

“The Language of Gods”: The Pragmatics of Bilingual Parallelism in Ritual Ch’orti’ Maya Discourse

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Parallelism in Mayan Languages and Ritual Speech

Parallelism is the foremost stylistic device in Mayan and other Mesoamerican languages (B. Tedlock 1985; Tedlock 1986; Brody 1986). Metrical features common to Western poetic traditions play no significant role in Maya poetics. According to Josserand (Josserand and Hopkins 1991:21), what meter and rhyme are to Western poetry, couplets and parallelism are to Maya poetry. The most common forms of parallelism in Mayan languages are couplet, triplets, and the quatrain, though distich couplets remain the dominant structuring mechanism. Maxwell (1997:101) defines couplets as “the stylized repetition of all or part of an utterance, echoing either form or content.” Monaghan (1990:134) defines a couplet as the repetition of a line that is associated by parallelism in semantics or syntax to the previous line. Paralleled forms can be found in daily speech in some Maya groups, but it appears more commonly in narratives and ritual discourse. Gossen (1983:309) notes that all oral narratives of the Chamula Tzotzil use semantic couplets as the *unidad poética principal* (“principal poetic unity”).

Ritual speech, however, is where parallelism really flourishes in Mayan languages. Parallelism is the defining *sine qua non* of ritual discourse, primarily in the form of couplet speech. Ritual speech among most Maya groups tends to be denser and more frequent in couplet forms than other varieties of speech (Gossen 1974; Maxwell 1997; Stross 1974). For example, the Ixil of Cotzal make considerable use of both figurative and non-figurative couplets in ritual contexts (Townsend et al. 1980).

For the Ch’orti’ Maya of southern Guatemala, ritualized forms of speech are always performed in parallelistic fashion, especially in traditional healing ceremonies. Unfortunately, community-wide ceremonialism is in steep decline among the Ch’orti’ today as fears of being labeled a “witch” or “sorcerer” have driven most ritual specialists underground or out of business altogether.¹ During my fieldwork of over 30 months with the Ch’orti’, I worked with many of the few surviving ritual specialists and recorded numerous healing rites. The data gathered during that process informs the discussion of Ch’orti’ ritual poetics that follows. The results presented here add to our understanding of the expressive creativity that can occur in bilingual communities in which two languages can be tasked the formation of parallel structures.

¹ See Hull (2003) for a fuller discussion.

Metadiscourse on Parallelism

Very little in terms of a metadiscourse exists regarding poetic structuring. After giving an elderly consultant of mine several examples of parallelism in Ch'orti', I asked her why some people speak that way. She answered "*Así hablan los ángeles*" ("Thus speak the angels") (Hull 2003:63). The Spanish term *ángel*, as commonly used by the Ch'orti', represents a large class of gods in the Ch'orti' pantheon. This term is commonly applied specifically to the deities responsible for the production of rain, but it equally encompasses many other divine beings. The overt declaration that paralleled speech patterns are the form of expression for supernatural beings—"the language of gods"—is a significant insight into the perceived origins of this discourse style in Ch'orti' thought.² If this view is more general in Ch'orti' thought, then the projection of such highly structured parallelistic speech of Ch'orti' ritual specialists as the style of speech of those divine entities they address in supplication would reciprocally inform and reinforce³ the perception of the poetry. It is curious, however, that in oral traditions containing dialog involving divine beings I have not noted any increase in paralleled speech; indeed, they speak colloquially in nearly all cases. Perhaps paralleled speech is something of an idealized notion of divine parlance,⁴ but ordinary speech forms appear in informal genres of most oral traditions.

Other consultants of mine describe parallelistic speech as "*onya'n ojroner*" ("ancient speech") immediately reminiscent of the '*antivo k'opetik*' ("ancient speech") of the Tzotzil Maya of Chamula in Chiapas, Mexico (Gossen 1974:398 and 1984:105-09) and the '*poko k'op*' ("ancient speech") of the Tzeltal Maya (Stross 1974:215). One consultant noted that his father "knew the prayers and the way to say them" (Hull 2003:376). It was clear that the "way to say them" referred to his ability to properly formulate a prayer in couplet style.

In short, many Ch'orti' understand the general repetitive, parallel nature of ritual texts without necessarily being able to define this process easily in words. Consultants could easily *demonstrate* a few simple couplets, but very often could not *describe* them.

Sociolinguistic Situation of the Ch'orti' Maya

More than 90 percent of Ch'orti' speakers today are bilingual in Spanish. Bilingualism and the dominant influence of Spanish are contributing to a steady decline in the number of

²The projection of ritual poetic discourse as the language of supernatural beings is a widespread phenomenon in the context of shamanism, see, for example, Eliade (2004 [1964]:196-99); as part of Indo-European religion, see West (2007:160-62); see also Eila Stepanova's (2015) discussion of Karelian lament believed to be the only language that the dead could understand.

³In Durkheim's view (1915:225) religion is a projection of society, and something whose "primary object is not to give men a representation of the physical world . . . it is a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it." For a more current reference outlining a semiotic approach to mythology, see Frog (2014:360-62).

⁴Models of mythology within a community are consistently genre-dependent. For a fuller discussion on the variation in mythology by genre with special attention to authoritative specialist roles, see Frog (2014:374).

