

THE CH'ORTI' PROJECT COLLABORATION

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Dr. Robin Quizar and Dr. Rich Sandoval are both alumni of CU Boulder Linguistics, and they are both affiliated with Metropolitan State University of Denver, Robin as Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and Rich as Assistant Professor of Anthropology. Together they run a language documentation effort called the *Ch'orti' Project*, of which Robin is the director. Robin worked extensively with the Ch'orti' (Mayan) language and community in Guatemala throughout the 1970s and 80s, helping to produce a number of language reference and revitalization materials. After retiring from MSU Denver, Robin renewed this research, reconnected with the Ch'orti' community, and founded the Ch'orti' Project in 2013 as a collaborative effort with MSU Denver's Ethnography Lab. Rich joined the project in 2017. Given his background in linguistic anthropology, language documentation, and other relevant linguistics subfields, Rich was a good fit to help Robin run the project. The project's accomplishments over the years are in large part due to the work of student assistants from the Ethnography Lab. One of the main goals of the project is to give these anthropology and linguistics undergraduate students real-world experience as well as the opportunity to develop a variety of practical and technological skills. The project has also involved other collaborators, including other scholar/researchers. Because a primary focus of the Ch'orti' Project is to support the Ch'orti' community's own language revitalization efforts, including the reclamation of the Classic Mayan writing system, the project has undertaken a number of trips to the Ch'orti' communities of Guatemala and Honduras in order to learn about these efforts, conduct research, and otherwise develop community relationships. The essay elaborates on Robin, Rich, and other collaborators' work with respect to these project activities and goals. It also provides background on Ch'orti' language revitalization efforts, general Ch'orti' language scholarship, and Robin's contributions to both.

Keywords: Ch'orti' Mayan; language documentation, revitalization, reclamation; Classic Mayan; collaborative research

1. INTRODUCTION

Although Dr. Robin Quizar and Dr. Rich Sandoval completed their graduate studies at different time periods, both are alumni of CU Boulder Linguistics. They currently work together on a long-term interdisciplinary community-oriented language documentation effort called the *Ch'orti' Project*, of which Robin is the director. The project is in association with Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU), where Robin is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and Rich is Assistant Professor of Anthropology. In this brief essay, the authors describe the background,

activities, and goals of the project, including information about the Ch'orti' language and community. In doing so, they hope to underscore how important it is for linguists working in such projects to collaborate and partner with community members and how beneficial it can be to involve a variety of colleagues and students. Additionally, given the range of language-related phenomena involved in this particular project, the authors also hope to highlight the necessity for linguists to have – or be prepared to develop – skills across sub- and allied fields. In this way, they look back to the diverse opportunities and training that they were provided through their time at CU Linguistics, a factor that should be evident in what follows.

Robin Quizar received her PhD from CU Boulder, Linguistics, in 1979, and returned to CU for an MA in Anthropology, 1989. Her doctoral dissertation, “Comparative Word Order in Mayan”, stemmed in large part from her work in Guatemala with the Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín (PLFM). One of her tasks there was to teach linguistics to Ch'orti' speakers so that they could develop revitalization materials, such as a bilingual Ch'orti'-Spanish dictionary, a reference grammar, and translations of stories into their native language. In 1991 she was hired as a linguistics professor in the English Department at MSU Denver. During her 20 years of teaching at MSU, she headed the development of the Linguistics Program, which included two tracks for students to major in linguistics. Upon retirement, she reconnected with the Ch'orti' community to support and assist their language documentation and revitalization efforts. She also continues to conduct related research, such as examining the relationship between Ch'orti' and other Ch'olan languages and uncovering outside influences on Ch'orti' from Xinkan, a non-Mayan language (Quizar 2020; Quizar 2021). She is currently working on a historical reference grammar of Ch'orti'.

