

Introducing Referents in Mopan Maya

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ABSTRACT

We discuss aspects of the grammar of Mopan Maya. We focus on the forms used to introduce noun phrases: the gender markers (GM) *ix* ('feminine') and *aj* ('masculine') and the "article" *a*. These resemble so-called "Determiners" (elements that introduce a noun phrase, conveying information about e.g. familiarity of the referent); they also resemble "Noun Classifiers" (elements that subdivide nouns according to conceptual categories like male/female, animate/inanimate etc.). However their interaction is typologically unusual, and commonly identified semantic functions of determiners, such as expressing definiteness or individuation, are not their central function.

In fieldwork conducted with Mopan speakers in Toledo District (summer 2011), we found that all three forms share the function of "entitizing": making it clear that the following word/phrase should be interpreted as a noun rather than as a verb. This is communicatively useful because in Mopan, like some other indigenous languages of the Americas, nouns and verbs can carry the same grammatical endings, or inflections. One difference between the Gender Marker (GM) and the article is that GM + verb is interpreted as the performer of the action (*aj ok'ot* 'the dancer'), whereas article + verb is interpreted as the action itself (*a ok'ot* 'the dance'). Speakers may creatively exploit these forms, e.g. in stories, to suggest agency of inanimate objects.

This study sheds light on how grammatical forms help speakers identify and characterize discourse referents. Understanding how human languages can vary ultimately helps us understand the nature of the human language faculty itself.

KEYWORDS: Mopan, Mayan, language, determiners, noun classifiers, grammar, grammatical gender, agency, animacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mopan Maya belongs to the Yucatekan language subfamily and is spoken by several thousand people in Belize and Guatemala. In this paper we focus on the grammatical forms that are used to introduce noun phrases: the gender markers *ix* ('feminine') and *aj* ('masculine') and the "article" *a*. These forms resemble so-called "Determiners" (elements that introduce a noun phrase, conveying information about e.g. whether the person or thing being talked about is already familiar to the hearer). They also resemble "Noun Classifiers" (elements that subdivide nouns according to conceptual categories like male/female, animate/inanimate etc.; Grinevald 1021; Aikhenvald ch. 3). However the Mopan noun-introducers interact in ways that are unusual in comparison with other languages, and as we show below, commonly identified semantic functions of determiners, such as expressing definiteness or individuation (Ghameshi, Paul and Wiltschko, Introduction), are not their central function.

We begin by describing "noun classification", comparing Mopan with a more widely studied language (Spanish). The term "noun classification" usually refers to a situation where the nouns of a language are sorted into categories, and a noun's membership in a certain category is marked by some other grammatical forms. For example, the "genders" of Spanish are a type of noun classification:

Table 1. Illustration of noun classification: Spanish gender.

Masculine	Feminine
<i>el hombre</i> 'the man'	<i>la mujer</i> 'the woman'
<i>el piojo</i> 'the louse'	<i>la hormiga</i> 'the ant'
<i>el pupitre</i> 'the desk'	<i>la mesa</i> 'the table'

In languages like Spanish, ALL the nouns in the language are divided up into one or the other category. In Spanish these categories are called “masculine” and “feminine”. Words that relate to the noun, like the article ‘the’ (*el* or *la* in Spanish), adjectives, words for ‘this/that’ etc. have different forms depending on which class the noun belongs to. When we are talking about people, usually males are in the “masculine” class and females are in the “feminine” class, e.g. *el hombre* ‘the man’, *la mujer* ‘the woman’, and this is why the classes are called “masculine” and “feminine”. Names for animals are less predictable. For example the masculine word *piojo* means any kind of louse, not just a male one, and the feminine word *hormiga* means any kind of ant, not just a female. Furthermore, inanimate objects like tables have no inherent sex, but these words are also obligatorily placed in one or the other class in Spanish.

Those who speak a language that does not have noun classification (such as English) might wonder: what is the use of this complicated grammatical apparatus? Why would a language have it? Some have argued that this kind of classification can be useful to speakers because it helps identify words that go together (for example, which noun is modified by a particular adjective), and it also helps identify who or what is being referred to, a function known as “reference tracking” (Aikhenvald 321; Contini-Morava and Kilarski). A comparison between example (1), from English, and example (2), from Spanish, illustrates how noun classification might be useful for reference tracking:

(1) Ambiguity in reference tracking (English).