Ch’orti’ speakers. In some homes where parents are fluent Ch’orti’ speakers, only Spanish is taught to children because of the perception that Spanish is the language of opportunity. One Ch’orti’ mother explained to me that she “owed it to her children to ensure they’ll have a better life than she did” and so she only speaks Spanish to them. In certain cases Ch’orti’ is viewed, according to many of my consultants, as an “agricultural language,” one that leads only to a life of working in the *milpa* (“cornfield”). Spanish, on the other hand, opens any number of occupational doors.

Bilingualism in Ch’orti’ healing rites represents a highly pragmatic and creative aspect of these forms of discourse. Healing prayers are characterized by two dominant features: archaic Ch’orti’ forms and the generous use of Spanish terms. The use of esoteric terms, obsolete morphology, and complex syntactic constructions is a hallmark of Ch’orti’ healer speech. Much like “doctor talk” of our own day, healing jargon serves to elevate the status of the Ch’orti’ healer in the eyes of the patient and to distance the healer from the ordinary or mundane (see Fisher 1983). Incomprehensible or unique ritual terms do nothing if not show the healer to be a specialist of his or her trade and to punctuate their power and position in society (see Brody 1995:135).

The second remarkable aspect of Ch’orti’ healing prayers is the pervasive use of Spanish. While bilingualism today is the norm in the Ch’orti’ area, monolingualism was much more common early in the last century. Healers therefore incorporated large numbers of Spanish forms into their curing rites as a distancing device (Hull 2003:83). One elderly healer explained to me that he was told by his mentor that they would use Spanish vocabulary as a way of adding a cryptic or enigmatic character to their prayers since most people did not speak Spanish. Other elderly healers confirmed that Spanish terms were purposefully incorporated into their prayers and that this resulted in the loss of many original Ch’orti’ ritual words. The status of Spanish as a prestige language at that time played a significant role in their wilful inclusion of Spanish vocabulary into Ch’orti’ ritual discourse. Again, since the audience did not understand Spanish well, those terms were thereby esoteric and effective in adding mystique to healers’ speech. At that time, the Spanish language had achieved a prestige status associated with power and authority through its role in official, government contexts. It also appeared as the essential medium for communication with peoples outside of the Ch’orti’ cultural sphere. These factors also played a role in the incorporation of Spanish vocabulary into Ch’orti’ ritual discourse: Spanish was not the “language of the gods,” but it was a language of those with power over the social world, and it was the language of the world of the “other” even if it was not associated with the supernatural otherworld *per se*.

The result was a massive influx of Spanish terms in the Ch’orti’ healing prayers—but at a cost. The original Ch’orti’ terms that these words replaced were in many cases soon lost from use and memory. Spanish forms in Ch’orti’ ritual speech today appear in a variety of ways: 1) the wholesale incorporation of the term and the original meaning, 2) adoption of the Spanish form but with altered semantics, and 3) the blending of the Spanish term into Ch’orti’ morphological and phonological patterns. Within this rubric, the Ch’orti’ healer gains considerable flexibility in the ways one could use Spanish forms in ritual speech.

Since *parallelismus membrorum* (“parallelism of members”) forms the structural core of poetic discourse in most languages of Mesoamerica, the process of creating complementary

second lines to couplets can be greatly facilitated by the social presence of a second language or dialect from which to draw terminology (see Bricker 1974:372; Brody 1995:139-40; Fox 2014:374-79). In short, the idiom, register, or way of speaking⁵ of Ch'orti' healers and ritual priests has developed from three distinct forms of speech: archaic forms not otherwise in use today, modern spoken Ch'orti', and Spanish terms. The use of Spanish in ritual speech is common across many different Mayan languages. In Yucatec Mayan, for example, Spanish words in the couplets of narrative texts are a regular occurrence (Mudd 1979:50). In terms of importance on a compositional level, Mudd (1979:51) notes that out of 178 Spanish words in a single narrative text, 129 were the focus of the parallelism in the couplet. For Yucatecan narratives, Mudd (1979:58) concluded that "Spanish loan words constitute an integral aspect of Yucatec narrative parallelism. As an important element in this pervasive stylistic device, they enhance the similarity and contrast operative at the various linguistic levels—phonological, semantic, grammatical, and syntactic." Such use of Spanish words through code-switching and lexical borrowing is pervasive in Ch'orti' ritual texts.

The use of Spanish terms in the construction of couplet lines contributes to what Brody (1995:139) calls "a powerful aesthetic force" to the poetic quality of the language. This is accomplished in three principal Types: 1) using Spanish forms in both halves of the couplet (see example [1]; 2) using Spanish in both halves of the couplet then followed by a secondary synonymous couplet using two Ch'orti' terms (see examples [2] and [3]; or 3) using one native term paired with a Spanish synonym (see example [8]). These types of bilingual parallelism are by no means unique to Ch'orti'. Bricker (1974:372) has noted similar uses among the Tzotzil of Chamula. The following is an example of Type 1, using Spanish parallel terms in both lines of a couplet otherwise in Ch'orti'. In example (1) the Spanish nouns *día* 'day' and *tiempo* 'time' are used, even though native terms in fact exist for both:

- (1) 1- *K'otoy e día*,⁶
 2- *K'otoy e tiempo*.
- 1- The day arrived,
 2- The time arrived.