Rich Sandoval received his PhD from CU Boulder, Linguistics, in 2016. His doctoral dissertation focused on the interactional and grammatical integration of spoken and signed language in Arapaho (a Plains Algonquian language). This work was conducted in alignment with Arapaho language documentation and revitalization efforts under the direction of Dr. Andrew Cowell (CU Linguistics) and with the support of Northern Arapaho community members. In 2019 Rich was hired as a professor of Anthropology at MSU Denver, making him the first and only fully dedicated linguistic anthropologist at MSU. He is currently building up the linguistic anthropology curriculum with coursework that ranges from folklore to conversation analysis to epigraphy. The goal is to provide students with a broad foundation in linguistic analysis, including

ethnographic, interactional, multimodal, critical, and historical approaches. His ongoing research and scholarship also cover various topics, including Ch'orti' and other language documentation work, multimodality in Classic Maya inscriptions, and historical sociolinguistic issues of Spanish-English contact in the American Southwest. He is currently co-editing a volume of work on interactional approaches to language documentation (Sandoval, Williams, and Sammons 2021).

2. THE CH'ORTI' PROJECT

Following her retirement, Robin founded the Ch'orti' Project in 2013 as part of MSU Anthropology's Ethnography Lab and in cooperation with Dr. Rebecca Forghash, the lab Director. Rich started working with Robin on the project in 2017. In general, the Ch'orti' Project is a collaborative effort involving a number of people and encompassing a variety of sub-projects and activities. A primary goal of the Ch'orti' Project is to support the Ch'orti' community's own language revitalization efforts, which also involves the reclamation of the Classic Mayan writing system and other aspects of their heritage. Thus, one of the project's focal activities has been yearly short trips to the Ch'orti' communities of Jocotán, Guatemala, and Copán Ruínas, Honduras, to build and maintain relationships with the local people, as well as to conduct related research and learn how the project can be more supportive of their efforts.

Another of the primary goals of the Ch'orti' Project is to provide undergraduate student research assistants with applied experiences relevant to their linguistics and anthropological coursework. Student members of the project are hired as work study by the Ethnography Lab. Depending on their interests and skills, they are assigned to work with others on different sub-projects. Some of this work involves linguistics research, while other work is supportive in other ways, such as data organization, website development, and transcribing. Student assistants of the project also engage in presentations and other activities to learn about Ch'orti' language and culture, thereby becoming more invested in their work. Of course, one of the best ways for students to become involved in the project is through travel to the Ch'orti' communities in Guatemala and Honduras, and many students have been able to do that throughout the years. As such, travel is a highlight, but the core of the student research assistant experience comes from year-round project work back at MSU.

Under Robin's direction, Ch'orti' Project work has included the preparation of Ch'orti' legacy texts, the development of pedagogical materials, and linguistics research involving the historical

development of the language and its relation to other Mayan languages, including its descendant relationship to Classic Mayan. She has also initiated and managed Ch'orti' Project connections with the Ch'orti' community. Currently she is working to establish project connections with the broader Mayanist research community, which includes linguists, epigraphers, and anthropologists. Rich has been working on developing Ch'orti' Project initiatives involving language documentation and Classic Mayan writing. Currently Rich is heading the development of a Ch'orti' Project website, which has the goal of making Ch'orti' language documentation, pedagogical materials, and related scholarship more accessible to the Ch'orti' community and interested scholars. Dr. Rebecca Forgash (Professor of Anthropology, MSU) has been intimately involved in Ch'orti' Project work from the start. Most recently this has involved ethnographic research on Ch'orti' understandings and language ideologies around speakership, sociocultural domains of use, and geographic distribution. Jill Scott (Laboratory Coordinator, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, MSU) supports student research assistants and helps administer project work. She is also part of the development team for the Ch'orti' Project website. Dr. Andrew Pantos (Professor of Linguistics, MSU) directed and supported some past project research, notably involving the phonetic measurement of Ch'orti' vowel space. Dr. Marina Gorlach (Professor of Linguistics, MSU) has also participated in and supported project research. In what follows, Ch'orti' Project activities will be elaborated on and contextualized within an overview of the Ch'orti' language, including revitalization efforts and related research.

3. CH'ORTI' LANGUAGE AND REVITALIZATION EFFORTS

The Ch'orti' (Mayan) community is somewhat regionally isolated from the rest of the Maya world, and the Ch'orti' language is currently spoken only in eastern Guatemala near the Honduran border. There are about 47,000 ethnic Ch'orti's living in Guatemala and over 4,000 in Honduras, but according to official census data, only about 15,000 Ch'orti's speak their native language, mostly in and around Jocotán, Guatemala. The number of speakers is unclear because the language is somewhat stigmatized, even within some of the Ch'orti' communities. Notably, there is a long history of speakers not admitting to speaking the language given the possible risk of claiming an indigenous identity. The risk has been most severe during the waves of political and ethnic violence that characterize much of the past century in Guatemala and Honduras.

