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An Ethnography of Mayan Baby Talk
with Special Reference to Quiché

Clifton Pye
Child Language Program
The University of Kansas

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Abstract

This paper describes the nature of the prelinguistic interaction which takes place between Mayan parents and infants, and something of the conceptual framework which underlies and supports the interaction. The study shows that North American middle-class patterns of infant-caregiver interaction are far from universal. This suggests that a cultural perspective is a prerequisite of an adequate theory of baby talk and language acquisition. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the implications such a cultural perspective holds for the study of child language.

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After such studies as Bruner (1975), Greenfield & Smith (1976), Snow (1977a) and Trevarthen (1977), researchers find it fashionable to consider the context in which language acquisition takes place. The interaction between infants and their caretakers provides the foundation for infants' success in reconstructing the speech forms of their community. However, present theories about the emergence of speech in infants rest primarily on studies of middle-class American and European homes. In this culture caretakers think of their babies as potential conversational partners, capable of engaging in some form of turn-taking or response to commands (Snow, DeBlauw & Van Roosmalen, 1979:269). This belief is associated with a special register (motherese) that is both simpler and better formed than speech to adults (see Snow, 1977b and Vorster, 1975 for reviews).

In this paper I provide the ethnographic background of Mayan caretaker speech with special reference to Quiché, a Mayan language spoken in the western highland region of Guatemala. I collected the Quiché data as part of my study on the acquisition of grammatical morphemes (Pye, 1980). I have had to make use of ethnographic observations from other Mayan societies in order to complete the picture since Quiché baby talk was not the focus of my original investigation. Nevertheless, the details are so consistent across space and time that I am confident of a general Mayan pattern of childcare. This pattern is based on concepts that are quite distinct from those of North America. The Mayan concepts of children and childcare, in turn, support a style of speaking to children that has few of the features that are thought to be universals of such speech (Ferguson, 1978). Quiché baby talk uses normal pitch and speed, the usual verbal morphology, and many

complex sentences (Pye, in press; Ratner & Pye, 1984). A better understanding of how such beliefs are translated into features of caretaker speech is important in specifying the input that infants must deal with in acquiring language. The Mayan data shows that a cultural perspective is a prerequisite of an adequate theory of caretaker speech and language acquisition.

The Mayan Concept of Infancy

Mayans use a set of conceptual dimensions (soul, heat, embracing, time and talk) to evaluate all people--adults and infants alike (Vogt, 1976). The most important of these is their notion of soul. Vogt (1969) states that the Zinacantecos of Chiapas, Mexico believe each person has two different types of soul, the inner soul (*ch'u'lel*)¹ and the animal spirit companion (*chanul*). The inner soul has thirteen parts and is located in the heart and blood of each person. The ancestral gods place this soul in the body of an unborn embryo. At the same time, they create an animal spirit companion and place it in a mountain for safekeeping. Although the inner soul is supposed to be eternal and indestructible, it may be temporarily divisible during various kinds of 'soul-loss'. This is particularly apt to happen with infants, so elaborate precautions must be taken:

When a Zinacanteco mother gets up from a spot on the ground away from home where she has been sitting with her baby for some time, she almost invariably brushes the ground with the rebozo in which she carries the baby in order to gather up any parts of the infant's soul that might have left the body at that location. Until (and to a lesser extent, after) the baptism, great care is exercised, since the early period of a Zinacanteco life is an extraordinarily delicate one (Vogt, 1969:185).

Brian Stross mentions a similar belief among the nearby Tenejapa Tzeltal:

The younger the child the more capricious, easily harmed, easily lost, and weak (*k'un*) is its *ch'u-lel* (soul). A young child must not fall down or it may lose its *ch'u-lel* to the earth... Once walking, a young child is often allowed to accompany his mother in getting water or on some other short errand. If he trips and falls on the way the mother will become anxious and often pray with great urgency that the earth will not take and keep the child's spirit (1969:48).

