1. Introduction

The use of phonetic complements is attested in a few ancient writing systems where word signs (logograms) exist alongside signs denoting syllabic or alphabetic values (syllabograms/phonograms). Amongst logosyllabic scripts, only Egyptian (Ritner 1996), hieroglyphic “Lu- vian” (Melchert 2004), the cuneiform scripts (Cooper 1996) and Maya hieroglyphic writing use phonetic complements. Phonetic complements are syllabic signs, which are preposed, postposed, or both, in relation to a logographic sign and serve as a reading aid. Phonetic complements can be partial or complete in regard to the reading of the logographic sign. All logosyllabic scripts which use phonetic complementation overwhelmingly favor final over initial position (Justeson 1978:92). Phonetic complements in initial position are so rare, that Ignace Gelb, one of the most influential theoreticians of writing systems has totally ignored them (1973:275). Phonetic complements are generally considered as ways of specifying dubious readings, although their use often later was extended to cases which are not dubious. Logographic signs sometimes can have multiple potential readings, either because the signs have been adopted from a language which provides different phonic values for the same meaning or because related but different meanings are rendered by a single sign (Justeson 1978:254-255).

2. Phonetic complements in Maya hieroglyphic writing

The role of phonetic complements in Maya hieroglyphic writing is still little understood, although considerable progress has been made in
recent years. Phonetic complements do not define a separate class of signs in Maya writing but a function of syllabic signs. In Maya writing, phonetic complements are found in front of a logographic sign (Figures 1a, b) or after it (Figures 1c, d), see appendix for Figures. In the case of prefixed syllabic signs of CV structure, both the consonant and the vowel repeat the initial consonant and vowel of the word (typically a CVC root) represented by the logogram \((c_1v_1-c_1v_1C_2)\). In the case of postposed CV complements, only the consonant replicates the consonant of the logogram, while the vowel can be either the harmonic vowel or another vowel \((C_1V_1C_2-c_2v_1\) or \(C_1V_1C_2-c_1v_2\)). The complex rules underlying the selection of the vowels of postposed phonetic complements have received substantial attention in the past years, inspired by the discovery of the relationship between vowel length and glottalization and harmonic/disharmonic spellings (Houston, Stuart and Robertson 1998, 2004; Houston, Robertson and Stuart 2000; Lacadena and Wichmann 2004; Robertson et al. 2007).

In contrast to postposed phonetic complements, preposed complements in Maya hieroglyphic writing have received no significant attention by scholars. It is generally assumed that prefixed phonetic complements act as “reading aids”, especially in those cases where a logographic sign seems to be polyvalent. One of the most prominent examples for the common understanding of prefixed phonetic complements is Linda Schele’s famous illustrations of spelling variants of the word *b’ahlam* ‘jaguar’, where she illustrates alternative spellings, including fully logographic and fully syllabic spellings, as well as a spelling which shows the logogram for B’AHLAM ‘jaguar’ with a prefixed syllabic sign *b’a* acting as a silent phonetic complement in order to indicate the first two phonemes of the following logogram \((b’a-)B’AHLAM\) (Schele and Freidel 1990: Fig. 1:3A). This illustration has become part of many textbooks about the ancient Maya, and yet, there is not a single example in the corpus of Maya inscriptions for the use of the *b’a* syllable as a phonetic complement with the jaguar sign.

This paper, therefore, intends to shed light on the use of preposed phonetic complements. It will be shown that prefixed phonetic complements are extremely rare. They are limited to a few clearly defined

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1. Rules for the transcription and transliteration of Maya hieroglyphs in this article are in accordance with the useful system developed by George Stuart (1988): upper-case terms represent logographs, lower-case ones syllables. Linguistic reconstructions follow common conventions in Mayan linguistics.