For members of the Ch'orti' community, the current era of relative peace has meant an increased willingness to publicly identify as Ch'orti' and engage in associated activities. This factor is most notable in various community activist organizations that share a publicly stated goal of revitalizing and reclaiming the Ch'orti' language. However, although these organizations and associated initiatives have had some successes, they face a variety of difficulties that are best understood through a survey of their development. Initial work at language revitalization started in the 1970s with the *Proyecto Lingüístico Francisco Marroquín* (PLFM), an organization based in the Guatemalan cities of Huehuetenango and Antigua. The PLFM supported the revitalization efforts of numerous Mayan languages by hiring linguists to work on languages and train community members in a way that would enable them to develop their own language-learning pedagogical materials. Robin worked with the PLFM and a team of Ch'orti' speakers during 1975-1979, which aided in the development of a PLFM Ch'orti' dictionary (Pérez et al. 1996), a reference grammar (Pérez 1994), and a set of stories in Ch'orti' (Pérez 1996). The idea was for the PLFM-trained Ch'orti' linguists to use their knowledge to teach Ch'orti' linguistics to other members of the Ch'orti' community. The early success of PLFM in training local Ch'orti' speaker-linguists is evidenced by continued trainee involvement in Jocotán's bilingual education programs, as well as adult literacy programs, even after PLFM had become less influential in revitalization efforts.

Since the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords in Guatemala, the government has underwritten bilingual education programs in state schools. Additionally, the government pledged support to the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala* (ALMG), a community activist organization formed in the late 1980's with the mission to support the revitalization and maintenance of the country's indigenous languages, in alignment with the Pan-Maya movement. With a nod to the PLFM, the ALMG worked to train native linguists and publish pedagogical language materials. Most significantly, the ALMG used the PLFM's original orthographic conventions to develop a standard alphabet for all of Guatemala's Mayan languages. This move was quite important for Ch'orti' revitalization efforts, as the various inconsistent orthographies represented in teaching materials presented unnecessary difficulties for learners (and teachers).

However, the Guatemalan government no longer provides the same level of financial support to the ALMG, and so the Ch'orti' branch of the ALMG in Jocotán lacks the funds needed to further develop much-needed teaching materials. The Ch'orti' ALMG continues to do what they can to

support teacher training, both for public education teachers as well as for those involved in more community-based programs. One implication of this situation for the community is that the government's primary goal is to use bilingual education as a pedagogical tool to increase children's abilities in standard Spanish as opposed to helping to revitalize and maintain the Ch'orti' language. This is most evident in that Ch'orti' language teachers, although being ethnically Ch'orti', often cannot speak the language themselves. Despite the existence of Ch'orti'-speaking administrators trained in linguistics, Guatemalan governing institutions and other aspects of the sociopolitical system unfortunately make it extremely difficult for actual fluent Ch'orti' speakers to gain the credentials to teach Ch'orti'. Because schools lack resources to otherwise support teachers in any efforts to develop Ch'orti' fluency among students, those who are credentialed to be Ch'orti' language teachers mostly focus on basic tasks that don't require fluency, notably teaching the letter-sound correspondences of the Ch'orti' alphabet. The result is that Ch'orti' language lessons are less about language revitalization and more about functional literacy, skills that are transferable to Spanish or any other language with a Romanized writing system.

Another hurdle facing the Ch'orti' ALMG and other revitalization efforts is that, for most Ch'orti' adults, the traditional language only has nostalgic value, in contrast to the social, political, and economic value associated with Spanish. Thus, adults often insist on speaking only Spanish with their children to better prepare them for success in school. Without real government support and without a common sense of urgency for language revitalization, the ALMG and other Ch'orti' community activist organizations are tasked with not only Ch'orti' language education but also with building a stronger sense of community heritage and identity around the language.