Next, example (2) illustrates the use of Type 2, where two Spanish parallel terms are used in parallel with two additional parallel terms in Ch'orti'. The healer calls upon the curative properties of tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*)—a plant much revered for its ability to "drive away" evil spirits. Four terms are chosen and placed into two paralleled verses. Lines 1-2 are Ch'orti' ritual terms that are only used in healing contexts, never in colloquial speech. Lines 3-4 contain

⁵Register in speech refers to "variety according to use" (Halliday et al. 1964:87) in one's speech based on what is appropriate in a given situation. The rules one follows in speech are, according to Hymes (1972:36), "the ways in which speakers associate particular modes of speaking, topics or message form, with particular settings and activities." See also Hymes (1967).

⁶Spanish focal terms or phrases are shown with double underlines, as are the corresponding English translations. Also, terms borrowed from Spanish appear in bold.

the Spanish names *hierbita llana* and *hierbita bendecida*, both specialized terms applied solely to tobacco by the Ch’orti’:

- (2)
- | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|
| 1- | <i>tama e nawalch’a’n,</i> |
| 2- | <i>ajxujch’a’n,</i> |
| 3- | <u>hierbita llana,</u> |
| 4- | <u>hierbita bendecida.</u> |
-
- | | |
|----|--------------------------|
| 1- | with the <u>tobacco,</u> |
| 2- | <u>tobacco,</u> |
| 3- | <u>tobacco,</u> |
| 4- | <u>tobacco.</u> |

The curer constructs an elegant quatrain by employing four distinct terms for “tobacco,” none of which, incidentally, is the word used in daily speech for it, *k’utz*. Part of aesthetic prowess shown by the healer is her ability to draw upon various lexemes, order them in two couplets—one Ch’orti’ and one Spanish—and to forge them into a quatrain that retains a ritual tenor through her avoidance of the common term *k’utz*.

Example (3) provides another case of Type (2) parallelism which further demonstrates this process:

- (3)
- | | |
|----|---|
| 1- | <i>tamar e kriatura tya’ leb’e’na uyalma,</i> |
| 2- | <i>ya’ umusijk’yo’b’ wajrna.</i> |
| 3- | <i>tya’ <u>agarrado</u> uyalma,</i> |
| 4- | <u>amenazado</u> , <i>Nuestro Señor, tamar e kriatura.</i> |
-
- | | |
|----|--|
| 1- | on the patient where his spirit <u>was afflicted</u> , |
| 2- | here they <u>blew [on] him</u> , was blown, |
| 3- | where his spirit <u>was “grabbed.”</u> |
| 4- | <u>harassed</u> , Our Lord, on the patient. |

In lines 1 and 2 the healer uses three Ch’orti’ terms that relate to ways in which evil spirits afflict people. The passive form *leb’e’na* means “was afflicted” in Ch’orti’ thought and describes how a menacing spirit grabs and holds captive the spirit of a person, that is, causes him or her to become ill. The second verb *umusijk’yo’b’* is a transitive form referring to the native concept of disease that evil spirits “blow” their blighting breath upon an individual, thereby causing that person to fall ill. The third verb *wajrna* is passive, meaning “was blown,” but understood again in Ch’orti’ mythology to be the action of evil spirits who cause sickness. Thus, the actions detailed in lines 1-2 are pure Ch’orti’ conceptions of how evil spirits infect people. In lines 3 and 4, however, the healer switches to two Spanish terms for the second couplet, which is essentially synonymous to the first. Here the terms *agarrado* and *amenazado* appear, the former in Ch’orti’ thought signifying a person’s spirit is “grabbed” by the evil spirit, that is, sickened, and the latter “harassed,” referring to the menacing nature of evil spirits as they afflict individuals. Line 4 also

shows ellipsis in the first part of the line but then augmentation at the end. Then quite beautifully, the healer incorporates enveloping parallelism by repeating the prepositional phrase “on the patient” both at the beginning and at the end of the stanza. A delicate symmetry is created, nearly chiasmic, in this section of the prayer, further punctuated by the use of Ch’orti’ terms in the first two lines and Spanish forms in the final two.

The Type 3 use of Spanish in paralleled forms of speech is what the remainder of this study will focus on. In the discussion below, I examine the nature of this type of parallelism and how Ch’orti’ healers creatively incorporate synonymous Spanish forms together with Ch’orti’ terms.

Ch’orti’ Ritual Speech and Poetics

Ritual prayers in Ch’orti’ are completely executed with paralleled forms. Parallelism functions as the structural base upon which all ritual discourse is built and elaborated. The most common type of parallelism is the couplet, representing about 95 percent of the Ch’orti’ ritual prayers I have recorded. Triplets and quatrains also appear, but the structural core of nearly all such prayers is the couplet. Ch’orti’ healing prayers follow a fully consistent pattern of parallelistic formation. Couplets and other forms of parallelism are creatively employed in each performance, yet following strict structural constraints. While the macro-level creativity of the ritual specialist is expressed within these constraints of form, specific dyads and vocabulary combinations are consistently drawn upon at the micro-level. Most pairings are well-known and standard to the genre, but their combined use in performance allows for innovation based on the specifics of the disease and the caprice of the healer. The *sine qua non* of healing prayers is parallelistic presentation; healers themselves, however, select the content within those formulations in each case as the situation requires. For example, many healing prayers are built around a prescribed skeletal core, the terms *ensak* and *enyax*, “white” (associated with the direction north) and “blue/green” (associated with the center, not one of the cardinal direction), respectively. In the first line of the couplet the first noun will be preceded by *ensak* and the paired noun in the second line by *enyax*. For example, *A’si tamar enyax alaguna, ensak alaguna*, (“They come playing in the green lagoon, the white lagoon”). Here *ensak* and *enyax* act as a poetic framing device for paired items, and their structure is fixed. The accompanying verbal phrase and noun/noun phrase, however, are up to the discretion of the healer. Hence, creativity abounds within certain confines of prescribed structural forms.