After birth, mother and baby are confined to the house for a period of twenty days (one round of the ancient Mayan ritual calendar), during which time the mother must observe certain precautions. She must eat only "hot" foods like chicken and beef, and not go out of the house except to relieve herself or take the sweat bath with the midwife. The baby must be kept wrapped up and hidden from view in order to keep the soul in its body. The mother also binds its wrists and ankles to this end (Vogt, 1969:182). During this time, all the rubbish from whatever the mother eats is thrown under the bed (Cosminsky, 1976:113). The baby's spirit might be present in the trash and thrown out by mistake (Hinshaw, 1975:118). One of the major purposes of baptism is to "fix" the soul more firmly in the child's body (Vogt, 1969:370). At death, the soul leaves the body and rejoins the supply of souls which the ancestral gods maintain for reuse in other people. "If the child is born feet first and dead, it is the spirit of an ancestor... This ancestor was sinful in this world, is suffering in the other life, and wants to be born again" (Wagley, 1949:23). Parents are expected to treat a small child with utmost care and affection, lest its soul, not yet used to its new receptacle, become frightened and leave (Vogt, 1969:370).

For the Mam of Santiago Chimaltenango, Guatemala, the soul (*na:bl*) is what enables people

to perceive physical objects as well as act appropriately in social settings (Watanabe, 1981). A new-born baby is said to have *na:bl* because it responds to the people and things around it. On the other hand, the infant is not believed to be responsible. The phrase *te tu:l tna:bl xja:l*, literally 'when the person's *na:bl* arrived here,' is used to refer to the time of the person's earliest childhood memories as well as when the person woke up or got well (Watanabe, 1981). Vogt notes that the primary reason given for soul-loss is deviant social behavior: 'fighting with or mistreating kinsmen; failure to accept community service as a cargoholder in the religious hierarchy; failure to care for maize fields properly; mishandling of the maize after it is brought into the home; failure to wash regularly and change into clean clothes; failure to pay "taxes" for fiestas' (1969:373). The ancestral gods punish bad behavior by making people fall down or sending a lightning bolt to knock out one or more parts of the soul. It is somewhat of a paradox, then, that infants, regarded as the least responsible members of Mayan society, should be in such constant peril of losing their souls. A possible explanation is that Mayan parents have some well defined beliefs about what they consider to be proper social behavior for infants. Among these would appear to be strictures against crying of falling down excessively. As June Nash observes:

If the child cries frequently, it is suspected that his soul is still not firmly lodged and has been wandering in the streets where it encounters animal spirits that frighten him. This requires a soul-calling ceremony performed in the house in which he lives. The midwife, the only person present besides the mother, performs the ritual. She puts cold water in the child's mouth and then goes to the door, saying, "Enter if you arrive, little boy (or little girl)." Then she brushes the child with pine branches dipped in springwater, and smokes with incense of pitch pine the clothing which is

then put on the child. The incense "makes a path for the soul to find the body of the child" (1970:116-7).

These beliefs not only determine what parents consider to be appropriate behavior for infants, but also serve as potent indicators to the baby that his behavior carries a social significance. It probably does not take too many ceremonies before a baby learns that he has a powerful effect on the behavior of others which may entail extraordinary consequences.

Another conceptual dimension for the Mayan parent is "heat":

Although ultimately this heat is derived from, or partakes of the Sun, it is measured not by degrees, but by conventional modes of Zinacanteco thought. Heat is a general quality of existence. It provides a language for describing the differences in power in the universe, whether this be the political power of an Indian leader, the ritual power of an expert shaman or competent cargoholder, the supernatural strength of the *ch'ulel* of a respected older man... the curing power of a hot ritual plant, or the highly intoxicating potential of hot cane liquor (Vogt, 1976:206-7).