He passed in front of the door of an office, but it was not the one he was looking for.

In example (1) both ‘door’ and ‘office’ are mentioned, but we can’t tell which of them is intended by “it” or “the one”. In a language like Spanish, however, noun classification can help resolve this kind of ambiguity, as shown in (2):

(2) Gender used for reference tracking in Spanish.

[Example from C. Vidal, *El Empleo*, p. 16. Cited in Otheguy 165-166]

Pasó por delante de la puerta de un despacho, pero todavía no era el que buscaba.

He passed in front of the (fem.) door of an (masc.) office, but [it] still was not the one (masc.) he was looking for.

In the Spanish example, the fact that ‘door’ is in the feminine class and ‘office’ is in the masculine class makes it possible to use a masculine pronoun to clarify that the reference is to ‘office’ rather than ‘door’.

Mopan and many other Mayan languages have noun classification that is in some ways similar to Spanish. In Mopan, however, the classifiers are not used for this “reference tracking” function. In our project we ask the question, what communicative functions do these grammatical forms have in Mopan? This research will contribute to the study of how grammatical forms help people identify and characterize who and what they are talking about. Ultimately, we speak to the broader question of whether all languages are fundamentally alike, sharing a “Universal Grammar” that is built into the human brain (as argued by Noam Chomsky, e.g. 1980), or whether there are truly significant differences among them, so that cultural learning would be an important part of what language is all about (as argued e.g. by Evans and Levinson). We also aim to begin the appreciation of the literary and aesthetic qualities of Mopan, with some examples of how Mopan speakers use grammatical forms creatively, for artistic effects.

In Table 2 below, we list the Mopan forms we are focusing on, along with some examples.

Table 2. Mopan noun-introducers with example nouns.

Nouns introduced by <i>ix</i> (feminine)	Nouns introduced by <i>aj</i> (masculine)	Nouns introduced by <i>a</i> (not gendered)
<i>ix ch'up</i> woman	<i>aj ma'ätan</i> widower	<i>a winik</i> man
<i>ix kolool</i> partridge	<i>aj much</i> toad	<i>a yuk</i> antelope
<i>ix tz'unu'un</i> hummingbird	<i>aj woyotz</i> anteater	<i>a k'änb'ul</i> pheasant
<i>ix ib'</i> black bean	<i>aj kuul</i> palm heart	<i>a p'uul</i> jug

[Orthographic conventions for Mopan follow those established by the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (England and Elliott 1990). Differences from standard International Phonetic Alphabet symbols: <'> glottalization of the preceding consonant, or a glottal stop if it follows a vowel. <x> the voiceless palatal fricative. <j> the voiceless glottal fricative. <ä> the mid-central vowel. <tz> the voiceless alveodental affricate. <ch> the voiceless alveopalatal affricate.]

In Mopan there are two gender markers, sometimes called classifiers, *ix* and *aj*, and when referring to human beings, the words used with *aj* denote males and the words used with *ix* denote females. This includes proper names such as *Aj Juan, Ix Maria*. As in Spanish, *aj* and *ix* are also used with the terms for some animals regardless of their actual sex, and also with some words that denote inanimate objects. But unlike Spanish, in Mopan only a minority of nouns belong to these two gender classes. Most nouns (including the word for ‘man’, as shown in Table 2) are introduced by *a*, usually described as an “article”. One thing we are interested in is the relationship among these three forms.

All three Mopan forms resemble so-called “Determiners”: elements that introduce a noun phrase, like the English articles *the* and *a* (Ghomeshi et al.). But in most languages determiners convey information about things like “definiteness”—whether or not the referent is already familiar to the discourse participants, like they do in English. However, the noun-introducers of Mopan can be used regardless whether the referent is familiar to the discourse participants (we will illustrate this below), so they do not seem to be signaling information about definiteness. What are they doing, then?