At other times when the immediate and ongoing nature of the action is the focus within the parallelism, two forms are used, *ch’a’r* and *war*. In Ch’orti’, *ch’a’r* is a perfect participle of a positional verb and means “lies (down),” and *war* is the present progressive marker. In ritual texts, however, *ch’a’r* is used functionally as a present progressive marker and is regularly paired with *war*. The following excerpt from a healing prayer⁷ is notable for both its informative

⁷Ch’orti’ healing performances are best described as prayers rather than incantations, charms, or chants. Healers address specific deities asking for particular types of aid in each prayer, so creativity and adaptation to the individual circumstances of the patient are crucial. In terms of cadence, the prayers, however, can indeed have a chant-like quality in performance, especially when standard paralleled forms are used.

discussion on the origins of a certain eye disease caused by sorcery and its highly poetic style, interweaving triplet constructions (lines 7-9, 12-14) within numerous couplet expressions, and showing the paired use of *ch'a'r* and *war*:

- (4) 1- *E luser xe'k'ob'ir koche'ra ja'xto e ti'n uk'ajtyo'b'e ti'n aketpa naku'tob',*
 2- *k'ani awitk'a anaku'tob.*
 3- *Ja'x e ti'n ajna't yajjentob' uk'ajtyo'b'.*
 4- *Ja'xto ch'a'r takar uprinsipo u'tob',*
 5- *take'e nukir lusera,*
 6- *Prinsipo de Lusero.*
 7- *Ch'a'r taka ub'osya'n jararyo'b',*
 8- *Ch'a'r atanlum ujararyo'b',*
 9- *Ch'a'r atanlum.*
 10- *War apok'omyo'b',*
 11- *War t'ot'omya'n jararyo'b'.*
 12- *Ajch'ujrja' Ausente de Lusero,*
 13- *Ajch'ujrja' Ausente de Lusera de Don Paskwal Nube de Pulsera.*
 14- *Ch'a'r ach'ujje'yrjarari'.*
 15- *War ab'osya'n,*
 16- *War atanlumjararyo'b'.*
 17- *Ch'a'r amotz'mo'b'jararyo'b',*
 18- *War amotz'mo'b'b'akyo'b'ya'.*

- 1- The star that is big like this, that's the one to which some people ask that the
 eyes of some others remain shut,
 2- *your eyes will burst open.*
 3- The ones who ask this are people who work in black magic.
 4- Those are lying with Prince of their expressions,
 5- with the Great Star,
 6- Prince of the Star.
 7- Lying with their burning eyes infecting rays,
 8- Lying are your 'dust-in-the-eyes' infecting rays,
 9- Lying is your 'dust-in-the-eyes'.
 10- They are festering,
 11- They are blistering with infecting rays.
 12- The Strainer Murdered-Spirit Star,
 13- The Strainer Murdered-Spirit Star of Don Pascual Pulsing Cloud.
 14- They are straining with the infecting rays,
 15- They are burning the eyes,
 16- They are dusting the eyes with infecting rays.
 17- They are piling on with infecting rays,
 18- They are piling on the bones indeed.

The consistent repetition of parallel lines of discourse automatically creates an ideal canvas for the aesthetics of prosody to make their mark. Indeed, the prosodic aspects of ritual prayers are some of their most distinctive features. The cadence of delivery beautifully compliments the poetic structure already found in the paralleled lines. The resulting forms are hypnotic and repetitive, while simultaneously elevating the speech to one worthy of discourse with deities. Furthermore, in lines 7-18 the content of the prayer is specific to the disease being discussed, but the presentation of that material falls within the standard structuring device of the paired forms *ch'a'r* and *war*. Again, creativity flourishes within certain genre-specific constraints.

Bilingual Parallelism

Drawing upon linguistic resources from two or more languages provides a wealth of forms and nuances to choose from in the construction of parallel discourse. For Ch'orti' ritual specialists, bilingual parallelism is a standard practice for the already stated pragmatic purposes. A particularly favored form is the Type 3 use of Spanish, that is, juxtaposing a Ch'orti' term in one line of a couplet with a synonymous Spanish form in the other. The following example contains several instances of this poetic device. The context is a healing prayer for someone suffering from an eye disease caused by the planet Venus ("Don Pascual"):

- (5)
- | | |
|-----|---|
| 1- | <i>Ch'a'r usaktokarir o'k,</i> |
| 2- | <i>Ch'a'r usaktokarir <u>akwerpo</u>,</i> |
| 3- | <i>Tya'a'si wate't tama e Pwerta Poniente Kristo,</i> |
| 4- | <i>Don Paskwal de Lusero Briyante.</i> |
| 5- | <i>Ink'ajti usaktokarir oy't,</i> |
| 6- | <i>usaktokarir <u>akwerpo</u>.</i> |
| 7- | <i>Ink'ajti uyempanyir uch'ijrje'yr o'yt,</i> |
| 8- | <i>uch'ijrje'yr ak'ab' tu'naku't Jwan.</i> |
| 9- | <i>Ink'ajti ubriyador <u>uyespejir</u> o'k,</i> |
| 10- | <i><u>uyespejir</u> ak'ab'.</i> |
-
- | | |
|-----|--|
| 1- | There lies the blurring of your <u>feet</u> , |
| 2- | There lies the blurring of your <u>body</u> . |
| 3- | Where you come to play in the Western Portal of Christ, |
| 4- | Don Pascual of the Bright Star. |
| 5- | I ask for the blurring of your <u>eyes</u> , |
| 6- | the blurring of your <u>body</u> , |
| 7- | I ask for the blurring of the water-increasing of your eyes, |
| 8- | the water-increasing of your hands in the eyes of Juan. |
| 9- | I ask for the shininess of the <u>mirror</u> of your feet, |
| 10- | the <u>mirror</u> of your hands. |