People and things become hotter as power and age increase. An infant is born cold. After delivery, the midwife bathes the infant in warm water which has been boiled with aromatic leaves. Then she rubs salt (a hot substance) twice on the top of the baby's mouth, and presents the child with three red chilis, 'giving much-needed "heat" to a still "cold" body' (Vogt, 1976:20). Afterwards the mother and baby are covered with blankets to protect them from the dangers of "evil eye" and "winds". The "evil eye" is caused by the glance of people who are dangerously "hot". These include pregnant women (Cosminsky, 1976:110), strangers and men who are warm and perspiring (Wagley, 1949:26). The *aires*, or "winds" may

cause the baby to become excessively "cold" (Wagley, 1949:27). For a period of weeks following the birth, the baby is kept guarded from view so that its soul will not be lost and it can gain the necessary strength and "heat" to survive (Vogt, 1976:20). A nursing mother should avoid "cold" foods since they would turn the mother's milk cold and make the baby ill from nursing (Cosminsky 1976:112). It would seem that Mayan parents literally "cook" their infants in order to preserve them from the dangers that lurk outside the family (see Levi-Strauss, 1968 for the significance of the concept of cooking). As a result, Mayan babies experience a fairly restricted inter action with the world during the first few months of their existence (cf. Brazelton, 1977).

Mayan parents are expected to be "embracers" or "carriers" of their children so that they do not lose their *ch'ulel* (Vogt, 1976:206). The same concept applies to the godfather and godmother that a child acquires at baptism, who are supposed to embrace their godchild during this ceremony. At weddings, a ritual specialist introduces the bride into her new home and "embraces" the souls of the bride and groom, "planting" them beneath the feet of Zinacantan's patron saints (Vogt, 1969:215). During curing ceremonies, a patient who has lost parts of his soul is embraced by the shaman in an attempt to wield them back together and symbolically restore the patient to Zinacanteco society (Vogt, 1976:88). On a public sphere, periodic ceremonial processions around the town and the community "embrace" the Zinacantecan center and its locus of culture, keeping it safe and separate from outside demons and forces of nature. Finally, `As Zinacanteco society is guarded within its "frame", so the universe is embraced by the paths traced by the Sun and the Moon... As parents of the universe, they embrace their creation through ceaseless movements around it (Vogt, 1976:206).

Time is the conceptual dimension that is most often associated with Mayan culture. The ancient

Maya were skilled mathematicians and are famous for their "long count" which reckoned time from a mythical event set at 3133 B.C. (Wolf, 1959:89). Each day and month carried its own fortune which could be good or bad depending on the god which ruled that particular date. Since the calendar revolved around cycles of 52 years, it was possible to read both history and the future from the same succession of days. Vestiges of this calendrical system and associated beliefs permeate modern Mayan communities (Tedlock, 1981). Mayan shamans can predict a baby's character from the day sign of its birth.

The ancestors also determine a Mayan child's fate by recycling the souls of the deceased. Nearly all the families that I observed in Zunil had named a child after a grandparent. If the grandparent is still alive, the child and his grandparent refer to one another as *nuk'axe:l* (which my informants always translated as *tocayo* "namesake"). Mondloch (1980:11) states that the people are thereby expressing their belief that the child is the actual replacement for his grandparent. He adds that, 'One is careful to see that the *k'e?x* is treated properly, for whatever treatment the child receives, be it good or bad, it taken personally by the grandparent since they are in essence one and the same person' (p. 11). People expect children to have the personality of their *k'axe:l* since they are their grandparent's replacement. It also explains why Zunil parents frequently address their children as *na:n* "mother" or *ta:t* "father".² The succession of souls directly embodies the cycles of time and is just as immutable. Mayan children are doomed to relive the past.

One final conceptual dimension along which Mayan children are placed is talk. Vogt states that, 'The Zinacantecos are a highly verbal people; the fact that many different terms describe and differentiate hierarchically the types of talking...testifies to the importance of speech' (1976:203).³ The ability to speak well is a primary attribute of a mature Zinacantecan.

