

## **Grammatical Images of Perception and Legitimacy: An Example from Jacaltec Maya**

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Seeking a more tenable conception of discourse, new cognitive theory considers conventional imagery as a sort of “middle ground” through which the multiple meanings that emerge in distinct discourse situations are negotiated (Palmer, 1996: 39). Conventional grammar should be recognized as a resource for observing the appearance and developments of such imagery. In Langacker’s usage-based approach toward grammar, grammatical rules are viewed as “schematizations of expressions” (Langacker, 1991: 555). They are the conventional tools of the language that allow speakers to frame the meanings that emerge within varied contexts. This discursive conception of grammar warrants consideration and development in anthropological studies because of its potential to offer a structuring framework of analysis for the constitution of discourse.

The concept of imagery should not be limited to visual images. As Lakoff states, “We also have auditory images, olfactory images, and images of how forces act upon us” (1987: 444). This paper will consider imagery in this broader sense as it appears in conventional grammar, by focusing on verbs of perception in the Jacaltec language that relate the auditory and the cutaneous with the recognized forces that act upon the individual in the Jacaltec Maya community. It will be further argued that imagery which refers to physical perception can become a powerful tool in establishing and reiterating socially constructed concepts.

Jacaltec, also referred to as Pobp’ al Ti’ by native speakers, is a Mayan language spoken in the region of Huehuetenango, Guatemala and in a few nearby settlements in Chiapas, Mexico. This study examines the dialect of Jacaltec spoken in the town of Jacaltenango, with a focus on some aspects of the Jacaltec stative verb phrase. In stative phrases where the SV is complemented by a noun equivalent to the subject, only pronouns are needed to form the stative phrase:

(1)	“I am a woman ”	<i>ix</i> woman	<i>in</i> I	<i>an</i> 1 p subject
	“I am a man”	<i>winaj</i> man	<i>in</i> I	<i>an</i> 1 p subject
	“She is a student ”	<i>kuyum</i> student	<i>hum</i>	<i>ix</i> she

When the SV is complemented by an adjective, the stative phrase will take the form of Adjective followed by copula. The root of the copula is *-e*, with *-yi* as a stem formative suffix that is lost under usual conditions. Morphophonemic differences between the following examples are probably accounted for by difference in subject:

(2a)	“I am happy”	<i>tzalal</i> happy	<b><i>we y</i></b>	<i>han</i> 1 p subject
	“You are happy”	<i>tzalal</i> happy	<i>ha</i> you	<b><i>we y</i></b>
	“She is happy”	<i>tzalal</i> happy	<b><i>ye y</i></b>	<i>ix</i> she
	“He is happy”	<i>tzalal</i> happy	<b><i>ye y</i></b>	<i>naj</i> he
	“We are happy”	<i>tzalal</i> happy	<b><i>he y</i></b>	<i>i</i> 1 p pl. subject

Adjectives that refer to ‘feeling’ or ‘mood’ typically take this form:

(2b)	I am/feel sad	<i>piskol</i> <b><i>wey</i></b> <i>han</i>
	I am/feel sick	<i>coj</i> <b><i>wey</i></b> <i>han</i>
	I am/feel nervous	<i>matakula</i> <b><i>wey</i></b> <i>han</i>
	I am/feel sleepy	<i>kos stitiway</i> <b><i>ey(n)</i></b> <i>han</i>

However, adjectives that refer to physical characteristic seem to be broken into special adjectival subclasses by morphological marking:

(3a)	“I am little ”	<i>solikin</i> little	<b><i>teyl</i></b> STAT	<i>an</i> 1 p subject
	“I am big ”	<i>nimi</i> big	<i>ha</i> 1p subject	<b><i>teyl</i></b> STAT

(3b)	“He is ugly”	<i>kos koya</i> ugly	<b>heylni</b> STAT “see”	<i>naj</i> he
	“She is pretty”	<i>kulcan</i> pretty	<b>heylni</b> STAT “see”	<i>ix</i> she

Note that in example set (3a) where SV is complemented by adjectives referring to size, **teyl** takes the place of the copular segment for 1st person that **wey** serves in the stative phrases where SV is complemented by ‘mood’ adjectives. The Jacaltec system of morphemic values is complex and more analysis is needed to achieve a better understanding of how the use of specific morphemes impacts meaning in stative verb phrases. However, Mercedes Montejo (2000) identifies the morpheme **heylni** that takes the place of third person copula in example set (3b) as having a general meaning of “see.” This suggests that Jacaltec adjectives referring to physical characteristics form a distinct adjective class, further broken into subclasses where adjectives like *ugly* and *pretty* take on a special value associated with sight. This classification is necessarily reflected in stative verb phrases by morphemic transformations of the copula *-eyi*.