In line 2 of example (5), the Spanish term *cuervo* (“body”) is used to compliment the Ch’orti’ term *ok* (“foot”) in line 1. Similarly *cuervo* in line 6 is paired with *ut* (“eye”) in line 5. Then in line 9 and line 10 the Spanish word *espejo* (“mirror”) appears surrounded by Ch’orti’ possessive morphology (*u- . . . -ir*). Thus in this short excerpt we see both the use of Spanish paired with a native Ch’orti’ term (lines 1-2, 5-6) and the use of a Spanish term in both lines of the couplet (lines 9-10).

Nominal pairing

The pairing of Ch’orti’ and Spanish forms in couplets can have several manifestations, one of the more common being the use of nominals as in example (6):

- (6) 1- *Koche b’an atz’i ik’ab’a’*,
 2- *b’an atz’i inombre senyor.*
- 1- As thus are your names,
 2- thus are your names, Sirs.
- (7) 1- *Tya’ achpe’n inche’t nombrar.*
 2- *Ink’ab’ajsyey’.*
- 1- Where I rose up I named you,
 2- I named you.

Example (6) contains nominal forms (Spanish *nombre* and Ch’orti’ *k’ab’a’*) for “name.” In example (7), however, the verb “to name” (Spanish *nombrar*) appears in both parts. In standard Ch’orti’ practice when adapting Spanish verbs into Ch’orti’, the general Ch’orti’ verb “to do” *che* is used in conjunction with the Spanish infinitive form, here *nombrar*. Verbal pairing will be discussed further below.

Ch’orti’ ritual specialists take clear advantage of both lexical sources available to them when forming paralleled lines. This fortuitous circumstance allows them to cogently construct couplets at times when an exact synonymous noun is desired but absent in Ch’orti’. Note the following case:

- (8) 1- *tu’t e rum*,
 2- *tu’t e tierra.*
- 1- on the earth,
 2- on the land.

In Ch'orti' *rum* is the only term that can refer to "land" or "earth,"⁸ so the speaker employed the Spanish term *tierra* to appropriately complete this synonymous couplet in example (8).

There is evidently no restriction or perceivable preference on whether the Ch'orti' or Spanish noun appears in the first or second stich of a verse:

- (9) 1- *Ch'a'r e Noxi' **Rey Kilis Kilisante**,*
 2- *Ch'a'r a'si taka **uyogamiente**.*
 3- *Uwala,*
 4- *uwich'.*
- 1- The Great King Kilis Kilisante lies there,
 2- Lies playing with his drowning.
 3- His wings,
 4- His wings.

In example (8) the Ch'orti' form was used in the first stich, but in example (9) the Spanish *ala* appears first and the Ch'orti' equivalent *wich'* is found in the subsequent stich.

Sometimes a nominal form will only be used in one line and another grammatical category in the other:

- (10) 1- *To'yt ne't matuk'a engaño,*
 2- *Maja'x majresb'iret kocha no'n.*
- 1- In your eyes you have no deception.
 2- You are not deceived like us.

Line 1 of example (10) contains the Spanish noun *engaño* ("deception"), whereas line 2 shows a perfect past participle *majresb'ir* ("deceived"), here functioning as an adjective. The semantic correlation is justification enough for the existence of the couplet.

The creative processes involved with bilingual parallelism can be further amplified through semantic extensions. In the following curing prayer the healer identifies the level of the Otherworld from which the afflicting evil spirits hails:

- (11) 1- *Ya' ch'a'r e 17 **estado***
 2- *e 17 **puerta***
 3- *e 17 **grado de infernal del mundo***
 4- *tamar e 4 **koykin del mundo de infernal***
 5- *e 4 esquinera del mundo de infernal*

⁸The term *rum* in Ch'orti' has a broad semantic range, referring to "dirt," "ground," "plot of land," "area," "land," "country," and "earth." No canonical pair is known to exist in any stage of Ch'orti' nor in ritual vocabulary.

- 1- There they lie (in) the 17th level,
- 2- the 17th portal,
- 3- the 17th stage of the infernal world,
- 4- in the 4 supports of the infernal world,
- 5- the 4 corner [supports] of the infernal world.

Lines 1-3 of example (11) form a triplet that shows ellipsis in lines 2 and 3. Three synonyms in Spanish describing the “levels” of the Otherworld are used. In the locative prepositional phrase in lines 4 and 5, the healer states that evil spirits are at the four corner posts that support the earth in Ch’orti’ mythology. Note that in line 4 the healer uses the Ch’orti’ term *koykin*, which usually refers to a roof support beam in typical Ch’orti’ houses. It is paired in line 5 with the Spanish term *esquinera* (“corner”). While “support” and “corner” may on the surface not seem to be an ideal synonymous pairing, in Ch’orti’ thought the corners of the world are where the four pillar-supports of the world are located, and so share an intimate geographic relationship. The creativity in this couplet lies in the use of *koykin*, which is not applied to the world pillar-supports in daily speech, but only to house roof supports. The notion of “support,” however, sufficed to create a proper parallelism.

