There are also fewer examples of it, only 25 in Schele (1982), as opposed to 75 and 164 for *mal* and *ak' b'ah* respectively. It is not certain whether the hand/fish is meant to include the direct object of the verb phonetically or logographically. As mentioned above, however, a verb with an ergative person marker and the zero affix for the third person absolutive meets the criteria for transitivity.

Next I would like to discuss the C-structure in Figure 2. It contains the sentence from the front of Stela 24 at the site of Naranjo. In the interests of space, the date 9 Lamat 1 Zotz' (9.13.7.3.8, 699 A.D.) has been deleted. This sentence is actually an abbreviated version of sentence four of the main text found on the sides of the monument. Sentence four is the longest and most complex of the sentences which gives several titles for Lady Six Sky, along with the names of her parents. Immediately following the verb glyph (here divided for illustrative purposes into V and object NP) is a PP which might more appropriately be labelled a COMP. The affix read *ti* functions both as a multi-purpose preposition and complementizer. The monkey face, God C, is a personage associated with bloodletting rites. The phonetic reading is not known, but if it were read 'blood', *č'ič'*, then it would have to occur with a

possessive prefix. In fact, in this case, although the glyph is eroded, there are two possible candidates for the possessive prefix *u*, one across the top of the glyph, the other to the left of the face. The sentence might then read "She offers herself, presents herself, for the purpose of bloodletting (*or* by her blood, with her blood), Lady Six Sky of Tikal, Bacab (ruler).

The verb *ak' b'ah* sometimes occurs only with the subject NP, but frequently with *ti*-constructions containing a variety of different nouns or nominalized verbs. Many have to do with bloodletting, but others include the 'ahau (lord)-in-hand glyph' or the verb *ak ta* 'setting up' associated with the staff ceremonies observed on the Yaxchilan lintels. Since *ak' b'ah*, which is always preceded by the ergative person marker never occurs with both full subject and object NPs, it was cited as support for Bricker's proposal of nominative/accusative marking in incompletive aspect in the inscriptions (Bricker 1985, Schele 1982: 10). If, however, the interpretation suggested here is correct, the verb is transitive, and the direct object is the reflexive pronoun (*b'ah*) represented in the glyph by the head of the gopher (*b'ah*).

In this paper I have presented evidence for transitive interpretations of three verbs known to occur in blood-letting contexts. In the case of the hand-scattering glyph indications of the presence of a direct object are the droplets found issuing from the hand itself. Whether or not there is a phonological realization of this concept is not essential to the polyadicity of the verb, since the absolutive person marker is present as \emptyset . In the case of the gopher glyph, the direct object is phonologically realized as the reflexive, *bah*. That the hand/fish glyph is transitive seems to be clear, but whether or not it contains the direct object is unclear at this time. As part of a rigorous analysis of the syntax of the glyphs, the polyadicity of each of the verbs needs to be established. In some cases it will be possible to establish that, even when a phonetic reading or an exact meaning of the verb has not been discovered.

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