Vogt states that the field workers who are still learning to speak Tzotzil 'are treated like babies who are not yet fully human' (1976:204). Yet, 'There is little pressure to master the basic skills of walking, talking, and learning to urinate and defecate outside, and little or no pride on the part of parents over the speed which children learn them' (1969:185). Wagley adds:

People pay little attention to the sounds that a child makes before it learns to speak intelligibly. Andrea believed that the jabbering of babies "has some meaning to the baby, but that as soon as it learns to talk the child forgets all about it." Children invariably learn to say *Ta* (father) first and only a little later to say *Na* (mother). For a while these monosyllables are all that is expected of the child, and, as far as I could learn, there was no specific age at which children were supposed to have learned to speak. Informants estimated two years, or even three years, as the age when children begin to speak' (1949:29-30).

Most ethnographers of Mayan societies report that parents do not engage in any traditional games or songs with their infants. Bunzel's description is typical:

The Quiché woman is a gentle and solicitous mother, but she never takes time off from serious occupations like weaving to play with her children, or to talk to them. There are no lullabies, no children's tales, no little games which adults play with children. Men pay no attention whatever to small babies except to call their wives when they cry (1959:101)

Brian Stross, however, reports 'a general Tzeltal belief that parental response to child speech is a necessary feature of child socialization and that the state of the child's soul is directly influenced by parental response or the lack of it' (1972:7). Stross' description is in the context

of a discussion of a mother's speech to her 30-month-old daughter, and as I show below, there is reason to believe that Mayan parents change their speech behavior after a child begins to talk. Stross also describes a game which this mother played with her daughter.⁴

There are a number of Mayan beliefs that relate specifically to promoting a child's language development. The Tenejapa Tzeltal believe the umbilical cord should be cut at least six inches from the infant; otherwise, when the baby grew up it would not be able to shout across canyons (Stross, 1969:28). Before a child is able to speak well, they believe it helps to bump the child's head gently every once in a while with a *culha*, a large, short gourd used to keep tortillas warm (p. 41). 'A child of three or four with pronunciation difficulties, delays in learning to speak, or problems in the area of speaking well and correctly, may be given one or more roasted cicadas (*chikitin*) to eat. Another remedy for such speech difficulties is a small bell, the *kashkawela* worn by *alferezes*, which is lightly touched on the crown of the child's head three times and then on top of the chest three times' (p. 42). The Cakchiquel of Panaja chel, Guatemala believe that feeding a child the food dropped from a parrot's beak will give it the parrot's ability to speak clearly (Hinshaw, 1975:120). The Chamula of Chiapas, Mexico believe they can aid a child's language development by feeding him a special type of small tortilla called *memella* (Gossen, personal communication, 1982).⁵

The Mayan Pattern of Child Care

Mayan beliefs in the reincarnation of souls and the predestination of individual lives may be the explanation of a certain ambivalence they show toward their children. On one hand they are extremely indulgent, permitting their children to eat as often and whatever they want or to destroy anything within reach. The parents will resort to discipline only when unusually provoked, as when a

child interferes with the parent's work. On the other hand, children do suffer occasional extremes of neglect or abuse due to their parents' poverty or drunkenness. One one-year-old child I knew died because his parents were too drunk to take care of him for several days. Another woman who lived next to us almost allowed her newborn to die when her milk dried up. They were probably too poor to support any more children, but it seemed as though once the mother's milk had gone, she accepted as a matter of fact that she would lose her baby. She was a warm, protective mother who cared deeply for her children. Beliefs in the reincarnation and predestination of souls would help to cushion the loss of a child by both the fact that this was the child's destiny and that it still might reappear at some later time.