Verb Phrase Parallelism

Verbs and verb phrases can also be poetically paired using Type 3 bilingual parallelism. Functionally this form is valued by Ch’orti’ ritual specialists because Spanish infinitives can be incorporated into poetic verse, but with an additional caveat not found with nominal pairings. In spoken Ch’orti’ today, Spanish verbs are commonly used but only after a degree of morphological integration, that is, all such verbs must be preceded by the Ch’orti’ verb *che*, meaning “to do” or “to make.” Note the following example:

- (12) 1- *Chenik levantar.*
- 2- *Chenik retirar uyespiritu inmediateamente.*
- 3- *Día kone’r.*
- 4- *y día noche.*

- 1- Lift it [out],
- 2- Remove it [from] his spirit immediately.
- 3- Day today,
- 4- and day tonight.

In example (12) the healer speaks to some among the myriad of deities who are invoked to help cure a patient. In line 1 the second-person plural jussive form (*chen-ik*) is used to call upon those supernatural patrons for divine assistance in “lifting out” the afflicting disease from the person.⁹

⁹Wisdom provides a good description of this process. For a patient who suffers from intestinal worms caused by sorcery, Wisdom states (1940:350, compare 325, 355): “The curer passes his hands over his patient, who is lying on a bed, and imitates a pulling movement in the air, the purpose of which is to pull the worms out.”

In lines 1 and 2 the Ch'orti' verb form *chenik* precedes the Spanish infinitive (*levantar* and *retirar*, respectively). The primary verb in this instance is Spanish in both lines, with the addition of a Ch'orti' element. This use of a generic verb “do” or “make” in conjunction with a Mayan verb is also attested in Tojolob'al (Furbee 2000:101).

In other cases the verb phrase appears fully language-specific in each line of the couplet:

- (13) 1- **Te pido Madre Santisima,**
 2- **Ink'ajti e ajgorgortu',**
 3- **e ajgorgortata',**
 4- **e ajgorgor-Espíritu Santo.**

- 1- I ask you Holiest Mother,
 2- I ask you the Mother Seed,
 3- the Father Seed,
 4- the Corn Seed.

In example (13) the ritual specialist pleads with Mother Earth to bless the seeds that are being placed in the ground. The Spanish verb phrase *te pido* (“I ask you”) is paired with the Ch'orti' *ink'ajti* (“I ask [you]”), followed by a triplet construction containing different ritual terms for corn seeds.

Grammatical Parallelism

The paralleled element can also be grammatical:

- (14) 1- **War uk'ajti e permiso Lucero de Malo,**
 2- **Está pidiendo permiso con la Reina,**
 3- **taka e Katu',**
 4- **War uk'ajti e permiso kochwa e familia e Katu' Reina.**
- 1- It is asking permission [from] *Lucero de Malo* (‘Evil Star’),
 2- It is asking permission from the Queen (the Moon),
 3- from the Moon,
 4- It is asking permission for those such as the children of the Moon.

This culturally complex verse in example (14) refers to a celestial phenomenon in which the moon and Venus rise together on the horizon. The Ch'orti' say that when this happens, Venus is “asking” the moon for permission to kill some of her children (that is, humans on earth). She concedes and the Ch'orti' believe that when these two celestial bodies rise in tandem, there will be a fight to the death in one of the villages that night since Venus is the god of war and strife. That stated, note the elegant use of Type 3 bilingual parallelism in line 1-2 by mimicking the grammatical structure of the present continuous “*war + verb*” in Ch'orti'. Line 2 contains an exact Spanish translation of that verb phrase. In addition, the healer poetically alternates the

names for the moon, first by using the Spanish form *Reina* in line 2, then the Ch’orti’ term *Katu’* in line 3, and then combines them together as *Reina Katu’* in line 4. Also of note is the use of ellipsis in line 3 and the explanatory line 4 that appears either as a monocolon or as the third element in a complex triplet construction.

As we saw earlier in example (10), sometimes the parallelism does not depend on grammatical similarity, but only on the general semantic relationship between two lexemes in the different stichs:

- (15) 1- *tya’ xujch’na utuminob’*,
 2- **robador** *tijtjutir*.
- 1- where his monies were stolen,
 2- **robber** fright.

In example (15) the semantics of the verb in line 1 correlate to the noun in line 2, both relating to the idea of “stealing.” Parallelism is created strictly on semantics, despite grammatical dissimilarity.

Textual Analysis of the Benefits from Bilingual Parallelism

For the modern researcher of indigenous languages, bilingual parallelism can be a considerable aid in determining obscure meanings in ritual forms of speech. Ritual vocabulary in Ch’orti’, for example, is sometimes so archaic and suspended in a formulaic sequence that even the ritual specialists themselves no longer know what particular words mean. Other times, their concepts are complex and often resist simple definitions. In both of these cases, juxtaposed forms employing bilingual parallelism can offer general insights into meanings. Let me illustrate this with a few challenging terms found in Ch’orti’ healing rites. The first I would like to discuss is *tijtjutir*. Note the following examples of its use:

- (16A) 1- *Tijtjutir*,
 2- **espanto** *caído*.
- 1- *Tijtjutir(?)*,
 2- Fallen Fright.
- (16B) 1- ***Ogamiento*** *tijtjutir hombre*,
 2- ***ogamiento*** **espanto** *de hombryob’ atz’i*.
- 1- Drowning Evil Spirit *tijtjutir(?)* of Men,
 2- Drowning Evil Spirits Fright of Men indeed.

