
Conclusion

This thesis has examined the nature of person marking in Petalcingo Tzeltal. The verb agreement markers are the primary device for disambiguation between subject and object in transitive constructions. Moreover, since few nouns generally occur in Tzeltal discourse, the person markers frequently are the only indication of who is doing what to whom. The same markers are employed with nouns to indicate and specify possession.

The first chapter is an all-too-brief grammatical sketch of this fascinating language, where, among other things, some particularly interesting features of Tzeltal grammar are highlighted. These include radically disjunctive aspect marking, an all-pervasive separation of transitive and intransitive verbs, identity of ergative and possessive cross-reference markers, as well as the indeterminate status of the distinction between the /h/ and /j/ phones.

The second chapter takes up the analysis of the *-el* participles in Petalcingo Tzeltal. Contrary to previous hypotheses which analyzed these participles as infinitives, a nominal account is proposed. This treatment offers a straightforward explanation of the optionality of ergative/possessive cross-reference markers with the *-el* participles, their apparent syntactic ergativity, as well as the appearance (or lack thereof) of a preposition in progressive constructions. It is further argued that *-bel* participles also serve as arguments to auxiliary verbs, though the nominal status of the *-bel* participles is called into question. Lastly, a nominal analysis of all transitive verbs in Petalcingo Tzeltal is explored, and though it seems to offer attractive explanations for some curious phenomena (such as the disjunctiveness of the aspectual system), this proposal in the end is rejected, because it cannot account for some apparent problems.

The third chapter considers the identity of ergative marking and possessor cross-reference in Tzeltal. First, a clitic analysis is proposed for ergative/possessive person cross-reference. This analysis argues against the previous assumptions that these morphemes are affixes. What follows is a cross-linguistic examination of identity of verbal grammatical relations marking with that in the noun phrase. Various functional and diachronic theories are considered with respect to this phenomenon, as well as several principles-and-parameters (P&P)-style approaches. None of the current theories appear to be able to account for the Tzeltal data.

The basic stance of this thesis is that, all things being equal, identical linguistic forms are reflexes of the same entities. More colloquially this translates into a simple dictum of the introductory linguistics class: “form first!” This principle, is designed to minimize linguists’ temptations to force new (and interesting) linguistic phenomena into the mold of languages previously studied.

Even though plenty of work remains to be done on every language ever researched, linguistics, as a discipline that seeks to understand what human Language is, sometimes appears to be a little too content to concern itself with languages that are rather close to home. If we are to understand what is human Language, we must seek to find out what linguistic phenomena exist in the world. The rapid disappearance of the world's languages makes it imperative to document existing the linguistic diversity, if not for some altruistic purpose of preserving the multiplicity of tongues and cultures for posterity, then from a purely selfish motive of having more data to check against our sometimes all-to-European-centric theories. To this end, perhaps the most useful part of the present work, if any, is the first chapter and the appendices that follow this conclusion, which attempt to record, however insufficiently, some aspects the language spoken in Petalcingo, municipio de Tila, Chiapas, Mexico.