While parents seldom resort to physical punishment, they often use threats of strangers or bogeymen to gain compliance from small children. Tourists were the ideal bogeymen before they became scarce since they are tall, dress differently, and talk in strange languages. Mothers point them out to their children on a crowded bus and tell them that if they do not behave, they will be given to the tourist who would take them for away and eat them. The mothers of the children I recorded would use this threat as a way of getting their children to speak for me, usually without much success. In one instance, I was playing with A To:n (1;7) in a room with a radio playing marimba music in the background. I pretended to dance and said, 'Let's go to the fiesta.' My assistant's wife immediately asked if I would carry A To:n. When I said 'yes,' she commented that I would probably lose him in the market. I had to give up trying to record two children because they were too terrified of me to play. The only reason I was able to work with another child (Al Tiya:n) was because she had a three and a half year old sister who was relatively unafraid of us. I was told that until several years ago the people believed the tourists caused outbreaks of smallpox by

taking pictures of children and throwing them into the nearby volcano.

Zunil mothers were frequently evasive when questioned about their youngest children. In one tape that I recorded a mother says her youngest son is not yet talking, that he only says *na:n* "mother" and *ta:t* "father", and that he does not know what a truck is (even though they lived just below a main highway). When we asked what his older brother's age was, the mother responded that it was three and a half and that his birthday was the 18th of February. When we asked how old A Ci?s was, his mother became evasive. She told us A Ci?s was a year and a half old, but did not know when he was born, adding that perhaps it was the 14th, but she did not know which month and that it would be four months to the end of his second year. It may be that the mother did not know A Ci?s' birthday, but since I elicited this response from other mothers of young children, I am inclined to think it stems from the mothers' concern for the well-being of their children's souls.

Quiché parents told me that children were a good thing—they kept you from being sad. They were extremely solicitous about the welfare of their infants. If a mother was careless in the way she carried her baby, other mothers made sure that she readjusted her babycarrier (*re:qab'a:l ak'al*). Small children are especially vulnerable to inadequate diets, infectious diseases, intestinal parasites, and accidents, any one of which may be fatal (Berg, Scrimshaw & Call, 1973; Mata, 1978). One informant told me that eight children was an ideal number to have, that way at least four or five would survive to help their parents in old age. Nonetheless, mothers evidence little concern when setting their infants down to play by the fire or among machetes and other debris scattered over the dirt floor of their houses. Small children appear fairly adept at handling dangerous objects.

The high infant mortality rate supports a number of beliefs about pregnancy and the causes of disease among children. A pregnant woman is referred to as *yawa:b'* "sick", probably because of her unusually "hot" condition. They take care not to tell anyone else of their condition lest they provoke *envidia* (envy). A woman who is barren is supposed to be jealous of a pregnant woman and cause her to miscarry or die in childbirth. An older sibling may also show *envidia* towards a newborn, causing the disease *chaq'imal* in the newborn (Mannard, 1966). Pregnant women experience food cravings which they try to satisfy. My assistant's wife once asked us to buy some quinces for her. Women insist upon being attended by an *iyom* (native midwife) at birth, and regard the hospital as a place one goes to die. My assistant's wife, who had to go to the hospital in Quetzaltenango for a Caesarean, was attended by a midwife on her return home. Belief in the evil eye is universal, and infants are kept well covered when taken away from home. One of my subjects was treated for the condition known as *xetzalob' uwi:?* "his hair breaks" by having powdered cow's horn rubbed onto it. The village shamans are highly respected; my informant insisted there were diseases such as polio (*ront*) which only a shaman could cure, and that even nonIndians had come to Zunil for treatment.

