

What's your sign for TORTILLA? A comparative study of Yucatec Maya Sign Languages

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Abstract

In my PhD dissertation, I focus on the documentation and comparison of indigenous sign languages used by deaf and hearing people in Yucatec Maya villages. Over the course of my PhD project, I conducted fieldwork in four communities with a high incidence of deafness in the peninsula of Yucatán, Mexico: Chicán, Nohkop, Trascorral and Cepeda Peraza. Because deaf people born into these communities never had access to deaf schools or similar institutions, they developed their own local sign languages, which are independent from the national Mexican Sign Language, in order to communicate with each other and with their hearing relatives. All Yucatec Maya Sign Languages (YMSLs) are young languages, with three generations of deaf signers in Chicán and only one generation in Nohkop, Trascorral and Cepeda Peraza.

The sign languages in the four communities are historically unrelated, but they developed in the same geographic region and from a common cultural background (Yucatec Maya community structures, patterns of socialisation, cultural practices, ideologies and attitudes). They are in ongoing contact with the same spoken languages, namely Yucatec Maya and Spanish, and, most crucially, with the system of co-speech gestures used by hearing people. The shared cultural foundation and common gestural substrate give rise to striking similarities in lexicon and grammar between sign languages without any historical affiliation.

My dissertation consists of four sub-studies: In Study I, I looked at various semiotic resources that deaf and hearing members of Yucatec Maya communities employ to interact with each other and with people from outside their village. I demonstrate that the rich repertoire of Yucatec Maya conventional gestures, positive attitudes towards deafness and sign language, as well as shared cultural knowledge facilitate communication between deaf and hearing people and contribute to the emergence of similar sign languages in historically unrelated communities. In Study II, we investigated the systems of cardinal numbers in YMSLs from three communities. We

found that certain features of Yucatec Maya counting gestures are preserved in YMSLs, but that distinct number paradigms have evolved in YMSLs from three communities. These signed numerals are subject to systematic variation as a result of linguistic and sociolinguistic factors. Study III deals with the question how YMSL signers convey a linguistic distinction between objects and actions and discusses whether these strategies more generally discern nouns from verbs. Two possible strategies of noun-verb distinction were examined, which both have their roots in hearing people's co-speech gestures, but which were integrated into YMSLs in different ways and to a different extent. In Study IV, I focused on a specific gesture conventionally used by hearing speakers of Yucatec Maya to depict the height of upright, usually human, referents. I analysed the various ways how this height-specifier gesture was incorporated into YMSLs from four communities. Comparing form, meaning and distribution of height-specifiers in Yucatec Maya gestures and YMSLs, I demonstrate paths of lexicalisation and grammaticalisation from gesture to sign as well as variation between the communities.

Apart from providing a documentation of largely undescribed, endangered sign languages with unique typological features my project makes several theoretical contributions. YMSLs offer a window on the emergence of linguistic structures and their evolution over the generations. They allow us to examine the role of gesture for sign language creation and to study paths of lexicalisation and grammaticalisation from gestures to signs. The comparison of sign languages that originated in the same geographic and cultural region helps us identify which sociolinguistic factors (e.g. number of generations of deaf signers, age of deaf signers, distribution of deafness across one vs. multiple families, deaf people's levels of formal education, etc.) are relevant for shaping sign language structures.

List of papers

- I. Safar, Josefina. 2019. Translanguaging in Yucatec Maya Signing Communities. *Applied Linguistics Review* 10(1). 31–53.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2017-0082> (Published online in 2017).
- II. Safar, Josefina, Olivier Le Guen, Geli Collí Collí & Merli Collí Hau. 2018. Numeral Variation in Yucatec Maya Sign Languages. *Sign Language Studies* 18(4). 488–516.
- III. Safar, Josefina & Rodrigo Petatillo Chan (in press). Strategies of noun-verb distinction in Yucatec Maya Sign Languages. In Olivier Le Guen, Josefina Safar & Marie Coppola (eds.), *Emerging Sign Languages of the Americas*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.
- IV. Safar, Josefina (forthcoming). “When you were *that* little...” – From Yucatec Maya height-specifier gestures to Yucatec Maya Sign Language person-classifier signs. To appear in *Gesture* 18(1).