Danny Law

Studies of language contact have tended to focus on cases of contact between languages that are neither closely related nor typologically similar. In the case of contact between closely related languages, similar forms may be the result of shared inheritance rather than due to language contact. As the effects of contact are more obvious and easily discernable in cases where the languages involved are not related, the scarcity of research on contact within language families is not surprising. In *Language Contact, Inherited Similarity, and Social Difference*, Danny Law analyzes language contact between lowland Mayan languages, demonstrating that the study of contact between related languages is not only possible, but that such studies have important implications for understanding language contact more broadly.

The contact phenomena that Law examines involve typologically rare forms, such as borrowing bound morphemes, person markers, aspectual categories, and patterns of split ergativity. Although the dearth of cases of borrowing of bound morphemes (for example) is typically presumed to be due to universal linguistic principles, Law suggest that the absence of such cases in the literature might simply result from the lack of research on contact between closely related languages. Law’s analysis suggests that such “rare” forms of borrowing might be quite common in cases of contact between similar or closely related languages.

In the first chapter, Law discusses the problem of studying contact between closely related languages and outlines the factors that must be considered in empirical efforts to distinguish shared innovations from language contact. Law then presents an overview of the history of contact between lowland Mayan languages. He reviews the proposed genetic subgroupings within the
Mayan family and provides archaeological and historical evidence for contact between particular languages, including maps of the distribution of Mayan languages across various historical periods.

The second chapter examines areal phonology within the Mayan family. Law lays out a number of sound changes with boundaries that do not correspond to genetic subgroupings. Law presents detailed evidence that specific sound changes spread through contact. In addition to evidence based on geographic distribution, Law presents additional evidence to determine the approximate dates (and relative order) of specific sound changes (which are compared to the time range for the emergence of different branches of the Mayan family). For example, the loss of vowel length in Cholan languages is illustrated in hieroglyphic texts where errors in writing make it clear that the authors were losing their ability to distinguish short and long vowels. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the likely mechanisms for the transfer of phonemic innovations across language boundaries.

Just as the second chapter examines areal phonology, Chapter Three examines contact involving morphological, syntactic, and semantic features. Law includes both cases of borrowing grammatical patterns and cases of borrowing matter (specific linguistic forms). He outlines a number of contact-induced changes involving aspectual marking, person marking, quantification, numerical classifiers, word order, and the agent focus construction. The chapter concludes by bringing together the evidence for considering the lowland Maya region as a linguistic area.

The following four chapter present detailed analyses of specific examples of contact in the lowland Maya area. Chapter Four considers cases of pattern borrowing involving person marking within the verb. These patterns involve the replacement of the third person plural marker with a combination of the third singular marker with a distinct plural marker and the extension of this pattern from third plural to first and second plural. Other person-marking borrowings include the introduction of an inclusive/exclusive distinction, the emergence of a dual form, and the movement of the absolutive marker from a prefix to a post-clitic. Chapter Five examines matter borrowing involving person marking. After a detailed discussion of matter borrowing involving both ergative and absolutive markers, Law outlines the relative order of the changes involved and addresses the question of the borrowability of person markers in contact situations. Chapter Six analyzes pattern and matter borrowing involving the aspectual system. Here, Law examines the spread of the completive marker *ti-, the spread of the perfect incompletive marker –oom, and progressive constructions involving *iyuwal. In Chapter Seven, Law discusses pattern borrowing involving split ergativity. Law examines the ways in which contact
has influenced the distribution of nominative/accusative versus ergative/absolutive marking in various Mayan languages.

In the eighth chapter, Law discusses internal changes triggered by language contact. He considers secondary effects related to the spread of the completive aspect and changes in transitive verbs related to the introduction of split ergativity. Law also considers specific cases of contact-induced grammaticalization and contact-induced drift. The ninth chapter discusses the role of language ideologies in language contact situations. In particular, Law emphasizes ideologies of similarity and difference, both between language varieties and between speaker identities. The final chapter discusses the theoretical implications of Law’s research for understanding contact between related languages. He first considers the implications for presuming the regularity of sound change in comparative reconstruction and then discusses the relationship between paradigm interchangeability and linguistic convergence and the role of overlap between grammatical systems in contact between related languages.

This book is a major contribution both to the study of language contact and to Mayan historical linguistics. For Mayanists, Law presents new analyses that challenge traditional genetic classifications in the Mayan family and raises new questions regarding the place of Tojol-ab’al within the Maya family. Building on new and interesting data from Classic (Hieroglyphic) Maya and colonial documents and using recent linguistic work by native speakers of various Mayan languages, Law presents an impressively nuanced and careful analysis of the history of a number of areas of Mayan grammar.

Through very careful and original analyses, Law presents clear empirical arguments for distinguishing shared inheritance from language contact across a wide range of phonological, morphological, and syntactic phenomena. Given the highly marked character of the types of contact effects Law presents, the case of language contact among the lowland Maya deserves attention from scholars of language contact. This work demonstrates that much more work needs to be done on contact between related languages. Indeed, such research may reveal patterns that are quite different from those typically found in research on contact between unrelated languages. In addition to providing a unique and interesting case study, the book challenges a number of common assumptions within the field and makes a major theoretical contribution to the study of language contact.

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