4. RECLAIMING CH'ORTI' HERITAGE AND CLASSIC MAYAN HIEROGLYPHS

In support of these goals, one emerging area of interest for Ch'orti' activists has involved the reclamation of Pre-Columbian Classic Mayan writing and other traditions. Relative to other areas of the Maya world, the Ch'orti' interest here is recent, owing in large part to a contemporary body of developing research showing that Ch'orti' is the living Mayan language with the closest descendent connections to the written language of the Classic Maya civilization, c. 250-900 CE. Mayan linguists and other Mayan scholars have claimed for decades that Classic Mayan writing represents a language from the Ch'olan branch of the Mayan language family. However, controversy exists regarding which modern Ch'olan language has the most direct claim to the

language of the hieroglyphs. Some Mayan scholars posit that the Ch'olan branch was a single language, i.e., Proto-Ch'olan, during the Classic period (e.g. Mora-Marín 2009). Linguistic variation in the corpus of inscriptions would thus be due to dialectal variation across the Classic Maya area. Under this view, all Ch'olan languages share equally in the glyphic heritage.

A competing and increasingly more dominant hypothesis holds that the Ch'olan languages had already split up into Eastern and Western language groups by the time of the Classic Maya, the writing system being based on Eastern Ch'olan, which includes Ch'orti' and the now-extinct Ch'olti'. Robin is involved in working to understand the relationship between these two Eastern Ch'olan languages. Some linguists claim that Ch'orti' is best described as a descendant of Ch'olti', the two languages thus representing different historical stages (Robertson 1998; Houston et al. 2000; Robertson and Law 2009). Others support a more traditional view that the two were distinct sister languages. Current research by Robin leads her to support the latter view of separate languages. Her findings indicate that in many respects Ch'orti' is more conservative than Ch'olti' (Quizar 2020) and that certain grammatical features in Ch'orti' were likely the result of contact with speakers of the non-Mayan Xinkan language (Quizar 2021). Regardless, because Ch'orti' is both a Ch'olan language and an Eastern Ch'olan language, the consensus view now is that Ch'orti' represents a descendant language of Classic Mayan.

Informed by this research and its historical perspective, there is a growing sense among the Ch'orti' that they have more claim than other Mayan communities to Mayan glyphic writing and other associated Classic traditions as part of how they construct Ch'orti' identity. Here, too, community activists have a steep road to climb. K'iche and other non-Ch'olan Mayan communities have been involved in the reclamation of Mayan glyphic writing for several years and have popularized their own association with the Classic Maya, relying on this claim for tourist dollars. Moreover, the Ch'orti' language (and other Ch'olan languages) is erased from narratives of the Classic Mayan inscriptions in many museums, including those in the famous Classic Maya site of Copán, located in Ch'orti' territory. Additionally, there are teachers with well-developed pedagogical resources throughout the Maya world who are engaged in supporting community efforts to reclaim Classic Mayan glyphic writing, but the location of the Ch'orti' community means they once again suffer due to their geographic separation from the rest of the Maya world.

Regardless, Ch'orti' activists understand that developing this connection with their Classic Maya heritage will help to create a stronger sense of Ch'orti' community. Given the situation in

other Maya communities, Ch'orti' activists also understand that such reclamation efforts could do well to increase the community visibility with respect to tourists and researchers, giving the Ch'orti' language economic value as well. The desire and move to claim and teach Mayan glyphic writing and other aspects of Classic Maya traditions are therefore seen by many as integral to broader language revitalization and community development efforts.

5. LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION, OTHER PROJECT WORK, AND LOOKING FORWARD

Given this social and historical context involving Ch'orti' language revitalization, participants in the Ch'orti' Project are constantly positioning themselves to understand how their work can directly or indirectly support community efforts and resultant needs. Specifically, a focal part of Ch'orti' Project travel has been to visit and work with the Ch'orti' ALMG in Jocotán, Guatemala. For example, the ALMG has hosted a Ch'orti' Project workshop discussing the use of Ch'orti' texts as pedagogical materials in the schools and another one introducing Classic Mayan glyphic writing to the local community. Plans are in the works for future workshops on Mayan glyphs and other language-oriented topics of community interest and need.

Much of the work done by Robin and other Ch'orti' Project members during these visits, however, has been to assess the needs of the ALMG and other community-based organizations. For example, some of the earliest work of the Ch'orti' Project involved finding out what kind of language pedagogical materials were needed during one trip, developing them back in Denver, and then, for the next trip a year later, delivering those materials. Currently, Rich is leading a Ch'orti' Project team in developing a Ch'orti'-language website, one of the main goals being to provide support to the ALMG and other Ch'orti' language initiatives. The plan is for the website to provide pedagogical materials as well as reference information on Ch'orti' linguistics and Classic Mayan writing, among other things.