This brings us to what seems to be another distinct class of adjectives in Jacaltec. This class consists of a limited group of adjectives that refer to perception. These adjectives are marked by the use of the verb *abe* as a complement in stative verb phrases. Stative verb phrases that include the verb *abe* distinguish adjectives that are *sensed* or *felt*:

(4)	“I am/feel hot”	<i>co ay k’a</i> hot	<i>xw-abe</i> to feel	<i>han</i> 1 p subject
	“I am/feel cold”	<i>cheu</i> cold	<i>xw-abe</i> to feel	<i>han</i> 1 p subject
	“I am in/feel pain”	<i>ya’</i> pain	<i>xw-abe</i> to feel	<i>han</i> 1 p subject
	“I am/feel dirty”	<i>co tzilin</i> dirty	<i>xw-abe</i> to feel	
	“I am/feel clean”	<i>co sal hin</i> clean	<i>xw-abe</i> to feel	<i>an</i> 1 p subject
	“I am/feel wet”	<i>cacakin</i> wet	<i>xw-abe</i> to feel	<i>han</i> 1 p subject

This class of adjectives requires the presence of *abe* following the adjective in statives.

*abe* can also be used to change the perception or quality of other adjectives in stative phrases. For instance, the phrase *ko ko wil we han* is glossed as “I am healthy.” Yet, the construction *sa al xwabe han* can be used to state “I feel healthy.” It is important to note that transforming the quality of the adjective by means of *abe* also requires the use of a completely new term to describe the adjective. Here *sa al* is used in place of *ko ko wil*. This is also the case in the phrase, “I feel sick” that makes use of the verb *abe*:

- (5) *coch nyey coj*    *xw-abe*    *han*  
          pig    sick    to feel    1 p subject

literal: “I feel sick like a pig”

As noted in example set (2b) I am/feel sick typically takes the form *coj we han*. The transformation of adjectives in statives that are complemented by *abe* suggests that “feel” is being used in a different sense than its use in example set (2b) where it can be used to refer to ‘mood’. So that terms like *sa al* and *coch nyey coj* are also a part of the subclass of adjectives that are *sensed*. Therefore, when ‘healthy’ and ‘sick’ are referred to by these terms and complemented by the verb *abe* these adjectives are presented as more corporeal or felt in a manner that is more akin to the physical perception of cold, heat and pain.

Verbal stative phrases complemented by *abe* demonstrate the verb *abe* when glossed as ‘to sense.’ However, *abe* is a verb with multiple glosses: ‘to sense’ ‘to hear’ ‘to understand’ ‘to dry’. Interestingly, each of these glosses appears to bear a significant semantic relationship to *abe* as a verb of physical perception. There is enough semantic recognition between Jacaltec ‘to sense’ and *abe* when glossed as ‘to hear’ that native speakers can comment that stating, *cheu xwabe han* “I am/feel cold” is ‘like’ saying “I hear the cold,” though Jacaltec grammatically distinguishes between the two verbs.

The main point of interest with *abe* is that while Jacaltec distinguishes its several uses through the grammar, the general semantic relation of the verbs as referents to “physical reaction” remains strong. This is not only evidenced in the verbs ‘to sense’ and ‘to hear’ that certainly refer to types of perceptive reaction to objects or changes in the environment, but is also evidenced in the limited use of *abe* as ‘to dry.’ In this regard, *abe* is used to indicate the drying of certain vegetative substances such as coffee, fruit, and beans. This verb typically occurs in conversation as a specific question/answer construction:

- (6)    Q: *tahin xatey’ xwabe* an?                      “Is it (the substance) drying?”  
           A: *tahin xatey’ xwabe* an.                      “It is drying.”

This use of *abe* marks the transformation of a substance’s physical state. It is also used to describe a fire when it is dying out, more literally translated as ‘the wood is drying’:

- (7)    *lahing xatey swabe*  
           now    wood    to dry

The several uses of *abe* as discussed so far have indicated that *a’bey* bears the basic semantic quality of “physical reaction.” However, one must note early data by Oliver Le Farge (1931) in which *abe* has a limited use as a verb meaning ‘to understand.’