- (16C) 1- *Ajgarradera tijtijutir*.
 2- *garradera espanto de hombryob'atz'i ya'che*.
 1- Grabber *tijtijutir(?)*,
 2- Grabber Fright of Men indeed.
- (16D) 1- *Temblor tijtijutirob'*.
 2- *temblor espanto jolchan hombryob'*.
 1- Shaker *tijtijutirs(?)*,
 2- Shaker Frights Infectious Heat Men
- (16E) 1- *Ch'a'r kalor tijtijutir*.
 2- *kalor espanto jolchanob'*.
 1- Lying there is the Evil Eye *tijtijutir(?)*,
 2- Evil Eye Fright Infectious Heaters.
- (16F) 1- *Sudor tijtijutir*.
 2- *sudor espanto jolchanob'*.
 1- Sweat *tijtijutir(?)*,
 2- Sweat Fright Infectious Heaters.

In each of the cases in example (16), the term *tijtijutir* derives from the verbal root *tij* in Ch'orti' meaning "to leap." The reduplicated form *tijtij* is commonly conjoined to the derived noun *jutir*, ("eye," "face," "expression," "appearance"). The resulting form, *tijtijutir*, is a highly common term found in healing prayers. The literal meaning of "jumping-expression" makes little sense. The consistent pairing of this ritual term that is drenched in mythological associations, however, provides some semantic control over its meaning. In all example (16) cases the Spanish term *espanto* ("fright") is given as a synonym for *tijtijutir*, suggesting *tijtijutir* similarly refers to a "fright." Yet that still does not adequately define the term, but rather offers some insights into its semantics. Culturally, the concept of "fright" is linked to notions of cause and effect in Ch'orti' mythology, whereby if one becomes frightened by something, one's spirit is said to "jump from fear," which makes one susceptible to the nefarious influences of evil spirits. Thus, in cases such as this, parallelism in ritual texts can enlighten mythologically and semantically dense terms.

Another example of this process is with the term *jolchan* in Ch'orti':

- (17) 1- *Ajjolchan de kolero*,
 2- *Ajflicción de kolero*.
 1- *Ajjolchan(?)* of anger evil eye,
 2- Affliction of anger evil eye.

In example (17) the term *jolchan*, pregnant with specific cultural and mythological associations, is paired with the Spanish *aflicción* (given as *aj-flicción*, the *aj-* being the Ch’orti’ agentive prefix) “affliction.” Once again this allows for some semantic understanding, that of *jolchan* being a form of “affliction.” The deeper meaning of the term, however, lies outside the Spanish semantics and refers to an infectious evil heat that emanates from malevolent spirits, which “afflicts” people and causes illness.

Certain ritual words whose meaning has been lost altogether can be illuminated through bilingual parallelism, even if that only involves a narrowing of their semantics:

- (18) 1- *Wajtij de hombre*,
 2- *espanto de hombre*.
- 1- *Wajtij(?) of Man*,
 2- *Fright of Man*.

Example (18) contains the term *watij* whose meaning is unknown to all of the healers I interviewed, yet its pairing with *espanto* (“fright”) in this context strongly suggests a synonymous or related meaning for *watij*.

Semantic Transference

As we saw in the previous section, Type 3 bilingual parallelism can provide some understanding for the meaning of juxtaposed terms by semantic association. What I have discussed above, however, was ways the Spanish terms could inform our understanding of complex ritual Ch’orti’ terms, in part at least. The flip side of this equation is that, from the viewpoint of the Ch’orti’ ritual specialist, many of the paired Spanish terms are being used as *synonyms* for the Ch’orti’ words, even if the Ch’orti’ forms have complex mythological associations not found in the original Spanish. We must therefore assume a degree of semantic transference in many cases from the Ch’orti’ onto the Spanish form. In such cases the Spanish terms can be viewed as assimilated into the ritual discourse such that they have become relexicalized with a similar semantic load to those in Ch’orti’.

By way of example, I have selected a single term, common in the Ch’orti’ mythological system, but for which no true Spanish (or likely any other language for that matter) equivalent exists: *mak*. In quotidian speech the verbal root *mak* means “close,” “cover,” “shut up,” or “block.” Illness in Ch’orti’ thought, is often attributed to a “blocking” (*mak-*) action by evil spirits. Note the following:

- (19) 1- *Tapadorob’ malairob’*,
 2- *Cerrador de malaire ausentob’*.
 3- *Ja’xto ch’a’r umakyo’b’u’i e ch’urkab’*,
 4- *Ja’xto ya’*.

- 1- Blocker Evil Winds,
- 2- Blocker of Evil Wind Murdered Souls.
- 3- That's who it is who is lying there blocking the child,
- 4- That's who it is.

In this divination ceremony in example (19), the healer is told by her pulsating calf (*k'in*) that certain evil spirits are “blocking” the baby in the mother’s womb. Here blocking could be seen as quite a literal action; however, in other cases *mak* can refer more generally to disruptive and menacing actions of evil spirits. Lines 1 and 2 pair two Spanish terms, *tapador* and *cerrador*, both meaning “closer” or “blocker.” These link to line 3 where the Ch’orti’ verb *umakyo’b’* (“they block”) (that is, they cause illness that is causing the baby to not be born) is given as the specific actions the “Blockers” were engaged in.