We will argue that the noun-introducers of Mopan help identify the status of the following word: that it should be understood as an entity—a person or thing, rather than as a predicate—an action or process. In addition, Mopan speakers can use these forms creatively to suggest whether or not the referent is an animate being that has the ability for voluntary action. They can also use the masculine and feminine markers to indicate the sex of the referent when that information is useful.

2. THE NOUN-INTRODUCERS OF MOPAN

The three noun-introducers are not all used in the same way. Specifically, the “article” *a* is used differently from the masculine *aj* and feminine *ix* gender markers, which instead behave alike from a syntactic point of view, as we will show below. We therefore group the masculine and feminine together with the single label “gender markers” and we use the term “article” for the *a* form. We begin by describing the uses of the gender markers; then we show how they interact with the article.

2.1 Gender Markers

The masculine and feminine gender markers *aj* and *ix* cannot both be used together on the same noun, and aside from certain terms for human beings, it seems to be largely arbitrary why some nouns go with the feminine marker and others with the masculine one (see, for example, the nouns listed in Table 2). However, as we mentioned earlier, the majority of Mopan nouns are not associated with either gender marker. This in itself is unusual for a noun class system.

One well known semantic function of gender-markers, that Mopan shares with its immediate relatives in the Mayan language family, is to add them to a certain type of verb stem to indicate the Agent of the action in question, that is, the one who is doing the action (Ulrich, Ulrich and Peck). For example:

(3) Gender marker as Agent of Active Verb. [Ventur 1976:1.1, Rafael K'oj]

<i>U-kwentoj-il</i>	<i>aj</i>	<i>jook'</i>
3A-story-REL	MASC	to_fish
The story of		

'the story of a fisherman'

In this case the gender markers also indicate the sex of the Agent. Note that the pronouns of Mopan do not distinguish between 'he' and 'she': there is a single third person pronoun that is not specified for sex. Of course, it is possible to make the sex of a referent clear by adding extra words such as "3rd person said it, the woman". But using a masculine or feminine gender-marker to indicate the Agent of an action is an efficient way of giving information about the sex of sentence participants, if that is specifically wanted. Example (4) is from a Mopan folk tale (see Appendix for a key to the abbreviations used in the translations of grammatical forms). The speakers have instructed a young woman to go and fetch water and they have told her husband to go and chop wood. In the distance they now hear the distinctive sounds of the two kinds of labour, and they remark with satisfaction:

(4) Using agentivity to specify sex of the referent. [ED data]

<i>Tan-Ø</i>	<i>ix</i>	<i>puut-ja'-a.</i>
be_ongoing-3B	FEM	draw-water-ECHO.
is-happening		

<i>Tan-Ø</i>	<i>aj</i>	<i>si'-i.</i>
be_ongoing-3B	MASC	chop_firewood-ECHO.
is-happening		

'The water-drawer-woman is busy. The woodchopper-man is busy.'

Here the feminine gender marker *ix* is used to indicate the Agent of the action of drawing water and the masculine gender marker *aj* indicates the Agent of the action of chopping wood. If the speaker had just said '3rd person is drawing water' or '3rd person is chopping wood', it would not be clear who is doing what. This example shows how the gender markers can be used creatively to indicate both who is doing the action and their sex. What is noteworthy about this example is that this grammatical construction makes it possible for the noun phrase to do the work of a predicate (specifying what the action is), while at the same time indicating the sex of the Agent.

We now move to the functions of the article and its relationship with the gender markers.

2.2 Article

As shown in Table 2 above, in Mopan nouns that are not regularly associated with one of the gender markers are usually used with the article instead. We mentioned earlier that the article is used differently from the gender markers. One difference is that the article may be omitted in certain kinds of syntactic contexts, while the gender markers remain in place. For example, in (5) the speaker mentions a list of animals that he would like to hunt, but which he cannot find. Of these, the noun *kolool* ‘partridge’ is a feminine gendered noun and all the others are not gendered, i.e. they would normally occur with the article instead of a gender marker. But note that here the gender marker stays in place before its noun, whereas some of the articles are omitted.