- (8)    *tcey abe*    you understand  
          *y abe ni*    he understands  
          *matcawabe*                                        I do not know  
          *matcawabe*                                        thou dost not know  
          *tcawabe, awabe*                                thou knowest

These particular examples taken from Le Farge's work suggest that *abe* is used in a formal form linked to Jacaltec sacred speech (La Farge, 1931) and the soothsayers, which will be further discussed in a moment.

But to reiterate, Jacaltec distinguishes certain stative adjectives referring to 'feeling' from other 'feeling' adjectives through the obligatory use of the verb *abe*. The general division between 'feeling' adjectives is shown here:

Feeling 'Mood'

I am happy	<i>tsalal wey han</i>
I am/feel sad	<i>piskol wey han</i>
I am/feel sick	<i>coj wey han</i>
I am/feel nervous	<i>matakula wey han</i>
I am/feel sleepy	<i>kos stitiway ey(n) han</i>

Feeling 'Sense'

I am/feel hot	<i>co ay k'a xwabe han</i>
I am/feel cold	<i>cheyu xwabe han</i>
I am in/feel pain	<i>ya'xwabe han</i>
I am/feel dirty	<i>co tsilin swabe</i>
I am/feel clean	<i>co sal hin xwabe an</i>
I am/feel wet	<i>cacakin xwabe han</i>

However, if *abe* is primarily used to indicate physical perception, it is interesting to note the use of *abe* in stative verb phrases such as,

- (9) *coch xw-abe han*  
 bad to feel 1 p subject  
 "I feel bad"  
 (about what I have said or done)

*kul xw-abe han*  
 good to feel 1 p subject  
 "I feel good"  
 (about what I have done or a compliment I have received)

Such adjectives refer to what might be translated as 'guilty' and 'proud' in English. And as discussed previously, *abe* glossed as 'to understand' also presents a problem in defining *abe* as a marker for physical sense perception exclusively.

It is, nevertheless, interesting to note that the use of *abe* to transform the adjective 'bad' and 'good' in the above examples specifically refers to situations in which an individual experiences a certain feeling in relation to specific deeds or interactions with others. Of special note are the types of deeds from which such feelings are derived. Montejo is careful to explain that the deeds from which *kul* 'good' feeling can derive are activities of social significance, such as weaving, or doing one's share of work well (2000, interview). Deeds from which *coch* 'bad' feeling can derive are actions such as calling a person in the community a bad name or saying things about a person that shouldn't be said. Without limiting the potential use of *abe* in different discourse situations, it can be noted that the use of *abe* in the specific sense of 'proud' and 'guilty,' referred to here,

signifies situations in which specific feelings are derived from a social sense of community obligation.

The production of internal *feelings* by either the exceptional attention to community obligation or the transgression of appropriate community relationships, points to a socially-linked value for *abe* that is not far from its use to mark physical perceptions. The above examples still illustrate *external* forces acting upon the individual and producing specific feelings as a result. Therefore, the perceptual image of *reaction to external stimuli* is extended to refer to social obligation. In this context, *abe* may be used to mark the perception of social judgment or social commitment as it acts upon the individual.

If this image can be extended to a productive use in this particular context, it is not unreasonable to assume that the salient image associated with *abe* might further be extended to the use of *abe* as a gloss ‘to understand.’ The use of *abe* in this sense is rare and there is little data to suggest the varied contexts in which it is applied. The most helpful analysis currently available is an early one by La Farge (1931). In this study, La Farge glosses *abe* as ‘to know’ or ‘to understand.’ La Farge does not provide much help in clarifying how *abe* is distinguished from other Jacaltec terms like *ohatX* ‘to know.’ La Farge’s main interest is in exploring what he perceives as an etymological relationship between the terms *abe* ‘to understand’ and *ahbe* ‘diviner.’ La Farge posits a semantic relationship between the two terms that seems based primarily in folk etymology, but is supported by the apparent use of *abe* in a sacred context that is linked to the context in which *ahbe* is used to refer to individuals with divine understandings, as well as a parallel semantic relationship between the Yucatecan words for ‘seer’ and ‘to know.’

The semantic relationship between physical and social ‘sense’ is not unusual. As Hanks notes, “The human body is at once highly local...and at the same time equally general insofar as values, orientations, and features of the social field are inscribed on the body and realized through it” (1996: 248). In analyzing Maya representations of the body, Hanks points to the significance of the body as a central figure in the production of social meaning. The active “corporeal field” of Maya discourse reveals how speaking communities develop and establish social meanings by reference to bodily incorporation. A theory that regards the signifying value of physical binaries among the Maya may help clarify the significance of relationships drawn between types of physical perception and what other languages would commonly distinguish as emotional or mental perceptions within the Jacaltec language.