The disease-carrying nature of such blocker-spirits can also be seen in example (20), where evil spirits are said to be involved with a solar eclipse:

- (20)
- 1- *A'si tamar urabanilla de Katata’*,
 - 2- *tamar umakchanir*,
 - 3- *uruedir umakchanir uyok.*
 - 4- *Ch'a'r amakajryo'b’*,
 - 5- *War amakb'akyob' yaja' ja'xto.*
 - 6- *Ch'a'r asijb'ij jararyo'b ja'xto,*
 - 7- *Jitjityanir u'tob'ya’.*
 - 8- *Insolo ajtapadir de Kilis,*
 - 9- *Travesador.*
 - 10- *Ch'a'r takar utapadir u'tob’*,
 - 11- *utapadir uxamb'arob'ya’*,
 - 12- *ucerrador ya’*,
 - 13- *umakchanir uruedir de Katata'tichan.*

- 1- They play in the ring of Sun God,
- 2- in his rainbow,
- 3- the circle of the ring of his feet.
- 4- They are “blocking.”
- 5- They are “blocking” there indeed.
- 6- They are causing inflammation with infectious rays indeed.
- 7- They are tying up tightly the surface there.
- 8- It’s just Blocker Eclipse,
- 9- The Mischief Causer.
- 10- Lying there with the ‘blocking’ of their appearance,
- 11- the “blocking” of their movements there.
- 12- their straining there,
- 13- the rainbow of the ring of the Sun God above.

Lines 1-3 of example (20) describe the actions of evil spirits “playing” (*a si*) around the rings of the sun (*parhelia*). The rings are known as *makchan* in Ch’orti’ (literally, “rainbow”), but further parses as *mak* “close” and *chan* “snake” since rainbows are thought of as giant snakes that “cover” or “block” the sky. It is there in the *makchan* that evil spirits are said, in lines 4-5, to be “blocking.” In line 9 we find out that another evil spirit causing the blockage is known as Kilis, that is, Eclipse. Kilis is said to be *Ajtapadir* in lines 9-11, with *aj-* being a Ch’orti’ agentive prefix and *tapadir*, from the Spanish verb *tapar*, meaning “blocker,” that is, One who Blocks. The notion of “blocking” seems transparent enough between the two languages, yet the Ch’orti’ term carries additional semantic weight, that of causing disease—something utterly absent from the Spanish *tapar*. So while the Ch’orti’ curer uses forms of *mak-* and the Spanish *tapar* seemingly as synonyms, a substantial semantic transference takes place onto the form *tapadir* to mean not only a literal blocking of the sun during a solar eclipse but also the illnesses that come with an eclipse in Ch’orti’ thought, all of which is part of the semantics of the ritual use of the root *mak-*.

One final example also shows this principle to be at work:

- (21) 1- *Ch’a’r amakajryo’b’*,
 2- *Ajtapador ausente*.
- 1- They lie “blocking,”
 2- “Blocker” Murdered Soul.

In example (21) the healer mixes grammatical categories in the construction of the parallelism with an intransitive verb *amakajryo’b’* (“they block”) paired with an agentive noun in Spanish *ajtapador* (“blocker”). The evil spirit that is said to be “blocking” (read: causing illness) is an “*ausente*,” a wandering soul in limbo who was murdered while in this life. The Spanish agentive *tapador* in line 2 receives the same semantic load as the Ch’orti’ root *mak-* in line 1, that of causing illness, not simply the act of blocking *per se*.

Conclusion

The ability to draw upon two linguistic sources can be a creative boon for cultures whose poetry includes paralleled lines. This study contributes to our increasing understanding of what I have termed “bilingual parallelism,” that is, parallelism involving the pairing of synonymous terms from different languages in a distich.

As shown above, poetic structuring of Ch’orti’ ritual texts is a defining feature of the discourse. In traditional healing rites, prayers are obligatorily offered in paralleled lines, principally in the form of couplets. Combined with a highly specialized vocabulary that is far removed from that of daily speech, formal poetic structuring in ritual contexts has a pragmatic function of elevating the social status of ritual specialists. Today among the Ch’orti’ healers are keepers of traditional poetics in their society, an art form that is precariously close to disappearing. What the above discussion makes clear, however, is that healers and other ritual

specialists are the poets of the Ch'orti' people, still tapped into archaic discourse structuring techniques. While some canonical pairings within curing prayers are standardized, healers show considerable creativity and expertise in poetically constructing their petitions by making use of numerous types of parallelism (synonymous, antithetical, grammatical, and so on), ellipsis, augmentation, chiasmus, and others. What the rise of bilingualism in Spanish among the Ch'orti' created was an opportunity to exploit two lexicons in the formation of parallelisms. The influx of Spanish vocabulary, however, must be viewed as intrusive in some cases since those terms replaced native Ch'orti' forms. The innovative aspect of the introduction of Spanish vocabulary into Ch'orti' ritual speech was augmenting it with terms that indexed the sociocultural status of Spanish language while maintaining appropriate parallelistic discourse forms. This bolstering of poetic speech can be seen as a strategy whereby healers sought to raise their own status through the sociocultural status of Spanish. Such communication with the divine for Ch'orti' ritual specialists requires a distinctive form of address, one containing the aesthetic beauties of the paralleled line—the language of gods.

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