Parent-child interaction is very different from the American middle-class standard. Quiché babies are kept close to their mothers at all times, either strapped to their back, in a cradle of rags nearby, or beside them in bed. The mothers are quick to interpret any movement or vocalization as a signal to feed their babies, which they can do while continuing with their own activities. They will also quiet a baby they are carrying on their backs by gently rocking forwards and backwards while patting it on the bottom and saying "sh, sh, sh..." in a soft voice (*kukux ka? chila?*). Occasionally a mother would amuse her baby with her necklace, flowers or bits of string, but for the most part, the baby was ignored. Bunzel's observation is typical:

Presently the baby wakes up and cries. Immediately her father calls Manuela, and she takes the baby to her mother to be nursed. Tomasa nurses him without laying aside her loom, holding him on her lap, with the folds of her voluminous huipil (blouse) pulled over his head. After he has finished she holds him in her arms, whacking his little rear until he falls asleep. Then he is returned to his shady corner. But he has decided he doesn't want the corner any more, and protests. He is promptly picked up, put on his mother's back and tied securely in two large square cloths. This is satisfactory and he goes to sleep at once, while his mother goes on with her work (1959:101).

Such scenes take place all about one and set the tenor for the first year of a Zunil baby's existence.

Quiché Speech to Children

My impression is that vocal interaction between infants and parents was minimal, although there was some variation between parents in this regard. One mother made a great deal of fuss over her baby girl and frequently talked to her. But she also left her in the care of a deaf and mute sister for long periods of the day. I often felt compelled to talk with my subjects in order to get material for my study of their morphological development--spontaneous speech being an extremely rare event. Quiché parents spend their time working, not entertaining their children. I did not observe (nor could I elicit) any traditional games or songs which parents engaged in with their young children. The following example, taken from the tapes of A Ci?s, A Se:?, and their mother, illustrate the Quiché mother's tendency to ignore their young children's vocalizations.⁶

Example 1. Blowing soap bubbles.

Na:n: Ay, they're going up.
Ay, there, there, there they are, there.

A Ci?s: Na:n.

A Se:?: They went up high.

A Ci?s: Na:n, na:n.

Na:n: What?
Catch one of your own.
There it goes.
There went another one.

Throughout this tape and others, the mother seems preoccupied with what my assistant and I were doing, and tended to ignore A Ci?s. She only responds to him when he addresses her as *na:n* "mother", and even then she ignores him sometimes. She repeatedly ignored his other sounds (*m*, *le:* "there", *ah*, and the like). In this, she is a fairly typical representative of Mayan mothers.

However, this example also shows that Quiché parents treat their toddlers as conversational partners after they learn to speak. The mother's reply ("What?") is a typical response to being addressed by name. A better example of a conversation between young Quiché children and their parents occurs between Al Tiya:n (2;1), her brother (7 years) and her father, who had just returned home from work in the field.

Example 2. Playing with some plastic farm animals.

Al Tiya:n: Chick, daddy. (Referring to plastic animal)

Ta:t: What?

Al Tiya:n: There.

Ta:t: What?
Al Tiya:n: Chick.
Ta:t: You have a chick?
Al Tiya:n: There.
Ta:t: That's right.
Al Tiya:n: There, there.
Ta:t: Where did you get it?
Al Tiya:n: Chick.

Here, Al Tiya:n and her father have a conversation even though they seem to be talking past one another. Al Tiya:n is practicing her conversational openers, while her father attempts to move the conversation along to a new aspect.

These conversations suggest that Quiché parents make a sharp distinction in their vocal behavior between infants and toddlers. Parents address almost no speech to their babies, whereas by the time their children reach A Ci?s' age (1;6-1;8), and certainly by Al Tiya:n's age (2;1), parents engage them in "real" conversation. This corresponds to the transition between baby status (*loch'*) and child status (*alih* "girl" and *alah* "boy") which Francesca Cancian (1963) claimed was marked by weaning and cessation of the nearly constant carrying. This distinction may be slightly exaggerated since even at the toddler stage, Quiché parents did not talk very often with their children. They certainly lacked any concept of talking with their children for the sake of their language development and were not conscious of their children's particular stage of linguistic development. Al Tiya:n's mother told my assistant that while Al Tiya:n's speech was not yet clear, she was talking. Other parents told me their children were not talking and could not understand why I would be interested in taperecording their

speech. It may be that Quiché parents only respond to their children's speech, rather than actively eliciting it. This would explain why they do not respond vocally to infants, but do respond to children who know just two or three words.