However, such binary structures may also be noted in Western scientific fields, such as neuroscience. Neuroscience sharply distinguishes “touch” or “light touch” sensations from visceral sensations, such as hunger pangs and nausea. Due to the ambiguous source of such sensations, they are not as well studied as either vision or hearing. As Angevine and Cotman (1981) state, “Visceral sensations are frequently hard to verbalize (a ‘burning feeling’) and are difficult to locate precisely (‘somewhere about here’)” (116). Therefore, the field marks such internal sensations as distinct from the types of sensations involving pressure, vibration, etc., that arise from external stimulation.

The language of neuroscience marks this distinction with its use of terms like external/internal, and the labeling of “cutaneous” vs. “visceral” in the domain of the somesthetic system. While these labels may simplify a complex and little understood reality of the nervous system, they also make it possible to mark specific sensations as having a certain identifiableness that less understood sensations lack. Notably, scientific

language makes use of such distinctions in order to identify which sensations deem analysis in the field. While visceral/internal sensations are recognized as having some sort of bodily significance, neuroscience marks these sensations as ‘internal,’ vague sensations that lack the sort of identifiable features to which scientific study can be lent. Therefore, scientific language serves as a sort of ‘symbolic code’ in which the half of the dichotomy associated with the external develops a legitimacy within fields of study.

Certainly, as Roland Barthes suggests, the development of legitimating ‘symbolic codes’ is not limited to the scientific community. The tendencies of language as described by Barthes include the organization of meaning through a structure of binary oppositions, power asymmetries in the structure of meaning that mirror asymmetric social relations, and a final tendency toward the naturalization of the existing linguistic structure (Barthes, 1982). Barthes uses his concept of the ‘symbolic code’ to explore the naturalization of dominant ideologies in a public sphere that privileges the perceptions associated with the ‘dominant’ side of the symbolic code in everyday language use. My digression into scientific language has only been to point out that the focus on the body in the code of legitimization within scientific literature relates in significant ways to the significance of body imagery within various speaking communities (Anderson, 1978; Foley, 1997; Hanks, 1996). Like scientific language, the Jacaltec language extends a relational image of *reaction to external stimuli* in order to differentiate specific ‘feelings’ evoked by physical, though invisible forces in the environment from vague, personal feelings more accurately described as ‘moods.’ In this way, Jacaltec utilizes an asymmetric symbolic code whereby the speaking community legitimates perceptions that are linguistically associated with physical feeling.

Victor Montejo’s most recent translation of *Q’anil* (Man of Lightning) demonstrates the importance of *ahbe* “diviners” in Maya narrative and the term’s historical importance in Maya belief. In order to avoid the danger of simplifying the very complex narrative content of *Q’anil*, it will simply be stated that *ahbe* serve as significant figures in some of *Q’anil*’s most dramatic moments. And as Montejo states, “the oral traditions of the present-day Maya peoples are...of great importance, because their content expresses dramatic moments that the Maya peoples have experienced throughout their history” (Montejo 2001: xvii). It is impossible to conclude that the noun *ahbe* and the related verb ‘to understand’ are directly derived from the Jacaltec Maya verb marking physical perception without sufficient historical linguistic data. However, it is known that both *ahbe* and *abe*, used in a sacred narrative context, hold important social value to members of the Jacaltenango community.

In the sense that *abe* as sacred or intuitive understanding within the Maya oral tradition has a significant impact on the society as a whole, the image of *reaction to the external* may be extended to the semantic value of *abe*. If the Jacaltec language uses *abe* to distinguish feelings that are derived by the impact of the external—though often invisible—physical forces on the self, then it is possible that *abe* is also used to mark a significant and recognizable source for divine or intuitive understandings. Such marking may be a way by which ‘divine understanding’ as a sacred and social value is regarded by Jacaltec speakers and given a saliency that other types of understanding or internal feelings lack. In regard to cultural values expressed in Maya oral tradition, Montejo states, “Despite the denial by non-Mayas of these values and of the indigenous system of knowledge, the Maya continued to express their creative and philosophical thought through stories, fables, legends, and histories, which live on in the oral tradition of the modern Maya people” (Montejo, 2001: xvii). The obligatory use of *abe* as a grammatical

image in the everyday use of Jacaltec language, given weight by its association with the physical and social body of the Maya people, may be another means by which Jacaltec Maya speakers preserve cultural values that “non-Mayas” deny.

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