- (5) Discourse salience, not indefiniteness, motivates dropping of Article but not of Gender Marker. [ED data]

<i>Ix</i>	<i>kolool,</i>	<i>k'änb'ul,</i>	<i>kox</i>
FEM	partridge	pheasant	crested guan (type of game bird)

<i>etel</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>kek'enche'</i>	<i>etel</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>yuk-u</i>
with	ART	wild_pig	with	ART	antelope-ECHO

<i>Le'ek-Ø</i>	<i>kuchi</i>	<i>in-k'ati</i>	<i>tz'on-oo'</i>
be_3EMPH-3B	indeed	1A-want	shoot-3B_PL
those-are-what			want-to-shoot

<i>pere</i>	<i>ma'</i>	<i>yan-Ø</i>	<i>kut'an</i>
but	NEG	exist-3B	QUOT_3
		they-are-not-there	he-said

‘ “[*Ix*] Partridge, [*Ø*] pheasant, [*Ø*] crested guan [type of game bird], and [*a*] wild pig, and [*a*] antelope, those are what I really want to hunt, but they aren't there!” he said.’

Unlike the gender marker, the presence or absence of the article in (5) seems to be sensitive to the importance of the referent: it is omitted before the names of the birds and retained before the names of the larger mammals that are more desirable as game. The wild pig and antelope are also treated differently from the birds in that they are introduced individually with the conjunction *etel* ‘and’ or ‘with’. Since all of these animals have equal status from the point of view of definiteness—none of them is already familiar to the audience, and they are all hypothetical--

this example also shows that the article does not signal “definiteness”: the wild pig and the antelope, marked with *a*, are no more definite than the pheasant, from which *a* is dropped.

2.3. Relation of gender-markers and article

We have already mentioned that choosing one gender marker rather than the other conveys information about the sex of the referent. We will now show how using one of the gender markers versus the article can affect interpretations of agency. Earlier (example 3) we showed how a gender marker can be used to derive the Agent of a verb stem. We repeat the example here:

(6) Gender Marker as Agent of Active Verb. [Ventur 1976:1.1, Rafael K’oj]

<i>U-kwentoj-il</i>	<i>aj</i>	<i>jook’</i>
3A-story-REL	MASC	to_fish
The story of		
‘the story of a fisherman’		

The stem *jook’* means ‘to fish’, and if one puts a gender marker in front of it, the meaning is ‘a person who fishes’—male or female depending on the gender marker. However, if one puts the article *a* in front of the same stem, the resulting form denotes the action itself rather than the one who is doing it, as shown in example (7).

(7) Action of Active Intransitive Verb [Ventur 1976:7.5, Antonio Toralla]

<i>Top</i>	<i>ki’-Ø</i>	<i>b’in</i>	<i>t-u-wich</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>jook’-o</i>
very	be_good-3B	HEARSAY	PREP-3A-face	ART	fishing-ECHO
			he-liked-very-much		

‘They say that he liked fishing very much [fishing was very good in his eyes]’

This contrast in agency between the gender markers and the article can be used creatively, employing the mechanism of gender to suggest enhanced animacy of unexpected objects. This is illustrated in example (8), from a story in which three walking-sticks magically move on their own to help a hunter carry some meat:

(8) Creative use of gender markers to suggest agency. [ED data]

<i>Ox-tuul-oo'</i>	<i>aj</i>	<i>kuch-b'äk'</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>xoolte'</i>	<i>leek-oo'</i>	<i>ab'e'</i>
three-CL_ANIM- 3B_PL	MASC	carry-meat	ART	walking- stick	be_3EMPH-3B_PL aforementioned	DX_TEXT

they were 3 live

‘Those walking sticks we’ve been talking about became three (living) meat-carriermen.’

The word *xoolte'* ‘walking stick’ is not gendered in Mopan, and of course walking-sticks have no sex. In this example however, the walking-sticks are referred to as “masculine” in their capacity as meat-carriers. This usage is motivated not by a need to indicate sex per se but by the association of gender with the performer of an action.