The Ch'orti' Project also supports Ch'orti' language revitalization efforts by helping to develop the body of Ch'orti' language documentation and linguistics research. Very early on, Spanish priests engaged in Ch'orti' linguistic scholarship as part of their goals of spreading Catholic doctrine amongst natives. For example, Morán in the 17th century worked with Ch'olti' (closely related to Ch'orti'), documenting vocabulary and texts and describing much of its grammar. In the early 20th century, the ethnographer Charles Wisdom recorded Ch'orti' texts and took detailed notes on the language, although this work was not published (but it has always been

easily accessible to researchers). A more significant body of research on Ch'orti' language was developed by John Fought, working in the Jocotán area in the 1960's. His work includes a reference grammar and a varied and sizable corpus consisting of dozens of texts on topics that include religion, home life, and agriculture (1972). Starting in the 1970's, John Lubeck, as a Summer Institute of Linguistics initiative, settled in Jocotán to create and disseminate a Ch'orti' translation of the Bible. He has also published a pedagogical grammar with Diane Cowie (1989). Since then, a variety of linguists and anthropologists, including Otto Schumann, Kerry Hull, Cédric Becquey, and Robin Quizar, have recorded Ch'orti' texts, compiled wordlists, and engaged in other language documentation research, most of which is not published, at least not yet. Kerry Hull, however, has recently published an extensive Ch'orti' dictionary (2016).

The Ch'orti' Project has been working in a number of ways to build on this body of work. Its biggest endeavor to date has involved Robin and student research assistants in the preparation of legacy Ch'orti' texts. This work includes the digitization and transliteration into modern Ch'orti' alphabet of 40 texts on a variety of topics, originally collected and phonetically transcribed by John Fought (1972). Other work includes a similar preparation of texts about daily life and culture, which were collected by Charles Wisdom (1950). Wisdom's original corpus is comprised of 180 handwritten pages, including English glosses for each word. The Ch'orti' Project has also prepared texts collected by Vitalino Pérez (1996). These legacy texts are now much more useful for scholars and accessible to the Ch'orti' community. During the project's 2014 trip to Guatemala, copies of these prepared texts were presented and given to the ALMG. The Ch'orti' Project website will make the texts even more accessible.

Under Rich's guidance, the Ch'orti' Project has also taken some initial steps to develop a Ch'orti' language database consisting of video-recorded everyday interactions. In 2018, Rich and Robin conducted meetings with a variety of Ch'orti' community members to gauge interest in such a documentation project. The response was overwhelmingly positive and encouraging, especially given the potential for education of having ready examples of fluent speakers using everyday Ch'orti' with one another. Members of the Ch'orti' ALMG partnered in the endeavor, making plans to help the Ch'orti' Project start video recording during the next year's travel. Unfortunately, a tragedy in the community as well as US government travel advisories temporarily halted a continuation of the documentation effort in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that it may be a while before it's feasible to restart the effort.

While this setback has been a bit unsettling for the Ch'orti' Project, such complications are not unexpected. As with any other dynamic community-engaging linguistics project, Robin, Rich, and other Ch'orti' Project members expect any given task to present unforeseen challenges, even tasks with a seemingly straight-forward process. Thus, as much as project members are engaged in actual tasks, they are also soliciting feedback on works in progress, experimenting with and developing methods and means for achieving goals, and brainstorming ideas for future efforts. Current project brainstorming involves expanding internet presence beyond the website so that (potential) Ch'orti' speakers can engage in other ways with the language and do so more conveniently. Ideas include online language-learning games and translation programs. Of course, such tasks will first require Ch'orti' Project members to gauge Ch'orti' community interest and concerns as well as overall efficacy of such efforts. Another, potential future endeavor involves engaging with the various museums in Guatemala, Honduras, and the US where Ch'orti' language and culture are not accurately or fairly represented. Finally, project members are considering ways that they might engage with and support Ch'orti' migrant communities in the US. Regardless of when, if, and how these ideas are realized, the Ch'orti' Project is set to continue making progress by working to develop Ch'orti' scholarship and support the revitalization efforts of the Ch'orti' community.

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