

A 'small' language in contact with a 'big' one: The loss of alienability distinction in Teenek (Mayan) under Spanish influence

Elwira Sobkowiak (University of Warsaw) torlino@gmail.com

Marcin Kilarski (Adam Mickiewicz University) kilarski@amu.edu.pl

In this paper we analyze changes in possession marking in Teenek (Mayan; also Tének, Huastec). Traditionally in Teenek only alienable possession is marked with the suffix *-il* (attached to the possessed noun), as opposed to unmarked inalienable possession. The analysis of our own data from the modern variety of Teenek spoken by the young and socially-mobile generation of Teenek speakers shows that the distinction between alienable and inalienable possession marking is disappearing. We demonstrate that possession marking in modern Teenek is not only sensitive to semantic/pragmatic factors but also to the socio-cultural background of Teenek speakers.

Maldonado (1994) argued that the choice of possession marking in Teenek depends on the degree of proximity, as determined by conceptual dependence of the possessum and the degree of inherence of the possessum-possessor relation. His study focused on the semantic conditioning of possession marking, showing how kinship terms, body parts as well as certain types of sickness and emotions are considered inalienable, and therefore unmarked. Maldonado also proposed a number of cultural criteria influencing the degree of individuation and showed how some objects are considered conceptually dependent and unmarked for possession, e.g. bed, walking stick, cigarette, home. Our data collected in elicitation sessions (translations and grammatical judgements) with Teenek native speakers during fieldwork in Mexico in 2015, and earlier over instant messaging services and e-mail, suggests that the study of possession marking in Teenek has to take into consideration also the socio-cultural context. We show that the choice of possession marking also depends on such factors as age, level of fluency and degree of social mobility, as well as the size of the community and degree of social stability. In the case of some young speakers of Teenek many items which in the more traditional variety are considered inalienable are now regarded as conceptually independent and marked for possession.

The present work on the Teenek possessives is part of a larger project analysing the outcomes of language contact in the Huasteca region between Spanish and indigenous languages, i.e. Huasteca Nahuatl and Teenek. Our analysis shows the role of the social/demographic context in the study of language contact and change: while explicit structural modifications involving e.g. morphological marking of possession result from language contact, the changes can also be attributed to the loss of culture-specific interpretation of categories among bilingual Teenek speakers who are more exposed to Spanish and the *mestizo* culture.

References

Maldonado, Ricardo. 1994. "Iconic Proximity in Veracruz Huastec Possessives." In: Roberto Zavala Maldonado (ed.), *Estudios sobre lenguas mayas*. Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, pp. 1-25.