To summarize: Although to some degree the two Mopan gender markers and the article are each used with a different set of words by arbitrary historical association, we have seen that they also have some freedom of productive and creative occurrence. This shows that even though these forms are not used for the function of reference-tracking that is reported for other languages with noun classification systems, they do a different kind of communicative work in Mopan. We have shown that the gender markers and the article participate in different grammatical patterns and in two kinds of semantic contrast with one another: Gender-markers contrast with each other to indicate sex of the referent, and can be used to make the sex of the referent clear when that information is useful. The two gender markers as a pair contrast with the article to distinguish between agents of actions and referents that are not agents. We now look briefly at the function of all three classifiers as a group.

3. “OMNIPREDICATIVITY”

In Mopan the distinction between “nouns”, “verbs” and “adjectives” is not as clearly demarcated as it is in some other languages. Words that might be described as nouns or adjectives can have the same endings as verbs, and like verbs, can function as the predicate of a sentence. This property has been described as “omnipredicativity” (Launey). The endings are the same as the ones used with predicates that indicate states, as opposed to actions (cf. Danziger 1996). This is illustrated in the following examples:

(9) Omnipredicativity. [ED data]

a. *Saak-ech*
fear-2B

‘you fear/you’re afraid’

- b. *Winik-ech*
man-2B

‘you are (a) man’

Example (9a) shows a state-predicate, ‘fear’, with the 2nd person pronoun ending, meaning ‘you fear’ or ‘you’re afraid’. In (9b) the same ending is added to the word *winik*, which means ‘man’, and this makes ‘man’ the predicate of the sentence: ‘you are a man’.

A complication arises in the third person singular, however. Instead of an ending, normally the third person singular of this set of person-markers is expressed by the absence of any suffix (represented by Ø in example 10 below). There is no direct equivalent of the verb ‘to be’, so plain nouns may look exactly like nouns that are being used as predications.

(10) Omnipredicativity, continued. [ED data]

- a. *Winik-Ø*
man-3B

‘It’s/ he’s a man’

- b. *winik*

‘man/a man’

As shown in (10a and b), many Mopan words can be understood either as describing a state, i.e. as a predicate, or as describing an entity, i.e. as a person or thing (Lois and Vapnarsky; Danziger 2008). This means that it is not always obvious how a given word is to be interpreted. This kind of ambiguity has been documented for some other indigenous languages of the Americas, such as Salishan languages of the Pacific Northwest (cf. Jacobsen; Jelinek). Even though in actual conversation it is often possible to tell whether a word is meant to refer to an entity or predication based on the meaning of the word, the intonation pattern of the sentence, or other contextual information, we propose that presence of a gender marker or article is a reliable clue that the following word or phrase is to be interpreted as an entity rather than a predicate (see similar arguments for Salishan languages by Jacobsen, going back to Sapir and Swadesh).

In example (11), the word *much* 'toad' appears with the usual masculine classifier and refers to an entity that is the subject of the sentence, whose predicate is *yan* 'to exist'.

(11) Masculine toad, referring to an entity. [Ulrich and Ulrich 1982:66.1, Dolores Ka'al]

<i>Bueno</i>	<i>te'ij-i</i>		<i>t-u-wich</i>		<i>karetera</i>
so	DX_LOC_TEXT-ECHO		prep-3A-face		highway
	there				on-the-highway
<i>yan-Ø</i>	<i>b'in</i>	<i>jun</i>	<i>tuul</i>	<i>aj</i>	<i>much-u</i>
exist-3B	HEARSAY	one one-live	CL_ANIM	MASC	toad-ECHO
there-was					

'Well, there on the highway there was a toad.'

In (12), however, taken from a story about a toad-woman, the word *much* itself functions as the main predicate, and appears without any noun-introducer:

(12) Toad with no noun-introducer, interpreted as a predicate. [ED data]

<i>Pues</i>	<i>yalt-e'-Ø</i>	<i>kut'an</i>	<i>yalt-e'-Ø</i>	<i>a-jok'-s-en</i>
so	try-TR_IMP-3B	QUOT_3	try-TR_IMP-3B	2A-come_out-CAUS-1B
	try-it	she-said		
<i>ix</i>	<i>ch'up</i>	<i>ab'e'</i>	<i>pero</i>	<i>much-Ø</i>
FEM	woman	DX_TEXT	but	toad-3B
		aforementioned		she-was-a-toad

"Just try it" she said, "Try to get me out", but that woman was a toad.

