Linguistic Similarity and Language Mixing: The Case of Tojol-ab’al

The grammar of Tojol-ab’al, a Mayan language, seems to have resulted from a mixture of linguistic features from the genetically related languages Chuj and Tseltal, which belong to different branches of the family. In comparison to prototypical mixed languages, such Michif or Media Lengua, however, Tojol-ab’al appears almost too mixed—the morphological subsystems of the language all demonstrably contain an assortment of features from both donor languages, with no ‘compartmentalization’ as has been noted for other mixed languages (Matras 2003, Bakker and Mous 1994). This paper will first describe the historical linguistics facts of Tojol-ab’al in the Mayan context. Then, building on mounting evidence that mixed languages can emerge out of community-wide code-switching patterns (McConvell and Meakins 2005, O’Shannessy 2005, 2012), it will propose that the unusual etymological mixture found in Tojol-ab’al can be understood as a reflection of patterns of code-switching that are common between closely related languages, what Muysken (2000) refers to as “congruent lexicalization”. Finally, the paper will compare Tojol-ab’al to other Mayan languages that have been shown to elsewhere (Law 2014) to display extensive morphological and morphosyntactic borrowing and argue that the factors that appear to have facilitated those grammatical borrowings are the same in kind, if not degree, to the factors that allowed for congruent lexicalization in code-switching and the formation of such a thoroughly mixed language like Tojol-ab’al.

WORKS CITED


Law, Danny. 2014. Language contact, inherited similarity and social difference: the story of linguistic interaction in the Maya Lowlands. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.