Mayan mothers spend a good deal of their conversational time acting as interpreters--either repeating what is said to their child or interpreting what the child said.

Example 3. Talking with Al Cha:y (3;0), and her mother.

C: What is her name?

Na:n: `What is her name,' he says.
`Li:n,' you say to him.
Tell it to that whiteman there.

C: What is your sister's name?

Al Cha:y: No, Li:n.

Here, Al Cha:y's mother interprets my question to Al Cha:y and provides her with a response. Had I known about this routine when I arrived in the field, I might have used it to greater effect in eliciting different syntactic constructions from the children. The interpretive routines are easy to identify because they involve some form of the verb *-cha?* "to say". This verb is formally intransitive since it takes the intransitive person marker *-at*. Unlike most other Quiché verbs, even in speech to children, it frequently appears without the markers for aspect, person and clause-final position (compare the position of the "say" verbs in this example with the position of the "tell" verb). The mothers use the bare stem when interpreting a sentence for the child and the full verb form when responding for the child.⁷ They use such verbs as *-b'i:j* "tell" and *-ch'aw* "speak" when they actually expect their

children to speak. Another unusual feature of this verb is that it always appears sentence finally. The usual word order in Quiché is VOS. The verb is used outside motherese in reciting narratives and myths (Norman, 1976; Maxwell, 1982) as well as in divination (Tedlock, 1981).

Quiché parents use the verb *-cha?* to interpose themselves linguistically between their children and their children's conversational partners, perhaps as a linguistic means of embracing their child's speech. While this routine involves children in conversation beyond their current linguistic abilities, their mothers do not do this consciously in order to aid their children's language development (cf. Schieffelin, 1979).

Summary

In this paper I have presented the conceptual framework which underlies and supports baby talk in Mayan societies. Mayans consider all human interaction in terms of a fixed number of souls whose basic characteristics were determined at the beginning of time. A Mayan parent's major task is to "embrace" the soul of their infant, keeping it safe from the outside world until it has gained enough "heat". Mayan mothers keep their babies well protected from the gaze of strangers and do not attach special communicative significance to their infants' vocalizations. During this period their infants are at risk from disease. Many never survive to the next stage, and so Mayan parents may not dare to invest much emotional attachment. Since their children are the reincarnation of an ancestor, Mayan parents have no particular need to "teach" them language. Such beliefs support a style of baby talk that is extremely different from that of North American middle-class households. Mayan baby talk underlines the extent to which all baby talk is a culturally defined medium rather than some form of genetic booster seat for language. The determinants of the baby talk register are no

different from any other style of speaking, which ultimately depend upon cultural definitions of the various social roles and settings as well as the speech behavior that is proper for each. There is an intimate relationship between language and culture--the forces which determine the care and feeding of infants are also responsible for the speech directed to them.

Caretakers have particular, culturally defined conceptualizations of infants which affect their behavior with infants and especially their speech to infants. Mohave parents, for example, believe that even fetuses about to be born are capable of understanding and responding to rational verbal admonitions (Devereux, 1949). Japanese mothers see their babies as extensions of themselves whose needs and wishes are obvious without extensive interpersonal communication (Caudill & Weinstein, 1969). Mothers in Western Samoa strive not to speak to their young children due to culturally prescribed rules of etiquette (Ochs, 1982). These conceptualizations are founded on more general beliefs about what it means to be human in each society. Clifford Geertz notes that, 'In Java, for example, ... the people quite flatly say, "To be human is to be Javanese." Small children, boors, simpletons, the insane, the flagrantly immoral are said to be *ndurung djawa* "not yet Javanese"' (1973:52). All cultures face the task of transforming infants into their conception of a competent, social being. The speech addressed to young children is but one of the means used to accomplish this transformation. In Mayan culture, infants seem to have more in common with the dead ancestors than the living. Their rituals of birth and early infancy may be as much for the parents' benefit as the child's, insuring that the land of the dead is kept separate from the living while slowly transforming a dead creature into a member of society.