We see from these examples that the appearance of the article or gender-marker is useful in figuring out how to distinguish entities from predicates.

A further set of examples show multiple uses of the Mopan word *otzil* 'poor'. In (13) it is understood as a predicate:

(13) *Otzil* 'poor' as predicate. [Ventur 1976:3.19, Eleodoro Sacul]

<i>Otzil-Ø</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>palomaj-a</i>
be_poor-3B	ART	pigeon-ECHO

‘The pigeon is pitiable.’

In example (14) we find the same word used as both a predicate and as an attribute of the noun *paloma* ‘pigeon’. Here the second *otzil* has the article *a* in front of it; it is easy to see how the positioning of the article helps distinguish between these two uses of this word.

(14) ‘Poor’ as both adjective and predicate. [Ventur 1976:3.19, Eleodoro Sacul]

<i>Otzil-Ø</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>otzil</i>	<i>palomaj-e'ex</i>	<i>a-men-e</i>
be_poor-3B	ART	poor	pigeon-2B_PL	2A-do-ECHO
			you_all	because-of-you

‘Ah, the poor pigeon is pitiable because of you-all.’

Finally, in example (15), we see the same word *otzil*, this time understood as an entity because of the preceding article. (The example comes from a text in which one *compadre*, who is very poor, is contrasted with another, who is characterized as “evil” and who comes to a bad end).

(15) *Otzil* ‘poor’ nominalized (functioning like a noun). [Ventur 1976:3.14, Eleodoro Sacul]

<i>A</i>	<i>kompadre</i>	<i>ab'e'</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>top</i>	<i>otzil-i</i>
ART	compadre	DX-TEXT	ART	very	poor-ECHO
	compadre	aforementioned			
<i>u</i>	<i>ganar-t-aj-Ø</i>	<i>u-kuxtal-a</i>			
3A	gain-TR-TR_COMPL-3B	3A-living-ECHO			
	he-earned-it	his-living			

‘That compadre, the very poor (one), he made his fortune.’

We see from these examples that *otzil* can be understood as an adjective, predicate, or noun. The article helps in figuring out which use is intended.

3. CONCLUSION

In the Mopan system of noun classification, we do not find the familiar function of reference tracking that is found in languages like Spanish, but another function, that of identifying the following word as an entity rather than a predicate, is paramount. Looking within the system, the gender-markers and the article have very different syntactic behavior, but they work together to divide semantic territory first along an axis of agentivity/animacy (gender markers versus article), and second along an axis of male/female sex (masculine versus feminine gender marker), otherwise absent in the grammar of the language.

The noun-introducers of Mopan are not used to resolve ambiguities about who or what is being referred to, as gender does in languages like Spanish, but instead they help resolve other kinds of ambiguity that are specific to the structure of Mopan and some other indigenous languages of the Americas. Every language has its own configuration of grammatical tools, available to speakers both for clarity of communication and for art.

APPENDIX. Key to abbreviations used for translating Mopan grammatical forms.

1 = First person

2 = Second person

3 = Third person

A = Actor/ Set A person-marker series

AORIST = Aorist

ART = Article

B=Undergoer/Set B person-marker series

CAUS = Causative

CL_ANIM = Numeral Classifier for animates

DISC = Discourse particle

DUR = Durative

DX_LOC_TEXT = Anaphoric Locative

DX_TEXT = Anaphoric Demonstrative

ECHO = prosodic echo vowel

EMPH = Emphatic

FEM = Feminine

HABITUAL = Habitual

HEARSAY = Evidential particle

INTR_INC = Intransitive Incompletive

MASC= Masculine

NEG = Negator

NOM = Nominalizer

PASS = Passive

PL = Plural

PREP = Preposition

QUOT = Quotative

RELATOR = Relator

TR= Transitivity

TR_COMPL = Transitive Completive

TR_IMP = Transitive Imperative

TR_INC = Transitive Incompletive

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