

UnBelizable Fieldwork on Mopan Maya

Nicole Hober

(Galen University/Bremen University)

Mopan Maya is one of many languages of Belize, the only English-speaking country in Central America. Today, there are around 8,000 Mopan speakers among Belize's population of 400,000. With the exception of some elders, the majority of Mopan Maya are multilingual and additionally speak English or Belize Kriol; some also speak Spanish, Q'eqchi' Maya, or Yucatec Maya. There are clear signs of language shift to English and Belize Kriol in the Mopan communities, which presents a challenge to the transmission of the Mopan Maya language. Speakers place different value on the languages spoken in Belize. English is said to be the language needed for educational and economic success, while Belize Kriol serves as the main lingua franca and is said to constitute the language uniting the diverse Belizean population with strong ties to national identity.

The current individual and community multilingualism has also led to variation and change the lexicon and grammar of Mopan Maya, ranging from, e.g., lexical borrowing, *pushintik* instead of *tulka'tik* (1), over syntactic variation, from VOS to SVO word order in unmarked declaratives(2), to sound changes, Spanish loanwords such as <rey> are realized as [rei] instead of [rei].

(1) *tan-∅ u pushin-t-ik ix tz'i' chu' ix*
DUR-B3 A3 push.GER-TRANS-INCOMPL.TR F small girl F
ch'up-u
woman-ENC

'The woman is pushing the girl.'

(2) *winik tan-∅ u xim-b'al*
man DUR-B3 A3 walk-INCOMPL.INTR

'A man is walking.'

In this talk, I present some preliminary findings from ongoing fieldwork on (a) language practices and (b) languages ideologies among Mopan Maya speakers, and (c) contact-induced features in Mopan Maya. I also comment on the ethical and practical challenges and opportunities that come with conducting linguistic research on Mayan languages in Belize.

Abbreviations

A3 = Set A 3rd person (ergative); B3 = Set B 3rd person (absolutive); DUR = durative; ENC = enclitic; F = feminine; GER = gerund; INCOMPL = incomplete; INTR = intransitive; TR = transitive; TRANS = transitivizer