The differences between Mayan and American patterns of child care underline the fact that child rearing in human society is as much a

cultural activity as painting or religion. The human infant enters a world where each routine and speech style has its own cultural interpretation. A child cannot acquire language without also acquiring the particular cultural assumptions on which the language is built (cf. Keesing, 1979). This fact multiplies the child's task enormously. Basic biological states such as hunger, pain or happiness may have very different meanings in different cultures. The child's behavior does not supply him with any "natural" clues about the meanings of events he witnesses and, thus, there are no meanings available for the child to associate with the speech he hears (contra Wexler & Culicover, 1980; Pinker, 1984). Rather, the child must negotiate every meaning through interaction with his caretakers. Such meanings are by no means evident in a single example. They emerge gradually from the sum total of the individual's interaction with other members of his culture.

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Footnotes

¹Forms from all Mayan languages are cited in a practical orthography developed for the Mayan languages by Terrence Kaufman (1976). All symbols have their customary phonetic values except that ch = [tʃ], tz = [ts], x = [ʃ], j = [x], C' = glottalized consonant, V: = long vowel.

²See Colby 1981:303, fn. 1 for a discussion of a similar custom among the Ixil Maya.

³For descriptions of Mayan ways of speaking see Bricker 1974; Gossen 1974a, 1974b; Stross 1974.

⁴See Gossen 1974a for other descriptions of games which Mayan children over the age of three years play.

⁵Laughlin (1975) traces this word to the Aztec term *mimilli*, which may indicate that this belief is widespread in Mesoamerica.

⁶I have provided free translations for the two examples cited in this paper to make them more accessible for the average reader. Transcriptions in Quiché with interlinear translations are given in the appendix.

⁷John DuBois informs me that Sacapultec speakers use the bare stem with the completive aspect and the whole verb form with the incompletive aspect.

Appendix

Example 1.

Na:n: Ay, x- 0- paqe chi kaj.
ay, completive-it-climbed to sky.

Ay, le:, le:, le:, le:
there, ...

k'o: ya le:, le:, le:, le:.
it is now there, ...

A Ci?s: Na:n.
Mother.

A Se?: aq chi kaj (= e- naq chi kaj)
go-perfect to sky

A Ci?s: Na:n, na:n.

Na:n: Qasa:ch?
What?

Example 2.

Al Tiya:n: Ch'iw ta:t (= le: ch'iw ta:t)
the chick daddy

Ta:t: Sa:ch?
What?

Al Tiya:n: Le?.
There.

Ta:t: Sa:ch?
What?

Al Tiya:n: ?iw (= ch'iw)
chick

Ta:t: K'o: inaj a- ch'iw?
Is there diminutive your-chick?

Al Tiya:n: Le?.
There.

Ta:t: La k'ut e?.
That's right.

Al Tiya:n: Le?, le?.
There, there.

Ta:t: Jawi x- 0- a- ma wih?
Where completive-it-you-get Loc

Al Tiya:n: Ch'iw.
Chick.

Example 3.

C: Jas u-b'i:?
What her-name?

Al Cha:y: m?

Na:n: Jas u-b'i: cha??
What her-name he says?

Mpe: cha-r-e: Li:n k-at-cha?.
Better to-him Li:n incomplete-you-say.

Ch- 0-a- b'i:j mpe cha-r-e:
imperative-it-you-tell better to-him

le: mu?s le?!
that whiteman there!

C: Jas u-b'i: l- aw- a:tz?
What her-name the-your-older sister?

Al Cha:y: No, Li:n.